No Doors, No Windows

AN [**e- *reads***] BOOK
New York, NY

First e-reads publication 2002
www.e-reads.com
ISBN 0-7592-4354-9

For Years of Friendship,
for Forcing Open Doors and
Busting Out Windows,
This One, with Love, for

JOE L. and CHARLOTTE HENSLEY

"I feel it's tremendously satisfying to use the cinematic art to achieve something of a mass emotion; if you've [written] a picture correctly, in terms of its emotional impact, the Japanese audience should scream at the same time as the Indian audience."

Alfred Hitchcock

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Introduction

Blood / Thoughts

"Writing has nothing much to do with pretty manners, and less to do with sportsmanship or restraint …

"Every fictioneer re-invents the world because the facts, things or people of the received world are unacceptable. Every fiction writer dreams of imposing his invention upon the world and winning the world's acclaim. (Such dreams are known as delusions of grandeur in pathology but tolerated as expressions of would-be genius in bookstores and libraries.) Every writer begins as a subversive, if in nothing more than the antisocial means by which he earns his keep. Finally, every fantasist who cannibalizes himself knows that misfortune is his friend, that grief feeds and sharpens his fancy, that hatred is as sufficient a spur to creation as love (and a world more common) and that without an instinct for lunacy he will come to nothing."

GEOFFREY WOLFF, 1975

What are we to make of the mind of humanity? What are we to think of the purgatory in which dreams are born, from whence come the derangements that men call magic because they have no other names for smoke or fog or hysteria? What are we to dwell upon when we consider the forms and shadows that become stories? Must we dismiss them as fever dreams, as expressions of creativity, as purgatives? Or may we deal with them even as the naked ape dealt with them: as the only moments of truth a human calls throughout a life of endless lies.

Who will be the first to acknowledge that it was only a membrane, only a vapor, that separated a Robert Burns and his love from a Leopold Sacher-Masoch and his hate?

Is it too terrible to consider that a Dickens, who could drip treacle*and* God bless us one and all, through the mouth of a potboiler character called Tiny Tim, could also create the escaped convict Magwitch; the despoiler of children, Fagin; the murderous Sikes? Is it that great a step to consider that a woman surrounded by love and warmth and care of humanity as was Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, wife of Percy Bysshe Shelley, the greatest romantic poet western civilization has ever produced, could herself produce a work of such naked horror as*Frankenstein?* Can the mind equate the differences and similarities that allow both an*Annabell Lee* and a*Masque of the Red Death* to emerge from the same churning pit of thought-darkness?

Consider the dreamers:*all* of the dreamers: the glorious*and* the corrupt:

Aesop, Attilla; Benito Mussolini and Benvenuto Cellini; Chekhov and Chang Tao-ling; Democritus, Disraeli; Epicurus, Edison; Fauré and Fitzgerald; Goethe, Garibaldi; Huysmann and Hemingway,

ibn-al-Farid and Ives; Jeanne d'Arc and Jesus of Nazareth; and on and on.*All* the dreamers. Those whose visions took form in blood and those which took form in music. Dreams fashioned of words, and nightmares molded of death and pain. Is it inconceivable to consider that Richard Speck — who slaughtered eight nurses in Chicago in 1966, who was sentenced to 1,200 years in prison — was a devout Church-going Christian, a boy who lived in the land of God, while Jean Genet — avowed thief, murderer, pederast, vagrant who spent the first thirty years of his life as an enemy of society, and in the jails of France where he was sentenced to life imprisonment — has written prose and poetry of such blazing splendor that Sartre has called him "saint"? Does the mind shy away from the truth that a Bosch could create hell-images so burning, so excruciating that no other artist has ever even*attempted to* copy his staggeringly brilliant style, while at the same time he produced works of such ecumenical purity as "L'Epiphanie"?*All* the dreamers. All the mad ones and the noble ones, all the seekers after alchemy and immortality, all those who dashed through endless midnights of gore-splattered horror and all those who strolled through sunshine springtimes of humanity. They are one and the same. They are all born of the same desire.

Speechless, we stand before Van Gogh's "Starry Night" or one of those hell-images of Hieronymous Bosch, and we find our senses reeling; vanishing into a daydream mist of*what must this man have been like, what must he have suffered? A* passage from Dylan Thomas, about birds singing in the eaves of a lunatic asylum, draws us up short, steals the breath from our mouths; and the blood and thoughts stand still in our bodies as we are confronted with the absolute incredible achievement of what he has done. The impossibility of it. So imperfect, so faulty, so broken the links in communication between humans, that to pass along one corner of a vision we have had to another creature is an accomplishment that fills us with pride and wonder, touching us and them for a nanoinstant with magic. How staggering it is then, to*see,* to*know* what Van Gogh and Bosch and Thomas knew and saw. To live for that nanoinstant what they lived. To look out of their eyes and view the universe from a never before conquered height, from a dizzying, strange place.

This, then, is the temporary, fleeting, transient, incredibly valuable, priceless gift from the genius dreamer to those of us crawling forward moment after moment in time, with nothing to break our routine save death.

Mud-condemned, forced to deal as ribbon clerks with the boredoms and inanities of lives that may never touch — save by this voyeuristic means — a fragment of glory … our only hope, our only pleasure, is derived through the eyes of the genius dreamers; the genius madmen; the creators.

How amazed … how stopped like a broken clock we are, when we are in the presence of the creator. When we see what his singular talents — wrought out of torment — have proffered; what magnificence, or depravity, or beauty, perhaps in a spare moment, only half-trying; they have brought it forth nonetheless, for the rest of eternity and the world to treasure.

And how awed we are, when caught in the golden web of that true genius — so that finally, for the first time we know that all the rest of it was*kitsch;* it is made so terribly, crushingly obvious to us, just how mere, how petty, how mud-condemned we really are, and that the only grandeur we will ever know is that which we know second-hand from our damned geniuses. That the closest we will ever come to our "Heaven" while alive, is through our unfathomable geniuses, however imperfect or bizarre they may be.

And is this, then, why we treat them so shamefully, harm them, chivvy and harass them, drive them inexorably to their personal madhouses, kill them?

Who is it, we wonder, who*really* still the golden voices of the geniuses, who turn their visions to dust?

Who, the question asks itself unbidden, are the savages and who the princes?

Fortunately, the night comes quickly, their graves are obscured by darkness, and answers can be avoided till the next time; till the next marvelous singer of strange songs is stilled in the agony of his rhapsodies.

On all sides the painter wars with the photographer. The dramatist battles the television scenarist. The novelist is locked in combat with the reporter and the creator of the non-novel. On all sides the struggle to build dreams is beset by the forces of materialism, the purveyors of the instant, the dealers in tawdriness. The genius, the creator falls into disrepute. Of what good is he? Does he tell us useable gossip, does he explain our current situation, does he "tell it like it is"? No, he only preserves the past and points the way to the future. He only performs the holiest of chores. Thereby becoming a luxury, a second-class privilege to be considered only after the newscasters and the sex images and the "personalities." The public entertainments, the safe and sensible entertainments, those that pass through the soul like beets through a baby's backside … these are the hallowed, the revered.

And what of the mad dreams, the visions of evil and destruction? What becomes of them? In a world of Tiny Tim, there is little room for a Magwitch, though the former be saccharine and the latter be noble.

Who will speak out for the mad dreamers?

Who will insure with sword and shield and grants of monies that these most valuable will not be thrown into the lye pits of mediocrity, the meat grinders of safe reportage? Who will care that they suffer all their nights and days of delusion and desire for ends that will never be noticed? There is no foundation that will enfranchise them, no philanthropist who will risk his hoard in the hands of the mad ones.

And so they go their ways, walking all the plastic paths filled with noise and neon, their multifaceted bee-eyes seeing much more than the clattering groundlings will ever see, reporting back from within their torments that Nixons cannot save nor Wallaces uplift. Reporting back that the midnight of madness is upon us; that wolves who turn into men are stalking our babies; that trees will bleed and birds will speak in strange tongues. Reporting back that the grass will turn blood-red and the mountains soften and flow like butter; that the seas will congeal and harden for iceboats to skim across from the chalk cliffs of Dover to Calais.

The mad dreamers among us will tell us that if we take a woman (that most familiar of alien creatures that we delude ourselves into thinking we rule and understand to the core) and pull her inside-out we will have a wondrousness that looks like the cloth-of-gold gown in which Queen Ankhesenamun was interred. That if we inject the spinal fluid of the dolphin into the body of the dog, our pets will speak in the riddles of a Delphic Oracle. That if we smite the very rocks of the Earth with quicksilver staffs, they will split and show us where our ghosts have lived since before the winds traveled from pole to pole.

The geniuses, the mad dreamers, those who speak of debauchery in the spirit, they are the condemned of our times; they give everything, receive nothing, and expect in their silliness to be spared the gleaming axe of the executioner. How they will whistle as they die!

Let the shamans of Freud and Jung and Adler dissect the pus-sacs of society's mind. Let the rancid evil of reality flow and surge and gather strength as it hurries to the sea, forming a river that girdles the globe, a new Styx, beyond which men and women will go and from whence never return. Let the rulers and the politicians and the financiers throttle the dreams of creativity. It doesn't matter.

The mad ones win persist. In the face of certain destruction they will still speak of the unreal, the forbidden, all the seasons of the witch.

Consider it.

Please: consider.

Enough philosophy. The preceding, in different forms, was an essay I wrote in defense of the nightmare vision. Its title has changed from "Black / Thoughts" to "Dark / Thoughts" (for obvious contemporary reasons), to "Blood / Thoughts," which I think will remain on the piece forever. I've rewritten it and used it as the opening of the introduction to this, my first collection of suspense stories,*per se,* because it speaks directly to the intent of the works in this book: to scare you, to keep you guessing, and to demonstrate how much fear can be generated in lives that have been bent and twisted so there are no exits.

It's a special pleasure to have a book of suspense stories published, at last. Even though a large segment of my weirdo readership knows me as a "sci-fi writer" (and God how I hate that ghastly neologism! If you ever want to see my lips skin back over my teeth like those of a rabid timber wolf, just use that moron phrase in my presence), I was writing a good deal more detective and suspense fiction than fantasy when I began my career. But that was in the middle and late Fifties, when there was a hot truckload of magazines publishing that kind of fiction.*Manhunt, The Saint Mystery Magazine, Mantrap, Pursued, Guilty, Suspect, Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine, Trapped, Terror, Murder!, Hunted, Crime and Justice,* boy the list just went on endlessly with one lousy imitator after another; and of course, in a class by itself,*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* .

But that was twenty years ago, and with the exception of*EQMM* (still indisputably the fountainhead of significant mystery fiction throughout the civilized world), most of the magazines I listed above are dead. Crumbling yellow pulp relics in my files, dropping brittle little triangles from page corners.

After having been tagged a writer of sf for so many years — and having fought the categorization for the past ten or twelve — with the help of Pyramid Books I'm breaking out of the corner at last. And it feels good. Not only because I want to be judged on the merits of what I write, as opposed to being judged as a representative of a genre that means one thing to one reader and quite another thing to someone else, but because it permits the publication of a book like this. (The fight isn't quite over yet, either. Nine chances out of ten, when you bought this book it was in among the giant cockroach and berserk vacuum cleaner books. It was in the "sf section," right? And it isn't even remotely a book of sf stories. Oh, there are four stories out of the sixteen that could be called fantasies, but I guarantee that*nowhere* in these pages will you find a spaceship, a robot, an android, a mad scientist, a death ray, a bug-eyed monster, an ecology parable, a malevolent computer, an alternate universe, an insect big enough to eat a city, a menace from interstellar space, a lost race of super-scientific villains or even a mention of the planet Mars. But there it was, right between a Philip K. Dick novel on one side, and a Philip José Farmer novel on the other. Now those are pretty heavyweight guys in whose company to languish, waiting for you to come along to buy me, but it's a ripoff. They write sf, they*say* they write sf, if you buy one of their books with sf on the cover you'll be*getting* sf of a high order, and no one will feel cheated. But think how annoyed all those dudes are gonna be who picked up this book, paid for it, got it home and are now reading what you're reading. "What," they'll be saying, their fingers balling up into fists, "what the hell is this? Not sf? Not my nightly fix of extrapolation? No sci-fi to wile away the hours?" And they'll read, oh, say, "Pride in the Profession," which is a story about a little guy who always wanted to be a hangman, and they'll finish the story and — even if they liked it — they'll hurl this book against the wall. "I been robbed!" they'll shriek. And I don't blame them. If I go to a massage parlor for a massage, and some nice young woman suggests we perform acts of a personal nature one would have to really stretch the word "massage" to include, well, I'd be annoyed also. If I buy a can of pineapple, I don't want to spill beets out into my plate. I am dead against false advertising. Yet there NO DOORS, NO WINDOWS was, right smack in the middle of the sf shelves. So. In the name of fair business practices, I urge you to buttonhole the management of the newsstand or bookstore where you purchased this nifty tome, and

insist on the following: "Mr. Owner [you should say], the books of Harlan Ellison that are being published by the wonderful Pyramid Books cover the full spectrum of Mr. Ellison's multifarious literary talents and virtually horizonless range of interests. Each one is numbered." And then you point out to him or her — in which case it would be Ms. Owner — the big series number in the "O" of the name ELLISON on the front cover. "These books are not always speculative fiction [you will continue, I hope, dashedly cleverly avoiding that nasty phrase we agreed you'd never use again]. Some of them are contemporary novels; some are nostalgia fiction of the world as we knew it in the Fifties; some are autobiography; some are television essays; and this one I hold in my hand is a superb collection of crime and suspense fictions." Then the Owner, not a bad sort, but sadly in need of guidance, will moan, "But I*have* to categorize everything, otherwise the assholes who never read anything but their specialty wont be able to find what they want. See, over here, ten thousand gothics. You can tell they're gothics because there's a scared lady in a nightgown running away from a dark house on a rainswept mountaintop, and there's only one light lit in an upper storey of the mansion, see? And here … fourteen hundred nurse novels, all with apple-cheeked angels of mercy staring covertly at interns with naked lust in their clear blue eyes. And here … violence series novels: The Slaughterer, The Crusher, The Kung Fu Brigade, The Pillager, The Hardy Boys." And he or she will take you on a tour of the westerns, the classics, the sexy historicals — all with titles like THE FALCON AND THE HYACINTH or THE PLUME AND THE SWORD or THE DIKE AND THE FINGER — the fact science books, the metaphysical books — where forty-two versions of the few lines Plato wrote about Atlantis have been rewritten and re-rewritten by shameless hack popularizers in direct steals of Ignatius Donnelly and that poor coocoo, Madame Blavatsky — the self-help books, the cookbooks, the stiffeners with their wonderfully exotic titles like SUCK MY BUTTONS and WHIP GIRL, the war novels, the detective books and, if it's a fairly large stock, the movie star biography books cheek-by-jowl with all those handy reference works on how to shoot a movie in your spare time, by people like Jerry Lewis and Peter Bogdanovitch, at least one of whom [to borrow a phrase from John Simon] does not exist. And then*you* can release the poor Owner from this labyrinth of spatial immurement by saying, "But sir, or ma'am, you have merely fallen prey to the outmoded theory of commercial marketing distinctions. Mr. Ellison*transcends* such pitiful categories. His work is one with the ages; something for everyone; no home should be without a full set of all nineteen of his handsome Pyramid Books with their delicious Dillon covers; his work uplifts, it enthralls, it ennobles, it clears up acne and the heartbreak of psoriasis; babies cry for more! Why not start a Harlan Ellison *section,* right here in the very forefront of your shop, directly next to the cash register, whose charming tinkle win be heard ever more frequently with Ellison product chockablock beside the Dyna-Mints and *TV Guide,* where your unenlightened flock can grab a stack of meaty titles as they would a life preserver in a turbulent sea? Mr. Ellison is a category unto himself.*Sui generis!* Oh do, do, kind sir or madame! Make this a better world in which to live. Put Ellison where he belongs: all by himself." And having said that, the Owner will, with tears in eyes, clasp your hand and thank you for the pristine lucidity of your thinking.

(And I won't have to argue with Tom Snyder that when I do the*Tomorrow Show* he shouldn't have a flash-card overprinted on my beaming image that says HARLAN ELLISON, SCI-FI GUY.)

Where was I? Oh, yeah. A book of suspense stories, and how nice it is to finally get noticed as a writer who's written lots of other things than fantasy.

It began, I suppose, when the Mystery Writers of America awarded me the Edgar Allan Poe statuette last year for the Best Mystery Story. The funny thing is, the story isn't even a mystery. Not in the terms usually associated with mysteries. The yarn is the lead-off piece in this book, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." And for those of you who bought THE OTHER GLASS TEAT [Pyramid A3791] and who read a script I wrote for the now-defunct TV series,*The Young Lawyers,* a script with the same title, be advised they have no connection. I just liked the title, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." The story is … well, I'll hold off on that till I hit the section of this introduction where I tip you to the background or

impetus that caused me to write the various pieces included here.

In any case, what I was getting at is that "Whimper" is a fantasy, not a mystery. In the usual sense. Though I guess there must have been a sufficiently weighty suspense element in the story to convince the judges of MWA that it belonged on the ballot. (One tiny horn-toot: I beat out a story by Joyce Carol Oates for the award. Hot diggity!)

So here we have twenty years' of my writing, all across the board from western stories and mystery fiction to critical literary essays and occasional columns of contemporary events, and they keep labeling me a "science fiction writer." Very frustrating, particularly when my compatriots in the literature of the fantastic keep pointing out, "Ellison isn't a science fiction writer," and they're right; and there's no reason why *they* should have to suffer denigration because they're held responsible for the berserk stuff I write. Also, *my* books shouldn't have to suffer the kind of dumb reviews from the hinterlands — such as the New York *Times* — that say, "Well, this was a good book, but it certainly isn't sf," not to mention the treatment *anything* labeled sf gets from "serious" reviewers who will wax ecstatic about the nine millionth nostalgic novel dealing with Jewish or Italian home life in the poorer sections of Brooklyn or tike Bronx, in the late Thirties, but who turn up their patrician noses at anything with fantasy in it. Unless it's by an accepted "serious" writer. Like Ira Levin or Fred Mustard Stewart or one of the many other nameless (and frequently talentless) clowns who've just last week discovered such fresh and untapped themes as exorcism, cloning, diabolic possession or reincarnation. If I had a dime for every half-assed novel published in hardcover since 1967 when Levin stumbled across ROSEMARY'S BABY, that deals with a supernatural or fantasy theme in cornball terms that would get it rejected from *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction,* I'd have a lotta dimes to make obscene phone calls to the know-nothing publishers who lay out fifty grand a whack to reprint them in paperback.

But then, I'm just an unhappy, bitter, sour grapes writer who resents the hell out of popularizers who get fat on worn-out themes sf / fantasy passed by twenty years ago, right?

So how come I ain't pissed at John Fowles or John Barth or Vladimir Nabokov or Michael Crichton or Jorge Luis Borges or even Ira Levin? Answer: because they're *writers,* dammit, and they bring freshness and talent even to tired ideas.

Thass why!

This has wandered rather far afield, I now realize. (If you want an eight-hour diatribe on the state of the market situation for a writer today, just drop in a slug, wind me up and aim me in the direction of The New York Literary Establishment.) Suffice to say, it ain't all as terrific as it looks from the outside. Being labeled a science fiction writer today guarantees you a certain amount of readership, but it denies you an even larger group. For a writer who cares about what work comes out with his or her name on it, who fights to keep expanding his or her talent, and who wants freedom to experiment while making a decent living and providing entertaining books for as wide an audience as possible, having a category tag slapped on can be pure death.

So. A book of suspense stories. Filled with visions of murder, mayhem, deceit, fear, psychopathia, crime and rotten interpersonal relationships. Your basic light-time reading fare. Something to make you laugh at your own nasty life struggles. No matter how bad you've got it, *believe* me, you haven't got it as tough as Beth O'Neill in "Whimper" or poor old Mr. Huggerson in "Status Quo at Troyden's" or quick-tempered Hervey Ormond in "Ormond Always Pays His Bills."

I've been talking a lot lately about the condition of fear by which many of us judge the value of our existences. In THE DEADLY STREETS (last month's Pyramid paperback offering of the Ellison-of-the-Month Club) I did an introduction touching on the subject, and I'd like to share with you a

letter I received yesterday that speaks to the same situation.

A word about my mail. There's an ever-increasing amount of it these days, which is nice on the one hand because many people feel so comfortable in these books that they take the introductions and the comments as an invitation to chat; but it's a drag on the other hand, because I'm averaging about 200 pieces a day, and even with two associates helping me out, just *opening* the mail has become a long, arduous chore each day. I tried sending out a long form letter for a while, but that was costing a fortune and it only encouraged the correspondents to write another letter. I *read* everything, but I've just simply decided to hell with it: I can't reply to all that mail and still keep writing. And since it's the stories and comments that make people want to write in the first place, that's where *my* writing time should be spent, not in responding to questions about writing, my life, the correspondent's life, how to write a teleplay, how to get an agent, where the Clarion Writers' Workshop will be this year, why more of my books aren't available in Kankakee or Billings, what my sexual proclivities might be, or why and how the letter-writer feels we are *simpatico* because the both of us hate a) Richard Nixon, b) Rod McKuen poetry, c) the military-industrial-CIA-FBI-IRS complex and / or d) movies starring Cybill Shepherd. I refuse to read stories submitted for my august opinion. For a lot of different reasons, but most prominently because I'm too deep into my *own* stuff to play teacher to amateurs. I used to send the following rejection note, but I don't even do that any more:

A CHINESE REJECTION SLIP

Illustrious Brother of the Sun and Moon:

Behold thy servant prostrate before thy feet! I kowtow to thee and beg that of thy graciousness thou mayest grant that I may speak and live. Thine honored manuscript has deigned to cast the light of its august countenance upon me. With raptures I have perused it. By the bones of my ancestors, never have I encountered such wit, such pathos, such lofty thought! With fear and trembling I return the writing. Were I to publish the treasure thou hast sent me, the Emperor would order that it be made a standard of excellence and that none be published except such as equaled it. Knowing literature as I do, and that it would be impossible in ten thousand years to equal what thou hast done, I send thy writing back by guarded servants.

Ten thousand times I crave thy pardon. Behold! My head is at thy feet and I am but dust.

Thy servant's servant,

Wan Chin (Editor).

Note: author unknown.

So the point of this digression is to plead with you *not* to write to me unless you want to give me money. And since that eliminates 99% of you, all that remains is for me to express my gratitude for your *wanting* to write me, even if it was only to tell me what a bastard I am. But we'll get along much better if we keep the communication a telepathic one. You just shoot the good vibes in my direction, I'll pick up on them, it'll spur me to more and better stories, and we'll both come out happier and more productive. Please!

(God, I'm scatterbrained here. I keep going off into every little byway of thought that presents itself. Like one of my lectures. Very free-form. But let me wrench myself back to the topic of fear and lay that letter on you.)

I'm having it set by the typographer exactly as I received it. Hold it! Another digression, but to the point.

I recently had a bum experience with a dude who sent me a letter in response to the dedication of one of my books. The book was dedicated to the memory of the Kent State students who were slaughtered, and one day a few months after the book first came out, in flew this letter, informing me those college students were Commies and they deserved to be shot. Well, last year I did another book; in the introduction to*that* one I reprinted the dedication from the first book and the guy's letter. It wasn't a nut-case letter, despite the content; it was well-written, grammatical, perfectly coherent; I said so in the introduction, but went on to comment how sad such brutal beliefs, in these perilous times, made me feel. Well, the tone of the letter was a mild one — the guy said he just wanted to straighten me out on how the world was really run — and it seemed to me to be one of those probably misguided but at least honest communiqués. Imagine my feelings of revulsion when, six months after publication of the book containing the letter, my publisher and my agent received a terse communication from this wonderful, patriotic American chap who "only wanted to straighten me out," demanding "substantial remuneration" for the use of his letter. Apparently, he wasn't quite as selfless and dedicated to his beliefs as the innocent letter seemed. He was clearly another one of those whiplash cases trying to make a few bucks from a nuisance suit. Well, at least, that's how it looked to me; it also looked that way to my publisher, my agent, and my attorneys, who sent him a long, detailed legal brief explaining why he had no claim and could forget the whole attempt at the grab.

I mention this here, before running*another* unsolicited letter, just to let the author of the missive following know that he has no claim, either. Notably, because it's an*anonymous* letter, and because I suppose I agree with it.

But, anyhow, on the subject of fear, here's another face of the monster. I reproduce it in the form I received it, without grammatical corrections. It's disturbing, to say the least.

Mr. Ellison,

I plead guilty. I'm the one …

… removing the drunk from the emergency room to late. The eighteen year old girl has died while the doctor was preoccupied with the drunk. I'm listening to the nurses deciding how to fake the report on the girl who should not have died. The explaining to the mother is mine.

… picking up drunks at midnight in frount of the bar full of onlookers shouting and screaming protest. I left a drunk here once before and he ended up a crippled vegestable when these kind folks robbed him. So I pick up the drunks and take them (not to jail?) home.

… finding the kid swearing to commit suicide and take him to the hospital. The one who talks to him when the psychiatrist tells him to go to hell. I'm the one finding him the next day, a block away, face up, dead.

… wondering what the hell is wrong when I pick up a kid speeding thru the hospital zone to late. Something went wrong. Did the pedestrian know that she was carried six blocks on the boy's frount fender before she slid under the wheels? Why blame the kid? He didn't buy the car or set up the law.

… bastard who was trying to give a kid an even break when I caught him running from a mobile home with the goods. The idea wavered when the owner stumbled out with a busted head.

… fool trying to tarn kids over to their parents. I call and talk to some kid's little sister saying mommy isn't home and, oh, by the way, mommy wants to know what Jonny did. So the kid goes to jail to lose his rights, his scholarship, and his future career.

… motherfucker buying the coke for the scared kid who threw piss on me from a can. I let him go becuase no parents show.

… idiot who fought on off-duty cop to save derelict with a lip from a belting.

… whose a State police officer that is just like every city and federal officer across the United States. Just a guy trying to protect people from themselves.

… who wants to stop working in this lousy business but can not. I can not let some trigger-happy cop take my badge. I can't let people kill the loser when he is down. I can't let you kill because of hate, carelessness or indifference. I'll die one day protecting the losers you and the Society of Man hate so much because I'm a loser too. If there is anything lower than Black, it's Blue.

… who personally likes your writing about reality. In your stories I don't escape reality, but see an end to this senselessness. Either good or bad wins in your story and with the end I'm satisfied because I'm so tired of the war. But I'm one who'll never agree that all

cops are bad, and one who'll probably die by your hand or others like them either physically or spiritually in the street.

Sincerely,

[1]A Policeman.

Whew! Occasionally, gentle readers, the mail gets heavy in here. The letter from the nurse I quoted in PAINGOD [Pyramid V3646]. The suicide note from the woman who said one of my stories kept her going a few weeks longer than she would have hung on otherwise. The unsigned letter from the Viet Nam vet who confessed to all the people he'd shot up in free-fire zones. The crazed postcard from the Fundamentalist loonie who vowed he'd kill me because I was obviously the antichrist. My patriotic whiplash correspondent with the scoop on Kent State. And now this one.

Listen, friend, if you're out there, and you've picked up this book, let me tell you I neither hate nor fear you. Even swathed in Blue, m'man, you come across filled with pain and concern. I would like to meet you some day. But only when you're off-duty, when you're not packing heat.

I know damned well there are cops like you. I've met a few; and they always wind up like Serpico, brokenhearted or bust-headed. Because police these days aren't like police when I was a kid in Painesville, Ohio, in the Forties. Friend of mine, a lieutenant of homicide, got a trifle bombed one night, sitting around rapping with me, and he let slip one of the most scary things I've ever heard. He said, "Harlan, it used to be, when a cop said 'them or us' he meant*us* were the good people, the cops and the decent citizens and the responsible business community, anybody on the side of Law and Order, the way

it used to be in those Frank Capra films. *Them* meant bank robbers, homicidal maniacs, rapists, guys who torched their own stores for the insurance, murderers, all the kooks. Things've changed so much, these days when we say 'them or us' we mean anybody with a badge is *us* … all the rest of you are *them.* "

There are lines written by Maxwell Anderson in the Kurt Weill musical tragedy version of Alan Paton's book CRY, THE BELOVED COUNTRY — the stage production is, of course, LOST IN THE STARS — in which the chorus sings of the condition of fear that existed (and exists) in South Africa, the fear of the whites for the blacks, the fear of the blacks for the whites, and the lines are, 'It is fear! It is fear! It is fear! It is fear! / Who can enjoy the lovely land, / The seventy years, / The sun that pours down on the earth, / When there is fear in the heart? … Yes, we fear them. / For they are many and we are few! … Yes, we fear them, / Though we are many and they are few! … Men are not safe in the streets, / Not safe in their houses. / There are brutal murders, robberies. / Tonight again a man lies dead. / Yes, it is fear. / Fear of the few for the many, / Fear of the many for the few."

That is the condition of existence under which we sustain ourselves in this country, tied umbilically to our police. I'm not fool enough to lay it entirely on the police, the crushing responsibility for this fog of uneasiness through which we feel our way, always on edge, always angry, more than a little mad. Police are just postal people, milkmen, sanitation workers. They are employees of city, state and federal government. Only a lunatic would shoot down a mailman. But they are something else. They are representatives of the System. They are the visible fist at the end of the long arm of government, the status quo, order, the establishment need to keep waves from being made. And in an era when big business, the corporate giants, the megalopolitan conglomerates serve their own ends much more ruthlessly than ever they served the needs of the people they no longer even think of as consumers (we are now only "economic purchasing units"), the police find themselves — reluctantly in many cases I'm sure — cast in the roles of thugs, strike breakers, assassins and harassers for the extruders of plastic, the smelters of ore, the manufacturers of aerosol sprays, the foreclosers and the short-sellers.

Police represent (and in many cases cannot seem to get straight in their heads) not *justice,* but retribution. Those who were in the dissent movement in the Sixties and early Seventies understand that terrifying fact. They still cling to the naive belief that they work for the Law and the Order, and here in Los Angeles the black-and-whites bear a colophon that reads, "To serve and protect," yet they no longer assume responsibility (as beat cops used to do) for averting rancor between antagonistic neighbors, for helping drunks out of the gutters to "sleep it off" in a cell till they can be taken home tomorrow, for dealing sympathetically with a woman who has been raped, without asking, "Did you like it?" or "What did you do to encourage him?"

Yes, there are cops like the man who sent that letter you've just read, but dig the tone of submerged guilt and misery in that poor guy's letter. *He* knows. And why should a man obviously sincerely dedicated to making the world just a tiny bit better, have to feel such pain? Why should he have such a hard time doing the job of easing the anguishes of everyday life for the people he meets? Why do we suddenly totemize and revere the snipers of the S.W.A.T. teams?

The complexity of the problem is staggering. In trying to do a television script for NBC on the uses of psychiatry in prisons, I found myself being drawn off into one convoluted area after another. It isn't possible to just point the finger at the cops, or the CIA, or Nixon, or the Military-Industrial Complex and heave a sigh of relief. The fear is omnipresent. And it comes from a realization that *we* are the villains. And even that's too easy a platitude. I wrote in the introduction to one of my books that *they* are the Bad Guys: the ones who throw Dr. Pepper cans in the bushes; the ones who get their back bumper tapped at a stop light and scream whiplash; the ones who hate all kids, or all adults, or all blacks, or all whites, or all rich, or all poor; the ones who won't come to the aid of someone screaming in an alley; the ones who are "only doing their job" and can't break or bend the pointless rules. *They* are the Bad Guys.

And I must have received a thousand letters telling me I had no*right* to wash my hands of the human race; I had no*right* to say fuck'm and stop fighting for "the cause" (whatever the hell that is); I had no *right* to point the finger at*them* and exclude myself.

Clearly, my readers did not understand the message. As the old Midwestern saying goes, "When you point a finger at someone else, you point three at yourself." I agree. I'm one of*them*, so are you. We're *all* the villains, the Bad Guys, the fear-makers. That part in each of us, even the noblest and most self-sacrificing of us, that forgets or fears or avoids or rationalizes and permits evil to flourish. We are*all* Jekyll and Hyde. And I wrote that introduction to say that we are permitting Mr. Hyde to dominate us more and more each day. Just like cops. Just like preachers. Just like humanitarians and school kids and politicians. How can you fight the fight against that evil, except in yourself?

Yes, I have the right to become a misanthrope, to decide the human race doesn't have the stuff to make it, that it won't last one-thousandth the life-span of the great saurians, because seemingly the human race doesn't give a damn. And one fights only as long as one has the fiber strong enough*to* fight; after which, one tries to simply get through the days. And no, I haven't*really* given it all up, as the writing of*this* introduction shows, because I've never learned (like Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer) to "give it up and quit gracefully."

But what is one to say in the face of a letter like the one from that cop? Can we possibly beat the Hyde in each of us and defeat the fear that gags us like an evil fog?

Perhaps. But probably not. We seem determined to go on this way till we either reduce ourselves to barbarians or make "civilized" existence so unbearable that crime and the suicide rate claim us before we taste the simplest joys.

I don't have the answers for anyone but myself.

Perhaps you have some of the answers.

If so, apply them.

And then, perhaps, one day soon, guys like that cop will be able to sign their names to letters as potent and meaningful as the one you just read.

Religion won't get it, dope won't get it, letting Congress do it won't get it, only caring and education will do it.

Or, as Louis Pasteur put it, "Chance favors the prepared mind."

I've gone on too long. Conversation, the rap, still holds top spot in my catalogue of ways to have a good time. But I've rambled and digressed, and I've got to tell you a few things about how some of these stories came to be written, and then I'll get my face out of your way and let you go on to read the entertainments. Excuse me if I lecture. I don't mean to. It just comes over me sometimes.

In the main, most of these stories were written in the early and mid years of my writing career. I went through about 300,000 words of previously published (but never collected) stories to select these sixteen. I like each one of them, or they wouldn't be here. But I've substantially rewritten all of them. The errors of style and grammar I made when I was learning my craft were so silly and awful, I couldn't bear to let them stand. So in many ways these are new stories. Two*were* written for this book, just a few months before you bought the book.

Only one of these stories has ever appeared in a collection before, "The Whimper of Whipped Dogs." I

include it here, even though it's available in the recently-published DEATHBIRD STORIES, because it is the most prominent of my suspense stories, and comes with the cachet of the MWA award I mentioned earlier in this introduction. Besides, it's only 8000 words long, out of a total wordage in this book of almost 77,500. (This introduction is over 12,200 words long, a major chunk of work, as essay material intended for collections goes; or merely another example of The Mouth That Doth Run Off. Who knows …?) As a matter of fact, it occurs to me that some of you may be curious as to the way word-lengths are computed, and how a sufficiency of material is gathered together for a collection. Well, most paperbacks contain about 60,000 words, if they're original novels of ordinary length, or collections of stories. So you're getting quite a package for your money. Using typewriter margins set at 12 on the left and 73 on the right (good margins are necessary for the eyesight and sanity of editors, proofreaders, typesetters and even authors correcting dumb mistakes they made when they were in their twenties), using pica type — elite is too small — most writers average out between 250 to 300 words a typewritten page. I use 260 as a figure to even things out where there are stories with a lot of dialogue, which takes up less space. So that means a twelve-page story (typed, that is) will. run 3000 words. Sixteen pages is a 4000 worder. And so on. The accepted categories of story lengths are: short story — anything under 7500 words; novelette — at least 7500 but less than 17,500 words; novella — from 17,500 to 40,000; novel — anything of 40,000 words or higher. These are the generally accepted length and category judgments, as adhered to by, for instance, the Science Fiction Writers of America when classifying stories for the Nebula Awards.

To carry this helpful bit of public service data to its logical conclusion, for those budding authors among you who never had anyone lay such necessary but primitive information on you, as I discuss each story. I'll insert its wordage in square brackets. Don't thank me,*just don't send me your stories to read …* I'll only burn them.

"The Whimper of Whipped Dogs" [8000] is based on the murder of Kitty Genovese, about which I've nattered in books like THE DEADLY STREETS [Pyramid V3931]. The case is now so famous, it's obsessed me for eleven years since it happened. Woman knifed to death in the streets of New York's Kew Gardens section while thirty-eight people watched from their windows, heard her screams for help, did nothing, turned up their TV sets so the screams wouldn't penetrate. It took the rapist-killer over half an hour to slice her up as she dragged herself around almost a full city block. They could have saved her. They didn't I was never satisfied with the intellectual theories about*why* no one had aided her. It's not the kind of dehumanized behavior that can be explained with phrases like "disinvolvement" or "alienation" or "inurement to the reality of violence from seeing so much death on nightly newscasts." It was the kind of mythic situation that could only be explained in terms of magic realism, fantasy.

"Eddie, You're My Friend" [1300] is a rarity. It's an unsold story. I've written over 800 short stories and articles and essays and suchlike in my twenty years behind this machine, and with only one or two exceptions — dogs that embarrass me even to look at, which I'd fight to the death against letting appear in print —*everything* has sold to one magazine or another. But when I went through my files to put this book together, and read all those old stories, and picked only the best, I found "Eddie" and remembered it, and smiled and liked it. It's not a particularly thoughtful story, just a little one-punch blowdart, but it worked, so I added it to the book. But when I went to locate the source of first publication, to enter it on the acknowledgment page where copyrights are listed, I couldn't find any mention of its having been published. I consulted the exhaustive and elegant bibliography of my work assembled by Leslie Kay Swigart, but even she had no mention of the story. And I realized I'd*assumed* that story had been published, all these years. But it hadn't. It was, in effect, a brand-new, unpublished yarn. And it appears here for the first time. (Unless, in the five and a half months between the time I write this page, and NO DOORS, NO WINDOWS is published, I manage to sell it to a magazine, in which case it will*still* be a new story as far as book publication is concerned.)

There isn't much to say about "Status Quo at Troyden's" [4600]; it speaks for itself. Except to say that if there was one reason why I wanted a book of my suspense fiction to get between covers, it was to preserve for "posterity," or whatever, this one story. I don't know why I've always thought highly of it, but I like it enormously. I think it has a lot of heart, and it was an early indication of where my interests and writing abilities were going. So now Mr. Huggerson and Harry Troyden and Mr. Zeckhauser will have some extended life since they appeared in a long-gone mystery magazine in 1958.

"Nedra at f:5.6" [3100] is one of those cases of literary cross-pollination that people looking to misinterpret your actions could label plagiarism. I'll head them off at the pass by copping to it in front. Back in the late Forties, 1949 to be exact, even before I'd "discovered" science fiction, I was intrigued by, and bought, a 25¢ paperback titled THE GIRL WITH THE HUNGRY EYES. (Yes, Virginia, in those days*all* paperbacks were 25¢ and it was such an accepted thing, that the book doesn't even have a price on it; everybody just*knew*.) That was a remarkable little paperback. Historically as well as personally for me. It was the very first*original* collection of sf / fantasy stories. That is, the contents was not made up of culls from magazines or other books, but were stories commissioned especially for*that* book. The publisher was Avon Books (#184), the editor was the indefatigable (and still going strong) Donald A. Wollheim, now a publisher himself with his line of DAW paperbacks; and it contained six excellent stories never-before-published by William Tenn, the late P. Schuyler Miller, Frank Belknap Long, Manly Wade Wellman, the late August Derleth writing under the name Stephen Grendon and, author of the title story, "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," the master of us all, Mr. Fritz Leiber.

Well, the story blew me away. I won't tell you what it was about, you can find it reprinted in …

Holy Jesus! I just went and checked my four foot shelf of everything Fritz Leiber has ever written — no self-respecting writer in our time would dare to set pen to paper without having studied the master*in toto* — and I find "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes" has*never* been reprinted in a Leiber collection in this country. I see it in an English edition called THE SECRET SONGS, but of the twenty or so Leiber collections that have gone on the racks of America's newsstands, not one of them has included that superb fantasy. Yes, I*know it* was done on television on*Night Gallery* a few years ago, but that's ephemeral, and they made mush of it, anyway. What I'm trying to say here is that even in the recently released Ballantine collection called THE BEST OF FRITZ LEIBER, that story isn't available. Now that's bloody disgraceful!

I pulled out my battered, mildewed (literally mildewed) copy of the Avon paperback, and the same thrill I got when I read Fritz's chilling fantasy twenty-six years ago, I got a minute ago, holding that poor little battered Avon edition. In short, what I'm getting at, is that the story stayed with me, in tone and in general concept, until 1956, when I sat down and wrote a variation on the idea, and called it "The Hungry One" and added beneath the title, "An*hommage* to Fritz Leiber." It was published in a slick men's magazine in that year, sans the dedication to Fritz, and it's been reprinted in lesser magazines maybe a dozen times since, but I've never had it in a book under the title it now has, nor has it ever managed to get into print with the respectful homage addressed to Fritz that was on it from the first. But I've rewritten it for this book, I've reinstated the credit line, and though I know it isn't one one-millionth the story Fritz's was, it is a way of saying thank you to a writer whose life's writing has not only influenced mine, but has touched virtually*every* fantasist working in the genre today.

And if you hit the used paperback stores from time to time, keep your eyes open for that moth-eaten Avon paperback. Or maybe somebody will hip Peter Mayer at Avon to include it in his "Science Fiction Rediscovery" series.

"Opposites Attract" [4000], "Toe the Line" [4000], "Pride in the Profession" [4100], "The Children's Hour" [2350], "Two Inches in Tomorrow's Column" [2300] and "Ormond Always Pays His Bills"

[1800] are simple, uncomplicated crime and / or suspense stories with a gimmick at the end. A snap in the tail. O. Henry time. They don't need any frills. I wrote them for money, in the days when I was writing a lot of stories as fast as I could because (as today) I loved writing more than anything *including* sex, and I had (as today) more ideas than my two-finger typing (as today) could keep up with. "The Children's Hour" is a kind of sf story, I suppose, but it's just a variation on the Pied Piper idea. They were written to provide entertainment and I doubt very much that any of them will alter the course of Western Civilization. But I hope you like them.

"Down in the Dark" [4000] and "The Man on the Juice Wagon" [7500] are action-adventure stories with the emphasis on danger and suspense. They were written for men's magazines and I found when I re-read them, and wanted to include them, that I had to change the ending to "Juice Wagon" completely to eradicate the stench of male chauvinist rancidness that I, and those magazines, subscribed to in them there unenlightened days. I suppose the men's magazines *still* consider women toys to play with, but, like an Alcoholics Anonymous convert, I has seen de light, and I find that treating women as human beings, in my personal life as well as in my stories, makes for a better, richer, more intelligent life … and the same for the stories. Both "Dark" and "Juice Wagon" are based on experiences in my checkered past. To some small degree.

"White Trash Don't Exist" [6000] has one element stolen from Steinbeck's OF MICE AND MEN. You'll spot it right off. That's okay. It isn't stealing, it's, uh, er, *research.* (What was it Rodin was supposed to have said, quoting Michelangelo? Oh, yeah. "Where I steal an idea, I leave my knife.") The interesting thing about "White Trash" is that when I first wrote it, for the *Manhunt* market of the mid-Fifties, a market that used tough, brutal crime stories without even a hint of traditional detective material in it, I called it "Niggers Don't Exist" and I intended it as a statement about life for blacks in areas of the South I'd passed through. The editor loved the story, but wouldn't buy it with blacks in it, so I rewrote it using "white trash." I was hungrier to sell in those days. That was before I got hip to Bob Heinlein's 5 rules for a writer, and before I added two of my own.

So when you read "White Trash," you can replace whatever elements this introduction compels you to replace.

What's that? Oh, I see. I've teased you with Heinlein's and my rules, so the least I can do is digress again and give them to you. I'd be a rat not to do it, wouldn't I?

Well, never let it be said that a sweetie like me made his readers angry. God *knows* I've never antagonized any of you. Okay, here they are:

1. You must *write.*

2. You must *finish* what you write.

3. You must refrain from rewriting except to editorial order.

4. You must put it on the market.

5. You must keep it on the market until sold.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, 1947

6. Only accept the last four words of rule 3 if your integrity and the quality / interior logic of the story reconcile with such changes.

Otherwise:

7. Kill to maintain the integrity of your work.

HARLAN ELLISON, 1970

"Promises of Laughter" [3600] happened to me. The lady called "Holdie Karp" is a reasonably well-known author these days. She really did that to me, what happens to the dude in the story. And how I wrote the yarn was this: when the events of that night went down, I got so pissed off I got into my Austin-Healey and drove like a lunatic across the twisting, accident-laden Mulholland Drive to my house, ran at the typewriter like a Rams linebacker, banged out the story (sexual pun intended) in about two hours, yanked the carbon off the desk, got back in the Healey, hit Mulholland again, made the course in about thirteen minutes batting sixty all the way through the night and the fog, slammed into her driveway, and started kicking on her front door.

She came to the window, in her nightgown, obviously having been asleep, saw it was wild-eyed li'l ole me, and damn near didn't open the door because she was afraid I'd knife her or something. But when she let it slide open just a crack, I shoved the manuscript into her hand, got back in my car and raced away … having had (I thought) the last fucking word, damn her eyes!

It appeared in a magazine containing one of the articles referred to in the story. She was furious. Everyone now knew our personal lives. So several months later she wrote *her* view of that incident

It was a better story than mine.

We are friends to this day, "Holdie Karp" and I, and she writes for magazines and for one of New York's biggest newspapers, and she taught me more about being a non-macho male than anyone I've ever met.

So the least I could do was to rewrite the story a little, to make it a fairer representation of her, uh, position on that fateful night.

I have no idea why people keep identifying me with the stuff in my stories.

Which brings me to the last story in the book, and the most recent one I've written. I wrote it *for* this book, and unless I sell it to a magazine in the next 5½ months … but we've been through that before. Anyhow. "Tired Old Man" [5000] was written in June of this year, 1975. It's one of my most recent stories, so you can judge how I'm doing these days; but beyond that curious conceit, it is a story with a peculiar history, and one I'm inclined to tell you.

First, however, let me warn you. I am *not* the protagonist, Billy Landress, even though much of Billy's career parallels mine and some of the things that happen to him in the story happened in a sorta kinda way, and some of the perceptions at which he arrives are ones I've lately come to hold as my own. Now I suppose all that disclaiming will convince those of you who believe in the "he protesteth too much" philosophy that I *am* Billy. Well, that only goes to show how little some of you understand about the art of creating fiction. A writer takes bits and pieces of himself — as Geoffrey Wolff put it in that quote leading off this introduction — he cannibalizes himself, and he applies a little meat here and a little meat there, and he comes up with a character that bears a *resemblance* to himself (because who do I know *better* than myself, for God's sake), but who is a new person entirely. So don't get all screwed up trying to fit me into Billy's shoes.

Back to the story.

I was in New York on a visit about eight, ten, eleven years ago. I went to dinner with Bob Silverberg and Bobbie Silverberg, and after dinner we went to a gathering of the old Hydra Club. Willy Ley was there; it

was shortly before that great and wonderful man died; it was good to see him again. And a bunch of other people, most of whom I didn't know. And I wandered around and finally found myself sitting on the sofa next to a weary-looking old man in an easy chair. Marvelous conversationalist. We talked for almost an hour, until I got up and went to the kitchen where I found Bob with the late Hans Santesson, a dear friend and ex-editor of mine. I described the old man and asked who he was.

"That is Cornell Woolrich," Hans said.

My mouth must have fallen open. I had been sitting next to one of the giants of mystery fiction, a man whose work I'd read and admired for twenty years, since I'd been a kid and discovered a copy of BLACK ALIBI after seeing the 1946 Val Lewton film, *The Leopard Man.* I was nine years old at the time, and the film made such an impression on me that I stayed on at the Lake Theater in Painesville, Ohio to see it three times on a Saturday. And it was the first time I ever really read those funny words that come at the beginning of the movie (I later learned those were the "credits"); the words that said "Screenplay by Ardel Wray, based on the novel *Black Alibi* by Cornell Woolrich."

How I got hold of the novel, I don't remember. But it was the first mystery fiction I'd ever read (excluding Poe, of course, all of whom I'd read by that time). Nine years old!

And in the years when I was voraciously devouring the works of every decent writer I could find, Woolrich (under his own name and his possibly even-more-famous pseudonym, "William Irish") became a treasurehouse of twists and turns in plotting, elegant writing style, misdirection, mood, setting and suspense. God, the beautiful stories that man wrote. The "black book" series: THE BLACK ANGEL, THE BLACK CURTAIN, THE BLACK PATH OF FEAR, RENDEZVOUS IN BLACK, THE BRIDE WORE BLACK and, many more times, BLACK ALIBI. And DEADLINE AT DAWN, PHANTOM LADY, NIGHTMARE, STRANGLER'S SERENADE, WALTZ INTO DARKNESS. And all the short stories!

Cornell Woolrich!

Jeeeezus, if Hans had said I was sitting next to Ernest fucking Hemingway it couldn't have collapsed me more thoroughly. Bertrand Russell, Bob Feller, Dick Bong, Walt Kelly … all my heroes … it wouldn't have gotten to me half as much. Cornell goddam Woolrich! I damn near fainted.

"But I thought he'd died *years* ago," I said.

They laughed at me. He was old, no doubt about *that,* but he was very much alive. He wasn't writing any more; his mother — whom he'd lived with through all of his adult life, in a resident hotel in Manhattan — had recently died; and he was just getting out and around.

I was flabbergasted. I'd sat and *talked* with Cornell Woolrich, one of my earliest writing heroes, and hadn't even known it. I wanted to find him in that crowded apartment and just be *near* him for a while longer.

They were bemused by my goshwow attitude, but they were also a little perplexed. Hans said, "I do not remember seeing him here. Where is he?"

And I led them back to the easy chair in the far rear corner of the room. And he was gone. And he was nowhere in the apartment. And no one else had talked to him. And I never saw him again. And be died soon after that night, I learned later.

To this day, I've felt there was something strange and pivotal in my meeting with Woolrich. He could not possibly have known who I was, nor could he have much cared. But we talked writing, and I was the

only one who saw or talked to him that night. I'm sure of that. Don't ask me how I know, I cannot give you a rational explanation; and I firmly do*not* believe in ghosts or astrology or UFO's or much else of the nonsense gobbledygook that people substitute for the ability to handle reality. But from the time I left him in that easy chair till the moment I went back to find him, I was right in front of the only exit from that apartment and*there was no way he could have gotten past me without my seeing him.*

For years I thought about that night in New York.

And one afternoon I sat down and wrote the first two pages of a story titled "Tired Old Man," in which I thought I would fictionalize that evening, and (as I had with Leiber) pay homage to a writer whose words had so deeply affected me.

But the two pages went into the idea file, unresolved. They stayed there for six years, until earlier this month, June 1975. I was in the process of writing an original story for this book, and had started on another idea I'd had a while back, and in looking for the note for*that* story (which will be included in SHATTERDAY, coming from Pyramid in three months), I chanced upon the two pages of "Tired Old Man." And without my even knowing why, or realizing what I was doing, in a lunatic move that could only make this book late to my publisher and late to the printer and late to the on-sale date and late to your hands, I took up the writing of the story as if it had been six years earlier.

And as impossible as it had been for me to write it six years before, because I hadn't known*how to* write it six years before, it was that easy for me to start with the very next sentence — as if I'd written the last word of the previous sentence only a moment earlier, not six years before — and go all the way through to the end in one sitting.

Marki Strasser in the story is Cornell Woolrich.

At least, in the impetus for the character. It isn't*supposed* to be Woolrich in the story, it's … well … that's what the story is about, as you'll see … but I wanted you to know how "Tired Old Man" came to be written; in answer to the people who always ask me, "Where do you get your ideas?"

And that brings me, at last, to the end of this introduction. I assure you when I started, some 42 typewritten pages earlier, I had no idea I'd run on like this.

But it's nice getting together with you like this, if for no other reason than to keep out the darkness for just a few minutes longer. And in the course of writing these words, I went back and read the section of BLACK ALIBI in which the young girl, Teresa Delgado, is stalked and killed by the black panther as she screams for her mother to open the door and let her in. And it still conjures up the stark terror I first felt when I saw it in a Val Lewton film at the age of nine.

And for giving rebirth to that "tolerable terror" I thank you. We've got to get together again like this.

That is, if you get through the night.

HARLAN ELLISON

Los Angeles

[1]I'm not anti-women. this not expresses only my own opinion and not police officers in general. Further, I'm male.

One

The Whimper of Whipped Dogs

On the night after the day she had stained the louvered window shutters of her new apartment on East 52nd Street, Beth saw a woman slowly and hideously knifed to death in the courtyard of her building. She was one of twenty-six witnesses to the ghoulish scene, and, like them, she did nothing to stop it.

She saw it all, every moment of it, without break and with no impediment to her view. Quite madly, the thought crossed her mind as she watched in horrified fascination, that she had the sort of marvelous line of observation Napoleon had sought when he caused to have constructed at the *Comédie-Française* theaters, a curtained box at the rear, so he could watch the audience as well as the stage. The night was clear, the moon was full, she had just turned off the 11:30 movie on channel 2 after the second commercial break, realizing she had already seen Robert Taylor in *Westward the Women* , and had disliked it the first time; and the apartment was quite dark.

She went to the window, to raise it six inches for the night's sleep, and she saw the woman stumble into the courtyard. She was sliding along the wall, clutching her left arm with her right hand. Con Ed had installed mercury-vapor lamps on the poles; there had been sixteen assaults in seven months; the courtyard was illuminated with a chill purple glow that made the blood streaming down the woman's left arm look black and shiny. Beth saw every detail with utter clarity, as though magnified a thousand power under a microscope, solarized as if it had been a television commercial.

The woman threw back her head, as if she were trying to scream, but there was no sound. Only the traffic on First Avenue, late cabs foraging for singles paired for the night at Maxwell's Plum and Friday's and Adam's Apple. But that was over there, beyond. Where *she* was, down there seven floors below, in the courtyard, everything seemed silently suspended in an invisible force-field.

Beth stood in the darkness of her apartment, and realized she had raised the window completely. A tiny balcony lay just over the low sill; now not even glass separated her from the sight; just the wrought-iron balcony railing and seven floors to the courtyard below.

The woman staggered away from the wall, her head still thrown back, and Beth could see she was in her mid-thirties, with dark hair cut in a shag; it was impossible to tell if she was pretty: terror had contorted her features and her mouth was a twisted black slash, opened but emitting no sound. Cords stood out in her neck. She had lost one shoe, and her steps were uneven, threatening to dump her to the pavement.

The man came around the corner of the building, into the courtyard. The knife he held was enormous — or perhaps it only seemed so: Beth remembered a bone-handled fish knife her father had used one summer at the lake in Maine: it folded back on itself and locked, revealing eight inches of serrated blade. The knife in the hand of the dark man in the courtyard seemed to be similar.

The woman saw him and tried to run, but he leaped across the distance between them and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her head back as though he would slash her throat in the next reaper-motion.

Then the woman screamed.

The sound skirled up into the courtyard like bats trapped in an echo chamber, unable to find a way out, driven mad. It went on and on …

The man struggled with her and she drove her elbows into his sides and he tried to protect himself, spinning her around by her hair, the terrible scream going up and up and never stopping. She came loose and he was left with a fistful of hair torn out by the roots. As she spun out, he slashed straight across and opened her up just below the breasts. Blood sprayed through her clothing and the man was soaked; it

seemed to drive him even more berserk. He went at her again, as she tried to hold herself together, the blood pouring down over her arms.

She tried to run, teetered against the wall, slid sidewise, and the man struck the brick surface. She was away, stumbling over a flower bed, falling, getting to her knees as he threw himself on her again. The knife came up in a flashing arc that illuminated the blade strangely with purple light. And still she screamed.

Lights came on in dozens of apartments and people appeared at windows.

He drove the knife to the hilt into her back, high on the right shoulder. He used both hands.

Beth caught it all in jagged flashes — the man, the woman, the knife, the blood, the expressions on the faces of those watching from the windows. Then lights clicked off in the windows, but they still stood there, watching.

She wanted to yell, to scream, "What are you doing to that woman?" But her throat was frozen, two iron hands that had been immersed in dry ice for ten thousand years clamped around her neck. She could feel the blade sliding into her own body.

Somehow — it seemed impossible but there it was down there, happening somehow — the woman struggled erect and*pulled* herself off the knife. Three steps, she took three steps and fell into the flower bed again. The man was howling now, like a great beast, the sounds inarticulate, bubbling up from his stomach. He fell on her and the knife went up and came down, then again, and again, and finally it was all a blur of motion, and her scream of lunatic bats went on till it faded off and was gone.

Beth stood in the darkness, trembling and crying, the sight filling her eyes with horror. And when she could no longer bear to look at what he was doing down there to the unmoving piece of meat over which he worked, she looked up and around at the windows of darkness where the others still stood — even as she stood — and somehow she could see their faces, bruise-purple with the dim light from the mercury lamps, and there was a universal sameness to their expressions. The women stood with their nails biting into the upper arms of their men, their tongues edging from the corners of their mouths; the men were wild-eyed and smiling. They all looked as though they were at cock fights. Breathing deeply. Drawing some sustenance from the grisly scene below. An exhalation of sound, deep, deep, as though from caverns beneath the earth. Flesh pale and moist.

And it was then that she realized the courtyard had grown foggy, as though mist off the East River had rolled up 52nd Street in a veil that would obscure the details of what the knife and the man were still doing … endlessly doing it … long after there was any joy in it … still doing it … again and again …

But the fog was unnatural, thick and gray and filled with tiny scintillas of light. She stared at it, rising up in the empty space of the courtyard. Bach in the cathedral, stardust in a vacuum chamber.

Beth saw eyes.

There, up there, at the ninth floor and higher, two great eyes, as surely as night and the moon, there were *eyes* . And — a face? Was that a face, could she be sure, was she imagining it … a face? In the roiling vapors of chill fog something lived, something brooding and patient and utterly malevolent had been summoned up to witness what was happening down there in the flower bed. Beth tried to look away, but could not. The eyes, those primal burning eyes, filled with an abysmal antiquity yet frighteningly bright and anxious like the eyes of a child; eyes filled with tomb depths, ancient and new, chasm-filled, burning, gigantic and deep as an abyss, holding her, compelling her. The shadow play was being staged not only for the tenants in their windows, watching and drinking of the scene, but for some*other* . Not on frigid

tundra or waste moors, not in subterranean caverns or on some faraway world circling a dying sun, but here, in the city, here the eyes of that*other* watched.

Shaking with the effort, Beth wrenched her eyes from those burning depths up there beyond the ninth floor, only to see again the horror that had brought that*other* . And she was struck for the first time by the awfulness of what she was witnessing, she was released from the immobility that had held her like a coelacanth in shale, she was filled with the blood thunder pounding against the membranes of her mind: she had*stood* there! She had done nothing, nothing! A woman had been butchered and she had said nothing, done nothing. Tears had been useless, tremblings had been pointless, she*had done nothing!*

Then she heard hysterical sounds midway between laughter and giggling, and as she stared up into that great face rising in the fog and chimneysmoke of the night, she heard*herself* making those deranged gibbon noises and from the man below a pathetic, trapped sound, like the whimper of whipped dogs.

She was staring up into that face again. She hadn't wanted to see it again — ever. But she was locked with those smoldering eyes, overcome with the feeling that they were childlike, though she*knew* they were incalculably ancient.

Then the butcher below did an unspeakable thing and Beth reeled with dizziness and caught the edge of the window before she could tumble out onto the balcony; she steadied herself and fought for breath.

She felt herself being looked at, and for a long moment of frozen terror she feared she might have caught the attention of that face up there in the fog. She clung to the window, feeling everything growing faraway and dim, and stared straight across the court. She*was* being watched. Intently. By the young man in the seventh-floor window across from her own apartment. Steadily, he was looking at her. Through the strange fog with its burning eyes feasting on the sight below, he was staring at her.

As she felt herself blacking out, in the moment before unconsciousness, the thought flickered and fled that there was something terribly familiar about his face.

It rained the next day. East 52nd Street was slick and shining with the oil rainbows. The rain washed the dog turds into the gutters and nudged them down and down to the catch-basin openings. People bent against the slanting rain, hidden beneath umbrellas, looking like enormous, scurrying black mushrooms. Beth went out to get the newspapers after the police had come and gone.

The news reports dwelled with loving emphasis on the twenty-six tenants of the building who had watched in cold interest as Leona Ciarelli, 37, of 455 Fort Washington Avenue, Manhattan, had been systematically stabbed to death by Burton H. Wells, 41, an unemployed electrician, who had been subsequently shot to death by two off-duty police officers when he burst into Michael's Pub on 55th Street, covered with blood and brandishing a knife that authorities later identified as the murder weapon.

She had thrown up twice that day. Her stomach seemed incapable of retaining anything solid, and the taste of bile lay along the back of her tongue. She could not blot the scenes of the night before from her mind; she re-ran them again and again, every movement of that reaper arm playing over and over as though on a short loop of memory. The woman's head thrown back for silent screams. The blood. Those eyes in the fog.

She was drawn again and again to the window, to stare down into the courtyard and the street. She tried to superimpose over the bleak Manhattan concrete the view from her window in Swann House at Bennington: the little yard and another white, frame dormitory; the fantastic apple trees; and from the other window the rolling hills and gorgeous Vermont countryside; her memory skittered through the change of seasons. But there was always concrete and the rain-slick streets; the rain on the pavement was black and shiny as blood.

She tried to work, rolling up the tambour closure of the old rolltop desk she had bought on Lexington Avenue and hunching over the graph sheets of choreographer's charts. But Labanotation was merely a Jackson Pollock jumble of arcane hieroglyphics to her today, instead of the careful representation of eurhythmics she had studied four years to perfect. And before that, Farmington.

The phone rang. It was the secretary from the Taylor Dance Company, asking when she would be free. She had to beg off. She looked at her hand, lying on the graph sheets of figures Laban had devised, and she saw her fingers trembling. She had to beg off. Then she called Guzman at the Downtown Ballet Company, to tell him she would be late with the charts.

"My God, lady, I have ten dancers sitting around in a rehearsal hall getting their leotards sweaty! What do you expect me to do?"

She explained what had happened the night before. And as she told him, she realized the newspapers had been justified in holding that tone against the twenty-six witnesses to the death of Leona Ciarelli. Paschal Guzman listened, and when he spoke again, his voice was several octaves lower, and he spoke more slowly. He said he understood and she could take a little longer to prepare the charts. But there was a distance in his voice, and he hung up while she was thanking him.

She dressed in an argyle sweater vest in shades of dark purple, and a pair of fitted khaki gabardine trousers. She had to go out, to walk around. To do what? To think about other things. As she pulled on the Fred Braun chunky heels, she idly wondered if that heavy silver bracelet was still in the window of Georg Jensen's. In the elevator, the young man from the window across the courtyard stared at her. Beth felt her body begin to tremble again. She went deep into the corner of the box when he entered behind her.

Between the fifth and fourth floors, he hit the*off* switch and the elevator jerked to a halt.

Beth stared at him and he smiled innocently.

"Hi. My name's Gleeson, Ray Gleeson, I'm in 714."

She wanted to demand he turn the elevator back on, by what right did he pre*sume*to do such a thing, what did he mean by this, turn it on at once or suffer the consequences. That was what she*wanted* to do. Instead, from the same place she had heard the gibbering laughter the night before, she heard her voice, much smaller and much less possessed than she had trained it to be, saying, "Beth O'Neill, I live in 701."

The thing about it, was that*the elevator was stopped* . And she was frightened. But he leaned against the paneled wall, very well-dressed, shoes polished, hair combed and probably blown dry with a hand drier, and he*talked* to her as if they were across a table at L'Argenteuil. "You just moved in, huh?"

"About two months ago."

"Where did you go to school? Bennington or Sarah Lawrence?"

"Bennington. How did you know?"

He laughed, and it was a nice laugh. "I'm an editor at a religious book publisher; every year we get half a dozen Bennington, Sarah Lawrence, Smith girls. They come hopping in like grasshoppers, ready to revolutionize the publishing industry."

"What's wrong with that? You sound like you don't care for them."

"Oh, I*love* them, they're marvelous. They think they know how to write better than the authors we

publish. Had one darlin' little item who was given galleys of three books to proof, and she rewrote all three. I think she's working as a table-swabber in a Horn & Hardart's now."

She didn't reply to that. She would have pegged him as an anti-feminist, ordinarily; if it had been anyone else speaking. But the eyes. There was something terribly familiar about his face. She was enjoying the conversation; she rather liked him.

"What's the nearest big city to Bennington?"

"Albany, New York. About sixty miles."

"How long does it take to drive there?"

"From Bennington? About an hour and a half."

"Must be a nice drive, that Vermont country, really pretty. It's an all-girls' school, they haven't thought of making it co-ed? How many girls enrolled there?"

"Approximately."

"Yes, approximately."

"About four hundred."

"What did you major in?"

"I was a dance major, specializing in Labanotation. That's the way you write choreography."

"It's all electives, I gather. You don't have to take anything required, like sciences, for example." He didn't change tone as he said, "That was a terrible thing last night. I saw you watching. I guess a lot of us were watching. It was really a terrible thing."

She nodded dumbly. Fear came back.

"I understand the cops got him. Some nut, they don't even know why he killed her, or why he went charging into that bar. It was really an awful thing. I'd very much like to have dinner with you one night soon, if you're not attached."

"That would be all right."

"Maybe Wednesday. There's an Argentinian place I know. You might like it."

"That would be all right."

"Why don't you turn on the elevator, and we can go," he said, and smiled again. She did it, wondering why it was she had stopped the elevator in the first place.

On her third date with him, they had their first fight. It was at a party thrown by a director of television commercials. He lived on the ninth floor of their building. He had just done a series of spots for *Sesame Street* (the letters "U" for Underpass, "T" for Tunnel, lower-case "b" for boats, "C" for cars; the numbers 1 to 6 and the numbers 1 to 20; the words *light* and *dark*) and was celebrating his move from the arena of commercial tawdriness and its attendant $75,000 a year to the sweet fields of educational programming and its accompanying descent into low-pay respectability. There was a logic in his joy Beth could not quite understand, and when she talked with him about it, in a far corner of the kitchen, his arguments didn't seem to parse. But he seemed happy, and his girl friend, a long-legged ex-model from

Philadelphia, continued to drift to him and away from him, like some exquisite undersea plant, touching his hair and kissing his neck, murmuring words of pride and barely submerged sexuality. Beth found it bewildering, though the celebrants were all bright and lively.

In the living room, Ray was sitting on the arm of the sofa, hustling a stewardess named Luanne. Beth could tell he was hustling: he was trying to look casual. When he*wasn't* hustling, he was always intense, about everything. She decided to ignore it, and wandered around the apartment, sipping at a Tanqueray and tonic.

There were framed prints of abstract shapes clipped from a calendar printed in Germany. They were in metal Crosse frames.

In the dining room a huge door from a demolished building somewhere in the city had been handsomely stripped, teaked and refinished. It was now the dinner table.

A Lightolier fixture attached to the wall over the bed swung out, levered up and down, tipped, and its burnished globe-head revolved a full three hundred and sixty degrees.

She was standing in the bedroom, looking out the window, when she realized this had been one of the rooms in which light had gone on, gone off; one of the rooms that had contained a silent watcher at the death of Leona Ciarelli.

When she returned to the living room, she looked around more carefully. With only three or four exceptions — the stewardess, a young married couple from the second floor, a stockbroker from Hemphill, Noyes — everyone at the party had been a witness to the slaying.

"I'd like to go," she told him.

"Why, aren't you having a good time?" asked the stewardess, a mocking smile crossing her perfect little face.

"Like all Bennington ladies," Ray said, answering for Beth, "she is enjoying herself most by not enjoying herself at all. It's a trait of the anal retentive. Being here in someone else's apartment, she can't empty ashtrays or rewind the toilet paper roll so it doesn't hang a tongue, and being tightassed, her nature demands we go.

"All right, Beth, let's say our goodbyes and take off. The Phantom Rectum strikes again."

She slapped him and the stewardess's eyes widened. But the smile stayed frozen where it had appeared.

He grabbed her wrist before she could do it again. "Garbanzo beans, baby," he said, holding her wrist tighter than necessary.

They went back to her apartment, and after sparring silently with kitchen cabinet doors slammed and the television being tuned too loud, they got to her bed, and he tried to perpetuate the metaphor by fucking her in the ass. He had her on elbows and knees before she realized what he was doing; she struggled to turn over and he rode her bucking and tossing without a sound. And when it was clear to him that she would never permit it, he grabbed her breast from underneath and squeezed so bard she howled in pain. He dumped her on her back, rubbed himself between her legs a dozen times, and came on her stomach.

Beth lay with her eyes closed and an arm thrown across her face. She wanted to cry, but found she could not. Ray lay on her and said nothing. She wanted to rush to the bathroom and shower, but he did not move, till long after his semen had dried on their bodies.

"Who did you date at college?" he asked.

"I didn't date anyone very much." Sullen.

"No heavy makeouts with wealthy lads from Williams and Dartmouth … no Amherst intellectuals begging you to save them from creeping faggotry by permitting them to stick their carrots in your sticky little slit?"

"Stop it!"

"Come on, baby, it couldn't all have been knee socks and little round circle-pins. You don't expect me to believe you didn't get a little mouthful of cock from time to time. It's only, what? about fifteen miles to Williamstown? I'm sure the Williams werewolves were down burning the highway to your cunt on weekends, you can level with old Uncle Ray …"

"*Why are you like this?!*" She started to move, to get away from him, and he grabbed her by the shoulder, forced her to lie down again. Then he rose up over her and said, "I'm like this because I'm a New Yorker, baby. Because I live in this fucking city every day. Because I have to play patty-cake with the ministers and other sanctified holy-joe assholes who want their goodness and lightness tracts published by the Blessed Sacrament Publishing and Storm Window Company of 277 Park Avenue, when what I*really* want to do is toss the stupid psalm-suckers out the thirty-seventh floor window and listen to them quote chapter-and-worse all the way down. Because I've lived in this great big snapping dog of a city all my life and I'm mad as a mudfly, for chrissakes!"

She lay unable to move, breathing shallowly, filled with a sudden pity and affection for him. His face was white and strained, and she knew he was saying things to her that only a bit too much*Almadén* and exact timing would have let him say.

"What do you expect from me," he said, his voice softer now, but no less intense, "do you expect kindness and gentility and understanding and a hand on*your* hand when the smog burns your eyes? I can't do it, I haven't got it. No one has it in this cesspool of a city. Look around you; what do you think is happening here? They take rats and they put them in boxes and when there are too many of them, some of the little fuckers go out of their minds and start gnawing the rest to death.*It ain't no different here ,baby!*It's rat time for everybody in this madhouse. You can't expect to jam as many people into this stone thing as we do, with buses and taxis and dogs shitting themselves scrawny and noise night and day and no money and not enough places to live and no place to go have a decent think … you can't do it without making the time right for some god-forsaken other kind of thing to be born! You can't hate everyone around you, and kick every beggar and nigger and*mestizo* shithead, you can't have cabbies stealing from you and taking tips they don't deserve, and then cursing you, you can't walk in the soot till your collar turns black, and your body stinks with the smell of flaking brick and decaying brains, you cant do it without calling up some kind of awful —"

He stopped.

His face bore the expression of a man who has just received brutal word of the death of a loved one. He suddenly lay down, rolled over, and turned off.

She lay beside him, trembling, trying desperately to remember where she had seen his face before.

He didn't call her again, after the night of the party. And when they met in the hall, he pointedly turned away, as though he had given her some obscure chance and she had refused to take it. Beth thought she understood: though Ray Gleeson had not been her first affair, he had been the first to reject her so completely. The first to put her not only out of his bed and his life, but even out of his world. It was as though she were invisible, not even beneath contempt, simply not there.

She busied herself with other things.

She took on three new charting jobs for Guzman and a new group that had formed on Staten Island, of all places. She worked furiously and they gave her new assignments; they even paid her.

She tried to decorate the apartment with a less precise touch. Huge poster blowups of Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham replaced the Brueghel prints that had reminded her of the view looking down the hill toward Williams. The tiny balcony outside her window, the balcony she had steadfastly refused to stand upon since the night of the slaughter, the night of the fog with eyes, that balcony she swept and set about with little flower boxes in which she planted geraniums, petunias, dwarf zinnias and other hardy perennials. Then, closing the window, she went to give herself, to involve herself in this city to which she had brought her ordered life.

And the city responded to her overtures:

Seeing off an old friend from Bennington, at Kennedy International, she stopped at the terminal coffee shop to have a sandwich. The counter circled like a moat a center service island that had huge advertising cubes rising above it on burnished poles. The cubes proclaimed the delights of Fun City.*NewYork is a Summer Festival* , they said, and*Joseph Papp Presents Shakespeare in Central Park* and*Visit the Bronx Zoo* and*You'll Adore our Contentious but Lovable Cabbies* . The food emerged from a window far down the service area and moved slowly on a conveyor belt through the hordes of screaming waitresses who slathered the counter with redolent washcloths. The lunchroom had all the charm and dignity of a steel rolling mill, and approximately the same noise-level. Beth ordered a cheeseburger that cost a dollar and a quarter, and a glass of milk.

When it came, it was cold, the cheese unmelted, and the patty of meat resembling nothing so much as a dirty scouring pad. The bun was cold and untoasted. There was no lettuce under the patty.

Beth managed to catch the waitress's eye. The girl approached with an annoyed look. "Please toast the bun and may I have a piece of lettuce?" Beth said.

"We dun' do that," the waitress said, turned half away as though she would walk in a moment.

"You don't do what?"

"We dun' toass the bun here."

"Yes, but I*want* the bun toasted," Beth said, firmly.

"An' you got to pay for extra lettuce."

"If I was asking for*extra* lettuce," Beth said, getting annoyed, "I would pay for it, but since there's*no* lettuce here, I don't think I should be charged extra for the first piece."

"We dun' do that."

The waitress started to walk away. "Hold it," Beth said, raising her voice just enough so the assembly-line eaters on either side stared at her. "You mean to tell me I have to pay a dollar and a quarter and I can't get a piece of lettuce or even get the bun toasted?"

"Ef you dun' like it …"

"Take it back."

“You gotta pay for it, you order it.”

“I said take it back, I don’t want the fucking thing!”

The waitress scratched it off the check. The milk cost 27¢ and tasted going-sour. It was the first time in her life that Beth had said that word aloud.

At the cashier’s stand, Beth said to the sweating man with the felt-tip pens in his shirt pocket, “Just out of curiosity, are you interested in complaints?”

“No!” he said, snarling, quite literally snarling. He did not look up as he punched out 73¢ and it came rolling down the chute.

The city responded to her overtures:

It was raining again. She was trying to cross Second Avenue, with the light. She stepped off the curb and a car came sliding through the red and splashed her. “Hey!” she yelled.

“Eat shit, sister!” the driver yelled back, turning the corner.

Her boots, her legs and her overcoat were splattered with mud. She stood trembling on the curb.

The city responded to her overtures:

She emerged from the building at One Astor Place with her big briefcase full of Laban charts; she was adjusting her rain scarf about her head. A well-dressed man with an attaché case thrust the handle of his umbrella up between her legs from the rear. She gasped and dropped her case.

The city responded and responded and responded.

Her overtures altered quickly.

The old drunk with the stippled cheeks extended his hand and mumbled words. She cursed him and walked on up Broadway past the beaver film houses.

She crossed against the lights on Park Avenue, making hackies slam their brakes to avoid hitting her; she used that word frequently now.

When she found herself having a drink with a man who had elbowed up beside her in the singles’ bar, she felt faint and knew she should go home.

But Vermont was so far away.

Nights later. She had come home from the Lincoln Center ballet, and gone straight to bed. She heard a sound in the bedroom. One room away, in the living room, in the dark, there was a sound. She slipped out of bed and went to the door between the rooms. She fumbled silently for the switch on the lamp just inside the living room, and found it, and clicked it on. A black man in a leather car coat was trying to get *out* of the apartment. In that first flash of light filling the room she noticed the television set beside him on the floor as he struggled with the door, she noticed the police lock and bar had been broken in a new and clever manner*New York Magazine* had not yet reported in a feature article on apartment ripoffs, she noticed that he had gotten his foot tangled in the telephone cord that she had requested be extra-long so she could carry the instrument into the bathroom, I don’t want to miss any business calls when the shower is running; she noticed all things in perspective and one thing with sharpest clarity: the expression on the burglar’s face.

There was something familiar in that expression.

He almost had the door open, but now he closed it, and slipped the police lock. He took a step toward her.

Beth went back, into the darkened bedroom.

The city responded to her overtures.

She backed against the wall at the head of the bed. Her hand fumbled in the shadows for the telephone. His shape filled the doorway, light, all light behind him.

In silhouette it should not have been possible to tell, but somehow she knew he was wearing gloves and the only marks he would leave would be deep bruises, very blue, almost black, with the tinge under them of blood that had been stopped in its course.

He came for her, arms hanging casually at his sides. She tried to climb over the bed, and he grabbed her from behind, ripping her nightgown. Then he had a hand around her neck and he pulled her backward. She fell off the bed, landed at his feet and his hold was broken. She scuttled across the floor and for a moment she had the respite to feel terror. She was going to die, and she was frightened.

He trapped her in the corner between the closet and the bureau and kicked her. His foot caught her in the thigh as she folded tighter, smaller, drawing her legs up. She was cold.

Then he reached down with both hands and pulled her erect by her hair. He slammed her head against the wall. Everything slid up in her sight as though running off the edge of the world. He slammed her head against the wall again, and she felt something go soft over her right ear.

When he tried to slam her a third time she reached out blindly for his face and ripped down with her nails. He howled in pain and she hurled herself forward, arms wrapping themselves around his waist. He stumbled backward and in a tangle of thrashing arms and legs they fell out onto the little balcony.

Beth landed on the bottom, feeling the window boxes jammed up against her spine and legs. She fought to get to her feet, and her nails hooked into his shirt under the open jacket, ripping. Then she was on her feet again and they struggled silently.

He whirled her around, bent her backward across the wrought-iron railing. Her face was turned outward.

They were standing in their windows, watching.

Through the fog she could see them watching. Through the fog she recognized their expressions. Through the fog she heard them breathing in unison, bellows breathing of expectation and wonder. Through the fog.

And the black man punched her in the throat. She gagged and started to black out and could not draw air into her lungs. Back, back, he bent her further back and she was looking up, straight up, toward the ninth floor and higher …

Up there: eyes.

The words Ray Gleeson had said in a moment filled with what he had become, with the utter hopelessness and finality of the choice the city had forced on him, the words came back. *You can't live in this city and survive unless you have protection …you can't live this way ,like rats driven mad, without making the time right for some god-forsaken other kind of thing to be born …you can't*

do it without calling up some kind of awful …

God! A new God, an ancient God come again with the eyes and hunger of a child, a deranged blood God of fog and street violence. A God who needed worshippers and offered the choices of death as a victim or life as an eternal witness to the deaths of *other* chosen victims. A God to fit the times, a God of streets and people.

She tried to shriek, to appeal to Ray, to the director in the bedroom window of his ninth-floor apartment with his long-legged Philadelphia model beside him and his fingers inside her as they worshipped in their holiest of ways, to the others who had been at the party that had been Ray's offer of a chance to join their congregation. She wanted to be saved from having to make that choice.

But the black man had punched her in the throat, and now his hands were on her, one on her chest, the other in her face, the smell of leather filling her where the nausea could not. And she understood Ray had *cared* , had wanted her to take the chance offered; but she had come from a world of little white dormitories and Vermont countryside; it was not a real world. *This* was the real world and up there was the God who ruled this world, and she had rejected him, had said no to one of his priests and servitors. *Save me! Don't make me do it!*

She knew she had to call out, to make appeal, to try and win the approbation of that God. *I can't … save me!*

She struggled and made terrible little mewling sounds trying to summon the words to cry out, and suddenly she crossed a line, and screamed up into the echoing courtyard with a voice Leona Ciarelli had never known enough to use.

"Him! Take him! Not me! I'm yours, I love you, I'm yours! Take him, not me, please not me, take him, take him, I'm yours!"

And the black man was suddenly lifted away, wrenched off her, and off the balcony, whirled straight up into the fog-thick air in the courtyard, as Beth sank to her knees on the ruined flower boxes.

She was half-conscious, and could not be sure she saw it just that way, but up he went, end over end, whirling and spinning like a charred leaf.

And the form took firmer shape. Enormous paws with claws and shapes that no animal she had ever seen had ever possessed, and the burglar, black, poor, terrified, whimpering like a whipped dog, was stripped of his flesh. His body was opened with a thin incision, and there was a rush as all the blood poured from him like a sudden cloudburst, and yet he was still alive, twitching with the involuntary horror of a frog's leg shocked with an electric current. Twitched, and twitched again as he was torn piece by piece to shreds. Pieces of flesh and bone and half a face with an eye blinking furiously, cascaded down past Beth, and hit the cement below with sodden thuds. And still he was alive, as his organs were squeezed and musculature and bile and shit and skin were rubbed, sandpapered together and let fall. It went on and on, as the death of Leona Ciarelli had gone on and on, and she understood with the blood-knowledge of survivors *at any cost* that the reason the witnesses to the death of Leona Ciarelli had done nothing was not that they had been frozen with horror, that they didn't want to get involved, or that they were inured to death by years of television slaughter.

They were worshippers at a black mass the city had demanded be staged, not once, but a thousand times a day in this insane asylum of steel and stone.

Now she was on her feet, standing half-naked in her ripped nightgown, her hands tightening on the wrought-iron railing, begging to see more, to drink deeper.

Now she was one of them, as the pieces of the night's sacrifice fell past her, bleeding and screaming.

Tomorrow the police would come again, and they would question her, and she would say how terrible it had been, that burglar, and how she had fought, afraid he would rape her and kill her, and how he had fallen, and she had no idea how he had been so hideously mangled and ripped apart, but a seven-storey fall, after all. . . .

Tomorrow she would not have to worry about walking in the streets, because no harm could come to her. Tomorrow she could even remove the police lock. Nothing in the city could do her any further evil, because she had made the only choice. She was now a dweller in the city, now wholly and richly a part of it. Now she was taken to the bosom of her God.

She felt Ray beside her, standing beside her, holding her, protecting her, his hand on her naked backside, and she watched the fog swirl up and fill the courtyard, fill the city, fill her eyes and her soul and her heart with its power. As Ray's naked body pressed tightly into her, she drank deeply of the night, knowing whatever voices she heard from this moment forward, they would be the voices not of whipped dogs, but those of strong, meat-eating beasts.

At last she was unafraid, and it was so good, so very good not to be afraid.

"When inward life dries up, when feeling decreases and apathy increases, when one cannot affect or even genuinely*touch* another person, violence flares up as a daimonic necessity for contact, a mad drive forcing touch in the most direct way possible."

— Rollo May,*Love and Will*

Two

Eddie, You're My Friend

Eddie, you're my friend, ain't you?

I mean, it's been a long time, and we've been through a lot of bad shit together, a lot of stuff most guys wouldn't share, even with a buddy, the way we did. I'm not mad, honest to God, Eddie. You got to believe me.*I* know you're my friend; hell, I come to you without even thinking about it, you know? I just said to myself, "Eddie is the one guy who can help me out of all this," so I just come on over.

You're all alone, ain't you?

That's real good. I wouldn't want to talk like this if Bernice was around. It's pretty embarrassing, you know.… Mostly I'm embarrassed because today is Bernice's and my third anniversary, and I feel really wiped out. With this rain and all that thunder and everything; you know how rain depresses me. It always did.

Like when we were kids and I'd be real down on a day like this and you'd come over and we'd lay around and read all those comic books. And we were so impressed by Plastic Man and Superman and all those other characters that we used to take bath towels and put a big black letter on them with Crayola, and then get one of those little Halloween masks that cover your eyes and your nose, and then we'd go running around the neighborhood pretending we were avengers of justice and stuff. You remember that, don't you, Eddie?

Hell, we were tight friends even back then!

Sure you remember. It was a day all rainy like today, back on the old block, and we were calling ourselves the Krime Kracker Kids — you know, with all K's — and we caught Johnny Mummey, the fireman's kid, and shoved him off his garage roof because he broke some milk bottles on my back porch? Remember?

It was just like today. And boy! Did I get beat up for that. It was terrible. Teddy Mummey caught me the next day in the playground and whipped me bad for racking up his kid brother. He said it was you told him I was the one did it. And you watched him beat the crap outta me. Come on, you *gotta* remember that. I was kept indoors for a week.

Sore? Hell no, you were my friend … you were my *best* friend, even then. I knew you only did it because you had to. I never got sore at you, Eddie. That'd of been foolish, to get P.O.'d at a buddy. Your friendship meant more than a lousy week in the house or a busted snot-locker.

But those were cool times, back the old days.

Or — man, you *must* remember this — the time I threw that party, and hell, nobody dug me too much then, because I got to admit it, I was pretty much of a turkey even then, and you said you were coming, and nobody showed and I had all that cake and stuff all ready, and had to throw it out. You remember, it was a Valentine's Day or something like that. I was racked, Eddie man. Real laid out. I wanted that party like crazy, you know.

Oh hell, I got a strange memory. I remember all those times we were together. The time at State when we both went out for that frat and I didn't get it, but you did, because somebody told the committee I was Jewish. You know. That was a blast, too. But, hell, those things happen.

But I remember how we were good buddies even then, Eddie. I mean, like if I came to you, we'd do our themes together, and I'd take those great cool ideas of yours and write them up and we'd both have final themes to hand in. Only that once we got stuck, but at least you got out of it, when the Prof asked who'd copied whose, and he picked me. What did he say to you when he had you alone in that office? Boy, he knew it was me right off. I've always thought about that; but I couldn't figure how that teacher — what was his name … oh yeah, old Mastermans — how Professor Mastermans knew *I'd* been doing the copying. It wasn't *exactly* true, but better just *me* getting bounced outta school than *both* of us, right? Hell, that wouldn't of done no good, both of us getting canned.

The way it turned out, that was the best thing ever happened to me. I mean, I got out and hadda start looking around for a job, and finally took my horn and got with the combo, and that was the start of my career. You know, Eddie, it was like it was *supposed* to've happened that way. Kismet, right?

Then when you graduated it was a natural for you to come on the combo with me, and be the business manager. I mean, I knew you needed a job — Christ, those were rough days for finding work, what with all them vets from the Nam climbing over each other trying to find slots — and I was glad to give *you* a hand for a change, when you needed it, and it could help.

That's what friends *do* for friends, ain't it?

Lucky we stuck together when the combo flopped, because you had quite a bit of dough saved. No, hell, I *never* paid any attention to what those other four creeps in the group said about mismanagement of funds and all that crap. What the hell did *they* know about friendship, right? You did a great job. You wouldn't never shaft a buddy, I knew that.

Anyhow, it was for the best. I got in with Larry in the big time, and there we were, you my manager and all, just doing great, hanging tough; and I've never thought thirty per cent was a big enough cut for the

way you pushed me. With solos and all like that. And then TV and that contract with Columbia and the flick we made. I mean, that was the greatest.

Then Bernice came along, and we got hitched, and it was all solid, man. I mean, she was just about all of it to me.

Sore? Hell no, I've told you a couple times I'm not sore. I mean, Bernice just couldn't take me. The only thing is, after three years being married to one chick, you sort of get the blues when she goes over to someone else. I know you didn't encourage her, Eddie. I mean, you're my friend. It's just that — well — you know, like she was the whole world for me. And when she decided she wanted a divorce so's you two could get hitched, well, it kind of laid me back for good.

That's why I came over here tonight.

You sure you're alone, man?

Yeah. Well, like I haven't got the horn in this case, y'know. Here, see, it's this gun. Like I borrowed it from Stacey. You know Stacey. He's the one with the spike, like he's second trom.

Yeah. I want you to do me a favor.

Huh? Kill you? No, man, you don't get it. Like, I know you're my friend, and if I needed a favor you'd come by me and lay it on me. That's why I brought up this gun. No, man, stop that jazz. I ain't going to blow a hole in you. I want you to help me. I sort of found out I'm a really weak character, Eddie, and you're stronger than me, and I wrote this good note here, see, and it's got everything written right down in black and white, and I got my accounts all squared away so's Bernice gets it all when I go.

I mean, you wear these gloves I brought along, wait a minute, I got 'em right here in my jacket pocket. Here. See? And when I'm down, you just stick the gun in my hand like I done it myself, no fingerprints. I mean, you*got* to help, Eddie. Like the guy at the used car joint says, "Let me work with you on this thing."

I*got* to have someone help me, Eddie.

Without her, I'm nothing, just useless shit.

So I come to you. You'll do it, won't you?

I mean, Eddie, you're my friend, ain't you?

Three

Status Quo at Troyden's

A matter of twenty dollars threatened Mr. Huggerson's universe. This universe was fifteen feet by twenty-three feet long, on the second floor of a dingy building on Fourth Street: namely, a ten-dollar-per-week room in Harry Troyden's flophouse. Mr. Huggerson had inhabited this particular corner of the universe for close to eight years, and it suited him just nicely.

But now, from the blue, Ralph had written him a very polite note — well, not written; typed, and at the bottom Mr. Huggerson had seen RH:et and that meant Ralph's secretary had typed the note — and with understanding of the letter had come the cold wash of fear for Mr. Huggerson.

He lifted the single sheet of paper for the hundredth time that day, and read it through once more. He knew nothing would have changed on the paper, but he read it again, in hopes the shock might diminish if he searched the words many times. It did not, of course, but again he read:

"Dear Dad:

"You will notice that this month's check is slightly less than usual. I'm really sorry about this, but I've had some awfully big expenditures out here on the Coast, and with that new McDonald's I told you about opening up here, right across from the Van Nuys stand, giving me such stiff competition, every penny counts. And with the recession and all …

"So I'm sure you will understand, and not think too unkindly of me. Greta and the kids are just fine, and they send their love. Let us hear from you more often.

Love, Ralph."

The check had been for only fifty dollars. Slightly less? Twenty dollars less! With seventy a month, Mr. Huggerson had been able to pay his ten dollars a week for the room, and have thirty left over for food, cleaning and the newspaper every evening. But with fifty dollars, oh that was something else again. It had been just impossible to think what it meant at first; then the truth had slowly dawned on Mr. Huggerson.

It would mean Harry Troyden would turn him out if he could not pay the rent each Saturday. Turned away from the few friends he knew — the aging and toothless men who had, with almost lemming-like magnetism, come to Troyden's to die away their last years.

Mr. Huggerson was a special case at Troyden's. Where most of the other twenty-seven old men who resided there were kept in room and board by social security pittances, old army pensions, small returns from investments made years before, or company pension plans, Mr. Huggerson was supported solely by the gratuitous doles of his West Coast son, Ralph, owner of the Starburger chain. A chain of two stands in Los Angeles.

Mr. Huggerson had owned and operated a small grocery on the corner of Elm and Mitchell Streets for forty years, and had saved considerable money, which he had used to put Ralph through college and merchandising school; then, soon after Ralph had borrowed the remaining ten thousand in Mr. Huggerson's account, to open the first Starburger, the conglomerate had opened a gigantic shining supermarket in the new plaza half a block away on Elm.

Mr. Huggerson had gone out of business within a year.

There was very little loyalty in the world these days.

After a frightening period of dislocation, and the eventual sale of the home Georgette and he had shared for twenty-nine years — and in which he had resided after her untimely death from pneumonia — he had come to Troyden's. Ralph had been faithful about sending the seventy dollars each month, and Mr. Huggerson had settled into the warm sun and solitude of the flophouse, thinking this might not be such a bad way to end his days after all. For the other old men of the place were mild and interesting companions, bound together as they were in a sheaf of weariness and weak bladders and bannister-holding as they walked upstairs. They spent many evenings around the radio, listening to the remaining few shows they remembered from the old days. And when the air waves were filled with music, rock n' roll and classical, they turned inward and poured warmth and reminiscence at one another. And, occasionally, television; but not often.

There were pleasant walks in the street, and gin rummy with Mr. Bonheim and Mr. Zeckhauser who had

once been in the garment industry, and who talked knowingly of crushed velvet and cutting on the bias. All summed, it was a pleasant life; at seventy dollars a month.

But fifty dollars was the end of the universe.

Mr. Huggerson let the slip of paper fall from his fingers. It slid though the air and landed atop last evening's newspaper. It lay beside the check, drawn on the Western State Security & Trust.

Mr. Huggerson ran a shaking hand up his face. He could feel the wrinkles that rolled up from his thin chin and made shaving so difficult these days. He had the terrible, overpowering feeling that he was a chipmunk on a treadmill.

It was, of course, impossible to try and live on ten dollars a month for food and cleaning and the newspaper. Since he could not talk the grocery or the dry cleaner or the fellow in the newsstand into cutting the price of their respective wares, there was only one way out.

He would have to go to Harry Troyden and ask him to lower the rent on the room.

The room was on the side of the building facing the street; and though grit came in through the open summer windows, still, the breeze and the sun did the same, and Mr. Huggerson was willing to suffer the one to obtain the others. He had a bed that was not too hard and not too soft, though it was built on a low metal frame and squeaked hideously during Mr. Huggerson's nightly coughing fits. But even that inconvenience had its advantages: when Bonheim or Zeckhauser heard the noise, they came to see if their old friend was all right, and then would follow some quiet, pleasant, late-night reminiscing.

In addition, there was a table, an imitation fireplace that had been built when Troyden's was a fashionable apartment house in the Twenties, an easy chair much the worse for many tenants having taken their ease in it, and a low bookshelf that contained four books: a Gideon bible, a copy of Dreiser's "Chains," Zane Grey's "Under The Tonto Rim" and the Fall 1948 edition of the Reader's Digest Condensed Books.

It was a familiar room, a warm room for Mr. Huggerson; all the universe he needed.

True, it was well worth the ten dollars per week he paid for its use, and the use of the bathroom down the hall, but he would have to go to Harry Troyden, and make him lower the rent. It was the only way.

The decision had not come to Mr. Huggerson in an incendiary fashion; he had considered it for two days, since first reading Ralph's letter. Had he not been a proud man, seeking respect and peace in these final years, he would have packed up and moved to another — cheaper — rooming house. (If such a miracle existed in these days of spiraling inflation. My God, a 13¢ loaf of bread cost 49¢ today! How could *any* small market stay in business? Impossible!) But eight years in this room, with his friends about him, had brought a slightly vegetable aspect to his life. To move now would be the end; he knew he would die inside a month, should his roots be torn free of even such poor soil as Troyden's had been.

So he knew, after two days of contemplating every possibility, that he must go to Harry Troyden's room on the third floor, and discuss with him the lowering of the rent to meet the reduced finances allocated to Mr. Huggerson. But first, he had to summon his strength.

He spoke to Mr. Zeckhauser over that evening's chess match in the other's room on the first floor.

"I heard from my son, Ralph, the other day." He opened the conversation in a distant fashion.

"Ah-hm." Mr. Zeckhauser bent his buglenose to the chessboard; he was a serious player. Every game was a life and death struggle; victory meant freedom of breath and the head held high; defeat meant momentary but painful oblivion. "Ah-hm."

"He, uh, says money is very tight in California," Mr. Huggerson said, pointedly. It was his move. He interposed, blocking Mr. Zeckhauser's attempt to yoke two pieces.

Zeckhauser looked up, his rheumy eyes settling on a point between Mr. Huggerson's thin, wrinkled, half-shaven chin and the knot of the wide, flowered tie. He disapproved of that tie — holdover that it was from the Forties — but he had made a point of concealing his distaste out of respect and friendship for Mr. Huggerson. But conversation during a chess game was another matter.

He sat back on the bed and folded his veined hands across his wide stomach.

"What is the matter this evening, Mr. Huggerson? You seem singularly distracted. Is there some problem with which I can be of service?"

Mr. Huggerson pulled at his nose in confusion; he had not expected such perceptiveness so quickly.

"Well, sir, I do have a bit of a problem … I find myself in a singular quandary." He had picked up many of the flowery speech habits affected by Mr. Zeckhauser. And he looked up to Mr. Zeckhauser, for that worthy rented the*ne plus ultra* of Troyden's rooms, the fabulous fourteen-dollar-a-week extra large room with private bath; the only one of its kind in the building, located on the first floor. Each of the other twenty-seven men in the flophouse coveted that room — Mr. Huggerson no less than any of them — and it was only because of his investments from pre-bankruptcy days in the garment district that Mr. Zeckhauser was able to afford the room, thus lending him superior status in their ranks. He was, in fact, the elder statesman of the group, the oracle to whom all problems were eventually brought, a garment center Solomon without portfolio.

"Is it your boy, Ralph?" Mr. Zeckhauser always probed adroitly.

Mr. Huggerson looked down at the board and nodded back and forth, just the way Mr. Horowitz did when he*dovened* over his nightly prayers. "Yes, Ralph has, well, run afoul of some business difficulties, and was forced to cut down my check. I don't think … that is, I'm not*sure* I can manage here with what he sent."

Mr. Zeckhauser puffed out his thick lips knowingly. "Ah-hm. And —?"

"Well, sir, I was merely considering the possibility that Mr. Troyden might consider lowering my rent."

The plump Mr. Zeckhauser pushed away the straight-backed chair on which the chess board rested, and stood up. He clasped both hands behind his back, thrust his round little belly out, and paced the room. It was indeed spacious enough for heroic pacing. Mr. Huggerson envied the living space.

"You now pay ten dollars the week, Mr. Huggerson. Is that not so, sir?"

Mr. Huggerson admitted it was so.

"To what do you wish Mr. Troyden to reduce your rent?"

Mr. Huggerson had given that problem a great deal of careful thought. He could pull in his belt a bit on his weekly expenditures, but since they were virtually nonexistent already, he could not trim too much. He had been doing satisfactorily on thirty dollars, after rent. Now if Harry Troyden would settle for six dollars per week, that would be twenty-four dollars; leaving him twenty-six on which to live. Only a four-dollar cutback, as Mr. Zeckhauser would phrase it. He could stop having his underwear and socks done at the laundry, wash them himself — though the water would certainly affect his arthritic fingers — and do very nicely.*If* Mr. Troyden would settle for six dollars a week.

He conveyed his reasoning to Mr. Zeckhauser.

"Sir, as we say in the garment industry, 'You are in a serious bind.' I would suggest a great deal of thought on the matter before ever speaking to our worthy landlord."

This was no help whatsoever.

They resumed the game; Mr. Huggerson's opinion of Mr. Zeckhauser's opinions was greatly reduced.

However, later in the game, the plumper of the two dropped a bit of gossip that resolved Mr. Huggerson to see Troyden at once.

"I overheard Troyden with his son, that Oscar or Oswald or whatever his name is, this afternoon. They were discussing*raising* rents here. I was, of course, appalled at the mere mention, and was pleased to hear it had not gone beyond the conjecture stage. But then, one never knows.

"Consequently, Mr. Huggerson, sir, ah-hm, I would seriously recommend you not mention your scheme to Mr. Troyden, but try to work out some other, more amicable solution on your own." And he put Mr. Huggerson in check.

Later, Mr. Huggerson bade farewell to his chess partner and started upstairs to his own room.

He did not stop at the second floor, but continued up to the third. He found himself at Harry Troyden's door, and almost without volition, found himself knocking softly. From within he heard the sounds of a television set blaring in the room. The Carol Burnett Show.

He knocked a bit louder, and a moment later heard a grunted curse, and the sounds of Harry Troyden heaving himself to his feet. "I'm comin', dammit, I'm comin', don't bang the damned thing down — oh, whaddaya want, Huggerson?"

That was one of the things Mr. Huggerson disliked most about Troyden. He always spoke with such profanity and such deprecation, never using the prefatory*Mister* that all the residents of the flophouse affected in due respect to one another's age.

"I would like to speak to you a moment, Mr. Troyden."

The landlord was a good head taller than Mr. Huggerson; he looked over the old man's head as he snarled, "Well, okay. C'mon in fer a second." He stood aside, allowing Mr. Huggerson to pad past him into the room. Mr. Huggerson's bedroom slippers made a silken whispering on the carpet.

The room was quite dark, with only the blue-white square of the TV set casting weird shadows along the walls.

Harry Troyden lived in this less-than-sumptuous place, instead of one of his more regal properties uptown, more out of habit than anything else. He had started here, and had extended his holdings only through his son Omar's sharp dealings; he lived here because he had always lived here. Harry Troyden, like his tenants, was a creature of habit.

He flipped on the lights in the room.

The naked bulbs shone down on him.

Mr. Huggerson marveled anew, as he did each time he saw Harry Troyden clearly.

Troyden was a subterranean creature brought up from the depths. He was squat and fat, built like a

bloated cave-dwelling fish, with eyes that were mere puckers in the fish-white flesh of a totally bald head. He gave the impression of being a human toadstool of some kind. From the top of his ridged hairless scalp to the soles of his thick shoes, Harry Troyden was a completely repulsive creature.

Yet, to be sure, Mr. Huggerson reminded himself, he *was* the landlord.

"What can I do fer ya, Huggerson?" Troyden asked with half-interest, slumping back into the chair in front of the TV set. The chair groaned agonizingly, then settled to keeping its misery to itself.

"Well, Mr. Troyden …" Mr. Huggerson said slowly, "… I — I was wondering how business was, these days, what with —"

"Lousy, bud, just lousy! All them new condominiums goin' up, they're alla time tearin' down an' makin' the section so hotsy-totsy, ya'd think they'd offer me a little gelt fer my locations. But do they? Hell, no, they don't. You know what my kid Omar says to me just this morning? He says —"

Mr. Huggerson cut Troyden off, with what he hoped was not a brusque or rude sound. "Er."

It brought the pale creature back to his late evening visitor. "Yeah. What is it now, Huggerson. I got the thing goin' here an' there's a show on I wanna see what happened. So, what's up?"

"Well, Mr. Troyden …" His voice faltered and he was embarrassed but decided to bull it through regardless. "I've found my finances aren't what they were, and I know it isn't the best thing to ask you, since you're a businessman and this is your livelihood, but since I've been here eight years and we're friends —" It was an assumption Mr. Huggerson was making for the first time on either of their parts. "— I felt, well, it isn't so much to ask, but I was wondering if you might consider lowering, that is, *slightly* lowering my rent. You see, if I could pay *six* dollars a week, instead of ten, I could manage to make ends mee —"

Troyden came out of his chair like a porpoise breaking water. "Whajoosay?"

The sudden onslaught brought Mr. Huggerson to instant fright and contrition. He had sinned. More softly, he tried again. "Well, sir, you see, six dollars would be —"

He was poleaxed in mid-sentence. "Whaddaya talkin'? Whaddaya, crazy or somethin'? You know goddam well I can't cut no rents. I been losin' money on you buncha' creeps fer years now. I onny letcha live on here at the old rents cause it was a sorta what? Status kwo, what my kid Omar said just this mornin'! He warned me, dammit, whyn't I lissen ta him, he says ta me, Pop, he says, this here status kwo gotta change aroun' here, these old cockers been livin' here, no dough an' like that — well, lissen, Huggerson, I'm gonna tell ya somethin' …" He drew a great blast of air.

"Mr. Troyden, I —"

Troyden catapulted on without break. "You lissen here, old man. Lemme hand you some news. You ain't gonna have to pay no ten no more. From now on, damn you old ingrates, you're all gonna pay up rent. From now on that room a' yours is gonna cost ya fifteen bucks a week. An' that starts day after tomorra' Satu'day. An' if ya can't pay, out ya go. Fifteen?" He stopped the length of time it took Mr. Huggerson's heart to beat a million times — an instant — then shouted, "Fifteen, my ass! Your room costs thirty! Thirty bucks a week!"

He turned away in anger, crimson blotches in his subterranean paleness. He slumped back into his chair and mumbled, "Howdja like that? How's 'at for ingrates. Omar was right about that status —"

He never quite finished. Mr. Huggerson had moved with the precision of a zombie as the fat man had

turned away. He lifted the metal ashtray with the heavy weighted base, and moved in behind Troyden's chair.

Without sense or reason or actual volition, all energy had drained from him as the cruelty and unreasonableness of the landlord's words struck him forcibly. To not get the reduction was bad enough — but to pay twice again as *much!* It was horrible, it was torture; he had to put a stop to those words that were terribly, mercilessly destroying his universe. He had to stop the torment of this man. He had to!

Strangely, there had been no blood. The skull was crushed, of that he was certain, but the edge of the ashtray was clean, and there was no blood on the carpet where Troyden had fallen.

Then, and only then, when he had replaced the ashtray, did the horror of what he had done strike him.

Mr. Huggerson stumbled to the sofa. He had to feel around behind himself before sitting down, for fear he might miss the sofa entirely. He hung his weary head in his shaking hands and for the first time in many years he cried. It was terrible, this terrible, terrible thing he had done. Simply terrible. Oh, he hadn't meant to do it, he hadn't meant to kill Troyden. It was just that all those words, all those sounds that were so terrible, so terrible; he'd had to stop them before they drove him mad.

He had been tailored to fit this place, with all his friends here, and to think he would be driven into the street, it was just too much, too much for Mr. Huggerson to contemplate. And now — he hesitated to admit it to himself — he was a — murderer.

For a long, long time he sat there, shivering, crying sporadically. Finally, he knew he must draw himself together.

This would not do, he told himself. He was a man of pride and resolution, and this would not do. It would also do Ralph no good, were it to be known that his father was a murderer. He thought bitterly: if it didn't bother Ralph to have his father living in such a place, why should it bother him if his father were a murderer; but he dismissed the thought as being unworthy.

Then he turned to his fat, dead problem. Harry Troyden.

After pondering a great while, it came to him; and he acted swiftly.

He took Troyden under the arms with great difficulty, and with a maximum of straining and grunting and sweating he managed to drag the heavy corpse after him, into the deserted third floor hall. His fingers — swollen and arthritic — were beginning to hurt terribly, but he struggled with the dead man, inching him along the uncarpeted floor to the edge of the stairs.

Then he managed somehow to stand Harry Troyden's lifeless shell on its feet, and be gently — shoved.

He was in Troyden's room when he heard the crash; and then the yells of the other twenty-seven tenants. He managed to slip out and join them, unnoticed.

This time, there was a great deal of blood.

After the twenty-eight of them had returned from the P. J. Kyley & Thomas Roseforth Funeral Home, Mr. Huggerson was approached in the upper hall by Omar Troyden.

For a sharp instant, Mr. Huggerson felt fear, but Omar Troyden soon put him at his ease. A warm handshake and a thirty-cent cigar did that quite admirably. Then Troyden drew him into the room Mr. Huggerson had occupied for eight years, and sat down in the easy chair to speak.

If anything, Omar Troyden was a satire of what his father had been. Obese, pasty, bald and squinting, he hunched forward, squeezing his lap into the round pillars of his legs, and said, "Mr. Huggerson, how long have you lived here?"

Mr. Huggerson's spine became clammy and cold. The rent was going to be raised. It had all been for nothing; he was getting his just desserts. He had sinned, and now he was to be turned out into the street after all.

"Ei-eight years."

Troyden smiled and sat back. "Good, good," he said to the ceiling with its water stains. "Fine. You know, Mr. Huggerson, for some time now I've been of the opinion that my father was not running things properly here. This house has been losing money for him for some years."

Oh dear, here it comes, thought Mr. Huggerson.

"So I've been intending to do something about the status quo here at Troyden's, ever since father died. It's unfortunate that my father had to fall down those stairs, but we must take these things philosophically, eh?"

Mr. Huggerson nodded, confused. This did not seem the proper tone to use when raising a man's rent.

"So." Omar spoke the word as a proclamation. "So! What I would like you to do, Mr. Huggerson, and I know this is an imposition, but I felt sure I could ask you, seeing as how you've been here the longest of anyone, what I wanted to ask you is if you would consider managing this place for me."

He waited a second. Mr. Huggerson blew air between his thin, strained lips. "I — I —"

"Yes, I imagined it might be a shock, but you know how it is. I have a great many other interests uptown, and can't be here as my father was. I know you would have only the best interests of the place at heart, seeing as how you live here yourself. So, I wondered if you would consider taking the job. Now, I can't pay much, but aside from well, say, thirty dollars a week, I can guarantee you a room here free of cost. How does that sound?"

"I — I —"

"The work won't be hard." Omar pressed onward, undaunted, seemingly unaware of Mr. Huggerson's consternation. "We have a janitorial service I'm engaging that will tend to all the cleaning-up chores, and all you'll have to do, really, is make sure the rents are paid on time, and no one gets into trouble."

He spoke on at some length, as though he felt he had to sell the job to Mr. Huggerson. Mr. Huggerson, on the other hand, had been sold from the outset. He was, simply, caught with his throat locked in shock, forced to listen to the beauty of it all being poured out by the son of the man he had killed.

Finally, be agreed and it was done.

Omar Troyden even shook Mr. Huggerson's hand.

Later that day, when news had gone through the rest of the establishment, and the twenty-seven tenants knew Mr. Huggerson was to be manager of the flophouse, Mr. Huggerson felt impelled to speak to Mr. Zeckhauser.

He drew the stout man aside near the desk, and said, "Mr. Zeckhauser, you have been with us for a good many years, and though we are most happy to have you remain with us, I'm afraid the status quo

here at Troyden's is not quite satisfactory.

"Now there is no reason to be alarmed, but I wanted to speak to you about —"

It was only fair; a man of responsibility should not be compelled to live in a single, ten-dollar-a-week room. It was more fitting, therefore more logical, for a man of Mr. Huggerson's position to occupy a larger room. A fourteen-dollar room, with private bath.

Besides, he had never liked "Under The Tonto Rim."

Four

Nedra at *f*:5.6

(AN HOMMAGE TO FRITZ LEIBER)

I'm looking at the pictures, but I don't believe it. I may just go have my eyes examined, or trade in that goddamned Leica and be done with it, but I don't — doubly do*not* — believe it. Listen: it's so weird, I didn't simply trust the raw negatives … I actually developed the bloody things, every frame.

Nedra's asleep in the bedroom, and well she*should* be after the monumental bout we staged tonight, and I'm almost afraid to go in and wake her. Oh, hell, it's just a trick of lighting, that's all, or something wrong with that damned Leica, or some crap got into the developer. But still …

Central Park uptown can be a strange and wonderful thing on an early spring day, but today wasn't a spring day. This was the middle of October, overcast, with the grass frantically struggling to stay green as it was trampled; with the trees whispering how clever they were to be dumping their leaves; with the sky siphoning down from a watery blue to a washed-out orange near the horizon. It was the Park on a day when all the nannies would have rather been in the apartments, with their white shoes off, drinking Pimms Cups pilfered from their employer's larders, and watching*The Edge of Night* instead of perambulating their charges' perambulators. A week after the World Series, when the wormy tittle bookies who had lost their shirts when the Dodgers folded in five had crawled back into the topsoil till football season was under way. A sort of day that idles along, like a rolling hoop, just lightly jouncing over troublesome things like the canine Twinkies on the paths and the creepy gang kids looking for someone to mug; just going its way with an occasional shove or two.

That sort of day. And the people on the benches were nothing spectacular. Mostly old men and women, taking the sun — what there was of it — and proud young mamas, showing their offspring to the folks.

It didn't look like the sort of day to be getting any good photos, but I decided to leg it around a few blocks of park and snap what there was. Overcast, just right, can get you some good candid color stuff. Sometimes.

Well, I was skirting the benches along in the Sixties, snapping one here and one there; catching a kid trying to stomp a dirty pigeon; catching a woman watching the sky to see if rain was coming and picking her nose at the same time; catching a bum twisted like a foetus on a bench, with a copy of the*Wall Street Journal* over him for warmth. Nothing spectacular, but maybe it would look good in the darkroom.

It was just as I was passing the 79th Street underpass — you know, the part that takes you down to the boat basin — with the October wind snapping up off the Hudson, tossing my hair around my head, making me wish I'd worn my Aquascutum, when I spotted her.

Now let me get this straight with you for a second. I've been a professional photographer for twelve years now. I'm thirty-five years old, and I've snapped some of the wildest-looking women in the game. I've had Valerie Perrine and Ann-Margret up on kitchen stools in front of a white cyclorama sheet; I've posed Victoria Vetri and Claudia Jennings and Charlotte Rampling and Elsa Martinelli with and without their undies; I've done fashion layouts with every*courant* breathtaker from The Shrimp to Farrah Fawcett; even worked with the mythic lust-dreams like Bettie Page and June Wilkinson and Irish McCalla and Anita Ekberg and Vikki Dougan right at the end of their popularity, before they vanished to wherever the great beauties vanish to; I've seen more hundreds of women in the bare, with their vitals exposed, than any other dude with a planar I can think of, excluding maybe Haskins, Avedon, de Dienes, Rotsler, Casilli and a couple of others. So stunning women aren't anything that special to me, except maybe something to make a buck off, if I can develop a set on them. What I'm saying is that Lauren Hutton isn't a coronary arrest where I'm concerned if, as they say, you get my drift.

I've made my living at cheesecake, when there weren't "art" jobs or fashion layouts handy, and I know damned well what*it* looks like from every crotch-crazy angle you can think of. So I should have known better … it shouldn't have stopped me.

But that's just what she did. She stopped me flat.

I just stared at her, sitting there in the afternoon, with the feeble sun breaking through overhead, and the bench cool and green under her round bottom, and the skirt up just a bit so I could see her knees didn't show bones, but were smooth and firm and flesh-colored.

She was like nothing I'd ever seen before. She was the answer to every cheesecaker's dream.

She just looked like she wanted to lie down on the grass.

With me. With the Good Humor Man. With the park attendant. With anybody.

You've probably seen pictures in magazines of girls like that. They just look more natural prone than vertical. They seem to be saying with their eyes and their mouths and the lines of their bodies, "Let me lie down … I want to be horizontal." Well, she was like that, only more so, only much more so. She looked … well … the only word I could come up with was*hungry* . Yeah, that was it,*hungry* . She looked like she hadn't had a certain kind of meal in a helluva long time.

She was about five-feet-six, with hair that sent back the weak rays of the sun in a brilliant red explosion. Her hair wasn't the brassy, carroty red so many women think is hotcha; it was a delicate sort of amber, with highlights of black and streakers of deep crimson in it. It was hair that came down around her shoulders; and she tossed it out of her face with an eloquent twist of her shoulders.

I couldn't see what color her eyes were, because they were closed. She was sitting there with her hands in her lap, and her head tilted back and to the side slightly, as though she was sleeping.

It was a nippy day, and yet she wore no coat. She had on a dark charcoal skirt and a pale blue poorboy jersey that stopped short of her upper arms. She must have been chilly as hell, but she wasn't shivering.

I was glad she hadn't worn that coat, because it gave me an uninterrupted view of her body. Now, ordinarily, in most women, no matter how skimpy or thin the clothing, there's still a portion of the anatomy you can't quite shape out in your mind. The under-breasts, the joint of the legs, the slide of the belly to the hips. But this girl was the next best thing to naked. Voluptuous. That was another word for her. Hungrily voluptuous. Voluptuously hungry. Either way, I could see the sharp molding of her breasts against the front of the jersey. I could see the sharp lines of indentation as the legs raced up to wide, rounded thighs, and plunged out of sight beneath her stomach. I could see her all, all of her, and it made

me dizzy.

Have you ever experienced anything comparable? A roller coaster, doing forty push-ups, running a mile and a half in eleven minutes? All of them and others. This girl was the original Circe, the dyed-in-the-cotton-jersey siren.

I*had* to pose her.

I'm not bashful around women — my studio apartment has resounded long and loud to the outraged squeals of outraged models — but there was something about her that made me walk softly, on the balls of my feet, toward her.

Almost as though I'd tripped an electric eye as I approached, she sat up, and stared at me openly. I was stopped cold again. Her eyes were the most fantastic things I'd ever seen. They were like the first movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's*Le Coq D'or* transposed from sound to solid. They were like two green-hot chunks of emerald, bathed by the heat of an exploding sun, and smoldering, smoldering. They were all the invitations and all the ecstasies and all the open accusations of a woman who wants to make love no matter what the cost. They were alone in their category. They were more than merely eyes. Eyes see … these spoke.

"Hello," she said.

The voice couldn't have been more right for her had it been taped and recorded in the Muscle Shoals sound studios, with all the acoustical tricks of an echo chamber built into her vocal cords. The voice came at me and cracked me across the mouth. When that girl said hello, so help me God, I bit my lip.

"Hi … I'm, uh, my name is Paul Shores. I'm a, uh, photographer, and I'm, uh, I was watching you. Has anyone ever —"

She smiled, and it was the oddest smile I'd ever seen; working up from one corner of her very red mouth, and abruptly splitting at me, showing two rows of perfectly white teeth, with the little canines peeking out sharp and pointy. The smile brought two spots of color to her cheeks, and they looked almost unnatural in the setting of fine alabaster flesh. Her face was a study-composite in red and pale pink. The kind of complexion they meant when they said peaches-and-cream, with none of the sick look of soggy peaches.

She finished my sentence for me. "Has anyone ever told me I was pretty enough to be a model? Yes, Mr. Shores, any number of times, and any number of people."

The smile continued, as though she were mocking me, and I was so embarrassed I turned to leave, without even excusing myself.

I got one step away, and I felt her hand slip through my arm. "I'd love to pose for you," she said. I looked down at her.

She was serious, goddammit! Absolutely serious about posing for a total stranger.

"But why?" I asked. "You don't know me from Ad —"

"Adam was much fatter than you," she replied with a pixie grin replacing the smile. "And besides, I think I can trust you. Any man who can afford a Leica doesn't have to pick up girls in the park."

I was surprised that she recognized my camera, and even more surprised at her logic which, crazy as it was in an era when you can buy a hot Hasselblad on most street corners for sixty bucks, sounded logical.

Nuts, but logical.

So we were off. In a little while most of my tongue-tootled attitude wore off, and I found I could speak almost coherently. I posed her in front of a statue of Pulaski; I posed her on a bench with her skirt up a bit; I posed her playing with two little children and their bastard-hound; I must have taken ten rolls of color on her before she took my hand and led me out of the park.

"Where are we going?" I asked, feeling foolish as hell. A man is supposed to be master of these situations, and I felt like a Pekingese on a leash.

"You have a studio, don't you?" she inquired demurely.

I guess I hobbled my head stupidly in agreement, because the next time I took a breath, we were leaving the cab in front of my building, downtown, and the doorman was holding open the door for us, staring at her, just staring.

The minute she got inside the door to my studio, the first thing she said was, "My name is Nedra. May I take off my clothes?"

What the hell do you say? Sure you can take off your clothes.

So she did. Or she started to, anyhow. "Let me take some snaps of you undressing," I said, knowing damned well few girls who aren't pro models will let you shoot that kind of thing; don't ask me why; maybe because they're the sexiest shots in the world.

"Okay," she said, and started in.

She stepped up onto the model's pedestal I have in the studio, and began taking off that pale blue poorboy jersey. Now, hold it a second.

You'd better understand this.

She wasn't doing a strip. None of that chubby housewife trying to hold onto her fat-assed hubby by learning to belly dance or excite him with "imaginative sex" fantasies bullshit.

She was doing it*for* me, of course; I'd asked her if I could take the shots, for God's sake! But she wasn't trying to do it*to* me; do you know what I'm saying here? There's nothing more cornball than some female trying to pull a Theda Bara, batting her eyelashes and all turkey-flapping with what "family programmed" television and sexploitation films have conned her into believing is a turn-on. Jesus, it's a puker.

No, there wasn't any of that going down. She was just*doing* it … for me …*at* me … but not purposely *to* me …

Click!

The sweater was stuck in the top of her skirt. She yanked at it, and it came loose, dragging up the top of her black lace panties, too. My eyes had trouble focusing on the camera. She pulled the sweater off, letting her arms go back and her breasts jut out at me, and the sweater fell down behind her, off the pedestal, onto the floor. Her breasts were just as I'd imagined them in the sweater.

Click!

They were large and round, and they stayed where they were. But then, they must have been where they

were all the time, because, you see, she didn't have on a brassiere. Then she unfastened the catch on the side of the skirt.

Click!

I watched her, and the thought that this girl was going a lot further than was expected for just a little modeling hit me right in the head. Was she a nympho, who let every guy pick her up? Was she a psycho? What was the score?

To hell with Click!

I dumped the camera and moved toward her. She stood there, naked but for the black lace panties, and her breath was coming with difficulty, rasping in and out faintly. Her hands were quivering. Then I was beside her, and I slid my arms around her. She was on the pedestal, and I locked hands behind her, the smooth curve of her back strange and wonderful to me. I let my hands slide up to the small of her back, down to the indentations where her legs joined her trunk. Was this girl real? Was all this happening to me? Then she bent, and she kissed me.

Then she bit my lip. She bit me right where I'd bitten myself, and I felt the trickle of salty warmth, and her tongue smoothed over it, and I felt her shudder.

I stood up, from where I'd slumped against the pedestal, and let one hand slide under her legs at the knees, the other behind her back, turning her to me, lifting her, cradling her in my arms.

Then we were in the bedroom, and she was on the white sheets, whiter than they could ever hope to be, with that flame hair and those hell-green eyes staring at me.

Without movement, without time, without the feeling of penetration, it was done, her voice dying stillborn, and her hands scraping terribly at my back.

My God! It was unbelievable.

Neither one of us thought about rest, or food, or anything else, much less photography, till an hour ago. I woke up and looked across at her. Even after the passion-effort I'd expended, and the fatigue coursing through me, she still looked untouched and magnificent; her hair an amber aurora sprayed out across the rumpled pillow, her eyes closed, and her breath shallow. I felt weak in every muscle, every joint. My back was ripped from the sharp ness of her nails, and my lips were raw. It had been so unlike any other thing I knew, I couldn't let her go. I had to have Nedra around all the time.

I lay there for a few minutes, and then the excitement of those films I'd taken earlier sent me out of the bed. I grabbed my bathrobe and got the rolls of film from my case, flipped the last one out of the camera, and made for the darkroom.

They developed nicely, and they were clear as hell. Some of the best shots I'd ever taken. I'm standing here looking at them now.

There's just one thing wrong with them. It must be a trick of the light, or something … or something …

But here are the pictures I took in the Park. Here's the fountain, and the two children with the hound, and the bench, and the trees and the sky and the river and the grass, and everything …

But no Nedra.

Yeah. That's right. Everything else in perfect focus, but there isn't a sign of her in any of the shots. I've

got the pedestal, and the backdrop and the apartment and the shadows, but no shadow of Nedra. In fact, no Nedra at all.

But she's no figment of my imagination. That's for sure. A girl with a horizontal mind like that *couldn't* be imaginary. I just don't believe in anything like that.

Well, when she wakes up, I'll go in and just ask her what she's … oh, hi!

I was just coming in to wake you. Say, look at these crazy pix I shot of you today. Aren't they screwy? Yon just didn't photograph. You know, I was thinking all sorts of crazy stuff, and listen to this, this is the craziest thing yet.

I started to think, and the only kind of person I could think of who doesn't reflect in a mirror, or who won't show up on a photo … now I know it's crazy, it must have been the light or something, but …

Nedra!

Five

Opposites Attract

Bombs had to be handled carefully. It took more than just caution. It took a sort of thinking; a way of looking at them; an attitude.

Erwin Beltman had developed that attitude long ago. At least thirty-five years before. That was in 1941. Just two months before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. That had been when he'd laid his first bomb. It had been difficult, during the war. No one seemed to realize he wasn't a saboteur … my goodness, *not.* He had tried to correct that wrong attitude on the public's part (strange how attitudes played such an important part of things), by sending an anonymous letter to the New York *Times* , explaining his motives. But those who didn't call him a saboteur now, called him insane.

It didn't matter that he *wasn't* insane, there was no sense telling them otherwise. They just wouldn't understand. To people who derived their only pleasure from sitting in front of droning TV sets, someone who searched abroad for a more sympathetic thrill was thought insane.

Erwin Beltman had planted over one hundred and ninety bombs, big and small, in the city of New York in thirty-five years.

That was his thrill; and as he made the bombs, forming them from black powder and plumbing pipe, Erwin Beltman knew he was alone in his thrill. Anyone could watch a TV, but only Erwin could lay a pipe bomb.

But to lay a bomb properly, the right attitude had to be there from the first moment. Erwin thought on that as he rode up the escalator in the Port Authority Bus Terminal. He carried the brown paper bag loosely, casually, as though he had nothing in it but his lunch. He walked off the balls of his feet, in the eventuality that he should trip, so that he could regain his balance quickly. He treated the bomb as though it were a young child who only needed slight hand-guidance to cross the street … not a temperamental baby that had to be clutched tightly. He swung the bag from his right hand, letting the sure weight of it almost propel him up the steps of the escalator.

The big bus terminal on Eighth Avenue buzzed and jabbered about him; people moved to and from ticket windows; the hollow bass voice of the announcer filled the building; Erwin Beltman rode silently to the

mezzanine.

Erwin stopped at the top of the escalator, turned, and looked down at the clean crowd movement, the solid lines of the Port Authority Building. He moved to the side as a short man in a leather jacket stepped off the escalator. He excused himself politely, but the man shoved past rudely. He watched the ebb and flow of me crowd, watching too, as the leather-jacketed man became just another cell of that monstrous organism. There was so much rudeness in the world today; so little graciousness. Erwin Beltman lounged over the aluminum rail that ran around the short wall beside the stairs. There was such a full pleasure from just standing there, legs crossed, bomb in hand, watching all those scurrying people.

Erwin Beltman felt a great identification with the masses.

The blast of the bus arrival from Ridgewood shattered Erwin's thoughts as the microphone voice filled the terminal. He turned away, continued in the direction he had been going, with a sort of indefinite sigh.

Ah, it was an indefinite life.

As he passed the candy stand he scanned the headlines of the newspapers. Yes, by jingo, he *still* beat out the South American revolution, the busing problem and the ball scores for top spot. The *Post* had a dandy comment:

MAD BOMBER TIPS COPS

ROXY THEATER PIPE BOMB NIPPED!

There was always a certain ring of cleverness to the headlines the *Post* copy chief dreamed up. But he did wish they would get rid of that monstrous misnomer, "mad bomber." Erwin Beltman would have been the first one to refute any such title.

Erwin stopped momentarily in front of the black-painted glass of the closed barber shop beside the candy stand. The reflection was poor, but he caught enough of himself to be able to nod his head severely, confide to himself, "I most certainly am *not* a mad bomber!" His soft brown eyes stared back at him. A mild, gray-haired man in an old, but neat, suit stared back at him. A kindly, intelligent, sensitive face stared back at him.

"Mad bomber. *Indeed!* " he murmured, hurrying away from the closed barber shop. "No one can seem to understand that this is just a hobby … just a hobby! A man my age, living off the welfare, well, he just has to make *something* of himself!"

He wasn't mad: muggers and junkies and people like the one the papers called the Slasher were mad. *He* was an artist!

But the ruminations were cut short by sight of his evening's objective. The phone booth by the escalators. Erwin studied the terrain for a moment.

The empty corridor stretching back behind him, the cool off-yellow brick walls, the lighted number glasses in the walls, announcing what buses were in — on the floor above. The escalators. The silent phone booth.

Oh, fine!

He walked quickly to the booth, and sat down inside, carefully taking the receiver off the hook, planting it under his chin. He turned his back half-toward the glass panels in the phone booth door. That way, hunched over, but with the receiver in view, seemingly in use, he would not be studied too carefully nor

be disturbed till the delicate work was completed. Then he stripped the brown paper bag from the evening's baby.

Oh, wasn't it just as lovely as anything!

The pipe was shiny, and the powder was stuffed inside just as tightly as Erwin had been able to do it with the soft-faced plunger. The clock-mechanism was not as fancy as last week's bomb, but then, he'd have to wait till the pension check came in before extending himself with more elaborate equipment. But the hookup device was so much more effective it made up for the lack of fanciness in the clock.

"Oh, if they only knew what a perfectionist I am," he thought earnestly. "If they could see how seriously I take my hobby, how I'm not just a low prankster. Then they would hold me in greater esteem, I'm sure."

He taped the bomb to the underside of the ledge beneath the coin box, making certain it was out-of-sight from a natural, normal position. He held the triggering device open with his finger. He removed a bit of cotton-batting from his pocket and wedged it between switch and terminal, allowing him to work unhampered.

The wiring was the most delicate part of all, but he accomplished it quickly, arranging the mechanism so that nothing would happen when coins were put in the slot …

Ah, but when the dial was spun!

Then he set the clock, with a one-hour limit. It was a two-way bomb. If no one came along within an hour, to make a call (and that really seemed unlikely, didn't it?), then the bomb would go off automatically … and well, perhaps it might catch a passerby or two. There was no way of telling.

Erwin philosophized as he casually strolled back toward the candy stand: "That's the one thing I so dislike about my hobby: the element of uncertainty, the element of doubt, of chance. Oh well …"

Though Erwin was a sportsman at heart — didn't he call the police quite often, tell them where the bomb was, approximately? — he still liked to make that kill. Still liked to get the thrill of seeing the bull downed.

That was why he positioned himself behind the late edition of the*Post* (with that clever headline) near the candy stand, to see what happened. Erwin did not usually linger, as there were other considerations than "watching for the kill," as he put it to himself. The police were most unpleasant, and once they had almost caught him.

Erwin would not have liked that.

But this time, with the new mechanism, he knew he would not rest easily till he had seen what came of this baby. He leaned against the wall, and watched carefully.

Ten minutes later the college boy bounded up the stairs, swung his head around as though desperately searching for something, and sighted the phone booth. "Hot damn!" the boy said. He chuckled and, grinning, made a sprint down the corridor to the booth. He stood outside for a moment, fumbling in his pocket for change, and finally came up with two nickels.

Erwin's palms were wet, and he felt a stiffness in his neck. The tension was almost more than he could bear as the boy swung the booth door open and slumped down in the seat. He watched — the boy left the door open — with growing excitement, feeling a flush climb his neck; the boy put the first nickel into the slot. He dropped the second one, and for an instant, Erwin thought he would surely see the bomb when he stooped.

But the boy picked up the nickel, and slipped it in after the first one; he began to dial.

Erwin waited across the street for the arrival of the police bomb squad and the ambulance. They had roped off the corridor.

He decided not to follow the ambulance this time; it had been sweet, a sure thing. What was left of the boy would arrive D.O.A. In sections.

The trouble started for Erwin a month after the Port Authority beauty went up through the top floor, carrying the sophomore from Duke University with it. It started with the flower lady.

Erwin was trying to set a difficult one in the vestibule of the Chanin Building on 42nd and Lexington, just beside the flower shop, when the little old lady came out, and stumbled into him. The package dropped, and Erwin's eyes leaped open as the pipe bomb appeared. His tongue wadded up like moldy bread as he saw that the woman recognized what it was; he was terribly frightened.

The woman gripped her brown wicker basket all the tighter, the violets in it neatly arranged, and walked away. But she turned and stared at Erwin for a long moment before she went out the side door of the building. Erwin gathered the bomb back into its bag, and stood there watching the revolving door. It seemed to mock him; each glass panel whipped past shussssh, and with each one he wanted to run after her, make up some story that he was a plumber, silence her. But he knew that would be foolish.

Erwin left by the front way, and walked back up toward Broadway. That had unnerved him. It was bound to happen, of course. But this was the first time anyone had come close to discovering him laying one. The old woman was just a street peddler, and probably stupid to boot, but just the same …

When he stopped at the light, he looked behind him.

She was there.

Following him.

With the basket, with the drawn face, with the gray hair pulled back severely in a bun, like a disapproving school teacher.

The old woman.

Oh, my God!

Erwin hurried around the corner, feeling in his pockets for all the change he carried. He had slightly more than a dollar and a half … not nearly enough to get him uptown to his place, quickly.

He took a quick look behind him; she was rounding the corner. A checker cab was coming down the block, beside the stanchions of the overhead highway that led over Grand Central, and onto Park Avenue.

He flagged the cab, and it pulled into the curb.

"Q-quick, uptown," Erwin stammered, shoving into the cab, thrusting the bomb in its brown paper bag against the cab's upholstery.

The cabbie shoved down the flag, and then turned around. "*Where* uptown, Mister?" Erwin was very conscious of the driver's big red face, the soft clicking of the meter, and the hurrying gray shape of the old woman with her basket.

"J-just any, anywhere uptown, but go on, sir, go on,*please!* " He urged the man with his hand, and the cabbie shrugged, turned around, rolled away.

As the cab passed the woman, she stopped and carefully watched it. She would get his number, Erwin was sure. Oh, goodness … this was the worst thing that could ever happen. He saw every line of her drawn, old, gray face as they whipped past. He saw her, and knew she saw him.

She was still standing there as the cab turned right, down 42nd. Erwin wasn't certain, but as the cab turned left again, out of the traffic onto Lexington uptown, he thought he saw another taxi following.

With the flower lady in it.

But he wasn't sure.

Erwin was frightened; he had seen her eight times since that terrible day at the Chanin Building. She obviously knew who he was and where he lived … had followed him that day. On eight separate mornings, when he had left the building to walk Jefferson, and pick up a morning paper, she had been somewhere nearby in plain sight, as if trying to torment and frighten him.

The first morning, the day after the Chanin affair, he saw her in the doorway of the building across the street, her wicker basket held close to her body, her dull green, grubby coat wrapped tightly around her round little form, and he very nearly tripped over Jefferson's leash. He hurried away, dragging the chow till it had whimpered alarmingly; he bought his paper in a panic; and he crept back to the building by the next street.

Next day she had been there again.

And a third day.

So it had gone for eight days, till now Erwin was so frightened, and so bewildered that he only peered out through the mildewed drapes covering the lobby doors, till he caught sight of her. Then he would go back to the still, solid room where he lived alone with Jefferson in the too-silent, too-solid loneliness of his old age, and wish she had never seen him.

By the eighth day he had reconciled his problem.

She had not called the police … therefore, she was out to blackmail him. Erwin looked at the empty social security check envelope, recalled what the sum had been when it had come in, and knew instantly that blackmail was not only out of the question — it was ridiculous.

He decided to kill the old flower lady.

It was easy enough, really. All be had to do was prepare a tinier model of the others, all the many others. A smaller pipe, a lot less black powder, a percussion cap, and it was all ready. Just throw it, hit something solid like a face, or a wicker flower basket, or even the sidewalk at her feet, and she would trouble him no more.

He knew she would be out there when he left, so he waited till the late evening. At precisely eight o'clock Erwin emerged from the front of the old brownstone apartment building, and walked briskly up toward Broadway, humming "Silver Threads Among The Gold," which his mother had sung to him when he had been ever so small back home in Minnesota.

She came out of the shadows and followed him at a respectful distance. Erwin made sure she saw him, and he went down into the subway. She came down after him, trying to keep behind the stanchions, but

he saw her.

When the local came, he boarded it and rode downtown to 4th Street in the Village, and got off, making certain she was in sight before he went up the stairs onto the street.

Then past the little park with the old people — not like him, they were *really* old, and not making something of themselves as he was — and down the dark street, past the shops where the Villagers made inexpensive earrings and belts.

As he passed the winding darkness that was Gay Street, he hurried his steps, and came abreast of the alley he knew was there beyond Gay. He sidestepped into it quickly, knowing she would see him, hoping she would think be was going to plant the brown paper bag there.

He flattened against the wall, like one of the spies in a movie at the Orpheum; and hoping his slight belly bulge would not give him away, he waited quietly, trembling.

It did not. She came to the mouth of the alley, and hardly without a glance, stepped in. He grabbed for her, and shoved her deeper into the alley. His voice came not at all the way he had planned it; Erwin had planned it to be rough and hard, the way the man in the movie's bad been …

But it was a bit squeaky, instead.

"So! You thought you'd blackmail me, eh? You must think I'm mad like they say, eh? Thought I'd be a sucker, eh?" (He wasn't at all certain this was the way they talked in situations like this, but it *was* a bit of a thrill.)

She tried to say something, dropped her wicker basket, and rumbled with the pockets of her dull, grubby, green coat. Her mouth made a squishy sound, and Erwin dragged the bomb from its bag.

"This is the first one I've ever made that would kill just one person, but anything to get rid of a nasty snoop like you …"

But the policeman stepped into the alley before he could continue. And the raw light of the flash beam stopped his words dustily in his mouth. The policeman saw the bomb in Erwin's hand.

"Hey! You! Old man, whaddaya think ya got there! Hey! That's a pipe bomb … you must be …"

He didn't finish, nor did he wait to utter those two words of inaccurate description Erwin so despised. He was dragging his big pistol from its holster, and Erwin saw the muzzle rising.

Then from the corner of his eye he saw the old flower lady's hand come free of her pocket, and there was a snicking sound, and something bright and slim and shining went slashing with a hiss down the alley, passing Erwin, and entered the policeman's throat.

The blue-coated figure sank to the cement, and Erwin almost gagged at the bubbling sound the officer made as he died. Then the old woman was beside him, saying, "Quickly, drag him back here behind these empty crates!" And then Erwin was straining mightily with the old woman, and in a few moments the policeman was concealed behind the crates.

Then she pulled her knife from his throat, and cleaned it assiduously on the policeman's jacket, and she was smiling at him, in the dim light from the street. The flashlight was broken, lying beside the policeman.

"You — you killed him," Erwin mumbled, and he knew he should throw the bomb now, but why?

She took his arm, led him away a step, then stopped.

She went back, got the revolver and tucked it into Erwin's coat pocket. "That's right. I've been trying to get up enough nerve to speak to you for over a week. I knew we were right for each other when I first saw you."

Erwin's mind tumbled and backed up and sputtered like an old car he had owned in 1928. But he could not understand what was happening.

She walked him down the streets of the Village, and after a while they went into Rienzi's and talked over a pair of *cappuccinos* with lots of cinnamon.

"You. You're the one they call the Slasher," Erwin said softly, marveling. "You've bad as many press notices as I've had, the last few years." He could not *help* but marvel at her. So old and so tired-looking, yet she was so well-known.

"That's right. And I've read about you, too."

"Well, I'm — I'm pleased to meet you. And I'd like to thank you for what you did back there."

She waved it off, smiling a tender little smile, and Erwin felt a strange lump form inside him, he hadn't felt that way since Ellen had died thirty-five years before.

"Where do you live?" he asked, and she told him.

Finally, they knew they would like to see more of each other, and perhaps, well, no one was *that* old, that a little fine, high-class companionship would not be pleasant.

"You know what they say," Erwin philosophized, as he magnanimously paid the check and helped her on with her nice green coat, "opposites *do* attract."

As they walked out onto the sidewalk, visitors from uptown — obviously tourists — sitting by the window of Rienzi's, remarked to one another, "Aren't they lovely. So old and yet so much in love."

And Erwin turned to the flower lady — whose name was Martha — and he smiled. "Though we use different forms of expression, I'm sure we'll get along beautifully, and with your check, and with mine, we're sure to do nicely."

They walked a little bit, and then Martha added confidentially, "And with that nasty policeman's gun, well, we can always experiment, Erwin … and perhaps find some common ground."

Erwin smiled back. Oh, it *was* compatibility, he could tell that right off.

Six

Toe the Line

The cell door clanged into the wall, and the turnkey motioned Eddie Cappen to step out. Cappen winked at his cellmate, picked up the handkerchief full of odds and ends he bad collected during the past two years, and started toward the guard, saying, "So long, Willie, see you never, buddy!"

The little rat-faced man still in the cell laughed, gibed back, "See me never, hell! You'll be back before I can grow a beard!"

Eddie Cappen waved an amused, disgusted goodbye, and stepped onto the cell block ledge with its steel railing. The guard signaled to the end of the line, and the lever was thrown. The cell door slowly slid back into place, closed, and Eddie Cappen knew now — for certain — he was getting out.

The guard hustled Eddie ahead of him, across the upper tier catwalk, and down the stairs at the end of the line. They walked quickly to the locker rooms, where the guard handed Eddie a package.

Cappen opened it and saw the cheap suit. He laughed. The first thing he would burn, when he was out, was this bit of charity from the State. He would be wearing three hundred dollar suits soon enough. He laughed inside, and put on the suit

"This way," the guard said, leading Eddie down the corridor, past the administration offices of the prison. They stopped before the office that had WARDEN A. H. FELLOWS blocked in black letters on its glass.

They entered the anteroom, and the guard motioned at Eddie, saying to the receptionist, "Tell Warden Fellows number 118022, Cappen, is here."

The girl nodded and flicked on her intercom, repeating the information. A gruff voice answered from the box, "Send him in."

Eddie entered the Warden's office for the second time since he and the Joint had said their hellos. The first time had been on his arrival, when the Warden had thoughtfully warned him to "toe the line and stay out of trouble." It seemed to be one of the Warden's pet phrases; Eddie had heard other cons laughing about it, but he had considered it good advice; and he had done as the Warden had suggested.

That was one of the reasons why his parole had come through early; he had been a model prisoner.

He*had* to be, to get out. And he*had* to get out, because his time in the Joint hadn't been wasted: he had figured out the foolproof system.

"Sit down, Eddie," the Warden said.

He was a big, blocky man, with an almost bald head, a few strands of brown hair combed studiedly back over the bald areas. His face was long, but fleshy. He had a nervous, cigarette cough. He was a rough man to deal with. Almost alone he had queued a riot a year before, using nothing but a bullhorn and a firmly pointing finger. Eddie respected Fellows, and more, never underestimated the man.

The Warden closed a folder, tapping it gently on the desk top to align the papers inside. He looked up at Eddie, and his expression was so severe Eddie was certain the Warden wanted to smile, but would not.

"So you're leaving us, Eddie."

It was a statement, so Eddie just nodded, letting a reserved, lopsided bit of a grin cross his face.

"Well, you probably know what I'm going to say then."

Cappen decided to play the part to the hilt. Sincerely, he said, "I'd appreciate it if you'd say it anyhow, Warden. I haven't exactly enjoyed my stay here, but I think I've, well, learned my lesson."

The Warden's face reflected pleasure, though there was no real, concrete evidence of it. "That's good, Eddie.

"Many men come out of here bitter and disillusioned. A few can make it just even with the world, and

even less can come out ahead. You seem to be one of the latter. You've been a good prisoner, Eddie."

Eddie knew that; he'd planned it just that way.

"But more than that, Eddie," the Warden continued, "you seem honestly interested in making a good life for yourself. Now you haven't got as big a row to hoe as some of the men who come out of here; your time was for auto theft."

Eddie decided he should point out one fact. "Yeah, but it was my third conviction, Warden; that makes it pretty rough. I got to watch myself real close." It was always wisest to acknowledge the fact than pretend it didn't exist.

"Well, Eddie, you're right in that, but with a little perseverance you can lead a good, healthy life, become a valuable member of society. All you have to do is toe that line …"

There it was!

That was the phrase. That was what had started Eddie thinking. The Warden had said that two years ago when he had entered the Joint, and the words had stuck with Eddie, till they had become a catchphrase in his mind, till the sound of the words had altered their spelling, and finally Eddie had hit the perfect, the ultimate, the foolproof method of auto hi-jacking.

"… and you'll be okay, boy." The Warden finished, almost beaming, convinced he had produced one good man from all the filth in his cells. Convinced he had salvaged one soul.

He gave Eddie his possessions, taken from him when first he had come to the prison, and his two years' wages — pitifully small amount — and the instructions about keeping in touch with his parole officer.

Eddie shook the Warden's hand, stood up, and turned to go. "Don't forget, Eddie, just toe the line, and you'll be all right"

Eddie smiled back and nodded again.

Yassuh, boss, he thought, I'll do that little thing; I'll just do that.

When Eddie Cappen told his parole officer he intended to get a job with a garage, the lean, suspicious man arched an eyebrow and glanced over Eddie's record. Auto theft.

"Isn't that a little too close to your old trouble, Cappen?"

Eddie had made a calculated move, and now was the time to back it up.

"Well, sir, I don't really know anything else but cars. I worked in the auto body shop at the Pen, and they said I was pretty good. I — I thought I'd put what talent I've got to good use."

There was more talk, but finally Eddie convinced the parole officer he was best suited to the role of a mechanic, that he was sincerely interested in the garage business, and that his eventual goal was to open his own auto body and repair shop.

That week he went to work for Mickey Dalco at the little man's garage. Mickey knew Eddie had a record, but pursuing his policy of giving ex-cons a chance, he hired Cappen nonetheless. "Just work hard and leave the till alone, Eddie, and you've got yourself a good job for a long time." Mickey and Eddie shook hands on it

Later that week he met with his parole officer again, and checked in, giving him the news of the job. The

parole officer was still suspicious, but it seemed Eddie was taking steps in the right direction. He smiled, and Eddie shook his hand on it

Still later that week, Eddie met with the old members of his car-heist gang. He talked to them in the back room of a beauty parlor, operated by his ex-girl friend.

They sat around, having shoved the hair driers aside, and Eddie grinned at the four men and one girl around the room.

"Benny," he said to a dapper, thin man, "what's the best method for grabbing a car*you've* ever found?"

Benny ran a hand through his greased hair, and replied slowly, "I use the adhesive tape. I take two rolls and lay a strip vertically down the window, with each of them, so there are like two bars on the window. I leave enough tape about the middle of the window so I can get a hold on it, then I jerk*down* real hard. It opens the window every time."

Eddie interrupted. "What're the risks?"

"They know my routine, the cops. If I'm caught with a roll of adhesive on me, they book me on suspicion."

Eddie nodded, turned to the second man. "What's your bit, Vinny?"

Vinny sucked in on the cigarette perpetually hanging from a corner of his slash mouth, said, "I use a jump wire on the motor. The under 'alligator' clip, so's the vibrations of the motor don't shake the jump loose."

Eddie said again, "Risks?"

Vinny shrugged helplessly, "Same as Benny's, but also the wire sometimes comes loose anyhow, and I stall in the middle of the street."

Then it was the third man's turn. Grouse answered quickly, "I use two spoons. I shove one between the rubber edgings on the little window, stick the other one in and bend it, twist the second spoon so it opens the handle of the little window."

"Then you're in, right?" Grouse nodded, and Eddie added, "but you've got the same problems as the others."

Grouse replied, "Not only that, but it's harder than hell to get into a car these days that way. People spot you, what can you say?"

Benny inserted, "Yeah, and with my adhesive tape method, it don't work so well with power windows."

Eddie looked at the last man, "And you, Tom?"

"I use a rolled-up magazine. The big, thick ones. I use it for a lever. Jack-handle it over the door handle and jerk down. I'm strong, that's why it works."

Then the woman spoke. "Okay, Eddie, we all know how each other make a buck. We know all the routines, and we know all the handicaps. What's the score?"

Eddie Cappen slid back in his seat, tilted his hat back on his head and grinned widely. "Kiddies, I've got the pitch of the year. The*only* sure-fire way of getting off with a hot car."

They grinned back at him, first dubiously, unbelievingly, but as he explained in detail, their grins grew wider, and finally …

Eddie shook hands on it.

Six months of inactivity came first. Eddie had to allay the fears and suspicions of the parole officer. He also had to get Mickey Dalco's complete trust. Trust that would allow Eddie to say:

"Mick, I've got some more work to do on re-touching that '71 Chevy's paint job over the rust repair. Okay with you if I stay late tonight?"

Trust that would allow Mickey Dalco to reply:

"Yeah. Sure. Here's the keys, Eddie. Lock up tonight, and just be here by eight tomorrow mornin', so's I don't have to stand around in the cold waitin'."

Trust like that took six months.

Trust like that allowed Eddie to use the tow truck. The big red tow truck with the Dalco sign on it.

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Trust like that was important. But finally trust like that came, and with it, Eddie's first venture into the foolproof car-jacking system typified by the phrase "toe the line."

Or, more correctly, "*tow* the line."

Eddie took Vinny with him on the first job. They took out the tow truck on Eddie's lunch hour, in broad daylight.

"Mickey, I'm gonna use the tow. Want to take a run uptown, see if they got my TV installed at home. Okay with you?"

"Sure, Eddie. Go ahead. But I'll need you pretty quick after lunch. Don't dawdle."

"I won't."

Eddie didn't dawdle. He traveled the nine blocks to the alley where Vinny waited with the big sign. The sign had pressure-sensitive tape stuck to its back, and it fitted neatly over the Dalco advertising on the side of the truck. The new sign read

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With the sign up, they went looking. The car they wanted was parked double outside an apartment building, and Eddie backed up to the Continental in accepted tow style. He got out and lowered the winch chain. He hooked the big steel hook under the front fender, noting through the locked car window that the emergency was off and the car was in park. It wasn't really necessary; even rear-wheel drives

move with their front wheels off the ground, but there was no chance of error if you were observant.

That was Eddie's key to success. Be observant, and nothing can go wrong.

He jumped back in beside Vinny, and they took off quickly. A few pedestrians idly took notice of the big red tow truck hauling away the new Landau-top Continental, but had they been checked later, they could not have told what the men looked like who had done the towing, what the sign on the truck said, or which way they had gone after they'd turned the corner.

It was a foolproof method.

On the fifth job they learned it was better to hoist the car by the rear wheels, for two reasons: the car followed the truck better, and they had found cases where front-wheel towing was impossible due to locked brakes. It was the sort of thing experience taught, as was the incident that occurred on that fifth job.

They crashed a light.

Unintentionally, but the cop whose motorcycle was parked by the curb took after them and they were dragged to a stop.

He berated them, checked the truck registration — not the registration of the car in back — and let them go with a warning. On that job, Tom sweated; Eddie laughed all the way to the junkyard.

The four cars that had been previously stolen were all parked side by side in the yard. In the center of the deep yard, surrounded on all sides by chrome and rusting parts of old autos. Work had to be done on them, and Eddie did it in his spare time, cut off from the world, safe from cops.

He towed the Continental in beside the Cadillac, and unwinched the chain, letting the car down with a clang. Tom got out and lit a cigarette, leaning against the truck.

"Whew!" he gasped, "that was damned, damned close."

Eddie playfully dug him in the ribs with an elbow. "Close, nothing. That's as close as they'll ever get. D'you ever read a story by Poe called 'The Purloined Letter'?"

Tom shook his head, and Eddie said, "Well, it was simple. This letter was stolen, and they knew it was in a guy's room, so they hunted and hunted, but they couldn't find it, even though it was there."

"Where was it?"

"In a letter box, with a bunch of others, right up on the wall, where they could see it all the time. Y'see what I mean? The cops can't see what's in front of their noses. They'll see us, but what's more logical than a tow truck draggin' a car away for repair?"

Tom grinned, started to say something.

Eddie cut him off. "*I* know. What if a guy comes out and yells at us for hooking up his car? We just say, 'Oh, excuse me, Mister, we got a call for a repair on a crate like this … must be the wrong car,' and we drive off, grab another one down the line.

"And if the cops spot us, they check the truck registration and not the car we're hauling. No point to *that!*"

Tom nodded, clapped Eddie on the back. "Ed, buddy, you're a goddam genius."

Eddie smiled. “I owe it all to the Warden.”

Eddie worked steadily on the cars over the weekends, filing down serial numbers on the engines, repainting when necessary, changing plates and other identification. Benny, who owned the junkyard, made sure he was let strictly alone, and they moved five to eight cars a week.

The money was rolling in, but Eddie was playing it cool. He checked with his parole officer, and he buried his share of the money, living no higher than his garage salary allowed.

He was becoming a pillar of the community.

The auto theft toll mounted alarmingly, but the police were stymied. Somehow, a phantom was boosting cars in broad daylight and running them out of the state before anything could be done about it.

On their thirty-eighth haul, Eddie stole a Pontiac parked outside a grocery store, and as they pulled away, Vinny swore he saw a woman come rushing out onto the curb, screaming.

“Let her scream,” Eddie said. “We’ll be long gone before she can do anything about it.”

He left Vinny to check with the broker about getting rid of the new heist, and took the Pontiac to the junkyard. All the other cars had been removed, and it stood alone.

Eddie jacked it down, and left it there. He was due back at the garage.

It was three days before he could get to work on it, but before he could leave work the scheduled night, three men came to the garage.

They talked to Mickey, and they studied the tow truck, and when they started back into the repair shop, Eddie knew something was wrong. He made a run for it.

He got as far as the window, ready to leap through and break down the alley, when they drew their guns.

“Hold it, hold it! Don’t shoot!” he yelled, and they lowered their aim.*Must be another gang* , Eddie thought.*They don’t look like plainclothes.*

“Looks like this is our boy, Paul,” one of the men said to the other. They were all hard-eyed, ruthless.

“Where’s the car, fellow,” the man addressed as Paul said.

“What car?” Eddie tried to bluff it.

Paul’s hand, holding the .32 Police Positive, came around in an arc, slashing at Eddie Cappen’s face. The pain penetrated all the way to Eddie’s brain, and he staggered, putting a hand to his cheek. Blood was flowing down his face.

“In — in the junkyard, crosstown,” he said, in pain. “Who are you? How’d you find me? Who squealed?” Anger boiled in him.

Paul answered as he supped the cuffs on Eddie Cappen. “Nobody squealed. The woman saw a red tow truck, and this thing was big enough to call us in, so we searched the city till we found a red tow truck that fit the description. Then we found you. Too bad it took us this long.”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean, ‘Big enough to call us in?’ Who are you?”

“FBI, Mister. You pulled a beaut this time.”

Eddie Cappen reeled, his legs felt like soggy soda straws. “What’re ya talkin’ about? I only swiped a car. That’s maybe a few years, but with parole I’ll get out!”

The Federal agent shook his head. “Uh-uh, buddy. We don’t want you for the car job. We’ve got you on kidnapping, and probably murder.

“There was a baby asleep in the back seat of that car, and this long without attention, it’s probably dead.”

The third man said, “That’s the chair in this state, brother, if they reinstate the death penalty; and if they don’t it means twenty-to-life on death row. You’ll never make it, I can tell: you shake too much.”

Eddie Cappen felt sickness backing up in him. A baby in the back seat. Dead … yes, after three days … dead!

Be observant.

Toe the line.

He would never make it.

Seven

Down in the Dark

Griff could hear Ivy’s husband moving toward him in the darkness. Only the faintest sounds of gravel betrayed his movements. Down here, deep in the gut of the Earth, it was another world. A world Griff knew well as a geologist. A world in which Kenneth Cory was at a disadvantage. That was why Ivy and Griff had lured him down here. To kill him.

The coffin silence of the great limestone cavern pressed down on Griff as he lay there, the vaguely cool breeze only accenting the comfortable temperature. Off somewhere behind him, where the ceiling of the cave suddenly sloped sharply, nearly joining with the moist cool floor, he could hear a stalactite drip-drip-dripping its eternal water message; a message that would end only when the spear joined with the floor, flowed into one continuous bar from above to below a thousand years from now. And there was the sound of a man crawling on his belly toward him.

Griff smiled in the darkness. Poor Cory, that ass. He actually thought he had trapped Griff down here. He actually thought that revolver was going to work for him down here. (That revolver, what pride he took in it. A Ruger .256 Hawkeye, scope-mounted for varmint hunting. It would be as much help down in the dark as an arbolest or an ICBM.)

Griff hugged the powerful spring-driven crossbow to his chest, lying doggo and hearing Cory slithering through blackness in his general direction. Release that trigger and the metal-frame crossbow would drive a steel-tipped hunting arrow under eighty pounds of thrust, straight through the hairless chest of Ivy’s cuckolded husband.*Come on, Kenny baby, just crawl to it. A little farther, you jerk, just a little farther .*

Cory started moving too far right and, fearing he might lose the channel that would bring him into the line of fire, Griff snuffled softly, as though stifling a cough, the way a man might who was hiding in terror. Cory moved sidewise on elbows and knees and came forward again, crablike. Griff grinned.

Griff was not only a trained speleologist, he was a trained hunter. Kenya, Ranchipur, sharks with a spear gun in the Java sea, even a little human game — inadvertently — while red-balling supplies in the Mekong Delta. How odd, he mused, that his most significant kill would occur here, deep in a side-cave of New Mexico's Chaco Caverns. But of all the trophies he had collected for his stalking of predators, Ivy was the most exciting.

The name echoed back through his skull, back through his memories, and he let his head down onto his crossed arms, closing his eyes, thinking about her. It would take Cory time to get close, and Griff was a trained hunter. He let his mind slip back through the events of the past week … back … back …

"I want to hunt javelina," Cory said, chain-lighting a fresh cigarette from the stub of the old one. The smell of dead tobacco was all over him. You could smell him coming half a room away. The second and third fingers of his right hand were ochre from nicotine stains. To an outdoorsman like Griff, whose senses had never been dulled by tobacco or drugs, and only occasionally by alcohol, Kenneth Cory was a perversion of nature.

Outside the cocktail lounge the Santa Fe mid-afternoon burned hot as the mouth of a volcano. Bright white light shattered against impeccably clean stucco buildings and cascaded down on asthmatics from Bayonne, New Jersey, suffering deliciously in the hammering heat under the delusion it would cure their sniffles. But in the hotel cocktail lounge it was cool with the purring of air conditioners and Griff sat across from Cory, wondering how the hell he had wound up tapped-out in Santa Fe, of all places.

"Are you listening, Mr. Griffen?" Cory asked, annoyed.

"I suppose you could call it that," Griff said slowly. He was a big man, narrow in the waist and burned a leather tan by hundreds of suns over hundreds of landscapes. The kind of tan that was melted and fused in. His pale blue eyes looked out from under heavy brow-ridges in that dark face; totally incongruous.

"The undertaking doesn't appeal to you?"

"*Any* undertaking that will put some flesh on my wallet appeals to me, Mr. Cory. But I hope you know what you're looking for. It's called aggravation, and it's spelled jablí with an accent over the i."

Cory sat up straighter in the foam-padded lounge chair. He was bigger than he seemed, a barrel of a chest, huge hands, thick bull neck. His features were regular and well-formed, but rather than melding into handsomeness, there was something coarse and porcine omnipresent. Griff had instantly disliked the man when he'd come up to the table, asking if Griff was the guide that had been recommended by the hotel manager.

"Get this, Mr. Griffen. I'm a wealthy man. Unashamedly and filthy rich. I've been everywhere, I've done everything, and the only fear I've got at the moment is that I'll run out of kinds of animals to hunt before they plant me.

"I tried the Coronado National Forest in Arizona, but the hunting's been controlled for the past seven years. One of the game wardens said there was peccary over here in New Mexico. I want mine."

He settled back and drained the bourbon-and-branch.

"What were you planning on using?"

Cory considered. "I'd like to try the new Remington XP-100, the pistol-rifle."

Griff chuckled. "Single shot. I suppose you'd use a Bushnell 'Phantom' scope, too. Right?" Cory looked off-balance. He nodded.

“Mr. Cory, the jabalina live in caves. They run in packs. He’s got teeth that are damned near fangs, and when he runs, friend, he runs like a two-cushion bank into the hip pocket. A single-shot bolt action weapon would give you just enough time to kill one — accepting you’re a decent marksman — before the rest of the pack ripped you in half.”

Cory’s brow furrowed. “You’d suggest?”

“Something light, semi-automatic, no scope. You’d have to get up close anyway, that’s the only way to flush ‘em. A 30.06 would be enough power, but it’s too heavy. Ever hear of the ArmaLite AR-7?”

Cory nodded. “Isn’t that a bit too gadgety for big varmint?”

Griff paused a second. “Yeah, it’s mickeymouse, no question about it. But it’s light, clip-fed, eight shots, and the accuracy is good on short distances …”

He continued talking, explaining weaponry to the layman with his superficial knowledge, but his eyes were over Cory’s shoulder. A woman had entered the lounge, was looking around.

She was as tall as Griffen, with wider shoulders than he usually liked, but the shoulders were necessary to support the weight of breast the woman carried. Her hair was black, dead black and nearly invisible against the gloom of the cocktail lounge. But it was the face that had caught Griffen’s attention. She was the most carnal-looking woman he had ever seen. Instinctively he sensed her as a biter, a groaner, a woman who panted and made little animal noises in bed with a man.

Cory became aware that Griff’s attention was elsewhere, and he half-turned in the chair as the woman saw him and started in their direction. Cory turned back, and there were bits of burning coal in his dark eyes. “That’s my wife, Mr. Griffen.”

Griff’s jaw muscles jumped. “I think we can make a deal, Mr. Cory.”

Later that night, after they had joined up for dinner and more talk about the impending hunting trip, Griff carried Cory to his suite. Cory may not have had fear, but he had inabilities. One of them was holding his liquor. He had passed out around midnight, long after Griff and Ivy Cory had exchanged the glances and mouth movements that meant she was anxious to try him.

Griffen tossed Cory down on the king-sized bed and turned to see Ivy standing in the doorway, tilted onto one hip. “If you say, ‘Now we’re alone,’ Mr. Griffen, it may blow the entire romance.”

He moved toward her, and she retreated into the living room of the suite. He closed the door behind him. “I’m a man of very slim dialogue, Mrs. Cory.”

“At least call me Ivy.”

“Afterward, I’ll call you Ivy. Familiarity breeds.”

She beat him out of his clothes by a pair of socks and his undershorts.

And when it was over and they lay there, she said, very gently, “How would you like to help me kill my husband, Mr. Griffen?”

He considered calling her Ivy. But decided Mrs. Cory was better.

The sudden acrid scent of cigarettes came to Griff through his memory-fog, and he realized he had nearly fallen asleep, there in the mother-warm comfort of the underworld. Cory was nearly on him. He rolled

sidewise without making a sound on the gravel. There was a tiny ledge that jutted out from the side of the main channel. In the rainy season, such as it was, every inch of this passage was underwater, and the flow had bitten a channel-ledge under which it was possible to lie supine when the water table sank in the summer months.

Cory crawled right past. Griff fitted the stock of the crossbow to his shoulder. The bowstring was iron-tight and merely waiting to be released by his finger on the trigger to send the slim powerful bolt straight through Cory's back.

Then thoughts began to impinge. Strange thoughts that his memories of the past few minutes had dredged up.

He had accepted Ivy Cory's suggestion: kill Kenneth on the hunting trip, make it look like an accident, and then if Griff didn't think she was prize enough for a long, long time under some tropical sun, why then she would make a handsome settlement on him, they would kiss and bid each other fond adieu, and she would go off to Pantelleria or Papeete or Palma de Mallorca to play the grieving widow in the sort of affluent hedonism Kenneth's hunt-fever and stinginess had never allowed.

He had made love to her every night since Santa Fe, purposely making it easy for Cory; but it had taken the clod almost a week to discover them in a parking lot, Ivy's skirt up around her hips, underpants hanging off one ankle. Cory had gone a little mad, and Griff had dashed away, barely getting his pants zipped before Cory could get back with his revolver.

He had entered the caves and made his progress simple for Cory to follow. And there, well within the mouth of the cave, he had grabbed up the crossbow he had secreted for just this situation.

Now Cory was precisely where Griff and Ivy had wanted him. With his back bullseyed for a dead shot. Yet the scheme jangled out of focus for Griff. If Ivy had wanted Cory out of the way, there were simpler ways of doing it.

Drain the brake fluid out of his car.

Hire a torpedo to gun him in his sleep.

Simply shoot him herself and just say he was away on a hunting trip. They traveled enough for her to get away without suspicion.

Or simply divorce him.

He hesitated at the trigger. There was something far uglier here than simply murder. Griff bit his lip.

And there was a scream from Cory, well past Griff in the inky darkness of the cavern. The scream came again, and Griff rolled out from under the ledge, got to his knees and stared off into the nothingness. He could not see the man, but now there came the soft snuffling baby-sounds of a man in constant pain. Then silence.

Griff pulled the flashlight from his hip pocket and let it shine down the channel. The dripping perspiration of the limestone walls was all that met his light until he moved forward, around a slight bend in the channel, and saw that the ledge under which he had rolled had angled upward again, and almost met a similar ledge on the opposite side of the channel, thus forming an upper and lower channel, cut nearly in two by the ledges. Cory had clambered up on the ledges and had been crawling along till the channel opened out once more. He had slipped and fallen halfway through. His feet dangled off the floor of the cave, and his arms were pinned in the thin space between the ledges. The razor-edges of moist limestone

were literally cutting him in half.

Griff stared at the unconscious man for a long moment, then turned and crawled back down the channel, leaving him in darkness. It was simpler than perforating his body with a hunting arrow.

Ivy was waiting inside the mouth of the cave, where the side-tunnels all met.

"Where is he?" she asked, breathless, her eyes glowing with something malignant.

"He's trapped down there. Between two ledges. No chance of his ever getting out. We can wait a week and come back. If the ledges haven't cut him in half, he'll be dead of starvation."

Ivy smiled a terrible smile, and brought the XP-100 out from behind her back. It was a huge Buck Rogers kind of weapon with the ungainly telescopic sight on it. "Thank you, Mr. Griffen," she said, and fired. Griff threw himself sidewise just as the incredible report of the pistol-rifle shattered the stillness of the cave. The .221 Fireball cartridge zinged past his ear and clattered off one wall then another then another as it ricocheted down into the main channel.

He rolled and got to one knee and pulled the trigger of the crossbow. The bolt whizzed past her, missing her stomach by bare inches. She chuckled then, a soft deadly sound in the cave. He was up against the wall, with his back to a small ledge, but nowhere to run. She reloaded the weapon and slammed the bolt home. Griff felt the terrible pain of fear in his stomach and the taste of antimony in his mouth.

As she sighted him down, an impossible shot to miss, Griff heard the growing-thunder of movement in the cave. The rasp of fur and the rattle of hooves against rock, and as he looked down the bore of the handgun a pack of javelina burst out of a side-corridor where they had been hiding. Ivy screamed once as the gunshot-stampeded boars plunged toward her. There must have been sixty of them, none over fifty pounds but bristling with wire-fur and deadly tusks as they rushed her. She got off one shot, right into the pack, felling a four-foot prime boar, before they ran her down.

Griff leaped up onto the ledge as they rushed past, and the ivory clicking of their tusks was a fearful song in the filtered sunlight of the shadowy cavern.

The javelina went right over her. They cut her legs out from under her with the hideous ripping of flesh and muscle and cartilage that meant meat literally stripped off the bones. She fell, and they went on, thundering over her, snapping pieces out of her body, off her face, as they insanely plunged into the afternoon.

When the sound of their passage had gone, Griffen let himself down from the ledge and moved to look at what was left of her. One breast had been bared and scored by fangs, but was still intact. It was*all* that was intact.

He leaned against the side wall of the cave and fought to keep his stomach down.

Finally, the thought of what she had intended came to rest in his mind, and he tried to be phlegmatic about it. Then he turned and went back down the channel to find Cory. A man can't be too vengeful when his wife has been torn to shreds by killer pigs and the wife's paramour has just saved you from a fate worse than death. A man tends to be grateful in those circumstances. There might even be a tidy reward.

It would have to be the least Cory could do for a nice guy like Griff.

Eight

Pride in the Profession

There were many who called the lynching of Eustace Powder a blot on the previously-unbesmirched reputation of Princetown, but for Matthew Carty, it was the handing-down of a latter-day Ten Commandments.

The alleged crime for which the dusty Negro was swung high is of no consequence at this time; suffice to say he was innocent, if not in thought, at least in deed, indeed; but all things pass, and the momentary upheavals that result in the neck-stretching of one unimportant dark man are of no importance in the shadow of later, more electric events.

For it was the excitement, the crowd-respect directed at the man who knotted the rope and threw it over the elm's thick branch, that struck eight-year-old Matt Carty with such lasting force. The humid, expectant rustle of the summer day, the pavement warm beneath his bare, dirty feet, the women watching flame-eyed. It was all such a rich experience, he could not put it from him.

There was even an unexpected touch of homespun humor. The black, black man's last request, jocularly offered by one of the local rakehells, was to have a pair of dice, to hold in his hand when they swung him aloft. "Those who live by the bones gonna*die* by the bones!" replied the last-request-man, and fishing in his own jeans, he came up with a fine set of red plastic dice; as neat a set of see-through galloping dominoes as ever was. And giving them to Eustace Powder, the local happy-smith patted the Negro on the cheek. "Roll a natural, boogie." He grinned, and the black man clenched them in his fist tightly as they yanked him aloft.

The face of the gap-toothed Eustace Powder, his mouthings of horror and expectation. The gurgle and retching and final gasp as he swung clear of the ground. He seemed to thrash and twitch interminably. It was one of the two high points of Matt Carty's life, even if Powder*did* drop one of them.

In the light of that one incident, his existence was systematically directed, till the day he died, many years later.

For Matt Carty*liked* the idea of being a hangman.

There was a certain pride a man could take in such a profession. So he took pride, and he took the profession. It suited him, and he suited it. A wedding of the right job with the proper tool.

Matt Carty had always been a little man. Not a small man, for that is a thing of personality, and Matt's personality was just fine, thank you. He was outgoing and dryly witty, with perception to temper it; but this was too much offset by his lack of height — an almost comical lack. He was five feet, one inch tall.

He had often considered elevator shoes. Only the inherent hypocrisy of them prevented their purchase. In their place he substituted an almost pathetic eagerness for love and friendship. Indiscriminately, Matt Carty made friends.

Unfortunately, they did not stick to him for long:

"Jeez, it's real funny, meeting a guy from Princetown here in Chi. I mean, me being a guy from Henshaw, I mean that's only twenty-six miles, an' this is a helluva big town. Wanta 'nother drink, Matt?"

"Oh, golly, no. So tell me — uh, what was it? Harold? — Harold, tell me, what are you doing here in Chicago?"

"I'm a buyer for a linoleum house. You know, I price rolls and cuttings. How about you?"

“I’m at the U. of C.”

“No kidding?”

“Uh-huh. Studying plane geometry and advanced engineering design.”

“What line are you in?”

“I’m a hangman.”

“— uh?”

“That’s right. I’m a professional executioner. I work free-lance for the states. Of course, I haven’t had too many jobs to my credit, but, well, *you* know … you’ve got to start somewhere. You see, I’m studying the mathematics of falling weights, and the force of vectors so when I — say, where are you going?”

“— uh — I just saw an old friend of mine, a business acquaint — I, uh, gotta go. Say, it was real swell meeting you; take it easy, huh.”

End of friendship.

With love, it was considerably more difficult. Being a normal, red-blooded American lad, Matt Carty sought the companionship of attractive young women. But in that case, also, it was star-crossed:

“Matty, pl*eee*ase!”

“Aw, c’mon, Jeannie.”

“Now, Matthew Carty, if you don’t take your hand out of there, I’m getting out of this car this*minute!* ”

“I thought you loved me …”

“… well … I*do* , but …”

“But what?”

A prolonged silence.

“Isn’t the night cool, Jeannie?”

“Mmm.”

“It was on nights like this that the hangmen of Henry the First’s period prepared their scaffolds.”

“What a perfectly*sick* thing to think about, Matt.”

“Why, what’s sick about it? I think it’s a real fine thing to think about. I mean, after all, it*is* my line of work.”

“You-y*whaaat?* ”

“I, uh … heh-heh …”

“You told me you were in lumber!”

"Heh-heh …"

"*What, exactly*, do you do for a living, Mr. Carty?"

"I'm a, uh, well, I'm a h —"

End of love.

But the hazards of the trade were offset by other, more ephemeral, pleasures. There was the pleasure of the feel of good hemp stretched taut. There was the satisfying*rightness* of a great weight swinging free, like a pendulum, at the end of a straight plumb. There was the heady wine of sound produced by the progression of an execution:

Feet mounting scaffold.

Milling about.

Monotoned prayers.

Man puffing cigarette.

Adjustment sounds, most precise.

Trap release.

The door banging free.

The thwumpppp!

The twannnng!

The sound of silence.

From the first tentative stirrings within him, the subliminal cravings for recognition — recognition in the field he had chosen — Matt Carty had gone about the business of preparation properly. First high school, with emphasis on woodworking (in case of do-it-yourself emergencies), mathematics, abnormal psychology, dynamics of geometry and a fine grounding in biology — one must know the merchandise with which one works.

Then college, with several architectural courses, penology, criminology, group behavior classes, ethics, advanced vector analysis and even biochemistry. He did not stay long at any one University, however, and as a consequence, he never came up with a degree of any sort. How could he, with the variegated courses he undertook, a smattering of one, a spray-exposure to another?

And oddly enough, there were no deterrents to his career. His parents at first expressed a white-faced horror and complete refusal of cooperation. But they were much too involved with their own problems — she with her religion composed of unequal parts devout hypochondria and incipient nymphomania, and he with*his* God: the Mighty Green Buck — so they sent young Matthew to the schools he wished to attend.

Thus he observed the slaughtering of cattle, watching carefully as they were weighted and hung. He sat in at executions. His eyes were constantly on watch for stresses and effects brought about by pressure and dead-weight. He carried on harmless experiments.

He went to study at Columbia, and fell in with a disparate clique of Greenwich Village bohemians, one of

whom was a bottle-auburn brunette named Carinthe who inducted him into the mysteries of sex and liquor, narcotics and bad poetry, and who cast him aside, huskless, some months later, leaving him with a bruised id and a resolute determination to become the first hangman in history to bring neck-stretching out as a sincere art-form.

Soon enough, for he was — as noted — perceptive and diligent, he developed a certain efficiency and style in the matters of hangsmanship. So, figuratively speaking, he hung out his shingle.

He offered himself — after his first bonding — to the state of New Hampshire. His rate was reasonable, his manner quick and orderly, and the job was dispatched with aplomb and a certain grace. His reputation was very much like a summer virus: it spread to odd places and sank deep.

By the time he was an unwrinkled thirty, Matthew Carty was known as "that hanging man" and he had acquired a scent of fame that was responsible for articles inTHE SATURDAY REVIEW, andTHE AMERICAN PENOLOGIST. He was known as "that hanging man."

There were high points, of course, as there must be in all careers of note:

The celebrated swinging of "Lousy" Harry Gottesman, the helicopter-employing rustler, in Montana. His was a singular case: Mr. Gottesman weighed three hundred and sixteen pounds. It brought Matthew Carty to the notice of law enforcement agencies in each of the (then, nine; now seven) states and two territories where hanging was the accepted form of capital punishment. And, until they became states, switching to life imprisonment, Hawaii and Alaska as well. For Gottesman's demise was achieved with a facility and care that could only be arranged by a genius in his field.

In his way, Matthew Carty had become the Picasso of the scaffold.

There was an all-expense-paid trip to Hawaii, in the sixth year of his fame, sponsored by the local government, to perform what the officials called an "*Aloha* ceremony" on Miss Melba Rooney, a four-timer poisoner of husbands, not all of them her own.

There was the notoriety gained from the Restout Case, and its accompanying gruelling activity on the part of the Utah state police to locate Algernon Restout's victim, a certain Miss Mamie Helf, known locally as an exotic dancer. Mr. Restout had separated the well-known belly dancer from her equipment — with a meat cleaver.

Public sentiment was high on that occasion; the bleachers were packed, and the popcorn sales were a local record high; Matthew Carty fulfilled his obligation to an attentive audience.

In each case, and to each hanging, Carty brought a certain indefinable gentleness and *savoir-faire* that were identifiable to the perceptive as an unflagging pride in his profession.

He was the best, and there was no getting around it.

Then, when he had begun soaking his plates in warm salt water, when he had acquired a sturdy set of grouse-tracks around his eyes and nose, when he had been warned by his doctor to move slowly in protection of an aging heart, when he was, in short, in the thickening of his lifetime, he was called upon to create history.

It was several months after he had completed the execution of a certain gun-runner named Moxlossis, who had butchered his partner with an icepick over a center cut of *filet mignon* on the cruise hack from Cuba, when the governor of the state of Delaware contacted him.

By official conveyance, Matthew Carty was brought to the State House, and in secret session with the

Governor — that year a rather paunchy man with a predilection for cigarillos and fetid breath — he was informed he was to preside at the hanging of Dr. Bruno Kolles.

Matthew Carry's aging heart leaped into his wrinkled throat. The culmination of a glorious career! The *piece de resistance!*

Matthew swallowed heavily, and swung his short legs in the air with unrestrained emotion. It was a high-legged chair, and though he felt awkward, this was news enough to sublimate his feelings of awkwardness.

The Kolles case was a*cause célèbre* . The tabloids had been publishing steadily on the matter, publicizing his arrest and conviction for over seven months:

Anna Pasteur had been a cancer victim. Her days had been numbered, and her body wasting away. It had been a body loved with singular ardor by Dr. Kolles, and as a result of the strain and horror visited upon the good Doctor at sight of his paramour wasting away, a mercy killing had been performed, her hand locked in his throughout the activity with hypodermic and sleep-inducing drug.

It had been quick and with sweet terror. But he had been discovered in the act by a jealous nurse, a remarkably horsey woman he had several times rebuffed, and she had turned him in. The case had been followed with much accompanying conjecture and opinion from all sides.

It was, in fact, that the country was divided in its feelings. Half the people believed he should be turned loose — for his had been an act of compassion, easily understood and condoned — and half believed he should be hanged with brutal speed.

Thus it was that the Governor of the state of Delaware (chewing on a fetid cigarillo) told Matthew Carty, "We cannot chance a slip-up in this matter. Public sentiment is too strong." There was a detectable note in the Governor's voice, vaguely reminiscent of subdued hysteria. "You can do a speedy job, without trouble, can't you?"

Matthew assured him he could. He was most convincing. The tariff on this execution was slightly higher than usual, for the prestige was greater.

Prestige, yes, but more! This was the high point of a career marked by high points.

On the morning of the execution, Matthew felt strange quivers in his stomach. He told himself it was the nervousness of his*greatest* job, his most exacting bit of artistry. It was da Vinci completing*La Gioconda;* it was Wilbur and Orville on that chilly morning near Kitty Hawk; it was Melville, cribbing out painfully the last magnificent lines of "Moby Dick."

He felt like Icarus soaring toward the sun.

The public notice — which would not be removed until after the inquest — had been posted some twenty hours before. The demonstrators had been staunchly turned back from the prison walls. The sheriff, jailer, chaplain and surgeon of the prison all were present, as well as several dry-faced relatives, resigned to the fate of Dr. Kolles.

Matthew Carty made a point of never meeting the man (or woman) he was to execute, but today was something special, something remarkable, so he went to the cell in the late afternoon, rubbing his chin warily.

He wanted to meet the man who was soon to be the most intimately involved with his art. It seemed fitting, though oddly disquieting, somehow.

Kolles was a short, fat man. Not quite as short as Matthew, but still under five-and-a-half feet. He had a fine hairline mustache that seemed almost hesitant about its own existence, and he took the impending stretching of his neck with restrained impotence.

"Are you the man who is going to do this thing?"

Matthew nodded. "I thought I'd come in and say I'll make it as quick as I can."

Kolles bowed his head. A red flush came up from inside his shirt and clouded his face. "What kind of a man*are* you?" he asked with a quiet fury. It was the first sign of emotional strain he had evinced since the beginning of his trial. "I'm a man who tried to save lives … but …*you!* You*take* them, without apparent compunction."

Carty stared at him silently for a moment. Then he leaned down and stuck his uncomplicated face into the Doctor's. "I'm a craftsman," he explained. "My idol has always been Henry I of England. Do you know why? Because he furthered the cause of hanging. He was a great man, and his life has given me inspiration. I'm an artist, Doctor. My work is important. I take a great deal of pride in it, because I'm the best in my field.

"Can you understand that?"

None of it made much sense, and of course the good doctor did*not* understand.

Dr. Kolles turned his face to the wall.

Matthew Carty left the cell, and went out to the courtyard where the white pine scaffold rose in cleanlimbed serenity. This was the first time he had been talked to like that since the days of his rude beginnings, when the girls had slapped him and turned gray at mention of his beloved trade. The days before fame had made him tolerable, if not socially acceptable. He had encysted himself, and this stripping-off of his shell left him raw and unprotected. He shuddered to himself.

The fools, he thought, they could never understand me.

He checked the sash weights and the oiled trap. He checked the arm and the lever and the floorboards for squeaks — which made an unpleasant effect of jollity when he was struggling so earnestly for somberness and seriousness. Yes, everything was in readiness.

Kolles would drop eight feet before the breaking strain. And served him right

Yet that nervousness, compounded with the annoyance generated by the Doctor, and the pressure of the event itself, further unsettled Matthew Carty. He began to perspire on the job for the first time in his life.

He found himself biting his perfect little nails.

How glorious today would be — his ultimate triumph!

When they brought Kolles out, with the newsmen trailing along behind (and that hideous sob-sister from the New York paper, with her frock much too gay for this occasion) something seemed to frazzle inside Matthew. For as Kolles emerged out of shadow, he stuck his tongue out at Matthew Carty.

Carty was too surprised to be flabbergasted.

It was very much like that time in Alaska, up past White Horse, when he had had to thaw out the hemp in a bucket of boiling water before he could do the job. Or the time in Kansas when the fall had been too

great and had pulled the prisoner's head off. He had been unnerved then, too, but he had been much younger and his confidence had returned, buoyed up.

But now …

Was he getting old, unsure of himself? Had he lost his confidence in his talent?

He swallowed heavily, and strung Kolles up.

Kolles stuck his tongue out once more.

"*Stop that!*" Matthew hissed under his breath, but Kolles just smiled cherubically.

The execution would be accomplished by the fracturing or dislocating of the first three cervical vertebrae, hence crushing the vital centers in the spinal cord.

Matthew heard the music of lyre, sackbut and dulcimer.

He placed the knot behind the ear for the most symmetrical garrote. It was more artistic than the method favored by lesser talents — under the neck.

(In point of fact, Matthew favored the *thuggee* three-knot method as used in India. He had made an extensive study of choke methods in his exuberant youth, but had, in later life, realized the truth of tried and true old-fashioned approaches.)

His joy was constrained, but enormous. His fingers sang at their work.

He did not notice the knot slip around, as he moved away.

Perhaps it was unsteadiness of hand.

Perhaps the glory of this event in his career had discautioned him.

Perhaps he was not aware of the stress on the rope.

Perhaps Kolles jiggled a bit, out of spite.

Any of these are possibilities.

In any case, when the lever was thrust home, and the trap sprang open beneath Kolles, and he plummeted the eight feet to *twaaaang* at the end of the line, he did not break his neck. He did not die. Obstinately!

The sob-sister screamed and messed her gay frock.

The newsmen's faces screwed up hideously in expressions of compounded horror, as their eyes moved click and click, back and forth, as though they were watching a tennis match in slow motion.

The jailer turned puce, then gray, and fled.

The chaplain began praying.

And Dr. Kolles twisted and writhed and bounced and danced and flopped and tumbled about at the end of the hemp. The hanging was a ghastly fiasco … obstinately endless … it went on for a lifetime and a half, in Matthew Carty's mind. The condemned man seemed determined to kill himself slowly. The corpse was not a corpse for a very long time.

Everyone stood transfixed, not moving, almost blind with the ghastliness of it all. Except the jailer, who continued running till he spanged against a barred door some distance down the hall and was knocked totally unconscious.

After a while, someone croaked, "Get a kn-knife … cut him d-d-down …"

But no one did. They just stood and watched the airborne gavotte.

In actuality, it was a mere three minutes, but it was a week to each of the horrified observers.

The newspapers called him an "incompetent."

Eric Sevareid referred to him as a "butcher."

One Sunday morning egghead commentator labeled him a "male Ilse Koch!"

The women's leagues impeached him as a "paid murderer."

In all, it was a serious blow, a killing blow to Matthew Carty's career. For Matthew Carty knew the truth; the truth that lived inside simple appearances. He was not inept. Till Dr. Kolles, he had never felt one way or the other about his "participants" in the act. They had merely been utensils, specified by the authorities as the correct instrument for the assignment. Till Dr. Kolles. He had made the mistake of meeting the man, and from Kolles' loathing of what Matthew Carty did for a living, had been born the first stench-weed of hate in the little man.

Matthew Carty had allowed himself to become personally involved with Kolles. He had hated, and that had thrown him off his stride. He knew he was washed up. Hung up, really. He knew he had lost his touch. His time had come and gone. He had met each challenge with skill, with pride in his profession, but all that was dust now.

He was a has-been.

Because it was a rather small room, and because he had closed and locked all the windows, and because it was a very hot August, and because he had done it to excess, and because the cleaning woman didn't come for a week, putrefaction had progressed considerably and, when she came to clean Matthew Carty's apartment, the smell was overpowering. When she called the custodian and he unlocked the door, and they entered, they began to gag and had to step back into the hall to tie handkerchiefs over their noses.

It was the cleaning woman who first entered the bedroom. When she saw him, she tried to jam her fist into her mouth to stop the screams, but the handkerchief prevented the movement and her hysterical shrieks brought the custodian.

Even the police were shocked and surprised.

He had done it to excess. The bloodstains and brownish material he had vomited were all over the bed. The mouth was corroded and scarred, as well as the throat. He had convulsed so terribly that he was arched back into a perfect bow, the entire weight of his small body resting on the heels and back of the head. His skin was very gray and in places dark blue. The final grimace was the one most commonly associated with lockjaw. The hands had ripped the bedsheets.

Everyone knew who he was, what he was famous for, and none of them could understand the kind of fierce, unrelenting pride in his profession a man could possess that would cause him — as was revealed in the autopsy — to drink a bottle of household ammonia, swallow a diluted half-box of DDT-laden plant

poison, and swallow eleven grains of strychnine sulphate.

That hanging man was dead. Pride in his profession. Not even at the end had he compromised his craft; he had poisoned himself.

Nine

The Children's Hour

Don't say it didn't happen. Of course, it happened! Don't you ever learn? I was *there* when it happened. It was a thing of quiet terror, and in its own way, beautiful. How can you ignore the fact that it *happened!*

The United Nations building stands on the edge of the East River. It is an incredibly thin, wondrous structure all glass and fine stonework. Beside it is a smaller structure, the General Assembly building. If you were to look down from a window in one of the offices of a building on, say, East 45th Street, the top of the General Assembly building might look to you like a fat man with goggles in a bathtub. The dome and stacks do it very nicely.

But the Secretariat Building, that nearly unbroken face of windows that reflects back the Manhattan skyline on clear days, is nothing humorous.

In it, the work of the world is done. In it, the plans and dreams and frustrations of billions of men and women are studied and catalogued and interoffice memoed. I work in that building.

For the record — and there will be a record, I'm certain — my name is Wallace Edmondson. I am an interpreter. I speak three languages in addition to English: Italian, French and German, all three flawlessly, idiomatically. My job with the UN has been a simple one, nothing romantic, nothing full of intrigue and disaster. I have never been outside the United States, and so my curiosity about the rest of the world has gone untended, save for information culled from periodicals and the people around me.

Unfortunately, I was present at the greatest disaster that ever befell the human race. I'll tell you about it; there is truth in what I say; and perhaps truth will help.

God knows — nothing else will now.

The General Assembly that day — it was a Tuesday, the 3rd of June, 1995 — was a madhouse. The agenda was up to its title page in trouble. We had ten different, imperative conflicts on our hands, and any one of them could have been the one to start the big war. The *big* war that would make World War II seem like a street fight.

We had been drunkenly teetering on the razor-edge for years. June 25th, 1950 had been the starting date, as well as anyone could remember. That was the day the Republic of Korea was overrun by 60,000 North Korean troops spearheaded by 100 Russian-built tanks. It lasted till 1953 and no one really won. We didn't know it till 1954, but the first hydrogen device explosion had taken place at the AEC Eniwetok proving grounds. In August of 1953 the USSR detonated theirs. Dien Bien Phu and its French garrison fell to Ho Chi Minh's army in May of 1954. And it all began to accelerate. 1956: the Polish revolution in Poznan; Egypt seized the Suez Canal; the Hungarian uprising; Israel invaded the Sinai Peninsula. Not even the establishment of our UN international police force in November to supervise the Middle East truce could slow the rush toward war.

1957: racial violence in Arkansas; 1958: Arab nationalist rebels seized the Iraqi government and killed Faisal; 1959: the civil war in Cuba came to a bloody end and Castro assumed power; 1960: the U-2

reconnaissance plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers was shot down in the USSR; 1961: the terrible Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba by American CIA-subsidized rebels ended in slaughter; East Germany built the Wall across Berlin; Dag Hammarskjöld, our beloved Secretary-General, our best hope for peace, was assassinated in a rigged air crash; nuclear blasts of 25 and over 50 megatons were set off by the USSR; 1962: the Cuban missile crisis, and war was narrowly averted; by the end of 1963: 15,000 US troops in Viet Nam and the war was on; John Kennedy was assassinated; 1964: civil rights workers murdered in Mississippi; the Communist Chinese exploded their first atomic bomb; 1965: civil rights violence in American cities culminating in Watts riots in Los Angeles; minority white regime took power in Rhodesia; Dominican Republic revolution; 1966: Charles Whitman sniping from a Texas tower killed 14; Nkruma overthrown in Ghana as the African continent began to seethe; 1967: brush wars in sixteen separate locations; my wife and daughter were killed in an auto accident; the 6-day Israeli-Arab war; Johnson and Kosygin met to try to avert further saber-rattling; 1968: Pueblo seized; further white-black violence in America; Martin Luther King assassinated; French students rioted and civil violence reigned for a month; Soviet Union and other Warsaw Pact nations invaded and crushed Czechoslovakia.

Between 1969 and 1975, a mere six years, the noose was drawn tighter and tighter: two million lives were lost in the Nigerian civil war as millions more starved to death in Biafra; the Manson murders set the tone of the times; civil war in East and West Pakistan; Brazil systematically proceeded with the slaughter of their native Indians; India invaded Pakistan; the religious war began in Northern Ireland; Watergate set the tone of the times; Black September terrorists machine-gunned Olympic athletes in Munich; upheavals and political murders in Afghanistan, Greece, the People's Republic of China and nine emerging African nations; the fourth and biggest Arab-Israeli war in 25 years; violence escalated in Japan, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, the Spanish premier was assassinated in Madrid, Israel and Egypt poised on both sides of the Canal, Iran and Iraq clashed, rebellion in Portugal, slaughter in Turkey, Argentina, Northern Ireland, Ethiopia, Cyprus …

And on and on. Tuesday, June 3rd, 1995.

It all broke loose at once. The people's Republic of China invaded Japan. The United States sent atomic subs to within miles of the Russian seaport of Murmansk and shelled coast defenses. The Israelis moved back into positions they had recently vacated in the Sinai and did not stop. Six nations declared war on Israel.

It was as if a platoon of giants had suddenly gone mad. And as if … if it was going to be war, then all the little countries, all the secondary powers … they wanted their shares.

Everyone attacked everyone else. Suddenly, the world was one vast battlefield, from pole to pole. From South Africa to Tanzania, from Somalia to Ghana, the African continent was aflame with black and white tearing out each other's throats. Russia, even while massing its defenses in the north, moved on Finland in the west. Argentina invaded Chile.

Who could doubt: it was the apocalypse.

Madness prevailed. Men who had formerly been cool and logical now screamed for the death and destruction of the men and states that would kill *them* if given the chance.

It was more than panic that ruled the UN that day: it was a sense of impending terror and death that would overrun the world like nothing since the hordes of Genghis Khan. Every man there was stark of face; every face there held threats and warnings and accusations and most of alt — fear.

The Secretary General — a Latvian named Rezekne — used his gavel, and the session was brought to order. I won't trouble with the affairs that were taken up during the first two hours, except to note that

the Russian delegation made a surprise move and did not walk out when the Ethiopian representative made his appeal for justice and peace for his land. What happened during those first two hours does not matter any longer.

I was translating M. Louperc's harangue against the German Triumvirate, a few minutes into the third hour of the session, when we all heard a great sound from the hall outside the chamber. I was not alone in hearing it; heads began to turn in the delegations as the sound grew louder. M. Louperc stopped speaking, and turned to the men beside him for some explanation. I saw Montgomery of England spread his hands in confusion. I took off my earphones, and stood up so I could see through the window of my booth more clearly, and just then the huge doors at the rear of the chamber flew open, and they came in, by the hundreds.

I might have expected anything.

Striking workers, or invading Martians or conquering armies, any of them might have seemed apropos. But not what came through that door.

Children.

Of all sizes and colors, clad in every conceivable style of ethnic dress, all different, but none older than ten or twelve, as best I could tell; and the only thing they shared beyond their presence in that hall was their solemnity. There was not one smile, one laugh, no jostling or childish games as they flooded into the General Assembly chamber. Some time I will ponder at length on how they got together. There were obviously Berber children and French schoolgirls and fur-clothed children from Lapland and little mutation Russian cossacks from the Steppes in that great herd. How they got together, perhaps no one will ever know; how they got to the UN buildings, perhaps no one will ever know.

But there they were, and they were jammed into the aisles with their faces quite clean, and their eyes quite bright, and their little hands quite still.

They were quietly terrible. For these were not the children we had known; there was no singing among them, and no whispering, and no giggling between even the closest friends, and no shying of eyes and no shuffling of feet.

They stood very, very still, and they looked at the Secretary General.

Then one of them came forward. It is fitting that I tell this story; I knew the child who came forward. My name is Wallace Edmondson, and the child was mine. My son, Barry. Ten years old; who had been reading comic books the night before, and — yes, now that I thought of it — looking at his toybox full of guns and war weapons with a strange light in his eyes. My son, Barry, who now walked forward and mounted the steps to the speaker's platform.

I could not speak. I could only watch, as all the others watched, as this one child from among so many went to the front of the chamber and climbed those stairs.

When he was behind the speaker's podium and had taken down the microphone and had moved aside — for the podium quite blocked him off from sight — he began to speak.

This is what he said … and I interpreted into German, as my colleagues interpreted into other languages.

"We want you to stop fighting. We are scared, and we have waited and waited, but no one will do anything. If you knew how you scare us all the time with your fighting, you wouldn't do it. But you do, and we are here to tell you, if you don't stop right now, right away, we are leaving."

That was all Barry said.

He put down the microphone, and he left the platform, and the children began to mill around as he descended. Then he joined them and, as a unit, they left the General Assembly chamber.

In a few minutes, they were gone, as quickly as they had come.

What happened next was pandemonium. A pandemonium of laughter. The Russian delegation began, and in a few moments it had spread till the entire room was a bonfire of mirth. The Russians begged to speak and when their representative rose he said this was a poor, shabby trick for the Americans to pull, and that it changed no one's mind, except that perhaps the Yankees were greater fools than the world had thought.

The US representative accused the Russians.

The Chinese accused the British.

The French accused the Germans.

Bedlam was the order of the day.

And the next day …

And the next …

But on the fourth day, there was no bedlam, because the wars in Europe, Africa and Asia simultaneously escalated. They didn't last long, however. On the same day, wherever anyone might have been … whether in a bathtub, or on a desert, or in a jungle, or on a mountain-top, they heard the sounds.

The sound that came from everywhere, and nowhere and no place all at the same time. The sound that might have been monstrous ships of space, though no one ever saw them, or saw fire trails in the sky, or anything else. The sound that might have been space tearing and shifting and warping to allow passage.

The sound might have been anything.

Though no one cares too much to find out; no one has been able to think straight since it happened.

On that day, they left.

Where, we do not know. How, we do not know. But they made good their warning. We played the Pied Piper, and we played the wrong tune.

Our children have gone.

It has been a long, long time, and I have not seen my son. It was inevitable that there would be no*more* sons … or daughters … no children born; that seems to fit, ironically.

We have no children, and we miss them, but we haven't too much time to worry about it now. After all, there*is* a war on.

Ten

White Trash Don't Exist

“White Trash don’t exist! Am I right?”

It was Mister Herm Cressman, startin’ in on me again, and I hunkered down near the jukebox with my slop-pail and my brush. I didn’t want Mr. Herm to see me … ’cept I knew he already had, if he was yellin’ that business about me not existin’.

I knew all right. He was wantin’ to do me ever since I come to work at the Deepwater Cafe. He was standin’ there in the middle of the cafe, with his big old sod-boot on the brass rail, and holdin’ his beer mug ’way up high. He looked like he was callin’ the most important thing in the world, and he yelled it again:

“White trash don’t eat, right?”

An’ all them bar loafers who didn’t want to get in bad with big Mr. Herm, they chimed right back at him. “You right, Herm!”

“White trash don’t breathe!”

“Right!”

“White trash just don’t even exist.”

“Yeahhh, you right, Herm!”

They had to say it; they was afraid not to, with him ownin’ the factory and all and being big besides. That would start him off. He slammed the mug on the bar, spillin’ beer all over for Poppa Jango to wipe up, then he stomped all over where I was scrubbin’ on my hands and knees. He yelled down, “White trash don’t even eat. Right, scum-boy?”

My name is Charles Bennett, but he meant me. I always knew that. I’d never answer. I’d learned.

Then, he gave me a nasty little almost-laugh like I was yellow, an’ just stepped on my hand and spit in my hair and kicked the soap-water bucket over before walkin’ away.

I knew my place, sure enough. You got to be poor and miserable all your life to know what it’s all about. If you ain’t, then don’t even try. You wouldn’t understand none of what I’m tellin’ you, how people never talk*to* you, they just talk*at* you. Like they needed all their eyesight to make you out. Like all they could see was the top inch layer of you. That’s how they all looked at me anyways, Mr. Herm ’specially. He hated me clean through. I din’t want trouble. No sir, no trouble.

I guess I was scared right from the start. Then Poppa Jango called me into the storeroom out back of the Deepwater Cafe to warn me, and he was lookin’ all frog-belly white with scare himself. “Charles,” he said, “that Herm Cressman is out for you, boy.”

“I know,” I said, wishin’ I didn’t.

Poppa nodded his head like we’d made a good start on a tough problem, and all the while his face was puckered like a new-born baby. “Good,” he said, soft-like. “But he’s settin’ Lottie on you — to fire you up!”

Then I felt surprised, much as scared, ’cause I’d always stayed far from Miss Lottie, the waitress. She never bothered me much neither, except once or twice to clean up behind the jukebox if I forgot to move it.

“What you mean?” I asked Poppa.

“You know Herm’s been cheatin’ on his wife with Lottie.” He said it like I should know it. Everyone knew it. Those two made up to each other in the back booth at the Deepwater and they didn’t care *who* saw it. Otherwise Poppa Jango wouldn’t of said nothing. He’s a good man who don’t spread gossip.

I nodded my head like to say yes.

“Well, Herm’s told her he’d take her to New Orleans for a week if she pushed you into makin’ a move on her. I guess he just wants an excuse to do ya, Charles.”

I didn’t wanna believe him, but Poppa was meaning it. Why, makin’ a move on Mister Herm’s woman would be just like killin’ myself sure; an’ I wouldn’t kill myself. Then Poppa told me again, real clear like, so’s there wouldn’t be no mistaking. Miss Lottie was gonna smile all over me and brush me and call me like everything till I got so hungry I’d reach at her. And she could do it too. She was like that. I seen men go almost crazy at the sight of her on some Saturday nights in the Deepwater. She’d set that brown, fluffy hair on top her head like a scoop of brown soapsuds that’s about ready to fly off, and wear those pearl things around that white neck of hers. And she was always about to bust out of her clothes. Like one of the men said once, she might be tall and slim but Lottie’s meaty in all the right places. She really got to men all right. I’ve seen them get tossed right out into the mud in the street by Mister Herm ’cause they made a grab for her skirt when she passed by. She was that bad.

“What I’m gone do, Poppa Jango?”

He looked at me like I should know how to melt and said, “Go away, Charles. He hates you. He’ll go real far to do you. Leave Deepwater — go North. You’d have a better chance there anyway. You’re a smart boy.”

I liked what he said, but I din’t believe him. And I knew he din’t believe it neither. I’m real slow, I am. Then I got all confused. I kept thinkin’ of Mam. Mam would never go. She was born in that shack what Daddy built and we lived in and she was bound to die there. That was her wish an’ she wouldn’t do nothin’ else. All she wanted was the swamp smell, the bright birds that flew over the shack, and her pint. And I wasn’t gonna foul it up none.

“No.” I shook my head. “I got to stay with Mam.”

Poppa reached down to me then, grabbed my big arm muscle high up, looked me close. “Then you got to stay far away from Lottie, Charles. She’ll do it for Herm Cressman. She don’t love him, she couldn’t love nobody, that woman — but he’s got the money to take her where she wants to go and you know how he hates you.”

I tried to stay away from her, God knows. I’d make sure I was outside when she was in, and be sweepin’ the floor or somethin’ when she was out. I’d walk a block around the Deepwater in the afternoon, instead of comin’ to work ’long the way she did. I never looked in her face none.

But she was after me, that was sure. She’d be brushing up against me when we passed. Lickin’ her lips. straightening her body with her hands, whisperin’ soft, silky things in my ear when I was workin’ — doin’ all that kind of thing. I was goin’ crazy. She was makin’ me think things, too. Things I din’t want to think. Things Mam told me wasn’t right for me to think.

I’m not made of stone, God knows. I know it ain’t right for me to want a woman, ’cause I ain’t quite as smart as most, but that went on and on and on, till I swear I finally started goin’ crazy. You got to believe me when I tell you I din’t want none of that. I’m just a person, that’s all. I just wanted her to let me be.

It's not that I felt sorry for myself, but she was doin' somethin' wasn't natural, wasn't decent and sure wasn't right.

Then three nights ago, she got me to her house.

"I got packages I need you to carry, Charles," she said, leaning toward me over the bar. Everybody in the Deepwater was takin' their tenth drink of the evening — the bar was full. It was that time of night, and everyone just stopped quiet and watched what was gonna happen. Even Poppa Jango got puckered up like he does when he's scared.

"Sorry, Miss Lottie, I gotta go straight home after work. Mam is down with the croup and I gotta …"

"I want you to*carry* for me, Charles," she said, and her voice was so hard I thought sure it'd shatter.

"No, I …" I started to say no again, but I felt Mr. Herm's big hand on my shoulder. I knew it was him. Then I knew I was gonna be in trouble. Right then was when I knew, so help me God!

"You givin' the lady trouble, scum-boy?"

I looked up over my shoulder. I'm not real small but he was big, almost six foot five, I guess. All bigness. He had a body like dough. I knew if I ever did get a chance to whomp him — no matter*where* I whomped him — it wouldn't mean a thing; he'd just soak up my fist like it was sinking in a pillow. He'd never feel it, then he'd up and kill me. He was so mean, it was comin' outen his eyes.

"No," I said, looking at the floor between Miss Lottie's high heel shoes. "No trouble. No trouble at all, Mr. Herm."

I din't see it, but I knew they was grinnin' at each other. I could feel it. Her with that evil smile that said, "I*love* doin' bad!" and him with his all-over hate-smile, sayin', "We gonna get you soon, white trash!"

I felt my throat like it had a knot in it, so I swallowed. I tried so hard not to let them know I was worried. If I ran fast, I could leave her packages and get away from her house quick.

"What you want me to carry, Miss Lottie?"

Mr. Herm took his hand off me, off my shoulder. I thought a rock had lifted from me. I looked up.

They was both smilin' at each other like I thought they was.

I set the packages down on the table and started to leave.

"Wait a minute, Charles," Miss Lottie said. She said it real low, and in a voice I knew would boil half the men that came into the Deepwater.

She was really tryin' to get me, I was sure of that. 'Cause she'd stayed with me ever since she'd gotten off work at the Cafe. It was gonna be open till later and I had to get back, to clean up when they closed. She knew that. But she wouldn't let me go. I tried to leave once but she called me back, told me to stay with her.

"Protect me, Charles," she'd said, smilin' nasty. "I don't want none of them dirty boys to rape me when I go home." Then she laughed real mean. I knew she didn't mean it, 'cause nobody'd bother her with Mr. Herm being her boy friend. Besides, all they'd had to do is give her five dollars. They din't have to force her. I'd heard tell about it from the men once.

"I got to go. Miss Lottie," I told her. She leaned against the back door, and shrugged off her coat. It was

one of them little halfie things, and she let it fall to the floor. “I got to go,” I said again, and I felt my throat ball up again. Her eyes narrowed down to real finey slits, and I could see she was tryin’ to do me. She was tryin’!

“Stay around a bit, Charles,” she said, swayin’ towards me. I stepped back and wanted to run, but there wasn’t no place to run. I din’t know her house and she’d of locked the front door. Besides, she’d just of got mad, and told Mr. Herm, and I’d be as bad off as ever. She was tryin’ to do me!

“You stay here a minute, Charles. I have to take a bath, then I’ll be goin’ over to meet Mr. Herm. I’ll want you to walk me back.” She had changed, sort of. She wasn’t as slinky as she’d been a second before. Now she was kind of businessy, like she really *did* want me just to hang around so’s I could protect her. That din’t seem right though, ’cause her house was only a block or less from the Deepwater and Mr. Herm could sure as not hear her yell if something wasn’t right.

I didn’t like it at all. I guess I ain’t too smart, because if she had anything planned, I sure couldn’t figure it out. But I wasn’t gonna balk her none. “Okay, Miss Lottie,” I said. I sat down in a kitchen chair.

She went out and I started to get up. Then I sat back down again. I couldn’t run off. There weren’t nowhere to run.

I heard the water running upstairs. I wondered why Miss Lottie was goin’ to all this trouble, just to do me. Why didn’t she just make it up that I’d tried to touch her or made a noise at her, then Mr. Herm could beat me up without no trouble. Why was that?

Then I thought something that scared me right up. What if Mr. Herm wanted to kill me, maybe? He’d do it, alright. He was that bad — he’d do it! What if then?

I knew right away why Miss Lottie was doin’ it. I knew why. It was ’cause she was mean. That woman was as nasty as Mr. Herm hisself, and she liked to see a man suffer. I’d heard how she married once and had a kid, but her old man was mean and beat her up, and she left him and the kid. That’s what I’d heard. I don’t know how true it was — just I heard it. But she liked to see men unhappy, that was plain. And she was fixin’ to make me unhappy. Right then, honest, I hated her worse than anything. I just wanted to be left be. I wasn’t makin’ no trouble.

“Charles!” I heard her voice come driftin’ downstairs. “Come up here a minute.” Oh, Lord, I knew she had somethin’ bad in mind, and I din’t want to go. But she kept callin’ and finally yelled she’d tell Mr. Herm and he’d stomp me if I didn’t do like she said. So I went upstairs.

I*knew* bad was gonna happen. I just knew it!

She was sittin’ in the tub. The water trickles were all over her body and little round drops were in her brown hair, and on her breasts, and all over. She was beautiful that way. Just a little bit pink from the warm water, and the rippling that I could see right through, see all of her in that tab. She had those long legs pulled up together, huggin’ her knees, and when I came into the open doorway, she let them slip down, slow.

I turned my face away. I didn’t want to see that. I looked all over at that bathroom. All the pink curtains and the perfumes on the glass shelf, and the fingernail stuff to file and paint and make her beautiful. I looked at all that stuff laying there.

Then I had to look back at her. I couldn’t help myself none. Ain’t nobody could blame me a bit I*had* to.

“Soap up my back, Charles,” she said, holding out a pink washrag.

"I — I gotta go, M-Miss Lottie …" My voice was real wavery, like it might not have even been my own to speak with. She glared at me real mad, and snapped I should wash her back or she'd tell Mr. Herm on me. I got scared, then, and took that cloth.

Her skin was warm, and like it seemed to be glowin'. When I started soapin' the rag, she stood up, the water flowin' off her and splashin' on the floor.

"Now here," she said, running her hands over her stomach. Oh God! I knew this was what she wanted. I felt my tongue get all dry in my mouth, and I started shakin'. She was a tall lady, and she had beautiful legs and body right there in front of me.

She looked at me careful-like, up and down. "My goodness," she said, real sweetness. "I do believe you're excited, Charles."

I din't say nothing, just kept running that soapy cloth over her. Once my fingers touched the skin and I felt like an eel had grabbed onto me. She was so pretty. Why was she tryin' to do me so?

I guess I got carried away because my hand kept feelin', even after I dropped the washrag and it fell in the tub. First with just one hand, then with both. I was lookin' at her stomach, just feelin' around and rubbin' and I was sweatin' and feelin' real strange. I started to say, "M-Miss Lottie, you're so pret …"

That's as much as she let me get out. She gritted at me, the words comin' out between her teeth. "Okay, trash, you touched me. Now get the hell outta here. Just wait'll Herm gets his hooks on you." She kept on like that, yet kind of ooin' and ahhin' 'cause I kept rubbin'. She tried to back away but I guess I wasn't thinkin' because I stuck right with her, leanin' over the tub and when she slipped and splashed in the tub, I couldn't help fallin' in with her, I guess.

"Get off me, scum!" she yelled, thrashin' all about but I din't hear her.

I guess I went bad inside, 'cause I started unbuttoning my jeans and tryin' to kiss her movin' shoulders with the wet hair and like that. I don't remember it all except I did something I never did before. We was flappin' around in the tub like catfish in a net and for a while she stopped callin' me "trash" and "scum" and started scratching my back and yellin' things and moanin' so's I wanted to stop but couldn't. She wouldn't let me. She locked her legs around mine and kept splashin' until all of a sudden I stopped and laid there like paralyzed.

I never felt like that before in my life. Then after a minute, we stopped breathin' heavy and her little noises stopped. She tried to open her eyes but they wouldn't stay open.

I got scared when I remembered where I was. I climbed up off her and the tub and ran down the stairs with my shoes squishin' and drippin' water everywhere.

I din't want goin' in the Deepwater like that. My clothes was all wet. I din't know what I was goin' to say. When I walked in, everyone just stared at me. Mr. Herm stared and Poppa Jango stared and even old Walker Drummon who was half-corked, even he stared at me like everyone else. And when I looked down, I knew darn well why.

My jeans was still unbuttoned and I was bare there.

Mr. Herm got mad in the eyes and looked like he was goin' to ask me something. I looked at Poppa Jango, buttonin' up and feelin' more scared than before, when all a sudden we heard her yell. It came from down the street. I heard her and they heard her too.

"Hermy!" she screamed. "He did it! He did it, Hermy!"

I got that feelin' in my throat again and watched Mr. Herm. His face turned all kinds of colors and he started comin' toward me. He was mumblin' "dirty scum" and "white trash" and Poppa Jango was wavin' like "go."

Next thing, I was out the door runnin' like a hound. I was flyin' down the street, past where Miss Lottie was standin' on her porch in a nightcoat and runnin' straight for the swamp.

Trees was flyin' past me and back behind me I could hear Mr. Herm yellin' and swearin' and comin' after me.

He din't even stop to see Miss Lottie. It was me he was wantin'.

"Rotten stinkin' white trash sonofabitch!" he was yellin'. "I'll kill you!"

I kept goin' fast as I could. The dark was closing in so tight over Deepwater you'd of thought the end of the world was comin'. I ran down streets and through an alley and, all the time, Mr. Herm behind me.

Maybe 'cause he drank too much or 'cause I'm younger and faster, I got clean away. I ran right out of town. Down the Sidehill Road and into the swamp back of Gurley's farm. I saw car lights comin' over the hill and down the road about ten minutes after I ploughed in, so I had to go deeper.

The swamp ain't no place for a man. Not in the day, and never, never in the night! There's stuff you can hear: crickets clicking in the reeds, the fish down deep, bubblin' slow, and the cottonmouths slitherin' through the brush. And then there's stuff you*can't* hear — stuff you know comes from Hell and don't belong to man nor God. Like the swamp dust, like the bog-smell and the quicksand and death all around.

I din't like goin' in there, so help me, I din't. But I was more scared of Mr. Herm than of all that death in there.

The mud was up to my waist but I kept swinging one leg in front the other, pushing forward till the hanging stuff was all around me, till the swamp had closed in like a blanket. Once in a while the water slithered when a moccasin went past near me. An' once I almost stumbled out of the mud into a bog-patch of quicksand.

I moved all night — I don't know why I din't get tired.

I was up on a little island in the middle of the blackwater when the dawn come up. The white mist was rising and the way the island pushed out I could see everything for a hundred yards each way. It's almost pretty in the swamp in the morning like that. The way the little wigglers skitter across the watertop. The pools are so clear you can see clean through to the bottom. And it was quiet. So quiet that when the swamp-critters was makin' a huge fussin', all chirp and bellow and mouthin' at once, I knew someone was comin'.

I couldn't move. I was too tired of it all.

I saw Mr. Herm way before he saw me.

He was comin' through, poling a flatbottom like he wanted nothing else but to get me. A shotgun, twelve-gauge, I'd guess, was stickin' on up and he was swipin' them stringers that was hangin', getting them outten his way. I knew, sudden, that man was happy as he could be. He din't care none about Miss Lottie — he just wanted at me. Out here, with no one else around, he could beat me till I dropped stone dead.

He spotted me sittin' on the bank, with my knees hugged to my chest — it was pretty chilly, early then.

In the mist, he looked like he was walking on air or clouds. He was workin' that pole like he couldn't get to me fast enough.

"Bennett!" he yelled. "Bennett, you scum! I'm gonna kill you for what you done!" He went on like that for the longest time, his bellowin' echoing through the swamp and all the while glidin' straight toward me.

I looked around for something to swat with. But there wasn't nothing on that muddy island. Not even a good rock. Then when he got real close, till he was so big I could hardly see around him, he grabbed the shotgun and jumped on out of that flatbottom. He came down hard on the mud and started running toward me.

I backed up but there weren't nowhere to go. I just waited.

He took about two steps and that's all. He just started sinking in and looking all around surprised. He yanked and strained and wanted to come after me — I was only about fifteen feet away up the bank — but he couldn't make it.

His ankles went under. "*Quicksand!*" He screamed at me, his eyeballs bulgin' so big and white. "Quicksand, Bennett, quicksand!"

He kept yellin' like I should do something. I walked over slow, just as the mud sucked in around the twin poles of his legs, draggin' him deeper. He reached out with the gun barrel, holdin' it by the stock. "Grab it, Bennett!"

I started to but I was afraid he'd pull the trigger on me.

"For God's sake, Bennett, grab it!"

I got scared and started backing away. And when his thighs disappeared and then his big dough stomach, he started hollering and screaming. He layed out flat like he was goin' to swim out of it and when he seen he couldn't, he fired on me.

The blast brought down a tree limb over my head. He tried to fire the other barrel but the mud was already suckin' his hands in. And with all that squishin' and suckin' I felt funny-like. 'Cause every inch of Mr. Herm that went in, was an inch that couldn't hurt me no more.

It was him what made me bad and do what I did with Miss Lottie. I don't know why he hated me so. Maybe 'cause his factory was doin' poor and he din't like bein' married and he had to take it out on someone. I never talked back to him. Not once. Even now, while he was bein' swallowed up — I never said nothing.

The shotgun and his shoulders went under about the same time, real smooth. Only his head was stickin' out now and I watched real close. I didn't want to miss none of that. And it was only then that I found the words.

I walked up to the edge of the darker mud. "How can I help you, Mr. Herm? You always told me true that white trash don't eat, don't sleep or breathe —*and don't exist at all. And if I don't exist,* Mr. Herm —" I laughed kinda "— how'm I goin' to pull you out?"

He started to say something, but his mouth filled up with mud.

Then his head went under, went down with a sucking, puffing noise, and the bubbles came up real slow for a little bit, till the mud closed over his hair with little ripples and movements, and the top was all smooth and quiet.

I could of helped him, I guess. But I was scared and after I wasn't scared no more, I din't care. He hated me, Mr. Herm did, and bein' as hate can run both ways, I guess some of it rubbed off on me. Maybe if he wasn't always tellin' me I din't exist when I knew I did …

Anyway, it's too late now.

Sittin' with my knees pulled up like before and thinkin' of Miss Lottie instead, I knew it's bad what we did an' Mam'll be mad with me, but it felt good just the same.

In a little while, I'm goin' back — after I've thought a little bit more. I hope they'll believe me; I won't lie none. If Poppa Jango will allow, I'll work the Deepwater same as always. No — not the same as always. Things has changed now, I guess. Won't no one say I don't exist. No one — 'specially not Miss Lottie.

Eleven

Thicker than Blood

"Blood may be thicker than water.… but there ain't no getting away from it: money's thicker than blood."

—Old Times Square Saying

"No, no, no and *no* , Roger, we are *not* going to give you the twelve thousand dollars! We put you in business when you married Felice —*because* you married Felice — and we thought it was a bad investment *then;* you've only borne out our contention. I speak for Harold and Madge and Ralph, as well as myself in this. No money. Not a cent."

Roger Singer stared moodily at his right shirt cuff. It was frayed. Only slightly, but it somehow seemed indicative: he was going downhill. He looked up at the florid man who had spoken.

"But, Uncle Bob, you've got to understand. I'm in debt *twelve thousand dollars* ."

The florid man nodded in annoyance. He sucked on the imported Cuban cigar between his lips, rolled it to the opposite corner of his mouth. "I know, I know, Roger. You've been saying that all evening … it seems to be the only thing you *can* say. And *you've* got to understand, too. You're not getting the money from us. Just because we're Felice's brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts, don't think you can lean on us because of your own mismanagement."

His deep-set black eyes flashed, and he removed the cigar, adding with vehemence, "And stop calling me Uncle Bob!"

Roger Singer ran a shaking hand through the short hairs at the back of his neck, feeling the loose hair from the barber shop; he had gotten the haircut specially; rented the evening jacket specially; invited the family to dinner specially. All for nothing.

He knew it was hopeless, all hopeless now. They would force him into bankruptcy; force, too, his working for someone else, probably the family. He would lose the linoleum shop, lose his independence, lose his integrity working for those filthy rich, filthy fat relatives of his — who hated him.

He stared across momentarily at Uncle Bob, sitting there with legs spread far apart because his belly got in the way. Uncle Bob looking fat and florid and surly because he'd had to refuse that wastrel Roger

again.

Roger saw the gleam of pleasure in Uncle Bob's eyes; they'd been waiting for this, waiting for him to get so far in debt he'd have to come begging, so they could refuse him.

"You — won't — reconsid …"

Bob's fat, oily hand came down on the kitchen table with a thump. "No! I will not! Now let's get out of this kitchen, and back to the family. Thank God Penny is more like her mother … not like you. It's the only reason I came tonight. To see Felice and the child."

He rose heavily, straining against the fat, and waddled toward the living room of the apartment.

Roger watched him go for a moment, thinking. You can spare the money, you bastard! You just won't, that's all!

In the living room Harold and scrawny Madge and Ralph were coaxing Penny to do her imitation of Lily Tomlin. Roger stared at his stepdaughter from the doorway of the kitchen, and knew he couldn't go in there immediately.

"I'll be right in," he said. "Just getting a glass of water." He backed into the kitchen. He turned off the lights.

He stood in the darkness and let his hand glide over the angry sharpness of his jawline. It was all so futile, just when it could have been so right.

He flipped back through his memories of the past six years as he might have flipped a series of animation cards, letting sequence after sequence pop into sight before descending into blackness.

He had married Felice for her money. He had no compunctions about admitting it to himself; but he had been justified. There was no other way to get the money for the shop. And it wasn't selfishness entirely; Felice's first husband had been dead two years, and she had needed someone to lean on badly. Penny, too, had needed an object of male affection. It was so true; the way she called him "Daddy" and hung on him. Roger's face quirked slightly at the nauseating thought of the nine-year-old girl hanging on him, literally *begging* for affection. So it had been a fifty-fifty bargain, and Felice had not come off badly at all.

In fact, it had been he who had come off badly. Those dollar-clutching relatives, with their millions. They had made his road as difficult as possible. They just hadn't liked him. Right from the first.

Now they had their revenge.

He would lose the linoleum shop, and they would put him to work in some menial office job at the mill, or in the brokerage, or perhaps even in the shipping office of one of their many small businesses.

Perhaps he *had* handled the shop's affairs a bit poorly. It had only been through over-optimism about the shop's potential. Overbuying. Overstock. And then an extra-long slack season called Recession. Upper Amsterdam was dotted with linoleum shops; he should have realized it took a long, long time to build up prestige in a neighborhood. But he hadn't, and now he was in trouble.

Would they help him … their Felice's husband … when he needed it so desperately? *They would not!*

He let the last memory flick out of sight, and sighed wearily, sinking back against the wall. He had even tried to get Felice to cash in Penny's bonds, but she had looked at him as though he were crazy. Penny. She was wealthier than him! Thoughts of the little girl annoyed him; he put her instantly from his mind.

He shoved back through the swinging door and joined the family in the living room.

"Oh, Daddy!" Penny smiled as he came into sight, running to him. "Let's show Uncle Bob and Aunt Madge how I can swing from the door ledge. Lift me, Daddy!"

Roger felt an unreasoning fury rise up in him.

"Not now, Penny."

"Pleeease, Daddy?"

"I*said* not now, Penny. Later."

She sulked then, the way she always did, and he felt like slapping her, the way he had yesterday when she had washed his pipe, saying it was smelly. But he could see the annoyed expressions of the relatives. No need to get them any more rankled than they were. He lifted her, let her fingertips hook onto the ledge over the door to the dining room. Penny hung there an instant, then let go with a sharp squeal.

She fell to the carpet, and instantly the relatives were on their feet.*Their darling niece* , Roger thought sourly.

"She's all right," he said quickly.

Penny got up, shamefacedly, and brushed off her skirt. "I couldn't hold on as good as I usually do." She grinned.

The relatives grinned back.

Roger felt the depression of finality welling up in him.

The evening went badly.

Roger lay awake in his bed, thinking. Across from him Felice lay heavily on her back, the sharp, short wheeze that annoyed him so helping to keep him alert now; he wanted to be alert now.

There seemed no way out. The jobbers would take back the merchandise, and the shop owner would break the lease somehow. Shortly thereafter he would be back in servitude. To work under someone again, as he had six years before, seemed the most abhorrent of fates after being his own boss.

Then, as he lay there, from some unknown well of desperate resource … because he*was* desperate … something that Uncle Bob (no, not again, never again*Uncle* Bob; just Bob, that was all) had said when Penny got up from the floor, registered. Registered differently than the first time he had heard it.

We just wouldn't know what to do if anything happened to our little Penny.

The first time, he had thought wryly that it would be delightful if something happened to the affection-hungry little brat. But now …

Now there was more to it, and a plan formed. Slowly, but with increasing clarity, till he sat up and thought about it coldly. Finally, he got out of bed and went to find his pipe. To think some more. Would it work? Could it work? Why not?

He examined it from every angle, playing devil's advocate with the idea, posing every possible catastrophic fuck-up imaginable. But be was able to continue a way around each one; till it became obvious the plan was foolproof.

Revenge and a solution and everything all knitted together so beautifully he felt like clapping his hands in joy. But he stilled the happiness within him and looked at it again, exhaustively, from every fantastically improbable viewpoint of failure. There would be difficulties, but not nearly as many as he had first supposed. By doing it as simply and directly as possible, it would work.

He drew deeply on the pipe, sitting on the sofa, his feet up on the coffee table, staring at the redness of his heels in the bedroom slippers.

It would work. Dammit, it would work!

The next day he closed the shop at lunchtime and drove the pickup truck down onto 23rd Street, stopping at a likely pawn shop.

He bought the old office model Underwood typewriter for fifteen dollars, carrying it quickly to the truck, and leaving before the owner could remember who he was, or what direction he had taken.

Back in the shop he typed the note on a piece of plain paper napkin, taken from a Nedick's orange juice stand in midtown Manhattan. He wore gloves.

The note was short and direct.

Then he waited three weeks, stalling off the bill collectors, telling them he was getting a loan from the bank.

Then the*night* arrived.

He waited silently, feigning sleep, till three-thirty when the night was at its most silent. Then, he dressed quickly and quietly, making certain Felice in the other bed did not waken. Then he took the rope and the gag and the many strips of adhesive tape he had secreted beneath his winter sweaters in the bureau, and crept silently into Penny's room.

He had the ten strips of adhesive over her eyes, and the gag in her mouth, taped down, before her struggles grew violent. It was unnecessary to become brutal about it; just a light tap behind the ear, and she went limp.

He tied her securely, hands behind her back, and carried her down the service stairs to the street, making certain he had not been seen. It was perfect; not a soul in sight, and as moonless a night as one could wish, so the insomniacs in their nocturnal wanderings could not be sure of anything they saw.

The car was directly in front of the building. He had made certain of that. The drive out to Jersey was smooth and fast with traffic in the Holland Tunnel almost nonexistent. Penny lay silently under a blanket in the trunk.

He had scouted the area carefully, and found the abandoned farmhouse outside Red Bank, New Jersey with little difficulty. The weather-beaten, almost-collapsed tool shed was set back from the house, in a little hollow: cut off from sight from the road.

He put the flashlight on the shelf and shone it on the post he had driven into the ground the week before. He tested it again to make certain it was solid. It wouldn't budge an inch, no matter how hard he struggled, and he tied Penny to it tightly, making certain the adhesive was still over her eyes. She came to, just as he was burning the gloves. She struggled and coughed, and tried to scream, but it did no good. She was secured. For two days, if all went well.

For an instant he had qualms about her starving, left alone for two days. He thought back and tried to

remember if he had heard of two-day starvation. Nothing came to mind, and he dismissed the thoughts, making certain the gloves burned to ash …

He gathered the remains on a piece of newspaper and folded it together to be disposed of along the road back to New York.

He looked at his step-daughter for a moment longer, then edged the door open with his foot. As he did so, he looked down, and smiled at his cleverness in wearing a new pair of tennis shoes. Shoes that could be bought in any one of a hundred stores in Manhattan, but shoes he had bought two years before — and had never gotten to wear. *They* would go, too, as soon as he was in the car and driving back.

He didn't bother to say goodbye to Penny.

No sense letting her know it was her "Dear, Darling Daddy" who had kidnapped her.

He edged the door closed securely, and went back to the car. The night was still moonless. Ideal for a late drive home.

It had all been easier than he'd thought.

He had made a point of sleeping late the next morning, waiting till Felice's sharp, repetitive screams had brought him leaping from the bed. He had rushed into the small bedroom, seen Felice screaming over and over again, crying, moaning, beating at the pillow.

He had given close attention to the note, just like any terrified father, and read it over to himself, reveling in its simple wording as keynote of the entire scheme:

DELIVER 200 THOUSAND DOLLARS TO ME IN SMALL UNMARKED BILLS AT THE DOWNTOWN ENTRANCE OF THE 79TH ST IRT SUBWAY BY NOON TOMORROW OR YOU WILL NEVER SEE YOUR UTTLE GIRL ALIVE AGAIN. DO NOT CONTACT THE COPS OR SHE WILL DIE. WE WILL KNOW IF YOU CONTACT THEM.

He had called Bob immediately, reaching him at the brokerage. All the relatives had shown up an hour later, all terrified, all anxious to help, an anxious to kick in their share of the two hundred thousand dollars to get their darling little Penny back again.

Felice had had to be put under a sedative, and for a time Roger worried only about Bob's suspicions nature. He knew the question would come up of why *Penny* had been singled out for kidnapping, but he pretended too much anguish to worry about trivial details, and the question passed unnoticed. So did all the others — how the kidnapper had gotten in, how he had left, what would happen if they *did* see the police — and finally, Bob and Ralph and Madge and Harold had called their lawyers for the money.

Two hours later the money arrived, and Roger was adamant about carrying the payoff. "After all, she *is* my little girl, even if she is my step-daughter!"

Three years in high school dramatics paid off handsomely. They believed him. He had the money.

The next day at noon, he took the envelopes of bills — which, under the pretense of being the distraught father, he had checked to insure against markings — and went to the subway, making certain he was not followed.

He left the money wedged behind the big candy machine bolted to the wall in the subway, and came home, describing a pock-faced man with hat pulled low who had disappeared into the subway immediately after telling him to go home and wait and to tell no one what had happened.

They believed him.

What else could they do.

He cried so damned convincingly.

The night was not moonless, but the overcast clouds blotted it so effectively, it might well *have* been. He drove to Red Bank with a light heart. He would wait an appropriate length of time before using the money he had retrieved from behind the candy machine. The money that nestled under the rubber matting of the car's trunk. He would use small amounts to make token payments to all his creditors, to forestall them, and in a year he would have it all paid off, with enough capital to expand a bit.

Roger whistled merrily as he drove the endless night to the abandoned farm house.

Penny had worked steadily at the ropes. They were tight, but a nine-year-old girl's fingers are small, and fingernails are sharp, and two days struggling, though producing bloody hands, could work wonders. It was night again. She could tell, because the owl in the tree somewhere outside to the left was hooting again in that frightening way.

Then, suddenly, the bonds were loose, and her numbed hands slipped free. She struggled with the tape over her eyes, ripping it off painfully. Then the tape from her mouth, and she spat out the gag with a strangled cough. It was so, so, so dark from behind the tape; she could see nothing. Then, as she fumbled with the ropes that bound her feet, the tool shed came into focus a bit.

She heard a car drive up outside, and stop. Then the crunch of footsteps approaching. Was *he* coming back? What would he do to her now?

Vague, formless terrors of childhood surrounded her: the devil, the bogey-man, the twitchee that Daddy said would eat her alive if she whined, all of them back to haunt her at once. Two days of terror mounted in her throat, and she turned like a caged animal, a small animal, seeking some way out. The door was the only way, and now she could hear the steps approaching the door.

She saw a flicker of lighter something in the dirt by the wall, and reached for it.

A pitchfork, broken off three-quarters of the way up the handle.

She hefted it, feeling the bits of dirt clinging to the wood. The rusty pitchfork felt terribly heavy in her tired arms, but she stood trembling, ready at least to scream and fight!

The footsteps began to hurry, almost run, as though the man was in a rush to do what he had come to do.

Then the door burst open, and a gigantic black shape was there, and Penny lunged heavily at it. The combined speed of the running man and the lunging child drove the rusty pitchfork deep, deep, deep into the black shadow, and the man screamed high and whining, the sound bubbling up in his throat.

Penny screamed, and shouted at the shadow, "You let me alone, let me alone! I want my Daddy, I want my Daddy!"

The shadow bubbled again, then fell.

The night was silent once more, save the hoot of the owl in the tree, and the soft moan of the little girl as she cried, over and over, "I want my Daddy …"

Twelve

Two Inches in Tomorrow's Column

Benny kicked the electric blanket off his naked feet, patted Bonnie on her naked stomach, and placed the telephone receiver to his naked ear. Three chuckles of ringing and abruptly, on the other end, a cricket was rubbing its hind legs together. It was Candy, Orson Heller's right-hand boy.

"Mistuh Helluh's office," the cricket chirruped.

"Candy baby!" Benny was not smiling. "Like to talk to Mr. Heller. This is Benny." Bonnie had lit a filter; now she handed it across, and Benny puffed deeply.

"Jus'a'minnit, Mr. Mogelson. Mr. Helluh'll be right whichah." There was the soggy sound of a hand coming across the mouthpiece, a faraway voice, and the phone changed owners.

Orson Heller — who, for seventeen years, had been in charge of the Combine's hit system, i.e., its assassination branch — cleared his throat. As befitted the new owner of the Sunset Strip's poshest dining club. "Benny. How's my PR man?"

"Orson, I'm a hero."

"That so?"

The public relations man straightened in Bonnie's bed, and flicked ashes unceremoniously onto the white pile rug. "So. Very much so. Remember I told you I'd make you a star? Well, by this time tomorrow, The Barbary Coast and its new owner — the celebrated Mr. Orson Heller — will be the hottest properties in Hollywood."

"You talk a lot, Benny."

Heller had not quite lost the thug tones he bad employed for seventeen years. Or perhaps the weight of sixty-four men's souls — shot, stabbed, doused with acid, embedded in concrete, and fed to the fishes — rested heavily on the vocal cords as well as the spirit.

"What I'm trying to build you up for, Orson sweetie, is —"

"Don't call me those names, Benny."

"— uh, yessir, yessir, well, what I'm trying to tell you is that you get two inches in tomorrow's paper. And are you sitting down? Are you planted firmly? Are you ready for this? Ta-ra-ta-t*aaaa!* You, oh employer of mine, will be two inches in *Bonnie Prentiss'* column."

The smirk came unbidden to Benny Mogelson's publicly related face.

The gasp was tiny, but audible, at the other end. "Bonnie Prentiss? Saaaaay …" Heller drew the word out with awe and pleasure. "Benny boy, you are a winner. An authentic winner. How did you manage *that?"*

Benny's hand strayed absently to Bonnie's full breasts. Firm and still warm from the recent encounter. "Oh, just a little *schmachling* — a little butter — Orson. Miss Prentiss and I are old friends."

Heller was delighted. "Great, Benny, just great. I knew when I hired you on as PR for the club, I just

knew, you were going to pan out. Glad to see it. See you tomorrow after the column hits the newsstands. A little bonus perhaps."

"Fine, Orson. Just fine. Talk to you tomorrow."

He racked the receiver and turned to Bonnie. She was really getting long in the tooth, he mentally noted for the thousandth time. The little crow's tracks were becoming more prominent, even with her heavy tan, evenly laid on by metal reflectors, poolside. And the sooty puddles of dissipation under the eyes were daily becoming a little harder to disguise with heavier and heavier layers of pancake makeup. Too many oversweet daiquiris, and too many overplayed young boys. Too many rocks in the rack with hustlers like Benny Mogelson, PR man supreme.

"That hood!" Bonnie Prentiss snorted viciously. "All the French cuffs, big studs and white-on-white ties will never make him anything more than a hood. Why do you associate with such filth, Benny?"

"Because," Benny replied nastily, snubbing the butt in the onyx ashtray, "this is a town full of teeth, Bonnie baby, and I have this thing about fang marks in my neck. Heller pays me a nice fee for getting him promo coverage. If I don't do it, some other*schlep* 'll do it instead."

"He's a dangerous clown," Bonnie said, rubbing herself up against Benny.

As he turned toward her again, feeling her body heat rise, Benny murmured softly, "Hey, baby, that, uh, that column already went to bed, didn't it? Tomorrow's items?"

"Mmm-hmm," Bonnie hummed, reaching her half-open mouth up to his. "Time for*everybody* to go to bed …"

Benny closed his eyes and moved in next to her. He had to close his eyes; he couldn't stomach making love to Bonnie with them open … the aging harridan … and with his eyes closed he could dwell in silence and darkness on the exquisite pleasure of the letter she would receive in her mail that day. The letter that would tell her it was all over between them; that he had been using her lust and his cunning against her for three months; bedding her in exchange for favorable items about his clients in her column. The letter that wished her hail and farewell, since he now had a happy and contented list of big-name clients who would stick with him despite the anger he knew she would direct against him.

"… but it gets to be time for me to remember that I'm a human being, not a rutting machine," the letter concluded, "and there are other columnists I don't have to wallow in scum with, to get a mention. Bye bye baby. Stay well, and say hello to the next young patsy you sucker into your sack.

With eyes closed, and hands mechanically busy, Benny could dwell on the fact that he had outsmarted Hollywood, that the town had not gotten to him, that he had come out on top.

Yes, this time he was on top.

And after a while, she was.

Benny's tailor was fitting the new hopsacking sport jacket in the office (very Palm Springs: double-breasted, royal blue, military crest buttons), when the phone call came. It was a full day since he had last seen Bonnie, and he had been expecting this call. She had gotten the letter.

"Mr. Mogelson," said the switchboard girl, "Miss Prentiss on 45, sir." He pressed the button and Bonnie's voice came floating out at him.

"Benny darling, I got your letter."

He took a deep breath. What threats would she offer? “Sorry, Bonnie. But it’s been a hard three months.” He tapped his right cuff, holding the phone with his shoulder, indicating to the kneeling tailor that he wanted more length at the wrist.

“I understand perfectly, darling. Perfectly.” Bonnie almost purred. Benny’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t sound angry.

“It was fun while it lasted, Bonnie, that’s it.” He tried to goad her into frenzy, trying to extract from her a tiny measure of anguish for the degradation she had heaped on him for the blackmailing hours in her bed of pain.

But Bonnie was soft as one of Dali’s watches. “Benny, my sweet, I understand completely. I’m sorry I misused you. Well, I’ll just sign off now, darling.”

There was a golden pause.

“Oh, yes,” Bonnie added, almost as an afterthought, “you know my friend Theo, at the Amusement Center? He also sends his hellos and goodbyes. Night-night, darling.” And she was gone.

He was still holding the phone as the switchboard girl came back on. “Mr. Mogelson? Today’s papers are here, sir. Do you want me to send them in with Diane?”

Benny answered yes, absently, and hung up the phone, still perplexed by Bonnie’s call. No fury? No threats? There was something wrong. That woman had ruined better men than him for less than what he had done to her. She was infamous in Hollywood; the most vindictive shrike going. And that comment about Theo, at the penny arcade. Now what the hell did she mean by that …?

The office door opened and Diane came in, depositing a stack of daily papers on Benny’s desk. “I’m leaving now, Mr. Mogelson,” she said. “My afternoon with the dentist.” She smiled at him with her almost complete set of capped teeth. Benny nodded absently; he was still thinking about Bonnie.

“Oh, there’s a paper there from Miss Prentiss’ office, Mr. Mogelson,” she added, hand on doorknob. “It came over by special messenger a few minutes ago.”

Benny had hurriedly rummaged through the paper seeking Bonnie’s column before the office door had closed behind the secretary. He found it and scanned down the column till he found the item:

For T-Men curious about phony restaurateur Orson Heller’s income tax, a reliable tipster informs this columnist that a careful study of safety deposit boxes in the Farmers’ Trust, the Surety National and the Seaforth Savings & Loan under the respective names Seymour Sunson, Walter Moon and Kenneth Starzl will reveal interesting results. Mr. Heller’s current enterprise, the shabbily renovated Barbary Coast *boîte* , fails to purchase for this gentleman the respectability denied him by a career as checkered as his tablecloths.

Benny’s mouth was dry as chalk-dust. It was impossible. He had read the item before she had sent it to the newspaper. She couldn’t*possibly* have changed it. The edition had gone to bed a day ahead of time, standard procedure for syndicated columnists, and there was no way of calling it back. He grabbed up a newsstand copy of the paper from the desk, and turned to the column. He’d been right. It was as she had sent it in.

Then what was this other, deadly, item?

He had no more time to wonder about it; the door to the office opened, and Orson Heller and Candy came into the room softly. “Leave!” Candy jabbed a finger at the tailor.

The tailor took one look at Candy, at the set of his yellow teeth against his lower lip, and nearly swallowed the pins in his mouth. He looked up at Benny Mogelson. “I said: leave,” Candy repeated. The tailor left, hurriedly.

Benny found himself staring at the blued-steel bulk of a .38 Police Special, the cumbersome cylinder of a silencer marring its smooth muzzle length. “Orson, baby, I —”

“I got this by special messenger, fifteen minutes ago, Benny buddy,” Orson said gently, handing across the folded edition of Bonnie’s newspaper.

One glance told Benny it was the bogus edition, and all at once, clearly and quickly, he knew what Bonnie had done. Theo, at the penny arcade, printed up dummy newspapers. The kind hick tourists bought, with jazzy headlines like HARRY SMITH HITS HOLLYWOOD, GIRLS TAKE TO THE HILLS!

And before Heller could get to Bonnie, she would somehow let him know it had been a gag, and get the real, the street, edition to him, saying Benny had thought it would be a funny bit, for his eyes only … or some-such drivel. But it would work; Heller would think ten times before giving Bonnie — as big as she was on the scene — a hard time.

But that wouldn’t save Benny.

It would be too late, then.

“Orson, baby, sweetie, listen, I —”

“I’ve told you, Benny, don’t call me those names,” Heller said companionably.

The silencer chugged once, asthmatically.

Benny was spun backward, against the desk, and as he hit the floor, as the light began to flicker and dim, he realized they would never find his body. He would be gone, like most of the other men Heller had hit. Bonnie had fouled him good. Very good.

Today, Orson Heller had gotten his two inches in the daily edition.

And by tomorrow, Benny Mogelson would have gotten six feet, or possibly full fathom five.

And as the light went further and further away, finally fading out entirely, he contemplated the ultimate irony of his career; that Benny Mogelson would never, never even get his two inches in tomorrow’s column. The obituary column.

Thirteen

Promises of Laughter

All you need to know about me is that I was maybe, just possibly, there’s a good chance, you’d better believe it, going down for the third time in the sea of life.

That was the way it was for me — maybe — the night I met Holdie Karp. First time I set eyes on her, coming across the room at that phonyass literary coke-spoon party, I knew we’d get down together. Didn’t need any vibrations, didn’t need any sparring, didn’t need any games people play; there was enough heat coming off her to shatter my thermostat.

Denny Zucker introduced us. Denny was the lively arts editor of *The Flash* , an underground newspaper. Both Holdie Karp and I had written for him, and he knew we hadn't met. "Johnny, this is Holdie Karp. Holdie, I want you to meet Johnny Noone."

What a thrump of joy: not only did she have a considerable talent, but she was fine to behold, too. She was a writer, with a lot of clout. At one and the same instant we lunged at each other, me saying, "Hey, I read that piece you did on swinging singles in the Valley," and her saying, "Hey, I read that piece you did on William DeVane," and both of us coming in on harmony, "Jeezus, you can write!"

Then we stood there grinning at each other.

A week later, prior commitments being what they are, we wound up in bed.

She was a big lady and inventive and we both enjoyed the hell out of it. I was performing like the headline attraction in a Cuban Superman act. Ordinarily, I'm okay in bed … nothing to rent a Sunset Strip billboard to crow about, but Holdie brought out the best in me, a lot of which I hadn't even known was in there. It went on for hours and hours, till the bed was soaked with sweat, and we ran out of baby oil to slop all over us. Oh, it was fine, just fine.

Couple of nights later I took her to a play. It was a bad play, and we dug it like mad because we both sat there knowing the other was hating it in precisely the same way, and when it was intermission we went out for a smoke. I lit her cigarette, and she lit mine; and we looked at each other and then looked at the poster of the play in the show-window of the theater; at the star and the director posing for the camera, looking like a pair of bats without a guano pile; and we broke up laughing. We split at once, went back to my place, broke apart long enough to use the two typewriters in my apartment to write our reviews of the play for our respective editors, and then fell into bed. We rolled around and around and laughed and did it every whichway we could think of, just to thumb our noses at bats and their bum plays.

I took her out to dinner and we played grabass in the car, and it was that seldom once-in-a-while fine thing, being turned on by a woman who was also a person and had stuff going for herself, and knowing that even if my Wurlitzer rotted and fell off, even if her Charlies sagged and turned to empty Baggies, we'd still be buddies and craft companions and could laugh at all the bats and their bum plays.

Which was what I needed. Because you see, down where I lived, down here in my gut, I was foundering. I was going down for the third time, sucking up all the bile in my nostrils and my mouth, feeling the tide beating black in my head. So Holdie was a life preserver. Hosannah!

Then, less than a month after I'd met her, I was doing some talking with the editor of a men's magazine I'd written for. He was desperate for high-grade material. I was already boxed-in on assignments, didn't have the time for him, and he was crying the blues.

"Hold on," I said. "I've got just the writer for you. Holdie Karp. Really dynamite writer. You've seen her stuff in *Cosmo* and *Esquire* , haven't you?"

He opened up like a flower after the rain.

I couldn't wait to get over to her house in the hills, to tell her she could make a grand a month just selling reprints of her other magazine pieces. Picked up a couple of barbequed beef sandwiches and milk shakes, and came ripping into her driveway doing fifty. Almost hit her MG.

She was covered with black from changing a typewriter ribbon, hair dangling down onto her big chest, tongue hanging out at the sight of the food. She gave me an enormous, sloppy kiss and rolled her eyes like a panda, trying to figure out if she wanted food first, or bed first.

“No sex,” I said sternly. “No sex. I have the world’s greatest deal for you. Only the world’s most sen-say-sheh-null deal. A star you’ll be by this time tomorrow, buhbie. A star of the first magnitude!”

I came on like an eight-axle diesel. I ran her all the data on what the editor needed, on how she had the subsidiary rights to all her work and could sell it for more than what she’d gotten the first time because this was a national magazine and not a local newspaper or a dinky underground sheet. She reeled back and flopped on the sofa, barely missing crushing her dog, Roger.

“Let me see everything you’ve written in the past year,” I said. “Now! Jump jump jump!”

I knew that in one of the cubbyholes of her neat roll-top desk she had a stack of unpaid bills, and I knew she was too independent a creature to let me pay any of them for her. She was making money, but not a lot. She was on her way, and in another year or two she’d be one of the hottest female writers in the country … but right now she needed some bread. And here was I, God the Savior, ready to dump just globs and gobs of manna in her neat long-nailed hands. Ah, she would adore me!

Then I realized she wasn’t as enthused as I thought she should be. Her eyes were almost cold. Her mouth was tight.

“Come on, Rapunzel, bestir yo’ ass. Lemme see them carbons. Trot out the goodies!”

She got up and went over to the filing cabinet where she kept all the yellow second-sheet copies of her stories and articles. She fished around, not saying a word, and came up with a stack. She handed them to me, and I went over by the fireplace and sat down, started reading.

An hour went by. She lit the fire in the fireplace and fixed me a cup of her good coffee, with a wedge of coffee cake on the saucer. I read and read, and set aside half a dozen articles I thought would work.

Finally, I turned the last page of the last article, and realized I hadn’t heard her pounding her typewriter all the time I’d been reading. I knew she had a deadline on a piece about costume designers for *Cosmopolitan* due that Friday; and the silence suddenly scared me.

I turned around and she was still sitting in the same place on the sofa, watching me. Her body may have been in the same room with me, but her soul and mind were off someplace in faraway frigid Tibet, understudying the Dalai Tama.

“What’s the matter?”

She didn’t say anything. Then she said, “Nothing.” Which was still not saying anything.

Holdie Karp had turned me off.

“Listen, I*think* ,”*I*said, “the piece on airline stewardesses would be perfect for him, if you wrote a new lead paragraph slanting it for men — every guy in America thinks stewardesses put out, right? — and drop in about five sexy paragraphs here and there. And the piece on nude models is perfect the way it is. And the —”

“No.”

I stared at her. “What?”

“I said: no.”

“What no? He’ll lay two-fifty on you for every one of these he uses. I can see three of them right here

that can make it; that's seven hundred and fifty bucks. What're you, allergic to a life without bill collectors?"

"I don't know if those nude modeling agencies are still down there on Santa Monica."

"So what. These, three others, none at all. What's it matter? This is Americana, baby. It presents a great picture of what it was like when you wrote it, and that was only six months ago. Of course they're still down there. So change the names, make 'em fictitious. Who cares? The guys in Topeka who read the magazine don't give a shit."

"I care."

I thought maybe I'd lost my way. "What the hell is wrong with you? Look, okay, *don't* write a new lead on this one about the stews. I'll take them down to his office tomorrow just as they are … I'll lay them on him. He's *anxious* to buy your stuff. He wants an original from you. Christ, Holdie, this can mean ten grand a year for you … you'll have all the time you want to write the stuff you *want* to write. You've been telling me you want to get heavier behind short stories, well, this is your chance."

"No."

I was getting mad now. Didn't this brain damage case know when I was trying to do her a favor?

"Well, fuck it, baby, I'm taking these down tomorrow, and if you have any qualms about the money, you can stuff the checks in your bidet for all I care!"

I turned around and lit a cigarette.

It was dead silent for a long while.

Then she was speaking, behind me. I didn't turn around, I just listened.

"You know, you come on just like a benevolent dictator. *Deus ex machina*. You try to steamroller me. My ex was like that, except he *insinuated* himself, not like you, like a jackhammer. He kept telling me I couldn't do this or that, or the other thing, until I believed him. He got me so goddamned dependent on him that when we broke up I thought I had lost everything. I was right at the bottom, you know. But I wanted to be a writer. I wanted it more than I even wanted him back. So I worked, and I'm still working, and I'm not going to backslide. I'm not going to make the same mistakes I made with my life before. There was a guy after my ex, a rebound, you know. And I let *him* do for me, little things, but after a while I was dependent again. And I didn't even *love* him! I know my pattern, and I'm not falling into it again."

I was furious. I jumped up and came down on her like … like a steamroller, like a jackhammer, like a benevolent dictator … "Listen, you stupid, you! I'm ten years ahead of you in the writing thing. I starved and suffered, and I thought that made me holier than shit, because I didn't deserve any good things happening to me. But that's a crock of piss, you know, because I had talent, and I *deserved* whatever I could knock out of the rock for myself. And I'm trying to shortcut a little heartache for you. Do you think there's some fucking *nobility* in poverty? Don't be an asshole! Poor is dirty, and poor is chained, and money means freedom, and it means you can write better and more, and what you want. So what the hell are you trying to do to me here, make me feel guilty for wanting to do you a favor?"

Then my mad passed. Just like that. I don't hold it for very long. And she looked like she might cry, and I didn't want that, God knows.

"It was your manner," she said.

I was suddenly contrite. “Yeah, well, I’m sorry. I guess I was just so enthused about the possibilities, I didn’t realize I was coming on strong.”

“But you understand why I can’t let you do it, don’t you?”

I understood. “Sure. I suppose. You want to do it yourself.”

“I have to. To prove I’m worth it”

I nodded my head, too many times. “Right, right. I understand. I’m not stupid, I understand.”

I walked over to the typing table. “What’re you working on?”

“Short story.”

“What happened to that *Cosmo* piece? Aren’t you late with it?”

“I’ll finish it. Don’t start prying.”

I gritted my teeth, and picked up the short story. “Mind if I read it?”

“No, I guess not.” She paused. She wanted to say something. I walked over slowly, kissed her lightly, and grinned. “Whose turn is it to put some fresh sheets on the bed?”

She grinned back. At first timorously, then with her comic rendition of naked lust. “Mine.”

She went into the bedroom and I heard her opening drawers. I sat down on Roger and started reading the short story. It was good. Very good.

She came in and started undressing. In front of me. I wanted to read her story. I wanted to be as impressed by her as a talent, as a substance, as I was by her in bed. It was tough concentrating on the story. She peeled down to black bra and red knit panties. Then she peeled out of them, too, and arched her back. I looked up, and smiled.

“Come along to bed, Johnny, like a good boy.”

Something went hard and flat in my gut.

She waltzed into the bedroom. I heard the bed springs creak. I didn’t move. She called. I didn’t answer. She called again, urgently. I tensed my jaw muscles and kept reading. I wasn’t going to let her do it to me. I’d see how good the story was, despite her.

She was silent a moment, then I heard her moving around. She came out bareass, wearing a fur vest. She paraded around in front of me, a voluptuous Raggedy Ann. “Hey, psssst, meester … kinky sex?”

“I’m reading your story,” I said.

She stopped moving and stood there, and I felt heat rising in the room. Then she reached over and grabbed it out of my hands. “Well, *stop* reading it! I don’t *want* you to read it. I want you to —”

I stood up and started to put on my jacket. She looked at me. “Where are *you* going?”

“Home.”

“I thought you said you understood?”

"I said it and I meant it. I do understand."

"Then why are you going home? You're being a bastard!"

I turned around three times, widdershins, like I didn't know where the hell the wind was blowing from, but cold all the same. Outer dark waited.

"No, baby, I'll tell you what I'm being. I'm being sick.

"You make me feel like a cock with a mouth at the other end that once in a while says something cute."

"I —"

"No, fuck it, Holdie! A man likes to *do* for a woman sometimes, you know. He likes to *do* for her. That doesn't make *him* a sexist or *her* a piece of property; it's just a way of caring, you know what I mean? But you won't give me that. All you can handle is the cheapest thing I've got to offer. Now I know what a whore feels like. You reduce me to being a stud. Well, I won't play that, baby. I've got to do some things for myself, too."

'That's not the way it is, at all!"

"Not, huh? Well, then, why is it that all I can think of in this scene is that big body of yours, and getting laid? Politics me? Violence me? Dissent me? What's the world like me? Not on your life, baby. It's just come in and stick it in and move it around and leave it behind because I don't *need* anything from you but that."

She dropped her jaw. I hurt inside.

"Well, it's no price, baby. No price. What I get from you is promises of laughter, just promises, you know. And that ain't near enough."

I got out of there, somehow, and got the car started, somehow, and managed not to go off the cliffs on the way home, somehow, and I swore when — if — I made it back to my apartment, somehow, I'd attack that fucking typewriter and write it all out, somehow.

This last will and testament of the man going down for the big third.

No death. Nobody dies of a broken heart. That's too cheap gothic novel, too cornball. But outer dark awaits. I swore I'd write it all down, Holdie Karp. Write it all down, about nails in the coffin.

And this is it.

A lot of us are reconstructed sexists. We ain't perfect. Sometimes we call you chicks, and sometimes we call you baby, and there are even some who still slip up once in a while and call a woman a broad.

But we do the best we can.

A lot of us learned the hard way about women, that you aren't the chattel we thought you were, what we were *taught* you were through two thousand-plus years of tradition and bad novels by men. But we learned, and we're still learning. And it isn't that easy for some of us who were brought up *macho*.

But we do the best we can, dammit!

And maybe it's only fitting that some of us, the biggest offenders, get back some of the shit treatment we gave out. And maybe it isn't.

Fourteen

Ormond Always Pays His Bills

It was, perhaps, that Hervey Ormond had been a criminal for ten years. And when a man has been a criminal for that long — concealing it as well as Hervey Ormond — the first person to cry "Thief!" at him may well meet with misfortune.

Hervey Ormond shot his secretary three times.

Eleanor Lombarda was not a beautiful girl, a fact so obvious it had caused wonder among the more inquisitive residents of Chambersville. Wonder as to why Ormond — who was known to like his women full and fawning — had hired her. More, they wondered why he had kept her on for six years. Eleanor had been preceded by a string of comely girls, few of whom could actually take shorthand, or find the business end of a dictaphone. So it was with wonder that the residents of Chambersville saw the too-thin, too-nervous girl with the too-red face establish herself in the office of the Ormond Construction Company as Hervey Ormond's personal secretary — for six years.

They might have been surprised to know that the reason for her stranglehold on the position was simply that she did a marvelous job. She was industrious, interested in the work and kept things in top-drawer shape. She always knew what was going on, precisely.

That was another reason why Hervey Ormond shot her three times.

"I found the reports," Eleanor said, her face white in the glare of the lone desk lamp. For the first time in her life her face was not florid but a pale and unhealthy white.

"Yes," Ormond said slowly, thoughtfully, closing the office door, "I know you did."

He had returned for the dossier left behind that afternoon. He had returned abruptly and without warning, at midnight, to find Eleanor leafing through his hidden file.

Eleanor's voice was nervously firm. "You aren't paying me enough, Mr. Ormond. I want a raise … a big raise."

Hervey Ormond was a fat little man. No more fitting description could be summoned up than that. He was a fat little man, almost the caricature of a butterball. Round of face and form, with rosy cheeks, little squinting eyes of gray paste, execrable taste in clothes and unsavory breath.

Luckily, it had not been his personal appearance that had made him his fortune. Perspicacity and a certain ruthlessness in business had done that.

That ruthlessness was now needed; much as he appreciated Eleanor's sterling qualities around the office, she was tinkering with a long prison term for him as she riffled the papers.

"How did you get the drawer open?" he asked quietly, ignoring her demand for more money.

"The lock sprung," she answered, a faint blush rising up from her long neck. It was this expanse of neck that had kept Ormond from making advances to her during the entire six years of their relationship. She had an exceedingly long neck and did not have the sense to wear necklaces or high-collared dresses to remove the exaggeration.

Ormond stared down at the desk drawer momentarily. It had been forced. The blade of her letter opener

was bent.

“You were snooping,” he said.

“I want that raise Mr. Ormond,” she persisted. “I don’t see any reason to beat about the bush; I want three hundred dollars a week, and I only want to work three days each week.”

She seemed uncomfortable making demands, but she was firm. They were outrageous demands, but she made them firmly and quickly, as though plunging through with an unpleasant duty.

Ormond continued to ignore her requests. “What made you think there was anything in that drawer, Eleanor?”

She fumbled for a second with one of the stacks of notated papers, sliding them back into a three-ring notebook, snapping the clasps shut.

She didn’t answer.

“Why did you go snooping, Eleanor? Haven’t we been friends for a long time? Haven’t I paid you well?” His voice was one of confusion. His tones remained on one level, not angry and certainly not vindictive. Merely inquiring, as though trying to establish some pattern here.

Her head lifted, and she assumed a defiant tone. “There have been some large discrepancies in the material orders. I’ve been noticing it for some time.

“Why, you’ve been using inferior materials on *all* those state road constructions! You’ve been cutting requisition quality for ten years! They could put you in prison for twenty …”

It was at this point that Eleanor Lombarda received her three bullets.

Night surrounded the office building of the Ormond Construction Company. It stood two stories high in a tract of carefully clipped lawn, on the highway outside Chambersville. As the night came down, the crickets of Chambersville tuned themselves raspingly and waited for their baritone accompanists, the frogs, to arrive.

In the office, Hervey Ormond sat slumped in his desk chair, turned away from the desk itself. He slumped over so he could watch the body on the floor. Remarkably enough, in spite of everything he had ever believed, there had been very little blood.

Eleanor Lombarda lay twisted in the dim yellow egg-shape of light cast by the desk lamp. Her auburn hair had fanned out against the unpolished floorboards, and she seemed, in death, all the more unattractive.

“An unpleasant person,” Ormond murmured to himself, lowering his perfectly round chin into his cupped hand. “Just perfectly unpleasant.

“You work with a person, you sweat with her, you give her good money and she turns against you.

“It just doesn’t seem fair, that’s all. Just doesn’t seem fair.” Then he added as a tentative afterthought, “She was a fine secretary, though. Just fine. But an unpleasant person.”

Then his thoughts sank darkly. This was nothing circumspect like providing short shrift on building materials. This was not cutting the quality of goods so the kickback would be fatter. This was — and he hesitated to use the word in so close a juxtaposition to himself — murder.

Oh, my God, I've killed her! he thought, an agonized grimace briefly masking his loose features. I've killed the girl. I never, oh I never would have wanted to do that. No one would believe me — if I told them I'd lost my head. They all say that, I imagine. Oh, good Lord, this is terrible! She's lying there in the middle of my floor, and I'm just sitting here, looking at her. I'll "have to do something," he finished, aloud.

But what*could* he do? Ormond swung idly back and around in the swivel chair, as though seeking some direction that led out. When the big wall clock, donated by Prester's Jewelry Store at the office's opening, struck three o'clock, Hervey Ormond was no farther than before.

It had been different, a different thing when the State Investigating Committee had come. They had gone over his books, found them satisfactory and been quite pleasant about everything.

The roads had buckled and warped, fallen apart at the shoulders and split at the points of most wear, but as Ormond had told Senator Frankenson and the other distinguished visitors, "There's been some pretty heavy and unusual weather in this state recently, gentlemen. You might not be aware of that in Washington, and it's certainly no slur against you or your attentiveness to the local situation — your place is at the seat of our great government, naturally — but it's something we're all too aware of, around here.

"With an that, and these new fuels they're using that eat into the very molecular structure of roadbeds these days, well …"

He had left it hanging as his hands hung outstretched. A man who had done his job despite the vagaries of Man and Environment.

The committee had left.

There had been a substantial amount deposited to Senator Frankenson's personal account — under the listing "campaign fund donations" — that next week.

Hervey Ormond always paid his bill promptly.

And this bill, too, had been paid. After six years it had been stamped, sealed and spindled — as Eleanor Lombarda lay silently on the floor of his office.

The clock had passed the 4:15 position, and suddenly, abruptly, as though the idea had been perching there on his knee, sucking ruminatively at his consciousness, Ormond knew how he would get rid of his ex-secretary.

It was the work of ten minutes to get the cement mixings from the shed behind the building, mix the gloppy mess and lay Eleanor in it.

He stood by, leaning against a tree, watching her harden into the mass. When it was sufficiently dry, he would take her out, dump her on the grass — he imagined it would be quite heavy so he stripped off his jacket, hanging it on a low branch — and let her finish hardening completely.

Then he would put her in the trunk of the car, cover her with a brick tarpaulin, and drive up to Round Schooner Lake.

He would tell everyone that Eleanor had been forced to visit sick relatives in Omaha. She had no one close here in town, and it was obvious a girl of her exceeding unattractiveness could not have a lover, so the ruse could very easily succeed.

With a little patience and a great deal of reserve, he was certain this bill would stay paid — and, happily,

no rebates would be forthcoming.

He smiled, and listened to the crickets welcoming their baritone accompanists.

The drive to Round Schooner was quiet and pleasant.

The state troopers were, also; and they looked alike, of course. They were faceless and looked alike. Had one been two-headed with purple warty skin and wearing tie and tails, and the other a six-armed and gelatinous mass of mold, they would have looked alike to Hervey Ormond.

They were whipcord, impartial, disinterested Furies. They had come for him, and they meant to take him away. His State prescribed the electric chair; and though he had a great and abiding fear of personal extinction, he had an even greater fear of closed-in places. His State had its appeal for reinstatement of the death penalty in the courts. At the moment, his State prescribed nothing but years in closed-in places.

"All right, Mr. Ormond, get your hat. Let's go."

They walked him down the steps of the building, while the entire office staff watched. They hustled him heavily into the patrol car, and tooled it out the winding drive, onto the highway.

They sped toward the state police station five miles away, and beside Ormond in the back seat, the faceless police officer had decided to be clever.

"She came to the surface this morning … spotted by some kids fishing, Ormond."

The fat little man clung to the car strap, silently watching the lines of houses and fir nurseries flit by.

And I've always been so good about paying my bills on time.

"Your big mistake." the trooper said, with a grin, "was using your own cement. You should know that much sand don't hold together."

Fifteen

The Man on the Juice Wagon

He took the hairpin curve at sixty-five, and the big truck-and-cab reeled drunkenly toward the edge of the road, toward the dark lip that pouted above nothingness. He pumped the air brakes and the rig squealed like a whale with a harpoon in its blowhole. Two baby-fat tires left the road and pawed air for a moment, then fell back, and the dynamite truck was around the bend. On the left, the rock wall of a nameless North Carolina hill rose up to an invisible peak, lost in darkness. To the right, unfenced, unprotected, the road fell off in a sheer drop, three hundred and eighty feet to the valley below; to tarpaper shacks huddled in cold and poverty. And on that thin strip of tarmac, room for two cars to pass *ever so carefully* (and one truck to pray no one was coming up, while it was coming down), Harry Fischer hunched over the big steering wheel, eyes squinting into the night, half-smoked butt wedged in a corner of his mouth, sweat chilling his neck and back …

Behind him in the truck section, the cases of nitro were murmuring in their gelatin straitjackets, and a harsh word would convince them they should forget their manners.

Beside him in the cab, the half-naked girl huddled against the other door, her gold-flecked eyes wide with terror, the whip scars still welling blood across her back, and her mouth open, dragging in air raggedly.

Back of him, and closing fast on the treacherous, twisting mountain road, was a caravan of four cars, holding a small army of pistoleros stinking of hate who didn't give a damn how he went down the hole: in flames, over the edge of the road, like a shooting star … or from a shotgun blast that would turn him into one hundred and eighty pounds of dogmeat. It was all the same to them.

"Look out!" the girl shrieked, and Harry realized his eyes had been locked in road hypnosis, that the tarmac was twirling off to the left again. He walked the wheel between his hands, fast, and the truck careened around the bend, punched holes in the darkness with the beams of its two big heads, and roared away down a short slope. He flicked his eyes up without moving his head, and caught sight of the four pairs of lights behind him, in the rear-view; two single sets, and two sets of doubles, brights; bounding around the bend and down the slope in charge pursuit; they were gaining on him.

"Oh, yeahhh …" He drew the words out in whispered undertones, ruefully. "Are you*ready* for them!" He stomped the accelerator and the big rig cleared its throat, dug in at the tarmac and pulled away. He felt pain at his lips, and ripped the roach of the cigarette out of his mouth. He dropped it and ground it against the rubber floormat.

"We'll die! We're never going to make it!" The girl was babbling. Harry didn't even look over. If he'd been where she was, with some crazy asshole driving the way*he* was, he'd have been puking already.

There had to be a pull-off along the way … there had to be, or he wasn't going to be hauling much freight in the future. His mouth was dry, now that the cigarette was gone, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it; he couldn't spare the effort or thought to light a fresh one; nor was there anything he could do about the four carloads of clowns behind him. The rear-view mirror sparkled and he tossed a glance into it. They were still back there, and coming in faster, it seemed. Harry's foot refused to go any farther to the floor; more speed would be like taking an enema with a thermite bomb. Like spreading himself out across half a mile of scenic North Carolina like peanut butter; like an uncomplicated suicide. And Harry was convinced he still had a couple of good hours left in him.

"Reach into my shirt pocket," he said to the girl. "Light me a cigarette."

His tone frightened her, on an entirely different level than the gut-wrenching fear of the men behind them, the road over which they hurtled, the death all around them. He was an ominous, cruel figure, beside her in the cab, his craggy features limned by the dash lights. She reached across his barrel chest and fingered the crumpled pack of cigarettes out of the pocket. "Matches on the seat somewhere," he said, in a matter-of-fact way, screaming around a curve, missing the rock wall by inches.

She found them, lit the cigarette, coughed twice at their acrid brittle taste, and put it between his lips. "The pack," he said. "Put it back where you got it, please." She was amazed at his surface calm, but reached across once more, put the crumpled pack into his shirt pocket.

He drew deeply, threw smoke against the windshield, and made his decision. "When I stop, I want you out that door and down the road as fast as you can go. Do you understand?"

She looked at him with renewed fear. "I don't have any shoes."

His tone became softer, coping with the crazily appropriate remark as if it made sense, rather than as an indication of her nervousness. "That's all right, the road is smooth, and it won't be too far. Just try to get around a bend or under cover if you can. There might be an explosion." Her eyes grew wide.

"But—"

"Do you understand?" he asked again, tightly. His patience was running thin. "Yes or no?" She nodded

yes, but he was watching the road; he asked her again, and she answered with the one syllable, softly, timorously.

"Okay then," he said, "open your door now. Don't let it fly open, just slip the latch. Hold it ready to jump when I tell you." He caught sight of the four cars pulling in like hunting falcons, above him in the rear view, behind him in the all-too-real world.

He took an S-curve right, then left, then right again, and for several beats was out of sight of the pursuers. The wheel seemed to flow like licorice in his hands as he slewed the rig sidewise, and amid the banshee-shriek of air brakes and peeling rubber, he jackknifed the cab left, right, left again, and wedged it between the rock-wall and the end-on bulk of the truck that lay across the road, its right rear wheels on the lip of the precipice. He had effectively blocked the road by turning the rig into an L-shaped barricade. "*Now jump!*" he howled at her, shoving her against the open door as hard as he could.

The girl tumbled out of the cab, hit the ground, rolled like a jellybean, and came up with slim legs pistoning, flashing white as her torn dress flapped about her thighs. She was running running and down the road … the sound of heavy boots running behind her, and she tossed a quick glance around; it was Harry Fischer, broken-field sprinting as though time was running out. They gained the safety of a bend, and Harry caught up with her.

"Here, take my hand!" He started climbing the raggedy face of the rock-wall. They were more than fifty feet up, moving like mountain goats, quickly, effortlessly on the ledged rock-wall, when they saw the lights of the first car slithering around the bend. They could not see what happened, but there was a squeal of brakes, a sound of something tearing, and then the car smashed full into the rig. There was an electric moment of waiting, and then the second car hit, the third, the fourth, and then came the explosion. It caught the night and tore it up the middle viciously. The sound was incredible, like a thousand rifles going off inside the semicircular canal of the ear. A whanging, metallic report that ratcheted back and forth through the mountains, building, building, phasing itself up like a dynamo gaining momentum. Harry threw himself across the girl as they hung there on the rock wall and the girl clapped her hands against her ears, a scream tearing from her mouth. The explosion seemed to go on forever, and then bits of metal and rock and dirt and foliage and — other things, cascaded down on them.

Harry started to move, flattening himself protectively against the girl, when something huge and black and heavy came down out of the night sky and clipped him solidly across the top of his skull. He sagged without a sound, and started to slip away. The girl grabbed for him, they lost their footing and tumbled in a welter of rock and dirt down the rock wall. He hit first and lay crumpled, and an instant later she crashed down on top of him. She tried to rise, the debris continued to pelt them, and she was caught by a bit of tree stump that took her high above the right eye; and with a tiny murmur of pain she sagged across Harry Fischer's body.

They lay there, unmoving, while the faraway hills echoed the dying gasps of the explosion, farther and farther away, till only the stars shied back and hid from the sound.

When he swam up through the ebony pain. Harry knew he was where he was, but superimposed over the watery image of the returning scene around him was another scene, not too far back in the past. He had been coming through the mountains, had stopped in the little town for a cup of joe, a couple of sinkers and a goofball to keep him awake the rest of the run to the excavations. There had been a carnival in the town. One of those balk-line jobs with a freak tent and half a dozen rube games rigged to pay once in ten thousand tries, a couple of animals, maybe a geek, a cotton candy bowl, and a nautch tent with half a dozen worn-over hags.

Harry had wandered down the midway and bought a suety hot dog, and a twist-cup of pink lemonade

that tasted as though a boar had urinated in it. As he had come to the darker end of the midway he had heard the scream, and the girl pleading not to be hit again. Then the crack of a whip — that sound unlike any other sound in the world, when thong leather strikes flesh and draws blood — and another scream.

He had dropped the wienie and the pee-juice, and plunged into the darkness at the end of the midway. Behind the road trucks used to haul canvas and booths, there had been a dozen men in white sheet hoods, and one of them was beating the crap out of a blonde, her dress ripped in half a dozen places, and the whip lash-marks already thick and dark across her back and breasts. The man with the whip yelled "Whore!" and pulled his arm back to let her have it again.

Harry had barely realized what he was doing. A sharp remembered image of his mother being struck across the face by his father when he had been a child — it came and went — and he was on his way already. He hadn't even thought of the ridiculous odds. A dozen big men who could tear his arms from their sockets and shillelagh him to death with the bloody ends.

He had caught the leader low in the back, like a pile-driver, and the man shot forward into the crowd like a cannonball. The whip had flown from his hand, and Harry quickly retrieved it. "Back, you buncha bastards!" he screamed shrilly, and cracked the whip around his head like a cowboy. They had fallen back, the circle of pain he created with the whip keeping them at bay. He grabbed the girl under one arm and started dragging her away.

They were moving in and he flicked the whip toward their faces with vicious determination. They had fallen back, and in one quick movement he picked the slight girl up in his arms and ran like a madman. He gained the cab of the truck just as they burst out from between the carny tents, and in a second he was inside, the doors locked, and the motor kicking.

The mob had grown by two or three men, unmasked, and one of them had a shotgun. He leveled it, ready to blow a hole through the cab, but one of the others had pointed in panic to the legend on the door of Harry's cab: DANGER DYNAMITE EXPLOSIVES DANGER and the shotgun had gone down off point fast. Then Harry had kicked the heap, and gunned it forward. The big hulk had jumped as though goosed, and the hooded men had leaped out of the way.

A turn out into the town, a short run to the highway, and then out, climbing. And then the headlights behind him. The death-chase, the jackknifed rig, climbing the rock wall with the girl, the explosion and he had Had It. . . .

The scene flashed in an instant, re-told everything, and he came back to consciousness lying at the side of the road with the girl on top of him. His head ached as though someone had steam-driven a tenpenny spike in behind each eye, with a third shard of steel into his medulla oblongata, just for a fail-safe. He groaned, and the girl squirmed on his body. It was a disconcerting combination of feelings. The pain, and the pleasure.

Harry slid out from under her.

He staggered around the roadway for a few moments, trying to convince his synaptic relays they weren't sending out orders for spaghetti. When he had mastered the trick of walking without falling down, he went back to the girl, and lifted her by the waist. She sat up, groaned in a fine alto, and opened her eyes blearily.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "Some of them may have made it through little Hiroshima down the road."

He helped her to her feet, and supported her as they stumbled down the road. They did not talk for quite

a while, until she seemed able to carry her own weight, and then they moved at a regular pace, casting weary, threadbare smiles at each other from time to time. Harry was impressed with the girl's recovery, and the uncomplaining way she jogged along beside him.

When they reached the bottom of the steep incline, they found a fire-gutted shack, and part of a barn. There was hay in the barn, and they climbed into it, burrowing deeply inside, at the back of the mow, and Harry kept an eye out for travelers down the road.

"Who the hell were those men?"

"The local enforcers. They were kicked out of the Klan ten years ago for unnecessary brutality, or something, and they've been surly ever since."

Harry grinned. She was all right. "That's a very funny line. How true is it?"

"Every word."

"So who was the big stud with the whip? He didn't seem to like you very much."

She tried to adjust the ripped bodice of her dress, but it only exposed more flesh, and Harry caught a brief flash of dark aureole and pink nipple before she covered herself with a dirt-smeared hand. "That was my father. He has a tendency toward crankiness."

"What does he do for entertainment, let babies play with plastic clothing bags?"

She grinned youthfully. "He was angry at me."

"For what?"

"For wanting to run away. I hired on at the carnival, in the girl tent; to try and get out of town. I was desperate; I'd have tried anything."

"What's wrong with the bus?"

"Daddy runs the town. He has a fellow, Routener; he does dirty things for him. Routener would have stopped me, sent me back into town. I tried everything: bus, train, even hitching a ride on the highway. They always brought me back. I figured if I could slip out of town with the carnival, I might make it."

Harry scratched at his stubbled jaw. "You must be a pretty popular girl, them wanting to keep you handy like that."

She snapped out a sweet, deadly laugh. "Popular! Ha, that's a good one. They'd like me dead, but Daddy won't let them do it; he says I look too much like my mother to put me in cement and sink me in the lake." She paused, and a cloud passed across her expression. "I don't know why my looking like mother should keep the dirty bastard from killing me … he drove mother to her grave."

She pulled her full mouth tight, and Harry noted that she had dimples. "And besides, I know too much," she said. "He knows all I have to do is get out of town, and I'll tell everyone about why the new hospital collapsed. He stole close to eighty thousand dollars from that job!"

"Your father's a big man in construction, I gather." A horrible realization was dawning on him.

She nodded. "Everything from the new school library to the mine excavations about ten miles from here."

"Bingo," he said, and lay back in the hay, wishing he had taken a nice quiet job tending cobras. "I was

hauling that juice to the excavations for him."

"Oh," she said softly, looking at Harry with fear.

"Bonded driver," Harry reassured her. "No connection with your old man's outfit." He lay back for a long time in silence.

"I'll fuck you if you'll get me out of town," she said, and removed her hand from her breast. Harry closed his eyes very slowly, then opened them, and what he had seen was still there, breathing heavily at him. *Oh boy* , he thought.

"Well, that's very nice," he said, "but what makes you think we can get out of town without your Daddy's group stopping us … hey!" She had her hand on his leg, and was moving it in slow circles.

"Maybe Daddy was killed in the explosion," she said gently, moving nearer to him. "I think so, you know?"

"When that juice wagon went up," Harry said, moving closer to *her* , "almost anything could have happened. I heard all four cars hit, but whether they were just piled up and the first car caught most of it, I don't know. Or even if your old man *was* in the damned car, it's simply a shuck, baby, we could be in real trubb —"

She came at him mouth first, and he caught her on the fly.

It was a long, twisting time before he got his mouth free enough to say, "You must want out of here pretty bad …"

"Very bad," she answered, pulling up her skirt. "Daddy was whipping me because I was working the girl show after the regular show ended. *That's* how bad I wanted out."

"You mean the 'blow-off,' in the raw?"

She nodded, and did something interesting with her underpants. "What's your name?" she asked him, just before their bodies ran together like lava.

After the third time, they lay in the hay, and she lit a cigarette for him. Her name was Angela; she told him to call her Angie.

"You're going to be a problem if your old man didn't buy it in the crash back there," Harry said. She grinned and took a deep drag from his cigarette. He grinned in mock ferocity and yelped, "*Wowch!*" as she handed the cigarette back, and it burned his fingers.

He dropped the butt, and it disappeared in the hay, and she started giggling at him. "I think good fucking really shakes you up, doesn't it, Harry?"

"Stop clowning!" he yelled. "This hay's drier than hell, and that cigarette's in there." He started scrabbling through the debris, trying to hitch up his pants at the same time. He began throwing hay like a dog burying a bone.

"Oh Harry, don't be such a jerk! It'll put itself out." She tried to drag him back down to her, just as the first wisp of smoke floated up out of the mass. An instant later a thin tongue of flame leaped past their faces.

"Run!" Harry yelled, and dragged her to her feet. They struggled hip-deep out of the hay, and by the time

they had reached the open door of the ruined barn, there was a wall of thick, acrid smoke and yellow-crimson flame behind them.

They stumbled out into the weed-overgrown yard between the stump of the tarpaper shack and the furiously blazing barn. They stood there choking, trying to rub the smoke from their eyes, trying to empty their lungs of smoke.

"Good show," Harry said resignedly, just as the first bullet cracked across the hillside, and whanged past his head, losing itself somewhere in the woods behind the burning barn. The second and third shots were wilder, far wide of the mark, but Harry got the message. His head came up and he saw the bunch clambering down the roadside toward them.

"Shoot by the light of the barn!" one of the men was shouting, and even across that great a distance, Harry could recognize the voice of the girl's hooded Daddy. "But watch Angela! Don't hit Angela!"

Angie's hands went to her face in terror, as though on puppet strings, and Harry spun around in confusion. "I don't know how they came out of it alive, but we've got trouble, little lady."

He grabbed her by the wrist and turned, looking for an avenue of escape. "C'mon, the woods!" He plunged forward, dragging her along behind.

They hit the woods at a gallop, and lost themselves in the twisted shadow mass among the trees. They ran on through the twisting stands of short-leaf pines, oak, poplar and hickory trees that seemed to converge on them, mass against them, send them deeper into the murky undergrowth, blot out the sky overhead, trip them, send them sprawling.

They were on their feet again, plunging through a clump of dogwood, and suddenly, they were out on the other side. Against the night sky, now just lightening into dawn with a gray, zombie-flesh paleness, they could see the huge grotesque bulk of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

They were in a field of ripe tobacco.

"Run, for chrissakes!" Harry gasped. They ran, hurling themselves forward through the great leafy plants, the flat green fronds slapping their faces. They did not hear the chopper till it was almost overhead, and spinning down on them. "Harry!" Angie shrieked, looking up into the whirling rotors.

"Jeezus, Christ, Awmiddy!" Harry bellowed, and tried to run in another direction. The eggbeater followed his progress. They tried hiding in the tobacco, but the backwash of the rotors cleared them out like maggots from under a piece of fetid meat.

"A chopper! Where the hell did*that* come from?"

Harry was running as hard as he could. Angie dragged hard on the end of his hand, and her words came as gasps: "He has a … radiophone in his … car … he uses the heli, heli … cop … ter for surveying construction sites … he must … must have called it from the c-car …"

The chopper swooped at them, and they fled before it.

They were trapped.

The 'copter drove them forward, coming at them field-level high and hovering, sending them out of the tobacco, toward the road: the road that curved around the forest, that now carried the group of men in white hoods and sheets. The sheets were dirty and torn and some of the men were without cover, but when they saw Harry and the girl they yelled like rebel troops at Missionary Ridge and pounded down

the road toward them.

The first one to reach Harry caught a fist high in the face. It spun him like a dervish and his legs twisted like vines. He went down in an untidy heap; and then the rest of them were on Harry. He kicked out, and swung his locked hands like a mace, but there were too many, and when they grabbed him from behind he kicked off with both feet and jacked his heavy boots into someone's crotch. There was a scream, and a moan, and Angie yelled something obscene, and then they hit Harry very hard with something very*very* hard, and he sagged in their grasp. Suddenly, the dawn (that had been coming up like thunder) went out like the light when you close the refrigerator door.

And Harry was in cold storage.

Angie's Daddy was a cartoon impression of Little Orphan Annie's Daddy. He was a huge phallus of a man, bald and glistening, with a pair of slitted eyes that looked as though they'd been cut in the yellow papyrus of his thick face with a serrated-edge bread knife. His mouth was almost entirely lipless; and aside from the resemblances to Daddy Warbucks, Mr. Clean and Disraeli, there was a salamander air about him. Harry expected Daddy to hiss, rather than shout.

But Daddy shouted. For a long time!

"If it hadn't of been for that goddamned fire we never woulda seen your goddamned bodies standin' out against the light. Thought you had old Daddy, din'tcha, you goddamned snotty punk! Thought you put old goddamned Daddy down for the long count, din'tcha? Well, old Daddy got nineteen lives an' then some, like a*mass* 'a cats!"

"Daddy's got a dirty mouth," Harry said. And received a gloveful of nickels across the back of the head for his trouble. He slumped forward in the chair, arms tied behind him to the slats. His eyes fluttered closed, open, closed again. The man with the five-fingered blackjack was a short, extremely surly, box-shaped individual named Routener. His face was oily and his hair was very curly.

Harry came up from the pit again, and stared unfocused at Daddy.

"Boy, you know what old Daddy's gonna goddam well do for you? He's gonna introduce you to some of the finest goddam concrete that you ever saw. He's gonna make your acquaintance all the way from your goddam feet to your*gaah* dam head. And then he's gonna have a li'l heart-to-heart and mouth-to-hand talktalk with his goddam daughter. In't that right, Angela girl?" Angie shivered. There was such loathing in her eyes as she stood against the wall of the construction shed, that it burned from her face like the inferno the barn had become.

"Is that the sandy concrete you used on the hospital?" Harry asked. "I hear tell it's groovy goods; how many people got buried when the building collapsed and fell into the valley?"

"Shut your goddamned mouth!"

"Better use somebody else's concrete, Daddy. I might be able to chew my way out of*your* product." The gloveful of nickels again. Wham! Across the temple. He went away for a while. When his eyes opened again, he was lying on the ground outside the shed, and Routener was standing over him, a big .45 packed in his mitt, and that oily face saying something. After a few minutes and several kicks in the ribs, he understood that Routener wanted him to get up.

"Where's the rest of the group?" It was a toss-off question; Harry was merely glad the other hooded men were nowhere in sight. There was always a better chance of getting away without holes in untidy places if there were less cooks ready to stir the pot.

"Rggll," said Routener.

"Thanks," Harry answered, and moved forward as Routener shoved the .45 into his ribs, hard.

They walked toward the excavations and Harry found himself looking down into what must have been set-pits for three big buildings. The drop was easily a hundred feet, and at the bottom of all three was quagmire. It was suckmud of the worst sort. Harry had been around enough to know what Daddy was going to have to do, if he was going to build there: fill in that muck till it settled. And it looked as though they had started the fill already. With garbage. Soft sand. Rubbish.

The buildings would get erected, and then, slowly, begin to sink. If the residents were lucky they would find out in time and third-floor occupants could step out of their windows onto the surrounding ground. First- and second-floor tenants would have to take the elevators upstairs to free themselves. Harry wondered how much graft was attached to this little goodie. He didn't wonder for very long; at that point Routener indicated the mixing trough of wet cement standing by the edge of the pit.

"Fszl," Routener commanded Harry. He pressed the .45 even harder into Harry's ribs.

And Harry was about to say *screw it* and take a chance on diving headfirst down the slope, trying to get away from the Neanderthal with the blocky .45 — when he heard the click. It was right down alongside his ribs. It was the locking mechanism in the barrel of the .45 — a mechanism that kept the pistol from firing as long as pressure was exerted against it. Harry stepped closer to Routener, swung heavily, keeping the .45 imbedded in his side, and stuck his thumb into the pistolero's eye, as hard as he could. Routener screamed. The thumb went in. Harry dropped his shoulder, hauled back and grabbed the pistol. Then he swung hard. Holding the .45 by the barrel he caught Routener flush on the tip of his prognathous jaw. The squat bully-boy's head flipped back like the top on a pack of cigarettes, and he did a gainer and a half off the edge of the excavation. Harry watched him go.

When Daddy turned around and saw the big mouth of the .45, his style was fine, just fine:

"How'd you like to drive for me, boy. How'd you like to make ten times what that bonding outfit paid you? You could make a goddamned fortune workin' for me, boy, a goddamned fortune. Whaddaya say?"

"No thanks, big Daddy," Harry said, untying Angie as he kept the .45 trained unwaveringly on the bald contractor. "You've got a foul mouth, and my family always brought me up to be genteel. Move!" He ushered Daddy ahead of him, with Angie bringing up the rear, rubbing her chafed wrists.

They went back around the construction shed, and Harry saw another nitro truck, a previous shipment from his company. "Get in; see if the keys are there," he said to Angie. She climbed up, looked inside, said the ignition was empty. "Come here and hold this howitzer on your poppa." She came to him, took the .45 and stood with legs wide apart staring down the blue-metal length of it.

"Move?" She dared him.

Daddy froze.

Harry went to the cab, opened the hood and proceeded to jump the ignition wires. He crawled behind the wheel, kicked it over, and the engine roared into life.

He was checking just how much juice had been left in the wagon when he heard the first two shots. He was out of the truck and around the side when the next three explosions ripped the air.

Daddy was bleeding profusely. It wasn't that she was a bad shot, just sadistic. She'd shot him in the

neck, both arms, both legs, and seemed ready to put one into his stomach when Harry grabbed the weapon away from her. “Give me that! What the fuck is it with you! You some kind of goddam nut-case? Jeeezus!” She started crying then. She folded against him. He helped her up into the cab of the nitro wagon.

“We’ll call a doctor for you, Daddy, first house we hit down the road,” Harry said. “Stay healthy, Daddy. See you around sometime.” He sprinted around the truck, popped behind the wheel and threw the monster into gear. He drove fast, but carefully, and the image of Daddy lying there, bleeding from every pore, was a heartwarming thought.

“Where are we going?”

“Raleigh. The capitol. I think the highway commission would like to know about Daddy’s dealings.”

“They’ll come after us. If you stop to call, they’ll come after us.”

“We’ll call.”

“Let him die, Harry. He let my mother die; let*him* die!”

“We’ll call.”

“They’ll come after us. They’ll catch us, there are plenty of them, all over the state. We’ll never get to Raleigh.”

“We’ll call, and we’ll get there. They’ll stay away from us in this truck. I’ve got enough juice in this wagon to turn a lot of hair prematurely gray. And they’ve had experience with my lousy driving already. Nobody’s going to make me too nervous.”

She smiled wanly and after they stopped at a roadhouse to call, the smile strengthened. They were on the highway, heading out, and Angie seemed pleased to be in the warm cab.

“Where will we go after Raleigh?” she said.

“You can go where you want, I suppose, it’s a big world.”

She was staring at him. There was a long moment of silence, then she said, “No, I asked where*we* would go after Raleigh?”

He stared straight ahead. Kept driving. There were no other cars on the road. “Wrong word. There’s no *we* . There’s you, and there’s me, and that’s two separate units.”

“Why, you sonofabitch!”

Then she started trying to slap him. Harry let her work at it for a few seconds, then punched her in the mouth. Not hard enough to put her away, but hard enough to convince her he wasn’t there for target practice.

“You’re like all the rest of them,” she said, with the nastiest tone Harry could remember having heard in years.

“How’s that, Angie? Like all the rest of the knights on white chargers who’ve saved you from Daddy and the Klan? Get off it. What the hell’s that supposed to mean:*you’re like all the rest? ”*

“You took what you could get back there in that barn.”

“I took what was offered. And why not? Does fucking you mean I inherit you? This isn’t the Orient, we’re not locked together forever by a bond of debt. Don’t be cute, kiddo: it didn’t mean any more to you than it did to me. You’re a big girl, and I’m a converted chauvinist pig, and this is the middle of the Seventies and we don’t owe each other anything.”

Then she tried to be sweet. “But, Harry … I*want* to go with you. You got me out of there, you saved my skin …”

“Call it even for the wonderful sex. But that’s it. When we get to Raleigh you go your way, and I go mine.”

“You’re too wild for that. Harry. You*like* the excitement.”

Harry hit the brakes. Air blew out, the rig fought the road, slowed, and Harry tooled it onto the shoulder. He let it idle in neutral as he turned to her.

“Okay, now here is what it’s*really* all about. Not the bullshit that’s swamping your brain, but what it’s *really* all about.

“My name is Harry Fischer. That’s Fischer with a ‘c’ in it; I figured I’d tell you that because you were too busy getting it on in that haystack to really catch the name; I mean, you were already trying to maneuver me into fucking you before you gave a shit*who* I was, except that I was a guy who could get you out of town. So the sex is about as big a debt as a hot roast beef sandwich with mashed potatoes and salad on the side.

“So pay attention: it’s Harry Fischer, and I’m forty years old, and I’ve got a terrific wife and three kids and I like them and they like me and the only reason I’m on this fucking suicide run lugging nitro is because it pays high-hazard and nobody else wanted the goddam job and*I* took it because the biopsy report came back three months ago and it says with treatment I’ve got maybe another year. Now can you piece all that together and understand that I’m not the fucking Lone Ranger, that I jumped in to ‘save’ your ass because of, hell, I’m not even sure, something I remembered from when I was a kid, and *any* body can be a hero once, but I’m not John Wayne or Clint Eastwood or any damn body else, I’m just a forty-year-old truck driver who’s dying of cancer and I didn’t have as much to lose as some guys so I*did* it! But that don’t make me Sir Lancelot, and it*sure* don’t make me a gay, mad adventurer ready to go streaking off across the countryside with a lady who shoots her old man as many times as she can before I grabbed the gun. Does all of that penetrate, kiddo?”

She sat staring at him for a long time.

And after that long time she said, simply, “You prick.”

Harry nodded with resignation. “Right. I’m a prick. A tired old prick, little miss. And there’s an awful lot of your Daddy in you. But at least now we’ve been properly introduced.”

And he put it in gear, moved it off the shoulder, got it up to cruising speed, and went to Raleigh.

And after he let her out on a street corner in downtown Raleigh, and after she gave him the finger as the rig moved away from the curb, Harry Fischer with a c returned the truck to the company that had bonded him, picked up his paycheck, and went home to his wife and kids.

Sixteen

Tired Old Man

(AN HOMMAGE TO CORNELL WOOLRICH)

The hell of it is, you're never as tough as you think you are. There's always somebody with sad eyes who'll shoot you down when you're not even looking, when you're combing your hair, tying your shoelace. Down you go, like a wounded rhino, nowhere near as tough as you thought.

I came in from the Coast on a Wednesday, got myself locked up in the Warwick to finish the book, did it, called the messenger and had him take the manuscript over to Wyeth the following Tuesday, and I was free. Only nine months late, but it was an okay piece of work. It was going to be at least three days till I got the call telling me what alterations he wanted — there were three chapters dead in the middle I knew he'd balk at — I'd cheated on the psychiatric rationale for the brother-in-law's actions, had held back some stuff I knew Wyeth would demand I flesh out — and so I had time to kill.

I've got to remember to remind myself: if I ever use that phrase again, may my carbons always be reversed. Time to kill. Yeah, just the phrase.

I called Bob Catlett, thinking we'd get together for dinner with his wife, the psychiatrist, if he was still seeing her. He said we could set it up for that night and by the way, why didn't I come along for the monthly meeting of The Cerberus Club. I choked back a string of uglies. "I don't think so, man. They give me a pain in the ass."

The Cerberus is a "writers' club" of old pros who've been around since Clarence Buddington Kelland was breaking in at Munsey's *Cavalier* . And what had been a fairly active group of working professionals in the Fifties and Sixties was now a gaggle of burnt-out cases and gossips, drinking too much and lamenting the passing of Ben Hibbs at the *Saturday Evening Post* . I was thirty years past that time, a young punk by their lights, and I saw no merit whatsoever in spending an evening up to my hips in dull chatter and weariness, gagging on cigarette smoke and listening to septuageneric penny-a-word losers comparing the merits of *Black Mask* to those of *Weird Tales* .

So he talked me into it. That's what friends are for.

We had dinner at an Argentinian restaurant off Times Square; and with my belly full of skirt steak and bread pudding I felt up to it. We arrived at the traditional meeting-place — the claustrophobic apartment of a sometime-editor who had once been a reader for Book-of-the-Month Club — around nine-thirty. It was packed from wall to wall.

I hadn't seen most of them in ten years, since I'd gone to the Coast to adapt my novel, THE STALKING MAN, for Paramount. It had been a good ten years for me. I'd left New York with a molehill of unpaid bills the creditors were rapidly turning into a mountain, and such despair both personally and professionally I'd half accepted the idea I'd never really make a decent living at writing. But doing four months' work each year in films and television had provided the cushion so I could spend eight months of the year working on books. I was free of debt, twenty pounds heavier, secure for the first time in my life, and reasonably happy. But walking into that apartment was like walking back into a corporeal memory of the dismal past. Nothing had changed. They were all there, and all the same.

My first impression was of lines of weariness.

Someone had superimposed a blueprint on the room and its occupants. In the background were all the

moving figures, older and more threadbare than the last time I'd seen them gathered together in a room like this, moving (it seemed, oddly) a good deal more slowly than they should have been. As if they were imbedded in amber. Not slow motion, merely an altered index of the light-admitting properties of the lenses of my eyes. Out of synch with their voices. But in the foreground, much sharper and brighter than the colors of the people or the room, was an overlay of lines of weariness. Gray and blue lines that were not merely topographically superimposed over faces and hands, and the elbows of the women, but over the entire room: lines rising off toward the ceiling, laid against the lamps and chairs, dividing the carpet into sections.

I walked through, between and among the blue and gray lines, finding it difficult to breathe as the oppressiveness of massed failure and dead dreams assaulted me. It was like breathing the dust of ancient tombs.

Bob Catlett and his wife had immediately wandered off to the kitchen for drinks. I would have scurried after them, but Leo Norris saw me, shoved between two ex-technical writers (each of whom had had brief commercial successes twenty years before with non-fiction popularizations of space science theory) and grabbed my hand. He looked exhausted, but sober.

"Billy! For God's sake.*Billy!* I didn't know you were in town. What a great thing! How long're you in for?"

"Only a few days, Leo. Book for Harper. I've been all locked up finishing it."

"Well, I'll say this for you, the Scott Fitzgerald Syndrome certainly hasn't hit you out there. How many books have you written since you left, three? Four?"

"Seven."

He smiled with embarrassment, but not enough embarrassment to slow the phony camaraderie. Leo Norris and I — despite his effusions — had never been close. When he had already been an established novelist, a fact one verified by getting one's name on the cover of*The Saint Detective Magazine* , I was banging off hammer murder novelettes for*Manhunt* , just to pay the rent in the Village. There had been no camaraderie in those days. But Leo was now on the slide, had been for the last six or eight years, had been reduced to writing a series of sex/spy/violence paperbacks: each one numbered (he was up to #27 the last time I looked), pseudonymous, featuring an unpleasant CIA thug named Curt Costener. Four of my last seven novels had been translated into successful films and one of them had become a television series. Camaraderie.

"Seven books in what — ten years? — that's damned good."

I didn't say anything. I was looking around; indicating I wanted to move on. He didn't pick up the message.

"Brett McCoy died, you know. Last week."

I nodded. I'd read him, but had never met him. Good writer. Police procedurals.

"Terminal. Inoperable. Lungs; really spread. Oh, he'd been on the way out for a long time. He'll be missed."

"Yeah. Well, excuse me, Leo, I have to find some people I came with."

I couldn't get through the press near the front door to join Bob in the kitchen. The only breeze was coming in from the hallway and they were jammed together in front of the passage. So I went the other

way, deeper into the room, deeper into the inversion layer of smoke and monotoned chatter. He watched me go, wanting to say something, probably wanting to strengthen a bond that didn't exist. I moved fast. I didn't want any more obituary reports.

There were only five or six women in the crowd, as far as I could tell. One of them watched me as I edged through the bodies. I couldn't help noticing her noticing me. She was in her late forties, severely weathered, staring openly as I neared her. It wasn't till she spoke, "Billy?" that I recognized the voice. Not the face; even then, not the face. Just the voice, which hadn't changed.

I stopped and stared back. "Dee?"

She smiled no kind of smile at all, a mere stricture of courtesy. "How are you, Billy?"

"I'm fine. How're you? What's happening, what're you doing these days?"

"I'm living in Woodstock. Cormick and I got divorced; I'm doing books for Avon."

I hadn't seen anything with her name on it for some time. Those who haunt the newsstands and bookstores out of years of habit are like sidewalk cafe Greeks unable to stop fingering their worry beads. I would have seen her name.

She caught the hesitation. "Gothics. I'm doing them under another name."

This time the smile was nasty and it said: you've had the last laugh; yes, I'm selling my talent cheap; I hate myself for it; I'll slice my wrists in this conversation before I'll permit you to gloat. What's more offensive than being successful when they always dismissed you as the least of their set, and they've dribbled away all the promise and have failed? Nothing. They would eat the air you breathe. Bierce: SUCCESS,*n* . The one unpardonable sin against one's fellows. Unquote.

"Look me up if you get to Los Angeles," I said. She didn't even want to try that one. She turned back to the three-way conversation behind her. She took the arm of an elegant man with a thick, gray mop of styled Claude Rains hair. He was wearing aviator-style eyeglasses, wrap-arounds, tinted auburn. Dee hung on tight. That wouldn't last long. His suits were too well-tailored. She looked like a tattered battle flag.*When had they all settled for oblivion?*

Edwin Charrel was coming toward me from the opposite side of the room. He still owed me sixty dollars from ten years before. He wouldn't have forgotten. He'd lay a long, guilt-oozing story on me, and try to press a moist five bucks into my hand. Not now;*really* , not now; not on top of Leo Norris and Dee Miller and all those crinkled elbows. I turned a hard right, smiled at a mom-and-pop writing team sharing the same glass of vodka, and worked my way to the wall. I kept to the outside and began to circumnavigate. My mission: to get the hell out of there as quickly as possible. Everyone knows, it's harder to hit a moving target.

And miles to go before I sleep.

The back wall was dominated by a sofa jammed with loud conversations. But the crowd in the center of the room had its collective back to the babble, so there was a clear channel across to the other side. I made the move. Charrel wasn't even in sight, so I made the move. No one noticed, no one gave a gardyloo, no one tried to buttonhole me. I made the move. I thought I was halfway home. I started to turn the corner, only one wall to go before the breeze, the door, and out. That was when the old man motioned to me from the easy chair.

The chair was wedged into the rear corner of the room, at an angle to the sofa. Big, overstuffed,

colorless thing. He was deep in the cushions. Thin, wasted, tired-looking, eyes a soft, watery blue. He was motioning to me. I looked behind me, turned back. He was motioning to*me* . I walked over and stood there above him.

"Sit down."

There wasn't anywhere to sit. "I was just leaving." I didn't know him.

"Sit down, we'll talk. There's time."

A spot opened at the end of the sofa. It would have been rude to walk away. He nodded his head at the open spot. So I sat down. He was the most exhausted-looking old man I'd ever seen. Just stared at me.

"So you write a little," he said. I thought he was putting me on. I smiled, and he said, "What's your name?"

I said, "Billy Landress."

He tested that for a moment, silently. "William. On the books it's William."

I chuckled. "That's right. William on the books. It's better for the lending libraries. Classier. Weightier." I couldn't stop smiling and laughing softly. Not to myself, right into his face. He didn't smile back, but I knew he wasn't taking offense. It was a bemusing conversation.

"And you're …?"

"Marki," he said; be paused, then added, "Marki Strasser."

Still smiling, I said, "Is that the name you write under?"

He shook his head. "I don't write any more. I haven't written in a long time."

"Marki," I said, lingering on the word, "Marki Strasser. I don't think I've read any of your work. Mystery fiction?"

"Primarily. Suspense, a few contemporary novels, nothing terribly significant. But tell me about you."

I settled back into the sofa. "I have the feeling, sir, that you're amused by me."

His soft, blue eyes stared back at me without a trace of guile. There was no smile anywhere in that face. Tired; old and terribly tired. "We're*all* amusing, William. Except when we get too old to take care of ourselves, when we get too old to keep up. Then we cease to be amusing. You don't want to talk about yourself?"

I spread my hands in surrender. I would talk about myself. He may have conceived of himself as too old to be amusing, but he was a fascinating old man nonetheless. He was a good listener. And the rest of the room faded, and we talked. I told him about myself, about life on the Coast, the plots of my books, in *précis* , what it took to adapt a suspense novel for the screen.

Body language is interesting. On the most primitive level, even those unfamiliar with the unconscious messages the positions of the arms and legs and torso give, can perceive what's going on. When two people are talking and one is trying to get across an important point to the other, the one making the point leans forward; the one resisting the point leans back. I realized I was leaning far forward and to the side, resting my chest on the arm of the sofa. He wasn't sinking too far back in the soft cushions of the easy chair; but he was back, in any event. He was listening to me, taking in everything I was saying, but it was

as though he knew it was all past, all dead information, as though he was waiting to tell me some things I needed to know.

Finally, he said, "Have you noticed how many of the stories you've written are concerned with relationships of fathers to sons?"

I'd noticed. "My father died when I was very young," I said, and felt the usual tightness in my chest "Somewhere, I don't remember where, I stumbled on a line Faulkner wrote once, where he said, something like, 'No matter what a writer writes about, if it's a man he's writing about the search for his father.' It hit me particularly hard. I'd never realized how much I missed him until one night just a few years ago, I was in a group encounter session and we were told by the leader of the group to pick one person out of the circle and to make that person someone we wanted to talk to, someone we'd never been*able* to talk to, and to tell that person everything we'd always wanted to say. I picked a man with a mustache and talked to him the way I'd never been able to talk to my father when I was a very little boy. After a little bit I was crying." I paused, then said very softly, "I didn't even cry at my father's funeral. It was a very strange thing, a disturbing evening."

I paused again, and collected my thoughts. This was becoming a good deal heavier, more personal, than I'd anticipated, "Then, just a year or two ago, I found that quote by Faulkner; and it all fitted into place."

The tired old man kept watching me. "What did you tell him?"

"Who? Oh, the man with the mustache? Hmmm. Well, it wasn't anything that potent. I just told him I'd made it, that he would be proud of me now, that I had succeeded, that I was a good guy and … he'd be proud of me. That was all."

"What*didn't* you tell him?"

I felt myself twitch with the impact of the remark. I went chill all over. He had said it so casually, and yet the force of the question jammed a cold chisel into the door of my memory, applied sudden pressure and snapped the lock. The door sprang open and guilt flooded out. How could Marki have known?

"Nothing. I don't know what you mean." I didn't recognize my voice.

"There must have been something. You're an angry man, William. You're angry at your father. Perhaps because he died and left you alone. But you didn't say something very important that you*needed* to say; you still need to say it. What was it?"

I didn't want to answer him. But he just waited. And finally I murmured, "He never said goodbye. He just died and never said goodbye to me." Silence. Then I shook, helplessly, trembled, reduced after so many years to a child, tried to shake it off, tried to dismiss it, and very quietly said, "It wasn't important."

"It wasn't important for him to hear it; but it was for you to say it." I couldn't look at him.

Then Marki said, "In the lens of time we are each seen as a diminishing mote. I'm sorry I upset you."

"You didn't upset me."

"Yes. I did. Let me try and make amends. If you have the time, let me tell you about a few books I wrote. You may enjoy this." So I sat back and he told me a dozen plots. He spoke without hesitations, fluidly, and they were awfully good. Excellent, in fact. Suspense stories, something in the vein of James M. Cain or Jim Thompson. Stories about average people, not private eyes or foreign agents; just people in stress situations where violence and intrigue proceeded logically from entrapping circumstances. I was fascinated. And what a talent he had for titles: DEAD BY MORNING, CANCEL BUNGALOW 16,

AN EDGE IN MY VOICE, WHITEMAIL, THE MAN WHO SEARCHED FOR JOY, THE DIAGNOSIS OF DR. D'ARQUEANGEL, PRODIGAL FATHER and one that somehow struck me so forcibly I made a mental note to contact Andreas Brown at the Gotham Book Mart, to locate a used copy for me through his antiquarian book sources. I had to read it. It was titled LOVER, KILLER.

When he stopped talking he looked even more exhausted than when he'd asked me to sit down. His skin was almost gray, and the soft, blue eyes kept closing for moments at a time. "Would you like a glass of water or something to eat?"

He looked at me carefully, and said, "Yes. I'd very much like a glass of water, thank you."

I got up, to force my way through to the kitchen.

He put his dry hand on mine. I looked down at him. "What do you want to be, eventually, William?"

I could have given a flip answer. I didn't. "Remembered," I said. Then he smiled, and removed his hand.

"I'll get that water; be right back."

I pushed through the crowd and got to the kitchen. Bob was still there, arguing with Hans Santesson about cracking the pro rata share of royalties problem for reprints of stories in college-level text-anthologies. Hans and I shook hands, and exchanged quick pleasantries while I drew a glass of water and put in a couple of ice cubes from the plastic sack half-filled with melted cubes in the sink. I didn't want to leave Marki for very long.

"Where the hell have you been tonight?" Bob asked.

"I'm sitting way at the back, with an old man; fascinating old man. Used to be a writer, he says. I don't doubt it. Jesus, he must have written some incredible books. Don't know how I could have missed them. I thought I'd read practically everything in the genre."

"What is his name?" Hans asked, with that soft lovely Scandinavian accent.

"Marki Strasser," I said. "What a goddam sensational story-sense he's got."

They were staring at me.

"Marki Strasser?" Hans had frozen, his cup of tea halfway to his lips.

"Marki Strasser," I said again. "What's the matter?"

"The only Marki I know, who was a writer, was a man who used to come to these evenings thirty years ago. But he's been dead for at least fifteen, sixteen years."

I laughed. "Can't be the same one, unless you're wrong about his having died."

"No, I am certain about his death. I attended his funeral."

Then it's someone else."

"Where's he sitting?" Bob asked.

I stepped out into the passage and motioned them to join me. I waited for the crowd to sway out of the way for a moment, and pointed. "There, back in the corner, in the big easy chair."

There was no one in the big easy chair. It was empty.

And as I stared, and they stood behind me, staring, a woman sat down in the chair and went to sleep, a cocktail glass in her hand. "He got up and moved somewhere else in the room," I said.

No, he hadn't. Of course.

We were the last to go. I wouldn't leave. I watched each person pass out through the front door, standing right in front of the door so no one could get past me. Bob checked out the toilet. He wasn't in there. There was only one exit from the apartment, and I was in front of it. "Listen, goddammit," I said heatedly, to Hans and Bob and our host, who wanted desperately to vomit and go to bed, "I do*not* believe in ghosts; he*wasn't* a ghost, he*wasn't* a figment of my imagination, he*wasn't* a fraud; for God's sake I'm not*that* gullible I can't tell when I'm being put on; those stories he told me were too damned good; and if he was here, how the hell did he get out past me? I was right in front of the door even when I came to the kitchen to get the water. He was an*old* man, at least seventy-five, maybe older; he wasn't a goddam sprinter! *Nobody* could have gotten through that crowd fast enough to slip out into the hall behind me without banging into everyone, and*someone* would have remembered being pushed like that … so …"

Hans tried to calm me. "Billy, we asked everyone who was here. No one else saw him. No one even saw you sitting on the sofa there, where you say you were sitting. No one else spoke to anyone like that, and many of the writers here tonight*knew* him. Why would a man tell you he was Marki Strasser if he was*not* Marki Strasser? He would have known that a room filled with writers who*knew* Marki Strasser would tell you if it was a joke."

I wouldn't let go of it. I was*not* hallucinating!

Our host went digging around in the back closet and came up with a bound file of old Mystery Writers of America programs from Edgar Award dinners; he flipped through them, back fifteen years, and found a photograph of Marki Strasser. I looked at it. The photo was clear and sharp. It wasn't the same man. There was no way of confusing the two, even adding fifteen years to the face in the picture, even allowing for a severe debilitation from sickness. The Marki in the photograph was a round-faced man, almost totally bald, with thick eyebrows and dark eyes. The Marki I had talked to for almost an hour had had soft, blue eyes. Even if he had been wearing a hairpiece, those eyes couldn't be mistaken.

"It's not him, dammit!"

They asked me to describe him again. When that didn't connect, Hans asked me to tell him the stories and the titles. The three of them listened and I could see from their faces that they were as impressed with the books Marki had written as I was. But when I ran down and sat there, breathing hard, Hans and my host shook their heads. "Billy," Hans said, "I was the editor of the Unicorn Mystery Book Club for seven years; I edited*The Saint Detective Magazine* for more than ten. I have read as widely in the field of mystery fiction as anyone alive. No such books exist."

Our host, an authority on the subject, agreed.

I looked at Bob Catlett. He devoured them a book a day. Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded his head in agreement.

I sat there and closed my eyes.

After a little while. Bob suggested we go. His wife had vanished an hour earlier with a group intent on getting cheesecake. He wanted to get to bed. I didn't know what to do. So I went back to the Warwick.

That night I pulled an extra blanket onto the bed, but still it was cold, very cold, and I shivered. I left the television set on, nothing but snow and a steady humming. I couldn't sleep.

Finally, I got up and got dressed and went out into the night. Fifty-fourth Street was empty and silent at three in the morning. Not even delivery trucks and, though I looked and looked for him, I couldn't find him.

I thought about it endlessly, walking, and for a while I imagined he had been my father, come back from the grave to talk to me. But it wasn't my father. I would have recognized him. I'm no fool, I would have recognized him. My father had been a much shorter man, with a mustache; and he had never spoken like that, in that way, with those words and those cadences.

It wasn't the almost-forgotten mystery novelist known as Marki Strasser. Why he had used that name, I don't know; perhaps to get my attention, to lead me down a black path of fear that would tell me without question that he was someone else, because it had*not* been Marki Strasser. I didn't know who he was.

I came back to the Warwick and rang for the elevator. I stood in front of the mirrored panel between the two elevator doors, and I stared through my own reflection, into the glass, looking for an answer.

Then I went up to my room and sat down at the writing desk and rolled a clean sandwich of white bond, carbon, and yellow second sheet into the portable.

I began writing LOVER, KILLER.

It came easily. No one else could write that book.

But, like my father, he hadn't even said goodbye when I went to get him that glass of water. That tired old man.

Biography

Harlan Ellison

Harlan Ellison has been called "one of the great living American short story writers" by the "Washington Post." In a career spanning more than 50 years, he has won more awards for the more than 70 books he has written or edited, the more than 1700 stories, essays, articles, and newspaper columns, the two dozen teleplays, and a dozen motion pictures he has created, then any other living fantasist. He has won the Hugo award eight and a half times (shared once); the Nebula award three times; the Bram Stoker award, presented by the Horror Writers Association, five times (including The Lifetime Achievement Award in 1996); the Edgar Allan Poe award of the Mystery Writers of America twice; the Georges Melies fantasy film award twice; two Audie Awards (for the best in audio recordings); and was awarded the Silver Pen for Journalism by P.E.N., the international writer's union. He was presented with the first Living Legend award by the International Horror Critics at the 1995 World Horror Convention. He is also the only author in Hollywood ever to win the Writers Guild of America award for Outstanding teleplay (solo work) four times, most recently for "Paladin of the Lost Hour" his Twilight Zone episode that was Danny Kaye's final role, in 1987. In March (1998), the National Women's Committee of Brandeis University honored him with their 1998 "Words, Wit & Wisdom" award.