

Opposites make good companions sometimes.

The reason Irish coffee is the perfect beverage is that the stimulant and the depressant play tug of war with your consciousness, thereby stretching and exercising it. Isometric intoxication, opposed tensions producing calm at the center, in the eye of the metabolic hurricane. You end up an alert drunk I suppose speedballs—the cocaine-heroin combination that killed John Belushi—must be a similar phenomenon, on a more vivid and lethal level. Fear and lust is another good, heady mixture of opposites ... as many have learned in war-zones or hostage situations.

But if you can get hope and pride and serious fear all going at the same time, balanced in roughly equal portions, let me tell you, then you've really got something *powerful*.

You can turn your head around with a mixture like that, end up spinning like a top and paralyzed, exhausted and insomniac, starving and nauseous, running a fine cold sweat. Like a car in neutral, with the accelerator to the floor. It's exhilarating, in a queasy kind of way.

I'm embarrassed to admit I binged on it for days before I realized that was what I was doing, and then another day before I made up my mind to kick it. Finally I admitted to myself that I was being selfish, that other peoples' hopes—and cash—were involved in this too. They'd been waiting a long time already. Besides, in a *three-way* tug of war, the chances of one side suddenly letting go with a loud snap are doubled.

Hell, I'd already *jumped*. It was time to open my eyes and see where I was going to land....

So one fine day in May of 1988, I picked up the phone and made the call.

"Hello there, son," he said when they finally tracked him down. "I was just thinking about you. Been too long. What's the good word?" His voice was strong and clear despite the lousy connection. As always.

"I think I'm ready," I said.

Short pause. "Say that again. Like you believe it, this time."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I don't know if *I'll* ever be ready. But I think *it's* ready. I truly do, Sam. As ready as it's ever gonna be."

"Why, that's fine! Uh ... want me to come over and take a look? Before you—"

"Thanks. But no, take it all in one dose. Put the word out for me, OK? I open Friday at nine. Just the immediate family."

"Friday, huh? Appropriate date. We'll all be there. I'm looking forward to it. It's been too awful damn long. Good luck—wups, Code Blue, got to go!" The line was dead.

Friday was two days away. Time for one last binge of conflicting emotions before the balloon went up....

The thing is, I had accomplished a miracle—and I knew in my heart it wasn't good enough.

After two years of careful planning and hard work, I had produced something excellent. I believed that, and I guess I should have been proud. Oh hell, I guess I was proud. But I was trying to match something long gone that, in its own back-assward way, had been perfect. And it seemed to me, in those last couple of days, that the distance on the scale between lousy and excellent is *nothing* compared to the distance between excellent and perfect.

There was nothing I could do about it. Perfection exceeded my grasp. I didn't have the tools. None-the-less, I spent those last days like a frustrated cat, trying to bite myself on the small of the back.

My staff was the first to arrive that Friday night, pulling in at about eight, but he didn't count. He'd already seen the place, under oath of secrecy, because I'd needed his help in finishing it. (If you can't trust a guy with his background to keep a vow, who can you trust?) But I was glad to see him, and gladder when he was dressed for work.

It was the sheer familiarity of the sight of him in that getup, I think. So much about this place was different from the old one, and he was a thread of continuity that I appreciated. Some of those

differences had been driving me crazy.

Getting ready to open took us a combined total of maybe five minutes. I'd been there all after-noon—and we'd been essentially ready for a week. Then he had the grace to not only suggest a game of darts, but fail to notice how badly I was playing. It took him some doing; at one point I actually threw one shank-first. It bounced halfway back to me. Terrific omen, for those who believe in such.

At ten minutes to nine, I left him in command and went out into the big foyer, letting the swinging door close behind me. Its breeze started all the empty coat hangers whispering. I felt the need to wait out there, to talk to the whole crew, at least for a few minutes, before I brought them in-side and showed them the place.

At nine precisely, the outer door burst open and Doc Webster, Long-Drink McGonnigle, Fast Eddie Costigan, Noah Gonzalez, Tommy Janssen, Marty Matthias and his new wife Dave, all three Masers, Ralph von Wau Wan, Willard and Maureen Hooker, Isham Latimer and *his* new wife Tanya, Bill Gerrity, and both of the Cheerful Charlies all came crowding into the foyer at once. Don't tell me that's physically impossible; I'm telling you what I saw.

My head *pulsed* like a giant heart, and my heart spun like a little head. A couple of fairly had years began to melt away....

They advanced on me like a lynch mob, baying and whooping, arms out-stretched, and then we all hugged each other. Don't tell me that's physically impossible; I'm telling you what we did. The coat hangers became Zen bells. The more physically demonstrative of us pummeled the rest of us and each other, hard enough to raise bruises, and all of us grinned until the tears flowed. Somewhere in there it occurred to me that the foyer now held every single soul who had been present on the first night I ever had a drink in Callahan's Place—with the sole exceptions of Callahan himself, and of course Tom Flannery (it was the twelfth anniversary of Tom's death that night). We stopped hugging when our arms stopped working.

There was a moment of warm silence. Then the combined pressure of them tried to back me into the bar, but I stood my ground.

"Hold it a second, folks," I said, smiling ruefully. "There's something I want to get straight before we go in, OK?"

"It's your place, Jake," Doc Webster said.

"That's the first thing to get straight," I said. "It's not. It's *our* place. I know I hogged all the fun of putting it together, but that's because a design committee is a contradiction in terms, and I had some strong opinions. And ... well, I wanted to surprise you all. But if there's anything you really don't like, we can change it."

"You're saying you want us to complain?" Long-Drink asked.

"I tink we c'u'd handle dat," Fast Eddie said helpfully.

"I hate the Jacuzzi," the Doc said promptly, and Ralph bit him on the ankle just as promptly. In fact, the dog may have started to bite before the Doc had started to wisecrack. They know each other.

"Come on, let's see de jernt," Eddie said.

"One more thing," I said. "Before I show you all what Mary's Place *is*, I want to talk for a second about what it is *not*." I could see that they all knew more or less where I was going, but I said it anyway. "This is not Callahan's Place. This is Mary's Place. It will never be Callahan's Place. No place will ever be that place again, and certainly no place we build. Even if Mike should ever come back from the future and open another bar, it wouldn't be Callahan's Place, and he wouldn't call it that if he did. We can all have some fun here—but if we try and make this be Callahan's Place, it will all go sour on us."

"Hell, we know that," Long-Drink said indignantly.

"Relax, Jake," Tommy Janssen said. "Nobody expected you to work miracles."

"We're not fools," Suzy Maser said. Then she glanced at her husband Slippery Joe and co-wife Susan. "Wait a minute, maybe I take your point. We *are* fools."

"Look," I pressed on, "I don't mean that the layout is different or the setup is different. I don't even mean just that Mike is gone. He'll be *less* gone in this building than he will anywhere else, I think, because

he'll be in our collective memories, and maybe if we're lucky a little bit of Callahan magic will linger on.

"*But a lot of it won't.* Some of the specific 'magic,' if that's what you want to call it, that made Callahan's Place work is simply not available to us any more."

Rooba rooba rooba. The Doc's fog-horn baritone rose over the rest. "What are you saying, Jake?"

"For one thing, I'm talking about whatever kind of magic it was that watched over that Place like a door-checker. The Invisible Protective Shield—a selectively permeable shield. You all know damn well what I mean. Did anybody ever wander into Callahan's that didn't belong there? And did anybody who needed to go there bad enough ever fail to find it?"

That stopped them. "I don't know about that last part," the Doc said. "There *were* suicides on Long Island during those years. And I can remember one or two jokers that came in who didn't belong there. But as Suzy said a minute ago, I take your point. Those few jokers didn't stay. In all those years, '46 to '86, we never seemed to get normal bar traffic. No bikers, or predators, or jerks looking to get stupid, or goons looking for someone drunk enough to screw even them—"

"Hell, no *drunks*," Long-Drink said, looking thunderstruck. "Not one."

"No grab-asses," Merry said.

"No brawlers," Tommy supplied. "No jackrollers."

Fast Eddie summed it up. "No pains in de ass."

"Was that magic?" the Doc asked. "Or some kind of advanced technology we don't savvy yet? Like Mickey Finn's 'magic' raincoat?"

"What's the difference?" I told him. "We haven't got it—and so this is going to be a different kind of joint. It doesn't matter what it was. For all I know, it was just a sustained run of incredibly good l—"

SCREECH!

I had been peripherally aware of rapidly growing automotive sounds from the world outside, but before I could finish my sentence we all heard the nerve-jangling shriek of brake shoes doing their very best (a sound I happen to find even more disturbing than most people do) *much* too close to the door. We all froze, expecting a vehicle to come crashing in and kill us all. Just as the noise reached its crescendo and died away, there was a violent, expensive-sounding *clang! crump!*, and then a single knock at the door.

Silence ...

There was a harsh emphatic *crack!* sound. *Behind* me, in the bar. And then a heavy, dull *chop!* from the same place, followed by a gasp: and a faint, hard-to-identify sound that made me think of a gerbil, curling.

Fast Eddie happened to be closest to the outside door. He opened it experimentally, and it was a good thing it opened inward. The front grille of a Studebaker filled the doorway, faint tendrils of steam curling out of it. The rest of a Studebaker was attached in the usual manner. The only unusual thing about it was the pair of rumpled frayed blue jeans on the hood.

"Hi, guys," Shorty Steinitz's voice came hollowly from the passenger compartment. "Sorry I'm late. Did I kill him?"

One mystery solved. Shorty is the worst driver alive. But how had he managed to punch someone through that door and through all of us and into the bar, without any of us noticing it happen?

I turned and pushed open the swinging door, just as tentatively as Eddie had opened the outside door.

A stranger was sitting at my bar, in one of the tall armchairs I use instead of barstools. Kindling lay in the sawdust at his feet, and there appeared to be either more sawdust or heavy dandruff on his hairy head. He was just finishing a big gulp of beer. Tom Hauptman, my assistant bartender, was gaping at him. This seemed understandable, for the stranger had no pants on.

He caught my eye, looked me up and down briefly, and pursed his lips as if preparing to sneer. "Evening, stringbean," he said.

He was short and hairy. His eyes and nose and lips, and the upper slopes of his cheeks, were the only parts of his head that were not covered with tight curls of brown hair. As far as I could see, they did not share that distinction with any other part of his body except his fingernails. He made me think of

hobbits. Surly hobbits. He wore a brown leather jacket, a long scarf, a black turtleneck, basketball shoes, and white jockey shorts. There were a motorcycle helmet and a pair of leather gloves on the bar beside him.

"How did you get in there?" I asked, as calmly as I could, aware of people gawking over my shoulder,

He looked at me as if I had asked a very stupid question, and pointed silently upward.

Like Callahan's Place before it, Mary's Place had an access hatch to the roof. Or rather, it *had* had. I hadn't rigged up a ladder to it yet, because it was awkwardly placed, almost directly over the bar. Now there was no longer a hatch there—just a yawning hole where the hatch had been. The hatch cover was the kindling around the stranger's feet.

"You broke in from the roof?" I said.

He grimaced. "Not voluntarily," he assured me. "I could have done without the last eight feet or so of that little journey. But I didn't get a vote. This is good beer." He made the last part sound like a grudging admission.

"Rickard's Red," I said, seeing the color. "From Canada."

"No," he said, frowning as though I'd called an automatic a revolver, or spelled "adrenalin" with an e on the end. "From Ontario. Americans always make that mistake."

Shorty came bustling up behind me. "Is he alive?" he asked.

"Are you alive?" I asked the stranger.

"No, I'm on tape," he said disgustingly, and gulped more beer.

"Honest to God, Mister," Shorty said, trying to push past me, "I never saw you. Be honest, I wasn't looking—it just never occurred to me anybody could be on my tail at that speed—"

"I was in your slipstream, Andretti, saving gas; are you familiar with the concept or shall I do a lecture on elementary aerodynamics? Even a rocket scientist like you will concede that there's not much point in *doing* that unless the guy is going at a hell of a clip, now is there?"

"Well, I never seen ya," Shorty said uncertainly.

"That's because you weren't *look-ing*," the stranger explained.

"One of you want to tell me what happened?" I asked. To my pleased surprise I heard my voice come out the way Mike Callahan would have said it in my place. A quiet, polite request for information, with the explicitly mortal threat all in the undertones.

The stranger looked up at the ceiling again. No, at the sky. Apparently God signaled him to get it over with. He sighed. "I was following that maniac at a—"

"Idiot," Long-Drink interrupted. "If they're in front of you, they're idiots."

The stranger glared at him, and decided to ignore him. "—hundred and twenty when he made an unsignaled left into your parking lot without slowing. On a Suzuki at that speed, you don't want to bust out of the slipstream at an angle, so I swallowed my heart and cornered with him—better, of course—and there we both were, bearing down on a brick building at 120 together, and I would like to state for the record that I would not, repeat *not* have hit him if his god-damned brake lights had been working!"

"Are they out again?" Shorty asked mournfully.

The stranger looked at him. "Or if his brakes hadn't been so goddamned good."

"I hafta get new shoes every couple of months," Shorty said.

"No shit, Sherlock. How did I magically divine this information before you told me? I don't know, I must be psychic."

"You ploughed into the back of Shorty's car on a motorcycle?" I asked.

"That," he agreed, "was the very last moment I was *on* a motorcycle this evening. A microsecond later I was airborne."

"Jesus," Doc Webster said, and pushed Shorty aside to take a turn at trying to get past me. But even he couldn't manage it.

The stranger finished his beer and signaled Tom Hauptman for another. Tom didn't move, kept staring at him. "So I hit the trunk like a flat rock, up the rear window, and into the wild blue," he pointed

upward, "yonder. Somewhere along the way my trou-sers left me. The next thing I know I'm sitting here with a draft in my jockeys and a glass of Rickard's in front of me. Snappy service."

Tom shook off his stasis. "I'd just drawn myself a beer when he came crashing in. I was so startled I just—" He made a sort of pushing motion away from himself with both hands. "And it went—I mean, right smack dab—as if I'd—" He pantomimed sliding a schooner down the bar like you see in old movies. "Bang into his hand."

Dead silence.

"Are you all right, son?" the Doc asked finally.

"Dad," he replied sarcastically, "I was only all right up to about age six. After that I was more or less consistently fantastic up until about twenty-five, and since that time I have been world-class. How are you?"

"On my best day," the Doc quoted, "'I'm borderline.' You know what I'm asking, and I'll thank you to answer. No cuts? No sprains, bruises, contusions?"

The stranger only shrugged.

The Doc sighed. "Mister, I've seen a few things. I can manage to make myself believe, just barely, that you survived that experience—but with-out so much as a scratch? How could you?"

The stranger shrugged with his mouth. "Just lucky, I guess."

There was another short silence, and then the Doc tapped me on the shoulder. (I could tell by the girth of the finger.) I turned and looked at him.

"Jake," he said softly, "weren't you saying something just a few minutes ago about a 'sustained run of incredibly good luck'?"

I took a deep breath. "Ladies and gentlemen," I said, "I believe we are ready to open. Please come in."

Amazing stranger or no, I watched my friends' faces closely as they filed in. Upstaged or not, this was my pre-miere....

Noah was the first one who glanced around as the gang galloped inside, and he couldn't help it: Noah can't enter a strange room without looking around to try and guess where the bomb is. The rest either stared at the pantsless stranger or talked to each other or called out greetings to Tom. But as the stampede crested at the bar, folks remembered where they were: everybody picked a spot and began spinning in slow circles on it with expectant faces.

I held my breath. That's how I know that the silence couldn't have lasted as long as it seemed to: I was still alive when it ended.

It was Fast Eddie who broke it. "Jeez, Jake, dis place is OK."

In the time it took me to exhale, Doc and Long-Drink had nodded agreement, the Drink judiciously and the Doc vigorously. Maybe others did too, but they were the two I was watching closest, the experts whose opinion I most feared. About half of a great weight left my shoulders when I saw those two nods. A buzzing sound in my ears, of which I had not previously been aware, diminished in volume.

"`OK?'" Susan Maser said. "Eddie, I bet if you ever saw the Grand Canyon up close, you'd say, 'Nice ditch.' Jake, this place is great! You really did a job on it."

That was nice to hear, too. Susan was the only one present besides Tom who'd ever seen the place before, back when I'd first bought it. She's an interior decorator, so I'd sought her advice before signing the papers—then thanked her and threw her out, doing all the work myself. If she liked it, I knew the others all would.

And they did. "This is just the way I hoped it would look," Merry Moore said, and Les, her husband and fellow Cheerful Charlie, said, "Me too!"

"Nice size," Long-Drink said judiciously. "Huge, but it feels comfy. Good lighting. Nice tables, too—and I really like those couches—"

"Nice *fireplace*," Doc Webster said.

There was a chorus of agreement that warmed my heart. I'd worked hard on that fireplace. Do you have any idea how hard it is to chisel a bull's-eye into firebrick?

"It ain't exactly like the old hearth," Noah said, "but it looks to me like it'll work just as well. That won't throw glass."

"It's *pretty*," Maureen said, as though Noah had missed the point.

The stranger looked at Noah. "The fireplace won't throw glass?"

"We like to deep-six our glasses in the fireplace sometimes," Noah explained.

"A lot," Long-Drink said, and a general murmur ratified the amendment.

"Really." For the first time the stranger looked mildly impressed. "But you're just opening tonight?"

"Reopening," I said.

"De old place got nuked," Eddie explained.

"Nuked?" The stranger looked at us, decided we weren't kidding, lowered the raised eyebrow, and nodded. "Nuked. You people obviously don't believe in omens. Wait a minute ... I think I heard about that. Pony nuke, back in '86? Some Irish joint on 25A? Terrorists?"

Now I was impressed. "Not a lot of people know about it. Know that it was nuclear, I mean. There was a kind of major news blackout on that part."

The stranger nodded. "I'll bet. Come to sunny Long Island, where terrorists take out recreational facilities with nuclear weapons. That would have looked swell in *Newsday*."

"Well, the Place was pretty isolated," I said, "and it wasn't much of a nuke, as nukes go, and the fallout pattern was out onto the Sound and east to no place in particular, so they decided what with one thing and another they'd pass on starting God's own stampede off the island. I kind of think they made the right decision."

"—and the truth shall make you flee," the stranger said. "I'd like to have seen it. Millions of terrified suburbanites, everything they treasure strapped to the roofs of their station wagons, pour into New York City—and find themselves in the Traffic Jam From Hell, surrounded by street kids and derelicts with great big smiles. Talk about a massive transfer of resources. Like cattle stampeding into the slaughterhouse." He chuckled wickedly.

"How'd you happen to hear about it being nuclear?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I have sources."

"I said," Doc Webster said with a long-suffering air, "Nice fireplace."

I nodded. "Thanks, Doc. The way I—"

"What I mean," he interrupted, "is when are we going to give it a field test?"

"Oh!" My friends had been in my bar for several minutes, and still had empty hands. I blushed deeply and ran around behind the bar, nearly trampling Tom Hauptman.

"I'm buying," the Doc said, and a cheer went up.

I shook my head. "Sorry, Doc. You can buy the first round bought—but this one's on the house. My privilege."

He nodded acknowledgment, smiling at me like a proud uncle, and another cheer went up.

Rickard's turned out to be OK with everybody; Tom and I became briefly busy drawing and passing out glasses. No one drank until everyone had been served. I noticed that Shorty was missing; he'd stepped out to see if his car was movable. I hoped he could, for once, find reverse on the first try. Finally every hand was full. "Your privilege, Jake," the Doc said, gesturing toward the hearth.

I nodded, stepped out from behind the bar and walked up to the chalk line on the floor, facing the fireplace. I lifted my glass. Something was wrong with my vision, and my cheeks felt cool.

"To Mary Callahan-Finn, brothers and sisters," I said solemnly.

There was a nice warm power to the chorus. "*To Mary Callahan-Finn!*"

I drained my glass, and hit that bull's-eye dead center. As it had every time in rehearsal, the shape of the fireplace contained all the shards beautifully.

A staggered barrage of empty glasses rained into the hearth, like fireworks filmed in reverse, flashing colors as they tumbled, sparkling as they struck and burst. When the last of them had landed—Ralph's: he had to move in kind of close and flick it with his muzzle—I noted happily there still were no fragments on the floor of the bar proper.

Then I took a closer look, and blinked.

All the smithereened remains of those eighteen glasses were still in the fireplace, all right. And they had arranged themselves on the hearth floor in the shape of the word "MARY" In glittering italic script. It was nearly perfect, except that each letter had a small gap in it.

I turned to stone. "Hully Jeeze," Fast Eddie said. There were grunts and exclamations all around as others saw the phenomenon. That reassured me somewhat; if others saw it too, at least I wasn't crazy. Maybe that was good ...

"Sorry," the stranger said.

I turned very slowly to face him. So did everyone else.

His expression was of mildest apolo-gy, as though he'd just committed some very small and unintentional faux pas.

"You did that?" I asked, pointing behind me at the fireplace.

"Not consciously, no." He got up—tugging at the seat of his jockey shorts and tossing his motorcycle scarf jauntily over his shoulder—and came over to me at the chalk line. He had one of those small-man's-jaunty--strides, just a touch of rooster in it. But it wasn't like he was overcom-pensating for his size; it was simply that he had *total* self-confidence. You can tell the genuine article from even the best fake, every time. He turned his back to the fireplace, finished the last sip of his beer, and tossed the empty glass backwards over his shoulder. It hit the bullseye as squarely as my throw had.

And when its little musical smash had ended, all four letters in Mary's name were filled in.

After a moment of silence, Long-Drink McGonnigle spoke up. "Mister, I'd like to buy you a drink."

The stranger looked him up and down carefully. "Let me think about it."

The Doc was looking thoughtful. "Stuff like that happen around you a lot? If you don't mind my asking?"

The stranger stuck out his hairy jaw, sublimely comfortable at being the center of attention in his jockey shorts. "To the best of my knowledge, only while I'm awake. The rest of the time I lead a normal existence."

The door swung open and Shorty came back in, looking thunderstruck. "What's the matter, Shorty?" Doc Webster asked. "Damage bad?"

Shorty blinked at us all. "I went to look. See how bad it was, you know?" He gestured with his hands, looking a little like a man playing an invisible banjo.

"*That* bad?" I asked sympatheti-cally.

He shook his head. "When I left the house tonight, I had this ding in the rear bumper from a hit-and-run two days ago. I'd been meaning to report it to my insurance company. That motorsickel fixed it."

"*Huh?*"

"Fixed it nice as you please. The ding is gone. Popped back out. Near as I can figure, chrome from the bike fender plated itself everywhere there was chrome scraped off. You can't tell there ever *was* a ding. And my trunk light works now." He shook his head. "Never did before. Not even when she was new."

Rooba rooba rooba.

The only one in the room who did not seem to need the services of a wig-tapper was the hairy stranger. He looked quite unsurprised and unim-pressed by Shorty's news.

"Friend," I said to him, cutting through the buzz of conversation, "I am Jake Stonebender, and this is Mary's Place. These here are—" I in-troduced all my friends, one after an-other. "Welcome to our joint."

For the first time he smiled. Well, it had aspects of a smile to it, and for a second there teeth actually flashed in the undergrowth. "Usually I get more reaction. You people are all right." He looked at us all a little closer. "You've seen some shit, haven't you? All of you."

"That we have," Long-Drink said solemnly.

He nodded. "That's gonna save a lot of time. People generally call me the Duck."

An unusual name for a small man to choose. But there *was* just a touch of duck in his walk, and a trace of nasal honk to his voice, and he cer-tainly could have given either Daffy or Donald points for

attitude. Then I got it. "The Lucky Duck!"

"The proverbial," he agreed, and quacked twice nasally. "But I some-times think of myself as The Improbable Man. It's less misleading. 'Lucky' implies that the luck is always good."

"You mean—" Long-Drink began.

"How was the bike?" the Duck asked Shorty, interrupting.

"Well, that's the other funny thing," Shorty said. "I never in my life seen a piece of machinery so fucked up. I mean, every single piece of gear I could see on it was wrecked or ripped loose or mashed up some way or other. Even things you wouldn't think would—Mister, I'm sorry. I don't think you can salvage as much as a bolt out of her."

The Duck nodded. "There you go. Don't worry about it. The best bargain you can get today, the Russians'll charge you \$187,000 to loft you into orbit. Your rates are more reasonable."

"I should have been more careful," Shorty said. "Look, I'm insured—"

"I'm not. And I hate cashing checks. Forget it."

"Huh?"

"It happens all the time. Don't worry about it. *You*, I'll let buy me a drink. After the Doctor there buys his round for the house. That'll square us, OK?"

"Sure thing," Shorty agreed dazedly.

"Wait a minute," Long-Drink said, doggedly pursuing his point. "Are you trying to tell me—"

The Duck's eyes flashed. "OK, I'll show, not tell," he said. "That's how to handle the third-grade mentality. Watch, Sir Stephen Hawking: I'll try again." He glanced around, and saw the dart board. "You got darts for that thing?" he asked me.

I went back to the bar and got the compact little tube for him. Plastic darts, good ones, with snug little plastic tail sockets so you can nest six of them in a tube that small, or carry them around out of the tube in comparative safety. He took them out and separated them, set down all but one of them on a nearby table, looked up and snatched Long-Drink's night watchman's cap from his head. Drink blinked, and then glared, and for an instant I thought, *That duck'll have to be lucky to survive now*, but the hairy man returned his glare with a look of such total confidence that Long-Drink decided to let it go.

"Thanks," the Duck said insolently. He held the cap up over his face, completely obscuring his vision, and let go with one of the darts.

It was a rotten shot. It just barely hit the target, wedging its way in precisely between the target proper and the surrounding rim.

I guess we'd all been expecting a bull's-eye. We giggled. Well, some of us guffawed. Relief of tension and all that.

Without looking at the results of his shot, he glared around at us from behind the hat until silence descended again. He took another dart, and let fly.

It socketed neatly into the first dart, with a *suck-pop* sound like kids make by plucking a finger out of their cheek.

No laughter this time.

He shifted hands. His view of the target still blocked by the hat, he threw a third dart left-handed, quite clumsily.

It homed in on the second dart like a Sidewinder up a MiG tailpipe. *Thop!* Dead silence.

He turned around and threw the fourth dart over his shoulder, the way he had his glass. It spun like a Catherine wheel as it flew.

Fap! Bull's ... uh, nether receptacle. Four darts stuck out from the target as one, drooping slightly.

He turned back to face the board, put Long-Drink's hat on his head backwards, picked up the fifth dart, balanced it on the point on his index finger, and let it fall. It fell tumbling, and when he drop-kicked it, it chanced not to be point-down. It rose in an arc across the room, and slammed into dart number four with an upward angle, correcting the droop.

Silence so complete that I could hear my digestion.

He turned around again, back to the board, and threw the last dart directly at me, hard.

As it left his hand, a last piece of debris dropped from the hatchway overhead and fell in front of me.

The dart ricocheted off it, *WOK!* and then off a beer *tap*, *CLANG!* and then off the ceiling, *BOK!* and then off the edge of the bar, *TOK!* and joined the daisy chain at the target, *THUP!* The piece of wood caromed off the bar top at an angle and ended up in a trash can behind the bar, adding *KDAP!* and *FUSH!* to the sound effects. I contributed "Eep," the best I could come up with on the spur of the moment, in a fetching soprano.

And *this* silence was so complete I could hear myself think.

Now, you could think about that and say to yourself, he's the best dart-thrower I ever saw. But that first shot had been *lousy*. A good shooter would have planted them all at the *center* of the target. It hadn't been extraordinary skill, but extraordinary coincidence....

The silence lasted a little under ten seconds. Then Doc Webster said, "Nice form. So show us around the place a little, Jake. Is that over there in the corner what I think it is?"

"Yeah, Doc," I said at once. "It's a TV."

"Jeeze," Fast Eddie said. "You watch TV, Jake?"

"It's like China, Eddie," I told him. "If you don't pay any attention to it, it just gets worse. I've got it hooked up to cable, for news and weather and *Rockford Files* reruns—but its main purpose is to serve that laser disc machine. Up to eight people can watch a movie together if they want—and it can't be turned to face the rest of the room."

"Zpeakers or headphoney?" Ralph asked.

"It's rigged for both. But the speakers are directional, and they can't be turned up loud enough to bother the serious drinkers."

"Slick," Willard said approvingly.

I snuck a glance at the Duck—who seemed quite pleased about being ignored. The Doc's instincts were sound. A guy like the Duck must get tired of being gaped at and marveled over. I went on with my spiel. "The house sound system is a Technics CD, a Kenwood logic-controlled cassette deck with Dolby B and C, an AR turn-table, Dynaco SCA-35 tube amp with Van Alstine modifications, and Cambridge Soundworks speakers by old man Kloss himself—the woofer's built into the bar."

"Jesus," said Shorty, who sells and installs custom audiophile gear for a living, "that's money damn well spent."

"And not much of it," I agreed.

"That's what I mean. I've sold systems for eight times the price that weren't as good. No, ten times."

"Well, the KX-790-R is the first perfect cassette deck ever made, so naturally hardly anybody bought one, and Kenwood discontinued the model almost at once. I got the AR table twenty years ago for seventy-eight dollars, and in another twenty years it'll probably need some maintenance. Lots of people are stupid enough to throw away tube amplifiers these days, and old Santa Kloss sells those speakers direct from the factory at a price so low you wouldn't believe it if I told you—call 1-800-AKA-HIFI if you want to know. I've set it up so everybody can reach the controls—but I get to settle any squabbles."

"Let's hear a taste," Tommy said. "Crank it up, Jake."

"Sure." I switched on the Dynakit, and waited.

"What are you waiting for?" Tommy asked.

I smiled. "Back at the dawn of time," I explained, "they used to make amplifiers with tubes. They used to take time to warm up. It was worth the wait. Now listen." I turned up the volume. I already had a CD in the player; I punched the button.

A horn-section vamped three notes, and was answered by a piano. People jumped at the fidelity. Again, the piano answering differently this time. A third time, and then a fourth, completed the intro ... and then Betty Carter told us she really couldn't stay.

And there was respectful silence as she and Ray Charles sang "Baby, It's Cold Outside." Digitally remastered from the original 1962 master tapes by the genius himself. Do you know that track? It'll make you smile, and sigh wistfully, and nod....

When Ray and Betty were done, people were smiling and sighing wistfully and nodding. Both the

sound system and the track were praised ex-travagantly. I killed the disc and re-moved it, put in background music and turned the volume way down. "Now, over there, of course," I said, pointing to the piano in the corner, "is Fast Eddie's upright, so we don't have to live entirely on canned music. I've rigged a switch so you can turn the sound system off from there any time you like, Eddie. The box has been tuned, and there's a pack of thumbtacks on it for the hammers."

His monkey face split in a grin. "Tanks, Jake."

"In that corner," I went on, "is the house computer. It's a Mac II. It's got 5 megs of RAM, and a 40-meg hard disk. A crazy friend of mine named Jon Singer gave it to me; all I had to put into it was the extra RAM, the hard drive and the monitor. I've got software in it for both beginners and power users."

"Modem?" Tommy asked.

I nodded. "Pay as you go. That cigar box next to the mouse is for settling up; same policy as the one on the bar." Which meant, honor system: no one would watch with beady eyes to make sure people paid for time used. "Which brings up an important mat-ter, jadies and lentilmen. Uh ..." This was one of the parts I had fretted over for days; I braced myself for the storm. "I'm still accepting nothing but dollar bills, like always—but I'm afraid the price of a drink has tripled, and the change-back has only doubled."

A few nods, a few shrugs; not one protest. "Three bucks a drink, a buck back if you don't bust the glass?" Les asked, but he was just making sure he understood me. I nodded, and he nodded back. "Like we figured," he said philosophically.

I ought to have known my friends would understand inflation.

But the Duck showed surprise. "You mean to tell me drinks used to be a buck apiece at that other place? And you got fifty cents back just for turning in your empty?"

There was a chorus of agreement.

"Jesus," he said. "No wonder the place got bombed. Oh shit, excuse me—'got nuked,' I mean."

"No apology necessary," I told him. "We tolerate punning in here."

"As a matter of fact, we encourage punning in here sometimes," Noah Webster said. There was a rumble of general agreement.

"Not all the time," Maureen has-tened to assure the Duck. "Only on days ending in `-y.'"

He closed his eyes and sighed deeply. "Naturally. My luck."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "in honor of your arrival, I've been giving some thought to changing the name of the place—"

"—to the Dude Drop Inn, right, I've been holding my breath praying that nobody would think of that one since I sat down."

"Nobody had," I told him. "I'd been thinking of 'the Fall-In Shelter.' But yours is rotten, too."

He shrugged with his mouth. "Thanks."

"Wait, let me introduce you to the champ. Hey, Doc!"

"Yes, Jake?"

"How bad did you say that movie was?"

The Doc knows a straightline (the shortest distance between two puns) when he hears it. Glancing ceil-ingard in perfunctory apology to Johnny Mercer, he sang, "Mack Son-net ate the positive, and Jack Lemmon ate the negative—"

Groans arose, and several handfuls of peanuts or pretzels bounced off the Doc, who ignored them. "Talk about a movie that turned to shit," Long-Drink said, grinning.

The Duck regarded the Doc. "Say," he said, "have you read the new Tony Hillerman novel?"

"Which one?" the Doc asked cau-tiously.

"*The Hemming Way*," the Duck said. "Or was it *The Seg Way*. . . ? Any-way, Officer Jim Chee becomes a Navajo narc—and plants a recording device on a pot smoker."

"So?" the Doc asked incautiously.

The Duck buffed his nails. "Makes him the first American Indian to wire a head for a reservation."

I guess I shouldn't have been sur-prised. Every single morsel of food thrown at him happened to bounce into one of the free-lunch bowls it had come from.

"Stop the presses: Duck Decks Doc!" Long-Drink crowed. The Doc smiled with genuine pleasure,

and made a little bow of respect as the general groan subsided. But his eyes were sparkling, and I knew this con-test was not over yet.

"Hey Jake, what the hell is that?"

Tommy Janssen asked, pointing be-hind me. "It looks like that thing Alec Guinness built in *The Man in the White Suit*."

"It looks like a stereo makin' love to a soda fountain," Eddie said.

"It looks like something in the Sci-ence Museum in Boston," Martin said.

"Someday it will be," I told him. "But not until we're done with it. Tommy, you asked, so the honor is yours." I looked Tommy over, checked my memory, made one small adjustment of a dial, touched three solenoids, and pushed the go-button. There ensued a curious sequence of sounds. The overall effect was indeed vaguely reminiscent of the Guinness-movie gadget Tommy had men-tioned. First a brief soft rattling noise. Then for about twenty seconds the softer sounds of a small fan and a tiny turntable. Then another short rat-ting, slightly louder and higher in pitch than the first. Then a much louder rattling for twelve seconds, followed by a *chuff*, a *huff*, and what sounded like someone blowing bub-bles in mud. As if cued by that last sound, a small conveyor belt started up at the bottom of the device, enter-ing on the left and exiting at the right, and briefly visible in a cereal-box sized alcove in the center. An over-sized mug slid into view, stopped when it was centered in the al-cove—just in time to catch the dark fluid that began to drip from above.

Nostrils flared all along the bar. "Holy shit," Eddie breathed. "It's—"

"—the Ultimate Coffee Machine," I agreed. "Notice how *fast* it's dripping. The brewing module is mildly pressurized. Not enough for espresso, but enough to speed things up. Watch, now."

The mug had tilled enough for its weight to restart the conveyor belt. The mug slid to the right and disap-peared into the machine again ... re-emerged at its right side with a lumpy white hat on. I picked up the mug and handed it to Tommy. He stared at it, looked around at the rest of us, and took a tentative sip.

Then he took a big gulp.

Then he drained the mug, and looked up at me with an oddly stricken expression. He groped for words.

What he finally came up with was, "For this Blessing, much thanks." And then his features relaxed into a bliss-ful grin. "That was the best goddam Irish Coffee I ever drank in my life."

The Doc broke the silence that en-sued. "Jake, what did we just see?"

"The apotheosis of technological civilization," I said. "At least until someone invents a good sex robot. Watch." I leaned over and reset the parameters, pushed the go-button again. I pointed with my index finger to the source of the first rattling sound. "That's the raw coffee beans dropping into the roaster. Wet-pro-cessed. Hear that fan? *Microwave* dry-roasting. Default setting is American roast, but I can do anything from pale to Italian. Now the roasted beans are dropping into the grinder—hear it? Ground, not chopped: a chopper heats them too much too soon. Now the grinder's cleaning itself. And there's the water entering the brew-ing chamber at just the right temperature and pressure—and there's the pre-heated mug, just in time." A sec-ond mug of coffee appeared, filled, and whisked away to be adulterated to taste. It too emerged snow-capped with whipped cream, and I handed it to the Doc.

He took a sip—then held it away from him and gaped at it.

"Yours isn't brewed as strong as Tommy's," I said, "and I gave you a darker roast, and you've got half as much sugar, just the way you like it."

"God's Blessing, indeed," he said reverently, and finished the mug in one long slow savored draught. He licked his lips.

"The machine self-cleans con-stantly, and when you shut it down for the night it autoclaves itself." I took the empty mugs back from Tommy and the Doc, and set them down to the left of the machine, up-side down, on a turntable the size of an extra large pizza, speckled with draining holes. The mugs' weight ac-tivated it: it delivered them both onto the conveyor belt where it entered the machine at the lower left. "It washes the mugs, dries them, and flips them rightside up." I opened the right-side access and showed them the hoppers for cream and sugar and the rack that held a quart of the Black Bush

upside down. "I can vary the roast, the brew, and the amounts of booze, sugar, cream or whipped cream. It whips its own cream. I feed it with raw beans and additives before I open, and for the rest of the night all I have to do is put dirty cups in this side and take full ones out this side. The inventor says it's fully automatic, but actually you have to push this button here."

Like a grenade. Five seconds of silence, and then, rooba rooba rooba.

I preened. I had been looking forward to this moment with keen anticipation for a long time. Even the nagging weight of the big unsolved problem I was still carrying around didn't spoil my pleasure: it may have enhanced it.

"Jake," Doc said, "am I crazy, or was that the McCoy?"

I grinned. "Neither. But if I told you it was, you'd believe it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," he stated.

"Naw, I stopped buying Blue Mountain when the price became unreasonable. How anybody can say that the people who cornered the world market in Jamaica Blue and keep nearly all of it for themselves are a polite race is beyond me. But if Blue Mountain is a ten, and Kona Gold is an 8.5, what you just drank is at least a 9—at a third of the cost of the Blue, half the cost of Kona. And if we can just keep it a secret, it'll stay that way for a while."

"What is it?" Tommy asked.

I looked around for imaginary Japaneese importers, and said conspiratorially, "Celebes Kalossi. From the island of Sulawesi, in Indonesia. But don't tell anybody you don't love."

"Huh," the Doc said. "Never tried it."

"It's the best-kept secret in the world," I agreed. "At the moment I've also got the machine fed with Kenya Double A, Tanzania Peaherry, and a custom Australian from Queensland—but there's an extra hopper for special requests, with an option to bypass the roaster module on that one. You bring the beans, raw or roasted, I'll serve you the coffee. But no flavored crap."

People stared at the thing with expressions of awe. I knew just how they felt. The first time I'd ever seen it, I'd spent the next six hours just staring at it, studying it—and drinking its output, of course.

"This one's on the house too, Doc," I said. "You'll want a toast with your round, and these mugs are kinda dear to bust." I began punching up mugs for everyone present and passing them out. I had to ask Suzy and Susan Maser and Willard and Maureen to remind me how they took theirs, and I had to find a bowl for Ralph....

Pretty soon there were a lot of smiles in the house, with whipped-cream mustaches.

Pyotr wandered in late (being a vampire, he never gets up before dark), admired the place extravagantly, and was made welcome; I poured him a distilled water while the others brought him up to speed. It was he who suggested that since our name for Irish coffee is "God's Blessing," the machine should be called "The Fount," as in, the fount of all blessings. The name was adopted by acclamation.

"Why is the cup accessible there in the center before it's ready?" Willard asked. "So you can get it faster if the customer wants it black?"

"Nah," I said. "The cup exits the moment it's full anyway. That opening is just there so you can *smell* the coffee dripping."

Willard smiled, and finished his Blessing.

"My god, Jake," his wife Maureen said, "The thing must have cost a king's ransom."

"It cost me about two days of talking," I said.

"How?"

"Did any of you ever hear of a guy up in Syracuse called The Slave of Coffee?"

Blank stares, except for the Duck, who just nodded, and Fast Eddie, who said, "I hold of him, sure—are youse tryin'a tell me he really *exists*?"

"He sure does," I told him. "Retired now though, God have mercy on us all."

Everyone looked to Eddie. "The Slave of Coffee?" Doc Webster asked, with the air of one resigned to hearing something amazing.

"He's this whackadoo," Eddie said. "Inherits a shitpot o' dough, and decides to start his own cult. Coffee woyship."

"He used to have a little hole-in--the-wall shop off Spadina," I told them, "called the Slave of Coffee. Half a dozen chairs, a couple dozen opaque vacuum jars, a roasting drum, a hand mill, two single-cup Brauns with gold filter baskets, a sink, fifty gallons of spring water, and a little beer fridge for cream. You go in there, he'd sit you down and ask you to describe the perfect cup of coffee. What, by you, an ideal cup should *taste* like. He'd explain the terminol-ogy if you didn't know it. Then he'd listen to what you said, nod, crack three or four jars and take a few beans from each one, roast 'em and grind 'cm, and brew you up a cup. Then he'd ask you to tell him, precisely, in what particulars it fell short of abso-lute perfection. So you'd try, and pretty soon he'd nod again and as-semble a new blend, change one or two of the jars, vary the proportions. In those jars he had all the great cof-fees of the world, and the cream of every crop. This process continued until he'd brewed you a cup of coffee that you felt was *perfect*—or at least the best the planet could provide for your taste. Then he'd write down your prescription for you, file a copy—and sell you a pound at cost."

"Jesus Christ," Long-Drink said rev-erently. "How could he show a profit?"

"By creating a category in his book-keeping called 'Satisfaction,' Drink. He inherited his pile when he was thirty, and decided he couldn't think of anything better to spend it on than turning people on to good coffee."

"Come to think of it," the Doc rum-bled, "neither can I."

"He drove the IRS crazy, but so far it's still legal to lose money if you have a mind to. He operated like that twelve hours a day, six days a week, for over twenty years. If nobody came in, he'd read a book. Once a year he'd take off a month and travel around the world, visiting all the great coffee kings—he knew 'em all; they'd give him beans out of their personal stashes."

"My God," Bill said, adjusting a bra strap, "he must have done something awful good in his last incarnation." "There were many nods."

"One day," I went on, "he realized that his money was running out. So he sank most of what he had left into designing the Fount. He figured to sell it for enough to keep peddling superb coffee at cost until he dropped in his tracks. He started with the concept of microwave roasting. In conventional roasting, by the time the inside of the bean is done, the outside is a little overdone ... so you have to go for a compromise. With microwave, the inside and outside reach optimum temperature together."

"Brilliant," Doc Webster said. Even the Duck looked impressed.

"It grew from there. He said he re-alized the idea was too big for indi-vidual home consumers, so he aimed at the restaurant, bar and big office markets. The Fount's made like a VW used to be. Every single component is stock generic hardware, cheap and easy to replace. The prototype cost him his last dime, but he wasn't wor-ried. He knew he had a winner. He went looking for venture capital and a patent lawyer."

"Which one got him?" Willard asked, with the reflexive interest of a retired professional. "The money man or the lawyer?"

"Both," I said sadly. "He was lucky to come out of it with physical pos-session of the Mark I—which he's not allowed to sell. There's a patent but his name doesn't appear on it, and he's legally enjoined by a corporation he supposedly worked for against ever inventing anything involving coffee again, and the lawyer has his nephew, the engineering student, busy crapping up the design to suit the capitalist. In about five years you'll be able to pay eight hundred bucks for a version that looks like the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*, and will actually produce a drinkable cup of coffee right up until its thirty-day warranty runs out, after which you will find that the capitalist is sole source for all the customized parts. It'll stiff big, because hardly anyplace wants to devote that much money and space to a better cup of coffee and not get it, and that'll kill the mar-ket for at least a decade."

"Meanwhile, the Slave's retired, broke. He's so bummed out, he gave me The Machine pretty much just to know that it was being used by peo-ple who'd appreciate it. I offered him 100 percent of the profits I made sell-ing coffee, but he isn't allowed to ac-cept 'em."

"Jesus," Tommy said. "No good deed goes unpunished. Maybe this society is too stupid to *deserve* the Fount. What's this Slave's name?"

"What else?" I said. "Coffey. Joe Coffey. Like the cop Ed Marinaro played on 'Hill Street Blues'. For

all I know he was born with that name, and it triggered his interest. I never asked."

"He actually is Mister Coffey...." Long-Drink said wonderingly, and flinched under Doc Webster's glare.

"Yeah, it's hard to say that with a straight face," I agreed. "I always call him Cough."

"You got a spare cigar box, Jake?" Tommy asked.

The non sequitur took me aback. Or did it sequite? Cough—cigar—ci-gar box? "Yeah, as a matter of fact. Why?"

"Whip it out," he said. When I obliged, he set it at the end of the bar, beside the customary one intended to let people reclaim whatever change they have coming back when they leave. "That there is for dona-tions to the Order of the Sainted Slave," he announced, and dropped in a couple of singles.

Doc Webster drifted over. "I hereby dub it The Cough Drop," he said, and dropped in a five. A line formed behind him.

The Duck was so surprised he for-got to grimace. "Have I got this right?" he asked me. "The guy gave you this thing ... and now they all in-sist on paying for it? In installments?"

I blinked. "Yeah. Why—you got a problem with that?"

He shook his head. "No," he said. "It's just that I've been looking for a place like this all my life ... and up until now, even my luck hadn't been that good."

I smiled and stuck out my hand. "Welcome to Mary's Place, Duck."

The hair at one corner of his mouth twitched, as though he were trying to grin but the necessary muscles had atrophied. "A pleasure."

"Better," I said. "A joy. You'll see."

He sighed and nodded philosophi-cally. "I probably will. Hey, Doc! You're buyin', you said?"

"My shout," Doc Webster agreed, and I got busy.

This toast was to gentle, funny Tom Flannery, who had died a dozen years earlier to the day—and was still fondly remembered by all those who had had the privilege of knowing him.

By the time the last glass had smashed, the shrapnel in the hearth had randomized again.

"One thing I'll say for you people," the Duck said some time later. "You don't ask the obvious questions."

"You don't ask many yourself," I said.

"Just about everybody else I ever met seems to think that if you're weird you have some obligation to go around explaining yourself."

I nodded. "We've got a fair number of customs and habits, but only a handful of rules. One of 'em is that anybody who asks a snoopy question in here wakes up in the alley with a sore skull bone."

"Who gets to define 'snoopy'?"

"The person asked. If you want to know something personal, it's best to begin with, 'Do you mind if I ask—?' and be prepared to accept a `Yes'."

The answer clearly pleased him. "You people are all right. What the hell is the name of this joint, anyway?"

"Mary's Place," I told him.

He glanced around the room. "Uh ... you mind if I ask where Mary is?"

"Not at all—but I can't answer. You asked the wrong question."

He tilted his head and regarded me out of the corner of his eye. "What is the right question?"

"The right question is, 'When is Mary?'"

He didn't even blink. "OK. When *is* Mary?"

"Not yet," I said, and moved down the bar to get the McGonnigle an ale.

I expected that to end it. Enough time had passed that I was no longer suffused with sick helpless yearning at the sound of Mary's name—no-thing worse than a toothache—but I still wasn't ready to discuss her with a stranger. Even an interesting stranger that I was beginning to take a shine to.

But while I was away, he paid me a pretty high compliment. The Duck thought about what I'd said, and how I'd said it, and decided to assume *not only* that I'd meant it literally ... but that I wasn't as crazy

as it made me sound.

"Time traveler, eh?" he said matter-of-factly when I got back to him.

I nodded, trying to be just as matter-of-fact. "Ever met any?"

"Just one. Guy named Phee—"

I whooped with delight. "—and he swindled you out of even, penny you had, right? We had him in here too, once! Boy, that's an amazing co—" Just in time I caught myself.

"Thank you," the Duck said quietly. "You have no idea how much I hate those words."

"I can see how that would be."

"Your Mary isn't a friend of Phee's, is she?" he asked.

"No, no, she's from further up the line. Much nicer class of people." He nodded. "And she founded this place?"

"No, that was her dad. Mike Callahan. He established Callahan's Place in 1948, about twenty miles from here."

"What'd he do there?"

I shrugged. How do you answer a question like that? "Fixed broken brains. Made sad people happy and happy people merry and merry people joyous. Tutored in kindness and telepathy. Smoked hideous cigars. Forgave people. Accessory before and after the pun."

"Where ... excuse me, when is *he* now?"

"I wish I knew, Duck. I truly do. He left that night, and hasn't been back."

He snorted. "Hell, I would too. All it takes is one nuclear weapon and I'm gone; that's just the kind of guy I am. Call me touchy."

"Oh, that's not why he left. It was more of a 'Tonto, our work here is done' kind of deal."

"What—" He caught himself. "You mind if I ask, what was his work here? Besides being a jolly host."

"Well, basically he had to save the world."

The Duck nodded. "Glad to hear it. Only sensible reason I can think of for using a time machine. I gather he was successful?"

"Seems so," I agreed.

"How'd he do it?"

"He killed a cockroach."

He sighed and looked pained. "Look, Jake, you can tell I'm crazy enough to believe this bullshit—so why are you dragging it out like this? Are you gonna tell me the story or what?" When I hesitated, he looked even more pained. "OK, I understand. You just met my face."

"No, no," I said. "It's not that. There's nothing secret about it. But it's a real long story, Duck. I mean, I think it'd probably take about three books to tell you all of it."

"I got time," he said.

So I made a start. It seemed appropriate to be telling someone the story of Mike Callahan, on Opening Night at Mary's Place. But I hadn't gotten very far—barely as far as the night Mickey Finn walked in and told us all that he was gonna destroy the Earth shortly, and felt just terrible about it—when the door opened, and a white-haired old stranger came in, and I shut up.

Why? you may ask. Why stop in the midst of a perfectly good yarn just because someone walks in who probably wouldn't understand a word of it, or believe it if he did? It wasn't simply because he was a stranger: so was the Duck. To be sure, the Duck had already sort of established himself as Our Kind of Guy—but I had no reason to conceal Mike's story from *anybody*. What harm could it do? If Mike had wanted us to keep our mouths shut about him, he'd have told us before he left. Tom Hauptman was closer to the door than I was, and not busy; I could have kept on talking.

But several things about the old-timer were striking.

First of all, of course, the simple fact of his advent. This was Opening Night, for what was intended to be something like a semi private club. I didn't plan to bar new trade—but I hadn't *expected* any this soon. There was no neon outside; no sign of any kind, on the building or out on 25A. I had done no

advertising, posted no fliers. The place did not *look* particularly like a bar from the outside, more like a warehouse of some kind. What had led the old gent to wander inside?

There was no storm without....

And he was clearly in great need of a drink, that was the next striking thing about him. What he looked like, really, was somebody wandering around in shock after a major accident. Only technically present. Eyes like Mickey Finn had the night *he* walked in: what grunts call the Thousand-Mile Stare. Novocaine features, skin wrinkled and sagging. Vaguely storklike walk. Neglected clothes, buttons in the wrong holes.

That, I found myself thinking, must be what I looked like right after Barbara and Jessica died.

(You think that's a depressing thought? I was improving. A couple of years earlier I'd have thought, *that must be what I looked like right after I killed Barbara and Jessica.*)

(No. A couple of years earlier, I would not have had that thought at all. Not if I could possibly have helped it.)

He looked, in other words, like a man carrying a load larger than his design limit ... and so bone-deep ex-hausted from shouldering it that he has ceased to even mind the pain.

In fact, however, the only load he appeared to be carrying at the moment would probably have assayed out at not much over five pounds. Possibly less—depending on how many bullets were in the clip. The muzzle diameter seemed noticeably smaller than the Holland Tunnel. And I was looking at it head-on. It oscillated at about the same rate that I was trembling.

If Dejah Thoris married a guy named Parley Voo, she'd be—

It was by no means the first déjà vu of that night for me—but it was certainly the most powerful so far. I tried to take what comfort I could from the fact that the last guy who'd walked into Callahan's Place with a .45 automatic in his hand, a decade and a half ago, was presently standing ten feet away from me, serving drinks. But it didn't help much.

Conversations died away as people saw the stranger and the gun. Fast Eddie kept on playing piano; soon that and the crackling fire were the only sounds in the room.

I wanted to handle this situation in as Callahan-like a manner as possible. I knew this was an important surprise test of my fitness to assume his mantle—and that I had already lost points for stopping in the middle of a sentence when I'd seen the gun. Mike would have finished his sentence, excused himself to his listener, and *then* dealt with the gunman. So I wanted very much to hit the ground running. The problem was, first I had to deal with a blockage in my airway ... which turned out to be my heart. It's damned odd: the fight-or-flight adrenal rush is supposed to be the evolutionary heritage of millions of years of success in surviving crises ... and just about every time it's ever happened to me, it ruined my judgment or my coordination or both. Especially on those occasions—like this one—when the judges split evenly on the question of fight or flight. The net result was quivering quadriplegia without the comfort of numbness.

And so it was that selfsame abovementioned former gunslinger, ex-minister and utility bartender, Tom Hauptman, who had to deal with the situation.

He finished the sentence he was speaking to Noah Gonzalez, and walked down the bar toward me. My peripheral vision was unnaturally vast, and I could see Tom clearly. He walked slowly and casually, and with every step he got larger and broader and calmer and more Callahan-like; as he reached me I could have sworn I caught a sharp whiff of cheap cigar. He and the stranger reached opposite sides of the bar at the same time and locked eyes. The old guy held out his gun. Tom held out a salt shaker. The gunman opened his mouth, then his eyes focused on the salt shaker, and he closed his mouth.

"Might as well salt that thing, mister," Tom said gently. "You're about to eat it."

All of us remembered those words. Callahan had spoken them to Tom himself, the night that Tom

had tried to stick up the joint.

But I had been watching Mike when he said it that night, and I re-called that his hands had been under the bar, resting on his sawed-off, at the time. I had an alley-sweeper un-der the bar myself, and other items slightly less lethal. But I was in the stranger's visual field, and did not dare upstage Tom in this psychologi-cally crucial moment. Also I was not certain my body would obey orders, and it is usually better to not pull a gun than to screw it up. I had one small comfort. In that stopped-time moment of hyperacute sensitivity, I became aware of a subliminal change in the music Fast Eddie was playing, and realized that his left hand was now doing the playing for both, so well that probably no one else no-ticed.

But the old gent lowered his gun, and Tom lowered the salt shaker, and Eddie lowered the blackjack, and I lowered my CO₂ level, by inhaling for the first time in what seemed to have been a very long while.

Eddie went back to playing two-handed, but his left was playing Pro-fessor Longhair style, and his right sounded like Monk.

"But you'll be wanting a drink first," Tom went on pleasantly. "How about God's Blessing?"

I hadn't thought Tom was going to get a word out of this guy ... but he managed to puzzle him into speech. "What's that?" His voice was rusty.

"Irish coffee," Tom said, and went to the Fount, turning his back on the man with the gun without hesitation. "You take sugar?" Tom asked without turning.

The old man frowned down at the gat, and put it in his pants pocket. "Please."

I could spend an hour making a list of Words I'd Most Like A Stranger Who's Just Walked Into My Bar With A Gun To Say, and that'd still be in the top three at least. (Think about it. Suppose it was Marilyn Chambers, and she said, "Strip!"?) It was the word more than the simple pocketing of the gat that made me stop calculat-ing the distance between my hand and my scattergun. I swallowed as unobtrusively as I could, and said, "Howdy, friend. Welcome to Mary's Place. I'm the proprietor; my name's Jake." My voice came out steady, friendly.

He focused his eyes on me. He saw a tall skinny forty-something galoot with glasses, a greying heard and a ponytail, wearing an apron. I saw a paunchy man of average height in his middle or late seventies with Mark Twain hair, dressed like an absent-minded professor whose wife has re-cently discovered LSD. He was wildly out of character as a burglar, and I saw him beginning to realize it. "Ah ... hello. I'm ah ... Jonathan."

"Pleased to meet you, Jonathan," I said. "Let me know if there's anything you need." And I went back to telling the Duck about Mickey Finn. He looked at me a little oddly, but soon he was nodding and *mm* humming.

Conversations restarted all around the room. Not the rooba-rooba you get after a crisis, just normal bar chatter.

Tom gave Jonathan his Blessing, in-troduced himself briefly, made change, and left him alone. The old guy blinked at Tom's retreating back—I averted my eyes as he glanced at me—and then he spent a few seconds blinking at the steaming mug, then he turned bright red for just a moment, and finally he took what was meant to be a big gulp of coffee. For the first second he was disappointed that it wasn't hot enough to burn his mouth, and then the flavor hit him and he converted the gulp into a long deep swallow that emptied half the mug and gave him a horn-player's beard the same color as his hair. I glanced at the Fount, saw that Tom had dialed two full ounces of whiskey and the extra strong Kayserlingck's Kastle coffee from Daintree, Australia. Good man. When Jonathan finished the mug, Tom waited to be asked for another, and dialed the Bush back to an ounce and a half this time. He fetched a dish of shortbreads with it. When Jona-than made no conversational over-tures, Tom nodded pleasantly and moved away.

After five or ten minutes, when the medication had begun to take hold and Jonathan was probably starting to acquire a rudimentary awareness of his surroundings, Les Glueham stepped up to the chalk line before the fireplace, raised his glass, and cleared his throat. The general chat-ter died away almost at once.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Les said, "to tooth decay!"

There was something like a gleeful snarl of agreement from the room. Les finished his beer, threw his

glass forcefully but carefully, and the fire-place echoed musically. Three or four other glasses floated in from various parts of the room, in support of Les's toast, and then everybody went back to what they'd been doing.

The next time I caught Jonathan's eye, he held up a finger. I drifted over and nodded. "What ... ah ... was that all about?" he asked.

First nibble. "House custom," I said. "You can smash your empty in the hearth if you want—but you have to make a toast. Lots of folks toast whatever made 'em feel like busting a glass. Les there has been sentenced to root canal." And I went back to my yarn before the question why *don't* you *try it?* could even hang implied in the air.

A few minutes later, Tommy Jans-sen toed the line. "I'm gonna tell 'em, Ish," he said as the expectant silence fell.

Isham Latimer shrugged his broad shoulders and smiled a strange wry smile. "Go ahead on," he rumbled. "I won't stop you." His wife Tanya started to say something, and changed her mind.

"I guess you all heard by now," Tommy went on, "that Isham and Tanya got married up at her parents' place in Oswego. I know most of you weren't able to make it." One or two people who had made it were seen to wince visibly, but Tommy plowed ahead. "Ish asked me to be Toastmas-ter at the wedding feast. Well, natu-rally, I was tickled to death. I mean, a white guy being asked to be party-master for a room full of mostly black people, how cool can you be, right? This was gonna go on my Liberal Cre-dentials resume. So I'm doing my after-dinner riffs, telling funny stories about Ish to a room that's probably 85 percent African-American, and I start to tell them about Ish's eye problems." Catching Jonathan's eye, Tommy explained to him, "See, Ish moved here from Halifax, and the day he arrived they diagnosed him for double cataracts."

Jonathan nodded. Second nibble.

Tommy went back to talking to the room at large. "So I tell them, 'Isham's arrival in New York was not a totally happy one: the first day he got there, they said to him, "Congratulations: a strange white man is going to stick a knife in both your eyes!" ' " People laughed, and Tommy nodded. "Yep, it got a pretty good laugh, about Force Five. But the next laugh was Force Ten. That was when a tall distin-guished gent stood up in the back of the room, skin about two shades darker than Ish, and said, very po-litely, 'Pardon me, sir ... but *I* am the "white man" who stuck the knife into Mr. Latimer's eyes.' "

There was a general gasp, and then an *OOOOO* of horror and sympa-thy ... and then, slowly, laughs of em-barrassment as we all realized that we were *almost* as surprised as Tommy must have been, ourselves. We too had assumed that an eye-surgeon would be Caucasian.

Tommy nodded ruefully. "Yep. Caught white-handed. Bare-ass naked in front of a hundred strangers, three or four omelets on my face. Mr. Cool White Homeboy. Dr. Saunders came up to me at the reception afterward, and forgave me most graciously, but forgiving myself isn't gonna be so easy. So my toast is to unconscious racism: one of the nastiest kinds." And he pivoted and snapped his glass into the fireplace.

There was applause, and a barrage of glasses saluted his self-criticism.

Isham got up—just before Tanya pushed him—went over to Tommy, and put an arm around him. "You just keep tellin' that story, my man," he said, "and you'll have it worked off in no time. People, I'd like to propose a toast myself: to men who know how to deal with guilt."

That brought even louder ap-prise, and Tom and I had to hustle to meet the sudden demand for fresh glasses. So the second barrage was much raggeder than the first, more spread out. And then it stopped alto-gether as Jonathan screamed "*HOW?*" at the top of his lungs and made a wild attempt to hurl his half-full cof-fee mug at the fireplace.

This time he'd taken the bait whole. The cure had begun.

Every head swiveled his way, so we all saw. He had pulled the mug back too far, and lost control just as he tried to throw it; it shot up almost straight up in the air, disappeared briefly through the hole in the ceiling, reappeared again, and *smacked* down flat-footed on the bar top behind him, right in front of the Duck. During its entire flight, the mug had remained as perfectly upright as if it were a cheap special

effect, trailing a column of coffee and whipped cream on the way down. The trail vanished as the mug hit, then reappeared twice as long, then fell again, then reappeared half as long, and finally subsided. Not a drop had spilled on the bar. Without batting an eye, the Duck picked up the mug, finished it, and saluted Jona-than with the empty mug.

The business was so preposterous that Jonathan elected to ignore it. "Tell me how," he bellowed again to the room at large, and looked around for something else to throw.

I started to reach for a glass, thought better of it, and handed him a bag of beer nuts instead. "How what?" I asked.

He flung the bag at the fireplace, and sure enough his aim sucked: he got Bill Gerrity in the forehead. "Ow," Bill said, and I guess his voice must have been Jonathan's first clue that Bill is a man, for Jonathan looked startled. (Bill is an unusually convinc-ing transvestite.)

Again it was just too weird to deal with; Jonathan ignored it and an-swered me. But he didn't shout "How to deal with guilt," he said, and sat back down in his chair, swiveled it around to face the bar, and buried his face in his hands and began to sob loudly.

There was a general murmur which somehow managed to convey sympathy without pity. Merry Moore moved toward him, and then stopped. Nobody second-guessed her. This was her line of work.

"That is one of the tough ones," I agreed. "There aren't any easy an-swers for that one."

"Some people seem to find it very easy," he said bitterly into his hands. "They say Dr. Mengele slept like a baby in his old age. Somehow even Geraldo Rivera lives with himself. Could it be a missing chromosome, do you think? And if so, do you know a *competent* gene-cutter?"

From the bitter emphasis on the next-to-last word, I inferred that my would-be robber *du soir* was in ge-netics or one of the other biosciences himself, and held a low opinion of his own skill thereat. I started thinking about some of the things a gene-splicer could be feeling suicidally guilty about, and felt a fine sweat break out on my forehead—which had not happened when he'd come in waving a hogleg.

"No," I said. "But I know a pretty good home remedy. It can taste like hell, and it's not a cure, but some-times it can afford symptomatic relief."

"Oh, bullshit!" he snarled, slapping his palms against the bar. "I've already had so much of that, I can't hit the wall with a bag of nuts, and *it doesn't help a fucking bit!*"

I shook my head. "You misunder-stand. I wasn't talking about booze. Or drugs."

He glared at me. "What then? Re-ligion?"

"Action," I said.

"What kind of action?" he asked au-tomatically.

"Right action."

He looked at my face a long time to see if I was putting him on in some way. I saw the anger begin to ease in him as he decided I was not. "Like what?"

I turned to the fount and made him a cup of Celebes with no booze. "Well," I said, setting it before him, "usually if you've got the guilts, it's because you did a disservice to some-one or something you care about."

He nodded tensely and took a sip. "So?"

"So you go and do a service for someone or something you care about."

Pain rose up in his face. "And what if they're dead, and you can't?"

"Oh, it doesn't have to be the *same* someone," Merry said. "It's best, but sometimes the guilt is nonspecific and it can't be. Or like you say, some- times it's too late. That doesn't matter so much. The point is just to release the pressure—equal and opposite re-action. Slow and steady, ideally. What I'm aiming for myself is to achieve balance, equilibrium, about half an hour before I die."

His face was now a mask of pain. "And what if you've caused more pain than you could feel yourself in a sin-gle lifetime?" he asked her, "Like Mengele. Or Hitler."

I wiped the sweat from my fore-head as inconspicuously as I could. *Goddamn it*, I thought, *healing the wounded is one of the reasons I opened this place—but for one this bad to come in on Opening Night is sure one hell of a—*

—and then I saw the Duck out of the corner of my eye, and sighed. Sure.

It was in fact the Duck himself, stranger to our ways, who answered Jonathan. "You start by doing what Tommy just did," he said. "Telling the story on yourself, and taking what-ever comes back."

Soft sounds of agreement from the rest of us.

"As soon as you're ready to," Tommy amended quietly. "It hurts—I know. But it is good when you get it over with."

Jonathan looked around at us, on the verge. "All of you really want to hear this?" he asked.

Nods, murmurs, one way or an-other everybody said yes.

"You'll listen nonjudgmentally."

Doc Webster folded his hands across his great belly and said, "No, we're human beings. But *good* judges come in a spectrum between fair and merciful, and I'd have to say this group definitely falls on the merciful end of the range."

"We wouldn't forgive Hitler," Long-Drink said by way of clarification.

Jonathan, of course, assumed the Drink was using the word "wouldn't" in the subjunctive, rather than the simple past tense. "In that case, it ... ah ... might be touch and go," he said.

"But we heard him out first," Long-Drink added.

Jonathan wasn't listening. We all shut up and waited for him to make up his mind.

He looked down at himself finally, and made a heart-breaking little giggle. "What am I worried about? I came in here hoping to get shot. Sure, why not? I've held it in for so long I think I'm finally ready to vomit." He lurched to his feet.

I handed him a beer. He blinked at it. "For the toast, after your story," I explained. He picked it up and took it with him to a spot just before the crackling fire. As he stood there, he became a lecturing professor, the way Paladin used to be able to just *become* a gunfighter without moving. A lectern seemed to appear before him, with a faulty lamp and no lip to hold the papers. Not a successful lecturing professor.

"All right, let's get right to it," he said, gesturing with his beer. "Have any of you ... no, wrong question. *How many* of you have lost a friend or loved one to AIDS?"

Damn, I thought, I was afraid of that. And I raised my hand.

Even though it was only 1988, ev-eryone in the room raised a hand, I'm sorry to say. But not as sorry as Jona-than was to see us do it. He flinched, and gestured with his glass again, as if to wave away our answer. Then his shoulders slumped, and he aban-doned even symbolic defense.

"Well, I'm the stupid son of a bitch that gave it to them," he said.

Ten seconds of absolute silence...

... representing not disbelief, but simple surprise. We were the former patrons of Mike Callahan. In our ex-perience, preposterous statements tended to be true. I'm not saying we'll believe anything—but we're pre-pared to.

"I thought it was some Air Canada steward," Long-Drink said at last. "Gay Tan something."

"A very active assistant," Jonathan said. "But I am the originator. Accept no substitutes."

Doc Webster cleared his throat, making it sound like no easy task. "You're saying that you—you personally—"

"—introduced AIDS to the human race. That is correct. I suppose I should have introduced the human race to AIDS as well, but my manners always were weak. Still, the word got round eventually. Yes, to answer your question without evasion: I person-ally loosed AIDS on the world. *Mea maxima culpa.*"

A silence so total that I heard the fridge compressor switch itself off in sympathy—then a ROOBA-ROOBA! That took a long time to fade.

"How de fuck did youse do dat?" Fast Eddie asked.

"Point of order, Eddie," Doc inter-rupted gently. "Details like that can wait. A long time, as far as I'm con-cerned. Jonathan, tell me this first—*did you do it deliberately?*"

Jonathan pursed his lips. "I'd have to say a great deal of deliberation took place. Not very astute delibera-tion, perhaps—"

Doc frowned. "You know damn well what I mean—" He caught him-self and went on in a softer tone. "Did you do it *intentionally*?"

Jonathan sighed and slumped his shoulders. "No, that I did not."

"Well, then—" Long-Drink began, but Jonathan interrupted and kept talking over him until he shut up.

"I have *tried* that particular escape hatch a great deal already, thank you very much—the damn thing just isn't big enough for my hips. I get stuck halfway through and the hatch closes. All right, a prosecutor probably *couldn't* make a charge of first-degree murder stick in criminal court. But even an incompetent could get a con-viction for multiple manslaughter, reckless endangerment, negligence resulting in mass death, felonious stu-pidity—"

"Yeah, OK," said the Drink, "but what I mean is, you did something dumb ... not something evil. Right?"

He recoiled slightly, then shook his head and plowed doggedly on, his voice rising. "It transcends dumb. If a class action were brought against me in civil court, and the judge assigned a minimum value for every life I've taken or will take, he'd fine me the gross national product of the planet—it took mankind three hun-dred years since Leeuwenhoek to de-stroy smallpox, and I've replaced it single-handed—"

"Brag, brag, brag," the Duck said.

"—you don't understand—all of that is *nothing—I killed my mate—*"

"All right, save the speeches for your summation," I said. "Let's get to the evidence. You're already sworn, we've heard the charges, let's hear your theory." I rapped it out as brusquely as Judge Wapner might have on "The People's Court." It star-tled him, and thus derailed his grow-ing hysteria. He frowned at me, and took a deep gulp of his beer, and finally nodded heavily.

"You're right: let's play the trial out properly. This should be interest-ing—if the converse of the usual rela-tionship obtains, then a man who prosecutes himself has a genius for a defendant, yes? Very well. Let's estab-lish motive first. Question: Doctor Crawford, are you a screaming fag-got? Answer: yes, I am."

"Objection, Your Honor," the Duck said to me. "The characteriza-tion is both argumentative and spuri-ous: defendant is not presently screaming."

I was struck by the fact that he'd given us his last name in the same breath with which he'd outed him-self. "Sustained."

"Besides," Marty said, "you look more like a homosexual than a faggot to me."

"And he's an expert witness," Marty's wife Dave said.

Jonathan blinked at us all. "Ah ... very well, then. I'm homosexual. I've known I was gay since I was twelve years old. Question: how did this sexual preference affect your professional life? Answer: it made me a driven man. I was monomaniacally determined to be ... ah ... a credit to my gender. I had the recurring fan-tasy that I would make some great and noble contribution to the world, and *then*, as they were handing me my Nobel prize, then I would come out of the closet, and proudly an-nounce that I was a homosexual."

"Relevance, Your Honor?" the Duck asked me.

"I'm trying to establish a pattern of behavior," Jonathan said. "A motive for taking stupid risks, failing to take proper precautions, willful refusal to think things through—"

"I'll allow it," I said. "But move on."

"Question: where were you in Jan-uary of 1940? Answer: in federal prison in Atlanta, Georgia." He made a brief, bitter smile. "No, that's not self-incrimination, Judge. I was there: as a medical researcher, fresh out of school, determined to do something marvelous and stun the world. I had talked two of my professors into backing me in a series of experiments with which I hoped to wipe out ma-laria. When I say 'backing,' of course, I mean I had all the ideas and did most of the work, and they arranged the funding and got their names on the title page of the paper. Much good that it did them; the experi-ments were completely unsuccessful. Question: without boring the jury with details, what did these experi-ments involve? Answer: we injected prisoners with monkey blood, and in some cases vice versa."

"Volunteers?" I asked.

"Yes. They agreed to risk malaria. *Not* certain death. But they volun-teered, and malaria could have

killed them, and ... ah ... did in fact kill some of them." He looked at Isham and Tanya. "Most of our subjects, by the way—and nearly all those who died—were black."

Isham met his eyes. "Your Honor," he said to me, "the racial composition of the prison population in Atlanta in 1940 falls outside this defendant's sphere of responsibility."

"Not entirely," I said. "He stated that he was old enough to vote. But this court has no evidence that he did not do so, and rules this issue ... uh, Doc, what's that big grey thing with the long nose and the two tusks?"

"That's irrelevant," the Doc said at once.

"Dat's-a right. Continue your ex-amination, Mr. Persecutor."

Jonathan ignored the badinage, sipped more beer and went on. "Question: Doctor Crawford, where does modern medical science now believe AIDS came from? Answer: from African apes. There is a simian version of AIDS, and a whole spec-trum of other monkey viruses which are markedly similar to, in some cases partially identical to, the human AIDS virus. It has recently been found that there may be a second form of human HIV, HIV-2, even more similar in ge-netic structure to the simian version. Question: and how do authorities be-lieve the virus crossed from apes to humans? Answer: they haven't got a clue."

"Objection," Doc Webster said. "I've read a couple of theories. Some-thing about weird African sex rituals—"

"Even if you believe that over the last fifty years, some Africans in fact routinely cut their genitalia and smeared them with monkey blood—which I don't for a minute, and I know something about Africa—even so, it doesn't explain why the disease didn't cross over centuries ago."

"He's right, Doc," Isham said. "I heard that story, too. It's Jungle Jim bullshit." Isham happens to be an ex-pert in African history, customs and traditions.

Jonathan nodded. "Question: then you did in fact begin the crossover process—you personally, Dr. Crawford—by injecting human beings with infected monkey blood and in-fected monkeys with human blood? Answer: that is precisely why I have been brought—" He winced as he saw the pun coming, but delivered it anyway: "—before the bar."

"Now hold on a minute," Doc Webster said. "You couldn't have been the only guy using monkeys, or even monkey blood, to make vac-cines in 1940."

"Virtually everyone else in the world worked with rhesus macaques from India—right up until the Indian government noticed they were al-most wiped out, and banned their export in 1955. But not me. *I* had a bet-ter idea. I had a cheap source for so-called 'African green' monkeys, from what was then the northeastern Bel-gian Congo. It has recently been es-tablished that they were the original carriers of SW—the simian AIDS. It wasn't until the early '80s that SIV made the jump to macaques ... whereupon it was discovered, be-cause the macaques got sick. You see, STV lives in green monkeys, but it doesn't make them sick.

"Question: where is the most in-tense focus of the African AIDS infec-tion? Answer: Zaire—what used to be the northeastern Belgian Congo. And when the Congo threw off Belgian rule and became Zaire, what French-speaking blacks with no ties to Bel-gium migrated there en masse to help run the new government? Answer: Haitians. Question: where, outside the homosexual community, was the first major outbreak of AIDS in the Western Hemisphere? Answer: re-member that literally sick joke that was going around awhile ago, about how the worst part of having AIDS was convincing your parents you were Haitian?"

"Question: if you expose a virus to a new host, about how long will it take to mutate into a form that can live in it? Answer: roughly twenty to forty years. And when did AIDS first become a significant problem? An-swer: *about forty years after my inge-nious experiments.*"

He stopped, took another sip of beer, and said to the room at large, "Cross-examine?"

"You tested the blood thoroughly," Doc Webster said, and it wasn't a question. "For every known patho-gen. I know you did."

"Every pathogen known in 1940, certainly. Monkey B virus, and a dozen others. And then I injected

the blood into human beings. I proceeded, not because I knew the blood was safe, but because with existing technology no one could prove it wasn't. In light of the results, would you say that was good enough?"

Silence fell.

"What'd you do after that?" Merry asked after a long while.

"Continued to chase greatness," he said bitterly. "With no more success: malaria continues to laugh at me, and all my colleagues. Along the way, I had the only lucky break of my life: I met Martin, and somehow convinced him to love me. I had Martin for twenty-eight years. The best years of my life." He paused and frowned. "And in all that time I don't think the poor man ever got more than 20 percent of my attention. I was so consumed with my work, so sure that one day I'd be hailed as one of the great microbe hunters, a gay role model. Isn't that the classic gay mistake: to care more about your gayness than about your lover? He never gave me anything but kindness and devotion, and ... I was short-changing him for nearly thirty years before he died in my arms today, of a disease I created for him!" He tossed back the rest of his beer. "My gayness died with him. My sexuality died with him. My last ambition died with him. The best parts of me all died with him. So my toast is to self-destruction—"

And with that he pegged his glass into the hearth so hard that the shattering glass sounded like a small explosion.

And took out his gun....

I spoke up hastily. "Has the prosecution rested?"

He sighed deeply and worked the slide on the automatic. "Not in years."

"So does the defense get a chance? Or is this a Nazi kangaroo court?"

He shook his head wearily and placed the gun to his temple. "I have had several decades to examine the excuses I might offer," he said. "None of them are any good. Thank you, but—"

I pulled my sawed-off out from behind the bar and drew down on him. "Hold it right there!" I barked.

He was so stunned he froze, unable to think of anything to say or do. There were a few murmurs from the crowd, but nobody tried to stop me or express an objection.

"If you blow your silly brains out in front of all of us, and don't give us a chance to argue you out of it," I said, "what you'll be doing is dumping all your bad karma on our laps and leaving us no place to put it, no way to get rid of it. Before I'll let you do that to my friends and me, you selfish son of a bitch, I'll blow your goddamned head all over the wall. I got problems of my own, friend. Now put that piece away!"

For a long moment I thought I was going to have to put him down. Just as I remembered the safety was on, and surreptitiously flipped it off, he slumped and lowered his gun. For the second time, he burst into tears. "I'm sorry—"

"Shut up," I said. "It's our turn to talk."

He waved the gun at me, butt-first.

"I don't want it," I said. "Put the safety back on and put it in your pants." He did as he was told.

"Now sit down, shut up, and listen. Doc, you want to go first?"

As Jonathan took a seat at one of the tables, Doc Webster strode over to the hearth, and turned to face the room. "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I'd like to begin with something that may seem irrelevant. How many of you have lived around here long enough to remember the story of the Great White Trash Mountain of Long Island?"

About ten hands went up.

"Every township on the Island has a garbage disposal problem, and none of them has a solution that's any damn good. Some years back, one township administration—no sense identifying them—came up with a beauty. They decided to build a mountain of garbage. A layer of trash, a layer of soil, a layer of trash, a layer of soil—voilà: instant mountain. Long Island is as flat as a pool table: put artificial snow machines on the sucker, they reasoned, and you'd have the only ski resort for a hundred miles in any direction."

"The White Trash Mountains of Virginy," Maureen said, quoting the Firesign Theatre.

"An inventive notion," the Duck said.

Doc Webster nodded. "The problem was, they didn't do their home-work. They got the thing half-built, placed a non-cancelable order for the snow generators ... and then all that weight started to work on the bottom layer of garbage. Pressure. Friction ..."

Tesla began to giggle. "Oh, my goodness—"

Doc nodded again. "That's right. The mountain caught fire ... and over a period of weeks, it burned to the ground."

Howls of laughter all around. Even Jonathan came close to smiling. "Oh Lord," the Duck crowed, "the *smell*—"

"They spent a bundle and used up every favor they were owed keeping the story out of the national news," the Doc said. "But the next township downwind had some pungent things to say. And they said 'em in court. Do any of you happen to recall exactly why the mountain men lost the case?"

Expectant silence.

"My, it's hard to talk when you're thirsty."

"Jesus Christ, Doc," I said, and slid a beer down the bar to him.

"They lost the case because *they hadn't even needed a competent en-gineer*. Anyone capable of working a slide rule could have done the calcu-lation that showed the scheme wouldn't work. The town simply failed to even ask the question. But if it had required a competent engineer to spot the problem, they would have *won* the suit ... because you can't re-quire someone by law to hire the right engineer.

"Now Jonathan's case here is a sort of mirror image. It's not that he was such a lousy scientist he failed to real-ize what he was doing was dangerous. In this case, any scientist alive who had looked over his shoulder would have made the same mistake he did. There was no one he failed to consult who could have straightened him out. Except God, who has a nasty habit of not returning His calls. As far as Jonathan could *possibly* have known, the experiment was ... well, not `safe'—nothing that involves al-tering human biochemistry is safe, ever—but safe *enough* that it was le-gal to do."

"Legality isn't the point—" Jona-than began.

Doc Webster overvoiced him. "And it isn't my point, either, so kindly leggo of that red herring, OK? The experiment was *moral* to do, too. Do you deny it? Can you name one scientist or ethicist who—at the time—would have argued?"

"It does not mitigate my guilt to tell me that there were thousands of other people just as criminally stupid. *I* was the one whose sloppy thinking triggered the disaster. I know that's bad luck, but it's bad luck I earned. The point is that no one, ever, can look at an organic substance and say, `Now that is perfectly safe: there's nothing in there I don't know about. That is safe to shoot into human be-ings who would really rather I didn't, people I've manipulated into volun-teering.' It was wishful thinking—or would have been, if I'd ever thought about it. I didn't."

The Doc sighed. "Your turn, Jake. He's just washed his brain and I can't do a thing with it."

I came around the bar, walked through Jonathan's imaginary podium and made him join me at a table. He didn't resist. The gang crowded gent-ly around us, then parted again to let Tom Hauptman through with a cou-ple of low-octane Blessings. I clinked mugs with Jonathan, and did my best to hold his eyes with my own.

"I'm going to tell you a little story," I said, "and I want you to believe that I'm not trying to measure my pain against yours, OK? But once upon a time I had a wife and daughter, and I loved them so much my teeth hurt. And one day I decided I could save thirty bucks by doing my own brake-job, and the next day I didn't have Barbara or Jess any more."

He lifted one eyebrow and gri-maced, as if to say *tough break* and *big deal* at the same time.

"Listen to me," I went on. "Under-stand me. I replaced the rear shoes myself, with a Chilton manual to help, and that night I decided to take both of my loves out for a drive. And sud-denly I needed brakes bad and they weren't there. A truck hit us. While I was unconscious, Barbara and Jessica were conscious and trapped and they burned to death; the M.E. said so. I woke up with nothing worse than

bruises and one first-degree burn. Physically. Also, the trucker died, so I had to deal with the additional guilt of deep-down not giving a *shit* about *his* death. Now, I'm not saying I'm in your league, OK, Typhoid Johnny? But I was proud and stupid, and my loved ones and one stranger suffered horribly and I escaped miraculously—are we together so far? Is this sounding at all familiar? Is there *that* much difference between killing two loved ones, or killing one loved one and two million strangers? Do I have the right to say I know a *little* bit of what you're feeling?"

He closed his eyes and sipped coffee. "I'm sorry. Yes, you do."

"I carried that sack around by the testicles for *fifteen years*," I said quietly.

He opened his eyes again, set the mug down on the table and took my hand in his. "How did you stay alive?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

I looked around the room and tried to think how I could possibly explain it to him. "Friends," I said finally.

His hand held mine in a death grip.

"But I haven't finished the story," I said. "I'll make it as short as I can. Fifteen years after the crash, I stumbled across proof—proof!—that it hadn't been my fault after all. *The brakes I'd fixed weren't the ones that failed.* It was the front brakes that went."

He gaped at me.

"Do you get it? All those years of guilt and remorse and self-recrimination—all they accomplished was to put lines on my face and give me gobs of character. I'd spent a third of my life giving myself a beating I didn't deserve. I'd sentenced an innocent man to life imprisonment on circumstantial evidence. All I can say is, thank God I didn't believe in capital punishment, like you."

He frowned. "The cases aren't parallel. In my case there is no doubt—"

"Bullshit, there isn't. Can you describe the mechanism that caused SIV to mutate into HIV?"

"Not at present, but—"

"*Then how do you know it did?* And how do you know it happened in blood you handled? You've got less hard evidence than I did."

"But how else—" BONG!

A G major triad...

I jumped, and frowned, and looked over my shoulder to see who had picked now to start playing games.

But there was no one at all at the computer, or anywhere near it. It had—apparently—switched itself on. Its fan powered up to speed, its hard disk chirped, and the twelve-inch monitor lit up and said, WELCOME TO MACINTOSH.

Rooba rooba—

"Duck—" I began.

"Nothing to do with me," he said. "As far as I know."

I turned back to Jonathan. "I'm sorry," I said. "Even for this place, that's weird."

"It just turned itself on?" he asked, frowning.

"As far as I know," I agreed.

We all silently watched the Mac II boot up.

I had left the Mac set up with the Finder as the startup application—but now it bypassed the Desktop, went right into Multifinder and opened up two applications at once, in splitscreen. The modem program and a word-processor.

And then it waited for input.

"Jake—" Doc Webster began.

"Don't look at me," I said. "I don't know what the hell is going on. Or what to do next." I thought hard, and a lightbulb appeared metaphorically above my head. "But I can think of one thing to try. Duck?"

"Yah."

"Why don't you go over there and close your eyes and hit eleven keys at random?"

He hesitated a moment, then went wordlessly to the Mac, covered his eyes with one hand, and poked at the keyboard with a stiff index finger as if he were testing it for fat content. "OK, that's eleven. Now what?"

"Hit 'Return.' "

He did so, and after a brief pause, the screen changed.

"Aha," I said softly, "I was right." I didn't know exactly what I had been right *about*—the intuition had been too vague to put into words—but I knew I was onto something now. We had reached one of the biggest scientific database services in the world, and it was asking for our password....

"Hit random keys again," I said. "As many as you like." I had no idea how many characters were in the typical password for that service, but I was prepared to trust to luck.

"Wait," Jonathan said. "I have a password to that service."

I nodded. "Sure. Go ahead."

He got up slowly and went over to sit at the Mac, putting his coffee where it could be knocked over without endangering anything. He entered his password, and the main search menu appeared onscreen.

"Now what?" he said to the room at large.

I went over and stood at his shoulder, squinted at the screen. "What do you think, people?" I said. "Look up 'AIDS' and let the Duck hunt around starting there? Or 'SIV'?"

"How about 'malaria'?" Doc Webster suggested.

"Green monkey," Mary Kay Care said.

That was so out-of-left-field it felt right. "Punch up 'African green monkey,'" I said to Jonathan.

"This is silly," he said, and did as I asked. People started to cluster around the computer. Mary Kay went over and took the keyboard away from Jonathan. "This is my pidgin," she said, and he relinquished it. (Mary Kay is one of the secret masters of the world: a librarian. They control information. Don't ever piss one off.)

The database began listing appearances of the words "African green monkey" in scientific literature. Text scrolled upward on the screen. We all stared at it dumbly. After a few minutes it became evident that we could wait all night for the last citation to appear.

"Can you get that thing to do correlations?" Doc Webster asked.

"Of course," Mary Kay said.

"Tell it to list the citations in descending order of number of references to African green monkeys," the Doc suggested. "Then cross-reference by number of references to viruses in the same source."

She nodded enthusiastically, and did so. The screen display froze momentarily as she worked, and then text began to scroll by again—but there were far fewer hits now, a total of perhaps thirty citations.

She scrolled around, looked at dates, then places. I pointed to a reference. "Try that one," I directed.

Mary Kay hit more keys, and the article cited appeared onscreen. It was Greek to me, but I waited patiently for him to scan it.

Suddenly he made a small "uh" sound.

"Something?" I asked.

He ignored me and kept on reading. Presently he said, "Jesus Christ." Then he said, "Oh, I don't—" Then he said, "It can't—"

Then he didn't say anything at all for a long moment.

Finally he reached for his coffee, and knocked it endwise, spilling the half-cup left in it. He caught it before it could head for the floor, picked it up upside down and tried to pour coffee into his mouth from the bottom of the mug. When it didn't work, he frowned at it and flung it away over his shoulder. I ducked just in time.

It landed in the hearth with a hearty *chunkle*.

Jonathan just kept staring at the screen, with the expression of a man who is completely redecorating the inside of his head.

Doc Webster muscled his way to the front of the crowd and read over Jonathan's shoulder. After a few seconds, the smile wrinkles came out in his fat face. "Bingo," he said.

"What is it, Doc?" I asked over the growing murmur.

"The seeds of a tabloid headline," he said. "But one that lets Dr. Crawford off the hook. It ought to hit the papers in a few more years."

"Koprowski," Jonathan said hol-lowly. "Live polio vaccine, competing with Salk's killed vaccine. The first live oral polio vaccine tested on a large population. Sprayed in aerosol form into the open mouths of some-thing like a third of a million Africans.

Grown in the kidneys of African green monkeys—"

"From 1957 to 1961," Doc Webster agreed, pointing to the screen. "In the eastern Belgian Congo." He scrolled the text. "Looley there: in 1959, Sabin reported that an unknown monkey virus contaminated Koprowski's vaccine." He punched up a reference of his own. "And in 1960, the first-ever case of AIDS appeared. In the Belgian Congo."

Jonathan now looked even more tormented than at any time so far in the evening. "But it takes *time* for a virus to mutate."

The Doc nodded. "Maybe. And maybe it starts right away, and just takes time to spread enough to be noticed. What was that incubation period you mentioned? Twenty to forty years? AIDS started to hit big in 1980—twenty-three years after Dr. Koprowski ground up his first green Monkey kidney and sprayed the cul-ture onto the wet mucous membranes of 350,000 Congolese! What'll you bet some of them had open sores in their mouths or noses?"

Jonathan sprang up, knocking over his chair. "But I ... that doesn't ... it still—"

"Oh sure," the Doc said. "You could still be guilty—if you need to be badly enough. But I'm afraid no jury in the world would indict you on the present evidence ... much less convict you. Or Dr. Koprowski ei-ther. There's an excellent chance nei-ther of you ever had a thing to do with spreading AIDS. At worst, you're suspicious bystanders at this point. Are you ready to admit that now?"

"Goddamn it—"

"Jonathan," I said sadly, "it looks like you're going to have to return that hair-shirt to the rental shop, and get along without the joy of being a Tragic Figger of a Man. You're a fraud."

Jonathan looked stricken. He spun back and forth, as if trying to find a path through us to safety ... then turned his face to the ceiling.

"Oh, Martin!" he cried, and began to sob like a child.

Marty Matthias and Dave pulled him into their arms and hugged him together, and a cheer went up.

There was an especially joyous note to the celebration that ensued. We had come through our first crisis, on Opening Night—and in a manner that would, we felt, have made Mike Callahan proud of us. By the time folks began to so much as slow down in their drinking, my arms were tired, and Tom Hauptman was looking ex-hausted, and neither of us minded a hit. I had managed to completely for-get the problem that still loomed large on my horizon.

"Here you go," I told the Duck, set-ting yet another Blessing in front of him and circling my palm over it.

"Thanks," he said, and put three singles on the bar.

"No, no," I said. "That gesture—" I repeated it. "—means it's on the house."

He glared at me scornfully. "No, re-ally? Do you know this one?" He gave me the finger, and pushed the bills another inch toward me.

"Well, you earned it," I said, confused.

"I'm not so sure of that," he said. "You mean that computer business, right?"

"Well, having a Mac turn itself on at just the right moment sure seems to *me* like a funny coincidence. That's you."

He shook his head. "Have you looked at the power cord?"

I glanced over at it. It was not plugged in.

"Improbabilities I do," the Duck said. "Miracles I don't. Lucking onto the right database, that was me, all right. The rest—uh uh."

"*Cushlamachree*," said Long-Drink McGonnigle, who had been eaves-dropping—if that's not

redundant. "Then how—"

"Beats me," the Duck said.

An idea occurred to me, so ridicu-lous I'd have rejected it out of hand if I'd been just a little soberer. Instead I held it up to the light and turned it to and fro. "Holy Shit," I murmured.

"What?" the Drink asked.

"Drink," I said, and my own voice sounded odd in my ears, "who is the best hacker that ever took a drink in Callahan's bar?"

He looked down at the floor and thought for a minute. "Ever? Have to be Tom Flannery, I guess. He used to work for Xerox in Palo Alto before he moved east, didn't he?"

"Yeah. You happen to remember the date of his death, by any chance?"

"Hell, sure." The Drink looked up this time (according to Dr. W. H. Cosby, dates are stored in the air, above eye-level; names below) and thought some more. Suddenly his eyes opened so wide the wrinkles went away. "Christ in a garter belt! A dozen years ago tonight!"

"Almost to the hour," I agreed. "So what?" the Duck asked. "Drink," I said, "what did Tom die of?"

Long-Drink's eyes were like cue balls. "First friend I ever had that died of AIDS," he said hollowly. The three of us looked at each other—and finished our drinks as one.

"I hope this haunted computer business won't keep you from com-ing back here," I said to the Duck the next time I had a moment to talk. Privately I was prepared to offer him a discount if necessary to keep him coming around. A place like mine needed a guy like him.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he said sourly.

"Neither do I," said Long-Drink, who had been deep in conversation with him. "That's why it's so scary."

One of the problems with being around the other side of the bar for a change is that I can't discreetly kick Long-Drink in the shin any more. I made a mental note to talk to him later: maybe we could agree on a fa-cial expression to convey the same message. I emphatically did not, and do not, believe in ghosts my-self ... but the only alternate theory I had at the moment was one I was unwilling to discuss. I stuck with the only part of the problem I was intu-itively certain of. "Nothing to be scared of, Drink," I said hastily. "Whatever it was, it was good medicine. Nothing a man should give up a good tavern for."

"Relax, Mr. Subtle," the Duck said. "You couldn't keep me away from this place with rap music."

I brightened. "Pleased to hear it."

"That's part of why, right there," he said "Most places I hang out, after awhile they start to look at me funny, and pretty soon they ask me if I really have to leave so early."

"Why—" Long-Drink began ... and across the room, Fast Eddie's right hand stopped playing. "—if you don't mind my asking, else?" he finished hastily.

"This Callahan gent," the Duck said. "I'd like to talk with him."

I didn't want to discourage him, but felt compelled to say, "I don't re-ally think he'll be back. I mean, I don't know ... but we're not expecting him."

"Maybe not," he agreed. "Then again, if *I* hang out here long enough, maybe he will."

"I can't argue with that," I said. "And I'll tell you the truth, I'd hang around *hell* for a long while, for the chance of another conversation with Mike."

"I'd like to ask him a few things I've wondered about for a long time," he said. His voice sounded wistful, and—for the first and only time that night—and for only a second—his face looked vulnerable.

I sent words on tiptoe. "You mean, 'Why am I so—'?"

"'Why?' is good," he said, nodding. "'How?' would be even better. 'Is there an on-off switch for the phe-nomenon' would be best of all. I've satisfied myself that nobody alive to-day knows the answers to those ques-tions—but if anybody does, it'd be a time traveler. They'd have to know a lot about probability. I pumped that Phee character for all I could get, but most of what he told me turned out to be bullshit. Your guy Mike sounds OK. I got nothing better to do. Maybe I'll stick around. As long as you don't mind."

"Oh, we like coincidence around here," Long-Drink assured him. "Why, Jake and I once worked in

the same carnival, me runnin' the carou-sel and him on the Ferris wheel, for almost two years, and we never met until he showed up here."

"Of course, we moved in different circles," I said.

We all cracked up. Jonathan ordered straight Bushmill's and took a stool next to the Duck. They laughed together and exchanged a high five, the elderly scientist and the grouchy hobbit.

"Well, you're looking much more manic," the Duck said.

Jonathan nodded. "It's silly. I should be at peace. I keep thinking, well, now you've lost the great melo-drama of your life, your grand trag-ed-y. Now you're just a failure." He grimaced self-consciously and sipped whiskey. "Maybe you're right, Jake," he said to me. "Maybe I've become addicted to self-pity."

"Self-pity is an easy disease to cure," I said. "Try what I suggested earlier. Go do some good thing."

"Like what?"

"Hell, I don't know. Random acts of senseless kindness?" I felt another lightbulb form above my cranium. "Wait a half, how about this? How many other experienced medical re-searchers would you say there are walking around right now *who won-der why the SW virus doesn't make African green monkey sick?*"

His eyes glazed over. He stopped breathing for so long that I reached for the seltzer teat to startle him back into it, but as I got my thumb on the mojo he took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly, shoulders lowered a half-inch—and got two inches wider.

"May I use your computer?" he asked, staring through me.

"Sure," I said.

He turned and looked at it for a moment. He took a step forward and then stopped and looked at it for an-other long moment. He was looking at the plug, lying there a foot from the socket.

"Never mind," he said suddenly, and came back to his seat. "There's no hurry. I work better when I'm sober, anyway."

"Don't feel bad," Long-Drink told him. "Lots of people have that problem."

Jonathan finished his drink in a long slow gulp, and stared into the glass for a moment. "And besides," he went on, "there's something I've been meaning to ask you, Jake."

"Shoot," I said, and then winced.

So did he. "Excuse me a second." He got up and walked to the chalk line. People quieted down expect-tantly, and he held his empty glass high.

"To random acts of senseless kind-ness," he said in a loud clear voice, and eighty-sixed the glass. As it burst, he pulled his gun out, popped the clip out, worked the slide, and sent the gun after the glass.

What a merry sound it made, when it hit all that broken glass! The flames flared, and a few of them turned a cheery green from burning Cosmoline.

An irregular rain of glasses ap-plauded his toast—and then folks went back to their conversations.

Jonathan returned to his seat. "Now," he said briskly, "back when you were holding a shotgun on me, Jake, you said something that's been nagging at me more and more as the night wore on."

"What's that?"

"Maybe it stuck in my head be-cause you used a polite word in the middle of cursing me. You said, 'I've got problems of my own, friend.'"

"So?"

"So what's *your* problem, friend?"

I blinked at him. Cure complete.

And as I opened my mouth to an-swer, Merry Moore drifted up to the bar, tacking against a breeze only she could feel. "Hey, Jake," she said in a voice only a little too loud, "re's somethin' I been meanin' to ask, once things kinda quieted down—I just remembered."

I smiled. What a lucky man I was, to have friends like these. "Sure, Merry. Matter of fact, I was just about to—"

"Hey, Tommy," she called, ignor-ing me. "Cmere a minute."

Tommy Janssen came over and joined us.

She blinked around at us owlshly. "Now listen when I ask him this. Tommy, you know that story you told about Ish'sh ... about Ish's wedding, and the white man with the knife?"

"Sure," Tommy said.

She slapped the bar top. "What made you assume it was a white *man*?"

In the silence that followed, Tommy stared at her with no expres-sion at all for maybe ten seconds.

And then his face broke into a big grin. "Hey, everybody," he called out to the room at large, "Check this out: I did it *again*. ..."