

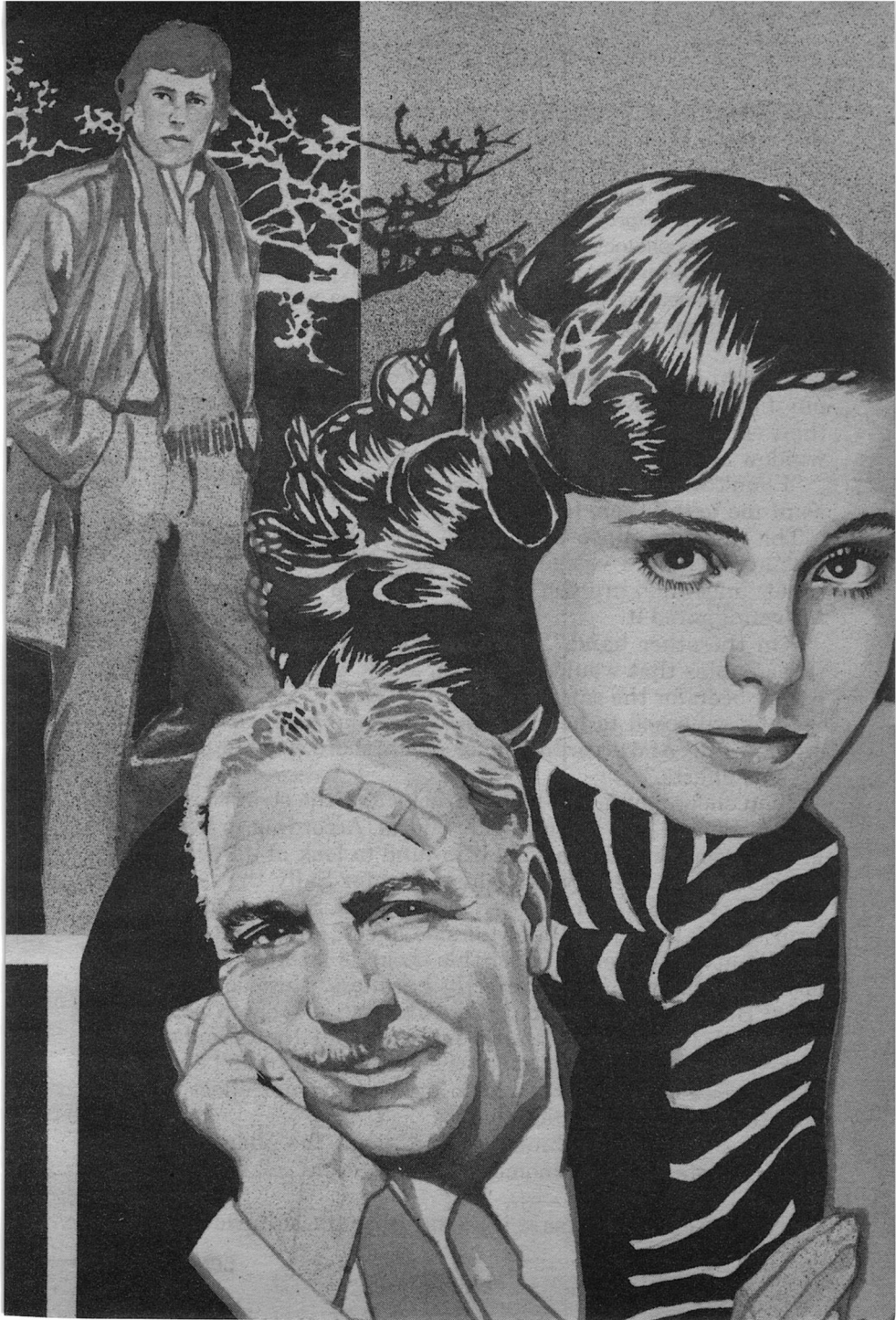


Despite the fact that Ms. Willis recently won two Nebula awards (for "Fire Watch" and "A Letter from the Clearys"), the only thing she's asked us to mention here is that she wrote the following story while under a National Endowment for the Humanities grant. And a word of warning: if you're looking for the sort of subtly-plotted, understated story that one has come to expect from Ms. Willis—well, we're afraid you won't interface with one here.

by Connie Willis

art: Laura Lakey

BLUED MOON



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Mowen Chemical today announced implementation of an innovative waste emissions installation at its experimental facility in Chugwater, Wyoming. According to project directors Bradley McAfee and Lynn Saunders, nonutilizable hydrocarbonaceous substances will be propulsively transferred to stratospheric altitudinal locations, where photochemical decomposition will result in triatomic allotropism and formation of benign bicarbonaceous precipitates. Preliminary predictive databasing indicates positive ozonation yields without statistically significant shifts in lateral ecosystem equilibria.

"Do you suppose Walter Hunt would have invented the safety pin if he had known that punk rockers would stick them through their cheeks?" Mr. Mowen said. He was looking gloomily out the window at the distant 600-foot-high smokestacks.

"I don't know, Mr. Mowen," Janice said. She sighed. "Do you want me to tell them to wait again?"

The sigh was supposed to mean, It's after four o'clock and it's getting dark, and you've already asked Research to wait three times, and when are you going to make up your mind? but Mr. Mowen ignored it.

"On the other hand," he said. "What about diapers? And all those babies that would have been stuck with straight pins if it hadn't been for the safety pin?"

"It is supposed to help restore the ozone layer, Mr. Mowen," Janice said. "And according to Research, there won't be any harmful side effects."

"You shoot a bunch of hydrocarbons into the stratosphere, and there won't be any harmful side effects. According to Research." Mr. Mowen swivelled his chair around to look at Janice, nearly knocking over the picture of his daughter Sally that sat on his desk. "I stuck Sally once. With a safety pin. She screamed for an hour. How's that for a harmful side effect? And what about the stuff that's left over after all this ozone is formed? Bicarbonate of soda, Research says. Perfectly harmless. How do they know that? Have they ever dumped bicarbonate of soda on people before? Call Research . . ." he started to say, but Janice had already picked up the phone and tapped the number. She didn't even sigh. "Call Research and ask them to figure out what effect a bicarbonate of soda rain would have."

"Yes, Mr. Mowen," Janice said. She put the phone up to her ear and listened for a moment. "Mr. Mowen . . ." she said hesitantly.

"I suppose Research says it'll neutralize the sulfuric acid that's

killing the statues and sweeten and deodorize at the same time."

"No, sir," Janice said. "Research says they've already started the temperature-differential kilns, and you should be seeing something in a few minutes. They say they couldn't wait any longer."

Mr. Mowen whipped back around in his chair to look out the window. The picture of Sally teetered again, and Mr. Mowen wondered if she were home from college yet. Nothing was coming out of the smokestacks. He couldn't see the candlestick-base kilns through the maze of fast-food places and trailer parks. A McDonald's sign directly in front of the smokestacks blinked on suddenly, and Mr. Mowen jumped. The smokestacks themselves remained silent and still except for their blinding strobe aircraft lights. He could see sagebrush-covered hills in the space between the stacks, and the whole scene, except for the McDonald's sign, looked unbelievably serene and harmless.

"Research says the kilns are fired to full capacity," Janice said, holding the phone against her chest.

Mr. Mowen braced himself for the coming explosion. There was a low rumbling like distant fire, then a puff of whitish smoke, and finally a deep, whooshing sound like one of Janice's sighs, and two columns of blue shot straight up into the darkening sky.

"Why is it blue?" Mr. Mowen said.

"I already asked," Janice said. "Research says visible spectrum diffraction is occurring because of the point eight micron radii of the hydrocarbons being propelled . . ."

"That sounds like that damned press release," Mr. Mowen said. "Tell them to speak English."

After a minute of talking into the phone, she said, "It's the same effect that causes the sunsets after a volcanic eruption. Scattering. Research wants to know what staff members you'd like to have at the press conference tomorrow."

"The directors of the project," Mr. Mowen said grumpily, "and anyone over at Research who can speak English."

Janice looked at the press release. "Bradley McAfee and Lynn Saunders are the directors," she said.

"Why does the name McAfee sound familiar?"

"He's Ulric Henry's roommate. The company linguist you hired to . . ."

"I know why I hired him. Invite Henry, too. And try to get Sally as soon as she gets home. Tell her that I expect her there; and tell her to dress up." He looked at his watch. "Well," he said. "It's

been going five minutes, and there haven't been any harmful side effects yet."

The phone rang. Mr. Mowen jumped. "I knew it was too good to last," he said. "Who is it? The EPA?"

"No," Janice said, and sighed. "It's your ex-wife."

"I'm shut of that," Brad said when Ulric came in the door. He was sitting in the dark, the green glow of the monitor lighting his face. He tapped at the terminal keys for a minute more and then turned around. "All done. Slicker'n goose grease."

Ulric turned on the light. "The waste-emissions project?" he said.

"Nope. We turned that on this afternoon. Works prettier than a spotted pony. No, I been spending the last hour erasing my fiancée Lynn's name from the project records."

"Won't Lynn object to that?" Ulric said, fairly calmly, mostly because he did not have a very clear idea of which one Lynn was. He never could tell Brad's fiancées apart. They all sounded exactly the same.

"She won't hear tell of it till it's too late," Brad said. "She's on her way to Cheyenne to catch a plane back east. Her mother's all het up about getting a divorce. Caught her husband Adam 'n' Evin'."

If there was anything harder to put up with than Brad's rottenness, it was his incredibly good luck. While Ulric was sure Brad was low enough to engineer a sudden family crisis to get Lynn out of Chugwater, he was just as sure that he had had no need to. It was a lucky coincidence that Lynn's mother was getting a divorce just now, and lucky coincidences were Brad's specialty. How else could he have kept three fiancées from ever meeting each other in the small confines of Chugwater and Mowen Chemical?

"Lynn?" Ulric said. "Which one is that? The redhead in programming?"

"Nope, that's Sue. Lynn's little and yellow-haired and smart as a whip about chemical engineering. Kind of a dodunk about everything else."

"Dodunk," Ulric said to himself. He should make a note to look that up. It probably meant "one so foolish as to associate with Brad McAfee." That definitely included him. He had agreed to room with Brad because he was so surprised at being hired that it had not occurred to him to ask for an apartment of his own.

He had graduated with an English degree that everyone had

told him was worse than useless in Wyoming, and which he very soon found out was. In desperation, he had applied for a factory job at Mowen Chemical and been hired on as company linguist at an amazing salary for reasons that had not yet become clear, though he had been at Mowen for over three months. What *had* become clear was that Brad McAfee was, to use his own colorful language, a thimblerrigger, a pigeon plucker, a hornswoggler. He was steadily working his way toward the boss's daughter and the ownership of Mowen Chemical, leaving a trail of young women behind him who all apparently believed that a man who pronounced fiancée "fee-an-see" couldn't possibly have more than one. It was an interesting linguistic phenomenon.

At first Ulric had been taken in by Brad's homespun talk, too, even though it didn't seem to match his sophisticated abilities on the computer. Then one day he had gotten up early and caught Brad working on a program called "Project Sally."

"I'm gonna be the president of Mowen Chemical in two shakes of a sheep's tail," Brad had said. "This little dingclinker is my master plan. What do you think of it?"

What Ulric thought of it could not be expressed in words. It outlined a plan for getting close to Sally Mowen and impressing her father based almost entirely on the seduction and abandonment of young women in key positions at Mowen Chemical. Three-quarters of the way down he saw Lynn's name.

"What if Mr. Mowen gets hold of this program?" Ulric had said finally.

"Not a look-in chance that that'd happen. I got this program locked up tighter than a hog's eye. And if anybody else tried to copy it, they'd be sorrier than a coon romancin' a polecat."

Since then Ulric had put in six requests for an apartment, all of which had been turned down "due to restrictive areal housing availability," which Ulric supposed meant there weren't any empty apartments in Chugwater. All of the turndowns were initialed by Mr. Mowen's secretary, and there were moments when Ulric thought that Mr. Mowen knew about "Project Sally" after all and had hired Ulric to keep Brad away from his daughter.

"According to my program, it's time to go to work on Sally," Brad said now. "Tomorrow at this press conference. I'm enough of a rumbustigator with this waste-emissions project to dazzlefy Old Man Mowen. Sally's going to be there. I got my fiancée Gail in publicity to invite her."

"I'm going to be there, too," Ulric said belligerently.

"Now, that's right lucky," Brad said. "You can do a little hon-

eyfuggling for me. Work on old Sally while I give Pappy Mowen the glad hand. Do you know what she looks like?"

"I have no intention of honeyfuggling Sally Mowen for you," Ulric said, and wondered again where Brad managed to pick up all these slang expressions. He had caught Brad watching Judy Canova movies on TV a couple of times, but some of these words weren't even in Mencken. He probably had a computer program that generated them. "In fact, I intend to tell her you're engaged to more than one person already."

"Boy, you're sure wadgetty," Brad said. "And you know why? Because you don't have a gal of your own. Tell you what, you pick out one of mine, and I'll give her to you. How about Sue?"

Ulric walked over to the window. "I don't want her," he said.

"I bet you don't even know which one she is," Brad said.

I don't, Ulric thought. They all sound exactly alike. They use "interface" as a verb and "support" as an adjective. One of them had called for Brad and when Ulric told her he was over at Research, she had said, "Sorry. My wetware's nonfunctional this morning." Ulric felt as if he were living in a foreign country.

"What difference does it make?" Ulric said angrily. "Not one of them speaks English, which is probably why they're all dumb enough to think they're engaged to you."

"How about if I get you a gal who speaks English and you honeyfuggle Sally Mowen for me?" Brad said. He turned to the terminal and began typing furiously. "What exactly do you want?"

Ulric clenched his fists and looked out the window. The dead cottonwood under the window had a kite or something caught in its branches. He debated climbing down the tree and walking over to Mr. Mowen's office to demand an apartment.

"Makes no never mind," Brad said when he didn't answer. "I've heard you oratin' often enough on the subject." He typed a minute more and hit the print button. "There," he said.

Ulric turned around.

Brad read from the monitor, "'Wanted: Young woman who can generate enthusiasm for the Queen's English, needs to use correct grammar and syntax, no gobbledygook, no slang, respect for the language. Signed, Ulric Henry.' What do you think of that? It's the spittin' image of the way you talk."

"I can find my own 'gals,'" Ulric said. He yanked the sheet of paper as it was still coming out of the printer, ripping over half the sheet in a long ragged diagonal. Now it read, "Wanted: Young woman who can generate language. Ulric H"

"I'll swap you horses," Brad said. "If this don't rope you in a

nice little filly, I'll give you Lynn when she gets back. It'll cheer her up, after getting her name taken off the project and all. What do you think of that?"

Ulric put the scrap of paper down carefully on the table, trying to resist the impulse to wad it up and cram it down Brad's throat. He slammed the window up. There was a sudden burst of chilly wind, and the paper on the table balanced uneasily and then drifted onto the windowsill.

"What if Lynn misses her plane in Cheyenne?" Ulric said. "What if she comes back here and runs into one of your other fiancées?"

"No chance on the map," Brad said cheerfully. "I got me a program for that, too." He tore the rest of the paper out of the printer and wadded it up. "Two of my fiancées come callin' at the same time, they have to come up in the elevators, and there's only two of them. They work on the same signals, so I made me up a program that stops the elevators between floors if my security code gets read in more than once in an hour. It makes an override beep go off on my terminal, too, so's I can soft-shoe the first gal down the back stairs." He stood up. "I gotta go over to Research and check on the waste-emissions project again. You better find yourself a gal right quick. You're givin' me the flit-flats with all this unfriendly talk."

He grabbed his coat off the back of the chair and went out. He slammed the door, perhaps because he had the flit-flats, and the resultant breeze hit the scrap of paper on the windowsill and sailed it neatly out the window.

"Flit-flats," Ulric mumbled to himself, and tried to call Mowen's office. The line was busy.

Sally Mowen called her father as soon as she got home. "Hi, Janice," she said. "Is Dad there?"

"He just left," Janice said. "But I have a feeling he might stop by Research. He's worried about the new stratospheric waste-emissions project."

"I'll walk over and meet him."

"Your father said to tell you there's a press conference tomorrow at eleven. Are you at your terminal?"

"Yes," Sally said, and flicked the power on.

"I'll send the press releases for you so you'll know what's going on."

Sally was going to say that she had already received an invitation to the press conference and the accompanying PR material

from someone named Gail, but changed her mind when she saw what was being printed out on the printer. "You didn't send me the press releases," she said. "You sent me a bio on somebody named Ulric Henry. Who's he?"

"I did?" Janice said, sounding flustered. "I'll try it again."

Sally held up the tail of the printout sheet as it came rolling out of the computer. "Now I've got a picture of him." The picture showed a dark-haired young man with an expression somewhere between dismay and displeasure. I'll bet someone just told him she thought they could have a viable relationship, Sally thought. "Who is he?"

Janice sighed, a quick, flustered kind of sigh. "I didn't mean to send that to you. He's the company linguist. I think your father invited him to the press conference to write press releases."

I thought the press releases were already done and you were sending them to me, Sally thought, but she said, "When did my father hire a linguist?"

"Last summer," Janice said, sounding even more flustered. "How's school?"

"Fine," Sally said. "And no, I'm not getting married. I'm not even having a viable relationship, whatever that is."

"Your mother called today. She's in Cheyenne at a NOW rally," Janice said, which sounded like a non sequitur, but wasn't. With a mother like Sally's, it was no wonder her father worried himself sick over who Sally might marry. Sometimes Sally worried, too. Viable relationship.

"How did Charlotte sound?" Sally said. "No, wait. I already know. Look, don't worry about the press conference stuff. I already know all about it. Gail Somebody in publicity sent me an invitation. That's why I came home for Thanksgiving a day early."

"She did?" Janice said. "Your father didn't mention it. He probably forgot. He's been a little worried about this project," she said, which must be the understatement of the year, Sally thought, if he'd managed to rattle Janice. "So you haven't met anyone nice?"

"No," Sally said. "Yes. I'll tell you tomorrow." She hung up. They're all nice, she thought. That isn't the problem. They're nice, but they're incoherent. A viable relationship. What on earth was that? And what was "respecting your personal space?" Or "fulfilling each other's socio-economic needs?" I have no idea what they are talking about, Sally thought. I have been going out with a bunch of foreigners.

She put her coat and her hat back on and started down in the elevator to find her father. Poor man. He knew what it was like

to be married to someone who didn't speak English. She could imagine what the conversation with her mother had been like. All sisters and sexist pigs. She hadn't been speaking ERA very long. The last time she called, she had been speaking EST and the time before that California. It was no wonder Sally's father had hired a secretary that communicated almost entirely through sighs, and that Sally had majored in English.

Tomorrow at the press conference would be dreadful. She would be surrounded by nice young men who spoke Big Business or Computer or Bachelor on the Make, and she would not understand a word they said.

It suddenly occurred to her that the company linguist, Ulric something, might speak English, and she punched in her security code all over again and went back up in the elevator to get the printout with his address on it. She decided to go through the oriental gardens to get to Research instead of taking the car. She told herself it was shorter, which was true, but she was really thinking that if she went through them, she would go past the housing unit where Ulric Henry lived.

The oriental gardens had originally been designed as a shortcut through the maze of fast-food places that had sprung up around Mowen Chemical, making it impossible to get anywhere quickly. Her father had purposely stuck Mowen Chemical on the outskirts of Chugwater so the plant wouldn't disturb the natives, trying to make the original buildings and housing blend in to the Wyoming landscape. The natives had promptly disturbed Mowen Chemical, so that by the time they built the Research complex and computer center, the only land not covered with Kentucky Fried Chickens and Arbys was in the older part of town and very far from the original buildings. Mr. Mowen had given up trying not to disturb the natives. He had built the oriental gardens so that at least people could get from home to work and back again without being run over by the Chugwaterians. Actually, he had intended just to put in a brick path that would wind through the original Mowen buildings and connect them with the new ones, but at the time Charlotte had been speaking Zen. She had insisted on bonsais and a curving bridge over the irrigation ditch. Before the landscaping was finished, she had switched to an Anti-Watt dialect that had put an end to the marriage and sent Sally flying off east to school. During that same period her mother had campaigned to save the dead cottonwood she was standing under now, picketing her husband's office with signs that read, "Tree Murderer!"

Sally stood under the dead cottonwood tree, counting the win-

dows so she could figure out which was Ulric Henry's apartment. There were three windows on the sixth floor with lights in all three, and the middle window was open for some unknown reason, but it would require an incredible coincidence to have Ulric Henry come and stand at one of the windows while Sally was standing there so she could shout up to him, "Do you speak English?"

I wasn't looking for him anyway, she told herself stubbornly. I'm on my way to meet my father, and I stopped to look at the moon. My, it certainly is a peculiar blue color tonight. She stood a few minutes longer under the tree, pretending to look at the moon, but it was getting very cold, the moon did not seem to be getting any bluer, and even if it were, it did not seem like an adequate reason for freezing to death, so she pulled her hat down farther over her ears and walked past the bonsais and over the curved bridge towards Research.

As soon as she was across the bridge, Ulric Henry came to the middle window and shut it. The movement of pulling the window shut made a little breeze. The torn piece of printout paper that had been resting on the ledge fluttered to a place closer to the edge and then went over, drifting down in the bluish moonlight past the kite, and coming to rest on the second lowest branch of the cottonwood tree.

Wednesday morning Mr. Mowen got up early so he could get some work done at the office before the press conference. Sally wasn't up yet, so he put the coffee on and went into the bathroom to shave. He plugged his electric razor into the outlet above the sink, and the light over the mirror promptly went out. He took the cord out of the outlet and unscrewed the blackened bulb. Then he pattered into the kitchen in his bare feet to look for another light bulb.

He put the burned-out bulb gently in the wastebasket next to the sink and began opening cupboards. He picked up the syrup bottle to look behind it. The lid was not screwed on tightly, and the syrup bottle dropped with a thud onto its side and began oozing syrup all over the cupboard. Mr. Mowen grabbed a paper towel, which tore in a ragged, useless diagonal, and tried to mop it up. He knocked the salt shaker over into the pool of syrup. He grabbed the other half of the paper towel and turned on the hot water faucet to wet it. The water came out in a steaming blast.

Mr. Mowen jumped sideways to get out of the path of the boiling water and knocked over the wastebasket. The light bulb bounced out and smashed onto the kitchen floor. Mr. Mowen stepped on

a large ragged piece. He tore off more paper towels to stanch the blood and limped back to the bathroom, walking on the side of his bleeding foot, to get a bandaid.

He had forgotten about the light in the bathroom being burned out. Mr. Mowen felt his way to the medicine cabinet, knocking the shampoo and a box of Q-Tips into the sink before he found the bandaids. The shampoo lid wasn't screwed on tightly either. He took the metal box of bandaids back to the kitchen.

It was bent, and Mr. Mowen got a dent in his thumb trying to pry the lid off. As he was pushing on it, the lid suddenly sprang free, spraying bandaids all over the kitchen floor. Mr. Mowen picked one up, being careful to avoid the pieces of light bulb, ripped the end off the wrapper, and pulled on the orange string. The string came out. Mr. Mowen looked at the string for a long minute and then tried to open the bandaid from the back.

When Sally came into the kitchen, Mr. Mowen was sitting on a kitchen chair sucking his bleeding thumb and holding a piece of paper towel to his other foot. "What happened?" she said.

"I cut myself on a broken light bulb," Mr. Mowen said. "It went out while I was trying to shave."

She grabbed for a piece of paper towelling. It tore off cleanly at the perforation, and Sally wrapped Mr. Mowen's thumb in it. "You know better than to try to pick up a broken light bulb," she said. "You should have gotten a broom."

"I did not try to pick up the light bulb," he said. "I cut my thumb on a bandaid. I cut my *feet* on the light bulb."

"Oh, I see," Sally said. "Don't you know better than to try to pick up a light bulb with your feet?"

"This isn't funny," Mr. Mowen said indignantly. "I am in a lot of pain."

"I know it isn't funny," Sally said. She picked a bandaid up off the floor, tore off the end, and pulled the string neatly along the edge of the wrapping. "Are you going to be able to make it to your press conference?"

"Of course I'm going to be able to make it. And I expect you to be there, too."

"I will," Sally said, peeling another bandaid and applying it to the bottom of his foot. "I'm going to leave as soon as I get this mess cleaned up so I can walk over. Or would you like me to drive you?"

"I can drive myself," Mr. Mowen said, starting to get up.

"You stay right there until I get your slippers," Sally said, and

darted out of the kitchen. The phone rang. "I'll get it," Sally called from the bedroom. "You don't budge out of that chair."

Mr. Mowen picked a bandaid up off the floor, tore the end off of it, and peeled the string along the side, which made him feel considerably better. My luck must be starting to change, he thought. "Who's on the phone?" he said cheerfully, as Sally came back into the kitchen carrying his slippers and the phone.

She plugged the phone cord into the wall and handed him the receiver. "It's Mother," she said. "She wants to talk to the sexist pig."

Ulric was getting dressed for the press conference when the phone rang. He let Brad answer it. When he walked into the living room, Brad was hanging up the phone.

"Lynn missed her plane," Brad said.

Ulric looked up hopefully. "She did?"

"Yes. She's taking one out this afternoon. While she was shooting the breeze, she let fall she'd signed her name on the press release that was sent out on the computer."

"And Mowen's already read it," Ulric said. "So he'll know you stole the project away from her." He was in no mood to mince words. He had lain awake most of the night trying to decide what to say to Sally Mowen. What if he told her about "Project Sally" and she looked blankly at him and said, "Sorry. My wetware is inoperable."?

"I didn't steal the project," Brad said amiably. "I just sort of skyugled it away from her when she wasn't looking. And I already got it back. I called Gail as soon as Lynn hung up and asked her to take Lynn's name off the press releases before Old Man Mowen saw them. It was right lucky, Lynn missing her plane and all."

Ulric put his down parka on over his sports coat.

"Are you heading for the press conference?" Brad said. "Wait till I rig myself out, and I'll ride over with you."

"I'm walking," Ulric said, and opened the door.

The phone rang. Brad answered it. "No, I wasn't watching the morning movie," Brad said, "but I'd take it big if you'd let me gander a guess anyway. I'll say the movie is *Carolina Cannonball* and the jackpot is six hundred and fifty-one dollars. That's right? Well, bust my buttons. That was a right lucky guess."

Ulric slammed the door behind him.

When Mr. Mowen still wasn't in the office by ten, Janice called him at home. She got a busy signal. She sighed, waited a minute,

and tried again. The line was still busy. Before she could hang up, the phone flashed an incoming call. She punched the button. "Mr. Mowen's office," she said.

"Hi," the voice on the phone said. "This is Gail over in publicity. The press releases contain an inoperable statement. You haven't sent any out, have you?"

I tried, Janice thought with a little sigh. "No," she said.

"Good. I wanted to confirm non-release before I effected the deletion."

"What deletion?" Janice said. She tried to call up the press release but got a picture of Ulric Henry instead.

"The release catalogs Lynn Saunders as co-designer of the project."

"I thought she *was* co-designer."

"Oh, no," Gail said. "My fiancé Brad McAfee designed the whole project. I'm glad the number of printouts is non-significant."

After Gail hung up, Janice tried Mr. Mowen again. The line was still busy. Janice called up the company directory on her terminal, got a resumé on Ulric Henry instead, and called the Chugwater operator on the phone. The operator gave her Lynn Saunders's number. Janice called Lynn and got her roommate.

"She's not here," the roommate said. "She had to leave for back east as soon as she was done with the waste-emissions thing. Her mother was doing head trips on her. She was really bummed out by it."

"Do you have a number where I could reach her?" Janice asked.

"I sure don't," the roommate said. "She wasn't with it at all when she left. Her fiancé might have a number."

"Her fiancé?"

"Yeah. Brad McAfee."

"I think if she calls you'd better have her call me. Priority." Janice hung up the phone. She called up the company directory on her terminal again and got the press release for the new emissions project. Lynn's name was nowhere on it. She sighed, an odd, angry sigh, and tried Mr. Mowen's number again. It was still busy.

On Sally's way past Ulric Henry's housing unit, she noticed something fluttering high up in the dead cottonwood tree. The remains of a kite were tangled at the very top, and just out of reach, on the second lowest branch, there was a piece of white paper. She tried a couple of halfhearted jumps, swiping at the paper with her hand, but she succeeded only in blowing the paper

farther out of reach. If she could get the paper down, she could take it up to Ulric Henry's apartment and ask him if it had fallen out of his window. She looked around for a stick and then stood still, feeling foolish. There was no more reason to go after the paper than to attempt to get the ruined kite down, she told herself, but even as she thought that, she was measuring the height of the branches to see if she could get a foot up and reach the paper from there. One branch wouldn't do it, but two might. There was no one in the gardens. This is ridiculous, she told herself, and swung up into the crotch of the tree.

She climbed swiftly up to the third branch, stretched out across it, and reached for the paper. Her fingers did not quite reach, so she straightened up again, hanging onto the trunk to get her balance, and made a kind of down-sweeping lunge toward the piece of paper. She lost her balance and nearly missed the branch, and the wind she had created by her sudden movement blew the paper all the way to the end of the branch, where it teetered precariously but did not fall off.

Someone was coming across the curving bridge. She blew a couple of times on the paper and then stopped. She was going to have to go out on the branch. Maybe the paper is blank, she thought. I can hardly take a blank piece of paper to Ulric Henry, but she was already testing the weight of the branch with her hand. It seemed firm enough, and she began to edge out onto the dead branch, holding onto the trunk until the last possible moment and then dropping into an inching crawl that brought her directly over the sidewalk. From there she was able to reach the paper easily.

The paper was part of a printout from a computer, torn raggedly at an angle. It read, "Wanted: Young woman who can generate language. Ulric H." The *ge* in "language" was missing, but otherwise the message made perfect sense, which she would have thought was peculiar if she had not been so surprised at the message. Her area of special study was language generation. She had spent all last week in class doing it, using all the rules of linguistic change on existing words: generalization and specialization of meaning, change in part of speech, shortening, and prepositional verb clustering to create a new-sounding language. It had been almost impossible to do at first, but by the end of the week, she had greeted her professor with, "Good aft. I readed up my book taskings," without even thinking about it. She could certainly do the same thing with Ulric Henry, whom she had been wanting to meet anyway.

She had forgotten about the man she had seen coming across the bridge. He was almost to the tree now. In approximately ten more steps he would look up and see her crouched there like an insane vulture. How will I explain this to my father if anyone sees me? she thought, and put a cautious foot behind her. She was still wondering when the branch gave way.

Mr. Mowen did not leave for the press conference until a quarter to eleven. He had still been on the phone with Charlotte when Sally left, and when he had asked Charlotte to wait a minute so he could tell Sally to wait and he'd drive her over, Charlotte had called him a sexist tyrant and accused him of stifling Sally's dominant traits by repressive male psychological intimidation. Mr. Mowen had had no idea what she was talking about.

Sally had swept up the glass and put a new light bulb in the bathroom before she left, but Mr. Mowen had decided not to tempt fate. He had shaved with a disposable razor instead. Leaning over to get a piece of toilet paper to put on the cut on his chin, he had cracked his head on the medicine cabinet door. After that, he had sat very still on the edge of the tub for nearly half an hour, wishing Sally were home so she could help him get dressed.

At the end of the half hour, Mr. Mowen decided that stress was the cause of the series of coincidences that had plagued him all morning (Charlotte had spoken Biofeedback for a couple of weeks) and that if he just relaxed, everything would be all right. He took several deep, calming breaths and stood up. The medicine cabinet was still open.

By moving very carefully and looking for hazards everywhere, Mr. Mowen managed to get dressed and out to the car. He had not been able to find any socks that matched, and the elevator had taken him all the way to the roof, but Mr. Mowen breathed deeply and calmly each time, and he was even beginning to feel relaxed by the time he opened the door to the car.

He got into the car and shut the door. It caught the tail of his coat. He opened the door again and leaned over to pull the coat out of the way. One of his gloves fell out of his pocket onto the ground. He leaned over farther to rescue the glove and cracked his head on the armrest of the door.

He took a deep, rather ragged breath, snagged the glove, and pulled the door shut. He took the keys out of his pocket and inserted the car key in the ignition. The key chain snapped open and scattered the rest of his keys all over the floor of the front seat. When he bent over to pick them up, being very careful not

to hit his head on the steering wheel, his other glove fell out of his pocket. He left the keys where they were and straightened up again, watching out for the turn signals and the sun visor. He turned the key with its still dangling key chain. The car wouldn't start.

Very slowly and carefully he got out of the car and went back up to the apartment to call Janice and tell her to cancel the press conference. The phone was busy.

Ulric didn't see the young woman until she was nearly on top of him. He had been walking with his head down and his hands jammed into the pockets of his parka, thinking about the press conference. He had left the apartment without his watch and walked very rapidly over to Research. He had been over an hour early, and no one had been there except one of Brad's fiancées whose name he couldn't remember. She had said, "Your biological clock is nonfunctional. Your biorhythms must be low today," and he had told her they were, even though he had no idea what they were talking about.

He had walked back across the oriental gardens, feeling desperate. He was not sure he could stand the press conference, even to warn Sally Mowen. Maybe he should forget about going and walk all over Chugwater instead, grabbing young women by the arm and saying, "Do you speak English?"

While he was considering this idea, there was a loud snap overhead, and the young woman fell on him. He tried to get his hands out of his pockets to catch her, but it took him a moment to realize that he was under the cottonwood tree and that the snap was the sound of a branch breaking, so he didn't succeed. He did get one hand out of his pocket and he did take one bracing step back, but it wasn't enough. She landed on him full force, and they rolled off the sidewalk and onto the leaves. When they came to a stop, Ulric was on top of her, with one arm under her and the other one flung above her head. Her wool hat had come off and her hair was spread out nicely against the frost-rimed leaves. His hand was tangled in her hair. She was looking up at him as if she knew him. It did not even occur to him to ask her if she spoke English.

After awhile it did occur to him that he was going to be late to the press conference. The hell with the press conference, he thought. The hell with Sally Mowen, and kissed her again. After a few more minutes of that, his arm began to go numb, and he

disengaged his hand from her hair and put his weight on it to pull himself up.

She didn't move, even when he got onto his knees beside her and extended a hand to help her up. She lay there, looking up at him as if she were thinking hard about something. Then she seemed to come to a decision because she took his hand and let him pull her up. She pointed above and behind him. "The moon blues," she said.

"What?" he said. He wondered if the branch had cracked her on the head.

She was still pointing. "The moon blues," she said again. "It blued up some last dark, but now it blues moreishly."

He turned to look in the direction she was pointing, and sure enough, the three-quarters moon was a bright blue in the morning sky, which explained what she was talking about, but not the way she was talking. "Are you all right?" he said. "You're not hurt, are you?" She shook her head. You never ask someone with a concussion if they are all right, he thought. "Does your head hurt?"

She shook her head again. Maybe she wasn't hurt. Maybe she was a foreign exchange consultant in Research. "Where are you from?" he said.

She looked surprised. "I falled down of the tree. You caught me with your face." She brushed the cottonwood leaves out of her hair and put her wool hat back on.

She understood everything he said, and she was definitely speaking English words even though the effect wasn't much like English. You caught me with your face. Irregular verb into regular. The moon blues. Adjective becomes verb. Those were both ways language evolved. "What were you doing in the tree?" he said, so she would talk some more.

"I hidinged in the tree for cause people point you with their faces when you English oddishly."

English oddishly. "You're generating language, aren't you?" Ulric said. "Do you know Brad McAfee?"

She looked blank, and a little surprised, the way Brad had probably told her to when he put her up to this. He wondered which one of Brad's fiancées this was. Probably the one in programming. They had had to come up with all this generated language somewhere. "I'm late for a press conference," he said sharply, "as you well know. I've got to talk to Sally Mowen." He didn't put out his hand to help her up. "You can go tell Brad his little honeyfuggling scheme didn't work."

She stood up without his help and walked across the sidewalk, past the fallen branch. She knelt down and picked up a scrap of paper and looked at it for a long time. He considered yanking it out of her hand and looking at it since it was probably Brad's language generation program, but he didn't. She folded it and put it in her pocket.

"You can tell him your kissing me didn't work," he said, which was a lie. He wanted to kiss her again as he said it, and that made him angrier than ever. Brad had probably told her he was wadgetty, that what he needed was a half hour in the leaves with her. "I'm still going to tell Sally."

She looked at him from the other side of the sidewalk.

"And don't get any ideas about trying to stop me." He was shouting now. "Because they won't work."

His anger got him over the curving bridge. Then it occurred to him that even if she was one of Brad's fiancées, even if she had been hired to kiss him in the leaves and keep him from going to the press conference, he was in love with her, and he went tearing back, but she was nowhere in sight.

At a little after eleven Janice got a call from Gail in publicity. "Where is Mr. Mowen? He hasn't shown up, and my media credibility is effectively nonfunctional."

"I'll try to call him at home," Janice said. She put Gail on hold and dialed Mr. Mowen's apartment. The line was busy. When she punched up the hold button to tell Gail that, the line went dead. Janice tried to call her back. The line was busy.

She typed in the code for a priority that would override whatever was on Mr. Mowen's home terminal. After the code, she typed, "Call Janice at office." She looked at it for a minute, then back-erased and typed, "Press conference. Research. Eleven a.m.," and pressed RUN. The screen clicked once and displayed the preliminary test results of side effects on the waste-emissions project. At the bottom of the screen, she read, "Tangential consequences statistically negligible."

"You want to bet?" Janice said.

She called programming. "There's something wrong with my terminal," she said to the woman on the line.

"This is Sue in peripherals rectification. Is your problem in implementation or hardware?"

She sounded just like Gail in publicity. "You wouldn't know Brad McAfee, would you?" she said.

"He's my fiancé." Sue said. "Why?"

Janice sighed. "I keep getting readouts that have nothing to do with what I punch in," Janice said.

"Oh, then you want hardware repair. The number's in your terminal directory," she said, and hung up.

Janice called up the terminal directory. At first nothing happened. Then the screen clicked once and displayed something titled, "Project Sally." Janice noticed Lynn Saunders's name three-quarters of the way down the screen, and Sally Mowen's at the bottom. She started at the top and read it all the way through. Then she typed in PRINT and read it again as it came rolling out of the printer. When it was done, she tore off the sheet carefully, put it in a file folder, and put the file folder in her desk.

"I found your glove in the elevator," Sally said when she came in. She looked terrible, as if the experience of finding Mr. Mowen's glove had been too much for her. "Is the press conference over?"

"I didn't go," Mr. Mowen said. "I was afraid I'd run into a tree. Could you drive me over to the office? I told Janice I'd be there by nine and it's two-thirty."

"Tree?" Sally said. "I fell out of a tree today. On a linguist."

Mr. Mowen put on his overcoat and fished around in the pockets. "I've lost my other glove," he said. "That makes fifty-eight instances of bad luck I've had already this morning, and I've been sitting stock still for the last two hours. I made a list. The pencil broke, and the eraser, and I erased a hole right through the paper, and I didn't even count those." He put the single glove in his coat pocket.

Sally opened the door for him, and they went down the hall to the elevator. "I never should have said that about the moon," she said. "I should have said hello. Just a simple hello. So what if the note said he wanted someone who could generate language? That didn't mean I had to do it right then, before I even told him who I was."

Mr. Mowen punched his security code into the elevator. The REJECT light came on. "Fifty-nine," Mr. Mowen said. "That's too many coincidences to just be a coincidence. And all bad. If I didn't know better, I'd say someone was trying to kill me."

Sally punched in her security code. The elevator slid open. "I've been walking around for hours, trying to figure out how I could have been so stupid," Sally said. "He was on his way to meet me. At the press conference. He had something to tell me. If I'd just stood up after I fell on him and said, 'Hello, I'm Sally Mowen, and I've found this note. Do you really want someone who can generate

language?" but, oh, no, I have to say, 'The moon blues.' I should have just kept kissing him and never said anything. But, oh, no, I couldn't let well enough alone."

Mr. Mowen let Sally push the floor button in the elevator so no more warning lights would flash on. He also let her open the door of the apartment building. On the way out to the car, he stepped in some gum.

"Sixty. If I didn't know better, I'd say your mother was behind this," Mr. Mowen said. "She's coming up here this afternoon. To see if I'm minimizing your self-realization potential with my chauvinistic role expectations. That should count for a dozen bad coincidences all by itself." He got in the car, hunching far back in the seat so he wouldn't crack his head on the sun visor. He peered out the window at the gray sky. "Maybe there'll be a blizzard and she won't be able to get up from Cheyenne."

Sally reached for something under the driver's seat. "Here's your other glove," she said, handed it over to him, and started the car. "That note was torn in half. Why didn't I think about the words that were missing instead of deciding the message was all there? He probably wanted somebody who could generate electricity and speak a foreign language. Just because I liked his picture and I thought he might speak English I had to go and make a complete fool out of myself."

It started to snow halfway to the office. Sally turned on the windshield wipers. "With my luck," Mr. Mowen said, "there'll be a blizzard, and I'll be snowed in with Charlotte." He looked out the side window at the smokestacks. They were shooting another wavery blue blast into the air. "It's the waste-emissions project. Somehow it's causing all these damn coincidences."

Sally said, "I look and look for someone who speaks decent English, and when I finally meet him, what do I say? 'You caught me with your face.' And now he thinks somebody named Brad McAfee put me up to it to keep him from getting to a press conference, and he'll never speak to me again. Stupid! How could I have been so stupid?"

"I never should have let them start the project without more testing," Mr. Mowen said. "What if we're putting too much ozone into the ozone layer? What if this bicarbonate of soda fallout is doing something to people's digestion? No measurable side effects, they said. Well, how do you measure bad luck? By the fatality rates?"

Sally had pulled into a parking space directly in front of Mr. Mowen's office. It was snowing hard now. Mr. Mowen pulled on

the glove Sally had handed him. He fished in his pocket for the other one. "Sixty-one," he said. "Sally, will you go in with me? I'll never get the elevator to work."

Sally walked with him into the building. On the way up in the elevator, she said, "If you're so convinced the waste-emissions project is causing your bad luck, why don't you tell Research to turn it off?"

"They'd never believe me. Whoever heard of coincidences as a side effect of trash?"

They went into the outer office. Janice said, "Hello!" as if they had returned from an arctic expedition. Mr. Mowen said, "Thanks, Sally. I think I can make it from here." He patted her on the shoulder. "Why don't you go explain what happened to this young man and tell him you're sorry?"

"I don't think that would work," Sally said. She kissed him on the cheek. "We're in bad shape, aren't we?"

Mr. Mowen turned to Janice. "Get me Research, and don't let my wife in," he said, went into his office, and shut the door. There was a crash and the muffled sound of Mr. Mowen swearing.

Janice sighed. "This young man of yours," she said to Sally. "His name wouldn't be Brad McAfee, would it?"

"No," Sally said, "but he thinks it is." On the way to the elevator she stopped and picked up Mr. Mowen's glove and put it in her pocket.

After Mr. Mowen's secretary hung up, Sue called Brad. She wasn't sure what the connection was between Brad and Mr. Mowen's secretary's terminal not working, but she thought she'd better let him know that Mr. Mowen's secretary knew his name.

There was no answer. She tried again at lunch and again on her afternoon break. The third time the line was busy. At a quarter of three her supervisor came in and told Sue she could leave early since heavy snow was predicted for rush hour. Sue tried Brad's number one more time to make sure he was there. It was still busy.

It was a good thing she was getting off early. She had only worn a sweater to work, and it was already snowing so hard she could hardly see out the window. She had worn sandals, too. Somebody had left a pair of bright blue moon boots in the coatroom, so she pulled those on over her sandals and went out to the parking lot. She wiped the snow off the windshield with the sleeve of her sweater, and started over to Brad's apartment.

* * *

"You didn't meander on over to the press conference," Brad said when Ulric came in.

"No," Ulric said. He didn't take off his coat.

"Old Man Mowen didn't either. Which was right lucky, because I got to jaw with all those reporters instead of him. Where did you go off to? You look colder than an otter on a snowslide."

"I was with the 'gal' you found for me. The one you had jump me so I wouldn't go to the press conference and ruin your chances with Sally Mowen."

Brad was sitting at his terminal. "Sally wasn't there, which turned out to be right lucky because I met this reporter name of Jill who . . ." He turned around and looked at Ulric. "What gal are you talking about?"

"The one you had conveniently fall out of a tree on me. I take it she was one of your spare fiancées. What did you do? Make her climb out of the apartment window?"

"Now let me get this straight. Some gal fell out of that old cottonwood on top of you? And you think I did it?"

"Well, if you didn't, it was an amazing coincidence that the branch broke just as I was passing under it and an even more amazing coincidence that she generated language, which was just what that printout you came up with read. But the most amazing coincidence of all is the punch in the nose you're going to get right now."

"Now, don't get so dudfoozled. I didn't drop no gal on you, and if I'm lyin', let me be kicked to death by grasshoppers. If I was going to do something like that, I'd have gotten you one who could speak good English, like you wanted, not . . . what did you say she did? Generated language?"

"You expect me to believe it's all some kind of coincidence?" Ulric shouted. "What kind of . . . of . . . dodunk do you take me for?"

"I'll admit it is a pretty seldom thing to have happen," Brad said thoughtfully. "This morning I found me a hundred dollar bill on the way to the press conference. Then I meet this reporter Jill and we get to talking and we have a whole lot in common like her favorite movie is *Lay that Rifle Down* with Judy Canova in it, and then it turns out she's Sally Mowen's roommate last year in college."

The phone rang. Brad picked it up. "Well, ginger peachy. Come on over. It's the big housing unit next to the oriental gardens. Apartment 6B." He hung up the phone. "Now that's just what I been talking about. That was that gal reporter on the phone. I

asked her to come over so's I could honeyfuggle her into introducing me to Sally, and she says she can't 'cause she's gotta catch a plane outta Cheyenne. But now she says the highway's closed, and she's stuck here in Chugwater. Now that kind of good luck doesn't happen once in a blue moon."

"What?" Ulric said, and unclenched his fists for the first time since he'd come into the room. He went over to look out the window. He couldn't see the moon that had been in the sky earlier. He supposed it had long since set, and anyway it was starting to snow. "The moon blues," he said softly to himself.

"Since she is coming over here, maybe you should skedaddle so as not to spoil this run of good luck I am having."

Ulric pulled *Collected American Slang* out of the bookcase and looked up, "moon, blue" in the index. The entry read, "Once in a blue moon: rare, as an unusual coincidence, orig. rare as a blue moon; based on the rare occurrence of a blue-tinted moon from aerosol particulates in upper atmosphere; see Superstitions." He looked out the window again. The smokestacks sent another blast up through the gray clouds.

"Brad," he said, "is your waste-emissions project putting aerosols into the upper atmosphere?"

"That's the whole idea," Brad said. "Now I don't mean to be bodacious, but that gal reporter's going to be coming up here any minute."

Ulric looked up "Superstitions." The entry for "moon, blue" read, "Once in a blue moon; folk saying attrib. SE America; local superstition linked occurrence of blue moon and unusual coincidental happenings; origin unknown."

He shut the book. "Unusual coincidental happenings," he said. "Branches breaking, people falling on people, people finding hundred dollar bills. All of those are coincidental happenings." He looked up at Brad. "You wouldn't happen to know how that saying got started, would you?"

"Bodacious? It probably was made up by some feller who was waiting on a gal and this other guy wouldn't hotfoot it out of there so's they could be alone."

Ulric opened the book again. "But if the coincidences were bad ones, they would be dangerous, wouldn't they? Somebody might get hurt."

Brad took the book out of his hands and shoved Ulric out the door. "Now git!" he said. "You're givin' me the flit-flats again."

"We've got to tell Mr. Mowen. We've got to shut it off," Ulric said, but Brad had already shut the door.

"Hello, Janice," Charlotte said. "Still an oppressed female in a dehumanizing male-dominated job, I see."

Janice hung up the phone. "Hello, Charlotte," she said. "Is it snowing yet?"

"Yes," Charlotte said, and took off her coat. It had a red button pinned to the lapel. It read, "NOW . . . or else!" "We just heard on the radio they've closed the highway. Where's your reactionary chauvinist employer?"

"Mr. Mowen is busy," Janice said, and stood up in case she needed to flatten herself against Mr. Mowen's door to keep Charlotte out.

"I have no desire to see that last fortress of sadistic male dominance," Charlotte said. She took off her gloves and rubbed her hands together. "We practically froze on the way up. Lynn Saunders rode back up with me. Her mother isn't getting a divorce after all. Her bid for independence crumbled at the first sign of societal disapproval, I'm afraid. Lynn had a message on her terminal to call you, but she couldn't get through. She said for me to tell you she'd be over as soon as she checks in with her fiancé."

"Brad McAfee," Janice said.

"Yes," Charlotte said. She sat down in the chair opposite Janice's desk and took off her boots. "I had to listen to her sing his praises all the way from Cheyenne. Poor brainwashed victim of male oppressionist propaganda. I tried to tell her she was only playing into the hands of the entrenched male socio-sexual establishment by getting engaged, but she wouldn't listen." She stopped massaging her stockinged foot. "What do you mean, he's busy? Tell that arrogant sexist pig I'm here and I want to see him."

Janice sat back down and took the file folder with "Project Sally" in it out of her desk drawer. "Charlotte," she said, "before I do that, I was wondering if you'd give me your opinion of something."

Charlotte padded over to the desk in her stockinged feet. "Certainly," she said. "What is it?"

Sally wiped the snow off the back window with her bare hands and got in the car. She had forgotten about the side mirror. It was caked with snow. She rolled down the window and swiped at it with her hand. The snow landed in her lap. She shivered and rolled the window back up, and then sat there a minute, waiting

for the defroster to work and blowing on her cold, wet hands. She had lost her gloves somewhere.

No air at all was coming out of the defroster. She rubbed a small space clean so she could see to pull out of the parking space and edged forward. At the last minute she saw the ghostlike form of a man through the heavy curtain of snow and stamped on the brake. The motor died. The man she had almost hit came around to the window and motioned to her to roll the window down. It was Ulric.

She rolled the window down. More snow fell in her lap. "I was afraid I'd never see you again," Ulric said.

"I . . ." Sally said, but he waved her silent with his hand.

"I haven't got much time. I'm sorry I shouted at you this morning. I thought . . . anyway, now I know that isn't true, that it was a lot of coincidences that . . . anyway I've got to go do something right now that can't wait, but I want you to wait right here for me. Will you do that?"

She nodded.

He shivered and stuck his hands in his pockets. "You'll freeze to death out here. Do you know where the housing unit by the oriental gardens is? I live on the sixth floor, apartment B. I want you to wait for me there. Will you do that? Do you have a piece of paper?"

Sally dug in her pocket and pulled out the folded scrap of paper with, "Wanted: Young woman," on it. She looked at it a minute and then handed it to Ulric. He didn't even unfold it. He scribbled some numbers on it and handed it back to her.

"This is my security code," he said. "You have to use it for the elevator. My roommate will let you into the apartment." He stopped and looked hard at her. "On second thought, you'd better wait for me in the hall. I'll be back as soon as I can." He bent and kissed her through the window. "I don't want to lose you again."

"I . . ." Sally said, but he had already disappeared into the snow. Sally rolled the window up. The windshield was covered with snow again. She put her hand up to the defroster. There was still no air coming out. She turned on the windshield wipers. Nothing happened.

Gail didn't get back to her office until after two. Reporters had hung around after the press conference asking her questions about Mr. Mowen's absence and the waste-emissions project. When she did make it back to the office, they began calling, and she didn't get started on her press conference publicity releases until nearly

three. She almost immediately ran into a problem. Her notes mentioned particulates, and she knew Brad had said what kind, but she hadn't written it down. She couldn't let the report go without specifying which particulates or the press would jump to all kinds of alarming conclusions. She called Brad. The line was busy. She stuffed everything into a large manila envelope and started over to his apartment to ask him.

"Did you get Research yet?" Mr. Mowen said when Janice came into his office.

"No, sir," Janice said. "The line is still busy. Ulric Henry is here to see you."

Mr. Mowen pushed against his desk and stood up. The movement knocked over Sally's picture and a pencilholder full of pencils. "You might as well send him in. With my luck, he's probably found out why I hired him and is here to quit."

Janice went out, and Mr. Mowen tried to gather up the pencils that had scattered all over his desk and get them back in the pencilholder. One rolled toward the edge, and Mr. Mowen leaned over the desk to catch it. Sally's picture fell over again. When Mr. Mowen looked up, Ulric Henry was watching him. He reached for the last pencil and knocked the receiver off the phone with his elbow.

"How long has it been like this?" Ulric said.

Mr. Mowen straightened up. "It started this morning. I'm not sure I'm going to live through the day."

"That's what I was afraid of," Ulric said, and took a deep breath. "Look, Mr. Mowen, I know you hired me to be a linguist, and I probably don't have any business interfering with Research, but I think I know why all these things are happening to you."

I hired you to marry Sally and be vice-president in charge of saying what you mean, Mr. Mowen thought, and you can interfere in anything you like if you can stop the ridiculous things that have been happening to me all day.

Ulric pointed out the window. "You can't see it out there because of the snow, but the moon is blue. It's been blue ever since you turned on your waste-emissions project. 'Once in a blue moon' is an old saying used to describe rare occurrences. I think the saying may have gotten started because the number of coincidences increased every time there was a blue moon. I think it may have something to do with the particulates in the stratosphere doing something to the laws of probability. Your waste-emissions project

is pumping particulates into the stratosphere right now. I think these coincidences are a side effect."

"I *knew* it," Mr. Mowen said. "It's Walter Hunt and the safety pin all over again. I'm going to call Research." He reached for the phone. The receiver cord caught on the edge of the desk. When he yanked it, the phone went clattering over the edge, taking the pencilholder and Sally's picture with it. "Will you call Research for me?"

"Sure," Ulric said. He punched in the number and then handed the receiver to Mr. Mowen.

Mr. Mowen thundered, "Turn off the waste-emissions project. Now. And get everyone connected with the project over here immediately." He hung up the phone and peered out the window. "Okay. They've turned it off," he said, turning back to Ulric. "Now what?"

"I don't know," Ulric said from the floor where he was picking up pencils. "I suppose as soon as the moon starts to lose its blue color, the laws of probability will go back to normal. Or maybe they'll rebalance themselves, and you'll have all good luck for a day or two." He put the pencilholder back on the desk and picked up Sally's picture.

"I hope it changes before my ex-wife gets back," Mr. Mowen said. "She's been here once already, but Janice got rid of her. I knew she was a side effect of some kind."

Ulric didn't say anything. He was looking at the picture of Sally.

"That's my daughter," Mr. Mowen said. "She's an English major."

Ulric stood the picture on the desk. It fell over, knocking the pencilholder onto the floor again. Ulric dived for the pencils.

"Never mind about the pencils," Mr. Mowen said. "I'll pick them up after the moon gets back to normal. She's home for Thanksgiving vacation. You might run into her. Her area of special study is language generation."

Ulric straightened up and cracked his head on the desk. "Language generation," he said, and walked out of the office.

Mr. Mowen went out to tell Janice to send the Research people in as soon as they got there. One of Ulric's gloves was lying on the floor next to Janice's desk. Mr. Mowen picked it up. "I hope he's right about putting a stop to these coincidences by turning off the stacks," he said. "I think this thing is catching."

Lynn called Brad as soon as Charlotte dropped her off. Maybe

he knew why Mr. Mowen's secretary wanted to see her. The line was busy. She took off her parka, put her suitcase in the bedroom, and then tried again. It was still busy. She put her parka back on, pulled on a pair of red mittens, and started across the oriental gardens to Brad's apartment.

"Are those nincompoops from Research here?" Mr. Mowen asked Janice.

"Yes, sir. All but Brad McAfee. His line is busy."

"Well, put an override on his terminal. And send them in."

"Yes, sir," Janice said. She went back to her desk and called up a directory on her terminal. To her surprise, she got it. She wrote down Brad's code and punched in an override. The computer printed ERROR. I knew it was too good to last, Janice thought. She punched the code again. This time the computer printed OVERRIDE IN PLACE. Janice thought a minute, then decided that whatever the override was, it couldn't be more important than Mr. Mowen's. She punched the code for a priority override and typed, "Mr. Mowen wants to see you immediately." The computer immediately confirmed it.

Exhilarated by her success, Janice called Brad's number again. He answered the phone. "Mr. Mowen would like to see you immediately," she said.

"I'll be there faster than blue blazes," Brad said, and hung up.

Janice went in and told Mr. Mowen Brad McAfee was on the way. Then she herded the Research people into his office. When Mr. Mowen stood up to greet them, he didn't knock over anything, but one of the Research people managed to knock over the pencils again. Janice helped him pick them up.

When she got back to her desk she remembered that she had superseded an override on Brad's terminal. She wondered what it was. Maybe Charlotte had gone to his apartment and poisoned him and then put an override on so he couldn't call for help. It was a comforting thought somehow, but the override might be something important, and now that she had gotten him on the phone there was really no reason to leave the priority override in place. Janice sighed and typed in a cancellation. The computer immediately confirmed it.

Jill opened the door to Brad's apartment building and stood there for a minute trying to get her breath. She was supposed to have driven back to Cheyenne tonight, and she had barely made it across Chugwater. Her car had slid sideways in the street and

gotten stuck, and she had finally left it there and come over here to see if Brad could help her put her chains on. She fished clumsily in her purse for the numbers Brad had written down for her so she could use the elevator. She should have taken her gloves off.

A young woman with no gloves on pushed open the door and headed for one of the two elevators, punched some numbers, and disappeared into the nearer elevator. The doors shut. She should have gone up with her. Jill fished some more and came up with several folded scraps of paper. She tried to unfold the first one, gave up, and balanced them all on one hand while she tried to pull her other glove off with her teeth.

The outside door opened, and a gust of snowy air blew the papers out of her hand and out the door. She dived for them, but they whirled away in the snow. The man who had opened the door was already in the other elevator. The doors slid shut. Oh, for heaven's sake.

She looked around for a phone so she could call Brad and tell him she was stranded down here. There was one on the far wall. The first elevator was on its way down, between four and three. The second one was on six. She walked over to the phone, took both her gloves off and jammed them in her coat pocket, and picked up the phone.

A young woman in a parka and red mittens came in the front door, but she didn't go over to the elevators. She stood in the middle of the lobby brushing snow off her coat. Jill rummaged through her purse for a quarter. There was no change in her wallet, but she thought there might be a couple of dimes in the bottom of her purse. The second elevator's doors slid open, and the mittened woman hurried in.

She found a quarter in the bottom of her purse and dialed Brad. The line was busy. The first elevator was on six now. The second one was down in the parking garage. She dialed Brad's number again.

The second elevator's doors slid open. "Wait!" she said, and dropped the phone. The receiver hit her purse and knocked its contents all over the floor. The outside door opened again, and snow whirled in. "Push the hold button," said the middle-aged woman who had just come in from outside. She had a red "NOW . . . or else!" button pinned to her coat, and she was clutching a folder to her chest. She knelt down and picked up a comb, two pencils, and Jill's checkbook.

"Thank you," she said gratefully.

"We sisters have to stick together," the woman said grimly. She

stood up and handed the things to Jill. They got into the elevator. The woman with the mittens was holding the door. There was another young woman inside, wearing a sweater and blue moon boots.

"Six please," Jill said breathlessly, trying to jam everything back into her purse. "Thanks for waiting. I'm just not all together today." The doors started to close.

"Wait!" a voice said, and a young woman in a suit and high heels, with a large manila envelope under her arm, squeezed in just as the door shut. "Six please," she said. "The wind chill factor out there has to be twenty below. I don't know where my head was to try to come over and see Brad in weather like this."

"Brad?" the young woman in the red mittens said.

"Brad?" Jill said.

"Brad?" the young woman in the blue moon boots said.

"Brad McAfee," the woman with the "NOW . . . or else!" button said grimly.

"Yes," the young woman in high heels said, surprised. "Do you all know him? He's my fiancé."

Sally punched in her security code, stepped in the elevator, and pushed the button for the sixth floor. "Ulric, I want to explain what happened this morning," she said as soon as the door closed. She had practiced her speech all the way over to Ulric's housing unit. It had taken her forever to get here. The windshield wipers were frozen and two cars had slid sideways in the snow and created a traffic jam. She had had to park the car and trudge through the snow across the oriental gardens, but she still hadn't thought of what to say.

"My name is Sally Mowen, and I don't generate language." That was out of the question. She couldn't tell him who she was. The minute he heard she was the boss's daughter, he would stop listening.

"I speak English, but I read your note, and it said you wanted someone who could generate language." No good. He would ask, "What note?" and she would haul it out of her pocket, and he would say, "Where did you find this?" and she would have to explain what she was doing up in the tree. She might also have to explain how she knew he was Ulric Henry and what she was doing with his file and his picture, and he would never believe it was all a coincidence.

Number six blinked on, and the door of the elevator opened. "I can't," Sally thought, and pushed the lobby button. Halfway

down she decided to say what she should have said in the first place. She pushed six again.

"Ulric, I love you," she recited. "Ulric, I love you." Six blinked. The door opened. "Ulric," she said. He was standing in front of the elevator, glaring at her.

"Aren't you going to say something?" he said. "Like 'I withspeak myself?' That's a nice example of Germanic compounding. But of course you know that. Language generation is your area of special study, isn't that right, Sally?"

"Ulric," Sally said. She took a step forward and put her hand on the elevator door so it wouldn't close.

"You were home for Thanksgiving vacation and you were afraid you'd get out of practice, is that it? So you thought you'd jump out of a tree on the company linguist just to keep your hand in."

"If you'd shut up a minute, I'd explain," Sally said.

"No, that's not right," Ulric said. "It should be 'quiet up' or maybe 'mouth-close you.' More compounding."

"Why did I ever think I could talk to you?" Sally said. "Why did I ever waste my time trying to generate language for you?"

"For me?" Ulric said. "Why in the hell did you think I wanted you to generate language?"

"Because . . . oh, forget it," Sally said. She punched the lobby button. The door started to shut. Ulric stuck his hand in the closing doors and then snatched them free and pressed the hold button. Nothing happened. He jammed in four numbers and pressed the hold button again. It gave an odd click and began beeping, but the doors opened again.

"Damn it," Ulric said. "Now you've made me punch in Brad's security code, and I've set off his stupid override."

"That's right," Sally said, jamming her hands in her pockets. "Blame everything on me. I suppose I'm the one who left that note in the tree saying you wanted somebody who could generate language?"

The beeping stopped. "What note?" Ulric said, and let go of the hold button.

Sally pulled her hand out of her pocket to press the lobby button again. A piece of paper fell out of her pocket. Ulric stepped inside as the doors started to close and picked up the piece of paper. After a minute, he said, "Look, I think I can explain how all this happened."

"You'd better make it snappy," Sally said. "I'm getting out when we get to the lobby."

* * *

As soon as Janice hung up the phone Brad grabbed his coat. He had a good idea of what Old Man Mowen wanted him for. After Ulric had left, Brad had gotten a call from *Time*. They'd talkified for over half an hour about a photographer and a four-page layout on the waste-emissions project. He figured they'd call Old Man Mowen and tell him about the article, too, and sure enough, his terminal had started beeping an override before he even hung up. It stopped as he turned toward the terminal, and the screen went blank, and then it started beeping again, double-quick, and sure enough, it was his pappy-in-law to be. Before he could even begin reading the message, Janice called. He told her he'd be there faster than blue blazes, grabbed his coat, and started out the door.

One of the elevators was on six and just starting down. The other one was on five and coming up. He punched his security code in and put his arm in the sleeve of his overcoat. The lining tore, and his arm went down inside it. He wrestled it free and tried to pull the lining back up to where it belonged. It tore some more.

"Well, dadfetch it!" he said loudly. The elevator door opened. Brad got in, still trying to get his arm in the sleeve. The door closed behind him.

The panel in the door started beeping. That meant an override. Maybe Mowen was trying to call him back. He pushed the DOOR OPEN button, but nothing happened. The elevator started down. "Dagnab it all," he said.

"Hi, Brad," Lynn said. He turned around.

"You look a mite wadgetty," Sue said. "Doesn't he, Jill?"

"Right peaked," Jill said.

"Maybe he's got the flit-flats," Gail said.

Charlotte didn't say anything. She clutched the file folder to her chest and growled. Overhead, the lights flickered, and the elevator ground to a halt.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Mowen Chemical today announced temporary finalization of its pyrolitic stratospheric waste-emissions program pending implementation of an environmental impact verification process. Lynn Saunders, director of the project, indicated that facilities will be temporarily deactivated during reorientation of predictive assessment criteria. In an unrelated communication, P.B. Mowen, president of Mowen Chemical, announced the upcoming nuptials of his daughter Sally Mowen and Ulric Henry, vice-president in charge of language effectiveness documentation. ●