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Hello May.

I haven’t written in a while and maybe it seems I only write when there’s bad news. Well, this is not the exception that proves the rule, if you know what I mean.

I lost almost all my business cards. If you got my last letter, you’ll remember I sent you one of them, so that you can see what your prodigal kid brother’s up to these days and maybe be proud, maybe just a little. If you didn’t get my letter—and who knows these days?—then they had my name, “Professor” Harry Ransom, “Professor” like that, in what they call “quotes,” because I always say I’m nothing if not honest, as best I can be, and at least I never claim to be anything I’m not. There were lightning bolts printed on either side of my name. Those cost extra. Under my name it said *Lightbringer*, then *Licensed* and then *By Appointment*, which weren’t exactly true but didn’t mean anything either way, as I saw it, and then below that *Inventor of the Ransom Process for &c &c*, which is true. A dollar for fifty at Tally’s Printers on Tenth Avenue in Melville City, and I bought two hundred-fifty, and in consequence went hungry for a week, and so did good old never-complaining Carver, my assistant, who I’m sure I’ve mentioned before.

Also I have lost my Apparatus, and my wagon, and Sasha (the horse), and just about everything else in the world I own except the white suit and my wits.

If you got my last letter you’ll be thinking, *Not again*. So am I, believe me, so am I. The strange thing is that when I think back on the incident what I first recall is those business cards sticking up in the mud in the tire tracks where they’d been scattered by those awful wings and how they looked like little white tombstones for the very tiny dead, all with my name on them, kind of funny in a way, only not really. I can picture that so clearly, but I can’t remember the name of the town at all. Memory’s strange, or at least mine is.

This is where you’d cross your arms and say, *Get to the point, Harry.* Well, okay.

I was putting on the usual show. I have told you about it before more than once and it was the same as those times, only in a new town and for a new bunch of Investors. The Apparatus was set up right in the middle of town and I had the white suit on and Carver was hunkered down the way he gets ready to work the pedals and the Demonstration was ready to commence. I have told you before that I don’t like to describe the Apparatus in writing, not because I don’t trust you, May, but because I don’t trust the mail. There are always snoops, in particular if the mail goes across Line Territories, as it must to get to you. And as I have confessed before, the status of my patents is questionable. So no more on that except to say that the sun had come out after a morning of rain and the Glass shone in it and so did the copper coils, everything shining like a premonition of that greater and perpetual Light that was to come next, was to come as soon as Carver threw the switch. Or so I hoped, the Apparatus not in fact being reliable always, or even often, as I have always been honest about, at least with you, May, at least with you.

So I stood before the assembled citizenry of Wherever-It-Was and opened my arms wide and said: *Ladies*. And before I could get as far as *Gentlemen* there was a terrible roaring sound. *Gentlemen*, I said anyway. *Behold*. Then I shut up.

A dirt road led into town, into to the heart of Whatever-They-Called-It. Up that road five or maybe six motor cars were approaching. They roared and threw up dust and smoked in the way of all the things of the Line. A moment later two of their Heavier-Than-Air Vessels appeared in the sky like they’d dropped from the clouds, and they circled, iron wings a-clatter, spyglasses keenly glinting. Same oily black smoke, always the same. The motor cars roared into the center of town and circled like wolves while the Vessels watched overhead.

I have never liked to be upstaged.

One of the motor cars crashed straight through my Apparatus, leaving broken glass and wire in its wake and the very expensive and rare acids and alkalis pooling in its tracks. The citizens of I-Don’t-Know-Where screamed, or threw themselves down in the mud in attitudes of surrender or maybe worship, or ran for the hills, which I guess is what I should have done but I didn’t seem to be able to move. All I could do was stand there and think, *Not again.*

So every so often one of the motor cars stopped, and an Officer of the Line got out, black-uniformed and scowling, and some unlucky citizen got lifted roughly by his collar and got questions barked in his face. I don’t know about what. Out here on the western rim of the world, which is a war zone these days, you learn that there’s always some reason, there’s always about a thousand different ways anyone might have offended against the Authority the Line claims, so who knows what the citizens of Wherever might have done. Smuggling? Seditious publications? Or maybe they were harboring Agents of the you-know-what. Or maybe they’d done nothing at all. I saw some young people cuffed and shoved into the back of the cars and about a dozen women lined up against a
wall weeping, and I guess I should have mentioned earlier that there was some shooting, too, and one or two of Wherever’s buildings were on fire. Also the beating iron wings of the Vessels had blown my business cards off the table where I’d arranged them, carefully, in a fan, and the wings had blown them off the table and into the mud, like I said, the tiny tombstones &c.

May, I do not want to frighten or upset you. You’ll already have figured that your long-prodigal brother is not dead, nor in a Line jail. What happened next was that one of the Linesman Officers shouted You, yeah you, and he pointed, and I just about, well, it would be vulgar to write what I just about did, you know. And I guess he was pointing at a citizen of Wherever, not me, because he then wrestled him to the ground—the officer wrestled the civilian, I mean. That unfroze me. Sometimes when you pass an Electric jolt through a dead frog or bird it seems to come to life again for an instant. It was like that. I backed slowly away and did not start to run until out of sight. If you ever run afoul of the forces of the Line, and I pray that you and East Condon remain in the neutral zone forever, but if you do I recommend this approach. It has always worked for me.

If you’re wondering what had happened to Mr. Carver, well, so was I.

I stood, panting, heart pounding, sweating, alone in the hills outside of town.

He stepped from behind a tree.

I greeted him. “Mr. Carver.”

His long black hair was wild and a little singed. Otherwise he was the same as ever.

He gave me a curt nod, as if to say, See you’re not dead, then. As if to say, It goes on. Carver speaks very little, but his silences are expressive.

“Yes,” I said. “I guess. I don’t suppose you saved any of the…”

He hadn’t, of course.

“Let’s take stock.” I said this to Carver, and I’m saying it to you now, but I guess most of all I was saying it to myself, the first time and this time too, if you follow me.

“So this is the third time something like this has happened. There was Kloan, a couple months back, and I’m counting Melville City too.”

If you got my letters, May, you know what happened in Kloan and in Melville.

“There comes a time when a man has to consider the possibility that he may be taking the wrong direction in life. That he may be pushing against a door that’s just closed to him, and that’s all there is to it, and the harder he pushes the more he’ll hurt himself.”

Carver grunted.

“But not yet. I agree. Right now my thinking is, this is wartime, this is border country, this is what happens, it’s just bad luck is all. Easy come, easy go. Smile through adversity. Whatever other clichés come to mind. What do we have left?”

Carver furrowed his brow and looked thoughtful.

“The Apparatus is gone. Again. That’s one. Two, the wagon is down in what’s left of Wherever, and three so’s poor Sasha, and I don’t much want to go back, or at least not till this whole unpleasantness blows over. How about you? That’s the problem with running, is that you can’t go back. Speak up if you disagree; I run a democratic outfit here. So four, we have no food and no warm clothes, and five we have none of any goddamn son of a bitch thing else in the world.”

Pardon the cursing, May. And Sasha was the horse, if you have forgotten.

In my pockets I had my last three business cards, and some bits of wire and some notes for the Process, and a little over three dollars. I had two crisp green bills backed by the Bank of Melville, and one crumpled red Tri-City bill, which aren’t worth much out here. Carver never carries money.

“Stick with me, I said, I’ll make you rich.” I made myself smile, like I am making myself smile now. “I never said it would happen any time soon. But it will happen.”

Maybe.

May, I knew that once the shock wore off I would start feeling just awful about the people of that town, and how I can’t even remember their names or even the name of the town, and here it comes. I’m still not Religious, but if you still are I wouldn’t object if you prayed for them & for all those who suffer in this stupid War. Anyway, that’s enough for now.

Your brother,

“Professor” Harry Ransom, Lightbringer, &c.


II. The World’s Edge

Dear Sue,

I guess if you get this letter it means May will have got the other one, because I have mailed neither of them yet and will mail them together if I ever get a chance to mail them at all. Ask her to share her letter and share this one with her. I know you will anyway. Hope you all are well. Your kid brother Harry is not doing too badly. Keep smiling, that’s what they say, isn’t it?

How is he writing to us, you’ll be thinking, if he is up in the hills with nothing in the world but three dollars in his pockets and mud on his shoes and the few tools and scraps of wire Carver wears all the time? You’re right. I like to think I’m smart, but I know you are the shrewd one, really. I got to somewhere. I am writing these letters from a room in the World’s Edge Hotel in a town called Disorder. It’s about four days south or maybe north, but in either case not west or east from the town of Wherever-It-Was. I have told you already how directions get confused out on the rim of the world, or maybe I told May. You would hate it. In any case I do not plan to tell you about what it was like to walk here in the heat with nothing except to say that when I am finally rich and famous I will have earned it fair and square.

I have entered into a business arrangement with the owner. He will give me room and board free for two weeks while I work. There is a great deal your brother can do in two weeks. I am not out of the game yet, and tomorrow is a new morning with new Light. Good night.

Yours,

Harry

Okay Jess. I know Sue and May will share the other letters with you. Do not share this with them. I ask as your brother. You know how Sue can be judgmental and May is Religious, or at least she was when I left town, anyway, and anyway I do not want to tell them the situation, but I must tell someone because I am both guilty and pleased with myself and cannot sleep and not only because Carver is snoring in the next room so loudly it is bothersome, like an Engine. Remember you always covered for me when I was in trouble when we were kids, Jess. Anyway this is the situation.

I am staying in the World’s Edge Hotel. It is big, and empty, and full of shadows and dust and heaps of furniture, and up on the walls are some ugly dead animals and a few trophies stolen from the Hill Folk, mostly stone spears and some flat rocks carved with spirals and triangles and the like. It probably all meant something very important to the Hill Folk, but when you put it here it is just Stuff. The place is maybe ten years old but looks much older, almost like a Ruin. Conditions out here take their toll. When I walked in the door, the owner—I guessed he was the owner and guessed right—the owner was down on his knees now in a kind of prayer-like attitude and looking at me with interest, could see what I was doing. Carver went off into the street and I came inside. You know I have always loved Light, but for once I was glad of the shadows because after four days on the road from Wherever I knew I looked like a bum, or a refugee.

The windows were shuttered and it was dark, though it was only the middle of the afternoon outside, and sunny. There was no one there but the owner and a fat pale woman who was leaning against the bar and stared with a puzzled and you might say wounded expression at Nothing, like she was waiting for her date to come back from an absence of a length she could not explain or ever forgive.

Anyway there was a bell by the door, and I rang it.

Very loudly I said, “Mr. Carver,” and “Fetch my bags,” and I pressed a dollar bill into Carver’s hand, in such a way that the owner, who was up on his knees now in what was a kind of prayer-like attitude and looking at me with interest, could see what I was doing. Carver went off into the street and I came inside. You know I have always loved Light, but for once I was glad of the shadows because after four days on the road from Wherever I knew I looked like a bum, or a refugee.

The owner looked at me, at the woman, who kept staring at Nothing, and back at me.

“What d’ya want?”

“Well, it said Hotel outside. Sorry if I’m the first to break it to you. My name’s Harry Ransom. I need a room. Myself and my assistant.”

“That’s two rooms.”

“One. I like him close by, in case I have a flash of genius and someone has to take notes. I’m a scientist, you see.”

I smiled at the owner, and then at the woman, who kept staring, and then at the owner again.

I said, “Can I ask your name?”
“Adams.”
“Well, good afternoon, Mr. Adams. I’m new in town.”
“You here for the celebrations?”
“I never miss ‘em. Sure. What celebrations, exactly?”
Adams got to his feet, and tossed the washcloth into a bucket. He is short, also bald, with hair scraped thin across his scalp but bushy sideburns below.
“Founding Day, of course.”
“Right.” I nodded and smiled. I have never heard of it. Have you, Jess? I don’t recall Founding Day being observed back in good old East Condon. You know I am terribly ignorant of History, always with my eyes on the Light Of The Future &c, but I think I would have heard of it. By the way I shall forget to ask later so I’ll ask now if your kids are doing okay.
“We got rooms,” Adams said. “No one travels much these days. A dollar a night. That’s two dollars for you both—you and your hairy friend, wherever he’s gone to.”
“Fetching my bags.”
“Right.” Adams went to stand behind the bar. “You said. Eight dollars and you can stay for the week.”
“Is that for both of us?”
The town is called Disorder. Not a good omen, you might think, but not necessarily a bad one, either. In my extensive experience there are two basic ways of naming towns out in this part of the western Rim. One is to name them after some sort of local Hill Folk word, which usually turns out to be the word for how dare you or go away or stop touching that. Like Kloan, for instance, or Kumko. The other way is when you get to the Edge where you daren’t go farther you just stop and pick a word at random out of whatever dog-eared sacred text you happened to have with you on the journey, like Sam Smiles’ Self-Help Commonplace Book or The Book of the White City or whatever your tastes run to, and that’s how you get Increase and Prosperity and Dominion, but also how you get Mischief and Abomination, and once I passed through a Shellfish, and my theory as a Scientist and a Man of the World is that Disorder is the same story: it means nothing. You may not have found this little lecture interesting, Jess, but it beats an account of the haggling which followed, all throughout which Adams wiped the bar pretending like he wasn’t interested and didn’t need my business, and I pretended not to be starving, and the fat woman kept staring, until I began to wonder, being starving and light-headed, if she was stuffed.
We got it down to six dollars for the week, which I still didn’t have. I said, “Forget the money. Let me make you a better offer.”
“No,” Adams said.
“I said I was a Scientist. I said that, I’m pretty sure, and I can already tell not much escapes you. What kind of Scientist, you’re wondering, and what’s he doing out here, why isn’t he back in Jasper City or Gibson at one of the big brick universities with the robes and the funny hats, why’s he out here, on the ragged edge of creation? No offense to your great little town here—I mean that as a compliment to your courage and pioneer spirit. Out here, making the world, a Light in the dark, et cetera and et cetera.”
“I charge for wasting my time, Mr. Ransom. It’s back to eight dollars now.”
“Light,” I said. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. I’ll get to the point. I am a maker of Light.”
You know how I get when I am on this topic, Jess.
“I won’t bore you with the science. It’s Electricity, which is a kind of lightning, and there’s more to it but that’s the essence. Light in the glass, the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen, like God himself in a bottle. One spark, one little spark, and then there’s Light forever—it pays for itself in candles and lamp oil in less than a month. My assistant Carver’s got the Apparatus, I’m afraid, out with my bags, the lightning jars and the capacitors and the coils and everything. I’d love to show it to you but instead, here.”
I gave him one of my last business cards, and pointed to where it said, Inventor of the Ransom Process.
“Never heard of it.”
“You will. You know, Adams, as it happens I am looking for investors….”
“Oh yeah? I know how this goes. I bet there’s a reason why you can’t get it working right now, but if I give you some money, well then…”
“You got me. The fact is I’m lacking some parts, due to an accident on the road.”
That was the truth but not the whole truth, Jess. I was lacking some parts, though also other parts, and in fact everything.
I said, “Valuable stuff, I’m sorry to say, was lost.”
Adams perked up. “Valuable?”
“Very! Materials alone worth a prince’s ransom.”
“Well, what’re we talking about? You mean gold or… ?”
“Brass. Copper. Zinc. Certain very valuable chemicals and minerals you don’t even have names for. And yes, gold, too.”

That’s true, Jess—there are certain parts of the Process that require an inert metal, if you know what that means. There was some gold in the Apparatus, though only a very little.

“But that’s not important—mere earthly dross. We’re talking about Light.” I gestured at the shadows of the room, at the dark heaps of dusty furniture. “We’re talking about the abolition of night. This whole town, gleaming, why, people would come from miles around to—”

Adams looked interested despite himself. “And it runs on—”

“Once it gets started it runs on itself, spinning and spinning like the sun. The word is perpetual. But I’m not going to tell you how that works, because that’s not the deal. I’m not going to ask for money, either. Here’s the deal. I need some time to fix my apparatus, and gather parts. I’d like to work right here. It’s private, and quiet, by which I mean I’ve noticed you don’t have a whole hell of a lot of business here. That’s all right. I’m a businessman too, as well as a scientist, and I know what it’s like to have a bad patch. I’ll work here, and when I get the apparatus up and running again the first place in town I’ll install it is right here. And because I’ll be working for you, it’s only fair I get room and board free. Right?”

Adams looked at the fat woman for support, but she didn’t give it.

“How long?”

I wondered how far I could push it, and settled on two weeks.

“Two weeks, and if you don’t do what you said you’d do by the end of it, which you won’t, I keep your whatever you called it, your apparatus.”

I honestly was not steering him in this direction, and was caught by surprise. I know you think I am something of a con artist, but I had pretended to send Carver for my nonexistent bags only so that I wouldn’t look like a bum, which I am not. My conscience reproached me, but I ganged up on it with my hunger and exhaustion and wrestled it down.

I said, “In two weeks, Adams, if I don’t come through, you can have everything but the clothes on my back.”

We shook on it.

Jess, this has been a great help to me, talking it out with you. I recall what I said precisely, and I do not think that I lied, though I may have misled or allowed Mr. Adams to mislead himself. He is desperate for money, by the way, and that is why he jumped at the chance of acquiring the Apparatus for parts. Disorder is in the grip of a Drought so bad it seems like the whole town might dry up and blow away into the west at any moment, and all the farms are failing and no one comes to market here, and all the fighting between Line and Gun is not helping business any either, and he needs to move on but no one will buy this big crumbling ruin of a Hotel from him. Of course in two weeks when I have nothing to give him then he will very likely consider me a fraud regardless. Almost but not quite casually he mentioned to me while I was eating that his wife is the Mayor and his brother-in-law is the Sheriff.

I do not know what I will do, but something will turn up, no doubt.

So Adams brought me something to eat. I told him I was a Vegetarian and that took some explaining, believe me. He asked where I had come from, and I said I had gotten turned around some but thought I had come here from the north, and he thought that couldn’t be right because I would have passed through Wild Folk territory, alone except for Carver, and would have known about it, if you know what I mean. Well I said the First Folk and I have never been at odds, and he looked at me very oddly in a way that gave me a chill.

Then since that was the mood at the table already I told him about what happened in Wherever. I thought I ought to warn him, I guess, that the War is coming to these parts. I could not tell him the actual name of the town or where it was exactly. He guessed for a while, throwing out names of places I’d never heard of. The fat woman did too. It was the first time she’d spoken, and her eyes lit up. She wanted to know all about the Motor Cars and the Heavier-Than-Air Vessels and whether they used the Ironclads, and I told her there weren’t any of the Ironclads, thanks for small mercies, and she asked whether they used the poison gas or the rockets or the wire or the noise-makers or any of the other horrible weapons they use. Some people get like that about the Line, I think because they have been afraid so long they end up a little in love with it, like some Religious people get about Death. She wanted to know what they were looking for: smugglers, she suggested, or refugees from the Republic or maybe even an Agent of the Gun. She said the Line had been hunting for someone or something in this part of the world ever since that incident at the Hospital, and I didn’t ask which Hospital or what incident because I just wanted to get away from her horrible hungry grin. I do not like thinking about these things. Also, just half an hour ago, while I was writing this letter or maybe the letter to Sue, at the writing desk in this little room under the mirror beside the window, a Vessel passed overhead. I heard it first then saw it out of the window, iron wings beating, bullying through the clouds and for a
moment defacing the moon. They are hunting for someone, and one of the things about the Line is that even though you know it isn’t you and there is no reason for it to be you it still always feels like it is, like you have done something terribly wrong for which you must be punished, and will be punished forever. Anyway you know how I get in the dark, and I do not want to stop writing because then I shall have to put out the Light of this candle.

How are the kids? See, I remembered to ask.

H.
Dear Sue,

Two letters in two days! Surely a record. Don’t panic. All I have in the world is the clothes on my back and writing paper, because the rooms in the World’s Edge have writing paper, so I write. Like the Process, once begun it is Perpetual. I believe the writing paper was left there by the Smilers, for the purpose of making Confessions and Resolutions on. Instead I am writing to you.

I am still in Disorder. I should say that in addition to writing paper I have acquired a razor for shaving and needle and thread for the white suit and I am almost presentable again; you would not necessarily be ashamed to acknowledge me your brother.

I have entered into a new business arrangement. You can picture it as triangular. It involves me, and the whole town of Disorder, and a Mr. Flood, who is a Scientist like myself, a Rain-Maker. I stand to make between 150 and 300 dollars, depending on how things go, and also to do some good for some people who’ve had a bad time lately, much worse than me. It is not exactly my usual arrangement, but out here you have to take things as they come.

Yours,
Harry.

* * *

Hi Jess. There is a fellow here who is exactly like some of those boys you used to run with back in East Condon when you were wild and I was a skinny kid with my nose always in a book of Mathematics. He is also exactly like what some people take me for, by which I mean I think but cannot prove that he is a crook. His name is Mr. Flood, but that can’t be his real name. I guess there are people who come by that name honestly, but not this guy. He is a professional Rain-Maker, you see, the same way I do Light, and “Flood” is just too pat. He and I are in business together, in a way. Let me explain.

I think I said in last night’s letter that Disorder is in the grips of Drought, worst of all the horrors of the western Rim. The irony, if that’s the right word, is that three days’ walk to the north in Wherever it was raining just fine, in fact more than I liked, enough to seep under canvas and threaten the integrity of the Apparatus. Probably three days’ walk south of Disorder there is rain too. The weather out on the Rim is not reliable, as you know. Out here the weather, like just about everything else in the world of nature or Man or Folk, is always up for renegotiation without warning.

So farming is what Disorder does, or did, before the Drought. There are maybe three hundred souls here. The World’s Edge Hotel is at its western end like a pioneer striding into the wilderness, and behind it straggles Main Street, which frankly is kind of halfhearted as these things go. There are a couple of general stores and a doctor of sorts and three lawyers, which seems excessive but what do I know. There is a huge sprawl of farms with wire fences and yellow dead-looking vegetation and bony animals and a few unfree Folk working in chains, which you know is a thing I have never liked to see. Otherwise it is not so ugly. It is in a dry waterless valley between two hills. The northwestern one has a strange kind of point like a crumpled witch’s hat when seen from most Main Street angles, and that is probably why they call it Big Witch or the Big Red Witch. The southeastern one is nameless and I guess just hill-shaped.

The better of the two general stores is Jo’s. The woman who runs it is pretty and blonde in the way of a flower that is a little faded but only needs water to come alive. I walked into her store this morning because when you are trying to make a deal with a town it is always good to get the store-owners on your side first, and because often the women are more open than the men are to hearing about the wonders of the Process and about Light and the New Century &c, and because I needed to buy needle and thread for the white suit and a razor for shaving, and she threw in ink for free, the ink you’re reading now. It was Jo who told me all about Disorder and about the Founding Day celebrations and about Mr. Flood, who she doesn’t like so much and I think neither do I, but she likes me and I am a little bit what you might call smitten with her. Now we (Jo & me) are sitting out side by side on the warm rocks and watching the sun set over the town and the valley and the Founding Day stage and Flood’s Pole and she is smiling at me. You have no idea how much work I invested in getting her to smile, but once she gets that first smile going the rest come easily and without cease. I told her I am writing to my business partners back east, which is true in a way, Jess, in that I still owe you money. It is one of those pretty scenes you could only really get out here, where everything may be gone at any moment. I should put this letter away now. More later if all goes well. H.
Hello May.

It seems only fair, after my last letter to you, that I let you know I’m okay, though I’m sure you will have heard from our sisters, if I ever get to a place where any of these letters can be mailed. In fact I guess you will get these letters all at once, so you may read them out of order and know I am okay before you knew I was in trouble. That is not so different from the jumbled-up way Time gets out here anyway. For me it is always one day into the Future. For Disorder it could be fifty years ago or it could be four hundred years. For the Line it is always wartime, and for the Folk up on Big Witch maybe it is a million years ago. May, I had a drink tonight and you know I ordinarily never drink but I had to look confident for the people of Disorder, who are now counting on me. So forgive me if I get confused.

Anyway I was asking you before if you knew what Founding Day is. I have had it all explained to me, and that is what got me thinking about Time.

Adams from the hotel is a Webb on his mother’s side and the Mayor is a Nimmo. That may not mean much to you and it didn’t mean much to me, but it means they are direct descendants of families from Founding. And so are a lot of other people in town. One of the lawyers traces his heritage back to Governor Self himself, or so he said, and I nodded and smiled. I never cared for History, but I know that Founding was the first colony in this world on this side of the Mountains when everything was just woods and before anything anywhere had names or at least had names in our language. That must be three or four thousand miles from here, or more, and four hundred years ago. Every summer at high summer they celebrate Founding’s survival. Survival against what, I asked. Against the dark, Jo said. Ask Jess about Jo. The Mayor said, survival against the wild Folk of the Woods, who came at night and clawed at the walls. They have built a kind of stage for the celebrations. It has painted trees and painted darkness and part of a high wall. It looks fun in a morbid way. To these people it is like a religion and no dumber or less dumb than any other religion. I am sorry, May. That is rude and I should strike it out.

It is night and there is a Vessel going overhead again. Down on Main Street on the wall of the lawyer’s house someone has posted up WANTED posters in the gray-black print of the Line, for a John Creedmoor and a Doctor Lysvet Alleroosyn and a Drunkard Cuffee and some other people I do not remember the names of. It said that they were Agents of you-know-what. I do not like the Line, but its enemies are even worse, of course—thieves and murderers and bandits and bank robbers and wicked, wicked men and women, or so everyone says. I felt sorry for them anyway.

I do not know what Time is like for the Agents of the gee-you-enn, but I imagine for them it is always just now, like it must be for wolves or snakes.

Anyway Founding Day is in two weeks. Near the stage is Flood’s Pole. It is thirty feet high and painted white, and it has a shining metal crown.

So here is who Flood is. He is a Rainmaker. Three weeks ago he came into town and promised to make rain for them. He has a Process, he says, for making rain, and the Pole is part of it. It looks like a lightning rod, in a way. That is Electricity, and you know I consider that my territory. I do not know whether the Pole is intended to attract clouds or swell them or pierce them or to do nothing at all—I suspect the latter. They have promised him 300 dollars plus expenses if he brings Rain on or before Founding Day, which is why they are paying him.

For three weeks Flood has made no rain, but has proved instead a prodigious conjuror of expenses. Here is his excuse. There are Hill Folk up on Big Witch, living wild and free. They do not often trouble the town, but everyone fears them anyway. It is their doing, Flood says. Their wild magic keeps away the clouds and interferes with the operations of his device, the vibrations of which, he says, are subtle. No one in town knows whether or not to believe him, including me.

(If you travel out here long enough you hear all kinds of stories about the Folk. They mess with the weather, they mess with the weather, they mess with the weather, they mess with the weather. Who knows, is what I say).

My friend Jo led me up to the Founding Day stage. It is in a wide dusty bowl just above town, in what you might describe as the hem of Big Witch’s skirts. Half the town was up there, sawing or hammering or painting or sewing. The sun was hot, and I guess with the Drought they have nothing else to look forward to except for the long-dead and faraway past, which is kind of sad. Anyway Flood was there, sitting on the floor with his back against his Pole, drinking from a bottle. It was the early afternoon. He is dark—a little darker than you or me, about as dark as Father. He is brown-eyed, and flat and a little plump in the face, and curly-haired. He is maybe five years older than me.

I said, Hello Mr. Flood.

He said, Who the hell are you?

I said I wanted to discuss a proposition with him. I said I am a master of Electricity, and my assistant Mr. Carver is the deftest mechanical hand in the west, a real miracle-worker, practically a wizard. For a thirty-seventy share in
Flood’s favor we would fix whatever ailed his machine, or alternatively we would take our payment in parts, because I had my eye on some of the things glinting up there at the top of his Pole. What Flood said to me cannot be repeated to a woman of your sensibilities.

I do not often get angry but sometimes you have to or no one will take you seriously, so we stood there and shouted at each other in the heat and the dust for a while. And to cut a long story short, he told me that story about how it was the fault of the Folk again and there was nothing he or anybody could do. And Adams from the hotel, who I should have mentioned was also there listening, same as just about everyone else in town, said that in that case they should just get together some guns and go up on Big Witch and sort things out, or maybe petition the Linesmen to take care of the Folk, a couple of good poison-gas rockets should settle the issue, because he had heard the Line had its armies in the area. And Jo started crying, and I was angry with Flood for that and also for a lot of other reasons including that no Scientist should ever say there is nothing anyone can do—that is like religion for us—and so what it came into your brother’s head to say was:

“In addition, ladies and gentlemen, to being a master of Electricity, I am also learned in the ways of the Folk. I shall go out on Big Witch and negotiate with them for you. If and when they consent to let Mr. Flood’s machine work we will split the money thirty-seventy, this time in my favor, because it seems to me I am taking the risk here.”

Jo smiled. Carver grunted in surprise.

Flood said, “Like hell you are. You’ll just go and hide in the next town over for two weeks and if it so happens to rain you’ll come running back and claim your money. Ladies and gentlemen, I know his kind.”

I said I would cut a long story short and I haven’t, but I will now. I light out on Big Witch tomorrow, and Flood is coming with me, to protect his investment. “I’m not taking my eyes off this cheating son-of-a-bitch,” he said. He does not want to go, but perhaps his pride is making him. We are now talking fifty-fifty, or more if it turns out that he is just a fraud. He is no doubt thinking the same about me. It is true I guess that I do not really know anything about the Folk except that they scare me a little, but I got carried away with optimism in the moment. Now I had better think quickly. You will say that my problem is I think too much, and it is true I have a lot of ideas flashing in my head right now about the Folk and about Clouds and Electricity and Lightning Rods, but May, there is also a small but valuable part of your prodigal brother that does not think or talk or daydream but instead notices, and that is probably how come I have been out here zipping from town to town on the frontier in the war zone for a year and not died. Anyway, that part of your brother noticed two things. First, Flood was not really angry, but only playing at anger, like the whole thing was a game. Second, when I said thirty-seventy just for a moment Flood was annoyed and his hand flashed to his belt, where he wasn’t wearing a gun but you could tell at once that he usually was. Once again, May, if you wish to say a little prayer I wouldn’t say no, this time for my own safety out on Big Witch.

Yours,
Harry.

P.S. I suppose by the time you get this and consider praying it will all be over one way or the other. But if I think too much about that I will start thinking about Time again and never sleep, and tomorrow is a busy day.
IV. On Big Witch

Dear Mr. Baxter,

You do not know me. I imagine you get a lot of letters that begin that way. I have heard of your exploits for a long time, and admired you. They say you are the richest honest businessman or the honestest rich businessman in Keaton City. Either of those seems to me to be a good thing to be. I am an entrepreneur and an inventor, too. My particular line of work is Electricity and Light. I have gone out to the edge of things to make my name and my fortune, and sometimes it seems the whole world is against it, because it does not want to become a better place. I once read where you were talking to a newspaper reporter about the obstacles you overcame when you were a young man, and it lifts my spirits to think about it, and helps me to forget about the fact that I am trapped in this pit.

The obstacles in my case are somewhat larger than they were in yours. As I recall your father did not believe in you. In my case the issue is that I have stumbled into a war zone. The fighting between Line and G_n is very bad in this part of the world. The Line has its machines and its legions, and the enemy has its Agents and whatever else, its saboteurs and arsonists and poisoners and blackmailers and I do not know what else but I do not like it. They say it has something to do with something that happened at a Hospital, I do not know what. The War cost me my Apparatus, and now it looks like that is not all it will cost me. To me the War seems like a great Mountain between us and the Future, like the first pioneers must have crossed to get here. Anyway I hope that if I somehow get out of this goddamn pit one day I may make it to Keaton City and you & I can talk business.

Yours sincerely,
"Professor" Harry Ransom, Lightbringer, Inventor of the Ransom Process for Perpetual Energy
Out on Big Witch

* * *

Carver:

If you find this note I guess things have gone badly for me but at least you are okay and you have come back. Two things. First, send a letter to my sisters saying something nice about what happened to me. Second, watch out for Flood, he is trouble.

Harry.

* * *

To Whom it May Concern:

I have never before written to an Officer of the Line, or imagined that I ever might. But I am stuck in this pit and I still have my writing paper, and more ink than water. Your Vessels are circling overhead around & around on their great iron wings, and I can see their spyglasses glinting blood-red in the light of the sun as it sets. Perhaps they are waiting for night to fall. Sooner or later they will find me, or if they wait too long and I am dead of thirst they will find my body and this letter. This letter contains VALUABLE INTELLIGENCE AND YOU SHOULD READ IT. Get to the point, you will be thinking, because your kind are nothing if not efficient. Well, tough. There is still light to write by and I have nothing else to do.

I have been out on Big Witch for about three days. I started out from a town to the southeast of here, called Disorder, and the first thing I want to say is that no one in the town of Disorder knew any of what I’m telling you here. All they knew was that Flood & I were coming out here to fix their problem, namely Drought, by talking to the Folk who live out on this Hill, whose magic was hobbling Flood’s Apparatus. When I write it out like that I see that it does not make a whole lot of sense, but at the time when Flood & my assistant & I set out, everyone in town was very hopeful. It was morning and the town was all behind us as we set off and the sun was behind them smiling on us all. I nearly wrote here the name of the woman who kissed me as we set off, but I would not want to bring her name to the attention of the Line. I am sure you understand why.

We were all traveling light, really just water and food. Flood had made a big show about how he would not carry a gun because it would make no difference if the Folk turned against us, and so I did not carry one either; also I never could shoot straight.

When you get an hour out of town there are no trails any more. There is a band of rocks that are sharp to climb, but there is no going round them. My assistant helped me. He is an excellent climber, and so is Flood. At the top Flood turned to me and said:

“What are you really, Harry Ransom?”
“Harry Ransom,” I said. “The ‘Professor’ is optional, and as a fellow man of Science you can drop it if you like.” Actually I was not quite so cool, but you will indulge me, I’m sure.

Those were the first words he’d said to me since the lawyer’s office, and the last words he said for a while. Mostly he just walked in silence, and sometimes it was like he was talking to someone in his head.

Let me tell you about the lawyer’s office. It is on Main Street, not far from the hotel. It was where we went to put the deal in writing, between me and Flood and the town. Ordinarily I do not like lawyers’ offices, but it made others happy to put it in writing. On the wall outside there are posters for some of the people you are hunting for. Inside there are legal diplomas from Jasper City. I gave the lawyer my second-to-last business card and he gave me his. He is a well-educated man and must have hoped for more when he came out to the edge of the world than a little town dying of Drought. Like a lot of people here he traces his ancestry back four hundred years to Founding and to the first Governor, or thinks he does. There is a painting on his wall of an ugly man with yellowish eyes and an old-style ruff and buttoned velvet coat, and that is the Governor of Founding. Behind him there are pines and darkness, and it seems in the corners of the painting in the darkness you can see the Wild People waiting and watching. Anyway it is a frightening painting, and it was in my mind as we went out on the hill.

Once you are an hour outside of town there is nothing but silence—no wind. Everything is wide and empty and it looks flat, though it is not, it is hard work, believe you me. There are red rocks that look hunched over and cast long shadows in the morning.

Flood and me walked ahead, heads down, mostly in silence at first. Neither of us wanted to fall behind or let the other get in front. My assistant followed behind. He was not eager and I do not blame him. We did not know exactly where we were going, only northwest, and up, toward that witch-hat peak. We did not really know if that was where the Folk were to be found, but we needed a destination, so that was it. It was no closer by the afternoon than it was when we set out.

We came to a tree, the first green thing we’d seen. It had alarm-red fruit that I did not recognize or trust, but Flood jumped up to get one—have I mentioned he is short? a little shorter than me, and stout—and he put it in his mouth and bit down and smiled.

“I apologize,” I said.

He wiped juice from his chin and raised an eyebrow.

“You must be pretty sore,” I said. “About the money, and about the whole thing. I’d tell you it’s just competition, and competition is the lifeblood of business and science alike, but I don’t know if that would matter to you.”

He said nothing. My assistant took one of the fruit, too. He is also short but has this way about him where when he reaches for something it seems to come to his hand. I guess that is what makes him such a good mechanic.

I said, “I’d say I just wanted to do something good for those people down there—I don’t know if that matters, either.”

He threw what was left of his fruit away. “To hell with Disorder. Three weeks down there. Three goddamn weeks.”

“Well then look at it this way: better something than nothing. If I get your rain-making apparatus working again and we share the money, that’s more than you would have got just sitting down there drinking.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know what’s going on at all, do you?”

My assistant gave a kind of laugh. That is not the first time someone has told me that.

I said all this because I wanted to work with Flood, and not to fight. After all, we were not going to find the Folk before nightfall, it looked like, and I would have to sleep with him nearby. And what if he really was a Scientist? What if he had discovered the secret of making rain? That would be a man worth learning from, even if he was kind of an asshole.

Nobody ever gets a chance to lecture an Officer of the Line and not fear retaliation. So I’ll take that chance now. You have been fighting the you-know-what and its Agents for three hundred years and what has it accomplished? Only more fighting. Your armies seize another town, and another. You lay the Line across another hundred miles of plain. Then the Agents of your Enemy sneak in after dark and blow up the Line, poison the wells, burn down your buildings. Then you do it again. It is the ordinary people who suffer. Think of what you and all your factories and your tens of thousands of machines and your sacred Engines could do if you made peace—for instance, you could dig channels or send trucks with water to Disorder; it would cost you nothing. And probably there is something the Agents of your Enemy could do that is more useful than murder and sabotage and blackmail and fraud and poisoning, though I can’t think what.

Anyway there was a lot I wanted to ask Flood about. But at that moment the silence was broken by the sound of engines in the valley, and not long after that we saw a squadron of six Vessels of the long-winged variety passing overhead, hunting. Possibly the same ones that are circling overhead now.
I am not much of a reader of the Novel and certainly neither are you, Linesman, but I have seen those three little stars used in stories to mean that time has passed or the writer has forgotten where he was going and needs to start over. In this case it is because it got too dark to write for a while after the sun went down, but now the moon is very bright.

So we slept that night around the foot of a tree, kind of head-to-toe, and we rose early in the morning and pressed on.

I tried a different tack.

“I make Light,” I said.

“So I’ve heard.” Flood stopped, and studied the sky. It was blue, and empty again. The peak was red in the distance.

“Electric Light,” I added. “The Line smashed the prototype of my Apparatus, but you should have seen it when it was working.”

Flood nodded. “They do that.”

It is not just that it makes Electric Light. It makes an infinity of Electric Light, burning no fuel. Once it begins it does not stop. You will say this is impossible—I know how your Engines hunger for fuel—and in fact it has never quite worked right yet, but it will.

I told Flood all about the Valves and the Coils and the acids and the ’Scopes and the Alternating Current Technique (patent pending) and the Ransom Theory of the Equilibrium of Opposites. My assistant mimed the working of pedals.

Flood said, “Yeah, yeah.”

He drank a little of his water and looked at me.

He said, “Are you going to do this, then?”

“What?”

“The peak.” He pointed. “Are you really going all the way there?”

I shrugged. “I don’t see that I have much choice. I made a promise. And besides I need the money, if I’m ever going to rebuild the Apparatus. You know how that is, right?”

He laughed and we started walking again. This was yesterday, and we were high up, but not as high as we got later. There were scraggly thornbushes and slopes of red earth. If you looked behind you couldn’t make out the town, or anything else really. All you could see in the blue distance was the slopes of other hills, so everything in the world was vast angled planes, nothing was flat or firm, it was like being at sea.

“Tell me about rain,” I said.

“It’s fucking wet, Ransom. What else do you need to know?”

“I’ve been out here on the Rim for about a year now,” I said.

My assistant grunted.

“Right,” I said. “We both have. And in that time we’ve met mesmerists, transmuters of lead into gold, star-readers, inventors of cures for cancer and the common cold, a woman who knew the secret language of horses, and various utopians, including at least one Communist. The unsettled conditions of the Rim draw us all here. Maybe you too, Flood. I’ve heard of rainmakers before but never met one. How does it work? I saw the Pole down in Disorder. It has something to do with lightning, right?”

“Something like that.”

“It pierces the clouds.”

“Could be.”

“We had no farmers in East Condon. That’s where I was born. Mining town. So no one watched the weather much. But I was a curious child. There was a rich kid in town and his father had an encyclopedia and I read it, cover to cover. Here’s what I learned about clouds.”

Flood stopped again and looked back into the valley. He seemed to be listening for something.

“They come out of the west. Like everything else—the sky is like the land in that respect. They form in the wilderness beyond the Rim, and by the time they get here they are only beginning to take shape.”

I searched the sky for a cloud to take as example. Mostly it was blue, and there were some faint gray-black scars where Vessels were passing. But I found one.

“They don’t know what to be yet. By the time they get east they are predictable. They rain in due course. Here
they’re wild.”
“Something like that,” Flood said.
“So what is it? You have some way of taming them? Is that it?”
We talked like this for a while. I will cut it short. He did not know a damn thing about the clouds or about rain or about electricity or about science, and he was hardly even pretending he did any more.
Meanwhile we were still walking up the slopes of Big Witch.
From back down in town it did not look like it could take more than a day to get to the peak of Big Witch. And it shouldn’t have. It was bigger than it should have been. This is what happens when you start on the Edge and go west of it, of course, as everybody knows. We did not have enough water.
He said, “So what do you know about the Folk, Harry Ransom?”
“Not a whole lot,” I confessed.
He smiled, as if to say that he knew it all along.
“I’ve been out here for a long time, and I’ve passed through their territories before, and they’ve never given me any trouble, nor I them. I’ve seen them, once or twice, in the distance. I’ve seen their carvings and their paintings. I picked up one or two of their words from a book. I hear a lot about their tricks and their magic, but I don’t know if I believe that. Electric Light looks like magic too, but it isn’t.”
“Deep thoughts, Ransom. What’ll you do if you find them? They don’t like intruders, and with good reason. They’ll wind your guts on a stick.”
“I’m a persuasive fellow, and people generally like me, present company excepted, I guess. I’m going to talk to them, and do my best.”
You might be thinking: if I believed Flood was a con artist, which by that time I was certain of, then it follows that his rain-making machine didn’t work. If his stupid Pole didn’t work, then it follows that the Folk weren’t stopping it from working. So what was I still doing out there? Well, I needed to be sure. There were 300 dollars on the line, and I meant to earn them honestly. This will sound stupid to you, I bet.
Flood laughed.
“You got something you want to tell me, Flood?”
“Four things.” He held up four fingers.
“If you were lying about the Folk,” I said. “If…”
“One,” he said. “You’re not as smart as you think you are, Ransom.” He pointed to a rock and then to another rock. “There’s Folk markings all around and you haven’t noticed them.”
I looked closer and saw that he was right. There were spirals and whorls and beautiful and alien forms carved into that rock, and another, and others all about.
“You think too much and you don’t see what’s really there. And two,” he said. “You heard those engines last night? You saw the smoke?”
“Sure.”
“That was the Line coming to Disorder.”
I thought about it and I guessed he was right. It was kind of upsetting, though it didn’t seem to upset Flood.
“They were in Hekima a few days ago. That was the name of the town where you lost your precious Apparatus, by the way, Ransom. They’ve made it down to Disorder by now.”
“Why? Are they—?”
“They’re not looking for you, Ransom.”
“Are they looking for you, Flood?”
“Yes and no,” he said.
“That’s why you came with me, isn’t it? An excuse to get out of town. So is that the third thing you wanted to tell me, or is there more?”
“The third thing is that we’ve been traveling too long. We should have hit the peak long ago. We’re traveling west, on the Rim, and we’re lost.”
“I figured.”
“Do you know what that means?”
“Is that the fourth thing?”
“The fourth thing is that the Folk are watching us now. They’ve been watching us for a while, Ransom. They don’t generally care too much for me or my kind. So it’s best that we move on. Even if we don’t know where we’re going.”
“Your kind? Flood, are you—?”
“Four things, I said. And I said ’em.”
Those stars again. This time it is because the stars are out overhead. No constellations that I recognize. That is how it is out here, of course. The Vessels have gone, but I guess they'll be back; if you are reading this it is because they have come back and found me. A while ago I heard shooting, so I will be brief.

We found a cave to sleep in. It was carved and painted red with shapes that seemed to move, though maybe that was only a trick of the firelight. There were spirals and triangles but also other shapes, geometries that I do not have names for. They were all over the walls and the ceiling of that cave. It was kind of like being in church, one of the old-school White City ones with the wrought gold all over everything and the stained glass, only more beautiful. I had strange dreams.

In the morning my assistant was gone.

Flood shrugged. “Nothing to do with me. Guess he went home.”

“He’s stuck with me through worse than this, Flood. Why would he go home now?”

“It’ll get worse, Ransom. Now get moving.”

I wanted to look around for a while, and Flood and me argued until in the end he pulled a gun. I still do not know exactly from where.

“What’s that, Flood?”

“Move.”

We walked. As best I could tell we were still heading west.

“Where are we going, Flood?”

“Where I say we’re going.”

“I guess we’re not looking for the Folk anymore.”

“We are not.”

He kept looking behind him. You know why, of course. There were Vessels in the sky and I heard engines behind us. Your pursuit had woken him.

“What’s going on, Flood? Who are you?”

“You know what I am, Ransom. You’re dumb, but you’re not that dumb.”

I did. He is an Agent of your Enemy, of course. An Agent of the Gun. That means he is a murderer a hundred times over. That means he is even worse than you.

I said to him, and I guess I am saying it to you, that I don’t want to have anything to do with your stupid war. I am neutral. If I work on behalf of anything it is Light, or the Future.

He pushed me ahead of him.

“What did you do with my assistant? If you hurt him, Flood—”

“If I hurt him what, Ransom? What’ll you do? Anyway I didn’t. He ran out on you, Ransom. Weird little mute freak.”

He shoved me again.

“Let me go.”

“You may be useful to me.”

“I’m not much of a hostage, if that’s what you’re thinking. The Line’s soldiers won’t care if I live or die. In fact they’d—”

“Shut up.”

We walked all morning. He kept shoving me. He had his gun in his hand all the time now. I considered running but did not. I hear it said that Agents of the Gun never miss, and that every shot kills. You have fought more of them than me so I guess you would know if that’s true or not, but I did not want to risk it.

He kept changing direction. But whatever he did the V-formation of the Vessels was still there in the sky, still on our trail. And wherever we went there were the markings of the Folk on the rocks, and I began to think the Line wasn’t the only thing on our trail. Sometimes I thought I saw people moving on the edges of vision, darting behind rocks. Not Linesmen, who are slow and heavy-footed. Flood’s eyes must be better than mine, and I wonder what he saw.

I hoped for a time it was my assistant, but it seems it wasn’t; if he is still alive he has fled.

For a time we were going downslope, and I stumbled whenever Flood shoved me; then after that we were going up, and I was getting tired and hot, as if I didn’t have enough problems.

“What’s going on, Flood?”

“If I tell you I can’t let you go—you realize that.”

“One way or another I don’t expect to get out of this anyway, and I always was curious. What’s going on?”

“That’s a bigger question than you know. That’s a question as big as the world. Bigger.”
“All right, then: what were you doing down in Disorder?”
“Waiting.”
“For what?”
“For someone to come out of the west.”
“What? Is this to do with—?”
“With what the Line’s looking for? Yes.” He shoved me forward. We were on a steep slope and I kept sliding. “They look in their way—with hundreds of men, and machines, and the law. We look in ours—with a few clever people keeping their eyes open.”

“Why rain-making, Flood? Why lie to everyone?”
“To keep in practice, Ransom. Lying is what we do.”

He shoved me again. “My bosses assigned me to Disorder. To wait and watch and listen. I needed a reason to stay in town, and I didn’t see why I shouldn’t stay in style. So I said I was a rainmaker, and they just about made me king. I met a fellow once who said he was a rainmaker, and it sounded like as good a story as any. I made them make me a Pole—well, it was funny at the time.”

“And the story about the Folk?”
“I made it up. After the first couple of weeks I needed an excuse. And you saw—they were always talking about their big Founding Day celebration. Who the hell’s ever heard of Founding Day anyway? These little towns out here celebrate the stupidest things: The first colony and struggling in the wilderness and all that shit. The terrible Folk of the Woods. Four hundred years and they haven’t gotten over it yet! That’s what gave me the idea. Even I was surprised they took it so seriously.”

He kept looking behind him. We were climbing now, clambering with our hands and knees up over big rocks. He made me go first. The Vessels were closer than ever.

“You know what, Ransom, somebody down in that horrible little town told the Linesmen about me. Told them too much about me—told them enough to get them hunting me. Really hunting me. Who do you think it was? I knew I stayed too long in that town. I told my bosses, I’ve been too long in that town, they’re starting to get suspicious. If I get away from them today I’m coming back, I’m coming back to town; I’ll find out who it was who ratted on me, and I’ll settle the score.”

He mentioned a couple of names, which I will not repeat. One of them was a woman I like.

“What are you looking for, Flood? Or who, who are you looking for?”
“What difference does it make to you, Ransom?”
“I want to understand.”
“Well, you don’t get to understand, Ransom.” He shoved me again.

Not long after that the first of the Vessels opened fire on us.

It missed, of course.

We were climbing among sharp rocks, along the edges of deep cracks in the earth that I could not see the bottom of. We were heading toward the peak. I do not think that was the way Flood wanted to go, but I guess he thought he was cornered.

When the Vessels opened fire something changed in Flood’s face. A fixing of resolve. It was as if he had been waiting for days for them to start shooting, which I guess he had.

Another one of the Vessels opened fire. It missed. Bullets hit the rocks about thirty feet from us. I do not think your Vessels are very accurate: it must come of the wind and the altitude and the difficult angle, and probably the pilot is trying to keep the thing even-keeled and up in the air with one hand while he directs the motor-gun with the other. Anyway that is an interesting engineering problem which I hope you never solve.

We got to where we were sheltered by an overhang of carved red rock, so your Vessels could not shoot us or probably even see us.

“Strip,” Flood said.
I took off my white shirt and white trousers, and he put them on. I put on his clothes. Even the shoes. He went through my pack and took my water and matches but did not think the ink or writing paper worth stealing, it seems.

“All that nonsense about clouds and light and electricity and the future. You think you’re smart, Ransom? You don’t understand anything.”

I do not think he knows exactly what he is looking for, either. And I bet whoever finds this note will not know. I expect it makes sense in someone’s Grand Strategy for this stupid war, but I do not think Flood understands, or you understand, and I know that I don’t.

He leveled his gun at me. He said, “Good-bye, Mr. Flood.”
Then there was a spear in Flood’s shoulder and blood all over the white shirt, and he screamed.

It was a long spear of hard red wood with a stone tip, which you would not guess would be very sharp but
obviously it is. It had come from the rocks above us, and I did not see who had thrown it, but I recognized it as a weapon of the Folk, of course. I might have noticed more, but when Flood cried out I jumped back in surprise and my foot slid on the edge of this pit. I think maybe if I hadn’t been wearing Flood’s shoes, which do not fit me, I might have kept my balance, but as it was I did not.

So far as I know nothing is broken, though my ankle is sprained. The pack got caught on my foot and it fell down after me, which accounts for some of the bruises, but by no means all.

I have had a lot of time to study this goddamn hole in the ground, and I do not think anyone dug it. I think it is just a hole in the ground, a kind of cave, but open to the sky. It is just an accident, like everything else. But if someone had dug it, for the express purpose of keeping people in, they couldn’t have done a better job. I mean that I cannot climb out. But that is not your problem, of course, and you do not care.

I think Flood is still alive. I heard him shouting for a while. I do not know why he didn’t come back to finish the job.

I do not want to take any side in your horrible War and I would not care if he gets away from you, except that I did not like what he said about going back to Disorder, later, because one or two people there were kind to me. So if you meet a man in white who says he is me (the undersigned) you should shoot him.

Yours,

“Professor” Harry Ransom, Lightbringer, Inventor of the Ransom Process, &c &c.
V. The Peak

Dear Jo,

I am well and I hope you are well too. I like to hope that everything is better in Disorder these days. For my part I am doing well—with the money I got from the Mayor for ending the drought I was able to buy a new wagon, and a horse, and Carver and I were able to reconstruct the prototype of my Apparatus better than ever. It is still not perfect, but it comes as close to perfection as anything in this fallen world. Also I had a tailor in the last-town-but-one run up a new white suit; I did not feel altogether myself without the white suit.

About that money—my conscience has been nagging at me, Jo.

I told you that I spoke to the Hill Folk out on Big Witch and they agreed to let Flood’s machine do what it does. That was not exactly a lie, but it was not exactly true either. This is what happened.

* * *

So Flood and me had kind of a falling-out up there. You will not be surprised, I know. Like you said, he was an asshole and he was a crook. You do not need to know exactly what it was all about, except that we got to shouting and then some harsh words and even blows were exchanged. It scared off poor Carver, who despite his hirsute and grimy appearance is a sensitive soul. Do not ever trade blows with anyone up on the peak of a rocky hill, Jo, because there is a fair chance you will stumble and fall down a pit which you cannot climb out of, which is exactly what happened to me. It is not as comic as it sounds. I sat down there for some time feeling sorry for myself and writing letters which I did not ever send, while Flood, that asshole, just left me there and went about his business. In fact I sat down there all day and most of the night before I heard someone hissing my name and then there was an arm reaching down to me, fingers outstretched, and Flood’s round face leaned over the edge of the pit, with the smoky yellow moon encircling it like the halo they assign you for being whatever the opposite of a saint is, and he said, *Take my hand.*

Well I was still sore over the aforementioned altercation and I was not inclined to trust him. But we talked things out like reasonable businessmen.

It seems Flood had run into two big problems.

First, the Line’s forces were out on that hill, looking for whatever it is they’re always looking for—hunting for enemies, real or imagined. You know how it is. I know they passed through Disorder and questioned everyone, and I know they were rough, and I am sorry about that, Jo. But out on that hill they were rougher. Neither Flood nor I wanted to be caught by them.

Second, the Hill Folk were not happy to see us. In fact, while I’d been down in that pit, happily writing letters to strangers, the Folk had been giving poor Flood a bad time, almost as bad as he deserved. He was bleeding and he looked scared.

He said, “I thought I’d never find you again, Ransom.”

I awaited his apology.

“You said they liked you, Ransom. You said you could talk to the Folk. They left us alone while you were with us. They hate me, Ransom, they hate my kind. Help me.”

In fact I had not told him I could talk with the Folk. I had said I would try. I think that is all I ever really promised anyone. I had not said that they liked me any more than they like anyone else—certainly they have no particular reason to. But it seemed he had forgotten exactly what I had said. He was desperate, and desperate people are poor negotiators, as you know.

I said, “Give me water and let me out, then, and I’ll do what I can.”

“Wait,” he said. He tried to look shrewd, but that is hard when you are as tired as he looked. “How have you lasted down there without water? Have they been bringing you water?”

I observed that I had only been down there about nine hours—longer than I had enjoyed, but not long enough to perish of thirst. Well, long story short, Jo, he was quite convinced he’d been lost out there alone for a week or more. We could not reconcile our accounts, and so being practical men of the world we forgot about it and moved on.

* * *

That was a long night, Jo.

Flood said, “Put this on.” It was the jacket of my white suit, which he had stolen and kind of ruined. I saw that it had brought him no joy.
He said, “Where do we go?” And I did not want to admit that I did not know either, so I started walking.

It is dangerous to walk in high and rocky places in the dark, but as I have said the moon was very bright. When I got out of the pit and started walking, what I saw was that the moon lit up the rocks of the peak of Big Witch, which are tall and jagged, like houses or at least like tents, and every single one of them is carved. There is something the Folk use in their carvings that is not exactly like paint. It catches the moonlight and sends it back. So everywhere out on the peak of Big Witch there were red spirals and loops and triangles and various other patterns and geometries, glowing softly and winking from every shadow. I have said to someone else that it was like being in church. Really it is like looking at a city at night from a high place. You think it should mean something if only you were smart enough to understand everything all at once, but I am not. Another thing you think is that it must have taken a thousand years for them to carve the peak like that, but then you think, well, look how big Jasper City or Keaton is and we built those in fifty, so who knows? Different kinds of Time. Anyway I got lost.

The Folk were hunting us. You could see them out of the corner of your eye. Sometimes Flood shot at them. And there were no clouds above, so you could see very clearly that the Vessels were following us too, half a dozen of them, looping and looping the peak at wide angles, in a long trailing V-formation like geese, only hideous and frightening.

I tried to lead us down, but we kept going up instead. I still do not understand why.

The Vessels went away to refuel, and came back. Hours passed and we kept walking.

We came to a place between two tall walls of rock. We could not go forward anymore because the way ahead was blocked by the Folk, and we could not go back, for the same reason.

I know you have seen the Folk before, Jo. There are a few chained ones who work in the fields of Disorder, I noticed. They are long-maned and long-limbed and very tall and bone-white. When you see them in their own places they are different from when you see them in ours.

They stood very still. I could not count their numbers, because some of them were shadows and I was not sure which ones. A lot, anyway.


One of the Folk stood over me. I believe it was a woman. The long black manes are like robes. I looked up into her face, and it was all angles and planes and deep shadows. I could not read her expression.

Jo, you will not believe this, but I did not know what to do and so while my mind was thinking about it and mostly trying not to panic my fingers reached into the pocket of the white jacket and took out my last business card, and I smiled and gave it to her and said, “Hi.”

She held the card in her long long fingers, and turned it over. I had not noticed it before, but they have one more knuckle than we do, Jo. It is strange, though of course hardly the strangest thing that night.

Flood shot at the ground and said, “Tell ’em, Ransom. Tell ’em to let us go or else. Tell ’em they don’t know what they’re messing with.”

Jo, I am pretty sure that they did.

She turned the card over again. I wonder if she could read our language. I do not think that she could, but I think she understood everything all at once anyway. She didn’t say much, but her silences were expressive. I would swear that she was smiling at me. I did not bargain with her because I knew I had nothing to offer her.

Behind me I heard Flood scream. I did not look round; in fact I closed my eyes and soon it was over.

Without saying too much about things it’s better you don’t know, Jo, I will tell you that he deserved it, and nobody should be mad at the Folk for what they did to him; in fact I know that Disorder has some of the Folk in chains working their fields, and you should consider releasing them in thanks and maybe saying sorry as hard as you can. I don’t know if it would do you any good, but it couldn’t hurt.

* * *

Well anyway, when I opened my eyes again there was nobody there. I started walking again.

When I say there was nobody there I do not mean the Vessels. They were still there, all right.

They opened fire.

I started to run, but of course they are much, much faster than anyone can run.

That was when the rains began.

* * *

Jo, you told me how it was down in Disorder when the first drops fell. How you did not believe it at first, how no one in that crowd believed it, how you were all afraid to lift up your palms or turn your faces up in case you were all imagining it, and then when you did the next moment there was a torrent out of the purple evening sky and all the
torches went out and you were all screaming with laughter and suddenly sliding in the mud. For me it was also a happy moment, because the thing is that the Vessels cannot fly in the rain, or at least not rain like that—it was like a whole sea got upended over the peak. I saw one of them go down. It was a beautiful thing to see.

There was floodwater in the channels of the peak, and I was not safe, of course. I ran and slid through mud and water. I slid down a side of Big Witch I had not seen before, which was not bare of trees but covered in pines, green and wet and fragrant, and, well, now you know the rest, because that is about when I stumbled out through the trees and then through what it turned out were only flat and painted trees and out onto the Founding Day Stage, where it was the night of Founding Eve and you were all gathered for the celebration and so it turned out two weeks had passed while I was up on Big Witch, which was a lot more than I had bargained for and even more than Flood’s guess, who knows how or why, and Adams the hotel owner jumped up in the rain and pointed and shouted “One of them! Get him!”—meaning I guess he figured I was one of the Folk creeping through the woods. Or maybe not—I do not know exactly what he thought I was—but anyway I am very grateful for your intervention at that point, to stop me from being lynched and also to make sure I got my three 300 dollars for bringing the rains.

Which you will now understand I did not really do. In fact I do not understand at all what I did, except for blunder about and do my best to do my best and somehow not get killed. Perhaps that is all we can ever do until a better world is made and we can see by a clearer Light, but regardless I do not feel right about taking everyone’s money. The important thing is not always to understand but to do right and be happy, I say, and Carver agrees.

Now there is more of it—the money, that is. I invested it in a new wagon and a new horse and a new prototype of the Apparatus. Also I advertised in a town called Black Ankle for a new assistant, and who showed up but Carver! I said, Where were you? and What happened to you? and What did you do up there? and Loyal assistant, my ass! but he just smiled and looked wise—you remember how he does. It is maddening, but he is good with the Apparatus, which works better now than ever, by the way. And so we found new investors in Black Ankle and in a town called Something-or-Other that came after Black Ankle, and long story short 300 has become 600, and half of it plus a fair rate of interest is waiting for you in the Bank of Melville City if you ever make it there, which you should—it is a great city. There is something about the movement of money up and down the Rim bringing life and energy with it which reminds me of Light moving across the valleys or maybe rain clouds or people, too, I guess, but I do not have time to think about that now or explain what I mean, if I even know what I mean, because Carver is banging on the door of the wagon and the crowd outside is expectant and it is time to go out and put on a show for wherever it is this time. And so,

All the best,
Harry Ransom, Lightbringer, &c &c
In the town of Whatever-it’s-called
Books by Felix Gilman

The Half-Made World
Thunderer
Gears of the City
Science fiction. Fantasy. The universe.
And related subjects.

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