

# LOVE IN VAIN

BY LEWIS SHINER

*For James Ellroy*

THE ROOM HAD whitewashed walls, no windows, and a map of the US on my left as I came in. There must have been a hundred pins with little colored heads stuck along the interstates. By the other door was a wooden table, the top full of scratches and coffee rings. Charlie was already sitting on the far side of it.

They called it Charlie's "office" and a Texas Ranger named Gonzales had brought me back there to meet him. "Charlie?" Gonzales said. "This here's Dave McKenna. He's an Assistant DA up in Dallas?"

"Morning," Charlie said. His left eye, the glass one, drooped a little, and his teeth were brown and ragged. He had on jeans and a plaid short-sleeved shirt and he was shaved clean. His hair was damp and combed straight back. His sideburns had gray in them and came to the bottom of his ears.

I had files and a notebook in my right hand so I wouldn't have to shake with him. He didn't offer. "You looking to close you up some cases?" he said.

I had to clear my throat. "Well, we thought we might give it a try." I sat down in the other chair.

He nodded and looked at Gonzales. "Ernie? You don't suppose I could have a little more coffee?"

Gonzales had been leaning against the wall by the map, but he straightened right up and said, "Sure thing, Charlie." He brought in a full pot from the other room and set it on the table. Charlie had a Styrofoam cup that held about a quart. He filled it up and then added three packets of sugar and some powdered creamer.

"How about you?" Charlie said.

"No," I said. "Thanks."

"You don't need to be nervous," Charlie said. His breath smelled of coffee and cigarettes. When he wasn't talking his mouth relaxed into an easy smile. You didn't have to see anything menacing in it. It was the kind of smile you could see from any highway in Texas, looking out at you from a porch or behind a gas pump, waiting for you to drive on through.

I took out a little pocket-sized cassette recorder. "Would it be okay if I taped this?"

"Sure, go ahead."

I pushed the little orange button on top. "March 27, Williamson County Jail. Present are Sergeant Ernesto Gonzales and Charles Dean Harris."

"Charlie," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Nobody ever calls me Charles."

"Right," I said. "Okay."

“I guess maybe my mother did sometimes. Always sounded wrong somehow.” He tilted his chair back against the wall. “You don’t suppose you could back that up and do it over?”

“Yeah, okay, fine.” I rewound the tape and went through the introduction again. This time I called him Charlie.

Twenty-five years ago he’d stabbed his mother to death. She’d been his first.

**I**T HAD TAKEN ME three hours to drive from Dallas to the Williamson County Jail in Georgetown, a straight shot down Interstate 35. I’d left a little before eight that morning. Alice was already at work and I had to get Jeffrey off to school. The hardest part was getting him away from the television.

He was watching *MTV*. They were playing the Heart video where the blonde guitar player wears the low-cut golden prom dress. Every time she moved, her magnificent breasts seemed to hesitate before they went along, like they were proud, willful animals, just barely under her control.

I turned the *TV* off and swung Jeffrey around a couple of times and sent him out for the bus. I got together the files I needed and went into the bedroom to make the bed. The covers were turned back on both sides, but the middle was undisturbed. Alice and I hadn’t made love in six weeks. And counting.

I walked through the house, picking up Jeffrey’s *Masters of the Universe* toys. I saw that Alice had loaded up the mantel again with framed pictures of her brothers and parents and the dog she’d had as a little girl. For a second it seemed like the entire house was buried in objects that had nothing to do with me—dolls and vases and doilies and candles and baskets on every inch of every flat surface she could reach. You couldn’t walk from one end of a room to the other without running into a Victorian chair or secretary or umbrella stand, couldn’t see the floors for the flowered rugs.

I locked up and got in the car and took the *LBJ* loop all the way around town. The idea was to avoid traffic. I was kidding myself. Driving in Dallas is a matter of manly pride: if somebody manages to pull in front of you he’s clearly got a bigger dick than you do. Rather than let this happen it’s better that one of you die.

I was in traffic the whole way down, through a hundred and seventy miles of Charlie Dean Harris country: flat, desolate grasslands with an occasional bridge or culvert where you could dump a body. Charlie had wandered and murdered all over the south, but once he found *I-35* he was home to stay.

**I** OPENED ONE OF the folders and rested it against the edge of the table so Charlie wouldn’t see my hand tremble. “I’ve got a case here from 1974. A Dallas girl on her way home from Austin for spring break. Her name was Carol, uh, Fairchild. Black hair, blue eyes. Eighteen years old.”

Charlie was nodding. “She had braces on her teeth. Would have been real pretty without ‘em.”

I looked at the sheet of paper in the folder. Braces, it said. The plain white walls seemed to wobble a little. “Then you remember her.”

“Yessir, I suppose I do. I killed her.” He smiled. It looked like a reflex, something he didn’t even know he was doing. “I killed her to have sex with her.”

“Can you remember anything else?”

He shrugged. “It was just to have sex, that’s all. I remember when she got in the car. She was wearing a T-shirt, one of them man’s T-shirts, with the straps and all.” He dropped the chair back down and put his elbows on the table. “You could see her titties,” he explained.

I wanted to pull away but I didn’t. “Where was this?”

He thought for a minute. “Between here and Round Rock, right there off the Interstate.”

I looked down at my folder again. Last seen wearing navy tank top, blue jeans. “What color was the T-shirt?”

“Red,” he said. “She would have been strangled. With a piece of electrical wire I had there in the car. I had supposed she was a prostitute, dressed the way she was and all. I asked her to have sex and she said she would, so I got off the highway and then she didn’t want to. So I killed her and I had sex with her.”

Nobody said anything for what must have been at least a minute. I could hear a little scratching noise as the tape moved inside the recorder. Charlie was looking straight at me with his good eye. “I wasn’t satisfied,” he said.

“What?”

“I wasn’t satisfied. I had sex with her but I wasn’t satisfied.”

“Listen, you don’t have to tell me...”

“I got to tell it all,” he said.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I said. My voice came out too high, too loud. But Charlie kept staring at me.

“It don’t matter,” he said. “I still got to tell it. I got to tell it all. I can’t live with the terrible things I did. Jesus says that if I tell everything I can be with Betsy when this is all over.” Betsy was his common law wife. He’d killed her too, after living with her since she was nine. The words sounded like he’d practiced them, over and over.

“I’ll take you to her if you want,” he said.

“Betsy...?”

“No, your girl there. Carol Fairchild. I’ll take you where I buried her.” He wasn’t smiling any more. He had the sad, earnest look of a laundromat bum telling you how he’d lost his oil fortune up in Oklahoma.

I looked at Gonzales. “We can set it up for you if you want,” he said. “Sheriff’ll have to okay it and all, but we could prob’ly do it first thing tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. “That’d be good.”

Charlie nodded, drank some coffee, lit a cigarette. “Well, fine,” he said. “You want to try another?”

“No,” I said. “Not just yet.”

“Whatever,” Charlie said. “You just let me know.”

Later, walking me out, Gonzales said, “Don’t let Charlie get to you. He wants people to like him, you know? So he figures out what you want him to be, and he tries to be that for you.”

I knew he was trying to cheer me up. I thanked him and told him I'd be back in the morning.

**I** CALLED ALICE from my friend Jack's office in Austin, thirty miles farther down I-35. "It's me," I said.

"Oh," she said. She sounded tired. "How's it going?"

I didn't know what to tell her. "Fine," I said. "I need to stay over another day or so."

"Okay," she said.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," she said.

"Jeffrey?"

"He's fine."

I watched thirty seconds tick by on Jack's wall clock. "Anything else?" she said.

"I guess not." My eyes stung and I reflexively shaded them with my free hand. "I'll be at Jack's if you need me."

"Okay," she said. I waited a while longer and then put the phone back on the hook.

Jack had just come out of his office. "Oh oh," he said.

It took a couple of breaths to get my throat to unclench. "Yeah," I said.

"Bad?"

"Bad as it could be, I guess. It's over, probably. I mean, I think it's over, but how do you know?"

"You don't," Jack said. His secretary, a good-looking Chicana named Liz, typed away on her word processor and tried to act like she wasn't having to listen to us. "You just after a while get fed up and you say fuck it. You want to get a burger or what?"

**J**ACK AND I went to UT law school together. He'd lost a lot of hair and put on some weight but he wouldn't do anything about it. Jogging was for assholes. He would rather die fat and keep his self-respect.

He'd been divorced two years now and was always glad to fold out the couch for me. It had been a while. After Jeffrey was born Alice and I had somehow lost touch with everything except work and TV. "I've missed this," I said.

"Missed what?"

"Friends," I said. We were in a big prairie-style house north of campus that had been fixed up with a kitchen and bar and hanging plants. I was full, but still working on the last of the batter-dipped French fries.

"Not my fault, you prick. You're the one dropped down to Christmas cards."

"Yeah, well..."

"Forget it. How'd it go with Charlie Dean?"

"Unbelievable," I said. "I mean, really. He confessed to everything. Had details. Even had a couple wrong, enough to look good. But the major stuff was right on."

"So that's great. Isn't it?"

“It was a set up. The name I gave him was a fake. No such person, no such case.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Jack, the son of a bitch has confessed to something like three thousand murders. It ain’t possible. So they wanted to catch him lying.”

“With his pants down, so to speak.”

“Same old Jack.”

“You said he had details.”

“That’s the creepy part. He knew she was supposed to have braces. I had it in the phony case file, but he brought it up before I did.”

“Lucky guess.”

“No. It was too creepy. And there’s all this shit he keeps telling you. Things you wish you’d never heard, you know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean,” Jack said. “When I was in junior high I saw a bum go in the men’s room at the bus station with a loaf of bread. I told this friend of mine about it and he says the bum was going in there to wipe all the dried piss off the toilets with the bread and then eat it. For the protein. Said it happens all the time.”

“Jesus Christ, Jack.”

“See? I know what you’re talking about. There’s things you don’t want in your head. Once they get in there, you’re not the same any more. I can’t eat white bread to this day. Twenty years, and I still can’t touch it.”

“You asshole.” I pushed my plate away and finished my Corona. “Christ, now the beer tastes like piss.”

Jack pointed his index finger at me. “You will never be the same,” he said.

**Y**OU COULD NEVER TELL how much Jack had been drinking. He said it was because he was careful not to let on if he was ever sober. I always thought it was because there was something in him that was meaner than the booze and together they left him just about even.

It was a lot of beers later that Jack said, “What was the name of that bimbo in high school you used to talk about? Your first great love or some shit? Except she never put out for you?”

“Kristi,” I said. “Kristi Spector.”

“Right!” Jack got up and started to walk around the apartment. It wasn’t too long of a walk. “A name like that, how could I forget? I got her off a soliciting rap two months ago.”

“Soliciting?”

“There’s a law in Texas against selling your pussy. Maybe you didn’t know that.”

“Kristi Spector, my god. Tell me about it.”

“She’s a stripper, son. Works over at the Yellow Rose. This guy figured if she’d show her tits in public he could have the rest in his car. She didn’t, he called the pigs. Said she made lewd advances. Crock of shit, got thrown out of court.”

“How’s she look?”

“Not too goddamn bad. I wouldn’t have minded taking my fee in trade, but she didn’t seem to get the hint.” He stopped. “I got a better idea. Let’s go have a look for ourselves.”

“Oh no,” I said.

“Oh yes. She remembers you, man. She says you were ‘sweet.’ Come on, get up. We’re going to go look at some tits.”

THE PLACE WAS BIGGER inside than I expected, the ceilings higher. There were two stages and a runway behind the second one. There were stools right up by the stages for the guys that wanted to stick dollar bills in the dancers’ G-strings and four-top tables everywhere else.

I should have felt guilty but I wasn’t thinking about Alice at all. The issue here was sex, and Alice had written herself out of that part of my life. Instead I was thinking about the last time I’d seen Kristi.

It was senior year in high school. The director of the drama club, who was from New York, had invited some of us to a “wild” party. It was the first time I’d seen men in dresses. I’d locked myself in the bathroom with Kristi to help her take her bra off. I hadn’t seen her in six months. She’d just had an abortion; the father could have been one of a couple of guys. Not me. She didn’t want to spoil what we had. It was starting to look to me like there wasn’t much left to spoil. That had been 18 years ago.

The DJ played something by Pat Benatar. The music was loud enough to give you a kind of mental privacy. You didn’t really have to pay attention to anything but the dancers. At the moment it seemed like just the thing. It had been an ugly day and there was something in me that was comforted by the sight of young, good looking women with their clothes off.

“College town,” Jack said, leaning toward me so I could hear him. “Lots of local talent.”

A tall blonde on the north stage unbuttoned her long-sleeved white shirt and let it hang open. Her breasts were smooth and firm and pale. Like the others she had something on the point of her nipples that made a small, golden flash every time one caught the light.

“See anybody you know?”

“Give me a break,” I shouted over the music. “You saw her a couple months ago. It’s been almost twenty years for me. I may not even recognize her.” A waitress came by, wearing black leather jeans and a red tank top. For a second I could hear Charlie’s voice telling me about her titties. I rubbed the sides of my head and the voice went away. We ordered beers, but when they came my stomach was wrapped around itself and I had to let mine sit.

“It’s got to be weird to do this for a living,” I said in Jack’s ear.

“Bullshit,” Jack said. “You think they’re not getting off on it?”

He pointed to the south stage. A brunette in high heels had let an overweight man in sideburns and a western shirt tuck a dollar into the side of her bikini bottoms. He talked earnestly to her with just the start of an embarrassed smile. She had to keep leaning closer to hear him. Finally she nodded and turned around. She bent over and grabbed her ankles. His face was about the height of the backs of her knees. She was smiling like she’d just seen somebody else’s baby do something cute. After a few seconds she stood up again and the man went back to his table.

“What was that about?” I asked Jack.

“Power, man,” he said. “God, I love women. I just love ‘em.”

“Your problem is you don’t know the difference between love and sex.”

“Yeah? What is it? Come on, I want to know.” The music was too loud to argue with him. I shook my head. “See? You don’t know either.”

The brunette pushed her hair back with both hands, chin up, fingers spread wide, and it reminded me of Kristi. The theatricality of it. She’d played one of Tennessee Williams’ affected Southern bitches once and it had been almost too painful to watch. Almost.

“Come on,” I said, grabbing Jack’s sleeve. “It’s been swell, but let’s get out of here. I don’t need to see her. I’m better off with the fantasy.”

Jack didn’t say anything. He just pointed with his chin to the stage behind me.

She had on a leopard skin leotard. She had been a dark blonde in high school but now her hair was brown and short. She’d put on a little weight, not much. She stretched in front of the mirrored wall and the DJ played the Pretenders.

I felt this weird, possessive kind of pride, watching her. That and lust. I’d been married for eight years and the worst thing I’d ever done was kiss an old girl friend on New Year’s Eve and stare longingly at the pictures in *Playboy*. But this was real, this was happening.

The song finished and another one started and she pulled one strap down on the leotard. I remembered the first time I’d seen her breasts. I was fifteen. I’d joined a youth club at the Unitarian Church because she went there Sunday afternoons. Sometimes we would skip the program and sneak off into the deserted Sunday school classrooms and there, in the twilight, surrounded by crayon drawings on manila paper, she would stretch out on the linoleum and let me lie on top of her and feel the maddening pressure of her pelvis and smell the faint, clinically erotic odor of peroxide in her hair.

She showed me her breasts on the golf course next door. We had jumped the fence and we lay in a sandtrap so no one would see us. There was a little light from the street, but not enough for real color. It was like a black and white movie when I played it back in my mind.

They were fuller now, hung a little lower and flatter, but I remembered the small, pale nipples. She pulled the other strap down, turned her back, rotating her hips as she stripped down to a red G-string. Somebody held a dollar out to her. I wanted to go over there and tell him that I knew her.

Jack kept poking me in the ribs. “Well? Well?”

“Be cool,” I said. I had been watching the traffic pattern and I knew that after the song she would take a break and then get up on the other stage. It took a long time, but I wasn’t tense about it. I’m just going to say hi, I thought. And that’s it.

The song was over and she walked down the stairs at the end of the stage, throwing the leotard around her shoulders. I got up, having a little trouble with the chair, and walked over to her.

“Kristi,” I said. “It’s Dave McKenna.”

“Oh my *God!*” She was in my arms. Her skin was hot from the lights and I could smell her deodorant. I was suddenly dizzy, aware of every square inch where our bodies touched. “Do you still hate me?” she said as she pulled away.

“What?” There was so much I’d forgotten. The twang in her voice. The milk chocolate color of her eyes. The beauty mark over her right cheekbone. The flirtatious look up through the lashes that now had a desperate edge to it.

“The last time I saw you, you called me a bitch. It was after that party at your teacher’s house.”

“No, I...believe me, it wasn’t like...”

“Listen, I’m on again,” she said. “Where are you?”

“We’re right over there.”

“Oh Christ, you didn’t bring your wife with you? I heard you were married.”

“No, it’s...”

“I got to run, sugar, wait for me.”

I went back to the table.

“You rascal,” Jack said. “Why didn’t you just slip it to her on the spot?”

“Shut up, Jack, will you?”

“Ooooh, touchy.”

I watched her dance. She was no movie star. Her face was a little hard and even the heavy makeup didn’t hide all the lines. But none of that mattered. What mattered was the way she moved, the kind of puckered smile that said yes, I want it too.

**S**HE SAT DOWN with us when she was finished. She seemed to be all hands, touching me on the arm, biting on a fingernail, gesturing in front of her face.

She was dancing three times a week, which was all they would schedule her for any more. The money was good and she didn’t mind the work, especially here where it wasn’t too rowdy. Jack raised his eyebrows at me to say, see? She got by with some modeling and some “scuffling” which I assumed meant turning tricks. Her mother was still in Dallas and had sent Kristi clippings the couple of times I got my name in the paper.

“She always liked me,” I said.

“She liked you the best of all of them. You were a gentleman.”

“Maybe too much of one.”

“It was why I loved you.” She was wearing the leotard again but she might as well have been naked. I was beginning to be afraid of her so I reminded myself that nothing had happened yet, nothing *had* to happen, that I wasn’t committed to anything. I pushed my beer over to her and she drank about half of it. “It gets hot up there,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe. Sometimes you think you’re going to pass out, but you got to keep smiling.”

“Are you married?” I asked her. “Were you ever?”

“Once. It lasted two whole months. The shitheel knocked me up and then split.”

“What happened?”

“I kept the kid. He’s four now.”

“What’s his name?”

“Stoney. He’s a cute little bastard. I got a neighbor watches him when I’m out, and I do the same for hers. He keeps me going sometimes.” She drank the rest of the beer. “What about you?”

“I got a little boy too. Jeffrey. He’s seven.”

“Just the one?”

“I don’t think the marriage could handle more than one kid,” I said.



“It’s an old story,” Jack said. “If your wife puts you through law school, the marriage breaks up. It just took Dave a little longer than most.”

“You’re getting divorced?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.” She nodded. I guess she didn’t need to ask for details. Marriages come apart every day.

“I’m on again in a little,” she said. “Will you still be here when I get back?” She did what she could to make it sound casual.

“I got an early day tomorrow,” I said.

“Sure. It was good to see you. Real good.”

The easiest thing seemed to be to get out a pen and an old business card. “Give me your phone number. Maybe I can get loose another night.”

She took the pen but she kept looking at me. “Sure,” she said.

“‘YOU’RE AN IDIOT,’” Jack said. “Why didn’t you go home with her?”

I watched the streetlights. My jacket smelled like cigarettes and my head had started to hurt.

“That gorgeous piece of ass says to you, ‘Ecstasy?’ and Dave says, ‘No thanks.’ What the hell’s the matter with you? Alice make you leave your dick in the safe deposit box?”

“Jack,” I said, “will you shut the fuck up?” The card with her number on it was in the inside pocket of the jacket. I could feel it there, like a cool fingernail against my flesh.

JACK WENT BACK to his room to crash a little after midnight. I couldn’t sleep. I put on the headphones and listened to Robert Johnson, “King of the Delta Blues Singers.” There was something about his voice. He had this deadpan tone that sat down and told you what was wrong like it was no big deal. Then the voice would crack and you could tell it was a hell of a lot worse than he was letting on.

They said the devil himself had tuned Johnson’s guitar. He died in 1938, poisoned by jealous husband. He’d made his first recordings in a hotel room in San Antonio, just another 70 miles on down I-35.

CHARLIE AND GONZALES and I took my car out to what Gonzales called the “site.” The sheriff and a deputy were in a brown county station wagon behind us. Charlie sat on the passenger side and Gonzales was in the back. Charlie could have opened the door at a stoplight and been gone. He wasn’t even in handcuffs. Nobody said anything about it.

We got on I-35 and Charlie said, “Go on south to the second exit after the caves.” The Inner Space Caverns were just south of Georgetown, basically a single long, unspectacular tunnel that ran for miles under the highway. “I killed a girl there once. When they turned off the lights.”

I nodded but I didn’t say anything. That morning, before I went in to the “office,” Gonzales had told me that it made Charlie angry if you let on that you didn’t believe him. I was tired, and hung over from watching Jack drink, and I didn’t really give a damn about Charlie’s feelings.

I got off at the exit and followed the access road for a while. Charlie had his eyes closed and seemed to be thinking hard.

“Having trouble?” I asked him.

“Nah,” he said. “Just didn’t want to take you to the wrong one.” I looked at him and he started laughing. It was a joke. Gonzales chuckled in the back seat and there was this cheerful kind of feeling in the car that made me want to pull over and run away.

“Nosir,” Charlie said, “I sure don’t suppose I’d want to do that.” He grinned at me and he knew what I was thinking, he could see the horror right there on my face. He just kept smiling. Come on, I could hear him say. Loosen up. Be one of the guys.

I wiped the sweat from my hands onto my pant legs. Finally he said, “There’s a dirt road a ways ahead. Turn off on it. It’ll go over a hill and then across a cattle grating. After the grating is a stand of trees to the left. You’ll want to park up under ‘em.”

How can he do this? I thought. He’s got to know there’s nothing there. Or does he? When we don’t turn anything up, what’s he going to do? Are they going to wish they’d cuffed him after all? The sheriff knew what I was up to, but none of the others did. Would Gonzales turn on me for betraying Charlie?

The road did just what Charlie said it would. We parked the cars under the trees and the deputy and I got shovels out of the sheriff’s trunk. The trees were oaks and their leaves were tiny and very pale green.

“It would be over here,” Charlie said. He stood on a patch of low ground, covered with clumps of Johnson grass. “Not too deep.”

He was right. She was only about six or eight inches down. The deputy had a body bag and he tried to move her into it, but she kept coming apart. There wasn’t much left but a skeleton and a few rags.

And the braces. Still shining, clinging to the teeth of the skull like a metal smile.

ON THE WAY back to Georgetown we passed a woman on the side of the road. She was staring into the hood of her car. She looked like she was about to cry. Charlie turned all the way around in his seat to watch her as we drove by.

“There’s just victims ever’where,” Charlie said. There was a sadness in his voice I didn’t believe. “The highway’s full of ‘em. Kids, hitchhikers, waitresses... You ever pick one up?”

“No,” I said, but it wasn’t true. It was in Dallas, I was home for spring break. It was the end of the sixties. She had on a green dress. Nothing happened. But she had smiled at me and put one arm up on the back of the seat. I was on the way to my girlfriend’s house and I let her off a few blocks away. And that night, when I was inside her, I imagined my girlfriend with the hitchhiker’s face, with her blonde hair and freckles, her slightly coarse features, the dots of sweat on her upper lip.

“But you thought about it,” Charlie said. “Didn’t you?”

“Listen,” I said. “I’ve got a job to do. I just want to do it and get out of here, okay?”

"I know what you're saying," Charlie said. "Jesus forgives me, but I can't ask that of nobody else. I was just trying to get along, that's all. That's all any of us is ever trying to do."

I CALLED DALLAS collect from the sheriff's phone. He gave me a private room where I could shout if I had to. The switchboard put me through to Ricky Slatkin, Senior Assistant DA for Homicide.

"Dave, will you for Chrissake calm down. It's a coincidence. That's all. Forensics will figure out who this girl is and we'll put another 70 or 80 years on Charlie's sentence. Maybe give him another death penalty. What the hell, right? Meanwhile we'll give him another ringer."

"You give him one. I want out of this. I am fucking terrified."

"I, uh, understand you're under some stress at home these days."

"I am not at home. I'm in Georgetown, in the Williamson County Jail, and I am under some fucking stress right here. Don't you understand? He *thought* this dead girl into existence."

"What, Charlie Dean Harris is God now, is that it? Come on, Dave. Go out and have a few beers and by tomorrow it'll all make sense to you."

"HE'S EVIL, JACK," I said. We were back at his place after a pizza at Conan's. Jack had ordered a pitcher of beer and drunk it all himself. "I didn't use to believe in it, but that was before I met Charlie."

He had a women's basketball game on TV, the sound turned down to a low hum. "That's horseshit," he said. His voice was too loud. "Horseshit, Christian horseshit. They want you to believe that Evil has got a capital E and it's sitting over there in the corner, see it? Horseshit. Evil isn't a thing. It's something that's *not* there. It's an absence. The lack of the thing that stops you from doing whatever you damn well please."

He chugged half a beer. "Your pal Charlie ain't evil. He's just damaged goods. He's just like you or me but something died in him. You know what I'm talking about. You've felt it. First it goes to sleep and then it dies. Like when you stand up in court and try to get a rapist off when you know he did it. You tell yourself that it's part of the game, you try to give the asshole the benefit of the doubt, hell, somebody's got to do it, right? You try to believe the girl is just some slut that changed her mind, but you can smell it. Something inside you starting to rot."

He finished the beer and threw it at a paper sack in the corner. It hit another bottle inside the sack and shattered. "Then you go home and your wife's got a goddamn headache or her period or she's asleep in front of the TV or she's not in the goddamn mood and you just want to beat the..." His right fist was clenched up so tight the knuckles were a shiny yellow. His eyes looked like open sores. He got up for another beer and he was in the kitchen for a long time.

When he came back I said, "I'm going out." I said it without giving myself a chance to think about it.

"Kristi," Jack said. He had a fresh beer and was all right again.

"Yeah."

"You bastard! Can I smell your fingers when you get back?"

“Fuck you, Jack.”

“Oh no, save it for her. She’s going to use you up, you lucky bastard.”

I CALLED HER from a pay phone and she gave me directions. She was at the Royal Palms Trailer Park, near Bergstrom Air Force Base on the south end of town. It wasn’t hard to find. They even had a few palm trees. There were rural-type galvanized mailboxes on posts by the gravel driveways. I found the one that said Spector and parked behind a white Dodge with six-figure mileage.

The temperature was in the sixties but I was shaking. My shoulders kept trying to crawl up around my neck. I got out of the car. I couldn’t feel my feet. Asshole, I told myself. I don’t want to hear about your personal problems. You better enjoy this or I’ll fucking kill you.

I knocked on the door and it made a kind of mute rattling sound. Kristi opened it. She was wearing a plaid bathrobe, so old I couldn’t tell what the colors used to be. She stood back to let me in and said, “I didn’t think you’d call.”

“But I did,” I said. The trailer was tiny—a living room with a green sofa and a 13-inch color TV, a kitchen the size of a short hall, a single bedroom behind it, the door open, the bed unmade. A blond-haired boy was asleep on the sofa, wrapped in an army blanket. The shelf above him was full of plays—Albee, Ionesco, Tennessee Williams. The walls were covered with photographs in dime-store frames.

A couple of them were from the drama club; one even had me in it. I was sixteen and looked maybe nine. My hair was too long in front, my chest was sucked in, and I had a stupid smirk on my face. I was looking at Kristi. Who would want to look at anything else? She had on cutoffs that had frayed up past the crease of her thighs. Her shirt was unbuttoned and tied under her breasts. Her head was back and she was laughing. I’d always been able to make her laugh.

“You want a drink?” she whispered.

“No,” I said. I turned to look at her. We weren’t either of us laughing now. I reached for her and she glanced over at the boy and shook her head. She grabbed the cuff of my shirt and pulled me gently back toward the bedroom.

It smelled of perfume and hand lotion and a little of mildew. The only light trickled in through heavy, old-fashioned Venetian blinds. She untied the bathrobe and let it fall. I kissed her and her arms went around my neck. I touched her shoulder blades and her hair and her buttocks and then I got out of my clothes and left them in a pile on the floor. She ran on tiptoes back to the front of the trailer and locked and chained the door. Then she came back and shut the bedroom door and lay down on the bed.

I lay down next to her. The smell and feel of her was wonderful, and at the same time it was not quite real. There were too many unfamiliar things and it was hard to connect to the rest of my life.

Then I was on my knees between her legs, gently touching her. Her arms were spread out beside her, tangled in the sheets, her hips moving with pleasure. Only once, in high school, had she let me touch her there, in the back seat of a friend’s car, her skirt up around her hips, panties to her knees, and before I had recovered from the wonder of it she had pulled away.

But that was 18 years ago and this was now. A lot of men had touched her since then. But that was all right. She took a condom out of the nightstand and I put it on and she guided me inside her. She tried to say something, maybe it was only my name, but I put my mouth over hers to shut her up. I put both my arms around her and closed my eyes and let the heat and pleasure run up through me.

When I finished and we rolled apart she lay on top of me, pinning me to the bed. "That was real sweet," she said.

I kissed her and hugged her because I couldn't say what I was thinking. I was thinking about Charlie, remembering the earnest look on his face when he said, "It was just to have sex, that's all."

**S**HE WAS WIDE AWAKE and I was exhausted. She complained about the state cutting back on aid to single parents. She told me about the tiny pieces of tape she had to wear on the ends of her nipples when she danced, a weird Health Department regulation. I remembered the tiny golden flashes and fell asleep to the memory of her dancing.

Screaming woke me up. Kristi was already out of bed and headed for the living room. "It's just Stoney," she said, and I lay back down.

I woke up again a little before dawn. There was an arm around my waist but it seemed much too small. I rolled over and saw that the little boy had crawled into bed between us.

I got up without moving him and went to the bathroom. There was no water in the toilet; when I pushed the handle a trap opened in the bottom of the bowl and a fine spray washed the sides. I got dressed, trying not to bump into anything. Kristi was asleep on the side of the bed closest to the door, her mouth open a little. Stoney had burrowed into the middle of her back.

I was going to turn around and go when a voyeuristic impulse made me open the drawer of her nightstand. Or maybe I subconsciously knew what I'd find. There was a Beeline book called *Molly's Sexual Follies*, a tube of KY, a box of Ramses lubricated condoms, a few used Kleenex. An emery board, a finger puppet, one hoop earring. A short barreled Colt .32 revolver.

**I** GOT TO THE JAIL at nine in the morning. The woman at the visitor's window recognized me and buzzed me back. Gonzales was at his desk. He looked up when I walked in and said, "I didn't know you was coming in today."

"I just had a couple of quick questions for Charlie," I said. "Only take a second."

"Did you want to use the office...?"

"No, no point. If I could just talk to him in his cell for a couple of minutes, that would be great."

Gonzales got the keys. Charlie had a cell to himself, five by ten feet, white-painted bars on the long wall facing the corridor. There were Bibles and religious tracts on his cot, a few paintings hanging on the wall. "Maybe you can get Charlie to show you his pictures," Gonzales said. A stool in the corner had brushes and tubes of paint on the top.

"You painted these?" I asked Charlie. My voice sounded fairly normal, all things considered.

"Yessir, I did."

"They're pretty good." They were landscapes with trees and horses, but no people.

"Thank you kindly."

"You can just call for me when you're ready," Gonzales said. He went out and locked the door.

"I thought you'd be back," Charlie said. "Was there something else you wanted to ask me?" He sat on the edge of the cot, forearms on his knees.

I didn't say anything. I took the Colt out of the waistband of my pants and pointed it at him. I'd already looked it over on the drive up and there were bullets in all six cylinders. My hand was shaking so I steadied it with my left and fired all six rounds into his head and chest.

I hadn't noticed all the background noises until they stopped, the typewriters and the birds and somebody singing upstairs. Charlie stood up and walked over to where I was standing. The revolver clicked on an empty shell.

"You can't kill me," Charlie said with his droopy-eyed smile. "You can't never kill me." The door banged open at the end of the hall. "You can't kill me because I'm inside you."

I dropped the gun and locked my hands behind my head. Gonzales stuck his head around the corner. He was squinting. He had his gun out and he looked terrified. Charlie and I stared back at him calmly.

"It's okay, Ernie," Charlie said. "No harm done. Mr. McKenna was just having him a little joke."

CHARLIE TOLD GONZALES the gun was loaded with blanks. They had to believe him because there weren't any bulletholes in the cell. I told them I'd bought the gun off a defendant years ago, that I'd had it in the car.

They called Dallas and Ricky asked to talk to me. "There's going to be an inquiry," he said. "No way around it."

"Sure there is," I said. "I quit. I'll send it to you in writing. I'll put it in the mail today. Express."

"You need some help, Dave. You understand what I'm saying to you here? *Professional* help. Think about it. Just tell me you'll think about it."

Gonzales was scared and angry and wanted me charged with smuggling weapons into the jail. The sheriff knew it wasn't worth the headlines and by suppertime I was out.

Jack had already heard about it through some kind of legal grapevine. He thought it was funny. We skipped dinner and went down to the bars on Sixth Street. I couldn't drink anything. I was afraid of going numb, or letting down my guard. But Jack made up for me. As usual.

"Kristi called me today," Jack said. "I told her I didn't know but what you might be going back to Dallas today. Just a kind of feeling I had."

"I'm not going back," I said. "But it was the right thing to tell her."

"Not what it was cracked up to be, huh?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "That and much, much more."

For once he let it go. “You mean you’re not going back tonight or not going back period?”

“Period,” I said. “My job’s gone, I pissed that away this morning. I’ll get something down here. I don’t care what. I’ll pump gas. I’ll fucking wait tables. You can draw up the divorce papers and I’ll sign them.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“What’s Alice going to say?”

“I don’t know if she’ll even notice. She can have the goddamn house and her car and the savings. All of it. All I want is some time with Jeffrey. As much as I can get. Every week if I can.”

“Good luck.”

“I’ve got to have it. I don’t want him growing up screwed up like the rest of us. I’ve got stuff I’ve got to tell him. He’s going to need help. All of us are. Jack, goddamn it, are you listening to me?”

He wasn’t. He was staring at the Heart video on the bar’s big screen TV, at the blonde guitarist. “Look at that,” Jack said. “Sweet suffering Jesus. Couldn’t you just fuck that to death?”

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