

FLASHBACK

By EDWARD WELLEN

Illustrated by KILPATRICK

Dr. Hunt Patterson did not want to play God. But every moment that he made a choice, man was playing God for the highest stakes. If you want design and order in the Universe, you must seek it out, arrange it, and—take the consequences.

FINGER still stiff on the trigger, Hunt Patterson eyed the dead man. Patterson's hand opened of itself and the gun fell to the carpet. He eyed the revolver dully. Let the dead past bury it in this dead past where it belonged.

Stirring in the hall. Shadow under the bolted door, silting across the sill.

The knob rattled.

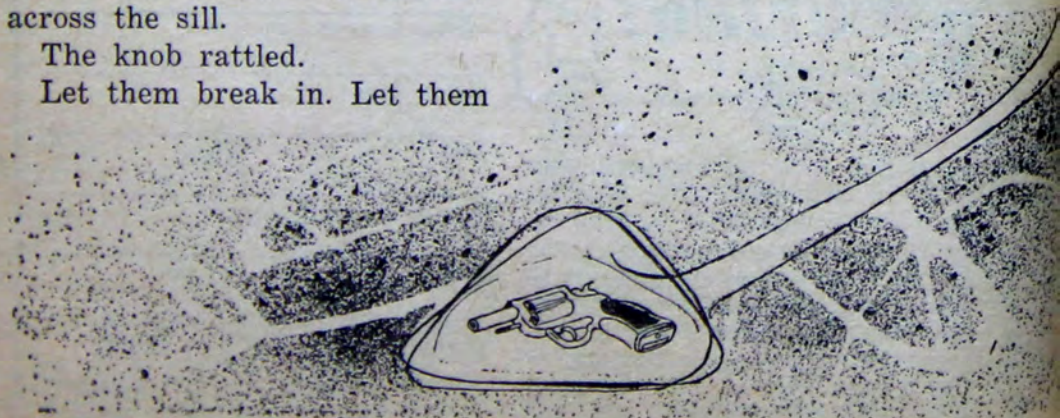
Let them break in. Let them

find him. He felt empty; he was Dead Sea fruit, a time-eaten tomb.

The knob rattled. There was knocking.

Shadow deepened on the threshold.

The killer sniffled. A police-woman bandaged the boy's





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wrist and sought to soothe him. The boy kept sniffing and saying, "Make him stop playing dead."

The governurse in charge of the playground stood by, feeling useless. The death of one of its pupils, to say nothing of the police questioning it had undergone, had shaken it to its main behavior circuit.

A siren.

The governurse suppressed a surge of hunting and responded eagerly, happy to have something to do. It pressed the button to open the screening.

A police copter, belly beacon flashing, set down in the playground. The screening closed over the area again. The copter helped Hunt Patterson out and ramped a black bag out after him. The gilt lettering on the bag had renewed itself unevenly but read plainly enough *Property of Forensic Biophysics Dept., Phoenix Medico-Legal Institute*.

Patterson glanced at the crowd behind the police lines. He filled out his lab coveralls and set his face in a professional look of determined urgency. Wondering where to head, he picked out a flashy plainclothesman talking to a governurse, a sniffing boy in a policewoman's custody, a small shrouded form on the gamesin-laid grasstex, and a revolver in a chalked outline of itself. He fixed on the revolver.

A flashy plainclothes arm thrust into his field of vision. "Lt. Mishugasu. You're Patterson?"

Patterson nodded. "Dr. Patterson." He shook hands with a tall ruddy man.

The scene of the crime. Patterson's eyes lighted on trivia—a broken crayon, a power-skate key, a scrap of paper—but came back to the revolver.

"That's it, doc. The murder weapon. Though I suppose I shouldn't call it murder. According to that"—Lt. Mishugasu thumbed at the governurse, which gave a start as of guilt—"the kid there thought it was a toy gun. The toy gun blew off the top of the other kid's head."

PATTERSON grew impatient with the lieutenant's drawl and casual manner but kept a grave face and nodded slowly. Maybe not murder, but in any case a killing. More exciting by far than a charge of fraudulent dissipation. This last had become common since the switch from stress on chronological age, and Patterson had grown weary of determining whether or not someone overeager for Social Security benefits had illicitly speeded up his biological aging.

Lt. Mishugasu was going on. "We've questioned the other kids and sent them back to their dorm. They saw nothing till it

was all over. We have only one real eyewitness. According to that"—the governurse flinched again—"the gun appeared out of thin air. I'm not buying that unless I have to. But the gun wasn't here an hour ago and it sure didn't sieve through the screening. So how did it get here and where did it come from?"

Patterson felt himself aging waiting for the lieutenant to turn him loose. He smiled tiredly. "Teleportation?" He laughed.

Lt. Mishugasu said abruptly, "Doc, you tell me." He made a turning-it-over-to-you gesture.

Patterson felt his face go hot. But he quickly forgot himself, Lt. Mishugasu, the governurse, the sniffing boy and the police-woman, the shrouded form, the blur of crowd—everything but the revolver. The black bag he had brought had heeled; now, at command, it upped on legs to workbench height, opened, and laid out instruments. Patterson selected a tensor magnet; with it he lifted the revolver. He set the butt of the magnet into a slot in the work surface. He studied the floating revolver. He noted that Lt. Mishugasu had vibro-etched his initials—J.A.M.—on the barrel for identification. His mouth twisted toward an eye tooth; he would have to make corrections on the colloidal level. Why wouldn't the police stick to old-fashioned scratching?

He carefully molded laminate plastic to the smooth walnut grip of the gun. He eyed his watch, then peeled off the top layer. He had lifted a fine set of finger prints. He beckoned the police-woman over with her charge and impressed the sniffing boy's prints on an overlay. The overlay snuggled to match the set from the gun.

Lt. Mishugasu snorted. "That we knew."

Patterson managed to smile. "Yes. But there's a possible set underneath. We have to get the knowns out of the way before we attack the unknowns."

"Go right ahead, doc. Pardon me."

Patterson held his breath and peeled off another layer. He let out his breath. He had lifted something. He fostatated this. The fostat showed Lt. Mishugasu only a hopeless smudge. Patterson verniered his probability-aligner; the prints unsmudged to a usable degree of resolution. He refostatated this and handed the new fostat to Lt. Mishugasu. The lieutenant pursed his lips, nodded, and shot it by portable telesender to headquarters computer.

Patterson selected a chemo-swab and rubbed it over the laminate remaining on the revolver grip. While whatever sweat was on the grip osmosed into the laminate, Patterson used the wait to

take prints of the dead boy.

Lt. Mishugasu helped with the routine, sliding the hands out from under the shroud, holding them, then tucking them under again.

The killer sniffled in the police-woman's bosom.

Watching the lieutenant tele-sens the prints to headquarters, Patterson stiffened. A chill had gripped him. He thought he had heard the boy say "Make Jim stop playing dead." He shook his head and returned to the revolver.

The transfer was complete. He peeled off the laminate, uncurled it with a tap, and slid it into the spectroscope. He set the spectroscope for sweat-analysis, correcting for such disturbance as Lt. Mishugasu's vibro-etching had caused. Analysis would take several minutes; there were two samples of sweat to separate out and examine.

HE turned his attention meanwhile to the revolver itself. An antique six-shooter in a fine state of preservation. Lt. Mishugasu broke in on Patterson's admiration; the lieutenant had tele-sens the revolver's serial number to headquarters and had just got word the make was coming up. They listened to the flash.

The salient facts were date of manufacture, 1940; issuance of permit in Carbondale, Ill., to Ar-

thur Hame, in 1950; and, upon the relocation of the possessor, issuance of permit for the same weapon to the same Arthur Hame, in Phoenix, Ariz., in 1960. After that, no trace. The arms plant had mothballed under UN seal in 1985.

Patterson eyed the revolver; it was—in its shape of revolver—172 years old. A very fine state of preservation.

The spectroscope buzzed. Patterson tore off the strip of paper bearing its readings.

Both sweat samples showed not too advanced stage of evaporation. The sniffing boy had held the gun less than an hour ago. Someone else had held the gun previously, but still less than an hour ago. The boy's sweat proved out to match his ID description. The other's sweat belonged to a light-skinned ectomorphic male, 41-45, with type O blood; protein analysis suggested heart disease.

But the really significant thing about this other, the thing that made Patterson feel cold between the shoulder blades, was the low level of fallout absorption.

It stood at the 1960 level, ten percent less than that prevailing here and now in 2112. No one living since 1985—when it rose to its present level and the UN clamped down to hold it there—could have escaped taking in the prevailing dosage.

Patterson was dimly aware

that Lt. Mishugasu eyed him curiously. But the lieutenant did not speak and Patterson kept troubled silence. He noted again the fine condition of the gun, frowned, shook his head impatiently, and continued his examination.

The revolver had fired one shot. Five bullets remained in the cylinder. Patterson broke it open and pried out a cartridge. He twisted loose the casing and shook out a pinch of powder. The powder had not deteriorated. He took a carbon 14 reading of the charcoal in the gunpowder. It dated from—

That was just it; the needle oscillated wildly between 1955 and 2106.

"Trouble?"

He didn't trouble to answer Lt. Mishugasu, but waited for the carbochron's apology and explanation. He watched the master control type out an accusation.

Too much data.

Reluctantly, because it went against all reason, he cut out a whole bloc of built-in corrections.

The needle locked triumphantly on 1955. It worked out right only if you ignored both the plus of cumulative cosmic radiation and the minus of dissipation, for the period 1955-2106.

With mounting uneasiness he notched the walnut grip, charred

the sliver of wood this gave him, and, cutting the corrections back in, took a reading. Again the oscillating. He cut out the corrections. The needle froze on 1937. Allowing for seasoning of the wood of a tree felled in 1937, that would fit in with the 1940 date of manufacture of the revolver.

"Impossible."

"What's impossible?"

It was only when Lt. Mishugasu's question sank in that Patterson knew he had said the word out loud. He stared at the lieutenant without answering. No need to panic. There had to be a pattern, a reasonable explanation. Stalling for time, he handed the lieutenant the strip recording the readings.

Lt. Mishugasu eyed the strip and gave it back with a dissatisfied air. "I see a lot of figures. What do they mean?"

PATTERSON gave a laugh of frustration. There was only one way to reconcile his contradictory findings. He sighed inwardly, knowing he was going to sound foolish.

"The gun came out of the past."

To his surprise he saw Lt. Mishugasu nod mild agreement.

"Sure it came out of the past. H.Q. says it goes back to 1940."

"No, I mean it jumped across time."

"Come again?"

Patterson was patient. "It skipped the years between." He hurried on. "Way it seems to add up, the gun stopped being in or about 1960 and started being in 2112—today."

Lt. Mishugasu said nothing.

Patterson swallowed dry. "Put all those figures together and you have someone living 150 years ago holding this gun less than an hour ago."

When Lt. Mishugasu spoke he was kindly but plaintive. "Just do your stuff once more, will you, doc? We don't want any slipups, do we?"

Smiling hopelessly, Patterson shook his head but said, "Sure." He began to go over the readings again. He knew he would come up with the same findings. But he had a dim uneasy presentiment as to what more the future would show him about the past.

Lt. Mishugasu moved away and lit a non-deionized cigarette—a legal dissipation, but not in a playground. The governurse automatically put out a restraining hand, then stopped itself, realizing the lieutenant was not one of its charges and that this was not a time to be officious.

But Lt. Mishugasu absently said "O" out of a thoughtful cloud and offered his pack without looking. The governurse hesitated, then took a cigarette and murmured thanks. Lt. Mishugasu turned with a start. He leveled

his gaze at the governurse. The governurse managed to puff away nonchalantly. Lt. Mishugasu felt unsure of himself but out of habit leaped to the attack.

"How do I know you're not faking your memory tape to get out of a neglect charge? That's what it is, isn't it?"

The governurse nonchalantly flicked the cigarette off and put the ash in its mouth. Lt. Mishugasu felt surer of himself. Not that the governurse was a real suspect.

"No, sir."

"Tell the truth, now. The rod didn't materialize out of nothing. It was here all along. Some kid found it somewhere outside and sneaked it in. You just forgot to do a good job of frisking. That's how it was, wasn't it?" Just suspect.

"No, sir."

Lt. Mishugasu glared into its eyes. He opened his mouth but there was a flash from headquarters computer. He tensed.

"Fingerprints of the victim match those of James Patterson, chronological age nine, School Dorm IV. Next of kin, father, Hunt Patterson, D.F.B., Circle Development Bachelor Quarters . . ."

Lt. Mishugasu faded the sound but Patterson had heard. His finger froze on the rerun key of the spectroscope.

"Sorry, doctor. I could kick

myself. The governurse told me the boy's name of course when I first interrogated it and H.Q. told me to expect you to help out on this case—but I never put the two names together." The lieutenant paused. "If you think you're up to it—"

Patterson nodded stiffly and mechanically followed the lieutenant to the small shrouded form. Lt. Mishugasu unveiled the statue-cold face. Patterson looked, closed his eyes, had to force himself to nod. Lt. Mishugasu covered the face. Patterson's eyes flew open. He whirled.

THE leaky-nosed boy looked up. He choked on a snuffle. He stepped back as Patterson made for him. The policewoman fell back too, sheltering the boy from Patterson—and from the governurse, which had moved in anxiously.

Lt. Mishugasu's hand was light but firm on Patterson's upraised arm and pulled Patterson gently away.

"Before you blame the kid why don't you see for yourself how it happened. Come over here." He led Patterson to the governurse.

It hummed nervously but smoked a non-existent cigarette nonchalantly.

Patterson tensed himself to look in the governurse's eyes. Lt. Mishugasu spoke to the governurse. And Patterson viewed a

playback of what the governurse had seen an hour ago. The image vibro-etched itself in his mind as he watched.

He saw his son Jimmy and the other boy. They were part of a happily roughhousing group. One instant the revolver wasn't there; the next instant it was there, a blur in midair. In spite of distracting flutter he kept his eyes on the gun. It firmed; preservation made it seem to stand stationary a full moment; it fell. He saw the boy spot the revolver, scoop it up, heft it, spin tentatively, pretend to holster and draw. He saw the boy aim between Jimmy's blue eyes and he saw Jimmy smile. He heard himself cry out. He moved in with the governurse, too late. He almost felt with the boy the wicked jar of recoil. He saw Jimmy whirl and fall flat, already dead. He felt the pain Jimmy had not had time to feel. But he had not yet had time to feel his own grief.

The image lost stereoscopic depth and the governurse's eyes went blank, merely mirroring Patterson's own dark gaze.

Patterson heard the boy unbosom himself of a snuffle. Patterson did not glance again at the boy but turned to Lt. Mishugasu. "Why hold him here? The real killer is someone else."

"You're right." Lt. Mishugasu signed to the policewoman to take the boy dormward.

"Someone's been criminally careless letting a lethal weapon loose in a playground." Patterson looked hard at the governurse. "They damn well ought to dismantle it for dereliction of duty."

The governurse stood still, as though at attention. It had a kind of dignity.

TO BE fair, the sudden materializing of the revolver had been out of its ken. The ultimate blame lay with the governurse's maker for failing to build in quicker response to the unexpected. But then the truly ultimate blame lay with the community for acquiescing in the governurse's specifications, accepting delivery of the finished product, and assigning it to playground duty. But then the absolutely ultimate blame lay with the individual members of the community for not making sure their children were in safe hands.

He himself was partly to blame. What did he know of the care he took for granted? Save for the daily visiting hour Jimmy had been in the keeping of tutorgans and governurses. All he knew was that Jimmy had seemed well-adjusted. Patterson knew himself to be undemonstrative. But he was sure the boy had sensed the love he felt for his son. He had helped Jimmy with semantics problems— "True or false. Eye

is to gag as egg is to moo." Enough of that. While he was maudling the real culprit was going unpunished.

He looked with hate into the governurse's eyes. "Let's have that again."

Lt. Mishugasu eyed him curiously, as though registering an interesting case of masochism, but gave the governurse the go-ahead.

The sequence repeated itself. But this time Patterson was watching for what he had been vaguely aware of—a scrap of paper. It adhered, as though electrostatically, to the far side of the revolver. It materialized with the gun then fluttered loose and planed out of vision as the gun fell. Patterson had the governurse reverse a few frames and stop. He pointed the paper out to Lt. Mishugasu.

The lieutenant reddened. "My eye was on the gun. I missed the paper. Well, it's here somewhere."

He found it. He picked it up with tweezers. On one side was writing. On the other, a faint patterning of dust. His eyes lit up. A footprint. He made out the official phoenix-embossed tread. His own footprint. His back to Patterson, he blew off the dust. He wafted the paper to Patterson's workbag.

Patterson looked it over. The writing was a jerky cardiographic scrawl.

Here's the gift of death

Patterson gazed blindly at the writing long after he had read it. It was a severed limb, lacking period, lacking context. But for Patterson it needed no context. It told him what it was—the flaunting of a gratuitous act.

Back there in 1961 someone had with deliberate intent sent a loaded gun into the then future—to fall to earth he cared not when or where.

Here's the gift of death

A mocking invitation to murder, the sender hoping the gun would fall into irresponsible hands? A booby trap, the sender hoping the gun would wake unsuspecting curiosity in some new Eve in some new Eden? In either case, malice aforethought.

NUMBLY Patterson went through the motions. He fostatated the watermark. Lt. Mishugasu shot the fostat to H.Q. and by the time Patterson had torn a bit of paper off a corner, put it to carbon 14 testing, and come up with the date 1958, headquarters computer was corroboratingly stating that the watermark had been in use from 1938 to 1965. Sweat on the note was that of a lightskinned ectomorphic male, 41-45, with type O blood, protein analysis suggesting heart disease, and too-low fallout absorption. Fingerprints matched those of the underlying

set on the revolver. Again that contradiction in time—paper and ink were old but fresh.

Patterson trained his eyes on the writing itself. Courts did not as yet accept the validity of correlation between a person's handwriting and his electroencephalogram. But in his own judgment Patterson admitted this specimen into evidence. He could see that a confused and disorganized mind had guided this self-incriminating scribble.

To pin the blame you need a name, and headquarters computer, intercalating information from various sources, was flashing the name. Records of the Phoenix Department of Buildings showed that on this very spot in 1961 had stood the home of Arthur Hame—the Arthur Hame who had owned the revolver. In 1980 the house had made way for a mobile homes park, which in 2063 had made way for the playground. Health Department records showed that Arthur Hame, birthplace Carbondale, Ill., birthdate September 22, 1916, had died in Phoenix Ariz., March 20, 1961; cause of death, heart failure. Fingerprints to Arthur Hame were in Pentagon archives; T/5 Hame had served in the Pacific as an ordnance mechanic. The newsmorgue gave up his obituary.

Arthur Hame, gas station operator, died yesterday of a

heart attack in his home. 711 Palm Ave. His age was 45.

Mr. Hame, who was born in Carbondale, Ill., had moved here last year.

During World War II Mr. Hame served with the Army overseas.

He leaves his widow, Vivian.

Just on circumstantial evidence you could make out a strong case against Hame. Patterson was up on his history of criminology; the mid-twentieth century had been the time of the mad bombers. Hame had been one—with a difference. A mechanic, Hame must have done his share of inventive tinkering—

Patterson whirled; Lt. Mishugasu backed a step.

"Lieutenant, will you find out if Hame ever applied for a patent on any device having to do with time?"

Lt. Mishugasu looked weary. "Why not?" He bent to his tele-sender.

Patterson was at his elbow with an afterthought.

"Or any sort of disintegrator."

Hame might have seen his device cause things to disappear and not have known or been sure they shot ahead in time.

But there was nothing in Patent Office records to show that Hame had ever tried to protect a time machine or a disintegrator or anything at all. Nor did Defense Department records yield

any correspondence with Hame about military use of a disintegrator.

That still proved nothing conclusively. Hame might have discovered the effect but have been unable to control it; in that case his device would have been unpatentable. Frustration would have embittered him and helped warp his mind. That had to be it. Hame was their man.

Lt. Mishugasu was spreading out empty hands. "Guess that wraps it up."

Patterson tightened his mouth to keep from saying something biting. *What are you going to do with all this evidence, tread it under your big flat foot?* After a moment he felt he could trust his voice. "You're leaving it at that?" Harsh, but at least not a scream.

"Have to. Far as I can see this case leads to a dead end. Sorry, doc, it's out of my hands. Time is not my beat."

They had taken Jimmy away. Patterson saw only a chalk outline, as for some game.

LT. MISHUGASU seemed ill at ease. He looked around Patterson's lab unseeingly. "I've come by to pick up exhibits A and B."

"Case closing?" Patterson could taste the bitterness of his own words.

Lt. Mishugasu flashed helpless

empty hands. "Just to make sure, we took that governurse apart. We found no evidence it revised its memory. We took your findings apart and put them together again. We've come to your conclusion. The computer agrees the only logical inference is that Hame somehow jumped the gun from his time to ours. That does it then."

Patterson kept silence.

"You don't expect us to turn back the clock?"

Patterson kept silence.

"The most we might do is try Hame in absentia and revise him in effigy—and what the hell would that change?"

Patterson kept silence.

"Suppose you tell me how to extradite him."

Patterson shook with fury. "What good are computers and laws if we can't get at Hame?"

"Doc, there are a few things beyond us."

Patterson kept silence.

"I don't know if you're a believing man—"

Patterson kept silence.

"If you were, you could think of Hame up before a higher power that squares everything."

Patterson eyed the other unwaveringly. "Everything is one, and the square of one is still one."

"Meaning?"

"Injustice remains. Jimmy died and Hame didn't pay."

Lt. Mishugasu tried but failed

to look inscrutable. With obvious relief he spotted the revolver and the note. "Ah, exhibits A and B."

Patterson put his hands over them. "Mind if I hold on to these a bit longer?"

Lt. Mishugasu's eyebrows went up a notch and his eyes narrowed. Patterson could almost see his dead son and his dead wife in Lt. Mishugasu's eyes. Patterson kept from losing a bitter laugh.

"Doc, I know the question is an affront, but you won't do anything foolish?" His eyes shot to the revolver; then they lifted and he smiled. "I guess you have lots of other ways to do something foolish if you want to. Sure. You need 'em for your job. Experiments in dating, right? I'll take care of the authorizations." He moved to the door, shaking his head sadly. "Paper work, paper work. The mills of the gods. Well, back to the grind."

Patterson waited for the door to come together, then for Lt. Mishugasu's copter to whirl away. Then he let out his breath. He picked up the revolver.

He weighed it in his palm. His hand curled to mold to the grip, almost fondling it. His index finger crept around the trigger, slowly tensed. He felt fever-eyed. He could not make unhappiness unhappen. He could not bring his son back to life. But there had to be design in the universe.

THIS had been a senseless killing, without even the twisted logic of victim inviting the crime. Here was nothing more than aimless cause triggering aimless effect. But there had to be design. Crime and punishment. But society, this great society wanted to forget there were forces it could not control. Time was a barrier, but a closed mind was a greater barrier. He fingered the notch he had cut in the grip.

There was design in the revolver. Be fitting to kill the killer with his own gun. But fate had foreclosed that end; Hame had died of heart failure. Patterson grimaced. If only he could be—have been—present at Hame's death as Hame had been constructively present at Jimmy's. If he could go back, confront Hame with the gun and the note. That would be—have been—enough to bring on the heart attack.

There had to be a way of going back. Not just to avenge. He might even be doing Hame a favor. He might find himself clearing Hame. Maybe someone else was the cause of killing Jimmy. Maybe Hame was not the culprit but another victim. A fall guy—all the circumstantial evidence being only a red herring in the milk of the cosmos, a spatiotemporal frame. Someone else could have been providing against the possibility of vengeance from the future.

On the other hand, and this was of course the more likely, if he found it was Hame after all, who knew but what he might be able to alter the past? He would not hesitate to pull the trigger and execute Hame even if changing the past started a new continuity, changing the present. As it was, he had nothing more to lose in this present.

He felt suddenly a chill of glory. If he could monkey with the past there was a wondrous possibility he did not dare let himself pause to think of now. There had to be a way.

He felt weary all at once. He would sleep on it. Some times answers came in sleep. He had put in his four hours for the day, but even if he had not he was in sole charge here. He drawered revolver and note and told the lab to lock up. He dozed in the auto; it coughed softly when it pulled up, and murmured, "Sir, you are home."

He walked in blindly, dropped his clothes, stepped under the shower-ray, then sank into bed. Eyes shut, he realized sleepily he had avoided gazing at the too-lifelike imagestures of Iris and Jimmy that switched on when he entered.

He drifted into dream. He was an avenging angel descending out of time to confront a culprit strangely like Lt. Mishugasu. The avenging angel said no word.

the culprit recognizing the revolver and the revolver doing the accusing. The culprit, finding no mercy in the eyes of the avenging angel, collapsed with a soundless scream and fell dead.

PATTERSON awakened. He must have snored. Whenever he started snoring the bed gently prodded him onto his side. He didn't know why he left it at that setting; there was no need, with Iris gone and himself now lodging alone. But he had left it that way, almost as a kind of penance.

He rolled on his back and lay staring at the night sky on the ceiling. He shut his eyes and saw himself and Jimmy during one of their meetings. Jimmy was wanting to box his father. Patterson was frustrating Jimmy—now pretending not to realize he held Jimmy in an inexorable grip, now holding Jimmy off by flailing longer arms—so that Jimmy turned away in exasperation; but always Jimmy returned to the uneven battle. Patterson sighed. The bed gently turned him over. He rolled back angrily.

He had to smile at himself. Anger came strangely easy to one who early in life had made up his mind he would not give way to unreason. He felt the smile change phase. A wave of salt melancholy. This was indulgence in sentiment. But to grow furious with himself for giving way

would only compound the fault. Grief and rage were unreason. But—might as well spend this wakefulness reasoning—sometimes there was reason in unreason. Take the greatest unreason, love. Its reason for being was to perpetuate the race. But the design was wrong; there was unreason in having reason in unreason.

Iris. He stifled a sigh.

He met Iris at a fetish-party. He had seen her come in, her eyes narrow and searching. When their host made the introductions her pale blue eyes widened and her shoulders went back.

"A forensic biophysicist?" She shivered pleasurably. "I'll just bet those black eyes see right through me."

During the chase he came on her suddenly and gave her such a turn she dropped her slipper. Her heart beat fast; she had him touch to see. She told him it was very unfeeling of him to laugh at her fright. But that only made him laugh the more, and in the end she herself had to join in. He picked up her slipper. They exchanged locks of hair and spent the evening in a cotel.

That was the beginning. But he soon saw she felt she owned him. He let her know straight out where they stood. He was his own man and nothing would make him forsake the way of reason. She nodded humbly. That seemed

to settle the issue. He would be free to come and go.

But as time wore on she grew more demanding of his attention. She wanted them to marry. Love. That was Iris's answer, her reason for being unreasonable. He had to smile. She had tried to make him jealous with that albino-eyed Ghlauck fellow. That didn't work. Then she wanted them to marry for form's sake; she was pregnant. How old-fashioned could you get?

SHE had no claim on him just because they co'd. It pleased his male pride that she wanted him. Yet it shamed him too that she was the aggressor. Disregarding her appealing look, he took her to task for breaking their bargain. He stated firmly it was all off between them.

Her eyes filled. "Do you want to kill me?"

(He relived the snort he had given. The bed turned him onto his side. He rolled back, suppressing a grunt of rage.) "Don't tell me you'll pine away?"

"No, I'll kill myself."

This half amused, half angered him. He couldn't believe she was truly suicidal. "See here, Iris, I can't marry you merely because you say you'll kill yourself if I don't marry you."

She was in a fury. "I'll kill myself."

He laughed and left.

SHE attempted suicide. Later he realized she had taken care it happened where there were people to save her from herself. But at the time it had shocked him into capitulating. They married. So she had her way; though once having had her way she was kindly and forgiving. Sometimes forgiveness seemed to him a form of revenge. The pregnancy was a false alarm. That disenchanted him further and he showed it. He had to smile. Again she had tried to make him jealous with Ghlauck. Again that didn't work. So for a time she was all understanding and consideration. Jimmy came into being. That alone would have made all the fuss worth while—if motherhood had changed her. But she was the same Iris. Indeed, with governesses interposing between Jimmy and her possessiveness, more of the same. She grew more demanding of her husband's time and thought. If she could not get the warmth of affection, she would take the warmth of rage—anything but indifference. After five years of marriage, option time, he told her with relief it was best not to renew. She eyed him but said nothing. That gave him hope they would part friends. But on option eve he saw in her eyes a look that filled him with unease. He found an excuse to stay overtime at the lab. He came home to find her dead of an over-

dose of vitasleep. If he had come at his usual hour he might have saved her.

He sighed, and found himself rolling over. But by now he was too drowsy for unreasoning anger at the bed.

He awakened weary. The bed had tossed and turned him most of the rest of the night. But he remembered he had spent the night remembering.

To remember was to put yourself in phase with the past. The past was where? Where when *is*, *was*; back there on the world-line of earth. Earth was coil and iron core in one, a magnet spiraling through space-time. Space-time was another name for the expanding universe. The expanding universe was action, the reaction being an equal and opposite imploding—the binding energy at the core of atoms. Atoms were where the uncertainty principle came to matter, making it impossible to know the future. The future, no; but you knew the past; and if—here in the terrestrial electromagnetic field—you could create indefinite space, say with an electronic oscillator, you might isolate time and put present in phase with past, just like that. That was the line to follow in the days to come; to turn back the clock was the thing to remember.

HE moved his effects to the lab to eliminate the waste of

coming and going. He slept there on a cot, ate there when he remembered to dial for food, and begrudged sleeping and eating. The greatest gift was the present and he wanted to use every moment.

He used the means of the Institute to his own ends. To do justice you sometimes had to do injustice; the scales were to tell you when the justice you sought weighed less than the injustice you had to commit to bring about that justice. In this case it was only just to let society subsidize unconsciously what it consciously credited. The lab facilities were far from adequate to his purposes. He requisitioned components "to study the relation of terrestrial magnetism to biorhythms." The components for a massive large-scale vibro-etcher formed the electronic oscillator he had in mind. Anything to further his cause.

THE work was not going well. From bad to worse—he was beginning to have hallucinations. He strained his eyes at the space above the energy disk. Strictly speaking, it wasn't space but chaos, a gray formlessness. Entropy, in the meaning he had come to accept, was space without time; chaos was time without space. He thought he saw a pendulumlike swinging, a blurry spot of light moving back and forth. It stopped and vanished.

He squeezed his eyes shut and opened them. Nothing. A bad sign, that. When you began to see things it was time to knock off.

He quit for the day. But guilt feelings would not let him rest easy for the remainder of the day, nor during the fruitless days that followed. He tried to excuse himself for the sense of letting down. He had known urgency too long. But wasn't it becoming easier to excuse himself? Of late he had been telling himself time was not of the essence; once the past was the past it had nothing to do but wait. Hame, deep in yesterdrift, frozen forever on his cold trail, could not escape. But wasn't that rationalization? Patterson grimaced.

Face it, he was on the point of quitting.

Why not? He seemed only to be wandering in circles like a man lost in the woods.

Momentum set him to work again. He switched on the oscillator and with a twisted smile watched the space above the energy disk become haze. The setting automatically clicked to the next random pairing of Helmholtz coils and solenoid. Alongside was a ring stand holding a Pyrex ball; in the ball was a sediment of iron filings. The ring stand swung slowly around, carrying the ball into the zone of chaos. The filings flurried up and

became a swirling black snow. He strained to see. He had long since given up hope of seeing them form lines of magnetic force vanishing-pointing toward the past. Still it was a wrench when nothing new happened and after a moment the ring stand slowly swung the ball back out and the filings settled in a heavy heap. The heap looked the way his heart felt. He knew he was going to quit.

A shadow.

He quickly pressed the randomizing stop-button, looked up angrily, then forced a smile. "Why, hello, lieutenant. Come in."

"Captain. Advancement is slow but sure if you hang on long enough. Sorry to interrupt. I see you're busy."

"Not at all. Just routine." He had not seen Mishugasu for a long time, not since the then lieutenant had transferred to computer section on limited duty for reasons of health.

MISHUGASU wasn't saying right out why he had come here now and Patterson wasn't asking right out. They talked trivia. It had slipped Patterson's mind, but it was Nature Week, and they traded awkward commonplaces, necessarily vague on Patterson's part, about the temporarily decontrolled wind and weather. They reminisced about

cases they had been on together—refraining from bringing up their first. The captain declined a nondeionized cigarette.

Then out of clear air he said, "By the way, doc, I'm due for my pension in a few weeks."

Patterson, eyeing the captain, saw why the statement was not a non sequitur. It was sad to note

how the man had sallowed and lined.

Patterson felt in his vest pocket for his credit key. "That calls



for celebrating." The key was missing. A moment of unreasoning scare, then he saw the key on the energy disk. It must've fallen out in his fumbling haste to hide what he was working on. He stuck the key in the transfone slot and eyed the captain inquiringly.

"The bends, thanks."

Patterson dialed refreshments central and gave the order. He and Mishugasu smiled at each other, waiting, then a brace of pressure drinks slid out. Patterson handed one to Mishugasu, took the other; they clicked containers, held them slightly apart and watched the friendship spark jump the gap, then each downed his drink. They sat smiling.

Almost at once Patterson felt the bubbling in his blood. The room seemed brighter and Mishugasu, wearing an empty grin and gazing uncomprehendingly around at the apparatus, was a foolish old man he felt sorry for. Then Mishugasu turned back and he read compassion in Mishugasu's eyes. He flushed angrily.

Mishugasu's voice was soft. "You're still thinking about—what's his name?"

"Hame."

"You're still thinking about him." The captain was watching the heat of his hands evaporate the empty container. "You still believe there ought to be a way to get back at him?"

Patterson would not let himself say he was near giving up that belief, that hope. "Of course."

Mishugasu eyed him directly. "Doc, why don't you forget it?"

"I can't."

"That's what a psi-chi's for."

"Let's say I don't want to forget." He shifted to the attack. "Why didn't you see a psi-chi?"

"Me?" Mishugasu frowned. "Oh, you mean about the urge to speed up my b-age?"

Patterson nodded. He had the satisfaction of seeing Mishugasu flush.

"I want you to know I stayed within the law. Just non-d smoking, free-floating-anxiety flickers, and—" His flush deepened as Patterson smiled twistedly. "But you wanted to know why. Naturally it goes back to the formative phase. Tests showed aptitude for manhunting. So that became my career. Tests showed no aptitude for starlistening. But starlistening is what I've always wanted to spend my life doing. Now I'll be free to starlisten all I want."

Patterson felt his smile fade. There was sudden poignancy in the bubbling aliveness coursing his veins. Mishugasu had wasted the present for the sake of the future. He himself had wasted the present for the sake of the past. "I know how you feel."

"And I think I know how you

feel. We all serve time. Hame too has done his bit."

IT WAS true. Time put a period to, a statute of limitations on, everything. On the law's responsibility, on crime, on punishment. But Patterson heard himself saying, "No." That was the bends talking.

Mishugasu sighed. "I hoped I wouldn't have to say this—"

Patterson was aware not of words but of a series of jolts. They had known all along. They had let him pursue his vain dream of visiting punishment on Hame. They had connived in his diverting of funds; that had been conscience money to make up for a reality in which society was helpless to right every wrong.

"Why tell me now?"

Mishugasu winced but went on. Time had changed. Now it was against public policy to encourage obsessive behavior.

"Obsessive?" That sounded wrong but he didn't right it. He stared at Mishugasu.

Mishugasu looked away. "You don't have to prove anything to anybody."

Patterson's stomach knotted. Mishugasu was absolving him. Of what? And then he knew. He did not have to ask Mishugasu to spell it out. Mishugasu had investigated him at the time, learned about Iris's death, considered unconscious motivation.

So he had been a suspect in the death of his own son. That would be to laugh at if it were not to rage at. He rose.

The room whirled and a chorus of Mishugasus was saying, "Patterson, are you okay?" Job's comforters.

He waved them away and they became one. He found his chair and sat limp. He eyed Mishugasu through haze; the effect of the bends was dissipating. Mishugasu too had been seeking meaning, had seen potential pattern in Iris's death and Jimmy's. Mishugasu must've known from the beginning the link between James Patterson the dead boy and Dr. Hunt Patterson the forensic biophysicist, must've brought Patterson into the case by way of putting psychopressure on him, must've been watching for any giveaway he had been responsible for the gun's materializing—perhaps by the teleportation Patterson had mentioned with a laugh, in which case that laugh would have seemed mocking.

Patterson laughed, self-mocking. He knew, along with a smarting awareness of defeat and resentment, a sense of relief now this was out in the open. Mishugasu had given him the facesaving excuse he needed to call the whole thing off. A hopeless quest for vengeance was unreasonable—the more so if it turned out to be a rationalizing and pro-

jecting of your own guilt feelings for a death or deaths you sensed you might have forestalled. His face set with resolve. He would drop the quest.

Mishugasu got up and began to walk off the bends. He missed his footing and put his hand to the control panel of the oscillator for balance. Patterson closed his eyes.

Mishugasu took an unsteady step to the workbench and clung to it. "Sorry, doc. Afraid I shook your setup."

Patterson opened his eyes. The chaos had altered. But he shrugged. After all it made no difference now he had decided to discontinue.

Mishugasu eased his butt on to the bench and sat swinging a kink out of his leg. He spoke, but Patterson was not listening. Patterson widened his eyes as the foot cut across the energy disk, in and out. Mishugasu had stopped talking and was waiting for an answer to some question. He followed Patterson's gaze to his own foot and stopped its swinging.

"Oh, am I disturbing your setup again?" His fist gave the air a rap of self-blame.

Patterson did not answer. He was still watching in his mind the hypnotic pendulum of polished toe. As though a probability-aligner were at work it became the blurry spot of light he

had taken for hallucination three days ago.

He glanced up. Mishugasu was eyeing him with something like alarm. He smiled, he hoped reassuringly.

Mishugasu, standing straight and sober, said, "I'd better go."

HE WAS not alone. He was with his thoughts. He was once again bent on confronting the culprit.

Hame.

And if he found it was not Hame but some other?

Back . . . backer . . . backest . . . till he had that other. Crime must have a stop—unless it came full circle, its pattern a self-avenging doom, creature tracking down creator. He smiled. To fix ultimate blame a believing man would have to go back to Cain . . . and beyond, to Demiurge . . . to God. He smiled. First things first.

Hame.

By not doing anything he was doing something. He did not touch the setting but blessed Mishugasu and watched for signs he was on the right track. If Patterson future mastered the effect, he would send encouraging hints back to Patterson present.

He thought he had reasoned himself easy in his mind, but here it was Friday, another long and fruitless day of watching. He cursed Mishugasu.

There was an amorphous sound from the oscillator. He heard it as a cluck. An egg was materializing on the stage of the energy disk.

Now it was no longer if but when.

Drunk with joy, he caught himself putting out his hand for balance—as Mishugasu had done. With horror he saw himself about to disturb the setting.

In a flash he had to resolve whether the delicate balance now in effect was the one Patterson future needed to send the egg back to Patterson present or whether an accidental jolt by Patterson present was what would have enabled Patterson future to have brought it about. To let accident be the deciding factor would be to prove the ultimate unreason of the universe. This had to be the result of deliberation and design.

He stopped himself in time.

He found his chair and sat limp. Uncertainty weighted his mind. Didn't it make any difference what he did or didn't do now? What was the next move? He would soon be Patterson future.

He eyed the egg. It stood out in the gray swirl of chaos. It was an Easter egg. Reminded him of the plastic one he once bought Jimmy.

It had held a chocolate chick, soon smear. But Jimmy had

prized the shell and had laid it up in his toy chest. Patterson rose. Keeping an eye on the egg, he found a scanner on a shelf, focused it on the egg, detached the portovisor from the scanner. Carrying the portovisor, his eye now on the image of the egg on its screen, he made for the storage closet where against all reason he kept his mementos.

His throat tightened as he entered. He lifted the lid of Jimmy's toy chest. Jimmy's egg was not inside.

He returned, set down the portovisor, and moved to the oscillator. He hesitated, remembered Mishugasu's foot had seemed to suffer no harm, reached in and snatched the egg out. There had been a not unpleasant tingling.

He pulled the halves apart; the egg was empty. He smiled. He felt in his vest pocket, took out his credit key, dropped the key in the flat end of the egg, put the egg together and replaced it on the energy disk. Pins and needles again; if that was the only effect on organic matter he could easily abide time travel.

He found his chair and sat eyeing the egg.

ON Sunday, in spite of dosing himself wakeful, he could not help closing his eyes at times. He roused with a start and sprang to his feet. He hurried to the storage closet.

That ache in the throat came of tensing it against crying out. He stood facing the toy chest for an unmoving moment. He lifted the lid. The egg was there.

He picked it up, almost dropped it, opened it. The key was gone.

He put the egg together and carried it to the oscillator. He placed it on the energy disk. It blurred into nothingness.

Patterson past was seeing it materialize.

Time was a series of closed systems. Induction told him that much. He had the setting for a three-day cycle. Now he could go on to calibrate, could go on to construct a periodic table, could go on to formulate the setting for a 145-year cycle, for the jump back to Hame.

This was it. But momentous as it was it was only a test circuit. The confronting of Hame would be merely a beginning.

He felt suddenly a chill of glory. Here he was, on the verge of the wondrous possibility he had not let himself pause to think of till now. If this went off well, he might yet go back again, farther back, and prevent the crime—undo his son's death.

He found himself thinking parenthetically. That ought to raise a nice question. Would undoing Hame's crime justify undoing Hame's punishment—or should the latter stand on ground of intent?

That would be to play God. But what was man doing, every moment he was aware of choice, but playing God for the highest stakes! What could a man do, having shaken his fist at blind chance, but open his hand and roll out the dice?

With an effort he shook off a feeling of foreboding. If you wanted design in the universe you had to seek it out—and take the consequences.

He felt dizzy; foolish to let excitement black him out. He glanced at his watch with a start. It was later than he had thought. Relax. Time was not of the essence. Hame, deep in yesterdrift, frozen forever on his cold trail, could not escape.

The sense of urgency remained. Patterson frowned. All the more reason for going over it once again to see he left nothing to chance.

He had calibrated fine enough to arrive at the moment preceding Hame's death. But he had to allow himself leeway. For one thing, he didn't know how accurate the death certificate was. For another, he had to cover the distance from where he came out to where Hame lived. The street directory of 1961 Phoenix put a stationery store, commercial, where the lab stood now. Blue-points and topographical charts showed there would be a two-foot drop from oscillator stage to

ground floor of the stationery. He had shifted the oscillator to a spot where there would be unoccupied space, just inside the swing of the door. If he could not work the lock his pocket vibro-etcher would cut a way out through the glass. There were reasons why 2214 hours Hame's time would best do the job; the place would be empty at that late hour and evening would help make up for any oddness in his appearance—though he had made his clothing conform to the street style of that era. He had gone over the route so often in his mind he could run it blind. Using the street map of 1961 Phoenix he had clocked himself at a brisk walk around and around this room, simulating the distance from lab-stationery to playground-Hame's.

There was nothing to go badly wrong. If he had miscalculated he could try again. Just as electricity would not start unless it was sure of its return, so this field of energy without matter would circuit him there and back. He smiled tensely. He would be, in effect, a surge of new information, causing modulation of output. That was it, then. In eight minutes flat it would all be over.

A ready light was flashing on the control panel. His mouth dry, he pressed the automatic timer and stepped onto the stage. His

hands were sweaty on gun and note in his pocket. He braced for the fall.

NOT pins and needles but arrows of time; they numbed the jolt. He thought he was weaving but all was blur. He stiffened, tried to sense.

Smells hit him, then noise of traffic in the street outside. Then light, unexpectedly harsh.

He turned from brown paneling. This was no store but a room, a study.

A man, anxiety-gray face in profile, sat bent over a desk in writing pose. Pen slipped from swollen fingertips. The man, staring unseeing at the bare top of the desk, fell forward, skull thudding.

It had to be Hame. He had miscalculated; he had come an instant too late. And yet, how was it he had shot straight here to Hame? Of course. By its very nature his oscillator was short-circuiting probability. He eyed Hame. He felt nothing when he looked at the dead man.

In the minutes remaining to him here he would do better to look around for clues, for proof. He drew gun and note from his pockets; if he searched the desk he might match ammunition and paper.

Paper. The man had been writing but there was no paper on the desk.

The desk was bare except for head, hands, pen. And, near the right hand, a drop of oil. He bent stiffly to smell it. Gun oil. He felt suddenly a chill. He grew aware his hand had molded of itself to the revolver.

Finger still stiff on the trigger, Hunt Patterson eyed the dead man. Patterson's hand opened of itself and the gun fell to the carpet. He eyed the revolver dully. Let the dead past bury it in this dead past where it belonged.

STIRRING in the hall. Shadow under the bolted door, silting across the sill.

The knob rattled.

Let them break in. Let them find him. He felt empty; he was Dead Sea fruit, a time-eaten tomb.

The knob rattled. There was knocking.

Shadow deepened on the threshold.

"Art, you all right?" A woman. A listening breathing. "Art, darling, don't do anything foolish. We'll manage somehow. Art—" A listening breathing, then a half cry, half gasp, and slippers slapped away.

She would bring back help but it would not help. Hame had given her all he thought he could give her—the gift of death.

Patterson eyed the revolver. It could not co-exist with itself.

When Patterson had brought it from the future it vanished from the past. Not merely when, because. Because Patterson had brought it back from the future it vanished from the past. Hame had been writing a suicide note when the shock of seeing note and gun vanish—the note whisking into nothingness from under his pen—did for him. Patterson stared.

The initials Mishugasu had vibro-etched on the barrel—J.A.M.—were blurring out and the notch in the grip seemed to be healing itself. That, or he himself was growing dizzy. The note was vibrating in his left hand; he thought he saw the ghost of the corner he had torn off for testing manifest itself.

HE was growing dizzy. The bends? No, the arrows of time. He and the note and the revolver would vanish together into the future. He would materialize—where, in his lab? The revolver and the note would materialize, years earlier, in the playground. They would come together again in the fullness of time and the cycle would begin again—over and over, eight minutes flat, world without end.

He felt dizzy; foolish to let excitement black him out. He glanced at his watch with a start. It was later than he had thought.

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(Continued from page 102)

MISHUGASU sighed. "He should've seen. A forensic biophysicist. But he wouldn't let himself see. He wouldn't let himself see that with him having black eyes and his wife pale blue it was dead certain their child would have dark eyes. Jimmy had blue eyes—obviously, that albino-eyed guy she was playing around with. Patterson wouldn't let himself see this consciously. But he knew it unconsciously. Unconsciously he wanted Iris dead. Unconsciously he became accessory to her death. Unconsciously he kept his guilt in bounds by feeling over-paternal toward Jimmy. Then, when that freak thing happened to Jimmy and he could tag Hame for it he went classical revenge. He wouldn't listen to me. He wouldn't see a psi-chi. He wouldn't give up the notion of getting Hame. So I jolted his when's-it to the setting you figured out. So no more Patterson." He sighed. "And no more manhunting for me, I'm glad to say." He rose to leave. "Oh, you won't forget to forward my pension to Luna City?"

The computer beamed. Case closed, and in line with public policy—the rule of reason.

Mishugasu fed his badge into the null slot and, congratulating himself on having got in under the wire, went forth to starlisten.

THE END

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