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Ed GORMAN

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by Ed Gorman

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Introduction

Ed Gorman has been a full time writer for over fourteen years, during which time he has written more that twenty novels, five collections of short stories and three screenplays. Previously he spent twenty years in advertising, mostly writing and directing tv commercials in Chicago, Minneapolis, Des Moines and Cedar Rapids. While Gorman is generally regarded as a crime novelist, he has also written a number of westerns and horror novels. Several of his books and stories have been optioned for TV and movies lately. He lives in Cedar Rapids with his wife, novelist Carole Gorman, and their three cats.

Volume 1 of *Ed Gorman: Short Stories* contains Fictionwise.com members favorites "En Famille" and "Favor and the Princess" and more excellent short mysteries.

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The Christmas Kitten

1

"She in a good mood?" I asked.

The lovely and elegant Pamela Forrest looked up at me as if I'd suggested that there really was a Santa Claus.

"Now why would she go and do a foolish thing like that, McCain?" She smiled.

"Oh, I guess because—"

"Because it's the Christmas season, and most people are in good moods?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, not our Judge Whitney."

"At least she's consistent," I said.

I had been summoned, as usual, from my law practice, where I'd been working the phones, trying to get my few clients to pay their bills. I had a 1951 Ford ragtop to support. And dreams of taking the beautiful Pamela Forrest to see the Platters concert when they were in Des Moines next month.

"You thought any more about the Platters concert?" I said.

"Oh, McCain, now why'd you have to go and bring *that* up?"

"I just thought—"

"You know how much I love the Platters. But I really don't think it's a good idea for the two of us to go out again." She gave me a melancholy little smile. "Now I probably went and ruined your holidays and I'm sorry. You know I like you, Cody, it's just—Stew."

This was Christmas 1959, and I'd been trying since at least Christmas 1957 to get Pamela to go out with me. But we had a problem—while I loved Pamela, Pamela loved Stewart, and Stewart happened to be not only a former football star at the university but also the heir to the town's third biggest fortune.

Her intercom buzzed. "Is he out there pestering you again, Pamela?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Tell him to get his butt in here."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And call my cousin John and tell him I'll be there around three this afternoon."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And remind me to pick up my dry cleaning."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And tell McCain to get his butt in here. Or did I already say that?"

"You already said that, Your Honor."

I bade goodbye to the lovely and elegant Pamela Forrest and went in to meet my master.

"You know what he did this time?" Judge Eleanor Whitney said three seconds after I crossed her threshold.

The "he" could only refer to one person in the town of Black River Falls, Iowa. And that would be our esteemed chief of police, Cliff Sykes, Jr., who has this terrible habit of arresting people for murders they didn't commit and giving Judge Whitney the pleasure of pointing out the error of his ways.

A little over a hundred years ago, Judge Whitney's family dragged a lot of money out here from the East and founded this town. They pretty much ran it until World War II, a catastrophic event that helped make Cliff Sykes, Sr., a rich and powerful man in the local wartime construction business. Sykes, Sr., used his money to put his own members on the town council, just the way the Whitneys had always done. He also started to bribe and coerce the rest of the town into doing things his way. Judge Whitney saw him as a crude outlander, of course. Where her family was conversant with Verdi, Vermeer, and Tolstoy, the Sykes family took as cultural icons Ma and Pa Kettle and Francis the Talking Mule, the same characters I go to see at the drive-in whenever possible.

Anyway, the one bit of town management the Sykes family couldn't get to was Judge Whitney's court. Every time Cliff Sykes, Jr., arrested somebody for murder, the judge called me up and put me to work. In addition to being an attorney, I'm taking extension courses in criminology. The judge thinks this qualifies me as her very own staff private investigator, so whenever she wants something looked into, she calls me. And I'm glad she does. She's my only source of steady income.

"He arrested my cousin John's son, Rick. Charged him with murdering his girlfriend. That stupid ass."

Now in a world of seventh-ton crime-solving geniuses, and lady owners of investigative firms who go two hundred pounds and are as bristly as barbed wire, Judge Eleanor Whitney is actually a small, trim, and very handsome woman. And she knows how to dress herself. Today she wore a brown

suede blazer, a crisp button-down, white-collar shirt, and dark fitted slacks. Inside the open collar of the shirt was a green silk scarf that complemented the green of her eyes perfectly.

She was hiked on the edge of the desk, right next to an ample supply of rubber bands.

"Sit down, McCain."

"He didn't do it."

"I said sit down. You know I hate it when you stand."

I sat down.

"He didn't do it," I said.

"Exactly. He didn't do it."

"You know, one of these times you're bound to be wrong. I mean, just by the odds, Sykes is bound to be right." Which is what I say every time she gives me an assignment.

"Well, he isn't right this time." Which is what she says every time I say the thing about the odds.

"His girlfriend was Linda Palmer, I take it."

"Right."

"The one found in her apartment?"

She nodded.

"What's Sykes's evidence?"

"Three neighbors saw Rick running away from the apartment house the night before last."

She launched one of her rubber hands at me, thumb and forefinger style, like a pistol. She likes to see if I'll flinch when the rubber band comes within an eighth of an inch of my ear. I try never to give her that satisfaction.

"He examine Rick's car and clothes?"

"You mean fibers and blood, things like that?"

"Yeah."

She smirked. "You think Sykes would be smart enough to do something like that?"

"I guess you've got a point."

She stood up and started to pace.

You'll note that I am not permitted this luxury, standing and pacing, but for her it is fine. She is, after all, mistress of the universe.

"I just keep thinking of John. The poor guy. He's a very good man."

"I know."

"And it's going to be a pretty bleak Christmas without Rick there. I'll have to invite him out to the house."

Which was not an invitation I usually wanted. The judge kept a considerable number of rattlesnakes in glass cages on the first floor of her house. I was always waiting for one of them to get loose.

I stood up. "I'll get right on it." I couldn't recall ever seeing the judge in such a pensive mood. Usually, when she's going to war with Cliff Sykes, Jr., she's positively ecstatic.

But when her cousin was involved, and first cousin at that, I supposed even Judge Whitney—a woman who had buried three husbands, and who frequently golfed with President Eisenhower when he was in the Midwest, and who had been ogled by Khrushchev when he visited a nearby Iowa farm—I supposed even Judge Whitney had her melancholy moments.

She went back to her desk, perched on the edge of it, loaded up another rubber band, and shot it at me.

"Your nerves are getting better, McCain," she said. "You don't twitch as much as you used to."

"I'll take that as an example of your Christmas cheer," I said. "You noting that I don't twitch as much as I used to, I mean."

Then she glowered at me. "Nail his butt to the wall, McCain. My family's honor is at stake here. Rick's a hothead but he's not a killer. He cares too much about the family name to soil it that way."

Thus basking in the glow of Christmas spirit, not to mention a wee bit of patrician hubris, I took my leave of the handsome Judge Whitney.

2

Red Ford ragtops can get a little cold around Christmas time. I had everything buttoned down but winter winds still whacked the car every few yards or so.

The city park was filled with snowmen and Christmas angels as Bing Crosby and Perry Como and Johnny Mathis sang holiday songs over the loudspeakers lining the merchant blocks. I could remember being a kid, in the holiday concerts in the park. People stood there in the glow of Christmas-tree lights listening to us sing for a good hour. I always kept warm by staring at the girl I had a crush on that particular year. Even back then, I gravitated toward the ones who didn't want me. I guess that's why my favorite holiday song is "Blue Christmas" by Elvis. It's really depressing, which gives it a certain honesty for romantics like myself.

I pulled in the drive of Linda Palmer's apartment house. It was a box with two apartments up, two down. There was a

gravel parking lot in the rear. The front door was hung with holly and a plastic bust of Santa Claus.

Inside, in the vestibule area with the mailboxes, I heard Patti Page singing a Christmas song, and I got sentimental about Pamela Forrest again. During one of the times that she'd given up on good old Stewart, she'd gone out with me a few times. The dates hadn't meant much to her, but I looked back on them as the halcyon period of my entire life, when giants walked the earth and you could cut off slices of sunbeams and sell them as gold.

"Hi," I said as soon as the music was turned down and the door opened up.

The young woman who answered the bell to the apartment opposite Linda Palmer's was cute in a dungaree-doll sort of way—ponytail and Pat Boone sweatshirt and jeans rolled up to mid calf.

"Hi."

"My name's McCain."

"I'm Bobbi Thomas. Aren't you Judge Whitney's assistant?"

"Well, sort of."

"So you're here about—"

"Linda Palmer."

"Poor Linda," she said, and made a sad face. "It's scary living here now. I mean, if it can happen to Linda—"

She was about to finish her sentence when two things happened at once. A tiny calico kitten came charging out of her apartment between her legs, and a tall man in a gray uniform with DERBY CLEANERS sewn on his cap walked in and handed her a package wrapped in clear plastic. Inside

was a shaggy gray throw rug and a shaggy white one and a shaggy fawn-colored one.

"Appreciate your business, miss," the DERBY man said, and left.

I mostly watched the kitten. She was a sweetie. She walked straight over to the door facing Bobbi's. The card in the slot still read LINDA PALMER.

"You mind picking her up and bringing her in? I just need to put this dry cleaning away."

Ten minutes later, the three of us sat in her living room. I say three because the kitten, who'd been introduced to me as Sophia, sat in my lap and sniffed my coffee cup whenever I raised it to drink. The apartment was small but nicely kept. The floors were oak and not spoiled by wall-to-wall carpeting. She took the throw rugs from the plastic dry-cleaning wrap and spread them in front of the fireplace.

"They get so dirty," she explained as she straightened the rugs, then walked over and sat down.

Then she nodded to the kitten. "We just found her downstairs in the laundry room one day. There's a small TV down there and Linda and I liked to sit down there and smoke cigarettes and drink Cokes and watch *Bandstand*. Do you think Dick Clark's a crook? My boyfriend does." She shrugged. "Ex-boyfriend. We broke up." She tried again: "So do you think Dick Clark's a crook?"

A disc jockey named Alan Freed was in trouble with federal authorities for allegedly taking bribes to play certain songs on his radio show. Freed didn't have enough power to make a hit record and people felt he was being used as a scapegoat. On

the other hand, Dick Clark did have the power to make or break a hit record (Lord, did he, with *American Bandstand* on ninety minutes several afternoons a week), but the feds had rather curiously avoided investigating him in any serious way.

"Could be," I said. "But I guess I'd rather talk about Linda."

She looked sad again. "I guess that's why I was talking about Dick Clark. So we wouldn't *have* to talk about Linda."

"I'm sorry."

She sighed. "I just have to get used to it, I guess." Then she looked at Sophia. "Isn't she sweet? We called her our Christmas kitten."

"She sure is."

"That's what I started to tell you. One day Linda and I were downstairs, and there Sophia was. Just this little lost kitten. So we both sort of adopted her. We'd leave our doors open so Sophia could just wander back and forth between apartments. Sometimes she slept here, sometimes she slept over there." She raised her eyes from the kitten and looked at me. "He killed her."

"Rick?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why do I say that? Are you kidding? You should've seen the arguments they had."

"He ever hit her?"

"Not that I know of."

"He ever *threaten* her?"

"All the time."

"You know why?" I asked.

"Because he was so jealous of her. He used to sit across the street at night and just watch her front window. He'd sit there for hours."

"Would she be in there at the time?"

"Oh, sure. He always claimed she had this big dating life on the side but she never did."

"Anything special happen lately between them?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I guess not."

"She gave him back his engagement ring."

"And that—"

"He smashed out her bedroom window with his fist. This was in the middle of the night and he was really drunk. I called the police on him. Just because he's a Whitney doesn't mean he can break the rules any time he feels like it."

I'd been going to ask her if she was from around here but the resentment in her voice about the Whitneys answered my question. The Whitneys had been the valley's most imperious family for a little more than a century now.

"Did the police come?"

"Sykes himself."

"And he did what?"

"Arrested him. Took him in." She gave me a significant look with her deep blue eyes. "He was relishing every minute, too. A Sykes arresting a Whitney, I mean. He was having a blast."

So then I asked her about the night of the murder. We spent twenty minutes on the subject but I didn't learn much.

She'd been in her apartment all night watching TV and hadn't heard anything untoward. But when she got up to go to work in the morning and didn't hear Linda moving around in her apartment, she knocked, and, when there wasn't any answer, went in. Linda lay dead, the left side of her head smashed in, sprawled in a white bra and half-slip in front of the fireplace that was just like Bobbi's.

"Maybe I had my TV up too loud," Bobbi said. "I love westerns and it was *Gunsmoke* night. It was a good one, too. But I keep thinking that maybe if I hadn't played the TV so loud, I could've heard her—"

I shook my head. "Don't start doing that to yourself, Bobbi, or it'll never end. If only I'd done this, if only I'd done that. You did everything you could."

She sighed. "I guess you're right."

"Mind one more question?"

She shrugged and smiled. "You can see I've got a pretty busy social calendar."

"I want to try and take Rick out of the picture for a minute. Will you try?"

"You mean as a suspect?"

"Right."

"I'll try."

"All right. Now, who are three people who had something against Linda—or Rick?"

"Why Rick?"

"Because maybe the killer wanted to make it *look* as if Rick did it."

"Oh, I see." Then: "I'd have to say Gwen. Gwen Dawes. She was Rick's former girlfriend. She always blamed Linda for taking him away. You know, they hadn't been going together all that long, Rick and Linda, I mean. Gwen would still kind of pick arguments with her when she'd see them in public places."

"Gwen ever come over here and pick an argument?"

"Once, I guess."

"Remember when?"

"Couple months ago, maybe."

"What happened?"

"Nothing much. She and a couple of girlfriends were pretty drunk, and they came up on the front porch and started writing things on the wall. It was juvenile stuff. Most of us graduated from high school two years ago but we're still all kids, if you see what I mean."

I wrote Gwen's name down and said, "Anybody else who bothered Linda?"

"Paul Walters, for sure."

"Paul Walters?"

"*Her* old boyfriend. He used to wait until Rick left at night and then he'd come over and pick a fight with her."

"Would she let him in?"

"Sometimes. Then there was Millie Styles. The wife of the man Linda worked for."

"Why didn't she like Linda?"

"She accused Linda of trying to steal her husband."

"Was she?"

"You had to know Linda."

"I see."

"She wasn't a rip or anything."

"Rip?"

"You know, whore."

"But she—"

"—could be very flirtatious."

"More than flirtatious?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Maybe with Mr. Styles?"

"Maybe. He's an awfully handsome guy. He looks like Fabian."

She wasn't kidding. They weren't very far out of high school.

That was when I felt a scratching on my chin and I looked straight down into the eager, earnest, and heartbreakingly sweet face of Sophia.

"She likes to kiss noses the way Eskimos do," Bobbi said. We kissed noses.

Then I set Sophia down and she promptly put a paw in my coffee cup.

"Sophia!" Bobbi said. "She's always putting her paw in wet things. She's obsessed, the little devil."

Sophia paid us no attention. Tail switching, she walked across the coffee table, her left front paw leaving coffee imprints on the surface.

I stood up. "I appreciate this, Bobbi."

"You can save yourself some work."

"How would I do that?"

"There's a skating party tonight. Everybody we've talked about is going to be there." She gave me another one of her significant looks. "Including me."

"Then I guess that's a pretty good reason to go, isn't it?" I said.

"Starts at six-thirty. It'll be very dark by then. You know how to skate?"

I smiled. "I wouldn't exactly call it skating."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Falling down is the term that comes to mind," I said.

3

Rick Whitney was even harder to love than his aunt.

"When I get out of this place, I'm going to take that hillbilly and push him off Indian Cliff."

In the past five minutes, Rick Whitney, of the long blond locks and relentlessly arrogant blue-eyed good looks, had also threatened to shoot, stab, and set fire to our beloved chief of police, Cliff Sykes, Jr. As an attorney, I wouldn't advise any of my clients to express such thoughts, especially when they were in custody, being held for premeditated murder (or as my doctor friend Stan Greenbaum likes to say, "premedicated murder").

"Rick, we're not getting anywhere."

He turned on me again. He'd turned on me three or four times already, pushing his face at me, jabbing his finger at me.

"Do you know what it's like for a Whitney to be in jail? Why, if my grandfather were still alive, he'd come down here and shoot Sykes right on the spot."

"Rick? Sit down and shut up."

"You're telling me to shut up?"

"Uh-huh. And to sit down."

"I don't take orders from people like you."

I stood up. "Fine. Then I'll leave."

He started to say something nasty, but just then a cloud passed over the sun and the six cells on the second floor of the police station got darker.

He said, "I'll sit down."

"And shut up?"

It was a difficult moment for a Whitney. Humility is even tougher for them than having a tooth pulled. "And shut up."

So we sat down, him on the wobbly cot across from my wobbly cot, and we talked as two drunks three cells away pretended they weren't listening to us.

"A Mrs. Mawbry who lives across the street saw you running out to your car about eleven p.m. the night of the murder. Dr. Mattingly puts the time of death at right around that time."

"She's lying."

"You know better than that."

"They just hate me because I'm a Whitney."

It's not easy going through life being of a superior species, especially when all the little people hate you for it.

"You've got fifteen seconds," I said.

"For what?"

"To stop stalling and tell me the truth. You went to the apartment and found her dead, didn't you? And then you ran away."

I watched the faces of the two eavesdropping winos. It was either stay up here in the cells, or use the room downstairs that I was sure Cliff Sykes, Jr., had bugged.

"Ten seconds."

He sighed and said, "Yeah, I found her. But I didn't kill her."

"You sure of that?"

He looked startled. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means were you drinking that evening, and did you have any sort of alcoholic blackout? You've been known to tip a few."

"I had a couple beers earlier. That was it. No alcoholic blackout."

"All right," I said. "Now tell me the rest of it."

* * * *

"Wonder if the state'll pass that new law," Chief Cliff Sykes, Jr., said to me as I was leaving the police station by the back door.

"I didn't know that you kept up on the law, Cliff, Jr."

He hated it when I added the Jr. to his name, but since he was about to do a little picking on me, I decided to do a little picking on him. With too much Brylcreem—Cliff, Jr., apparently never heard the part of the jingle that goes "A little dab'll do ya"—and his wiry mustache, he looks like a bar rat all duded up for Saturday night. He wears a khaki uniform that Warner Brothers must have rejected for an Errol Flynn western. The epaulets alone must weigh twenty-five pounds each.

"Yep, next year they're goin' to start fryin' convicts instead of hanging them."

The past few years in Iowa, we'd been debating which was the more humane way to shuffle off this mortal coil. At least when the state decides to be the shuffler and make you the shufflee.

"And I'll bet you think that Rick Whitney is going to be one of the first to sit in the electric chair, right?"

He smiled his rat smile, sucked his toothpick a little deeper into his mouth. "You said it, I didn't."

There's a saying around town that money didn't change the Sykes family any—they're still the same mean, stupid, dishonest, and uncouth people they've always been.

"Well, I hate to spoil your fun, Cliff, Jr., but he's going to be out of here by tomorrow night."

He sucked on his toothpick some more. "You and what army is gonna take him out of here?"

"Won't take an army, Cliff, Jr., I'll just find the guilty party and Rick'll walk right out of here."

He shook his head. "He thinks his piss don't stink because he's a Whitney. This time he's wrong."

4

The way I figure it, any idiot can learn to skate standing up. It takes a lot more creativity and perseverance to skate on your knees and your butt and your back.

I was putting on quite a show. Even five-year-olds were pointing at me and giggling. One of them had an adult face pasted on his tiny body. I wanted to give him the finger but I

figured that probably wouldn't look quite right, me being twenty-six and an attorney and all.

Everything looked pretty tonight, gray smoke curling from the big log cabin where people hung out putting on skates and drinking hot cider and warming themselves in front of the fireplace. Christmas music played over the loudspeakers, and every few minutes you'd see a dog come skidding across the ice to meet up with its owners. Tots in snowsuits looking like Martians toddled across the ice in the wake of their parents.

The skaters seemed to come in four types: the competitive skaters who were just out tonight to hone their skills; the show-offs who kept holding their girlfriends over their heads; the lovers who were melting the ice with their scorching looks; and the junior-high kids who kept trying to knock everybody down accidentally. I guess I should add the seniors; they were the most fun to watch, all gray hair and dignity as they made their way across the ice arm in arm. They probably came here thirty or forty years ago when Model-Ts had lined the parking area, and when the music had been supplied by Rudy Vallee. They were elegant and touching to watch here on the skating rink tonight.

I stayed to the outside of the rink. I kept moving because it was, at most, ten above zero. Falling down kept me pretty warm, too.

I was just getting up from a spill when I saw a Levi'd leg—two Levi'd legs—standing behind me. My eyes followed the line of legs upwards and there she was. It was sort of like a dream, actually, a slightly painful one because I'd dreamt it so often and so uselessly.

There stood the beautiful and elegant Pamela Forrest. In her white woolen beret, red cable-knit sweater, and jeans, she was the embodiment of every silly and precious holiday feeling. She was even smiling.

"Well, I'm sure glad you're here," she said.

"You mean because you want to go out?"

"No, I mean because I'm glad there's somebody who's even a worse skater than I am."

"Oh," I said.

She put out a hand and helped me up. I brushed the flesh of her arm—and let my nostrils be filled with the scent of her perfume—and I got so weak momentarily I was afraid I was going to fall right back down.

"You have a date?"

I shook my head. "Still doing some work for Judge Whitney."

She gave my arm a squeeze. "Just between you and me, McCain, I hope you solve one of these cases yourself someday."

She was referring to the fact that in every case I'd worked on, Judge Whitney always seemed to solve it just as I was starting to figure out who the actual culprit was. I had a feeling, though, that this case I'd figure out all by my lonesome.

"I don't think I've ever seen Judge Whitney as upset as she was today," I said.

"I'm worried about her. This thing with Rick, I mean; it isn't just going up against the Sykes family this time. The family honor's at stake."

I looked at her. "You have a date?"

And then she looked sad, and I knew what her answer was going to be.

"Not exactly."

"Ah. But Stewart's going to be here."

"I think so. I'm told he comes here sometimes."

"Boy, you're just as pathetic as I am."

"Well, that's a nice thing to say."

"You can't have him any more than I can have you. But neither one of us can give it up, can we?"

I took her arm and we skated. We actually did a lot better as a team than we did individually. I was going to mention that to her but I figured she would think I was just being corny and coming on to her in my usual clumsy way. If only I were as slick as Elvis in those movies of his where he sings a couple of songs and beats the crap out of every bad guy in town, working in a few lip locks with nubile females in the interim.

I didn't recognize them at first. Their skating costumes, so dark and tight and severe, gave them the aspect of Russian ballet artists. People whispered at them as they soared past, and it was whispers they wanted.

David and Millie Styles were the town's "artistic fugitives," as one of the purpler of the paper's writers wrote once. Twice a year they ventured to New York to bring radical new items back to their interior decorating "salon, " as they called it, and they usually brought back a lot of even more radical attitudes and poses. Millie had once been quoted in the paper as saying that we should have an "All Nude Day" twice a year in town;

and David was always standing on the library steps waving copies of banned books in the air and demanding that they be returned to library shelves. The thing was, I agreed with the message; it was the messengers I didn't care for. They were wealthy, attractive dabblers who loved to outrage and shock. In a big city, nobody would've paid them any attention. Out here, they were celebrities.

"God, they look great, don't they?" Pamela said.

"If you like the style."

"Skin-tight, all-black skating outfits. Who else would've thought of something like that?"

"You look a lot better."

She favored me with a forehead kiss. "Oh God, McCain, I sure wish I could fall in love with you."

"I wish you could, too."

"But the heart has its own logic."

"That sounds familiar."

"*Peyton Place*."

"That's right."

Peyton Place had swept through town two years ago like an army bent on destroying everything in its path. The fundamentalists not only tried to get it out of the library; they tried to ban its sale in paperback. The town literary lions, such as the Styleses, were strangely moot. They did not want to be seen defending something as plebeian as Grace Metalious's book. I was in a minority. I not only liked it; I thought it was a good book. A true one, as Hemingway often said.

On the far side of the rink, I saw David Styles skate away from his wife and head for the warming cabin.

She skated on alone.

"Excuse me. I'll be back," I said.

It took me two spills and three near-spills to reach Millie Styles.

"Evening," I said.

"Oh," she said, staring at me. "You." Apparently I looked like something her dog had just dragged in from the backyard, something not quite dead yet.

"I wondered if we could talk."

"What in God's name would you and I have to talk about, McCain?"

"Why you killed Linda Palmer the other night."

She tried to slap me but fortunately I was going into one of my periodic dives so her slap missed me by half a foot.

I did reach out and grab her arm to steady myself, however.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Did you find out that Linda and David were sleeping together?"

From the look in her eyes, I could see that she had. I kept thinking about what Bobbi Thomas had said, how Linda was flirtatious.

And for the first time, I felt something human for the striking, if not quite pretty, woman wearing too much makeup and way too many New York poses. Pain showed in her eyes. I actually felt a smidgen of pity for her.

Her husband appeared magically. "Is something wrong?" Seeing the hurt in his wife's eyes, he had only scorn for me. He put a tender arm around her. "You get the hell out of here, McCain." He sounded almost paternal, he was so protective of her.

"And leave me alone," she said again, and skated away so quickly that there was no way I could possibly catch her.

Then Pamela was there again, sliding her arm through mine.

"You have to help me, McCain," she said.

"Help you what?"

"Help me look like I'm having a wonderful time."

Then I saw Stew McGinley, former college football star and idle rich boy, skating around the rink with his girlfriend, the relentlessly cheery and relentlessly gorgeous Cindy Parkhurst, who had been a cheerleader at State the same year Stew was All Big-Eight.

This was the eternal triangle: I was in love with Pamela; Pamela was in love with Stew; and Stew was in love with Cindy, who not only came from the same class—right below the Whitneys—but had even more money than Stew did, and not only that but had twice done the unthinkable. She'd broken up with Stew and started dating somebody else. This was something Stew wasn't used to. *He* was supposed to do the breaking up. Stew was hooked, he was.

They were both dressed in white costumes tonight, and looked as if they would soon be on *The Ed Sullivan Show* for no other reason than simply existing.

"I guess I don't know how to do that," I said.

"How to do what?"

"How to help you look like you're having a wonderful time."

"I'm going to say something and then you throw your head back and break out laughing." She looked at me. "Ready?"

"Ready."

She said something I couldn't hear and then I threw my head back and pantomimed laughing. I had the sense that I actually did it pretty well—after watching all those Tony Curtis movies at the drive-in, I was bound to pick up at least a few pointers about acting—but the whole thing was moot because Stew and Cindy were gazing into each other's eyes and paying no attention to us whatsoever.

"There goes my Academy Award," I said.

We tried skating again, both of us wobbling and waffling along, when I saw Paul Walters standing by the warming house smoking a cigarette. He was apparently one of those guys who didn't skate but liked to come to the rink and look at all the participants so he could feel superior to them. A sissy sport, I could hear him thinking.

"I'll be back," I said.

By the time I got to the warming house, Paul Walters had been joined by Gwen Dawes. Just as Paul was the dead girl's old boyfriend, Gwen was the suspect's old girlfriend. Those little towns in Kentucky where sisters marry brothers had nothing on our own cozy little community.

Just as I reached them, Gwen, an appealing if slightly overweight redhead, pulled Paul's face down to hers and kissed him. He kissed her right back.

"Hi," I said, as they started to separate.

They both looked at me as if I had just dropped down from a UFO.

"Oh, you're Cody McCain," Walters said. He was tall, sinewy, and wore the official uniform of juvenile delinquents everywhere—leather jacket, jeans, engineering boots. He put his Elvis sneer on right after he brushed his teeth in the morning.

"Right. I wondered if we could maybe talk a little."

"We?" he said.

"Yeah. The three of us."

"About what?"

I looked around. I didn't want eavesdroppers.

"About Linda Palmer."

"My one night off a week and I have to put up with this crap," he said.

"She was a bitch," Gwen Dawes said.

"Hey, c'mon, she's dead," Walters said.

"Yeah, and that's just what she deserved, too."

"You wouldn't happened to have killed her, would you, Gwen?" I asked.

"That's why he's here, Paul. He thinks we did it."

"Right now," I said, "I'd be more inclined to say you did it."

"He works for Whitney," Walters said. "I forgot that. He's some kind of investigator."

She said, "He's trying to prove that Rick didn't kill her. That's why he's here."

"You two can account for yourselves between the hours of ten and midnight the night of the murder?"

Gwen eased her arm around his waist. "I sure can. He was at my place."

I looked right at her. "He just said this was his only night off. Where do you work, Paul?"

Now that I'd caught them in a lie, he'd lost some of his poise.

"Over at the tire factory."

"You were there the night of the murder?"

"I was—sick."

I watched his face.

"Were you with Gwen?"

"No—I was just riding around."

"And maybe stopped over at Linda's, the way you sometimes did?"

He looked at Gwen then back at me.

"No, I—I was just riding around."

He was as bad a liar as Gwen was.

"And I was home," Gwen said, "in case you're interested."

"Nobody with you?"

She gave Walters another squeeze.

"The only person I want with me is Paul."

She took his hand, held it tight. She was protecting him the way Mr. Styles had just protected Mrs. Styles. And as I watched her now, it gave me an idea about how I could smoke out the real killer. I wouldn't go directly for the killer—I'd go for the protector.

"Excuse us," Gwen said, and pushed past me, tugging Paul along in her wake.

I spent the next few minutes looking for Pamela. I finally found her sitting over in the empty bleachers that are used for speed-skating fans every Sunday when the ice is hard enough for competition.

"You okay?"

She looked up at me with those eyes and I nearly went over backwards. She has that effect on me, much as I sometimes wished she didn't.

"You know something, McCain?" she said.

"What?"

"There's a good chance that Stew is never going to change his mind and fall in love with me."

"And there's a good chance that *you're* never going to change your mind and fall in love with *me*."

"Oh, McCain," she said, and stood up, the whole lithe, elegant length of her. She slipped her arm in mine again and said, "Let's not talk anymore, all right? Let's just skate."

And skate we did.

5

When I got home that night, I called Judge Whitney and told her everything I'd learned, from my meeting with Bobbi Thomas to meeting the two couples at the ice rink tonight.

As usual, she made me go over everything to the point that it got irritating. I pictured her on the other end of the phone, sitting there in her dressing gown and shooting rubber bands at an imaginary me across from her.

"Get some rest, McCain," she said. "You sound like you need it."

It was true. I was tired and I probably sounded tired. I tried watching TV. *Mike Hammer* was on at 10:30. I buy all the Mickey Spillane books as soon as they come out. I think Darren McGavin does a great job with Hammer. But tonight the show couldn't quite hold my interest.

I kept thinking about my plan—

What if I actually went through with it?

If the judge found out, she'd probably say it was corny, like something out of Perry Mason. (The only mysteries the judge likes are by Rex Stout and Margery Allingham.)

But so what if it was corny—if it turned up the actual culprit?

I spent the next two hours sitting at my desk in my underwear typing up notes.

Some of them were too cute, some of them were too long, some of them didn't make a hell of a lot of sense.

Finally, I settled on:

If you really love you-know-who, then you'll meet me in Linda Palmer's apt. tonight at 9:00 o'clock.

A Friend

Then I addressed two envelopes, one to David Styles and one to Gwen Dawes, for delivery tomorrow.

I figured that they each suspected their mates of committing the murder, and therefore whoever showed up tomorrow night had to answer some hard questions.

It was going to feel good, to actually beat Judge Whitney to the solution of a murder. I mean, I don't have that big an

ego, I really don't, but I'd worked on ten cases for her now, and she'd solved each one.

6

I dropped off the notes in the proper mailboxes before going to work, then I spent the remainder of the day calling clients to remind them that they, ahem, owed me money. They had a lot of wonderful excuses for not paying me. Several of my clients could have great careers as science fiction novelists if they'd only give it half a chance.

I called Pamela three times, pretending I wanted to speak to Judge Whitney.

"She wrapped up court early this morning," Pamela told me on the second call. "Since then, she's been barricaded in her chambers. She sent me out the first time for lunch—a ham-and-cheese on rye with very hot mustard—and the second time for rubber bands. She ran out."

"Why doesn't she just pick them up off the floor?"

"She doesn't like to reuse them."

"Ah."

"Says it's not the game."

After work, I stopped by the A&W for a burger, fries, and root beer float. Another well-balanced Cody McCain meal.

Dusk was purple and lingering and chill, clear pure Midwestern stars suddenly filling the sky.

Before breaking the seal and the lock on Linda Palmer's door, I went over and said hello to Bobbi Thomas.

She came to the door with the kitten in her arms. She wore a white sweater that I found difficult to keep my eyes off of, and a pair of dark slacks.

"Oh, hi, Cody."

"Hi."

She raised one of the kitten's paws and waggled it at me.

"She says 'hi' too."

"Hi, honey." I nodded to the door behind me. "Can I trust you?"

"Sure, Cody. What's up?"

"I'm going to break into Linda's apartment."

"You're kidding."

"You'll probably hear some noises—people in the hallway and stuff—but please don't call the police. All right?"

For the first time, she looked uncertain. "Couldn't we get in trouble?"

"I suppose."

"And aren't you an officer of the court or whatever you call it?"

"Yeah," I said guiltily.

"Then maybe you shouldn't—"

"I want to catch the killer, Bobbi, and this is the only way I'll do it."

"Well—" she started to say. Her phone rang behind her. "I guess I'd better get that, Cody."

"Just don't call the police."

She looked at me a long moment. "Okay, Cody. I just hope we don't get into any trouble."

She took herself, her kitten, and her wonderful sweater back inside her apartment.

I saw a great crime movie once where he was sitting in the shadowy apartment of the woman who'd betrayed him. You know how a scene like that works. There's this lonely wailing sax music and Alan is smoking one butt after another (no wonder he was so short, probably stunted his growth smoking back when he was in junior high or something), and you could just feel how terrible and empty and sad he felt.

Here I was sitting in an armchair, smoking one Pall Mall after another, and if I wasn't feeling quite terrible and empty, I was at least feeling sort of sorry for myself. It was way past time that I show the judge that I could figure out one of these cases for myself.

When the knock came, it startled me, and for the first time I felt self-conscious about what I was doing.

I'd tricked four people into coming here without having any proof that any of them had had anything to do with Linda Palmer's murder at all. What would happen when I opened the door and actually faced them?

I was about to find out.

Leaving the lights off, I walked over to the door, eased it open, and stared into the faces of David and Millie Styles. They both wore black—black turtlenecks; a black peacoat for him; a black suede car coat for her; and black slacks for both of them—and they both looked extremely unhappy.

"Come in and sit down," I said.

They exchanged disgusted looks and followed me into the apartment.

"Take a seat," I said.

"I just want to find out why you sent us that ridiculous note," David Styles said.

"If it's so ridiculous, why did you come here?" I said.

As he looked at his wife again, I heard a knock on the back door. I walked through the shadowy apartment—somehow, I felt that lights-out would be more conducive to the killer blubbering a confession—and peeked out through the curtains near the stove: Gwen and Paul, neither of them looking happy.

I unlocked the door and let them in.

Before I could say anything, Gwen glared at me. "I'll swear under oath that Paul was with me the whole time the night she was murdered."

Suspects in Order of Likelihood

1. Millie
2. Gwen
3. David
4. Paul

That was before Gwen had offered herself as an alibi. Now Paul went to number one, with her right behind.

I followed them into the living room, where the Styleses were still standing.

I went over to the fireplace and leaned on the mantel and said, "One of us in this room is a murderer."

Millie Styles snorted. "This is just like a Charlie Chan movie."

"I'm serious," I said.

"So am I," she said.

"Each of you had a good reason to kill Linda Palmer," I said.

"I didn't," David Styles said.

"Neither did I," said Paul.

I moved away from the mantel, starting to walk around the room, but never taking my eyes off them.

"You could save all of us a lot of time and trouble by just confessing," I said.

"Which one of us are you talking to?" Gwen said. "I can't see your eyes in the dark."

"I'm talking to the real killer," I said.

"Maybe you killed her," David Styles said, "and you're trying to frame one of us."

This was pretty much how it went for the next fifteen minutes, me getting closer and closer to the real killer, making him or her really sweat it out, while I continued to pace and throw out accusations.

I guess the thing that spoiled it was the blood-red splash of light in the front window, Cliff Sykes, Jr.'s, personal patrol car pulling up to the curb, and then Cliff Sykes, Jr., racing out of his car, gun drawn.

I heard him on the porch, I heard him in the hall, I heard him at the door across the hall.

Moments after the door opened, Bobbi Thomas wailed, "All right! I killed her! I killed her! I caught her sleeping with my boyfriend!"

I opened the door and looked out into the hall.

Judge Whitney stood next to Cliff Sykes, Jr., and said, "There's your killer, Sykes. Now you get down to that jail and let my nephew go!"

And with that, she turned and stalked out of the apartment house.

Then I noticed the Christmas kitten in Bobbi Thomas's arms.

"What's gonna happen to the kitty if I go to prison?" she sobbed.

"Probably put her to sleep," the ever-sensitive Cliff Sykes, Jr., said.

At which point, Bobbi Thomas became semi-hysterical.

"I'll take her, Bobbi," I said, and reached over and picked up the kitten.

"Thanks," Bobbi said over her shoulder as Sykes led her out to his car.

The people in Linda Palmer's apartment each took a turn at glowering at me as they walked into the hall and out the front door.

"See you, Miss Marple," said David Styles.

"So long, Sherlock," smirked Gwen Dawes.

Her boyfriend said something that I can't repeat here.

And Millie Styles said, "Charlie Chan does it a lot better, McCain."

When Sophie (I'm an informal kind of guy, and Sophia is a very formal kind of name) and I got back to my little apartment over a store that Jesse James had actually shot up one time, we both got a surprise.

A Christmas tree stood in the corner—resplendent with green and yellow and red lights, and long shining strands of silver icing, and a sweet little angel right at the very tip-top of the tree.

And next to the tree stood the beautiful and elegant Pamela Forrest, gorgeous in a red sweater and jeans. Now, in the Shell Scott novels I read, Pamela would be completely naked and beckoning to me with a curling, seductive finger.

But I was happy to see her just as she was.

“Judge Whitney was afraid you'd be kind of down about not solving the case, so she asked me to buy you a tree and set it up for you.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I didn't even have Bobbi on my list of suspects. How'd she figure it out anyway?”

Pamela immediately lifted Sophia from my arms and started doing Eskimo noses with her. “Well, first of all, she called the cleaners and asked if any of the rugs that Bobbi had had cleaned had had red stains on it—blood, in other words, meaning that she'd probably killed Linda in her apartment and then dragged her back across to Linda's apartment. The blood came from Sophia's paws, most likely when she walked on the white throw rug.” She paused long enough to do some more Eskimo nosing.

“Then second, Bobbi told you that she'd stayed home and watched *Gunsmoke*. But *Gunsmoke* had been preempted for a Christmas special and wasn't on that night. And third—” By now she was rocking Sophia in the cradle of her arm. “Third, she found out that the boyfriend that Bobbi had only mentioned briefly to you had fallen under Linda's spell. Bobbi

came home and actually found them in bed together—he hadn't even been gentleman enough to take it across the hall to Linda's apartment." Then: "Gosh, McCain, this is one of the cutest little kittens I've ever seen."

"Makes me wish I was a kitten," I said. "Or Sherlock Holmes. She sure figured it out, didn't she?"

Pamela carried Sophia over to me and said, "I think your daddy needs a kiss, young lady."

And I have to admit, it was pretty nice at that moment, Pamela Forrest in my apartment for the very first time, and Sophia's sweet little sandpaper tongue giving me a lot of sweet little kitty kisses.

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En Famille

By the time I was eight years old, I'd fallen disconsolately in love with any number of little girls who had absolutely no interest in me. These were little girls I'd met in all the usual places, school, playground, neighborhood.

Only the girl I met at the racetrack took any interest in me. Her name was Wendy and, like me, she was brought to the track three or four times a week by her father, after school in the autumn months, during working hours in the summer.

Ours was one of those impossibly romantic relationships that only a young boy can have (all those nights of kissing pillows while pretending it was her—this accompanied by one of those swelling romantic songs you hear in movies with Ingrid Bergman and Cary Grant—how vulnerable and true and beautiful she always was in my mind's perfect eye). I first saw her the spring of my tenth year, and not until I was fifteen did we even say hello to each other, even though we saw each other at least three times a week. But she was always with me, this girl I thought about constantly, and dreamed of nightly, the melancholy little blonde with the slow sad blue eyes and the quick sad smile.

I knew all about the sadness I saw in her. It was my sadness, too. Our fathers brought us to the track in order to make their gambling more palatable to our mothers. How much of a vice could it be if you took the little one along? The money lost at the track meant rent going unpaid, grocery

store credit cut off, the telephone frequently disconnected. It also meant arguing. No matter how deeply I hid in the closet, no matter how many pillows I put over my head, I could still hear them shrieking at each other. Sometimes he hit her. Once he even pushed her down the stairs and she broke her leg. Despite all this, I wanted them to stay together. I was terrified they would split up. I loved them both beyond imagining. Don't ask me why I loved him so much. I have no idea.

The day we first spoke, the little girl and I, that warm May afternoon in my fifteenth year, a black eye spoiled her very pretty, very pale little face. So he'd finally gotten around to hitting her. My father had gotten around to hitting me years ago. They got so frustrated over their gambling, their inability to *stop* their gambling, that they grabbed the first person they found and visited all their despair on him.

She was coming up from the seats in the bottom tier where she and her father always sat. I saw her and stepped out into the aisle.

"Hi," I said after more than six years of us watching each other from afar.

"Hi."

"I'm sorry about your eye."

"He was pretty drunk. He doesn't usually get violent. But it seems to be getting worse lately." She looked back at her seats. Her father was glaring at us. "I'd better hurry. He wants me to get him a hot dog."

"I'd like to see you sometime."

She smiled, sad and sweet with her black eye. "Yeah, me, too."

I saw her the rest of the summer but we never again got the chance to speak. Nor did we make the opportunity. She was my narcotic. I thought of no one else, wanted no one else. The girls at school had no idea what my home life was like, how old and worn my father's gambling had made my mother, how anxious and angry it had made me. Only Wendy understood.

Wendy Wendy Wendy. By now, my needs having evolved, she was no longer just the pure dream of a forlorn boy. I wanted her carnally, too. She'd become a beautiful young woman.

Near the end of that summer an unseasonable rainy grayness filled the skies. People at the track took to wearing winter coats. A few races had to be called off. Wendy and her father suddenly vanished.

I looked for them every day, and every night trudged home feeling betrayed and bereft. "Can't find your little girlfriend?" my father said. He thought it was funny.

Then one night, while I was in my bedroom reading a science fiction magazine, he shouted: "Hey! Get out here! Your girlfriend's on TV!"

And so she was.

"Police announce an arrest in the murder of Myles Larkin, who was found stabbed to death in his car last night. They have taken Larkin's only child, sixteen-year-old Wendy, into custody and formally charged her with the murder of her father."

I went twice to see her but they wouldn't let me in. Finally, I learned the name of her lawyer, lied that I was a shirttail cousin, and he took me up to the cold concrete visitors' room on the top floor of city jail.

Even in the drab uniform the prisoners wore, she looked lovely in her bruised and wan way.

"Did he start beating you up again?" I asked.

"No."

"Did he start beating up your mother?"

"No."

"Did he lose his job or get you evicted?"

She shook her head. "No. It was just that I couldn't take it anymore. I mean, he wasn't losing any more or any less money at the track, it was just I—I snapped. I don't know how else to explain it. It was like I saw what he'd done to our lives and I—I snapped. That's all—I just snapped."

She served seven years in a minimum-security women's prison upstate during which time my parents were killed in an automobile accident, I finished college, got married, had a child and took up the glamorous and adventurous life of a tax consultant. My wife, Donna, knew about my mental and spiritual ups and downs. Her father had been an abusive alcoholic.

I didn't see Wendy until twelve years later, when I was sitting at the track with my seven-year-old son. He didn't always like going to the track with me—my wife didn't like me going to the track at all—so I'd had to fortify him with the usual comic books, candy and a pair of "genuine" Dodgers sunglasses.

Between races, I happened to look down at the seats Wendy and her father usually took, and there she was. Something about the cock of her head told me it was her.

"Can we go, Dad?" my son, Rob, said. "It's so boring here."

Boring? I'd once tried to explain to his mother how good I felt when I was at the track. I was not the miserable, frightened, self-effacing owner of Advent Tax Systems (some system—me and my low-power Radio Shack computer and software). No ... when I was at the track I felt strong and purposeful and optimistic, and frightened of nothing at all. I was pure potential—potential for winning the easy cash that was the mark of men who were successful with women, and with their competitors, and with their own swaggering dreams.

"Please, Dad. It's really boring here. Honest."

But all I could see, all I could think about, was Wendy. I hadn't seen her since my one visit to jail. Then I noticed that she, too, had a child with her, a very proper-looking little blond girl whose head was cocked at the odd and fetching angle so favored by her mother.

We saw each other a dozen more times before we spoke. Then: "I knew I'd see you again someday."

Wan smile. "All those years I was in prison, I wasn't so sure."

Her daughter came up to her then and Wendy said: "This is Margaret."

"Hello, Margaret. Glad to meet you. This is my son, Rob."

With the great indifference only children can summon, they nodded hellos.

"We just moved back to the city," Wendy explained. "I thought I'd show Margaret where I used to come with my father." She mentioned her father so casually, one would never have guessed that she'd murdered the man.

Ten more times we saw each other, children in tow, before our affair began.

April 6 of that year was the first time we ever made love, this in a motel where the sunset was the color of blood in the window, and a woman two rooms away wept inconsolably. I had the brief fantasy that it was my wife in that room.

"Do you know how long I've loved you?" she said.

"Oh, God, you don't know how good it is to hear that."

"Since I was eight years old."

"For me, since I was nine."

"This would destroy my husband if he ever found out."

"The same with my wife."

"But I have to be honest."

"I want you to be honest."

"I don't care what it does to him. I just want to be with you."

In December of that year, my wife, Donna, discovered a lump in her right breast. Two weeks later she received a double mastectomy and began chemotherapy.

She lived nine years, and my affair with Wendy extended over the entire time. Early on, both our spouses knew about our relationship. Her husband, an older and primmer man than I might have expected, stopped by my office one day in

his new BMW and threatened to destroy my business. He claimed to have great influence in the financial community.

My wife threatened to leave me but she was too weak. She had one of those cancers that did not kill her but that never left her alone, either. She was weak most of the time, staying for days in the bedroom that had become hers, as the guest room had become mine. Whenever she became particularly angry about Wendy, Rob would fling himself at me, screaming how much he hated me, pounding me with fists that became more powerful with each passing year. He hated me for many of the same reasons I'd hated my own father, my ineluctable passion for the track, and the way there was never any security in our lives, the family bank account wholly subject to the whims of the horses that ran that day.

Wendy's daughter likewise blamed her mother for the alcoholism that had stricken the husband. There was constant talk of divorce but their finances were such that neither of them could quite afford it. Margaret constantly called Wendy a whore, and only lately did Wendy realize that Margaret sincerely meant it.

Two things happened the next year. My wife was finally dragged off into the darkness, and Wendy's husband crashed his car into a retaining wall and was killed.

Even on the days of the respective funerals, we went to the track.

"He never understood."

"Neither did she," I said.

"I mean why I come here."

"I know."

"I mean how it makes me feel alive."

"I know."

"I mean how nothing else matters."

"I know."

"I should've been nicer to him, I suppose."

"I suppose. But we can't make a life out of blaming ourselves. What's happened, happened. We have to go on from here."

"Do you think Rob hates you as much as Margaret hates me?"

"More, probably," I said. "The way he looks at me sometimes, I think he'll probably kill me someday."

But it wasn't me who was to die.

All during Wendy's funeral, I kept thinking of those words. Margaret had murdered her mother just as Wendy had killed her father. The press made a lot of this.

All the grief I should have visited upon my dead wife I visited upon my dead lover. I went through months of alcoholic stupor. Clients fell away; rent forced me to move from our nice suburban home to a small apartment in a section of the city that always seemed to be on fire. I didn't have to worry about Rob anymore. He got enough loans for college and wanted nothing to do with me.

Years and more years, the track the only constant in my life. Many times I tried to contact Rob through the alumni office of his school but it was no use. He'd left word not to give his current address to his father.

There was the hospital and, several times, the detox clinic. There was the church in which I asked for forgiveness, and

the born-again rally at which I proclaimed my happiness in the Lord.

And then there was the shelter. Five years I lived there, keeping the place painted and clean for the other residents. The nuns seemed to like me.

My teeth went entirely, and I had to have dentures. The arthritis in my foot got so bad that I could not wear shoes for days at a time. And my eyesight, beyond even the magic of glasses, got so bad that when I watched the horse races on TV, I couldn't tell which horse was which.

Then one night I got sick and threw up blood and in the morning one of the sisters took me to the hospital where they kept me overnight. In the morning the doctor came in and told me that I had stomach cancer. He gave me five months to live.

There were days when I was happy about my death sentence. Looking back, my life seemed so long and sad, I was glad to have it over with. Then there were days when I sobbed about my death sentence, and hated the God the nuns told me to pray to. I wanted to live to go back to the track again and have a sweet, beautiful winner.

Four months after the doctor's diagnosis, the nuns put me in bed and I knew I'd never walk on my own again. I thought of Donna, and her death, and how I'd made it all the worse with the track and Wendy.

The weaker I got, the more I thought about Rob. I talked about him to the nuns. And then one day he was there.

He wasn't alone, either. With him was a very pretty dark-haired woman and a seven-year-old boy who got the best features of both his mother and father.

"Dad, this is Mae and Stephen."

"Hello, Mae and Stephen. I'm very glad to meet you. I wish I was better company."

"Don't worry about that," Mae said. "We're just happy to meet you."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Stephen said.

"Why don't I take him, and give you a few minutes alone with your dad?" Mae said.

And so, after all these years, we were alone and he said, "I still can't forgive you, Dad."

"I don't blame you."

"I want to. But somehow I can't."

I took his hand. "I'm just glad you turned out so well, son. Like your mother and not your father."

"I loved her very much."

"I know you did."

"And you treated her very, very badly."

All his anger. All these years.

"That's a beautiful wife and son you've got."

"They're my whole life, everything that matters to me."

I started crying; I couldn't help it. Here at the end I was glad to know he'd done well for himself and his family.

"I love you, Rob."

"I love you, too, Dad."

And then he leaned down and kissed me on the cheek and I started crying harder and embarrassed both of us.

Mae and Stephen came back.

"My turn," Rob said. He patted me on the shoulder. "I'll be back soon."

I think he wanted to cry but wanted to go somewhere alone to do it.

"So," Mae said, "are you comfortable?"

"Oh, very."

"This seems like a nice place."

"It is."

"And the nuns seem very nice, too."

"Very nice." I smiled. "I'm just so glad I got to see you two."

"Same here. I've wanted to meet you for years."

"Well," I said, smiling. "I'm glad the time finally came."

Stephen, proper in his white shirt and blue trousers and neatly combed dark hair, said, "I just wish you could go to the track with us sometime, Grandpa."

She didn't have to say anything. I saw it all in the quick certain pain that appeared in her lovely gray eyes.

"The race track, you mean?" I said.

"Uh-huh. Dad takes me all the time, doesn't he, Mom?"

"Oh, yes," she said, her voice toneless. "All the time."

She started to say more but then the door opened up and Rob came in and there was no time to talk.

There was no time at all.

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The Reason Why

"I'm scared."

"This was your idea, Karen."

"You scared?"

"No."

"You bastard."

"Because I'm not scared I'm a bastard?"

"You not being scared means you don't believe me."

"Well."

"See. I knew it."

"What?"

"Just the way you said 'Well.' You bastard."

I sighed and looked out at the big redbrick building that sprawled over a quarter mile of spring grass turned silver by a fat June moon. Twenty-five years ago a 1950 Ford fastback had sat in the adjacent parking lot. Mine for two summers of grocery store work.

We were sitting in her car, a Volvo she'd cadged from her last marriage settlement, number four if you're interested, and sharing a pint of bourbon the way we used to in high school when we'd been more than friends but never quite lovers.

The occasion tonight was our twenty-fifth class reunion. But there was another occasion, too. In our senior year a boy named Michael Brandon had jumped off a steep clay cliff called Pierce Point to his death on the winding river road below. Suicide. That, anyway, had been the official version.

A month ago Karen Lane (she had gone back to her maiden name these days, the Karen Lane-Cummings-Todd-Brown-LeMay getting a tad too long) had called to see if I wanted to go to dinner and I said yes, if I could bring Donna along, but then Donna surprised me by saying she didn't care to go along, that by now we should be at a point in our relationship where we trusted each other ("God, Dwyer, I don't even look at other men, not for very long anyway, you know?"), and Karen and I had had dinner and she'd had many drinks, enough that I saw she had a problem, and then she'd told me about something that had troubled her for a long time....

In senior year she'd gone to a party and gotten sick on wine and stumbled out to somebody's backyard to throw up and it was there she'd overheard the three boys talking. They were earnestly discussing what happened to Michael Brandon the previous week and they were even more earnestly discussing what would happen to them if "anybody ever really found out the truth."

"It's bothered me all these years," she'd said over dinner a month earlier. "They murdered him and they got away with it."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

"I didn't think they'd believe me."

"Why not?"

She shrugged and put her lovely little face down, dark hair covering her features. Whenever she put her face down that way it meant that she didn't want to tell you a lie so she'd just as soon talk about something else.

"Why not, Karen?"

"Because of where we came from. The Highlands."

The Highlands is an area that used to ring the iron foundries and factories of this city. Way before pollution became a fashionable concern, you could stand on your front porch and see a peculiarly beautiful orange haze on the sky every dusk. The Highlands had bars where men lost ears, eyes, and fingers in just garden-variety fights, and streets where nobody sane ever walked after dark, not even cops unless they were in pairs. But it wasn't the physical violence you remembered so much as the emotional violence of poverty. You get tired of hearing your mother scream because there isn't enough money for food and hearing your father scream back because there's nothing he can do about it. Nothing.

Karen Lane and I had come from the Highlands, but we were smarter and, in her case, better looking than most of the people from the area, so when we went to Wilson High School—one of those nightmare conglomerates that shoves the poorest kids in a city in with the richest—we didn't do badly for ourselves. By senior year we found ourselves hanging out with the sons and daughters of bankers and doctors and city officials and lawyers and riding around in new Impala convertibles and attending an occasional party where you saw an actual maid. But wherever we went, we'd manage for at least a few minutes to get away from our dates and talk to each other. What we were doing, of course, was trying to comfort ourselves. We shared terrible and confusing feelings—pride that we were acceptable to those we saw as

glamorous, shame that we felt disgrace for being from the Highlands and having fathers who worked in factories and mothers who went to Mass as often as nuns and brothers and sisters who were doomed to punching the clock and yelling at ragged kids in the cold factory dusk. (You never realize what a toll such shame takes till you see your father's waxen face there in the years-later casket.)

That was the big secret we shared, of course, Karen and I, that we were going to get out, leave the place once and for all. And her brown eyes never sparkled more Christmas-morning bright than at those moments when it all was ahead of us, money, sex, endless thrills, immortality. She had the kind of clean good looks brought out best by a blue cardigan with a line of white button-down shirt at the top and a brown suede car coat over her slender shoulders and moderately tight jeans displaying her quietly artful ass. Nothing splashy about her. She had the sort of face that snuck up on you. You had the impression you were talking to a pretty but in no way spectacular girl, and then all of a sudden you saw how the eyes burned with sad humor and how wry the mouth got at certain times and how the freckles enhanced rather than detracted from her beauty and by then of course you were hopelessly entangled. Hopelessly.

This wasn't just my opinion, either. I mentioned four divorce settlements. True facts. Karen was one of those prizes that powerful and rich men like to collect with the understanding that it's only something you hold in trust, like a yachting cup. So, in her time, she'd been an ornament for a professional football player (her college beau), an

orthodontist ("I think he used to have sexual fantasies about Barry Goldwater"), the owner of a large commuter airline ("I slept with half his pilots; it was kind of a company benefit"), and a sixty-nine-year-old millionaire who was dying of heart disease ("He used to have me sit next to his bedside and just hold his hand—the weird thing was that of all of them, I loved him, I really did—and his eyes would be closed and then every once in a while tears would start streaming down his cheeks as if he was remembering something that really filled him with remorse; he was really a sweetie, but then cancer got him before the heart disease and I never did find out what he regretted so much, I mean if it was about his son or his wife or what"), and now she was comfortably fixed for the rest of her life and if the crow's feet were a little more pronounced around eyes and mouth and if the slenderness was just a trifle too slender (she weighed, at five-three, maybe ninety pounds and kept a variety of diet books in her big sunny kitchen), she was a damn good-looking woman nonetheless, the world's absurdity catalogued and evaluated in a gaze that managed to be both weary and impish, with a laugh that was knowing without being cynical.

So now she wanted to play detective.

I had some more bourbon from the pint—it burned beautifully—and said, "If I had your money, you know what I'd do?"

"Buy yourself a new shirt?"

"You don't like my shirt?"

"I didn't know you had this thing about Hawaii."

"If I had your money I'd just forget about all of this."

"I thought cops were sworn to uphold the right and the true."

"I'm an ex-cop."

"You wear a uniform."

"That's for the American Security Agency."

She sighed. "So I shouldn't have sent the letters?"

"No."

"Well, if they're guilty, they'll show up at Pierce Point tonight."

"Not necessarily."

"Why?"

"Maybe they'll know it's a trap. And not do anything."

She nodded to the school. "You hear that?"

"What?"

"The song?"

It was Bobby Vinton's "Roses Are Red."

"I remember one party when we both hated our dates and we ended up dancing to that over and over again. Somebody's basement. You remember?"

"Sort of, I guess," I said.

"Good. Let's go in the gym and then we can dance to it again."

Donna, my lady friend, was out of town attending an advertising convention. I hoped she wasn't going to dance with anybody else because it would sure make me mad.

I started to open the door and she said, "I want to ask you a question."

"What?" I sensed what it was going to be so I kept my eyes on the parking lot.

"Turn around and look at me."

I turned around and looked at her. "Okay."

"Since the time we had dinner a month or so ago I've started receiving brochures from Alcoholics Anonymous in the mail. If you were having them sent to me, would you be honest enough to tell me?"

"Yes, I would."

"Are you having them sent to me?"

"Yes, I am."

"You think I'm a lush?"

"Don't you?"

"I asked you first."

So we went into the gym and danced.

* * * *

Crepe of red and white, the school colors, draped the ceiling; the stage was a cave of white light on which stood four balding fat guys with spit curls and shimmery gold lamé dinner jackets (could these be the illegitimate sons of Bill Haley?) playing guitars, drum, and saxophone; on the dance floor couples who'd lost hair, teeth, jaw lines, courage and energy (everything, it seemed, but weight) danced to lame cover versions of "Breaking up Is Hard to Do" and "Sheila," "Run-around Sue" and "Running Scared" (tonight's lead singer sensibly not even trying Roy Orbison's beautiful falsetto) and then, they broke into a medley of dance tunes—everything from "Locomotion" to "The Peppermint Twist"—and the place went a little crazy, and I went right along with it.

"Come on," I said.

"Great."

We went out there and we burned ass. We'd both agreed not to dress up for the occasion so we were ready for this. I wore the Hawaiian shirt she found so despicable plus a blue blazer, white socks and cordovan penny-loafers. She wore a salmon-colored Merikani shirt belted at the waist and tan cotton fatigue pants and, sweet Christ, she was so adorable half the guys in the place did the kind of double takes usually reserved for somebody outrageous or famous.

Over the blasting music, I shouted, "Everybody's watching you!"

She shouted right back, "I know! Isn't it wonderful?"

The medley went twenty minutes and could easily have been confused with an aerobics session. By the end I was sopping and wishing I was carrying ten or fifteen pounds less and sometimes feeling guilty because I was having too much fun (I just hoped Donna, probably having too much fun, too, was feeling guilty), and then finally it ended and mate fell into the arms of mate, hanging on to stave off sheer collapse.

Then the head Bill Haley clone said, "Okay, now we're going to do a ballad medley," so then we got everybody from Johnny Mathis to Connie Francis and we couldn't resist that, so I moved her around the floor with clumsy pleasure and she moved me right back with equally clumsy pleasure. "You know something?" I said.

"We're both shitty dancers?"

"Right."

But we kept on, of course, laughing and whirling a few times, and then coming tighter together and just holding each

other silently for a time, two human beings getting older and scared about getting older, remembering some things and trying to forget others and trying to make sense of an existence that ultimately made sense to nobody, and then she said, "There's one of them."

I didn't have to ask her what "them" referred to. Until now she'd refused to identify any of the three people she'd sent the letters to.

At first I didn't recognize him. He had almost white hair and a tan so dark it looked fake. He wore a black dinner jacket with a lacy shirt and a black bow tie. He didn't seem to have put on a pound in the quarter century since I'd last seen him.

"Ted Forester?"

"Forester," she said. "He's president of the same savings and loan his father was president of."

"Who are the other two?"

"Why don't we get some punch?"

"The kiddie kind?"

"You could really make me mad with all this lecturing about alcoholism."

"If you're really not a lush then you won't mind getting the kiddie kind."

"My friend, Sigmund Fraud."

We had a couple of pink punches and caught our respective breaths and squinted in the gloom at name tags to see who we were saying hello to and realized all the terrible things you realize at high school reunions, namely that people who thought they were better than you still think that way,

and that all the sad people you feared for—the ones with blackheads and low IQs and lame left legs and walleyes and lisps and every other sort of unfair infirmity people get stuck with—generally turned out to be deserving of your fear, for there was melancholy in their eyes tonight that spoke of failures of every sort, and you wanted to go up and say something to them (I wanted to go up to nervous Karl Carberry, who used to twitch—his whole body twitched—and throw my arm around him and tell him what a neat guy he was, tell him there was no reason whatsoever for his twitching, grant him peace and self-esteem and at least a modicum of hope; if he needed a woman, get him a woman, too), but of course you didn't do that, you didn't go up, you just made edgy jokes and nodded a lot and drifted on to the next piece of human carnage.

"There's number two," Karen whispered.

This one I remembered. And despised. The six-three blond movie-star looks had grown only slightly older. His blue dinner jacket just seemed to enhance his air of malicious superiority. Larry Price. His wife, Sally, was still perfect, too, though you could see in the lacquered blond hair and maybe a hint of face-lift that she'd had to work at it a little harder. A year out of high school, at a bar that took teenage IDs checked by a guy who must have been legally blind, I'd gotten drunk and told Larry that he was essentially an asshole for beating up a friend of mine who hadn't had a chance against him. I had the street boy's secret belief that I could take anybody whose father was a surgeon and whose house included a swimming pool. I had hatred, bitterness and rage

going, right? Well, Larry and I went out into the parking lot, ringed by a lot of drunken spectators, and before I got off a single punch, Larry hit me with a shot that stood me straight up, giving him a great opportunity to hit me again. He hit me three times before I found his face and sent him a shot hard enough to push him back for a time. Before we could go at it again, the guy who checked IDs got himself between us. He was madder than either Larry or me. He ended the fight by taking us both by the ears (he must have trained with nuns) and dragging us out to the curb and telling neither of us to come back.

"You remember the night you fought him?"

"Yeah."

"You could have taken him, Dwyer. Those three punches he got in were just lucky."

"Yeah, that was my impression, too. Lucky."

She laughed. "I was afraid he was going to kill you."

I was going to say something smart, but then a new group of people came up and we gushed through a little social dance of nostalgia and lies and self-justifications. We talked success (at high school reunions, everybody sounds like Amway representatives at a pep rally) and the old days (nobody seems to remember all of the kids who got treated like shit for reasons they had no control over) and didn't so-and-so look great (usually this meant they'd managed to keep their toupees on straight) and introducing new spouses (we all had to explain what happened to our original mates; I said mine had been eaten by alligators in the Amazon, but nobody seemed to find that especially believable) and in the midst of

all this, Karen tugged my sleeve and said, "There's the third one."

Him I recognized, too. David Haskins. He didn't look any happier than he ever had. Parent trouble was always the explanation you got for his grief back in high school. His parents had been rich, truly so, his father an importer of some kind, and their arguments so violent that they were as eagerly discussed as who was or was not pregnant. Apparently David's parents weren't getting along any better today because although the features of his face were open and friendly enough, there was still the sense of some terrible secret stooping his shoulders and keeping his smiles to furtive wretched imitations. He was a paunchy balding little man who might have been a church usher with a sour stomach.

"The Duke of Earl" started up then and there was no way we were going to let that pass so we got out on the floor; but by now, of course, we both watched the three people she'd sent letters to. Her instructions had been to meet the anonymous letter writer at nine-thirty at Pierce Point. If they were going to be there on time, they'd be leaving soon.

"You think they're going to go?"

"I doubt it, Karen."

"You still don't believe that's what I heard them say that night?"

"It was a long time ago and you were drunk."

"It's a good thing I like you because otherwise you'd be a distinct pain in the ass."

Which is when I saw all three of them go stand under one of the glowing red Exit signs and open a fire door that led to the parking lot.

"They're going!" she said.

"Maybe they're just having a cigarette."

"You know better, Dwyer. You know better."

Her car was in the lot on the opposite side of the gym.

"Well, it's worth the drive even if they don't show up.

Pierce Point should be nice tonight."

She squeezed against me and said, "Thanks, Dwyer. Really."

So we went and got her Volvo and went out to Pierce Point where twenty-five years ago a shy kid named Michael Brandon had fallen or been pushed to his death.

Apparently we were about to find out which.

* * * *

The river road wound along a high wall of clay cliffs on the left and a wide expanse of water on the right. The spring night was impossibly beautiful, one of those moments so rich with sweet odor and even sweeter sight you wanted to take your clothes off and run around in some kind of crazed animal circles out of sheer joy.

"You still like jazz," she said, nodding to the radio.

"I hope you didn't mind my turning the station."

"I'm kind of into country."

"I didn't get the impression you were listening."

She looked over at me. "Actually, I wasn't. I was thinking about you sending me all of those AA pamphlets."

"It was arrogant and presumptuous and I apologize."

"No, it wasn't. It was sweet and I appreciate it."

The rest of the ride, I leaned my head back and smelled flowers and grass and river water and watched moonglow through the elms and oaks and birches of this new spring. There was a Dakota Staton song, "Street of Dreams," and I wondered as always where she was and what she was doing, she'd been so fine, maybe the most unappreciated jazz singer of the entire fifties.

Then we were going up a long, twisting gravel road. We pulled out next to a big park pavilion and got out and stood in the wet grass, and she came over and slid her arm around my waist and sort of hugged me in a half-serious way. "This is probably crazy, isn't it?"

I sort of hugged her back in a half-serious way. "Yeah, but it's a nice night for a walk so what the hell."

"You ready?"

"Yep."

"Let's go then."

So we went up the hill to the Point itself, and first we looked out at the far side of the river where white birches glowed in the gloom and where beyond you could see the horseshoe shape of the city lights. Then we looked down, straight down the drop of two hundred feet, to the road where Michael Brandon had died.

When I heard the car starting up the road to the east, I said, "Let's get in those bushes over there."

A thick line of shrubs and second-growth timber would give us a place to hide, to watch them.

By the time we were in place, ducked down behind a wide elm and a mulberry bush, a new yellow Mercedes sedan swung into sight and stopped several yards from the edge of the Point.

A car radio played loud in the night. A Top 40 song. Three men got out. Dignified Forester, matinee-idol Price, anxiety-tight Haskins.

Forester leaned back into the car and snapped the radio off. But he left the headlights on. Forester and Price each had cans of beer. Haskins bit his nails.

They looked around in the gloom. The headlights made the darkness beyond seem much darker and the grass in its illumination much greener. Price said harshly, "I told you this was just some kind of goddamn prank. Nobody knows squat."

"He's right. He's probably right," Haskins said to Forester. Obviously he was hoping that was the case.

Forester said, "If somebody didn't know something, we would never have gotten those letters."

She moved then and I hadn't expected her to move at all. I'd been under the impression we would just sit there and listen and let them ramble and maybe in so doing reveal something useful.

But she had other ideas.

She pushed through the undergrowth and stumbled a little and got to her feet again and then walked right up to them.

"Karen!" Haskins said.

"So you did kill Michael," she said.

Price moved toward her abruptly, his hand raised. He was drunk and apparently hitting women was something he did without much trouble.

Then I stepped out from our hiding place and said, "Put your hand down, Price."

Forester said, "Dwyer."

"So," Price said, lowering his hand, "I was right, wasn't I?" He was speaking to Forester.

Forester shook his silver head. He seemed genuinely saddened. "Yes, Price, for once your cynicism is justified."

Price said, "Well, you two aren't getting a goddamned penny, do you know that?"

He lunged toward me, still a bully. But I was ready for him, wanted it. I also had the advantage of being sober. When he was two steps away, I hit him just once and very hard in the solar plexus. He backed away, eyes startled, and then he turned abruptly away.

We all stood looking at one another, pretending not to hear the sounds of violent vomiting on the other side of the splendid new Mercedes.

Forester said, "When I saw you there, Karen, I wondered if you could do it alone."

"Do what?"

"What?" Forester said. "What? Let's at least stop the games. You two want money."

"Christ," I said to Karen, who looked perplexed, "they think we're trying to shake them down."

"Shake them down?"

"Blackmail them."

"Exactly," Forester said.

Price had come back around. He was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. In his other hand he carried a silver-plated .45, the sort of weapon professional gamblers favor.

Haskins said, "Larry, Jesus, what is that?"

"What does it look like?"

"Larry, that's how people get killed." Haskins sounded like Price's mother.

Price's eyes were on me. "Yeah, it would be terrible if Dwyer here got killed, wouldn't it?" He waved the gun at me. I didn't really think he'd shoot, but I sure was afraid he'd trip and the damn thing would go off accidentally. "You've been waiting since senior year to do that to me, haven't you, Dwyer?"

I shrugged. "I guess so, yeah."

"Well, why don't I give Forester here the gun and then you and I can try it again."

"Fine with me."

He handed Forester the .45. Forester took it all right, but what he did was toss it somewhere into the gloom surrounding the car. "Larry, if you don't straighten up here, I'll fight you myself. Do you understand me?" Forester had a certain dignity and when he spoke, his voice carried an easy authority. "There will be no more fighting, do you both understand that?"

"I agree with Ted," Karen said.

Forester, like a teacher tired of naughty children, decided to get on with the real business. "You wrote those letters, Dwyer?"

"No."

"No?"

"No. Karen wrote them."

A curious glance was exchanged by Forester and Karen.

"I guess I should have known that," Forester said.

"Jesus, Ted," Karen said, "I'm not trying to blackmail you, no matter what you think."

"Then just exactly what are you trying to do?"

She shook her lovely little head. I sensed she regretted ever writing the letters, stirring it all up again. "I just want the truth to come out about what really happened to Michael Brandon that night."

"The truth," Price said. "Isn't that goddamn touching?"

"Shut up, Larry," Haskins said.

Forester said, "You know what happened to Michael Brandon?"

"I've got a good idea," Karen said. "I overheard you three talking at a party one night."

"What did we say?"

"What?"

"What did you overhear us say?"

Karen said, "You said that you hoped nobody looked into what really happened to Michael that night."

A smile touched Forester's lips. "So on that basis you concluded that we murdered him?"

"There wasn't much else to conclude."

Price said, weaving still, leaning on the fender for support, "I don't goddamn believe this."

Forester nodded to me. "Dwyer, I'd like to have a talk with Price and Haskins here, if you don't mind. Just a few minutes." He pointed to the darkness beyond the car. "We'll walk over there. You know we won't try to get away because you'll have our car. All right?"

I looked at Karen.

She shrugged.

They left, back into the gloom, voices receding and fading into the sounds of crickets and a barn owl and a distant roaring train.

"You think they're up to something?"

"I don't know," I said.

We stood with our shoes getting soaked and looked at the green green grass in the headlights.

"What do you think they're doing?" Karen asked.

"Deciding what they want to tell us."

"You're used to this kind of thing, aren't you?"

"I guess."

"It's sort of sad, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Except for you getting the chance to punch out Larry Price after all these years."

"Christ, you really think I'm that petty?"

"I know you are. I know you are."

Then we both turned to look back to where they were. There'd been a cry and Forester shouted, "You hit him again,

Larry, and I'll break your goddamn jaw." They were arguing about something and it had turned vicious.

I leaned back against the car. She leaned back against me. "You think we'll ever go to bed?"

"I'd sure like to, Karen, but I can't."

"Donna?"

"Yeah. I'm really trying to learn how to be faithful."

"That been a problem?"

"It cost me a marriage."

"Maybe I'll learn how someday, too."

Then they were back. Somebody, presumably Forester, had torn Price's nice lacy shirt into shreds. Haskins looked miserable.

Forester said, "I'm going to tell you what happened that night."

I nodded.

"I've got some beer in the backseat. Would either of you like one?"

Karen said, "Yes, we would."

So he went and got a six-pack of Michelob and we all had a beer and just before he started talking he and Karen shared another one of those peculiar glances and then he said, "The four of us—myself, Price, Haskins, and Michael Brandon—had done something we were very ashamed of."

"Afraid of," Haskins said.

"Afraid that if it came out, our lives would be ruined. Forever," Forester said.

Price said, "Just say it, Forester." He glared at me.

"We raped a girl, the four of us."

"Brandon spent two months afterward seeing the girl, bringing her flowers, apologizing to her over and over again, telling her how sorry we were, that we'd been drunk and it wasn't like us to do that and—" Forester sighed, put his eyes to the ground. "In fact we had been drunk; in fact it wasn't like us to do such a thing—"

Haskins said, "It really wasn't. It really wasn't."

For a time there was just the barn owl and the crickets again, no talk, and then gently I said, "What happened to Brandon that night?"

"We were out as we usually were, drinking beer, talking about it, afraid the girl would finally turn us in to the police, still trying to figure out why we'd ever done such a thing—"

The hatred was gone from Price's eyes. For the first time the matinee idol looked as melancholy as his friends. "No matter what you think of me, Dwyer, I don't rape women. But that night—" He shrugged, looked away.

"Brandon," I said. "You were going to tell me about Brandon."

"We came up here, had a case of beer or something, and talked about it some more, and that night," Forester said, "that night Brandon just snapped. He couldn't handle how ashamed he was or how afraid he was of being turned in. Right in the middle of talking—"

Haskins took over. "Right in the middle, he just got up and ran out to the Point." He indicated the cliff behind us. "And before we could stop him, he jumped."

"Jesus," Price said, "I can't forget his screaming on the way down. I can't ever forget it."

I looked at Karen. "So what she heard you three talking about outside the party that night wasn't that you'd killed Brandon but that you were afraid a serious investigation into his suicide might turn up the rape?"

Forester said, "Exactly." He stared at Karen. "We didn't kill Michael, Karen. We loved him. He was our friend."

But by then, completely without warning, she had started to cry and then she began literally sobbing, her entire body shaking with some grief I could neither understand nor assuage.

I nodded to Forester to get back in his car and leave. They stood and watched us a moment and then they got into the Mercedes and went away, taking the burden of years and guilt with them.

* * * *

This time I drove. I went far out the river road, miles out, where you pick up the piney hills and the deer standing by the side of the road.

From the glove compartment she took a pint of J&B, and I knew better than to try and stop her.

I said, "You were the girl they raped, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell the police?"

She smiled at me. "The police weren't exactly going to believe a girl from the Highlands about the sons of rich men."

I sighed. She was right.

"Then Michael started coming around to see me. I can't say I ever forgave him, but I started to feel sorry for him. His fear—" She shook her head, looked out the window. She said,

almost to herself, "But I had to write those letters, get them there tonight, know for sure if they killed him." She paused.

"You believe them?"

"That they didn't kill him?"

"Right."

"Yes, I believe them."

"So do I."

Then she went back to staring out the window, her small face childlike there in silhouette against the moonsilver river.

"Can I ask you a question, Dwyer?"

"Sure."

"You think we're ever going to get out of the Highlands?"

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One of Those Days, One of Those Nights

The thing you have to understand is that I found it by accident. I was looking for a place to hide the birthday gift I'd bought Laura—a string of pearls she'd been wanting to wear with the new black dress she'd bought for herself—and all I was going to do was lay the gift-wrapped box in the second drawer of her bureau...

...and there it was.

A plain number ten envelope with her name written across the middle in a big manly scrawl and a canceled Elvis Presley stamp up in the corner. Postmarked two days ago.

Just as I spotted it, Laura called from the living room, "Bye, honey, see you at six." The last two years we've been saving to buy a house so we have only the one car. Laura goes an hour earlier than I do, so she rides with a woman who lives a few blocks over. Then I pick her up at six after somebody relieves me at the computer store where I work. For what it's worth, I have an MA in English Literature but with the economy being what it is, it hasn't done me much good.

I saw a sci-fi movie once where a guy could set something on fire simply by staring at it intently enough. That's what I was trying to do with this letter my wife got. Burn it so that I wouldn't have to read what it said inside and get my heart broken.

I closed the drawer.

Could be completely harmless. Her fifteenth high school reunion was coming up this spring. Maybe it was from one of her old classmates. And maybe the manly scrawl wasn't so manly after all. Maybe it was from a woman who wrote in a rolling dramatic hand.

Laura always said that I was the jealous type and this was certainly proof. A harmless letter tucked harmlessly in a bureau drawer. And here my heart was pounding, and fine cold sweat slicked my face, and my fingers were trembling.

God, wasn't I a pitiful guy? Shouldn't I be ashamed of myself?

I went into the bathroom and lathered up and did my usual relentless fifteen-minute morning regimen of shaving, showering and shining up my apple-cheeked Irish face and my thinning Irish hair, if hair follicles can have a nationality, that is.

Then I went back into our bedroom and took down a white shirt, blue necktie, navy blazer and tan slacks. All dressed, I looked just like seventy or eighty million other men getting ready for work, this particular sunny April morning.

Then I stood very still in the middle of the bedroom and stared at Laura's bureau. Maybe I wasn't simply going to set the letter on fire. Maybe I was going to ignite the entire bureau.

The grandfather clock in the living room tolled eight-thirty. If I didn't leave now I would be late, and if you were late you inevitably got a chewing out from Ms. Sandstrom, the boss. Anybody who believes that women would run a more benign

world than men needs only to spend five minutes with Ms. Sandstrom. Hitler would have used her as a pin-up girl.

The bureau. The letter. The manly scrawl.

What was I going to do?

Only one thing I could think of, since I hadn't made a decision about reading the letter or not. I'd simply take it with me to work. If I decided to read it, I'd give it a quick scan over my lunch hour.

But probably I wouldn't read it at all. I had a lot of faith where Laura was concerned. And I didn't like to think of myself as the sort of possessive guy who snuck around reading his wife's mail.

I reached into the bureau drawer.

My fingers touched the letter.

I was almost certain I wasn't going to read it. Hell, I'd probably get so busy at work that I'd forget all about it.

But just in case I decided to...

I grabbed the letter and stuffed it into my blazer pocket, and closed the drawer. In the kitchen I had a final cup of coffee and read my newspaper horoscope. Bad news, as always. I should never read the damn things ... Then I hurried out of the apartment to the little Toyota parked at the curb.

Six blocks away, it stalled. Our friendly mechanic said that moisture seemed to get in the fuel pump a lot. He's not sure why. We've run it in three times but it still stalls several times a week.

* * * *

Around ten o'clock, hurrying into a sales meeting that Ms. Sandstrom had decided to call, I dropped my pen. And when I bent over to pick it up, my glasses fell out of my pocket and when I moved to pick them up, I took one step too many and put all 175 pounds of my body directly onto them. I heard something snap.

By the time I retrieved both pen and glasses, Ms. Sandstrom was closing the door and calling the meeting to order. I hurried down the hall trying to see how much damage I'd done. I held the glasses up to the light. A major fissure snaked down the center of the right lens. I slipped them on. The crack was even more difficult to see through than I'd thought.

Ms. Sandstrom, a very attractive fiftyish woman given to sleek gray suits and burning blue gazes, warned us as usual that if sales of our computers didn't pick up, two or three people in this room would likely be looking for jobs. Soon. And just as she finished saying this, her eyes met mine. "For instance, Donaldson, what kind of month are you having?"

"What kind of month am I having?"

"Do I hear a parrot in here?" Ms. Sandstrom said, and several of the salespeople laughed.

"I'm not having too bad a month."

Ms. Sandstrom nodded wearily and looked around the room. "Do we have to ask Donaldson here any more questions? Isn't he telling us everything we need to know when he says 'I'm not having too bad a month?' What're we hearing when Donaldson says that?"

I hadn't noticed till this morning how much Ms. Sandstrom reminded me of Miss Hutchison, my fourth grade teacher. Her favorite weapon had also been humiliation.

Dick Weybright raised his hand. Dick Weybright always raises his hand, especially when he gets to help Ms. Sandstrom humiliate somebody.

"We hear defeatism, when he says that," Dick said. "We hear defeatism and a serious lack of self-esteem."

Twice a week, Ms. Sandstrom made us listen to motivational tapes. You know, "I upped my income, Up yours," that sort of thing. And nobody took those tapes more seriously than Dick Weybright.

"Very good, Dick," Ms. Sandstrom said. "Defeatism and lack of self-esteem. That tells us all we need to know about Donaldson here. Just as the fact that he's got a crack in his glasses tells us something else about him, doesn't it?"

Dick Weybright waggled his hand again. "Lack of self-respect."

"Exactly," Ms. Sandstrom said, smiling coldly at me. "Lack of self-respect."

She didn't address me again until I was leaving the sales room. I'd knocked some of my papers on the floor. By the time I got them picked up, I was alone with Ms. Sandstrom. I heard her come up behind me as I pointed myself toward the door.

"You missed something, Donaldson."

I turned. "Oh?"

She waved Laura's envelope in the air. Then her blue eyes showed curiosity as they read the name on the envelope.

"You're not one of those, are you, Donaldson?"

"One of those?"

"Men who read their wives' mail."

"Oh. One of those. I see."

"Are you?"

"No."

"Then what're you doing with this?"

"What am I doing with that?"

"That parrot's in here again."

"I must've picked it up off the table by mistake."

"The table?"

"The little Edwardian table under the mirror in the foyer.

Where we always set the mail."

She shook her head again. She shook her head a lot. "You are one of those, aren't you, Donaldson? So were my first three husbands, the bastards."

She handed me the envelope, brushed past me and disappeared down the hall.

* * * *

There's a park near the river where I usually eat lunch when I'm downtown for the day. I spend most of the time feeding the pigeons.

Today I spent most of my time staring at the envelope laid next to me on the park bench. There was a warm spring breeze and I half hoped it would lift up the envelope and carry it away.

Now I wished I'd left the number ten with the manly scrawl right where I'd found it because it was getting harder and harder to resist lifting the letter from inside and giving it a quick read.

I checked my watch. Twenty minutes to go before I needed to be back at work. Twenty minutes to stare at the letter. Twenty minutes to resist temptation.

Twenty minutes—and how's this for cheap symbolism?—during which the sky went from cloudless blue to dark and ominous.

By now, I'd pretty much decided that the letter had to be from a man. Otherwise, why would Laura have hidden it in her drawer? I'd also decided that it must contain something pretty incriminating.

Had she been having an affair with somebody? Was she thinking of running away with somebody?

On the way back to the office, I carefully slipped the letter from the envelope and read it. Read it four times as a matter of fact. And felt worse every time I did.

So Chris Tomlin, her ridiculously handsome, ridiculously wealthy, ridiculously slick college boyfriend was back in her life.

I can't tell you much about the rest of the afternoon. It's all very vague: voices spoke to me, phones rang at me, computer printers spat things at me—but I didn't respond. I felt as if I were scuttling across the floor of an ocean so deep that neither light nor sound could penetrate it.

Chris Tomlin. My God.

I kept reading the letter, stopping only when I'd memorized it entirely and could keep rerunning it in my mind without any visual aid.

Dear Laura,
I still haven't forgotten you—or forgiven you
for choosing you-know-who over me.
I'm going to be in your fair city this Friday.
How about meeting me at the Fairmont right at
noon for lunch?
Of course, you could contact me the evening
before if you're interested. I'll be staying at the
Wallingham. I did a little checking and found
that you work nearby.
I can't wait to see you.

Love,
Chris Tomlin.

Not even good old Ms. Sandstrom could penetrate my stupor. I know she charged into my office a few times and made some nasty threats—something about my not returning the call of one of our most important customers—but I honestly couldn't tell you who she wanted me to call or what she wanted me to say.

About all I can remember is that it got very dark and cold suddenly. The lights blinked on and off a few times. We were having a terrible rainstorm. Somebody came in soaked and

said that the storm sewers were backing up and that downtown was a mess.

Not that I paid this information any particular heed.

I was wondering if she'd call him Thursday night. I took it as a foregone conclusion that she would have lunch with him on Friday. But how about Thursday night?

Would she visit him in his hotel room?

And come to think of it, why *had* she chosen me over Chris Tomlin? I mean, while I may not be a nerd, I'm not exactly a movie star, either. And with Chris Tomlin, there wouldn't have been any penny-pinching for a down payment on a house, either.

With his daddy's millions in pharmaceuticals, good ole Chris would have bought her a manse as a wedding present.

The workday ended. The usual number of people peeked into my office to say the usual number of good nights. The usual cleaning crew, high school kids in gray uniforms, appeared to start hauling out trash and run roaring vacuum cleaners. And I went through my usual process of staying at my desk until it was time to pick up Laura.

I was just about to walk out the front door when I noticed in the gloom that Ms. Sandstrom's light was still on.

She had good ears. Even above the vacuum cleaner roaring its way down the hall to her left, she heard me leaving and looked up.

She waved me into her office.

When I reached her desk, she handed me a slip of paper with some typing on it.

"How does that read to you, Donaldson?"

"Uh, what is it?"

"A Help Wanted ad I may be running tomorrow."

That was another thing Miss Hutchison, my fourth grade teacher, had been good at—indirect torture.

Ms. Sandstrom wanted me to read the ad she'd be running for my replacement.

I scanned it and handed it back.

"Nice."

"Is that all you have to say? Nice?"

"I guess so."

"You realize that this means I'm going to fire you?"

"That's what I took it to mean."

"What the hell's wrong with you, Donaldson? Usually you'd be groveling and sniveling by now."

"I've got some—personal problems."

A smirk. "That's what you get for reading your wife's mail." Then a scowl. "When you come in tomorrow morning, you come straight to my office, you understand?"

I nodded. "All right."

"And be prepared to do some groveling and sniveling. You're going to need it."

* * * *

Why don't I just make a list of the things I found wrong with my Toyota after I slammed the door and belted myself in.

A) The motor wouldn't turn over. Remember what I said about moisture and the fuel pump?

B) The roof had sprung a new leak. This was different from the old leak, which dribbled rain down onto the passenger seat. The new one dribbled rain down onto the driver's seat.

C) The turn signal arm had come loose again and was hanging down from naked wires like a half-amputated limb. Apparently after finding the letter this morning, I was in so much of a fog I hadn't noticed that it was broken again.

I can't tell you how dark and cold and lonely I felt just then. Bereft of wife. Bereft of automobile. Bereft of—dare I say it?—self-esteem and self-respect. And, on top of it, I was a disciple of defeatism. Just ask my co-worker Dick Weybright.

The goddamned car finally started and I drove off to pick up my goddamned wife.

The city was a mess.

Lashing winds and lashing rains—both of which were still lashing merrily along—had uprooted trees in the park, smashed out store windows here and there, and had apparently caused a power outage that shut down all the automatic traffic signals.

I wanted to be home and I wanted to be dry and I wanted to be in my jammies. But most of all I wanted to be loved by the one woman I had ever really and truly loved.

If only I hadn't opened her bureau drawer to hide her pearls...

She was standing behind the glass door in the entrance to the art deco building where she works as a market researcher for a mutual fund company. When I saw her, I felt all sorts of things at once—love, anger, shame, terror—and all I wanted

to do was park the car and run up to her and take her in my arms and give her the tenderest kiss I was capable of.

But then I remembered the letter and...

Well, I'm sure I don't have to tell you about jealousy. There's nothing worse to carry around in your stony little heart. All that rage and self-righteousness and self-pity. It begins to smother you and...

By the time Laura climbed into the car, it was smothering me. She smelled of rain and perfume and her sweet tender body.

"Hi," she said. "I was worried about you."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

Then, closing the door, she gave me a long, long look. "Are you all right?"

"Fine."

"Then why did you say, 'Yeah. I'll bet?'"

"Just being funny."

She gave me another stare. I tried to look regular and normal. You know, not on the verge of whipping the letter out and shoving it in her face.

"Oh, God," she said, "you're not starting your period already are you?"

The period thing is one of our little jokes. A few months after we got married, she came home cranky one day and I laid the blame for her mood on her period. She said I was being sexist. I said I was only making an observation. I wrote down the date. For the next four months, on or around the same time each month, she came home crabby. I pointed this out to her. She said, "All right. But men have periods, too."

"They do?"

"You're damned right they do." And so now, whenever I seem inexplicably grouchy, she asks me if my period is starting.

"Maybe so," I said, swinging from outrage to a strange kind of whipped exhaustion.

"Boy, this is really leaking," Laura said.

I just drove. There was a burly traffic cop out in the middle of a busy intersection directing traffic with two flashlights in the rain and gloom.

"Did you hear me, Rich? I said this is really leaking."

"I know it's really leaking."

"What's up with you, anyway? What're you so mad about? Did Sandstrom give you a hard time today?"

"No—other than telling me that she may fire me."

"You're kidding."

"No."

"But why?"

Because while I was going through your bureau, I found a letter from your ex-lover and I know all about the tryst you're planning to set up.

That's what I wanted to say.

What I said was: "I guess I wasn't paying proper attention during another one of her goddamned sales meetings."

"But, Rich, if you get fired—"

She didn't have to finish her sentence. If I got fired, we'd never get the house we'd been saving for.

"She told me that when I came in tomorrow morning, I should be prepared to grovel and snivel. And she wasn't kidding."

"She actually said that?"

"She actually said that."

"What a bitch."

"Boss's daughter. You know how this city is. The last frontier for hard-core nepotism."

We drove on several more blocks, stopping every quarter block or so to pull out around somebody whose car had stalled in the dirty water backing up from the sewers.

"So is that why you're so down?"

"Yeah," I said. "Isn't that reason enough?"

"Usually, about Sandstrom, I mean, you get mad. You don't get depressed."

"Well, Sandstrom chews me out but she doesn't usually threaten to fire me."

"That's true. But—"

"But what?"

"It just seems that there's—something else." Then, "Where're you going?"

My mind had been on the letter tucked inside my blazer. In the meantime, the Toyota had been guiding itself into the most violent neighborhood in the city. Not even the cops wanted to come here.

"God, can you turn around?" Laura said. "I'd sure hate to get stuck here."

"We'll be all right. I'll hang a left at the next corner and then we'll drive back to Marymount Avenue."

"I wondered where you were going. I should have said something." She leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

That boil of feelings, of profound tenderness and profound rage, churned up inside of me again.

"Things'll work out with Sandstrom," she said, and then smiled. "Maybe she's just starting her period."

And I couldn't help it. The rage was gone, replaced by pure and total love. This was my friend, my bride, my lover. There had to be a reasonable and innocent explanation for the letter. There had to.

I started hanging the left and that's when it happened. The fuel pump. Rain.

The Toyota stopped dead.

"Oh, no," she said, glancing out the windshield at the forbidding blocks of falling-down houses and dark, condemned buildings.

Beyond the wind, beyond the rain, you could hear sirens. There were always sirens in neighborhoods like these.

"Maybe I can fix it," I said.

"But, honey, you don't know anything about cars."

"Well, I watched him make that adjustment last time."

"I don't know," she said skeptically. "Besides, you'll just get wet."

"I'll be fine."

I knew why I was doing this, of course. In addition to being rich, powerful and handsome, Chris Tomlin was also one of those men who could fix practically anything. I remembered her telling me how he'd fixed a refrigerator at an old cabin they'd once stayed in.

I opened the door. A wave of rain washed over me. But I was determined to act like the kind of guy who could walk through a meteor storm and laugh it off. Maybe that's why Laura was considering a rendezvous with Chris. Maybe she was sick of my whining. A macho man, I'm not.

"Just be careful," she said.

"Be right back."

I eased out of the car and then realized I hadn't used the hood latch inside. I leaned in and popped the latch and gave Laura a quick smile.

And then I went back outside into the storm.

* * * *

I was soaked completely in less than a minute, my shoes soggy, my clothes drenched and cold and clinging. Even my raincoat.

But I figured this would help my image as a take-charge sort of guy. I even gave Laura a little half-salute before I raised the hood. She smiled at me. God, I wanted to forget all about the letter and be happily in love again.

Any vague hopes I'd had of starting the car were soon forgotten as I gaped at the motor and realized that I had absolutely no idea what I was looking at.

The mechanic in the shop had made it look very simple. You raised the hood, you leaned in and snatched off the oil filter and then did a couple of quick things to it and put it back. And *voila*, your car was running again.

I got the hood open all right, and I leaned in just fine, and I even took the oil filter off with no problem.

But when it came to doing a couple of quick things to it, my brain was as dead as the motor. That was the part I hadn't picked up from the mechanic. Those couple of quick things.

I started shaking the oil filter. Don't ask me why. I had it under the protection of the hood to keep it dry and shook it left and shook it right and shook it high and shook it low. I figured that maybe some kind of invisible cosmic forces would come into play here and the engine would start as soon as I gave the ignition key a little turn.

I closed the hood and ran back through the slashing rain, opened the door and crawled inside.

"God, it's incredible out there."

Only then did I get a real good look at Laura and only then did I see that she looked sick, like the time we both picked up a slight case of ptomaine poisoning at her friend Susan's wedding.

Except now she looked a lot sicker.

And then I saw the guy.

In the backseat.

"Who the hell are you?"

But he had questions of his own. "Your wife won't tell me if you've got an ATM card."

So it had finally happened. Our little city turned violent about fifteen years ago, during which time most honest working folks had to take their turns getting mugged, sort of like a rite of passage. But as time wore on, the muggers weren't satisfied with simply robbing their victims. Now they

beat them up. And sometimes, for no reason at all, they killed them.

This guy was white, chunky, with a ragged scar on his left cheek, stupid dark eyes, a dark turtleneck sweater and a large and formidable gun. He smelled of sweat, cigarette smoke, beer and a high sweet unclean tang.

"How much can you get with your card?"

"Couple hundred."

"Yeah. Right."

"Couple hundred. I mean, we're not exactly rich people. Look at this car."

He turned to Laura. "How much can he get, babe?"

"He told you. A couple of hundred." She sounded surprisingly calm.

"One more time." He had turned back to me. "How much can you get with that card of yours?"

"I told you," I said.

You know how movie thugs are always slugging people with gun butts? Well, let me tell you something. It hurts. He hit me hard enough to draw blood, hard enough to fill my sight with darkness and blinking stars, like a planetarium ceiling, and hard enough to lay my forehead against the steering wheel.

Laura didn't scream.

She just leaned over and touched my head with her long, gentle fingers. And you know what? Even then, even suffering from what might be a concussion, I had this image of Laura's fingers touching Chris Tomlin's head this way. Ain't jealousy grand?

"Now," said the voice in the backseat, "let's talk."

Neither of us paid him much attention for a minute or so. Laura helped me sit back in the seat. She took her handkerchief and daubed it against the back of my head.

"You didn't have to hit him."

"Now maybe he'll tell me the truth."

"Four or five hundred," she said. "That's how much we can get. And don't hit him again. Don't lay a finger on him."

"The mama lion fights for her little cub. That's nice." He leaned forward and put the end of the gun directly against my ear. "You're gonna have to go back out in that nasty ole rain. There's an ATM machine down at the west end of this block and around the corner. You go down there and get me five hundred dollars and then you haul your ass right back. I'll be waiting right here with your exceedingly good-looking wife. And with my gun."

"Where did you ever learn a word like exceedingly?" I said.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"I was just curious."

"If it's any of your goddamned business, my cell-mate had one of them improve your vocabulary books."

I glanced at Laura. She still looked scared but she also looked a little bit angry. For us, five hundred dollars was a lot of money.

And now a robber who used the word "exceedingly" was going to take every last dime of it.

"Go get it," he said.

I reached over to touch Laura's hand as reassuringly as possible, and that was when I noticed it.

The white number ten envelope.

The one Chris had sent her.

I stared at it a long moment and then raised my eyes to meet hers.

"I was going to tell you about it."

I shook my head. "I shouldn't have looked in your drawer."

"No, you shouldn't have. But I still owe you an explanation."

"What the hell are you two talking about?"

"Nothing that's exceedingly interesting," I said, and opened the door, and dangled a leg out and then had the rest of my body follow the leg.

"You got five minutes, you understand?" the man said.

I nodded and glanced at Laura. "I love you."

"I'm sorry about the letter."

"You know the funny thing? I was hiding your present, that's how I found it. I was going to tuck it in your underwear drawer and have you find them. You know, the pearls."

"You got me the pearl necklace?"

"Uh-huh."

"Oh, honey, that's so sweet."

"Go get the goddamned money," the man said, "and get it fast."

"I'll be right back," I said to Laura and blew her a little kiss.

* * * *

If I hadn't been sodden before, I certainly was now.

There were two brick buildings facing each other across a narrow alley. Most people drove up to this particular ATM

machine because it was housed in a deep indentation that faced the alley. It could also accommodate foot traffic.

What it didn't do was give you much protection from the storm.

By now, I was sneezing and feeling a scratchiness in my throat. Bad sinuses. My whole family.

I walked up to the oasis of light and technology in this ancient and wild neighborhood, took out my wallet and inserted my ATM card.

It was all very casual, especially considering the fact that Laura was being held hostage.

The card would go in. The money would come out. The thief would get his loot. Laura and I would dash to the nearest phone and call the police.

Except I couldn't remember my secret pin number.

If I had to estimate how many times I'd used this card, I'd put it at probably a thousand or so.

So how, after all those times, could I now forget the pin number?

Panic. That's what was wrong. I was so scared that Laura would be hurt that I couldn't think clearly.

Deep breaths. There.

Now. Think. Clearly.

Just relax and your pin number will come back to you. No problem.

That was when I noticed the slight black man in the rain parka standing just to the left of me. In the rain. With a gun in his hand.

"You wanna die?"

"Oh, shit. You've got to be kidding. You're a goddamned thief?"

"Yes, and I ain't ashamed of it, either, man."

I thought of explaining it to him, explaining that another thief already had first dibs on the proceeds of my bank account—that is, if I could ever remember the pin number but he didn't seem to be the understanding type at all. In fact, he looked even more desperate and crazy than the man who was holding Laura.

"How much can you take out?"

"I can't give it to you."

"You see this gun, man?"

"Yeah. I see it."

"You know what happens if you don't crank some serious money out for me?"

I had to explain after all. " ... so, you see, I can't give it to you."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Somebody's already got dibs on it."

"Dibs? What the hell does 'dibs' mean?"

"It means another robber has already spoken for this money."

He looked at me carefully. "You're crazy, man. You really are. But that don't mean I won't shoot you."

"And there's one more thing."

"What?"

"I can't remember my pin number."

"Bullshit."

"It's true. That's why I've been standing here. My mind's a blank."

"You gotta relax, man."

"I know that. But it's kind of hard. You've got a gun and so does the other guy."

"There's really some other dude holdin' your old lady?"

"Right."

He grinned with exceedingly bad teeth. "You got yourself a real problem, dude."

I closed my eyes.

I must have spent my five minutes already.

Would he really kill Laura?

"You tried deep breathin'?"

"Yeah."

"And that didn't work?"

"Huh-uh."

"You tried makin' your mind go blank for a little bit?"

"That didn't work, either."

He pushed the gun right into my face. "I ain't got much time, man."

"I can't give you the money, anyway."

"You ain't gonna be much use to your old lady if you got six or seven bullet holes in you."

"God!"

"What's wrong?"

My pin number had popped into my head.

Nothing like a gun in your face to jog your memory.

I dove for the ATM machine.

And started punching buttons.

The right buttons.

"Listen," I said as I cranked away, "I really can't give you this money."

"Right."

"I mean, I would if I could but the guy would never believe me if I told him some other crook had taken it. No offense, 'crook' I mean."

"Here it comes."

"I'm serious. You can't have it."

"Pretty, pretty Yankee dollars. Praise the Lord."

The plastic cover opened and the machine began spitting out green Yankee dollars.

And that's when he slugged me on the back of the head.

The guy back in the car had hit me but it had been nothing like this.

This time, the field of black floating in front of my eyes didn't even have stars. This time, hot shooting pain traveled from the point of impact near the top of my skull all the way down into my neck and shoulders. This time, my knees gave out immediately.

Pavement. Hard. Wet. Smelling of cold rain. And still the darkness. Total darkness. I had a moment of panic. Had I been blinded for life? I wanted to be angry but I was too disoriented. Pain. Cold. Darkness.

And then I felt his hands tearing the money from mine.

I had to hold on to it. Had to. Otherwise Laura would be injured. Or killed.

The kick landed hard just above my sternum. Stars suddenly appeared in the field of black. His foot seemed to have jarred them loose.

More pain. But now there was anger. I blindly lashed out and grabbed his trouser leg, clung to it, forcing him to drag me down the sidewalk as he tried to get away. I don't know how many names I called him, some of them probably didn't even make sense, I just clung to his leg, exulting in his rage, in his inability to get rid of me.

Then he leaned down and grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled so hard I screamed. And inadvertently let go of his leg.

And then I heard his footsteps, retreating, retreating, and felt the rain start slashing at me again. He had dragged me out from beneath the protection of the ATM overhang.

I struggled to get up. It wasn't easy. I still couldn't see. And every time I tried to stand, I was overcome by dizziness and a faint nausea.

But I kept thinking of Laura. And kept pushing myself to my feet, no matter how much pain pounded in my head, no matter how I started to pitch forward and collapse again.

By the time I got to my feet, and fell against the rough brick of the building for support, my eyesight was back. Funny how much you take it for granted. It's terrifying when it's gone.

I looked at the oasis of light in the gloom. At the foot of the ATM was my bank card. I wobbled over and picked it up. I knew that I'd taken out my allotted amount for the day but I

decided to try and see if the cosmic forces were with me for once.

They weren't.

The only thing I got from the machine was a snotty little note saying that I'd have to contact my personal banker if I wanted to receive more money.

A) I had no idea who this personal banker was, and

B) I doubted if he would be happy if I called him at home on such a rainy night even if I did have his name and number.

Then I did what any red-blooded American would do. I started kicking the machine. Kicking hard. Kicking obsessively. Until my toes started to hurt.

I stood for a long moment in the rain, letting it pour down on me, feeling as if I were melting like a wax statue in the hot sun. I became one with the drumming and thrumming and pounding of it all.

There was only one thing I could do now.

I took off running back to the car. To Laura. And the man with the gun.

I broke into a crazy grin when I saw the car. I could see Laura's profile in the gloom. She was still alive.

I reached the driver's door, opened it up and pitched myself inside.

"My God, what happened to you?" Laura said. "Did somebody beat you up?"

The man with the gun was a little less sympathetic. "Where the hell's the money?"

I decided to answer both questions at once. "I couldn't remember my pin number so I had to stand there for a while. And then this guy—this black guy—he came out of nowhere and he had a gun and then he made me give him the money." I looked back at the man with the gun. "I couldn't help it. I told him that you had first dibs on the money but he didn't care."

"You expect me to believe that crap?"

"Honest to God. That's what happened."

He looked at me and smiled. And then put the gun right up against Laura's head. "You want me to show you what's gonna happen here if you're not back in five minutes with the money?"

I looked at Laura. "God, honey, I'm telling the truth. About the guy with the gun."

"I know."

"I'm sorry." I glanced forlornly out the window at the rain filling the curbs. "I'll get the money. Somehow."

I opened the door again. And then noticed the white envelope still sitting on her lap. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you, sweetheart."

She was scared, that was easy enough to see, but she forced herself to focus and smile at me. "I love you, honey."

"Get the hell out of here and get that money," said the man with the gun.

"I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"You heard what I said. Get going."

I reached over and took Laura's hand gently. "I'll get the money, sweetheart. I promise."

I got out of the car and started walking again. Then trotting. Then flat-out running. My head was still pounding with pain but I didn't care. I had to get the money. Somehow. Somewhere.

I didn't even know where I was going. I was just running. It was better than standing still and contemplating what the guy with the gun might do.

I reached the corner and looked down the block where the ATM was located.

A car came from behind me, its headlights stabbing through the silver sheets of night rain. It moved on past me. When it came even with the lights of the ATM machine, it turned an abrupt left and headed for the machine.

Guy inside his car. Nice and warm and dry. Inserts his card, gets all the money he wants, and then drives on to do a lot of fun things with his nice and warm and dry evening.

While I stood out here in the soaking rain and—

Of course, I thought.

Of course.

There was only one thing I could do.

I started running, really running, splashing through puddles and tripping and nearly falling down. But nothing could stop me.

The bald man had parked too far away from the ATM to do his banking from the car. He backed up and gave it another try. He was concentrating on backing up so I didn't have much trouble opening the passenger door and slipping in.

"What the—" he started to say as he became aware of me.

"Stick up."

"What?"

"I'm robbing you."

"Oh, man, that's all I need. I've had a really crummy day today, mister," he said. "I knew I never should've come in this neighborhood but I was in a hurry and—"

"You want to hear about my bad day, mister? Huh?"

I raised the coat of my raincoat, hoping that he would think that I was pointing a gun at him.

He looked down at my coat-draped fist and said, "You can't get a whole hell of a lot of money out of these ATM machines."

"You can get three hundred and that's good enough."

"What if I don't have three hundred?"

"New car. Nice new suit. Maybe twenty CDs in that box there. You've got three hundred. Easy."

"I work hard for my money."

"So do I."

"What if I told you I don't believe you've got a gun in there?"

"Then I'd say fine. And then I'd kill you."

"You don't look like a stick-up guy."

"And you don't look like a guy who's stupid enough to get himself shot over three hundred dollars."

"I have to back up again. So I can get close."

"Back up. But go easy."

"Some goddamned birthday this is."

"It's your birthday?"

"Yeah. Ain't that a bitch?"

He backed up, pulled forward again, got right up next to the ATM, pulled out his card and went to work.

The money came out with no problem. He handed it over to me.

"You have a pencil and paper?"

"What?"

"Something you can write with?"

"Oh. Yeah. Why?"

"I want you to write down your name and address."

"For what?"

"Because tomorrow morning I'm going to put three hundred dollars in an envelope and mail it to you."

"Are you some kind of crazy drug addict or what?"

"Just write down your name and address."

He shook his head. "Not only do I get robbed, I get robbed by some goddamned fruitcake."

But he wrote down his name and address, probably thinking I'd shoot him if he didn't.

"I appreciate the loan," I said, getting out of his car.

"Loan? You tell the cops it was a 'loan' and see what they say."

"Hope the rest of your day goes better," I said, and slammed the door.

And I hope the rest of my day goes better, too, I thought.

* * * *

"Good thing you got back here when you did," the man with the gun said. "I was just about to waste her."

"Spare me the macho crap, all right?" I said. I was getting cranky. The rain. The cold. The fear. And then having to

commit a felony to get the cash I needed—and putting fear into a perfectly decent citizen who'd been having a very bad day himself.

I handed the money over to him. "Now you can go," I said.

He counted it in hard, harsh grunts, like a pig rutting in the mud.

"Three goddamned hundred. It was supposed to be four. Or five."

"I guess you'll just have to shoot us, then, huh?"

Laura gave me a frantic look and then dug her nails into my hands. Obviously, like the man I'd just left at the ATM, she thought I had lost what little of my senses I had left.

"I wouldn't push it, punk," the man with the gun said. "Because I just might shoot you yet."

He leaned forward from the backseat and said, "Lemme see your purse, babe."

Laura looked at me. I nodded. She handed him her purse. More rutting sounds as he went through it.

"Twenty-six bucks?"

"I'm sorry," Laura said.

"Where're your credit cards?"

"We don't have credit cards. It's too tempting to use them. We're saving for a house."

"Ain't that sweet!"

He pitched the purse over the front seat and opened the back door.

Chill. Fog. Rain.

"You got a jerk for a husband, babe, I mean, just in case you haven't figured that out already."

Then he slammed the door and was gone.

"You were really going to tear it up?"

"Or let you tear it up. Whichever you preferred. I mean, I know you think I still have this thing for Chris but I really don't. I was going to prove it to you by showing you the letter tonight and letting you do whatever you wanted with it."

* * * *

We were in bed, three hours after getting our car towed to a station, the tow truck giving us a ride home.

The rain had quit an hour ago. Now there were just icy winds.

But it was snug and warm in the bed of my one true love and icy winds didn't bother me at all.

"I'm sorry," I said, "about being so jealous."

"And I'm sorry about hiding the letter. It made you think I was going to take him up on his offer. But I really don't have any desire to see him at all."

Then we kind of just lay back and listened to the wind for a time.

And she started getting affectionate, her foot rubbing my foot, her hand taking my hand.

And then in the darkness, she said, "Would you like to make love?"

"Would I?" I laughed. "Would I?"

And then I rolled over and we began kissing and then I began running my fingers through her long dark hair and then I suddenly realized that—

"What's wrong?" she said, as I rolled away from her, flat on my back, staring at the ceiling.

"Let's just go to sleep."

"God, honey, I want to know what's going on. Here we are making out and then all of a sudden you stop."

"Oh God," I said. "What a day this has been." I sighed and prepared myself for the ultimate in manly humiliation.

"Remember that time when Rick's sister got married?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I got real drunk?"

"Uh-huh."

"And that night we tried—well, we tried to make love but I couldn't?"

"Uh-huh." She was silent a long moment. Then, "Oh, God, you mean, the same thing happened to you just now?"

"Uh-huh," I said.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry."

"The perfect ending to the perfect day," I said.

"First you find that letter from Chris—"

"And then I can't concentrate on my job—"

"And then Ms. Sandstrom threatens to fire you—"

"And then a man sticks us up—"

"And then you have to stick up another man—"

"And then we come home and go to bed and—" I sighed. "I think I'll just roll over and go to sleep."

"Good idea, honey. That's what we both need. A good night's sleep."

"I love you, sweetheart," I said. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to ... well, you know."

"It's fine, sweetheart. It happens to every man once in a while."

"It's just one of those days," I said.

"And one of those nights," she said.

* * * *

But you know what? Some time later, the grandfather clock in the living room woke me as it tolled twelve midnight, and when I rolled over to see how Laura was doing, she was wide awake and took me in her sweet warm arms, and I didn't have any trouble at all showing her how grateful I was.

It was a brand-new day ... and when I finally got around to breakfast, the first thing I did was lift the horoscope section from the paper ... and drop it, unread, into the wastebasket.

No more snooping in drawers ... and no more bad-luck horoscopes.

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Favor and the Princess

Thursday, finally, something happened.

Favor had been tailing David Carson for two days, and they had each been equally dull days. Back when he was a city detective, there were two jobs Favor hated most: telling parents that their child had been killed, and tailing people. Favor's ass always went to sleep.

For two days, Carson, a slender and handsome man, went to work, played squash, stopped by his country club for two quick drinks, and then drove on home to the wife and kids. Home being a walled estate complete with large gurgling fountain on the front lawn, and a pair of jags in the three-stall garage.

Thursday, Carson was nice enough to do something different.

As CEO of the electronics firm he had recently inherited from his father-in-law, Carson didn't have any problem sneaking off in the middle of the afternoon. He stopped first at a branch of the Federal National Savings bank. Favor figured this was going to be another nowhere tail. But Carson parked and went inside, and stayed inside for nearly half an hour. When he came out, he carried a manila envelope.

From the bank, he drove straight to the bluffs out in Haversham State Park. On a weekday May afternoon, the birds and the butterflies frolicking in the warm air, the park was empty. Carson angled his shiny black Lincoln Towncar into a spot near the log-cabin restrooms, and got out carrying

the manila envelope. There was another car already parked there, a sporty little red Mustang convertible with the top up. He then took off walking toward a path that led straight to an overlook above the river.

Favor gave him a couple of minutes and then went after him, shoving his small notebook back in the pocket of his blue blazer. He'd written down the number of the Mustang.

All Favor could think of, as he wound his way down the forest path, the damp leaves and loam playing hell with his sinuses, was that he didn't have a cap on and was therefore susceptible to Lyme disease.

Favor was a good-looking guy of forty-five who seemed competent and confident in every way. His darkest secret was his hypochondria. Being in a room where somebody sneezed pissed him off for an hour and he could feel the jack-booted cold germs invading his body and seizing control of it. Sometimes he was so upset he wanted to take out his trusty old Police .38 Special and waste the offender. If he ever got to be President of the United States, which, he had to admit, wasn't real likely, he would make public sneezing a felony.

For a few minutes, as the path wended and wound its way through the deepest part of the forest, and possums and rabbits and raccoons lined up to look at him, he was a seven-year-old again, imagining he was Tarzan, and this wasn't a forest at all but a jungle, and it wasn't in Iowa, it was in Africa, and it wasn't the real Africa, which was actually kind of boring, it was Tarzan's Africa, which was about the coolest place on the whole planet. Favor had been a stone Tarzan freak until he was fifteen years old, when he discovered a)

girls b) marijuana and c) Neil Young records. Neil couldn't sing for shit but he did stuff to a guitar that never failed to give Favor chills. But now, for a brief time at least, he was Tarzan again and seven years old again and if he wasn't careful he just might get himself attacked by an alligator...

The overlook was actually a kind of stone verandah set on the highest point of a woodsy bluff. It was the kind of aerie the Indians had no doubt used for spying on intruders. Beyond, across the wide rushing river, were other bluffs, gleaming with the skins of white birch trees that struggled all the way up hill to the point where some old narrow-gauge railroad track could still be found. Jesse James had once robbed one of the short-haul trains that had used these very same tracks.

The man with David Carson was short, stumpy and bald. He wore a buff blue polo shirt, khaki pants, argyle socks and penny loafers. He put his hand out and Carson set the manila envelope on it.

Favor couldn't hear what they were saying. A couple of motor boats were showing off below and drowning out the words.

Then Carson was angrily jamming his finger into the smaller man's chest.

The man backed up but Carson pursued him, continuing to jab at his chest, continuing to spit angry words into the man's face.

Favor could see that Carson was starting to glance back up the trail. He was probably going to leave soon.

Favor decided this would be a good time to leave.

He hurried back along the path, got in his car, and drove up near the exit where he parked on the shoulder of the road and took out his trusty newspaper. The paper was ten years old. He used it for every surveillance job. Someday he'd have to get a new paper.

A few minutes later, Carson came shooting up the asphalt. The posted speed limit was 15. He was doing at least 60. When he reached the stop sign at the exit, he jammed on his brakes, fishtailing a bit. Then he peeled out, laying down rubber. He was sure pissed off about something.

Favor followed him back to the manse, then drove down to the police station, where he had an old buddy of his run a check on the Mustang's plates.

* * * *

"You know anybody who drives a red Mustang?" Favor said three hours later.

"I didn't know they still *made* Mustangs."

"Yeah, they do. This one is red."

Jane Carson shook her wondrously lovely head.

Jane Dalworth Carson had come from one of the old-money families in the city. Favor had first met her when he was ten, helping his dad in the yardwork business. He got goopy over Jane. No matter what girl he met he always compared her to Jane and found her coming up short. Jane was not only blonde and beautiful and rich and fun to be around, she knew how to make you feel like the most special guy in the known universe. None of Favor's first three wives had been able to do that.

Jane had called him three nights ago. She said her husband was acting weird. Would Favor kind of, you know, follow him around a little and see what was going on? She suspected he might have a woman. "Nobody married to you would ever have a woman on the side," Favor said. "Oh, you haven't seen me lately. I'm looking middle-aged, Favor. I really am."

Today was the first time he'd actually seen her in eleven years, here in this fern-infested restaurant with the waiters who all wore bouncy little pony-tails and nose-rings.

Favor made a point of it to be modern. It didn't always work. As for Jane, she looked great to him. Maybe a teensy-tiny bit older. But nothing to take seriously.

* * * *

Jane said "Do you know anything about this guy?"

"He's a male nurse. Sam Evans."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I was kind've of surprised, too."

"Why would he be meeting a male nurse?"

"I don't know. He handed him a manila envelope."

"An envelope?"

"I think it had money in it. He went into the bank without it, and then came out with it. There's only one thing I know you can get in a bank."

"A male nurse and an envelope with money in it."

Favor said, "Guy's shaking him down."

"Blackmail?"

"Uh-huh."

She looked stunned by a thought she'd obviously just had. "I saw an Oprah once where this woman didn't know her husband was gay till she found him in bed with another guy. I mean, a male nurse—"

For some reason, Favor was disappointed she watched Oprah. Princesses should have better things to do with their time. "I don't think he's gay."

"How can you tell?"

Favor shrugged. "I just don't."

"Then what do you think it is?"

"He drink a lot?"

"Not really."

"Take drugs?"

She laughed. "David? God, he's the most conservative man I know." Her laugh made him mushy inside. He knew that even if there happened to be a fourth Mrs. Favor, his last thought on planet earth would be about Princess Jane. She was drinking wine and he was drinking Diet Pepsi because he was afraid he might blurt out something embarrassing if he had any booze in him. Many, many drunken nights he'd come this close to picking up the phone and calling her and telling her something embarrassing.

"I guess I wouldn't blame him if he did have a woman on the side."

"I told you. That's crazy. Nobody married to you should even look at anybody else."

She smiled. "Maybe I should've married you, Favor."

"Yeah, right. What a prize I am."

He wanted her to go on a little more, you know, kind of extol the hell out of all his virtues, but she didn't. "I haven't been much company since Dad died."

"I was sorry to hear about it. I would've been there but I was working in Chicago."

"That's all right. We just had a small family funeral. Dad wanted to be cremated. He hated big funerals." Her blue blue eyes were damp. "Things were kind of rough for him the last couple of years. All the foreign competition. Profits were way down. He didn't blame David. My two brothers, did, of course. They've always thought that they should be in charge of the company. He got so sick, the cancer and everything, he had to turn it all over to David. Actually, after the chemo didn't do any good, I expected he'd die right away. But he hung on for almost a year."

"He was a good man."

"He always liked you and your father very much. He never forgot where he came from. The west side, I mean."

Her lower lip began to tremble. He wanted to take her in his arms, hold her, comfort her, make her forever grateful for his remarkable powers of succoring. "How's the business doing now?" he said, trying to forestall her tears.

"Much better."

"Oh?"

She sipped wine, then nodded with that gorgeous head of hers.

"We were way overextended," she said. "The bank was even calling in some of our biggest notes. Then, thank God, right after Dad died, David met Mr. Vasquez."

"Who's he?"

"A very rich Argentinian. David's broker knew him. And he brought them together."

"Vasquez bought in?"

She shrugged. "You know me. I don't know much about business. And really have no interest in it. I'm really more artistic than anything."

"Right. Your painting."

"It's still the center of my life."

She was a terrible painter. Fortunately, she chose the representational mode to paint in. If she did abstract art, Favor wouldn't have been able to tell if she was any good or not. If he found a bunch of paintings by Picasso in his garage, he'd be inclined to throw them away.

"So the company's doing well again?"

"Yes. As I said, I just wish Dad were alive to see it. He spent his whole life building that company. And at the end—" Her eyes were moist again. "I'm sorry."

"No problem. I cry sometimes myself."

"You do?"

"Yeah."

"Somehow I can't imagine that. You crying, I mean."

Favor wasn't sure how to take that. Was she saying that he lacked the sensitivity to cry? Or was she saying that he was too macho to cry? Either way, he wasn't sure she'd paid him a compliment.

"The only time I ever saw David cry," she said, "when my father got on him one night and blamed him for the business going downhill."

"I thought you said your father didn't blame him."

"Just that one time."

"Oh."

"It really got to David."

"I imagine."

"Took away all his pride. So he went into the den and I knocked but he wouldn't let me in. And then I heard him crying. It was a terrible sound." More wine. "I just don't know what any of this has to do with that man in the red Mustang."

"Neither do I. But I'm going to try and find out."

She reached over and put her hand on his. He felt as if he were going into cardiac arrest.

"I really appreciate this, Favor. And I want to pay you for it."

"No way."

She gave his hand a cute little squeeze. "Maybe I really should have married you, Favor." And for one brief moment he had this wonderful thought: what if he really got something on her husband, and she really did decide to take up with Favor? What if...

* * * *

Sitting in a car and doing surveillance allowed you certain liberties. You could pick your nose, scratch your butt, belch, pass gas, and dig the green stuff out of the corners of your eyes. While his thoughts of Princess Jane were mostly ethereal, every once in awhile thoughts of her got him right in the old libido. He kept seeing the swell of her small but perfect breasts, and smelling the erotic scent of her perfume.

This was five hours after leaving her at the restaurant. He'd started following Sam Evans right after dinner. While he waited, Favor picked up his cell phone and called a private number at the credit bureau.

"Hey, Favor."

"How'd you know it was me?"

"We got one of those deals?"

"Oh, that identifies the caller?"

"Yeah."

"I should get one of those. So what'd you find out about Sam Evans."

Paulie Daye worked at the local credit bureau. At night, from his apartment, he hacked into the bureau's computers and sold information to a variety of people.

"Well, he paid off all his bills. Had about ten different creditors really on his ass. Had a whole bunch of stuff—stereo, shit like that—repossessed in fact."

"Any idea where the money came from?"

"Huh-uh."

"When did it start showing up?"

"Eight, nine months ago. Paid everything up to date in two days."

"Cash or checks?"

"What'm I, a mind-reader?"

"He buy a lot of new stuff?"

"A lot. Bought himself a condo, for one thing, and a new Mustang and about five thousand dollars worth of clothes."

"Man, what a waste."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, he ain't exactly a male model."

"And he took two vacations."

"To where?"

"San Juan and Paris."

"Wow. Sounds like Mr. Evans is doing all right for himself."

"He shaking somebody down?"

"Probably."

"Figures. No male nurse makes this kind've change."

"I need to see his checks for the past ten months. That possible?"

"You looking for anything special?"

"I'll know it when I see it."

"Cost you five big ones."

"Done."

"Take me till about this time tomorrow. I got a friend at his bank can help me, but not till right after work."

Just then, Sam Evans came out of Cock A Doodle Do Night Club and got into his red Mustang.

"Gotta go," Favor said.

Turned out Sam Evans was a real XXX-freak.

He hit, in the next two hours, Club Syn, Lap-Dance-A-Looza, Your Place Or Mine, and The Slit Skirt. He stayed about the same time in each one, forty, forty-five minutes, and then jumped back in his red Mustang and hauled ass down the road. At the last one, he emerged about midnight with a bottle blonde with balloon boobs and a giggle that could shatter glass. He shagged on back to the condo. And ten minutes after crossing the threshold, killed the lights.

Through the open window on the second floor, the blonde's giggle floated down. A waste of a whole night. Didn't learn one damned useful thing about Sam Evans.

"I got the print-outs," Paulie said nineteen hours later.
"You want me to fax them?"

"Yeah," Favor said.

"Sounds like a pretty boring evening to me. Going through all these check print-outs."

"Yeah, but I'll be naked while I'm doing it."

"Careful, you can get arrested for stuff like that, Favor."

"Don't remind me. I used to work vice."

Couple hours later, Favor was seriously thinking about getting naked. Anything to break the monotony of poring over and over the print-outs of where Sam Evans had written the checks, and in what amount. There was a Cubs game on. Every time the crowd groaned, he looked up to see a Cub player looking embarrassed. Cub fans didn't cheer, they sighed.

He went through the lists six times before he saw that there was only one really interesting name on the whole print-out: nine months ago, Sam Evans had spent \$61.00 at Zenith Pharmacy. Favor wondered why a male nurse who worked for a hospital that had its own pharmacy would spend money at another pharmacy. Maybe it was as simple as the fact that the hospital pharmacy didn't stock certain things. Maybe. The Cubs lost a close one, 14-3, and then Favor went to bed.

* * * *

"Good morning."

"Accounting please."

"Thank you."

This was the next morning in Favor's combination apartment office. Favor was gagging down a cup of instant coffee while Mr. Coffee took his good sweet time about making the first real cup of the day, the sonofabitch.

"Hello. This is Ruth."

"Hi, Ruth. My name's Bob Powell and I'm a tax accountant. I've got a client named Sam Evans and we're filing a late return this year. But Sam isn't exactly great at keeping receipts. He's got a canceled check here written to Zenith and I wondered if you could tell me what he bought that day."

"I can help you if he's got an account here. Sam Evans?"

"Right."

"Thank you."

She went away and then she came back. "The check paid the balance of his old account."

"I see. Do you have a list of what the check paid for?"

"The specific items?"

"Yes."

"Let's see here. Two hypodermic needles. Looks like the large ones with very fine points. And a bottle of insulin."

The accountant Bob Powell wrote down everything she said. "Well, that's about all I need, I guess."

"He in trouble?"

"Trouble?"

"You know, the IRS."

"Oh. No, not really. Just a late file. A lot of people do that."

"We got audited once, my husband and I, I mean, and it was terrible."

"I bet. Well, listen Ruth, thanks a lot."

"Sure."

* * * *

"I'm not sure there *was* an autopsy," Jane Carson said on the phone half an hour later.

"He died of what?"

"A heart attack."

"Did he have a history of heart problems?"

"No."

"Did he see a doctor within two weeks of his death for heart problems?"

"No."

"Then there was an autopsy. Had to be. Legally."

"God, how'd you ever learn all this stuff, Favor?"

"I just picked it up."

"I keep wanting to ask him about that male nurse."

"I wouldn't."

"No, I won't. But it's tempting." Then: "Why did you want to know about an autopsy?"

Princess Jane had one of those circuitous conversational styles. You never knew when she was going to circle back to the original topic.

"Because a week before your father died, Sam Evans bought some insulin at a medical supply house."

"Insulin? You mean for diabetes?"

He didn't want to share his suspicions with her just yet.
"I'm not sure why he bought it," Favor said. "It may not have anything to do with this at all."

"How will you find out?"

"Talk to the medical examiner."

"He a friend of yours?"

"More or less."

She laughed. "You don't sound real thrilled about him."

"He borrowed fifty bucks from me two Christmases ago and never paid me back."

"Why don't you ask him for it?"

"Because if I asked him, he might get mad, and if he got mad then he wouldn't help me any more."

"Maybe he was drunk and forgot about it."

"Maybe."

"Then just figure out some subtle way to ask him, if it really bothers you, I mean."

"We'll see. I'll check in with you after I talk to him."

"I just can't figure out," Princess Jane said, "why David'd pay off a male nurse."

"I think," Favor said, "we're about to find out."

* * * *

Bryce Lenihan, MD, it said. He was fat, bald with a little cherub Irish face. The shoulders of his dark suit coats were invariably snowy with dandruff and his teeth were invariably clogged with bits of his most recent meal. He had been medical examiner for twelve years, as long as Mayor O'Toole had been mayor. O'Toole was his uncle. You figure it out.

Favor decided now was the time to give Lenihan the Big Hint.

"You like my tie, Lenihan?"

"Your tie?"

"Yeah. This one." He waggled the tie at him the way a big dog waggles his tongue at you.

"Yeah, I mean it's nice and all."

"Guy owed me fifty bucks for so long, I figured he'd forgotten about it. And when I open my mail box the other day, and there's a nice new fifty in an envelope. Guy said he was just walking down the street and remembered it all of a sudden, after all these years. You ever do that, Lenihan, forget you owe somebody money I mean?"

"Not that I remember."

As if on cue, so he wouldn't have to pursue the subject any more, Lenihan's phone rang and he got into this five-minute discussion about spots on a dead guy's liver, and what the spots did or didn't signify. Favor didn't see how anybody could be a doctor.

After Lenihan hung up, he said, "I gotta go down to the morgue. That's why I don't think chicks should be doctors. Dizzy bitch can't ever figure things out for herself, my assistant I mean. So what can I do for you, Favor, and make it fast."

Favor knew he could forget all about his fifty bucks. Probably forever.

"I got three things I'm trying to put together here," he said. "First I got a guy who had a heart attack with no history of heart attacks."

"Which doesn't mean diddly. Lots of guys with no history of heart trouble die from heart attacks."

"Two, I've got a male nurse who may or may not be involved in this whole thing. And three—"

The phone rang again.

"Yeah?" Lenihan said, after snapping up the receiver. Then: "Then let him do his own fucking autopsy, he's so god-damned smart. I say the guy suffocated and if he doesn't like it, tell him to put it up his ass."

Lenihan slammed the phone. "Lawyers."

He glanced at his watch. Would Favor be able to finish his question?

"I gotta haul ass, Favor," Lenihan said, standing up. He did what he usually did when he stood up, whisked dandruff off his shoulders with his fingers.

"Number three is, four days before this guy has a heart attack, the male nurse buys two large syringes with fine points—"

"—probably 60 ccs—"

"And some insulin—" That's when the first knock came. "And I'd like to find out," Favor said, "if there's a connection between these things."

Lenihan looked as if he were about to say something to Favor when the second knock came. "Yeah?" Lenihan shouted.

The woman who came through the door literally cowered when she saw Dr. Lenihan. She looked as if he might turn on her and throw her into the wall or something.

"What the hell is it, Martha?"

A trembling hand held out a single piece of paper.

"The lab report you wanted on the Henderson case."

He snatched it from her. "Tell them they can kiss my ass. I wanted this early this morning."

The woman cowered again, and then quickly left.

Lenihan probably wasn't going to win any Boss of the Year awards. He was scanning the lab report when Favor said, "So what do you think? Those three things I told you about fit together?"

When Lenihan looked up, his eyes were glassy. Whatever information the lab report held, it must be damned engrossing. "Huh?" he said.

"The male nurse and the syringe and the insulin."

"God," Dr. Bruce Lenihan, MD, said, shooting his cuff and glaring at his wristwatch. "I'm so fucking late I can't believe it." Then he said, "I figure a smarty-pants like you woulda been able to figure it out all by your lonesome, Favor."

"Figure what out?"

"The insulin bit. Very old trick. Thing is, it still works eight out of ten times. Last convention I went to, that was one of the big topics on the docket. It's still a problem. I mean, it doesn't happen that often, but it's still a bitch to spot."

On the way down in the elevator, Lenihan gave the lowdown on how exactly you killed a guy the way the male nurse had. Lenihan's last words, just as Favor was saying goodbye, "But a really good medical examiner would be able to spot it." He smiled. "A good one like me."

Lenihan had done the autopsy in question, of course, and he hadn't spotted it at all.

* * * *

Favor had kept some of the old burglary pics he'd taken from various thieves back during his city detective days. He got into Sam Evans' condo with no problem. He went out into the kitchen and found some Jack Daniels black label and fixed himself a drink. Then he went into the living room and parked himself in the recliner. He used the channel zapper and found the Cubs game. During a long commercial break, Favor picked up the phone and called Princess Jane.

"I think I figured it out. What your husband was up to."

"Oh, God, Favor, I'm almost afraid to hear."

He told her and she started crying almost immediately.

All the time she cried, he thought, the cops're going to nail David's ass, and she's going to be free. Maybe seventh-grade dreams really do come true You just have to wait a while. Say twenty or thirty years.

She kept on sobbing. "I'm sorry, Favor. I'd better go."

"Don't mention any of this to your husband. I've got a little plan in mind."

He could imagine how she'd feel in his arms right now, the tender slender body against his, the warmth of the tears on her cheeks.

"Just remember," Favor said, "you need anything, any time night or day, you've got my number."

"Oh, Favor, I just feel so terrible right now."

"You lie down and try to nap. That's the best thing."

He could feel the gratitude coming from the other end of the phone. It was almost tangible.

Four innings later—the Cubs losing another close one, 9-0—Favor heard somebody in the hall. Evans.

Favor took out his .38—he saw no reason to carry one of the monsters cops seemed to favor these days—and then just sat there with his drink in one hand and his .38 in the other.

When Evans came through the door, the .38 was pointing directly at his chest. He was all flashy sports clothes—yellow summer sweater, white ducks, \$150 white Reeboks, and enough Raw Vanilla cologne to peel off wallpaper. Being bald and dumpy and squint-eyed kind of spoiled the effect, though.

"Hey," he said, "what the hell's going on?"

"Close the door and sit down and shut up."

"That my booze you're drinking?"

Guy's holding a gun on him and all Evans worries about is his booze.

"You heard what I said."

"You're obviously not the cops."

"No shit."

Then Evans finally went over and sat down on the couch. What he didn't do was shut up.

"You're in deep shit, my friend," he said.

"First of all," Favor said. "You're the one in deep shit. And second of all, I ain't your friend."

"Who the hell are you?"

"I want you to get David Carson over here."

"I don't know any David Carson."

"Yeah, right. Now pick up that phone and call him and tell him he needs to get over here right away, that somebody's figured out what you two did."

"You're crazy, you know that? I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Pick up the phone."

"No."

"No?"

"Damn right, no. This is my condo, not yours."

Favor got up and went over to where Evans was perched anxiously on the edge of the couch. He brought the barrel of his gun down hard across the side of Evans' head.

"You sonofabitch," Evans said, and then kind of rolled around on the couch, holding the right side of his head, and wrinkling his pretty yellow sweater. After the pain had subsided somewhat, Evans said, "I still don't know any David Carson."

"Pick up the phone."

Evans started to protest again. This time, all Favor did was give him a good swift kick in the shin. An old playground technique.

"Ow! Aw shit! Ow!" This hurt a lot more, surprisingly, than the gun barrel along the side of the head. Evans bitched and cursed for four, five minutes and then Favor handed him the receiver.

"You sonofabitch," Evans said. He dialed the number, asked for Carson. "You need to get over to my place right away," he said as soon as Carson came on the line. "We got a

problem. A big one." He looked up at Favor. "Right away." He hung up.

Favor sat down in the recliner again. "How much he pay you?"

"None of your business."

"Whatever it was, it wasn't enough, was it? You've still been shaking him down."

"Yeah? Is that right?"

"One thing about people you blackmail. They wake up one day and decide they're really sick of living under your thumb. And then they get violent."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You're gonna get life, you know that, don't you?" Evans didn't say anything. Just stared out the window at the spring blue sky. "Unless, of course, you turn state's evidence against him. His idea, you say. He came to me with the whole plan. The County Attorney'll cut you some slack if you go that route."

Evans said, "I wouldn't get life?"

"Not if you cooperate."

"Carson's a lot bigger fish to fry. Socially, I mean."

"He sure is. The County Attorney'd rather have his scalp than yours any day."

Evans put his face in his hands. When he took them away, his eyes were moist. "God, I don't know why I ever agreed to do this."

"How'd you meet Carson?"

"He had an employee, this guy named Mandlebaum, and he had cancer and I took care of him the last couple weeks of

his life. At home, I mean. So then Carson looked me up about ten, eleven months ago."

"So he offered you the deal?"

"He kept hinting at it, talking about how the only thing that could save the business was the old man's insurance policy. They had one of those key-man deals, where if one of the partners dies the business gets a lot of money. Almost three million, in this case. Enough to pay off some of the bills and keep things going."

"How much he pay you?"

"Hundred grand."

"How much more you been getting out of him?"

"Not that much."

"How much?" Favor said.

"Thirty, around there. I'm not sure exactly."

"You think it'd last forever?"

"Yeah, I guess I kinda started thinking that way. Kinda dumb, huh?"

Favor nodded. "Someday he'd either run out of money or run out of patience."

"God, does my head hurt."

"Sorry."

"And my shin."

"Sorry about that, too."

"You really get off on slapping people around?"

"Sometimes."

"That seems weird to me, hurting people I mean. I'm always trying to *help* people, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, like you helped Carson's father-in-law."

"That was the only time I ever did anything like that." He sounded as if Favor had deeply hurt him by reminding him of the incident.

Footsteps in the hallway. Coming this way.

"You going to hide?" Evans whispered.

"Huh-uh," Favor whispered back. "Just go open the door."

The footsteps came closer. Evans looked scared. Favor waved him to the door with the .38. "When he knocks, open the door and then step back and let him walk inside."

When the knock came, Evans looked back at Favor. Favor nodded. David Carson was framed in the doorway. He was a lanky, impressive middle-aged man. He looked very unhappy.

"What the hell is this, Evans?"

Evans stepped aside so Carson could get a look at Favor.

"C'mon in, Carson," Favor said.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Just get your ass in here." Favor liked pushing people like Carson around. For once, it was Carson's turn to be the pushee.

"He knows," Evans said.

"Oh, isn't that just fucking ducky?" Carson said. He walked into the living room. "How'd he find out?" Carson said to Evans.

"I told him."

"Figures. You dumb bastard." Carson looked at Favor. "You're not getting jack shit from me. You'd better understand that right up front. No more for Evans, and none at all for you."

Favor decided now was probably a good time to get out of the recliner.

"You killed your father-in-law," Favor said.

"What I did is my own business." Carson's tone made it clear that he never explained himself to peons.

"You ever think how your wife might feel about that?"

"Say," Carson said, snapping his fingers. "Favor. Now I know who you are. Your father used to be the old man's groundskeeper or something like that."

"I liked the old man," Favor said, "a lot more than you did, apparently."

Carson looked at him and smiled. "When's the last time you talked to her? To Jane."

"A while ago. Why?"

"Go down and get her," Carson said to Evans. Evans looked baffled. "My wife," Carson said. "In my car."

"What the hell're you trying to pull here, anyway?" Favor said.

"Go get her, Evans," Carson said. "I picked her up on the way over here."

Evans looked at Favor for approval. Favor nodded. "Right back," Evans said.

"You gullible bastard," Carson said after Evans was gone. "You're one of these guys who has a life-time crush on my wife, aren't you? She told me how you used to write her letters sometimes."

Favor felt his face redden.

"She may not be what you think," Carson said. He was smiling again. Smirking, actually. "You're some kind of

investigator, right?" Carson said. "What'd she do, hire you to follow me around or something? That how you got into this? Stupid bitch."

The name-calling stunned him. How dare anybody call Princess Jane a name. My God, this guy must be insane. Favor was about to say something when Jane came through the door. She wore a camel-colored suede car coat, a starched white shirt, black slacks and a pair of black flats. She was, as always, gorgeous.

"I'm sorry for all this, Favor," she said.

Favor looked at Carson. "She knows what you did. To her father."

Favor expected a big scene. All that happened was Jane looked at Carson. "I need to talk with Favor alone," she said.

"Why the hell'd you have him following me around?" Carson said. If Carson had called her a name, Favor was prepared to slug him.

"Because I didn't know what was going on," she said. "You were acting so strange. I thought maybe you had a woman on the side."

"So you hire this creep?" Carson said.

"He isn't a creep, and I want to talk to him alone. Why don't you and Mr. Evans go outside for a while?"

Carson glared at him, then nodded for Evans to follow him out. Carson slammed the door behind him good and hard.

Jane said, "I really appreciate everything you've done for me, Favor. And I do want to pay you."

"You know better than that." Then: "I know some good divorce lawyers."

Jane smiled sadly. "I love him, Favor. We have two children together."

"He murdered your father."

"We talked about that, on the way over here. I told him what I knew and we talked about it." She reached out and took his hand. "This isn't a very pretty thing to say about myself, Favor, but it's true. I'm used to living a very lavish lifestyle. That's the first thing David said to me after I told him that I knew what he and Evans had done to my father. He said, 'I did it for the sake of our family. If I hadn't, we'd be broke today. He was dying anyway, he didn't have long to go. The company needed that key-man insurance payoff.' That's what he said, and you know, he's right."

"Oh, shit," Favor said. "You mean you don't mind he killed your father?"

She leaned forward on her tip-toes and kissed him on the cheek. "I knew you'd be disappointed in me."

"He killed your father. In cold blood."

"He saved our family. Me. The girls. Himself. He didn't have any choice. Daddy was dying anyway, don't forget." Done kissing him, she leaned back and said, "My father would have done the same thing in David's circumstances. They're the same kind of man, really. I'm sure that, sub-consciously, I knew. That's why I married him."

"I should go the police."

"You'd destroy my life, Favor. Do you really want to do that?"

He looked at her. She was a stranger suddenly. "I guess not."

"I knew you'd say that. I said that to David on the way over here. I said Favor's an honorable man. He wouldn't let me be hurt that way."

This time, she kissed him on the lips, quickly but with real tenderness. "We just come from different backgrounds, Favor," she said. "I guess I can't expect you to understand me sometimes." She looked back at the closed door.

"Now I'd better go."

"Yeah. I guess you'd better."

"I know you're disappointed, Favor. And I'm sorry."

"Sure."

"Goodbye, Favor."

"Yeah."

"I'll always remember you. Really."

And then she was gone.

Princess Jane was gone. Forever, Favor knew.

Forever.

When Sam Evans came through the door, Favor was in the kitchen helping himself to more Jack Daniels.

"Hey, man," Evans said, sounding pissed. "That's my booze."

"This is for you," Favor said, and slapped a ten spot down on the counter. Favor knew he should be heading out but right now he didn't want to go anywhere. He just wanted to stay right here and get wasted.

"She's a looker."

"She sure is that," Favor said. "She sure is."

"But her tits aren't big enough."

"Don't talk about her that way. And I mean it."

Evans was smart enough to look scared. Favor had suddenly turned dangerous again.

"She's a princess," Favor said. "A princess." He felt like crying.

"Hey, man, I just like bigger tits is all. Sorry if I offended you. Now do you mind if I get in there and have a drink from my own bottle?"

"She's a princess," Favor said.

"Yeah, man, you said that already."

"A princess," Favor said, getting out of the way so Evans could get in there and get a drink from his own bottle. "A regular god-damned princess and don't you forget it."

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Turn Away

On Thursday she was there again. (This was on a soap opera he'd picked up by accident looking for a western movie to watch since he was all caught up on his work.) Parnell had seen her Monday but not Tuesday then not Wednesday either. But Thursday she was there again. He didn't know her name, hell it didn't matter, she was just this maybe twenty-two twenty-three-year-old who looked a lot like a nurse from Enid, Oklahoma, he'd dated a couple of times (Les Elgart had been playing on the Loop) six seven months after returning from WWII.

Now this young look-alike was on a soap opera and he was watching.

A frigging soap opera.

He was getting all dazzled up by her, just as he had on Monday, when the knock came sharp and three times, almost like a code.

He wasn't wearing the slippers he'd gotten recently at Kmart so he had to find them, and he was drinking straight from a quart of Hamms so he had to put it down. When you were the manager of an apartment building, even one as marginal as the Alma, you had to go to the door with at least a little "decorousness," the word Sgt. Meister, his boss, had always used back in Parnell's cop days.

It was 11:23 A.M. and most of the Alma's tenants were at work. Except for the ADC mothers who had plenty of work of their own kind what with some of the assholes down at social

services (Parnell had once gone down there with the Jamaican woman in 201 and threatened to punch out the little bastard who was holding up her check), not to mention the sheer simple burden of knowing the sweet innocent little child you loved was someday going to end up just as blown-out and bitter and useless as yourself

He went to the door, shuffling in his new slippers which he'd bought two sizes too big because of his bunions.

The guy who stood there was no resident of the Alma. Not with his razor-cut black hair and his three-piece banker's suit and the kind of melancholy in his pale blue eyes that was almost sweet and not at all violent. He had a fancy mustache spoiled by the fact that his pink lips were a woman's.

"Mr. Parnell?"

Parnell nodded.

The man, who was maybe thirty-five, put out a hand. Parnell took it, all the while thinking of the soap opera behind him and the girl who looked like the one from Enid, Oklahoma. (Occasionally he bought whack-off magazines but the girls either looked too easy or too arrogant so he always had to close his eyes anyway and think of somebody he'd known in the past.) He wanted to see her, fuck this guy. Saturday he would be sixty-one and about all he had to look forward to was a phone call from his kid up the Oregon coast. His kid, who, God rest her soul, was his mother's son and not Parnell's, always ran a stopwatch while they talked so as to save on the phone bill. Hi Dad Happy Birthday and It's Been Really Nice Talking To You. I-Love-You-Bye.

"What can I do for you?" Parnell said. Then as he stood there watching the traffic go up and down Cortland Boulevard in baking July sunlight, Parnell realized that the guy was somehow familiar to him.

The guy said, "You know my father."

"Jesus H. Christ—"

"—Bud Garrett—"

"—Bud. I'll be goddamned." He'd already shaken the kid's hand and he couldn't do that again so he kind of patted him on the shoulder and said, "Come on in."

"I'm Richard Garrett."

"I'm glad to meet you, Richard."

He took the guy inside. Richard looked around at the odds and ends of furniture that didn't match and at all the pictures of dead people and immediately put a smile on his face as if he just couldn't remember when he'd been so enchanted with a place before, which meant of course that he saw the place for the dump Parnell knew it to be.

"How about a beer?" Parnell said, hoping he had something beside the generic stuff he'd bought at the 7-Eleven a few months ago.

"I'm fine, thanks."

Richard sat on the edge of the couch with the air of somebody waiting for his flight to be announced. He was all ready to jump up. He kept his eyes downcast and he kept fiddling with his wedding ring. Parnell watched him. Sometimes it turned out that way. Richard's old man had been on the force with Parnell. They'd been best friends. Garrett Sr. was a big man, six-three and fleshy but strong, a

brawler and occasionally a mean one when the hootch didn't settle in him quite right. But his son ... Sometimes it turned out that way. He was manly enough, Parnell supposed, but there was an air of being trapped in himself, of petulance, that put Parnell off.

Three or four minutes of silence went by. The soap opera ended with Parnell getting another glance of the young lady. Then a "CBS Newsbreak" came on. Then some commercials. Richard didn't seem to notice that neither of them had said anything for a long time. Sunlight made bars through the venetian blinds. The refrigerator thrummed. Upstairs but distantly a kid bawled.

Parnell didn't realize it at first, not until Richard sniffed, that Bud Garrett's son was either crying or doing something damn close to it.

"Hey, Richard, what's the problem?" Parnell said, making sure to keep his voice soft.

"My, my Dad."

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes."

"What?"

Richard looked up with his pale blue eyes. "He's dying."

"Jesus."

Richard cleared his throat. "It's how he's dying that's so bad."

"Cancer?"

Richard said, "Yes. Liver. He's dying by inches."

"Shit."

Richard nodded. Then he fell once more into his own thoughts. Parnell let him stay there a while, thinking about Bud Garrett. Bud had left the force on a whim that all the cops said would fail. He started a rent-a-car business with a small inheritance he'd come into. That was twenty years ago. Now Bud Garrett lived up in Woodland Hills and drove the big Mercedes and went to Europe once a year. Bud and Parnell had tried to remain friends but beer and champagne didn't mix. When the Mrs. had died Bud had sent a lavish display of flowers to the funeral and a note that Parnell knew to be sincere but they hadn't had any real contact in years.

"Shit," Parnell said again.

Richard looked up, shaking his head as if trying to escape the aftereffects of drugs. "I want to hire you."

"Hire me? As what?"

"You're a personal investigator aren't you?"

"Not anymore. I mean I kept my ticket—it doesn't cost that much to renew it—but hell I haven't had a job in five years." He waved a beefy hand around the apartment. "I manage these apartments."

From inside his blue pin-striped suit Richard took a sleek wallet. He quickly counted out five one-hundred-dollar bills and put them on the blond coffee table next to the stack of Luke Short paperbacks. "I really want you to help me."

"Help you do what?"

"Kill my father."

Now Parnell shook his head. "Jesus, kid, are you nuts or what?"

Richard stood up. "Are you busy right now?"

Parnell looked around the room again. "I guess not."

"Then why don't you come with me?"

"Where?"

* * * *

When the elevator doors opened to let them out on the sixth floor of the hospital, Parnell said, "I want to be sure that you understand me."

He took Richard by the sleeve and held him and stared into his pale blue eyes. "You know why I'm coming here, right?"

"Right."

"I'm coming to see your father because we're old friends. Because I cared about him a great deal and because I still do. But that's the only reason."

"Right."

Parnell frowned. "You still think I'm going to help you, don't you?"

"I just want you to see him."

On the way to Bud Garrett's room they passed an especially good-looking nurse. Parnell felt guilty about recognizing her beauty. His old friend was dying just down the hall and here Parnell was worrying about some nurse.

Parnell went around the corner of the door. The room was dark. It smelled sweet from flowers and fetid from flesh literally rotting.

Then he looked at the frail yellow man in the bed. Even in the shadows you could see his skin was yellow.

"I'll be damned," the man said.

It was like watching a skeleton talk by some trick of magic.

Parnell went over and tried to smile his ass off but all he could muster was just a little one. He wanted to cry until he collapsed. You sonofabitch, Parnell thought, enraged. He just wasn't sure who he was enraged with. Death or God or himself—or maybe even Bud himself for reminding Parnell of just how terrible and scary it could get near the end.

"I'll be damned," Bud Garrett said again.

He put out his hand and Parnell took it. Held it for a long time.

"He's a good boy, isn't he?" Garrett said, nodding to Richard.

"He sure is."

"I had to raise him after his mother died. I did a good job, if I say so myself."

"A damn good job, Bud."

This was a big private room that more resembled a hotel suite. There was a divan and a console TV and a dry bar. There was a Picasso lithograph and a walk-in closet and a deck to walk out on. There was a double-sized water bed with enough controls to drive a space ship and a big stereo and a bookcase filled with hardcovers. Most people Parnell knew dreamed of living in such a place. Bud Garrett was dying in it.

"He told you," Garrett said.

"What?" Parnell spun around to face Richard, knowing suddenly the worst truth of all.

"He told you."

"Jesus, Bud, you sent him, didn't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I did."

"Why?"

Parnell looked at Garrett again. How could somebody who used to have a weight problem and who could throw around the toughest drunk the barrio ever produced get to be like this. Nearly every time he talked he winced. And all the time he smelled. Bad.

"I sent for you because none of us is perfect," Bud said.

"I don't understand."

"He's afraid."

"Richard?"

"Yes."

"I don't blame him. I'd be afraid, too." Parnell paused and stared at Bud. "You asked him to kill you, didn't you?"

"Yes. It's his responsibility to do it."

Richard stepped up to his father's bedside and said, "I agree with that, Mr. Parnell. It is my responsibility. I just need a little help is all."

"Doing what?"

"If I buy cyanide, it will eventually be traced to me and I'll be tried for murder. If you buy it, nobody will ever connect you with my father."

Parnell shook his head. "That's bullshit. That isn't what you want me for. There are a million ways you could get cyanide without having it traced back."

Bud Garrett said, "I told him about you. I told him you could help give him strength."

"I don't agree with any of this, Bud. You should die when it's your time to die. I'm a Catholic."

Bud laughed hoarsely. "So am I, you asshole." He coughed and said, "The pain's bad. I'm beyond any help they can give

me. But it could go on for a long time." Then, just as his son had an hour ago, Bud Garrett began crying almost imperceptibly. "I'm scared, Parnell. I don't know what's on the other side but it can't be any worse than this." He reached out his hand and for a long time Parnell just stared at it but then he touched it.

"Jesus," Parnell said. "It's pretty fucking confusing, Bud. It's pretty fucking confusing."

* * * *

Richard took Parnell out to dinner that night. It was a nice place. The table cloths were starchy white and the waiters all wore shiny shoes. Candles glowed inside red glass.

They'd had four drinks apiece, during which Richard told Parnell about his two sons (six and eight respectively) and about the perils and rewards of the rent-a-car business and about how much he liked windsurfing even though he really wasn't much good at it.

Just after the arrival of the fourth drink, Richard took something from his pocket and laid it on the table.

It was a cold capsule.

"You know how the Tylenol Killer in Chicago operated?" Richard asked.

Parnell nodded.

"Same thing," Richard said. "I took the cyanide and put it in a capsule."

"Christ. I don't know about it."

"You're scared, too, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am."

Richard sipped his whiskey-and-soda. With his regimental striped tie he might have been sitting in a country club. "May I ask you something?"

"Maybe."

"Do you believe in God?"

"Sure."

"Then if you believe in God, you must believe in goodness, correct?"

Parnell frowned. "I'm not much of an intellectual, Richard."

"But if you believe in God, you must believe in goodness, right?"

"Right."

"Do you think what's happening to my father is good?"

"Of course I don't."

"Then you must also believe that God isn't doing this to him—right ?"

"Right."

Richard held up the capsule. Stared at it. "All I want you to do is give me a ride to the hospital. Then just wait in the car down in the parking lot."

"I won't do it."

Richard signaled for another round.

"I won't goddamn do it," Parnell said.

* * * *

By the time they left the restaurant Richard was too drunk to drive. Parnell got behind the wheel of the new Audi. "Why don't you tell me where you live? I'll take you home and take a cab from there."

"I want to go to the hospital."

"No way, Richard."

Richard slammed his fist against the dashboard. "You fucking owe him that, man!" he screamed.

Parnell was shocked, and a bit impressed, with Richard's violent side. If nothing else, he saw how much Richard loved his old man.

"Richard, listen."

Richard sat in a heap against the opposite door. His tears were dry ones, choking ones. "Don't give me any of your speeches." He wiped snot from his nose on his sleeve. "My dad always told me what a tough guy Parnell was." He turned to Parnell, anger in him again. "Well, I'm not tough, Parnell, and so I need to borrow some of your toughness so I can get that man out of his pain and grant him his one last fucking wish. DO YOU GODDAMN UNDERSTAND ME?"

He smashed his fist on the dashboard again.

Parnell turned on the ignition and drove them away.

When they reached the hospital, Parnell found a parking spot and pulled in. The mercury vapor lights made him feel as though he were on Mars. Bugs smashed against the windshield.

"I'll wait here for you," Parnell said.

Richard looked over at him. "You won't call the cops?"

"No."

"And you won't come up and try to stop me?"

"No."

Richard studied Parnell's face. "Why did you change your mind?"

"Because I'm like him."

"Like my father?"

"Yeah. A coward. I wouldn't want the pain, either. I'd be just as afraid."

All Richard said, and this he barely whispered, was "Thanks."

* * * *

While he sat there Parnell listened to country western music and then a serious political call-in show and then a call-in show where a lady talked about Venusians who wanted to pork her and then some salsa music and then a religious minister who sounded like Foghorn Leghorn in the old Warner Brothers cartoons.

By then Richard came back.

He got in the car and slammed the door shut and said, completely sober now, "Let's go."

Parnell got out of there.

They went ten long blocks before Parnell said, "You didn't do it, did you?"

Richard got hysterical. "You sonofabitch! You sonofabitch!"

Parnell had to pull the car over to the curb. He hit Richard once, a fast clean right hand, not enough to make him unconscious but enough to calm him down.

"You didn't do it, did you?"

"He's my father, Parnell. I don't know what to do. I love him so much I don't want to see him suffer. But I love him so much I don't want to see him die, either."

Parnell let the kid sob. He thought of his old friend Bud Garrett and what a good goddamn fun buddy he'd been and then he started crying, too.

* * * *

When Parnell came down Richard was behind the steering wheel.

Parnell got in the car and looked around the empty parking lot and said, "Drive."

"Any place especially?"

"Out along the East River road. Your old man and I used to fish off that little bridge there."

Richard drove them. From inside his sportcoat Parnell took the pint of Jim Beam.

When they got to the bridge Parnell said, "Give me five minutes alone and then you can come over, OK?"

Richard was starting to sob again.

Parnell got out of the car and went over to the bridge. In the hot night you could hear the hydroelectric dam half a mile downstream and smell the fish and feel the mosquitoes feasting their way through the evening.

He thought of what Bud Garrett had said, "Put it in some whiskey for me, will you?"

So Parnell had obliged.

He stood now on the bridge looking up at the yellow circle of moon thinking about dead people, his wife and many of his WWII friends, the rookie cop who'd died of a sudden tumor, his wife with her rosary-wrapped hands. Hell, there was probably even a chance that nurse from Enid, Oklahoma, was dead.

"What do you think's on the other side?" Bud Garrett had asked just half an hour ago. He'd almost sounded excited. As

if he were a farm kid about to ship out with the Merchant Marines.

"I don't know," Parnell had said.

"It scare you, Parnell?"

"Yeah," Parnell had said. "Yeah it does."

Then Bud Garrett had laughed. "Don't tell the kid that. I always told him that nothin' scared you."

* * * *

Richard came up the bridge after a time. At first he stood maybe a hundred feet away from Parnell. He leaned his elbows on the concrete and looked out at the water and the moon. Parnell watched him, knowing it was all Richard, or anybody, could do.

Look out at the water and the moon and think about dead people and how you yourself would soon enough be dead.

Richard turned to Parnell then and said, his tears gone completely now, sounding for the first time like Parnell's sort of man, "You know, Parnell, my father was right. You're a brave sonofabitch. You really are."

Parnell knew it was important for Richard to believe that—that there were actually people in the world who didn't fear things the way most people did—so Parnell didn't answer him at all.

He just took his pint out and had himself a swig and looked some more at the moon and the water.

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Prisoners

For Gail Cross

I am in my sister's small room with its posters of Madonna and Tiffany. Sis is fourteen. Already tall, already pretty. Dressed in jeans and a blue T-shirt. Boys call and come over constantly. She wants nothing to do with boys.

Her back is to me. She will not turn around. I sit on the edge of her bed, touching my hand to her shoulder. She smells warm, of sleep. I say, "Sis listen to me."

She says nothing. She almost always says nothing.

"He wants to see you Sis."

Nothing.

"When he called last weekend—you were all he talked about. He even started crying when you wouldn't come to the phone Sis. He really did."

Nothing.

"Please, Sis. Please put on some good clothes and get ready 'cause we've got to leave in ten minutes. We've got to get there on time and you know it." I lean over so I can see her face.

She tucks her face into her pillow.

She doesn't want me to see that she is crying.

"Now you go and get ready Sis. You go and get ready, all right?"

"I don't know who she thinks she is," Ma says when I go downstairs. "Too good to go and see her own father."

As she talks Ma is packing a big brown grocery sack. Into it go a cornucopia of goodies—three cartons of Lucky Strike filters, three packages of Hershey bars, two bottles of Ban roll-on deodorant, three Louis L'Amour paperbacks as well as all the stuff that's there already.

Ma looks up at me. I've seen pictures of her when she was a young woman. She was a beauty. But that was before she started putting on weight and her hair started thinning and she stopped caring about how she dressed and all. "She going to go with us?"

"She says not."

"Just who does she think she is?"

"Calm down Ma. If she doesn't want to go, we'll just go ahead without her."

"What do we tell your dad?"

"Tell him she's got the flu?"

"The way she had the flu the last six times?"

"She's gone a few times."

"Yeah twice out of the whole year he's been there."

"Well."

"How do you think he feels? He gets all excited thinking he's going to see her and then she doesn't show up. How do you think he feels? She's his own flesh and blood."

I sigh. Ma's none too healthy and getting worked up this way doesn't do her any good. "I better go and call Riley."

"That's it. Go call Riley. Leave me here alone to worry about what we're going to tell your dad."

"You know how Riley is. He appreciates a call."

"You don't care about me no more than your selfish sister does."

I go out to the living room where the phone sits on the end table I picked up at Goodwill last Christmastime. A lot of people don't like to shop at Goodwill, embarrassed about going in there and all. The only thing I don't like is the smell. All those old clothes hanging. Sometimes I wonder if you opened up a grave if it wouldn't smell like Goodwill.

I call Kmart, which is where I work as a manager trainee while I'm finishing off my retail degree at the junior college. My girlfriend Karen works at Kmart too. "Riley?"

"Hey, Tom."

"How're things going in my department?" A couple months ago, Riley, who is the assistant manager over the whole store, put me in charge of the automotive department.

"Good great."

"Good. I was worried." Karen always says she's proud 'cause I worry so much about my job. Karen says it proves I'm responsible. Karen says one of the reasons she loves me so much is 'cause I'm responsible. I guess I'd rather have her love me for my blue eyes or something but of course I don't say anything because Karen can get crabby about strange things sometimes.

"You go and see your old man today, huh?" Riley says.

"Yeah."

"Hell of a way to spend your day off."

"It's not so bad. You get used to it."

"Any word on when he gets out?"

"Be a year or so yet. Being his second time in and all."

"You're a hell of a kid Tom, I ever tell you that before?"

"Yeah you did Riley and I appreciate it." Riley is a year older than me but sometimes he likes to pretend he's my uncle or something. But he means well and, like I told him, I appreciate it. Like when Dad's name was in the paper for the burglary and everything. The people at Kmart all saw it and started treating me funny. But not Riley. He'd walk up and down the aisles with me and even put his arm on my shoulder like we were the best buddies in the whole world or something. In the coffee room this fat woman made a crack about it and Riley got mad and said, "Why don't you shut your fucking mouth, Shirley?" Nobody said anything more about my dad after that. Of course poor Sis had it a lot worse than me at Catholic school. She had it real bad. Some of those kids really got vicious. A lot of nights I'd lay awake thinking of all the things I wanted to do to those kids. I'd do it with my hands, too, wouldn't even use weapons.

"Well say hi to your mom."

"Thanks Riley. I'll be sure to."

"She's a hell of a nice lady." Riley and his girl came over one night when Ma'd had about three beers and was in a really good mood. They got along really well. He had her laughing at his jokes all night. Riley knows a lot of jokes. A lot of them.

"I sure hope we make our goal today."

"You just relax Tom and forget about the store. OK?"

"I'll try."

"Don't try Tom. Do it." He laughs, being my uncle again.
"That's an order."

* * * *

In the kitchen, done with packing her paper bag, Ma says, "I shouldn't have said that."

"Said what?" I say.

"About you being like your sister."

"Aw Ma. I didn't take that seriously."

"We couldn't have afforded to stay in this house if you hadn't been promoted to assistant manager. Not many boys would turn over their whole paychecks to their mas." She doesn't mention her sister who is married to a banker who is what bankers aren't supposed to be, generous. I help but he helps a lot.

She starts crying.

I take her to me, hold her. Ma needs to cry a lot. Like she fills up with tears and will drown if she can't get rid of them. When I hold her I always think of the pictures of her as a young woman, of all the terrible things that have cost her her beauty.

When she's settled down some I say, "I'll go talk to Sis."

But just as I say that I hear the old boards of the house creak and there in the doorway, dressed in a white blouse and a blue skirt and blue hose and the blue flats I bought her for her last birthday, is Sis.

Ma sees her, too, and starts crying all over again. "Oh God hon thanks so much for changing your mind."

Then Ma puts her arms out wide and she goes over to Sis and throws her arms around her and gets her locked inside this big hug.

I can see Sis's blue eyes staring at me over Ma's shoulder.

* * * *

In the soft fog of the April morning I see watercolor brown cows on the curve of the green hills and red barns faint in the rain. I used to want to be a farmer till I took a two-week job summer of junior year where I cleaned out dairy barns and it took me weeks to get the odor of wet hay and cowshit and hot pissy milk from my nostrils and then I didn't want to be a farmer ever again.

"You all right hon?" Ma asks Sis.

But Sis doesn't answer. Just stares out the window at the watercolor brown cows.

"Ungrateful little brat," Ma says under her breath.

If Sis hears this she doesn't let on. She just stares out the window.

"Hon slow down," Ma says to me. "This road's got a lot of curves in it."

And so it does.

Twenty-three curves—I've counted them many times—and you're on top of a hill looking down into a valley where the prison lies.

* * * *

Curious, I once went to the library and read up on the prison. According to the historical society it's the oldest prison still standing in the Midwest, built of limestone dragged by prisoners from a nearby quarry. In 1948 the west wing had a fire that killed eighteen blacks (they were segregated in those days) and in 1957 there was a riot that got a guard castrated with a busted pop bottle and two inmates shot dead in the back by other guards who were never brought to trial.

From the two-lane asphalt road that winds into the prison you see the steep limestone walls and the towers where uniformed guards toting riot guns look down at you as you sweep west to park in the visitors' parking lot.

* * * *

As we walk through the rain to the prison, hurrying as the fat drops splatter on our heads, Ma says, "I forgot. Don't say anything about your cousin Bessie."

"Oh. Right."

"Stuff about cancer always makes your dad depressed. You know it runs in his family a lot."

She glances over her shoulder at Sis shambling along. Sis had not worn a coat. The rain doesn't seem to bother her. She is staring out at something still as if her face was nothing more than a mask which hides her real self. "You hear me?" Ma asks Sis.

If Sis hears she doesn't say anything.

* * * *

"How're you doing this morning Jimmy?" Ma asks the fat guard who lets us into the waiting room.

His stomach wriggles beneath his threadbare uniform shirt like something troubled struggling to be born.

He grunts something none of us can understand. He obviously doesn't believe in being nice to Ma no matter how nice Ma is to him. Would break prison decorum apparently, the sonofabitch. But if you think he is cold to us—and most people in the prison are—you should see how they are to the families of queers or with men who did things to children.

The cold is in my bones already. Except for July and August prison is always cold to me. The bars are cold. The walls are cold. When you go into the bathroom and run the water your fingers tingle. The prisoners are always sneezing and coughing. Ma always brings Dad lots of Contac and Listerine even though I told her about this article that said Listerine isn't anything except a mouthwash.

In the waiting room—which is nothing more than the yellow-painted room with battered old wooden chairs—a turnkey named Stan comes in and leads you right up to the visiting room, the only problem being that separating you from the visiting room is a set of bars. Stan turns the key that raises these bars and then you get inside and he lowers the bars behind you. For a minute or so you're locked in between two walls and two sets of bars. You get a sense of what it's like to be in a cell. The first couple times this happened I got scared. My chest started heaving and I couldn't catch my breath, sort of like the nightmares I have sometimes.

Stan then raises the second set of bars and you're one room away from the visiting room or VR as the prisoners call it. In prison you always lower the first set of bars before you raise the next one. That way nobody escapes.

In this second room, not much bigger than a closet with a stand-up clumsy metal detector near the door leading to the VR, Stan asks Ma and Sis for their purses and me for my wallet. He asks if any of us have got any open packs of cigarettes and if so to hand them over. Prisoners and visitors alike can carry only full packs of cigarettes into the VR. Open packs are easy to hide stuff in.

You pass through the metal detector and straight into the VR room.

The first thing you notice is how all of the furniture is in color-coded sets—loungers and vinyl molded chairs makes up a set—orange green blue or red. Like that. This is so Mona the guard in here can tell you where to sit just by saying a color such as “Blue” which means you go sit in the blue seat. Mona makes Stan look like a really friendly guy. She's fat with hair cut man short and a voice man deep. She wears her holster and gun with real obvious pleasure. One time Ma didn't understand what color she said and Mona's hand dropped to her service revolver like she was going to whip it out or something. Mona doesn't like to repeat herself. Mona is the one the black prisoner knocked unconscious a year ago. The black guy is married to this white girl which right away you can imagine Mona not liking at all so she's looking for any excuse to hassle him so the black guy one time gets down on his hands and knees to play with his little baby and Mona comes over and says you can only play with the kids in the Toy Room (TR) and he says can't you make an exception and Mona sly-like bumps him hard on the shoulder and he just flashes the way prisoners sometimes do and jumps up from the floor and not caring that she's a woman or not just drops her with a right hand and the way the story is told now anyway by prisoners and their families, everybody in VR instead of rushing to help her break out into applause just like it's a movie or something. Standing ovation. The black guy was in the hole for six months but was quoted afterward as saying it was worth it.

Most of the time it's not like that at all. Nothing exciting I mean. Most of the time it's just depressing.

Mostly it's women here to see husbands. They usually bring their kids so there's a lot of noise. Crying laughing chasing around. You can tell if there's trouble with a parole—the guy not getting out when he's supposed to—because that's when the arguments always start, the wife having built her hopes up and then the husband saying there's nothing he can do I'm sorry honey nothing I can do and sometimes the woman will really start crying or arguing. I even saw a woman slap her husband once, the worst being of course when some little kid starts crying and says, "Daddy I want you to come home!" That's usually when the prisoner himself starts crying.

As for touching or fondling, there's none of it. You can kiss your husband for thirty seconds and most guards will hassle you even before your time's up if you try it open mouth or anything. Mona in particular is a real bitch about something like this. Apparently Mona doesn't like the idea of men and women kissing.

Another story you hear a lot up here is how this one prisoner cut a hole in his pocket so he could stand by the Coke machine and have his wife put her hand down his pocket and jack him off while they just appeared to be innocently standing there, though that may be one of those stories the prisoners just like to tell.

The people who really have it worst are those who are in the hole or some other kind of solitary. On the west wall there's this long screen for them. They have to sit behind the

screen the whole time. They can't touch their kids or anything. All they can do is look.

* * * *

I can hear Ma's breath take up sharp when they bring Dad in.

He's still a handsome man—thin, dark curly hair with no gray, and more solid than ever since he works out in the prison weight room all the time. He always walks jaunty as if to say that wearing a gray uniform and living in an interlocking set of cages has not yet broken him. But you can see in his blue eyes that they broke him a long time ago.

"Hiya everybody," he says trying to sound real happy.

Ma throws her arms around him and they hold each other. Sis and I sit down on the two chairs. I look at Sis. She stares at the floor.

Dad comes over then and says, "You two sure look great."

"So do you," I say. "You must be still lifting those weights."

"Bench pressed two-twenty-five this week."

"Man," I say and look at Sis again. I nudge her with my elbow.

She won't look up.

Dad stares at her. You can see how sad he is about her not looking up. Soft he says, "It's all right."

Ma and Dad sit down then and we go through the usual stuff; how things are going at home and at my job and in junior college, and how things are going in prison. When he first got there, they put Dad in with this colored guy—he was Jamaican—but then they found out he had AIDS so they

moved Dad out right away. Now he's with this guy who was in Vietnam and got one side of his face burned. Dad says once you get used to looking at him he's a nice guy with two kids of his own and not queer in any way or into drugs at all. In prison the drugs get pretty bad.

We talk a half hour before Dad looks at Sis again. "So how's my little girl."

She still won't look up.

"Ellen," Ma says, "you talk to your dad and right now."

Sis raises her head. She looks right at Dad but doesn't seem to see him at all. Ellen can do that. It's really spooky.

Dad puts his hand out and touches her.

Sis jerks her hand away. It's the most animated I've seen her in weeks.

"You give your dad a hug and you give him a hug right now," Ma says to Sis.

Sis, still staring at Dad, shakes her head.

"It's all right," Dad says. "It's all right. She just doesn't like to come up here and I don't blame her at all. This isn't a nice place to visit at all." He smiles. "Believe me I wouldn't be here if they didn't make me."

Ma asks, "Any word on your parole?"

"My lawyer says two years away. Maybe three, 'cause it's a second offense and all." Dad sighs and takes Ma's hand. "I know it's hard for you to believe hon—I mean practically every guy in here says the same thing—but I didn't break into that store that night. I really didn't. I was just walking along the river."

"I do believe you hon," Ma says, "and so does Tom and so does Sis. Right kids?"

I nod. Sis has gone back to staring at the floor.

"Cause I served time before for breaking and entering the cops just automatically assumed it was me," Dad says. He shakes his head. The sadness is back in his eyes. "I don't have no idea how my billfold got on the floor of that place." He sounds miserable and now he doesn't look jaunty or young. He looks old and gray.

He looks back at Sis. "You still gettin' straight A's hon?"

She looks up at him. But doesn't nod or anything.

"She sure is," Ma says. "Sister Rosemary says Ellen is the best student she's got. Imagine that."

Dad starts to reach out to Sis again but then takes his hand back.

Over in the red section this couple start arguing. The woman is crying and this little girl maybe six is holding real tight to her dad who looks like he's going to start crying, too. That bitch Mona has put on her mirror sunglasses again so you can't tell what she's thinking but you can see from the angle of her face that she's watching the three of them in the red section. Probably enjoying herself.

"Your lawyer sure it'll be two years?" Ma says.

"Or three."

"I sure do miss you hon," Ma says.

"I sure do miss you too hon."

"Don't know what I'd do without Tom to lean on." She makes a point of not mentioning Sis who she's obviously still mad at because Sis won't speak to Dad.

"He's sure a fine young man," Dad says. "Wish I woulda been that responsible when I was his age. Wouldn't be in here today if I'da been."

Sis gets up and leaves the room. Says nothing. Doesn't even look at anybody exactly. Just leaves. Mona directs her to the ladies room.

"I'm sorry she treats you this way hon," Ma says. "She thinks she's too good to come see her dad in prison."

"It's all right," Dad says looking sad again. He watches Sis leave the visiting room.

"I'm gonna have a good talk with her when we leave here hon," Ma says.

"Oh don't be too hard on her. Tough for a proud girl her age to come up here."

"Not too hard for Tom."

"Tom's different. Tom's mature. Tom's responsible. When Ellen gets Tom's age I'm sure she'll be mature and responsible too."

Half hour goes by before Sis comes back. Almost time to leave. She walks over and sits down.

"You give your dad a hug now," Ma says.

Sis looks at Dad. She stands up then and goes over and puts her arms out. Dad stands up grinning and takes her to him and hugs her tighter than I've ever seen him hug anybody. It's funny because right then and there he starts crying. Just holding Sis so tight. Crying.

"I love you hon," Dad says to her. "I love you hon and I'm sorry for all the mistakes I've made and I'll never make them again I promise you."

Ma starts crying, too.

Sis says nothing.

When Dad lets her go I look at her eyes. They're the same as they were before. She's staring right at him but she doesn't seem to see him somehow.

Mona picks up the microphone that blasts through the speakers hung from the ceiling. She doesn't need a speaker in a room this size but she obviously likes how loud it is and how it hurts your ears.

"Visiting hours are over. You've got fifteen seconds to say goodbye and then inmates have to start filing over to the door."

"I miss you so much hon," Ma says and throws her arms around Dad.

He hugs Ma but over his shoulder he's looking at Sis. She is standing up. She has her head down again.

Dad looks so sad, so sad.

* * * *

"I'd like to know just who the hell you think you are treatin' your own father that way," Ma says on the way back to town.

The rain and the fog are real bad now so I have to concentrate on my driving. On the opposite side of the road cars appear quickly in the fog and then vanish. It's almost unreal.

The wipers are slapping loud and everything smells damp—the rubber of the car and the vinyl seat covers and the ashtray from Ma's menthol cigarettes. Damp.

"You hear me young lady?" Ma says.

Sis is in the backseat again alone. Staring out the window. At the fog I guess.

"Come on Ma, she hugged him," I say.

"Yeah when I practically had to twist her arm to do it." Ma shakes her head. "Her own flesh and blood."

Sometimes I want to get really mad and let it out but I know it would just hurt Ma to remind her what Dad was doing to Ellen those years after he came out of prison the first time. I know for a fact he was doing it because I walked in on them one day little eleven-year-old Ellen was there on the bed underneath my naked dad, staring off as he grunted and moved around inside her, staring off just the way she does now.

Staring off.

Ma knew about it all along of course but she wouldn't do anything about it. Wouldn't admit it probably not even to herself. In psychology, which I took last year at the junior college, that's called denial. I even brought it up a couple times but she just said I had a filthy mind and don't ever say nothing like that again.

Which is why I broke into that store that night and left Dad's billfold behind. Because I knew they'd arrest him and then he couldn't force Ellen into the bed anymore. Not that I blame Dad entirely. Prison makes you crazy no doubt about it and he was in there four years the first time. But even so I love Sis too much.

"Own flesh and blood," Ma says again lighting up one of her menthols and shaking her head.

I look into the rearview mirror at Sis's eyes. "Wish I could make you smile," I say to her. "Wish I could make you smile."
But she just stares out the window.
She hasn't smiled for a long time of course.
Not for a long time.

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