

# Under the Hollywood Sign

by Tom Reamy

I can't pinpoint the exact moment I noticed him. I suppose I had been subliminally aware of him for some time, though he was just standing there with the rest of the crowd. Anyway, I had other things on my mind: a Pinto and a Buick were wrapped around each other like lettuce leaves. The paramedics had two of them out, wrapped in plastic sheets waiting for the meat wagon, and were cutting out a third with a torch. He appeared to be in the Buick, but you couldn't really tell.

My partner Carnehan and I were holding back the crowd of gawkers. A couple of bike cops in their gestapo uniforms were keeping the traffic moving on Cahuenga, not letting any of them stop and get out. But there were still twenty or twenty-five of them standing there—eyes bright, noses crinkled, mouths disapproving.

All except him.

That's one of the reasons I noticed him in particular. He wasn't wearing that horrified, fascinated expression they all seem to have. He might have been watching anything—or nothing. His face was smooth and placid. I think that's the first time I ever saw a face totally without expression. It wasn't dull or blank or lifeless. No, there was vitality there. It just simply wasn't doing anything at the moment.

And he was ... Don't get the wrong idea—my crotch doesn't get tight at the sight of an attractive young man. But there's only one word to describe him—beautiful!

I've seen my share of pretty boys—the ones that flutter and the ones that don't. It seems the prettier they are, the more trouble they get into. But he wasn't that kind of beautiful.

Even though the word is used these days to describe practically everything, it was the only one that fitted. I thought at first he was very young: nineteen, twenty, not more than twenty-one. But then I got the impression he was much older, though I don't know why, because he still looked twenty. He was about five-ten, a hundred and sixty-seventy pounds—one of those bodies the hero of the book always has but that you never see in real life.

His hair was red, or it might have just been the light from the flashers. There were no peculiarities of feature; just a neutral perfection. I've heard it said that perfect beauty is dull, that it takes an imperfection to make a face interesting. Whoever said it had never seen this kid.

He was standing with his hands in his pockets, watching the guys with the torch, neither interested nor uninterested. I guess I was staring at him, because his head turned and he looked directly at me.

I could smell the rusty odor of the antifreeze dribbling from the busted radiators and the sharp ozone of the acetylene and the always-remembered smell of blood. A coyote began yipping somewhere in the darkness.

Then a couple of kids got too close and I had to hustle them out of the way. When I looked back, he

was no longer there.

They finally got the third one out of the Buick. When they pulled him out I could see the wet brown stain all over the seat of his pants where his bowels had relaxed in death. The ambulance picked up all three of them and the wrecker hauled off the two cars still merged as one. Part of the mess was dragging on the street and I could hear the scraping for a long time. The bike cops did a few flashy turns and roared away. The crowd started to wander off, and Carnehan and I began sweeping the broken glass from the pavement.

But there was only one thing I could think of: I couldn't remember the color of his eyes.

Nothing much happened the rest of the night. We cruised the Boulevard a few times, but there wasn't anything going on. A few hustlers still lounged around the Gold Cup and the Egyptian, never giving up hope. There was no point in hassling them—they'd just say they were waiting for a bus, and we couldn't prove they weren't. It was a pretty scruffy-looking bunch this late in the morning. The presentable ones had scored a long time ago. You could probably get most of these with an offer of breakfast.

Carnehan reached behind the seat and pulled an apple from the paper sack he always kept back there. He took a bite that sounded like a rifle shot and then offered me one. "No, thanks."

"An apple a day keeps the doctor away." He grinned and took another bite.

"You're keeping the entire AMA at bay."

He laughed; partly chewed apple dribbled down his chin. He wiped it off with the back of his hand. I kept my eyes on the street. "Why don't you eat soft apples? They're quiet."

"I like the hard ones."

We stopped a car with only one taillight and gave the guy a warning ticket.

Then the sun was coming up. It was hitting the tops of the Hollywood Hills and illuminating the Hollywood sign. It looked decent from this far away. You couldn't tell it was made of rotting timbers and sagging sheet metal clinging in the wind. From here you couldn't see the obscenities scrawled on it.

We went back to the station, reported, and then into the locker room. The rest of the graveyard shift were wandering in, showering, and changing out of their uniforms. Cunningham has the locker next to mine. He had been on the Pansy Patrol and was wearing a shirt unbuttoned to the waist, no underwear, and pants so tight you could count every hair on his ass.

Wharton, one of the police psychiatrists, was leaning against the lockers talking to him. Doc was on his favorite theme again. He was telling Cunningham why he, Cunningham, was so successful on the Pansy Patrol. The fags recognized a kindred spirit; the fags always knew one of their own kind; if Cunningham would only stop fooling himself, just stop deluding himself that he was straight, just know himself, just start living a conscious life, he would be a happier, more fulfilled person.

I had been on the Pansy Patrol with Cunningham a few times and had seen him operate. I wasn't completely sure Doc was wrong. Cunningham was peeling off the tight pants and I watched in fascination, although I'd seen it before, as the sizable bulge in his crotch stayed with the pants.

Poor Cunningham.

He was standing there naked with a slight smile on his face, putting the pants neatly on a hanger, listening to Doc's clarinet voice. He looked a lot like the cop on *Adam-12*, whatever his name is, the kid. The boys had even called him "Adam-12" for a while until they got tired of it. I couldn't keep from comparing him to the guy I had seen at the wreck, but Cunningham didn't compare at all. He was just a good-looking kid with a slim, muscular body and not much equipment. But it didn't seem to bother him. He always grinned and said it wasn't size that counted, it was technique.

I took off my own pants and looked at myself. I wasn't as young or as good-looking as Cunningham, but I did all right on the Pansy Patrol. I was bulkier and more heavily muscled and hairier; I guess I appealed to the rough-trade crowd. I was never very comfortable without underwear, and thank God I didn't have to wear padding.

Wharton finished his catalogue of Cunningham's emotional failings. Cunningham looked at me and winked. "I don't really know anything about it, Doc, but maybe the reason I'm not interested in sex with another man is because I'm just not interested in sex with another man."

Doc's lips got a little tight and his face was slightly flushed. I knew Cunningham had been reading Kingsley Amis again and had probably maneuvered Doc into the whole conversation—and Doc was eminently maneuverable. I'd heard most of it before, so I got a towel and started for the showers.

Cunningham followed me and Wharton followed him.

"You're right, Cunningham, you don't know anything about it!"

I turned on the water and began soaping. Cunningham got next to me and Doc stood at the door, still talking. Cunningham looked at me and grinned and said loudly, "Sorry, Doc, I can't hear you with the water running!"

There were about ten other guys in the shower, grinning at each other. Cunningham leaned toward me. "Hey, Rankin, you notice how Doc always manages to look in the showers?"

I shrugged.

"According to him, everyone is either a fag or a closet queen."

"What about himself?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes and laughed. "Getting him to talk about himself is like catching fairies in a saucepan."

Carnehan came in, pitching an apple core into the wastebasket. I could see why he had never been on the Pansy Patrol. Then . . . I don't know why I thought of it, but the thought crossed my mind. I wondered what the guy at the wreck looked like naked.

I left the station and got into my five-year-old Dart. It looked like a nice day. There was enough wind from the ocean to clear away the smog. Of course, the wind was packing it into the San Gabriel Valley, but that was their problem, not mine. I went straight home and went to bed.

I was scrambling some eggs and watching *The Price is Right* when the phone rang. They were doing the one where the screaming dame has to zero in on the prices of two objects within thirty seconds. When she names a price, the MC says "Higher" or "Lower." This keeps up until she guesses the price. You can

get it in ten guesses maximum. She started at a hundred on a color TV and worked up ten dollars at a time.

"Hundred and ten!"

"Higher!"

"Hundred and twenty!"

"Higher!"

"Hundred and thirty!"

"Higher!"

She got to three-seventy before her time ran out. Dumb dame!

It was Carnehan on the phone. "Hey, Lou, Margaret wants you to come over for dinner tonight."

"Hell, Carnehan, I wish you'd said something this morning. I've already made other plans." You stupid jerk! Don't you ever wonder why your wife is always inviting me to dinner?

"Got a heavy date, Lou?"

"Something like that. Some other time, Carnehan." No other time, Carnehan. Margaret's a pretty good-looking dame for her age, but not good enough to take chances with. You didn't even notice how her hand stayed under the table all through dinner last time.

"Margaret says how about Wednesday?"

"I'll have to let you know later." And you never even had a suspicion about what goes on after you fall asleep in front of the TV, Carnehan. If you ever found out ...

"Okay, Lou. I'll remind you Tuesday night."

"You do that." And I'll have a good excuse ready. Not that I give a good goddamn if you do find out, but you could make a stink in the department. I don't want to lose my job, Carnehan. I like being a cop.

"Bye, Lou. See you later."

"Bye, Carnehan." I hung up the phone in time to see a granny-lady have an orgasm over winning a dune buggy.

I usually eat dinner about eight o'clock at David's. I know it's a fag hangout but the food's good and, since I let it be known I was a cop, the service is even better. I spotted him as I was leaving about nine. He went into the gay bar next to David's. It was called Goliath's, of course. I only glimpsed him from behind but I was sure of the red hair and body. Wouldn't you know he'd be a queer!

I paid my dollar and a quarter cover charge and went through the black curtains after him. I don't know what I was planning to do, but I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind. I stood for a moment, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the gloom and my ears to the plaster-cracking music. There were three

small stages with naked boys dancing on them, wiggling their little round butts for all they were worth. There were also five screens showing movies of naked boys doing everything it's physically possible for naked boys to do and a few things I would have thought impossible before I joined the force.

Then there were the customers. A few were at the bar and a few were scattered around but most of them were packed like Vienna sausages against one wall. There was plenty of room and no need for the press of bodies—no need but one, and the busy hands told what that was. A few watched the movies but mostly they watched each other. One of the dancers was waving around a hardon and was getting some attention but not much. A couple of dykes at the bar watched him. I guess this is the only chance they have to see one.

I spotted the back of the redhead in the middle of the mass, so I waded in. There's no way to move through something like that. No one can move out of your way; they're just as trapped as you are. You just wait and move with the current because the pack is in constant eddy as they move from one body to the next, trying to touch everything.

It was no more than thirty seconds before I felt feather touches on my ass. I thought about my wallet, but I knew that wasn't what they were after. I pushed away the first hand that closed on my crotch and saw a pout of disappointment flicker across a face in front of mine. I put my wallet in my shirt pocket anyway.

After five minutes and fifty gropes, I finally reached the redhead, but he was turned the other way. I was pressed against him and could feel his hard body. By pushing with determination, I managed to get to the side of him. He was standing face to face with another guy. Both of them had their eyes closed and their mouths slightly open, occasionally coming together in a lazy kiss. Their hands were out of sight, but I could feel the movement. It wasn't him.

This was one of the pretty ones. I might even have said beautiful if I hadn't seen the other one. But, like Cunningham, he was ordinary in comparison.

He opened his eyes and saw me watching him and he smiled dreamily. I felt a hand massaging my crotch but I couldn't tell for sure if it was him. I was so disappointed I didn't push it away. Then my zipper went down and fingers expertly scooped everything out. The press was so tight I couldn't even get my arms down, much less move away. Whoever was working on me was very good and I couldn't help getting it up.

*Jesus Christ!*

I had a wild urge to take out my badge and shove it in every face in sight. I enjoyed my mental image of the panic it would create. But I didn't do it. I forced my arms down, pushed the clutching hands away, closed my pants, and got the hell out of there.

When I went into the locker room about eleven thirty, Carnehan already had his uniform on, sitting there reading a copy of the *Advocate* and eating an apple. He looked up when I rattled my locker.

"Hey, Lou! You missed a great dinner."

"It couldn't be helped, Carnehan."

"Don't forget about Wednesday."

"I won't."

I took off my shirt and remembered my wallet was still in the pocket. I put it on the shelf and took off my pants. I grabbed a towel and headed for the shower. I felt clammy. I must have sweated off a pound in that damn bar. Those groping bodies can generate a lot of heat.

Carnehan laughed out loud. He came toward me waving the newspaper. "Hey, Lou! Did you see this cartoon in the *Advocate*?"

"Why in hell would I be reading the *Advocate*?"

"Look, there's these two cops standing before a judge with a handcuffed fag and a hooker. One of the cops is saying, 'But Your Honor, you can get *hurt* chasing robbers and murderers.' Isn't that a scream?"

"Ha ha," I said and went on to the showers. He started rushing around the room showing it to everyone else.

I was almost finished when Cunningham came in. He turned on the water and stood under it, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed and a sappy grin on his face.

"You look like the cat that swallowed the aviary," I said.

He sighed. "I am *exhausted!*"

"Let me guess from what."

"I met the most *fantastic* girl! A waitress at the Hamburger Hamlet on the Strip. I'm gonna give it two weeks and, if I'm *still* alive, I'm gonna propose." He rubbed his hand between his legs. "I tell you, Rankin, I didn't know I had it in me. Boy, I'd like to see Wharton try to convince *her* I'm a repressed homosexual."

I laughed dutifully. He began soaping and glanced down at me.

"You look a little shriveled up yourself. Have a big night?" He grinned good-naturedly, wanting to share his sexual excitement.

"Yeah. Some women are just as happy with size as they are with technique."

He looked a little wistful for a moment, then the grin returned. "Shit! If I had your size and my technique, I'd quit the force, put an ad in the *Free Press*, and open a screwing service."

And I wondered about *him* again. With that face and that body, did he worry about size and technique? How did women react to him? Were they intimidated by his beauty? Was he as beautiful in bed?

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I saw him going into the Vogue Record Shop on the Boulevard. This time there was no mistake. I told Carnehan to park the car and meet me at the entrance. When I went through the turnstiles, I saw him leaning against the end of the counter. I walked into the book department and watched him from behind a

rack of paperbacks.

He had his back to me and it took me a moment to figure out what he was doing. The cashier was playing the *Symphonie Fantastique*—it was the passage where the two shepherds are calling to each other on their flutes and, at the end, one doesn't answer—and he was standing there listening to the music. Then he turned slightly and I could see his face.

I could feel the skin crawling on the back of my neck.

It wasn't the same one!

It was all there: the red hair, the magnificent body, the neutral beauty of the bland face. But the features were different. He had to be the other one's brother, they were so alike.

The lights in the store were very bright. No one else was in the place but the cashier and she had her nose in a paperback volume of Toynbee. His clothes were clean and neatly pressed, but they were old and hadn't cost much when they were new. His hair was neat and not very long. His face was so smooth I doubted that he shaved. And his eyes were gray—just as beautiful and as neutral as the rest of him.

Finally the record ended and he left. I glanced at the book I had been holding. The cover was a photograph of Burt Reynolds standing with his back to the camera looking over his shoulder. He was wearing nothing but a football jersey, with his bare ass hanging out. I closed the book, put it back on the rack, and for some reason thought of Betty Grable.

The cashier never even looked up when he went out. Carnehan, standing on the sidewalk looking confused, never glanced at him as he walked by. The girl was watching me. She smiled but her eyes were guarded.

"Did you know the man who just went out?" I asked, trying to sound casual.

She glanced out the door, but he had turned left toward Las Palmas. She looked back at me. "I don't think so, officer. Did he do something?"

"No. I just thought I'd seen him before. Maybe in the movies or on television."

She shrugged. "Movie stars come in here all the time. Jo Anne Worley was in yesterday. Wendell Burton comes in every once in a while."

"Thanks." I left before she could give me a complete catalogue of the celebrities she'd seen. She raised her voice as I went out the door.

"Chad Everett was in a couple of weeks ago, but I was off that day."

I looked down the Boulevard but didn't see him. I told Carnehan to wait for me and went after him. At Las Palmas I looked in every direction, but there was no sign of him. The hustlers standing around the Gold Cup pretended to ignore me, but a couple of drag queens gave me defiant looks.

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There was another bad one that night on the off-ramp at Western. Four cars were scattered half a block. There were seven dead and two others who probably wouldn't see morning. And there were two of *them* in the crowd. Two different ones.

I motioned Carnehan over.

"Yeah, Lou?"

"Carnehan. See those two guys over there, the ones with red hair?"

He looked confused. "Where?"

"You see the black dame in the yellow dress? The one with pigtails all over her head that make her look like an upside-down johnny brush?"

He snickered. "Sure."

"One of them is standing right beside her. On her left. You see him?"

Slowly: "Yeah."

"What does he look like?"

He looked up at me. "What d'ya mean?"

"No! Keep looking at him!" He looked back. "You still see him?"

"Yeah."

"Describe him to me."

He thought for a moment. "Don't forget. Tomorrow's Wednesday. Margaret's expecting you for dinner."

"*Carnehan!* Concentrate on the redheaded guy. Don't think about anything else. What does he look like?"

"I don't know. He's just a guy."

"How old is he?"

"It's hard to tell. The light's not too good."

"Is he under thirty?"

He considered. "Yeah."

"Under twenty-five?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd say so."



"Under twenty?"

He was silent for a moment. Good old Carnehan. His little pea brain was doing its best. "Maybe ... but probably not."

"What about his face?"

"What about it?"

"Is it an ugly face?"

"No."

"Is it a handsome face?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"How handsome?"

"Golly, Lou."

"Very handsome?"

"Yeah."

"Better-looking than Cunningham?"

"Yeah." His voice suddenly got excited. "Hey, Lou, is that a movie star or something?"

We went through the whole thing again with the other one. Carnehan finally saw them the same way I did, but he couldn't remember the one at the record shop. Later I asked him if he remembered the two good-looking redheaded guys.

"Sure. How could you forget somebody who looks like that? Especially when there's two of 'em. Hey, you suppose they're twins?"

"Are they still there?"

"Naw. They musta left," he said, looking right at them. "Don't forget about dinner Wednesday night."

Then they both turned and looked at me with their expressionless eyes. Or were they expressionless? I thought I saw recognition and speculation, but I wasn't sure. Carnehan was right. The light *was* bad.

They kept us hopping the rest of the night. We'd barely get through with one before we were sent to another.

An old hotel on Vermont burned to the ground. Half the department was there, keeping the curious out from underfoot, rerouting traffic. My eyes were burning and watery from the smoke, but it didn't keep me from seeing them.

I counted seven. Seven beautiful redheaded young men with perfect bodies.

I leaned against my locker in pure exhaustion, wondering if I should take a shower. I was grimy from smoke and dust, but I was so tired I only wanted to go to bed. Cunningham came in, looking as beat as I felt.

He looked at me and sighed, shaking his head.

"What are you doing in uniform?" I asked, not really caring. "You off the Pansy Patrol?"

He started undressing. "Yeah. They called us in about three. What got into people last night, anyway? Seems like everybody was trying to get themselves killed."

The same thought had crossed my mind, but not seriously. I had other things to think about.

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Margaret called herself the next afternoon to remind me about dinner. But I'd already laid out my plan of action.

"I'm sorry, Margaret. I was just about to call you. I'm leaving for Texas in about two hours. My father is very ill, and I've taken a leave of absence from the department."

"Oh, Lou, I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, thank you, Margaret. Everything's taken care of."

"At least let me drive you to the airport."

"I'm not flying. I'll need my car when I get there."

"How long will you be gone?"

"I don't know. My father isn't expected to live ..." I let my voice break a little. "Say so long to Carnehan for me."

"Of course, Lou. You're sure there's nothing I can do?"

"No. Nothing. Good-bye, Margaret."

"Bye, Lou, dear."

Well, it wasn't *all* a lie. My father had taken three months to die seventeen years ago when I was in high school, but nobody out here knew that. The lieutenant hadn't much liked the idea of giving me an indefinite leave of absence, but what could he do? I packed enough supplies in the Dart to last two people six weeks, paid my landlady two months in advance, drove up La Brea to the Boulevard, and put my car in the underground garage near Graumann's Chinese. I walked down to the Vogue and caught a double feature.

It was dark when I came out. I could hear sirens in several directions. I got in the car and drove to David's for something to eat. All I had to do was get in one place and wait, no driving around, no taking extra chances of being seen.

I had almost finished eating when I heard the sirens. I didn't pay much attention because there would be plenty of time and plenty of sirens, if tonight was anything like last night. When I came out of the restaurant there were little bunches of people standing on the corners looking south down La Brea. I walked over and saw a crowd around the Gordon, standing in that tense way they do when somebody's had it. This was going to be a lot easier than I'd thought.

I crossed over Melrose past the camera store and eased my way through the press of bodies. The colored neon of the marquee made the blood look black. The guy was under a blanket, flat on his back on the sidewalk, one brown hand poking out from under the edge. The hand had blood on it, and a spot had soaked through the blanket. More of it was smeared around on the concrete.

One of the cops talking to a couple of people was named Henderson. I only knew him vaguely, so he probably wouldn't know I was supposed to be on my way to Texas. I began sorting through a number of excuses for my delay just in case.

He saw me and waved. The patrol car was behind him at the curb, the flashers turning hypnotically but losing out to the bright marquee. A young Chicano sat in the back seat looking dazed and surly. He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand and I saw the glint of cuffs. A girl was hunched in the front seat weeping.

Henderson finished with his witnesses and started toward me. "Hello, Rankin. Don't you get enough of this on duty?"

"Just passing by. What happened?"

He groaned and shook his head. "Couple of kids in a knife fight over a señorita. Wonder if she was worth it."

"The way she's carrying on, the wrong one musta lost."

"Yeah." Another siren approached. "Here's the ambulance. See you around, Rankin." He walked away, being very official, moving the onlookers back another inch.

I looked over the crowd and saw him almost immediately. He was about twelve feet from me, his eyes on the blanket. As usual no one was paying him the slightest attention. I edged toward him as they put the body in the ambulance. The crowd began drifting away, but I kept my eyes on that beautiful boy. I wasn't sure if I had seen him before, they all looked so much alike.

He turned and walked north on La Brea. I followed him across Melrose. A few people were still milling around the intersection, but I couldn't let him get too far away from my car.

I overtook him, touched his arm, and said, "Excuse me." I had my badge in my hand when he turned with a startled look.

My face was only a foot from his. I saw the clear, healthy skin and the bewildered gray eyes that looked at me with recognition. All the artists for the last thousand years have been trying to paint that face on angels, but their poor, fumbling attempts never came close. It was only for an instant, but I had to look

away or be overwhelmed.

The traffic on La Brea moved by us silently, like a movie with the sound turned off. But, oddly enough, I could hear the hum and click of the traffic lights as they changed. I realized I was still stupidly holding my badge in my hand and put it away. I forced myself to look at him again.

"Will you please come down to the station with me ..." My voice cracked. Come on, Rankin, get hold of yourself! "It's purely a routine matter."

"What do you want?"

It was only four words, but I realized I'd never heard one of them speak. How can you describe music to a deaf person? Any actor in the world would trade his prick for that voice. My own words stopped, and we looked at each other. Get your shit together! You're acting like some poor fairy who's just been propositioned by Robert Redford.

"I can make ... this official if you refuse to cooperate." His shoulders sagged slightly. He nodded.

He followed me to the Dart without protest. I had been a little worried because I wasn't in uniform and wasn't in a squad car, but he didn't seem to notice. I had my revolver handy when I handcuffed him to the door handle, but he sat slumped in the seat looking at nothing.

I took the Hollywood Freeway to the Pasadena Freeway. I was going down Colorado Boulevard when he said, "Why are you doing this to me?"

I glanced at him, but he was still looking at nothing. I almost turned the car around. I wish I had, but I didn't.

He didn't say anything else as I got on the Foothill Freeway and headed east through the San Gabriel Valley. It was almost dawn when I pulled off the pavement winding up Mt. Baldy. I opened the gate to the gravel road down the canyon. I drove through and put on the padlock I had brought with me. I drove up the canyon a couple of miles until the road ended at a cabin. It belonged to a director friend of mine who was on location in Jamaica and would be for several months. He'd let me use it before. Besides, what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

I had to break a window to get in, but that could be fixed. I'd brought a pane of glass and a cutter. I turned on the electricity at the meter box and took him in. I took the chain I had brought, handcuffed one end to his ankle and the other end around the commode. Now he could use the bathroom and the bed, but the chain wasn't long enough to reach the bedroom door or the window. He didn't complain through any of this. He acted as if he didn't even know I was there.

I unloaded the car, put on a pot of coffee, scrambled some eggs, and tried to get him to eat something but he wouldn't. I finished eating, unpacked my clothes, took a shower in the other bathroom and went to sleep in the other bedroom.

He still wouldn't eat when I woke up. I took another shower and shaved. I moved a chair just out of the limit of the chain—he hadn't given me any trouble, but I wasn't taking chances—and sat down to watch him.

He was still sitting on the side of the bed, where he'd been when I put on the chain, his magnificent body relaxed and his beautiful face calm. His cheeks were as smooth as ever. I knew for sure he didn't have to

shave. His hands were folded in his lap and his eyes seemed to be on them. For two hours he didn't move except for gentle breathing. I didn't realize so much time had passed until the room began to get dark.

I turned on the lights and went to him, holding out my hand. "Give me your wallet." He acted as if he hadn't heard me. "Give me your wallet," I said again, louder.

He looked up at me then, puzzlement in his eyes. "I don't have one."

"Stand up," I said. He hesitated for a moment, then stood. I went over him quickly. He was telling the truth. He had no wallet; nothing but empty pockets.

I returned to my chair and sat, watching him. He stood where I had left him, stood as calmly as he had sat. "How many of you are there?" I said. He didn't seem to hear. "Look, we might as well get a few things straight. You're gonna tell me everything I want to know. We can do it easy or we can do it hard. It's up to you."

He stood for a moment in the same position, then looked at me. "I don't know." His voice still made the hair on my arms stand up.

"You must have some idea. A hundred? A thousand? Ten thousand? A million?" He shook his head. Maybe he wasn't going to let it be easy after all. I let it go; there was plenty of time. "I can fix you something to eat if you want. I'm not trying to starve you to death. Aren't you hungry?" He said nothing.

"Look! It won't do any good to go on a hunger strike. Not one damn bit of good!" No response. I used my buddy voice. "You can have anything you want. Just name it."

He looked at me quickly. "I want to leave."

I laughed. "Anything but that."

He looked back at his hands. "I would like to bathe."

"Sure. Go ahead."

He moved his foot; the chain rattled. I dug the key out of my pocket and pitched it to him. "Unlock the cuff and throw the key back." I picked up the revolver. He unlocked the chain and tossed me the key. He started for the bathroom.

"Wait!" My heart was beating too hard. "Undress in here and leave the clothes." My mouth was dry and I swallowed. He took off his shirt and hung it on the back of the chair. He took off the shoes and socks and the pants and jockey shorts. His back was toward me, but it wasn't modesty. He just happened to be standing that way. Michelangelo, you bumbling incompetent! If you could see this, you'd take a hammer to all those misshapen pieces of rock you spent so much time on.

He took a step toward the bathroom. I made a croaking sound in my throat. I tried again.

"Stop!" He stopped. "Turn around." He turned. I felt the blood singing in my ears. I don't know how long I looked at him. He stood unselfconsciously, totally unconcerned by my staring or his own nakedness. There wasn't a blemish on him. Light reddish-gold hair was scattered on his arms, legs, and chest. You could hardly see it until it caught the light. There was a darker, thicker patch of pubic hair, and he was

uncircumcised. He wasn't as large as me, or as small as Cunningham. Either way would have been wrong, out of proportion, a staggering flaw. My own that I'd always been so proud of—it seemed now gross and mutilated. I felt the pressure of it and realized I had a hardon.

The gun was pointing at him. What would he look like with a bullet there? Nothing between those perfect thighs but blood. Would he writhe screaming? Would that inhumanly placid face show human agony? "Get out of here," I said.

While he showered, I put the clothes in a grocery sack and stuck them in the closet of my bedroom. When he came out of the bathroom, he looked at the empty chair, then at me.

"You won't need them. Put the cuff back on." He sat in the chair, snapped the cuff around his ankle. I could take it only for an hour. I got my bathrobe and tossed it to him. He put it on, but only because I told him to. It didn't seem to matter to him one way or the other.

I wondered if he had ever smiled. What would those perfect lips look like with a big, happy grin on them? I could feel goosebumps popping out on my arms.

. . . . .

For three weeks I watched him do nothing. He sat in the chair and sometimes lay on the bed, but I never saw him sleep. I watched him and asked questions, but the only things I learned for sure were: he didn't eat or use the toilet. He ignored me except when I forced him to answer a question. And the answers were usually meaningless.

Some days neither of us said a word. I would just watch his face and never tire of it, the way you never tire of looking at a perfect piece of art. Then, suddenly, it would be night again. He bathed every day, but I never let him remove the robe until he was in the bathroom. I didn't want to go through that again.

Sometimes I would force him to speak—not because I expected to learn anything, but because I wanted to hear his voice again. I was trying to find out what he did when he wasn't siren-chasing. I said something inane like: "Why aren't you in the movies? You wouldn't even need talent; with your looks you could make a fortune. The movies or television would eat you up."

He turned his head toward me. "My looks?"

"Don't you know how beautiful you are?"

"I'm ugly." His fantastic voice colored the words with subtle shades of despair. "Everything is ugly."

I studied him closely. I think he believed what he said. "Don't you want to be rich? Don't you want the luxuries of life?"

"There's no point."

"Why not?"

"We're here such a short time. There's no point in gathering possessions. There's no point in anything."

And there's not enough time."

"Not enough time?"

He had drifted off in a reverie. "A very short time—but it seems like forever." Impatience, hope, futility, expectation, anticipation; the voice showed it all.

"But how do you pass the time? What do you do?"

I think he sighed. "We wait," he said. "We wait."

"What are you waiting for?" I yelled in exasperation. He didn't answer. I knew better than to continue with a frontal attack. I backed up and started in at a different angle. "You said, 'We wait.' Are the others like you?"

"Yes."

A thought occurred to me. "Do they know you're here?"

"Yes."

"Why don't they try to rescue you?"

"They're afraid."

"Afraid? Of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You're dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes. They would do anything to prevent premature interruption of the cycle."

I started to ask what the hell he was talking about, but I knew it wouldn't do any good. "How am I dangerous?"

"You can see us."

"Do you know why I can see you?"

"No."

"Am I the only one?"

"The only one we know of now."

"Now?"

"It's happened before."

I changed directions again. "Are you afraid of me?"

"Yes."

"Why? I haven't hurt you."

"There is danger that you will interrupt the cycle."

"Why did you come with me so passively?"

"I couldn't believe you would do this to me." Again subtle shadings of accusation, hopelessness, and sadness in the beautiful voice. He turned his head to look at me. For an instant, the barest instant, I felt like a real son of a bitch. Then he looked away. He sat on the side of the bed, my bathrobe too big for him, the chain snaking into the bathroom.

Don't get the idea that he had become an unexpected chatterbox. That conversation is a distillation of three weeks' questions and silences.

About a week later, I went during the night to check on him. I hadn't been sleeping very well. My mind was full of wild, impossible speculations. I won't go into them, but they consisted of men from Mars and other equally incredible flights of fancy. I started to put on my bathrobe but remembered he was wearing it. I tiptoed down the hall stark naked hoping to catch him doing something—doing anything.

The door to his room was always left open. I looked in cautiously. I couldn't see him anywhere. I turned on the light. He was pressed against the outside wall of the room, my bathrobe crumpled at his feet. His arms were outstretched to bring as much of him against the wall as possible. He didn't seem to notice me, but then, he never did. I went to him and saw his face, the side of it flat against the wall. It was no longer expressionless. It was filled with the most overpowering hopelessness I had ever seen. I felt my throat constrict.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

He didn't answer for a moment—not because he was ignoring me as he usually did, but because he was preoccupied. Then he said, very softly, in a voice caressed by a cold, bleak wind: "The small creatures in the forest; their deaths are so tiny and insignificant. There's hardly any life energy at all."

Then he really was aware of me. I saw him retreat until the eyes and face were neutral. I bellowed and slapped him as hard as I could. I remembered them standing around the wrecks. He fell to his knees, the crimson print of my hand on his face. I pulled him up by his armpits and looked into his empty face.

"Stop hiding from me!" I screamed and slapped him again. He slumped against me and my arms were around him, holding him up. Our naked bodies were together, exciting me. The blood rushed to my groin and my erection was painful. He was there, in the eyes, not completely, but there. I put my mouth over his. He neither drew away nor responded, but his bruised lips were sweet and I didn't want to stop.

I had been looking at his placid face for a month. I knew he was capable of emotion if he would let it show. He hadn't uttered a sound or responded in any way to physical blows. He had to have a breaking point somewhere. I pushed him onto the bed on his stomach. The chain rattled. I rammed into him, trying



to hurt him. He was tight, very tight. It must have been painful, but he didn't cry out or even moan. It had been a long time since the last time—a month—too long. It only took a dozen strokes, my pelvis pounding against the flawless flesh of his buttocks, before I came. I shouldn't have waited so long. It burned.

I lay on him for a moment, then reached and pulled his face around. It was vacant. I withdrew, still hard. I pulled him into a sitting position facing me. That beautiful face. That beautiful, bland, bruised face. I put my hands on either side of it.

"Don't hide from me. It doesn't do any good. I can see you. I can see you!" He swam to the surface and looked at me. "Did you enjoy it? Did you even feel it?"

"Yes."

"Did it feel good? Did it hurt?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you groan? Why didn't you scream? Why didn't you beg me to stop? Why don't you get mad? Why don't you curse me? What's inside you?" I put my hand on his breast and felt the hard nipple against my palm. "Do you have a heart? I can feel something in there. Is it a heart? What would I find if I got a knife and slit you open? Do you have sexual feelings at all?" I grabbed his penis and squeezed. It was soft but firm. "Has it ever been hard? You don't piss with it. What do you use it for?"

I put his hand on my tingling erection. He didn't pull away. It just lay there. "That's what it's for. That's how a human uses it!" He started going away again. I slapped him. "Stay with me. Stay with me every second." I pushed him on his back. The chain clattered on the floor. I hooked his knees over my shoulders, watching his eyes the whole time. He tried to go away a few times, but I slapped him back. I took a very long, slow time and I enjoyed the hell out of it.

The next morning I drove down the mountain to the village and phoned the Department. With direct dialing you can't tell where a long-distance call is coming from. My father was worse and not expected to live much longer. Yeah, too bad. I shouldn't be away much longer. Good-bye.

I started going to him every night. I hadn't meant to, but I couldn't sleep without him. He didn't go away anymore and I didn't have to slap him. The bruises on his face faded finally. He was there all right, but that was all. I never succeeded in bringing emotion to his face.

Finally I began sleeping in the same bed with him, touching him all night, feeling his hard nipples under the palms of my hands.

He woke me one morning, moaning. The window was gray with light, and I could see his mouth moving. I touched his face. It was hot and dry. He spoke, and the music in his voice was muted. "Why have you done this to me? I never harmed you. I've never harmed anyone. All we ever want is to survive until the birth."

"What's wrong with you?"

"It's time. The end of the cycle. The birth."

"Isn't that what you've been waiting for?"

"I'm not strong enough. I haven't collected enough life energy."

"I'll let you go. I'll take you back to LA"

"It's too late. Too late."

He never said anything again. I watched him for three days. His fever got worse, and the life went from his vibrant flesh. His skin flaked away in gray scales. He was struggling with all his might against something. I don't know what. But in the end he failed. His moans were so piteous that I had to put my hands over my ears. But I couldn't take my eyes off the disintegration of that magnificent creature.

And that's all he was, wasn't he? A creature. Something not human. It wasn't my fault that, by some fluke, I could see them. I didn't know this would happen. He never told me. On the second day a hump began forming on his back. He was curling more and more into a fetal position as the hump forced him over. He began bleeding at the mouth. I put the shower curtain under him. When I rolled him over, my hands got covered with something like ashes.

On the third day he began to quieten, and I knew it was almost over. He hadn't moved in several hours except for ragged breathing. There was a sharp cracking sound, like Carnehan biting into a new apple, only louder. The now ugly body trembled violently for a few moments, and then nothing. He lay facing me, his eyes open, the color of clay. The breathing stopped. It was finished.

I got out of the chair and walked around to the other side of the bed. The hump on his back had split, and something white was sticking out. I reached down and pulled on it. It was a wing, a large, white wing covered with feathers. No, not feathers. Soft, white, silky hair.

There was a second wing, but it was twisted and not properly developed. I pulled away all of the body and exposed what was inside it.

I cleaned up the cabin so no one would know it had been occupied. I packed everything back in the Dart. I buried them both in the woods, the body of the dead winged thing and the husk that had held it. I drove back to Hollywood. It seemed as if I passed a wreck every half mile. I went into my apartment without noticing the apple cores in the yard. I unlocked the door, went straight to the toilet, and vomited.

I was splashing cold water on my face when I heard her.

"Lou? Is that you?" She walked in wearing a slip, her eyes red from sleep and her hair sticking out on one side where she'd been lying on it.

"Margaret! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Oh, Lou!" She pressed against me. "It's been *awful!* Alfred found out about us!"

My head was spinning. "Who the shit is Alfred?"

She looked puzzled. "My husband!"

Jesus Christ! I'd forgotten Carnehan's first name. She was right. It was awful. "What'd he do? Do they know at the Department?"

"He hit me!" She began to blubber on my shoulder. "I was afraid. I've been hiding here for three *days!* He keeps pounding on the door, but I stay quiet. He doesn't know for sure I'm here."

"How did he find out?"

"I don't *know!* He came home from work three days ago, screaming at me and hitting me. Oh, Lou. I was so frightened." She kissed me and her breath was bad. *His* breath had had no odor at all. "Come to bed with me, Lou. It's been so long," she whined.

I felt her doughy flesh through the thin slip. But it was woman flesh, and I had to forget about him. I led her to the bed and began undressing. I was sticky. I hadn't bathed or shaved since he started... Stop it!

She pulled the slip over her head, unhooked her bra, and peeled down her pantyhose. Her tits were beginning to sag, her thighs were puffy, and there was a small roll of fat around her waist. Her skin looked muddy, not clear like ... Stop it!

She walked toward me, smiling coyly. I wish I had been able to see ... Stop it!

I pushed her roughly onto the bed, and she squealed. Margaret liked it rough. I was about to make her very happy. She gasped deep in her throat every time my pelvis slammed against her flabby flesh. It was good—but ... Stop it!

I lay on my back, half asleep. Margaret lay on top of me, licking my nipples and trying to coax it back up again. It hadn't lasted long enough for her, but she was wasting her time and she was heavy. I closed my eyes, trying to stay awake. I felt her hair on my face. There was a noise and her head hit mine. Her breath rushed out in one stale puff and I felt something dripping on my cheek.

I focused my eyes. Carnehan was standing over us, his nightstick raised. I couldn't move Margaret's dead weight. "Carnehan! Don't!" I yelled. The stick came down. I remembered I hadn't locked the door.

When I came out of it, it was dark. I was in a moving car. My head hurt and the car sounded as if it were driving in the bottom of a well. I could feel dried blood in my left eye; maybe mine or maybe Margaret's. I tried to wipe it away, but my hands wouldn't move. I heard the clink of handcuffs and felt the door handle. My head was leaning against the glass. It felt cool. I opened my eyes and saw brush going past and a sea of lights spread out below. I could see a dozen fires burning. We must be somewhere in the Hollywood Hills.

I turned my head and looked at Carnehan driving the car. He stared straight ahead. "Carnehan, what do you think you're doing?" The words didn't come out as forcefully as I had intended. He ignored me. "Carnehan, Margaret doesn't mean anything to me." That was the wrong thing to say. Think straight! "She's not worth it, Carnehan. I'm not worth it. Neither of us is worth destroying yourself."

He wasn't listening. "You can't hope to get away with this." Of course he didn't. "Why don't you just write it off as a mistake?"

The car had been bouncing around for a while. We must not have been on a main road. I couldn't raise myself high enough to see ahead. After a bit Carnehan stopped the car and got out. He opened the back door on my side and began dragging out Margaret's naked body. She must have been already dead, the way she flopped around like a rubber dummy. He dragged her a few feet from the car and rolled her down a hill. I could hear her crackling the brush, then silence.

Carnehan opened my door and the handcuffs pulled me out. I felt sharp rocks digging into my butt and realized I was naked too. He pulled out his revolver.

"Carnehan! Don't be a fool!"

He shot me in the stomach. Good old Carnehan. He remembered what we'd been taught: always aim for the gut.

He unlocked the handcuffs and pulled me to the edge. All I had to do was overpower him and get away, but I decided to wait because I was very tired. I rolled down the hill like a sack of potatoes. I didn't feel the prickly pears and sharp brush. The pain in my belly was too fierce. I hit something hard, and I think my shoulder broke.

I was lying on my back, my head leaning against whatever I'd hit, looking back up the hill. The car drove away. Carnehan, you bungler! I'm not dead! You wasted it all!

The sound of the car died away. It was very quiet, just crickets and the far-off rumble of traffic. You couldn't get away from that sound anywhere in Los Angeles County. A slight wind was blowing, making some loose sheet metal creak and groan somewhere near by.

I couldn't just lie here. I was bound to die if I didn't get help. I tried to move and looked up. An immense "Y" loomed over me. I was under the Hollywood sign. I couldn't see Margaret anywhere. Let me rest a moment more and get my breath back. Damn fuckin' Carnehan. Are you gonna be surprised when they haul you in and I'm there to point the finger. I looked down at my stomach. A mistake. But it doesn't hurt so much anymore. I must be in shock. I've heard that happens.

I can see my prick. It looks wrinkled and shrunken, even smaller than Cunningham's. This is a hell of a time to be thinking about pricks! My shoulder hurts worse than my gut. I can feel blood on the ground under my back. I've rested long enough.

What's that noise? Sounded like a twig cracking somewhere in the darkness. What if it's a coyote? I wonder if it will attack me. Probably not. Do coyotes react to the smell of blood the way sharks do?

Footsteps. Not a coyote. People. More than one. I'm saved! Up yours, Carnehan!

There are four of them: four redheaded young men who don't look a day over twenty. Four perfect faces that I used to think were overwhelmingly beautiful—until I saw the face of that dead winged thing. But I did see it. And I had to cover it because the beauty was too painful to look at.

Four magnificent bodies that only a few days ago would have sent the blood rushing to my penis—if I hadn't seen the pale body of the winged creature, all the more beautiful because it was sexless. A body I knew would have gleamed had it been alive.

Now these four faces seem drab and plain and the four bodies might belong to trolls.

But the eyes! They stand around me, watching me with eyes I still think beautiful because the winged creature's eyes were closed in death.

Those four pairs of beautiful, bland eyes look at me the same way Carnehan looks at an apple he's been saving for a special occasion.

The End

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