

Mr F. is Mr F.

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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And baby makes three.

Eleven o'clock. Hanson should have reached here by now. Elizabeth! Damn, why does she always move so quietly?

Climbing down from the window overlooking the road, Freeman ran back to his bed and jumped in, smoothing the blankets over his knees. As his wife poked her head around the door he smiled up at her guilelessly, pretending to read a magazine.

„Everything all right?“ she asked, eyeing him shrewdly. She moved her matronly bulk towards him and began to straighten the bed. Freeman fidgeted irritably, pushing her away when she tried to lift him off the pillow on which he was sitting.

„For heaven's sake, Elizabeth, I'm not a child!“ he remonstrated, controlling his sing-song voice with difficulty.

„What's happened to Hanson? He was supposed to be here half an hour ago.“

His wife shook her large handsome head and went over to the window. The loose cotton dress disguised her figure, but as she reached up to the bolt Freeman could see the incipient swell of her pregnancy.

„He must have missed his train.“ With a single twist of her forearm she securely fastened the upper bolt, which had taken Freeman ten minutes to unlatch.

„I thought I could hear it banging,“ she said pointedly. „We don't want you to catch a cold, do we?“

Freeman waited impatiently for her to leave, glancing at his watch. When his wife paused at the foot of the bed, surveying him carefully, he could barely restrain himself from shouting at her.

„I'm getting the baby's clothes together,“ she said, adding aloud to herself, „which reminds me, you need a new dressing gown. That old one of yours is losing its shape.“

Freeman pulled the lapels of the dressing gown across each other, as much to hide his bare chest as to fill out the gown.

„Elizabeth, I've had this for years and it's perfectly good. You're getting an obsession about renewing everything.“ He hesitated, realizing the tactlessness of this remark—he should be flattered that she was identifying him with the expected baby. If the strength of the identification was sometimes alarming, this was probably because she was having her first child at a comparatively late age, in her early forties. Besides, he had been ill and bed-ridden during the past month (and what were his unconscious motives?) which only served to reinforce the confusion.

„Elizabeth. I'm sorry. It's been good of you to look after me. Perhaps we should call a doctor.“

No! something screamed inside him.

As if hearing this, his wife shook her head in agreement.

„You'll be all right soon. Let nature take its proper course. I don't think you need to see the doctor yet.“

Yet?

Freeman listened to her feet disappearing down the carpeted staircase. A few minutes later the sound of the washing machine drummed out from the kitchen.

Yet!

Freeman slipped quickly out of bed and went into the bathroom.

The cupboard beside the wash-basin was crammed with drying baby clothes, which Elizabeth had either bought or knitted, then carefully washed and sterilized. On each of the five shelves a large square of gauze covered the neat piles, but he could see that most of the clothes were blue, a few white and none pink.

I hope Elizabeth is right, he thought. If she is it's certainly going to be the world's best-dressed baby. We're supporting an industry single-handed.

He bent down to the bottom compartment, and from below the tank pulled out a small set of scales. On the shelf immediately above he noticed a large brown garment, a six-year-old's one-piece romper suit. Next to it was a set of vests, outside, almost big enough to fit Freeman himself. He stripped off his dressing gown and stepped on to the platform. In the mirror behind the door he examined his small hairless body, with its thin shoulders and narrow hips, long coltish legs.

Six stone nine pounds yesterday. Averting his eyes from the dial, he listened to the washing machine below, then waited for the pointer to steady.

„Six stone two pounds!“

Fumbling with his dressing gown, Freeman pushed the scales under the tank.

Six stone two pounds! A drop of seven pounds in twenty-four hours!

He hurried back into bed, and sat there trembling nervously, fingering for his vanished moustache.

Yet only two months ago he had weighed over eleven stone. Seven pounds in a single day, at this rate—His mind balked at the conclusion. Trying to steady his knees, he reached for one of the magazines, turned the pages blindly.

And baby makes two.

* * * * *

He had first become aware of the transformation six weeks earlier, almost immediately after Elizabeth's pregnancy had been confirmed.

Shaving the next morning in the bathroom before going to the office, he discovered that his moustache was thinning. The usually stiff black bristles were soft and flexible, taking on their former ruddy-brown colouring.

His beard, too, was lighter; normally dark and heavy after only a few hours, it yielded before the first few strokes of the razor, leaving his face pink and soft.

Freeman had credited this apparent rejuvenation to the appearance of the baby. He was forty when he married Elizabeth, two or three years her junior, and had assumed unconsciously that he was too old to become a parent, particularly as he had deliberately selected Elizabeth as an ideal mother-substitute, and saw himself as her child rather than as her parental partner. However, now that a child had actually materialized he felt no resentment towards it. Complimenting himself, he decided that he had entered a new phase of maturity and could whole-heartedly throw himself into the role of young parent.

Hence the disappearing moustache, the fading beard, the youthful spring in his step. He crooned: „Just Lizzie and me, And baby makes three.“

Behind him, in the mirror, he watched Elizabeth still asleep, her large hips filling the bed. He was glad to see her rest. Contrary to what he had expected, she was even more concerned with him than with the baby, refusing to allow him to prepare his own breakfast. As he brushed his hair, a rich blond growth, sweeping back off his forehead to cover his bald dome, he reflected wryly on the time-honoured saws in the maternity books about the hypersensitivity of expectant fathers—evidently Elizabeth took these counsels seriously.

He tiptoed back into the bedroom and stood by the open window, basking in the crisp early morning air. Downstairs, while he waited for breakfast, he pulled his old tennis racquet out of the hall cupboard, finally woke Elizabeth when one of his practice strokes cracked the glass in the barometer.

To begin with Freeman had revelled in his new-found energy. He took Elizabeth boating, rowing her furiously up and down the river, rediscovering all the physical pleasures he had been too preoccupied to enjoy in his early twenties. He would go shopping with Elizabeth, steering her smoothly along the pavement, carrying all her baby purchases, shoulders back, feeling ten feet tall.

However, it was here that he had his first inkling of what was really happening.

Elizabeth was a large woman, attractive in her way, with broad shoulders and strong hips, and accustomed to wearing high heels. Freeman, a stocky man of

medium height, had always been slightly shorter than her, but this had never worried him.

When he found that he barely reached above her shoulder he began to examine himself more closely.

On one of their shopping expeditions (Elizabeth always took Freeman with her, unselfishly asked his opinions, what he preferred, almost as if he would be wearing the tiny matinee coats and dresses) a saleswoman unwittingly referred to Elizabeth as his „mother“. Jolted, Freeman had recognized the obvious disparity between them—the pregnancy was making Elizabeth’s face puffy, filling out her neck and shoulders, while his own features were smooth and unlined.

When they reached home he wandered around the lounge and dining room, realized that the furniture and bookshelves seemed larger and more bulky. Upstairs in the bathroom he climbed on the scales for the first time, found that he had lost one stone six pounds in weight.

Undressing that night, he made another curious discovery.

Elizabeth was taking in the seams of his jackets and trousers. She had said nothing to him about this, and when he saw her sewing away over her needle basket he had assumed she was preparing something for the baby.

During the next days his first flush of spring vigour faded. Strange changes were taking place in his body—his skin and hair, his entire musculature, seemed transformed. The planes of his face had altered, the jaw was trimmer, the nose less prominent, cheeks smooth and unblemished.

Examining his mouth in the mirror, he found that most of his old metal fillings had vanished, firm white enamel taking their place.

He continued to go to the office, conscious of the stares of his colleagues around him. The day after he found he could no longer reach the reference books on the shelf behind his desk he stayed at home, feigning an attack of influenza.

Elizabeth seemed to understand completely. Freeman had said nothing to her, afraid that she might be terrified into a miscarriage if she learned the truth. Swathed in his old dressing gown, a woollen scarf around his neck and chest to make his slim figure appear more bulky, he sat on the sofa in the lounge, blankets piled across him, a firm cushion raising him higher off the seat.

Carefully he tried to avoid standing whenever Elizabeth was in the room, and when absolutely necessary circled behind the furniture on tiptoe.

A week later, however, when his feet no longer touched the floor below the dining-room table, he decided to remain in his bed upstairs.

Elizabeth agreed readily. All the while she watched her husband with her bland impassive eyes, quietly readying herself for the baby.

Damn Hanson, Freeman thought. At eleven forty-five he had still not appeared. Freeman flipped through the magazine without looking at it, glancing irritably at his watch every few seconds. The strap was now too large for his wrist and twice he had prised additional holes for the clasp.

How to describe his metamorphosis to Hanson he had not decided, plagued as he was by curious doubts. He was not even sure what was happening. Certainly he had lost a remarkable amount of weight—up to eight or nine pounds each day—and almost a foot in height, but without any accompanying loss of health. He had, in fact, reverted to the age and physique of a fourteen-year-old schoolboy.

But what was the real explanation? Freeman asked himself. Was the rejuvenation some sort of psychosomatic excess? Although he felt no conscious animosity towards the expected baby, was he in the grip of an insane attempt at retaliation?

It was this possibility, with its logical prospect of padded cells and white-coated guards, that had frightened Freeman into silence. Elizabeth's doctor was brusque and unsympathetic, and almost certainly would regard Freeman as a neurotic malingerer, perpetrating an elaborate charade designed to substitute himself for his own child in his wife's affections.

Also, Freeman knew, there were other motives, obscure and intangible. Frightened of examining them, he began to read the magazine.

It was a schoolchild's comic. Annoyed, Freeman stared at the cover, then looked at the stack of magazines which Elizabeth had ordered from the newsagent that morning. They were all the same.

His wife entered her bedroom on the other side of the landing. Freeman slept alone now in what would eventually be the baby's nursery, partly to give himself enough privacy to think, and also, to save him the embarrassment of revealing his shrinking body to his wife.

She came in, carrying a small tray on which were a glass of warm milk and two biscuits. Although he was losing weight, Freeman had the eager appetite of a child. He took the biscuits and ate them hurriedly.

Elizabeth sat on the bed, producing a brochure from the pocket of her apron.

„I want to order the baby's cot,“ she told him. „Would you like to choose one of the designs?“

Freeman waved airily. „Any of them will do. Pick one that's strong and heavy, something he won't be able to climb out of too easily.“

His wife nodded, watching him pensively. All afternoon she spent ironing and cleaning, moving the piles of dry linen into the cupboards on the landing, disinfecting pails and buckets.

They had decided she would have the baby at home.

Four and a half stone!

Freeman gasped at the dial below his feet. During the previous two days he had lost over one stone six pounds, had barely been able to reach up to the handle of the cupboard and open the door. Trying not to look at himself in the mirror, he realized he was now the size of a six-year-old, with a slim chest, slender neck and face. The skirt of the dressing gown trailed across the floor behind him, and only with difficulty could he keep his arms through the voluminous sleeves.

When Elizabeth came up with his breakfast she examined him critically, put the tray down and went out to one of the landing cupboards. She returned with a small sports-shirt and a pair of corduroy shorts.

„Would you like to wear these, dear?“ she asked. „You'll find them more comfortable.“

Reluctant to use his voice, which had degenerated into a piping treble, Freeman shook his head. After she had gone, however, he pulled off the heavy dressing gown and put on the garments.

Suppressing his doubts, he wondered how to reach the doctor without having to go downstairs to the telephone. So far he had managed to avoid raising his wife's

suspicious, but now there was no hope of continuing to do so. He barely reached up to her waist. If she saw him standing upright she might well die of shock on the spot.

Fortunately, Elizabeth left him alone. Once, just after lunch, two men arrived in a van from the department store and delivered a blue cot and play-pen, but he pretended to be asleep until they had gone. Despite his anxiety, Freeman easily fell asleep—he had begun to feel tired after lunch—and woke two hours later to find that Elizabeth had made the bed in the cot, swathing the blue blankets and pillow in a plastic sheet.

Below this, shackled to the wooden sides, he could see the white leather straps of a restraining harness.

The next morning Freeman decided to escape. His weight was down to only three stone one pound, and the clothes Elizabeth had given him the previous day were already three sizes too large, the trousers supporting themselves precariously around his slender waist. In the bathroom mirror Freeman stared at the small boy, watching him with wide eyes. Dimly he remembered snapshots of his own childhood.

After breakfast, when Elizabeth was out in the garden, he crept downstairs. Through the window he saw her open the dustbin and push inside his business suit and black leather shoes.

Freeman waited helplessly for a moment, and then hurried back to his room. Striding up the huge steps required more effort than he imagined, and by the time he reached the top flight he was too exhausted to climb on to the bed. Panting, he leaned against it for a few minutes. Even if he reached the hospital, how could he convince anyone there of what had happened without having to call Elizabeth along to identify him?

Fortunately, his intelligence was still intact. Given a pencil and paper he would soon demonstrate his adult mind, a circumstantial knowledge of social affairs that no infant prodigy could ever possess.

His first task was to reach the hospital or, failing that, the local police station. Luckily, all he needed to do was walk along the nearest main thoroughfare—a four-year-old child wandering about on his own would soon be picked up by a constable on duty.

Below, he heard Elizabeth come slowly up the stairs, the laundry basket creaking under her arm. Freeman tried to lift himself on to the bed, but only succeeded in disarranging the sheets. As Elizabeth opened the door he ran around to the far side of the bed and hid his tiny body behind it, resting his chin on the bedspread.

Elizabeth paused, watching his small plump face. For a moment they gazed at each other, Freeman's heart pounding, wondering how she could fail to realize what had happened to him. But she merely smiled and walked through into the bathroom.

Supporting himself on the bedside table, he climbed in, his face away from the bathroom door. On her way out Elizabeth bent down and tucked him up, then slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind her.

The rest of the day Freeman waited for an opportunity to escape, but his wife was busy upstairs, and early that evening, before he could prevent himself, he fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

He woke in a vast white room. Blue light dappled the high walls, along which a line of giant animal figures danced and gambolled. Looking around, he realized that he was still in the nursery. He was wearing a small pair of polka-dot pyjamas (had Elizabeth changed him while he slept?) but they were almost too large for his shrunken arms and legs.

A miniature dressing gown had been laid out across the foot of the bed, a pair of slippers on the floor. Freeman climbed down from the bed and put them on, his balance unsteady. The door was closed, but he pulled a chair over and stood on it, turning the handle with his two small fists.

On the landing he paused, listening carefully. Elizabeth was in the kitchen, humming to herself. One step at a time, Freeman moved down the staircase, watching his wife through the rail. She was standing over the cooker, her broad back almost hiding the machine, warming some milk gruel. Freeman waited until she turned to the sink, then ran across the hall into the lounge and out through the french windows.

The thick soles of his carpet slippers muffled his footsteps, and he broke into a run once he reached the shelter of the front garden. The gate was almost too stiff for him to open, and as he fumbled with the latch a middleaged woman stopped and peered down at him, frowning at the windows.

Freeman pretended to run back into the house, hoping that Elizabeth had not yet discovered his disappearance. When the woman moved off, he opened the gate, and hurried down the street towards the shopping centre.

He had entered an enormous world. The two-storey houses loomed like canyon walls, the end of the street one hundred yards away below the horizon. The paving stones were massive and uneven, the tall sycamores as distant as the sky. A car came towards him, daylight between its wheels, hesitated and sped on.

He was still fifty yards from the corner when he tripped over one of the pavement stones and was forced to stop. Out of breath, he leaned against a tree, his legs exhausted.

He heard a gate open, and over his shoulder saw Elizabeth glance up and down the street. Quickly he stepped behind the tree, waited until she returned to the house, and then set off again.

Suddenly, sweeping down from the sky, a vast arm lifted him off his feet. Gasping with surprise, he looked up into the face of Mr Symonds, his bank manager.

„You're out early, young man,“ Symonds said. He put Freeman down, holding him tightly by one hand. His car was parked in the drive next to them. Leaving the engine running, he began to walk Freeman back down the street. „Now, let's see, where do you live?“

Freeman tried to pull himself away, jerking his arm furiously, but Symonds hardly noticed his efforts. Elizabeth stepped out of the gate, an apron around her waist, and hurried towards them. Freeman tried to hide between Symonds' legs, felt himself picked up in the bank manager's strong arms and handed to

Elizabeth. She held him firmly, his head over her broad shoulder, thanked Symonds and carried him back into the house.

As they crossed the pathway Freeman hung limply, trying to will himself out of existence.

In the nursery he waited for his feet to touch the bed, ready to dive below the blankets, but instead Elizabeth lowered him carefully to the floor, and he discovered he had been placed in the baby's play-pen. He held the rail uncertainly, while Elizabeth bent over and straightened his dressing gown. Then, to Freeman's relief, she turned away.

For five minutes Freeman stood numbly by the rail, outwardly recovering his breath, but at the same time gradually realizing something of which he had been dimly afraid for several days—by an extraordinary inversion of logic, Elizabeth identified him with the baby inside her womb! Far from showing surprise at Freeman's transformation into a three-year-old child, his wife merely accepted this as a natural concomitant of her own pregnancy. In her mind she had externalized the child within her. As Freeman shrank progressively smaller, mirroring the growth of her child, her eyes were fixed on their common focus, and all she could see was the image of her baby.

Still searching for a means of escape, Freeman discovered that he was unable to climb out of the play-pen. The light wooden bars were too strong for his small arms to break, the whole cage too heavy to lift. Exhausting himself, he sat down on the floor, and fiddled nervously with a large coloured ball.

Instead of trying to evade Elizabeth and hide his transformation from her, he realized that he must now attract her attention and force her to recognize his real identity.

Standing up, he began to rock the play-pen from side to side, edging it across to the wall where the sharp corner set up a steady battering.

Elizabeth came out of her bedroom.

„Now, darling, what's all the noise for?“ she asked, smiling at him. „How about a biscuit?“ She knelt down by the pen, her face only a few inches from Freeman's.

Screwing up his courage, Freeman looked straight at her, searching the large, unblinking eyes. He took the biscuit, cleared his throat and said carefully: „I'd nod blor aby.“

Elizabeth ruffled his long blond hair. „Aren't you, darling? What a sad shame.“

Freeman stamped his foot, then flexed his lips. „I'd nod blor aby!“ he shouted. „I'd blor usban!“

Laughing to herself, Elizabeth began to empty the wardrobe beside the bed. As Freeman remonstrated with her, struggling helplessly with the strings of consonants, she took out his dinner jacket and overcoat. Then she emptied the chest of drawers, lifting out his shirts and socks, and wrapped them away inside a sheet.

After she had carried everything out she returned and stripped the bed, pushed it back against the wall, putting the baby cot in its place.

Clutching the rail of the play-pen, Freeman watched dumbfounded as the last remnants of his former existence were dispatched below.

„Lisbeg, lep me, I'd—!“

He gave up, searched the floor of the play-pen for something to write with. Summoning his energies, he rocked the cot over to the wall, and in large letters, using the spit which flowed amply from his mouth, wrote: ELIZABETH HELP ME! I AM NOT A BABY! Banging on the door with his fists, he finally attracted Elizabeth's attention, but when he pointed to the wall the marks had dried. Weeping with frustration, Freeman toddled across the cage and began to retrace the message. Before he had completed more than two or three letters Elizabeth put her arms around his waist and lifted him out.

A single place had been set at the head of the dining-room table, a new high chair beside it. Still trying to form a coherent sentence, Freeman felt himself rammed into the seat, a large bib tied around his neck.

During the meal he watched Elizabeth carefully, hoping to detect in her motionless face some inkling of recognition, even a fleeting awareness that the two-year-old child sitting in front of her was her husband. Freeman played with his food, smearing crude messages on the tray around his dish, but when he pointed at them Elizabeth clapped her hands, apparently joining in his little triumphs, and then wiped the tray clean. Worn out, Freeman let himself be carried upstairs, lay strapped in the cot under the miniature blankets.

Time was against him. By now, he found, he was asleep for the greater portion of each day. For the first hours he felt fresh and alert, but his energy faded rapidly and after each meal an overwhelming lethargy closed his eyes like a sleeping draught. Dimly he was aware that his metamorphosis continued unchecked—when he woke he could sit up only with difficulty. The effort of standing upright on his buckling legs tired him after a few minutes.

His power of speech had vanished. All he could produce were a few grotesque grunts, or an inarticulate babble. Lying on his back with a bottle of hot milk in his mouth, he knew that his one hope was Hanson. Sooner or later he would call in and discover that Freeman had disappeared and all traces of him had been carefully removed.

Propped against a cushion on the carpet in the lounge, Freeman noted that Elizabeth had emptied his desk and taken down his books from the shelves beside the fireplace. To all intents she was now the widowed mother of a twelvemonth-old son, parted from her husband since their honeymoon.

Unconsciously she had begun to assume this role. When they went out for their morning walks, Freeman strapped back into the pram, a celluloid rabbit rattling a few inches from his nose and almost driving him insane, they passed many people he had known by sight, and all took it for granted that he was Elizabeth's son. As they bent over the pram, poking him in the stomach and complimenting Elizabeth on his size and precosity, several of them referred to her husband, and Elizabeth replied that he was away on an extended trip. In her mind, obviously, she had already dismissed Freeman, forgetting that he had ever existed.

He realized how wrong he was when they returned from what was to be his last outing.

As they neared home Elizabeth hesitated slightly, jolting the pram, apparently uncertain whether to retrace her steps. Someone shouted at them from the distance, and as Freeman tried to identify the familiar voice Elizabeth bent forwards and pulled the hood over his head.

Struggling to free himself, Freeman recognized the tall figure of Hanson towering over the pram, doffing his hat.

„Mrs Freeman, I’ve been trying to ring you all week. How are you?“

„Very well, Mr Hanson.“ She jerked the pram around, trying to keep it between herself and Hanson. Freeman could see that she was momentarily confused. „I’m afraid our telephone is out of order.“

Hanson side-stepped around the pram, watching Elizabeth with interest. „What happened to Charles on Saturday? Have to go off on business?“

Elizabeth nodded. „He was very sorry, Mr Hanson, but something important came up. He’ll be away for some time.“

She knew, Freeman said automatically to himself.

Hanson peered under the hood at Freeman. „Out for a morning stroll, little chap?“ To Elizabeth he commented: „Fine baby there. I always like the angry-looking ones. Your neighbour’s?“

Elizabeth shook her head. „The son of a friend of Charles’s. We must be getting along, Mr Hanson.“

„Do call me Robert. See you again soon, eh?“

Elizabeth smiled, her face composed again. „I’m sure we will, Robert.“

„Good show.“ With a roguish grin, Hanson walked off.

She knew!

Astounded, Freeman pushed the blankets back as far as he could, watching Hanson’s retreating figure. He turned once to wave to Elizabeth, who raised her hand and then steered the pram through the gate.

Freeman tried to sit up, his eyes fixed on Elizabeth, hoping she would see the anger in his face. But she wheeled the pram swiftly into the passageway, unfastened the straps and lifted Freeman out.

As they went up the staircase he looked down over her shoulder at the telephone, saw that the receiver was off its cradle. All along she had known what was happening, had deliberately pretended not to notice his metamorphosis. She had anticipated each stage of the transformation, the comprehensive wardrobe had been purchased well in advance, the succession of smaller and smaller garments, the play-pen and cot, had been ordered for him, not for the baby.

For a moment Freeman wondered whether she was pregnant at all. The facial puffiness, the broadening figure, might well have been illusory. When she told him she was expecting a baby he had never imagined that he would be the baby.

Handling him roughly, she bundled Freeman into his cot and secured him under the blankets. Downstairs he could hear her moving about rapidly, apparently preparing for some emergency. Propelled by an uncharacteristic urgency, she was closing the windows and doors. As he listened to her, Freeman noticed how cold he felt. His small body was swaddled like a new-born infant in a mass of shawls, but his bones were like sticks of ice. A curious drowsiness was coming over him, draining away his anger and fear, and the centre of his awareness was shifting from his eyes to his skin. The thin afternoon light stung his eyes, and as they closed he slipped off into a blurring limbo of shallow sleep, the tender surface of his body aching for relief.

Some while later he felt Elizabeth’s hands pull away the blankets, and was aware of her carrying him across the hallway. Gradually his memory of the house

and his own identity began to fade, and his shrinking body clung helplessly to Elizabeth as she lay on her broad bed.

Hating the naked hair that rasped across his face, he now felt clearly for the first time what he had for so long repressed. Before the end he cried out suddenly with joy and wonder, as he remembered the drowned world of his first childhood.

As the child within her quietened, stirring for the last time, Elizabeth sank back on to the pillow, the birth pains slowly receding. Gradually she felt her strength return, the vast world within her settling and annealing itself. Staring at the darkened ceiling, she lay resting for several hours, now and then adjusting her large figure to fit the unfamiliar contours of the bed.

The next morning she rose for half an hour. The child already seemed less burdensome, and three days later she was able to leave her bed completely, a loose smock hiding what remained of her pregnancy. Immediately she began the last task, clearing away all that remained of the baby's clothing, dismantling the cot and play-pen. The clothing she tied into large parcels, then telephoned a local charity which came and collected them. The pram and cot she sold to the second-hand dealer who drove down the street. Within two days she had erased every trace of her husband, stripping the coloured illustrations from the nursery walls and replacing the spare bed in the centre of the floor.

All that remained was the diminishing knot within her, a small clenching fist. When she could almost no longer feel it Elizabeth went to her jewel box and took off her wedding ring.

On her return from the shopping centre the next morning, Elizabeth noticed someone hailing her from a car parked outside her gate.

„Mrs Freeman!“ Hanson jumped out of the car and accosted her gaily. „It's wonderful to see you looking so well.“

Elizabeth gave him a wide heart-warming smile, her handsome face made more sensual by the tumescence of her features. She was wearing a bright silk dress and all visible traces of the pregnancy had vanished.

„Where's Charles?“ Hanson asked. „Still away?“

Elizabeth's smile broadened, her lips parted across her strong white teeth. Her face was curiously expressionless, her eyes momentarily fixed on some horizon far beyond Hanson's face.

Hanson waited uncertainly for Elizabeth to reply. Then, taking the hint, he leaned back into his car and switched off the engine. He rejoined Elizabeth, holding the gate open for her.

So Elizabeth met her husband. Three hours later the metamorphosis of Charles Freeman reached its climax. In that last second Freeman came to his true beginning, the moment of his conception coinciding with the moment of his extinction, the end of his last birth with the beginning of his first death.

And baby makes one.

