

GORDON EKLUND

THE CROSS ROAD BLUES

I went to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
I went to the crossroad
fell down on my knees
Asked the Lord above "Have mercy
save poor Bob, if you please."

--Robert Johnson

What rough beast, its hour come round at last
Slouches towards...?
(And so on.)

--W. B. Yeats

Chapter Zero -- Who Do You Love/(11/1)

The short, hard-boiled, shaven-headed young woman comes energetically hopping in through the front door like a cat out of the rain and the first thought Leary's thinking is how it's been seven, eight months since the last time he's had any other human being inside this here personal domicile. (In reality: a raw sewage dump of a commuted roomapt in a nasty corner of the Little Hell Projects.) And with various of his soiled personal possessions, records and socks mostly, chaotically strewn about the bare dirt floor, half empty bottle of mescal (with Leary, mescal bottles are always half empty, never half full) resting forlornly atop the clanking radiator like a mourner at a funeral. Well shit in the sink, thinks Leary, struggling to sit and taking a squint at his caller, so here he lies a drunken spent dick of a lowzone ex-cop and here waltzes in some kind of skin pale-as-death, big wet doe brown eyes, grab-your-balls and squeeze-for-sweet-Jesus class act of a bebopping girl-child's face and body in a red vinyl leather vest, boots, and bursting blue velvet pantaloons.

So what gives?

Then he recognizes her. (And freezes up inside: ohjesuschristnotagainoh please not fucking again.)

She purrs: "Hi, I'm Sunny," plopping her fetchingly boyish little butt unceremoniously down beside him, knees crossed seductively, boot tops clinging to bare calf skin. "What's that music you're playing? I think I know it."

"Robert Johnson," he lies. "Now get out of here. I'm retired."

She smirks, showing far too much gum. "Forcibly retired."

"So?"

"So who cares? Get up off the floor. Sit straight. You look like a dead turd down there."

He stands, swaying over her, scowling like a goose, wagging a bony finger. "Get the fuck out of my--"

"Your home?" She laughs, spraying glee like a lizard. "Leary, you crazy shit. You've got to be --"

He bellows: "It's still my home!"

She lets her big brown eyes flutter. "And that's not Robert Johnson either. He never played electric guitar. And he died in 1938 -- '39. A jealous girlfriend poisoned him."

"That's one version," says Leary.

"There's another?" she asks, eyes wide with interest. Chapter Zero and One-half -- Sweet Little Angel (11/1)

"So how come you're here, Sunny? He sways, taking a swig from the mescal, wishing he would stop swaying. (It's so goddamn undignified.)

"You really want to know?"

"Uh-uh. But you're going to tell anyway."

She nods like a puppet on a loose string. "The guys downtown wants you to take out Rathbone," she tells him.

Chapter One -- Dust My Broom (11/1)

Leary isn't much interested in hearing Sunny out. But he doesn't want her to go away anytime soon either. (Maybe he's in love now or maybe he's horny as a hog or maybe he just hasn't spoken to another human being for over a month.)

He thinks he should probably explain the facts for her, fill in some prerequisite background: "Rathbone and I came up through the ranks together like brothers, him taking a bullet in the thigh for me one time, me a knife in the groin for him another, you look hard you can see the movie playing in front of your face like it was real life. Which it was. And the Central Zone was our bailiwick, nobody else knowing how to keep it from blowing night after boiling night, both of us crazy as the niggers but knowing the whole fucking time any one of them could take us both out any time and not spit snot over it."

"I don't like that word," she says.

"What word?"

"Nigger."

"I'm still not going to fucking kill him for you," Leary says.

"Sure you are." She lays a warm hand on his leg above the knee, squeezes like mashed potatoes. "I'll tell you why."

Chapter Two -- Terraplane Blues (11/1)

Sunny tells Leary: "William Campbell Rathbone, as you likely are aware, has served as Central Zone Captain for somewhat more than the nineteen months. There was some initial resistance to his appointment on the grounds that although a highly successful operational officer he was not a proven administrator, but for the first year of his tenure he was an effective if at times unconventional occupant of an historically difficult position. Then in the spring of this year, this previously observed unconventionality began to assume a more dominant aspect in his relationships both within and without the Force. He offended several ranking officers through his salty language and blunt demeanor. It became known that he had abandoned his wife of fourteen years and established living quarters in a room at the rear of his precinct station, where he was reported to fornicate nightly with a succession of mistresses from the Zone, many of them known prostitutes, sometimes two and three per evening, leaving at least one known pregnant with child. He further became an obsessive reader of the Christian Bible, specifically the four gospels of the New Testament, asserting views which while Biblical in origin were nevertheless far from conventional and even, some might assert, illegal. As an example, he strongly supported the concept of a second coming of the messiah while also proclaiming that the first messiah, our lord Jesus Christ, was a false messiah, the literal spawn of the devil. He further alleged that the being we call Satan is in actuality God while God is the devil. Additionally, he refused to attend regularly scheduled captains' meetings downtown and ceased returning phone calls from his superior officers. On June seventeenth of this year he produced an interdepartmental memo in which he severed all communication between himself, his precinct, and the rest of the city. No specific reasons for this decision were given, only that he believed it was (and here I quote) 'in the best interests of myself, the City Police Force, the citizens of the Central Zone, and all children of God and/or Cain.' Since that .day no official word has been received from either Captain Rathbone or his assigned officers."

Leary grins like butter in a pan: "And you're trying to get me to think you haven't done a fucking thing about it.?"

Her liquid eyes flash as cool as mercury in a bottle: "You know better than that, Leary. We made three forays. The first we sent in one man, the second three, the last a dozen in an armored cruiser."

"And Rathbone took them all out, right.?"

She shrugged. "Nobody's made it back yet, no."

"They won't. Rathbone's too fucking sly for you guys. Once he's made up his mind, the movie's done."

Sunny intones: "Captain Rathbone to this day continues to operate his command in a totally individualistic and out of control manner contrary not only to the Edicts and Ordinances of Separation but to the general good order of this city, county, state, and nation."

"So you want me to kill him for you."

"You're an experienced officer, you know the terrain, and, most crucially, you know Rathbone."

"None of which says why I'm going to do what you want."

She gives him another roiling dart with her eyes, smiles elliptically, lips like jelly, and starts ticking off on her razor red fingernails: "Reinstatement in the Department at your previous rank and grade. All due back pay and allowances up to and including Zone rations. A Special Achievement Award and accompanying official citation for valor above and beyond. And of course there's the oldest motivation of all: revenge. Totally free and unpunishable too."

"What revenge? Rathbone was my best friend."

She laughs out loud, grabs his thigh, jerks him down on the floor next to her. Her lips are inches from his. She whispers: "Now who's the dumb shit? Have a brain, Leary. Billy Rathbone snitched you out. Haven't you fucking figured that out yet?"

"He'd never --"

"He's the only one who could. Who else knew all the ragged shit you two were pulling in the Zone? Rathbone knew and when it came down to him or you, somebody to take the fall, he picked you."

"Prove it."

She pulls a micro from her waistcoat, flips it over. "Hit play and scan. It's all there. The complete official shit. While you're doing that --" she bounces lightly to her feet with the grace of a native dancer " --I'm going to piddle."

She leaves the door hanging open as she strides into the corridor. He can hear heels rap-tapping like gunfire in the desert.

Leary scans the micro.

Of course it could be a fucking forgery, he thinks.

Chapter Three -- Shake, Rattle, and Roll (11/1)

Leary twists his head from side to one. "How do I know everything in here isn't a fucking forgery?"

"You don't." She closes the door. "But you used to be a cop. Doesn't it hang together? Doesn't it make sense?"

His head keeps shaking. "I still won't die for you bastards. Drop me in the Zone and they'd spot me in an instant. I don't care how much heat I'm packing, I can't take on a whole precinct."

"We'll take care of that. They won't know you."

"How? Shoe polish? You want me to wear blackface?"

For the first time she seems hesitant: "A procedure. Even the genes are somehow altered. You won't just look native. For all intents and purposes you'll be one -- body and soul."

"You're going to turn me into a nigger?" His laughter is like the baying of a hound.

She frowns. "I said it was a procedure. Much of it reversible. There may be scars though."

"You're all fucking crazy."

"You won't do it?"

"Oh, sure. Black, white, what difference does it make? Anything's better than this. There's one other thing though."

"What?"

"You."

She says, eyes batting as if irreducibly charmed: "Uh-uh, Leary. Forget it. I work for the Force. It doesn't own me."

"Afterward, then? After I snuff Rathbone?"

"How do you know he won't kill you instead?"

"I don't," he says. "That's what makes it a risk."

Chapter Four -- Black Snake Moan (11/11)

He runs thick hard rough fieldhand fingers across the polished, ivory sheen,

pale-as-death flesh of her shoulder blade. Muscles underneath ripple like waves in a wind.

"I could purr," she says, voice a river low in her throat. "God, I want you inside me again."

So am I still the same person I was before? Leary ponders, studying his reflection in the mirror above her bed. Everything about himself seems altered. (It's a feminine room, full of frilly objects, dainty things: very much her room. A scent of vanilla rife in the air.) And I told her I wanted to fuck her dry but now that I have it's as though I've done it with another man's body, another man's dick. Leary's sensual world has transformed itself too. Sensations are stronger, sharper...more authentic. Like lye instead of bar soap. And not just sensations: he realizes how he never believed in the immortal soul till he Changed and how now even after only a few hours in this new body he believes not only in the soul but also in God Itself and -- even more crucially for his present predicament-- in the devil too -- in Satan. For of course Satan is real. And Satan is black. (As everyone knows. It's in the Bible.) And because he-- Leary-- is now black too -- and just as real --so if Leary exists, then Satan must exist too. But not as evil: this is where the first great fallacy appears. And why the Preachings of Rathbone (at least in the form explicated by the gloriously lovely barenaked plumpbutted Sunny as he enters her again, this time from behind) upon which he has considerably -- and consistently meditated at length (squeezing fuzzy cheeks) makes no fucking logical sense whatsoever no how, no way. Which is how come it all got turned around wrong in the first place: this whole coonshow thing where God is supposed to be white and Satan black so the one is all good (the white God) and the other evil (black Satan).

What bullshit, he thinks.

Hell, ask Sunny. (As she squirms, ready to come.) Hell, ask anybody who knows: white is the purity of the essence of falling snow and black the specter of death but they're both mixed up in the blood like wine and therefore God can be as evil as Satan and Satan as good as God and snow is death and death snow. Oh no nothing is ever as simple as it seems, on my fucking knees, I pray to the black dog god of Satan ...

Leary tilts, hurls his long hard arms around her chest, cups her milky breasts, one in each big hand. "I'm going to fuck you dry as a dove," he says.

("There is one other thing you probably ought to know about," she adds later in the night.

("Like what ?")

("Maybe nothing important, just rumor, but it's part of our regular intelligence briefings and I suppose you ought to know. But it's so weird I haven't said anything till now.")

("What?

(" Something about a new messiah being born. Like a second Jesus. We figure it's pretty much got to be tied in with Rathbone's insanity but which came first, him or the rumors, we don't know yet. Either this baby's about to be born or it's just been born and every psychic healer and Tarot dealer in the Central Zone knows all about it, where it is and what it's about, and they're all crazy excited and thinking it means something significant and important, that it's going to grow up to be the black Jesus Christ or even more. The whole story seemed to get going just about the same time Rathbone went out of control and that's why we figure the two things may be connected.")

Chapter Five -- Night in Tunisia (11/12)

(This scene will be covered in a single arty long take, an elevated pan shot, the setting the broad black ribbon of a mid-city boulevard on a moonless wintry night, a few patches of snow dotting bleak pavement, a forty-foot-high cyclone fence crowned with glistening barbed wire severing the dead center of the street, the buildings on either side dark as the eyes of a vampire and windowless, big warehouses, abandoned factories, tool-and-die shops, with the solitary exception of a garishly ritzy cocktail lounge maybe half-a-block to the right, pink-and-green neon flashing, from out of which titters the occasional tinkle of laughter, the clink of glass, the lowdown rumble of nightrain blues. Then (suddenly!) light bursts like a star going nova, the roar of an engine cracks, and a sleek streaking black limousine comes rippling down the left side of the boulevard, brakes screeching like banshees as it spins to a halt. Doors fly open like birds from their cages. Dark furtive figures emerge in long jackets and cocked fedoras. Four men --no, five -- and a lone woman in a black skirt (though she appears to be the one giving orders, hands motioning). The men surge close to the fence. The woman mouths shouted instructions. A cutting grinding noise like eyes wrenched from their sockets: a torn hole gapes in the chain link fence. One man separates from the others. The camera pans near for a shadowy close-up: flat nose, slitted eyes, heavy lips, teeth like jewels, as he slips quicksilver-like through the hole in the fence. (The camera lunges after him, pursuing, rising, as he races stealthily into the death rattle of the night.) The others pile back into the limousine. The motor coughs, catches, surges. The limousine edges away, a round face (the woman) ambiguously pressed to the window glass. Then nothing. Only the street. And the darkness. And the tinkle of glass, the baying of laughter, the rumble of the blues.)

Chapter Six -- (You Ain't Nothin but a) Hound Dog(1 1/13)

Being some initially selected excerpts from the journals of David Leary:

-- Day 1 inside the Fence and immediately I'm finding the Zone largely as I recall tho simultaneously completely different too on account of because altho what I'm seeing as I snake my way furtively along the familiar broad streets and cracked pavements at dawn has changed little (if at all) in the intervening years, the perspective from which I'm viewing has now altered dramatically: in other words where before I was a badass white fuzz cop in a blue uniform with a black gun now I'm just another Zone dude in my long vinyl jacket and cocked

fedora, my thick fieldhand fingers, my hatchet face, my raspy twang. Hey, nobody glances twice at me. (Or once.?) Nor does nobody warily watch from the comers of his (or her) eyes. They do not watch because they fail to give even itty-bitty fried shit. For who am I to be watched? I am: nothing. Anonymous. Invisible. An unseen and unseeable presence. I could fade into walls. Become as one with the boulevard. I could (and have) cease(d) to exist in the blink of an eye. I am an immaterial object of no particular consequence to anyone else. And in the old days as a white beat cop riding shotgun with Rathbone it was like being on stage every waking instant, watching warily, always watching. And that distorts reality for a man. It's like a red hot pipe rammed up the ass. It gives you the crazy idea you're a lot bigger pile of shit than you really are. It's conducive to megalomania. So is this what's happened to my old partner Rathbone? I wonder as I snake the streets. Is this where it's gone wrong with him? It's a theory anyway, not that I need a theory to snuff Rathbone, revenge being -- as always, since the time of Cain w sweet as a melon. (And by the way: I've ventured into the Zone deliberately unarmed, knowing guns are cheap and easily come by here.)

-- Two hours inside the Zone, dawn well etched in the sky, and I spot my first cop walking a foot beat. Go figure but it's got to be somebody I know from before: Tony Alonzo. No buttbud or anything intimate but Alonzo and I did go round a few bases some cool hard times in the past like one fatal instant when Alonzo aced an unarmed kid in a liquor store heist and I held him tight in my arms while he cried on my shoulder and Rathbone slipped around and dropped an extra .38 in case the kid had friends. (Those were fucking wild days, for sure.) And here I am coolie squatting in front of an Ace Hardware, airing my dirty socks, when Alonzo saunters around the comer, pauses menacingly like meat in front of me, glancing down with the tips of his eyes only, wiggling shaggy brows. "What's up here, bro?" he officially inquires. "All be cool," I implore, holding up thick hands to partly shield my face, not looking away though, keeping my rasp steady in the back of my throat. I let my head loll on my neck like a drunken moo-cow. "All be very cool." Alonzo nods, considers, flicks a wry grin (showing a little tooth), nods again, taps my foot gently with his nightstick, saunters off. It's over in an instant-and-a-half. Tho only when he's well gone past does the air come rushing out of my lungs in a burst of pure orgasmic relief: heymyfuckinGodwowohboy! No recognition. Nowhere. (Yet one thing does disturb me: in his open top buttonhole, protruding, waves the long thin stem of a daisy.) (No, two things disturb me because later the more I think about it, the more times I run the movie through my head, the more I'm sure: Alonzo was not carrying a gun.)

-- Noon Day 1 and I do lunch on the far right stool at the stained formica counter of Ol' Uncle Elmer's Hot Sauce Emporium and Bar BQ Grill located directly across from the station house. Perched inside in three booths (I count) eight cops in uniform, two in plainclothes: not a one I know from before. (Go figure.) Three have daisies in their buttonholes, a fourth a carnation, and none are packing heat, including the plainclothes. I slurp barbecue grease on a hot poppyseed bun, splashing down beer. Still the same old gaunt gray concrete fortress (the station house, I mean, not Uncle Elmer's), tho I note the iron bars have been removed from the windows and now there's just bare glass. My waitress is a sweet-looking high red with big teeth named Edith Elaine whom I

also recollect. (She doesn't bat an eye. (Edith Elaine, I whisper at one point, what's this I hear about the boys across the street? Strange doings over there, I hear, and no guns in their holsters. What gives? But she just grins. You been off in neverneverland playing with your pecker, old fool? But there's no rancor in her tone, no fear. I sit there gazing dreamily through the window soaking up a second beer as one shift departs and another assumes its place. But where do they go? I wonder. None of Rathbone's troops have emerged from the Zone since the circulation of his memo of farewell.

-- And what about God? I get to thinking later on as the day drifts inexorably toward night. Maybe what I'm thinking is that God is a lot like a cop Himself and that helps explain the suffering in the world. Maybe so many billions of people watching God all the time, waiting on Him, expecting Him to do something to set everything right, and pretty soon He just says Fuck It All and does something mean like summoning up a hurricane or starting a war or killing a baby for no reason. And then afterward He feels miserable as hell about it.

-- Edith Elaine and I make a date to hit a couple joints later tonight, her in search of company, me in pursuit of further intelligence. I am sorely aware that I must be careful with my drinking so as not to say the wrong thing at the wrong time to the wrong person, endangering not only my mission but my black ass as well. Sunny cautioned me often on this point.

Chapter Seven -- Potato Head Blues (11/13)

A Play in One Act

The Setting: The formica countertop of Ol' Uncle Elmer's Hot Sauce Emporium and Bar BO Grill, the Central Zone.

The Time: November 13, 1680 Hours.

The Characters:

David Leary -- undercover ex-cop looking for revenge sweet as honey.

Edith Elaine Lyman -- high red waitress and mother of Barry, age 10.

Leary (rasping): I asked bring me another beer.

Edith Elaine: And I said you already had plenty. I don't want you puking up and me having to clean after you.

Leary (with feigned sincerity): Now look here, baby (whispering softly) so how 'bout the two of us hopping a little later on, maybe catching some vibes, a little night music, making some of our own magic too. When you get off work, what you say, my sweet thing?

Edith Elaine: Man, you have more to drink than I thought. You crazy as a hoot owl

Leary: And you as beautiful.

Edith Elaine (cackling): As what? As shit. Old man, you blind crazy.

Leary: Now, listen here and look at me good, this is how it's going down. You do your shift, you hang your apron on the peg, you say my good sweet lover man, where will it be? And off we go, steppin' high and handsome.

Edith Elaine: I got a little boy at home alone.

Leary: We won't be long then.

Edith Elaine: Besides I don't go steppin' with gentlemen whose names I don't know.

Leary: It's Doctor Brown.

Edith Elaine: Doctor of what? Doctor of Fools?

Leary (archly): I am a licensed veterinarian.

Edith Elaine: You gonna end up in jail for lying too.

Leary (sounding sly): But everybody tells me the cops here are sweet as molasses. Nobody goes to jail, I hear. How you figure that?

Edith Elaine (sudden fear in her eyes, tension in her voice w she speaks too loudly): I don't figure nothing where it comes to no police. Now you get out of here, you crazy old man. You get back to the crazy man's farm where you come from.

Chapter Eight -- Soul Survivor (11/13)

Leary dances spinning like a merry-go-round in the midnight empty neon speckled street, whirling dervishly, arms outstretched like a bird on wing, feet skipping crazily pat-a-pat-a-pat, head tossed back like an apple, eyes shut, mouth open, and he's howling as loud as he can, screaming and laughing both at the same time, and there's a woman in a red spangled dress with a jug of mescal in her hand and she's screaming at him too, calling him lunatic and fool and crazy coot, but she's laughing almost as hard as he's laughing and finally, dizziness overwhelming them both at the same time, they collapse like balloons into each other's arms and her dress rips up the spine and the mescal jug goes flying and they land in the street and he's kissing her naked bosom and snaking his hands up under the hem of her red dress and it rips too and they're both laughing so fucking hard, eyes watering, glass shattering from the broken jug, that when the beefy moonfaced white cop comes sprinting up with his baton in his hand huge and erect like a bloated wood penis they don't even hear him.

Wham! (The baton slices down.)

Leary screams out in pain, throwing up his hands.

But it's too late.

A black pool gapes next to him. He falls into it.

Chapter Eight and one-half- Smokestack Lightning (11/14)

Speckled ceiling spinning crazily overhead like a child's kaleidoscope, Leary opens his eyes. He lies stretched on his back, legs askew, on a thin cot chained to a concrete wall. He reaches up and touches his forehead gingerly. A gob of blood comes away. He moans, skull still splintering as if under attack from insects boring from within. Cautiously, cradling his temples lovingly in his hands like the breasts of a maiden, he rolls to a sitting position and lets his feet seek out the solidity of the floor. His pants are ripped, his shirt a rag of cloth clinging to his back. Blood spatters everywhere he looks -- on his chest, hands, everywhere. His own blood.

He occupies a cell. (Iron bars a prison making.)

He moans again. Even thinking hurts.

In starts and fits like a boat riding out the remnants of a storm his vision clears.

Across from him a man squats on a toilet seat, his pants hanging loose at his knees. The man is smiling beatifically as if he has only just now heard the funniest farmer's daughter joke of all time. ("Hot, hell, I'm six inches deep in snow," goes the punchline as Leary remembers it.)

The man wears the black clerical garb of a minister of the gospel.

The Reverend (whispering conspiratorially) sez: "You may not goddamn well know it yet, son, but the best thing in the world to happen to you was last night when good Sergeant Shaw bashed you over the head with his nightstick in the service of the Lord God Eternal."

Leary (still holding his head) responds: "Yeah, sure."

The Reverend: "No, boy, you listen to me, you were the one who was risking the fires of damnation because of the carnal relations of fornication which you might lustfully have partaken with that sinful whore of a woman with whom you were dallying."

Leary: "What are you talking about? We went out and had a couple drinks together. Edith Elaine Lyman. She's a waitress at Uncle Elmer's rib joint across the street."

The Rev. proceeds, scowling, "Your story, son, and an honestly intended one, I'm

sure. But good Sergeant Shaw has a different tale to tell, an older, sadder, and far from uncommon one. The woman was a slut, a Jezebel, a whore of the Earth. Spawn of the devil, she sought to tap into your essence and through it purloin your soul. Hear my words as we sit, for when the Day of Days is proclaimed at last when all Earthly temptations will be put aside and punishments endured for all our deadly sins, then salvation must and shall be denied to those many who will thence be flung into the flaming pits of hell. I know this must transpire as surely as the turning of the Earth, for I have seen it witnessed through my own mind's eye. Remember what I preach, son, for this Day of Days draweth nigh."

Leary snaps alert in spite of his agony. Slyly, he infers, "So maybe you're talking about this new baby Jesus being born I've been hearing about."

The Rev. (cunningly): "There is no new messiah." He stands, wipes his ass, hitches up his pants. "Or old one either. There is only the one messiah which is the Truth of the Lord.

Leary sez: "You mean Jesus then?"

The Reverend curtly remarks, "Oh, no. I said no name. This Jesus was the so-called son of God only."

Leary asks, "So what are you talking about?"

Rev. (his smile somehow even broader, more beatific, his voice an even gentler whisper): "Tell me, son, have you ever considered the possibility that even God Himself may need a god of His own to worship, a god we in our error have chosen to call Satan?"

Chapter Nine -- Let's Go Get Stoned (11/14)

1. As he departs the Precinct Station later that day ushered by two uniformed cops neither of whom is the asshole who clubbed him the night before, Leary shifts his gaze, searching for any sight of Rathbone.
2. Leary uncovers nothing pertinent to his quest beyond a glazed glass door inscribed upon which are the following letters: C, A, P, T, A, I, N.
3. His escorts leave him at the high front doors. He proceeds down concrete steps to the street. It is a brilliant warm sunny day, cloudless blue sky, etc. From the left, a shadow falls over him.
4. Leary swivels his head, glancing up.
5. He discovers a sharp-tipped steel spike approximately ten feet tall and three inches in diameter protruding from the soft sandy ground, impaled vertically upon which he recognizes Edith Elaine Lyman. She is naked, bleeding profusely.
- 5a. Something he has somehow not previously noticed: etched in the concrete edifice of the Precinct Station above the high front doors is the design of a

cross, a crucifix. The precise nature of the image upon the cross is uncertain. But it is most certainly not Jesus of Nazareth. Instead the image appears to be that of a cloven hoofed beast.

5b. Leary's gaze darts from the crucifix to the impaled woman and back to the crucifix again. "God, Edith Elaine," he murmurs like water in a brook.

6. Edith Elaine's eyes are open and staring. She appears to be looking at nothing at all.

7. A handprinted sign around her neck proclaims: BY ORDER OF THE PRECINCT CAPTAIN

8. A cursory examination of her wounds indicates that the tip of the spike has entered her body between the vaginal and rectal canals and exited diagonally through her right shoulder blade. Her heart therefore has not been pierced.

9. Nevertheless, Leary is hopeful that she's dead.

10. But she isn't.

11. Her head twists, her shoulders heave. She mouths: "God, please help me. Oh my God."

Chapter Ten -- Hellhound on My Trail (11/14)

Being some additional excerpts from the journals of David Leary.

--Two things are now as clear to me as a fire bell in the night. (But first an interruption for narrative purposes: staggering away in a state of extreme psychological trauma from the station house and the impaled Edith Elaine, Leary wanders aimlessly through the teeming afternoon streets of the Central Zone. [More local color herewith painted, probably in montage sequences reminiscent of forties Warner Brothers melodrama.] Then as darkness descends like a vampire's shroud Leary slips a hand into a torn pants pocket and to his surprise pulls out a rabbit's foot key ring with an address imprinted upon it. While Leary goggles at the keys nestled in his weathered palm, a flashback shot as if through the haze of memory depicts a red-eyed Edith Elaine (the night before) handing Leary her keys, saying, "This is my extra set, sweet darlin'. You use 'em now if we lose each other." Back in real time, Leary lets himself into the building, ascends rotting wooden stairs to the fourth floor, unlocks a door. Here he finds a ten-year-old boy sitting in the dimness staring at a muted television picture. (A cat and mouse cartoon, sledgehammer violence.) The boy looks up hopefully as Leary enters and sez, haltingly, "Did my -- my mamma send for me?")

Chapter Ten point nine-oh-nine -- Got My Mojo Workin' [11/14-11/15)

Being a continuation of the further excerpts from the journals of David Leary:

--Three things are now as clear to me as a fire bell in the night. First that

Rathbone (whatever his fucking story) needs to be killed. Second that I'm the one guy ready and able to do it. The third thing, I forget at the moment, though it may have something to do with all this shit about God and Satan and Jesus and the New Messiah, how it must all mean something, must be leading somewhere, and where that somewhere is is scaring the holy piss out of me as I sit here in poor dead Edith Elaine's apartment, jug of red wine in one hand, cold chicken leg out of the fridge in the other, looking at this doe-eyed ten-year-old kid who just keeps looking back at me.

"Hey, man, what's your name?" I finally manage.

"Barry," he sez. "What's yours?"

I think for a second. But the kid's had too much lying in his life. Then:

"Leary. But don't tell nobody."

"Who I tell?"

"Some dickhead."

"What dickhead?"

"The one who lives under the stairs and eats kids who talk out of turn."

"There ain't nobody like that."

I give him a wink. "Smart, kid. But don't tell nobody, hear?"

That night as the TV casts a greenish glow upon our shadowed faces I perch half-drunk on my end of the couch and tell Barry (my voice fake hard) that his mama won't be back. "She took the bus and went away," I say.

He knows better. "You full of shit, man. She dead."

Like I said: smart kid.

--The next day (with Barry) strolling the main boulevard I spot Rathbone for the first time as his white limo glides past like a ship at sea. In the back seat he squats alone, like a frog basking on a rock. His head turns as we pass. Our eyes lock. But there's no recognition.

"Who that, boy?" I ask softly, playing dumb.

"That there's the Devil Man," Barry shouts back.

"Who told you that? Your mamma?"

"Everybody knows the Devil Man."

--That same day (I've gone dinner shopping for two: four butchered chops,

potatoes to be peeled and mashed, jar of hot mustard, butter slab, milk, sugar cookies for the boy) I see crossing the street ahead of me a beefy white man. I know him. A cop named Hogan. From the old days.

According to Sunny, Hogan was among the men dropped into the Zone to kill Rathbone.

For the hell of it-- and for intelligence gathering purposes-- I follow him home.

Chapter Eleven -- The Cross Road Blues (11/17)

OMITTED

Chapter Twelve -- Hoochie Coochie Man (11/18)

(The interrogation of the suspect Hogan commenced at 9.015 hours, November 17, in unit 23b of the Sunny Dell Apartments, Central Zone, interrogating officer David Leary present, the interrogation herewith transcribed.)

Hogan (looking at the gun): So where'd you get the piece?

Leary (shrugging): On the street.

Hogan: They wouldn't let you bring it in with you?

Leary: They wanted the job done right this time.

Hogan: I can see that looking at you. (Smirking.) Hey, I hardly recognized you as a nigger.

L: Neither did Rathbone.

H (more quietly): You seen him already then?

L: Not up close. In his limo. He went riding by.

H: Ain't that some rig?

L: So why don't you tell me what's going on around here?

H: Christ, starting where?

L: With you. Like how come you didn't kill Rathbone. And why he didn't kill you. And how come you're still fucking around here in the Zone.

Chapter Twelve and a Quarter -- Statesboro Blues (11/18)

Some background: Hogan was one of the men dropped into the Zone by armored cruiser in the third unsuccessful attempt at assassinating Rathbone. Leary knew

Hogan off and on during his years on the Force. They even partnered together early in their careers before Leary requested reassignment to the Central Zone. Hogan was best known for his hot gunhand, including five certified in-line-of-duty kills. Leary hated his fucking guts, always had.

Chapter Twelve (continued) -- Hoochie Coochie Man (11/18)

Hogan (finger in the air): Let me tell you a few things, Leary. First, you say you want to know how come we didn't kill Rathbone. Well, it's not like we didn't try. We came roaring down here in that fucking cruiser thinking nothing could stop us and drove straight up to the station house door, you should have seen the coons scatter, and me and Finnegan and Gordie Shaw all jump out, guns out too, flack jackets zipped, and guess who's fucking coming out the door just as we show --fucking Rathbone himself, that's who. So guess what Finnegan's got to do?

Leary: What?

Hogan: He's ranking officer and he stops dead and goes, "Captain Rathbone, put your hands on top of your head for you are now under arrest by the authority invested in me..." I mean bull fucking shit!

Leary: And?

Hogan: And so I shot Rathbone square in heart. But it was too fucking late. He hops back through the door into the arms of his guys and then about a hundred and twenty others are over us like flies on shit. That was something else we hadn't figured on. The cops here are fucking nuts about Rathbone. They'd walk through blood and water to save his ass. Like he was God.

L: So you missed.

H: Like fuck! I never missed in my life. I hit the asshole for sure, right where I said, right in the heart.

L: He's not dead, Hogan.

H: I know. And you won't believe this either. I wouldn't myself except he showed me with my own eyes. It was the Bible. The Bible he carries in his pocket. The bullet hit the fucking Bible and ricocheted. It was like a miracle.

L (taking a breath): So tell me what you know about this New Messiah thing.

Chapter Thirteen -- Blind Willie McTell (11/19)

At "home" early the next morning as young Barry nods off on the couch, Leary, plate of blooded rib bones in front of him, sits cross-legged in front of the blank television screen contemplating the whole long sad history of race in this country. And in the contemplation he is at the same time contemplating the fate of the lush fertile world he and his species inhabit. (By the grace of God?)

Brought to this land in chains and manacles, as commodities, property, as Things, he thinks, simplifying to the essence. As Things which were regarded as superficially human but also less than human. As Things to be used, to be worked until-broken -- like a plow or a reaper or a gin. As Things --as tools, as implements. Things to be sold. Things to be bought. Things to be bred. (And slaughtered?) Things without will (or destiny?) of their own. And Leary thinks (contemplating still) how this horror endured like a rock for centuries till the land itself rotted with the reddish stain of hell and those who owned it burned with the brand of Cain. For if God is the god of love and man created in His image, then to be human is to love also and to hate is to be bereft of humanity. Oh yes, it was indeed along sad fucking story, he thinks. Generations died. And lived again. And died. He hears a stirring in his ears. Like the seashell wind. It is the promise never kept -- the chalice never tasted. And he closes his eyes one last time and stands in bib overalls in an East Texas field and above, dangling from the tree limb, sways the carcass of a human being, neck snapped, legs and arms like twigs, and he stands so filled with shame and with horror, with guilt and with dread, that he cannot move a muscle to flee from this dream as nightmare, as truth, as history, as vision. And so, my God, why did you not make us all the same so that the hate which comes from difference did not bum in our hearts like a fire on the land? (And there is no answer to this question. Only silence, which ever reverberates.) And the years of attempted integration, he recalls, a dream pursued too little and too late, and then the savage uprisings, spreading, and the Edicts and Ordinances of Separation promulgated, and with that the final sealing of the urban walls, the erection of the great fences, the creation of the Zones. And the end of the last dream. To Leary, the more he thinks, the less he knows. For are we not all born and created equal, are we not all birthed by the same loving God? But if that God is not the true god, if He is an impostor, if in other words, the one true God is a god of evil, then it all does make sense, it rings true, he muses.

And Rathbone is right.

Chapter Fourteen w Preaching Blues (Up Jumped the Devil) (11/18)

Leary tosses out a hand, grabs the wine jug off the formica table, gulps, wipes a greasy palm across his mouth, bangs the bottle down. "All right, asshole. So you missed your chance at a clean kill, you dumb shit. So now the question is: how come if Rathbone's alive, you're not dead? And what about your partners? Where are they?"

Hogan eyes the wine as he has all night. Beseechingly -- assiduously --his need for it whines like a prayer in his face. A ham-listed man with a round head and the blank, dazed expression of a camel. "Then can I have a drink?"

Leary speaks slowly as if the words choke in his throat: "I'll consider it."

Hogan bobs his head, licks his lips, snakes his tongue, sez, "Okay. I'll talk. Finnegan, he's what you think. Rathbone killed him. The same day. Never had a chance. You won't fucking believe what Rathbone did. He impaled Finnegan. Stuck him up on a big steel pole --"

"I know. I saw it. Not Finnegan. Another friend of mine."

"And you know the strange part, what was really awful? Poor fucking Finnegan. He stayed alive for hours. I couldn't believe it. Rathbone made us watch. Me and Gordie Shaw. Handcuffed us to the railing."

Leary nods: "Rathbone loves shit like that -- teaching lessons. So what about the other guy?"

"Shaw. He went over. Rathbone must have talked him into it. He's one of his boys now."

"You too?"

"No." His voice is soft.

"What, then?"

"It don't matter."

Leary picks up the .22 pistol from the tabletop, aims the muzzle at Hogan. "Tell me, goddamn it."

Hogan averts his eyes. Perspiration beads his chin. "You want to know, Leary, I'll tell. But you'd better not fucking ever tell anybody else. I mean it."

"Who would I tell?"

Hogan nods. "Okay. Then how come I'm still alive is because

Rathbone offered me a choice. He said which'll it be, Hogan, your balls or your life. I thought he was kidding. What would you have done!"

"I want to know what you did do."

"What do you think/I'm here, aren't I? I'm alive. But you don't see me trying to get back home either. I've got a wife and two kids, Leary, on the other side. Fuck it."

"Have a drink, Hogan."

"Really?"

"Really. You've got it coming."

As Hogan eases the wine jug to his lips, Leary shoots him through the mouth.

An Unnumbered Chapter -- Big Boss Man (11/18- 12/23)

Time passes. Leary lives a day by day existence in the Zone, taking care of Barry as if he were his own. But he's also thinking. Leary thinks: If God is truly alive in His heaven and if the rest of us below are simply his pawns, his agents, then isn't it wisest to wait upon His hand, to see first where He is choosing to lead before plunging blindly forward? And even if as now seems likely this god whom we worship (on our knees) is a false God, is in fact the Beast in disguise, then there still must exist a Higher Force, for the existence of this universe alone is proof of that.

And so Leary makes no immediate move to kill Rathbone.

Chapter Fifteen -- Mystery Train (12/23)

The diminutive figure in the crimson coat and hood falls into step beside him as he makes his way home from the grocery store, bulging paper bag clasped to his chest like a baby to be loved. (Which means no way Leary can get to his gun in any kind of hurry to plug the bitch.)

From the scent of vanilla he knows in an instant who she is.

Sunny sez, "So, Leary, you dumb fuck, what do you think you're up to?"

He's cool as a snowfall: "On my way home for dinner."

(It's a keen, warm, gentle, absolutely gorgeous winter day, birds chiming in the treetops, warbling like warblers.)

"Rathbone's still alive."

"I know that."

"So what the fuck are you going to do about it?"

"I guess that's the part I don't know yet."

"You crazy shit. After all he's done to you."

"Him and everybody else in the world when you come right down to it."

"Don't get pathetic with me, Leary. You've been down in the Zone long enough. You know what he's turned into."

But that, too, was a part he didn't know yet. (And he thinks how incredibly vulnerable she is, walking here beside him, a true stranger in the strange land, how one word from him could seal her fate, impaled on a spike. And the pressures that must have welled up to cause her to venture down here on her own. Assuming she is alone.)

He swivels his head but sees no one who looks obviously suspect. (Which means diddly squat.)

He waxes philosophic: "So the guys downtown are pissed are they? That's the gist of the whole fucking problem, Sunny. I have been down here in the Zone long enough. And I have seen much, much shit."

"Not so much that you couldn't ace Hogan."

"So?"

"If you can do him, do Rathbone."

"Not yet."

Her hand is on his arm. She squeezes hard. "Goddamn it, Leary. Do it. Please. Not for you. Not for me either. For everybody. He's a madman, Leary. You know that. He rides around in that fucking limo like he was God on Earth."

"Maybe he is."

"Bullshit. Gods don't need a back room stocked with sweet brown whores he fucks two and three at a time."

"Rathbone doesn't do that."

"Then what does he do?"

"It's a long story," says Leary (tiredly).

Chapter Sixteen -- Stones in My Pass Way (11/18)

(In which it is revealed for all to know what Hogan responded when asked by Leary, "So tell me what you know about this New Messiah thing.")

Hogan sez, "It's not born yet, if that's what you're worried about. Rathbone's supposed to have the mother holed up in a room at the station house. He wants everybody to think it's a bunch of hookers he's got back there but it's really only this one girl, the mother, and the one thing Rathbone ain't doing is fucking her, let me tell you. The way I hear, every night he goes in there and gets down on his knees and worships in front of her and cries like a baby and begs forgiveness. Who he's supposed to be begging, I don't know. Maybe her. Maybe God. Maybe somebody or something -- else. They say you can hear him from every fucking corner of the station house, even from outside. I haven't been around to listen. Finnegan said he saw her too. The mother. Rathbone took him back there before he killed him. He said here's your chance to be forgiven, Finnegan. Finnegan told him to shove it up his ass. Maybe me too if I'd said go ahead and hang me on the spike, I would've seen her too. But I didn't. Finnegan said she was just a little kid, no more than like fourteen, but pregnant as a whale. Some kind of albino kid, he said. White looking but with heavy nigger features. Didn't talk, he said. Never let out a peep. But he said she scared the living shit out of him. Just looking at her did it. He said after that he was

almost fucking glad to die. And he was shivering all over when he said it too. Ugly. Like I'd never seen him before. And then they grabbed him and stuck him on that spike and that was the end of it. He never screamed. I bet all Rathbone's boys have seen her at least one time too. That's how come they believe like they do. They're scared shitless. Now some'll try and tell you Rathbone's the father but if it's really like the son of the nigger god, then, shit, nobody's the real father. Except Him. God."

"So when's the baby to be born?"

"Christmas Eve." He laughed. "When do you think?"

"Have a drink, Hogan."

"Really?"

"Really. You've got it coming."

As Hogan raises the wine jug to his lips, Leary shoots him through the mouth.

Chapter Seventeen -- Death Don't Have No Mercy (12/23)

In which Leary comes home and finds Barry gone, snatched (he assumes) by Sunny and/or her agents. Alone, he drinks himself asleep and suffers a dream in which he and Rathbone debate the meaning of the New Messiah, whether it's good or evil or what. Then a scrawled note arrives signed by Sunny saying he must either kill Rathbone or else never see Barry again. What shit, he thinks.

Chapter Eighteen -- 32-20 Blues (12/24)

The assassination scene will be done in a single extended take shot from an objective eye level viewpoint, the idea being to replicate through deliberate image manipulation the visceral impact that almost everyone has experienced while witnessing an actual real time assassination on television. A crowded corridor. Inside the bowels of Rathbone's station house: perhaps a subtitle to so indicate. And a dateline -- December 24. Bare wood benches splintered along each side of the corridor, the walls painted in heavy gray-green splotches. Lots of cops surging back and forth, their uniforms providing a splash of color though often damp, soaked, covered by black rain slickers, puddles of water shimmering on the floor -- it's raining like hell out tonight. Much cacophony. Voices clashing like hot wires. Shouts. Howls. Few words actually decipherable. Upon the wood benches a dozen shabbily dressed men and an equal number of women resplendent in satin, lace, and cheap leather idly sit. (The idea is to get across a quick impression of the criminal classes.) The people on the benches are black, the cops white. Then from around a corner at the end of the corridor a knot of five or so new cops materializes. Surging. These are different from the other cops. Soldierly. Disciplined. Martial in their attitude and bearing. They seem almost to be marching in step to the beat of a soundless drum. (Bootheels rapping on the wet tile floor.) Suddenly -- at the first apparition of the knot: silence. Heads swivel like cranes turning in unison to look. The man hunched in

the dead center of the knot can barely be glimpsed. His cap and collar glitter with braid, silver captain's insignia glistening like a star. No one utters a word. They stare like cats wakened from a nap. (For the first time the sound of the rain pounding like hammer and nails on the rooftop can be heard.) And now the assassin emerges. Lunging past the camera from the opposite end, clenched in his fist the black bulk of a .22 pistol, the camera blurry now, as if peeping through the window of a dream. The assassin wears black, knit cap down over his eyes. Shots ring out. (Or do shots truly ring? They crack, they explode, they burst, they boom, they thud, they go bang-bang-bang.) Three shots in succession: bang! bang! bang! The cop in the middle of the knot -- the captain! -- topples like a puppet from a severed string, cap saucerizing off his head. Now the noise detonates: a woman screams wordlessly, a man yells, "Hey, look out, the fucker's got a gun!" Cops hurl themselves on top of the assassin, bringing him down. One more gunshot rings out muffled. The camera tilts, bucks, sways, topples, falls. Glass shatters like a broken goblet. The image is now cracked, spiderwebby. Abruptly there looms a huge close-up of the assassin's face lying with his cheek squashed flat against the floor, one eye glassily staring. "Got the motherfucker!" screams a voice. "Get a doctor!" screams another. "Oh, fuck fuck fuck, he's dying," says a third. "I know he's dying. Oh, no, oh, no, my God, fuck no no no!"

Chapter Nineteen -- Fattening Frogs for Snakes (12/25)

"I think the only really lousy Christmas I had when I was a kid," Leary tells Barry as they finish Christmas dinner, "was when I was probably about ten and I'd asked for all this stuff, I don't even remember what now, games and toys and shit, and like every year I'd always be poking through the house -- we lived in this big old barn of a white house out in the woods: and we raised all these animals, not just dogs and cats and fish but ducks and rabbits, bantam chickens, we even had a goat one time, you would've loved it there -- me poking around trying to find the presents my parents had bought but, Jesus, this one time -- guess what? -- it sure wasn't funny, then, even if it is now, this one year I really fucked up and looked too good and I found them, found all my presents, so guess what? -- I bet you already figured it -- none of the stuff I asked for was there -- I don't really know why either, still don't to this day, because usually whatever I wanted, no matter how stupid, my parents went out and got it, it was like their yearly ritual every year my mom and dad going to a loan company and borrowing the money to get Christmas presents for the kids -- the four of us -- and then taking the rest of the year to pay the money back because that was the one serious expense in their whole lives -- it wasn't like they wore good clothes or went on a lot of vacations -- they couldn't afford any of that -- not that any of this was stuff I knew then of course -- it was years later before I figured it out -- and my sister who died in the Third Uprising, she told me a lot of it -- but you know, that's how it went that year, what I wanted for Christmas was not what I was getting -- and I'm telling you now, I felt like shit and what was worse -- think about it -- what was worse was, what could I do about it? I mean, look, I didn't dare say anything, I didn't want to get my ass chewed, I didn't want them thinking I was a snoop even if I was, and I couldn't go up and say, look, Mom and Dad, guess what? I know what you got me for Christmas and it's not what I want, so why don't you just take it back and

get me something else? So I had to suffer in silence, acting noble like I didn't know shit when I did, and I felt lousy the whole time right up, I think, to the day itself and then all of a sudden that morning it just didn't seem important anymore, once it was actually Christmas Day everything was basically okay. Christmas was still Christmas. But I never went snooping after that either. I learned to let things be."

Chapter Twenty -- If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day (12/24)

Leary sez, "I know I had to mark you. I fired three fucking bullets. No way I'm going to miss that many times, not from that range, not even with a .22. No fucking way in hell."

Grinning, lips peeling back like the skin of a snake, Rathbone slips a hand in his blue coat. He pulls out a Bible and holds it in the air, letting the pages flutter.

"No, goddamn it," Leary says, shaking his head. "Goddamn it, no, not again."

Rathbone is laughing. He's got four uniformed men behind him, two of them with their guns out. The windowless interrogation chamber. White walls. Two-sided mirrors. Leary knows the room well. He once saw a man beaten to death in here, blood running onto the floor like a pool.

"You shot Hogan," Rathbone says, his voice like a hoarse whisper.

"Maybe. So?"

"What did he tell you before he died?"

Leary spreads his hands. "He told me all sorts of shit."

Rathbone's mouth creases. "Did he tell you that God was on my side?"

"Are you so fucking sure He is?"

Rathbone wags the Bible in his hand. "What do you think, David?"

"That's not God."

"It isn't?"

The room seems barely bigger than a closet, two steel-backed chairs one on either side of a formica table. Leary is secured to his chair by manacles on both wrists.

"I don't intend to have you executed," Rathbone says.

"Why not?"

Rathbone shrugs, shoulders rising and falling almost imperceptibly. "And the little boy will be returned to you too, if that's the other thing bothering you. As soon as you and I are finished here. You'll then be free to go."

"How do you know I won't come after you again?"

"You won't."

"But how do you know?"

A skeletal smile. "What would be the point? It doesn't matter. Don't you understand, David? I can't be killed."

"Bullshit. You're not God."

"No. But as I explained: He's on my side. For now. At least until the child is grown."

"The Messiah?"

"So they say."

"He's been born, then?"

"This morning at dawn. She was."

"Can I see him -- her?"

"Of course."

"Where are they?"

"I'll take you."

"Now?"

"If you want."

Rathbone motions to one of the cops behind him. The man nods, holsters his gun, walks around the table, unlocks Leary's manacles.

Leary comes slowly to his feet, knees shaky. "I want you to know I don't give a shit whether you live or die."

Rathbone remains seated. "Nor do I, David."

Now it's Leary's turn to shrug. "That's your problem, not mine. What about Sunny? Is she dead too?"

"Not yet, I believe."

"When?"

"Oh, soon. Justice must be served."

"That's murder, not justice."

"And Hogan?" His eyes dance, the lids fluttering like parchment, not skin. Then a hand rises from his lap and cuts through the air. He points to the door in the far wall. "This way," he says.

Chapter Twenty point five -- Baby, Please Don't Go (12/25)

As Leary and Rathbone descend the concrete steps outside the station house, a shadow falls upon them.

Leary glances left.

Sunny.

Impaled.

On the spike.

Before he can speak Rathbone reaches inside his coat, pulls out a gun, and blows the top of her head off.

It is an act of mercy.

For the first time all day Leary feels a welling up of hope.

Chapter Twenty-one -- The Cross Road Blues (12/25)

The house lies nestled on a back avenue far from the press of traffic. But the street is awash with people today, a hundred or more, none of them speaking now, people just standing and waiting expectantly.

They put Leary in mind of mourners at a funeral.

But no one seems to be grieving.

Rathbone cuts a path through the crowd. People step back to let him pass.

The house is warm, almost stuffy. There is a pine fresh scent in the air. An elderly black man in a white coat and rimless spectacles sits on the davenport. He glances up as Rathbone passes.

The two men nod at one another.

Rathbone gestures at a door in the wall. "In here," he says.

Leary follows.

As Leary steps through the door to behold the mother and the child, the New Messiah, the black messiah, the child who is both daughter of God and of the creature who is not god but God's god and who is known sometimes as Satan, he finds himself filled again with hope.

For beyond the door a light is brightly shining.

And for a moment he can see nothing.