

Where Is Everybody?

by Rod Serling, 1924-1975

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The sensation was unrelated to anything he'd ever felt before. He awoke, but had no recollection of ever having gone to sleep. And, to mystify him further, he was not in a bed. He was walking down a road, a two-lane black macadam with a vivid white stripe running down the center. He stopped, stared up at a blue sky, a hot, mid-morning sun. Then he looked around at a rural landscape, high, full-leafed trees flanking the road. Beyond the trees were fields of wheat, golden and rippling.

Like Ohio, he thought. Or maybe Indiana. Or parts of upstate New York. Suddenly he was conscious of the words being thought. Ohio. Indiana. New York. It immediately occurred to him that he didn't know where he was. A new thought followed quickly—he didn't know who he was, either! He looked down at himself, fingering the green, one-piece set of coveralls he was wearing, the heavy, high shoes, the zippered front that went from neck to crotch. He touched his face and then his hair. An inventory. Trying to piece together items of familiarity. An

orientation through the tips of his fingers. He felt a light beard stubble, a nose slightly indented at the bridge, moderately heavy eyebrows, close-cropped hair. Not quite a butch—but close. He was young. Reasonably young, anyway. And he felt good. Healthy. At peace. He was confused as hell, but not at all frightened.

He walked over to the side of the road, took out a cigarette and lit it. He stood there leaning in the shade of one of the giant oaks that flanked the road. And he thought: I don't know who I am. I don't know where I am. But it's summer and I'm out in the country someplace and this must be some kind of amnesia or something.

He drew deeply and enjoyably on the cigarette. As he took it out of his mouth and held it between his fingers, he looked at it. King-sized and filtered. Phrases came to him. "Winstons taste good like a cigarette should." "You get a lot to like in a Marlboro." "Are you smoking more now but enjoying it less?" That was for Camels—the kind you used to be willing to walk a mile for. He grinned and then laughed out loud. The power of advertising. He could stand there not knowing his name or where he was, but the twentieth-century poetry of the tobacco company cut across even the boundaries of amnesia. He stopped laughing and considered. Cigarettes and slogans meant America. So that's what he was—an American.

He flipped away the cigarette and walked on. A few hundred yards up the road he heard music coming from around the bend ahead. Loud trumpets. Good ones. There was a drum in the background and then a single, high-flying trumpet that rode an obbligato to the percussion. Swing. That's what it was, and again he was conscious of a word symbol that meant something to him. Swing. And this one he could relate to a specific time. It went with the 1910s. And this was beyond the thirties. This was the fifties. The 1950s. He let these facts pile up on top of one another. He felt like the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle, other pieces falling into place around him, forming a recognizable picture. And it was odd, he thought, how definite the pattern was, once they fell. Now he knew it was 1959. This was beyond doubt. Nineteen fifty-nine.

As he rounded the bend and saw the source of the music, he took a quick inventory of what he had discovered. He was an American, maybe in his twenties, it was summer, and here he was.

In front of him was a diner, a small, rectangular clapboard building with a sign on the front door which read, "OPEN." Music was pouring out the front door. He went inside and got an impression of familiarity. He'd been to places like this before, this much he knew definitely. A long counter studded with catsup bottles and napkin holders; a back wall plastered with handwritten signs announcing kinds of sandwiches, soups, pie a la mode and a dozen other items. There were a couple of large posters with girls in bathing suits holding up Coke bottles, and at the far end of the room was what he knew to be a juke box, the source of the music.

He walked the length of the counter, swinging a couple of seats around as he passed. Behind the counter an open swinging door led to the kitchen where he could see a big restaurant stove, a pot of coffee perking on it. The gurgling sound of the coffee was familiar and comforting and sent an aroma of breakfast and morning into the room.

The young man smiled as if seeing an old friend, or better, feeling the presence of an old friend. He sat down on the last stool so that he could see into the kitchen. There were shelves laden with canned goods, a big double-door refrigerator, a wooden chopping table, a screen door. He looked up at the signs on the wall. The Denver sandwich. The hamburger. Cheeseburger. Ham and eggs. Again he was aware of the phenomenon of having to associate obviously familiar words with what they represented. What was a Denver sandwich, for example? And what was pie a la mode? Then, after a few moments of reflection, a picture came into his mind along with a taste. He had an odd thought then, that he was like an infant who was being exposed to the maturing process in a fantastically telescoped, jet-propelled way.

The music on the juke box broke through his thoughts, loud and intrusive.

He called out, toward the kitchen, "That loud enough for you, is it?"

There was a silence. Only the music answered him.

He raised his voice, "Can you hear it okay?"

Still no response. He went over to the machine, pushed it out a few inches from the wall and found a small volume-knob near the base. He turned it. The music fell away from him and the room seemed quieter and more comfortable. He pushed the machine back against the wall and returned to his stool. He picked up the cardboard menu that was leaning against the napkin holder and studied it, occasionally looking up into the kitchen. He could see four pies browning nicely through the glass door of the oven and again there was the sense of something familiar, something friendly that he could respond to.

He called out again: "I think I'll have ham and eggs. Eggs up and easy and some hash browns."

Still there was no movement from the kitchen and no answering voice.

"I saw a sign that there was a town up ahead. What's the name of it?"

Coffee bubbled in the big enameled pot, the steam rising into the air. A light wind moved the screen door in a creaking four-inch arc back and forth, and the juke box continued to play quietly. The young man was getting hungry now and felt a little nudge of irritation.

"Hey," he called out, "I asked you a question in there. What's the name of the town up ahead?"

He waited for a moment and when there was no answer he got up from the stool, vaulted the counter, pushed the swinging door open and went into the kitchen. It was empty. He walked through to the screen door, pulled it open and went outside. There was a big gravel back yard, unpunctuated by anything but a row of garbage cans, one of which had tipped over, littering the ground with a collection of tin cans, coffee grounds, egg shells and some empty cereal boxes; some orange crates; a broken, partially spokeless wheel; three or four piles of old newspapers. He was about to go back inside when something made him stop dead. He looked again at the garbage cans. There was something missing. An element not there that should have been there. He didn't know what it was. It was just a minute tilt to the dial inside his head that registered balance and reason. Something was wrong and he didn't know what it was. It left him with a tiny feeling of disquiet which he pushed into the back of his mind.

He returned to the kitchen, went over to the coffeepot, smelled it again, carried it over to the chopping table. He found a mug and poured himself a cup of hot coffee. He leaned against the back of the chopping table and sipped the coffee, enjoying it, liking its familiarity.

Then he went into the other room and took a large doughnut from a glass jar. He carried it back to the kitchen, and leaned against the jamb of the swinging door so that he could survey both rooms. He munched slowly on the doughnut, sipped at the coffee, and reflected. Whoever ran this place, he thought, is either in the basement or maybe his wife's having a baby. Or maybe the guy's sick. Maybe he's had a coronary or something. Maybe he should look around and find a basement door. He looked over at the cash register behind the counter. What an easy set up for a heist. Or for a free meal. Or for anything, for that matter.

The young man reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of coins and a dollar bill.

"American money," he said aloud. "That settles that. No question about it. I am an American. Two half-dollars. A quarter. A dime. Four pennies and a dollar bill. That's American money"

He went into the kitchen again, looking up at the cereal boxes with the familiar names. The Campbell soup cans. Was that the one with the fifty-seven varieties? Again he reflected on who he was and where he was. On the disjointed non sequiturs that passed through his consciousness: his knowledge of music, the colloquialisms he spoke, the menu that he read and understood perfectly. Ham and eggs and hash browns—things he could relate to appearance and taste and smell. And then a phalanx of questions marched by. Exactly who was he? What the hell was he doing there? And where was "there"? And why? That was the big question. Why did he suddenly wake up on a road and not know who he was? And why wasn't anyone in the diner? Where was the owner or the cook or the counterman? Why weren't they there? And again the little germ of disquiet that he'd felt outside stirred inside him.

He chewed the last piece of doughnut, swigged it down with what remained of the coffee, and went back into the other room. Once again he vaulted over the counter; tossed a quarter on top of it. At the front door, he turned and surveyed the room again. Damnit, but it was normal, it was real, it was natural looking. The words, the place, the smell, the look. He put his hand on the knob of the door and pulled it open. He was about to step outside when a thought hit him. Suddenly he knew what had disturbed him about the garbage cans. He carried this disquiet with him as he walked out into the hot morning. He knew what was the missing element and the knowledge gave him a cold apprehension that he hadn't felt before. It did little jarring things to his nerve endings because suddenly something formed and entered into his thoughts. Something that couldn't be understood. Something beyond the norm. Beyond the word symbols, past the realm of logic that had been supporting him and answering his questions and giving him a link to reality.

There were no flies.

He walked around the corner of the building to stare again at the back yard with its row of garbage cans. There were no flies. There was a silence and nothing stirred and there were no flies.

He walked slowly back toward the highway, suddenly conscious of what was wrong. The trees were real and the highway and the diner with everything in it. The smell of the coffee was real and the taste of the doughnut and the cereals had the right names and Coca-Cola came in a bottle and cost a nickel. It was all right and proper and everything was in its right place. But there was no life to it! This was the missing element—activity! This was the thought he carried down the highway past a sign which said, CARSVILLE, 1 MILE.

He entered the town and it spread out in front of him, neat and attractive. A small main street circled a village park that lay in the center of everything. Set back in the middle of this park area was a large school. On the circular main street were a row of stores, a movie theater, more stores and a police station. Further down was a church, a residential street that lay beyond and finally a drugstore on the corner. There was a bookstore, a confectionery, a grocery store and out in front of it, a small sign which read "Bus Stop." It lay there quietly and prettily in the mid-morning sun and it was quiet. There was no sound at all.

He walked down the sidewalk peering into the windows. All of the stores were open. The bakery had fresh cake and cookies. The bookstore was running a special sale. The movie theater advertised a picture out front having to do with war in the air. There was a three-story office building that told of lawyers inside, public notary and a real estate firm. Further down there was a glass-enclosed public telephone and then a department store with a delivery entrance blocked off from the street by a wire mesh fence.

Once again he reflected on the phenomena. There were the stores, the park, the bus stop, the whole works, but there were no people. There wasn't a soul to be seen. He leaned against the side of the bank building and scanned the street left to right, as if somehow he could find something stirring if he looked hard enough.

It was when his eyes reached the fence fronting the department store delivery entrance directly across the street, that he saw the girl. She was sitting in a truck parked inside the yard, plain as day—the very first person he'd seen. He felt his heart jump as he nervously stepped off the curb and started walking toward her. Halfway across the street he stopped, feeling his palms wet. He had an impulse to run like hell over to the truck or to stand there and shout questions at the girl. He forced a matter-of-factness into his tone, made himself smile.

"Hey, Miss! Miss, over here." He felt his voice rising higher and again he made an effort to keep it low and conversational. "Miss, I wonder if you could help me. I was wondering if you knew where everyone was. Doesn't seem to be anyone around. Literally...not a soul."

Now he took what he hoped was a sauntering walk across the street toward her, noticing that she continued to look straight at him from inside the cab of the truck. He reached the other side of the street, stopped a few feet from the wire mesh gate and smiled at her again.

"It's a crazy thing," he said. "Crazy, oddball thing. When I woke up this morning—" He stopped and he thought this over. "Well, I didn't exactly wake up; he said. "I just sort of—just sort of found myself walking down the road."

He reached the sidewalk, went through the half-open gate to the passenger side of the truck. The girl inside wasn't looking at him any longer. She was staring

straight out through the front windshield and he saw her profile. Beautiful woman. Long blonde hair. But pale. He tried to think where he'd seen features like that—so immobile, so without expression. Bland, yes, but more than bland. Spiritless.

“Look, Miss,” he said. “I don't want to frighten you, but there must be somebody around here who could tell me—”

His hand had opened the truck door when his voice was cut off by the girl's body as she slumped over, past the wide, amazed eyes of the young man, and down, hitting the sidewalk with a loud, almost metallic clank. He stared down at the upturned face, then became aware of words on the panel of the truck, “Resnick's Store Mannequins.” He looked back at her face—the wooden, lifeless face with the painted cheeks and the painted mouth and the formed half-smile, with the eyes that were wide open and showed nothing, told nothing. Eyes that looked exactly like what they were—holes in a dummy's face. Something of the humor of it struck him now. He grinned, scratched his jaw, then slowly slid down, his back against the side of the truck till he was sitting next to the mannequin who lay there staring up at the blue sky and the hot sun.

The young man nudged her hard wooden arm, winked, clucked his tongue and said, “You'll forgive me, babe, but at no time did I mean to be so upsetting. As a matter of fact”—he nudged her again— “I've always had kind of a secret yen for the quiet type.” Now he reached over to pinch the unyielding cheek and laughed again. “Get what I mean, babe?”

He picked up the dummy and carefully deposited her back in the cab of the truck, pulling her dress down to a modest point over the knees. He closed the cab door, then turned and took a few aimless steps away from the truck. On the other side of the mesh gate was the circular main street with the small park in the middle. He went to the fence and let his eyes move left to right once more, taking in every one of the stores, as if by some unique concentration he might find a sign of life. But the street lay empty, the stores were unoccupied, the silence was persistent.

He went toward the service entrance of the department store beyond the truck and stuck his head into a dark hall loaded with mannequins piled nude on top of one another. The thought hit him that it was like World War II pictures of the gas ovens at the concentration camps, the way they were piled on top of one another. He was disturbed by the similarity and hurriedly backed out into the delivery yard. Then he shouted toward the open door.

“Hey! Anybody here? Anybody hear me?”

He went to the truck again and looked inside. There was no key in the ignition. He grinned at the lifeless face of the mannequin.

“How about it, babe? You wouldn't know where the ignition keys would be, would you?”

The mannequin stared straight ahead at the windshield.

It was then he heard the sound. The first he'd heard outside the diner. At first it made no sense to him. It was unrelated to anything he knew or could associate with the stillness. Then he realized what the sound was. It was a phone ringing. He ran toward the fence, slamming himself against it, his fingers gripping the wire strands, his eyes darting around until he found what he was looking for. It was

the glass-enclosed public phone booth just across the street, a few yards into the park. The phone was still ringing.

The young man flung himself through the gate and raced across the street. He reached the booth at a dead run, flung open the glass door and almost pulled the phone out by the wire as he grabbed the receiver off the hook. He kicked the door shut behind him.

“Hello. Hello!” He jangled the receiver furiously. “Hello! Operator? Operator?”

The phone was dead. He waited a moment, then slammed the receiver back on the cradle. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a dime. He shoved it in the slot and waited. Presently he heard his first voice, the colorless, astringently courteous tone of a telephone operator.

“The number you have reached,” the voice said, “is not a working number—”

The young man was angry now. He shouted into the phone. “Are you out of your minds down there? I didn’t dial a number—”

“Please be sure you have the right number and are dialing it correctly.”

“I didn’t dial a number, operator. The phone rang and I answered it.” Again he jiggled the hook wildly. “Operator. Operator, will you listen to me, please? All I want to know is where I am. Understand? I just want to find out where I am and where the people are. Please, operator, listen—”

Again the operator’s voice, impersonal, cold, as if from another planet. “The number you have reached is not a working number. Please be sure you have the right number and are dialing it correctly.”

Then there was a long pause before the voice continued, “This is a recording!”

The young man slowly replaced the receiver and stood there conscious now of the quiet town that surrounded him through the glass, terribly aware of the silences that hung over the place, a silence punctuated by what the operator had said. “This is a recording.” The whole damn place was a recording. Sound put on wax. Pictures put on canvas. Things placed on a stage. But only for effect. But a voice—that was a lousy joke.

The inanimate things such as unattended coffeepots, mannequins, stores—these he could wonder at and walk away. But a human voice—he desperately needed to know that this was surrounded with flesh and blood. It was a cheat to have it any other way. It was a promise and then a withdrawal. It made him angry in addition to causing that tiny flutter of frightened concern. The phone book was hanging by a chain. He grabbed it, ripped it open, started to read through the pages. The names sprang up at him. Abel. Baker. Botsford. Carstairs. Cathers. Cepeda.

“Well, where are you people,” he shouted. “Where do you hang out? Where do you live? Just in this Goddamned book here?”

Again he riffled through the pages. The Dempseys. The Farvers. The Grannigans. And so on to a man named Zatelli who lived on North Front Street and whose first initial was A. The young man let the book drop from his hands. It swung back and forth on the chain. Slowly his head lifted until he stared out at the empty street.

“Look, boys,” he said softly. “Who’s watching the stores?” The glass windows looked back at him. “Who’s watching any of the stores?”

He turned slowly, put his hand on the door and pushed. The door remained stationary. He pushed again. It was stuck tight. And now he had the feeling that it was a gag. A very big, complex, terribly unfunny gag. He pushed hard, throwing his shoulder against the door and still it did not move.

“Awright,” he shouted. “Awright, it’s a very funny joke. Very funny. I love your town. I love the sense of humor. But now it’s not funny anymore. Understand? Now it stinks. Who’s the wise guy who locked me in here?” Now he kicked, shoved, pushed at the door until the sweat rolled down his face. He closed his eyes and leaned against the glass for a moment and then suddenly looked down to see the door hinge arched toward him. He gently pulled and the door swung open, bent and out of alignment, but open. He’d been pushing on it instead of pulling. It was as simple as that. He felt he should laugh or perhaps apologize to something or someone, but of course, there was no one to apologize to.

He stepped out into the sunlight and went across the park toward a building with a big glass globe in front with lettering on it which read “Police.” He smiled to himself as he went toward it. Head for law and order, he thought. But more than just law and order—head for sanity. Maybe that’s where to find it. When you’re a little boy and lost, your mother tells you to go up to the nice policeman and tell him your name. Well, now he was a little boy and he was lost and there was no one else he could report to. And as to a name—someone would have to tell him.

The police station was dark and cool, split in half by a counter which ran the length of the room. Behind it was the sergeant’s desk and chair and across the far wall a radio operator’s table with microphone and a CW sending and receiving set. To the right was a barred door into a cell block. He went through the swinging door in the middle of the counter to the microphone. He picked it up, studying it, then illogically, as if it were expected of him to go along with the gag, he put on an official radio-car voice.

“Calling all cars. Calling all cars. Unknown man walking around police station. Very suspicious-looking egg. Probably wants to—” His voice broke off. Across the room by the sergeant’s desk, a thin column of smoke drifted lazily up toward the ceiling. He slowly put down the microphone and went to the desk. A big, quarter-smoked cigar was lying in an ash tray, lighted and smoking. He picked it up, then put it down. He felt a tension, a fear, a sense of being watched and listened to. He whirled around as if to catch someone in the act of just that—staring and listening.

The room was empty. He opened the barred door. It creaked noisily. He went into the cell block. There were eight cells, four on each side, and they were all empty. Through the bars of the last cell on the right he could see a sink. Water was running. Hot water. He saw the steam. On a shelf was a razor, dripping wet and a shaving brush, full of lather. He closed his eyes for a moment because this was too much. This was far too much. Show me goblins, he thought, or ghosts or monsters. Show me dead people walking in a parade. Play shrill and discordant trumpet sounds on a funeral horn that jars the stillness of the morning—but stop frightening me with the grotesque normality of things. Don’t show me cigar butts in ash trays and water running in a sink and lather-covered shaving brushes. These are what shock more than apparitions.

He slowly entered the cell and went to the sink. He reached out a trembling hand and touched the lather on the brush. It was real. It felt warm. It smelled of soap. The water dripped into the sink. The razor said Gillette, and he thought of the World Series on television and the New York Giants taking four in a row from the Cleveland Indians. But God that must have been ten years ago. Or maybe it was last year. Or maybe it hadn't happened yet. Because now he had no base, no starting point, no date or time or place of reference. He was not conscious of the sound of the creaking cell door, as it slowly closed on him, until he saw the shadow of it on the wall inching across slowly, inexorably.

He let out a sob and flung himself across to the door, squeezing through just before it closed. He hung on to it for a moment, then backed away from the cell to lean against the door on the opposite side, and stare across at the now closed and locked door as if it were a kind of poisonous animal.

Something told him to run. Run. Run like hell. Get out. Take off. Get away. It was a whispered command in his inner ear. It was a last ditch order from an embattled mind, assaulted by nightmarish fear that could at any moment lock him rooted to the earth. It was all his instincts screaming at him in the name of safety and salvation. Get the hell out of here. Run! Run! RUN!

He was outside in the sun racing across the street, stumbling over the curb, scratching himself on a hedge as he ploughed headfirst into it. Then over the hedge and into the park, running, running, running. He saw the school building loom up in front of him and there was a statue in front. His motion carried him up the steps to the statue until suddenly he found himself clutching a metal leg of a heroic looking educator who died in 1911 and whose metal visage loomed up in front of him silhouetted against the blue sky. Then he began to cry. He looked up at the stillness, the stores, the movie theater, and finally the statue, and he cried. "Where is everybody? Please, for Christ's sake tell me... where is everybody?"

The young man sat on the curb in the late afternoon staring down at his shadow and the other shadows that flanked him. A store awning, a bus-stop sign, a streetlight post—formless globs of shadow that stretched across the sidewalk in a line. He slowly rose to his feet, looked briefly at the bus-stop sign and then down the street as if in some halfhearted, half-hopeless expectation of seeing a big red and white bus approach, open its doors, let out a crowd of people. People. That's what the young man wanted to see. His own kind.

The silence had been building all day. It had become an entity all of itself, a pressure on him, an oppressive, hot, itchy, wool-like thing that surrounded and covered him, that made him sweat and squirm and wish he could throw it off and crawl out.

He took a slow walk down the main street—his fortieth or fiftieth walk down that same street since morning. He passed the now familiar stores, looking into the now familiar doors, and it was the same. Counters, goods unattended.

He entered a bank for the fourth time that afternoon, and also for the fourth time, walked behind the tellers' cages, picking up handfuls of money and throwing them aside. Once he lit his cigarette from a hundred-dollar bill and laughed uproariously at it until suddenly, after he'd thrown the half-burnt bill down on the

ground, he found himself unable to laugh any longer. All right, so a guy can light a cigarette from a hundred-dollar bill, but so what?

He walked out of the bank and then crossed the street and headed for the drugstore. There was a two-for-one sale announced on signs plastered across the window. Church bells rang from down the street and this jarred him. For a moment he flattened himself against the side of the drugstore staring wildly toward the sound until he realized what it was.

He walked into the drugstore, a big, square room surrounded by high counters and shelves with many glass display cases running in lines across the room. A big, mirror-backed fountain was at the rear, with pictures of floats and frappes and sodas and malts. He stopped by the cigar counter, helped himself to an expensive one, took off its paper and sniffed.

"A good cigar, that's what this country needs," he said aloud as he walked toward the fountain. "A good cigar. A couple of good cigars. And some people to smoke them—"

He put the cigar carefully in a breast pocket and went in back of the fountain. From there he scanned the room, the empty booths, the juke box selectors over each one. And felt the stillness of the place that was totally incongruous with what was in it. It was a room poised for action; a room on the verge of coming alive, but never quite doing so. Behind the fountain were the ice-cream containers. He picked up an ice-cream scoop, took a glass dish from a shelf near the mirror and put two large scoops of ice cream in it. He covered this with syrup, then with nuts, added a cherry and some whipped cream.

He looked up and said, "—How about it, anybody? Anybody for a sundae?" He paused and listened to the silence. "Nobody, huh? Okay."

He spooned up a large hunk of ice cream and cherry and whipped cream, put it in his mouth and liked the taste of it. For the first time he saw his reflection in the mirror and he was not surprised by what he saw. The face had a vaguely familiar look, not handsome, but not unpleasant. And young, he thought. It was quite young. It was the face of a man well under thirty. Maybe twenty-five or twenty-six, but no older. He studied the reflection. "You'll forgive me, old pal," he said to it, "but I don't recollect the name. The face seems familiar, but the name escapes me."

He took another bite of the ice cream, rolled it around in his mouth, melted it, and swallowed it, watching these actions in the mirror. He pointed the spoon very casually at the image.

"I'll tell you what my problem is. I'm in the middle of a nightmare that I can't wake up from. You're part of it. You and the ice cream and the cigar. The police station and the phone booth—that little mannequin." He looked down at the ice cream and then around at the drugstore, then back to his reflection.

"This whole bloody town—wherever it is—whatever it is—" He cocked his head to one side, suddenly remembering something and he grinned at the image.

"I just remembered something. Scrooge said it. You remember Scrooge, old buddy—Ebenezer Scrooge? It's what he said to the ghost, Jacob Marley He said, 'You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard. A crumb of cheese. A fragment of an undone potato. But there's more of gravy about you than grave.'"

He put the spoon down now and pushed the ice cream away. “You see? That’s what you are. That’s what you all are. You’re what I had for dinner last night.” Now the smile faded. Something intense crept into the voice. “But I’ve had it now. I’ve had it. I want to wake up.” He turned from the mirror to the store and the empty booths. “If I can’t wake up I’ve got to find somebody to talk to. That much I’ve got to do. I’ve got to find somebody to talk to.”

For the first time he noticed a card standing on the counter. It was a basketball schedule of Carsville High School, announcing that on September 15th Carsville would play Corinth High. On September 21st, Carsville would play Leedsville. There’d be games on through December with six or seven other high schools—this was all announced matter-of-factly, quite officially, on the large poster.

“I must be a very imaginative guy!” the young man said at last. “Very, very imaginative. Everything right down to the last detail. The last little detail.”

He left the fountain and crossed the room to where there were several revolving pocket-book racks. Titles on the book covers flicked briefly across his consciousness, then disappeared. Murder stories, introduced on the covers by blondes in negligees, with titles like *The Brothel Death Watch*. Reprints of famous novels and gag books. Something called *Utterly Mad*, with a smiling half-wit face, captioned, “Alfred E. Neuman says, *What, me worry!*” Some of the books seemed familiar. Fragments of plots and characters made brief excursions into his mind. He absent-mindedly turned the racks as he walked by. They creaked around, sending titles, pictures and covers blurring in front of his eyes, until he saw one that made him reach forward, grab the rack to stop it.

The book’s cover depicted a kind of vast desert with a tiny, almost undistinguishable figure of a human being standing in the middle of it, arms akimbo, staring up toward the sky. There was a dim range of mountains beyond and, seemingly rising from the mountaintops, was a single line title, *The Last Man On Earth*.

The young man riveted his eyes to these words, feeling a fusion taking place between mind and sight. *The Last Man On Earth*. There was something especially meaningful—something of particular significance—something that suddenly made him gasp and whirl the rack around, sending the title off into a blurred orbit.

But when the rack slowed down, the book cover took on clarity again and it was then that he discovered there were many of them. There were many books of the last man on earth. Row after row of tiny figures standing, arms outstretched, on vast deserts, each cover staring back at him as the rack slowed and finally stopped moving.

He backed away from the books, unable to take his eyes away from them, until he reached the front door and briefly saw his reflection in the mirror—a white-faced, youngish looking man who stood at the entrance to a drugstore, looking tired, lonely, desperate and—frightened.

He went out, assuming composure while both his body and his mind pulled and yanked at him. Halfway across the street, he stopped, turning round and round and round.

Suddenly he shouted, “Hey? Hey! Hey, anybody? Anybody see me? Anybody hear me? Hey!”

An answer came after a moment. The deep throated, melodic bells of the church pealed out the notice of the passing day. They rang five times and then stopped. The echo lingered, and then this too faded away. The young man went down the street past the now familiar stores, no longer seeing them. His eyes were open but he saw nothing. He kept thinking of the book titles—*The Last Man On Earth*, and it did something to his insides. It was as if a heavy glob of indigestible food had gone protesting down his throat to settle, leaden and heavy, in his gut. *The Last Man On Earth*. The picture and the words stuck with frightening clarity in his consciousness. The tiny figure of the lone man in the desert, hands outstretched. The indistinct, lonely little figure whose fate was spread across the sky, across the mountain ranges beyond it—the last man on earth. He couldn't shake that picture, or the words, as he headed toward the park.

He was quite unaware that the afternoon sun now looked pale and distant as it moved across the sky. It was on its way out for that day.

It was night and the young man sat on a park bench close to the statue in front of the school. He played tic-tac-toe with a stick in the dirt, winning game after game and then wiping out each victory with the heel of his shoe to begin all over again. He'd made himself a sandwich in a small restaurant. He'd walked through the department store and then through a Woolworth five-and-dime. He'd gone into the school, through empty classrooms and had stifled an impulse to scrawl obscenities on a blackboard. Anything to shock or jar or to defy. Anything in the way of a gesture to rip away at the facade of reality that surrounded him. He was sure it was a facade. He was sure it must be just the real quality of the unreal dream and if only he could erase it and reveal what was underneath!—but he couldn't.

A light shone on his hand. He looked up startled. Street lights were going on and lights in the park joined them. Light after light all over the town. Street lights. Store windows. And then the flickering of the marquee lights in front of the theater.

He rose from the bench and went to the theater and stopped by the tiny box office. A ticket was sticking out of the metal slot. He put it in his breast pocket and was about to go inside when he saw a poster announcing the movie inside. On the poster was a large blowup of an air force pilot, profile to the sky, staring up at a flight of jet aircraft that streaked across and over him.

The young man took a step toward the poster. Slowly and unconsciously his hands touched the coveralls he was wearing and very gradually there was a bridge between himself and the man on the poster. And then it came to him. They were dressed alike. The coveralls were almost identical. The young man grew excited, and some of the fatigue washed away, leaving behind it an enthusiasm bordering on exultation. He reached out and touched the poster. Then he whirled around to look toward the empty streets and spoke aloud.

"I'm Air Force. That's it. I'm Air Force. I'm in the Air Force. That's right! I remember. I'm in the Air Force." It was a tiny, insignificant skein to a crazy quilt blanket of unknowns—but it was something he could pick up and hold and analyze. It was a clue. And it was the first one. The only one. "I'm in the Air Force," he shouted. He headed into the theater. "I'm in the Air Force!" His voice

reverberated through the empty lobby. “Hey, anybody, everybody, somebody—I’m in the Air Force!” He yelled it into the theater, the words banging through the air, over the row after row of empty seats and hitting against the huge, white, motionless screen at the far end.

The young man sat down and found he was perspiring. He felt for a handkerchief, pulled it out, wiped his face. He felt the beard stubble, knowing that there were a thousand closed doors to his subconscious he was close to opening.

“Air Force,” he said softly now. “Air Force. But what does that mean? What does ‘Air Force’ mean?” His head jerked upward. “Was there a bomb? Is that it? That must have been it. A bomb—” He stopped, shaking his head. “But if there’d been a bomb, everything would have been destroyed. And nothing’s been destroyed. How could it have been a—”

The lights began to dim and a strong beam of light from a projectionist’s booth somewhere in the rear of the theater suddenly shone on the white screen. There was the sound of music, loud, blaring, martial music, and on the screen a B-52 bomber headed down a runway and suddenly screamed into the air over his head. There were more big B-52’s and now they were in the sky, a flight of them, heading up leaving lines of vapor trails. And always the music blaring out underneath it.

The young man rose to his feet, his eyes wide, disbelieving. The beam of light disappeared into a small, blinking hole high above a balcony.

“Hey!” he screamed. “Who’s showing the picture? Somebody must be showing the picture! Hey! Do you see me? I’m down here. Hey, whoever’s showing the picture—I’m down here!”

He ran up the aisle, through the lobby, and up the stairs to the balcony. He stumbled across the dark seats, falling several times and finally, not finding an aisle, he simply crawled and jumped and scrambled over the tops of seats toward the small bright hole in the wall at the far end. He threw his face against it, staring directly into the blinding, white light. It sent him reeling back in momentary blindness.

When he could see again he found another opening in the wall, higher than the first. He jumped up, and got a quick glimpse of an empty room, a giant projector and stacks of film cans. He was dimly aware of voices on the screen, loud, giant voices that filled the theater. Once again he jumped up to look in the projectionist’s booth and in the brief moment of one-sided combat with gravity, he again saw the empty room, the machine running smoothly, the hum of it heard dimly through the glass.

But when he landed back on his feet he knew there was no one up there. It was a machine running by itself. It was a picture showing itself. It was like the town and everything in it. Machines, items, things—all unattended. He backed away, banged against the back of the top row of seats and, losing his balance, sprawled head first.

The beam of light kept changing intensity as scenes altered on the screen. There was dialogue and music and it reverberated around the theater. Voices of giants. Music of a million-piece band. And something inside the young man cracked. The small compartment in the back of his mind, where man closets his fears, ties them up, controls and commands them, broke open and they surged across brain and nerves and muscles—a nightmare flood in open rebellion.

The young man scrambled to his feet, sobbing, choking, screaming. He raced down the stairs, through the door, down the steps toward the lobby.

It was when he reached the foot of the steps that he saw the other person. He was directly across the lobby and approaching from a flight of stairs the young man hadn't noticed before. The young man didn't see him clearly nor did he try. He just ran toward him, dimly aware that the other person was running toward him at the same time. In the fraction of a moment that it took him to cross the lobby he had only one thought and that was to reach the other person, to touch him, to hold him. To follow him out to wherever he was going. Out of the building, off the streets, out of the city, because now he knew that he must get away.

It was this thought that filled his mind just before he hit the mirror—a full length mirror that hung on the opposite wall. And he hit it with the force of a hundred and seventy pounds, smashing into it at a dead run. The mirror seemed to explode into a thousand pieces. He found himself on the floor looking at little fragments of his reflection in the small and minute sections of mirror that remained on the wall. It was the picture of a hundred young men lying cut and dazed on the floor of a theater lobby, staring up at what was left of a mirror. And then he lurched to his feet and, like a drunken man in a tilting ship in a heavy sea, he stumbled out of the lobby and out into the street.

Outside it was dark and misty; the streets were wet. The street lights were enveloped in fog and each shone like a dim moon hanging in vapor. He began to run along sidewalks and across streets. He tripped over a bicycle stand and landed on his face, but was on his feet in a moment continuing the mad, headlong, thoughtless, desperate race to no place in particular. He tripped over a curb near the drugstore and again fell on his face, conscious for a moment that he could still feel pain—a jarring, wrenching pain. But only for a moment. He pushed his palms against the sidewalk, forcing himself up and then fell over on his back.

For a moment he lay there, eyes closed. And then he opened them. A nightmare knocked at his head and asked to come in and ice flowed over his body. He started to scream. An eye was looking at him. A giant eye, bigger than the upper trunk of a man. An unblinking, cold-looking eye was staring at him and his scream never let up, even after he had floundered again to his feet and started to run back toward the park. He was like a human siren disappearing into the dark. Behind him the big painted eye on the optometrist's window stared after him—cold, inhuman and unblinking.

He fell, clutching against a street light. There was a panel with a button which his fingers touched, scrabbled at and finally kept pushing over and over again. A sign over it read, "Push to turn green." He didn't know the sign was there. He only knew he had to push the button and this he kept doing, while the light over the intersection turned red, then yellow, then green, over and over again, responding to the bleeding knuckles of the young man who kept pushing a button and moaning to himself in a soft, barely intelligible chant.

"Please—please, somebody—help me. Help me, somebody. Please. Please. Oh dear God—somebody help me! Won't somebody help me. Won't somebody come—can anyone hear me—?"

The control room was dark and the figures of the uniformed men were silhouetted against the light that came from a small viewing screen on which could be seen the face and upper body of Sergeant Mike Ferris, a youngish looking man in coveralls who kept pushing a button to the right of the screen. Ferris's voice babbled out into the darkness of the control room pleading for help, or someone to listen, for someone to show themselves. It was the sobbing, pleading, supplicating voice of a man whose mind and body were laid bare on a block and the up-and-down intonation seemed naked and embarrassing, as if listened to through a keyhole, with an ear pressed against the door.

The brigadier general rose, his face strained from long hours of protracted concentration. He was obviously disturbed by the face and voice of the man on the screen. His voice, however, was clipped and authoritative.

"All right, clock him and get him out of there," the general commanded.

A lieutenant colonel to the general's right reached over, pressed a button and spoke into a panel microphone.

"Release the subject on the double!"

Inside the vast, high-ceilinged hangar, men sprang to their feet and ran toward the rectangular metal box that squatted impassively in the center of the huge room. A metal door was swung open. Two noncoms entered followed by an Air Force doctor. Very gently the wires and electrodes were removed from Sergeant Ferris's body. The doctor's hands wandered over his wrists and then propped open his eyes to stare into the dilated pupils. His ear listened to the hollow thumping of an overworked heart. Then Ferris was lifted carefully out and placed on a stretcher.

The medical officer went to the general, where he stood with his staff, staring across the hangar toward the prostrate figure on the stretcher.

The medical officer said, "He's all right, sir. Delusions of some sort, but he's responding all right now."

The general nodded and said, "Can I see him?"

The medical officer nodded and the eight uniformed men walked across the hangar, their feet making a clickety-clack against the concrete as they approached the stretcher. On each of their left shoulders was an insignia patch, indicating that they were members of the Space Technological Research Command, US. Air Force. They reached the side of the stretcher and the general leaned over to look closely into the face of Sergeant Mike Ferris.

Ferris's eyes were open now. He turned his face to look up at the general and smiled slightly. The face was wan, pale, bearded. Anguish, loneliness, the misery of some two hundred-odd hours in solitary confinement in a metal box showed in his eyes and the lines of his face.

It was the post-shock look of every wounded man the general had ever seen and while he didn't know Ferris—that is, didn't know him personally except from sixty typewritten sheets in the man's file that he'd studied intensively before the test, he felt he knew him now. He'd been watching him for over two weeks on the small screen closely, more closely than any human being had been watched before.

The general reminded himself that there should be a medal in this for the sergeant. He had taken what no man had ever taken before. He had remained alone for two hundred and eighty-four hours on a simulated trip to the moon with

almost every condition a man might have to face duplicated in the five-by-five box. The wires and electrodes had given a good indication of how the space traveler would react physically. They had charted his respiration, heart action, blood pressure. Beyond this, and most important, they had given a good idea of the point at which a man would break; of the moment a man would succumb to loneliness and try to battle his way out. It was at this moment that Sergeant Mike Ferris had pushed the release button inside his tiny confinement.

The general forced a grin as he leaned over Ferris and said, "How you doing, Sergeant? Feeling better?"

Ferris nodded, "Much better, sir, thank you."

There was a moment's silence before the general spoke again. "Ferris," he asked, "What was it like? Where'd you think you were?"

Ferris stared up toward the high ceiling of the hangar and reflected a moment before he spoke. "A town, sir," he answered. "A town without people... without anybody. A place I don't want to go to again."

Then he turned to look back toward the general and he said, "What was wrong with me, sir? Just off my rocker or something?"

The general turned toward the medical officer with a nod. The medical officer said softly, "Just a kind of nightmare your mind manufactured for you, Sergeant. You see, we can feed the stomach with concentrates. We can pump oxygen in and waste materials out. We can supply you with reading for recreation and try to keep your mind occupied."

There was a silence now as the men surrounding the stretcher looked toward the medical officer.

"There's one thing we can't simulate," he continued. "And that's a very basic need. Man's hunger for companionship. That's a barrier we don't know how to breach yet. The barrier of loneliness."

Four aid men lifted Mike Ferris up on the stretcher and carried him across the vast room to the giant doors at the opposite side. He was then carried out into the night where an ambulance had been pulled up and was waiting. Ferris looked up at a giant moon and thought to himself that the next time it would be for real. Not just a box in a hangar. But he was too tired to give it much thought.

They lifted him gently and were about to place him in the rear of the ambulance when Mike Ferris quite accidentally touched his breast pocket. He felt something stiff and took it out of his pocket. The doors of the ambulance shut on him and left him in the quiet darkness of the inside. He heard the engines start and felt the wheels underneath him and was much too tired to reflect on whatever was in his fingers, just a hand's length from his face.

Just a theater ticket—that's all it was. A theater ticket from a small movie house in an empty town. A theater ticket, he thought to himself, and it was in his breast pocket and as the ambulance engines lulled him to sleep and the gently rolling wheels made him close his eyes, he held on to the ticket very tightly. In the morning he'd have to ask himself some questions. In the morning he would have to piece together some impossible fabric of dream and reality. But all that would have to come in the morning. Mike Ferris was much too tired now.

The CAMERA BEGINS A SLOW PAN

back into the hangar until it is shooting on the box, squatting empty and impassive in the empty room.

NARRATOR'S VOICE

The barrier of loneliness. The palpable, desperate need of the human animal to be with his fellow man.

LAP DISSOLVE TO:

NIGHT SKY

The moon and the stars.

NARRATOR'S VOICE

Up there... up there in the vastness of space, in the void that is sky... up there is an enemy known as isolation. It sits there in the stars waiting... waiting with the patience of eons... forever waiting... in The Twilight Zone.

FADE TO BLACK

