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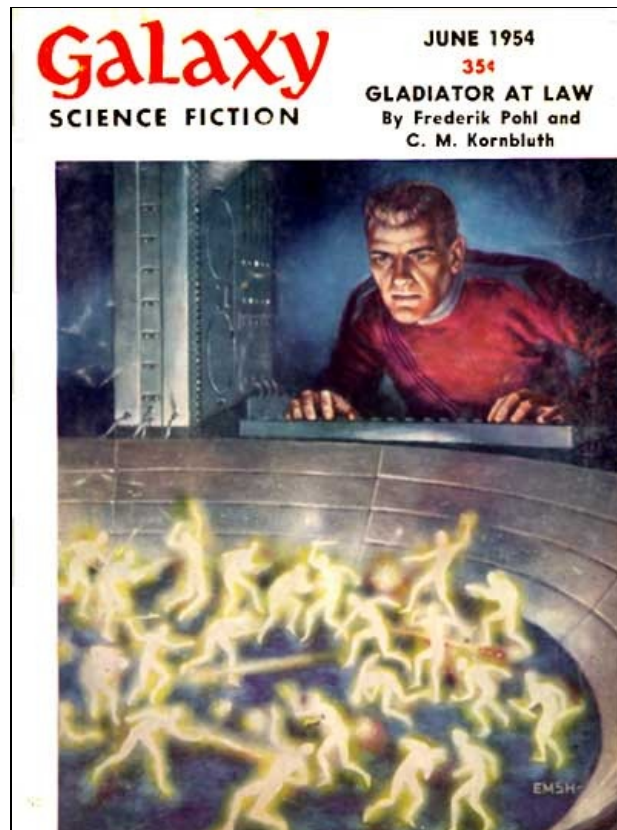
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# FORGET ME NEARLY

By F. L. Wallace

Illustrated by E.M.S.H.

*What sort of world was it, he puzzled, that wouldn't help victims find out whether they had been murdered or had committed suicide?*



**T**he police counselor leaned forward and tapped the small nameplate on his desk, which said: *Val Borgenese*. "That's my name," he said. "Who are you?"

The man across the desk shook his head. "I don't know," he said indistinctly.

"Sometimes a simple approach works," said the counselor, shoving aside the nameplate. "But not often. We haven't found anything that's effective in more than a small percentage of cases." He blinked thoughtfully. "Names are difficult. A name is like clothing, put on or taken off, recognizable but not part of the person—the first thing forgotten and the last remembered."

The man with no name said nothing.

"Try pet names," suggested Borgenese. "You don't have to be sure—just say the first thing you think of. It may be something your parents called you when you were a child."

The man stared vacantly, closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them and mumbled something.

"What?" asked Borgenese.

"Putsy," said the man more distinctly. "The only thing I can think of is Putsy."

The counselor smiled. "That's a pet name, of course, but it doesn't help much. We can't trace it, and I don't think you'd want it as a permanent name." He saw the expression on the man's face and added hastily: "We haven't given up, if that's what you're thinking. But it's not easy to determine your identity. The most important source of information is your mind, and that was at the two year level when we found you. The fact that you recalled the word Putsy is an indication."

"Fingerprints," said the man vaguely. "Can't you trace me through fingerprints?"

"That's another clue," said the counselor. "Not fingerprints, but the fact that you thought of them." He jotted something down. "I'll have to check those re-education tapes. They may be defective by now, we've run them so many times. Again, it may be merely that your mind refused to accept the proper information."

The man started to protest, but Borgenese cut him off. "Fingerprints were a fair means of

identification in the Twentieth Century, but this is the Twenty-second Century."

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**T**he counselor then sat back. "You're confused now. You have a lot of information you don't know how to use yet. It was given to you fast, and your mind hasn't fully absorbed it and put it in order. Sometimes it helps if you talk out your problems."

"I don't know if I have a problem." The man brushed his hand slowly across his eyes. "Where do I start?"

"Let me do it for you," suggested Borgenesese. "You ask questions when you feel like it. It may help you."

He paused, "You were found two weeks ago in the Shelters. You know what those are?"

The man nodded, and Borgenesese went on: "Shelter and food for anyone who wants or needs it. Nothing fancy, of course, but no one has to ask or apply; he just walks in and there's a place to sleep and periodically food is provided. It's a favorite place to put people who've been retroed."

The man looked up. "Retroed?"

"Slang," said Borgenesese. "The retrogression gun ionizes animal tissue, nerve cells particularly. Aim it at a man's legs and the nerves in that area are drained of energy and his muscles won't hold him up. He falls down.

"Aim it at his head and give him the smallest charge the gun is adjustable to, and his most recent knowledge is subtracted from his memory. Give him the full charge, and he is swept back to a childish or infantile age level. The exact age he reaches is dependent on his physical and mental condition at the time he's retroed.

"Theoretically it's possible to kill with the retrogression gun. The person can be taken back to a stage where there's not enough nervous organization to sustain the life process.

"However, life is tenacious. As the lower levels are reached, it takes increasing energy to subtract from anything that's left. Most people who want to get rid of someone are satisfied to leave the victim somewhere between the mental ages of one and four. For practical purposes, the man they knew is dead—or retroed, as they say."

"Then that's what they did to me," said the man. "They retroed me and left me in the Shelter. How long was I there?"

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**B**orgenesese shrugged. "Who knows? That's what makes it difficult. A day, or two months. A child of two or three can feed himself, and no record is kept since the place is free. Also, it's cleaned automatically."

"I know that now that you mention it," said the man. "It's just that it's hard to remember."

"You see how it is," said the counselor. "We can't check our files against a date when someone disappeared, because we don't know that date except within very broad limits." He tapped his pen on the desk. "Do you object to a question?"

"Go ahead."

"How many people in the Solar System?"

The man thought with quiet desperation. "Fourteen to sixteen billion."

The counselor was pleased. "That's right. You're beginning to use some of the information we've put back into your mind. Earth, Mars and Venus are the main population centers. But there are also Mercury and the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn, as well as the asteroids. We can check to see where you might have come from, but there are so many places and people that you can imagine the results."

"There must be *some* way," the man said painfully. "Pictures, fingerprints, something."

"Something," Borgenesese nodded. "But probably not for quite a while. There's another factor, you see. It's a shock, but you've got to face it. And the funny thing is that you'll never be better able to than now."

He rocked back. "Take the average person, full of unsuspected anxiety, even the happiest and most successful. Expose him to the retrogression gun. Tensions and frustrations are drained away.

"The structure of an adult is still there, but it's empty, waiting to be filled. Meanwhile the life of the organism goes on, but it's not the same. Lines on the face disappear, the expression alters drastically, new cell growth occurs here and there throughout the body. Do you see what that means?"

The man frowned. "I suppose no one can recognize me."

"That's right. And it's not only your face that changes. You may grow taller, but never shorter. If your hair was gray, it may darken, but not the reverse."

"Then I'm younger too?"

"In a sense, though it's actually not a rejuvenation process at all. The extra tension that everyone carries with him has been removed, and the body merely takes up the slack.

"Generally, the apparent age is made less. A person of middle age or under seems to be three to fifteen years younger than before. You appear to be about twenty-seven, but you may actually be nearer forty. You see, we don't even know what age group to check.

"And it's the same with fingerprints. They've been altered by the retrogression process. Not a great deal, but enough to make identification impossible."

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**T**he nameless man stared around the room—at Val Borgenes, perhaps fifty, calm and pleasant, more of a counselor than a policeman—out of the window at the skyline, and its cleanly defined levels of air traffic.

Where was his place in this?

"I guess it's no use," he said bleakly. "You'll never find out who I am."

The counselor smiled. "I think we will. Directly, there's not much we can do, but there are indirect methods. In the last two weeks we've exposed you to all the organized knowledge that can be put on tapes—physics, chemistry, biology, math, astrology, the works.

"It's easy to remember what you once knew. It isn't learning; it's actually relearning. One fact put in your mind triggers another into existence. There's a limit, of course, but usually a person comes out of re-education with slightly more formal knowledge than he had in his prior existence." The counselor opened a folder on his desk. "We gave you a number of tests. You didn't know the purpose, but I can tell you the results."

He leafed slowly through the sheets. "You may have been an entrepreneur of some sort. You have an excellent sense of power ethics. Additionally, we've found that you're physically alert, and your reactions are well coordinated. This indicates you may have been an athlete or sportsman."

Val Borgenes laid down the tests. "In talking with you, I've learned more. The remark you made about fingerprints suggests you may have been a historian, specializing in the Twentieth Century. No one else is likely to know that there was a time in which fingerprints were a valid means of identification."

"I'm quite a guy, I suppose. Businessman, sportsman, historian." The man smiled bitterly. "All that ... but I still don't know who I am. And you can't help me."

"Is it important?" asked the counselor softly. "This happens to many people, you know, and some of them do find out who they were, with or without our help. But this is not simple amnesia. No one who's been retroed can resume his former identity. Of course, if we had tapes of the factors which made each person what he is..." He shrugged. "But those tapes don't exist. Who knows, really, what caused him to develop as he has? Most of it isn't at the conscious level. At best, if you should learn who you were, you'd have to pick up the thread of your former activities and acquaintances slowly and painfully.

"Maybe it would be better if you start from where you are. You know as much as you once did, and the information is up to date, correct and undistorted. You're younger, in a sense—in better physical condition, not so tense or nervous. Build up from that."

"But I don't have a name."

"Choose one temporarily. You can have it made permanent if it suits you."

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**T**he man was silent, thinking. He looked up, not in despair, but not accepting all that the counselor said either. "What name? All I know is yours, and those of historical figures."

"That's deliberate. We don't put names on tapes, because the effects can be misleading. Everyone has thousands of associations, and can mistake the name of a prominent scientist for his own. Names unconsciously arrived at are usually no help at all."

"What do I do?" the man said. "If I don't know names, how can I choose one?"

"We have a list made up for this purpose. Go through it slowly and consciously. When you come to something you like, take it. If you chance on one that stirs memories, or rather where memories ought to be but aren't, let me know. It may be a lead I can have traced."

The man gazed at the counselor. His thought processes were fast, but erratic. He could race

along a chain of reasoning and then stumble over a simple fact. The counselor ought to know what he was talking about—this was no isolated occurrence. The police had a lot of experience to justify the treatment they were giving him. Still, he felt they were mistaken in ways he couldn't formulate.

"I'll have to accept it, I suppose," he said. "There's nothing I can do to learn who I was."

The counselor shook his head. "Nothing that *we* can do. The clues are in the structure of your mind, and you have better access to it than we do. Read, think, look. Maybe you'll run across your name. We can take it from there." He paused. "That is, if you're determined to go ahead."

That was a strange thing for a police counselor to say.

"Of course I want to know who I am," he said in surprise. "Why shouldn't I?"

"I'd rather not mention this, but you ought to know." Borgenese shifted uncomfortably. "One third of the lost identity cases that we solve are self-inflicted. In other words, suicides."

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**H**is head rumbled with names long after he had decided on one and put the list away. Attractive names and odd ones—but which were significant he couldn't say. There was more to living than the knowledge that could be put on tapes and played back. There was more than choosing a name. There was experience, and he lacked it. The world of personal reactions for him had started two weeks previously; it was not enough to help him know what he wanted to do.

He sat down. The room was small but comfortable. As long as he stayed in retro-therapy, he couldn't expect much freedom.

He tried to weigh the factors. He could take a job and adapt himself to some mode of living.

What kind of a job?

He had the ordinary skills of the society—but no outstanding technical ability had been discovered in him. He had the ability of an entrepreneur—but without capital, that outlet was denied him.

His mind and body were empty and waiting. In the next few months, no matter what he did, some of the urge to replace the missing sensations would be satisfied.

The more he thought about that, the more powerfully he felt that he had to know who he was. Otherwise, proceeding to form impressions and opinions might result in a sort of betrayal of himself.

Assume the worst, that he was a suicide. Maybe he had knowingly and willingly stepped out of his former life. A suicide would cover himself—would make certain that he could never trace himself back to his dangerous motive for the step. If he lived on Earth, he would go to Mars or Venus to strip himself of his unsatisfactory life. There were dozens of precautions anyone would take.

But if it weren't suicide, then who had retroed him and why? That was a question he couldn't answer now, and didn't need to. When he found out who he was, the motivation might be clear; if it wasn't, at least he would have a basis on which to investigate that.

If someone else had done it to him, deliberately or accidentally, that person would have taken precautions too. The difference was this: as a would-be suicide, he could travel freely to wherever he wished to start over again; while another person would have difficulty enticing him to a faroff place, or, assuming that the actual retrogression had taken place elsewhere, wouldn't find it easy to transport an inert and memory-less body any distance.

So, if he weren't a suicide, there was a good chance that there were clues in this city. He might as well start with that idea—it was all he had to go on.

He was free to stay in retro-therapy indefinitely, but with the restricted freedom he didn't want to. The first step was to get out. He made the decision and felt better. He switched on the screen.

Borgenese looked up. "Hello. Have you decided?"

"I think so."

"Good. Let's have it. It's bound to touch on your former life in some way, though perhaps so remotely we can't trace it. At least, it's something."

"Luis Obispo." He spelled it out.

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**T**he police counselor looked dubious as he wrote the name down. "It's not common, nor uncommon either. The spelling of the first name is a little different, but there must be countless Obispos scattered over the System."

It was curious. Now he almost did think of himself as Luis Obispo. He wanted to be that person. "Another thing," he said. "Did I have any money when I was found?"

"You're thinking of leaving? A lot of them do." Val Borgenesse flipped open the folder again. "You did have money, an average amount. It won't set you up in business, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't. How do I get it?"

"I didn't think you were." The counselor made another notation. "I'll have the desk release it—you can get it any time. By the way, you get the full amount, no deductions for anything."

The news was welcome, considering what he had ahead of him.

Borgenesse was still speaking. "Whatever you do, keep in touch with us. It'll take time to run down this name, and maybe we'll draw a blank. But something significant may show up. If you're serious, and I think you are, it's to your advantage to check back every day or so."

"I'm serious," said Luis. "I'll keep in touch."

There wasn't much to pack. The clothing he wore had been supplied by the police. Ordinary enough; it would pass on the street without comment. It would do until he could afford to get better.

He went down to the desk and picked up his money. It was more than he'd expected—the average man didn't carry this much in his pocket. He wondered about it briefly as he signed the receipt and walked out of retro-therapy. The counselor had said it was an average amount, but it wasn't.

He stood in the street in the dusk trying to orient himself.

Perhaps the money wasn't so puzzling. An average amount for those brought into therapy for treatment, perhaps. Borgenesse had said a high proportion were suicides. Such a person would want to start over again minus fears and frustrations, but not completely penniless. If he had money he'd want to take it with him, though not so much that it could be traced, since that would defeat the original purpose.

The pattern was logical—suicides were those with a fair sum of money. This was the fact which inclined Borgenesse to the view he obviously held.

Luis Obispo stood there uncertainly. Did he want to find out? His lips thinned—he did. In spite of Borgenesse, there were other ways to account for the money he had. One of them was this: he was an important man, accustomed to handling large sums of money.

He started out. He was in a small city of a few hundred thousand on the extreme southern coast of California. In the last few days he'd studied maps of it; he knew where he was going.

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**W**hen he got there, the Shelters were dark. He didn't know what he had expected, but it wasn't this. Reflection showed him that he hadn't thought about it clearly. The mere existence of Shelters indicated an economic level in which few people would either want or need to make use of that which was provided freely.

He skirted the area. He'd been found in one of the Shelters—which one he didn't know. Perhaps he should have checked the record before he came here.

No, this was better. Clues, he was convinced, were almost non-existent. He had to rely on his body and mind; but not in the ordinary way. He was particularly sensitive to impressions he had received before; the way he had learned things in therapy proved that; but if he tried to force them, he could be led astray. The wisest thing was to react naturally, almost without volition. He should be able to recognize the Shelter he'd been found in without trouble. From that, he could work back.

That was the theory—but it wasn't happening. He circled the area, and there was nothing to which he responded more than vaguely.

He would have to go closer.

He crossed the street. The plan of the Shelters was simple; an area two blocks long and one block wide, heavily planted with shrubs and small trees. In the center was an S-shaped continuous structure divided into a number of small dwelling units.

Luis walked along one wing of the building, turned at the corner and turned again. It was quite dark. He supposed that was why he wasn't reacting to anything. But his senses were sharper than he realized. There was a rustle behind him, and instinctively he flung himself forward, flat on the ground.

A pink spot appeared, low on the wall next to him. It had been aimed at his legs. The paint crackled faintly and the pink spot faded. He rolled away fast.

A dark body loomed past him and dropped where he'd been. There was an exclamation of surprise when the unknown found there was no one there. Luis grunted with satisfaction—this

might be only a stickup, but he was getting action faster than he'd expected. He reached out and took hold of a leg and drew the assailant to him. A hard object clipped the side of his head, and he grasped that too.

The shape of the gun was familiar. He tore it loose. This wasn't any stickup! Once was enough to be retrogressed, and he'd had his share. Next time it was going to be the other guy. Physically, he was more than a match for his attacker. He twisted his body and pinned the struggling form to the ground.

That was what it was—a form. A woman, very much so; even in the darkness he was conscious of her body.

Now she was trying to get loose, and he leaned his weight more heavily on her. Her clothing was torn—he could feel her flesh against his face. He raised the gun butt, and then changed his mind and instead fumbled for a light. It wasn't easy to find it and still keep her pinned.

"Be quiet or I'll clip you," he growled.

She lay still.

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**H**e found the light and shone it on her face. It was good to look at, that face, but it wasn't at all familiar. He had trouble keeping his eyes from straying. Her dress was torn, and what she wore underneath was torn too.

"Seen enough?" she asked coldly.

"Put that way, I haven't." He couldn't force his voice to be matter-of-fact—it wouldn't behave.

She stared angrily at the light in her eyes. "I knew you'd be back," she said. "I thought I could get you before you got me, but you're too fast." Her mouth trembled. "This time make it permanent. I don't want to be tormented again like this."



He let her go and sat up. He was trembling, too, but not for the same reason. He turned the light away from her eyes.

"Ever consider that you could be mistaken?" he asked. "You're not the only one it happens to."

She lay there blinking at him, eyes adjusting to the changed light. She fumbled at the torn dress, which wouldn't stay where she put it. "You too?" she said with a vast lack of surprise. "When?"

"They found me here two weeks ago. This is the first time I've come back."

"Patterns," she said. "There are always patterns in what we do." Her attitude toward him had changed drastically, he could see it in her face. "I've been out three weeks longer." She sat up and leaned closer. She didn't seem to be thinking about the same things that had been on her mind only seconds before.

He stood up and helped her to her feet. She was near and showed no inclination to move away. This was something Borgenese hadn't mentioned, and there was nothing in his re-education to prepare him for this sensation, but he liked it. He couldn't see her very well, now that the light was turned off, but she was almost touching him.

"We're in the same situation, I guess." She sighed. "I'm lonely and a little afraid. Come into my place and we'll talk."

He followed her. She turned into a dwelling that from the outside seemed identical to the others.

Inside, it wasn't quite the same. He couldn't say in what way it was different, but he didn't think it was the one he'd been found in.

That torn dress bothered him—not that he wanted her to pin it up. The tapes hadn't been very explicit about the beauties of the female body, but he thought he knew what they'd left out.

She was conscious of his gaze and smiled. It was not an invitation, it was a request, and he didn't mind obeying. She slid into his arms and kissed him. He was glad about the limitations of re-education. There were some things a man ought to learn for himself.

She looked up at him. "Maybe you should tell me your name," she said. "Not that it means much in our case."

"Luis Obispo," he said, holding her.

"I had more trouble, I couldn't choose until two days ago." She kissed him again, hard and deliberately. It gave her enough time to jerk the gun out of his pocket.

She slammed it against his ribs. "Stand back," she said, and meant it.

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**L**uis stared bewilderedly at her. She was desirable, more than he had imagined and for a variety of reasons. Her emotions had been real, he was sure of that, not feigned for the purpose of taking the gun away. But she had changed again in a fraction of a second. Her face was twisted with an effort at self-control.

"What's the matter?" he asked. He tried to make his voice gentle, but it wouldn't come out that way. The retrogression process had sharpened all his reactions—this one too.

"The name I finally arrived at was—Luise Obispo," she said.

He started. The same as his, except feminine! This was more than he'd dared hope for. A clue—and this girl, who he suddenly realized, without any cynicism about "love at first sight," because the tapes hadn't included it, meant something to him.

"Maybe you're my wife," he said tentatively.

"Don't count on it," she said wearily. "It would have been better if we were strangers—then it wouldn't matter what we did. Now there are too many factors, and I can't choose."

"It has to be," he argued. "Look—the same name, and so close together in time and place, and we were attracted instantly—"

"Go away," she said, and the gun didn't waver. It was not a threat that he could ignore. He left.

She was wrong in making him leave, completely wrong. He couldn't say how he knew, but he was certain. But he couldn't prove it, and she wasn't likely to accept his unsubstantiated word.

He leaned weakly against the door. It was like that. Retrogression had left him with an adult body and sharper receptiveness. And after that followed an urge to live fully. He had a lot of knowledge, but it didn't extend to this sphere of human behavior.

Inside he could hear her moving around faintly, an emotional anticlimax. It wasn't just frustrated sex desire, though that played a part. They had known each other previously—the instant attraction they'd had for each other was proof, leaving aside the names. Lord, he'd trade his unknown identity to have her. He should have taken another name—any other name would have been all right.

It wasn't because she was the first woman he'd seen, or the woman he had first re-seen. There had been nurses, some of them beautiful, and he'd paid no attention to them. But Luise Obispo was part of his former life—and he didn't know what part. The reactions were there, but until he could find out why, he was denied access to the satisfactions.

From a very narrow angle, and only from that angle, he could see that there was still a light inside. It was dim, and if a person didn't know, he might pass by and not notice it.

His former observation about the Shelters was incorrect. Every dwelling might be occupied and he couldn't tell unless he examined them individually.

He stirred. The woman was a clue to his problem, but the clue itself was a far more urgent problem. Though his identity was important, he could build another life without it and the new life might not be worse than the one from which he had been forcibly removed.

Perhaps he was over-reacting, but he didn't think so: *his new life had to include this woman.*

He wasn't equipped to handle the emotion. He stumbled away from the door and found an unoccupied dwelling and went in without turning on the lights and lay down on the bed.

In the morning, he knew he had been here before. In the darkness he had chosen unknowingly but also unerringly. This was the place in which he had been retrogressed.

It was here that the police had picked him up.



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**T**he counselor looked sleepily out of the screen. "I wish you people didn't have so much energy," he complained. Then he looked again and the sleepiness vanished. "I see you found it the first time."

Luis knew it himself, because there was a difference from the dwelling Luise lived in—not much, but perceptible to him. The counselor, however, must have a phenomenal memory to distinguish it from hundreds of others almost like it.

Borgenesse noticed the expression and smiled. "I'm not an eidetic, if that's what you think. There's a number on the set you're calling from and it shows on my screen. You can't see it."

They would have something like that, Luis thought. "Why didn't you tell me this was it before I came?"

"We were pretty sure you'd find it by yourself. People who've just been retroed usually do. It's better to do it on your own. Our object is to have you recover your personality. If we knew who you were, we could set up a program to guide you to it faster. As it is, if we help you too much, you turn into a carbon copy of the man who's advising you."

Luis nodded. Give a man his adult body and mind and turn him loose on the problems which confronted him, and he would come up with adult solutions. It was better that way.

But he hadn't called to discuss that. "There's another person living in the Shelters," he said. "You found her three weeks before you found me."

"So you've met her already? Fine. We were hoping you would." Borgenesse chuckled. "Let's see if I can describe her. Apparent age, about twenty-three; that means that she was originally between twenty-six or thirty-eight, with the probability at the lower figure. A good body, as you are probably well aware, and a striking face. Somewhat oversexed at the moment, but that's all right—so are you."

He saw the expression on Luis's face and added quickly: "You needn't worry. Draw a parallel with your own experience. There were pretty nurses all around you in retro-therapy, and I doubt that you noticed that they were female. That's normal for a person in your position, and it's the same with her."

"It works this way: you're both unsure of yourselves and can't react to those who have some control over their emotions. When you meet each other, you can sense that neither has made the necessary adjustments, and so you are free to release your true feelings."

He smiled broadly. "At the moment, you two are the only ones who have been retroed recently. You won't have any competition for six months or so, until you begin to feel comfortable in your new life. By then, you should know how well you really like each other."

"Of course tomorrow, or even today, we might find another person in the Shelter. If it's a man, you'll have to watch out; if a woman, you'll have too much companionship. As it is, I think you're very lucky."

Yeah, he was lucky—or would be if things were actually like that. Yesterday he would have denied it; but today, he'd be willing to settle for it, if he could get it.

"I don't think you understand," he said. "She took the same name that I did."

Borgenesse's smile flipped over fast, and the other side was a frown. For a long time he sat there scowling out of the screen. "That's a hell of a thing to tell me before breakfast," he said. "Are you sure? She couldn't decide on a name before she left."

"I'm sure," said Luis, and related all the details of last night.

The counselor sat there and didn't say anything.

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**L**uis waited as long as he could. "You can trace *us* now," he said. "One person might be difficult. But two of us with nearly the same name, that should stick out big, even in a population of sixteen billion. Two people are missing from somewhere. You can find that."

The counselor's face didn't change. "You understand that if you were killed, we'd find the man who did it. I can't tell you how, but you can be sure he wouldn't escape. In the last hundred years there's been no unsolved murder."

He coughed and turned away from the screen. When he turned back, his face was calm. "I'm not supposed to tell you this much. I'm breaking the rule because your case and that of the girl is different from any I've ever handled." He was speaking carefully. "Listen. I'll tell you once and won't repeat it. If you ever accuse me, I'll deny I said it, and I have the entire police organization behind me to make it stick."

The counselor closed his eyes as if to see in his mind the principle he was formulating. "If we can catch a murderer, no matter how clever he may be, it ought to be easier to trace the identity of a

person who is still alive. It is. *But we never try.* Though it's all right if the victim does.

*"If I should ask the cooperation of other police departments, they wouldn't help. If the solution lies within an area over which I have jurisdiction and I find out who is responsible, I will be dismissed before I can prosecute the man."*

Luis stared at the counselor in helpless amazement. "Then you're not doing anything," he said shakily. "You lied to me. You don't intend to do anything."

"You're overwrought," said Borgenese politely. "If you could see how busy we are in your behalf—" He sighed. "My advice is that if you can't convince the girl, forget her. If the situation gets emotionally unbearable, let me know and I can arrange transportation to another city where there may be others who are—uh—more compatible."

"But she's my wife," he said stubbornly.

"Are you sure?"

Actually Luis wasn't—but he wanted *her* to be, or any variation thereof she would consent to. He explained.

"As she says, there are a lot of factors," commented the counselor. "I'd suggest an examination. It may remove some of her objections."

He hadn't thought of it, but he accepted it eagerly. "What will that do?"

"Not much, unfortunately. It will prove that you two can have healthy normal children, but it won't indicate that you're not a member of her genetic family. And, of course, it won't touch on the question of legal family, brother-in-law and the like. I don't suppose she'd accept that."

She wouldn't. He'd seen her for only a brief time and yet he knew that much. He was in an ambiguous position; he could make snap decisions he was certain were right, but he had to guess at facts. He and the girl were victims, and the police refused to help them in the only way that would do much good. And the police had, or thought they had, official reasons for their stand.

Luis told the counselor just exactly what he thought of that.

"It's too bad," agreed the counselor. "These things often have an extraordinary degree of permanency if they ever get started."

If they ever got started! Luis reached out and turned off the screen. It flickered unsteadily—the counselor was trying to call him back. He didn't want to talk to the man; it was painful, and Borgenese had nothing to add but platitudes, and fuel to his anger. He swung open the panel and jerked the wiring loose and the screen went blank.

There was an object concealed in the mechanism he had exposed. It was a neat, vicious, little retrogression gun.

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**H**e got it out and balanced it gingerly in his hand. Now he had something else to work on! It was *the* weapon, of course. It had been used on him and then hidden behind the screen.

It was a good place to hide it. The screens never wore out or needed adjustment, and the cleaning robots that came out of the wall never cleaned there. The police should have found it, but they hadn't looked. He smiled bitterly. They weren't interested in solving crimes—merely in ameliorating the consequences.

Though the police had failed, he hadn't. It could be traced back to the man who owned it, and that person would have information. He turned the retro gun over slowly; it was just a gun; there were countless others like it.

He finished dressing and dropped the gun in his pocket. He went outside and looked across the court. He hesitated and then walked over and knocked.

"Occupied," said the door. "But the occupant is out. No definite time of return stated, but she will be back this evening. Is there any message?"

"No message," he said. "I'll call back when she's home."

He hoped she wouldn't refuse to speak to him. She'd been away from retro-therapy longer than he and possibly had developed her own leads—very likely she was investigating some of them now. Whatever she found would help him, and vice versa. The man who'd retroed her had done the same to him. They were approaching the problem from different angles. Between the two of them, they should come up with the correct solution.

He walked away from the Shelters and caught the belt to the center of town; the journey didn't take long. He stepped off, and wandered in the bright sunshine, not quite aimlessly. At length he found an Electronic Arms store, and went inside.

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A robot came to wait on him. "I'd like to speak to the manager," he said and the robot went away.

Presently the manager appeared, middle aged, drowsy. "What can I do for you?"

Luis laid the retrogression gun on the counter. "I'd like to know who this was sold to."

The manager coughed. "Well, there are millions of them, hundreds of millions."

"I know, but I have to find out."

The manager picked it up. "It's a competitor's make," he said doubtfully. "Of course, as a courtesy to a customer...." He fingered it thoughtfully. "Do you really want to know? It's just a freezer. Not at all dangerous."

Luis looked at it with concern. Just a freezer—not a retro gun at all! Then it couldn't have been the weapon used on him.

Before he could take it back the manager broke it open. The drowsy expression vanished.

"Why didn't you say so?" exclaimed the manager, examining it. "This gun has been illegally altered." He bent over the exposed circuits and then glanced up happily at Luis. "Come here, I'll show you."

Luis followed him to the small workshop in the back of the store. The manager closed the door behind them and fumbled among the equipment. He mounted the gun securely in a frame and pressed a button which projected an image of the circuit onto a screen.

The manager was enjoying himself. "Everybody's entitled to self-protection," he said. "That's why we sell so many like these. They're harmless, won't hurt a baby. Fully charged, they'll put a man out for half an hour, overload his nervous system. At the weakest, they'll still keep him out of action for ten minutes. Below that, they won't work at all." He looked up. "Are you sure you understand this?"

It had been included in his re-education, but it didn't come readily to his mind. "Perhaps you'd better go over it for me."

The manager wagged his head. "As I said, the freezer is legal, won't harm anyone. It'll stop a man or an elephant in his tracks, freeze him, but beyond that will leave him intact. When he comes out of it, he's just the same as before, nothing changed." He seized a pointer and adjusted the controls so as to enlarge the image on the screen. "However, a freezer can be converted to a retrogression gun, and that's illegal." He traced the connections with the pointer. "If this wire, instead of connecting as it does, is moved to here and here, the polarity is reversed. In addition, if these four wires are interchanged, the freezer becomes a retrogressor. As I said, it's illegal to do that."

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The manager scrutinized the circuits closely and grunted in disgust. "Whoever converted this did a sloppy job. Here." He bent over the gun and began manipulating micro-instruments. He worked rapidly and surely. A moment later, he snapped the weapon together and straightened up, handing it to Luis. "There," he said proudly. "It's a much more effective retrogressor than it was. Uses less power too."

Luis swallowed. Either he was mad or the man was, or perhaps it was the society he was trying to adjust to. "Aren't you taking a chance, doing this for me?"

The manager smiled. "You're joking. A tenth of the freezers we sell are immediately converted into retrogressors. Who cares?" He became serious. "Do you still want to know who bought it?"

Luis nodded—at the moment he didn't trust his voice.

"It will take several hours. No charge though, customer service. Tell me where I can reach you."

Luis jotted down the number of the screen at the Shelter and handed it to the manager. As he left, the manager whispered to him: "Remember, the next time you buy a freezer—ours can be converted easier than the one you have."

He went out into the sunlight. It didn't seem the same. What kind of society was he living in? The reality didn't fit with what he had re-learned. It had seemed an orderly and sane civilization, with little violence and vast respect for the law.

But the fact was that any school child—well, not quite *that* young, perhaps—but anyone older could and did buy a freezer. And it was ridiculously easy to convert a freezer into something far more vicious. Of course, it was illegal, but no one paid any attention to that.

This was wrong; it wasn't the way he remembered....

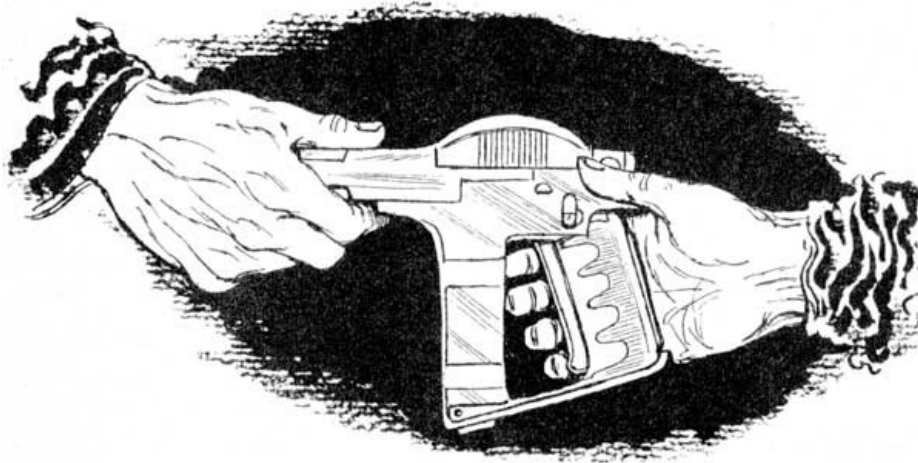
He corrected himself: he didn't actually remember anything. His knowledge came from tapes, and was obviously inadequate. Certain things he just didn't understand yet.

He wanted to talk to someone—but who? The counselor had given him all the information he

intended to. The store manager had supplied some additional insight, but it only confused him. Luise—at the moment she was suspicious of him.

There was nothing to do except to be as observant as he could. He wandered through the town, just looking. He saw nothing that seemed familiar. Negative evidence, of course, but it indicated he hadn't lived here before.

Before what? Before he had been retrogressed. He had been brought here from elsewhere, the same as Luise.



He visited the spaceport. Again the evidence was negative; there was not a ship the sight of which tripped his memory. It had been too much to hope for; if he had been brought in by spaceship, it wouldn't still be around for him to recognize.

Late in the afternoon, he headed toward the center of town. He was riding the belt when he saw Luise coming out of a tall office building.

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**H**e hopped off and let her pass, boarding it again and following her at a distance. As soon as they were out of the business district, he began to edge closer.

A few blocks from the Shelter she got off the belt and waited, turning around and smiling directly at him. In the interim her attitude toward him had changed, evidently—for the better, as far as he was concerned. He couldn't ignore her and didn't want to. He stepped off the belt.

"Hello," she said. "I think you were following me."

"I was. Do you mind?"

"I guess I don't." She walked along with him. "Others followed me, but I discouraged them."

She was worth following, but it was not that which was strange. Now she seemed composed and extraordinarily friendly, a complete reversal from last night. Had she learned something during the day which changed her opinion of him? He hoped she had.

She stopped at the edge of the Shelter area. "Do you live here?"

Learned something? She seemed to have forgotten.

He nodded.

"For the same reason?"

His throat tightened. He had told her all that last night. Couldn't she remember?

"Yes," he said.

"I thought so. That's why I didn't mind your following me."

Here was the attraction factor that Borgenese had spoken of; it was functioning again, for which he was grateful. But still, why? And why didn't she remember last night?

They walked on until she came to her dwelling. She paused at the door. "I have a feeling I should know who you are, but I just can't recall. Isn't that terrible?"

It was—frightening. Her identity was apparently incompletely established; it kept slipping backward to a time she hadn't met him. He couldn't build anything enduring on that; each meeting with her would begin as if nothing had happened before.

Would the same be true of him?

He looked at her. The torn dress hadn't been repaired, as he'd thought at first; it had been replaced by the robots that came out of the wall at night. They'd done a good job fitting her, but with her body that was easy.

It was frightening and it wasn't. At least this time he didn't have a handicap. He opened his mouth to tell her his name, and then closed it. He wasn't going to make that mistake again. "I haven't decided on a name," he said.

"It was that way with me too." She gazed at him and he could feel his insides sloshing around. "Well, man with no name, do you want to come in? We can have dinner together."

He entered. But dinner was late that night. He had known it would be.

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**I**n the morning light, he sat up and put his hand on her. She smiled in her sleep and squirmed closer. There were compensations for being nobody, he supposed, and this was one of them. He got up quietly and dressed without waking her. There were a number of things he wanted to discuss, but somehow there hadn't been time last night. He would have to talk to her later today.

He slipped out of the house and went across the court into his own. The screen he had ripped apart had been repaired and put back in place. A voice chimed out as he entered: "A call came while you were gone."

"Let's have it."

The voice descended the scale and became that of the store manager. "The gun you brought in was sold six months ago to Dorn Starret, resident of Ceres and proprietor of a small gallium mine there. That's all the information on record. I trust it will be satisfactory."

Luis sat down. It was. He could trace the man or have him traced, though the last might not be necessary.

The name meant something to him—just what he couldn't say. Dorn Starret, owner of a gallium mine on Ceres. The mine might or might not be of consequence; gallium was used in a number of industrial processes, but beyond that was not particularly valuable.

He closed his eyes to concentrate. The name slid into vacant nerve cells that were responsive; slowly a picture formed, nebulous and incomplete at first. There was a mouth and then there were eyes, each feature bringing others into focus, unfolding as a germ cell divides and grows, calling into existence an entire creature. The picture was nearly complete.

Still with eyes closed, he looked at the man he remembered. Dorn Starret, five-eleven, one hundred and ninety, flesh that had once been muscular and firm. Age, thirty-seven; black hair that was beginning to recede from his forehead. The face was harder to define—strong, though slightly hard, it was perhaps good looking. It was the eyes which were at fault, Luis decided—glinting often—and there were lines on the face that ought not to be there.

There was another thing that set the man apart. Not clothing; that was conventional, though better than average. Luis stared into his memory until he was able to see it. *Unquestionably the man was left-handed.* The picture was too clear to permit a mistake on that detail.

He knew the man, had seen him often. How and in what context? He waited, but nothing else came.

Luis opened his eyes. He would recognize the man if he ever saw him. This was the man who owned the gun, presumably had shot him with it, and then had hidden it here in this room.

He thought about it vainly. By itself, the name couldn't take him back through all past associations with the man, so he passed from the man to Ceres. Here he was better equipped; re-education tapes had replaced his former knowledge of the subject.

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**T**he asteroid belt was not rigidly policed; if there was a place in the System in which legal niceties were not strictly observed, it was there. What could he deduce from that? Nothing perhaps; there were many people living in the belt who were engaged in legitimate work: miners, prospectors, scientific investigators. But with rising excitement, he realized that Dorn Starret was not one of these.

He was a criminal. The gallium mine was merely an attempt to cover himself with respectability. How did Luis know that? He wasn't sure; his thought processes were hidden and erratic; but he knew.

Dorn Starret was a criminal—but the information wasn't completely satisfactory. What had caused the man to retrogress Luis and Luise Obispo? That still had to be determined.

But it did suggest this: as a habitual criminal, the man was more than ordinarily dangerous.

Luis sat there a while longer, but he had recalled everything that would come out of the original stimulus. If he wanted more, he would have to dig up other facts or make further contacts. But at least it wasn't hopeless—even without the police, he had learned this much.

He went over the room thoroughly once more. If there was anything hidden, he couldn't find it.

He crossed the court to Luise's dwelling. She was gone, but there was a note on the table. He picked it up and read it:

*Dear man with no name:*

*I suppose you were here last night, though I'm so mixed up I can't be sure; there's so little of memory or reality to base anything on. I wanted to talk to you before I left but I guess, like me, you're out investigating.*

*There's always a danger that neither of us will like what we find. What if I'm married to another person and the same with you? Suppose ... but there are countless suppositions—these are the risks we take. It's intolerable not to know who I am, especially since the knowledge is so close. But of course you know that.*

*Anyway I'll be out most of the day. I discovered a psychologist who specializes in restoring memory; you can see the possibilities in that. I went there yesterday and have an appointment again today. It's nice of him, considering that I have no money, but he says I'm more or less an experimental subject. I can't tell you when I'll be back but it won't be late.*

*Luise.*

He crumpled the note in his hand. Memory expert. Her psychologist was that—in reverse. Yesterday he had taken a day out of her life, and that was why Luise hadn't recognized him and might not a second time.

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**H**e leaned against the table. After a moment, he straightened out the note. A second reading didn't help. There it was, if he could make sense from it.

Luise and himself, probably in that order. There was no proof, but it seemed likely that she had been retrogressed first, since she had been discovered first.

There was also Dorn Starret, the criminal from Ceres who had hidden the gun in the Shelter that he, Luis, had been found in. And there was now a fourth person: the psychologist who specialized in depriving retrogression victims of what few memories they had left.

Luis grimaced. Here was information which, if the police would act on it properly ... but it was no use, they wouldn't. Any solution which came out of this would have to arise out of his own efforts.

He folded the note carefully. It would be handy to have if Luise came back and didn't know who he was.

Meanwhile, the psychologist. Luise hadn't said who he was, but it shouldn't be difficult to locate him. He went to the screen and dialed the directory. There were many psychologists in it, but no name that was familiar.

He pondered. The person who had retroed Luise and himself—what would he do? First he would take them as far from familiar scenes as he could. That tied in with the facts. Dorn Starret came from Ceres.

Then what? He would want to make certain that his victims did not trace their former lives. And he would be inconspicuous in so doing.

Again Luis turned to the screen, but this time he dialed the news service. He found what he was looking for in the advertisements of an issue a month old. It was very neat:

**DO YOU REMEMBER EVERYTHING—or is your mind hazy? Perhaps my system can help you recall those little details you find it so annoying to forget. MEMORY LAB.**

That was all. No name. But there was an address. Hurriedly Luis scanned every succeeding issue. The advertisement was still there.

He was coming closer, very close. The ad was clever; it would attract the attention of Luise and himself and others like them, and almost no one else. There was no mention of fees, no claim that it was operated by a psychologist, nothing that the police would investigate.

Night after night Luise had sat alone; sooner or later, watching the screen, she had to see the ad. It was intriguing and she had answered it. Normally, so would he have: but now he was forewarned.

Part of the cleverness was this: that she went of her own volition. She would have suspected an outright offer of help—but this seemed harmless. She went to him as she would to anyone in business. A very clever setup.

But who was behind MEMORY LAB? Luis thought he knew. A trained psychologist with a legitimate purpose would attach his name to the advertisement.

Luis patted the retro gun in his pocket. Dorn Starret, criminal, and inventor of a fictitious

memory system, was going to have a visitor. It wasn't necessary to go to Ceres to see him.

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It was the only conclusion that made sense. Dorn Starret had retroed him—the gun proved that—and Luise as well. Until a few minutes ago, he had thought that she had been first and he later, but that was wrong. They had been retrogressed together and Dorn Starret had done it; now he had come back to make certain that they didn't trace him.

Neat—but it wasn't going to work. Luis grinned wryly to himself. He had a weapon in his pocket that was assurance it wouldn't work.

He got off the belt near the building he had seen Luise leaving yesterday. He went into the lobby and located MEMORY LAB, a suite on the top floor. It wasn't necessary, but he checked rental dates. The lab had been there exactly three weeks. This tied in with Luise's release from retrotherapy. Every connection he had anticipated was there.

He rode up to the top floor. There wasn't a chance that Starret would recognize him; physically he must have changed too much since the criminal had last seen him. And while Luise hadn't concealed that she was a retro and so had given herself away, he wasn't going to make that mistake.

The sign on the door stood out as he came near and disappeared as he went by. MEMORY LAB, that was all—no other name, even here. Naturally. A false name would be occasion for police action. The right one would evoke Luise's and his own memories.

He turned back and went into the waiting room. No robot receptionist. He expected that; the man didn't intend to be around very long.

"Who's there?" The voice came from a speaker in the wall; the screen beside it remained blank, though obviously the man was in the next room. For a commercial establishment, the LAB was not considerate of potential clients.

Luis smiled sourly and loosened the weapon in his pocket. "I saw your advertisement," he said. No name; let him guess.

"I'm very busy. Can you come back tomorrow?"

Luis frowned. This was not according to plan. First, he didn't recognize the voice, though the speaker could account for that if it were intentionally distorted. Second, Luise was inside and he had to protect her. He could break in, but he preferred that the man come out.

He thought swiftly. "I'm Chals Putsyn, gallium importer," he called. "Tomorrow I'll be away on business. Can you give me an appointment for another time?"

There was a long silence. "Wait. I'll be out."

He'd *thought* the mention of gallium would do it. True, the mine Starret owned was probably worthless, but he couldn't restrain his curiosity.

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The door swung open and a man stepped out, closing the door before Luis could see inside. He had erred—the man was not Dorn Starret.

The other eyed him keenly. "Mr. Chals Putsyn? Please sit down."

Luis did so slowly, giving himself time to complete a mental inventory. The man *had* to be Dorn Starret—and yet he wasn't. No disguise could be that effective. At least three inches shorter; the shape of his head was different; his body was slighter. Moreover, he was right-handed, not left, as Starret was.

Luis had a story ready—names, dates, and circumstances. It sounded authentic even to himself.

The man listened impatiently. "I may not be able to help you," he said, interrupting. "Oddly enough, light cases are hardest. It's the serious memory blocks that I specialize in." There was something strange about his eyes—his voice too. "However, if you can come back in two days, late in the afternoon, I'll see what I can do."

Luis took the appointment card and found himself firmly ushered to the door. It was disturbing; Luise was in the next room, but the man gave him no opportunity to see her.

He stood uncertainly in the hall. The whole interview had taken only a few minutes, and during that time all his previous ideas had been upset. If the man was not Dorn Starret, who was he and what was his connection? The criminal from Ceres was not so foolish as to attempt to solve his problems by assigning them to another person. This was a one-man job from beginning to end, or ought to be.

Luis took the elevator to the ground floor and walked out aimlessly on the street. There was something queer about the man on the top floor. It took time to discover what it was.

The man was not Starret—but he was disguised. His irises were stained another color and the voice was not his own—or rather it was, but filtered through an artificial larynx inserted painfully in his throat. And his face had been recently swabbed with a chemical irritant which caused the tissues beneath his skin to swell, making his face appear plumper.

Luis took a deep breath. Unconsciously he had noticed details too slight for the average person to discern. This suggested something about his own past—that he was trained to recognize disguises.

But more important was this: that the man was disguised at all. The reason was obvious—to avoid evoking memories.

The man's name—what was it? It hadn't even been registered in the building—he'd asked on his way out. And Luise couldn't tell him. She was no longer a reliable source of information. He had to find out, and there was only one way that suggested itself.

Luise was still in there, but not in physical danger. The police were lax about other things, but not about murder, and the man knew that. She might lose her memories of the past few weeks; regrettable if it happened, but not a catastrophe.



But who was the man and what was his connection?

He spent the rest of the day buying equipment—not much, but his money dwindled rapidly. He considered going back to the Shelter and then decided against it. By this time Luise would be back, and he would be tempted not to leave her.

After dark, when the lights in the offices went out, he rented an aircar and set it down on the top of the building.

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**H**e walked across the roof, estimating the distances with practiced ease, as if he'd undergone extensive training and the apprenticeship period had been forgotten and only the skill remained. He knelt and fused two small rods to a portion of the roof, and then readjusted the torch and cut a small circular hole. He listened, and when there was no alarm, lifted out the section. There was nothing but darkness below.

He fastened a rope to the aircar. He dropped the rope through the hole and slid down. Unless he had miscalculated, he was where he wanted to be, having bypassed all alarm circuits. There were others inside, he was reasonably certain of that, but with ordinary precautions he could avoid them.

He flashed on a tiny light. He had guessed right; this was MEMORY LAB—the room he'd wanted to see this afternoon but hadn't been able to. In front of him was the door to the waiting room, and beyond that the hall. He swung the light in an arc, flashing it over a desk and a piece of equipment the nature of which he didn't know. Behind him was still another door.

The desk was locked, but he took out a small magnetic device and jiggled it expertly over the concealed mechanism and then it was unlocked. He went hurriedly through papers and documents, but there was nothing with a name on it. He rifled the desk thoroughly and then went to the machine.

He didn't expect to learn anything, but he might as well examine it. There was a place for a patient to sit, and a metal hood to fit over the patient's head. He snapped the hood open and



peered into it. It seemed to have two functions. One circuit was far larger and more complicated, and he couldn't determine what it did. But he recognized the other circuit; essentially it was a retrogressor, but whereas the gun was crude and couldn't be regulated, this was capable of fine adjustment—enough, say, to slice a day out of the patient's life, and no more.

That fitted with what had happened to Luise. She had been experimented on in some way, and then the memory of that experiment had been erased. But the man had grown careless and had taken away one day too many.

He snapped the mechanism closed. This was the method, but he still didn't know who the man was nor why he found it necessary to do all this.

There was a door behind him and the answer might lie beyond it. He listened carefully, then swung the door open and went through.

The blow that hit him wasn't physical; nothing mechanical could take his nerves and jerk them all at once. A freezer. As he fell to the floor, he was grateful it was that and not a retro gun.

Lights flooded the place, and the man of the afternoon interview was grinning at him.

"I thought you'd be back," he said, pleased. "In fact, I knew you would."

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Somewhere he had blundered; but he didn't know how. Experimentally he wriggled his fingers. They moved a fraction of an inch, but no more. He was helpless and couldn't say anything. He wasn't quite sure at the moment that he wanted to.

"You were right, I didn't recognize you physically," continued the man. "Nevertheless, you gave yourself away. The name you used this afternoon, Chals Putsyn, is *my* name. Do you remember now?"

Of course. He'd chosen Chals Putsyn at random, because he'd had to say something, and everything would have been all right—except it actually hadn't been a random choice. The associations had triggered the wrong words into existence.

His mind flashed back to the time he'd discussed names with Borgnese. What had he said?

Putsy. But it wasn't Putsy—it was Putsyn.

"You're very much improved," said the real Chals Putsyn, staring curiously at him. "Let me recommend the retro treatment to you. In fact I'd take it myself, but there are a few inconveniences."

Yeah, there were inconveniences—like starting over again and not knowing who you were.

But Putsyn was right: he was physically improved. A freezer knocked a man down and kept him there for half an hour. But Luis had only been down a few minutes, and already he could move his feet, though he didn't. It was a phenomenally fast recovery, and perhaps Putsyn wasn't aware of it.

"The question is, what to do with you?" Putsyn seemed to be thinking aloud. "The police are intolerant of killing. Maybe if I disposed of every atom...." He shook his head and sighed. "But that's been tried, and it didn't make any difference. So you'll have to remain alive—though I don't think you'll approve of my treatment."

Luis didn't approve—it would be the same kind of treatment that Luise had been exposed to, but more drastic in his case, because he was aware of what was going on.

Putsyn came close to drag him away. It was time to use the energy he'd been saving up, and he did.

Startled, Putsyn fired the freezer, but he was aiming at a twisting target and the invisible energy only grazed Luis's leg. The leg went limp and had no feeling, but his two hands were still good and that was all he needed.

He tore the freezer away and put his other hand on Putsyn's throat. He could feel the artificial larynx inside. He squeezed.

He lay there until Putsyn went limp.

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When there was no longer any movement, he sat up and pried open the man's jaws, thrusting his fingers into the mouth and jerking out the artificial larynx. The next time he would hear Putsyn's real voice, and maybe that would trigger his memory.

He crawled to the door and pulled himself up, leaning against the wall. By the time Putsyn moved, he had regained partial use of his leg.

"Now we'll see," he said. He didn't try to put anger in his voice; it was there. "I don't have to tell

you that I can beat answers out of you."

"You don't know?" Putsyn laughed and there was relief in the sound. "You can kick me around, but you won't get your answers!"

The man had physical courage, or thought he did, and sometimes that amounted to the same thing. Luis shifted uneasily. It was the first time he'd heard Putsyn's actual voice; it was disturbing, but it didn't arouse concrete memories.

He stepped on the outstretched hand. "Think so?" he said. He could hear the fingers crackle.

Putsyn paled, but didn't cry out. "Don't think you can kill me and get away with it," he said.

He didn't sound too certain.

Slightly sick, Luis stepped off the hand. He couldn't kill the man—and not just because of the police. He just couldn't do it. He felt for the other gun in his pocket.

"This isn't a freezer," he said. "It's been changed over. I think I'll give you a sample."

Putsyn blinked. "And lose all chance of finding out? Go ahead."

Luis had thought of that; but he hadn't expected Putsyn to.

"You see, there's nothing you can do," said Putsyn. "A man has a right to protect his property, and I've got plenty of evidence that you broke in."

"I don't think you'll go to the police," Luis said.

"You think not? My memory system isn't a fraud. Admittedly, I didn't use it properly on Luise, but in a public demonstration I can prove that it does work."

Luis nodded wearily to himself. He'd half suspected that it did work. Here he was, with the solution so close—this man knew his identity and that of Luise, and where Dorn Starret came into the tangle—and he couldn't force Putsyn to tell.

He couldn't go to the police. They would ignore his charges, because they were based on unprovable suspicions ... ignore him or arrest him for breaking and entering.

"Everything's in your favor," he said, raising the gun. "But there's one way to make you leave us alone."

"Wait," cried Putsyn, covering his face with his uninjured hand, as if that would shield him. "Maybe we can work out an agreement."

Luis didn't lower the gun. "I mean it," he said.

"I know you mean it—I can't let you take away my life's work."

"Talk fast," Luis said, "and don't lie."

He stood close and listened while Putsyn told his story.

This is what had happened, he thought. This is what he'd tried so hard to learn.

"I had to do it that way," Putsyn finished. "But if you're willing to listen to reason, I can cut you in—more money than you've dreamed of—and the girl too, if you want her."

Luis was silent. He wanted her—but now the thought was foolish. Hopeless. This must be the way people felt who stood in the blast area of a rocket—but for them the sensation lasted only an instant, while for him the feeling would last the rest of his life.

"Get up," he said.

"Then it's all right?" asked Putsyn nervously. "We'll share it?"

"Get up."

Putsyn got to his feet, and Luis hit him. He could have used the freezer, but that wasn't personal enough.

He let the body fall to the floor.

He dragged the inert form into the waiting room and turned on the screen and talked to the police. Then he turned off the screen and kicked open the door to the hall. He shouldered Putsyn and carried him up to the roof and put him in the aircar.

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**L**uise was there, puzzled and sleepy. For reasons of his own, Borgnese had sent a squad to bring her in. Might as well have her here and get it over with, Luis thought. She smiled at him, and he knew that Putsyn hadn't lied about that part. She remembered him and therefore Putsyn hadn't had time to do much damage.

Borgnese was at the desk as he walked in. Luis swung Putsyn off his shoulder and dropped him

into a chair. The man was still unconscious, but wouldn't be for long.

"I see you brought a visitor," remarked Borgenesse pleasantly.

"A customer," he said.

"Customers are welcome too," said the police counselor. "Of course, it's up to us to decide whether he *is* a customer."

Luise started to cross the room, but Borgenesse motioned her back. "Let him alone. I think he's going to have a rough time."

"Yeah," said Luis.

It was nice to know that Luise liked him now—because she wouldn't after this was over.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead; all of it hadn't come from physical exertion.

"Putsyn here is a scientist," he said. "He worked out a machine that reverses the effects of the retro gun. He intended to go to everyone who'd been retrogressed, and in return for giving them back their memory, they'd sign over most of their property to him.

"Naturally, they'd agree. They all want to return to their former lives that bad, and, of course, they aren't aware of how much money they had. He had it all his way. He could use the machine to investigate them, and take only those who were really wealthy. He'd give them a partial recovery in the machine, and when he found out who they were, give them a quick shot of a built-in retro gun, taking them back to the time they'd just entered his office. They wouldn't suspect a thing.

"Those who measured up he'd sign an agreement with, and to the other poor devils he'd say that he was sorry but he couldn't help them."

Putsyn was conscious now. "It's not so," he said sullenly. "He can't prove it."

"I don't think he's trying to prove that," said Borgenesse, still calm. "Let him talk."

Luis took a deep breath. "He might have gotten away with it, but he'd hired a laboratory assistant to help him perfect the machine. She didn't like his ideas; she thought a discovery like that should be given to the public. He didn't particularly care what she thought, but now the trouble was that she could build it too, and since he couldn't patent it and still keep it secret, she was a threat to his plans." He paused. "Her name was Luise Obispo."

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**H**e didn't have to turn his head. From the corner of his eye, he could see startlement flash across her face. She'd got her name right; and it was he who had erred in choosing a name.

"Putsyn hired a criminal, Dorn Starret, to get rid of her for him," he said harshly. "That was the way Starret made his living. He was an expert at it.

"Starret slugged her one night on Mars. He didn't retro her at once. He loaded her on a spaceship and brought her to Earth. During the passage, he talked to her and got to like her a lot. She wasn't as developed as she is now, kind of mousy maybe, but you know how those things are—he liked her. He made love to her, but didn't get very far.

"He landed in another city on Earth and left his spaceship there; he drugged her and brought her to the Shelter here and retroed her. That's what he'd been paid to do.

"Then he decided to stick around. Maybe she'd change her mind after retrogression. He stayed in a Shelter just across from the one she was in. And he made a mistake. He hid the retro gun behind the screen.

"Putsyn came around to check up. He didn't like Starret staying there—a key word or a familiar face sometimes triggers the memory. He retroed Starret, who didn't have a gun he could get to in a hurry. Maybe Putsyn had planned to do it all along. He'd built up an airtight alibi when Luise disappeared, so that nobody would connect him with that—and who'd miss a criminal like Starret?

"Anyway, that was only part of it. He knew that people who've been retroed try to find out who they are, and that some of them succeed. He didn't want that to happen. So he put an advertisement in the paper that she'd see and answer. When she did, he began to use his machine on her, intending to take her from the present to the past and back again so often that her mind would refuse to accept anything, past or present.

"But he'd just started when Starret showed up, and he knew he had to get him too. So he pulled what looked like a deliberate slip and got Starret interested, intending to take care of both of them in the same way at the same time."

He leaned against the wall. It was over now and he knew what he could expect.

"That's all, but it didn't work out the way Putsyn wanted it. Starret was a guy who knew how to look after his own interests."

Except the biggest and most important one; there he'd failed.

Borgenesse was tapping on the desk, but it wasn't really tapping—he was pushing buttons. A policeman came in and the counselor motioned to Putsyn: "Put him in the pre-trial cells."

"You can't prove it," said Putsyn. His face was sunken and frightened.

"I think we can," said the counselor indifferently. "You don't know the efficiency of our laboratories. You'll talk."

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**W**hen Putsyn had been removed, Borgenesse turned. "Very good work, Luis. I'm pleased with you. I think in time you'd make an excellent policeman. Retro detail, of course."

Luis stared at him.

"Didn't you listen?" he said. "I'm Dorn Starret, a cheap crook."

In that mental picture of Starret he'd had, he should have seen it at once. Left-handed? Not at all—that was the way a man normally saw himself in a mirror. And in mirror images, the right hand becomes the left.

The counselor sat up straight, not gentle and easygoing any longer. "I'm afraid you can't prove that," he said. "Fingerprints? Will any of Starret's past associates identify you? There's Putsyn, but he won't be around to testify." He smiled. "As final evidence let me ask you this: when he offered you a share in his crooked scheme, did you accept? You did not. Instead, you brought him in, though you thought you were heading into certain retrogression."

Luis blinked dazedly. "But—"

"There are no exceptions, Luis. For certain crimes there is a prescribed penalty, retrogression. The law makes no distinction as to how the penalty is applied, and for a good reason. If there was such a person, Dorn Starret ceased to exist when Putsyn retroed him—and not only legally."

Counselor Borgenesse stood up. "You see, retroing a person wipes him clean of almost everything he ever knew—*right and wrong*. It leaves him with an adult body, and we fill his mind with adult facts. Given half a chance, he acts like an adult."

Borgenesse walked slowly to stand in front of his desk. "We protect life. Everybody's life. *Including those who are not yet victims*. We don't have the death penalty and don't want it. The most we can do to anyone is give him a new chance, via retrogression. We have the same penalty for those who deprive another of his memory as we do for those who kill—with this difference: the man who retrogresses another knows he has a good chance to get away with it. The murderer is certain that he won't.

"That's an administrative rule, not a law—that we don't try to trace retrogression victims. It channels anger and greed into non-destructive acts. There are a lot of unruly emotions floating around, and as long as there are, we have to have a safety valve for them. Retrogression is the perfect instrument for that."

Luise tried to speak, but he waved her into silence.

"Do you know how many were killed last year?" he asked.

Luis shook his head.

"Four," said the counselor. "Four murders in a population of sixteen billion. That's quite a record, as anyone knows who reads Twentieth Century mystery novels." He glanced humorously at Luis. "You did, didn't you?"

Luis nodded mutely.

Borgenesse grinned. "I thought so. There are only three types of people who know about fingerprints today, historians and policemen being two. And I didn't think you were either."

Luise finally broke in. "Won't Putsyn's machine change things?"

"Will it?" The counselor pretended to frown. "Do you remember how to build it?"

"I've forgotten," she confessed.

"So you have," said Borgenesse. "And I assure you Putsyn is going to forget too. As a convicted criminal, and he will be, we'll provide him with a false memory that will prevent his prying into the past.

"That's one machine we don't want until humans are fully and completely civilized. It's been invented a dozen times in the last century, and it always gets lost."

He closed his eyes momentarily, and when he opened them, Luise was looking at Luis, who was staring at the floor.

"You two can go now," he said. "When you get ready, there are jobs for both of you in my

department. No hurry, though; we'll keep them open."

Luis left, went out through the long corridors and into the night.

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She caught up with him when he was getting off the belt that had taken him back to the Shelters.

"There's not much you can say, I suppose," she murmured. "What can you tell a girl when she learns you've stopped just short of killing her?"

He didn't know the answer either.

They walked in silence.

She stopped at her dwelling, but didn't go in. "Still, it's an indication of how you felt—that you forgot your own name and took mine." She was smiling now. "I don't see how I can do less for you."

Hope stirred and he moved closer. But he didn't speak. She might not mean what he thought she did.

"Luis and Luise Obispo," she said softly. "Very little change for me—just add Mrs. to it." She was gazing at him with familiar intensity. "Do you want to come in?"

She opened the door.

Crime was sometimes the road to opportunity, and retrogression could be kind.

—F. L. WALLACE

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