

The Bachman Books

Stephen King

Why I Was Bachman

1

Between 1977 and 1984, I published five novels under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. These were *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), and *Thinner* (1984). There were two reasons I was finally linked with Bachman: first, because the first four books, all paperback originals, were dedicated to people associated with my life, and second, because my name appeared on the copyright forms of one book. Now people are asking me why I did it, and I don't seem to have any very satisfactory answers. Good thing I didn't murder anyone, isn't it?

2

I can make a few suggestions, but that's all. The only important thing I ever did in my life for a conscious reason was to ask Tabitha Spruce, the college co-ed I was seeing, if she would marry me. The reason was that I was deeply in love with her. The joke is that love itself is an irrational and indefinable emotion.

Sometimes something just says *Do this* or *Don't do that*. I almost always obey that voice, and when I disobey it I usually rue the day. All I'm saying is that I've got a hunch-player's approach to life. My wife accuses me of being an impossibly picky Virgo and I guess I am in some ways-I usually know at any given time how many pieces of a 500-piece puzzle I've put in, for instance-but I never really planned anything big that I ever did, and that includes the books I've written. I never sat down and wrote page one with anything but the vaguest idea of how things would come out.

One day it occurred to me that I ought to publish *Getting It On*, a novel which Doubleday *almost* published two years before they published *Carrie*, under a pseudonym. It seemed like a good idea so I did it.

Like I say, good thing I didn't kill anybody, huh?

3

In 1968 or 1969, Paul McCartney said a wistful and startling thing in an interview. He said the Beatles had discussed the idea of going out on the road as a bar-band named Randy and the Rockets. They would wear hokey capes and masks a la Count Five, he

said, so no one would recognize them, and they would just have a raveup like in the old days.

When the interviewer suggested they would be recognized by their voices, Paul seemed at first startled . . . and then a bit appalled.

4

Cub Koda, possibly America's greatest houserocker, once told me this story about Elvis Presley, and like the man said, if it ain't true, it oughtta be. Cub said Elvis told an interviewer something that went like this: I was like a cow in a pen with a whole bunch of other cows, only I got out somehow. Well, they came and got me and put me in another pen, only this one was bigger and I had it all to myself. I looked around and seen the fences was so high I'd never get out. So I said, "All right, I'll graze. "

5

I wrote five novels before *Carrie*. Two of them were bad, one was indifferent, and I thought two of them were pretty good. The two good ones were *Getting It On* (which became *Rage* when it was finally published) and *The Long Walk*. *Getting It On* was begun in 1966, when I was a senior in high school. I later found it moldering away in an old box in the cellar of the house where I'd grown up-this rediscovery was in 1970, and I finished the novel in 1971. *The Long Walk* was written in the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, when I was a freshman at college.

I submitted *Walk* to the Bennett Cerf/Random House first-novel competition (which has, I think, long since gone the way of the blue suede shoe) in the fall of 1967 and it was promptly rejected with a form note . . . no comment of any kind. Hurt and depressed, sure that the book must really be terrible, I stuck it into the fabled TRUNK, which all novelists, both published and aspiring, carry around. I never submitted it again until Elaine Geiger at New American Library asked if "Dicky" (as we called him) was going to follow up *Rage*. *The Long Walk* went in the TRUNK, but as Bob Dylan says in "Tangled Up in Blue," it never escaped my mind.

None of them has ever escaped my mind-not even the really bad ones.

6

The numbers have gotten very big. That's part of it. I have times when I feel as if I planted a modest packet of words and grew some kind of magic beanstalk . . .or a runaway garden of books (OVER 40 MILLION KING BOOKS IN PRINT!!!, as my publisher likes to trumpet). Or, put it another way-sometimes I feel like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*. I knew enough to get the brooms started, but once they start to march, things are never the same.

Am I bitching? No. At least they're very gentle bitches if I am. I have tried my best to

follow that other Dylan's advice and sing in my chains like the sea. I mean, I could get down there in the amen corner and crybaby about how tough it is to be Stephen King, but somehow I don't think all those people out there who are a) unemployed or b) busting heavies every week just to keep even with the house payments and the MasterCard bill would feel a lot of sympathy for me. Nor would I expect it. I'm still married to the same woman, my kids are healthy and bright, and I'm being well paid for doing something I love. So what's to bitch about?

Nothing.

Almost.

7

Memo to Paul McCartney, if he's there: the interviewer was right. They would have recognized your voices, but before you even opened your mouths, they would have recognized George's guitar licks. I did five books as Randy and the Rockets and I've been getting letters asking me if I was Richard Bachman from the very beginning.

My response to this was simplicity itself: I lied.

8

I think I did it to turn the heat down a little bit; to do something as someone other than Stephen King. I think that all novelists are inveterate role-players and it was fun to be someone else for a while—in this case, Richard Bachman. And he *did* develop a personality and a history to go along with the bogus author photo on the back of *Thinner* and the bogus wife (Claudia Inez Bachman) to whom the book is dedicated. Bachman was a fairly unpleasant fellow who was born in New York and spent about ten years in the merchant marine after four years in the Coast Guard. He ultimately settled in rural central New Hampshire, where he wrote at night and tended to his medium-sized dairy farm during the day. The Bachmans had one child, a boy, who died in an unfortunate accident at the age of six (he fell through a well cover and drowned). Three years ago a brain tumor was discovered near the base of Bachman's brain; tricky surgery removed it. And he died suddenly in February of 1985 when the *Bangor Daily News*, my hometown paper, published the story that I was Bachman—a story which I confirmed. Sometimes it was fun to be Bachman, a curmudgeonly recluse à la J. D. Salinger, who never gave interviews and who, on the author questionnaire from New English Library in London, wrote down "rooster worship" in the blank provided for religion.

I've been asked several times if I did it because I thought I was overpublishing the market as Stephen King. The answer is no. I didn't think I was overpublishing the market . . . but my publishers did. Bachman provided a compromise for both of us. My "Stephen King publishers" were like a frigid wifey who only wants to put out once or twice a year, encouraging her endlessly horny hubby to find a call girl. Bachman was where I went when I had to have relief. This does nothing, however, to explain why I've felt this restless need to *publish* what I write when I don't need the dough.

I repeat, good thing I didn't kill someone, huh?

I've been asked several times if I did it because I feel typecast as a horror writer. The answer is no. I don't give a shit what people call me as long as I can go to sleep at night.

Nevertheless, only the last of the Bachman books is an out-and-out horror story, and the fact hasn't escaped me. Writing something that was not horror as Stephen King would be perfectly easy, but answering the questions about why I did it would be a pain in the ass. When I wrote straight fiction as Richard Bachman, no one asked the questions. In fact, ha-ha, hardly anyone read the books.

Which leads us to what might be well, not the reason why that voice spoke up in the first place, but the closest thing to it.

You try to make sense of your life. Everybody tries to do that, I think, and part of making sense of things is trying to find reasons . . . or constants . . . things that don't fluctuate.

Everyone does it, but perhaps people who have extraordinarily lucky or unlucky lives do it a little more. Part of you wants to think-or must at least speculate that you got whopped with the cancer stick because you were one of the bad guys (or one of the good ones, if you believe Durocher's Law). Part of you wants to think that you must have been one hardworking S.O.B. or a real prince or maybe even one of the Sainted Multitude if you end up riding high in a world where people are starving, shooting each other, burning out, bumming out, getting loaded, getting 'Luded.

But there's another part that suggests it's all a lottery, a real-life game-show not much different from "Wheel of Fortune" or "The New Price Is Right" (two of the Bachman books, incidentally, are about game-show-type competitions). It is for some reason depressing to think it was all-or even mostly-an accident. So maybe you try to find out if you could do it again.

Or in my case, if *Bachman* could do it again.

The question remains unanswered. Richard Bachman's first four books did not sell well at all, perhaps partly because they were issued without fanfare.

Each month paperback houses issue three types of books: "leaders," which are heavily advertised, stocked in dump-bins (the trade term for those showy cardboard displays you see at the front of your local chain bookstore), and which usually feature fancy covers that have been either die-cut or stamped with foil;" subleaders, " which are less heavily advertised, less apt to be awarded dump-bins, and less expected to sell millions of copies (two hundred thousand copies sold would be one hell of a good showing for a sub-leader); and just plain books. This third category is the paperback book publishing world's equivalent of trench warfare or . . . cannon fodder. "Just plain books" (the only

other term I can think of is sub-sub-leaders, but that is *really* depressing) are rarely hardcover reprints; they are generally backlist books with new covers, genre novels (gothics, Regency romances, westerns, and so on), or series books such as *The Survivalist*, *The Mercenaries*, *The Sexual Adventures of a Horny Pumpkin* . . . you get the idea. And, every now and then, you find genuine *novels* buried in this deep substratum, and the Bachman novels are not the only time such novels have been the work of well-known writers sending out dispatches from deep cover. Donald Westlake published paperback originals under the names Tucker Coe and Richard Stark; Evan Hunter under the name Ed McBain; Gore Vidal under the name Edgar Box. More recently Gordon Lish published an excellent, eerie paperback original called *The Stone Boy* under a pseudonym.

The Bachman novels were "just plain books," paperbacks to fill the drugstore and bus-station racks of America. This was at my request; I wanted Bachman to keep a low profile. So, in that sense, the poor guy had the dice loaded against him from the start.

And yet, little by little, Bachman gained a dim cult following. His final book, *Thinner*, had sold about 28,000 copies in hardcover before a Washington bookstore clerk and writer named Steve Brown got suspicious, went to the Library of Congress, and uncovered my name on one of the Bachman copyright forms. Twenty-eight thousand copies isn't a lot-it's certainly not in best-seller territory-but it's 4,000 copies more than my book *Night Shift* sold in 1978. I had intended Bachman to follow *Thinner* with a rather gruesome suspense novel called *Misery*, and I think that one might have taken "Dicky" onto the best-seller lists. Of course we'll never know now, will we? Richard Bachman, who survived the brain tumor, finally died of a much rarer disease-cancer of the pseudonym. He died with that question-is it work that takes you to the top or is it all just a lottery? -still unanswered.

But the fact that *Thinner* did 28,000 copies when Bachman was the author and 280,000 copies when *Steve King* became the author, might tell you something, huh?

13

There is a stigma attached to the idea of the pen name. This was not so in the past; there was a time when the writing of novels was believed to be a rather low occupation, perhaps more vice than profession, and a pen name thus seemed a perfectly natural and respectable way of protecting one's self (and one's relatives) from embarrassment. As respect for the art of the novel rose, things changed. Both critics and general readers became suspicious of work done by men and women who elected to hide their identities. *If it was good*, the unspoken opinion seems to run, *the guy would have put his real name on it. If he lied about his name, the book must suck like an Electrolux.*

So I want to close by saying just a few words about the worth of these books. Are they good novels? I don't know. Are they honest novels? Yes, I think so. They were honestly meant, anyway, and written with an energy I can only dream about these days (*The Running Man*, for instance, was written during a period of seventy-two hours and published with virtually no changes). Do they suck like an Electrolux? Overall, no. In places . . . welllll . . .

I was not quite young enough when these stories were written to be able to dismiss them as juvenilia. On the other hand, I was still callow enough to believe in oversimple motivations (many of them painfully Freudian) and unhappy endings. The most recent of the Bachman books offered here, *Roadwork*, was written between *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*, and was an effort to write a "straight" novel. (I was also young enough in those days to worry about that casual cocktail-party question, "Yes, but when are you going to do something *serious*? ") I think it was also an effort to make some sense of my mother's painful death the year before -- a lingering cancer had taken her off inch by painful inch. Following this death I was left both grieving and shaken by the apparent senselessness of it all. I suspect *Roadwork* is probably the worst of the lot simply because it tries so hard to be good and to find some answers to the conundrum of human pain.

The reverse of this is *The Running Man*, which may be the best of them because it's nothing but story-it moves with the goofy speed of a silent movie, and anything which is *not* story is cheerfully thrown over the side.

Both *The Long Walk* and *Rage* are full of windy psychological preachments (both textual and subtextual), but there's still a lot of story in those novels-ultimately the reader will be better equipped than the writer to decide if the story is enough to surmount all the failures of perception and motivation.

I'd only add that two of these novels, perhaps even all four, might have been published under my own name if I had been a little more savvy about the publishing business or if I hadn't been preoccupied in the years they were written with first trying to get myself through school and then to support my family. And that I only published them (and am allowing them to be republished now) because they are still my friends; they are undoubtedly maimed in some ways, but they still seem very much alive to me.

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And a few words of thanks: to Elaine Koster, NAL's publisher (who was Elaine Geiger when these books were first published), who kept "Dicky's" secret so long and successfully to Carolyn Stromberg, "Dicky's" first editor, who did the same; to Kirby McCauley, who sold the rights and also kept the secret faithfully and well; to my wife, who encouraged me with these just as she did with the others that fumed out to be such big and glittery money-makers; and, as always, to you, reader, for your patience and kindness.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine

RAGE
Richard Bachman

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A high school Show-and-Tell session explodes into a nightmare of evil...

So you understand that when we
increase the number of variables,
the axioms themselves never change.
-Mrs. Jean Underwood

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell,
My lessons all to you I'll tell,
And when my day at school is through,
I'll know more than aught I knew.
-Children's rhyme, c. 1880

Chapter 1

The morning I got it on was nice; a nice May morning. What made it nice was that I'd kept my breakfast down, and the squirrel I spotted in Algebra II.

I sat in the row farthest from the door, which is next to the windows, and I spotted the squirrel on the lawn. The lawn of Placerville High School is a very good one. It does not fuck around. It comes right up to the building and says howdy. No one, at least in my four years at PHS, has tried to push it away from the building with a bunch of flowerbeds or baby pine trees or any of that happy horseshit. It comes right up to the concrete foundation, and there it grows, like it or not. It is true that two years ago at a town meeting some bag proposed that the town build a pavilion in front of the school, complete

with a memorial to honor the guys who went to Placerville High and then got bumped off in one war or another. My friend Joe McKennedy was there, and he said they gave her nothing but a hard way to go. I wish I had been there. The way Joe told it, it sounded like a real good time. Two years ago. To the best of my recollection, that was about the time I started to lose my mind.

Chapter 2

So there was the squirrel, running through the grass at 9:05 in the morning, not ten feet from where I was listening to Mrs. Underwood taking us back to the basics of algebra in the wake of a horrible exam that apparently no one had passed except me and Ted Jones. I was keeping an eye on him, I can tell you. The squirrel, not Ted.

On the board, Mrs. Underwood wrote this: $a = 16$. "Miss Cross," she said, turning back. "Tell us what that equation means, if you please."

"It means that a is sixteen," Sandra said. Meanwhile the squirrel ran back and forth in the grass, tail bushed out, black eyes shining bright as buckshot. A nice fat one. Mr. Squirrel had been keeping down more breakfasts than I lately, but this morning's was riding as light and easy as you please. I had no shakes, no acid stomach. I was riding cool.

"All right," Mrs. Underwood said. "Not bad. But it's not the end, is it? No. Would anyone care to elaborate on this fascinating equation?"

I raised my hand, but she called on Billy Sawyer. "Eight plus eight," he blurted.

"Explain. "

"I mean it can be . . . " Billy fidgeted. He ran his fingers over the graffiti etched into the surface of his desk; SM L DK, HOT SHIT, TOMMY '73. "See, if you add eight and eight, it means . . . "

"Shall I lend you my thesaurus?" Mrs. Underwood asked, smiling alertly. My stomach began to hurt a little, my breakfast started to move around a little, so I looked back at the squirrel for a while. Mrs. Underwood's smile reminded me of the shark in *Jaws*.

Carol Granger raised her hand. Mrs. Underwood nodded. "Doesn't he mean that eight plus eight also fulfills the equation's need for truth?"

"I don't know *what* he means," Mrs. Underwood said.

A general laugh. "Can you fulfill the equation's truth in any other ways, Miss Granger?"

Carol began, and that was when the intercom said: "Charles Decker to the office, please. Charles Decker. Thank you."

I looked at Mrs. Underwood, and she nodded. My stomach had begun to feel

shriveled and old. I got up and left the room. When I left, the squirrel was still scampering.

I was halfway down the hall when I thought I heard Mrs. Underwood coming after me, her hands raised into twisted claws, smiling her big shark smile. *We don't need boys of your type around here . . . boys of your type belong in Greenmantle . . . or the reformatory . . . or the state hospital for the criminally insane . . . so get out! Get out! Get out!*

I turned around, groping in my back pocket for the pipe wrench that was no longer there, and now my breakfast was a hard hot ball inside my guts. But I wasn't afraid, not even when she wasn't there. I've read too many books.

Chapter 3

I stopped in the bathroom to take a whiz and eat some Ritz crackers. I always carry some Ritz crackers in a Baggie. When your stomach's bad, a few crackers can do wonders. One hundred thousand pregnant women can't be wrong. I was thinking about Sandra Cross, whose response in class a few minutes ago had been not bad, but also not the end. I was thinking about how she lost her buttons. She was always losing them-off blouses, off skirts, and the one time I had taken her to a school dance, she had lost the button off the top of her Wranglers and they had almost fallen down. Before she figured out what was happening, the zipper on the front of her jeans had come halfway unzipped, showing a V of flat white panties that was blackly exciting. Those panties were tight, white, and spotless. They were immaculate. They lay against her lower belly with sweet snugness and made little ripples while she moved her body to the beat . . . until she realized what was going on and dashed for the girls' room. Leaving me with a memory of the Perfect Pair of Panties. Sandra was a Nice Girl, and if I had never known it before, I sure-God knew it then, because we all know that the Nice Girls wear the white panties. None of that New York shit is going down in Placerville, Maine.

But Mr. Denver kept creeping in, pushing away Sandra and her pristine panties. You can't stop your mind; the damn thing just keeps right on going. All the same, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Sandy, even though she was never going to figure out just what the quadratic equation was all about. If Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace decided to send me to Greenmantle, I might never see Sandy again. And that would be too bad.

I got up from the hopper, dusted the cracker crumbs down into the bowl, and flushed it. High-school toilets are all the same; they sound like 747s taking off. I've always hated pushing that handle. It makes you sure that the sound is clearly audible in the adjacent classroom and that everybody is thinking: Well, there goes another load. I've always thought a man should be alone with what my mother insisted I call lemonade and chocolate when I was a little kid. The bathroom should be a confessional sort of place. But they foil you. They always foil you. You can't even blow your nose and keep it a secret. Someone's always got to know, someone's always got to peek. People like Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace even get paid for it.

But by then the bathroom door was wheezing shut behind me and I was in the hall again. I paused, looking around. The only sound was the sleepy hive drone that means it's Wednesday again, Wednesday morning, ten past nine, everyone caught for another day in the splendid sticky web of Mother Education.

I went back into the bathroom and took out my Flair. I was going to write something witty on the wall like SANDRA CROSS WEARS WHITE UNDERPANTS, and then I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There were bruised half-moons under my eyes, which looked wide and white and stary. The nostrils were half-flared and ugly. The mouth was a white, twisted line.

I Wrote EAT SHIT On the wall until the pen suddenly snapped in my straining fingers. It dropped on the floor and I kicked it.

There was a sound behind me. I didn't turn around. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply until I had myself under control. Then I went upstairs.

Chapter 4

The administration offices of Placerville High are on the third floor, along with the study hall, the library, and Room 300, which is the typing room. When you push through the door from the stairs, the first thing you hear is that steady clickety-clack. The only time it lets up is when the bell changes the classes or when Mrs. Green has something to say. I guess she usually doesn't say much, because the typewriters hardly ever stop. There are thirty of them in there, a battle-scarred platoon of gray Underwoods. They have them marked with numbers so you know which one is yours. The sound never stops, clickety-clack, clickety-clack, from September to June. I'll always associate that sound with waiting in the outer office of the admin offices for Mr. Denver or Mr. Grace, the original dipso-duo. It got to be a lot like those jungle movies where the hero and his safari are pushing deep into darkest Africa, and the hero says: "Why don't they stop those blasted drums?" And when the blasted drums stop he regards the shadowy, rustling foliage and says: "I don't like it. It's too quiet."

I had gotten to the office late just so Mr. Denver would be ready to see me, but the receptionist, Miss Marble, only smiled and said, "Sit down, Charlie. Mr. Denver will be right with you. "

So I sat down outside the slatted railing, folded my hands, and waited for Mr. Denver to be right with me. And who should be in the other chair but one of my father's good friends, Al Lathrop. He was giving me the old slick-eye, too, I can tell you. He had a briefcase on his lap and a bunch of sample textbooks beside him. I had never seen him in a suit before. He and my father were a couple of mighty hunters. Slayers of the fearsome sharp-toothed deer and the killer partridge. I had been on a hunting trip once with my father and Al and a couple of my father's other friends. Part of Dad's never-ending campaign to Make a Man Out of My Son.

"Hi, there!" I said, and gave him a big shiteating grin. And I could tell from the way he jumped that he knew all about me.

"Uh, hi, uh, Charlie. " He glanced quickly at Miss Marble, but she was going over attendance lists with Mrs. Venson from next door. No help there. He was all alone with Carl Decker's psychotic son, the fellow who had nearly killed the chemistry-physics teacher.

"Sales trip, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right. " He grinned as best he could. "Just out there selling the old books."

"Really crushing the competition, huh?"

He jumped again. "Well, you win some, you lose some, you know, Charlie."

Yeah, I knew that. All at once I didn't want to put the needle in him anymore. He was forty and getting bald and there were crocodile purses under his eyes. He went from school to school in a Buick station wagon loaded with textbooks and he went hunting for a week in November every year with my father and my father's friends, up in the Allagash. And one year I had gone with them. I had been nine, and I woke up and they had been drunk and they had scared me. That was all. But this man was no ogre. He was just forty-baldish and trying to make a buck. And if I had heard him saying he would murder his wife, that was just talk. After all, I was the one with blood on my hands.

But I didn't like the way his eyes were darting around, and for a moment just a moment-I could have grabbed his windpipe between my hands and yanked his face up to mine and screamed into it: *You and my father and all your friends, you should all have to go in there with me, you should all have to go to Greenmantle with me, because you're all in it, you're all in it, you're all a part of this!*

Instead I sat and watched him sweat and thought about old times.

Chapter 5

I came awake with a jerk out of a nightmare I hadn't had for a long time; a dream where I was in some dark blind alley and something was coming for me, some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along . . . a monster that would drive me insane if I saw it. Bad dream. I hadn't had it since I was a little kid, and I was a big kid now. Nine years old.

At first I didn't know where I was, except it sure wasn't my bedroom at home. It seemed too close, and it smelled different. I was cold and cramped, and I had to take a whiz something awful.

There was a harsh burst of laughter that made me jerk in my bed-except it wasn't a bed, it was a bag.

"So she's some kind of fucking bag," Al Lathrop said from beyond the canvas wall,

"but *fucking's* the operant word there."

Camping, I was camping with my dad and his friends. I hadn't wanted to come.

"Yeah, but how do you git it up, Al? That's what I want to know. " That was Scotty Norwiss, another one of Dad's friends. His voice was slurred and furry, and I started to feel afraid again. They were drunk.

"I just turn off the lights and pretend I'm with Carl Decker's wife," Al said, and there was another bellow of laughter that made me cringe and jerk in my sleeping bag. Oh, God, I needed to whiz piss make lemonade whatever you wanted to call it. But I didn't want to go out there while they were drinking and talking.

I turned to the tent wall and discovered I could see them. They were between the tent and the campfire, and their shadows, tall and alien-looking, were cast on the canvas. It was like watching a magic lantern show. I watched the shadow-bottle go from one shadow-hand to the next.

"You know what I'd do if I caught you with my wife?" My dad asked Al.

"Probably ask if I needed any help," Al said, and there was another burst of laughter. The elongated shadow-heads on the tent wall bobbed up and down, back and forth, with insectile glee. They didn't look like people at all. They looked like a bunch of talking praying mantises, and I was afraid.

"No, seriously," my dad said. "Seriously. You know what I'd do if I caught somebody with my wife?"

"What, Carl?" That was Randy Earl.

"You see this?"

A new shadow on the canvas. My father's hunting knife, the one he carried out in the woods, the one I later saw him gut a deer with, slamming it into the deer's guts to the hilt and then ripping upward, the muscles in his forearm bulging, spilling out green and steaming intestines onto a carpet of needles and moss. The firelight and the angle of the canvas turned the hunting knife into a spear.

"You see this son of a bitch? I catch some guy with my wife, I'd whip him over on his back and cut off his accessories."

"He'd pee sitting down to the end of his days, right, Carl?" That was Hubie Levesque, the guide. I pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them. I've never had to go to the bathroom so bad in my life, before or since.

"You're goddamn right," Carl Decker, my sterling Dad, said.

"Wha' about the woman in the case, Carl?" Al Lathrop asked. He was very drunk. I could even tell which shadow was his. He was rocking back and forth as if he was sitting in a rowboat instead of on a log by the campfire. "Thass what I wanna know. What do you do about a woman who less-lets-someone in the back door? Huh?"

The hunting knife that had turned into a spear moved slowly back and forth. My father said, "The Cherokees used to slit their noses. The idea was to put a cunt right up on their faces so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble."

My hands left my knees and slipped down to my crotch. I cupped my testicles and looked at the shadow of my father's hunting knife moving slowly back and forth. There were terrible cramps in my belly. I was going to whiz in my sleeping bag if I didn't hurry up and go.

"Slit their noses, huh?" Randy said. "That's pretty goddamn good. If they still did that, half the women in Placerville would have a snatch at both ends. "

"Not my wife," my father said very quietly, and now the slur in his voice was gone, and the laughter at Randy's joke stopped in mid-roar.

"No, 'course not, Carl," Randy said uncomfortably. "Hey, shit. Have a drink. "

My father's shadow tipped the bottle back.

"I won't slit her nose," Al Lathrop said. "I'd blow her goddamn cheatin' head off. "

"There you go," Hubie said. "I'll drink to it."

I couldn't hold it anymore. I squirmed out of the sleeping bag and felt the cold October air bite into my body, which was naked except for a pair of shorts. It seemed like my cock wanted to shrivel right back into my body. And the one thing that kept going around and around in my mind-I was still partly asleep, I guess, and the whole conversation had seemed like a dream, maybe a continuation of the creaking monster in the alley-was that when I was smaller, I used to get into my mom's bed after Dad had put on his uniform and gone off to work in Portland, I used to sleep beside her for an hour before breakfast.

Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother.

I came out through the tent flap, and my father turned toward me. The hunting knife was still in his hand. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I've never forgotten that my dad with a reddish beard stubble on his face and a hunting cap cocked on his head and that hunting knife in his hand. All the conversation stopped. Maybe they were wondering how much I had heard. Maybe they were even ashamed.

"What the hell do you want?" my dad asked, sheathing the knife.

"Give him a drink, Carl," Randy said, and there was a roar of laughter. Al laughed so hard he fell over. He was pretty drunk.

"I gotta whiz," I said.

"Then go do it, for Christ's sake," my dad said.

I went over in the grove and tried to whiz. For a long time it wouldn't come out. It was like a hot soft ball of lead in my lower belly. I had nothing but a fingernail's length of penis-the cold had really shriveled it. At last it did come, in a great steaming flood, and when it was all out of me, I went back into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. None of them looked at me. They were talking about the war. They had all been in the war.

My dad got his deer three days later, on the last day of the trip. I was with him. He got it perfectly, in the bunch of muscle between neck and shoulder, and the buck went

down in a heap, all grace gone.

We went over to it. My father was smiling, happy. He had unsheathed his knife. I knew what was going to happen, and I knew I was going to be sick, and I couldn't help any of it. He planted a foot on either side of the buck and pulled one of its legs back and shoved the knife in. One quick upward rip, and its guts spilled out on the forest floor, and I turned around and heaved up my breakfast.

When I turned back to him, he was looking at me. He never said anything, but I could read the contempt and disappointment in his eyes. I had seen it there often enough. I didn't say anything either. But if I had been able to, I would have said: *It isn't what you think.*

That was the first and last time I ever went hunting with my dad.

Chapter 6

Al Lathrop was still thumbing through his textbook samples and pretending he was too busy to talk to me when the intercom on Miss Marble's desk buzzed, and she smiled at me as if we had a great and sexy secret. "You can go in now, Charlie. "

I got up. "Sell those textbooks, Al."

He gave me a quick, nervous, insincere smile. "I sure will, uh, Charlie."

I went through the slatted gate, past the big safe set into the wall on the right and Miss Marble's cluttered desk on the left. Straight ahead was a door with a frosted glass pane. THOMAS DENVER PRINCIPAL was lettered on the glass. I walked in.

Mr. Denver was looking at *The Bugle*, the school rag. He was a tall, cadaverous man whg looked something like John Carradine. He was bald and skinny. His hands were long and full of knuckles. His tie was pulled down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. The skin on his throat looked grizzled and irritated from overshaving.

"Sit down, Charlie."

I sat down and folded my hands. I'm a great old hand-folder. It's a trick I picked up from my father. Through the window behind Mr. Denver I could see the lawn, but not the fearless way it grew right up to the building. I was too high, and it was too bad. It might have helped, like a night-light when you are small.

Mr. Denver put *The Bugle* down and leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hard to see that way, isn't it?" He grunted. Mr. Denver was a crackerjack grunter. If there was a National Grunting Bee, I would put all my money on Mr. Denver. I brushed my hair away from my eyes.

There was a picture of Mr. Denver's family on his desk, which was even more cluttered than Miss Marble's. The family looked well-fed and well-adjusted. His wife was sort of porky, but the two kids were as cute as buttons and didn't look a bit like John Carradine. Two little girls, both blond.

"Don Grace has finished his report, and I've had it since last Thursday, considering his conclusions and his recommendations as carefully as I can. We all appreciate the seriousness of this matter, and I've taken the liberty of discussing the whole thing with John Carlson, also. "

"How is he?" I asked.

"Pretty well. He'll be back in a month, I should think."

"Well, that's something."

"It is?" He blinked at me very quickly, the way lizards do.

"I didn't kill him. That's something."

"Yes." Mr. Denver looked at me steadily. "Do you wish you had?"

"No."

He leaned forward, drew his chair up to his desk, looked at me, shook his head, and began, "I'm very puzzled when I have to speak the way I'm about to speak to you, Charlie. Puzzled and sad. I've been in the kid business since 1947, and I still can't understand these things. I feel what I have to say to you is right and necessary, but it also makes me unhappy. Because I still can't understand why a thing like this happens. In 1959 we had a very bright boy here who beat a junior-high-school girl quite badly with a baseball bat. Eventually we had to send him to South Portland Correctional Institute. All he could say was that she wouldn't go out with him. Then he would smile. " Mr. Denver shook his head.

"Don't bother. "

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to understand. Don't lose any sleep over it. "

"But why, Charlie? Why did you do that? My God, he was on an operating table for nearly four hours-"

"Why is Mr. Grace's question, " I said. "He's the school shrink. You, you only ask it because it makes a nice lead-in to your sermon. I don't want to listen to any more sermons. They don't mean *shit* to me. It's *over*. He was going to live or die. He lived. I'm glad. You do what you have to do. What you and Mr. Grace decided to do. But don't you try to understand me."

"Charlie, understanding is part of my job."

"But helping you do your job isn't part of mine," I said. "So let me tell you one thing. To sort of help open the lines of communication, okay?"

"Okay..."

I held my hands tightly in my lap. They were trembling. "I'm sick of you and Mr. Grace and all the rest of you. You used to make me afraid and you still make me afraid but now you make me tired too, and I've decided I don't have to put up with that. The way I am, I can't put up with that. What you think doesn't mean anything to me. You're not qualified to deal with me. So just stand back. I'm warning you. You're not qualified. "

My voice had risen to a trembling near-shout.

Mr. Denver sighed.

"So you may think, Charlie. But the laws of the state say otherwise. After having read Mr. Grace's report, I think I agree with him that you don't understand yourself or the consequences of what you did in Mr. Carlson's classroom. You are disturbed, Charlie. "

You are disturbed, Charlie.

The Cherokees used to slit their noses . . . so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble.

The words echoed greenly in my head, as if at great depths. They were shark words at deep fathoms, jaws words come to gobble me. Words with teeth and eyes.

This is where I started to get it on. I knew it, because the same thing that happened just before I gave Mr. Carlson the business was happening now. My hands stopped shaking. My stomach flutters subsided, and my whole middle felt cool and calm. I felt detached, not only from Mr. Denver and his overshaved neck, but from myself. I could almost float.

Mr. Denver had gone on, something about proper counseling and psychiatric help, but I interrupted him. "Mr. Man, you can go straight to hell."

He stopped and put down the paper he had been looking at so he wouldn't have to look at me. Something from my file, no doubt. The almighty file. The Great American File.

"What?" he said.

"In hell. Judge not, lest ye be judged. Any insanity in your family, Mr. Denver?"

I'll discuss this with you, Charlie," he said tightly. "I won't engage in-

". . . immoral sex practices," I finished for him. "Just you and me, okay? First one to jack off wins the Putnam Good Fellowship Award. Fill yore hand, pardner. Get Mr. Grace in here, that's even better. We'll have a circle jerk."

"Wh-

"Don't you get the message? You have to pull it out sometime, right? You owe it to yourself, right? Everybody has to get it on, everybody has to have someone to jack off on. You've already set yourself up as Judge of What's Right for Me. Devils. Demon possession. Why did I hit dat l'il girl wit dat ball bat, Lawd, Lawd? De debbil made me do it, and I'm so *saw-ry*. Why don't you admit it? You get a kick out of peddling my flesh. I'm the best thing that's happened to you since 1959. "

He was gawping at me openly. I had him by the short hair, knew it, was savagely proud of it. On the one hand, he wanted to humor me, go along with me, because after all, isn't that what you do with disturbed people? On the other hand, he was in the kid business, just like he told me, and Rule One in the kid business is: Don't Let 'Em Give You No Lip-be fast with the command and the snappy comeback.

"Charlie-"

"Don't bother. I'm trying to tell you I'm tired of being masturbated on. Be a man, for God's sake, Mr. Denver. And if you can't be a man, at least pull up your pants and be a principal. "

"Shut up," he grunted. His face had gone bright red. "You're just pretty damn lucky you live in a progressive state and go to a progressive school, young man. You know where you'd be otherwise? Peddling your papers in a reformatory somewhere, serving a term for criminal assault. I'm not sure you don't belong there anyway. You-'

"Thank you," I said.

He stared at me, his angry blue eyes fixed on mine.

"For treating me like a human being even if I had to piss you off to do it. That's real progress. " I crossed my legs, being nonchalant. "Want to talk about the panty raids you made the scene at while you were at Big U learning the kid business?"

"Your mouth is filthy," he said deliberately. "And so is your mind."

"Fuck you," I said, and laughed at him.

He went an even deeper shade of scarlet and stood up. He reached slowly over the desk, slowly, slowly, as if he needed oiling, and bunched the shoulder of my shirt in his hand. "You show some respect," he said. He had really blown his cool and was not even bothering to use that really first-class grunt. "You rotten little punk, you show me some respect. "

"I could show you my ass and you'd kiss it," I said. "Go on and tell me about the panty raids. You'll feel better. Throw us your panties! Throw us your panties! "

He let go of me, holding his hand away from his body as if a rabid dog had just pooped on it. "Get out," he said hoarsely. "Get your books, turn them in here, and then get out. Your expulsion and transfer to Greenmantle Academy is effective as of Monday. I'll talk to your parents on the telephone. Now get out. I don't want to have to look at you."

I got up, unbuttoned the two bottom buttons on my shirt, pulled the tail out on one side, and unzipped my fly. Before he could move, I tore open the door and staggered into the outer office. Miss Marble and Al Lathrop were conferring at her desk, and they both looked up and winced when they saw me. They had obviously both been playing the great American parlor game of We Don't Really Hear Them, Do We?

"You better get to him," I panted. "We were sitting there talking about panty raids and he just jumped over his desk and tried to rape me. "

I'd pushed him over the edge, no mean feat, considering he'd been in the kid business for twenty-nine years and was probably only ten away from getting his gold key to the downstairs crapper. He lunged at me through the door; I danced away from him and he stood there looking furious, silly, and guilty all at once.

"Get somebody to take care of him," I said. "He'll be sweeter after he gets it out of his system. " I looked at Mr. Denver, winked, and whispered, "Throw us your panties, right?"

Then I pushed out through the slatted rail and walked slowly out the office door, buttoning my shirt and tucking it in, zipping my fly. There was plenty of time for him to say something, but he didn't say a word.

That's when it really got rolling, because all at once I knew he couldn't say a word. He was great at announcing the day's hot lunch over the intercom, but this was a different thing joyously different. I had confronted him with exactly what he said was wrong with me, and he hadn't been able to cope with that. Maybe he expected us to smile and shake hands and conclude my seven-and-one-half-semester stay at Placerville High with a literary critique of *The Bugle*. But in spite of everything, Mr. Carlson and all the rest, he hadn't really expected any irrational act. Those things were all meant for the closet, rolled up beside those nasty magazines you never show your wife. He was standing back there, vocal cords frozen, not a word left in his mind to say. None of his instructors in *Dealing with the Disturbed Child*, EdB-211, had ever told him he might someday have to deal with a student who would attack him on a personal level.

And pretty quick he was going to be mad. That made him dangerous. Who knew better than me? I was going to have to protect myself. I was ready, and had been ever since I decided that people might-just might, mind you-be following me around and checking up.

I gave him every chance.

I waited for him to charge out and grab me, all the way to the staircase. I didn't want salvation. I was either past that point or never reached it. All I wanted was recognition . . . or maybe for someone to draw a yellow plague circle around my feet.

He didn't come out.

And when he didn't, I went ahead and got it on.

Chapter 7

I went down the staircase whistling; I felt wonderful. Things happen that way sometimes. When everything is at its worst, your mind just throws it all into the wastebasket and goes to Florida for a little while. There is a sudden electric what-the-hell glow as you stand there looking back over your shoulder at the bridge you just burned down.

A girl I didn't know passed me on the second-floor landing, a pimply, ugly girl wearing big horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a clutch of secretarial-type books. On impulse I turned around and looked after her. Yes; yes. From the back she might have been Miss America. It was wonderful.

Chapter 8

The first-floor hall was deserted. Not a soul coming or going. The only sound was the hive drone, the sound that makes all the schoolhouses the same, modern and glass-walled or ancient and stinking of floor varnish. Lockers stood in silent sentinel rows, with a break here and there to make room for a drinking fountain or a classroom door.

Algebra II was in Room 16, but my locker was at the other end of the hall. I walked down to it and regarded it.

My locker. It said so: CHARLES DECKER printed neatly in my hand on a strip of school Con-Tact paper. Each September, during the first home-room period, came the handing out of the blank Con-Tact strips. We lettered carefully, and during the two-minute break between home room and the first class of the new year, we pasted them on. The ritual was as old and as holy as First Communion. On the first day of my sophomore year, Joe McKennedy walked up to me through the crowded hall with his Con-Tact strip pasted on his forehead and a big shit-eating grin pasted on his mouth. Hundreds of horrified freshmen, each with a little yellow name tag pinned on his or her shirt or blouse, turned to look at this sacrilege. I almost broke my balls laughing. Of course he got a detention for it, but it made my day. When I think back on it, I guess it made my year.

And there I was, right between ROSANNE DEBBINS and CARLA DENCH, who doused herself in rosewater every morning, which had been no great help in keeping my breakfast where it belonged during the last semester.

Ah, but all that was behind me now.

Gray locker, five feet high, padlocked. The padlocks were handed out at the beginning of the year along with the Con-Tact strips. Titus, the padlock proclaimed itself. Lock me, unlock me. I am Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

"Titus, you old cuffer," I whispered. "Titus, you old cock-knocker."

I reached for Titus, and it seemed to me that my hand stretched to it across a thousand miles, a hand on the end of a plastic arm that elongated painlessly and nervelessly. The numbered surface of Titus' black face looked at me blandly, not condemning but certainly not *approving*, no, not *that*, and I shut my eyes for a moment. My body wrenched through a shudder, pulled by invisible, involuntary, opposing hands.

And when I opened my eyes again, Titus was in my grasp. The chasm had closed.

The combinations on high-school locks are simple. Mine was six to the left, thirty right, and two turns back to zero. Titus was known more for his strength than his intellect. The lock snapped up, and I had him in my hand. I clutched him tightly, making no move to open the locker door.

Up the hall, Mr. Johnson was saying: ". . . and the Hessians, who were paid mercenaries, weren't any too anxious to fight, especially in a countryside where the opportunities for plunder over and above the agreed-upon wages . . ."

"Hessian," I whispered to Titus. I carried him down to the first wastebasket and

dropped him in. He looked up at me innocently from a litter of discarded homework papers and old sandwich bags.

" . . . but remember that the Hessians, as far as the Continental Army knew, were formidable German killing machines . . . "

I bent down, picked him up, and put him in my breast pocket, where he made a bulge about the size of a pack of cigarettes.

"Keep it in mind, Titus, you old killing machine," I said, and went back to my locker.

I swung it open. Crumpled up in a sweaty ball at the bottom was my gym uniform, old lunch bags, candy wrappers, a month-old apple core that was browning nicely, and a pair of ratty black sneakers. My red nylon jacket was hung on the coat-hook, and on the shelf above that were my textbooks, all but Algebra II. Civics, American Government, French Stories and Fables, and Health, that happy Senior gut course, a red, modern book with a high-school girl and boy on the cover and the section on venereal disease neatly clipped by unanimous vote of the School Committee. I started to get it on beginning with the health book, sold to the school by none other than good old Al Lathrop, I hoped and trusted. I took it out, opened it somewhere between "The Building Blocks of Nutrition" and "Swimming Rules for Fun and Safety," and ripped it in two. It came easy. They all came easy except for Civics, which was a tough old Silver Burdett text circa 1946. I threw all the pieces into the bottom of the locker. The only thing left up top was my slide rule, which I snapped in two, a picture of Raquel Welch taped to the back wall (I let it stay), and the box of shells that had been behind my books.

I picked that up and looked at it. The box had originally held Winchester .22 long-rifle shells, but it didn't anymore. I'd put the other shells in it, the ones from the desk drawer in my father's study. There's a deer head mounted on the wall in his study, and it stared down at me with its glassy too-alive eyes as I took the shells and the gun, but I didn't let it bother me. It wasn't the one he'd gotten on the hunting trip when I was nine. The pistol had been in another drawer, behind a box of business envelopes. I doubt if he even remembered it was still there. And as a matter of fact, it wasn't, not anymore. Now it was in the pocket of my jacket. I took it out and shoved it into my belt. I didn't feel much like a Hessian. I felt like Wild Bill Hickok.

I put the shells in my pants pocket and took out my lighter. It was one of those Scripto see-through jobs. I don't smoke myself, but the lighter had kind of caught my fancy. I snapped a light to it, squatted, and set the crap in the bottom of my locker on fire.

The flames licked up greedily from my gym trunks to the lunch bags and candy wrappers to the ruins of my books, carrying a sweaty, athletic smell up to me.

Then, figuring that I had gotten it on as much as I could by myself, I shut the locker door. There were little vents just above where my name was Con-Tact-papered on, and through them I could hear the flames whooshing upward. In a minute little orange flecks were glaring in the darkness beyond the vents, and the gray locker paint started to crack and peel.

A kid came out of Mr. Johnson's room carrying a green bathroom pass. He looked at the smoke belching merrily out of the vents in my locker, looked at me, and hurried down to the bathroom. I don't think he saw the pistol. He wasn't hurrying that fast.

I started down to Room 16. I paused just as I got there, my hand on the doorknob, looking back. The smoke was really pouring out of the vents now, and a dark, sooty stain was spreading up the front of my locker. The Con-Tact paper had turned brown. You couldn't see the letters that made my name anymore.

I don't think there was anything in my brain fight then except the usual background static-the kind-you get on your radio when it's turned up all the way and tuned to no station at all. My brain had checked to the power, so to speak; the little guy wearing the Napoleon hat inside was showing aces and betting them.

I turned back to Room 16 and opened the door. I was hoping, but I didn't know what.

Chapter 9

" . . . So you understand that when we *increase* the number of variables, the axioms *themselves* never change. For example-'

Mrs. Underwood looked up alertly, pushing her harlequin glasses up on her nose. "Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?"

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

Chapter 10

Sanity:

You can go through your whole life telling yourself that life is logical, life is prosaic, life is sane. Above all, sane. And I think it is. I've had a lot of time to think about that. And what I keep coming back to is Mrs. Underwood's dying declaration: *So you understand that when we increase the number of variables, the axioms themselves never change.*

I really believe that.

I think; therefore I am. There are hairs on my face; therefore I shave. My wife and child have been critically injured in a car crash; therefore I pray. It's all logical, it's all sane. We live in the best of all possible worlds, so hand me a Kent for my left, a Bud for my right, turn on *Starsky and Hutch*, and listen to that soft, harmonious note that is the universe turning smoothly on its celestial gyros. Logic and sanity. Like Coca-Cola, it's the real thing.

But as Warner Brothers, John D. MacDonald, and Long Island Dragway know so

well, there's a Mr. Hyde for every happy Jekyll face, a dark face on the other side of the mirror. The brain behind that face never heard of razors, prayers, or the logic of the universe. You turn the mirror sideways and see your face reflected with a sinister left-hand twist, half mad and half sane. The astronomers call that line between light and dark the terminator.

The other side says that the universe has all the logic of a little kid in a Halloween cowboy suit with his guts and his trick-or-treat candy spread all over a mile of Interstate 95. This is the logic of napalm, paranoia, suitcase bombs carried by happy Arabs, random carcinoma. This logic eats itself. It says life is a monkey on a stick, it says life spins as hysterically and erratically as the penny you flick to see who buys lunch.

No one looks at that side unless they have to, and I can understand that. You look at it if you hitch a ride with a drunk in a GTO who puts it up to one-ten and starts blubbing about how his wife turned him out; you look at it if some guy decides to drive across Indiana shooting kids on bicycles; you look at it if your sister says "I'm going down to the store for a minute, big guy" and then gets killed in a stickup. You look at it when you hear your dad talking about slitting your mom's nose.

It's a roulette wheel, but anybody who says the game is rigged is whining. No matter how many numbers there are, the principle of that little white jittering ball never changes. Don't say it's crazy. It's all so cool and sane.

And all that weirdness isn't just going on outside. It's in you too, right now, growing in the dark like magic mushrooms. Call it the Thing in the Cellar. Call it the Blow Lunch Factor. Call it the Loony Tunes File. I think of it as my private dinosaur, huge, slimy, and mindless, stumbling around in the stinking swamp of my subconscious, never finding a tarpit big enough to hold it.

But that's me, and I started to tell you about *them*, those bright college-bound students that, metaphorically speaking, walked down to the store to get milk and ended up in the middle of an armed robbery. I'm a documented case, routine grist for the newspaper mill. A thousand newsboys hawked me on a thousand street corners. I had fifty seconds on Chancellor-Brinkley and a column and a half in *Time*. And I stand here before you (metaphorically speaking, again) and tell you I'm perfectly sane. I do have one slightly crooked wheel upstairs, but everything else is ticking along just four-o, thank you very much.

So, them. How do you understand *them*? We have to discuss that, don't we?

"Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

I'm the sane one: I'm the croupier, I'm the guy who spins the ball against the spin of the wheel. The guy who lays his money on odd/even, the girl who lays her money on black/red . . . what about *them*?

There isn't any division of time to express the marrow of our lives, the time between

the explosion of lead from the muzzle and the meat impact, between the impact and the darkness. There's only barren instant replay that shows nothing new.

I shot her; she fell; and there was an indescribable moment of silence, an infinite duration of time, and we all stepped back, watching the ball go around and around, ticking, bouncing, lighting for an instant, going on, heads and tails, red and black, odd and even.

I think that moment ended. I really do. But sometimes, in the dark, I think that hideous random moment is still going on, that the wheel is even yet in spin, and I dreamed all the rest.

What must it be like for a suicide coming down from a high ledge? I'm sure it must be a very sane feeling. That's probably why they scream all the way down.

Chapter 11

If someone had screamed something melodramatic at that precise moment, something like *Oh, my God, he's going to kill us all!* it would have been over right there. They would have bolted like sheep, and somebody aggressive like Dick Keene would have belted me over the head with his algebra book, thereby earning a key to the city and the Good Citizenship Award.

But nobody said a word. They sat in utter stunned silence, looking at me attentively, as if I had just announced that I was going to tell them how they could all get passes to the Placerville Drive-In this Friday night.

I shut the classroom door, crossed the room, and sat behind the big desk. My legs weren't so good. I was almost to the point of sit down or fall down. I had to push Mrs. Underwood's feet out of the way to get my own feet into the kneehole. I put the pistol down on her green blotter, shut her algebra book, and put it with the others that were stacked neatly on the desk's corner.

That was when Irma Bates broke the silence with a high, gobbling scream that sounded like a young tom turkey getting its neck wrung on the day before Thanksgiving. But it was too late; everyone had taken that endless moment to consider the facts of life and death. Nobody picked up on her scream, and she stopped, as if ashamed at screaming while school was in session, no matter how great the provocation. Somebody cleared his throat. Somebody in the back of the room said "Hum!" in a mildly judicial tone. And John "Pig Pen" Dano slithered quietly out of his seat and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

They looked up at me from the trough of shock.

"This," I said pleasantly, "is known as getting it on."

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and somebody asked somebody else if something had exploded in the chemistry lab. While somebody else was saying he didn't know, the

fire alarm went off stridently. Half the kids in the class started to get up automatically.

"That's all right," I said. "It's just my locker. On fire. I set it on fire, that is. Sit down."

The ones that had started to get up sat down obediently. I looked for Sandra Cross. She was in the third row, fourth seat, and she did not seem afraid. She looked like what she was. An intensely exciting Good Girl.

Lines of students were filing out onto the grass; I could see them through the windows. The squirrel was gone, though. Squirrels make lousy innocent bystanders.

The door was snatched open, and I picked up the gun. Mr. Vance poked his head in. "Fire alarm," he said. "Everybody . . . Where's Mrs. Underwood?"

"Get out," I said.

He stared at me. He was a very porky man, and his hair was neatly crew cut. It looked as if some landscape artist had trimmed it carefully with hedge clippers. "What? What did you say?"

"Out." I shot at him and missed. The bullet whined off the upper edge of the door, chipping wood splinters.

"Jesus," somebody in the front row said mildly.

Mr. Vance didn't know what was happening. I don't think any of them did. It all reminded me of an article I read about the last big earthquake in California. It was about a woman who was wandering from room to room while her house was being shaken to pieces all around her, yelling to her husband to please unplug the fan.

Mr. Vance decided to go back to the beginning. "There's a fire in the building. Please-"

"Charlie's got a gun, Mr. Vance," Mike Gavin said in a discussing-the-weather tone. "I think you better-"

The second bullet caught him in the throat. His flesh spread liquidly like water spreads when you throw a rock in it. He walked backward into the hall, scratching at his throat, and fell over.

Irma Bates screamed again, but again she had no takers. If it had been Carol Granger, there would have been imitators galore, but who wanted to be in concert with poor old Irma Bates? She didn't even have a boyfriend. Besides, everyone was too busy peeking at Mr. Vance, whose scratching motions were slowing down.

"Ted," I said to Ted Jones, who sat closest to the door. "Shut that and lock it.-"

"What do you think you're doing?" Ted asked. He was looking at me with a kind of scared and scornful distaste.

"I don't know all the details just yet," I said. "But shut the door and lock it, okay?"

Down the hall someone was yelling: "It's in a locker! It's in a Vance's had a heart attack! Get some water! Get . . ."

Ted Jones got up, shut the door, and locked it. He was a tall boy wearing wash-faded Levi's and an army shirt with flap pockets. He looked very fine. I had always admired

Ted, although he was never part of the circle I traveled in. He drove last year's Mustang, which his father had given him, and didn't get any parking tickets, either. He combed his hair in an out-of-fashion DA, and I bet his was the face that Irma Bates called up in her mind when she sneaked a cucumber out of the refrigerator in the wee hours of the night. With an all-American name like Ted Jones he couldn't very well miss, either. His father was vice-president of the Placerville Bank and Trust.

"Now what?" Hannon Jackson asked. He sounded bewildered.

"Um." I put the pistol down on the blotter again. "Well, somebody try and bring Pig Pen around. He'll get his shirt dirty. Dirtier, I mean."

Sarah Pasterne started to giggle hysterically and clapped her hand over her mouth. George Yannick, who sat close to Pig Pen, squatted down beside him and began to pat his cheeks. Pig Pen moaned, opened his eyes, rolled them, and said, "He shot Book Bags."

There were several hysterical laughs this time. They went off around the room like popping corn. Mrs. Underwood had two plastic briefcases with tartan patterns on them, which she carried into each class. She had also been known as Two-Gun Sue.

Pig Pen settled shakily into his seat, rolled his eyes again, and began to cry.

Somebody pounded up to the door, rattled the knob, and yelled, "Hey! Hey in there!" It looked like Mr. Johnson, who had been talking about the Hessians. I picked up the pistol and put a bullet through the chicken-wired glass. It made a neat little hole beside Mr. Johnson's head, and Mr. Johnson went out of sight like a crash-diving submarine. The class (with the possible exception of Ted) watched all the action with close interest, as if they had stumbled into a pretty good movie by accident.

"Somebody in there's got a gun!" Mr. Johnson yelled. There was a faint bumping sound as he crawled away. The fire alarm buzzed hoarsely on and on.

"Now what?" Harmon Jackson asked again. He was a small boy, usually with a big cockeyed grin on his face, but now he looked helpless, all at sea.

I couldn't think of an answer to that, so I let it pass. Outside, kids were milling restlessly around on the lawn, talking and pointing at Room 16 as the grapevine passed the word among them. After a little bit, some teachers-the men teachers-began shooing them back toward the gymnasium end of the building.

In town the fire whistle on the Municipal Building began to scream, rising and falling in hysterical cycles.

"It's like the end of the world," Sandra Cross said softly.

I had no answer for that, either.

Chapter 12

No one said anything for maybe five minutes-not until the fire engines got to the high

school. They looked at me, and I looked at them. Maybe they still could have bolted, and they're still asking me why they didn't. *Why didn't they cut and run, Charlie? What did you do to them?* Some of them ask that almost fearfully, as if I had the evil eye. I don't answer them. I don't answer any questions about what happened that morning in Room 16. But if I told them anything, it would be that they've forgotten what it is to be a kid, to live cheek-by-jowl with violence, with the commonplace fistfights in the gym, brawls at the PAL hops in Lewiston, beatings on television, murders in the movies. Most of us had seen a little girl puke pea soup all over a priest right down at our local drive-in. Old Book Bags wasn't much shakes by comparison.

I'm not taking on any of those things, hey, I'm in no shape for crusades these days. I'm just telling you that American kids labor under a huge life of violence, both real and make-believe. Besides, I was kind of interesting: Hey, Charlie Decker went apeshit today, didja hear? No! Did he? Yeah. Yeah. I was there. It was just like *Bonnie and Clyde*, except Charlie's got zitizes and there wasn't any popcorn.

I know they thought they'd be all right. That's part of it. What I wonder about is this: Were they hoping I'd get somebody else?

Another shrieking sound had joined the fire siren, this one getting closer real fast. Not the cops. It was that hysterical yodeling note that is all the latest rage in ambulances and paramedic vehicles these days. I've always thought the day will come when all the disaster vehicles will get smart and stop scaring the almighty shit out of everyone they're coming to save. When there's a fire or an accident or a natural disaster like me, the red vehicles will rush to the scene accompanied by the amplified sound of the Darktown Strutters playing "Banjo Rag." Someday. Oh, boy.

Chapter 13

Seeing as how it was the school, the town fire department went whole hog. The fire chief came first, gunning into the big semicircular school driveway in his blue bubble-topped Ford Pinto. Behind him was a hook-and-ladder trailing firemen like battle banners. There were two pumpers behind that.

"You going to let them in?" Jack Goldman asked.

"The fire's out there," I said. "Not in here."

"Did you shut ya locka door?" Sylvia Ragan asked. She was a big blond girl with great soft cardiganed breasts and gently rotting teeth.

"Yes. "

"Prolly out already, then."

Mike Gavin looked at the scurrying firemen and snickered. "Two of 'em just ran into each other," he said. "Holy moly."

The two downed firemen untangled themselves, and the whole group was preparing

to charge into the inferno when two suit-coated figures ran over to them. One was Mr. Johnson, the Human Submarine, and the other was Mr. Grace. They were talking hard and fast to the fire chief.

Great rolls of hose with shiny nozzles were being unreeled from the pumpers and dragged toward the front doors. The fire chief turned around and yelled, "Hold it!" They stood irresolutely on the lawn, their nozzles gripped and held out before them like comic brass phalluses.

The fire chief was still in conference with Mr. Johnson and Mr. Grace. Mr. Johnson pointed at Room 16. Thomas Denver, the Principal with the Amazing Overshaved Neck, ran over and joined the discussion. It was starting to look like a pitcher's mound conference in the last half of the ninth.

"I want to go home!" Irma Bates said wildly.

"Blow it out," I said.

The fire chief had started to gesture toward his knights again, and Mr. Grace shook his head angrily and put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to Denver and said something to him. Denver nodded and ran toward the main doors.

The chief was nodding reluctantly. He went back to his car, rummaged in the back seat, and came up with a really nice Radio Shack battery-powered bullhorn. I bet they had some real tussles back at the fire station about who got to use that. Today the chief was obviously pulling rank. He pointed it at the milling students.

"Please move away from the building. I repeat. Will you please move away from the building. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. We will have buses here to pick you up shortly. School is canceled for-

Short, bewildered whoop.

' . . . for the remainder of the day. Now, please move away from the building."

A bunch of teachers-both men and women this time-started herding them up toward the road. They were craning and babbling. I looked for Joe McKennedy but didn't see him anywhere.

"Is it all right to do homework?" Melvin Thomas asked tremblingly. There was a general laugh. They seemed surprised to hear it.

"Go ahead." I thought for a moment and added: "If you want to smoke, go ahead and do it. "

A couple of them grabbed for their pockets. Sylvia Ragan, doing her lady-of--the-manor bit, fished a battered pack of Camels delicately out of her purse and lit up with leisurely elegance. She blew out a plume of smoke and dropped her match on the floor. She stretched out her legs, not bothering overmuch with the nuisance of her skirt. She looked comfy.

There had to be more, though. I was getting along pretty well, but there had to be a thousand things I wasn't thinking of. Not that it mattered.

"If you've got a friend you want to sit next to, go ahead and change around. But don't

try to rush at me or run out the door, please."

A couple of kids changed next to their buddies, walking quickly and softly, but most of them just sat quiet. Melvin Thomas had opened his algebra book but couldn't seem to concentrate on it. He was staring at me glassily.

There was a faint metallic *chink!* from the upper corner of the room. Somebody had just opened the intercom system.

"Hello," Denver said. "Hello, Room 16."

"Hello," I said.

"Who's that?"

"Charlie Decker."

Long pause. Finally: "What's going on down there, Decker?"

I thought it over. "I guess I'm going berserk," I said.

An even longer pause. Then, almost rhetorically: "What have you done?"

I motioned at Ted Jones. He nodded back at me politely. "Mr. Denver?"

"Who's that?"

"Ted Jones, Mr. Denver. Charlie has a gun. He's holding us hostage. He's killed Mrs. Underwood. And I think he killed Mr. Vance, too."

"I'm pretty sure I did," I said.

"Oh," Mr. Denver said.

Sarah Pasterne giggled again.

"Ted Jones?"

"I'm here," Ted told him. He sounded very competent, Ted did, but at the same time distant. Like a first lieutenant who has been to college. You had to admire him.

"Who is in the classroom besides you and Decker?"

"Just a sec," I said. "I'll call the roll. Hold on."

I got Mrs. Underwood's green attendance book and opened it up. "Period two, right?"

"Yeah," Corky said.

"Okay. Here we go. Irma Bates?"

"I want to go *home!*" Irma screamed defiantly.

"She's here," I said. "Susan Brooks?"

"Here. "

"Nancy Caskin?"

"Here. "

I went through the rest of the roll. There were twenty-five names, and the only

absentee was Peter Franklin.

"Has Peter Franklin been shot?" Mr. Denver asked quietly.

"He's got the measles," Don Lordi said. This brought on another attack of the giggles. Ted Jones frowned deeply.

"Decker?"

"Yes."

"Will you let them go?"

"Not right now," I said.

"Why?" There was dreadful concern, a dreadful heaviness in his voice, and for a second I almost caught myself feeling sorry for him. I crushed that quickly. It's like being in a big poker game. Here is this guy who has been winning big all night, he's got a pile of chips that's a mile-high, and all at once he starts to lose. Not a little bit, but a lot, and you want to feel bad for him and his falling empire. But you cram that back and bust him, or you take it in the eye.

So I said, "We haven't finished getting it on down here yet."

"What does that mean?"

"It means stick it," I said. Carol Granger's eyes got round.

"Decker-"

"Call me Charlie. All my friends call me Charlie."

"Decker-"

I held my hand up in front of the class and crossed the fingers in pairs. "If you don't call me Charlie, I'm going to shoot somebody."

Pause.

"Charlie?"

"That's better." In the back row, Mike Gavin and Dick Keene were covering grins. Some of the others weren't bothering to cover them. "You call me Charlie, and I'll call you Tom. That okay, Tom?"

Long, long pause.

"When will you let them go, Charlie? They haven't hurt you."

Outside, one of the town's three black-and-whites and a blue state-police cruiser had arrived. They parked across the road from the high school, and Jerry Kesslering, the chief since Warren Talbot had retired into the local Methodist cemetery in 1975, began directing traffic onto the Oak Hill Pond road.

"Did you hear me, Charlie?"

"Yes. But I can't tell you. I don't know. There are more cops coming, I guess."

"Mr. Wolfe called them," Mr. Denver said. "I imagine there will be a great deal more

when they fully appreciate what's going on. They'll have tear gas and Mace, Dec . . . Charlie. Why make it hard on yourself and your classmates?"

"Tom?"

Grudgingly: "What?"

"You get your skinny cracked ass out there and tell them that the minute anyone shoots tear gas or anything else in here, I am going to make them sorry. You tell them to remember who's driving."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" He sounded angry and impotent and frightened. He sounded like a man who has just discovered there is no place left to pass the buck.

"I don't know," I said, "but it sure beats panty raids, Tom. And I don't think it actually concerns you. All I want you to do is trot back out there and tell them what I said. Will you do that, Tom?"

"I have no choice, do I?"

"No, that's right. You don't. And there's something else, Tom."

"What?" He asked it very hesitantly.

"I don't like you very much, Tom, as you have probably realized, but up to now you haven't had to give much of a rip how I felt. But I'm out of your filing cabinet now, Tom. Have you got it? I'm not just a record you can lock up at three in the afternoon. Have you got it?" My voice was rising into a scream. "HAVE YOU GOT THAT, TOM? HAVE YOU INTERNALIZED THAT PARTICULAR FACT OF LIFE?"

"Yes, Charlie," he said in a deadly voice. "I have it."

"No you don't, Tom. But you will. Before the day's over, we are going to understand all about the difference between people and pieces of paper in a file, and the difference between doing your job and getting jobbed. What do you think of that, Tommy, my man?"

"I think you're a sick boy, Decker."

"No, you think I'm a sick boy, *Charlie*. Isn't that what you meant to say, Tom?"

"Yes..."

"Say it."

"I think you're a sick boy, Charlie." The mechanical, embarrassed rote of a seven-year-old.

"You've got some getting it on to do yourself, Tom. Now, get out there and tell them what I said. "

Denver cleared his throat as if he had something else to say, and then the intercom clicked off. A little murmur went through the class. I looked them over very carefully. Their eyes were so cool and somehow detached (shock can do that: you're ejected like a fighter pilot from a humdrum dream of life to a grinding, overloaded slice of the real meat, and your brain refuses to make the adjustment; you can only free-fall and hope that sooner or later your chute will open), and a ghost of grammar school came back to me:

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell, My lessons all to you I'll tell, And when my day at school is through, I'll know more than aught I knew.

I wondered what they were learning today; what I was learning. The yellow school buses had begun to appear, and our classmates were going home to enjoy the festivities on living-room TVs and pocket transistor radios; but in Room 16, education went on.

I rapped the butt of the pistol sharply on the desk. The murmur died. They were watching me as closely as I was watching them. Judge and jury, or jury and defendant? I wanted to cackle.

"Well," I said, "the shit has surely hit the fan. I think we need to talk a little. "

"Private?" George Yannick asked. "Just you and us?" He had an intelligent, perky face, and he didn't look frightened.

"Yes. "

"You better turn off that intercom, then. "

"You big-mouth son of a bitch," Ted Jones said distinctly. George looked at him, wounded.

There was an uncomfortable silence while I got up and pushed the little lever below the speaker from TALK-LISTEN to LISTEN.

I went back and sat down again. I nodded at Ted. "I was thinking of it anyway," I lied. "You shouldn't take on so."

Ted didn't say anything, but he offered me a strange little grin that made me think he might have been wondering about how I might taste.

"Okay," I said to the class at large. "I may be crazy, but I'm not going to shoot anyone for discussing this thing with me. Believe it. Don't be afraid to shoot off your mouths. As long as we don't all talk at once." That didn't look as if it was going to be a problem. "To take the bull by the horns, is there anyone here who really thinks I'm going to just up and murder them?"

A few of them looked uneasy, but nobody said anything.

"Okay. Because I'm not. We're just going to sit around and bug the hell out of everybody. "

"Yeah, you sure bugged the hell out of Mrs. Underwood," Ted said. He was still smiling his strange smile.

"I had to. I know that's hard to understand, but . . . I had to. It came down to that. And Mr. Vance. But I want everyone here to take it easy. No one is going to shoot the place up, so you don't have to worry. "

Carol Granger raised her hand timidly. I nodded at her. She was smart, smart as a whip. Class president, and a cinch to speak a piece as valedictorian in June "Our Responsibilities to the Black Race" or maybe "Hopes for the Future. " She was already signed up for one of those big-league women's colleges where people always wonder how many virgins there are. But I didn't hold it against her.

"When can we go, Charlie?"

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. "We'll just have to wait and see what happens."

"But my mother will be worried to death!"

"Why?" Sylvia Ragan asked. "She knows where you are, doesn't she?"

General laugh. Except for Ted Jones. He wasn't laughing, and I was going to have to watch that boy. He was still smiling his small, savage smile. He wanted badly to blow everything out of the water-obvious enough. But why? Insanity Prevention Merit Badge? Not enough. Adulation of the community in general-the boy who stood on the burning deck with his finger in the dike? It didn't seem his style. Handsome low profile was Ted's style. He was the only guy I knew who had quit the football team after three Saturdays of glory in his junior year. The guy who wrote sports for the local rag had called him the best running back Placerville High School had ever produced. But he had quit, suddenly and with no explanation. Amazing enough. What was more amazing was the fact that his popularity quotient hadn't lost a point. If anything, Ted became more the local BMOG than ever. Joe McKennedy, who had suffered through four years and one broken nose at left tackle, told me that the only thing Ted would say when the agonized coach demanded an explanation was that football seemed to be a pretty stupid game, and he (Ted) thought that he could find a better way to spend his time. You can see why I respected him, but I was damned if I knew why he wanted me in such a personal way. A little thought on the matter might have helped, but things were going awful fast.

"Are you nuts?" Harmon Jackson asked suddenly.

"I think I must be," I said. "Anyone who kills anyone else is nuts, in my book. "

"Well, maybe you ought to give yourself up," Hannon said. "Get some help. A doctor. You know."

"You mean like that Grace?" Sylvia asked. "My God, that creepster. I had to go see him after I threw an inkwell at old lady Green. All he did was look up my dress and try to get me to talk about my sex life."

"Not that you've had any," Pat Fitzgerald said, and there was another laugh.

"And not that it's any business of his or yours," she said haughtily, dropped her cigarette on the floor, and mashed it.

"So what are we going to do?" Jack Goldman asked.

"Just get it on," I said. "That's all."

Out on the lawn, a second town police car had arrived. I guessed that the third one was probably down at Junior's Diner, taking on vital shipments of coffee and doughnuts. Denver was talking with a state trooper in blue pants and one of those almost-Stetsons they wear. Up on the road, Jerry Kesserling was letting a few cars through the roadblock to pick up kids who didn't ride the bus. The cars picked up and then drove hastily away. Mr. Grace was talking to a guy in a business suit that I didn't know. The firemen were standing around and smoking cigarettes and waiting for someone to tell them to put out a fire or go home.

"Has this got anything to do with you beating up Carlson?" Corky asked.

"How should I know what it has to do with?" I asked him irritably. "If I knew what was making me do it, I probably wouldn't have to."

"It's your parents." Susan Brooks spoke up suddenly. "It must be your parents."

Ted Jones made a rude noise.

I looked over at her, surprised. Susan Brooks was one of those girls who never say anything unless called upon, the ones that teachers always have to ask to speak up, please. A very studious, very serious girl. A rather pretty but not terribly bright girl-the kind who isn't allowed to give up and take the general or the commercial courses, because she had a terribly bright older brother or older sister, and teachers expect comparable things from her. In fine, one of those girls who are holding the dirty end of the stick with as much good grace and manners as they can muster. Usually they marry truck drivers and move to the West Coast, where they have kitchen nooks with Formica counters-and they write letters to the Folks Back East as seldom as they can get away with. They make quiet, successful lives for themselves and grow prettier as the shadow of the bright older brother or sister falls away from them.

"My parents," I said, tasting it. I thought about telling them I had been hunting with my dad when I was nine. "My Hunting Trip," by Charles Decker. Subtitle: "Or, How I Overheard My Dad Explain the Cherokee Nose Job." Too revolting.

I snatched a look at Ted Jones, and the rich, coppery aroma of paydirt filled my nostrils. His face was set in a furious, jeering expression, as if someone had just forced a whole lemon into his mouth and then jammed his jaws together. As if someone had dropped a depth charge into his brains and sent some old, sunken hulk into long and ominous psychic vibrations.

"That's what it says in all the psychology books," Susan was going on, all blithely unaware. "In fact . . ." She suddenly became aware of the fact that she was speaking (and in a normal tone of voice, *and* in class) and clammed up. She was wearing a pale-jade-colored blouse, and her bra straps showed through like ghostly, half-erased chalk marks.

"My parents," I said again, and stopped again. I remembered the hunting trip again, but this time I remembered waking up, seeing the moving branches on the tight canvas of the tent (was the canvas tight? you bet it was-my dad put that tent up, and everything he did was tight, no loose screws there), looking at the moving branches, needing to whiz, feeling like a little kid again . . . and remembering something that had happened long ago. I didn't want to talk about that. I hadn't talked about it with Mr. Grace. This was getting it on for real-and besides, there was Ted. Ted didn't care for this at all. Perhaps it was all very important to him. Perhaps Ted could still be . . . helped. I suspected it was much too late for me, but even on that level, don't they say that learning is a good and elegant thing for its own sake? Sure.

Outside, nothing much seemed to be going on. The last town police car had arrived, and, just as I had expected, they were handing out coffee-and. Story time chilluns.

"My parents," I said:

Chapter 14

My parents met at a wedding reception, and although it may have nothing to do with anything-unless you believe in omens-the bride that day was burned to death less than a year later. Her name was Jessie Decker Hannaford. As Jessie Decker, she had been my mom's roommate at the University of Maine, where they were both majoring in political science. The thing that seemed to have happened was this: Jessie's husband went out to a special town meeting, and Jessie went into the bathroom to take a shower. She fell down and hit her head and knocked herself unconscious. In the kitchen, a dish towel fell on a hot stove burner. The house went up like a rocket. Wasn't it a mercy she didn't suffer.

So the only good that came of that wedding was my mother's meeting with Jessie Decker Hannaford's brother. He was an ensign in the Navy. After the reception, he asked my mother if she would like to go dancing. She said yes. They courted for six months, and then they were married. I came along about fourteen months after the nuptials, and I've done the math again and again. As near as I can figure, I was conceived on one of the nights just before or just after my father's sister was being broiled alive in her shower cap. She was my mom's bridesmaid. I've looked at all the wedding pictures, and no matter how often I've looked, it always gives me a weird feeling. There is Jessie holding my mother's bridal train. Jessie and her husband, Brian Hannaford, smiling in the background as my mom and dad cut the wedding cake. Jessie dancing with the minister. And in all the pictures she is only five months away from the shower and the dishrag on the hot stove burner. You wish you could step into one of those Kodachromes and approach her, say: "You're never going to be my aunt Jessie unless you stay out of the shower when your husband is away. Be careful, Aunt Jessie. " But you can't go back. For want of a shoe the horse was lost, and all that.

But it happened, which is another way of saying I happened, and that's it. I was an only child; my mother never wanted another. She's very intellectual, my mother. Reads English mysteries, but never by Agatha Christie. Victor Canning and Hammond Innes were always more her cup of tea. Also magazines like *The Manchester Guardian* and *Monocle* and *The New York Review of Books*. My father, who made a career of the Navy and ended up as a recruiter, was more the all-American type. He likes the Detroit Tigers and the Detroit Redwings and wore a black armband the day Vince Lombardi died. No shit. And he reads those Richard Stark novels about Parker, the thief. That always amused the hell out of my mother. She finally broke down and told him that Richard Stark was really Donald Westlake, who writes sort of funny mysteries under his real name. My father tried one and hated it. After that he always acted like Westlake/Stark was his private lapdog who turned against him one night and tried to bite his throat.

My earliest memory is of waking up in the dark and thinking I was dead until I saw the shadows moving on the walls and the ceiling-there was a big old elm outside my window, and the wind would move the branches. This particular night-the first night I remember anything-there must have been a full moon (hunter's moon, do they call it?),

because the walls were very bright and the shadows were very dark. The branch shadows looked like great moving fingers. Now when I think of it, they seem like corpse fingers. But I couldn't have thought that then, could I? I was only three. A kid that little doesn't even know what a corpse is.

But there was something coming. I could hear it, down the hall. Something terrible was coming. Coming for me through the darkness. I could hear it, creaking and creaking and creaking.

I couldn't move. Maybe I didn't even want to move. I don't remember about that. I just lay and watched the tree fingers move on the wall and ceiling, and waited for the Creaking Thing to get down to my room and throw open the door.

After a long time-it might have been an hour, or it might only have been seconds-I realized the Creaking Thing wasn't after me at all. Or at least, not yet. It was after Mom and Dad down the hall. The Creaking Thing was in Mom and Dad's room.

I lay there, watching the tree fingers, and listened. Now the whole thing seems so dreamy and far away, like a city must look from a mountaintop where the air is rare, but very real just the same. I can remember the wind shuffling back and forth against the glass of my bedroom window. I can remember wetting myself-it was warm and somehow comforting. And I can remember the Creaking Thing.

After a long, long, long time, I can remember my mother's voice, out of breath and irritable, and a little afraid: "Stop now, Carl." Again the creaking, furtive. "Stop it! "

A mutter from my father.

From my mother: "I don't care! I don't care if you didn't! Stop it *and let me sleep!* "

So I knew. I went to sleep, but I knew. The Creaking Thing was my father.

Chapter 15

Nobody said anything. Some of them hadn't got the point, if there was one; I wasn't sure. They were still looking at me expectantly, as if awaiting the punch line of a rather good joke.

Others were studying their hands, obviously embarrassed. But Susan Brooks looked altogether radiant and vindicated. It was a very nice thing to see. I felt like a farmer, spreading shit and growing corn.

Still nobody said anything. The clock buzzed away with a vague kind of determination. I looked down at Mrs. Underwood. Her eyes were half-open, glazed, gummy. She looked no more important than a woodchuck I had once blown away with my father's four-ten. A fly was unctuously washing its paws on her forearm. Feeling a little disgusted, I waved it away.

Outside, four more police cars had arrived. Other cars were parked along the shoulder of the highway for as far as I could see beyond the roadblock. Quite a crowd was

gathering. I sat back, dry-scrubbed the side of my face with my hand, and looked at Ted. He held up his fists to shoulder height, smiled, and popped up the middle fingers on each one.

He didn't speak, but his lips moved, and I read it easily: Shit.

Nobody knew it had been passed but him and me. He looked ready to speak aloud, but I wanted to just keep it between us for a little while. I said:

Chapter 16

My dad has hated me for as long as I can remember.

That's a pretty sweeping statement, and I know how phony it sounds. It sounds petulant and really fantastic-the kind of weapon kids always use when the old man won't come across with the car for your heavy date at the drive-in with Peggy Sue or when he tells you that if you flunk world history the second time through he's going to beat the living hell out of you. In this bright day and age when everybody thinks psychology is God's gift to the poor old anally fixated human race and even the president of the United States pops a trunk before dinner, it's really a good way to get rid of those Old Testament guilts that keep creeping up our throats like the aftertaste of a bad meal we overate. If you say your father hated you as a kid, you can go out and flash the neighborhood, commit rape, or burn down the Knights of Pythias bingo parlor and still cop a plea.

But it also means that no one will believe you if it's true. You're the little boy that cried wolf. And for me it is true. Oh, nothing really stunning until after the Carlson thing. I don't think Dad himself really knew it until then. Even if you could dig to the very bottom of his motives, he'd probably say-at the most-that he was hating me for my own good.

Metaphor time in the old corral: To Dad, life was like a precious antique car. Because it is both precious and irreplaceable, you keep it immaculate and in perfect running order. Once a year you take it to the local Old Car Show. No grease is ever allowed to foul the gasoline, no sludge to find its way into the carb, no bolt to loosen on the driveshaft. It must be tuned, oiled, and greased every thousand miles, and you have to wax it every Sunday, just before the pro game on TV. My dad's motto: Keep It Tight and Keep It Right. And if a bird shits on your windshield, you wipe it off before it can dry there.

That was Dad's life, and I was the birdshit on his windshield.

He was a big, quiet man with sandy hair, a complexion that burned easily, and a face that had a vague-but not unpleasant-touch of the simian. In the summertime he always looked angry, with his face sunburned red and his eyes peering belligerently out at you like pale glints of water. Later, after I was ten, he was transferred to Boston and we saw him only on weekends, but before that he was stationed in Portland, and as far as I was concerned, he was like any other nineto-five father, except that his shirt was khaki instead of white, and his tie was always black.

It says in the Bible that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons, and that may be true. But I could also add that the sins of other fathers' sons were visited on me. Being a recruiting chief was very tough on Dad, and I often thought he would have been much happier stationed out to sea-not to mention how much happier I would have been. For him it was like having to go around and see other people's priceless antique cars driven to rack and ruin, mud-splattered, rust-eaten. He in ducted high-school Romeos leaving their pregnant Juliets behind them. He in ducted men who didn't know what they were getting into and men who only cared about what they were getting out of. He got the sullen young men who had been made to choose between a bang in the Navy and a bang in South Portland Training and Correction. He got scared bookkeepers who had turned up 1-A and would have done anything to keep away from the gooks in Nam, who were just then beginning their long-running special on Pickled Penis of American Grunt. And he got the slack jawed dropouts who had to be coached before they could sign their own names and had IQs to match their hat sizes.

And there was me, right there at home, with some budding characteristics attributable to all of the above. Quite a challenge there. And you have to know that he didn't hate me just because I was there; he hated me because he was unequal to the challenge. He might have been if I hadn't been more my mother's child than his, and if my mother and I hadn't both known that. He called me a mamma's boy. Maybe I was.

One day in the fall of 1962 I took it into my head to throw rocks at the storm windows Dad was getting ready to put on. It was early October, a Saturday, and Dad was going at it the way he went at everything, with a step-by-step precision that precluded all error and waste.

First he got all the windows out of the garage (newly painted the spring before, green to match the house trim) and lined them up carefully against the house, one beside each window. I can see him, tall and sunburned and angry-looking, even under the cool October sun, in the vintage October air, which was as cool as kisses. October is such a fine month.

I was sitting on the bottom step of the front porch, playing Quiet and watching him. Every now and then a car would blip by going up Route 9 toward Winsor or down 9 toward Harlow or Freeport. Mom was inside, playing the piano. Something minor-Bach, I think. But then, whatever Mother played usually sounded like Bach. The wind tugged and pushed it, now bringing it to me, now carrying it away. Whenever I hear that piece now, I think about that day. Bach Fugue for Storm Windows in A Minor.

I sat and played Quiet. A 1956 Ford with an out-of-state license plate went by. Up here to shoot partridge and pheasant, probably. A robin landed by the elm tree that threw shadows on my bedroom wall at night, and pecked through the fallen leaves for a worm. My mother played on, right hand rippling the melody, left hand counterpointing it. Mother could play wonderful boogie-woogie when the urge struck her, but it didn't often. She just didn't like it, and it was probably just as well. Even her boogies sounded like Bach wrote them.

All at once it occurred to me how wonderful it would be to break all those storm windows. To break them one by one; the upper panes, and then the lower ones.

You might think it was a piece of revenge, conscious or unconscious, a way to get back at the spit-and-polish, all-hands-on-deck old man. But the truth is, I can't remember putting my father in that particular picture at all. The day was fine and beautiful. I was four. It was a fine October day for breaking windows.

I got up and went out to the soft shoulder and began picking up stones. I was wearing short pants, and I stuffed stones into the front pockets until it must have looked like I was carrying ostrich eggs. Another car went by, and I waved. The driver waved back. The woman beside him was holding a baby.

I went back across the lawn, took a stone out of my pocket, and threw it at the storm window beside the living-room window. I threw it as hard as I could. I missed. I took out another rock, and this time I moved right up on top of that window. A little chill went through my mind, disturbing my thoughts for a tiny moment. I couldn't miss. And didn't.

I went right around the house breaking windows. First the living-room window, then the music-room window. It was propped up against the brick side of the house, and after I broke it I looked in at Mom, playing the piano. She was wearing a sheer blue slip. When she saw me peering in, she jumped a little and hit a sour note, then she gave me a big sweet smile and went on playing. You can see how it was. She hadn't even heard me break the window.

Funny, in a way-there was no sense of doing anything wrong, just of doing something pleasurable. A little kid's selective perception is a strange thing; if the windows had been fastened on, I never would have dreamed of breaking them.

I was regarding the last window, the one outside the den, when a hand fell on my shoulder and turned me around. It was my father. He was mad. I hadn't ever seen him so mad. His eyes were big, and he was biting his tongue between his teeth as if he were having a fit. I cried out, he scared me so bad. It was like your mother coming to the breakfast table with a Halloween mask on.

"Bastard"

He picked me up in both hands, right hand holding my legs at the ankles and left hand holding my left arm against my chest, and then he threw me on the ground. It was hard-as-hard as he could throw, I think. I lay there with all the breath out of me, staring up at the dismay and realization creeping over his face, dissolving the flash of his anger. I was unable to cry or speak or even move my diaphragm. There was a paralyzing pain in my chest and my crotch.

"I didn't mean it," he said, kneeling over me. "You all right? You okay, Chuck?" Chuck was what he called me when we were playing toss in the backyard.

My lungs operated in a spasmodic, lurching gasp. I opened my mouth and let out a huge, screaming bray. The sound scared me, and the next scream was even louder. Tears turned everything to prisms. The sound of the piano stopped.

"You shouldn't have broken those windows," he said. Anger was replacing dismay. "Now, shut up. Be a man, for God's sake."

He jerked me roughly to my feet just as Mom flew around the corner of the house, still in her slip.

"He broke all the storm windows," my father said. "Go put something on."

"What's the matter?" she cried. "Oh, Charlie, did you cut yourself? Where? Show me where!"

"He isn't cut," Dad said disgustedly. "He's afraid he's going to get licked. And he damned well is."

I ran to my mother and pressed my face into her belly, feeling the soft, comforting silk of her slip, smelling her sweet smell. My whole head felt swollen and pulpy, like a turnip. My voice had turned into a cracked donkey bray. I closed my eyes tightly.

"What are you talking about, licking him? He's purple! If you've hurt him, Carl..."

"He started to cry when he saw me coming, for Christ's sake."

The voices were coming from high above me, like amplified declarations from mountaintops.

"There's a car coming," he said. "Go inside, Rita."

"Come on, love," my mother said. "Smile for mummy. Big smile." She pushed me away from her stomach and wiped tears from under my eyes. Have you ever had your mother wipe your tears away? About that the hack poets are right. It's one of life's great experiences, right up there with your first ball game and your first wet dream. "There, honey, there. Daddy didn't mean to be cross."

"That was Sam Castinguay and his wife," my father said. "Now you've given that motor-mouth something to talk about. I hope--"

"Come on, Charlie," she said, taking my hand. "We'll have chocolate. In my sewing room."

"The hell you will," Dad said curtly. I looked back at him. His fists were clenched angrily as he stood in front of the one window he had saved. "He'll just puke it up when I whale the tar out of him."

"You'll whale no tar out of anyone," she said. "You've scared him half to death already . . ."

Then he was over to her, not minding her slip anymore, or Sam and his wife. He grabbed her shoulder and pointed to the jagged kitchen storm window. "Look! Look! *He* did that, and now you want to give him chocolate! He's no baby anymore, Rita, it's time for you to stop giving him the tit!"

I cringed against her hip, and she wrenched her shoulder away. White fingermarks stood out on her flesh for a moment and then filled in red.

"Go inside," she said calmly. "You're being quite foolish, Carl."

"I'm going to--"

"Don't tell me what you'll do!" she shouted suddenly, advancing on him. He flinched away instinctively. "Go inside! You've done enough damage! Go inside! Go find some of your friends and have drinks! Go anywhere! *But . . . get out of my sight!*"

"Punishment," he said deliberately. "Did anyone teach you that word in college, or

were they too busy filling you full of that liberal bullshit? Next time, he may break something more valuable than a few storm windows. A few times after that, he may break your heart. Wanton destruction-

"*Get out!*" she screamed.

I began to cry again, and shrank away from them both. For a moment I stood between, tottering, and then my mother gathered me up. It's all right, honey, she was saying, but I was watching my father, who had turned and was stomping away like a surly little boy. It wasn't until then, until I had seen with what practiced and dreadful ease he had been banished, that I began to dare to hate him back.

While my mother and I were having cocoa in her sewing room, I told her how Dad had thrown me on the ground. I told her Dad had lied.

It made me feel quite wonderful and strong.

Chapter 17

"What happened then?" Susan Brooks asked breathlessly.

"Not much, " I said. "It blew over. " Now that it was out, I found myself mildly surprised that it had stuck in my throat so long. I once knew a kid, Herk Orville, who ate a mouse. I dared him, and he swallowed it. Raw. It was just a small fieldmouse, and it didn't look hurt at all when we found it; maybe it had just died of old age. Anyway, Herk's mom was out hanging clothes, and she just happened to look over at us, sitting in the dirt by the back step. She looked just in time to see the mouse going down Herk's throat, headfirst.

She screamed-what a fright it can give you when a grown-up screams!-and ran over and put her finger down Herk's throat. Herk threw up the mouse, the hamburger he'd eaten for lunch, and some pasty glop that looked like tomato soup. He was just starting to ask his mother what was going on when *she* threw up. And there, in all that puke, that old dead mouse didn't look bad at all. It sure looked better than the rest of the stuff. The moral seemed to be that puking up your past when the present is even worse makes some of the vomitus look nearly tasty. I started to tell them that, and then decided it would only revolt them-like the story of the Cherokee Nose Job.

"Dad was in the doghouse for a few days. That was all. No divorce. No big thing."

Carol Granger started to say something, and that was when Ted stood up. His face was pale as cheese except for two burning patches of red, one above each cheekbone. He was grinning. Did I tell you he wore his hair in a duck's ass cut? Grease, out of style, not cool. But Ted got away with it. In that click of a second when he stood up, he looked like the ghost of James Dean come to get me, and my heart quailed.

"I'm going to take that gun away from you now, tin shit," he said, grinning. His teeth were white and even.

I had to fight hard to keep my voice steady, but I think I did pretty well. "Sit down, Ted."

Ted didn't move forward, but I could see how badly he wanted to. "That makes me sick, you know it? Trying to blame something like this on your *folks*. "

"Did I say I was trying to-?"

"Shut up!" he said in a rising, strident voice. "You killed two people!"

"How really observant of you to notice," I said.

He made a horrible rippling movement with his hands, holding them at waist level, and I knew that in his mind he had just grabbed me and eaten me.

"Put that down, Charlie," he said, grinning. "Just put that gun down and fight me fair."

"Why did you quit the football team, Ted?" I asked amiably. It was very hard to sound amiable, but it worked. He looked stunned, suddenly unsure, as if no one but the stolidly predictable coach had ever dared ask him that. He looked as if he had suddenly become aware of the fact that he was the only one standing. It was akin to the look a fellow gets when he realizes his zipper is down, and is trying to think of a nice unobtrusive way to get it back up-so it will look like an act of God.

"Never mind that," he said. "Put down that gun." It sounded melodramatic as hell. Phony. He knew it.

"Afraid for your balls? Your ever-loving sack? Was that it?"

Irma Bates gasped. Sylvia, however, was watching with a certain predatory interest.

"You . . ." He sat down suddenly in his seat, and somebody chuckled in the back of the room. I've always wondered exactly who that was. Dick Keene? Harmon Jackson?

But I saw their faces. And what I saw surprised me. You might even say it shocked me. Because there was pleasure there. There had been a showdown, a verbal shootout, you might say, and I had won. But why did that make them happy? Like those maddening pictures you sometimes see in the Sunday paper-"Why are these people laughing? Turn to page 41." Only, there was no page for me to turn to.

And it's important to know, you know. I've thought and thought, racked whatever brains I have left, and I don't know. Maybe it was only Ted himself, handsome and brave, full of the same natural *machismo* that keeps the wars well-attended. Simple jealousy, then. The need to see everyone at the same level, gargling in the same rat-race choir, to paraphrase Dylan. *Take off your mask, Ted, and sit down with the rest of us regular guys.*

Ted was still staring at me, and I knew well enough that he was unbroken. Only, next time he might not be so direct. Maybe next time he would try me on the flank.

Maybe it's just mob spirit. Jump on the individual.

But I didn't believe that then, and I don't believe it now, although it would explain much. No, the subtle shift from Ted's end of the seesaw to mine could not be dismissed as some mass grunt of emotion. A mob always wipes out the strange one, the sport, the mutant. That was *me*, not Ted. Ted was the exact opposite of those things. He was a boy

you would have been proud to have down in the rumpus room with your daughter. No, it was in *Ted*, not in them. It had to be in Ted. I began to feel strange tentacles *of* excitement in my belly-the way a butterfly collector must feel when he thinks he has just seen a new species fluttering in yon bushes.

"I know why Ted quit football," a voice said slyly. I looked around. It was Pig Pen. Ted had fairly jumped at the sound *of* his voice. He was beginning to look a wee bit haggard.

"Do tell," I said.

"If you open your mouth, I'll kill you," Ted said deliberately. He turned his grin on Pig Pen.

Pig Pen blinked in a terrified way and licked his lips. He was torn. It was probably the first time in his life that he'd had the ax, and now he didn't know if he dared to grind it. Of course, almost anyone in the room could have told you how he came by any information he had; Mrs. Dano spent her life attending bazaars, rummage sales, church and school suppers, and Mrs. Dano had the longest, shrewdest nose in Gates Falls. I also suspected she held the record for party-line listening in. She could latch on to anyone's dirty laundry before you could say have-you-heard-the-latest-about-Sam-Delacorte.

"I . . ." Pig Pen began, and turned away from Ted as he made an impotent clutching gesture with his hands.

"Go on and tell," Sylvia Ragan said suddenly. "Don't let Golden Boy scare you, hon."

Pig Pen gave her a quivering smile and then blurted out: "Mrs. Jones is an alcoholic. She had to go someplace and dry out. Ted had to help with his family."

Silence for a second.

"I'm going to kill you, Pig Pen," Ted said, getting up. His face was dead pale.

"Now, that's not nice," I said. "You said so yourself. Sit down."

Ted glared at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to break and charge at me. If he had, I would have killed him. Maybe he could see it on my face. He sat back down.

"So," I said. "The skeleton has boogied right out of the closet. Where's she drying out, Ted?"

"Shut up," he said thickly. Some of his hair had fallen across his forehead. It looked greasy. It was the first time it had ever looked that way to me.

"Oh, she's back now," Pig Pen said, and offered Ted a forgiving smile.

"You said you'd kill Pig Pen," I said thoughtfully.

"I will kill him," Ted muttered. His eyes were red and baleful.

"Then you can blame it on your parents," I said, smiling. "Won't that be a relief?"

Ted was gripping the edge of his desk tightly. Things weren't going to his liking at all. Harmon Jackson was smiling nastily. Maybe he had an old grudge against Ted.

"Your father drive her to it?" I asked kindly. "How'd it happen? Home late all the time? Supper burned and all that? Nipping on the cooking sherry a little at first? Hi-ho."

"I'll kill you." he moaned.

I was needling him-needling the shit out of him-and no one was telling me to stop. It was incredible. They were all watching Ted with a glassy kind of interest, as if they had expected all along that there were a few maggots under there.

"Must be tough, being married to a big-time bank officer," I said. "Look at it that way. She probably didn't realize she was belting down the hard stuff so heavy. It can creep up on you, look at it that way. It can get on top of you. And it's not your fault, is it? Hi-ho."

"*Shut up!* " he screamed at me.

"There it was, right under your nose, but it just got out of control, am I right? Kind of disgusting, wasn't it? Did she really go to pot, Ted? Tell us. Get rid of it. Kind of just slopping around the house, was she?"

"*Shut up! Shut up!* "

"Drunk in front of *Dialing for Dollars*? Seeing bugs in the corners? Or was she quiet about it? Did she see bugs? Did she? Did she *go* bugs?"

"*Yeah, it was disgusting!*" He brayed at me suddenly, through a mouthful of spit. "Almost as disgusting as you! Killer! Killer!"

"Did you write her?" I asked softly.

"Why would I write her?" he asked wildly. "Why should I write her? She copped out."

"And you couldn't play football."

Ted Jones said clearly, "Drunk *bitch*. "

Carol Granger gasped, and the spell was broken. Ted's eyes seemed to clear a little. The red light went out of them, and he realized what he had said.

"I'll get you for this, Charlie," he said quietly.

"You might. You might get your chance. " I smiled. "A drunken old bitch of a mother. That surely is disgusting, Ted."

Ted sat silently, staring at me.

It was over, then. We could turn our attention to other things-at least, for the moment. I had a feeling we might be getting back to Ted. Or that he would get back to me.

People moved around restlessly outside.

The clock buzzed.

No one said anything for a long time, or what seemed like a long time. There was a lot to think about now.

Chapter 18

Sylvia Ragan finally broke the silence. She threw back her head and laughed long, hard, and loud. Several people, including me, jumped. Ted Jones didn't. He was still on his own trip. "You know what I'd like to do after this is over?" she asked.

"What?" Pig Pen asked. He looked surprised that he had spoken up again. Sandra Cross was looking at me gravely. She had her ankles crossed the way pretty girls do when they want to foil boys who want to look up their dresses.

"I'd like to get this in a detective magazine. 'Sixty Minutes of Terror with the Placerville Maniac.' I'd get somebody who writes good to do it. Joe McKennedy or Phil Franks . . . or maybe you, Charlie. How's that bite your banana?" She guffawed, and Pig Pen joined in tentatively. I think he was fascinated by Sylvia's fearlessness. Or maybe it was only her blatant sexuality. She sure didn't have her ankles crossed.

Out on the lawn, two more trooper cars had arrived. The firemen were leaving; the fire alarm had cut out a few minutes ago. Abruptly Mr. Grace disengaged himself from the crowd and started toward the main doors. A light breeze flapped the bottom of his sport coat.

"More company," Corky Herald said.

I got up, went over to the intercom, and switched it back onto TALK-LISTEN. Then I sat down again, sweating a little. Mr. Don-God-Give-Us-Grace was on his way. And he was no lightweight.

A few seconds later there was that hollow *chink!* that means the line is open. Mr. Grace said, "Charlie?" His voice was very calm, very rich, very certain.

"How are you, skinner?" I asked.

"Fine, thanks, Charlie. How are you?"

"Keeping my thumb on it," I said agreeably.

Snickers from some of the boys.

"Charlie, we've talked about getting help for you before this. Now, you've committed a pretty antisocial act, wouldn't you agree?"

"By whose standards?"

"Society's standards, Charlie. First Mr. Carlson, now this. Will you let us help you?"

I almost asked him if my co-students weren't a part of society, because no one down here seemed too worked up about Mrs. Underwood. But I couldn't do that. It would have transgressed a set of rules that I was just beginning to grasp.

"How does Ah do it?" I bawled. "Ah already tole dat dere Mr. Denber how sorry Ah is for hittin' dat l'il girl wit dat Loosyville Sluggah. Ali wants mah poor paid shrunk! Ali wants mah soul saved an' made white as snow! How does Ah do it, Rev'rund?"

Pat Fitzgerald, who was nearly as black as the ace of spades, laughed and shook his head.

"Charlie, Charlie," Mr. Grace said, as if very sad. "Only you can save your soul now."

I didn't like that. I stopped shouting and put my hand on the pistol, as if for courage. I didn't like it at all. He had a way of slipping it to you. I'd seen him a lot since I bopped Mr. Carlson with the pipe wrench. He could really slip it in.

"Mr. Grace?"

"What, Charlie?"

"Did Tom tell the police what I said?"

"Don't you mean 'Mr. Denver'?"

"Whatever. Did he ... ?"

"Yes, he relayed your message."

"Have they figured out how they're going to handle me yet?"

"I don't know, Charlie. I'm more interested in knowing if you've figured out how you're going to handle yourself."

Oh, he was slipping it to me, all right. Just like he kept slipping it to me after Mr. Carlson. But then I had to go see him. Now I could turn him off anytime I wanted to. Except I couldn't, and he knew I couldn't. It was too normal to be consistent. And I was being watched by my peerless peers. They were evaluating me.

"Sweating a little?" I asked the intercom.

"Are you?"

"You guys," I said, an edge of bitterness creeping into my voice. "You're all the same."
"

"We are? If so, then we all want to help you."

He was going to be a much tougher nut to strip than old Tom Denver had been. That was obvious. I called Don Grace up in my mind. Short, dapper little fuck. Bald on top, big muttonchop sideburns, as if to make up for it. He favored tweed coats with suede patches on the elbows. A pipe always stuffed with something that came from Copenhagen and smelled like cowshit. A man with a headful of sharp, prying instruments. A mind-fucker, a head-stud. That's what a shrink is for, my friends and neighbors; their job is to fuck the mentally disturbed and make them pregnant with sanity. It's a bull's job, and they go to school to learn how, and all their courses are variations on a theme: *Slipping It to the Psychos for Fun and Profit, Mostly Profit*. And if you find yourself someday lying on that great analyst's couch where so many have lain before you, I'd ask you to remember one thing: When you get sanity by stud, the child always looks like the father. And they have a very high suicide rate.

But they get you lonely, and ready to cry, they get you ready to toss it all over if they will just promise to go away for a while. What do we have? What do we really have? Minds like terrified fat men, begging the eyes that look up in the bus terminal or the

restaurant and threaten to meet ours to look back down, uninterested. We lie awake and picture ourselves in white hats of varying shapes. There's no maidenhead too tough to withstand the seasoned dork of modern psychiatry. But maybe that was okay. Maybe now they would play my game, all these shysters and whores.

"Let us help you, Charlie," Mr. Grace was saying.

"But by letting you help me, I would be helping you." I said it as if the idea had just occurred to me. "Don't want to do that."

"Why, Charlie?"

"Mr. Grace?"

"Yes, Charlie?"

"The next time you ask me a question, I'm going to kill somebody down here. " I could hear Mr. Grace suck wind, as if someone had just told him his son had been in a car crash. It was a very un-self-confident sound. It made me feel very good.

Everyone in the room was looking at me tightly. Ted Jones raised his head slowly, as if he had just awakened. I could see the familiar, hating darkness cloud his eyes. Anne Lasky's eyes were round and frightened. Sylvia Ragan's fingers were doing a slow and dreamy ballet as they rummaged in her purse for another cigarette. And Sandra Cross was looking at me gravely, gravely, as if I were a doctor, or a priest.

Mr. Grace began to speak.

"Watch it!" I said sharply. "Before you say anything, be careful. You aren't playing your game any longer. Understand that. You're playing mine. Statements only. Be very careful. Can you be very careful?"

He didn't say anything about my game metaphor at all. That was when I began to believe I had him.

"Charlie . . . "Was that almost a plea?

"Very good. Do you think you'll be able to keep your job after this, Mr. Grace?"

"Charlie, for God's sake . . . "

"Ever so much better. "

"Let them go, Charlie. Save yourself. Please."

"You're talking too fast. Pretty soon a question will pop out, and that'll be the end for somebody."

"Charlie . . . "

"How was your military obligation fulfilled?"

"Wh . . . " Sudden whistling of breath as he cut that off.

"You almost killed somebody," I said. "Careful, Don. I can call you Don, can't I? Sure. Weigh those words, Don."

I was reaching out for him.

I was going to break him.

In that second it seemed as if maybe I could break them all.

"I think I better sign off for the moment, Charlie."

"If you go before I say you can, I'll shoot somebody. What you're going to do is sit there and answer my questions."

The first sweaty desperation, as well concealed as underarm perspiration at the junior prom: "I really mustn't, Charlie. I can't take the responsibility for-"

"*Responsibility?*" I screamed. "My God, you've been taking the responsibility ever since they let you loose from college! Now you want to cop out the first time your bare ass is showing! But I'm in the driver's seat, and by God you'll pull the cart! Or I'll do just what I said. Do you dig it? Do you *understand me?*"

"I won't play a cheap parlor game with human lives for party favors, Charlie. "

"Congratulations to you," I said. "You just described modern psychiatry. That ought to be the textbook definition, Don. Now, let me tell you: you'll take a piss out the window if I tell you to. And God help you if I catch you in a lie. That will get somebody killed too. Ready to bare your soul, Don? Are you on your mark?"

He drew in his breath raggedly. He wanted to ask if I really meant it, but he was afraid I might answer with the gun instead of my mouth. He wanted to reach out quick and shut off the intercom, but he knew he would hear the echo of the shot in the empty building, rolling around in the corridor below him like a bowling ball up a long alley from hell.

"All right," I said. I unbuttoned my shirt cuffs. Out on the lawn, the cops and Tom Denver and Mr. Johnson were standing around restlessly, waiting for the return of their tweedy bull stud. Read my dreams, Sigmund. Squirt 'em with the sperm of symbols and make 'em grow. Show me how we're different from, say, rabid dogs or old tigers full of bad blood. Show me the man hiding between my wet dreams. They had every reason to be confident (although they did not look confident). In the symbolic sense, Mr. Grace was Pathfinder of the Western World. Bull stud with a compass.

Natty Bumpo was breathing raggedly from the little latticed box over my head. I wondered if he'd read any good rapid eye movements lately. I wondered what his own would be like when night finally came.

"All right, Don. Let's get it on."

Chapter 19

"How was your military obligation fulfilled?"

"In the Army, Charlie. This isn't going to accomplish anything."

"In what capacity?"

"As a doctor. "

"Psychiatrist?"

"No. "

"How long have you been a practicing psychiatrist?"

"Five years."

"Have you ever eaten your wife out?"

"Wh . . . " Terrified, angry pause.

"I . . . I don't know the meaning of the phrase. "

"I'll rephrase it, then. Have you ever engaged in oral-genital practices with your wife?"

"I won't answer that. You have no right."

"I have all the rights. You have none. Answer, or I'll shoot someone. And remember, if you lie and I catch you in a lie, I'll shoot someone. Have you ever engaged in-?"

"No!"

"How long have you been a practicing psychiatrist?"

"Five years. "

"Why?"

"Wh . . . Well, because it fulfills me. As a person."

"Has your wife ever had an affair with another man?"

"No."

"Another woman?"

"How do you know?"

"She loves me."

"Has your wife ever given you a blow job, Don?"

"I don't know what you-"

"You know goddamn well what I mean!"

"No, Charlie, I-"

"Ever cheat on an exam in college?"

Pause. "Absolutely not."

"On a quiz?"

"No."

I pounced. "Then how can you say your wife has never engaged in oral-genital sex practices with you?"

"I . . . I never . . . Charlie . . . "

"Where did you do your basic training?"

"F-Fort Benning."

"What year?"

"I don't remem-"

"Give me a year or I'm going to shoot somebody down here!"

"Nineteen-fifty-six. "

"Were you a grunt?"

"I . . . I don't-"

"Were you a grunt? Were you a dogface?"

"I was . . . I was an officer. First lieu-"

"I didn't ask you for that!" I screamed.

"Charlie . . . Charlie, for God's sake, calm down-"

"What year was your military obligation fulfilled?"

"N-Nineteen-sixty."

"You owe your country six years! You're lying! I'm going to shoot-"

"No!" He cried. "National Guard! I was in the Guard!"

"What was your mother's maiden name?"

"G-G-Gavin. "

"Why?"

"Wh . . . I don't know what you m-"

"Why was her maiden name Gavin?"

"Because her father's name was Gavin. Charlie-"

"In what year did you do your basic training?"

"Nineteen-fifty-sev-six!"

"You're lying. Caught you, didn't I, Don?"

"No! I – I – "

"You started to say *fifty-seven.*"

"I was mixed up."

"I'm going to shoot somebody. In the guts, I think. Yes."

"Charlie, for Jesus' sake!"

"Don't let it happen again. You were a grunt, right? In the Army?"

"Yes-no-I was an officer . . . "

"What was your father's middle name?"

"J-John. Chuh-Charlie, get hold of yourself. D-D-Don't-"

"Ever gobbled your wife, my man?"

"No!"

"You're lying. You said you didn't know what that meant."

"You explained it to me!" He was breathing in fast little grunts. "Let me go, Charlie, let me g-"

"What is your religious denomination?"

"Methodist. "

"In the choir?"

"No."

"Did you go to Sunday school?"

"Yes."

"What are the first three words in the Bible?"

Pause. "In the beginning."

"First line of the Twenty-third Psalm?"

"The . . . um . . . The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"And you first ate your wife in 1956?"

"Yes-no . . . Charlie, let me alone . . . "

"Basic training, what year?"

"Nineteen-fifty-six!"

"You said fifty-seven before!" I screamed. "Here it goes! I'm going to blow someone's head off right now!"

"I said fifty-six, you bastard!" Screaming, out of breath, hysterical.

"What happened to Jonah, Don?"

"He was swallowed by a whale."

"The Bible says big fish, Don. Is that what you meant?"

"Yeah. Big fish. 'Course it was." Pitifully eager.

"Who built the ark?"

"Noah. "

"Where did you do your basic?"

"Fort Benning."

More confident; familiar ground. He was letting himself be lulled. "Ever eaten your

wife?"

"No."

"What?"

"No!"

"What's the last book in the Bible, Don?"

"Revelations. "

"Actually it's just Revelation. No s. Right?"

"Right, sure, right."

"Who wrote it?"

"John. "

"What was your father's middle name?"

"John."

"Ever get a revelation from your father, Don?"

A strange, high, cackling laugh from Don Grace. Some of the kids blinked uneasily at the sound of that laugh. "Uh . . . no . . . Charlie . . . I can't say that I ever did."

"What was your mother's maiden name?"

"Gavin."

"Is Christ numbered among the martyrs?"

"Ye-ess . . . " He was too Methodist to really be sure.

"How was he martyred?"

"By the cross. Crucified."

"What did Christ ask God on the cross?"

" 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' "

"Don?"

"Yes, Charlie."

"What did you just say?"

"I said 'My God, my God, why . . . ' " Pause. "Oh, no, Charlie. That's not fair! "

"You asked a question."

"You tricked me!"

"You just killed someone, Don. Sorry."

"No!"

I fired the pistol into the floor. The whole class, which had been listening with taut, hypnotic attention, flinched. Several people screamed. Pig Pen fainted again, and he

struck the floor with a satisfying meat thump. I don't know if the intercom picked it up, but it really didn't matter.

Mr. Grace was crying. Sobbing like a baby.

"Satisfactory," I said to no one in particular. "Very satisfactory."

Things seemed to be progressing nicely.

I let him sob for the best part of a minute; the cops had started toward the school at the sound of the shot, but Tom Denver, still betting on his shrink, held them back, and so *that* was all right. Mr. Grace sounded like a very small child, helpless, hopeless. I had made him fuck himself with his own big tool, like one of those weird experiences you read about in the *Penthouse Forum*. I had taken off his witch doctor's mask and made him human. But I didn't hold it against him. To err is only human, but it's divine to forgive. I believe that sincerely.

"Mr. Grace?" I said finally.

"I'm going outside now," he said. And then, with tearful rebelliousness: "And you can't stop me!"

"That's all right," I said tenderly. "The game's over, Mr. Grace. We weren't playing for keepsies this time. No one is dead down here. I shot into the floor."

Breathing silence. Then, tiredly: "How can I believe you, Charlie?"

Because there would have been a stampede.

Instead of saying that, I pointed. "Ted?"

"This is Ted Jones, Mr. Grace," Ted said mechanically.

"Y-Yes, Ted."

"He shot into the floor," Ted said in a robot voice. "Everyone is all right." Then he grinned and began to speak again. I pointed the pistol at him, and he shut his mouth with a snap.

"Thank you, Ted. Thank you, my boy." Mr. Grace began to sob again. After what seemed like a long, long time, he shut the intercom off. A long time after that, he came into view on the lawn again, walking toward the enclave of cops on the lawn, walking in his tweed coat with the suede elbow patches, bald head gleaming, cheeks gleaming. He was walking slowly, like an old man. It was amazing how much I liked seeing him walk like that.

Chapter 20

"Oh, man," Richard Keene said from the back of the room, and his voice sounded tired and sighing, almost exhausted.

That was when a small, savagely happy voice broke in: "I thought it was great!" I

craned my neck around. It was a tiny Dutch doll of a girl named Grace Stanner. She was pretty in a way that attracted the shop-course boys, who still slicked their hair back and wore white socks. They hung around her in the hall like droning bees. She wore tight sweaters and short skirts. When she walked, everything jiggled-as Chuck Berry has said in his wisdom, it's such a sight to see somebody steal the show. Her mom was no prize, from what I understood. She was sort of a pro-am barfly and spent most of her time hanging around at Denny's on South Main, about a half-mile up from what they call the corner here in Placerville. Denny's will never be mistaken for Caesar's Palace. And there are always a lot of small minds in small towns, eager to think like mother, like daughter. Now she was wearing a pink cardigan sweater and a dark green skirt, thigh-high. Her face was alight, elvish. She had raised one clenched fist unconsciously shoulder-high. And there was something crystal and poignant about the moment. I actually felt my throat tighten.

"Go, Charlie! Fuck 'em all!"

A lot of heads snapped around and a lot of mouths dropped open, but I wasn't too surprised. I told you about the roulette ball, didn't I? Sure I did. In some ways-in a lot of ways-it was still in spin. Crazy is only a matter of degree, and there are lots of people besides me who have the urge to roll heads. They go to the stockcar races and the horror movies and the wrestling matches they have in the Portland Expo. Maybe what she said smacked of all those things, but I admired her for saying it out loud, all the same-the price of honesty is always high. She had an admirable grasp of the fundamentals. Besides, she was tiny and pretty.

Irma Bates wheeled on her, face stretched with outrage. It suddenly struck me that what was happening to Irma must be nearly cataclysmic. "Dirty-mouth!"

"Fuck you, too!" Grace shot back at her, smiling. Then, as an afterthought: "Bag!"

Irma's mouth dropped open. She struggled for words; I could see her throat working as she tried them, rejected them, tried more, looking for the words of power that would line Grace's face, drop her breasts four inches toward her belly, pop up varicose veins on those smooth thighs, and turn her hair gray. Surely those words were there someplace, and it was only a matter of finding them. So she struggled, and with her low-slung chin and bulging forehead (both generously sprinkled with blackheads), she looked like a frog.

She finally sprayed out: "They ought to shoot you, just like they'll shoot him, you slut!" She worked for more; it wasn't enough. It couldn't yet express all the horror and outrage she felt for this violent rip in the seam of her universe. "Kill all sluts. Sluts and sluts' daughters!"

The room had been quiet, but now it became absolutely silent. A pool of silence. A mental spotlight had been switched on Irma and Grace. They might have been alone in a pool of light on a huge stage. Up to this last, Grace had been smiling slightly. Now the smile was wiped off.

"What?" Grace asked slowly. "What? What?"

"Baggage! Tramp!"

Grace stood up, as if about to recite poetry. "My mother-works-in-a-laundry--

you-fat-bitch-and-you-better-take-back-what-you-just-said!"

Irma's eyes rolled in caged and desperate triumph. Her neck was slick and shiny with sweat: the anxious sweat of the adolescent damned, the ones who sit home Friday nights and watch old movies on TV and also the clock. The ones for whom the phone is always mute and the voice of the mother is the voice of Thor. The ones who peck endlessly at the mustache shadow between nose and upper lip. The ones who go to see Robert Redford with their girlfriends and then come back alone on another day to see him again, with their palms clutched damply in their laps. The ones who agonize over long, seldom-mailed letters to John Travolta, written by the close, anxious light of Tensor study lamps. The ones for whom time has become a slow and dreamy sledge of doom, bringing only empty rooms and the smell of old sweats. Sure, that neck was slimy with sweat. I wouldn't kid you, any more than I would myself.

She opened her mouth and brayed: "WHORE'S DAUGHTER!"

"Okay," Grace said. She had started up the aisle toward Irma, holding her hands out in front of her like a stage hypnotist's. She had very long fingernails, lacquered the color of pearl. "I'm going to claw your eyes out, cunt."

"Whore's daughter, whore's daughter!" She was almost *singing* it.

Grace smiled. Her eyes were still alight and elvish. She wasn't hurrying up that aisle, but she wasn't lagging, either. No. She was coming right along. She was pretty, as I had never noticed before, pretty and precious. It was as if she had become a secret cameo of herself.

"Okay, Irma, " she said. "Here I come. Here I come for your eyes."

Irma suddenly aware, shrank back in her seat.

"Stop," I said to Grace. I didn't pick up the pistol, but I laid my hand on it.

Grace stopped and looked at me inquiringly. Irma looked relieved and also vindicated, as if I had taken on aspects of a justly intervening god. "Whore's daughter," she confided to the class in general. "Missus Stanner has open house every night, just as soon as she gets back from the beerjoint. With *her* as practicing apprentice." She smiled sickly at Grace, a smile that was supposed to convey a superficial, cutting sympathy, and instead only inscribed her own pitiful empty terror. Grace was still looking at me inquiringly.

"Irma?" I asked politely. "Can I have your attention, Irma?"

And when she looked at me, I saw fully what was happening. Her eyes had a glittery yet opaque sheen. Her face was flushed of cheek but waxy of brow. She looked like something you might send your kid out wearing for Halloween. She was blowing up. The whole thing had offended whatever shrieking albino bat it was that passed for her soul. She was ready to go straight up to heaven or dive-bomb down into hell.

"Good," I said when both of them were looking at me. "Now. We have to keep order here. I'm sure you understand that. Without order, what do you have? The jungle. And the best way to keep order is to settle our difficulties in a civilized way. "

"Hear, hear!" Harmon Jackson said.

I got up, went to the blackboard, and took a piece of chalk from the ledge. Then I drew a large circle on the tiled floor, perhaps five feet through the middle. I kept a close eye on Ted Jones while I did it, too. Then I went back to the desk and sat down.

I gestured to the circle. "Please, girls."

Grace came forward quickly, precious and perfect. Her complexion was smooth and fair.

Irma sat stony.

"Irma, " I said. "Now, Irma. You've made accusations, you know."

Irma looked faintly surprised, as if the idea of accusations had exploded an entirely new train of thought in her mind. She nodded and rose from her seat with one hand cupped demurely over her mouth, as if to stifle a tiny, coquettish giggle. She stepped mincingly up the aisle and into the circle, standing as far away from Grace as was possible, eyes cast demurely down, hands linked together at her waist. She looked ready to sing "Granada" on *The Gong Show*.

I thought randomly: Her father sells cars, doesn't he?

"Very good," I said. "Now, as has been hinted at in church, in school, and even on *Howdy Doody*, a single step outside the circle means death. Understood?"

They understood that. They all understood it. This is not the same as comprehension, but it was good enough. When you stop to think, the whole idea of comprehension has a faintly archaic taste, like the sound of forgotten tongues or a look into a Victorian *camera obscura*. We Americans are much higher on simple understanding. It makes it easier to read the billboards when you're heading into town on the expressway at plus-fifty. To comprehend, the mental jaws have to gape wide enough to make the tendons creak. Understanding, however, can be purchased on every paperback-book rack in America.

"Now, " I said. "I would like a minimum of physical violence here. We already have enough of that to think about. I think your mouths and your open hands will be sufficient, girls. I will be the judge. Accepted?"

They nodded.

I reached into my back pocket and brought out my red bandanna. I had bought it at the Ben Franklin five-and-dime downtown, and a couple of times I had worn it to school knotted around my neck, very continental, but I had gotten tired of the effect and put it to work as a snot rag. Bourgeois to the core, that's me.

"When I drop it, you go at it. First lick to you, Grace, as you seem to be the defendant. "

Grace nodded brightly. There were roses in her cheeks. That's what my mother always says about someone who has high color.

Irma Bates just looked demurely at my red bandanna.

"Stop it!" Ted Jones snapped. "You said you weren't going to hurt anyone, Charlie. Now, stop it!" His eyes looked desperate. "Just stop it!"

For no reason I could fathom, Don Lordi laughed crazily.

"She started it, Ted Jones," Sylvia Ragan said heatedly. "If some Ethiopian jug-diddler called my mother a whore-

"Whore, dirty whore," Irma agreed demurely.

". . . I'd claw her fuggin' eyes out!"

"You're crazy!" Ted bellowed at her, his face the color of old brick. "We could stop him! If we all got together, we could-

"Shut up, Ted," Dick Keene said. "Okay?"

Ted looked around, saw he had neither support nor sympathy, and shut up. His eyes were dark and full of crazy hate. I was glad it was a good long run between his desk and Mrs. Underwood's. I could shoot him in the foot if I had to.

"Ready, girls?"

Grace Stanner grinned a healthy, gutsy grin. "All ready."

Irma nodded. She was a big girl, standing with her legs apart and her head slightly lowered. Her hair was a dirty blond color, done in round curls that looked like toilet-paper rolls.

I dropped my bandanna. It was on.

Grace stood thinking about it. I could almost see her realizing how deep it could be, wondering maybe how far in over her head she wanted to get. In that instant I loved her. No . . . I loved them both.

"You're a fat, bigmouth bitch," Grace said, looking Irma in the eye. "You stink. I mean that. Your body *stinks*. You're a louse."

"Good," I said, when she was done. "Give her a smack."

Grace hauled off and slapped the side of Irma's face. It made a flat whapping noise, like one board striking another. Her sweater pulled up above the waistband of her skirt with the swing of her arm.

Corky Herald went "Unhh!" under his breath.

Irma let out a whoofing grunt. Her head snapped back, her face screwed up. She didn't look demure anymore. There was a large, hectic patch on her left cheek.

Grace threw back her head, drew a sudden knife-breath, and stood ready. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, beautiful and perfect. She waited.

"Irma for the prosecution," I said. "Go ahead, Irma. "

Irma was breathing heavily. Her eyes were glazed and offended, her mouth horrified. At that moment she looked like no one's sweet child of morning.

"Whore," she said finally, apparently deciding to stick with a winner. Her lip lifted, fell, and lifted again, like a dog's. "Dirty boy-fucking whore."

I nodded to her.

Irma grinned. She was very big. Her arm, coming around, was like a wall. It rocketed

against the side of Grace's face. The sound was a sharp crack.

"Ow!" someone whined.

Grace didn't fall over. The whole side of her face went red, but she didn't fall over. Instead, she smiled at Irma. And Irma flinched. I saw it and could hardly believe it: Dracula had feet of clay, after all.

I snatched a quick look at the audience. They were hung, hypnotized. They weren't thinking about Mr. Grace or Tom Denver or Charles Everett Decker. They were watching, and maybe what they saw was a little bit of their own souls, flashed at them in a cracked mirror. It was fine. It was like new grass in spring.

"Rebuttal, Grace?" I asked.

Grace's lips drew back from her tiny ivory teeth. "You never had a date, that's what's the matter with you. You're ugly. You smell bad. And so all you think about is what other people do, and you have to make it all dirty in your mind. You're a bug."

I nodded to her.

Grace swung, and Irma shied away. The blow struck her only glancingly, but she began to weep with a sudden, slow hopelessness. "Let me out," she groaned. "I don't want to any more, Charlie. Let me *out!* "

"Take back what you said about my mother," Grace said grimly.

"Your mother sucks cocks!" Irma screamed. Her face was twisted; her toilet-roll curls bobbed madly.

"Good," I said. "Go ahead, Irma."

But Irma was weeping hysterically. "J-J-Je-*Jesusss* . . . " she screamed. Her arms came up and covered her face with terrifying slowness. "God I want to be *d-dd-dead* . . . "

"Say you're sorry," Grace said grimly. "Take it back."

"You suck cocks! " Irma screamed from behind the barricade of her arms.

"Okay," I said. "Let her have it, Irma. Last chance."

This time Irma swung from the heels. I saw Grace's eyes squeeze into slits, saw the muscles of her neck tighten into cords. But the angle of her jaw caught most of the blow and her head shifted only slightly. Still, that whole side of her face was bright red, as if from sunburn.

Irma's whole body jogged and jiggled with the force of her sobs, which seemed to come from a deep well in her that had never been tapped before.

"You haven't got nothing," Grace said. "You *ain't* nothing. Just a fat, stinky pig is what you are. "

"Hey, give it to her!" Billy Sawyer yelled. He slammed both fists down heavily on his desk. "Hey, pour it on!"

"You ain't even got any *friends*, " Grace said, breathing hard. "Why do you even bother living?"

Irma let out a thin, reedy wail.

"All done," Grace said to me.

"Okay," I said. "Give it to her."

Grace drew back, and Irma screamed and went to her knees. "Don't h-h-hit me. Don't hit me no more! *Don't you hit me-*"

"Say you're sorry."

"I can't," she wept. "Don't you know *I can't?*"

"You can. You better."

There was no sound for a moment, but the vague buzz of the wall clock. Then Irma looked up, and Grace's hand came down fast, amazingly fast, making a small, ladylike splat against Irma's cheek. It sounded like a shot from a .22.

Irma fell heavily on one hand, her curls hanging in her face. She drew in a huge, ragged breath and screamed, "Okay! All right! I'm sorry!"

Grace stepped back, her mouth half-open and moist, breathing rapidly and shallowly. She raised her hands, palms out, in a curiously dove-like gesture, and pushed her hair away from her cheeks. Irma looked up at her dumbly, unbelievably. She struggled to her knees again, and for a moment I thought she was going to offer a prayer to Grace. Then she began to weep.

Grace looked at the class, then looked at me. Her breasts were very full, pushing at the soft fabric of her sweater.

"My mother fucks," she said, "and I love her."

The applause started somewhere in the back, maybe with Mike Gavin or Nancy Caskin. But it started and spread until they were all applauding, all but Ted Jones and Susan Brooks. Susan looked too overwhelmed to applaud. She was looking at Gracie Stanner shinningly.

Irma knelt on the floor, her face in her hands. When the applause died (I had looked at Sandra Cross; she applauded very gently, as if in a dream), I said, "Stand up, Irma. "

She looked at me wonderingly, her face streaked and shadowed and ravaged, as if she had been in a dream herself.

"Leave her alone," Ted said, each word distinct.

"Shut up," Harmon Jackson said. "Charlie is doing all right."

Ted turned around in his seat and looked at him. But Harmon did not drop his eyes, as he might have done at another place, another time. They were both on the Student Council together-where Ted, of course, had always been the power.

"Stand up, Irma," I said gently.

"Are you going to shoot me?" she whispered.

"You said you were sorry."

"She made me say it. "

"But I bet you are."

Irma looked at me dumbly from beneath the madhouse of her toilet-paper-roll curls. "I've always been sorry," she said. "That's what makes it s-s-s-so hard to s-say."

"Do you forgive her?" I asked Grace.

"Huh?" Grace looked at me, a little dazed. "Oh. Yeah. Sure." She walked suddenly back to her seat and sat down, where she looked frowningly at her hands.

"Irma?" I said.

"What?" She was peering at me, doglike, truculent, fearful, pitiful.

"Do you have something you want to say?"

"I don't know."

She stood up a little at a time. Her hands dangled strangely, as if she didn't know exactly what to do with them.

"I think you do. "

"You'll feel better when it's off your chest, Irma, " Tanis Gannon said. "I always do. "

"Leave her alone, fa Chrissake," Dick Keene said from the back of the room.

"I don't want to be let alone," Irma said suddenly. "I want to say it." She brushed back her hair defiantly. Her hands were not dove-like at all. "I'm not pretty. No one likes me. I never had a date. Everything she said is true. There." The words rushed out very fast, and she screwed up her face while she was saying them, as if she were taking nasty medicine.

"Take a little care of yourself, " Tanis said. Then, looking embarrassed but still determined: "You know, wash, shave your legs and, uh, armpits. Look nice. I'm no raving beauty, but I don't stay home *every* weekend. You could do it."

"I don't know how!"

Some of the boys were beginning to look uneasy, but the girls were leaning forward. They looked sympathetic now, all of them. They had that confessions-at--the-pajama-party look that every male seems to know and dread.

"Well . . . " Tanis began. Then she stopped and shook her head. "Come back here and sit down. "

Pat Fitzgerald snickered. "Trade secrets?"

"That's right."

"Some trade," Corky Herald said. That got laughs. Irma Bates shuttled to the back of the room, where she, Tanis, Anne Lasky, and Susan Brooks started some sort of confabulation. Sylvia was talking softly with Grace, and Pig Pen's eyes were crawling avidly over both of them. Ted Jones was frowning at the air. George Yannick was carving something on the top of his desk and smoking a cigarette-he looked like any busy carpenter. Most of the other; were looking out the windows at the cops directing traffic and conferring in desperate-looking little huddles. I could pick out Don Grace, good old

Tom Denver, and Jerry Kesserling, the traffic cop.

A bell went off suddenly with a loud bray, making all of us jump. It made the cops outside jump, too. A couple of them pulled their guns.

"Change-of-classes bell," Harmon said.

I looked at the wall clock. It was 9:50. At 9:05 I had been sitting in my seat by the window, watching the squirrel. Now the squirrel was gone, good old Tom Denver was gone, and Mrs. Underwood was really gone. I thought it over and decided I was gone, too.

Chapter 21

Three more state-police cars came, and also a number of citizens from town. The cops tried to shoo them away, with greater or lesser degrees of success. Mr. Frankel, owner and proprietor of Frankel's Jewelry Store & Camera Shop, drove up in his new Pontiac Firebird and jawed for quite a while with Jerry Kesserling. He pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose constantly as he talked. Jerry was trying to get rid of him, but Mr. Frankel wasn't having any of it. He was also Placerville's second selectman and a crony of Norman Jones, Ted's father.

"My mother got me a ring in his store," Sarah Pasterne said, looking at Ted from the corner of her eye. "It greened my finger the first day."

"My mother says he's a gyp," Tanis said.

"Hey!" Pig Pen gulped. "There's my mother!"

We all looked. Sure enough, there was Mrs. Dano talking with one of the state troopers, her slip hanging a quarter of an inch below the hem of her dress. She was one of those ladies who do fifty percent of their talking with their hands. They fluttered and whipped like flags, and it made me think of autumn Saturdays on the gridiron, somehow: holding . . . clipping . . . illegal tackle. I guess in this case you'd have to say it was illegal holding.

We all knew her by sight as well as by reputation; she headed up a lot of PTA functions and was a member in good standing of the Mothers Club. Go out to a baked-bean supper to benefit the class trip, or to the Sadie Hawkins dance in the gym, or to the senior outing, and you'd be apt to find Mrs. Dano at the door, ready with the old glad hand, grinning like there was no tomorrow, and collecting bits of information the way frogs catch flies.

Pig Pen shifted nervously in his seat, as if he might have to go to the bathroom.

"Hey, Pen, your mudda's callin'," Jack Goldman intoned from the back of the room.

"Let her call," Pig Pen muttered.

The Pen had an older sister, Lilly Dano, who was a senior when we were all

freshmen. She had a face that looked a lot like Pig Pen's, which made her nobody's candidate for Teen Queen. A hook-nosed junior named LaFollet St. Armand began squiring her about, and then knocked her up higher than a kite. LaFollet joined the Marines, where they presumably taught him the difference between his rifle and his gun-which was for shooting and which was for fun. Mrs. Dano appeared at no PTA functions for the next two months. Lilly was packed off to an aunt in Boxford, Massachusetts. Shortly after that, Mrs. Dano returned to the same old stand, grinning harder than ever. It's a small-town classic, friends.

"She must be really worried about you," Carol Granger said.

"Who cares?" Pig Pen asked indifferently. Sylvia Ragan smiled at him. Pig Pen blushed.

Nobody said anything for a while. We watched the townspeople mill around beyond the bright yellow crash barricades that were going up. I saw some other mums and dads among them. I didn't see Sandra's mother and father, and I didn't see big Joe McKennedy. Hey, I didn't really expect he'd show up, anyway. Circuses have never been our style.

A newsmobile from WGAN-TV pulled up. One of the guys got out, patting his process neatly into place, and jawed with a cop. The cop pointed across the road. The guy with the process went back to the newsmobile, and two more guys got out and started unloading camera equipment.

"Anybody here got a transistor radio?" I asked.

Three of them raised hands. Corky's was the biggest, a Sony twelve transistor that he carried in his briefcase. It got six bands, including TV, shortwave, and CB. He put it on his desk and turned it on. We were just in time for the ten-o'clock report:

"Topping the headlines, a Placerville High School senior, Charles Everett Decker . . . "

"Everett!" Somebody snickered.

"Shut up," Ted said curtly.

Pat Fitzgerald stuck out his tongue.

". . . apparently went berserk early this morning and is now holding twenty-four classmates hostage in a classroom of that high school. One person, Peter Vance, thirty-seven, a history teacher at Placerville, is known dead. Another teacher, Mrs. Jean Underwood, also thirty-seven, is feared dead. Decker has commandeered the intercom system and has communicated twice with school authorities. The list of hostages is as follows . . . "

He read down the class list as I had given it to Tom Denver. "I'm on the radio! " Nancy Caskin exclaimed when they reached her name. She blinked and smiled tentatively. Melvin Thomas whistled. Nancy colored and told him to shut up.

". . . and George Yannick. Frank Philbrick, head of the Maine State Police, has asked that all friends and family stay away from the scene. Decker is presumed dangerous, and Philbrick emphasized that nobody knows at this time what might set him off. 'We have to assume that the boy is still on a hair trigger,' Philbrick said."

"Want to pull my trigger?" I asked Sylvia.

"Is your safety on?" she asked right back, and the class roared. Anne Lasky laughed with her hands over her mouth, blushing a deep bright red. Ted Jones, our practicing party poop, scowled.

". . . Grace, Placerville's psychiatrist and guidance counselor, talked to Decker over the intercom system only minutes ago. Grace told reporters that Decker threatened to kill someone in the classroom if Grace did not leave the upstairs office immediately."

"Liar!" Grace Stanner said musically. Irma jumped a little.

"Who does he think he is?" Melvin asked angrily. "Does he think he can get away with that shit?"

". also said that he considers Decker to be a schizophrenic personality, possibly past the point of anything other than borderline rationality. Grace concluded his hurried remarks by saying: 'At this point, Charles Decker might conceivably do anything.' Police from the surrounding towns of . . . "

"Whatta crocka shit!" Sylvia blared. "I'm gonna tell those guys what really went down with that guy when we get outta here! I'm gonna-"

"Shut up and listen!" Dick Keene snapped at her.

". and Lewiston have been summoned to the scene. At this moment, according to Captain Philbrick, the situation is at an impasse. Decker has sworn to kill if tear gas is used, and with the lives of twenty-four children at stake . . . "

"*Children*," Pig Pen said suddenly. "Children this and children that. They stabbed you in the back, Charlie. Already. Children. Ha. Shit. What do they think is happening? I-"

"He's saying something about-" Corky began.

"Never mind. Turn it off," I said. "This sounds more interesting." I fixed the Pen with my best steely gaze. "What seems to be on yore mind, pal?"

Pig Pen jerked his thumb at Irma. "She thinks she's got it bad," he said. "Her. Heh." He laughed a sudden, erratic laugh. For no particular reason I could make out, he removed a pencil from his breast pocket and looked at it. It was a purple pencil.

"Be-Bop pencil," Pig Pen said. "Cheapest pencils on the face of the earth, that's what I think. Can't sharpen 'em at all. Lead breaks. Every September since I started first grade Ma comes home from the Mammoth Mart with two hundred Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box. And I use 'em, Jesus."

He snapped his purple pencil between his thumbs and stared at it. To tell the truth, I did think it looked like a pretty cheap pencil. I've always used the Eberhard Faber myself.

"Ma," Pig Pen said. "That's Ma for you. Two hundred Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box. You know what her big thing is? Besides all those shitty suppers where they give you a big plate of Hamburger Helper and a paper cup of orange Jell-O full of grated carrots? Huh? She enters contests. That's her hobby. Hundreds of contests. All the time. She subscribes to all the women's magazines and enters the sweepstakes. Why she likes

Rinso for all her dainty things in twenty-five words or less. My sister had a kitten once, and Ma wouldn't even let her keep it. "

"She the one who got pregnant?" Corky asked.

"Wouldn't even let her keep it," Pig Pen said. "Drowned it in the bathtub when no one would take it. Lilly begged her to at least take it to the vet so it could have gas, and Ma said four bucks for gas was too much to spend on a worthless kitten. "

"Oh, poor thing," Susan Brooks said.

"I swear to God, she did it right in the bathtub. All those goddamn pencils. Will she buy me a new shirt? Huh? Maybe for my birthday. I say, 'Ma, you should hear what the kids call me. Ma, for Lord's sake.' I don't even get an allowance, she says she needs it for postage so she can enter her contests. A new shirt for my birthday and a shitload of Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box to take back to school. I tried to get a paper route once, and she put a stop to that. She said there were women of loose virtue who laid in wait for young boys after their husbands went to work. "

"Oh, my Gawwd!" Sylvia bellowed.

"And contests. And PTA suppers. And chaperoning dances. Grabbing on to everybody. Sucking up to them and grinning."

He looked at me and smiled the oddest smile I had seen all day. And that was going some.

"You know what she said when Lilly had to go away? She said I'd have to sell my car. That old Dodge my uncle gave me when I got my driver's license. I said I wouldn't. I said Uncle Fred gave it to me and I was going to keep it. She said if I wouldn't sell it, she would. She'd signed all the papers, and legally it was hers. She said I wasn't going to get any girl pregnant in the back seat. Me. Get a girl pregnant in the back seat. That's what she said. "

He brandished a broken pencil half. The lead poked out of the wood like a black bone. "Me. Hah. The last date I had was for the eighth-grade class picnic. I told Ma I wouldn't sell the Dodge. She said I would. I ended up selling it. I knew I would. I can't fight her. She always knows what to say. You start giving her a reason why you can't sell your car, and she says: 'Then how come you stay in the bathroom so long?' Right off the wall. You're talking about the car, and she's talking about the bathroom. Like you're doing something dirty in there. She grinds you. " He stared out the window. Mrs. Dano was no longer in sight. "She grinds and grinds and grinds, and she always beats you. Be-Bop pencils that break every time you try to sharpen them. That's how she beats you. That's how she grinds you down. And she's so mean and stupid, she drowned the kitty, just a little kitty, and she's so stupid that you know everybody laughs at her behind her back. So what does that make me? Littler and stupider. After a while you feel just like a little kitty that crawled into a plastic box full of Be-Bop pencils and got brought home by mistake." The room was dead quiet. Pig Pen had center stage. I don't think he knew it. He looked grubby and pissed off, fists clenched around his broken pencil halves. Outside, a cop had driven a police cruiser onto the lawn. He parked it parallel to the school, and a few more cops ran down behind it, presumably to do secret things. They had riot guns in their hands. "I don't think I'd mind if she snuffed it," Pig Pen said, grinning a small,

horrified grin. "I wish I had your stick, Charlie. If I had your stick, I think I'd kill her myself. "

"You're crazy, too," Ted said worriedly. "God, you're all going crazy right along with him. "

"Don't be such a creep, Ted. " It was Carol Granger. In a way, it was surprising not to find her on Ted's side. I knew he had taken her out a few times before she started with her current steady, and bright establishment types usually stick together. Still, it had been she who had dropped him. To make a very clumsy analogy, I was beginning to suspect that Ted was to my classmates what Eisenhower must always have been to the dedicated liberals of the fifties-you had to like him, that style, that grin, that record, those good intentions, but there was something exasperating and a tiny bit slimy about him. You can see I'm fixated on Ted...

Why not? I'm still trying to figure him out. Sometimes it seems that everything that happened on that long morning is just something I imagined, or some half-baked writer's fantasy. But it *did* happen. And sometimes, now, it seems to me that Ted was at the center of it all, not me. It seems that Ted goaded them all into people they were not . . . or into the people they really were. All I know for sure is that Carol was looking at him defiantly, not like a demure valedictorian-to-be due to speak on the problems of the black race. She looked angry and a wee bit cruel.

When I think about the Eisenhower administration, I think about the U-2 incident. When I think about that funny morning, I think about the sweat patches that were slowly spreading under the arms of Ted's khaki shirt.

"When they drag him off, they won't find anything but nut cases," Ted was saying. He looked mistrustfully at Pig Pen, who was glaring sweatily at the halves of his Be-Bop pencil as if they were the only things left in the world. His neck was grimy, but what the hell. Nobody was talking about his neck.

"They grind you down, " he whispered. He threw the pencil halves on the floor. He looked at them, then looked up at me. His face was strange and grief-stunned. It made me uncomfortable. "They'll grind you down, too, Charlie. Wait and see if they don't. "

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. I was holding on to the pistol very tightly. Without thinking about it much, I took out the box of shells and put three of them in, filling the magazine again. The handgrip was sweaty. I suddenly realized I had been holding it by the barrel, pointing it at myself, not looking at them. No one had made a break. Ted was sort of hunched over his desk, hands gripping the edge, but he hadn't moved, except in his head. I suddenly thought that touching his skin would be like touching an alligator handbag. I wondered if Carol had ever kissed him, touched him. Probably had. The thought made me want to puke.

Susan Brooks suddenly burst into tears.

Nobody looked at her. I looked at them, and they looked at me. I had been holding the pistol by the barrel. They knew it. They had seen it.

I moved my feet, and one of them kicked Mrs. Underwood. I looked down at her. She had been wearing a casual tartan coat over a brown cashmere sweater. She was beginning

to stiffen. Her skin probably felt like an alligator handbag. Rigor, you know. I had left a footmark on her sweater at some point in time. For some reason, that made me think of a picture I had once seen of Ernest Hemingway, standing with one foot on a dead lion and a rifle in his hand and half a dozen grinning black bearers in the background. I suddenly needed to scream. I had taken her life, I had snuffed her, put a bullet in her head and spilled out algebra.

Susan Brooks had put her head down on her desk, the way they used to make us do in kindergarten when it was nap time. She was wearing a powder-blue scarf in her hair. It looked very pretty. My stomach hurt.

"DECKER! "

I cried out and jerked the pistol around toward the windows. It was a state trooper with a battery-powered bullhorn. Up on the hill, the newsmen were grinding away with their cameras. Just grinding away-Pig Pen hadn't been so far wrong, at that.

"COME OUT, DECKER, WITH YOUR HANDS UP!"

"Let me be," I said.

My hands had begun to tremble. My stomach really did hurt. I've always had a lousy stomach. Sometimes I'd get the dry heaves before I went to school in the morning, or when I was taking a girl out for the first time. Once, Joe and I took a couple of girls down to Harrison State Park. It was July, warm and very beautiful. The sky had a dim, very high haze. The girl I was with was named Annmarie. She spelled it all one name. She was very pretty. She wore dark green corduroy shorts and a silk pullover blouse. She had a beach bag. We were going down Route 1 toward Bath, the radio on and playing good rock 'n' roll. Brian Wilson, I remember that, Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. And Joe was driving his old blue Mercury-he used to call it *De Blue Frawwwg* and then grin his Joe McKennedy grin. All the vents were open. I got sick to my stomach. It was very bad. Joe was talking to his girl. They were talking about surfing, which was certainly compatible with the Beach Boys on the radio. She was a fine-looking girl. Her name was Rosalynn. She was Annmarie's sister. I opened my mouth to say I felt sick, and puked all over the floor. Some of it got on Annmarie's leg, and the look on her face, you couldn't imagine it. Or maybe you could. They all tried to make light of it, brush it off. I let all my guys puke on me on the first date, ha-ha. I couldn't go in swimming that day. My stomach felt too bad. Annmarie sat on the blanket next to me most of the time and got a burn. The girls had packed a picnic lunch. I drank a soda, but I couldn't eat any of the sandwiches. I was thinking about Joe's blue Mere, standing in the sun all day, and how it was going to smell going home. The late Lenny Bruce once said you can't get snot off a suede jacket, and to that I would add one of the other great home truths: you can't get the smell of vomit out of a blue Mercury's upholstery. It's there for weeks, for months, maybe years. And it smelled just about like I thought it would. Everybody just pretended it wasn't there. But it was.

"COME ON OUT, DECKER. WE'RE THROUGH FOOLING AROUND WITH YOU!"

"Stop it! Shut up!" Of course they couldn't hear me. They didn't want to. This was their game.

"Don't like it so well when you can't talk back, do you?" Ted Jones said. "When you can't play any of your smart games."

"Leave me alone." I sounded suspiciously like I was whining.

"They'll wearya out," Pig Pen said. It was the voice of doom. I tried to think about the squirrel, and about the way the lawn grew right up to the building, no fucking around. I couldn't do it. My mind was jackstraws in the wind. The beach that day had been bright and hot. Everybody had a transistor radio, all of them tuned to different stations. Joe and Rosalynn had body-surfed in glass-green waves.

"YOU'VE GOT FIVE MINUTES, DECKER!"

"Go on out," Ted urged. He was gripping the edge of his desk again. "Go out while you've got a chance."

Sylvia whirled on him. "What have you got to be? Some kind of hero? Why? Why? Shit, that's all you'll be, Ted Jones. I'll tell them-"

"Don't tell me what-"

". . . wearya down, Charlie, grind ya, wait and-"

"DECKER!"

"Go on out, Charlie . . . "

". . . please, can't you see you're upsetting him-"

"DECKER! "

". . . PTA suppers and all that lousy . . . "

". . . cracking up if you'd just let him DECKER! alone grindya wearya down you go Charlie you can't DON'T WANT TO BE FORCED TO SHOOT until you're ready leave him be Ted if you know what all of you shut up good for you COMEOUT . . . "

I swung the pistol up at the windows, holding it in both hands, and pulled the trigger four times. The reports slammed around the room like bowling balls. Window glass blew out in great crackling fistfuls. The troopers dived down out of sight. The cameramen hit the gravel. The clot of spectators broke and ran in all directions. Broken glass shone and twinkled on the green grass outside like diamonds on show-window velvet, brighter gems than any in Mr. Frankel's store.

There was no answering fire. They were bluffing. I knew that; it was my stomach, my goddamn stomach. What else could they do but bluff?

Ted Jones was not bluffing. He was halfway to the desk before I could bring the pistol around on him. He froze, and I knew he thought I was going to shoot him. He was looking right past me into darkness.

"Sit down," I said.

He didn't move. Every muscle seemed paralyzed.

"Sit down. "

He began to tremble. It seemed to begin in his legs and spread up his trunk and arms

and neck. It reached his mouth, which began to gibber silently. It climbed to his right cheek, which began to twitch. His eyes stayed steady. I have to give him that, and with admiration. One of the few things my father says when he's had a few that I agree with is that kids don't have much balls in this generation. Some of them are trying to start the revolution by bombing U.S. government washrooms, but none of them are throwing Molotov cocktails at the Pentagon. But Ted's eyes, even full of darkness, stayed steady.

"Sit down," I repeated.

He went and sat down.

Nobody in the room had cried out. Several of them had put their hands over their ears. Now they took them away carefully, sampling the noise level of the air, testing it. I looked for my stomach. It was there. I was in control again.

The man with the bullhorn was shouting, but this time he wasn't shouting at me. He was telling the people who had been watching from across the road to get out of the area and be snappy about it. They were doing it. Many of them ran hunched over, like Richard Widmark in a World War II epic.

A quiet little breeze riffled in through the two broken windows. It caught a paper on Harmon Jackson's desk and fluttered it into the aisle. He leaned over and picked it up.

Sandra Cross said, "Tell something else, Charlie."

I felt a weird smile stretch my lips. I wanted to sing the chorus from that folk song, the one about beautiful, beautiful blue eyes, but I couldn't remember the words and probably wouldn't have dared, anyway. I sing like a duck. So I only looked at her and smiled my weird smile. She blushed a little but didn't drop her eyes. I thought of her married to some slob with five two-button suits and fancy pastel toilet paper in the bathroom. It hurt me with its inevitability. They all find out sooner or later how unchic it is to pop your buttons at the Sadie Hawkins dance, or to crawl into the trunk so you can get into the drive-in for free. They stop eating pizza and plugging dimes into the juke down at Fat Sammy's. They stop kissing boys in the blueberry patch. And they always seem to end up looking like the Barbie doll cutouts in *Jack and Jill* magazine. Fold in at Slot A, Slot B, and Slot C. Watch Her Grow Old Before Your Very Eyes. For a second I thought I might actually turn on the waterworks, but I avoided that indignity by wondering if she was wearing white panties today.

It was 10:20. I said:

Chapter 22

I was twelve when Mom got me the corduroy suit. By that time Dad had pretty much given up on me and I was my mother's responsibility. I wore the suit to church on Sundays and to Bible meetings on Thursday nights. With my choice of three snap-on bow ties. Rooty-toot.

But I hadn't expected her to try and make me wear it to that goddamn birthday party. I tried everything. I reasoned with her. I threatened not to go. I even tried a lie-told her the party was off because Carol had the chickenpox. One call to Carol's mother set that straight. Nothing worked. Mom let me run pretty much as I pleased most of the time, but when she got an idea solid in her mind, you were stuck with it. Listen to this: for Christmas one year, my dad's brother gave her this weird jigsaw puzzle. I think Uncle Tom was in collusion with my dad on that one. She did a lot of jigsaws-I helped-and they both thought it was the biggest waste of time on earth. So Tom sent her a five-hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle that had a single blueberry down in the lower-right-hand corner. The rest of the puzzle was solid white, no shades. My father laughed his ass off. "Let's see you do that one, Mother," he said. He always called her "Mother" when he felt a good one had been put over on her, and it never ceased to irritate her. She sat down on Christmas afternoon and spread the puzzle out on her puzzle table in her bedroom-by this time they each had their own. There were TV dinners and pickup lunches for Dad and I on December twenty-sixth and the twenty-seventh, but on the morning of the twenty-eighth, the puzzle was done. She took a Polaroid picture of it to send to Uncle Tom, who lives in Wisconsin. Then she took the puzzle apart and put it away in the attic. That was two years ago, and so far as I know, it's still there. But she did it. My mother is a humorous, literate, pleasant person. She is kind to animals and accordion-playing mendicants. But you didn't cross her, or she could dig in her heels . . . usually somewhere in the groin area.

I was crossing her. I was, in fact, starting to run through my arguments for the fourth time that day, but time had just about tun out. The bow tie was clutching my collar like a pink spider with hidden steel legs, the coat was too tight, and she'd even made me put on my square-toed shoes, which were my Sunday best. My father wasn't there, he was down at Gogan's sopping up a few with his good buddies, but if he'd been around he would have said I looked "squared away." I didn't feel like an asshole.

"Listen, Mother-'

"I don't want to hear any more about it, Charlie. " I didn't want to hear any more about it either, but since I was the one running for the Shithead of the Year Award, and not her, I felt obliged to give it the old school grunt.

"All I'm trying to tell you is that nobody is going to be wearing a suit to that party, Mom. I called up Joe McKennedy this morning, and he said he was just going to wear-"

"Just shut up about it," she said, very soft, and I did. When my mother says "shut up," she's really mad. She didn't learn "shut up" reading *The Guardian*. "Shut up, or you won't be going anywhere."

But I knew what that meant. "Not going anywhere" would apply to a lot more than Carol Granger's party. It would probably mean movies, the Harlow rec center, and swimming classes for the next month. Mom is quiet, but she carries a grudge when she doesn't get her way. I remembered the jigsaw puzzle, which had borne the whimsical title "Last Berry in the Patch." That puzzle had crossed her, and it hadn't been out of the attic for the last two years. And if you have to know, and maybe some of you do anyway, I had a little crush on Carol. I'd bought her a snot-rag with her initials on it and wrapped it myself. Mom offered, but I said no. It wasn't any lousy fifteen-cent hankie, either. Those

babies were going in the Lewiston J. C. Penney's for fifty-nine cents, and it had lace all the way around the edge.

"Okay." I grumped at her. "Okay, okay, okay."

"And don't you wise-mouth me, Charlie Decker," she said grimly. "Your father is quite capable of thrashing you yet."

"Don't I know it," I said. "Every time we're in the same room together, he reminds me."

"Charlie . . . "

"I'm on my way," I said quickly, heading it off. "Hang in there, Mom."

"Don't get dirty!" she called after me as I went out the door. "Don't spill any ice cream on your pants! Remember to say thank you when you leave! Say hi to Mrs. Granger!"

I didn't say anything to any of these orders, feeling that to acknowledge might be to encourage. I just jammed the hand that wasn't carrying the package deeper into my pocket and hunched my head.

"Be a gentleman!"

Gawd.

"And remember not to start eating until Carol does!"

Dear Gawd.

I hurried to get out of her sight before she decided to run after me and check to see if I'd peed myself.

But it wasn't a day made to feel bad on. The sky was blue and the sun was just warm enough, and there was a little breeze to chase along at your heels. It was summer vacation, and Carol might even give me a tumble. Of course, I didn't know just what I'd do if Carol *did* give me a tumble-maybe let her tide double on my Schwinn-but I could cross that bridge when I came to it. Perhaps I was even overestimating the negative sex appeal of the corduroy suit. If Carol had a crush on Myron Floren, she was going to love me.

Then I saw Joe and started to feel stupid all over again. He was wearing ragged white Levi's and a T-shirt. I could see him looking me up and down, and I winced. The jacket had little brass buttons with a heralds embossed on them. Rooty-toot.

"Great suit," he said. "You look just like that guy on the Lawrence Belch show. The one with the accordion."

"Myron Floren," I said. "Riiight."

He offered me a stick of gum, and I skinned it.

"My mother's idea." I stuck the gum into my mouth. Black Jack gum. There is no finer. I rolled it across my tongue and chomped. I was feeling better again. Joe was a friend, the only good one I ever had. He never seemed afraid of me, or revolted by my weird mannerisms (when a good idea strikes me, for instance, I have a tendency to walk

around with my face screwed up in the most godawful grimaces without even being aware of it-didn't Grace have a field day with that one). I had Joe beat in the brains department, and he had me in the making-friends department. Most kids don't give a hoot in hell for brains; they go a penny a pound, and the kid with the high I.Q. who can't play baseball or at least come in third in the local circle jerk is everybody's fifth wheel. But Joe liked my brains. He never said, but I know he did. And because everyone liked Joe, they had to at least tolerate me. I won't say I worshiped Joe McKennedy, but it was a close thing. He was my mojo.

So there we were, walking along and chewing our Black Jack, when a hand came down on my shoulder like a firecracker. I almost choked on my gum. I stumbled, turned around, and there was Dicky Cable.

Dicky was a squat kid who always somehow reminded me of a lawn mower, a big Briggs & Stratton self-propelling model with the choke stuck open. He had a big square grin, and it was chock-full of big white square teeth that fitted together on the top and bottom like the teeth in two meshing cogs. His teeth seemed to gnash and fume between his lips like revolving mower blades that are moving so fast they seem to stand still. He looked like he ate patrol boys for supper. For all I knew, he did.

"Son of a *gun*, you look slick!" He winked elaborately at Joe. "Son of a *gun*, you just look slicker than owl *shit*!" *Whack!* on the back again. I felt very small. About three inches, I'd say. I was scared of him-I think I had a dim idea that I might have to fight him or crawfish before the day was over, and that I would probably crawfish.

"Don't break my back, okay?" I said. But he wouldn't leave it alone. He just kept riding and riding until we got to Carol's house. I knew the worst the minute we went through the door. Nobody was dressed up. Carol was there in the middle of the room, and she looked really beautiful.

It hurt. She looked beautiful and casual, a shadow glass of sophistication over the just-beginning adolescent. She probably still cried and threw tantrums and locked herself in the bathroom, probably still listened to Beatles records and had a picture of David Cassidy, who was big that year, tucked into the corner of her vanity mirror, but none of that showed. And the fact that it didn't show hurt me and made me feel dwarfed. She had a rust-colored scarf tied into her hair. She looked fifteen or sixteen, already filling out in front. She was wearing a brown dress. She was laughing with a bunch of kids and gesturing with her hands.

Dicky and Joe went on over and gave her their presents, and she laughed and nodded and thank-you'd, and my God but she looked nice.

I decided to leave. I didn't want her to see me in my bow tie and my corduroy suit with the little brass buttons. I didn't want to see her talking with Dicky Cable, who looked like a human Lawnboy to me but who seemed to look pretty good to her. I figured I could slip out before anyone got a really good look at me. Like Lamont Cranston, I would just cloud a few minds and then bug out. I had a buck in my pocket from weeding Mrs. Katzentz's flower garden the day before, and I could go to the movies in Brunswick if I could hook a ride, and work up a good head of self-pity sitting there in the dark.

But before I could even find the doorknob, Mrs. Granger spotted me.

It wasn't my day. Imagine a pleated skirt and one of those see-through chiffon blouses on a Sherman tank. A Sherman tank with two gun turrets. Her hair looked like a hurricane, one glump going one way and one glump the other. The two glumps were being held together somehow by a big sateen bow that was poison yellow in color.

"Charlie *Decker!*" she squealed, and spread out arms that looked like loaves of bread. *Big* loaves. I almost chickened and ran for it. She was an avalanche getting ready to happen. She was every Japanese horror monster ever made, all rolled into one, Ghidra, Mothra, Godzilla, Rodan, and Tukkan the Terrible trundling across the Granger living room. But that wasn't the bad part. The bad part was everybody looking at me-you know what I'm talking about.

She gave me a slobbery kiss on the cheek and crowed, "Well, don't you look *nice?*" And for one horribly certain second I expected her to add: "Slicker than *owl shit!*"

Well, I'm not going to torture either you or myself with a blow-by-blow. Where would be the sense? You've got the picture. Three hours of unadulterated hell. Dicky was right there with a "Well, don't you look *nice?*" at every opportunity. A couple of other kids happened over to ask me who died.

Joe was the only one who stuck by me, but even that embarrassed me a little. I could see him telling kids to lay off, and I didn't like it very well. It made me feel like the village idiot.

I think the only one who didn't notice me at all was Carol. It would have bothered me if she had come over and asked me to dance when they put on the records, but it bothered me worse that she didn't. I couldn't dance, but it's the thought that counts.

So I stood around while the Beatles sang "The Ballad of John and Yoko" and "Let It Be," while the Adreizi Brothers sang "We Gotta Get It On Again," while Bobby Sherman sang "Hey, Mr. Sun" in his superbly tuneless style. I was giving my best imitation of a flowerpot. The party, meanwhile, went on. Did it ever. It seemed like it was going to go on eternally, the years flashing by outside like leaves in the wind, cars turning into clumps of rust, houses decaying, parents turning into dust, nations rising and falling. I had a feeling that we would still be there when Gabriel flew overhead, clutching the Judgment trump in one hand and a party favor in the other. There was ice cream, there was a big cake that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CAROL in green and red icing, there was more dancing, and a couple of kids wanted to play spin the bottle, but Mrs. Granger laughed a big jolly laugh and said no, haha, no no no. Oh, no.

Finally Carol clapped her hands and said we were all going outside and play follow the leader, the game which asks the burning question: Are you ready for tomorrow's society?

Everybody spilled outside. I could hear them running around and having a good time, or whatever passes for a good time when you're part of a mass puberty cramp. I lingered behind for a minute, half-thinking Carol would stop for a second, but she hurried right by. I went out and stood on the porch watching. Joe was there too, sitting with one leg hooked over the porch railing, and we both watched. Somehow Joe always seems to be where I end up, with one leg hooked over something, watching.

"She's stuck up," he said finally.

"Nah. She's just busy. Lot of people. You know.'

"Shit," Joe said.

We were quiet for a minute. Someone yelled, "Hey, Joe!"

"You'll get crap all over that thing if you play, " Joe said. "Your mother'll have a kitten."

"She'll have two," I said.

"Come on, Joe!" This time it was Carol. She had changed into denims, probably designed by Edith Head, and she looked flushed and pretty. Joe looked at me. He wanted to look out for me, and suddenly I felt more terrified than at any time since I woke up on that hunting trip up north. After a while, being somebody's responsibility makes them hate you, and I was scared that Joe might hate me someday. I didn't know all that then, not at twelve, but I sensed some of it.

"Go on," I said.

"You sure you don't want to-?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I got to get home anyway."

I watched him go, hurt a little that he hadn't offered to come with me, but relieved in a way. Then I started across the lawn toward the street.

Dicky noticed me. "You on your way, pretty boy?"

I should have said something clever like: Yeah. Give my regards to Broadway. Instead I told him to shut up.

He jackrabbited in front of me as if he had been expecting it, that big lawnmower grin covering the entire lower half of his face. He smelled green and tough, like vines in the jungle. "What was that, pretty boy?"

All of it lumped together, and I felt ugly. Really ugly. I could have spit at Hitler, that's how ugly I felt. "I said shut up. Get out of my way."

[In the classroom, Carol Granger put her hands over her eyes . . . but she didn't tell me to stop. I respected her for that.]

Everyone was staring, but no one was saying anything. Mrs. Granger was in the house, singing "Swanee" at the top of her voice.

"Maybe you think you can shut me up." He ran a hand through his oiled hair.

I shoved him aside. It was like being outside myself. It was the first time I ever felt that way. Someone else, some other me, was in the driver's seat. I was along for the ride, and that was all.

He swung at me; his fist looped down and hit me on the shoulder. It just about paralyzed the big muscle in my arm. Jesus, did that hurt. It was like getting hit with an iceball.

I grabbed him, because I never could box, and shoved him backward across the lawn, that big grin steaming and fuming at me. He dug his heels in and curled an arm around

my neck, as if about to kiss me. His other fist started hammering at my back, but it was like someone knocking on a door long ago and far away. We tripped over a pink lawn flamingo and whumped to the ground.

He was strong, but I was desperate. All of a sudden, beating up Dicky Cable was my mission in life. It was what I had been put on earth for. I remembered the Bible story about Jacob wrestling with the angel, and I giggled crazily into Dicky's face. I was on top, and fighting to stay there.

But all at once he slid away from me-he was awful slippery-and he smashed me across the neck with one arm.

I let out a little *cry* and went over on my belly. He was astride my back in no time. I tried to turn, but I couldn't.

I couldn't. He was going to beat me because I couldn't. It was all senseless and horrible. I wondered where Carol was. Watching, probably. They were all watching. I felt my corduroy coat ripping out under the arms, the buttons with the heralds embossed on them ripping off one by one on the tough loam. But I couldn't turn over.

He was laughing. He grabbed my head and slammed it into the ground like a whiffle ball. "Hey, pretty boy!" Slam. Interior stars and the taste of grass in my mouth. Now I was the lawnmower. "Hey, pretty boy, don't you look *nice*?" He picked my head up by the hair and slammed it down again. I started to cry.

"Don't you just look dan-dan-dandy!" Dicky Cable cried merrily, and hammered my head into the ground again- fore! "Don't you just look *woooonderfur*.,

Then he was off me, because Joe had dragged him off. "That's enough, goddammit!" he was shouting. "Don't you know that's enough?"

I got up, still crying. There was dirt in my hair. My head didn't hurt enough for me to still be crying, but there it was. I couldn't stop. They were all staring at me with that funny hangdog look kids get when they've gone too far, and I could see they didn't want to look at me and see me crying. They looked at their feet to make sure they were still there. They glanced around at the chain-link fence to make sure no one was stealing it. A few of them glanced over at the swimming pool in the yard next door, just in case someone might be drowning and in need of a quick rescue.

Carol was standing there, and she started to take a step forward. Then she looked around to see if anyone else was stepping forward, and no one else was. Dicky Cable was combing his hair. There was no dirt in it. Carol shuffled her feet. The wind made ripples on her blouse.

Mrs. Granger had stopped singing "Swanee." She was on the porch, her mouth wide open.

Joe came up and put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Charlie," he said. "What do you say we go now, huh?"

I tried to shove him away and only made myself fall down. "Leave me alone!" I shouted at him. My voice was hoarse and raw. I was sobbing more than yelling. There was only one button left on the corduroy jacket, and it was hanging by a string. The pants

were all juiced up with grass stains. I started to crawl around on the matted earth, still crying, picking up buttons. My face was hot.

Dicky was humming some spry ditty and looking as if he might like to comb his hair again. Looking back, I have to admire him for it. At least he didn't put on a crocodile face about the whole thing.

Mrs. Granger came waddling toward me. "Charlie . . . Charlie, *dear-*"

"Shut up, fat old *bag!*" I screamed. I couldn't see anything. It was all blurred in my eyes, and all the faces seemed to be crowding in on me. All the hands seemed to have claws. I couldn't see to pick up any more buttons. "Fat old *bag!*"

Then I ran away.

I stopped behind an empty house down on Willow Street and just sat there until all the tears dried up. There was dried snot underneath my nose. I spat on my handkerchief and wiped it off. I blew my nose. An alley cat came by, and I tried to pet it. The cat shied from my hand. I knew exactly how he felt.

The suit was pretty well shot, but I didn't care about that. I didn't even care about my mother, although she would probably call Dicky Cable's mother and complain in her cultured voice. But my father. I could see him sitting, looking, carefully poker-faced, saying: *How does the other guy look?*

And my lie.

I sat down for the best part of an hour, planning to go down to the highway and stick out my thumb, hook a ride out of town, and never come back.

But in the end I went home.

Chapter 23

Outside, a regular cop convention was shaping up. Blue trooper cars, white cruisers from the Lewiston P.D., a black-and-white from Brunswick, two more from Auburn. The police responsible for this automotive cornucopia ran hither and yon, ducked over low. More newsmen showed up. They poked cameras equipped with cobra-like telephoto lenses over the hoods of their vehicles. Sawhorses had been set up on the road above and below the school, along with double rows of those sooty little kerosene pots-to me those things always look like the bombs of some cartoon anarchist. The DPW people had put up a DETOUR sign. I guess they didn't have anything more appropriate in stock-slow! MADMAN AT WORK, for instance. Don Grace and good old Tom were hobnobbing with a huge, blocky man in a state police uniform. Don seemed almost angry. The big blocky man was listening, but shaking his head. I took him to be Captain Frank Philbrick of the Maine State Police. I wondered if he knew I had a clear shot at him.

Carol Granger spoke up in a trembling voice. The shame on her face was alarming. I hadn't told that story to shame her. "I was just a kid, Charlie." "I know that," I said, and

smiled. "You were awful pretty that day. You sure didn't look like a kid."

"I had kind of a crush on Dicky Cable, too. "

"After the patty and all?"

She looked even more ashamed. "Worse than ever. I went with him to the eighth-grade picnic. He seemed . . . oh, daring, I guess. Wild. At the picnic he . . . you know, he got fresh, and I let him, a little. But that was the only time I went anyplace with him. I don't even know where he is now."

"Placerville Cemetery," Dick Keene said flatly.

It gave me a nasty start. It was as if I had just seen the ghost of Mrs. Underwood. I could still have pointed to the places where Dicky had pounded on me. The idea that he was dead made for a strange, almost dreamy terror in my mind-and I saw a reflection of what I was feeling on Carol's face. *He got fresh, and I let him, a little*, she had said. What, exactly, did that mean to a bright college-bound girl like Carol? Maybe he had kissed her. Maybe he had even gotten her out into the puckerbrush and mapped the virgin territory of her burgeoning chest. At the eighth grade picnic, God save us all. He had been daring and wild.

"What happened to him?" Don Lordi asked.

Dick spoke slowly. "He got hit by a car. That was really funny. Not ha-ha, you know, but peculiar. He got his driver's license just last October, and he used to drive like a fool. Like a crazy man. I guess he wanted everybody to know he had, you know, balls. It got so that no one would ride with him, hardly. He had this 1966 Pontiac, did all the body work himself. Painted her bottle green, with the ace of spades on the passenger side."

"Sure, I used to see that around," Melvin said. "Over by the Harlow Rec."

"Put in a Hearst four-shifter all by himself," Dick said. "Four-barrel carb, overhead cam, fuel injection. She purred. Ninety in second gear. I was with him one night when he went up the Stackpole Road in Harlow at ninety-five. We go around Brissett's Bend and we start to slide. I hit the floor. You're right, Charlie. He looked weird when he was smiling. I dunno if he looked exactly like a lawnmower, but he sure looked weird. He just kept grinning and grinning all the time we were sliding. And he goes . . . like, to himself he goes, 'I can hold 'er, I can hold 'er,' over and over again. And he did, I made him stop, and I walked home. My legs were all rubber. A couple of months later he got hit by a delivery truck up in Lewiston while he was crossing Lisbon Street. Randy Milliken was with him, and Randy said he wasn't even drunk or stoned. It was the truck driver's fault entirely. He went to jail for ninety days. But Dicky was dead. Funny."

Carol looked sick and white. I was afraid she might faint, and so, to take her mind somewhere else, I said, "Was your mother mad at me, Carol?"

"Huh?" She looked around in that funny, startled way she had.

"I called her a bag. A fat old bag, I think. "

"Oh." She wrinkled her nose and then smiled, gratefully, I think, picking up on the gambit. "She was. She sure was. She thought that fight was all your fault. "

"Your mother and my mother used to both be in that club, didn't they?"

"Books and Bridge? Yeah." Her legs were still uncrossed, and now her knees were apart a little. She laughed. "I'll tell you the truth, Charlie. I never really cared for your mother, even though I only saw her a couple of times to say hi to. My mother was always talking about how dreadfully *intelligent* Mrs. Decker was, what a very fine *grasp* she had on the novels of Henry James, stuff like that. And what a fine little *gentleman* you were."

"Slicker than owl shit," I agreed gravely. "You know, I used to get the same stuff about you. "

"You did?"

"Sure." An idea suddenly rose up and smacked me on the nose. How could I have possibly missed it so long, an old surmiser like me? I laughed with sudden sour delight. "And I bet I know why she was so deternuned I was going to wear my suit. It's called 'Matchmaking,' or 'Wouldn't They Make a Lovely Couple?' or, 'Think of the Intelligent Offspring.' Played by all the best families, Carol. Will you marry me?"

Carol looked at me with her mouth open. "They were . . ." She couldn't seem to finish it.

"That's what I think."

She smiled; a little giggle escaped her. Then she laughed right out loud. It seemed a little disrespectful of the dead, but I let it pass. Although, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Underwood was never far from my mind. After all, I was almost standing on her.

"That big guy's coming," Billy Sawyer said.

Sure enough, Frank Philbrick was striding toward the school, looking neither right nor left. I hoped the news photographers were getting his good side; who knew, he might want to use some of the pix on this year's Xmas cards. He walked through the main door. Down the hall, as if in another world, I could hear his vague steps pause and then go up to the office. It occurred to me in a strange sort of way that he seemed real only inside. Everything beyond the windows was television. They were the show, not me. My classmates felt the same way. It was on their faces.

Silence.

Chink. The intercom.

"Decker?"

"Yes, sir?" I said.

He was a heavy breather. You could hear him puffing and blowing into the mike up there like some large and sweaty animal. I don't like that, never have. My father is like that on the telephone. A lot of heavy breathing in your ear, so you can almost smell the scotch and Pall Malls on his breath. It always seems unsanitary and somehow homosexual.

"This is a very funny situation you've put us all in, Decker."

"I guess it is, sir."

"We don't particularly like the idea of shooting you."

"No, sir, neither do I. I wouldn't advise you to try."

Heavy breathing. "Okay, let's get it out of the henhouse and see what we got in the sack. What's your price?"

"Price?" I said. "Price?" For one loony moment I had the impression he had taken me for an interesting piece of talking furniture—a Morns chair, maybe, equipped to huckster the prospective buyer with all sorts of pertinent info. At first the idea struck me funny. Then it made me mad.

"For letting them go. What do you want? Air time? You got it. Some sort of statement to the papers? You got that." *Snort-snort-snore*. Likewise, puff-puff-puff. "But let's do it and get it done before this thing turns into a hairball. But you got to tell us what you want."

"You," I said.

The breath stopped. Then it started again, puffing and blowing. It was starting to really get on my nerves. "You'll have to explain that," he said.

"Certainly, sir," I said. "We can make a deal. Would you like to make a deal? Is that what you were saying?"

No answer. Puff, snort. Philbrick was on the six-o'clock news every Memorial Day and Labor Day, reading a please-drive-safely message off the teleprompter with a certain lumbering ineptitude that was fascinating and almost endearing. I had felt there was something familiar about him, something intimate that smacked of *deja vu*. Now I could place it. The breathing. Even on TV he sounded like a bull getting ready to mount Farmer Brown's cow in the back forty.

"What's your deal?"

"Tell me something first," I said. "Is there anybody out there who thinks I might just decide to see how many people I can plug down here? Like Don Grace, for instance?"

"That piece of shit," Sylvia said, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Who said that?" Philbrick barked.

Sylvia went white.

"Me," I said. "I have certain transsexual tendencies too, sir." I didn't figure he would know what that meant and would be too wary to ask. "Could you answer my question?"

"Some people think you might go the rest of the way out of your gourd, yes," he answered weightily. Somebody at the back of the room tittered. I don't think the intercom picked it up.

"Okay, then," I said. "The deal is this. You be the hero. Come down here. Unarmed. Come inside with your hands on your head. I'll let everybody go. Then I'll blow your fucking head off. Sir. How's that for a deal? You buy it?"

Puff, snort, blow. "You got a dirty mouth, fella. There are girls down there. Young girls."

Irma Bates looked around, startled, as if someone had just called her.

"The deal," I said. "The deal."

"No," Philbrick said. "You'd shoot me and hold on to the hostages." Puff, *snort*. "But I'll come down. Maybe we can figure something out."

"Fella," I said patiently, "if you sign off and I don't see you going out the same door you came in within fifteen seconds, someone in here is just going to swirl down the spout. "

Nobody looked particularly worried at the thought of just swirling down the spout.

Puff, puff. "Your chances of getting out of this alive are getting slimmer."

"Frank, my man, none of us get out of it alive. Even my old man knows that. "

"Will you come out?"

"No. "

"If that's how you feel." He didn't seem upset. "There's a boy named Jones down there. I want to speak with him."

It seemed okay. "You're on, Ted," I told him. "Your big chance, boy. Don't blow it. Folks, this kid is going to dance his balls off before your very eyes."

Ted was looking earnestly at the black grating of the intercom. "This is Ted Jones, sir. " On him, "sir" sounded good.

"Is everyone down there still all right, Jones?"

"Yes, sir. "

"How do you judge Decker's stability?"

"I think he's apt to do anything, sir," he said, looking directly at me. There was a savage leer in his eyes. Carol looked suddenly angry. She opened her mouth as if to refute, and then, perhaps remembering her upcoming responsibilities as valedictorian and Leading Lamp of the Western World, she closed her mouth with a snap.

"Thank you, Mr. Jones."

Ted looked absurdly pleased at being called mister.

"Decker?"

"Right here."

Snort, snort. "Be seeing you."

"I better see you," I said. "Fifteen seconds." Then, as an afterthought: "Philbrick?"

"Yeah?"

"You've got a shitty habit, you know it? I've noticed it on all those TV drive-safely pitches that you do. You breathe in people's ears. You sound like a stallion in heat, Philbrick. That's a shitty habit. You also sound like you're reading off a teleprompter, even when you're not. You ought to take care of stuff like that. You might save a life."

Philbrick puffed and snorted thoughtfully.

"Screw, buddy," he said, and the intercom clicked off.

Exactly twelve seconds later he came out the front door, striding stolidly along. When he got to the cars that had been driven onto the lawn, there was another conference. Philbrick gestured a lot.

Nobody said anything. Pat Fitzgerald was chewing a fingernail thoughtfully. Pig Pen had taken out another pencil and was studying it. And Sandra Cross was looking at me steadily. There seemed to be a kind of mist between us that made her glow.

"What about sex?" Carol said suddenly, and when everyone looked at her, she colored.

"Male," Melvin said, and a couple of the jocks in the back of the room haw-hawed.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Carol looked very much as if she wished her mouth had been stitched closed. "I thought when someone started to act . . . well . . . you know, strangely . . ." She stopped in confusion, but Susan Brooks sprang to the ramparts.

"That's right," she said. "And you all ought to stop grinning. Everyone thinks sex is so dirty. That's half what's the matter with all of us. We worry about it." She looked protectively at Carol.

"That's what I meant," Carol said. "Are you . . . well, did you have some bad experience?"

"Nothing since that time I went to bed with Mom," I said blandly.

An expression of utter shock struck her face, and then she saw I was joking. Pig Pen snickered dolefully and went on looking at his pencil.

"No, really," she said.

"Well," I said, frowning. "I'll tell about my sex life if you'll tell about yours."

"Oh . . ." She looked shocked again, but in a pleasant way.

Gracie Stanner laughed. "Cough up, Carol." I had always gotten a murky impression that there was no love lost between those two girls, but now Grace seemed genuinely to be joking-as if some understood but never-mentioned inequality had been erased.

"Ray, 'ray," Corky Herald said, grinning.

Carol was blushing furiously. "I'm sorry I asked."

"Go on," Don Lordi said. "It won't hurt."

"Everybody would tell," Carol said. "I know the way bo . . . the way people talk around. "

"Secrets," Mike Gavin whispered hoarsely, "give me more secrets." Everybody laughed, but it was getting to be no laughing matter.

"You're not being fair," Susan Brooks said.

"That's right," I said. "Let's drop it."

"Oh . . . never mind," Carol said. "I'll talk. I'll tell you something."

It was my turn to be surprised. Everybody looked at her expectantly. I didn't really know what they expected to hear—a bad case of penis envy, maybe, or Ten Nights with a Candle. I figured they were in for a disappointment, whatever it was. No whips, no chains, no night sweats. Small-town virgin, fresh, bright, pretty, and someday maybe she would blow Placerville and have a real life. Sometimes they change in college. Some of them discover existentialism and anomie and hash pipes. Sometimes they only join sororities and continue with the same sweet dream that began in junior high school, a dream so common to the pretty small-town virgins that it almost could have been cut from a Simplicity pattern, like a jumper or a Your Yummy Summer blouse or play skirt. There's a whammy on bright girls and boys. If the bright ones have a twisted fiber, it shows. If they don't, you can figure them as easily as square roots. Girls like Carol have a steady boyfriend and enjoy a little necking (but, as the Tubes say, "Don't Touch Me There"), nothing overboard. It's okay, I guess. You'd expect more, but, so sorry please, there just isn't. Bright kids are like TV dinners. That's all right. I don't carry a big stick on that particular subject. Smart girls are just sort of dull.

And Carol Granger had that image. She went steady with Buck Thorne (the perfect American name). Buck was the center of the Placerville High Greyhounds, which had posted an 11-0 record the previous fall, a fact that Coach Bob "Stone Balls" Stoneham made much of at our frequent school-spirit assemblies.

Thorne was a good-natured shit who weighed in at a cool two-ten; not exactly the brightest thing on two feet (but college material, of course), and Carol probably had no trouble keeping him in line. I've noticed that pretty girls make the best lion tamers, too. Besides, I always had an idea that Buck Thorne thought the sexiest thing in the world was a quarterback sneak right up the middle.

"I'm a virgin," Carol said defiantly, startling me up out of my thoughts. She crossed her legs as if to prove it symbolically, then abruptly uncrossed them. "And I don't think it's so bad, either. Being a virgin is like being bright."

"It is?" Grace Stanner asked doubtfully.

"You have to work at it," Carol said. "That's what I meant, you have to work at it." The idea seemed to please her. It scared the hell out of me.

"You mean Buck never . . ."

"Oh, he used to want to. I suppose he still does. But I made things pretty clear to him early in the game. And I'm not frigid or anything, or a puritan. It's just that . . ." She trailed off, searching.

"You wouldn't want to get pregnant," I said.

"No!" she said almost contemptuously. "I know all about that." With something like shock I realized she was angry and upset because she was. Anger is a very difficult emotion for a programmed adolescent to handle. "I don't live in books all the time. I read all about birth control in . . ." She bit her lip as the contradiction of what she was saying

struck her.

"Well," I said. I tapped the stock of the pistol lightly on the desk blotter. "This is serious, Carol. Very serious. I think a girl should know why she's a virgin, don't you?"

"I know why!"

"Oh." I nodded helpfully. Several girls were looking at her with interest.

"Because . . . "

Silence. Faintly, the sound of Jerry Kesserling using his whistle to direct traffic.

"Because . . . "

She looked around. Several of them flinched and looked down at their desks. Just then I would have given my house and lot, as the old farmers say, to know just how many virgins we had in here. "And you don't all have to stare at me! I didn't ask you to stare at me! I'm not going to talk about it! I don't *have* to talk about it!"

She looked at me bitterly.

"People tear you down, that's it. They grind you if you let them, just like Pig Pen said. They all want to pull you down to their level and make you dirty. Look at what they are doing to you, Charlie. "

I wasn't sure they had done anything to me just yet, but I kept my mouth shut.

"I was walking along Congress Street in Portland just before Christmas last year. I was with Donna Taylor. We were buying Christmas presents. I'd just bought my sister a scarf in Porteus-Mitchell, and we were talking about it and laughing. Just silly stuff. We were giggling. It was about four o'clock and just starting to get dark. It was snowing. All the colored lights were on, and the shop windows were full of glitter and packages . . . pretty . . . and there was one of those Salvation Army Santa Clauses on the corner by Jones's Book Shop. He was ringing his bell and smiling. I felt good. I felt really good. It was like the Christmas spirit, and all that. I was thinking about getting home and having hot chocolate with whipped cream on top of it. And then this old car drove by, and whoever was driving cranked his window down and yelled, 'Hi, cunt!' "

Anne Lasky jumped. I have to admit that the word did sound awfully funny coming out of Carol Granger's mouth.

"Just like that," she said bitterly. "It was all wrecked. Spoiled. Like an apple you thought was good and then bit into a worm hole. 'Hi, cunt.' As if that was all there was, no person, just a huh-h-h . . . " Her mouth pulled down in a trembling, agonized grimace. "And that's like being bright, too. They want to stuff things into your head until it's all filled up. It's a different hole, that's all. That's all. "

Sandra Cross's eyes~were half-closed, as if she dreamed. "You know," she said. "I feel funny. I feel . . . "

I wanted to jump up and tell her to keep her mouth shut, tell her not to incriminate herself in this fool's parade, but I couldn't. Repeat, couldn't. If I didn't play by my rules, who would?

"I feel like this is all," she said.

"Either all brains or all cunt," Carol said with brittle good humor. "Doesn't leave room for much else, does it?"

"Sometimes," Sandra said, "I feel very empty."

"I . . ." Carol began, and then looked at Sandra, startled. "You do?"

"Sure." She looked thoughtfully out the broken windows. "I like to hang out clothes on windy days. Sometimes that's all I feel like. A sheet on the line. You try to get interested in things . . . Politics, the school . . . I was on the Student Council last semester . . . but it's not real, and it's awfully dull. And there aren't a lot of minorities or anything around here to fight for, or . . . well, you know. Important things. And so I let Ted do that to me."

I looked carefully at Ted, who was looking at Sandra with his face frozen. A great blackness began to drizzle down on me. I felt my throat close.

"It wasn't so hot," Sandra said. "I don't know what all the shouting's about. It's . . ." She looked at me, her eyes widening, but I could hardly see her. But I could see Ted. He was very clear. In fact, he seemed to be lit by a strange golden glow that stood out in the new clotted darkness like a halo, a supernormal aura.

I raised the pistol very carefully in both hands.

For a moment I thought about the inner caves of my body, the living machines that run on and on in the endless dark.

I was going to shoot him, but they shot me first.

Chapter 24

I know what happened now, although I didn't then.

They had the best sharpshooter in the state out there, a state policeman named Daniel Malvern, from Kent's Hill. There was a picture of him in the Lewiston Sun after everything was all over. He was a small man with a crew cut. He looked like an accountant. They had given him a huge Mauser with a telescopic sight. Daniel Malvern took the Mauser to a gravel pit several miles away, test-fired it, and then brought it back and walked down to one of the cruisers parked on the lawn with the rifle stuffed down his pants leg. He rested in the prone position behind the front fender, in deep shadow. He gauged the windage with a wet thumb. Nil. He peered through the telescopic sight. Through the 30X cross-hatched lens, I must have looked as big as a bulldozer. There was not even any window glass to throw a glare, because I had broken it earlier when I fired the pistol to make them stop using the bullhorn. An easy shot. But Dan Malvern took his time. After all, it was probably the most important shot of his life. I was not a clay pigeon; my guts were going to splatter all over the blackboard behind me when the bullet made its mushrooming exit. Crime Does Not Pay. Loony Bites the Dust. And when I half-rose, half-leaned over Mrs. Underwood's desk to put a bullet in Ted Jones, Dan's big

chance came. My body half-twisted toward him. He fired his weapon and put the bullet exactly where he had hoped and expected to put it: through my breast pocket, which lay directly over the living machine of my heart.

Where it struck the hard steel of Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

Chapter 25

I held on to the pistol.

The impact of the slug knocked me straight backward against the blackboard, where the chalk ledge bit cruelly into my back. Both of my cordovan loafers flew off. I hit the floor on my fanny. I didn't know what had happened. There was too much all at once. A huge auger of pain drilled my chest, followed by sudden numbness. The ability to breathe stopped. Spots flashed in front of my eyes.

Irma Bates was screaming. Her eyes were closed, her fists were clenched, and her face was a hectic, patched red with effort. It was far away and dreamy, coming from a mountain or a tunnel.

Ted Jones was getting out of his seat again, floating really, in a slow and dreamy motion. This time he was going for the door. "They got the son of a bitch!" His voice sounded incredibly slow and draggy, like a 78-RPM record turned down to 33 1/3. "They got the crazy-'

"Sit down."

He didn't hear me. I wasn't surprised. I could hardly hear myself. I didn't have any wind to talk with. He was reaching for the doorknob when I fired the pistol. The bullet slammed into the wood beside his head, and he shied away. When he turned around, his face was a stew of changing emotions: white astonishment, agonized unbelief, and twisted, murdering hate.

"You can't . . . you're . . . "

"Sit down." A little better. Perhaps six seconds had gone by since I had been knocked on my ass. "Stop yelling, Irma. "

"You're shot, Charlie," Grace Stanner said calmly.

I looked outside. The cops were rushing the building. I fired twice and made myself breathe. The auger struck again, threatening to explode my chest with pain.

"Get back! I'll shoot them!"

Frank Philbrick stopped and looked around wildly. He seemed to want a telephone call from Jesus. He looked confused enough to try and carry on with it, so I fired again, up in the air. It was his turn to go a hundred miles in his head during half a second. "Get back!" he yelled. "Get the Christ back!"

They retreated, getting back even quicker than they had gotten down.

Ted Jones was edging toward me. That boy was simply not part of the real universe. "Do you want me to shoot your weenie off?" I asked.

He stopped, but that terrifying, twisted expression was still on his face. "You're dead," he hissed. "Lie down, God damn you."

"Sit down, Ted."

The pain in my chest was a live thing, horrible. The left side of my rib cage felt as if it had been struck by Maxwell's silver hammer. They were staring at me, my captive class, with expressions of preoccupied horror. I didn't dare look down at myself because of what I might see. The clock said 10:55.

"DECKER!"

"Sit down, Ted."

He lifted his lip in an unconscious facial gesture that made him look like a slatsided hound that I had seen lying mortally wounded beside a busy street when I was just a kid. He thought about it, and then he sat down. He had a good set of sweat circles started under his armpits.

"DECKER! MR. DENVER IS GOING UP TO THE OFFICE!"

It was Philbrick on the bullhorn, and not even the asexual sexuality of the amplification could hide how badly he was shaken up. An hour before, it would have pleased me-fulfilled me-in a savage way, but now I felt nothing.

"HE WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!"

Tom walked out from behind one of the police cars and started across the lawn, walking slowly, as if he expected to be shot at any second. Even at a distance, he looked ten years older. Not even that could please me. Not even that.

I got up a little at a time, fighting the pain, and stepped into my loafers. I almost fell, and had to clutch the desk with my free hand for support.

"Oh, Charlie," Sylvia moaned.

I fully loaded the pistol again, this time keeping it pointed toward them (I don't think even Ted knew it couldn't be fired with the clip sprung), doing it slowly so I could put off looking down at myself for as long as possible. My chest throbbed and ached. Sandra Cross seemed lost again in whatever fuzzy dream it was that she contemplated.

The clip snapped back into place, and I looked down at myself almost casually. I was wearing a neat blue shirt (I've always been fond of solid colors), and I expected to see it matted with my blood. But it wasn't.

There was a large dark hole, dead center through my breast pocket, which was on the left. An uneven scattering of smaller holes radiated out from all around it, like one of those solar-system maps that show the planets going around the sun. I reached inside the pocket very carefully. That was when I remembered Titus, whom I had rescued from the wastebasket. I pulled him out very carefully. The class went "*Aaahhh!*" as if I had just sawed a lady in half or pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of Pig Pen's nose. None of them asked why I was carrying my combination lock in my pocket. I was glad. Ted was

looking at Titus bitterly, and suddenly I was very angry at Ted. And I wondered how he would like to eat poor old Titus for his lunch.

The bullet had smashed through the hard, high-density plastic dial, sending highspeed bits of shrapnel out through my shirt. Not one of them had touched my flesh. The steel behind the face had caught the slug, had turned it into a deadly lead blossom with three bright petals. The whole lock was twisted, as if by fire. The semi-circular lock bar had been pulled like taffy. The back side of the lock had bulged but not broken through.

[It was a year and a half later when I saw that commercial on TV for the first time. The one where the guy with the rifle takes aim at the padlock nailed to the board. You even get a look through the telescopic sight at the padlock-a Yale, a Master, I don't know which. The guy pulls the trigger. And you see that lock jump and dent and mash, and it looked in that commercial just the way old Titus looked when I took him out of my pocket. They show it happening in regular motion, and then they show it in slow motion, and the first and only time I saw it, I leaned down between my legs and puked between my ankles. They took me away. They took me back to my room. And the next day my pet shrink here looked at a note and said, "They tell me you had a setback yesterday, Charlie. Want to talk about it?" But I couldn't talk about it. I've never been able to talk about it. Until now.]

Chink! on the intercom.

"Charlie?"

"Just a minute, Tom. Don't rush me."

"Charlie, you have to-"

"Shut the fuck up."

I unbuttoned my shirt and opened it. The class went "*Aaahhh!*" again. Titus was imprinted on my chest in angry purple, and the flesh had been mashed into an indentation that looked deep enough to hold water. I didn't like to look at it, any more than I liked to look at the old drunk with the bag of flesh below his nose, the one that always hung around Gogan's downtown. It made me feel nauseated. I closed my shirt.

"Tom, those bastards tried to shoot me."

"They didn't mean-"

"Don't tell me what they didn't mean to do!" I screamed at him. There was a crazy note in my voice that made me feel even sicker. "You get your old cracked ass out there and tell that mother-fucker Philbrick he almost had a bloodbath down here, have you got it?"

"Charlie . . ." He was whining.

"Shut up, Tom. I'm through fooling with you. I'm in the driver's seat. Not you, not

Philbrick, not the superintendent of schools, not God. Have you got it?"

"Charlie, let me explain."

"HAVE YOU GOT IT?"

"Yes, but--"

"All right. We've got that straight. So you go back and give him a message, Tom. Tell him that I don't want to see him or anyone else out there make a move during the next hour. No one is going to come in and talk on this goddamn intercom, and no one else is going to try and shoot me. At noon I want to talk to Philbrick again. Can you remember all that, Tom?"

"Yes, Charlie. All right, Charlie." He sounded relieved and foolish. "They just wanted me to tell you it was a mistake, Charlie. Somebody's gun went off by accident and--"

"One other thing, Tom. Very important."

"What, Charlie?"

"You need to know where you stand with that guy Philbrick, Tom. He gave you a shovel and told you to walk behind the ox cart, and you're doing it. I gave him a chance to put his ass on the line, and he wouldn't do it. Wake up, Tom. Assert yourself."

"Charlie, you have to understand what a terrible position you're putting us all in."

"Get out, Tom."

He clicked off. We all watched him come out through the main doors and start back toward the cars. Philbrick came over to him and put a hand on his arm. Tom shook it off. A lot of the kids smiled at that. I was past smiling. I wanted to be home in my bed and dreaming all of this.

"Sandra," I said. "I believe you were telling us about your *affaire de coeur* with Ted."

Ted threw a dark glance at me. "You don't want to say anything, Sandy. He's just trying to make all of us look dirty like he is. He's sick and full of germs. Don't let him infect you with what he's got."

She smiled. She was really radiant when she smiled like a child. I felt a bitter nostalgia, not for her, exactly, or for any imagined purity (Dale Evans panties and all that), but for something I could not precisely put my hand on. Her, maybe. Whatever it was, it made me feel ashamed.

"But I want to," she said. "I want to get it on, too. I always have."

It was eleven o'clock on the nose. The activity outside seemed to have died. I was sitting well back from the windows now. I thought Philbrick would give me my hour. He wouldn't dare do anything else now. I felt better, the pain in my chest receding a little. But my head felt very strange, as if my brains were running without coolant and overheating like a big hot rod engine in the desert. At times I was almost tempted to feel (foolish conceit) that I was holding them myself, by sheer willpower. Now I know, of course, that nothing could have been further from the truth. I had one real hostage that day, and his name was Ted Jones.

"We just did it," Sandra said, looking down at her desk and tracing the engravings there with a shaped thumbnail. I could see the part in her hair. She parted it on the side, like a boy. "Ted asked me to go to the Wonderland dance with him, and I said I would. I had a new formal." She looked at me reproachfully. "You never asked me, Charlie. "

Could it be that I was shot in the padlock only ten minutes ago? I had an insane urge to ask them if it had really happened. How strange they all were!

"So we went to that, and afterward we went to the Hawaiian Hut. Ted knows the man who runs it and got us cocktails. Just like the grown-ups." It was hard to tell if there was sarcasm in her voice or not.

Ted's face was carefully blank, but the others were looking at him as if they were seeing a strange bug. Here was a kid, one of their own, who knew the man who runs it. Corky Herald was obviously chewing it and not liking it.

"I didn't think I'd like the drinks, because everybody says liquor tastes horrible at first, but I did. I had a gin fizz, and it tickled my nose." She looked pensively in front of her. "There were little straws in it, red ones, and I didn't know if you drank through them or just stirred your drink with them, until Ted told me. It was a very nice time. Ted talked about how nice it was playing golf at Poland Springs. He said he'd take me sometime and teach me the game, if I wanted."

Ted was curling and uncurling his lip again, doglike.

"He wasn't, you know, fresh or anything. He kissed me good night, though, and he wasn't a bit nervous about it. Some boys are just miserable all the way home, wondering if they should try to kiss you good night or not. I always kissed them, just so they wouldn't feel bad. If they were yucky, I just pretended I was licking a letter."

I remembered the first time I took Sandy Cross out, to the regular Saturday-night dance at the high school. I had been miserable all the way home, wondering if I should kiss her good night or not. I finally didn't.

"After that, we went out three more times. Ted was very nice. He could always think of funny things to say, but he never told dirty jokes or anything, you know, like that. We did some necking, and that was all. Then I didn't see him to go out with for a long time, not until this April. He asked me if I wanted to go to the Rollerdrome in Lewiston."

I had wanted to ask her to go to the Wonderland dance with me, but I hadn't dared. Joe, who always got dates when he wanted them, kept saying why don't you, and I kept getting more nervous and kept telling him to fuck off. Finally I got up the stuff to call her house, but I had to hang up the telephone after one ring and run to the bathroom and throw up. As I told you, my stomach is bad.

"We were having a pretty blah time, when all of a sudden these kids got into an argument on the middle of the floor, " Sandra said. "Harlow boys and Lewiston boys, I think. Anyway, a big fight started. Some of them were fighting on their roller skates, but most of them had taken them off. The man who runs it came out and said if they didn't stop, he was going to close. People were getting bloody noses and skating around and kicking people that had fallen down, and punching and yelling horrible things. And all the time, the jukebox was turned up real loud, playing Rolling Stones music."

She paused, and then went on: "Ted and I were standing in one corner of the floor, by the bandstand. They have live music on Saturday nights, you know. This one boy skated by, wearing a black jacket. He had long hair and pimples. He laughed and waved at Ted when he went by and yelled, 'Fuck her, buddy, I did!' And Ted just reached out and popped him upside the head. The kid went skating right into the middle part of the rink and tripped over some kid's shoes and fell on his head. Anyway, Ted was looking at me, and his eyes were, you know, almost bugging out of his head. He was grinning. You know, that's really the only time I ever really saw Ted grin, like he was having a good time.

"Ted goes to me, 'I'll be right back,' and he walks across the rink to that inside part where the kid who said that was still getting up. Ted grabbed him by the back of the jacket and . . . I don't know . . . started to yank him back and forth . . . and the kid couldn't turn around . . . and Ted just kept yanking him back and forth, and that kid's head was bouncing, and then his jacket ripped right down the middle. And he goes, 'I'll kill you for ripping my best jacket, you m. f.' So Ted hit him again, and the kid fell down, and Ted threw the piece of his jacket he was holding right down on top of him. Then he came back to where I was standing, and we left. We drove out into Auburn to a gravel pit he knew about. It was on that road to Lost Valley, I think. Then we did it. In the back seat."

She was tracing the graffiti on her desk again. "It didn't hurt very much. I thought it would, but it didn't. It was nice. " She sounded as if she were discussing a Walt Disney feature film, one of those with all the cute little animals. Only, this one was starring Ted Jones as the Bald-Headed Woodchuck.

"He didn't use one of those things like he said he would, but I didn't get pregnant or anything. "

Slow red was beginning to creep out of the collar of Ted's khaki army shirt, spreading up his neck and over his cheeks. His face remained fumingly expressionless.

Sandra's hands made slow, languorous gestures. I suddenly knew that her natural habitat would be in a porch hammock at the very August height of summer, temperature ninety-two in the shade, reading a book (or perhaps just staring out at the heat shimmer rising over the road), a can of Seven-Up beside her with an elbow straw in it, dressed in cool white short-shorts and a brief halter with the straps pushed down, small diamonds of sweat stippled across the upper swell of her breasts and her lower stomach

"He apologized afterward. He acted uncomfortable, and I felt a little bad for him. He kept saying he would marry me if . . . you know, if I got preggers. He was really upset. And I go, 'Well, let's not buy trouble, Teddy,' and he goes, 'Don't call me that, it's a baby name.' I think he was surprised I did it with him. And I didn't get preggers. There just didn't seem to be that much to it.

"Sometimes I feel like a doll. Not really real. You know it? I fix my hair, and every now and then I have to hem a skirt, or maybe I have to baby-sit the kids when Mom and Dad go out. And it all just seems very fake. Like I could peek behind the living-room wall and it would be cardboard, with a director and a cameraman getting ready for the next scene. Like the grass and the sky were painted on canvas flats. Fake. " She looked at me earnestly. "Did you ever feel like that, Charlie?"

I thought about it very carefully. "No," I said. "I can't remember that ever crossing my mind, Sandy."

"It crossed mine. Even more after with Ted. But I didn't get pregnant or anything. I used to think every girl got pregnant the first time, without fail. I tried to imagine what it would be like, telling my parents. My father would get real mad and want to know who the son of a bee was, and my mother would cry and say, 'I thought we raised you right.' That would have been real. But after a while I stopped thinking about that. I couldn't even remember exactly what it felt like, having him . . . well, inside me. So I went back to the Rollerdrome."

The room was totally silent. Never in her wildest dreams could Mrs. Underwood have hoped to command such attention as Sandra Cross commanded now.

"This boy picked me up. I let him pick me up. " Her eyes had picked up a strange sparkle. "I wore my shortest skirt. My powder-blue one. And a thin blouse. Later on, we went out back. And *that* seemed real. He wasn't polite at all. He was sort of . . . jerky. I didn't know him at all. I kept thinking that maybe he was one of those sex maniacs. That he might have a knife. That he might make me take dope. Or that I might get pregnant. I felt *alive*. "

Ted Jones had finally turned and was looking at Sandra with an almost woodcut expression of horror and dead revulsion. It all seemed like a dream-something out of *le moyen age*, a dark passion play.

"That was Saturday night, and the band was playing. You could hear it out in the parking lot, but kind of faint. The Rollerdrome doesn't look like much from the back, just all boxes and crates piled up, and trashcans full of Coke bottles. I was scared, but I was excited, too. He was breathing really fast and holding on to my wrist tight, as if he expected me to try to get away. He . . . "

Ted made a horrid gagging sound. It was hard to believe that anyone in my peer group could be touched so painfully by anything other than the death of a parent. Again I admired him.

"He had an old black car, and it made me think of how my mother used to tell me when I was just little that sometimes strange men want you to get in the car with them and you should never do it. That excited me too. I can remember thinking: What if he kidnaps me and takes me to some old shack in the country and holds me for ransom? He opened the back door, and I got in. He started to kiss me. His mouth was all greasy, like he'd been eating pizza. They sell pizza inside for twenty cents a slice. He started to feel me up, and I could see he was smudging pizza on my blouse. Then we were lying down, and I pulled my skirt up for him-

"*Shut up!* " *Ted* cried out with savage suddenness. He brought both fists crashing down on his desk, and everybody jumped. "*You rotten whore! You can't tell that in front of people! Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you! You-*"

"You shut up, Teddy, or I'll knock your teeth down your fucking throat, " Dick Keene said coldly. "You got yours, didn't you?"

Ted gaped at him. The two of them shot a lot of pool together down at the Harlow

Rec, and sometimes went cruising in Ted's car. I wondered if they would be hanging out together when this was all over. I had my doubts.

"He didn't smell very nice," Sandra continued, as if there had been no interruption at all. "But he was hard. And bigger than Ted. Not circumcised, either. I remember that. It looked like a plum when he pushed it out of, you know, his foreskin. I thought it might hurt even, though I wasn't a virgin anymore. I thought the police might come and arrest us. I knew they walked through the parking lot to make sure no one was stealing hubcaps or anything.

"And a funny thing started to happen inside me, before he even got my pants down. I never felt anything so good. Or so *real*." She swallowed. Her face was flushed. "He touched me with his hand, and I went. Just like that. And the funny thing was, he didn't even get to do it. He was trying to get it in and I was trying to help him and it kept rubbing against my leg and all of a sudden . . . you know. And he just laid there on top of me for a minute, and then he said in my ear: 'You little bitch. You did that on purpose,' And that was all."

She shook her head vaguely. "But it was very real. I can remember everything-the music, the way he smiled, the sound his zipper made when he opened it-everything. "

She smiled at me, that strange, dreamy smile.

"But this has been better, Charlie."

And the strange thing was, I couldn't tell if I felt sick or not. I didn't think I did, but it was really too close to call. I guess when you turn off the main road, you have to be prepared to see some funny houses. "How do people know they're real?" I muttered.

"What, Charlie?"

"Nothing. "

I looked at them very carefully. They didn't look sick, any of them. There was a healthy sheen on every eye. There was something in me (maybe it came over on the *Mayflower*) that wanted to know: *How could she let that beyond the walls of herself? How could she say that?* But there was nothing in the faces that I saw to echo that thought. There would have been in Philbrick's face. In good old Tom's face. Probably not in Don Grace's, but he would have been thinking it. Secretly, all the evening news shows notwithstanding, I'd held the belief that things change but people don't. It was something of a horror to begin realizing that all those years I'd been playing baseball on a soccer field. Pig Pen was still studying the bitter lines of his pencil. Susan Brooks only looked sweetly sympathetic. Dick Keene had a half-interested, half-lustful expression on his face. Corky's head was furrowed and frowning as he wrestled with it. Gracie looked slightly surprised, but that was all. Irma Bates merely looked vapid. I don't think she had recovered from seeing me shot. Were the lives of all our elders so plain that Sandy's story would have made lurid reading for them? Or were all of theirs so strange and full of terrifying mental foliage that their classmate's sexual adventure was on a level with winning a pinball replay? I didn't want to think about it. I was in no position to be reviewing moral implications.

Only Ted looked sick and horrified, and he no longer counted.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Carol Granger said, mildly worried. She looked around. "I'm afraid all of this changes things. I don't like it." She looked at me accusingly. "I liked the way things were going, Charlie. I don't want things to change after this is over. "

"Heh," I said.

But that kind of comment had no power over the situation. Things had gotten out of control. There was no real way that could be denied anymore. I had a sudden urge to laugh at all of them, to point out that I had started out as the main attraction and had ended up as the sideshow.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Irma Bates said suddenly.

"Hold it," I said. Sylvia laughed.

"Turnabout is fair play," I said. "I promised to tell you about my sex life. In all actuality, there isn't very much to tell about, unless you read palms. However, there is one little story which you might find interesting."

Sarah Pasterne yawned, and I felt a sudden, excruciating urge to blow her head off. But number two must try harder, as they say in the rent-a-car ads. Some cats drive faster, but Decker vacuums all the psychic cigarette butts from the ashtrays of your mind.

I was suddenly reminded of that Beatles song that starts off: "I read the news today, oh boy . . . "

I told them:

Chapter 26

In the summer before my junior year at Placerville, Joe and I drove up to Bangor to spend a weekend with Joe's brother, who had a summer job working for the Bangor Sanitation Department. Pete McKennedy was twenty-one (a fantastic age, it seemed to me; I was struggling through the open sewer that is seventeen) and going to the University of Maine, where he was majoring in English.

It looked like it was going to be a great weekend. On Friday night I got drunk for the first time in my life, along with Pete and Joe and one or two of Pete's friends, and I wasn't even very hungover the next day. Pete didn't work Saturdays, so he took us up to the campus and showed us around. It's really very pretty up there in summer, although on a Saturday in July there weren't many pretty coeds to look at. Pete told us that most of the summer students took off for Bar Harbor or Clear Lake on weekends.

We were just getting ready to go back to Pete's place when he saw a guy he knew slouching down toward the steam-plant parking lot.

"Scragg!" He yelled. "Hey, Scragg!"

Scragg was a big guy wearing paint-splattered, faded jeans and a blue workshirt. He

had a drooping sand-colored mustache and was smoking an evil-looking little black cigar that he later identified as the Original Smoky Perote. It smelled like slowly burning underwear.

"How's it hanging?" He asked.

"Up a foot," Pete said. "This is my brother, Joe, and his buddy Charlie Decker," he introduced. "Scragg Simpson. "

"Howdy-dooddy," Scragg said, shaking hands and dismissing us. "What you doing tonight, Peter?"

"Thought the three of us might go to a movie. "

"Doan do that, Pete," Scragg said with a grin. "Doan do that, baby."

"What's better?" Pete asked, also grinning.

"Dana Collette's throwing a party at this camp her folks own out near Schoodic Point. There's gonna be about forty million unattached ladies there. Bring dope. "

"Does Larry Moeller have any grass?" Pete asked.

"Last I knew, he had a shitload. Foreign, domestic, local . . . everything but filter tips. "

Pete nodded. "We'll be there, unless the creek rises."

Scragg nodded and waved a hand as he prepared to resume his version of that ever-popular form of campus locomotion, the Undergraduate Slouch. "Meetcha," he said to Joe and me.

We went down to see Jerry Mueller, who Pete said was the biggest dope dealer in the Orono-Oldtown-Stillwater triangle. I kept my cool about it, as if I were one of the original Placerville Jones men, but privately I was excited and pretty apprehensive. As I remember it, I sort of expected to see Jerry sitting naked on the john with a piece of rubber flex tied off below his elbow and a hypo dangling from the big forearm vein. And watching the rise and fall of ancient Atlantis in his navel.

He had a small apartment in Oldtown, which borders the campus on one side. Oldtown is a small city with three distinctions: its paper mill; its canoe factory; and twelve of the roughest honky-tonks in this great smiling country. It also has an encampment of real reservation Indians, and most of them look at you as if wondering how much hair you might have growing out of your asshole and whether or not it would be worth scalping.

Jerry turned out to be not an ominous Jones-man type holding court amid the reek of incense and Ravi Shankar music, but a small guy with a constant wedge-of-lemon grin. He was fully clothed and in his right mind. His only ornament was a bright yellow button which bore the message GOLDILOCKS LOVED IT. Instead of Ravi and His Incredible Boinging Sitar, he had a large collection of bluegrass music. When I saw his Greenbriar Boys albums, I asked him if he'd ever heard the Tarr Brothers-I've always been a country-and-bluegrass nut. After that, we were off. Pete and Joe just sat around looking bored until Jerry produced what looked like a small cigarette wrapped in brown paper.

"You want to light it?" he asked Pete.

Pete lit it. The smell was pungent, almost tart, and very pleasant. He drew it deep, held the smoke, and passed the j on to Joe, who coughed most of it out.

Jerry turned back to me. "You ever heard the Clinch Mountain Boys?"

I shook my head. "Heard of them, though."

"You gotta listen to this," he said. "Boy, is it horny." He put an LP with a weird label on the stereo. The j came around to me. "You smoke cigarettes?" Jerry asked me paternally.

I shook my head.

"Then draw slow, or you'll lose it."

I drew slow. The smoke was sweet, rather heavy, acrid, dry. I held my breath and passed the j on to Jerry. The Clinch Mountain Boys started in on "Blue Ridge Breakdown. "

Half an hour later we had progressed through two more joints and were listening to Flatt and Scruggs charge through a little number called "Russian Around. " I was about ready to ask when I should start feeling stoned when I realized I could actually visualize the banjo chords in my mind. They were bright, like long steel threads, and shuttling back and forth like looms. They were moving rapidly, but I could follow them if I concentrated deeply. I tried to tell Joe about it, but he only looked at me in a puzzled, fuzzy way. We both laughed. Pete was looking at a picture of Niagara Falls on the wall very closely.

We ended up sticking around until almost five o'clock, and when we left, I was wrecked out of my mind. Pete bought an ounce of grass from Jerry, and we took off for Schoodic. Jerry stood in the doorway of his apartment and waved good-bye and yelled for me to come back and bring some of my records.

That's the last really happy time I can remember.

It was a long drive down to the coast. All three of us were still very high, and although Pete had no trouble driving, none of us could seem to talk without getting the giggles. I remember asking Pete once what this Dana Collette who was throwing the party looked like, and he just leered. That made me laugh until I thought my stomach was going to explode. I could still hear bluegrass playing in my head.

Pete had been to a party out there in the spring, and we only took one wrong turn finding it. It was at the end of a narrow mile of gravel marked PRIVATE ROAD. You could hear the heavy bass signature of the music a quarter-mile from the cabin. There were so many cars stacked up that we had to walk from just about that point.

Pete parked and we got out. I was starting to feel unsure of myself and self-conscious again (partly the residue of the pot and partly just me), worried about how young and stupid I would probably look to all these college people. Jerry Mueller had to be one in a hundred. I decided I would just stick close to Joe and keep my mouth closed.

As it turned out, I could have saved the worry. The place was packed to the rafters with what seemed like a million people, every one of them drunk, stoned, or both. The

smell of marijuana hung on the air like a heavy mist, along with wine and hot hods. The place was a babble of conversation, loud rock music, and laughter. There were two lights dangling from the ceiling, one red, one blue. That rounds off the first impression the place gave me-it was like the funhouse at Old Orchard Beach.

Scragg waved at us from across the room.

"*Pete!*" someone squealed, almost in my ear. I jerked and almost swallowed my tongue.

It was a short, almost pretty girl with bleached hair and the shortest dress I have ever seen-it was a bright fluorescent orange that looked almost alive in the weird lighting.

"Hi, Dana! " Pete shouted over the noise. "This is my brother, Joe, and one of his buddies, Charlie Decker. "

She said hi to both of us. "Isn't it a great party?" she asked me. When she moved, the hem of her dress swirled around the lace bottoms of her panties.

I said it was a great party.

"Did you bring any goodies, Pete?" Pete grinned and held up his Baggie of weed. Her eyes sparkled. She was standing next to me, her hip pressed casually against mine. I could feel her bare thigh. I began to get as horny as a bull moose.

"Bring it over here," she said.

We found a relatively unoccupied corner behind one of the stereo speakers, and Dana produced a huge scrolled water pipe from a low bookshelf that was fairly groaning with Hesse, Tolkien, and Reader's Digest condensed books. The latter belonged to the parents, I assumed. We toked up. The grass was much smoother in the water pipe, and I could hold the smoke better. I began to get very high indeed. My head was filling up with helium. People came and went. Introductions, which I promptly forgot, were made. The thing that I liked best about the introductions was that, every time a stray wandered by, Dana would bounce up to grab him or her. And when she did, I could look straight up her dress to where the Heavenly Home was sheathed in the gauziest of blue nylon. People changed records. I watched them come and go (some of them undoubtedly talking of Michelangelo, or Ted Kennedy or Kurt Vonnegut). A woman asked me if I had read Susan Brownmiller's *Women Rapists*. I said no. She told me it was very tight. She crossed her fingers in front of her eyes to show me how tight it was and then wandered off. I watched the fluorescent poster on the far wall, which showed a guy in a T-shirt sitting in front of a TV. The guy's eyeballs were slowly dripping down his cheeks, and there was a big cheese-eating grin on his face. The poster said: SHEEEIT! FRIDAY NIGHT AND I'M STONED AGAIN

I watched Dana cross and uncross her legs. A few filaments of pubic hair, nine shades darker than the bleach job, had strayed out of the lacy leg bands. I don't think I have ever been that horny. I doubt if I will ever be that horny again. I had an organ which felt large enough and long enough to pole-vault on. I began to wonder if the male sex organ can explode.

She turned to me and suddenly whispered in my ear. My stomach heated up twenty degrees instantly, as if I had been eating chili. A moment before, she had been talking to

Pete and to some joker I remembered being non-introduced to. Then she was whispering in my ear, her breath tickling the dark channel. "Go on out the back door," she said. "There." She pointed.

It was hard to comprehend, so I just followed her finger. Yes, there was the door. The door was real and the door was earnest. It had one hell of a knob on it. I chuckled, convinced that I had just thought a particularly witty thought. She laughed lightly in my ear and said, "You've been looking up my dress all night. What does that mean?" And before I could say anything, she kissed my cheek softly and gave me a little shove to get me going.

I looked around for Joe, but I didn't see him anyplace. Sorry, Joe. I got up and heard both my knees pop. My legs were stiff from sitting in the same position so long. I had an urge to un-tuck my shirt and cover up the huge bulge in my jeans. I had an urge to tiptoe across the room. I had an urge to cackle wildly and announce to the general attendance that Charles Everett Decker earnestly believed that he was about to get screwed; that-to drop a bad pun-Charles Everett Decker was about to rip off his maiden piece.

I didn't do any of those things.

I went out the back door.

I was so stoned and so horny that I almost fell twenty feet to the tiny white shingle of beach that was down below. The back of the cabin overlooked a sudden rocky drop to a postage-stamp inlet. A flight of weather-washed steps led down. I walked carefully, holding on to the railing. My feet felt a thousand miles away. The music sounded distant on this side, blending and almost being covered by the rhythmic sound of the waves.

There was a slip of a moon and a ghost of a breeze. The scene was so frozenly beautiful that for a moment I thought I had walked into a black-and-white picture postcard. The cabin behind and above was only a dim blur. The trees climbed on both sides, pines and spruces that sloped off to naked rock headland-twin spurs of it, which cupped the crescent-shaped beach where the waves licked. Straight ahead was the Atlantic, pinpointed with uncertain nets of light from the moon. I could see the faintest curve of an island far out to the left, and wondered who walked there that night besides the wind. It was a lonesome thought, and it made me shiver a little.

I slipped off my shoes and waited for her.

I don't know how long it was before she came. I didn't have any wristwatch and was too stoned to be able to judge in any case. And after a little while, unease began to creep in. Something about the shadow of trees on the wet, packed sand, and the sound of the wind. Maybe the ocean itself, a big thing, a mean mother-humper full of unseen life and all those little pricks of light. Maybe the cold feel of the sand under my bare feet. Maybe none of those things, maybe all of them and more. But by the time she put her hand on my shoulder, I had lost my erection. Wyatt Earp striding into the OK Corral with no sixgun.

She turned me around, stood on tiptoe, kissed me. I could feel the warmth of her thighs, but now it was nothing special to me. "I saw you looking at me," is what she said. "Are you nice? Can you be nice?"

"I can try," I told her, feeling a little absurd. I touched her breasts, and she held me close. But my erection was still gone.

"Don't tell Pete," she said, taking me by the hand. "He'd kill me. We've got a . . . kind of a thing."

She led me underneath the back steps, where the grass was cool and matted with aromatic pine needles. The shadows made cold venetian blinds on her body as she slipped out of her dress.

"This is so crazy," she said, and she sounded excited.

Then we were rolling together and my shirt was off. She was working at the snap on the front of my jeans. But my cock was still on coffee break. She touched me, sliding her hand inside my underpants, and the muscles down there jerked-not in pleasure or in revulsion, but in a kind of terror. Her hand felt like rubber, cold and impersonal and antiseptic.

"Come on," she whispered. "Come on, come on, come on . . ."

I tried to think of something sexy, anything sexy. Looking up Darleen Andreissen's skirt in study hall and her knowing it and letting me. Maynard Quinn's pack of dirty French playing cards. I thought of Sandy Cross in sexy black underwear, and that started to move something around down there . . . and then, of all things to come cruising out of my imagination, I saw my father with his hunting knife, talking about the Cherokee Nose Job.

["The what?" Corky Herald asked. I explained the Cherokee Nose Job. "Oh," Corky said. I went on.]

That did it. Everything collapsed into noodledom again. And after that, there was nothing. And nothing. And nothing. My jeans had joined my shirt. My underpants were somewhere down around my ankles. She was quivering underneath me, I could feel her, like the plucked string of a musical instrument. I reached down and took hold of my penis and shook it as if to ask what was wrong with it. But Mr. Penis wasn't talking. I let my hand wander around to the warm junction of her thighs. I could feel her pubic hair, a little kinky, shockingly like my own. I slid an exploratory finger into her, thinking: *This is the place. This is the place men like my father joke about on hunting trips and in barber shops. Men kill for this. Force it open. Steal it or bludgeon it. Take it . . . or leave it.*

"Where is it?" Dana whispered in a high, breathless voice. "Where is it? Where . . . ?"

So I tried. But it was like that old joke about the guy that tried to jam a marshmallow into the piggy bank. Nothing. And all the time I could hear the soft sound of the ocean grounding on the beach, like the soundtrack of a sappy movie.

Then I rolled off. "I'm sorry." My voice was shockingly loud, rasping.

I could hear her sigh. It was a short sound, an irritated sound. "All right," she said. "It happens."

"Not to me," I said, as if this was the first time in several thousand sexual encounters that my equipment had malfunctioned. Dimly I could hear Mick Jagger and the Stones shouting out "Hot Stuff." One of life's little ironies. I still felt wrecked, but it was a cold

feeling, depthless. The cold certainty that I was queer crept over me like rising water. I had read someplace that you didn't have to have any overt homosexual experience to be queer; you could just be that way and never know it until the queen in your closet leaped out at you like Norman Bates's mom in *Psycho*, a grotesque mugger prancing and mincing in Mommy's makeup and Mommy's shoes.

"It's just as well," she said. "Pete-"

"Look, I'm sorry."

She smiled, but it looked manufactured. I've wondered since if it was or not. I'd like to believe it was a real smile. "It's the dope. I bet you're a hell of a lover when things are right."

"Fuck," I said, and shivered at the dead sound in my own voice.

"No." She sat up. "I'm going back in. Wait until I'm gone awhile before you come up."
"

I wanted to tell her to wait, to let me try it again, but I knew I couldn't, not if all the seas dried up and the moon turned to zinc oxide. She zipped into her dress and was gone, leaving me there under the steps. The moon watched me closely, perhaps to see if I might cry. I didn't. After a little while I got my clothes straightened around and most of last fall's leaves brushed off me. Then I went back upstairs. Pete and Dana were gone. Joe was over in a corner, making out with a really stunning girl who had her hands in his mop of blond hair. I sat down and waited for the party to be over. Eventually it was.

By the time the three of us got back to Bangor, dawn had already pulled most of her tricks out of her bag and a red edge of sun was peering down at us from between the smokestacks of beautiful downtown Brewer. None of us had much to say. I felt tired and grainy and not able to tell how much damage had been done to me. I had a leaden feeling that it was more than I really needed.

We went upstairs, and I fell into the tiny daybed in the living room. The last thing I saw before I went to sleep was bars of sunlight falling through the venetian blinds and onto the small throw rug by the radiator.

I dreamed about the Creaking Thing. It was almost the same as when I was small, I in my bed, the moving shadows of the tree outside on the ceiling, the steady, sinister sound. Only, this time the sound kept getting closer and closer, until the door of the bedroom burst open with an awful crack like the sound of doom.

It was my father. My mother was in his arms. Her nose had been slit wide open, and blood streamed down her cheeks like war paint.

"You want her?" he said. "Here, take her, you worthless good-for-nothing. Take her. "

He threw her on the bed beside me and I saw that she was dead, and that's when I woke up screaming. With an erection.

Chapter 27

Nobody had anything to say after that one, not even Susan Brooks. I felt tired. There didn't seem to be a great deal left to say. Most of them were looking outside again, but there wasn't anything to see that hadn't been there an hour before-actually less, because all of the pedestrians had been shoed away. I decided Sandra's sex story had been better. There had been an orgasm in hers.

Ted Jones was staring at me with his usual burning intensity (I thought, however, that revulsion had given way entirely to hate, and that was mildly satisfying). Sandra Cross was off in her own world. Pat Fitzgerald was carefully folding a cheap piece of study-hall math paper into an aerodynamically unsound aircraft.

Suddenly Irma Bates said defiantly, "I have to go to the *bathroom!*"

I sighed. It sounded a great deal like the way I remember Dana Collette's sigh at Schoodic Point. "Go, then."

She looked at me unbelievably. Ted blinked. Don Lordi snickered.

"You'd shoot me."

I looked at her. "Do you need to go to the crapper or not?"

"I can hold it," she said sulkily.

I blew out my cheeks, the way my father does when he's put out. "Well, either go or stop wiggling around in your seat. We don't need a puddle underneath your desk."

Corky went haw-haw at that. Sarah Pasterne looked shocked.

As if to spite me, Irma got up and walked with flat-footed vigor toward the door. I had gained at least one point: Ted was staring at her instead of me. Once there, she paused uncertainly, hand over the knob. She looked like someone who has just gotten an electric shock while adjusting the TV rabbit ears and is wondering whether or not to try again.

"You won't shoot me?"

"Are you going to the bathroom or not?" I asked. I wasn't sure if I was going to shoot her. I was still disturbed by (jealous of?) the fact that Sandra's story seemed to have so much more power than my own. In some undefined way, they had gained the upper hand. I had the crazy feeling that instead of my holding them, it was the other way around. Except for Ted, of course. We were all holding Ted.

Maybe I was going to shoot her. I certainly didn't have anything to lose. Maybe it would even help. Maybe I could get rid of the crazy feeling that I had waked up in the middle of a new dream.

She opened the door and went out. I never raised the gun off the blotter. The door closed. We could hear her feet moving off down the hall, not picking up tempo, not breaking into a run. They were all watching the door, as if something completely unbelievable had poked its head through, winked, and then withdrawn.

For myself, I had a strange feeling of relief, a feeling so tenuous that I could never explain it.

The footfalls died out.

Silence. I waited for someone else to ask to go to the bathroom. I waited to see Irma Bates dash crazily out of the front doors and right onto the front pages of a hundred newspapers. It didn't happen.

Pat Fitzgerald rattled the wings of his plane. It was a loud sound.

"Throw that goddamn thing away," Billy Sawyer said irritably. "You can't make a paper plane out of study-hall paper." Pat made no move to throw the goddamn thing away. Billy didn't say anything else.

New footfalls, coming toward us.

I lifted up the pistol and pointed it toward the door. Ted was grinning at me, but I don't think he knew it. I looked at his face, at the flat, conventionally good looking planes of his cheeks, at the forehead, barricading all those memories of summer country-club days, dances, cars, Sandy's breasts, calmness, ideals of rightness; and suddenly I knew what the last order of business was; perhaps it had been the only order of business all along; and more importantly, I knew that his eye was the eye of a hawk and his hand was stone. He could have been my own father, but that didn't matter. He and Ted were both remote and Olympian: gods. But my arms were too tired to pull down temples. I was never cut out to be Samson.

His eyes were so clear and so straight, so frighteningly purposeful-they were politician's eyes.

Five minutes before, the sound of the footfalls wouldn't have been bad, do you see? Five minutes before, I could have welcomed them, put the gun down on the desk blotter and gone to meet them, perhaps with a fearful backward glance at the people I was leaving behind me. But now it was the steps themselves that frightened me. I was afraid Philbrick had decided to take me up on my offer-that he had come to shut off the main line and leave our business unfinished.

Ted Jones grinned hungrily.

The rest of us waited, watching the door. Pat's fingers had frozen on his paper plane. Dick Keene's mouth hung open, and in that moment I could see for the first time the family resemblance between him and his brother Flapper, a borderline IQ case who had graduated after six long years in Placerville. Flapper was now doing postgraduate work at Thomaston State Prison, doing doctoral work in laundry maintenance and advanced spoon sharpening.

An unformed shadow rose up on the glass, the way it does when the surface is pebbly and opaque. I lifted the pistol to high port and got ready. I could see the class out of the corner of my right eye, watching with absorbed fascination, the way you watch the last reel of a James Bond movie, when the body count really soars.

A clenched sound, sort of a whimper, came out of my throat.

The door opened, and Irma Bates came back in. She looked around peevishly, not

happy to find everyone staring at her. George Yannick began to giggle and said, "Guess who's coming to dinner." It didn't make anyone else laugh; it was George's own private yuck. The rest of us just went on staring at Irma.

"What are you looking at me for?" she asked crossly, holding the knob. "People do go to the bathroom, didn't you know that?" She shut the door, went to her seat, and sat down primly.

It was almost noon.

Chapter 28

Frank Philbrick was right on time. *Chink*, and he was on the horn. He didn't seem to be puffing and blowing as badly, though. Maybe he wanted to placate me. Or maybe he'd thought over my advice on his speaking voice and had decided to take it. Stranger things have happened. God knows.

"Decker?"

"I'm here."

"Listen, that stray shot that came through the window wasn't intentional. One of the men from Lewiston-"

"Let's not even bother, Frank," I said. "You're embarrassing me and you're embarrassing these people down here, who saw what happened. If you've got any integrity at all, and I'm sure you do, you're probably embarrassing yourself."

Pause. Maybe he was collecting his temper. "Okay. What do you want?"

"Not much. Everybody comes out at one o'clock this afternoon. In exactly"-I checked the wall clock-"fifty-seven minutes by the clock down here. Without a scratch. I guarantee it. "

"Why not now?"

I looked at them. The air felt heavy and nearly solemn, as if between us we had written a contract in someone's blood.

I said carefully, "We have a final piece of business down here. We have to finish getting it on."

"What is it?"

"It doesn't concern you. But we all know what it is." There wasn't a pair of eyes that showed uncertainty. They knew, all right, and that was good, because it would save time and effort. I felt very tired.

"Now, listen carefully, Philbrick, so we have no misunderstanding, while I describe the last act of this little comedy. In about three minutes, someone is going to pull down all the shades in here."

"No way they are, Decker." He sounded very tough.

I let the air whistle through my teeth. What an amazing man he was. No wonder he screwed up all his drive-safely spiels. "When are you going to get it through your head that I'm in charge?" I asked him. "Someone is going to pull the shades, Philbrick, and it won't be me. So if you shoot someone, you can pin your badge to your ass and kiss them both good-bye. "

Nothing.

"Silence gives consent," I said, trying to sound merry. I didn't feel merry. "I'm not going to be able to see what you're doing either, but don't get any clever ideas. If you do, some of these people are going to get hurt. If you sit until one, everything will be fine again and you'll be the big brave policeman everybody knows you are. Now, how 'bout it?"

He paused for a long time. "I'm damned if you *sound* crazy," he said finally.

"How about it?"

"How do I know you're not going to change your mind, Decker? What if you want to try for two o'clock? Or three?"

"How about it?" I asked inexorably.

Another pause. "All right. But if you hurt any of those kids . . ."

"You'll take away my Junior Achiever card. I know. Go away, Frank."

I could feel him wanting to say something warm, wonderful, and witty, something that would summarize his position for the ages, something like: Fuck off, Decker, or: Cram it up y'ass, Decker; but he didn't quite dare. There were, after all, young girls down here. "One o'clock," he repeated. The intercom went dead. A moment later he was walking across the grass.

"What nasty little masturbation fantasies have you got lined up now, Charlie?" Ted asked, still grinning.

"Why don't you just cool it, Ted?" Harmon Jackson asked remotely.

"Who will volunteer to close the shades?" I asked. Several hands went up. I pointed to Melvin Thomas and said, "Do it slowly. They're probably nervous."

Melvin did it slowly. With the canvas shades pulled all the way down to the sills, the room took on a half-dreamlike drabness. Lackluster shadows clustered in the comers like bats that hadn't been getting enough to eat. I didn't like it. The shadows made me feel very jumpy indeed.

I pointed to Tanis Gannon, who sat in the row of seats closest to the door. "Will you favor us with the lights?"

She smiled shyly, like a deb, and went to the light switches. A moment later we had cold fluorescents, which were not much better than the shadows. I wished for the sun and the sight of blue sky, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Tanis went back to her seat and smoothed her skirt carefully behind her thighs as she sat down.

"To use Ted's adequate phrase," I said, "there is only one masturbation fantasy left before we get down to business-or two halves of one whole, if you want to look at it that

way. That is the story of Mr. Carlson, our late teacher of chemistry and physics, the story that good old Tom Denver managed to keep out of the papers but which, as the saying goes, remains in our hearts.

"And how my father and I got it on following my suspension."

I looked at them, feeling a dull, horrid ache in the back of my skull. Somewhere it had all slipped out of my hands. I was reminded of Mickey Mouse as the sorcerer's apprentice in the old Disney cartoon *Fantasia*. I had brought all the brooms to life, but now where was the kindly old magician to say abracadabra backwards and make them go back to sleep?

Stupid, stupid.

Pictures whirled in front of my eyes, hundreds of them, fragments from dreams, fragments from reality. It was impossible to separate one from the other. Lunacy is when you can't see the seams where they stitched the world together anymore. I supposed there was still a chance that I might wake up in my bed, safe and still at least half-sane, the black, irrevocable step not taken (or at least not yet), with all the characters of this particular nightmare retreating back into their subconscious caves. But I wasn't banking on it.

Pat Fitzgerald's brown hands worked on his paper plane like the sad, moving fingers of death itself.

I said:

Chapter 29

There was no one reason why I started carrying the pipe wrench to school.

Now, even after all of this, I can't isolate the major cause. My stomach was hurting all the time, and I used to imagine people were trying to pick fights with me even when they weren't. I was afraid I might collapse during physical-education calisthenics, and wake up to see everybody around me in a ring, laughing and pointing . . . or maybe having a circle jerk. I wasn't sleeping very well. I'd been having some goddamn funny dreams, and it scared me, because quite a few of them were wet dreams, and they weren't the kind that you're supposed to wake up after with a wet sheet. There was one where I was walking through the basement of an old castle that looked like something out of an old Universal Pictures movie. There was a coffin with the top up, and when I looked inside I saw my father with his hands crossed on his chest. He was neatly decked out-pun intended, I guess-in his dress Navy uniform, and there was a stake driven into his crotch. He opened his eyes and smiled at me. His teeth were fangs. In another one my mother was giving me an enema and I was begging her to hurry because Joe was outside waiting for me. Only, Joe was there, looking over her shoulder, and he had his hands on her breasts while she worked the little red rubber bulb that was pumping soapsuds into my ass. There were others, featuring a cast of thousands, but I don't want to go into them. It was all Napoleon XIV stuff.

I found the pipe wrench in the garage, in an old toolbox. It wasn't a very big piece, but there was a rust-clotted socket on one end. And it hefted heavy in my hand. It was winter then, and I used to wear a big bulky sweater to school every day. I have an aunt that sends me two of those every year, birthday and Christmas. She knits them, and they always come down below my hips. So I started to carry the pipe wrench in my back pocket. It went everywhere with me. If anyone ever noticed, they never said. For a little while, it evened things up, but not for long. There were days when I came home feeling like a guitar string that has been tuned five octaves past its proper position. On those days I'd say hi to Mom, then go upstairs and either weep or giggle into my pillow until it felt as if all my guts were going to blow up. That scared me. When you do things like that, you are ready for the loony bin.

The day that I almost killed Mr. Carlson was the third of March. It was raining, and the last of the snow was just trickling away in nasty little rivulets. I guess I don't have to go into what happened, because most of you were there and saw it. I had the pipe wrench in my back pocket. Carlson called me up to do a problem on the board, and I've always hated that-I'm lousy in chemistry. It made me break out in a sweat every time I had to go up to that board.

It was something about weight-stress on an inclined plane, I forget just what, but I fucked it all up. I remember thinking he had his fucking gall, getting me up here in front of everybody to mess around with an inclined-plane deal, which was really a physics problem. He probably had it left over from his last class. And he started to make fun of me. He was asking me if I remembered what two and two made, if I'd ever heard of long division, wonderful invention, he said, ha-ha, a regular Henry Youngman. When I did it wrong for the third time he said, "Well, that's just *woonderful*, Charlie. *Wooonderful*." He sounded just like Dicky Cable. He sounded so much like him that I turned around fast to look. He sounded so much like him that I reached for my back pocket where that pipe wrench was tucked away, before I even thought. My stomach was all drawn up tight, and I thought I was just going to lean down and blow my cookies all over the floor.

I hit the back pocket with my hand, and the pipe wrench fell out. It hit the floor and clanged.

Mr. Carlson looked at it. "Now, just what is that?" he asked, and started to reach for it.

"Don't touch it," I said, and reached down and grabbed it for myself.

"Let me see it, Charlie." He put his hand out for it.

I felt as if I were going in twelve different directions at once. Part of my mind was screaming at me-really, actually screaming, like a child in a dark room where there are horrible, grinning boogeymen.

"Don't," I said. And everybody was *looking* at me. All of them staring.

"You can give it to me or you can give it to Mr. Denver," he said.

And then a funny thing happened to me . . . except, when I think about it, it wasn't funny at all. There must be a line in all of us, a very clear one, just like the line that divides the light side of a planet from the dark. I think they call that line the terminator.

That's a very good word for it. Because at one moment I was freaking out, and at the next I was as cool as a cucumber.

"I'll give it to you, skinner," I said, and thumped the socket end into my palm. "Where do you want it?"

He looked at me with his lips pursed. With those heavy tortoiseshell glasses he wore, he looked like some kind of bug. A very stupid kind. The thought made me smile. I thumped the business end of the wrench into my palm again.

"All right, Charlie," he said. "Give that thing to me and then go up to the office. I'll come up after class."

"Eat shit," I said, and swung the pipe wrench behind me. It thocked against the slate skin of the blackboard, and little chips flew out. There was yellow chalk dust on the socket end, but it didn't seem any worse for the encounter. Mr. Carlson, on the other hand, winced as though it had been his mother I'd hit instead of some fucking torture-machine blackboard. It was quite an insight into his character, I can tell you. So I hit the blackboard again. And again.

"Charlie!"

"It's a treat . . . to beat your meat . . . on the Mississippi mud," I sang, whacking the blackboard in time. Every time I hit it, Mr. Carlson jumped. Every time Mr. Carlson jumped, I felt a little better. Transitional action analysis, baby. Dig it. The Mad Bomber, that poor sad sack from Waterbury, Connecticut, must have been the most well-adjusted American of the last quarter-century.

"Charlie, I'll see that you're suspen-"

I turned around and began to whack away at the chalk ledge. I had already made a hell of a hole in the board itself; it wasn't such a tough board at that, not once you had its number. Erasers and chalk fell on the floor, puffing up dust. I was just on the brink of realizing you could have anybody's number if you held a big enough stick when Mr. Carlson grabbed me.

I turned around and hit him. Just once. There was a lot of blood. He fell on the floor, and his tortoiseshell glasses fell off and skated about eight feet. I think that's what broke the spell, the sight of those glasses sliding across the chalk-dusty floor, leaving his face bare and defenseless, looking the way it must look when he was asleep. I dropped the pipe wrench on the floor and walked out without looking back. I went upstairs and told them what I had done.

Jerry Kesserling picked me up in a patrol car and they sent Mr. Carlson to Central Maine General Hospital, where an X ray showed that he had a hairline fracture just above the frontal lobe. I understand they picked four splinters of bone out of his brain. A few dozen more, and they could have put them together with airplane glue so they spelled ASSHOLE and given it to him for his birthday with my compliments.

There were conferences. Conferences with my father, with good old Tom, with Don Grace, and with every possible combination and permutation of the above. I conferenced with everybody but Mr. Fazio, the janitor. Through it all my father kept admirably calm-my mother would come out of the house and was on tranquilizers-but every now

and then during these civilized conversations, he would turn an icy, speculative eye on me that I knew eventually we would be having our own conference. He could have killed me cheerfully with his bare hands. In a simpler time, he might have done it.

There was a very touching apology to a bandage-wrapped, black-eyed Mr. Carlson and his stony-eyed wife (" . . . distraught . . . haven't been myself . . . sorrier than I can say . . . "), but I got no apology for being badgered in front of the chemistry class as I stood sweating at the blackboard with all the numbers looking like fifth-century Punic. No apology from Dicky Cable or Dana Collette. Or from your Friendly Neighborhood Creaking Thing who told me through tight lips on the way home from the hospital that he wanted to see me out in the garage after I had changed my clothes.

I thought about that as I took off my sport jacket and my best slacks and put on jeans and an old chambray workshirt. I thought about not going-just heading off down the road instead. I thought about just going out and taking it. Something in me rebelled at that. I had been suspended. I had spent five hours in a holding cell in Placerville Center before my father and my hysterical mother ("Why did you do it, Charlie? Why? Why?") forked over the bail money-the charges, at the joint agreement of the school, the cops, and Mr. Carlson (not his wife; she had been hoping I'd get at least ten years), had been dropped later.

One way or the other, I thought my father and I owed each other something. And so I went out to the garage.

It's a musty, oil-smelling place, but completely trim. Shipshape. It's his place, and he keeps it that way. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Yoho-ho, matey. The riding lawnmower placed neatly with its nose against the wall. The gardening and landscaping tools neatly hung up on nails. Jar tops nailed to the roof beams so jars of nails could be screwed into them at eye level. Stacks of old magazines neatly tied up with twine-Argosy, *Bluebook*, *True*, *Saturday Evening Post*. The ranch wagon neatly parked facing out.

He was standing there in an old faded pair of twill khakis and a hunting shirt. For the first time, I noticed how old he was starting to look. His belly had always been as flat as a two-by-four, but now it was bulging out a little-too many beers down at Gogan's. There seemed to be more veins in his nose burst out into little purple deltas under the skin, and the lines around his mouth and eyes were deeper.

"What's your mother doing?" he asked me.

"Sleeping, " I said. She had been sleeping a lot, with the help of a Librium prescription. Her breath was sour and dry with it. It smelled like dreams gone rancid.

"Good," he said, nodding. "That's how we want it, isn't it?"

He started taking off his belt.

"I'm going to take the hide off you," he said.

"No," I said. "You're not."

He paused, the belt half out of the loops. "What?"

"If you come at me with that thing, I'm going to take it away from you," I said. My

voice was trembling and uneven. "I'm going to do it for the time you threw me on the ground when I was little and then lied about it to Mom. I'm going to do it for every time you belted me across the face for doing something wrong, without giving me a second chance. I'm going to do it for that hunting trip when you said you'd slit her nose open if you ever caught her with another man."

He had gone a deadly pale. Now it was his voice trembling. "You gutless, spineless wonder. Do you think you can blame this on me? You go tell that to that pansy psychiatrist if you want to, that one with the pipe. Don't try it on me."

"You stink," I said. "You fucked up your marriage and you fucked up your only child. You come on and try to take me if you think you can. I'm out of school. Your wife's turning into a pinhead. You're nothing but a booze-hound." I was crying. "You come on and try it, you dumb fuck. "

"You better stop it, Charlie," he said. "Before I stop just wanting to punish you and start wanting to kill you. "

"Go ahead and try," I said, crying harder. "I've wanted to kill you for thirteen years. I hate your guts. You suck. "

So then he came at me like something out of a slave-exploitation movie, one end of his Navy-issue belt wrapped in his fist, the other end, the buckle end, dangling down. He swung it at me, and I ducked. It went by my shoulder and hit the hood of his Country Squire wagon with a hard clank, scoring the finish. His tongue was caught between his teeth, and his eyes were bulging. He looked the way he had that day I broke the storm windows. Suddenly I wondered if that was the way he looked when he made love to my mother (or what passed for it); if that's what she had to look up at while she was pinned under him. The thought froze me with such a bolt of disgusted revelation that I forgot to duck the next one.

The buckle came down alongside my face, ripped into my cheek, pulling it open in a long furrow. It bled a lot. It felt like the side of my face and neck had been doused in warm water.

"Oh, God," he said. "Oh, God, Charlie."

My eye had watered shut on that side, but I could see him coming toward me with the other. I stepped to meet him and grabbed the end of the belt and pulled. He wasn't expecting it. It jerked him off balance, and when he started to run a little to catch it back, I tripped him up and he thumped to the oil-stained concrete floor. Maybe he had forgotten I wasn't four anymore, or nine years old and cowering in a tent, having to take a whiz while he yucked it up with his friends. Maybe he had forgotten or never knew that little boys grow up remembering every blow and word of scorn, that they grow up and want to eat their fathers alive.

A harsh little grunt escaped him as he hit the concrete. He opened his hands to break his fall, and I had the belt. I doubled it and brought it down on his broad khaki ass. It made a loud smack, and it probably didn't hurt much, but he cried out in surprise, and I smiled. It hurt my cheek to smile. He had really beaten the shit out of my cheek.

He got up warily. "Charlie, put that down," he said. "Let's take you to the doctor and

get that stitched up. "

"You better say yes-sir to the Marines you see if your own kid can knock you down," I said.

That made him mad, and he lunged at me, and I hit him across the face with the belt. He put his hands up to his face, and I dropped the belt and hit him in the stomach as hard as I could. The air whiffled out of him, and he doubled over. His belly was soft, even softer than it had looked. I didn't know whether to feel disgust or pity suddenly. It occurred to me that the man I really wanted to hurt was safely out of my reach, standing behind a shield of years.

He straightened up, looking pale and sick. There was a red mark across his forehead where I had hit him with the belt.

"Okay," he said, and turned around. He pulled a hardhead rake off the wall. "If that's how you want it. "

I reached out beside me and pulled the hatchet off the wall and held it up with one hand.

"That's how I want it," I said. "Take one step, and I'll cut your head off, if I can. "

So we stood there, trying to figure out if we meant it. Then he put the take back, and I put the hatchet back. There was no love in it, no love in the way we looked at each other. He didn't say, "*If you'd had the guts to do that five years ago, none of this would have happened, son . . . come on, I'll take you down to Gogan's and buy you a beer in the back room.*" And I didn't say I was sorry. It happened because I got big enough, that was all. None of it changed anything. Now I wish it was him I'd killed, if I had to kill anyone. This thing on the floor between my feet is a classic case of misplaced aggression.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get that stitched up."

"I can drive myself. "

"I'll drive you."

And so he did. We went down to the emergency room in Brunswick, and the doctor put six stitches in my cheek, and I told him that I had tripped over a chunk of stove wood in the garage and cut my cheek on a fireplace screen my dad was blacking. We told Mom the same thing. And that was the end of it. We never discussed it again. He never tried to tell me what to do again. We lived in the same house, but we walked in wide circles around each other, like a pair of old toms. If I had to guess, I'd say he'll get along without me very well . . . like the song says.

During the second week of April they sent me back to school with the warning that my case was still under consideration and I would have to go see Mr. Grace every day. They acted like they were doing me a favor. Some favor. It was like being popped back into the cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

It didn't take as long to go bad this time. The way people looked at me in the halls. The way I knew they were talking about me in the teachers' rooms. The way nobody would even talk to me anymore except Joe. And I wasn't very cooperative with Grace.

Yes, folks, things got bad very fast indeed, and they went from bad to worse. But I've always been fairly quick on the uptake, and I don't forget many lessons that I've learned well. I certainly learned the lesson about how you could get anyone's number with a big enough stick. My father picked up the hardhead take, presumably planning to trepan my skull with it, but when I picked up the hatchet, he put it back.

I never saw that pipe wrench again, but what the fuck. I didn't need that anymore, because that stick wasn't big enough. I'd known about the pistol in my father's desk for ten years. Near the end of April I started to carry it to school.

Chapter 30

I looked up at the wall clock. It was 12:30. I drew in all my mental breath and got ready to sprint down the homestretch.

"So ends the short, brutal saga of Charles Everett Decker," I said. "Questions?"

Susan Brooks said very quietly in the dim room, "I'm sorry for you, Charlie." It was like the crack of damnation.

Don Lordi was looking at me in a hungry way that reminded me of Jaws for the second time that day. Sylvia was smoking the last cigarette in her pack. Pat Fitzgerald labored on his plane, crimping the paper wings, the usual funny-sly expression gone from his face, replaced by something that was wooden and carved. Sandra Cross still seemed to be in a pleasant daze. Even Ted Jones seemed to have his mind on other matters, perhaps on a door he had forgotten to latch when he was ten, or a dog he might once have kicked.

"If that's all, then it brings us to the final order of business in our brief but enlightening stay together," I said. "Have you learned anything today? Who knows the final order of business? Let's see."

I watched them. There was nothing. I was afraid it wouldn't come, couldn't come. So tight, so frozen, all of them. When you're five and you hurt, you make a big noise unto the world. At ten you whimper. But by the time you make fifteen you begin to eat the poisoned apples that grow on your own inner tree of pain. It's the Western Way of Enlightenment. You begin to cram your fists into your mouth to stifle the screams. You bleed on the inside. But they had gone so far . . .

And then Pig Pen looked up from his pencil. He was smiling a small, red-eyed smile, the smile of a ferret. His hand crept up into the air, the fingers still clenched around his cheap writing instrument. Be-bop-a-lula, she's my baby.

So then it was easier for the rest of them. One electrode begins to arc and sputter, and-yoiks!-look, professor, the monster walks tonight.

Susan Brooks put her hand up next. Then there were several together: Sandra raised hers, Grace Stanner raised hers-delicately-and Irma Bates did likewise. Corky. Don. Pat.

Sarah Pasterne. Some smiling a little, most of them solemn. Tanis. Nancy Caskin. Dick Keene and Mike Gavin, both renowned in the Placerville Greyhounds' backfield. George and Harmon, who played chess together in study hall. Melvin Thomas. Anne Lasky. At the end all of them were up-all but one.

I called on Carol Granger, because I thought she deserved her moment. You would have thought that she might have had the most trouble making the switch, crossing the terminator, so to speak, but she had done it almost effortlessly, like a girl shedding her clothes in the bushes after dusk had come to the class picnic.

"Carol?" I said. "What's the answer?"

She thought about how to word it. She put a finger up to the small dimple beside her mouth as she thought, and there was a furrow in her milk-white brow.

"We have to help," she said. "We have to help show Ted where he has gone wrong. "

That was a very tasteful way to put it, I thought.

"Thank you, Carol," I said.

She blushed.

I looked at Ted, who had come back to the here and now. He was glaring again, but in kind of a confused way.

"I think the best thing," I said, "would be if I became a sort of combination judge and public attorney. Everyone else can be witnesses; and of course, you're the defendant, Ted."

Ted laughed wildly. "You," he said. "Oh, Jesus, Charlie. Who do you think you are? You're crazy as a bat. "

"Do you have a statement?" I asked him.

"You're not going to play tricks with me, Charlie. I'm not saying a darn thing. I'll save my speech for when we get out of here." His eyes swept his classmates accusingly and distrustfully. "And I'll have a lot to say."

"You know what happens to squealers, Rocco," I said in a tough Jimmy Cagney voice. I brought the pistol up suddenly, pointed it at his head, and screamed "BANG!"

Ted shrieked in surprise.

Anne Lasky laughed merrily.

"Shut up! " Ted yelled at her.

"Don't you tell me to shut up," she said. "What are you so afraid of?"

"What . . . ?" His jaw dropped. The eyes bulged. In that moment I felt a great deal of pity for him. The Bible says the snake tempted Eve with the apple. What would have happened if he had been forced to eat it himself?

Ted half-rose from his seat, trembling. "What am I . . . ? What am I . . . ?" He pointed a shivering finger at Anne, who did not cringe at all. "YOU GODDAMN SILLY BITCH! HE HAS GOT A GUN! HE IS CRAZY! HE HAS SHOT TWO PEOPLE! DEAD! HE IS

HOLDING US HERE!"

"Not me, he isn't," Irma said. "I could have walked right out."

"We've learned some very good things about ourselves, Ted," Susan said coldly. "I don't think you're being very helpful, closing yourself in and trying to be superior. Don't you realize that this could be the most meaningful experience of our lives?"

"He's a killer," Ted said tightly. "He killed two people. This isn't TV. Those people aren't going to get up and go off to their dressing rooms to wait for the next take. They're *really dead*. He *killed* them."

"Soul killer!" Pig Pen hissed suddenly.

"Where the fuck do you think you get off?" Dick Keene asked. "All this just shakes the shit out of your tight little life, doesn't it? You didn't think anybody'd find out about you banging Sandy, did you? Or your mother. Ever think about her? You think you're some kind of white knight. I'll tell you what you are. You're a cocksucker."

"Witness! Witness!" Grace cried merrily, waving her hand. "Ted Jones buys girlie magazines. I've seen him in Ronnie's Variety doing it."

"Beat off much, Ted?" Harmon asked. He was smiling viciously.

"And you were a Star Scout," Pat said dolorously.

Ted twitched from them like a bear that has been tied to a post for the villagers' amusement. "*I don't masturbate!*" he yelled.

"Right," Corky said disgustedly.

"I bet you really stink in bed," Sylvia said. She looked at Sandra. "Did he stink in bed?"

"We didn't do it in bed," Sandra said. "We were in a car. And it was over so quick . . ."

"Yeah, that's what I figured."

"All right," Ted said. His face was sweaty. He stood up. "I'm walking out of here. You're all crazy. I'll tell them . . ." He stopped and added with a strange and touching irrelevancy, "I never meant what I said about my mother." He swallowed. "You can shoot me, Charlie, but you can't stop me. I'm going out."

I put the gun down on the blotter. "I have no intention of shooting you, Ted. But let me remind you that you haven't really done your duty."

"That's right," Dick said, and after Ted had taken two steps toward the door, Dick came out of his seat, took two running steps of his own, and collared him. Ted's face dissolved into utter amazement.

"Hey, Dick," he said.

"Don't you Dick me, you son of a bitch."

Ted tried to give him an elbow in the belly, and then his arms were pinned behind him, one by Pat and one by George Yannick.

Sandra Cross got slowly out of her seat and walked to him, demurely, like a girl on a country road. Ted's eyes were bulging, half-mad. I could taste what was coming, the way you can taste thunderheads before summer rain . . . and the hail that comes with it sometimes.

She stopped before him, and an expression of sly, mocking devotion crossed her face and was gone. She put a hand out, touched the collar of his shirt. The muscles of his neck bunched as he jerked away from her. Dick and Pat and George held him like springs. She reached slowly inside the open collar of the khaki shirt and began to pull it open, popping the buttons. There was no sound in the room but the tiny, flat tic-tic as the buttons fell to the floor and rolled. He was wearing no undershirt. His flesh was bare and smooth. She moved as if to kiss it, and he spit in her face.

Pig Pen smiled from over Sandra's shoulder, the grubby court jester with the king's paramour. "I could put your eyes out," he said. "Do you know that? Pop them out just like olives. *Poink! Poink!*"

"Let me go! Charlie, make them let me-"

"He cheats," Sarah Pasterne said loudly. "He always looks at my answer sheet in French. Always."

Sandra stood before him, now looking down, a sweet, murmurous smile barely curving the bow of her lips. The first two fingers of her right hand touched the slick spittle on her cheek lightly.

"Here," Billy Sawyer whispered. "Here's something for you, handsome." He crept up behind Ted on tippy-toe and suddenly pulled his hair.

Ted screamed.

"He cheats on the laps in gym, too," Don said harshly. "You really quit football because you dint have no sauce, dintchoo?"

"Please," Ted said. "Please, Charlie." He had begun to grin oddly, and his eyeballs were shiny with tears. Sylvia had joined the little circle around him. She might have been the one who goosed him, but I couldn't really see.

They were moving around him in a slow kind of dance that was nearly beautiful. Fingers pinched and pulled, questions were asked, accusations made. Irma Bates pushed a ruler down the back of his pants. Somehow his shirt was ripped off and flew to the back of the room in two tatters. Ted was breathing in great, high whoops. Anne Lasky began to rub the bridge of his nose with an eraser. Corky scurried back to his desk like a good mouse, found a bottle of Carter's ink, and dumped it in his hair. Hands flew out like birds and rubbed it in briskly.

Ted began to weep and talk in strange, unconnected phrases.

"Soul brother?" Pat Fitzgerald asked. He was smiling, whacking Ted's bare shoulders lightly with a notebook in cadence. "Be my soul brother? That right? Little Head Start? Little free lunch? That right? Hum? Hum? Brothers? Be soul brothers?"

"Got your Silver Star, hero," Dick said, and raised his knee, placing it expertly in the big muscle of Ted's thigh.

Ted screamed. His eyes bulged and rolled toward me, the eyes of a horse staved on a high fence. "*Please . . . pleeeese, Charlie . . . pleeeeeeeeee-*" And then Nancy Caskin stuffed a large wad of notebook paper into his mouth. He tried to spit it out, but Sandra rammed it back in.

"That will teach you to spit," sire said reproachfully.

Harmon knelt and pulled off one of his shoes. He rubbed it in Ted's inky hair and then slammed the sole against Ted's chest. It left a huge, grotesque footprint.

"Admit one!" he crowed.

Tentatively, almost demurely, Carol stepped on Ted's stockinged foot and twisted her heel. Something in his foot snapped. Ted blubbered.

He sounded like he was begging somewhere behind the paper, but you couldn't really tell. Pig Pen darted in spiderlike and suddenly bit his nose.

There was a sudden black pause. I noticed that I had turned the pistol around so that the muzzle was pointed at my head, but of course that would not be at all cricket. I unloaded it and put it carefully in the top drawer, on top of Mrs. Underwood's plan book. I was quite confident that this had not been in today's lesson plan at all.

They were smiling at Ted, who hardly looked human at all anymore. In that brief flick of time, they looked like gods, young, wise, and golden. Ted did not look like a god. Ink ran down his cheeks in blue-black teardrops. The bridge of his nose was bleeding, and one eye glared disjointedly toward no place. Paper protruded through his teeth. He breathed in great white snuffles of air.

I had time to think: *We have got it on. Now we have got it all the way on.*

They fell on him.

Chapter 31

I had Corky pull up the shades before they left. He did it with quick, jerky motions. There were now what seemed like hundreds of cruisers out there, thousands of people. It was three minutes of one.

The sunlight hurt my eyes.

"Good-bye," I said.

"God-bye," Sandra said.

They all said good-bye, I think, before they went out. Their footfalls made a tunny, echoy noise going down the hall. I closed my eyes and imagined a giant centipede wearing Georgia Giants on each of its one hundred feet. When I opened them again, they were walking across the bright green of the lawn. I wished they had used the sidewalk; even after all that had happened, it was still a hell of a lawn.

The last thing I remember seeing of them was that their hands were streaked with black ink.

People enveloped them.

One of the reporters, throwing caution to the winds, eluded three policemen and raced down to where they were, pell-mell.

The last one to be swallowed up was Carol Granger. I thought she looked back, but I couldn't tell for sure. Philbrick started to walk stolidly toward the school. Flashbulbs were popping all over the place.

Time was short. I went over to where Ted was leaning against the green cinderblock wall. He was sitting with his legs splayed out below the bulletin board, which was full of notices from the Mathematical Society of America, which nobody ever read, Peanuts comic strips (the acme of humor, in the late Mrs. Underwood's estimation), and a poster showing Bertrand Russell and a quote: "Gravity alone proves the existence of God. " But any undergraduate in creation could have told Bertrand that it has been conclusively proved that there is no gravity; the earth just sucks.

I squatted beside Ted. I pulled the crumpled wad of math paper out of his mouth and laid it aside. Ted began to drool.

"Ted. "

He looked past me, over my shoulder.

"Ted," I said, and patted his cheek gently.

He shrank away. His eyes rolled wildly.

"You're going to get better," I said. "You're going to forget this day ever happened. "

Ted made mewling sounds.

"Or maybe you won't. Maybe you'll go on from here, Ted. Build from this. Is that such an impossible idea?"

It was, for both of us. And being so close to Ted had begun to make me very nervous.

The intercom chinked open. It was Philbrick. He was puffing and blowing again.

"Decker?"

"Right here."

"Come out with your hands up."

I sighed. "You come down and get me, Philbrick, old sport. I'm pretty goddamn tired. This psycho business is a hell of a drain on the glands."

"All right," he said, tough. "They'll be shooting in the gas canisters in just about one minute."

"Better not, " I said. I looked at Ted. Ted didn't look back; he just kept on looking into emptiness. Whatever he saw there must have been mighty tasty, because he was still drooling down his chin. "You forgot to count noses. There's still one of them down here. He's hurt." That was something of an understatement.

His voice was instantly wary. "Who?"

"Ted Jones."

"How is he hurt?"

"Stubbed his toe. "

"He's not there. You're lying."

"I wouldn't lie to you, Philbrick, and jeopardize our beautiful relationship. "

No answer. Puff, snort, blow.

"Come on down," I invited. "The gun is unloaded. It's in a desk drawer. We can play a couple of cribbage hands, then you can take me out and tell all the papers how you did it single-handed. You might even make the cover of *Time* if we work it right. "

Chink. He was off the com.

I closed my eyes and put my face in my hands. All I saw was gray. Nothing but gray. Not even a flash of white light. For no reason at all, I thought of New Year's Eve, when all those people crowd into Times Square and scream like jackals as the lighted ball slides down the pole, ready to shed its thin party glare on three hundred and sixty-five new days in this best of all possible worlds. I have always wondered what it would be like to be caught in one of those crowds, screaming and not able to hear your own voice, your individuality momentarily wiped out and replaced with the blind empathic overslop of the crowd's lurching, angry anticipation, hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder with no one in particular.

I began to cry.

When Philbrick stepped through the door, he glanced down at the drooling Tedthing and then up at me. "What in the name of God did you . . . ?" he began.

I made as if to grab something behind Mrs. Underwood's desktop row of books and plants. "Here it comes, you shit cop!" I screamed.

He shot me three times.

Chapter 32

THOSE WHO WOULD BE INFORMED IN THIS MATTER DRAW YE NEAR
AND KNOW YE THEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

CHARLES EVERETT DECKER, convicted in Superior Court this day, August 27, 1976, of the willful murder of *Jean Alice Underwood*, and also convicted this day, August 27, 1976, of the willful murder of *John Downes Vance*, both human beings.

It has been determined by five state psychiatrists that Charles Everett Decker cannot at this time be held accountable for his actions, by reason of insanity. It is therefore the decision of this court that he be remanded to the Augusta State Hospital, where he will be

held in treatment until such time as he can be certified responsible to answer for his acts.

To this writ have I set my hand.

(Signed)

(Judge) Samuel K. N. Deleavney

In other words, until shit sticks on the moon, baby.

Chapter 33

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

FROM: Dr. Andersen

TO: Rich Gossage, Admin. Wing

SUBJECT: Theodore Jones

Rich,

Am still loath to try the shock treatments on this boy, altho I can't explain it even to myself-call it hunch. Of course I can't justify hunch to the board of directors, or to Jones's uncle, who is footing the bill, which, in a private institution like Woodlands, don't come cheap, as we both know. If there is no movement in the next four to six weeks, we'll go on with the standard electroshock therapy, but for now I would like to run the standard drug schedule again, plus a few not so standard-I am thinking of both synthetic mescaline and psyilocybin, if you concur. Will Greenberger has had a great deal of success with semi-catatonic patients as you know, and these two hallucinogens have played a major part in his therapy.

Jones is such a strange case-goddammit, if we only could be sure what had gone on in that classroom after that Decker individual had the shades pulled down!

Diagnosis hasn't changed. Flat-line catatonic state w /some signs of deterioration.

I might as well admit to you up front, Rich, that I am not as hopeful for this boy as I once was.

November 3, 1976

Chapter 34

December 5, 1976

Dear Charlie,

They tell me you can have mail now, so I thought I would drop you a line. Maybe you noticed this is postmarked Boston-your old buddy finally made the Big Time, and I'm taking sixteen hours here at B.U. (that stands for Bullshit Unlimited). It's all pretty slushy except for my English class. The instructor assigned us a book called *The Postman Always Rings Twice* that was really good, and I got an A on the exam. It's by James Cain, did you ever read it? I'm thinking about majoring in English, how's that for a laugh? Must be your influence. And you were always the brains of the combination.

I saw your mom just before I left Placerville, and she said you were just about all healed up and the last of the drains were out three weeks ago. I was sure glad to hear it. She said you aren't talking much. That doesn't sound like you, skinner. It would sure be a loss to the world if you clammed up and just scrunched in a comer all day.

Although I haven't been home since the semester started, Sandy Cross wrote me a letter with a lot of news about all the people at home. (Will the bastards censor this part? I bet they read all your mail.) Sandy herself decided not to go to college this year. She's just sort of hanging around, waiting for something to happen, I guess. I might as well tell you that I dated her a couple of times last summer, but she just seemed kind of distant. She asked me to say "hi" to you, so "hi" from Sandy.

Maybe you know what happened to Pig Pen, no one in town can believe it, about him and Dick Keene [following has been censored as possibly upsetting to patient], so you can never tell what people are going to do, can you?

Carol Granger's validictory (sp?) speech was reprinted by *Seventeen* magazine. As I remember, it was on "Self-Integrity and a Normal Response to It, " or some such happy horseshit. We would have had some fun ranking that one out, right, Charlie?

Oh, yeah, and Irma Bates is going out with some "hippie" from Lewiston. I guess they were even in a demonstration when Robt. Dole came to Portland to campaign in the presidential election stuff. They were arrested and then let go when Dole flew out. Mrs. Bates must be having birds about it. Can't you just see Irma trying to brain Robt. Dole with a Gus Hall campaign sign? Ha-ha, that just kills me. We would have had some laughs over that one, too, Charlie. God, I miss your old cracked ass sometimes.

Gracie Stanner, that cute little chick, is going to get married, and that's also a local sensation. It boggles the mind. [Following has been censored as possibly upsetting to patient.] Anyway, you can never tell what sort of monkeyshines people are going to get up to, right?

Well, guess that's all for now. I hope they are treating you right, Ferd, as you've got to be out of there as soon as they'll let you. And if they start letting you have visitors, I want you to know that I will be the first in line.

There are a lot of us pulling for you, Charlie. Pulling hard.

People haven't forgotten. You know what I mean.

You have to believe that.

With love, your friend,
(Joe McK)

Chapter 35

I haven't had any bad dreams for two weeks, almost. I do lots of jigsaw puzzles. They give me custard and I hate it, but I eat it just the same. They think I like it. So I have a secret again. Finally I have a secret again.

My mom sent me the yearbook. I haven't unwrapped it yet, but maybe I will. Maybe next week I will. I think I could look at all the senior pictures and not tremble a bit. Pretty soon. Just as soon as I can make myself believe that there won't be any black streaks on their hands. That their hands will be clean. With no ink. Maybe next week I'll be completely sure of that.

About the custard: it's only a little secret, but having a secret makes me feel better. Like a human being again.

That's the end. I have to turn off the light now. Good night.

ROADWORK

Richard Bachman

[05 feb 2001 – scanned for #bookz, proofread and released – v1]

What happens when one good-and-angry man fights back is murder - and then some...

Prologue

I don't know why. You don't know why. Most likely God don't know why, either. It's just Government business, that's all.

-Man-in-the-street interview concerning
Viet Nam, circa 1967

But Viet Nam was over and the country was getting on.

On this hot August afternoon in 1972, the WHLM Newsmobile was parked near Westgate at the end of the Route 784 expressway. There was a small crowd around a bunting-covered podium that had been hurriedly tossed together; the bunting was thin flesh on a skeleton of naked planks. Behind it, at the top of a grassy embankment, were the highway tollbooths. In front of it, open, marshy land stretched toward the suburban hem of the city's outskirts.

A young reporter named Dave Albert was doing a series of man-on-the-street interviews while he and his co-workers waited for the mayor and the governor to arrive for the ground-breaking ceremony.

He held the microphone toward an elderly man wearing tinted spectacles.

"Well," the elderly man said, looking tremulously into the camera, "I think it's a great thing for the city. We've needed this a long time. It's . . . a great thing for the city." He swallowed, aware that his mind was broadcasting echos of itself, helpless to stop, hypnotized by the grinding, Cyclopean eye of posterity. "Great," he added limply.

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much."

"Do you think they'll use it? On the news tonight?"

Albert flashed a professional, meaningless smile. "Hard to tell, sir. There's a good chance."

His sound man pointed up to the tollgate turnaround, where the governor's Chrysler Imperial had just pulled up, winking and gleaming like a chrome-inlaid eight ball in the summer sunshine. Albert nodded back, held up a single finger. He and the cameraman approached a guy in a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. The guy was looking moodily at

the podium.

"Would you mind stating your opinion of all this, Mr . . . ?"

"Dawes. No, I don't mind." His voice was low, pleasant.

"Speed," the cameraman murmured.

The man in the white shirt said, still pleasantly, "I think it's a piece of shit."

The cameraman grimaced. Albert nodded, looking at the man in the white shirt reproachfully, and then made cutting gestures with the first two fingers of his right hand.

The elderly gentleman was looking at this tableau with real horror. Above, up by the tollbooths, the governor was getting out of his Imperial. His green tie was resplendent in the sun.

The man in the white shirt said politely: "Will that be on the six or eleven o'clock news?"

"Ho-ho, fells, you're a riot, " Albert said sourly, and walked away to catch the governor. The cameraman trailed after him. The man in the white shirt watched the governor as he came carefully down the grassy slope.

Albert met the man in the white shirt again seventeen months later, but since neither of them remembered that they had met before, it might as well have been the first time.

PART ONE

November

Late last night the rain was knocking on my window I moved across the darkened room and in the lampglow I thought I saw down in the street The spirit of the century Telling us that we're all standing on the border.

-Al Stewart

November 20, 1973

He kept doing things without letting himself think about them. Safer that way. It was like having a circuit breaker in his head, and it thumped into place every time part of him tried to ask: *But why are you doing this?* Part of his mind would go dark. Hey Georgie, who turned out the lights? Whoops, I did. Something screwy in the wiring, I guess. Just a sec. Reset the switch. The lights go back on. But the thought is gone. Everything is fine. Let us continue, Freddy-where were we?

He was walking to the bus stop when he saw the sign that said:

AMMO HARVEY'S GUN SHOP AMMO
Remington Winchester Colt Smith & Wesson
HUNTERS WELCOME

It was snowing a little out of a gray sky. It was the first snow of the year and it landed on the pavement like white splotches of baking soda, then melted. He saw a little boy in a

red knitted cap go by with his mouth open and his tongue out to catch a flake. It's just going to melt, Freddy, he thought at the kid, but the kid went on anyway, with his head cocked back at the sky.

He stopped in front of Harvey's Gun Shop, hesitating. There was a rack of late edition newspapers outside the door, and the headline said:

SHAKY CEASE-FIRE HOLDS

Below that, on the rack, was a smudged white sign that said:

PLEASE PAY FOR YOUR PAPER!

THIS IS AN HONOR RACK, DEALER MUST PAY FOR ALL PAPERS

It was warm inside. The shop was long but not very wide. There was only a single aisle. Inside the door on the left was a glass case filled with boxes of ammunition. He recognized the .22 cartridges immediately, because he'd had a .22 single-shot rifle as a boy in Connecticut. He had wanted that rifle for three years and when he finally got it he couldn't think of anything to do with it. He shot at cans for a while, then shot a blue jay. The jay hadn't been a clean kill. It sat in the snow surrounded by a pink blood stain, its beak slowly opening and closing. After that he had put the rifle up on hooks and it had stayed there for three years until he sold it to a kid up the street for nine dollars and a carton of funny books.

The other ammunition was less familiar. Thirty-thirty, thirty-ought-six, and some that looked like scale-model howitzer shells. What animals do you kill with those? he wondered. Tigers? Dinosaurs? Still it fascinated him, sitting there inside the glass case like penny candy in a stationery store.

The clerk or proprietor was talking to a fat man in green pants and a green fatigue shirt. The shirt had flap pockets. They were talking about a pistol that was lying on top of another glass case, dismembered. The fat man thumbed back the slide and they both peered into the oiled chamber. The fat man said something and the clerk or proprietor laughed.

"Autos always jam? You got that from your father, Mac. Admit it."

"Harry, you're full of bullshit up to your eyebrows."

You're full of it, Fred, he thought. Right up to your eyebrows. You know it, Fred?

Fred said he knew it.

On the right was a glass case that ran the length of the shop. It was full of rifles on pegs. He was able to pick out the double-barreled shotguns, but everything else was a mystery to him. Yet some people—the two at the far counter, for example, had mastered this world as easily as he had mastered general accounting in college.

He walked further into the store and looked into a case filled with pistols. He saw some air guns, a few .22's, a .38 with a wood-grip handle, .45's, and a gun he recognized as a .44 Magnum, the gun Dirty Harry had earned in that movie. He had heard Ron Stone and Vinnie Mason talking about that movie at the laundry, and Vinnie had said: They'd never let a cop carry a gun like that in the city. You can blow a hole in a man a mile away with one of those.

The fat man, Mac, and the clerk or proprietor, Harry (as in Dirty Harry), had the gun back together.

"You give me a call when you get that Menschler in," Mac said.

"I will . . . but your prejudice against autos is irrational," Harry said. (He decided Harry must be the proprietor-a clerk would never call a customer irrational.) "Have you got to have the Cobra next week?"

"I'd like it," Mac said.

"I don't promise."

"You never do . . . but you're the best goddam gunsmith in the city, and you know it."

"Of course I do. "

Mac patted the gun on top of the glass case and turned to go. Mac bumped into him-Watch it, Mac. *Smile when you do* that-and then went on to the door. The paper was tucked under Mac's arm, and he could read:

SHAKY CEA

Harry turned to him, still smiling and shaking his head. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so. But I warn you in advance, I know nothing about guns."

Harry shrugged. "There's a law you should? Is it for someone else? For Christmas?"

"Yes, that's just right," he said, seizing on it. "I've got this cousin-Nick, his name is. Nick Adams. He lives in Michigan and he's got yea guns. You know. Loves to hunt, but it's more than that. It's sort of a, well, a-

"Hobby?" Harry asked, smiling.

"Yes, that's it." He had been about to say *fetish*. His eyes dropped to the cash register, where an aged bumper sticker was pasted on. The bumper sticker said:

IF GUNS ARE OUTLAWED, ONLY OUTLAWS WILL HAVE GUNS

He smiled at Harry and said, "That's very true, you know.

"Sure it is," Harry said. "This cousin of yours . . ."

"Well, it's kind of a one-upmanship type of thing. He knows how much I like boating and I'll be damned if he didn't up and give me an Evinrude sixty-horsepower motor last Christmas. He sent it by REA express. I gave him a hunting jacket. I felt sort of like a horse's ass."

Harry nodded sympathetically.

"Well, I got a letter from him about six weeks ago, and he sounds just like a kid with a free pass to the circus. It seems that he and about six buddies chipped in together and bought themselves a trip to this place in Mexico, sort of like a freefire zone-

"A no-limit hunting preserve?"

"Yeah, that's it." He chuckled a little. "You shoot as much as you want. They stock it, you know. Deer, antelope, bear, bison. Everything."

"Was it Boca Rio?"

"I really don't remember. I think the name was longer than that."

Harry's eyes had gone slightly dreamy. "That guy that just left and myself and two others went to Boca Rio in 1965. I shot a zebra. A goddam zebra! I got it mounted in my game room at home. That was the best time I ever had in my life, bar none. I envy your cousin."

"Well, I talked it over with my wife," he said, "and she said go ahead. We had a very good year at the laundry. I work at the Blue Ribbon Laundry over in Western. "

"Yes, I know where that is."

He felt that he could go on talking to Harry all day, for the rest of the year, embroidering the truth and the lies into a beautiful, gleaming tapestry. Let the world go by. Fuck the gas shortage and the high price of beef and the shaky ceasefire. Let there be talk of cousins that never were, right, Fred? Right on, Georgie.

"We got the Central Hospital account this year, as well as the mental institution, and also three new motels."

"Is the Quality Motor Court on Franklin Avenue one of yours?"

"Yes, it is."

"I've stayed there a couple of times," Harry said. "The sheets were always very clean. Funny, you never think about who washes the sheets when you stay at a motel."

"Well, we had a good year. And so I thought, maybe I can get Nick a rifle and a pistol. I know he's always wanted a .44 Magnum, I've heard him mention that one-"

Harry brought the Magnum up and laid it carefully on top of the glass case. He picked it up. He liked the heft of it. It felt like business.

He put it back down on the glass case.

"The chambering on that-" Harry began.

He laughed and held up a hand. "Don't sell me. I'm sold. An ignoramus always sells himself. How much ammunition should I get with that?"

Harry shrugged. "Get him ten boxes, why don't you? He can always get more. The price on that gun is two-eighty-nine plus tax, but I'm going to give it to you for two-eighty, ammo thrown in. How's that?"

"Super," he said, meaning it. And then, because something more seemed required, he added: "It's a handsome piece."

"If it's Boca Rio, he'll put it to good use."

"Now the rifle-"

"What does he have?"

He shrugged and spread his hands. "I'm sorry. I really don't know. Two or three shotguns, and something he calls an auto-loader-"

"Remington?" Harry asked him so quickly that he felt afraid; it was as if he had been walking in waist-deep water that had suddenly shelved off.

"I think it was. I could be wrong."

"Remington makes the best," Harry said, and nodded, putting him at ease again. "How high do you want to go?"

"Well, I'll be honest with you. The motor probably cost him four hundred. I'd like to go at least five. Six hundred tops. "

"You and this cousin really get along, don't you?"

"We grew up together," he said sincerely. "I think I'd give my right arm to Nick, if he wanted it. "

"Well, let me show you something," Harry said. He picked a key out of the bundle on his ring and went to one of the glass cabinets. He opened it, climbed up on a stool, and brought down a long, heavy rifle with an inlaid stock. "This may be a little higher than you want to go, but it's a beautiful gun. " Harry handed it to him.

"What is it?"

"That's a four-sixty Weatherbee. Shoots heavier ammunition than I've got here in the place right now. I'd have to order however many rounds you wanted from Chicago. Take about a week. It's a perfectly weighted gun. The muzzle energy on that baby is over eight thousand pounds . . . like hitting something with an airport limousine. If you hit a buck in the head with it, you'd have to take the tail for a trophy."

"I don't know," he said, sounding dubious even though he had decided he wanted the rifle. "I know Nick wants trophies. That's part of-"

"Sure it is," Harry said, taking the Weatherbee and chambering it. The hole looked big enough to put a carrier pigeon in. "Nobody goes to Boca Rio for meat. So your cousin gutshoots. With this piece, you don't have to worry about tracking the goddam animal for twelve miles through the high country, the animal suffering the whole time, not to mention you missing dinner. This baby will spread his insides over twenty feet. "

"How much?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I can't move it in town. Who wants a freaking anti-tank gun when there's nothing to go after anymore but pheasant? And if you put them on the table, it tastes like you're eating exhaust fumes. It retails for nine-fifty, wholesales for six-thirty. I'd let you have it for seven hundred."

"That comes to . . . almost a thousand bucks. "

"We give a ten percent discount on orders over three hundred dollars. That brings it back to nine." He shrugged. "You give that gun to your cousin, I guarantee he hasn't got one. If he does, I'll buy it back for seven-fifty. I'll put that in writing, that's how sure I am."

"No kidding?"

"Absolutely. Absolutely. Of course, if it's too steep, it's too steep. We can look at some other guns. But if he's a real nut on the subject, I don't have anything else he might

not have two of. "

"I see." He put a thoughtful expression on his face. "Have you got a telephone?"

"Sure, in the back. Want to call your wife and talk it over?"

"I think I better."

"Sure. Come on."

Harry led him into a cluttered back room. There was a bench and a scarred wooden table littered with gun guts, springs, cleaning fluid, pamphlets, and labeled bottles with lead slugs in them.

"There's the phone," Harry said.

He sat down, picked up the phone, and dialed while Harry went back to get the Magnum and put it in a box.

"Thank you for calling the WDST Weatherphone," the bright, recorded voice said. "This afternoon, snow flurries developing into light snow late this evening--"

"Hi, Mary?" he said. "Listen, I'm in this place called Harvey's Gun Shop. Yeah, about Nicky. I got the pistol we talked about, no problem. There was one right in the showcase. Then the guy showed me this rifle--"

"--clearing by tomorrow afternoon. Lows tonight will be in the thirties, tomorrow in the mid to upper forties. Chance of precipitation tonight--"

"I -so what do you think I should do?" Harry was standing in the doorway behind him; he could see the shadow.

"Yeah," he said. "I know that."

"Thank you for dialing the WDST Weatherphone, and be sure to watch News-plus-Sixty with Bob Reynolds each weekday evening at six o'clock for a weather update. Good-bye."

"You're not kidding. I *know* it's a lot."

"Thank you for calling the WDST Weatherphone. This afternoon, snow flurries developing into--"

"You sure, honey?"

"Chance of precipitation tonight eight percent, tomorrow--"

"Well, okay." He turned on the bench, grinned at Harry, and made a circle with his right thumb and forefinger. "He's a nice guy. Said he'd guarantee me Nick didn't have one."

"--by tomorrow afternoon. Lows tonight-" "I love you too, Mare. Bye." He hung up. Jesus, Freddy, that was neat. It was, George. It was. He got up. "She says go if I say okay. I do." Harry smiled. "What are you going to do if he sends you a Thunderbird?" He smiled back. "Return it unopened." As they walked back out Harry asked, "Check or charge?" "American Express, if it's okay." "Good as gold." He got his card out. On the back, written on the special strip, it said:

BARTON GEORGE DAWES

"You're sure the shells will come in time for me to ship everything to Fred?"

Harry looked up from the credit blank. "Fred?"

His smile expanded. "Nick is Fred and Fred is Nick," he said. "Nicholas Frederic Adams. It's kind of a joke about the name. From when we were kids."

"Oh." He smiled politely as people do when the joke is in and they are out. "You want to sign here?"

He signed.

Harry took another book out from under the counter, a heavy one with a steel chain punched through the upper left corner, near the binding. "And your name and address here for the federals."

He felt his fingers tighten on the pen. "Sure," he said. "Look at me, I never bought a gun in my life and I'm mad." He wrote his name and address in the book:

Barton George Dawes 1241 Crestallen Street West

"They're into everything," he said.

"This is nothing to what they'd like to do," Harry said.

"I know. You know what I heard on the news the other day? They want a law that says a guy riding on a motorcycle has to wear a mouth protector. A mouth protector, for God's sake. Now is it the government's business if a man wants to chance wrecking his bridgework?"

"Not in my book it isn't," Harry said, putting his book under the counter.

"Or look at that highway extension they're building over in Western. Some snotnose surveyor says 'It's going through here' and the state sends out a bunch of letters and the letters say, 'Sorry, we're putting the 784 extension through here. You've got a year to find a new house.' "

"It's a goddam shame."

"Yes, it is. What does 'eminent domain' mean to someone who's lived in the frigging house for twenty years? Made love to their wife there and brought their kid up there and come home to there from trips? That's just something from a law book that they made up so they can crook you better. "

Watch it, watch it. But the circuit breaker was a little slow and some of it got through.

"You okay?" Harry asked.

"Yeah. I had one of those submarine sandwiches for lunch, I should know better. They give me gas like hell."

"Try one of these," Harry said, and took a roll of pills from his breast pocket. Written on the outside was:

ROLAIDS

"Thanks," he said. He took one off the top and popped it into his mouth, never minding the bit of lint on it. Look at me, I'm in a TV commercial. Consumes forty-seven times its own weight in excess stomach acid.

"They always do the trick for me," Harry said.

"About the shells-"

"Sure. A week. No more than two. I'll get you seventy rounds."

"Well, why don't you keep these guns right here? Tag them with my name or something. I guess I'm silly, but I really don't want them in the house. That's silly, isn't it?"

"To each his own," Harry said equably.

"Okay. Let me write down my office number. When those bullets come in-"

"Cartridges," Harry interrupted. "Cartridges or shells."

"Cartridges," he said, smiling. "When they come in, give me a ring. I'll pick the guns up and make arrangements about shipping them. REA will ship guns, won't they?"

"Sure. Your cousin will have to sign for them on the other end, that's all. "

He wrote his name on one of Harry's business cards. The card said:

Harold Swinnerton 849-6330

HARVEY'S GUN SHOP

Ammunition Antique Guns

"Say," he said. "If you're Harold, who's Harvey?" "Harvey was my brother. He died eight years ago." "I'm sorry." "We all were. He came down here one day, opened up, cleared the cash register, and then dropped dead of a heart attack. One of the sweetest men you'd ever want to meet. He could bring down a deer at two hundred yards." He reached over the counter and they shook. "I'll call," Harry promised.

"Take good care."

He went out into the snow again, past SHAKY CEASE-FIRE HOLDS. It was coming down a little harder now, and his gloves were home.

What were you doing in there, George?

Thump, the circuit breaker.

By the time he got to the bus stop, it might have been an incident he had read about somewhere. No more.

Crestallen Street West was a long, downward-curving street that had enjoyed a fair view of the park and an excellent view of the river until progress had intervened in the shape of a high-rise housing development. It had gone up on Westfield Avenue two years before and had blocked most of the view.

Number 1241 was a split-level ranch house with a one-car garage beside it. There was

a long front yard, now barren and waiting for snow-real snow-to cover it. The driveway was asphalt, freshly hot-topped the previous spring.

He went inside and heard the TV, the new Zenith cabinet model they had gotten in the summer. There was a motorized antenna on the roof which he had put up himself. She had not wanted that, because of what was supposed to happen, but he had insisted. If it could be mounted, he had reasoned, it could be dismantled when they moved. Bart, don't be silly. It's just extra expense . . . just extra work for you. But he had outlasted her, and finally she said she would "humor" him. That's what she said on the rare occasions when he cared enough about something to force it through the sticky molasses of her arguments. All right, Bart. This time I'll "humor" you.

At the moment she was watching Merv Griffin chat with a celebrity. The celebrity was Lorne Green, who was talking about his new police series, *Griff*. Lorne was telling Merv how much he loved doing the show. Soon a black singer (a negress songstress, he thought) who no one had ever heard of would come on and sing a song. "I left My Heart in San Francisco," perhaps.

"Hi, Mary," he called.

"Hi, Bart."

Mail on the table. He flipped through it. A letter to Mary from her slightly psycho sister in Baltimore. A Gulf credit card bill-thirty-eight dollars. A checking account statement: 49 debits, 9 credits, \$954.47 balance. A good thing he had used American Express at the gun shop.

"The coffee's hot," Mary called. "Or did you want a drink?"

"Drink," he said. "I'll get it."

Three other pieces of mail: An overdue notice from the library. *Facing the Lions*, by Tom Wicker. Wicker had spoken to a Rotary luncheon a month ago, and he was the best speaker they'd had in years.

A personal note from Stephan Ordner, one of the managerial bigwigs in Amroco, the corporation that now owned the Blue Ribbon almost outright. Ordner wanted him to drop by and discuss the Waterford deal-would Friday be okay, or was he planning to be away for Thanksgiving? If so, give a call. If not, bring Mary.

Carla always enjoyed the chance to see Mary and blah-blah and bullshit-bullshit, etc., *et al.*

And another letter from the highway department.

He stood looking down at it for along time in the gray afternoon light that fell through the windows, and then put all the mail on the sideboard. He made himself a scotch-rocks and took it into the living room.

Merv was still chatting with Lorne. The color on the new Zenith was more than good; it was nearly occult. He thought, if our ICBM's are as good as our color TV, there's going to be a hell of a big bang someday. Lorne's hair was silver, the most impossible shade of silver conceivable. Boy, I'll *snatch you bald-headed*, he thought, and chuckled. It had been one of his mother's favorite sayings. He could not say why the image of Lorne

Green bald-headed was so amusing. A light attack of belated hysteria over the gun shop episode, maybe.

Mary looked up, a smile on her lips. "A funny?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just my thinks."

He sat down beside her and pecked her cheek. She was a tall woman, thirty-eight now, and at that crisis of looks where early prettiness is deciding what to be in middle age. Her skin was very good, her breasts small and not apt to sag much. She ate a lot, but her conveyor-belt metabolism kept her slim. She would not be apt to tremble at the thought of wearing a bathing suit on a public beach ten years from now, no matter how the gods decided to dispose of the rest of her case. It made him conscious of his own slight bay window. Hell, Freddy, every executive has a bay window. It's a success symbol, like a Delta 88. That's right, George. Watch the old ticker and the cancer-sticks and you'll see eighty yet.

"How did it go today?" she asked.

"Good. "

"Did you get out to the new plant in Waterford?"

"Not today."

He hadn't been out to Waterford since late October. Ordner knew it-a little bird must have told him-and hence the note. The site of the new plant was a vacated textile mill, and the smart mick realtor handling the deal kept calling him. We have to close this thing out, the smart mick realtor kept telling him. You people aren't the only ones over in Westside with your fingers in the crack. I'm going as fast as I can, he told the smart mick realtor. You'll have to be patient.

"What about the place in Crescent?" she asked him. "The brick house."

"It's out of our reach," he said. "They're asking forty-eight thousand."

"For that place?" she asked indignantly. "Highway robbery!"

"It sure is." He took a deep swallow of his drink. "What did old Bea from Baltimore have to say?"

"The usual. She's into consciousness-raising group hydrotherapy now. Isn't that a sketch? Bart--

I 'It sure is," he said quickly.

"Bart, we've got to get moving on this. January twentieth is coming, and we'll be out in the street."

"I'm going as fast as I can," he said. "We just have to be patient."

"That little Colonial on Union Street--"

--is sold." he finished, and drained his drink.

"Well that's what I mean," she said, exasperated. "That would have been perfectly fine for the two of us. With the money the city's allowing us for this house and lot, we

could have been ahead."

"I didn't like it."

"You don't seem to like very much these days," she said with surprising bitterness. "He didn't like it," she told the TV. The negress songstress was on now, singing "Alfie."

"Mary, I'm doing all I can."

She turned and looked at him earnestly. "Bart, I know how you feel about this house—"

"No you don't," he said. "Not at all."

November 21, 1973

A light skim of snow had fallen over the world during the night, and when the bus doors chuffed open and he stepped onto the sidewalk, he could see the tracks of the people who had been there before him. He walked down Fir Street from the corner, hearing the bus pull away behind him with its tiger purr. Then Johnny Walker passed him, headed out for his second pickup of the morning. Johnny waved from the cab of his blue and white laundry van, and he waved back. It was a little after eight o'clock.

The laundry began its day at seven when Ron Stone, the foreman, and Dave Radner, who ran the washroom, got there and ran up the pressure on the boiler. The shirt girls punched in at seven-thirty, and the girls who ran the speed ironer came in at eight. He hated the downstairs of the laundry where the brute work went on, where the exploitation went on, but for some perverse reason the men and women who worked there liked him. They called him by his first name. And with a few exceptions, he liked them.

He went in through the driver's loading entrance and threaded through the baskets of sheets from last night that the ironer hadn't run yet. Each basket was covered tightly with plastic to keep the dust off. Down front, Ron Stone was tightening the drive belt on the old Milnor single-pocket while Dave and his helper, a college dropout named Steve Pollack, were loading the industrial Washex machines with motel sheets.

"Bart!" Ron Stone greeted him. He bellowed everything; thirty years of talking to people over the combined noises of dryers, ironers, shirt presses, and washers on extract had built the bellow into his system. "This son of a bitch Milnor keeps seizing up. The program's so far over to bleach now that Dave has to run it on manual. And the extract keeps cutting out."

"We've got the Kilgallon order," he soothed. "Two more months--"

"In the Waterford plant?"

"Sure," he said, a little giddy.

"Two more months and I'll be ready for the nuthatch," Stone said darkly. "And switching over . . . it's gonna be worse than a Polish army parade."

"The orders will back up I guess."

"Back up! We won't get dug out for three months. Then it'll be summer."

He nodded, not wanting to go on with it. "What are you running first?"

"Holiday Inn."

"Get a hundred pounds of towels in with every load. You know how they scream for towels. "

"Yeah, they scream for everything."

"How much you got?"

"They marked in six hundred pounds. Mostly from the Shriners. Most of them stayed over Monday. Cummyest sheets I ever seen. Some of em'd stand on end. "

He nodded toward the new kid, Pollack. "How's he working out?" The Blue Ribbon had a fast turnover in washroom helpers. Dave worked them hard and Ron's bellowing made them nervous, then resentful.

"Okay so far," Stone said. "Do you remember the last one?"

He remembered. The kid had lasted three hours.

"Yeah, I remember. What was his name?"

Ron Stone's brow grew thundery. "I don't remember. Baker? Barker? Something like that. I saw him at the Stop and Shop last Friday, handing out leaflets about a lettuce boycott or something. That's something, isn't it? A fellow can't hold a job, so he goes out telling everyone how fucking lousy it is that America can't be like Russia. That breaks my heart."

"You'll run Howard Johnson next?"

Stone looked wounded. "We always run it first thing."

"By nine?"

"Bet your ass."

Dave waved to him, and he waved back. He went upstairs, through dry-cleaning, through accounting, and into his office. He sat down behind his desk in his swivel chair and pulled everything out of the in box to read. On his desk was a plaque that said:

THINK!

It May Be A New Experience

He didn't care much for that sign but he kept it on his desk because Mary had given it to him-when? Five years back? He sighed. The salesman that came through thought it was funny. They laughed like hell. But then if you showed a salesman a picture of starving kids or Hitler copulating with the Virgin Mary, he would laugh like hell.

Vinnie Mason, the little bird who had undoubtedly been chirruping in Steve Ordner's ear, had a sign on his desk that said:

THIMK

Now what kind of sense did that make, THIMK? Not even a salesman would laugh at that, right, Fred? Right, George-kee-rect. There were heavy diesel rumblings outside, and he swiveled his chair around to look. The highway people were getting ready to start

another day. A long flatbed with two bulldozers on top of it was going by the laundry, followed by an impatient line of cars.

From the third floor, over dry-cleaning, you could watch the progress of the construction. It cut across the Western business and residential sections like a long brown incision, an operation scar poulticed with mud. It was already across Guilder Street, and it had buried the park on Hebner Avenue where he used to take Charlie when he was small . . . no more than a baby, really. What was the name of the park? He didn't know. Just the Hebner Avenue Park I guess, Fred. There was a Little League ball park and a bunch of teeter-totters and a duck pond with a little house in the middle of it. In the summertime, the roof of the little house was always covered with bird shit. There had been swings, too. Charlie got his first swing experience in the Hebner Avenue Park. What do you think of that, Freddy old kid old sock? Scared him at first and he cried and then he liked it and when it was time to go home he cried because I took him off. Wet his pants all over the car seat coming home. Was that really fourteen years ago?

Another truck went by, carrying a payloader.

The Garson Block had been demolished about four months ago; that was three or four blocks west of Hebner Avenue. A couple of office buildings full of loan companies and a bank or two, the rest dentists and chiropractors and foot doctors. That didn't matter so much, but Christ it had hurt to see the old Grand Theater go. He had seen some of his favorite movies there, in the early fifties. *Dial Mfor Murder*, with Ray Milland. *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, with Michael Rennie. That one had been on TV just the other night and he had meant to watch it and then fell asleep right in front of the fucking TV and never woke up until the national anthem. He had spilled a drink on the rug and Mary had had a bird over that, too.

The Grand, though-that had really been something. Now they had these newbreed movie theaters out in the suburbs, crackerjack little buildings in the middle of four miles of parking lot. Cinema I, Cinema II, Cinema III, Screening Room, Cinema MCMXLVII. He had taken Mary to one out in Waterford to see *The Godfather* and the tickets were \$2.50 a crack and inside it looked like a fucking bowling alley. No balcony. But the Grand had had a marble floor in the lobby and a balcony and an ancient, lovely, grease-clotted popcorn machine where a big box cost a dime. The character who tore your ticket (which had cost you sixty cents) wore a red uniform, like a doorman, and he was at least six hundred. And he always croaked the same thing. "Hopeya enjoy da show." Inside, the auditorium glass chandelier overhead. You never wanted to sit under it, because if it ever fell on you they'd have to scrape you up with a putty knife. The Grand was--

He looked at his wristwatch guiltily. Almost forty minutes had gone by. Christ, that was bad news. He had just lost forty minutes, and he hadn't even been *thinking* that much. Just about the park and the Grand Theater.

Is there something wrong with you, Georgie?

There might be, Fred. I guess maybe there might be.

He wiped his fingers across his cheek under his eye and saw by the wetness on them that he had been crying.

He went downstairs to talk to Peter, who was in charge of deliveries. The laundry was in full swing now, the ironer thumping and hissing as the first of the Howard Johnson sheets were fed into its rollers, the washers grinding and making the floor vibrate, the shirt presses going *hissss-shuh!* as Ethel and Rhonda whipped them through.

Peter told him the universal had gone on number four's truck and did he want to look at it before they sent it out to the shop? He said he didn't. He asked Peter if Holiday Inn had gone out yet. Peter said it was being loaded, but the silly ass who ran the place had already called twice about his towels.

He nodded and went back upstairs to look for Vinnie Mason, but Phyllis said Vinnie and Tom Granger had gone out to that new German restaurant to dicker about tablecloths.

"Will you have Vinnie stop in when he gets back?"

"I will, Mr. Dawes. Mr. Ordner called and wanted to know if you'd call him back."

"Thanks, Phyllis."

He went back into the office, got the new things that had collected in the IN box and began to shuffle through them.

A salesman wanted to call about a new industrial bleach, Yello-Go. Where do they come up with the names, he wondered, and put it aside for Ron Stone. Ron loved to inflict Dave with new products, especially if he could wangle a free five hundred pounds of the product for test runs.

A letter of thanks from the United Fund. He put it aside to tack on the announcement board downstairs by the punch-clock.

A circular for office furniture in Executive Pine. Into the wastebasket.

A circular for a Phone-Mate that would broadcast a message and record incoming calls when you were out, up to thirty seconds. *I'm not here, stupid. Buzz off.* Into the wastebasket.

A letter from a lady who had sent the laundry six of her husband's shirts and had gotten them back with the collars burned. He put it aside for later action with a sigh. Ethel had been drinking her lunch again.

A water-test package from the university. He put it aside to go over with Ron and Tom Granger after lunch.

A circular from some insurance company with Art Linkletter telling you how you could get eighty thousand dollars and all you had to do for it was die. Into the wastebasket.

A letter from the smart mick realtor who was peddling the Waterford plant, saying there was a shoe company that was very interested in it, the Tom McAn shoe company no less, no small cheese, and reminding him that the Blue Ribbon's ninety-day option to buy ran out on November 26. *Beware, puny laundry executive. The hour draweth nigh.* Into the wastebasket.

Another salesman for Ron, this one peddling a cleaner with the larcenous name of

Swipe. He put it with Yello-Go.

He was turning to the window again when the intercom buzzed. Vinnie was back from the German restaurant.

"Send him in."

Vinnie came right in. He was a tall young man of twenty-five with an olive complexion. His dark hair was combed into its usual elaborately careless tumble. He was wearing a dark red sport coat and dark brown pants. A bow tie. Very rakish, don't you think, Fred? I do, George, I do.

"How are you, Bart?" Vinnie asked.

"Fine," he said. "What's the story on that German restaurant?"

Vinnie laughed. "You should have been there. That old kraut just about fell on his knees he was so happy to see us. We're really going to murder Universal when we get settled into the new plant, Bart. They hadn't even sent a circular, let alone their rep. That kraut, I think he thought he was going to get stuck washing those tablecloths out in the kitchen. But he's got a place there you wouldn't believe. Real beer hall stuff. He's going to murder the competition. The aroma . . . God!" He flapped his hands to indicate the aroma and took a box of cigarettes from the inside pocket of his sport coat. "I'm going to take Sharon there when he gets rolling. Ten percent discount."

In a weird kind of overlay he heard Harry the gun shop proprietor saying: *We give a ten percent discount on orders over three hundred.*

My God, he thought. Did I buy those guns yesterday? Did I really?

That room in his mind went dark.

Hey, Georgie, what are you-

"What's the size of the order?" he asked. His voice was a little thick and he cleared his throat.

"Four to six hundred tablecloths a week once he gets rolling. Plus napkins. All genuine linen. He wants them done in Ivory Snow. I said that was no problem. "

He was taking a cigarette out of the box now, doing it slowly, so he could read the label. There was something he could really come to dislike about Vinnie Mason: his dipshit cigarettes. The label on the box said:

PLAYER'S NAVY CUT
CIGARETTES
MEDIUM

Now who in God's world except Vinnie would smoke Player's Navy Cut? Or King Sano? Or English Ovals? Or Marvels or Murads or Twists? If someone put out a brand called Shit-on-a-Stick or Black Lung, Vinnie would smoke them.

"I did tell him we might have to give him two-day service until we get switched over," Vinnie said, giving him a last loving flash of the box as he put it away. "When we go up to Waterford."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," he said. Shall I blast him, Fred? Sure. Blow him out of the water, George.

"Really?" He snapped a light to his cigarette with a slim gold Zippo and raised his eyebrows through the smoke like a British character actor.

"I had a note from Steve Ordner yesterday. He wants me to drop over Friday evening for a little talk about the Waterford plant."

"Oh?"

"This morning I had a phone call from Steve Ordner while I was down talking to Peter Wasserman. Mr. Ordner wants me to call him back. That sounds like he's awfully anxious to know something, doesn't it?"

"I guess it does," Vinnie said, flashing his number 2 smile-*Track wet, proceed with caution.*

"What I want to know is who made Steve Ordner so all-at-once fucking anxious. That's what I want to know."

"Well-"

"Come on, Vinnie. Let's not play coy chambermaid. It's ten o'clock and I've got to talk to Ordner, I've got to talk to Ron Stone, I've got to talk to Ethel Gibbs about burnt shirt collars. Have you been picking my nose while I wasn't looking?"

"Well, Sharon and I were over to St-to Mr. Ordner's house Sunday night for dinner-"

"And you just happened to mention that Bart Dawes has been laying back on Waterford while the 784 extension gets closer and closer, is that it?"

"Bart!" Vinnie protested. "It was all perfectly friendly. It was very-"

"I'm sure it was. So was his little note inviting me to court. I imagine our little phone call will be perfectly friendly, too. That's not the point. The point is that he invited you and your wife to dinner in hopes that you'd run off at the mouth and he had no cause to be disappointed. "

"Bart-"

He leveled his finger at Vinnie. "You listen to me, Vinnie. If you drop any more shit like this for me to walk in, you'll be looking for a new job. Count on it."

Vinnie was shocked. The cigarette was all but forgotten between his fingers.

"Vinnie, let me tell you something," he said, dropping his voice back to normal. "I know that a young guy like you has listened to six thousand lectures on how old guys like me tore up the world when they were your age. But you earned this one."

Vinnie opened his mouth to protest.

"I don't think you slipped the knife into me," he said, holding up a hand to forestall Vinnie's protest. "If I thought that, I would have had a pink for you when you walked in here. I just think you were dumb. You got in that great big house and had three drinks before dinner and then a soup course and a salad with Thousand Island dressing and then surf and turf for the main course and it was all served by a maid in a black uniform and

Carla was doing her lady-of-the-manor bit-but not being the least bit condescending-and there was a strawberry tort or blueberry buckle with whipped cream for dessert and then a couple of coffee brandies or Tia Maria and you just spilled your guts. Is that about how it went?"

"Something like that," Vinnie whispered. His expression was three parts shame and two parts bullish hate.

"He started off by asking how Bart was. You said Bart was fine. He said Bart was a damned good man, but wouldn't it be nice if he could pick his feet up a little on that Waterford deal. You said, it sure would. He said, By the way, how's that going. You said, Well it really isn't my department and he said, Don't tell me, Vincent, you know what's going on. And you said, All I know is that Bart hasn't closed the deal yet. I heard that the Thom McAn people are interested in the site but maybe that's just a rumor. Then he said, Well I'm sure Bart knows what he's doing and you said, Yeah, sure and then you had another coffee brandy and he asked you if you thought the Mustangs would make the play-offs and then you and Sharon were going home and you know when you'll be out there again, Vinnie?"

Vinnie didn't say anything.

"You'll be out there when Steve Ordner needs another snitch. That's when."

"I'm sorry," Vinnie said sulkily. He started to get up.

"I'm not through."

Vinnie sat down again and looked into the corner of the room with smoldering eyes.

"I was doing your job twelve years ago, do you know that? Twelve years, it probably seems like a long time to you. To me, I hardly know where the fuck the time went. But I remember the job well enough to know you like it. And that you do a good job. That reorganization in dry-cleaning, with the new numbering system . . . that was a masterpiece."

Vinnie was staring at him, bewildered.

"I started in the laundry twenty years ago," he said. "In 1953, I was twenty years old. My wife and I were just married. I'd finished two years of business administration and Mary and I were going to wait, but we were using the interruption method, you see. We were going to town and somebody slammed the door downstairs and startled me right into an orgasm. She got pregnant out of it. So whenever I get feeling smart these days I just remind myself that one slammed door is responsible for me being where I am today. It's humbling. In those days there was no slick abortion law. When you got a girl pregnant, you married her or you ran out on her. End of options. I married her and took the first job I could get, which was here. Washroom helper, exactly the same job that Pollack kid is doing downstairs right this minute. Everything was manual in those days, and everything had to be pulled wet out of the washers and extracted in a big Stonington wringer that held five hundred pounds of wet flatwork. If you loaded it wrong, it would take your fucking foot off. Mary lost the baby in her seventh month and the doctor said she'd never have another one. I did the helper's job for three years, and my average take-home for fifty-five hours was fifty-five dollars. Then Ralph Albert's son, who was

the boss of the washroom in those days, got in a little fender-bender accident and died of a heart attack in the street while he and the other guy were exchanging insurance companies. He was a fine man. The whole laundry shut down the day of his funeral. After he was decently buried, I went to Ray Tarkington and asked for his job. I was pretty sure I'd get it. I knew everything about how to wash, because Ralph had shown me.

"This was a family business in those days, Vinnie. Ray and his dad, Don Tarkington, ran it. Don got it from his father, who started the Blue Ribbon in 1926. It was a nonunion shop and I suppose the labor people would say all three of the Tarkingtons were paternalistic exploiters of the uneducated working man and woman. And they were. But when Betty Keeson slipped on the wet floor and broke her arm, the Tarkingtons paid the hospital bill and there was ten bucks a week for food until she could come back. And every Christmas they put on a big dinner out in the marking-in room-the best chicken pies you ever ate, and cranberry jelly and rolls and your choice of chocolate or mince pudding for dessert. Don and Ray gave every woman a pair of earrings for Christmas and every man a brand-new tie. I've still got my nine ties in the closet at home. When Don Tarkington died in 1959, I wore one of them to his funeral. It was out of style and Mary gave me holy hell, but I wore it anyway. The place was dark and the bouts were long and the work was drudgery, but the people cared about you. If the extractor broke down, Don and Ray would be right down there with the rest of us, the sleeves of their white shirts rolled up, wringing out those sheets by hand. That's what a family business was, Vinnie. Something like that.

"So when Ralph died and Ray Tarkington said he'd already hired a guy from outside to run the washroom, I couldn't understand what in hell was going on. And Ray says, My father and I want you to go back to college. And I say, Great, on what? Bus tokens? And he hands me a cashier's check for two thousand dollars. I looked at it and couldn't believe what I was seeing. I say, What is this? And he says, It's not enough, but it'll get your tuition, your room, and your books. For the rest you work your summers here, okay? And I say, is there a way to thank you? And he says, yeah, three ways. First, repay the loan. Second, repay the interest. Third, bring what you learn back to the Blue Ribbon. I took the check home and showed Mary and she cried. Put her hands right over her face and cried. "

Vinnie was looking at him now with frank amazement.

"So in 1955 I went back to school and I got a degree in 1957. I went back to the laundry and Ray put me to work as boss of the drivers. Ninety dollars a week. When I paid the first installment on the loan, I asked Ray what the interest was going to run. He says, One percent. I said, What? He says, You heard me. Don't you have something to do? So I say, Yeah I think I better go downtown and get a doctor up here to examine your head. Ray laughs like hell and tells me to get the fuck out of his office. I got the last of that money repaid in 1960, and do you know what, Vinnie? Ray gave me a watch. This watch."

He shot his cuff and showed Vinnie the Bulova watch with its gold expansion band.

"He called it a deferred graduation present. Twenty dollars interest is what I paid on my education, and that son of a bitch turns around and gives me an eighty-buck watch. Engraved on the back it says: *Best from Don & Ray, The Blue Ribbon Laundry*. Don was

already a year in his grave then.

"In 1963 Ray put me on your job, keeping an eye on dry-cleaning, opening new accounts, and running the Laundromat branches-only in those days there were just five instead of eleven. I stayed with that until 1967, and then Ray put me in this job here. Then, four years ago, he had to sell. You know about that, the way the bastards put the squeeze on him. It turned him into an old man. So now we're part of a corporation with two dozen other irons in the fire-fast food, Ponderosa golf, those three eyesore discount department stores, the gas stations, all that shit. And Steve Ordner's nothing but a glorified foreman. There's a board of directors somewhere in Chicago or Gary that spends maybe fifteen minutes a week on the Blue Ribbon operation. They don't give a shit about running a laundry. They don't *know* shit about it. They know how to read a cost accountant's report, that's what they know. The cost accountant says, Listen. They're extending 784 through Westside and the Blue Ribbon is standing right in the way, along with half the residential district. And the directors say, Oh, is that right? How much are they allowing us on the property? And that's it. Christ, if Don and Ray Tarkington were alive, they'd have those cheap highway department fucks in court with so many restraining orders on their heads that they wouldn't get out from under until the year 2000. They'd go after them with a good sharp stick. Maybe they were a couple of buck--running paternalistic bastards, but they had a sense of *place*, Vinnie. You don't get that out of a cost accountant's report. If they were alive and someone told them that the highway commission was going to bury the laundry in eight lanes of composition hot-top, you would have heard the scream all the way down to city hall."

"But they're dead," Vinnie said.

"Yeah, they're dead, all right." His mind suddenly felt flabby and unstrung, like an amateur's guitar. Whatever he had needed to say to Vinnie had been lost in a welter of embarrassing personal stuff. Look at him, Freddy, he doesn't know what I'm talking about. He doesn't have a clue. "Thank God they're not here to see this."

Vinnie didn't say anything.

He gathered himself with an effort. "What I'm trying to say, Vinnie, is that there are two groups involved here. Them and us. We're laundry people. That's our business. They're cost accountant people. That's *their* business. They send down orders from on high, and we have to follow them. But that's *all* we have to do. Do you understand?"

"Sure, Bart," Vinnie said, but he could see that Vinnie didn't understand at all. He wasn't sure he did himself.

"Okay," he said. "I'll speak to Ordner. But just for your information, Vinnie, the Waterford plant is as good as ours. I'm closing the deal next Tuesday."

Vinnie grinned, relieved. "Jesus, that's great."

"Yes. Everything's under control."

As Vinnie was leaving, he called after him: "You tell me how that German restaurant is, okay?"

Vinnie Mason tossed him his number 1 grin, bright and full of teeth, all systems go. "I sure will, Bart."

Then Vinnie was gone and he was looking at the closed door. I made a mess of that, Fred. I didn't think you did so badly, George. Maybe you lost the handle at the end, but it's only in books that people say everything right the first time. No, I frigged up. He went out of here thinking Barton Dawes has lost a few cards out of his deck. God help him he's right. George, I have to ask you something, man to man. No, don't shut me off. Why did you buy those guns, George? Why did you do that?

Thump, the circuit breaker.

He went down on the floor, gave Ron Stone the salesmen's folders, and when he walked away Ron was bawling for Dave to come over and look at this stuff, might be something in it. Dave rolled his eyes. There was something in it, all right. It was known as work.

He went upstairs and called Ordner's office, hoping Ordner would be out drinking lunch. No breaks today. The secretary put him right through.

"Bart!" Steve Ordner said. "Always good to talk with you."

"Same here. I was talking to Vinnie Mason a little earlier, and he seemed to think you might be a little worried about the Waterford plant."

"Good God, no. Although I did think, maybe Friday night, we could lay out a few things--"

"Yeah, I called mainly to say Mary can't make it."

"Oh?"

"A virus. She doesn't dare go five seconds from the nearest john."

"Say, I'm sorry to hear that."

Cram it, you cheap dick.

"The doctor gave her some pills and she seems to be feeling better. But she might be, you know, catching."

"What time can you make it, Bart? Eight?"

"Yeah, eight's fine."

That's right, screw up the Friday Night Movie, prick. What else is new?

"How is the Waterford business progressing, Bart?"

"That's something we'd better talk about in person, Steve."

"That's fine. " Another pause. "Carla sends her best. And tell Mary that both Carla and I . . ."

Sure. Yeah. Blah, blah, blah.

November 22, 1973

He woke up with a jerk that knocked the pillow onto the floor, afraid he might have screamed. But Mary was still sleeping in the other bed, a silent mound. The digital clock on the bureau said:

4:23 A.M.

It clicked into the next minute. Old Bea from Baltimore, the one who was into consciousness-raising hydrotherapy, had given it to them last Christmas. He didn't mind the clock, but he had never been able to get used to the click when the numbers changed. 4:23 *click*, 4:24 *click*, a person could go nuts.

He went down to the bathroom, turned on the light, and urinated. It made his heart thump heavily in his chest. Lately when he urinated his heart thumped like a fucking bass drum. Are you trying to tell me something, God?

He went back to bed and lay down, but sleep didn't come for a long time. He had thrashed around while he slept, and the bed had been remolded into enemy territory. He couldn't get it right again. His arms and legs also seemed to have forgotten which way they arranged themselves when he slept.

The dream was easy enough to figure out. No sweat there, Fred. A person could work that circuit breaker trick easy enough when he was awake; he could go on coloring in some picture piece by piece and pretending he couldn't see the whole thing. You could bury the big picture under the floor of your mind. But there was a trapdoor. When you were asleep, sometimes it banged open and something crawled up out of the darkness. *Click.*

4:42 A.M.

In the dream he had been at Pierce Beach with Charlie (funny, when he had given Vinnie Mason that little thumbnail autobiography he had forgotten to mention Charlie-isn't that funny, Fred? No, I don't think it's too funny, George. Neither do I, Fred. But it's late. Or early. Or something.)

He and Charlie were on that long white beach and it was a fine day for the beach-bright blue sky and the sun beaming down like the face on one of those idiotic smiley-smile buttons. People on bright blankets and under umbrellas of many different hues, little kids dibbling around the water's edge with plastic pails. A lifeguard on his whitewashed tower, his skin as brown as a boot, the crotch of his white Latex swim trunks bulging, as if penis and testicle size were somehow a job prerequisite and he wanted everyone in the area to know they were not being let down. Someone's transistor radio blaring rock and roll and even now he could remember the tune:

But I love that dirty water,
Owww, Boston, you're my home.

Two girls walking by in bikinis, safe and sane inside beautiful screwable bodies, never for you but for boyfriends nobody ever saw, their toes kicking up tiny fans of sand.

Only it was funny, Fred, because the tide was coming and there was no tide at Pierce Beach because the nearest ocean was nine hundred miles away.

He and Charlie were making a sand castle. But they had started too near the water and the incoming waves kept coming closer and closer.

We have to build it farther back, Dad, Charlie said, but he was stubborn and kept building. When the tide brought the water up to the first wall, he dug a moat with his fingers, spreading the wet sand like a woman's vagina. The water kept coming.

Goddam it! He yelled at the water.

He rebuilt the wall. A wave knocked it down. People started to scream about something. Others were running. The lifeguard's whistle blew like a silver arrow. He didn't look up. He had to save the castle. But the water kept coming, lapping his ankles, slurping a turret, a roof, the back of the castle, all of it. The last wave withdrew, showing only bland sand, smooth and flat and brown and shining.

There were more screams. Someone was crying. He looked up and saw the lifeguard was giving Charlie mouth-to-mouth. Charlie was wet and white except for his lips and eyelids, which were blue. His chest was not rising and falling. The lifeguard stopped trying. He looked up. He was smiling.

He was out over his head, the lifeguard was saying through his smile. *Isn't it time you went?*

He screamed: *Charlie!* and that was when he had wakened, afraid he might really have screamed.

He lay in the darkness for a long time, listening to the digital clock click, and tried not to think of the dream. At last he got up to get a glass of milk in the kitchen, and it was not until he saw the turkey thawing on a plate on the counter that he remembered it was Thanksgiving and today the laundry was closed. He drank his milk standing up, looking thoughtfully at the plucked body. The color of its skin was the same as the color of his son's skin in his dream. But Charlie hadn't drowned, of course.

When he got back into bed, Mary muttered something interrogative, thick and indecipherable with sleep.

"Nothing," he said. "Go to sleep."

She muttered something else.

"Okay," he said in the darkness.

She slept.

Click.

It was five o'clock, five in the morning. When he finally dozed off, dawn had come into the bedroom like a thief. His last thought was of the Thanksgiving turkey, sitting on the kitchen counter below the glare of the cold fluorescent overhead, dead meat waiting thoughtlessly to be devoured.

November 23, 1973

He drove their two-year-old LTD into Stephan Ordner's driveway at five minutes of

eight and parked it behind Ordner's bottle-green Delta 88. The house was a rambling fieldstone, discreetly drawn back from Henreid Drive and partially hidden behind a high privet that was now skeletal in the smoky butt end of autumn. He had been here before, and knew it quite well. Downstairs was a massive rock-lined fireplace, and more modest ones in the bedrooms upstairs. They all worked. In the basement there was a Brunswick billiard table, a movie screen for home movies, a KLH sound system that Ordner had converted to quad the year before. Photos from Ordner's college basketball days dotted the walls—he stood six foot five and still kept in shape. Ordner had to duck his head going through doorways, and he suspected that Ordner was proud of it. Maybe he had had the doorways lowered so he could duck through them. The dining room table was a slab of polished oak, nine feet long. A wormy-oak highboy complimented it, gleaming richly through six or eight coats of varnish. A tall china cabinet at the other end of the room; it stood—oh, about six foot five, wouldn't you say, Fred? Yes, just about that. Out back there was a sunken barbecue pit almost big enough to broil an uncut dinosaur, and a putting green. No kidney-shaped pool. Kidney-shaped pools were considered jejune these days. Strictly for the Ra-worshipping Southern California middle-classers. The Ordners had no children, but they supported a Korean kid, a South Vietnamese kid, and were putting a Ugandan through engineering school so he could go back home and build hydroelectric dams. They were Democrats, and had been Democrats for Nixon.

His feet whispered up the walk and he rang the bell. The maid opened the door.

"Mr. Dawes," he said.

"Of course, sir. I'll just take your coat. Mr. Ordner is in the study."

"Thank you."

He gave her his topcoat and walked down the hall past the kitchen and the dining room. Just a peek at the big table and the Stephan Ordner Memorial Highboy. The rug on the floor ended and he walked down a hallway floored with white-and-black waxed linoleum checks. His feet clicked.

He reached the study door and Ordner opened it just as he was reaching for the knob, as he had known Ordner would.

"Bart!" Ordner said. They shook hands. Ordner was wearing a brown cord jacket with patched elbows, olive slacks, and Burgundy slippers. No tie.

"Hi, Steve. How's finance?"

Ordner groaned theatrically. "Terrible. Have you looked at the stock market page lately?" He ushered him in and closed the door behind him. The walls were lined with books. To the left there was a small fireplace with an electric log. In the center, a large desk with some papers on it. He knew there was an IBM Selectric buried in that desk someplace; if you pressed the right button it would pop out on top like a sleek-black torpedo.

"The bottom's falling out," he said.

Ordner grimaced. "That's putting it mildly. You can hand it to Nixon, Bart. He finds a use for everything. When they shot the domino theory to hell over in Southeast Asia, he just took it and put it to work on the American economy. Worked lousy over there.

Works great over here. What are you drinking?"

"Scotch-rocks would be fine."

"Got it right here."

He went to a fold-out cabinet, produced a fifth of scotch which returned only pocket change from your ten when purchased in a cut-rate liquor store, and splashed it over two ice cubes in a pony glass. He gave it to him and said, "Let's sit down. "

They sat in wing chairs drawn up by the electric fire. He thought: *If I tossed my drink in there, I could blow that fucking thing to blazes.* He almost did it, too.

"Carla couldn't be here either," Ordner said. "One of her groups is sponsoring a fashion show. Proceeds to go to some teenage coffeehouse down in Norton."

"The fashion show is down there?"

Ordner looked startled. "In *Norton*? Hell no. Over in Russell. I wouldn't let Carla down in the Landing Strip with two bodyguards and a police dog. There's a priest . . . Drake, I think his name is. Drinks a lot, but those little pick'ninnies love him. He's sort of a liaison. Street priest."

"Oh."

"Yes. "

They looked into the fire for a minute. He knocked back half of his scotch.

"The question of the Waterford plant came up at the last board meeting," Ordner said. "Middle of November. I had to admit my pants were a little loose on the matter. I was given . . . uh, a mandate to find out just what the situation is. No reflection on your management, Bart-"

"None taken," he said, and knocked back some more scotch. There was nothing left in there now but a few blots of alcohol trapped between the ice cubes and the glass. "It's always a pleasure when our jobs coincide, Steve."

Ordner looked pleased. "So what's the story? Vin Mason was telling me the deal wasn't closed."

"Vinnie Mason has got a dead short somewhere between his foot and his mouth. "

"Then it's closed?"

"Closing. I expect to sign us into Waterford next Friday, unless something comes up. "

"I was given to understand that the realtor made you a fairly reasonable offer, which you turned down."

He looked at Ordner, got up, and freshened the blots. "You didn't get that from Vinnie Mason."

"No."

He returned to the wing-back chair and the electric fire. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me where you did get it?"

Ordner spread his hands. "It's business, Bart. When I hear something, I have to check into it-even if all my personal and professional knowledge of a man indicates that the something must be off-whack. It's nasty, but that's no reason to piss it around."

Freddy, nobody knew about that turn-down except the real estate guy and me. Old Mr. Just Business did a little personal checking, looks like. But that's no reason to piss it around, right? Right, George. Should I blow him out of the water, Freddy? Better be cool, George. And I'd slow down on the firewater.

"The figure I turned down was four-fifty," he said. "Just for the record, is that what you heard?"

"That's about it."

"And that sounded reasonable to you."

"Well," Ordner said, crossing his legs, "actually, it did. The city assessed the old plant at six-twenty, and the boiler can go right across town. Of course, there isn't quite as much room for expansion, but the boys uptown say that since the main plant had already reached pretty much optimum size, there was no need for the extra room. It looked to me as if we might at least break even, perhaps turn a profit . . . although that wasn't the main consideration. We've got to locate, Bart. And damn quick. "

"Maybe you heard something else. "

Ordner recrossed his legs and sighed. "Actually, I did. I heard that you turned down four-fifty and then Thom McAn came along and offered five."

"A bid the realtor can't accept, in good faith."

"Not yet, but our option to buy runs out on Tuesday. You know that. "

"Yes, I do. Steve, let me make three or four points, okay?"

"Be my guest. "

"First, Waterford is going to put us three miles away from our industrial contracts-that's an average. That's going to send our operating overhead way up. All the motels are out by the Interstate. Worse than that, our service is going to be slower. Holiday Inn and Hojo are on our backs now when we're fifteen minutes late with the towels. What's it going to be like when the trucks have to fight their way through three miles of crosstown traffic?"

Ordner was shaking his head. "Bart, they're *extending* the Interstate. That's why we're moving, remember? Our boys say there will be no time lost in deliveries. It may even go quicker, using the extension. And they also say the motel corporations have already bought up good land in Waterford and Russell, near what will be the new interchange. We're going to improve our position by going into Waterford, not worsen it."

I stubbed my toe, Freddy. He's looking at me like I've lost all my marbles. Right, George. Kee-rect.

He smiled. "Okay. Point taken. But those other motels won't be up for a year, maybe two. And if this energy business is as bad as it looks-"

Ordner said flatly: "That's a policy decision, Bart. We're just a couple of foot soldiers.

We carry out the orders." It seemed to him that there was a dart of reproach there.

"Okay. But I wanted my own view on record."

"Good. It is. But you don't make policy, Bart. I want that perfectly clear. If the gasoline supplies dry up and all the motels fall flat, we'll take it on the ear, along with everyone else. In the meantime, we'd better let the boys upstairs worry about that and do our jobs."

I've been rebuked, Fred. That you have, George.

"All right. Here's the rest. I estimate it will take two hundred and fifty thousand dollars for renovations before the Waterford plant ever turns out a clean sheet."

"What?" Ordner set his drink down hard.

Aha, Freddy. Hit a bare nerve there.

"The walls are full of dry rot. The masonry on the east and north sides has mostly crumbled away to powder. And the floors are so bad that the first heavy-duty washer we put in there is going to end up in the basement."

"That's firm? That two-fifty figure?"

"Firm. We're going to need a new outside stack. New flooring, downstairs and up. And it's going to take five electricians two weeks to take care of that end. The place is only wired for two-forty-volt circuits and we have to have five-fifty loads. And since we're going to be at the far end of all the city utility conduits, I can promise you our power and water bills are going to go up twenty percent. The power increases we can live with, but I don't have to tell you what a twenty percent water-cost increase means to a laundry."

Ordner was looking at him now, shocked.

"Never mind what I said about the utility increase. That comes under operating overhead, not renovations. So where was I? The place has to be rewired for five-fifty. We're going to need a good burglar alarm and closed circuit TV. New insulation. New roofing. Oh yeah, and a drainage system. Over on Fir Street we're up on high ground, but Douglas Street sits at the bottom of a natural basin. The drainage system alone will cost anywhere from forty to seventy thousand dollars to put in."

"Christ, how come Tom Granger hasn't told me any of this?"

"He didn't go with me to inspect the place."

"Why not?"

"Because I told him to stay at the plant."

"You did what?"

"That was the day the furnace went out," he said patiently. "We had orders piling up and no hot water. Tom had to stay. He's the only one in the place that can talk to that furnace."

"Well Christ, Bart, couldn't you have taken him down another day?"

He knocked back the rest of his drink. "I didn't see the point."

"You didn't see the-" Ordner couldn't finish. He set his glass down and shook his head, like a man who has been punched. "Bart, do you know what it's going to mean if your estimate is wrong and we lose that plant? It's going to mean your *job*, that's what it's going to mean. My God, do you want to end up carrying your ass home to Mary in a basket? Is that what you want?"

You wouldn't understand, he thought, because you'd never make a move unless you were covered six ways and had three other fall guys lined up. That's the way you end up with four hundred thousand in stocks and funds, a Delta 88, and a typewriter that pops out of a desk at you like some silly jack-in-the-box. You stupid fuckstick, I could con you for the next ten years. I just might do it, too.

He grinned into Ordner's drawn face. "That's my last point, Steve. That's why I'm not worried."

"What do you mean?"

Joyously, he lied:

"Thorn McAn had already notified the realtor that they're not interested in the plant. They had their guys out to look at it and they hollered holy hell. So what you've got is my word that the place is shit at four-fifty. What you've also got is a ninety-day option that runs out on Tuesday. What you've *also* got is a smart mick realtor named Monohan, who had been bluffing our pants off. It almost worked."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting we let the option run out. That we stand pat until next Thursday or so. You talk to your boys in cost and accounting about that twenty percent utility hike. I'll talk to Monohan. When I get through with him, he'll be down on his knees for two hundred thousand."

"Bart, are you sure?"

"Sure I am," he said, and smiled tightly. "I wouldn't be sticking out my neck if I thought somebody was going to cut it off."

George, what are you doing???

Shut up, shut up, don't bother me now.

"What we've got here," he said, "is a smart-ass realtor with no buyer. We can afford to take our time. Every day we keep him swinging in the wind is another day the price goes down when we do buy."

"All right," Ordner said slowly. "But let's have one thing clear, Bart. If we fail to exercise our option and then somebody else *does* go in there, I'd have to shoot you out of the saddle. Nothing-"

"I know," he said, suddenly tired. "Nothing personal."

"Bart, are you sure you haven't picked up Mary's bug? You look a little punk tonight."
"

You look a little punk yourself, asshole.

"I'll be fine when we get this settled. It's been a strain.

"Sure it has." Ordner arranged his face in sympathetic lines. "I'd almost forgotten . . . your house is right in the line of fire, too."

"Yes."

"You've found another place?"

"Well, we've got our eye on two. I wouldn't be surprised if I closed the laundry deal and my personal deal on the same day."

Ordner grinned. "It may be the first time in your life you've wheeled and dealed three hundred thousand to half a million dollars between sunrise and sunset."

"Yes, it's going to be quite a day."

On the way home Freddy kept trying to talk to him-scream at him, really-and he had to keep yanking the circuit breaker. He was just pulling onto Crestallen Street West when it burnt out with a smell of frying synapses and overloaded axons. All the questions spilled through and he jammed both feet down on the power brake. The LTD screeched to a halt in the middle of the street, and he was thrown against his seat belt hard enough to lock it and force a grunt up from his stomach.

When he had control of himself, he let the car creep over to the curb. He turned off the motor, killed the lights, unbuckled his seat belt, and sat trembling with his hands on the steering wheel.

From where he sat, the street curved gently, the streetlights making a graceful flashhook of light. It was a pretty street. Most of the houses which now lined it had been built in the postwar period 1946-1958, but somehow, miraculously, it had escaped the Fifties Crackerbox Syndrome, and the diseases that went with it: crumbling foundation, balding lawn, toy proliferation, premature aging of cars, flaking paint, plastic storm windows.

He knew his neighbors-why not? He and Mary had been on Crestallen Street almost fourteen years now. That was a long time. The Upslingers in the house above them; their boy Kenny delivered the morning paper. The Langs across the street; the Hobarts two houses down (Linda Hobart had baby-sat for Charlie, and now she was a doctoral student at City College); the Stauffers; Hank Albert, whose wife had died of emphysema four years ago; the Darbys' and just four houses up from where he was parked and shaking in his car, the Quinns. And a dozen other families that he and Mary had a nodding acquaintance with-mostly the ones with small children.

A nice street, Fred. A nice neighborhood. Oh, I know how the intellectuals sneer at suburbia-it's not as romantic as the rat-infested tenements or the hale-and-heartily back-to-the-land stuff. There are no great museums in suburbia, no great forests, no great challenges.

But there had been good times. I know what you're thinking, Fred. Good times, what

are good times? There's no great joy in good times, no great sorrow, no great nothing. Just blah. Backyard barbecues in the summer dusk, everybody a little high but nobody getting really drunk or really ugly. Car pools we got up to go see the Mustangs play. The fucking Musties, who couldn't even beat the Pats the year the Pats were 1-12. Having people in to dinner or going out. Playing golf over at the Westside course or taking the wives to Ponderosa Pines and driving those little go-karts. Remember the time Bill Stauffer drove his right through that board fence and into some guy's swimming pool? Yeah, I remember that, George, we all laughed like hell. But George-

So bring on the bulldozers, right, Fred? Let's bury all of that. There'll be another suburb pretty quick, over in Waterford, where there was nothing but a bunch of vacant lots until this year. The March of Time. Progress in Review. Billion Dollar Babies. So what is it when you go over there to look? A bunch of saltine boxes painted different colors. Plastic pipes that are going to freeze every winter. Plastic wood. Plastic everything. Because Moe at the Highway Commission told Joe down at Joe's Construction, and Sue who works at the front desk at Joe's told Lou at Lou's Construction and pretty soon the big Waterford land boom is on and the developments are going up in the vacant lots, and also the high rises, the condominiums. You get a house on Lilac Lane, which intersects Spain Lane going north and Dain Lane going south. You can pick Elm Street, Oak Street, Cypress Street, White Pine Blister Street. Each house has a full bathroom downstairs, a half-bathroom upstairs, and a fake chimney on the east side. And if you come home drunk you can't even find your own fucking house.

But George-

Shut up, Fred, I'm talking. And where are your neighbors? Maybe they weren't so much, those neighbors, but you knew who they were. You knew who you could borrow a cup of sugar from when you were tapped out. Where are they? Tony and Alicia Lang are in Minnesota because he requested a transfer to a new territory and got it. The Hobarts've moved out to Northside. Hank Albert has got a place in Waterford, true, but when he came back from signing the papers he looked like a man wearing a happy mask. I could see his eyes, Freddy. He looked like somebody who had just had his legs cut off and was trying to fool everybody that he was looking forward to the new plastic ones because they wouldn't get scabs if he happened to bang them against a door. So we move, and where are we? What are we? Just two strangers sitting in a house that's sitting in the middle of a lot more strangers' houses. That's what we are. The March of Time, Freddy. That's what it is. Forty waiting for fifty waiting for sixty: Waiting for a nice hospital bed and a nice nurse to stick a nice catheter inside you. Freddy, forty is the end of being young. Well, actually thirty's the end of being young forty is where you stop fooling yourself. I don't want to grow old in a strange place.

He was crying again, sitting in his cold dark car and crying like a baby.

George, it's more than the highway, more than the move. I know what's wrong with you.

Shut up, Fred. I warn you.

But Fred wouldn't shut up and that was bad. If he couldn't control Fred anymore, how would he ever get any peace?

It's Charlie, isn't it, George? You don't want to bury him a second time.

"It's Charlie," he said aloud, his voice thick and strange with tears. "And it's me. I can't. I really can't . . ."

He hung his head over and let the tears come, his face screwed up and his fists plastered into his eyes like any little kid you ever saw who lost his candy-nickle out the hole in his pants.

When he finally drove on, he was husked out. He felt dry. Hollow, but dry. Perfectly calm. He could even look at the dark houses on both sides of the street where people had already moved out with no tremor.

We're living in a graveyard now, he thought. Mary and I, in a graveyard. Just like Richard Boone in *I Bury the Living*. The lights were on at the Arlins', but they were leaving on the fifth of December. And the Hobarts had moved last weekend. Empty houses.

Driving up the asphalt of his own driveway (Mary was upstairs; he could see the mild glow of her reading lamp) he suddenly found himself thinking of something Tom Granger had said a couple of weeks before. He would talk to Tom about that. On Monday.

November 25, 1973

He was watching the Mustangs-Chargers game on the color TV and drinking his private drink, Southern Comfort and Seven-Up. It was his private drink because people laughed when he drank it in public. The Chargers were ahead 27-3 in the third quarter. Rucker had been intercepted three times. Great game, huh, Fred? It sure is, George. I don't see how you stand the tension.

Mary was asleep upstairs. It had warmed up over the weekend, and now it was drizzling outside. He felt sleepy himself. He was three drinks along.

There was a time-out, and a commercial came on. The commercial was Bud Wilkenson telling about how this energy crisis was a real bitch and everybody should insulate their attics and also make sure that the fireplace flue was closed when you weren't toasting marshmallows or burning witches or something. The logo of the company presenting the commercial came on at the end; the logo showed a happy tiger peeking at you over a sign that said:

EXXON

He thought that everyone should have known the evil days were coming when Esso changed its name to Exxon. Esso slipped comfortably out of the mouth like the sound of a man relaxing in a hammock. Exxon sounded like the name of a warlord from the planet Yurir.

"Exxon demands that all puny Earthlings throw down their weapons," he said. "Off the pig, puny Earthmen." He snickered and made himself another drink. He didn't even

have to get up; the Southern Comfort, a forty-eight ounce bottle of Seven-Up, and a plastic bowl of ice were all sitting on a small round table by his chair.

Back to the game. The Chargers punted. Hugh Fednach, the Mustangs' deep man, collected the football and ran it out to the Mustangs 31. Then, behind the steely-eyed generalship of Hank Rucker, who might have seen the Heisman trophy once in a newsreel, the Mustangs mounted a six-yard drive . Gene Voreman punted. Andy Cocker of the Chargers returned the ball to the Mustangs' 46. And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut had so shrewdly pointed out. He had read all of Kurt Vonnegut's books. He liked them mostly because they were funny. On the news last week it had been reported that the school board of a town called Drake, North Dakota, had burned yea copies of Vonnegut's novel, *Slaughterhouse Five*, which was about the Dresden fire bombing. When you thought about it, there was a funny connection there.

Fred, why don't those highway department fucksticks go build the 784 extension through Drake? I bet they'd love it. George, that's a fine idea. Why don't you write *The Blade* about that? Fuck you, Fred.

The Chargers scored, making it 34-3. Some cheerleaders pranced around on the Astroturf and shook their asses. He fell into a semidoze, and when Fred began to get at him, he couldn't shake him off.

George, since you don't seem to know what you're doing, let me tell you. Let me spell it out for you, old buddy. (Get off my *back*, Fred.) First, the option on the Waterford plant is going to run out. That will happen at midnight on Tuesday. On Wednesday, Thom McAn is going to close their deal with that slaving little piece of St. Patrick's Day shit, Patrick J. Monohan. On Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning, a big sign that says *SOLD!* is going up. If anyone from the laundry sees it, maybe you can postpone the inevitable by saying: Sure. Sold to us. But if Ordner checks, you're dead. Probably he won't. But (*Freddy, leave me alone*) on Friday a new sign will go up. That sign will say:

SITE OF OUR NEW WATERFORD PLANT
TOM MCAN SHOES
Here We Grow Again!!!

On Monday, bright and early, you are going to lose your job. Yes, the way I see it, you'll be unemployed before your ten o'clock coffee break. Then you can come home and tell Mary. I don't know when that will be. The bus ride only takes fifteen minutes, so conceivably you could end twenty years of marriage and twenty years of gainful employment in just about half an hour. But after you tell Mary, comes the explanation scene. You could put it off by getting drunk, but sooner or later-

Fred, shut your *goddam* mouth.

-sooner or later, you're going to have to explain just how you lost your job. You'll just have to fess up. Well, Mary, the highway department is going to rip down the Fir Street plant in a month or so, and I kind of neglected to get us a new one. I kept thinking that this whole 784 extension business was some kind of nightmare I was going to wake up from. Yes, Mary, yes, I located us a new plant-Waterfond, that's right, you capish-but somehow I couldn't go through with it. How much is it going to cost Amroco? Oh, I'd say a million or a million-five, depending on how long it takes them to find a new plant

location and how much business they lose for good.

I'm warning you, Fred.

Or you could tell her what no one knows better than you, George. That the profit margin on the Blue Ribbon has gotten so thin that the cost accountants might just throw up their hands and say, Let's ditch the whole thing, guys. We'll just take the city's money and buy a penny arcade down in Norton or a nice little pitch 'n' putt out in Russell or Crescent. There's too much potential red ink in this after the sugar that son of a bitch Dawes poured into our gas tank. You could tell her that.

Oh, go to hell.

But that's just the first movie, and this is a double feature, isn't it? Part two comes when you tell Mary there isn't any house to go to and there isn't going to be any house. And how are you going to explain that?

I'm not doing anything.

That's right. You're just some guy who fell asleep in his rowboat. But come Tuesday midnight, your boat is going over the falls, George. For Christ's sweet sake, go see Monohan on Monday and make him an unhappy man. Sign on the dotted line. You'll be in trouble anyway, with all those lies you told Ordner Friday night. But you can bail yourself out of that. God knows you've bailed yourself out of trouble before this

Let me alone. I'm almost asleep.

It's Charlie, isn't it. This is a way of committing suicide. But it's not fair to Mary, George. It's not fair to anybody. You're-

He sat bolt upright, spilling his drink on the rug. "No one except maybe me."

Then what about the guns, George? What about the guns?

Trembling, he picked up his glass and made another drink.

November 26, 1973

He was having lunch with Tom Granger at Nicky's, a diner three blocks over from the laundry. They were sitting in a booth, drinking bottles of beer and waiting for their meals to come. There was a jukebox, and it was playing "Good-bye Yellow Brick Road," by Elton John.

Tom was talking about the Mustangs-Chargers game, which the Chargers had won 37-6. Tom was in love with all the city's sports teams, and their losses sent him into frenzies. Someday, he thought as he listened to Tom castigate the whole Mustangs' roster man by man, Tom Granger will cut off one of his ears with a laundry pin and send it to the general manager. A crazy man would send it to the coach, who would laugh and pin it to the locker room bulletin board, but Tom would send it to the general manager, who would brood over it.

The food came, brought by a waitress in a white nylon pants suit. He estimated her age at three hundred, possibly three hundred and four. Ditto weight. A small card over her left breast said:

GAYLE
Thanks For Your Patronage
Nicky's Diner

Tom had a slice of roast beef that was floating belly up in a plateful of gravy.

He had ordered two cheeseburgers, rare, with an order of French fries. He knew the cheeseburgers would be well done. He had eaten at Nicky's before. The 784 extension was going to miss Nicky's by half a block.

They ate. Tom finished his tirade about yesterday's game and asked him about the Waterford plant and his meeting with Ordner.

"I'm going to sign on Thursday or Friday," he said.

"Thought the options ran out on Tuesday."

He went through his story about how Thom McAn had decided they didn't want the Waterford plant. It was no fun lying to Tom Granger. He had known Tom for seventeen years. He wasn't terribly bright. There was no challenge in lying to Tom.

"Oh, " Tom said when he had finished, and the subject was closed. He forked roast beef into his mouth and grimaced. "Why do we eat here? The food is lousy here. Even the coffee is. My wife makes better coffee"

"I don't know," he said, slipping into the opening. "But do you remember when that new Italian place opened up? We took Mary and Verna."

"Yeah, in August. Verna still raves about that ricotta stuff . . . no, rigatoni. That's what they call it. Rigatoni."

"And that guy sat down next to us? That big fat guy?"

"Big, fat . . ." Tom chewed, trying to remember. He shook his head.

"You said he was a crook."

"Ohhhhh." His eyes opened wide. He pushed his plate away and lit a Herbert Tareyton and dropped the dead match into his plate, where it floated on the gravy. "Yeah, that's right. Sally Magliore."

"Was that his name?"

"Yeah, that's right. Big guy with thick glasses. Nine chins. Salvatore Magliore. Sounds like the specialty in an Italian whorehouse, don't it? Sally One-Eye, they used to call him, on account of he had a cataract on one eye. He had it removed at the Mayo Clinic three or four years ago . . . the cataract, not the eye. Yeah, he's a big crook. "

"What's he in?"

"What are they all in?" Tom asked, tapping his cigarette ash into his plate. "Dope, girls, gambling, crooked investments, sharking. And murdering other crooks. Did you see that in the paper? Just last week. They found some guy in the trunk of his car behind a filling station. Shot six times in the head and his throat cut. That's really ridiculous. Why would anyone want to cut a guy's throat after they just shot him six times in the head? Organized crime, that's what Sally OneEye's in. "

"Does he have a legitimate business?"

"Yeah, I think he does. Out on the Landing Strip, beyond Norton. He sells cars. Magliore's Guaranteed Okay Used Cars. A body in every trunk." Tom laughed and tapped more ashes into his plate. Gayle came back and asked then if they wanted more coffee. They both ordered more

"I got those cotter pins today for the boiler door," Tom said. "They remind me of my dork."

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, you should see those sons of bitches. Nine inches long and three through the middle."

"Did you mention my dork?" he asked, and they both laughed and talked shop until it was time to go back to work.

He got off the bus that afternoon at Barker Street and went into Duncan's, which was a quiet neighborhood bar. He ordered a beer and listened to Duncan bitch for a little while about the Mustangs-Chargers game. A man came up from the back and told Duncan that the Bowl-a-Score machine wasn't working right. Duncan went back to look at it, and he sipped his beer and looked at the TV. There was a soaper on, and two women were talking in slow, apocalyptic tones about a man named Hank. Hank was coming home from college, and one of the women had just found out that Hank was her son, the result of a disastrous experiment that had occurred after her high school prom twenty years ago.

Freddy tried to say something, and George shut him right up. The circuit breaker was in fine working order. Had been all day.

That's right, you fucking schizo! Fred yelled, and then George sat on him. Go peddle your papers, Freddy. You're persona non grata around here.

"Of course I'm not going to tell him," said one of the women on the tube. "How do you expect me to tell him that?"

"Just . . . tell him," said the other woman.

"Why should I tell him? Why should I knock his whole life out of orbit over something that happened twenty years ago?"

"Are you going to lie to him?"

"I'm not going to tell him anything."

"You *have* to tell him."

"Sharon, I can't afford to tell him."

"If you don't tell him, Betty, I'll tell him myself."

"That fucking machine is all fucked to shit," Duncan said, coming back. "That's been a pain in the ass ever since they put it in. Now what have I got to do? Call the fucking Automatic Industries Company. Wait twenty minutes until some dipshit secretary

connects me with the right line. Listen to some guy tell me that they're pretty busy but they'll try to send a guy out Wednesday. *Wednesday!* Then some guy with his brains between the cheeks of his ass will show up on Friday, drink four bucks' worth of free beer, fix whatever's wrong and probably rig something else to break in two weeks, and tell me I shouldn't let the guys throw the weights so hard. I used to have pinball machines. That was good. Those machines hardly ever fucked up. But this is progress. If I'm still here in 1980, they'll take out the Bowl-a-Score and put in an Automatic Blow-Job. You want another beer?"

"Sure," he said.

Duncan went to draw it. He put fifty cents on the bar and walked back to the phone booth beside the broken Bowl-a-Score.

He found what he was looking for in the yellow pages under *Automobiles, New and Used*. The listing there said: MAGLIORE'S USED CARS, Rt. 16, Norton 892-4576

Route 16 became Venner Avenue as you went farther into Norton. Venner Avenue was also known as the Landing Strip, where you could get all the things the yellow pages didn't advertise.

He put a dime in the phone and dialed Magliore's Used Cars. The phone was picked up on the second ring, and male voice said: "Magliore's Used Cars."

"This is Dawes," he said. "Barton Dawes. Can I talk to Mr. Magliore?"

"Says busy. But I'll be glad to help you if I can. Pete Mansey."

"No, it has to be Mr. Magliore, Mr. Mansey. It's about those two Eldorados."

"You got a bum steer," Mansey said. "We're not taking any big cars in trade the rest of the year, on account of this energy business. Nobody's buying them. So-"

"I'm buying," he said.

"What's that"

"Two Eldorados. One 1970, one 1972. One gold, one cream. I spoke to Mr. Magliore about them last week. It's a business deal."

"Oh yeah, right. He really isn't here now, Mr. Dawes. To tell you the truth, he's in Chicago. He's not getting in until eleven o'clock tonight."

Outside, Duncan was hanging a sign on the Bowl-a-Score. The sign said:

OUT OF ORDER

"Well he be in tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure will. Was this a trade deal?"

"No, straight buy."

"One of the specials?"

He hesitated a moment, then said: "Yes, that's right. Would four o'clock be okay?"

"Sure, fine."

"Thanks, Mr. Mansey."

"I'll tell him you called."

"You do that," he said, and hung up carefully. His palms were sweating.

Merv Griffin was chatting with celebrities when got home. There was nothing in the mail; that was a relief. He went into the living room.

Mary was sipping a hot rum concoction in a teacup. There was a box of Kleenex beside her and the room smelled of Vicks.

"Are you all right?" He asked her

"Don't kiss me," she said, and her voice had a distant foghorn quality. "I came down with something."

"Poor kid." He kissed her forehead.

"I had to ask you, Merv, but would you get the groceries tonight? I was going with Meg Carder, but I had to call her and beg off."

"Sure. Are you running a fever?"

"No. Well, maybe a little."

"Want me to make an appointment with Fontaine for you?"

"No. I will tomorrow if I don't feel better."

"You're really stuffy."

"Yes. The Vicks helped for a while, but now—" She shrugged and smiled wanly. "I sound like Donald Duck."

He hesitated a moment and then said, "I'll be home a little bit late tomorrow night."

"Oh?"

"I'm going out to Northside to look at a house. It seems like a good one. Six rooms. A little backyard. Not too far from the Hobarts."

Freddy said quite clearly: *Why, you dirty low-life son of a bitch.*

Mary brightened. "That's wonderful! Can I go look with you?"

"Better not, with that cold."

"I'll huddle up."

"Next time," he said firmly.

"Okay." She looked at him. "Thank God you're finally booping on this," she said. "I was worried."

"Don't worry."

"I won't."

She took a sip of the hot rum drink and snuggled against him. He could hear her

breath snuffling in and out. Merv Griffin was chatting with James Brolin about his new movie, *Westworld*. Soon to be showing at barbershops all over the country.

After a while Mary got up and put TV dinners in the oven. He got up, switched the TV over to reruns of "F Troop" and tried not to listen to Freddy. After a while, though, Freddy changed his tune.

Do you remember how you got the first TV, Georgie?

He smiled a little, looking not at Forrest Tucker but right through him. I do, Fred. I surely do.

They had come home one evening, about two years after they were married, from the Upshaws, where they had been watching "Your Hit Parade" and "Dan Fortune," and Mary had asked him if he didn't think Donna Upshaw had seemed a little . . . well, off. Now, sitting here, he could remember Mary, slim and oddly, fetchingly taller in a pair of white sandals she had gotten to celebrate summer. She had been wearing white shorts, too; her legs looked long and coltish, as if they really might go all the way up to her chin. In truth, he hadn't been very interested in whether or not Donna Upshaw had seemed a little off; he had been interested in divesting Mary of those tight shorts. That had been where his interest lay-not to put too fine a point on it.

"Maybe she's getting a little tired of serving Spanish peanuts to half the neighborhood just because they're the only people on the street with a TV," he said.

He supposed he had seen the little frown line between her eyes-the one that always meant Mary was cooking something up, but by then they were halfway upstairs, his hand was roaming down over the seat of those shorts-what little seat there was-and it wasn't until later, until after, that she said:

"How much would a table model cost us, Bart?"

Half asleep, he had answered, "Well, I guess we could get a Motorola for twenty-eight, maybe thirty bucks. But the Philco-"

"Not a radio. A TV."

He sat up, turned on the lamp, and looked at her. She was lying there naked, the sheet down around her hips, and although she was smiling at him, he thought she was serious. It was Mary's I-dare-you grin.

"Mary, we can't afford a TV."

"How much for a table model? A GE or a Philco or something?"

"New?"

"New?"

He considered the question, watching the play of lamplight across the lovely round curves of her breasts. She had been so much slimmer then (although she's hardly a fatty now, George, he reproached himself; never said she was, Freddy my boy), so much more alive somehow. Even her hair had crackled out its own message: *alive, awake, aware . . .*

"Around seven hundred and fifty dollars," he said, thinking that would douse the grin . . . but it hadn't.

"Well, look, " She said, sitting up Indian-fashion in bed, her legs crossed under the sheet.

"I am," he said, grinning

"Not at that. " But she laughed, and a flush had spread prettily down her cheeks to her neck (although she hadn't pulled the sheet up, he remembered).

"What's on your mind?"

"Why do men want a TV?" she asked. "To watch all the sports on the weekends. And why do women want one? Those soap operas in the afternoon. You can listen while you iron or put your feet up if your work's done. Now suppose we each found something to do-something that pays-during that time we'd otherwise just be sitting around . . . "

"reading a book, or maybe even making love?" he suggested.

"We always find time for that," she said, and laughed, and blushed, and her eyes were dark in the lamplight and it threw a warm, semicircular shadow between her breasts, and he knew then that he was going to give in to her, he would have promised her a fifteen-hundred-dollar Zenith console model if she would just let him make love to her again, and at the thought he felt himself stiffening, felt the snake turning to stone, as Mary had once said when she'd had a little too much to drink at the Ridpaths' New Year's Eve party (and now, eighteen years later, he felt the snake turning to stone again-over a memory).

"Well, all right," he said. "I'm going to moonlight weekends and you're going of moonlight afternoons. But what, dear Mary, Oh-not-so-Virgin Mary, are we going to do?"

She pounced on him, giggling, her breasts a soft weight on his stomach (flat-enough in those days, Freddy, not a sign of a bay window). "That's the trick of it!" she said. "What's today'? June eighteenth?"

"That's right."

"Well, you do your weekend things, and on December eighteenth we'll put our money together-"

"-and buy a toaster," he said, grinning.

"-and get that TV, " she said solemnly. "I'm sure we can do it, Bart." Then the giggles broke out again. "But the fun part'll be that we won't tell each other what we're up to until after."

"Just as long as I don't see a red light over the door when I come home from work tomorrow," he said, capitulating.

She grabbed him, got on top of him, started to tickle. The tickling turned to caresses.

"Bring it to me," she whispered against his neck, and gripped him with gentle yet excruciating pressure, guiding him and squeezing him at the same time. "Put it in me, Bart."

And later, in the dark again, hands crossed behind his head. he said: "We don't tell each other, right?"

"Nope."

"Mary, what brought this on? What I said about Donna Upshaw not wanting to serve Spanish peanuts to half the neighborhood?"

There were no giggles in her voice when she replied. Her voice was flat, austere, and just a little frightening: a faint taste of winter in the warm June air of their third-floor walkup apartment. "I don't like to freeload, Bart. And I won't. Ever."

For a week and a half he had turned her quirky little proposal over in his mind, wondering just what in the hell he was suppose to do to bring in his half of the seven hundred and fifty dollars (and probably more like three-quarters of it, the way it'll turn out, he thought) on the next twenty or so weekends. He was a little old to be mowing lawns for quarters. And Mary had gotten a look-a smug sort of look-that gave him the idea that she had either landed something or was landing something. Better get on your track shoes, Bart, he thought, and had to laugh out loud at himself.

Pretty fine days, weren't they, Freddy? he asked himself now as Forrest Tucker and "F Troop" gave way to a cereal commercial where an animated rabbit preached that "Trix are for kids." They were, Georgie. They were fucking great days.

One day he had been unlocking his car after work, and he had happened to look at the big industrial smokestack behind dry-cleaning, and it came to him.

He had put the keys back in his pocket and went in to talk to Don Tarkington. Don leaned back in his chair, looked at him from under shaggy eyebrows that were even then turning white (as were the hairs which bushed out of his ears and curled from his nostrils), hands steepled on his chest.

"Paint the stack," Don said.

He nodded.

"Weekends. "

He nodded again.

"Flat fee-three hundred dollars."

And again.

"You're crazy."

He burst out laughing.

Don smiled a little. "You got a dope habit, Bart?"

"No," he said. "But I've got a little thing on with Mary."

"A bet?" The shaggy eyebrows went up half a mile

"More gentlemanly than that. A wager, I guess you'd call it. Anyway, Don, the stack needs the paint, and I need the three hundred dollars. What do you say? A painting contractor would charge you four and a quarter. "

"You checked."

"I checked."

"You crazy bastard," Don said, and burst out laughing. "You'll probably kill yourself."

"Yeah, I probably will," he said, and began laughing himself (and here, eighteen years later, as the Trix rabbit gave way to the evening news, he sat grinning like a fool).

And that was how, one weekend after the Fourth of July, he found himself on a shaky scaffolding eighty feet in the air, a paintbrush in his hand and his ass wagging in the wind. Once a sudden afternoon thunderstorm had come up, snapped one of the ropes which held up the scaffolding as easily as you might snap a piece of twine holding a package, and he almost did fall. The safety rope around his waist had held and he had lowered himself to the roof, heart thudding like a drum, sure that no power on earth would get him back up there-not for a lousy table-model TV. But he had gone back. Not for the TV, but for Mary. For the look of the lamplight on her small, uptilted breasts; for the dare-you grin on her lips and in her eyes-her dark eyes which could sometimes turn so light or darken even more, into summer thunderheads.

By early September he had finished the stack; it stood cleanly white against the sky, a chalk mark on a blueboard, slim and bright. He looked at it with some pride as he scrubbed his spattered forearms with paint thinner

Don Tarkington paid him by check. "Not a bad job," was his only comment, "considering the jackass that did it."

He picked up another fifty dollars paneling the walls of Henry Chalmers' new family room-in those days, Henry had been the plant foreman-and painting Ralph Tremont's aging Chris-Craft. When December 18 rolled around, he and Mary sat down at their small dining room table like adversary but oddly friendly gunslingers, and he put three hundred and ninety dollars in cash in front of her-he had banked the money and there had been some interest.

She put four hundred and sixteen dollars with it. She took it from her apron pocket. It made a much bigger wad than his, because most of it was ones and fives.

He gasped at it and then said, "What the Christ did you do, Mare?"

Smiling, she said: "I made twenty-six dresses, hemmed up forty-nine dresses, hemmed down sixty-four dresses; I made thirty-one skirts; I crocheted three samplers; I hooked four rugs, one of latch-hook style; I made five sweaters, two afghans and one complete set of table linen; I embroidered sixty-three handkerchiefs; twelve sets of towels and twelve sets of pillowcases, and I can see all the monograms in my sleep."

Laughing, she held out her hands, and for the first time he really noticed the thick pads of calluses on the tips of the fingers, like the calluses a guitar player eventually builds up.

"Oh Christ, Mary," he said, his voice hoarse. "Christ, look at your hands."

"My hands are fine," she said, and her eyes darkened and danced. "And you looked very cute up there on the smokestack, Bart. I thought once I'd buy a slingshot and see if I

couldn't hit you in the butt-"

Roaring, he had jumped up and chased her through the living room and into the bedroom. Where we spent the rest of the afternoon, as I recall it, Freddy old man.

They discovered that they not only had enough for a table model TV, but that for another forty dollars they actually could have a console model. RCA had jumped the model year, the proprietor of John's TV downtown told them (John's was already buried under the 784 extension of course, long gone, along with the Grand and everything else), and was going for broke. He would be happy to let them have it, and for just ten dollars a week-

"No," Mary said.

John looked pained. "Lady, it's only four weeks. You're hardly signing your life away on easy credit terms."

"Just a minute," Mary said, and led him outside into the pre-Christmas cold where carols tangled in each other up and down the street.

"Mary," he said, "he's right. It's not as if-"

"The first thing we buy on credit ought to be our own house, Bart," she said. That faint line appeared between her eyes. "Now listen-"

They went back inside. "Will you hold it for us?" he asked John.

"I guess so-for a while. But this is my busy season, Mr. Dawes. How long?"

"Just over the weekend," he said. "I'll be in Monday night."

They had spent that weekend in the country, bundled up against the cold and the snow which threatened but did not fall. They drove slowly up and down back roads, giggling like kids, a six-pack on the seat for him and a bottle of wine for Mary, and they saved the beer bottles and picked up more, bags of beer bottles, bags of soda bottles, each one of the small ones worth two cents, the big ones worth a nickle. It had been one hell of a weekend, Bart thought now-Mary's hair had been long, flowing out behind her over that imitation-leather coat of hers, the color flaming in her cheeks. He could see her now, walking up a ditch filled with fallen autumn leaves, kicking through them with her boots, producing a noise like a steady low forest fire . . . then the click of a bottle and she raised it up in triumph, waggled it at him from across the road, grinning like a kid.

They don't have returnable bottles anymore, either, Georgie. The gospel these days is no deposit, no return. Use it up and throw it out.

That Monday, after work, they had turned in thirty-one dollars' worth of bottles, visiting four different supermarkets to spread the wealth around. They had arrived at John's ten minutes before the store closed.

"I'm nine bucks short," he told John

John wrote **PAID** across the bill of sale that had been taped to the RCA console. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Dawes," he said. "Let me get my dolly and I'll help you out with it. "

They got it home, and an excited Dick Keller from the first floor helped him carry it

up, and that night they had watched TV until the national anthem had come on the last operating channel and then they had made love in front of the test pattern, both of them with raging headaches from eyestrain.

TV had rarely looked so good since.

Mary came in and saw him looking at the TV, his empty scotch-rocks glass in his hand.

"Your dinner's ready, Bart," she said. "You want it in here?"

He looked at her, wondering exactly when he had seen the dare-you grin on her lips for the last time . . . exactly when the little line between her eyes had begun to be there all the time, like a wrinkle, a scar, a tattoo proclaiming age.

You wonder about some things, he thought, that you'd never in God's world want to know. Now why the hell is that?

"Bart?"

"Let's eat in the dining room," he said. He got up and snapped the TV off.

"All right."

They sat down. He looked at the meal in the aluminum tray. Six little compartments, and something that looked pressed in each one. The meat had gravy on it. It was his impression that the meats in TV dinners *always* had gravy on them. TV dinner-meat would look naked without gravy, he thought, and then he remembered his thought about Lorne Green for absolutely no reason at all: Boy, I'll *snatch you bald-headed*.

It didn't amuse him this time. Somehow it scared him.

"What were you sbling about in the living roob, Bart?" Mary asked. Her eyes were red from her cold, and her nose had a chapped, raw look.

"I don't remember," he said, and for the moment he thought: *I'll just scream now, I think. For lost things. For your grin, Mary. Pardon me while I just throw back my head and scream for the grin that's never there on your face anymore. Okay?*

"You looked very habby," she said.

Against his will-it was a secret thing, and tonight he felt the needed his secret things, tonight his feelings felt as raw as Mary's nose looked-against his will he said: "I was thinking of the time we went out picking up bottles to finish paying for that TV. The RCA console."

"Oh, that," Mary said, and then sneezed into her hankie over her TV dinner.

He ran into Jack Hobart at the Stop 'n' Shop. Jack's cart was full of frozen foods, heat-and-serve canned products, and a lot of beer.

"Jack!" he said. "What are you doing way over here?"

Jack smiled a little. "I haven't got used to the other store yet, so thought . . ."

"Where's Ellen?"

"She had to fly back to Cleveland," he said. "Her mother died."

"Jesus, I'm sorry Jack. Wasn't that sudden?"

Shoppers were moving all around them under the cold overhead lights. Muzak came down from hidden speakers, old standards that you could never quite recognize. A woman with a full cart passed them, dragging a screaming three-year-old in a blue parka with snot on the sleeves.

"Yeah, it was," Jack Hobart said. He smiled meaninglessly and looked down into his cart. There was a large yellow bag there that said:

KITTY-PAN KITTY LITTER
Use It, Throw It Away!
Sanitary!

"Yeah, it was. She'd been feeling punk, thank you, but she thought it might have been a, you know, sort of leftover from change of life. It was cancer. They opened her up, took a look, and sewed her right back up. Three weeks later she was dead. Hell of a hard thing for Ellen. I mean, she only twenty years younger. "

"Yeah," he said.

"So she's out in Cleveland for a little while."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

They looked at each other and grinned shamefacedly over the fact of death.

"How is it?" he asked. "Out there in Northside?"

"Well, I'll tell you the truth, Bart. Nobody seems very friendly."

"No?"

"You know Ellen works down at the bank?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Well, a lot of the girls used to have a car pool-I used to let Ellen have the car every Thursday. That was her part. There's a pool out in Northside into the city, but all the women who use it are part of some club that Ellen can't join unless she's been there at least a year. "

"That sounds pretty damn close to discrimination, Jack."

"Fuck them," Jack said angrily. "Ellen wouldn't join their goddam club if they crawled up the street on their hands and knees. I got her her own car. A used Buick. She loves it. Should have done it two years ago."

"How's the house?"

"It's fine," Jack said, and sighed. "The electricity's high, though. You should see our bill. That's no good for people with a kid in college."

They shuffled. Now that Jack's anger had passed, the shamefaced grin was back on his face. He realized that Jack was almost pathetically glad to see someone from the neighborhood and was prolonging the moment. He had a sudden vision of Jack knocking around in the new house, the sound from the TV filling the rooms with phantom company, his wife a thousand miles away seeing her mother into the ground.

"Listen, why don't you come back to the house?" he asked. "We'll have a couple of six-packs and listen to Howard Cosell explain everything that's wrong with the NFL."

"Hey, that'd be great."

"Just let me call Mary after we check out."

He called Mary and Mary said okay. She said she would put some frozen pastries in the oven and then go to bed so she wouldn't give Jack her cold.

"How does he like it out there?" she asked.

"Okay, I guess. Mare, Ellen's mother died. She's out in Cleveland for the funeral. Cancer."

"Oh, *no*."

"So I thought Jack might like the company, you know--"

"Sure, of course. " She paused. "Did you tell him we might be neighbors before long?"

"No," he said. "I didn't tell him that."

"You ought to. It might cheer him up."

"Sure. Good-bye, Mary."

"Bye."

"Take some aspirin before you go to bed."

"I will."

"Bye. "

"Bye, George." She hung up.

He looked at the phone, chilled. She only called him that when she was very pleased with him. Fred-and-George had been Charlie's game originally.

He and Jack Hobart went home and watched the game. They drank a lot of beer. But it wasn't so good.

When Jack was getting into his car to go home at quarter past twelve, he looked up bleakly and said: "That goddam highway. That's what fucked up the works."

"It sure did." He thought Jack looked old, and it scared him. Jack was about his age.

"You keep in touch, Bart."

"I will."

They grinned hollowly at each other, a little drunk, a little sick. He watched Jack's car until its taillights had disappeared down the long, curving hill.

November 27, 1973

He was a little hung-over and a little sleepy from staying up so late. The sound of the laundry washers kicking onto the extract cycle seemed loud in his ears, and the steady *thump-hiss* of the shirt presses and the ironer made him want to wince.

Freddy was worse. Freddy was playing the very devil today.

Listen, Fred was saying. This is your last chance, my boy. You've still got all afternoon to get over to Monohan's office. If you let it wait until five o'clock, it's going to be too late.

The option doesn't run out until midnight.

Sure it doesn't. But right after work Monohan is going to feel a pressing need to go see some relatives. In Alaska. For him it means the difference between a forty-five-thousand-dollar commission and fifty thousand dollars-the price of a new car. For that kind of money you don't need a pocket calculator. For that kind of money you might discover relatives in the sewer system under Bombay.

But it didn't matter. It had gone too far. He had let the machine tun without him too long. He was hypnotized by the coming explosion, almost lusted for it. His belly groaned in its own juices.

He spent most of the afternoon in the washroom, watching Ron Stone and Dave run test loads with one of the new laundry products. It was loud in the washroom. The noise hurt his tender head, but it kept him from hearing his thoughts.

After work he got his car out of the parking lot-Mary had been glad to let him have it for the day since he was seeing about their new house-and drove through downtown and through Norton.

In Norton, blacks stood around on street comers and outside bars. Restaurants advertised different kinds of soul food. Children hopped and danced on chalked sidewalk grids. He saw a pimpmobile-a huge pink Eldorado Cadillac-pull up in front of an anonymous brownstone apartment building. The man who got out was a Wilt Chamberlain-size black in a white planter's hat and a white ice cream suit with pearl buttons and black platform shoes with huge gold buckles on the sides. He carried a malacca stick with a large ivory ball on the top. He walked slowly, majestically, around to the hood of the car, where a set of caribou antlers were mounted. A tiny silver spoon hung on a silver chain around his neck and winked in the thin autumn sun. He watched the man in the rearview mirror as the children ran to him for sweets.

Nine blocks later the tenements thinned to ragged, open fields that were still soft and marshy. Oily water stood between hummocks in puddles, their surfaces flat, deadly rainbows. On the left, near the horizon, he could see a plane landing at the city's airport.

He was now on Route 16, traveling past the exurban sprawl between the city and the city limits. He passed McDonald's. Shakey's, Nino's Steak Pit. He passed a Dairy Freez and the Noddy-Time Motel, both closed for the season. He passed the Norton Drive-In,

where the marquee said:

FRI-SAT-SUN
RESTLESS WIVES
SOME CAME RUNNING RATED X
EIGHT-BALL

He passed a bowling alley and a driving range that was closed for the season. Gas stations-two of them with signs that said:

SORRY, NO GAS

It was still four days until they got their gasoline allotments for December. He couldn't find it in himself to feel sorry for the country as a whole as it went into this science-fiction-style crisis-the country had been pigging petroleum for too long to warrant his sympathy-but he could feel sorry for the little men with their peckers caught in the swing of a big door.

A mile farther on he came to Magliore's Used Cars. He didn't know what he had expected, but he felt disappointed. It looked like a cut-rate, fly-by-night operation. Cars were lined up on the lot facing the road under looped lines of flapping banners-red, yellow, blue, green-that had been tied between light standards that would shine down on the product at night. Prices and slogans soaped on the windshields:

\$795
RUNS GOOD

and

\$550
GOOD TRANSPORTATION!

and on a dusty old Valiant with flat tires and a cracked windshield:

\$75
MECHANIX SPECIAL

A salesman wearing a gray-green topcoat was nodding and smiling noncommittally as a young kid in a red silk jacket talked to him. They were standing by a blue Mustang with cancer of the rocker panels. The kid said something vehement and thumped the driver's side door with the flat of his hand. Rust flaked off in a small flurry. The salesman shrugged and went on smiling. The Mustang just sat there and got a little older.

There was a combination office and garage in the center of the lot. He parked and got out of his car. There was a lift in the garage, and an old Dodge with giant fins was up on it. A mechanic walked out from under, holding a muffler in both grease-gloved hands like a chalice.

"Say, you can't park there, mister. That's in the right-of-way."

"Where should I park?"

"Take it around back if you're goin in the office."

He drove the LTD around to the back, creeping carefully down the narrow way

between the corrugated metal side of the garage and a row of cars. He parked behind the garage and got out. The wind, strong and cutting, made him wince. The heater had disarmed his face and he had to squint his eyes to keep them from tearing.

There was an automobile junkyard back here. It stretched for acres, amazing the eye. Most of the cars had been gutted of parts and now they sat on their wheel rims or axles like the victims of some awful plague who were too contagious to even be dragged to the dead-pit. Grilles with empty headlight sockets gazed at him raptly .

He walked back out front. The mechanic was installing the muffler. An open bottle of Coke was balanced on a pile of tires to his right.

He called to the mechanic: "Is Mr. Magliore in?" Talking to mechanics always made him feel like an asshole. He had gotten his first car twenty-four years ago, and talking to mechanics still made him feel like a pimply teenager.

The mechanic looked over his shoulder and kept working his socket wrench. "Yeah, him and Mansey. Both in the office."

"Thanks. "

"Sure."

He went into the office. The walls were imitation pine, the floor muddy squares of red and white linoleum. There were two old chairs with a pile of tattered magazines between them-*Outdoor Life*, *Field and Stream*, *True Argosy*. No one was sitting in the chairs. There was one door, probably leading to an inner office, and on the left side, a little cubicle like a theater box office. A woman was sitting in there, working an adding machine. A yellow pencil was poked into her hair. A pair of harlequin glasses hung against her scant bosom, held by a rhinestone chain. He walked over to her, nervous now. He wet his lips before he spoke.

"Excuse me."

She looked up. "Yes?"

He had a crazy impulse to say: *I'm here to see Sally One-Eye, bitch. Shake your tail.*

Instead, he said: "I have an appointment with Mr. Magliore."

"You do?" She looked at him warily for a moment and then riffled through some slips on the table beside the adding machine. She pulled one out. "Your name is Dawes? Barton Dawes?"

"That's right."

"Go right in." She stretched her lips at him and began to peck at the adding machine again.

He was very nervous. Surely they knew he had conned them. They were running some kind of midnight auto sales here, that much had been obvious from the way Mansey had spoken to him yesterday. And they knew he knew. Maybe it would be better to go right out the door, drive like hell to Monohan's office, and maybe catch him before he left for Alaska or Timbuktu or wherever he would be leaving for.

Finally, Freddy said. The man shows some sense.

He walked over to the door in spite of Freddy, opened it, and stepped into the inner office. There were two men. The one behind the desk was fat and wearing heavy glasses. The other was razor thin and dressed in a salmon-pink sports coat that made him think of Vinnie. He was bending over the desk. They were looking at a J.C. Whitney catalogue.

They looked up at him. Magliore smiled from behind his desk. The glasses made his eyes appear faded and enormous, like the yolks of poached eggs.

"Mr. Dawes?"

"That's right. "

"Glad you could drop by. Want to shut the door?"

"Okay."

He shut it. When he turned back, Magliore was no longer smiling. Neither was Mansey. They were just looking at him, and the room temperature seemed to have gone down twenty degrees.

"Okay," Magliore said. "What is this shit?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"I talk for free. But not to shitbirds like you. You call up Pete and give him a line of crap about two Eldorados." He pronounced it "Eldoraydos." "You talk to me, mister. You tell me what your act is."

Standing by the door, he said: "I heard maybe you sold things."

"Yeah, that's right. Cars. I sell cars. "

"No," he said. "Other stuff. Stuff like . . ." He looked around at the fakepine-paneled walls. God knew how many agencies were bugging this place. "Just stuff," he finished, and the words came out on crutches.

"You mean stuff like dope and whores ('hoors') and off-track betting? Or did you want to buy a hitter to knock off your wife or your boss?" Magliore saw him wince and laughed harshly. "That's not too bad, mister, not bad at all for a shitbird. That's the big 'What if this place is bugged' act, right? That's number one at the police academy, am I right?"

"Look, I'm not a-

"Shut up," Mansey said. He was holding the J.C. Whitney catalogue in his hands. His fingernails were manicured. He had never seen manicured nails exactly like that except on TV commercials where the announcer had to hold a bottle of aspirin or something. "If Sal wants you to talk, he'll tell you to talk."

He blinked and shut his mouth. This was like a bad dream.

"You guys get dumber every day," Magliore said. "That's all right. I like to deal with dummies. I'm *used* to dealing with dummies. I'm good at it. Now. Not that you don't know it, but this office is as clean as a whistle. We wash it every week. I got a cigar box full of bugs at home. Contact mikes, button mikes, pressure mikes, Sony tape recorders no bigger than your hand. They don't even try that much anymore. Now they send

shitbirds like you."

He heard himself say: "I'm not a shitbird."

An expression of exaggerated surprise spread across Magliore's face. He turned to Mansey. "Did you hear that? He said he wasn't a shitbird."

"Yeah, I heard that," Mansey said.

"Does he look like a shitbird to you?"

"Yeah, he does," Mansey said.

"Even talks like a shitbird, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. "

"So if you're not a shitbird," Magliore said, turning back to him, "what are you?"

"I'm-" he began, not sure of just what to say. What was he? Fred, where are you when I need you?

"Come on, come on," Magliore said. "State Police? City? IRS? FBI? He look like prime Effa Bee Eye to you, Pete?"

"Yeah," Pete said.

"Not even the city police would send out a shitbird like you, mister. You must be Effa Bee Eye or a private detective. Which is it?"

He began to feel angry.

"Throw him out, Pete," Magliore said, losing interest. Mansey started forward, still holding the J.C. Whitney catalogue.

"You stupid dork!" He suddenly yelled at Magliore. "You probably see policemen under your bed, you're so stupid! You probably think they're home screwing your wife when you're here!"

Magliore looked at him, magnified eyes widening. Mansey froze, a look of unbelief on his face.

"Dork?" Magliore said, turning the word over in his mouth the way a carpenter will turn a tool he doesn't know over in his hands. "Did he call me a dork?"

He was stunned by what he had said.

"I'll take him around back," Mansey said, starting forward again.

"Hold it," Magliore breathed. He looked at him with honest curiosity. "Did you call me a dork?"

"I'm not a cop," he said. "I'm not a crook, either. I'm just a guy that heard you sold stuff to people who had the money to buy it. Well, I've got the money. I didn't know you had to say the secret word or have a Captain Midnight decoder ring or all that silly shit. Yes, I called you a dork. I'm sorry I did if it will stop this man from beating me up. I'm . . . " He wet his lips and could think of no way to continue. Magliore and Mansey were looking at him with fascination, as if he had just turned into a Greek marble statue before

their very eyes.

"Dork," Magliore breathed. "Frisk this guy, Pete.

Pete's hands slapped his shoulders and he turned around.

"Put your hands on the wall," Mansey said, his mouth beside his ear. He smelled like Listerine. "Feet out behind you. Just like on the cop shows."

"I don't watch the cop shows," he said, but he knew what Mansey meant, and he put himself in the frisk position. Mansey ran his hands up his legs, patted his crotch with all the impersonality of a doctor, slipped a hand into his belt, ran his hands up his sides, slipped a finger under his collar.

"Clean," Mansey said.

"Turn around, you," Magliore said.

He turned around. Magliore was still regarding him with fascination.

"Come here."

He walked over.

Magliore tapped the glass top of his desk. Under the glass there were several snapshots: A dark woman who was grinning into the camera with sunglasses pushed back on top of her wiry hair; olive-skinned kids splashing in a pool; Magliore himself walking along the beach in a black bathing suit, looking like King Farouk, a large collie at his heel.

"Dump out," he said.

"Huh?"

"Everything in your pockets. Dump it out."

He thought of protesting, then thought of Mansey, who was hovering just behind his left shoulder. He dumped out.

From his topcoat pockets, the stubs of the tickets from the last movie he and Mary had gone to. Something with a lot of singing in it, he couldn't remember the name.

He took the his topcoat. From his suit coat, a Zippo lighter with his initials-BGD-engraved on it. A package of flints. A single Phillies Cheroot. A tin of Phillips milk of magnesia tablets. A receipt from A&S Tires, the place that had put on his snow tires. Mansey looked at it and said with some satisfaction: "Christ you got burned."

He took off his jacket. Nothing in his shirt breast pocket but a ball of lint. From the right front pocket of his pants he produced his car keys and forty cents in change, mostly in nickles. For some reason he had never been able to fathom, pickles seemed to gravitate to him. There was never a dime for the parking meter; only nickles, which wouldn't fit. He put his wallet on the glass-topped desk with the rest of his things.

Magliore picked up the wallet and looked at the faded monogram on it-Mary had given it to him on their anniversary four years ago.

"What's the G for?" Magliore asked.

"George. "

He opened the wallet and dealt the contents out in front of him like a solitaire hand.

Forty-three dollars in twenties and ones.

Credit cards: Shell, Sunoco, Arco, Grant's, Sears, Carey's Department Store, American Express.

Driver's license. Social Security. A blood donor cans, type A-positive. Library card. A plastic flip-folder. A photostated birth certificate card. Several old receipted bills, some of them falling apart along the fold seams from age. Stamped checking account deposit slips, some of them going back to June.

"What's the matter with you?" Magliore asked irritably. "Don't you ever clean out your wallet? You load a wallet up like this and carry it around for a year, that wallet's hurting."

He shrugged. "I hate to throw things away." He was thinking that it was strange, how Magliore calling him a shitbird had made him angry, but Magliore criticizing his wallet didn't bother him at all.

Magliore opened the flip-folder, which was filled with snapshots. The top one was of Mary, her eyes crossed, her tongue popped out at the camera. An old picture. She had been slimmer then.

"This your wife?"

"Yeah. "

"Bet she's pretty when there ain't a camera stuck in her face."

He flipped up another one and smiled.

"Your little boy? I got one about that age. Can he hit a baseball? Whacko! I guess he can."

"That was my son, yes. He's dead now."

"Too bad. Accident?"

"Brain tumor."

Magliore nodded and looked at the other pictures. Fingernail clippings of a life: The house on Crestallen Street West, he and Tom Granger standing in the laundry washroom, a picture of him at the podium of the launderers' convention the year it had been held in the city (he had introduced the keynote speaker), a backyard barbecue with him standing by the grill in a chef's hat and an apron that said: DAD'S COOKIN', MOM'S LOOKIN'.

Magliore put the flip-folder down, bundled the credit cards into a pile, and gave them to Mansey. "Have them photocopied," he said. "And take one of those deposit slips. His wife keeps the checkbook under lock and key, just like mine." Magliore laughed.

Mansey looked at him skeptically. "Are you going to do business with this shitbird?"

"Don't call him a shitbird and maybe he won't call me a dork again." He uttered a wheezy laugh that ended with unsettling suddenness. "You just mind your business,

Petie. Don't tell me mine."

Mansey laughed, but exited in a modified stalk.

Magliore looked at him when the door was closed. He chuckled. He shook his head. "Dork," he said. "By God, I thought I'd been called everything."

"Why is he going to photocopy my credit cards?"

"We have part of a computer. No one owns all of it. People use it on a time-sharing basis. If a person knows the right codes, that person can tap into the memory banks of over fifty corporations that have city business. So I'm going to check on you. If you're a cop, we'll find out. If those credit cards are fake, we'll find out. If they're real but not yours, we'll find that out, too. But you got me convinced. I think you're straight. Dork." He shook his head and laughed. "Was yesterday Monday? Mister, you're lucky you didn't call me a dork on Monday."

"Can I tell you what I want to buy now?"

"You could, and if you were a cop with six recorders on you, you still couldn't touch me. It's called entrapment. But I don't want to hear it now. You come back tomorrow, same time, same station, and I'll tell you if I want to hear it. Even if you're straight, I may not sell you anything. You know why?"

"Why?"

Magliore laughed. "Because I think you're a fruitcake. Driving on three wheels. Flying on instruments."

"Why? Because I called you a name?"

"No," Magliore said. "Because you remind me of something that happened to me when I was a kid about my son's age. There was a dog that lived in the neighborhood where I grew up. Hell's Kitchen, in New York. This was before the Second World War, in the Depression. And this guy named Piazzzi had a black mongrel bitch named Andrea, but everybody just called her Mr. Piazzzi's dog. He kept her chained up all the time, but that dog never got mean, not until this one hot day in August. It might have been 1937. She jumped a kid that came up to pet her and put him in the hospital for a month. Thirty-seven stitches in his neck. But I knew it was going to happen. That dog was out in the hot sun all day, every day, all summer long. In the middle of June it stopped wagging its tail when kids came up to pet it. Then it started to roll its eyes. By the end of July it would growl way back in its throat when some kid patted it. When it started doing that, I stopped patting Mr. Piazzzi's dog. And the guys said, Wassa matta, Sally? You chickenshit? And I said, No, I ain't chickenshit but I ain't stupid, either. That dog's gone mean. And they all said, Up your ass, Mr. Piazzzi's dog don't bite, she never bit nobody, she wouldn't bite a baby that stuck its head down her throat. And I said, You go on and pat her, there's no law that says you can't pat a dog, but I ain't gonna. And so they all go around saying, Sally's chickenshit, Sally's a girl, Sally wants his mama to walk him past Mr. Piazzzi's dog. You know how kids are. "

"I know," he said. Mansey had come back in with his credit cards and was standing by the door, listening.

"And one of the kids who was yelling the loudest was the kid who finally got it. Luigi Bronticelli, his name was. A good Jew like me, you know?" Magliore laughed. "He went up to pat Mr. Piazzzi's dog one day in August when it was hot enough to fry an egg on the sidewalk, and he ain't talked above a whisper since that day. He's got a barbershop in Manhattan, and they call him Whispering Gee. "

Magliore smiled at him.

"You remind me of Mr. Piazzzi's dog. You ain't growling yet, but if someone was to pat you, you'd roll your eyes. And you stopped wagging your tail a long time ago. Pete, give this man his things."

Mansey gave him the bundle.

"You come back tomorrow and we'll talk some more," Magliore said. He watched him putting things back into his wallet. "And you really ought to clean that mess out. You're racking that wallet all to shit."

"Maybe I will," he said.

"Pete, show this man out to his car." "Sure."

He had the door open and was stepping out when Magliore called after him: "You know what they did to Mr. Piazzzi's dog, mister? They took her to the pound and gassed her."

After supper, while John Chancellor was telling about how the reduced speed limit on the Jersey Turnpike had probably been responsible for fewer accidents, Mary asked him about the house.

"Termites," he said.

Her face fell like an express elevator. "Oh. No good, huh?"

"Well, I'm going out again tomorrow. If Tom Granger knows a good exterminator, I'll take the guy out with me. Get an expert opinion. Maybe it isn't as bad as it looks."

"I hope it isn't. A backyard and all . . ." She trailed off wistfully.

Oh, you're a prince, Freddy said suddenly. A veritable prince. How come you're so good to your wife, George? Was it a natural talent or did you take lessons?

"Shut up," he said.

Mary looked around, startled. "What?"

"Oh . . . Chancellor," he said. "I get so sick of gloom and doom from John Chancellor and Walter Cronkite and the rest of them."

"You shouldn't hate the messenger because of the message," she said, and looked at John Chancellor with doubtful, troubled eyes.

"I suppose so," he said, and thought: *You bastard, Freddy.*

Freddy told him not to hate the messenger for the message.

They watched the news in silence for a while. A commercial for a cold medicine came on—two men whose heads had been turned into blocks of snot. When one of them took the cold pill, the gray-green cube that had been encasing his head fell off in large lumps.

"Your cold sounds better tonight," he said.

"It is. Bart, what's the realtor's name?"

"Monohan," he said automatically.

"No, not the man that's selling you the plant. The one that's selling the house. "

"Olsen," he said promptly, picking the name out of an internal litter bag.

The news came on again. There was a report on David Ben-Gurion, who was about to join Harry Truman in that great Secretariat in the sky.

"How does Jack like it out there?" she asked presently.

He was going to tell her Jack didn't like it at all and heard himself saying, "Okay, I guess."

John Chancellor closed out with a humorous item about flying saucers over Ohio.

He went to bed at half past ten and must have had the bad dream almost at once—when he woke up the digital clock said:

11:22P.M.

In the dream he had been standing on a corner in Norton—the corner of Venner and Rice Street. He had been standing right under the street sign. Down the street, in front of a candy store, a pink pimpmobile with caribou antlers mounted on the hood had just pulled up. Kids began to run toward it from stoops and porches.

Across the street, a large black dog was chained to the railing of a leaning brick tenement. A little boy was approaching it confidently.

He tried to cry out: *Don't pet that dog! Go get your candy!* But the words wouldn't come out. As if in slow motion, the pimp in the white suit and planter's hat turned to look. His hands were full of candy. The children who had crowded around him turned to look. All the children around the pimp were black, but the little boy approaching the dog was white.

The dog struck, catapulting up from its haunches like a blunt arrow. The boy screamed and staggered backward, hands to his throat. When he turned around, the blood was streaming through his fingers. It was Charlie.

That was when he had wakened.

The dreams. The goddam *dreams*.

His son had been dead three years.

November 28, 1973

It was snowing when he got up, but it had almost stopped by the time he got to the laundry. Tom Granger came running out of the plant in his shirtsleeves, his breath making short, stiff plumes in the cold air. He knew from the expression on Tom's face that it was going to be a crummy day.

"We've got trouble, Bart."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough. Johnny Walker had an accident on his way back from Holiday Inn with his first load. Guy in a Pontiac skidded through a red light on Deakman and hit him dead center. *Kapow*. " He paused and looked aimlessly back toward the loading doors. There was no one there. "The cops said Johnny was in a bad way. "

"Holy Christ."

"I got out there fifteen or twenty minutes after it happened. You know the intersection-"

"Yeah, yeah, it's a bitch."

Tom shook his head. "If it wasn't so fucking awful you'd have to laugh. It looks like somebody threw a bomb at a washerwoman. There's Holiday Inn sheets and towels everywhere. Some people were stealing them, the fucking ghouls, can you believe what people will do? And the truck . . . Bart, there's nothing left from the driver's side door up. Just junk. Johnny got thrown."

"Is he at Central?"

"No, St Mary's. Johnny's a Catholic, didn't you know that?"

"You want to drive over with me?"

"I better not. Ron's hollering for pressure on the boiler." He shrugged, embarrassed. "You know Ron. The show must go on. "

"All right."

He got back into his car and drove out toward St. Mary's Hospital. Jesus Christ, of all the people for it to happen to. Johnny Walker was the only person left at the laundry besides himself who had been working at the Blue Ribbon in 1953. Johnny, in fact, went back to 1946. The thought lodged in his throat like an omen. He knew from reading the papers that the 784 extension was going to make the dangerous Deakman intersection pretty much obsolete.

His name wasn't Johnny at all, not really. He was Corey Everett Walker-he had seen it on enough time cards to know that. But he had been known as Johnny even twenty years ago. His wife had died in 1956 on a vacation trip in Vermont. Since then he had lived with his brother, who drove a sanitation truck for the city. There were dozens of workers at the Blue Ribbon who called Ron "Stoneballs" behind his back, but Johnny had been the only one to use it to his face and get away with it.

He thought: If Johnny dies, I'm the oldest employee the laundry has got. Held over for a twentieth record-breaking year. Isn't that a sketch, Fred?

Fred didn't think so.

Johnny's brother was sitting in the waiting room of the emergency wing, a tall man with Johnny's features and high complexion, dressed in olive work clothes and a black cloth jacket. He was twirling an olive-colored cap between his knees and looking at the floor. He glanced up at the sound of footsteps.

"You from the laundry?" he asked.

"Yes. You're . . ." He didn't expect the name to come to him, but it did. "Arnie, right?"

"Yeah, Arnie Walker." He shook his head slowly. "I dunno, Mr . . . ?"

"Dawes. "

"I dunno, Mr. Dawes. I seen him in one of those examinin rooms. He looked pretty banged up. He ain't a kid anymore. He looked bad."

"I'm very sorry," he said.

"That's a bad corner. It wasn't the other guy's fault. He just skidded in the snow. I don't blame the guy. They say he broke his nose but that was all. It's funny the way those things work out, you know it?"

"Yes. "

"I remember one time when I was driving a big rig for Hemingway, this was in the early sixties, and I was on the Indiana Toll Road and I saw-

The outer door banged open and a priest came in. He stamped snow from his boots and then hurried up the corridor, almost running. Arnie Walker saw him, and his eyes widened and took on the glazed look of shock. He made a whining, gasping noise in his throat and tried to stand up. He put an arm around Arnie's shoulders and restrained him.

"Jesus!" Arnie cried. "He had his pyx, did you see it? He's gonna give him the last rites . . . maybe he's dead already. *Johnny-*"

There were other people in the waiting room: a teenage kid with a broken arm, an elderly woman with an elastic bandage around one leg, a man with his thumb wrapped in a giant dressing. They looked up at Arnie and then down, self-consciously, at their magazines.

"Take it easy," he said meaninglessly.

"Let me go," Arnie said. "I got to go see."

"Listen-

"Let me go! "

He let him go. Arnie Walker went around the corner and out of sight, the way the priest had gone. He sat in the plastic contour seat for a moment, wondering what to do. He looked at the floor, which was covered with black, slushy tracks. He looked at the nurses' station, where a woman was covering a switchboard. He looked out the window

and saw that the snow had stopped.

There was a sobbing scream from up the corridor, where the examining rooms were.

Everybody looked up, and the same half-sick expression was on every face.

Another scream, followed by a harsh, braying cry of grief.

Everyone looked back at their magazines. The kid with the broken arm swallowed audibly, producing a small click in the silence.

He got up and went out quickly, not looking back.

At the laundry everyone on the floor came over, and Ron Stone didn't stop them.

I don't know, he told them. I never found out if he was alive or dead. You'll hear. I just don't know.

He fled upstairs, feeling weird and disconnected.

"Do you know how Johnny is, Mr. Dawes?" Phyllis asked him. He noticed for the first time that Phyllis, jaunty blue-rinsed hair notwithstanding, was looking old.

"He's bad," he said. "The priest came to give him the last rites."

"Oh, what a dirty shame. And so close to Christmas."

"Did someone go out to Deakman to pick up his load?"

She looked at him a little reproachfully. "Tom sent out Harry Jones. He brought it in five minutes ago."

"Good," he said, but it wasn't good. It was bad. He thought of going down to the washroom and dumping enough Hexlite into the washers to disintegrate all of it-when the extract ended and Pollack opened the machines there would be nothing but a pile of gray fluff. *That* would be good.

Phyllis had said something and he hadn't heard.

"What? I'm sorry."

"I said that Mr. Ordner called. He wants you to call back right away. And a fellow named Harold Swinnerton. He said the cartridges had come in."

"Harold-?" And then he remembered. Harvey's Gun Shop. Only Harvey, like Marley, was as dead as a doornail. "Yes, right."

He went into his office and closed the door. The sign on his desk still said:

THINK!

It May Be A New Experience

He took it off the desk and dropped it into the wastebasket. Chink.

He sat behind his desk, took everything out of the IN basket and threw it into the wastebasket without looking at it. He paused and looked around the office. The walls were wood-paneled. On the left were two framed degrees: one from college, one from the

Laundry Institute, where he had gone during the summers of 1969 and 1970. Behind the desk was a large blow-up of himself shaking hands with Ray Tarkington in the Blue Ribbon parking lot just after it had been hot-topped. He and Ray were smiling. The laundry stood in the background, three trucks backed into the loading bay. The smokestack still looked very white.

He had been in this office since 1967, over six years. Since before Woodstock, before Kent State, before the assassination of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, since before Nixon. Years of his life had been spent between these four walls. Millions of breaths, millions of heartbeats. He looked around, seeing if he felt anything. He felt faintly sad. That was all.

He cleaned out his desk, throwing away personal papers and his personal account books. He wrote his resignation on the back of a printed wash formula and slipped it into a laundry pay envelope. He left the impersonal things-the paper clips, the Scotch tape, the big book of checks, the pile of blank time cards held together with robber bands.

He got up, took the two degrees off the wall, and threw them into the wastebasket. The glass covering the Laundry Institute diploma shattered. The squares where the degrees had hung all these years were a little brighter than the rest of the wall, and that was all.

The phone rang and he picked it up, thinking it would be Ordner. But it was Ron Stone, calling from downstairs.

"Bart?"

"Yeah."

"Johnny passed away a half hour ago. I guess he never really had a chance."

"I'm very sorry. I want to shut it down the rest of the day, Ron."

Ron sighed. "That's best, I guess. But won't you catch hell from the big bosses?"

"I don't work for the big bosses anymore. I just wrote my resignation." There. It was out. That made it real.

A dead beat of silence on the other end. He could hear the washers and the steady thumping hiss of the ironer. The mangler, they called it, on account of what would happen to you if you ever got caught in it.-

"I must have heard you wrong," Ron said finally. "I thought you said-"

"I said it, Ron. I'm through. It's been a pleasure working with you and Tom and even Vinnie, when he could keep his mouth shut. But it's over."

"Hey, listen, Bart. Take it easy. I know this has got you upset-"

"It's not over Johnny," he said, not knowing if it was true or not. Maybe he still would have made an effort to save himself, to save the life that had existed under a protective dome of routine for the last twenty years. But when the priest had walked quickly past them down the hall, almost running, to the place where Johnny lay dying or dead, and when Arnie Walker had made that funny whining noise high up in his throat, he had given up. Like driving a car in a skid, or fooling yourself that you were driving, and then

just taking your hands off the wheel and putting them over your eyes.

"It's not over Johnny," he repeated.

"Well, listen . . . listen . . ." Ron sounded very upset.

"Look, I'll talk to you later, Ron," he said, not knowing if he would or not. "Go on, have them punch out."

"Okay. Okay, but-"

He hung up gently.

He took the phone book out of the drawer and looked in the yellow pages under GUNS. He dialed Harvey's Gun Shop.

"Hello, Harvey's."

"This is Barton Dawes," he said.

"Oh, right. Those shells came in late yesterday afternoon. I told you I'd have them in plenty of time for Christmas. Two hundred rounds."

"Good. Listen, I'm going to be awfully busy this afternoon. Are you open tonight?"

"Open nights until nine right up to Christmas."

"Okay. I'll try to get in around eight. If not, tomorrow afternoon for sure."

"Good enough. Listen, did you find out *if* it was Boca Rio?"

"Boca . . ." Oh, yes, Boca Rio, where his cousin Nick Adams would soon be hunting. "Boca Rio. Yeah, I think it was."

"Jesus, I envy him. That was the best time I ever had in my life."

"Shaky cease-fire holds," he said. A sudden image came to him of Johnny Walker's head mounted over Stephan Ordner's electric log fireplace, with a small polished bronze plaque beneath, saying:

HOMO LAUNDROMAT
November 28, 1973
Bagged on the corner of Deakman

"What was that?" Harry Swinnerton asked, puzzled.

"I said, I envy him too," he said, and closed his eyes. A wave of nausea raced through him. *I'm cracking up*, he thought. *This is called cracking up.*

"Oh. Well, I'll see you, then."

"Sure. Thanks again, Mr. Swinnerton."

He hung up, opened his eyes, and looked around his denuded office again. He flicked the button on the intercom.

"Phyllis?"

"Yes, Mr. Dawes?"

"Johnny died. We're going to shut it down."

"I saw people leaving and thought he must have." Phyllis sounded as if she might have been crying.

"See if you can get Mr. Ordner on the phone before you go, will you?"

"Surely."

He swiveled around in his chair and looked out the window. A road grader, bright orange, was lumbering by with chains on its oversize wheels, lashing at the road. This is their fault, Freddy. All their fault. I was doing okay until those guys down at City Hall decided to rip up my life. I was doing fine, right, Freddy?

Freddy?

Fred?

The phone rang and he picked it up. "Dawes."

"You've gone crazy," Steve Ordner said flatly. "Right out of your mind."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I personally called Mr. Monohan this morning at nine-thirty. The McAn people signed the papers on the Waterford plant at nine o'clock. Now what the fuck happened, Barton?"

"I think we'd better discuss that in person."

"So do I. And I think you ought to know that you're going to have to do some fast talking if you want to save your job."

"Stop playing games with me, Steve."

"What?"

"You've got no intention of keeping me on, not even as the sweeper. I've written my resignation already. It's sealed up, but I can quote it from memory. 'I quit. Signed, Barton George Dawes.' "

"But why?" He sounded physically wounded. But he wasn't whining like Arnie Walker. He doubted if Steve Ordner had done any whining since his eleventh birthday. Whining was the last resort of lesser men.

"Two o'clock?" he asked.

"Two is fine."

"Good-bye, Steve."

"Bart-"

He hung up and looked blankly at the wall. After a while, Phyllis poked her head in, looking tired and nervous and bewildered beneath her smart Older Person hairdo. Seeing her boss sitting quietly in his denuded office did nothing to improve her state of mind.

"Mr. Dawes, should I go? I'd be glad to stay, if-"

"No, go on, Phyllis. Go home."

She seemed to be struggling to say something else, and he turned around and looked out the window, hoping to spare them both embarrassment. After a moment, the door snicked closed, very softly.

Downstairs, the boiler whined and died. Motors began to start up in the parking lot.

He sat in his empty office in the empty laundry until it was time to go and see Ordner. He was saying good-byes.

Ordner's office was downtown, in one of the new high-rise office buildings that the energy crisis might soon make obsolete. Seventy stories high, all glass, inefficient to heat in winter, a horror to cool in summer. Amroco's offices were on the fifty-fourth floor.

He parked his car in the basement parking lot, took the escalator up to lobby level, went through a revolving door, and found the right bank of elevators. He rode up with a black woman who had a large Afro. She was wearing a jumper and was holding a steno notebook.

"I like your Afro," he said abruptly, for no reason.

She looked at him coolly and said nothing. Nothing at all.

The reception room of Stephan Ordner's office was furnished with free-form chairs and a redheaded secretary who sat beneath a reproduction of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers." There was an oyster-colored shag rug on the floor. Indirect lighting. Indirect Muzak, piping Mantovani.

The redhead smiled at him. She was wearing a black jumper, and her hair was bound with a hank of gold yarn. "Mr. Dawes?"

"Yes. "

"Go right in, please. "

He opened the door and went right in. Ordner was writing something at his desk, which was topped with an impressive slab of Lucite. Behind him, a huge window gave on a western view of the city. He looked up and put his pen down. "Hello, Bart," he said quietly.

"Hello. "

"Sit down. "

"Is this going to take that long?"

Ordner looked at him fixedly. "I'd like to slap you," he said. "Do you know that? I'd like to slap you all the way around this office. Not hit you or beat you up. Just slap you."

"I know that," he said, and did.

"I don't think you have any idea of what you threw away," Ordner said. "I suppose the McAn people got to you. I hope they paid you a lot. Because I had you personally earmarked for an executive vice-presidency in this corporation. That would have paid thirty-five thousand a year to start. I hope they paid you more than that."

"They didn't pay me a cent."

"Is that the truth?"

"Yes."

"Then why, Bart? Why in the name of God?"

"Why should I tell you, Steve?" He took the chair he was supposed to take, the supplicant's chair, on the other side of the big, Lucite-topped desk.

For a moment Ordner seemed to be at a loss. He shook his head the way a fighter will when he has been tagged, but not seriously.

"Because you're my employee. How's that for a start?"

"Not good enough."

"What does that mean?"

"Steve, I was Ray Tarkington's employee. He was a real person. You might not have cared for him, but you had to admit he was real. Sometimes when you were talking to him he broke wind or burped or picked dead skin out of his ear. He had real problems. Sometimes I was one of them. Once, when I made a bad decision about billing a motel out in Crager Plaza, he threw me against a door. You're not like him. The Blue Ribbon is Tinkertoys to you, Steve. You don't care about me. You care about your own upward mobility. So don't give me that employee shit. Don't pretend you stuck your cock in my mouth and I bit it."

If Ordner's face was a facade, there was no crack in it. His features continued to register modulated distress, no more. "Do you really believe that?" Ordner asked.

"Yes. You only give a damn about the Blue Ribbon as it affects your status in the corporation. So let's cut the shit. Here." He slid his resignation across the Lucite top of the desk.

Ordner gave his head another little shake. "And what about the people you've hurt, Bart? The little people. Everything else aside, you were in a position of importance." He seemed to taste the phrase. "What about the people at the laundry who are going to lose their jobs because there's no new plant to switch to?"

He laughed harshly and said: "You cheap son of a bitch. You're too fucking high to see down, aren't you?"

Ordner colored. He said carefully: "You better explain that, Bart."

"Every single wage earner at the laundry, from Tom Granger on down to Pollack in the washroom, has unemployment insurance. It's theirs. They pay for it. If you're having trouble with that concept, think of it as a business deduction. Like a four-drink lunch at Benjamin's."

Stung, Ordner said, "That's welfare money and you know it. "

He reiterated: "You cheap son of a bitch."

Ordner's hands came together and formed a double fist. They clenched together like the hands of a child that has been taught to say the Lord's Prayer by his bed. "You're

overstepping yourself, Bart."

"No, I'm not. You called me here. You asked me to explain. What did you want to hear me say? I'm sorry, I screwed up, I'll make restitution? I can't say that. I'm not sorry. I'm not going to make restitution. And if I screwed up, that's between me and Mary. And she'll never even know, not for sure. Are you going to tell me I hurt the corporation? I don't think even you are capable of such a lie. After a corporation gets to a certain size, nothing can hurt it. It gets to be an act of God. When things are good it makes a huge profit, and when times are bad it just makes a profit, and when things go to hell it takes a tax deduction. Now you know that. "

Ordner said carefully: "What about your own future? What about Mary's?"

"You don't care about that. It's just a lever you think you might be able to use. Let me ask you something, Steve. Is this going to hurt you? Is it going to cut into your salary? Into your yearly dividend? Into your retirement fund?"

Ordner shook his head. "Go on home, Bart. You're not yourself."

"Why? Because I'm talking about you and not just about bucks?"

"You're disturbed, Bart."

"You don't know," he said, standing up and planting his fists on the Lucite top of Ordner's desk. "You're mad at me but you don't know why. Someone told you that if a situation like this ever came up you should be mad. But you don't know why. "

Ordner repeated carefully: "You're disturbed."

"You're damn right I am. What are you?"

"Go home, Bart."

"No, but I'll leave you alone and that's what you want. Just answer one question. For one second stop being the corporation man and answer one question for me. Do you care about this? Does any of it mean a damn to you?"

Ordner looked at him for what seemed a long time. The city was spread out behind him like a kingdom of towers, wrapped in grayness and mist. He said: "No."

"All right," he said softly. He looked at Ordner without animosity. "I didn't do it to screw you. Or the corporation. "

"Then why? I answered your question. You answer mine. You could have signed on the Waterford plant. After that it would have been someone else's worry. Why didn't you?"

He said: "I can't explain. I listened to myself. But people talk a different language inside. It sounds like the worst kind of shit if you try to talk about it. But it was the right thing. "

Ordner looked at him unflinchingly. "And Mary?"

He was silent.

"Go home, Bart, Ordner said.

"What do you want, Steve?"

Ordner shook his head impatiently. "We're done, Bart. If you want to have an encounter session with someone, go to a bar."

"What do you want from me?"

"Only for you to get out of here and go home."

"What do you want from life, then? Where are you hooked into things?"

"Go home, Bart."

"*Answer me! What do you want?*" He looked at Ordner nakedly.

Ordner answered quietly, "I want what everyone wants. Go home, Bart."

He left without looking back. And he never went there again.

When he got to Magliore's Used Cars, it was snowing hard and most of the cars he passed had their headlights on. His windshield wipers beat a steady back-and-forth tune, and beyond their sweep snow that had been defrosted into slush ran down the Saf-T-Glass like tears.

He parked in back and walked around to the office. Before he went in, he looked at his ghostly reflection in the plate glass and scrubbed a thin pink film from his lips. The encounter with Ordner had upset him more than he would have believed. He had picked up a bottle of Pepto-Bismol in a drugstore and had chugged half of it on the way out here. Probably won't shit for a week, Fred. But Freddy wasn't at home. Maybe he had gone to visit Monohan's relatives in Bombay.

The woman behind the adding machine gave him a strange speculative smile and waved him in.

Magliore was alone. He was reading *The Wall Street Journal*, and when he came in, Magliore threw it across the desk and into the wastebasket. It landed with a rattling thump.

"It's going right to fucking *hell*," Magliore said, as if continuing an interior dialogue that had started some time ago. "All these stockbrokers are old women, just like Paul Harvey says. Will the president resign? Will he? Won't he? Will he? Is GE going to go bankrupt with the energy shortage? It gives me a pain in the ass."

"Yeah," he said, but not sure of what he was agreeing to. He felt uneasy, and he wasn't totally sure Magliore remembered who he was. What should he say? *I'm the guy who called you a dork, remember?* Christ, that was no way to start.

"Snowing harder, ain't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"I hate the snow. My brother, he goes to Puerto Rico November first every year, stays until April fifteenth. He owns forty percent of a hotel there. Says he has to look after his investment. Shit. He wouldn't know how to look after his own ass if you gave him a roll of Charmin. What do you want?"

"Huh?" He jumped a little, and felt guilty.

"You came to me to get something. How can I get it for you if I don't know what it is?"

When it was put with such abrupt baldness, he found it hard to speak. The word for what he wanted seemed to have too many corners to come out of his mouth. He remembered something he had done as a kid and smiled a little.

"What's funny?" Magliore asked with sharp pleasantness. "With business the way it is, I could use a joke."

"Once, when I was a kid, I put a yo-yo in my mouth," he said.

"That's funny?"

"No, I couldn't get it out. *That's* funny. My mother took me to the doctor and he got it out. He pinched my ass and when I opened my mouth to yell, he just yanked it out."

"I ain't going to pinch your ass," Magliore said. "What do you want, Dawes?"

"Explosives," he said.

Magliore looked at him. He rolled his eyes. He started to say something and slapped one of his hanging jowls instead. "Explosives."

"Yes. "

"I knew this guy was a fruiter," Magliore told himself. "I told Pete when you left, 'There goes a guy looking for an accident to happen.' That's what I told him. "

He said nothing. Talk of accidents made him think of Johnny Walker.

"Okay, Okay, I'll bite. What do you want explosives for? You going to blow up the Egyptian Trade Exposition? You going to skyjack an airplane? Or maybe just blow your mother-in-law to hell?"

"I wouldn't waste explosives on her," he said stiffly, and that made them both laugh, but it didn't break the tension.

"So what is it? Who have you got a hardon against?"

He said: "I don't have a hardon against anyone. If I wanted to kill somebody, I'd buy a gun." Then he remembered he *had* bought a gun, had bought *two* guns, and his Pepto-Bismol-drugged stomach began to roll again.

"So why do you need explosives?"

"I want to blow up a road."

Magliore looked at him with measured incredulity. All his emotions seemed larger than life; it was as if he had adopted his character to fit the magnifying properties of his glasses. "You want to blow up a road? What road?"

"It hasn't been built yet. " He was beginning to get a sort of perverse pleasure from this. And of course, it was postponing the inevitable confrontation with Mary.

"So you want to blow up a road that hasn't been built. I had you wrong, mister. You're

not a fruitcake. You're a psycho. Can you make sense?"

Picking his words carefully, he said: "They're building a road that's known as the 784 extension. When it's done, the state turnpike will go right through the city. For certain reasons I don't want to go into-because I can't-that road has wrecked twenty years of my life. It's-"

"Because they're gonna knock down the laundry where you work, and your house?"

"How did you know that?"

"I told you I was gonna check you. Did you think I was kidding? I even knew you were gonna lose your job. Maybe before you did."

"No, I knew that a month ago," he said, not thinking about what he was saying. "And how are you going to do it? Were you planning to just drive past the construction, lighting fuses with your cigar and throwing bundles of dynamite out of your car window?"

"No. Whenever there's a holiday, they leave all their machines at the site. I want to blow them all up. And all three of the new overpasses. I want to blow them up, too."

Magliore goggled at him. He goggled for a long time. Then he threw back his head and laughed. His belly shook and his belt buckle heaved up and down like a chip of wood riding a heavy swell. His laughter was full and hearty and rich. He laughed until tears splurged out of his eyes and then he produced a huge comic-opera handkerchief from some inner pocket and wiped them. He stood watching Magliore laugh and was suddenly very sure that this fat man with the thick glasses was going to sell him the explosives. He watched Magliore with a slight smile on his face. He didn't mind the laughter. Today laughter sounded good.

"Man, you're crazy, all right," Magliore said when his laughter had subsided to chuckles and hitchings. "I wish Pete could have been here to hear this. He's never gonna believe it. Yesterday you call me a d-dork and t-today . . . t-t-today . . ." And he was off again, roaring his laughter, mopping his eyes with his handkerchief.

When his mirth had subsided again, he asked, "How were you gonna finance this little venture, Mr. Dawes? Now that you're no longer gainfully employed?"

That was a funny way to put it. *No longer gainfully employed*. When you said it that way, it really sounded true. He was out of a job. All of this was not a dream.

"I cashed in my life insurance last month," he said. "I'd been paying on a ten-thousand-dollar policy for ten years. I've got about three thousand dollars. "

"You've really been planning this for that long?"

"No," he said honestly. "When I cashed the policy in, I wasn't sure what I wanted it for. "

"In those days you were still keeping your options open, right? You thought you might burn the road, or machine-gun it to death, or strangle it, or-"

"No. I just didn't know what I was going to do. Now I know."

"Well count me out."

"What?" He blinked at Magliore, honestly stunned. This wasn't in the script. Magliore was supposed to give him a hard time, in a fatherly son of way. Then sell him the explosive. Magliore was supposed to offer a disclaimer, something like: *If you get caught, I'll deny I ever heard of you.*

"What did you say?"

"I said no. N-o. That spells no. " He leaned forward. All the good humor had gone out of his eyes. They were flat and suddenly small in spite of the magnification the glasses caused. They were not the eyes of a jolly Neapolitan Santa Claus at all.

"Listen," he said to Magliore. "If I get caught, I'll deny I ever heard of you. I'll never mention your name."

"The fuck you would. You'd spill your fucking guts and cop an insanity plea. I'd go up for life."

"No, listen-"

"You listen," Magliore said. "You're funny up to a point. That point has been got to. I said no, I meant no. No guns, no explosive, no dynamite, no nothing. Because why? Because you're a fruitcake and I'm a businessman. Somebody told you I could 'get' things. I can get them, all right. I've gotten lots of things for lots of people. I've also gotten a few things for myself. In 1946, I got a two-to-five bit for carrying a concealed weapon. Did ten months. In 1952 I got a conspiracy rap, which I beat. In 1955, I got a tax-evasion rap, which I also beat. In 1959 I got a receiving-stolen-property rap which I didn't beat. I did eighteen months in Castleton, but the guy who talked to the grand jury got life in a hole in the ground. Since 1959 I been up three times, case dismissed twice, rap beat once. They'd like to get me again because one more good one and I'm in for twenty years, no time off for good behavior. A man in my condition, the only part of him that comes out after twenty years is his kidneys, which they give to some Norton nigger in the welfare ward. This is some game to you. Crazy, but a game. It's no game to me. You think you're telling the truth when you say you'd keep your mouth shut. But you're lying. Not to me, to you. So the answer is flat no. " He threw up his hands. "If it had been broads, Jesus, I woulda given you two free just for that floor show you put on yesterday. But I ain't going for any of this."

"All right, " he said. His stomach felt worse than ever. He felt like he was going to throw up.

"This place is clean," Magliore said, "and I know it's clean. Furthermore, I know you're clean, although God knows you're not going to be if you go on like this. But I'll tell you something. About two years ago, this nigger came to me and said he wanted explosives. He wasn't going to blow up something harmless like a road. He was going to blow up a fucking federal courthouse."

Don't tell me any more, he was thinking. I'm going to puke, I think. His stomach felt full of feathers, all of them tickling at once.

"I sold him the goop," Magliore said. "Some of this, some of that. We dickered. He talked to his guys, I talked to my guys. Money changed hands. A lot of money. The goop changed hands. They caught the guy and two of his buddies before they could hurt

anyone, thank God. But I never lost a minute's sleep worrying was he going to spill his guts to the cops or the county prosecutor or the Effa Bee Eye. You know why? Because he was with a whole *bunch* of fruitcakes, nigger fruitcakes, and they're the worst kind, and a *bunch* of fruitcakes is a different proposition altogether. A single nut like you, he doesn't give a shit. He burns out like a lightbulb. But if there are thirty guys and three of them get caught, they just zip up their lips and put things on the back burner."

"All right," he said again. His eyes felt small and hot.

"Listen," Magliore said, a little more quietly. "Three thousand bucks wouldn't buy you what you want, anyway. This is like the black market, you know what I mean?-no pun intended. It would take three or four times that to buy the goop you need."

He said nothing. He couldn't leave until Magliore dismissed him. This was like a nightmare, only it wasn't. He had to keep telling himself that he wouldn't do something stupid in Magliore's presence, like trying to pinch himself awake.

"Dawes?"

"What?"

"It wouldn't do any good anyway. Don't you know that? You can blow up a person or you can blow up a natural landmark or you can destroy a piece of beautiful art, like that crazy shit that took a hammer to the Pieta, may his dink rot off. But you can't blow up buildings or roads or anything like that. It's what all these crazy niggers don't understand. If you blow up a federal courthouse, the feds build two to take its place-one to replace the blown-up one and one just to rack up each and every black ass that gets busted through the front door. If you go around killing cops, they hire six cops for every one you killed-and every one of the new cops is on the prod for dark meat. You can't win, Dawes. White or black. If you get in the way of that road, they'll plow you under along with your house and your job. "

"I have to go now," he heard himself say thickly.

"Yeah, you look bad. You need to get this out of your system. I can get you an old whore if you want her. Old and stupid. You can beat the shit out of her, if you want to. Get rid of the poison. I sort of like you, and-"

He ran. He ran blindly, out the door and through the main office and out into the snow. He stood there shivering, drawing in great white freezing gulps of the snowy air. He was suddenly sure that Magliore would come out after him, collar him, take him back into the office, and talk to him until the end of time. When Gabriel trumpeted in the Apocalypse, Sally One-Eye would still be patiently explaining the invulnerability of all systems everywhere and urging the old whore on him.

When he got home the snow was almost six inches deep. The plows had been by and he had to drive the LTD through a crusted drift of snow to get in the driveway. The LTD made it no sweat. It was a good heavy car.

The house was dark. When he opened the door and stepped in, stamping snow off on the mat, it was also silent. Merv Griffin was not chatting with the celebrities.

"Mary?" He called. There was no answer. "Mary?"

He was willing to think she wasn't home until he heard her crying in the living room. He took off his topcoat and hung it on its hanger in the closet. There was a small box on the floor under the hanger. The box was empty. Mary put it there every winter, to catch drips. He had sometimes wondered: Who cares about drips in a closet? Now the answer came to him, perfect in its simplicity. Mary cared. That's who.

He went into the living room. She was sitting on the couch in front of the blank Zenith TV, crying. She wasn't using a handkerchief. Her hands were at her sides.

She had always been a private weeper, going into the upstairs bedroom to do it, or if it surprised her, hiding her face in her hands or a handkerchief. Seeing her this way made her face seem naked and obscene, the face of a plane crash victim. It twisted his heart.

"Mary," he said softly.

She went on crying, not looking at him. He sat down beside her.

"Mary," he said. "It's not as bad as that. Nothing is." But he wondered.

"It's the end of everything," she said, and the words came out splintered by her crying. Oddly, the beauty she had not achieved for good or lost for good was in her face now, shining. In this moment of the final smash, she was a lovely woman.

"Who told you?"

"Everybody told me!" She cried. She still wouldn't look at him, but one hand came up and made a twisting, beating movement against the air before falling against the leg of her slacks. "Tom Granger called. Then Ron Stone's wife called. Then Vincent Mason called. They wanted to know what was wrong with you. And I didn't *know!* I didn't know anything was wrong!"

"Mary," he said, and tried to take her hand. She snatched it away as if he might be catching.

"Are you punishing me?" she asked, and finally looked at him. "Is that what you're doing? Punishing me?"

"No," he said urgently. "Oh Mary, no." He wanted to cry now, but that would be wrong. That would be very wrong.

"Because I gave you a dead baby and then a baby with a built-in self-destruct? Do you think I murdered your son? Is that why?"

"Mary, he was our son-

"He was yours!" she screamed at him.

"Don't, Mary. Don't." He tried to hold her and she fought away from him.

"Don't you touch me."

They looked at each other, stunned, as if they had discovered for the first time that there was more to them than they had ever dreamed of—vast white spaces on some interior map.

"Mary, I can't help what I did. Please believe that." But it could have been a lie. Nonetheless, he plunged on: "If it had something to do with Charlie, it did. I've done some things I don't understand. I . . . I cashed in my life insurance policy in October. That was the first thing, the first real thing, but things had been happening in my mind long before that. But it was easier to do things than to talk about them. Can you understand that? Can you try?"

"What's going to happen to me, Barton? I don't know anything but being your wife. What's going to happen to me?"

"I don't know."

"It's like you raped me," she said, and began to cry again.

"Mary, please don't do that anymore. Don't . . . try not to do that anymore. "

"When you were doing all those *things*, didn't you ever think of me? Didn't you ever think that I *depend* on you?"

He couldn't answer. In a strange, disconnected way it was like talking to Magliore again. It was as if Magliore had beaten him home and put on a girdle and Mary's clothes and a Mary mask. What next? The offer of the old whore?

She stood. "I'm going upstairs. I'm going to lie down."

"Mary-" She did not cut him off, but he discovered there were no words to follow that first.

She left the room and he heard her footsteps going upstairs. After that he heard the creak of her bed as she lay down on it. After that he heard her crying again. He got up and turned on the TV and jacked the volume so he wouldn't be able to hear it. On the TV, Merv Griffin was chatting with celebrities.

PART TWO

December

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused armies of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

-MATTHEW ARNOLD
"Dover Beach"

December 5, 1973

He was drinking his private drink, Southern Comfort and Seven-Up, and watching some TV program he didn't know the name of. The hero of the program was either a plainclothes cop or a private detective, and some guy had hit him over the head. This had made the plainclothes cop (or private detective) decide that he was getting close to something. Before he had a chance to say what, there was a commercial for Gravy Train. The man in the commercial was saying that Gravy Train, when mixed with warm water, made its own gravy. He asked the audience if it didn't look just like beef stew. To Barton George Dawes it looked just like a loose bowel movement that somebody had done in a red dog dish. The program came back on. The private eye (or plainclothes police detective) was questioning a black bartender who had a police record. The bartender said dig. The bartender *said, flake off*. The bartender said *dude*. He was a very hip bartender, all right, but Barton George Dawes thought that the private cop (or plainclothes investigator) had his number.

He was quite drunk, and he was watching television in his shorts and nothing else. The house was hot. He had turned the thermostat to seventy-eight degrees and had left it there ever since Mary left. What energy crisis? Fuck you, Dick. Also the horse you rode in on. Fuck Checkers, too. When he got on the turnpike, he drove at seventy, giving the finger to motorists who honked at him to slow down. The president's consumer expert, some woman who looked as if she might have been a child star in the 1930s before passing time had turned her into a political hermaphrodite, had been on a public-service program two nights ago, talking about the ways!! You & I!! could save electricity around the house. Her name was Virginia Knauer, and she was very big on different ways YOU & I could save energy, because this thing was a real bitch and we were all in it together. When the program was over he had gone into the kitchen and turned on the electric blender. Mrs. Knauer had said that blenders were the second-biggest small appliance energy wasters. He had let the blender run all night and when he got up the next morning-yesterday morning-the motor had burned out. The greatest electricity waster, Mrs. Knauer had said, were those little electric space heaters. He didn't have an electric space heater, but he had toyed with the idea of getting one so he could run it day and night until it burned up. Possibly, if he was drunk and passed out, it would burn him up, too. That would be the end of the whole silly self-pitying mess.

He poured himself another drink and fell to musing over the old TV programs, the ones they had been running when he and Mary were still practically newlyweds and a brand new RCA console model TV-your ordinary, garden-variety RCA console model black-and-white TV-was something to boggle over. There had been "The Jack Benny Program" and "Amos 'n Andy," those original jiveass niggers. There was "Dragnet," the original "Dragnet" with Ben Alexander for Joe Friday's partner instead of that new guy, Harry somebody. There had been "Highway Patrol," with Broderick Crawford growling ten-four into his mike and everybody driving around in Buicks that still had portholes on the side. "Your Show of Shows." "Your Hit Parade," with Gisele MacKenzie singing things like "Green Door" and "Stranger in Paradise." Rock and roll had killed that one. Or how about the quiz shows, how about them? "Tic-Tac-Dough" and "TwentyOne" every Monday night, starring Jack Barry. People going into isolation booths and putting UN-style earphones on their heads to hear fucking incredible questions they had already

been briefed on. "The \$64,000 Question," with Hal March. Contestants staggering offstage with their arms full of reference books. "Dotto," with Jack Narz. And Saturday morning programs like "Annie Oakley," who was always saving her kid brother Tag from some Christless mess. He had always wondered if that kid was really her bastard. There was "Rin-Tin-Tin," who operated out of Fort Apache. "Sergeant Preston," who operated out of the Yukon-sort of a roving assignment, you might say. "Range Rider," with Jock Mahoney. "Wild Bill Hickok," with Guy Madison and Andy Devine as Jingles. Mary would say Bart, if people knew you watched all that stuff, they'd think you were feeble. Honestly, a man your age! And he had always replied, I want to be able to talk to my kids, kid. Except there had never been any kids, not really. The first one had been nothing but a dead mess-what was that old joke about putting wheels on miscarriages?-and the second had been Charlie, who it was best not to think of. I'll be seeing you in my dreams, Charlie. Every night it seemed he and his son got together in one dream or another. Barton George Dawes and Charles Frederick Dawes, reunited by the wonders of the subconscious mind. And here we are, folks, back in Disney World's newest head trip, Self-Pity Land, where you can take a gondola ride down The Canal of Tears, visit the Museum of Old Snapshots, and go for a ride in The Wonderful NostalgiaMobile, driven by Fred MacMurray. The last stop on your tour is this wonderful replica of Crestallen Street West. It's right here inside this giant Southern Comfort bottle, preserved for all time. That's right, madam, just duck your head as you walk into the neck. It'll widen out soon. And this is the home of Barton George Dawes, the last living resident of Crestallen Street West. Look right in the window here just a second, sonny, I'll boost you up. That's George all right, sitting in front of his Zenith color TV in his striped boxer shorts, having a drink and crying. Crying? Of course he's crying. What else would he be doing in Self-Pity Land? He cries all the time. The flow of his tears is regulated by our WORLD-FAMOUS TEAM OF ENGINEERS. On Mondays he just mists a little, because that's a slow night. The rest of the week he cries a lot more. On the weekend he goes into overdrive, and on Christmas we may float him right away. I admit he's a little disgusting, but nonetheless, he's one of SelfPity Land's most popular inhabitants, right up there with our recreation of King Kong atop the Empire State Building. He-

He threw his drink at the television.

He missed by quite a bit. The glass hit the wall, fell to the floor, and shattered. He burst into fresh tears.

Crying, he thought: Look at me, look at me, Jesus you're disgusting. You're such a fucking mess it's beyond belief. You spoiled your whole life and Mary's too and you sit here joking about it, you fucking waste. Jesus, Jesus, Jesus-

He was halfway to the telephone before he could stop himself. The night before, drunk and crying, he had called Mary and begged her to come back. He had begged until she began to cry and hung up on him. It made him squirm and grin to think of it, that he had done such a Godawful embarrassing thing.

He went on to the kitchen, got the dustpan and the whiskbroom, and went back to the living room. He shut off the TV and swept up the glass. He took it into the kitchen, weaving slightly, and dumped it into the trash. Then he stood there, wondering what to do next.

He could hear the insectile buzz of the refrigerator and it frightened him. He went to bed. And dreamed.

December 6, 1973

It was half past three and he was slamming up the turnpike toward home, doing seventy. The day was clear and hand and bright, the temperature in the low thirties. Every day since Mary had left he went for a long ride on the turnpike-in a way, it had become his surrogate work. It soothed him. When the road was unrolling in front of him, its edges clearly marked by the low early winter snowbanks on either side, he was without thought and at peace. Sometimes he sang along with the radio in a lusty, bellowing voice. Often on these trips he thought he should just keep going, letting way lead on to way, getting gas on the credit card. He would drive south and not stop until he ran out of roads or out of land. Could you drive all the way to the tip of South America? He didn't know.

But he always came back. He would get off the turnpike, eat hamburgers and French fries in some pickup restaurant, and then drive into the city, arriving at sunset or just past.

He always drove down Stanton Street, parked, and got out to look at whatever progress the 784 extension had made during the day. The construction company had mounted a special platform for rubberneckers-mostly old men and shoppers with an extra minute-and during the day it was always full. They lined up along the railing like clay ducks in a shooting gallery, the cold vapor pluming from their mouths, gawking at the bulldozers and graders and the surveyors with their sextants and tripods. He could cheerfully have shot all of them.

But at night, with the temperatures down in the 20's, with sunset a bitter orange line in the west and thousands of stars already pricking coldly through the firmament overhead, he could measure the road's progress alone and undisturbed. The moments he spent there were becoming very important to him-he suspected that in an obscure way, the moments spent on the observation platform were recharging him, keeping him tied to a world of at least half-sanity. In those moments before the evening's long plunge into drunkenness had begun, before the inevitable urge to call Mary struck, before he began the evening's activities in Self-Pity-Land he was totally himself, coldly and blinkingly sober. He would curl his hands over the iron pipe and stare down at the construction until his fingers became as unfeeling as the iron itself and it became impossible to tell where the world of himself-the world of human things-ended and the outside world of tractors and cranes and observation platforms began. In those moments there was no need to blubber or pick over the rickrack of the past that jumbled his memory. In those moments he felt his *self* pulsing warmly in the cold indifference of the early-winter evening, a real person, perhaps still whole.

Now, whipping up the turnpike at seventy, still forty miles away from the Westgate tollbooths, he saw a figure standing in the breakdown land just past exit 16, muffled up in a CPO coat and wearing a black knitted watchcap. The figure was holding up a sign that said (amazingly, in all this snow): LAS VEGAS. And underneath that, defiantly: or BUST!

He slammed on the power brake and felt the seat belt strain a groove in his middle

with the swift deceleration, a little exhilarated by the Richard Petty sound of his own squealing tires. He pulled over about twenty yards beyond the figure. It tucked its sign under its arm and ran toward him. Something about the way the figure was running told him the hitchhiker was a girl.

The passenger door opened and she got in.

"Hey, thanks."

"Sure. " He glanced in the rearview mirror and pulled out, accelerating back to seventy. The road unrolled in front of him again. "A long way to Vegas."

"It sure is." She smiled at him, the stock smile for people that told her it was a long way to Vegas, and pulled off her gloves. "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No, go ahead."

She pulled out a box of Marlboros. "Like one?"

"No, thanks."

She stuck a cigarette in her mouth, took a box of kitchen matches from her CPO pocket, lit her smoke, took a huge drag and chuffed it out, fogging part of the windshield, put Marlboros and matches away, loosened the dark blue scarf around her neck and said: "I appreciate the ride. It's cold out there."

"Were you waiting long?"

"About an hour. The last guy was drunk. Man, I was glad to get out."

He nodded. "I'll take you to the end of the turnpike."

"End?" She looked at him. "You're going all the way to Chicago?"

"What? Oh, no." He named his city.

"But the turnpike goes through there." She pulled a Sunoco road map, dog-eared from much thumbing, from her other coat pocket. "The map says so. "

"Unfold it and look again."

She did so.

"What color is the part of the turnpike we're on now?"

"Green. "

"What color is the part going through the city?"

"Dotted green. It's . . . oh, Christ! It's under *construction!*"

"That's right. The world-famous 784 extension. Girl, you'll never get to Las Vegas if you don't read the key to your map."

She bent over it, her nose almost touching the paper. Her skin was clear, perhaps normally milky, but now the cold had brought a bloom to her cheeks and forehead. The tip of her nose was red, and a small drop of water hung beside her left nostril. Her hair was clipped short, and not very well. A home job. A pretty chestnut color. Too bad to cut it, worse to cut it badly. What was that Christmas story by O. Henry? "The Gift of the

Magi." Who did you buy a watch chain for, little wanderer?

"The solid green picks up at a place called Landy," she said. "How far is that from where this part ends?"

"About thirty miles."

"Oh Christ. "

She puzzled over the map some more. Exit 15 flashed by.

"What's the bypass road?" she asked finally. "It just looks like a snarl to me. "

"Route 7's best," he said. "It's at the last exit, the one they call Westgate." He hesitated. "But you'd do better to just hang it up for the night. There's a Holiday Inn. We won't get there until almost dark, and you don't want to try hitching up Route 7 after dark."

"Why not?" she asked, looking over at him. Her eyes were green and disconcerting; an eye color you read about occasionally but rarely see.

"It's a city bypass road," he said, taking charge of the passing lane and roaring past a whole line of vehicles doing fifty. Several of them honked at him angrily. "Four lanes with a little bitty concrete divider between them. Two lanes west toward Landy, two lanes east into the city. Lots of shopping centers and hamburger stands and bowling alleys and all that. Everybody is going in short hops. No one wants to stop."

"Yeah." She sighed. "Is there a bus to Landy?"

"There used to be a city bus, but it went bankrupt. I guess there must be a Greyhound--

"Oh, fuck it. " She squidged the map back together and stuffed it into her pocket. She stared at the road, looking put out and worried.

"Can't afford a motel room?"

"Mister, I've got thirteen bucks. I couldn't rent a doghouse."

"You can stay at my house if you want," he said.

"Yeah, and maybe you better let me out right here."

"Never mind. I withdraw the offer."

"Besides, what would your wife think?" She looked pointedly at the wedding ring on his finger. It was a look that suggested she thought he might also hang around school play yards after the monitor had gone home for the day.

"My wife and I are separated."

"Recently?"

"Yes. As of December first."

"And now you've got all these hang-ups that you could use some help with," she said. There was contempt in her voice but it was an old contempt, not aimed specifically at him. "Especially some help from a young chick."

"I don't want to lay anybody," he said truthfully. "I don't even think I could get it up." He realized he had just used two terms that he had never used before a woman in his life, but it seemed all right. Not good or bad but all right, like discussing the weather.

"Is that supposed to be a challenge?" she asked. She drew deeply on her cigarette and exhaled more smoke.

"No," he said. "I suppose it sounds like a line if you're looking for lines. I suppose a girl on her own has to be looking for them all the time."

"This must be part three," she said. There was still mild contempt and hostility in her tone, but now it was cut with a certain tired amusement. "How did a nice girl like you get in a car like this?"

"Oh, to hell with it," he said. "You're impossible."

"That's right, I am." She snuffed her cigarette in his ashtray and then wrinkled her nose. "Look at this. Full of candy wrappers and cellophane and every other kind of shit. Why don't you get a litterbag?"

"Because I don't smoke. If you had just called ahead and said, Barton old boy, I intend to be hitching the turnpike today so give me a ride, would you? And by the way, clear the shit out of your ashtray because I intend to smoke-then I would have emptied it. Why don't you just throw it out the window?"

She was smiling. "You have a nice sense of irony."

"It's my sad life."

"Do you know how long it takes filter tips to biodegrade? Two hundred years, that's how long. By that time your grandchildren will be dead."

He shrugged. "You don't mind me breathing in your used carcinogens, screwing up the cilia in my lungs, but you don't want to throw a filter tip out into the turnpike. Okay."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing."

"Listen, do you want to let me out? Is that it?"

"No," he said. "Why don't we just talk about something neutral? The state of the dollar. The state of the Union. The state of Arkansas."

"I think I'd rather catch a little nap if you don't mind. It looks like I'm going to be up most of the night. "

"Fine. "

She tilted the watchcap over her eyes, folded her arms, and became still. After a few moments her breathing deepened to long strokes. He looked at her in short snatches, shoplifting an image of her. She was wearing blue jeans, tight, faded, thin. They molded her legs closely enough to let him know that she wasn't wearing a second pair or long-handles. They were long legs, folded under the dashboard for comfort, and they were probably blushing lobster red now, itching like hell. He started to ask her if her legs itched, and then thought how it would sound. The thought of her hitchhiking all night on

Route 7, either getting rides in short hops or not getting rides at all, made him feel uncomfortable. Night, thin pants, temperatures in the 20's. Well, it was her business. If she got cold enough, she could go in someplace and warm up. No problem.

They passed exits 14 and 13. He stopped looking at her and concentrated on his driving. The speedometer needle stayed pegged at seventy, and he stayed in the passing lane. More cars honked at him. As they passed exit 12, a man in a station wagon which bore a KEEP IT AT 50 bumper sticker honked three times and blipped his lights indignantly. He gave the station wagon the finger.

With her eyes still closed she said: "You're going too fast. That's why they're honking."
"

"I know why they're doing it."

"But you don't care. "

"No."

"Just another concerned citizen," she intoned, "doing his part to rid America of the energy squeeze."

"I don't give a tin weasel about the energy squeeze."

"So say we; so say we all."

"I used to drive at fifty-five on the turnpike. No more, no less. That's where my car got the best mileage. Now I'm protesting the Trained Dog Ethic. Surely you read about it in your sociology courses? Or am I wrong? I took it for granted you were a college kid."

She sat up. "I was a sociology major for a while. Well, sort of. But I never heard of the Trained Dog Ethic."

"That's because I made it up. "

"Oh. April Fool." Disgust. She slid back down in the seat and tilted the watchcap over her eyes again.

"The Trained Dog Ethic, first advanced by Barton George Dawes in late 1973, fully explains such mysteries as the monetary crisis, inflation, the Viet Nam war, and the current energy crisis. Let us take the energy crisis as an example. The American people are the trained dogs, trained in this case to love oil-guzzling toys. Cars, snowmobiles, large boats, dune buggies, motorcycles, minicycles, campers, and many, many more. In the years 1973 to 1980 we will be trained to hate energy toys. The American people love to be trained. Training makes them wag their tails. Use energy. Don't use energy. Go pee on the newspaper. I don't object to saving energy, I object to training. "

He found himself thinking of Mr. Piazzi's dog, who had first stopped wagging his tail, had then started rolling his eyes, and had then ripped out Luigi Bronticelli's throat.

"Like Pavlov's dogs," he said. "They were trained to salivate at the sound of a bell. We've been trained to salivate when somebody shows us a Bombardier Skidoo with overdrive or a Zenith color TV with a motorized antenna. I have one of those at my house. The TV has a Space Command gadget. You can sit in your chair and change the channels, hike the volume or lower it, turn it on or off. I stuck the gadget in my mouth

once and pushed the on button and the TV came right on. The signal went right through my brain and still did the job. Technology is wonderful. "

"You're crazy," she said.

"I guess so." They passed exit 11.

"I think I'll go to sleep. Tell me when we get to the end."

"Okay."

She folded her arms and closed her eyes again.

They passed exit 10.

"It isn't the Trained Dog Ethic I object to anyway," he said. "It's the fact that the masters are mental, moral, and spiritual idiots."

"You're trying to soothe your conscience with a lot of rhetoric," she said with her eyes still closed. "Why don't you just slow down to fifty? You'll feel better."

"I will not feel better." And he spat it out so vehemently that she sat up and looked at him.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said. "I lost my wife and my job because either the world has gone crazy or I have. Then I pick up a hitchhiker-a nineteen-year-old kid for Chrissake, the kind that's supposed to take it for granted that the world's gone crazy-and she tells me it's me, the world is doing just fine. Not much oil, but other than that, just fine."

"I'm twenty-one."

"Good for you," he said bitterly. "If the world's so sane, what's a kid like you doing hitchhiking to Las Vegas in the middle of winter? Planning to spend the whole night hitchhiking along Route 7 and probably getting frostbite in your legs because you're not wearing anything under those pants?"

"I am so wearing something underneath! What do you think I *am*?"

"I think you're *stupid!*" he roared at her. "You're going to freeze your *ass* off! "

"And then you won't be able to get a piece of it, right?" she inquired sweetly.

"Oh boy," he muttered. "Oh boy."

They roared past a sedan moving at fifty. The sedan beeped at him. *"Eat it!"* He yelled. *"Raw!"*

"I think you better let me off right now," she said quietly.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm not going to crash us up. Go to sleep."

She looked at him distrustfully for a long second, then folded her arms and closed her eyes. They went past exit 9.

They passed exit 2 at five after four. The shadows stretching across the road had

taken on the peculiar blue cast that is the sole property of winter shadows. Venus was already in the east. The traffic had thickened as they approached the city.

He glanced over toward her and saw she was sitting up, looking out at the hurrying, indifferent automobiles. The car directly in front of them had a Christmas tree lashed to its roof rack. The girl's green eyes were very wide, and for a moment he fell into them and saw out of them in the perfect empathy that comes to human beings at mercifully infrequent intervals. He saw that all the cars were going to someplace where it was warm, someplace where there was business to transact or friends to greet or a loom of family life to pick up and stitch upon. He saw their indifference to strangers. He understood in a brief, cold instant of comprehension what Thomas Carlyle called the great dead locomotive of the world, rushing on and on.

"We're almost there?" she asked.

"Fifteen minutes."

"Listen, if I was hard on you-"

"No, I was hard on you. Listen, I've got nothing in particular to do. I'll take you around to Landy."

"No-"

"Or I'll stick you in the Holiday Inn for the night. No strings attached. Merry Christmas and all that."

"Are you really separated from your wife?"

"Yes. "

"And so recently?"

"Yes. "

"Has she got your kids?"

"We have no kids." They were coming up on the tollbooths. Their green gollights twinkled indifferently in the early twilight.

"Take me home with you, then."

"I don't have to do that. I mean, you don't have to-"

"I'd just as soon be with somebody tonight," she said. "And I don't like to hitchhike at night. It's scary."

He slid up to a tollbooth and rolled down his window, letting in cold air. He gave the toll taker his card and a dollar ninety. He pulled out slowly. They passed a reflectorized sign that said:

THANK YOU FOR DRIVING SAFELY!

"All right," he said cautiously. He knew he was probably wrong to keep trying to reassure her-probably achieving just the opposite effect-but he couldn't seem to help it. "Listen, it's just that the house is very lonely by myself. We can have supper, and then maybe watch TV and eat popcorn. You can have the upstairs bedroom and I'll-"

She laughed a little and he glanced at her as they went around the cloverleaf.

But she was hard to see now, a little indistinct. She could have been something he dreamed. The idea bothered him.

"Listen," she said. "I better tell you this right now. That drunk I was riding with? I spent the night with him. He was going on to Stilson, where you picked me up. That was his price."

He paused for the red light at the foot of the cloverleaf.

"My roommate told me it would be like that, but I didn't believe her. I wasn't going to fuck my way across the country, not me." She looked at him fleetingly, but he still couldn't read her face in the gloom. "But it's not people *making you*. It's being so disconnected from everything, like spacewalking. When you come into a big city and think of all the people in there, you want to cry. I don't know why, but you do. It gets so you'd spend the night picking some guy's bleeding pimples just to hear him breathe and talk."

"I don't care who you've been sleeping with," he said and pulled out into traffic. Automatically he turned onto Grand Street, heading for home past the 784 construction.

"This salesman," she said. "He's been married fourteen years. He kept saying that while he was humping me. Fourteen years, Sharon, he keeps saying, fourteen years, fourteen years. He came in about fourteen seconds." She uttered short bark of laughter, rueful and sad.

"Is that your name? Sharon?"

"No. I guess that was his wife's name."

He pulled over to the curb.

"What are you doing?" she asked, instantly distrustful.

"Nothing much," he said. "This is part of going home. Get out, if you want. I'll show you something."

They got out and walked over to the observation platform, now deserted. He laid his bare hands on the cold iron pipe of the railing and looked down. They had been undercoating today, he saw. The last three working days they had put down gravel. Now undercoat. Deserted equipment-trucks and bulldozers and yellow backhoes stood silently about in the shades of evening like a museum exhibit of dinosaurs. Here we have the vegetarian stegosaurus, the flesh-eating triceratops, the fearsome earth-munching diesel shovel. *Bon appetit*.

"What do you think of it?" he asked her.

"Am I supposed to think something?" She was fencing, trying to figure this out.

"You must think something," he said.

She shrugged. "It's roadwork, so what? They're building a road in a city I'll probably never be in again. What am I supposed to think? It's ugly."

"Ugly," he echoed, relieved.

"I grew up in Portland, Maine," she said. "We lived in a big apartment building and they put this shopping center up across the street-"

"Did they tear anything down to make it?"

"Huh?"

"Did they-"

"Oh. No, it was just a vacant lot with a big field behind it. I was just six or seven. I thought they were going to go on digging and ripping and plowing forever. And all I could think . . . it's funny . . . all I could think was the poor old earth, it's like they're giving it an enema and they never asked if it wanted one or if there was something wrong. I had some kind of an intestinal infection that year, and I was the block expert on enemas.

"Oh," he said.

"We went over one Sunday when they weren't working and it was a lot like this, very quiet, like a corpse that died in bed. They had part of the foundations laid, and there were all of these yellow metal things sticking out of the cement-"

"Core rods."

"Whatever. And there was lots of pipe and bundles of wire covered with clear plastic wrap and there was a lot of raw dirt around. Funny to think of it that way, whoever heard of cooked dirt, but that's how it looked. Just raw. We played hide-and-go-seek around the place and my mother came over and got us and gave me and my sister hell for it. She said little kids can get into bad trouble around construction. My little sister was only four and she cried her head off. Funny to remember all that. Can we get back in the car now? I'm cold.

"Sure," he said, and they did.

As they drove on she said: "I never thought they'd have anything out of that place but a mess. Then pretty soon the shopping center was all there. I can remember the day they hot-topped the parking lot. And a few days after that some men came with a little push-wagon and made all the yellow parking lines. Then they had a big party and some hot-shit cut a ribbon and everybody started using it and it was just like they never built it. The name of the big department store was Mammoth Mart, and my mom used to go there a lot. Sometimes when Angie and I were with her I'd think of all those orange rods sticking through the cement down in the basement. It was like a secret thought. "

He nodded. He knew about secret thoughts.

"What does it mean to you?" she asked.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," he said.

He was going to make TV dinners, but she looked in the freezer and saw the roast and said she'd fix it if he didn't mind waiting for it to cook.

"Sure," he said. "I didn't know how long to cook it or even what temperature. "

"Do you miss your wife?"

"Like hell."

"Because you don't know how to cook the roast?" she asked, and he didn't answer that. She baked potatoes and cooked frozen corn. They ate in the breakfast nook and she ate four thick slices of the roast, two potatoes, and two helpings of the corn.

"I haven't eaten like that in a year," she said, lighting a cigarette and looking into her empty plate. "I'll probably heave my guts."

"What have you been eating?"

"Animal crackers."

"What?"

"Animal crackers."

"I thought that's what you said."

"They're cheap," she said. "And they fill you up. They've got a lot of nutrients and stuff, too. It says so right on the box."

"Nutrients my ass. You're getting zits, girl. You're too old for those. Come here."

He led her into the dining room and opened Mary's china cupboard. He took out a silver serving dish and pulled a thick pile of paper money out of it. Her eyes widened.

"Who'd you off, mister?"

"I offed my insurance policy. Here. Here's two hundred bucks. Eat on it."

But she didn't touch the money. "You're nuts," she said. "What do you think I'm going to do to you for two hundred dollars?"

"Nothing."

She laughed.

"All right." He put the money on the sideboard and put the silver serving dish back into the cupboard. "If you don't take it with you in the morning, I'll flush it down the john." But he didn't think he would.

She looked into his face. "You know, I think you would."

He said nothing.

"We'll see," she said. "In the morning."

"In the morning," he echoed.

He was watching "To Tell the Truth" on the television. Two of the contestants were lying about being the world's champion female bronc rider, and one was telling the truth. The panel, which included Soupy Sales, Bill Cullen, Arlene Dahl, and Kitty Carlisle, had to guess which one was telling the truth. Garry Moore, television's only three-hundred-year-old game show host, smiled and cracked jokes and dinged a bell

when each panelist's time was up.

The girl was looking out the window. "Hey," she said. "Who lives on this street, anyway? All the houses look dark. "

"Me and the Dankmans," he said. "And the Dankmans are moving out January fifth."

"Why?"

"The road," he said. "Would you like a drink?"

"What do you mean, the road?"

"It's coming through here," he said. "This house is going to be somewhere in the middle of the median strip, as near as I can figure. "

"That's why you showed me the construction?"

"I guess so. I used to work for a laundry about two miles from here. The Blue Ribbon. It's going through there, too."

"That's why you lost your job? Because the laundry was closing?"

"Not exactly. I was supposed to sign an option on a new plant in a suburb called Waterford and I didn't do it."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't bear to," he said simply. "You want a drink?"

"You don't have to get me drunk," she said.

"Oh, Christ," he said, rolling his eyes. "Your mind runs on just one track, doesn't it?"

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence.

"Screwdrivers are about the only drinks I like. Do you have vodka and orange juice?"

"Yes."

"No pot, I guess."

"No, I've never used it."

He went out into the kitchen and made her a screwdriver. He mixed himself a Comfort and Seven-Up and took them back into the living room. She was playing with the Space Command gadget, and the TV switched from channel to channel, displaying its seven-thirty wares: "To Tell the Truth," snow, "What's My Line," "I Dream of Jeannie," "Gilligan's Island," snow, "I Love Lucy," snow, snow, Julia Child making something with avocados that looked a little like dog whoop, "The New Price Is Right," snow, and then back to Garry Moore, who was daring the panel to discover which of the three contestants was the real author of a book about what it was like to be lost for a month in the forests of Saskatchewan.

He gave her her drink.

"Did you eat beetles, number two?" Kitty Carlisle asked.

"What's the matter with you people?" the girl asked. "No 'Star Trek.' Are you

heathens?"

"They run it at four o'clock on channel eight," he said.

"Do you watch it?"

"Sometimes. My wife always watches Merv Griffin."

"I didn't see any beetles," number two said. "If I'd seen any, I would have eaten them."
" The audience laughed heartily.

"Why did she move out? You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." She looked at him warily, as if the price of his confession might be tiresomely high.

"The same reason I got fired off my job," he said, sitting down.

"Because you didn't buy that plant?"

"No. Because I didn't buy a new house. "

"I voted for number two," Soupy Sales said, "because he looks like he'd eat a beetle if he saw one." The audience laughed heartily.

"Didn't . . . wow. Oh, wow." She looked at him over her drink without blinking. The expression in her eyes seemed to be a mixture of awe, admiration, and terror. "Where are you going to go?"

"I don't know."

"You're not working?"

"No."

"What do you do all day?"

"I ride on the turnpike."

"And watch TV at night?"

"And drink. Sometimes I make popcorn. I'm going to make popcorn later on tonight."
"

"I don't eat popcorn."

"Then I'll eat it."

She punched the off button on the Space Command gadget (he sometimes thought of it as a "module" because today you were encouraged to think of everything that zapped on and off as a module) and the picture on the Zenith twinkled down to a bright dot and then winked out.

"Let me see if I've got this straight," she said. "You threw your wife and your job down the drain-"

"But not necessarily in that order."

"Whatever. You threw them away over this road. Is that right?"

He looked at the blank TV uncomfortably. Even though he rarely followed what was happening on it very closely, it made him uncomfortable to have it off. "I don't know if it

is or not," he said. "You can't always understand something just because you did it."

"Was it a protest?"

"I don't *know*. If you're protesting something, it's because you think something else would be better. All those people protested the war because they thought peace would be better. People protest drug laws because they think other drug laws would be fairer or more fun or less harm or . . . I don't know. Why don't you turn the TV on?"

"In a minute. " He noticed again how green her eyes were, intent, catlike. "Is it because you hate the road? The technological society it represents? The dehumanizing effect of-

"No, he said. It was so difficult to be honest, and he wondered why he was even bothering when a lie would end the discussion so much more quickly and neatly. She was like the rest of the kids, like Vinnie, like the people who thought education was truth: she wanted propaganda, complete with charts, not an answer. "I've seen them building roads and buildings all my life. I never even thought about it, except it was a pain in the ass to use a detour or have to cross the street because the sidewalk was ripped up or the construction company was using a wrecking ball."

"But when it hit home . . . to your house and your job, you said no."

"I said no all right. " But he wasn't sure what he had said no to. Or had he said yes? Yes, finally yes to some destructive impulse that had been part of him all along, as much a built in self-destruct mechanism as Charlie's tumor? He found himself wishing Freddy would come around. Freddy could tell her what she wanted to hear. But Fred had been playing it cool.

"You're either crazy or really remarkable," she said.

"People are only remarkable in books," he said. "Let's have the TV."

She turned it on. He let her pick the show.

"What are you drinking?"

It was quarter of nine. He was tipsy, but not as drunk as he would have been by now alone. He was making popcorn in the kitchen. He liked to watch it pop in the tempered glass popper, rising and rising like snow that had sprung up from the ground rather than come down from the sky.

"Southern Comfort and Seven-Up," he said.

"What?"

He chuckled, embarrassed.

"Can I try one?" She showed him her empty glass and grinned. It was the first completely unselfconscious expression she had shown him since he had picked her up. "You make a lousy screwdriver."

"I know," he said. "Comfort and Seven-Up is my private drink. In public I stick to scotch. Hate scotch."

The popcorn was done, and he poured it into a large plastic bowl.

"Can I have one?"

"Sure."

He mixed her a Comfort and Seven-Up, then poured a melted stick of butter over the popcorn.

"That's going to put a lot of cholesterol in your bloodstream," she said, leaning in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. She sipped her drink. "Hey, I *like* this."

"Sure you do. Keep it a secret and you'll always be one up."

He salted the popcorn.

"That cholesterol clogs up your heart," she said. "The passageways for the blood get smaller and smaller and then one day . . . graaag!" She clutched dramatically at her bosom and spilled some of her drink on her sweater.

"I metabolize it all away," he told her, and went through the doorway. He brushed her breast (primly bra-ed, by the feel) on the way by. It felt a way Mary's breast hadn't felt in years. It was maybe not such a good way to think.

She ate most of the popcorn.

She started to yawn during the eleven o'clock news, which was mostly about the energy crisis and the White House tapes.

"Go on upstairs," he said. "Go to bed."

She gave him a look.

He said, "We're going to get along good if you stop looking like somebody goosed you every time the word 'bed' comes up. The primary purpose of the Great American Bed is sleeping, not intercoursing."

That made her smile.

"You don't even want to turn down the sheets?"

"You're a big girl."

She looked at him calmly. "You can come up with me if you want," she said. "I decided that an hour ago."

"No . . . but you don't have any idea how attractive the invitation is. I've only slept with three women in my entire life, and the first two were so long ago I can hardly remember them. Before I was married."

"Are you kidding?"

"Not at all."

"Listen, it wouldn't be just because you gave me a ride or let me sleep over or anything like that. Or the money you offered."

"It's good of you to say that," he said, and got up. "You better go up now." But she

didn't follow his suit. "You ought to know why you're not doing it." "I should?"

"Yes. If you do things and can't explain them-like you said-that might be okay because they still get done. But if you decide not to, you ought to know why."

"All right," he said. He nodded toward the dining room, where the money still lay in the silver dish. "It's the money. You're too young to be off whoring."

"I won't take it," she said promptly.

"I know you won't. That's why I won't. I want you to take it."

"Because everybody isn't as nice as you?"

"That's right." He looked at her challengingly.

She shook her head in an exasperated way and stood up. "All right. But you're a bourgeois, you know that?"

"Yes."

She came over and kissed him on the mouth. It was exciting. He could smell her, and the smell was nice. He was almost instantly hard.

"Go on," he said.

"If you reconsider during the night-"

"I won't." He watched her go to the stairs, her feet bare. "Hey?"

She turned, her eyebrows raised.

"What's your name?"

"Olivia, if it matters. Stupid, isn't it? Like Olivia DeHaviland."

"No, it's okay. I like it. Night, Olivia."

"Night. "

She went up. He heard the light click on, the way he had always heard it when Mary went up before him. If he listened closely, he might be able to hear the quietly maddening sound of her sweater against her skin as she pulled it over her head, or the snap of the catch that held her jeans nipped in to her waist . . ."

Using the Space Command module, he turned on the TV.

His penis was still fully erect, uncomfortable. It bulged against the crotch of his pants, what Mary had sometimes called the rock of ages and sometimes the snake-that-turned-to-stone in their younger days, when bed was nothing but another playground sport. He pulled at the folds of his underwear and when it didn't go down, he stood up. After a while the erection wilted and he sat down again.

When the news was over, a movie came on-John Agar in *Brain from Planet Arous*. He fell asleep sitting in front of the TV with the Space Command module still clasped loosely in one hand. A few minutes later there was a stirring beneath the fly of his pants as his erection returned, stealthily, like a murderer revisiting the scene of an ancient crime.

December 7, 1973

But he did go to her in the night.

The dream of Mr. Piazzzi's dog came to him, and this time he knew the boy approaching the dog was Charlie before the bitch struck. That made it worse and when Mr. Piazzzi's dog lunged, he struggled up from sleep like a man clawing his way out of a shallow, sandy grave.

He clawed at the air, not awake but not asleep either, and he lost his sense of balance on the couch, where he had finally curled up. He tottered miserably on the edge of balance for a moment, disoriented, terrified for his dead son who died over and over again in his dreams.

He fell onto the floor, banging his head and hurting his shoulder, and came awake enough to know he was in his own living room and that the dream was over. The reality was miserable, but not actively terrifying.

What was he doing? A sort of gestalt reality of what he had done to his life came to him, a hideous overview. He had ripped it right down the middle, like a cheap piece of cloth. Nothing was right anymore. He was hurting. He could taste stale Southern Comfort in the back of his throat, and he burped up some acid-tasting sour stuff and swallowed it back.

He began to shiver and seized his knees in a futile effort to stop it. In the night everything was strange. What was he doing, sitting on the floor of his living room and holding his knees and shaking like an old drunk in an alley? Or like a catatonic, a fucking psycho, that was more like it. Was that it? Was he a psycho? Nothing sort of funny and whimsical like a fruitcake or a dork or a rubber crutch but an out-and-out psycho? The thought dumped him into fresh terror. Had he gone to a hoodlum in an effort to get explosives? Was he really hiding two guns out in the garage, one of them big enough to kill an elephant? A little whining noise came out of his throat and he got up tentatively, his bones creaking like those of a very old man.

He went up the stairs without allowing himself to think, and stepped into his bedroom. "Olivia?" he whispered. This was preposterous, like an old-time Rudolph Valentino movie. "Are you awake?"

"Yes," she said. She didn't even sound sleepy. "The clock was keeping me awake. That digital clock. It kept going click. I pulled the plug."

"That's all right," he said. It was a ludicrous thing to say. "I had a bad dream. " The sound of covers being thrown back. "Come on. Get in with me."

"I-

"Will you shut up?"

He got in with her. She was naked. They made love. Then slept.

In the morning, the temperature was only 10 degrees. She asked him if he got a

newspaper.

"We used to," he said. "Kenny Upslinger delivered it. His family moved to Iowa. "

"Iowa, yet," she said, and turned on the radio. A man was giving the weather. Clear and cold.

"Would you like a fried egg?"

"Two, if you've got them."

"Sure. Listen, about last night-"

"Never mind last night. I came. That's very rare for me. I enjoyed it. "

He felt a certain sneaking pride, maybe what she had wanted him to feel. He fried the eggs. Two for her, two for him. Toast and coffee. She drank three cups with cream and sugar.

"So what are you going to do?" she asked him when they had both finished.

"Take you out to the highway," he said promptly.

She made an impatient gesture. "Not that. About your life. "

He grinned. "That sounds serious."

"Not for me," she said. "For you."

"I haven't thought about it," he said. "You know, before"-he accented the word *before* slightly to indicate all of his life and all of its parts he had sailed off the edge of the world-"before the ax fell, I think I must have felt the way some condemned man feels in the death house. Nothing seemed real. It seemed I was living in a glass dream that would go on and on. Now everything seems real. Last night . . . that was very real. "

I'm glad," she said, and she looked glad. "But what will you do now?"

"I really don't know."

She said: "I think that's sad. "

"Is it?" he asked. It was a real question.

They were in the car again, driving Route 7 toward Landy. The traffic near the city was stop and go. People were on their way to work. When they passed the construction on the 784 extension, the day's operation was already cranking up. Men in yellow hi-impact plastic construction hats and green rubber boots were climbing into their machines, frozen breath pluming from their mouths. The engine of one of the orange city payloaders cranked, cranked, kicked over with a coughing mortar-explosion sound, cranked again, then roared into a choppy idle. The driver gunned it in irregular bursts like the sound of warfare.

"From up here they look like little boys playing trucks in a sandpile," she said.

Outside the city, traffic smoothed out. She had taken the two hundred dollars with neither embarrassment nor reluctance-with no special eagerness, either. She had slit a small section of the CPO coat's lining, had put the bills inside, and had then sewed the slit back up with a needle and some blue thread from Mary's sewing box. She had refused his

offer of a ride to the bus station, saying the money would last longer if she went on hitching.

"So what's a nice girl like you doing in a car like this?" he asked.

"Humh?" She looked at him, bumped out of her own thoughts.

He smiled. "Why you? Why Las Vegas? You're living in the margins same as me. Give me some background."

She shrugged. "There isn't much. I was going to college at the University of New Hampshire, in Durham. That's near Portsmouth. I was a junior this year. Living off campus. With a guy. We got into a heavy drug thing."

"You mean like heroin?"

She laughed merrily. "No, I've never known anyone who did heroin. Us nice middle-class druggies stick to the hallucinogens. Lysergic acid. Mescaline. Peyote a couple of times, STP a couple of times. Chemicals. I did sixteen or eighteen trips between September and November."

"What's it like?" he asked.

"Do you mean, did I have any 'bad trips'?"

"No, I didn't mean that at all," he said defensively.

"There were some bad trips, but they all had good parts. And a lot of the good trips had bad parts. Once I decided I had leukemia. That was scary. But mostly they were just strange. I never saw God. I never wanted to commit suicide. I never tried to kill anyone."

She thought that over for a minute. "Everybody has hyped the shit out of those chemicals. The straights, people like Art Linkletter, say they'll kill you. The freaks say they'll open all the doors you need to open. Like you can find a tunnel into the middle of yourself, as if your soul was like the treasure in an H. Rider Haggard novel. Have you ever read him?"

"I read *She* when I was a kid. Didn't he write that?"

"Yes. Do you think your soul is like an emerald in the middle of an idol's forehead?"

"I never thought about it. "

"I don't think so," she said. "I'll tell you the best and the worst that ever happened to me on chemicals. The best was topping out in the apartment one time and watching the wallpaper. There were all these little round dots on the wallpaper and they turned into snow for me. I sat in the living room and watched a snowstorm on the wall for better than an hour. And after a while, I saw this little girl trudging through the snow. She had a kerchief on her head, a very rough material like burlap, and she was holding it like this-" She made a fist under her chin. "I decided she was going home, and bang! I saw a whole street in there, all covered with snow. She went up the street and then up a walk and into a house. That was the best. Sitting in the apartment and watching wallovision. Except Jeff called it headovision. "

"Was Jeff the guy you were living with?"

"Yes. The worst trip was one time I decided to plunge out the sink. I don't know why. You get funny ideas sometimes when you're tripping, except they seem perfectly normal. It seemed like I *had* to plunge the sink. So I got the plunger and did it . . . and all this *shit* came out of the drain. I still don't know how much of it was real shit and how much was head shit. Coffee grounds. An old piece of shell. Great big hunks of congealed grease. Red stuff that looked like blood. And then the hand. Some guy's hand."

"A what?"

"A *hand*. I called to Jeff and said, Hey, somebody put somebody down the drain. But he had taken off someplace and I was alone. I plunged like hell and finally got the forearm out. The hand was lying on the porcelain, all spotted with coffee grounds, and there was the forearm, going right down the drain. I went into the living room for a minute to see if Jeff had come back, and when I went into the kitchen again, the arm and the hand was gone. It sort of worried me. Sometimes I dream about it."

"That's crazy," he said, slowing down as they crossed a bridge that was under construction.

"Chemicals make you crazy," she said. "Sometimes that's a good thing. Mostly it isn't. Anyway, we were into this heavy drug thing. Have you ever seen one of those drawings of what an atom looks like, with the protons and neutrons and electrons going around?"

"Yes. "

"Well, it was like our apartment was the nucleus and all the people who drifted in and out were the protons and electrons. People coming and going, drifting in and out, all disconnected, like in *Manhattan Transfer*. "

"I haven't read that one."

"You ought to. Jeff always said Dos Passos was the original gonzo journalist. Freaky book. Anyway, some nights we'd be sitting around watching TV with the sound shut off and a record on the stereo, everyone stoned, people balling in the bedroom, maybe, and you wouldn't even know who the fuck everyone was. You know what I mean?"

Thinking of some of the parties he had wandered drunkenly through, as bemused as Alice in Wonderland, he said that he did.

"So one night there was a Bob Hope special on. And everybody was sitting around all smoked up, laughing like hell at all those old one-liners, all those same stock expressions, all that good-natured kidding of the power-crazies in Washington. Just sitting around the tube like all the mommies and daddies back home and I thought well, that's what we went through Viet Nam for, so Bob Hope could close the generation gap. It's just a question of how you're getting high. "

"But you were too pure for all that. "

"Pure? No, that wasn't it. But I started to think of the last fifteen years or so like some kind of grotesque Monopoly game. Francis Gary Powers gets shot down in his U-2. Lose one turn. Niggers dispersed by fire hoses in Selma. Go directly to jail. Freedom riders shotgunned in Mississippi, marches, rallies, Lester Maddox with his ax handle, Kennedy getting blown up in Dallas, Viet Nam, more marches, Kent State, student strikes,

women's liberation, and all for what? So a bunch of heads can sit around stoned in a crummy apartment watching Bob Hope? Fuck that. So I decided to split."

"What about Jeff?"

She shrugged. "He has a scholarship. He's doing good. He says he's going to come out next summer, but I won't look for him until I see him. " There was a peculiar disillusioned expression on her face that probably felt like hardy forbearance on the inside.

"Do you miss him?"

"Every night."

"Why Vegas? Do you know someone out there?"

"No."

"It seems like a funny place for an idealist."

"Is that what you think I am?" She laughed and lit a cigarette. "Maybe. But I don't think an ideal needs any particular setting. I want to see that city. It's so different from the rest of the country that it must be good. But I'm not going to gamble. I'm just going to get a job."

"Then what?"

She blew out smoke and shrugged. They were passing a sign that said:

LANDY 5 MILES

"Try to get something together," she said. "I'm not going to put any dope in my head for a long time and I'm going to quit these." She gestured her cigarette in the air, and it made an accidental circle, as if it knew a different truth. "I'm going to stop pretending my life hasn't started yet. It has. It's twenty percent over. I've drunk the cream."

"Look. There's the turnpike entrance."

He pulled over to the side.

"What about you, man? What are you going to do?"

Carefully, he said: "See what develops. Keep my options open."

She said: "You're not in such hot shape, if you don't mind me saying so. "

"No, I don't mind. "

"Here. Take this." She was holding out a small aluminum packet between the first and second fingers of her right hand.

He took it and looked at it. The foil caught the bright morning sun and heliographed darts of light at his eyes. "What is it?"

"Product four synthetic mescaline. The heaviest, cleanest chemical ever made." She hesitated. "Maybe you should just flush it down the john when you get home. It might fuck you up worse than you are. But it might help. I've heard of it."

"Have you ever seen it?"

She smiled bitterly. "No."

"Will you do something for me? If you can?"

"If I can."

"Call me on Christmas day."

"Why?"

"You're like a book I haven't finished. I want to know how a little more of it comes out. Make it a collect call. Here, I'll write down the number."

He was fumbling a pen out of his pocket when she said, "No."

He looked at her, puzzled and hurt. "No?"

"I can get the number from directory assistance if I need it. But maybe it would be best not to."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I like you, but it's like someone put a hurtin' on you. I can't explain. It's like you were going to do something really bonkers."

"You think I'm a fruitcake," he heard himself say. "Well, fuck you."

She got out of the car stiffly. He leaned over. "Olivia—"

"Maybe that's not my name."

"Maybe it is. Please call."

"Be careful with that stuff," she said, pointing at the little aluminum packet. "You're space walking, too."

"Good-bye. Be careful."

"Careful, what's that?" The bitter smile again. "Good-bye, Mr. Dawes. Thanks. You're good in bed, do you mind me saying that? You are. Good-bye."

She slammed the door closed, crossed Route 7, and stood at the base of the turnpike entrance ramp. He watched her show a thumb to a couple of cars. Neither of them stopped. Then the road was clear and he U-turned, honking once. In the rearview mirror he saw a small facsimile of her wave.

Silly twit, he thought, stuffed full of every strange conceit in the world. Still, when he put his hand out to turn on the radio, the fingers trembled.

He drove back to the city, got on the turnpike, and drove two hundred miles at seventy. Once he almost threw the small aluminum packet out the window. Once he almost took the pill inside. At last he just put it in his coat pocket.

When he got home he felt washed out, empty of emotion. The 784 extension had progressed during the day; in a couple of weeks the laundry would be ready for the wrecking ball. They had already taken out the heavy equipment. Tom Granger had told him about that in an odd, stilted phone conversation three nights ago. When they leveled

it he would spend the day watching. He would even pack a bag lunch.

There was a letter for Mary from her brother in Jacksonville. He didn't know about the split, then. He put it aside absently with some other mail for Mary that he kept forgetting to forward.

He put a TV dinner in the oven and thought about making himself a drink. He decided not to. He wanted to think about his sexual encounter with the girl the night before, relish it, explore its nuances. A few drinks and it would take on the unnatural, fevered color of a bad sex movie-*Restless Coeds, ID Required*-and he didn't want to think of her like that.

But it wouldn't come, not the way he wanted it. He couldn't remember the precise tight feel of her breasts or the secret taste of her nipples. He knew that the actual friction of intercourse had been more pleasurable with her than with Mary. Olivia had been a snugger fit, and once his penis had popped out of her vagina with an audible sound, like the pop of a champagne cork. But he couldn't really say what the pleasure had been. Instead of being able to feel it, he wanted to masturbate. The desire disgusted him. Furthermore, his disgust disgusted him. She wasn't holy, he assured himself as he sat down to eat his TV dinner. Just a tramp on the bum. To Las Vegas, yet. He found himself wishing that he could view the whole incident with Magliore's jaundiced eye, and that disgusted him most of all.

Later that night he got drunk in spite of all his good intentions, and around ten o'clock the familiar maudlin urge to call Mary rose up in him. He masturbated instead, in front of the TV, and came to climax while an announcer was showing incontrovertibly that Anacin hit and held the highest pain-relief level of any brand.

December 8, 1973

He didn't go riding Saturday. He wandered uselessly around the house, putting off the thing that had to be done. At last he called the home of his in-laws. Lester and Jean Galloway, Mary's parents, were both nearing their seventies. On his previous calls, Jean (whom Charlie had always called "Mamma Jean") had answered the telephone, her voice freezing to ice chips when she realized who was on the line. To her, and to Lester also, undoubtedly, he was like some animal that had run amok and bitten her daughter. Now the animal kept calling up, obviously drunk, whining for their girl to come back so he could bite her again.

He heard Mary herself answer, "Hello?" with enough relief so he could talk normally.

"Me, Mary."

"Oh, Bart. How are you?" Impossible to read her voice.

"Fair. "

"How are the Southern Comfort supplies holding out?"

"Mary, I'm not drinking."

"Is that a victory?" She sounded cold, and he felt a touch of panic, mostly that his

judgment had been impossibly bad. Could someone he had known so long and whom he thought he knew so well be slipping away so easily?

"I guess it is," he said lamely.

"I understand the laundry had to close down," she said.

"Probably just temporary." He had the weird sensation that he was riding in an elevator, conversing uncomfortably with someone who regarded him as a bore.

"That isn't what Tom Granger's wife said." There, accusation at last. Accusation was better than nothing.

"Tom won't have any problem. The competition uptown has been after him for years. The Brite-Kleen people."

He thought she sighed. "Why did you call, Bart?"

"I think we ought to get together," he said carefully. "We have to talk this over, Mary."

"Do you mean a divorce?" She said it calmly enough, but he thought it was her voice in which he sensed panic now.

"Do you want one?"

"I don't know *what* I want." Her calm fractured and she sounded angry and scared. "I thought everything was fine. I was happy and I thought you were. Now, all at once, that's all changed."

"You thought everything was fine," he repeated. He was suddenly furious with her. "You must have been pretty stupid if you thought that. Did you think I kicked away my job for a practical joke, like a high school senior throwing a cherry bomb into a toilet?"

"Then what is it, Bart? What happened?"

His anger collapsed like a rotten yellow snowbank and he found that there were tears beneath. He fought them grimly, feeling betrayed. This wasn't supposed to happen sober. When you were sober you should be able to keep fucking control of yourself. But here he was, wanting to spill out everything and sob on her lap like a kid with a busted skate and a skinned knee. But he couldn't tell her what was wrong because he didn't precisely know and crying without knowing was too much like it's-time-for-the-loony-bin stuff.

"I don't know," he said finally.

"Charlie?"

Helplessly, he said: "If that was part of it, how could you be so blind to the rest of it?"

"I miss him too, Bart. Still. Every day."

Resentment again. *You've got a funny way of showing it, then.*

"This is no good," he said finally. Tears were trickling down his cheeks but he had kept them out of his voice. *Gentlemen, I think we've got it licked*, he thought, and almost cackled. "Not over the phone, I called to suggest lunch on Monday. Handy Andy's."

"All right. What time?"

"It doesn't matter. I can get off work. " The joke fell to the floor and died bloodlessly there.

"One o'clock?" she asked.

"Sure. I'll get us a table."

"Reserve one. Don't just get there at eleven and start drinking."

"I won't," he said humbly, knowing he probably would.

There was a pause. There seemed nothing else to say. Faintly, almost lost in the hum of the open wire, ghostly other voices discussed ghostly other things. Then she said something that surprised him totally.

"Bart, you need to see a psychiatrist."

"I need a what?"

"Psychiatrist. I know how that sounds, just coming out flat. But I want you to know that whatever we decide, I won't come back and live with you unless you agree. "

"Good-bye, Mary," he said slowly. "I'll see you on Monday."

"Bart, you need help I can't give."

Carefully, inserting the knife as well as he could over two miles of blind wire, he said: "I knew that anyway. Good-bye, Mary."

He hung up before he could hear the result and caught himself feeling glad. Game, set, and match. He threw a plastic milk pitcher across the room and caught himself feeling glad that he hadn't thrown something breakable. He opened the cupboard over the sink, yanked out the first two glasses his hands came to, and threw them on the floor. They shattered.

Baby, you fucking baby! he screamed at himself. *Why don't you just hold your fucking breath until you turn fucking BLUE?*

He slammed his right fist against the wall to shut out the voice and cried out at the pain. He held his wounded right in his left and stood in the middle of the floor, trembling. When he had himself under control he got a dustpan and the broom and swept the mess up, feeling scared and sullen and hung over.

December 9, 1973

He got on the turnpike, drove a hundred and fifty miles, and then drove back. He didn't dare drive any farther. It was the first gasless Sunday and all the turnpike pit stops were closed. And he didn't want to walk. See? He told himself. This is how they get shitbirds like you, Georgie. Fred? Is that really you? To what do I owe the honor of this visit, Freddy? Fuck off, buddy. On the way home he heard this public service ad on the radio:

"So you're worried about the gasoline shortage and you want to make sure that you and your family aren't caught short this winter. So now you're on your way to your

neighborhood gas station with a dozen five-gallon cans. But if you're really worried about your family, you better turn around and go back home. Improper storage of gasoline is dangerous. It's also illegal, but never mind that for a minute. Consider this: When gasoline fumes mix with the air, they become explosive. And one gallon of gas has the explosive potential of twelve sticks of dynamite. Think about that before you fill those cans. And then think about your family. You see-we want you to live.

"This has been a public service announcement from WLDM. The Music People remind you to leave gasoline storage to the people who are equipped to do it properly."

He turned off the radio, slowed down to fifty, and pulled back into the cruising lane. "Twelve sticks of dynamite," he said. "Man, that's amazing."

If he had looked into the rearview mirror, he would have seen that he was grinning.

December 10, 1973

He got to Handy Andy's at just past eleven-thirty and the headwaiter gave him a table beside the stylized batwings that led to the lounge-not a good table, but one of the few empties left as the place filled up for lunch. Handy Andy's specialized in steaks, chops, and something called the Andyburger, which looked a little like a chef's salad stuck between a huge sesame seed roll with a toothpick to hold the whole contraption together. Like all big city restaurants within executive walking distance, it went through indefinable cycles of inness and outness. Two months ago he could have come in here at noon and had his pick of tables-three months hence he might be able to do the same. To him, it had always been one of life's minor mysteries, like the incidents in the books of Charles Fort, or the instinct that always brought the swallows back to Capistrano.

He looked around quickly as he sat down, afraid he would see Vinnie Mason or Steve Ordner or some other laundry executive. But the place was stuffed with strangers. To his left, a young man was trying to persuade his girl that they could afford three days in Sun Valley this February. The rest of the room's conversation was just soft babble-soothing.

"A drink, sir?" The waiter was at his elbow.

"Scotch-rocks, please," he said.

"Very good, sir," the waiter said.

He made the first one last until noon, killed two more by twelve-thirty, and then, just mulishly, he ordered a double. He was just draining it dry when he saw Mary walk in and pause in the door between the foyer and the dining room, looking for him. Heads turned to look at her and he thought: *Mary, you ought to thank me--you're beautiful.* He raised his right hand and waved.

She raised her hand in return greeting and came to his table. She was wearing a knee-length wool dress, soft patterned gray. Her hair was braided in a single thick cable

that hung down to her shoulder blades, a way he could not recall having seen her wear it (and maybe worn that way for just that reason). It made her look youthful, and he had a sudden guilty flash of Olivia, working beneath him on the bed he and Mary had shared so often.

"Hello, Bart," she said.

"Hi. You look awful pretty."

"Thanks."

"Do you want a drink?"

"No . . . just an Andyburger. How long have you been here?"

"Oh, not long."

The lunch crowd had thinned, and his waiter appeared almost at once. "Would you like to order now, sir?"

"Yes. Two Andyburgers. Milk for the lady. Another double for myself." He glanced at Mary, but her face showed nothing. That was bad. If she had spoken, he would have canceled the double. He hoped he wouldn't have to go to the bathroom, because he wasn't sure he could walk straight. That would be a wonderful tidbit to carry back to the old folks at home. Carry me back to Ol' Virginnie. He almost giggled.

"Well, you're not drunk, but you're on your way," she said, and unfolded her napkin on her lap.

"That's pretty good," he said. "Did you rehearse it?"

"Bart, let's not fight."

"No," he agreed.

She toyed with her water glass; he picked at his coaster.

"Well?" she said finally.

"Well what?"

"You seemed to have something in mind when you called. Now that you're full of Dutch courage, what is it?"

"Your cold is better," he said idiotically, and tore a hole in his coaster without meaning to. He couldn't tell her what was on the top of his mind: how she seemed to have changed, how she seemed suddenly sophisticated and dangerous, like a cruising secretary who has bartered for a later lunch hour and who would refuse any offer of a drink unless it came from a man inside a four-hundred-dollar suit. And who could tell just by glancing at the cut of the fabric.

"Bart, what are we going to do?"

"I'll see a psychiatrist if you want me to," he said, lowering his voice.

"When?"

"Pretty soon."

"You can make an appointment this afternoon if you want to. "

"I don't know any shr-any."

"There's the Yellow Pages."

"That seems like a half-assed sort of way to pick a brainpeeker."

She only looked at him and he looked away, uncomfortable.

"You're angry with me, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yeah, well, I'm not working. Fifty dollars an hour seems sort of high for an unemployed fellow."

"What do you think I'm living on?" she asked sharply. "My folks' charity. And as you'll recall, they're both retired."

"As I recall, your father's got enough shares in SOI and Beechcraft to keep the three of you on easy street well into the next century."

"Bart, that's not so." She sounded startled and hurt.

"Bullshit it's not. They were in Jamaica last winter, Miami the year before that, at the Fountainbleau no less, and Honolulu the year before that. Nobody does that on a retired engineer's salary. So don't give me that poorbox routine, Mary-"

"Stop it, Bart. The green's showing."

"Not to mention a Cadillac Gran DeVille and a Bonneville station wagon. Not bad. Which one do they use when they go to pick up their food stamps?"

"Stop it!" she hissed at him, her lips drawn back a bit from her small white teeth, her fingers gripping the edge of the table.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"Lunch is coming."

The temperature between them cooled a little as the waiter set their Andyburgers and French fries before them, added minuscule dishes of green peas and baby onions, then retired. They ate without speaking for a while, both concentrating on not drooling down their chins or in their laps. I wonder how many marriages the Andyburger has saved? he wondered. Simply by its one providential attribute-when you're eating one you have to shut up.

She put hers down half-eaten, blotted her mouth with her napkin, and said, "They're as good as I remember. Bart, do you have any sensible idea at all about what to do?"

"Of course I do," he said, stung. But he didn't know what his idea was. If he'd gotten in another double, he might have.

"Do you want a divorce?"

"No," he said. Something positive seemed to be called for.

"Do you want me to come back?"

"Do you want to?"

"I don't know," she said. "Shall I tell you something, Bart? I'm worried about myself for the first time in twenty years. I'm *fending* for myself." She started to take a bite of her Andyburger, then set it down again. "Did you know I almost didn't marry you? Had that thought ever crossed your mind?"

The surprise on his face seemed to satisfy her.

"I didn't think it had. I was pregnant, so of course I wanted to marry you. But part of me didn't. Something kept whispering that it would be the worst mistake of my life. So I roasted myself over a slow fire for three days, throwing up every morning when I woke up, hating you for that, thinking this, that, and the other. Run away. Get an abortion. Have the baby and put it up for adoption. Have the baby and keep it. But I finally decided to do the sensible thing. The sensible thing. " She laughed. "And then lost the baby anyway."

"Yes, you did," he muttered, wishing the conversation would turn from this. It was too much like opening a closet and stepping into puke.

"But I was happy with you, Bart."

"Were you?" he asked automatically. He found he wanted to get away. This wasn't working. Not for him anyway.

"Yes. But something happens to a woman in marriage that doesn't happen to a man. Do you remember when you were a child how you never worried about your parents? You just expected them to be there and they were, same as the food and the heat and the clothes."

"I guess so. Sure."

"And I went and got my silly self pregnant. And for three days a whole new world opened up around me." She was leaning forward, her eyes glowing and anxious, and he realized with dawning shock that this recitation was important to her, that it was more than getting together with her childless friends or deciding which pair of slacks to buy in Banberry's or guessing which celebrities Merv would be chatting with at four-thirty. This was important to her, and had she really gone through twenty years of marriage with only this one important thought? *Had* she? She had almost said as much. Twenty years, my God. He felt suddenly sick to his stomach. He liked the image of her picking up the empty bottle and waving it at him gleefully from her side of the road so much better.

"I saw myself as an independent person," she was saying. "An independent person with no one to explain myself to or subordinate myself to. No one around to try and change me, because I knew I could be changed. I was always weak that way. But also no one to fall back on when I was sick or scared or maybe broke. So I did the sensible thing. Like my mother and *her* mother. Like my friends. I was tired of being a bridesmaid and trying to catch the bouquet. So I said yes, which was what you expected and things went on. There were no worries, and when the baby died and when Charlie died there was you. And you were always good to me. I know that, I appreciate that. But it was a sealed environment. I stopped thinking. I thought I was thinking, but I wasn't. And now it hurts to think. It *hues*. " She looked at him with bright resentment for a minute, and then it faded. "So I'm asking you to think for me, Bart. What do we do now?"

"I'm going to get a job," he lied.

"A job."

"And see a psychiatrist. Mary, things are going to be fine. Honest. I was a little off the beam, but I'm going to get back on. I'm-"

"Do you want me to come home?"

"In a couple of weeks, sure. I just have to get things together a little and-"

"Home? What am I talking about? They're going to tear it down. What am I talking about, home? Jesus," she groaned, "what a mess. Why did you have to drag me into such a shitty mess?"

He couldn't stand her this way. She wasn't like Mary, not at all. "Maybe they won't," he said, taking her hand across the table. "Maybe they won't tear it down, Mary, they might change their minds, if I go and talk to them, explain the situation, they might just-"

She jerked her hand away. She was looking at him, horrified.

"Bart," she whispered.

"What-" He broke off, uncertain. What had he been saying? What could he possibly have been saying to make her look so awful?

"You *know* they're going to tear it down. You knew it a long time ago. And we're sitting here, going around and around-"

"No, we're not," he said. "We're not. Really. We're not. We . . . we . . . But what *were* they doing? He felt unreal.

"Bart, I think I better go now."

"I'm going to get a job-"

"I'll talk to you." She got up hastily, her thigh bumping the edge of the table, making the silverware gossip.

"The psychiatrist, Mary, I promise-"

"Mamma wanted me to go to the store-"

"*Then go on!*" he shouted at her, and heads turned. "Get out of here, you bitch! You had the best of me and what have I got? A house the city's going to rip down. Get out of my *sight!*"

She fled. The room was horribly quiet for what seemed like eternity. Then the talk picked up again. He looked down at his dripping half-eaten hamburger, trembling, afraid he was going to vomit. When he knew he was not, he paid the check and left without looking around.

December 12, 1973

He made out a Christmas list the night before (drunk) and was now downtown filling an abridged version. The completed list had been staggering-over a hundred and twenty

names, including every relative near and distant that he and Mary had between them, a great many friends and acquaintances, and at the bottom-God save the queen-Steve Ordner, his wife, and their for Chrissakes maid.

He had pruned most of the names from the list, chuckling bemusedly over some of them, and now strolled slowly past windows filled with Christmas goodies, all to be given in the name of that long-ago Dutch thief who used to slide down people's chimneys and steal everything they owned. One gloved hand patted a five-hundred dollar roll of ten-dollar bills in his pocket.

He was living on the insurance money, and the first thousand dollars of it had melted away with amazing speed. He estimated that he would be broke by the middle of March at this rate, possibly sooner, but found the thought didn't bother him at all. The thought of where he might be or what he might be doing in March was as incomprehensible as calculus.

He went into a jewelry store and bought a beaten-silver owl pin for Mary. The owl had coldly flashing diamond chips for eyes. It cost one hundred and fifty dollars, plus tax. The saleslady was effusive. She was sure his wife was going to love it. He smiled. There goes three appointments with Dr. Psycho, Freddy. What do you think about that?

Freddy wasn't talking.

He went into a large department store and took an escalator up to the toy department, which was dominated by a huge electric train display-green plastic hills honeycombed with tunnels, plastic (rain stations, overpasses, underpasses, switching points, and a Lionel locomotive that bustled through all of it, puffing ribbons of synthetic smoke from its stack and hauling a long line of freight carsBB1.0, SOO LINE, GREAT NORTHERN, GREAT WESTERN, WARNER BROTHERS WARNER BROTHERS??), DIAMOND INTERNATIONAL, SOUTHERN PACIFIC. Young boys and their fathers were standing by the wooden picket fence that surrounded the display, and he felt a warm surge of love for them that was untainted by envy. He felt he could have gone to them, told them of his love for them, his thankfulness for them and the season. He would also have urged them to be careful.

He wandered down an aisle of dolls, and picked one up for each of his three nieces: Chatty Cathy for Tina, Maisie the Acrobat for Cindy, and a Bafiie for Sylvia, who was eleven now. In the next aisle he got a GI Joe for Bill, and after some deliberation, a chess set for Andy. Andy was twelve, an object of some worry in the family. Old Bea from Baltimore had confided in Mary that she kept finding stiff places on Andy's sheets. Could it be possible? So early? Mary had told Bea that children were getting more precocious every year. Bea said she supposed it was all the milk they drank, and vitamins, but she *did* wish Andy liked team sports more. Or summer camp. Or horseback riding. Or anything.

Never mind, Andy, he thought, tucking the chess set under his arm. You practice knight's gambits and queen to rook-4 and beat off under the table if you want to.

There was a huge Santa Claus throne at the front of the toy department. The throne was empty, and a sign was propped on an easel in front of it. The sign said:

SANTA IS HAVING LUNCH AT OUR FAMOUS

"MID-TOWN GRILL"
Why Not Join Him?

There was a young man in a denim jacket and jeans looking at the throne, his arms full of packages, and when the young man turned around, he saw it was Vinnie Mason.

"Vinnie!" he said.

Vinnie smiled and colored a little, as if he had been caught doing something a bit nasty. "Hello, Bart," he said, and walked over. There was no embarrassment over shaking hands; their arms were too full of packages.

"Christmas shopping a little?" he asked Vinnie.

"Yeah." He chuckled. "I brought Sharon and Bobbie-that's my daughter Roberta-over to look on Saturday. Bobbie's three now. We wanted to get her picture taken with Santa Claus. You know they do that on Saturdays. Just a buck. But she wouldn't do it. Cried her head off. Sharon was a little upset."

"Well, it's a strange man with a big beard. The little ones get scared sometimes. Maybe she'll go to him next year."

"Maybe." Vinnie smiled briefly.

He smiled back, thinking it was much easier with Vinnie now. He wanted to tell Vinnie not to hate his guts too much. He wanted to tell Vinnie he was sorry if he had fucked up Vinnie's life. "So what are you doing these days, Vinnie?"

Vinnie absolutely beamed. "You won't believe this, it's so good. I'm managing a movie theater. And by next summer I'll be handling three more."

"Media Associates?" It was one of the corporation's companies.

"That's right. We're part of the Cinemate Releasing chain. They send in all the movies . . . proven box-office stuff. But I'm handling the Westfall Cinema completely."

"They're going to add on?"

"Yeah, Cinema II and III by next summer. And the Beacon Drive-In, I'll be handling that, too. "

He hesitated. "Vinnie, you tell me if I'm stepping out of line, but if this Cinemate outfit picks the films and books them, then what exactly do you do?"

"Well, handle the money, of course. And order stuff, that's very important. Did you know that the candy stand alone can almost pay for one night's film rental if it's handled efficiently? Then there's maintenance and-" He swelled visibly, "and hiring and firing. It's going to keep me busy. Sharon likes it because she's a big movie freak, especially Paul Newman and Clint Eastwood. I like it because all of a sudden I jumped from nine thousand to eleven thousand-five."

He looked at Vinnie dully for a moment, wondering if he should speak. This was Ordner's prize, then. Good doggie. Here's the bone.

"Get out of it, Vinnie," he said. "Get out of it just as quick as you can."

"What, Bart?" Vinnie's brow wrinkled in honest puzzlement.

"Do you know what the word 'gofer' means, Vinnie?"

"Gopher? Sure. It's a little animal that digs holes-"

"No, gofer. G-O-F-E-R. "

"I guess I don't know that one, Bart. Is it Jewish?"

"No, it's white-collar. It's a person who does errands. A glorified office boy. Gofer coffee, gofer Danish, gofer a walk around the block, sonny. Gofer."

"What are you talking about, Bart? I mean-"

"I mean that Steve Ordner kicked your special case around with the other members of the board-the ones who matter, anyway-and said, Listen, fellas, we've got to do something about Vincent Mason, and it's a delicate sort of case. He warned us that Bart Dawes was riding a rubber bike, and even though Mason didn't swing quite enough weight to enable us to stop Dawes before he screwed up the waterworks, we owe this Mason something. But of course we can't give him too much responsibility. And do you know why, Vinnie?"

Vinnie was looking at him resentfully. "I know I don't have to eat your shit anymore, Bart. I know that. "

He looked at Vinnie earnestly. "I'm not trying to shit you. What you do doesn't mean anything to me anymore. But Chrissakes, Vinnie, you're a young man. I don't want to see him fuck you over this way. The job you've got is a short-term plum, a long-term lemon. The toughest decision you're going to have is when to reorder Buttercup containers and Milky Ways. And Ordner's going to see that it stays that way as long as you're with the corporation."

The Christmas spirit, if that was what it had been, curdled in Vinnie's eyes. He was clutching his packages tightly enough to make the wrappings crackle, and his eyes were gray with resentment. Picture of a young man who steps out his door whistling, ready for the evening's heavy date, only to see all four tires on his new sports car have been slashed. *And he's not listening. I could play him tapes and he still wouldn't believe it.*

"As it turned out, you did the responsible thing," he went on. "I don't know what people are saying about me now-"

"They're saying you're crazy, Bart," Vinnie said in a thin, hostile voice.

"That word's as good as any. So you were right. But you were wrong, too. You spilled your guts. They don't give positions of responsibility to people who spill their guts, not even when they were right to do it, not even when the corporation suffers because of their silence. Those guys on the fortieth floor, Vinnie, they're like doctors. And they don't like loose talk any more than doctors like an intern that goes around blowing off about a doctor who muffed an operation because he had too many cocktails at lunch."

"You're really determined to mess up my life, aren't you?" Vinnie asked. "But I don't work for you anymore, Bart. Go waste your poison on someone else."

Santa Claus was coming back, a huge bag slung over one shoulder, bellowing wild laughter and trailing small children like parti-colored exhaust.

"Vinnie, Vinnie, don't be blind. They're sugar-coating the pill. Sure you're making eleven-five this year and next year when you pick up the other theaters, they'll buck you up to maybe fourteen thousand. And there you'll be twelve years from now, when you can't buy a lousy Coke for thirty cents. Gofer that new carpeting, gofer that consignment of theater seats, gofer those reels of film that got sent across town by mistake. Do you want to be doing that shit when you're forty, Vinnie, with nothing to look forward to but a gold watch?"

"Better than what you're doing." Vinnie turned away abruptly, almost bumping Santa, who said something that sounded suspiciously like *watch where the fuck you're going*.

He went after Vinnie. Something about the set expression on Vinnie's face convinced him he was getting through, despite the defensive emplacements. God, God, he thought. Let it be.

"Leave me alone, Bart. Get lost.

"Get out of it," he repeated. "If you wait even until next summer it may be too late. Jobs are going to be tighter than a virgin's chastity belt if this energy crisis goes into high gear, Vinnie. This may be your last chance. It-"

Vinnie wheeled around. "I'm telling you for the last time, Bart."

"You're flushing your future right down the john, Vinnie. Life's too short for that. What are you going to tell your daughter when-"

Vinnie punched him in the eye. A bolt of white pain flashed up into his head and he staggered backward, arms flying out. The kids who had been following Santa scattered as his packages-dolls, GI Joe, chess set-went flying. He hit a rack of toy telephones, which sprayed across the floor. Somewhere a little girl screamed like a hurt animal and he thought *Don't cry, darling, it's just dumb old George falling down, I do it frequently around the house these days* and someone else jolly old Santa, maybe-was cursing and yelling for the store detective. Then he was on the floor amid the toy telephones, which all came equipped with battery-powered tape loops, and one of them was saying over and over in his ear: "Do you want to go to the circus? Do you want to go to the circus? Do you . . ."

December 17, 1973

The shrilling of the telephone brought him out of a thin, uneasy afternoon sleep. He had been dreaming that a young scientist had discovered that, by changing the atomic composition of peanuts just a little, America could produce unlimited quantities of low-polluting gasoline. It seemed to make everything all right, personally and nationally, and the tone of the dream was one of burgeoning jubilation. The phone was a sinister counterpoint that grew and grew until the dream split open and let in an unwelcome reality.

He got up from the couch, went to the phone, and fumbled it to his ear. His eye didn't hurt anymore, but in the hall mirror he could see that it was still colorful.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Bart. Tom."

"Yeah, Tom. How are you?"

"Fine. Listen, Bart. I thought you'd want to know. They're demolishing the Blue Ribbon tomorrow."

His eyes snapped wide. "Tomorrow? It can't be tomorrow. They . . . hell, it's almost Christmas! "

"That's why."

"But they're not up to it yet. "

"It's the only industrial building left in the way," Tom said. "They're going to raze it before they knock off for Christmas."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. They had a news feature on that morning program. 'City Day.' "

"Are you going to be there?"

"Yeah," Tom said. "Too much of my life went by inside that pile for me to be able to stay away."

"Then I guess I'll see you there."

"I guess you will."

He hesitated. "Listen, Tom. I want to apologize. I don't think they're going to reopen the Blue Ribbon, in Waterford or anyplace else. If I screwed you up royally--"

"No, I'm not hurting. I'm up at Brite-Kleen, doing maintenance. Shorter hours, better pay. I guess I found the rose in the shitheap. "

"How is it?"

Tom sighed across the wire. "Not so good," he said. "But I'm past fifty now. It's hard to change. It would have been the same in Waterford."

"Tom, about what I did--"

"I don't want to hear about it, Bart." Tom sounded uncomfortable. "That's between you and Mary. Really."

"Okay."

"Uh . . . you getting along good?"

"Sure. I've got a couple of things on the line."

"I'm glad to hear that. " Tom paused so long that the silence on the line became thick, and he was about to thank him for calling and hang up when Tom added: "Steve Ordner called up about you. Called me right up at my house."

"Is that so? When?"

"Last week. He's pissed like a bear at you, Bart. He kept asking if any of us had any idea you had been sandbagging the Waterford plant. But it was more than that. He was

asking all sorts of other things."

"Like what?"

"Like did you ever take stuff home, office supplies and stuff like that. Did you ever draw from petty cash without putting in a voucher. Or get your laundry done on the company clock. He even asked me if you had any kind of kickback deal going with the motels."

"That son of a bitch," he said wonderingly.

"Like I say, he's hunting around for a nice raw cob to stick up your pump, Bart. I think he'd like to find a criminal charge he could get you on."

"He can't. It's all in the family. And the family's broken up now."

"It broke up a long time ago," Tom said evenly. "When Ray Tarkington died. I don't know anyone who's pissed off at you but Ordner. Those guys downtown . . . it's just dollars and cents to them. They don't know nothing about the laundry business and they don't care to know."

He could think of nothing to say.

"Well . . ." Tom sighed. "I thought you ought to know. And I s'pose you heard about Johnny Walker's brother."

"Arnie? No, what about him?"

"Killed himself. "

"What?"

Tom sounded as if he might be sucking back spit through his upper plate. "Ran a hose from the exhaust pipe of his car into the back window and shut everything up. The newsboy found him."

"Holy God," he whispered. He thought of Arnie Walker sitting in the hospital waiting room chair and shivered, as if a goose had walked over his grave. "That's awful. "

"Yeah . . ." That sucking noise again. "Listen, I'll be seeing you, Bart."

"Sure. Thanks for calling."

"Glad to do it. Bye."

He hung up slowly, still thinking of Arnie Walker and that funny, whining gasp Arnie had made when the priest hurried in.

Jesus, he had his pyx, did you see it?

"Oh, that's too bad," he said to the empty room, and the words fell dead as he uttered them and he went into the kitchen to fix himself a drink.

Suicide.

The word had a hissing trapped sound, like a snake squirming through a small crevice. It slipped between the tongue and the roof of the mouth like a convict on the lam.

Suicide.

His hand trembled as he poured Southern Comfort, and the neck of the bottle chattered against the rim of the glass. Why did he do that, Freddy? They were just a couple of old farts who roomed together. Jesus Christ, why would *anybody* do that?

But he thought he knew why.

December 18-19, 1973

He got to the laundry around eight in the morning and they didn't start to tear it down until nine, but even at eight there was quite a gallery on hand, standing in the cold with their hands thrust into their coat pockets and frozen breath pluming from their mouths like comic strip balloons-Tom Granger, Ron Stone, Ethel Diment, the shirt girl who usually got tipsy on her lunch break and then burned the hell out of unsuspecting shirt collars all afternoon, Gracie Floyd and her cousin Maureen, both of whom had worked on the ironer, and ten or fifteen others.

The highway department had put out yellow sawhorses and smudge pots and large orange-and-black signs that said:

DETOUR

The signs would route traffic around the block. The sidewalk that fronted the laundry had been closed off, too.

Tom Granger tipped a finger at him but didn't come over. The others from the laundry glanced at him curiously and then put their heads together.

A paranoid's dream, Freddy. Who'll be the first to trot over and scream *j'accuse* in my face?

But Fred wasn't talking.

Around quarter of nine a new '74 Toyota Corolla pulled up, the ten-day plate still taped in the rear window, and Vinnie Mason got out, resplendent and a little self-conscious in a new camel's hair overcoat and leather gloves. Vinnie shot him a sour glance that would have bent steel nails out of plumb and then walked over to where Ron Stone was standing with Dave and Pollack.

At ten minutes of nine they brought a crane up the street, the wrecking ball dangling from the top of the gantry like some disembodied Ethiopian teat. The crane was rolling very slowly on its ten chest-high wheels, and the steady, crackling roar of its exhaust beat into the silvery chill of the morning like an artisan's hammer shaping a sculpture of unknown import.

A man in a yellow hard hat directed it up over the curb and through the parking lot, and he could see the man high up in the cab changing gears and clutching with one blocklike foot. Brown smoke pumped from the crane's overhead stack.

A weird, diaphanous feeling had been haunting him ever since he had parked the station wagon three blocks over and walked here, a simile that wouldn't quite connect. Now, watching the crane halt at the base of the long brick plant, just to the left of what had been the loading bays, the sense of it came to him. It was like stepping into the last

chapter of an Ellery Queen mystery where all the participants have been gathered so that the mechanics of the crime could be explained and the culprit unmasked. Soon someone—Steve Ordner, most likely—would step out of the crowd, point at him and scream: *He's the one! Bart Dawes! He killed the Blue Ribbon!* At which point he would draw his pistol in order to silence his nemesis, only to be riddled with police bullets.

The fancy disturbed him. He looked toward the road to assure himself and felt a sinking-elevator sensation in his belly as he saw Ordner's bottle-green Delta 88 parked just beyond the yellow barriers, exhaust plumbing from the twin tailpipes.

Steve Ordner was looking calmly back at him through the polarized glass.

At that moment the wrecking ball swung through its arc with a low, ratcheting scream, and the small crowd sighed as it struck the brick wall and punched through with a hollow booming noise like detonating cannon fire.

By four that afternoon there was nothing left of the Blue Ribbon but a jumbled pile of brick and glass, through which protruded the shattered main beams like the broken skeleton of some exhumed monster.

What he did later he did with no conscious thought of the future or consequences. He did it in much the same spirit that he had bought the two guns at Harvey's Gun Shop a month earlier. Only there was no need to use the circuit breaker because Freddy had shut up.

He drove to a gas station and filled up the LTD with hi-test. Clouds had come in over the city during the day, and the radio was forecasting a storm—six to ten inches of new snow. He drove back home, parked the station wagon in the garage, and went down cellar.

Under the stairs there were two large cartons of returnable soda and beer bottles, the top layer covered with a thick patina of dust. Some of the bottles probably went back five years. Even Mary had forgotten about them in the last year or so and had given up pestering him about taking them back for the refund. Most of the stores didn't even accept returnables now. Use them once, throw them away. What the hell.

He stacked the two cartons one on top of the other and carted them out to the garage. When he went back to the kitchen to get a knife, a funnel, and Mary's floor-washing pail, it had begun to spit snow.

He turned on the garage light and took the green plastic garden hose off its nail, where it had been looped since the third week of September. He cut off the nozzle and it fell to the cement floor with a meaningless clink. He paid out three feet and cut it again. He kicked the rest away and looked at the length of hose thoughtfully for a moment. Then he unscrewed his gas cap and slipped the hose gently in, like a delicate lover.

He had seen gas siphoned before, knew the principle, but had never done it himself. He steeled himself for the taste of gasoline and sucked on the end of the hoselength. For a moment there was nothing but an invisible, glutinous resistance, and then his mouth filled with a liquid so cold and foreign that he had to stifle an impulse to gasp and draw some of it down his throat. He spat it out with a grimace, still tasting it on his tongue like some

peculiar death. He tilted the hose over Mary's floor-bucket, and a stream of pinkish gasoline spurted into the bottom. The flow fell away to a trickle and he thought he would have to go through the ritual again. But then the flow strengthened a bit and remained constant. Gas flowed into the bucket with a sound like urination in a public toilet.

He spat on the floor, rinsed the inside of his mouth with saliva, spat again. Better. It came to him that although he had been using gasoline almost every day of his adult life, he had never been on such intimate terms with it. The only other time he had actually touched it was when he had filled the small tank of his Briggs & Stratton lawn mower to the overflow point. He was suddenly glad that this had happened. Even the residual taste in his mouth seemed okay.

He went back into the house while the bucket filled (it was snowing harder now) and got some rags from Mary's cleaning cupboard under the sink. He took them back into the garage and tore them into long strips, which he laid out on the hood of the LTD.

When the floor-bucket was half full, he switched the hose into the galvanized steel bucket he usually filled with ashes and clinkers to spread in the driveway when the going was icy. While it filled, he put twenty beer and soda bottles in four neat rows and filled each one three-quarters full, using the funnel. When that was done, he pulled the hose out of the gas tank and poured the contents of the steel pail into Mary's bucket. It filled it almost to the brim.

He stuffed a rag wick into each bottle, plugging the necks completely. He went back to the house, carrying the funnel. The snow filled the earth in slanting, wind-driven lines. The driveway was already white. He put the funnel into the sink and then got the cover that fitted over the top of the bucket from Mary's cupboard. He took it back to the garage and snapped it securely over the gasoline. He opened the LTD's tailgate and put the bucket of gasoline inside. He put his Molotov cocktails into one of the cartons, fitting them snugly one against the other so they would stand at attention like good soldiers. He put the carton on the passenger seat up front, within hand's reach. Then he went back into the house, sat down in his chair, and turned on the Zenith TV with his Space Command module. The "Tuesday Movie of the Week" was on. It was a western, starring David Janssen. He thought David Janssen made a shitty cowboy.

When the movie was over, he watched Marcus Welby treat a disturbed teenager for epilepsy. The disturbed teenager kept falling down in public places. Welby fixed her up. After Marcus came station identification and two ads, one for Miracle Chopper and one for an album containing forty-one spiritual favorites, and then the news. The weather man said it was going to snow all night and most of tomorrow. He urged people to stay home. The roads were treacherous and most snow-removal equipment wouldn't be able to get out until after 2:00 A.m. High winds were causing the snow to drift and generally, the weatherman hinted, things were going to be an all-around bitch-kitty for the next day or so

After the news, Dick Cavett came on. He watched half an hour of that, and then turned the TV off. So Ordner wanted to get him on something criminal, did he? Well, if he got the LTD stuck after he did it, Ordner would have his wish. Still, he thought his

chances were good. The LTD was a heavy car, and there were studded tires on the back wheels.

He put on his coat and hat and gloves in the kitchen entry, and paused for a moment. He went back through the warmly lighted house and looked at it—the kitchen table, the stove, the dining room bureau with the teacups hung from the runner above it, the African violet on the mantel in the living room—he felt a warm surge of love for it, a surge of protectiveness. He thought of the wrecking ball roaring through it, belting the walls down to junk, shattering the windows, vomiting debris over the floors. He wasn't going to let that happen. Charlie had crawled on these floors, had taken his first steps in the living room, had once fallen down the front stairs and scared the piss out of his fumbling parents. Charlie's room was now an upstairs study, but it was in there that his son had first felt the headaches and experienced the double vision and smelled those odd aromas, sometimes like roasting pork, sometimes like burning grass, sometimes like pencil shavings. After Charlie had died, almost a hundred people had come to see them, and Mary had served them cake and pie in the living room.

No, Charlie, he thought. Not if I can help it.

He tan the garage door up and saw there was already four inches of snow in the driveway, very powdery and light. He got in the LTD and started it up. He still had over three-quarters of a tank. He let the car warm up, and sitting behind the wheel in the mystic green glow of the dashlights, he fell to thinking about Arnie Walker. Just a length of rubber hose, that wasn't so bad. It would be like going to sleep. He had read somewhere that carbon monoxide poisoning was like that. It even brought the color up in your cheeks so you looked ruddy and healthy, bursting with life and vitality. It-

He began to shiver, the goose walking back and forth across his grave again, and he turned on the heater. When the car was toasty and the shivering had stopped, he slipped the transmission into reverse and backed out into the snow. He could hear the gasoline sloshing in Mary's floor-pail, reminding him that he had forgotten something.

He put the car in park again and went back to the house. There was a carton of paper matches in the bureau drawer, and he filled his coat pockets with perhaps twenty folders. Then he went back out.

The streets were very slippery.

There was patch ice under the new snow in places, and once when he braked for a stoplight at the corner of Crestallen and Garner, the LTD slued around almost sideways. When he brought the skid to a stop, his heart was thudding dully against his ribs. This was a crazy thing to be doing, all right. If he got rear-ended with all that gasoline in the back, they could scrape him up with a spoon and bury him in a dog-food box:

Better than suicide. Suicide's a mortal sin.

Well, that was the Catholics for you. But he didn't think he would get hit. Traffic had thinned almost to the vanishing point, and he didn't even see any cops. Probably they were all parked in alleys, cooping.

He turned cautiously onto Kennedy Promenade, which he supposed he would always think of as Dumont Street, which it had been until a special session of the city council had changed it in January of 1964. Dumont/Kennedy Prom ran from Westside all the way downtown, roughly parallel to the 784 construction for almost two miles. He would follow it for a mile, then turn left onto Grand Street. A half mile up, Grand Street became extinct, just like the old Grand Theater itself, might it rest in peace. By next summer Grand Street would be resurrected in the form of an overpass (one of the three he had mentioned to Magliore), but it wouldn't be the same street. Instead of seeing the theater on your right, you would only be able to see six-or was it eight?-lanes of traffic hurrying by down below. He had absorbed a great deal about the extension from radio, TV, and the daily paper, not through any real conscious effort, but almost by osmosis. Perhaps he had stored the material instinctively, the way a squirrel stores nuts. He knew that the construction companies who had contracted the extension were almost through with the actual roadwork for the winter, but he also knew that they expected to complete all the necessary demolitions (*demolitions*, there's a word for you, Fred-but Fred didn't pick up the gauntlet) within the city limits by the end of February. That included Crestallen Street West. In a way it was ironic. If he and Mary had been located a mile farther away, they would not have been liable to demolition until late in the spring-May or early June of 1974. And if wishes were horses, beggars would sit astride golden palominos. He also knew, from personal conscious observation, that most of the road machinery was left parked below the point where Grand Street had been murdered.

He turned onto Grand Street now, the rear end of the car trying to wander out from under him. He turned with the skid, jockeying the car, cajoling it with his hands, and it purred on, cutting through snow that was almost virgin-the tracks of the last car to pass this way were already fuzzy and indistinct. The sight of so much fresh snow somehow made him feel better. It was good to be moving, to be *doing*.

As he moved up Grand at a steady unhurried twenty-five, his thoughts drifted back to Mary and the concept of sin, mortal and venial. She had been brought up Catholic, had gone to a parochial grammar school, and although she had given up most religious concepts-intellectually, at least-by the time they met, some of the gut stuff had stuck with her, the stuff they sneak to you in the clinches. As Mary herself said, the nuns had given her six coats of varnish and three of wax. After the miscarriage, her mother had sent a priest to the hospital so that she could make a good confession, and Mary had wept at the sight of him. He had been with her when the priest came in, carrying his pyx, and the sound of his wife's weeping had torn his heart as only one thing had done in the time between then and now.

Once, at his request, she had reeled off a whole list of mortal and venial sins. Although she had learned them in catechism classes twenty, twenty-five, even thirty years before, her list seemed (to him at least) complete and faultless. But there was a matter of interpretation that he couldn't make clear. Sometimes an act was a mortal sin, sometimes only venial. It seemed to depend on the perpetrator's frame of mind. *The conscious will to do evil*. Was that something she had said during those long-ago discussions, or had Freddy whispered it in his ear just now? It puzzled him, worried him. *The conscious will to do evil*.

In the end, he thought he had isolated the two biggies, the two hard and fast mortal

sins: suicide and murder. But a later conversation-had it been with Ron Stone? yes, he believed it had-had even blurred half of that. Sometimes, according to Ron (they had been drinking in a bar, it seemed, as long as ten years ago). murder itself was only a venial sin. Or maybe not a sin at all. If you cold-bloodedly planned to do away with somebody who had raped your wife, that might just be a venial sin. And if you killed somebody in a *just* war-those were Ron's exact words, he could almost hear him speaking them in some mental taproom-then it wasn't a sin at all. According to Ron, all the American GI's that had killed Nazis and Japs were going to be okay when the Judgment Trump blew.

That left suicide, that hissing word.

He was coming up to the construction. There were black-and-white barriers with round flashing reflectors on top, and orange signs that glowed briefly and brightly in his headlights. One said:

ROAD ENDS TEMPORARILY

Another said:

DETOUR-FOLLOW SIGNS

Another said:

BLASTING AREA!
TURN OFF 2-WAY RADIOS

He pulled over, put the transmission lever in park, turned on his four-way flashers, and got out of the car. He walked toward the black-and-white barriers. The orange blinkers made the falling snow seem thicker, absurd with color.

He also remembered being confused about absolution. At first he had thought it was fairly simple: If you committed a mortal sin, you were mortally wounded, damned. You could hail Mary until your tongue fell out and you would still go to hell. But Mary said that wasn't always so. There was confession, and atonement, and reconsecration, and so on. It was very confusing. Christ had said there was no eternal life in a murderer, but he had also said whosoever believeth in me shall not perish. *Whosoever*. It seemed that there were as many loopholes in biblical doctrine as there were in a shyster lawyer's purchase agreement. Except for suicide, of course. You couldn't confess suicide or repent suicide or atone for it because that act cut the silver cord and sent you plunging out into whatever worlds there were. And-

And why was he thinking about it, anyway? He didn't intend to kill anybody and certainly he didn't intend to commit suicide. He never even thought about suicide. At least, not until just lately.

He stared over the black-and-white barriers, feeling cold inside.

The machines were down there, hooded in snow, dominated by the wrecking crane. In its brooding immobility it had gained a dimension of awfulness. With its skeletal gantry rising into the snowy darkness, it reminded him of a praying mantis that had gone into some unknown period of winter contemplation.

He swung one of the barriers out of the way. It was very light. He went back to the

car, got in, and pulled the transmission lever down into low. He let the car creep forward over the edge and down the slope, which had been worn into smooth ridges by the comings and goings of the big machines. With dirt underneath, the tendency of the heavy car to slip around was reduced. When he got to the bottom he shifted back into park and turned off all the car's lights. He climbed back up the slope, puffing, and put the barrier back in place. He went back down.

He opened the LTD's tailgate and took out Mary's bucket. Then he went around to the passenger seat and set the bucket on the floor beneath his carton of firebombs. He took the white lid off the bucket and, humming softly, dipped each wick in gasoline. That done, he carried the bucket of gas over to the crane and climbed up into the unlocked cab, being careful not to slip. He was excited now, his heartbeat hurrying along, his throat tight and close with bitter exultation.

He splashed gas over the seat, over the controls, over the gearbox. He stepped out on the narrow riveted catwalk that skirted the crane's motor hood and poured the rest of the gas into the cowling. Hydrocarbon perfume filled the air. His gloves had soaked through, wetting his hands and turning them numb almost immediately. He jumped down and stripped the gloves off, putting them into his overcoat pockets. The first packet of matches dropped from his fingers, which felt as distant as wood. He held onto the second pack, but the wind snuffed the first two he had scratched. He turned his back to the wind, hunched over the match folder protectively and got one to stay lighted. He touched it to the rest, and they hissed into flame. He tossed the burning matches into the cab.

At first he thought they must have gone out, because there was nothing. Then there was a soft explosive sound-*flump!*-and fire boiled out of the cab in a furious gust, driving him back two steps. He shielded his eyes from the bright orange flower opening up there.

An arm of fire ran out of the cab, reached the engine hood, paused for a moment as if in reflection, and then sniffed inside. This time the explosion was not soft. KAPLOOM! And suddenly the cowling was in the air, rising almost out of sight, fluttering and turning over. Something whizzed past his head.

It's burning, he thought. It's really burning!

He began to do a shuffling dance in the fiery darkness, his face contorted in an ecstasy so great that it seemed his features must shatter and fall in a million smiling pieces. His hands curled into waving fists above his head.

"Hooray!" He screamed into the wind, and the wind screamed back at him. *"Hooray goddam it hooray!"*

He dashed around the car and slipped in the snow and fell down and that might have saved his life because that was when the gas tank of the crane blew debris in a forty-foot circle. A hot piece of metal winged through the right window of the LTD, punching a stellated hole in the safety glass and sending out a drunken spiderweb of cracks.

He picked himself up, frosted with snow all the way down his front, and scrambled behind the wheel. He put his gloves back on-fingerprints-but after that, any thought of caution was gone. He started the car with fingers that could barely feel the ignition key and then heavy-footed the accelerator, "dragging out" they had called it when they had been kids and the world was young, the rear end of the station wagon whipping left and

right. The crane was burning furiously, better than he ever would have imagined, the cab an inferno, the big windshield gone.

"Hot damn!" he screamed. "Oh Freddy, *hot damn!*"

He skated the LTD in front of the crane, the firelight sketching his face in twotone Halloween colors. He rammed his right index finger at the dashboard, hitting the cigarette lighter on the third try. The construction machines were on his left now, and he rolled down his window. Mary's floor-bucket rolled back and forth on the floor, and the beer and soda bottles chattered frantically against one another as the wagon jounced across the gouged and frozen earth.

The cigarette lighter popped out and he slammed both feet down on the power brake. The station wagon looped the loop and came to a stop. He pulled the lighter out of its socket, took a bottle from the carton, and pressed the glowing coil against the wick. It flared alight and he threw it. It shattered against the mud-caked tread of a bulldozer and flame splashed gaudily. He pushed the cigarette lighter back in, drove twenty feet farther, and threw three more at the dark hulk of a payloader. One missed, one struck the side and spilled burning gasoline harmlessly into the snow, and the third arced neatly into the cab.

"*Fuckinbullseye!*" he screamed.

Another bulldozer. A smaller payloader. Then he came to a house trailer up on jacks. A sign over the door said:

LANE CONSTRUCTION CO.
On-Site Office
NO HIRING DONE HERE!
Please Wipe Your Feet

He pulled the LTD up at point-blank range and threw four burning bottles at the large window beside the door. They all went through, the first shattering the glass of both window and bottle, dragging a burning drape in after it.

Beyond the trailer a pickup truck was parked. He got out of the LTD, tried the pickup's passenger door, and found it unlocked. He lit the wick of one of his bombs and pitched it inside. Flames leaped hungrily across the bench seat.

He got back into his car and saw there were only four or five bottles left. He drove on, shivering in the cold, snot running from his nose, reeking of gasoline, grinning.

A steam shovel. He pitched the rest of the bottles at it, doing no damage until the last, which blew one of the tractor treads loose from its aft cog.

He probed the box again, remembered it was empty, and looked in the rearview mirror.

"Mother-fuck," he cried, "Oh, holy mother-fuck, Freddy you cock-knocker!"

Behind him, a line of isolated bonfires stood out in the snow-choked darkness like runway landing lights. Flames were belching madly from the windows of the office trailer. The pickup was a ball of fire. The cab of the payloader was an orange cauldron. But the crane was really the masterpiece, because the crane was a roaring yellow beacon of light, a sizzling torch in the middle of the roadwork.

"Demofuckinlition!" he screamed.

A semblance of sanity began to return. He dared not go back the way he had come. The police would be on the way soon, maybe already. And the fire department. Could he get out ahead, or was he blocked in?

Heron Place, he might be able to get up to Heron Place. It would be a twenty-five degree angle up the slope, maybe thirty, and he would have to crash the wagon through a highway department barrier, but the guardrails were gone. He thought maybe he could do it. Yes. He could do it. Tonight he could do anything.

He drove the LTD up the unfinished roadbed, skidding and slueing, using only his parking lights. When he saw the streetlights of Heron Place above and to the right, he fed the car more and more gas and watched the speedometer needle climb past thirty as he aimed at the embankment. It was near forty when he hit the incline and shot up. About halfway the rear wheels began to lose traction and he dropped the transmission lever into low. The engine dropped a note and the car hitched forward. He was almost nose over the top when the wheels began to spin again, machine-gunning snow and pebbles and frozen clods of earth out behind him. For a moment the issue was in doubt, and then the simple forward inertia of the LTD-coupled with willpower, perhaps-carried it up onto level ground.

The nose of the car bunted the black-and-white barrier aside; it toppled backward into a snowdrift, making a dreamy sugarpuff. He went down over the curb and was almost shocked to realize that he was on a normal street again, as if nothing at all had happened. He shifted back to drive and settled down to a sedate thirty.

He was getting ready to turn toward home when he remembered that he was leaving tracks that plows or new snow might not obliterate for two hours or more. Instead of turning up Crestallen Street, he continued out Heron Place to River Street, and then down River to Route 7. Traffic here had been light ever since the snow had begun to come hard, but there had been enough to chew the snow covering the highway into a loose, churned-up mess.

He merged his tail with that of all the other cars that were moving east and inched his speed up to forty.

He followed Route 7 for almost ten miles, then back into the city and drove toward Crestallen Street. A few plows were out now, moving through the night like gigantic orange mastiffs with glaring yellow eyes. Several times he looked toward the 784 construction, but in the blowing snow he could see nothing.

About halfway home he realized that even though all the windows were rolled up and the heater was on full blast, the car was still cold. He looked back and saw the jagged hole in the rear passenger-side window. There was broken glass and snow on the backseat.

Now how did that happen? he asked himself, bewildered. He honestly had no recollection.

He entered his street from the north and drove directly to his house. It was as he had left it, the single light in his kitchen the only light shining on this whole darkened section

of street. There were no police cars parked out front, but the garage door was open and that was just plain stupid. You closed the garage door when it snowed, always. That's why you have a garage, to keep the elements off your stuff. His father used to say that. His father had died in a garage, just like Johnny's brother, but Ralph Dawes had not committed suicide. He had had some kind of stroke. A neighbor had found him with his lawn clippers in his stiffening left hand and a small whetstone by his right. A suburban death. Oh Lord, send this white soul to a heaven where there is no crab grass and the niggers always keep their distance.

He parked the station wagon, pulled the garage door down, and went into the house. He was trembling from exhaustion and reaction. It was quarter past three. He hung his coat and hat in the hall closet and was closing the door when he felt a hot jolt of terror, as riveting as a straight knock of scotch whiskey. He fumbled wildly in his overcoat pockets and let out a whistling sigh when he felt his gloves, still soaked with gasoline, each of them crushed into a soggy little ball.

He thought of making coffee and decided against it. He had a queasy, thumping headache, probably caused by gasoline fumes and helped along by his scary drive through the snowy darkness. In his bedroom he took off his clothes and threw them over a chair without bothering to fold them. He thought he would fall asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, but it was not so. Now that he was home, and presumably safe, staring wakefulness seized him. It brought fear like a handmaiden. They were going to catch him and put him in jail. His picture would be in the papers. People who knew him would shake their heads and talk it over in cafeterias and lunchrooms. Vinnie Mason would tell his wife that he had known Dawes was crazy all along. Mary's folks would maybe fly her to Reno, where she would first pick up residency and then a divorce. Maybe she would find somebody to fuck her. He wouldn't be surprised.

He lay wakeful, telling himself they weren't going to catch him. He had worn his gloves. No fingerprints. He had Mary's bucket and the white cover that went over the top. He had hidden his tracks, had shaken off possible pursuit just as a fugitive will throw off bloodhounds by walking in a creek. None of these thoughts brought him sleep or comfort. They would catch him. Perhaps someone on Heron Place had seen his car and thought it suspicious that any vehicle should be out so late on such a stormy night. Perhaps someone had jotted down his license plate number and was even now being congratulated by the police. Perhaps they had gotten paint scrapings from the Heron Place construction barrier and were now cajoling his guilty name out of some auto registration computer. Perhaps-

He rolled and thrashed in his bed, waiting for the dancing blue shadows to come in his window, waiting for the heavy knock on his door, waiting for some bodiless, Kafkaesque voice to call: *Okay, open up in there!* And when he finally fell asleep he did it without knowing it, because thought continued without a break, shifting from conscious rumination to the skewed world of dreams with hardly a break, like a car going from drive to low. Even in his dreams he thought he was awake, and in his dreams he committed suicide over and over: burned himself; bludgeoned himself by standing under an anvil and pulling a rope; hanged himself; blew out the stove's pilot lights and then turned on the oven and all four burners; shot himself; defenestrated himself; stepped in front of a speeding Greyhound bus; swallowed pills; swallowed Vanish toilet bowl

disinfectant; stuck a can of Glade Pine Fresh aerosol in his mouth, pushed the button, and inhaled until his head floated off into the sky like a child's balloon; committed hara-kari while kneeling in a confessional at St. Dom's, confessing his self-murder to a dumbfounded young priest even as his guts accorded out onto the bench like beef stew, performing an act of contrition in a fading, bemused voice as he lay in his blood and the steaming sausages of his intestines. But most vividly, over and over, he saw himself behind the wheel of the LTD, racing the engine a little in the closed garage, taking deep breaths and leafing through a copy of *National Geographic*, examining pictures of life in Tahiti and Auckland and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans, turning the pages ever more slowly, until the sound of the engine faded to a fawaway sweet hum and the green waters of the South Pacific inundated him in rocking warmth and took him down to a silver fathom.

December 19, 1973

It was 12:30 in the afternoon when he woke up and got out of bed. He felt as though he had been on a huge bender. His head ached monstrously. His bladder was cramped and full. There was a dead-snake taste in his mouth. Walking made his heart thud like a snare drum. He was not even allowed the luxury of believing (for however short a time) that he had dreamed everything he remembered of the previous night, because the smell of gasoline seemed rubbed into his flesh and it rose, fulsomely fragrant, from the pile of his clothes. The snow was over, the sky was clear, and the bright sunshine made his eyes beg for mercy.

He went into the bathroom, sat on the ring, and a huge diarrhea movement rushed out of him like a mail train highballing through a deserted station. His waste fell into the water with a sickening series of jets and plops that made him groan and clutch his head. He urinated without getting up, the rich and dismaying smell of his digestion's unsavory end product rising thickly around him.

He flushed and went downstairs on his orange-wood legs, taking clean clothes with him. He would wait until the godawful smell cleared out of the bathroom and then he would shower, maybe all afternoon.

He gobbled three Excedrin from the green bottle on the shelf over the kitchen sink, then washed them down with two big gulps of Pepto-Bismol. He put on hot water for coffee and smashed his favorite cup by fumbling it off its hook. He swept it up, put out another, dumped instant Maxwell House into it, and then went into the dining room.

He turned on the radio and swept across the dial looking for news, which, like a cop, was never there when you needed it. Pop music. Feed and grain reports. A Golden Nugget 'Cause You Dug It. A call-in talk show. A swap-shop program. Paul Harvey selling Banker's Life Insurance. More pop music. No news.

The water for the coffee was boiling. He set the radio to one of the pop stations and brought his coffee back to the table and drank it black. There was an inclination to vomit with the first two mouthfuls, but after that it was better.

The news came on, first national, then local.

On the city newsfront, a fire was set at the site of the 784 thruway extension construction near Grand Street in the early hours of this morning. Police Lieutenant Henry King said that vandals apparently used gasoline bombs to fire a crane, two payloaders, two bulldozers, a pickup truck, and the on-site office of the Lane Construction Company, which was entirely gutted.

An exultation as bitter and dark as the taste of his unsweetened coffee closed his throat at the words *entirely gutted*.

Damage done to the payloaders and bulldozers was minor, according to Francis Lane, whose company got a substantial subcontracting bid on the crosstown extension, but the demolition crane, valued at \$60,000, is expected to be out of service for as long as two weeks.

Two weeks? Was that all?

More serious, according to Lane, was the burning of the on-site office, which contained time sheets, work records, and ninety percent of the company's cost accounting records over the last three months. "This is going to be the very devil to straighten out," Lane said. "It may set us back a month or more."

Maybe that was good news. Maybe an extra month of time made it all worthwhile.

According to Lieutenant King, the vandals fled the construction site in a station wagon, possibly a late-model Chevrolet. He appealed for anyone who may have seen the car leaving the construction area by Heron Street to come forward. Francis Lane estimated total damage in the area of \$100,000.

In other local news, State Representative Muriel Reston again appealed for . . .

He snapped it off.

Now that he had heard, and had heard in daylight, things seemed a little better. It was possible to look at things rationally. Of course the police didn't have to give out all their leads, but if they really were looking for a Chevy instead of a Ford, and if they were reduced to pleading for eyewitnesses to come forward, then maybe he was safe, at least for the time being. And if there had been an eyewitness, no amount of worrying would change that.

He would throw away Mary's floor-bucket and open the garage to air out the stink of gasoline. Make up a story to explain the broken back window if anyone asked about it. And most important, he would try to prepare himself mentally for a visit from the police. As the last resident of Crestallen Street West, it might be perfectly logical for them to at least check him out. And they wouldn't have to sniff up his back trail very far to find out

he had been acting erratically. He had screwed up the plant. His wife had left him. A former co-worker had punched him out in a department store. And of course, he had a station wagon, Chevrolet or not. All bad. But none of it proof.

And if they did dig up proof, he supposed he would go to jail. But there were worse things than jail. Jail wasn't the end of the world. They would give him a job, feed him. He wouldn't have to worry about what was going to happen when the insurance money ran out. Sure, there were a lot of things worse than jail. Suicide, for instance. That was worse. He went upstairs and showered.

Later that afternoon he called Mary. Her mother answered and went to get Mary with a sniff. But when Mary herself answered, she sounded nearly gay.

"Hi Bart. Merry Christmas in advance."

"No, *Mary* Christmas," he responded. It was an old joke that had graduated from humor to tradition.

"Sure," she said. "What is it, Bart?"

"Well, I've got a few presents . . . just little stuff . . . for you and the nieces and nephews. I wondered if we could get together somewhere. I'll give them to you. I didn't wrap the kids' presents-

"I'd be glad to wrap them. But you shouldn't have. You're not working."

"But I'm working on it," he said.

"Bart, have you . . . have you done anything about what we talked about?"

"The psychiatrist?"

"Yes,"

"I called two. One is booked up until almost June. The other guy is going to be in the Bahamas until the end of March. He said he could take me then."

"What were their names?"

"Names? Gee, honey, I'd have to look them up again to tell you. Adams, I think the first guy was. Nicholas Adams-

"Bart," she said sadly.

"It might have been Aarons," he said wildly.

"Bart," she said again.

"Okay," he said. "Believe what you want. You will anyway."

"Bart, if you'd only

"What about the presents? I called about the presents, not the goddam shrink. "

She sighed. "Bring them over Friday, why don't you? I can-

"What, so your mother and father can hire Charles Manson to meet me at the door?"

Let's just meet on neutral ground, okay?"

"They're not going to be here." she said. "They're going to spend Christmas with Joanna." Joanna was Joanna St. Claire, Jean Galloway's cousin, who lived in Minnesota. They had been close friends in their girlhood (back in that pleasant lull between the War of 1812 and the advent of the Confederacy, he sometimes thought), and Joanna had had a stroke in July. She was still trying to get over it, but Jean had told him and Mary that the doctors said she could go at any time. That must be nice, he thought, having a time bomb built right into your head like that. Hey, bomb, is it today? Please not today. I haven't finished the new Victoria Holt.

"Bart? Are you there?"

"Yes. I was woolgathering. "

"Is one o'clock all right?"

"That's fine."

"Was there anything else?"

"No, huh-uh."

"Well..."

"Take good care, Mary."

"I will. Bye, Bart." "Good-bye."

They hung up and he wandered into the kitchen to make himself a drink. The woman he had just talked to on the phone wasn't the same woman that had sat tearfully on the living room couch less than a month ago, pleading for some reason to help explain the tidal wave that had just swept grandly through her ordered life, destroying the work of twenty years and leaving only a few sticks poking out of the mudflats. It was amazing. He shook his head over it the way he would have shaken his head over the news that Jesus had come down from the sky and had taken Richard Nixon up to heaven upon wheels of fire. She has regained herself.

More: She had regained a person he hardly knew at all, a girl-woman he barely remembered. Like an archaeologist she had excavated that person, and the person was a little stiff in the joints from its long storage, but still perfectly usable. The joints would ease and the new-old person would be a whole woman, perhaps scarred by this upheaval but not seriously hurt. He knew her perhaps better than she thought, and he had been able to tell, strictly from the tone of her voice, that she was moving ever close to the idea of divorce, the idea of a clean break with the past . . . a break that would splint well and leave no trace of a limp. She was thirty-eight. Half of her life was ahead of her. There were no children to be casually maimed in the car wreck of this marriage. He would not suggest divorce, but if she did he would agree. He envied her new person and her new beauty. And if she looked back ten years from now on her marriage as a long dark corridor leading into sunlight, he could feel sorry she felt that way, but he couldn't blame her. No, he couldn't blame her.

December 21, 1973

He had given her the presents in Jean Galloway's ticking, ormolu living room, and the conversation that followed had been stilted and awkward. He had never been in this room alone with her, and he kept feeling that they should neck. It was a rusty knee-jerk reaction that made him feel like a bad double exposure of his college self.

"Did you lighten your hair?" he asked.

"Just a shade. " She shrugged a little.

"It's nice. Makes you look younger. "

"You're getting a little gray around the temples, Bart. Makes you look distinguished. "

"Bullshit, it makes me look ratty. "

She laughed-a little too high-pitched-and looked at the presents on the little side table. He had wrapped the owl pin, had left the toys and the chess set for her to do. The dolls looked blankly at the ceiling, waiting for some little girl's hands to bring them to life.

He looked at Mary. Their eyes caught seriously for a moment and he thought irrevocable words were going to spill out of her and he was frightened. Then the cuckoo jumped out of the clock, announced one-thirty, and they both jumped and then laughed. The moment had passed. He got up so it wouldn't come around again. Saved by a cuckoo bird, he thought. That fits.

"Got to go," he said.

"An appointment?"

"Job interview."

"Really?" She looked glad, "Where? Who? How much?"

He laughed and shook his head. "There's a dozen other applicants with as good a chance as me. I'll tell you when I get it."

"Conceited."

"Sure."

"Bart, what are you doing Christmas?" She looked concerned and solemn, and it suddenly came to him that an invitation to Christmas dinner and not to some new year's divorce court had been the thing on her lips inside. God! He almost sprayed laughter.

"I'm going to eat at home."

"You can come here," she said. "It would be just the two of us."

"No," he said, thoughtfully and then more firmly: "No. Emotions have a way of getting out of hand during the holidays. Another time."

She was nodding, also thoughtfully.

"Will you be eating alone?" he asked.

"I can go to Bob and Janet's. Really, are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Well . . ." But she looked relieved.

They walked to the door and shared a bloodless kiss.

"I'll call you," he said.

"You better. "

"And give my best to Bobby."

"I will. "

He was halfway down the walk to the car when she called: "Bart! Bart, wait a minute!"

He turned almost fearfully.

"I almost forgot," she said. "Wally Hammer called and invited us to his New Year's party. I accepted for both of us. But if you don't want to-"

"Wally?" He frowned. Walter Hammer was about their only crosstown friend. He worked for a local ad agency. "Doesn't he know we're, you know, separated?"

"He knows, but you know Walt. Things like that don't faze him much."

Indeed they didn't. Just thinking about Walter made him smile. Walter, always threatening to quit advertising in favor of advanced truss design. Composer of obscene limericks and even more obscene parodies of popular tunes. Divorced twice and tagged hard both times. Now impotent, if you believed gossip, and in this case he thought the gossip was probably true. How long had it been since he had seen Walt? Four months? Six? Too long.

"That might be fun," he said, and then a thought stuck him.

She scanned it from his face in her old way and said, "There won't be any laundry people there."

"He and Steve Ordner know each other."

"Well, yes, *him*-" She shrugged to show how unlikely she thought it was that *him* would be there, and the shrug turned into an elbow-holding little shiver. It was only about twenty-five degrees.

"Hey, go on in," he said. "You'll freeze, dummy."

"Do you want to go?"

"I don't know. I'll have to think about it. " He kissed her again, this time a little more firmly, and she kissed back. At a moment like this, he could regret everything-but the regret was far away, clinical.

"Merry Christmas, Bart," she said, and he saw she was crying a little.

"Next year will be better," he said, the phrase comforting but without any root meaning. "Go inside before you catch pneumonia. "

She went in and he drove away, still thinking about Wally Hammer's New Year's Eve

party. He thought he would go.

December 24, 1973

He found a small garage in Norton that would replace the broken back window for ninety dollars. When he asked the garage man if he would be working the day before Christmas, the garage man said: "Hell yes, I'll take it any way I can get it.

He stopped on the way at a Norton U-Wash-It and put his clothes in two machines. He automatically rotated the agitators to see what kind of shape the spring drives were in, and then loaded them carefully so each machine would extract (only in the laundromats they called it "spin-dry") without kicking off on the overload. He paused, smiling a little. You can take the boy out of the laundry, Fred, but you can't take the laundry out of the boy. Right, Fred? Fred? Oh fuck yourself.

"That's a hell of a hole," the garage man said, peering at the spiderwebbed glass.

"Kid with a snowball," he said. "Rock in the middle of it."

"It was," he said. "It really was."

When the window was replaced he drove back to the U-Wash-It, put his clothes in the dryer, set it to medium-hot, and put thirty cents in the slot. He sat down and picked up someone's discarded newspaper. The U-Wash-It's only other customer was a tired-looking young woman with wire-rimmed glasses and blond streaks in her long, reddish-brown hair. She had a small girl with her, and the small girl was throwing a tantrum.

"I want my *bottle!*"

"Goddam it, Rachel-"

"BOTTLE!"

"Daddys going to spank you when we get home," the young woman promised grimly. "And no treats before bed."

"BAWWWTLE"

Now why does a young girl like that want to streak her hair? he wondered, and looked at the paper. The headlines said:

SMALL CROWDS IN BETHLEHEM PILGRIMS FEAR HOLY TERROR

On the bottom of page one, a short news story caught his eye and he readit carefully:

WINTERBURGER SAYS ACTS OF VANDALISM WILL NOT BE TOLERATED

(Local) Victor Winterburger, Democratic candidate for the seat of the late Donald P. Naish, who was killed in a car crash late last month, said yesterday that acts of vandalism

such as the one that caused almost a hundred thousand dollars' worth of damage at the Route 784 construction site early last Wednesday, cannot be tolerated "in a civilized American city." Winterburger made his remarks at an American Legion dinner, and received a standing ovation.

"We have seen what has happened in other cities," Winterburger said. "The defaced buses and subway cars and buildings in New York, the broken windows and senselessly marred schools of Detroit and San Francisco, the abuse of public facilities, public museums, public galleries. We must not allow the greatest country in the world to be overrun with huns and barbarians."

Police were called to the Grand Street area of the construction when a number of fires and explosions were seen by

(Continued page 5 col. 2)

He folded the paper and put it on top of a tattered pile of magazines. The washer hummed and hummed, a low, soporific sound. Huns. Barbarians. They were the huns. They were the rippers and chewers and choppers, turning people out of their homes, kicking apart lives as a small boy might kick apart an anthill-

The young woman dragged her daughter, still crying for a bottle, out of the UWash-It. He closed his eyes and dozed off, waiting for his dryer to finish. A few minutes later he snapped awake, thinking he heard fire bells, but it was only a Salvation Army Santa who had taken up his position on the corner out front. When he left the laundry with his basket of clothes, he threw all his pocket change into Santa's pot.

"God bless you," Santa said.

December 25, 1973

The telephone woke him around ten in the morning. He fumbled the extension off the night table, put it to his ear, and an operator said crisply into his sleep, "Will you accept a collect call from Olivia Brenner?"

He was lost and could only fumble, "What? Who? I'm asleep."

A distant, slightly familiar voice said, "Oh for Chrissake," and he knew.

"Yes," he said. "I'll take it." Had she hung up on him? He got up on one elbow to see. "Olivia? You there?"

"Go ahead, please," the operator overrode him, not willing to vary her psalm.

"Olivia, are you there?"

"I'm here." The voice was crackling and distant.

"I'm glad you called."

"I didn't think you'd take the call."

"I just woke up. Are you there? In Las Vegas?"

"Yes," she said flatly. The word came out with curiously dull authority, like a plank dropped on a cement floor.

"Well, how is it? How are you doing?"

Her sigh was so bitter that it was almost a tearless sob. "Not so good. "

"No?"

"I met a guy my second . . . no, third . . . night here. Went to a party and go s-o-o-o fucked up-

"Dope?" he asked cautiously, very aware that this was long distance and the government was everywhere.

"Dope?" she echoed crossly. "Of course it was dope. Bad shit, full of dex or something . . . I think I got raped. "

The last trailed off so badly that he had to ask, "What?"

"*Raped!*" she screamed, so loudly that the receiver distorted. "That's when some stupid jock playing Friday night hippie plays hide the salami with you while your brains are somewhere behind you, dripping off the wall! Rape, do you know what rape is?"

"I know," he said.

"Bullshit, you know."

"Do you need money?"

"Why ask me that? I can't fuck you over the telephone. I can't even hand-job you."

"I have some money," he said. "I could send it. That's all. That's why." Instinctively he found himself speaking, not soothingly, but softly, so she would have to slow down and listen.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Do you have an address?"

"General Delivery, that's my address."

"You don't have an apartment?"

"Yeah, me and this other sad sack have got a place. The mailboxes are all broken. Never mind. You keep the money. I've got a job. Screw, I think I'm going to quit and come back. Merry Christmas to me."

"What's the job?"

"Pushing hamburgers in this fast-food joint. They got slots in the lobby, and people play them and eat hamburgers all night long, can you *believe* it? The last thing you have to do when your shift is over is to wipe off all the handles of the slot machines. They get all covered with mustard and mayo and catsup. And you should see the *people* here. All of them are fat. They've either got tans or burns. And if they don't want to fuck you,

you're just part of the furniture. I've had offers from both sexes. Thank God my roomie's about as sex-oriented as a juniper bush, I . . . oh, Christ, why am I telling you all this? I don't even know why I called you. I'm going to hitch out of here at the end of the week, when I get paid."

He heard himself say: "Give it a month."

"Don't go chickenshit. If you leave now you'll always wonder what you went out there for. "

"Did you play football in high school? I bet you did."

"I wasn't even the waterboy."

"Then you don't know anything, do you?"

"I'm thinking about killing myself."

"You don't even . . . what did you say?"

"I'm thinking about killing myself." He said it calmly. He was no longer thinking about long distance and the people who might monitor long distance just for the fun of it-Ma Bell, the White House, the CIA, the Effa Bee Eye. "I keep trying things and they keep not working. It's because I'm a little too old for them to work, I think. Something went wrong a few years ago and I knew it was a bad thing but I didn't know it was bad for me. I thought it just happened and then I was going to get over it. But things keep falling down inside me. I'm sick with it. I keep doing things. "

"Have you got cancer?" she whispered.

"I think I do."

"You ought to go to a hospital, get-"

"It's soul cancer."

"You're ego-tripping, man."

"Maybe so," he said. "It doesn't matter. One way or the other, things are set and they'll turn out the way they will. Only one thing that bothers me, and that's a feeling I get from time to time that I'm a character in some bad writer's book and he's already decided how things are going to turn out and why. It's easier to see things that way, even, than to blame it on God-what did He ever do for me, one way or the other? No, it's this bad writer, it's his fault. He cut my son down by writing in a brain tumor. That was chapter one. Suicide or no suicide, that comes just before the epilogue. It's a stupid story."

"Listen," she said, troubled, "if they have one of those Dial Help outfits in your town, maybe you ought to . . . "

"They couldn't do anything for me," he said, "and it doesn't matter. I want to help you. For Christsake look around out there before you go chickenshit. Get off dope, you said you were going to. The next time you look around you'll be forty and your options will mostly be gone."

"No, I can't take this. Some other place-"

"All places are the same unless your mind changes. There's no magic place to get

your mind right. If you feel like shit, everything you see looks like shit. I *know* that. Newspaper headlines, even the signs I see, they all say yeah, that's right, Georgie, pull the plug. This eats the bird. "

"Listen-"

"No, no, you listen. Dig your ears out. Getting old is like driving through snow that just gets deeper and deeper. When you finally get in over your hubcaps, you just spin and spin. That's life. There are no plows to come and dig you out. Your ship isn't going to come in, girl. There are no boats for nobody. You're never going to win a contest. There's no camera following you and people watching you straggle. This is it. All of it. *Everything.* "

"You don't know what it's *like* here!" she cried.

"No, but I know what it's like here."

"You're not in charge of my life."

"I'm going to send you five hundred dollars-Olivia Brenner, c/o General Delivery, Las Vegas."

"I won't be here. They'll send it back."

"They won't. Because I'm not going to put on a return address."

"Throw it away, then."

"Use it to get a better job."

"No. "

"Then use it for toilet paper," he said shortly, and hung up. His hands were shaking.

The phone rang five minutes later. The operator said: "Will you accept-"

"No," he said, and hung up.

The phone rang twice more that day, but it was not Olivia either time.

Around two in the afternoon Mary called him from Bob and Janet Preston's house-Bob and Janet, who always reminded him, like it or not, of Barney and Wilma Flintstone. How was he? Good. A lie. What was he doing for Christmas dinner? Going out to Old Customhouse tonight for turkey with all the trimmings. A lie. Would he like to come over here instead? Janet had all kinds of leftovers and would be happy to get rid of some. No, he really wasn't very hungry at the minute. The truth. He was pretty well looped, and on the spur of the moment he told her he would come to Walter's party. She sounded pleased. Did he know it was BYOB? When did Wally Hammer have a party that wasn't? he asked, and she laughed. They hung up and he went back to sit in front of the TV with a drink.

The phone rang again around seven-thirty, and by that time he was nothing as polite as looped-he was pissy-assed drunk.

"Lo?"

"Dawes?"

"Dozz here; whozzere?"

"Magliore, Dawes. Sal Magliore."

He blinked and peered into his glass. He looked at the Zenith color TV, where he had been watching a movie called *Home for the Holidays*. It was about a family that had gathered at their dying patriarch's house on Christmas Eve and somebody was murdering them one by one. Very Christmasy.

"Mr. Magliore," he said, pronouncing carefully. "Merry Christmas, sir! And the best of everything in the new year! "

"Oh, if you only knew how I dread '74," Magliore said dolefully. "That's the year the oil barons are going to take over the country, Dawes. You see if they don't. Look at my sales sheet for December if you don't believe me. I sold a 1971 Chevy Impala the other day, this car is clean as a whistle, and I sold it for a thousand bucks. *A thousand bucks!* Do you believe that? A forty-five percent knockdown in one year. But I can sell all the '71 Vegas I can get my hands on for fifteen, sixteen hundred bucks. And what are they, I ask you?"

"Little cars?" he asked cautiously.

"They're fucking Maxwell House coffee cans, that's what they are! " Magliore shouted. "Saltine boxes on wheels! Every time you look at the goddam things cross-eyed and say booga-booga at them the engine's outta tune or the exhaust system drops off or the steering linkage is gone. Pintos, Vegas, Gremlins, they're all the same, little suicide boxes. So I'm selling those as fast as I can get them and I can't move a nice Chevy Impala unless I fuckin' give it away. And you say happy new year. Jesus! Mary! Joseph the carpenter!"

"That's seasonal," he said.

"I didn't call about that anyway," Magliore answered. "I called to say congratulations."

"Congratuwhatchens?" He was honestly bewildered.

"You know. Crackle-crackle boom-boom."

"Oh, you mean-"

"Ssst. Not on the phone. Be cool, Dawes."

"Sure. Crackle-crackle boom-boom. That's good." He cackled.

"It was you, wasn't it, Dawes?"

"To you I wouldn't admit my middle name."

Magliore roared. "That's good. *You're* good, Dawes. You're a fruitcake, but you're a *clever* fruitcake. I admire that."

"Thanks," he said, and cleverly knocked back the rest of his drink.

"I also wanted to tell you that everything was going ahead on schedule down there. Rumble and roar."

The glass he was holding fell from his fingers and rolled across the rug.

"They've got seconds on all that stuff, Dawes. Thirds on most of it. They're paying cash until they got their bookwork straightened out, but everything is righton."

"You're crazy."

"No. I thought you ought to know. I told you, Dawes. Some things you can't get rid of. "

"You're a bastard. You're lying. Why do you want to call a man up on Christmas night and tell him lies?"

"I ain't lying. It's your play again, Dawes. In this game, it's *always* gonna be your play."

"I don't believe you."

"You poor son of a bitch," Magliore said. He sounded honestly sorry and that was the worst part. "I don't think it's gonna be a very happy new year for you either. " He hung up.

And that was Christmas.

December 26, 1973

There was a letter from *them* in the mail (he had begun to see the anonymous people downtown that way, the personal pronoun in italics and printed in drippy, ominous letters like the printing on a horror movie poster), as if to confirm what Magliore had said.

He held it in his hand, looking down at the crisp white business envelope, his mind filled with almost all the bad emotions the human mind can feel: Despair, hatred, fear, anger, loss. He almost tore it into small pieces and threw it into the snow beside the house, and then knew he couldn't do that. He opened it, nearly tearing the envelope in half, and realized that what he felt most was cheated. He had been gyped. He had been rooked. He had destroyed their machines and their records, and they had just brought up a few replacements. It was like trying to fight the Chinese Army singlehanded.

It's your play again, Dawes. In this game it's always gonna be your play.

The other letters had been form jobs, sent from the office of the highway department. *Dear Friend, a big crane is going to come to your house sometime soon. Be on the lookout for this exciting event as WE IMPROVE YOUR CITY!*

This was from the city council, and it was personal. It said:

December 20, 1973

Mr. Barton G. Dawes
1241 Crestallen Street West
M--, W--

Dear Mr. Dawes:

It has come to our attention that you are the last resident of Crestallen Street West who has not relocated. We trust that you are experiencing no undue problems in this matter. While we have a 19642-A form on file (acknowledgment of information concerning City Roads Project 6983-426-73-74-HC), we do not yet have your relocation form (6983-426-73-74-HC-9004, blue folder). As you know, we cannot begin processing your check of reimbursement without this form. According to our 1973 tax assessment, the property at 1241 Crestallen Street West has been valued at \$63,500, and so we are sure that you must be as aware of the situation's urgency as we are. By law, you must relocate by January 20, 1974, the date that demolitions work is scheduled to begin on Crestallen Street West.

We must also point out again that according to the State Statute of Eminent Domain (S.L. 19452-36), you would be in violation of the law to remain in your present location past midnight of January 19, 1974. We are sure you understand this, but we are pointing it out once more so that the record will be clear.

If you are having some problem with relocation, I hope you will call me during business hours, or better yet, stop by and discuss the situation. I am sure that things can be worked out; you will find us more than eager to cooperate in this matter. In the meantime, may I wish you a Merry Christmas and a most productive New Year?

Sincerely,

{John T. Gordon}
For the City Council

JTG/tk

"No," he muttered. "You may not wish it. You may not." He tore the letter to shreds and threw it in the wastebasket.

That night, sitting in front of the Zenith TV, he found himself thinking about how he and Mary had found out, almost forty-two months ago now, that God had decided to do a little roadwork on their son Charlie's brain.

The doctor's name had been Younger. There was a string of letters after his name on the framed diplomas that hung on the warmly paneled walls of his inner office, but all he understood for sure was that Younger was a neurologist; a fast man with a good brain

disease.

He and Mary had gone to see him at Younger's request on a warm June afternoon nineteen days after Charlie had been admitted to Doctors Hospital. He was a good-looking man, maybe halfway through his forties, physically fit from a lot of golf played with no electric golf cart. He was tanned a deep cordovan shade. And the doctor's hands fascinated him. They were huge hands, clumsy-looking, but they moved about his desk—now picking up a pen, now riffling through his appointment book, now playing idly across the surface of a silver-inlaid paperweight—with a lissome grace that was very nearly repulsive.

"Your son has a brain tumor," he said. He spoke flatly, with little inflection, but his eyes watched them very carefully, as if he had just armed a temperamental explosive.

"Tumor," Mary said softly, blankly.

"How bad is it?" he asked Younger.

The symptoms had developed over the space of eight months. First the headaches, infrequent at the beginning, then more common. Then double vision that came and went, particularly after physical exercise. After that, most shameful to Charlie, some incidence of bedwetting. But they had not taken him to the family doctor until a terrifying temporary blindness in the left eye, which had gone as red as a sunset, obscuring Charlie's good blue. The family doctor had had him admitted for tests, and the other symptoms had followed that: Phantom smells of oranges and shaved pencils; occasional numbness in the left hand; occasional lapses into nonsense and childish obscenity.

"It's bad," Younger said. "You must prepare yourself for the worst. It is inoperable. "
Inoperable.

The word echoed up the years to him. He had never thought words had taste, but that one did. It tasted bad and yet juicy at the same time, like rotten hamburger cooked rare.

Inoperable.

Somewhere, Younger said, deep in Charlie's brain, was a collection of bad cells roughly the size of a walnut. If you had that collection of bad cells in front of you on the table, you could squash them with one hard hit. But they weren't on the table. They were deep in the meat of Charlie's mind, still smugly growing, filling him up with random strangeness.

One day, not long after his admission, he had been visiting his son on his lunch break. They had been talking about baseball, discussing, in fact, whether or not they would be able to go to the American League baseball playoffs if the city's team won.

Charlie had said: "I think if their pitching mmmmm mmmm mmmm pitching staff holds up mmmmm nn mmmm pitching mmmm—"

He had leaned forward. "What, Fred? I'm not tracking you."

Charlie's eyes had rolled wildly outward.

"Fred?" George whispered. "Freddy-?"

"*Goddam motherfucking mothersucking nnnnnn fuckhole!*" his son screamed from the

clean white hospital bed. "*Cuntlickircg dinkrubbing asswipe sonofawhoringbitch-* "

"*NURSE!* " he had screamed, as Charlie passed out. "*OH GOD NURSE!* "

It was the cells, you see, that had made him talk like that. A little bunch of bad cells no bigger, say, than your average-sized walnut. Once, the night nurse said, he had screamed the word *boondoggle* again and again for nearly five minutes. Just bad cells, you know. No bigger than your garden-variety walnut. Making his son rave like an insane dock walloper, making him wet the bed, giving him headaches, making him-during the first hot week of that July-lose all ability to move his left hand.

"Look, " Dr. Younger had told them on that bright, just-right-for-golf June day. He had unrolled a long scroll of paper, an ink-tracing of their son's brain waves. He produced a healthy brain wave as a comparison, but he didn't need it. He looked at what had been going on in his son's head and again felt that rotten yet juicy taste in his mouth. The paper showed an irregular series of spiky mountains and valleys, like a series of badly drawn daggers.

Inoperable.

You see if that collection of bad cells, no bigger than a walnut, had decided to grow on the outside of Charlie's brain, minor surgery would have vacuumed it right up. No sweat, no strain, no pain on the brain, as they had said when they were boys. But instead, it had grown down deep inside and was growing larger every day. If they tried the knife, or laser, or cryosurgery, they would be left with a nice, healthy, breathing piece of meat. If they didn't try any of those things, soon they would be bundling their boy into a coffin.

Dr. Younger said all these things in generalities, covering their lack of options in a soothing foam of technical language that would wear away soon enough. Mary kept shaking her head in gentle bewilderment, but he had understood everything exactly and completely. His first thought, bright and clear, never to be forgiven, was: *Thank God it's not me.* And the funny taste came back and he began to grieve for his son.

Today a walnut, tomorrow the world. The creeping unknown. The incredible dying son. What was there to understand?

Charlie died in October. There were no dramatic dying words. He had been in a coma for three weeks.

He sighed and went out to the kitchen and made himself a drink. Dark night pressed evenly on all the windows. The house was so empty now that Mary was gone. He kept stumbling over little pieces of himself everywhere-snapshots, his old sweatsuit in an upstairs closet, an old pair of slippers under the bureau. It was bad, very bad, to keep doing that.

He had never cried over Charlie after Charlie's death; not even at the funeral. Mary had cried a great deal. For weeks, it seemed, Mary had gone around with a perpetual case of pinkeye. But in the end, she had been the one to heal.

Charlie had left scars on her, that was undeniable. Outwardly, she had all the scars. Mary before-and-after. Before, she would not take a drink unless she considered it

socially helpful to his future. She would take a weak screwdriver at a party and carry it around all night. A rum toddy before bed when she had a heavy chest cold. That was all. After, she had a cocktail with him in the late afternoon when he came home, and always a drink before bed. Not serious drinking by anyone's yardstick, not sick-and-puking-in-the-bathroom drinking, but more than before. A little of that protective foam. Undoubtedly just what the doctor would have ordered. Before, she rarely cried over little things. After, she cried over them often, always in private. If dinner was burned. If she had a flat. The time water got in the basement and the sump pump froze and the furnace shorted out. Before, she had been something of a folk music buff-white folk and blues, Van Ronk, Gary Davis, Tom Rush, Tom Paxton, Spider John Koerner. After, her interest just faded away. She sang her own blues and laments on some inner circuit. She had stopped talking about their taking a trip to England if he got promoted a step up. She started doing her hair at home, and the sight of her sitting in front of the TV in rollers became a common one. It was she their friends pitied-rightly so, he supposed. He wanted to pity himself, and did, but kept it a secret. She had been able to need, and to use what was given to her because of her need, and eventually that had saved her. It had kept her from the awful contemplation that kept him awake so many nights after her bedtime drink had lulled her off to sleep. And as she slept, he contemplated the fact that in this world a tiny collection of cells no bigger than a walnut could take a son's life and send him away forever.

He had never hated her for healing, or for the deference other women gave her as a right. They looked on her the way a young oilman might look on an old vet whose hand or back or cheek is shiny with puckered pink burn tissue-with the respect the never-hurt always hold for the once-hurt-now-healed. She had done her time in hell over Charlie, and these other women knew it. But she had come out. There had been Before, there had been Hell, there had been After, and there had even been After-After, when she had returned to two of her four social clubs, had taken up macrame (he had a belt she had done a year ago-a beautiful twisted rope creation with a heavy silver buckle monogrammed BGD), had taken up afternoon TV-soap operas and Merv Griffin chatting with the celebrities.

Now what? he wondered, going back to the living room. After-After-After? It seemed so. A new woman, a whole woman, rising out of the old ashes that he had so crudely stirred. The old oilman with skin grafts over the burns, retaining the old savvy but gaining a new look. Beauty only skin deep? No. Beauty was in the eye of the beholder. It could go for miles.

For him, the scars had all been inside. He had examined his hurts one by one on the long nights after Charlie's death, cataloguing them with all the morbid fascination of a man studying his own bowel movements for signs of blood. He had wanted to watch Charlie play ball on a Little League team. He had wanted to get report cards and rant over them. He wanted to tell him, over and over, to pick up his room. He wanted to worry about the girls Charlie saw, the friends he picked, the boy's internal weather. He wanted to see what his son became and if they could still be in love as they had been until the bad cells, no bigger than a walnut, had come between them like some dark and rapacious woman.

Mary had said, *He was yours.*

That was true. The two of them had fitted so well that names were ridiculous, even pronouns a little obscene. So they became George and Fred, a vaudeville sort of combination, two Mortimer Veeblefeezers against the world.

And if a collection of bad cells no bigger than a walnut could destroy all those things, those things that are so personal that they can never be properly articulated, so personal you hardly dared admit their existence to yourself, what did that leave? How could you ever trust life again? How could you see it as anything more meaningful than a Saturday night demolition derby?

All of it was inside him, but he had been honestly unaware that his thoughts were changing him so deeply, so irretrievably. And now it was all out in the open, like some obscene mess vomited onto a coffee table, reeking with stomach juice, filled with undigested lumps, and if the world was only a demo derby, wouldn't one be justified in stepping out of his car? But what after that? Life seemed only a preparation for hell.

He saw that he had drained his drink in the kitchen; he had come into the living room with an empty glass.

December 31, 1973

He was only two blocks from Wally Hammer's house when he put his hand into his overcoat pocket to see if he had any Canada Mints in there. There were no mints, but he came up with a tiny square of aluminum foil that glinted dully in the station wagon's green dash lights. He spared it a puzzled, absent glance and was about to toss it into the ashtray when he remembered what it was.

In his mind Olivia's voice said: *Synthetic mescaline. Product four, they call it. Very heavy stuff.* He had forgotten all about it.

He put the little foil packet back into his coat pocket and fumed onto Walter's street. Cars were lined up halfway down the block on both sides. That was Walter, all right—he had never been one to have anything so simple as a party when there ought be a group grope in the offing. The Principle of the Pleasure Push, Wally called it. He claimed that someday he would patent the idea and then publish instructional handbooks on how to use it. If you got enough people together, Wally Hamper maintained, you were forced into having a good time—pushed into it. Once when Wally was expounding this theory in a bar, he had mentioned lynch mobs. "There," Walter had said blandly, "Bart has just proved my case."

He wondered what Olivia was doing now. She hadn't tried to call back, although if she had he would probably have weakened and taken the call. Maybe she had stayed in Vegas just long enough to get the money and had then caught a bus for . . . where? Maine? Did anyone leave Las Vegas for Maine in the middle of winter? Surely not.

Product four, they call it. Very heavy stuff.

He snuggled the wagon up to the cuff behind a sporty red GTX with a black racing stripe and got out. New Year's Eve was clear but bitterly cold. A frigid rind of moon hung in the sky overhead like a child's paper cutout. Stars were spangled around it in lavish profusion. The mucus in his nose froze to a glaze that crackled when he flared his

nostrils. His breath plumed out on the dark air.

Three houses away from Walter's he picked up the bass line from the stereo. They really had it cranked. There was something about Wally's parties, he reflected, Pleasure Principle or no. The most well-intentioned of just-thought-we'd-drop-bys ended up staying and drinking until their heads were full of silver chimes that would turn to leaden church bells the next day. The most dyed-in-the-wool rock-music haters ended up boogying in the living room to the endless golden gassers that Wally trotted out when everybody got blind drunk enough to look back upon the late fifties and early sixties as the plateau of their lives. They drank and boogied, boogied and drank, until they were panting like little yellow dogs on the Fourth of July. There were more kisses in the kitchen by halves of differing wholes, more feel-ups per square inch, more wallflowers jerked rudely out of the woodwork, more normally sober folk who would wake up on New Year's Day with groaning hangovers and horridly clear memories of prancing around with lampshades on their heads or of finally deciding to tell the boss a few home truths. Wally seemed to inspire these things, not by any conscious effort, but just by being Wally-and of course there was no party like a New Year's Eve party.

He found himself scanning the parked cars for Steve Ordner's bottle-green Delta 88, but didn't see it anywhere.

Closer to the house, the rest of the rock band coalesced around the persistent bass signature, and Mick Jagger screaming:

*Ooooh, children-
It's just a kiss away,
Kiss away, kiss away . . .*

Every light in the house was blazing-fuck the energy crisis-except, of course in the living room, where rub-your-peepees would be going on during the slow numbers. Even over the heavy drive of the amplified music he could hear a hundred voices raised in fifty different conversations, as if Babel had fallen only seconds ago.

He thought that, had it been summer (or even fall), it would have been more fun to just stand outside, listening to the circus, charting its progress toward its zenith, and then its gradual fall-off. He had a sudden vision-startling, frightening-of himself standing on Wally Hammer's lawn and holding a roll of EEG graph paper in his hands, covered with the irregular spikes and dips of damaged mental function: the monitored record of a gigantic, tumored Party Brain. He shuddered a little and stuck his hands in his overcoat pockets to warm them.

His right hand encountered the small foil packet again and he took it out. Curious, he unfolded it, regardless of the cold that bit his fingertips with dull teeth. There was a small purple pill inside the foil, small enough to lie on the nail of his pinky finger without touching the edges. Much smaller than, say, a walnut. Could something as small as that make him clinically insane, cause him to see things that weren't there, think in a way he had never thought? Could it, in short, mime all the conditions of his son's mortal illness?

Casually, almost absently, he put the pill in his mouth. It had no taste. He swallowed it.

"BART!" The woman screamed. "BART DAWES!" It was a woman in a black off-the-shoulder evening dress with a martini in one hand. She had dark hair, put up for the occasion and held with a glittering rope spangled with imitation diamonds.

He had walked in through the kitchen door. The kitchen was choked, clogged with people. It was only eight-thirty; the Tidal Effect hadn't gotten far yet, then. The Tidal Effect was another part of Walter's theory; as a party continued, he contended, people would migrate to the four corners of the house. "The center does not hold," Wally said, blinking wisely. "T. S. Eliot said that." Once, according to Wally, he had found a guy wandering around in the attic eighteen hours after a party ended.

The woman in the black dress kissed him warmly on the lips, her ample breasts pushing against his chest. Some of her martini fell on the floor between them.

"Hi," he said. "Who's you?"

"Tina Howard, Bart. Don't you remember the class trip?" She waggled a long, spade-shaped fingernail under his nose. "NAUGH-ty BOY. "

"That Tina? By God, you are!" A stunned grin spread his mouth. That was another thing about Walter's parties; people from your past kept turning up like old photographs. Your best friend on the block thirty years ago; the girl you almost laid once in college; some guy you had worked with for a month on a summer job eighteen years ago.

"Except I'm Tina Howard Wallace now," the woman in the black dress said. "My husband's around here . . . somewhere . . ." She looked around vaguely, spilled some more of her drink, and swallowed the rest before it could get away from her. "Isn't it AWFUL, I seem to have lost him."

She looked at him warmly, speculatively, and Bart could barely believe that this woman had given him his first touch of female flesh-the sophomore class trip at Grover Cleveland High School, a hundred and nine years ago. Rubbing her breast through her white cotton sailor blouse beside . . .

"Cotter's Stream," he said aloud.

She blushed and giggled. "You remember, all right."

His eyes dropped in a perfect, involuntary reflex to the front of her dress and she shrieked with laughter. He grinned that helpless grin again. "I guess time goes by faster than we-"

"Bart! " Wally Hamner yelled over the general patty babble. "Hey buddy, really glad you could make it!"

He cut across the room to them with the also-to-be-patented Walter Hamner Party Zigzag, a thin man, now mostly bald, wearing an impeccable 1962-vintage pinstriped shirt and horn-rimmed glasses. He shook Walter's outstretched hand, and Walter's grip was as hard as he remembered.

"I see you met Tina Wallace," Walter said.

"Hell, we go way back when," he said, and smiled uncomfortably at Tina.

"Don't you tell my husband that, you naughty boy," Tina giggled. " 'Scuse, please. I'll

see you later, Bart?"

"Sure," he said.

She disappeared around a clump of people gathered by a table loaded with chips and dips and went on into the living room. He nodded after her and said, "How do you pick them, Walter? That girl was my first feel. It's like 'This Is Your Life.' "

Walter shrugged modestly. "All a part of the Pleasure Push, Barton my boy." He nodded at the paper bag tucked under his arm. "What's in that plain brown wrapper?"

"Southern Comfort. You've got ginger ale, don't you?"

"Sure," Walter said, but grimaced. "Are you really going to drink that down--by-de-Swanee-Ribber stuff? I always thought you were a scotch man."

"I was always a private Comfort-and-ginger-ale man. I've come out of the closet. "

Walter grinned. "Mary's around here someplace. She's kinda been keeping an eye out for you. Get yourself a drink and we'll go find her."

"Good enough."

He made his way across the kitchen, saying hi to people he knew vaguely and who looked as if they didn't know him at all, and replying hi, how are you to people he didn't remember who hailed him first. Cigarette smoke rolled majestically through the kitchen. Conversation faded quickly in and out, like stations on latenight AM radio, all of it bright and meaningless .

. . . Freddy and Jim didn't have their time sheets so I

. . . said that his mother died quite recently and he's apt to go on a crying jag if he drinks too much

. . . so when he got the paint scraped off he saw it was really a nice piece, maybe pre-Revolutionary

. . . and this little kike came to the door selling encyclopedias

. . . very messy; he won't give her the divorce because of the kids and he drinks like a

. . . terribly nice dress

. . . so much to drink that when he went to pay the check he bar all over the hostess

A long Formica-topped table had been set up in front of the stove and the sink, and it was already crowded with opened liquor bottles and glasses in varying sizes and degrees of fullness. Ashtrays already overflowed with filtertips. Three ice buckets filled with cubes had been crowded into the sink. Over the stove was a large poster which showed Richard Nixon wearing a pair of earphones. The earphone cord disappeared up into the rectum of a donkey standing on the edge of the picture. The caption said:

WE LISTEN BETTER!

To the left, a man in bell-bottomed baggies and a drink in each hand (a water glass filled with what looked to be whiskey and a large stein filled with beer) was entertaining a mixed group with a joke. "This guy comes into this bar, and here's this monkey sitting

on the stool next to him. So the guy orders a beer and when the bartender brings it, the guy says, 'Who owns this monkey? Cute little bugger.' And the bartender says, 'Oh, that's the piano player's monkey.' So the guy swings around . . . "

He made himself a drink and looked around for Walt, but he had gone to the door to greet some more guests-a young couple. The man was wearing a huge driving cap, goggles, and an old-time automobile duster. Written on the front of the duster were the words

KEEP ON TRUCKIN'

Several people were laughing uproariously, and Walter was howling. Whatever the joke was, it seemed to go back a long time.

" . . . and the guy walks over to the piano player and says, 'Do you know your monkey just pissed in my beer?' And the piano player says, 'No, but hum a few bars and I'll fake it.' " Calculated burst of laughter. The man in the bell-bottomed baggies sipped his whiskey and then cooled it with a gulp of beer.

He took his drink and strolled into the darkened living room, slipping behind the turned back of Tina Howard Wallace before she could see him and snag him into a long game of Where Are They Now. She looked, he thought, like the kind of person who could cite you chapter and verse from the lives of classmates who had turned out badly-divorce, nervous disorders, and criminal violations would be her stock in trade-and would have made unpersons out of those who had had success.

Someone had put on the inevitable album of 50's rock and roll, and maybe fifteen couples were jitterbugging hilariously and badly. He saw Mary dancing with a tall, slim man that he knew but could not place. Jack? John? Jason? He shook his head. It wouldn't come. Mary was wearing a party dress he had never seen before. It buttoned up one side, and she had left enough buttons undone to provide a sexy slit to a little above one nyloned knee. He waited for some strong feeling-jealousy or loss, even habitual craving-but none came. He sipped his drink.

She turned her head and saw him. He raised a noncommittal finger in salute: *Go on and finish your dance*-but she broke off and came over, bringing her partner with her.

"I'm so glad you could come, Bart," she said, raising her voice to be heard over the laughter and conversation and stereo. "Do you remember Dick Jackson?"

Bart stuck out his hand and the slim man shook it. "You and your wife lived on our street five . . . no, seven years ago. Is that right?"

Jackson nodded. "We're out in Willowood now."

Housing development, he thought. He had become very sensitive to the city's geography and housing strata.

"Good enough. Are you still working for Piels?"

"No, I've got my own business now. Two trucks. Tri-State Haulers. Say, if that laundry of yours ever needs day-hauling . . . chemicals or any of that stuff . . . "

"I don't work for the laundry anymore," he said, and saw Mary wince slightly, as if

someone had knuckled an old bruise.

"No? What are you doing now?"

"Self-employed," he said and grinned. "Were you in on that independent trucker's strike?"

Jackson's face, already dark with alcohol, darkened more. "You're goddam right. And I personally untracked a guy that couldn't see falling into line. Do you know what those miserable Ohio bastards are charging for diesel? 31.9! That takes my profit margin from twelve percent and cuts it right down to nine. And all my truck maintenance has got to come out of that nine. Not to mention the frigging double-nickle speed-limit-

As he went on about the perils of independent trucking in a country that had suddenly developed a severe case of the energy bends, Bart listened and nodded in the right places and sipped his drink. Mary excused herself and went into the kitchen to get a glass of punch. The man in the automobile duster was doing an exaggerated Charleston to an old Everly Brothers number, and people were laughing and applauding.

Jackson's wife, a busty, muscular-looking girl with carrot red hair, came over and was introduced. She was quite near the stagger point. Her eyes looked like the Tilt signs on a pinball machine. She shook hands with him, smiled glassily, and then said to Dick Jackson: "Hon, I think I'm going to whoopsie. Where's the bathroom?"

Jackson led her away. He skirted the dance floor and sat down in one of the chairs along the side. He finished his drink. Mary was slow coming back. Someone had collared her into a conversation, he supposed.

He reached into an inside pocket and brought out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. He only smoked at parties now. That was quite a victory over a few years ago, when he had been part of the three-packs a-day cancer brigade.

He was halfway through the cigarette and still watching the kitchen door for Mary when he happened to glance down at his fingers and saw how interesting they were. It was interesting how the first and second fingers of his right hand knew just how to hold the cigarette, as if they had been smoking all their lives.

The thought was so funny he had to smile.

It seemed that he had been examining his fingers for quite a while when he noticed his mouth tasted different. Not bad, just different. The spit in it seemed to have thickened. And his legs . . . his legs felt a little jittery, as if they would like to tap along with the music, as if tapping along with the music would relieve them, make them feel cool and just like legs again-

He felt a little frightened at the way that thought, which had begun so ordinarily, had gone corkscrewing off in a wholly new direction like a man lost in a big house and climbing a tall crrrrystal staircase-

There it was again, and it was probably the pill he had taken, Olivia's pill, yes. And wasn't that an interesting way to say crystal? Crrrrystal, gave it a crusty, banged sound, like a stripper's costume.

He smiled craftily and looked at his cigarette, which seemed amazingly white,

amazingly round, amazingly symbolic of all America's padding and wealth. Only in America were cigarettes so good-tasting. He had a puff. Wonderful. He thought of all the cigarettes in America pouring off the production lines in Winston-Salem, a plethora of cigarettes, an endless clean white cornucopia of them. It was the mescaline, all right. He was starting to trip. And if people knew what he had been thinking about the word crystal (a/k/a *crrrystal*), they would nod and tap their heads: *Yes, he's crazy, all right. Nutty as a fruitcake.* Fruitcake, there was another good word. He suddenly wished Sal Magliore was here. Together, he and Sally One-Eye would discuss all the facets of the Organization's business. They would discuss old whores and shootings. In his mind's eye he saw Sally One-Eye and himself eating linguini in a small Italian *ristorante* with dark-toned walls and scarred wooden tables while the strains of *The Godfather* played on the soundtrack. All in luxurious Technicolor that you could fall into, bathe in like a bubble bath.

"Crrrrrrystal," he said under his breath, and grinned. It seemed that he had been sitting here and going over one thing and another for a very long time, but no ash had grown on his cigarette at all. He was astounded. He had another puff.

"Bart?"

He looked up. It was Mary, and she had a canape for him. He smiled at her. "Sit down. Is that for me?"

"Yes." She gave it to him. It was a small triangular sandwich with pink stuff in the middle. It suddenly occurred to him that Mary would be frightened, horrified, if she knew he was on a trip. She might call an emergency squad, the police, God knew who else. He had to act normally. But the thought of acting normal made him feel stranger than ever.

"I'll eat it later," he said, and put the sandwich in his shirt pocket.

"Bart, are you drunk?"

"Just a little," he said. He could see the pores on her face. He could not recall ever having seen them so clearly before. All those little holes, as if God was a cook and she was a pie crust. He giggled and her deepening frown made him say: "Listen, don't tell. "

"Tell?" She offered a puzzled frown.

"About the Product four."

"Bart, what in the name of God are you-"

"I've got to go to the bathroom," he said. "I'll be back." He left without looking at her, but he could feel her frown radiating out from her face in waves like heat from a microwave oven. Yet if he didn't look back at her, it was possible she would not guess. In this, the best of all possible worlds, anything was possible, even crnystal staircases. He smiled fondly. The word had become an old friend.

The trip to the bathroom somehow became an odyssey, a safari. The party noise seemed to have picked up a cyclical beat, IT SEEMED TO fade in and FADE OUT in syllables OF THREE AND even the STEREO faded IN and OUT. He mumbled to people he thought he knew but refused to take up a single thrown conversational gambit; he only pointed to his crotch, smiled, and walked on. He left puzzled faces in his wake. Why is there never a party full of strangers when you need one? he scolded himself.

The bathroom was occupied. He waited outside for what seemed like hours and when he finally got in he couldn't urinate although he seemed to want to. He looked at the wall above the toilet tank and the wall was bulging in and out in a cyclical, three-beat rhythm. He flushed even though he hadn't gone, in case someone outside might be listening, and watched the water swirl out of the bowl. It had a sinister pink color, as if the last user had passed blood. Unsettling.

He left the bathroom and the party smote him again. Faces came and went like floating balloons. The music was nice, though. Elvis was on. Good old Elvis. Rock on, Elvis, rock on.

Mary's face appeared in front of him and hovered, looking concerned. "Bart, what's wrong with you?"

"Wrong? Nothing wrong." He was astounded, amazed. His words had come out in a visual series of musical notes. "I'm hallucinating." He said it aloud, but it was spoken only for himself.

"Bart, what have you taken?" She looked frightened now.

"Mescaline," he said.

"Oh God, Bart. *Drugs? Why?*"

"Why not?" he responded, not to be flip, but because it was the only response he could think of quickly. The words came out in notes again, and this time some of them had flags.

"Do you want me to take you to a doctor?"

He looked at her, surprised, and went ponderously over her question in his mind to see if it had any hidden connotations; Freudian echoes of the funny farm. He giggled again, and the giggles streamed musically out of his mouth and in front of his eyes, crrrrystal notes on lines and spaces, broken by bars and rests.

"Why would I want a doctor?" he said, choosing each word. The question mark was a high quarter-note. "It's just like she said. Not that good, not that bad. But interesting. "

"Who?" she demanded. "Who told you? Where did you get it?" Her face was changing, seeming to become hooded and reptilian. Mary as cheap mystery-movie police detective, shining the light in the suspect's eyes-*Come on, McGonigal, whichever way you want it, hard or soft*-and then worse still she began to remind him uneasily of the H. P. Lovecraft stories he had read as a boy, the Cthulu Mythos stories, where perfectly normal human beings changed into fishy, crawling things at the urgings of the Elder Ones. Mary's face began to look scaly, vaguely eellike.

"Never mind," he said, frightened. "Why can't you leave me alone? Stop fucking me up. I'm not bothering you."

Her face recoiled, became Mary's again, Mary's hurt, mistrustful face, and he was sorry. The party beat and swirled around them. "All right, Bart," she said quietly. "You hurt yourself just any way you like. But please don't embarrass me. Can I ask you that much?"

"Of course you c-"

But she had not waited for his answer. She left him, going quickly into the kitchen without looking back. He felt sorry, but he also felt relieved. But suppose someone else tried to talk with him? They would know too. He couldn't talk to people normally, not like this. Apparently he couldn't even fool people into thinking he was drunk.

"Rrrrreet," he said, ruffling the *r*'s lightly off the roof of his mouth. This time the notes came out in a straight line, all of them hurrying notes with flags. He could make notes all night and be perfectly happy, he didn't mind. But not here, where anybody could come along and accost him. Someplace private, where he could hear himself think. The party made him feel as if he were standing behind a large waterfall. Hard to think against the sound of all that. Better to find some quiet backwater. With perhaps a radio to listen to. He felt that listening to music would aid his thinking, and there was a lot to think about. Reams of things.

Also, he was quite sure that people had begun to glance over at him. Mary must have spread the word. *I'm worried. Bart's on mescaline.* It would move from group to group. They would go on pretending to dance, pretending to drink and have their conversations, but they would really be observing him from behind their hands, whispering about him. He could tell. It was all crrystal clear.

A man walked past him, carrying a very tall drink and weaving slightly. He twitched the man's sport jacket and whispered hoarsely: "What are they saying about me?"

The man gave him a disconnected smile and blew a warm breath of scotch in his face. "I'll write that down," he said, and walked on.

He finally got into Walter Hamper's den (he could not have said how much later) and when he closed the door behind him, the sounds of the party became blessedly muted. He was getting scared. The stuff he had taken hadn't topped out yet; it just kept coming on stronger and stronger. He seemed to have crossed from one side of the living room to the other in the course of one blink; through the darkened bedroom where coats had been stored in another blink; down the hall in a third. The chain of normal, waking existence had come unclipped, spilling reality beads every which way. Continuity had broken down. His time sense was *el destructo*. Suppose he never came down? Suppose he was like this forever? It came to him to curl up and sleep it off, but he didn't know if he could. And if he did, God knew what dreams would come. The light, spur-of-the-moment way he had taken the pill now appalled him. This wasn't like being drunk; there was no small kernel of sobriety winking and blinking down deep in the center of him, that part that never got drunk. He was wacky all the way through.

But it was better in here. Maybe he could get control of it in here, by himself. And at least if he freaked out he wouldn't-

"Hi there."

He jumped, startled, and looked into the corner. A man was sitting there in a high-backed chair by one of Walter's bookcases. There was an open book on the man's lap, as a matter of fact. Or was it a man? There was a single light on in the room, a lamp

on a small round table to the speaker's left. Its light cast long shadows on his face, shadows so long that his eyes were dark caverns, his cheeks etched in sardonic, malefic lines. For a moment he thought he had stumbled on Satan sitting in Wally Hammer's den. Then the figure stood and he saw it was a man, only a man. A tall fellow, maybe sixty, with blue eyes and a nose that had been repeatedly punched in losing bouts with the bottle. But he wasn't holding a drink, nor was there one on the table.

"Another wanderer, I see," the man said, and offered his hand. "Phil Drake."

"Barton Dawes," he said, still dazed from his fright. They shook. Drake's hand was twisted and scarred by some old wound—a burn, perhaps. But he didn't mind shaking it. *Drake*. The name was familiar but he couldn't remember where he had heard it before.

"Are you quite all right?" Drake asked. "You look a little—"

"I'm high," he said. "I took some mescaline and oh boy am I high." He glanced at the bookcases and saw them going in and out and didn't like it. It was too much like the beating of a giant heart. He didn't want to see things like that anymore.

"I see," Drake said. "Sit down. Tell me about it."

He looked at Drake, slightly amazed, and then felt a tremendous surge of relief. He sat down. "You know about mescaline?" he asked.

"Oh, a little. A little. I run a coffeehouse downtown. Kids wander in off the streets, tripping on something . . . is it a good trip?" he asked politely.

"Good and bad," he said. "It's . . . heavy. That's a good word, the way they use it."

"Yes. It is."

"I was getting a little scared." He glanced out the window and saw a long, celestial highway stretching across the black dome of the sky. He looked away casually, but couldn't help licking his lips. "Tell me . . . how long does this usually go on?"

"When did you drop?"

"Drop?" The word dropped out of his mouth in letters, fell to the carpet, and dissolved there.

"When did you take the stuff?"

"Oh . . . about eight-thirty."

"And it's . . ." He consulted his watch. "It's a quarter of ten now—"

"Quarter of *ten*? Is that all?"

Drake smiled. "The sense of time turns to rubber, doesn't it? I expect you'll be pretty well down by one-thirty."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, I should think so. You're probably peaking now. Is it very visual mesc?"

"Yes. A little *too* visual."

"More things to be seen than the eye of man was meant to behold," Drake said, and

offered a peculiar, twisted smile.

"Yes, that's it. That's just it." His sense of relief at being with this man was intense. He felt saved. "What do you do besides talk to middle-aged men who have fallen down the rabbit hole?"

Drake smiled. "That's rather good. Usually people on mesc or acid turn inarticulate, sometimes incoherent. I spend most of my evenings at the Dial Help Center. On weekday afternoons I work at the coffee house I mentioned, a place called Drop Down Mamma. Most of the clientele are street freaks and stewbums. Mornings I just walk the streets and talk to my parishioners, if they're up. And in between, I run errands at the county jail."

"You're a minister?"

"They call me a street priest. Very romantic. Malcolm Boyd, look out. At one time I was a real priest."

"Not any more?"

"I have left the mother church," Drake said. He said it softly, but there was a kind of dreadful finality in his words. He could almost hear the clang of iron doors slammed shut forever.

"Why did you do that?"

Drake shrugged. "It doesn't matter. What about you? How did you get the mesc?"

"I got it from a girl on her way to Las Vegas. A nice girl, I think. She called me on Christmas Day."

"For help?"

"I think so."

"Did you help her?"

"I don't know. " He smiled craftily. "Father, tell me about my immortal soul. "

Drake twitched. "I'm not your father."

"Never mind, then."

"What do you want to know about your 'soul'?"

He looked down at his fingers. He could make bolts of light shoot from their tips whenever he wanted to. It gave him a drunken feeling of power. "I want to know what will happen to it if I commit suicide."

Drake stirred uneasily. "You don't want to think about killing yourself while you're tripping. The dope talks, not you."

"I talk," he said. "Answer me."

"I can't. I don't know what will happen to your 'soul' if you commit suicide. I do, however, know what will happen to your body. It will rot."

Startled by this idea, he looked down at his hands again. Obliging, they seemed to crack and molder in front of his gaze, making him think of that Poe story, "The Strange

Case of M. Valdemar. " Quite a night. Poe and Lovecraft. A. Gordon Pym, anyone? How about Abdul Allhazred, the Mad Arab? He looked up, a little disconcerted, but not really daunted.

"What's your body doing?" Drake asked.

"Huh?" He frowned, trying to parse sense from the question.

"There are two trips," Drake said. "A head trip and a body trip. Do you feel nauseated? Achey? Sick in any way?"

He consulted his body. "No," he said. "I just feel . . . busy." He laughed a little at the word, and Drake smiled. It was a good word to describe how he felt. His body seemed very active, even still. Rather (fight, but not ethereal. In fact, he had never felt so *fleshy*, so conscious of the way his mental processes and physical body were webbed together. There was no parting them. You couldn't peel one away from the other. You were stuck with it, baby. Integration. Entropy. The idea burst over him like a quick tropical sunrise. He sat chewing it over in light of his current situation, trying to make out the pattern, if there was one. But-

"But there's the soul," he said aloud.

"What about the soul?" Drake asked pleasantly.

"If you kill the brain, you kill the body," he said slowly. "And vice versa. But what happens to your *soul*? There's the wild card, Fa . . . Mr. Drake."

Drake said: "In that sleep of death, what dreams may come? *Hamlet*, Mr. Dawes."

"Do you think the soul lives on? Is there survival?"

Drake's eyes grayed. "Yes," he said. "I think there is survival . . . in some form. "

"And do you think suicide is a mortal sin that condemns the soul to hell?"

Drake didn't speak for a long time. Then he said: "Suicide is wrong. I believe that with all my heart."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Drake stood up. "I have no intention of answering it. I don't deal in metaphysics anymore. I'm a civilian. Do you want to go back to the party?"

He thought of the noise and confusion, and shook his head.

"Home?"

"I couldn't drive. I'd be scared to drive."

"I'll drive you."

"Would you? How would you get back?"

"Call a cab from your house. New Year's Eve is a very good night for cabs."

"That would be good," he said gratefully. "I'd like to be alone, I think. I'd like to watch TV."

"Are you safe alone?" Drake asked somberly.

"Nobody is," he replied with equal gravity, and they both laughed.

"Okay. Do you want to say good-bye to anyone?"

"No. Is there a back door?"

"I think we can find one."

He didn't talk much on the way home. Watching the streetlights go by was almost all the excitement he could stand. When they went by the roadwork, he asked Drake's opinion.

"They're building new roads for energy-sucking behemoths while kids in this city are starving," Drake said shortly. "What do I think? I think it's a bloody crime."

He started to tell Drake about the gasoline bombs, the burning crane, the burning office trailer, and then didn't. Drake might think it was a hallucination. Worse still, he might think it wasn't.

The rest of the evening was not very clear. He directed Drake to his house. Drake commented that everyone on the street must be out partying or to bed early. He didn't comment. Drake called a taxi. They watched TV for a while without talking-Guy Lombardo at the Waldorf-Astoria, making the sweetest music this side of heaven. Guy Lombardo, he thought, was looking decidedly froggy.

The taxi came at quarter to twelve. Drake asked him again if he would be all right.

"Yes, I think I'm coming down." He really was. The hallucinations were draining toward the back of his mind.

Drake opened the front door and pulled up his collar. "Stop thinking about suicide. It's chicken."

He smiled and nodded, but he neither accepted nor rejected Drake's advice. Like everything else these days, he simply took it under advisement. "Happy New Year," he said.

"Same to you, Mr. Dawes."

The taxi honked impatiently.

Drake went down the walk, and the taxi pulled away, yellow light glowing on the roof.

He went back into the living room and sat down in front of the TV. They had switched from Guy Lombardo to Times Square, where the glowing ball was poised atop the Allis-Chalmers Building, ready to start its descent into 1974. He felt weary, drained, finally sleepy. The ball would come down soon and he would enter the new year tripping his ass off. Somewhere in the country a New Year's baby was pushing its squashed, placenta-covered head out of his mother's womb and into this best of all possible worlds. At Walter Hammer's party, people would be raising their glasses and counting down. New Year's resolutions were about to be tested. Most of them would prove as strong as

wet paper towels. He made a resolution of his own on the spur of the moment, and got to his feet in spite of his tiredness. His body ached and his spine felt like glass-some kind of hangover. He went into the kitchen and got his hammer off the kitchen shelf. When he brought it back into the living room, the glowing ball was sinking down the pole. There was a split screen, showing the ball on the right, showing the merry-makers at the Waldorf on the left, chanting: "Eight . . . seven . . . six . . . five . . ." One fat society dame caught a glimpse of herself on a monitor, looked surprised, and then waved to the country.

The turn of the year, he thought. Absurdly, goose bumps broke out on his arms.

The ball reached the bottom, and a sign lit up on the top of the Allis-Chalmers Building. The sign said:

1974

At the same instant he swung the hammer and the TV screen exploded. Glass belched onto the carpet. There was a fizz of hot wires, but no fire. Just to be sure the TV would not roast him during the night in revenge, he kicked out the plug with his foot.

"Happy New Year," he said softly, and dropped the hammer to the carpet.

He lay on the couch and fell asleep almost immediately. He slept with the lights on and his sleep was dreamless.

PART THREE

January

If I don't get some shelter,
Oh, I'm gonna fade away . . .

-Rolling Stones

January 5, 1974

The thing that happened in the Shop 'n' Save that day was the only thing that had happened to him in his whole life that actually seemed planned and sentient, not random. It was as if an invisible finger had written on a fellow human being, expressly for him to read.

He liked to go shopping. It was very soothing, very sane. He enjoyed doing sane things very much after his bout with the mescaline. He had not awakened on New Year's Day until afternoon, and he had spent the remainder of the day wandering disconnectedly around the house, feeling spaced-out and strange. He had picked things up and looked at them, feeling like Iago examining Yorick's skull. To a lesser degree the feeling had carried over to the next day, and even the day after that. But in another way, the effect had been good. His mind felt dusted and clean, as if it had been turned upside down, scrubbed and polished by some maniacally brisk internal housekeeper. He didn't get drunk and thus did not cry. When Mary had called him, very cautiously, around 7:00 P.m.

on the first, he had talked to her calmly and reasonably, and it seemed to him that their positions had not changed very much. They were playing a kind of social statues, each waiting for the other to move first. But she had twitched and mentioned divorce. Just the possibility, the eeriest wiggle of a finger, but movement for all that. No, the only thing that really disturbed him in the aftermath of the mescaline was the shattered lens of the Zenith color TV. He could not understand why he had done it. He had wanted such a TV for years, even though his favorite programs were the old ones that had been filmed in black and white. It wasn't even the act that distressed him as much as the lingering evidence of it—the broken glass, the exposed wiring. They seemed to reproach him, to say: *Why did you go and do that? I served you faithfully and you broke me. I never harmed you and you smashed me. I was defenseless.* And it was a terrible reminder of what they wanted to do to his house. At last he got an old quilt and covered the front of it. That made it both better and worse. Better because he couldn't see it, worse because it was like having a shrouded corpse in the house. He threw the hammer away like a murder weapon.

But going to the store was a good thing, like drinking coffee in Benjy's Grill or taking the LTD through the Clean Living Car Wash or stopping at Henny's newsstand downtown for a *copy of Time*. The Shop 'n' Save was very large, lighted with fluorescent bars set into the ceiling, and filled with ladies pushing carts and admonishing children and frowning at tomatoes wrapped in see-through plastic that would not allow a good squeeze. Muzak came down from discreet overhead speaker grilles, flowing evenly into your ears to be almost heard.

On this day, Saturday, the S&S was filled with weekend shoppers, and there were more men than usual, accompanying their wives and annoying them with sophomoric suggestions. He regarded the husbands, the wives, and the issue of their various partnerships with benign eyes. The day was bright and sunshine poured through the store's big front windows, splashing gaudy squares of light by the checkout registers, occasionally catching some woman's hair and turning it into a halo of light. Things did not seem so serious when it was like this, but things were always worse at night.

His cart was filled with the usual selection of a man thrown rudely into solitary housekeeping: spaghetti, meat sauce in a glass jar, fourteen TV dinners, a dozen eggs, butter, and a package of navel oranges to protect against scurvy.

He was on his way down a middle aisle toward the checkouts when God perhaps spoke to him. There was a woman in front of him, wearing powder-blue slacks and a blue cable-stitched sweater of a navy color. She had very yellow hair. She was maybe thirty-five, good looking in an open, alert way. She made a funny gobbling, crowing noise in her throat and staggered. The squeeze bottle of mustard she had been holding in her hand fell to the floor and rolled, showing a red pennant and the word FRENCH'S over and over again.

"Ma'am?" he ventured. "Are you okay?"

The woman fell backward and her left hand, which she had put up to steady herself, swept a score of coffee cans onto the floor. Each can said:

MAXWELL HOUSE

Good To The Very Last Drop

It happened so fast that he wasn't really scared-not for himself, anyway-but he saw one thing that stuck with him later and came back to haunt his dreams. Her eyes had drifted out into walleyes, just as Charlie's had during his fits.

The woman fell on the floor. She cawed weakly. Her feet, clad in leather boots with a salt rime around the bottoms, drummed on the tiled floor. The woman directly behind him screamed weakly. A clerk who had been putting prices on soup cans ran up the aisle, dropping his stamper. Two of the checkout girls came to the foot of the aisle and stared, their eyes wide.

He heard himself say: "I think she's having an epileptic seizure."

But it wasn't an epileptic seizure. It was some sort of brain hemorrhage and a doctor who had been going around in the store with his wife pronounced her dead. The young doctor looked scared, as if he had just realized that his profession would dog him to his grave, like some vengeful horror monster. By the time he finished his examination, a middling-sized crowd had formed around the young woman lying among the coffee cans which had been the last part of the world over which she had exercised her human prerogative to rearrange. Now she had become part of that other world and would be rearranged by other humans. Her cart was half-filled with provisions for a week's living, and the sight of the cans and boxes and wrapped meats filled him with a sharp, agonized terror.

Looking into the dead woman's cart, he wondered what they would do with the groceries. Put them back on the shelves? Save them beside the manager's office until cash redeemed them, proof that the lady of the house had died in harness?

Someone had gotten a cop and he pushed his way through the knot of people on the checkout side. "Look out, here," the cop was saying self-importantly. "Give her air. " As if she could use it.

He turned and bulled his way out of the crowd, butting with his shoulder. His calm of the last five days was shattered, and probably for good. Had there ever been a clearer omen? Surely not. But what did it mean? What?

When he got home he shoved the TV dinners into the freezer and then made himself a strong drink. His heart was thudding in his chest. All the way home from the supermarket he had been trying to remember what they had done with Charlie's clothes.

They had given his toys to the Goodwill Shop in Norton, they had transferred his bank account of a thousand dollars (college money-half of everything Charlie had gotten from relatives at birthdays and Christmas went into that account, over his howls of protest) to their own joint account. They had burned his bedding on Mamma Jean's advice-he himself had been unable to understand that, but didn't have the heart to protest; everything had fallen apart and he was supposed to argue over saving a mattress and box springs? But the clothes, that was a different matter. What had they done with Charlie's clothes?

The question gnawed at him all afternoon, making him fretful, and once he almost went to the phone to call Mary and ask her. But that would be the final straw, wouldn't it?

She wouldn't have to just guess about the state of his sanity after that.

Just before sunset he went up to the small half-attic, which was reached by crawling through a trapdoor in the ceiling of the master bedroom closet. He had to stand on a chair and shinny up in. He hadn't been in the attic for a long, long time, but the single bare 100-watt bulb still worked. It was coated with dust and cobwebs, but it still worked.

He opened a dusty box at random and discovered all his high school and college yearbooks, laid neatly away. Embossed on the cover of each high school yearbook were the words:

THE CENTURION
Bay High School . . .

On the cover of each college yearbook (they were heavier, more richly bound) were these words:

THE PRISM
Let Us Remember

He opened the high school yearbooks first, flipping through the signed end pages ("Uptown, downtown, all around the town/I'm the gal who wrecked your yearbook/Writing upside down-A.F.A., Connie"), then the photographs of long-ago teachers, frozen behind their desks and beside their blackboards, smiling vaguely, then of classmates he barely remembered with their credits (FHA 1,2; Class Council 2,3,4; Poe Society, 4) listed beneath, along with their nicknames and a little slogan. He knew the fates of some (Army, dead in a car crash, assistant bank manager), but most were gone, their futures hidden from him.

In his senior high yearbook he came across a young George Barton Dawes, looking dreamily toward the future from a retouched photograph that had been taken at Cressey Studios. He was amazed by how little that boy knew of the future and by how much that boy looked like the son this man had come to search out traces of. The boy in the picture had not yet even manufactured the sperm that would become half the boy. Below the picture:

BARTON G. DAWES
"Whizzer"
(Outing Club, 1,2,3,4 Poe Society, 3,4)
Bay High School
Bart, the Klass Klown, helped to lighten our load!

He put the yearbooks back in their box helter-skelter and went on poking. He found drapes that Mary had taken down five years ago. An old easy chair with a broken arm. A clock radio that didn't work. A wedding photograph album that he was scared to look through. Piles of magazines-ought to get *those out*, he told himself. *They're a fire hazard in the summer*. A washing machine motor that he had once brought home from the laundry and tinkered with to no avail. And Charlie's clothes.

They were in three cardboard cartons, each crisp with the smell of mothballs. Charlie's shirts and pants and sweaters, even Charlie's Hanes underwear. He took them out and looked at each item carefully, trying to imagine Charlie wearing these things,

moving in them, rearranging minor parts of the world in them. At last it was the smell of the mothballs that drove him out of the attic, shaking and grimacing, needing a drink. The smell of things that had lain quietly and uselessly over the years, things which had no purpose but to hurt. He thought about them for most of the evening, until the drink blotted out the ability to think.

January 7, 1974

The doorbell rang at quarter past ten and when he opened the front door, a man in a suit and a topcoat was standing there, sort of hipshot and slouched and friendly. He was neatly shaved and barbered, carrying a slim briefcase, and at first he thought the man was a salesman with a briefcase full of samples-Amway, or magazine subscriptions, or possibly even the larcenous Swipe-and he prepared to welcome the man in, to listen to his pitch carefully, to ask questions, and maybe even buy something. Except for Olivia, he was the first person who had come to the house since Mary left almost five weeks ago.

But the man wasn't a salesman. He was a lawyer. His name was Philip T. Fenner, and his client was the city council. These facts he announced with a shy grin and a hearty handshake.

"Come on in," he said, and sighed. He supposed that in a half-assed sort of way, this guy was a salesman. You might even say he was selling Swipe.

Fenner was talking away, a mile a minute.

"Beautiful house you have here. Just beautiful. Careful ownership always shows, that's what I say. I won't take up much of your time, Mr. Dawes, I know you're a busy man, but Jack Gordon thought I might as well swing out here since it was on my way and drop off this relocation form. I imagine you mailed for one, but the Christmas rush and all, things get lost. And I'd be glad to answer any questions you might have, of course."

"I have a question," he said, unsmiling.

The jolly exterior of his visitor slipped for a moment and he saw the real Fenner lurking behind it, as cold and mechanized as a Pulsar watch. "What would that be, Mr. Dawes?"

He smiled. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Back on with the smiling Fenner, cheerful runner or city council errands. "Gee, that'd be nice, if it's not too much trouble. A trifle nippy out there, only seventeen degrees. I think the winters have been getting colder, don't you?"

"They sure have." The water was still hot from his breakfast coffee. "Hope you don't mind instant. My wife's visiting her folks for a while, and I just sort of muddle along. "

Fenner laughed good-naturedly and he saw that Fenner knew exactly what the situation was between him and Mary, and probably what the situation was between him and any other given persons or institutions: Steve Ordner, Vinnie Mason, the corporation, God.

"Not at all, instant's fine. I always drink instant. Can't tell the difference. Okay to put

some papers on this table?"

"Go right ahead. Do you take cream?"

"No, just black. Black is fine." Fenner unbuttoned his topcoat but didn't take it off. He swept it under him as he sat down, as a woman will sweep her skirt so she doesn't wrinkle the back. In a man, the gesture was almost jarringly fastidious. He opened his briefcase and took out a stapled form that looked like an income tax return. He poured Fenner a cup of coffee and gave it to him.

"Thanks. Thanks very much. Join me?"

"I think I'll have a drink," he said.

"Uh-huh," Fenner said, and smiled charmingly. He sipped his coffee. "Good, very good. Hits the spot."

He made himself a tall drink and said, "Excuse me for just a minute, Mr. Fenner. I have to make a telephone call."

"Certainly. Of course." He sipped his coffee again and smacked his lips over it.

He went to the phone in the hall, leaving the door open. He dialed the Galloway house and Jean answered.

"It's Bart," he said, "Is Mary there, Jean?"

"She's sleeping." Jean's voice was frosty.

"Please wake her up. It's very important."

"I bet it is. I just bet. I told Lester the other night, I said: Lester, it's time we thought about an unlisted phone. And he agreed with me. We both think you've gone off your rocker, Barton Dawes, and that's the plain truth with no shellack on it."

"I'm sorry to hear that. But I really have to--"

The upstairs extension was picked up and Mary said, "Bart?"

"Yes. Mary, has a lawyer named Fenner been out to see you? Kind of slicktalking fellow that tries to act like Jimmy Stewart?"

"No," she said. *Shit, snake-eyes.* Then she added, "He called on the phone." *Jackpot!* Fenner was standing in the doorway now, holding his coffee and sipping it calmly. The half-shy, totally cheerful, aw-shucks expression was gone now. He looked rather pained.

"Mamma, get off the extension," Mary said, and Jean Galloway hung up with a bitter snort.

"Was he asking about me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He talked to you after the party?"

"Yes, but . . . I didn't tell him anything about that."

"You might have told him more than you know. He comes on like a sleepy tickhound, but he's the city council's ballcutter." He smiled at Fenner, who thinly smiled back.

"You've got an appointment with him?"

"Why . . . yes. " She sounded surprised. "But he only wants to talk about the house, Bart—"

"No, that's what he told you. He really wants to talk about me. I think these guys would like to drag me into a competency hearing."

"A . . . what? . . ." She sounded utterly befuddled.

"I haven't taken their money yet, ergo I must be crazy. Mary, do you remember what we talked about at Handy Andy's?"

"Bart, is that Mr. Fenner in the house?"

"Yes."

"The psychiatrist," she said dully. "I mentioned you were going to be seeing a . . . oh, Bart, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said softly, and meant it. "This is going to be all right, Mary. I swear. Maybe nothing else, but this is going to be all right."

He hung up and turned to Fenner. "Want me to call Stephan Ordner?" he asked. "Vinnie Mason? I won't bother with Ron Stone or Tom Granger, they'd recognize a cheap prick like you before you even had your briefcase unsnapped. But Vinnie wouldn't and Ordner would welcome you with open arms. He's on the prod for me. "

"You needn't," Fenner said. "You've misunderstood me, Mr. Dawes. And you've apparently misunderstood my clients. There is nothing personal in this. No one is out to get you. But there *has* been an awareness for some time that you dislike the 784 extension. You wrote a letter to the paper last August—"

"Last August," he marveled. "You people have a clipping service, don't you?"

"Of course."

He went into a harried crouch, rolling his eyeballs fearfully. "More clippings! More lawyers! Ron, go out and snow those reporters! We have enemies everywhere. Mavis, bring me my pills!" He straightened up. "Paranoia, anyone? Christ, I thought I was bad."

"We also have a public-relations staff," Fenner said stiffly. "We are not nic-kle-and-diming here, Mr. Dawes. We are talking about a ten-million-dollar project. "

He shook his head, disgusted. "They ought to hold a competency hearing on you road guys, not me."

Fenner said: "I'm going to lay all my cards on the table, Mr. Dawes."

"You know, it's been my experience that when anybody says that they're ready to stop screwing around with the little lies and they're about to tell a real whopper."

Fenner flushed, finally angry. "You wrote the newspaper. You dragged your heels on finding a new plant for the Blue Ribbon Laundry and finally got canned--"

"I didn't. I resigned at least a half an hour before they could pink me."

"-and you've ignored all our communications dealing with this house. The consensus

is that you may be planning some public display on the twentieth. Calling the papers and TV stations, getting them all out here. The heroic home owner dragged kicking and screaming from his hearth and home by the city's Gestapo agents. "

"That worries you, doesn't it?"

"Of course it worries us! Public opinion is volatile, it swings around like a weathervane-

"And your clients are elected officials."

Fenner looked at him expressionlessly.

"So what now?" he asked. "Are you going to make me an offer I can't refuse?"

Fenner sighed. "I can't understand what we're arguing about, Mr. Dawes. The city is offering you sixty thousand dollars to-

"Sixty-three five."

"Yes, very good. They are offering you that amount for the house and the lot. Some people are getting a lot less. And what do you get for that money? You get no hassles, no trouble, no heat. The money is practically tax free because you've already paid Uncle the taxes on the money you spent to buy it. All you owe is taxes on the markup. Or don't you think the valuation is fair?"

"Fair enough," he said, thinking about Charlie. "As far as dollars and cents go, it's fair. Probably more than I could get if I wanted to sell it, with the price of loans what they are."

"So what are we arguing about?"

"We're not," he said, and sipped his drink. Yes, he had gotten his salesman, all right. "Do you have a house, Mr. Fenner?"

"Yes I do," Fenner said promptly. "A very fine one in Greenwood. And if you are going to ask me what I would do or how I would feel if our positions were reversed, I'll be very frank. I would twist the city's tit for all I could get and then laugh all the way to the bank. "

"Yes, of course you would." He laughed and thought of Don and Ray Tarkington, who would have twisted both tits and rammed the courthouse flagpole up the city's ass for good measure. "Do you folks really think I've lost my marbles, then?"

Judiciously, Fenner said: "We don't know. Your resolution to the laundry relocation problem was hardly a normal one."

"Well, I'll tell you this. I have enough marbles left to know I could get myself a lawyer who doesn't like the eminent domain statute-one who still believes in that quaint old adage that a man's home is his castle. He could get a restraining order and we could tie you up for a month, maybe two. With luck and the right progression of judges, we could hold this thing off until next September."

Fenner looked pleased rather than disconcerted, as he had suspected Fenner would. Finally, Fenner was thinking. Here's the hook, Freddy, are you enjoying this? Yes, George, I have to admit I am.

"What do you want?" Fenner asked.

"How much are you prepared to offer?"

"We'll hike the valuation five thousand dollars. Not a penny more. And nobody will hear about the girl. "

Everything stopped. Stopped dead.

"What?" he whispered.

"The *girl*, Mr. Dawes. The one you were banging. You had her here December sixth and seventh."

A number of thoughts spiraled through his mind in a period of seconds, some of them extremely sensible, but most of them overlaid and made untrustworthy with a thin yellow patina of fear. But above both fear and sensible thoughts was a vast red rage that made him want to leap across the table and choke this tick-tuck man until clocksprings fell out of his ears. And he must not do that; above all, not that.

"Give me a number," he said.

"Number-?"

"Phone number. I'll call you this afternoon and tell you my decision."

"It would be ever so much better if we could wrap it up right now."

You'd like that, wouldn't you? Referee, let's extend this round thirty seconds. I've got this man on the ropes.

"No, I don't think so. Please get out of my house."

Fenner gave a smooth, expressionless shrug. "Here's my card. The number is on it. I expect to be in between two-thirty and four o'clock."

"I'll call."

Fenner left. He watched him through the window beside the front door as he walked down the path to his dark blue Buick, got in, and cruised away. Then he slammed his fist against the wall, hard.

He mixed himself another drink and sat down at the kitchen table to go over the situation. They knew about Olivia. They were willing to use that knowledge as a lever. As a lever to move him it wasn't very good. They could no doubt end his marriage with it, but his marriage was in serious trouble already. But they had spied on him.

The question was, how?

If there had been men watching him, they undoubtedly would have known about the world-famous crackle-crackle-boom-boom. If so, they would have used it on him. Why bother with something paltry like a little extramarital boogie-woogie when you can have the recalcitrant home owner slapped in jail for arson? So they had bugged him. When he thought how close he had come to drunkenly spilling the crime to Magliore over the phone, cold little dots of perspiration broke out on his skin. Thank God Magliore had shut

him up. Crackle-crackle-boom-boom was bad enough.

So he was living in a bugged house and the question remained: What to do about Fenner's offer and Fenner's clients' methods?

He put a TV dinner in the oven for his lunch and sat down with another drink to wait for it. They had spied on him, tried to bribe him. The more he thought about it, the angrier it made him.

He took the TV dinner out and ate it. He wandered around the house, looking at things. He began to have an idea.

At three o'clock he called Fenner and told him to send out the form. He would sign it if Fenner took care of the two items they had discussed. Fenner sounded very pleased, even relieved. He said he would be glad to take care of things, and would see he had a form tomorrow. Fenner said he was glad he had decided to be sensible.

"There are a couple of conditions," he said.

"Conditions," Fenner repeated, and sounded instantly wary.

"Don't get excited. It's nothing you can't handle."

"Let's hear them," Fenner said. "But I'm warning you, Dawes, you've squeezed us for about all you can."

"You get the form over to the house tomorrow," he said. "I'll bring it to your office on Wednesday. I want you to have a check for sixty-eight thousand five hundred dollars waiting for me. A *cashier's* check. I'll trade you the release form for the check. "

"Mr. Dawes, we can't do business that way--"

"Maybe you're not supposed to, but *you can*. The same way you're not supposed to tap my phone and God knows what else. No check, no form. I'll get the lawyer instead."

Fenner paused. He could almost hear Fenner thinking.

"All right. What else?"

"I don't want to be bothered anymore after Wednesday. On the twentieth, it's yours. Until then it's mine."

"Fine," Fenner said instantly, because of course that wasn't a condition at all. The law said the house was his until midnight on the nineteenth, incontrovertibly the city's property a minute later. If he signed the city's release form and took the city's money, he could holler his head off to every newspaper and TV station in town and not get a bit of sympathy.

"That's all," he said.

"Good," Fenner said, sounding extremely happy. "I'm glad we could finally get together on this in a rational way, Mr.-"

"Fuck you," he said, and hung up.

January 8, 1974

He wasn't there when the courier dropped the bulky brown envelope containing form 6983-426-73-74 (blue folder) through his letter slot. He had gone out into darkest Norton to talk to Sal Magliore. Magliore was not overjoyed to see him, but as he talked, Magliore grew more thoughtful.

Lunch was sent in-spaghetti and veal and a bottle of Gallo red. It was a wonderful meal. Magliore held up his hand to stop him when he got to the part about the five-thousand-dollar bribe and Fenner's knowledge of Olivia. He made a telephone call and spoke briefly to the man on the other end. Magliore gave the man on the other end the Crestallen Street address. "Use the van," he said and hung up. He twirled more spaghetti onto his fork and nodded across the table for the story to go on.

When he finished, Magliore said: "You're lucky they weren't tailing you. You'd be in the box right now."

He was full to bursting, unable to eat another mouthful. He had not had such a meal in five years. He complimented Magliore, and Magliore smiled.

"Some of my friends, they don't eat pasta anymore. They got an image to keep up. So they eat at steak houses or places that have French food or Swedish food or something like that. They got the ulcers to prove it. Why ulcers? Because you can't change what you are. " He was pouring spaghetti sauce out of the greasestained cardboard takeout bucket the spaghetti had come in. He began to mop it up with crusts of garlic bread, stopped, looked across the table with those strange, magnified eyes and said: "You're asking me to help you commit a mortal sin. "

He looked at Magliore blankly, unable to hide his surprise.

Magliore laughed crossly. "I know what you're thinkin'. A man in my business is the wrong guy to talk about sin. I already told you that I had one guy knocked off. More than one guy, too. But I never killed anyone that didn't deserve to be killed. And I look at it this way: a guy who dies before God planned him to die, it's like a rain-out at the ball park. The sins that guy committed, they don't count. God has got to let 'em in because they didn't have all the time to repent He meant them to have. So killing a guy is really sparing him the pain of hell. So in a way, I done more for those guys than the Pope himself could have done. I think God knows that. But this isn't any of my business. I like you a lot. You got balls. Doing what you did with those gas bombs, that took balls. This, though. This is something different. "

"I'm not asking you to do anything. It's my own free will."

Magliore rolled his eyes. "Jesus! Mary! Joseph the carpenter! Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Because you have what I need."

"I wish to God I didn't."

"Are you going to help me?"

"I don't know."

"I've got the money now. Or will have, shortly."

"It ain't a matter of money. It's a matter of principle. I never dealt with a fruitcake like you before. I'll have to think about it. I'll call you."

He decided it would be wrong to press further and left.

He was filling out the relocation form when Magliore's men came. They were driving a white Econoline van with RAY'S TV SALES AND SERVICE Written on the side, below a dancing TV with a big grin on its picture tube. There were two men, wearing green fatigues and carrying bulky service cases. The cases contained real TV repair tools and tubes, but they also contained sundry other equipment. They "washed" his house. It took an hour and a half. They found bugs in both phones, one in his bedroom, one in the dining room. None in the garage, which made him feel relieved.

"The bastards," he said, holding the shiny bugs in his hand. He dropped the bugs to the floor and ground them under his heel.

On the way out, one of the men said, not unadmiringly: "Mister, you really beat the shit out of that TV. How many times did you have to hit it?"

"Only once," he said.

When they had driven away into the cold late afternoon sunshine, he swept the bugs into a dustpan and dropped their shattered, twinkling remains into the kitchen wastebasket. Then he made himself a drink.

January 9, 1974

There were only a few people in the bank at 2:30 in the afternoon, and he went directly to one of the tables in the middle of the floor with the city's cashier's check. He tore a deposit ticket out of the back of his checkbook and made it out in the sum of \$34,250. He went to a teller's window and presented the ticket and the check.

The teller, a young girl with sin-black hair and a short purple dress, her legs clad in sheer nylon stockings that would have brought the Pope to present arms, looked from the ticket to the check and then back again, puzzled.

"Something wrong with the check?" he asked pleasantly. He had to admit he was enjoying this.

"Nooo, but . . . you want to deposit \$34,250 and you want \$34,250 in cash? Is that it?"

He nodded.

"Just a moment, sir, please."

He smiled and nodded, keeping a close eye on her legs as she went to the manager's desk, which was behind a slatted rail but not glassed in, as if to say this man was as human as you or I . . . or almost, anyway. The manager was a middle-aged man dressed in young clothes. His face was as narrow as the gate of heaven and when he looked at the

teller (telleress?) in the purple dress, he arched his eyebrows.

They discussed the check, the deposit slip, its implications for the bank and possibly for the entire Federal Deposit System. The girl bent over the desk, her skirt rode up in back, revealing a mauve-colored slip with lace on the hem. *Love o love o careless love*, he thought. Come home with me and we will diddle even unto the end of the age, or until they rip my house down, whichever comes first. The thought made him smile. He had a hard-on . . . well, a semi, anyway. He looked away from her and glanced around the bank. There was a guard, probably a retired cop, standing impassively between the safe and the front doors. An old lady laboriously signing her blue Social Security check. And a large poster on the left wall which showed a picture of the earth as photographed from outer space, a large blue-green gem set against a field of black. Over the planet, in large letters, was written:

GO AWAY

Underneath the planet, in slightly smaller letters:

WITH A FIRST BANK VACATION LOAN

The pretty teller came back. "I'll have to give this to you in five hundreds and hundreds," she said.

"That's fine."

She made out a receipt for his deposit and then went into the bank vault. When she came out, she had a small carrying case. She spoke to the guard and he came over with her. The guard looked at him suspiciously.

She counted out three stacks of ten thousand dollars, twenty flue-hundred-dollar bills in each stack. She banded each one and then slipped an adding machine notation between the band and the top bill of each stack. In each case the adding machine slip said:

\$10,000

She counted out foray-two hundreds, riffling the bills quickly with the pad of her right index finger. On top of these she laid five ten-dollar bills. She banded the bundle and slid in another adding machine slip which said:

\$4,250

The four bundles were lined up side by side, and the three of them eyed them suspiciously for a moment, enough money to buy a house, or five Cadillacs, or a Piper Cub airplane, or almost a hundred thousand cartons of cigarettes.

Then she said, a little dubiously: "I can give you a zipper bag-"

"No, this is fine." He scooped the bundles up and dropped them into his overcoat pockets. The guard watched this cavalier treatment of his *raison d'etre* with impassive contempt; the pretty teller seemed fascinated (her salary for five years was disappearing casually into the pockets of this man's off-the-rack overcoat and it hardly made a bulge); and the manager was looking at him with barely concealed dislike, because a bank was a place where money was supposed to be like God, unseen and reverentially regarded.

"Good 'nough," he said, stuffing his checkbook down on top of the ten-thou-

sand-dollar bundles. "Take it easy."

He left and they all looked after him. Then the old woman shuffled up to the pretty teller and presented her Social Security check, properly signed, for payment. The pretty teller gave her two hundred and thirty-five dollars and sixty-three cents.

When he got home he put the money in a dusty beer stein on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. Mary had given the stein to him as a gag present on his birthday, five years ago. He had never particularly cared for it, preferring to drink his beer directly from the bottle. Written on the side of the stein was an emblem showing an Olympic torch and the words:

U.S. DRINKING TEAM

He put the stein back, now filled with a headier brew, and went upstairs to Charlie's room, where his desk was. He rummaged through the bottom drawer and found a small manila envelope. He sat down at the desk, added up the new checkbook balance and saw that it came out to \$35,053.49. He addressed the manila envelope to Mary, in care of her folks. He slipped the checkbook inside, sealed the envelope, and rummaged in his desk again. He found a half-full book of stamps, and put five eight-centers on the envelope. He regarded it for a moment, and then, below the address, he wrote:

FIRST CLASS MAIL

He left the envelope standing on his desk and went into the kitchen to make himself a drink.

January 10, 1974

It was late in the evening, snowing, and Magliore hadn't called. He was sitting in the living room with a drink, listening to the stereo because the TV was still *hors de combat*. He had gone out earlier with two ten-dollar bills from the beer stein and had bought four rock and roll albums. One of them was called *Let It Bleed* by the Rolling Stones. They had been playing it at the party, and he liked it better than the others he had bought, which seemed sort of sappy. One of them, an album by a group called Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, was so sappy that he had broken it over his knee. But *Let It Bleed* was filled with loud, leering, thumping music. It banged and jangled. He liked it a great deal. It reminded him of "Let's Make a Deal," which was MC'ed by Monte Hall. Now Mick Jagger was singing:

*Well we all need someone to cream on,
And if you want to, you can cream on me.*

He had been thinking about the bank poster, showing the whole earth, various and new, with the legend that invited the viewer to Go AWAY. It made him think about the trip he had taken on New Year's Eve. He had gone away, all right. Far away.

But hadn't he enjoyed it?

The thought brought him up shop.

He had been dragging around for the last two months like a dog whose balls had been caught in a swinging door. But hadn't there been compensations along the way?

He had done things he never would have done otherwise. The trips on the turnpike, as mindless and free as migration. The girl and the sex, the touch of her breasts so unlike Mary's. Talking with a man who was a crook. Being accepted finally by that man as a serious person. The illegal exhilaration of throwing the gasoline bombs and the dreamy terror, like drowning, when it seemed the car would not lurch up over the embankment and carry him away. Deep emotions had been excavated from his dry, middle-echelon executive's soul like the relics of a dark religion from an archaeological dig. He knew what it was to be *alive*.

Of course there were bad things. The way he had lost control in Handy Andy's, shouting at Mary. The gnawing loneliness of those first two weeks alone, alone for the first time in twenty years with only the dreadful, mortal beat of his own heart for company. Being punched by Vinnie-Vinnie Mason of all people!-in the department store. The awful fear hangover the morning after he had firebombed the construction. That lingered most of all.

But even those things, as bad as they had been, had been new and somehow exciting, like the thought that he might be insane or going insane. The tracks through the interior landscape he had been strolling (or crawling?) through these last two months were the only tracks. He had explored himself and if what he had been finding was often banal, it was also sometimes dreadful and beautiful.

His thoughts reverted to Olivia as he had last seen her, standing on the turnpike ramp with her sign, LAS VEGAS . . . OR BUST! held up defiantly into the cold indifference of things. He thought of the bank poster: GO AWAY. Why not? There was nothing to hold him here but dirty obsession. No wife and only the ghost of a child, no job and a house that would be an unhouse in a week and a half. He had cash money and a car he owned free and clear. Why not just get in it and go?

A kind of wild excitement seized him. In his mind's eye he saw himself shutting off the lights, getting into the LTD, and driving to Las Vegas with the money in his pocket. Finding Olivia. Saying to her: *Let's GO AWAY*. Driving to California, selling the car, booking passage to the South Seas. From there to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Saigon, to Bombay, to Athens, Madrid, Paris, London, New York. Then to-

Here?

The world was round, that was the deadly truth of it. Like Olivia, going to Nevada, resolving to shake the shit loose. Gets stoned and raped the first time around the new track because the new track is just like the old track, in fact it is the old track, around and around until you've worn it down too deep to climb out and then it's time to close the garage door and turn on the ignition and just wait . . . wait . . .

The evening drew on and his thoughts went around and around, like a cat trying to catch and swallow its own tail. At last he fell asleep on the couch and dreamed of Charlie.

January 11, 1974

Magliore called him at quarter past one in the afternoon.

"Okay," he said. "We'll do business, you and I. It's going to cost you nine thousand dollars. I don't suppose that changes your mind. "

"In cash?"

"What do you mean in cash? Do you think I'm gonna take your personal check?"

"Okay. Sorry."

"You be at the Revel Lanes Bowladrome tomorrow night at ten o'clock. You know where that is?"

"Yes, out on Route 7. Just past the Skyview Shopping Mall."

"That's right. There'll be two guys on lane sixteen wearing green shirts with Marlin Avenue Firestone on the back in gold thread. You join them. One of them will explain everything you need to know. That'll be while you're bowling. You bowl two or three strings, then you go outside and drive down the road to the Town Line Tavern. You know where that is?"

"No."

"Just go west on 7. It's about two miles from the bowling alley on the same side. Park in back. My friends will park beside you. They'll be driving a Dodge Custom Cab pickup. Blue. They'll transfer a crate from their truck to your wagon. You give them an envelope. I must be crazy, you know that? Out of my gourd. I'll probably go up for this. Then I'll have a nice long time to wonder why the fuck I did it."

"I'd like to talk to you next week. Personally."

" No. Absolutely not. I ain't your father confessor. I never want to see you again. Not even to talk to you. To tell you the truth, Dawes, I don't even want to read about you in the paper. "

"It's a simple investment matter."

Magliore paused.

"No," he said finally.

"This is something no one can ever touch you on," he told Magliore. "I want to set up a . . . a trust fund for someone."

"Your wife?"

"No. "

"You stop by Tuesday," Magliore said at last. "Maybe I'll see you. Or maybe I'll have better sense."

He hung up.

Back in the living room, he thought of Olivia and of living-the two seemed constantly bound up together. He thought of GOING AWAY. He thought of Charlie, and he could

hardly remember Charlie's face anymore, except in snapshot fashion. How could this be possibly happening, then?

With sudden resolution he got up, went to the phone, and turned to TRAVEL in the yellow pages. He dialed a number. But when a friendly female voice on the other end said, "Arnold Travel Agency, how may we help you?" he hung up and stepped quickly away from the phone, rubbing his hands together.

January 12, 1974

The Revel Lanes Bowladrome was a long, fluorescent-lit building that resounded with piped-in Muzak, a jukebox, shouts and conversation, the stuttering bells of pinball machines, the rattle of the coin-op bumper-pool game, and above all else, the lumbering concatenation of falling pins and the booming, droning roll of large black bowling balls.

He went to the counter, got a pair of red-and-white bowling shoes (which the clerk sprayed ceremonially with an aerosol foot disinfectant before allowing them to leave his care), and walked down to Lane 16. The two men were there. He saw that the one standing up to roll was the mechanic who had been replacing the muffler on the day of his first trip to Magliore's Used Car Sales. The fellow sitting at the scoring table was one of the fellows who had come to his house in the TV van. He was drinking a beer from a waxed-paper cup. They both looked at him as he approached.

"I'm Bart," he said.

"I'm Ray," the man at the table said. "And that guy"-the mechanic was rolling now-"is Alan."

The bowling ball left Alan's hand and thundered down the alley. Pins exploded everywhere and then Alan made a disgusted noise. He had left the seven-ten split. He tried to hang his second ball over the right gutter and get them both. The ball dropped into the gutter and he made another disgusted noise as the pin-setter knocked them back.

"Go for one," Ray admonished. "Always go for one. Who do you think you are, Billy Welu?"

"I didn't have english on the ball. A little more and kazam. Hi, Bart.

"Hello. "

They shook hands all around.

"Good to meet you," Alan said. Then, to Ray: "Let's start a new string and let Bart in on it. You got my ass whipped in this one anyhow."

"Sure."

"Go ahead and go first, Bart," Alan said.

He hadn't bowled in maybe five years. He selected a twelve-pound ball that felt right to his fingers and promptly rolled it down the left-hand gutter. He watched it go, feeling like a horse's ass. He was more careful with the next ball but it hooked and he only got three pins. Ray rolled a strike. Alan hit nine and then covered the four pin.

At the end of the five frames the score was Ray 89, Alan 76, Bart 40. But he was enjoying the feeling of sweat on his back and the unaccustomed exertion of certain muscles that were rarely given the chance to show off.

He had gotten into the game enough that for a moment he didn't know what Ray was talking about when he said: "It's called maglinite."

He looked over, frowning a little at the unfamiliar word, and then understood. Alan was out front, holding his ball and looking seriously down at the four-six, all concentration.

"Okay," he said.

"It comes in sticks about four inches long. There are forty sticks. Each one has about sixty times the explosive force of a stick of dynamite."

"Oh," he said, and suddenly felt sick to his stomach. Alan rolled and jumped in the air when he got both pins for his spare.

He rolled, got seven pins, and sat down again. Ray struck out. Alan went to the ball caddy and held the ball under his chin, frowning down the polished lane at the pins. He gave courtesy to the bowler on his right, and then made his four-step approach.

"There's four hundred feet of fuse. It takes an electrical charge to set the stuff off. You can turn a blowtorch on it and it will just melt. *It-oh, good one! Good one, Al!*"

Al had made a Brooklyn hit and knocked them all back.

He got up, threw two gutterballs, and sat down again. Ray spared.

As Alan approached the line, Ray went on: "It takes electricity, a storage battery. You got that?"

"Yes," he said. He looked down at his score. 47. Seven more than his age.

"You can cut lengths of fuse and splice them together and get simultaneous explosion, can you dig it?"

"Yes."

Alan rolled another Brooklyn strike.

When he came back, grinning, Ray said: "You can't trust those Brooklyn hits, boy. Get it over in the right pocket."

"Up your ass, I'm only eight pins down."

He rolled, got six pins, sat down, and Ray struck out again. Ray had 116 at the end of seven.

When he sat down again Ray asked: "Do you have any questions?"

"No. Can we leave at the end of this string?"

"Sure. But you wouldn't be so bad if you worked some of the rust off. You keep twisting your hand when you deliver. That's your problem."

Alan hit the Brooklyn pocket exactly as he had on his two previous strikes, but this

time left the seven-ten split and came back scowling. He thought, *this is where I came in.*

"I told you not to trust that whore's pocket," Ray said, grinning.

"Screw," Alan growled. He went for the spare and dropped the ball into the gutter again.

"Some guys," Ray said, laughing. "Honest to God, some guys never learn, you know that? They never do."

The Town Line tavern had a huge red neon sign that knew nothing of the energy crisis. It flicked off and on with mindless, eternal confidence. Underneath the red neon was a white marquee that said:

TONITE
THE FABULOUS OYSTERS
DIRECT FROM BOSTON

There was a plowed parking lot to the right of the tavern, filled with the cars of Saturday night patrons. When he drove in he saw that the parking lot went around to the back in an L. There were several parking slots left back there. He drove in next to an empty one, shut off the car, and got out.

The night was pitilessly cold, the kind of night that doesn't feel that cold until you realize that your ears went as numb as pump handles in the first fifteen seconds you were out. Overhead a million stars glittered in magnified brilliance. Through the tavern's back wall he could hear the Fabulous Oysters playing "After Midnight." J.J. Care wrote that song, he thought, and wondered where he had picked up that useless piece of information. It was amazing the way the human brain filled up with road litter. He could remember who wrote "After Midnight," but he couldn't remember his dead son's face. That seemed very cruel.

The Custom Cab pickup rolled up next to his station wagon; Ray and Alan got out. They were all business now, both dressed in heavy gloves and Army surplus parkas.

"You got some money for us," Ray said.

He took the envelope out of his coat and handed it over. Ray opened it and riffled the bills inside, estimating rather than counting.

"Okay. Open up your wagon."

"He opened the back (which, in the Ford brochures, was called the Magic Doorgate) and the two of them slid a heavy wooden crate out of the pickup and carried it to his wagon.

"Fuse is in the bottom," Ray said, breathing white jets out of his nose. "Remember, you need juice. Otherwise you might just as well use the stuff for birthday candles."

"I'll remember."

"You ought to bowl more. You got a powerful swing."

They got back into their truck and drove away. A few moments later he also drove

away, leaving the Fabulous Oysters to their own devices. His ears were cold, and they prickled when the heater warmed them up.

When he got home, he carried the crate into the house and pried it open with a screwdriver. The stuff looked exactly as Ray had said it would, like waxy gray candles. Beneath the sticks and a layer of newspaper were two fat white loops of fuse. The loops of fuse had been secured with white plastic ties that looked identical to the ones with which he secured his Hefty garbage bags.

He put the crate in the living room closet and tried to forget it, but it seemed to give off evil emanations that spread out from the closet to cover the whole house, as though something evil had happened in there years ago, something that had slowly and surely tainted everything.

January 13, 1974

He drove down to the Landing Strip and crawled up and down the streets, looking for Drake's place of business. He saw crowded tenements standing shoulder to shoulder, so exhausted that it seemed that they would collapse if the buildings flanking them were taken away. A forest of TV antennas rose from the top of each one, standing against the sky like frightened hair. Bars, closed until noon. A derelict car in the middle of a side street, tires gone, headlights gone, chrome gone, making it look like a bleached cow skeleton in the middle of Death Valley. Glass twinkled in the gutters. All the pawnshops and liquor stores had accordion grilles across their plate glass windows. He thought: That's what we learned from the race riots eight years ago. How to prevent looting in an emergency. And halfway down Venner Street he saw a small storefront with a sign in Old English letters. The sign said:

DROP DOWN MAMMA COFFEEHOUSE

He parked, locked the car, and went inside. There were only two customers, a young black kid in an oversize pea coat who seemed to be dozing, and an old white boozer who was sipping coffee from a thick white porcelain mug. His hands trembled helplessly each time the mug approached his mouth. The boozer's skin was yellow and when he looked-up his eyes were haunted with light, as if the whole man were trapped inside this stinking prison, too deep to get out.

Drake was sitting behind the counter at the rear, next to a two-burner hotplate. One Silex held hot water, the other black coffee. There was a cigar box on the counter with some change in it. There were two signs, crayoned on construction paper. One said:

MENU
Coffee 15c
Tea 15c
All soda 25c
Balogna 30c
PB&125c
Hot Dog 35c

The other sign said:

PLEASE WAIT TO BE SERVED!

All Drop In counter help are VOLUNTEERS and when you serve yourself you make them feel useless and stupid. Please wait and remember GOD LOVES YOU!

Drake looked up from his magazine, a tattered copy of *The National Lampoon*. For a moment his eyes went that peculiar hazy shade of a man snapping his mental fingers for the right name, and then he said: "Mr. Dawes, how are you?"

"Good. Can I get a cup of coffee?"

"Sure can." He took one of the thick mugs off the second layer of the pyramid behind him and poured. "Milk?"

"Just black." He gave Drake a quarter and Drake gave him a dime out of the cigar box. "I wanted to thank you for the other night, and I wanted to make a contribution. "

"Nothing to thank me for."

"Yes there is. That party was what they call a bad scene. "

"Chemicals can do that. Not always, but sometimes. Some boys brought in a friend of theirs last summer who had dropped acid in the city park. The kid went into a screaming fit because he thought the pigeons were coming after him to eat him. Sounds like a *Reader's Digest* horror story, doesn't it?"

"The girl who gave me the mescaline said she once plunged a man's hand out of the drain. She didn't know afterwards if it really happened or not."

"Who was she?"

"I really don't know," he said truthfully. "Anyway, here." He put a roll of bills on the counter next to the cigar box. The roll was secured with a rubber band.

Drake frowned at it without touching it.

"Actually it's for this place," he said. He was sure Drake knew that, but he needed to plug Drake's silence.

Drake unfastened the rubber band, holding the bills with his left, manipulating with that oddly scarred right. He put the rubber band aside and counted slowly.

"This is five thousand dollars," he said.

"Yes. "

"Would you be offended if I asked you where-"

"I got it? No. I wouldn't be offended. From the sale of my house to this city. They are going to put a road through there."

"Your wife agrees?"

"My wife has no say in the matter. We are separated. Soon to be divorced. She has her half of the sale to do with as she sees fit."

"I see."

Behind them, the old boozier began to hum. It was not a tune; just humming.

Drake poked moodily at the bills with his right forefinger. The comers of the bills were curled up from being rolled. "I can't take this," he said finally.

"Why not?"

Drake said: "Don't you remember what we talked about?"

He did. "I've no plans that way."

"I think you do. A man with his feet planted in this world does not give money away on a whim."

"This is not a whim," he said firmly.

Drake looked at him sharply. "What would you call it? A chance acquaintance?"

"Hell, I've given money away to people I've never seen. Cancer researchers. A Save-the-Child Foundation. A muscular dystrophy hospital in Boston. I've never been in Boston."

"Sums this large?"

"No."

"And cash money, Mr. Dawes. A man who still has a use for money never wants to see it. He cashes checks, signs papers. Even playing nickle-ante poker he uses chips. It makes it symbolic. And in our society a man with no use for money hasn't much use for living, either."

"That's a pretty goddamned materialistic attitude for-"

"A priest? But I'm not that anymore. Not since this happened." He held up the scarred, wounded hand. "Shall I tell you how I get the money to keep this place on its feet? We came too late for the window-dressing charities like the United Fund or the City Appeal Fund. The people who work here are all retired, old people who don't understand the kids who come in here, but want to be something besides just a face leaning out of a third-story window watching the street. I've got some kids on probation that scout up bands to play for free on Friday and Saturday night, bands that are just starting up and need the exposure. We pass the hat. But mostly the grease comes from rich people, the upper crust. I do tours. I speak at ladies' teas. I tell them about the kids on bummers and the Sterno freaks that sleep under the viaducts and make newspaper fires to keep from freezing in the winter. I tell them about the fifteen-year-old girl who'd been on the road since 1971 and came in here with big white lice crawling all over her head and her pubic hair. I tell them about all the VD in Norton. I tell them about the fishermen, guys that hang out in the bus terminals looking for boys on the run, offering them jobs as male whores. I tell them about how these young boys end up blowing some guy in a theater men's room for ten dollars, fifteen if he promises to swallow the come. Fifty percent for him and fifty percent for his pimp. And these women, their eyes go all shocked and then sort of melty and tender, and probably their thighs get all wet and sloppy, but they pony up and that's the important thing. Sometimes you can latch onto one and get more than a

ten-buck contribution. She takes you to her house in Crescent for dinner, introduces you to the family, and gets you to say grace after the maid brings the first course. And you say it, no matter how bad the words taste in your mouth and you rumple the kid's hair-there's always one, Dawes, just the one, not like the nasty rabbits down in this part of town that breed a whole tenementful of them-and you say what a fine young man you've got here, or what a pretty girl, and if you're very lucky the lady will have invited some of her bridge buddies or country club buddies to see this sideshow-freak priest, who's probably a radical and running guns to the Panthers or the Algerian Freedom League, and you do the old Father Brown bit, add a trace of the auld Blarney, and smile until your face hurts. All this is known as shaking the money tree, and it's all done in the most elegant of surroundings, but going home it feels just like you were down on your knees and eating some AC/DC businessman's cock in one of the stalls at Cinema 41. But what the hell, that's my game, part of my 'penance' if you'll pardon the word, but my penance doesn't include necrophilia. And that, Mr. Dawes, is what I feel you are offering me. And that's why I have to say no."

"Penance for what?"

"That," said Drake with a twisted smile. "is between me and God."

"Then why pick this method of finance, if it's so personally repugnant to you? Why don't you just-"

"I do it this way because it's the only way. I'm locked in."

With a sudden, horrible sinking of despair, he realized that Drake had just explained why he had come here, why he had done everything.

"Are you all right, Mr. Dawes? You look-"

"I'm fine. I want to wish you the best of luck. Even if you're not getting anywhere. "

"I have no illusions," Drake said, and smiled. "You ought to reconsider . . . anything drastic. There are alternatives."

"Are there?" He smiled back. "Close this place now. Walk out with me and we'll go into business together. I am making a serious proposal."

"You're making sport of me."

"No," he said. "Maybe somebody is making sport of both of us." He turned away, rolling the bills into a short, tight cylinder again. The kid was still sleeping. The old man had put his cup down half empty on the table and was looking at it vacuously. He was still humming. On his way by, he stuffed the roll of bills into the old man's cup, splashing muddy coffee onto the table. He left quickly and unlocked his car at the curb, expecting Drake to follow him out and remonstrate, perhaps save him. But Drake did not, perhaps expecting him to come back in and save himself.

Instead, he got into his car and drove away.

January 14, 1974

He went downtown to the Sears store and bought an automobile battery and a pair of

jumper cables. Written on the side of the battery were these words, printed in raised plastic:

DIE-HARD

He went home and put them in the front closet with the wooden crate. He thought of what would happen if the police came here with a search warrant. Guns in the garage, explosives in the living room, a large amount of cash in the kitchen. B. G. Dawes, desperate revolutionary. Secret Agent X-9, in the pay of a foreign cartel too hideous to be mentioned. He had a subscription to *Reader's Digest*, which was filled with such spy stories, along with an endless series of crusades, anti-smoking, anti-pornography, anti-crime. It was always more frightening when the purported spy was a suburban WASP, one of us. KGB agents in Willmette or Des Moines, passing microdots in the drugstore lending library, plotting violent overthrow of the republic at drive-in movies, eating Big Macs with one tooth hollowed out so as to contain prussic acid.

Yes, a search warrant and they would crucify him. But he was not really afraid anymore. Things seemed to have progressed beyond that point.

January 15, 1974

"Tell me what you want," Magliore said wearily.

It was sleeting outside; the afternoon was gray and sad, a day when any city bus lurching out of the gray, membranous weather, spewing up slush in all directions with its huge tires, would seem like a figment of a manic-depressive's fantasies, when the very act of living seemed slightly psycho.

"My house? My car? My wife? Anything, Dawes. Just leave me alone in my declining years."

"Look," he said, embarrassed, "I know I'm being a pest."

"He knows he's being a pest," Magliore told the walls. He raised his hands and then let them fall back to his meaty thighs. "Then why in the name of Christ don't you stop?"

"This is the last thing."

Magliore rolled his eyes. "This ought to be beautiful," he told the walls. "What is it?"

He pulled out some bills and said, "There's eighteen thousand dollars here. Three thousand would be for you. A finder's fee."

"Who do you want found?"

"A girl in Las Vegas."

"The fifteen's for her?"

"Yes. I'd like you to take it and invest it in whatever operations you run that are good to invest in. And pay her dividends. "

"Legitimate operations?"

"Whatever will pay the best dividends. I trust your judgment."

"He trusts my judgment," Magliore informed the walls. "Vegas is a big town, Mr. Dawes. A transient town."

"Don't you have connections there?"

"As a matter of fact I do. But if we're talking about some half-baked hippie girl who may have already cut out for San Francisco or Denver--"

"She goes by the name of Olivia Brenner. And I think she's still in Las Vegas. She was last working in a fast-food restaurant--"

"Of which there are at least two million in Vegas," Magliore said. "Jesus! Mary! Joseph the carpenter!"

"She has an apartment with another girl, or at least she did when I talked to her the last time. I don't know where. She's about five-eight, darkish hair, green eyes. Good figure. Twenty-one years old. Or so she says."

"And suppose I can't locate this marvelous piece of ass?"

"Invest the money and keep the dividends yourself. Call it nuisance pay."

"How do you know I won't do that anyway?"

He stood up, leaving the bills on Magliore's desk. "I guess I don't. But you have an honest face."

"Listen," Magliore said. "I don't mean to bite your ass. You're a man who's already getting his ass bitten. But I don't like this. It's like you're making me executor to your fucking last will and testament."

"Say no if you have to."

"No, no, no, you don't get it. If she's still in Vegas and going under this Olivia Brenner name I think I can find her and three grand is more than fair. It doesn't hurt me one way or the other. But you spook me, Dawes. You're really locked on course. "

"Yes. "

Magliore frowned down at the pictures of himself, his wife, and his children under the glass top of his desk.

"All right," Magliore said. "This one last time, all right. But no more, Dawes. Absolutely not. If I ever see you again or hear you on the phone, you can forget it. I mean that. I got enough problems of my own without diddling around in yours. "

"I agree to that condition."

He stuck out his hand, not sure that Magliore would shake it, but Magliore did.

"You make no sense to me," Magliore said. "Why should I like a guy who makes no sense to me?"

"It's a senseless world," he said. "If you doubt it, just think about Mr. Piazzini's dog."

"I think about her a lot," Magliore said.

January 16, 1974

He took the manila envelope containing the checkbook down to the post office box on the corner and mailed it. That evening he went to see a movie called *The Exorcist* because Max von Sydow was in it and he had always admired Max von Sydow a great deal. In one scene of the movie a little girl puked in a Catholic priest's face. Some people in the back row cheered.

January 17, 1974

Mary called on the phone. She sounded absurdly relieved, gay, and that made everything much easier.

"You sold the house," she said.

"That's right. "

"But you're still there."

"Only until Saturday. I've rented a big farmhouse in the country. I'm going to try and get my act back together."

"Oh, Bart. That's so wonderful. I'm so glad." He realized why it was being so easy. She was being phony. She wasn't glad or not glad. She had given up. " About the checkbook . . . "

"Yes."

"You split the money right down the middle, didn't you?"

"Yes I did. If you want to check, you can call Mr. Fenner. "

"No. Oh, I didn't mean *that*." And he could almost see her making pushingaway gestures with her hands. "What I meant was . . . you separating the money like that . . . does it mean . . . "

She trailed off artfully and he thought: *Ow, you bitch, you got me. Bull's eye.*

"Yes, I guess it does," he said. "Divorce."

"Have you thought about it?" she asked earnestly, phonily. "Have you *really*-"

"I've thought about it a lot."

"So have I. It seems like the only thing left to do. But I don't hold anything against you, Bart. I'm not mad at you."

My God, she's been reading all those paperback novels. Next she'll tell me she's going back to school. He was surprised at his bitterness. He thought he had gotten past that part.

"What will you do?"

"I'm going back to school," she said, and now there was no phoniness in her voice, now it was excited, shining. "I dug out my old transcript, it was still up in Mamma's attic with all my old clothes, and do you know I only need twenty-four credits to graduate? Bart, that's hardly more than a year!"

He saw Mary crawling through her mother's attic and the image blended with one of himself sitting bewildered in a pile of Charlie's clothes. He shut it out.

"Bart? Are you still there?"

"Yes. I'm glad being single again is going to fulfill you so nicely."

"Bart," she said reproachfully.

But there was no need to snap at her now, to tease her or make her feel bad.

Things had gone beyond that. Mr. Piazzis's dog, having bitten, moves on. That struck him funny and he giggled.

"Bart, are you crying?" She sounded tender. Phony, but tender.

"No," he said bravely.

"Bart, is there anything I can do? If there is, I want to. "

"No. I think I'm going to be fine. And I'm glad you're going back to school. Listen, this divorce—who gets it? You or me?"

"I think it would look better if I did," she said timidly.

"Okay. Fine."

There was a pause between them and suddenly she blurted into it, as if the words had escaped without her knowledge or approval: "Have you slept with anyone since I left?"

He thought the question over, and ways of answering: the truth, a lie, an evasion that might keep her awake tonight.

"No," he said carefully, and added: "Have you?"

"Of course not, " she said, managing to sound shocked and pleased at the same time. "I wouldn't."

"You will eventually."

"Bart, let's not talk about sex."

"All right, " he said placidly enough, although it was she who had brought the subject up. He kept searching for something nice to say to her, something that she would remember. He couldn't think of a thing, and furthermore didn't know why he would want her to remember him at all, at least at this stage of things. They had had good years before. He was sure they must have been good because he couldn't remember much of what had happened in them, except maybe the crazy TV bet.

He heard himself say: "Do you remember when we took Charlie to nursery school the first time?"

"Yes. He cried and you wanted to take him back with us. You didn't want to let him go, Bart. "

"And you did."

She was saying something disclaiming in a slightly wounded tone, but he was remembering the scene. The lady who kept the nursery school was Mrs. Ricker. She had

a certificate from the state, and she gave all the children a nice hot lunch before sending them home at one o'clock. School was kept downstairs in a madeover basement and as they led Charlie down between them, he felt like a traitor; like a farmer petting a cow and saying Soo, Bess on the way to the slaughterhouse. He had been a beautiful boy, his Charlie. Blond hair that had darkened later, blue, watchful eyes, hands that had been clever even as a toddler. And he had stood between them at the bottom of the stairs, stock-still, watching the other children who were whooping and running and coloring and cutting colored paper with bluntnosed scissors, so *many* of them, and Charlie had never looked so vulnerable as he did in that instant, just watching the other children. There was no joy or fear in his eyes, only the watchfulness, a kind of *outsiderness*, and he had never felt so much his son's father as then, never so close to the actual run of his thoughts. And Mrs. Ricker came over, smiling like a barracuda and she said: *We'll have such fun, Chuck*, making him want to cry out: *That's not his name!* And when she put out her hand Charlie did not take it but only watched it so she stole his hand and began to pull him a little toward the others, and he went willingly two steps and then stopped, looked back at them, and Mrs. Young said very quietly: *Go right along, he'll be fine.* And Mary finally had to poke him and say *Come ON, Bart* because he was frozen looking at his son, his son's eyes saying, *Are you going to let them do this to me, George?* and his own eyes saying back, *Yes, I guess I am, Freddy* and he and Mary started up the stairs, showing Charlie their backs, the most dreadful thing a little child can see, and Charlie began to wail. But Mary's footsteps never faltered because a woman's love is strange and cruel and nearly always clear-sighted, love that sees is always horrible love, and she knew walking away was right and so she walked, dismissing the cries as only another part of the boy's development, like smiles from gas or scraped knees. And he had felt a pain in his chest so sharp, so physical, that he had wondered if he was having a heart attack, and then the pain had just passed, leaving him shaken and unable to interpret it, but now he thought that the pain had been plain old prosaic good-bye. Parents' backs aren't the most dreadful thing. The most dreadful thing of all is the speed with which children dismiss those same backs and turn to their own affairs-to the game, the puzzle, the new friend, and eventually to death. Those were the awful things he had come to know now. Charlie had begun dying long before he got sick, and there was no putting a stop to it.

"Bart?" she was saying. "Are you still there, Bart?"

"I'm here."

"What good are you doing yourself thinking about Charlie all the time? It's eating you up. You're his prisoner."

"But you're free," he said. "Yes."

"Shall I see the lawyer next week?"

"Okay. Fine."

"It doesn't have to be nasty, does it, Bart?"

"No. It will be very civilized."

"You won't change your mind and contest it?"

"No."

"I'll . . . I'll be talking to you, then."

"You knew it was time to leave him and so you did. I wish to God I could be that instinctive."

"What?"

"Nothing. Good-bye, Mary. I love you." He realized he had said it after he hung up. He had said it automatically, with no feeling-verbal punctuation. But it wasn't such a bad ending. Not at all.

January 18, 1974

The secretary's voice said: "Who shall I say is calling?"

"Bart Dawes."

"Will you hold for a moment?"

"Sure."

She put him in limbo and he held the blank receiver to his ear, tapping his foot and looking out the window at the ghost town of Crestallen Street West. It was a bright day but very cold, temperature about 10 above with a chill factor making it 10 below. The wind blew skirts of snow across the street to where the Hobarts' house stood broodingly silent, just a shell waiting for the wrecking ball. They had even taken their shutters.

There was a click and Steve Ordner's voice said: "Bart, how are you?"

"Fine. "

"What can I do for you?"

"I called about the laundry," he said. "I wondered what the corporation had decided to do about relocation."

Ordner sighed and then said with good-humored reserve: "A little late for that, isn't it?"

"I didn't call to be beaten with it, Steve. "

"Why not? You've surely beaten everyone else with it. Well, never mind. The board has decided to get out of the industrial laundry business, Bart. The Laundromats will stay; they're all doing well. We're going to change the chain name, though. To Handi-Wash. How does that sound?"

"Terrible," he said remotely. "Why don't you sack Vinnie Mason?"

"Vinnie?" Ordner sounded surprised. "Vinnie's doing a great job for us. Turning into quite the mogul. I must say I didn't expect such bitterness-'

"Come on, Steve. That job's got no more future than a tenement airshaft. Give him something worthwhile or let him out. "

"I handy think that's your business, Bart. "

"You've got a dead chicken tied around his neck and he doesn't know it yet because it

hasn't started to rot. He still thinks it's dinner."

"I understand he punched you up a little before Christmas. "

"I told him the truth and he didn't like it. "

"Truth's a slippery word, Bart. I would think you'd understand that better than anyone, after all the lies you told me.

"That still bugs you, doesn't it?"

"When you discover that a man you thought was a good man is full of shit, it does tend to bug one, yes."

"Bug one," he repeated. "Do you know something, Steve? You're the only person I've ever known in my life that would say that. Bug one. It sounds like something that comes in a fucking aerosol can."

"Was there anything else, Bart?"

"No, not really. I wish you'd stop beating Vinnie, that's all. He's a good man. You're wasting him. And you know goddam well you're wasting him."

"I repeat: why would I want to 'beat' Vinnie?"

"Because you can't get to me."

"You're getting paranoid, Bart. I've got no desire to do anything to you but forget you."

"Is that why you were checking to see if I ever had personal laundry done free? Or took kickbacks from the motels? I understand you even took the petty cash vouchers for the last five years or so."

"Who told you that?" Ordner barked. He sounded startled, off balance.

"Somebody in your organization," he lied joyfully. "Someone who doesn't like you much. Someone who thought I might be able to get the ball rolling a little in time for the next director's meeting."

"Who?"

"Good-bye, Steve. You think about Vinnie Mason, and I'll think about who I might or might not talk to."

"Don't you hang up on me! Don't you-"

He hung up, grinning. Even Steve Ordner had the proverbial feet of clay. Who was it Steve reminded him of? Ball bearings. Strawberry ice cream stolen from the food locker. Herman Wouk. Captain Queeg, that was it. Humphrey Bogart had played him in the movie. He laughed aloud and sang:

"We all need someone to Queeg on,

And if you want to, why don'tcha Queeg all over me?"

I'm crazy all right, he thought, still laughing. But it does seem there are certain advantages. It came to him that one of the surest signs of insanity was a man all alone,

laughing in the middle of silence, on an empty street filled with empty houses. But the thought could not still his humor and he laughed louder, standing by the telephone and shaking his head and grinning.

January 19, 1974

After dark he went out to the garage and brought in the guns. He loaded the Magnum carefully, according to the directions in the instruction pamphlet, after dryfiring it several times. The Rolling Stones were on the stereo, singing about the Midnight Rambler. He couldn't get over what a fine album that was. He thought about himself as Barton George Dawes, Midnight Rambler, Visits by Appointment Only.

The .460 Weatherbee took eight shells. They looked big enough to fit a medium howitzer. When the rifle was loaded he looked at it curiously, wondering if it was as powerful as Dirty Harry Swinnerton had claimed. He decided to take it out behind the house and fire it. Who was there on Crestallen Street West to report gunshots?

He put on his jacket and started out the back door through the kitchen, then went back to the living room and got one of the small pillows that lay on the couch. Then he went outside, pausing to flick on the 200-watt yard light that he and Mary had used in the summer for backyard barbecues. Back here, the snow was as he had pictured it in his mind a little more than a week ago-untouched, unmarred, totally virgin. No one had foot-fucked this snow. In past years Don Upslinger's boy Kenny sometimes used the backyard express to get up to his friend Ronnie's house. Or Mary used the line he had strung kitty-corner between the house and garage to hang a few things (usually unmentionables) on days when it was too warm for them to freeze. But he himself always went to the garage by the breezeway and now it struck him as sort of marvelous-no one had been in his backyard since snow first fell, in late November. Not even a dog, by the look of it.

He had a sudden crazy urge to stride out into the middle, about where he set the hibachi every summer, and make a snow angel.

Instead he tucked the pillow up against his right shoulder, held it for a moment with his chin, and then pressed the butt plate of the Weatherbee against it. He glared down the sight with his left eye shut, and tried to remember the advice the actors always gave each other just before the gyrenes hit the beaches in the late-night war movies. Usually it was some seasoned veteran like Richard Widmark talking to some green private-Martin Milner, perhaps: *Don't jerk that trigger, son - SQUEEZE it.*

Okay, Fred. Let's see if I can hit my own garage.

He squeezed the trigger.

The rifle did not make a report. It made an explosion. At first he was afraid it had blown up in his hands. He knew he was alive when the recoil knocked him back against the kitchen storm door. The report traveled off in all directions with a curious rolling sound, like jet exhaust. The pillow fell in the snow. His shoulder throbbed.

"Jesus, Fred!" he gasped.

He looked at his garage and was hardly able to believe it. There was a splintered hole in the siding big enough to fit a teacup through.

He leaned the gun against the kitchen storm door and walked through the snow, never minding the fact that he had his low shoes on. He examined the hole for a minute, bemusedly prying up loose splinters with his forefinger, and then he went around and inside.

The exit hole was bigger. He looked at his station wagon. There was a bullet hole in the driver's side door, and the paint had been seared off to show bare metal around the concave hole, which was big enough for him to stick the tips of two fingers in. He opened the door and looked across the seat at the passenger door. Yes, the bullet had gone through there too, just below the door handle.

He walked around to the passenger side and saw where the bullet had exited, leaving another big hole, this time with tines of metal sticking balefully out. He turned and looked at the garage wall opposite where the bullet had entered. It had gone through that too. For all he knew, it was still going.

He heard Harry the gun shop proprietor saying: *So your cousin gut-shoots . . . this baby will spread his insides over twenty feet.* And what would it do to a man? Probably the same. It made him feel ill.

He walked back to the kitchen door, stooped to pick up his pillow, and went back into the house, pausing automatically to stamp his feet so he wouldn't track across Mary's kitchen. In the living room he took off his shirt. There was a red welt in the shape of the rifle's butt plate on his shoulder in spite of the pillow.

He went into the kitchen with his shirt still off and fixed a pot of coffee and a TV dinner. When he finished his meal he went into the living room and laid down on the couch and began to cry, and the crying rose to a jagged, breaking hysteria which he heard and feared but could not control. At last it began to trail off and he fell heavily asleep, breathing harshly. In his sleep he looked old and some of the stubble on his cheeks was white.

January 20, 1974

He woke with a guilty start, afraid it was morning and too late. His sleep had been as sodden and dark as old coffee, the kind of sleep he always woke from feeling stupid and cottonheaded. He looked at his watch and saw it was quarter past two.

The rifle was where he had left it, leaning nonchalantly in the easy chair. The Magnum was on the end table.

He got up, went into the kitchen, and splashed cold water on his face. He went upstairs and put on a fresh shirt. He went back downstairs tucking it in. He locked all the downstairs doors, and for reasons he did not wish to examine too closely, his heart felt a tiny bit lighter as each tumbler clicked. He began to feel like himself again for the first time since that damnable woman had collapsed in front of him in the supermarket. He put the Weatherbee on the floor by the living room picture window and stacked the shells beside it, opening each box as he set it down. He dragged the easy chair over and set it on

its side.

He went into the kitchen and locked the windows. He took one of the dining room chairs and propped it under the kitchen doorknob. He poured himself a cup of cold coffee, sipped it absently, grimaced, and dashed it into the sink. He made himself a drink.

He went back into the living room and brought out the automobile storage battery. He put it behind the overturned easy chair, then got the jumper cables and coiled them beside the battery.

He carried the case of explosive upstairs, grunting and puffing. When he got to the landing he set it down with a thump and blew out his breath. He was getting too old for this sort of bullshit, even though a lot of the laundry muscle from the days when he and his partner had lifted four-hundred-pound lots of ironed sheets onto the delivery trucks, was still there. But muscle or no muscle, when a man got to be forty, some things were tempting fate. By forty it was attack time.

He went from room to room upstairs, turning on all the lights: The guest bedroom, the guest bathroom, master bedroom, the study that had once been Charlie's room. He put a chair under the attic trapdoor and went up there, turning on the dusty bulb. Then he went down to the kitchen and got a roll of electrician's tape, a pair of scissors, and a sharp steak knife.

He took two sticks of explosive from the crate (it was soft, and if you pressed it, you left fingerprints) and took them up to the attic. He cut two lengthy of fuse and peeled the white insulation back from the copper core with the steak knife. Then he pressed each bare wire into one of the candles. In the closet, standing below the trapdoor now, he peeled the insulation from the other ends of the fuses and carefully attached two more sticks, taping the fuse firmly to each so that the peeled wire wouldn't pull free.

Humming now, he strung more fuse from the attic into the master bedroom and left a stick on each of the twin beds. He strung more fuse from there down the hall and left a stick in the guest bathroom, two more in the guest bedroom. He turned off the lights as he left. In Charlie's old room he left four sticks, taped together in a cluster. He trailed fuse out the door and dropped a coil of it over the stairway railing. Then he went downstairs.

Four sticks on the kitchen counter, beside his bottle of Southern Comfort. Four sticks in the living room. Four in the dining room. Four in the hall.

He trailed fuse back into the living room, a little out of breath from going up and down stairs. But there was one more trip to make. He went back up and got the crate, which was considerably lighter now. There were only eleven sticks of explosive left inside it. The crate, he saw, had once contained oranges. Written on the side, in faded letters, was this word:

POMONA

Beside the word was a picture of an orange with one leaf clinging to the stem. He took the crate out to the garage, using the breezeway this time, and put the box on the back seat of his car. He wired each stick of malglinite with a short fuse, then joined all eleven to a long length with electrician's tape and strung the long fuse back into the house, being careful to slip the fuse into the crack beneath the side door that opened onto

the breezeway and then relocking it.

In the living room he joined the house master fuse with the one that came from the garage. Working carefully, still humming, he cut another length and joined it to the other two with electrician's tape. He payed this final fuse over to the battery and peeled the insulation from the end with the steak knife.

He separated the copper core wires and twisted each bunch into a little pigtail. He took the jumper cables and attached a black alligator clip to one pigtail, a red alligator clip to the other. He went to the storage battery and attached the other black alligator clip to the terminal marked:

POS

He left the red clip unhooked, lying beside the post marked

NEG

Then he went to the stereo, turned it on, and listened to the Rolling Stones. It was five minutes past four. He went to the kitchen, made himself another drink, and went back to the living room with it, suddenly at loose ends. There was a copy of *Good Housekeeping* on the coffee table. There was an article in it about the Kennedy family and their problems. He read the article. After that he read an article titled "Women and Breast Cancer." It was by a woman doctor.

They came at a little past ten, just after the bells of the Congregational Church five blocks over had rung in the hour, calling people to matins, or whatever in hell the Congregationalists called them.

There was a green sedan and a black-and-white police car. They pulled up at the curb and three men got out of the green sedan. One of them was Fenner. He didn't know who the other two were. Each of them had a briefcase.

Two policemen got out of the black-and-white and leaned against it. It was obvious from their attitudes that they expected no trouble; they were discussing something as they leaned against the hood of the black-and-white, and their words came out of their mouths in visible white puffs.

Things stopped.

Stoptime, January 20, 1974

well fred this is it i guess put up or shut up time oh i know in one sense it's too late to shut up i've got explosives strung all over the house like birthday decorations a gun in my hand and another one in my belt like fucking john dillinger well what do you say this is the last decision like climbing a tree i pick this fork then i pick that fork now this now that

(the men frozen in tableau outside in the hallway between seconds fenner in a green suit one foot six inches off the pavement as it steps forward good shoes clad in low fashionable rubbers if there is such a thing as fashionable rubbers his green topcoat

flapping open like a crusading attorney in a tv lead-in his head is slightly turned slightly cocked the man in back of him has made some comment and fenner is cocking his head to catch it the man who has spoken has a white plume half out of his mouth this second man is wearing a blue blazer and dark brown pants his topcoat is also open and the wind has caught it stoptime has caught his topcoat in midflap and the third man is just turning from the car and the cops are leaning against their black-and-white with their heads turned to one another they could be discussing anything marriage or a tough case or the shitty season the musties had or the state of their balls and the sun has come through the scud overhead just enough to make a single twinkle on a single shell of one policeman's assigned equipment said shell pushed through one of many little leather loops on said policeman's belt the other cop is wearing shades and the sun has pricked out a compass point on the right lens and his lips are thick sensual caught at the beginning of a smile: this is the photograph)

i'm going ahead freddy my boy do you have anything you'd care to say at this auspicious moment at this point in the proceedings yes says fred you're going to hold out for the newspeople aren't you i sure am says george the words the pictures the newsreels demolition i know has only the point of visibility but freddy does it strike you how lonely this is how all over this city and the world people are eating and shitting and fucking and scratching their eczema all the things they write books about while we have to do this alone yes i've considered that george in fact i tried to tell you something about it if you'll recall and if it's any consolation to you this seems right right now it seems okay because when you can't move you can give them their roadwork but please george don't kill anybody no not on purpose fred but you see the position i am in yes i see i understand by george i'm scared now i'm so scared no don't be scared i'm going to handle this and i'm in perfect control myself

roll it

January 20, 1974

"Roll it," he said aloud, and everything began to move.

He put the rifle to his shoulder, sighted on the right front wheel of the police cruiser, and pulled the trigger.

The gun kicked crushingly against his shoulder and the muzzle jerked upward after the bullet had been fired. The large living room window burst outward, leaving only jagged hunks protruding from the molding like impressionistic glass arrows. The cruiser's front tire did not flatten; it exploded with a loud bang, and the whole car shuddered on its springs like a dog that had been kicked while asleep. The hubcap flew off and rattled aimlessly on the frozen composition surface of Crestallen Street West.

Fenner stopped and looked unbelievably at the house. His face was raw with shock. The fellow in the blue blazer dropped his briefcase. The other fellow had better reflexes, or perhaps a more developed sense of self-preservation. He wheeled and ran around the green sedan, crouched low, and disappeared from sight.

The policemen moved right and left, behind their own cruiser. A moment later the one wearing sunglasses bounced up from behind the hood, his service revolver held in

both hands, and fired three times. The gun made an innocuous popping sound after the Weatherbee's massive crack. He fell behind his chair and heard the bullets pass overhead-you really could hear them, and the noise they made in the air was *zzzzzz!*-and bury themselves in the plaster above the couch. The sound they made entering the plaster reminded him of the sound fists made hitting the heavy bag in a gymnasium. He thought: that's what they'd sound like going into me.

The cop wearing sunglasses was shouting at Fenner and the man in the blue blazer. "Get down! Goddammit, get down! He's got a fucking howitzer in there!"

He raised his head a little more to see better and the cop in the sunglasses saw him do it and fired twice more. The bullets thudded into the wall and this time Mary's favorite picture, "Lobstermen" by Winslow Homer, fell off the wall, hit the couch, and then went to the floor. The glass facing on the picture shattered.

He raised his head again because he had to see what was happening (why hadn't he thought to get a kid's periscope?), he had to see if they were trying to flank him which was how Richard Widmark and Marty Milner always took the Jap pillboxes on the late movies, and if they were trying to do that he would have to try to shoot one, but the cops were still behind their cruiser and Fenner and the guy in the blue blazer were dashing behind the green car. Blue Blazer's briefcase lay on the sidewalk like a small dead animal. He aimed at it, wincing at the recoil of the big rifle even before it came, and fired.

CRRRACKK! and the briefcase exploded into two pieces and jumped savagely into the air, flapping, disgorging a flutter of papers for the wind to stir an invisible finger through.

He fired again, this time at the right front wheel of the green sedan, and the tire blew. One of the men behind the car screamed in soprano terror.

He looked over at the police car and the driver's side door was open. The cop with the sunglasses was lying half in on the seat, using his radio. Soon all the party-goers would be here. They were going to give him away, a little piece for anyone who wanted one, and it would not be personal anymore. He felt a relief that was as bitter as aloes. Whatever it had been, whatever mournful sickness that had brought him to this, the last crotch of a tall tree, it was not his alone anymore, whispering and crying in secret. He had joined the mainstream of lunacy, he had come out of the closet. Soon they could reduce him to safe headline-SHAKY CEASE-FIRE HOLDS ON CRESTALLEN STREET.

He put the rifle down and scrambled across the living room floor on his hands and knees, being careful not to cut himself on the glass from the shattered picture frame. He got the small pillow and then scrambled back. The cop was not in the car anymore.

He picked up the Magnum and put two shots across their bow. The pistol bucked heavily in his hand, but the recoil was manageable. His shoulder throbbed like a rotted tooth.

One of the cops, the one without sunglasses, popped up behind the cruiser's hunk to return his fire and he sent two bullets into the cruiser's back window, blowing it inward in a twisted craze of cracks. The cop ducked back down without firing.

"Hold it!" Fenner bawled. "Let me talk to him!"

"Go ahead," one of the cops said.

"Dawes! " Fenner yelled toughly, sounding like a detective in the last reel of a Jimmy Cagney movie. (The police spotlights are crawling relentlessly back and forth over the front of the sleazy slum tenement where "Mad Dog" Dawes has gone to ground with a smoking .45 automatic in each hand." "Mad Dog" is crouched behind an overturned easy chair, wearing a strappy T-shirt and snarling.) "*Dawes, can you hear me in there!* "

(And "Mad Dog, " his face twisted with defiance-although his brow is greased with sweat-screams out:)

"Come and get me, ya dirty coppers! " He bounced up over the easy chair and emptied the Magnum into the green sedan, leaving a ragged row of holes.

"Jesus!" somebody screamed. "Oh Jesus he's nuts!"

"*Dawes!* " Fenner yelled.

"You'll never take me alive! " he yelled, delirious with joy. "You're the dirty rats who shot my ,kid brother! I'll see some of ya in *hell* before ya get me!" He reloaded the Magnum with trembling fingers and then put enough shells into the Weatherbee to fill its magazine.

"*Dawes!* " Fenner yelled again. "*How about a deal?*

"How about some hot lead, ya dirty screw!" he screamed at Fenner, but he was looking at the police car and when the cop wearing sunglasses put his head stealthily over the hood, he sent him diving with two shots. One of them went through the picture window of the Quinns' house across the street.

"*Dawes!* " Fenner yelled importantly.

One of the cops said: "Oh shut the fuck up. You're just encouraging him."

There was an embarrassed silence and in it the sound of sirens, still distant, began to rise. He put the Magnum down and picked up the rifle. The joyous delirium had left him feeling tired and achey and needing to shit.

Please let them be quick from the TV stations, he prayed. Quick with their movie cameras.

When the first police car screamed around the corner in a calculated racing drift like something out of *The French Connection* he was ready. He had fired two of the howitzer shells over the parked cruiser to make them stay down, and he drew a careful bead on the grille of the charging cruiser and squeezed the trigger like a seasoned Richard Widmark-type veteran and the whole grille seemed to explode and the hood flew up. The cruiser roared straight over the curb about forty yards up the street and hit a tree. The doors flew open and four cops spilled out with their guns drawn, looking dazed. Two of them walked into each other. Then the cops behind the first cruiser (*his cops*, he thought of them with a trace of propriety) opened fire and he submarined behind the chair while the bullets whizzed above him. It was seventeen minutes of eleven. He thought that now they would try to flank him.

He stuck his head up because he had to and a bullet droned past his right ear. Two more cruisers were corning up Crestallen Street from the other direction, sirens whooping, blue lights flashing. Two of the cops from the crashed cruiser were trying to climb the stake fence between the sidewalk and the Upslingers' backyard and he fired the rifle at them three times, not firing to hit or miss but only to make them go back to their car. They did. Wood from Wilbur Upslinger's fence (ivy climbed on it in the spring and summer) sprayed everywhere, and part of it actually fell over into the snow.

The two new cruisers had pulled up in a V that blocked the road in front of Jack Hobart's house. Police crouched in the apex of the V. One of them was talking to the police in the crash cruiser on a walkie-talkie. A moment later the newest arrivals began laying down a heavy pattern of covering fire, making him duck again. Bullets struck the front door, the front of the house, and all around the picture window. The mirror in the front hall exploded into jumbled diamonds. A bullet punched through the quilt covering the Zenith TV, and the quilt danced briefly.

He scrambled across the living room on his hands and knees and stood up by the small window behind the TV. From here he could look directly into the Upslingers' backyard. Two policemen were trying the flanking movement again. One of them had a nosebleed.

Freddy, I may have to kill one of them to make them stop.

Don't do that, George. Please. Don't do that.

He smashed the window with the butt of the Magnum, cutting his hand. They looked around at the noise, saw him, and began to shoot. He returned their fire and saw two of his bullets punch holes in Wilbur's new aluminum siding (had the city recompensed him for that?). He heard bullets punching into his own house just below the window and on both sides of it. One whined off the frame and splinters flew in his face. He expected a bullet to rip off the top of his head at any moment. It was hard to tell how long the exchange went on. Suddenly one of the cops grabbed his forearm and cried out. The cop dropped his pistol like a child that has grown tired of a stupid game. He ran in a small circle. His partner grabbed him and they began to run back toward their crashed cruiser, the unhurt one with his arm around his partner's waist.

He dropped to his hands and knees and crawled back to the overturned chair and peeked out. Two more cruisers on the street now, one corning from each end. They parked on the Quinns' side of the street and eight policemen got out and run behind the cruiser with the flat tire and the green sedan.

He put his head down again and crawled into the hall. The house was taking very heavy fire now. He knew he should take the rifle and go upstairs, he would have a better angle on them from up there, could maybe drive them back from their car to cover in the houses across the street. But he didn't dare go that far from the master fuse and the storage battery. The TV people might come at any time.

The front door was full of bullet holes, the dark brown varnish splintered back to show the raw wood underneath. He crawled into the kitchen. All the windows were broken in here and broken glass littered the linoleum. A chance shot had knocked the coffeepot from the stove and it lay overturned in a puddle of brown goo. He crouched

below the window for a moment, then bounced up and emptied the Magnum into the V-parked cars. Immediately fire intensified on the kitchen. Two bullet holes appeared in the white enamel of the refrigerator and another struck the Southern Comfort bottle on the counter. It exploded, spraying glass and southern hospitality everywhere.

Crawling back to the living room he felt something like a bee sting in the fleshy part of his tight thigh just below the buttocks, and when he clapped his hand to it, his fingers came away bloody.

He lay behind the chair and reloaded the Magnum. Reloaded the Weatherbee. Poked his head up and ducked back down, wincing, at the ferocity of fire that came at him, bullets striking the couch and the wall and the TV, making the quilt shimmy. Poked his head up again and fined at the police cars parked across the street. Blew in one window. And saw-

At the top of the street, a white station wagon and a white Ford van. Written in blue letters on the sides of both was:

WHLM NEWSBEAT
CHANNEL 9

Panting, he crawled back to the window that looked out on the Upslingers' side yard. The news vehicles were crawling slowly and dubiously down Crestallen Street. Suddenly a new police car shot around them and blocked them off, tires smoking. An arm dressed in blue shot out of the cruiser's back window and began waving the newsmobiles off.

A bullet struck the windowsill and jumped into the room at an angle.

He crawled back to the easy chair, holding the Magnum in his bloody right hand and screamed: "*Fenner!*"

The fire slackened a little.

"*Fenner!* " he screamed again.

"*Hold on!* " Fenner yelled. "*Stop! Stop a minute!* "

There were a few isolated pops, then nothing.

"*What do you want?*" Fenner called.

"*The news people! Down behind those cars on the other side of the street! I want to talk to them!* "

There was a long, contemplative pause.

"No! " Fenner yelled.

"*I'll stop shooting if I can talk to them!*" That much was true, he thought, looking at the battery.

"No! " Fenner yelled again.

Bastard, he thought helplessly. Is it that important to you? You and Ordner and the rest of you bureaucratic bastards?

The firing began again, tentatively at first, then gaining strength. Then, incredibly, a

man in a plaid shirt and blue jeans was running down the sidewalk, holding a pistol-grip camera in one hand.

"I heard that!" the man in the plaid shirt yelled. "I heard every word! I'll get your name, fella! He offered to stop shooting and you-"

A policeman hit him with a waist-high flying tackle and the man in the plaid shirt crunched to the sidewalk. His movie camera flew into the gutter and a moment later three bullets shattered it into winking pieces. A clockspring of unexposed film unwound lazily from the remains. Then the fire flagged again, uncertainly.

"Fenner, let them set up!" he hollered. His throat felt raw and badly used, like the rest of him. His hand hurt and a deep, throbbing ache had begun to emanate outward from his thigh.

"Come out first!" Fenner yelled back. *"We'll let you tell your side of it!"*

Rage washed over him in a red wave at this barefaced lie. *"GODDAMMIT, I'VE GOTA BIG GUN HERE AND I'LL START SHOOTING AT GAS TANKS YOU SHITBIRD AND THERE'LL BE A FUCKING BARBECUE WHEN I GET DONE!"*

Shocked silence.

Then, cautiously, Fenner said: "What do you want?"

"Send that guy you tackled in here! Let the camera crew set up!"

"Absolutely not! We're not giving you a hostage to play games with all day!"

A cop ran over to the listing green sedan bent low and disappeared behind it. There was a consultation.

A new voice yelled: *"There's thirty men behind your house, guy! They've got shotguns! Come out or I'll send them in!"* Time to play his one ratty trump. *"You better not! The whole house is wired with explosive. Look at this!"*

He held the red alligator clip up in the window.

"Can you see it?"

"You're bluffing!" the voice called back confidently.

"If I hook this up to the car battery beside me on the floor, everything goes!"

Silence. More consultation.

"Hey!" someone yelled. "Hey, get that guy!" He poked his head up to look and here came the man in the plaid shirt and jeans, right out into the street, no protection, either heroically sure of his own profession or crazy. He had long black hair that fell almost to his collar and a thin dark moustache.

Two cops started to charge around the V-parked cruisers and thought better of it when he put a shot over their heads.

"Jesus Christ what a snafu!" somebody cried out in shrill disgust.

The man in the plaid shirt was on his lawn now, kicking up snow-bursts. Something buzzed by his ear, followed by a report, and he realized he was still looking over the

chair. He heard the front door being tried, and then the man in the plaid shirt was hammering on it.

He scrambled across the floor, which was now spotted with grit and plaster that had been knocked out of the walls. His right leg hurt like a bastard and when he looked down he saw his pants leg was bloody from thigh to knee. He turned the lock in the chewed-up door and released the bolt from its catch.

"Okay!" he said, and the man in the plaid shirt burst in.

Up close he didn't look scared although he was panting hard. There was a scrape on his cheek from where the policeman had tackled him, and the left arm of his shirt was ripped. When the man in the plaid shirt was inside he scrambled back into the living room, picked up the rifle, and fired twice blindly over the top of the chair. Then he turned around. The man in the plaid shirt was standing in the doorway, looking incredibly calm. He had taken a large notebook out of his back pocket.

"All right, man," he said. "What shit goes down?"

"What's your name?"

"Dave Albert."

"Has that white van got more film equipment in it?"

"Yes. "

"Go to the window. Tell the police to let a camera crew set up on the Quinns' lawn. That's the house across the street. Tell them if it isn't done in five minutes, you got trouble."

"Do I?"

"Sure."

Albert laughed. "You don't look like you could kill time, fella."

"Tell them."

Albert walked to the shattered living room window and stood framed there for a second, obviously relishing the moment.

"He says for my camera crew to set up across the street!" he yelled. *"He say's he's going to kill me if you don't let them!"*

"No!" Fenner yelled back furiously. *"No, no, n-"*

Somebody muzzled him. Silence for a beat.

"All right!" This was the voice that had accused him of bluffing about the explosive. *"Will you let two of our men go up and get them?"*

He thought it over and nodded at the reporter.

"Yes!" Albert called.

There was a pause, and then two uniformed policemen trotted self-consciously up toward where the news van waited, its engine smugly idling. In the meantime two more

cruisers had pulled up, and by leaning far to the right he could see that the downhill end of Crestallen Street West had been blocked off. A large crowd of people was standing behind the yellow crash barriers.

"Okay," Albert said, sitting down. "We got a minute. What do you want? A plane?"

"Plane?" he echoed stupidly.

Albert flapped his arms, still holding his notebook. "Fly away, man. Just FLYYYYYY away."

"Oh." He nodded to show that he understood. "No, I don't want a plane."

"Then what do you want?"

"I want," he said carefully, "to be just twenty with a lot of decisions to make over again." He saw the look in Albert's eyes and said, "I know I can't. I'm not that crazy."

"You're shot."

"Yes."

"Is that what you said it is?" He was pointing at the master fuse and the battery.

"Yes. The main fuse goes to all the rooms in the house. Also the garage."

"Where did you get the explosive?" Albert's voice was amiable but his eyes were alert.

"Found it in my Christmas stocking."

He laughed. "Say, that's not bad. I'm going to use that in my story."

"Fine. When you go back out, tell all the policemen that they better move away. "

"Are you going to blow yourself up?" Albert asked. He looked interested, nothing more.

"I am contemplating it. "

"You know what, fellow? You've seen too many movies. "

"I don't go to the movies much anymore. I did see *The Exorcist*, though. I wish I hadn't. How are your movie guys coming out there?"

Albert peered out the window. "Pretty good. We've got another minute. Your name is Dawes?"

"Did they tell you that?"

Albert laughed contemptuously. "They wouldn't tell me if I had cancer. I read it on the doorbell. Would you mind telling me why you're doing all this?"

"Not at all. It's roadwork."

"The extension?" Albert's eyes glowed brighter. He began to scribble in his book.

"Yes, that's right. "

"They took your house?"

"They tried. I'm going to take it."

Albert wrote it down, then snapped his book closed and stuffed it into his back pocket again. "That's pretty stupid, Mr. Dawes. Do you mind my saying that? Why don't you just come out of here with me?"

"You've got an exclusive," he said tiredly. "What are you trying for, the Pulitzer Prize?"

"I'd take it if they offered it." He smiled brightly and then sobered. "Come on, Mr. Dawes. Come on out. I'll see that your side gets told. I'll see-"

"There is no side."

Albert frowned. "What was that?"

"I have no side. That's why I'm doing this." He peered over the chair and looked into a telephoto lens, mounted on a tripod that was sunk into the snow of the Quinns' lawn. "Go on now. Tell them to go away."

"Are you really going to pull the string?"

"I really don't know."

Albert walked to the living room door and then turned around. "Do I know you from somewhere? Why do I keep feeling like I know you?"

He shook his head. He thought he had never seen Albert before in his life.

Watching the newsman walk back across his lawn, slightly at an angle so the camera across the street would get his good side, he wondered what Olivia was doing at that precise second.

He waited fifteen minutes. Their fire had intensified, but no one charged at the back of the house. The main purpose of the fire seemed to be to cover their retreat into the houses across the street. The camera crew remained where it was for a while, grinding impassively away, and then the white Econoline van drove up onto the Quinns' side lawn and the man behind the camera folded the tripod, took it behind the truck, and began to film again.

Something black and tubular whizzed through the air, landed on his lawn about midway between the house and the sidewalk, and began to spurt gas. The wind caught it and carried it off down the street in tattered rifts. A second shell landed short, and then he heard one dunk on the roof. He caught a whiff of that one as it fell into the snow covering Mary's begonias. His nose and eyes filled with crocodile tears.

He scurried across the living room on his hands and knees again, hoping to God he had said nothing to that newsman, Albert, that could be misconstrued as profound. There was no good place to make your stand in the world. Look at Johnny Walker, dying in a meaningless intersection smashup. What had he died for, so that the sheets could go through? Or that woman in the supermarket. The fucking you got was never worth the screwing you took.

He turned on the stereo and the stereo still worked. The Rolling Stones album was

still on the turntable and he put on the last cut, missing the right groove the first time when a bullet smacked into the quilt covering the Zenith TV with a thud.

When he had it right, the last bars of "Monkey Man" fading into nothingness, he scurried back to the overturned chair and threw the rifle out the window. He picked up the Magnum and threw that out after it. Good-bye, Nick Adams.

"You can't always get what you want," the stereo sang, and he knew that to be a fact. But that didn't stop you from wanting it. A tear gas canister arched through the window, struck the wall over the couch, and exploded in white smoke.

"But if you try something, you might find,
You get what you need. "

Well, let's just see, Fred. He grasped the red alligator clip in his hand. Let's see if I get what I need.

"Okay," he muttered, and jammed the red clip on the negative pole of the battery.

He closed his eyes and his last thought was that the world was not exploding around him but inside him, and while the explosion was cataclysmic, it was not larger than, say, a good-sized walnut.

Then white.

Epilogue

The WHLM newsteam won a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of what they called "Dawes' Last Stand" on the evening news, and for a half-hour documentary presented three weeks later. The documentary was called "Roadwork" and it examined the necessity-or lack of it-for the 784 extension. The documentary pointed out that one reason the road was being built had nothing to do with traffic patterns or commuter convenience or anything else of such a practical sort. The municipality had to build so many miles of road per year or begin losing federal money on all interstate construction. And so the city had chosen to build. The documentary also pointed out that the city was quietly beginning a litigation against the widow of Barton George Dawes to recover as much of their money as was recoverable. In the wake of the outcry the city dropped its suit.

Still photographs of the wreckage ran on the AP wire and most of the newspapers in the country carried them. In Las Vegas, a young girl who had only recently enrolled in a business school saw the photographs while on her lunch hour and fainted.

Despite the pictures and the words, the extension went ahead and was completed eighteen months later, ahead of schedule. By that time most of the people in the city had forgotten the "Roadwork" documentary, and the city's news force, including Pulitzer winner David Albert, had gone on to other stories and crusades. But few people who had been watching the original newsclip broadcast on the evening news ever forgot that; they remembered even after the facts surrounding it grew blurry in their minds.

That news clip showed a plain white suburban house, sort of a ranch house with an asphalt driveway to the right leading to a one-car garage. A nice-looking house, but

totally ordinary. Not a house you'd crane to look at if you happened to be on a Sunday drive. But in the news footage the picture window is shattered. Two guns, a rifle and a pistol, come flying out of it to lie in the snow. For one second you see the hand that has flung them, the fingers held limply up like the hand of a drowning man. You see white smoke blowing around the house, Mace or teargas or something. And then there is a huge belch of orange flame and all the walls of the house seem to bulge out in an impossible cartoon convexity and there is a huge detonation and the camera shakes a little, as if in horror. Peripherally the viewer is aware that the garage has been destroyed in a single ripping blast. For a second it seems (and slow motion replays prove that the eye's split-second impression is correct) that the roof of the house has lifted off its eaves like a Saturn rocket. Then the entire house blows outward and upward, shingles flying, hunks of wood lofted into the air and then returning to earth, something that looks like a quilt twisting lazily in the air like a magic carpet as debris rattle to the ground in a thudding, contrapuntal drum roll.

There is stillness.

Then the shocked, tear-streaming face of Mary Dawes fills the screen; she is looking with drugged and horrified bewilderment at the forest of microphones being thrust into her face, and we have been brought safely back to human things once more.

THE RUNNING MAN
Richard Bachman

[05 feb 2001 – scanned for #bookz, proofread and released – v1]

In the year 2025, the best men don't run for President. They run for their lives...

Minus 100 and COUNTING

She was squinting at the thermometer in the white light coming through the window. Beyond her, in the drizzle, the other highrises in Co-Op City rose like the gray turrets of a penitentiary. Below, in the airshaft, clotheslines flapped with ragged wash. Rats and plump alley cats circulated through the garbage.

She looked at her husband. He was seated at the table, staring up at the FreeVee with steady, vacant concentration. He had been watching it for weeks now. It wasn't like him. He hated it, always had. Of course, every Development apartment had one-it was the law-but it was still legal to turn them off. The Compulsory Benefit Bill of 2021 had failed to get the required two-thirds majority by six votes. Ordinarily they never watched it. But ever since Cathy had gotten sick, he had been watching the big-money giveaways. It filled her with sick fear.

Behind the compulsive shrieking of the half-time announcer narrating the latest newsie flick, Cathy's flue-hoarsened wailing went on and on.

"How bad is it?" Richards asked.

"Not so bad. "

"Don't shit me."

"It's a hundred and four."

He brought both fists down on the table. A plastic dish jumped into the air and clattered down.

"We'll get a doctor. Try not to worry so much. Listen-"She began to babble frantically to distract him; he had turned around and was watching the Free-Vee again. Half-time was over, and the game was on again. This wasn't one of the big ones, of course, just a cheap daytime come-on called *Treadmill to Bucks*. They accepted only chronic heart, liver, or lung patients, sometimes throwing in a cripple for comic relief. Every minute the contestant could stay on the treadmill (keeping up a steady flow of chatter with the emcee), he won ten dollars. Every two minutes the emcee asked a Bonus Question in the contestant's category (the current pal, a heart-murmur from Hackensack, was an

American history buff) which was worth fifty dollars. If the contestant, dizzy, out of breath, heart doing fantastic rubber acrobatics in his chest, missed the question, fifty dollars was deducted from his winnings and the treadmill was speeded up.

"We'll get along. Ben. We will. Really. I . . . I'll . . . "

"You'll what?" He looked at her brutally. "Hustle? No more. Shelia- She's got to have a real doctor. No more block midwife with dirty hands and whiskey breath. All the modern equipment. I'm going to see to it."

He crossed the room, eyes swiveling hypnotically to the Free-Vee bolted into one peeling wall above the sink. He took his cheap denim jacket off its hook and pulled it on with fretful gestures.

"No! No, I won't . . . won't allow it. You're not going to-"

"Why not? At worst you can get a few oldbucks as the head of a fatherless house. One way or the other you'll have to see her through this."

She had never really been a handsome woman, and in the years since her husband had not worked she had grown scrawny, but in this moment she looked beautiful . . . imperious. "I won't take it. I'd rather sell the govie a two-dollar piece of tail when he comes to the door and send him back with his dirty blood money in his pocket. Should I take a bounty on my man?"

He turned on her, grim and humorless, clutching something that set him apart, an invisible something for which the Network had ruthlessly calculated. He was a dinosaur in this time. Not a big one, but still a throwback, an embarrassment. Perhaps a danger. Big clouds condense around small particles.

He gestured at the bedroom. "How about her in an unmarked pauper's grave? Does that appeal to you?"

It left her with only the argument of insensate sorrow. Her face cracked and dissolved into tears.

"Ben, this is just what they want, for people like us, like you-"

"Maybe they won't take me," he said, opening the door. "Maybe I don't have whatever it is they look for. "

"If you go now, they'll kill you. And I'll be here watching it. Do you want me watching that with her in the next room?" She was hardly coherent through her tears.

"I want her to go on living. " He tried to close the door, but she put her body in the way.

"Give me a kiss before you go, then."

He kissed her. Down the hall, Mrs. Jenner opened her door and peered out. The rich odor of corned beef and cabbage, tantalizing, maddening, drifted to them. Mrs. Jenner did well-she helped out at the local discount drug and had an almost uncanny eye for illegal-card carriers.

"You'll take the money?" Richards asked. "You won't do anything stupid?"

"I'll take it," she whispered. "You know I'll take it."

He clutched her awkwardly, then turned away quickly, with no grace, and plunged down the crazily slanting, ill-lighted stairwell.

She stood in the doorway, shaken by soundless sobs, until she heard the door slam hollowly five flights down, and then she put her apron up to her face. She was still clutching the thermometer she had used to take the baby's temperature.

Mrs. Jenner crept up softly and twitched the apron. "Dearie," she whispered, "I can put you onto black market penicillin when the money gets here . . . real cheap . . . good quality-"

"Get out!" She screamed at her.

Mr. Jenner recoiled, her upper lip raising instinctively away from the blackened stumps of her teeth. "Just trying to help," she muttered, and scurried back to her room.

Barely muffled by the thin plastiwood, Cathy's wails continued. Mrs. Jenner's Free-Vee blared and hooted. The contestant on *Treadmill to Bucks* had just missed a Bonus Question and had had a heart attack simultaneously. He was being carried off on a robber stretcher while the audience applauded.

Upper lip rising and falling metronomically, Mrs. Jenner wrote Sheila Richards's name down in her notebook. "We'll see," she said to no one. "We'll just see, Mrs. Smell-So-Sweet. "

She closed the notebook with a vicious snap and settled down to watch the next game.

Minus 099 and COUNTING

The drizzle had deepened into a steady rain by the time Richards hit the street. The big Smoke Dokes for Hallucinogenic Jokes thermometer across the street stood at fifty-one degrees. (*Just the Right Temp to Stoke Up a Doke-High to the Nth Degree.* That might make it sixty in their apartment. And Cathy had the flu.

A rat trotted lazily, lousily, across the cracked and blistered cement of the street. Across the way, the ancient and rusted skeleton of a 2013 Humber stood on decayed axles. It had been completely stripped, even to the wheel bearings and motor mounts, but the cops didn't take it away. The cops rarely ventured south of the Canal anymore. Co-Op City stood in a radiating rat warren of parking lots, deserted shops, Urban Centers, and paved playgrounds. The cycle gangs were the law here, and all those newsie items about the intrepid Block Police of South City were nothing but a pile of warm crap. The streets were ghostly, silent. If you went out, you took the pneumo bus or you carried a gas cylinder.

He walked fast, not looking around, not thinking. The air was sulphurous and thick. Four cycles roared past and someone threw a ragged hunk of asphalt paving. Richards ducked easily. Two pneumo buses passed him, buffeting him with air, but he did not flag them. The week's twenty-dollar unemployment allotment (oldbucks) had been spent. There was no money to buy a token. He supposed the roving packs could sense his poverty. He was not molested.

Highrises, Developments, chain-link fences, parking lots empty except for stripped derelicts, obscenities scrawled on the pavement in soft chalk and now blurring with the rain. Crashed-out windows, rats, wet bags of garbage splashed over the sidewalks and into the gutters. Graffiti written jaggedly on crumbling gray walls: HONKY DON'T LET THE SUN SET ON YOU HEAR. HOME FOLKS BLOW DOKES. YOUR MOMMY ITCHES. SKIN YOUR BANANA. TOMMY'S PUSHING. HITLER WAS COOL. MARY. SID. KILL ALL KIKES. The old G.A. sodium lights put up in the 70s busted with rocks and hunks of paving. No technico was going to replace them down here; they were on the New Credit Dollar. Technicos stay uptown, baby. Uptown's cool. Everything silent except for the rising-then-descending whoosh of the pneumo buses and the echoing clack of Richards's footfalls. This battlefield only lights up at night. In the day it is a deserted gray silence which contains no movement but the cats and rats and fat white maggots trundling across the garbage. No smell but the decaying reek of this brave year 2025. The Free-Vee cables are safely buried under the streets and no one but an idiot or a revolutionary would want to vandalize them. Free-Vee is the stuff of dreams, the bread of life. Scag is twelve oldbucks a bag, Frisco Push goes for twenty a tab, but the Free-Vee will freak you for nothing. Farther along, on the other side of the Canal, the dream machine ions twenty-four hours a day . . . but it runs on New Dollars, and only employed people have any. There are four million others, almost all of them unemployed, south of the Canal in Co-Op City.

Richards walked three miles and the occasional liquor stores and smoke shops, at first heavily grilled, become more numerous. Then the X-Houses (!!24 Perversions-Count 'Em 24!!), the Hockerries, the Blood Emporiums. Greasers sitting on cycles at every corner, the gutters buried in snowdrifts of roach ends. Rich Blokes Smoke Dokes.

He could see the skyscrapers rising into the clouds now, high and clean. The highest of all was the Network Games Building, one hundred stories, the top half buried in cloud and smog cover. He fixed his eyes on it and walked another mile. Now the more expensive movie houses, and smoke shops with no grills (but Rent-A-Pigs stood outside, electric move-alongs hanging from their Sam Browne belts). A city cop on every corner. The People's Fountain Park: Admission 75c. Well-dressed mothers watching their children as they frolicked on the astroturf behind chain-link fencing. A cop on either side of the gate. A tiny, pathetic glimpse of the fountain.

He crossed the Canal.

As he got closer to the Games Building it grew taller, more and more improbable with its impersonal tiers of rising office windows, its polished stonework. Cops watching him, ready to hustle him along or bust him if he tried to commit loitering. Uptown there was only one function for a man in baggy gray pants and a cheap bowl haircut and sunken eyes. That purpose was the Games.

The qualifying examinations began promptly at noon, and when Ben Richards stepped behind the last man in line, he was almost in the umbra of the Games Building. But the building was still nine blocks and over a mile away. The line stretched before him like an eternal snake. Soon others joined it behind him. The police watched them, hands on either gun butts or move-alongs. They smiled anonymous, contemptuous smiles.

-That one look like a half-wit to you, Frank? Looks like one to me.

-Guy down there ast me if there was a place where he could go to the bathroom.
Canya magine it?

-Sons of bitches ain't

-Kill their own mothers for a

-Smelled like he didn't have a bath for

-Ain't nothin like a freak show I always-

Heads down against the rain, they shuffled aimlessly, and after a while the line began to move.

Minus 098 and COUNTING

It was after four when Ben Richards got to the main desk and was routed to Desk 9 (Q-R). The woman sitting at the rumbling plastipunch looked tired and cruel and impersonal. She looked at him and saw no one.

"Name, last-first-middle."

"Richards, Benjamin Stuart."

Her fingers raced over the keys. *Clitter-clitter-clitter* went the machine.

"Age-height-weight."

"Twenty-eight, six-two, one-sixty-five."

Clitter-clitter-clitter

"Certified LQ. by Weschler test if you know it, and age tested."

"One twenty-six. Age of fourteen."

Clitter-clitter-clitter

The huge lobby was an echoing, rebounding tomb of sound. Questions being asked and answered. People were being led out weeping. People were being thrown out. Hoarse voices were raised in protest. A scream or two. Questions. Always questions.

"Last school attended?"

"Manual Trades."

"Did you graduate?"

"No."

"How many years, and at what age did you leave?"

"Two years. Sixteen years old. "

"Reasons for leaving?"

"I got married."

Clitter-clitter-clitter

"Name and age of spouse if any."

"Sheila Catherine Richards, twenty-six."

"Names and ages of children, if any."

"Catherine Sarah Richards, eighteen months."

Clitter-clitter-clitter

"Last question, mister. Don't bother lying; they'll pick it up during the physical and disqualify you there. Have you ever used heroin or the synthetic-amphetamine hallucinogen called San Francisco Push?"

"No."

Clitter

A plastic card popped out and she handed it to him. "Don't lose this, big fella. If you do, you have to start back at go next week." She was looking at him now, seeing his face, the angry eyes, lanky body. Not bad looking. At least some intelligence. Good stats.

She took his card back abruptly and punched off the upper right-hand corner, giving it an odd milled appearance.

"What was that for?"

"Never mind. Somebody will tell you later. Maybe." She pointed over his shoulder at a long hall which led toward a bank of elevators. Dozens of men fresh from the desks were being stopped, showing their plastic LD.s and moving on. As Richards watched, a trembling, sallow-faced Push freak was stopped by a cop and shown the door. The freak began to cry. But he went.

"Tough old world, big fella," the woman behind the desk said without sympathy. "Move along."

Richards moved along. Behind him, the litany was already beginning again.

Minus 097 and COUNTING

A hard, callused hand slapped his shoulder at the head of the hall beyond the desks.

"Card, buddy."

Richards showed it. The cop relaxed, his face subtle and Chinese with disappointment.

"You like turning them back, don't you?" Richards asked. "It really gives you a charge, doesn't it?"

"You want to go downtown, maggot?"

Richards walked past him, and the cop made no move.

He stopped halfway to the bank of elevators and looked back. "Hey. Cop."

The cop looked at him truculently.

"Got a family? It could be you next week. "

"Move on!" the cop shouted furiously.

With a smile, Richards moved on.

There was a line of perhaps twenty applicants waiting at the elevators. Richards showed one of the cops on duty his card and the cop looked at him closely. "You a hardass, sonny?"

"Hard enough," Richards said, and smiled.

The cop gave him back his card. "They'll kick it soft again. How smart do you talk with holes in your head, sonny?"

"Just about as smart as you talk without that gun on your leg and your pants down around your ankles," Richards said, still smiling. "Want to try it?"

For a moment he thought the cop was going to swing at him. "They'll fix you, " the cop said. "You'll do some walking on your knees before you're done."

The cop swaggered over to three new arrivals and demanded to see their cards.

The man ahead of Richards turned around. He had a nervous, unhappy face and curly hair that came down in a widow's peak. "Say, you don't want to antagonize them, fella. They've got a grapevine. "

"Is that so?" Richards asked, looking at him mildly.

The man turned away.

Abruptly the elevator doors snapped open. A black cop with a huge gut stood protecting the bank of push buttons. Another cop sat on a small stool reading a 3D pervert mag in a small bulletproof cubicle the size of a telephone booth at the rear of the large car. A sawed-off shotgun rested between his knees. Shells were lined up beside him within easy reach.

"Step to the rear!" the fat cop cried with bored importance. "Step to the rear! Step to the rear! "

They crowded in to a depth where a deep breath was impossible. Sad flesh walled Richards on every side. They went up to the second floor. The doors snapped open. Richards, who stood a head taller than anyone else in the car, saw a huge waiting room with many chairs dominated by a huge Free-Vee. A cigarette dispenser stood in one corner.

"Step out! Step out! Show LD. cards to your left!"

They stepped out, holding out their I. D. cards to the impersonal lens of a camera. Three cops stood close by. For some reason, a buzzer went off at the sight of some dozen cards, and the holders were jerked out of line and hustled away.

Richards showed his card and was waved on. He went to the cigarette machine, got a package of Blams and sat down as far from the Free-Vee as possible. He lit up a smoke and exhaled, coughing. He hadn't had a cigarette in almost six months.

Minus 096 and COUNTING

They called the A's for the physical almost immediately, and about two dozen men got up and filed through a door beyond the Free-Vee. A large sign tacked over the door read THIS WAY. There was an arrow below the legend, pointing at the door. The literacy of Games applicants was notoriously low.

They were taking a new letter every fifteen minutes or so. Ben Richards had sat down at about five, and so he estimated it would be quarter of nine before they got to him. He wished he had brought a book, but he supposed things were just as well as they were. Books were regarded with suspicion at best, especially when carried by someone from south of the Canal. Pervert Mags were safer.

He watched the six o'clock newsie restlessly (the fighting in Ecuador was worse, new cannibal riots had broken out in India, the Detroit Tigers had taken the Harding Catamounts by a score of 6-2 in an afternoon game), and when the first of the evening's big-money games came on at six-thirty, he went restlessly to the window and looked out. Now that his mind was made up, the Games bored him again. Most of the others, however, were watching *Fun Guns* with a dreadful fascination. Next week it might be them.

Outside, daylight was bleeding slowly toward dusk. The els were slamming at high speed through the power rings above the second-floor window, their powerful headlights searching the gray air. On the sidewalks below, crowds of men and women (most of them, of course, technicos or Network bureaucrats) were beginning their evening's prowl in search of entertainment. A Certified Pusher was hawking his wares on the corner across the street. A man with a sabled dolly on each arm passed below him; the trio was laughing about something.

He had a sudden awful wave of homesickness for Sheila and Cathy, and wished he could call them. He didn't think it was allowed. He could still walk out, of course; several men already had. They walked across the room, grinning obscurely at nothing, to use the door marked TO STREET. Back to the flat with his daughter glowing fever-bright in the other room? No. Couldn't. Couldn't.

He stood at the window a little while longer, then went back and sat down. The new game, Dig Your Grave, was beginning.

The fellow sitting next to Richards twitched his arm anxiously. "Is it true that they wash out over thirty percent just on the physicals?"

"I don't know," Richards said.

"Jesus," the fellow said. "I got bronchitis. Maybe Treadmill to Bucks . . ."

Richards could think of nothing to say. The pal's respiration sounded like a faraway truck trying to climb a steep hill.

"I got a fambly," the man said with soft desperation.

Richards looked at the Free-Vee as if it interested him.

The fellow was quiet for a long time. When the program changed again at seven-thirty, Richards heard him asking the man on his other side about the physical.

It was full dark outside now. Richards wondered if it was still raining. It seemed like a very long evening.

Minus 095 and COUNTING

When the R's went through the door under the red arrow and into the examination room it was just a few minutes after nine-thirty. A lot of the initial excitement had worn off, and people were either watching the Free-Vee avidly, with none of their prior dread, or dozing. The man with the noisy chest had a name that began with L and had been called over an hour before. Richards wondered idly if he had been cut.

The examination room was long and tiled, lit with fluorescent tubes. It looked like an assembly line, with bored doctors standing at various stations along the way.

Would any of you like to check my little girl? Richards thought bitterly.

The applicants showed their cads to another camera eye embedded in the wall and were ordered to stop by a row of clotheshooks. A doctor in a long white lab coat walked over to them, clipboard tucked under one arm.

"Strip," he said. "Hang your clothes on the hooks. Remember the number over your hook and give the number to the orderly at the far end. Don't worry about your valuables. Nobody here wants them."

Valuables. That was a hot one, Richards thought, unbuttoning his shirt. He had an empty wallet with a few pictures of Sheila and Cathy, a receipt for a shoe sole he had had replaced at the local cobbler's six months ago, a keyring with no keys on it except for the doorkey, a baby sock that he did not remember putting in there, and the package of Blams he had gotten from the machine.

He was wearing tattered skivvies because Sheila was too stubborn to let him go without, but many of the men were buck under their pants. Soon they all stood stripped and anonymous, penises dangling between their legs like forgotten warclubs. Everyone held his card in one hand. Some shuffled their feet as if the floor were cold, although it was not. The faint, impersonally nostalgic odor of alcohol drifted through.

"Stay in line," the doctor with the clipboard was instructing. "Always show your card. Follow instructions. "

The line moved forward. Richards saw there was a cop with each doctor along the way. He dropped his eyes and waited passively.

"Card. "

He gave his card over. The first doctor noted the number, then said: "Open your mouth."

Richards opened it. His tongue was depressed.

The next doctor peered into his pupils with a tiny bright light, and then stared in his ears.

The next placed the cold circle of a stethoscope on his chest. "Cough."

Richards coughed. Down the line a man was being hauled away. He needed the money, they couldn't do it, he'd get his lawyer on them.

The doctor moved his stethoscope. "Cough."

Richards coughed. The doctor turned him around and put the stethoscope on his back.

"Take a deep breath and hold it. " The stethoscope moved.

"Exhale. "

Richards exhaled.

"Move along."

His blood pressure was taken by a grinning doctor with an eyepatch. He was given a short-arm inspection by a bald medico who had several large brown freckles, like liverspots, on his pate. The doctor placed a cool hand between the sac of his scrotum and his upper thigh.

"Cough. "

Richards coughed.

"Move along."

His temperature was taken. He was asked to spit in a cup. Halfway, now. Halfway down the hall. Two or three men had already finished up, and an orderly with a pasty face and rabbit teeth was bringing them their clothes in wire baskets. Half a dozen more had been pulled out of the line and shown the stairs.

"Bend over and spread your cheeks. "

Richards bent and spread. A finger coated with plastic invaded his rectal channel, explored, retreated.

"Move along."

He stepped into a booth with curtains on three sides, like the old voting booths voting booths had been done away with by computer election eleven years ago and urinated in a blue beaker. The doctor took it and put it in a wire rack.

At the next stop he looked at an eye-chart. "Read," the doctor said.

"E-A,L-D,M,F-S,P,M,Z-K,L,A, C,D-U, S, G,A- "

"That's enough. Move along."

He entered another pseudo voting booth and put earphones over his head. He was told to push the white button when he heard something and the red button when he didn't hear it anymore. The sound was very high and faint-like a dog whistle that had been pitch-lowered into just audible human range. Richards pushed buttons until he was told to stop.

He was weighed. His arches were examined. He stood in front of a fluoroscope and put on a lead apron. A doctor, chewing gum and singing something tunelessly under his breath, took several pictures and noted his card number.

Richards had come in with a group of about thirty. Twelve had made it to the far end of the room. Some were dressed and waiting for the elevator. About a dozen more had been hauled out of line. One of them tried to attack the doctor that had cut him and was felled by a policeman wielding a move-along at full charge. The pal fell as if poleaxed.

Richards stood at a low table and was asked if he had had some fifty different diseases. Most of them were respiratory in nature. The doctor looked up sharply when Richards said there was a case of influenza in the family.

"Wife?"

"No. My daughter."

"Age?"

"A year and a half. "

"Have you been immunized? Don't try to lie!" the doctor shouted suddenly, as if Richards had already tried to lie. "We'll check your health stats."

"Immunized July 2023. Booster September 2023. Block health clinic."

"Move along. "

Richards had a sudden urge to reach over the table and pop the maggot's neck. Instead, he moved along.

At the last stop, a severe-looking woman doctor with close-cropped hair and an Electric Juicer plugged into one ear asked him if he was a homosexual.

"No."

"Have you ever been arrested on a felony charge?"

"No."

"Do you have any severe phobias? By that I mean-"

"No. "

"You better listen to the definition," she said with a faint touch of condescension. "I mean-"

"Do I have any unusual and compulsive fears, such as acrophobia or claustrophobia. I don't."

Her lips pressed tightly together, and for a moment she seemed on the verge of sharp comment.

"Do you use or have you used any hallucinogenic or addictive drugs?"

"No."

"Do you have any relatives who have been arrested on charges of crimes against the government or against the Network?"

"No."

"Sign this loyalty oath and this Games Commission release form, Mr., uh, Richards. "

He scratched his signature.

"Show the orderly your card and tell him the number-"

He left her in midsentence and gestured at the bucktoothed orderly with his thumb. "Number twenty-six, Bugs." The orderly brought his things. Richards dressed slowly and went over by the elevator. His anus felt hot and embarrassed, violated, a little slippery with the lubricant the doctor had used.

When they were all bunched together, the elevator door opened. The bulletproof Judas hole was empty this time. The cop was a skinny man with a large wen beside his nose. "Step to the rear," he chanted. "Please step to the rear."

As the doors closed, Richards could see the S's coming in at the far end of the hall. The doctor with the clipboard was approaching them. Then the doors clicked together, cutting off the view.

They rode up to the third floor, and the doors opened on a huge, semi-lit dormitory. Rows and rows of narrow iron-and-canvas cots seemed to stretch out to infinity.

Two cops began to check them out of the elevator, giving them bed numbers. Richards's was 940. The cot had one brown blanket and a very flat pillow. Richards lay down on the cot and let his shoes drop to the floor. His feet dangled over the end; there was nothing to be done about it.

He crossed his arms under his head and stared at the ceiling.

Minus 094 and COUNTING

He was awakened promptly at six the following morning by a very loud buzzer. For a moment he was foggy, disoriented, wondering if Sheila had bought an alarm clock or what. Then it came to him and he sat up.

They were led by groups of fifty into a large industrial bathroom where they showed their cards to a camera guarded by a policeman. Richards went to a blue-tiled booth that contained a mirror, a basin, a shower, a toilet. On the shelf above the basin was a row of toothbrushes wrapped in cellophane, an electric razor, a bar of soap, and a half-used tube of toothpaste. A sign tucked into the corner of the mirror read: *RESPECT THIS PROPERTY!* Beneath it, someone had scrawled: *I ONLY RESPECT MY ASS!*

Richards showered, dried with a towel that topped a pile on the toilet tank, shaved, and brushed.

They were let into a cafeteria where they showed their L D. cards again. Richards took a tray and pushed it down a stainless steel ledge. He was given a box of cornflakes, a greasy dish of home fries, a scoop of scrambled eggs, a piece of toast as cold and hard as a marble gravestone, a halfpint of milk, a cup of muddy coffee (no cream), an envelope of sugar, an envelope of salt, and a pat of fake butter on a tiny square of oily paper.

He wolfed the meal; they all did. For Richards it was the first real food, other than greasy pizza wedges and government pill-commodities, that he had eaten in God knew how long. Yet it was oddly bland, as if some vampire chef in the kitchen had sucked all

the taste out of it and left only brute nutrients.

What were *they* eating this morning? Kelp pills. Fake milk for the baby. A sudden feeling of desperation swelled over him. Christ, when would they start seeing money? Today? Tomorrow? Next week?

Or maybe that was just a gimmick too, a flashy come-on. Maybe there wasn't even any rainbow, let alone a pot of gold.

He sat staring at his empty plate until the seven o'clock buzzer went and they were moved on to the elevators.

Minus 093 and COUNTING

On the fourth floor Richards's group of fifty was herded first into a large, furniture-less room ringed with what looked like letter slots. They showed their cards again, and the elevator doors whooshed closed behind them.

A gaunt man with receding hair with the Games emblem (the silhouette of a human head superimposed over a torch) on his lab coat came into the room.

"Please undress and remove all valuables from your clothes," he said. "Then drop your clothes into one of the incinerator slots. You'll be issued Games coveralls. " He smiled magnanimously. "You may keep the coveralls no matter what your personal Games resolution may be. "

There was some grumbling, but everyone complied.

"Hurry, please," the gaunt man said. He clapped his hands together twice, like a first-grade teacher signaling the end of playtime. "We have lots ahead of us. "

"Are you going to be a contestant, too?" Richards asked.

The gaunt man favored him with a puzzled expression. Somebody in the back snickered.

"Never mind," Richards said, and stepped out of his trousers.

He removed his unvaluable valuables and dumped his shirt, pants, and skivvies into a letter slot. There was a brief, hungry flash of flame from somewhere far below.

The door at the other end opened (there was always a door at the other end; they were like rats in a huge, upward-tending maze: an American maze, Richards reflected), and men trundled in large baskets on wheels, labeled S, M, L, and XL. Richards selected an XL for its length and expected it to hang baggily on his frame, but it fit quite well. The material was soft, clingy, almost like silk, but tougher than silk. A single nylon zipper ran up the front. They were all dark blue, and they all had the Games emblem on the right breast pocket. When the entire group was wearing them, Ben Richards felt as if he had lost his face.

"This way, please," the gaunt man said, and ushered them into another waiting room. The inevitable Free-Vee blared and cackled. "You'll be called in groups of ten."

The door beyond the Free-Vee was topped by another sign reading THIS WAY,

complete with arrow.

They sat down. After a while, Richards got up and went to the window and looked out. They were higher up, but it was still raining. The streets were slick and black and wet. He wondered what Sheila was doing.

Minus 092 and COUNTING

He went through the door, one of a group of ten now, at quarter past ten. They went through single file. Their cards were scanned. There were ten three-sided booths, but these were more substantial. The sides were constructed of drilled soundproof cork paneling. The overhead lighting was soft and indirect. Muzak was emanating from hidden speakers. There was a plush carpet on the floor; Richards's feet felt startled by something that wasn't cement.

The gaunt man had said something to him.

Richards blinked. "Huh?"

"Booth 6," the gaunt man said reprovingly.

"Oh. "

He went to Booth 6. There was a table inside, and a large wall clock mounted at eye level beyond it. On the table was a sharpened G-AIIBM pencil and a pile of unlined paper. Cheap grade, Richards noted.

Standing beside all this was a dazzling computer-age priestess, a tall, Junoesque blonde wearing iridescent short shorts which cleanly outlined the delta-shaped rise of her pudenda. Rouged nipples poked perkily through a silk fishnet blouselet.

"Sit down, please," she said, "I am Rinda Ward, your tester." She held out her hand.

Startled, Richards shook it. "Benjamin Richards."

"May I call you Ben?" The smile was seductive but impersonal. He felt exactly the token rise of desire he was supposed to feel for this well-stacked female with her well-fed body on display. It angered him. He wondered if she got her kicks this way, showing it off to the poor slob on their way to the meat grinder.

"Sure," he said. "Nice tits."

"Thank you," she said, unruffled. He was seated now, looking up while she looked down, and it added an even more embarrassing angle to the picture. "This test today is to your mental faculties what your physical yesterday was to your body. It will be a fairly long test, and your luncheon will be around three this afternoon-assuming you pass." The smile winked on and off.

"The first section is verbal. You have one hour from the time I give you the test booklet. You may ask questions during the examination, and I will answer them if I am allowed to do so. I will not give you any answers to test questions, however. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

She handed him the booklet. There was a large red hand printed on the cover, palm outward. In large red letters beneath, it said:

STOP!

Beneath this: *Do not turn to the first page until your tester instructs you to proceed.*

"Heavy," Richards remarked.

"Pardon me?" The perfectly sculpted eyebrows went up a notch.

"Nothing. "

"You will find an answer sheet when you open your booklet," she recited. "Please make your marks heavy and black. If you wish to change an answer, please erase completely. If you do not know an answer, do *not* guess. Do you understand?"

"Yes. "

"Then please turn to page one and begin. When I say stop, please put your pencil down. You may begin."

He didn't begin. He eyed her body slowly, insolently.

After a moment, she flushed. "Your hour has begun, Ben. You had better-"

"Why," he asked, "does everybody assume that when they are dealing with someone from south of the Canal they are dealing with a horny mental incompetent?"

She was completely flustered now. "I . . . I never . . . "

"No, you never. " He smiled and picked up his pencil. "My Christ, you people are dumb. "

He bent to the test while she was still trying to find an answer or even a reason for his attack; she probably really didn't understand.

The first section required him to mark the letter of the correct fill-in-the-blank answer.

1. One---does not make a summer.
 - a. thought
 - b. beer
 - c. swallow
 - d. crime
 - e. none of these

He filled in his answer sheet rapidly, rarely stopping to deliberate or consider an answer twice. Fill-ins were followed by vocabulary, then by word-contrasts. When he finished, the hour allotted still had fifteen minutes to run. She made him keep his exam-legally he couldn't give it to her until the hour was up-so Richards leaned back and wordlessly ogled her nearly naked body. The silence grew thick and oppressive, charged. He could see her wishing for an overcoat and it pleased him.

When the time was up, she gave him a second exam. On the first page, there was a drawing of a gasoline carburetor. Below:

- You would put this in a
- a. lawnmower
 - b. Free-Vee
 - c. electric hammock
 - d. automobile
 - e. none of these

The third exam was a math diagnostic. He was not so good with figures and he began to sweat lightly as he saw the clock getting away from him. In the end, it was nearly a dead heat. He didn't get a chance to finish the last question. Rinda Ward smiled a trifle too widely as she pulled the test and answer sheet away from him. "Not so fast on that one, Ben."

"But they'll all be right," he said, and smiled back at her. He leaned forward and swatted her lightly on the rump. "Take a shower, kid. You done good. "

She blushed furiously. "I could have you disqualified."

"Bullshit. You could get yourself fired, that's all."

"Get out. Get back in line. " She was snarling, suddenly near tears.

He felt something almost like compassion and choked it back. "You have a nice night tonight, " he said. "You go out and have a nice six-course meal with whoever you're sleeping with this week and think about my kid dying of flu in a shitty threeroom Development apartment. "

He left her staring after him, white-faced.

His group of ten had been cut to six, and they trooped into the next room. It was one-thirty.

Minus 091 and COUNTING

The doctor sitting on the other side of the table in the small booth wore glasses with tiny thick lenses. He had a kind of nasty, pleased grin that reminded Richards of a half-wit he had known as a boy. The kid had enjoyed crouching under the high school bleachers and looking up girls' skirts while he flogged his dog. Richards began to grin.

"Something pleasant?" the doctor asked, flipping up the first inkblot. The nasty grin widened the tiniest bit.

"Yes. You remind me of someone I used to know."

"Oh? Who?"

"Never mind. "

"Very well. What do you see here?"

Richards looked at it. An inflated blood pressure cuff had been cinched to his right arm. A number of electrodes had been pasted to his head, and wires from both his head and arm were jacked into a console beside the doctor. Squiggly lines moved across the face of a computer console.

"Two Negro women. Kissing."

He flipped up another one. "This?"

"A sports car. Looks like a Jag. "

"Do you like gascars?"

Richards shrugged. "I had a model collection when I was a kid."

The doctor made a note and flipped up another card.

"Sick person. She's lying on her side. The shadows on her face look like prison bars. "

"And this last one?"

Richards burst out laughing. "Looks like a pile of shit. " He thought of the doctor, complete with his white coat, conning around under the bleachers, looking up girls' skirts and jacking off, and he began to laugh again. The doctor sat smiling his nasty smile, making the vision more real, thus funnier. At last his giggles tapered off to a snort or two. Richards hiccupped once and was still.

"I don't suppose you'd care to tell me-"

"No," Richards said. "I wouldn't."

"We'll proceed then. Word association. " He didn't bother to explain it. Richards supposed word was getting around. That was good; it would save time.

"Ready?"

"Yes. "

The doctor produced a stopwatch from an inside pocket, clicked the business end of his ballpoint pen, and considered a list in front of him.

"Doctor. "

"Nigger," Richards responded.

"Penis. "

"Cock. "

"Red. "

"Black. "

"Silver. "

"Dagger. "

"Rifle. "

"Murder. "

"Win."

"Money. "

"Sex. "

"Tests. "

"Strike. "

"Out. "

The list continued; they went through over fifty words before the doctor clicked the stem of the stopwatch down and dropped his pen. "Good, " he said. He folded his hands and looked at Richards seriously. "I have a final question, Ben. I won't say that I'll know a lie when I hear it, but the machine you're hooked up to will give a very strong indication one way or the other. Have you decided to try for qualification status in the Games out of any suicidal motivation?"

"No. "

"What is your reason?"

"My little girl's sick. She needs a doctor. Medicine. Hospital care."

The ballpoint scratched. "Anything else?"

Richards was on the verge of saying no (it was none of their business) and then decided he would give it all. Perhaps because the doctor looked like that nearly forgotten dirty boy of his youth. Maybe only because it needed to be said once, to make it coalesce and take concrete shape, as things do when a man forces himself to translate unformed emotional reactions into spoken words.

"I haven't had work for a long time. I want to work again, even if it's only being the sucker-man in a loaded game. I want to work and support my family. I have pride. Do you have pride, Doctor?"

"It goes before a fall," the doctor said. He clicked the tip of his ballpoint in. "If you have nothing to add, Mr. Richards-" He stood up. That, and the switch back to his surname, suggested that the interview was over whether Richards had any more to say or not.

"No."

"The door is down the hall to your right. Good luck.

"Sure," Richards said.

Minus 090 and COUNTING

The group Richards had come in with was now reduced to four. The new waiting room was much smaller, and the whole group had been reduced roughly by the same figure of sixty percent. The last of the Y's and Z's straggled in at four-thirty. At four, an orderly had circulated with a tray of tasteless sandwiches. Richards got two of them and sat munching, listening to a pal named Rettenmund as he regaled Richards and a few others with a seemingly inexhaustible fund of dirty stories.

When the whole group was together, they were shunted into an elevator and lifted to the fifth floor. Their quarters were made up of a large common room, a communal lavatory, and the inevitable sleep-factory with its rows of cots. They were informed that a

cafeteria down the hall would serve a hot meal at seven o'clock.

Richards sat still for a few minutes, then got up and walked over to the cop stationed by the door they had come in through. "Is there a telephone, pal?" He didn't expect they would be allowed to phone out, but the cop merely jerked his thumb toward the hall.

Richards pushed the door open a crack and peered out. Sure enough, there it was. Pay phone.

He looked at the cop again. "Listen, if you loan me fifty cents for the phone, I'll--
"Screw off, Jack."

Richards held his temper. "I want to call my wife. Our kid is sick. Put yourself in my place, for Christ's sake."

The cop laughed: a short, chopping, ugly sound. "You types are all the same. A story for every day of the year. Technicolor and 3-D on Christmas and Mother's Day. "

"You bastard," Richards said, and something in his eyes, the stance of his shoulders suddenly made the cop shift his gaze to the wall. "Aren't you married yourself? Didn't you ever find yourself strapped and have to borrow, even if it tasted like shit in your mouth?"

The cop suddenly jammed a hand into his jumper pocket and came up with a fistful of plastic coins. He thrust two New Quarters at Richards, stuffed the rest of the money back in his pocket, and grabbed a handful of Richards's tunic. "If you send anybody else over here because Charlie Grady is a soft touch, I'll beat your sonofabitching brains out, maggot."

"Thank you," Richards said steadily. "For the loan."

Charlie Grady laughed and let him go. Richards went out into the hall, picked up the phone, and dropped his money into the horn. It banged hollowly and for a moment nothing happened--oh, *Jesus, all for nothing-but then* the dial tone came. He punched the number of the fifth floor hall phone slowly, hoping the Jenner bitch down the hall wouldn't answer. She'd just as soon yell wrong number when she recognized his voice and he would lose his money.

It rang six times, and then an unfamiliar voice said: "Hello?"

"I want to talk to Sheila Richards in SC."

"I think she went out," the voice said. It grew insinuating. "She walks up and down the block, you know. They got a sick kid. The man there is shiftless."

"Just knock on the door," he said, cotton mouthed.

"Hold on."

The phone on the other end crashed against the wall as the unfamiliar voice let it dangle. Far away, dim, as if in a dream, he heard the unfamiliar voice knocking and yelling: "Phone! Phone for ya, Missus Richards!"

Half a minute later the unfamiliar voice was back on the line. "She ain't there. I can hear the kid yellin, but she ain't there. Like I say, she keeps an eye out when the fleet's

in." The voice giggled.

Richards wished he could teleport himself through the phone line and pop out on the other end, like an evil genie from a black bottle, and choke the unfamiliar voice until his eyeballs popped out and rolled on the floor.

"Take a message," he said. "Write it on the wall if you have to."

"Ain't got no pencil. I'm hangin up. G'bye."

"Wait!" Richards yelled, panic in his voice.

"I'm . . . just a second. " Grudgingly the voice said, "She comin up the stairs now."

Richards collapsed sweatily against the wall. A moment later Sheila's voice was in his ear, quizzical, wary, a little frightened: "Hello?"

"Sheila." He closed his eyes, letting the wall support him.

"Ben. Ben, is that you? Are you all right?"

"Yeah. Fine. Cathy. Is she-"

"The same. The fever isn't so bad but she sounds so *croupy*. Ben, I think there's water in her lungs. What if she has pneumonia?"

"It'll be all right. It'll be all right."

"I-" She paused, a long pause. "I hate to leave her, but I had to. Ben, I turned two tricks this morning. I'm sorry. But I got her some medicine at the drug. Some good medicine." Her voice had taken on a zealous, evangelical lilt.

"That stuff is shit," he said. "Listen: No more, Sheila. Please. I think I'm in hems. Really. They can't cut many more guys because there's too many shows. There's got to be enough cannon fodder to go around. And they give advances, I think. Mrs. Upshaw-"

"She looked awful in black," Sheila broke in tonelessly.

"Never mind that. You stay with Cathy, Sheila. No more tricks."

"All right. I won't go out again." But he didn't believe her voice. *Fingers crossed, Sheila?* "I love you, Ben."

"And I lo-"

"Three minutes are up," the operator broke in. "If you wish to continue, please deposit one New Quarter or three old quarters."

"Wait a second!" Richards yelled. "Get off the goddam line, bitch. You-"

The empty hum of a broken connection.

He threw the receiver. It flew the length of its silver cord, then rebounded, striking the wall and then penduluming slowly back and forth like some strange snake that had bitten once and then died.

Somebody has to pay, Richards thought numbly as he walked back. *Somebody has* to.

Minus 089 and COUNTING

They were quartered on the fifth floor until ten o'clock the following day, and Richards was nearly out of his mind with anger, worry, and frustration when a young and slightly faggoty-looking pal in a skintight Games uniform asked them to please step into the elevator. They were perhaps three hundred in all: over sixty of their number had been removed soundlessly and painlessly the night before. One of them had been the kid with the inexhaustible fund of dirty jokes.

They were taken to a small auditorium on the sixth floor in groups of fifty. The auditorium was very luxurious, done in great quantities of red plush. There was an ashtray built into the realwood arm of every seat, and Richards hauled out his crumpled pack of Blams. He tapped his ashes on the floor.

There was a small stage at the front, and in the center of that, a lectern. A pitcher of water stood on it.

At about fifteen minutes past ten, the faggoty-looking fellow walked to the lectern and said: "I'd like you to meet Arthur M. Burns, Assistant Director of Games. "

"Huzzah," somebody behind Richards said in a sour voice.

A portly man with a tonsure surrounded by gray hair strode to the lectern, pausing and cocking his head as he arrived, as if to appreciate a round of applause which only he could hear. Then he smiled at them, a broad, twinkling smile that seemed to transform him into a pudgy, aging Cupid in a business suit.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've made it."

There was a huge collective sigh, followed by some laughter and back-slapping. More cigarettes were lit up.

"Huzzah," the sour voice repeated.

"Shortly, your program assignments and seventh floor room numbers will be passed out. The executive producers of your particular programs will explain further exactly what is expected of you. But before that happens, I just want to repeat my congratulations and tell you that I find you to be a courageous, resourceful group, refusing to live on the public dole when you have means at your disposal to acquit yourselves as men, and, may I add personally, as true heroes of our time.

"Bullshit," the sour voice remarked.

"Furthermore, I speak for the entire Network when I wish you good luck and Godspeed." Arthur M. Burns chuckled porkily and rubbed his hands together. "Well, I know you're anxious to get those assignments, so I'll spare you any more of my jabber."

A side door popped open, and a dozen Games ushers wearing red tunics came into the auditorium. They began to call out names. White envelopes were passed out, and soon they littered the floor like confetti. Plastic assignment cards were read, exchanged with new acquaintances. There were muffled groans, cheers, catcalls. Arthur M. Burns presided over it all from his podium, smiling benevolently.

-That Christly *How Hot Can You Take It*, Jesus I hate the heat

-the show's a goddam two-bitter, comes on right after the flictoons, for God's sake

-*Treadmill to Bucks*, gosh, I didn't know my heart was

-I was hoping I'd get it but I didn't really think

-Hey Jake, you ever seen this *Swim the Crocodiles*? I thought

-nothing like I expected

-I don't think you can

-Miserable goddam

-This *Run For Your Guns*-

"Benjamin Richards! Ben Richards?"

"Here!"

He was handed a plain white envelope and tore it open. His fingers were shaking slightly and it took him two tries to get the small plastic card out. He frowned down at it, not understanding. No program assignment was punched on it. The card read simply: ELEVATOR SIX.

He put the card in his breast pocket with his I. D. and left the auditorium. The first five elevators at the end of the hall were doing a brisk business as they ferried the following week's contestants up to the seventh floor. There were four others standing by the closed doors of Elevator 6, and Richards recognized one of them as the owner of the sour voice.

"What's this?" Richards asked. "Are we getting the gate?"

The man with the sour voice was about twenty-five, not bad looking. One arm was withered, probably by polio, which had come back strong in 2005. It had done especially well in Co-Op.

"No such luck," he said, and laughed emptily. "I think we're getting the bigmoney assignments. The ones where they do more than just land you in the hospital with a stroke or put out an eye or cut off an arm or two. The ones where they kill you. Prime time, baby."

They were joined by a sixth pal, a good-looking kid who was blinking at everything in a surprised way.

"Hello, sucker," the man with the sour voice said.

At eleven o'clock, after all the others had been taken away, the doors of Elevator 6 popped open. There was a cop riding in the Judas hole again.

"See?" The man with the sour voice said. "We're dangerous characters. Public enemies. They're gonna rub us out. " He made a tough gangster face and sprayed the bulletproof compartment with an imaginary Sten gun. The cop stared at him woodenly.

Minus 088 and COUNTING

The waiting room on the eighth floor was very small, very plush, very intimate, very private. Richards had it all to himself.

At the end of the elevator ride, three of them had been promptly whisked away down a plushly carpeted corridor by three cops. Richards, the man with the sour voice, and the kid who blinked a lot had been taken here.

A receptionist who vaguely reminded Richards of one of the old tee-vee sex stars (Liz Kelly? Grace Taylor?) he had watched as a kid smiled at the three of them when they came in. She was sitting at a desk in an alcove, surrounded by so many potted plants that she might have been in an Ecuadorian foxhole. "Mr. Jansky," she said with a blinding smile. "Go right in."

The kid who blinked a lot went into the inner sanctum. Richards and the man with the sour voice, whose name was Jimmy Laughlin, made wary conversation. Richards discovered that Laughlin lived only three blocks away from him, on Dock Street. He had held a part-time job until the year before as an engine wiper for General Atomics, and had then been fired for taking part in a sit-down strike protesting leaky radiation shields.

"Well, I'm alive, anyway," he said. "According to those maggots, that's all that counts. I'm sterile, of course. That don't matter. That's one of the little risks you run for the princely sum of seven New Bucks a day."

When G-A had shown him the door, the withered arm had made it even tougher to get a job. His wife had come down with bad asthma two years before, was now bed-ridden. "Finally I decided to go for the big brass ring," Laughlin said with a bitter smile. "Maybe I'll get a chance to push a few creeps out a high window before McCone's boys get me."

"Do you think it really is-"

"*The Running Man*? Bet your sweet ass. Give me one of those cruddy cigarettes, pal."

Richards gave him one.

The door opened and the kid who blinked a lot came out on the arm of a beautiful dolly wearing two handkerchiefs and a prayer. The kid gave them a small, nervous smile as they went by.

"Mr. Laughlin? Would you go in, please?"

So Richards was alone, unless you counted the receptionist, who had disappeared into her foxhole again.

He got up and went over to the free cigarette machine in the corner. Laughlin must be right, he reflected. The cigarette machine dispensed Dokes. They must have hit the big leagues. He got a package of Blams, sat down, and lit one up.

About twenty minutes later Laughlin came out with an ash-blond on his arm. "A friend of mine from the car pool," he said to Richards, and pointed at the blond. She dimpled dutifully. Laughlin looked pained. "At least the bastard talks straight," he said to Richards. "See you."

He went out. The receptionist poked her head out of her foxhole. "Mr. Richards? Would you step in, please?"

He went in.

Minus 087 and COUNTING

The inner office looked big enough to play killball in. It was dominated by a huge, one-wall picture window that looked west over the homes of the middle class, the dockside warehouses and oil tanks, and Harding Lake itself. Both sky and water were pearl-gray; it was still raining. A large tanker far out was chugging from right to left.

The man behind the desk was of middle height and very black. So black, in fact, that for a moment Richards was struck with unreality. He might have stepped out of a minstrel show.

"Mr. Richards. " He rose and extended his hand over the desk. When Richards did not shake it, he did not seem particularly flustered. He merely took his hand back to himself and sat down.

A sling chair was next to the desk. Richards sat down and butted his smoke in an ashtray with the Games emblem embossed on it.

"I'm Dan Killian, Mr. Richards. By now you've probably guessed why you've been brought here. Our records and your test scores both say you're a bright boy. "

Richards folded his hands and waited.

"You've been slated as a contestant on *The Running Man*, Mr. Richards. It's our biggest show; it's the most lucrative-and dangerous-for the men involved. I've got your final consent form here on my desk. I've no doubt that you'll sign it, but first I want to tell you why you've been selected and I want you to understand fully what you're getting into."

Richards said nothing.

Killian pulled a dossier onto the virgin surface of his desk blotter. Richards saw that it had his name typed on the front. Killian flipped it open.

"Benjamin Stuart Richards. Age twenty-eight, born August 8, 1997, city of Harding. Attended South City Manual Trades from September of 2011 until December of 2013. Suspended twice for failure to respect authority. I believe you kicked the assistant principal in the upper thigh once while his back was turned?"

"Crap," Richards said. "I kicked him in the ass."

Killian nodded. "However you say, Mr. Richards. You married Sheila Richards, nee Gordon, at the age of sixteen. Old-style lifetime contract. Rebel all the way, uh? No union affiliation due to your refusal to sign the Union Oath of Fealty and the Wage Control Articles. I believe that you referred to Area Governor Johnsbury as 'a corn-holing sonofabitch.' "

"Yes," Richards said.

"Your work record has been spotty and you've been fired . . . let's see . . . a total of six times for such things as insubordination, insulting superiors, and abusive criticism of authority."

Richards shrugged.

"In short, you are regarded as antiauthoritarian and antisocial. You're a deviate who has been intelligent enough to stay out of prison and serious trouble with the government, and you're not hooked on anything. A staff psychologist reports you saw lesbians, excrement, and a pollutive gas vehicle in various inkblots. He also reports a high, unexplained degree of hilarity-

"He reminded me of a kid I used to know. He liked to hide under the bleachers at school and whack off. The kid, I mean. I don't know what your doctor likes to do. "

"I see." Killian smiled briefly, white teeth glittering in all that darkness, and went back to his folder. "You held racial responses outlawed by the Racial Act of 2004. You made several rather violent responses during the word-association test. "

"I'm here on violent business," Richards said.

"To be sure. And yet we-and here I speak in a larger sense than the Games Authority; I speak in the national sense-view these responses with extreme disquiet. "

"Afraid someone might tape a stick of Irish to your ignition system some night?" Richards asked, grinning. .

Killian wet his thumb reflectively and turned to the next sheet. "Fortunately for us-you've given a hostage to fortune, Mr. Richards. You have a daughter named Catherine, eighteen months. Was that a mistake?" He smiled frostily.

"Planned," Richards said without rancor. "I was working for G-A then. Somehow, some of my sperm lived through it. A jest of God, maybe. With the world the way it is, I sometimes think we must have been off our trolley."

"At any rate, you're here," Killian said, continuing to smile his cold smile. "And next Tuesday you will appear on *The Running Man*. You've seen the program?"

"Yes. "

"Then you know it's the biggest thing going on Free-Vee. It's filled with chances for viewer participation, both vicarious and actual. I am executive producer of the program. "

"That's really wonderful," Richards said.

"The program is one of the surest ways the Network has of getting rid of embryo troublemakers such as yourself, Mr. Richards. We've been on for six years. To date, we have no survivals. To be brutally honest, we expect to have none."

"Then you're running a crooked table," Richards said flatly.

Killian seemed more amused than horrified. "But we're not. You keep forgetting you're an anachronism, Mr. Richards. People won't be in the bars and hotels or gathering in the cold in front of appliance stores rooting for you to get away. Goodness! no. They want to see you wiped out, and they'll help if they can. The more messy the better. And there is McCone to contend with. Evan McCone and the Hunters."

"They sound like a neo-group," Richards said.

"McCone never loses," Killian said.

Richards grunted.

"You'll appear live Tuesday night. Subsequent programs will be a patch-up of tapes, films, and live tricastings when possible. We've been known to interrupt scheduled broadcasting when a particularly resourceful contestant is on the verge of reaching his . . . personal Waterloo, shall we say.

"The rules are simplicity themselves. You-or your surviving family-will win one hundred New Dollars for each hour you remain free. We stake you to forty-eight hundred dollars conning money on the assumption that you will be able to fox the Hunters for forty-eight hours. The unspent balance refundable, of course, if you fall before the forty-eight hours are up. You're given a twelve-hour head start. If you last thirty days, you win the Grand Prize. One billion New Dollars."

Richards threw back his head and laughed.

"My sentiments exactly," Killian said with a dry smile. "Do you have any questions?"

"Just one," Richards said, leaning forward. The traces of humor had vanished from his face completely. "How would you like to be the one out there, on the run?"

Killian laughed. He held his belly and huge mahogany laughter rolled richly in the room. "Oh . . . Mr. Richards . . . you must excuse m-me-"and he went off into another gale.

At last, dabbing his eyes with a large white handkerchief, Killian seemed to get himself under control. "You see, not only are you possessed of a sense of humor, Mr. Richards. You . . . I-" He choked new laughter down. "Please excuse me. You've struck my funnybone."

"I see I have."

"Other questions?"

"No."

"Very good. There will be a staff meeting before the program. If any questions should develop in that fascinating mind of yours, please hold them until then." Killian pressed a button on his desk.

"Spare me the cheap snatch," Richards said. "I'm married."

Killian's eyebrows went up. "Are you quite sure? Fidelity is admirable, Mr. Richards, but it's a long time from Friday to Tuesday. And considering the fact that you may never see your wife again-"

"I'm married."

"Very well. " He nodded to the girl in the doorway and she disappeared. "Anything we *can* do for you, Mr. Richards? You'll have a private suite on the ninth floor, and meal requests will be filled within reason."

"A good bottle of bourbon. And a telephone so I can talk to my w-"

"Ah, no, I'm sorry, Mr. Richards. The bourbon we can do. But once you sign this release form,"-he pushed it over to Richards along with a pen-"you're incommunicado

until Tuesday. Would you care to reconsider the girl?"

"No," Richards said, and scrawled his name on the dotted line. "But you better make that two bottles of bourbon."

"Certainly." Killian stood and offered his hand again.

Richards disregarded it again, and walked out.

Killian looked after him and with blank eyes. He was not smiling.

Minus 086 and COUNTING

The receptionist popped promptly out of her foxhole as Richards walked through and handed him an envelope. On the front:

Mr. Richards,

I suspect one of the things that you will not mention during our interview is the fact that you need money badly right now. Is it not true?

Despite rumors to the contrary, Games Authority does not give advances. You must not look upon yourself as a contestant with all the glitter that word entails. You are not a Free-Vee star but only a working joe who is being paid extremely well for undertaking a dangerous job.

However, Games Authority has no rule which forbids me from extending you a personal loan. Inside you will find ten percent of your advance salary-not in New Dollars, I should caution you, but in Games Certificates redeemable for dollars. Should you decide to send these certificates to your wife, as I suspect you will, she will find they have one advantage over New Dollars; a reputable doctor will accept them as legal tender, while a quack will not.

Sincerely,

Dan Killian

Richards opened the envelope and pulled out a thick book of coupons with the Games symbol on the vellum cover. Inside were forty-eight coupons with a face value of ten New Dollars each. Richards felt an absurd wave of gratitude toward Killian sweep him and crushed it. He had no doubt that Killian would attach four hundred and eighty dollars of his advance money, and besides that, four-eighty was a pretty goddam cheap price to pay for insurance on the big show, the continued happiness of the client, and Killian's own big-money job.

"Shit," he said.

The receptionist poked attentively out of her foxhole. "Did you say something, Mr.

Richards?"

"No. Which way to the elevators?"

Minus 085 and COUNTING

The suite was sumptuous.

Wall-to-wall carpeting almost deep enough to breast stroke in covered the floors of all three rooms: living room, bedroom, and bath. The Free-Vee was turned off; blessed silence prevailed. There were flowers in the vases, and on the wall next to the door was a button discreetly marked SERVICE. The service would be fast, too, Richards thought cynically. There were two cops stationed outside his ninth floor suite just to make sure he didn't go wandering.

He pushed the service button, and the door opened. "Yes, Mr. Richards," one of the cops said. Richards fancied he could see how sour that *Mister* tasted in his mouth. "The bourbon you asked for will be—"

"It's not that," Richards said. He showed the cop the book of coupons Killian had left for him. "I want you to take this somewhere."

"Just write the name and address, Mr. Richards, and I'll see that it's delivered."

Richards found the cobbler's receipt and wrote his address and Sheila's name on the back of it. He gave the tattered paper and the coupon book to the cop. He was turning away when a new thought struck Richards. "Hey! Just a second!"

The cop turned back, and Richards plucked the coupon book out of his hand. He opened it to the first coupon, and tore one tenth of it along the perforated line. Equivalent value: One New Dollar.

"Do you know a cop named Charlie Grady?"

"Charlie?" The cop looked at him warily. "Yeah, I know Charlie. He's got fifth-floor duty. "

"Give him this." Richards handed him the coupon section. "Tell him the extra fifty cents is his usurer's fee."

The cop fumed away again, and Richards called him back once more.

"You'll bring me written receipts from my wife and from Grady, won't you?"

Disgust showed openly on the cop's face. "Ain't you the trusting soul?"

"Sure," Richards said, smiling thinly. "You guys taught me that. South of the Canal you taught me all about it."

"It's gonna be fun," the cop said, "watching them go after you. I'm gonna be glued to my Free-Vee with a beer in each hand."

"Just bring me the receipts," Richards said, and closed the door gently in the cop's face.

The bourbon came twenty minutes later, and Richards told the surprised delivery man

that he would like a couple of thick novels sent up.

"Novels?"

"Books. You know. Read. Words. Movable press." Richards pantomimed flipping pages.

"Yes, sir," he said doubtfully. "Do you have a dinner order?"

Christ, the shit was getting thick. He was drowning in it. Richards saw a sudden fantasy-cartoon: Man falls into outhouse hole and drowns in pink shit that smells like Chanel No. 5. The kicker: It still tastes like shit.

"Steak. Peas. Mashed potatoes. " God, what was Sheila sitting down to? A protein pill and a cup of fake coffee? "Milk. Apple cobbler with cream. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. Would you like-"

"No. " Richards said, suddenly distraught. "No. Get out. " He had no appetite. Absolutely none.

Minus 084 and COUNTING

With sour amusement Richards thought that the Games bellboy had taken him literally about the novels: He must have picked them out with a ruler as his only guide. Anything over an inch and a half is okay. He had brought Richards three books he had never heard of: two golden oldies titled *God Is an Englishman* and *Not as a Stranger* and a huge tome written three years ago called *The Pleasure of Serving*. Richards peeked into that one first and wrinkled his nose. Poor boy makes good in General Atomics. Rises from engine wiper to gear tradesman. Takes night courses (on what? Richards wondered, Monopoly money?). Falls in love with beautiful girl (apparently syphilis hadn't rotted her nose off yet) at a block orgy. Promoted to junior technico following dazzling aptitude scores. Three-year marriage contract follows, and-

Richards threw the book across the room. *God Is an Englishman* was a little better. He poured himself a bourbon on the rocks and settled into the story.

By the time the discreet knock came, he was three hundred pages in, and pretty well in the bag to boot. One of the bourbon bottles was empty. He went to the door holding the other in his hand. The cop was there. "Your receipts, Mr. Richards," he said, and pulled the door closed.

Sheila had not written anything, but had sent one of Cathy's baby pictures. He looked at it and felt the easy tears of drunkenness prick his eyes. He put it in his pocket and looked at the other receipt. Charlie Grady had written briefly on the back of a traffic ticket form:

Thanks, maggot. Get stuffed.
Charlie Grady

Richards snickered and let the paper flutter to the carpet. "Thanks, Charlie," he said to the empty room. "I needed that."

He looked at the picture of Cathy again, a tiny, red-faced infant of four days at the

time of the photo, screaming her head off, swimming in a white cradle dress that Sheila had made herself. He felt the tears lurking and made himself think of good old Charlie's thank-you note. He wondered if he could kill the entire second bottle before he passed out, and decided to find out.

He almost made it.

Minus 083 and COUNTING

Richards spent Saturday living through a huge hangover. He was almost over it by Saturday evening, and ordered two more bottles of bourbon with supper. He got through both of them and woke up in the pale early light of Sunday morning seeing large caterpillars with flat, murderous eyes crawling slowly down the far bedroom wall. He decided then it would be against his best interests to wreck his reactions completely before Tuesday, and laid off the booze.

This hangover was slower dissipating. He threw up a good deal, and when there was nothing left to throw up, he had dry heaves. These tapered off around six o'clock Sunday evening, and he ordered soup for dinner. No bourbon. He asked for a dozen neo-rock discs to play on the suite's sound system, and tired of them quickly.

He went to bed early. And slept poorly.

He spent most of Monday on the tiny glassed-in terrace that opened off the bedroom. He was very high above the waterfront now, and the day was a series of sun and showers that was fairly pleasant. He read two novels, went to bed early again, and slept a little better. There was an unpleasant dream: Sheila was dead, and he was at her funeral. Somebody had propped her up in her coffin and stuffed a grotesque corsage of New Dollars in her mouth. He tried to run to her and remove the obscenity; hands grabbed him from behind. He was being held by a dozen cops. One of them was Charlie Grady. He was grinning and saying: "This is what happens to losers, maggot. " They were putting their pistols to his head when he woke up.

"Tuesday," he said to no one at all, and rolled out of bed. The fashionable GA sunburst clock on the far wall said it was nine minutes after seven. The live tricast of *The Running Man* would be going out all over North America in less than eleven hours. He felt a hot drop of fear in his stomach. In twenty-three hours he would be fair game.

He had a long hot shower, dressed in his coverall, ordered ham and eggs for breakfast. He also got the bellboy on duty to send up a carton of Blams.

He spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon reading quietly. It was two o'clock on the nose when a single formal rap came at the door. Three police and Arthur M. Burns, looking potty and more than a bit ridiculous in a Games singlet, walked in. All of the cops were carrying move-alongs.

"It's time for your final briefing, Mr. Richards," Burns said. "Would you-"

"Sure," Richards said. He marked his place in the book he had been reading and put it down on the coffee table. He was suddenly terrified, close to panic, and he was very glad there was no perceptible shake in his fingers.

Minus 82 and COUNTING

The tenth floor of the Games Building was a great deal different from the ones below, and Richards knew that he was meant to go no higher. The fiction of upward mobility which started in the grimy street-level lobby ended here on the tenth floor. This was the broadcast facility.

The hallways were wide, white, and stark. Bright yellow go-carts powered by G-A solar-cell motors potted here and there, carrying loads of Free-Vee technicians to studios and control rooms.

A cart was waiting for them when the elevator stopped, and the five of them—Richards, Burns, and cops—climbed aboard. Necks craned and Richards was pointed out several times as they made the trip. One woman in a yellow Games shorts-and-halter outfit winked and blew Richards a kiss. He gave her the finger.

They seemed to travel miles, through dozens of interconnecting corridors. Richards caught glimpses into at least a dozen studios, one of them containing the infamous treadmill seen on *Treadmill to Bucks*. A tour group from uptown was trying it out and giggling.

At last they came to a stop before a door which read *THE RUNNING MAN: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE*. Burns waved to the guard in the bulletproof booth beside the door and then looked at Richards.

"Put your ID in the slot between the guard booth and the door," Burns said.

Richards did it. His card disappeared into the slot, and a small light went on in the guard booth. The guard pushed a button and the door slid open. Richards got back into the cart and they were trundled into the room beyond.

"Where's my card?" Richards asked.

"You don't need it anymore. "

They were in a control room. The console section was empty except for a bald technician who was sitting in front of a blank monitor screen, reading numbers into a microphone.

Across to the left, Dan Killian and two men Richards hadn't met were sitting around a table with frosty glasses. One of them was vaguely familiar, too pretty to be a technician.

"Hello, Mr. Richards. Hello, Arthur. Would you care for a soft drink, Mr. Richards?"

Richards found he was thirsty; it was quite warm on ten in spite of the many air-conditioning units he had seen. "I'll have a Rooty-Toot," he said.

Killian rose, went to a cold-cabinet, and snapped the lid from a plastic squeezebottle. Richards sat down and took the bottle with a nod.

"Mr. Richards, this gentleman on my right is Fred Victor, the director of *The Running Man*. This other fellow, as I'm sure you know, is Bobby Thompson. "

Thompson, of course. Host and emcee of *The Running Man*. He wore a natty green

tunic, slightly iridescent, and sported a mane of hair that was silvery-attractive enough to be suspect.

"Do you dye it?" Richards asked.

Thompson's impeccable eyebrows went up. "I beg pardon?"

"Never mind," Richards said.

"You'll have to make allowances for Mr. Richards," Killian said, smiling. "He seems afflicted with an extreme case of the nudes."

"Quite understandable," Thompson said, and lit a cigarette. Richards felt a wave of unreality surge over him. "Under the circumstances. "

"Come over here, Mr. Richards, if you please," Victor said, taking charge. He led Richards to the bank of screens on the other side of the room. The technico had finished with his numbers and had left the room.

Victor punched two buttons and left-right views of *The Running Man* set sprang into view.

"We don't do a run-through here," Victor said. "We think it detracts from spontaneity. Bobby just wings it, and he does a pretty damn good job. We go on at six o'clock, Harding time. Bobby is center stage on that raised blue dais. He does the lead-in, giving a rundown on you. The monitor will flash a couple of still pictures. You'll be in the wings at stage right, flanked by two Games guards. They'll come on with you, armed with riot guns. Move-alongs would be more practical if you decided to give trouble, but the riot guns are good theater."

"Sure," Richards said.

"There will be a lot of booing from the audience. We pack it that way because it's good theater. Just like the killball matches."

"Are they going to shoot me with fake bullets?" Richards asked. "You could put a few blood bags on me, to spatter on cue. That would be good theater, too. "

"Pay attention, please," Victor said. "You and the guards go on when your name is called. Bobby will, uh, interview you. Feel free to express yourself as colorfully as you please. It's all good theater. Then, around six-ten, just before the first Network promo, you'll be given your stake money and exit-sans guards-at stage left. Do you understand?"

"Yes. What about Laughlin?"

Victor frowned and lit a cigarette. "He comes on after you, at six-fifteen. We run two contests simultaneously because often one of the contestants is, uh, inadequate at staying ahead of the Hunters."

"With the kid as a back-up?"

"Mr. Jansky? Yes. But none of this concerns you, Mr. Richards. When you exit stage left, you'll be given a tape machine which is about the size of a box of popcorn. It weighs six pounds. With it, you'll be given sixty tape, clips which are about four inches long. The equipment will fit inside a coat pocket without a bulge. It's a triumph of modern technology."

"Swell. "

Victor pressed his lips together. "As Dan has already told you, Richards, you're a contestant only for the masses. Actually, you are a working man and you should view your role in that light. The tape cartridges can be dropped into any mailslot and they will be delivered express to us so we can edit them for airing that night. Failure to deposit two clips per day will result in legal default of payment. "

"But I'll still be hunted down."

"Right. So mail those tapes. They won't give away your location; the Hunters operate independently of the broadcasting section."

Richards had his doubts about that but said nothing.

"After we give you the equipment, you will be escorted to the street elevator. This gives directly on Rampart Street. Once you're there, you're on your own." He paused. "Questions?"

"No. "

"Then Mr. Killian has one more money detail to straighten out with you."

They walked back to where Dan Killian was in conversation with Arthur M. Burns. Richards asked for another Rooty-Toot and got it.

"Mr. Richards," Killian said, twinkling his teeth at him. "As you know, you leave the studio unarmed. But this is not to say you cannot arm yourself by fair means or foul. Goodness! no. You-or your estate-will be paid an additional one hundred dollars for any Hunter or representative of the law you should happen to dispatch-"

"I know, don't tell me," Richards said. "It's good theater."

Killian smiled delightedly. "How very astute of you. Yes. However, try not to bag any innocent bystanders. That's not kosher."

Richards said nothing.

"The other aspect of the program-"

"The stoolies and independent cameramen. I know."

"They're not stoolies; they're good North American citizens." It was difficult to tell whether Killian's tone of hurt was real or ironic. "Anyway, there's an 800 number for anyone who spots you. A verified sighting pays one hundred New Dollars. A sighting which results in a kill pays a thousand. We pay independent cameramen ten dollars a foot and up-"

"Retire to scenic Jamaica on blood money, " Richards cried, spreading his arms wide. "Get your picture on a hundred 3-D weeklies. Be the idol of millions. Just holograph for details."

"That's enough," Killian said quietly. Bobby Thompson was buffing his fingernails; Victor had wandered out and could be faintly heard yelling at someone about camera angles.

Killian pressed a button. "Miss Jones? Ready for you, sweets." He stood up and

offered his hand again. "Make-up next, Mr. Richards. Then the lighting runs. You'll be quartered offstage and we won't meet again before you go on. So-'

"It's been grand," Richards said. He declined the hand.

Miss Jones led him out. It was 2:30.

Minus 081 and COUNTING

Richards stood in the wings with a cop on each side, listening to the studio audience as they frantically applauded Bobby Thompson. He was nervous. He jeered at himself for it, but the nervousness was a fact. Jeering would not make it go away. It was 6:01.

"Tonight's first contestant is a shrewd, resourceful man from south of the Canal in our own home city," Thompson was saying. The monitor faded to a stark portrait of Richards in his baggy gray workshirt, taken by a hidden camera days before. The background looked like the fifth floor waiting room. It had been retouched, Richards thought, to make his eyes deeper, his forehead a little lower, his cheeks more shadowed. His mouth had been given a jeering, curled expression by some technico's airbrush. All in all, the Richards on the monitor was terrifying-the angel of urban death, brutal, not very bright, but possessed of a certain primitive animal cunning. The uptown apartment dweller's boogeyman.

"This man is Benjamin Richards, age twenty-eight. Know the face well! In a half-hour, this man will be on the prowl. A verified sighting brings you one hundred New Dollars! A sighting which results in a kill results in one thousand New Dollars for you!"

Richards's mind was wandering; it came back to the point with a mighty snap.

". . . and this is the woman that Benjamin Richards's award will go to, if and when he is brought down!"

The picture dissolved to a still of Sheila . . . but the airbrush had been at work again, this time wielded with a heavier hand. The results were brutal. The sweet, not-so-good-looking face had been transformed into that of a vapid slattern. Full, pouting lips, eyes that seemed to glitter with avarice, a suggestion of a double chin fading down to what appeared to be bare breasts.

"You bastard!" Richards grated. He lunged forward, but powerful arms held him back.

"Simmer down, buddy. It's only a picture."

A moment later he was half led, half dragged onstage.

The audience reaction was immediate. The studio was filled with screamed cries of "Boo! Cycle bum! " "Get out, you creep! " "Kill him! Kill the bastard! " "You eat it!" "Get out, get out! "

Bobby Thompson held his arms up and shouted good-naturedly for quiet. "Let's hear what he's got to say." The audience quieted, but reluctantly.

Richards stood bull-like under the hot lights with his head lowered. He knew he was projecting exactly the aura of hate and defiance that they wanted him to project, but he

could not help it.

He stared at Thompson with hard, red-rimmed eyes. "Somebody is going to eat their own balls for that picture of my wife," he said.

"Speak up, speak up, Mr. Richards!" Thompson cried with just the right note of contempt. "Nobody will hurt you . . . at least, not *yet*."

More screams and hysterical vituperation from the audience.

Richards suddenly wheeled to face them, and they quieted as if slapped. Women stared at him with frightened, half-sexual expressions. Men grinned up at him with blood-hate in their eyes.

"You bastards! " He cried. "If you want to see somebody die so bad, why don't you kill each other?"

His final words were drowned in more screams. People from the audience (perhaps paid to do so) were trying to get onstage. The police were holding them back. Richards faced them, knowing how he must look.

"Thank you, Mr. Richards, for those words of wisdom." The contempt was palpable now, and the crowd, nearly silent again, was eating it up. "Would you like to tell our audience in the studio and at home how long you think you can hold out?"

"I want to tell everybody in the studio and at home that that wasn't my wife! That was a cheap fake-"

The crowd drowned him out. Their screams of hate had reached a near fever pitch. Thompson waited nearly a minute for them to quiet a little, and then repeated: "How long do you expect to hold out, *Mister Richards*?"

"I expect to go the whole thirty," Richards said coolly. "I don't think you've got anybody who can take me."

More screaming. Shaken fists. Someone threw a tomato.

Bobby Thompson faced the audience again and cried: "With those last cheap words of bravado, Mr. Richards will be led from our stage. Tomorrow at noon, the hunt begins. *Remember his face!* It may be next to you on a pneumo bus . . . in a jet plane . . . at a 3-D rack . . . in your local killball arena. Tonight he's in Harding. Tomorrow in New York? Boise? Albuquerque? Columbus? Skulking outside *your* home? Will *you report him?*"

"YESS!!! " They screamed.

Richards suddenly gave them the finger-both fingers. This time the rush for the stage was by no stretch of the imagination simulated. Richards was rushed out the stage-left exit before they could rip him apart on camera, thus depriving the Network of all the juicy upcoming coverage.

Minus 080 and COUNTING

Killian was in the wings, and convulsed with amusement. "Fine performance, Mr. Richards. Fine! God, I wish I could give you a bonus. Those fingers . . . superb! "

"We aim to please," Richards said. The monitors were dissolving to a promo. "Give me the goddam camera and go fuck yourself. "

"That's generically impossible," Killian said, still grinning, "but here's the camera." He took it from the technico who had been cradling it. "Fully loaded and ready to go. And here are the clips. " He handed Richards a small, surprisingly heavy oblong box wrapped in oilcloth.

Richards dropped the camera into one coat pocket, the clips into the other. "Okay. Where's the elevator?"

"Not so fast," Killian said. "You've got a minute . . . twelve of them, actually. Your twelve hours' leeway doesn't start officially until six-thirty."

The screams of rage had begun again. Looking over his shoulder, Richards saw that Laughlin was on. His heart went out to him.

"I like you, Richards, and I think you'll do well," Killian said. "You have a certain crude style that I enjoy immensely. I'm a collector, you know. Cave art and Egyptian artifacts are my areas of specialization. You are more analogous to the cave art than to my Egyptian urns, but no matter. I wish you could be preserved-collected, if you please just as my Asian cave paintings have been collected and preserved."

"Grab a recording of my brain waves, you bastard. They're on record."

"So I'd like to give you a piece of advice," Killian said, ignoring him. "You don't really have a chance; nobody does with a whole nation in on the manhunt and with the incredibly sophisticated equipment and training that the Hunters have. But if you stay low, you'll last longer. Use your legs instead of any weapons you happen to pick up. And stay close to your own people." He leveled a finger at Richards in emphasis. "Not these good middle-class folks out there; they hate your guts. You symbolize all the fears of this dark and broken time. It wasn't all show and audience-packing out there, Richards. *They hate your guts*. Could you feel it?"

"Yes," Richards said. "I felt it. I hate them, too."

Killian smiled. "That's why they're killing you." He took Richards's arm; his grip was surprisingly strong. "This way." "

Behind them, Laughlin was being ragged by Bobby Thompson to the audience's satisfaction.

Down a white corridor, their footfalls echoing hollowly-alone. All alone. One elevator at the end.

"This is where you and I part company," Killian said. "Express to the street. Nine seconds."

He offered his hand for the fourth time, and Richards refused it again. Yet he lingered a moment.

"What if I could go up?" he asked, and gestured with his head toward the ceiling and the eighty stories above the ceiling. "Who could I kill up there? Who could I kill if I went right to the top?"

Killian laughed softly and punched the button beside the elevator; the doors popped open. "That's what I like about you, Richards. You think big."

Richards stepped into the elevator. The doors slid toward each other.

"Stay low," Killian repeated, and then Richards was alone.

The bottom dropped out of his stomach as the elevator sank toward the street.

Minus 079 and COUNTING

The elevator opened directly onto the street. A cop was standing by its frontage on Nixon Memorial Park, but he did not look at Richards as he stepped out; only tapped his move-along reflectively and stared into the soft drizzle that filled the air.

The drizzle had brought early dusk to the city. The lights glowed mystically through the darkness, and the people moving on Rampart Street in the shadow of the Games Building were only insubstantial shadows, as Richards knew he must be himself. He breathed deeply of the wet, sulphur-tainted air. It was good in spite of the taste. It seemed that he had just been let out of prison, rather than from one communicating cell to another. The air was good. The air was fine.

Stay close to your own people, Killian had said. Of course he was right. Richards hadn't needed Killian to tell him that. Or to know that the heat would be heaviest in Co-Op City when the truce broke at noon tomorrow. But by then he would be over the hills and far away.

He walked three blocks and hailed a taxi. He was hoping the cab's Free-Vee would be busted-a lot of them were-but this one was in A-1 working order, and blaring the closing credits of *The Running Man*. Shit.

"Where, buddy?"

"Robard Street." That was five blocks from his destination; when the cab dropped him, he would go backyard express to Moue's place.

The cab accelerated, ancient gas-powered engine a discordant symphony of pounding pistons and manifold noise. Richards slumped back against the vinyl cushions, into what he hoped was deeper shadow.

"Hey, I just seen you on the Free-Vee!" the cabbie exclaimed. "You're that guy Pritchard! "

"Pritchard. That's right," Richards said resignedly. The Games Building was dwindling behind them. A psychological shadow seemed to be dwindling proportionally in his mind, in spite of the bad luck with the cabby.

"Jesus, you got balls, buddy. I'll say that. You really do. Christ, they'll killya. You know that? They'll killya fuckin-eye dead. You must really have balls."

"That's right. Two of them. Just like you."

"Two of 'm!" the cabby repeated. He was ecstatic. "Jesus, that's good. That's hot! You mind if I tell my wife I hadja as a fare? She goes batshit for the Games. I'll hafts

reportcha too, but Christ, I won't get no hunnert for it. Cabbies gotta have at least one supportin witness, y'know. Knowin my luck, no one sawya gettin in."

"That would be tough," Richards said. "I'm sorry you can't help kill me. Should I leave a note saying I was here?"

"Jesus, couldja? That'd be-"

They had just crossed the Canal. "Let me out here," Richards said abruptly. He pulled a New Dollar from the envelope Thompson had handed him, and dropped it on the front seat.

"Gee, I didn't say nothin, did I? I dint meanta-"

"No," Richards said.

"Couldja gimme that note-"

"Get stuffed, maggot."

He lunged out and began walking toward Drummond Street. Co-Op City rose skeletal in the gathering darkness before him. The cabbie's yell floated after him: *"I hope they getya early, you cheap fuck!"*

Minus 078 and COUNTING

Through a backyard; through a ragged hole in a cyclone fence separating one barren asphalt desert from another; across a ghostly, abandoned construction site; pausing far back in shattered shadows as a cycle pack roared by, headlamps glaring in the dark like the psychopathic eyes of nocturnal werewolves. Then over a final fence (cutting one hand) and he was rapping on Molie Jernigan's back door-which is to say, the main entrance.

Molie ran a Dock Street hockshop where a fellow with enough bucks to spread around could buy a police-special move-along, a full-choke riot gun, a submachine gun, heroin, Push, cocaine, drag disguises, a styroflex pseudo-woman, a real whore if you were too strapped to afford styroflex, the current address of one of three floating crap-games, the current address on a swinging Pervert Club, or a hundred other illegal items. If Molie didn't have what you wanted, he would order it for you.

Including false papers.

When he opened the peephole and saw who was there, he offered a kindly smile and said: "Why don't you go away, pal? I never saw you."

"New Dollars," Richards remarked, as if to the air itself. There was a pause. Richards studied the cuff of his shirt as if he had never seen it before.

Then the bolts and locks were opened, quickly, as if Molie were afraid Richards would change his mind. Richards came in. They were in Moue's place behind the store, which was a rat warren of old newsies, stolen musical instruments, stolen cameras, and boxes of black-market groceries. Moue was by necessity something of a Robin Hood; a pawnbroker south of the Canal did not remain in business long if he became too greedy. Molie took the rich uptown maggots as heavily as he could and sold in the neighborhood

at close to cost-sometimes lower than cost if some pal was being squeezed hand. Thus his reputation in Co-Op City was excellent, his protection superb. If a cop asked a South City stoolie (and there were hundreds of them) about Molie Jernigan, the informant let it be known that Molie was a slightly senile old-timer who took a little graft and sold a little black market. Any number of uptown swells with strange sexual tendencies could have told the police differently, but there were no vice busts anymore. Everyone knew vice was bad for any real revolutionary climate. The fact that Molie also ran a moderately profitable trade in forged documents, strictly for local customers, was unknown uptown. Still, Richards knew, tooling papers for someone as hot as he was would be extremely dangerous.

"What papers?" Molie asked, sighing deeply and turning on an ancient gooseneck lamp that flooded the working area of his desk with bright white light. He was an old man, approaching seventy-five, and in the close glow of the light his hair looked like spun silver.

"Driver's license. Military Service Card. Street Identocard. Axial charge card. Social Retirement card."

"Easy. Sixty-buck job for anyone but you, Bennie."

"You'll do it?"

"For your wife, I'll do it. For you, no. I don't put my head in the noose for any crazy-ass bastard like Bennie Richards."

"How long, Molie?"

Molie's eyes flashed sardonically. "Knowin your situation as I do, I'll hurry it. An hour for each. "

"Christ, five hours . . . can I go-"

"No, you can't. Are you nuts, Bennie? A cop comes pullin up to your Development last week. He's got a envelope for your of lady. He came in a Black Wagon with about six buddies. Flapper Donnigan was standin on the corner pitchin nicks with Gerry Hanrahan when it transfired. Flapper tells me everythin. The boy's soft, you know."

"I know Flapper's soft," Richards said impatiently. "I sent the money. Is she-"

"Who knows? Who sees?" Molie shrugged and rolled his eyes as he put pens and blank forms in the center of the pool of light thrown by the lamp. "They're four deep around your building, Bennie. Anyone who sent to offer their condolences would end up in a cellar talkin to a bunch of rubber clubs. Even good friends don't need that scam, not even with your of lady flush. You got a name you want special on these?"

"Doesn't matter as long as it's Anglo. Jesus, Molie, she must have come out for groceries. And the doctor-"

"She sent Budgie O'Sanchez's kid. What's his name."

"Walt."

"Yeah, that's it. I can't keep the goddam spics and micks straight no more. I'm gettin senile, Bennie. Blowin my cool." He glared up at Richards suddenly. "I remember when

Mick Jagger was a big name. You don't even know who he was, do ya?"

"I know who he was," Richards said, distraught. He turned to Moue's sidewalk-level window, frightened. It was worse than he thought. Sheila and Cathy were in the cage, too. At least until-

"They're okay, Bennie, " Molie said softly. "Just stay away. You're poison to them now. Can you dig it?"

"Yes," Richards said. He was suddenly overwhelmed with despair, black and *awful*. *I'm homesick*, he thought, amazed, but it was more, it was worse. Everything seemed out of whack, surreal. The very fabric of existence bulging at the seams. Faces, whirling: Laughlin, Burns, Killian, Jansky, Molie, Cathy, Sheila-

He looked out into the blackness, trembling. Molie had gone to work, crooning some old song from his vacant past, something about having Bette Davis eyes, who the hell was *that*?

"He was a drummer," Richards said suddenly. "With that English group, the Beatles. Mick McCartney. "

"Yah, you kids," Molie said, bent over his work. "That's all you kids know."

Minus 077 and COUNTING

He left Moue's at ten past midnight, twelve hundred New Dollars lighter. The pawnbroker had also sold him a limited but fairly effective disguise: gray hair, spectacles, mouth wadding, plastic buck-teeth which subtly transfigured his lip line. "Give yourself a little limp, too," Molie advised. "Not a big attention-getter. Just a little one. Remember, you have the power to cloud men's minds, if you use it. Don't remember that line, do ya?"

Richards didn't.

According to his new wallet cards, he was John Griffen Springer, a text-tape salesman from Harding. He was a forty-three year-old widower. No technico status, but that was just as well. Technicos had their own language.

Richards reemerged on Robard Street at 12:30, a good hour to get rolled, mugged, or killed, but a bad hour to make any kind of unnoticed getaway. Still, he had lived south of the Canal all his life.

He crossed the Canal two miles farther west, almost on the edge of the lake. He saw a party of drunken winos huddled around a furtive fire, several rats, but no cops. By 1:15 A.m. he was cutting across the far edge of the no-man's-land of warehouses, cheap beaneries, and shipping offices on the north side of the Canal. At 1:30 he was surrounded by enough uptowners hopping from one sleazy dive to the next to safely hail a cab.

This time the driver didn't give him a second look.

"Jetport," Richards said.

"I'm your man, pal."

The airthrusters shoved them up into traffic. They were at the airport by 1:50.

Richards limped past several cops and security guards who showed no interest in him. He bought a ticket to New York because it came naturally to mind. The I. D. check was routine and uneventful. He was on the 2:20 speed shuttle to New York. There were only forty or so passengers, most of them snoozing businessmen and students. The cop in the Judas hole dozed through the entire trip. After a while, Richards dozed, too.

They touched down at 3:06, and Richards deplaned and left the airport without incident.

At 3:15 the cab was spiraling down the Lindsay Overway. They crossed Central Park on a diagonal, and at 3:20, Ben Richards disappeared into the largest city on the face of the earth.

Minus 076 and COUNTING

He went to earth in the Brant Hotel, a so-so establishment on the East Side. That part of the city had been gradually entering a new cycle of chic. Yet the Brant was less than a mile from Manhattan's own blighted inner city-also the largest in the world. As he checked in, he again thought of Dan Killian's parting words: *Stay close to your own people.*

After leaving the taxi he had walked to Times Square, not wanting to check into any hotel during the small morning hours. He spent the five and a half hours from 3:30 to 9:00 in an all-night pervert show. He had wanted desperately to sleep, but both times he had dozed off, he had been snapped awake by the feel of light fingers crawling up his inner thigh.

"How long will you be staying, sir?" the desk clerk asked, glancing at Richards's registration as John G. Springer.

"Don't know," Richards said, trying for meek affability. "All depends on the clients, you understand." He paid sixty New Dollars, holding the room for two days, and took the elevator up to the twenty-third floor. The room offered a somber view of the squalid East River. It was raining in New York, too.

The room was clean but sterile; there was a connecting bathroom and the toilet made constant, ominous noises that Richards could not rectify even by wiggling the ball in the tank.

He had breakfast sent up-a poached egg on toast, orange drink, coffee. When the boy appeared with the tray, he tipped lightly and forgettably.

With breakfast out of the way, he took out the videotape camera and looked at it. A small metal plate labeled INSTRUCTIONS was set just below the viewfinder. Richards read:

1. Push tape cartridge into slot marked A until it clicks home.
2. Set viewfinder by means of crosshairs within the sight.
3. Push button marked B to record sound with video.
4. When the bell sounds, tape cartridge will pop out

automatically.
Recording time: 10 minutes.

Good, Richards thought. They can watch me sleep.

He set the camera on the bureau next to the Gideon Bible and sighted the crosshairs on the bed. The wall behind was blank and nondescript; he didn't see how anyone could pinpoint his location from either the bed or the background. Street noise from this height was negligible, but he would leave the shower running just in case.

Even with forethought, he nearly pressed the button and stepped into the camera's field of vision with his naked disguise hanging out. Some of it could have been removed, but the gray hair had to stay. He put the pillowslip over his head. Then he pressed the button, walked over to the bed, and sat down facing the lens.

"Peekaboo," Ben Richards said hollowly to his immense listening and viewing audience that would watch this tape later tonight with horrified interest. "You can't see it, but I'm laughing at you shiteaters."

He lay back, closed his eyes, and tried to think of nothing at all. When the tape clip popped out ten minutes later, he was fast asleep.

Minus 075 and COUNTING

When he woke up it was just after 4 p.m. -the hunt was on, then. Had been for three hours, figuring for the time difference. The thought sent a chill through his middle.

He put a new tape in the camera, took down the Gideon Bible, and read the Ten Commandments over and over for ten minutes with the pillowslip on his head.

There were envelopes in the desk drawer, but the name and address of the hotel was on them. He hesitated, and knew it made no difference. He would have to take Killian's word that his location, as revealed by postmarks or return addresses, would not be revealed to McCone and his bird dogs by the Games Authority. He had to use the postal service. They had supplied him with no carrier pigeons.

There was a mail drop by the elevators, and Richards dropped the clips into the out-of-town slot with huge misgivings. Although postal authorities were not eligible for any Games money for reporting the whereabouts of contestants, it still seemed like a horribly risky thing to do. But the only other thing was default, and he couldn't do that, either.

He went back to his room, shut off the shower (the bathroom was as steamy as a tropical jungle), and lay down on the bed to think.

How to run? What was the best thing to do?

He tried to put himself in the place of an average contestant. The first impulse, of course, was pure animal instinct: Go to earth. Make a den and cower in there.

And so he had done. The Brant Hotel.

Would the Hunters expect that? Yes. They would not be looking for a cunning man at all. They would be looking for a hiding man.

Could they find him in his den?

He wanted very badly to answer no, but he could not. His disguise was good, but hastily put together. Not many people are observant, but there are always some. Perhaps he had been tabbed already. The desk clerk. The bellboy who had brought his breakfast. Perhaps even by one of the faceless men in the pervert show on Forty-second Street.

Not likely, but possible.

And what about his real protection, the false ID Molie had provided? Good for how long? Well, the taxi driver who had taken him from the Games Building could put him in South City. And the Hunters were fearfully, dreadfully good. They would be leaning hard on everyone he knew, from Jack Crager to that bitch Eileen Jenner down the hall. Heavy heat. How long until somebody, maybe a headsoftie like Flapper Donnigan, let it slip that Molie had forged papers on occasion? And if they found Molie, he was blown. The pawnbroker would hold out long enough to take a belting around; he was canny enough to want a few visible battle scars to sport around the neighborhood. Just so his place didn't have a bad case of spontaneous combustion some night. Then? A simple check of Harding's three jetports would uncover John G. Springer's midnight jaunt to Freak City.

If they found Molie.

You assume they will. You have to assume they will.

Then run. Where?

He didn't know. He had spent his entire life in Harding. In the Midwest. He didn't know the East Coast; there was no place here he could run to and feel that he was on familiar turf. So where? Where?

His teased and unhappy mind drifted into a morbid daydream. They had found Molie with no trouble at all. Pried the Springer name out of him in an easy five minutes, after pulling two fingernails, filling his navel with lighter fluid and threatening to strike a match. They had gotten Richards's flight number with one quick call (handsome, nondescript men in garbardine coats of identical cut and make) and had arrived in New York by 2:30 EST. Advance men had already gotten the address of the Brant by a telex canvass of the New York City hotel-listings, which were computer tabulated day by day. They were outside now, surrounding the place. Busboys and bellboys and clerks and bartenders had been replaced by Hunters. Half a dozen coming up the fire escape. Another fifty packing all three elevators. More and more, pulling up in air cars all around the building. Now they were in the hall, and in a moment the door would crash open and they would lunge in, a tape machine grinding enthusiastically away on a rolling tripod above their muscular shoulders, getting it all down for posterity as they turned him into hamburger.

Richards sat up, sweating. Didn't even have a gun, not yet.

Run. Fast.

Boston would do, to start.

Minus 074 and COUNTING

He left his room at 5:00 P.m. and went down to the lobby. The desk clerk smiled brightly, probably looking forward to his evening relief.

"Afternoon, Mr., uh-

"Springer." Richards smiled back. "I seem to have struck oil, my man. Three clients who seem . . . receptive. I'll be occupying your excellent facility for an additional two days. May I pay in advance?"

"Certainly, sir."

Dollars changed hands. Still beaming, Richards went back up to his room. The hall was empty. Richards hung the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the doorknob and went quickly to the fire stairs.

Luck was with him and he met no one. He went all the way to the ground floor and slipped out the side entrance unobserved.

The rain had stopped, but the clouds still hung and lowered over Manhattan. The air smelled like a rancid battery. Richards walked briskly, discarding the limp, to the Port Authority Electric Bus terminal. A man could still buy a ticket on a Greyhound without signing his name.

"Boston," he said to the bearded ticket-vendor.

"Twenty-three bucks, pal. Bus pulls out at six-fifteen sharp."

He passed over the money; it left him with something less than three thousand New Dollars. He had an hour to kill, and the terminal was chock-full of people, many of them Vol-Army, with their blue berets and blank, boyish, brutal faces. He bought a Pervert Mag, sat down, and propped it in front of his face. For the next hour he stared at it, turning a page occasionally to try and avoid looking like a statue.

When the bus rolled up to the pier, he shuffled toward the open doors with the rest of the nondescript assortment.

"Hey! Hey, you!"

Richards stared around; a security cop was approaching on the run. He froze, unable to take flight. A distant part of his brain was screaming that he was about to be cut down right here, right here in this shitty bus terminal with wads of gum on the floor and casual obscenities scrawled on the dirt-caked walls; he was going to be some dumb flatfoot's fluke trophy.

"Stop him! Stop that guy!"

The cop was veering. It wasn't him at all. Richards saw. It was a scruffy-looking kid who was running for the stairs, swinging a lady's purse in one hand and bowling bystanders this way and that like tenpins.

He and his pursuer disappeared from sight, taking the stairs three by three in huge leaps. The knot of embarkers, debarkers, and greeters watched them with vague interest for a moment and then picked up the threads of what they had been doing, as if nothing had happened.

Richards stood in line, trembling and cold.

He collapsed into a seat near the back of the coach, and a few minutes later the bus hummed smoothly up the ramp, paused, and joined the flow of traffic. The cop and his quarry had disappeared into the general mob of humanity.

If I'd had a gun. I would have burned him where he stood, Richards thought. Christ. Oh, Christ.

And on the heels of that: *Next time it won't be a purse snatcher. It'll be you.*

He would get a gun in Boston anyway. Somehow.

He remembered Laughlin saying that he would push a few of them out a high window before they took him.

The bus rolled north in the gathering darkness.

Minus 073 and COUNTING

The Boston YMCA stood on upper Huntington Avenue. It was huge, black with years, old-fashioned, and boxy. It stood in what used to be one of Boston's better areas in the middle of the last century. It stood there like a guilty reminder of another time, another day, its old-fashioned neon still winking its letters toward the sinful theater district. It looked like the skeleton of a murdered idea.

When Richards walked into the lobby, the desk clerk was arguing with a tiny, scruffy black boy in a killball jersey so big that it reached down over his blue jeans to midshin. The disputed territory seemed to be a gum machine that stood inside the lobby door.

"I loss my nickel, honky. I loss my muh-fuhn nickel!"

"If you don't get out of here, I'll call the house detective, kid. That's all. I'm done talking to you."

"But that goddam machine took my nickel!"

"You stop swearing at me, you little scumbag!" The clerk, who looked an old, cold thirty, reached down and shook the jersey. It was too huge for him to be able to shake the boy inside, too. "Now get out of here. I'm through talking."

Seeing he meant it, the almost comic mask of hate and defiance below the dark sunburst of the kid's afro broke into a hurt, agonized grimace of disbelief. "Lissen, thass the oney muh-fuhn nickel I got. That gumball machine ate my nickel! That-"

"I'm calling the house dick right now." The clerk turned toward the switchboard. His jacket, a refugee from some bargain counter, flapped tiredly around his thin butt.

The boy kicked the plaxteel post of the gum machine, then ran. "Muh-fuhn white honky *sumbitch!*"

The clerk looked after him, the security button, real or mythical unpressed. He smiled at Richards, showing an old keyboard with a few missing keys. "You can't talk to niggers anymore. I'd keep them in cages if I ran the Network."

"He really lose a nickel?" Richards asked, signing the register as John Deegan from Michigan.

"If he did, he stole it," the clerk said. "Oh, I suppose he did. But if I gave him a nickel, I'd have two hundred pickaninnies in here by nightfall claiming the same thing. Where do they learn that language? That's what I want to know. Don't their folks care what they do? How long will you be staying, Mr. Deegan?"

"I don't know. I'm in town on business." He tried on a greasy smile, and when it felt right, he widened it. The desk clerk recognized it instantly (perhaps from his own reflection looking up at him from the depths of the fake-marble counter, which had been polished by a million elbows) and gave it back to him.

"That's \$15.50, Mr. Deegan." He pushed a key attached to a worn wooden tongue across the counter to Richards. "Room 512."

"Thank you." Richards paid cash. Again, no ID. Thank God for the YMCA.

He crossed to the elevators and looked down the corridor to the Christian Lending Library on the left. It was dimly lit with flyspecked yellow globes, and an old man wearing an overcoat and galoshes was perusing a tract, turning the pages slowly and methodically with a trembling, wetted finger. Richards could hear the clogged whistle of his breathing from where he was by the elevators, and felt a mixture of sorrow and horror.

The elevator chinked to a stop, and the doors opened with wheezy reluctance. As he stepped in, the clerk said loudly: "It's a sin and a shame. I'd put them all in cages."

Richards glanced up, thinking the clerk was speaking to him, but the clerk was not looking at anything.

The lobby was very empty and very silent.

Minus 072 and COUNTING

The fifth floor hall stank of pee.

The corridor was narrow enough to make Richards feel claustrophobic, and the carpet, which might have been red, had worn away in the middle to random strings. The doors were industrial gray, and several of them showed the marks of fresh kicks, smashes, or attempts to jimmy. Signs at every twenty paces advised that there would be NO SMOKING IN THIS HALL BY ORDER OF FIRE MARSHAL. There was a communal bathroom in the center, and the urine stench became suddenly sharp. It was a smell Richards associated automatically with despair. People moved restlessly behind the gray doors like animals in cages--animals too awful, too frightening, to be seen. Someone was chanting what might have been the Hail Mary over and over in a drunken voice. Strange gobbling noises came from behind another door. A country-western tune from behind another ("I ain't got a buck for the phone/and I'm so alone . . ."). Shuffling noises. The solitary squeak of bedsprings that might mean a man in his own hand. Sobbing. Laughter. The hysterical grunts of a drunken argument. And from behind these, silence. And silence. And silence. A man with a hideously sunken chest walked past Richards

without looking at him, carrying a bar of soap and a towel in one hand, wearing gray pajama bottoms tied with string. He wore paper slippers on his feet.

Richards unlocked his room and stepped in. There was a police bar on the inside, and he used it. There was a bed with almost-white sheets and an Army surplus blanket. There was a bureau from which the second drawer was missing. There was a picture of Jesus on one wall. There was a steel rod with two coathangers kitty-cornered in the right angle of two walls. There was nothing else but the window, which looked out on blackness. It was 10:15.

Richards hung up his jacket, slipped off his shoes, and lay down on the bed. He realized how miserable and unknown and vulnerable he was in the world. The universe seemed to shriek and clatter and roar around him like a huge and indifferent jalopy rushing down a hill and toward the lip of a bottomless chasm. His lips began to tremble, and then he cried a little.

He didn't put it on tape. He lay looking at the ceiling, which was cracked into a million crazy scrawls, like a bad potter's-glaze. They had been after him for over eight hours now. He had earned eight hundred dollars of his stake money. Christ, not even out of the hole yet.

And he'd missed himself on Free-Vee. Christ, yes. The bag-over-the-head spectacular.

Where were they? Still in Harding? New York? Or on their way to Boston? No, they couldn't be on their way here, could they? The bus had not passed through any roadblocks. He had left the biggest city in the world anonymously, and he was here under an assumed name. They couldn't be onto him. No way.

The Boston Y might be safe for as long as two days. After that he could move north toward New Hampshire and Vermont, or south toward Hartford or Philadelphia or even Atlanta. Further east was the ocean, and beyond it was Britain and Europe. It was an intriguing idea, but probably out of reach. Passage by plane required ID, what with France under martial law, and while stowing-away might be possible, discovery would mean a quick and final end to the whole thing. And west was out. West was where the heat was the hottest.

If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Who had said that? Molie would know. He snickered a little and felt better.

The disembodied sound of a radio came to his ears.

It would be good to get the gun now, tonight, but he was too tired. The ride had tired him. Being a fugitive tired him. And he knew in an animal way that went deeper than the rational that very soon he might be sleeping in an October-cold culvert or in a weed- and cinder-choked gully.

The gun tomorrow night.

He turned off the light and went to bed.

Minus 071 and COUNTING

It was showtime again.

Richards stood with his buttocks toward the video recorder, humming the theme music to *The Running Man*. A YMCA pillowslip was over his head, turned inside out so the name stamped on its hem wouldn't show.

The camera had inspired Richards to a kind of creative humor that he never would have believed he possessed. The self-image he'd always held was that of a rather dour man, with little or no humor in his outlook. The prospect of his approaching death had uncovered a solitary comedian hiding inside.

When the clip popped out, he decided to save the second for afternoon. The solitary room was boring, and perhaps something else would occur to him.

He dressed slowly and then went to the window and looked out.

Thursday morning traffic hustled busily up and down Huntington Avenue. Both sidewalks were crowded with slowly moving pedestrians. Some of them were scanning bright-yellow Help-Wanted Fax. Most of them just walked. There was a cop, it seemed, on every corner. Richards could hear them in his mind: *Move along. Ain't you got someplace to go? Pick it up, maggot.*

So you moved on to the next corner, which was just like the last corner, and were moved along again. You could try to get mad about it, but mostly your feet hurt too much.

Richards debated the risk of going down the hall and showering. He finally decided it would be okay. He went down with a towel over his shoulder, met no one, and walked into the bathroom.

Essence of urine, shit, puke, and disinfectant mingled. All the crapper doors had been yanked off, of course. Someone had scrawled FUK THE NETWORK in foot-high letters above the urinal. It looked as though he might have been angry when he did it. There was a pile of feces in one of the urinals. Someone must have been really drunk, Richards thought. A few sluggish autumn flies were crawling over it. He was not disgusted; the sight was too common; but he was matter-of-factly glad he had worn his shoes.

He also had the shower room to himself. The floor was cracked porcelain, the walls gouged tile with thick runnels of decay near the bottoms. He turned on a nasty-clogged showerhead, full hot, and waited patiently for five minutes until the water ran tepid, and then showered quickly. He used a scrap of soap he found on the floor; the Y had either neglected to supply it or the chambermaid had walked off with his.

On his way back to his room, a man with a harelip gave him a tract.

Richards tucked his shirt in, sat on his bed, and lit a cigarette. He was hungry but would wait until dusk to go out and eat.

Boredom drove him to the window again. He counted different makes of cars-Fords, Chevies, Wints, VW's, Plymouths, Studebakers, Rambler-Supremes. First one to a hundred wins. A dull game, but better than no game.

Further up Huntington Avenue was Northeastern University, and directly across the street from the Y was a large automated bookshop. While he counted cars, Richards watched the students come and go. They were in sharp contrast to the Wanted-Fax idlers; their hair was shorter, and they all seemed to be wearing tartan jumpers, which were this year's kampus kraze. They walked through the milling ruck and inside to make their purchases with an air of uncomfortable patronization and hail-fellow that left a curdled amusement in Richards's mouth. The five-minute spaces in front of the store filled and emptied with sporty, flashy cars, often of exotic make. Most of them had college decals in the back windows: Northeastern, M.L.T., Boston College, Harvard. Most of the news-fax bums treated the sporty cars as part of the scenery, but a few looked at them with dumb and wretched longing.

A Wint pulled out of the space directly in front of the store and a Ford pulled in, settling to an inch above the pavement as the driver, a crewcut fellow smoking a foot-long cigar, put it in idle. The car dipped slightly as his passenger, a dude in a brown and white hunting jacket, got out and zipped inside.

Richards sighed. Counting cars was a very poor game. Fords were ahead of their nearest contender by a score of 78 to 40. The outcome going to be predictable as the next election.

Someone pounded on the door and Richards stiffened like a bolt.

"Frankie? You in there, Frankie?"

Richards said nothing. Frozen with fear, he played a statue.

"You eat shit, Frankie-baby. " There was a chortle of drunken laughter and the footsteps moved on. Pounding on the next door up. "You in there, Frankie?"

Richards's heart slipped slowly down from his throat.

The Ford was pulling out, and another Ford took its place. Number 79. Shit.

The day slipped into afternoon, and then it was one o'clock. Richards knew this by the ringing of various chimes in churches far away. Ironically, the man living by the clock had no watch.

He was playing a variation of the car game now. Fords worth two points, Studebakers three, Wints four. First one to five hundred wins.

It was perhaps fifteen minutes later that he noticed the young man in the brown and white hunting jacket leaning against a lamppost beyond the bookstore and reading a concert poster. He was not being moved along; in fact, the police seemed to be ignoring him.

You're jumping at shadows, maggot. Next you'll see them on the corners. He counted a Wint with a dented fender. A yellow Ford. An old Studebaker with a wheezing air cylinder, dipping in slight cycles. A VW-no good, they're out of the running. Another Wint. A Studebaker.

A man smoking a foot-long cigar was standing nonchalantly at the bus stop on the corner. He was the only person there. With good reason. Richards had seen the buses come and go, and knew there wouldn't be another one along for forty-five minutes.

Richards felt a coolness creep into his testicles.

An old man in a threadbare black overcoat sauntered down the side of the street and leaned casually against the building.

Two fellows in tartan jumpers got out of a taxi, talking animatedly, and began to study the menu in the window of the Stockholm Restaurant.

A cop walked over and conversed with the man at the bus stop. Then the cop walked away again.

Richards noted with a numb, distant terror that a good many of the newspaper bums were idling along much more slowly. Their clothes and styles of walking seemed oddly familiar, as if they had been around a great many times before and Richards was just becoming aware of it-in the tentative, uneasy way you recognize the voices of the dead in dreams.

There were more cops, too.

I'm being bracketed, he thought. The idea brought a helpless, rabbit terror.

*No, his mind corrected. You've already **been** bracketed.*

Minus 070 and COUNTING

Richards walked rapidly to the bathroom, being calm, ignoring his terror the way a man on a high ledge ignores the drop. If he was going to get out of this, it would be by keeping his head. If he panicked, he would die quickly.

Someone was in the shower, singing a popular song in a cracked and pitchless voice. No one was at the urinals or the washstands.

The trick had popped effortlessly into his mind as he had stood by the window, watching them gather in their offhand, sinister way. If it hadn't occurred to him, he thought he would be there yet, like Aladdin watching smoke from the lamp coalesce into an omnipotent djinn. They had used the trick as boys to steal newspapers from Development basements. Moue bought them; two cents a pound.

He took one of the wire toothbrush holders off the wall with a hard snap of his wrist. It was a little rusted, but that wouldn't matter. He walked down to the elevator, bending the toothbrush holder out straight.

He pushed the call button, and the cage took a slow eternity to come down from eight. It was empty. Thank Christ it was empty.

He stepped in, looked briefly down the halls, and then fumed to the control panel. There was a key slot beside the button marked for the basement. The janitor would have a special card to shove in there. An electric eye scanned the card and then the janitor could push the button and ride down to the basement.

What if it doesn't work?

Never mind that. Never mind that now.

Grimacing in anticipation of a possible electric shock, Richards jammed the

toothbrush wire into the slot and pushed the basement button simultaneously.

There was a noise from inside the control panel that sounded like a brief electronic curse. There was a light, tingling jolt up his arm. For a moment, nothing else. Then the folding brass gate slid across, the doors closed, and the elevator lurched unhappily downward. A small tendril of blue smoke curled out of the slot in the panel.

Richards stood away from the elevator door and watched the numbers flash backwards. When the L lit, the motor high above made a grinding sound, and the car seemed about to stop. Then, after a moment (perhaps after it thought it had scared Richards enough), it descended again. Twenty seconds later the doors slid open and Richards stepped out into the huge dim basement. There was water dripping somewhere, and the scurry of a disturbed rat. But otherwise, the basement was his. For now.

Minus 069 and COUNTING

Huge, rusted heating pipes festooned with cobwebs crawled crazily all over the ceiling. When the furnace kicked on suddenly, Richards almost screamed in terror. The surge of adrenaline to his limbs and heart was painful, for a moment almost incapacitating.

There were newspapers here, too, Richards saw. Thousands of them, stacked up and tied with string. The rats had nested in them by the thousands. Whole families stared out at the interloper with ruby distrustful eyes.

He began to walk away from the elevator, pausing halfway across the cracked cement floor. There was a large fuse box bolted to a supporting post, and behind it, leaning against the other side, a litter of tools. Richards took the crowbar and continued to walk, keeping his eyes on the floor.

Near the far wall he spied the main storm drain, to his left. He walked over and looked at it, wondering in the back of his mind if they knew he was down here yet.

The storm drain was constructed of vented steel. It was about three feet across, and on the far side there was a slot for the crowbar. Richards slipped it in, levered up the cover, and then put one foot on the crowbar to hold it. He got his hands under the lip of the cover and pushed it over. It fell to the cement with a clang that made the rats squeak with dismay.

The pipe beneath slanted down at a forty-five-degree angle, and Richards guessed that its bore could be no more than two and a half feet. It was very dark. Claustrophobia suddenly filled his mouth with flannel. Too small to maneuver in, almost too small to breathe in. But it had to be.

He turned the storm-drain cover back over and edged it toward the pipe entrance just enough so he could grip it from beneath once he was down there. Then he walked over to the fuse box, hammered the padlock off with the crowbar, and shoved it open. He was about to begin pulling fuses when another idea occurred to him.

He walked over to the newspapers which lay in dirty yellow drifts against the whole eastern length of the cellar. Then he ferreted out the folded and dog-eared book of

matches he had been lighting his smokes with. There were three left. He yanked out a sheet of paper and formed it into a spill; held it under his arm like a dunce cap and lit a match. The first one guttered out in a draft. The second fell out of his trembling hand and hissed out on the damp concrete.

The third stayed alight. He held it to his paper spill and yellow flame bloomed. A rat, perhaps sensing what was to come, ran across his foot and into the darkness.

A terrible sense of urgency filled him now, and yet he waited until the spill was flaming a foot high. He had no more matches. Carefully, he tucked it into a fissure in the chest-high paper wall and waited until he saw that the fire was spreading.

The huge oil tank which serviced the Y was built into the adjoining wall. Perhaps it would blow. Richards thought it would.

Trotting now, he went back to the fuse box and began ripping out the long tubular fuses. He got most of them before the basement lights went out. He felt his way across to the storm drain, aided by the growing, flickering light of the burning papers.

He sat down with his feet dangling, and then slowly eased in. When his head was below the level of the floor, he pressed his knees against the sides of the pipe to hold himself steady, and worked his arms up above his head. It was slow work. There was very little room to move. The light of the fire was brilliant yellow now, and the crackling sound of burning filled his ears. Then his groping fingers found the lip of the drain, and he slid them up until they gripped the vented cover. He yanked it forward slowly, supporting more and more of the weight with the muscles of his back and neck. When he judged that the far edge of the cover was on the edge of dropping into place, he gave one last fierce tug.

The cover dropped into place with a clang, bending both wrists back cruelly. Richards let his knees relax, and he slid downward like a boy shooting the chutes. The pipe was coated with slime, and he slid effortlessly about twelve feet to where the pipe elbow bent into a straight line. His feet struck smartly, and he stood there like a drunk leaning against a lamppost.

But he couldn't get into the horizontal pipe. The elbow bend was too sharp.

The taste of the claustrophobia became huge, gagging. *Trapped*, his mind babbled. *Trapped in here, trapped, trapped-*

A steel scream rose in his throat and he choked it down.

Calm down. Sure, it's very hackneyed, very trite, but we must be very calm down here. Very calm. Because we are at the bottom of this pipe and we can't get up and we can't get down and if the fucking oil tank goes boom, we are going to be fricasseed very neatly and-

Slowly he began to wriggle around until his chest was against the pipe instead of his back. The slime coating acted as a lubricant, helping his movement. It was very bright in the pipe now, and getting warmer. The vented cover threw prison-bar shadows on his struggling face.

Once leaning against his chest and belly and groin, with his knees bending the right

way, he could slip down further, letting his calves and feet slide into the horizontal pipe until he was in the praying position. Still no good. His buttocks were pushing against the solid ceramic facing above the entrance to the horizontal pipe.

Faintly, it seemed that he could hear shouted commands above the heavy crackle of the fire, but it might have been his imagination, which was now strained and fevered beyond the point of trust.

He began to flex the muscles of his thighs and calves in a tiring seesaw rhythm, and little by little his knees began to slide out from under him. He worked his hands up over his head again to give himself more room, and now his face lay solidly against the slime of the pipe. He was very close to fitting now. He swayed his back as much as he could and began to push with his arms and head, the only things left in any position to give him leverage.

When he had begun to think there was not enough room, that he was going to simply hang here, unable to move either way, his hips and buttocks suddenly popped through the horizontal pipe's opening like a champagne cork from a tight bottleneck. The small of his back scraped excruciatingly as his knees slid out from under him, and his shirt tucked up to his shoulder-blades. Then he was in the horizontal pipe-except for his head and arms, which were bent back at a joint-twisting angle. He wriggled the rest of the way in and then paused there, panting, his face streaked with slime and rat droppings, the skin of his lower back abraded and oozing blood.

This pipe was narrower still; his shoulders scraped lightly on both sides each time his chest rose in respiration.

Thank God I'm underfed.

Panting, he began to back into the unknown darkness of the pipe.

Minus 068 and COUNTING

He made slow, molelike progress for about fifty yards through the horizontal pipe, backing up blindly. Then the oil tank in the Y's basement suddenly blew with a roar that set up enough sympathetic vibrations in the pipes to nearly rupture his eardrums. There was a yellow-white flash, as if a pile of phosphorus had ignited. It faded to a rosy, shifting glow. A few moments later a blast of thermal air struck him in the face, making him grin painfully.

The tape camera in his jacket pocket swung and bounced as he tried to back up faster. The pipe was picking up heat from the fierce explosion and fire that was raging somewhere above him, the way the handle of a skillet picks up heat from a gas-ring. Richards had no urge to be baked down here like a potato in a Dutch oven.

Sweat rolled down his face, mixing with the black streaks of ordure already there, making him look, in the waxing and waning glow of the reflected fire, like an Indian painted for war. The sides of the pipe were hot to the touch now.

Lobsterlike, Richards humped backwards on his knees and forearms, his buttocks rising to smack the top of the pipe at every movement. His breath came in sharp, doglike

gasps. The air was hot, full of the slick taste of oil, uncomfortable to breathe. A headache surfaced within his skull and began to push daggers into the backs of his eyes.

I'm going to fry in here. I'm going to fry.

Then his feet were suddenly dangling in the air. Richards tried to peer through his legs and see what was there, but it was too dark behind and his eyes were too dazzled by the light in front. He would have to take his chance. He backed up until his knees were on the edge of the pipe's ending, and then slid them cautiously over.

His shoes were suddenly in water, cold and shocking after the heat of the pipe.

The new pipe ran at right angles to the one Richards had just come through, and it was much larger-big enough to stand in bent over. The thick, slowly moving water came up over his ankles. He paused for just a moment to stare back into the tiny pipe with its soft circle of reflected fireglow. The fact that he could see any glow at all from this distance meant that it must have been a very big bang indeed.

Richards reluctantly forced himself to know it would be their job to assume him alive rather than dead in the inferno of the YMCA basement, but perhaps they would not discover the way he had taken until the fire was under control. That seemed a safe assumption. But it had seemed safe to assume that they could not trace him to Boston, too.

Maybe they didn't. After all, what did you really see?

No. It had been them. He knew it. The Hunters. They had even carried the odor of evil. It had wafted up to his fifth floor room on invisible psychic thermals.

A rat dog-paddled past him, pausing to look up briefly with glittering eyes.

Richards splashed clumsily off after it, in the direction the water was flowing.

Minus 067 and COUNTING

Richards stood by the ladder, looking up, dumbfounded by the light. No regular traffic, which was something, but light-

The light was surprising because it had seemed that he had been walking in the sewers for hours piled upon hours. In the darkness, with no visual input and no sound but the gurgle of water, the occasional soft splash of a rat, and the ghostly thumpings in other pipes (what happens if someone flushes a john over my head, Richards wondered morbidly), his time sense had been utterly destroyed.

Now, looking up at the manhole cover some fifteen feet above him, he saw that the light had not yet faded out of the day. There were several circular breather holes in the cover, and pencil-sized rays of light pressed coins of sun on his chest and shoulders.

No air-cars had passed over the cover since he had gotten here; only an occasional heavy ground-vehicle and a fleet of Honda-cycles. It made him suspect that, more by good luck and the law of averages than by inner sense of direction, he had managed to find his way to the core of the city-to his own people.

Still, he didn't dare go up until dark. To pass the time, he took out the tape camera,

popped in a clip, and began recording his chest. He knew the tapes were "fastlight," able to take advantage of the least available light, and he did not want to give away too much of his surroundings. He did no talking or capering this time. He was too tired.

When the tape was done, he put it with the other exposed clip. He wished he could rid himself of the nagging suspicion-almost a certainty-that the tapes were pinpointing him. There had to be a way to beat that. *Had to.*

He sat down stolidly on the third rung of the ladder to wait for dark. He had been running for nearly thirty hours.

Minus 066 and COUNTING

The boy, seven years old, black, smoking a cigarette, leaned closer to the mouth of the alley, watching the street.

There had been a sudden, slight movement in the street where there had been none before. Shadows moved, rested, moved again. The manhole cover was rising. It paused and something-eyes?-glimmered. The cover suddenly slid aside with a clang.

Someone (or *something*, the boy thought with a trace of fear) was moving out there. Maybe the devil was coming out of hell to get Cassie, he thought. Ma said Cassie was going to heaven to be with Dicky and the other angels. The boy thought that was bullshit. Everybody went to hell when they died, and the devil jabbed them in the ass with a pitchfork. He had seen a picture of the devil in the books Bradley had snuck out of the Boston Public Library. Heaven was for Push freaks. The devil was the Man.

It could be the devil, he thought as Richards suddenly boosted himself out of the manhole and leaned for a second on the seamed and split cement to get his breath back. No tail and no horns, not red like in that book, but the mother looked crazy and mean enough.

Now he was pushing the cover back, and now-
-now holy Jesus he was running toward the alley.

The boy grunted, tried to run, and fell over his own feet.

He was trying to get up, scrambling and dropping things, and the devil suddenly grabbed him.

"Doan stick me wif it!" He screamed in a throat-closed whisper. "Doan stick me wif no fork, you sumbitch-"

"Shhh! Shut up! Shut up!" The devil shook him, making his teeth rattle like marbles in his head, and the boy shut up. The devil peered around in an ecstasy of apprehension. The expression on his face was almost farcical in its extreme fear. The boy was reminded of the comical fellows on that game show *Swim the Crocodiles*. He would have laughed if he hadn't been so frightened himself.

"You ain't the devil," the boy said.

"You'll think I am if you yell."

"I ain't gonna," the boy said contemptuously. "What you think, I wanna get my balls cut off? Jesus, I ain't even big enough to come yet."

"You know a quiet place we can go?"

"Doan kill me, man. I ain't got nothin." The boy's eyes, white in the darkness, rolled up at him.

"I'm not going to kill you."

Holding his hand, the boy led Richards down the twisting, littered alley and into another. At the end, just before the alley opened onto an airshaft between two faceless highrise buildings, the boy led him into a lean-to built of scrounged boards and bricks. It was built for four feet, and Richards banged his head going in.

The boy pulled a ditty swatch of black cloth across the opening and fiddled with something. A moment later a weak glow lit their faces; the boy had hooked a small lightbulb to an old cracked car battery.

"I kified that battery myself," the boy said. "Bradley tole me how to fix it up. He's got books. I got a nickel bag, too. I'll give it to you if you don't kill me. You better not. Bradley's in the Stabbers. You kill me an he'll make you shit in your boot an eat it."

"I'm not doing any killings," Richards said impatiently. "At least not little kids."

"I ain't no little kid! I kified that fuckin battery myself!"

The look of injury forced a dented grin to Richards's face. "All right. What's your name, kid?"

"Ain't no kid." Then, sulkily: "Stacey."

"Okay. Stacey. Good. I'm on the run. You believe that?"

"Yeah, you on the run. You dint come outta that manhole to buy dirty pos'cards." He stared speculatively at Richards. "You a honky? Kinda hard to tell wif all that dirt."

"Stacey. I-" He broke off and ran a hand through his hair. When he spoke again, he seemed to be talking to himself. "I got to trust somebody and it turns out to be a kid. A *kid*. Hot Jesus, you ain't even six, boy."

"I'm eight in March," the boy said angrily. "My sister Lassie's got cancer," he added. "She screams a lot. Thass why I like it here. Kified that fuckin battery myself. You wanna toke up, mister?"

"No, and you don't either. You want two bucks, Stacey?"

"Chris' yes!" Distrust slid over his eyes. "You dint come outta no manhole with two fuckin bucks. Thass bullshit."

Richards produced a New Dollar and gave it to the boy. He stared at it with awe that was close to horror.

"There's another one if you bring your brother," Richards said, and seeing his expression, added swiftly: "I'll give it to you on the side so he won't see it. Bring him alone."

"Won't do no good to try an kill Bradley, man. He'll make you shit in your boot-"

"And eat it. I know. You run and get him. Wait until he's alone."

"Three bucks."

"No."

"Lissen man, for three bucks I can get Cassie some stuff at the drug. Then she won't scream so fuckin much."

The man's face suddenly worked as if someone the boy couldn't see had punched him. "All right. Three."

"New Dollars," the boy persisted.

"Yes, for Christ's sake, yes. Get him. And if you bring the cops you won't get anything."

The boy paused, half in and half out of his little cubbyhole. "You stupid if you think I do that. I hate them fuckin oinkers worse than anyone. Even the devil."

He left, a seven-year-old boy with Richards's life in his grubby, scabbed hands. Richards was too tired to be really afraid. He turned off the light, leaned back, and dozed off.

Minus 065 and COUNTING

Dreaming sleep had just begun when his tight-strung senses ripped him back to wakefulness. Confused, in a dark place, the beginning of the nightmare held him for a moment and he thought that some huge police dog was coming for him, a terrifying organic weapon seven feet high. He almost cried aloud before Stacey made the real world fall into place by hissing:

"If he broke my fuckin light I'm gonna-"

The boy was violently shushed. The cloth across the entrance rippled, and Richards turned on the light. He was looking at Stacey and another black. The new fellow was maybe eighteen, Richards guessed, wearing a cycle jacket, looking at Richards with a mixture of hate and interest.

A switchblade clicked out and glittered in Bradley's hand. "If you're heeled, drop it down. "

"I'm not."

"I don't believe that sh-" he broke off, and his eyes widened. "Hey. You're that guy on the Free-Vee. You offed the YMCA on Hunington Avenue." The lowering blackness of his face was split by an involuntary grin. "They said you fried five cops. That probably means fifteen."

"He come outta the manhole," Stacey said importantly. "I knew it wasn't the devil right away. I knew it was some honky sumbitch. You gonna cut him, Bradley?"

"Just shut up an let men talk." Bradley came the rest of the way inside, squatting

awkwardly, and sat across from Richards on a splintery orange crate. He looked at the blade in his hand, seemed surprised to see it still there, and closed it up.

"You're hotter than the sun, man," he said finally.

"That's true."

"Where you gonna get to?"

"I don't know. I've got to get out of Boston."

Bradley sat in silent thought. "You gotta come home with me an Stacey. We gotta talk, an we can't do it here. Too open."

"All right," Richards said wearily. "I don't care."

"We go the back way. The pigs are cruising tonight. Now I know why."

When Bradley led the way out, Stacey kicked Richards sharply in the shin. For a moment Richards stared at him, not understanding, and then remembered. He slipped the boy three New Dollars, and Stacey made it disappear.

Minus 064 and COUNTING

The woman was very old; Richards thought he had never seen anyone as old. She was wearing a cotton print housedress with a large rip under one arm; an ancient, wrinkled dug swayed back and forth against the rip as she went about making the meal that Richards's New Dollars had purchased. The nicotine-yellowed fingers diced and pared and peeled. Her feet, splayed into grotesque boat shapes by years of standing, were clad in pink terrycloth slippers. Her hair looked as if it might have been self-waved by an iron held in a trembling hand; it was pushed back into a kind of pyramid by the twisted hairnet which had gone askew at the back of her head. Her face was a delta of time, no longer brown or black, but grayish, stitched with a radiating galaxy of wrinkles, pouches, and sags. Her toothless mouth worked craftily at the cigarette held there, blowing out puffs of blue smoke that seemed to hang above and behind her in little bunched blue balls. She puffed back and forth, describing a triangle between counter, skillet, and table. Her cotton stockings were rolled at the knee, and above them and the flapping hem of her dress varicose veins bunched in clocksprings.

The apartment was haunted by the ghost of long-departed cabbage.

In the far bedroom, Cassie screamed, whooped, and was silent. Bradley had told Richards with a kind of angry shame that he should not mind her. She had cancer in both lungs and recently it had spread upward into her throat and down into her belly. She was five.

Stacey had gone back out somewhere.

As he and Bradley spoke together, the maddening aroma of simmering ground beef, vegetables, and tomato sauce began to fill the room, driving the cabbage back into the corners and making Richards realize how hungry he was.

"I could turn you in, man. I could kill you an steal all that money. Turn in the body. Get a thousand more bucks and be on easy street."

"I don't think you could do it," Richards said. "I know I couldn't."

"Why're you doing it, anyway?" Bradley asked irritably. "Why you being their sucker? You that greedy?"

"My little girl's name is Cathy," Richards said. "Younger than Cassie. Pneumonia. She cries all the time, too."

Bradley said nothing.

"She could get better. Not like . . . her in there. Pneumonia's no worse than a cold. But you have to have medicine and a doctor. That costs money. I went for the money the only way I could."

"You still a sucker," Bradley said with flat and somehow uncanny emphasis. "You suckin off half the world and they comin in your mouth every night at six-thirty. Your little girl would be better off like Cassie in this world."

"I don't believe that."

"Then you ballsier than me, man. I put a guy in the hospital once with a rupture. Some rich guy. Cops chased me three days. But you ballsier than me. " He took a cigarette and lit it. "Maybe you'll go the whole month. A billion dollars. You'd have to buy a fuckin freight train to haul it off."

"Don't swear, praise Gawd," the old woman said from across the room where she was slicing carrots.

Bradley paid no attention. "You an your wife an little girl would be on easy street then. You got two days already."

"No," Richards said. "The game's rigged. You know those two things I gave Stacey to mail when he and your ma went out for groceries? I have to mail two of those every day before midnight. " He explained to Bradley about the forfeit clause, and his suspicion that they had traced him to Boston by postmark.

"Easy to beat that."

"How?"

"Never mind. Later. How you gonna get out of Boston? You awful hot. Made 'em mad, blowin up their oinkers at the YMCA. They had Free-Vee on that tonight. An those ones you took with the bag over your head. That was pretty sharp. Ma!" he finished irritably, "when's that stuff gonna be ready? We're fallin away to shadows right before ya!"

"She comin on," Ma said. She plopped a cover over the rich, slowly bubbling mass and walked slowly into the bedroom to sit by the girl.

"I don't know," Richards said. "I'll try to get a car, I guess. I've got fake papers, but I don't dare use them. I'll do something-wear dark glasses-and get out of the city. I've been thinking about going to Vermont and then crossing over into Canada. "

Bradley grunted and got up to put plates on the table. "By now they got every highway going out of Beantown blocked. A man wearin dark glasses calls tension to himself. They'll turn you into monkeymeat before you get six miles."

"Then I don't know," Richards said. "If I stay here, they'll get you for an accessory. "

Bradley began spreading dishes. "Suppose we get a car. You got the squeezin green. I got a name that isn't hot. There's a spic on Milk Street that'll sell me a Wint for three hundred. I'll get one of my buddies to drive it up to Manchester. It'll be cool as a fool in Manchester because you're bottled up in Boston. You eatin, Ma?"

"Yes an praise Gawd. " She waddled out of the bedroom. "Your sister is sleepin a little. "

"Good." He ladled up three dishes of hamburger gumbo and then paused. "Where's Stacey?"

"Said he was goin to the drug," Ma said complacently, shoveling gumbo into her toothless maw at a blinding speed. "Said he goan to get medicine."

"If he gets busted, I'll break his ass," Bradley said, sitting heavily.

"He won't," Richards said. "He's got money."

"Yeah, maybe we don't need no charity money, graymeat."

Richards laughed and salted his meal. "I'd probably be nabbed now if it wasn't for him," he said. "I guess it was earned money."

Bradley leaned forward, concentrating on his plate. None of them said anything more until the meal was done. Richards and Bradley had two helpings; the old woman had three. As they were lighting cigarettes, a key scratched in the lock and all of them stiffened until Stacey came in, looking guilty, frightened, and excited. He was carrying a brown bag in one hand and he gave Ma a bottle of medicine.

"Thass prime dope," he said. "That of man Curry ast me where I got two dollars and semney-fi cents to buy prime dope an I tole him to go shit in his boot and eat it. "

"Doan swear or the devil will poke you, " Ma said. "Here's dinner. "

The boy's eyes widened. "Jesus, there's meat in it!"

"Naw, we jus shat in it to make it thicker," Bradley said. The boy looked up sharply, saw his brother was joking, giggled, and fell to.

"Will that druggist go to the cops?" Richards asked quietly.

"Curry? Naw. Not if there might be some more squeezin green in this fambly. He knows Lassie's got to have heavy dope."

"What about this Manchester thing?"

"Yeah. Well, Vermont's no good. Not enough of our kind of people. Tough cops. I get some good fella like Rich Goleon to drive that Wint to Manchester and park it in an automatic garage. Then I drive you up in another car." He crushed out his cigarette. "In the trunk. They're only using Jiffy Sniffers on the back road. We'll go right up 495."

"Pretty dangerous for you," Richards said.

"Oh, I wasn't gonna do it free. When Cassie goes, she's gonna go out wrecked. "

"Praise Gawd," Ma said.

"Still pretty dangerous for you."

"Any pig grunts at Bradley, he make 'em shit in their boot an eat it," Stacey said, wiping his mouth. When he looked at Bradley, his eyes glittered with the flat shine of hero worship.

"You're dribblin on your shirt, Skinner," Bradley said. He knuckled Stacey's head. "You beatin your meat yet, Skinner? Ain't big enough, are ya?"

"If they catch us, you'll go in for the long bomb," Richards said. "Who's going to take care of the boy?"

"He'll take care of himself if something happens," Bradley said. "Himself and Ma here. He's not hooked on nothin. Are you Stace?"

Stacey shook his head emphatically.

"An he knows if I find any pricks in his arms I'll beat his brains out. Ain't that right, Stacey?"

Stacey nodded.

"Besides, we can use the money. This is a hurtin family. So don't say no more about it. I guess I know what I'm doin."

Richards finished his cigarette in silence while Bradley went in to give Cassie some medicine.

Minus 063 and COUNTING

When he awoke, it was still dark and the inner tide of his body put the time at about four-thirty. The girl, Cassie, had been screaming, and Bradley got up. The three of them were sleeping in the small, drafty back bedroom, Stacey and Richards on the floor. Ma slept with the girl.

Over the steady wheeze of Stacey's deep-sleep respiration, Richards heard Bradley come out of the room. There was a clink of a spoon in the sink. The girl's screams became isolated moans which trailed into silence. Richards could sense Bradley standing somewhere in the kitchen, immobile, waiting for the silence to come. He returned, sat down, farted, and then the bedsprings shifted creakily as he lay down.

"Bradley?"

"What?"

"Stacey said she was only five. Is that so?"

"Yes. " The urban dialectic was gone from his voice, making him sound unreal and dreamlike.

"What's a five-year-old kid doing with lung cancer? I didn't know they got it. Leukemia, maybe. Not lung cancer."

There was a bitter, whispered chuckle from the bed. "You're from Harding, right? What's the air-pollution count in Harding?"

"I don't know," Richards said. "They don't give them with the weather anymore. They haven't for . . . gee, I don't know. A long time."

"Not since 2020 in Boston," Bradley whispered back. "They're scared to. You ain't got a nose filter, do you?"

"Don't be stupid," Richards said irritably. "The goddam things cost two hundred bucks, even in the cut-rate stores. I didn't see two hundred bucks all last year. Did you?"

"No," Bradley said softly. He paused. "Stacey's got one. I made it. Ma and Rich Goleon an some other people got em, too. "

"You're shitting me," Richards said.

"No, man." He stopped. Richards was suddenly sure that Bradley was weighing what he had said already against a great many more things which he might say. Wondering how much was too much. When the words came again, they came with difficulty. "We've been reading. That Free-Vee shit is for empty-heads."

Richards grunted agreement.

"The gang, you know. Some of the guys are just cruisers, you know? All they're interested in is honky-stomping on Saturday night. But some of us have been going down to the library since we were twelve or so."

"They let you in without a card in Boston?"

"No. You can't get a card unless there's someone with a guaranteed income of five thousand dollars a year in your family. We got some plump-ass kid an kified his card. We take turns going. We got a gang suit we wear when we go. " Bradley paused. "You laugh at me and I'll cut you, man."

"I'm not laughing."

"At first we only read sexbooks. Then when Cassie first started getting sick, I got into this pollution stuff. They've got all the books on impurity counts and smog levels and nose filters in the reserve section. We got a key made from a wax blank. Man, did you know that everybody in Tokyo had to wear a nose filter by 2012?"

"No. "

"Rich and Dink Moran built a pollution counter. Dink drew the picture out of the book, and they did it from coffee cans and some stuff they boosted out of cars. It's hid out in an alley. Back in 1978 they had an air pollution scale that went from one to twenty. You understand?"

"Yes. "

"When it got up to twelve, the factories and all the pollution-producing shit had to shut down till the weather changed. It was a federal law until 1987, when the Revised Congress rolled it back." The shadow on the bed rose up on its elbow. "I bet you know a lot of people with asthma, that right?"

"Sure," Richards said cautiously. "I've got a touch myself. You get *that* from the air. Christ, everybody knows you stay in the house when it's hot and cloudy and the air doesn't move-"

"Temperature inversion," Bradley said grimly.

"-and lots of people get asthma, sure. The air gets like cough syrup in August and September. But lung cancer-

"You ain't talkin about asthma," Bradley said. "You talkin bout emphysema. "

"Emphysema?" Richards turned the word over in his mind. He could not assign a meaning to it, although the word was faintly familiar.

"All the tissues in your lungs swell up. You heave an heave an heave, but you're still out of breath. You know a lot of people who get like that?"

Richards thought. He did. He knew a lot of people who had died like that.

"They don't talk about that one," Bradley said, as if he had read Richards's thought. "Now the pollution count in Boston is twenty on a good day. That's like smoking four packs of cigarettes a day just breathing. On a bad day it gets up as high as forty-two. Old dudes drop dead all over town. Asthma goes on the death certificate. But it's the air, the air, the air. And they're pouring it out just as fast as they can, big smokestacks going twenty-four hours a day. The big boys like it that way.

"Those two-hundred-dollar nose filters aren't worth shit. They're just two pieces of screen with a little piece of metholated cotton between them. That's all. The only good ones are from General Atomics. The only ones who can afford them are the big boys. They gave us the Free-Vee to keep us off the streets so we can breathe ourselves to death without making any trouble. How do you like that? The cheapest G-A nose filter on the market goes for six thousand New Dollars. We made one for Stacey for ten bucks from that book. We used an atomic nugget the size of the moon on your fingernail. Got it out of a hearing aid we bought in a hockshop for seven bucks. How do you like that?"

Richards said nothing. He was speechless.

"When Cassie boots off, you think they'll put cancer on the death certificate? Shit they'll put asthma. Else somebody might get scared. Somebody might kife a library card and find out lung cancer is up seven hundred percent since 2015."

"Is that true? Or are you making it up?"

"I read it in a book. Man, they're killing us. The Free-Vee is killing us. It's like a magician getting you to watch the cakes falling outta his helper's blouse while he pulls rabbits out of his pants and puts 'em in his hat." He paused and then said dreamily: " Sometimes I think that I could blow the whole thing outta the water with ten minutes talk-time on the Free-Vee. Tell em. Show em. Everybody could have a nose filter if the Network wanted em to have em.

"And I'm helping them," Richards said.

"That ain't your fault. You got to run.

Killian's face, and the face of Arthur M. Burns rose up in front of Richards. He wanted to smash them, stomp them, walk on them. Better still, rip out their nose filters and turn them into the street.

"People's mad," Bradley said. "They've been mad at the honkies for thirty years. All

they need is a reason. A reason . . . one reason . . . "

Richards drifted off to sleep with the repetition in his ears.

Minus 062 and COUNTING

Richards stayed in all day while Bradley was out seeing about the car and arranging with another member of the gang to drive it to Manchester.

Bradley and Stacey came back at six, and Bradley thumbed on the Free-Vee. "All set, man. We go tonight."

"Now?"

Bradley smiled humorlessly. "Don't you want to see yourself coast-to-coast?"

Richards discovered he did, and when *The Running Man* lead-in came on, he watched, fascinated.

Bobby Thompson stared deadpan at the camera from the middle of a brilliant post in a sea of darkness. "Watch," he said. "This is one of the wolves that walks among you. "

A huge blowup of Richards's face appeared on the screen. It held for a moment, then dissolved to a second photo of Richards, this time in the John Griffen Springer disguise.

Dissolve back to Thompson, looking grave. "I speak particularly to the people of Boston tonight. Yesterday afternoon, five policemen went to a blazing, agonized death in the basement of the Boston YMCA at the hands of this wolf, who had set a clever, merciless trap. Who is he tonight? *Where is he tonight?* Look! Look at him!"

Thompson faded into the first of the two clips which Richards had filmed that morning. Stacey had dropped them in a mailbox on Commonwealth Avenue, across the city. He had let Ma hold the camera in the back bedroom, after he had draped the window and all the furniture.

"All of you watching this," Richards's image said slowly. "Not the technicians, not the people in the penthouses-I don't mean you shits. You people in the Developments and the ghettos and the cheap highrises. You people in the cycle gangs. You people without jobs. You kids getting busted for dope you don't have and crimes you didn't commit because the Network wants to make sure you aren't meeting together and talking together. I want to tell you about a monstrous conspiracy to deprive you of the very breath in y-"

The audio suddenly became a mixture of squeaks, pops, and gargles. A moment later it died altogether. Richards's mouth was moving, but no sound was coming out.

"We seem to have lost our audio," Bobby Thompson's voice came smoothly, "but we don't need to listen to any more of this murderer's radical ravings to understand what we're dealing with, do we?"

"No! " The audience screamed.

"What will you do if you see him on your street?"

"TURN HIM IN! "

"And what are we going to do when we find him?"

"KILL HIM! "

Richards pounded his fist against the tired arm of the only easy chair in the apartment's kitchen-living room. "Those bastards," he said helplessly.

"Did you think they'd let you go on the air with it?" Bradley asked mockingly. "Oh no, man. I'm s'prised they let you get away with as much as they did."

"I didn't think," Richards said sickly.

"No, I guess you didn't," Bradley said.

The first clip faded into the second. In this one, Richards had asked the people watching to storm the libraries, demand cards, find out the truth. He had read off a list of books dealing with air pollution and water pollution that Bradley had given him.

Richards's image opened its mouth. "Fuck every one of you," his image said. The lips seemed to be moving around different words, but how many of the two hundred million people watching were going to notice that? "Fuck all pigs. Fuck the Games Commission. I'm gonna kill every pig I see. I'm gonna-" There was more, enough so that Richards wanted to plug his ears and tun out of the room. He couldn't tell if it was the voice of a mimic, or a harangue made up of spliced bits of audio tape.

The clip faded to a split-screen of Thompson's face and the still photo of Richards. "Behold the man," Thompson said. "The man who would kill. The man who would mobilize an army of malcontents like himself to run riot through your streets, raping and burning and overturning. The man would lie, cheat, kill. He has done all these things.

"Benjamin Richards! " The voice cried out with a cold, commanding Old Testament anger. "Are you watching? If so, you have been paid your ditty blood money. A hundred dollars for each hour-now number fifty-four-that you have remained free. And an extra five hundred dollars. One hundred for each of these five men."

The faces of young, clear-featured policemen began appearing on the screen. The still had apparently been taken at a Police Academy graduation exercise. They looked fresh, full of sap and hope, heart-breakingly vulnerable. Softly, a single trumpet began to play Taps.

"And these . . . " Thompson's voice was now low and hoarse with emotion, " . . . these were their families. "

Wives, hopefully smiling. Children that had been coaxed to smile into the camera. A lot of children. Richards, cold and sick and nauseated, lowered his head and pressed the back of his hand over his mouth.

Bradley's hand, warm and muscular, pressed his neck. "Hey, no. No, man. That's put on. That's all fake. They were probably a bunch of old harness bulls who-

"Shut up," Richards said. "Oh shut up. Just. Please. Shut up."

"Five hundred dollars," Thompson was saying, and infinite hate and contempt filled his voice. Richards's face on the screen again, cold, hard, devoid of all emotion save an expression of bloodlust that seemed chiefly to be in the eyes. "Five police, five wives,

nineteen children. It comes to just about seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents for each of the dead, the bereaved, the heartbroken. Oh yes, you work cheap, Ben Richards. Even Judas got thirty pieces of silver, but you don't even demand that. Somewhere, even now, a mother is telling her little boy that daddy won't be home ever again because a desperate, greedy man with a gun-

"Killer!" A woman was sobbing. "Vile, dirty murderer! God will strike you dead!"

"Strike him dead!" The audience over the chant: "Behold the man! He has been paid his blood money-but the man who lives by violence shall die by it. And let every man's hand be raised against Benjamin Richards! "

Hate and fear in every voice, rising in a steady, throbbing roar. No, they wouldn't turn him in. They would rip him to shreds on sight.

Bradley turned off the screen and faced him. "Thass what you're dealing with, man. How about it. "

"Maybe I'll kill them," Richards said in a thoughtful voice. "Maybe, before I'm done, I'll get up to the ninetieth floor of that place and just hunt up the maggots who wrote that. Maybe I'll just kill them all."

"Don't talk no more! " Stacey burst out wildly. "Don't talk no more about it! "

In the other room, Cassie slept her drugged, dying sleep.

Minus 061 and COUNTING

Bradley had not dared drill any holes in the floor of the trunk, so Richards curled in a miserable ball with his mouth and nose pressed toward the tiny notch of light which was the trunk's keyhole. Bradley had also pulled out some of the inner trunk insulation around the lid, and that let in a small draft.

The car lifted with a jerk, and he knocked his head against the upper deck. Bradley had told him the ride would be at least an hour and a half, with two stops for roadblocks, perhaps more. Before he closed the trunk, he gave Richards a large revolver.

"Every tenth or twelfth car, they give it a heavy looking over," he said. "They open the trunk to poke around. Those are good odds, eleven to one. If it don't come up, plug you some pork. "

The car lurched and heaved over the potholed, cracked-crazed streets of the inner city. Once a kid jeered and there was the thump of a thrown piece of paving. Then the sounds of increasing traffic all around them and more frequent stops for lights.

Richards lay passively, holding the pistol lightly in his right hand, thinking how different Bradley had looked in the gang suit. It was a sober Dillon Street double-breasted, as gray as bank walls. It was rounded off with a maroon tie and a small gold NAACP pin. Bradley had made the leap from scruffy gang-member (pregnant ladies stay away; some of us'ns eat fetuses) to a sober black business fellow who would know exactly who to Tom.

"You look good," Richards said admiringly. "In fact, it's damn incredible."

"Praise Gawd," Ma said.

"I thought you'd enjoy the transformation, my good man," Bradley said with quiet dignity. "I'm the district manager for Raygon Chemicals, you know. We do a thriving business in this area. Fine city, Boston. Immensely convivial."

Stacey burst into giggles.

"You best shut up, nigger," Bradley said. "Else I make you shit in yo boot an eat it. "

"You Tom so good, Bradley," Stacey giggled, not intimidated in the least. "You really fuckin funky."

Now the car swung right, onto a smoother surface, and descended in a spiraling arc. They were on an entrance ramp. Going onto 495 or a feeder expressway. Copper wires of tension were stuffed into his legs.

One in eleven. That's not bad odds.

The car picked up speed and height, kicked into drive, then slowed abruptly and kicked out. A voice, terrifyingly close, yelling with monotonous regularity: "Pull over . . . have your license and registration ready . . . pull over . . . have your-

Already. Starting already.

You so hot, man.

Hot enough to check the trunk on one car in eight? Or six? Or maybe every one?

The car came to a full stop. Richards's eyes moved like trapped rabbits in their sockets. He gripped the revolver.

Minus 060 and COUNTING

"Step out your vehicle, sir," the bored, authoritative voice was saying. "License and registration, please."

A door opened and closed. The engine thrummed softly, holding the car an inch off the paving.

"-district manager for Raygon Chemicals-"

Bradley going into his song and dance. Dear God, what if he didn't have the papers to back it up? What if there was no Raygon Chemicals?

The back door opened, and someone began rummaging in the back seat. It sounded as if the cop (or was it the Government Guard that did this, Richards wondered half coherently) was about to crawl right into the trunk with him.

The door slammed. Feet walked around to the back of the car. Richards licked his lips and held the gun tighter. Visions of dead policemen gibbered before him, angelic faces on twisted, porcine bodies. He wondered if the cop would hose him with machine-gun bullets when he opened the trunk and saw Richards lying here like a curled-up salamander. He wondered if Bradley would take off, try to run. He was going to piss himself. He hadn't done that since he was a kid and his brother would tickle him until his

bladder let go. Yes, all those muscles down there were loosening. He would put the bullet right at the juncture of the cop's nose and forehead, splattering brains and splintered skull-fragments in startled streamers to the sky. Make a few more orphans. Yes. Good. Jesus loves me, this I know, for my bladder tells me so. Christ Jesus, what's he doing, ripping the seat out? Sheila, I love you so much and how far will six grand take you? A year, maybe, if they don't kill you for it. Then on the street again, up and down, cross on the corner, swinging the hips, flirting with the empty pocketbook. Hey mister, I go down, this is clean kitty, kid, teach you how-

A hand whacked the top of the trunk casually in passing. Richards bit back a scream. Dust in his nostrils, throat tickling. High school biology, sitting in the back row, scratching his initials and Sheila's on the ancient desk-top: *The sneeze is a function of the involuntary muscles*. I'm going to sneeze my goddam head off but it's pointblank and I can still put that bullet right through his squash and-

"What's in the trunk, mister?"

Bradley's voice, jocular, a little bored: "A spare cylinder that doesn't work half right. I got the key on my ring. Wait, I'll get it."

"If I wanted it, I'd ask."

Other back door opened; closed.

"Drive on."

"Hang tight, fella. Hope you get him. "

"Drive on, mister. Move your ass."

The cylinders cranked up. The car lifted and accelerated. It slowed once and must have been waved on. Richards jolted a little as the car rose, sailed a little, and kicked into drive. His breath came in tired little moans. He didn't have to sneeze any more.

Minus 059 and COUNTING

The ride seemed much longer than an hour and a half, and they were stopped twice more. One of them seemed to be a routine license check. At the next one a drawling cop with a dull-wilted voice talked to Bradley for some time about how the goddam commie bikers were helping that guy Richards and probably the other one, too. Laughlin had not killed anyone, but it was rumored that he had raped a woman in Topeka.

After that there was nothing but the monotonous whine of the wind and the scream of his own cramped and frozen muscles. Richards did not sleep, but his punished mind did finally push him into a dazed semi-consciousness. There was no carbon monoxide with the air cars, thank God for that.

Centuries after the last roadblock, the car kicked into a lower gear and banked up a spiraling exit ramp. Richards blinked sluggishly and wondered if he was going to throw up. For the first time in his life he felt carsick.

They went through a sickening series of loops and dives that Richards supposed was a traffic interchange. Another five minutes and city sounds took over again. Richards tried

repeatedly to shift his body into a new position, but it was impossible. He finally subsided, waiting numbly for it to be over. His right arm, which was curled under him, had gone to sleep an hour ago. Now it felt like a block of wood. He could touch it with the tip of his nose and feel only the pressure on his nose.

They took a right, went straight for a little, then turned again. The bottom dropped out of Richards's stomach as the car dipped down a sharp incline. The echoing of the cylinders told him that they were inside. They had gotten to the garage-

A little helpless sound of relief escaped him.

"Got your check, buddy?" A voice asked.

"Right here, pal."

"Rampway 5. "

"Thanks. "

They bore right. The car went up, paused, turned right again, then left. They settled into idle, then the car dropped with a soft bump as the engine died. Journey's end.

There was a pause, then the hollow sound of Bradley's door opening and closing. His footsteps clicked toward the trunk, then the chink of light in front of Richards's eyes disappeared as the key slid home.

"You there, Bennie?"

"No," he croaked. "You left me back at the state line. Open this goddam thing. "

"Just a second. Place is empty right now. Your car's parked next to us. On the right. Can you get out quick?"

"I don't know."

"Try hard. Here we go."

The trunk lid popped up, letting in dim garage light. Richards got up on one arm, got one leg over the edge, and could go no farther. His cramped body screamed. Bradley took one arm and hauled him out. His legs wanted to buckle. Bradley hooked him under the armpit and half led, half pushed him to the battered green Wint on the right. He propped open the driver's side door, shoved Richards in, and slammed it shut. A moment later Bradley also slid in.

"Jesus," he said softly. "We got here, man. We got here."

"Yeah," Richards said. "Back to Go. Collect two hundred dollars."

They smoked in the shadows, their cigarettes gleaming like eyes. For a little while, neither of them said anything.

Minus 058 and COUNTING

"We almost got it at that first roadblock," Bradley was saying as Richards tried to massage feeling back into his arm. It felt as if phantom nails had been pushed into it. "That cop almost opened it. Almost." He blew out smoke in a huge huff. Richards said

nothing.

"How do you feel?" Bradley asked presently.

"It's getting better. Take my wallet out for me. I can't make my arm work just right yet. "

Bradley shooed the words away with one hand. "Later. I want to tell you how Rich and I set it up. "

Richards lit another cigarette from the stub of the first. A dozen charley horses were loosening slowly.

"There's a hotel room reserved for you on Winthrop Street. The Winthrop House is the name of the place. Sounds fancy. It ain't. The name is Ogden Grassner. Can you remember that?"

"Yes. I'll be recognized immediately."

Bradley reached into the back seat, got a box and dropped it in Richards's lap. It was long, brown, tied with string. To Richards it looked like the kind of box that rented graduation gowns come in. He looked at Bradley questioningly.

"Open it."

He did. There was a pair of thick, blue-tinted glasses lying on top of a drift of black cloth. Richards put the glasses on the dashboard and took out the garment. It was a priest's robe. Beneath it, lying on the bottom of the box, was a rosary, a Bible, and a purple stole.

"A priest?" Richards asked.

"Right. You change right here. I'll help you. There's a cane in the back seat. Your act ain't blind, but it's pretty close. Bump into things. You're in Manchester to attend a Council of Churches meeting on drug abuse. Got it?"

"Yes," Richards said. He hesitated, fingers on the buttons of his shirt. "Do I wear my pants under this rig?"

Bradley burst out laughing.

Minus 057 and COUNTING

Bradley talked rapidly as he drove Richards across town.

"There's a box of gummed mailing labels in your suitcase," he said. "That's in the trunk. The stickers say: After five days return to Brickhill Manufacturing Company, Manchester, N.H. Rich and another guy ran em off. They got a press at the Stabbers' headquarters on Boylston Street. Every day you send your two tapes to me in a box with one of those stickers. I'll mail 'em to Games from Boston. Send the stuff Speed Delivery. That's one they'll never figure out."

The car coozied up to the curb in front of the Winthrop House. "This car will be back in the U-Park-It. Don't try to drive out of Manchester unless you change your disguise. You got to be a chameleon, man."

"How long do you think it will be safe here?" Richards asked. He thought: I've put myself in his hands. It didn't seem that he could think rationally for himself anymore. He could smell mental exhaustion on himself like body odor.

"Your reservation's for a week. That might be okay. It might not. Play it by ear. There's a name and an address in the suitcase. Fella in Portland. Maine.

They'll hide you for a day or two. It'll cost, but they're safe. I gotta go, man. This is a five-minute zone. Money time."

"How much?" Richards asked.

"Six hundred. "

"Bullshit. That doesn't even cover expenses. "

"Yes it does. With a few bucks left over for the family."

"Take a thousand."

"You need your dough, pal. Uh-uh. "

Richards looked at him helplessly. "Christ, Bradley-

"Send us more if you make it. Send us a million. Put us on easy street."

"Do you think I will?"

Bradley smiled a soft, sad smile and said nothing.

"Then why?" Richards asked flatly. "Why are you doing so much? I can understand you hiding me out. I'd do that. But you must have busted your club's arm. "

"They didn't mind. They know the score."

"What score?"

"Ought to naught. That score. If we doan stick out our necks for our own, they got us. No need to wait for the air. We could just as well run a pipe from the stove to the livin room, turn on the Free-Vee and wait."

"Someone'll kill you," Richards said. "Someone will stool on you and you'll end up on a basement floor with your guts beat out. Or Stacey. Or Ma. "

Bradley's eyes flashed dimly. "A bad day is comin, though. A bad day for the maggots with their guts full of roast beef. I see blood on the moon for them. Guns and torches. A mojo that walks and talks."

"People have been seeing those things for two thousand years."

The five-minute buzzer went off and Richards fumbled for the door handle. "Thank you," he said. "I don't know how to say it any other way-

"Go on," Bradley said, "before I get a ticket." A strong brown hand clutched the robe. "An when they get you, take a few along. "

Richards opened the rear door and popped the trunk to get the black satchel inside. Bradley handed him a cordovan-colored cane wordlessly.

The car pulled out into traffic smoothly. Richards stood on the curb for a moment, watching him go-watching him myopically, he hoped. The taillights flashed once at the corner, then the car swung out of sight, back to the parking lot where Bradley would leave it and pick up the other to go back to Boston.

Richards had a weird sensation of relief and realized that he was feeling empathy for Bradley-how glad he must be to have me off his back, finally!

Richards made himself miss the first step up to the Winthrop House's entrance, and the doorman assisted him.

Minus 056 and COUNTING

Two days passed.

Richards played his part well-that is to say, as if his life depended on it. He took dinner at the hotel both nights in his room. He rose at seven, read his Bible in the lobby, and then went out to his "meeting." The hotel staff treated him with easy, contemptuous cordiality-the kind reserved for half-blind, fumbling clerics (who paid their bills) in this day of limited legalized murder, germ warfare in Egypt and South America, and the notorious have-one-kill-one Nevada abortion law. The Pope was a muttering old man of ninety-six whose driveling edicts concerning such current events were reported as the closing humorous items on the seven o'clock newsies.

Richards held his one-man "meetings" in a rented library cubicle where, with the door locked, he was reading about pollution. There was very little information later than 2002, and what there was seemed to jell very badly with what had been written before. The government, as usual, was doing a tardy but efficient job of double thinking.

At noon he made his way down to a luncheonette on the corner of a street not far from the hotel, bumping into people and excusing himself as he went. Some people told him it was quite all right, Father. Most simply cursed in an uninterested way and pushed him aside.

He spent the afternoons in his room and ate dinner watching *The Running Man*. He had mailed four filmclips while enroute to the library during the mornings. The forwarding from Boston seemed to be going smoothly.

The producers of the program had adopted a new tactic for killing Richards's pollution message (he persisted with it in a kind of grinning frenzy-he had to be getting through to the lip-readers anyway): now the crowd drowned out the voice with a rising storm of jeers, screams, obscenities, and vituperation. Their sound grew increasingly more frenzied; ugly to the point of dementia.

In his long afternoons, Richards reflected that an unwilling change had come over him during his five days on the run. Bradley had done it-Bradley and the little girl. There was no longer just himself, a lone man fighting for his family, bound to be cut down. Now there were all of them out there, strangling on their own respiration-his family included.

He had never been a social man. He had shunned causes with contempt and disgust.

They were for pig-simple suckers and people with too much time and money on their hands, like those half-assed college kids with their cute buttons and their neo-rock groups.

Richards's father had slunk into the night when Richards was five. Richards had been too young to remember him in anything but flashes. He had never hated him for it. He understood well enough how a man with a choice between pride and responsibility will almost always choose pride-if responsibility robs him of his manhood. A man can't stick around and watch his wife earning supper on her back. If a man can't do any more than pimp for the woman he married, Richards judged, he might as well walk out of a high window.

He had spent the years between five and sixteen hustling, he and his brother Todd. His mother had died of syphilis when he was ten and Todd was seven. Todd had been killed five years later when a newsie airtruck had lost its emergency brake on a hill while Todd was loading it. The city had fed both mother and son into the Municipal Crematorium. The kids on the street called it either the Ash Factory or the Creamery; they were bitter but helpless, knowing that they themselves would most likely end up being belched out of the stacks and into the city's air. At sixteen Richards was alone, working a full eight-hour shift as an engine wiper after school. And in spite of his back-breaking schedule, he had felt a constant panic that came from knowing he was alone and unknown, drifting free. He awoke sometimes at three in the morning to the rotted-cabbage smell of the one-room tenement flat with terror lodged in the deepest chamber of his soul. He was his own man.

And so he had married, and Sheila had spent the first year in proud silence while their friends (and Richards's enemies; he had made many by his refusal to go along on mass-vandalizing expeditions and join a local gang) waited for the Uterus Express to arrive. When it didn't, interest flagged. They were left in that particular limbo that was reserved for newlyweds in Co-Op City. Few friends and a circle of acquaintances that reached only as far as the stoop of their own building. Richards did not mind this; it suited him. He threw himself into his work wholly, with grinning intensity, getting overtime when he could. The wages were bad, there was no chance of advancement, and inflation was running wild-but they were in love. They remained in love, and why not? Richards was that kind of solitary man who can afford to expend gigantic charges of love, affection, and, perhaps, psychic domination on the woman of his choice. Up until that point his emotions had been almost entirely untouched. In the eleven years of their marriage, they had never argued significantly.

He quit his job in 2018 because the chances of ever having children decreased with every shift he spent behind the leaky G-A old-style lead shields. He might have been all right if he answered the foreman's aggrieved "Why are you quitting?" with a lie. But Richards had told him, simply and clearly, what he thought *of* General Atomics, concluding with an invitation to the foreman to take all his gamma shields and perform a reverse bowel movement with them. It ended in a short, savage scuffle. The foreman was brawny and looked tough, but Richards made him scream like a woman.

The blackball began to roll. He's dangerous. Steer clear. *If* you need a man bad, put him on for a week and then get rid of him. In G-A parlance, Richards had Shown Red.

During the next five years he had spent a lot of time rolling and loading newsies, but the work thinned to a trickle and then died. The Free-Vee killed the printed word very effectively. Richards pounded the pavement. Richards was moved along. Richards worked intermittently for day-labor outfits.

The great movements of the decade passed by him ignored, like ghosts to an unbeliever. He knew nothing of the Housewife Massacre in '24 until his wife told him about it three weeks later—two hundred police armed with tommy guns and high-powered move-alongs had turned back an army of women marching on the Southwest Food Depository. Sixty had been killed. He was vaguely aware that nerve gas was being used in the Mideast. But none of it affected him. Protest did not work. Violence did not work. The world was what it was, and Ben Richards moved through it like a thin scythe, asking for nothing, looking for work. He ferreted out a hundred miserable day and half-day jobs. He worked cleaning jellylike slime from under piers and in sump ditches when others on the street, who honestly believed they were looking for work, did nothing.

Move along, maggot. Get lost. No job. Get out. Put on your boogie shoes. I'll blow your effing head off, daddy. Move.

Then the jobs dried up. Impossible to find anything. A rich man in a silk singlet, drunk, accosted him on the street one evening as Richards shambled home after a fruitless day, and told him he would give Richards ten New Dollars if Richards would pull down his pants so he could see if the street freaks really did have peckers a foot long. Richards knocked him down and ran.

It was then, after nine years of trying, that Sheila conceived. He was a wiper, the people in the building said. Can you believe he was a wiper for six years and knocked her up? It'll be a monster, the people in the building said. It'll have two heads and no eyes. *Radiation, radiation, your children will be monsters-*

But instead, it was Cathy. Round, perfect, squalling. Delivered by a midwife from down the block who took fifty cents and four cans of beans.

And now, for the first time since his brother had died, he was drifting again. Every pressure (even, temporarily, the pressure of the chase) had been removed.

His mind and his anger turned toward the Games Federation, with their huge and potent communications link to the whole world. Fat people with nose filters, spending their evenings with dollies in silk underpants. Let the guillotine fall. And fall. And fall. Yet there was no way to get them. They towered above all of them dimly, like the Games Building itself.

Yet, because he was who he was, and because he was alone and changing, he thought about it. He was unaware, alone in his room, that while he thought about it he grinned a huge white-wolf grin that in itself seemed powerful enough to buckle streets and melt buildings. The same grin he had worn on that almost-forgotten day when he had knocked a rich man down and then fled with his pockets empty and his mind burning.

Minus 055 and COUNTING

Monday was exactly the same as Sunday—the working world took no one particular

day off anymore-until six-thirty.

Father Ogden Grassner had Meatloaf Supreme sent up (the hotel's cuisine, which would have seemed execrable to a man who had been weaned on anything better than fast-food hamburgers and concentrate pills, tasted great to Richards) with a bottle of Thunderbird wine and settled down to watch *The Running Man*. The first segment, dealing with Richards himself, went much as it had on the two nights previous. The audio on his clips was drowned out by the studio audience. Bobby Thompson was urbane and virulent. A house-to-house search was taking place in Boston. Anyone found harboring the fugitive would be put to death. Richards smiled without humor as they faded to a Network promo. It wasn't so bad; it was even funny, in a limited way. He could stand anything if they didn't broadcast the cops again.

The second half of the program was markedly different. Thompson was smiling broadly. "After the latest tapes sent to us by the monster that goes under the name of Ben Richards, I'm pleased to give you some good news-"

They had gotten Laughlin.

He had been spotted in Topeka on Friday, but an intensive search of the city on Saturday and Sunday had not turned him up. Richards had assumed that Laughlin had slipped through the cordon as he had himself. But this afternoon, Laughlin had been observed by two kids. He had been cowering in a Highway Department road shed. He had broken his right wrist at some point.

The kids, Bobby and Mary Cowles, were shown grinning broadly into the camera. Bobby Cowles had a tooth missing. I wonder if the tooth fairy brought him a quarter, Richards thought sickly.

Thompson announced proudly that Bobby and Mary, "Topeka's number one citizens," would be on *The Running Man* tomorrow night to be presented Certificates of Merit, a life-time supply of FunTwinks cereal, and checks for a thousand New Dollars each, by Hizzoner the Governor of Kansas. This brought wild cheers from the audience.

Following were tapes of Laughlin's riddled, sagging body being carried out of the shed, which had been reduced to matchwood by concentrated fire. There were mingled cheers, boos, and hisses from the studio audience.

Richards turned away sickly, nauseated. Thin, invisible fingers seemed to press against his temples.

From a distance, the words rolled on. The body was being displayed in the rotunda of the Kansas statehouse. Already long lines of citizens were filing past the body. An interviewed policeman who had been in at the kill said Laughlin hadn't put up much of a fight.

Ah, how nice for you, Richards thought, remembering Laughlin, his sour voice, the straight-ahead, jeering look in his eyes.

A friend of mine from the car pool.

Now there was only one big show. The big show was Ben Richards. He didn't want any more of his Meatloaf Supreme.

Minus 054 and COUNTING

He had a very bad dream that night, which was unusual. The old Ben Richards had never dreamed.

What was even more peculiar was the fact that he did not exist as a character in the dream. He only watched, invisible.

The room was vague, dimming off to blackness at the edges of vision. It seemed that water was dripping dankly. Richards had an impression of being deep underground.

In the center of the room, Bradley was sitting in a straight wooden chair with leather straps over his arms and legs. His head had been shaved like that of a penitent. Surrounding him were figures in black hoods. The Hunters, Richards thought with budding dread. Oh dear God, these are the Hunters.

"I ain't the man," Bradley said.

"Yes you are, little brother," one of the hooded figures said gently, and pushed a pin through Bradley's cheek. Bradley screamed.

"Are you the man?"

"Suck it."

A pin slid easily into Bradley's eyeball and was withdrawn dribbling colorless fluid. Bradley's eye took on a punched, flattened look.

"Are you the man?"

"Poke it up your ass."

An electric move-along touched Bradley's neck. He screamed again, and his hair stood on end. He looked like a comical caricature black, a futuristic Stepinfetchit.

"Are you the man, little brother?"

"Nose filters give you cancer," Bradley said. "You're all rotted inside, honkies. "

His other eyeball was pierced. "Are you the man?"

Bradley, blind, laughed at them.

One of the hooded figures gestured, and from the shadows Bobby and Mary Cowles came tripping gaily. They began to skip around Bradley, singing: "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf, the big bad wolf?"

Bradley began to scream and twist in the chair. He seemed to be trying to hold his hands up in a warding-off gesture. The song grew louder and louder, more echoing. The children were changing. Their heads were elongating, growing dark with blood. Their mouths were open and in the caves within, fangs twinkled like razor-blades.

"I'll tell!" Bradley screamed. "I'll tell! I'll tell! I ain't the man! Ben Richards is the man! I'll tell! God . . . oh . . . G-G-God . . . "

"Where is the man, little brother?"

"I'll tell! I'll tell! He's in-"

But the words were drowned by the singing voices. They were lunging toward Bradley's straining, corded neck when Richards woke up, sweating.

Minus 053 and COUNTING

It was no good in Manchester anymore.

He didn't know if it was the news of Laughlin's brutal mid-western end, or the dream, or only a premonition.

But on Tuesday morning he stayed in, not going to the library. It seemed to him that every minute he stayed in this place was an invitation to quick doom. Looking out the window, he saw a Hunter with a black hood inside every old bearer and slumped taxi driver. Fantasies of gunmen creeping soundlessly up the hall toward his door tormented him. He felt a huge clock was ticking in his head.

He passed the point of indecision shortly after eleven o'clock on Tuesday morning. It was impossible to stay. He knew they knew.

He got his cane and tapped clumsily to the elevators and went down to the lobby.

"Going out, Father Grassner?" The day clerk asked with his usual pleasant, contemptuous smile.

"Day off," Richards said, speaking at the day clerk's shoulder. "Is there a picture show in this town?"

He knew there were at least ten, eight of them showing 3-D pervert shows.

"Well," the clerk said cautiously, "there's the Center. I think they show Disneys-"

"That will be fine," Richards said briskly, and bumped into a potted plant on his way out.

Two blocks from the hotel he went into a drugstore and bought a huge roll of bandage and a pair of cheap aluminum crutches. The clerk put his purchases in a long fiberboard box, and Richards caught a taxi on the next corner.

The car was exactly where it had been, and if there was a stakeout at the U-ParkIt, Richards could not spot it. He got in and started up. He had a bad moment when he realized he lacked a driver's license in any name that wasn't hot, and then dismissed it. He didn't think his new disguise would get him past close scrutiny anyway. If there were roadblocks, he would try to crash them. It would get him killed, but he was going to get killed anyway if they tabbed him.

He tossed the Ogden Grassner glasses in the glove box and drove out, waving noncommittally at the boy on duty at the gate. The boy barely looked up from the skin magazine he was reading.

He stopped for a full compressed-air charge on the high-speed urban sprawl on the northern outskirts of the city. The air jockey was in the midst of a volcanic eruption of acne, and seemed pathetically anxious to avoid looking at Richards. So far, so good.

He switched from 91 to Route 17, and from there to a blacktop road with no name or number. Three miles farther along he pulled onto a rutted dirt turnaround and killed the engine.

Tilting the rearview mirror to the right angle, he wrapped the bandage around his skull as quickly as he could, holding the end and clipping it. A bird twitted restlessly in a tired-looking elm.

Not too bad. If he got breathing time in Portland, he could add a neck brace.

He put the crutches beside him on the seat and started the car. Forty minutes later he was entering the traffic circle at Portsmouth. Headed up Route 95, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the crumpled piece of ruled paper that Bradley had left him. He had written on it in the careful script of the self-educated, using a soft lead pencil:

94 State Street, Portland
THE BLUE DOOR, GUESTS
Elton Parrakis (& Virginia Parrakis)

Richards frowned at it a moment, then glanced up. A black-and-yellow police unit was cruising slowly above the traffic on the turnpike, in tandem with a heavy ground-unit below. They bracketed him for a moment and then were gone, zigzagging across the six lanes in a graceful ballet. Routine traffic patrol.

As the miles passed, a queasy, almost reluctant sense of relief formed in his chest. It made him feel like laughing and throwing up at the same time.

Minus 052 and COUNTING

The drive to Portland was without incident.

But by the time he reached the edge of the city, driving through the built-up suburbs of Scarborough (rich homes, rich streets, rich private schools surrounded by electrified fences), the sense of relief had begun to fade again. They could be anywhere. They could be all around him. Or they could be nowhere.

State Street was an area of blasted, ancient brownstones not far from an overgrown, junglelike park-a hangout, Richards thought, for this small city's muggers, lovers, hypes, and thieves. No one would venture out on State Street after dark without a police dog on a leash, or a score of fellow gang-members.

Number 94 was a crumbling, soot-encrusted building with ancient green shades pulled down over its windows. To Richards the house looked like a very old man who had died with cataracts on his eyes.

He pulled to the curb and got out. The street was dotted with abandoned air cars, some of them rusted down to almost formless hulks. On the edge of the park, a Studebaker lay on its side like a dead dog. This was not police country, obviously. If you left your car unattended, it would gain a clot of leaning, spitting, slate-eyed boys in fifteen minutes. In half an hour some of the leaning boys would have produced crowbars and wrenches and screwdrivers. They would tap them, compare them, twirl them, have mock swordfights with them. They would hold them up into the air thoughtfully, as if

testing the weather or receiving mysterious radio transmission through them. In an hour the car would be a stripped carcass, from aircaps and cylinders to the steering wheel itself.

A small boy ran up to Richards as he was setting his crutches under himself. Puckered, shiny burn scars had turned one side of the boy's face into a hairless Frankenstein horror.

"Scag, mister? Good stuff. Put you on the moon." He giggled secretly, the lumped and knobbed flesh of his burnt face bobbing and writhing grotesquely.

"Fuck off," Richards said briefly.

The boy tried to kick one of his crutches out from under him, and Richards swung one of them in a low arc, swatting the boy's bottom. He ran off, cursing.

He made his way up the pitted stone steps slowly and looked at the door. It had once been blue, but now the paint had faded and peeled to a tired desert sky color. There had once been a doorbell, but some vandal had taken care of that with a cold chisel.

Richards knocked and waited. Nothing. He knocked again.

It was late afternoon now, and cold was creeping slowly up the street. Faintly, from the park beyond the end of the block, came the bitter clacking of October branches losing their leaves.

There was no one here. It was time to go.

Yet he knocked again, curiously convinced that there *was* someone in there.

And this time he was rewarded with the slow shuffling of house slippers. A pause at the door. Then: "Who's out there? I don't buy nothin. Go away."

"I was told to visit you," Richards said.

A peephole swung open with a minute squeak and a brown eye peeked through. Then the peephole closed with a snap.

"I don't know you," Flat dismissal.

"I was told to ask for Elton Parrakis."

Grudgingly: "Oh. You're one of those-"

Behind the door locks began to turn, bolts began to be unbolted, one by one. Chains dropped. There was the click of revolving tumblers in one Yale lock and then another. The *chunk-slap* of the heavy-duty Trap-Bolt being withdrawn.

The door swung open and Richards looked at a scrawny woman with no breasts and huge, knotted hands. Her face was unlined, almost cherubic, but it looked as if it had taken hundreds of invisible hooks and jabs and uppercuts in a no-holds-barred brawl with time itself. Perhaps time was winning, but she was not an easy bleeder. She was almost six feet tall, even in her flat, splayed slippers, and her knees were swollen into trees-tumps with arthritis. Her hair was wrapped in a bath turban. Her brown eyes, staring at him from under a deep ledge of brow (the eyebrows themselves clung to the precipice like desperate mountain bushes, struggling against the aridity and the altitude), were

intelligent and wild with what might have been fear or fury. Later he understood she was simply muddled, afraid, tottering on the edge of insanity.

"I'm Virginia Parrakis," she said flatly. "I'm Elton's mother. Come in."

Minus 051 and COUNTING

She did not recognize him until she had led him into the kitchen to brew tea.

The house was old and crumbling and dark, furnished in a decor he recognized immediately from his own environment: Modern junkshop.

"Elton isn't here now," she said, brooding over the battered aluminum teapot on the gas ring. The light was stronger here, revealing the brown waterstains that blotched the wallpaper, the dead flies, souvenirs of summer past, on the windowsills, the old linoleum creased with black lines, the pile of wet wrapping paper under the leaking drain pipe. There was an odor of disinfectant that made Richards think of last nights in sickrooms.

She crossed the room, and her swollen fingers made a painful search through the heaped junk on the countertop until they found two tea bags, one of them previously used. Richards got the used one. He was not surprised.

"He works," she said, faintly accentuating the first word and making the statement an accusation. "You're from that fellow in Boston, the one Eltie writes to about pollution, aintcha?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parrakis."

"They met in Boston. My Elton services automatic vending machines." She preened for a moment and then began her slow trek back across the dunes of linoleum to the stove. "I told Eltie that what that Bradley was doing was against the law. I told him it would mean prison or even worse. He doesn't listen to me. Not to his old mom, he doesn't." She smiled with dark sweetness at this calumny. "Elton was always building things, you know He built a treehouse with four rooms out back when he was a boy. That was before they cut the elm down, you know. But it was that darky's idea that he should build a pollution station in Portland. "

She popped the bags into cups and stood with her back to Richards, slowly warming her hands over the gas ring. "They write each other. I told him the mails aren't safe. You'll go to prison or even worse, I said. He said but Mom, we do it in code. He asks for a dozen apples, I tell him my uncle is a little worse. I said: Eltie, do you think they can't figure that Secret Spy stuff out? He doesn't listen. Oh, he used to. I used to be his best friend. But things have changed. Since he got to pooberty, things have changed. Dirty magazines under his bed and all that business. Now this darky. I suppose they caught you testing smogs or carcinogens or something and now you're on the run."

"I-"

"It don't matter!" She said fiercely at the window. It looked out on a backyard filled with rusting pieces of junk and tire rims and some little boy's sandbox that now, many years later, was filled with scruffy October woods.

"It don't matter!" she repeated. "It's the darkies." She turned to Richards and her eyes were hooded and furious and bewildered. "I'm sixty-five, but I was only a fresh young girl of nineteen when it began to happen. It was nineteen seventy-nine and the darkies were everywhere! Everywhere! Yes they were!" she nearly screamed, as if Richards had taken issue with her. "Everywhere! They sent those darkies to school with the whites. They set em high in the government. Radicals, rabble-rousing, and rebellion. I ain't so-"

She broke off as if the words had been splintered from her mouth. She stared at Richards, seeing him for the first time.

"OhGodhavemercy," she whispered.

"Mrs. Parrakis-

"Nope!" she said in a fear-hoarsened voice. "Nope! Nope! Oh, nope!" She began advancing on him, pausing at the counter to pick up a long, gleaming butcher knife out of the general clutter. "Out! Out! Out!" He got up and began to back away slowly, first through the short hall between the kitchen and shadowy living room, then through the living room itself.

He noticed that an ancient pay telephone hung on the wall from the days when this had been a bona fide inn. The Blue Door, Guests. When was that? Richards wondered Twenty years ago? Forty? Before the darkies had gotten out of hand, or after?

He was just beginning to back down the hall between the living room and the front door when a key rattled in the lock. They both froze as if some celestial hand had stopped the film while deciding what to do next.

The door opened, and Elton Parrakis walked in. He was immensely fat, and his lackluster blond hair was combed back in preposterous waves from his forehead to show a round baby face that held an element of perpetual puzzlement. He was wearing the blue and gold uniform of the Vendo-Spendo Company. He looked thoughtfully at Virginia Parrakis.

"Put that knife down, Mom."

"Nope!" she cried, but already the crumbling of defeat had begun to putty her face.

Parrakis closed the door and began walking toward her. He jiggled.

She shrank away. "You have to make him go, son. He's that badman. That Richards. It'll mean prison or worse. I *don't want you to go!*" She began to wail, dropped the knife, and collapsed into his arms.

He enfolded her and began to rock her gently as she wept. "I'm not going to jail," he said. "Come on, Mom, don't cry. Please don't cry." He smiled at Richards over one of her hunched and shaking shoulders, an embarrassed awfully-sorry-about-this smile. Richards waited.

"Now," Parrakis said, when the sobs had died to sniffles. "Mr. Richards is Bradley Throckmorton's good friend, and he is going to be with us for a couple of days, Mom."

She began to shriek, and he clapped a hand over her mouth, wincing as he did so.

"Yes, Mom. Yes he is. I'm going to drive his car into the park and wire it. And you'll

go out tomorrow morning with a package to mail to Cleveland."

"Boston," Richards said automatically. "The tapes go to Boston."

"They go to Cleveland now," Elton Parrakis said, with a patient smile. "Bradley's on the run. "

"Oh. Jesus."

"You'll be on the run, too!" Mrs. Parrakis howled at her son. "And they'll catch you, too! You're too fat!"

"I'm going to take Mr. Richards upstairs and show him his room, Mom."

"Mr. Richards? Mr. Richards? Why don't you call him by his right name? Poison!"

He disengaged her with great gentleness, and Richards followed him obediently up the shadowy staircase. "There are a great many rooms up here," he said, panting slightly as his huge buttocks flexed and clenched. "This used to be a rooming house many years ago-when I was a baby. You'll be able to watch the street."

"Maybe I better go," Richards said. "If Bradley's blown, your mother may be right. "

"This is your room," he said, and threw open a door on a dusty damp room that held the weight of years. He did not seem to have heard Richards's comment. "It's not much of an accommodation. I'm afraid, but-" He turned to face Richards with his patient I-want-to-please smile. "You may stay as long as you want. Bradley Throckmorton is the best friend I've ever had. " The smile faltered a bit. "The *only* friend I've ever had. I'll watch after my Mom. Don't worry."

Richards only repeated: "I better go."

"You can't, you know. That head bandage didn't even fool Mom for long. I'm going to drive your car to a safe place, Mr. Richards. We'll talk later."

He left quickly, lumberingly. Richards noted that the seat of his uniform pants was shiny. He seemed to leave a faint odor of apologia in the room.

Pulling the ancient green shade aside a little, Richards saw him emerge on the cracked front walk below and get into the car. Then he got out again. He hurried back toward the house, and Richards felt a stab of fear.

Ponderously climbing tread on the stairs. The door opened, and Elton smiled at Richards. "Mom's right," he said. "I don't make a very good secret agent. I forgot the keys."

Richards gave them to him and then essayed a joke: "Half a secret agent is better than none. "

It struck a sour chord or no chord at all; Elton Parrakis carried his torments with him too clearly, and Richards could almost hear the phantom, jeering voices of the children that would follow him forever, like small tugs behind a big liner.

"Thank you," Richards said softly.

Parrakis left, and the little car that Richards had come from New Hampshire in was driven away toward the park.

Richards pulled the dust cover from the bed and lay down slowly, breathing shallowly and looking at nothing but the ceiling. The bed seemed to clutch him in a perversely damp embrace, even through the coverlet and his clothes. An odor of mildew drifted through the channels of his nose like a senseless rhyme.

Downstairs, Elton's mother was weeping.

Minus 050 and COUNTING

He dozed a little but could not sleep. Darkness was almost full when he heard Elton's heavy tread on the stairs again, and Richards swung his feet onto the floor with relief.

When he knocked and stepped in, Richards saw that Parrakis had changed into a tentlike sports shirt and a pair of jeans.

"I did it," he said. "It's in the park."

"Will it be stripped?"

"No," Elton said. "I have a gadget. A battery and two alligator clips. If anyone puts his hand or a crowbar on it, they'll get a shock and a short blast on a siren. Works good. I built it myself." He seated himself with a heavy sigh.

"What's this about Cleveland?" Richards demanded (it was easy, he found, to demand of Elton).

Parrakis shrugged. "Oh, he's a fellow like me. I met him once in Boston, at the library with Bradley. Our little pollution club. I suppose Mom said something about that." He rubbed his hands together and smiled unhappily.

"She said something," Richards agreed.

"She's . . . a little dim," Parrakis said. "She doesn't understand much of what's been happening for the last twenty years or so. She's frightened all the time. I'm all she has."

"Will they catch Bradley?"

"I don't know. He's got quite a . . . uh, intelligence network." But his eyes slipped away from Richards's.

"You-"

The door opened and Mrs. Parrakis stood there. Her arms were crossed and she was smiling, but her eyes were haunted. "I've called the police," she said. "Now you'll have to go."

Elton's face drained to a pearly yellowish-white. "You're lying."

Richards lurched to his feet and then paused, his head cocked in a listening gesture.

Faintly, rising, the sound of sirens.

"She's not lying," he said. A sickening sense of futility swept him. Back to square one. "Take me to my car. "

"She's lying," Elton insisted. He rose, almost touched Richards's arm, then withdrew

his hand as if the other man might be hot to the touch. "They're fire trucks. "

"Take me to my car. Quick."

The sirens were becoming louder, rising and falling, wailing. The sound filled Richards with a dreamlike horror, locked in here with these two crazies while-

"Mother-" His face was twisted, beseeching.

"I called them!" She blatted, and seized one of her son's bloated arms as if to shake him. "I had to! For you! That darky has got you all mixed up! We'll say he broke in and we'll get the reward money-"

"Come on," Elton grunted to Richards, and tried to shake free of her.

But she clung-stubbornly, like a small dog bedeviling a Percheron. "I had to. You've got to stop this radical business, Eltie! You've got to-"

"Eltie!" He screamed. "*Elbe!*" And he flung her away. She skidded across the room and fell across the bed.

"Quick," Elton said, his face full of terror and misery. "Oh, come quick."

They crashed and blundered down the stairs and out the front door, Elton breaking into gigantic, quivering trot. He was beginning to pant again.

And upstairs, filtering both through the closed window and the open door downstairs, Mrs. Parrakis's scream rose to a shriek which met and mixed and blended with the approaching sirens: "I DID IT FOR YOOOOOOOOOOO-"

Minus 049 and COUNTING

Their shadows chased them down the hill toward the park, waxing and waning as they approached and passed each of the mesh-enclosed G.A. streetlamps. Elton Parrakis breathed like a locomotive, in huge and windy gulps and hisses.

They crossed the street and suddenly headlights picked them out on the far sidewalk in hard relief. Blue flashing lights blazed on as the police car came to a screeching, jamming halt a hundred yards away.

"RICHARDS! BEN RICHARDS!"

Gigantic, megaphone-booming voice.

"Your car . . . up ahead . . . see?" Elton panted.

Richards could just make the car out. Elton had parked it well, under a copse of run-to-seed birch trees near the pond.

The cruiser suddenly screamed into life again, rear tires bonding hot robber to the pavement in lines of acceleration, its gasoline-powered engine wailing in climbing revolutions. It slammed up over the curb, headlights skyrocketing, and came down pointing directly at them.

Richards turned toward it, suddenly feeling very cool, feeling almost numb. He dragged Bradley's pistol out of his pocket, still backing up. The rest of the cops weren't in

sight. Just this one. The car screamed at them across the October-bare ground of the park, self-sealing rear tires digging out great clods of ripped black earth.

He squeezed off two shots at the windshield. It starred but did not shatter. He leaped aside at the last second and rolled. Dry grass against his face. Up on his knees, he fired twice more at the back of the car and then it was coming around in a hard, slewing power turn, blue lights turning the night into a crazy, shadow-leaping nightmare. The cruiser was between him and the car, but Elton had leaped the other way, and was now working frantically to remove his electrical device from the car door.

Someone was halfway out of the passenger side of the police car, which was on its way again. A thick stuttering sound filled the dark. Sten gun. Bullets dug through the turf around him in a senseless pattern. Dirt struck his cheeks, pattered against his forehead.

He knelt as if praying, and fired again into the windshield. This time, the bullet punched a hole through the glass.

The car was on top of him-

He sprang to the left and the reinforced steel bumper struck his left foot, snapping his ankle and sending him sprawling on his face.

The cruiser's engine rose to a supercharged scream, digging through another power turn. Now the headlights were on him again, turning everything stark monochrome. Richards tried to get up, but his broken ankle wouldn't support him.

Sobbing in great gulps of air, he watched the police car loom again. Everything became heightened, surreal. He was living in an adrenaline delirium and everything seemed slow, deliberate, orchestrated. The approaching police car was like a huge, blind buffalo.

The Sten gun rattled again, and this time a bullet punched through his left arm, knocking him sideways. The heavy car tried to veer and get him, and for a moment he had a clear shot at the figure behind the wheel. He fired once and the window blew inward. The car screamed into a slow, digging, sideways roll, then went up and over, crashing down on the roof and then onto its side. The motor stalled, and in sudden, shocking silence, the police radio crackled clearly.

Richards still could not get to his feet and so he began to crawl toward the car. Parrakis was in it now, trying to start it, but in his blind panic he must have forgotten to lever the safety vents open; each time he turned the key there was only a hollow, coughing boom of air in the chambers.

The night began to fill up with converging sirens.

He was still fifty yards from the car when Elton realized what was wrong and yanked down the vent lever. The next time he turned the key the engine chopped erratically into life and the air car swept toward Richards.

He got to a half-standing position and tore the passenger door open and fell inside. Parrakis banked left onto Route 77 which intersected State Street above the park, the lower deck of the car no more than an inch from the paving, almost low enough to drag

and spill them.

Elton gulped in huge swatches of air and let them out with force enough to flap his lips like window blinds.

Two more police cars screamed around the corner behind them, the blue lights flashed on, and they gave chase.

"We're not fast enough!" Elton screamed. "We're not fast-"

"They're on wheels!" Richards yelled back. "Cut through that vacant lot!"

The air car banked left and they were slammed upward violently as they crossed the curb. The battering air pressure shoved them into drive.

The police cars swelled behind them, and then they were shooting. Richards heard steel fingers punching holes in the body of their car. The rear window blew in with a tremendous crash, and they were sprinkled with fragments of safety glass.

Screaming, Elton whipped the air car left and right.

One of the police cars, doing sixty-plus, lost it coming up over the curb. The car veered wildly, revolving blue dome-lights splitting the darkness with lunatic bolts of light, and then it crashed over on its side, digging a hot groove through the littered moraine of the empty lot, until a spark struck its peeled-back gas tank. It exploded whitely, like a road flare.

The second car was following the road again, but Elton beat them. They had cut the cruiser off, but it would gain back the lost distance very shortly. The gas-driven ground cars were nearly three times faster than air drive. And if an air car tried to go too far off the road, the uneven surface beneath the thrusters would flip the car over, as Parrakis had nearly flipped them crossing the curb.

"Turn right!" Richards cried.

Parrakis pulled them around in another grinding, stomach-lurching turn. They were on Route 1; ahead, Richards could see that they would soon be forced up the entranceway to the Coast Turnpike. No evasive action would be possible there; only death would be possible there.

"Turn off! Turn off, goddammit! That alley!" For a moment, the police car was one turn behind them, lost from view.

"NO! No!" Parrakis was gibbering now. "We'll be like rats in a trap!"

Richards leaned over and hauled the wheel around, knocking Elton's hand from the throttle with the same gesture. The air car skidded around in a nearly ninety-degree turn. They bounced off the concrete of the building on the left of the alley's mouth, sending them in at a crooked angle. The blunt nose of the car struck a pile of heaped trash, garbage cans, and splintered crates. Behind these, solid brick.

Richards was pitched violently into the dashboard as they crashed, and his nose broke with a sudden snap, gushing blood with violent force.

The air car lay askew in the alley, one cylinder still coughing a little. Parrakis was a silent lump lolling over the steering wheel. There was no time for him yet.

Richards slammed his shoulder against the crimped passenger door. It popped open, and he hopped on one leg to the mouth of the alley. He reloaded his gun from the crumpled box of shells Bradley had supplied him with. They were greasy-cool to the touch. He dropped some of them around his feet. His arm had begun to throb like an ulcerated tooth, making him feel sick and nauseated with pain.

Headlights turned the deserted city expressway from night to sunless day. The cruiser skidded around the turn, rear tires fighting for traction, sending up the fragrant smell of seared rubber. Looping black marks scored the expansion joint macadam in parabolas. Then it was leaping forward again. Richards held the gun in both hands, leaning against the building to his left. In a moment they would realize they could see no taillights ahead. The cop riding shotgun would see the alley, know-

Snuffling blood through his broken nose, he began to fire. The range was nearly pointblank, and at this distance, the high-powered slugs smashed through the bulletproof glass as if it had been paper. Each recoil of the heavy pistol pulsed through his wounded arm, making him scream.

The car roared up over the curb, flew a short, wingless distance, and crashed into the blank brick wall across the street. ECHO FREE-VEE REPAIR, a faded sign on this wall read. BECAUSE YOU WATCH IT, WE WON'T BOTCH IT.

The police car, still a foot above the ground, met the brick wall at high speed and exploded.

But others were coming; always others.

Panting, Richards made his way back to the air car. His good leg was very tired.

"I'm hurt," Parrakis was groaning hollowly. "I'm hurt so bad. Where's Mom? Where's my Momma?"

Richards fell on his knees, wriggled under the air car on his back, and began to pull trash and debris from the air chambers like a madman. Blood ran down his cheeks from his ruptured nose and pooled beside his ears.

Minus 048 and COUNTING

The car would only run on five of its six cylinders, and it would go no faster than forty, leaning drunkenly to one side.

Parrakis directed him from the passenger seat, where Richards had manhandled him. The steering column had gone into his abdomen like a railspike, and Richards thought he was dying. The blood on the dented steering wheel was warm and sticky on Richards's palms.

"I'm very sorry," Parrakis said. "Turn left here . . . It's really my fault. I should have known better. She . . . she doesn't think straight. She doesn't . . ." He coughed up a glut of black blood and spat it listlessly into his lap. The sirens filled the night, but they were far behind and off to the west. They had gone out Marginal Way, and from there Parrakis had directed him onto back roads. Now they were on Route 9 going north, and the Portland suburbs were petering out into October-barren scrub countryside. The strip

lumberers had been through like locusts, and the end result was a bewildering tangle of second growth and marsh.

"Do you know where you're telling me to go?" Richards asked. He was a huge brand of pain from one end to the other. He was quite sure his ankle was broken; there was no doubt at all about his nose. His breath came through it in flattened gasps.

"To a place I know," Elton Parrakis said, and coughed up more blood. "She used to tell me a boy's best friend is his Mom. Can you believe that? I used to believe it. Will they hurt her? Take her to jail?"

"No," Richards said shortly, not knowing if they would or not. It was twenty minutes of eight. He and Elton had left the Blue Door at ten minutes past seven. It seemed as if decades had passed.

A far distance off, more sirens were joining in the general chorus. *The unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible*, Richards thought disjointedly. If you *can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen*. He had dispatched two police cars singlehanded. Another bonus for Sheila. Blood money. And Cathy. Would Cathy sicken and die on milk paid for with bounty cash? *How are you, my darlings? I love you. Here on this twisting, crazy back road fit only for deer jackers and couples looking for a good make-out spot, I love you and wish that your dreams be sweet. I wish-*

"Turn left," Elton croaked.

Richards swung left up a smooth tarred road that cut through a tangle of denuded sumac and elm, pine and spruce, scrubby nightmare second growth. A river, ripe and sulphurous with industrial waste, smote his nose. Low-hanging branches scraped the roof of the car with skeleton screeches. They passed a sign which read: SUPER PINE TREE MALL-UNDER CONSTRUCTION-KEEP OUT!TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED!!

They topped a final rise and there was the Super Pine Tree Mall. Work must have stopped at least two years ago, Richards thought, and things hadn't been too advanced when it did. The place was a maze, a rat warren of half-built stores and shops, discarded lengths of pipe, piles of cinderblock and boards, shacks and rusted Quonset huts, all overgrown with scrubby junipers and laurels and witch-grass and blue spruce, blackberry and blackthorn, devil's paintbrush and denuded goldenrod. And it stretched on for miles. Gaping oblong foundation holes like graves dug for Roman gods. Rusted skeleton steel. Cement walls with steel core-rods protruding like shadowy cryptograms. Bulldozed oblongs that were to be parking lots now grassed over.

Somewhere overhead, an owl flew on stiff and noiseless wings, hunting.

"Help me . . . into the driver's seat."

"You're in no condition to drive," Richards said, pushing hard on his door to open it.

"It's the least I can do," Elton Parrakis said with grave and bloody absurdity. "I'll play hare . . . drive as long as I can."

"No," Richards said.

"Let me go! " He screamed at Richards, his fat baby face terrible and grotesque. "I'm

dying and you just better let me guh-guh-guh-" He trailed off into hideous silent coughs that brought up fresh gouts of blood. It smelled very moist in the car; like a slaughterhouse. "Help me," he whispered. "I'm too fat to do it by myself. Oh God please help me do this."

Richards helped him. He pushed and heaved and his hands slipped and squelched in Elton's blood. The front seat was an abattoir. And Elton (who would have thought anyone could have so much blood in him?) continued to bleed.

Then he was wedged behind the wheel and the air car was rising jaggedly, turning. The brake lights blinked on and off, on and off, and the car bunted at trees lightly before Elton found the road out.

Richards thought he would hear the crash, but there was none. The erratic *thumps-thumps-thumps* of the air cylinders grew fainter, beating in the deadly one--cylinder-flat rhythm that would burn out the others in an hour or so. The sound faded. Then there was no sound at all but the faraway buzz of a plane. Richards realized belatedly that he had left the crutches he had purchased for disguise purposes in the back of the car.

The constellations whirled indifferently overhead.

He could see his breath in small, frozen puffs; it was colder tonight.

He turned from the road and plunged into the jungle of the construction site.

Minus 047 and COUNTING

He spied a pile of cast-off insulation lying in the bottom of a cellar hole and climbed down, using the protruding core rods for handholds. He found a stick and pounded the insulation to scare out the rats. He was rewarded with nothing but a thick, fibrous dust that made him sneeze and yelp with the pain-burst in his badly used nose. No rats. All the rats were in the city. He uttered a harsh bray of laughter that sounded jagged and splintered in the big dark.

He wrapped himself in strips of the insulation until he looked like a human igloo-but it was warm. He leaned back against the wall and fell into a half-doze.

When he roused fully, a late moon, no more than a cold scrap of light, hung over the eastern horizon. He was still alone. There were no sirens. It might have been three o'clock.

His arm throbbed uneasily, but the flow of blood had stopped on its own; he saw this after pulling the arm out of the insulation and brushing the fibers gently away from the clot. The Sten gun bullet had apparently ripped a fairly large triangular hunk of meat from the side of his arm just above the elbow. He supposed he was lucky that the bullet hadn't smashed the bone. But his ankle throbbed with a steady, deep ache. The foot itself felt strange and ethereal, barely attached. He supposed the break should be splinted.

Supposing, he dozed again.

When he woke, his head was clearer. The moon had risen halfway up in the sky, but

there was still no sign of dawn, true or false. *He was forgetting something-*

It came to him in a nasty, jolting realization.

He had to mail two tape clips before noon, if they were to get to the Games Building by the six-thirty air time. That meant traveling or defaulting the money.

But Bradley was on the run, or captured.

And Elton Parrakis had never given him the Cleveland name.

And his ankle was broken.

Something large (a deer? weren't they extinct in the east?) suddenly crashed through the underbrush off to his right, making him jump. Insulation slid off him like snakes, and he pulled it back around himself miserably, snuffling through his broken nose.

He was a city-dweller sitting in a deserted Development gone back to the wild in the middle of nowhere. The night suddenly seemed alive and malevolent, frightening of its own self, full of crazed bumps and creaks.

Richards breathed through his mouth, considering his options and their consequences.

1. Do nothing. Just sit here and wait for things to cool off. Consequence: The money he was piling up, a hundred dollars an hour, would be cut off at six tonight. He would be running for free, but the hunt wouldn't stop, not even if he managed to avoid them for the whole thirty days. The hunt would continue until he was carried off on a board.

2. Mail the clips to Boston. It couldn't hurt Bradley or the family, because their cover was already blown. Consequences: (1) The tapes would undoubtedly be sent to Harding by the Hunters watching Bradley's mail, but (2) they would still be able to trace him directly to wherever he mailed the tapes from, with no intervening Boston postmark.

3. Mail the tapes directly to the Games Building in Harding. Consequences: The hunt would go on, but he would probably be recognized in any town big enough to command a mailbox.

They were all lousy choices.

Thank you, Mrs. Parrakis. Thank you.

He got up, brushing the insulation away, and tossed the useless head bandage on top of it. As an afterthought, he buried it in the insulation.

He began hunting around for something to use as a crutch (the irony of leaving the real crutches in the car struck him again), and when he found a board that reached approximately to armpit height, he threw it over the lip of the cellar foundation and began to climb laboriously back up the core rods.

When he got to the top, sweating and shivering simultaneously, he realized that he could see his hands. The first faint gray light of dawn had begun to probe the darkness. He looked longingly at the deserted Development, thinking: It would *have made such a fine hiding place-*

No good. He wasn't supposed to be a hiding man; he was a running man. Wasn't that what kept the ratings up?

A cloudy, cataract-like ground mist was creeping slowly through the denuded trees. Richards paused to get his directions and then struck off toward the woods that bordered the abandoned Super Mall on the north.

He paused only once to wrap his coat around the top of his crutch and then continued.

Minus 046 and COUNTING

It had been full daylight for two hours and Richards had almost convinced himself he was going around in large circles when he heard, through the rank brambles and ground bushes up ahead, the whine of air cars.

He pushed on cautiously and then peered out on a two-lane macadam highway. Cars rushed to and fro with fair regularity. About a half a mile up, Richards could make out a cluster of houses and what was either an air station or an old general store with pumps in front.

He pushed on, paralleling the highway, falling over occasionally. His face and hands were a needlepoint of blood from briars and brambles, and his clothes were studded with brown sticker-balls. He had given up trying to brush them away. Burst milkweed pods floated lightly from both shoulders, making him look as if he had been in a pillow fight. He was wet from top to toe; he had made it through the first two brooks, but in the third his "crutch" had slipped on the treacherous bottom and he had fallen headlong. The camera of course was undamaged. It was waterproof and shockproof. Of course.

The bushes and trees were thinning. Richards got down on his hands and knees and crawled. When he had gone as far as he thought he safely could, he studied the situation.

He was on a slight rise of land, a peninsula of the scrubby second-growth weeds he had been walking through. Below him was the highway, a number of ranch-type houses, and a store with air pumps. A car was in there now, being attended to while the driver, a man in a suede windbreaker, chatted with the air jockey. Beside the store, along with three or four gumball machines and a Maryjane vendor, stood a blue and red mailbox. It was only two hundred yards away. Looking at it, Richards realized bitterly that if he had arrived before first light he could have probably done his business unseen.

Well, spilt milk and all that. The best laid plans of mice and men.

He withdrew until he could set up his camera and do his taping without being seen.

"Hello, all you wonderful people out there in Free-Vee land," he began. "This is jovial Ben Richards, taking you on my annual nature hike. If you look closely you may see the fearless scarlet tanager or a great speckled cowbird. Perhaps even a yellow-bellied pig bird or two." He paused. "They may let that part through, but not the rest. If you're deaf and read lips, remember what I'm saying. Tell a neighbor or a friend. Spread the word. The Network is poisoning the air you breathe and denying you cheap protection because-

He recorded both tapes and put them in his pants pocket. Okay. What next? The only possible way to do it was to go down with the gun drawn, deposit the tapes, and run. He could steal a car. It wasn't as if they weren't going to know where he was anyway.

Randomly, he wondered how far Parrakis had gotten before they cut him down. He had the gun out and in his fist when he heard the voice, startlingly close, seemingly in his left ear: "Come on, Rolf!"

There was a sudden volley of barks that made Richards jump violently and he had just time to think: *Police dogs, Christ, they've got police dogs*, when something huge and black broke cover and arrowed at him.

The gun was knocked into the brush and Richards was on his back. The dog was on top of him, a big German shepherd with a generous streak of mongrel, lapping his face and drooling on his shirt. His tail flagged back and forth in vigorous semaphores of joy.

"Rolf! Hey Rolf! Rol-oh Gawd!" Richards caught an obscured glimpse of running legs in blue jeans, and then a small boy was dragging the dog away. "Jeez, I'm sorry, mister. Jeez, he don't bite, he's too dumb to bite, he's just friendly, he ain't . . . Gawd, ain't you a mess! You get lost?"

The boy was holding Rolf by the collar and staring at Richards with frank interest. He was a good-looking boy, well made, perhaps eleven, and there was none of the pale and patched inner city look on his face. There was something suspicious and alien in his features, yet familiar also. After a moment Richards placed it. It was innocence.

"Yes," he said dryly. "I got lost."

"Gee, you sure must have fallen around some. "

"That I did, pal. You want to take a close look at my face and see if it's scratched up very badly? I can't see it, you know. "

The boy leaned forward obediently and scanned Richards's face. No sign of recognition flickered there. Richards was satisfied.

"It's all burr-caught," the boy said (there was a delicate New England twang in his voice; not exactly Down East, but lightly springy, sardonic), "but you'll live." His brow furrowed. "You escaped from Thomaston? I know you ain't from Pineland cause you don't look like a retard."

"I'm not escaped from anywhere," Richards said, wondering if that was a lie or the truth. "I was hitchhiking. Bad habit, pal. You never do it, do you?"

"No way," the boy said earnestly. "There's crazy dudes running the roads these days. That's what my dad says. "

"He's right," Richards said. "But I just had to get to . . . uh . . ." He snapped his fingers in a pantomime of it-just-slipped-my-mind. "You know, jetport."

"You must mean Voigt Field."

"That's it."

"Jeez, that's over a hundred miles from here, mister. In Derry."

"I know," Richards said ruefully, and ran a hand over Rolf's fur. The dog rolled over obligingly and played dead. Richards fought an urge to utter a morbid chuckle. "I picked up a ride at the New Hampshire border with these three maggots. Real tough guys. They beat me up, stole my wallet and dumped me at some deserted shopping center-"

"Yeah, I know that place. Cripes, you wanna come down to the house and have some breakfast?"

"I'd like to, bucko, but time's wasting. I have to get to that jetport by tonight."

"You going to hitch another lift?" The boy's eyes were round.

"Got to." Richards started to get up, then settled back as if a great idea had struck him. "Listen, do me a favor?"

"I guess so," the boy said cautiously.

Richards took out the two exposed tape-clips. "These are chargeplate cash vouchers," he said glibly. "If you drop them in a mailbox for me, my company will have a lump of cash waiting for me in Derry. Then I'll be on my merry way. "

"Even without an address?"

"These go direct," Richards said.

"Sure. Okay. There's a mailbox down at Jarrold's Store." He got up, his inexperienced face unable to disguise the fact that he thought Richards was lying in his teeth. "Come on, Rolf. "

He let the boy get fifteen feet and then said: "No. Come here again."

The boy turned and came back with his feet dragging. There was dread on his face. Of course, there were enough holes in Richards's story to drive a truck through.

"I've got to tell you everything, I guess," Richards said. "I was telling you the truth about most of it, pal. But I didn't want to risk the chance that you might blab. "

The morning October sun was wonderfully warm on his back and neck and he wished he could stay on the hill all day, and sleep sweetly in fall's fugitive warmth.

He pulled the gun from where it had fallen and let it lie loosely on the grass. The boy's eyes went wide.

"Government," Richards said quietly.

"Jee-zus!" The boy whispered. Rolf sat beside him, his pink tongue lolling rakishly from the side of his mouth.

"I'm after some pretty hard guys, kid. You can see that they worked me over pretty well. Those clips you got there have *got* to get through. "

"I'll mail em," the boy said breathlessly. "Jeez, wait'll I tell-"

"Nobody," Richards said. "Tell nobody for twenty-four hours. There might be reprisals," he added ominously. "So until tomorrow this time, you never saw me. Understand?"

"Yeah! Sure!"

"Then get on it. And thanks, pal." He held out his hand and the boy shook it awefully.

Richards watched them trot down the hill, a boy in a red plaid shirt with his dog crashing joyfully through the golden-rod beside him. *Why can't my Cathy have something*

like that?

His face twisted into a terrifying and wholly unconscious grimace of rage and hate, and he might have cursed God Himself if a better target had not interposed itself on the dark screen of his mind: the Games Federation. And behind that, like the shadow of a darker god, the Network.

He watched until he saw the boy, made tiny with distance, drop the tapes into the mailbox.

Then he got up stiffly, propping his crutch under him, and crashed back into the brush, angling toward the road.

The jetport, then. And maybe someone else would pay some dues before it was all over.

Minus 045 and COUNTING

He had seen an intersection a mile back and Richards left the woods there, making his way awkwardly down the gravel bank between the woods and the road.

He sat there like a man who has given up trying to hook a ride and has decided to enjoy the warm autumn sun instead. He let the first two cars go by; both of them held two men, and he figured the odds were too high.

But when the third one approached the stop sign, he got up. The closing-in feeling was back. This whole area had to be hot, no matter how far Parrakis had gotten. The next car could be police, and that would be the ballgame.

It was a woman in the car, and she was alone. She would not look at him; hitchhikers were distasteful and thus to be ignored. He ripped the passenger door open even as the car was accelerating again. He was picked up and thrown sideways, one hand holding desperately onto the doorjam, his good foot dragging.

The thumping hiss of brakes; the air car swerved wildly. "What-who-you can't-

Richards pointed the gun at her, knowing he must look grotesque close up, like a man who had been run through a meat grinder. The fierce image would work for him. He dragged his foot in and slammed the door, gun never swerving. She was dressed for town, and wore blue wraparound sunglasses. Good looking from what he could see.

"Wheel it," Richards said.

She did the predictable; slammed both feet on the brake and screamed. Richards was thrown forward, his bad ankle scraping excruciatingly. The air car juddered to a stop on the shoulder, fifty feet beyond the intersection.

"You're that . . . you're . . . R-R-R-"

"Ben Richards. Take your hands off the wheel. Put them in your lap.

She did it, shuddering convulsively. She would not look at him. Afraid, Richards supposed, that she would be turned to stone.

"What's your name, ma'am?"

"A-Amelia Williams. Don't shoot me. Don't kill me. I . . . I . . . you can have my money only for *God sake don't kill meeeeeeee-* "

"Shhhhh," Richards said soothingly. "Shhhhh, shhhhhh." When she had quieted a little he said: "I won't try to change your mind about me, Mrs. Williams. Is it Mrs.?"

"Yes," she said automatically.

"But I have no intention of harming you. Do you understand that?"

"Yes," she said, suddenly eager. "You want the car. They got your friend and now you need a car. You can take it-it's insured-I won't even tell. I swear I won't. I'll say someone stole it in the parking lot-"

"We'll talk about it," Richards said. "Begin to drive. Go up Route 1 and we'll talk about it. Are there roadblocks?"

"N-yes. Hundreds of them. They'll catch you.

"Don't lie, Mrs. Williams. Okay?"

She began to drive, erratically at first, then more smoothly. The motion seemed to soothe her. Richards repeated his question about roadblocks.

"Around Lewiston," she said with frightened unhappiness. "That's where they got that other mag-fellow.

"How far is that?"

"Thirty miles or more."

Parrakis had gotten farther than Richards would have dreamed.

"Will you rape me?" Amelia Williams asked so suddenly that Richards almost barked with laughter.

"No," he said; then, matter-of-factly: "I'm married."

"I saw her," she said with a kind of smirking doubtfulness that made Richards want to smash her. *Eat garbage, bitch. Kill a rat that was hiding in the breadbox, kill it with a whiskbroom and then see how you talk about my wife.*

"Can I get off here?" she asked pleadingly, and he felt a trifle sorry for her again.

"No," he said. "You're my protection, Mrs. Williams. I have to get to Voigt Field, in a place called Derry. You're going to see that I get there."

"That's a hundred and fifty miles!" she wailed.

"Someone else told me a hundred."

"They were wrong. You'll never get through to there."

"I might," Richards said, and then looked at her. "And so might you, if you play it right. "

She began to tremble again but said nothing. Her attitude was that of a woman waiting to wake up.

Minus 044 and COUNTING

They traveled north through autumn burning like a torch.

The trees were not dead this far north, murdered by the big, poisonous smokes of Portland, Manchester, and Boston; they were all hues of yellow, red, brilliant starburst purple. They awoke in Richards an aching feeling of melancholy. It was a feeling he never would have suspected his emotions could have harbored only two weeks before. In another month the snow would fly and cover all of it.

Things ended in fall.

She seemed to sense his mood and said nothing. The driving filled the silence between them, lulled them. They passed over the water at Yarmouth, then there were only woods and trailers and miserable poverty shacks with outhouses tacked on the sides (yet one could always spot the Free-Vee cable attachment, bolted on below a sagging, paintless windowsill or beside a hinge-smashed door, winking and heliographing in the sun) until they entered Freeport.

There were three police cruisers parked just outside of town, the cops meeting in a kind of roadside conference. The woman stiffened like a wire, her face desperately pale, but Richards felt calm.

They passed the police without notice, and she slumped.

"If they had been monitoring traffic, they would have been on us like a shot," Richards said casually. "You might as well paint BEN RICHARDS IS IN THIS CAR on your forehead in Day-Glo."

"Why can't you let me go?" she burst out, and in the same breath: "Have you got a jay?"

Rich folks blow Dokes. The thought brought a bubble of ironic laughter and he shook his head.

"You're laughing at me?" she asked, stung. "You've got some nerve, don't you, you cowardly little murderer! Scaring me half out of my life, probably planning to kill me the way you killed those poor boys in Boston--"

"There was a full gross of those poor boys," Richards said. "Ready to kill me. That's their job."

"Killing for pay. Ready to do anything for money. Wanting to overturn the country. Why don't you find decent work? Because you're too lazy! Your kind spit in the face of anything decent. "

"Are you decent?" Richards asked.

"Yes!" She stormed. "Isn't that why you picked on me? Because I was defenseless and . . . and decent? So you could use me, drag me down to your level and then laugh about it?"

"If you're so decent how come you have six thousand New Dollars to buy this fancy car while my little girl dies of the flu?"

"What-" She looked startled. Her mouth started to open and she closed it with a snap. "You're an enemy of the Network," she said. "It says so on the Free-Vee. I saw some of those disgusting things you did."

"You know what's disgusting?" Richards asked, lighting a cigarette from the pack on the dashboard. ' I'll tell you. It's disgusting to get blackballed because you don't want to work in a General Atomics job that's going to make you sterile. It's disgusting to sit home and watch your wife earning the grocery money on her back. It's disgusting to know the Network is killing millions of people each year with air pollutants when they could be manufacturing nose filters for six bucks a throw. "

"You lie," she said. Her knuckles had gone white on the wheel.

"When this is over," Richards said, "you can go back to your nice split-level duplex and light up a Doke and get stoned and love the way your new silverware sparkles in the highboy. No one fighting rats with broomhandles in your neighborhood or shitting by the back stoop because the toilet doesn't work. I met a little girl five years old with lung cancer. How's that for disgusting? What do-"

"Stop!" she screamed at him. "*You talk dirty!*"

"That's right," he said, watching as the countryside flowed by. Hopelessness filled him like cold water. There was no base of communication with these beautiful chosen ones. They existed up where the air was rare. He had a sudden raging urge to make this woman pull over: knock her sunglasses onto the gravel, drag her through the dirt, make her eat a stone, rape her, jump on her, knock her teeth into the air like startled digits, strip her nude and ask her if she was beginning to see the big picture, the one that runs twenty-four hours a day on channel one, where the national anthem never plays before the sign-off.

"That's right," he muttered. "Dirty-talking old me."

Minus 043 and COUNTING

They got farther than they had any right to, Richards figured. They got all the way to a pretty town by the sea called Camden over a hundred miles from where he had hitched a ride with Amelia Williams.

"Listen," he said as they were entering Augusta, the state capital. "There's a good chance they'll sniff us here. I have no interest in killing you. Dig it?"

"Yes," she said. Then, with bright hate: "You need a hostage."

"Right. So if a cop pulls out behind us, you pull over. Immediately. You open your door and lean out. Just *lean*. Your fanny is not to leave that seat. Understand?"

"Yes. "

"You holler: Benjamin Richards is holding me hostage. If you don't give him free passage he'll kill me."

"And you think *that will* work?"

"It better," he said with tense mockery. "It's your ass."

She bit her lip and said nothing.

"It'll work. I think. There will be a dozen freelance cameramen around in no time, hoping to get some Games money or even the Zapruder Award itself. With that kind of publicity, they'll have to play it straight. Sorry you won't get to see us go out in a hail of bullets so they can talk about you sanctimoniously as Ben Richards's last victim. "

"Why do you *say* these things?" she burst out.

He didn't reply; only slid down in his seat until just the top of his head showed and waited for the blue lights in the rear-view mirror.

But there were no blue lights in Augusta. They continued on for another hour and a half, skirting the ocean as the sun began to wester, catching little glints and peaks of the water, across fields and beyond bridges and through heavy firs.

It was past two o'clock when they rounded a bend not far from the Camden town line and saw a roadblock; two police cars parked on either side of the road. Two cops were checking a farmer in an old pick-up and waving it through.

Go another two hundred feet and then stop," Richards said. "Do it just the way I told you. "

She was pallid but seemingly in control. Resigned, maybe. She applied the brakes evenly and the air car came to a neat stop in the middle of the road fifty feet from the checkpoint.

The trooper holding the clipboard waved her forward imperiously. When she didn't come, he glanced inquiringly at his companion. A third cop, who had been sitting inside one of the cruisers with his feet up, suddenly grabbed the hand mike under the dash and began to speak rapidly.

Here we go, Richards thought. Oh God, here we go.

Minus 042 and COUNTING

The day was very bright (the constant rain of Harding seemed light-years away) and everything was very sharp and clearly defined. The troopers' shadows might have been drawn with black Crayolas. They were unhooking the narrow straps that crossed their gunbutts.

Mrs. Williams swung open the door and leaned out. "Don't shoot, please," she said, and for the first time Richards realized how cultured her voice was, how rich. She might have been in a drawing room except for the pallid knuckles and the fluttering, birdlike pulse in her throat. With the door open he could smell the fresh, invigorating odor of pine and timothy grass.

"Come out of the car with your hands over your head," the cop with the clipboard said. He sounded like a well-programmed machine. General Atomics Model 6925-A9, Richards thought. The Hicksville Trooper. 16-psm Iridium Batteries included. Comes in White Only. "You and your passenger, ma'am. We see him."

"My name is Amelia Williams," she said very clearly. "I can't get out as you ask.

Benjamin Richards is holding me hostage. If you don't give him free passage, he says he'll kill me."

The two cops looked at each other, and something barely perceptible passed between them. Richards, with his nerves strung up to a point where he seemed to be operating with a seventh sense, caught it.

"*Drive!*" he screamed.

She stared around at him, bewildered. "But they won't-"

The clipboard clattered to the road. The two cops fell into the kneeling posture almost simultaneously, guns out, gripped in right hands, left hands holding right wrists. One on each side of the solid white line.

The sheets of flimsy on the clipboard fluttered errantly.

Richards tromped his bad foot on Amelia Williams's right shoe, his lips drawing back into a tragedy mask of pain as the broken ankle grated. The air car ripped forward.

The next moment two hollow punching noises struck the car, making it vibrate. A moment later the windshield blew in, splattering them both with bits of safety glass. She threw both hands up to protect her face and Richards leaned savagely against her, swinging the wheel.

They shot through the gap between the veed cars with scarcely a flirt of the rear deck. He caught a crazy glimpse of the troopers whirling to fire again and then his whole attention was on the road.

They mounted a rise, and then there was one more hollow *thunnn!* as a bullet smashed a hole in the trunk. The car began to fishtail and Richards hung on, whipping the wheel in diminishing arcs. He realized dimly that Williams was screaming.

"Steer!" he shouted at her. "Steer, goddammit! Steer! Steer!"

Her hands groped reflexively for the wheel and found it. He let go and batted the dark glasses away from her eyes with an openhanded blow. They hung on one ear for a moment and then dropped off.

"Pull over!"

"They shot at us. " Her voice began to rise. "They shot at us. *They shot at-* "

"*Pull over!* "

The scream of sirens rose behind them.

She pulled over clumsily, sending the car around in a shuddering half-turn that spurned gravel into the air.

"I told them and they tried to kill us," she said wonderingly. "They tried to kill us. "

But he was out already, out and hopping clumsily back the way they had come, gun out. He lost his balance and fell heavily, scraping both knees.

When the first cruiser came over the rise he was in a sitting position on the shoulder of the road, the pistol held firmly at shoulder level. The car was doing eighty easily, and

still accelerating; some backroad cowboy at the wheel with too much engine up front and visions of glory in his eyes. They perhaps saw him, perhaps tried to stop. It didn't matter. There were no bulletproof tires on these. The one closest to Richards exploded as if there had been dynamite inside. The cruiser took off like a big-ass bird, gunning across the shoulder in howling, uncontrolled flight. It crashed into the hole of a huge elm. The driver's side door flew off. The driver rammed through the windshield like a torpedo and flew thirty yards before crashing into the puckerbush.

The second car came almost as fast, and it took Richards four shots to find a tire. Two slugs splattered sand next to his spot. This one slid around in a smoking half-turn and rolled three times, spraying glass and metal.

Richards struggled to his feet, looked down and saw his shirt darkening slowly just above the belt. He hopped back toward the air car, and then dropped on his face as the second cruiser exploded, spewing shrapnel above and around him.

He got up, panting and making strange whimpering noises in his mouth. His side had begun to throb in slow, aching cycles.

She could have gotten away, perhaps, but she had made no effort. She was staring, transfixed, at the burning police car in the road. When Richards got in, she shrank from him.

"You killed them. You killed those men."

"They tried to kill me. You too. Drive. Fast."

"THEY DID NOT TRY TO KILL ME!"

"..Drive!"

She drove.

The mask of the well-to-do young *hausfrau* on her way back from the market now hung in tatters and shreds. Beneath it was something from the cave, something with twitching lips and rolling eyes. Perhaps it had been there all along.

They drove about five miles and came to a roadside store and air station.

"Pull in," Richards said.

Minus 041 and COUNTING

"Get out. "

"No."

He jammed the gun against her right breast and she whimpered. "Don't. Please. "

"I'm sorry. But there's no more time for you to play prima donna. Get out."

She got out and he slid after her.

"Let me lean on you. "

He slung an arm around her shoulders and pointed with the gun at the telephone

booth beside the ice dispenser. They began shuffling toward it, a grotesque two-man vaudeville team. Richards hopped on his good foot. He felt tired. In his mind he saw the cars crashing, the body flying like a torpedo, the leaping explosion. These scenes played over and over again, like a continuous loop of tape.

The store's proprietor, an old pal with white hair and scrawny legs hidden by a dirty butcher's apron, came out and stared at them with worried eyes.

"Hey," he said mildly. "I don't want you here. I got a fam'ly. Go down the road. Please I don't want no trouble."

"Go inside, pop," Richards said. The man went.

Richards slid loosely into the booth, breathing through his mouth, and fumbled fifty cents into the coin horn. Holding the gun and receiver in one hand, he punched 0.

"What exchange is this, operator?"

"Rockland, sir."

"Put me through to the local newsie hookup, please."

"You may dial that, sir. The number is-"

"You dial it."

"Do you wish-"

"Just dial it!"

"Yes, sir," she said, unruffled. There were clicks and pops in Richards's ear. Blood had darkened his shirt to a dirty purple color. He looked away from it. It made him feel ill.

"Rockland Newsie," a voice said in Richards's ear. "Free-Vee Tabloid Number 6943."

"This is Ben Richards."

There was a long silence. Then: "Look, maggot, I like a joke as well as the next guy, but this has been a long, hard d-"

"Shut up. You're going to get confirmation of this in ten minutes at the outside. You can get it now if you've got a police-band radio."

"I . . . just a second. " There was the dunk of a dropping phone on the other end, and a faint wailing sound. When the phone was picked up, the voice was hard and businesslike, with an undercurrent of excitement.

"Where are you, fella? Half the cops in eastern Maine just went through Rockland . . . at about a hundred and ten."

Richards craned his neck at the sign over the store. "A place called Gilly's Town Line Store & Airstop on U.S. 1. You know it?"

"Yeah. Just-"

"Listen to me, maggot. I didn't call to give you my life story. Get some photogs out

here. Quick. And get this on the air. Red Newsbreak Top. I've got a hostage. Her name is Amelia Williams. From-" He looked at her.

"Falmouth," she said miserably.

"From Falmouth. Safe conduct or I'll kill her."

"Jesus, I smell the Pulitzer Prize!"

"No, you just shit your pants, that's all," Richards said. He felt lightheaded. "You get the word out. I want the State Pigs to find out everyone knows I'm not alone. Three of them at a roadblock tried to blow us up."

"What happened to the cops!"

"I killed them."

"All three? Hot damn!" The voice, pulled away from the phone, yelled distantly: "Dicky, open the national cable!"

"I'm going to kill her if they shoot," Richards said, simultaneously trying to inject sincerity into his voice and to remember all the old gangster movies he had seen on tee-vee as a kid. "If they want to save the girl, they better let me through. "

"When-"

Richards hung up and hopped clumsily out of the booth. "Help me."

She put an arm around him, grimacing at the blood. "See what you're getting yourself into?"

"Yes."

"This is madness. You're going to be killed."

"Drive north," he mumbled. "Just drive north."

He slid into the car, breathing hard. The world insisted on going in and out. High, atonal music jangled in his ears. She pulled out and onto the road. His blood had smeared on her smart green and black-striped blouse. The old man, Gilly, cracked the screen door open and poked out a very old Polaroid camera. He clicked the shutter, pulled the tape, and waited. His face was painted with horror and excitement and delight.

In the distance, rising and converging, sirens.

Minus 040 and COUNTING

They traveled five miles before people began running out onto their lawns to watch them pass. Many had cameras and Richards relaxed.

"They were shooting at the aircaps at that roadblock," she said quietly. "It was a mistake. That's what it was. A mistake."

"If that maggot was aiming for an aircap when he put out the windshield, there must have been a sight on that pistol three feet high."

"It was a mistake! "

They were entering the residential district of what Richards assumed was Rockland. Summer homes. Dirt roads leading down to beachfront cottages. Breeze Inn. *Private Road*. Just Me'n Patty. *Keep Out*. Elizabeth's Rest. *Trespassers Will Be Shot*. Cloud-Hi. *5000 Volts*. Set-A-Spell. *Guard Dogs on Patrol*.

Unhealthy eyes and avid faces peering at them from behind trees, like Cheshire cats. The blare of battery-powered Free-Vees came through the shattered windshield.

A crazy, weird air of carnival about everything.

"These people," Richards said, "only want to see someone bleed. The more the better. They would just as soon it was both of us. Can you believe that?"

"No. "

"Then I salute you. "

An older man with silvery barbershop hair, wearing madras shorts that came down over his knees, ran out to the edge of the road. He was carrying a huge camera with a cobra-like telephoto lens. He began snapping pictures wildly, bending and dipping. His legs were fish-belly white. Richards burst into a sudden bray of laughter that made Amelia jump.

"What-"

"He's still got the lens cover on," Richards said. "He's still got-" But laughter overcame him.

Cars crowded the shoulders as they topped a long, slowly rising hill and began to descend toward the clustered town of Rockland itself. Perhaps it had once been a picturesque seacoast fishing village, full of Window Homer men in yellow rainslickers who went out in small boats to trap the wily lobster. If so, it was long gone. There was a huge shopping center on either side of the road. A main street strip of honky-tonks, bars, and AutoSlot emporiums. There were neat middle-class homes overlooking the main drag from the heights, and a growing slum looking up from the rancid edge of the water. The sea at the horizon was yet unchanged. It glittered blue and ageless, full of dancing points and nets of light in the late afternoon sun.

They began the descent, and there were two police cars parked across the road. The blue lights flick-flick-flicked jaggedly, crazy and out of sync with each other. Parked at an angle on the left embankment was an armored car with a short, stubby cannon barrel tracking them.

"You're done," she said softly, almost regretfully. "Do I have to die, too?"

"Stop fifty yards from the roadblock and do your stuff," Richards said. He slid down in the seat. A nervous tic stitched his face.

She stopped and opened the car door, but did not lean out. The air was dead silent. A *hush falls over the crowd*, Richards thought ironically.

"I'm scared," she said. "Please. I'm so scared."

"They won't shoot you," he said. "There are too many people. You can't kill hostages unless no one is watching. Those are the rules of the game."

She looked at him for a moment, and he suddenly wished they could have a cup of coffee together. He would listen carefully to her conversation and stir real cream into his hot drink-her treat, of course. Then they could discuss the possibilities of social inequity, the way your socks always fall down when you're wearing rubber boots, and the importance of being earnest.

"Go on, Mrs. Williams," he said with soft, tense mockery. "The eyes of the world are upon you. "

She leaned out.

Six police cars and another armored van had pulled up thirty feet behind them, blocking their retreat.

He thought: Now *the only way out is straight up to heaven.*

Minus 039 and COUNTING

"My name is Amelia Williams. Benjamin Richards is holding me hostage. If you don't give us safe conduct, he says he'll kill me."

Silence for a moment so complete that Richards could hear the faraway honk of some distant yacht's air horn.

Then, asexual, blaring, amplified: "WE WANT TO TALK TO BEN RICHARDS."

"No," Richards said swiftly.

"He says he won't."

"COME OUT OF THE CAR, MADAM."

"He'll kill me!" she cried wildly. "Don't you listen? Some men almost killed us back *there!* He says you don't care who you kill. My God, is *he right?*"

A hoarse voice in the crowd yelled "Let her through!"

"COME OUT OF THE CAR OR WE'LL SHOOT."

"Let her through! Let her through! " The crowd had taken up the chant like eager fans at a killball match.

"COME OUT-"

The crowd drowned it out. From somewhere, a rock flew. A police car windshield starred into a matrix of cracks.

There was suddenly a rev of motors, and the two cruisers began to pull apart, opening a narrow slot of pavement. The crowd cheered happily and then fell silent, waiting for the next act.

"ALL CIVILIANS LEAVE THE AREA," the bullhorn chanted. "THERE MAY BE SHOOTING. ALL CIVILIANS LEAVE THE AREA OR YOU MAY BE CHARGED WITH OBSTRUCTION AND UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY. THE PENALTY FOR OBSTRUCTION AND UNLAWFUL ASSEMBLY IS TEN YEARS IN THE STATE PENITENTIARY OR A FINE OF TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS OR BOTH. CLEAR

THE AREA. CLEAR THE AREA."

"Yeah, so no one'll see you shoot the girl!" a hysterical voice yelled. "Screw all pigs!"

The crowd didn't move. A yellow and black newsie-mobile had pulled up with a flashy screech. Two men jumped out and began setting up a camera.

Two cops rushed over and there was a short, savage scuffle for the possession of the camera. Then one of the cops yanked it free, picked it up by the tripod, and smashed it on the road. One of the newsmen tried to reach the cop that had done it and was clubbed.

A small boy darted out of the crowd and fired a rock at the back of a cop's head. Blood splattered the road as the cop fell over. A half-dozen more descended on the boy, bearing him off. Incredibly, small and savage fistfights had begun on the sidelines between the well-dressed townfolk and the rattier slum-dwellers. A woman in a ripped and faded housedress suddenly descended on a plump matron and began to pull her hair. They fell heavily to the road and began to roll on the macadam, kicking and screaming.

"My God," Amelia said sickly.

"What's happening?" Richards asked. He dared look no higher than the clock on the dashboard.

"Fights. Police hitting people. Someone broke a newsie's camera."

"GIVE UP, RICHARDS. COME OUT."

"Drive on," Richards said softly.

The air car jerked forward erratically. "They'll shoot for the air caps, " she said. "Then wait until you have to come out. "

"They won't," Richards said.

"Why?"

"They're too dumb."

They didn't.

They proceeded slowly past the ranked police cars and the bug-eyed spectators. They had split themselves into two groups in unconscious segregation. On one side of the road were the middle- and upper-class citizens, the ladies who had their hair done at the beauty parlor, the men who wore Arrow shirts and loafers. Fellows wearing coveralls with company names on the back and their own names stitched in gold thread over the breast pockets. Women like Amelia Williams herself, dressed for the market and the shops. Their faces were different in all ways but similar in one: They looked oddly incomplete, like pictures with holes for eyes or a jigsaw puzzle with a minor piece missing. It was a lack of desperation. Richards thought. No wolves howled in these bellies. These minds were not filled with rotted, crazed dreams or mad hopes.

These people were on the right side of the road, the side that faced the combination marina and country club they were just passing.

On the other side, the left, were the poor people. Red noses with burst veins. Flattened, sagging breasts. Stringy hair. White socks. Cold sores. Pimples. The blank and

hanging mouths of idiocy.

The police were deployed more heavily here, and more were coming all the time. Richards was not surprised at the swiftness and the heaviness of their crunch, despite the suddenness of his appearance. Even here, in Boondocks, U.S.A., the club and the gun were kept near to hand. The dogs were kept hungry in the kennel. The poor break into summer cottages closed for autumn and winter. The poor crash supermarts in subteen gangs. The poor have been known to soap badly spelled obscenities on shop windows. The poor always have itchy assholes and the sight of Naugahyde and chrome and two-hundred-dollar suits and fat bellies have been known to make the mouths of the poor fill with angry spit. And the poor must have their Jack Johnson, their Muhammad Ali, their Clyde Barrow. They stood and watched.

Here on the right, folks, we have the summer people, Richards thought. Fat and sloppy but heavy with armor. On the left, weighing in at only a hundred and thirty-but a scrappy contender with a mean and rolling eyeball-we have the Hungry Honkies. Theirs are the politics of starvation; they'd roll Christ Himself for a pound of salami. Polarization comes to West Sticksville. Watch out for these two contenders, though. They don't stay in the ring; they have a tendency to fight in the ten-dollar seats. Can we find a goat to hang up for both of them?

Slowly, rolling at thirty, Ben Richards passed between them.

Minus 038 and COUNTING

An hour passed. It was four o'clock. Shadows crawled across the road.

Richards, slumped down below eye level in his seat, floated in and out of consciousness effortlessly. He had clumsily pulled his shirt out of his pants to look at the new wound. The bullet had dug a deep and ugly canal in his side that had bled a great deal. The blood had clotted, but grudgingly. When he had to move quickly again, the wound would rip open and bleed a great deal more. Didn't matter. They were going to blow him up. In the face of this massive armory, his plan was a joke. He would go ahead with it, fill in the blanks until there was an "accident" and the air car was blown into bent bolts and shards of metal (" . . . terrible accident . . . the trooper has been suspended pending a full investigation . . . regret the loss of innocent life . . . "-all this buried in the last newsie of the day, between the stock-market report and the Pope's latest pronouncement), but it was only reflex. He had become increasingly worried about Amelia Williams, whose big mistake had been picking Wednesday morning to do her marketing.

"There are tanks out there," she said suddenly. Her voice was light, chatty, hysterical. "Can you imagine it? Can you-" She began to cry.

Richards waited. Finally, he said: "What town are we in?"

"W-W-Winterport, the sign s-said. Oh, I can't! I can't wait for them to do it! can't!"

"Okay," he said.

She blinked slowly, giving an infinitesimal shake of her head as if to clear it. "What?"

"Stop. Get out."

"But they'll kill y-"

"Yes. But there won't be any blood. You won't see any blood. They've got enough firepower out there to vaporize me and the car, too."

"You're lying. You'll kill me."

The gun had been dangling between his knees. He dropped it on the floor. It clunked harmlessly on the rubber floor-mat.

"I want some pot," she said mindlessly. "Oh God, I want to be high. Why didn't you wait for the next car? Jesus! Jesus!"

Richards began to laugh. He laughed in wheezy, shallow-chested heaves that still hurt his side. He closed his eyes and laughed until tears oozed out from under the lids.

"It's cold in here with that broken windshield," she said irrelevantly. "Turn on the heater. "

Her face was a pale blotch in the shadows of late afternoon.

Minus 037 and COUNTING

"We're in Derry," she said.

The streets were black with people. They hung over roof ledges and sat on balconies and verandahs from which the summer furniture had been removed. They ate sandwiches and fried chicken from greasy buckets.

"Are there jetport signs?"

"Yes. I'm following them. They'll just close the gates."

"I'll just threaten to kill you again if they do."

"Are you going to skyjack a plane?"

"I'm going to try."

"You can't."

"I'm sure you're right."

They made a right, then a left. Bullhorns exhorted the crowd monotonously to move back, to disperse.

"Is she really your wife? That woman in the pictures?"

"Yes. Her name is Sheila. Our baby, Cathy, is a year and a half old. She had the flu. Maybe she's better now. That's how I got into this."

A helicopter buzzed them, leaving a huge arachnid shadow on the road ahead. A grossly amplified voice exhorted Richards to let the woman go. When it was gone and they could speak again, she said:

"Your wife looks like a little tramp. She could take better care of herself."

"The picture was doctored," Richards said tonelessly.

"They would do that?"

"They would do that. "

"The jetport. We're coming up to it."

"Are the gates shut?"

"I can't see . . . wait . . . open but blocked. A tank. It's pointing its shooter at us."

"Drive to within thirty feet of it and stop."

The car crawled slowly down the four-lane access road between the parked police cars, between the ceaseless scream and babble of the crowd. A sign loomed over them: VOIGT AIRFIELD. The woman could see an electrified cyclone fence which crossed a marshy, worthless sort of field on both sides of the road. Straight ahead was a combination information booth and check-in point on a traffic island. Beyond that was the main gate, blocked by an A-62 tank capable of firing one-quarter-megaton shells from its cannon. Farther on, a confusion of roads and parking lots, all tending toward the complex jet-line terminals that blocked the runways from view. A huge control tower bulked over everything like an H. G. Wells Martian, the westering sun glaring off its polarized bank of windows and turning them to fire. Employees and passengers alike had crowded down to the nearest parking lot where they were being held back by more police. There was a pulsing, heavy whine in their ears, and Amelia saw a steel-gray Lockheed/G-A Superbird rising into a flat, powerful climb from one of the runways behind the main buildings.

"RICHARDS!"

She jumped and looked at him, frightened. He waved his hand at her nonchalantly. It's all right, Ma. I'm only dying.

"YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED INSIDE," the huge amplified voice admonished him. "LET THE WOMAN GO. STEP OUT."

"What now?" she asked. "It's a stand-off. They'll just wait until-"

"Let's push them a little farther," Richards said. "They'll bluff along a little more. Lean out. Tell them I'm hurt and half-crazy. Tell them I want to give up to the Airline Police."

"You want to do *what*?"

"The Airline Police are neither state enforcement nor federal. They've been international ever since the UN treaty of 1995. There used to be a story that if you gave up to them, you'd get amnesty. Sort of like landing on Free Parking in Monopoly. Full of shit, of course. They turn you over to the Hunters and the Hunters drag you out in back of the barn. "

She winced.

"But maybe they'll think I believe it. Or that I've fooled myself into believing it. Go ahead and tell them."

She leaned out and Richards tensed. If there was going to be an "unfortunate accident" which would remove Amelia from the picture, it would probably happen now. Her head and upper body were clearly and cleanly exposed to a thousand guns. One squeeze on one trigger and the entire farce would come to a quick end.

"Ben Richards wants to give up to the Airline Police!" she cried. "He's shot in two places! " She threw a terrified glance over her shoulder and her voice broke, high and clear in the sudden silence the diminishing jet had left. "He's been out of his mind half the time and God I'm *so frightened . . . please . . . please ... PLEASE!*"

The cameras were recording it all, sending it on a live feed that would be broadcast all over North America and half the world in a matter of minutes. That was good. That was fine. Richards felt tension stiffen his limbs again and knew he was beginning to hope.

Silence for a moment; there was a conference going on behind the check-point booth.

"Very good," Richards said softly.

She looked at him. "Do you think it's hard to sound frightened? We're not in this together, whatever you think. I only want you to go away."

Richards noticed for the first time how perfect her breasts were beneath the bloodstained black and green blouse. How perfect and how precious.

There was a sudden, grinding roar and she screamed aloud.

"It's the tank," he said. "It's okay. Just the tank."

"It's moving," she said. "They're going to let us in."

"RICHARDS! YOU WILL PROCEED TO LOT 16. AIRLINE POLICE WILL BE WAITING THERE TO TAKE YOU INTO CUSTODY!"

"All right," he said thinly. "Drive on. When you get a half a mile inside the gate, stop."

"You're going to get me killed," she said hopelessly. "All I need to do is use the bathroom and you're going to get me killed."

The air car lifted four inches and hummed smoothly forward. Richards crouched going through the gate, anticipating a possible ambush, but there was none. The smooth blacktop curved sedately toward the main buildings. A sign with a pointing arrow informed them that this was the way to Lots 16-20.

Here the police were standing and kneeling behind yellow barricades.

Richards knew that at the slightest suspicious move, they would tear the air car apart.

"Now stop," he said, and she did.

The reaction was instantaneous. "RICHARDS! MOVE IMMEDIATELY TO LOT 16!"

"Tell them that I want a bullhorn," Richards said softly to her. "They are to leave one in the road twenty yards up. I want to talk to them. "

She cried his message, and then they waited. A moment later, a man in a blue uniform trotted out into the road and laid an electric bullhorn down. He stood there for a moment, perhaps savoring the realization that he was being seen by five hundred million people, and then withdrew to barricaded anonymity again.

"Go ahead," he told her.

They crept up to the bullhorn, and when the driver's side door was even with it, she opened the door and pulled it in. It was red and white. The letters G and A, embossed over a thunderbolt, were on the side. "Okay," he said. "How far are we from the main building?" She squinted. "A quarter of a mile, I guess. " "How far are we from Lot 16?" "Half that." "Good. That's good. Yeah." He realized he was compulsively biting his lips and tried to make himself stop. His head hurt; his entire body ached from adrenaline. "Keep driving. Go up to the entrance of Lot 16 and then stop." "Then what?" He smiled tightly and unhappily. "That," he said, "is going to be the site of Richards's Last Stand."

Minus 036 and COUNTING

When she stopped the car at the entrance of the parking lot, the reaction was quick and immediate. "KEEP MOVING," the bullhorn prodded. "THE AIRPORT POLICE ARE INSIDE. AS SPECIFIED."

Richards raised his own bullhorn for the first time. "TEN MINUTES," he said. "I HAVE TO THINK."

Silence again.

"Don't you realize you're pushing them to do it?" she asked him in a strange, controlled voice.

He uttered a weird, squeezed giggle that sounded like steam under high pressure escaping from a teapot. "They know I'm getting set to screw them. They don't know how."

"You can't," she said. "Don't *you see* that yet?"

"Maybe I can," he said.

Minus 035 and COUNTING

"Listen:"

"When the Games first started, people said they were the world's greatest entertainment because there had never been anything like them. But nothing's that original. There were the gladiators in Rome who did the same thing. And there's another game, too. Poker. In poker the highest hand is a royal straight-flush in spades. And the toughest kind of poker is five-card stud. Four cards up on the table and one in the hole. For nickels and dimes anyone can stay in the game. It costs you maybe half a buck to see the other guy's hole card. But when you push the stakes up, the hole card starts to look bigger and bigger. After a dozen rounds of betting, with your life's savings and car and house on the line, that hole card stands taller than Mount Everest. *The Running Man* is like that. Only

I'm not supposed to have any money to bet with. They've got the men, the firepower, and the time. We're playing with their cards and their chips in their casino. When I'm caught, I'm supposed to fold. But maybe I stacked the deck a bit. I called the newsie line in Rockland. The newsies, that's my ten of spades. They *had* to give me safe conduct, because everyone was watching. There were no more chances for neat disposal after that first roadblock. It's funny, too, because it's the Free-Vee that gives the Network the clout that it has. If you see it on the Free-Vee, it must be true. So if the whole country saw the police murder my hostage-a well-to-do, middle-class female hostage-they would have to believe it. They can't risk it; the system is laboring under too much suspension of belief now. Funny, huh? My people are here. There's been trouble on the road already. If the troopers and the Hunters turn all their guns on us, something nasty might happen. A man told me to stay near my own people. He was more right than he knew. One of the reasons they've been handling me with the kid gloves on is because my people are here.

"My people, they're the jack of spades.

"The queen, the lady in the affair, is you.

"I'm the king; the black man with the sword.

"These are my up cards. The media, the possibility of real trouble, you, me. Together they're nothing. A pair will take them. Without the ace of spades it's junk. With the ace, it's unbeatable."

He suddenly picked up her handbag, an imitation alligator-skin clutch purse with a small silver chain. He stuffed it into his coat pocket where it bulged prominently.

"I haven't got the ace," he said softly. "With a little more forethought, I could have had it. But I *do* have a hole card-one they can't see. So I'm going to run a bluff. "

"You don't have a chance," she said hollowly. "What can you do with my bag? Shoot them with a lipstick?"

"I think that they've been playing a crooked game so long that they'll fold. I think they are yellow straight through from the back to belly.

"RICHARDS! TEN MINUTES ARE UP!"

Richards put the bullhorn to his lips.

Minus 034 and COUNTING

"LISTEN TO ME CAREFULLY!" His voice boomed and rolled across the flat jetport acres. Police waited tensely. The crowd shuffled. "I AM CARRYING TWELVE POUNDS OF DYNACORE HI-IMPACT PLASTIC EXPLOSIVE IN MY COAT POCKET-THE VARIETY THEY CALL BLACK IRISH. TWELVE POUNDS IS ENOUGH TO TAKE OUT EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE WITHIN A THIRD OF A MILE AND PROBABLY ENOUGH TO EXPLODE THE JETPORT FUEL STORAGE TANKS. IF YOU DON'T FOLLOW MY INSTRUCTIONS TO THE LETTER, I'LL BLOW YOU ALL TO HELL. A GENERAL ATOMICS IMPLODER RING IS SET INTO THE EXPLOSIVE. I HAVE IT PULLED OUT TO HALF-COCK. ONE JIGGLE AND YOU CAN ALL PUT YOUR HEADS BETWEEN YOUR LEGS

AND KISS YOUR ASSES GOODBYE."

There were screams from the crowd followed by sudden tidelike movement. The police found they had no one to hold back. Men and women were tearing across roads and fields, streaming out the gates and scaling the cyclone fence around the jetport. Their faces were blank and avid with panic.

The police shuffled uneasily. On no face did Amelia Williams see disbelief.

"RICHARDS?" The huge voice boomed. "THAT'S A LIE. COME OUT."

"I AM COMING OUT," he boomed back. "BUT BEFORE I DO, LET ME GIVE YOU YOUR MARCHING ORDERS. I WANT A JET FULLY FUELED AND READY TO FLY WITH A SKELETON CREW. THIS JET WILL BE A LOCKHEED/GA OR A DELTA SUPERSONIC. THE RANGE MUST BE AT LEAST TWO THOUSAND MILES. THIS WILL BE READY IN NINETY MINUTES."

Cameras reeling and cranking away. Flashbulbs popping. The press looked uneasy too. But, of course, there was the psychic pressure of those five hundred million watchers to be considered. They were real. The job was real. And Richards's twelve pounds of Black Irish might be just a figment of his admirable criminal mentality.

"RICHARDS?" A man dressed only in dark slacks and a white shirt rolled up to the elbows in spite of the fall chill strolled out from behind a gaggle of unmarked cars fifty yards beyond Lot 16. He was carrying a bullhorn larger than Richards's. From this distance, Amelia could see only that he was wearing small spectacles; they flashed in the dying sunlight.

"I AM EVAN McCONE."

He knew the name, of course. It was supposed to strike fear into his heart. He was not surprised to find that it *did* strike fear into his heart. Evan McCone was the Chief Hunter. A direct descendent of J. Edgar Hoover and Heinrich Himmler, he thought. The personification of the steel inside the Network's cathode glove. A boogeyman. A name to frighten bad children with. If you don't stop playing with matches, Johnny, I'll let Evan McCone out of your closet.

Fleeting, in the eye of memory, he recalled a dream-voice. *Are you the man, little brother?*

"YOU'RE LYING, RICHARDS. WE KNOW IT. A MAN WITHOUT A GA RATING HAS NO WAY OF GETTING DYNACORE. LET THE WOMAN GO AND COME OUT. WE DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO KILL HER, TOO."

Amelia made a weak, wretched hissing noise.

Richards boomed: "THAT MAY GO OVER IN SHAKER HEIGHTS, LITTLE MAN. IN THE STREETS YOU CAN BUY DYNACORE EVERY TWO BLOCKS IF YOU'VE GOT CASH ON THE LINE. AND I DID. GAMES FEDERATION MONEY. YOU HAVE EIGHTY-SIX MINUTES."

"NO DEAL."

"McCONE?"

"YES. "

"I'M SENDING THE WOMAN OUT NOW. SHE'S SEEN THE IRISH." Amelia was looking at him with stunned horror. "MEANWHILE, YOU BETTER GET IT IN GEAR. EIGHTY-FIVE MINUTES. I'M NOT BLUFFING, ASSHOLE. ONE BULLET AND WE'RE ALL GOING TO THE MOON."

"No," she whispered. Her face was an unbelieving rictus. "You can't believe I'm going to lie for you."

"If you don't, I'm dead. I'm shot and broken and hardly conscious enough to know what I'm saying, but I know this is the best way, one way or the other. Now listen: Dynacore is white and solid, slightly greasy to the touch. It-"

"No, no! No! " She clapped her hands over her ears.

"It looks like a bar of Ivory soap. Very dense, though. Now I'm going to describe the imploder ring. It looks-"

She began to weep. "I can't, don't you *know* that? I have my duty as a citizen. My conscience. I have my-"

"Yeah, and they might find out you lied," he added dryly. "Except they won't. Because if you back me, they'll cave in. I'll be off like a bigass bird."

"I can't!"

"RICHARDS! SEND THE WOMAN OUT!"

"The imploder ring is gold," he continued. "About two inches in diameter. It looks like a keyring with no keys in it. Attached to it is a slim rod like a mechanical pencil with a G-A trigger device attached to it. The trigger device looks like the eraser on the pencil."

She was rocking back and forth, moaning a little. She had a cheek in either hand and was twisting her flesh as if it were dough.

"I told them I had pulled out to half-cock. That means you would be able to see a single small notch just above the surface of the Irish. Got it?"

No answer; she wept and moaned and rocked.

"Sure you do," he said softly. "You're a bright girl, aren't you?"

"I'm not going to lie," she said.

"If they ask you anything else, you don't know from Rooty-Toot. You didn't see. You were too scared. Except for one thing: I've been holding the ring ever since that first roadblock. You didn't know what it was, but I had it in my hand. "

"Better kill me now."

"Go on," he said. "Get out."

She stared at him convulsively, her mouth working, her eyes dark holes. The pretty, self-assured woman with the wraparound shades was all gone. Richards wondered if that woman would ever reappear. He did not think so. Not wholly.

"Go," he said. "Go. Go."

"I-I-Ah, God-"

She lunged against the door and half sprang, half fell out. She was on her feet instantly and running. Her hair streamed out behind her and she seemed very beautiful, almost goddesslike, and she ran into the lukewarm starburst of a million flashbulbs.

Carbines flashed up, ready, and were lowered as the crowd ate her. Richards risked cocking an eyebrow over the driver's side window but could see nothing.

He slouched back down, glanced at his watch, and waited for dissolution.

Minus 033 and COUNTING

The red second hand on his watch made two circles. Another two. Another two. "RICHARDS!"

He raised the bullhorn to his lips. "SEVENTY-NINE MINUTES, McCONE."

Play it right up to the end. The *only* way to play it. Right up to the moment McCone gave the order to fire at will. It would be quick. And it didn't really seem to matter a whole hell of a lot.

After a long grudging, eternal pause: "WE NEED MORE TIME. AT LEAST THREE HOURS. THERE ISN'T AN L/G-A OR A DELTA ON THIS FIELD. ONE WILL HAVE TO BE FLOWN IN."

She had done it. O, amazing grace. The woman had looked into the abyss and then walked out across it. No net. No way back. Amazing.

Of course they didn't believe her. It was their business not to believe anyone about anything. Right now they would be hustling her to a private room in one of the terminals, half a dozen of McCone's picked interrogators waiting. And when they got her there, the litany would begin. *Of course you're upset, Mrs. Williams, but just for the record . . . would you mind going through this once more . . . we're puzzled by one small thing here . . . are you sure that wasn't the other way around . . . how do you know . . . why . . . then what did he say . . .*

So the correct move was to buy time. Fob Richards off with one excuse and then another. There's a fueling problem, we need more time. No crew is on the jetport grounds, we need more time. There's a flying saucer over Runway Zero-Seven, we need more time. And we haven't broken her yet. Haven't quite gotten her to admit that your high explosive consists of an alligator handbag stuffed with assorted Kleenex and change and cosmetics and credit cards. We need more time.

We can't take a chance on killing you yet. We need more time.

"RICHARDS?"

"LISTEN TO ME," he megaphoned back. "YOU HAVE SEVENTY-FIVE MINUTES. THEN IT ALL GOES UP."

No reply.

Spectators had begun to creep back in spite of Armageddon's shadow. Their eyes

were wide and wet and sexual. A number of portable spotlights had been requisitioned and focused on the little car, bathing it in a depthless glow and emphasizing the shattered windshield.

Richards tried to imagine the little room where they would be holding her, probing her for the truth, and could not. The press would be excluded, of course. McCone's men would be trying to scare the tits off her and undoubtedly would be succeeding. But how far would they dare go with a woman who did not belong to the ghetto society of the poor where people had no faces? Drugs. There were drugs, Richards knew, drugs that McCone could command immediately, drugs that could make a Yaqui Indian babble out his entire life story like a babe in arms. Drugs that would make a priest rattle off penitents' confessions like a stenographer's recording machine.

A little violence? The modified electric move-alongs that had worked so well in the Seattle riots of 2005? Or only the steady battering of their questions?

The thoughts served no purpose, but he could not shut them out or turn them off. Beyond the terminals there was the unmistakable whine of a Lockheed carrier being warmed up. His bird. The sound of it came in rising and falling cycles. When it cut off suddenly, he knew the fueling had begun. Twenty minutes if they were hurrying. Richards did not think they would be hurrying. Well, well, well. Here we are. All the cards on the table but one. *McCone? McCone, are you peeking yet? Have you sliced into her mind yet?* Shadows lengthened across the field and everybody waited.

Minus 032 and COUNTING

Richards discovered that the old cliché was a lie. Time did *not* stand still. In some ways it would have been better if it had. Then there at least would have been an end to hope.

Twice the amplified voice informed Richards that he was lying. He told them if it was so, they had better open up. Five minutes later a new amplified voice told him that the Lockheed's flaps were frozen and that fueling would have to begin with another plane. Richards told them that was fine. As long as the plane was ready to go by the original deadline.

The minutes crept by. Twenty-six left, twenty-five, twenty-two, twenty (*she hasn't broken yet, my God, maybe-*), eighteen, fifteen (the plane's engines again, rising to a strident howl as the ground crews went through fuel-system and preflight checks), ten minutes, then eight.

"RICHARDS?"

"HERE."

"WE HAVE SIMPLY GOT TO HAVE MORE TIME. THE BIRD'S FLAPS ARE FROZEN SOLID. WE'RE GOING TO IRRIGATE THE VANES WITH LIQUID HYDROGEN BUT WE SIMPLY HAVE TO HAVE TIME."

"YOU HAVE IT. SEVEN MINUTES. THEN I AM GOING TO PROCEED TO THE AIRFIELD USING THE SERVICE RAMP. I WILL BE DRIVING WITH ONE HAND

ON THE WHEEL AND ONE HAND ON THE IMPLODER RING. ALL GATES WILL BE OPENED. AND REMEMBER THAT I'LL BE GETTING CLOSER TO THOSE FUEL TANKS ALL THE TIME."

"YOU DON'T SEEM TO REALIZE THAT WE-"

"I'M THROUGH TALKING, FELLOWS. SIX MINUTES."

The second hand made its orderly, regular turns. Three minutes left, two, one. They would be going for broke in the little room he could not imagine. He tried to call Amelia's image up in his mind and failed. It was already blurring into other faces. One composite face composed of Stacey and Bradley and Elton and Virginia Parrakis and the boy with the dog. All he could remember was that she was soft and pretty in the uninspired way that so many women can be thanks to Max Factor and Revlon and the plastic surgeons who tuck and tie and smooth out and unbend. Soft. Soft. But hard in some deep place. Where did you go hard, WASP woman? Are you hard enough? Or are you blowing the game right now?

He felt something warm running down his chin and discovered he had bitten his lips through, not once but several times.

He wiped his mouth absently, leaving a tear drop-shaped smear of blood on his sleeve, and dropped the car into gear. It rose obediently, lifters grumbling.

"RICHARDS! IF YOU MOVE THAT CAR, WE'LL SHOOT! THE GIRL TALKED! WE KNOW!"

No one fired a shot.

In a way, it was almost anticlimactic.

Minus 031 and COUNTING

The service ramp described a rising arc around the glassine, futuristic Northern States Terminal. The way was lined with police holding everything from Mace-B and tear gas to heavy armor-piercing weaponry. Their faces were flat, dull, uniform. Richards drove slowly, sitting up straight now, and they looked at him with vacant, bovine awe. In much the same way, Richards thought, that cows must look at a farmer who had gone mad and lies kicking and sun-fishing and screaming on the barn floor.

The gate to the service area (CAUTION-EMPLOYEES ONLY-NO SMOKING-UNAUTHORIZED PERSONS KEEP OUT) had been swung open, and Richards drove sedately through, passing ranks of high-octane tanker trucks and small private planes pulled up on their chocks. Beyond them was a taxiway, wide oil-blackened cement with expansion joints. Here his bird was waiting, a huge white jumbo jet with a dozen turbine engines softly grumbling. Beyond, runways stretched straight and clean into the gathering twilight, seeming to approach a meeting point on the horizon. The bird's roll-up stairway was just being put into place by four men wearing coveralls. To Richards, it looked like the stairs leading to a scaffold.

And, as if to complete the image, the executioner stepped neatly out of the shadows that the plane's huge belly threw. Evan McCone.

Richards looked at him with the curiosity of a man seeing a celebrity for the first time-no matter how many times you see his picture in the movie 3-D's you can't believe his reality until he appears in the flesh-and then the reality takes on a curious tone of hallucination, as if entity had no right to exist separate from image.

He was a small man wearing rimless glasses, with a faint suggestion of a pot belly beneath his well-tailored suit. It was rumored that McCone wore elevator shoes, but if so, they were unobtrusive. There was a small silver flag-pin in his lapel. All in all, he did not look like a monster at all, the inheritor of such fearsome alphabet-soup bureaus as the FBI and the CIA. Not like a man who had mastered the technique of the black car in the night, the rubber club, the sly question about relatives back home. Not like a man who had mastered the entire spectrum of fear.

"Ben Richards?" He used no bullhorn, and without it his voice was soft and cultured without being effeminate in the slightest.

"Yes. "

"I have a sworn bill from the Games Federation, an accredited arm of the Network Communications Commission, for your apprehension and execution. Will you honor it?"

"Does a hen need a flag?"

"Ah." McCone sounded pleased. "The formalities are taken care of. I believe in formalities, don't you? No, of course you don't. You've been a very informal contestant. That's why you're still alive. Did you know you surpassed the standing *Running Man* record of eight days and five hours some two hours ago? Of course you don't. But you have. Yes. And your escape from the YMCA in Boston. Sterling. I understand the Nielsen rating on the program jumped twelve points."

"Wonderful. "

"Of course, we almost had you during that Portland interlude. Bad luck. Parrakis swore with his dying breath that you had jumped ship in Auburn. We believed him; he was so obviously a frightened little man."

"Obviously," Richards echoed softly.

"But this last play has been simply brilliant. I salute you. In a way, I'm almost sorry the game has to end. I suspect I shall never run up against a more inventive opponent. "

"Too bad," Richards said.

"It's over, you know," McCone said. "The woman broke. We used Sodium Pentothal on her. Old, but reliable." He pulled a small automatic. "Step out, Mr. Richards. I will pay you the ultimate compliment. I'm going to do it right here, where no one can film it. Your death will be one of relative privacy."

"Get ready, then," Richards grinned.

He opened the door and stepped out. The two men faced each other across the blank service area cement.

Minus 030 and COUNTING

It was McCone who broke the deadlock first. He threw back his head and laughed. It was a very cultured laugh, soft and velvet. "Oh, you are so good, Mr. Richards. *Par excellence*. Raise, call, and raise again. I salute you with honesty: The woman has not broken. She maintains stubbornly that the bulge I see in your pocket there is Black Irish. We can't S.A. P. her because it leaves a definable trace. A single EEG on the woman and our secret would be out. We are in the process of lifting in three ampoules of Canogyn from New York. Leaves no trace. We expect it in forty minutes. Not in time to stop you, alas.

"She is lying. It's obvious. If you will pardon a touch of what your fellows like to call elitism, I will offer my observation that the middle class lies well only about sex. May I offer another observation? Of course I may. I am." McCone smiled. "I suspect it's her handbag. We noticed she had none, although she had been shopping. We're quite observant. What happened to her purse if it isn't in your pocket, Richards?"

He would not pick up the gambit. "Shoot me if you're so sure."

McCone spread his hands sorrowfully. "How well I'd love to! But one does not take chances with human life, not even when the odds are fifty to one in your favor. Too much like Russian roulette. Human life has a certain *sacred* quality. The government-our government-realizes this. We are humane."

"Yes, yes," Richards said, and smiled ferally. McCone blinked.

"So you see-"

Richards started. The man was hypnotizing him. The minutes were flying, a helicopter was coming up from Boston loaded with three ampoules of jack-me-up-and-turn-me-over (and if McCone said forty minutes he meant twenty), and here he stood, listening to this man's tinkling little anthem. God, he was a monster.

"Listen to me," Richards said harshly, interrupting. "The speech is short, little man. When you inject her, she's going to sing the same tune. For the record, it's all here. Dig?"

He locked his gaze with McCone's and began to walk forward.

"I'll see you, shiteater."

McCone stepped aside. Richards didn't even bother to look at him as he passed. Their coat sleeves brushed.

"For the record, I was told the pull on half-cock was about three pounds. I've got about two and a half on now. Give or take. "

He had the satisfaction of hearing the man's breath whistle a little faster.

"Richards?"

He looked back from the stairs and McCone was looking up at him, the gold edges of his glasses gleaming and flashing. "When you get in the air, we're going to shoot you down with a ground-to-air missile. The story for the public will be that Richards got a little itchy on the trigger. RIP."

"You won't, though."

"No?"

Richards began to smile and gave half a reason. "We're going to be very low and over heavily populated areas. Add twelve fuel pods to twelve pounds of Irish and you got a very big bang potential. Too big. You'd do it if you could get away with it, but you can't." He paused. "You're so bright. Did you anticipate me on the parachute?"

"Oh, yes," McCone said calmly. "It's in the forward passenger compartment. Such old hat, Mr. Richards. Or do you have another trick in your bag?"

"You haven't been stupid enough to tamper with the chute, either, I'll bet."

"Oh no. Too obvious. And you would pull that nonexistent imploder ring just before you struck, I imagine. Quite an effective airburst."

"Goodbye, little man."

"Goodbye, Mr. Richards. And *bon voyage*." He chuckled. "Yes, you do rate honesty. So I will show you one more card. Just one. We are going to wait for the Canogyn before taking action. You are absolutely right about the missile. For now, just a bluff. Call and raise again, eh? But I can afford to wait. You see, I am never wrong. Never. And I know you are bluffing. So we can afford to wait. But I'm keeping you. 'Voir, Mr. Richards." He waved.

"Soon," Richards said, but not loud enough for McCone to hear. And he grinned.

Minus 029 and COUNTING

The first-class compartment was long and three aisles wide, paneled with real aged sequoia. A wine-colored rug which felt yards deep covered the floor. A 3-D movie screen was cranked up and out of the way on the far wall between the first class and the galley. In seat 100, the bulky parachute pack sat. Richards patted it briefly and went through the galley. Someone had even put coffee on.

He stepped through another door and stood in a short throat which led to the pilots' compartment. To the right the radio operator, a man of perhaps thirty with a care-lined face, looked at Richards bitterly and then back at his instruments. A few steps up and to the left, the navigator sat at his boards and grids and plastic-encased charts.

"The fellow who's going to get us all killed is coming up fellas," he said into his throat mike. He gazed coolly at Richards.

Richards said nothing. The man, after all, was almost certainly right. He limped into the nose of the plane.

The pilot was fifty or better, an old war-horse with the red nose of a steady drinker, and the clear, perceptive eyes of a man who was not even close to the alcoholic edge. His co-pilot was ten years younger, with a luxuriant growth of red hair spilling out from under his cap.

"Hello, Mr. Richards," the pilot said. He glanced at the bulge in Richards's pocket before he looked at his face. "Pardon me if I don't shake hands. I'm Flight Captain Don Holloway. This is my co-pilot Wayne Duninger."

"Under the circumstances, not very pleased to meet you," Duninger said.

Richards's mouth quirked. "In the same spirit, let me add that I'm song to be here. Captain Holloway, you're patched into communications with McCone, aren't you?"

"We sure are. Through Kippy Friedman, our communications man."

"Give me something to talk into."

Holloway handed him a microphone with infinite carefulness.

"Get going on your preflight," Richards said. "Five minutes."

"Will you want the explosive bolts on the rear loading door armed?" Duninger said with great eagerness.

"Tend your knitting," Richards said coldly. It was time to finish it off, make the final bet. His brain felt hot, overheated, on the verge of blowing a bearing. Call and raise, that was the game.

I'm going to sky's the limit right now, McCone.

"Mr. Friedman?"

"Yes. "

"This is Richards. I want to talk to McCone."

Dead air for half a minute. Holloway and Duninger weren't watching him anymore; they were going through preflight, reading gauges and pressures, checking flaps, doors, switches. The rising and falling of the huge G-A turbines began again, but now much louder, strident. When McCone's voice finally came, it was small against the brute noise.

"McCone here."

"Come on, maggot. You and the woman are going for a ride. Show up at the loading door in three minutes or I pull the ring."

Duninger stiffened in his bucket seat as if he had been shot. When he went back to his numbers his voice was shaken and terrified.

If he's got guts, this is where he calls. Asking for the woman gives it away. If he's got guts.

Richards waited.

A clock was ticking in his head.

Minus 028 and COUNTING

When McCone's voice came, it contained a foreign, blustery note. Fear? Possibly. Richards's heart lurched in his chest. Maybe it was all going to fall together. Maybe.

"You're nuts, Richards. I'm not"

"You listen, " Richards said, punching through McCone's voice. "And while you are, remember that this conversation is being party-lined by every ham operator within sixty

miles. The word is going to get around. You're not working in the dark, little man. You're right out on the big stage. You're coming because you're too chicken-shit to pull a double cross when you know it will get you dead. The woman's coming because I told her where I was going. "

Weak. Punch him harder. Don't let him think.

"Even if you should live when I pull the ring, you won't be able to get a job selling apples. " He was clutching the handbag in his pocket with frantic, maniacal tightness. "So that's it. Three minutes. Signing off."

"Richards, wait-"

He signed off, choking McCone's voice. He handed the mike back to Holloway, and Holloway took it with fingers that trembled only slightly.

"You've got guts," Holloway said slowly. "I'll say that. I don't think I ever saw so much guts."

"There will be more guts than anyone ever saw if he pulls that ring," Dunninger said.

"Continue with your preflight, please," Richards said. "I am going back to welcome our guests. We go in five minutes. "

He went back and pushed the chute over to the window seat, then sat down watching the door between first class and second class. He would know very soon. He would know very soon.

His hand worked with steady, helpless restlessness on Amelia Williams's handbag.

Outside it was almost full dark.

Minus 027 and COUNTING

They came up the stairs with a full forty-five seconds to spare. Amelia was panting and frightened, her hair blown into a haphazard beehive by the steady wind that rolled this manmade flatland. McCone's appearance was outwardly unchanged; he remained neat and unaffected, unruffled you might say, but his eyes were dark with a hate that was nearly psychotic.

"You haven't won a thing, maggot," he said quietly. "We haven't even started to play our trump cards yet. "

"It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Williams, " Richards said mildly.

As if he had given her a signal, pulled an invisible string, she began to weep. It was not a hysterical weeping; it was an entirely hopeless sound that came from her belly like hunks of slag. The force of it made her stagger, then crumple to the plush carpet of this plush first-class section with her face cupped in her hands, as if to hold it on. Richards's blood had dried to a tacky maroon smear on her blouse. Her full skirt, spread around her and hiding her legs, made her look like a wilted flower.

Richards felt sorry for her. It was a shallow emotion, feeling sorry, but the best he could manage.

"Mr. Richards?" It was Holloway's voice over the cabin intercom.

"Yes. "

"Do we . . . are we green?"

"Yes. "

"Then I'm giving the service crew the order to remove the stairs and seal us up. Don't get nervous with that thing."

"All right, Captain. Thank you. "

"You gave yourself away when you asked for the woman. You know that, don't you?" McCone seemed to be smiling and scowling at the same time; the overall effect was frighteningly paranoid. His hands were clenching and unclenching.

"Ah, so?" Richards said mildly. "And since you're never wrong, you'll undoubtedly jump me before we take off. That way you'll be out of jeopardy and come up smelling like a rose, right?"

McCone's lips parted in a tiny snarl, and then pressed together until they went white. He made no move. The plane began to pick up a tiny vibration as the engines cycled higher and higher.

The noise was suddenly muted as the boarding door in second class was slammed shut. Leaning over slightly to peer out one of the circular windows on the port side, Richards could see the crew trundling away the stairs. *Now we're all on the scaffold*, he thought.

Minus 026 and COUNTING

The FASTEN SEAT BELTS/ NO SMOKING sign to the right of the trundled-up movie screen flashed on. The airplane began a slow, ponderous turn beneath them. Richards had gained all his knowledge of jets from the Free-Vee and from reading, much of it lurid adventure fiction, but this was only the second time he had ever been on one; and it made the shuttle from Harding to New York look like a bathtub toy. He found the huge motion beneath his feet disturbing.

"Amelia?"

She looked up slowly, her face ravaged and tear streaked. "Uh?" Her voice was rusty, dazed, mucus clogged. As if she had forgotten where she was.

"Come forward. We're taking off. " He looked at McCone. "You go wherever you please, little man. You have the run of the ship. Just don't bother the crew. "

McCone said nothing and sat down near the curtained divider between first and second class. Then, apparently thinking better of it, he pushed through into the next section and was gone.

Richards walked to the woman, using the high backs of the seats for support. "I'd like the window seat," he said. "I've only flown once before." He tried to smile but she only looked at him dumbly.

He slid in, and she sat next to him. She buckled his belt for him so his hand did not have to come out of his pocket.

"You're like a bad dream," she said. "One that never ends."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't-" she began, and he clamped a hand over her mouth and shook his head. He mouthed the word No! at her eyes.

The plane swung around with slow, infinite care, turbines screaming, and began to trundle toward the runways like an ungainly duck about to enter the water. It was so big that Richards felt as if the plane were standing still and the earth itself was moving.

Maybe it's all illusion, he thought wildly. Maybe they've rigged 3-D projectors outside all the windows and-

He cut the thought off.

Now they had reached the end of the taxiway and the plane made a cumbersome right turn. They ran at right angles to the runways, passing Three and Two. At One they turned left and paused for a second.

Over the intercom Holloway said expressionlessly: "Taking off, Mr. Richards."

The plane began to move slowly at first, at no more than air-car speed, and then there was a sudden terrifying burst of acceleration that made Richards want to scream aloud in terror.

He was driven back into the soft pile of his seat, and the landing lights outside suddenly began to leap by with dizzying speed. The scrub bushes and exhaust-stunted trees on the desolate, sunset-riven horizon roared toward them. The engines wound up and up and up. The floor began to vibrate again.

He suddenly realized that Amelia Williams was holding on to his shoulder with both hands, her face twisted into a miserable grimace of fear.

Dear God, she's never flown either!

"We're going," he said. He found himself repeating it over and over and over, unable to stop. "We're going. We're going."

"Where?" she whispered.

He didn't answer. He was just beginning to know.

Minus 025 and COUNTING

The two troopers on roadblock duty at the eastern entrance of the jetport watched the huge liner fling itself down the runway, gaining speed. Its lights blinked orange and green in the growing dark, and the howl of its engines buffeted their ears.

"He's going. Christ, he's going."

"Where?" said the other.

They watched the dark shape as it separated from the ground. Its engines took on a curiously flat sound, like artillery practice on a cold morning. It rose at a steep angle, as real and as tangible and as prosaic as a cube of butter on a plate, yet improbable with flight.

"You think he's got it?"

"Hell, I don't know."

The roar of the jet was now coming to them in falling cycles.

"I'll tell you one thing, though." The first turned from the diminishing lights and turned up his collar. "I'm glad he's got that bastard with him. That McCone. "

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"As long as I don't have to answer it."

"Would you like to see him pull it off?"

The trooper said nothing for a long time. The sound of the jet faded, faded, faded, until it disappeared into the underground hum of nerves at work.

"Yes. "

"Do you think he will?"

A crescent smile in the darkness. "My friend, I think there's gonna be a big boom. "

Minus 024 and COUNTING

The earth had dropped away below them.

Richards stared out wonderingly, unable to drink his fill; he had slept through the other flight as if in wait for this one. The sky had deepened to a shade that hung on the borderline between royal velvet and black. Stars poked through with hesitant brilliance. On the western horizon, the only remnant of the sun was a bitter orange line that illuminated the dark earth below not at all. There was a nestle of lights below he took to be Derry.

"Mr. Richards?"

"Yes." He jumped in his seat as if he had been poked.

"We are in a holding pattern right now. That means we are describing a large circle above the Voigt Jetport. Instructions?"

Richards thought carefully. It wouldn't do to give too much away.

"What's the absolute lowest you can fly this thing?"

There was a long pause for consultation. "We could get away with two thousand feet," Holloway said cautiously. "It's against N.S.A. regs, but-"

"Never mind that," Richards said. "I have to put myself in your hands to a certain extent, Mr. Holloway. I know very little of flying and I'm sure you've been briefed on that. But please remember that the people who are full of bright ideas about how to

bamboozle me are all on the ground and out of danger. If you lie to me about anything and I find out-

"Nobody up here is going to do any lying," Holloway said. "We're only interested in getting this thing back down the way it went up. "

"Okay. Good." He gave himself time to think. Amelia Williams sat rigidly beside him, her hands folded in her lap.

"Go due west," he said abruptly. "Two thousand feet. Point out the sights as we go along, please. "

"The sights?"

"What we're going over," Richards said. "I've only flown once before.-

"Oh. " Holloway sounded relieved.

The plane banked beneath their feet and the dark sunset line outside the window tilted on its ear. Richards watched, fascinated. Now it gleamed aslant the thick window, making odd, fugitive sungleams just beyond the glass. *We're chasing the sun*, he thought. *Isn't that amazing?*

It was thirty-five minutes after six.

Minus 023 and COUNTING

The back of the seat in front of Richards was a revelation in itself. There was a pocket with a safety handbook in it. In case of air turbulence, fasten your belt. If the cabin loses pressure, pull down the air mask directly over your head. In case of engine trouble, the stewardess will give you further instructions. In case of sudden explosive death, hope you have enough dental fillings to insure identification.

There was a small Free-Vee set into the seat panel at eye level. A metal card below it reminded the viewer that channels would come and go with a fair degree of speed. A touch-control channel selector was provided for the hungry viewer.

Below and to the right of the Free-Vee was a pad of airline stationery and a GA stylus on a chain. Richards pulled out a sheet and wrote clumsily on his knee:

"Odds are 99 out of 100 that you're bugged, shoe mike or hair mike, maybe mesh transmitter on your sleeve. McCone listening and waiting for you to drop the other shoe, I bet. In a minute have a hysterical outburst and beg me not to pull the ring. It'll make our chances better. You game?"

She nodded and Richards hesitated, then wrote again:

"Why did you lie about it?"

She plucked the stylus out of his hand and held it over the paper on his knee for a moment and then wrote: "Don't know. You made me feel like a murderer. Wife. And you seemed so"-the stylus paused, wavered and then scrawled-"pitiful. "

Richards raised his eyebrows and grinned a little-it hurt. He offered her the stylus but she shook her head mutely. He wrote: "Go into your act in about 5 minutes."

She nodded and Richards crumpled the paper and stuffed it into the ashtray embedded in the armrest. He lit the paper. It puffed into flame and blazed brightly for a moment, kindling a tiny reflective glow in the window. Then it collapsed into ashes which Richards poked thoughtfully.

About five minutes later Amelia Williams began to moan. It sounded so real that for a moment Richards was startled. Then it flashed across his mind that it probably was real.

"Please don't," she said. "Please don't make that man . . . have to try you. I never did anything to you. I want to go home to my husband. We have a daughter, too. She's six. She'll wonder where her mommy is."

Richards felt his eyebrow rise and fall twice in an involuntary tic. He didn't want her to be that good. Not *that* good.

"He's dumb," he told her, trying not to speak for an unseen audience, "but I don't think he's that dumb. It will be all right, Mrs. Williams."

"That's easy for you to say. You've got nothing to lose."

He didn't answer her. She was so patently right. Nothing, anyway, that he hadn't lost already.

"Show it to him," she pleaded. "For God's sake, why don't you show it to him? Then he'd have to believe you . . . call off the people on the ground. They're tracking us with missiles. I heard him say so."

"I can't show him," Richards said. "To take it out of my pocket would mean putting the ring on safety or taking the full risk of blowing us up accidentally. Besides," he added, injecting mockery into his voice, "I don't think I'd show him if I could. He's the maggot with something to lose. Let him sweat it."

"I don't think I can stand it," she said dully. "I almost think I'd rather joggle you and have it over. That's the way it's going to end anyway, isn't it?"

"You haven't-" he began, and then the door between first and second was snapped open and McCone half strode, half lunged through. His face was calm, but beneath the calm was an odd sheeny look which Richards recognized immediately. The sheen of fear, white and waxy and glowing.

"Mrs. Williams," he said briskly. "Coffee, if you please. For seven. You'll have to play stewardess on this flight, I'm afraid."

She got up without looking at either of them. "Where?"

"Forward," McCone said smoothly. "Just follow your nose." He was a mild, blinking sort of man-and ready to lunge at Amelia Williams the moment she showed a sign of going for Richards.

She made her way up the aisle without looking back.

McCone stared at Richards and said: "Would you give this up if I could promise you amnesty, pal?"

"Pal. That word sounds really greasy in your mouth, " Richards marveled. He flexed his free hand, looked at it. The hand was caked with small runnels of dried blood, dotted

with tiny scrapes and scratches from his broken-ankle hike through the southern Maine woods. "Really greasy. You make it sound like two pounds of fatty hamburger cooking in the pan. The only kind you can get at the Welfare Stores in Co-Op City. " He looked at McCone's well-concealed pot. "That, now. That looks more like a steak gut. Prime cut. No fat on prime cut except that crinkly little ring around the outside right?"

"Amnesty," McCone repeated. "How does that word sound?"

"Like a lie," Richards said, smiling. "Like a fat fucking lie. Don't you think I know you're nothing but the hired help?"

McCone flushed. It was not a soft flush at all; it was hard and red and bricklike. "It's going to be good to have you on my home court," he said. "We've got hi-impact slugs that will make your head look like a pumpkin dropped on a sidewalk from the top floor of a skyscraper. Gas filled. They explode on contact. A gut shot, on the other hand-"

Richards screamed: "*Here it goes! I'm pulling the ring!*"

McCone screeched. He staggered back two steps, his rump hit the well-padded arm of seat number 95 across the way, he overbalanced and fell into it like a man into a sling, his arms flailing the air around his head in crazed warding-off gestures.

His hands froze about his head like petrified birds, splay fingered. His face stared through their grotesque frame like a plaster death-mask on which someone had hung a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles for a joke.

Richards began to laugh. The noise of it was cracked at first, hesitant, foreign to his own ears. How long had it been since he had had a real laugh, an honest one, the kind that comes freely and helplessly from the deepest root of the stomach? It seemed to him that he had never had one in his whole gray, straggling, earnest life. But he was having one now.

You bastard.

McCone's voice had failed him; he could only mouth the words. His face was twisted and scrunched like the face of a badly used teddy bear.

Richards laughed. He held on to one arm of his seat with his free hand and just laughed and laughed and laughed.

Minus 022 and COUNTING

When Holloway's voice informed Richards that the plane was crossing the bonier between Canada and the state of Vermont (Richards supposed he knew his business; he himself could see nothing but darkness below them, interrupted by occasional clusters of light), he set his coffee down carefully and said:

"Could you supply me with a map of North America, Captain Holloway?"

"Physical or political?" A new voice cut in. The navigator's, Richards supposed. Now he was supposed to play obligingly dumb and not know which map he wanted. Which he didn't.

"Both," he said flatly.

"Are you going to send the woman up for them?"

"What's your name, pal?"

The hesitant pause of a man who realizes with sudden trepidation that he has been singled out. "Donahue."

"You've got legs, Donahue. Suppose you trot them back here yourself. "

Donahue trotted them back. He had long hair combed back greaser fashion and pants tailored tight enough to show what looked like a bag of golf balls at the crotch. The maps were encased in limp plastic. Richards didn't know what Donahue's balls were encased in.

"I didn't mean to mouth off," he said unwillingly. Richards thought he could peg him. Well-off young men with a lot of free time often spent much of it roaming the shabby pleasure areas of the big cities, roaming in well-heeled packs, sometimes on foot, more often on choppers. They were queer-stomper. Queers, of course, had to be eradicated. Save our bathrooms for democracy. They rarely ventured beyond the twilight pleasure areas into the full darkness of the ghettos. When they did, they got the shit kicked out of them.

Donahue shifted uneasily under Richards's long gaze. "Anything else?"

"You a queer-stomper, pal?"

"*Huh?*"

"Never mind. Go on back. Help them fly the plane. "

Donahue went back at a fast shuffle.

Richards quickly discovered that the map with the towns and cities and roads was the political map. Pressing one finger down from Derry to the Canada-Vermont border in a western-reaching straightedge, he located their approximate position.

"Captain Holloway?"

"Yes."

"Turn left."

"Huh?" Holloway sounded frankly startled.

"South, I mean. Due south. And remember-

"I'm remembering," Holloway said. "Don't worry."

The plane banked. McCone sat hunched in the seat he had fallen into, staring at Richards with hungry, wanting eyes.

Minus 021 and COUNTING

Richards found himself drifting in and out of a daze, and it frightened him. The steady drone of the engines were insidious, hypnotic. McCone was aware of what was happening, and his leaning posture became more and more vulpine. Amelia was also aware. She cringed miserably in a forward seat near the galley, watching them both.

Richards drank two more cups of coffee. Not much help. It was becoming increasingly difficult to concentrate on the coordination of his map and Holloway's toneless commentary on their outlaw flight.

Finally he drove his fist into his side where the bullet had taken him. The pain was immediate and intense, like a dash of cold water in the face. A whistling half-whispered screech issued from either side of his clenched mouth, like stereo. Fresh blood wet his shirt and sieved through onto his hand.

Amelia moaned.

"We'll be passing over Albany in about six minutes," Holloway said. "If you look out, you'll see it coming up on your left."

"Relax," Richards said to no one, to himself. "Relax. Just relax."

God, will it be over soon? Yes. Quite soon.

It was quarter to eight.

Minus 020 and COUNTING

It could have been a bad dream, a nightmare that had crawled out of the dark and into the unhealthy limelight of his half-awake mind—more properly a vision or an hallucination. His brain was working and concentrating on one level, dealing with the problem of navigation and the constant danger of McCone. On another, something black was taking place. Things were moving in the dark.

Track on. Positive.

Huge, whining servomechanisms turning in the dark, in the night. Infrared eyes glowing in unknown spectrums. Pale green foxfire of dials and swinging radar scopes.

Lock. We have a lock.

Trucks rumbling along back-country roads, and on triangulated flatbeds two hundred miles apart, microwave dishes swing at the night sky. Endless streams of electrons fly out on invisible batwings. Bounce, echo. The strong blip and the fading afterimage lingering until the returning swing of light illuminates it in a slightly more southerly position.

Solid?

Yeah. Two hundred miles south of Newark. It could be Newark.

Newark's on Red, also southern New York.

Executive Hold still in effect?

That's right.

We had him dead-bang over Albany.

Be cool, pal.

Trucks thundering through closed towns where people look out of cardboard-patched windows with terrified, hating eyes. Roaring like prehistoric beasts in the night.

Open the holes.

Huge, grinding motors slide huge concrete dunce-caps aside, shunting them down gleaming steel tracks. Circular silos like the entrances to the underworld of the Morlocks. Gasps of liquid hydrogen escaping into the air.

Tracking. We are tracking, Newark.

Roger, Springfield. Keep us in.

Drunks sleeping in alleys wake foggily to the thunder of the passing tracks and stare mutely at the slices of sky between close-leaning buildings. Their eyes are faded and yellow, their mouths are dripping lines. Hands pull with senile reflex for newsies to protect against the autumn cold, but the newsies are no longer there, the Free-Vee has killed the last of them. Free-Vee is king of the world. Hallelujah. Rich folks smoke Dokes. The yellow eyes catch an unknown glimpse of high, blinking lights in the sky. Flash, flash. Red and green, red and green. The thunder of the trucks has faded, ramming back and forth in the stone canyons like the fists of vandals. The drunks sleep again. Bitchin'.

We got him west of Springfield.

Go-no-go in five minutes.

From Harding?

Yes.

He's bracketed and braced.

All across the night the invisible batwings fly, drawing a glittering net across the northeast corner of America. Servos controlled by General Atomics computers function smoothly. The missiles turn and shift subtly in a thousand places to follow the blinking red and green lights that sketch the sky. They are like steel rattlesnakes filled with waiting venom.

Richards saw it all, and functioned even as he saw it. The duality of his brain was oddly comforting, in a way. It induced a detachment that was much like insanity. His blood-crusting finger followed their southward progress smoothly. Now south of Springfield, now west of Hartford, now-

Tracking.

Minus 019 and COUNTING

"Mr. Richards?"

"Yes."

"We are over Newark, New Jersey."

"Yes," Richards said. "I've been watching. Holloway?"

Holloway didn't reply, but Richards knew he was listening.

"They've got a bead drawn on us all the way, don't they?"

"Yes," Holloway said.

Richards looked at McCone. "I imagine they're trying to decide if they can afford to do away with their professional bloodhound here. Imagine they'll decide in the affirmative. After all, all they have to do is train a new one."

McCone was snarling at him, but Richards thought it was a completely unconscious gesture, one that could probably be traced all the way to McCone's ancestors, the Neanderthals who had crept up behind their enemies with large rocks rather than battling to the death in the honorable but unintelligent manner.

"When do we get over open country again, Captain?"

"We won't. Not on a due south heading. We will strike open sea after we cross the offshore North Carolina drilling derricks, though."

"Everything south of here is a suburb of New York City?"

"That's about the size of it," Holloway said.

"Thank you."

Newark was sprawled and groined below them like a handful of dirty jewelry thrown carelessly into some lady's black-velvet vanity box.

"Captain?"

Wearily: "Yes."

"You will now proceed due west. "

McCone jumped as if he had been goosed. Amelia made a surprised coughing noise in her throat.

"West?" Holloway asked. He sounded unhappy and frightened for the first time. "You're asking for it, going that way. West takes us over pretty open country. Pennsylvania between Harrisburg and Pittsburgh is all farm country. There isn't another big city east of Cleveland."

"Are you planning my strategy for me, Captain?"

"No, I-

"Due west," Richards repeated curtly.

Newark swung away beneath them. "You're crazy," McCone said. "They'll blow us apart." "With you and five other innocent people on board? This honorable country?" "It will be a mistake," McCone said harshly. "A mistake on purpose." "Don't you watch *The National Report*?" Richards asked, still smiling. "We don't make mistakes. We haven't made a mistake since 1950." Newark was sliding away beneath the wing; darkness took its place. "You're not laughing anymore," Richards said.

Minus 018 and COUNTING

A half-hour later Holloway came on the voice-com again. He sounded excited.

"Richards, we've been informed by Harding Red that they want to beam a high-intensity broadcast at us. From Games Federation. I was told you would find it very much worth your while to turn on the Free-Vee."

"Thank you."

He regarded the blank Free-Vee screen and almost turned it on. He withdrew his hand as if the back of the next seat with its embedded screen was hot. A curious sense of dread and *deja vu* filled him. It was too much like going back to the beginning, Sheila with her thin, worked face, the smell of Mrs. Jenner's cabbage cooking down the hall. The blare of the games. *Treadmill to Bucks. Swim the Crocodiles. Cathy's screams.* There could never be another child, of course, not even if he could take all this back, withdraw it, and go back to the beginning. Even the one had been against fantastically high odds.

"Turn it on, " McCone said. "Maybe they're going to offer us-you-a deal."

"Shut up," Richards said.

He waited, letting the dread fill him up like heavy water. The curious sense of presentiment. He hurt very badly. His wound was still bleeding, and his legs felt weak and far away. He didn't know if he could get up to finish this charade when the time came.

With a grunt, Richards leaned forward again and pushed the ON button. The FreeVee sprang to incredibly clear, amplified-signal life. The face that filled the screen, patiently waiting, was very black and very familiar. Dan Killian. He was sitting at a kidney-shaped mahogany desk with the Games symbol on it.

"Hello there," Richards said softly.

He could have fallen out of his seat when Killian straightened up, grinned, and said, "Hello there yourself, Mr. Richards."

Minus 017 and COUNTING

"I can't see you," Killian said, "but I can hear you. The jet's voice-com is being relayed through the radio equipment in the cockpit. They tell me you're shot up."

"It's not as bad as it looks," Richards said. "I got scratched up in the woods."

"Oh yes," Killian said. "The famous Run Through the Woods. Bobby Thompson canonized it on the air just tonight-along with your current exploit, of course. Tomorrow those woods will be full of people looking for a scrap of your shirt, or maybe even a cartridge case."

"That's too bad," Richards said. "I saw a rabbit."

"You've been the greatest contestant we've ever had, Richards. Through a combination of luck and skill, you've been positively the greatest. Great enough for us to offer you a deal. "

"What deal? Nationally televised firing squad?"

"This plane hijack has been the most spectacular, but it's also been the dumbest. Do

you know why? Because for the first time you're not near your own people. You left them behind when you left the ground. Even the woman that's protecting you. You may think she's yours. *She* may even think it. But she's not. There's no one up there but us, Richards. You're a dead duck. Finally."

"People keep telling me that and I keep drawing breath."

"You've been drawing breath for the last two hours strictly on Games Federation say-so. I did it. And I'm the one that finally shoved through the authorization for the deal I'm going to offer you. There was strong opposition from the old guard-this kind of thing has never been done-but I'm going through with it.

"You asked me who you could kill if you could go all the way to the top with a machine gun. One of them would have been me. Richards. Does that surprise you?"

"I suppose it does. I had you pegged for the house nigger."

Killian threw back his head and laughed, but the laughter sounded forced-the laughter of a man playing for high stakes and laboring under a great tension.

"Here's the deal, Richards. Fly your plane to Harding. There will be a Games limo waiting at the airport. An execution will be performed-a fake. Then you join our team. "

There was a startled yelp of rage from McCone. "You black bastard-"

Amelia Williams looked stunned.

"Very good," Richards said. "I knew you were good, but this is really great. What a fine used-car salesman you would have made, Killian."

"Did McCone sound like I was lying?"

"McCone is a fine actor. He did a little song and dance at the airport that could have won an Academy Award." Still, he was troubled. McCone's hustling away of Amelia for coffee when it appeared she might trip the Irish, McCone's steady, heavy antagonism-they didn't fit. Or did they? His mind began to pinwheel. "Maybe you're springing this on him without his knowledge. Counting on his reaction to make it look even better. "

Killian said: "You've done your song and dance with the plastic explosive, Mr. Richards. We know-know-that you are bluffing. But there is a button on this desk, a small red button, which is not a bluff. Twenty seconds after I push it, that plane will be torn apart by surface-to-air Diamondback missiles carrying clean nuclear warheads. "

"The Irish isn't fake, either. " But there was a curdled taste in his mouth. The bluff was soured.

"Oh, it is. You couldn't get on a Lockheed G-A plane with a plastic explosive. Not without tripping the alarms. There are four separate detectors on the plane, installed to foil hijackers. A fifth was installed in the parachute you asked for. I can tell you that the alarm lights in the Voigt Field control tower were watched with great interest and trepidation when you got on. The consensus was that you probably had the Irish. You have proved so resourceful all the way up the line that it seemed like a fair assumption to make. There was more than a little relief when none of those lights went on. I assume you

never had the opportunity to pick any up. Maybe you never thought of it until too late. Well, doesn't matter. It makes your position worse, but-

McCone was suddenly standing beside Richards. "Here it goes," he said, grinning. "Here is where I blow your fucking head off, donkey. " He pointed his gun at Richards's temple.

Minus 016 and COUNTING

"You're dead if you do, " Killian said.

McCone hesitated, fell back a step, and stared at the Free-Vee unbelievably. His face began to twist and crumple again. His lips writhed in a silent effort to gain speech. When it finally came, it was a whisper of thwarted rage.

"I can take him! Right now! Right here! We'll all be safe! We'll-

Wearily, Killian said: "You're safe now, you God damned fool. And Donahue could have taken him-if we wanted him taken."

"This man is a criminal!" McCone's voice was rising. "He's killed police officers! Committed acts of anarchy and air piracy! He's . . . he's publicly humiliated me and my department!"

"Sit down," Killian said, and his voice was as cold as the deep space between planets. "It's time you remembered who pays your salary, Mr. Chief Hunter."

"I'm going to the Council President with this! " McCone was raving now. Spittle flew from his lips. "You're going to be chopping cotton when this is over, nig! You goddam worthless night-fighting sonofabitch-

"Please throw your gun on the floor," a new voice said. Richards looked around, startled. It was Donahue, the navigator, looking colder and deadlier than ever. His greased hair gleamed in the cabin's indirect lighting. He was holding a wire-stock Magnum/Springstun machine pistol, and it was trained on McCone. "Robert S. Donahue, old-timer. Games Council Control. Throw it on the floor."

Minus 015 and COUNTING

McCone looked at him for a long second, and then the gun thumped on the heavy pile of the carpet. "You-

"I think we've heard all the rhetoric we need," Donahue said. "Go back into second class and sit down like a good boy."

McCone backed up several paces, snarling futilely. He looked to Richards like a vampire in an old horror movie that had been thwarted by a cross.

When he was gone, Donahue threw Richards a sardonic little salute with the barrel of his gun and smiled. "He won't bother you again."

"You still look like a queer-stomper," Richards said evenly.

The small smile faded. Donahue stared at him with sudden, empty dislike for a moment, and then went forward again.

Richards turned back to the Free-Vee screen. He found that his pulse rate had remained perfectly steady. He had no shortness of breath, no rubber legs. Death had become a normality.

"Are you there, Mr. Richards?" Killian asked.

"Yes I am."

"The problem has been handled?"

"Yes. "

"Good. Let me get back to what I was saying."

"Go ahead."

Killian sighed at his tone. "I was saying that our knowledge of your bluff makes your position worse, but makes our credibility better. Do you see why?"

"Yes," Richards said detachedly. "It means you could have blown this bird out of the sky anytime. Or you could have had Holloway set the plane down at will. McCone would have bumped me. "

"Exactly. Do you believe we know you are bluffing?"

"No. But you're better than McCone. Using your planted houseboy was a fine stroke. "

Killian laughed. "Oh, Richards. You are such a peach. Such a rare, iridescent bird. " And yet again it sounded forced, tense, pressured. It came to Richards that Killian was holding information which he wanted badly not to tell.

"If you really had it, you would have pulled the string when McCone put the gun to your head. You knew he was going to kill you. Yet you sat there. "

Richards knew it was over, knew that they knew. A smile cracked his features. Killian would appreciate that. He was a man of a sharp and sardonic turn of mind. Make them pay to see the hole card, then.

"I'm not buying any of this. If you push me, everything goes bang."

"And you wouldn't be the man you are if you didn't spin it out to the very end. Mr. Donahue?"

"Yes, sir. " Donahue's cool, efficient, emotionless voice came over the voicecom and out of the Free-Vee almost simultaneously.

"Please go back and remove Mrs. Williams's pocketbook from Mr. Richards's pocket. You're not to harm him in any way."

"Yes, sir. " Richards was eerily reminded of the plastipunch that had stenciled his original ID card at Games headquarters. *Clitter-clitter-clitter.*

Donahue reappeared and walked toward Richards. His face was smooth and cold and empty. Programmed. The word leaped into Richards's mind.

"Stand right there, pretty boy," Richards remarked, shifting the hand in his coat pocket slightly. "The Man there is safe on the ground. You're the one that's going to the moon. "

He thought the steady stride might have faltered for just a second and the eyes seemed to have winced the tiniest uncertain bit, and then he came on again. He might have been promenading on the Cote d'Azur . . . or approaching a gibbering homosexual cowering at the end of a blind alley.

Briefly Richards considered grabbing the parachute and fleeing. Hopeless. Flee? Where? The men's bathroom at the far end of the third class was the end of the line.

"See you in hell," he said softly, and made a pulling gesture in his pocket. This time the reaction was a little better. Donahue made a grunting noise and threw his hands up to protect his face in an instinctive gesture as old as man himself. He lowered them, still in the land of the living looking embarrassed and very angry.

Richards took Amelia Williams's pocketbook out of his muddy, torn coat pocket and threw it. It struck Donahue's chest and plopped at his feet like a dead bird. Richards's hand was slimed with sweat. Lying on his knee again, it looked strange and white and foreign. Donahue picked up the bag, looked in it perfunctorily, and handed it to Amelia. Richards felt a stupid sort of sadness at its passage. In a way, it was like losing an old friend. "Boom," he said softly.

Minus 014 and COUNTING

"Your boy is very good," Richards said tiredly, when Donahue had retreated again. "I got him to flinch, but I was hoping he'd pee his pants." He was beginning to notice an odd doubling of his vision. It came and went. He checked his side gingerly. It was clotting reluctantly for the second time. "What now?" he asked. "Do you set up cameras at the airport so everyone can watch the desperado get it?"

"Now the deal," Killian said softly. His face was dark, unreadable. Whatever he had been holding back was now just below the surface. Richards knew it. And suddenly he was filled with dread again. He wanted to reach out and turn the Free-Vee off. Not hear it anymore. He felt his insides begin a slow and terrible quaking-an actual, literal quaking. But he could not turn it off. Of course not. It was, after all, Free.

"Get thee behind me, Satan," he said thickly.

"What?" Killian looked startled.

"Nothing. Make your point."

Killian did not speak. He looked down at his hands. He looked up again. Richards felt an unknown chamber of his mind groan with psychic presentiment. It seemed to him that the ghosts of the poor and the nameless, of the drunks sleeping in alleys, were calling his name.

"McCone is played out," Killian said softly. "You know it because you did it. Cracked him like a soft-shelled egg. We want you to take his place."

Richards, who thought he had passed the point of all shock, found his mouth hanging open in utter, dazed incredulity. It was a lie. Had to be. Yet-Amelia had her purse back now. There was no reason for them to lie or offer false illusions. He was hurt and alone. Both McCone and Donahue were armed. One bullet administered just above the left ear would put a neat end to him with no fuss, no muss, or bother.

Conclusion: Killian was telling God's truth.

"You're nuts," he muttered.

"No. You're the best runner we've ever had. And the best runner knows the best places to look. Open your eyes a little and you'll see that *The Running Man* is designed for something besides pleasuring the masses and getting rid of dangerous people. Richards, the Network is always in the market for fresh new talent. We have to be. "

Richards tried to speak, could say nothing. The dread was still in him, widening, heightening, thickening.

"There's never been a Chief Hunter with a family, " he finally said. "You ought to know why. The possibilities for extortion-"

"Ben," Killian said with infinite gentleness, "your wife and daughter are dead. They've been dead for over ten days. "

Minus 013 and COUNTING

Dan Killian was talking, had been perhaps for some time, but Richards heard him only distantly, distorted by an odd echo effect in his mind. It was like being trapped in a very deep well and hearing someone call down. His mind had gone midnight dark, and the darkness served as the background for a kind of scrapbook slide show. An old Kodak of Sheila wiggling in the halls of Trades High with a loose-leaf binder under her arm. Micro skirts had just come back into fashion then. A freeze-frame of the two of them sitting at the end of the Bay Pier (Admission: Free), backs to the camera, looking out at the water. Hands linked. Sepia-toned photo of a young man in an ill-fitting suit and a young woman in her mother's best dress-specially taken up-standing before a J. P. with a large wart on his nose. They had giggled at that wart on their wedding night. Stark black and white action photo of a sweating, bare-chested man wearing a lead apron and working heavy engine gear-levers in a huge, vaultlike underground chamber lit with arc lamps. Soft-toned color photo (soft to blur the stark, peeling surroundings) of a woman with a big belly standing at a window and looking out, ragged curtain held aside, watching for her man to come up the street. The light is a soft cat's paw on her cheek. Last picture: another old-timey Kodak of a thin fellow holding a tiny scrap of a baby high over his head in a curious mixture of triumph and love, his face split by a huge winning grin. The pictures began to flash by faster and faster, whirling, not bringing any sense of grief and love and loss, not yet, no, bringing only a cool Novocain numbness.

Killian assuring that the Network had nothing to do with their deaths, all a horrible accident. Richards supposed he believed him-not only because the story sounded too much like a lie not to be the truth, but because Killian knew that if Richards agreed to the job offer, his first stop would be Co-Op City, where a single hour on the streets would get

him the straight of the matter.

Prowlers. Three of them. (Or tricks? Richards wondered, suddenly agonized. She had sounded slightly furtive on the telephone, as if holding something back-) They had been hopped up, probably. Perhaps they had made some threatening move toward Cathy and Sheila had tried to protect her daughter. They had both died of puncture wounds.

That had snapped him out of it. "Don't feed me that shit!" He screamed suddenly. Amelia flinched backward and suddenly hid her face. "What happened? Tell me what happened! "

"There's nothing more I can say. Your wife was stabbed over sixty times. "

"Cathy," Richards said emptily, without thought, and Killian winced.

"Ben, would you like some time to think about all this?"

"Yes. Yes, I would."

"I'm desperately, desperately sorry, pal. I swear on my mother that we had nothing to do with it. Our way would have been to set them up away from you, with visiting rights if you agreed. A man doesn't willingly work for the people who butchered his family. We know that. "

"I need time to think."

"As Chief Hunter," Killian said softly, "you could get those bastards and put them down a deep hole. And a lot of others just like them."

"I want to think. Goodbye. "

"I-"

Richards reached out and thumbed the Free-Vee into blackness. He sat stonelike in his seat. His hands dangled loosely between his knees. The plane droned on into darkness.

So, he thought. It's all come unraveled. All of it.

Minus 012 and COUNTING

An hour passed.

The time has come, the walrus said, to talk of many things . . . of sailing ships and sealing-wax, And whether pigs have wings.

Pictures flitted in and out of his mind. Stacey. Bradley. Elton Parrakis with his baby face. A nightmare of running. Lighting the newspapers in the basement of the YMCA with that last match. The gas-powered cars wheeling and screeching, the Sten gun spitting flame. Laughlin's sour voice. The pictures of those two kids, the junior Gestapo agents.

Well, why not?

No ties now, and certainly no morality. How could morality be an issue to a man cut loose and drifting? How wise Killian had been to see that, to show Richards with calm

and gentle brutality just how alone he was. Bradley and his impassioned air-pollution pitch seemed distant, unreal, unimportant. Nose-filters. Yes. At one time the concept of nose-filters had seemed large, very important. No longer so.

The poor you will have with you always.

True. Even Richards's loins had produced a specimen for the killing machine. Eventually the poor would adapt, mutate. Their lungs would produce their own filtration system in ten thousand years or in fifty thousand, and they would rise up, rip out the artificial filters and watch their owners flop and kick and drum their lives away, drowning in an atmosphere where oxygen played only a minor part, and what was futurity to Ben Richards? It was all only bitchin.

There would be a period of grief. They would expect that, provide for it. There would even be rages, moments of revolt. Abortive tries to make the knowledge of deliberate poison in the air public again? Maybe. They would take care of it. Take care of him-anticipation of a time when he would take care of them. Instinctively he knew he could do it. He suspected he might even have a certain genius for the job. They would help him, heal him. Drugs and doctors. A change of mind.

Then, peace.

Contentiousness rooted out like bitterweed.

He regarded the peace longingly, the way a man in the desert regards water.

Amelia Williams cried steadily in her seat long after the time when all tears should have gone dry. He wondered indifferently what would become of her. She couldn't very well be returned to her husband and family in her present state; she simply was not the same lady who had pulled up to a routine stop sign with her mind all full of meals and meetings, clubs and cooking. She had Shown Red. He supposed there would be drugs and therapy, a patient showing off. The Place Where Two Roads Diverged, a pinpointing of the reason why the wrong path had been chosen. A carnival in dark mental browns.

He wanted suddenly to go to her, comfort her, tell her that she was not badly broken, that a single crisscrossing of psychic Band-Aids should fix her, make her even better than she had been before.

Sheila. Cathy.

Their names came and repeated, clanging in his mind like bells, like words repeated until they are reduced to nonsense. Say your name over two hundred times and discover you are no one. Grief was impossible; he could feel only a fuzzy sense of embarrassment: they had taken him, run him slack-lunged, and he had turned out to be nothing but a horse's ass after all. He remembered a boy from his grammar school days who had stood up to give the Pledge of Allegiance and his pants had fallen down.

The plane droned on and on. He sank into a three-quarter doze. Pictures came and went lazily, whole incidents were seen without any emotional color at all.

Then, a final scrapbook picture: a glossy eight-by-ten taken by a bored police photographer who had perhaps been chewing gum. Exhibit C, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. One ripped and sliced small body in a blood-drenched crib. Splatters and runnels

on the cheap stucco walls and the broken Mother Goose mobile bought for a dime. A great sticky clot on the secondhand teddy bear with one eye.

He snapped awake, full awake and bolt upright, with his mouth propped wide in a blabbering scream. The force expelled from his lungs was great enough to make his tongue flap like a sail. Everything, everything in the first-class compartment was suddenly clear and plangently real, overpowering, awful. It had the grainy reality of a scare tabloid newsie clip. Laughlin being dragged out of that shed in Topeka, for instance. Everything, everything was very real and in Technicolor.

Amelia screamed affrightedly in unison, cringing back in her seat with eyes as huge as cracked porcelain doorknobs, trying to cram a whole fist in her mouth.

Donahue came charging through the galley, his gun out. His eyes were small enthusiastic black beads. "What is it? What's wrong? McCone?"

"No," Richards said, feeling his heart slow just enough to keep his words from sounding squeezed and desperate. "Bad dream. My little girl. "

"Oh." Donahue's eyes softened in counterfeit sympathy. He didn't know how to do it very well. Perhaps he would be a goon all his life. Perhaps he would learn. He turned to go.

"Donahue?"

Donahue turned back warily.

"Had you pretty scared, didn't I?"

"No. " Donahue turned away on that short word. His neck was bunched. His buttocks in his tight blue uniform were as pretty as a girl's.

"I can scare you worse," Richards remarked. "I could threaten to take away your nose filter. "

Exeunt Donahue.

Richards closed his eyes tiredly. The glossy eight-by-ten came back. Opened them. Closed them. No glossy eight-by-ten. He waited, and when he was sure it was not going to come back (right away), he opened his eyes and thumbed on the Free-Vee.

It popped on and there was Killian.

Minus 011 and COUNTING

"Richards." Killian leaned forward, making no effort to conceal his tension.

"I've decided to accept," Richards said.

Killian leaned back and nothing smiled but his eyes. "I'm very glad," he said.

Minus 010 and COUNTING

"Jesus," Richards said. He was standing in the doorway to the pilot's country.

Holloway turned around. "Hi. " He had been speaking to something called Detroit VOR. Duninger was drinking coffee.

The twin control consoles were untended. Yet they swerved, tipped, and fumed as if in response to ghost hands and feet. Dials swung. Lights flashed. There seemed to be a huge and constant input and output going on . . . to no one at all.

"Who's driving the bus?" Richards asked, fascinated.

"Otto," Duninger said.

"Otto?"

"Otto the automatic pilot. Get it? Shitty pun." Duninger suddenly smiled. "Glad to have you on the team, fella. You may not believe this, but some of us guys were rooting for you pretty hard. "

Richards nodded noncommittally.

Holloway stepped into the slightly awkward breach by saying: "Otto freaks me out, too. Even after twenty years of this. But he's dead safe. Sophisticated as hell. It would make one of the old ones look like a . . . well, like an orange crate beside a Chippendale bureau."

"Is that right?" Richards was staring out into the darkness.

"Yes. You lock on P.O.D.-point of destination-and Otto takes over, aided by Voice-Radar all the way. Makes the pilot pretty superfluous, except for takeoffs and landings. And in case of trouble."

"Is there much you can do if there's trouble?" Richards asked.

"We can pray," Holloway said. Perhaps it was meant to sound jocular, but it came out with a strange sincerity that hung in the cabin.

"Do those wheels actually steer the plane?" Richards asked.

"Only up and down," Duninger said. "The pedals control sideside motion.

"Sounds like a kid's soapbox racer."

"A little more complicated." Holloway said. "Let's just say there are a few more buttons to push."

"What happens if Otto goes off his chump?"

"Never happens," Duninger said with a grin. "If it did, you'd just override him. But the computer is never wrong, pal. "

Richards wanted to leave, but the sight of the turning wheels, the minute, mindless adjustments of the pedals and switches, held him. Holloway and Duninger went back to their business-obscure numbers and communications filled with static.

Holloway looked back once, seemed surprised to see him still there. He grinned and pointed into the darkness. "You'll see Harding coming up there soon."

"How long?"

"You'll be able to see the horizon glow in five to six minutes."

When Holloway turned around next, Richards was gone. He said to Duninger: "I'll be glad when we set that guy down. He's a spook"

Duninger looked down morosely, his face bathed in the green, luminescent glow of the controls. "He didn't like Otto. You know that?"

"I know it," Holloway said.

Minus 009 and COUNTING

Richards walked back down the narrow, hip-wide corridor. Friedman, the communications man, didn't look up. Neither did Donahue. Richards stepped through into the galley and then halted.

The smell of coffee was strong and good. He poured himself a cup, added some instant creamer, and sat down in one of the stewardesses's off-duty chairs. The Silex bubbled and steamed.

There was a complete stock of luxury frozen dinners in the see-through freezers. The liquor cabinet was fully stocked with midget airline bottles.

A man could have a good drunk, he thought.

He sipped his coffee. It was strong and fine. The Silex bubbled.

Here I am, he thought, and sipped. Yes, no question about it. Here he was, just sipping.

Pots and pans all neatly put away. The stainless steel sink gleaming like a chromium jewel in a Formica setting. And, of course, that Silex on the hotplate, bubbling and steaming. Sheila had always wanted a Silex. A Silex lasts, was her claim.

He was weeping.

There was a tiny toilet where only stewardess bottoms had squatted. The door was half ajar and he could see it, yes, even the blue, primly disinfected water in the bowl. Defecate in tasteful splendor at fifty thousand feet.

He drank his coffee and watched the Silex bubble and steam, and he wept. The weeping was very calm and completely silent. It and his cup of coffee ended at the same time.

He got up and put his cup in the stainless steel sink. He picked up the Silex, holding it by its brown plastic handle, and carefully dumped the coffee down the drain. Tiny beads of condensation clung to the thick glass.

He wiped his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket and went back into the narrow corridor. He stepped into Donahue's compartment, carrying the Silex in one hand.

"Want some coffee?" Richards asked.

"No," Donahue said curtly, without looking up.

"Sure you do," Richards said, and swung the heavy glass pot down on Donahue's bent

head with all the force he could manage.

Minus 008 and COUNTING

The effort ripped open the wound in his side for the third time, but the pot didn't break. Richards wondered if it had been fortified with something (Vitamin B-12, perhaps?) to keep it from shattering in case of high level turbulence. It did take a huge, amazing blot of Donahue's blood. He fell silently onto his map table. A runnel of blood ran across the plastic coating of the top one and began to drip.

"Roger five-by, C-one-niner-eight-four," a radio voice said brightly.

Richards was still holding the Silex. It was matted with strands of Donahue's hair.

He dropped it, but there was no chink. Carpeting even here. The glass bubble of the Silex rolled up at him, a winking, bloodshot eyeball. The glossy eight-by-ten of Cathy in her crib appeared unbidden and Richards shuddered.

He lifted Donahue's dead weight by the hair and rummaged inside his blue flight jacket. The gun was there. He was about to drop Donahue's head back to the map table, but paused, and yanked it up even further. Donahue's mouth hung unhinged, an idiot leer. Blood dripped into it.

Richards wiped blood from one nostril and stared in.

There it was-tiny, very tiny. A glitter of mesh.

"Acknowledge E.T.A. C-one-niner-eight-four," the radio said.

"Hey, that's you!" Friedman called from across the hall. "Donahue-"

Richards limped into the passage. He felt very weak. Friedman looked up. "Will you tell Donahue to get off his butt and acknowledge-"

Richards shot him just above the upper lip. Teeth flew like a broken, savage necklace. Hair, blood, and brains splashed a Rorschach on the wall behind the chair, where a 3-D foldout girl was spreading eternal legs over a varnished mahogany bedpost.

There was a muffled exclamation from the pilot's compartment, and Holloway made a desperate, doomed lunge to shut the door. Richards noticed that he had a very small scar on his forehead, shaped like a question mark. It was the kind of scar a small, adventurous boy might get if he fell from a low branch while playing pilot.

He shot Holloway in the belly and Holloway made a great shocked noise: "Whoooo-OOO!" His feet flipped out from under him and he fell on his face.

Duninger was turned around in his chair, his face a slack moon. "Don't shoot me, huh?" he said. There was not enough wind in him to make it a statement.

"Here," Richards said kindly, and pulled the trigger. Something popped and flared with brief violence behind Duninger as he fell over.

Silence.

"Acknowledge E.T.A., C-one-niner-eight-four," the radio said.

Richards suddenly whooped and threw up a great glut of coffee and bile. The muscular contraction ripped his wound open further, implanting a great, throbbing pain in his side.

He limped to the controls, still dipping and sliding in endless, complex tandem. So many dials and controls.

Wouldn't they have a communications link constantly open on such an important flight? Surely.

"Acknowledge," Richards said conversationally.

"You got the Free-Vee on up there, C-one-niner-eight-four? We've been getting some garbled transmission. Everything okay?"

"Five-by," Richards said.

"Tell Duninger he owes me a beer," the voice said cryptically, and then there was only background static.

Otto was driving the bus.

Richards went back to finish his business.

Minus 007 and COUNTING

"Oh dear God," Amelia Williams moaned.

Richards looked down at himself casually. His entire right side, from ribcage to calf, was a bright and sparkling red.

"Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him?" Richards

McCone suddenly dashed through into first class. He took in Richards at a glance. McCone's gun was out. He and Richards fired at the same time.

McCone disappeared through the canvas between first and second class. Richards sat down hard. He felt very tired. There was a large hole in his belly. He could see his intestines.

Amelia was screaming endlessly, her hands pulling her cheeks down into a plastic witch-face.

McCone came staggering back into first class. He was grinning. Half of his head appeared to be blown away, but he was grinning all the same.

He fired twice. The first bullet went over Richards's head. The second struck him just below the collarbone.

Richards fired again. McCone staggered around twice in an aimless kind of dippy-doodle. The gun fell from his fingers. McCone appeared to be observing the heavy white styrofoam ceiling of the first class compartment, perhaps comparing it to his own in second class. He fell over. The smell of burned powder and burned flesh was clear and crisp, as distinctive as apples in a cider press.

Amelia continued to scream. Richards thought how remarkably healthy she sounded.

Minus 006 and COUNTING

Richards got up very slowly, holding his intestines in. It felt as if someone was lighting matches in his stomach.

He went slowly up the aisle, bent over, one hand to his midriff, as if bowing. He picked up the parachute with one hand and dragged it behind him. A loop of gray sausage escaped his fingers and he pushed it back in. It hurt to push it in. It vaguely felt as if he might be shitting himself.

"Guh," Amelia Williams was groaning. "Guh-Guh-Guh-God. Oh God. Oh dear God."
"

"Put this on," Richards said.

She continued to rock and moan, not hearing him. He dropped the parachute and slapped her. He could get no force into it. He balled his fist and punched her. She shut up. Her eyes stared at him dazedly.

"Put this on," he said again. "Like a packsack. You see how?"

She nodded. "I. Can't. Jump. Scared."

"We're going down. You have to jump."

"Can't. "

"All right. Shoot you then."

She popped out of her seat, knocking him sideways, and began to pull the packsack on with wild, eye-rolling vigor. She backed away from him as she struggled with the straps.

"No. That one goes uh-under."

She rearranged the strap with great speed, retreating toward McCone's body as Richards approached. Blood was dripping from his mouth.

"Now fasten the clip in the ringbolt. Around. Your buh-belly. "

She did it with trembling fingers, weeping when she missed the connection the first time. Her eyes stared madly into his face.

She skittered momentarily in McCone's blood and then stepped over him.

They backed through second class and into third class in the same way. Matches in his belly had been replaced by a steadily flaming lighter.

The emergency door was locked with explosive bolts and a pilot controlled bar.

Richards handed her the gun. "Shoot it. I . . . can't take the recoil."

Closing her eyes and averting her face, she pulled the trigger of Donahue's gun twice. Then it was empty. The door stood closed, and Richards felt a faint, sick despair. Amelia Williams was holding the ripcord ring nervously, giving it tiny little twitches.

"Maybe-"she began, and the door suddenly blew away into the night, sucking her

along with it.

Minus 005 and COUNTING

Bent haglike, a man in a reverse hurricane, Richards made his way from the blown door, holding the backs of seats. If they had been flying higher, with a greater difference in air pressure, he would have been pulled out, too. As it was he was being badly buffeted, his poor old intestines accordioning out and trailing after him on the floor. The cool night air, thin and sharp at two thousand feet, was like a slap of cold water. The cigarette lighter had become a torch, and his insides were burning.

Through second class. Better. Suction not so great. Now over McCone's sprawled body (step up, please) and through first class. Blood ran loosely from his mouth.

He paused at the entrance to the galley and tried to gather up his intestines. He knew they didn't like it on the Outside. Not a bit. They were getting all dirty. He wanted to weep for his poor, fragile intestines, who had asked for none of this.

He couldn't pack them back inside. It was all wrong; they were all jumbled. Frightening images from high school biology books jetted past his eyes. He realized with dawning, stumbling truth the fact of his own actual ending, and cried out miserably through a mouthful of blood.

There was no answer from the aircraft. Everyone was gone. Everyone but himself and Otto.

The world seemed to be draining of color as his body drained of its own bright fluid. Leaning crookedly against the galley entrance, like a drunk leaning against a lamppost, he saw the things around him go through a shifting, wraithlike grayout.

This is it. I'm going.

He screamed again, bringing the world back into excruciating focus. Not yet. Mustn't.

He lunged through the galley with his guts hanging in ropes around him. Amazing that there could be so much in there. So hound, so firm, so fully packed.

He stepped on part of himself, and something inside pulled. The flare of pain was beyond belief, beyond the world, and he shrieked, splattering blood on the far wall. He lost his balance and would have fallen, had not the wall stopped him at sixty degrees.

Gutshot. I'm gutshot.

Insanely, his mind responded: *Clitter-clitter-clitter.*

One thing to do.

Gutshot was supposed to be one of the worst. They had had a discussion once about the worst ways to go on their midnight lunch break; that had been when he was a wiper. Hale and hearty and full of blood and piss and semen, all of them, gobbling sandwiches and comparing the relative merits of radiation poisoning, freezing, falling, bludgeoning, drowning. And someone had mentioned being gutshot. Harris, maybe. The fat one who drank illicit beer on the job.

It hurts in the belly, Harris had said. It takes a long time. And all of them nodding and agreeing solemnly, with no conception of Pain.

Richards lurched up the narrow corridor, holding both sides for support. Past Donahue. Past Friedman and his radical dental surgery. Numbness crawling up his arms, yet the pain in his belly (what *had* been his belly) growing worse. Still, even through all this he moved, and his ruptured body tried to carry out the commands of the insane Napoleon caged inside his skull.

My God, can this be the end of Rico?

He would not have believed he had so many death-bed cliches inside him. It seemed that his mind was turning inward, eating itself in its last fevered seconds.

One. More. Thing.

He fell over Holloway's sprawled body and lay there, suddenly sleepy. A nap. Yes. Just the ticket. Too hard to get up. Otto, humming. Singing the birthday boy to sleep. Shhh, shhh, shhh. The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn.

He lifted his head-tremendous effort, his head was steel, pig iron, lead-and stared at the twin controls going through their dance. Beyond him, in the plexiglass windows, Harding.

Too far.

He's under the haystack, fast asleep.

Minus 004 and COUNTING

The radio was squawking worriedly: "Come in, C-one-niner-eight-four. You're too low. Acknowledge. Acknowledge. Shall we assume Guidance control? Acknowledge. Acknowledge Ack-"

"Eat it," Richards whispered.

He began to crawl toward the dipping, swaying controls. In and out went the pedals. Twitch-twitch went the wheels. He screamed as new agony flared. A loop of his intestines had caught under Holloway's chin. He crawled back. Freed them. Started to crawl again.

His arms went slack and for a moment he floated, weightless, with his nose in the soft, deep-pile carpet. He pushed himself up and began to crawl again.

Getting up and into Holloway's seat was Everest .

Minus 003 and COUNTING

There it was. Huge, bulking square and tall into the night, silhouetted black above everything else. Moonlight had turned it alabaster.

He tweaked the wheel just a little. The floor fell away to the left. He lurched in Holloway's seat and almost fell out. He turned the wheel back, overcorrected again, and

the floor fell away to the right. The horizon was tilting crazily.

Now the pedals. Yes. Better.

He pushed the wheel in gingerly. A dial in front of his eyes moved from 2000 to 1500 in the wink of an eye. He eased the wheel back. He had very little sight left. His right eye was almost completely gone. Strange that they should go one at a time.

He pushed the wheel in again. Now it seemed that the plane was floating, weightless. The dial slipped from 1500 to 1200 to 900. He pulled it back out.

"C-one-niner-eight-four. " The voice was very alarmed now. "What's wrong? Acknowledge! "

"Speak, boy," Richards croaked. "Rowf! Rowf!"

Minus 002 and COUNTING

The big plane cruised through the night like a sliver of ice and now Co-Op City was spread out below like a giant broken carton.

He was coming at it, coming at the Games Building.

Minus 001 and COUNTING

Now the jet cruised across the canal, seemingly held up by the hand of God, giant, roaring. A Push freak in a doorway stared up and thought he was seeing a hallucination, the last dope dream, come to take him away, perhaps to General Atomics heaven where all the food was free and all the piles were clean breeders.

The sound of its engines drove people into doorways, their faces craning upwards like pale flames. Glass show-windows jingled and fell inward. Gutter litter was sucked down bowling-alley streets in dervishes. A cop dropped his move-along and wrapped his hands around his head and screamed and could not hear himself.

The plane was still dropping and now it moved over rooftops like a cruising silver bat; the starboard wingtip missed the side of the Glamour Column Store by a bare twelve feet.

All over Herding, Free-Vees went white with interference and people stared at them with stupid, fearful incredulity.

The thunder filled the world.

Killian looked up from his desk and stared into the wall-to-wall window that formed one entire side of the room.

The twinkling vista of the city, from South City to Crescent, was gone. The entire window was filled with an oncoming Lockheed TriStar jet. Its running lights blinked on and off, and for just a moment, an insane moment of total surprise and horror and disbelief, he could see Richards staring out at him. His face smeared with blood, his black eyes burning like the eyes of a demon.

Richards was grinning.

And giving him the finger.

"-Jesus-" was all Killian had time to get out.

000

Heeling over slightly, the Lockheed struck the Games Building dead on, three quarters of the way up. Its tanks were still better than a quarter full. Its speed was slightly over five hundred miles an hour.

The explosion was tremendous, lighting up the night like the wrath of God, and it rained fire twenty blocks away.