

TIME TRAVELERS STRICTLY CASH

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An ACE Book

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This one's for Jim Baen, of course.

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FORE WORDS

TO NEW READERS:

If you have never heard of Callahan's Place before, a brief word of itroduction should be read-since four stories in this book take place there.

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## FORE WORDS

### TO NEW READERS:

If you have never heard of Callahan's Place before, a brief word of introduction should be read—since four stories in this book take place there.

Don't worry! You're not late, nothing has started without you, there is no lengthy What-Has~Gone-Before to digest before you can begin. The Callahan stories have appeared in several different magazines, and so I've done my best to make each individual story self-contained. All you need to know going in is that Callahan's bar has a fireplace, and a chalk line on the floor about ten meters away, and that patrons who are willing to give up the change from their drink are welcome to toe that line, propose a toast, and empty their empty glass in that fireplace.

(Callahan gets a bulk discount on glasses.) As a result of this custom, a great many strange stories end up getting told in Callahan's Place, and you may, (if you wish, skip now directly to the first one, "Fivesight.")

### TO FRIENDS OF CALLAHAN'S PLACE:

All right, I give up.

I tried; God knows I tried: you'd think a professional liar could have pulled it off. But you people are just too clever for me. My cover is blown; time to face the music and confess.

In the first collection of Callahan's bar stories, Callahan's Crosstime Saloon (Ace paperback), I maintained flatly that there is no such tavern. 'Callahan's Place,' I said as that time, "exists only between (a) my ears. (b) assorted Analog and Vertex covers, and of course (c) the covers of this book. If there is in fact a Callahan's Place out there in the so-called real world, and you know where it is, I sincerely hope you'll tell me."

In a fit of craftiness, I even went so far as to insert a few subtle contradictions in the stories themselves. For example, on page 10 I stated that the Place is always crowded on holidays; on page 162 I said it is usually empty on holidays. By this brilliant ploy I hoped I could discredit myself, and appear to be an absent-minded fictioneer. Such details get noticed! I have a hundred letters from readers who spotted that discrepancy, each convinced that they are smarter than me.

Since it seemed to work so well, I continued the custom. To each of the Callahan yarns Jake has told me since that first book was closed up I have added a tiny inconsistency with the rest of the series (and an autographed cigar butt to the first reader who correctly names them all). By this means I believed I could maintain the hoax forever.

But there are five letters on my desk that say that the jig is up.

The first four are from people who found Callahan's Place. All four had needed to believe so badly that they ignored my disclaimer: they simply kept searching for the Place until they found it. I should have known it would happen. The Place is like that. But those letters caused me to reconsider the ethics of concealing the truth. How many people needed Callahan's, but gave up because I told them the quest was hopeless?

Look: there is no restaurant so good that it can survive Being Discovered. If you know a real nice place to hang out, the best thing you can do-for yourself and for the place-is to keep your mouth shut about it, at least publicly. Close friends can sometimes be tipped off-but even here care is required, as every friend has other close friends. It sounds selfish, but it's just pragmatic. If five hundred people try to share an apple, nobody benefits. Especially not the apple. So my inclination has been to play Callahan's Place close to the vest.

But there's that fifth letter I mentioned.

It is from Mike Callahan; Handwritten, of course; his pinkies are a typewriter-key-and-a-half in width. The penmanship is superb; some long-ago nun's stern discipline has triumphed over broken fingers and popped knuckles and a natural disposition to be easygoing in all things. The ink is green. The paper is wrinkled and beer-stained, and smells faintly of cigar smoke-very cheap cigar smoke.

Mike writes, in part:

I appreciate your trying to keep the tourists and voyeurs out of our hair-if this Place gets too crowded, I can't let people smash their glasses in the fireplace. By all means keep our location under your hat, and keep your hat in a safe-deposit box. But I think you've gone just a bit too far in that direction. If folks think your stories are fiction, they're liable to get the idea that this Place is only imaginary, that a Place like this couldn't 'really' exist. They'll miss the point that any bar can be Callahan's Place, as soon as responsible people start hanging out there together. You'd be surprised how many sad sons of bitches believe people only care about each other in books.

I don't think you've given too many clues to our location. 'Somewhere off Route 25A in Suffolk County, N.Y.' covers a lot of territory-anybody who can track us from that is either hurting bad enough to belong here, or resourceful enough to buy a round for the house.

So let's go public.

P.S.: When are you coming down for a visit? The Doc has a new stinker for you, and Jake and Eddie want to jam.

Which last brings me to a second confession:

This is NOT “just” a collection of Callahan’s Place stories, and so it is not, strictly speaking, a sequel to Callahan’s Crosstime Saloon.

It was supposed to be; that’s how the contract reads. Yet Callahan stories occupy a little less than half the total wordage, just over 60% of the fiction content. Why? Well, now that I’ve revealed the truth-that Callahan’s Place really exists-I can explain, it’s absurdly simple, really.

I don’t live in Suffolk County any more.

I had so much success transcribing lake’s yarns about Callahan’s Place (somehow that way-out stuff never seems to happen while I’m there) that I was encouraged to try writing real science fiction on my own. It worked out rather well, and soon I decided I wanted to write for a living.

But the year I went freelance my annual income went from around ten thousand to around one thousand, and the next year it took a sharp drop-it speedily became apparent that I would have to live somewhere much less expensive than Suffolk County, Long Island. I chose the woods of Nova Scotia’s great North Mountain, and eventually made that province my home. I haven’t been back to Long Island but three or four quick visits since the first book of Callahan’s stories was closed up. Each time I wormed another yarn out of Jake; each time I sold the results to a magazine (and my financial agreement with Jake is none of your business, thanks)-but the total wordage as of last week was only 28,000, somewhat less than half a book.

That’s where matters stood when Jim Baen, then editor of Ace Books, and my old chum, called up to remind me that it has been along time since I contracted to supply a second Callahan’s book.

(Hell, it’s been a long time since the deadline.) I had failed, you see, to anticipate just how popular Callahan’s Place would become.

Crosstisne Saloon was published almost four years ago; here I sit at my desk wearing a Callahan’s Place t-shirt (not my doing-an Ann Arbor entrepreneur saw a profit in them). On the desk is a Callahan’s Christmas card (again, private enterprise), three different lyric sheets for songs written about the Place, and cassettes containing two more. Also on the desk is a copy of the new hardcover edition of Saloon (available from Ridley Enslow, 60 Crescent Place, Short Hills, NJ

07078), which exists because the paperback was named a Best Book For Young Adults in 1977 by the American Library Association. Funny stories almost never get nominated for Hugos, but “Dog Day Evening,” herein reprinted, is one of about five to make it in the last ten years. In 1978 The Sydney (Australia) Science Fiction Foundation awarded me the Pat Terry Memorial Award for Hunwrous Writing, for the Callahan stories. (It is one of the most practical awards I know: a silver-plated beer mug.) Television and movie rights to the book have been optioned, radio rights are being negotiated, I understand a tunnel in Boston has been named after Callahan...

In short, Baen had reason to believe he could sell another Callahan book. Furthermore, in law, he owned one, half paid for, “Where,” he inquired politely, “is it?”

I explained the situation, and assured him that a trip to Long Island was simply not possible any time in the foreseeable future.

He assured me that a trip to Sing Sing was inevitable if I didn’t deliver.

So we compromised.

Herein be four stories from Callahan’s Place. Herein also be four non-Callahan stories, all written within the last year (NOT, in other words, out-takes from my other story collection, *Antimony* [currently available from Dell books] but newer, even better stuff.) Finally, this book contains three non-fiction pieces, two at the request of Jim Baen, and one on my own initiative.

The two Baen insisted on were the very first book review column I ever wrote (for reasons to be discussed later) and an essay I wrote for his superb bookazine *Destinies* concerning Robert A Heinlein. The one I threw in is a speech I made at the 1978 Minneapolis Science Fiction Convention concerning the nature and value of fandom.

Put it all together, wrap it up with commentary, and it approaches 80,000 words, a pretty good-sized book, of which I find I am inordinately proud.

Now, there will, someday, be a “second Callahan book,” comprised exclusively of Jake’s yarns. Those contained in this book will form less than half of it. If you want to wait for it, by all means, do so.

But one thing that would hasten the day of its arrival would be for this book to make a bundle of money.

-Spider Robinson

Halifax, 1980

## FIVESIGHT

I know what the exact date was, of course, but I can't see that it would matter to you.

Say it was just another Saturday night at Callahan's Place.

Which is to say that the joint was merry as hell, as usual. Over in the corner Fast Eddie sat in joyous combat with Eubie Blake's old rag "Tricky Fingers," and a crowd had gathered around the piano to cheer him on. It is a demonically difficult rag, which Eubie wrote for the specific purpose of humiliating his competitors, and Eddie takes a crack at it maybe once or twice a year.

He was playing it with his whole body, grinning like a murderer and spraying sweat in all directions. The onlookers fed him energy in the form of whoops and rebel yells, and one of the unlikely miracles about Callahan's Place is that no one claps along with Eddie's music who cannot keep time. All across the rest of the tavern people whirled and danced, laughing because they could not make their feet move one fourth as fast as Eddie's hands. Behind the bar Callahan danced with himself, and bottles danced with each other on the shelves behind him. I sat stock-still in front of the bar, clutched my third drink in fifteen minutes, and concentrated on not bursting into tears.

Doc Webster caught me at it. You would not think that a man navigating that much mass around a crowded rooin could spare attention for anything else; furthermore, he was dancing with Josie Bauer, who is enough to hold anyone's attention. She is very pretty and limber enough to kick a man standing behind her in the eye. But the Doc has a built-in compass for pain; when his eyes fell on mine, they stayed there.

His other professional gift is for tact and delicacy. He did not glance at the calendar, he did not pause in his dance, he did not so much as frown. But I knew that he knew.

Then the dance whirled him away. I spun my chair around to the bar and gulped whiskey.

Eddie brought "Tricky Fingers" to a triumphant conclusion, hammering that final chord home with both hands, and his howl of pure glee was audible even over the roar of applause that rose from the whole crew at once. Many glasses hit the fireplace together, and happy conversation began everywhere. I finished my drink. For the hundredth time I was grateful that Callahan keeps no mirror behind his bar: Behind me, I knew, Doc Webster would be whispering in various ears, unobtnisively passing the word, and I didn't want to see it.

"Hit me again, Mike," I called out.

"Half a sec, Jake," Callahan boomed cheerily. He finished drawing a pitcher of beer, stuck a straw into it, and passed it across to Long-Drink McGonnigle, who ferried it to Eddie. The big barkeep ambled my way, running damp hands through his thinning red

hair. “Beer?”

I produced a very authentic-looking grin. “Irish again.”

Callahan looked ever so slightly pained and rubbed his big broken nose. “I’ll have to have your keys, Jake.”

The expression one too many has only a limited meaning at Callahan’s Place. Mike operates on the assumption that his customers are grown-ups—he’ll keep on serving you for as long as you can stand up and order ‘em intelligibly. But no, one drunk drives home from Callahan’s. When he decides you’ve reached your limit, you have to surrender your car keys to keep on drinking, then let Pyotr—who drinks only ginger ale—drive you home when you fold.~

“British constitution,” I tried experimentally. “The lethal policeman dismisseth us. Peter Pepper packed his pipe with paraquat . .

Mike kept his big hand out for the keys. “I’ve heard you sing ‘Shiny Stockings’ blind drunk wouthout a single syllabobble, Jake.”

“Damn it,” I began, and stopped. “Make it a beer, Mike.”

He nodded and brought me a Löwenbräu dark. “How about a toast?”

I glanced at him sharply. There was a toast that I urgently wanted to make, to have behind me for another year. “Maybe later.”

“Sure. Hey, Drink! How about a toast around here?”

Long-Drink looked up from across the room. “I’m your man.” The conversation began to abate as he threaded his way through the crowd to the chalk line on the floor and stood facing the deep brick fireplace. He is considerably taller than somewhat, and he towered over everyone. He waited until he had our attention.

“Ladies and gentlemen and regular customers.” he said then, “you may find this difficult to believe, but in my youth I was known far and wide as a jackass.” This brought a spirited response, which he endured stoically. “My only passion in life, back in my college days, was

grossing people out. I considered it a holy mission, and I had a whole crew of other jackasses to tell me I was just terrific. I would type long letters, onto a roll of toilet paper, smear mustard on the last square, then roll it back up and mail it in a box. I kept a dead mouse in my pocket at all times. I streaked Town Hall in 1952. I loved to see eyes glaze. And I regret to confess that I concentrated mostly on ladies, because they were the easiest to gross out. Foul Phil, they called me in them-days. I’ll tell you what cured me.” He wet his whistle, confident of our attention.

“The only trouble with a reputation for rudeness is that sooner or later you run short of

unsuspecting victims. So you look for new faces. One day I'm at a party off campus, and I notice a young lady I've never seen before, a pretty little thing in an off-the-shoulder blouse. Oboy, I sez to myself, fresh blood! What'll I do? I've got the mouse in one pocket, the rectal-thermometer swizzle stick in the other, but she looks so virginal and innocent I decide the hell with subtlety, I'll try a direct approach. So I walk over to where she's sittin' talkin' to Petey LeFave on a little couch. I come up behind her, like, upzip me trousers, out with me instrument, and lay it across her shoulder."

There were some howls of outrage, from the men as much as from the women, and some giggles, from the women as

much as from the men. "Well, I said I was a jackass," the Drink Said, and we all applauded.

"No reaction whatsoever do I get from her," he went on, dropping into his fake brogue.

"People grinnin' or growlin' all round the room just like here, Petey's eyes poppin', but this lady gives no sign that she's aware of me presence at all, at all. I kinda wiggle it a bit, and not a glance does she give me. Finally I can't stand it. 'Hey,' I sez, tappin' her other shoulder and pointing, 'what do you think this is?' And she takes a leisurely look. Then she looks me in the eye and says, 'It's something like a man's penis, only smaller.'

An explosion of laughter and applause filled the room.

"... wherefore," continued Long-Drink, "I propose a toast to me youth, and may God save me from a relapse." And the cheers overcame the laughter as he gulped his drink and flung the glass into the fireplace. I nearly grinned myself.

"My turn," Tommy Janssen called out, and the Drink made way for him at the chalk line.

Tommy's probably the youngest of the regulars; I'd put him at just about twenty-one. His hair is even longer than mine, but he keeps his face mowed.

"This happened to me just last week. I went into the city for a party, and I left it too late, and it was the wrong neighborhood of New York for a civilian to be in at that time of night, right? A dreadful error! Never been so scared in my life. I'm walking on tippy-toe, looking in every doorway I pass and trying to look insolvent, and the burning question in my mind is, 'Are the crosstown buses still running?' Because if they are, I can catch one a block away that'll take me to bright lights and safety-but I've forgotten how late the crosstown bus keeps running in this part of town. It's my only hope. I keep on walking, scared as hell. And when I get to the bus stop, there, leaning up against a mailbox, is the biggest, meanest-looking, ugliest, blackest man I have ever seen in my life. Head shaved, three days' worth of beard, big scar on his face, hands in his pockets."

Not a sound in the joint.

“So the essential thing is not to let them know you’re scared. I put a big grin on my face, and I walk right up to him and I stammer, ‘Uh... crosstown bus run all night long?’ And the fella goes ... ” Tommy’ mimed a ferocious looking giant with his hands in his pockets. Then suddenly he yanked them out, clapped them rhythmically, and sang, “Doo-dah, doo-dah!”

The whole bar dissolved in laughter.

“... fella whipped out a joint, and we both got high while we waited for the bus,” he went on, and the laughter redoubled. Tommy finished his beer and cocked the empty. “So my toast is to prejudice,” he finished, and pegged the glass square into the hearth, and the laughter became a standing ovation. Isham Latimer, who is the exact color of recording tape, came over and gave Tommy a beer, a grin, and some skin.

Suddenly I thought I understood something, and it filled me with-shame.

Perhaps in my self-involvement I was wrong. I had not seen the Doc communicate in any way with Long-Drink or Tommy, nor had the toasters seemed to notice me at all. But all at once it seemed suspicious that both men, both proud men, had picked tonight to stand up and uncharacteristically tell egg-on-my-face anecdotes. Damn Doc Webster! I had been trying so hard to keep my pain off my face, so determined to get my toast made and get home without bringing my friends down.

Or was I, with the egotism of the wounded, reading too much into a couple of good anecdotes well told? I wanted to bear the next toast. I turned around to set my beer down so I could prop my face up on both fists, and was stunned out of my self-involvement, and was further

ashamed.

It was inconceivable that I could have sat next to her for a full fifteen minutes without noticing her-anywhere in the world, let alone at Callahan’s Place.

I worked the night shift in a hospital once, pushing a broom. The only new faces you see are the ones they wheel into Emergency. There are two basic ways people react facially to mortal agony. The first kind smiles a lot, slightly apologetically, thanks everyone elaborately for small favors, extravagantly praises the hospital md its every employee.

The face is animated, trying to ensure that the last impression it leaves before going under the knife is of a helluva nice person whom it would be a shame to lose. The second kind is absolutely blank-faced, so utterly wrapped up in wondering whether he’s dying that he has no attention left for working the switches and levers of the face-or so certain of death that the perpetual dialogue people conduct with their faces has ceased to interest him. It’s not the total deaniination of a corpse’s face, butit’s not far

from it.

Her face was of the second type. I suppose it could have been cancer or some such, but somehow I knew her pain was not physical. I was just as sure that it might be fatal. I was so shocked I violated the prime rule of Callahan's Place without even thinking about it. "Good God, lady," I blurted, "What's the matter?"

Her head turned toward me with such elaborate care that I knew her car keys must be in the coffee can behind the bar. Her eyes took awhile focusing on me, but when they did, there was no one looking out of them. She enunciated her words.

"Is it to me to whom you are referring?"

She was not especially pretty, not particularly well dressed, her hair cut wrong for her face and in need of brushing. She was a normal person, in other words, save that her face was uninhabited, and somehow I could not take my eyes off her. It was not the pain I wanted to take my eyes from that it was something else.

It was necessary to get her attention. "Nothing, nothing, just wanted to tell you your hair's on fire."

She nodded. "Think nothing of it." She turned back to her screwdriver and started to take a sip and sprayed it all over the counter. She shrieked on the inhale, dropped the glass, and flung her hands at her hair.

Conversation stopped all over the house.

She whirled on me, ready to achieve total fury at the slightest sign of a smile, and I debated giving her that release but decided she could not afford the energy it would cost her.

"I'm truly, truly sorry," I said at once, "but a minute ago you weren't here and now you are, and that's the way I wanted it."

Callahan was there, his big knuckly hand resting light as lint on my shoulder. His expression was mournful. "Prying, Jake? You?"

"That's up to her, Mike," I said, holding her eyes.

"What you talkin' about?" she asked.

"Lady," I said, "there's so much pain on your face! just have to ask you, How come? If you don't want to tell me, then I'm prying." She blinked. "And if you are?"

"The little guy with a face like a foot who has by now tiptoed up behind me will brush his blackjack across my occiput, and I'll wake up tomorrow with the same kind of head you're gonna-have. Right, Eddie?"

“Dat’s right, Jake, “the piano man’s voice came from just behind me.

She shook her head dizzily, then looked around at friendly, attentive faces. “What the hell kind of place is this?”

Usually we prefer to let newcomers figure that out for themselves, but I couldn’t wait that long. “This is Callahan’s. Most joints the barkeep listens to your troubles, but we happen to love this one so much that we all share his load. This is the place you found because you needed to.” I gave it everything I had.

She looked around again, searching faces. I saw her look for the prurience of the accident spectator and not find it; then I saw her look again for compassion and find it. She turned back to me and looked me over carefully. I tried to look gentle, trustworthy, understanding, wise, and strong. I wanted to be more than I was for her. “He’s not prying, Eddie,” she said at last. “Sure, I’ll tell you people. You’re not going to believe it anyway. Innkeeper, gimme coffee, light and sweet.”

She picked somebody’s empty from the bar, got down unsteadily from her chair, and walked with great care to the chalk line. “You people like toasts? I’ll give you a toast. To fivesight,”

she said, and whipped her glass so hard she nearly fell. It smashed in the geometrical center of

the fireplace, and residual alcohol made the flames ripple through the spectrum.

I made a small sound.

By the time she had regained her balance, young Tommy was straightening up from the chair he had placed behind her, brushing his hair back over his shoulders. She sat gratefully. We formed a ragged half-circle in front of her, and Shorty Steinitz brought her the coffee. I sat at her feet and studied her as she sipped it. Her face was still not pretty, but now that the lights were back on in it, you could see that she was beautiful, and I’ll take that any day. Go chase a pretty one and see what it gets you. The coffee Seemed to help steady her.

“It starts out prosaic,” she began. “Three years ago my first husband, Freddie, took off with a sculptress named, God help us, Kitten, leaving me with empty savings and checking, a mortgage I couldn’t cut, and a seven-year-old son. Freddie was the life of the party. Lily of the valley. So I got myself a job on a specialist newspaper. Little businessmen’s daily, average subscriber’s median income fifty kay~ The front-page story always happened to be about the firm that had bought the most ad space that week. Got the picture? I did a weekly Leisure Supplement, ten pages every Thursday, with a... you don’t care about this crap. I don’t care about this crap.

“So one day I’m sitting at my little steel-desk. This place is a reconverted warehouse, one immense office, and the editorial department is six desks pushed together in the

back, near the paste-up tables and the library and the wire. Everybody else is gone to lunch, and I'm just gonna leave myself when this guy from accounting comes over. I couldn't remember his name; he was one of those grim, stolid, fatalistic guys that accounting departments run to. He hands me two envelopes. 'This is for you, 'he says, 'and this one's for Tom.' Tom was the hippy who put out the weekly Real Estate Supplement.

So I start to open mine-it feels like there's candy in it-and he gives me this look and says, 'Oh no, not now.' I look at him like huh? and he says, 'Not until it's time. You'll know when,' and he leaves. Okay, I say to myself, and I put both envelopes in a drawer, and I go to lunch and forget it.

"About three o'clock I wrap up my work, and I get to thinking about how strange his face looked when he gave me

those envelopes. So I take out mine and open it. Inside it are two very big downs-you know, powerful tranquilizers. I sit

up straight. I open Tom's envelope, and if I hadn't worked in a drugstore once, I never would have recognized it. Demerol. Synthetic morphine, one of the most addictive drugs in the world.

"Now Tom is a hippie-looking guy; like I say, long hair and mustache, not long like yours, but long for a newspaper.

So I figure this accounting guy is maybe his pusher and somehow he's got the idea I'm a potential customer. I was kind of fidgety and tense in those days. So I get mad as hell, and I'm just thinking about taking Tom into the darkroom and chewing him out good, and I look up, and the guy from accounting is staring at me from all the way across the room. No expression at all, he just looks. It gives me the heebiejeebies.

"Now, overhead is this gigantic air-conditioning unit, from the old warehouse days, that's supposed to cool the whole building and never does. What it does is drip water on editorial and make so much goddamn noise you can't talk on the phone while it's on. And what it does, right at that moment, is rip loose and drop straight down; maybe eight hundred pounds. It crushes all the desks in editorial, and it kills Mabel and Art and Dolores and Phil and takes two toes off of Tom's right foot and misses me completely. A flying piece of wire snips off one of my ponytails.

"So I sit there with my mouth open, and in the silence I hear the publisher say, 'God damn it,' from the middle of the room, and I climb over the wreckage and get the Demerol into Tom, and then I make a tourniquet on his arch out of rubber bands and blue pencils, and then everybody's taking me away and saying stupid things. I took those two tranquilizers and went home."

She took a sip of her coffee and sat up a little straighter.

Her eyes were the color of sun-cured Hawaiian buds. “They shut the paper down for a week.

The next day, when I woke up, I got out my employee directory and looked this guy up.

While Bobby was in school, I went over to his house. It took me hours to break him down, but I wouldn’t take no answer

for an answer. Finally he gave up. ‘I’ve got fivesight,’ he told me. ‘Something just a little bit better than foresight. ‘It was the only joke I ever heard him make, then or since.’”

I made the gasping sound again. “Precognition,” Doc Webster breathed. Awkwardly, from my tailor’s seat, I worked my keys out of my pocket and tossed them to Callahan. He caught them in the coffee can he had ready and started a shot of Bushmill’s on its way to me without a word.

“You know the expression ‘Bad news travels fast?’” she asked. “For him it travels so fast it gets there before the

event. About three hours before, more or less. But only bad news. Disasters, accidents, traumas large and small are all he ever sees.”

“That sounds ideal,” Doc Webster said thoughtfully. “He doesn’t have to lose the fun of pleasant surprises, but he

doesn’t have to worry about unpleasant ones. That sounds like the best way to ... ” He shifted his immense bulk in his chair. “Damn it, what is the verb for precognition? Precognite?”

“Ain’t they the guys that sang that ‘Jeremiah was a bullfrog’ song?” Long-Drink murmured to Tommy, who kicked him hard in the shins.

“That shows how much you know about it,” she told the Doc. “He has three hours to worry about each unpleasant surprise-and there’s a strictly limited amount he can do about it.”

The Doc opened his mouth and then shut it tight and let her tell it. A good doctor hates forming opinions in ignorance.

“The first thing I asked him when he told me was why hadn’t he warned Phil and Mabel and the others. And then I

caught myself and said, ‘What a dumb question! How’re you going to keep six people away from their desks without

telling them why? Forget I asked that.”

“‘It’s worse than that,’ he told me. ‘It’s not that I’m trying to preserve some kind of secret identity-it’s that it wouldn’t do the slightest bit of good anyway, I can ameliorate to some extent. But I cannot prevent. No matter what. I’m not... not permitted.’

“‘Permitted by who?’ I asked.

‘By whoever or whatever sends me these damned premonitions in the first place,’ he said.

‘I haven’t the faintest

idea who~

” ‘What exactly are the limitations?’

‘If a pot of water is going to boil over and scald me, I can’t just not make tea that night. Sooner or later I will make tea and scald myself. The longer I put off the inevitable, the worse I get burned. But if I accept it and let it happen in its natural time, I’m allowed to, say, have a pot of ice water handy to stick my hand in. When I saw that my neighbor’s steering box was going to fail, I couldn’t keep him from driving that day, but I could remind him to wear his seatbelt, and so his injuries were minimized. But if I’d seen him dying in that wreck, I couldn’t have done anything-except arrange to be near the wife when she got the news. It’s... it’s especially bad to try to prevent a death. The results are... I saw him start to say ‘horrible’ and reject it as not strong enough. He couldn’t find anything strong enough.

“‘Okay, Cass,’ I said real quick. ‘So at least you can help some. That’s more than some doctors can do. I think that was really terrific of you, to bring me that stuff like that, take a chance that I’d think you were-hey, how did you get hold of narcotics on three hours’ notice?’

“‘I had three hours’ warning for the last big blackout,’ he told me. I took two suitcases of stuff out of Smithtown General while they were trying to get their emergency generator going.

I... have uses for the stuff.”

She looked down into her empty cup, then handed to Eddie, who had it refilled. While he was gone, she stared at her lap, breathing with her whole torso, lungs cycling slowly from absolutely full to empty.

“I was grateful to him. I felt sorry for him. I figured he needed somebody to help him. I figured after a manic oppressive like Freddie, a quiet, phlegmatic kind of guy might suit me better. His favorite expression was, ‘What’s done is done.’ I started dating him. One day Bobby fell out of a tree and broke his leg, and Uncle Cass just happened to be

walking by with a hypo and splints.” She looked up and around at us, and her eyes fastened on me. “Maybe I wanted my kid to be safe.” She looked away again. “Make a long story short, I married him.”

I spilled a little Bushmill’s down my beard. No one seemed to notice.

“It’s... funny,” she said slowly, and getting out that second word cost her a lot. “It’s really damned funny. At

first... at first, there, he was really good for my nerves. He never got angry. Nothing rattled him. He never got emotional the way men do, never got the blues. It’s not that he doesn’t feel things. I thought so at first, but I was wrong. It’s just that living with a thing like that, either he could be irritable enough to bite people’s heads off all the time, or he could learn how to bold it all in. That’s what he did, probably back when he was a little kid. ‘What’s done is done,’ he’d say, and keep on going. He does need to be held and cared for, have his shoulders rubbed out after a bad one, have one person he can tell about it. I know I’ve been good for him,

and I guess at first it made me feel kind of special. As if it took some kind of genius person to share pain.” She closed her eyes and grimaced. “Oh, and Bobby came to love him sot!”

There was silence.

“Then the weirdness of it started to get to me. He’d put a BandAid in his pocket, and a couple of hours later he’d cut his finger chopping lettuce. I’d get diarrhea and run to the john, and there’d be my favorite magazine on the floor. I’d come downstairs at bedtime for vitamins and find every pot in the house full of water, and go back up to bed wondering what the hell, and wake up a little while later to find that a socket short had set the living room on fire before it tripped the breaker and he had it under control. I’d catch him concealing some little preparation from me, and know that it was for me or Bobby, and I’d carry on and beg him to tell me-and the bcst of those times were when all I could make him tell me was, ‘What’s done is done.’

“I started losing sleep and losing weight.

“And then one day the principal called just before dinner to tell me that a school bus had been hit by a tractor-trailer and fourteen students were critically injured and Bobby and another boy were... I threw the telephone across the room at him, I jumped on him like a wild animal and punched him with my fists, I screamed and screamed. ‘YOU DIDN’T EVEN TRY!’ “she screamed again now, and it rang and rang in the stillness of Callahan’s Place. I wanted to leap up and take her in my arms, let her sob it out against my chest, but something held me back.

She pulled herself together and gulped cold coffee. You could hear the air conditioner sigh and the clock whir. You could not hear cloth rustle or a chair creak. When she spoke again, her voice was under rigid control. It made my heart sick to hear it.