**Parade**

Lawrence Watt-Evans

As usual, Jack Handley was the first out of the elevator, striding quickly across the lobby.

Megan Fausel was next, chatting quietly with Amy Drinkwater. Claude Charette followed them, listening, while Tom Petilli held the door open button and studied the elevator’s control panel.

Tom wondered why the buttons for the different floors were arranged in two rows, rather than three or four. One would obviously have been too long, but why settle for two? A child might have trouble reaching the top few, as it was; why hadn’t they made it three rows?

“Tom!” Megan called, “Are you coming?”

“Sure!” he said. He forgot about the buttons and hurried after his office-mates.

Jack was already at the street door, waiting impatiently.

“Come on, dammit,” he said.

“What’s your hurry, Jack?” Megan answered. “I mean, we’re just going to lunch, and then coming back here, so what’s the rush?”

“The rush, Megan, is that I’m hungry and I want to eat, and I’ve got a shitload of work on my desk that I want to get back to.” Jack turned and shoved the door open; the roar of the street spilled into the lobby, washing over the five of them.

Amy sighed; Claude glanced at her, then turned quickly away. Tom noticed, and wondered why — he saw nothing repulsive about Amy, nothing that would make a man look away like that.

Jack was out the door already, Megan close behind him.

Tom heard Jack’s voice clearly, despite the noise, as it said, “Damn!”

“What is it?” he asked, stepping forward; Claude moved aside to let him through, but he bumped against Amy.

Jack didn’t answer. Tom made his way out onto the sidewalk, Amy beside him, Claude close behind.

The sidewalk was jammed with people — not hurrying along, as they usually did, nor standing and talking as groups might sometimes, but lined up in rows, staring out at the street.

“What is it?” Tom called, “What’s going on?” He rose up on his toes, trying to see.

A wave of cheering swept over him, coming from up the street, and he craned his neck, trying to spot the reason.

Jack was more direct; he had shoved his way through the crowd to the curb. Megan was close behind, peering over his shoulder.

Amy stood in the entry to the building, looking about in bewilderment, and Claude pressed himself flat against the grey stone wall, staying back where no one would step on his feet.

The cheering was spreading, coming nearer; it drowned out the more ordinary noise of the city. The hum of engines and ventilators and voices, the distant sirens and the jets high overhead, the rainfall tapping of a million hard-soled shoes on concrete, the rumble of subways and all the buzzing and hissing and whining of the city, all were lost in the wordless bellow of the happy crowd.

Megan turned and called to the others, “It’s a parade!” She had to shout to be heard over the noise.

“And they’ve got a police line up,” Jack announced at the top of his lungs, “So we can’t get across the street to the restaurant until it’s passed!”

“Why is there a parade today?” Tom asked, puzzled. “It’s not a holiday.”

“Perhaps it’s a local festival? Something the city sponsors?” Claude suggested.

“Or a march of some kind,” Megan said. “A demonstration or a protest, maybe. I haven’t marched like that in twenty years.”

“I can’t see anything,” Amy said worriedly, “and I love parades!”

Claude turned to look at her, then looked at the crowd, judging them.

“Oh, here,” Megan said, “Jack will let you in front — won’t you, Jack?”

“What?” Jack said, turning. “I was trying to see if I could spot any banners.”

“I said you’d let Amy in front,” Megan told him.

Jack glanced sourly at Megan, then at Amy, and then turned back to the street. “Sure,” he said.

Uncertainly, Amy slipped from the door, between Tom and Claude, and ducked under first Megan’s arm, and then Jack’s.

The cheering was almost upon them; Amy turned and looked, and the parade was only a block away.

The vanguard was a line of mounted police, half a dozen men on horseback strung across the street. Behind them marched a row of young women in a uniform Amy didn’t recognize — not quite a cheerleader costume, but something similar, with short, tight black skirts, white blouses, blue vests with badges she couldn’t read pinned to them. There were twenty or thirty of them, carrying a white banner with blue and gold writing on it, but as the women strutted their knees struck the cloth from behind, sending it bouncing and rippling and making it impossible to read.

That struck Amy as very odd; hadn’t anyone told them to hold the banner up a little higher? She almost called out herself, but lost her nerve.

Behind the women the parade seemed to be just a big crowd of ordinary people.

“That’s this damn city for you,” Jack snarled in her ear. “It’s always some damn thing making life difficult, keeping people from getting on with their lives. I mean, who needs a goddamn parade?”

“Oh, Jack,” Amy said reproachfully, “I love parades!”

“Well, this doesn’t look like much of one,” Megan said from her spot just behind Jack. “No music that I can see, no one carrying signs. I wonder what it’s about?”

“Oh, who cares?” Amy said. “Let’s just enjoy it! Nobody will mind if we’re a little late getting back from lunch.”

“They probably won’t even know,” Megan said. “Because probably everyone else is out here somewhere watching, too.”

“I care,” Jack said, “but I don’t see there’s a blasted thing I can do about it.”

Tom was beside Megan now, looking over Jack’s other shoulder as the horsemen passed. “What kind of a parade is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Megan replied.

“It’s a long one, that’s what kind it is,” Jack added a moment later, as the banner-bearing women marched on past the corner. “Look!”

He pointed uptown, at a blue-mirrored skyscraper a good twenty blocks away; Tom stared.

Then he saw what Jack meant; the reflective sides of the building acted as a mirror, and while it mostly reflected the blue sky and the surrounding towers, the angled portion at the nearest corner gave them a view of the street below it.

The parade was still passing, twenty blocks uptown.

Tom turned to face the street again.

The marchers were ordinary citizens, in ordinary clothes — business suits, blue jeans, summer dresses. Mixed in were a relative handful of people, both men and women, in glittering costumes of red sequins, with red-sequined top hats on their heads or held aloft, whirling through the crowd.

“Join us!” these red-garbed dancers called, “Everybody join in!”

The throng on the sidewalks cheered, and some of them spilled off into the street, past the white-painted police sawhorses, joining the parade.

Amy glanced up at Jack’s face, which was set in a frown.

Tom stared, open-mouthed, over Jack’s right shoulder; Megan leaned lazily on his left.

Claude remained pressed against the granite, uninvolved and quietly waiting.

Still frowning, Jack looked at the blue glass skyscraper again, then back at the jammed street, and then at the buildings up the block on the far side — particularly the one with the red-and-gold sign announcing Pierre’s.

“Listen,” he said, “This damn parade’s going to take forever to get past — see, they aren’t even up to Sixtieth Street yet, I can’t even see the end. How about if we just cross now, through the parade? Join in, march for a block or two until we can work our way across, and then come back uptown on the other side? I want my lunch.”

Megan considered, then nodded. “Good idea,” she said.

“Maybe we can make it three or four blocks?” Amy suggested wistfully.

Tom studied the crowd. “It might take that far,” he said. “The street’s packed pretty tight, but they’re moving along at a fast walk all the same.”

“Hey, Claude!” Megan called. “Join us! We’re going to cut across!”

Reluctantly, Claude left his place by the wall and stepped up close behind Tom.

“We don’t want to get separated,” Jack cautioned, “so stay close here.”

He eyed the marchers — thousands of them, grinning and smiling as they walked past, all the endless hordes of them, the glittering red figures in their midst still calling, “Join us!”

Fools, Jack thought, wasting their time — everybody’s time — like that.

“All right,” he said, pushing Amy forward. “Now!”

Amy stumbled, and a man in a dark gray overcoat caught her before she could fall.

“Hey, little lady,” he said, “Watch your step! And step along, join the parade!”

Amy smiled up at him, found her footing, and joined the march.

Jack was close behind her. “Come on,” he said. “Come on.”

Megan was there, too, making a place for herself in the crowd, pushing aside elbows as she pressed forward.

Behind them Tom was swept up in the march.

And finally, reluctantly, Claude allowed himself to be sucked into the crowd, pressed in among the cheering throngs.

It seemed to Amy that she had scarcely taken a step, and she was a block from the office already, passing a second cross street. She felt as light and airy as a milkweed blossom, and almost danced along amid the marchers.

“I love parades,” she said, to no one in particular.

One of the men in red sequins smiled at her and tipped his hat. “Glad to hear it, miss,” he said.

The others around her smiled, as well — a man in a tweed jacket, a woman in evening dress and pearls, a teenaged girl in jeans and a “Just Say No” T-shirt.

Amy looked for Jack and Tom and Megan, and realized she’d somehow become separated from them in the crowd, in what was surely just a few seconds. For a moment, she worried, her mouth turned down, her forehead creased.

Then she shrugged. It didn’t matter. She could find them later. And she wanted to enjoy the parade.

For a moment, then, she glimpsed Megan, off to her left; she waved and called, “Megan! Megan! Go on without me! I don’t want any lunch; I’m going to march in the parade. I’ll meet you back at the office later!”

Megan smiled, waved, and nodded.

Just like Amy, she thought, silly little Amy who would never get anywhere because she never worried about tomorrow, never planned ahead, got hung up on every little detail. Let the poor child enjoy her parade.

She turned her own attention to working her way methodically through the crowd, but despite her efforts she found herself carried at least three steps downtown for every step she moved toward the far sidewalk.

She looked around for Jack, trying to spot his familiar frown in the forest of smiling faces. She wanted to ask his help in bulling through the moving mass of people, but she couldn’t spot him.

Probably already across, she thought with a mix of admiration and resentment. Jack was someone who knew how to get what he wanted.

It was a shame he never knew how to enjoy it once he had it, and that he sometimes chose the wrong things to want. Like that Sheila from Accounting — why had he wanted her? Or any of the others he’d gone after over the years?

And why didn’t he want her, Megan Fausel?

And, she asked herself, where was he, anyway?

In point of fact, at that moment Jack wasn’t sure himself just where he was.

He prided himself on knowing his way around, and certainly he ought to know every block on the very avenue he worked on, but he had stumbled somewhere, and been swept along with the crowd, and now the buildings on either side looked unfamiliar. He couldn’t see Pierre’s; the Warner tower ought to be right there, but there was another building in the way, one he didn’t know. Had the parade gone around a corner without his even noticing it?

He cursed under his breath and began shoving his way through the moving crowd.

“Hey, there,” called one of the men in red, “what’s your hurry? Come on along, Jack! Join the fun!”

Jack turned and almost snarled. He hated it when people called strangers “Jack” that way — the fool had no way of knowing it was the right name. The man in red was just using it as a generic form of address, and Jack hated that.

He pushed toward the sidewalk.

“Not that way,” the man in red called, shoving his top hat tightly onto his head and somehow moving easily through the crowd toward Jack.

That was all he needed, some idiot in spangles telling him what to do. He looked around, and saw two other parade marshals, or whatever they were, watching.

He was outnumbered, just himself against the three of them, it seemed.

Where were Tom and Claude? They weren’t much, but they might do to back him up against these clowns.

Where had they got to?

As it happened, Claude hadn’t gotten to much of anywhere; from the moment he stepped off the curb he had been swept along, carried downtown by the crowd, unable to make his way across or to resist the steady march without an undignified struggle.

He didn’t struggle; he just let the crowd carry him. Sooner or later he’d find a way across.

It was always easiest to go along with the crowd, and Claude always had — though usually not quite so literally. He’d never been one to make waves. If he just did what he was told, things would eventually work out, he was sure. They always had.

So he marched downtown only a yard or so from the sidewalk he’d started from, his feet moving not because he wanted to march, but simply to keep from falling.

Tom had done better, had gotten out into the thick of it, out toward the middle of the street, where he looked about in wonder.

There were people everywhere; when he looked down he could barely see the asphalt for all the marching feet. To his right strode a plump Hispanic woman in a halter top and Bermuda shorts; to his left was an old man with a cane, stepping briskly along, stick swinging but somehow not hitting anyone. A boy in a sailor suit was ahead of him, perhaps ten years old, and Tom marveled at that; he hadn’t thought boys that age still wore sailor suits.

One of the women in red sequins was nearby, and Tom called to her, “What’s the parade for? What’s the occasion?”

“Join in!” she called. “March with us!”

That was hardly an answer; Tom pushed his way toward her as they both marched, but somehow she seemed to effortlessly move farther away, so that he drew no closer.

“Hey!” he called after her. “What’s the occasion?”

She was facing away, toward the sidewalk. She called, “Join the parade!”

Tom shrugged, and looked around again.

Now his neighbors were a black man in a trenchcoat, a shirtless kid with a bright blue mohawk and black leather pants, and an Asian girl, perhaps eight years old, in a nightgown, clutching a teddy bear.

What was she doing out here in her pajamas, Tom wondered. He leaned over to ask, but bumped against someone’s elbow, and by the time he had straightened that out the girl was gone, lost in the surrounding mob.

He turned to the kid with the mohawk.

“Hey,” he asked, “D’you know what this parade’s all about?”

The kid turned and gave him a glassy stare — Tom could see that the youth’s pupils were hugely dilated, his eyes black and bottomless.

“No, man,” he said. “Do you?”

“No,” Tom replied, “I just got caught up in it by accident.”

“Me, too, man,” the kid said, nodding. His blue hair waved gently with the motion. “I figured I’d just walk a couple of blocks.” He smiled, showing yellowing teeth.

Tom smiled back. “Thanks,” he said. He looked around.

Men in suits, women in dresses, a tall blond man in a leather skullcap, a woman in a velvet hood, three boys in street-gang colors over there, and half a dozen of the figures in red sequins, and beyond them all the sidewalks lined with watching crowds, behind them the blank, eyeless facades of the buildings, concrete and glass and brick, and inside the buildings more people, and beyond them more streets, more buildings, more people.

The weight of the city and all its complexity seemed to be pushing at him suddenly, and he shook his head, almost stumbled.

When he had recovered he looked about.

To the left, that was the sidewalk he wanted to reach. Just get to the sidewalk, turn in behind the watchers and make his way back uptown to Pierre’s, eat lunch while the rest of the parade goes by, and then back to the office and away from this teeming mass of humanity, back where he could pretend that he was more than just one of the millions of faceless human ants that made up the city.

All he had to do was reach the lefthand sidewalk. He could find out later what the parade was for; it would be in the papers, surely, or on the evening news.

Where had the others gone, anyway? Were they already at Pierre’s, waiting for him?

He began to push his way to the side.

“No need to shove!” called a woman in red sequins. “No need for that!”

He looked up, startled, to find her no more than ten feet away.

“Hey,” he called, “I wanted to ask, what’s the occasion for the parade?”

She smiled at him, showing brilliant white teeth. “What do you think?” she said.

Then she slipped away through the crowd before he could reply.

What did he think? He had no idea!

He didn’t want to think about it. All he wanted to do was get over to that sidewalk.

Where was Jack, anyway? If they’d told him not to shove, they might have had a riot on their hands.

“Not that way,” the man in red told Jack.

“You can’t tell me where to go,” Jack said. “You can’t tell me what to do!” He shoved aside a girl in a yellow party dress and made his way one step further toward the sidewalk, even as the crowd pulled him three steps downtown.

Then the man in red was right there in front of him, pushing him back toward the center of the street.

“This way, friend, this way,” the parade marshal, or whatever the man was, told him cheerfully.

“You can’t push me around!” Jack shouted. “What right have you got to treat me like that? Let me through!” He lowered his head and tried to force his way past the marshal, between the red-sequined frock coat and a man in a stained white apron.

The marshal blocked him and pushed him back.

“Hey!” Jack shouted. “Hey, you can’t do that! You can’t walk all over me! I have rights!”

The marshal shoved him again, harder, and he staggered back.

Another marcher, a woman in a black lace slip, pushed him while he was off-balance, and he stumbled, and another, a man in a grey suit, shoved him, and then there was an opening behind him and he fell.

His head hit the asphalt hard, and the pain fountained up from the back of his skull, and his neck seemed to vibrate with the impact, but before he could think about that the first foot hit his belly and knocked the wind out of him.

He gasped for breath, and a boot came down on his throat and closed his windpipe, leaving him airless and drowning for an endless handful of seconds.

Then the boot had moved on, but a woman’s spike heel was digging into his thigh, and a dirty sneaker pressed his shoulder down against the pavement. He waved his hands, struggling to find a grip somewhere; a woolen skirt slid through his fingers as a heavy black Oxford rammed down on his arm, slamming his elbow into the pavement and sending shooting pain out in all directions.

He had his breath back for an instant and wanted to yell, but a shoe caught him in the mouth, and another in the groin, and the weight of a fat man hit his foot and twisted it so that he thought his ankle would break.

And then he lost track of the individual blows, as the pain spread everywhere and the feet struck him everywhere and the parade marched on, oblivious, marched on across him, trampling him.

The last sound he heard, over the cheering of the crowds on the sidewalks, was a high-pitched giggle, as sunlight glittered on red sequins above him.

Amy giggled.

“I do love parades,” she told the man beside her, as the two of them watched a juggler ahead. The performer was having a hard time of it in the tightly-packed throng, but he was gamely continuing, tossing his glittering gold balls up in intricate patterns, catching each as it came down and tossing it back up — most of the time. He missed fairly often, because of the crowd, and when he did someone else would catch the ball and throw it back to him.

Sometimes he caught it, sometimes he didn’t; if he didn’t, someone else would, and they’d try again.

The man at Amy’s side smiled.

She smiled back, then stumbled over something, and he caught her before she could fall.

“Thank you,” she said.

“You folks okay?” asked a voice nearby; Amy turned and found herself face to face with the white-painted face of a clown in full regalia.

“Just fine, thanks,” she answered, grinning.

“Better watch where you step; we’ve a good long ways to go yet before this parade’s over.”

“Oh, do we?” Amy asked. “Oh, good! I love a parade. I always want them to last forever.”

The clown nodded. “Me, too,” he said.

“Yes,” Amy said. “It’s always such a let-down when you get to the end and have nothing to show for it but sore feet.”

“I know what you mean,” the clown agreed, “but maybe this time it’ll be different.”

“Oh, that’s silly,” Amy said. “How could it be different?”

“Well, look around you,” he replied.

She looked.

The crowd seemed to have thinned somewhat. The juggler ahead was tossing handkerchiefs now; a man on stilts, dressed as Uncle Sam, was striding along nearby. Someone was passing out cotton candy, though Amy couldn’t see where it had come from.

“It’s like a circus,” she said.

“Not the parade,” the clown said, “I mean the city.”

Amy looked up, puzzled, at gleaming white spires, like fairy castles, that had replaced the brick and concrete to either side.

“Oh,” she said, not questioning. “Oh!”

“Oh!” said Megan, as she stumbled over something, “Damn it!” She glanced down, not to see what she had tripped on, but to make sure her shoes still had their heels. They seemed intact.

She looked up at the buildings nearby.

“Where the hell are we, anyway?” she asked nobody in particular. “Is this Thirty-fifth Street? I don’t see any signs.”

No one answered.

She looked about.

The man to her right wore a greasy T-shirt and a black denim vest; she wanted nothing to do with him. On the left, though, was a tall, thin man with a greying mustache, clad in an impeccable blue suit.

“Excuse me,” she said, tugging at his sleeve, “but where are we? I don’t think I know this part of the city.”

She had meant that to be a lie, but looking up again she realized it wasn’t. The buildings and streets were unfamiliar.

The man in the blue suit brushed her hand away, then looked her over appraisingly — it struck her as an unusually impolite look for a man of his obvious breeding.

“Ah, my dear,” he said, taking up the hand he had just knocked away. “What were you saying?”

“Do you know where we are?” she asked. “I seem to have lost my bearings.”

He didn’t so much as glance away from her face. “No, I’m afraid not,” he said.

“Do you know the parade route?” she asked. “I mean, where we’ll come out?”

“Oh, I think it’s headed straight downtown,” he said, with a smile.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling back. She started to withdraw her hand.

He didn’t let it go.

“Do you have your ticket?” he asked.

She blinked at him, startled, then snatched her hand away. “What ticket?” she asked.

He frowned at her. “Should have known,” he said to himself, as if he had forgotten she was listening. “Well, it should be quite a show.”

“What should be?” she snapped. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said, “Nothing at all.”

Claude could see nothing at all that he recognized. The buildings to either side were strange — not just unfamiliar, but unnatural, alien. As the parade swept him downtown they seemed to merge, from separate buildings with their own personalities into a single unbroken facade of concrete and stone, one with few windows, and those small and high and oddly placed.

He could see no doors.

And the sidewalks had narrowed, almost vanished. There were no watching crowds any more; the parade surged up over the curbs and filled the street from side to side, an unbroken mass of humanity, himself trapped in its midst. It was as if the entire population of the city was crowded onto this single thoroughfare.

The air had grown thick and polluted, though the day had been sunny and the air clear when he left the office. It was as if the strange buildings were somehow holding in this foul atmosphere.

He didn’t understand how this place could be here, how he could be in it. The parade had made no turns, and yet this was definitely not the familiar avenue; he knew he had never seen any place like this in the city, ever before, and he had driven all through downtown. He had driven past, safe in his car, past the streetwalkers and the old men clutching bottles and the young men with their little plastic packets and vials, very pleased that he was better than they, and he had never seen any place like this, anything like these blank gray walls.

He had driven through rain-slick, gleaming black nights when the streetlights shone from the wet pavement and the police cruisers sprayed red and blue light across the asphalt, watching it all from securely behind the tinted glass of his windshield, and he had seen buildings of concrete and stone and brick and wood, buildings that were rubble and charred timbers, buildings that were steel frame yet unadorned, and he had never seen anything like these featureless barriers to either side.

The people around him had somehow changed, as well — they were gaunt and hollow-eyed, staring straight ahead. No one was cheering any more; all he heard was the shuffling march of thousands of feet. He could see none of the red-dressed marshals; everyone around him, men and women both, wore suits of gray and brown and black, drab and hostile.

Something was clearly very wrong here, something was happening that he didn’t understand. He realized he should have followed the others, fought his way across the street instead of allowing himself to be propelled along.

It was too late now, though; there was no longer any sidewalk on either side. Near panic, he watched helplessly as the crowd trudged onward, carrying him with it.

At least, he thought, we’ll come to an ending somewhere. This weird parade can’t go on forever; they’ll have to disperse eventually, and I’ll be free, I can find my way out and go back.

He looked ahead, and realized that the street was, indeed, coming to an end. It turned into a ramp, leading upward into a miasmic haze of pollution; the marchers were continuing on up the ramp.

He looked up, rising up on his toes to see over the heads of those in front of him, trying to make out what stood at the top of the ramp.

At first he saw nothing but blank grayness.

Then he saw the ovens.

And the marchers marching on, carrying him with them.

He began screaming, but it made no difference, no difference at all.

Megan had been trying in vain to reach the sidewalks, had tried shouting and pushing, but it made no difference at all; she was still in the same spot in the crowd she had been in for blocks, being carried helplessly forward. And now, ahead, she saw that the parade was reaching its end, marching into a gigantic stadium.

She didn’t remember any such stadium being downtown.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“The Arena, of course,” the mustached man replied.

“It is?” She tried to remember whether she had ever heard of a city arena, and thought she had; wasn’t that where the hockey team played?

“Certainly,” the mustached man told her. “Can’t you tell?”

“No,” Megan replied, defensively, “I’ve never been here before. I’m not a hockey fan.”

“Oh, it’s not hockey they play here,” he said. “What ever gave you that idea?”

She shrugged. “What is it, then?”

He made no reply, but smiled and looked away.

They were under the arches of the stadium, amid a maze of concrete pillars and chain-link fence, and although the crowd seemed to be thinning Megan had been swept through one gate and was approaching another before she was able to stop her forward motion. “Tickets!” a uniformed man was calling, “Tickets!”

The mustached man had pulled a blue pasteboard from his breast pocket; the greasy fellow dug one out of his jeans. The ticket-taker waved them through.

Megan looked for some way out, but could find none, and then she was at the gate, people behind her forcing her forward.

“Ticket, lady?”

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I don’t have one. I must be here by mistake. Could you direct me to the exit?”

“No ticket?” The man looked her over critically. He was young and blond and trying unsuccessfully to grow a beard. “That way,” he said, pointing off to the left. “You go down that way and through the red steel door. Any problem, ask the guard.”

“Thank you.” Megan turned left.

The crowd was suddenly all behind her, she was in the clear, and she found herself in a narrow, shadowy passageway between two tall fences — both of them, she noticed, topped with coils of barbed wire.

She walked on, nervous — this place made her nervous, being alone made her nervous, and she still didn’t understand how she had come here. She could hear the crowd roaring in the distance, like a heavy freight passing just out of sight.

She glanced back, thinking she might go back and ask the ticket-taker to repeat his directions, but she could no longer see him; she must have been walking longer than she realized.

Then she saw the red steel door ahead, illuminated by the glow of a sign, the uniformed guard a dark shadow to one side. She tugged her jacket straight, brushed back her hair, and strode forward.

Tom strode forward. If he couldn’t get out of the parade to the side, and if the mob behind him wouldn’t let him stop, then he would fight his way up to the front, up to those cheerleaders or whatever they were, and the mounted policemen, and he would get out that way.

No one tried to stop or slow him, and he pushed easily through the mass of cheering, marching people.

There were certainly a lot of them, and so varied — it was as if all the world had come out to march.

There was a woman in a black string bikini; he paused for a second to stare. And there was man wearing nothing at all, he realized, a great fat man with short black hair — hadn’t anyone else noticed? Tom wondered if the man would he be arrested.

It wasn’t any of his business, of course, and he pushed onward, past a boy in a loincloth and a girl in a purple down-filled parka, a young woman in full harlequinade, an old man in blackface, a mime in whiteface.

The clown smiled at Amy. “We’re almost there,” he said.

She smiled back at him. “And my feet don’t hurt at all,” she said. She danced a little pirouette to demonstrate. Her fellow marchers applauded, and somewhere overhead a bird whistled appreciatively.

Amy curtsied in response, then looked up.

They were at the end of the street, where the gleaming pavement ran up to broad marble steps, and at the top of the steps glittered immense crystal gates. Faintly, Amy could hear people singing somewhere.

The gates were closed; the marchers were lined up along either side of the steps, waiting.

Amy stopped. “What’s everyone waiting for?” she asked, worried.

“For you,” the clown told her.

“Me?” Amy shrank back. “But who am I?”

“Well,” the clown asked, grinning, “Who are you?”

The guard smiled at Megan. “Name, please?” he asked.

“No, I just want to get out,” she said. “I’m here by mistake.”

“I need your name, please,” he said.

She frowned, and then decided it didn’t matter. “Megan Fausel,” she told him.

He glanced at a clipboard on the wall behind him, and nodded.

“Go right out, Ms. Fausel,” he said, rolling back the heavy steel door.

“Thank you,” Megan answered, stepping through.

It was dark on the other side, not just dim as the passageway had been, but utterly black; that wasn’t right. She knew it couldn’t be night yet, and besides, the city was never dark, not really.

She was still in the stadium somewhere. She blinked, trying to adjust her eyes, and then light sprang up, blinding her anew. She shielded her face with one arm.

Dimly, through the glare, she could make out the interior of the arena. All around her were tiers of seats, all of them filled, men and women and children, and they were all staring down into the arena, staring at her, and she was caught in the spotlight, on the sand floor of the arena.

“There’s been a mistake,” she said, turning.

The red steel door was closed. She pushed at it, but it didn’t move.

The crowd laughed, an immense, overwhelming sound, and she realized they were all laughing at her.

She pounded on the door, and her banging was lost in the redoubled laughter of the audience.

She turned, trying to gather her dignity, trying to keep from crying in embarrassment, and marched over to the stands, to find herself at the foot of a sheer concrete wall some nine feet tall.

The spotlight followed her, and the crowd quieted, watching her intently.

She put her hand on the rough concrete and began following the wall.

There had to be an opening, a way out, somewhere.

The crowd seemed to be hushed in anticipation of something, and Megan wondered uncomfortably what it could be. She stumbled along the wall, and found nothing but solid, bare concrete — no doors, no steps, no way up into the stands, no way out.

When she had gone halfway around a circle, she found a door, at last — a black steel door hung from a rail, much like the red one she had entered by.

The crowd was utterly still.

Megan hesitated. She tugged at the door.

It moved slightly, but she released it again, didn’t push it open.

Something was wrong here, she knew from the crowd’s silence. She put her ear to the black door and listened.

Something growled, a deep, inhuman growl, close behind the door. A terrifying, powerful growl — a hungry growl.

Megan shivered at the sound.

The crowd laughed. She looked up at them.

“Open it!” someone called, and amid renewed laughter part of the crowd began to chant.

“Open it!”

“Open it!”

“Open it!”

“Oh, God,” Megan said. She sank to her knees on the sand.

“This can’t be happening,” she said. “This can’t be happening to me. I’m just an ordinary person, I never did anything terrible; why am I here?”

No one answered; the chanting died away, and the laughing, and an uneasy, anticipatory silence fell.

A nervous giggle sounded somewhere high above.

And then a rumble sounded, close at hand.

The black door was opening.

“I’m just Amy Drinkwater,” Amy told the clown, and the singing grew louder, rising in a triumphant chorus.

“Tell them,” the clown said, gesturing toward the gates.

Amy turned. “I’m Amy Drinkwater,” she said.

The gates trembled. She glanced back, and the clown nodded encouragement.

“I’m Amy Drinkwater!” she called, and the crystal gates swung open before her, the chorus of song welled up on all sides, sweeping her up the steps into paradise.

Tom swept forward through the crowd, past men in armor and bearded dwarfs, past naked women and writhing dancers, and still he could not see the front of the parade.

He could no longer see the sides, either. The avenue had widened, the buildings drawing farther back, until now all he could see, from horizon to horizon, was the marching, dancing throng. The city’s buildings were gone; only the street and the people remained, marching on to an unknown destination.

Tom struggled on, trying to find his way out, away from the sweating, singing crowd.

It was several days before he began to wonder why he wasn’t tired, and weeks before he began to worry.

*end*