

Wildsmith

Ron Goulart

I

HE STEPPED ON the tiny screws with his bare left foot while running to catch the buzzing phone. “That nitwit,” said Tom Miley. “He’s gone back to dismantling himself.” He clicked on the pixphone. “Hello.”

His ex-wife’s face showed up on the small, rectangular screen. “We’re not married anymore,” she said.

Tom was frowning back at one of the little, fleshcolored screws that lay on the crimson, thermal rug. “I know that, Mary Alice. But it’s nice of you to call up and remind me.”

“What I mean is I wish you wouldn’t answer the phone while naked,” said Mary Alice, tilting her head and squinting slightly. “What’s that, Tom? Do you have an erection? Well, I suppose that’s flattering in a gross sort of way.”

“I’m going to put you on hold for a minute, Mary Alice. I’ve got to call the desk right away.” Tom was a tall, lanky man of thirty-one, bony and with shaggy, sandy hair.

“At least black out your side of the conversation while you’re talking to them,” his ex-wife suggested.

“Though I suppose that faggot might enjoy the sight.”

“The faggot goes off duty at six, Mary Alice. Hold on.” He fingered a toggle and the image of his former wife snapped away. Tom punched the blackout button and then the desk switch.

“Manhattan Towers Apartments,” said the low voice of the plump, old man who appeared on the phone screen.

“This is Tom Miley.” He left the immediate area of the phone and knelt on the rug. He poked at the synthetic fabric and dug out one of the fallen screws. “Have you seen Mr. Wildsmith lately?”

“Oh, good evening, Mr. Miley. How are you?”

“Fine.”

“How’s your ex? She just a minute ago called you. Looking kind of fragile, don’t you think?”

“Wildsmith?” Tom called toward the phone mike. “Have you seen him?”

“Yes, Mr. Miley. Mr. Wildsmith sped off in a taxi, oh, about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Ground taxi or copter?”

“Ground.”

Tom had located four of the little screws. He hefted them on his palm. “Did you happen to notice if he had his . . .” Tom rattled the screws once more, frowning, “. . . his left hand stuck down in his coat pocket?”

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Miley, Mr. Wildsmith didn’t seem to have a left hand at all. He stopped at the desk to ask where he could mail a package at this hour.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I suggested a post office,” said the plump, old night man. “Was Mr. Wildsmith’s hand injured due to some lack of thoughtfulness on the apartment house’s part?”

“No. There’s a rather tragic story behind it all and I’m sure Mr. Wildsmith would prefer that it remain a secret. If he comes back within the next few minutes, let me know. Thanks, bye.” Tom closed his fingers over the flesh-colored screws. “That nitwit must be out mailing his hand to that girl sniper from Rahway, New Jersey.” He clicked his ex-wife back onto the screen. “I’ve got to get going, Mary Alice.”

“You’re still naked,” said the pretty, pale-skinned, young woman. She nodded her head. “And you still have the erection.”

“I haven’t had time to get rid of it,” said Tom. “Listen, Mary Alice, I have to get Wildsmith delivered over to

NBC by 8:30, and he’s not even here.” Tom had left Wildsmith on the aluminum love seat next to the TV wall when he’d gone in to shower.

“How is he behaving these days?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I suppose that was good publicity for his new book, being caught in that motel in Croton-On-Hudson with the wife of the governor of New York .”

“It wasn’t a motel, it was an inn.”

“She’s a little old and about thirty plus pounds overweight,” said the pale-skinned Mary Alice. “At least she came across that way on the 11 o’clock news.”

“Everybody does, Mary Alice. Wildsmith only went there because he was lonely and needed somebody to talk to. She reminded him of his mother.”

“His mother? How can Wildsmith have a mother?”

“Not over the phone, Mary Alice. We’ll discuss it later. I really have to get out and track him down now.”

“He’s probably heading for Croton-On-Hudson for another shack up with Mrs. Rubinoff.”

“You don’t shack up at an inn, Mary Alice. A historical landmark like that especially,” Tom told her. “I’ve got to start looking in post offices.”

“Has he taken to mailing away parts of himself again?”

“Not over the phone, Mary Alice.” Tom nodded yes. “Some nitwit girl pacifist sniper he met at an autographing party yesterday over in New Jersey . He’s quite taken with her.”

His dark-eyed ex-wife said, “There are a couple of things I want to talk about with you. First I wanted to tell you about the dream I had last night. Despite the fact that we have a lot of insoluble differences, I still feel you’re one of the very few people who are any good at understanding what my dreams mean.”

“I have to catch Wildsmith, Mary Alice. He’s supposed to be a guest on the Right Now Show tonight and he can’t talk to Larry Finger with one of his nitwit hands in the mail someplace.”

“Don’t you keep spare parts in the apartment anymore? The way you did when we were married and living together,” said his former wife. “I recall a lot of his clutter even in the area where I was trying to work on my books.”

“Not over the phone, Mary Alice,” cautioned Tom. “Yes, I do. But I have to catch him first.”

“I can tell you my dream while you get dressed.”

“Okay, Mary Alice.” He set the hand screws on the pixphone stand and then ran back to the bathroom unit. He pushed the still running shower off and then jumped into the drying stall. After sixty seconds of hot air he ran for the bedroom.

“The other man,” Mary Alice was saying in the living room, “didn’t have a bicycle.”

Tom dialed an outfit on the wardrobe closet door. “Uh huh,” he called out. “That’s a common dream symbol, Mary Alice, the bicycle.”

“I’m not telling you the dream now. I’m telling you about the two men who’ve been watching my apartment.”

The wardrobe closet whirred, opened and handed him all-season underwear, a fresh slipover shirt and a one-piece evening suit. “What, Mary Alice?”

“Two Brazilians,” said his ex-wife. “One is tall and dark with a floppy, boomerang shape moustache. The other is not your typical Brazilian. He’s a modest-sized man with a rather cherubic face and tautly curled, strawish hair.”

Tom pulled the shirt on and returned to the living room. “How do you know they’re Brazilians?”

“They loitered in the boutique across the street once last week, and the girls who run it heard them exchanging banter in Portuguese,” said Mary Alice. “You haven’t hired private eyes to watch me and keep me under scrutiny have you?”

“No,” he answered. “And if I had, why would I use Portuguese private eyes?”

“I thought maybe they were cheaper,” said the pale girl. “Well, perhaps I ought to check with the police.”

“Two possible Brazilians, huh?”

“One with a bicycle.”

Tom shook his head and returned to the bedroom. He bent to his shoe locker and dialed a pair of shoes. The mechanism whirred and one black and one brown shoe popped out onto the noryl plastic flooring. “Nitwit.” Tom kicked gingerly at the machine with one bare foot. It made a subdued whooping sound and ratcheted. Six black shoes, all for the left foot, dropped out rapid-fire.

Mary Alice said, “I’ve been worried about the war, and now this.”

“Which war?” called Tom.

“The war in Brazil,” she answered. “I really don’t think it’s right for the United States to be giving aid and advisors to the junta. I suppose they’re not a bad junta as juntas go, but they’re treating the populace and the guerrillas very badly. And we’re supporting them.” She paused, coughed once. “Still, I can’t see where my feelings about U. S. involvement with Brazil would cause two Brazilians to come and stare at me at odd hours. With a bicycle.”

Tom unplugged the shoe locker, lifted it, shook it. “No, neither can I, Mary Alice.” All the shoes came falling out. He tossed the heavy box aside and selected two shoes that nearly matched. Hurrying into his suit, he then tugged on his sox and shoes.

“Well, I guess you want to go trailing after Wildsmith,” said his ex-wife, when Tom came back into her line of vision.

“Yes,” Tom replied. “I’ve got to have him at NBC in less than two hours. Then, come next Monday, I’m going to be taking him on a publicity tour of the whole nitwit country.” He reached up carefully and got a plainboxed pair of extra hands from a wall cabinet.

“You know,” said his ex-wife, “you’re looking awfully frail lately. Even fully dressed and without an erection.

You ought to slow down, maybe take some time off from the publicity racket.”

“Publicity profession.” Tom jammed the box into a briefcase and zipped the case up tight. “I’ve told you before, especially during the two and a half years of our nitwit marriage, that public relations, like novel writing, is a perfectly legitimate profession. It’s my vocation.”

“Only priests have got vocations.”

“Well, God bless you then,” he said. “I’ve got to catch Wildsmith.” He turned off the pixphone and sprinted for the apartment door.

II

DROPPING DOWN from his thirteenth floor apartment, Tom asked the elevator, “Did you take Wildsmith down?”

“That rascal,” chuckled the voice grid. “Yes, about a half hour ago, Mr. Miley. Is there any truth in the rumors?”

“What rumors?”

“About him and Mrs. Rubinoff, the governor’s wife.”

“No. That’s just press distortion.”

“I don’t read myself,” said the elevator. “I’m not programmed to. I have a friend, a computer down at NYP #3, who does, and he’s quite a fan of Mr. Wildsmith’s books. He tells me that Mr. Wildsmith’s new paperback, *Confusion On Thy Banners Wait!*, is the dirtiest historical novel ever written. As well as one of the most thoroughly researched.”

“Yes,” said Tom. “They’re going to run off another two million copies in the fax edition. Did Wildsmith indicate where he might be going?”

“To a post office.”

“Which one?”

“He didn’t specify,” said the elevator from its overhead speech box. “I don’t usually like to pry too much into our tenants’ activities. With many I don’t go beyond a cordial hello. I talk so much to you, Mr. Miley, because you strike me as basically personable. Now your wife, before she moved out last year, she was a bit cool. I hope you don’t mind my saying this. In my line of work I meet all kinds, and I think the way a person treats an elevator tells you a lot about his character.”

“Probably so.”

“Here we are.” The doors swished open. “Oops. Six inches off again. There. Step up a little and good luck.”

As Tom jogged across the apartment house lobby the pharmacist in the all night drugstore just off the entrance hailed him. “Mr. Miley. I’ve got it.”

“What?”

The druggist was small, gray toned with a blond hair piece. “The cure for your case of Pollution Throat.”

“Did you see Wildsmith go by here?”

“About a half hour ago. He caught a cab out front He didn’t seem to have any left hand. Is he sick?”

“Nothing but overwork.”

“I imagine so. A best seller every six months. Tell him I really loved the gondola sequence in Consider This Small Dust! a whole lot. I usually don’t go for flagellation, but that was so extremely well done.” He lifted a small electric motor up onto one of his glass counters. “This is for your throat.”

“How?”

“I devised it myself. Built up from a paint sprayer I bid for successfully at an unclaimed sale. Combined with an insect-spraying attachment out of a robot maid. Plus a couple of secret touches. All you have to do is put in a special cough formula of mine and douse your throat with it morning, noon and night.”

“It’s my nose that’s bothering me lately,” said Tom. “And even that hasn’t been too bad the past week.”

“Sure, you’ve picked up Pollution Nose,” said the little, blond druggist. “I’ve got an attachment for that, too.”

“We’ll talk tomorrow about it. I’ve got to catch up with Wildsmith.”

“Ah, the literary life,” sighed the druggist.

The New York City night was warm and prickly. Tom stopped beside the Manhattan Towers doorman. “Do you happen to know where Wildsmith went?”

“Five dollars,” replied the lumpy-uniformed man.

Tom got a bill out of his breast pocket wallet. “So?”

“Usually I’d tell you things free, Mr. Miley.” The doorman’s lower lip bulged under his slowly chewing teeth. He worked a ball of gum from one cheek to the other. “You’re nice and personable. But him. Oy oy.”

“Wildsmith you mean?”

“Himself. Frankly, Mr. Miley, he spoke very unkindly to me, making sarcastic remarks about how my uniform coat doesn’t match my uniform pants. Which is only because I have the pants dry-cleaned every

Friday. Of course, I've read Wildsmith's Hence Vain Deluding Joys! in the Reader's Digest. Being able to see between the lines, I'm not at all surprised to find Wildsmith drinks a lot."

"No, he seldom takes a drink. He does get a little touchy when he's under pressure, though."

"Selling millions of those books a year wouldn't pressure me." The doorman narrowed one eye. "He's gone to a bar up in the East 60's. Place called McAlfey's."

"McAlfey's? Not the post office?"

"There's a post office next door to the bar, as I recall."

"Okay, I'll try there," said Tom.

III

WILDSMITH WAS LOOKING at pictures of Hannibal, Missouri and crying. He had the dozen tri-op photos spread out on the wooden table in his booth at the shadowy back of McAlfey's. His right hand was gone now, too, and when he wanted to point out a particularly sad scene, he tilted forward and tapped the picture with his nose. Wildsmith was tall and broad. He looked handsome, rumped and about forty. His hair was grizzled and curly, and his eyes were a sharp blue. "I should never have left the Mississippi River," he was telling the black girl opposite him. "I was happy in the pilot house."

"Um," said the Negro girl. She was as tall as Wildsmith and very bony. She had on a vinyl suit and a floppy brimmed straw hat. In her long, knobby right hand she held a nylon tip pen. "Where you want to send this mother?" She tapped the hand-sized package sitting next to her bottle of ale.

"Just address it to the public library in Hannibal, Missouri," Wildsmith told her. "They'll know how to enshrine it."

"Why they want to enshrine your right hand?"

"Native son, former Mississippi riverboat pilot makes good."

"Not that kind of pilot." The author sat back and wiped his eyes on the empty wrist of his suit. "Oh, hello, Tom."

Tom nodded, grinned at the black girl. "He's been under a lot of pressure lately."

"Um."

"I wonder if they'd give me my old job back on the steamboat." Wildsmith had a tumbler of rye whiskey with a straw in it near one elbow.

Tom reached down from where he was standing at the edge of the booth and slid the packaged hand away from the Negro girl. "I'll take care of that, miss. Thanks."

"He says it's a relic."

"He's been under a lot of pressure."

“Taking off your hands like that,” said the girl, “you could get in a mess of trouble. I doubt it’s even sanitary. Lots of people in New York City aren’t going to treat your hand like no relic. They’d just up and make off with it. You know?”

“She’s right.” Wildsmith leaned and sipped his drink. “If I hadn’t already promised both my hands, I’d send you one.”

“Where’d you get all the photos?” Tom sat down next to the big author and nudged him over.

The pretty, bony girl said, “He says his grandfather sent them.”

Into Wildsmith’s ear Tom said, “I brought you spare hands. Let’s go back into the John and put them on.”

“No use, no use,” said Wildsmith. “I’ll never write again.”

“Is he really an author?”

“Yes.” Tom grabbed Wildsmith. “That is why he’s under so much pressure. You’ll excuse us. I’ve got to get him over to an interview show.”

“What show?”

“Larry Finger’s Right Now Show”

“That’s a prestigious show.”

“Right, which is why he should have hands on. You have to have both hands on to appear on a show like that. Nice to have met you.” He pulled Wildsmith out of the booth and guided him to the men’s room.

There was no one in the small, plastic-walled room except a tank-shaped towel and change robot. “Welcome to McAlfey’s men’s room,” said the robot. Its head was

ball shaped and featureless, except for a circular voice grid and a monitoring eye.

Tom unzipped his briefcase and grabbed out the new hands. “Let’s go into a stall and put these on,” he told Wildsmith.

Wildsmith put an arm around the robot. “I could end up like this, Tommy.”

“Yes, if you keep mailing your parts to New Jersey.”

“Hannibal, Missouri,” corrected Wildsmith.

The robot asked, “Are you two boys up to some tricks? We try to discourage anything too odd.”

Tom stuck a dollar bill into the robot and got four Nixon quarters back. “No, this is a simple medical emergency. Here, Wildsmith, attach these nitwit hands. I’ve got to have you at NBC in an hour.”

“I’m not in the mood.”

Tom put a quarter into a toilet compartment slot and yanked the door open. He shoved Wildsmith in, caught his right arm and rolled up the sleeve. "I'll stick the right one on for you and then you can do the left."

"Welcome to one of McAlfey's clean water closets," said the toilet.

"Yes, thanks," said Tom. He got Wildsmith's new hand attached to his metal and vinyl arm. He noticed the author's gaze drifting toward the toilet bowl and decided to put both the hands on himself. Finally he said "There."

"Faith and bejabbers." Wildsmith used one of his hands to muss his hair. Then he swung a fist at Tom. "Faith and I'll show you what I learned in the workhouses around Dublin."

"You were never in Dublin, you nitwit," said Tom. "You were never in Hannibal, Missouri. Now shut up and let's get to NBC. We're going to stop and call Dr. Mackinson before we go, too."

"Bejabbers, I won't talk to that bloody papist."

"You're supposed to like papists if you're pretending to be Irish."

The towel and change robot said, "I've seen a lot of strange acts performed in here, but I'm darned if I can figure you two."

Tom pulled Wildsmith out of the bathroom and into a phone alcove. There were three private booths here, the middle one empty. "In!"

"Up the Black & Tans," cried Wildsmith, bouncing on the booth seat.

Tom fished out his credit card and slipped in into the pixphone unit. An operator appeared on the screen and Tom said, "I want to make a scramble call to Berkeley, California."

"What a fair colleen," observed Wildsmith.

Tom said, "Shut up."

Another girl appeared. "Proceed, sir."

"This scramble call is to Dr. Jack Mackinson, Berkeley, California. I'm Tom Miley, New York City."

"Yes, thank you, one moment."

Rainbow patterns whirled on the trap size phone screen.

"Tis like Guy Fawkes Day," said Wildsmith.

A Lincoln-shaped man came on, sitting in a wicker chair. "Good evening, Tom."

Tom pointed both forefingers at Wildsmith. "Talk to him."

"Trouble again?" asked Dr. Mackinson.

“He’s back to mailing his hands to people. He’s pretending to be a drunk. He wanders off. We’re supposed to go on the Right Now Show tonight and plug his new novel, *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!* Talk to him.”

Dr. Mackinson said, “Wildsmith is a sensitive machine, Tom. Much more complex than a television wall or an ERV unit, say, and think how many times some little thing goes wrong with them.”

“M TV wall doesn’t run off and pick up spade chicks when it’s supposed to be interviewed by Larry Finger,” said Tom. “Now so far my boss, Peg-Leg Wister, and I have been able to keep most of this from Swangler & Sons. But if Wildsmith keeps slipping back even the publishers are going to find out and lose faith in their sensitive machine.”

His cheeks narrowing, the doctor said, “You have to build them quirky, Tom. All of Wildsmith’s quirky sensitivity is linked with his creativity. In order to touch the public heart on the scale that Alex Wildsmith has you need a few quirks. That’s where the big boys went wrong, you see. Your IBM and RAND and FAS have all gotten nowhere so far because they refuse to program in the quirks. With what result? I am the only person so far to have built a functional, human shape robot who can write best selling novels.”

“God bless you and keep you, Dr. Mackinson,” sang Wildsmith.

Tom said, “We think Little, Brown’s got one. Possibly two.”

Mackinson tensed. “They can’t. Oh, perhaps in five years, by 1990 or so. Not yet, you see. I’m still too far ahead.”

“Peg-Leg Wister and I hear Little, Brown has got one intense girl novelist android and maybe one gay Southern short story writer,” Tom told the doctor. “And you know that old English lady detective thriller writer who won an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America this May? She died in 1983 and Simon & Schuster didn’t tell anybody. They and her British literary agents simply had her replaced with an android.”

“No, impossible. Especially not the British,” said the Lincolnesque inventor. “Now then, let’s get on with the immediate problem. Wildsmith’s basic identity keeps coming loose, huh?”

“That’s right,” said Tom. “The first thing you have to do, doctor, is convince him he has to do the Right Now Show and not screw around. Then you have to stabilize him enough so he can start a new publicity jaunt next week. Swangler & Sons wants me to take him to thirty—

six cities and towns across America to plug *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!* Our last stop, by the way, will be San Francisco. Then I can bring him over to your lab in Berkeley.”

“Yes, that would be nice. As for now, there’s really nothing to worry about, Tom.” The doctor left his wicker chair and walked off screen. “Most of his idiosyncrasies are built into him,” came Mackinson’s voice. “At times he’ll think himself middle-aged and waning, at others that he’s an incurable drunkard. All done with microelectronics. When I built all those bits of creative talent and best seller instinct into Wildsmith, I also fed in all the wild, impulsive traits of the great men of letters, past and present. When operating properly they all add up to a composite personality and that is Wildsmith.”

“You’re sure he’s not fragmenting for good, having some kind of breakdown?”

A large sound, part musical and part mechanical, came from somewhere off in the doctor's cluttered parlor. "I didn't hear your last remark, Tom. I stumbled and knocked over the Goldman Band."

"Which Goldman Band? I saw them last Sunday in Central Park."

"This is an android version."

"Who the hell's ordered that?"

"No one, yet. I'm building them on spec." The gaunt doctor was back in view, a small, lopsided oscillograph in his hands. "What were you asking?"

"Are you sure Wildsmith isn't breaking down for good?" asked Tom. "We've been using him almost four years now."

"Has it been four years?"

"Yes, I began handling him when I'd been with PegLeg Wister's publicity outfit for a year and just five months before I got married."

"Wildsmith can't go downhill," explained Dr. Mackinson. "Unlike your usual author and your usual servomechanism. He was built to last a good long while. Tell

him to look directly at me and we'll diagnose him and fix him up telemetrically."

Tom caught hold of the android's wide shoulders and aimed him at the screen. "Look at Doctor Mackinson."

"To be sure, to be sure," said Wildsmith, smiling up at his inventor.

IV

THE LOVELY, CHESTNUT-haired girl put her slim legs tight together and locked her hands on her knees. "Bullshit," she said, as Tom Miley came into Monitoring Room 6.

"Okay, so it's a little unexpected, Cindy," said the heavysset NBC junior executive, who was leaning toward her tin butterfly chair. "And Larry is sorry. But the State Department insists we squeeze the bishop of Rio on tonight. You know, because the Brazilian prison farm story broke yesterday. The bishop is going to explain things."

"How's he going to explain blessing the pens?" said the small, slender girl.

"Now, Cindy, the bishop blessed the whole prison farm complex from a helicopter. Just flew over and shook the holy water or whatever it is they use," said the tall, dark, thirty-three-year-old junior executive. "How could he know they had some of the captured guerrillas in pens down there?"

"Well, Magic Sam isn't going to compromise," said the girl. Her long fingers were white from the pressure she was putting on them.

"Hi, Tom," said the NBC man, straightening up and shaking hands. "Do you know Cindy Haye?"

“No,” said Tom. “You just recently joined the Swangler & Sons publicity department, didn’t you, Miss Haye? I’ve heard your name.”

“Yes.” Cindy caught the NBC man by his coat pocket and pulled him back down to a listening position. “Don’t

you read our handouts, Henry? Magic Sam Sewlin is an uncompromising black man. Anyway, how is he going to plug the damn cassette if he can’t say the frigging name of the thing?”

Henry Weiner-Werner straightened again and backed slowly out of the reach of the small, lovely girl. “Cindy is handling the publicity for Magic Sam Sewlin, Tom, as you probably know. He’s got the #3 dramatic TV cassette in America right now.”

“#2,” said Cindy.

“The trouble is,” said the broad Henry, “the trouble is Magic Sam’s cassette is entitled Kiss My Ass, Whitey.”

“I know.” Tom took a tin chair and looked around the cool green monitoring room. There was no one else here except the pretty girl and Henry Weiner-Werner. On all six of the television screens on the far wall Larry Finger was holding up a bottle of pineapple drink.

Henry explained, “The State Department would sort of like the bishop of Rio to appear on the show tonight and explain the way the Brazilian guerrillas are being treated by the junta. You know, from the official Brazilian point of view. So upstairs they thought Magic Sam’s title might be a little too rough for the same show with a man of the cloth.”

“Bullshit,” said Cindy. She handed Tom a yellow memo pad. “Read that.”

Tom looked the pad over and nodded.

“Read it aloud,” suggested the lovely, freckled girl.

“Kiss My Behind, Whitey. Kiss My Fanny, Whitey. Kiss My Rear End, Whitey. Kiss My Backside, Whitey.” Tom nodded once more. “None of these is quite as forceful, no.”

“I won’t let Magic Sam go on and plug something called Kiss My Fanny.” Cindy snatched the memo pad back, tore off the top sheet and crumpled it in one slender hand. “Phooey.”

Henry caught the balled memo after it was flung. “We hate to bounce him off the show completely, Cindy.

Suppose,” he said, “suppose we don’t mention the title at all. He can just, you know, hold up the cassette. Then Larry can do a little business, that cute way of his, about not being able to mention the title. Because, Cindy, we’re going to have the State Department all watching tonight. And the president.”

“I thought he watched every night.”

“Not when he’s at the summer White House in Omaha,” explained Henry. “We’ve been blacked out in that area since last year.”

Cindy bit her lower lip and tapped her fists on her pretty knees. She stopped and smiled over at Tom. "You're a veteran in PR, Miley. What do you think we should do?"

"Compromise," he said.

The girl sat still and silent for a long moment. She stroked one hand down through her long, chestnut hair. She inhaled, sighed, inhaled. "Okay, Henry. I'll go tell Magic Sam not to mention the title out loud. Where is he? In makeup?"

"Yep. Thanks, Cindy."

The lovely girl stood, squinted her left eye at Tom and left the room.

"Pretty girl," remarked Henry. "Too skinny for me. She's sleeping with the spade, with Magic Sam. Seems to me you shouldn't sleep with your clients, hurts your objectivity. How's Wildsmith doing? He looked a little weather-beaten when I saw him in makeup."

Tom turned from watching the door Cindy had used. "He'll be fine."

"Larry likes Wildsmith when he's a little drunk." Henry sat heavily in the now vacant tin butterfly. "But with a lush it's hard to hit the right balance. You have to be drunk enough to be provocative and amusing but not so drunk as to be belligerent and snotty. We have quite a few authors who fall down, too. Sometimes that plays good if they fall down and do it funny. But when we had the poet laureate of Australia on last month, he

broke his nose and his glasses when he fell down and there was a lot of blood. Plus which he stayed down for nearly ten minutes. Larry likes to avoid stuff like that."

"You can always depend on Wildsmith to keep on the tightrope, Hank."

"Yep, he is dependable. Why we keep asking him back."

Tom looked up at the bank of monitors. A heavy man of sixty was sitting on the sofa with Larry Finger now.

Henry glanced up at the screens, too. "Oh, this asshole. Excuse me if I turn up the sound. His agent denies it, but I think he's developing a compulsion."

"Joe Chuck?"

"Yep, I ran into him at a party up in Westchester last week and he kept dropping obscenities into the conversation at odd moments. Some old guys get that way."

"One of our most respected graphic humorists," the lean, blond Larry Finger was saying. "And a center of healthy controversy for nearly thirty years. I don't suppose there's a man or woman or child in America who doesn't know Joe Chuck. A very funny man and creator of one of the nation's all-time favorite newspaper comic strips, Tiny Boob the Hillybilly Midget."

Joe Chuck smiled. "Tiny Boob, Larry, is actually the number one favorite. We have 400 papers in the United States and, since there are only 500 newspapers left in the whole country, that's fart pretty good."

Larry Finger licked his lips. "I suppose a lot of people ask you where you get your ideas, Joe."

"A lot of people hate me right now, Larry."

"Let's not say that, Joe. Let's say that, as always, you're the center of controversy."

"Satirists have a tough row to hoe," said Chuck. He took a flowered paper handkerchief from the pocket of his white jumpsuit. "Of course we never mean any harm in our Tiny Boob strip. You really can't be funny and cruel. Piss."

Larry Finger swung his right arm up onto the sofa

back and slid his hand toward the fat cartoonist. "I hear your current story sequence in the strip is causing some fresh controversy, isn't it, Joe?"

"That's right prick, Larry."

Larry Finger gripped Chuck's shoulder. "I believe the president of Mexico has protested."

"Ouch," said the cartoonist. "The Mexican government doesn't understand satire. Which is what you'd expect from a backward, essentially asshole, agrarian economy. They've dropped Tiny Boob from all the Mexican papers, and in Mexico City they burned me in effigy. Did you get the film clip of the effigy burning, Larry? It doesn't look much like me. Making an effigy isn't as easy as you might horsecock think."

"We'll be back with America's favorite graphic satirist in just three short minutes," said Larry Finger.

Henry reached over and turned the sound down low. "Oh, boy. And we're going out live tonight. It's hard to catch those random obscenities in time to bleep them, too, Tom. We'll have to put Wildsmith on right away and get Chuck off the sofa and over into one of the morris chairs. Excuse me, I'll be back."

When Henry opened the door and hurried into the corridor, a small, curly-haired, blond man jumped back and then walked quickly away. Tom thought of the man his ex-wife had mentioned. He got up and headed for the door. Cindy Haye came back and into the room.

"Hello," she said to Tom.

Tom frowned out at the now empty corridor, let the door close and walked back to the tin chairs with the pretty freckled girl. "Did you convince Magic Sam?"

Sitting down, Cindy folded her hands in her lap. "Yes, yes."

"Wildsmith, one of our clients, writes for Swangler & Sons," Tom said, taking the chair next to her. "Book division, of course."

"Books are finished, on the way out." She turned suddenly and caught his hand. She held it hard and said,

"What in the hell am I doing anyway. Sometimes I think I'll just . . ."

"Just what?"

“Nothing,” she replied finally. She let go his hand and then smiled. “Nothing.” I’m okay. How are you?”

Up on all six monitors Wildsmith appeared. He had come on jiggling, and he was snapping his fingers now and grinning and refusing Larry Finger’s invitation to join him on the sofa.

“Me?” said. “I’m in as good shape as you are I guess, Cindy.” He reached across her bare knees and turned the sound up. Her skin seemed extremely warm. “You have a fever?”

“My temperature always goes up a couple of notches when I’m angry.” She nodded at what the various television cameras were picking up. “That’s your client, huh?”

“Yes, Alex Wildsmith himself.”

“You’re in one of your lively moods tonight, Wildsmith,” Larry Finger observed, patting the empty cushion next to him.

Wildsmith continued his jig, in a narrowing circle. “Bejabbers, that I am, to be sure, Larry.”

“And feeling Irish,” said Larry Finger. “I bet you’ve been recently inspired by some good Irish whiskey.”

The studio audience laughed and Wildsmith abruptly sat down. “Now what might this be, faith?” He reached beneath his buttocks and withdrew a copy of his new novel. “I thought for a moment it was a copy of the good book.”

From off camera Joe Chuck said, “You never let me explain why the Mexicans hate me, Larry. Manure.”

Wildsmith gave himself a head rub with his right fist and his hair grew more entangled. “Tis unkind to midgets you’ve been of late, Joe.”

Wildsmith moved closer to the host. “Now, Joey, come back and sit yourself down and we’ll talk of the little people.”

“I won’t sit down next to a man who writes trash.”

“Wildsmith is the author of this new runaway best seller,” put in Larry Finger. He held up the fat, hard cover book. “It’s called *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!* I haven’t had a chance to read this yet, Alex, but I’m going to take it home tonight and start in on it. Tell us what it’s about?”

“Screwing,” said Wildsmith.

“Jesus, him, too?” asked Henry Weiner-Werner, as he came back into the room.

“He’s anxious,” said Tom. “Wildsmith is a pretty sensitive guy, Hank. He can sense there’s something wrong in the Joe Chuck situation.”

“Greaseballs,” said Joe Chuck, who now joined Wildsmith and Larry Finger on the sofa. “That’s why the Mexicans got mad.”

“If I were a midget, I’d sock you one, faith,” Wildsmith told the fat cartoonist.

Larry Finger held the novel up higher. "When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears! by Alex Wildsmith. Published by Swangler & Sons at \$7.95."

"Greaseballs, you see," resumed Chuck, "are amusing little creatures who are tickling the public funny bone at the moment."

"You aren't tickling many midget funny bones," said Wildsmith.

"These amusing greaseballs come from a distant planet and they landed right in Tiny Boob's hillbilly home town of Hogwallow. They resemble wax basketballs and have amusing little legs and wear sombreros. They've come to our poor, plundered portion of this planet because they've heard you can get a handout quicker here than anyplace else in the universe. If there's one prick thing these greaseballs hate, it is working for a living. So naturally . . ."

"Bejabbers, Joey, watch your mouth."

Larry Finger said, "I guess people ask you, Alex,

where you get your ideas." He rested the thick book on his thin lap.

"No, Larry, no one has ever asked me that," replied Wildsmith. "A good lot of folks, though, are curious as to whether my books are autobiographical." Wildsmith made an expansive gesture and a spec of something flesh colored went sailing off camera.

"A screw," said Tom aloud.

"You're starting to talk like the guests," said Cindy.

Tom blinked, then grinned at her. He returned to watching Wildsmith, particularly his right hand. He probably hadn't gotten it put on just right back in McAlfey's rest room. Wildsmith waved again and a second tiny screw left his wrist and arced away. This one pinged Joe Chuck on the ear and he swatted at it. "Six screws," muttered Tom. "Or is it only five?"

Cindy touched his arm. "You okay?"

"Yes," he replied, trying to remember how many screws held the hand on.

A pixphone on a stand near Henry buzzed. The junior executive picked up the talk unit and the image of the vice president of the United States came on the saucer size phone screen. "Where's the bishop?" he asked.

"We're saving him for the final hour of the show, sir."

"The president is getting sleepy. We're at a motel in Council Bluffs, Iowa in order to catch your broadcast. He always gets sleepy early when's away from the summer White House." There was a loud hammering going on somewhere behind the vice president.

"Yep, I know. Are you have some trouble there, sir?"

"The pounding, you mean? No, that's the Secret Service erecting a bulletproof dome over the motel.

You never can tell these days. Better safe than sorry. Can you have the bishop come on pretty soon?"

"Yes, sir. Right after the next commercial break."

"Fine. I'll tell the president and try to keep him awake until then."

"Yes, sir. Good night." Henry hung up and ran for

the door. "We'll have to yank Wildsmith and that asshole Chuck off and stall Magic Sam. Forgive me everybody."

Tom let himself relax some. Wildsmith's hand should hold in place until the next batch of commercials. If he didn't punch anybody. Tom slouched in his tin chair. "Could I buy you a drink after the broadcast, Cindy?"

The lovely, freckled girl smiled. "No, but thanks. Magic Sam and I have got to head out to Connecticut to a cocktail party tonight."

"Whereabouts in Connecticut?"

"Supposed to be near Westport. Little town called Brimstone."

"Sure, that's the Swangler & Sons cocktail party, for their new Brazilian novelist."

"Oh, of course. Then it must be your boss's house we're supposed to go to. You'll be there then?"

Tom said, "Yes, the Brazilian novelist is another one of our clients at the Peg-Leg Wister publicity agency. He's somebody they figure needs more than you inside PR people can do. It's taken Peg-Leg three years to get them to think that way at Swangler & Sons. Yes, I'll have to be there eventually. So I can have my drink with you then."

"Well, yes. Except I'll be with Magic Sam and you won't be able to get safely too close." She touched his arm again. "In case you do talk to us, don't mention my getting upset in here tonight. Okay? I'll do you a favor in return sometime."

"Sure."

On the six screens the bishop of Rio was blessing Larry Finger and the sofa.

V

PEG-LEG WISTER rolled up the left leg of his pants and flat handed his aluminum knee. A compartment in the bright knee popped open, and the public relations chief pulled out a folded sheet of fax paper. "This is the revised final version of your itinerary, Tommy." He handed it to Tom and let his pants leg fall.

"You forgot to close your knee," said Tom, taking the publicity tour city list in his left hand. His right hand was holding on to Wildsmith.

Wister, a small, gray man, whacked at his false leg with a small fist. "I worked this version of the list out with old Swangler, Jr. So it should be final, set for good."

“The misty lights across the Sound,” remarked Wildsmith, tugging, “look like lonely stars, brushed with moon dust.”

There were already about thirty people at Wister’s cocktail party, mingling and drinking in the low, shadowy room. “How does Swangler feel?” Tom asked his boss.

“He has asthma, but outside of that he’s okay.”

“I mean about Wildsmith.” Tom lowered his voice. “You saw him tonight on Right Now.”

“I’ve already called Larry about screwing us out of our time.”

“Like phantom traffic lights that never change in our favor,” continued Wildsmith, looking sadly at the glass wall of the big room. Below stretched the Connecticut shore and the dark Long Island Sound. Mist was commencing to roll gently down, blurring the night.

“He going blooey,” Tom told Wister. “Tonight he thought he was Mark Twain and picked up some exotic spade girl, and he was gettin her to mail his hands to Missouri when I found him.”

Wister shook his little, ray head. “Mark Twain wouldn’t make a play for a colored girl. He was a bigot. Magic Sam brings that out in Kiss My Ass, Whitey.”

“Okay, so Wildsmith thought he was Harriet Beecher Stowe,” said Tom. “The point is he’s mailing his parts off again, and if the nitwit bishop of Rio hadn’t been dragged on when he was, Wildsmith’s hand would have fallen off right in the middle of Right Now.”

Wister bent and scratched at his false leg. “I was on the phone with Dr. Mackinson, Tommy. He assures me that Wildsmith is in first-class shape. He’ll hold up fine and do his usual great job on this new junket.”

“Which of us,” said Wildsmith, “truly knows his fate?”

“Shut up,” said Wister. “You’re fine. Go pretend to have a drink for yourself. Let him loose, Tommy.”

“I expect you to still have both hands at the end of this party.” Tom slowly relaxed his grip on the android novelist.

“Now for a draught of forgetfulness,” said Wildsmith, as he loped away after a robot houseboy.

Tom looked around the room. There was no sign of Cindy Haye or Magic Sam yet. “I met Cindy Haye tonight,” he told his boss.

“That skinny nymphomaniac?”

“What?”

Wister scratched his real ankle with the heel of his aluminum foot. “I understand she’s logging up a lot of sack time with Magic Sam.”

“Is that the new clinical definition of nymphomania? Sleeping with him?”

“These blacks are horny devils,” said Wister. “According to Kiss My Ass, Whitey, that’s one racial myth which is abundantly true.”

Tom said, “I assume Swangler & Sons doesn’t let its own internal publicity staff in on the Wildsmith secret?”

“No,” replied Wister. “Only you and I know. Plus old Swangler, Jr. and his three sons and their wives and Bockman, the certified public accountant, and your former wife. How is Mary Alice?”

“The same. How come Bockman knows?”

“He became curious over all the spare electronics parts the company keeps buying.”

“Pretty soon everybody is going to know.” Tom still held the itinerary list in his hand. Tapping it, he said, “Somewhere in one of these thirty-six cities Wildsmith is going to go permanently blooey.”

“Don’t be pessimistic, Tommy. Anyhow, it’s only twenty-four cities now. So you have a lot less chance of his malfunctioning.”

A plump hand rubbed at Tom’s stomach. “What a lovely fiat stomach you have, Thomas.”

Tom jumped back. “Oh, hello, Mercedes.”

Wister grunted and wandered away as the large, plump Mercedes McLew stepped in front of Tom. “You have a convex navel, too. They thrill and excite me much more than concave navels.”

“How are things at Swangler & Sons, Mercedes?”

“Your friend, Wildsmith, on the other hand, seems to have hardly any navel at all, said the plump, forty-three-year-old lady editor. “That should repulse me and yet it, too, thrills and excites me. I’d like to take that one to bed.”

“Which one?”

“Wildsmith.”

Tom said, “No, you wouldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll be honest with you, Mercedes. He’s a little quirky. We’ve kept this quiet, but he’s given to strange sexual practices.”

“Describe a few of them.”

“I don’t think you’d want to hear this sort of thing, Mercedes. It’s Wildsmith’s secret shame really.”

“Come on, Thomas, tell me about at least one of his strange sexual habits.”

“No, I can’t. Let me caution you, friend to friend, that it’s best to stay away from Wildsmith.”

“Does he tie his women up with chains?”

“No, not chains.”

“Solk ropes?”

Tom said, “How are things in the children’s book division these days, Mercedes?”

“Can’t complain,” replied the plump editor, tugging at her ear. “Let’s see, what else could he use. Some kind of wire. How about electrician’s tape?”

“He doesn’t actually tie them up at all,” said Tom. “I noticed in Publishers’ Weekly the entire Bunny Twins series has been sold in Finland.”

“Yes, for ten grand,” said Mercedes McLew. “Does he go in for unnatural acts then?”

“They all seem perfectly natural to him,” said Tom.

“This conversation has strangely thrilled and excited me, Thomas,” said the lady editor. “By the way, tell your wife to call me.”

“Ex-wife.”

“Yes, I forgot. Mary Alice is still writing children’s books, isn’t she?”

“Far as I know. She just finished one about the cement industry.”

Mercedes nodded and sighed. “Nobody can write on industry and technology for the 4-8-year-old market the way Mary Alice does. You’ve got a very gifted wife, Thomas.”

“Ex-wife.”

“Yes, I forgot. Why’d you two break up anyway?”

“She kept wanting me to tie her up with electrician’s tape.” Tom moved out of the plump editor’s grip. He worked his way through the growing crowd. Cindy was still not here. A copper-plated robot placed a greencolored drink in his hand and spun him around once. Tom was against the glass wall now, overlooking the

dark, foggy coastline. Some one caught his free hand and gave him an odd handshake. Tom looked away from the Sound and into the expectant face of a chubby, blond man of about his age. “Fat Jim Hannahan,” said Tom, recognizing the cherubic face.

“Hello, Tom. You remembered the handshake, eh?”

“What handshake?”

“That was our old Phi Sigma Kappa secret shake I just gave you.”

“It was?”

“We swore we’d never forget it.”

“I forgot it.”

“You’re in publicity now and married, eh?”

“In publicity and divorced. You?”

Fat Jim said, “I know a few more things about you, Tom. I know you’re honest and relatively loyal to the United States.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have access to considerable information sources,” explained Tom’s chubby ex-college friend. “Listen, I’m with the government now in a secret intelligence outfit.”

“Oh, so?”

“We’re known as the NSO.”

“NSO?”

“As I say, it’s pretty secret. There’s no wonder you’re not really familiar with our initials. NSO stands for National Security Organization. We’re one of the outfits that grew up after the CIA scandals of 1980.”

Tom said, “Are you here watching someone?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’m looking after Vespas.”

“Joaquim Vespas, the Brazilian novelist,” said Tom. “He’s contracted with the publisher I do PR for.”

“I know,” said Fat Jim. “In fact, he’s over talking to your client right now.”

Near a silent automatic piano Wildsmith was standing with his hand on the shoulder of a wide, dark-haired

man with a small, spiky moustache. “Why Vespas?” asked Tom.

“Joaquim Vespas is very much in favor of the ruling junta in Brazil, and he also fervently supports the United States’ participation in the counter-guerrilla efforts down there,” explained the chubby NSO agent. “Naturally there are pro-guerrilla groups in America who might like to do Vespas harm. Matter of fact, there’s a group called Pro-Brasil that’s made threats against him. You spell that B-r-a-s-i-l, the way it’s done in South America.”

Tom said, “Vespas is about to go on a publicity tour to promote his new book, isn’t he?”

“Fogo.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Title of the book,” said Fat Jim. Togo means fire. We understand the book has sold 750,000 copies in Brazil. It would have sold even more if the guerrillas hadn’t blown up a whole trainload of books.”

“Maybe we’ll cross paths,” said Tom. “Wildsmith and I will be hitting a couple of dozen cities ourselves, starting next week.”

“I thought it was thirty-six cities.”

Tom frowned. “Swangler & Sons just gave us a revised itinerary.”

Fat Jim held out his hand. “Could I copy that, names of the cities and your hotels. It’ll save me the trouble of having to go through espionage channels.”

Tom hesitated then produced the fax sheet. “Why are you interested in my route?”

“Not yours, Wildsmith’s,” said the NSO agent. “We’re keeping track of all Swangler & Sons’ touring authors.” He paused to concentrate on the list of cities. “There, got it memorized.” He returned it, then tilted his head at the doorway. “I’ve got a file on that guy, too.”

A thin, black man was coming into the room. He was thirty and wore a one-piece yellow suit and a band of olive-tinted glass over his eyes. His hair and circular beard were close-cut. His features were all pushed

slightly toward the left side of his face. When he walked, his narrow shoulders continually hunched. “Here I am, all you racist mother fuckers,” announced Magic Sam in his thin, nasal voice. He knifed through the cocktail party and put a hand on the arm of a houseboy robot. “Magic Sam can see into all your skulls. I can see your secretmost thoughts hiding in the caverns of your racist minds, lurking in there like black, furry spiders.” He grabbed a bottle of Mexican beer from the robot’s serving tray. “You’d like to see Magic Sam doing this poor robot’s job.”

Tom was not looking at him with an concentration. Cindy was still in the doorway, slim and pretty in a short, dark dress. Her mouth was slightly open and one hand rested above her breasts. The fingers were pale from the pressure she was exerting against herself.

Magic Sam noticed Tom. “Hey,” he called, “that is my girl. Magic Sam can bore into your head, too, brother. I know what you’re are thinking, and I suggest you don’t ever do it or Magic Sam will descend on you.”

Vespas, the Brazilian novelist, shook his head and mumbled, “Preto,” to Wildsmith. “I love your country, Alex, but I do think our junta manages certain issues much better.” He tapped two broad fingers against the android’s chest. “More bem, more better. Entende me?”

“Oh, sim,” replied Wildsmith. “Keep them in pens.”

“I knew you wrote crap,” observed Magic Sam. “I see you talk it also.”

Wildsmith turned toward the black celebrity. “Which of us are you insulting?”

“Both of you, brothers. Magic Sam sees into your innermost hearts and hears the little code messages you are sending out. Your hearts are full of spiders, little, squiggly racist spiders.”

Excusing himself from his agent friend, Tom eased through the gathering and halted in front of Cindy. He reached out and got hold of one warm hand and pulled the girl into the room. “Good evening. How are you?”

Cindy smiled faintly, kicked out backward and closed the door behind her. “Splendid and joyful, as always. Yourself?”

“The same.”

Slowly she took her hand away from his. “I bet my client can lick your client.”

Tom turned and saw Wildsmith swinging at Magic Sam. “Oops,” he said.

Peg-Leg Wister came shoving into the Vespas-Wildsmith-Magic Sam triangle and put his small body between the black artist and the android novelist. “I want no fighting in the vicinity of the guest of honor.”

“Get out of my way, you racist mother jumper,” said Magic Sam.

Wildsmith made a jab around one side of Wister. “That’s no way to address a man who lost a leg in the service of his country.”

“Okay, get out of my way you one-legged, racist mother jumper.”

Vespas knuckled his bristly moustache and beckoned Fat Jim. “Venha ca,” he said loudly.

The plump, NSO agent started toward the angry grouping. Memento.”

Tom was approaching the squabble from his own angle. “Hey, Wildsmith.”

Magic Sam and the android were pivoting around the one-legged publicity chief. Wildsmith swung another blow past Wister and connected with Magic Sam’s chin. The black man’s strip of glass left his head and spiraled toward the glass wall of the room.

“Magic Sam will bring off a tremendous vengeance in less than one minute,” he shouted, bending low. He ran toward the view wall and grabbed up his glasses.

Wildsmith dived after him, and the two tangled and then stumbled out through an open panel door in the glass wall. They went thrashing down the foggy hillside toward the beach.

Tom stopped to pick up his boss, who’d been flung

down by the charging Wildsmith. “If this isn’t blooey, what is?”

“He’s only being high-spirited,” answered Wister when he’d caught his breath. “But you’d best go bring him back. They’re both Swangler & Son properties, and we can’t afford to have either one get bunged up.”

Fat Jim was at the doorway leading to the beach. The fog hung thick now and the Sound was not showing at all. “I’ll help you break this up,” he said as Tom approached. He patted Tom on the back and stood aside to let him out first.

“Don’t manhandle him,” cried Mercedes McLew. “Haven’t we had enough violence for one evening?”

“Eh?” asked Fat Jim.

The plump lady editor gave the chubby government agent a terrific karate chop against the side of the neck. “Everyone had better calm down.”

Fat Jim fell down and slumped in the doorway.

Out in the thick fog Tom stopped, looking back toward the house. “Mercedes, he was going to help me.”

“Excuse me then,” said Mercedes. “The sight of men pummeling each other strangely excites me and prompts me to violence, Thomas.”

“That’s Fat Jim Hannahan. He’s an old college friend of mine.”

“Fat Jim Hannahan? Does he write under his own name?”

“He’s not a writer, not in publishing at all.”

“Well, I’ll drag him in and wake him up anyway.” She bent, grunting, and jerked the unconscious secret agent back into the party room.

Tom cut downhill carefully, listening. The fog wound around him, and in a short while he could see neither the house nor the beach. “Hey, Wildsmith,” he called. Eventually he felt sand beneath his feet and heard the cold sea. “Wildsmith!”

There was no answer, no sound of anyone.

VI

A PEBBLE SNAPPED against his right temple, then a larger one skimmed the bridge of his nose. Wispy fog was all around, and it took Tom several seconds to notice a pair of bare legs uphill from him. “Cindy?” he called, recognizing the legs.

The freckled, auburn-haired girl was sitting on a bow of driftwood, her knees tight together and her shoes swinging from one hand. “Yes, hello.”

“Have you seen Wildsmith?”

“No. Have you seen Magic Sam?”

“Nope.” He squatted on the pebbled sand, near the girl.

“Listen,” said Cindy. She dropped a handful of small stones and then caught Tom’s hand.

“Still feverish. You mad again?”

She shrugged. “I usually am, about something. Listen, Tom, about a quarter mile or so up the beach

there's a motor inn with a bar. Let's go there for a while. I'm tired of looking for lost clients."

Tom watched her as she stood up. "Okay. Maybe we'll encounter them en route."

Cindy let go his hand. "Screw them." She took long, quick steps, striding through the night mist. "I hear you're married to a girl who writes books about cement."

"I was married to her," he said. "We're divorced."

"Did she write books about cement while you were married?"

"No. About tractors, monorails, soy beans and garbage disposal. Mary Alice's speciality is books on industrial

and technological subjects for the prejuvenile market."

"Was she good in bed?"

"Pretty good."

Cindy took hold of his hand again. "I suppose you've been told I'm sleeping with Magic Sam."

"Rumors have reached me."

"Well, I am." She looked straight ahead at the prickly mist. "How long have you been in publicity?"

"Seven years, one place and another."

"Doing PR inside Swangler & Sons isn't as prestigious as doing it outside. Inside or outside, though, it's mostly crap."

"It's a profession."

"Something can be a profession and still be crap," said the pretty girl. "What I'd like to do is . . ."

"Is what?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I don't seem to be able to fill in the blanks just yet." She let go of him and hugged herself for a moment. Her shoes clicked together and one fell to the cold sand.

Tom retrieved it. "Our first stop is going to be Philadelphia, on the publicity tour. Will you hit there?"

"No," replied Cindy. "We start in Pittsburgh and then go to Detroit. Magic Sam is speaking at a Free Angola rally in Pittsburgh, in addition to plugging the cassette."

"We're due in Detroit next Friday."

"Perhaps we'll meet then. I'll save some pebbles to attract your attention with." From up to their right came harpsichord music. Cindy took his hand and pointed. "We cut up through here."

He followed her up a gentle, scrub-filled incline. Through the fog he saw a giant George Washington

winking at him. "It's Washington."

"Yes, he's on top of the motor inn," said Cindy. "There's a speaker in his stomach for the eighteenth century music to come out."

They climbed to the parking and landing area. Across

an acre of gritty field stood the motor inn, a large low complex that looked like a dozen old English inns shoved together. Atop the central inn was an illuminated automaton of George Washington, fifteen feet high and slowly spinning in the fog. "The Antique Shop Motel," said Tom, reading the sign at George Washington's feet.

"Their bar is quiet." Cindy led him to a separate inn building to the right of the motor inn. It stood in a slim grove of maples, its roof thick with a scatter of dry leaves.

Tom reached around her and opened the oaken door of the inn barroom. "Oops," he said.

Kneeling on the hardwood floor immediately inside the door was a ninety-five-year-old man. He wore a striped apron over a vaguely colonial costume. "Don't take another step," he said in a thin, dry voice.

"Are you ill?" asked Cindy.

"No, I'm enraged," replied the kneeling man. He moistened the tip of his forefinger and poked at the bright brown flooring. "Come in cautiously to the left of my left buttock and walk carefully along the wall. Take a table on the left side of the room. Near the fireplace would be best."

There didn't appear to be any other customers in the room. "Are you open for business?" asked Tom, still stopped on the threshold.

"Yes, of course. It's a little late for much of a crowd," answered the old man. "All to the good. This way nobody is likely to trample on it."

Cindy nudged Tom and they edged into the warm, dimly lit room. "What have you lost?" she asked.

The old man bent lower and ran one long, brittle finger over a crack in the hardwood. "My entire library," he replied. "Only it's not exactly lost. My wife threw it at me during one of her fits. She's my third wife and barely thirty two years old. Given to late night fits."

Tom held a chair for Cindy and then sat himself

across from her at their round wood table. The floor looked empty. "What sort of library?"

"Smut." The old man grunted and stretched upright. "Oh, smile if you will. When you're in your nineties, however, a three thousand volume library of smut and pornography can be a consolation. In my seventies I reread Dickens and Thackeray. You can't go on doing that forever. So now it's 101 Odd Swedish Love Practices and The Coffee Table Book of Oral-Genital Variations and the like. My wife characterizes me as a dirty old coot, and I suppose there is some truth in that."

"Three thousand volumes?" Cindy leaned and tugged on a shoe.

"It's all in microbook form," explained the old innkeeper. "The entire thing isn't any bigger than a gnat's

ass. My young wife had to use tweezers to fling it at me. She didn't do this to inflict physical injury, you understand. To do me that kind of harm she tosses one of the many priceless antiques that give the motel its name. No, tonight her fit moved her to do an aesthetic injury to me, and she heaved my smut collection. I was in the mood to flick through the pages of 99 Unretouched Scandinavian Virgins Deflowered In Full Color and then toddle off to my antique spool bed. No such luck." He grunted again and came up to a nearly standing position. He backed, in a flat-footed shuffle, away from the spot where he'd been searching for his microbooks. "I might as well serve you people first."

When he arrived at their table, Cindy said, "I think it's on your chin. Hold still." She picked up her napkin and lifted a large, black speck off his face. "There you are."

The old innkeeper squinted at the speck. "By golly, miss, that's it. You've brightened my evening. Have a drink on the house, you and your affable companion."

They ordered and the old man moved off, carrying the microbook collection carefully in his palm.

Cindy said, "Do me a favor, Tom."

"Sure, what?"

"Forget about Wildsmith tonight," she said, both hands locked together and pressing down on the tabletop. "I'll forget about Magic Sam. Stay here tonight with me."

Tom said, "To spite Magic Sam?"

"No." Her face paled and the tan freckles stood out. "Because I like you, and I'd like to sleep with you tonight. That's all. That's the reason."

"That's sufficient," said Tom.

VII

CINDY WAS SITTING naked in a cane-backed rocker, early morning sunlight shining on her through a slit in the window shutters. "I doubt this is an authentic 1870 cane-backed rocker," she said, rocking. She shifted her position slightly, and her narrow buttocks slapped the maple gently. "It doesn't feel authentic."

From the edge of the spool bed Tom kept pulling in air through his open mouth until he was completely awake. He gave a few lip smacks, rubbed his eyes. "Um?"

"You're a slow waker," said Cindy. "Some men snap up wide awake at once, and others do it slowly, like a flowering unfolding."

"Hey."

"What?"

"You don't have to impress me," he told her. "I like you. You can spare the statistics."

The slim girl put her bare knees together and brought them up under her chin. She hugged her ankles and kept on rocking. "Yes, and I like you. I can relax with you. I guess I'm trying too hard to be honest."

Tom stood up and stretched, scratched his head, gave a final yawn. “Why don’t we keep seeing each other, Cindy?”

She put her tongue against her upper lip and was silent, rocking slower. “Yes, we’re certain to keep running into each other since I work in the publicity department of Swangler & Sons and you do PR for one of their most important authors. We compared our itineraries last

night. Remember? We should cross paths in ten cities over the next month. So we’ll see each other.”

“Eleven cities,” corrected Tom. “You’re going to stay with Magic Sam?”

The girl shook her head once, sharply. “Look, I can like you, and feel fine when I’m with you, Tom, and love making love with you. But that doesn’t mean I’m through with Magic Sam.”

Tom didn’t say anything. He found his all season underwear resting on top of a Louis XVI center table. He put the underwear on and then his socks.

Cindy observed, “You’re in good shape for a PR man.”

“I swim a lot at the YMCA.”

Cindy said, “You don’t get Sam at his best at these public things. He’s a very gentle, loving man a good part of the time. He’s had a much tougher Me than most of us.”

“Has he? You haven’t told me enough about your life for me to make comparisons too well.”

“I’ll send you a mimeographed bio sometime,” said the girl. “Don’t get very serious about me, don’t yet. Please don’t put too much significance into me. Don’t make me important to you. I don’t want to have to feel like that any more, not now, not yet.”

Tom lifted his one-piece suit off a peg on the scrolled hat rack near the inn room door. “Okay, but I do like you. Have I mentioned that?”

She smiled. “Yes. I appreciate that.” She lowered her knees and then hugged herself with her arms just under her small breasts. “You’re probably better at quitting things than I am. Or sticking with things. You got out of a marriage you didn’t like, and you’ve been able to stay with a job, I guess, you do like. Of course you must make about \$25,000 a year.”

“\$27,500.”

“Which is one good reason for liking your work.”

He looked away from her. “I’ll tell you . . .”

“Yes?”

“Nothing.” He faced the lovely, freckled girl, walked to her. He beckoned her to her feet and held her, kissing her. Finally he said, “Yes, I like you.”

Cindy replied, “Someday you may even love me. And I may love you. We’ll see.” She pulled herself a

little back from him. “You’d better call your boss, Peg-Leg Wister, and determine the whereabouts of our respective clients.”

He let her go, nodding, “Back to our profession.”

The girl began gathering up her clothes. “We’re going to see each other next in Detroit. That’s the first place we coincide.” She smiled at him once again. “The first of eleven places.”

Tom smiled back and crossed to the pixphone.

VIII

THE ANNOUNCER’S EARPHONE buzzed and he stood up and walked to a backstage microphone. “Good morning, America. From downtown Philadelphia, the cradle of liberty, Vetz, the Breakfast Food for Dogs, presents the only nationally broadcast television show for you and your pets. Yes, it’s the Dog Hour, winner of two Emmys and a Peabody. The show guaranteed to enlighten not only you but your doggie, too. The Dog Hour, starring that affable canine fancier, Huey Dewey. Brought to you by Vetz, the dynamic way to start a dog’s day. It’s all yours, Huey.”

The small studio audience applauded as a curtain rose to reveal to them the small, round Huey Dewey seated in an easy chair with a poodle on his lap. Next to him Wildsmith was slouched in a wing chair. Dewey’s white poodle had just made a snap at the android author and missed him, sinking his sharp tiny teeth instead into Wildsmith’s copy of *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!*

Tom, backstage, moved around a crated beagle and watched.

Wildsmith swung his free fist into the poodle’s nose. The dog yelped but held tight to the book. “Let go, you little schmuck,” said Wildsmith, as he socked the little dog again.

“Ha, ha,” said Huey Dewey toward the restless audience. “Hello, folks. As you can see our guest today is the famous and prankish novelist, Alex Wildsmith. He loves to fool around playfully with my pet pek, Scruffy.

All in fun, folks.” He cleared his throat, chuckled. “Tell us about your new book, Alex.”

Wildsmith gave a tremendous tug and help up his novel, with the angry Scruffy still biting into it. “The book is a damn good piece of writing.” The white poodle swung like a furry pendulum from the upheld book. Wildsmith flicked his hand and the dog’s grip was broken, and it went somersaulting, yelping, into the host’s chest.

“Well, we’re glad you were able, Alex, during your very busy whirlwind tour of our city to come over from your nice suite at the famous Warwick Hotel and talk to all the men, women and dogs in our audience.” He clutched Scruffy down into his lap.

Wildsmith was still holding the book aloft. “What size audience do you have, Huey?”

The pale, round host smiled. “The last rating figures indicate we have well over 20,000,000 viewers.”

There was some applause. “How does that break down between people and dogs?”

“Oh, the twenty million is all people, Alex,” said Dewey. “We have about forty million regular dog

viewers, too. Of course it's hard to get an accurate count of the dogs. For instance, lots of folks have written to tell me that when they go out they leave the set on so their doggies can watch us. Suppose a rating service called at a time like that. Obviously our puppy viewers couldn't answer the pixphone."

"I knew a hyena in Mombasa who could answer a phone." Wildsmith let his novel fall to his knee with a smack.

"Well, yes, some pets can be especially trained to do something like that." Dewey rubbed his poodle behind the ears. "Folks who watch the Dog Hour regularly know we stress improving your pet's mind as well as its body. We like to have intellectuals such as yourself call on us, Alex, to keep us thinking. Both our folks and our doggies benefit."

"This hyena taught himself to answer the phone," said Wildsmith, "He was nothing more than a simple run-of-the-mill hyena who'd wandered into the grounds of a hunter friend of mine to eat the remains of a water buffalo who had unexpectedly died in the front yard. The pixphone chanced to ring while he was at his repast and he trotted into the house and answered. Pushed the talk and screen clear buttons with his snout. Laughed into the speaker in a fair approximation of a friendly hello. Scared the shit out of the registered nurse who'd called up to see if my friend was over his bout of intestinal flu."

Dewey tugged at the silver dog whistle clipped in his tunic pocket. "Well, I suppose now and then a wild animal is possessed of a rare ability such as you mention, Alex. Our animal friends are brighter than many people think, as we often remind our viewers."

Tom's hand felt odd, and he looked down to discover it was being licked by the crated beagle. "Nice boy," he whispered, moving closer to the stage.

"Any hyena can answer a phone if he wants to," said Wildsmith. "I've hunted often in Africa, Huey, and I know. I even lived with the hyenas all one fall and part of the winter. It rained a good deal and there wasn't much else to do and we got to know each other very well. Those little bastards are smart, every single one of them. They laugh a lot, too." He swung out with the novel and thwacked Scruffy over the head. "Show me even one dog who can laugh at life."

Several people in the audience began to boo. Tom signaled the android. "Stop screwing around, you nitwit," he mouthed.

But the android failed to look in his direction. "One thing I learned in the bush, Huey," said Wildsmith. "Your average dog is basically stupid, what your animal psychologists call a nitwit. You can talk to a dog day in and day out and he won't learn a damn thing. Even if you stuff him up to the gunwales with Vetz he remains

basically a clunk. Hyenas, on the other hand, have a natural affinity for learning. When I was looking for the headwaters of the Orinoco I encountered packs of the little bastards who had made considerable steps toward what we would call culture. They were monogamous and had developed social dancing."

"The Orinoco is in South America not Africa, isn't it?"

"Proving that hyenas are smart all over." He spun in his chair and faced the audience and the camera. "Throw away your dogs, friends, and get a hyena."

"Nitwit," said Tom aloud.

Dewey placed his poodle on the stage and patted its rear end. “Go wait for poppa in the dressing room, Scruffy,” he said. “Now, Alex, I know you’re teasing, but I think the folks in our audience won’t care for any more jokes along this line.”

“That’s right,” shouted someone in the audience.

“I’ve known several hyenas who could put on a better show than this.”

Dewey reached out to pull Wildsmith back into a calmer position. “Let’s all settle down for a nice chat.”

Wildsmith swung his novel and hit Dewey on his round, pale head. The host popped half up, then slumped back in his chair.

Moans and gasps rose from the audience.

Wildsmith tugged the dog whistle out of the dazed Dewey’s pocket. “Listen, all you dog viewers, if you’re so smart. What tune am I playing?” He put the silver whistle to his mouth and blew into it.

The show announcer tapped Tom on the arm. “We knew he was a lush, but we figured not this early in the morning.”

“He’s sober,” said Tom. “Traveling unsettles him. This is the first stop on our trip and he’s still a little nervous.”

“Looks more like booze than nerves,” observed the announcer. “We’ll get the curtain closed and do a commercial and then cut to some Labrador retriever footage. Get your author off there as soon as the curtain closes.

Wildsmith removed the silent whistle from his lips. “That was ‘Little Brown Jug.’ I bet not one in ten of you dumb dogs recognized the tune. Now here’s something a bit trickier. The ‘Minute Waltz’ by Frederic F. Chopin, which you seldom hear rendered on a dog whistle.” He reinserted the silver instrument.

The curtain fell and Tom ran out to grab the android.

IX

TOM TOOK OVER control of the rented land car and drove it off the turnpike slotway and into the multilevel parking area next to Captain Nutrition’s Food Village. “What kind of mood are you in now?” he asked Wildsmith.

The handsome android said, “I’m my usual shiny self.”

“Don’t hit anyone, man or beast, with the novel while we’re here at this supermarket complex.”

Wildsmith sighed as the car stopped in a space on level 1. “I miss the veld sometimes.”

Tom got out. “You’ve never been near any velds or any hyenas.” The android author swung out of the other side of the land car. Tom continued, “All we have to do is spend a half hour in the book department of this supermarket. You sign autographs in copies of the book and make shiny comments to the people who buy the nitwit thing.”

“I wish,” said Wildsmith, “more good-looking, young broads read my stuff. I really relate better to women under thirty.”

“What about Mrs. Rubinoff?” Tom guided the android onto the convey ramp which would carry them to the proper level of Captain Nutrition’s Food Village.

“She was an exception.” Wildsmith rubbed a hand through his already rumpled hair. “What’s the age of consent in this state, by the way?”

“We’re only going to be in Pennsylvania one more day. You lecture the Milford Writers Commune tomorrow and then we move on,” Tom told him. “All you have to do is

sign autographs and talk literature. In three weeks or so we’ll be in California and you can see Dr. Mackinson. He’ll give you a complete checkup.”

The ramp passed them under a high arch and into a labyrinth of aisles devoted to breakfast. “Tom you have nothing to worry about,” said Wildsmith. “I may not have a conspicuous navel but I am complete in every other way.” He winked once. “Mrs. Rubinoff will testify to that.”

“If she wants to be screwed by a robot, that’s her problem,” said Tom. You keep trying that sort of thing and you’re going to be exposed.”

“Ho ho,” said Wildsmith. He stopped and dialed a package of Reddi-Waffles from a vending shelf. “You really must learn to relax, Tom. You’re the one who is under pressure. A fellow with your potential shouldn’t worry so much about trivia.” The packaged waffles popped out of a vent under the display package. “I didn’t even get a courtesy cup or soycoffee on that dumb dog show.” He pulled a red ring on the waffle pack and a steaming hot waffle, dripping imitation maple syrup, fell into his palm. “My mother used to fix these for all the guests at our boarding house. Only they were big, round waffles, homemade, smelling of wheat fields and October wind.” He folded a syrupy waffle into a thick wad and bit into it with his bright and even vinyl teeth.

“Dat sho make me splendiferously happy,” remarked a vending android at the aisle’s end. “Seein’ dat boy enjoyin’ hisself. My, my.” The robot was built to resemble a nineteenth century slave.

“Who’s the jig?” asked Wildsmith, his mouth full of waffle.

“Yassuh, I bet you gwine like dat waffle even better if you puts Joel Chandler Harris Brand Imitation Southern Sorghum Syrup on topper him. My, my,” said the black robot. “Joel Chandler Harris come in two kinds, red label and blue label. De blue got itseff all fortified with

iron and de minimum daily adult requirements of all de vitamins and minerals.”

Tom pulled Wildsmith out of the vicinity of the robot. “The Book Bin is supposed to be adjacent to the fruit market sector.”

“Book Bin?” Wildsmith licked imitation syrup off his thumb and little finger.

“One of a large chain of book outlets, remember? We always hit at least a dozen of them on our cross-country junkets.”

“I wonder if that jig’s brand of syrup is really any good. This stuff tastes a little like floor wax.”

“You’re probably licking the plastic coating off your fingers.”

Wildsmith halted in the breakfast drink section. “Hold on, Tom. I want some grapefruit juice.”

In a low voice Tom said, “You don’t have to eat or drink at all. That’s built into you for authenticity’s sake, to fool the public.”

“So I’m out in public and I want grapefruit juice,” the android replied. “What’s this? Kal-Good Imitation Grapefruitlike Drink. No, won’t do. Southern Can Grapefruit Punch, artificially flavored. Gud-4-U Simulated Grapefruitlike Breakfast Drink Substitute, with Twice Your Daily Requirement of Vitamin C.” He scowled. “I want genuine grapefruit juice.”

“Wait till California,” suggested Tom. “They even sell real grapefruits there.”

“I don’t intend to wait three weeks to finish my breakfast,” said Wildsmith. “Good morning.”

A small, thin man was walking, smiling, toward them down an aisle of breakfast punch. He had on a gray, onepiece business suit and a scarlet cape. “Welcome to the Philadelphia Captain Nutrition Food Village,” said the man. “I’m Mr. Hermansdorfer, the official Captain Nutrition Philadelphia Publicity Chairman and Greeter. Hence the cape. Good afternoon. Actually it is afternoon already, just a little. You’re nearly an hour late for the

autographing party, Mr. Wildsmith. Couldn’t be helped, I’m sure.”

“I was set upon by dogs,” explained Wildsmith. He shook hands with the cloaked Hermansdorfer.

“We have two dozen very anxious ladies over in the Book Bin, champing at the bit to meet you.” Hermansdorfer took a plyochief from a pocket somewhere within his cape and wiped syrup off his fingers. “And you can consider the waffles on the house, Mr. Wildsmith. Compliments of the more than four hundred Captain Nutrition Food Villages across America.”

“Could you throw in a grapefruit?”

“Get over to the Book Bin,” said Tom. The book selling area of the supermarket was fenced off by a low, white picket fence and furnished with old-fashioned wooden benches, cracker barrels and bentwood rockers. It reminded Tom of the Antique Shop Motel. “I’m sorry we were delayed, Mr. Hermansdorfer.”

“Couldn’t be helped I’m sure,” replied the small man. “Though we did lose about fifteen or more potential book consumers. You’re Don Miles, aren’t you?”

“Tom Miley.”

“Yes. I believe I glimpsed you when Mr. Wildsmith made a prior visit here back in around 1983. I worked in the Sandwich Department at the time, though even then I had a burning urge to get into public relations. I suppose you can understand that.”

“Yes, certainly.”

“I have a burning desire to get my ashes hauled,” said Wildsmith, vaulting the picket fence. “Good afternoon, ladies.”

Tom stopped on the outside of the white pickets and watched the smiling android begin to sign his name in the copies of his novel. The scent dispensers over in the fruit market area began spinning out banana fragrance and Tom glanced over his shoulder at the decorative banana trees. Someone ducked away behind a synthetic tree bole. Tom frowned briefly, then moved toward the

grove of four false banana palms. Hiding behind the tree on the right was the blond man he’d noticed in the corridor at the National Broadcasting Company last week. The man who might be one of Mary Alice’s Brazilian eavesdroppers. “Pardon me,” said Tom, pushing aside a decorative banana stalk. “I’d like to talk with you.”

The blond man was gone. Tom turned just in time to see him running through an orchard of dwarf apple and pear trees. Tom was about to take off after the diminishing blond Brazilian when the caped Hermansdorfer caught his arm.

“I’m sure Mr. Wildsmith means nothing by it, Tom,” began the supermarket publicity man, “but he’s pinching some of the ladies in the fleshy parts of their legs. Could you take him aside and mention that Philadelphia is not New York City?”

The curly-haired, blond man dodged around a giant, styrofoam orange and was lost from sight. “Yes, of course.” Tom went back toward the white picket fence.

X

TOM SAW THE curly-haired Brazilian again in Detroit.

It was out the window of a private grocery market in the fashionable Grosse Pointe area. The market was called The Greengrocers Guild and only members with keys could shop there. The place was small and smelled like an authentic early twentieth century grocery store. There were wooden bins of fresh vegetables, barrels of rice, glass-faced drawers full of macaroni and noodles. Cheeses, salamis and links of sausage hung from the shadowy ceiling.

A tall, blonde girl in tight-fitting, dacron overalls had admitted Tom and Wildsmith. “Good morning, I’m Dayna, your costermonger maiden. You must be Tom Miller.”

“Tom Miley,” replied Tom. “This is Alex Wildsmith. He’s here to autograph copies of *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!*”

The girl blinked, then smiled. “Oh, it’s a book. Yes, you’re expected.”

Wildsmith yawned and rubbed synthetic rheum from his eyes. “That was some bash last night. Ann Arbor is a stimulating town.”

“We were in Ann Arbor two nights ago,” said Tom.

Wildsmith rubbed at his rumpled hair with the same lax motion he’d used on his eyes. “I was a wee bit zonked. I was plastered and woopsie and stoned to the gills. They expect it of me.” He fumbled a bootlegged tobacco cigarette out of a pocket in his tweed slipover.

“Who, Mr. Wildsmith?” asked Dayna, as she escorted them across the small store to a sunlit corner.

“Youth,” answered the android author. “Youth looks to me as a mentor, an arbiter. They expect me to be much emersed in sins of the flesh.” He lit the illicit cigarette and sucked in a great lot of dry smoke.

“Isn’t that funny,” said the tall, lovely Dayna. “I’m a youth and I’ve never heard of your books until today. Not that, now I’ve seen you in person, I don’t think you wouldn’t make a cute mentor. Or arbiter.” She smiled at the android. “Please, don’t think you have to drink yourself to death on my account.”

Six fifty-year-old women in exclusive fiberglass clothes were circling the Greengrocers Guild’s one table book section. A pile of two dozen copies of Wildsmith’s newest novel dominated the table. “Ladies,” announced Wildsmith, blowing smoke, “you must forgive me if I don’t embrace each of you. I have the devil’s own hangover today. Nao estou bem, as my good friend Joaquim Vespas puts it. I was truly wonkered senseless for hours, or it may be days. I wandered ecstatically, so I’m told, around Ann Arbor, or a town closely resembling Ann Arbor, with a beatific smile on my face.”

“He is very cute,” Dayna said to Tom. “Especially for an author of books. Doesn’t mentor and arbiter mean the same thing?”

Tom inhaled sharply. Looking in at the window above the book table was the blond Brazilian with the curly hair. “Hey.”

“Do you know that man?” asked the lovely Dayna. “He made an attempt to get in without a key, a short while before you and Mr. Wildsmith arrived.”

“I’ll be right gack.” Tom spun, ran along by bins of fresh lettuce and squash and shoved out through a fire exit. There was a long, narrow parking area back here, with a copter landing pad bordering. The blond man was still under the window, standing on the black seat of a bicycle. “I still want to talk to you.”

The man looked wide-eyed at Tom, smiled apologetically. “Ate logo,” he said in a soft voice. He jumped to the ground and began running his bike toward a gate.

Tom started after him. “No, wait.”

From off to Tom’s left an electric motor started up, quietly humming.

The blond man leaped up into the bicycle seat and commenced pedaling hard.

Tom was narrowing the distance between them when a gray Rolls Royce land car suddenly appeared at his right side and hit him.

XI

HE’D BEEN TALKING for a while, Tom realized as he came fully awake.

The blond man’s head was about six inches from his, smiling. Next to the curly-haired man stood a second man. He was tall, with a long face and a thin, brown moustache arching over his narrow mouth. He was smiling, too.

The pair of them were murmuring, “Muito bem,” and, “Bom, bom,” to each other.

Tom intended to speak out but coughed instead.

The moustached man reached out and slapped him across the back. “We wish you no further harm, Senhor Miley.”

“This next portion of our questioning will only take another half hour or, at best, a full hour,” the curlyhaired, blond man told him.

Tom attempted to stand and discovered he was strapped into a black and silver, metal chair. He looked at his left arm and noticed the sleeves of his suit and shirt had been slit up to the elbow. There were three red blisters on the inner side of his arm.

“Estou desconsolado,” admitted the moustached man. “I am very sorry, Senhor Miley. We had to administer the shots ourselves because the . . . como se diz?”

“The robot,” supplied his partner. “The robot refused to do so.” He kicked out and something clanked.

Tom tilted forward as far as he could against the synthetic leather straps and saw a white, enameled robot

sprawled on its back, a trickle of machine oil slowly spilling out of its smashed ball head.

“He told us, this stubborn robot, that to give you such shots would violate both the oath of Hippocrates and the basic laws of robotics,” explained the moustached Brazilian.

Tom said, “This is some kind of hospital.”

“Sim,” said the blond man. “We are in the Ford Memorial Nearly Automatic Hospital on East Grand Boulevard in Detroit. We have a contact and so were able to bring you here immediately after your sad but not too serious automobile accident. Fortunately, most of the other mechanisms are more cooperative than this stupid robot.”

Tom blinked, yawned. His arm was sore and his right leg ached in its entire length. The room he found himself in was small and gray. Lumps of black and silver machinery filled the corridors and there was a smell of rubbing alcohol and dust. “This must be part of the old mental health wing. I saw something about the Ford Memorial Hospital on the news yesterday.”

“Sim, this is the wing they could no longer afford to maintain,” said the moustached man. “This annoys the people of the neighborhood and they threaten to demonstrate. Since your country is more democratic than ours they will no doubt be allowed to protest a while before they are shot down.”

“Are you guys,” asked Tom, “really from Brazil?”

“It is we who question you, senhor,” smiled the curlyhaired blond. “We have some few more to ask of you.”

“More questions? I don’t recall. . .”

From the street outside came the sound of a large number of people chanting. “Liberate Ford Memorial! Liberate Ford Memorial!”

A brick came smashing through one of the windows across the room.

“Bom, good,” said the moustached man, crossing to

pick up the brick. “That was a good throw, considering we’re on the second floor.”

Another brick sailed in through the opening made by the first and it cracked against the moustached man’s head while he was still bent. “Cuidadoso,” exhaled his blond partner.

“Hospital care for all the people! Hospital care for all the people!” The shouting and chanting was inside as well as outside the hospital. “More power to the Young Angola Commandos! More power to the Young Angola Commandos! No more unused facilities! No more unused facilities! Liberate the long dormant mental health wing! Liberate the long dormant health wing! Free therapy and a warm breakfast for all! Free therapy and a warm breakfast for all!”

“How ironic,” observed the blond Brazilian. “We are in complete sympathy with the black Angola cause. Yet we didn’t know of their plans to take over this hospital today. So they are to interrupt our work with you, Senhor Miley. We’ll have to postpone our talk until later.” He went to his reviving partner and gripped him under the arms. “Let’s go. Perigo!” Smiling, he hurried the other man out of the room and closed the door.

From nearby people chanted. “A sensible group therapy plan for the neighborhood! A sensible group therapy plan for the neighborhood!”

Alone, Tom shouted, “Help, I’m tied up in a chair. Help, I’m tied up in a chair.”

After a moment his door was cautiously opened and a tall, gaunt black man in a white jumpsuit and a tartan stocking cap squinted in. ““Help, I’m tied up in a chair?”” he said. “That’s not one of our planned slogans, friend. If you’re going to yell, you got to yell with the group.”

“The thing is, I am tied in a chair.”

The Young Angola Commando came a small way inside the room. “I see. From your point of view, therefore, getting yourself out of that particular chair is more

important than, say, hot oatmeal for a hundred little skinny kids?”

Tom said, “At the moment, yes.”

The bony black man leaned against the half-open door. “Some of the Young Angola Commandos might not be able to understand or accept your apparent self-interest. Lucky for you I happen to be in a philosophical brigade and I can comprehend alternate points of view. You want me to help you get loose?”

“Yes, I’d appreciate it.”

The black commando came over to the metal restraining chair. “How do you happen to be in this thing in the first place, friend?”

“A couple of guys jumped me.”

“Yes, this is a rough part of Detroit to be wandering around in.” The black man was behind the chair, starting to work on the strap fastenings.

“I wasn’t jumped around here. I was jumped out in Grosse Pointe.”

The commando stopped unfastening. “Do you live there, friend?”

“No. I was walking through a parking lot and they knocked me down with a Rolls Royce.”

“That sounds like typical Grosse Pointe behavior.” The Young Angola Commando went back to work on the straps and got them all undone in less than two minutes. “There friend.”

Tom pulled himself up out of the chair. “Oops.” His right leg twisted under him and he stumbled.

“You ought to see a doctor,” suggested the black man. “It’s too bad we scared most of them out of this hospital.” He steadied Tom, taking his arm.

“I’ll see somebody back at my hotel.” Tom found he was able to walk on the injured leg after a few cautious steps. He walked some, then halted to examine the leg. He found it bruised and scraped, particularly around the knee. “Okay, I can make it,” he said, starting to walk again.

The commando opened the room door and helped Tom get into the hall. “Nice talking to you.” He quick stepped away.

Ten other people were marching through the gray hospital corridor. Tom stood aside, reaching out one hand to brace himself against the wall. He began to walk slowly in the direction opposite from that of the demonstrators, having noticed an exit arrow pointing that way. He got in a couple dozen steps before he stumbled and went down on his knees.

“Here, take my hand,” said someone.

“Thanks.” Tom got hold of a warm hand. He looked up and saw Cindy standing there.

XII

CINDY DROPPED her shoes on the thermal rug of the hotel room and crossed barefooted to the windows. She stood watching the ground cars on the Jefferson Avenue slotway. “You have a better view than we do over in the West End.”

“Shouldn’t you be getting back to Magic Sam?” Tom was trying to walk without a limp. “Now that you’ve seen me safely home.”

The pretty, slender girl said, her back to him, “He’ll be agitating at the hospital all afternoon, and then he’s going to read a statement to the news media. The Free Angola movement is one of his favorite black causes.” She shrugged, with her hands resting on the window sill and her long auburn hair brushed her shoulders. An aircab flew by and two Shriners waved pennants at her. “There’s another thing you have we don’t. We rarely have Shriners flying through the West End. What about Wildsmith? Don’t you have to gather him up from somewhere.”

Tom held out a message he’d picked up from the desk andy. “Wildsmith phoned here to say: ‘Missed

you eventually at the Greengrocers. Where have you gone to? Myself, I'm off to visit Belle Isle and look at the botanical gardens with Dayna, our costermonger maiden, as you may recall. See you at dusk. Your pal, the Great White Hope.' That nitwit." His right leg went out on him again, and he slipped and fell against the water-filled, vinyl bed.

Cindy was looking at him now, her fingers steepled and resting on her stomach. "Shouldn't you, really, see a doctor?"

"I will later if I don't feel better." He sat and the bed made a sloshing sound.

The girl came over to him and touched his arm. "Tell me now."

"What?"

"Tell me what happened to you and who did it and why?"

Tom took her hand. "Brazilians."

"Is that why or who?"

"Who. Two affable Brazilians. They've been following me around the country, and before that they were watching Mary Alice, my ex-wife," he explained. "Today they ran me down with a Rolls Royce."

"Upper class Brazilians."

"No, they simply swiped the car to hit me with I think. And then to transport me to that nitwit hospital."

Cindy said, "They shot something into you."

"To make me talk."

"Talk about what?"

"I'm not sure," he answered. "I'm not even sure why they're following me."

Cindy tried to catch his eye and couldn't. "Why don't you go to the police or the FBI or the NSO or any three other letters who might help?"

"Listen," he said.

"You always say that when you're not going to tell me something."

"Wildsmith is an android," Tom said and then looked at her.

Cindy widened her gray eyes slightly. "A machine?"

"Yes, a high class robot," continued Tom. "Swangler & Sons had him built on the sly to write best sellers. Only a few people know."

"He writes best sellers sure enough," said the girl, sitting beside him. The bed sloshed once more. "You're afraid detectives and investigators are liable to find out your secret if you call them in."

Tom said, "I have the impression I told those two

smiling Brazilians all about Wildsmith. I feel a small gap or two in my memory. Probably they're interested in him for some reason."

Cindy frowned. "Maybe they're concerned with something else entirely, Tom. You feel guilty about Wildsmith, and you think everybody is after his secret. Could there be some other piece of knowledge?"

"Mostly what I know is the publishing business. I don't see anyone going to all this trouble to get trade gossip."

"Well, why would they want to learn about Wildsmith?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "Some kind of blackmail or extortion maybe."

"They may try to hurt you again."

"That's possible, sure. They don't seem to want to kill me, though. That they could have done today," said Tom. "I'll have to think about this. If they do show up again, then I'll have to do something."

Cindy smiled to herself. "Right, postpone."

"Yeah, postponing is my philosophy of life at the moment. I can't lately seem to ... to come to any conclusions about anything."

"One reason why we like each other. We share a fondness for vacillating. Since I met you I've been thinking about . . . about quitting everything. Magic Sam, Swangler & Sons. So far I'm postponing, too."

The pixphone buzzed on its table next to the bed. Tom picked up the speaker. "Excuse me, Cindy. Hello."

The pale face of his former wife appeared on the screen. "Hello, Tom. I just wanted to tell you I'm not bothered by Brazilians any more. I decided to call you long-distance rather than write because I like to have a more direct contact with people if I can. You look terrible."

"I was hit by a car and tied in a chair," said Tom. "I'll talk to you later, Mary Alice."

"Hit by a car? Isn't that weird. I had a dream last

night I was assaulted by a gang of men in a used car lot after closing time."

"Probably a premonition, Mary Alice. I'll talk to you later."

His pale, former wife narrowed her eyes. "Do you have some kind of naked girl in your hotel room there with you?"

"Nope."

"I can see a girl's naked leg just at the edge of my screen."

Tom glanced at Cindy's bare leg that was swinging slightly back and forth. "The part you see is naked but the rest isn't."

"Up to our old tricks again."

"What old tricks? This is the first time in my life I've ever been in a Detroit hotel room with a barefooted girl."

"Tom. Honestly." Mary Alice made a rapid, blurred gesture and the screen went blank.

To Cindy, Tom said, "That was my ex-wife."

"She's very maternal," said the girl. "Like Magic Sam."

"He's maternal?"

"Paternal. You have trouble ending things, too."

The phone sounded again. "Mary Alice is a writer. In my profession I've fallen into the habit of humoring writers. Excuse me again. Hello."

A fat, Detroit police sergeant appeared on the screen. "Mr. Thomas Miley, is it?"

"Yes."

"Let me begin by saying that in college back in the 1950's I had a yen to be a novelist myself. I wrote a book detailing my experiences in the Korean War and attempted to depict, somewhat too allegorically I now realize, the anxieties and aspirations of my generation. They called us the Silent Generation, if you can remember back over thirty years."

"We studied that in school. Sergeant, is there some problem?"

"I titled my book Through A Glass Not So Darkly.

A small play on words intended, so far as I can now recollect, to convey both disenchantment and a sort of guarded hope," continued the fat policeman. He took off his silver crash helmet and rubbed at his perspiring head. "All this is preamble to let you know I am not your usual dumb cop but rather something of a literary man myself."

"You've got Wildsmith?"

"Fortunately it was me—my name is Sergeant Dan O'Malley, though when I tried to scale the citadel of the arts I favored the more formal Daniel Yeats O'Malley—who apprehended Mr. Wildsmith when he came driving down Charlesvoix Avenue in the Bugatti Type 35 at one hundred and two miles an hour."

"A Bugatti Type 35?"

"Which he had borrowed from the Greenfield Village museum to take his young lady for a joy ride in."

"Dayna from the Greengrocers Guild."

“No, this is a Chinese skin dancer known professionally as the Insidious Madame Yen Sin,” said Sergeant O’Malley. “At any rate, sir, I’ve persuaded Mr. Wildsmith to let me have the historic auto, and the Chinese girl for that matter, returned to their proper owners. The whole unfortunate incident has been settled to everyone’s satisfaction. Mr. Wildsmith has agreed to remain here at the precinct fortress until I run home for my copies of his novels for autographing. After which you can run down and pick him up.” He gave the address.

Tom asked, “Can’t you send him home in a cab?”

“Frankly, Mr. Miley, he’s a bit under the weather. Three sheets to the wind and feeling no pain, if you catch my meaning. It would be much safer, I’m thinking, for you to get hold of him here and hand deliver him back to his hotel. Can I expect you in a half hour then?”

“Yes, okay.” Tom clicked off. He put a hand on Cindy’s shoulder. “I better go get Wildsmith.”

She leaned and kissed him once. “Don’t worry. We won’t stay star-crossed forever.”

XIII

WILDSMITH CLOMPED to the top of the pale green convey ramp, leaped into the air and clicked his heels together. One ankle gave off an odd spongg sound. He hit the noryl plastic flooring, grabbed his suitcase off the moving luggage belt to his left and turned to wait for Tom. “I’m in a lighthearted mood tonight,” he said.

Tom was letting the ramp move him upward to level 16 of the Chicago Alternate Airport. They had been on the tour nearly three weeks now, and it was a few minutes away from midnight. A cold wind chafed unseen beyond the noryl walls of the airport corridors. “Why is your ankle going spongg?”

The android author wound his fingers in the hair at his temple. He put his hands on his hips, watching Tom ascend toward him. “I’ve been doing a good deal of running and jumping of late.”

“Listen,” said Tom. “When we get to this college town in Ohio, no more.”

“No more what?”

They were face to face now. Tom took his suitcase from the ramp and said to Wildsmith, “In Pittsburgh you took to consuming forty cups of coffee a day, wandering around skid row, then drinking patent medicine all night, while writing standing up in a flannel bathrobe. In Sault Ste. Marie you tried to join the merchant marine and have a replica of the Pequod tattooed on your hip. Here in Chicago you refused to go out until after dark, tried to get our suite lined with cork, attempted an affair with a seventeen-year-old Siamese actress who’s touring in the road company of the musical version of Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy In America, sat in on the drums with Blind Sunflower Slim’s Electrified &

Sanctified Jook Band in an Angolese-only bar, tried to run for assemblyman in Cicero on a reform ticket and got yourself photographed with a seventy-two-year-old former Roman Catholic prelate who just returned from a sex change operation in Tangiers.”

They began walking along the pale green corridor. A silver robot went by pushing an old man in a chrome wheelchair. Wildsmith said, “If I simply autograph books and sit through dull interviews with nitwits who’ve never even picked up the novel let alone read it, we wouldn’t get any publicity at all. You ought to know that, Tom. You’re the professional. What is this college we’re heading for anyway?”

“We’re going to the Ohio Unified Junior College, near Youngstown,” said Tom. The long, warm corridor was empty except for the two of them. The heating unit strips fluttered faintly. “This is a new addition to our itinerary. Peg-Leg says the college was originally going to give an honorary degree in literature to the poet laureate of Nebraska, but he got picked up in a speakeasy raid. Nebraska is a dry state.”

Wildsmith said, “See? I’m not the only man of letters who gets in a little trouble now and then.” He whistled with his tongue against his vinyl teeth. “Magic Sam Sewlin is supposed to receive an honorary degree at the same time?”

“According to Peg-Leg. Ohio Unified J. C. has been called racist, and this is a gesture.”

The corridor ended and another moving ramp took over, carrying them downward again. “You’ll be able to see Cindy Haye again.”

Tom said, “Probably.”

“I’ve known a lot of women in my time, Tom. Loved my way halfway around this cockeyed globe of ours. If you want my opinion, Cindy is a much nicer girl than your old wife.”

“You really think so? Mary Alice is considerably more even tempered and predictable.”

“Mary Alice has a nice skin tone,” said Wildsmith, “and a fair understanding of the 4-8-year-old reader. Beyond which she’s dull. Cindy is a girl with considerable potential. Right at the moment her behavior may be a bit erratic. Once she realizes you two belong together, all her energy will get channeled properly. Why, I had a letter from a reader only the other day with a problem very much like your own. ‘Dear Bought-thering-and-now-have-second-thoughts,’ I told this fellow ...”

Tom cut in, “You’re giving me stuff out of your memory banks.”

“It pertains, however,” replied the android. “Don’t worry about her supposed affair with Magic Sam either. She’s twenty-six, isn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Magic Sam represents her last symbolic rebellion against the paternal image,” said Wildsmith. “Once this phase is over and done, Cindy can settle down to business. By then you may be ready to meet her.”

“Who are you trying to be now?”

“Your own true friend, the one and only Wildsmith.”

Tom said, “I don’t know.” He glanced back over his shoulder. “At least the Brazilians aren’t after us any more.”

“At least the same Brazilians aren’t.”

“Have yon noticed new ones lurking around?”

“No. Myself, I don’t believe that frumus of yours in Detroit was of much significance. A one-shot

prank.” Wildsmith jammed a fist into his overcoat pocket and whistled for a moment. “Still and all, once you and those two met they became useless. Anyone who wants to continue watching us would put new people on the job. Are you absolutely certain, Tom it isn’t Mary Alice who hired them to scare you back to her side?”

“A girl who writes cute technological books for fifth graders wouldn’t hire somebody to run me down with a car.”

“Ah, look.” He pointed at two men who were coming toward them down a pale yellow corridor.

“Fat Jim Hannahan and Joaquim Vespas, the Brazilian novelist.”

“I like Joaquim,” said Wildsmith. “He’s one of the most likable fascists I’ve ever met. Hello, Fat Jim. Hello, Joaquim. Boa noite.”

The four men met at the edge of the yellow corridor. While Wildsmith moved to talk to the wide, spikymoustached Brazilian novelist, Tom asked Fat Jim, “You’re heading for where?”

“We just completed a series of autographings and cocktail parties in Evanston,” said the chubby National Security Organization agent. “Vespas is going to give a lecture in Ft. Worth and do some interviews.” He began patting himself. “I had a fax memo about you I’ve been carry around. You got run over by a car?”

“Nothing serious. I limped for a few days.”

Fat Jim stopped searching himself. “Are you sure, Tom? I can put a couple of NSO boys on it. You think there’s somebody trying to do you harm?”

Tom hesitated, then answered, “No, Jim. This was probably only a prank that got out of hand. Wildsmith is a pretty strong personality, and he sometimes brings out some strong reactions among his fans. I was in the middle is probably all.”

Fat Jim located a new memo in one of his pockets. He unfolded it, read it over to himself. He frowned briefly, folded the memo up again and slipped it away. “Okay, Tom. If anything else does happen, check in with me. We’ll both be in Los Angeles around the same time, later in the month. I’ll call you then. Meantime you can reach me through the NSO office in Washington, D. C.”

“Thanks, Jim.” Tom shook hands with the chubby secret agent. Wildsmith shook hands with the Brazilian novelist. Tom and Wildsmith walked on toward their autojet’s boarding ramp.

XIV

The campus chimes struck ten. The stone tower quivered and two gargoyles and a twist of ornamental railing fell two hundred feet to the Ohio Unified Junior College quad.

“We’re a relatively new campus,” said the grinning young man who was strolling up to Tom and Wildsmith. “A scant five years old, and everything hasn’t settled in yet.”

Ten yards behind him a middle-sized freshman fell over, struck by a fragment of gargoyle.

“You’re Riggio?” Tom asked.

“Yes, Vito ‘Chicken Man’ Riggio, assistant head of our publicity bureau here at O.U.J.C.,” grinned Riggio. “We’re happy you two could get out here a day early to look around.”

Wildsmith was watching the fallen freshman, who lay sprawled on a patch of yellowed grass, as a dozen students began running toward him. “I’d better pitch in,” he said. “I saw a lot of this during the war.” He pushed by the grinning college publicity man and ran.

Riggio asked Tom, “Which was was that?”

“The one before last.”

The campus chimes struck ten again, and the metal spire on the pinnacle of the tower gave off an enormous creaking sound and went tilting far to the left. “You’ll notice while you’re here, Mr. Miley,” said Riggio, “that a good percentage of our faculty and staff is Italian. I’m sure you’re aware of what the unenlightened say about Italians.”

“You’re hot-blooded.”

Riggio grinned. “Besides that.” He took Tom’s elbow and started walking him across the campus. It was a clear, crisp morning, and yellow and gold leaves were spinning off the junior college’s few trees. Suddenly a loose shingle came flying by, nicking at Riggio’s ear. He swatted at it, grinning still. “No, I’ll tell you. Many people, even this late in the century, still believe all Italians are crooks. Yes, that we are all members of some so-called secret organization. An organization variously dubbed by the one-sided news media the Mafia, the Syndicate, the Cosa Nostra, the Organization or the Black Hand. You may already have heard some such ethnic slurs made against our college.”

“We haven’t,” said Tom. “Of course we only arrived in Youngstown two hours ago.” Ahead a small wooden bridge arched over a stream.

Riggio pulled Tom back. “I wouldn’t chance the bridge. It’s actually intended mostly for decoration. We’ll wade across over there where the water’s shallowest. We can sit on the glade until Mr. Wildsmith is ready to join us.”

Behind them at a distance of some hundred feet the android was kneeling at the side of the spread-eagled freshman and tapping at the pale-faced boy’s chest. “Stand back,” he told the gathering students. “We saw a lot of this in the trenches.”

Riggio grinned and stepped on tiptoe into the scummy water of the stream. Wine cans and labels from 30-day birth control pill containers bobbed in the gray green water. “Naturally there have been false charges that our university was built crookedly. That accounts were padded, bids and estimates falsified, inferior materials and workmanship used. No, don’t sit on that bench. Use the other, with crates propping it up.”

Tom had forded the stream first. He moved to the iron bench Riggio indicated and sat down. He couldn’t hear Wildsmith from here. He saw him ripping a strip

from the slip of a pretty Chinese girl. Wildsmith measured the bandage against the stunned freshman’s head, decided to reach up under the pretty girl’s short skirt for another length of slip. “You might as well,” said Tom, when Riggio had joined him, “give me the final schedule for the degree awarding ceremonies tomorrow. Then Wildsmith and I can look around and familiarize ourselves with the campus

and the auditorium.”

Riggio laughed. “There’s a possibility, Mr. Miley, a remote possibility, the awarding will take place in the president’s house instead of the auditorium.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the president’s house is bulletproof and the auditorium isn’t,” explained the junior college publicity man. “Being from out of state you probably haven’t heard our president has been getting some criticism of late.”

“They’re shooting at him, too?”

Riggio said, “You know how kids are. When you and I were at school, it was mostly bricks and bombs and a little good-natured sniping. Nowadays kids are more hot tempered.” He gestured toward the groggy freshman, who was sitting up with Wildsmith’s arm bracing his shoulders. “A harmless accident like this, for instance, will no doubt cause many students’ tempers to flare out of control. You see, 47 percent of our students are armed. We try to discourage the carrying of anything larger than a hand gun. You know kids. If one’s got, they all want.”

Tom said, “This honorary degree for Wildsmith business came up pretty fast, and we didn’t have much time to look into your college. I hope Wildsmith won’t be in any danger.”

“No, not him,” said Riggio. “You know how leftist kids are. They seldom shoot intellectuals. I was telling Giacomo ‘Fast Buck’ Macarelli only this morning, ‘It’s too bad these punks don’t think of you as a double dome.’”

“Giacomo ‘Fast Buck’ Macarelli?”

Riggio grinned and reached into an inner pocket of his three-piece pseudo-sharkskin suit. “Giacomo is the

president of Ohio Unified Junior College. A swell man. Here, I’ll give you a copy of our school indoctrination booklet, which will tell you who’s who and what’s where. Printed on the presses in our own graphic arts center complex. The last twelve pages came out a little blurry. Otherwise it’s a handsome job.”

Tom took the green-covered booklet and rested it on his knee. Wildsmith had the injured boy up and was walking him around on the dried out grass of the quad. The chimes struck ten again and the middle-sized freshman clutched at his bandaged head and dived for the grass. Part of a gargoyle fell from the bell tower. This time there was no fragmenting when it struck the marble steps leading to the tower.

“We intended to run off the booklet again to catch those twelve fuzzy pages. However, some big part or other fell off our best press and we had to forget about it.” Riggio reached over and took the booklet back. “I tell you what, Mr. Miley. I have the feeling I’d better go talk to the group forming there around Mr. Wildsmith. Kids tend to let little accidents get them all excited and then the shooting starts.” He opened the brochure to a blurred map and tapped a building. “Why don’t you and Mr. Wildsmith meet me at the English department in an hour. Roland ‘Bookie’ Gugliardo is the head of the department and a very ardent admirer of the Wildsmith novels. He’s got a soundproof office with shatterproof windows. Nobody will bother us there.”

Tom put his thumb in the booklet and retrieved it. "I understand Magic Sam Sewlin is also going to be given a degree tomorrow."

Riggio grinned. "That's right. I talked to his publicity girl on the pixphone this morning. Very attractive, though underweight. She and Magic Sam will be here shortly to look over the campus," he said. "Tell you what. If the lads haven't ceased the faculty dining room again, we maybe can have lunch, all of us." He snapped his fingers. "Oh, and we've got Joe Chuck, the famed car—

toonist and satirist, lecturing in the graphic arts center this morning. Well ask him to lunch, too. I'll keep my fingers crossed I don't get shot before noon and spoil the fun." He went double-timing for the crowd of a hundred students. Tom followed more slowly to gather up Wildsmith.

XV

THE PRESIDENT of Ohio Unified Junior College poured his glass of red wine and then held it up. "To the lively arts," he said.

Across the round, lopsided table Wildsmith brought his glass almost to his lips, then said, "Speaking of the lively arts, when is Joe Chuck to join us?"

Riggio, sitting next to the small, wrinkled university president, said, "He's been delayed and suggested we go ahead. Joe will join us for coffee and dessert."

"What's delaying that racist mother bumper?" asked Magic Sam. He was drinking left-handed and had his right hand under the table, gripping Cindy's bare left leg just above the knee. "Did he come back after his fascist lecture to do more ethnic slurs for an encore?"

Giacomo "Fast Buck" Macarelli, the college president, took on an even more wrinkled look. Of Riggio he asked, "What kind of talk is that?"

Tom watched Cindy, but the pretty, freckled girl wouldn't look his way. She took a sip of her wine and returned the glass to the tabletop.

President Macarelli continued, "Where I grew up, in Palermo, we had respect for our mothers."

Professor Roland "Bookie" Gugliardo was a mediumsized man, about forty, and the only other guest in the small dining room behind the faculty dining hall. He said, "Fast Buck, artists are different. I've told you that."

"Okay, okay, Bookie," replied Macarelli, unwrinkling slightly. "I think you can be an artist and not make fun of people's mothers."

"You mother friggers are obsessed with maternity," observed Magic Sam. "Chiefly because your racial guilt has transferred to a safer object."

Wrinkled President Macarelli said, "I don't know why I let you talk me into giving this guy some degree, Bookie."

"Take it easy, Fast Buck. He means well."

Magic Sam leaned forward, his hand gripping tighter on Cindy's leg. "Magic Sam can see inside your

heads, into the innermost recesses where the shaggy, dark spiders frolic with the racist notions in attenuated orgies of bigotry. I know why you mother fuyers want artists much as myself to come here, as well as literary courtesans like friend Wildsmith. It is to bring prestige to your highly discredited university and remove some of the suspicion that O.U.J.C. is controlled by gangdom.”

President Macarelli tapped his fingers on the tabletop. “I don’t see why we got to give no degree to some shine who says my head is full of spiders. What kind of talk is that?”

Riggio said, “Let’s all start in on our soup and let the air clear.”

“I would rather wait for my good friend, Joe Chuck,” said Wildsmith. “Neither Joe nor I are geniuses. Merely craftsmen who know how to reach the public heart.”

“You reach its heart by kissing its ass,” suggested Magic Sam.

The wrinkled college president banged his soup spoon against the side of his bowl of minestrone. “What kind of way is that to talk when there’s a lady around?” he asked the grinning Riggio. “This shine don’t respect his mother. He don’t like Tiny Boob the Hillbilly Midget. I read that every single morning in my office and get a great kick out of it. If this was the old days, I wouldn’t give that guy no degree. I’d have him roughed up good.”

“This isn’t the old days no more, Fast Buck,” said Professor Gugliardo. “Relax. Eat.”

Old Macarelli sighed. “What kind of world is this

today?” He began crying, wiping at his wrinkle-surrounded eyes with his napkin. “Thank God my mother is dead and in heaven and don’t have to see what a lousy college I got to run.”

Above and behind him a wall pixphone buzzed, its blank screen flashing a sharp red. Riggio, still grinning, got up and answered. “Hello?”

A lean, dark man with waved black hair appeared on the screen. “Hello, Vito. This is Dante ‘Dan the Artist’ Bascofigli here. I’m still at the graphic arts center lecture hall with Joe Chuck. Frankly, Vito, things have grown even worse. At first it was only name calling. Since then some of the kids have opened fire.”

“I can hear the shooting, Dan,” said Riggio. “Sounds like they’ve got some rifles.”

“Yes, Vito,” replied the head of the college’s graphic arts department. “Joe and I are barricaded in the movie archives room, and we’ve pushed a bunch of antique movie palace lounge seats up in front of the door. The kids found Joe’s speech more controversial than we anticipated. Looks like we’ll have to miss lunch.”

“The Mounted Riot Police will be sent right over, Dan.”

“I don’t think you can get them, Vito. Some of the kids chased all the horses out of the police corral this morning.”

“The riot police will come on foot then. You hold on, Dan.”

Wrinkled Macarelli pushed his soup bowl away from him and began crying again.

Professor Gugliardo said, “These things have a way of dragging on. He may well have to postpone the awarding of the honorary degrees.”

Magic Sam jumped up, leaving Cindy, and headed for the door. “Magic Sam will see what’s really taking place over there.” He lifted his strip of dark glass and narrowed one eye at Cindy. “You wait right here. Understand?”

The pretty girl nodded.

After Magic Sam left the room Tom moved into the chair beside Cindy. “How are you?”

“Fine.” She picked up a breadstick and broke it in two, scattering crumbs. “Tom . . .”

“Yes?”

“I guess I’ll stay here and wait for him,” she said. “Things seem too complicated to me right now. In a way, I want to be with you. Still, I keep feeling that would only complicate me more.”

Tom said, “With the festivities here likely postponed or off entirely, we’ll have some extra time, Cindy.”

“No. I have to figure things out. Another week or so and I may know what I’m doing.”

“That’ll be California. Los Angeles. That’s where our paths cross, next week.”

“Yes, I’ll see you there.”

“And no more here?”

“Please don’t complex things up.”

At the head of the table President Macarelli was crying with both wrinkled hands masking his face. Professor Gugliardo stood and helped the old man out of the room.

“Shell shock,” said Wildsmith, pouring himself a second glass of wine. “We saw a lot of that during the war.”

XVI

THE MAYOR of Los Angeles wouldn’t come down off the girder. He was a large, well-built, blond man of fiftytwo, wearing a loose sarong of leopard skin. He had his legs wrapped around a second-story noryl girder and was swinging, upside down, to and fro in the bright afternoon. The leopard’s tail was still attached to the skin, and it snapped like a whip as the burly mayor ticked back and forth.

The mayor’s small press secretary said to Tom, “He’s been under a lot of pressure lately.”

Tom looked from the steps of city hall across to the unfinished Greater Los Angeles Pre-Teen Drug Rehabilitation Center, where Mayor Orlando O’Ryan was swinging. “We could come back later for the key to the city.”

The small, short-haired Neddy Brissler bounced twice on his city hall step. “I’d give it to Mr. Wildsmith myself, except the mayor’s got the darn key with him.”

“Is that what he’s gripping in his teeth?”

“You have better eyesight than I do.” Brissler bounced, squinting, twice more. “Yes, that’s the key to Los Angeles. I thought for a minute it was his old Ki-Gor hunting knife.”

“Mayor O’Ryan used to be a television actor,” said Tom.

“Most people in California politics were,” said Brissler. “Mayor O’Ryan had quite a career as Ki-Gor the Jungle Lord on national television back in the 1960’s. You’re probably too young to recall.”

“I saw reruns as a kid.”

Brissler bounced and said, “The mayor has been getting a lot of criticism lately. The news media call him a boondoggler. He’s, like most actors, very sensitive to criticism.”

Mayor O’Ryan was up on his feet now, standing in midgirder, with his hands cupped around his mouth. “Umpawaug! Simpaug! Umpawaug! Simpaug!” he shouted.

“What did he say?” the bouncing press secretary asked Tom.

“Umpawaug, simpaug,” repeated Tom.

“You have better ears than I do,” said Brissler. “That’s his old jungle yell. I’m afraid he really thinks he’s KiGor the Jungle Lord now.”

“Mayor O’Ryan has spells?”

“Too much criticism from the news media and—wham!—it’s into the leopard skin and up into the trees. Or girders, in this case.”

“How long does he usually stay Ki-Gor?”

“So far not more than an hour or two.”

“We could come back tomorrow for the key to the city.”

Brissler squinted again at the mayor across the street. “Maybe I can get him to toss the darn key down and I can hand it over to Mr. Wildsmith. Though that’s not likely to satisfy the news media.”

Three steps below them Wildsmith was talking to a black television newsman. The other half-dozen reporters and the camera man who’d come to watch the Wildsmith ceremonies were across the street, filming and trying to interview Mayor O’Ryan. A heavyset and bearded CBS commentator was already halfway up a plastic girder to the first floor of the unfinished rehabilitation center.

Tom said, “This building is one of the ones the press feels is a boondoggle, isn’t it?”

“Looked like the mayor lost his balance for a moment. Can you tell?”

“No, he’s just dancing. Kicking one foot in the air.”

“The bull ape juju dance,” said Brissler. “He’s really upset. Yes, the rehabilitation center was to have been completed by 1984. Still, we’re not as far behind on this as we are on the Seadome project.”

“Seadome?”

“I haven’t done as good a PR job on that project as I should have,” said Brissler, bouncing. “I’ve been under a lot of pressure myself. Seadome is to be a low cost housing development off the coast. Ten thousand economical houses, apartments, cottages, bungalows and town houses. All underwater.”

“Underwater?”

“Yes. The city of Los Angeles is the major participant in the project, which will eventually benefit all of Los Angeles County. Right at the moment we only have about one and a half domes and some two dozen buildings up down there. Ki-Gor’s brother-in-law—that is, Mayor O’Ryan’s brother-in-law is the chairman of the Seadome project, and he assures us we can expect to have all thirty-five domes completed and the first disadvantaged families moved in by probably 1989, which isn’t as distant a date as the mayor’s detractors maintain.”

“Nobody lives in Seadome yet?”

“Unfortunately a goodly number of squatters and drifters, who we can’t seem to drive out,” answered Brissler. “Work has temporarily halted, and naturally you’re going to find people taking advantage of a seemingly abandoned housing project. They’ve even got communes and night spots set up down there. Has he put his clothes back on?”

“No, that’s the guy from CBS,” said Tom, as the heavysset young reporter neared the second floor.

Wildsmith left the black newsman and rejoined Tom. “Usually I don’t enjoy chatting with pundits.”

“Was that a pundit?”

“Yes, he’s Burton Hix, who runs the News Therapy Show on KWFN-TV,” said the rumple-haired android. “He invited me to participate in his program this after—

noon and take part in a current events psychodrama.”

Tom said, “We have to go over and film a couple of promotion spots this afternoon.”

“I’d play the migrant problem.”

“Nope.”

“I won’t have to take off my clothes unless I want to.”

“As soon as we pick up this nitwit key to the city of Los Angeles, we’ve got to get to the film studio and do the book commercials.”

“Besides the publicity,” pointed out the android, “this appearance with Hix will kill the rumors that I’m a political innocent.”

“No.”

Wildsmith scratched at his tangled hair. "You'll never guess who else is going to be on the show today. Mrs. Rubinoff."

"The wife of the governor of New York?"

"That Mrs. Rubinoff, yes," replied the android author. "She's going to portray one of Mayor O'Ryan's boondoggles in the current events psychodrama."

"You got in enough trouble with her in Croton-OnHudson," said THom. "Why is Mrs. Rubinoff out here in California anyway? Have you been in touch with her?"

"No," said Wildsmith. "She's here to have the Pacific Ocean."

"From what?"

"Extinction. She's on some presidential commission. The secretary of ecology flew out with her."

"No news encounters and no Mrs. Rubinoff," Tom told Wildsmith.

"What are they doing up there?" asked Brissler.

The CBS reporter and the mayor were grappling on the narrow plastic girder. "Grappling," said Tom.

"I'll have to try and climb up there," said the bouncing press secretary. "If he throws somebody from CBS off the unfinished Greater Los Angeles Pre-Teen Drug Rehabilitation Center, there'll be a mess."

"I'll lend a helping hand," offered Wildsmith. "I used to climb trees in Tanzania." He took hold of the small press secretary and ran him down the city hall steps.

"Umpawaug! Simpaug!" cried the mayor.

XVII

TOM WAS IN A CORNER of the large, chill, tin-walled room with a pixphone on his lap. The phone screen showed a robot hotel clerk who was saying, "Miss Cindy Haye's room does not answer, sir. To the best of my knowledge she and Mr. Magic Sam Sewlin have not yet returned from Black Marineland, which is a separatist amusement park down the coast. Any message?"

Tom hesitated, then said, "Yes, tell her Tom Miley called."

"One l or two?"

"One. I'm calling from the Enormous Nickelodeon, Inc, which is a small film studio on Santa Monica Boulev ..."

"We know all about them, sir," cut in the round-headed robot. "Many of our guests rent screwies from them. May I ask if you're an actor?"

"Screwies?"

“Pornographic television cassettes,” explained the robot clerk at Cindy’s Los Angeles hotel. “You don’t look like anyone I’ve ever seen in a screwie, but that could be because you have your clothes on. Are you?”

“No.”

“You have a very expressive face.”

“Thank you.” Tom hung up and turned toward the pretty Negro girl who was seated at a circular reception desk near him. “I didn’t know you made pornographic films here, too.”

The black girl replied, “We couldn’t earn a living on television commercials exclusively.” She smiled and resumed signing things on her desk. “As a matter of fact,

I’m something of a star in the screwies world. My professional name is Carmilla.”

“I don’t watch much pornography.” Tom set the phone down and left his chair. Wildsmith was sitting at the other end of the room, pretending to seat a sandwich. Next to him a tall, fat man in a one-piece, embroidered suit was chewing on a pastry and looking through a script.

Carmilla picked up a glossy photo she’d just signed. “This is me, as I appeared in San Bernadino Wife Swap.”

Tom took the proffered photo, a nude shot of the pretty, black girl. “Who’s this in bed with you?”

“A goat,” answered Carmilla. “No, wait. In San Bernadino Wife Swap it was a burro. The goat was in The Masked Plumber. I have some stills from that one also.”

Tom was handed a second photo. “Yes, I can see this one is a goat. Even with the mask.”

Carmilla smiled. “One of the humorous bits of business in The Masked Plumber was a confusion of identities. I’m supposed to think the goat is the plumber.”

“Because of the mask.” Tom returned the photos. “You get many requests for autographed pictures?”

“Not really, compared to real stars,” admitted the lovely Carmilla. “About a hundred letters a week and roughly 25 percent of those are from policemen trying to get incriminating evidence. Screwies are perfectly legal, but some of the cops around LA have their own ideas about what constitutes virtue. Here’s my favorite part, in a science fiction screwie.” She held up a new glossy. “See, I’m not completely bareass in this one.”

“No, you’re wearing that space helmet.”

“Notice this big thing out the window here that looks like a penis?” she asked. “Well, it is. That was the theme of our film. This giant penis arrives from outer space. Science fiction screwies are more difficult to do, because you have to have a strong plot.”

“And extra props.”

“Exactly.”

“I don’t know,” said the fat man in the embroidered suit. He’d finished his pastry and was holding the scripts for Wildsmith’s book promotion commercials in both hands.

Wildsmith leaned away from the fat man and tapped at a toggle on the tin wall. Half of this wall was filled with small transparent-doored compartments. Wildsmith waited and in ten seconds a pastrami on dark rye sandwich popped half out of a compartment. Taking the new sandwich, Wildsmith asked, “What’s wrong, Hogg?”

J. Alien Hogg let the scripts rattle in his hands. “I don’t know.”

Tom smiled at Carmilla and crossed the studio reception room to join the producer. “Some problem with our scripts?”

Hogg sighed, put the scripts half over his face. “I don’t know. Who wrote these? You?”

“My boss, Peg-Leg Wister.”

Hogg left his iron chair and paced by the compartmented wall. “Let’s have a small snack while I think.” He pursed his lips, selected a toggle and flipped it. A piece of pumpkin pie emerged. After two bites and a swallow, Hogg continued, “His visual sense. Wister’s. I don’t know. I’m worried about the opening.”

“Where Wildsmith says, ‘Hello, my name is Alex Wildsmith and I write books?’”

“The audio I can buy,” said Hogg, as he finished the pie. “This visual stuff. I don’t know. Where’s the place? Yes, here. ‘Something . . . something . . . blah, blah . . . Open on medium shot Wildsmith sitting in chair. On words ‘Hello, my name,’ he stands, holds up copy of *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!* and points to it, smiling warmly at us. Dolly into medium close-up. I don’t know.”

“Suppose,” suggested Wildsmith, “you fly the camera?”

“What does that mean?” asked Hogg.

“Put it up in the rafters and then zoom down on me.”

“No good.” Hogg crouched and circled once around the

android’s chair. “This is not a sitting down face.” He asked Tom, “Can we afford some location shooting in Madrid?”

“No.”

Hogg shook his head. “Mexico then?”

“We can afford,” Tom told him, “one afternoon here. These spots have to go on the coastal network by the end of this week to tie in with Wildsmith’s tour of California.”

“This face is an action face,” said Hogg. “What was it I just ate?”

“Pumpkin pie,” said Wildsmith.

“What’s that you have?”

“Pastrami on dark.”

“I should have ordered that,” said Hogg. “Wait a minute. How about a bed? Yes, a large, ornate, Latin bed. Wildsmith, stripped to the waist, is in the bed. In his brawny hands he holds not a copy of *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!* but a wispy! lace mantilla. Sitting sensuously at the edge of the bed, languidly peeling off her last black net stocking, is Carmilla. Between them on the bed sits a ...”

“Goat?” said Tom.

“Yes, exactly. So you visualize the commercial the same way I do?”

“You’re not making a screwie, Hogg. Swangler & Sons is a very conservative house.”

“Carmilla could keep her underwear on.”

“You’ll have to stick to the script.”

“And we’ll scrap the goat,” offered Hogg. He moved again to his automatic food wall and punched up a pastrami on dark rye. “Ah. We can open on a tight shot of ancient Spanish hands playing a mournful tune on a silver guitar.”

“Why not a Portuguese fado?” asked Wildsmith.

“What’s that?”

“A mournful tune, according to my friend Joaquim

Vespas. He’s in Los Angeles right now, and I can ask him for a good fado.”

“Too obscure,” said Hogg. “No, we’ll stick with the mournful Spaniard. We pull back and pan across the moonlit bedchamber. Crucifix on the whitewashed wall, fan in the ceiling, sultry shadows pouring out of the corners of the room. And there is Wildsmith—there you are, Wildsmith—on the bed, stripped to the waist. You say, ‘Something . . . something . . .’ Yes, you say, ‘I write as I live.’ Then Carmilla says . . . Let’s see, we’ve got to get in some sell. She says, “You’ve written a masterpiece in *When The Stars Threw Down Their Spears!*, my love. Published by blah, blah and available for something, something at your favorite blah, blah and so on.’ That is going to sell books.”

Wildsmith jumped to his feet. “I’m anxious to try it, Hogg. I’ll strip to the waist. Where’s the bathroom?”

“Through the blue door and then to your left.”

Tom said, “You don’t have to strip to the waist. We’re not going to do anything except you sitting in a chair.”

“Let’s try one Hogg’s way and see what results.” Before Tom could reply Wildsmith went to the blue door and opened it.

“You’re sure you don’t want the goat?” asked Hogg, as he ate the kosher dill accompanying his sandwich. “Because I keep him here at the studio. In a cage. I used to have him at our place in Woodland Hills until my wife’s complaining made that impossible.”

“No goat,” said Tom.

“Why not have a snack while we’re waiting for Wildsmith? A snack helps you think. I had this food wall installed not so much for nutrition’s sake as to stimulate my thinking.”

After a few quiet minutes, Tom said, “Listen, we’re going to have to do the two book commercials as written.”

“Viewers won’t buy dullness.”

“Nevertheless,” said Tom. He waited another ten min—

utes and then left the commercial producer went through the blue doorway. He knocked on the men’s room door, opened it. The small, ivory-colored room was empty.

XVIII

THE DOORS of KWFN’s studio 6 stood open, and an usherette was on one knee gathering up the ripped off gold buttons belonging to her uniform coat. She smiled up at Tom and her bare left breast swung out through the coat opening. “This was more audience empathy than we’ve had all week,” she said, poking the large darktipped breast back away.

Tom stood on the threshold and scanned the interior of the studio. The hundred seats were unoccupied and the stage as well. “The News Therapy Show is over?”

“Yes, about fifteen minutes ago,” said the large, redhaired girl. “They hauled the last of the audience away, the ones who weren’t up to walking to the emergency ward, a couple minutes ago.”

“Did Alex Wildsmith take part in the show?” After searching around the neighborhood of the commercial studio, Tom had driven here to see if the android had decided to come and do the current events psychodrama.

“Oh, yes. Oh, my, yes.” The redhead stood, smiling, and both her breasts snapped out of her coat. “Mr. Wildsmith surely was here, and he was exceptional. Truly exceptional. You should have seen him as Water Pollution.”

“I thought he was going to be the migrant problem.”

“He did that, too. Then, after some prompting from sweet Mrs. Rubinoff, he switched roles,” the disheveled usherette explained. “He was stunningly brilliant and gave a performance which had the audience breathless

and on the edge of their seats. Unfortunately, they then left their seats and tried to mob him.”

“They mobbed you, too?”

“Yes, but they do that every day,” said the girl. “I’ve learned something about crowd psychology during my stint with Burton Hix and the News Therapy Show. A group of men will almost always grab at a statuesque redhead.” She pulled her scarlet coat shut, gold buttons rattling in her hand.

“I’m Tom Miley, Wildsmith’s public relations man. I came by to pick him up.”

“Oh, he’s gone, long ago,” said the statuesque girl. “He and that nice Mrs. Rubinoff left in a copter.”

“Did they mention where they were heading?”

The girl smiled. “To be alone someplace, I’d guess.”

“Who’d know where Mrs. Rubinoff is staying?”

“Burt Hix and his male secretary book all the guests.”

“And where’s Hix?”

“Over in the emergency ward with a contusion.”

“His secretary?”

“Up in intensive care,” said the girl. “We had a particularly responsive audience today, as I mentioned. Thanks mostly to your friend, Mr. Wildsmith.”

Inside the studio a broad, chunky man with closecropped, dark hair was moving up the main aisle toward them. “\$90 an hour plus expenses,” he said to Tom.

“Beg pardon?”

The red-haired usherette knelt to catch another gold button. “He’s Joseph N. Greenwich, another guest on today’s encounter. Joseph N. Greenwich, the prince of peepers, the king of the keyhole. You know?”

“I’m a dick,” said Greenwich. “I used to be a weight lifter, but this pays better. I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation with the young lady.”

“How could hear from all the way in there?”

“With this sound gun aimed at you two.” The chunky Greenwich showed Tom the buff-colored listening device

in his palm. “I’ve got \$200,000 worth of equipment. For \$90 an hour plus expenses I’ll locate Wildsmith.”

“Too much.”

“Make it \$45 and I’ll find him in half an hour,” offered the private detective.

Tom glanced from the kneeling usherette to the detective. “Okay, find him.”

Greenwich pocketed the sound gun and reached elsewhere into his hand-painted suit. “We’ll talk to my car. Come on.” He doubled swiftly and scooped up a final gold button the usherette had missed. Flipping it to her, he said, “Compliments of Joe Greenwich.”

The redhead raised her hands to catch the button and both her large breasts dropped once more out of

the scarlet coat. "Thank you, Mr. Greenwich."

The private detective chuckled and motioned Tom to follow him down the steps to the street. "In my line you'd think I'd see more than my share of teats. Yet I never grow tired."

"Of what?"

"Teats. T-e-a-t-s. Maybe they pronounce them tits where you come from," said Greenwich, trotting along the hot afternoon pavement toward the studio parking lot. "It's underworld slang for boobs. Teats." At the guardhouse on the edge of the private parking lot Greenwich yelled, "Draw!" and fell unexpectedly forward to the pavement.

"Bang! Bang!" said the old, uniformed guard, jumping from the metal shack and point a bent finger at the sprawled detective. "Beat you this time, Joe."

Greenwich frowned at his own chunky forefinger and got lopsidedly up. "You're too spry for me, Billy."

"Forty-two years with the Pinkertons before I took this position." The old man reached into the guard shack and caught a microphone. Into it he said, "Roscoe, your boss is here."

Greenwich brushed street dust off his hand-painted suit. He narrow his eyes and looked up into the hazy afternoon sky. "Roscoe is my automatic car," he told Tom.

Tires squealed and a long, low, eggshell white car shot up to the guardrail and stopped two inches from the retaining barrier. "Everything on the up and up, Joe?" asked the car. There was a speaker somewhere in its hood ornament.

Greenwich moistened his thumb and rubbed a smudge from the palm tree painted on the left elbow of his suit. "A client, Roscoe."

The old guard raised the metal barrier and Roscoe rolled out of the parking area and opened his rear door. "Hop in and we'll take a spin."

Tom entered the car first. The back of the big auto was partly filled with equipment, a miniaturized computer, small video screens and an assortment of other gadgets Tom couldn't identify. He sat in a black leather chair and waited until Greenwich was next to him and the car was moving along the boulevard. "Maybe this is too elaborate for my problem," he said to the chunky detective.

"Is it dame trouble?" asked Roscoe from a speaker in the ceiling.

"Concentrate on your driving," Greenwich told the car.

"Goddamn LA coppers," said Roscoe. "You can't even open up any more. I wish we'd work another caper down at the Springs. I can do one eighty on those desert roads."

"We're looking for a guy named Alex Wildsmith," said Greenwich.

"The pen pusher?" asked Roscoe, turning down a street lined with artificial palm trees.

A screen on one of the small back seat sets flashed on, showing Wildsmith taking off the shoe of a

handsome gray-haired woman. “Is that where he is now?” asked Tom.

“No, you’re seeing a tape of the news show,” said Greenwich.

“He undressed Mrs. Rubinoff on the news?”

“Only her shoes and socks,” said Roscoe.

“Our client here is Wildsmith’s public relations man.” Greenwich stretched back and crossed his legs, covering a caramel sunset with a view of the Golden Gate Bridge. “Wildsmith departed with Mrs. Rubinoff about twenty, twenty-five minutes ago. Our client would like to prevent an incident.”

“A shack up?” asked the automatic car.

“Wildsmith has a lot of personal appearances to do,” said Tom.

“I got the idea he likes private appearances better,” laughed Roscoe, passing a soy produce truck on the right. “Gooks shouldn’t be allowed to drive.”

“Find out where Mrs. Rubinoff is staying while in LA,” said Greenwich. “And whether she and Wildsmith are there now.”

“Okay, Joe,” said Roscoe. “Here’s something for you to feast your glims on while I’m checking hotels and such.”

On a second screen a pair of portrait photos appeared, profile and full face of a blond, curly-haired man. “Wait,” said Tom. “He’s one of the men who tried to run me down in Detroit. Where’d you get his picture?”

“It’s in my Wildsmith file,” answered the car, swerving to miss a chain of black cyclists.

Greenwich said, “Don’t mention this to any friends you have in government. We can sometimes siphon info out of a supposedly secret file. While you and I have been sitting here Roscoe’s been compiling a little dossier of background material on Wildsmith.”

“When you lay out \$100,000 for a buggy,” observed Roscoe, “you’re going to get a lot of extras.”

“Who is this guy in the pictures?” asked Tom.

“His name is Wilson Coveiro,” said Roscoe. “Age 36, height 5’6”. A citizen of Brazil, where he is wanted for armed robbery, extortion, espionage, treason and inciting to rebellion. He’s in the U.S.A. illegally. An agent for a

left wing terrorist group known as Pro-Brasil. He was picked up two days ago in Kansas City.”

“Pro-Brasil? Why was he following me and Wildsmith?”

“I don’t have any dope on that yet,” replied the car. “They got this bozo’s mug shots in one of the NSO’s files on your boy Wildsmith.”

“Want us to work on this new angle?” asked the private detective.

Tom said, "I'll have to think about it. You're sure there's nothing more on Coveiro? Nothing on another Brazilian, a tall guy with a moustache?"

"No sir," said Roscoe. "I do have a nice batch of book reviews just in. Wat to give a listen?"

"Not at all."

"'Unputdownable,' says the New York Times. 'A nasty piece of pseudo-pornographic tripe,' says the San Francisco Chronicle."

"Enough," cut in Greenwich. "Have you located Mrs. Rubinoff?"

"Sure thing." Roscoe sped around a turn in the road, and the Pacific Ocean appeared down below them. "The old broad has sublet a cabana here in Malibu during her stay on the coast. She's home now and was seen entering the joint with your double dome buddy about ten minutes ago. According to my various contacts." The car swung over to the curb and stopped. "Across the street on the next block. Fourth dump from the corner, with the gilt tile roof."

Greenwich touched the door handle. "You owe us forty-five bucks, Miley. Plus . . . how much for gas, Roscoe, and calls?"

"We'll toss the gas in free, Joe," said the car. "The communications costs come to ... \$13.80. On top of which there's a \$25.00 bribe for the pictures of the greaser from Brazil."

"Including tax it'll be \$92.18," said the private detec—

tive, as the door opened. "Want us to stick around and back up your play?"

Tom shook his head, tugging out his wallet. "Here's a hundred. Call it even."

"One, two, three, four, five." Greenwich counted the twenty dollar bills Tom handed him. "Thanks, and here."

Roscoe made a bell sound and a receipt fluttered out of a slot next to Tom.

Tom took the slip of blue paper and left the car, walking toward the bright Pacific Ocean.

XIX

As THE GLASS-WALLED, pressurized elevator dropped down through the twilight sea Mrs. Rubinoff said, "Think how much lovelier this would be without all the pollution."

"Did Wildsmith mention where exactly in Seadome he was going?" asked Tom.

The handsome, broad-shouldered Mrs. Rubinoff said, "Yes, yes. As I explained, Mr. Miley, while I was soaping off after that strenuous news experience Wildsmith decided to make a few calls. Half attentively, while the water in the shower coursed over my form, I heard him out in the living room of my cabana."

"He called Joaquim Vespas?"

The elevator hit bottom and opened onto a snaking, ribbed tunnel. A young man in a tinfoil jumpsuit was sitting on a stool at the tunnel mouth. "Five dollars each."

"Admission charge?" Mrs. Rubinoff pulled her wallet from back pocket.

"Part admission, part donation to the Seadome Squatters' Fund."

Mrs. Rubinoff gave him two five dollar bills. "I'm glad I'm seeing all this. You ought to use a bit of the money to clean up your ocean, though."

"It's not my fault, ma'am," said the young man, his suit making a crinkling sound. "I'm personally very neat. You ought to see what some of them flush out through the bilge pipes."

The governor of New York's handsome wife asked, "Where do we find a clandestine night club known as Slumgullion's?"

The young man shook his head and his suit crinkled. "You don't want to go there. I recommend Jape's Rendezvous as a much nicer place for the sort of quiet affair you two are up to."

"I'm not having a quiet affair," said Mrs. Rubinoff. "At least, not with this gentleman."

Tom asked, "Where's Slumgullion's?"

"Down the tube and left at tube B and into the first dome. You can't miss the first dome since it's the only one anywhere near finished. Slumgullion's is a blue geodesic dome midway across the first esplanade. I'd still go to Jape's, even if you're not having an affair."

When they were moving through the tube, Tom said, "You heard Wildsmith call Vespas and agree to meet him at Slumgullion's?"

Mrs. Rubinoff nodded her handsome head. "Yes, Vespas, the noted Brazilian novelist. Wildsmith kept addressing him as King, a fond contraction of the rather unwieldy Joaquim."

"Why didn't he stay with you?"

Mrs. Rubinoff cleared her throat and studied the ribbed wall. "He's very capricious sometimes, is Wildsmith. A restless man. Perhaps I was too direct. Basically, you see, I'm a highly physical person, sensuous. To little avail today, however. While I was rubbing a huge coarse towel over my flushed and tingling bare skin, Wildsmith made a date to meet King Vespas. Then, with a mumbled promise to see me again, he left me standing unclothed and unsatisfied in my bath cubicle."

"Maybe you ought to go back to your cabana, Mrs. Rubinoff. I'll find Wildsmith and get him back on schedule again."

Mrs. Rubinoff said, "No, I guess I'm still carrying the torch for the big lug. Do you younger people still use that expression, carrying the torch?"

"No."

"Carrying the torch is not a wise thing for a woman my age to do, a married woman," she said. "Fortunately

this is not an election year, and Slim isn't as perturbed as he might be. Slim is Mr. Rubinoff."

"The governor. Yes, I know."

The darkening ocean seemed to be pressing down on them now, tight against the clear walls of the high first dome. Sickly fish and tatters of seaweed slowly spun by above, in a jigsaw of garbage and refuse. "I'm getting a whole new perspective," said Mrs. Rubinoff.

To their left were a dozen smaller opaque domes, some serving as clubs and others as improvised hotels and hostels. About a hundred people roamed the noryl tiles of the Seadome esplanade, moving in and out of the smaller domes. "There's Slumgullion's," pointed out Tom.

There were at least another hundred people inside the place, a good percentage of them young. In the center of the main room stood a raised circular platform and on it was a bald boy of nineteen. He wore a handpainted, pornographic suit and was surrounded by electronic musical instruments. "Um, I'm your host," announced the bald, young man. "Um, wait. You probably can't hear me. Wait I'll get the mike plugged into the, um, gadget here. Okay, wait now. Um, yes, this is the right mike. Is it? Um, yes. Yes, this is the microphone I want." Feedback wanged through the club and then the boy's voice smacked out of the ten loudspeakers hung in clusters beneath the blue ceiling. "Is this better? Um, yes. Um, I'm your host, Slumgullion."

Applause and cheerful greetings rose from the crowd. Tom helped Mrs. Rubinoff down the three steps to the pseudo-cork floor and they both stood looking for Wildsmith.

"Yes, um, I'm a Slumgullion himself. Better known as the best, um, functioning, electrified, blue grass, one-man band on, um, the coast. You know? Um, for my first number on this set, folks, I'd, um like to do Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down?" First I'll, um,

get my electric tambourine tuned up. Oops, knocked over the table. Hold on, folks."

"There's Wildsmith," said Mrs. Rubinoff, clutching Tom's arm.

Far across the room Tom spotted the android. Wildsmith was grinning, drinking from a wineskin. He was at a small, square table with Joaquim Vespas and two blonde-wigged Japanese girls in muslin tunics. "Let's work our way over there," suggested Tom.

"Um, okay, there's the tambourine all fixed. No, wait, that's the wrong jack in the wrong hole. Just a second and, um, we'll do Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down?" I'll, um, simply unravel this cord here and wind it under the pianola and around the, um, thing here. The, um, harmonium. That should do it."

"Boa noite, Senhor Miley," called Vespas when he recognized Tom. "Ah, and Senhora Rubinoff. We haven't met since that charity festival in Albany, New York, last spring."

Mrs. Rubinoff elbowed her way closer to Wildsmith's table, unsmiling and silent.

"These, um, little wires are the ones, um, that always get, you know, entwined like so. We'll, um, have them all smooth in a second, and then I'll do my first number of this set, folks. Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down?" Carolyn, honey, who moved my favorite chair off the stand? I noticed it gone just now when I was crawling around behind the harp. Find it, huh? That's Carolyn, our best waitress.

Bring me, um, a glass of soymilk, too, Carolyn, if you pass the kitchen. No, I can't, um, really sing comfortably without my favorite chair. The, um, green one is my favorite, Look around."

"Join us, Tom," said Wildsmith. He was holding the rough-surfaced wineskin at arm's length, and a thin stream of red wine was spraying into his synthetic mouth.

"Do you know the Okamura twins?"

"No." Tom edged around a waiter who was carrying

three watercress sandwiches and a pitcher of dark ale. "We're way off schedule."

Wildsmith said, "The Okamura twins are in the animated cartoon business and run an animation sweatshop down in Tijuana."

"Daffy Duck," said one of the blonde Japanese girls.

"She means they make bootleg versions of American cartoons," explained Wildsmith while continuing to squirt wine into his open mouth.

"Bugs Bunny," added the other sister.

"I'd rather stand," Mrs. Rubinoff said to the large, moustached Vespas, who was offering her the other empty chair at the table.

"Forgive me," said the Brazilian novelist, "for pirating away our friend Wildsmith, Senhora Slim Rubinoff. I assumed you would join us eventually, as you now have. Bom."

Tom sat beside the android. "We still have to do the book commercials back at that nitwit screwie factory. And in one more hour from now you're due to light the match to a fireworks display on the roof of the Pickwick book store."

"In due time."

"Well, I may as well join you for one drink." Mrs. Rubinoff sat.

"Now, um, that takes care of the kazoo, doesn't it? Yep, kazoo all tuned and plugged into the proper amplifier. While I'm waiting for my favorite chair to arrive, I'd, um, like to tell you a little bit about the background of my first number, which is entitled 'Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down?'"

A new waiter stepped near the table. "Sim," he said. Or rather, yes, sir."

Vespas grinned. "A drink for the handsome Senhora Rubinoff and also for Senhor Miley."

"A glass of sparkling burgundy," said Mrs. Rubinoff, not looking at the android.

"Nothing," said Tom.

"Ah, Senhor Miley, join us for at least one drink and then I promise you—verdadeiramente—you and my dear friend Wildsmith can continue on your important rounds. Only my strong liking for this homin macho caused me to intrude myself into your very busy schedule."

Tom frowned. "By the way, where's Fat Jim Hannahan? Isn't he still watching out for you?"

Vespas laughed and his spiky moustache bobbed up and down. "Desculpe me, Senhor Miley. I have to admit I slipped away from the well-meaning scrutiny of your Senhor Fat Jim. In order that I might have a bit of unobserved fun. Entende me?"

"Certainly he does." Wildsmith lowered the wineskin to the tabletop and wiped at his spotted chin. "Tom is one of the most understanding public relations men I've ever met in my years in the book racket."

"Profession," said Tom.

The waiter was back with a glass of sparkling burgundy for Mrs. Rubinoff and a glass of light beer for Tom. "I took the little liberty, senhor, rather sir, of bringing you the specialty of the house to drink."

Tom accepted the beer. "Okay, thanks."

"I, um, suppose now I think about it . . . No, Carolyn, that's not the right chair, honey. Green. Um, yes, but not that shade of green. You must remember my favorite chair. I sit up here on it four sets a night. Um, yes. Now I think about Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down? I'm, um, not real certain there is much of a story behind it. Let me warm up the guitar and I'll just go ahead and, um, sing it for you folks."

"Felicidades," smiled Vespas, as Tom and Mrs. Rubinoff tried their drinks. He turned to the Japanese twins. "Who do you think is the most famous cartoon character in all of Brazil?"

"Popeye the sailor?"

Tom drank a third of the light beer and said to Wildsmith, "Come on, start extricating yourself."

"Um, there's a little pick I wear on this finger here.

Just a minute and, um, I'll get down and feel under the drum because I, um, think I see it there. Something that glistens like a, um, guitar pick. I'm getting it, folks."

Tom placed his glass on the table and brought both hands up. He placed them against his chest, inhaling sharply through his open mouth.

"Something?" asked Wildsmith.

"Um, there. I've at long last got my favorite chair. Thanks, Carolyn, honey. And, um, here's my pick. So now, folks, I'll do you my first number of this set. 'Wasn't It Sad When The Great Ship Went Down?'"

"Well," said Tom. Slowly and unavoidably, he tipped forward. His head slapped down into the tabletop and he lost consciousness.

XX

HE AWOKE ON an airplane. A small autojet rushing through clear midday. Tom sat up in his wide, black passenger seat, ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth a few times, clicked his teeth. "Have

the Brazilians got me?”

“They left you down in the dome.” Fat Jim Hannahan moved along the soft yellow aisle of the compartment. “I’m really sorry it took me so long to catch up with King Vespas.”

“Where is he?”

The chubby National Security Office agent said, “At the moment he’s eluding me again. Through we’re fairly certain he headed for Frisco.”

“San Francisco?” Tom worked at unwrinkling his clothes. “Is that where we’re bound?”

“Yes.” Fat Jim handed Tom a fax copy of a note. “Wildsmith left this message at your LA hotel.”

Tom caught the note between thumb and forefinger, didn’t look at it. “What happened to me at Slumgullion’s?”

“A drug in your beer,” explained Fat Jim. “Some kind of obscure, relatively mild, natural plant derivative. Found mostly in the Mato Grosso region of Brazil. They have lots of trees and plants in that part of the country and this . . .”

“When did you find me?”

Fat Jim watched the noon sky outside the ship. “Not until this morning, Tom. Actually, I’m usually pretty good at shadowing. But Vespas really got away from me.

I even taught a seminar in trailing suspects at the NSO Academy in Washington last year. Of course, there we used dummies.”

“Vespas took Wildsmith and Mrs. Rubinoff off someplace with him, after Slumgullion’s?”

“Along with two Japanese girls, according to my information. See, actually, it was Mrs. Rubinoff who told me where to find you. Wildsmith dropped her at a drivein group therapy center in Pasadena around dawn, and she, angry and a bit ashamed of having let them ditch you, put in a call to me. Because she’d heard you mention my name. With her contacts, plus her very close friendship with the secretary of ecology, she knew how to reach me.”

“You mean I was slumped over that table all night and nobody noticed?”

“Slumgullion’s is a very casual place. People who live outside organized society usually aren’t as fastidious as we are, Tom,” said the NSO agent. “When I reached the place after breakfast this morning, Slumgullion himself was just getting reading to sing his version of “Wasn’t It Sad When The Great Sip Went Down?” He’s a one-man band.”

Tom remembered Wildsmith’s note. ““Sorry you were feeling poorly. Looked to me like the classic symptoms of the bends, and we thought it best not to move you. Look up a good ship’s doctor when you get a chance. We saw a lot of this kind of thing in the Pacific during World War Deuce. King and I have a few errands to run up and down the lovely Cal coast. But never fear, I’ll meet you in SF in time for the television auction show tonight. Try putting your head between your knees and breathing with your mouth open. As ever, the Bard of Avon.”” Tom dropped his hand to the arm of his chair. He looked up at Fat Jim, frowning. “What exactly is Joaquim ‘King’ Vespas doing?”

The chubby government agent sat next to Tom, lowered his voice. "I know you've forgotten our old Phi Sigma Kappa handshake, but I'm hoping you still remember our vows of secrecy between brother and brother. Do you?"

"More or less. I couldn't recite them."

"I wouldn't ask you to." Fat Jim felt at himself and said, "If you weren't an old fraternity brother of mine, I wouldn't tell you this, since I actually took a solemn pledge at the summer White House this summer not to spread around these facts."

"The president confided something in you?"

"Not the president himself. It was pretty late and he'd gone to bed. This particular briefing was from the secretary of state. Still, we were at the summer White House, and so a certain sanctity surrounds my pledge to keep quiet."

Tom crumpled up Wildsmith's note. "Vespas is a ProBrasil agent?"

Fat Jim sat up. "Yes, but I only found that out yesterday. That's not what the secretary of state told us this summer. How'd you figure Vespas out?"

"I've reached the point where I'm suspicious of all Brazilians," said Tom. "What's his mission?"

"I'm not sure. Vespas apparently knew I'd been alerted about him and he slipped away," said Fat Jim. "Any guesses as to what he's up to?"

"Something requiring the help of Wildsmith."

"I'd guess the same." Fat Jim came across another memo in a pocket. "By the way, your ex-wife called you at your LA hotel. Nothing important, but she'd like you to return the call."

Tom shook his head. "I'm not returning her calls any more."

Fat Jim now located a notebook in an inner pocket. "Actually I was supposed to memorize and then eat these notes. I've been so damn busy these past weeks I haven't had a chance. Well, you know how these crosscountry publicity junkets are. It still annoys me Vespas was able to apparently carry on some kind of espionage

while supposedly plugging his damn book." He leafed through the small, brown-covered notebook with plump fingers. "Here we are. It seems the United States is aiding the Brazilian junta in its war with the insurgents in some ways not too widely known. Not mentioned in the news media. Now, Tom, don't promise me, mention this stuff to anyone. This isn't something I'm especially proud of."

"What's the United States giving them?"

"We're allowing the Brazilian army to field test a few, relatively mild, chemical-biological weapons."

"That's illegal, isn't it?"

Fat Jim nodded. "Which is why I feel sheepish telling you." He turned a page. "The thing is, most of these particular CBW weapons are being produced in an underground lab beneath the University of California at Berkeley. Whatever you do, Tom, don't mention any of this to any Cal students. You know how they are. Well then, the UC scientist in charge of this CBW project is a brilliant young guy named Dr. Pieter Churchill-Laan."

"Churchill-Laan. The name's familiar."

"He's due to appear on that fund-raising TV auction with Wildsmith at eight tonight."

"You let him run around loose?"

"To the world at large Dr. Churchill-Laan is a simple professor of allergic medicine," said Fat Jim. "Matter of fact, the one time I met him, he gave me a great spray gadget to use on my chronic case of Washington Pollution Nose. We allow him to move about openly so as to avoid suspicion. He's always carefully watched at any public event."

"Listen," said Tom.

"What?"

"Maybe you don't know this. Wildsmith is an android."

Fat Jim grinned. "I'm glad you told me, Tom. I did already know. This makes me feel the confiding isn't one-sided."

"How did you find out?"

"Actually we should have tumbled earlier. Except the fake background you people made up for Wildsmith is quite good," said the government agent. "We picked up one of these Pro-Brasil agents the other day, and in the course of his interrogation he mentioned the fact Wildsmith was a mechanical man. He's one of the most believable androids I've ever seen, I will say."

"Did the Pro-Brasil guy say what they have in mind for Wildsmith?"

Fat Jim replied, "Unfortunately, no. This particular agent, a fellow named Wilson Coveiro, had only the job of confirming the rumor Wildsmith was an android. He and his partner, whom we're still looking for, did that and dropped off your trail. They passed their info on to another pair of Pro-Brasil agents and were through. The other big piece of news we got out of this Coveiro is the fact that Vespas is working with them. His supposed sympathies with the junta were only a cover. I should have noticed."

Tom dropped the balled fax note to the floor as the plane began to circle into a landing pattern. "So you have no idea why Vespas wants Wildsmith with him? Or how the fact that he's an android fits in with their plans?"

"They have to be planning to get at Dr. ChurchillLaan," said Fat Jim. "They may try to snatch him, for instance. He'd give them a lot of information about what's specifically being used against the guerrillas down there in Brazil."

"And tonight Wildsmith and Churchill-Laan will both be on the KQED-TV fund raising auction." His hands fisted suddenly. "Hey, so will Magic Sam Sewlin and . . ."

“Cindy Haye,” said the chubby agent. “You’re fond of her, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” said Tom. “I’ve let this Wildsmith tour keep me from doing much about it, though.”

“If you can, without giving away any government secrets, persuade Cindy not to go near the KQED auc—

tion tonight,” said Fat Jim. “We’re letting ChurchillLaan go ahead and appear in hopes we can trap the Pro-Brasil people if they make a play. There may be some kind of trouble then, and she’ll be safer elsewhere.”

“I’ll call her when we land. She should be checked in at the St. Francis by now.”

“Good,” said Fat Jim. “I’m going to see if I can pick up King Vespas. You get to your hotel—the Mark, isn’t it?—and wait for Wildsmith. When he shows up, contact me.”

“If he shows up,” said Tom.

XXI

FRAGMENTS OF BERKELEY were visible through the thin afternoon fog on the Bay. Tom left the pixphone booth on the upper deck of the hydroferry and moved toward the rail to watch the ship glide into the Berkeley harbor. According to the robot switchboard at the St. Francis Hotel, Cindy was still in Marin County touring Muir Woods with Magic Sam and hadn’t called to pick up messages. “What can he agitate about in Muir Woods?” Tom said to himself, leaning against the noryl rail.

Wildsmith’s suitcase was in the room along with a note reading: “Doing the town. See you at the auction tonight. Yours, the Dean of American Letters.” Both had been delivered by messenger. After waiting an hour in his room and then searching up and down three of San Francisco’s seven hills for the android, Tom decided to cross the Bay and visit Wildsmith’s creator, Dr. Mackinson, to ask his advice.

Tom checked his watch again. “Almost five,” he murmured.

“Did you say it was nearly five o’clock?” asked a roundshouldered, slope-foreheaded man down rail from Tom. The growing fog had clouded his eyeglasses.

“Yes,” answered Tom. The hydroferry slowed and slewed slightly in making its docking approach.

“Means I’m going to be late for my lecture.” The sloping man removed his glasses and rubbed them against the sleeve of his three-piece, red, lumberjack style suit. “I supposed you’ve recognized me by now?”

“No.”

“Oh, really? I’m Professor F. E. Fergus. You’ve heard of me.”

“No, but then I live in New York.”

“I’m nationally known,” said Professor Fergus, returning his glasses to his wide nose. “Internationally known, for that matter. My work has been translated into eight languages, including Swedish. F. E.

Fergus.”

“Pleased to meet you, Professor Fergus.”

“My idea is,” continued the professor, “why teach young people a lot of crap about long dead authors. Especially when there are any number of good contemporary writers, fellows whose work has been translated into as many as eight languages, alive and kicking. You see?”

The ferry edged into its berth. “What course do you teach?”

“Myself.”

“Your own work?”

“Right,” replied Professor Fergus. “The official title of the class is Myself IA and Myself IB. My notion is, who knows an author’s work better than the author himself. Why allow a clump of shrabbish, dusty-minded academics to grub through your stuff? I told the regents, if you want to teach Fergus, get Fergus to teach it. I’ve had seventeen books published and have six more forthcoming.”

The shipped locked into its dock and a gangway eased from its side to the pier. “Novels you write?” asked Tom, walking for the exit stairs.

“I’m what they call a multimedia writer,” Professor Fergus told Tom, moving alongside him. “I always start my first lecture to the kids enrolled in Myself IA that way. Fergus is a multifaceted author, I tell them. Five novels under my belt, seven teleplays, six works on nonfiction, a book of crossword puzzles ... It would take an hour to tell you all my writing credits. Can I offer you a lift? My copter is over in the copter lot. I built it myself. Should you ever have a similar urge I’ll send you

a copy of my book *So You Want To Build A Copter?* What’s your name, by the way?”

“Not important,” said Tom. “I can use a ride, though. You’re heading for the vicinity of the campus?”

“That’s where I’m to give my lecture. I can let you off at the Hurford E. Stone Memorial Landing Field on Euclid Street.”

“My lecture today, if I ever get to the thing,” said the professor, as they moved down the hydroferry ramp, “deals with where I get my ideas. Can you guess where?”

“Out of the air.”

“You’re close.” Fergus pointed at the helicopter field next to the ferry piers. “There’s my copter, the lemon yellow one with the apple red racing strips. No, my ideas come to me from here, there and everywhere. I jot everyone down. In little appointment booklets I carry for the purpose. For instance, tonight before I make love to my lovely wife and turn in I’ll jot. “Met man on ferry, gave lift.” You must allow an idea like that to incubate and, in all good time, out comes a story or a poem. Perhaps a crossword puzzle.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever inspired a crossword puzzle before.”

“I’m not promising anything,” said Fergus, as he unlocked the passenger door of his yellow copter. “Right now you’re only a rough idea.”

XXII

PANORAMIC WAY began at the ruins of the old University of California football stadium and would up into low hills. When Tom reached the foot of the street, the campus chimes were striking the half hour, marking 5:30. The fog was settling in, and the day was thick and gray.

The walk to Dr. Mackinson's house took Tom nearly fifteen minutes. The house was two stories high, covered with loose redwood shingles. Small oak trees and tall yellow grass grew in the wide front yard. Tom coughed once and climbed the inclined flagstone path to the front door.

"The situation has changed," said Dr. Mackinson, opening the front door before Tom knocked.

"Since I called this afternoon?"

The tall Lincolnesque doctor stroked the mole on his cheek. "Perhaps," he said, ushering Tom inside, "perhaps you've been correct, and Wildsmith is indeed going blooey."

A brown cocker spaniel trotted up and licked Tom's hand. "Do I pet him or is he mechanical?"

"Half and half," said the doctor absently. "Wildsmith has been in communication with me."

"What'd he say?"

Mackinson stalked the long, brown-toned hallway and pivoted into the parlor. "He told me he was Portuguese."

Tom followed Wildsmith's inventor into the large, cluttered parlor. "Where is he?"

"I never programmed any Portuguese writer traits into

him," said the doctor. "Which is why I'm worried. Not that I had anything against the Portuguese as a people. However, they've provided few important best selling writers. The only one I came across in my researches wrote an account of being lost in Newfoundland in the sixteenth century and eating his shipmates."

Tom stepped over a sprawled black android and asked again, "Where was Wildsmith when he called?"

"Don't step on the MIQ," cautioned Mackinson. He carefully lifted another Negro android out of a wicker rocker, set it on the floor and slid the chair toward Tom with one slippered foot. "I'm building the Modern Jazz Quartet for a jazz buff in Arizona. This is John Lewis, and that's Milt Jackson you almost put your foot on. He has a tendency to fall over into his vibraphone. A little kink I have still to smooth out. Wildsmith? I don't know where he was when he called, and I couldn't persuade him to tell me. Some bar it appeared to be, where they were playing mournful songs in the background."

"Fados," said Tom.

"I don't keep up with popular music," said the tall, gaunt doctor. "Unless someone orders a popular music android, and then I research." He sat down suddenly in the chair he'd offered Tom. "Wildsmith called up to say good-bye."

“Good-bye?”

“He phoned not more than a half hour ago, looking quite rumpled,” said Dr. Mackinson. “Rumpled beyond the rumpling which I programmed into him. He told me he was going to make one final graceful gesture to avenge his people.”

“He means the Brazilian people?”

“The Brazilian guerrillas, yes.” The doctor slouched, hitting himself on the knee with a vibes mallet he’d found on the chair. “He told me some nonsense about the United States sending chemical-biological weapons to Brazil to use against the guerrillas.”

“That part is true.”

“It is? Well, I don’t watch the news much. Unless I get an order for a political simulacrum.”

Tom bent toward the seated doctor. “How is he going to avenge the guerrillas?”

“Going to kill Pieter Churchill-Laan, a fellow from the university. Why Pete I don’t know. Seems a nice enough young fellow, the few times I’ve met him.”

“Churchill-Laan heads Cal’s secret CBW lab,” explained Tom. “So they’re not going to kidnap him. They’re just going to kill him. But how?”

“With a bomb.”

“A bomb? Where are they going to plant a bomb?”

Dr. Mackinson’s eyes grew tearful. “They’ve already placed the device,” he said. “Inside Wildsmith. He babbled about a dear friend named King something, who introduced him to a couple of affable Brazilian electronics experts.”

Tom inhaled sharply. “That’s what they wanted him for. King Vespas softened him up and then had somebody work on him. They’ve turned him into a walking time bomb. It is a timed device, isn’t it?”

“So Wildsmith told me,” replied the Lincolnesque doctor. “At times he seemed almost himself. Yet I’m afraid they’ve done considerable damage to him in implanting that bomb, even though he assures me it’s a small one.”

“Did he tell you the time?”

“The bomb will go off at exactly 8:30 tonight.”

“Good Christ, right in the middle of the KQED auction,” said Tom. “I imagine Vespas didn’t figure Wildsmith was already half blooey and would call you to confide about the bomb plot. Have you contacted anyone to warn them?”

Dr. Mackinson rubbed his eyes. “I’m not exactly in a position to tell people Wildsmith is an android. Will you take the responsibility for that revelation, or do you want to check with Peg-Leg Wister and Swangler & Sons?”

Tom looked at the doctor. "We don't have to do that.

I'll take the responsibility." He walked to the pixphone and punched out the number Fat Jim Hannahan had given him.

A gun metal colored answering machine showed on the screen. "This is the National Security Organization, San Francisco Branch. Speak your piece."

"I want to talk to agent James Hannahan. I'm Tom Miley and this is an emergency."

"Your message has been recorded and is now being distributed," answered the large, square machine. "Your reply will be ready in 5 seconds."

"If James Hannahan isn't available, I'll talk to anyone who's working on the Pro-Brazil business."

"Your additional message has been recorded and is now being distributed. Here is the reply to your first message." The machine spoke next in a deeper voice. "Agent James Hannahan is out of the office and cannot be reached. Here is the answer to your second message." The voice changed again. "The National Security Organization cannot at this time acknowledge that it is in any way connected with the matter you mentioned. Any further inquiries or messages?"

"Yes. Tell NSO an attempt will be made to kill Dr. Pieter Churchill-Laan at 8:30 tonight, during the KQED auction. He has to be prevented from attending."

"Your message has been recorded and is now being distributed. Your reply will be ready in 5 seconds. Yes, here it is." The machine's voice was once again deep. "Please leave your name and number. You will be contacted as soon as an NSO agent is available to evaluate you and your information."

"Tom Miley," said Tom, adding the doctor's pixphone number. "How long will this take?"

"Your message has been recorded and is ..."

Tom hung up. "How can I reach Dr. Churchill-Laan?"

"Try the allergic medicine department. The number is 666-707839-5."

Tom punched out the numbers. To the young man

who appeared now, he said, "I want to talk to Dr. Churchill-Laan. It's an emergency."

"Oh, okay. Hold on," said the young man, who was thin and dark and wearing a white smock. He pushed buttons on his metallic desk and listened to something in his earphone. "Dr. Churchill-Laan is gone for the day. I think he's having dinner over in SF. If you want to get a look at him, he's helping auction off merchandise on KQED tonight around eight."

Tom said, "Find out where he's eating and call him. Tell him an attempt will be made on his life at 8:30."

The young man blinked, then laughed. "Oh, sure." The screen blanked.

Tom punched the St. Francis Hotel number. "Miss Cindy Haye's room, please." He told the robot desk.

“Hi, again,” said the desk. “You’re sure persistent Must be love in bloom.”

“Cindy Haye. It’s an emergency.”

“Give me a chance to talk, will you? Mr. Magic Sam Sewlin phoned in to say that he and Miss Cindy Haye will be going directly to the KQED auction. He picked up all the messages. Tough luck, huh?”

“If Miss Haye does happen to call, tell her not to go near the auction.”

“Don’t go near the auction. Got it, bye.”

It was now ten after six. “You have a copter, don’t you, doctor?”

“Yes. You think we’d better fly to San Francisco and try to intercept Wildsmith at this television auction?”

“Yeah,” said Tom. “I’ll call the SF police from your plane while we’re en-route. Can you bring along your oscillograph and whatever else you need to control him and patch him up?”

Dr. Mackinson left the wicker chair and tugged a large, black suitcase up off the floor. “I packed the oscillograph and some other gear right after Wildsmith called, in anticipation.”

Tom was already walking toward the front door.

XXIII

THE COPTER BOBBED through the foggy night. Tom turned away from the cabin pixphone. “So much for the bomb squad.”

At the controls Dr. Mackinson asked, “What did they say?”

“Same as the other San Francisco police I called. They get hundreds of bomb threats a day. Mine will be checked out as soon as possible.” Tom walked to the doctor’s small television monitor set and pushed the on button. “I see it’s already tuned to KQED.”

“The only thing I watch on television is the documentaries.”

“. . . new batch of auctioneers is coming on duty as the clock strikes eight,” said a smiling old man on the small screen. “Most of them don’t require introductions. First, here is that astringent graphic commentator on the contemporary mores and folkways of these United States, the inimitable Joe Chuck. Known and loved by all as the creator of Tiny Rube the Silly Midget.”

Joe Chuck stumbled into view, straightening his clothes. “That’s Tiny Boob the Hillbilly Midget, Herb. I want to say, by the way, I’m going ahead and volunteering turd my time to help this station in spite of that crowd of nasty demonstrators outside the studios.”

“Wai now, Joe. There are hundreds of folks milling around our studios here at San Francisco’s lovely Marina Green,” said the smiling old man. “Most of them, however, are simply KQED well-wishers, waiting to take their turn in the audience.”

“I’m talking prick about those bums with the signs reading ‘Kill Joe Chuck’ and ‘You’re No Satirist,

Joe,” said Chuck. “They’re already burning me in effigy out there.”

“Was that supposed to be you? I thought it was a pile of autumn leaves.”

“Everybody isn’t an artist or a caricaturist, Herb. Making a lifelike effigy is hard work, not bums’ work.”

“Well, I’m certain you’ll do a swell job in auctioneering off merchandise and services for San Francisco’s well-loved educational channel. I see a whole table of appliances just waiting for the Joe Chuck touch over there, Joe,” said the smiling old man. “Now here’s another fellow who’s always the center of healthy controversy. Since KQED is an educational station, I can tell you the name of his current bestselling cassette. Here then is Magic Sam Sewlin, author of *Kiss My Ass, Whitey*. And we’ve been able to persuade Magic Sam’s pert little publicity miss, Cindy Haye, to come out on stage and lend a hand, too.”

“Jesus,” said Tom, “she’s going to be right on target.”

“Looks like I’ll have to introduce our next volunteer auctioneers as a team, since they seem to be deep in conversation. So, reading from left to right, here are America’s favorite novelist, Alex Wildsmith, and the academic but affable Dr. Pieter Churchill-Laan.”

“Wildsmith’s got his nitwit arm around him.” Tom turned the set off.

“I perfected these blind landing instruments myself,” said Dr. Mackinson, his Lincolnesque face taking on a puzzled look. “This is perplexing.”

“Shouldn’t we be landing about now?”

“Yes, which is why I’m concerned.” The doctor’s gaunt fingers flicked over the copter’s control panel. “I’ve set things so we’ll land at public copter port 18, two blocks from the Marina Green and KQED. Except we don’t seem to be losing altitude.”

“We’ve only got twenty-five minutes to get there. Can’t you take over manually?”

“I suppose I’d better.” Mackinson pulled three switches and grabbed a rod in one knobby hand. “There, now I’ll figure how far we are from the Gree. . .”

The copter smacked down hard, humping along some unseen land surface, swaying and groaning and then making a swooping fall. The ship gave off great ripping sounds and tilted far to the left.

Tom was snapped across the aisle and his right knee smashed through the screen of the little TV set. Specks of blood and glass flurried up. Tom went bicycling back, his head thwacking into the arm of a passenger seat.

The copter was suddenly still and silent. “We’ve landed.” Dr. Mackinson tugged himself free of his seat belts and came lopsidedly back to Tom. “What shape are you in?”

Tom pulled up. Blood was on his lips and rings of light flashed in the air whenever he blinked. “Yeah, I’m okay. Get your nitwit equipment suitcase and let’s find out where we are.” He jerked himself out of the doctor’s grip and threw his weight against the safety exit. Nothing happened. Tom tried again and the door popped down and an exit tube billowed out into the foggy night. Tom jumped, went spiraling down the tube.

“The suitcase is giving off ominous rattlings,” said Dr. Mackinson, as he spun from the wrecked ship.

“We’re near the Bay anyway.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m standing knee-deep in water.”

“Oh, yes, so am I.”

Tom frowned around him. He jabbed one hand at the night. “Those lights floating in the sky on our right. That must be the Golden Gate Bridge.”

Dr. Mackinson had the suitcase up near his Lincolnesque head and was shaking it. “Our Wildsmith controlling equipment sounds much the worse for wear.”

Tom pointed to his left. “The Marina Green has to be down this way. Let’s go, doctor.”

Looking around in the spinning fog, Dr. Mackinson said, “I expect you’re right.”

Tom was running, splashing chill water. He made it to the shore and began jogging along gritty beach. “Yes, the Green is this way.”

They ran for five minutes, the equipment suitcase giving off cracked tinkling. “Not that we’ll be able to do much,” panted Dr. Mackinson.

“There’s the Marina,” said Tom, as he led the gaunt doctor up toward a strip of yacht harbor, where small boats rested in the mist.

The two of them worked their way over wooden piers and around pilings and then they saw a thousand people milling and shouting on the several acre stretch of grass that was the Marina Green. The KQED studios were in a yacht club type building built out over the dark waters of the Bay.

Tom saw now the anti-Joe Chuck signs and a scattering expressing support for Magic Sam. Around each entrance to the studios were clusters of uniformed policemen, wearing riot masks and carrying their stun guns at the ready. Stopping at the edge of the green, Tom said, “We’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“I doubt we can even get inside in time, through the crowds and the police.”

“Haven’t you got anything to contact Wildsmith from a distance, by remote control?”

“Yes, I brought a telemetric unit that I designed for emergencies.” Mackinson went down on one knee and tugged the suitcase open. He withdrew a square bright black object that was leaking machine oil. “Broken I’m afraid. We’d better approach the officers and attempt to explain the situation.”

Tom looked into the suitcase and grabbed up a piece of equipment resembling a small robot sewing machine. “You try at entrance A there, while I hit B.” Tom spun,

clutching the electronic mechanism, and ran toward a barrier of a dozen police.

“For the auction?” The policeman gestured at the mechanism with his stun gun.

“Yes, and if I don’t get the silly thing inside right away, there’ll be a dickens of a row at work tomorrow. Mr. Gump entrusted this to me and while en-route I took a spill off a cable car and I’ve had all sorts of other trouble.”

“I noticed you had a bloody knee,” said the cop. “Okay, I don’t like to see anybody, even a pansy, lose his job. Take the thing on inside, buddy.”

“Thank you so much.”

The policeman dropped out of the ring circling the entrance and took Tom to the metal dors. “This pansy is on the up and up,” he said to the two corporals at the doorway.

Tom smiled, showing them the mechanism. Inside he found himself at the rear of the broadcast studio, where the auction was going on. It was twenty-two minutes after eight. Between him and the stage were two hundred seated people.

“How much am I bid for this puissant thing, whatever it is?” Joe Chuck was asking, as he waved an electric crutch over his head.

“Ten dollars,” shouted a one-legged man in midaudience, jumping up.

“Twenty,” called Tom. He began running down the center aisle. “Thirty.”

“I hear thirty,” said Chuck. “Apparently some of you bums know more about this fart thing than I do.”

Wildsmith, rumped and wrinkled, was standing casually next to Dr. Churchill-Laan. Cindy was leaning against a lawn mowing cart some five feet from the pair. “Forty,” said Tom. He was nearly to the stage. “Fifty.”

“Here’s a guy who really wants this whatnot,” said Chuck, pausing to examine the crutch.

Tom dropped the mechanism he’d been hauling and

hurried up the side stairs to the stage. “Cindy,” he said, “get out of the way. He’s going to explode.”

“Tom?”

Tom dived past the auctioneering Chuck and went straight to Wildsmith. He caught the android around the waist and rotated him. “You nitwit son of a bitch,” Tom said. “Letting them put a bomb in you.”

“It’s my duty to my people.”

“You don’t have any people, you nitwit.” Tom pushed and Wildsmith went tumbling backward toward a fire exit. Tom pushed and shouldered, and he and the android went out through the doors. Police whistles were blowing in the studio, the audience was screaming and shouting.

Wildsmith fell down hard and his head thunked twice on the hard ground. Tom grabbed him again and dragged him further from the studio building.

The android shook himself once, blinked. “Tom, what’s wrong?”

“You know what’s wrong, you nitwit knickknack. You went and let that bastard Vespas plant a time bomb inside you.” A few yards away was the Bay.

Wildsmith put one hand over his synthetic eyes for a second, shaking his head. “A bomb inside me? I don’t recall that happening.”

Tom kept grappling the android nearer the water and further from the building. “Well, remember or not the thing is set to go off in about five minutes unless I can rip it out of you.”

Wildsmith said, “A bomb set to go off in five minutes? I wonder to what purpose.”

“To blow up Dr. Churchill-Laan. Vespas was sent from Brazil to assassinate him.”

Wildsmith held up a hand as Tom began tearing at the android’s clothes. “You won’t get it in time, Tom.”

“We’ll see.”

“Wait,” said the android. “Death cometh soon or late, and how can man die better than facing fearful odds?”

Or to put it another way, death opens unknown doors.”

“Stop running off your quotation tapes.”

“I mean,” said Wildsmith, “there’s no need your blowing up, too.” He swung his fist suddenly and hit Tom hard in the face.

Tom let go and fell.

“Ah, the deeper drink,” sighed the android. He left Tom flat on the beach and ran toward the water. He stepped in and splashed out from the shore.

Tom pushed to his feet, watching. It was almost 8:30.

Fifty feet from shore Wildsmith turned and touched his fingertips to his forehead in a salute. There was an enormous flash where he stood and a rumbling thunder sound. The fog split and tattered and then closed in again.

Tom was knocked back to the beach.

People were moving toward him from the back door of the studio. He heard the crunching of feet and murmuring. But he sat looking at the spot where Wildsmith had been.

A warm hand reached down and touched his. “You okay?”

“Yes, Cindy.”

“Listen,” she said.

“What?”

“I’ve been thinking,” said the lovely, freckled girl. “And I think I like you and I think it’s time for me to quit Magic Sam and the publicity racket.”

Tom started to say, “Profession,” but stopped himself.