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# STEPHEN KING

WRITING AS RICHARD BACHMAN

## *THE RUNNING MAN*

A NOVEL



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## **. . . Minus 100 and COUNTING . . .**

She was squinting at the thermometer in the white light coming through the window. Beyond her, in the drizzle, the other highrises in Co-Op City rose like the gray turrets of a penitentiary. Below, in the airshaft, clotheslines flapped with ragged wash. Rats and plump alley cats circulated through the garbage.

She looked at her husband. He was seated at the table, staring up at the Free-Vee with steady, vacant concentration. He had been watching it for weeks now. It wasn't like him. He hated it, always had. Of course, every Development apartment had one—it was the law—but it was still legal to turn them off. The Compulsory Benefit Bill of 2021 had failed to get the required two-thirds majority by six votes. Ordinarily they never watched it. But ever since Cathy had gotten sick, he had been watching the big-money giveaways. It filled her with sick fear.

Behind the compulsive shrieking of the half-time announcer narrating the latest newsie flick, Cathy's flu-hoarsened wailing went on and on.

"How bad is it?" Richards asked.

"Not so bad."

“Don’t shit me.”

“It’s a hundred and four.”

He brought both fists down on the table. A plastic dish jumped into the air and clattered down.

“We’ll get a doctor. Try not to worry so much. Listen—” She began to babble frantically to distract him; he had turned around and was watching the Free-Vee again. Half-time was over, and the game was on again. This wasn’t one of the big ones, of course, just a cheap daytime come-on called *Treadmill to Bucks*. They accepted only chronic heart, liver, or lung patients, sometimes throwing in a cripple for comic relief. Every minute the contestant could stay on the treadmill (keeping up a steady flow of chatter with the emcee), he won ten dollars. Every two minutes the emcee asked a Bonus Question in the contestant’s category (the current pal, a heart-murmur from Hackensack, was an American history buff) which was worth fifty dollars. If the contestant, dizzy, out of breath, heart doing fantastic rubber acrobatics in his chest, missed the question, fifty dollars was deducted from his winnings and the treadmill was speeded up.

“We’ll get along. Ben. We will. Really. I . . . I’ll . . .”

“You’ll what?” He looked at her brutally. “Hustle? No more, Sheila. She’s got to have a real doctor. No more block midwife with dirty hands and whiskey breath. All the modern equipment. I’m going to see to it.”

He crossed the room, eyes swiveling hypnoti-

cally to the Free-Vee bolted into one peeling wall above the sink. He took his cheap denim jacket off its hook and pulled it on with fretful gestures.

“No! No, I won’t . . . won’t allow it. You’re not going to—”

“Why not? At worst you can get a few oldbucks as the head of a fatherless house. One way or the other you’ll have to see her through this.”

She had never really been a handsome woman, and in the years since her husband had not worked she had grown scrawny, but in this moment she looked beautiful . . . imperious. “I won’t take it. I’d rather sell the govie a two-dollar piece of tail when he comes to the door and send him back with his dirty blood money in his pocket. Should I take a bounty on my man?”

He turned on her, grim and humorless, clutching something that set him apart, an invisible something for which the Network had ruthlessly calculated. He was a dinosaur in this time. Not a big one, but still a throwback, an embarrassment. Perhaps a danger. Big clouds condense around small particles.

He gestured at the bedroom. “How about her in an unmarked pauper’s grave? Does that appeal to you?”

It left her with only the argument of insensate sorrow. Her face cracked and dissolved into tears.

“Ben, this is just what they want, for people like us, like you—”

“Maybe they won’t take me,” he said, opening

the door. “Maybe I don’t have whatever it is they look for.”

“If you go now, they’ll kill you. And I’ll be here watching it. Do you want me watching that with her in the next room?” She was hardly coherent through her tears.

“I want her to go on living.” He tried to close the door, but she put her body in the way.

“Give me a kiss before you go, then.”

He kissed her. Down the hall, Mrs. Jenner opened her door and peered out. The rich odor of corned beef and cabbage, tantalizing, maddening, drifted to them. Mrs. Jenner did well—she helped out at the local discount drug and had an almost uncanny eye for illegal-card carriers.

“You’ll take the money?” Richards asked. “You won’t do anything stupid?”

“I’ll take it,” she whispered. “You know I’ll take it.”

He clutched her awkwardly, then turned away quickly, with no grace, and plunged down the crazily slanting, ill-lighted stairwell.

She stood in the doorway, shaken by soundless sobs, until she heard the door slam hollowly five flights down, and then she put her apron up to her face. She was still clutching the thermometer she had used to take the baby’s temperature.

Mrs. Jenner crept up softly and twitched the apron. “Dearie,” she whispered, “I can put you onto black market penicillin when the money gets here . . . real cheap . . . good quality—”

“Get out!” she screamed at her.

Mrs. Jenner recoiled, her upper lip rising instinctively away from the blackened stumps of her teeth. “Just trying to help,” she muttered, and scurried back to her room.

Barely muffled by the thin plastiwood, Cathy’s wails continued. Mrs. Jenner’s Free-Vee blared and hooted. The contestant on *Treadmill to Bucks* had just missed a Bonus Question and had had a heart attack simultaneously. He was being carried off on a rubber stretcher while the audience applauded.

Upper lip arising and falling metronomically, Mrs. Jenner wrote Sheila Richards’s name down in her notebook. “We’ll see,” she said to no one. “We’ll just see, Mrs. Smell-So-Sweet.”

She closed the notebook with a vicious snap and settled down to watch the next game.



## . . . Minus 099 and COUNTING . . .

The drizzle had deepened into a steady rain by the time Richards hit the street. The big Smoke Dokes for Hallucinogenic Jokes thermometer across the street stood at fifty-one degrees. (*Just the Right Temp to Stoke Up a Doke—High to the Nth Degree!*) That might make it sixty in their apartment. And Cathy had the flu.

A rat trotted lazily, lousily, across the cracked and blistered cement of the street. Across the way, the ancient and rusted skeleton of a 2013 Humber stood on decayed axles. It had been completely stripped, even to the wheel bearings and motor mounts, but the cops didn't take it away. The cops rarely ventured south of the Canal anymore. Co-Op City stood in a radiating rat warren of parking lots, deserted shops, Urban Centers, and paved playgrounds. The cycle gangs were the law here, and all those newsie items about the intrepid Block Police of South City were nothing but a pile of warm crap. The streets were ghostly, silent. If you went out, you took the pneumo bus or you carried a gas cylinder.

He walked fast, not looking around, not thinking. The air was sulphurous and thick. Four cycles

roared past and someone threw a ragged hunk of asphalt paving. Richards ducked easily. Two pneumo buses passed him, buffeting him with air, but he did not flag them. The week's twenty-dollar unemployment allotment (oldbucks) had been spent. There was no money to buy a token. He supposed the roving packs could sense his poverty. He was not molested.

Highrises, Developments, chain-link fences, parking lots empty except for stripped derelicts, obscenities scrawled on the pavement in soft chalk and now blurring with the rain. Crashed-out windows, rats, wet bags of garbage splashed over the sidewalks and into the gutters. Graffiti written jaggedly on crumbling gray walls: HONKY DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU HEAR. HOME FOLKS BLOW DOKES. YOUR MOMMY ITCHES. SKIN YOUR BANANA. TOMMY'S PUSHING. HITLER WAS COOL. MARY. SID. KILL ALL KIKES. The old G.A. sodium lights put up in the 70s busted with rocks and hunks of paving. No technico was going to replace them down here; they were on the New Credit Dollar. Technicos stay uptown, baby. Uptown's cool. Everything silent except for the rising-then-descending whoosh of the pneumo buses and the echoing clack of Richards's foot-falls. This battlefield only lights up at night. In the day it is a deserted gray silence which contains no movement but the cats and rats and fat white maggots trundling across the garbage. No smell

but the decaying reek of this brave year 2025. The Free-Vee cables are safely buried under the streets and no one but an idiot or a revolutionary would want to vandalize them. Free-Vee is the stuff of dreams, the bread of life. Scag is twelve oldbucks a bag, Frisco Push goes for twenty a tab, but the Free-Vee will freak you for nothing. Farther along, on the other side of the Canal, the dream machine runs twenty-four hours a day . . . but it runs on New Dollars, and only employed people have any. There are four million others, almost all of them unemployed, south of the Canal in Co-Op City.

Richards walked three miles and the occasional liquor stores and smoke shops, at first heavily grilled, became more numerous. Then the X-Houses (*!24 Perversions—Count 'Em 24!!*), the Hockerries, the Blood Emporiums. Greasers sitting on cycles at every corner, the gutters buried in snowdrifts of roach ends. Rich Blokes Smoke Dokes.

He could see the skyscrapers rising into the clouds now, high and clean. The highest of all was the Network Games Building, one hundred stories, the top half buried in cloud and smog cover. He fixed his eyes on it and walked another mile. Now the more expensive movie houses, and smoke shops with no grills (but Rent-A-Pigs stood outside, electric move-alongs hanging from their Sam Browne belts). A city cop on every corner. The People's Fountain Park: Admission 75¢. Well-dressed mothers watching their children as they frolicked on the astroturf behind chain-link

fencing. A cop on either side of the gate. A tiny, pathetic glimpse of the fountain.

He crossed the Canal.

As he got closer to the Games Building it grew taller, more and more improbable with its impersonal tiers of rising office windows, its polished stonework. Cops watching him, ready to hustle him along or bust him if he tried to commit loitering. Uptown there was only one function for a man in baggy gray pants and a cheap bowl haircut and sunken eyes. That purpose was the Games.

The qualifying examinations began promptly at noon, and when Ben Richards stepped behind the last man in line, he was almost in the umbra of the Games Building. But the building was still nine blocks and over a mile away. The line stretched before him like an eternal snake. Soon others joined it behind him. The police watched them, hands on either gun butts or move-alongs. They smiled anonymous, contemptuous smiles.

—That one look like a half-wit to you, Frank?  
Looks like one to me.

—Guy down there ast me if there was a place where he could go to the bathroom. Canya imagine it?

—Sons of bitches ain't—

—Kill their own mothers for a—

—Smelled like he didn't have a bath for—

—Ain't nothin like a freak show I always—

Heads down against the rain, they shuffled aimlessly, and after a while the line began to move.

## . . . Minus 098 and COUNTING . . .

It was after four when Ben Richards got to the main desk and was routed to Desk 9 (Q-R). The woman sitting at the rumbling plastipunch looked tired and cruel and impersonal. She looked at him and saw no one.

“Name, last-first-middle.”

“Richards, Benjamin Stuart.”

Her fingers raced over the keys. *Clitter-clitter-clitter* went the machine.

“Age-height-weight.”

“Twenty-eight, six-two, one-sixty-five.”

*Clitter-clitter-clitter*

The huge lobby was an echoing, rebounding tomb of sound. Questions being asked and answered. People were being led out weeping. People were being thrown out. Hoarse voices were raised in protest. A scream or two. Questions. Always questions.

“Last school attended?”

“Manual Trades.”

“Did you graduate?”

“No.”

“How many years, and at what age did you leave?”

“Two years. Sixteen years old.”

“Reasons for leaving?”

“I got married.”

*Clitter-clitter-clitter*

“Name and age of spouse if any.”

“Sheila Catherine Richards, twenty-six.”

“Names and ages of children, if any.”

“Catherine Sarah Richards, eighteen months.”

*Clitter-clitter-clitter*

“Last question, mister. Don’t bother lying; they’ll pick it up during the physical and disqualify you there. Have you ever used heroin or the synthetic-amphetamine hallucinogen called San Francisco Push?”

“No.”

*Clitter.*

A plastic card popped out and she handed it to him. “Don’t lose this, big fella. If you do, you have to start back at go next week.” She was looking at him now, seeing his face, the angry eyes, lanky body. Not bad looking. At least some intelligence. Good stats.

She took his card back abruptly and punched off the upper right-hand corner, giving it an odd milled appearance.

“What was that for?”

“Never mind. Somebody will tell you later. Maybe.” She pointed over his shoulder at a long hall which led toward a bank of elevators. Dozens of men fresh from the desks were being stopped, showing their plastic I.D.s and moving on. As

Richards watched, a trembling, sallow-faced Push freak was stopped by a cop and shown the door. The freak began to cry. But he went.

“Tough old world, big fella,” the woman behind the desk said without sympathy. “Move along.”

Richards moved along. Behind him, the litany was already beginning again.



## **. . . Minus 097 and COUNTING . . .**

A hard, callused hand slapped his shoulder at the head of the hall beyond the desks. “Card, buddy.”

Richards showed it. The cop relaxed, his face subtle and Chinese with disappointment.

“You like turning them back, don’t you?” Richards asked. “It really gives you a charge, doesn’t it?”

“You want to go downtown, maggot?”

Richards walked past him, and the cop made no move.

He stopped halfway to the bank of elevators and looked back. “Hey. Cop.”

The cop looked at him truculently.

“Got a family? It could be you next week.”

“Move on!” the cop shouted furiously.

With a smile, Richards moved on.

There was a line of perhaps twenty applicants waiting at the elevators. Richards showed one of the cops on duty his card and the cop looked at him closely. “You a hardass, sonny?”

“Just about as smart as you talk without that gun on your leg and your pants down around your ankles,” Richards said, still smiling. “Want to try it?”

For a moment he thought the cop was going

to swing at him. "They'll fix you," the cop said. "You'll do some walking on your knees before you're done."

The cop swaggered over to three new arrivals and demanded to see their cards.

The man ahead of Richards turned around. He had a nervous, unhappy face and curly hair that came down in a widow's peak. "Say, you don't want to antagonize them, fella. They've got a grapevine."

"Is that so?" Richards asked, looking at him mildly.

The man turned away.

Abruptly the elevator doors snapped open. A black cop with a huge gut stood protecting the bank of push buttons. Another cop sat on a small stool reading a 3-D Pervert Mag in a small bullet-proof cubicle the size of a telephone booth at the rear of the large car. A sawed-off shotgun rested between his knees. Shells were lined up beside him within easy reach.

"Step to the rear!" the fat cop cried with bored importance. "Step to the rear! Step to the rear!"

They crowded in to a depth where a deep breath was impossible. Sad flesh walled Richards on every side. They went up to the second floor. The doors snapped open. Richards, who stood a head taller than anyone else in the car, saw a huge waiting room with many chairs dominated by a huge Free-Vee. A cigarette dispenser stood in one corner.

"Step out! Step out! Show I.D. cards to your left!"

They stepped out, holding out their I.D. cards to the impersonal lens of a camera. Three cops stood close by. For some reason, a buzzer went off at the sight of some dozen cards, and the holders were jerked out of line and hustled away.

Richards showed his card and was waved on. He went to the cigarette machine, got a package of Blams and sat down as far from the Free-Vee as possible. He lit up a smoke and exhaled, coughing. He hadn't had a cigarette in almost six months.



## **. . . Minus 096 and COUNTING . . .**

They called the A's for the physical almost immediately, and about two dozen men got up and filed through a door beyond the Free-Vee. A large sign tacked over the door read THIS WAY. There was an arrow below the legend, pointing at the door. The literacy of Games applicants was notoriously low.

They were taking a new letter every fifteen minutes or so. Ben Richards had sat down at about five, and so he estimated it would be quarter of nine before they got to him. He wished he had brought a book, but he supposed things were just as well as they were. Books were regarded with suspicion at best, especially when carried by someone from south of the Canal. Pervert Mags were safer.

He watched the six o'clock newsie restlessly (the fighting in Ecuador was worse, new cannibal riots had broken out in India, the Detroit Tigers had taken the Harding Catamounts by a score of 6–2 in an afternoon game), and when the first of the evening's big-money games came on at six-thirty, he went restlessly to the window and looked out. Now that his mind was made up, the Games bored him again. Most of the others, how-

ever, were watching *Fun Guns* with a dreadful fascination. Next week it might be them.

Outside, daylight was bleeding slowly toward dusk. The els were slamming at high speed through the power rings above the second-floor window, their powerful headlights searching the gray air. On the sidewalks below, crowds of men and women (most of them, of course, technicos or Network bureaucrats) were beginning their evening's prowl in search of entertainment. A Certified Pusher was hawking his wares on the corner across the street. A man with a sabled dolly on each arm passed below him; the trio was laughing about something.

He had a sudden awful wave of homesickness for Sheila and Cathy, and wished he could call them. He didn't think it was allowed. He could still walk out, of course; several men already had. They walked across the room, grinning obscurely at nothing, to use the door marked TO STREET. Back to the flat with his daughter glowing fever-bright in the other room? No. Couldn't. Couldn't.

He stood at the window a little while longer, then went back and sat down. The new game, *Dig Your Grave*, was beginning.

The fellow sitting next to Richards twitched his arm anxiously. "Is it true that they wash out over thirty percent just on the physicals?"

"I don't know," Richards said.

"Jesus," the fellow said. "I got bronchitis. Maybe *Treadmill to Bucks* . . ."

Richards could think of nothing to say. The pal's respiration sounded like a faraway truck trying to climb a steep hill.

"I got a fambly," the man said with soft desperation.

Richards looked at the Free-Vee as if it interested him.

The fellow was quiet for a long time. When the program changed again at seven-thirty, Richards heard him asking the man on his other side about the physical.

It was full dark outside now. Richards wondered if it was still raining. It seemed like a very long evening.



## . . . Minus 095 and COUNTING . . .

When the *R*'s went through the door under the red arrow and into the examination room it was just a few minutes after nine-thirty. A lot of the initial excitement had worn off, and people were either watching the Free-Vee avidly, with none of their prior dread, or dozing. The man with the noisy chest had a name that began with *L* and had been called over an hour before. Richards wondered idly if he had been cut.

The examination room was long and tiled, lit with fluorescent tubes. It looked like an assembly line, with bored doctors standing at various stations along the way.

Would any of you like to check my little girl? Richards thought bitterly.

The applicants showed their cards to another camera eye embedded in the wall and were ordered to stop by a row of clotheshooks. A doctor in a long white lab coat walked over to them, clipboard tucked under one arm.

"Strip," he said. "Hang your clothes on the hooks. Remember the number over your hook and give the number to the orderly at the far end. Don't worry about your valuables. Nobody here wants them."

Valuables. That was a hot one, Richards thought, unbuttoning his shirt. He had an empty wallet with a few pictures of Sheila and Cathy, a receipt for a shoe sole he had had replaced at the local cobbler's six months ago, a keyring with no keys on it except for the doorkey, a baby sock that he did not remember putting in there, and the package of Blams he had gotten from the machine.

He was wearing tattered skivvies because Sheila was too stubborn to let him go without, but many of the men were buck under their pants. Soon they all stood stripped and anonymous, penises dangling between their legs like forgotten war-clubs. Everyone held his card in one hand. Some shuffled their feet as if the floor were cold, although it was not. The faint, impersonally nostalgic odor of alcohol drifted through.

"Stay in line," the doctor with the clipboard was instructing. "Always show your card. Follow instructions."

The line moved forward. Richards saw there was a cop with each doctor along the way. He dropped his eyes and waited passively.

"Card."

He gave his card over. The first doctor noted the number, then said: "Open your mouth."

Richards opened it. His tongue was depressed.

The next doctor peered into his pupils with a tiny bright light, and then stared in his ears.

The next placed the cold circle of a stethoscope on his chest. "Cough."

Richards coughed. Down the line a man was being hauled away. He needed the money, they couldn't do it, he'd get his lawyer on them.

The doctor moved his stethoscope. "Cough."

Richards coughed. The doctor turned him around and put the stethoscope on his back.

"Take a deep breath and hold it." The stethoscope moved.

"Exhale."

Richards exhaled.

"Move along."

His blood pressure was taken by a grinning doctor with an eyepatch. He was given a short-arm inspection by a bald medico who had several large brown freckles, like liverspots, on his pate. The doctor placed a cool hand between the sac of his scrotum and his upper thigh.

"Cough."

Richards coughed.

"Move along."

His temperature was taken. He was asked to spit in a cup. Halfway, now. Halfway down the hall. Two or three men had already finished up, and an orderly with a pasty face and rabbit teeth was bringing them their clothes in wire baskets. Half a dozen more had been pulled out of the line and shown the stairs.

"Bend over and spread your cheeks."

Richards bent and spread. A finger coated with plastic invaded his rectal channel, explored, retreated.

"Move along."

He stepped into a booth with curtains on three sides, like the old voting booths—voting booths had been done away with by computer election eleven years ago—and urinated in a blue beaker. The doctor took it and put it in a wire rack.

At the next stop he looked at an eye-chart. “Read,” the doctor said.

*“E—A,L—D,M,F—S,P,M,Z—K,L,A,C,D—  
U,S,G,A—”*

“That’s enough. Move along.”

He entered another pseudo voting booth and put earphones over his head. He was told to push the white button when he heard something and the red button when he didn’t hear it anymore. The sound was very high and faint—like a dog whistle that had been pitch-lowered into just audible human range. Richards pushed buttons until he was told to stop.

He was weighed. His arches were examined. He stood in front of a fluoroscope and put on a lead apron. A doctor, chewing gum and singing something tunelessly under his breath, took several pictures and noted his card number.

Richards had come in with a group of about thirty. Twelve had made it to the far end of the room. Some were dressed and waiting for the elevator. About a dozen more had been hauled out of line. One of them tried to attack the doctor that had cut him and was felled by a policeman wielding a move-along at full charge. The pal fell as if poleaxed.

Richards stood at a low table and was asked if he had had some fifty different diseases. Most of them were respiratory in nature. The doctor looked up sharply when Richards said there was a case of influenza in the family.

“Wife?”

“No. My daughter.”

“Age?”

“A year and a half.”

“Have you been immunized? Don’t try to lie!” the doctor shouted suddenly, as if Richards had already tried to lie. “We’ll check your health stats.”

“Immunized July 2023. Booster September 2023. Block health clinic.”

“Move along.”

Richards had a sudden urge to reach over the table and pop the maggot’s neck. Instead, he moved along.

At the last stop, a severe-looking woman doctor with close-cropped hair and an Electric Juicer plugged into one ear asked him if he was a homosexual.

“No.”

“Have you ever been arrested on a felony charge?”

“No.”

“Do you have any severe phobias? By that I mean—”

“No.”

“You better listen to the definition,” she said with a faint touch of condescension. “I mean—”

“Do I have any unusual and compulsive fears, such as acrophobia or claustrophobia. I don’t.”

Her lips pressed tightly together, and for a moment she seemed on the verge of sharp comment.

“Do you use or have you used any hallucinogenic or addictive drugs?”

“No.”

“Do you have any relatives who have been arrested on charges of crimes against the government or against the Network?”

“No.”

“Sign this loyalty oath and this Games Commission release form, Mr., uh, Richards.”

He scratched his signature.

“Show the orderly your card and tell him the number—”

He left her in midsentence and gestured at the buck-toothed orderly with his thumb. “Number twenty-six, Bugs.” The orderly brought his things. Richards dressed slowly and went over by the elevator. His anus felt hot and embarrassed, violated, a little slippery with the lubricant the doctor had used.

When they were all bunched together, the elevator door opened. The bulletproof Judas hole was empty this time. The cop was a skinny man with a large wen beside his nose. “Step to the rear,” he chanted. “Please step to the rear.”

As the door closed, Richards could see the S’s coming in at the far end of the hall. The doctor

with the clipboard was approaching them. Then the doors clicked together, cutting off the view.

They rode up to the third floor, and the doors opened on a huge, semilit dormitory. Rows and rows of narrow iron-and-canvas cots seemed to stretch out to infinity.

Two cops began to check them out of the elevator, giving them bed numbers. Richards's was 940. The cot had one brown blanket and a very flat pillow. Richards lay down on the cot and let his shoes drop to the floor. His feet dangled over the end; there was nothing to be done about it.

He crossed his arms under his head and stared at the ceiling.



## . . . Minus 094 and COUNTING . . .

He was awakened promptly at six the following morning by a very loud buzzer. For a moment he was foggy, disoriented, wondering if Sheila had bought an alarm clock or what. Then it came to him and he sat up.

They were led by groups of fifty into a large industrial bathroom where they showed their cards to a camera guarded by a policeman. Richards went to a blue-tiled booth that contained a mirror, a basin, a shower, a toilet. On the shelf above the basin was a row of toothbrushes wrapped in cellophane, an electric razor, a bar of soap, and a half-used tube of toothpaste. A sign tucked into the corner of the mirror read: *RESPECT THIS PROPERTY!* Beneath it, someone had scrawled: *I ONLY RESPECT MY ASS!*

Richards showered, dried with a towel that topped a pile on the toilet tank, shaved, and brushed.

They were let into a cafeteria where they showed their I.D. cards again. Richards took a tray and pushed it down a stainless steel ledge. He was given a box of cornflakes, a greasy dish of home fries, a scoop of scrambled eggs, a piece of toast as

cold and hard as a marble gravestone, a halfpint of milk, a cup of muddy coffee (no cream), an envelope of sugar, an envelope of salt, and a pat of fake butter on a tiny square of oily paper.

He wolfed the meal; they all did. For Richards it was the first real food, other than greasy pizza wedges and government pill-commodities, that he had eaten in God knew how long. Yet it was oddly bland, as if some vampire chef in the kitchen had sucked all the taste out of it and left only brute nutrients.

What were *they* eating this morning? Help pills. Fake milk for the baby. A sudden feeling of desperation swelled over him. Christ when would they start seeing money? Today? Tomorrow? Next week?

Or maybe that was just a gimmick too, a flashy come-on. Maybe there wasn't even any rainbow, let alone a pot of gold.

He sat staring at his empty plate until the seven o'clock buzzer went and they were moved on to the elevators.

## **. . . Minus 093 and COUNTING . . .**

On the fourth floor Richards's group of fifty was herded first into a large, furnitureless room ringed with what looked like letter slots. They showed their cards again, and the elevator doors whooshed closed behind them.

A gaunt man with receding hair with the Games emblem (the silhouette of a human head superimposed over a torch) on his lab coat came into the room.

"Please undress and remove all valuables from your clothes," he said. "Then drop your clothes into one of the incinerator slots. You'll be issued Games coveralls." He smiled magnanimously. "You may keep the overalls no matter what your personal Games resolution may be."

There was some grumbling, but everyone complied.

"Hurry, please," the gaunt man said. He clapped his hands together twice, like a first-grade teacher signaling the end of playtime. "We have lots ahead of us."

"Are you going to be a contestant, too?" Richards asked.

The gaunt man favored him with a puzzled expression. Somebody in the back snickered.

“Never mind,” Richards said, and stepped out of his trousers.

He removed his unvaluable valuables and dumped his shirt, pants, and skivvies into a letter slot. There was a brief, hungry flash of flame from somewhere far below.

The door at the other end opened (there was *always* a door at the other end; they were like rats in a huge, upward-tending maze: an American maze, Richards reflected), and men trundled in large baskets on wheels, labeled S, M, L, and XL. Richards selected an XL for its length and expected it to hang baggily on his frame, but it fit quite well. The material was soft, clingy, almost like silk, but tougher than silk. A single nylon zipper ran up the front. They were all dark blue, and they all had the Games emblem on the right breast pocket. When the entire group was wearing them, Ben Richards felt as if he had lost his face.

“This way, please,” the gaunt man said, and ushered them into another waiting room. The inevitable Free-Vee blared and cackled. “You’ll be called in groups of ten.”

The door beyond the Free-Vee was topped by another sign reading THIS WAY, complete with arrow.

They sat down. After a while, Richards got up

and went to the window and looked out. They were higher up, but it was still raining. The streets were slick and black and wet. He wondered what Sheila was doing.



## . . . Minus 092 and COUNTING . . .

He went through the door, one of a group of ten now, at quarter past ten. They went through single file. Their cards were scanned. There were ten three-sided booths, but these were more substantial. The sides were constructed of drilled soundproof cork paneling. The overhead lighting was soft and indirect. Muzak was emanating from hidden speakers. There was a plush carpet on the floor; Richards's feet felt startled by something that wasn't cement.

The gaunt man had said something to him.

Richards blinked. "Huh?"

"Booth 6," the gaunt man said reprovably.

"Oh."

He went to Booth 6. There was a table inside, and a large wall clock mounted at eye level beyond it. On the table was a sharpened G-A/IBM pencil and a pile of unlined paper. Cheap grade, Richards noted.

Standing beside all this was a dazzling computer-age priestess, a tall, Junoesque blonde wearing iridescent short shorts which cleanly outlined the delta-shaped rise of her pudenda. Roughed nipples poked perkily through a silk fishnet blouselet.

"Sit down, please," she said, "I am Rinda Ward, your tester." She held out her hand.