

# PERSONAL SPACE

Lawrence Watt-Evans

**Lawrence Watt-Evans is currently traveling the world to celebrate his wife's retirement. So far the couple has visited Spain, France, England, and the Isle of Man, with Scotland, Wales, Belgium, Germany, Croatia, and Italy planned for the next few months. They expect to return to the United States and start looking for a new home by the end of the year. With any luck, their travels won't take them too close to Anna's . . .**

## PERSONAL SPACE

He clicked "PRINT" and sat back in his chair, then glanced at the clock on the office wall. Startled by what he saw, he checked the time on the computer screen. It matched.

He pulled out his phone, and that, too, gave the time as 6:20. He flipped to his list of contacts and tapped "ANNA," then held the phone to his ear and listened to it buzz while he watched the Madison agreements print out.

The buzz stopped. "Hi, Gary," Anna's voice said. "What's up?"

"Hey, Annie," he said. "Look, I'm running late—I came into the office to catch up on some stuff, so I could start the day Monday with a clean desk, but it took longer than I expected. I'm still here."

"At the office?"

"Yeah."

"So are we on for dinner?"

"Of course! But could you meet me here? Seems silly to come all the way out to your place and then back into town when I'm two blocks from the restaurant, and we're going to be late for our reservations as it is."

The printer stopped, but the screen said "LOAD PAPER," rather than reverting to "READY." He grimaced.

"Oh, sure," Anna said. "I'll be right there. Meet you out front of the office?"

"Sounds good. See you soon!" He tapped the red button, dropped the phone back in his pocket, then got up and headed for the supply closet. He had time; Anna's apartment was twenty minutes away.

He found a ream of paper and loaded it into the printer, then waited while the contracts finished printing. He put them in a folder, slid them into his desk drawer, then headed out. He turned off the lights, closed the door of the office and made sure it

was locked and that his keys were in his pocket, then turned around.

And there was Anna, standing in the corridor halfway to the elevators.

“Hey!” he said, startled. “How’d you get here so fast?”

She jerked, obviously as startled by his presence as he was by hers, and stared at him.

“Weren’t you at home when I called?”

“Yes, I was,” she said. “But I made good time.”

“You couldn’t have! Not *that* good! And why are you up here? I thought we were meeting out front. And how did you even get in?”

“I . . . I don’t . . .”

He realized he had almost been shouting and quickly forced himself to calm down. Anna was prone to nerves—not surprising, with her background. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t mean to yell. But you *startled* me!”

“Then we’re even,” she said. “I thought you’d be out front waiting by now.”

“The printer ran out of paper,” he explained. “And I knew you wouldn’t be here for another ten minutes at least, so I didn’t see any need to rush, and . . . here we are.”

“The reservations are for 6:30, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are, and we aren’t going to make it, but we can still keep it close. I’ll call the restaurant to say we’re on our way.”

He did just that as they hurried to the elevators and started down the fourteen stories to the lobby. That done, he put the phone away, and the two of them rode the last few floors in silence. They crossed the lobby, let themselves out through the security door, and made their way along the sidewalk, his arm around her waist.

Gary still couldn’t figure out how Anna could possibly have been in that corridor if she had been at home when he called. Had she actually been in one of the other offices, catching up on some of her own work? But if that was it, why hadn’t she just said so? Why would she have said she was at home?

They got to the restaurant, and their reservation had been held; they were seated, water was poured, menus delivered. Their waiter recited the list of specials and recommended the tilapia, then left them to it.

“They push the tilapia because they get it cheap,” Gary remarked a moment later. “I’m going for the scallops.”

“I think I want the grilled chicken,” Anna replied.

That settled, Gary put down his menu and waited a few polite seconds, then asked, “Seriously, Annie, what were you doing outside my office?”

She silently shook her head and kept her eyes on the menu.

“Were you working overtime, too?”

“No,” she said.

“Then why were you there, instead of home at your apartment? I mean, I said I’d pick you up at six, and I know I was late, but . . .” He let the sentence trail off.

“I was in my apartment when you called!” she said, setting the menu down. “I said I was home, and I was! I was right there waiting for you, all dressed up and ready!”

“But you couldn’t have been! I mean, it couldn’t have been ten minutes between when I called and when I found you.”

“So?”

“So you couldn’t possibly have gotten your car out of the garage and driven eleven miles and parked somewhere and walked to the building and gotten the doorman to let you in and come up to the fourteenth floor in ten minutes!”

“I didn’t take my car,” she said. “Or talk to the doorman or use the elevator.”

“But then how did you get there? Magic?”

She hesitated, and he thought he saw a . . . blush? A reddening of her cheeks?

“I don’t know what it is,” she said. “I mean, I know what it is, but I don’t have a

name for it. I don't know if it's magic or what."

"What?"

"The waiter's coming."

She was right. They placed their orders, handed over the menus, and then stared across the table at each other.

He broke the interlocked gaze first. He took a sip of water and said, "I've got to say, this dinner isn't going the way I expected."

"I'm not enjoying it as much as I expected, either," she replied. She straightened up. "Look, Gary, I do have a secret. I admit it. I haven't told anyone about it since I was a little girl, because when I *did* tell people, they never believed me. They thought it was just my imagination. They never gave me a chance to prove it."

"Prove what?" he asked, confused.

"I'll show you after dinner, all right? For now let's just have a nice meal and talk about other things, okay?"

He struggled to do as she suggested, but his thoughts kept circling back to finding her there in the corridor when she should have miles away. It didn't make any *sense*. He barely tasted his scallops as he ate them.

Anna did not seem to have any such problem. She ate her chicken with enthusiasm and talked at length about her neighbor's adorable new cat. Gary was aware that he was not holding up his end of the conversation, but he simply could not focus on the meal.

Anna did not seem to mind; in fact, she seemed happier than usual as she rambled on and on about that stupid cat.

Finally, though, the waiter cleared away their plates and asked whether they would like to see the dessert menu. Ordinarily Gary would at least have taken a look at it, but tonight he was too eager for the promised demonstration, and started to wave it away. At the last second he caught himself, and said, "Unless you . . . ?"

Anna shook her head. "No, that's fine."

He knew it was probably not fine; she loved sweets. She was deferring to him. Normally he would have encouraged her to stand up for herself, but not tonight. "Just the check," he said.

They did not make the usual small talk as he led the way back to the building where they both worked and showed his badge to the doorman. They rode up to the fourteenth floor in uncomfortable silence, and emerged into the reception area. There Anna took the lead, heading down the corridor.

She did not go to his office, though, nor to the workroom where she and three other administrative assistants looked after the everyday details that kept the firm running smoothly. Instead she led him to the ladies' room.

Or more precisely, to a blank stretch of corridor wall next to the door to the ladies' room.

She stopped. "Here," she said.

"Here, what?" he said, looking around.

She hesitated. "I haven't tried this here before, bringing someone else along, but it should work."

"*What* should work? Anna, you aren't making any sense."

"Gary, I'm about to show you my biggest, most personal secret, something I haven't shown anyone since I was a little girl. I haven't even *told* anyone about it since I was twelve, and no one ever believed me, so for you I'm going to *prove* it. Give me your hand."

"Anna, I don't—"

She did not wait for him to finish his sentence; instead she grabbed him by the arm with both her hands and stepped forward, pulling him with her.

He reared his head back as he was dragged toward the wall, expecting to bang his nose against the beige wallboard, but there was no impact; instead he passed *through* the wall, into a place he had never seen before.

It wasn't the tiled interior of the ladies' room, nor any of the familiar offices; it was not a room that belonged in an office building at all. In fact, he wasn't sure it was actually a *room*. It was a *space*, with black, featureless walls and floor.

And ceiling, on which he bumped his head. Instinctively, he ducked and looked up.

The ceiling was completely, utterly black, and mere inches away, even now that he was stooping. He turned, though, and saw that Anna was standing upright without any difficulty; that blank, dark ceiling was a few inches above her head.

"I hadn't thought of that," she said, looking up at him and seeing how he was crouched. "I'll want to raise that if you're going to come in here much."

"Come in *where*?" he asked. "Where *are* we? Is this a secret room of some sort?"

"Sort of," she said, taking his hand and leading him forward.

The black room was not empty, he saw. There was a big overstuffed chair, worn and battered, next to a small table piled with paperbacks. A battery-powered camp lantern was perched on a cheap set of shelves, the sort of *étagère* you could buy at Target or Wal-Mart and assemble at home. The shelves also held a few cardboard boxes and framed photos, as well as more books. A large, ragged old teddy bear sat on a kitchen stool beside the shelves. The entire place had something of the feel of a college dorm room, furnished as cheaply as possible, with no concern for aesthetics, but still comfortable.

These were all in an area maybe a dozen feet on a side, but he had the feeling the place was considerably larger than that. The completely featureless black walls were effectively invisible, so it was impossible to judge the size accurately. The little bunch of gently lit furniture seemed to be floating in an empty, infinite void.

"Have a seat," Anna said, gesturing at the chair. For herself, she picked up the teddy bear and settled on the stool.

Gary settled onto the upholstery and looked around, baffled. At least when he was seated he didn't need to worry about hitting his head.

"What *is* this place?"

"This is my *secret* place, Gary," Anna replied. "It's where I go when I want to be alone, or to get away from something. Or someone." She gazed at him expectantly.

He still did not grasp the situation. "Here in our office?" he asked.

The look she gave him was not flattering. "No. We aren't in the office building. We aren't *anywhere*. It's my own special place."

"I don't understand. And what does this have to do with you showing up early?"

She sighed. "We came in over there," she said, pointing. "There's an opening there that comes out next to the fourteenth-floor ladies' room." Then she turned and pointed in another direction. "And over *there* is an opening that comes out in my apartment, in the corridor that connects my bedroom and the living room. So I can get from one place to the other in about two minutes, and I never need to go out in the rain or snow to get to work. It saves on gas or bus fare, too."

"But . . . how? How is this possible?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's just something I can do. I found it when I was five, when I was a little girl in Pyongyang. My father had done something suspicious, and the police took him in for questioning, and my mother thought they might come for us, too, so she hid me in a closet. She kept me hidden there for about two days—just me, alone in the dark, with nothing to do and scared half to death that those men might come and take me away, so I tried *very, very hard* to be somewhere else, where they could never, ever find me.

"And then I *was*. I was in a little place that wasn't much bigger than I was, but it

felt warm and safe, so I just stayed in there—in *here*. But then I got worried about my mother, so I came back out and peeked out to make sure she was still there. I found out I could go in and out any time I wanted—I could just crawl through the back of the closet as if it wasn't even there, just the way we came through the wall, and could come back out the same way. I could make the opening bigger, and it would *stay* bigger, and I could push back the walls and ceiling in here and make *it* bigger. I could bring things in and out."

"You found all this out in two days?"

"No, I don't . . . well, I don't remember for sure. It was a long time ago. But we lived in that same apartment for almost another year, and I came here lots of times when I wanted to feel safe, or when my mother told me to hide. But then they took my father away again, and this time we knew he wouldn't be coming back, so my mother and I left, and we got to the border and escaped into China, and honestly I don't really know most of what we did or where we went, because I was only six and most of the time the people around us weren't speaking Korean and I hadn't learned any Chinese or English yet." She picked up the teddy bear and held it out. "There was one place where some people took care of us, and let us sleep in a real bed, and a nice lady who had the lightest hair I had ever seen up to then gave me this bear, and I've kept it ever since, everywhere I went. It's my comfort bear. Her name is Gom." She looked at Gary expectantly.

"But we didn't get here from a closet in North Korea."

"No, of course not!" She set the bear back on her lap with an expression of mild disappointment. "I was getting to that. That first night in China I was scared again, and I found out that I could still get into my secret place—I could make *another* door, just like in the closet, and there I was. I could go back out into the closet in Pyongyang, or come out in the house in China; then my secret place had *two* doors." She waved a hand. "Now it has at least a dozen. I can make a new one any time I want, though it takes a few minutes. I brought in the furniture, and the lantern—it's much nicer now. And bigger; I've pushed the walls back a lot. I smoothed out the floor, too." She smiled. "If I'm going to bring in people as tall as you, though, I guess I need to push the ceiling up."

He looked around, amazed. "So can you just step out *anywhere*?"

"No, I can only make new doors coming *in*. I can go out any door I've already made, but I can't make new ones from inside."

"Who else knows about it? Are there *other* people who can do this?"

"I don't know of anyone else, but how would I? I told my mother about it, and some of the people who helped us get from China to America, and some of my friends when I was little, but no one ever believed me. I even brought one of my friends in here when I was about ten, but she thought it was a trick and *still* didn't believe it was real. I didn't have any furniture in here back then, I used a flashlight so we could see, but of course there wasn't anything *to* see. So she thought I was playing a joke on her and she got mad at me and we stopped playing together after that. She tried to get in without me pulling her, and she couldn't do it, and that got her even angrier. I think she was mostly mad that she couldn't figure out how I did it."

"It probably scared her," Gary said. "It scares *me*, a little."

"Maybe. But why be scared? It's my *safe* place!"

"But it's not *my* safe place. This is all a lot to take in!"

"But you're here with *me*. I trusted you enough to tell you the truth and bring you here, Gary. I've never done that before, not since Emily when I was ten."

"Well, you had to explain, after you appeared like that." He looked around again. "So you just came through here?"

"Yes. I thought you'd already be out on the sidewalk waiting for me, so I could come this way and sneak out behind you and go around the block to meet you. But you

were running late because of the printer, and you caught me.” She grimaced. “I could have made up a story, but I . . . well, you’re special. So here we are.”

“Are you sure we can get out again?”

She laughed. “I’ve been coming here since I was five, and I’ve never had any trouble getting out.”

“But can you get *me* out?”

“Sure! I got Emily out. I bring stuff in and out all the time; why would you be any different?”

“I don’t know, this is all . . .” He let his voice trail off.

She looked down at Gom, then set the bear on a nearby shelf. “Well, now you’ve seen it, shall we go? I assume you have your car in the underground garage, so we’ll go back out through the office.”

“Wait—where else could we come out?”

“Well, my apartment, but I don’t . . . I’m not ready for that. I have a door near some of my favorite shops downtown, and one at my mother’s house, and some others. I suppose I could even go to the farmhouse in Liaoning, or the closet in Pyongyang, if they’re still there, but I haven’t been back to either of those since I was little.” She shuddered. “Why would I *want* to?”

Gary found himself starting to imagine reasons she might want to, but he put that aside. “What about that shopping one? Could you show me that, just so I can see how it works?”

“I guess.” She slid off the stool. “Take my hand and follow me.”

He rose from the chair and took her hand, keeping his head down to not bump the black ceiling, and let her lead him across the black floor to a black wall that looked just like all the others. She stretched out a hand, and tugged at his arm so that he stumbled . . .

And they were on a street, midway between streetlights, and he recognized it as Michigan Avenue, halfway across the city from the office.

“Oh,” he said, straightening up as she released her hold. “Wow.” He tried to take it all in. He put a hand on the wall behind them and felt only stone.

After a few seconds Anna asked, “Should we go back for your car now?”

He took a few steps away from her, staring at the stores and the lights and the cars. “Wow,” he said again.

“Gary, I didn’t come here to go shopping,” she said, wrapping her coat more tightly around herself.

“I know, but . . . it worked!” He looked up at the touch of a raindrop; the skies had clouded over, and it was beginning to sprinkle. “We’re here, across town!”

“That’s right. Can we go back now? I want to get home.”

He turned to look at her and realized she looked unhappy, though he did not quite grasp why. “Sure, of course,” he said. “How does it work?”

“I showed you,” she said. “Come here.” She held out a hand.

He took it, and let her pull him up to the blank limestone wall—and *through* it, back to the black space.

He stumbled as he hit his head on the ceiling, then ducked. She let go of his hand. He looked at the chair and the stool and the shelves, then turned and reached out.

His hand hit the wall. It was absolutely solid and unyielding, but he could not *feel* anything; there was no texture at all, no temperature. It wasn’t warm, or cool, or smooth, or rough, it was just solid—the only way he could tell it was there was that his hand stopped and would not go through it.

“This place is amazing,” he said. He looked up, trying to see where the wall joined the ceiling. There was no visible distinction; it was all just blackness.

“It is, isn’t it?” He thought she smiled again, though it was hard to see her face; her

back was to the lantern that provided the only light.

"So it isn't really anywhere at all?" he said. "You'd be safe in here no matter what was happening outside, wouldn't you?"

"That's right."

"So if there was an earthquake, or a hurricane, or even a nuclear war, you could just come in here until it was over."

She tilted her head; he could no longer read her expression at all in the limited illumination. "I guess so," she said.

"You could bring friends in here to keep them safe."

"I . . . I suppose," she said. "But it's a *private* place. I don't want other people to know about it."

"Oh, but think about it! You could bring people through to get them out of a disaster area—bring them in from wherever they are, then take them back out somewhere safe." He looked around at the sparse furnishings. "You could go on vacation somewhere, then make an opening there, and be back home in five minute—no more airfare! You could spend every weekend at the beach!"

She did not reply.

He wandered back to the area around the chair, and looked at the lantern. "Could you run electricity in here? What happens if the battery dies?"

"If the battery dies, it gets dark. It's happened. I can find my way out without it. I tried running an extension cord in once, as an experiment, but current wouldn't flow through it, and when I let go of it, it got cut in half—half in here, and half in my apartment, cut apart as if I'd snipped it with a pair of scissors. Nothing can go through any of the doors unless I'm holding it."

"But anything you can carry can go in and out?"

"Well, yeah."

He gestured wildly. "Then . . . could you make an opening inside a store, or a bank? You could step through in the middle of the night and just take whatever you want!"

"I'm not a thief," Anna said, her tone flat.

"No, no, of course you aren't," he replied hurriedly. "But there are so many possibilities! You could carry things for people, run a courier service."

"I'd need to open a lot more doors to do that," she said. "And I'd need to carry every package myself."

"That's true, or . . . maybe you could open these doors in cities all over the world, so you'd be able to carry things from China or London without spending fourteen hours on a plane. Or, or you could volunteer as one of Elon Musk's Martian colonists, and after you land on Mars you could open a door *there*, and instead of two years in a cramped spaceship you could come back home in two *minutes!*"

"Gary," she said, "this is my private place. *My* place. It's not for Elon Musk or bank robbers or refugees."

"But it's got so many possibilities!"

She took his arm. "Let's get you back to your car," she said. "It's getting late."

He let her drag him away from the chair, and a moment later they were in the fourteenth-floor corridor, next to the ladies' room. He turned to stare at the blank wall. "You can't see anything," he said.

"No, you can't," she agreed, releasing her grip. "Thank you for dinner, Gary. It was a lovely meal." Then she took a step back and was gone. He was alone in the corridor.

He studied the wall, running his hands over the wallpaper, but he could not detect any sign of an opening. There were no edges he could see or feel, no softness or give.

He spent ten minutes at his investigations, then finally stepped back, took a final look, and headed for the elevator.

He did not hear from Anna again that night; she did not call or text. He did not hear

anything Sunday, either. Several times he debated calling her, but he always decided against it. He didn't know what he could say about the astonishing experiences they had had together—though they had not astonished Anna; she was used to her abilities.

Sometimes he wondered if perhaps he had dreamed the whole thing, but he remembered it so clearly that he knew he hadn't.

Monday he arrived at work early and waited by the elevator for twenty minutes for her to come in—and then realized that was stupid. He turned and headed up the corridor.

She was already in the workroom, talking to Janice the social media guru. She glanced up when he entered, then continued her conversation with Janice. He waited.

Before he had a chance to say anything to Anna, though, his boss appeared in the doorway. "Have you seen . . . oh, there you are! Do you have those contracts?"

Reluctantly, Gary allowed himself to be led away to his own office to do his job.

It was almost 11:00 by the time he finally got an opportunity to talk to her, catching her in the corridor.

"Anna!" he called.

She ignored him.

"Anna!" he called, more loudly.

She stopped and waited for him to come around to face her.

"Hi," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't call yesterday."

"It's all right," she said.

"I didn't know what to say. What you showed me Saturday was just so *amazing!* There's so much potential!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said and started to walk away.

"No, wait!" He followed and grabbed her arm.

She stopped, looked down at his hand, and said quietly, "Let go of me."

He released his hold, a little hurt by her coldness. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was just . . . your secret place is . . ."

She looked him in the eye. "What secret place?"

He was momentarily speechless, but when she started to turn away again he said, "The one you showed me after dinner on Saturday!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Anna, wait!" The possibility that he had dreamed the entire thing occurred to him again, and again he dismissed it. He didn't have dreams like that. He ran after her and said, "We had a dinner date Saturday, right?"

"Of course we did. It was a lovely meal."

"And afterward you showed me . . . we . . ."

"Afterward I went *home*, Gary, and I assume you did, too."

"But you showed me something, this place . . ." He pointed down the corridor toward the ladies' room.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she repeated.

"Look, I didn't *imagine* it!" he said, his voice rising. "You showed me this incredible thing you can do."

She flushed. "If you're implying I know some secret Asian sex technique you never saw before, Gary Brannon, then you're *definitely* imagining it. I just went home after dinner. You didn't even drive me there." She spoke at a normal volume.

"No, I don't mean anything like that!" he said. "You *showed* me . . .!"

"I didn't show you *anything*, Mr. Brannon. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do." She marched back to the workroom, leaving him in the passageway.

He realized that half a dozen other people were staring at him; he hesitated, realized anything he might say would only make it worse, and then retreated to his office.

He tried to work, but could not concentrate. Finally he stopped pretending he could think about anything else and wrote her an email, being very, very careful to send it only to her account.

"Anna," he wrote, "I'm sorry if I offended you. I'm not sure what I did, but whatever it was, I apologize."

He was not sure that was the best way to start, but he didn't want to take time to revise it. He continued, "That place you showed me is a miracle, and it could be worth a fortune. I don't think you understand how important it could be, for you and really, for all of us. If scientists studied it and learned to duplicate it, it could change the world! You could be rich and famous. Or even if it can't be duplicated, there are so many ways it could be used! It could be so much more than just your hiding place and personal shortcut. Please, let me discuss some of my ideas with you."

He signed it "Gary" and clicked SEND.

He waited, but there was no response. Finally he sighed and went back to his own duties, promising himself he would catch her at lunch or after work.

He watched for her in the corridor around lunchtime, but did not see her; eventually he gave up and went for his own meal.

At the end of the day he went out to the corridor and waited. He worried that she might have left early, but he did not see a viable alternative. He positioned himself near the wall where her "door" was, hoping she hadn't decided to take the bus to avoid him.

He was about to give up when the door to the ladies' room opened, and Anna stepped out.

"Anna!" he called, positioning himself in front of where he thought the door was, and hoping he had remembered the location correctly.

She glared at him, then started past him, headed for the elevator lobby.

"Come on, Anna," he said, grabbing her arm as she tried to pass. "Stop playing games. I know what I saw on Saturday, and we need to talk about it."

She tried to pull her arm free, but he held on. "No, we do *not* need to talk about it. Let me go."

"Please, Anna! This ability of yours is important! All the things you could do with it—did you read my email?"

"I read it," she said. She stopped struggling, and faced him, clearly trying to stay calm. "It's not important to *me* what *you* want to do with it. Gary, do you think I haven't thought of all those things? I've been able to do this since I was *five*. Do you really think I didn't experiment when I was a teenager? Do you think I haven't read up on everything that might help explain it? Do you really think I'm that *stupid*?"

"Uh . . ." His grip loosened, but then he tightened it again.

"Yes, I have a door on a beach in the Bahamas. Yes, I have a door in New York, and a door in Boston, and a door in New Orleans I use to go to Mardi Gras every year. I have a door in Disneyland, and one in Vail, and a couple in California. I am the *queen* of the one-way ticket, Gary—but you never even *asked*, you just assumed that because I'm a little Korean girl five years younger than you and a couple of levels lower on the corporate ladder that I hadn't thought of any of that.

"Maybe I just didn't want to *tell* you; did *you* ever think of *that*?"

He stammered something, but before he could put together a coherent response she continued.

"As for letting some damned doctors study me and poke around in my brain, does that sound like fun to you? Like something *you'd* want to do, for the greater good of society? Because it doesn't sound like anything *I* want to do."

"I don't . . ."

"I tried to share a very important and private part of my life with you, Gary," she

told him, “and all you could talk about was finding ways to exploit it—to exploit *me*. I told you about hiding in a closet for two days, and my father being taken away, and you never tried to comfort me or ask what happened to him—not that we ever found out, but you should have *asked*. I showed you Gom and told you where she came from, and you didn’t say a word about her. My dearest, oldest possession, and you never so much as looked at her. You never said a word about *me* at all—all you would talk about was my private place, and it was all about what we could *do* with it. You never looked at the pictures I’d put there, never asked what any of it meant to me. You never said anything about Emily when I told you about bringing her in. You never paid any attention to *me*; you only wanted to know more about the place. You just wanted to *use* it. Well, forget it, Gary! It’s *mine*! You tell anyone you like, and they’ll just think you’re crazy. I know you’re not crazy, but you *are* stupid and inconsiderate. Good night and goodbye!” She pulled her arm free and stepped toward the wall.

But he was not about to let her get away that easily. He grabbed her again, ducked his head, and let himself be pulled through the wall into that cozy black void.

“Let go of me!” she said, trying to twist free.

“No,” he said, tightening his hold. “Not yet, not in here—you could leave me stuck in here.”

She stopped struggling. “And give it up myself? Why would I do *that*?”

“It wouldn’t be forever; you could just wait until I died of thirst.”

“You think I’d *do* that?”

“I don’t *know* what you’d do!” he exclaimed. “That’s why I want to talk about this place, and what you do with it!”

“If you’re trying to convince me to cooperate with you about *anything*, you aren’t going about it very well.”

“You won’t let me do it any other way! I *tried* to talk to you nicely, and you wouldn’t listen!”

“Maybe you should have taken the hint!”

“Maybe you should have talked to me! I’m only trying to help you.”

“I don’t *want* your help, and I don’t need it. None of the things I can do, none of the places I can go, are any of your business, Gary. This thing I have is mine, and you don’t get to tell me what to do with it.”

“But you don’t have any right to keep it to yourself!”

“Why *not*? It’s part of me!”

“Look, can we go somewhere else to talk about this stuff, about you keeping it private? Somewhere back in the real world?”

She studied his face for a moment, then said, “All right. We can go to my apartment.”

“Fine. Lead the way.”

She did, guiding him across the space and around behind the chair. He frowned.

“This isn’t where you pointed when we were in here before,” he said.

“No, it isn’t,” she agreed, stepping into the blackness.

And then they were somewhere else, and she led him forward out of a closet into a drab, empty room lit only by faint twilight.

Startled, he looked around. The floor was bare concrete, the walls roughly finished. “This is your apartment?” he said.

“Let go of my arm,” she said.

“It doesn’t look right.”

“*Let go of my arm!*” She began tugging again.

Puzzled, he released his hold. “Where *are* we?”

“My apartment,” Anna replied. “The one I lived in when I was five.”

Stunned, he whirled to face the nearest window. “In *Korea*?”

“See for yourself,” she said.

He pulled aside the ragged remains of a yellow curtain and looked out on an unfamiliar cityscape lit by the first glow of dawn, the skyline dominated by a strange triangular building that he thought must be a hundred stories high. "We're in Korea?" he exclaimed.

"North Korea," she said. "The People's Democratic Republic of Korea. I don't suppose you speak any Korean, or have your passport with you?"

In a sudden panic he turned and tried to grab her again, but she dove into the closet, closing the door behind her before he could catch her.

He tugged at the doorknob, but she held the door closed.

"Gary," she said from the closet, "this is your last chance to apologize and back down. I won't leave you to die in my own private place, but if you won't give up your obsession with *using* me, I can leave you *here*."

"Apologize? Obsession? But don't you see, Anna, what your . . . your place means? It only took us five seconds to get here, not a fourteen-hour flight!"

He thought he might have heard a sigh. "That's still all you have to say?"

"*We could be rich!*"

"We?" There was a brief pause, and he thought perhaps she was coming to her senses, but then she said, "Goodbye, Gary."

Suddenly the knob turned freely in his hand. He opened the door, but she was gone. He stared, unable to believe she would really desert him, could really leave him here. He waited a few seconds for her to reappear, to laugh at the joke, but the closet stood dark and empty, and his nerve broke.

"Anna!" he screamed, as he pounded on the unyielding back wall of the closet. "*Anna!*"

In the street below the window, two policemen looked up at the sound.