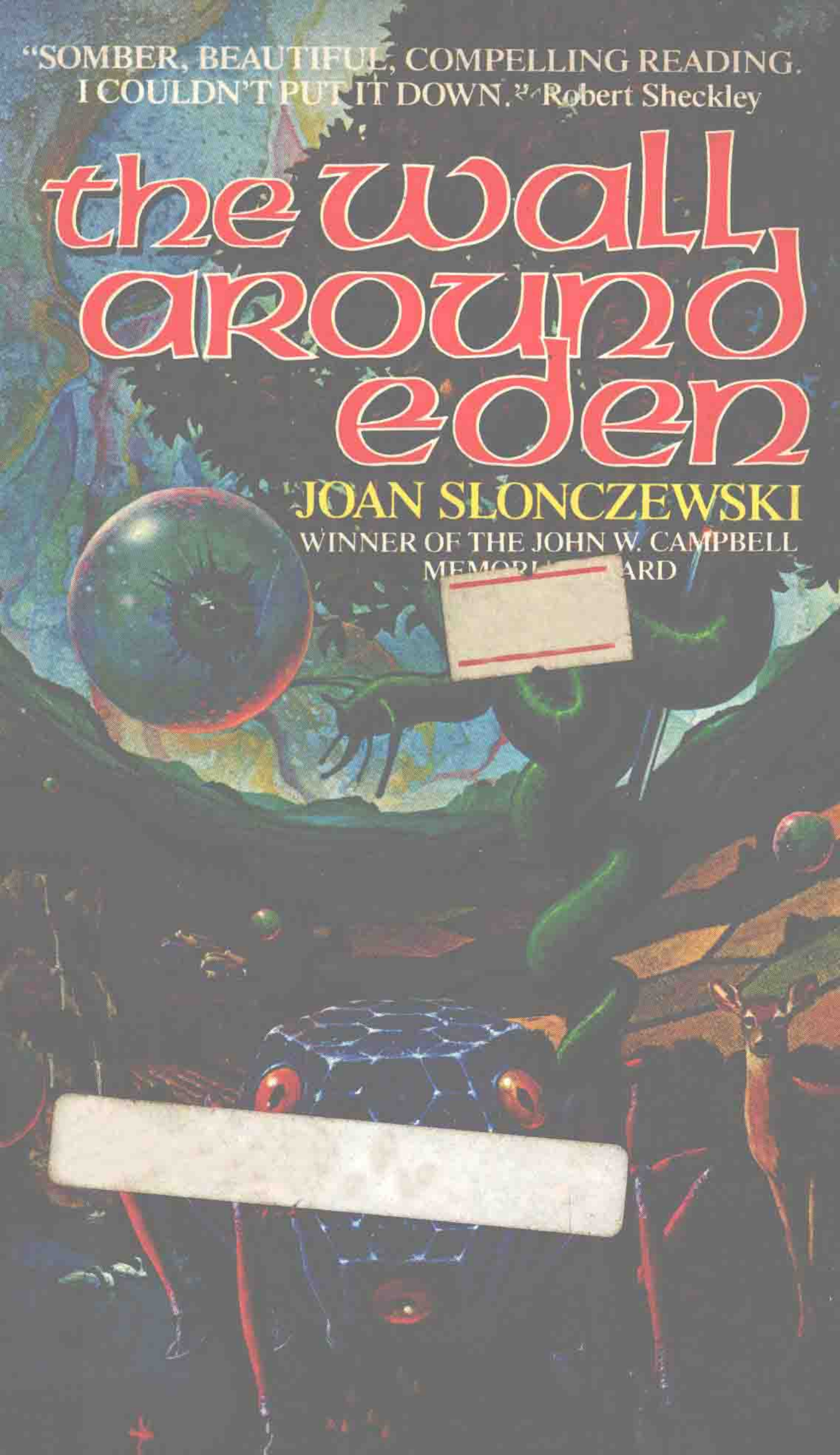


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the wall
around
eden

JOAN SLONCZEWSKI

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**For my son, Daniel,
who told me that God will appear as a
mouse creeping out from the wall**

AT THE TOP of Gwynwood Hill the path dipped, the mat of pine needles fell away, and without care you might slip down the cliff in the darkness. But Isabel Garcia-Chase knew the path too well; she stopped herself at the edge, breathing hard from the hurried climb.

Tonight the angelbees would appear in the clearing below, as they did each month at the new moon. But what if they caught her and Daniel watching?

Isabel turned off her flashlight, her hands shaking with apprehension. She stared out upon the shrouded clearing. In the clearing beneath the stars rose the Pylon, a six-sided pyramid, white and pointed like a sun-bleached rib. The Pylon was where the angelbees would appear.

Angelbees had ruled what remained of the human race since the Death Year, in enclaves like Gwynwood. Each enclave was imprisoned by an invisible airwall like the Gwynwood Wall, an immense dome of pressure some ten miles across. Just outside the Wall lay another sort of wall, of piled bones and even complete skeletons, all sun-bleached whiter than the Pylon.

The angelbees would communicate only with their chosen Contact, here at the Pylon, which stood at the center of the enclosed land. But now the Contact, Daniel's grandmother Alice Scattergood, was confined to bed, dying of leukemia, like so many others in the twenty years since the Death Year. The moon was dark, but Alice could not come. What would the angelbees do without their Contact?

Isabel planned to find out. Whatever she learned, she would use, somehow, to resist those masters of Earth.

"Daniel?" she called softly to her companion, a fellow graduate of the Gwynwood "high school." Along with three classmates, theirs was the first high school class to graduate since the Death Year.

Crickets chortled steadily, and from a branch above her the cry of a barn owl wheezed and choked off. Daniel Jacoby

had fallen behind as he picked his way up Gwynwood Hill at a more studied pace.

For a moment Isabel felt amiss, as if she had broken the silence of Quaker Worship. What if Daniel had fainted again, as he often did from his anemia?

Daniel's steps sounded at last, heavily, as he pushed back a branch and appeared at the cliff's edge. Like her, Daniel wore faded farmer's overalls. His face was pale in the starlight, his mouth small and serious as usual, though in a tranquil way that made her yearn to touch his cheek. Why had he agreed to come, Isabel wondered; why had he bothered with what she expected him to call a fool's errand?

"Daniel, are you all right?"

His eyes turned toward her. She could barely see in the dark, but she knew his eyes so well, the most beautiful eyes she knew. Like lodestars, she recalled from *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Daniel said, "I am fine, thanks. And thee?"

"I'm okay. Just watching."

Daniel's anemia had troubled him since childhood, thanks to the radioactive poisons that seeped in from the deadland beyond the Wall. Isabel knew all about it; she kept the card file for her mother, Dr. Marguerite Chase, the Town's only doctor. Daniel's card said that he might not live out his twenties. A bone-marrow transplant would save him; but the only place to get it was Sydney, the one City left on Earth. If only the Walls would fall.

Isabel clenched her binoculars. "Wait till we catch those angelbees. We'll find a chink in their armor yet." Few chinks had appeared in twenty years. Tunneling the Wall, disobeying the Pylon, potshots at angelbees—the only result was the whole town got put to sleep for three days. After that happened, the Town Meeting forbade any more resistance.

Daniel said, "I don't see any angelbees. Perhaps they know that Alice is sick."

Isabel tossed her black hair back over her shoulder and searched the valley again. She was tall, and her profile jutted a bit harshly, like a "Spanish aristocrat," her mother used to say, referring to her Chilean-born father. In the daytime, she could have seen past the Pylon and the farms all the way to where the invisible Wall enclosed Gwynwood, and the ring of

bones lay outside, marking the edge of the Pennsylvania deadland. But now the valley was dark, and you could not even see the Meetinghouse; that is, the Church, if you were Lutheran. The field below twinkled with fireflies, while above, the sky glittered with stars that came out of hiding when the moon was gone. To the west, a meteor streaked down, a straggler from the Perseid shower the week before.

And up there in Leo, tracking steadily, was a reddish satellite, believed to hold the Hive of the angelbees. But still no sign of angelbees at the Pylon.

"Oh, look—"

A dusky glow filled the Pylon, as if a candle had been lit within, delineating its six faces. Isabel's pulse raced. She stared, and the binoculars became slippery with sweat in her hands.

Wisps of cloud appeared around the Pylon, thickening until the Pylon was obscured. The fog grew until it filled out a hemisphere, about the height of an oak tree. The surface of the hemisphere, Isabel knew, was a miniature airwall which kept humans out of the Pylon's domain, just as the greater Wall around Gwynwood kept them in. But angelbees could pass through the Pylon's airwall, as did the Sydney mailbag, and once even a criminal transportee from Chile, who later became her father. How did things "arrive" there, in that little space around the Pylon? Something happened to time and space, something that defied what humans knew of physics, her favorite class at school.

"The Pylon won't talk," Daniel warned. "Alice is not there."

Alice Scattergood was the only human in Gwynwood whom the angelbees would "talk" to—once a month, when the moon was new and least interfered with their night vision. They did not really "talk," but made "visions" appear in the Pylon, as the Contact put it. "Visions" might warn of an impending storm, or advise the destruction of a radioactive corn crop, or herald the arrival of a transportee from another Wall-town, like Isabel's father.

There was no other way out. No human had ever breached a Wall.

Below, within the Pylon's airwall, the fog receded a bit

and an unfamiliar dark object appeared. Isabel pressed the binoculars to her eyes and winced in pain as the eyepiece jabbed her skull. The object looked like a long, jointed spiderleg with a cupped foot pressed into the ground. The spiderleg was visible barely long enough for Isabel to be sure she had seen it before it vanished again in the fog. "Daniel, what is it? A spacecraft of some sort?" It looked so fragile. Mentally she filed this datum for future use. *Spacecraft—fragile*. The Underground might want to know about this.

Above the hemisphere of fog emerged the first angelbee, a pale reflective globe, like a miniature moon. It floated upward, followed by another, and then another. Each globe had a dark eyespot that passed across its face as it rotated. The fourth angelbee had a secondary globe growing out of one side, a budding daughter cell.

The first people to see the creatures, when they had appeared after Doomsday, had called them "bees" because they arrived in a swarm, out of a spaceship of hexagonal cells, it was said, though none had ever seen the ship since. Others had called them "angels," for the beauty of their shimmering forms. So they were "angelbees," the diminutive limbless destroyers of Earth.

"Why did they come?" asked Daniel, as if to himself. "Whatever brought them to Earth, in the first instance?"

"Why indeed," said Isabel dryly. "*Veni, vidi, vici*. They've used Earth as they pleased, ever since Doomsday." June twenty-third that was, twenty-one years before. Isabel's arm itched, irritated by the sweat rolling down, and she tried not to scratch at the scaly patches that were not just dry skin. Epithelioma, said her card in the file.

"But why," Daniel wondered. "What do they want from us?"

Isabel frowned. "They want nothing particular from us. What did the British colonists want from the New World?"

"They took such trouble to preserve us."

"So we're an Indian reservation."

"They must have a conscience, then."

"Conscience!" Isabel laughed briefly. "'A very gentle beast, and of a good conscience.' Come, Daniel. Even Quakers can't make excuses for the creatures that started the Six-Min-

ute War." On Doomsday the angelbees had jammed the radar of both sides with illusory missile trails. In six minutes the world was crippled by fire; it took another year to die of ice.

"Nahum says that's not how it happened," said Daniel. Nahum Scattergood, whose mother was the Contact, was Daniel's uncle. "Nahum does not believe the *Sydney Herald*."

"Nahum is such a literal old Quaker, he wouldn't believe a black sheep was black on the far side."

"Thee should not talk so, Isabel."

She smiled at his annoyance. Isabel's mother was a Quaker too, though not a strict "plain Friend" like the Scattergoods. But Isabel was getting tired of Quakers; they were as bad as the Lutherans about her attempts to join the Underground.

A mosquito buzzed in her ear. She slapped at it and lost the view in her binoculars for a moment. When she looked up, she blinked in surprise. "Those angelbees—so many of them."

All at once there seemed to be dozens of the moonlike globes, floating across the plain, toward the abandoned highway where they had made a bit of marshland to wallow in. Angelbees fed themselves in the marsh by soaking up methane, most of which was metabolized to hydrogen, which filled the buoyant spheres.

"Isabel." Daniel's voice was lower but not tense, which for him meant he was beginning to get worried. "Thee knows that we should not be here."

Yet he had come, after all, because she had asked. Perhaps he might yet join the Underground, even though he was a "plain Friend."

"The angelbees may see us here," Daniel warned. "They see . . . warmth, beyond red."

"Infrared." The angelbees could "see" out to wavelengths more than ten times longer than red light—the wavelength of body heat. Like rattlesnakes, angelbees could see you in the dark.

Against the stars, a touch of light caught her eye. Dropping her binoculars, she caught her breath and craned her neck toward the sky. A streak of pale orange grew into a jagged

branch, limbs of it creeping into the black as if the sky itself were cracking and peeling.

Isabel gasped, her forehead turned cold, and she leaned against a birch trunk to steady herself. She tried to speak, but she could not, as the trail of orange bled into the night sky. It was two years since the last time this had happened, the sky going wild as the upper atmosphere boiled away, ensuring that the ozone would never return to screen the murderous ultraviolet from the sun's rays. This was how the angelbees kept the deadland dead.

She watched, transfixed by the spectre of the tortured sky, until she barely recalled where she was or how long she had been there. She became aware of Daniel's arm around her shoulders as he watched the sky with her, and his voice repeating lines from Isaiah. What good was that? Daniel would die, perhaps they all would, unless someone drove out the angelbees.

"Conscience, indeed," she whispered. "We're worse off than slaves." Isabel reflected on her own slave ancestors and wondered, not for the first time, what they would have done.

"God will send us freedom," Daniel said, "when we've earned it."

"When we fight for it." She thought about the Underground Resistance in Sydney, and about the radio she was building in secret to get in touch with them. If only she could convince Daniel to help her.

From across the valley came the sound of the hospital alarm, its distant ring competing with the crickets.

Daniel's fingers dug into her arm. "It must be Grandmother Alice—"

"Or Ruth's baby at last. It could be a dozen things. Come on." In any event, Isabel would be needed at the hospital.

They hiked swiftly down to the dirt road, where they picked up their bikes near Anna Tran's house and rode another mile through fields of wheat and soy. All the while, the sky above was cracking and peeling like orange cellophane.

The road turned onto the old highway, a stretch of cracked pavement overgrown by grass and Queen Anne's lace; it cut straight through Gwynwood, coming in from the deadland and leading out again. The light from their pedal-driven

headlights pulsed across the old gas station, and the storefronts which had been empty as long as Isabel could remember, windows gaping empty like the eyes of a skull. The town, whose survivors numbered a hundred forty-one, had no need of stores.

At last they turned up Radnor Lane, and another block up was Isabel's house, a white colonial with a faded rose pattern in the slate roof. The hospital was on the second floor.

Isabel leaned her bike next to the garage, where her machine shop was set up. Breathing hard, she noted the horses tied to the fence; the bay mare hitched to Liza Scattergood's carriage, and the piebald hitched to Ruth Weiss's. So it must be Ruth Weiss having her baby, and Nahum's wife, Liza, had come to help. Isabel sighed with relief and headed up the steps, not waiting for Daniel.

The interior was dark, with just a fifteen-watt bulb above the stairs. A smell of ammonia drifted down, from recent cleaning. Isabel went on upstairs.

Voices came from the far end of the hall, formerly the bedroom of her grandparents, where the birthing was done now. Inside, Ruth Weiss stood leaning over the back of a chair, her blouse dark with perspiration, her black hair matted over her face. Beside her sat her sister-in-law, Becca Weiss, the blind schoolteacher whom all the kids called Teacher Becca. Teacher Becca had kept them riveted with her reading of *Midsummer Night's Dream* the year before. Becca had been blinded on Doomsday; a twelve-year-old climbing an apple tree, she happened to be looking toward Philadelphia when the nuclear flash hit.

Gently Becca massaged Ruth's shoulders and brushed the hair from her face. Isabel's tongue thickened, recalling that Ruth's husband Aaron, Becca's brother, should have been here, only he had succumbed to melanoma two months before. Aaron's last days in the hospital came back to her, but she forced herself back to the present.

"Breathe, breathe," murmured Becca.

Ruth's breathing was good and regular, about every five seconds. It sounded like a mid-phase contraction.

"Active labor, four centimeters." Isabel's mother, Dr. Marguerite Chase, spoke for the first time from behind the tray of

instruments. "Looks like a hole in one." She meant, the head had plenty of room to descend. Marguerite had Isabel's dark complexion, her African features unusual in this town, with tight waves of black hair caught in a green surgical cap. Her busy hands were red and chafed from incessant hand-scrubbing; the doctor could not risk spreading infection when the nearest batch of ampicillin might be a continent away.

Isabel crossed the room to bathe her own hands in disinfectant. Ruth's breathing quieted as the contraction subsided, and she paced across the room to relax. Isabel nodded to the remaining two women seated in the corner: tall Liza Scattergood, and Grace Feltman, the orphaned "Special Child" whom the Scattergoods had taken in. Despite the heat, both Liza and Grace wore "plain dress," a long skirt of gray homespun with the hair pinned back in a white cap. Grace was the only survivor born during the Death Year. Two years older than Isabel, she had reached a mental age of five. As Daniel appeared in the doorway at last, Grace flashed a broad smile and clapped her hands. Daniel taught the children in Sunday School.

What had possessed Liza to bring her, Isabel wondered. Grace's presence would hardly be a comfort at a birth.

"Good evening, Friends," Liza spoke in a firm voice. "Grace was so anxious to come," she added, as if answering Isabel's unspoken question. "She loves the little babies."

"Good evening, Liza," said Isabel. Liza's remark troubled her. By age eighteen, they said, you had to start the babies since two out of four would not make it to adulthood. Even then, you would not live to see them grow up. That was the fate of those born since Doomsday.

But Isabel had other plans. Isabel wanted to go to the Sydney Uni, to get a real education, as her mother had. For now, she studied physics with Teacher Matthew, and even Latin when the elders insisted.

"Water," Ruth asked hoarsely. Marguerite nodded, and Liza got up to pass her an ice chip.

"Isabel, dear, please check the autoclave," Marguerite called to her daughter. The buzzer had blown a couple of years ago and had not been replaced.

Isabel dutifully went to check, passing Daniel, who fol-

lowed her down the hall. "Ruth is okay," she assured him. "You can go home now," she added reluctantly.

"That's okay, I'll stay and help." His eyes were so wide and hopeful.

"But tomorrow's Sunday; you teach. You need your strength."

Daniel looked away, and the dim light from the birthing room cast jagged shadows over his face. "That is true. Good night, then." He touched her arm, then left. She looked after, wishing she had let him stay.

The autoclave had been installed in the bathroom several years before. Sparks of color played across its steel handle, reflected from the ghastly light show out the window. Isabel turned the handle; the cross bars pulled in and the steam hissed as it escaped. Gloves on, she reached inside for the contents, sterile linen and bottles of saline in case they needed an IV.

The red indicator light went dark. Isabel blinked. "Mother?" she called, looking down the hall, which was dark.

"The power's gone," Marguerite called back.

Isabel flicked on her penlight and raced downstairs, trying not to stumble. In the cellar, the circuit breakers were still on. It was just as she feared; the autoclave had overdrawn the solar storage. She switched on the diesel generator, thinking at this rate Gwynwood would have to go without electricity for a month to save for the winter. Physics by candlelight.

In the birthing room, now, Ruth lay on her back in the bed, taking rapid shallow breaths, with Becca on one side and Liza on the other. "Breathe, breathe, breathe," murmured Becca, much faster now. Ruth was in transition now, the baby's head entering the birth canal.

"Oh," Ruth sobbed, "I can't go on, I—"

"All right," said Marguerite, "you can push now."

Ruth's face went taut with strain as she pushed with each contraction. At the perineum a round patch of baby scalp appeared. As Ruth cried out, the head emerged.

Isabel swallowed hard, and her stomach knotted with fear despite herself. The Wall that kept people in did not keep radioactive poisons out, even after twenty years. What if the baby was deformed, limbless like her best friend in school, or,

worse, like Grace? Liza should not have brought Grace, she thought again.

Then suddenly there was the wrinkled little creature hanging by its feet from Marguerite's fingers: the one hundred forty-second citizen of Gwynwood. It let out a squeaking cry, and a stream of urine projected out from its tiny organ.

"Well, at least that part's okay." Marguerite nodded to Isabel to take care of the umbilical cord. Isabel stripped the cord between her fingers back toward the baby, to save the extra blood, then she clamped it twice. Then Marguerite laid the little boy on Ruth's chest, where he quieted and opened his eyes, staring.

Isabel held up the pan for the afterbirth, a dark mass like a muddy fist within the pale torn sac of the amnion, the vessel that had enclosed its occupant for nine months. An amazing piece of engineering, insubstantial yet as sturdy as an airwall.

"Just as I thought," said Marguerite, "a hole in one." She grinned and hugged Isabel around the shoulders.

Everyone cheered, though they knew, of course, that faulty genes might not appear for years. The little bundle was passed from hand to hand, even Grace getting to hold him briefly above Liza's protecting arms. Then he settled to nurse for just a minute before falling asleep.

Liza opened a hamper of dinner for Ruth, lentil pie with corn on the cob, a thermos of goat's milk, and fresh-picked raspberries for all. Marguerite told Isabel, "You did great. You're getting to be a real baby-snatcher."

Isabel smiled, warm in her mother's praise. Still, though, to become a real doctor she would have to go to the Uni. Somehow, someday. Isabel took up the mop and started to clean the floor. She glanced at the clock; four A.M., her father would be getting up to milk the goats and sheep.

Teacher Becca caught her arm and gently tried to pull her close, as if to whisper in her ear. "Isabel. Do you see anything?"

"What?"

"Outside; out the window. What do you see?" Becca had only a trace of peripheral vision left, fleeting shadows around the grayness.

"The sky is burning again," Isabel told her. Liza and Mar-