

Pyotr's Story

SPIDER ROBINSON

Two total drunks in a single week is much higher than average for anyone who goes to Callahan's Place—no pun intended.

Surely there is nothing odd about a man going to a bar in search of oblivion. Understatement of the decade. But Callahan's Place is what cured me of being a lush, and it's done the same for others. Hell, it's helped keep Tommy Janssen off of *heroin* for years now. I've gotten high there, and once or twice I've gotten tight, but it's been a good many years since I've been flat-out, helpless drunk—or yearned to be. A true drunk is a rare sight at Callahan's. Mike Callahan doesn't just pour his liquor, he serves it; to get pissed in his Place you must convince him you have a need to, persuade him to take responsibility for you. Most bars, people go to in order to get blind. Mike's customers go there to see better.

But that night I had a need to completely dismantle my higher faculties, and he knew that as I crossed the threshold. Because I was carrying in my arms the ruined body of Lady Macbeth. Her head dangled crazily, her proud neck broken clean through, and a hush fell upon Callahan's Place as the door closed behind me.

Mike recovered quickly; he always does. He nodded, a nod which meant both hello and something else, and glanced up and down the bar until he found an untenanted stretch. He pointed to it, I nodded back, and by the time I reached it he had the free lunch and the beer nuts moved out of the way. Not a word was said in the bar—everyone there understood my feelings as well as Callahan did. Do you begin to see how one could stop being an alcoholic there? Someone, I think it was Fast Eddie, made a subvocal sound of empathy as I laid the Lady on the bar-top.

I don't know just how old she is. I could find out by writing the Gibson people and asking when serial number 427248 was sent out into the world, but somehow I don't want to. Somewhere in the twenty-to-thirty range, I'd guess, and she can't be less than fifteen, for I met her in 1966. But she was a treasure even then, and the man I bought her from cheated himself horribly. He was getting married *much* too quickly and needed folding money in a hurry. All I can say is, I hope he got one hell of a wife—because I sure got one hell of a guitar.

She's a J-45, a red sunburst with a custom neck, and she clearly predates the Great Guitar Boom of the Sixties. She is *hand-made*, not machine-stamped, and she is some forgotten artisan's masterpiece. The very best, top-of-the-line Gibson made today could not touch her; there are very few guitars you can buy that would. She has been my other voice and the basic tool of my trade for a decade and a half. Now her neck, and my heart, were broken clean through.

Lone-Drink McGonnigle was at my side, looking mournfully down past me at the pitiful thing on the bar. He touched one of the sprawled strings. It rattled. Death rattle. "Aw," he murmured.

Callahan put a triple Bushmill's in my hand, closed my fingers around it. I made it a double, and then I turned and walked to the chalk line on the floor, faced the merrily crackling fireplace from a distance of twenty feet. People waited respectfully. I drank again while I considered my toast. Then I raised my glass, and everybody followed suit.

"To the Lady," I said, and drained my glass and threw it at the back of the fireplace, and then I said, "Sorry folks," because it's very difficult to make Mike's fireplace emit shards of glass—it's designed like a parabolic reflector with a shallow focus—but I had thrown hard enough to spatter four tables just the same. I know better than to throw that hard.

Nobody paid the least mind; as one they chorused, "To the Lady" and drank, and when the Barrage was finished, *eight* tables were littered with shards.

Then there was a pause, while everybody waited to see if I could talk about it yet. The certain knowledge that they were prepared to swallow their curiosity, go back to their drinking and ignore me if that were what I needed, made it possible to speak.

"I was coming offstage. The Purple Cat, over in Easthampton. Tripped over a cable in the dark. Knew I was going down, tried to get her out from under me. The stage there is waist-high, her head just cleared it and wedged in under the monitor speaker. Then my weight came down on her..." I was sobbing. "... and she *screamed*, and I..."

Long-Drink wrapped me in his great long arms and hugged tight. I buried my face in his shirt and wept. Someone else hugged us both from behind me. When I was back under control, both let go and I found a drink in my hand. I gulped it gratefully.

"I hate to ask, Jake," Callahan rumbled. "I'm afraid I already know. Is there any chance she could be fixed?"

"Tell him, Eddie." But Eddie wasn't there; his piano stool was empty. "All right, look, Mike: There are probably ten shops right here on Long Island that'd accept the commission and my money, and maybe an equal number who'd be honest enough to turn me away. There are maybe five real guitar-makers in the whole New York area, and they'd all tell me to forget it. There might be four Master-class artisans still alive in all of North America, and their bill would run to four figures, maybe five, assuming they thought they could save her at all." Noah Gonzalez had removed his hat, with a view toward passing it; he put it back on. "*Look at her*. You can't *get* wood like that anymore. She's got a custom neck and fingerboard, skinnier'n usual, puts the strings closer together—when I play a normal guitar it's like my fingers shrunk. So a rebuilt neck would have less strength, and the fingerboard'd have to be hand-made..."

Long-Drink burst into tears. Callahan nodded and looked sad, and passed me another big drink. He poured one for himself, and *he* toasted the Lady, and when that barrage was over he set 'em up for the house.

The folks treated me right; we had a proper Irish wake for the Lady, and it got pretty drunk out. We laughed and danced and reminisced and swapped lies, created

grand toasts; everyone did it up nice. The only thing it lacked was Eddie on the piano; he had disappeared and none knew where. But a wake for Lady Macbeth *must* include the voice of her long-time colleague—so Callahan surprised us all by sitting down and turning out some creditable barrelhouse. I hadn't known he could play a note, and I'd have sworn his fingers were too big to hit only one key at a time, but he aid okay.

Anyhow, when the smoke cleared, Pyotr ended up driving better than half of his home, in groups of three—a task I wouldn't wish on my senator.

I guess I should explain about Pyotr...

The thing about a joint like Callahan's Place is that it could not possibly function without the cooperation of all its patrons. It takes a lot of volunteer effort to make the Place work the way it does.

Some of this is obvious. Clearly, if a barkeep is going to allow his patrons to smash their empties in the fireplace, they must all be responsible enough to exercise prudence in this pursuit—and furthermore they must nave better than average aim. But perhaps it is not obvious, and so I should mention, that there is a broom-and-scoop set on either side of the hearth, and whenever an occasional wild shard ricochets across the room, one of those broom-and-scoops just naturally finds its way into the hands of whoever happens to be nearest, without anything being said.

Similarly, if you like a parking lot in which anarchy reigns, with cars parked every which way like goats in a pen, you must all be prepared to pile outside together six or ten times a night, and back-and-fill in series until whoever is trying to leave can get his car out. This recurring scene looks rather like a grand-scale Chinese Fire Drill, or perhaps like Bumper Cars for Grownups; Doc Webster points out that to a Martian it would probably look like some vast robot orgy, and insists on referring to it as Auto-Eroticism.

Then there's closing ritual. Along about fifteen minutes before closing, somebody, usually Fast Eddie Costigan the piano player, comes around to all the tables with a big plastic-lined trash barrel. Each table has one of those funnel-and-tin-can ashtrays; someone at each table unscrews it and dumps the butts into the barrel. Then Eddie inserts two corners of the plastic tablecloth into the barrel, the customer lifts the other two corners into the air, and Eddie sluices off the cloth with a seltzer bottle. Other cleanup jobs, mopping and straightening and the like, just seem to get done by somebody or other every night; all Mike Callahan ever had to do is polish the bartop, turn out the lights and go home. Consequently, although he is scrupulous about ceasing to sell booze at legal curfew, Mike is in no hurry to chase his friends out, and indeed I know of several occasions on which he kept the Place open round the clock, giving away nose-paint until the hour arrived at which it became legal to sell it again.

And finally, of course, there's old Pyotr. You see, no one tight drives home from

Callahan's bar. When Mike decides that you've had enough—and they'll never make a Breathalyzer as accurate as his professional judgment—the only way in the world you will get another drink from him is to surrender your car keys and then let Pyotr, who drinks only distilled water, drive you home when you fold. The next morning you drive Pyotr back to his cottage, which is just up the street from Callahan's, and if this seems like too much trouble, you can always go drink somewhere else and see what that gets you.

For the first couple of years after Pyotr started coming around, some of us used to wonder what he got out of the arrangement. None of us ever managed to get him to accept so much as a free breakfast the morning after, and how do you buy a drink for a man who drinks distilled water? Oh, Mike gave him the water for free, but a gallon or so of water a night is pretty poor wages for all the hours of driving Pyotr put in, in the company of at least occasionally troublesome drunks, not to mention the inconvenience of spending many nights sleeping on a strange bed or couch or floor. (Some of the boys, and especially the ones who want to get pie-eyed once in a while, are married. Almost to a woman, their wives worship Pyotr; are happy to put him up now and then.)

For that matter, none of us could ever figure out what old Pyotr did for a living. He never had to be anywhere at any particular time next morning, and he was never late arriving at Callahan's. If asked what he did he would say, "Oh, a little bit of everything, whenever I can get it," and drop the subject. Yet he never seemed to be in need of money, and in all the time I knew him I never once saw him take so much as a peanut from the Free Lunch.

(In Callahan's Place there *is* a free lunch—supported by donations. The value of the change in the jar is almost always greater than the value of the Free Lunch next to it, but nobody watches to make sure it stays that way. I mind me of a bad two weeks when that Free Lunch was the only protein I had, and nobody so much as frowned at me.)

But while he is a bit on the pale side for a man of Middle European stock, Pyotr certainly never looks undernourished, and so there was never any need for us to pry into his personal affairs. Me, I figured him for some kind of a pensioner with a streak of pure altruism, and let it go.

He certainly looks old enough to be a pensioner. Oh, he's in very good shape for his age, and not overly afflicted with wrinkles, but his complexion has that old-leather look. And when you notice his habit of speaking into his cupped hand, and hear the slight lisp in his speech, and you realize that his smiles never seem to pry his lips apart, you get the idea that he's missing some bridgework. And there's something old about his eyes...

Anyway, Pyotr was busier than usual that night, ferrying home all the casualties of Lady Macbeth's wake. It took quite a while. He took three at a time, using the vehicle of whoever lived furthest away, and taxied back for the next load. Two out of every three drunks would have to taxi back to Callahan's the next day for their cars. I was

proud of the honor being paid my dead Lady. Pyotr and Callahan decided to save me for last. Perhaps on the principle that the worst should come last—I was *pissed*, and at the stage of being offensively cheerful and hearty. At last all the other wounded had been choppered out, and Pyotr tapped me on one weaving shoulder.

"So they weld—well hell, hi, Pyotr, wait a half while I finish telling Mike this story—they weld manacles on this giant alien, and they haul him into court for trial, and the first thing he does, they go to swear him in and he swallows the bailiff whole."

Mike had told me this gag, but he is a very compassionate man. He relit his cheroot and gave me the straight line, "What'd the bailiff do?"

"His job, o'course—he swore, in the witness. Haw haw!" Pyotr joined in the polite laughter and took my arm. "Time to bottle it up, Pyotr you old lovable Litvak?"

Time to scamper, is it? Why should you have to haul my old ashes, huh? Gimme my keys, Mike, I'm not nearly so drunk as you think—I mean, so thunk as you drink. Shit, I said it right, I *must* be drink. All right, just let me find my pants—"

It took both of them to get me to the car. I noticed that every time one of my feet came unstuck from the ground, it seemed to take enormous effort to force it back down again. A car seat leaped up and hit me in the ass, and a door slammed. "Make sure he takes two aspirins before he passes out for good," Callahan's voice said from a mile away.

"Right," Pyotr said from only a few blocks distant, and my old Pontiac woke up grumbling. The world lurched suddenly, and we fell off a cliff, landing a million years later in white water. I felt nausea coming up, chattered merrily to stave it off.

"Splendid business, Pyotr old sock, absolutely magnelephant. You drive well, and this car handles well on ice, but if you keep spinning like this we're going to dend up in the itch—mean, we'll rote off the ride, right? Let's go to the Brooklyn Navy Yard and try to buy a drink for every sailor on the *U.S.S. Missouri*—as a songwriter I'm always hoping to find the Moe juiced. Left her right there on the bartop, by all the gods! Jus' left her and—turn around, God damn it, I left my Lady back there!"

"It's all right, Jake. Mr. Callahan will leave her locked up. We will wake her for several days, correct Irish custom, yes? Even those not present tonight should have opportunity to pay their respects."

"Hey, yeah, sure. Hey! *Funeral*. How? Bury or cremate?"

"Cremation would seem appropriate."

"Strings? Gearboxes? Heavy metal air pollution? Fuggoff. Bury her, dissolve in acid, heave her into the ocean off Montauk Point and let the fish lay eggs in her sounding box. Know why I called her Lady Macbeth?"

"No, I never knew."

"Used to sneak up and stab me inna back when didn't expect it. Bust a string, go

out of tune, start to buzz on the high frets for no reason at all. Treacherous bitch. Oh, *Lady!*"

"You used each other well, Jake. Be glad. Not many have ever touched so fine an instrument."

"Goddam right. Stop the car, please. I want to review inputs."

"Open the window."

"I'll get it all over the—"

"It's raining. Go ahead."

"Oh. Not sure I like Finn's magic. Have to pay attention to notice it's raining. Right ho. *Oh.*"

Eventually the car stopped complaining and rain sprinkled everything but Pyotr and me and then my house opened up and swallowed me. "Forget aspirins," I mumbled as my bed rushed at me. "Don' need 'em."

"You'll be sorry tomorrow."

"I'm sorry now."

The bed and I went inertialess together, spun end over end across the macrocosmic Universe.

I was awakened by the deafening thunder of my pulse.

I knew that I was awake lone before I had the power to raise my eyelids. I knew it because I knew I lacked the imagination to dream a taste like that in my mouth. But I was quite prepared to believe that the sleep had lasted at least a century; I felt *old*. That made me wonder if I had snored right through the wake—*the wake!* Everything came back in a rush; I flung open my eyes, and two large icicles were rammed into the apertures as far as they would go, the points inches deep in my forebrain. I screamed. That is, I tried to scream, and it sounded like a scream—but my pulse sounded like an empty oil tank being hit with a maul, so more likely what I did was bleat or whimper.

Something heavy and bristly lay across me; it felt like horsehair, with the horse still attached. I strained at it, could not budge it. I wept.

The voice spoke in an earsplitting whisper. "Good morning, Jake."

"Fuck you too," I croaked savagely, wincing as the smell of my breath went past my nose.

"I warned you," Pyotr said sadly.

"Fuck you twice. Jesus, my eyelashes hurt. What is *lying* on me?"

"A cotton sheet."

"Gaah."

"You should have accepted the aspirins."

"You don't understand. I don't get hangovers."

Pyotr made no reply.

"Damn it, I don't! Not even when I was a lush, not the first time I ever got smashed, not *ever*. Trick metabolism. Worst that ever happens is I wake up not hungry—but no head, no nausea, no weakness, never."

Pyotr was silent a long time. Then, "You drank a good deal more than usual last night."

"Hell, I been drunker'n *that*. Too many times, man."

"Never since I have known you."

"Well, that's true, Maybe that's... no, I've fallen off the wagon before. I just don't get hangovers."

He left the room, was gone awhile. I passed the time working on a comprehensive catalog of all the places that hurt, beginning with my thumbnails. I got quite a lot of work done before Pyotr returned; I had gotten halfway through the hairs on my forearms when he came in the door with a heavily laden tray in his hands. I opened my mouth to scream, "Get that *food* out of here!"—and the smell reached me. I sat up and began to salivate. He set the tray down on my lap and I ignored the pain and annihilated bacon, sausage, eggs, cheese, onions, green peppers, hot peppers, bread, butter, English muffins, jam, orange juice, coffee, and assorted condiments so fast I think I frightened him a little. When I sank back against the pillows the tray contained a plate licked clean, an empty cup and glass, and a fork. I was exhausted, and still hurt in all the same places—that is, in all places—but I was beginning to believe that I wanted to live. This is crazy," I said. "If I *am* hung over, the concept of food ought to be obscene. I never ate that much breakfast in my life, not even the morning after my wedding night"

I could *see* Pyotr now, and he looked embarrassed, as though my appetite were his fault.

"What time is it?"

"Seven p.m."

"God's teeth."

"It was four in the morning when we arrived here. You have slept for thirteen hours. I fell asleep at noon and have just awakened. Do you feel better now that you have eaten?"

"No, but I concede the trick is possible. What's good for total bodily agony?"

"Well, there is no cure. But certain medications are said to alleviate the symptoms."

"And Callahan's has opened by now. Well, how do we get me to the car?"

In due course we got to Callahan's where Lady Macbeth lay in state on top of the

bar. The wake was already in full swing when we arrived and were greeted with tipsy cheers. I saw that it was Riddle Night: The big blackboard stood near the door, tonight's game scrawled on it in the handwriting of Doc Webster. On Riddle Night the previous week's winner is Riddle Master; each solved riddle is good for a drink on the Riddle Master's tab. The Doc looked fairly happy—every unsolved riddle is a free drink for him, on the house.

The board was headed "public personalities." Beneath that were inscribed the following runes:

I.

- a) Hindu ascetic; masculine profession
- b) tramp; crane
- c) profligate; cheat
- d) span; tavern, money
- e) fish; Jamaican or Scottish male, caviar
- f) certainly; Irish street
- g) handtruck; forgiveness

II.

- a) pry; manager
- b) smart guy; Stout
- c) chicken coop; more loving
- d) bandit; crimson car

e) coffin; baby boy

f) tote; subsidy

g) moaning; achieve

III.

a) irrigated; laser pistol

b) Nazi; cook lightly

c) British punk; Knowledge, current

d) chicken coop; foreplay

e) wealthier; nuts to

IV.

a) Italian beauty; stead, depart, witness

b) toilet; auto, senior member

c) be dull; Carmina Burana

d) grass; apprentice, younger

e) valley; odd

f) burns; leer at

Example: penis; truck = peter; lorry = Peter Lorre.

Extra drinks for identifying Categories I-IV.

People were staring at the board, seemed to have *been* staring at it for some time, but none of the riddles were checked off yet. I paid my respects to the Lady, said hello to Mike, accepted a large glass of dog-hair. Then, deliberately, I turned away from the Lady and toward the board (Why don't you take a crack at it before reading further?)

"Got one," I said at once, and allowed Lone-Drink to help me to the board. "First one in line," I said, marking with chalk. "Hindu ascetic; masculine profession. That's Jain; Man's Field, and Category One is Actresses."

Doc Webster looked pained. "Say Film Women," he suggested. "More accurate. Mike, one for Jake on me."

Given the category Section I was fairly simple. I got b) 'Bo; Derrick. Long-Drink McGonnigle got c) Rakehell; Welsh. Tommy Janssen figured out that d) and e) were Bridge It; Bar Dough and Marlin; Mon Roe. Josie Bauer took f) Surely; Mick Lane and g) Dolly; Pardon. We collected our drinks gleefully.

I suspected that the second category would be Male Actors (or Film Men), but kept my mouth shut, hoping I could figure them all out and do a sweep before anyone else twigged. This turned out to be poor tactics; I got a), b), d) and 0, but while I was puzzling over the rest, Shorty Steinitz spoke up. "The category is Male Film Stars, and the first one is Jimmy; Steward!" I tried to jump in at once, but Long-Drink drowned me out. "Got b): Alec; Guinness! Hey, and 0 has to be Carry; Grant."

"And d)," I said irritably, "is Robber; Red Ford. But what about the others?" We stared at them in silence for awhile.

"A hint," Doc Webster said at last. "With reference to g), the first name is what I'll be doing if you do the second."

"Got it!" Long-Drink cried. "Keenin'; Win." The Doc grimaced. Callahan was busy keeping score and distributing the prizes, but he had attention left to spare. "That third one there, c): That has to be Hennery; Fonder."

There was a pause, then. Nobody could figure out "coffin; baby boy." (Can you?) After awhile we turned our attention to the remaining two categories, but the silence remained unbroken. The Doc looked smug. "No hurry, gents and ladies," he said. "Closing time isn't for several hours yet." We all glared at him and thought hard.

Surprisingly, it was Pyotr who spoke up. "I have a sweep," he stated. "Category IV in its entirety."

Folks regarded him with respectful interest. He was committed now: if he missed *one*, he would owe the Doc all six drinks. The Doc looked startled but game—he

seemed to think he had an ace up his sleeve. "Go ahead, Pyotr."

"The category is Famous Monsters." The Doc winced. "The first is Bella; Lieu Go See." Applause. "Then John; Gar a Dean." More applause.

"Not bad," the Doc admitted. "Keep going."

"The next two, of course, are among the most famous of all. Be dull; Carmina Burana *has* to be Bore Us; Carl Orff..." He paused to sip one of the three drinks Callahan had passed him.

"Brilliant, Pyotr," I said, slapping him on the back. "But I'm still stumped for the last three."

"That is because they are tricky. The first is tortured, and the last two are obscure."

"Go ahead," Doc Webster said grimly.

"The first is the famous Wolfman: Lawn; Trainee Junior." Delighted laughter and applause came from all sides. "The others are both Frankenstein's Creature, but it would require an historian of horror films to guess both. Glenn Strange played the Monster in at least three movies..." The Doc swore. "... and the last shall be first; the man who played the Monster in the very first film version of *Frankenstein*."

"But we already had Karloff," I protested.

"No, Jake," Pyotr said patiently. "That was the first *talkie* version. The very first was released in 1910, and the Monster was played by a man with the unusual name of Charles Ogle. Read 'chars' for 'burns' and you come close enough."

We gave him a standing ovation—in which the Doc joined.

All of this had admirably occupied my attention, from almost the moment of my arrival. But before I turned to a study of Category III, I turned to the bar to begin the third of the four drinks I had won—and my gaze fell on the ruined Lady. She lay there in tragic splendor, mutely reproaching me for enjoying myself so much while she was broken. All at once I lost all interest in the game, in everything but the pressing business of locating and obtaining oblivion. I gulped the drink in my hand and reached for the next one, and a very elderly man came in the door of Callahan's Place with his hands high in the air, an expression of infinite weariness on his face. He was closely followed by Fast Eddie Costigan, whose head just about came up to the level of the elderly man's shoulder blades. Conversations began to peter out.

I just had time to recall that Eddie had vanished mysteriously the night before, and then the two of them moved closer and I saw why everybody was getting quiet. And why the old gent had his hands in the air. I didn't get a real good look, but what Eddie had in his right hand, nestled up against the other man's fourth lumbar vertebra, looked an awful lot like a Charter Arms .38. The gun that got Johnny Lennon and George Wallace.

I decided which way I would jump and put on my blandest expression. "Hi, Eddie."

"Hi, Jake," he said shortly, all his attention on his prisoner.

"I tell you for the last time, Edward—" the old gent began in a Spanish accent.

"Shaddap! Nobody ast you nuttin'. Get over here by de bar an' get to it, see?"

"Eddie," Callahan began gently.

"Shaddap, I said."

I was shocked. Eddie *worships* Callahan. The runty little piano man prodded with his piece, and the old Spaniard sighed in resignation and came toward me.

But as he came past me, his expression changed suddenly and utterly. If aged Odysseus had come round one last weary corner and found Penelope in a bower, legs spread and a sweet smile on her lips, his face might have gone through such a change. The old gent was staring past me in joyous disbelief at the Holy Grail, at the Golden Fleece, at the Promised Land, at—

—at the ruined Lady Macbeth.

"*Santa Maria*," he breathed. "*Madre de Dios*."

Years lifted from his shoulders, bitter years, and years smoothed away from his face. His hands came down slowly to his sides, and I saw those hands, really *saw* them for the first time. All at once I knew who he was. My eyes widened.

"Montoya," I said. "Domingo Montoya."

He nodded absently.

"But you're dead."

He nodded again, and moved forward. His eyes were dreamy, but his step was firm. Eddie stood his ground. Montoya stopped before the Lady, and he actually bowed to her. And then he looked at her.

First he let his eyes travel up her length the way a man takes in a woman, from the toes up. I watched his face. He almost smiled when he reached the bridge. He almost frowned when he got to the scars around the sounding hole that said I had once been foolish enough to clamp a pick-up onto her. He did smile as his gaze reached the fingerboard and frets, and he marveled at the lines of the neck. Then his eyes reached the awful fracture, and they shut for an instant. His face became totally expressionless; his eyes opened again, studied the wreck with dispassionate thoroughness, and went on to study the head.

That first look took him perhaps eight seconds. He straightened up, closed his eyes again, clearly fixing the memory forever in his brain. Then he turned to me. "Thank you, sir," he said with great formality. "You are a very fortunate man."

I thought about it. "Yes, I believe I am."

He turned back and looked at her again, and now he *looked*. From several angles, from up close and far away. The joining of neck to body. The joining of head to neckstub. "Light," he said, and held out his hand. Callahan put a flashlight into it, and Montoya inspected what he could of Lady Macbeth's interior bracings through

her open mouth. I had the damndest feeling that he was going to tell her to stick out her tongue and say "Ah!" He tossed the flashlight over his shoulder—Eddie caught it with his free hand—and stooped to sight along the neck. "Towel," he said, straightening. Callahan produced a clean one. He wiped his hands very carefully, finger by finger, and then with the tenderness of a mother bathing her child he began to touch the Lady here and there.

"Jake," Long-Drink said in hushed tones. "What the hell is going on? Who *is* this guy?"

Montoya gave no sign of hearing; he was absorbed.

"Remember what I said last night? That there are only maybe four Master-class guitar makers left in the country?"

"Yeah. This guy's a Master?"

"*No*," I cried, scandalized.

"Well then?"

"There is one rank higher than Master. Wizard. There have been a dozen or so in all the history of the world. Domingo Montoya is the only one now living." I gulped Irish whiskey. "Except that he died five years *ago*."

"The hell you say."

Fast Eddie stuffed the gun into his belt and sat down on his piano stool. "He didn't die," he said, signalling Callahan for a rum. "He went underground."

I nodded. "I think I understand."

Long-Drink shook his head. "I don't."

"Okay, Drink, think about it a second. Put yourself in his shoes. You're Domingo Montoya, the last living guitar Wizard. *And all they bring you to work on is shit.* There are maybe fifty or a hundred guitars left on the planet worthy of your skill, most of which you made yourself, and they're all being *well* cared for by careful and wealthy owners. Meanwhile, fools keep coming in the door with their broken toys, their machine-stamped trash, asking Paul Dirac to do their physics homework for them. Damnfool Marquises who want a guitar with the name of their mistress spelled out in jewels on the neck; idiot rock stars who want a guitar shaped like a Swiss Army knife; stupid rich kids who want their stupid Martins and stupid Goyas outfitted with day-glo pick-guards by the man everyone knows is the last living Wizard. Nobody wants to pay what honest materials cost nowadays, nobody wants to wait as long as true Quality requires, everybody wants their goddamn lily gilded, and *still* you can't beat them off with a club, because you're Domingo Montoya. You triple your fee, and then triple it again, and then square the result, and still they keep coming with their stupid broken trash—or worse, they purchase one of your own handmade masterworks, and use it ignobly, fail to respect it properly, treat it like some sort of common utensil." I glanced at Montoya. "No wonder he retired."

Montoya looked up. "I have not retired. If God is kind I never will. But I no

longer sell my skills or its fruits, and I use another name. I did not believe it was possible to locate me."

"Then how—"

"Two years ago I accepted an apprentice." My brows went up; I would not have thought there was anyone worthy to be the pupil of Domingo Montoya. "He is impatient and lacks serenity, but both of these are curable with age. He is not clumsy, and his attitude is good." He glowered at Eddie. "*Was* good. He swore secrecy to me."

"I went ta school wit' 'im," Eddie said. "P.S. Eighty-t'ree. He hadda tell somebody."

"Yes," Montoya said, nodding slowly. "I suppose I can see how that would be so."

"He come back ta de old neighborhood ta see his Ma. I run into 'im on de street an' we go to a gin mill an' pretty soon he's tellin' me de whole story, how he's never been so happy in his life. He tells me ta come out to Ohio an' meetcha sometime, an' he gimme yer address." Eddie glanced down at the gun in his belt and looked sheepish. "I guess he sh'unta done dat."

Montoya looked at him, and then at Lady Macbeth, and then at me. He looked me over very carefully, and to my great relief I passed muster. "No harm done," he said to Eddie, and for the first time I noticed that Montoya was wearing a sweater, pajamas, and bedroom slippers.

I was bursting with the need to ask, and I *could not ask*, I was afraid to ask, and it must have showed in my face, at least to a gaze as piercing as his, because all of a sudden his own face got all remorseful and compassionate. My heart sank. It was beyond even his skill—

"Forgive me, sir," he said mournfully. "I have kept you waiting for my prognosis. I am old, my mind is full of fur. I will take you, how is it said, off the tender hooks."

I finished my drink in a swallow, lobbed the empty into the fireplace for luck, and gripped both arms of my chair. "Shoot."

"You do not want to know, can this guitar be mended. This is not at issue. You know that any imbecile can butt the two ends together and brace and glue and tinker and give you back something which looks just like a guitar. What you want to know is, can this guitar ever be what she was two days ago, and I tell you the answer is never in this world."

I closed my eyes and inhaled sharply; all the tiny various outposts of hangover throughout my body rose up and *throbbed* all at once.

Montoya was still speaking. "—trauma so great as this must have subtle effects all throughout the instrument, microscopic ruptures, tiny weakenings. No man could trace them all, nor heal them if he aid. But if you ask me can I, Domingo Montoya, make this guitar so *close* to what it was that you yourself cannot detect any difference, then I tell you that I believe I can; also I can fix that buzz I see in the

twelfth fret and replace your pegs."

My ears roared.

"I cannot guarantee success! But I believe I can do it. At worst I will have to redesign the head. It will take me two months. For that period I will loan you one of my guitars. You must keep your hands in shape for her, while she is healing for you. You have treated her with kindness, I can see; she will not malingering."

I could not speak. It was Callahan who said, "What is your fee, Don Domingo?"

He shook his head. "There is no charge. My eyes and hands tell me that this guitar was made by an old pupil of mine, Goldman. He went to work for Gibson, and then he saw the way the industry was going and got into another line. I always thought that if he had kept working, kept learning, he might have taught me one day." He caressed the guitar. "It is good to see his handiwork. I *want* to mend her. How daring the neck! She must be a pleasure to play once you are used to her, eh?"

"She is. Thank you, Don Domingo."

"Nobody here will reveal your secret," Callahan added. "Oh, and say, I've got a jug of fine old Spanish wine in the back I been saving for a gentleman such as yourself—could I pour you a glass on the house? Maybe a sandwich to go with it?"

Montoya smiled.

I swiveled my chair away from him. "*Eddie!*" I cried.

The little piano man read my expression, and his eyes widened in shock and horror. "Aw Jeez," he said, shaking his head, "aw, *now*," and I left my chair like a stone leaving a slingshot. Eddie bolted for cover, but strong volunteers grabbed him and prevented his escape. I was on him like a stooping falcon, wrapping him up in my arms and kissing him on the mouth before he could turn his face away. An explosion of laughter and cheers shook the room, and he turned bright red. "*Aw jeez!*" he said again.

"Eddie," I cried, "there is no way I will *ever* be able to repay you."

"Sure dere is," he yelled. "Leggo o' me."

More laughter and cheers. Then Doc Webster spoke up.

"Eddie, that was a good thing you did, and I love you for it. And I know you tend to use direct methods, and I can't argue with results. But frankly I'm a little disappointed to learn that you own a handgun."

"I bought it on de way to Ohio," Eddie said, struggling free of my embrace. "I figger maybe de Wizard don' wanna get up at seven inna mornin' an' drive five hunnert miles to look at no busted axe. Sure enough, he don't."

"But dammit, Eddie, those things are dangerous. Over the course of a five-hundred-mile drive... suppose he tried to get that gun away from you, and it went off?"

Eddie pulled the gun, aimed it at the ceiling, and pulled the trigger. There was no

explosion. Only a small clacking sound as the hammer fell and then an inexplicable loud hiss. Eddie rotated the cylinder slightly. In a loud voice with too much treble, the gun offered to clear up my pimples overnight without messy creams or oily pads.

It actually had time to finish its pitch, give the time and call-letters, and begin Number Three on the Hot Line of Hits before the tidal wave of laughter and applause drowned it out. Montoya left off soothing the wounded Lady to join in, and when he could make himself heard, he called, "You could have threatened me with nothing more fearsome, my friend, than forced exposure to am radio," at which Eddie broke up and flung the "gun" into the fireplace.

Eventually it got worked out that Eddie and Montoya would bring Lady Macbeth back to Eddie's place together, get some sleep, and set out the next morning for Montoya's home, where he could begin work. Eddie would bring me back the promised loaner, would be back with it by the night after next, and on his return we would jam together. Montoya made me promise to tape that jam and send him a dupe.

What with one thing and another, I finished up that evening just about as pickled as I'd been the night before. But it was happy drunk rather than sad drunk, an altogether different experience, in kind if not in degree. Popular myth to the contrary, drink is not really a good drug for pain. That is, it can numb physical pain, but will not blunt the edge of sorrow; it can help that latter only by making it easier for a man to curse or weep. But alcohol is great for happiness: it can actually intensify joy. It was perfect for the occasion, then; it anesthetized me against the unaccustomed aches of my first hangover, and enhanced my euphoria. My Lady was saved, she would sing again. My friends, who had shared my loss, shared my joy. I danced with Josie and Eddie and Rachel and Leslie; I solved Category III of Doc's riddle and swept it without a mistake; I jollied Tommy out of being worried about some old friend of his, and made him laugh; with Eddie on piano and everybody else in the joint as the Raelettes I sang "What'd I Say" for seventeen choruses; for at least half an hour I studied the grain on the bartop and learned therefrom a great deal about the structure and purpose of the Universe; I leaped up on the same bartop and performed a hornpipe—on my hands. After that it all got a bit vague and hallucinatory—at least, I don't *think* there were any real horses present.

A short while later it seemed to be unusually quiet. The only sound was the steady cursing of my Pontiac and the hissing of the air that it sliced through. I opened my eyes and watched white lines come at me.

"Pyotr. Stout fellow. No—water fellow, won't drink stout. Why don't you drink, Pyotr? *S'nice.*"

"Weak stomach. Rest, Jake. Soon we are home."

"Hope I'm not hung over again tomorrow. That was awful. Cripes, my neck still hurts..." I started to rub it; Pyotr took my hand away.

"Leave it alone, Jake. Rest. Tonight I will make sure you take two aspirins."

"Yeah. You're the lily of the valley, man."

A short while later wetness occurred within my mouth in alarming proportions, and when I swallowed I felt the aspirins going down. "Good old Pyotr." Then the ship's engines shut down and we went into free fall.

Next morning I decided that hangovers are like sex—the second time isn't *quite* as painful. If the analogy held, by tomorrow, I'd be enjoying it.

Oh, I hurt, all right. No mistake about that. But I hurt like a man with a medium bad case of the flu, whereas the day before I had hurt like a man systematically tortured for information over a period of weeks. This time sensory stimuli were only about twice the intensity I could handle, and a considerably younger and smaller mouse had died in my mouth, and my skull was no more than a half size too small. The only thing that hurt as much as it had the previous morning was my neck, as I learned when I made an ill-advised attempt to consult the clock beside me on the night table. For a horrified moment I actually *believed* that I had unscrewed my skull and now it was falling off. I put it back on with my hands, and it felt like I nearly stripped the threads until I got it right.

I must have emitted sound. The door opened and Pyotr looked in. "Are you all right, Jake?"

"Of course not—half of me is left. Saved me for last again, eh?"

"You insisted. In fact you could not be persuaded to leave at all, until you lost consciousness altogether."

"Well, I—OH! *My guitar*. Oh, Pyotr, I think I'm going to do something that will hurt me very much."

"What?"

"I am going to smile."

It did hurt. If you don't happen to be hung over, relax your face and put a finger just behind and beneath each ear, and concentrate. Now smile. The back of my neck was a knot of pain, and those two muscles you just felt move were the ends of a knot. Smiling tightened it. But I had to smile, and didn't mind the pain. Lady Macbeth was alive! Life was good.

That didn't last; my metabolism just wasn't up to supporting good cheer. The Lady was *not* alive. Back from the dead, perhaps—but still in deep coma in Intensive Care. Attended, to be sure, by the world's best surgeon. But she did not have youth going for her—and neither did the surgeon.

Pyotr must have seen the smile fade and guessed why, because he said exactly the right thing.

"There is hope, my friend."

I took my first real good look at him.

"Thanks, Pyotr. Gawd, you look worse than I do. I must have woken you up, what time is it, I don't dare turn my head and look."

"Much like yesterday. You have slept the clock 'round, and I have just finished my customary six hours. I admit I do not feel very rested."

"You must be coming down with something. Truly, man, you look like I feel."

"How *do* you feel?"

"Uh—oddly enough, not as bad as I expected to. Those aspirins must have helped. Thanks, brother."

He ducked his head in what I took to be modesty or shyness.

"You should take a couple yourself."

He shook his head. "I am one of those people who can't take asp—"

"No problem, I've got the other kind, good for all stomachs."

"Thank you, no."

"You sure? What time did you say *it* was?"

"Normal people are eating their dinners."

"Their—*dinner!*" I sat up, ignoring all agony, got to my feet and staggered headlong out of the room, down the hall to the kitchen. I wept with joy at the sight of so much food in one place. That same eerie, voracious hunger of the morning before, except that today I was not going to make Pyotr do the cooking. I was ashamed enough to note that he had cleaned up the previous night's breakner (a compound word formed along the same lines as "brunch"), apparently before he had gone to sleep.

I designed a megaomelet and began amassing construction materials. I designed for twin occupants. "Pyotr, you old Slovak Samaritan, I know you have this thing about not letting people stand you to a meal the next day, and I can dig that, makes the generosity more pure, but I've been with you now close to forty hours and you've had bugger all to eat, so what you're gonna do is sit down and shut up and eat this omelet or I'm gonna shove it up your nose, right?"

He stared in horror at the growing pile on the cutting board. "Jake, no, thank you! No."

"Well, God damn it, Pyotr, I ain't asking for a structural analysis of your digestion! Just tell me what ingredients to leave out and I'll double up on the rest."

"No, truly—"

"Damn it, anybody can eat *eggs*."

"Jake, thank you, I truly am not at all hungry."

I gave up. By that time all eight eggs had already been cracked, so I cut enough other things to fill an eight-egg omelet anyhow, figuring I'd give the other half to the cats. But to my surprise, when I paused to wipe my mouth, there was nothing left before me that I could legitimately eat except for a piece of ham gristle I had rejected once already. So I ate it, and finished the pot of coffee, and looked up.

"Cripes, maybe you really are sick. I'm gonna call Doc Webster—"

"Thank you, no, Jake, I would appreciate only a ride home, if you please, and to lie down and rest. If you are up to it..."

"Hell, I feel practically vertebrate. Only thing still sore is the back of my neck. Just let me shower and change and we'll hit the road."

I pulled up in front of Pyotr's place, a small dark cottage all by itself about a half a block from Callahan's Place. I got out with him. "I'll just come in with you for a second, Pyotr, get you squared away."

"You are kind to offer, but I am fine now. I will sleep tonight, and see you tomorrow. Goodbye, Jake—I am glad your guitar is not lost."

So I got back into the car and drove the half block to Callahan's.

"Evenin', Jake. What'll it be?"

"Coffee, please, light and sweet."

Callahan nodded approvingly. "Coming up."

Long-Drink snorted next to me. "Can't take the gaff, huh, youngster?"

"I guess not, Drink. These last two mornings I've had the first two hangovers of my life. I guess I'm getting old."

"Hah!" The Drink looked suddenly puzzled. "You know, now I come to think of it... Huh. I never thought."

"And no one ever accused you of it, either."

"No, I mean I just now come to realize what a blessed long time it's been since I been hung over myself."

"Really? You?" The Drink is one of Pyotr's steadiest (or unsteadiest) customers. "You must have the same funny metabolism I have—ouch!" I rubbed the back of my neck. "Used to have."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "No, I've *had* hangovers. Lots of 'em. Only I just realized I can't remember when was the last *time* I had one."

Slippery Joe Maser had overheard. "I can. Remember *my* last hangover, I mean. About four years ago. Just before I started comin' here. Boy, it was a honey—"

"Ain't that funny?" Noah Gonzalez put in. "Damned if I can remember a hangover since I started drinking here myself. Used to get 'em all the time. I sort of figured it had something to do with the vibes in this joint."

Joe nodded. "That's what I thought. This Place is kinda magic, everybody knows that. Boy, I always wake up hungry after a toot, though. Hell of a stiff neck, too."

"Magic, hell," Long-Drink said. "Callahan, you thievin' spalpeen, we've got you red-handed! Waterin' your drinks, by God, not an honest hangover in a hog's head. Admit it."

"I'll admit you got a hog's head, all right," Callahan growled back, returning with my coffee. He stuck his seven o'clock shadow an inch from Long-Drink's and exhaled rancorous cigar smoke. "If my booze is watered down, how the hell come it gets you so damn pie-faced?"

"Power of suggestion," the Drink roared. "Placebo effect. Contact high from these other rummies. Tell him, Doc."

Doc Webster, who had been sitting quietly hunched over his drink, chose this moment to throw back his head and shout, "*Woe is me!*"

"Hey, Doc, what's wrong?" two or three of us asked at once.

"I'm ruined."

"How so?"

He turned his immense bulk to face us. "I've been moonlighting on the side, as a theatrical agent."

"No foolin'?"

"Yeah, and my most promising client, Dum Dum the Human Cannonball, just decided to retire."

Lone-Drink looked puzzled. "Hey, what the hell, unemployment and everything, you shouldn't have any trouble lining up a replacement. Hell, if the money's right, *I'll* do it."

The Doc shook his head. "Dum-Dum is a midget. They cast the cannon special for him." He sipped bourbon and sighed. "I'm afraid we'll never see an artist of his caliber again."

Callahan howled, and the rest of us accorded the Doc the penultimate compliment: we held our noses and wept. He sat there in his special-built oversize chair and he looked grave, but you could see he was laughing, because he shook like jello. "Now I've got my own back for last night," he said. "Guess my riddles, will you?" He finished his bourbon. "Well, I'm off. Filling in tonight over at Smithtown General." His glass hit the exact center of the fireplace, and he strode out amid a thunderous silence.

We all crept back to our original seats and placed fresh orders. Callahan had barely finished medicating the wounded when the door banged open again. We turned, figuring that the Doc had thought of a topper, and were surprised.

Because young Tommy Janssen stood in the doorway, and tears were running down his face, and he was stinging drunk.

I got to him first. "Jesus, pal, what is it? Here, let me help you."

"Ricky's been kicking the gong—" he sang, quoting that old James Taylor song, "Junkie's Lament," and my blood ran cold. Could Tommy possibly have been stupid enough to... but no, that was booze on his breath, all right, and his sleeves were rolled up. I got him to a chair, and Callahan drew him a beer. He inhaled half of it, and cried some more. "Ricky," he sobbed. "Oh, Ricky, you stupid shit. He taught

me how to smoke cigarettes, you know that?"

"Ricky who?"

"Ricky Maresca. We grew up together. We... we were junkies together once." He giggled through tears. "I turned him on, can you dig it? He turned me on to tobacco, I gave him his first taste of smack." His face broke. "Oh, Christ!"

"What's the matter with Ricky?" Callahan asked him.

"Nothing," he cried. "Nothing on Earth, baby. Ricky's got no problems at all."

"Jesus," I breathed.

"Oh, man. I *tried* to get him to come down here, do you know how hard I tried? I figured you guys could do it for him the way you did for me. Shit, I did everything but drag him here. I shoulda dragged him!" He broke down, and Josie hugged him.

After a while Callahan said, "Overdose?"

Tommy reached for his beer and knocked it spinning. "Shit, no. He tried to take off a gas station last night, for the monkey, and the pump jock had a piece in the desk. Ricky's down, man, he's down. All gone. Callahan, gimme a fucking whiskey!"

"Tommy," Callahan said gently, "let's talk awhile first, have a little java, then we'll drink, OK?"

Tommy lurched to his feet and grabbed the bar for support. "Don't goddammit ever try to con a junkie! You think I've had enough, and you are seriously mistaken. Gimme a fuckin' whiskey or I'll come over there an' get it."

"Take it easy, son."

I tried to put my arm around Tommy.

"Hey, pal—"

He shoved me away, "Don't patronize me, Jake! *You* got wasted two nights running, why can't I?"

"I'll keep serving 'em as long as you can order 'em," Callahan sad. "But son, you're close to the line now. Why don't you talk it out first? Whole idea of getting drunk is to talk it out before you pass out."

"Screw this," Tommy cried. "What the hell did I come here for, anyway? I can drink at home." He lurched in the general direction of the door.

"Tommy," I called, "wait up—"

"No," he roared. "Damn it, leave me alone, all of you! You hear me? I wanna be by myself, I—I'm not ready to talk about it yet. Just leave me the hell alone!" And he was gone, slamming the door behind him.

"Mike?" I asked.

"Hmmm." Callahan seemed of two minds. "Well, I guess you can't help a man who don't want to be helped. Let him go; he'll be in tomorrow." He mopped the bar-top and looked troubled.

"You don't think he'll—"

"Go back to smack himself? I don't think so. Tommy hates that shit now. I'm just a little worried he might go look up Ricky's connection and try to kill him."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," Long-Drink muttered.

"But he's too drunk to function. More likely *he'll* go down. Or do a clumsy job and get busted for it."

"Be his second fall," I said.

"Damn it," the Drink burst out, "I'm goin' after him."

But when he was halfway to the door and we all heard the sound of a vehicle door slamming out in the parking lot, and he pulled up short. "It's okay," he said. "That's my pickup, I'd know that noise anywhere. Tommy knows I keep a couple bottles under the seat in case of snakebite. He'll be okay—after a while I'll go find him and put him in the truckbed and take him home."

"Good man, Drink," I said. "Pyotr's out with the bug, we've got to cover for him."

Callahan nodded slowly. "Yeah, I guess that'll do it" The Place began to buzz again. I wanted a drink, and ordered more coffee instead, my seventh cup of the day so far. As it arrived, one of those accidental lulls in the conversation occurred, and we all plainly heard the sound of glass breaking out in the parking lot. Callahan winced, but spilled no coffee.

"How do you figure a thing like heroin, Mike? It seems to weed out the very stupid and the very talented. Bird, Lady Day, Tim Hardin, Janis, a dozen others we both know—and a half a million anonymous losers, dead in alleys and pay toilets and gas stations and other people's bedrooms. Once in every few thousand of 'em comes a Ray Charles or a James Taylor, able to put it down and keep on working.

"Tells you something about the world we're making. The very stupid and the very sensitive can't seem to live in it. Both kinds need dangerous doses of anesthetic just to get through a day. Be a lot less bother for all concerned if they could get it legal, I figure. If that Ricky wanted to die, okay—but he shouldn't have had to make some poor gas jockey have to shoot him."

Another sound of shattering glass from outside, as loud as the first.

"Hey, Drink," Callahan said suddenly, "*how* much juice you say you keep in that truck?"

Long-Drink broke off a conversation with Margie Shorter. "Well, how I figure is, I got two hands—and besides, I might end up sharing the cab with somebody fastidious."

"Two *full* bottles?"

All of us got it at once, but the Drink was the first to move, and those long legs of his can really eat distance when they start swinging. He was out the door before the rest of us were in gear, and by the time we got outside he was just visible in the

darkness, kneeling up on the tailgate of his pickup, shaking his head. Everybody started for the truck, but I waved them back and they heeded me. When I got to the truck there was just enough light to locate the two heaps of glass that had been full quarts of Jack Daniels once. The question was, how recently? I got down on my hands and knees, swept my fingers gingerly through the shards, accepting a few small cuts in exchange for the answer to the question, is the ground at all damp hereabouts?

It was not.

"Jesus, Drink, he's sucked down two quarts of high test! Get him inside!"

"Can a man die from that?"

"*Get him inside.*" Tommy has one of those funny stomachs, that won't puke even when it ought to; I was already running.

"Where are you—oh, right." I could hear him hauling Tommy off the truck. Callahan's phone was out of service that week, so the Drink knew where I had to be headed. He was only half right. I left the parking lot in a spray of gravel, slipped in dogshit just on the curb, nearly got creamed by a Friday-night cowboy in a Camaro, went up over the hood of a parked Caddy and burst in the door of the all-night deli across the street from Callahan's. The counterman spun around, startled.

"Bernie," I roared, "call the Doc at Smithtown. Alcohol overdose across the street, *stat*," and then I was out the door again and sprinting up the dark street, heading for my second and most important destination.

Because I knew. Don't ask me how, I just knew. They say a hunch is an integration of data you did not know you possessed. Maybe I'd subconsciously begun to suspect just before the Doc had distracted me with his rotten pun—I'd had a lot of coffee, and they say coffee increases the I.Q. some. Maybe not—maybe I'd never have figured it out if I hadn't *needed* to just then, if figuring it all out hadn't been the only thing that could save my silly-ass friend Tommy. I had no evidence that would stand up in any kind of court—only hints and guesswork. All I can tell you is that when I first cleared the doorway of Callahan's Place, I knew where I would end up going—hipping Bernie was only for backup, and because it took so little time and was on the way.

Half a block is a short distance. Practically no distance at all. But to a man dreadfully hung over, afraid that his friend is dying, and above all absolutely, preternaturally *certain* of something that he cannot believe, a half block can take forever to run. By the time I got there, I believed. And then for the second time that day I was looking at a small, dark cottage with carven-Swiss drolleries around the windows and doors. This time I didn't care if I was welcome.

I didn't waste time on the door bell or the door. There was a big wooden lawn chair, maybe sixty or seventy pounds I learned later, but right then it felt like balsa as I heaved it up over my head and flung it through the big living room window. It took out the milk of the window and the drapes behind; I followed it like Dum-Dum the Human Cannonball, at a slight angle, and God was kind: I landed on nothing but rug.

I heard a distant shout in a language I did not know but was prepared to bet was Rumanian, and followed it through unfamiliar darkness, banging myself several times on hard objects, destroying an end table. Total dark, no moon or starlight, no time for matches, a door was before me and I kicked it open and there he was, just turning on a bedside lamp.

"I know," I said. "There's no more time for lying."

Pyotr tried to look uncomprehending, and failed, and there just wasn't any time for it.

"You don't drink blood. You *filter* it." He went white with shock. "I can even see how it must have happened, your trip at Callahan's, I mean. When you first got over here to the States, you must have landed in New York and got a job as a technician in a blood bank, right? Leach a *little* bit of nourishment out of a *lot* of whole blood you can feed without giving serious anemia to the transfusion patients. An ethical vampire—with a digestion that has trouble with beef broth. I'll bet you've even got big canines like the movie vampires—not because size makes them any more efficient at *letting* blood, but because there're some damned unusual glands in 'em. You interface with foreign blood and filter out the nourishment it carries in solution. Only you couldn't have known how they got blood in New York City, who the typical donor is, and before you knew it it was too late, you were a stone alcoholic." I was talking a mile a minute, but I could see every single shot strike home. I had no time to spare for his anguish: I grabbed him and hauled him off the bed, threw clothes at him. "Well, I don't give a shit about that now! You know young Tommy Janssen, well he's down the block with about three quarts of hooch in him, and the last two went down in a gulp apiece, so you move your skinny Transylvanian ass or I'll kick it off your spine, you got me? *Jump, goddammit!*"

He caught on at once, and without a word he pulled his clothes on, fast enough to suit me. An instant later we were sprinting out the door together.

The half-block run gave me enough time to work out how I could do this without blowing Pyotr's cover. It was the total blackness of the night that gave me the idea. When we reached Callahan's I kept on running around to the back, yelling at him to follow. As we burst in the door to the back room I located the main breaker and killed it, yanking a few fuses for insurance. The lights went out and the icebox stopped sighing. Fortunately I don't need light to find my way around Callahan's Place, and good night-sight must have been a favorable adaptation for anyone with Pyotr's basic mutation; we were out in the main room in seconds and in silence.

At least compared with the hubbub there; everybody was shouting at once. I cannoned into Callahan in the darkness—I saw the glowing cheroot-tip go past my cheek—and I hugged him close and said in his ear, "Mike, trust me. Do *not* find the candles you've got behind the bar. And open the windows."

"Okay, Jake," he said calmly at once, and moved away in the blackness. With the windows open, matches blew out as fast as they could be lit. The shouting intensified. In the glow of one attempted match-lighting, I saw Tommy laid out on the bar in the same place Lady Macbeth had lain the night before, and I saw Pyotr

reach him. I sprang across the room to the fireplace—thank God it was a warm night; no fire—and cupped my hands around my mouth.

"ALL RIGHT, PEOPLE," I roared as loud as I could, and silence fell.

Damned if I can remember what I said. I guess I told them that the Doc was on the way, and made up some story about the power failure, and told a few lies about guys I'd known who drank twice as much booze and survived, and stuff like that. All I know is that I *held* them, by sheer force of vocal personality, kept their attention focused on me there in the dark for perhaps four or five minutes of impassioned monologue. While behind them, Pyotr worked at the bar.

When I heard him clear his throat I began winding it down. I heard the distant sound of a door closing, the door that leads from the back room to the world outside. "So the important thing," I finished, locating one of those artificial logs in the dark and laying it on the hearth, "is not to panic and to wait for the ambulance," and I lit the giant crayon and stacked real maple and birch on top of it. The fire got going at once, and that sorted out most of the confusion. Callahan was bending over Tommy, rubbing at the base of his neck with a bar-rag, and tie looked up and nodded. "I think he's okay, Jake. His breathing is a lot better."

A ragged cheer went up.

By the time we had the lights back on, the wagon arrived, Doc Webster bursting in the door like a crazed hippo with three attendants following him. I stuck around just long enough to hear him confirm that Tommy would pull through, promised Callahan I'd give him the yarn later, and slipped out the back.

Walking the half block was much more enjoyable than running it. I found Pyotr in his bedroom. Roaring drunk, of course, reeling around the room and swearing in Rumanian.

"Hi, Pyotr. Sorry I busted your window."

"Sodomize the window. Jake, is he—"

"Fine. You saved his life."

He frowned ferociously and sat down on the floor. "It is no good, Jake. I thank you for trying to keep my secret, but it will not work."

"No, it won't."

"I cannot continue. My conscience forbids. I have helped young Janssen. But it must end. I am ripping you all up."

"Off, Pyotr. Ripping us off. But don't kick yourself too hard. What choice did you have? And you saved a lot of the boys a lot of hangovers, laundering their blood the way you did. Just happens I've got a trick metabolism, so instead of skimming off my hangover, you gave me one. And doubled your own: the blood I gave you the last two nights must have been no prize."

"I stole it."

"Well, maybe. You didn't rob me of the booze—we *both* got drunk on it. You *did* rob me of a little nourishment—but I gather you also 'robbed' me of a considerable amount of poisonous byproducts of fatigue, poor diet, and prolonged despair. So maybe we come out even."

He winced and rolled his eyes. "These glands in my teeth—that was a very perceptive guess, Jake—are unfortunately not very selective. Alcoholism was not the only unpleasant thing I picked up working at the blood bank—another splendid guess—although it is the only one that has persisted. But it must end. Tomorrow night when I am capable I will go to Mr. Callahan's Place and confess what I have been doing—and then I will move somewhere else to dry out, somewhere where they do not buy blood from winos. Perhaps back to the Old Country." He began to sob softly. "In many ways it will be a relief. It has been *hard*, has made me ashamed to see all of you thinking I was some kind of *altruist*, when all the time I was—" He wept.

"Pyotr, listen to me." I sat on the floor with him. "Do you know what the folks are going to do tomorrow night when you tell them?"

Headshake.

"Well, *I* do, sure as God made little green thingies to seal plastic bags with, and so do you if you think about it. I'm so certain, I'm prepared to bet you a hundred bucks in gold right now.."

Puzzled stare; leaking tears.

"They'll take up a collection for you, asshole!"

Gape.

"You've been hanging out there for years, now, you *know* I'm right. Every eligible man and woman there is a blood donor already, the Doc sees to that—do you mean to tell me they begrudge another half liter or so for a man who'd leave a warm bed in the middle of the night to risk his cover and save a boy's life?"

He began to giggle drunkenly. "You know—hee, hee—I believe you are right." The giggle showed his fangs. Suddenly it vanished. "Oh," he cried, "I do not deserve such friends. Do you know what first attracted me about Callahan's Place? There is no mirror. No, no, not that silly superstition—mirrors reflect people like me as well as anyone. That's just it. *I was ashamed to look at my reflection in a mirror.*"

I made him look at me. "Pyotr, listen to me. You worked *hard* for your cakes and ale, these last few years. You kept a lot of silly bastards from turning into highway statistics. Okay, you may have had *another* motive that we didn't know—but underneath it all, you're just like everybody else at Callahan's Place."

"Eh?"

"A sucker for your friends."

And it broke him up, thank God, and everything worked out just fine.

And a couple of weeks later, Pyotr played us all a couple of fabulous Rumanian folk songs—on Lady Macbeth.

Answers to the riddles left unsolved:

Category II

e) coffin; baby boy = pall; new man = *Paul Newman*

Category III (Male American Politicians)

a) irrigated; laser pistol = runneled; ray gun = *Ronald Reagan*

b) Nazi; cook tightly = Jerry; brown = *Jerry Brown*

c) British punk; knowledge: current = Teddy; ken; eddy = *Teddy Kennedy*

d) chicken coop; foreplay = hennery; kissing her = *Henry Kissinger*

e) wealthier; nuts to = richer; nix on = *Richard Nixon*