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The Package
Kurt Vonnegut

What do you know about that?" said Earl Fenton. He unslung his stereoscopic camera, took off his coat, and laid the coat and the camera on top of the television-radio-phonograph console. "Here we go on a trip clean around the world, Maude, and two minutes after we come back to our new house, the telephone rings. That's civilization."

"For you, Mr. Fenton," said the maid.

"Earl Fenton speaking . . . Who? . . . You got the right Fenton? There's a *Brudd* Fenton on San Bonito Boulevard . . . . Yes, that's right, I did. Class of 1910 . . . Wait! No! Sure I do! Listen, you tell the hotel to go to hell, Charley, you're my guest . . . . Have we got room?"

Earl covered the mouthpiece and grinned at his wife. "He wants to know if .we've got room!" He spoke into the telephone again. "Listen, Charley, we've got rooms I've never been in. No kidding. We just moved in today-five minutes ago . . . . No, it's all fixed up. Decorator furnished the place nice as you please weeks ago, and the servants got everything going like a dollar watch, so we're ready. Catch you a cab, you hear? . . .

"No, I sold the plant last year. Kids are grown up and on their own and all-young Earl's a doctor now, got a big house in Santa Monica, and Ted's just passed his bar exams and gone in with his Uncle George-Yeah, and Maude and I, we've just decided to sit back and take a well-earned- But the hell with talking on the phone. You come right on out. Boy! Have we got a lot of catching up to do!" Earl hung up and made clucking sounds with his tongue.

Maude was examining a switch panel in the hallway. "I don't know if this thingamajig works the air-conditioning or the garage doors or the Windows or what," she said.

"We'll get Lou Converse out here to show us how everything works," said Earl. Converse was the contractor who had put up the rambling, many-leveled "machine for living " during their trip abroad.

Earl's expression became thoughtful as he gazed through a picture window at the flagstone terrace and grill, flooded with California sunshine, and at the cartwheel gate that opened onto the macadam driveway, and at the garage, with its martin house, weathercock, and two Cadillacs. "By golly Maude," he said, "I just finished talking to a ghost."

"Um?" said Maude. "Aha! See, the picture window goes up, and down comes the screen. Ghost? Who on earth?"

"Freeman, Charley Freeman. A name from the past, Maude. I couldn’t t believe it at first. Charley was a fraternity brother and just about the biggest man in the whole class of 1910. Track star, president of the fr2ternity editor of the paper, Phi Beta Kappa."

"Goodness! What's he doing coming here to see poor little us?" said Maude.

Earl was witnessing a troubling tableau that had been in the back of his mind for years: Charley Freeman, urbane, tastefully clothed, was having a plate set before him by Earl, who wore a waiter's jacket. When he'd invited Charley to come on out, Earl's enthusiasm had been automatic, the reflex of a man who prided himself on being a plain, ordinary, friendly fellow, for all of his success. Now, remembering **their college** relationship, Earl found that the prospect of Charley's arrival was making him uncomfortable. "He was a rich kid," Earl said. "One of those gays"-and his voice was tinged with bitterness-"who had everything. **You know?"**

"Well, hon," said Maude, "you weren't exactly behind the door when they passed out the looks and brains."

"No-but when they passed out the **money they handed me a waiter's** jacket and a mop." She looked at him **sympathetically, and he was encour**aged to pour out his heart on the subject. **"By golly, Maude, it does** something to a man to go around having to wait on guys his same age, cleaning up after 'em, and seeing them with nice clothes and all the money in the world, going off to some resort in the summer when I had to go to work to pay next year's tuition." Earl was surprised at the emotion in his voice. And all the time they're looking down on you, like there was something wrong with people who weren't handed their money on a silver platter."

"Well, that makes me good and mad!" Maude said, squaring her shoulders indignantly, as though to protect Earl from those who'd humiliated him in college. "If this great Charley Freeman snooted you in the old days, I don't see why we should have him in the house now"

"Oh, heck-forgive and forget," Earl said gloomily. "Doesn't throw me anymore. He seemed to want to come out, and I try to be a good fellow, no matter what."

"So what's the high-and-mighty Freeman doing now?"

"Don't know. Something big, I guess. He went to med school, and 1 came back here, and we kind of lost touch." Experimentally, Earl pressed a button on the wall. From the basement came muffled whirs and clicks, as machines took control of the temperature and humidity and purity of the atmosphere about him. "But I don't expect Charley's doing a bit better than this."

"What were some of the things he did to you?" Maude pursued, still indignant.

Earl waved the subject away with his hand. There weren't any specific incidents that he could tell Maude about. People like Charley Freeman hadn't come right out and said anything to humiliate Earl when he'd waited on them. But just the same, Earl was sure that he'd been looked down on, and he was willing to bet that when he'd been out of earshot, they d talked about him, and . . .

He shook his head in an effort to get rid of his dour mood, and he smiled. "Well, Mama, what say we have a little drinkie, and then take a tour of the place? If 1'm going to show it to Charley, I'd better find out how a few of these gimcracks work, or he'll think old Earl is about as at home in a setup like this as a retired janitor or waiter or something. By golly, there. goes the phone again! That's civilization for you."

"Mr. Fenton," the maid said, "it's Mr. Converse."

"Hello, Lou, you old horse thief. Just looking over your handiwork. Maude and I are going to have to go back to college for a course in electrical engineering, ha ha . . . . Eh? Who? . . . No kidding. They really want to? . . . Well, I guess that's the kind of thing you have to expect to go through. If they've got their heart set on it, okay. Maude and I go clean around the world, and two minutes after we're home, it's like the middle of Grand Central Station."

Earl hung up and scratched his head in mock wonderment and we2riness. In reality, he was pleased with the activity, with the bell-ringing proof that his life, unlike his ownership of the plant and the raising of his kids and the world cruise, was barely begun.

"What now?" said Maude.

Aw, Converse says some fool home magazine wants to do a story on the place, and they want to get the pictures this afternoon."

"What fun!"

"Yeah-1 guess. I dunno. I don't want to be standing around in all the pictures like some stuffed shirt." To show how little he cared, he interested himself in another matter. "I don't know why she wouldn't, considering what we paid her, but that decorator really thought of everything, you know?" He'd opened a closet next to the terrace doors and found an apron, a chef's hat, and asbestos gloves inside. "By golly, you know, that's pretty rich. See what it says on the apron, Maude?"

"Cute," said Maude, and she read the legend aloud: "'Don t shoot the cook, he's doing the best he can.' Why, you look like a regular Oscar of the Waldorf, Earl. Now let me see you in the hat."

He grinned bashfully and fussed with the hat. "Don't know exactly how one of the fool things is supposed to go. Feel kind of like a man from Mars."

"Well, you look wonderful to me, and I wouldn't trade you for a hundred stuck-up Charley Freemans."

They wandered arm in arm over the flagstone terrace to the grill, a stone edifice that might have been mistaken from a distance for a branch post office. They kissed, as they had kissed beside the Great Pyramid, the Colosseum, and the Taj Mahal.

"You know something, Maude?" said Earl, a great emotion ballooning in his breast. "You know, I used to wish my old man was rich, so you and I could have had a place like this right off-bing!-the minute I got out of college and we got married. But you know, we couldn't have had this moment looking back and knowing, by God, we made every inch of the way on our own. And we understand the little guy, Maude, because we were little guys once. By gosh, nobody born with a silver spoon in their mouth can buy that understanding. A lot of people on the cruise didn't want to look at all that terrible poverty in Asia, like their consciences bothered them. But us-we, seeing as how we'd come up the hard way, I don't guess we had much on our consciences, and we could look out at those poor people and kind of understand."

"Uh-huh," said Maude.

Earl worked his fingers in the thick gloves. **And tonight I'm** going to broil you and me and Charley a sirloin **steak as thick as a Manhattan** phone book, and deserve every ounce of it, if I do say so myself."

"We aren't even unpacked."

"So what? I'm not tired. Got a lot of living to do, and the quicker I get at it, the more I71 get done."

Earl and Maude were in the living room, Earl still in his chefs outfit, when Charley Freeman was ushered in by the maid.

"By golly!" said Earl. "If it isn't Charley!"

Charley was still thin and erect, and the chief mark of age upon him was the graying of his thick hair. While his face was lined, it was still confident and wise-looking, was still, in Earl's opinion, subtly mocking. There was so much left of the old Charley, in fact, that the college relationship, dead for forty years, came alive again in Earl's mind. In spite of himself, Earl felt resentfully servile, felt crude and dull. His only defense was the old one-hidden resentment, with a promise that things would be very different before long.

"Been a long time, hasn't it, Earl?" Charley said, his voice still deep and virile. "You're looking fine."

"Lot of water can go under the bridge in forty years," said Earl. He was running his finger nervously over the rich fabric of the sofa. And then he remembered Maude, who was standing rigid, thin-lipped behind him. "Oh, excuse me, Charley, this is my wife, Maude."

"This is a pleasure I've had to put off for a long time," said Charley. "1 feel I know you, Earl spoke of you so much in college."

"How do you do?" said Maude.

"Far better than I had any reason to expect six months ago," said Charley. "What a handsome house!' He laid his hand on the televisionradio-phonograph console. "Now, what the devil do you call this?"

"Huh?" said Earl. "TV set. What's it look like?"

"TV?" said Charley, frowning. "TV? Oh-abbreviation for television.' That it?"

"You kidding me, Charley?"

"No, really. There must be more than a billion and a half poor souls who' ve never seen one of the things, and I'm one of them. Does it hurt to touch the glass part?"

"The tube?" Earl laughed uneasily. "Hell, no-go ahead."

"Mr. Freeman's probably got a tube five times as big as this one at home," said Maude, smiling coldly, "and he's kidding us along like he doesn't even know this is a TV set, the tube's so small."

"Well, Charley," said Earl, cutting briskly into the silence that followed Maude's comment, "and to what do we owe the honor of this visit?"

"For old times' sake," said Charley. "1 happened to be in town, and I remem-

Before Charley could elaborate, he was **interrupted by a party** composed of Lou Converse, a photographer from **Home Beautiful,** and young, pretty woman writer. .

The photographer, who introduced himself simply as Slotkin, took command of the household, and as he was to do for the whole of his stay; he quashed all talk and activities not related to getting the magazine pictures taken. "Zo," said Slotkin, "und de gimmick is de pagatch, eh?"

"Baggage?" said Earl.

"Package," said the writer. "See, the angle on the story is that you con home from a world cruise to a complete package for living-everything anybody could possibly want for a full life."

"Oh."

"It's complete," said Lou Converse, "complete right down to a fin stocked wine cellar and a pantry filled with gourtnet specialties. Brand-new cars, brand-new everything but wine."

'Aha! Dey vin a condezt."

"He sold his factory and retired," said Converse.

"Maude and I figured we owed ourselves a little something," said Ea "We held back all these years, putting money **back into the business and** all, and then, when the **kids were grown up and the big offer came for the** plant, we all of a sudden felt kind of crazy, and said, 'Why not?' And v just went ahead and ordered everything we'd ever **wanted."**

Earl glanced at Charley Freeman, who stood apart and in the background, half smiling, seeming to be fascinated by the scene. "We start(out, Maude and I," said Earl, "in a two-room apartment down by the docks. Put that in the story"

"We had love," said Maude.

"Yes," said Earl, "and I don't want people to think I'm just another stuffed shirt who was born with a wad of money and blew himself to the setup. No, sir! This is the end of a long, hard road. Write that down Charley remembers me back in the old days, when I had to work my way through school."

"Rugged days for Earl," said Charley.

Now the center of attention, Earl felt his self-confidence returning, and he began to see Charley's coming back into his life at this point as a generous act of fate, a fine opportunity to settle the old scores once and for all. "It wasn't the work that made it rugged," Earl said pointedly.

Charley seemed surprised by Earl's vehemence. "All right," he said, "then the work wasn't rugged. It was so long ago I can remember it either way."

"I mean it was tough being looked down on because I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth," said Earl.

"Earl!" said Charley, smiling in his incredulity. "As many fatheads as we had for fraternity brothers, not one of them for a minute looked down-"

"Make ready for de pigdures," Slotkin said. "Stardt mit de grill-breadt, saladt, und a big, bloody piece of meadt."

The maid brought a five-pound slab of steak from the freezer, and Earl held it over the grill. "Hurry up," he said. "Can't hold a cow at arm's length all day." Behind his smile, however, he was nettled by Charley's bland dismissal of his college grievances.

"Hold it!" said Slotkin. The flashbulbs went off. "Good!"

And the party moved indoors. T11ere; Earl and Maude posed in room after room, watering a plant in the solarium, reading the latest book before the living room fireplace, working push-button windows, chatting with the maid over the laundry console, planning menus, having a drink at the rumpus room bar, sawing a plank in the workshop, dusting off Earl's gun collection in the den.

And always, there was Charley Freeman at the rear of the entourage, missing nothing, obviously amused as Maude and Earl demonstrated their packaged good life. Under Charley's gaze, Earl became more and more restless and self-conscious as he performed, and Slotkin berated him for wearing such a counterfeit smile.

"By God, Maude," said Earl, perspiring in the master bedroom, "if I ever have to come out of retirement-knock on wood-I can go on television as a quick-change artist. This better be the last picture, by golly. Feel like a dam clotheshorse."

But the feeling didn't prevent his changing once more at Slotkin's command, this time into a tuxedo. Slotkin wanted a picture of dinner by candlelight. The dining room curtains would be drawn, electrically, to hide the fact of midafternoon outdoors.

"Well, I guess Charley's getting an eyeful," said Earl, distorting his face as he punched a collar button into place. "I think he's pretty dam impressed." His voice lacked conviction, and he turned hopefully to Maude for confirmation.

She was sitting at her dressing table, staring mercilessly at her image 6 the mirror, trying on different bits of jewelry. "Hmm?"

"I said I guess Charley's pretty impressed."

"Him," she said flatly. "He's just a little too smooth, if you ask me. After the way he used to snoot you, and then he comes here all smiles and good manners."

"Yeah," said Earl, with a sigh. "Doggone it, he used to make me feel like two bits, and he still does, looking at us like we were showing off instead o just trying to help a magazine out. And did you hear what he said when came right out and told him what I didn't like about college?"

"He acted like you just made it up, like it was just in your mind. Oh he's a slick article, 211 right. But I'm not going to let him get my goat," said Maude. "This started out as the happiest **day of our lives, and it's** going to go on being that. And you want to know something else?"

"What's that?" Backed by Maude, Earl felt his morale rising. He had been absolutely sure that Charley was inwardly making fun of them, but Maude was, and she was burned up about it, too.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "For all his superior ways, and kiddin! us about our TV set and everything, I don't think the great Charley Free man amounts to a hill of beans. Did you see his suit-up close?"

"Well, Slotkin kept things moving so fast, I don't guess I got a close look.

"You can bet I did, Earl," said Maude. **"It's all worn and** shiny, an(the cuffs are a sight! I'd die of shame if you went around in a suit like that."

Earl was startled. He had been so on the defensive that it hadn't occurred to him that Charley's fortunes could be anything but what they'(been in college. "Maybe a favorite old suit he hates to chuck out," he said at last. "Rich people are funny about things **like that sometimes."**

"He's got on a favorite old shirt and a favorite old pair of shoes, too."

"I can't believe it," murmured Earl. He pulled aside a curtain for a glimpse of the fairyland of the terrace and grill, where Charley Freeman stood chatting with Slotkin and Converse and the writer. The cuffs of Charley's trousers, Earl saw with amazement, were indeed frayed, and the heels of his shoes were worn thin. Earl touched a button, and a bedroom window slithered open.

"It's a pleasant town," Charley was telling them. "I might as well settle here as anywhere, since I haven't very strong reasons for living in any particular part of the country."

"Zo eggspensifl" said Slotkin.

"Yes," said Charley, "I'd probably be smart to move inland, where my money'd go a little farther. Lord, it's incredible what things cost these days!"

Maude laid her hand on Earl's shoulder. "Seems kind of fishy, doesn't it?" she whispered. "You don't hear from him for forty years, and all of a sudden he shows up, down-and-out, to pay us a big, friendly call. What's he after?"

"Said he just wanted to see me for old times' sake," said Earl.

Maude sniffed. "You believe that?"

The dining room table looked like an open treasure chest, with the flames of the candelabra caught in a thousand perfect surfaces-the silver, the china, the facets of the crystal, Maude's rubies, and Maude's and Earl's proud eyes. The maid set steaming soup, prepared for the sake of the picture, before them.

"Perfect!" said Slotkin. "So! Now talk."

"What about?" said Ear1.

Anything," said the woman writer. "Just so the picture won't look posed. Talk about your trip. How does the situation in Asia look?"

It was a question Earl wasn't inclined to chat about lightly.

"You've been to Asia?" said Charley.

Earl smiled. "India, Burma, the Philippines, Japan. All in all, Maude and I must have spent two months looking the situation over."

"Earl and I took every side trip there was," said Maude. "He just had to see for himself what was what."

"Trouble with the State Department is they're all up in an ivory tower said Earl.

Beyond the glittering camera lens and the bank of flashbulb reflectors Earl saw the eyes of Charley Freeman. Expert talk on large affairs had be among Charley's many strong points in college, and Earl had been al only to listen and nod and wonder.

"Yes, sir," said Earl, summing up, "the situation looked just about hopeless to everybody on the cruise but Maude and me, and it took a while to figure out why that was. Then we **realized that we were about** the only ones who'd pulled themselves up by their bootstraps-that we were the only ones who really understood that no matter how low a man is, he's got what it takes, he can get clean to the top." He paused. "There's nothing wrong with Asia that a little spunk and common sense and know how won't cure."

"I'm glad it's that easy," said Charley. "I was afraid things were more complicated than that."

Earl, who rightly considered himself one of the easiest men on earth get along with, found himself in the unfamiliar position of being furious with a fellow human being. Charley Freeman, who evidently had failed Earl had risen in the world, was openly belittling one of Earl's proudest accomplishments, his knowledge of Asia. "I've seen it, Charley!" said Earl" I'm not talking as just one more darn fool armchair strategist who's never been outside his own city limits!"

Slotkin fired his flashbulbs. "One more," he said.

"Of course you're not, Earl," said Charley. "That was rude of me. What you say is very true, in a way, but it's such an oversimplification. Taken itself, it's a dangerous way of thinking. I shouldn't have interrupted. 1 simply that the subject is one I have a deep interest in."

Earl felt his cheeks reddening, as Charley, with his seeming apology, himself up as a greater authority on Asia than Earl. "Think maybe I entitled to some opinions on Asia, Charley. I actually got out and rubbed elbows. with the people over there, finding out how their minds work and all."

"You should have seen him jawing away with the Chinese bellboys in Manila," said Maude, challenging Charley with her eyes to top that.

"Now then," said the writer, checking a list, "the last shot we want is of you two coming in the front door with your suitcases, looking surprised, as though you've just arrived . . . ."

In the master bedroom again, Earl and Maude obediently changed back into the clothes they'd been wearing when they first arrived. Earl was studying his face in a mirror, practicing looks of pleased surprise and trying not to let the presence of Charley Freeman spoil this day of days.

"He's staying for supper and the night?" asked Maude.

"Oh heck, I was just trying to be a good fellow on the phone. Wasn't even thinking when I asked him to stay here instead of at the hotel. I could kick myself around the block."

"Lordy. Maybe he'll stay a week."

"Who knows? Slot kin hasn't given me a chance to ask Charley much of anything."

Maude nodded soberly. "Earl, what does it all add **up to?"**

All what?"

"I mean, have you tried to put any of it together-the old clothes, and his paleness, and that crack about doing better now than he'd had any right to expect six months ago, and the books, and the TV set? Did you hear him ask Converse about the books?"

"Yeah, that threw me, too, because Charley was the book kind."

All best-sellers, and he hadn't heard of a one! And he wasn't kidding about television, either. He really hasn't seen it before. He's been out of circulation for a while, and that's for sure."

"Sick, maybe," said Earl.

"Or in jail," whispered Maude.

"Good gosh! You don't suppose-"

"1 suppose something's rotten in the state of Denmark," said Maude, "and I don't want him around much longer, if we can help it. I keep trying to figure out what he's doing here, and the only thing that makes sense is that he's here with his fancy ways to bamboozle you out of money, one way or another."

"All right, all right," said Earl, signaling with his hands for her to lower her voice. "Let's keep things as friendly as we can, and ease him out gently."

"How?" said Maude, and between them they devised what they considered a subtle method for bringing Charley's visit to an end before supp

"Zo . . . zo much for dis," the photographer said. He winked at Earl a Maude warmly, as though noticing them as human beings for the first, time. "Denk you. Nice pagatch you live." He had taken the last picture. l packed his equipment, bowed, and left with Lou Converse and the writer. Putting off the moment when he would have to sit down with Charley, Earl joined the maid and Maude in the hunt for flashbulbs, which Slotkin had thrown everywhere. When the last bulb was found, Earl mixed martinis and sat down on a couch that faced another, on which Charley sat.

"Well, Charley, here we are."

“And you've come a distance, too, haven't you, Earl?" said Charley turning his palms upward to indicate the wonder of the dream house. see you've got a lot of science fiction on your shelves. Earl, this house science fiction."

"I suppose," said Earl. The flattery was beginning, building up to something-a big touch, probably. Earl was determined not to be spellbound Charley's smooth ways. About par for the course in America, maybe, I somebody who isn't afraid of hard work."

"What a course-with this for par, eh?"

Earl looked closely at his guest, trying to discover if Charley was belittling him again. "If I seemed to brag a little when those fool magazine people were here," he said, "I think maybe I've got a little something brag about. This house is a lot more'n a house. It's the story of my life Charley-my own personal pyramid, sort of."

Charley lifted his glass in a toast. "May it last as long as the Great Pyramid at Gizeh."

"Thanks," said Earl. It was high time, he decided, that Charley be put on the defensive. "You a doctor, Charley?"

"Yes. Got my degree in 1916."

"Uh-huh. Where you practicing?"

"Little old to start practicing medicine again, Earl. Medicine's changed so much in this country in recent years, that I'm afraid I'm pretty much out of it."

"I see." Earl went over in his mind a list of things that might get a doctor in trouble with the lave He kept his voice casual. "How come you suddenly got the idea of coming to see me?"

"My ship docked here, and I remembered that this was your hometown," said Charley. "Haven't any family left, and trying to start life all over on this side again, 1 thought I'd look up some of my old college friends. Since the boat landed here, you were the first."

That was going to be Charley's tale, then, Earl *thought-that he* had been out of the country for a long time. Next would come the touch. "Don't pay much attention to the college gang, myself," he said, unable to resist a small dig. "Such a bunch of snobs there that I was glad to get away and forget 'em."

"God help them if they didn't outgrow the ridiculous social values of college days," said Charley.

Earl was taken aback by the sharpness in Charley's voice, and not understanding it, he hastily changed the subject. "Been overseas, eh? Where, exactly, Charley?"

"Earl!" Maude called from the dining room, according to the plan. "The most awful thing has happened."

"Oh?"

Maude appeared in the doorway. "Angela"-she turned to Charley to explain-"my sister. Earl, Angela just called to say she was coming here with Arthur and the children before dinner, and could we put them up for the night."

"Gosh," said Earl, "don't see how we can. There're five of them, and we've only got two guest rooms, and Charley here-"

"No, no," said Charley. "See here, tell them to come ahead. I planned to stay at the hotel, anyway, and I have some errands to run, so I couldn't possibly stay."

"Okay, if you say so," said Earl.

"If he's got to go, he's got to go," said Maude.

"Yes, well, got a lot to do. Sorry." Charley was on his way to the doc having left his drink half finished. "Thanks. It's been pleasant seeing you. envy you your package."

"Be good," said Earl, and he closed the door with a shudder and a sigh.

While Earl was still in the hallway, wondering at what could become of a man in forty years, the door chimes sounded, deep and sweet. Ea opened the door cautiously to find Lou Converse, the contractor, standing on the doorstep. Across the street, Charley Freeman was getting into a tax

Lou waved to Charley, then turned to face Earl. "Hello! Not inviting myself to dinner. Came back after my hat. Think I left it in the solarium

"Come on in," said Earl, watching Charley's taxi disappear toward the heart of town. "Maude and I are just getting set to celebrate. Why not stay for dinner and, while you're at it, show us how some of the gadgets work'

"Thanks, but I'm expected home. I can stick around a little while an explain whatever you don't understand. Too bad you couldn't get Freeman to stay, though."

Maude winked at Earl. "We asked him, but he said he had a lot of errands to run."

"Yeah, he seemed like he was in kind of a hurry just now. You know Converse said *thoughtfully, "guys* like Freeman are funny. They make you feel good and bad at the same time."

"What do you know about that, Maude?" said Earl. "Lou instinctive felt the same way we did about Charley! How do you mean that, exact Lou, about feeling good and bad at the same time?"

"Well, good because you're glad to **know there are still** some people live that in the world," said Converse. "And bad-well, when you come across guy like that, you can't help wondering where the hell your own life's gone to."

"I don't get you," said Earl.

Converse shrugged. "Oh, Lord knows we couldn't all dedicate our lives the way he did. Can't all be heroes. But thinking about Freeman makes me feel like maybe I could have done a little more'n I have."

Earl exchanged glances with Maude. "What did Charley tell you he'd been doing, Lou?"

"Slotkin and I didn't get much out of him. We just had a few minutes there while you and Maude were changing, and I figured I'd get the whole story from you sometime. All he told us was, he'd been in China for the. last thirty years. Then I remembered there was a big piece about him in the paper this morning, only I'd forgotten his name. That's where I found out about how he sunk all his money in a hospital over there and ran it until the Commies locked him up and finally threw him out. Quite a story"

"Yup," Earl said bleakly, ending a deathly silence, "quite a story all right." He put his arm around Maude, who was staring through the picture window at the grill. He squeezed her gently. "I said it's quite a story isn't it, Mama?"

"We really did ask him to stay," she said.

"That's not like us, Maude, or if it is, I don't want it to be anymore.
Come on, hon, let's face it." -

"Call him up at the hotel!" said Maude. "That's what we'll do. We'll tell him it was all a mistake about my sister, that " The impossibility of any sort of recovery made her voice break. "Oh, Earl, honey, why'd he have to pick today? All our life we worked for today, and then he had to come and spoil it."

"He couldn't have tried any harder not to," Earl sighed. "But the odds were too stiff."

Converse looked at them with incomprehension and sympathy. "Well, heck, if he had errands he had errands," he said. "That's no reflection on your hospitality. Good gosh, there isn't another host in the country who's got a better setup for entertaining than you two. All you have to do is flick a switch or push a button for anything a person could want."

Earl walked across the thick carpet to a cluster of buttons by the bookshelves. Listlessly, he pressed one, and floodlights concealed in shrubbery all around the house went on. "That isn't it." He pressed another, and a garage door rumbled shut. "Nope." He pressed another, and the maid appeared in the doorway.

"You ring, Mr. Fenton?" "Sorry a mistake," said Earl. "That wasn't the one I wanted." Converse frowned. "What is it you're **looking for,** Earl?" "Maude and I'd like to start today all over again," said Earl. "Show us which button to push, Lou."