

THAT POST OFFICE BOX IN SCHENECTADY THAT YOU'VE ALL HEARD SO MUCH ABOUT

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The room had three doors and no windows, and although these were its most obvious irregularities (the decor being in a class all its own) they were by no means its most truly irregular; for at least their intentions were clearly marked. The first door said **IN**. The second, directly across the room, said **OUT**. The third door, perpendicular to the other two, was smaller, narrower, darker-grained, carved with subtle and disturbing designs. Above its crystal knob were elegant gilt letters exactly one inch high that read, simply:

DO NOT OPEN.

Without even a “please” to soften the command. *This* was a door that let you know where it stood.

And the decor?

Happy hodge-podge, careful chaos . . . tasteless tastefulness. All that, and more. The basic furnishings were an inexpensive French Provincial, repeatedly reupholstered. But there was also an eight foot tall antique brass-bound mirror, a massive and ornate cuckoo clock, dozens of badly framed landscapes, an annoyingly “modern” television set, three different cheap stereos, an extensive congregation of houseplants gathered in ranked circles around a tower of fluorescent plant-lites, and two pink plaster flamingoes standing at attention on either side of an old brick fireplace.

It was early in the evening, and a small fire danced cheerfully behind the grille.

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope paid it no heed. Mr. Pomene because he was comfortably settled into his armchair, reading a day-old newspaper, and Mrs. Ope because she had put aside her knitting to finally read the mail. Only the orange cat lying in Mr. Pomene's lap watched the flames cavort, and even that grudging attention seemed given with the baleful eye of a critic. Things that were not edible really shouldn't draw such attention to themselves.

“Oh look, Mel, this will please you. We've finally gotten another letter from Harlan. Such a nice boy.”

“Um,” grunted Mr. Pomene. “Did he remember to include a check?”

Mrs. Ope peeked into the envelope. “Yes, dear. And he's paid in advance for the next three months. I told you he was a good boy. Didn't I tell you? I can always tell. I got that from mother's side of the family.”

“You’re the very image of her, Cally,” said Mr. Pomene without glancing up.

“I’ll put him back on the mailing list first thing in the morning. Goodness! It says in his letter that he’s sorry things got so confused, but that he’s been wrapped up in some sort of silly old lawsuit. No wonder he gave up the service for a while — I know lawyers always put *me* off.”

“Ben Franklin,” said the cat, “felt exactly the same way.”

Mr. Pomene looked down in annoyance. “How would you know?”

The cat blinked haughtily. “He told me,” it said.

Enough was too much. Mr. Pomene flung his paper aside angrily. “You just hold it right there, furface. I’ve sat back and accepted every piece of idiotic claptrap you’ve spouted around here, but this is too goddamn much. Do you seriously expect me to believe that you — a *cat*, for God’s sake, a grubby orange tomcat! — are over two hundred years old? Hah!”

“Two hundred?” The cat flattened its ears. “*Two hundred?* You pathetic hyperthyroid orangutan, I was being pampered by the Pharaohs when they were putting up the pyramids.”

“That tears it, buster! It’s back to the ASPCA for you — and *this* time we aren’t accepting any collect phone calls!”

“Just for that I won’t tell you how they built the damned things!” the cat shouted back.

“Fleabag!”

“Baldy!”

Man and cat glared at each other. The flamingoes said nothing. Mrs. Ope sighed. “Honestly,” she said, “I don’t know why you two can’t manage to get along.”

The cat jumped from Mr. Pomene’s lap, sniffed disdainfully, and busied itself combing out the fur on its tail.

At that moment the timer attached to the plant-lites shut off their power. Immediately a thin clamor of complaint rose from the assembled flora. “Aw come on, Mizzus Ope,” begged a diffenbachia, “just a few more minutes, prettyplease?”

“Yeah!” shouted another.

“I just know I was about to bud, really I was.”

“Golly, it was just settling into a good wavelength!”

The din grew as the plants started to beat their stems and fronds against their pots, and chant, in unison: “Don’t be sore, give us more!”

“Absolutely not,” said Mrs. Ope, kindly but firmly. “The man from Quigley’s Greenhouse said no more than ten hours a day, and you’ve already sweet-talked me into giving you an extra hour before bed. No. No more. You’ll get fat.”

“Aw jeez,” the plants muttered, and started to shuffle downheartedly back to their normal places around the room.

The **IN** door slid open and a rather distraught teletype rolled through, clicking and ticking to itself. It pulled up to where Mr. Pomene was kneeling, and waited as he tried to coax a stubborn fern off his newspaper. The fern, protesting what it considered manifestly unjust treatment, had stopped exactly one foot short of its niche next to the armchair.

At last the teletype could contain itself no longer, and nudged his ankle gently.

He gave up on the paper and framed a mental prayer for fern blight. “Yes, Tommy?”

I HAVE AN IDEA, the machine printed.

“Well?”

A NEW TIME-TRAVEL GIMMICK SIR.

“Why bother me with it? You know where to file the science fiction notions.”

YES SIR. I KNOW SIR. BUT THE APPLE III SAID IT WASN’T ANY GOOD AND HE’S SO STATE OF THE ART AND I’M JUST A POOR TELETYPE MACHINE AND I WASN’T SURE I MEAN I THOUGHT IT WAS A GOOD IDEA BUT HE MAKES ME FEEL SO INSECURE AND UNCERTAIN AND SO I THOUGHT I’D ASK YOU.

It paused.

SIR, it added.

“Tommy, who’s been working for us the longest, you or it? You know we trust your judgment. You’ve come up with some really dynamite ideas over the years . . . so just stick it in the files as usual, all right? And we’ll kick it around later.”

THANK YOU SIR. Clicking more decisively, it rolled towards the door marked **OUT**. Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope watched it fondly as the little machine went away. It had a good heart, albeit no self-respect, and it believed with every atom of that heart in the business. Not at all like the Apple, which seemed to think it was destined for grander things.

Out of the corner of her eye, Mrs. Ope noticed the time.

“Oh my goodness! Mel — grab the cat!”

Several things happened all at once. The cuckoo clock struck seven. Mr. Pomene made a desperate flying leap for the cat (startling a sleeping footstool in the process, which galloped in terror to a hiding place under the sidetable) and just barely managed to grab the suddenly transformed feline by the scruff of its neck.

“It’s that time!” the cat howled. “Once, just once, let me at ‘em!” Its claws shredded the rug.

A miniscule rope ladder unfurled from the bottom of the clock and fell to the floor. With an ear-splitting cry of “Liberty! Equality! Fraternity!” a hoard of people, none more than two inches tall and all wearing the tricolor of the French Revolution, poured from the clock, down the ladder, and out across the room. They scurried everywhere, dusting the furniture, cleaning the rug, polishing the knickknacks on the television and straightening the magazines and making sure the third door was locked and stacking more wood for the fireplace and just generally seeing that the place was spotless.

All through the job, the cat struggled in Mr. Pomene’s grip. “One of ‘em! Just one of ‘em! I’ve wanted to take those bastards on for years! Let me go — I’ll just play with it a little, I swear!” Mr. Pomene finally trapped it in a hammerlock he’d learned among the lions of Mesopotamia.

“You idiot, you *did* go after them. Remember last month? They turned you into a frog! We had to keep you in a bucket of water for a week, remember?”

The cat’s eyes glazed over with unpleasant memories. It shuddered, and all the fight went out of it. “Fluke,” it muttered.

The flamingoes said nothing.

Finally, with one last high-pitched patriotic cry, the little people swarmed back up the ladder and into the clock.

Mr. Pomene released the cat. “Well, that’s that for another hour. I wish they wouldn’t yell like that every time.”

“You’re the one who wanted French Provincial, dear.”

“Well I damned well couldn’t stand another day of that Roman Imperial — ‘*Veni! Vidi! Vici!*’ over and over, and those aqueducts they built everywhere . . .”

“This is a very old argument and there really isn’t anything to be gained by it. You know we have to keep the place clean for company. Why don’t you just relax again and read your paper?”

“Can’t. The little buggers took it with them.” He stood up. “Come on, cat, we might as well get some work done. Speaking of company, Cally, have we got anybody coming over tonight?”

“Yes,” she said, resuming her knitting. “There’s a young fellow joining us for dinner in just a little while. He was recommended to us by Lizzy. I’m sure he’ll be a very nice young man. I have a feeling about it. While you’re up, why don’t you turn on your cousin’s alchemy lamp? You know how that impresses newcomers.”

Mr. Pomene walked over to the television set. On top of it, along with various framed and yellowing photographs, was a bell jar containing a large shiny rock. He pressed a switch at the jar’s base. The rock began to crumble and change color, and Mr. Pomene watched, fascinated as the first time, as the lump of gold (element 79) changed into mercury (element 80.)

“I don’t care what Brad thinks. I say he ought to market this gadget before somebody beats him to it.”

“Now dear, you know very well the bottom dropped out of the novelty lamp market back in the sixties. When was the last time you saw one of those lava-lights?”

Mr. Pomene was still trying to organize a convincing counter-argument when the cat spoke up. It was standing on its hind legs, looking into one of the framed landscapes, and fur was standing in wild ridges along its spine.

“We’ve got some heavy action here . . . whoops! Shut your eyes, everybody, quick!”

They just made it. An incredibly bright, incredibly brief flash of light erupted inside the picture frame, a flash so bright they could see it as a red glow through their closed eyelids. It was warmer in the room, afterwards, and all the plants leaned in the direction of the flash with an avid interest.

The flamingoes said nothing.

The cat peered carefully over the edge of the frame. Where there had once been a striking vista there was now only smoldering, fused glass and a glow like banked hellfire.

“Scratch one galactic empire,” it said.

“Damn,” said Mr. Pomene. “I’m going to hate having to tell Herbert the series is over. He did awfully well with that one.” Feeling a little guilty — on some level he was convinced that if he looked in on them more often, these little flare-ups wouldn’t happen — he picked up his clipboard and started to carefully examine each landscape, taking occasional notes. The cat helped out by studying those below waist level and calling out anything that looked particularly interesting.

“I do hope tonight’s young man doesn’t want a trilogy,” Mrs. Ope fretted. “Every time you have to cut a new hole in that wall I worry about your bursitis.”

“Aren’t you getting a little ahead of things? He’s got to pass The Test, first. Me, I just hope he’s not a skeptic. I can’t stand those clowns. Remember that insurance salesman from Sheboygan with delusions of grandeur? The one who wanted to see our references? Hmph. *Our* references, I ask you, just as though we were some amateur outfit and not one of the most

reputable Idea Houses in the world for over . . . over . . .” He turned and addressed one of the old photographs on top of the television. “Hey, Dad! How long have we been doing this?”

The figure in the photo (an ancient and wizened man nearly lost within a voluminous Turkish bathrobe) stroked its beard and scratched its head, figuring. “Well, the family’s been at it for five-hundred-and-twenty years, near as I can put t’gether, and you’ve been handling the last eighty-seven of it.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“S’okay, son. Everybody’s memory kinda craps out after the first fifty years or so.”

The doorbell rang.

“That’ll be the new feller,” said Mr. Pomene’s father’s picture.

“I’ll go let him in. Cally, you flag down the kitchen and tell it we’ll be ready to eat soon.”

“Gonna be a cretin, I bet,” said Mr. Pomene’s father’s picture. “You just don’t get the same class o’ feller we *used* to get. Now you take that Eddie Poe, or Sam Clemens, there was real talent. Them fellers knew how to take a good idea and make it steam . . . Yessir. Make it *steam*.”

The figure of the old man in the photograph mumbled this critical proclamation over and over again to itself, until at last it drifted off to sleep.

By the time Mr. Pomene came back through the IN door, leading their somewhat dazed-looking guest, Mrs. Ope had arranged things with the highly temperamental kitchen and done some last minute touchup to her hair, knowing she was at her best as soon as her mirror image gave her a thumbs up sign. She always wanted to look her best for potential customers.

The moment she saw this new young man her heart went out to him, utterly without restraint.

“Uh . . . hi,” he said, looking around nervously. “My name’s Tom. Tom Selman. Lizzy wrote you about me — ?”

Everything about him was a *wasn’t*. He wasn’t tall, but then he wasn’t exactly short, either; and he wasn’t ugly, but he certainly wasn’t handsome. . . in fact, on first glance, he wasn’t much of anything at all. In the whole wide world he resembled nothing so much as a just-punished Labrador puppy with glasses and terrible taste in sportcoats.

Mr. Pomene surveyed Tom critically from behind the young man’s back, and frowned; but Mrs. Ope was smiling.

“Yes, dear. She did. In fact, she had some very nice things to say about your writing talent . . . tsk, silly old me, forgetting all my manners. I’m Mrs. Ope, Tom, and that’s Mr. Pomene. This is where we live and work and you are very welcome here.”

“Right.” Mr. Pomene did not sound convincing.

“Do sit down.” Mrs. Ope took Tom firmly by the sleeve and guided him to one of the armchairs in front of the fire. He tripped over his own instep twice on the way. “Can we get you something? Water? Wine? Coffee or tea? Some Ovaltine? Maybe you’d like a little fresh pomegranate juice?”

“Err . . . do you have any root beer?”

“If I were you,” said Mr. Pomene, “I’d take the wine. You’ll need it.”

“Huh?”

“Mel! You stop that!

“It’s good advice, Cally. The Test is never easy.”

“Test?”

“*The Test*,” intoned Mr. Pomene in graveyard tones.

“I have to take a *test*?” Years of academic horror rose, unbidden, to terrorize him. “Lizzy didn’t say anything about a — “

“Mel Pomene, you hush right now and don’t say another word! You’ve got no cause to scare the poor boy the minute he walks in.” To Tom she added, soothingly, “it’s nothing, dear. Just a little formality.”

“The Test is not nothing — it’s *everything*. And it’s damned hard!”

Mrs. Ope fixed a grim and righteous eye on her companion. “I would very much appreciate it if you’d save these good cop/bad cop routines for our mystery writer clients. Just *once* I wish you could be considerate to a new guest.”

“I’ll bet he was born in Sheboygan.”

“Los Angeles,” offered Tom, meekly. His borrowed tie seemed awfully tight, all of a sudden, and both his socks were sliding down the sweat on his calves.

Mr. Pomene was about to continue when Mrs. Ope stopped him with a primal glare. Then she turned to Tom.

“Would you excuse us for a minute? Mr. Pomene and I are going to go see if dinner has landed yet, and *have a little chat*. You just make yourself comfortable. Look around, if you want. We’ll be right back.”

It wasn’t until they’d vanished through the **OUT** door that Tom’s derailed consciousness noticed the phrasing: see if dinner has landed? What the — ? He shook his head once, and then again for good measure, and took (he was certain) the first breath he had managed to take since arriving.

Lizzy was going to get a letter about this. She really should have warned him before sending him to this loony bin. And what was all this stuff about a test?

Tom shivered. No. *The* test.

Trying to calm himself, he sat back in the armchair and minutely examined his surroundings. As he did so, noticing the greenhouse grab-bag of plants, the clashing television and clock and mirror, the ratty French Provincial, the doors marked **IN** and **OUT** and (oh yeah?) **DO NOT OPEN**, his nervousness and incipient breakdown began to recede before a new tide of thought that wasn’t frightening at all, only embarrassing.

It’s a practical joke, he thought. The words washed through his head.

Sure. He could see it all now, or near enough, and it was such an old story he couldn’t even be angry about it, except perhaps a very little bit at himself for being so gullible. There he had been, in his latest creative writing class, trying hard to impress his instructor — a real live author, published and everything, the first he had ever met — and when he had finally confided in her about his difficulty finding good ideas, and had asked her where she got hers, and she had said *there’s this post office box in Schenectady, see . . .* He’d fallen for it.

Very funny. Also, typical.

But where had she dug up these lunatics, and why were they playing along with the gag?

Maybe, he thought, they’re relatives. Very sick relatives.

There was an orange cat looking at him with extreme solemnity. He rose from the chair and bowed, formally offering it for new occupancy. “I’d stay and let you sit in my lap,” he said, “But I’ve decided to get the hell out of this madhouse.”

“Don’t blame you,” said the cat.

From the knees down Tom did an excellent and entirely spontaneous impersonation of Jell-O.

“D-did you just say something?”

“Wouldn’t sit on your lap anyway, fella. I’d clash with your pants.” The cat, apparently considering this its final word, jumped onto the armchair and settled there in a posture that would have shamed a professional contortionist.

Tom’s sense of reality gave at the edges. “Right,” he said. “A talking cat. I’ve traveled cross-country to a place where they sell ideas and I have just met a talking cat.” He wanted very much to move, but someone appeared to have disconnected his legs. Both socks were all the way down now. His shirttail had worked loose. The insides of his glasses were fogging with sweat, but he didn’t notice that, since his eyes were thoroughly screwed shut.

“There is no such thing as a talking cat,” he muttered to himself. “And as there is no such thing I couldn’t possibly have heard it, I couldn’t have heard it, I didn’t hear it, *I didn’t hear it . . .*”

Slowly this litany calmed him, and after a time he found he could once more open his eyes.

Every plant in the room had gathered in a circle around him.

“OF COURSE YOU HEARD IT, YOU IDIOT!” they all shouted.

The flamingoes said nothing.

The final rip in his sense of reality yawned open beneath his feet and, taking the easy way out, he let himself fall in. On the way down he thought he heard one of the plants whine, “Mister, could you turn on the plant-lites?”

But he wasn’t sure.



“Do you feel like eating now?” True concern was in Mrs. Ope’s voice.

“I’m not sure.”

“Please try. The kitchen will sulk for weeks if it thinks it isn’t appreciated.”

“Okay. I guess I can try.” Tom reached for his spoon, and watched unimpressed as the utensil dodged round to the other side of the plate. It didn’t surprise him. After the incident with the cat and the plants, and that funny lamp on the TV, and that peculiar cuckoo clock with the little Frenchmen in it — he glanced over at the cat’s table setting, and watched it snarl quietly to itself as it soaked its recently-acquired flipper in a fingerbowl — ah yes, those little Frenchmen . . . after all that, he doubted he could ever be surprised again.

He said as much, as he faked out the spoon by reaching for the knife and then swooping left at the last minute.

“You’ll find out different when you take The Test,” said Mr. Pomene. Whatever Mrs. Ope had said to him had worked; his tone was considerably kinder, almost friendly.

“I’m not sure I want to.”

“What? But. you have to, son!”

Tom was finding the food even harder to catch than the spoon had been. He gave up, and looked Mr. Pomene straight in the eye.

“How come?”

“Because our service is special, that’s why!”

“Temper, Mel, temper,” said Mrs. Ope. “What he means, Tom, is that we have to find out if we’re right for each other.”

“But I need ideas, and you sell them. Isn’t that enough?”

“I’m afraid not, dear.”

“Look,” said Mr. Pomene. “I’ll put this bluntly. We’re not just any old idea factory. We’re something special. I mean, if all you want to do is become another tired old hack straining to pay the rent, why, we could send you to any one of a dozen competitors. They wouldn’t put you through any tests, except maybe a credit check. All they care about is getting your money. But all *you’d* get is the same mimeographed monthly sheet they’d send to a thousand other customers.

“Oh, they’ll tell you that doesn’t matter. They’ll say that any two writers given the same idea will come up with two different stories. But that has never been our family’s policy. We’re strictly one to a customer here, one at a time and no duplication. That and the quality of our ideas combine to make us the best Idea House in the whole goddamn world, and so we’ve got to make sure that we only take on people who have a shot at being the best *authors* in the world.”

“That’s why you have to take The Test, dear,” said Mrs. Ope. “No matter how frightening or difficult it may be.”

Tom looked dubious. “How can I make up my mind about it when I don’t even know what it is?”

“That’s simple enough. All you have to do is open that door —” Mr. Pomene pointed at the disturbingly carved one marked **DO NOT OPEN** — “and successfully face down what is inside.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“It varies. But whatever it is, it’ll be the worst thing you’ll ever have to cope with as a writer. I guarantee it.”

“Then my answer is no. Mrs. Selman didn’t raise her boy to be a coward, but she also didn’t raise him to be an idiot. After all the crazy stuff that’s gone down in this place I’m not walking into *anything* with my eyes closed. No way.”

Mrs. Ope sighed heavily. “Then we won’t be able to sell you any ideas.” The potential loss seemed to stagger her. Tom could see that she was barely holding back one large and eloquent tear.

“But dammit — “ he said, and then the inner waffling began. Different parts of his being chose up sides, like on a baseball diamond, and started to bash away at the ball of his thoughts. On one hand, maybe he didn’t need these people after all. Maybe by hard work and diligent application he could break the block and start generating his own ideas. Hadn’t he thought of one just a few years back? . . . on the other hand, he hadn’t managed that *yet*. And all he wanted to be was a writer, but a writer without ideas was about as useful as a goiter, and a lot more unpleasant to live with.

Of course, there was . . .

But maybe . . .

If . . .

Then again . . .

Tom’s internal World Series went into extra innings.

Mr. Pomene frowned, and began impatiently drumming his fingers on the tabletop. Mrs. Ope watched hopefully. The cat jerked its tail back and forth (mostly because it had troubles of its own.) The plants leaned towards the table, trying to suss out the vibe.

Mr. Pomene’s father’s picture could, at last, stand no more. “Make up your rinky-dink mind already!” it shouted.

“*Don’t pressure me!*” Tom shouted back. He put his head in his hands. “Oh Lord, Lord, if only I could have some kind of sign . . .”

A thunderously loud crash rattled the room, as if a wrecking ball had come down on the roof.

Tom looked up in surprise. The cat looked up in disgust, muttering “Not *again*.” The flamingoes said nothing.

There was yet another crash, and this time the entire ceiling shattered in a mosaic of fine, twisting cracks. Greenish gas poured forth from these, but not far, and in mere instants the ceiling was obscured by a dense and boiling cloud of smoke, out of which descended, just as

though there had never been a ceiling there at all, a woman's hand. The hand was well-manicured, wore bright red fingernail polish, and was easily fourteen feet across from thumbtip to little pinky.

Tom's mouth was having trouble working. "T-t-that isn't t-the . . . the hand of . . ."

"Oh no, dear," said Mrs. Ope. "Wrong color nail polish."

The giant hand did three things.

First, it descended majestically from the cloud and tapped Tom on the chest, light as a sunbeam, with its outstretched index finger. Then it pointed at the dark wooden door (which, Tom noted, no longer said **DO NOT OPEN**; instead the small gold leaf letters spelled out the rather direct **FISH OR CUT BAIT, SELMAN**.) Finally, it settled down to drumming its fingers on the floor, setting up seismic waves and counterwaves that had everything in the room involuntarily dancing.

"Okay! Okay! I'll do it!"

The hand stopped, made a circle with its thumb and index finger, and started to retract out of sight.

"Don't look so surprised," said the cat to Tom. "Around here you get what you ask for." He lifted his flipper. "I know."

"I'm very proud of you," said Mrs. Ope. "You've made the right decision."

"Thanks . . . I think. Now what?"

"Why, open the door, of course."

He stood up, scared to the very bottom of his soul, and was seized by an incredible need to go to the bathroom. Or throw up. Or both.

"Right," he said. "Here we go." He walked up to the disturbing door, and all he could think of were childhood fears about giant spiders in the basement, and ghouls in the closet, and all the assorted spooks and demons and monstrosities that were always lurking just out of reach, waiting to grab you. Pandora's box came to mind, as did the lady and the tiger, except that in this particular case he'd had advance assurance that the choice was between competing brands of tigers, and ladies were completely erased from the equation . . .

He almost turned back. But thought of the giant hand stopped him; and then his hunger for writing and ideas asserted itself, and he found his fingers clutching the door's crystal knob.

He shuddered once, suppressed a scream, closed his eyes . . . and flung the door open!

Nothing happened.

Patting himself to make sure he was still there, Tom opened his eyes.

Through the doorway he saw a room bare except for a desk, chair, and typewriter. To the right of the typewriter was a ream of blank white paper. Behind the typewriter, leaning against the wall so that it faced whoever might sit down in the chair, was a mirror.

“That’s IT?!”

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope bustled up to his side and looked in. Mrs. Ope beamed. Mr. Pomene looked pleasantly surprised, and said — with a note of true respect, for the first time in the evening — “Actually, son, you’re looking pretty good so far. Some of our most successful clients got that one. Hemmingway, for example. Charlie Dickens, too, or so my dad’s picture tells me.”

“But-but . . . what do I do?”

“*Do?* Hell, you go in there and you write something!”

“But I don’t have any ideas!”

Mrs. Ope looked deeply into his eyes. “Listen to me, Tom. Think about all you’ve gone through here. Think about all you’ve seen, and felt, and heard. You’ve been deep down in the motherlode of ideas for hours now . . . don’t you think there’s something, some little thing that has caught a spark in you? You just go and try it, now.” She patted his hand reassuringly. “Try it for me.”

He stumbled uncertainly into the room. Once seated, he stared at the image of himself that stared back from the mirror.

“That’s my biggest problem as a writer — *me?*”

“Isn’t it for all the best writers?” asked Mr. Pomene.

Mrs. Ope gave Tom a last brave smile. “Do your best, dear. We’ll wait outside.”

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope busied themselves with the mundane necessities of work and life — cleaning away the dinner dishes, curing the cat, combing the coleanders, chastising the Apple III — but with one ear each, they listened. At first they heard only hesitant bouts of typing, and the regular sound of sheets of paper being crumpled and tossed aside. But gradually, almost imperceptibly, the percentages shifted. The staccato rhythm of typing caught up, took over, surged into the lead. Three hours passed, then four (during which the cat studiously ignored the little Frenchmen from the clock, even when they braided the hair on its tail) until, just after midnight, the typing stopped.

Mr. Pomene and Mrs. Ope were ready and waiting when the door to the almost bare room opened. As Tom stepped out, exhausted, holding high a sheaf of manuscript, they lifted glasses of the ritual vintage champagne that tradition declared necessary.

An already-drunken smile lit-up Tom's face.

"I did it! I goddamn well hallelujah DID IT!"

"Welcome to the service, son." said Mr. Pomene.

Mrs. Ope took a sip of the champagne and started to cry tears of unabashed joy. "See, Mel, I knew it. I knew he was a good boy. I can always tell."

The first flamingo said nothing; and the second nodded in total agreement.

NOTES:

Written in 1981. Initial riff from Phil Foglio, performed out loud off one-and-a-half pages of sketchy typewritten notes. I expanded that into roughly half this version of the story, and submitted to George Scithers at ISAAC ASIMOV'S SF. He rightly bounced it, saying he wanted to know what happened to Tom Selman after he arrived. The rest followed naturally from that cue, and Scithers bought the final result.

In a way, it wound up being something of a precursor to my Keyboard Magazine "Creative Options" essays.

The magazine publication had a really nifty illustration by Jack Gaughan that Phil, predictably, hated. He was just miffed that he didn't get to do it. One final note: using many different voices, and a duet for the flamingos, back in the days before Phil and I fell out over *D'arc Tangent* we "performed" readings of this story at a couple of different conventions.

[5244 words]