

The Concentration City

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by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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Noon talk on Millionth Street: „Sorry, these are the West Millions. You want 9775335th East.“

„Dollar five a cubic foot? Sell!“

„Take a westbound express to 495th Avenue, cross over to a Redline elevator and go up a thousand levels to Plaza Terminal. Carry on south from there and you'll find it between 568th Avenue and 422nd Street.“

„There's a cave-in down at KEN County! Fifty blocks by twenty by thirty levels.“

„Listen to this—*PYROMANIACS STAGE MASS BREAKOUT! FIRE POLICE CORDON BAY COUNTY!*“

„It’s a beautiful counter. Detects up to .005 per cent monoxide. Cost me three hundred dollars.“

„Have you seen those new intercity sleepers? They take only ten minutes to go up 3,000 levels!“

„Ninety cents a foot? Buy!“

„You say the idea came to you in a dream?“ the voice snapped. „You’re sure no one else gave it to you.“

„No,“ M. said. A couple of feet away from him a spot-lamp threw a cone of dirty yellow light into his face. He dropped his eyes from the glare and waited as the sergeant paced over to his desk, tapped his fingers on the edge and swung round on him again.

„You talked it over with your friends?“

„Only the first theory,“ M. explained. „About the possibility of flight.“

„But you told me the other theory was more important. Why keep it from them?“

M. hesitated. Outside somewhere a trolley shunted and clanged along the elevated. „I was afraid they wouldn’t understand what I meant.“

The sergeant laughed. „Do you mean they would have thought you really were insane?“

M. shifted uncomfortably on the stool. Its seat was only six inches off the floor and his thighs felt like slabs of inflamed rubber. After three hours of cross-questioning logic had faded. „The concept was a little abstract. There weren’t any words for it.“

The sergeant shook his head. „I’m glad to hear you say it.“ He sat down on the desk, watched M. for a moment and then went over to him.

„Now look,“ he said confidentially. „It’s getting late. Do you still think both theories are reasonable?“

M. looked up. „Aren’t they?“

The sergeant turned to the man watching in the shadows by the window. „We’re wasting our time,“ he snapped. „I’ll hand him over to Psycho. You’ve seen enough, haven’t you, Doctor?“

The surgeon stared at his hands. He had taken no part in the interrogation, as if bored by the sergeant’s method of approach.

„There’s something I want to find out,“ he said. „Leave me alone with him for half an hour.“

When the sergeant had gone the surgeon sat down behind the desk and stared out of the window, listening to the dull hum of air through the ventilator shaft which rose out of the street below the station. A few roof lights were still burning and two hundred yards away a single policeman patrolled the iron catwalk running above the street, his boots ringing across the darkness.

M. sat on the stool, elbows between his knees, trying to edge a little life back into his legs.

Eventually the surgeon glanced down at the charge sheet.

Name Franz M.

Age 20.

Occupation Student.

Address 3599719 West 783rd St. Level 549-7705-45KN1 (Local).

Charge Vagrancy.

„Tell me about this dream,“ he said, idly flexing a steel rule between his hands as he looked across at M.

„I think you’ve heard everything, sir,“ M. said.

„In detail.“

M. shifted uneasily. „There wasn’t much to it, and what I do remember isn’t too clear now.“

The surgeon yawned. M. waited and then started to recite what he had already repeated twenty times.

„I was suspended in the air above a flat stretch of open ground, something like the floor of an enormous arena. My arms were out at my sides, and I was looking down, floating—„Hold on,“ the surgeon interrupted. „Are you sure you weren’t swimming?“

„No,“ M. said. „I’m certain I wasn’t. All around me there was free space. That was the most important part about it. There were no walls. Nothing but emptiness. That’s all I remember.“

The surgeon ran his finger along the edge of the rule.

„Go on.“

„Well, the dream gave me the idea of building a flying machine. One of my friends helped me construct it.“

The surgeon nodded. Almost absently he picked up the charge sheet and crushed it with a single motion of his hand.

„Don’t be absurd, Franz!“ Gregson remonstrated. They took their places in the chemistry cafeteria queue. „It’s against the laws of hydrodynamics. Where would you get your buoyancy?“

„Suppose you had a rigid fabric vane,“ Franz explained as they shuffled past the hatchways. „Say ten feet across, like one of those composition wall sections, with hand grips on the ventral surface. And then you jumped down from the gallery at the Coliseum Stadium. What would happen?“

„You’d make a hole in the floor. Why?“

„No, seriously.“

„If it was large enough and held together you’d swoop down like a paper dart.“

„Glide,“ Franz said. „Right.“ Thirty levels above them one of the intercity expresses roared over, rattling the tables and cutlery in the cafeteria. Franz waited until they reached a table and sat forward, his food forgotten.

„And say you attached a propulsive unit, such as a battery-driven ventilator fan, or one of those rockets they use on the Sleepers. With enough thrust to overcome your weight. What then?“

Gregson shrugged. „If you could control the thing, you’d, you’d...“ He frowned at Franz. „What’s the word? You’re always using it.“

„Fly.“

„Basically, Matheson, the machine is simple,“ Sanger, the physics lecturer, commented as they entered the science library. „An elementary application of the Venturi Principle. But what’s the point of it? A trapeze would serve its purpose

equally well, and be far less dangerous. In the first place consider the enormous clearances it would require. I hardly think the traffic authorities will look upon it with any favour."

"I know it wouldn't be practical here," Franz admitted. "But in a large open area it should be."

"Allowed. I suggest you immediately negotiate with the Arena Garden on Level 347-25," the lector said whimsically. "I'm sure they'll be glad to hear about your scheme."

Franz smiled politely. "That wouldn't be large enough. I was really thinking of an area of totally free space. In three dimensions, as it were."

Sanger looked at Franz curiously. "Free space? Isn't that a contradiction in terms? Space is a dollar a cubic foot." He scratched his nose. "Have you begun to construct this machine yet?"

"No," Franz said.

"In that event I should try to forget all about it. Remember, Matheson, the task of science is to consolidate existing knowledge, to systematize and reinterpret the discoveries of the past, not to chase wild dreams into the future."

He nodded and disappeared among the dusty shelves.

Gregson was waiting on the steps.

"Well?" he asked.

"Let's try it out this afternoon," Franz said. "We'll cut Text 5 Pharmacology. I know those Fleming readings backwards. I'll ask Dr McGhee for a couple of passes."

They left the library and walked down the narrow, dimly-lit alley which ran behind the huge new civil engineering laboratories. Over seventy-five per cent of the student enrolment was in the architectural and engineering faculties, a meagre two per cent in pure sciences. Consequently the physics and chemistry libraries were housed in the oldest quarter of the university, in two virtually condemned galvanized hutments which once contained the now closed philosophy school.

At the end of the alley they entered the university plaza and started to climb the iron stairway leading to the next level a hundred feet above. Halfway up a white-helmeted F. P. checked them cursorily with his detector and waved them past.

"What did Sanger think?" Gregson asked as they stepped up into 637th Street and walked across to the suburban elevator station.

"He's no use at all," Franz said. "He didn't even begin to understand what I was talking about."

Gregson laughed ruefully. "I don't know whether I do."

Franz took a ticket from the automat and mounted the down platform. An elevator dropped slowly towards him, its bell jangling.

"Wait until this afternoon," he called back. "You're really going to see something."

The floor manager at the Coliseum initialled the two passes.—"Students, eh? All right." He jerked a thumb at the long package Franz and Gregson were carrying. "What have you got there?"

"It's a device for measuring air velocities," Franz told him.

The manager grunted and released the stile.

Out in the centre of the empty arena Franz undid the package and they assembled the model. It had a broad fan-like wing of wire and paper, a narrow strutted fuselage and a high curving tail.

Franz picked it up and launched it into the air. The model glided for twenty feet and then slithered to a stop across the sawdust.

„Seems to be stable,“ Franz said. „We’ll tow it first.“

He pulled a reel of twine from his pocket and tied one end to the nose. As they ran forward the model lifted gracefully into the air and followed them around the stadium, ten feet off the floor.

„Let’s try the rockets now,“ Franz said. He adjusted the wing and tail settings and fitted three firework display rockets into a wire bracket mounted above the wing.

The stadium was four hundred feet in diameter and had a roof two hundred and fifty feet high. They carried the model over to one side and Franz lit the tapers.

There was a burst of flame and the model accelerated across the floor, two feet in the air, a bright trail of coloured smoke spitting out behind it. Its wings rocked gently from side to side. Suddenly the tail burst into flames. The model lifted steeply and looped up towards the roof, stalled just before it hit one of the pilot lights and dived down into the sawdust.

They ran across to it and stamped out the glowing cinders. „Franz!“ Gregson shouted. „It’s incredible! It actually works.“

Franz kicked the shattered fuselage. „Of course it works,“ he said impatiently. „But as Sanger said, what’s the point of it?“

„The point? It flies! Isn’t that enough?“

„No. I want one big enough to hold me.“

„Franz, slow down. Be reasonable. Where could you fly it?“

„I don’t know,“ Franz said fiercely. „But there must be somewhere!“

The floor manager and two assistants, carrying fire extinguishers, ran across the stadium to them.

„Did you hide the matches?“ Franz asked quickly. „They’ll lynch us if they think we’re Pyros.“

Three afternoons later Franz took the elevator up 150 levels to 677-98, where the Precinct Estate Office had its bureau.

„There’s a big development between 493 and 554 in the next sector,“ one of the clerks told him. „I don’t know whether that’s any good to you. Sixty blocks by twenty by fifteen levels.“

„Nothing bigger?“ Franz queried.

The clerk looked up. „Bigger? No. What are you looking for—a slight case of agoraphobia?“

Franz straightened the maps spread across the counter. „I wanted to find an area of more or less continuous development. Two or three hundred blocks long.“

The clerk shook his head and went back to his ledger. „Didn’t you go to engineering school?“ he asked scornfully. „The City won’t take it. One hundred blocks is the maximum.“

Franz thanked him and left.

A south-bound express took him to the development in two hours. He left the car at the detour point and walked the three hundred yards to the end of the level.

The street, a seedy but busy thoroughfare of garment shops and small business premises running through the huge ten-mile-thick B. I. R. Industrial Cube, ended abruptly in a tangle of ripped girders and concrete. A steel rail had been erected along the edge and Franz looked down over it into the cavity, three miles long, a mile wide and twelve hundred feet deep, which thousands of engineers and demolition workers were tearing out of the matrix of the City.

Eight hundred feet below him unending lines of trucks and railcars carried away the rubble and debris, and clouds of dust swirled up into the arc-lights blazing down from the roof. As he watched, a chain of explosions ripped along the wall on his left and the whole face slipped and fell slowly towards the floor, revealing a perfect cross-section through fifteen levels of the City.

Franz had seen big developments before, and his own parents had died in the historic QUA County cave-in ten years earlier, when three master-pillars had sheared and two hundred levels of the City had abruptly sunk ten thousand feet, squashing half a million people like flies in a concertina, but the enormous gulf of emptiness still stunned his imagination.

All around him, standing and sitting on the jutting terraces of girders, a silent throng stared down.

„They say they're going to build gardens and parks for us,“ an elderly man at Franz's elbow remarked in a patient voice. „I even heard they might be able to get a tree. It'll be the only tree in the whole county.“

A man in a frayed sweat-shirt spat over the rail. „That's what they always say. At a dollar a foot promises are all they can waste space on.“

Below them a woman who had been looking out into the air started to simper nervously. Two bystanders took her by the arms and tried to lead her away. The woman began to thresh about and an F. P. came over and pulled her away roughly.

„Poor fool,“ the man in the sweat-shirt commented. „She probably lived out there somewhere. They gave her ninety cents a foot when they took it away from her. She doesn't know yet she'll have to pay a dollar ten to get it back. Now they're going to start charging five cents an hour just to sit up here and watch.“

Franz looked out over the railing for a couple of hours and then bought a postcard from one of the vendors and walked back to the elevator: He called in to see Gregson before returning to the student dormitory. The Gregsons lived in the West millions on 985th Avenue, in a top three-room flat right under the roof. Franz had known them since his parents' death, but Gregson's mother still regarded him with a mixture of sympathy and suspicion. As she let him in with her customary smile of welcome he noticed her glancing at the detector mounted in the hall.

Gregson was in his room, happily cutting out frames of paper and pasting them on to a great rickety construction that vaguely resembled Franz's model.

„Hullo, Franz. What was it like?“

Franz shrugged. „Just a development. Worth seeing.“

Gregson pointed to his construction. „Do you think we can try it out there?“

„We could do.“ Franz sat down on the bed. He picked up a paper dart lying beside him and tossed it out of the window. It swam into the street, lazed down in a wide spiral and vanished into the open mouth of the ventilator shaft.

„When are you going to build another model?“ Gregson asked.

„I’m not.“

Gregson looked up. „Why? You’ve proved your theory.“

„That’s not what I’m after.“

„I don’t get you, Franz. What are you after?“

„Free space.“

„Free?“ Gregson repeated.

Franz nodded. „In both senses.“

Gregson shook his head sadly and snipped out another paper panel. „Franz, you’re mad.“

Franz stood up. „Take this room,“ he said. „It’s twenty feet by fifteen by ten. Extend its dimensions infinitely. What do you find?“

„A development.“

„Infinitely!“

„Non-functional space.“

„Well?“ Franz asked patiently.

„The concept’s absurd.“

„Why?“

„Because it couldn’t exist.“

Franz pounded his forehead in despair. „Why couldn’t it?“

Gregson gestured with the scissors. „It’s self-contradictory. Like the statement *I am lying*. Just a verbal freak. Interesting theoretically, but it’s pointless to press it for meaning.“ He tossed the scissors on to the table. „And anyway, do you know how much free space would cost?“

Franz went over to the bookshelf and pulled out one of the volumes. „Let’s have a look at your street atlas.“ He turned to the index. „This gives a thousand levels. KNI County, one hundred thousand cubic miles, population 30 million.“

Gregson nodded.

Franz closed the atlas. „Two hundred and fifty counties, including KNI, together form the 493rd Sector, and an association of 1,500 adjacent sectors comprise the 298th Local Union.“ He broke off and looked at Gregson. „As a matter of interest, ever heard of it?“

Gregson shook his head. „No. How did—“

Franz slapped the atlas on to the table. „Roughly 4 x 10’s cubic Great-Miles.“ He leaned on the window-ledge. „Now tell me: what lies beyond the 298th Local Union?“

„Other unions, I suppose,“ Gregson said. „I don’t see your difficulty.“

„And beyond those?“

„Farther ones. Why not?“

„For ever?“ Franz pressed.

„Well, as far as for ever is.“

„The great street directory in the old Treasury Library on 247th Street is the largest in the county,“ Franz said. „I went down there this morning. It occupies three complete levels. Millions of volumes. But it doesn’t extend beyond the 598th Local Union. No one there had any idea what lay farther out. Why not?“

„Why should they?“ Gregson asked. „Franz, what are you driving at?“

Franz walked across to the door. „Come down to the Bio-History Museum. I'll show you.“

The birds perched on humps of rock or waddled about the sandy paths between the water pools.

„*Archaeopteryx*,“ Franz read off one of the cage indicators. The bird, lean and mildewed, uttered a painful croak when he fed a handful of beans to it.

„Some of these birds have the remnants of a pectoral girdle,“ Franz said. „Minute fragments of bone embedded in the tissues around their rib cages.“

„Wings?“

„Dr McGhee thinks so.“

They walked out between the lines of cages.

„When does he think they were flying?“

„Before the Foundation,“ Franz said. „Three million years ago.“

When they were outside the museum they started down 859th Avenue. Halfway down the street a dense crowd had gathered and people were packed into the windows and balconies above the elevated, watching a squad of Fire Police break their way into a house.

The bulkheads at either end of the block had been closed and heavy steel traps sealed off the stairways from the levels above and below. The ventilator and exhaust shafts were silent and already the air was stale and soupy.

„Pyros,“ Gregson murmured. „We should have brought our masks.“

„It's only a scare,“ Franz said. He pointed to the monoxide detectors which were out everywhere, their long snouts sucking at the air. The dial needles stood safely at zero. „Let's wait in the restaurant opposite.“

They edged their way over to the restaurant, sat down in the window and ordered coffee. This, like everything else on the menu, was cold. All cooking appliances were thermostated to a maximum 95F., and only in the more expensive restaurants and hotels was it possible to obtain food that was at most tepid.

Below them in the street a lot of shouting went up. The Fire Police seemed unable to penetrate beyond the ground floor of the house and had started to baton back the crowd. An electric winch was wheeled up and bolted to the girders running below the kerb, and half a dozen heavy steel grabs were carried into the house and hooked round the walls.

Gregson laughed. „The owners are going to be surprised when they get home.“

Franz was watching the house. It was a narrow shabby dwelling sandwiched between a large wholesale furniture store and a new supermarket.

An old sign running across the front had been painted over and evidently the ownership had recently changed. The present tenants had made a half-hearted attempt to convert the ground floor room into a cheap stand-up diner. The Fire Police appeared to be doing their best to wreck everything, and pies and smashed crockery were strewn all over the pavement.

The noise died away and everyone waited as the winch began to revolve. The hawsers wound in and tautened, and the front wall of the house staggered outwards in rigid jerky movements.

Suddenly there was a yell from the crowd.

Franz raised his arm. „Up there! Look!“

On the fourth floor a man and woman had come to the window and were looking down helplessly. The man lifted the woman on to the ledge and she crawled out and clung to one of the waste pipes. Bottles were lobbed up at them and bounced down among the police. A wide crack split the house from top to bottom and the floor on which the man was standing dropped and catapulted him backwards out of sight. Then one of the lintels in the first floor snapped and the entire house tipped over and collapsed.

Franz and Gregson stood up, almost knocking over the table.

The crowd surged forward through the cordon. When the dust had settled there was nothing left but a heap of masonry and twisted beams. Embedded in this was the battered figure of the man. Almost smothered by the dust he moved slowly, trying to free himself with one hand, and the crowd started roaring again as one of the grabs wound in and dragged him down under the rubble.

The manager of the restaurant pushed past Franz and leant out of the window, his eyes fixed on the dial of a portable detector. Its needle, like all the others, pointed to zero.

A dozen hoses were playing on the remains of the house and after a few minutes the crowd shifted and began to thin out.

The manager switched off the detector and left the window, nodding to Franz. „Damn Pyros. You can relax now, boys.“

Franz pointed at the detector. „Your dial was dead. There wasn't a trace of monoxide anywhere here. How do you know they were Pyros?“

„Don't worry, we know.“ He smiled obliquely. „We don't want that sort of element in this neighbourhood.“

Franz shrugged and sat down. „I suppose that's one way of getting rid of them.“

The manager eyed Franz. „That's right, boy. This is a good dollar five neighbourhood.“ He smirked to himself. „Maybe a dollar six now everybody knows about our safety record.“

„Careful, Franz,“ Gregson warned him when the manager had gone. „He may be right. Pyromaniacs do take over small cafs and food bars.“

Franz stirred his coffee. „Dr McGhee estimates that at least fifteen per cent of the City's population are submerged Pyros. He's convinced the number's growing and that eventually the whole City will flameout.“

He pushed away his coffee. „How much money have you got?“

„On me?“

„Altogether.“

„About thirty dollars.“

„I've saved fifteen,“ Franz said. „Forty-five dollars; that should be enough for three or four weeks.“

„Where?“ Gregson asked.

„On a Supersleeper.“

„Super—!“ Gregson broke off, alarmed. „Three or four weeks! What do you mean?“

„There's only one way to find out,“ Franz explained calmly. „I can't just sit here thinking. Somewhere there's free space and I'll ride the Sleeper until I find it. Will you lend me your thirty dollars?“

„But Franz—“ „If I don't find anything within a couple of weeks I'll change tracks and come back.“

„But the ticket will cost...“ Gregson searched „...billions. Forty-five dollars won't even get you out of the Sector.“

„That's just for coffee and sandwiches,“ Franz said. „The ticket will be free.“ He looked up from the table. „You know...“

Gregson shook his head doubtfully. „Can you try that on the Supersleepers?“

„Why not? If they query it I'll say I'm going back the long way round. Greg, will you?“

„I don't know if I should.“ Gregson played helplessly with his coffee. „Franz, how can there be free space? How?“

„That's what I'm going to find out,“ Franz said. „Think of it as my first physics practical.“

Passenger distances on the transport system were measured point to point by the application of a $i b + c^2 + d^2$. The actual itinerary taken was the passenger's responsibility, and as long as he remained within the system he could choose any route he liked. Tickets were checked only at the station exits, where necessary surcharges were collected by an inspector. If the passenger was unable to pay the surcharge—ten cents a mile—he was sent back to his original destination.

Franz and Gregson entered the station on 984th Street and went over to the large console where tickets were automatically dispensed. Franz put in a penny and pressed the destination button marked 984. The machine rumbled, coughed out a ticket, and the change slot gave him back his coin.

„Well, Greg, goodbye,“ Franz said as they moved towards the barrier. „I'll see you in about two weeks. They're covering me down at the dormitory. Tell Sanger I'm on Fire Duty.“

„What if you don't get back, Franz?“ Gregson asked. „Suppose they take you off the Sleeper?“

„How can they? I've got my ticket.“

„And if you do find free space? Will you come back then?“

„If I can.“

Franz patted Gregson on the shoulder reassuringly, waved and disappeared among the commuters.

He took the local Suburban Green to the district junction in the next county. The Green Line train travelled at an interrupted 70 m.p.h. and the ride took two and a half hours.

At the junction he changed to an express elevator which lifted him out of the sector in ninety minutes, at 400 m.p.h. Another fifty minutes in a Through-Sector Special brought him to the Mainline Terminus which served the Union.

There he bought a coffee and gathered his determination together. Supersleepers ran east and west, halting at this and every tenth station. The next arrived in seventy-two hours time, westbound.

The Mainline Terminus was the largest station Franz had seen, a mile-long cavern thirty levels in depth. Hundreds of elevator shafts sank through the station and the maze of platforms, escalators, restaurants, hotels and theatres seemed like an exaggerated replica of the City itself.

Getting his bearings from one of the information booths, Franz made his way up an escalator to Tier 15, where the Supersleepers berthed. Running the length of the station were two steel vacuum tunnels each three hundred feet in diameter, supported at thirty-four intervals by huge concrete buttresses.

Franz walked along the platform and stopped by the telescopic gangway that plunged into one of the airlocks. Two hundred and seventy degrees true, he thought, gazing up at the curving underbelly of the tunnel. It must come out somewhere. He had forty-five dollars in his pocket, sufficient coffee and sandwich money to last him three weeks, six if he needed it, time anyway to find the City's end.

He passed the next three days nursing cups of coffee in any of the thirty cafeterias in the station, reading discarded newspapers and sleeping in the local Red trains which ran four-hour journeys round the nearest sector.

When at last the Supersleeper came in he joined the small group of Fire Police and municipal officials waiting by the gangway, and followed them into the train. There were two cars; a sleeper which no one used, and a day coach.

Franz took an inconspicuous corner seat near one of the indicator panels in the day coach, and pulled out his notebook ready to make his first entry.

1st Day: West 2700. Union 4,350.

„Coming out for a drink?“ a Fire Captain across the aisle asked. „We have a ten-minute break here.“

„No thanks,“ Franz said. „I'll hold your seat for you.“

Dollar five a cubic foot. Free space, he knew, would bring the price down. There was no need to leave the train or make too many inquiries. All he had to do was borrow a paper and watch the market averages.

2nd Day: West 2700. Union 7,550.

„They're slowly cutting down on these Sleepers,“ someone told him. „Everyone sits in the day coach. Look at this one. Seats sixty, and only four people in it. There's no need to move around. People are staying where they are. In a few years there'll be nothing left but the suburban services.“

97 cents.

At an average of a dollar a cubic foot, Franz calculated idly, it's so far worth about \$4 x 10²⁷.

„Going on to the next stop, are you? Well, goodbye, young fellow.“

Few of the passengers stayed on the Sleeper for more than three or four hours. By the end of the second day Franz's back and neck ached from the constant acceleration. He managed to take a little exercise walking up and down the narrow corridor in the deserted sleeping coach, but had to spend most of his time strapped to his seat as the train began its long braking runs into the next station.

3rd Day: West 2700. Federation 657.

„Interesting, but how could you demonstrate it?“

„It's just an odd idea of mine,“ Franz said, screwing up the sketch and dropping it in the disposal chute. „Hasn't any real application.“

„Curious, but it rings a bell somewhere.“

Franz sat up. „Do you mean you’ve seen machines like this? In a newspaper or a book?“

„No, no. In a dream.“

Every half day’s run the pilot signed the log, the crew handed over to their opposites on an Eastbound sleeper, crossed the platform and started back for home.

125 cents.

\$8 x 1028.

4th Day: West 2700. Federation 1,225.

„Dollar a cubic foot. You in the estate business?“

„Starting up,“ Franz said easily. „I’m hoping to open a new office of my own.“

He played cards, bought coffee and rolls from the dispenser in the washroom, watched the indicator panel and listened to the talk around him.

„Believe me, a time will come when each union, each sector, almost I might say, each street and avenue will have achieved complete local independence. Equipped with its own power services, aerators, reservoirs, farm laboratories.“

The car bore.

\$6 x 10.

5th Day: West 2700. 17th Greater Federation.

At a kiosk on the station Franz bought a clip of razor blades and glanced at the brochure put out by the local chamber of commerce.

„12,000 levels, 98 cents a foot, unique Elm Drive, fire safety records unequalled...“

He went back to the train, shaved, and counted the thirty dollars left. He was now ninety-five million Great-Miles from the suburban station on 984th Street and he knew he could not delay his return much longer. Next time he would save up a couple of thousand.

\$7 x 10127.

7th Day: West 2700. 212th Metropolitan Empire.

Franz peered at the indicator.

„Aren’t we stopping here?“ he asked a man three seats away. „I wanted to find out the market average.“

„Varies. Anything from fifty cents a—“

„Fifty!“ Franz shot back, jumping up. „When’s the next stop? I’ve got to get off!“

„Not here, son.“ He put out a restraining hand. „This is Night Town. You in real estate?“

Franz nodded, holding himself back. „I thought...“

„Relax.“ He came and sat opposite Franz. „It’s just one big slum. Dead areas. In places it goes as low as five cents. There are no services, no power.“

It took them two days to pass through.

„City Authority are starting to seal it off,“ the man told him. „Huge blocks. It’s the only thing they can do. What happens to the people inside I hate to think.“ He chewed on a sandwich. „Strange, but there are a lot of these black areas. You don’t hear about them, but they’re growing. Starts in a back street in some

ordinary dollar neighbourhood; a bottleneck in the sewage disposal system, not enough ash cans, and before you know it a million cubic miles have gone back to jungle. They try a relief scheme, pump in a little cyanide, and then—brick it up. Once they do that they're closed for good."

Franz nodded, listening to the dull humming air.

"Eventually there'll be nothing left but these black areas. The City will be one huge cemetery!"

10th Day: East 900.755th Greater Metropolitan—

"Wait!" Franz leapt out of his seat and stared at the indicator panel.

"What's the matter?" someone opposite asked.

"East!" Franz shouted. He banged the panel sharply with his hand but the lights held. "Has this train changed direction?"

"No, it's eastbound," another of the passengers told him. "Are you on the wrong train?"

"It should be heading west," Franz insisted. "It has been for the last ten days."

"Ten days!" the man exclaimed. "Have you been on this sleeper for ten days?"

Franz went forward and found the car attendant. "Which way is this train going? West?"

The attendant shook his head. "East, sir. It's always been going east."

"You're crazy," Franz snapped. "I want to see the pilot's log."

"I'm afraid that isn't possible. May I see your ticket, sir?"

"Listen," Franz said weakly, all the accumulated frustration of the last twenty years mounting inside him. "I've been on this..."

He stopped and went back to his seat.

The five other passengers watched him carefully.

"Ten days," one of them was still repeating in an awed voice.

Two minutes later someone came and asked Franz for his ticket.

"And of course it was completely in order," the police surgeon commented. "Strangely enough there's no regulation to prevent anyone else doing the same thing. I used to go for free rides myself when I was younger, though I never tried anything like your journey."

He went back to the desk. "We'll drop the charge," he said. "You're not a vagrant in any indictable sense, and the transport authorities can do nothing against you. How this curvature was built into the system they can't explain, it seems to be some inherent feature of the City itself. Now about yourself. Are you going to continue this search?"

"I want to build a flying machine," M. said carefully. "There must be free space somewhere. I don't know... perhaps on the lower levels."

The surgeon stood up. "I'll see the sergeant and get him to hand you over to one of our psychiatrists. He'll be able to help you with your dreams!"

The surgeon hesitated before opening the door. "Look," he began to explain, "you can't get out of time, can you? Subjectively it's a plastic dimension, but whatever you do to yourself you'll never be able to stop that clock"—he pointed to the one on the desk—"or make it run backwards. In exactly the same way you can't get out of the City."

„The analogy doesn't hold," M. said. He gestured at the walls around them and the lights in the street outside. „All this was built by us. The question nobody can answer is: what was here before we built it?"

„It's always been here," the surgeon said. „Not these particular bricks and girders, but others before them. You accept that time has no beginning and no end. The City is as old as time and continuous with it."

„The first bricks were laid by someone," M. insisted. „There was the Foundation."

„A myth. Only the scientists believe in that, and even they don't try to make too much of it. Most of them privately admit that the Foundation Stone is nothing more than a superstition. We pay it lip service out of convenience, and because it gives us a sense of tradition. Obviously there can't have been a first brick. If there was, how can you explain who laid it and, even more difficult, where they came from?"

„There must be free space somewhere," M. said doggedly. „The City must have bounds."

„Why?" the surgeon asked. „It can't be floating in the middle of nowhere. Or is that what you're trying to believe?"

M. sank back limply. „No."

The surgeon watched M. silently for a few minutes and paced back to the desk. „This peculiar fixation of yours puzzles me. You're caught between what the psychiatrists call paradoxical faces. I suppose you haven't misinterpreted something you've heard about the Wall?"

M. looked up. „Which wall?"

The surgeon nodded to himself. „Some advanced opinion maintains that there's a wall around the City, through which it's impossible to penetrate. I don't pretend to understand the theory myself. It's far too abstract and sophisticated. Anyway I suspect they've confused this Wall with the bricked-up black areas you passed through on the Sleeper. I prefer the accepted view that the City stretches out in all directions without limits."

He went over to the door. „Wait here, and I'll see about getting you a probationary release. Don't worry, the psychiatrists will straighten everything out for you."

When the surgeon had left M. stared at the floor, too exhausted to feel relieved. He stood up and stretched himself, walking unsteadily round the room.

Outside the last pilot lights were going out and the patrolman on the catwalk under the roof was using his torch. A police car roared down one of the avenues crossing the street, its rails screaming. Three lights snapped on along the street and then one by one went off again.

M. wondered why Gregson hadn't come down to the station. Then the calendar on the desk riveted his attention. The date exposed on the fly leaf was 12 August. That was the day he had started off on his journey—exactly three weeks ago.

Today!

* * * * *

Take a westbound Green to 298th Street, cross over at the intersection and get a Red elevator up to Level 237. Walk down to the station on Route 175, change to

a 438 suburban and go down to 795th Street. Take a Blue line to the Plaza, get off at 4th and 275th, turn left at the roundabout and You're back where you first started from. \$Hell x ion.

