

The Star Dummy

Anthony Boucher

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ANTHONY BOUCHER

THE STAR DUMMY

"... It's something outside of me," Paul Peters found himself saying. "I've read stories, Father, about ... losing control. It sounded absurd. But this is real. It ... he talks to me."

It was close and dark in the booth, but Paul could almost see the slow smile spreading from the Paulist priest. "My son, I know that anonymity is usual in the confessional booth. But since there is only one professional ventriloquist in this parish, it's a little hard to maintain in this case, isn't it? And knowing you as I do outside of the confessional, Paul, does make a difference in advising you. You say that your dummy—"

"Chuck Woodchuck," Paul muttered venomously.

"Chuck talks back to you, says things not in your mind?"

"Yes."

"Not even in your subconscious mind?"

"Can my conscious mind answer that?"

"Question withdrawn. Paul, to certain souls I might say simply fast and pray. To others I might suggest consulting

with the Archbishop for permission for a formal exorcism. To you, however, I think I might make a more materialistic recommendation: see an analyst."

Paul groaned in the darkness. "It's more than that. It's something *outside* of me...."

"Occam's razor," the Paulist murmured. "With your fondness for science fiction, you'll appreciate that. See if the simplest answer works. If it doesn't, we can discuss less materialistic causes. See an analyst. And perhaps you needn't offend the good doctor by telling him that I also advise prayer along with his treatment."

"... and I see no reason," the eminent analyst concluded, "why we should not dispel your demon in a relatively brief time. In fact, young man, we'll leave you in better shape than when you started having these hallucinations. Your choice of profession is of course highly symptomatic. A predilection for ventriloquism clearly indicates a basically schizoid personality, which chooses to externalize one portion of itself."

Paul brought his attention back from the splendid view of the Bay. "And you'll fix that up?"

The analyst deigned to smile. "Easily, I hope."

"I don't know," Paul ventured, "if you've heard of a friend of mine named Joe Henderson? Writes science fiction?"

"That escapist dianetics-spawning rubbish?" the analyst exclaimed, as if each word were spelled with four letters.

"As you say. My friend went to an analyst, and in the course of the first interview mentioned his profession. 'Aha!' said the doctor gleefully. 'We'll soon put a stop to that nonsense!'"

"Sound attitude," the analyst agreed.

"Only it occurred to Joe that then how was he going to pay his bills—including, of course, the doctor's. So somehow Joe never did get himself analyzed...."

Paul got up hesitantly. "I'm a professional ventriloquist, Doctor. I'm a good one. I make good money. At least, I used to when..." his voice became a little unsteady for a trained ventriloquist, or even for a normal man ... "when Chuck was nothing more than an amusingly carved piece of wood. It's the only business I know. If you 'cure' me of it, well—Othello's occupation's gone."

"This Othello." The analyst's eyes sharpened. "Another externalization? Does he speak to you too?"

"Tell you what," said Paul. "I'll send Chuck in to see you. He'll tell you more about me than I can."

Which was perfectly true, Paul thought as he rode down fifteen stories. Could anyone, even the psychiatrist—even the priest—imagine what it was like to sit there awake all night in the dark room with the carved wood telling you all about yourself? All the little indecencies, the degradations of

humanity hidden deep under your thoughts. Taunting you with the baseness of your flesh viewed with a cold contempt which only wood could feel. Sitting there listening, listening and feeling the contempt probe ever more deeply, ever more accurately.

Somehow he was on the sidewalk in front of the office building, shaking so violently that he suddenly had to force his hands around the standard of a No-Parking sign to keep himself erect.

Fortunately, this was San Francisco, where no one is ever far from a bar. When he was capable again of freeing one hand from the standard, he made the sign of the cross and moved off. A brief wordless prayer and two wordless straight bourbons later he knew, since he could not return to the room where the wood lay, the best place for him that afternoon.

The zoo is a perfect place for relaxation, for undoing internal knots. Paul had often found it so when baffled by script problems, or by the idiosyncrasies of agencies and sponsors. Here are minds of a different order, a cleaner, freer creation to which you can abandon yourself, oblivious of human complexities.

He knew most of the animals by sight as individuals, and he had even acquired a better-than-nodding acquaintance with many of the attendants. It was one of these who literally bumped into him as he stood in front of the parrot cage, and

proceeded to make the afternoon far more distracting than he had ever anticipated.

"Tim!" Paul exclaimed. "Where on earth are you running to? Or from? Lion escaped or what?"

"Mr. Peters!" the attendant gasped. "I been chasing all over the place making phone calls to God knows who all. There's something screwy going on over in the wombats'."

"It couldn't pick a better place," Paul smiled. "Catch your breath a minute and tell me what gives."

"Got a cigarette? Thanks. Well, Mr. Peters, I'll tell you: couple of times lately some of the boys they say they see something funny in one of the cages. Somebody checks up, it's always gone. Only today it's in there with the wombats and everybody's looking at it and nobody knows what—"

Paul Peters had always had a highly developed sense of curiosity. (Schizoid externalization? he reflected. No, cancel that. You're forgetting things. This may be fun.) He was already walking toward the wombats' enclosure as he asked, "This thing. What does it look like?"

"Well, Mr. Peters, it's pretty much like a koala," Tim explained, "except for where it's like an anteater."

Paul was never able to better that description. With the exception, of course, that neither koalas nor anteaters have six-digitated forepaws with opposing thumbs. But that factor was not obvious on first glance.

He could see the thing now, and it was in body very much like an outsize koala—that oddly charming Australian eucalyptus-climber after whom the Teddy bear was patterned. It had no visible pouch—but then it might be a male—and its ears were less prominent. Its body was about two feet long. And its face was nothing like the flat and permanently startled visage of the koala, but a hairless expanse sloping from a high forehead, past sharp bright eyes, to a protracted proboscis which did indeed resemble nothing so much as the snout of an anteater.

The buzz through which they pushed their way consisted chiefly of "What *is* that?" and "I don't know," with an occasional treble obbligato of "*Why* don't you know, Daddy?"

But it was not what it was so much as what it was doing that fascinated Paul. It concentrated on rubbing its right forepaw in circles on the ground, abruptly looking up from time to time at the nearest wombat, while those stumpy marsupials either stared at it detachedly or backed away with suspicion.

"When the other boys saw it," Paul asked, "what was it doing then?"

"It's funny you ask that, Mr. Peters, on account of that's one of the things that's funny about it. What it was doing, I mean. One time when it was in with the llamas it was doing like this, just playing in the dirt."

"Playing?" Paul wondered softly.

"Only when it was in with the monkeys it was chattering at them something fierce, just like a monkey too, this guy said. And when it was in with the lions, well I'm not asking you to believe this and God knows I didn't yesterday and I don't know as I do now, but this other guy says it gives a roar just like a lion. Only not *just* like, of course, because look at it, but like as if you didn't have your radio turned up quite enough."

"Wombats don't make much noise, do they? Or llamas?" All right, Paul said to himself. You're crazy. This is worse than wood talking; but it's nicer. And there *is* a pattern. "Tim," he said abruptly, "can you let me in the wombat enclosure?"

"Jeez, Mr. Peters, there's bigshots coming from the University and ... But you did give us that show for free at the pension benefit and ... And," Tim concluded more firmly as he tucked the five unobtrusively into his pocket, "can do, I guess. O.K., everybody! Let's have a little room here. Got to let Dr. Peters in!"

Paul hesitated at the gate. This was unquestionably either the most momentous or the most ridiculous effort he had made in a reasonably momentous-ridiculous life. "Joe Henderson, thou shouldst be with me at this hour!" he breathed, and went in.

He walked up to where the creature squatted by its circles.

He knelt down beside it and pointed his forefinger, first at the small central circle with the lines sticking out all around

it, then up at the sun. Next he tapped his finger insistently on the unmarked ground, then thrust it at the large dot on the third of the bigger concentric circles.

The creature looked up at him, and for the first time in his life Paul understood just what Keats had meant by a *wild surmise*. He saw it on the creature's face, and he felt it thrill through his own being.

An animal who can draw, an animal who can recognize a crude diagram of the solar system, is rational—is not merely a beast like the numbly staring wombats.

Hastily the creature held up a single digit of one forepaw and then drew a straight line in the dirt. Paul did the same, with an amused sudden realization of the fact that the figure *one* is probably a straight line in almost any system.

The creature held up two fingers and made an odd squiggle. Paul held up two fingers and made our own particular odd squiggle which is shaped 2. They almost raced each other through the next three numbers.

At the squiggle shape 5, the creature looked at Paul's five fingers, hesitated, then advanced by a daring step. It held up both its hands, each with its six digits, and made a straight line followed by an *S*-shaped curve.

Paul thought frantically, and wished that he had majored in mathematics. He held up his ten fingers, then marked down a straight line followed by a circle. The creature paused a moment, as if rapidly calculating. Then it nodded, looked

carefully at Paul's 2 squiggle, held up its own twelve fingers again, and wrote down *12*.

Paul sank back on his heels. This twelve-fingered being had, as was plausible, a duodecimal system, based on twelve as our decimal system is on ten.

And it had almost instantaneously grasped the human ten-system so well as to write down its *twelve* in our method.

"Friend," said Paul softly, pitching his voice too low for the crowds outside the enclosure, "you can't understand my language; but in the name of God and Man, welcome to Earth."

"Oh dear," said the creature, "you communicate only by speech! And otherwise you seem such a highly rational being."

Paul gulped. "That's an accusation I haven't had leveled against me recently."

"I never dreamed," it went on, "that the beings shaped like you were the rational ones. I couldn't get any waves from them. I can from you, though, even enough to pick up the language."

"And you got waves from the other animals," Paul mused. "That's why you chattered like a monkey and roared like a lion-not-turned-up-enough. Only they didn't understand your diagrams, so you knew they weren't high enough for you to deal with."

"But why do you have waves and not the others?"

"I am not," said Paul hastily, "a mutant. We can figure out why later. The trouble right now, if I know anything about the people-without-waves, is that nobody's going to believe a word of this scene. As if indeed I did. But it's nicer than wood...."

The creature shuddered, then apologized. "I'm sorry. Something I touched in there...."

"I know," said Paul, abruptly grave and humble. "Maybe we can help each other. God grant. I'm taking a chance—but I think the first thing is to get you out of here before Tim's 'bigshots from the University' show up and maybe decide to dissect you. Will you trust me?"

The pause was a long one—long enough for Paul to think of all the vile weakness of his humanity and know his infinite unworthiness of trust. He could hear the words pouring forth from the wood—and then the creature said simply, "Yes."

And the wood was silent even in memory.

Never, Paul felt, had he invested twenty dollars more wisely. And never had he discovered such unsuspected inborn acting talent as Tim's. There was something approaching genius, in a pure vein of Stanislavsky realism, in Tim's denunciation of Paul as a publicity-seeker—in his explanation to the crowd that the koala-like object was a highly ingenious mechanical dummy planted here by a venal

ventriloquist who had planned to "discover" it as some strange being and trade on the good name of the Zoo itself for his own selfish promotional advancement. Bitter lashings of denunciation followed Paul and the creature as they departed—a matter of minutes, Tim confessed *sotto voce*, before the professors from across the Bay were due.

Now they were parked by the beach in Paul's convertible. Sensibly, he felt he should head for home and privacy; but he still could not quite bring himself to enter that room where Chuck Woodchuck waited.

"First of all, I suppose," he ventured, "comes: what's your name?"

"The nearest, my dear Paul, that your phonetics can come to it is something like *Tarvish*."

"Glad to meet you. Now—how did you know mine? But of course," he added hastily, "if you can read ... Well, next: where are you from? Mars?"

Tarvish thought. "Mars ... Ah, you mean the fourth planet? All that sand..." He shuddered as if at a memory of infinite boredom. "No. I'm from a planet called Earth, which revolves around a star called the sun."

"Look!" Paul exclaimed. "Fun's fun, but isn't this a little too much of a muchness? This is Earth. That ball getting low over there is the sun. And you—"

"Don't you understand?" The tip of Tarvish's nose twitched faintly. "Then ask me what kind of a creature I am, what race

I belong to."

"All right, Mr. Bones, I'm asking."

"I," said Tarvish, twitching violently, "am a man."

It took Paul a minute to interpret; then his laugh, his first free laugh in days was as loud as Tarvish's twitching was vigorous. "Of course. Everybody has a name for everything in the universe—everything else. But there aren't names for your own race or your own planet or your own star. You're *men*, you're *people*, you live on the *earth*, you're warmed by the *sun*. I remember reading that some Indian languages were like that: the name for the tribe meant simply *the people* and the name for their country was just *the land*. We've smiled at that, and interplanetically we're doing the same damned thing. All right—where is *your* sun?"

"How can I tell you? You don't know our system of spatial coordinates. I don't understand what I find in your mind about 'constellations,' meaningless pictures which look different from any two points in space, or 'lightyears,' because your *year* doesn't convey a time-meaning to me."

"It's three hundred and sixty-five days."

"And what is a *day*?"

"Twenty-four—no, skip it. I can see that this is going to be a lot tougher than Joe Henderson and his friends think. Let's start over again. How did you get here?"

Two minutes later Paul repeated the question.

"I've been thinking," said Tarvish. "Trying to find the words in your mind. But they aren't there. Your words make too sharp a distinction between matter and energy. If I say 'a spaceship,' you will think of a metal structure. If I say 'a force field,' you will picture me traveling in something immaterial. Both are wrong."

"Let's try again. Why did you—" Paul stopped abruptly.

The nose twitched. "No," said Tarvish gently, "I am not the advance guard of an invasion and you are not betraying your race by being human to me. Please forget your science-fiction friends. We men of Earth have no desire to take over any of the planets of this star; ever since our terrible experience with the—" it sounded a little like *Khrj*—"we have made it a firm rule never to land on an inhabited planet."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"Because..." Tarvish hesitated. A faint blue colored the root of his nose. "Because my girl is here."

"I'm improving," Paul said. "It took me only five seconds to adjust to that *girl*. You're in love?" Oddly, he didn't even feel like smiling.

"That's why I had to land. You see, she went off by herself in the ... I think if I invent the word 'space dinghy' it will give you the idea. I warned her that the ... well, an important part was defective; but we had just had a small quarrel and she insisted on spiting me. She never came back. That's why I

had to make contact with intelligent life to learn something of the planet which I have to search."

"Only the intelligent life doesn't have waves. Except me because, God help me, I expect strange things to speak. You need a combination of Sherlock Holmes and Frank Buck, and you're stuck with a possibly not quite sane ventriloquist."

"You will help me? When you see her!" Tarvish was almost rapturous. "The most beautiful girl, I swear, in the whole earth. With," he added reminiscently, "the finest pair of ears in the universe." On the word *ears* his voice sank a little, and the blue tinge deepened at the root of his proboscis.

The universe, Paul smiled to himself, must provide a fascinating variety of significant secondary sexual characteristics. "If I can help you," he said sincerely, "I'll try. I'll do my best. And in the meantime we've the little problem of feeding you. I'll have to take you—" he tensed a little "—home. I suppose, that is, you *do* eat?"

"So far as we have observed," Tarvish pronounced solemnly, "all races of rational beings eat and sleep and..." The blue was again intensified.

"And relish a fine pair of ears," Paul concluded for him. "Definition of rationality." He started the car.

By the next morning Paul Peters had learned a number of things.

He had learned that men of Tarvish's race are, as they choose, bipeds or quadrupeds. When they entered the

Montgomery Block, that sprawling warren of odd studios where Paul lived, Tarvish had trotted behind him on all fours "because," he said, "it would be less conspicuous," as indeed was true. He was only by a small margin the most unusual of the animal and human companions whom Montgomery Block denizens had brought home, few of whom—including the humans—were at the moment functionally bipedal. But once inside the studio apartment, he seemed to prefer the erect posture.

Between them they had worked out the problem of feeding. The probosciferous Tarvish was of course edentate, and accustomed to subsisting on liquids and pap. Milk, raw eggs and tomato juice sufficed him for the time being—a surprisingly simple diet to contain most of the requisite vitamins and proteins. Later Paul planned to lay in a supply of prepared baby foods, and looked forward to the astonishment of the clerk at the nearby chain store who knew him as a resolute bachelor.

Paul had also learned an astonishing amount, considering the relative brevity of the conversation, concerning the planet which was to Tarvish *the earth*—from its socio-economic systems to the fascinating fact that at present fine, full, ripe ears were, as any man would prefer, in style, whereas only a generation ago they had been unaccountably minimized and even strapped down. Paul's amused explanation of the analogy on this earth served perhaps as much as anything to establish an easy man-to-man intimacy. Tarvish went so far as to elaborate a plan for introducing gradually inflatable false earlobes on his earth. It was never quite clear to Paul

how an edentate being could speak so easily, but he imagined that the power resembled his own professional skill.

All of these strange thoughts coursed through Paul's head as he lay slowly waking up the next morning; and it was only after several minutes of savoring them that he perceived the wonderful background note that served as their ground-bass. Not since the first difficult instant of entering the apartment had he so much as thought of the corner of the main room in which Chuck Woodchuck lay.

"You know, Tarvish," Paul said as they finished breakfast, "I like you. You're easy to be with."

"Thank you, Paul." The root of the proboscis blushed faintly blue. "I like you too. We could spend happy days simply talking, exchanging, learning to know ... But there *is* Vishta."

"Vishta?"

"My girl. I dreamed about her last night, Paul...." Tarvish gave a little sigh, rose, and began bipedally to pace the room. "Your earth is enormous, even though the figures you tell me convey no meaning to me. Whatever a square mile means, one hundred and ninety-seven million of them must represent quite an area. There must be some way..."

"Look," Paul said. "Before we tackle the problem again, let's try restating it. (A), we must find Vishta. But that doesn't necessarily mean literally, physically, Dr. Livingstone-I-presume *find*, does it? She'll be over the lovers' quarrel by

now; she'll want to get back to the—you'll pardon the expression—spaceship. If we can let her know where you are, that's enough, isn't it?"

Tarvish rubbed the tip of his large nose. "I should think so."

"All right. Restate the restatement. (A), get word to Vishta. (B), without revealing your interplanetary presence to the world at large. Both because it's against your mores and because I think it'll cause just too damned much trouble. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

The two sat in silence for perhaps five minutes. Paul alternately cudgelled his brains, and addressed brief prayers to the Holy Ghost for assistance in helping this other creature of God. Meanwhile, his eyes drifted around the apartment, and for a moment rested on the noble two-volume Knopf edition of Poe.

"My God in Heaven!" he exclaimed. The most devout could not have considered this a violation of the decalog. "Look, Tarvish. We have in our literature a story called *The Purloined Letter*. Its point is that the most over-obvious display can be the subtlest concealment."

"The point occurs in our folklore as well," said Tarvish. "But I don't—" Suddenly he stopped.

Paul grinned. "Did you get a wave? But let me go on out loud—this race is happier that way. Yes, we had it all solved

yesterday and let it slip. The lie we bribed Tim to tell—"

"—that I am your new dummy," Tarvish picked up eagerly.

"The act'll be sensational. Because you can really talk, I can do anything. Eat soda crackers while you're talking—it won't make any difference. And you—I hate like hell to say this to any man, but from an audience viewpoint it's true—you're *cute*. You're damned near cuddly. They'll love you. And we bill you with the precise truth: you're a visitant from outer space. It ties a ventriloquism act into the science-fiction trend in TV. You're THE STAR DUMMY. We'll make a fortune—not that I'm thinking of that—"

"Aren't you?" Tarvish asked dryly.

Paul smiled. "Can anyone be a hypocrite in a telepathic civilization?"

"It's been known to happen."

"Well, anyway, I'm not thinking *primarily* of the fortune. We'll get publicity we couldn't buy. And wherever she is, unless it's in Darkest Africa or behind the Iron Curtain, Vishta'll learn where you are."

"Paul," said Tarvish solemnly, "you're inspired. On that I could use a drink."

"Another custom of all rational races?"

"Nearly all. But just a moment: I find in your mind the concept *alcohol*. I'm afraid that doesn't convey much."

Paul tried to think back to his high-school chemistry. Finally he ventured, "C₂H₅OH. That help any?"

"Ah, yes. More correctly, of course, CH₃CH₂OH. You find that mild fluid stimulating? We use it somewhat in preparing food, but ... Now, if I might have a little C₈H₁₀N₄O₂?"

Paul rubbed his head. "Doesn't mean a thing to me. Sounds like some kind of alkaloid. It's the touch of nitrogen that does it with you people?"

"But indeed you do know it. You were drinking it at breakfast. And I must say I admired the ease with which you put away so much strong liquor so early in the day."

Hastily Paul checked in a dictionary. "*Caffein*," he groaned. "And what do you use to sober up? A few cups of good straight alcohol, no cream?"

And in copious shots of C₂H₅OH and C₈H₁₀N₄O₂ the two men pledged the future of THE STAR DUMMY.

So now you see at last to what this story has been leading. What began in a confessional and passed through an analyst's office to a zoo—all symbolism is read into the sequence at your own peril—is in actuality the backstage story of the genesis of your own favorite television program.

Most of the rest of that genesis you know from a thousand enthusiastic recountings, from John Crosby's in the *Herald Tribune* to Philip Hamburger's in the *New Yorker*: how network producers at first greeted Paul Peters skeptically

when he returned to show business, after a mysterious absence, with a brand-new type of act; how THE STAR DUMMY was at first somewhat hesitantly showcased on *San Francisco Presents*; how the deluge of fan mail caused that first showing to be kinnied all over the country, while the next week a live performance shot over the nation on a microwave relay; how the outrageous concept of a cuddlesome dummy from Outer Space managed unbelievably to combine the audiences of Charlie McCarthy and *Space Cadet*; how Star Dummies outgrossed the combined total sales of Sparkle Plenty Dolls and Hopalong Cassidy suits.

But there are a few untold backstage scenes which you should still hear.

Scene: Station KMNX-TV. Time: the morning after the first Star Dummy broadcast. Speaker: a vice-president.

"But my God, M.N., there's all hell popping. That was Hollywood on the phone. They've got the same damned show lined up for show-casing next week. Same format—identical dummy—only maybe theirs has bigger ears. The property owner's flying up here and our lawyers had better be good!"

Scene: Same. Time: that afternoon.

"I think," Paul had said, "that we might be able to reach a settlement out of court." The vice-presidents had filed out eagerly, the lawyers somewhat reluctantly.

Once he had been introduced to Vishta (and so close had he come, in weeks of preparing the show, to Tarvish's ways of thinking that he found her enchantingly lovely), it would have been inconceivably rude and prying to do anything but turn his back on the reunion of the lovers. Which meant that he had to keep his eyes on Marcia Judd, property owner of the Hollywood show.

"I'm not a professional ventriloquist like you, Mr. Peters," she was saying. "I couldn't do a thing without Vishta. But when we talked about it, it seemed the most logical way to let Tarvish know where she was. You know, like *The Purloined Letter*."

"And you have waves?" Paul marveled. It was about the only thing which she did not obviously have on first glance.

"I guess maybe it's because I write fantasy and s.f. Oh, I don't sell much, but a little. And I'm not too sure that there's *anything* that can't happen. So when I was walking through the San Diego zoo and I saw something in with the koalas that was making diagrams ... Well, I couldn't help remembering Joe's story about inter-cultural communication —"

"Joe Henderson? You know old Joe?"

"He's helped me a lot. I guess you'd sort of say I'm his protege."

"So long," Paul smiled, "as he isn't your protector. But tell me, does Joe still..."

And one half of the room was as happy in the perfect chatter of a first meeting as was the other half in the perfect silence of a long-delayed reunion.

Truth had shifted again, and THE STAR DUMMY was in fact a dummy—a brilliantly constructed piece of mechanism which had eaten up the profits of the three shows on which Tarvish himself had appeared. But the show was set now, and Paul's own professional skill could carry it from this point on. And the highly telegenic presence of Marcia Judd did no harm.

Paul's car stopped by a lonely stretch of beach south of the city.

"We can find what you like to call the spaceship from here," said Tarvish. "I'd sooner you didn't see it. I think it would only confuse you."

"We love you both," said Vishta gently. "God bless you."

"God!" Marcia exclaimed. "Don't tell me people with a science like yours believe in God!"

Paul sighed. "I hope you don't mind too much that I'm such a barbarian."

"It's your conditioning," said Marcia. "But with them...!"

"And *your* conditioning, Marcia," Tarvish observed, "has driven you the other way? Yes, I do believe in God in a way—if less devoutly than Paul, or at least than Paul being devout. Many do on our earth; not all, but many. There was

once a man, or possibly more than a man. We argue about that. His name was Hraz, and some call him the Oiled One." Marcia smiled and Tarvish added, "It refers to a ceremony of honor. I am not quite a follower of Hraz, and yet when I pray—as I did, Paul, shortly before you found me—it is in words that Hraz taught us."

"Which are?"

"We'll say them together," said Vishta. "It makes a good good-bye."

And the lovers recited:

Lifegiver over us, there is blessing in the word that means you. We pray that in time we will live here under your rule as others now live with you there; but in the meantime feed our bodies, for we need that here and now. We are in debt to you for everything, but your love will not hold us accountable for this debt; and so we too should deal with others, holding no man to strict balances of account. Do not let us meet temptations stronger than we can bear; but let us prevail and be free of evil.

Then they were gone, off down the beach.

Marcia sniffled away a tear. "It is *not* the prayer," she protested indignantly. "But they were so *nice*...."

"Yes," said the Paulist at Old St. Mary's, "you may tell your fiancée to come in next Thursday at three to start her pre-marital instruction."

"You'll find her a tartar, Father," Paul grinned.

"Atheism can be the most fanatical of religions. Thank Heaven my duty is only to inform, not to convert her. I'm glad you're getting married, Paul. I don't think anything inside or outside of you will denounce the flesh so violently again. Did the analysis help you?"

"Somehow I never got around to it. Things started happening."

"Now this ... ah ... document," the Paulist went on. "Really extraordinary. *Lifegiver over us* ... Terribly free, of course, but still an unusually stimulating, fresh translation of the *Pater Noster*. I've shown it to Father Massini—he was on the Bishops' Committee for the revised translation of the New Testament—and he was delighted. Where on earth did you get it?"

"Father, you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"No?" asked the priest.

[The end of *The Star Dummy* by William Anthony Parker White (as Anthony Boucher)]