An Infinity of Karen

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The approving officer had told him that his request was unusual, the first of its kind. He didn’t know whether that had encouraged or delayed its eventual approval.

He remembered that clearly as the policemen led him to the waiting car. Had anyone here ever made such a request? Would they believe his story?

He had the entry tag the guards had given him, and he had done no real harm; at worst, they would simply throw him back into the Hole. As long as he didn’t lose his bearings, he’d be no worse off than before.

After all, if they let him go, he would simply go back to the Hole on his own. He had seen all he had to see here, and again, he had not found what he wanted. If he had been strong, if he had followed his own rules, he would have already been gone, but he had been weak. The sight of her, alone, had broken down his resolve, and instead of the quick check he had intended, and had already made fourteen times in nightmarish repetition, he had followed her home and watched.

He remembered crouching in the all-too-familiar bushes, peering in through those familiar windows, as he watched her put away the groceries, heard, faint through the glass, her shouted conversation with her husband. He remembered how he had hated that husband, hated himself, and toyed with thoughts of killing him and taking his place.

He could not do that, though—at least, not yet. If the disappointments continued, world after world, he was not sure he would be able to resist that evil temptation. He told himself that his doubles had as much right to live—and to her—as he did himself, that it would still be cold-blooded murder whatever the circumstances, and that, worst of all, the deception couldn’t work; he had lost five months out of their life together, months he could never recover, months she would remember and discuss that he knew nothing about. He would be out of place, out of time, with his business and their friends—and all that was in addition to whatever other divergences there might be between this reality and his native world, divergences not related to her death.

He climbed into the police car, grateful that the officers had not bothered to handcuff him. He thought they believed what he had told them of his story; certainly his face provided good evidence. Karen’s reaction when they had brought him to the door had been proof enough of that. He had seen not the slightest doubt or hesitation on her face as she blurted, “Not him! That’s my husband!”

Then her husband, her real husband, her husband of this world, had come up behind her, and her annoyance with the blundering police had dissolved into shock. She had stared first at one, then the other, and been able to distinguish them only by their clothes and by the prowler’s unkempt hair.

The officer had seen the resemblance, of course, and had demanded, “Lady, are you sure which one’s your husband?”

Karen had hesitated, a ghastly uncertainty in her eyes, and he had fought down that treacherous urge to lie, to try and win her by deceit. He could not bear that hurt confusion. “He’s her husband,” he had said, “I’m from crosstime. I came through the Hole, and I wanted to see my double.” That was not exactly true—in fact, he had hoped above all else that he had no living double in this world. He had come to see Karen.

But that would be too hard to explain, there on the little porch with Karen staring at him, so he had lied and let the police lead him away.

He said nothing during the ride. When they reached the little station on Corrigan Street he sat silently while one of the pair got out, came around, and opened the car door. Obediently, he slid out and stood up, then froze.

The old red Chevy was pulling in behind them, Karen in the passenger seat and his double driving.

“What are they doing here?” he demanded.

“They’re the complainants,” a policeman replied. “They have to decide whether to press charges.”

“Oh, God,” he said. He fought back tears at the thought of Karen—not his Karen but still Karen—swearing out a complaint against him.

The doubles sat in the car, waiting for him to be led inside before they emerged, and he knew she couldn’t hear him, but he shouted, “I’m sorry, Karen!”

The officers led him up the stone steps.

Inside he told the whole story, with Karen sitting and staring at him. He tried not to look at her as he described the accident, when the drunken idiot had lost control and sent his Mercedes smashing into the side of the old red Chevy, crushing her body, driving shards of glass into her face, but he glanced over involuntarily and saw her expression of horror, so like the one that had been frozen on his own Karen’s face when they took him to identify the body. The undertaker had straightened her features and covered the wounds with make-up, but the result had not been Karen any more, but a mannequin.

He didn’t have to explain the Hole, of course, since it had appeared in their world as well, but he did explain the special commission that decided who was allowed in and out, and how they had approved his request on humanitarian grounds. In this reality such a commission had never been appointed, and anyone who chose to could enter the Hole after listening to a few hours’ instruction on the theory of parallel worlds, what was known of the Hole’s history, the odds against ever returning to exactly the world one left, and what the greatest dangers were believed to be.

Incoming people were searched, questioned briefly, then allowed to roam freely. When they released him, as he had done fourteen times before, he had headed directly for his own house and looked it over.

The garage was empty, and no one answered the bell. He had taken out his key, but hesitated; even if it worked, if the parallelism extended that far, he would be guilty of breaking and entering if he used it.

And then, as he stood on the little porch, it didn’t matter any more, because he saw himself come driving up in an unfamiliar blue sedan. There could be no doubt of the driver’s identity.

He had turned away. He was not here to steal his double’s wife. Somewhere, in one of the infinite worlds the Hole touched, was a world where Karen had lived and he had died; he was certain of it, believed in it with the same faith a Christian had in God. He was determined to find that world, a world where a Karen waited, as bereft as himself.

He had walked quickly away, before his double could be sure he’d seen anyone at the door, bound for the Hole and a sixteenth attempt. But then, two blocks away, the red Chevy had appeared with Karen driving in her slow, timid fashion, and he had stopped, mesmerized by the sight of her there, alone, returning home. She had been so very much like his own wife, with no husband there to spoil the illusion, and he had turned and followed, watched as she parked the Chevy in front of the garage, as she hauled the groceries from the back, as she stepped up on the stoop and fumbled with her keys, trying to open the back door.

He had slipped into the bushes—just to watch, he told himself, to see a little of her, of the life that that drunk had stolen from him. Just for a moment.

But the moment had stretched on and on, as he was unable to tear his eyes away, and he had grown careless, thought himself unreal, invisible. How could he be lurking in the shrubbery, when he was inside with Karen?

And they had seen him, and his double had called the police without his realizing it, and now he was explaining it all to them, and to the sergeant and two officers.

When he had finished there was a moment of silence, and he looked up at Karen.

She was crying, and he could not hold back his own tears anymore, but she turned to her own husband and embraced him. He folded her in his arms and comforted her, staring over her back at his double with puzzlement, sorrow, and anger in his eyes.

“Ma’am?” the sergeant asked, “Do you want to press charges? If you don’t, we’ll take him back to the Hole, as an undesirable. If you do he’ll probably wind up there anyway, but it’ll have to go to a judge.”

“Let him go,” his double said.

“Thank you,” he answered.

The husband glanced down at his wife. “Good luck,” he said.

“Thank you,” the widower repeated. “Sergeant, if you could have someone drive me to the Hole, I’ll be glad to leave.”

The sergeant nodded.

Half an hour later he stepped through the door of the ramshackle inner barrier around the hole, the plywood and scrap that had been thrown up in the first panicky confusion after the Appearance. He looked up at the Hole.

Sunlight poured through it from another cosmos somewhere, a world where no one had yet roofed it over. He leaned a few inches to one side and the sunlight vanished.

He had stood beside the Hole fifteen times before, read all the descriptions and theories, and he still didn’t really understand how it worked, what he was actually seeing. He did know that the world he saw through the Hole now was not the one he would reach if he stepped through. Whatever that sunlit world was, it was very far away in crosstime, probably totally unlike any world he knew, and that was not what he wanted. He wanted his own world back, but with a single difference: a living, widowed Karen.

He stepped forward into the Hole. As always, he felt no transition, sensed nothing out of the ordinary, save that around him everything he saw shifted slightly, the visible aspect of the Hole expanding into vast confusion before him; but he knew that he had stepped out of that world forever, twisted himself sideways in time.

He turned around and stepped back, out of the Hole, knowing that he could not possibly have arrived in exactly the reality he left; in the Hole the worlds were crowded together in an infinite density, after all. To return, he would need to have stepped back through exactly that spot through which he had departed, down to the width of an electron or less.

He had come close, though, so this world should be similar. The barrier around the Hole appeared identical. He knocked on the door.

No one answered. He tried the latch; it worked. He swung it open and stepped out onto a parking lot.

There were no guards, no scientists, no one to interrogate him or search him for weapons; the prefabricated offices and laboratories that had surrounded the Hole in the last world he had visited—and most of the others he had seen—were gone without a trace. The inner barrier stood, untended and neglected, in the parking lot of a Holiday Inn, just as it had when first built.

He glanced around and shrugged. This neglect certainly made things simple. Apparently in this reality nothing had been done about the Hole’s manifestation.

He closed the door behind him, and saw that a large sign hung on it, reading “Extreme Danger! Enter At Your Own Risk!” He smiled, and walked up the short slope toward the hotel.

He called a cab from the lobby, and got a candy bar from a machine while he waited for it to arrive. His coins had worked the vending machine correctly, and he hoped that his paper money would be close enough to pass here.

The cab arrived, and he gave his home address as he settled into the rear seat.

He watched the scenery closely during the ride. There were differences—a billboard bore a different advertisement, a house hadn’t been painted—but it was, generally speaking, all familiar. He had not stepped too far away from his own world.

The cab stopped at the curb; he paid the fare, and the cabbie accepted the bills without comment. A moment later he was standing alone on the sidewalk.

The bushes in front of the house had been cut back, far shorter than he had ever trimmed them. An unfamiliar porch swing was crowded in to the left of the front door.

He walked slowly up the path, wondering what significance these changes might have.

The living room drapes were different, as well, and he was suddenly sure that in this reality he did not live in this house; no analog of himself could possibly allow those things in his home. He rang the bell anyway.

An unfamiliar woman answered, about thirty, short and slender, with beautiful red hair and a plain, bland face. “Yes?” she said.

“Ah...I was looking for a Karen Criswell? Mrs. Karen Criswell?”

“Oh, that’s the lady we bought the house from! Gee, I’m sorry, but she’s gone; we’ve lived here for three months now.”

“Gone? Gone where?”

“Well...”

“Listen, I really need to find her; it’s a family matter. About her brother-in-law.” That seemed like his best approach. After all, wasn’t he his own brother? If there was a Karen Criswell who had owned this house, then surely it was his wife—her maiden name had been Hoechst.

“I don’t know, I don’t think I can help you.”

“Why not?” He had almost shouted. He fought himself under control again, then said, “I’m sorry. It’s been pretty rough. Please, where did she go? Do you know why she moved?”

“Well, after her husband died she didn’t want the house any more—said it was too big for her, that it reminded her of him. Gave us a real good price, to get rid of it quickly—I don’t know if we could have afforded a place this nice otherwise.”

His throat tightened, and he felt as if a great weight had fallen from his back, as he remembered what hope was. “Her husband died?”

“Oh, about five months ago. Didn’t you know?”

“No, we’ve been out of touch for a year now. Family argument.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Well, he died—car crash. Hit by a drunk driver while he was running some errand for her.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” he said, forcing his lips not to smile, and inwardly wondering that he could be so delighted by news of his own death.

“Yes, well, so was she, I guess. She was about the sorriest woman I ever saw, Mrs. Criswell was. She said she just couldn’t live in this world without him, so she wrapped up her affairs, sold her belongings, and went down to the Holiday Inn out on Route Four and jumped into that thing there, the Hole, they call it. Said she’d find him somewhere—that there had to be a world where he lived and she died, and she’d find it if it took the rest of her life. So you see, Mister, I can’t help you find her; she’s gone.”

Hope vanished, and he plummeted anew into desperation. He said nothing more, just turned and walked down the path. He had been so close, so very close! If only she had waited! He would find her yet! She was somewhere in the Hole, somewhere in the universes that the Hole could reach, searching for him.

He turned onto the sidewalk and began running, back toward the Hole, toward his only hope, running and crying like a lost child.