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THE ATTACK OF THE IGNOROIDS

I, DERRIK RAMSDEN, DO NOT rattle easily. So when old pal Vreedon emptied my bank accounts, leaving me exactly \$8.73, did I weep? Did I moan?

Hardly.

I did, however, contact two junkies, give them his address, and tell them that he had five and a half pounds of crack hidden someplace in his apartment. Vreedon, however, is no sloth. He moved too fast for them; he had already vanished, and the junkies, pathetic skinks, got six months for trying to steal the doors and plumbing fixtures.

A month before, Vreedon had told me, "C'mon Ramsden, I need investment capital and I know from hacking around that you've got \$9,000 stuck in miserable savings at something like 2.1%. This is heavily big. This is, in short, a deal!" He sprawled on my plywood-bottomed sofa drinking my last generic beer and doing a little absent-minded tap-dance, crushing various bugs as they skittered across my floor.

"I'll make us a killing that'll set us up for life. This one, my friend, is a sure thing, and since we've known each other longer than we've known anyone but family, I came to you. You, of all people, I came to. You, who live like a roach in this dump. I thought you'd like the chance to move up. Have, you know, like heating, like when you worked at Madame Helga's."

His reference to that singular blot on my employment history was gratuitous and not appreciated. "You have five or six sure things a year, Vreedon, and you're still riding the bus. So what's so majorly big about this one?"

"Trust me. The less you know about it, the better. But the return will be a hundred to one. You give me your \$9,000--a month later, I give you \$900,000, minimum. Never work again for the rest of your life."

It tempted me. Selling tombstones to welfare recipients for the last six months dragged down my soul. It made me ask annoying questions about the purpose of life and how to more deeply screw the relatives of the dead. It was immoral, but it was legal. The \$9,000 I'd saved plus another year's savings was supposed to be my ticket out of this roach motel.

"No deal, Vreedon. It's too good to be true, however illegal it is."

He lurched forward and sat on the edge of the sofa. "Have I ever screwed you on a deal, Ram?"

"Not since the business with the Hitler sex video, no."

"Jeez. You got no spirit of adventure, Ramsden."

"Right. Poverty ate it."

My next bank statement indicated a total balance of \$8.73. He even emptied my checking account.

However, a month later, a package with a lot of strapping tape around it arrived with "Educational Material" stamped several times on the outside.

Inside, in crude bundles of well-used twenties, fifties, and hundreds, I found \$915,920. First I was robbed, then I was rich. It took days to sink in. I kept opening the box and studying the bills.

I, Derrik Ramsden, no longer had to look for angles. I could have a life just like before I was disbarred. I was rich.

So I moved into a house with coherent walls, actual electrical wiring, and water that came from faucets instead of a garden hose stuck through the kitchen window. And I re-hired the one surviving junkie for my houseboy as soon as the Honor Farm released him. His deceased partner, during a religious seizure, had boiled a Bible to get the ink off the pages and had then mainlined the distillate in order to get closer to God, which he did.

Cleetis worked furiously at whatever he did, his little crewcut blond halfwit head devoid of the slightest thought, and he worked for practically nothing except the revolting food he ate in tremendous quantities and the two-room cottage he lived in behind the house.

Life was good. Life was wonderful.

I even had enough life in me to put a few lightweight moves on one Vera Kamchatka, high-school nurse and part-time real estate agent who'd sold me the house.

Then, one morning, there were three dead spots in the front lawn.

"Cleetis! You take a leak on the grass?"

"No boss! Nuh-uh. Not me. I'm a clean guy. I like white porcelain, boss."

"So what's the deal?"

True to form, Cleetis rushed to the front yard and on his hands and knees began poking, smelling, and prodding the dead grass, the little brain in his blond head popping along full speed on a cylinder and a half.

"Burn spot, boss! Done been burned." He stood up and wiped his hands on his pants. "Wumme reseed it?" His little blue eyes jittered inside their sockets. "Do it now, boss? Get some seed and --"

"I want you to keep an eye on the front yard tonight. You can --"

"I get a lawn chair, stay outta sight, they come back, I tap-dance on their jewels, boss, you better believe it, that's right."

"Right, right. You ever sleep Cleetis?"

"Huh?"

About five that afternoon, Vera Kamchatka called to tell me she'd rented my old house, the roach breeding colony. "What? Why? Vera, the deal was to leave it empty a month and see if someone would burn it down --remember? You're in real estate, you're supposed to understand these things."

"There was a good reason. We need to talk about it."

When she spoke, I could visualize those legs of hers, coming out of her body about three feet below her voice.

"I've got three burn holes in my front yard, still unresolved fears that the IRS is going to ask how I can afford to live in this house, a houseboy who, at this very moment, is out screaming at dogs or something in the front yard, and I need simplicity, Vera, not to be a liable landlord responsible for some human being living in that trap. I could be sued."

Her voice lowered. "Ramsden, I need to talk to you. There have been anomalous occurrences."

I loved it when she talked to me like that.

Still, from the front yard, Cleetis's shrill voice whooped and yapped incoherently.

Enough was enough. I'd fire the half-wit. I didn't need any more strangeness in my life. He kept the place clean but I didn't need someone who stood in the front yard and screamed.

"Vera, I need to go see if Cleetis has hurt himself or if he's just longing for the old days."

"Can you come over this evening?" she asked. "Seven o'clock."

Visions danced in my head. Vera stood an even six feet tall and in her real estate clothes looked like a Detroit parole officer--hair back in a tight black bun, eyes the color of frozen slag, and her thin lips the color of an aluminized rose.

"I'll be th -- "

"Boss!" Cleetis exploded into the room in a flurry of waving arms, fast breathing, rolling eyes, and a spew of incoherence. "...outside! ...yard!...whoof!... jesus! You gotta get out here!"

"Bye, Vera. I'll bring wine."

A dozen steps out the front door, I saw her. A petite dark-skinned woman, standing on my lawn, holding a small bouquet of gardenias in her two hands. She had on some kind of brightly colored wraparound sarong.

"Jesus, another one!" Cleetis screamed, grabbing his face as though it might peel off.

"Misser Ramden?" she said in a thin and reedy voice.

"Look out, boss! Stay back! Don't let her get close to you!"

"Yeah, I'm Ramsden." I couldn't figure why Cleetis was going moron on me. The little kid probably weighed all of ninety-five pounds.

In the slowly gathering gloom of the fall evening, I saw her grin broadly, her teeth very white with a few gold fillings. "A flower for you, sir." She picked out one of the gardenias and tossed it toward me.

Then little wisps of white smoke started trailing out of her hair and out of the folds of her ankle-length wraparound skirt.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" Cleetis screamed at her. "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Cleetis, what's--"

"Stay back, boss! Stay back! She's gonna whoof on us!"

"Goo'bye, Misser Ramsden, goo'bye." Small tongues of flame spurted out of her blouse. One of her gold teeth glittered in the flames. "Goo'bye, Misser Ramsden."

The next instant, her fire billowed out of her clothes and her hair flashburned with a sudden whoof.

I, Derrik Ramsden, do not rattle easily, but neither have I ever seen a person self-combust.

I lunged for the garden hose, turned the valve, and when I turned back to spray her, she had vanished.

Dark billows of smoke rolled up into the darker sky. No ashes even. And on my lawn was a fifth burn hole.

And one uncharted gardenia.

CLEETIS RAVED for a few minutes till I hosed him down. He became marginally sober. "Go clean up. When you stop gibbering, we're going to Vera's."

"Uuuuh...uuuh ...."

As an exemplary shallow person Cleetis's emotions run with equivalent depth. Fifteen minutes later he came back out, his little driver's cap on, tossing the car keys in one hand, and humming. "Gotta get grass seed while we're out, boss."

I got in the back seat of the Buick and decided to stop thinking. Vera would distract me.

"Here, boss, this make you feel better." He slipped a cassette of country and

western music into the player. Two chords into "Lick My Chops" I threatened to report his three parole violations I'd kept track of, and he turned it off.

I do not sympathize with suffering cowboys.

"Ramsden! You're early. And very pale."

"A woman just combusted in my front yard," I said sullenly.

"Two of 'em," Cleetis corrected. "Went up whoof, just like that."

I looked at him.

"I'll wait in the car," he said.

Inside, Vera snuggled up to me as much as a six-foot woman can to a guy who's five-ten. She'd taken off her real estate uniform and now wore something that looked like a very expensive poncho, blue-black with a high black embroidered collar. She wrapped her arms around me and breathed in my ear, "Patience dear. Would you like a drink to take the edge off? You do smell a bit smoky," she said.

"Vera, a woman went up in flames in my front yard."

She planted a swift kiss on my sun-cracked lips and left for the kitchen. "I have just what you need. Something without subtlety."

Along with selling houses, Vera was the nurse at a place she referred to as Hormonal High. Her background was nearly as Byzantine as my own. Her degrees were in DNA protein synthesis, but once upon a time she had accepted a job at the infamous Ortho-Nuclear Chemical Dynamics Corporation and been given a fabulous salary. But when a certain presidential candidate was in the death-throes of his campaign and needed a public service scandal to boost his ratings, he revealed the story of Ortho-Nuke's "Project Frankenstein" and Vera ended up selling pieces of quadruplexes to white trash and bandaging bite-wounds on juveniles.

I flopped on her black leather sofa. This evening, what with having witnessed a death by fire, it was hard to focus on that which stood before my eyes -- the semi-transparent silk poncho she wore and her loose hair that seemed to fly around her head like weather patterns.

Money was supposed to make life make sense, not make me mental.

"You rented my old house to someone," I called to her. "I was hoping the neighborhood kids would burn it down. Only way I'll get any money out of it."

She came out of the kitchen with a huge goblet half filled with pale green slush. A sheet of paper covered the top and she carried it very carefully.

"Here." She held it under my nose and slid off the paper. "Breathe deeply."

I did.

Everything changed. The world brightened. My cares became less world-shaking.

I even managed to notice as she stood with the light behind her that the blue-black thing she wore was the only thing she wore.

"Gee," I said.

"Nice cold nitrous oxide hovering over vodka-lime slush. Feel better now?"

"Yeah... I could watch people spontaneously combust all day. Okay," I said, "what is it you said we need to talk about? I assume it's bad news. What's the worst news you can give me? Do it before this wears off."

She sat beside me and laid her long fingers along the side of my neck. "A few weeks after you bought the new house, something unusual happened at school. We have a fundamentalist science teacher there named Tick. He was having his kids do individual science projects, and one of his Lao-Haitian kids brought in his grandfather as his project."

I took a few deep breaths of clean air. There seemed to be several serious non sequiturs in what she was telling me. A fundamentalist Zick? A grandfather project?

"You're blinking a lot," she said.

"I'm all right. Speak more. If it doesn't all come together in a minute, I'll let you know."

"Well, in his own brand of English, the old man started telling them that there was a new disease starting right here in Santa Miranda and that soon it would affect nearly everyone with some very bad consequences. Zick apparently liked this news since it fit in with several Biblical verses he always recites about the end of the world."

"Vera, although you have amazing legs, you're making the world seem very complex right now."

"I know, dear. Keep your random access memory alive a minute longer." She recrossed her legs. I'd never seen past her knees before. She had great muscles in there. "As soon as the old guy told them that it was sexually transmitted--and I gather he did this with some kind of Laotian hand gestures -- Zick went ape and did a lot of yelling. Now this last part I don't know what to make of, but it was enough to cause Zick to evacuate his class and to call the police. Are you hyperventilating?"

"He did what in his class?"

"He evacuated his class, he didn't evacuate in class."

I was relieved, although the post-digestive image remained in my mind.

"But what evidently drove Zick over the edge was that the old man kept saying, 'reality fucks generators.' Over and over. Zick couldn't shut him up, so he called the police."

One of her unrestrained breasts, I suddenly realized, was resting on the back of my hand. Heavily resting on the back of my hand. With only an eighth of a millimeter of fabric between me and her actual warm breasticular flesh.

"Vera," I said, "My concentration isn't what it was two minutes ago. Before I pass out, I want you to tell me what this crazy old man has to do with me? Why are you tormenting me with this story?"

"I must've got too much nitrous in your glass." She moved closer and rested one hand on the back of my neck. The breast remained on my hand. "I'm telling you this," she said soothingly, "because when the police came, he said his head hurt and asked for 'the nurse.' And when he saw me, he smiled, bowed politely, said he felt fine, and asked if he could rent your house. Also, five or six times, he said 'Mr. Ramden come see me, get to keep money.' His name is Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez."

That brought me around. I even forgot what was on my hand. "Keep my money? And he knew my name? And asked to rent my house? It's got to be the Internal Revenue Service. They found out somehow. Vreedon squealed -- it has to be Vreedon. The way the IRS manipulate these foreigners is despicable. They probably offered this Fang person a job at a taco stand if he'd pull this stunt." My vision began going grainy around the edges.

For the first month in four years I didn't have to eat macaroni and beans six times a week, and now, whatever else all this meant, it meant I was involved, and I didn't want to be involved with anything where people burned up and talked about my money and the police asked questions.

"Well," she said, "given my experience in the federal sector, your paranoia may not be unwise. However, with his knowing you and his implied threat to your money, I thought I should rent it to him for a couple of months. And this disease thing is something he shouldn't have known about." Her voice turned dark and low. "It's very ominous, Derrik."

For the second time in a single minute, my blood ran cold. "What disease?"

She patted my shoulder sympathetically. "STS, dear. Neither one of us has it, but as another in the long series of sexually transmitted diseases that are turning up, it's ominously fascinating. The best guess is that it causes microscopic lesions in the prefrontal cortex and perhaps a subtle but widespread deterioration of the limbic system. Probably a virus. It --"

"I have it, don't I. This is why you gave me this drink and why you're telling me this complicated story, to confuse me -- so I'll think I'm okay till I wake up in the morning and it all sinks in. Go ahead and say it. I get a little money and two months later, I'm going to die."

"No, dear."

She wrapped her nurse-realtor's hands around my face, turned me to face her, and gave me a kiss that rearranged my priorities...lips and the touch of her tongue

across my teeth...it felt like god had spoken to me.

"I'd never kiss someone who had a transmissible disease, Mr. Ramsden."

"I've been celibate for a year and a half," I said truthfully. "By choice," I lied.

"Yummy," she said. Then she shifted gears. "The Atlanta Centers for Disease Control already have two people here and others across the state --very quietly, of course -- and they're officially calling it STPL. Sexually transmitted pre-frontal lesions. But unofficially they're calling it STS sexually transmitted stupidity, and it's no joke. It's one of those very mean viruses that evidently popped up out of nowhere, and the biggest problem they're going to have, when they have to announce it to the public, is to convince them that it's real. After all, stupid people are the hardest ones to convince that they're stupid."

"STS?"

Her hair swirled when she nodded.

"How stupid does it make a person?"

"Some of the teachers at school are convinced that the kids have a conspiracy going where one by one they pretend to forget how to read anything over about fourth grade level."

"What are they complaining for? That's enough to graduate, isn't it?"

"To get out of high school they have to read at fifth grade level. It could cost the school a lot of money -- and cause a reevaluation of the staff. Outside school, in the real world, all you have to do is pick up the paper."

She leaned over the arm of the sofa and pulled a sheaf of newspaper from under an end table.

"`Burglar Caught Napping -- Beaten Into Coma.' He broke into a house with the apparent intention of stealing the refrigerator shelves but stopped, to eat and went to sleep on the sofa. The owner came back and nearly killed him. Owner's in jail now." She turned a page. "`Teen Gives Birth In Class, Thinks Baby Alien Parasite.' After it was explained that it was a baby, her baby, she became quite maternal."

"You think these people are stupid? They sound like degree candidates to me."

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Okay. How about this." She pulled out a half-size section of newsprint. "`What's Hot, What's Not.' It's part of a teen-oriented insert the paper does. You might need something to bite on for this one."

"I've lived with insects, remember."

"According to this, branding is hot. `As a gesture of bonding, young adults now



use soldering irons and decorative branding irons to mark each other at branding parties. Popular patterns include pitchforks, flames, hamburgers, and the Nike swoosh.'" She smiled. "They do it on tender parts."

I felt my nostrils involuntarily flare. But what the hell. Kids will be kids.

"What's also hot-self-surgery. `Popular operations include removing the last joint of the little toe, drying it, and giving it to a loved one to wear around the neck.' You'll appreciate this one: `And what could be more intimate than a sealed jewel of your loved one's intestinal effluent inserted sub-cutaneously between the eyebrows.?'"

"That's hideous! Even Cleetis would be repelled."

"That's fashion. Also what's hot -- cranial transducers."

I must have looked blank.

"Sixteen kids in my health classes have cranial transducers. They jack their CD players right into this thing that's screwed into their skull. Makes their skulls vibrate. They say the bass is excellent After a few hundred hours of that, they need friends to wipe their chins. That's STS."

The whole thing gave me the creeps--self-mutilation as a party sport, purposeful brain damage -- but why should I care? Teenagers are famous for annoying their elders. She read my mind.

"You should care, Derrik, because Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez has your number. Khamphang both knew about STS and wanted to rent your specific house. He knew your name. He knows something about your money, which I, fortunately, do not know about. Put that together with the burning woman in your yard, and I'd say you have an interesting situation developing."

"There's only one thing to do," I said, "and that's to get my hands on this Fang person and find out who put him up to it."

"After school tomorrow, I'll go with you. I'd like to know what he meant by `reality fucks generators.'"

"I'm not going to wait till tomorrow -- I'm going now. He's probably in bed, sleeping like a child, and if there's one thing I've learned in life, if you want to get a straight answer, catch them with their pants down. It's harder to lie when you're naked, except when you're sexually aroused."

"In point of fact, Mr. Ramsden, you're looking a bit peaked at the moment."

"Nothing energizes me like the search for truth." I stood up and got to the door. "I'll sleep tomorrow," I said heroically.

She followed me to her front step. Out in the car I could hear country music playing softly.

"Actually," I said to her, "I feel like a piece of flank steak. But it's hard to

get to sleep when somebody's about to pull your plug."

"So well I know."

I went down the walk and looked back once as I got in the back seat of the car.

I could dream about those legs later.

Cleetis turned off the car lights and we coasted to a stop in front of the dump where I used to live. The neighborhood was a mix of the three races and nine or ten nationalities. The kids all played together during the day, but at night the older ones came out to rob and stomp anyone with an accent different from their own. At this hour, the houses were locked like vaults and the street was dark except for a few windows dimly lit by low-wattage bulbs.

"Bet you glad you don't live here nomore," Cleetis whispered. "You gonna roust this old guy? You want me to help? I could go screamin' at the back door--"

I studied the dark front of the house, but nothing looked unusual "Two things, Cleetis. First, stay in the car. Second, no music. Keep your ears open."

"You think this old guy has a gun?"

"Who knows. He may be in there with a houseful of flamers." I got out of the car while Cleetis breathed heavily.

"I don't want nothing to do with no flamers, boss. They unnerve me."

"Pretend it's lights-out on the cell block, Cleetis. Watch for creepers."

He shuddered as I left him.

The front door was open behind the screen door, and the breeze that blew through the house smelled like seaweed. I drew back my hand to knock and the porch light next to my face flared like a runway beacon.

"Harrow, Mr. Ramden," said a shadowy face on the other side of the screen. "Make self inside." He turned on a ceiling light and pushed the screen open. "I have expected you."

Khamphang LaNuit-Gomez was old, sunken-chested, and had a neat rim of bristly white hair around his head. He wore a clean white T-shirt, baggy faded blue pants, and rubber thongs. The living room had three things in it arranged in a triangle: a thrift-shop sofa, a portable TV on the floor, and a wooden kitchen chair. He gestured politely to the chair. He sat in the middle of his earthtone houndstooth sofa and looked like a stickman with his ankles crossed, his clasped hands between his knees, and a big smile on his crinkly face. "So nice I see you, Mr. Ramden."

There were no wires or unusual attachments on the kitchen chair, so I sat

down.

We stared at each other a few seconds. I wanted to make the old guy uneasy, but it wasn't working. He grinned and nodded to me.

"You may ask first question," he said.

"Do you work for the IRS?"

"No," he said crisply.

"Who do you work for?"

"Want to work for you."

I noted that he didn't answer the question. "Well," I said, "I probably could use some help fixing up the bum holes in my yard. Next question: Why did the woman bum up in front of me today?"

"Because to make you pay attention. I want to see you soon, Mr. Ramden. We have very interesting problem. You can help."

"You burned up this woman so I would come here? Why didn't you use the phone? You know, give me a call. You think because I'm a landlord I don't have compassion? That I don't have feelings? If you wanted to make an impression, you could've sent flowers or a few good stock tips."

"Didn't kill woman," he said. "Those fire people, you not really see what you think you see. We wanted to make big impression."

"So I'm impressed enough to be here. Speak."

"There a problem with reality fucks generators."

"Really. Well, reality does that to all of us every now and then. Look, Fang, I can appreciate your having hard times, but if you want to get your rent reduced, double-talk won't help. And if you keep turning people into charcoal briquettes, or whatever the hell it is you're doing, you could find yourself back in Port-au-Prince providing a little entertainment for the ton-ton police."

He looked worried. That was a good sign.

"Excuse moment please." He was up and back into the kitchen before I could stop him. For an old man, he moved fast. I positioned myself by the door in case he returned with armaments.

He came back holding one of those ninety-five cent Wal-Mart dictionaries, thumbing through it as he went back to the sofa.

"Here," he said, pointing to a word. "Look. Reality fucks generators."

I leaned over to look at the extended book and the word he pointed to was flux.

"Reality flux generators?" I asked.

His face lit up. "Jess!" he said, nodding vigorously.

I was getting the feeling that rent reduction wasn't on his mind. I had been hoping for something simple for a change, fool that I was.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Fang, what is a reality flux generator?"

"It be what we want you to rejust for us. It keep things running same way all the time, smoothly," he said pleasantly, his eyebrows raised, "and sometimes, generators mess up, need be rejusted. All things attach to all things.

Generator

in center of .... "He searched for a word, then his face lit up. "Generator in center of center. When generator go out on whack, bad things happen, you know? Like people get disease, go nuts. You like a beer, Mr. Ramden?"

"Certainly, Mr. Fang."

Deciding to humor him, while he was in the kitchen, I called out, "So why don't you get yourself a wrench and adjust these things yourself?"

"Not able," he said, coming back into the room with a couple of Sun Lik beers for us. "I --"

There was a crash through the side window right next to me, glass sprayed across the floor, and a rock glumped on the floor with a piece of paper duct-taped to it. I thought people were supposed to use string on such things.

"Neighbors," he said. He handed me the rock and said, "You read."

I peeled off the tape. The note looked like it had been written by someone who held his crayon like a butter knife. It said, "Gokes go bake were you cam frome!!!" but I didn't read it aloud.

"Don't have to tell me. I know what it say," he said. "See? People get stupid more faster. Stupid sex sickness go person to person -- two then four then eight, then everybody. Nobody help nobody, people do bad stuff all over, first kill Kampuchea, Rwanda, Serbia, kill whole world -- all because of stupid sickness go person to person jiggy-jig." He made a Lao-Haitian hand-gesture that

looked pretty universal to me. "Mr. Ramden must fix generators."

"Go fix these reality flux generators yourself, Fang. Why me? A wrench costs three bucks. I'll deduct it from your rent."

"You fix," he said, giving me a dismissive wave of his hand and taking a long pull from his beer. "I too old. Beside, I don't have car." He grinned and pointed a gnarled finger at me. "I know you, Mr. Ramden. You sold tombstone to family, say spirits must be held down by big stone --cost much much money. But then you come back next day and give half money back. You crazy white guy. Heh-heh! Good crazy, Mr. Ramden."

"If it's any comfort to you, Fang, I came back the next day to sell you another one -- but you were gone and I didn't think the little kid you left behind could close the deal." My professional training allowed me to lie like a teenager.

Fang shook his head and chuckled. Why was I losing this one so fast?

I swilled off the Sun Lik. "Let me phrase it this way, Fang. My reality's been fine till your friends started wrecking my lawn. Thanks for the beer."

He thumbed madly through his dictionary and pointed to another word.

"Monitor," I read.

"Yes." He did his grin again. "Monitor. Khamphang is monitor."

"And what does that mean?"

"Mean Khamphang responsible for fucks generators here. You fix them, sickness go away."

"Thanks for the beer, Fang." I stood up. "I'll have the window fixed. In the meantime, I'll call you sometime. We can do lunch. Later."

I didn't even wait to see the expression on his face. The guy had been up late a lot of nights to dream up that one. If he wasn't with the IRS, he was probably involved in some kind of rent scam invented in a Phnom Penh basement.

Once I got to the car, I looked in and couldn't see my driver.

"Cleetis?"

He climbed up out of the floor of the front seat. "Are they gone, boss?"

"You mean Fang's friends who threw the rock through the window? Yeah, they're gone."

"Those weren't no friends, boss. Those was six guys in ski masks carrying ax handles."

"Let's go home, Cleetis."

"God damn right, boss."

We lost about 15,000 miles of rubber by the time we got there. In the moonlight except for the dead spots, my new home, complete with water and electricity, looked wonderful. And sane.

Inside, I fell across the bed with my clothes on and was asleep by the second bounce.

Somebody talked to me. I had been dreaming Vera's legs wrapping around me, but somewhere now, a voice talked to me.

"...so the question of the hour is, `How did Socrates know that he was living in 400 BC? I sure don't know the answer to that brain twister, so call in if you know the answer because one of our listeners is real puzzled! Hey, am I supposed to know everything? Am I Eisenstein? Give us a call, gang." I faded out and faded back in to hear the same voice talking about a NASA probe that had

landed

on the outskirts of Heaven and brought back voodoo germs which would cause worldwide attention deficit disorder.

When I finally got my eyes open, I saw it was my radio talking to me, so I hit the button on top to keep from being more depressed about the human condition than I already was. Money gave you time to brood about things like that.

I had a few cups of coffee at the kitchen table and went through the mail while

Cleetis scrubbed the tile grout on the drain board with a toothbrush. He wore his cassette player and earphones while he worked, but I could still hear the dismal moan of his suffering cowboys as they lamented their girlfriends getting

snaked by out-of-state truck drivers and other large animals. If this STS thing

was real, Cleetis must have dipped in at the source...an ugly thought.

The mail was typical...except for a postcard with a picture of wheat fields on the front side. On the back, down at the bottom, it was signed by Vreedon.

That

gink.

The writing was microscopic. I started at the top.

Dear Ramsden,

Well, it finally happened. I never even got to my plane. I had the cargo in my car trunk, and all of a sudden, this Fed lays his bazooka through my window and

says, "Howdy." All in all, it might be for the best. How was I to know that stuff in the boxes wasn't Gatorade? I thought they were paying quite a lot just

for transportation, but I figured what the hell, soldiers down in Paraguay get thirsty too. However, if I'd landed too hard, they'd been able to see the fireball from Waikiki. C4 shouldn't be flown in DC-3's with bad suspension.

Nobody tells me anything. A good thing you didn't invest. Uncle took everything,

plane, bucks, everything. See you in six months, (I had a good lawyer.) New add:

#41-82-0503, Box 42346, Leavenworth, KS.

Yrs. Vreedon

I swallowed hard. Vreedon never got off the ground? Vreedon never took my savings? Vreedon was in Leavenworth?

I roused Cleetis from his grout and told him to go scrub the spots on the driveway. While he was in front, I got a shovel and dug up one of the boxes in the garden where I kept a major chunk of the cash.

Guess what.

It wasn't there.

The three thousand bucks of mad money I had taped under the sink --gone. The inch of 50s inside the radio -- gone. I was about to pull up the carpet in the bedroom where I'd hidden a layer of 100s when I heard Cleetis shrieking at me from the front of the house.

I really didn't want to see that black-haired kid, eighteen or nineteen years

old, standing there with a shy grin on his face, one finger in his mouth and a scraggly bouquet of gardenias in the crook of his other arm.

Cleetis yelled at him, "G'won! Scram! My god it's another one! We don't want nothing. Boss! Go 'way! Boss!"

The kid just stood there.

I figured what the hell. I had to go outside sooner or later, so I stepped out on the porch. Just like I'd touched a match to him, he started to smoke. His Hawaiian shirt crinkled up, turned a light brown and flash-burned. "Howdy, goo'bye," the kid said with that same weird grin as the woman the night before.

He tossed a gardenia in my direction and it landed smoldering on the lawn. Cleetis looked at me with mad-dog terror in his eyes.

"Howdy, goo'bye," the kid said again as close to his body he burned a yellow-white and was surrounded by a flickering orange aura.

"You'd better get out of the way, Cleetis." I could feel the heat from where I stood.

Then the kid whoofed off like a hundred pounds of loosely wrapped black powder. Billows of gray smoke swooshed over the front porch, the yard, the car, and Cleetis.

When the breeze finally carried it away, I saw Cleetis standing thereon the edge of the drive, staring at the new burn hole in the lawn. Now there were six dead spots in the yard. He looked up at me in open-mouthed wonder.

No ashes, and one smoldering gardenia.

"Better buy a big bag of grass seed while we're out today," I said. "And we need to go see that new tenant again."

As I stepped back inside the house, I realized I was in my underwear. These were not amateurs I was dealing with.

They had caught me with my pants off.

AS WE DROVE deeper into the slum sections, I couldn't help but notice that a lot of people were milling around for that time of day. Despite the very warm morning, a lot of them seemed to be wearing shorts with overcoats. Poor fashion sense did not seem to be the reason.

"These people," Cleetis called back over his shoulder, "they make me uneasy. They got instruments of havoc under them coats, boss, you can count on it"

"Just keep the windows up and the motor running at all times."

"Yo boss."

When I was in college I wrote a paper on the inverse relationship between

ambient temperature and intelligence w up to 102, the hotter it gets, the more people act like hitleroids, and all those lumpy overcoats on a day like this did not bode for happy times. We still had a few minutes before we got to Fang's, so I thought I'd check in with Vera and see if her voice was as sexy as I remembered.

"Cleetis, gimme the phone."

"Atlanta CDC sent in six more people last night on a charter plane," she said. "Two are in Sacramento, two in Merced, and two more here in Santa Miranda. Significant populations as far away as Denver are starting to act up -- and probably in LA, although aside from the increase in freeway killings, it's hard to tell down there. Where are you calling from?"

"The Buick. I'm on my way to Fang's. We've been passing a lot of mugger-types standing around with ax handles and motorcycle chains hanging out the bottoms of their overcoats. Maybe your Atlanta people are on to something."

"I thought you saw Khamphang last night."

"I did. We got nowhere. This guy's been on Mars too long."

Cleetis suddenly swerved to miss some guy who had stopped in the middle of the street to look at something he'd picked out of his teeth.

"What was all that swearing?" Vera asked.

"Never mind. We're under control now. I have to go -- we're almost there."

"Listen," she said. "It still troubles me that Khamphang knew about STS -- very few people have that information -- and he knew. Don't take this guy lightly."

"Don't worry."

I opened the rear-seat glove box and poured myself a drink of Acceler-Oh! from the thermos -- a completely legal synaptic transport enhancer, prescribed for me by one of the finest pharmacists in Tijuana. I hadn't been getting a lot of restful sleep lately, and there was an off-chance Fang might try doing a "Howdy, goo'bye" on me if I didn't participate in his psychotic notions about "reality flux generators." In a closed room I wanted to be able to respond with great rapidity. If I was lucky, the house would go up in flames along with him, and I could finally collect on the insurance.

This Fang person had wanted my attention, and now he was going to get it -- Derrik Ramsden, moving quickly, mind like teal strap.

"Be inside," he said graciously. "Welcome, Mr. Ramden. You come to `just reality generators this morning?" He bowed and nodded his little white-bristled head like I was a wonderful person.

The place smelled funny. On top of the odor of fish was something else. I



looked  
around. Yes, on top of the odor of fish was the odor of burned curtains.

"What happened?"

"Gentlemen returned after throwing rock and threw fire into curtain."

"You may have to wait for me to get them fixed," I said. "That's a special-order item and costs measurable money, which is something I seem to be without at the moment. Get my drift? Comprendo?"

"Si, yes. Money gone from all hiding places. You like ice tea?"

"I like my money back, Fang."

"Our money," Fang said. "Get back very easy."

I was starting to feel like a stray dog who'd been coaxed into the gas chamber.

If this guy wasn't working for the IRS, he had read their manuals.

"Your money?" I said stupidly.

"We let you enjoy it a while, then take away. Make you hungry, huh."

"You set up Vreedon in this, didn't you? He's in prison because you set us both up."

"Oh yes, but get out soon, with your help. He get good lawyer. Or you sell tombstone again to welfare people. Neighbor across street about to die," he added idly. "Could be first sale of new life."

I gazed past him out the window. It was such a pretty day, the sun rose mindlessly through the trees, the birds sang their little hearts out, hunted worms, and ate each other's young, the muggers strolled peaceably through the streets, waiting for the temperature to go up. And I was looking at a major lifestyle demotion.

"Okay, Fang," I said, snapping my mind back to what currently seemed like the real world. I sat down. I figured I should say something tough. "Who do you want me turn into chunk style?"

"Ah," he said, giving me his big squinty smile. "No one need to be messed up. Only need you to `just reality generators. Very easy. No sweat. Piece of nice cake. Without `justment, people get very very bad stupid. Then ...." He shrugged up his shoulders and flipped his hands outward. The gesture for hopelessness was apparently the same in both our cultures.

I nodded my head and tried to keep the desolation out of my voice. "I do this and you get Vreedon out and my money...your money reappears in my possession."

"Oh yes. Very easy. Take maybe hour only."

"Fine. How about one of those Sun Liks while you tell me about it."

You know those dreams where you're standing in your living room, say, petting a dog...and then the dog turns into an ex-wife that tries to chew the face off your head? You know it's impossible, but there it is. It can't be, but it's happening anyway, and if you don't believe it, a full set of teeth is going to snag the eyes right out of your face.

That's what was happening to me. After being disbarred, I had always thought there were limits to the lunacy I would get involved in. The sun also rises, but the wangers are out there twenty-four hours a day.

Everything is connected to everything else, he said. And at vital points there are these reality flux generators which were disguised as ordinary objects. These generators, Fang said, were scattered around by persons or beings unknown, and generations ago his people had been chosen to monitor the things, to try to keep reality running smoothly.

That's what he said. He had my money, so who was I to argue?

His were a chosen people, he said. His people, he said. Lao-Haitians? I asked. Well, not exactly, he said. They were from a lot of places, but...well...they weren't really what you'd call Lao-Haitians. Martians, I suggested. Well...not really.

These generators, he said, control the way things happen. They "went out on whack" in Cambodia, he said with a smile, and they couldn't get people to adjust them in the right way at the right time, so his country turned into a mausoleum janitored by Khmer Rouge thrill-killers. Now, he said, the generators here are going out on whack here and would I please help.

Certainly I would, I told him, for the remaining eight hundred thousand bucks, if it only took an hour.

"No, no, not eight hunderd thousand," he said, causing my blood to run cold. "With quick investment, now million three."

My blood warmed quickly. He had my money, after all, and if he could put Vreedon in Leavenworth as a hostage, the man was not to be abused.

"I'm all ears."

"Generators disguised as ordinary things," he said. "Big one near here look like old car in field, over by school, Madison and Spruce Streets."

"So, what am I supposed to do?"

"Move old car."

"And that's going to make this stupid disease go away, I'll get the money back, and Vreedon gets out of Leavenworth?" "Yes true."

"Anybody could do this, Fang. Why me? It's too easy. There has to be a booby trap here. If you expect me to go for this, Fang, you're crazy."

"Had to be someone. Today, it be you. And you very poor, Mr. Ramden."

Fang had an intimate understanding of fate and human motivation.

CLEETIS TWITCHED morbidly, but he promised to do what I said. I didn't see any reason to smother the poor man with details, so I just told him we were going to do some precision car-ramming. The destructive aspect cheered him up a little, but when he heard the location, he became abject.

On our way over to the junked car, I called Vera to listen to her voice again

"Listen," she said, "we may have bad problems soon. The Lieutenant Governor has just been on television talking about how mediocre citizens are not fully represented in government. He wants to establish a department of mediocrity."

"Can he even spell it?"

"He's going to call it the Department of Ordinary People--DOPE. He also said that at his next press conference he would only take questions from women in black hose with a seam up the back."

"Vera, I've got business to attend to. You may not believe this, but I suspect aliens disguised as Lao-Haitians have robbed me blind and sent Vreedon to Leavenworth."

There was a long pause. "You should come in to the clinic for a blood workup when you have time."

"I'm serious."

"It's sexually transmitted, Ramsden. We'll need a history."

"There is no history. Since I was disbarred, my sexual history is as barren as the Sahara--well, with the exception of one small oasis, which, I might add, turned out to be an illusion." I was babbling. Fortunately I stopped short of detailing my stay at Madame Helga's, as a janitor. Maybe I was infected.

"Never mind," I said and hung up. "Drive, Cleetis, fast."

I had to get my money back and convince Vera I was clean, even if I had to save the world to do it.

So this, I thought, was a reality flux generator. It looked to me like another junked car, a rusted out Ford Fairmont with no windows or doors, and long ago, someone had burned the seats down to the springs. It lay in a weedy lot with an auto upholstery shop on one side and an abandoned health food restaurant on the other. The problem with moving the car like Fang had said wouldn't be with the car--it would be with the six guys who loitered next to it, roasting weenies over a can of burning gasoline. One of them had a medium-sized chainsaw and sat on a spool of yellow electrical cord.

Fang had been very precise: move it one foot north and eighteen inches southwest.

When I gave Cleetis his assignment, he started some lightweight blubbering. "Don't make me do this, boss. I could smash three, four of those bums there, and I'm on parole, and if I get questioned ...." Saliva glistened on his lips. "We already had one person blow up on us today, boss. We could run out of luck."

"Luck? We don't need luck. Everything I do is calculated down to the short hairs. Luck is for wimps." I reached forward and patted him on the shoulder. "Cleetis, have I ever steered you wrong?"

"No boss."

"And you have a nice little cottage behind the house you can call all your own, right?"

"Yes boss."

"It's much bigger than a jail cell, isn't it."

He turned and stared at me. Fear choked off his blubbering.

"You get evenings off every now and then, I let you drive my car, and when was the last time some guy with tattoos whispered sweet somethings in your ear?"

"Yeah," he said defiantly, "but those guys in the joint didn't have no chainsaws."

"Look again, Cleetis. It's an electric chainsaw. We'll just keep our distance from any outlets."

"But they got extension cords, boss, big ones! Lookit that spool that guy's sittin' on!"

"I have a telephone here, Cleetis, and your parole officer is on insta-dial, button number three. Don't tell me you're going to flush our relationship."

He whimpered like a newbie at Madame Helga's. "Boss, you make life so difficult!"

"I wouldn't ask you to just run them down, Cleetis. They're human beings, after all, and deserve something more stylish. This is only a Buick. All you have to do is stroll over and tell them there's a liquor store being looted on the next street."

"Boss, I can't do that, boss --"

"Make the move, Cleetis, or I hit button number three."

His nerves stuttered and his head bobbed erratically.

"Cleetis," I said softly. "This hesitation is beginning to make me nervous."

He opened the door and the guys with the chainsaw looked up from their blackening weenies.

"Remember," I said. "Look excited. Look happy."

I never was clear about what went wrong. Whenever I asked him what he said, he started whining. I wouldn't be surprised if the little knob offered them money to jump me.

Cleetis kind of half ran and half shuffled across the lot to the guys and I could hear him saying something to them, but halfway there, he turned around and ran full-tilt back to the car, and the one with the chainsaw ran after him while another one dragged the plug end of the cord across the lot to the auto upholstery shop. The chainsaw buzzed to life. I never knew how threatening one of those things looked close up.

Of course, Cleetis had trouble starting the car, and by that time the guy had scratched up the windshield pretty badly by trying to saw through it.

Giving up on the window, he went after the front grill, but the chain jammed in the metal and the saw whipped him around like a rag before it threw him under the car.

Cleetis proved unreliable. He sat up there slapping at the steering wheel and going "Nuhh, nuhh, nuhh" and grinding the gears and stalling out the engine while the other guys hammered on the car roof with their fists, screamed at us through the windows, and pulled their friend out from under the front of the car.

When I saw one of them rev up the saw and start to go for the tires, I figured it was time to get involved.

"Cleetis!" I screamed over the racket of the saw, "I'm going to get you out of this mess you got us into and I don't ever want to hear any backtalk from you. You get my message?"

"Nuhh! Nuhh!"

"I'll take that as a yes."

I opened up the back-seat glovebox and took out the plastic bag of baking soda I kept for such emergencies. I shoved open the back door and shouted, "Free coke!" and gave it a twenty-foot heave away from us. It splattered on a crumbled slab of asphalt.

They swarmed it like piranhas.

"Very good," I yelled after them. "Excuse us, please."

Cleetis had started the car, but he wept like an old virgin. "I can't do it, boss. It's my nerves. I can't do it. You carryin' around kilos of coke, people try to hack me up with a chainsaw, it don't make no sense!"

"C'est la vie, Cleetis. Just think of those tattooed arms that want to embrace you. Think of those whiskered lips crooning jail house lullabies in your ear."

"Stop it, boss!" he wept. "Stop it, god, christ." The Buick rumbled to life.

"Okay, I'll do it, whatever," he said wimpily.

"Hit that car from the rear," I said. "Try to jounce it about a foot forward."

While he circled behind it, I snapped on the restraining harness. "It's on its rims, so hit it a good one."

The guys with the chainsaw watched us dispassionately while they snorkeled baking soda and vomited on each other. No doubt life must have seemed quite mysterious to them.

Cleetis rear-ended it at about twenty-five miles an hour and the old Fairmont scooted forward about eight inches. "Push it," I commanded him. "Move it a tad more." He made high-pitched whining noises, but he did it.

"Okay now. Circle around and come at it at an angle, hit it on the right front corner. I want about a foot and a half movement this time. Use your own judgment about the speed."

What a mistake.

What a half-witted thing to say to someone with limited cognitive abilities and the intelligence of a bright hamster. Suggesting that he use his judgment was like telling a toaster oven to wash the car.

He got the car in position well enough, but then he floored it, ripping out parallel ditches through the empty lot, and screamed, "I can't take it no more!

I can't take it! I gotta go back to jail." And then we hit hard enough that I thought I was going to be diced through the harness.

The Fairmont leaped sideways, knocked over the can of burning gasoline I had so carelessly disregarded, and we were engulfed in flames.

"I gonna die! I gonna die!" Cleetis shrilled, flailing his hands at the windshield.

I didn't like seeing orange flames and black smoke lapping at the windows. Burning to death with a screaming moron was the sort of thing that made me re-evaluate my life's priorities. It seemed time to inject a little gentility into my driver's demeanor, whatever crude methods it might require. We were, after all, on the cusp of burning to death.

With both hands I got a good tight grip on the skin on each side of his scrawny little white neck. He stopped screaming long enough that I explained the situation clearly: "Put the car in reverse," I said into his ear, "or your brain will die right here, right now."

In seconds we were away from the conflagration. As we sped out of the lot and banged over the curb, I saw the guys with baking soda all over their upper lips slapping their legs and pointing at us, choking with laughter.

People who laugh at the misfortunes of others should be on welfare the rest of their lives.

"Okay," I said. "Take us to Fang's. We've got bucks to collect."

At last things were winding down, but Cleetis started whining again. I looked up but didn't see anything.

"Behin' us, boss, look behin' us."

One glance and I realized that Cleetis was doing a very good job dealing with his feelings. Perhaps I had misjudged him after all.

"Burn rubber, Cleetis!"

Pouring out of the rat-trap houses, out the corner groceries, and out of side streets stormed dozens -- maybe hundreds -- of kitchen-knife-waving, raving, club-carrying, shrieking gap-toothed, half-witted ignoroids, and I couldn't tell where all of them were going, but some of them were definitely going after us.

My head lolled back when Cleetis floored it, and when the turbocharger kicked in, I felt my corneas flatten out and my eyeballs squeeze toward the back of my head.

Something about them struck chords in me that went back to the Pleistocene. They swarmed off the sidewalks ahead of us, everywhere, crawling over cars, over each other, like insects, like vermin.

Cleetis took a corner on the sidewalls of two wheels, and I saw something that made me desire the company of Madame Helga: Five or six blocks behind us, roughly over the vacant lot where we had knocked around the old car, there hovered a vast black cloud. And it wasn't just black -- it was so dark it looked like the absence of light, like a chunk of the interstellar void had been dropped on us. Around the vortex, the air started to spark, as though with a little more incentive, it could ignite. This whole ugly mess was Not Good.

"Cleetis! Change of course: get us back to my house!" It seemed to be the right time for some restful contemplation of what the hell was coming loose and a relaxing IV of white rum. "Jesus, Cleetis! Slow down -- keep it under eighty."

Back at the intersection where we had turned, people were emptying from their houses and old laundromats and liquor stores and running toward the vacant lot, and, I noticed, these people didn't look quite as psychotic as the first wave we saw. Maybe there was a pattern here, but I sincerely hoped it was somebody else's job to figure out what it was.

"Bad news, boss!" He was pointing to a flash off to the side but I missed it --

however, I didn't miss the next one. Little saronged or Hawaiian-shirred people stood at the curb every thirty or forty feet, all of them holding bouquets of gardenias, and every time we got near one of them, they burst into flames and exploded in a fireball of heat and smoke.

"Sweet creeping jesus! Hit the brakes! Stop!"

We fishtailed through an intersection, up across the sidewalk, and took out a couple of newspaper boxes. Ten feet ahead of us stood a grinning young girl, maybe twelve years old, in purple pants and a yellow-flowered shirt. She held an armful of gardenias and I could tell by the look in her eyes, she was just waiting to go up in smoke.

I rolled down the window and yelled at her, "It's okay, don't do anything, all right? We're on our way to talk to Fang."

She nodded deeply. , 'Goo' idea," she said.

"Reverse course, Cleetis. Take us to the Fang man."

People in this area were starting to emerge from their dens, coming out on the sidewalk and gazing up at the sky at the spinning funnel cloud of black. Gradually they began strolling in that direction.

It was idle speculation on my part, but I had begun to think that reality really had been fluxed and that I had had something to do with it.

I tried calling Vera on the car-phone, but when she answered there was a great turbulence of sound in the background, much like I would imagine wailing and gnashing of teeth might sound, and I barely made out her shouting into the phone, "...lunatics all over the...have guns...call back later .... "and a disconnect.

Fang sat out in his front yard on a kitchen chair, waiting for us.

"You move reality generator too far," he said amiably. "Mess up everything way bad."

"I messed up everything? People have gone mandrill out there, Fang! We almost got chainsawed, burned up, and mobbed, and it's not even noon yet!"

"No need to rave," he said. "Just move reality generator back." He looked at a little scrap of paper he'd been holding in his hand. "Move generator nine inches northeast. That all." He had a winning smile. "Wan' 'nother Sun Lik?"

"Those people are dangerous, Fang. They'd eat their young, given half a chance."

"Mebbe so, mebbe so," he said meditatively. "But if you d'not fix, everybody get eat." He looked up the street and nodded in that direction.

"Have to go now," he said. "Need to save skin."

A pickup full of rednecks in yellowed T-shirts roared toward us with their Merle Haggard at 116 decibels. The pickup had been jacked up so the thirty-six inch wheels would fit halfway under the frame. The thing looked like a shoe box mounted on tractor tires, and had probably just been driven out of a showroom window. It still had a lot of stickers on it. The oversized engine hung below the bottom of the frame. It popped and shuddered after they turned it off and



we  
could hear ourselves think. The neck that had been driving jumped down to  
street  
level, black cowboy hat, bloodshot eyes, "Call Me Redneck" T-shirt, and belt  
buckle big enough to hold a three-course meal.

"Hey, shitheel, this where that gook lives?" He was missing a couple of front  
teeth and had a tattoo up his arm that said, "Fuck you." A witty man. It  
looked  
like he had done it himself with a ball-point and a pocketknife. The pipe  
wrench  
he carried had some gooey brown stuff matted on its jaws.

"Gook?" I said, strolling back to the Buick.

"Don't dick me around, Shitly. We already got us a nigger boy and now we need  
us  
a gook."

I had the door to the ca? open now. "Hey," I said, "I know where there's an  
old  
folks' home. You could go stomp them real easy. Most of 'em's in wheelchairs."  
Then, to Cleetis, "Pop the hood." His pupils flared. "Do as I say!" It clicked  
open.

"We just want us a gook for now. Is this where .... "

I lifted the hood, gave the rubber fuel line a stiff yank, and aimed it at the  
redneck. The electric fuel pump squirted gasoline far enough to significantly  
dampen his crud-yellow T-shirt.

"Hey, you bastard, you -- "

A few quick steps, and I had my lighter against his sopping chest.

"Smoke?" I asked.

"Uhh..."

"I know. It's a tough question. Drop the wrench and give me your keys."

"Uhh."

"Wanna meet Jesus with all your skin still on?" I yelled in his face. He  
dropped  
the wrench, but stalled out on the key command. Bad short-term memory.

From inside the cab, one of the necks yelled down, "Screw 'im, Conway, he's  
bluffing."

"Well," Conway said, "I might burn to death." He seemed to be evaluating the  
pros and cons.

"C'mon, Con," the truck neck yelled down, "I know where another gook lives --  
"

"Okay, Conway," I said, backing off a step, "I give up. I guess you geniuses  
saw  
right through me. Back up in the truck with your friends, Conway. C'mon, move  
it."

"Tolja!" one of the necks jeered.

"Dickhead!" the other one remarked.

Conway just heh-heh'ed as he got up and slid into the driver's seat.

I hopped up on the running board, kept my face well out of the way, stuck my hand in the window, and flicked that little black wheel on my lighter.

The inside of the cab WHOOFed and rednecks shot at great velocity from the doors making all-purpose exclamations of general surprise. Conway had a few flames on him, but nothing that wouldn't go out as soon as his flimsy T-shirt burned off him.

"Cleetis!"

"Boss?" The parolee had cowered under the Buick's steering wheel.

"Get in the pickup. This time, I'm driving."

I saw his nostrils flare and his lips went white around the edges. But he didn't give me any backtalk.

There was a refrigerator full of Budweiser under the dash. Newer vehicles seemed to come with everything. "Open me one of those," I said. I fired up the engine and ground it into gear.

The two rednecks that had been blown out the passenger door were coming back at us. Some people.

They got a grip on the truck bed and started pulling themselves up.

"All right," I told Cleetis as I popped the clutch and raced us down Fang's street, "hang tight." Nothing breaks in a new engine like high-speed stop-and-go driving, and I was in the mood for it.

I weaved the pickup violently down the middle of the street, slammed the brakes a couple of times and from the back came the sudden shrieks and fading screams of disoriented rednecks.

"Are they still there/" I yelled at Cleetis over the howling of the engine.

He looked back and then grinned. "All gone, boss. Now you can slow down."

I floored it. My patience had run out. There was work to be done.

I figured the best way to deal with those raving halfwits who were out there dogging up the right-of-way would be to go at them at high velocity while laying on the horn. If they got out of the way, fine, and if they didn't, their dangling remnants would serve a warning to the others. And if they ganged up and

tried to slow us down with solid walls of human flesh, the inertia of the truck would carry us a long satisfying way. I laid on the horn. Cleetis lost his tan.

Ignoroids can move fast when they want to. They parted like the Red Sea -- but we were, after all, on a mission to save the partially civilized world from a tidal wave of moronism. We clipped a few of them before they realized we were serious. The crowded sidewalks were a blur of screaming gap-toothed dipsticks who gave us the finger and threw at us whatever was at hand. A few buck-knives clacked off the windshield and a couple potbellied bikers dug garbage out of cans and slung it at us.

It was a couple miles back to the vacant lot, and I thought Cleetis might need a little distraction, so I turned up the radio.

"...shore you can sit on my lap, as we head South, nothing to fear. Let's play telephone, put one in my mouth, and one in my ear."

Cleetis stared at one of the eight blaring speakers in the cab like it was a TV set.

I hit one of the buttons and changed the station.

"Okay, we do the news," the announcer said. "Um, a Toronad0 was sighted, sighted... somewhere. What's this button for? Okay, right. People should stay away -- Ow! It's caught in your zipper."

I shut it off. Obviously we weren't the only ones with problems.

What had merely been an epidemic of sexually transmitted stupidity was now evidently some kind of rolling flux of brain-fade. Would it hit us before we got to the reality generator? And would we then start acting like speed-eating suck-heads like everybody else?

Maybe it only worked on people who had already been exposed to the virus, who had gone to bed with someone stupider than they were. Visions of Madame Helga's tattooed flanks swam before my eyes.

I just wanted to get this over with.

Clipped to the bottom of the dash was an added-on toggle switch that was labeled NO. A truck with a nitrous oxide tank hooked up to the intake manifold? A very handy option. I took this as a sign. The addition of a little nitrous to the combustion chambers would probably decrease the harmful emissions of this beast and at the same time boost the horsepower by fifty or sixty percent. I flipped the switch and watched the view out the side windows blur as the blood drained to the back of my head. Steering became a challenge, but at least Cleetis stopped whimpering after the G-force pressed the air out of his lungs.

The scene at the vacant lot was something like Heironymus Bosch might have painted if he had been chained in front of a TV for a month and force-fed a diet of Twinkles and full-sugar Kool-Aid.

The violent black vortex hovered over the junked car and whirled a mile into the air, as black as a hole in the sky. As far as I could tell, it didn't make a sound or ruffle a scrap of trash on the ground, but its effect on the people was one of unrestrained violence.

The ugliest part was the fascination people had for this thing. They came in droves, in hordes, ripping and shoving at each other, people climbing over other people, trampling them, howling and slashing at each other to get near the old car, but whatever they saw there, it wasn't the piece of junk I saw. They were enraptured by the force that drew them closer.

As soon as they got within ten feet whatever effect it was having, it had royally, and they turned away from it with a look on their faces like their brains had fried inside their heads. They charged grab-assing, slugging, groping, and raving with renewed frenzy as they fought their way back out and clear of the mob, where they ran amok through the streets, attacking anything, pounding on cars, breaking windows, or copulating lik insects in swarming mounds of arms and legs.

I kept one hand on the horn as I circled around to the southwest side of the wreck. At one point two guys stood in front of the truck and screamed that I should engage in onanistic practices. When they wouldn't move, I ran over them.

Actually I only ran over their legs, but in the side mirror I saw they were unrepentant -- they shrieked at me and gave me the finger until other ignoroids, running crazed away from the vortex, found them and kicked them into regret.

I eased us forward to the critical boundary, expecting at any time to start wanting to rape and pillage. Cleetis hadn't been making any noise, but he was glassy-eyed and sweat slicked his face.

"I just want to nudge it about nine inches," I yelled at him over the noise of the engine and the ambient screaming. "Hang on. This could be hairy."

He seemed to be nodding. "Ha," he said limply.

"Good man. Keep a stiff upper wrist. Here we go."

I put it in low and four-wheel-drive and let the shuddering vehicle creep forward.

It was interesting, getting stupid like that. Every foot closer we went, the more pissed off at everything I got. I got indignant that I would end up in a stupid place like this, surrounded by stupid people, dicking around with a stupid wrecked car in an ugly stupid vacant lot, and I didn't care what happened to me, I just wanted to give all those A-holes out there what they deserved for being what they were. I seethed with longing for Old Testament justice, pure and simple: round up the infidels, sell their children for street work in L.A., rape the women till boredom set in, and sell the men for bone meal. They were all

animals anyway. Exterminate all of them down to the last post-menstrual grandmother and sell their hair for rug padding. Exterminate them all.

When the undercarriage of the pickup started nudging the junker back to the position Fang wanted it to be in, for every inch it moved, the saner I became. And when I got to the point where I was willing to let most of the swine go on living, I cut the engine.

Everything went silent. The mob had stopped circling and stood around looking embarrassed at each other. Slowly they began shuffling away, back to their homes. Overhead, the last traces of the black whirlpool of whatever-the-hell-it-was dissipated, and I could hear Cleetis start breathing again.

"Boss," he said.

"Yo, Cleetis."

"Can I have tomorrow off?"

"If Fang comes through with his end of the deal, I'll send you to Vegas for a week. With a bonus."

There was a tentative knocking on the bottom of the truck door.

I opened it up and looked down.

My skin turned to ice.

It was a ten-year-old Laotian girl with an armful of gardenias.

"Howdy," she said in a piping little voice.

"Don't say the rest of it!" I yelled at the kid. "Please don't say it!"

Cleetis began clawing at his seatbelts and screaming for his mother.

The kid looked puzzled and I expected to see smoke come drizzling out of her nose, but she handed me up the flowers and smiled prettily. "Goo'bye," she said, and walked away, her brown little bare feet making neat footprints in the pulverized dirt.

WHEN VERA let me in her front door, I handed her the package with the two steaks she had asked me to bring. I was hungry and imagined hot steaks crisscrossed with sear marks and dripping with garlicked herbs.

"You're a dear," she said. "Cleetis with you?" She had on her gray work clothes and a tight-headed mouse-brown wig she wore in public.

"Cleetis caught a bus for Vegas an hour ago." I'd given him an extra \$2,000 and I was once again a monied person deeply concerned about the IRS.

"Like a drink?"

"D'you have any beer?"

She handed me a Kirin from the refrigerator. She was a woman of taste. I hated to drink it fast, but I had done a lot of sweating that day.

I asked her if she knew what was being said about the disturbance across town that afternoon.

"The police think it was a race riot, but Atlanta says there are some indications that it might have been related to STS. Some kind of massive outbreak. But it doesn't fit the pattern. What do you know about it?" She peeled the tape off the package of meat.

"I've been out driving around all day, re-familiarizing myself with human nature," I said without answering. "Living with Cleetis can give a person a distorted perspective, you know." She was handling the meat suggestively. "Can I take a shower before we eat?"

"Eat?" she said. "Oh. You mean the steaks. They're not for us to eat." She pulled off her wig and took a couple of clips out of her hair. After combing her fingers through it and shaking her head, her hair puffed up hugely. She unbuttoned her jacket and hung it over a chair. "Ramsden, what do you really know about what happened?"

"I would just as soon not be on a steady diet of Thorazine and electroshock, but I can say this: According to my source, everything is connected to everything else, so that if you, say, move a piece of junk across a vacant lot, the effects can be immense. The riot and STS, I was led to believe, were aspects of the same thing. Beyond that, truth, as I know it, is elusive."

She cocked her head a little and gazed at me. The moment was broken by the chirp of her phone. She answered it, listened briefly, and handed it over to me. "For you."

"What," I said into the thing.

"Ramsden! Vreedon here! Long story! I'm out! I was commuted!"

"How did you find me? And stop shouting!"

"Long story! Hey, I met this guy named Karo Fang! He showed me this incredible pyramid deal! You ever hear of these MENSA people? I'm gunna be rich! All I need is about five thousand -- "

I hung up. "Wrong number."

Vera glanced back over her shoulder at me as she ambled into the bedroom, steaks in hand. I followed her, ready for anything. "Mr. Ramsden, you have nice eyes."

"You have nice legs, Miss Kamchatka." When she moved, she moved more ways than one.

"Shall one of us seduce the other?"

"Seduction requites subtlety. And I've had a long day."

She lifted the bedroom window and threw the steaks out. I heard huge dogs growling and massive jaws crunching bones.

"That'll keep them quiet for a while, in case they hear any unusual noises."

"Ms. Kamchatka."

"Mr. Ramsden."