

Bilennium

by James Graham Ballard, 1930-2009

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All day long, and often into the early hours of the morning, the tramp of feet sounded up and down the stairs outside Ward's cubicle. Built into a narrow alcove in a bend of the staircase between the fourth and fifth floors, its plywood walls flexed and creaked with every footstep like the timbers of a rotting windmill. Over a hundred people lived in the top three floors of the old rooming house, and sometimes Ward would lie awake on his narrow bunk until 2 or 3 a.m., mechanically counting the last residents returning from the all-night movies in the stadium half a mile away. Through the window he could hear giant fragments of the amplified dialogue booming among the rooftops. The stadium was never empty. During the day the huge four-sided screen was raised on its davit and athletics meetings or football matches ran continuously. For the people in the houses abutting the stadium the noise must have been unbearable.

Ward, at least, had a certain degree of privacy. Two months earlier, before he came to live on the staircase, he had shared a room with seven others on the ground floor of a house in 755th Street, and the ceaseless press of people jostling past the window had reduced him to a state of exhaustion. The street was always full, an endless clamour of voices and shuffling feet. By 6.30, when he woke, hurrying to take his place in the bathroom queue, the crowds already jammed it from sidewalk to sidewalk, the din punctuated every half minute by the roar of the elevated trains running over the shops on the opposite side of the road. As soon as he saw the advertisement describing the staircase cubicle he had left (like everyone else, he spent most of his spare time scanning the classifieds in the newspapers, moving his lodgings an average of once every two months) despite the higher rental. A cubicle on a staircase would almost certainly be on its own.

However, this had its drawbacks. Most evenings his friends from the library would call in, eager to rest their elbows after the bruising crush of the public reading room. The cubicle was slightly more than four and a half square metres in floor area, half a square metre over the statutory maximum for a single person, the carpenters having taken advantage, illegally, of a recess beside a nearby chimney breast. Consequently Ward had been able to fit a small straight-backed chair into the interval between the bed and the door, so that only one person at a time needed to sit on the bed—in most single cubicles host and guest had to sit side by side on the 267 bed, conversing over their shoulders and changing places periodically to avoid neck-strain.

„You were lucky to find this place,“ Rossiter, the most regular visitor, never tired of telling him. He reclined back on the bed, gesturing at the cubicle. „It’s enormous, the perspectives really zoom. I’d be surprised if you haven’t got at least five metres here, perhaps six.“

Ward shook his head categorically. Rossiter was his closest friend, but the quest for living space had forged powerful reflexes. „Just over four and a half, I’ve measured it carefully. There’s no doubt about it.“

Rossiter lifted one eyebrow. „I’m amazed. It must be the ceiling then.“

Manipulating the ceiling was a favourite trick of unscrupulous landlords—most assessments of area were made upon the ceiling, out of convenience, and by tilting back the plywood partitions the rated area of a cubicle could be either increased, for the benefit of a prospective tenant (many married couples were thus bamboozled into taking a single cubicle), or decreased temporarily on the visits of the housing inspectors. Ceilings were criss-crossed with pencil marks staking out the rival claims of tenants on opposite sides of a party wall. Someone timid of his rights could be literally squeezed out of existence—in fact, the advertisement „quiet clientele“ was usually a tacit invitation to this sort of piracy.

„The wall does tilt a little,“ Ward admitted. „Actually, it’s about four degrees out—I used a plumb-line. But there’s still plenty of room on the stairs for people to get by.“

Rossiter grinned. „Of course, John. I’m just envious, that’s all. My room is driving me crazy.“ Like everyone, he used the term „room“ to describe his tiny cubicle, a hangover from the days fifty years earlier when people had indeed lived one to a room, sometimes, unbelievably, one to an apartment or house. The microfilms in the architecture catalogues at the library showed scenes of

museums, concert halls and other public buildings in what appeared to be everyday settings, often virtually empty, two or three people wandering down an enormous gallery or staircase. Traffic moved freely along the centre of streets, and in the quieter districts sections of sidewalk would be deserted for fifty yards or more.

Now, of course, the older buildings had been torn down and replaced by housing batteries, or converted into apartment blocks. The great banqueting room in the former City Hall had been split horizontally into four decks, each of these cut up into hundreds of cubicles.

As for the streets, traffic had long since ceased to move about them. Apart from a few hours before dawn when only the sidewalks were crowded, every thoroughfare was always packed with a shuffling mob of pedestrians, perforce ignoring the countless „KEEP LEFT“ signs suspended over their heads, wrestling past each other on their way to home and office, their clothes dusty and shapeless. Often „locks“ would occur when a huge crowd at a street junction became immovably jammed. Sometimes these locks would last for days. Two years earlier Ward had been caught in one outside the stadium, for over forty-eight hours was trapped in a gigantic pedestrian jam containing over 20,000 people, fed by the crowds leaving the stadium on one side and those approaching it on the other. An entire square mile of the local neighbourhood had been paralysed, and he vividly remembered the nightmare of swaying helplessly on his feet as the jam shifted and heaved, terrified of losing his balance and being trampled underfoot. When the police had finally sealed off the stadium and dispersed the jam he had gone back to his cubicle and slept for a week, his body blue with bruises.

„I hear they may reduce the allocation to three and a half metres,“ Rossiter remarked.

Ward paused to allow a party of tenants from the sixth floor to pass down the staircase, holding the door to prevent it jumping off its latch. „So they're always saying,“ he commented. „I can remember that rumour ten years ago.“

„It's no rumour,“ Rossiter warned him. „It may well be necessary soon. Thirty million people are packed into this city now, a million increase in just one year. There's been some pretty serious talk at the Housing Department.“

Ward shook his head. „A drastic revaluation like that is almost impossible to carry out. Every single partition would have to be dismantled and nailed up again, the administrative job alone is so vast it's difficult to visualize. Millions of cubicles to be redesigned and certified, licences to be issued, plus the complete resettlement of every tenant. Most of the buildings put up since the last revaluation are designed around a four-metre modulus—you can't simply take half a metre off the end of each cubicle and then say that makes so many new cubicles. They may be only six inches wide.“ He laughed. „Besides, how can you live in just three and a half metres?“

Rossiter smiled. „That's the ultimate argument, isn't it? They used it twenty-five years ago at the last revaluation, when the minimum was cut from five to four. It couldn't be done they all said, no one could stand living in only four square metres, it was enough room for a bed and suitcase, but you couldn't open the door to get in.“ Rossiter chuckled softly. „They were all wrong. It was merely decided

that from then on all doors would open outwards. Four square metres was here to stay.“

Ward looked at his watch. It was 7.30. „Time to eat. Let’s see if we can get into the food-bar across the road.“

Grumbling at the prospect, Rossiter pulled himself off the bed. They left the cubicle and made their way down the staircase. This was crammed with luggage and packing cases so that only a narrow interval remained around the banister. On the floors below the congestion was worse. Corridors were wide enough to be chopped up into single cubicles, and the air was stale and dead, cardboard walls hung with damp laundry and makeshift larders. Each of the five rooms on the floors contained a dozen tenants, their voices reverberating through the partitions.

People were sitting on the steps above the second floor, using the staircase as an informal lounge, although this was against the fire regulations, women talking to the men queueing in their shirtsleeves outside the washroom, children diving around them. By the time they reached the entrance Ward and Rossiter were having to force their way through the tenants packed together on every landing, loitering around the notice boards or pushing in from the street below.

Taking a breath at the top of the steps, Ward pointed to the food-bar on the other side of the road. It was only thirty yards away, but the throng moving down the street swept past like a river at full tide, crossing them from right to left. The first picture show at the stadium started at 9 o’clock, and people were setting off already to make sure of getting in.

„Can’t we go somewhere else?“ Rossiter asked, screwing his face up at the prospect of the food-bar. Not only was it packed and take them half an hour to be served, but the food was flat and unappetizing. The journey from the library four blocks away had given him an appetite.

Ward shrugged. „There’s a place on the corner, but I doubt if we can make it.“ This was two hundred yards upstream; they would be fighting the crowd all the way.

„Maybe you’re right.“ Rossiter put his hand on Ward’s shoulder. „You know, John, your trouble is that you never go anywhere, you’re too disengaged, you just don’t realize how bad everything is getting.“

Ward nodded. Rossiter was right. In the morning, when he set off for the library, the pedestrian traffic was moving with him towards the down-town offices; in the evening, when he came back, it was flowing in the opposite direction. By and large he never altered his routine. Brought up from the age of ten in a municipal hostel, he had gradually lost touch with his father and mother, who lived on the east side of the city and had been unable, or unwilling, to make the journey to see him. Having surrendered his initiative to the dynamics of the city he was reluctant to try to win it back merely for a better cup of coffee. Fortunately his job at the library brought him into contact with a wide range of young people of similar interests. Sooner or later he would marry, find a double cubicle near the library and settle down. If they had enough children (three was the required minimum) they might even one day own a small room of their own.

They stepped out into the pedestrian stream, carried along by it for ten or twenty yards, then quickened their pace and sidestepped through the crowd, slowly tacking across to the other side of the road. There they found the shelter of

the shop-fronts, slowly worked their way back to the food-bar, shoulders braced against the countless minor collisions.

„What are the latest population estimates?“ Ward asked as they circled a cigarette kiosk, stepping forward whenever a gap presented itself.

Rossiter smiled. „Sorry, John, I'd like to tell you but you might start a stampede. Besides, you wouldn't believe me.“

Rossiter worked in the Insurance Department at the City Hall, had informal access to the census statistics. For the last ten years these had been classified information, partly because they were felt to be inaccurate, but chiefly because it was feared they might set off a mass attack of claustrophobia. Minor outbreaks had taken place already, and the official line was that world population had reached a plateau, levelling off at 20,000 million. No one believed this for a moment, and Ward assumed that the 3 per cent annual increase maintained since the 1960s was continuing.

How long it could continue was impossible to estimate. Despite the gloomiest prophecies of the Neo-Malthusians, world agriculture had managed to keep pace with the population growth, although intensive cultivation meant that 95 per cent of the population was permanently trapped in vast urban conurbations. The outward growth of cities had at last been checked; in fact, all over the world former suburban areas were being reclaimed for agriculture and population additions were confined within the existing urban ghettos. The countryside, as such, no longer existed. Every single square foot of ground sprouted a crop of one type or other. The one-time fields and meadows of the world were now, in effect, factory floors, as highly mechanized and closed to the public as any industrial area. Economic and ideological rivalries had long since faded before one overriding quest—the internal colonization of the city.

Reaching the food-bar, they pushed themselves into the entrance and joined the scrum of customers pressing six deep against the counter.

„What is really wrong with the population problem,“ Ward confided to Rossiter, „is that no one has ever tried to tackle it. Fifty years ago short-sighted nationalism and industrial expansion put a premium on a rising population curve, and even now the hidden incentive is to have a large family so that you can gain a little privacy. Single people are penalized simply because there are more of them and they don't fit neatly into double or triple cubicles. But it's the large family with its compact, space-saving logistic that is the real villain.“

Rossiter nodded, edging nearer the counter, ready to shout his order. „Too true. We all look forward to getting married just so that we can have our six square metres.“

Directly in front of them, two girls turned around and smiled. „Six square metres,“ one of them, a dark-haired girl with a pretty oval face, repeated. „You sound like the sort of young man I ought to get to know. Going into the real estate business, Henry?“

Rossiter grinned and squeezed her arm. „Hello, Judith. I'm thinking about it actively. Like to join me in a private venture?“

The girl leaned against him as they reached the counter. „Well, I might. It would have to be legal, though.“

The other girl, Helen Waring, an assistant at the library, pulled Ward's sleeve. „Have you heard the latest, John? Judith and I have been kicked out of our room. We're on the street right at this minute.“

„What?“ Rossiter cried. They collected their soups and coffee and edged back to the rear of the bar. „What on earth happened?“

Helen explained: „You know that little broom cupboard outside our cubicle? Judith and I have been using it as a sort of study hole, going in there to read. It's quiet and restful, if you can get used to not breathing. Well, the old girl found out and kicked up a big fuss, said we were breaking the law and so on. In short, out.“ Helen paused. „Now we've heard she's going to let it as a single.“

Rossiter pounded the counter ledge. „A broom cupboard? Someone's going to live there? But she'll never get a licence.“

Judith shook her head. „She's got it already. Her brother works in the Housing Department.“

Ward laughed into his soup. „But how can she let it? No one will live in a broom cupboard.“

Judith stared at him sombrely. „You really believe that, John?“

Ward dropped his spoon. „No, I suppose you're right. People will live anywhere. God, I don't know who I feel more sorry for—you two, or the poor devil who'll be living in that cupboard. What are you going to do?“

„A couple in a place two blocks west are sub-letting half their cubicle to us. They've hung a sheet down the middle and Helen and I'll take turns sleeping on a camp bed. I'm not joking, our room's about two feet wide. I said to Helen that we ought to split up again and sublet one half at twice our rent.“

They had a good laugh over all this. Then Ward said good night to the others and went back to his rooming house.

There he found himself with similar problems.

The manager leaned against the flimsy door, a damp cigar butt revolving around his mouth, an expression of morose boredom on his unshaven face.

„You got four point seven two metres,“ he told Ward, who was standing out on the staircase, unable to get into his room. Other tenants pressed by on to the landing, where two women in curlers and dressing gowns were arguing with each other, tugging angrily at the wall of trunks and cases. Occasionally the manager glanced at them irritably. „Four seven two. I worked it out twice.“ He said this as if it ended all possibility of argument.

„Ceiling or floor?“ Ward asked.

„Ceiling, whaddya think? How can I measure the floor with all this junk?“ He kicked at a crate of books protruding from under the bed.

Ward let this pass. „There's quite a tilt on the wall,“ he pointed out. „As much as three or four degrees.“

The manager nodded vaguely. „You're definitely over the four. Way over.“ He turned to Ward, who had moved down several steps to allow a man and woman to get past. „I can rent this as a double.“

„What, only four and a half?“ Ward said incredulously. „How?“

The man who had just passed him leaned over the manager's shoulder and sniffed at the room, taking in every detail in a one-second glance. „You renting a double here, Louie?“

The manager waved him away and then beckoned Ward into the room, closing the door after him.

„It’s a nominal five,“ he told Ward. „New regulation, just came out. Anything over four five is a double now.“ He eyed Ward shrewdly. „Well, whaddya want? It’s a good room, there’s a lot of space here, feels more like a triple. You got access to the staircase, window slit—“ He broke off as Ward slumped down on the bed and started to laugh. „Whatsa matter? Look, if you want a big room like this you gotta pay for it. I want an extra half rental or you get out.“

Ward wiped his eyes, then stood up wearily and reached for the shelves. „Relax, I’m on my way. I’m going to live in a broom cupboard. *Access to the staircase*—that’s really rich. Tell me, Louie, is there life on Uranus?“

Temporarily, he and Rossiter teamed up to rent a double cubicle in a semi-derelict house a hundred yards from the library. The neighbourhood was seedy and faded, the rooming houses crammed with tenants. Most of them were owned by absentee landlords or by the city corporation, and the managers employed were of the lowest type, mere rent-collectors who cared nothing about the way their tenants divided up the living space, and never ventured beyond the first floors. Bottles and empty cans littered the corridors, and the washrooms looked like sumps. Many of the tenants were old and infirm, sitting about listlessly in their narrow cubicles, wheedling at each other back to back through the thin partitions.

Their double cubicle was on the third floor, at the end of a corridor that ringed the building. Its architecture was impossible to follow, rooms letting off at all angles, and luckily the corridor was a cul de sac. The mounds of cases ended four feet from the end wall and a partition divided off the cubicle, just wide enough for two beds. A high window overlooked the area ways of the buildings opposite.

Possessions loaded on to the shelf above his head, Ward lay back on his bed and moodily surveyed the roof of the library through the afternoon haze.

„It’s not bad here,“ Rossiter told him, unpacking his case. „I know there’s no real privacy and we’ll drive each other insane within a week, but at least we haven’t got six other people breathing into our ears two feet away.“

The nearest cubicle, a single, was built into the banks of cases half a dozen steps along the corridor, but the occupant, a man of seventy, was deaf and bed-ridden.

„It’s not bad,“ Ward echoed reluctantly. „Now tell me what the latest growth figures are. They might console me.“

Rossiter paused, lowering his voice. „Four per cent. Eight hundred million extra people in one year—just less than half the earth’s total population in 1950.“

Ward whistled slowly. „So they will revalue. What to? Three and a half?“

„Three. From the first of next year.“

„Three square metres!“ Ward sat up and looked around him. „It’s unbelievable! The world’s going insane, Rossiter. For God’s sake, when are they going to do something about it? Do you realize there soon won’t be room enough to sit down, let alone lie down?“

Exasperated, he punched the wall beside him, on the second blow knocked in one of the small wooden panels that had been lightly papered over.

„Hey!“ Rossiter yelled. „You’re breaking the place down.“ He dived across the bed to retrieve the panel, which hung downwards supported by a strip of paper. Ward

slipped his hand into the dark interval, carefully drew the panel back on to the bed.

„Who's on the other side?“ Rossiter whispered. „Did they hear?“

Ward peered through the interval, eyes searching the dim light. Suddenly he dropped the panel and seized Rossiter's shoulder, pulled him down on to the bed.

„Henry! Look!“

Directly in front of them, faintly illuminated by a grimy skylight, was a medium-sized room some fifteen feet square, empty except for the dust silted up against the skirting boards. The floor was bare, a few strips of frayed linoleum running across it, the walls covered with a drab floral design. Here and there patches of the paper peeled off and segments of the picture rail had rotted away, but otherwise the room was in habitable condition.

Breathing slowly, Ward closed the open door of the cubicle with his foot, then turned to Rossiter.

„Henry, do you realize what we've found? Do you realize it, man?“

„Shut up. For Pete's sake keep your voice down.“ Rossiter examined the room carefully. „It's fantastic. I'm trying to see whether anyone's used it recently.“

„Of course they haven't,“ Ward pointed out. „It's obvious. There's no door into the room. We're looking through it now. They must have panelled over this door years ago and forgotten about it. Look at that filth everywhere.“

Rossiter was staring into the room, his mind staggered by its vastness.

„You're right,“ he murmured. „Now, when do we move in?“

Panel, by panel, they prised away the lower half of the door and nailed it on to a wooden frame, so that the dummy section could be replaced instantly.

Then, picking an afternoon when the house was half empty and the manager asleep in his basement office, they made their first foray into the room, Ward going in alone while Rossiter kept guard in the cubicle.

For an hour they exchanged places, wandering silently around the dusty room, stretching their arms out to feel its unconfined emptiness, grasping at the sensation of absolute spatial freedom. Although smaller than many of the subdivided rooms in which they had lived, this room seemed infinitely larger, its walls huge cliffs that soared upward to the skylight.

Finally, two or three days later, they moved in.

For the first week Rossiter slept alone in the room, Ward in the cubicle outside, both there together during the day. Gradually they smuggled in a few items of furniture: two armchairs, a table, a lamp fed from the socket in the cubicle. The furniture was heavy and Victorian; the cheapest available, its size emphasized the emptiness of the room. Pride of place was taken by an enormous mahogany wardrobe, fitted with carved angels and castellated mirrors, which they were forced to dismantle and carry into the house in their suitcases. Towering over them, it reminded Ward of the micro-films of gothic cathedrals, with their massive organ lofts crossing vast naves.

After three weeks they both slept in the room, finding the cubicle unbearably cramped. An imitation Japanese screen divided the room adequately and did nothing to diminish its size. Sitting there in the evenings, surrounded by his books and albums, Ward steadily forgot the city outside. Luckily he reached the library by a back alley and avoided the crowded streets. Rossiter and himself began to

seem the only real inhabitants of the world, everyone else a meaningless by-product of their own existence, a random replication of identity which had run out of control.

It was Rossiter who suggested that they ask the two girls to share the room with them.

„They’ve been kicked out again and may have to split up,“ he told Ward, obviously worried that Judith might fall into bad company. „There’s always a rent freeze after a revaluation but all the landlords know about it so they’re not reletting. It’s damned difficult to find anywhere.

Ward nodded, relaxing back around the circular red-wood table. He played with the tassel of the arsenic-green lamp shade, for a moment felt like a Victorian man of letters, leading a spacious, leisurely life among overstuffed furnishings.

„I’m all for it,“ he agreed, indicating the empty corners. „There’s plenty of room here. But we’ll have to make sure they don’t gossip about it.“

After due precautions, they let the two girls into the secret, enjoying their astonishment at finding this private universe.

„We’ll put a partition across the middle,“ Rossiter explained, „then take it down each morning. You’ll be able to move in within a couple of days. How do you feel?“

„Wonderful!“ They goggled at the wardrobe, squinting at the endless reflections in the mirrors.

There was no difficulty getting them in and out of the house. The turnover of tenants was continuous and bills were placed in the mail rack. No one cared who the girls were or noticed their regular calls at the cubicle.

However, half an hour after they arrived neither of them had unpacked her suitcase.

„What’s up, Judith?“ Ward asked, edging past the girls’ beds into the narrow interval between the table and wardrobe.

Judith hesitated, looking from Ward to Rossiter, who sat on the bed, finishing off the plywood partition. „John, it’s just that...“

Helen Waring, more matter-of-fact, took over, her fingers straightening the bed-spread. „What Judith’s trying to say is that our position here is a little embarrassing. The partition is—“

Rossiter stood up. „For heaven’s sake, don’t worry, Helen,“ he assured her, speaking in the loud whisper they had all involuntarily cultivated. „No funny business, you can trust us. This partition is as solid as a rock.“

The two girls nodded. „It’s not that,“ Helen explained, „but it isn’t up all the time. We thought that if an older person were here, say Judith’s aunt—she wouldn’t take up much room and be no trouble, she’s really awfully sweet—we wouldn’t need to bother about the partition—except at night,“ she added quickly.

Ward glanced at Rossiter, who shrugged and began to scan the floor.

„Well, it’s an idea,“ Rossiter said. „John and I know how you feel. Why not?“

„Sure,“ Ward agreed. He pointed to the space between the girls’ beds and the table. „One more won’t make any difference.“

The girls broke into whoops. Judith went over to Rossiter and kissed him on the cheek. „Sorry to be a nuisance, Henry.“ She smiled at him. „That’s a wonderful partition you’ve made. You couldn’t do another one for Auntie—just a little one? She’s very sweet but she is getting on.“

„Of course,“ Rossiter said. „I understand. I’ve got plenty of wood left over.“

Ward looked at his watch. „It’s seven-thirty, Judith. You’d better get in touch with your aunt. She may not be able to make it tonight.“

Judith buttoned her coat. „Oh she will,“ she assured Ward. „I’ll be back in a jiffy.“

The aunt arrived within five minutes, three heavy suitcases soundly packed.

„It’s amazing,“ Ward remarked to Rossiter three months later. „The size of this room still staggers me. It almost gets larger every day.“

Rossiter agreed readily, averting his eyes from one of the girls changing behind the central partition. This they now left in place as dismantling it daily had become tiresome. Besides, the aunt’s subsidiary partition was attached to it and she resented the continuous upsets. Ensuring she followed the entrance and exit drills through the camouflaged door and cubicle was difficult enough.

Despite this, detection seemed unlikely. The room had obviously been built as an afterthought into the central well of the house and any noise was masked by the luggage stacked in the surrounding corridor. Directly below was a small dormitory occupied by several elderly women, and Judith’s aunt, who visited them socially, swore that no sounds came through the heavy ceiling. Above, the fanlight let out through a dormer window, its lights indistinguishable from the hundred other bulbs in the windows of the house.

Rossiter finished off the new partition he was building and held it upright, fitting it into the slots nailed to the wall between his bed and Ward’s. They had agreed that this would provide a little extra privacy.

„No doubt I’ll have to do one for Judith and Helen,“ he confided to Ward.

Ward adjusted his pillow. They had smuggled the two armchairs back to the furniture shop as they took up too much space. The bed, anyway, was more comfortable. He had never become completely used to the soft upholstery.

„Not a bad idea. What about some shelving around the wall? I’ve got nowhere to put anything.“

The shelving tidied the room considerably, freeing large areas of the floor. Divided by their partitions, the five beds were in line along the rear wall, facing the mahogany wardrobe. In between was an open space of three or four feet, a further six feet on either side of the wardrobe.

The sight of so much spare space fascinated Ward. When Rossiter mentioned that Helen’s mother was ill and badly needed personal care he immediately knew where her cubicle could be placed—at the foot of his bed, between the wardrobe and the side wall.

Helen was overjoyed. „It’s awfully good of you, John,“ she told him, „but would you mind if Mother slept beside me? There’s enough space to fit an extra bed in.“

So Rossiter dismantled the partitions and moved them closer together, six beds now in line along the wall. This gave each of them an interval two and a half feet wide, just enough room to squeeze down the side of their beds. Lying back on the extreme right, the shelves two feet above his head, Ward could barely see the wardrobe, but the space in front of him, a clear six feet to the wall ahead, was uninterrupted.

Then Helen’s father arrived.

Knocking on the door of the cubicle, Ward smiled at Judith's aunt as she let him in. He helped her swing out the made-up bed which guarded the entrance, then rapped on the wooden panel. A moment later Helen's father, a small, grey-haired man in an undershirt, braces tied to his trousers with string, pulled back the panel.

Ward nodded to him and stepped over the luggage piled around the floor at the foot of the beds. Helen was in her mother's cubicle, helping the old woman to drink her evening broth. Rossiter, perspiring heavily, was on his knees by the mahogany wardrobe, wrenching apart the frame of the central mirror with a jemmy. Pieces of the wardrobe lay on his bed and across the floor.

„We'll have to start taking these out tomorrow,“ Rossiter told him. Ward waited for Helen's father to shuffle past and enter his cubicle. He had rigged up a small cardboard door, and locked it behind him with a crude hook of bent wire.

Rossiter watched him, frowning irritably. „Some people are happy. This wardrobe's a hell of a job. How did we ever decide to buy it?“

Ward sat down on his bed. The partition pressed against his knees and he could hardly move. He looked up when Rossiter was engaged and saw that the dividing line he had marked in pencil was hidden by the encroaching partition. Leaning against the wall, he tried to ease it back again, but Rossiter had apparently nailed the lower edge to the floor.

There was a sharp tap on the outside cubicle door—Judith returning from her office. Ward started to get up and then sat back. „Mr Waring,“ he called softly. It was the old man's duty night.

Waring shuffled to the door of his cubicle and unlocked it fussily, clucking to himself.

„Up and down, up and down,“ he muttered. He stumbled over Rossiter's tool-bag and swore loudly, then added meaningly over his shoulder: „If you ask me there's too many people in here. Down below they've only got six to our seven, and it's the same size room.“

Ward nodded vaguely and stretched back on his narrow bed, trying not to bang his head on the shelving. Waring was not the first to hint that he move out. Judith's aunt had made a similar suggestion two days earlier. Since he had left his job at the library (the small rental he charged the others paid for the little food he needed) he spent most of his time in the room, seeing rather more of the old man than he wanted to, but he had learned to tolerate him.

Settling himself, he noticed that the right-hand spire of the wardrobe, all he had been able to see of it for the past two months, was now dismantled.

It had been a beautiful piece of furniture, in a way symbolizing this whole private world, and the salesman at the store told him there were few like it left. For a moment Ward felt a sudden pang of regret, as he had done as a child when his father, in a moment of exasperation, had taken something away from him and he had known he would never see it again.

Then he pulled himself together. It was a beautiful wardrobe, without doubt, but when it was gone it would make the room seem even larger.

