

## THE MAGNIFICENT CONSPIRACY

### I

By the time I had pulled in and put her in park, alarm bells were going off all over my subconscious so I just stayed put and looked around.

After a minute and a half, I gave *up*. *Everything* about the place was wrong.

Even the staff. Reserved used-car salesmen are about as common as affable hangmen—but I had the whole minute and a half to myself, and as much longer as I wanted. The man semivisible through the dusty office window was clearly aware of my arrival, but he failed to get up from his chair.

So I shut off the ignition and climbed out into un-air-conditioned July, and by God even the music was wrong. It wasn't Muzak at all; it was an old Peter, Paul and Mary album. How can you psych someone into buying a clunker with music like that? Even when I began wandering around kicking tires and glancing under hoods he stayed in the office. He seemed to be reading. I was determined to get a reaction now, so I picked out the classiest car I could see (easily worth three times as much as my Dodge), hotwired her and started her up. As I'd expected, it fetched him—but he didn't hurry. Except for that, he was standard-issue salesman—which is like saying, "Except for the sun porch, it was a standard issue fighter jet."

"Sorry, mister. That one ain't for sale." I looked disappointed.

"Already spoken for, huh?"

"Nope. But you don't want her."

I listened to the smooth, steady rumble of the engine. "Oh, yeah? Why not? She sounds beautiful."

He nodded. "Runs beautiful, too—now. Feller sold it to us gimmicked 'er with them pellets you get from the Whitney catalog. Inside o' five hundred miles you wouldn't have no more rings than a spinster."

I let my jaw drop.

"She wouldn't even be sittin' out here, except the garage is full up. Could show you a pretty good Chev, you got your heart set on a convertible."

"Hey, listen," I broke in. "Do you realize you could've kept your mouth shut and sold me this car for two thousand flat?"

He wiped his forehead with a red handkerchief "Yep. Couple year ago, I would've." He hitched his glasses higher on his nose and grinned suddenly. "Couple year ago I had an ulcer."

I had the same disquieting sensation you get in an earthquake when the ground refuses to behave properly. I shut the engine off. "There isn't a single sign about the wonderful bargains you've got," I complained. "The word 'honest' does not appear anywhere on your lot. You don't hurry. I've been here for three minutes and you haven't shaken my hand and you haven't tried to sell me a thing and you *don't hurry*. What the hell kind of used-car lot is this?"

He looked like he was trying hard to explain, but he only said, "Couple of year ago I had an ulcer," again, which explained nothing. I gave up and got out of the convertible. As I did so, I noticed for the first time an index card on the dashboard which read \$100. "That can't be the price," I said flatly. "Without an *engine* she's

worth more than that."

"Oh, no," he said, looking scandalized. "That ain't the price. Couldn't be: price ain't fixed."

Oh. "What determines the price?"

"The customer. What he needs, how bad he needs it, how much he's got."

This of course is classic sales doctrine—but you're not supposed to *tell* the customer. You're supposed to go through the quaint charade of an asking price, then knock off a hastily com-puted amount because "I can see you're in a jam and I like your face."

"Well then," I said, trying to get this script back on the track, "maybe I'd better tell you about my situation."

"Sure," he agreed. "Come on in the office. More comfortable there. Got the air conditioning"

I saw him notice my purple sneakers as I got out of the convertible—which pleased me. You can't buy them that garish you have to dye them yourself.

And halfway to the office, my subconscious identified the specific tape being played over the sound system. Just a hair too late; the song hit me before I was braced for it. I barely had time to put my legs on automatic pilot. Fortunately, the salesman was walking ahead of me, and could not see my face. *Album 1700*, side one, track six: "The Great Mandella (The Wheel of Life)."

**"So I told him**

**"That he'd better**

**"Shut his mouth And do his job like a man And he answered Listen** (*father didn't even come to the funeral and the face in the coffin was my own but oh God so thin and drawn like collapsed around the skull and the skin like gray paper and the eyes dear Jesus Christ the eyes he looked so content so hideously content didn't he understand that he'd blown it blown it bl)own it very long, Mr. Uh?"*)

He was standing, no, squatting by my Dodge, peering up the tailpipe. The hood was up.

If you're good enough, you can put face and mouth on automatic pilot, too. I told him I was Bob Campbell and that I had owned the Dodge for three years. I told him I was a clerk in a supermarket. I told him I had a wife and two children and an MA in Business Administration.

I told him I needed a newer model car to try for a better job. It was a plausible story; he didn't seem to find anything odd about my facial expressions, and I'm sure he believed every word. By the time I had finished sketching my income and outgo, we were in the office and the door was closing on the song:

**"Take your place on**

**"The Great Mandalla**

**"As it moves through your brief moment of** (*click*) **time that Dodge of yours had a ring job, too, Bob."**

I came fully aware again, remembered my purpose.

"Ring job? Look, uh ... " We seated ourselves.

"Arden Larsen."

"Look, Arden, that car had a complete engine overhaul not five thousand miles

ago. It's—"

"Stow it, Bob. From the inside of your exhaust pipe alone my best professional estimate is that you are getting about forty or fifty miles to a quart of oil. Nobody can overhaul a slant-six that bad." I began to protest. "If that engine was even so much as steam cleaned less'n ten thousand mile ago I'll eat my socks."

"Just a damned minute, Larsen—"

"Don't ever try to bamboozle a used-car man my age, son—it just humiliates the both of us. Now, it's hard to tell for sure without jackin' up the front end or drivin' her, but I'd guess the actual value of that Dodge to be about a hun-dred dollars. That's half of what it'd cost you to rent a car for as long as the Dodge is liable to last."

"Well, of all the colossal ... I don't have to listen to this crap!" I got up and headed for the door, which was corny and a serious mistake, because when I was halfway to the door he hadn't said a word and when I was upon it he still hadn't said a word and I was so puzzled at how I could have overplayed it so badly that I actually had the door open before I remembered what lay outside it.

"Tell the jailer

"Not to bother

"With his meal of bread and water today

"He is fasting till the killing's over here and I'll get you some ice water, Bob. Must be ninety-five in the shade out there. You'll be okay in a minute."

"Yeah. Sure." I stumbled back to my seat and gratefully accepted the ice water he brought from the refrigerator in a corner of the office. I remembered to keep my back very straight. *Get a hold of yourself, boy. It's just a song. Just some noise ...*

"Now as I was sayin', Bob ... figure your car's worth a hundred. Okay. So figure the Dutchman up the road'd offer you two hundred, and then sell it to some sorry son of a bitch for four. Okay. Figure if you twisted his arm, he'd go three—Mid-City Motors in town'd go that high, just to get you offa the lot quick. Okay. So I'll give you four and a quarter."

I sprayed ice water and nearly choked. "Huh?"

"And I'll throw in that fancy convertible for three hundred, if you really want her—but you'll have to let us do the ring job first. Won't cost you anything, and I could let you have a loaner 'til we get to it. Oh yeah, an' that \$100 tag you was askin' about is our best estimate of monthly gas, oil and maintenance outlay. I'd recommend a different car for a man in your situation myself, but it's up to you."

I didn't have to pretend surprise, I was flab-bergasted. "Are you out of your mind?" Appar-ently my employer was given to understatement.

He didn't have the right set of wrinkles for a smile like that; he must have just learned how. "Feels like I get saner every day."

"But ... but you can't be serious. This is a rib, right?"

Still smiling, he pulled out a wallet the size of a paperback dictionary, and counted out one hundred and twenty-five dollars in twenties and fives. He held it out in a hand so gnarled it looked like weathered maple. "What do you say? Deal?"

"I say, `You're getting reindeer shit all over my roof, fatso.' What's the catch?"

"No catch."

"Oh, no. You're offering me a free lunch, and I'm supposed to just fasten the bib and open my mouth, right? Is that convertible hot, or what?"

He sighed, scratched behind his glasses. "Bob, your attitude makes sense, in a world like this. That's why I don't much like a world like this, and that's why I'm working here. Now I understand how you feel. I've seen ten dozen variations of the same reaction since I started working for Mr. Cardwell, and it makes me a little sadder every time. That convertible ain't hot and there ain't no other catch neither. I'm offerin' you the car for what she's honestly worth, and if you can't believe that, why, you just go down the line and see the Dutchman. He'll skin you alive, but he won't upset you any."

I know when people are *angry* at me. He was angry, but not at me. So I probed. "Larsen, you've got to be completely crazy."

He blew up.

"You're damn right I am! Crazy means out o' step with the world, and accordin' to the rules o' the world, I'm supposed to cheat you out of every dime I smell on ya plus ten percent an' if you like that world so much that you wanna subsidize it then you get yer ass outa here an' go see the Dutchman but *whatever you do don't* you tell him we sent ya *you* got that?"

Nothing in the world makes a voice as harsh as the shortness of breath caused by a run-on sentence. I waited until he had fed his starving lungs and then said, "I want to see the manager," and he emptied them again very slowly and evenly, so that when he closed his eyes I knew he was close to hyperventilating. He clenched his fingers on the desk between us as though he were trying to pull it toward him, and when he opened his eyes the anger was gone from them.

"Okay, Bob. Maybe Mr. Cardwell can explain it to you. I ain't got the right words."

I nodded and got up.

"Bob ... " He was embarrassed now. "I didn't have no call to bark at you thataway. I can't blame you for bein' suspicious. Sometimes I miss my ulcers myself. It's—well, it's a lot easier to live in a world of mud if you tell yourself there ain't no such thing as dry land."

It was the first sensible thing he'd said. "What I mean, I'm sorry."

"Thanks for the ice water," I said.

He relaxed and smiled again. "Mr. Cardwell's in the garage out back. You take it easy in that heat."

I knew that I'd stalled long enough for the cassette or record or whatever it was to have ended, but I treated the doorknob like an angry rattlesnake just the same. But when I opened it, the only thing that hit me in the face was the hot dry air I'd expected. I left.

## II

I went through an arched gate in the plank fence that abutted the office's rear wall, and followed a wide strip of blacktop through weedy flats to the garage.

It was a four-bay job, a big windowless wood building surrounded with the usual clutter of handtrucks, engine blocks, transmissions, gas cans, fenders, drive trains,

and rusted oil drums. All four bays were closed, in spite of the heat. It was set back about five hundred yards from the office, and the field behind it was lushly overgrown with dead cars, a classic White Elephant's Graveyard that seemed better tended than most. As I got closer I realized the field was actually organized: a section for GM products, one for Chryslers, one for Fords and so on, each marked with a sign and subdivided by model and, apparently, year. A huge Massey-Ferguson sat by one of three access roads, ready to haul the next clunker in to its appointed resting place. There was big money in this operation, very impressive money, and I just couldn't square that with Arden Larsen's crackpot pricing policy.

Arden seemed to have flipped the cassette to side two of *Album 1700*. I passed beneath a speaker that said it dug rock and roll music, and entered the garage through a door to the right of the four closed bays. Inside, I stopped short. Whoever heard of an air-conditioned garage? Especially one this size. Big money.

Over on the far side of the room, just in front of a Rambler, the floor grew a man, like the Wicked Witch melting in reverse. It startled the hell out of me—until I realized he had only climbed out of one of those rectangular pits the better garages have for jobs where a lift might get in the way. With the help of unusually efficient lighting, I studied him as he approached me. Late fifties, snow-white hair and goatee, strong jaw and incongruously soft mouth. A big man, reminding me strongly of Burl Ives, but less bulky, whipcord fit. An impression of enormous energy, but used only by volition—he walked slowly, clearly because he saw no need to hurry. Paradoxical hands: thin-fingered and aristocratic, but with the ground-in grime which is the unmistakable trademark of the professional or dedicated-amateur mechanic. The right one held a pipe wrench. His overalls were oily and torn, but he wore them like a not-rented tux.

I absorbed and stored all these details automatically, however, while most of my attention was taken up by the utter *peacefulness* of his face, of his eyes, of his expression and carriage and manner. I had never seen a man so manifestly content with his lot. It showed in the purely decorative way in which the wrinkles of his years lay upon his face; it showed in the easy swing of his big shoulders and the purposeful but carefree stride; it showed in the eager yet unhurried way that his eyes measured me: not as a cat sizes up another cat, but as a happy baby investigates a new person—with delighted interest. My purple sneakers *pleased* him. He was plainly a man who drank of his life with an unquenchable thirst, and it annoyed the hell out of me, because I knew good and goddam well when was the last time I had seen a man possessed of such peace and because nothing on earth was going to make me consciously acknowledge it.

But I am not a man whose emotions are wired into his control circuits. I smiled as he neared, and my body language said I was confused, but amiably so.

"Mr. Cardwell?"

"That's right. What can I do for you?" The way he asked it, it was not a conversational convention.

"My name's Bob Campbell. I ... uh ... "

His eyes twinkled. "*Of* course. You want to know if Arden's crazy, or me, or the *both* of us." His lips smiled, then got pried apart by his teeth into a full-blown grin.

"Well ... something like that. He offered to buy my car for, uh, more than it's worth, and then he offered to sell me the classiest-looking car on the lot for ... "

"Mr. Campbell, I'll stand behind whatever prices Arden made you."

"But you don't know what they are yet."

"I don't need to," he said, still grinning. "I know Arden."

"But he offered to do a free ring job on the car, for Chrissake."

"Oh, that convertible. Mr. Campbell, he didn't do that `for Chrissake'—Arden's not a church-going man. He did it for his sake, and for mine and for yours. That car isn't worth a thing without that ring job—the aggravation it'd give you would use up more energy than walk-ing."

"But—but," I sputtered, "how can you pos-sibly survive doing that kind of business?"

His grin disappeared. "How long can any of us survive, Mr. Campbell, doing business any other way? I sell cars for what I believe them to be genuinely worth, and I pay much more than that for them so that people will sell them to me. What's wrong with that?"

"But how can you make a profit?"

"I can't."

I was shocked speechless. When he saw this, Cardwell smiled again—but this time it was a smile underlain with sadness. "Money, young man, is a symbol representing the life energy of those who subscribe to it. It is a useful and even nec-essary symbol—but because it is only a symbol, it is possible to amass on paper more profit than there actually is to be made. The more people who insist on making a profit, all the time, in every dealing, the more people who will be required to go bankrupt to pour their life-energy into the system and get nothing back—in order to keep the machine running. A profit is without honor, save in its own country—there is certainly nothing sacred about one. Especially if you don't need it."

I continued to gape.

"Perhaps I should explain," he went on, "that I was born with a golden spoon in my mouth. My family has been unspeakably wealthy for twelve generations, controlling one of the old-est and most respected fortunes in existence—the kind that calls for battalions of tax lawyers in every country in the world. My personal worth is so absurdly enormous that if I were to set a hundred dollar bill on fire every minute of my waking life I would never succeed in getting out of the highest income tax bracket."

"You ... " My system flooded with adrena-line. "You *can't* be *that* Cardwell."

BIG money.

"There are times when I almost wish I wasn't. But since I have no choice at all in the matter, I'm trying to make the best of it."

"By throwing money away?" I yelled, and fought for control.

"No. By putting it back where it belongs. I inherited control of a stupendous age-old leech—and I'm forcing it to regurgitate."

"I don't understand." I shook my head vigorously and rubbed a temple with my thumb, "I just don't understand."

He smiled the sad smile again, and the pipe wrench loosened in his grip for the

first time. "You don't have to, you know. You can take your money from Arden and drive home in a loaner and pick up your convertible in a few days and then put it all out of your mind. All I'm sell-ing is used cars."

He was asking me a question.

I shook my head again, more slowly. "No ... no, I'd like to understand, I think. Will you explain?"

He put the wrench down on an oil drum. "Let's sit down."

There were a pair of splendidly comfortable chairs in the rear of the garage, with foldaway armrests that let you select for comfort or elbow room at need. Beyond them stood an expensive (but not frost-free) refrigerator, from which Cardwell produced two frosty bottles of Dos Equis. I accepted one and sat in the nearer chair. Cardwell sprawled back in his and put his feet up on a beheaded slant six engine, and when he drank he gave the beer his full attention.

I regret to say I did not. Despite all the evi-dence, I could not make myself believe that this grease-stained mechanic with his sneakers on an engine block was actually *the* Raymond Sinclair Cardwell. If it was true, my fee was going to quintuple, and Hakluyt was fucking well going to pay it. Send a man after a cat, and forget to mention that it's a black panther ... *Jesus*.

Cardwell's chair had a beverage holder built into the armrest; he set his beer in it and folded his arms easily. He spoke slowly, thoughtfully; and he had that knack of observing you as he spoke, modifying his word choice by feedback. I have the knack myself; but I wondered why a man in his situation would have troubled to acquire it. I found myself trying as hard to understand him as he was trying to be understood.

I don't know [he said] if I can convey what it's like to be born preposterously wealthy, Mr. Campbell, so I won't try. It presents one with an incredible view of reality that cannot be imagined by a normal human being. The world of the very rich is only tangentially connected with the real world, for all that their destinies are intertwined. I lived totally in that other world and that world view for thirty-six years, happily moving around mountains of money with a golden bulldozer, stoking the fires of progress. I rather feel I was a typical multibillionaire, if that conveys anything to you. My only eccentric-ity was a passion for working on cars, which I had absorbed in my youth from a chauffeur I admired. I had access to the finest assistance and education the world had to offer, and became rather handy. As good as I was with international finance and real estate and arbitrage and interlocking cartels and all the other avenues through which a really enormous fortune is intercon-nected with the world, I enjoyed manipulating my fortune, using it—in some obscure way I believe I felt a duty to do so. And *I always* made a profit.

It was in London that it changed.

I had gone there to personally oversee a large and complex merger involving seven nations. The limousine had just left the airport when the first shot killed my driver. He was the man who taught me how to align-bore a block and his name was Ted. The window was down; he just hurled sideways and soiled his pants. I think I figured it out as the second shot got my personal bodyguard, but by then we were under the wheels of the semi. I woke up eight weeks later, and one of the first things

I learned is that no one is ever truly unconscious. I woke up speaking in a soft but pronounced British accent precisely like that of my private nurses, and it persisted for two days.

I discovered that Phillip, the bodyguard, had died. So had Lisa, a lady who meant entirely too little to me. So had Teal, the London regional director who had met my plane, and the driver of the semi. The rifleman had been apprehended: a common laborer, driven mad by his poverty. He had taken a gun to traffic in the same way that a consistently mistreated Doberman will attack anyone who approaches, because it seemed to him the only honorable and proper response to the world.

[Cardwell drank deep from his beer.]

My convalescence was long. The physical crisis was severe, but the spiritual trauma was infinitely greater. Like Saint Paul, I had been smashed from my horse, changed at once from a mover and shaper to a terrified man who hurt terribly in many places. The best drugs in the world cannot truly kill pain—they blunt its edge without removing it, or its terrible reminder of mortality. I had nearly died, and I suddenly had a tremendous need to explain to myself why that would have been such a tragedy. I could not but wonder who would have mourned for me, and how much, and I had a partial answer in the shallow extent of my own mourning for Ted and Phillip and Teal and Lisa. The world I had lived my life in was one in which there was little love, in which the glue of social relationships was not feelings, but common interests. I had narrowly, by the most costly of medical miracles, avoided inconveniencing many hundreds of people, and not a damn thing else.

And, of course, I could not deal with this consciously or otherwise. My world view lacked the "spiritual vocabulary" with which to frame these concepts: I desperately needed to resolve a conflict I could not even express. It delayed my effective recovery for weeks beyond the time when I was technically "on my feet"—I was simply unable to reenter the lists of life, unable to see why living was worth the terrible danger of dying. And so my body healed slowly, by the same instinctive wisdom with which it had kept my forebrain in a coma until it could cope with the extent of my injuries.

And then I met John Smiley.

[Cardwell paused for so long that I had begun to search for a prompting remark when he continued.]

John was an institution at that hospital. He had been there longer than any of the staff or patients. He had not left the bed he was in for twelve years. Between his ribcage and his knees he was mostly plastic bags and tubes and things that are to a colostomy bag what a Rolls-Royce is to a dogcart. He needed one and sometimes two operations every year, and his refusal to die was an insult to medical science, and he was the happiest man I have ever met in my life.

My life had taught me all the nuances of pleasure; joy, however, was something I had only dimly sensed in occasional others and failed to really recognize. Being presented with a pure distillate of the thing forced me to learn what it was—and from



there it was only a short step to realizing that I lacked it. You only begin to perceive where you itch when you learn how to scratch.

John Smiley received the best imaginable care, far better than he was entitled to. His only financial asset was an insurance company which grudgingly disbursed enough to keep him alive, but he got the kind of service and personal attention usually given only to a man of my wealth. This puzzled me greatly when I first got to know him, the more so when I learned that he could not explain it himself. But I soon understood.

Virtually every doctor, nurse, and long-term patient in the hospital worshipped him. The rare, sad few who would have blackly hated him were identified by the rest and kept from him. The more common ones who desperately needed to meet him were also identified, and sent *to* him, subtly or directly as indicated.

Mr. Campbell, John Smiley was simply a fountain of the human spirit, a healer of souls. Utterly wrecked in body, his whole life telescoped down to a bed he didn't rate and a TV he couldn't afford and the books scrounged for him by nurses and interns and the Pall Malls that appeared magically on his bedside table every morning—and the people who chanced to come through his door. John made of life a magnificent thing. He listened to the social and sexual and financial and emotional woes of anyone who came into his room, drawing their troubles out of them with his great gray eyes, and he sent them away lighter in their hearts, with a share of the immeasurable joy he had somehow found within himself. He had helped the charge nurse when her marriage failed, and he had helped the head custodian find the strength to raise his mongoloid son alone, and he had helped the director of the hospital to kick Demerol. And while I knew him, he helped a girl of eighteen die with grace and dignity. In that hospital, they sent the tough ones around, on one pretext or another, to see John Smiley—and that was simply all it took.

He had worked for the police as a plain-clothesman, and one day as he and his partner were driving his own car into the police garage, a two-ton door had given way and come down on them. Ackroyd, his partner, had been killed outright, and so Mrs. Ackroyd received an award equivalent to half a million dollars. John's wife was less fortunate—his life was saved. They explained to her that under the law she would not collect a cent until he was dead. Then they added softly that they gave him a month at the outside. Twelve years later he was still chain-smoking Pall Malls and bantering with his wife's boyfriend when they came to visit him, which was frequently.

I wandered into John Smiley's room one day, sick in my heart and desperately thirsty for something more than thirty-six years had taught me of life, seeking a reason to go on living. Like many others before and since, I drank from John Smiley, drank from his seemingly inexhaustible well of joy in living—and in the process, I acquired the taste. I learned some things. Mostly, I think, I learned the difference between pleasure and joy. I suppose I had already made the distinction, subconsciously, but I considered the latter a fraud, an illusion overlaid upon the former to lend it respectability. John Smiley proved me wrong. His pleasures were as restricted as mine had been unrestricted—and his joy was so incandescently superior to mine that on the night of the day I met him I found myself humming the last verse of "Richard Corey" in my mind.

Cardwell paused, and his voice softened.

He forgave me my ignorance. He forgave me my money and my outlook and my arrogance and *treated me as an equal*, and most amazing of all, he made me forgive myself. The word "forgive" is interesting. Someone robs you of your wallet, and they find him down the line and bring him back to you, saying, "We found your wallet on this man," and you say, "That's all right. He can have--can have had—it; I fore-give it to him."

To preserve his sanity, John Smiley had been forced to "fore-give" virtually everything God had given him. In his presence you could not do less yourself.

And so I even gave up mourning a "lost innocence" I had never had, and put the shame he inspired in me to positive use. I began design-ing my ethics.

[I interrupted for the first and last time. "A rich man who would design his own eth-ics is a dangerous thing," I said.]

Damn right [he said, with the delight of one who sees that his friend really *understands*]. A profit is without honor except in its own coun-try—but that's a hell of a lot of territory. The economic system reacts, with the full power of the racial unconscious, to preserve itself—and I had no wish to tilt at the windmill. I confess that my first thought was of simply giving my money away, in a stupendous orgy of charity, and taking a job in a garage. But John was wise enough to be able to show me that that would have been as practical as disposing of a warehouse full of high explosive by setting fire to it with a match. You may have read in newspapers, some years back, of a young man who attempted to give away an inheritance, a *much* smaller fortune than mine. He is now hopelessly insane, shattered by the power that was thrust upon him. *He did not do it to himself.*

So I started small, and very slowly. The first thing I did was to heal the ulcers of the hospital's accounting department. They had been juggling desperately to cover the cost of the care that John Smiley was getting, so I bought the hospital and told them to juggle away, whenever they felt they should. That habit was hard to break; I bought forty-seven hospitals in the next two years, and quietly instructed them to run whatever loss they had to, to provide maximum care and comfort for their patients. I spent the next six years working in them, a month or two each, as a janitor. This helped me to assess their management, replacing entire staffs down to the bedpan level when neces-sary. It also added considerably to my educa-tion. There are many hospitals in the world, Mr. Campbell, some good, some bad, but I know for certain that forty-seven of them are won-derful places in which to hurt.

The janitor habit was hard to break, too. Over the next ten years I toured my empire, like a king traveling incognito to learn the *flavor* of his land. I held many and varied jobs, for my empire is an octopus, but they all amounted to janitor. I spent ten years toiling anonymously at the very borders of my fortune, at the last interface between it and the people it involved, the com-munities it affected. And without me at the helm, for *ten years*, the nature and operation of my fortune changed in no way whatsoever, and when I realized that, it shook me. I gave up my tour of inspection and went to my estate in British Columbia and holed up for a few years, thinking it through. Then I began effecting changes. This used-car lot is only one of them. It's

my favorite, though, so it's the first one I've implemented and it's where I choose to spend my personal working hours.

But there are many other changes planned.

### III

The silence stretched like a spring, but when at last I spoke my voice was soft, quiet, casual, quite calm. "And you expect me to believe that none of these changes will make a profit?" He blinked and started, precisely as if a tape recorder had started talking back to him.

"My dear Mr. Campbell," he said with a trace of sadness, "I frankly don't expect you to believe a word I've said."

My voice was still calm. "Then why tell me all this?"

"I'm not at all sure. But I believe it has much to do with the fact that you are the first person to *ask* me about it since I opened this shop."

Calm gone. "Bullshit," I roared, much too loud. "Bullfuckingshit, I mean a king-size mea-dow muffin! Do you goddammit," I was nearly incoherent, "think I was fucking born yesterday? Sell *me* a free lunch? You simple sonofabitch I *am not that stupid!*"

This silence did not stretch; it lay there like a bludgeoned dove. I wondered whether all garages echoed like this and I'd never noticed. *The hell with control, I don't need control, control is garbage, it's just me and him.* My spine was very straight.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, as sorrowfully as though my anger were truly his fault. "I hum-bly apologze, Mr. Campbell. I took you for a different kind of man. But I can see now that you're no fool."

His voice was infinitely sad.

"I don't mind a con, but this is stupid. You're giving away cars and you and Larsen are plenty to handle the traffic. I'm your only customer—what do you take me for?"

"The first wave has passed," he said. "There are only so many fools in any community, only a few naive or desperate enough to turn out for a free lunch. It was quite busy here for six months or so, but now all the fools have been accommodated. It will be weeks, months, before word-of-mouth gets around, before people learn that the cars I've sold them are good cars, that my guarantees are genuine. Dozens will have to return, scream for service, promptly receive it and numbly wander home before the news begins to spread. It will get quite busy again then, for a while, and probably very noisy, too—but at the moment I'm not even a Silly Season filler in the local paper. The editor killed it, as any good editor would. He's no fool, either.

"I'm recruiting fools, Mr. Campbell. There was bound to be a lull after the first wave hit. But I believe that the second will be a tsunami."

My voice was a whip. "And this is how you're going to save the world? By doing lube jobs and fixing mufflers?"

"This is one of the ways, yes. It's not surgery, but it should help comfort the patient until surgery can be undertaken. It's hard to concentrate on anything when

you have a boil on your ass."

"What?"

"Sorry. A metaphor I borrowed from John Smiley, at the same time I borrowed the idea itself. 'Ray,' he said to me, 'you're talking about using your money to make folks more comfortable, to remove some of the pointless distractions so they have the energy to sit down and think. Well, the one boil on everybody's ass is his vehicle—everybody that has to have one, which is most everybody.' Everywhere I went over the next decade, I heard people bitterly complaining about their cars, pouring energy and money into them, losing jobs because of them, going broke because of them, being killed because of them. So I'm lancing the boil—in this area anyway.

"It makes an excellent test operation, too. If people object too strongly to having their boils lanced, then I'll have to be *extremely* circumspect in approaching their cancers. Time will tell."

"And no one's tried to stop you from giving away cars?"

"I don't give away cars. I sell them at a fair price. But the effect is similar, and yes, there have been several attempts to stop me by various legal means. But there has never been a year of my life when I was being sued for less than a million dollars.

"Then there were the illegal attempts. For a while this lot was heavily, and unobtrusively, guarded, and twice those guards found it necessary to break a few arms. I've dismissed them all for the duration of the lull between waves, but there'll be an army here if and when I need it.

"But until the next wave of customers hits, the only violence I'm expecting is a contract assassination or two."

"Oh?"

The anger drained from my voice as professional control switched in again. I noted that his right hand was out of sight behind his chair—on the side I had not yet seen. I sat bolt upright.

"Yes, the first one is due any time now. He'll probably show up with a plausible identity and an excellent cover story, and he'll probably demand to see the manager on the obvious pretext. He'll wear strikingly gaudy shoes to draw the attention of casual witnesses from his face, and his shirt will have a high collar, and he'll hold his spine very straight. He'll be completely untraceable, expensive, and probably good at his work, but his employers will almost certainly have kept him largely in the dark, and so he'll underestimate his opposition until it is too late. Only then will he realize that I could have come out of that pit with an M-16 as easily as with a pipe wrench if the situation had seemed to warrant it. What is that thing, anyway? It's too slim for a blowgun."

If you've lost any other hope of misdirecting the enemy, try candor. I sighed, relaxed my features in a gesture of surrender, and very slowly reached up and over my shoulder. Gripping the handle that nestled against my last few vertebrae, I pulled straight up and out, watching the muscles of his right arm tense where they disappeared behind the chair and wishing mightily that I knew what his hand was doing. I pointedly held the weapon in a virtually useless overhand grip, but I was unsettled to see him pick up on that—he was altogether too alert for my taste. *Hang on, dammit, you can still pull this off if you just hang on.*

"Stiffened piano wire," I said, meeting his eyes, "embedded in a hardwood grip and filed sharp. You put it between the correct two ribs and shove. Ruptures the heart, and the pericardial sac self-seals on the way out. Pressure builds. If you do it properly, the victim himself thinks it's a heart attack, and the entry wound is virtually undetectable. A full-scale autopsy would pick it up—but when an overweight car dealer in his fifties has a heart attack, pathologists don't generally get up on their toes."

"Unless he happens to be a multibillionaire," Cardwell noted.

"My employers will regret leaving me in ignorance. Fluoroscope in the fence gate?"

"The same kind they use in airports. If that weapon hadn't been so damned interesting, you'd never have reached the garage."

"I wanted to do the research, but they were paying double for a rush job." I sighed. "I knew better. Or should have. Now what?"

"Now let go of that thing and kick it far away." I did so at once.

"Now you can have another beer and tell me some things."

"Sorry, Cardwell. No names. They sent me in blind, and I'll speak to them about that one day, but I don't give names. It's bad for business. Go ahead and call the man."

"You misunderstand me, sir. I already know Hakluyt's name quite well, and I have no intention of calling police of any description."

I knew the location of every scrap of cover for twenty yards in any direction, and I favored the welding tanks behind me and to my left—he looked alert enough not to shoot at them at such close range, and they were on wheels facing him. If I could tip my chair backwards and come at him from behind the tank ...

"... and I'd rather not kill you unless you force me to, so please unbunch those muscles."

There was no way he was going to let me walk away from this, and there was no way I was going to sit there and let him pot me at his leisure, so there was no question of sitting still, and so no one was more surprised than me when the muscles of my calves and thighs unbunched and I sat still.

Perhaps I believed him.

"Ask your questions," I said.

"Why did you take this job?"

I broke up. "Oh, my God," I whooped, "how did a nice girl like me wind up in such a profession, you mean?" The ancient gag was suddenly very hilarious, and I roared with laughter as I gave the punchline. "Just lucky, I guess."

Pure tension release, of course. But damned if he didn't laugh at the old chestnut, too—or at himself for all I know. We laughed together until I was done, and then he said, "But why?" and I sobered up.

"For the money, of course."

He shook his head. "I don't believe you." *What's in your right hand, old man?* I only shrugged. "It's the truth."

He shook his head again. "Some of your colleagues, perhaps. But I watched your face while I told you my story, and *your* empathic faculty seems to be functioning quite nicely. You're personally involved in this, involved with me. You're too damn

mad at me, and it's confusing you as you sit there, spoiling your judgment. Oh no, son, you can't fool me. You're *some* kind of idealist. But *what brand?*"

There isn't a policeman in the world who knows my name, none of my hits have so much as come to the attention of Homicide, and the reason for it is that my control is flawless, I am an unflappable killing machine, like I said, my emotions aren't even in circuit, and well yes, I had gotten hot under the collar a couple of times this afternoon for reasons I would certainly think about when I got a chance, but now of course it was killing floor time and I was in total command, and so I was again surprised and shocked to find myself springing up from my chair and, not diving behind the welding tanks, or even leaping for his right hand, but simply running flat out full tilt in plain sight for the door. It was the most foolish imaginable move and half of my mind screamed, *Fool! Fool! At least run broken field your back is a fucking perfect target you'll never get halfway to the door with every step until I was halfway to the door and then it shut up until I had reached the door and then the other half said quietly I knew he wouldn't shoot* but then I had the door open and both halves screamed. It hadn't occurred to any of us that the sound system might be antiquated enough to use those miserable eight-track tapes.

Eight-tracks break down frequently, they provide mediocre sound quality under the best playback, their four-program format often leaves as much as ten minutes of dead air between programs, and you can't rewind or cue them. And they don't shut themselves off when they're done. They repeat indefinitely.

**Hunger stopped him  
He lies still in his cell  
Death has gagged his accusations  
We are free now  
We can kill now  
We can hate now  
Now we can end the world  
We're not guilty  
He was crazy  
And it's been going on for  
ten thousand years!**

It is possible for an unrestrained man to kill himself with his hands. I moved to do so, and Cardwell hit me from behind like a bag of cement. One wrist broke as I landed, and he grabbed the other. He shouted things at me, but not loud enough to be heard over the final chorus:

**"Take your place on the Great Mandala  
"As it moves through your brief moment of time  
"Win or lose now: you must choose now**

**"And if you lose you've only wasted your** *(life is what it really was even if they called it five years he never came out the front door again so it was life imprisonment, right? and maybe the Cong would've killed him just as dead but they wouldn't have raped him first and they wouldn't have starved him not literally*

*we could have been heroes together if only he hadn't been fucking coward coward coward ... )*

"Who was a coward?" Cardwell asked distantly, and I took it the wrong way and screamed, "*Him!* Not me! HIM!" and then I realized that the song had ended and it was very very silent out, only the distant murmuring of highway traffic and the power hum from the speakers and the echo of my words; and I thought about what I had just said, and seven years' worth of the best ratio-nalizations I ever built came thundering down around my ears. The largest chunk came down on my skull and smashed it flat.

*Gil, I'm sorry!*

#### IV

Ever since Nam I've been accustomed to coming awake instantly—sometimes with a wea-pon in my hand. I had forgotten what a luxuri-ous pleasure it can be to let awareness and alertness seep back in at their own pace, to be truly *relaxed*. I lay still for some time, aware of my surroundings only in terms of their peacefulness, before it occurred to me to identify them. Nor did I feel, then, the slightest surprise or alarm at the defection of my subconscious sentries. It was as though in some back corner of my mind a dozen yammering voices had, for the first time within memory, shut up. All deci-sions were made ...

I was in the same chair I'd left so hastily. It was tilted and reshaped into something more closely resembling the acceleration cradles astro-nauts take off in, only more comfortable. My left wrist was set and efficiently splinted, and hurt surprisingly little. Above me girders played geo-metric games across the high curved ceiling, interspersed with diffused-light fixtures that did not hurt to look at. Somewhere to my left, work was being done. It produced sound, but sound is divided into music and noise and somehow this clattering wasn't noise. I waited until it stopped, with infinite patience, in no hurry at all.

When there had been no sound for a while I got up and turned and saw Cardwell again emerging from the pit beneath the Rambler, with a thick streak of grease across his forehead and a skinned knuckle. He beamed. "I love ball joints. Your wrist okay?"

"Yes, thanks."

He came over, turned my chair back into a chair, and sank into his own. He produced ciga-rettes and gave me one. I noticed a wooden stool, obviously handmade, lying crippled near a workbench. I realized that Cardwell had sawed off and split two of its legs to make the splints on my wrist. The stool was quite old, and all at once I felt more guilt and shame for its destruction than I did for having come to murder its owner. This amused me sourly. I took my cigarette to the front of the garage, where one of the great bay doors now stood open, and watched night sky and listened to crickets and bull frogs while I smoked. Shop closed, Arden gone home. Af-ter a while Cardwell got up and came to the door, too, and we stepped out into the darkness. The traffic, too, had mostly gone home for the night, and there was no moon. The dark suited me fine.

"My name," I said softly, "is Bill Maeder." From out of the black Cardwell's voice

was serene. "Pleased to meet you," was all he said. We walked on.

"I used to be a twin," I said, flicking the cigarette butt beneath my walking feet. "My brother's name was Gil, and we were identical twins. After enough people have called your twin your Other Half, you begin to believe it. I guess we allowed ourselves to become polarized, because that suited everyone's sense of symmetry or some damned thing. Yin and Yang Maeder, they called us. All our lives we disagreed on everything, and we loved each other deeply.

"Then they called us in for our draft physi-cal. I showed up and he didn't and so they sent me to Nam and Gil to Leavenworth. I walked through the jungles and came out a hero. Gil died in his cell at the end of a protracted hunger strike. A man who is starving to death smells like fresh-baked bread, did you know that? I spent my whole first furlough practically living in his cell, arguing with him and screaming at him, and he just sat there the whole time smell-ing like whole wheat right out of the oven."

Cardwell said nothing. For a while we kept strolling. Then I stopped in my tracks and said, "For seven years I told myself that *he* was the coward, that he was the chump, that he had failed the final test of survival. My father is a drunk now. My mother is a Guru Maharaj Ji premie." I started walking again, and still Cardwell was silent. "I was the coward, of course. Rather than admit I was wrong to let them make me into a killer, I gloried in it. I went freelance." We had reached my Dodge, and I stop-ped for the last time by the passenger-side door. "Goodness, sharing, caring about other people, ethics and morals and all that—as long as I believed that they were just a shuck, lies to keep the sheep in line, I could function, my choice made sense. If there is no such thing as hope, despair can be no sin. If there is no truth, one lie is no worse than another. Come to think of it, your Arden said something like that." I sighed. "But I hated that God-damned mandala song, the one about the draft resister who dies in jail. It came out just before I was shipped out to Nam." I reached through the open car window and took the Magnum from the glove compartment. "Right after the funeral." I put the barrel between my teeth and aimed for the roof of my mouth.

Cardwell was near, but he stood stock-still. All he said was, "Some people never learn." My finger paused on the trigger.

"Gil will be glad to see you. You two tragic expiators will get on just fine. While the rest of us clean up the mess you left behind you. Go ahead. We'll manage."

I let my hand fall. "What are you talking about?"

All at once he was blazing mad, and a multi-billionaire's rage is a terrible thing to behold. "You simple egocentric bastard, did it ever occur to you that you might be *needed*? That the brains and skills and talent you've been using to kill strangers, to play head-games with yourself, are scarce resources? Trust an assassin to be arrogant; you colossal jackass, *do you thank Arden Larsens grow on trees?* A man in my kind of business can't recruit through the want ads. I need people with *guts!*"

"To do what?" I said, and threw the pistol into the darkness.