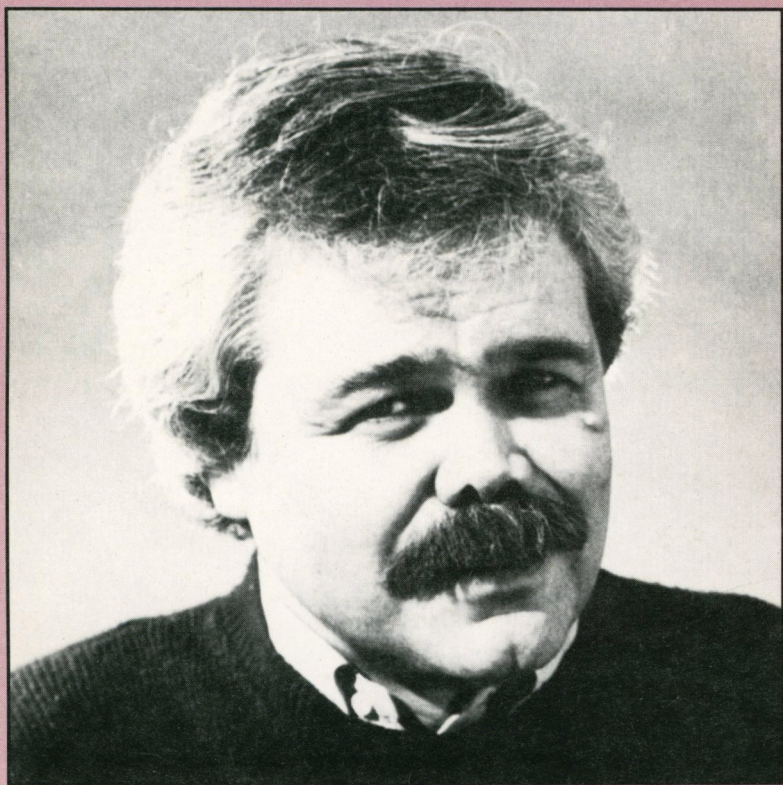


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Finally, a book for my brother Dan.

INTRODUCTION

When I was five, my grandmother died, quite young, of heart disease. On that day, for the first and only time in my life, I saw my grandfather cry. This took a great and abiding toll on me. I have never forgotten how he looked, or sounded.

After the graveyard, and on the way back to an aunt's house where hams and beef roasts and pies and cakes and cookies would be shared in a sort of communion, my father stopped at a drug store and took me inside and bought me a nickel fountain Coke and said I could have anything I wanted. He must have seen me watch my grandfather cry, and thus wanted to woo back laughter and shoo away a little boy's pain and fear.

That day I bought my very first comic book. It was an issue of *Superman*. I know all this happened exactly as I recall it because, just before his own death, my father talked about that day. He said that rather than go into my aunt's, I stayed in the car and read and reread the *Superman*. He was kind enough to bring me treats from inside. He said that he and my mother had been worried about me. I'd borne my grandmother's death in commendable style — probably I didn't have a clue as to what was going on — but that when I saw my grandfather cry, I clung to my father's trouser leg and began shaking and crying myself. I suppose, without quite understanding the process, I began to realize that even the strongest and most stoical among us is susceptible to loss and grief. (He was never the same again, my grandfather, and died, still a strapping man, not many years later, "a pore lonesome wife-left feller" in the way with which Nelson Algren chose to open *A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE*.)

My father said that for the next week I fixated on the *Superman* comic. It was all I wanted to do, read that comic book. I did not

want new comic books. I just wanted this one, to read again and again and again. And when I was not reading it for myself, I asked my mother to come in and read it to me. Sweet woman that she is, she obliged me.

Early on, I learned that reading offered great distraction. Nothing has ever engrossed me more than a good piece of fiction. Powerful as film can be, it has never held me, or taught me, or solaced me, the way fiction can.

I say all this just after reading a rather shallow and pretentious article in one of the fanzines about "the duty of genre fiction to become art." The writer even slips in a few Latin phrases to show us that he's indeed the erudite chap we suspected all along.

I'm afraid I disagree with him. For me, the first duty of fiction is to entertain, to offer distraction from a world too tangled to ever be knowable or comforting in any ultimate sense. Puritans that we are, we seem to find something slightly sinful in taking pleasure so directly and without apology. I guess the professors would have us read only things laced with Latin phrases.

This isn't to say that entertainment shouldn't have resonance. Think of Dean Koontz's *WATCHERS* or Stephen King's *THE DEAD ZONE*. True and powerful and fine statements about mankind, and entertaining as hell, page after gorgeous page. I recently reread Chandler's *THE LADY IN THE LAKE* and Cain's *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* and Brian Moore's *THE LONELY PASSION OF JUDITH HEARNE*, and you know what? All the great artists without exception were first and foremost entertainers, from Homer through Balzac to the much-maligned John O'Hara.

My mother says that even when I was six or seven I would sleep with a stack of library novels right in bed with me. I wasn't a happy child and books were my ticket out.

Now here I am writing about stories of my own.

Except for the occasional sale to a minor literary or men's magazine, my writing career didn't begin in earnest until I was thirty-nine. Only then did I start writing to a regular schedule, and only then did I begin submitting stories in a systematic way. I also began, and promised myself I'd finish, a suspense novel. I'd had many false starts before.

But I also began writing stories with a passion that hinted at obsession or frenzy. I sent lots out, I got lots back, but I kept writing anyway and fairly quickly I began to sell to the men's field, which

was surprisingly open as to what it would accept. I sold mysteries, westerns, horror, fantasy, even a few science fiction stories. This was before men's magazines insisted on "erotic content." That was a few years off.

A few of those early stories are in this collection, though the majority are of more recent vintage. I don't write as much as I did in those days but I think that all that writing was good for me. My heroes have always been big producers, from John D. MacDonald to Ed McBain to Max Brand to Georges Simenon. I think you'll find that slow writers write just the same percentage of bad stories as fast writers. The only difference is that slow writers tend to get sanctimonious about their pace, as if being slow were inherently virtuous. (This is not to excuse hasty or sloppy writing. I'm merely saying that each of us writes at his or her own pace, a pace, I think, that is largely preordained by a number of factors.)

I am blessed. I find that I take the same comfort from writing that I take from reading. Most mornings, I go happily to my writing office. On a few mornings, I've even been known to bound down the stairs, genuinely excited about working on a particular scene or story. Fortunately, my wife Carol is also a writer and knows just what I'm going through.

For all the editors who bought these stories, I thank you. And for all the readers who took pleasure from these stories, I thank you, too.

May these tales entertain you half as much as that long ago *Superman* story entertained me.

— Ed Gorman

FRIENDS

I've written two long stories and one long novel about Jack Walsh. I suppose, in most respects, he's really my father, albeit much happier than my father ever managed to be. Whoever he is, he's not me — I'm Jack Dwyer, my other series character; lots of anger and rancor and occasional embarrassing bursts of violence in that puppy. But the relatively gentle Walsh stories are fun to do because I truly never know where they're going to end up. When I started this story, for example, I had no idea where it was headed. It ended not as I wanted it to. It ended as Jack Walsh, whoever he is, wanted it to.

1

I saw a small child twisted with cerebral palsy. I saw an even smaller child stomach-bloated with malnutrition, flies walking his face. And a man who had ruined his life with cocaine. And a forlorn, whispery woman dying of AIDS.

I almost couldn't finish the late-night dinner I'd brought back to my motel room from a nearby McDonald's.

I don't mean to be sarcastic. I felt all the things those television commercials begged me to feel — guilt, sadness, rage at injustice, and utter helplessness. You know the commercials I mean and you know the time I mean — late night TV in between commercials for Boxcar Willie and Slim Whitman albums and forthcoming professional wrestling matches.

The trouble is, being a sixty-plus retired sheriff's deputy, I don't exactly have a lot of money to contribute to charities, worthy or not, and even if I did have money, I'd be confused as to which one

needed my funding most. How do you decide between a kid with cerebral palsy and a kid with Down's syndrome?

Finishing my cheeseburger that was by now cold, finishing my Pepsi that was by now warm, I rolled up the grease-stained sack and hook-shotted it for two points into a tiny brown plastic wastebasket next to the bureau. The wastebasket was one of the few things not chained down in this small motel room right on the edge of a Chicago ghetto. I'd been here three days. It seemed more like sixty.

I was starting to think about Faith and Hoyt again — Faith being my thirty-one-year-old ladyfriend and Hoyt the child we inadvertently produced — when the phone rang.

I had hopes, of course, that it would be Faith herself, even though I'd given her all sorts of stern reasons not to phone me and run up the bill, reasons that seemed inane this lonely time of night.

I grabbed the phone.

"Mr. Parnell?"

The voice was young, black.

"We probably should talk," he said.

"I'm listening."

"You was in the neighborhood today."

"Yes."

"Looking for somebody who knows somethin' about a certain woman."

"Right."

"You still interested?"

"Very much."

"You was lookin' in the wrong places. Ask for Charlene."

"Charlene?"

"She works at a restaurant called Charlie's. She's cashier there."

"Okay. You mind if I ask who I'm speaking with?"

"Why do you want to know?"

I looked at my Bulova. "It's nearly midnight. You wouldn't be suspicious about a call like this?"

"I guess."

"Plus, if this leads somewhere, there might be some money in it."

"I'll call you tomorrow night. If there's some money in it, tell me then."

"Maybe we could accomplish more if we could sit down and talk. Face to face."

"No reason for that."

"Up to you."

"Charlene can tell you some things."

"I appreciate the advice."

"Tomorrow night, then."

He hung up.

I replaced the receiver, stretched my legs and set them between the cigarette burns somebody had decorously put in the bedspread, and leaned back to watch an episode of *Andy Griffith*, the one where Gomer proves to be a better singer than Barney.

About halfway through the show, two men in the room next door came back from some sort of close and prolonged association with alcohol and turned on their TV to some kind of country-western hoe-down that lead them to stomp their feet and say every few minutes, "Lookit the pair on that babe, will ya?" and then giggle and giggle.

About the time Andy was figuring out a solution to Barney's dilemma (if you watch the show often enough, you'll see how Andy evolved over the years from a sly redneck into a genuinely wise and compassionate man) and about the time I was sneaking my fifth cigarette for the day (but sneaking from whom? I was alone), the phone rang.

I decided to be bold and not even say hello. "I'm sure glad you don't do what old farts tell you to."

Faith laughed. "I'm glad I don't either. Otherwise I never would have called tonight."

"How's Hoyt's cold?"

"A lot better."

"How're you?"

"Feeling wonderful. I took Hoyt to Immaculate Conception tonight. I've always liked Lenten services for some reason. Maybe it's the bare altar and all the incense and the monks chanting." A little more than a year ago, Faith had had a mastectomy. You sure wouldn't know it now.

I laughed. "There were monks there tonight?"

"No, but when I was a girl they'd come up from New Mallory, the monks, and the Gregorian chant was beautiful. Really. You still depressed?"

"It's just the weather. You know how November is. Rainy and damp."

"Anything turn up on Carla DiMonte yet?"

"Maybe. Just had a phone call about twenty minutes ago."

"I miss you."

"I miss you," I said. I hesitated.

"You're doing it, aren't you?"

"What?" I said.

"Looking at your wristwatch."

"Clairvoyance."

"No; it's just something I've picked up on since you've been in Chicago. How you start noting the minutes."

"We're coming up on three minutes."

She laughed. "God, I wish you were here."

"Kiss Hoyt for me."

Ten minutes later, I lay in bed afraid I'd have to go and confront the guests next door. But there was a crash, leaden weight smashing into an end table it sounded like, and then a male voice laughing said, "Man, you're really soused. You better lay down." Then the TV went off and then later there was just the sound of the toilet flushing.

Then there was just the darkness of the room and the way the blood-red light of the neon outside climbed along the edge of the curtain like a luminous snake.

Always late at night, and particularly when I was alone, the fear came about Faith. Her health seemed to be all right. Seemed to be.

I fell asleep saying earnest grade school Hail Marys. I woke up twice, the second time to hear one of the men next door barfing on the other side of the wall.

2

I came to Chicago at the request of Sal Carlucci, a Brooklyn private investigator with whom I served in World War II. Sal had been hired by no less a mobster than Don DiMonte to check into the activities of Carla DiMonte, the mobster's twenty-one-year-old daughter who had a penchant for trouble. At sixteen, for example, DiMonte had had to ease her out of a murder charge. A few weeks ago DiMonte had received a blackmail letter saying that his daughter had killed somebody else — and that if one million dollars wasn't turned over to the letter writer, said letter writer would go to the police with evidence that would convict Carla.

As if Mr. DiMonte's troubles weren't already plentiful, there was yet one more problem. A private detective he'd hired showed him that over the past year Carla had traveled with a rock band, spending decent amounts of time in five major cities. The murder, if it had actually taken place, most likely occurred in one of these cities.

Now, as good a private investigator as Sal Carlucci is, there's no way he could visit five cities in a week — the amount of time DiMonte figured he had to hold the blackmailer off. So Carlucci hired four other private investigators, including me, to help. Since I'm closest to Chicago, and since Carla spent time there, that's where I headed.

I spent my first day in the new library on North Franklin, checking out all the local murders for the past twelve months. It was Carlucci's idea that we first try to ascertain if the blackmailer really had something on Carla — was there an unsolved murder that sounded as if Carla might have been involved?

I found nothing that looked even promising until late in the day when I found an item about the slaying of a prominent drug dealer near a housing project. Several witnesses said that he had been shot dead by a white woman who seemed to resemble very much the description I'd been given of Carla DiMonte.

I spent yesterday walking off the blocks around the development where the killing had taken place. I had interviewed a few dozen people but learned precisely nothing. Nobody, it seemed, had ever heard of John Wade, the drug dealer who'd been murdered, nor had anybody seen a well-dressed white woman down here. "She wouldn't'a stayed white for long, man," one man told me around a silver-toothed grin.

Around nine the next morning I walked into Charlie's, the restaurant I'd been told about by my mysterious late-night caller.

Neither black nor white faces looked up at me as I came inside out of the raw gray cold and stood in the entranceway watching a chunky black cashier in a pink uniform stab out numbers on a cash register with deadly efficiency. Presumably, this was Charlene.

I stood there ten minutes. It took that long for the line to disperse. Then I went inside.

"Charlene," I said over the Phil Collins record assaulting the smoke-hazed air.

She looked up at me from under aqua eyebrows that seemed to be the texture of lizard skin. "Yes?"

"My name's Parnell."

"So?"

"I just wondered if I could ask you some questions."

"You law?"

"Indirectly. I'm a private investigator."

"Then I don't have to answer?"

"Right. You don't have to answer."

She shrugged meaty shoulders. "Then get lost."

"You mind?" a white guy said to me. "Jesus." He pushed into place at the cash register and handed over a green ticket. He only glared at me maybe three times while Charlene did her killer routine with his receipt. "You have a nice day, Charlene," he said to her when she handed him back his change but he was staring at me. He was no more than thirty and obviously he could see that I was about twice his age. He had the energy of a pit bull. Energy wasn't something I had in plentiful supply these days. He made sure to push against me as he went out the door.

Two more guys came up and handed her tickets. During her business, she glanced up at me twice and scowled.

When the guys were gone, I said, "Did you know a man named John Wade?"

Her eyes revealed nothing but her full, sensuous mouth gave an unpleasant little tug. She was maybe forty and twenty pounds overweight, but she was an appealing woman nonetheless, one of those women of fleshy charms men seem to appreciate the older they get, when the ideal of femininity has given way to simple need. You no longer worry about physical beauty so much; you want companionship in and out of bed. Charlene looked as if she'd be a pretty good companion. "You know what I do when I get off this ten-hour shift?"

"No. What?"

"I go home and take care of my two kids."

"Hard work?"

"Real hard."

"But I'm afraid I don't get your point."

A black guy came over. He was little and seemed nervous. He kept coughing as if an invisible doctor were giving him an invisible hernia checkup.

"You have a nice day, Benny," Charlene said to the little man as he pushed out the door. She looked at me again. "What I'm saying is that I'm too busy for trouble. I work here and then I go home. I don't have time to get involved in whatever it is you're pushing."

"You get a break?"

She sighed. "Nine forty-five Belinda comes out from the book-keeping office and spells me for fifteen minutes."

I nodded to the long row of red-covered seats that ran along the counter. But it was a booth I wanted. "I'll go have some breakfast over there. By nine forty-five I should have gotten us a booth. All right?"

"I get anything for this?"

"Fifty dollars if you tell me anything useful."

She shrugged again. It was the gesture of a weary woman who had long ago been beaten past pain into sullen submission. "Guess that'll pay a few doctor bills."

The food — bacon, two eggs over easy, a big piece of wheat toast spread with something that managed to taste neither like butter nor margarine — was better than I had expected.

Afterward, I read the *Tribune*, all about Richard Daley, Jr.'s new administration, and drank three cups of hot coffee and was naughty and smoked two cigarettes.

Charlene appeared right on time.

She had brought a big plastic purse the size of a shopping bag with her. She slipped into the other side of the booth and said, "He's been dead several months. Why're you interested in him now?"

"You knew him?"

"You're not going to answer my question?"

"Not now. But I need you to tell me about him."

She tamped a cigarette from a black and white generic pack and said, "What's to know? In this neighborhood, he was an important man."

"A pusher."

Anger filled her chocolate eyes. "Maybe, being a black man, that's the only thing he knew how to do."

"You really believe that?"

She cooled down, exhaled smoke, looked out the window. "No." She looked back at me. "He was the father of my two boys."

"Did you live with him?"

"A long time ago. Not since the youngest was born." She smiled her full, erotic smile. "That's the funny thing about some men. You have a kid for them and all of a sudden they start to treat you like you're some kind of old lady. Right after Omette was born, John started up with very young girls. Nineteen seemed to be the right age for him."

"Was he pushing then?"

"Not so much. Actually, he still had his job at the A&P as an assistant manager. Then he started doing drugs himself and — " The shrug again. "It changed him. He'd always had a good mind, one of the best in the neighborhood. He decided to put it to use, I guess."

"Pushing?"

"Uh-huh."

"The newspaper accounts said that several eyewitnesses saw him being shot to death by a white woman. You know anything about that?"

She hesitated. "I was one of the eyewitnesses."

"You saw him being shot?"

"Right."

"He was getting out of his car — "

"He was getting out of his car when this other car pulled up and a white woman got out and said something to him and then shot him. She got back in the car and took off before any of us could do anything about it."

"Would you describe the woman?"

The description she gave matched that in the newspaper. While it could fit a lot of women, it could also fit Carla DiMonte.

"You'd never seen her before?" I asked.

"No."

"So you wouldn't have any idea why she shot him?"

"No."

"How'd your boys deal with it?"

"I don't want to talk about my boys."

"They don't know he was their father?"

"Why is that important?"

"Just curious, I guess."

"My boys didn't have nothing to do with this."

"So John was a big man in the neighborhood?"

She looked relieved that I'd changed the subject. "Very big."

"Feared or respected?"

"Both. In the ghetto, nobody respects you unless they fear you, too."

I laughed. "I don't think that applies to just the ghetto."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"Sure."

"He had a big blue Mercedes and he had a reputation for having never been busted and he lived over near Lake Shore in this fabulous condo and when he'd come back to the neighborhood the kids would flock around like some rock star had shown up or something."

"That's one of the things I don't understand."

"What's that?"

"Why he'd come back to the neighborhood. He didn't need to."

"His ego."

"How so?"

"He wasn't an especially strong man, you know? Growing up, he'd had to take a lot of pushing around by other kids in the neighborhood. I don't think he ever got over the thrill of coming back here and kind of rubbing their faces in it."

She glanced at her wristwatch. "Time's up. I told you I wouldn't be much help."

"You see him much?"

"Not much."

"He pay you child support?"

"Not much."

"With all his money?"

"With all his money."

"He see the kids much?"

"When it suited him."

"He have a lot of enemies?"

She looked at me as if I were hopelessly naive. "You know much about dealing drugs? All you got is enemies."

"The white woman — you think she killed him because of drugs?"

"I wouldn't know."

"And you don't care?"

"I quit caring about him a long time ago."

"You give me the names of the other witnesses?"

Again, she hesitated. "I guess you could find out anyway."

She gave me the names. I wrote them down in my little notebook.

"What're you lookin' for, mister?" she said.

I sighed. "I wish I knew, Charlene. I wish I knew."

3

Two blocks after leaving the restaurant, I was joined by a jaunty little black man in a coat of blue vinyl that tried with great and sad difficulty to be leather. It would probably have even settled for being leatherette.

He was my age and he walked with a slight limp and he knew nothing whatsoever about tailing anybody. It had not taken Charlene long to get to the phone.

I thought about this as I reached the neighborhood proper, five square blocks where rats crouched in living room corners and where there wasn't enough water pressure to flush a toilet. The neighborhood seemed to huddle, as if for warmth and inspiration, around a ma and pa corner grocery store with rusting forty-year-old "PEPSI COLA...in the big bottle!" signs on either side of the door. People came and went bearing groceries bought with food stamps and the quick sad last of paychecks; shuffling shambling stumbling away if they were into hootch or cough syrup or street drugs; moving briskly and soberly if they had some sort of purpose, kids to feed, jobs to get to. In the cold drizzle, the dark faces staring at me held distrust and anger and curiosity; only a few smiled. I wouldn't have smiled at me, either.

For a time, I stood out on the corner looking at the place, in front of the laundromat that also rented videos, where John Wade had been shot to death and where a woman who had looked not unlike Carla DiMonte had been seen fleeing.

The jaunty little man in the blue vinyl coat stood maybe thirty yards away, leaning into a doorway and hacking harshly around his cigarette. Twice we made eye contact. I doubted I'd be hiring him in the near future to do any leg work.

Inside, the grocery store smelled of spices, overripe fruit, and blooded meat.

A tiny bald black man in a proud white apron stood behind a counter dispatching people with all the efficiency and courtesy of a

supply sergeant dispatching recruits. His plastic name badge read PHIL WARREN. He was one of the people I was looking for.

One woman was stupid enough to question a certain odor from the bundled hamburger she laid on the counter and the little black man said, "You want to talk about your bill now, Bertha?"

The woman dropped her gaze. He wrote up her ticket and jammed it into a large manilla envelope taped to the wall next to endless rows of cigarettes. In Magic Marker the envelope was labeled CREDIT.

When my turn came, I said, "I'd like to ask you some questions about John Wade." I'd waited until the place was empty except for a chunky woman sweeping up in back. The only real noise in the place was the thrumming of cooler motors too old to work efficiently.

The little man, who looked to be about forty and who wore a snappy red bowtie across the collar of his white shirt, said, "I can tell you exactly two things about John Wade. One is that he's dead; two is that he deserves to be dead."

"I understand you were an eyewitness?"

"Yes, I happen to be." He looked at me carefully. "You're not the law, are you?"

"Not the official law."

"You couldn't be a friend of his because drug dealers don't have friends."

"I suspect that's true."

"So you're trying to find out exactly what?"

"If you saw this woman kill him."

"Oh, I saw it all right."

I described the woman to him.

"That's her, all right," he said.

"And you actually saw her shoot him?"

"I actually saw her shoot him."

"And then get into a Mercedes-Benz and leave?"

He nodded. "Umm-hmm. Why would you be interested now? He's been dead for some time."

"A client is interested."

"Oh," he said. "A client. Must be an interesting business you're in."

I smiled. "Sometimes."

For the first time, he smiled, too. "This used to be a nice neighborhood. Oh, I don't mean like your white neighborhoods. But nice."

If you lived here, you were reasonably safe." He shook his head. "And there were drugs. I mean, I can't deny that. Why, I can remember after coming back from Korea, all the marijuana I suddenly saw here. But the past ten years, it's different. They'll kill you to get the drug money and the pushers are gods and that's maybe the saddest thing of all. How the youngsters look up to the pushers."

"So John Wade was —"

"— was just one less pusher to worry about."

I was reaching over to take a book of matches from a small white plastic box that said FREE when I saw something familiar written on a notepad next to the black dial telephone.

"Charlene called you."

"Pardon me?" he said, suddenly snappy as his bow tie.

"Your notepad there."

He saw the problem and grabbed the notepad.

"You had my name written on it. So, unless you're a psychic, Charlene called ahead about me and told you my name."

He decided to give up the ruse. "You know how it is in a neighborhood. People take care of each other."

Just then, from the back, a tall, good-looking woman of perhaps twenty-five came through curtains and walked up to the register. She had the kind of coffee-colored beauty that lends itself to genuine grace. She said to Phil Warren, "Here's a list of everything I took, Phil. Just put it on the Friend House account." She glanced at me dismissively and went out the door, toting a large square cardboard box heavy with groceries.

"Would that be Karen Dooley?"

"I suppose," he said.

I nodded. "Thank you." Then I went out the door quickly.

She was already halfway down the block by the time I reached her. She walked with her head down to avoid the stinging drizzle.

"I'd be happy to carry that for you," I said.

"It's fine just the way it is."

"My name's Parnell."

"Hello, Mr. Parnell."

"I take it Charlene called you about me."

She surprised me by laughing. "Charlene is very fast on the phone. That's why the machine always tries to recruit her at election time. She can call five people in the time it takes others to call two."

"You work at Friend House?"

"I'm the director there."

"And you were an eyewitness to John Wade being murdered?"

She stopped. Stared at me. "Charlene said you were going to ask me that. What is it you want, Mr. Parnell?"

"I'm just looking into some things for a client."

"I see."

Her beautiful eyes held mine for a long time. Then we were walking again.

Behind us, the man in the blue vinyl coat was limping along.

She said, "These are getting heavy, Mr. Parnell. Maybe I'll take you up on your offer to carry them, after all."

I felt almost idiotically blessed by her decision to let me help her in some small way.

The first thing you noticed about Friend House was the new paint job. A two-story frame house with a long front porch and a steep, sloping roof, Friend House looked as if it had been lifted out of a very nice middle-class neighborhood and set down here, in the middle of this bombed-out neighborhood, to serve as a reminder of the lifestyle that awaited those plucky and lucky enough to seize it.

The new casement windows sported smart black trim, the roof vivid new red tiles, and the new aluminum front door a dignified gray that complemented perfectly the new white paint.

Inside, the marvels continued, each room I saw was a model of middle-class decorum. Nothing fancy, you understand; nothing ostentatious, just plain good furniture, just plain good taste, including a red-brick fireplace with an oak mantel in the living room and country-style decor throughout.

Here and there along the trim, or in a slightly crooked line of wallpaper, you could see that the refurbishment had not been perfect but it was easy to see that what had probably been a run-down house had been transformed, despite a few flaws, into a real beauty.

In the kitchen, I set the groceries on a butcher block table and turned to see two young women watching me.

"Dora, Janie, this is Mr. Parnell, the man Charlene told us would be coming." She looked at me and smiled. "And Mr. Parnell, we're the three eyewitnesses you wanted to interview. Along with Phil

Warren, we're the ones who went to the police." She nodded to a silver coffee urn on the white stove and said, "Would you care for a cup?"

"I'd appreciate it."

After the coffee came in a hefty brown mug, the four of us sat at the kitchen table. Steam had collected on one of the kitchen windows and was now dripping down; beyond the pane you could see the hard gray November sky. In the oven a coffee cake was baking, filling the air with sweet smells. I felt warm for the first time in an hour, and pleasantly dulled.

Dora was a white girl of perhaps twenty. She wore a blue jumper and a white turtleneck sweater and her blonde hair was caught back in a leather catch. She said, "Charlene says you wouldn't tell her why you were asking questions, Mr. Parnell."

I smiled. "Nothing all that mysterious. I'm trying to find out a few things about the woman who shot John Wade."

"About the woman?" Janie said. She was Dora's black counterpart — almost prim in her starched aqua blouse and V-neck sweater and fitted gray skirt. "About the woman?" she repeated, glancing at Karen.

Karen said, "I'm afraid we don't know much about the woman, Mr. Parnell."

From my pocket, I took out the newspaper clipping and read to them the gospel according to the *Tribune*, from the account of the shooting itself, to the description of the murderess.

"Is that about the way it happened?" I asked when I'd finished reading.

"Exactly," Karen Dooley said.

"She didn't say anything?"

"Say anything?" Karen asked, obviously the official spokesperson for the three of them.

"The woman. The killer. She didn't shout anything at Wade?"

"Not that I heard," Karen said. "Do either of you two girls remember hearing anything?"

They shook their heads.

"And then she just got in her car and sped away, right?"

"Right."

"The same kind of car as described in the newspaper account, right?"

"Right."

"And that's about it?"

"That's about it."

"You never saw her previously; you've never seen her since?"

"Right."

Dora put her pert nose into the air. "I'd say that coffee cake's about done." She smiled her lopsided smile. "Mrs. Weideman upstairs will sure be glad to hear about that."

She got up and went over to the stove, grabbing a wide red oven mitt on the way. "You'll want some of this, Mr. Parnell."

I looked back at Karen. "So all you saw — "

"— was exactly what it said we saw. In the paper, I mean." She laughed. "We're kind of frustrating, aren't we? We had the same effect on the police. They went over and over our story but this is about all they could get from us."

Janie put down her coffee cup and said, "We were scared, Mr. Parnell. I know that people who live outside the neighborhood think that we get used to all the violence, but we don't. We get scared just like everybody else."

Dora opened the oven door. Billows of warm air tumbled toward us bearing the wonderful scent of coffee cake. "The truth is, we don't know what happened, Mr. Parnell, because we were so frightened we tried to duck behind a lightpole. I know that sounds pathetic, but that's what we did." She grinned. "Three of us behind the same lightpole."

"And anyway," Karen said, "it happened very quickly. It was over in no more than half a minute or so. She just stepped from her car and shot him."

"And then got back in and drove away," Janie said.

"And we never saw her again," Dora said.

"Honest," Karen said.

The cake cut and cooled slightly, Janie served me a formidable wedge. She also gave me more coffee.

While I was eating, two very old people came into the kitchen, one with a chrome walker, the other with a cane. Both were men. Karen introduced us. We all nodded. She told them about the cake they'd have in their rooms. They smiled like children. Dora led them away.

When I was nearly finished, a young man came into the kitchen and stood watching me eat. I tried not to be self-conscious. He was

probably Janie's age, of mixed blood, and wore a BEARS sweatshirt and jeans. He twitched very badly and in the course of a minute or so, teared up twice, as if overcome by terrible emotion.

Karen, who had excused herself to go to the bathroom, came back, saw him and said, "Kenny, this is Mr. Parnell."

Kenny bobbed his head in my direction. He looked both suspicious and exhausted.

Just then Dora appeared. Karen gave her Kenny's elbow as if she were passing off a baton. "Why don't you go back to your room, Kenny, and Dora will give you some coffee cake."

"Jackie Gleason's on," Kenny said. "Pretty soon."

"I forgot," Karen said tenderly, "how much you like Jackie Gleason."

"I like Ed Norton more," Kenny said.

"Good," Karen said and glanced at Dora, who led Kenny away.

Karen came back to the table and sat across from me. "Would you like some more coffee cake, Mr. Parnell?"

"It's tempting but I think I've had enough." I looked around the kitchen. "You've got a nice place here. What is it — a shelter of some kind?"

"I guess that's a fair way to put it. Friend House is a place where anybody in the neighborhood can come and stay for a while when things get too bad on the street. Those two older gentlemen, for instance, they're staying here because the landlord of their apartment house didn't pay the gas bill — and they're too old to freeze. Soon as the gas goes back on, we'll take them back. And Kenny — well, he's trying to kick heroin. Right now, he's very afraid of going to a clinic. His brother died there of some complications with methadone. We had a doctor check Kenny and the doctor said Kenny was fine to stay here for a few days."

"So no permanent solution but at least a temporary one?"

"Exactly."

"How many guest rooms do you have?"

"With the four new ones in the basement, we've got fourteen. That's nowhere near enough to help everybody in the neighborhood who's hurting very badly but at least it's something."

"It must be pretty expensive, running a place like this. Does the city contribute?"

"Yes, the city." She made a clucking noise and glanced down at the slender gold watch on her slender brown wrist. "Ooops, I'm

sorry, Mr. Parnell. I'm afraid I've got a meeting upstairs. Have we helped you?"

I stood up. "As much as you could, I guess."

She put out her hand and we shook.

"I hope you find whatever you're looking for, Mr. Parnell," she said.

In less than a minute, I was standing on the sidewalk again. The coffee cake kept me full and warm.

I decided to find out who was following me and why.

4

We went two blocks. A hard wind came and chafed my cheeks and nose, a mumbling drunken black man bounced off a building and nearly fell into me, a cop ticketed a rusted weary VW that looked as if it had not been moved in weeks, and the man tailing me got all worked up when I took two steps into an alley.

Pressed against the wall, I waited, making a fist of my gloved hand.

But he was in no shape to swing on me when he came trotting into the alley, a small man the color of hickory, his chest heaving from a long lifetime of cigarettes.

He ran right into me and I grabbed him.

I didn't put him against the wall with any special force but even so he looked afraid. His nose was running in the cold and he hadn't cleaned his eyes so well this morning.

"Make it easy on yourself," I said. "Who put you on to me?"

"Tommy," he said between gasps.

"Who?"

"Tommy, man."

"I don't know any Tommy."

His brown eyes narrowed. "Her son. Charlene's."

I thought of last night, the late phone call, the young black voice. "Why'd he put you on to me?"

"Don't know."

"Bull."

"Don't, man. Honest. He's jes' a good kid so I tol' him I'd help him."

"Why didn't he tail me himself?"

"Aw, I guess 'cause he believes some of m'ah stories. Been tellin' them stories for years and years, ever since he was a little kid."

"What stories?"

"You know, man, how I was an MP in Korea. That whole gig."

"And you weren't?"

He shrugged. "Had a buddy who was, I guess."

"How did Tommy know about me?"

"He heard about you bein' in the neighborhood yesterday, then he saw you with his ma this morning."

"He isn't in school?"

"Dropped out."

"Where do I find him?"

He told me.

5

Steam rolled from the front end of the car wash like smoke from an angry dragon. Inside the smoke you could see a shiny new red Buick struggling like some metal monster to be born. As soon as the Buick reached the park area, the smoke evaporating now against the gray sky, four black boys descended on it with dirty white rags and dirtier white wiping mitts, shouting things to each other over the top of the car as rap music played above the roar of the cleaning and buffing machinery inside. One of the boys, I suspected, was Tommy.

Inside the office, the plump dark woman in the lime-green blastjacket put down her Kool filter-tip and said, "Tommy's a good kid."

All I'd asked was where I'd find him. Nothing else.

"Not all the kids who work here are good kids, if you know what I mean," she went on. "But Tommy is. Most definitely."

"I'm not going to hurt him."

"He ain't done nothin', if that's what you're about."

"I'd just like to ask him some questions."

"He's straight. In every sense. No fightin', no drugs, nothin'. He's the one I leave in charge when I got to go to the doctor or somethin'. You can trust him."

Feeling eyes on me, I turned at an angle. Through the glass separating the wind tunnel of the wash itself from the shabby waiting area, I saw a tall, lean young man, gray in the shadows now, watching me.

I nodded in his direction. "Tommy?"

She saw him, too. "Yes."

"Thanks."

I went out the door and into the wind tunnel. The roar was deafening. Customers waved white tickets at the cleaning kids and then piled in their cars. It reminded me of working around fighter planes in WW II, the ceaseless and overwhelming noise that you got lost inside of.

For a moment, Tommy looked afraid, and I had the sense that he might run.

Then he surprised me by tossing his rag to another kid and coming toward me.

"I'm Tommy," he shouted over the roar.

"Yes."

"Let's go in the back where we can have a cup of coffee."

"Fine."

I followed him down a narrow concrete path that paralleled the cleaning equipment. Sudsy spray flicked at us. It was freezing in here. The kids probably had head colds all winter long.

In a small room with two vending machines and a long, scarred table, Tommy got two cups of black coffee in paper cups and set them down on either side of the table.

He sat down and I did likewise.

"I figured you'd come looking for me," he said.

"You were the one who called me last night, right?"

"Right."

I watched him. He had a good, high, intelligent forehead and somber, intelligent eyes. Even dressed in a sweatshirt and a dirty blastjacket, he carried himself with poise and dignity. He had long but very masculine hands the undersides of which were tan in contrast to the dark uppers. He was one of those kids who would have been mature around age ten. He said, "I want you to find out who killed my father."

"From the police and press reports, I gather it was an unidentified white woman."

"No."

"You know something they don't?"

"I just know it wasn't an 'unidentified white woman.'"

"How do you know that?"

"Because of what Phil Warren did to me."

"The guy who runs the grocery store?"

"Right."

"What did he do to you?"

"Slapped me. Real hard."

"For what?"

"For eavesdropping."

"When?"

"The night my father was killed. I went looking for my mother — my little brother told me she was over at Warren's — and I heard them in the back room there. Phil's got a little room where some of the neighborhood people meet when something bad happens or when they want to get some neighborhood project going. At least, they used his little room till they got Friend House."

"So what did you hear?"

"When I was eavesdropping?"

"Right."

"Nothing. I was just there a minute or two, you know, kind of pressed up against the door, and I stumbled against something and Phil came out and — "

"Why didn't you just go inside the room or knock? Why were you eavesdropping?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I heard voices and I didn't want to interrupt. So I kind of started listening and — "

In the silence I could hear the distant roar of the car wash. It was like the distant sound of war.

"Why aren't you in school?"

"My father didn't get much education. He did pretty well."

"Yeah, he did pretty well all right, Tommy. Somebody shot him to death in the street."

Tommy's eyes dropped to his coffee. "Maybe I'll go back sometime. You know, to school."

"The longer you're out, the harder it'll be to go back."

"You sound like my mother."

"She seems like a decent woman."

He didn't say anything, which I found odd. Most boys agree with nice things said about their mothers.

I said, "Who do you think killed him?"

"I don't know."

"You want to try and look me in the eye and tell me that?"

He raised his gaze. "I don't know."

"C'mon, Tommy. There's something you're not saying."

"Some white chick killed him."

"You believe that, do you?"

"That's what the papers said, right?" He glanced down at a battered Timex on his right wrist. "Mr. Franklin don't like us taking long breaks. I better get back."

"You heard something, didn't you? When you were eavesdropping."

He took his soggy paper coffee cup and tossed it for three points into a wastebasket to our right. "I didn't hear anything," he said. He stood up. "I better get back, man."

When he reached the roar of the cleaning machines, he shouted a goodbye and disappeared into the chill rolling steam.

6

"When did Tommy drop out of school?" I said.

"I don't know. A while back."

"Right after his father was murdered, maybe?"

Charlene looked at me with growing impatience. "I already told you, Parnell, I'm busy."

She wasn't kidding about that. The restaurant was packed with supertime customers. Grease and cigarette smoke were heavy.

"Tommy dropped out of school because he found out who really killed his father," I said. "He figured being a good boy wasn't worth it any more."

"Is that right?" she said, reaching past me to take a green ticket from a customer.

She punched it up with her usual formidable efficiency.

"He also called me in my room last night so I'd be sure to do some investigating," I said.

"Have a nice night," she said to the customer, a man who looked at me with equal degrees of malice and pity, bothering the pretty woman as I was.

"He knows who killed his father but he won't tell me," I said.

This time it was a chunky woman bundled up inside a threadbare brown coat. She looked like a nearsighted bear.

"Don't forget, your favorite show's on TV tonight, Emma," Charlene said, as she handed her back her change.

The old woman, nearsighted, tromped on my foot as she moved past the register.

"If your son knows who killed his father, that means you do, too," I said.

Only at the last did I see the flick of her eyes, a preordained signal of some kind that brought a dusky fellow too young, too angry and too big for me to do anything about.

"He's hassling me, Roland," Charlene said.

"I'm leaving," I said.

Down the block was an old-fashioned glass phone booth whose dim light was like a forlorn beacon in the gathering gloom. Though it was not yet four-thirty in the afternoon, night was here.

Inside, a drunken kid with a mean facial scar stood bounding on his feet as if he had to go to the bathroom very badly and trying to explain in a whining voice why he'd been unfaithful to the woman he was attempting to sweet-talk on the other end of the phone.

Finally — she must have known telepathically how cold I was getting waiting my turn — she hung up on him. For the next minute silver breath poured from his mouth as he shouted at the phone he'd just slammed.

Tearing open the door, he came out onto the sidewalk, seeing me for the first time.

"She's a bitch," he said, and vanished into the shadows.

There wasn't, of course, anything left of the phone book except the black plastic covers. I had to call information for the general number and then I had to ask the operator who answered the general number to whom I might speak about funding for halfway houses.

In all, I talked to four people at some length before I got my answer.

By then, I was very cold and not just physically. Now, I understood why an otherwise all right kid like Tommy would drop out of school.

Down by the restaurant, I waited next to a tree, smoking cigarettes eight, nine and ten for the day, until Charlene came walking fast out of the restaurant.

7

"I'd like to talk with you," I said, trying to match her quick steps.

Turning, seeing who I was, her pace only increased. "I've had enough of you, Parnell. Now, I want you to leave me alone."

People appeared and disappeared in the darkness like phantoms. I caught up with her and took her arm and slowed her down.

"He knows," I said.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Parnell."

"Your son. Tommy. He knows what happened."

Only for a moment did her eyes allow the possibility that she was afraid. Then she tried to cover everything in anger again. "Leave me alone."

"It isn't too hard to figure out, when you think about it," I said. "A drug dealer making a drop is going to have a lot of money on him. Did he have it in a suitcase?"

Ahead, in the faint streetlight, I could see the new, clean shape of Friend House, obviously her destination. Knowing what I knew now, that did not surprise me.

Silhouetted on the front steps, the open door pouring warm yellow light into the chill night, stood Phil Warren. He held his hand out to her, as if to a drowning victim.

She went up the steps two at a time, huddling next to him like a girl to her father when the neighborhood bully came 'round.

"You don't have no call to be here, Mr. Parnell. Now you go on back to where you belong," Warren said. In his cardigan sweater, white shirt and gray slacks, he looked relaxed and composed. Not even his voice betrayed the panic he must have been feeling. "Out of this neighborhood," he said, in case I didn't get the point.

"There wasn't any white woman who shot John Wade, was there? She was somebody you made up and told the police about."

"You heard me, Mr. Parnell. You get away from us and stay away."

He took Charlene's arm and turned to guide her inside.

"There's a sixteen-year-old boy who wants to know why the five of you murdered his father," I said, there in the glow of the porch light, my breath cold. Down the street a dog barked angrily at the quarter-moon.

Warren had the grace and good sense to let that one stop him. To Charlene, he said, "You go on inside. I'll talk to him."

She glanced down at me and said, "Maybe you don't understand everything you *think* you do, Parnell."

"Hand me my coat, would you, Charlene?" Warren asked, going back to the threshold and putting his hand out. He bundled up inside a dark topcoat and then came down the stairs.

We walked two blocks before saying anything. In the soft moonlight the ugliness of the neighborhood, the buildings half-toppled, the rusted, deserted automobiles, the brothers standing loud and boastful in the red-lit roaring mouths of bars — in the moonlight and shadows none of this looked so forlorn and menacing. There was even a lurid beauty about it, one only a tourist like myself could appreciate. The practiced eye of the resident would see far different things.

"You know what it's like to need help and have nowhere to turn?" Warren asked.

"Not really. I've been lucky."

"It's about the most terrible feeling there is."

"And that's what Friend House is all about?"

"We've helped more than three hundred people in less than a year. That's a lot of people."

"What happens when the money runs out? You going to kill another dealer?"

He kept walking but looked over at me. "If we have to."

"What happens if I tell the police what I know?"

"Somehow, I think you're a better man than that."

We walked another block. Babies cried. Couples argued. Music played too loud. In front of us a homeless man crouched with a bottle of wine in a doorway. Warren knelt down to him and said, "You know where you should be, Clinton. Now you git, hear me?"

"Charlene there?" the man asked, his face buried somewhere in a dusty dark stocking cap and several days' growth of beard.

Warren grinned. "She's waiting for you, Clinton. You're her favorite."

Clinton grinned back. He had no teeth.

"Now git. It's supptime," Warren said.

Clinton struggled to his feet and moved off in the direction of the shelter.

After another block of silent walking, Warren said, "You know how this neighborhood has changed over the past fifteen years?" He was being rhetorical, of course. "Back then, we were poor and angry and we had a lot of resentment toward white people — but we didn't prey on each other. Not very much, anyway. Then the drug dealers appeared in our midst and — " He shook his head. His rage was visible. "Now in the neighborhood, we have two kinds of

slavery — we've got black skin and half our children are hooked on crack cocaine."

"So you killed him?"

"He was a sonofabitch, Mr. Parnell. He took some of his drug money downtown and bribed a judge into helping him get custody of his two kids. Charlene's a hardworking, decent woman and she's raised those boys well. You know the kind of lifestyle they would have seen with their father? All his thugs and whores? Charlene came to me and I knew then that was the only way to stop him."

"Where did the money come in?"

He shrugged. "Well, when you've lived in the neighborhood as long as I have, you see just how many people need help. I have to turn them away in my store. I can't give everybody credit or I'd go broke myself. So I had the idea for a place like Friends House for a long time, even went to talk to some politicians about it but got nowhere. So then I thought — well, we waited until a night when John Wade was making a drug deal and we shot him. He had a lot of money in his car."

We had reached the steps of a massive stone Catholic church whose spires seemed tall enough to snag the passing silver clouds.

"I'm sorry Tommy found out," Warren said. "When I saw him that night, standing by the door while we were counting the money — you know, Charlene and me and the two girls you met — I knew he'd heard what happened."

"Making it right with him is going to be difficult. Killing his father and all."

"Maybe when he's a little older, he'll understand why we had to kill him. What kind of parasite his father and all drug dealers are. How they prey on their own, how they take the last ounce of hope and dignity from people who have very little hope and dignity to begin with."

"You're going to kill more so you can keep Friend House going?"

"As the need arises, Mr. Parnell; as the need arises. And as far as I'm concerned, we'll be doing the neighborhood and our society a favor." He put his hand out.

He had a firm grip.

"You know what you're asking me to do?" I said.

"I know."

"Conceal evidence from the police."

"Maybe if you lived in the neighborhood, you'd understand my point of view a little bit more."

"I'm going to have to think about it. I'll call you later tonight and let you know. I really don't feel right about this. I spent my life as a law officer."

"It's not easy for any of us, Mr. Parnell. But it's something that needs to be done."

The two guys in the next room were watching a country-western cable channel and remarking on how big the women's breasts were. The guys seemed almost appealing right then, juvenile and naive and clean-cut. A long way from a neighborhood where you had to make judgments on predators so that others could live.

I called Faith and she put Hoyt up to the phone and he babbled a few of those squeaky wet two-year-old noises that can break your heart when you're alone and far away and then I told Faith how much I loved her and how much I missed her and that I would be coming home tomorrow.

"So how did it work out?" she said. "Was Carla DiMonte involved in the murder?"

"Huh-uh. I'll call Carlucci tomorrow and tell him."

"You sound tired."

"Yeah, I guess so, hon. Long day."

"Well, maybe you'll get a good night's sleep for once."

"Hope so. Love you, hon. Very much."

I sat five minutes in the room with two quick cigarettes and a can of beer and then I looked up Warren's number in the plump red Chicago phone book and called him.

"I'm kind of nervous, Mr. Parnell," he said. "I mean, a lot's riding on your answer."

"Some of these dealers may catch on to what you're doing and come after you."

"I'm willing to take that chance."

"Then I wish you luck, Mr. Warren. I wish you a lot of luck."

"You're going to keep our secret?"

"I am."

"God bless you, Mr. Parnell."

"I just hope Tommy can understand someday."

"We'll all say prayers for that, Mr. Parnell. We'll all say prayers."

Afterwards, I went over to the set and cranked up *The Honey-mooners*. It was the episode where Ralph confuses a cat's terminal illness with his own.

There's an especially moving scene where the great Gleason sits at the shabby table in the shabby little apartment and tries to make sense of the things that composed his life. And can't.

I thought of Phil Warren and what he was doing and how wrong it was yet how right it was, too.

Some things you can't make sense of, I guess; some things you just can't.

DARK MUSE

I've always enjoyed a certain kind of melodramatic pulp writing, especially the sort found in Fifties paperbacks. The late Peter Rabe called it "The Grand Opera style of pulp." I don't enjoy it very often, as either writer or reader, but when I'm up for it, I'm really up for it. As here.

Hanratty came in that rainy Thursday afternoon and found what he'd dreaded he'd find.

Another song waiting for him on the battered Steinway that provided half the entertainment in Kenny's Lounge; the other half being Hanratty's cigarette-raspy forty-two-year-old voice. Hard to believe anything that rough sounding had ever sung "Ave Maria" at St. Mallory's Catholic High back in Shaker Heights.

Another song.

He lit a cigarette and sat down at the Steinway and started playing the notes and singing the words that had been left there for him. This one was a ballad called "Without You" and it was so heartbreakingly good that even the janitor, turning the chairs back up and polishing the floors, stopped to listen. As did the bartender shining glasses.

When he finished, Hanratty's entire body was shaking and tears collected in silver drops in the corners of his blue eyes.

It wasn't just the song that had gotten to him — though God knew it was beautiful enough — it was the mystery behind the song.

For the past three months now Kenny's Lounge (if you were wealthy and inclined to cheat, then you knew all about Kenny's Lounge) had been enjoying standing-room-only business and it was

exactly because of all the new songs that Richard Hanratty had been introducing here.

There was only one trouble with all the adulation being bestowed on Hanratty. He didn't deserve it. Literally. Because he wasn't writing the songs.

Once a week he'd come into work — he was never sure which day it would be — and there on the Steinway up on the circular little stage with the baby blue spotlight that made him look a little less fleshy and a little more handsome than he was...waiting for him there on the Steinway would be a brand new song all laid out in perfect form on sheet music in a very precise and knowing hand.

Hanratty had no idea who was leaving these songs for him.

Hanratty said, "You think over my offer?"

Kenny Bentley said, "You want a lot, Richard. Too much."

"You think they're coming here to see you — or hear me?"

Kenny Bentley sighed. He was forty-one, slender, and had apparently taken as his hero one of those gangster B-movie actors from the Forties who never seem to be out of tuxedo or into daylight. He wore his dyed black hair slicked back. He wore contacts so dark his eyes sparkled like black ice. He carried a gun in a shoulder rig in an obvious way. It added to the sense of danger he liked to create right down to the small jagged scar under his left eye which Hanratty felt sure Bentley had put there himself for effect. Bentley — even that was phony, Hanratty learning from the bartender that Bentley's real last name was Conroy.

They were in Hanratty's dressing room. It smelled now of mil-dew and martini, the one drink Hanratty allowed himself before going on. The walls were covered with big black and white blow-ups of movie goddesses from the Thirties and Forties. Hanratty's favorite was of Rita Hayworth in a silky, sensual slip. He didn't think he'd ever seen a more erotic woman. The rest of the room was taken up by a couch, a full-length dressing table with bubble lights encircling the mirror and various kinds of makeup strewn across the chipped and faded mahogany surface. He was secure in his masculinity. Wearing makeup had never bothered him.

He said, taking a slightly defensive tone that sickened him to hear, "I'm just asking for my fair share, Kenny. Business has nearly tripled, but you're paying me the same."

"That another new song I heard out there?"

"Is that an answer to my question?"

Bentley smiled with startling white teeth a vampire would envy. "I still can't figure out where you got so much talent all of a sudden."

"Maybe my muse decided to pay me a visit."

"Your muse." Bentley bit the words off bitterly. "You're a lounge piano player for twenty-some years who's had three bad marriages, ten cars that the finance company has repossessed, and you've got a drinking problem. The few times you ever played your own compositions before, the whole crowd went to sleep and I had to force you to go back to playing standards. But then all of a sudden — " He took out an unfiltered cigarette from a silver case that cost as much as Hanratty's monthly rent. The smoke he exhaled was silver as the case itself. His hair shone dark as his eyes. He gazed suspiciously at Hanratty. "Then all of a sudden, you start writing these beautiful, beautiful songs. I don't understand and something's damn funny about it. Damn funny."

"Maybe it just took time for my talent to bloom," Hanratty said. There was a note of irony in his voice. He was uncomfortable talking about the songs. They weren't, after all, his.

A knock sounded on the door just as Bentley was about to say something else.

Bentley went to the door, opened it.

She stood there, Sally Carson, looking as overwhelmingly voluptuous as ever — almost unreal in certain ways — spilling out of the tiny pirate's costume all the waitresses wore at Kenny's Lounge. She was six feet or better, with a breathtaking bust, and perfectly formed hips and legs. She also owned one of those tiny overbites that add just the right sexy bit of imperfection to a beautiful woman's face. Only one thing was wrong with Sally and that was all the makeup she wore around her right eye. It looked as if she'd put it on with a spade and Hanratty knew why.

She was Kenny Bentley's current girlfriend and Kenny Bentley, a man who brought new meaning to the term insanely jealous, had obviously worked her over again last night. If you looked carefully at Sally — as Hanratty did dreamily many times — you also noticed that her nose had been fractured right up on the bridge. Another memento from Kenny.

"What the hell is it?" Bentley demanded. "We're talking business."

Sally suddenly lost all her poise and confidence. She shied back and said, "You said to tell you when the Swansons arrived."

"Oh. Right. Thanks."

And with that, Bentley slammed the door in her face.

Hanratty said, "You shouldn't treat her like that, Kenny. She's a hell of a nice woman. Smart." He wanted to say *too smart for you* but he knew better.

Bentley stubbed out his cigarette. "I'll go half your demand, Hanratty. Half but no more."

Hanratty shrugged. "I'll have to think it over, Kenny."

"You do that." The suspicion was back in his eyes. "In the meantime, I'm going to find out what the hell's going on here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that no broken-down lounge singer suddenly comes into talent. There's just no way, Hanratty, just no way." He started toward the door and paused. "In college did you read a book called *WHAT MAKES SAMMY RUN?*"

"As a matter of fact, I did."

"Well, you know how Sammy Glick steals that poor jerk's movie scripts and sells them as his own?"

Hanratty felt his face redden and his hands fold up naturally into fists.

"Well, something like that's going on here, Hanratty. Something very much like that."

With that, he was gone, the sound of the slamming door reverberating like a gunshot.

Hanratty smoked a cigarette, just one of the innumerable vices he'd never been able to give up, and tried to calm down. He thought of how ironic it was that he'd just become so self-righteous when Bentley had accused him of using somebody else's material. Wasn't that exactly what he was doing?

He thought again of the tentative call he'd made this morning to a New York song publisher. Inquiring about how you went about selling songs...but then he'd backed off and told the woman he'd call her back soon. Without knowing where the songs came from, it would be a dangerous thing to start peddling them...at the least it could lead to embarrassment, at the worst to prison.

He jabbed out his cigarette and went over to the walk-in closet to select one of four lamé dinner jackets. There was a green one, a

red one, a blue one, a black one, festive and tacky at the same time, and just what you'd expect from somebody who had spent his life — despite big gaudy dreams of being a star in his own right — singing other people's material, tapping parasite-like into creativity not his own.

As usual, the smell of moth balls startled his senses as he pushed the sliding closet door back. It always reminded him of his parents' attic back in South Dakota. He reached in for the blue jacket and felt another familiar sensation — a slight draft, one whose source he'd never been sure of. He'd never checked it out but tonight, with twenty minutes to go and no desire to sit at his dressing table and brood, he decided to get on his hands and knees and find out just where the draft came from somewhere in the darkness at the east end of the long closet.

He had just gotten down on his hands and knees and started to crawl into the closet, the draft becoming stronger and colder the more deeply he went inside, when an abrupt knock came on his door. Instead of responding to the knock, he decided to go a few feet closer to the wall. He put his hand out and felt for the first time a piece of plywood about three feet by three feet that had been nailed against the wall itself. Given all the nailheads his fingers found there in the gloom, Hanratty could tell that the plywood should have been firmly affixed. But it wasn't. Not at all. It almost came off in his hands. He put fingers on either side of the plywood and felt an opening, a wide piece of duct work now closed off for some reason. He wondered where it led and why it had been closed off. Then, just as he sensed a sweet odor — perfume coming from duct work? — the knock on his door became adamant. He reaffixed the piece of plywood as well as he could, crawled backward out of the closet, and then went to answer the door.

There, in his standard white bartender's uniform, stood David Sullivan. David was twenty-four, a former second-string tackle for the Browns, and now a guy trying to get himself an MBA at the local state university while working nights here. Sullivan was big, as you might expect, and handsome in the way a somewhat forlorn St. Bernard is handsome. Hanratty knew why he was forlorn. Sullivan was in love with Sally Carson.

"I talk to you a minute, Richard?"

Sullivan was a good kid and Hanratty both liked him and felt sorry for him. "Sure. Come in."

Sullivan did so, closing the door. His brown eyes watched curiously as Hanratty wiped closet dust from his hands. Hanratty thought of explaining, then saw that Sullivan's business seemed to be a lot more urgent.

"What's going on?"

"You saw Sally?" Sullivan said. His voice was trembling.

"Yeah, kid, I did."

"That bastard. That's the third black eye in less than two months." He made a fist the size of a melon. "You know what I want to do —"

Hanratty lit a cigarette, exhaled smoke. "Look, kid, I don't mean to hurt your feelings, but remember the last time we had this conversation?"

"I remember, Richard. You told me that if she really wanted to get away from him she would."

"That's right."

"Not any more."

"Oh?"

"She snuck over to my place about dawn this morning and really broke down. Just laid on my couch and cried and cried. She was really scared."

"Of Bentley?"

"Right."

"Why doesn't she just leave him?"

Sullivan said, "She thinks he'll kill her."

Hanratty frowned. "Look, I take no back seat in my loathing of Kenny Bentley. I know he likes to cheat his employees every way he can, and I know he likes to harass and debase people every way he can, and I know that he gets some kind of sick kick from beating up his woman-of-the-moment. But I can't say that I see him as a killer. Not on purpose anyway."

"She thinks he may already have killed one of his women."

"What?"

"Two years ago. She ran into a waitress who used to work here and the waitress told her that there was this really gorgeous but very quiet waitress named Denise Ayles who worked here while she was going to the Harcourt Academy. She got involved with Kenny very

briefly but started to back away once she saw what he was like. Only he wouldn't *let* her back away. He kept coming at her. Then she just vanished."

"Vanished?"

"Right. Vanished. The waitress said she called the police and had them look into it, but all they concluded was that Denise Ayles, for reasons of her own, just took off." He made a melon-sized fist again. "You know damn well what happened, Richard. He killed her and got rid of the body."

Hanratty's jaw muscles had begun to work. "I guess that wouldn't be out of the question, would it?"

"Not with Bentley."

"And the cops lost interest?"

"Bentley had an alibi. He was in Vegas."

"Then maybe he didn't kill her."

"You know Bentley's friends. He could buy an alibi with no problem."

"I guess that's true."

Big, shaggy Sullivan looked sorrowful again. "I don't know what to do about Sally."

"Just kind of ride with things, kid. See what happens."

"If he lays a hand on her again, I'll break his neck, Richard. That's a promise." The cold rage in his otherwise friendly gaze told Hanratty that this was no idle threat. Not at all.

Hanratty reached up and put his hand on Sullivan's shoulder and said, "Let's just see what happens, all right? I don't want to see you or Sally get into a jam, okay?"

Sullivan sighed, calmed down somewhat. He even offered a quick flash of smile. "I don't know why you stay here. Especially since you got hot as a songwriter the past few months. You ever think of selling your songs?"

Hanratty wanted to say: Kid, I'd love to. If they were really *my* songs.

He played the new song for them that night, "Without You," and you could sense how the audience liked it. Enough to set down their drinks; enough to quit copping cheap feels in the shadows; enough to quit shedding tears over lovers who were never going to leave their spouses. How intent they looked then, sleek pretty people in

sleek pretty clothes, the sort of privileged people Hanratty had always wanted to be — and now, as always when he played one of the songs left so mysteriously for him — now he was one of them.

By the time he got to the payoff, his voice straining just a little to hit the final high notes, he could see their eyes shine with the sadness of the song itself. The lyrics got to Hanratty, too and always did. Whoever was writing them knew the same kind of tortured loneliness Hanratty had felt all his life but had never been able to articulate, not even to himself. But it was there in the majestic melancholy of the music itself, and only reinforced by the words.

They applauded till their hands grew numb.

A few of the drunker ones even staggered to their feet and gave him an ovation.

And there was one more phenomenon Hanratty took note of — the look certain of the women had been giving him. Not as if he were a too old, too chunky, too clichéd piano bar man but instead a very desirable piece of work. The same kind of looks the bartender David Sullivan was always getting.

Finished with "Without You," and realizing that he had now run through the six songs that had been left to him over the past few months, he sat down and began playing the standards Kenny Bentley insisted on, everything from Billy Joel to Barry Manilow, with a few Broadway tunes thrown in to give the proceedings a more metropolitan air.

And he lost them then, as he always lost them then.

They started talking again, and grabbing cheap feels, and giggling and arguing.

Without the six original songs composed for him by the phantom composer, Richard Hanratty's act had gone back to what it had always been — background music.

Three hours later, finished for the night and sitting in his dressing room with a scotch and water and a filter cigarette, Hanratty stared at the six pieces of sheet music that he felt could secure him the sort of future he'd always wanted. If only he could be sure that once the songs became hits nobody would show up to claim them....

He got the chills, as happened many times after the show, because even playing ballads you worked up a sweat. He needed

to get out of his jacket and shirt, wash up in the basin in the corner, and put on a turtle-neck and regular tweed sportcoat.

He splashed water on his face and under his arms and then slapped on Brut and deodorant. Feeling much cleaner, he stepped to the closet and picked out the turtle-neck he'd worn to the show tonight.

Because the club was so quiet — the unregistered aliens Bentley liked to hire for less than minimum wages sweeping up the floor now, David Sullivan preparing the bar for tomorrow — he was able to hear the whimper.

His first impression was that it belonged to an animal. A cat, perhaps, caught somewhere in the walls.

Then he remembered the piece of plywood over the duct opening in the closet wall. A cat lover, he wondered if a feline of some kind might not be caught down there.

He went over to the drawer and took out a long silver tube of flashlight and then went back to the closet and got down on his hands and knees and put his hand on the plywood rectangle again.

Still loose, it was easily pulled away from the nails mooring it.

He pushed the beam inside the wide mouth of the dusty metal duct and then poked his head inside.

He saw what was down there instantly and just as instantly, he recoiled. His stomach knotted, he felt real nausea, and he banged the crown of his head pulling it from the duct.

He'd seen what had made the whimpering sound, all right.

My God had he seen it.

After he had composed himself, and still armed with the flashlight, he replaced the piece of plywood, moved backward out of the closet, stood up, finished dressing, and then went out into the club to speak with David Sullivan.

"Bentley around?" Hanratty asked.

Sullivan sighed. "No, he and Sally split already."

"Good."

"What?"

"Oh. Nothing." Instinctively, Hanratty knew enough to keep what he'd seen to himself. "I'm going down to the basement."

Sullivan grinned. "It's okay, Richard. We've got a bathroom up here." Then, more seriously, "What's down in the basement?"

"A sub-basement, if I remember right."

"Yes. We're close enough to the river that the sewer system runs right next to the sub-basement, which used to be kind of a retaining wall before this part of the city burned down in the early part of the century."

Now it was Hanratty's turn to grin. "How do you know all this stuff, kid?"

Sullivan snapped his white bar towel like a whip. Hanratty had no doubt who the kid was whipping. "Well, when the woman you love spends all her time with a jerk like Bentley, you've got a lot of time to read." Then he shrugged. "Actually, I heard it on the news the other night. This whole area of the sewer system has become a refuge for some of the homeless who are wandering around."

"Poor bastards," Hanratty said. He nodded to the fifth of Chivas sitting next to the register. "How about a shot?"

"Sure." Sullivan poured and handed the shot glass to Hanratty. "It's on Bentley."

The first level of the basement was what you would expect to find — essentially a storehouse of supplies to keep the lounge running, everything from large cardboard boxes of napkins and paper plates to crates of glassed olives and cocktail cherries. The majority of the storage room, naturally enough, was taken up by tall and seemingly endless rows of brand name booze. The basement walls had been finished in imitation knotty pine and the floor had been given a perfunctory coat of green paint. Everything was tidy and dry and smelled of dust and the vapors of natural gas from the large furnace unit in the east corner.

Duct work of various types ran everywhere. It took Hanratty ten minutes to figure out which of the pieces of silver metal fed into his closet. Once he concluded that he'd found the right piece, he found its track along the ceiling over to the door to the sub-basement, which was just where he suspected it would lead.

He had not forgotten what he'd seen in the duct work earlier. He would never forget.

It waited for him on the other side of the sub-basement door. He could sense it.

He clicked on the flashlight, felt his stomach grab in anticipation, and put his hand on the door leading to the sub-basement.

It was locked.

He spent the next five minutes trying everything from the edge of a chisel to a screwdriver — he found a tool kit in the corner — but nothing worked. The lock remained inviolate.

He raised his head, finally, and shone the light along the duct work leading over the door and beyond. He needed to find a section he could pry open.

This time from the tool kit he took a hammer and an even larger screwdriver. He went to work.

In all, it took twenty minutes. He cut his hands many times — he'd done sheet metal work two summers in college and it had always been a bitch — and he was soaked and cold with sweat.

His work complete, he took two cases of Cutty Sark, piled one on the other, and used them as a ladder.

Then he crawled up inside the duct work and started his inching passage down the angling metal cave till he reached its end.

His first reaction, once inside, was of claustrophobia. He thought of all those horror films he'd seen over the years about being buried alive. What if he never got out of here...?

He kept moving, knowing that was his only hope.

Fortunately, the passage was straight, no sudden turns to block or trap him.

After five minutes he began smelling more than dust and sheet metal and the rat droppings that he crushed beneath his hands and knees. He began smelling — river water.

Then the duct ended abruptly and he let himself drop from it into a huge concrete tunnel that was obviously the sewer system David Sullivan had been talking about. Everything smelled fetid. As he played the flashlight around on the walls, he saw red, blue, yellow and green obscenities spray-painted on the filthy gray arching walls. Rats with burning, hungry eyes fed on the carcass of what had apparently been an opossum. Broken soda bottles, crushed cans, sticks with leaves that trailed like dead hair all floated in the foot of filthy water that ran down the curving floor of the sewer.

He spent the next few minutes getting oriented, moving the beam around, fascinated and sickened at what he saw. To think that people actually lived here....

Then he heard the whimpering again and when he wheeled around he saw, high up on this side of the wall, a ragged hole in the concrete.

The creature he had earlier glimpsed was, Hanratty was sure, inside that hole.

Steeling himself for his second glimpse of the thing, he walked through the dirty water until he was directly beneath the hole.

"Why don't you come down?"

Nothing.

"Why don't you come down?" Hanratty said, his voice reverberating off the peaked ceiling and the vast stretch of concrete cave.

Still nothing.

"I won't hurt you. I want to help you." He paused. "You've been leaving those songs for me, haven't you?"

The whimpering sound — this time it was more like mewling — began again.

He stood on his tiptoes and played his light inside the dark hole a few feet above him. The opening made him think of a bird's nest. The reeking dampness choked him.

The opening was perhaps four feet deep and three feet high. Inside he saw a six-pack of Coke, a loaf of Wonderbread, an open package of Oscar Meyer luncheon meat, several magazines including *Vogue* and *Harper's* and then female clothes of all kinds, from undergarments to dresses and sweaters. Spread across the floor were several mismatched blankets. At this point he raised the beam and waved it in the rear of the opening, where it angled down sharply to meet the retaining wall behind.

This was where he found her.

This time her face wasn't deeply pitted with what appeared to be radiation burns of some kind. Nor was her head sleek and bald and likewise tufted with terrible burns. No, this time she wore a mask to cover her hideousness, a rubber Cinderella mask from the Disney version of the classic fairy tale.

She said something he could not understand. The mask made her words incomprehensible. She tried again and this time he heard, "Stay away."

"I want to help you. You're the one who writes the songs, aren't you?"

"Stay away."

Despite her face, the rest of her was a quite beautiful woman with perfectly formed wrists, ankles and neck, and a pleasing swell of breast beneath her ragged man's work shirt and heavy blue cardigan and baggy jeans.

"You live down here, don't you?"

She cowered in the rear of the opening, covering the eye-holes in the mask as his beam bore in.

"Why do you live down here?"

But as soon as he'd spoken he knew exactly why she lived down here. Her face. Of course. That horribly scarred and boiled face.

"Would you come out of there so we can talk?"

She shook her head.

He went back to asking questions. "You work your way up the duct work and leave the songs on my piano in the middle of the night when nobody's there, don't you?"

Faintly, she nodded.

"But why? Why do you want me to have them?"

Once more she spoke and once more he had a difficult time understanding what she was trying to say. Finally, finally, he heard properly. "Turn out the light."

"Why?"

"I want to take this mask off so you can hear me more clearly."

"All right."

He clicked off the light, lowered the long silver tube of flashlight.

He heard the rumple of rubber being pulled off. The opening was now a black pit with no detail whatsoever.

From the gloom, she said, "At night I lie here and listen to you play the piano and sing. You have a very sad voice."

He laughed. "'Sad' as in pathetic."

"No, 'sad' as in troubled. Hopeless. And that's why I write the songs for you. Because you and I share the same kind of pain."

"You could make a fortune with your songs."

Now it was her turn to laugh, but when she did so it sounded morose. "Yes, I suppose I could get my face on the cover of *People*."

"No, but —"

She sighed. "I write for my own pleasure — and yours, I hope."

"Believe me, I love your songs."

"You may have them."

"What?"

"I'm making a gift of them to you."

"But —"

"That's a very serious offer, Mr. Hanratty. Very serious. Now, I've talked enough and so have you."

"But I'd like to help you in some way."

She sighed once again, sounding old beyond imagining. "You can't help me, Mr. Hanratty. Only one man can. Only one man." She paused and said, "Now go, Mr. Hanratty. Please."

Her voice was resolute.

"I appreciate the songs."

"If they make you wealthy, Mr. Hanratty, promise me just one thing."

"What?"

"To never fall in love as foolishly as I did."

"But — "

"Leave now, Mr. Hanratty. Leave now."

He heard a rustling sound as the woman crawled to the back of her chair, lost utterly in the darkness.

He stared a moment longer at the wall of gloom keeping her hidden from him, and then he jumped down to the watery floor, and started his way back through the duct work.

In the morning, he called New York and a music publisher who at first would not even take his call. But finally, adamant, he convinced the secretary to put him through to her boss, who turned out to be a woman with a somewhat mannered accent and a strongly cultivated hint of *ennui* in her voice.

He made the call from his small apartment cluttered as usual with scabrous cardboard circles from delivery pizza, beer cans and overflowing ashtrays. Grubby overcast light fell through the cracked window and fell on his lumpy unmade bed.

She was about to hang up when he said, "Listen, I'm sure you get thirty calls like this a week. But I really do have songs that could make both of us really wealthy. I really do."

"That will be all now," the woman said. "I'm very busy and — "

"Two minutes."

"What?"

"I just want two minutes. I'm sitting at an upright piano and all I need to do is set the phone down and play you one of these songs for two minutes and — "

A frustrated sigh. "How old are you?"

"Huh?"

"I asked how old you are."

"Mid-forties. Why?"

Her laugh startled him. "Because you're like dealing with a little boy." She exhaled cigarette smoke. "All right, Mr. Hanratty, you've got two minutes."

So he played. With fingers that would never be envied by concert artists. With a voice that not even the raspiest rocker would want. But even given that, even given his hangover, even given the grubby winter light, even given the mess and muck of his apartment — even given all that — there was beauty that morning in his apartment.

The beauty of the deformed woman's pain and yearnings and imprisonment in a face few could stand to gaze on.

He played much longer than two minutes and somehow he knew that the woman on the other end of the line wouldn't hang up. Because of the beauty of the melody and the poetry of the words.

By the time he finished the song, he'd forgotten where he was. He had given himself over completely to the music.

When he picked the receiver up again, he was sweating, trembling. "Well?" he said.

"How soon can you catch a flight to New York?"

"A couple of hours."

"I'll have a car waiting for you, Mr. Hanratty." As hard as she tried, she could not keep the tears from her voice. The tears the music had inspired.

Hanratty went to New York with a checking account of \$437.42. He returned with a checking account of \$50,437.42 — and a contract that promised much, much more once Sylvia Hamilton, the music publisher, interested top recording artists in these properties. She was talking Streisand, for openers, and she was talking quite seriously.

As he deplaned, he caught the white swirling bite of the blizzard that had virtually shut the city down. He had to wait an hour for a taxi to take him directly to Kenny's. Bentley had not wanted him to leave in the first place and told him that if he took more than two days off, he'd be fired. In an expansive mood now, Hanratty planned to finish out the week at the lounge, and then head immediately back to New York where Sylvia (not a bad-looking older lady whom

Hanratty felt he was going to get to know a lot better) was already finding an apartment for him.

Coming in on the crosstown expressway was an excruciating crawl behind big yellow trucks spewing billions of sand particles beneath whirling yellow lights into the late afternoon gloom and watching the ditches where overworked and weary city cops were checking to see that the people who'd slid off the road were all right. Fog only added to the air of claustrophobia Hanratty felt in the back seat of the cab that smelled of cigarette smoke and disinfectant.

He saw the red emergency lights a block before the Checker reached the lounge. They splashed through the blizzard like blood soaking through a very white sheet. His stomach tightened the way it always had when he'd been a little boy and feared that a siren meant that something had happened to one of his parents or to his brother or sister.

Something was wrong at Kenny's.

The police already had sawhorse barricades up, but in this kind of weather they were almost pointless. It was too bitterly cold to stand outside on a night like this and gawk at somebody else's misfortune.

He paid off the cabbie and fled the vehicle immediately.

A tall, uniformed officer tried to stop him from going into the brick-faced lounge but after Hanratty explained who he was, the cop waved him in.

"What happened?" Hanratty said, his voice tight.

"You better ask one of the detectives."

What surprised him, two steps across the threshold, was how strange the familiar place appeared. Violence had a way of doing that — of altering forever a setting one once took pleasure in.

From behind, a voice said, "May I be of any help?"

He turned to see a gray-haired detective in an expensive gray suit and a regimental striped tie step forward. He wore his ID tag pinned to his left lapel.

Hanratty once again explained who he was.

"You're the piano player."

"Yes," Hanratty said. "Why?"

"Sullivan said you'd vouch for him."

"David? The bartender?"

"Right. We've got him in custody."

"Custody."

The detective, who looked as much like a banker as a cop, nodded. "For killing the owner of this place, Kenny Bentley."

Hanratty felt shock travel from his chest all the way out to the ends of his extremities. He could easily enough imagine the scenario Detective Keller (that being the name on the ID) had just sketched out. Sally Carson had come to work beaten up once again and David, unable to control himself, had grabbed Kenny and —

"Stabbed," the detective said. "In his office."

Hanratty was jarred back into reality. "You said stabbed?"

"Yes."

"No way."

"What?"

"David might beat him to death. Or choke him. But stab him — no way."

"You may be a great piano player, Mr. Hanratty, but I can't say that I put much stock in your abilities as a detective."

As he finished speaking, a white-coated man from the crime lab came out of Kenny Bentley's private office and drew Keller aside.

Hanratty looked around again. The chairs had not been taken down from the tables. The lights behind the long, elegant bar had not been lit. The stage seemed ridiculously small and shabby. Even the Steinway lacked sheen.

"I need to go have one more look at the body, Mr. Hanratty," Keller said. "You'll excuse me."

Without quite knowing why, Hanratty said, "Mind if I go?"

Keller offered a bitter smile. "You hated him, too, and want to make sure he's dead?"

"Oh, I hated him. But that isn't why I want to go."

"No?"

"No. I just can't believe David is the killer."

Keller shrugged and exchanged an ironic glance with the crime lab man. "Well, if you enjoy looking at corpses, Mr. Hanratty, then I guess I can't see any harm in your coming along."

The office showed virtually no sign of struggle. The flocked red wallpaper and gaslight-style wall fixtures and huge leather-padded desk all suggested Kenny Bentley's fascination with the Barbary Coast of the 1900s.

Bentley's face was down on his desk. A common wood-handled butcher knife protruded from the right side of his spine. It had not been pushed all the way in, a good three inches of metal blade still showing.

Hanratty said, "Even if David had stabbed him, you don't think he would have pushed the knife all the way in — with his strength and his anger?"

Keller's eyes narrowed. Obviously Hanratty's comment had made sense to him.

Hanratty moved around the desk. Kenny Bentley's body already smelled sourly of decay.

"Hey," Keller said, "don't touch anything."

"I won't."

Hanratty examined the proximity of a pencil to Bentley's right hand. He leaned over and stared at a single word scrawled in a dying man's clumsy script.

The word was "Harcourt."

Keller must have caught Hanratty's surprised expression. "Something I might be interested in, Mr. Hanratty?"

Hanratty shook his head. "Guess not." He took his cigarettes from his trench coat and stuck one carefully between his lips. "Maybe I'll go have myself a drink."

Keller, no longer so unfriendly, said, "Maybe seeing him dead proves you didn't hate him quite as much as you thought, huh?"

"Oh, no," Hanratty said. "It proves that I hated him even *more* than I thought."

"What?" Keller said.

But Hanratty didn't answer. He just went out of the office and across the small dance floor to the bar where he had himself several good belts of Chivas while the police finished their work.

Two hours later, Keller came over and said, "Afraid we're going to have to throw you out, Mr. Hanratty. We're closing down for the night."

The ambulance people had come and gone, as had at least a dozen other people. Now Kenny Bentley was headed for the morgue.

Hanratty set down his drink and said, "Fine."

He went outside. The wind and snow whipped at him. Whatever kind of drunk he'd been building was quickly banished by the

chill. He walked ten blocks, along a black wrought iron fence on the other side of which was the sprawling river, its pollutants frozen for the moment by ice.

When he figured he'd walked half an hour, he turned around and went back the way he'd come, back to Kenny's place.

He had a key to the back door so getting in was no problem, even if the police signs warning of CRIME SCENE were ominous. Inside was shadowy and warm. He went to the dressing room. He took off his trench coat and went immediately to the closet where he lifted off the plywood rectangle that covered the duct.

This time, he made the trip in less than fifteen minutes.

When he'd constructed another jerry-rigged ladder and gotten up on it and clicked on the flashlight, he got a brief glimpse of her without the Cinderella mask. She must have been sleeping and he'd surprised her. The lair was the same as before, reminding him of an animal's cave.

This time he recognized the horrible raw burns for what they were. Not radiation, but acid.

As she grappled on the mask, he said, "I know who you are."

"I knew you'd figure it out."

"You worked for Kenny Bentley two years ago and went to the Harcourt Academy, which is a music school for particularly gifted people. Kenny got jealous of you and threw acid on you and you were so ashamed of your looks that you took up living down here where nobody could see you."

"Please turn out the light."

"All right."

Once again, he spoke to her in darkness. The sewer system echoed with their voices. The amber eyes of rats flicked through the gloom.

"I went to doctors," she said. "But they couldn't help me."

"Why didn't you turn Kenny in?"

"Because I wanted my own kind of vengeance. Just seeing him go to prison wouldn't have satisfied me."

"They think somebody else killed him. A nice young kid named David Sullivan."

"I know. I crawled up the duct and heard the police talking and then arresting him." Pause. "Get ready to catch something, Mr. Hanratty."

From the blackness a small white oblong of paper drifted down to his hands.

"That's a complete confession, Mr. Hanratty. Your friend will be freed as soon as you hand it over to the police."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You know something, Mr. Hanratty, I sincerely believe you are."

The gunshot came just after her words, deafening as the noise of it bounced off the walls of her small lair, acrid as the odor of gunpowder filled his nostrils.

"My God," he said. "My God."

He stood there on his rickety makeshift ladder for a long time, thinking of her hideous face and her beautiful songs.

When he jumped free of the boxes and stuffed the envelope into his trousers, he realized he was crying, the way he sometimes cried when he played her songs.

He paused for a moment and angled the flashlight beam up the wall and across the dark opening again.

Finally, he did the only thing he could do. He walked away, the sound of his footsteps softly splashing through the fetid water.

He kept trying not to cry; kept trying.

FALSE IDOLS

Fans sometimes begin to despise the very people they profess to idolize. I once heard, for example, a rude and rather shallow mystery fan reveal some very harsh and nasty things about another mystery writer she had long corresponded with. "She's so pathetic," the fan said, "and she doesn't even know it." Here is the story that resulted from my overhearing those remarks.

On the way over to the reception I had to stop three times. Twice so Buddy could run into gas stations and pee and once so Buddy could duck into an alley and puke. That's how nervous he was about this morning.

I'm talking here about the Buddy Knoeller. That's right, the guy whose 1962 single on the SLAM label (SL755961) went gold the same month "Surfin' Safari" by the Beach Boys and "Telstar" by the Tornadoes did likewise. "Baby Mine" was the name of the record and you probably saw Buddy lip-synch it several times on *American Bandstand* and perform it live when he did the Dick Clark Caravan of Stars tour.

When Buddy got back to the car after throwing up, he looked pretty bad, his thinning brown hair sticky from sweat and his blue eyes beagle-sad. The shirt I'd bought him at K-Mart was splattered and his white plastic shoes were scuffed from rocks in the alley. Worst of all, his hands were twitching. Some people say he's a spaz but it's really the booze. He sticks to beer, he's middling okay, but when he reaches for the Old Grandad, you've got to watch yourself. And watch Buddy.

One night in a blue collar bar we sometimes drank in — Buddy coasting on maybe a dozen bourbons — he got crazy and started

screaming he was a star. Before the bartender had time to get his ballbat and run around and collar him, Buddy had time to pick up a chair and throw it through the window. The cops came and hauled Buddy away. I went to the station and pleaded with them not to press charges, to keep the whole thing quiet, considering Buddy's status. All they said was what status. He's just some unemployed rummy. Yeah, I said, but he did the Caravan of Stars tour with Frankie Avalon and the Ventures, among others, and got third billing. They just looked at me and smirked and tossed Buddy in the drunk tank and sure enough in the paper the next day there was a story about Buddy being arrested for drunk and disorderly. At least they referred to him as "former rock star Buddy Knoeller." The "star" was important to a man of Buddy's status.

"Take me back, man," Buddy said when he got himself arranged in the car again, a Merit between his lips (frankly, his teeth could use some work, I mean given who he is), his hands clawing the dashboard for steadiness.

"We gotta go to the reception, Buddy," I said. "We promised. They've got everything ready."

"You promised, man, I didn't promise." He ripped the gold chain from around his neck and threw it on the floor.

"Open the glove compartment," I said.

Buddy shook his head. Without the gold chain he looked pretty much like any other forty-year-old man in this factory town where we'd both been raised, a little false-pregnancy beer belly, dirty nails and razor nicks on his chin. "Screw yourself," he said.

"Open it, Buddy. You gotta. You need it."

"Shit."

But I could hear him weakening.

"Please, Buddy."

"You think I need it? That what you think?"

"I don't think you need it, Buddy. I think you deserve it. All the pressure you're under, Buddy. All the pressure."

He kind of slumped in the seat a moment, his eyes closed, his hands twitching really crazy, and then he sighed and when he sighed I knew he'd do it.

He opened the glove compartment and took out the pint of Old Grandad I keep in there just for him. Buddy had his drink and we went on to the reception.

One thing I have to say for Howard Farr. He's a promoter. When we wheeled in to the parking lot of FARR OUT, which is Howard's name for his nostalgia store, sixty people were standing outside, enjoying the warm June morning, paper cups of Howard's inevitable punch (Hawaiian stuff heavily dosed with cheap vodka) in their hands.

The next few minutes were just like a movie.

Buddy and I got out of the car. Buddy's shakes were almost gone from the three hits he'd had, and everybody started swarming around us and applauding.

From a speaker mounted above the door of the crumbling storefront (Howard was smart enough, and cheap enough, to put his store near a university, where deterioration is considered chic) came the sounds of "Baby Mine," Buddy's gold record. In the display window was a Caravan of Stars poster that Howard had found somewhere. It showed Buddy — a rail-thin, healthy, grinning, twenty-three-year-old Buddy — standing between Dick Clark and Frankie Avalon.

Buddy couldn't help himself. Tears filled his eyes and he started smiling with no thought to the dental work he needed.

"This is for you, Buddy," I said. "This is your day because we all think you're one of the great rock and rollers."

I said this loud enough for everybody to hear. A cheer went up. Buddy let the tears roll. He didn't even seem embarrassed.

While most of the other people stayed outside to talk with Buddy, got him to sign their battered copies of his record jacket and tell him how happy they were to see he was making public appearances again (between his drinking and his moods, mostly Buddy stayed in his tiny apartment, living off occasional royalty checks and food stamps). While all this was going on I went inside and looked for Howard.

There was a time when FARR OUT was my favorite place in the city. It was like time traveling, the bookshelves filled with pulp magazines, the walls covered with original art by illustrators like Virgil Finlay, John Allen St. John, and Roy Krenkel, the record racks jammed with 45s by Chuck Berry and The Moonglows and Bobby Darin. There was a special dust that rolled on the air and lightly covered everything, a decades-old, dust from the era when you could stroll up to a newsstand and buy a brand-new copy of *Dime Detective* and *Thrilling Wonder Stories*.

For a long time, going to FARR OUT had given me the same satisfaction that going to church had as a boy. The place had seen me through two wives — neither of whom understood nor shared my passion for collecting, neither of whom believed that collecting nostalgia was the best way to be part of the human continuum — two wives I scarcely remembered now. But then it stopped, the reverence I felt for the place, the sense of well-being and total escape it had given me.

Now, thanks to an inheritance that allowed me to buy anything I wanted, I owned everything that FARR OUT and all the other similar places throughout the country had to offer. My otherwise thoroughly respectable home was a museum of pulps, rare records and artwork. The range of my collection far exceeded Howard's. Far exceeded.

Howard had, over the years, chuckled about my impending jadedness, predicted it would happen, just as it had happened to him. "You get to the point where you don't even read the stuff, or listen to the stuff, or look at the stuff anymore," Howard had said. "You just want to own it for the sake of owning it, my friend. And you'll do anything, anything you can to get it; the rarer the better."

Now, Howard stood in the back of the store, in the corner where the once-magic dust was thickest, smiling at me. Howard is not the type you'd expect to find in the nostalgia business — too many of whom compensate for physical or mental or spiritual deformities by burying reality in the musty smell of pulp paper — but rather a bankerish sort with razor-cut gray hair and a body kept trim by handball.

"I was beginning to think you couldn't get him here," Howard said, the ironic smile remaining on his face.

"I almost didn't. He threw up and wanted me to take him back to his apartment."

"His apartment." Howard shook his head and frowned. "I'd be surprised if even rats wanted to live there. It's the kind of place a nobody deserves."

"All your customers seem to like him. To them he's somebody."

He scowled. "They aren't exactly great arbiters of taste. Look at the trash they buy."

This time I smiled, indicating the over-priced merchandise cramming the store. "And the prices they pay for it."

He laughed. "And the prices they pay for it." His good mood vanished abruptly. From inside his suitcoat he took a small

prescription bottle and handed it to me. Murky behind the tan plastic were capsules I recognized as Librium.

I hefted the bottle in my hand, then slipped it into my own pocket.

I glanced out the front window. Buddy was still in his glory, signing autographs, laughing with people who found his boozy chatter amusing. In the eight months I'd known him, I'd never seen him happier.

"I'm glad we gave him this reception," I said. "It makes me feel better about — well, you know."

Howard did not seem interested in sentiment. "We're doing him a favor. Look at him. Look at where he lives. He's a goddamned helpless wretch, is what he is."

Another glance out the window. I couldn't really disagree with Howard. We were doing Buddy a favor, ultimately.

"Maybe if he'd had better management, he could have had another hit," I said, feeling sorry for Buddy again.

"He was lucky to have had the one he did," Howard said. "He didn't have much talent."

I nodded. "All he had was one incredible piece of luck."

Howard nodded. "The tape."

"Yes," I said. "The tape."

During the three years Buddy had been able to get work on the rock 'n' roll circuit, one fantastic thing had happened to him. He had talked his manager into cajoling an Allied Artists P.R. man into letting him on to the set of an Elvis movie. For some reason, Elvis had liked Buddy, perhaps saw something of himself in the raw and affecting Buddy Knoeller presence. Whatever. Elvis called Buddy up a few days later and invited him out to his Hollywood mansion. Elvis had been depressed and wanted to talk to somebody who wasn't a sycophant. Buddy had done something terrible, put a tape recorder inside an acoustic guitar he'd brought along ostensibly to play should Elvis want to sing. Buddy had been the most devout type of Elvis fan. He wasn't running a scam, thinking he might sell the tape later on. He wanted it for himself, for the satisfaction of knowing that whatever else might happen in his career, he had once had an intimate conversation with Elvis Presley.

When I phoned Buddy that first time eight months ago, I'd simply been inquiring about any memorabilia he owned that he

might want to sell. After getting drunk with him a few times, he brought up the existence of the tape. At first I hadn't believed him, but one night he played me a few minutes of it. It was the real thing. A melancholy Elvis talking about his life, some startling feelings and memories, a whole new perspective on the supposedly "hayseed" singer.

Of course I immediately offered Buddy a great deal of money for the tape. He surprised me by refusing. "It's all I got to show for all the bullshit and heartache I went through, man," he'd said. "It's the only thing I've ever owned that was valuable to me." Buddy even refused my offer to pay several thousand just to make a dub of it. Instead, he put it back in the strongbox he kept under the couch and wouldn't even talk about it any more. It was his secret, his icon.

When I told Howard about the tape he got excited, too. For several months we talked about ways we might wedge the tape from Buddy. That's why I'd been hanging around him, listening to his tirades, buying him booze, clothes, medical supplies, but it hadn't done any good. Buddy liked me and had begun to trust me, but he wouldn't part with the tape, or let me dub it, under any conditions.

That was when Howard evolved his plan.

The day he'd revealed it to me he'd seemed pleased with himself. "If it was good enough for Nick Adams, Judy Garland and Dorothy Kilgallen, it should be good enough for a nobody like Buddy Knoeller."

"Looks like the crowd is breaking up," Howard said now, nodding to the sidewalk outside.

"I'm still glad we gave the reception for him," I said.

"What a sentimental bastard," Howard laughed.

I sighed. "Well, it's been an hour, I suppose I should take him back now."

"He's had his thrill," Howard said. He pointed to the pocket where I had slid the librium. "Just get him plenty drunk and start putting them in his drinks. Nobody will ever know what happened. Just another suicide."

"I'll call you when I get the tape," I said.

Howard glanced at his watch. "I promised my wife lunch today. Get him out of here, will you? I've got to close up."

Outside, Buddy was joking with a fat woman in hair curlers. "Was Dick Clark as nice as he seemed?" she was asking.

"Helluva nice guy," Buddy said, "helluva nice guy."

It took ten minutes to get Buddy to the car. The stragglers remained on the sidewalk waving to Buddy as we pulled away, Buddy waving back.

Once we hit the freeway, Buddy reached for the glove compartment, then stopped himself. "You mind if I have a little suck on the tit?"

"Of course not, Buddy," I said. In my pocket the librium seemed to pulsate.

"Man," Buddy said, "I owe you. I really fucking owe you. I mean, those people loved me."

"We all love you, Buddy," I said, " We all love you."

DANCE GIRL

One day, while researching a historical novel, I came upon a one-hundred-year-old newspaper story about a small-town girl who'd come to the sinful city of Cedar Rapids and been murdered a year later. I kept thinking about it and this tale is the result.

At the time of her murder, Madge Tucker had been living in Cedar Rapids, two blocks west of the train depot, for seven years.

After several quick interviews with other boarders in the large frame rooming house, investigating officers learned that Madge Evelyn Tucker had first come to the city from a farm near Holbrook in 1883. At the time she'd been seventeen years old. After working as a clerk in a millinery store, where her soft good looks made her a mark for young suitors in straw boaters and eager smiles, she met a man named Marley who owned four taverns in and around the area of the Star Wagon Company, and the Chicago and Northwestern Railyards. She spent the five final years of her life being a dance girl in these places. All this came to an end when someone entered her room on the night of August 14, 1890.

A Dr. Baines, who was substituting for the vacationing doctor the police ordinarily used, brought a most peculiar piece of information to the officer in charge. After examining Madge Evelyn Tucker, he had come to two conclusions — one being that she'd been stabbed twice in the chest and two being that she had died a virgin.

One did not expect to hear about a dance girl dying a virgin.

Three months later, just as autumn was turning treetops red and gold and brown, a tall, slender young man in a dark Edwardian suit

and a homburg stepped from the early morning Rock Island train and surveyed the platform about him. He was surrounded by people embracing each other — sons and mothers, mothers and fathers, daughters and friends. A shadow of sorrow passed over his dark eyes as he watched this happy tableau. Then, with a large-knuckled hand, he lifted his carpetbag and began walking toward the prosperous downtown area, the skyline dominated by a six-story structure that housed the Cedar Rapids Savings Bank.

He found a horse-drawn trolley, asked the driver where he might find a certain cemetery, and sat back and tried to relax as two plump women discussed the forthcoming election for mayor.

For the rest of the ride, he read the letters he kept in his suit coat. The return address was always the same, as was the name. Madge Evelyn Tucker. Just now, staring at her beautiful penmanship, tears formed in his eyes. He realized that the two women who had been arguing about the present mayor had stopped talking and were staring at him.

Rather than face their scrutiny, he got off the trolley at the next block and walked the remaining distance to the cemetery.

He wondered, an hour and a half later, if he had not come to Cedar Rapids on the worst sort of whim. Perhaps his grief over his dead sister Madge was undoing him. Hadn't Mr. Staley at the bank where Richard Tucker worked suggested a "leave of absence"? What he'd meant, of course, was that Richard was behaving most strangely and that good customers were becoming upset.

Now Richard crouched behind a wide oak tree. In the early October morning, the sky pure blue, a chicken hawk looping and diving against this blue, Richard smelled grass burning in the last of the summer sun and heard the song of jays and bluebirds and the sharp resonating bass of distant prowling dogs.

It would be so pleasant just to sit here uphill from the place where she'd been buried. Just sit here and think of her as she'd been....

But he had things to do. That was why a Navy Colt trembled in his big hand. That was why his other hand kept touching the letters inside his jacket.

By three p.m. the man had not come. By four p.m. the man had not come. By five p.m. the man had not come.

Richard began to grow ever more nervous, hidden behind the oak and looking directly down at his sister's headstone. Perhaps the man had come very early in the morning, before Richard's arrival. Or perhaps the man wasn't coming at all.

A rumbling wagon of day workers from a construction site came past the iron cemetery fence, bringing dust and the smell of beer and the cheer of their weary laughter with them. Later, a stagecoach, one of the few remaining in service anywhere in the Plains states, jerked and jostled past, a solitary passenger looking bored with it all. Finally, a young man and woman on sparkling new bicycles came past the iron fence. He saw in the gentle lines of the woman's face Madge's own gentle lines.

I tried to warn you, Madge.

His remembered words shook him. All his warnings. All his pleadings. For nothing. Madge, good sweet Madge, saw nothing wrong in being a dance girl, not if you kept, as she always said, "your virtue."

Well, the doctor had said at her death that her virtue had indeed remained with her.

But virtue hadn't protected her from the night of August 14. It hadn't protected her at all.

Dusk was chill. Early stars shone in the gray-blue firmament. The distant dogs now sounded lonely.

Crouched behind the oak, Richard pulled his collar up and began blowing on his hands so the knuckles would not feel so raw. Below, the graveyard had become a shadowy place, the tips of granite headstones white in the gloom.

Several times he held his Ingram watch up to the light of the half-moon. He did this at five-minute intervals. The last time, he decided he would leave if nothing happened in the next five minutes.

The man appeared just after Richard had finished consulting his watch.

He was a short man, muscular, dressed in a suit and wearing a Western-style hat. At the cemetery entrance, he looked quickly about, as if he sensed he were being spied upon, and then moved without hesitation to Madge's headstone.

The roses he held in his hand were put into an empty vase next to the headstone. The man then dropped to his knees and made a large and rather dramatic sign of the cross.

He was so involved in his prayers that he did not even turn around until Richard was two steps away. By then it was too late.

Richard shot the man three times in the back of the head — the man who had never been charged with the murder of Richard's sister.

On the train that night, Richard took out the letter in which Madge had made reference to the man he had killed earlier this evening. Cletus Boyer, the man's name had been. He'd been a clerk in a haberdasher's and was considered quite a ladies' man.

He met Madge shortly after she became a dance girl. He made one terrible mistake. He fell in love with her. He begged her to give up the taverns but she would not. This only seemed to make his love the more unbearable for him.

He began following her, harassing her, and then he began slapping her.

Finally, Madge gave up the dance hall. By now, she realized how much Cletus loved her. She had grown, in her way, to love him. She took a job briefly with Greene's Opera House. Cletus was to take her home to meet his parents, prominent people on the east side. But over the course of the next month, Madge saw that for all he loved her, he could never accept her past as a dance girl. He pleaded with her to help him in some way — he did not want to feel the rage and shame that boiled up in him whenever he thought of her in the arms of other men. But not even her assurances that she was still a virgin helped. Thinking of her as a dance girl threatened his sanity.

All these things were told Richard in the letter. One more thing was added.

Whenever he called her names and struck her, he became paralyzed with guilt. He brought her gifts of every sort by way of apology. "I don't know what to do, Brother. He is so complicated and tortured a man." Finally, she broke off with him and went back to the taverns.

As the train rattled through the night, the Midwestern plains silver in the dew and moonlight, Richard Tucker sat now feeling sorry for the man he'd just killed.

Richard supposed that in his way Cletus Boyer really had loved Madge.

He sighed, glancing at the letter again.

The passage about Cletus bringing gifts of apology had proved to Richard that Boyer was a sentimental man. And a sentimental

killer, Richard had reasoned, was likely to become especially sentimental on the day of a loved one's birthday. That was how Richard had known that Cletus would come to the cemetery today, Madge's birthday.

Richard put the letter away and looked out again at the silver prairie, hoarfrost and pumpkins on the horizon line. A dread came over him as he thought of his job in the bank and the little furnished room where he lived. He felt suffocated now. In the end, his life would come to nothing, just as his sister's life had come to nothing; just as Cletus Boyer's life had come to nothing. There had been a girl once but now there was a girl no longer. There had been the prospect of a better job once, but these days he was too tired to pursue it. Dragging himself daily to the bank was easier —

The prairie rushed past. And the circle of moon, ancient and secret and indifferent, stood still.

The world was a senseless place, Richard knew as the train plunged onward into darkness. A senseless place.

MASQUE

One night a reporter on 20/20 interviewed a serial killer. The man told a story chillingly similar to the one that evolved later that night at my word processor.

From a police report:

I found the nude body of Janice Hollister in a deep ravine. Some children who'd been playing in the neighborhood told me that they'd seen a dog with what appeared to be blood on his coat. The dog led me back to her. The first thing I noticed about the Hollister woman was the incredible way her body had been cut up. Her entire right breast had been ripped away.

"I've listed it as a car accident," Dr. Temple says.

They are in a room of white tiles and green walls and white cabinets and stainless steel sinks. The room smells of antiseptic and the white tile floor sparkles with hot September sunlight.

Dr. Temple is in his mid-fifties, balding, a lean jogger in a white medical smock. He has very blue eyes and very pink skin. He is an old family friend.

"You've taken care of the records, then?" Mrs. Garth asks. She is sixty-eight and regal in a cold way, given to Dior suits and facelifts.

"Yes."

"There'll be no problem?"

"None. The record will show that he was transferred here two weeks ago following a car accident."

"A car accident?"

"That will account for the bandages. So many lacerations and contusions we had to cover his entire body." He makes a grim line of his mouth. "Very dramatic and very convincing to the eye. Almost theatrical."

"I see. Very good. I appreciate it."

"And we appreciate all you've done for the hospital, Ruth. Without your generosity, there'd be no cancer clinic."

She stands up and offers her delicate hand in such a way that the doctor fears for a terrified moment she actually expects him to kiss it.

From a police report:

I thought the dog might have attacked her after the killer fled. But when I looked closer, I found the mosaic of knife wounds, and nothing else. He must have stabbed her dozens of times. I checked the immediate vicinity for footprints and anything that might have fallen from his pockets. I found nothing that looked useful.

A new elevator, one more necessity her money has bought this hospital, takes her to the ninth floor.

She walks down a sunny corridor being polished by a dumpy, middle-aged black woman who has permitted her hose to bag about her knees. The woman, Mrs. Garth thinks, should have more respect for herself.

Mrs. Garth finds 909 and enters.

She takes no more than ten steps inside, around the edge of the bathroom, when she stops and looks in horror at him.

All she can think of are those silly movies about Egyptian mummies brought back to life.

Here sits Steve, his head and both arms swathed entirely in bandages. All she can see of him his face, his eyes, and his mouth.

"My Lord," she moans.

She edges closer to his hospital bed. The room is white and clean and lazy in the sunlight. Above, the TV set mounted to the wall plays a game show with two fat contestants jumping up and down on either side of the handsome host who cannot quite rid his eyes of boredom.

"Aren't you awfully hot inside there?" she asks.

He says nothing, but then at such times he never does.

She pulls up a chair and sits down.

"I am Zoser, founder of the Third Dynasty," he says.

"Oh, you," she says. "Now's no time to joke. Anyway, I can barely understand you with all those bandages over your face."

"I am Senferu, the Warrior King."

"Oh, you," she says.

From a police report:

Her neck appears to have been broken. At least that was my first impression. The killer's strength must be incredible. To say nothing of how much he must hate women.

An hour after she arrives in the hospital room, she says, "An old man saw you."

Inside the mummy head, the blue eyes show panic.

"Don't worry," she continues. "He has vision trouble, so he's not a very credible witness. But he did describe you pretty accurately to the press. Fortunately, I told Dr. Temple that some drug dealers were looking for you. That's why we needed to hide you out for a while. He seemed to accept my story."

She pats him on the arm. "Didn't that medication Dr. Gilroy gave you help? I had such high hopes for it. He said you wouldn't any longer want to...You know what I'm trying to say."

But now that he knows he's going to be safe, the panic dies in his blue eyes and he says, "I am King Tut."

"Oh, pooh. Can't you be serious?"

"I'm not serious. I'm King Tut."

She clucks.

They sit back and watch the Bugs Bunny cartoon he has on. He says, through his bandages, "I wish they'd show Porky."

"Porky?"

"Porky Pig."

"Oh, I see." My God, he's forty-six years old. She says, "In case there's any trouble, Dr. Temple is going to tell the police that you've been here two weeks and that the old man couldn't possibly identify you because even if you had been out and about, you'd have been wearing bandages."

"They won't arrest Senferu the Warrior King, Mother. They'd be afraid to."

"I thought after that trouble in Chicago you told me about — "

"There's Sylvester!" he exclaims.

And so there is: Sylvester the cat.

She lets him watch a long minute, the exasperated cat lispng and spitting and spraying. "You were very savage with this one," she says. "Very savage."

"I've seen this one before. This is where Tweety really gives it to Sylvester. Watch!"

She watches, and when she can endure it no more, she says, "Perhaps I made some mistakes with you."

"Oh, God, Sylvester — watch out for Tweety!"

"Perhaps, after your father died, I took certain liberties with you I shouldn't have." Pause. "Letting you sleep in my bed...things happened and I don't suppose either one of us is to blame but nonetheless — "

"Great! Porky's coming on! Look, Mother, it's Porky!"

From a police report:

Down near the creek bed, I stared at it. I started getting sick. By this time the first backup was arriving. They had to take over for me for a few minutes. I wasn't feeling very well. I hadn't seen anything like this.

In the hospital room, sitting there in his mummy bandages, his mother at his side, Steve stares up at the TV set. There's a commercial on now. He hates commercials.

"Maybe Daffy Duck will be on next, Mother. God, wouldn't that be great?"

Now it's her turn for silence. She thinks of the girls in Chicago and Kansas City and Akron. So savage with them; so savage. She will never again believe him that everything's fine and that his medication has gotten him calmed down once and for all and that she should let him take a trip.

But of course this time he didn't even go anywhere. Most dangerous of all, he did it here at home.

Right here at home.

"Wouldn't it be great, Mother?" he asks, wanting her to share his enthusiasm. He loves those occasions when they share things.

She says, "I'm sorry, darling, my mind just wandered. Wouldn't what be great, dear?"

"If it was Daffy on next."

"Daffy?"

"Daffy Duck," he says from inside his mummy head. And then he does a Daffy Duck imitation right on the spot.

Not even the bandages can spoil it, she thinks. He's so clever. "Oh, yes, dear. That would be great if Daffy came on next."

He reaches over and touches her with his bandaged hand and for a horrible moment she almost believes he's been injured.

But then she sees the laughter in his blue blue eyes inside the mummy head.

She pats his bandaged hand. "You'll get nice rest here for a few weeks and then we'll go home again, dear, and everything will be fine."

He lays his head back and sighs. "Fine." He repeats the word almost as if he doesn't know what it means. "Fiiiine." He seems to be staring at the ceiling. She hopes it's not another depression. They come on so quickly and last so long.

But then abruptly he's sitting up again and clapping his bandaged hands together and staring up at the TV screen.

"It *is* Daffy, Mother. It *is* Daffy!"

"Yes, dear," she says. "It is Daffy, isn't it?"

GUNSLINGER

Once again, I was doing research for a historical novel when I came upon the fact that in the Los Angeles of the 1910s and 1920s, real cowboys lived in a veritable ghetto and left only during the daytime to work as silent movie extras. At night, they drank and sang sad songs of the West they'd left for fame and fortune. Eventually, that fact became this story.

He reaches Los Angeles three days early, a scrawny forty-eight-year-old man in a three-piece black Cheviot suit made of wool and far too hot for the desertlike climate here. He chews without pause on stick after stick of White's Yucatan gum. He carries, tucked in his trousers beneath his vest, a Navy Colt that belonged to his father, a farmer from Morgan County, Missouri.

As he steps down from the train, a Negro porter accidentally bumping into him and tipping his red cap in apology, he takes one more look at the newspaper he has been reading for the last one hundred miles of his journey, the prime headline of which details President Teddy Roosevelt's hunting trip to the Badlands, the secondary headline being concerned with the annexation by Los Angeles of San Pedro and Wilmington, thereby giving the city a harbor. But it is the third headline that holds his interest: DIRECTOR THOMAS INCE, NOW RECOVERED FROM HEART TROUBLE, STARTS NEW PICTURE THURSDAY WITH HIS FAMOUS WESTERN STAR REX SWANSON.

Today was Monday.

He finds a rooming house two blocks from a bar called The Waterhole, which is where most of the cowboys hang out. Because

real ranches in the West have fallen on hard times, the cowboys had little choice but to drift to Los Angeles to become extras and stunt riders and trick shooters in the silent movie industry. Now there is a whole colony, a whole subculture of them out here, and they are much given to drink and even more given to violence. So he must be careful around them, very careful.

In the street below his room runs a trolley car, its tingling bell the friendliest sound in this arid city of 'dobe buildings for the poor and unimaginable mansions for the rich. It is said, at least back in Missouri, that at least once a day a Los Angeles police officer draws down on a man and kills him. He has no reason to doubt this as he falls asleep on the cot in the hot shabby room with its flowered vase lamp, the kerosene flame flickering into the dusk as his exhausted snoring begins.

In the morning he goes down the hall, waits till a Mexican woman comes out of the bathroom smelling sweetly of perfume, and then goes in and bathes and puts on the things he bought just before leaving Morgan County. A bank teller, he is not particularly familiar with real Western attire, but he knew it would be a mistake to buy his things new. That would mark him as a dude for certain. He had found a livery up in the northern edge of the county that had some old clothes in the back, which he bought for \$1.50 total.

Now, looking at himself in the mirror, trying to be as objective as he can, he sees that he does not look so bad. Not so bad at all. The graying hair helps. Not shaving helps. And he's always been capable of a certain blue evil eye (as are most of the men in his family). Then there are the clothes. The dusty brown Stetson creased cowhand-style. The faded denim shirt. The Levi's with patches on knee and butt. The black Texas boots.

For the first time he loses some of his fear.

For the first time there is within him excitement.

In his room, before leaving, he writes a quick letter.

Dear Mother,

By the time you read this, you will know what I have done. I apologize for the pain and humiliation my action will cause you but I'm sure you will understand why I had to do this.

*If it were not for the man I will kill Thursday, you would
have had a husband all these years, and I a father.*

I will write you one more letter before Thursday.

*Your loving son,
Todd*

The next two days....

In the Los Angeles of the movie cowboy extra, there are certain key places to go for work. On Sunset Boulevard there is a horse barn where you wait like a farmhand to be picked for a day's work; then there are a few studio backlots where you can stand in the baking sun all day waiting for somebody already hired to keel over and need to be replaced; and then there is Universal's slave-galley arrangement where extras are literally herded into a big cage to wait to be called. Five dollars a day is the pay, which for some men is five times what they were getting back in the blizzard country of Montana and Wyoming and Utah.

It is into this world he slips now, making the rounds, trying to get himself hired as an extra. If he does not get on Ince's set Thursday, if he does not get that close, then he will be unable to do what he has waited most of his life to do.

He is accepted. Or at least none of the other cowboys question him. They talk in their rough boozy way of doing stunt work — something called the "Running W" or the even more frightening "Dead Man's Fall" are particularly popular topics — and they gossip about the movie stars themselves. Which sweet young virginal types can actually be had by just about anybody who has taken a bath in the past month. Which so-called he-men are actually prancing nancies afraid to even get close to a horse.

All this fascinates and frightens him. He wants to be back home in Morgan County, Missouri.

All that keeps him going is his memory of his father. The pennies on Father's eyes during the wake. The waxen look in the coffin. The smell of funeral flowers. His mother weeping, weeping.

The Navy Colt burns in his waistband. Burns....

Late on Wednesday, near the corral on the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Ince makes his two-reelers, a fat, bald casting director in jodhpurs comes over and says, "You five men there. Can you be here at sunup?"

He has traveled fifteen hundred miles and forty-one years for this moment.

Dear Mother,

I never have told you about where I saw him first, in the nickelodeon six years ago. He used a different name, of course, but I've seen so many photographs of him that even with his dyed hair and new mustache I knew it was him. I see now that his whole so-called "murder" was nothing more than a ruse to let him escape justice. He is not dead; he's alive out here....

He is very popular, of course, especially with the ladies, just as he was back there. He is also celebrated as a movie hero. But we know differently, don't we? If Father hadn't been riding back from the state capitol that day on the train....

In the morning I go out to the Miller ranch where the picture is to be shot.

It will not be the only thing being shot....

Say hello to Aunt Eunice for me and think of me when you're making mince meat pie next Thanksgiving.

I think of your smile, Mother. I think of it all the time.

*Your loving son,
Todd*

All he can liken it to was his six-month stint in the Army (six months only because of what the post doctor called his "nervous condition") — hundreds of extras milling around for a big scene in which a railroad car is to be held up and then robbers and good citizens alike are attacked by an entire tribe of savage Indians. It is in this way that the robber will become a hero — he will be forced to save the lives of the very passengers whom he was robbing.

The trolley car ran late. He did not sleep well. He urinates a lot. He paces a lot. He mooches two pre-rolls from a Texas cowhand who keeps talking about what a nancy the casting director in the jodhpurs is. The smoke, as always, makes him cough. But it helps calm him. The "nervous condition" being something he's always suffered from.

For two hours, waiting for the casting director to call him, he wanders the ranch, looks at the rope corral, the ranch house, the two

hundred yards of train track meant to simulate miles of train track. There's even a replica of the engine from the Great Northern standing there. Everything is hot, dusty. He urinates a lot.

Around ten he sees Rex Swanson.

Rex is taller than he expected and more handsome. Dressed in a white Stetson, white Western shirt with blue pearl buttons, white sheepskin vest and matching chaps, and enough rouge and lipstick to make him look womanly. Rex has just arrived, being dispatched from the back of a limousine long enough to house thirty people. He is instantly surrounded, and in the tone of everybody about him there is a note of supplication.

Please Rex this.

Please Rex that.

Please Rex.

Rex *please*.

Just before lunch he sees his chance.

He has drifted over to a small stage where a painted backdrop depicts the interior of a railroad car.

It is here that Rex, in character, holds up the rich passengers, a kerchief over his face, twin silver Peacemakers shining in his hands. He demands their money, gold, jewelry.

A camera rolls; an always-angry director shouts obscenities through a megaphone. Everybody, particularly the casting director, looks nervous.

His father knocking a baseball to him. His father bouncing him on his knee. His father driving the three of them — how good it felt to be the-three-of-them, mother son father — in the buggy to Sunday church. Then his father happening to be on the train that day/so waxen in the coffin/pennies on his eyes —

He moves now.

Past the director who is already shouting at him.

Past the actors who play the passengers.

Right up to Rex himself.

"You killed my father," he hears himself say, jerking the Navy Colt from his waistband. "Thirty-seven years ago in Morgan County, Missouri!"

Rex, frantic, shouts to somebody. "Lenny! My God, it's that lunatic who's been writing me letters all these years!"

"But I know who you really are. You're really Jesse!" he says, fear gone once again, pure excitement now.

Rex — now it's his turn to be the suppliant — says, "I'm an actor from New Jersey. I only play Jesse James in these pictures! I only *play* him!"

But he has come a long ways, fifteen hundred miles and forty-one years, for this moment.

He starts firing.

It takes him three bullets, but he gets it done, he does what Robert Ford only supposedly did. He kills Jesse James.

Then he turns to answer the fire of the cowboys who are now shooting at him.

He smiles. The way that special breed of men in the nickelo-deons always do.

The gunslingers.

NIGHTMARE CHILD

Judging by reader mail, the single most popular piece I've ever written was the prologue to an otherwise forgettable programmer called NIGHTMARE CHILD, a novel I wrote as Daniel Ransom (most of the Ransoms are, in fact, forgettable programmers). Three college instructors wrote to ask me questions about it. They were using it in their writing courses and wondered just how I'd come to write it. And the twenty or so readers who wrote me right after publication all seemed to agree that here were two people you genuinely loved to hate. I remember the two days I worked on this, how I laughed out loud at several points, and then how I suddenly stopped, and felt a little sad, recognizing at the last that there was more than a little bit of me in both characters.

Deep into the steamy August afternoon they drove, Jeff with his allergies, Mindy with her menstrual cramps.

The little girl was not fortunate enough to be up front with the BMW's air conditioning blowing and festive rock music playing on the tape deck. No, nine-year-old Jenny lay inside a four-foot wooden box in the trunk. She had been blindfolded, her mouth taped shut, and her wrists bound together with clothesline cord. Inside the box it was dark. Inside the box it was one hundred six degrees above zero.

"You think we should check her?"

"Jeff, will you relax?"

"She could've worked her way loose or something."

"And then what? She's in the *trunk*, for God's sake. Where's she going to go?"

By now the red BMW was climbing up into the steep clay cliffs and rough timberland above Silver Lake. Tourists were everywhere, plump in gaudy vacation clothes as they broiled in the sun along the side of the road, bug-eyed in dark glasses, packed into the station wagons and campers that zipped by in the opposite lane.

Jeff was careful to drive fifty-five. *Please, God, don't let me get stopped for anything now. Not now.*

"I should never have started that diet yesterday," Mindy said. "Not with my period and all. But I guess I needed to."

"Oh, honey, you know I like you fine the way you are."

"Dr. Goldberg said I needed to lose twenty-five pounds."

"Did you ever see Dr. Goldberg's wife?"

"No. Have you?"

Jeff nodded. Blond, he was one of those handsome men who would appear boyish well into his fifties. He was thirty-seven. "A blimp."

"His wife's a blimp?"

"Absolutely."

Dark, fat Mindy slapped the dashboard. "Then where does he get off telling me I need to lose twenty-five pounds?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. He wants to tell his own wife that *she* needs to lose twenty-five pounds, but he doesn't have the nerve so he takes it out on you."

"Oh, Jeff, thanks. I really needed to hear that. I've only had seven hundred calories since yesterday. Now I can eat something."

"Eating sensibly. That's the key, Mindy. Eating sensibly."

After another quarter-mile, Mindy said, "Do you suppose we could hit a DQ? There's one about a mile outside the park. I wouldn't get a big one. Just a dinky one. A real dinky one." Mindy always called Dairy Queen "DQ," and whenever she used the word "dinky" she illustrated it by putting her right forefinger and thumb about a tenth of an inch apart to show that "dinky" meant nearly infinitesimal. "Huh? Could we?"

"Sure," Jeff said. "Why not? A dinky one wouldn't hurt anything."

In the sunlight the white DQ was blinding. Kids with stuff all over their faces tugged tirelessly on the tired arms of parents, wanting permission to pee or play or get another cone.

As Jeff aimed the BMW into a parking place, Mindy said, "Did you really see Dr. Goldberg's wife?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"At the supermarket one day."

"How do you know it was her?"

"She was with him."

"You don't have to lie to spare my feelings."

"Now, honey."

"Really. You don't. If you think I'm fat just say so and I'll go right back on that diet."

"Honey. Please."

"Really. I will."

"You're not fat. And I love you."

"And you really did see Dr. Goldberg's wife?"

"Yes."

"And she was a blimp?"

"Huge."

She smiled. Made her "dinky" thumb-and-forefinger sign again. This "dinky" was slightly bigger than the last "dinky" she'd flashed. "Could I get a...well...not a *big* one, but not a *small* one, either?"

"Something in the middle?"

"Yes. That's right. In the middle." She kept her "dinky" sign up in the air.

As he got out of the car, Jeff wondered if he should have made up that lie about seeing Dr. Goldberg's wife. It was just giving Mindy permission to keep on gorging herself and she was getting so fat he could barely stand to look at her.

Dusk was purple. The windshield was fretted with the dead, black nubby bodies of mosquitoes. The air conditioning was almost cold now. Mindy, her head back against the seat rest, her mouth wide open, snored. She'd put a sweater across her knees.

Jeff drove through the dusk, glad for the sight of occasional yellow headlights. With Mindy asleep, he felt isolated and afraid. All he could think of was Jenny in the trunk and what they were about to do.

While he couldn't actually say he *loved* Mindy's little sister, he certainly *liked* her. She was polite, obedient, and pretty. (He'd always felt uncomfortable acknowledging Jenny's good looks because she was so young, but, dammit, she *was* attractive and there

was nothing wrong in admitting it.) Unfortunately, she was also the only person who stood between them and two million dollars, Jenny's inheritance. Mindy and Jeff had already squandered their part of the inheritance and now needed more. Lots more.

Getting her in the box had been no problem. Earlier that day he'd taken two Benadryl, an over-the-counter allergy medicine, and told her to take them too. Within fifteen minutes she was asleep. Within ten minutes after that she was in the box.

He hit his brights as he angled the BMW up a gravel road to the fishing cabin. Dusk in the forest was dark as night. Stars burned beyond a gray spectral haze.

Reaching the crest of the hill, Jeff gazed down at the ragged terrain of buffalo grass and scrub pines that was to be Jenny's final resting place.

He pulled the car off the road, yanked on the emergency brake, and turned off the ignition.

Mindy came awake immediately.

"God, what time is it?" she said, stretching as if she were in her own bed and this was some fine lazy yellow morning.

"Nearly nine."

"We here?"

"Uh-huh."

"You don't sound too good."

"Uh-huh. You know."

She leaned over and kissed him with breath that could crack plaster. "Hon, by midnight we'll be back home. You can play that new videotape you got. The one with Candy Dane."

"How'd you know about that?"

"Well, I was cleaning your desk in the den and I just happened to find it."

"I thought we had an understanding about my desk."

"Hon, don't get cranky just because you're all plugged up with your allergies. Anyway, I don't mind if you have tapes like that. There's nothing wrong with masturbation. I do it, too. I just don't need videotapes to help me."

He knew he was blushing. He sat there and smelled the heat of the day dying and heard the nighttime crickets and gazed up at the lemon slice of quarter-moon and wondered just what it all meant anyway.

How did a former altar boy, Boy Scout, and young Republican ever come to be sitting in a car in which his overweight wife told him masturbation was all right, while in the trunk a little girl waited to die?

How, exactly, did you get here, anyway?

"We'll have some smoked salmon."

"Huh?" Jeff said.

"You weren't paying attention."

"Sorry."

"I said we'll have smoked salmon."

"When?"

"Tonight. When we're home. We'll have smoked salmon and then we can watch that Candy Dane tape."

"Together?"

"Sure." She giggled. "Maybe it'll give me some new ideas."

He slumped in the seat. It was as if a giant invisible wrecking ball had just crashed into his stomach. "I can't do it."

"What?"

"I can't go through with it."

"Hon, you're not thinking very straight."

"I'm not?"

"Hon, she's probably already dead."

"Oh, my God."

"You mean you didn't understand that?"

"No."

"Well, I didn't want to say anything in case you *didn't* understand that. But I'd bet you a hundred dollars that she's already...well, you know."

"My God."

And with that, he flung open the BMW door, leaped into the night, ran around to the trunk of the car, inserted his key, snapped up the lid, and peered inside with the help of the flashlight he'd brought along.

The wooden box had never looked more like a coffin. Cheap pine, unpainted. He opened the lock with such force that he cut his finger. Throwing back the lid, he shined the light inside.

She lay as he recalled, bound, gagged, blinded in her virginal white blouse, her loose jeans, her white anklets, and her new blue Reebok hightops. Blonde and slender, she was the daughter every man wanted to have and so few would ever know.

Staring at her now, at her frail, unmoving chest and her tiny pale hands, he could hear her on another gentle summer night, creaking in her rocker with her doll held tenderly to her beautiful cheeks, a sweet lullaby coming from her perfect pink lips.

"No!" he shouted.

And he began undoing all the restraints Mindy had put on her during the day.

Off came the blindfold.

Off came the gag in her mouth.

Off came the cords wrapped around her wrists and legs.

He was just lifting her from the box when Mindy, coming around the car, said, "Oh, God, Jeff. I really didn't want to see her again. I really didn't. It's just going to make it all the harder. For both of us."

He sat on the ground, Jenny in his arms, as if she weighed no more than an infant. He rocked her gently as he kissed her face and spoke soft, insistent, meaningless words to her.

Finally Mindy sat plumply down next to him and put a soft hand gently on his shoulder and said, "Hon, I'm sorry but she's dead. She suffocated."

But far into the night, he rocked the little girl and sang to her, there in the buffalo grass with the crickets, which were later joined by barn owls and Savannah sparrows in crying tribute to the warm, starry night.

Finally, the little girl began to smell, and Mindy, more quiet than he had ever seen her, took Jenny from Jeff's arms and put her back in the box.

"We'd better get it over with," she said.

Nodding, numb, Jeff took a brand-new shovel from the trunk and followed Mindy down the hill.

They buried her where they planned to bury her, beneath a stand of heavy scrub pine where nobody would find her for a long time. The grave was four feet deep.

Jeff, exhausted, sat in the car running the air conditioning. He didn't care if he later got a chest cold. He needed relief and now. The digging had been incredibly exhausting.

In the shadowlight of quarter-moon, he saw the lumpen silhouette of his wife as she stood near the grave site. She was talking. To herself or to Jenny, he wasn't certain.

When she came back, she got in the car and quietly shut the door.

"You all right?" he said.

She said nothing.

"Honey," he said. She had taken care of him. Now it was his turn to take care of her.

"Please," she said. "Drive."

Forty-five minutes later they came to the DQ again. It was an oasis of light against the prairie night.

"You want a DQ?" he said.

"No, thanks."

"A nice big one?"

"No, thanks."

"A Buster Bar, then?"

"No, thanks. I don't want to look like Dr. Goldberg's wife," she said.

And then she started crying.

He had never heard her sob this way. She sobbed all the way back home. Once, he put his hand on her, hoping to stop her. But she pushed it gently away. Another time, he started saying "honey" there in the roaring highway darkness sweet with the smell of corn and grass and alfalfa, but that did no good, either.

She spoke only once. She said, "She was my little sister."

DREAMS OF DARKNESS

Nothing to say about this, really. I woke up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep, and went downstairs to my office and started putzing around and all of a sudden the main character came to mind, and off I went.

For Robert Gleason

1

The two men were about what you'd expect. Crew cuts. Freckles. Dark suits. Very white button-down shirts. Club neckties. Shoes so shiny they revealed that the men had spent at least some time in the armed forces. Intelligent but curiously empty blue eyes.

Five hours ago, the two men had been in Langley, Virginia. It had been raining, festive Indian summer suddenly giving way to the harsh gray tones of winter.

Missouri was a bit more fortunate. As the men walked from the small airport to the green Ford sedan that had been arranged for them, the temperature was 84 and the sunlight was so brilliant they quickly put on their sunglasses.

"Hot," said the first man as they strode — each gripping an identical brown leather attaché case in his right hand — across concrete and then across gravel and then across grass to where the Ford sat.

You could smell asphalt melt. You could smell smoke in the surrounding hills. You could smell burning sunlight and dog shit on the green lawn and exhaust from passing cars. You could smell the sweat on their faces commingle with the sharp scent of Old Spice.

"Very hot," said the second man, as he opened up the rear door of the sedan and set his attaché case on the back seat.

In a few minutes, they had the front windows rolled down and they were pulling away from the airport. They drove slowly.

There was no hurry. They could do what they'd come to do and there would still be plenty of time to be on the last flight out tonight at 10:08 p.m.

2

Name: Jessica Anne Reardon
Present Address: 145 Farber Avenue, Baxter, Missouri
Occupation: student, Wilson Junior High
Parents: William and Helen Reardon
Occupation (father): factory worker
Occupation (mother): housewife

The first time Jessica exhibited her special talents was in first grade when she woke up one morning and came down to breakfast and told her mother that she'd had a terrible dream. Her older brother David would be hit by a car today.

Later, of course, her mother would feel guilty about the way she reacted. She told Jessica that many people, herself included, often had terrible dreams about people they loved but that didn't mean anything, and they never came true.

At 3:04 that same afternoon, David Reardon was struck from behind on his bicycle. Both his arms were broken, and it was feared at first that the paralysis in his legs might be permanent.

Approximately a year later, Jessica had a dream about the house next door catching fire. She did not tell anybody about the dream because by now she was afraid that her dream about David had not only predicted his bicycle accident, but had somehow caused it to come true.

That night, the elderly widow Mrs. Pinehurst was burned to death while sleeping in her bed.

Over the next six years, eight more dreams of Jessica's proved true. There was the school bus accident with the football team aboard; the explosion in the boiler room of Rafferty's department store; the tornado that ripped apart an entire mobile home court, leaving ten dead, including an infant. And so on.

During this time, Mr. and Mrs. Reardon had consulted with a city council member (a shirt-tail cousin of the mister's); a young and wry

and somewhat snotty priest; a psychologist who showed a most appreciative eye for Mrs. Reardon's worn but gentle beauty; and a minister who kept glancing at himself in the mirror behind Mr. Reardon's head. (Mr. Reardon had worn a necktie for this particular meeting and the minister had looked suitably impressed, until Mr. Reardon told him that he worked in the local Choate factory on the loading dock. It was then that the minister had frowned and started looking at himself in the mirror.)

All these people said the same thing.

The dreams are just coincidence.

There's nothing wrong — or special — about your daughter.

Just go back home and lead a nice, normal family life and don't pay any attention to these dreams.

Lots of people have them and they don't mean a darn thing. All right? Well, thanks for stopping in Mr. and Mrs. Reardon, and good luck on everything.

3

Dr. Fran Lederer had never been exactly sure why she'd come to the blue hills of Missouri, and taken the job as psychologist for the school district.

She supposed it might have been because of a broken heart (rather badly broken, in fact) and because, having grown up in New York City, she had a sentimental notion of rural life. Life here would be clean and simple and she'd meet at last the "right" man and they would live out a clean and simple life together.

Instead, she'd found Baxter to be a small city of rigid class and religious lines.

The first man she dated that first autumn could never get over the fact that she was Jewish. It was all he talked about, her being Jewish, and she soon tired of it, and spent the winter alone in her three-room apartment writing letters to her sarcastic friend Sharon and getting to know her cat, Sara.

In the spring, she took a driver's ed course, bought a car and started driving around the countryside. She found a huge pottery kiln that fascinated her, and among the local artists who worked there she met a man named Steve Robisher, whom she liked a lot.

The following September, a rain-lashed, late afternoon, she was sitting in her tiny office watching the rain slant silver and cold from the dark sky, when a new blue Chevrolet sedan pulled up and three people emerged, running immediately for her office building.

This was her first sight of the Reardon family. Her first impression was that they were working class in a sound, dignified way; that the mother and father looked very young to have a daughter this age; and that their problem, whatever it was, was serious. In this part of the country, folks were skeptical about psychologists. Getting fathers to come to a session was a tug-of-war. Yet this father had shown up willingly. Hence: these people had a serious problem.

At that first meeting, they told Fran of Jessica's history of predictive dreams and while Fran had listened as politely as possible, she was not convinced that anything remarkable was going on here. Applying scientific method to what the Reardons were describing would soon discredit it.

What Fran was interested in was fourteen-year-old Jessica herself. She had the same shy beauty as her mother except for her eyes. They told of some great and overburdening sorrow. Fran could never recall seeing such grief in the dark eyes of a teenage girl. She wanted to learn about the events that had put such sorrow in Jessica's eyes, and then she wanted to help Jessica take that grief away forever.

Fran was careful not to hurt any feelings, not to make them feel crazy in any way. She said that the dreams were interesting but that before she could appraise them, she would have to know a great deal more about Jessica. She would, she said, like to see Jessica once a week for an indefinite period. Would that be all right?

Thus began the friendship between Fran and Jessica, between Fran and the entire Reardon family, really.

4

Jessica's summer job continued into the fall. Mr. Washburn at the Rexall Pharmacy kept her on as a stock clerk. He'd never had much luck with boys, they just couldn't concentrate on what they were doing, and so Jessica was perfect.

She liked stock work. She'd spent a week at the cash register up front but her shyness had turned the task into an ordeal. She

didn't know what to say when boys flirted with her, she didn't know what to say when the adults whispered about her. Most of the townspeople knew about her dreams. Some people snickered at her. Others shook their heads at her, as if she were bedeviled or insane. She felt humiliated by all this.

Her job ended at six-thirty. Most days she went straight home, out along Renzler Park Road. She loved Indian summer sunsets, the impossible colors streaking the sky, indigo and gold and vermillion and wine-red. She loved the smell, too, of day's end, heat fading to a slight chill, and the melancholy cries of dogs and birds as the harvest moon first appeared in the dusk.

On Fridays after work, she went to Fran's. She called her by name now, and not "Doctor" because during the past year they had become best friends.

Over small bottles of ice-cold Cokes Fran kept in a little refrigerator, the two talked usually until nine or ten about every subject imaginable, from the boys Jessica found cute, to what fun Fran used to have as a high school student going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and places like that. Fran promised to take Jessica to New York the summer of Jessica's high school graduation.

And of course, they talked about the dreams.

There had been two of them in the past year and both of them had turned out to be accurate in what they had predicted. One snowy afternoon Fran and Jessica had bundled up, gotten into Fran's five-year-old Dodge, and driven to the state university, where a somber man with a salt-and-pepper beard and thick black horn-rimmed glasses questioned Jessica for more than three hours. At the beginning of this session, Jessica had been terrified. By the end, she was merely exhausted.

On the way home, driving no more than thirty miles per hour because of the drifting snow and all the emergency alerts on the radio, Fran had explained that Dr. Toler was a famous parapsychologist and was interested in talking with Jessica again in a year or so. He'd told Fran to keep an accurate journal of everything that Jessica dreamed about.

Then a month ago, Jessica had started having one dream in particular, and several times over a week.

The first time she heard it, Fran was clearly rattled. She asked Jessica to ride her bike over three times a week instead of one.

This dream had disturbed Jessica greatly, too. Many nights, she couldn't sleep. She lost twelve pounds in three weeks. Her parents kept asking what was wrong but Jessica did not want to share this particular dream. She was horrified that if she told anybody but Fran and the dream then came true — she was afraid she would be marked a freak forever.

The terrible dream was their secret, Fran and Jessica's, and Jessica had agreed to let Fran decide the best thing to do about it.

5

Seven months ago, Fran had changed offices. A garden shed in back of the main red-brick administration building had been remodeled into a small office. Fran took it, the shed being about the size of a one-stall garage and offering her clients more privacy.

Jessica leaned her Schwinn against the oak tree to the right of the shed, inhaled deeply of the fresh dusk air, and went inside. The temperature had already dipped into the low forties and Fran had the oil heater turned up. Jessica could smell the oil fumes as she opened the screen door to knock.

"C'mon in, my friend," Fran called.

Inside, Fran sat at a large black manual typewriter. She worked quickly but with only two fingers. The keys striking the platen sounded loud and hollow in the silence. "Be right with you. Help yourself to a Coke." Her back was to Jessica. She hadn't turned around.

The shed was one large room. In the center was the Montgomery Ward oil stove. To the left of it were two big easy chairs that had been recovered recently. One wall was filled with books of all kinds, the other wall with a row of four three-drawer filing cabinets.

Jessica got a Coke from the refrigerator, then went over and sat down in one of the easy chairs. She watched Fran type. She hoped some day that she had Fran's poise and elegance.

Suddenly, Fran stopped typing and said, "Hey, maybe I should show you the letter."

"Letter?"

"The one I sent two days ago."

"About — "

Fran's dark eyes held Jessica's. "About your dream, my friend. I had to do something."

Jessica loved it when Fran called her "my friend." It made her feel very special.

Fran opened the center drawer of her desk and took out a copy of the letter she'd sent. She fluttered the paper like a bird's wing, and Jessica took it.

Jessica looked at who the letter was addressed to and said, "You really sent it to him?"

"I really sent it to him. Seems like he's the right person, don't you think?"

"Gosh," Jessica said, excited. "Gosh."

6

After Jessica was inside and sitting down with Fran, the two men stepped from the shadows of the administration building and went to work quickly.

Both men crouched, running through the shadows to the front door of the shed.

Both men set their identical brown attaché cases on the ground and began pulling out various pieces of equipment.

The stove inside burned oil. It would not be difficult to make it look as if a terrible accident had taken place.

Ready now, the men nodded to each other.

The first man went to the door of the shed and knocked. In a moment, Fran opened up. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry, miss. We've had some car trouble. I wonder if we could use your phone."

Crew cut. Dark suits. White shirts. Intelligent faces.

"Of course. Come in," Fran said, stepping aside for the men.

7

The explosion scattered everything inside the small shed for hundreds of yards.

Glass, wood, tiling, metal — all looked like the remnants of a giant airplane crash. Fran and Jessica, the fire inspector who wrote up the final report surmised, had had no warning of the explosion. They had died instantly and without pain. Both the Lederer and Reardon families had wanted to be reassured of this.

8

On the night of the explosion, the two men in crew cuts and dark suits made their last flight out of Baxter as planned.

When they reached Washington, D.C., and the black Oldsmobile sedan waiting for them, the first man excused himself and went over to a pay phone.

He deposited the proper number of coins and waited for an answer.

A gruff male voice said, "Yes."

"It's me, Ruffin."

"How did it go?"

"Very, very well."

The man on the other end of the phone sighed. "You'll be properly rewarded, Mr. Ruffin. And the same for your partner."

"Thank you, sir."

9

And with that, J. Edgar Hoover set the receiver back down in its cradle.

He had been expecting Ruffin's call for the past hour.

So it was done and the mission ahead of him was once again back on track.

He stared down at the piece of plain typing paper that the woman had typed her letter on.

"Dear Mr. Hoover,

"I am a school psychologist who, for the past year, has worked with a lovely, intelligent fourteen-year-old named Jessica Reardon. She has dreams of future events. Many of these events actually come true, sometimes to a terrifying degree. I know this sounds impossible, but it's a fact.

"Lately, she has had dreams that President John Kennedy will be assassinated on November 22, 1963 at 12:30 p.m. (Central Standard Time) in Dallas, Texas.

"As you know, that is less than two weeks away.

"I've enclosed both my address and telephone number.

"Please contact me right away. I'm sure you'll want to speak directly with Jessica. I can assure you that Jessica and I have kept her dream to ourselves.

"Yours truly,
"Fran Lederer"

Hoover put his face into his hands and tried to rub away sleep. With the assassination plans so near to hand, this letter could have been a disaster.

How could anybody have guessed the time and place for Kennedy to be killed?

Well, now there wasn't anything more to worry about. The girl with the dream and her hysterical counselor were threats no longer.

He lifted the receiver up again and dialed a familiar number from memory.

"I sure as hell hope you're going to tell me that all this bullshit about dreams is over, Edgar."

Hoover winced. He didn't approve of swearing.

But then how else could you expect a swine like Lyndon Baines Johnson to act, anyway?

"Yessir, Mr. Vice President, it's over and now we can get back to concentrating on Dallas."

"Good," Johnson said. "Good."

THE MAN IN THE LONG BLACK SEDAN

A TV producer called me one night and said he really really liked my stuff and really really wanted to bring one and perhaps two of my novels to the tube as soon as possible. In the meantime — God, the guy was so excited he was nearly out of breath — in the meantime, see, he's doing this syndicated package of half-hour horror programs and did I have anything he could do that was effective but cheap, something, you know, basic. Actually, I didn't but by this time I was just as excited as the producer, so next morning — still pretty much out of breath myself — I sat down and wrote this story and FAXed it to him and he was practically orgasmic on his return call from Hwood. He was sure his People would love it just as much as he loved it. He was sure of it. I never heard from the guy again.

At first light, the crickets still unceasing and the neighborhood dogs joining in, I eased from bed so as to not wake Ellen, and walked along the hardwood of the hallway to Christopher's room. It was August and humid, and the floor was almost sticky against my bare feet.

Two of them lay in bed, my eight-year-old Christopher and his classmate Donny. They'd spent all day yesterday taking full advantage of hot blue summer and slept now in sweet exhaustion. Donny was his best friend, Christopher had confided recently. Donny liked to rent *INDIANA JONES AND THE TEMPLE OF DOOM* just as often as Christopher did and his favorite Stooge was Shemp. You couldn't ask for a better friend than that.

In the downstairs bathroom I gave myself what my mother always calls a sponge bath, afraid a full-force shower would wake

Ellen. Ellen would have questions for which I would have no answers.

I dressed in a clean white button-down shirt and newly dry-cleaned blue slacks. Add a tie and you have the uniform I wear every day to the computer store I manage. Just before I left the bathroom, I stared with disbelief at the thirty-nine-year-old face fixed forlornly in the mirror. I've always felt a tiny shock of betrayal when I look on my mirror image, as if my real face had been stolen and an imposter put in my place. What I feel seems to bear no relation to the wry, even smug face I've been given.

In the basement, in a cabinet that locks with an ancient antique key, I found the Smith and Wesson .38 that had belonged to my father. Taking it to a cobwebbed window, holding it up to the dust and dawn, I turned it over and over in my slender hands, as if by doing so it would reveal some sublime secret about its purpose.

But of course I knew its purpose, didn't I?

Harcourt is a Midwestern town of forty-two thousand. It wakes early. White milk trucks crisscross the wide streets and avenues, and paperboys and papergirls on quick new bikes toss their papers with reasonable accuracy on silent front porches still silver with dew. After college, I did not want to go back east. I wanted the furious rolling green of heartland summer and the vast cool shadows of its nights.

The motel I sought sits half a mile from the westernmost part of town. A one-floor, twelve-room complex with the office in the center, it is the sort of place I often stayed in as a boy, when my angry father and defeated mother spent their vacations driving across country in search of a peace neither of them would ever find.

The long black sedan sat in the last parking slot on the northern wing of the building. It was this year's model but dulled by the dust of gravel roads. A red, white, and blue bumper sticker said STAND UP FOR AMERICA.

Oh, he was some ironic bastard, he was.

I pulled in next to him, took the .38 from the glove compartment, went up to his door.

Despite the noisy country-western music coming from the next room, I could hear his shower running.

He was making it damned easy for me.

I took out my credit card and went to work, looking around to see if anybody was watching. It's never as easy as it looks on TV shows, opening doors this way, but most of the time it does work.

He had clothes laid out on the bed, a blue summer-weight suit, a short-sleeved blue shirt, a red regimental-striped tie, white Jockey shorts, and black socks. Beneath the clothes, the bed lay unmade and you could see black hairs on the pink pillow where he'd slept. The air smelled of steam from the shower and after-shave and cigarettes.

I sat down in a patterned armchair next to a nightstand with a phone and a copy of *Penthouse* that was probably his. He was very good. Very, very good. All these little bits of business to disguise who and what he really was. The magazine was a nice touch.

When I heard the bathroom door open, I got the .38 ready.

He was a short, chunky man of perhaps fifty, balding, jowly, and cross looking, like the crabby neighbor on TV sitcoms. He had a wide white towel wrapped around his fat belly and green rubber shower thongs that went *thwack* against his heels when he walked. On his right bicep was a tattoo of a panther. That was another nice touch, the tattoo.

He had his head down so he didn't see me at first, but when he came into the room and raised his eyes, his first reaction was to get angry. Most people would be afraid — startled — to see somebody with a .38 sitting in their motel room chair. But not him.

"Who the hell are you?" he said, nodding to the gun, "and just what the hell are you doing in my room?"

"I know who you are. I know what you are."

"What the hell are you talking about, pal?" He shook his head in disgust. "You want my money, right? And my wallet, too, I suppose. For the credit cards." He scowled. "Nice little town like this, you don't expect this kind of thing." Keeping the towel modestly about him, he went over to the nightstand, his thongs *thwacking* against his heels again, and picked up his wallet and tossed it to me. "There you go, pal. Now put the gun away and get the hell out of here." He didn't sound so angry now. More disappointed in his luck.

I just let his wallet lie at my feet where it had landed. "I know who you are."

"Who I am? What the hell's the big deal about that? I'm Larry Washburn and I work for Calico Chemical Company and I'm in this burg for a week to sell my herbicide to farmers. So what?"

I smiled. "You're good. I'll say that for you."

For the first time, his voice softened. "Are you all right, pal?"

"You've chosen my son, haven't you?"

"Your son?"

"What'll it be? A car accident? Drowning?" I shook my head, repelled at the sight of him. "No, it'll more likely be a disease, won't it? Cancer, I suppose, or cerebral palsy. Something that will make him suffer a long time." When I thought of how poor little Christopher would suffer with cancer, I raised the .38 so that it was square at the center of his chest. "You like them to suffer, don't you? And for their parents to suffer, too, right? Accidents are over too quickly. They're not nearly as much fun as disease."

For the first time, he started glancing around the room and looking afraid. "Pal, you've got me confused with somebody else."

"You drive around from town to town and you pick them out, don't you? One by one. A boy here, a girl there. They're so innocent and loving and trusting and you don't care at all how much you make them suffer, do you? Do you know what it's like to hold your little child in your arms and know that this child is going to die from a horrible disease? Do you know how heartbreaking that is? But you feed on it, don't you? And nobody ever recognizes you for what you are. Nobody ever realizes you've got the power. But I know. Because I've got the power, too. But I use my power to help people." I thought of Dr. Russo at the state university where I ultimately went when no other kind of doctor could help assuage my headaches. "They're not headaches," Dr. Russo had told me: "They're visions. You're seeing things other people can't see. And it's terrifying you." I said, "You know how I knew you were here?"

He didn't say anything. He just kept looking around the room. Especially at the door.

"Little Cindy Brisbane. Her mother brought her over to my son's birthday party and I saw inside Cindy's head. I saw what was growing there. A tumor. And six days later, they rushed her to a hospital after she kept fainting. And you know what they found? They found that tumor I'd seen." I was starting to get angry again. "Why the hell did you put that tumor in Cindy? She's had a hard enough

life as it is being adopted and all." I gripped the .38 tighter. "You're not going to get my son."

"You got a ring. Your married."

"What?"

"Wedding ring. We can call your wife."

I looked at the gold band on my finger. "You know all about me. You've been checking me and my family out for the past several days. You know I'm married. And you know about my son."

"Why don't we call your wife?"

"What?"

"Call your wife. Have her come over."

"So you can give her an aneurysm? Or rheumatoid arthritis? Or some kind of spinal disease? You'd just love to have my wife come over, wouldn't you?"

"Pal, please, look, you got me confused with somebody else. I'm from Traer, Iowa, born and raised there. I'm a door pounder. A goddamn salesman, can't you see that? I don't even know what this power is you're talking about."

He had a lot of wiry gray hair on his chest and little breasts like a thirteen-year-old girl. I put the bullet right there, right between his breasts.

He went over backward on the bed. The funny thing was that the towel kept him covered very well.

His arms went out as if he were falling helplessly into a swimming pool. Blood made his chest hair the color of copper wire even before he hit the bed.

I'd struck him directly in the heart.

Far away on the other side of the motel room walls, I could hear shouts and curses. The gunshot had awakened people, of course.

I had to hurry now.

I went over to him and stood over him. If you didn't know who and what he was, you'd think he was dead. His eyes had rolled back and his tongue was angled out of his mouth and his fingers were already getting rigid.

But because I knew exactly what I was dealing with, I knew that in no time he would be up and coming for Christopher.

Shouts grew louder; distantly, I heard a siren.

I needed to get out of the motel room and I did.

* * *

On the drive back home, I could sense him stirring back in the room. When you're able to see things in the way I can — identifying Cindy's tumor, for example — you're sometimes able to tell what people are doing even at great distances.

I could see him sitting up now, holding his hand to the pumping wound in his chest, cursing me.

Then I saw what he had planned for Christopher....

I hurried.

"Hi, hon," Ellen said when I got home. She was in red shorts and a white T-shirt and standing over the stove where she was fixing bacon and eggs. "You sure got up early this morning. You run down to the store?"

"No," I said.

How could I possibly explain to her what I had to do?

She smiled. "Our son and his friend are getting used to summer hours. I'll bet they won't be up before afternoon."

"He's coming," I said.

"What?"

"He's coming."

"Who's coming?"

"He wants to hurt Christopher. A disease. Maybe Donny will be lucky and get off with an accident. But Christopher will get a terrible disease."

I could see she was scared now. She put down the spatula and came over to me. "Honey, what are you *talking* about?"

Up in the room, they were still sleeping. Christopher and Donny.

My head was throbbing. He was very angry back there in his motel room. Very angry.

In Christopher's body I see, I hear, I *feel* the cancer cells already beginning to grow.

I think of the photos I've seen of youngsters with cancer after chemotherapy. Those round, hairless little faces. Those sad and yearning eyes. And the parents standing by so brave, so brave.

She wanted to stop me, Ellen did, and that's why I had to kill her.

She just didn't understand *why* I need to help Christopher before he can get to him....

But then, it's not possible to understand unless you have the power.

I raise the gun.

Christopher stirs.

Begins to look up.

Blond hair mussed.

Face smudged with sleep.

Eyes on the .38 now.

I'm not going to let him have them. He wants them to suffer. Even Donny will suffer. I see that clearly now.

But I won't let them suffer.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Christopher says.

I wish he'd stayed asleep. Sleeping, it would have been easier for me.

"I'm sorry, Chris," I say. "I love you, honey. I love you."

I get him near the temple. Death, a red blooming flower against his blond hair, is quick and final.

I kill Donny right after.

I've scarcely started to leave the room when I hear them coming up the stairs so heavily, heavily in the narrow echoing staircase. Police.

I turn, the gun still in my hand and

"You scared us, Mr. Washburn."

"Oh? How's that?"

"Several of our guests were sure they heard a gunshot in your room."

Washburn laughed. "Gunshot? Afraid not."

"It's a terrible morning, anyway," the desk clerk said, taking the key from Washburn and shaking his head. "Real nice fellow named Tom Brice went crazy this morning and killed his wife and his son and a friend of his son's. Shot them dead." You could hear the numbed disbelief still in the clerk's voice. "Just don't know what to make of a thing like that, do you?"

Washburn frowned. "Nope, guess I don't, my friend. Guess I don't."

Then he pushed out into the sunlight and got in his long black sedan and drove away.

KILLING KATE

One night in a bar I watched a semi-tough ad man bully and humiliate his mistress because he had just learned that his wife, the bitch, was having an affair. Hell, he'd only been having one for ten years. She sure had her nerve. Anyway, as I watched the ugliness he was inflicting on his mistress — I knew the couple only by reputation and it was none of my business; I mean, he wasn't punching her, at least not with fists — I thought of how we often use others as surrogates for the people we really long to hurt. Fifteen years later — the ad man long dead in a six-martini car wreck — I recalled that sad, nasty night and came up with this story.

One night, after he learned what was going on, he got into bed with Kate and they made love. Inside, she was cold. Always before, and quite normally, her body temperature inside had been warm. But this night and for many nights after, she was cold inside, cold against his sex, cold even during orgasm.

That's one of the ways he learned about the man Kate was sleeping with. For the other man, her insides were undoubtedly warm. Juicy. He could imagine her moans.

Shortly after this he actually saw them together. He was eating in the park across from the building where she worked — thinking he might surprise her in the good sense — when he noticed them. Throwing bread on the tranquil surface of the sunny duck pond. The man had his big hand over hers. Up near the playground part of the park, where cute little innocent kids made the swings groan from fervent use, the man took her in his arms and kissed her.

Sitting there watching them — stunned, ashamed for himself and ashamed for Kate, all their plans for a good marriage and children

seemingly dashed now, wanting to die but alive in a terrible irrevocable way — he knew then he'd kill her.

Oh, yes; oh yes, he'd kill her.

In the afternoon, he called Myrna.

"Yeah?"

God, he wished she weren't so crude. Over the past two months, he'd tried to teach her some manners. Little things. Not smacking your gum. Crossing your legs in a ladylike way. And answering the phone by saying, "Yes" instead of the grating "Yeah."

"This is Robert."

"Oh. Hi."

"Wondered if you were busy tonight."

"Uh, lemme think." Smacking her gum as she riffled through pages. "Earlier I'm busy. Like five till five-thirty."

"How about six, then?"

"Yeah. Great."

But he sensed it wasn't so great with her. Sensed some reluctance in her voice. Was she getting tired of it?

"Is another time better for you?" he asked.

"Six's fine."

"Myrna, I thought we were honest with each other."

"Well, actually I wish it could be seven."

"Seven would be fine with me."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Great. Then I won't have to miss the match."

He said nothing. What could you say? You tried to help a young woman refine and reform her ways and she spends her time exulting over professional wrestling.

"You're, uh, still being careful?"

She sighed, suddenly a little girl being chastised by her father. "I always make 'em wear a rubber, if that's what you're asking."

"I'm just trying to be your friend."

Again, a sigh. "Oh. I got the package."

"You did?" He couldn't keep the excitement from his voice.

"Weird stuff."

"It's called a Poet's shirt."

"It just looks like this weird sleep shirt."

"It's real silk."

"Oh, yeah?"

Grating with the "yeah" again.

"Well, anyway, I got it. You want me to wear it, huh?"

"If you would."

He could hear the smirk in her voice — it was always there when she addressed this subject — as she said, "We're gunna do the same stuff, huh?"

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind, I mean."

"I'm in the shower again?"

"Yes."

"So you want me to leave the front door open?"

"Please."

"And then you come in and — "

"Yes. Then I come in and — yes."

The sigh again. "You're the boss."

God, he hated it when she used that cliché, so dutiful and contemptuous at the same time.

"Seven?" she asked.

"Seven," he said.

He kept the knife in a drawer of his big mahogany desk in the center of his big mahogany law office where he was the most senior of partners in a resolutely successful firm that specialized in criminal law. It was a chef's knife with an 8" blade and a walnut handle. It had once belonged to a client of his, a gigantic Hispanic who had used it to lob off the ears of six different women, after, that is, he was done strangling them. Somehow, through bureaucratic confusion, the knife had come back to him after the trial and after the Hispanic (a well-heeled drug dealer) had been sent upstate for a minimum of thirty years.

Now the knife — cleaned and stropped carefully with a piece of sharpening steel several times a month — rested in his hand. Ready.

For some reason, he always ate a huge meal before he did his deed. Nothing fancy, usually a McDonald's or a Hardee's. Greasy fries and greasy burger and fake milk shake and imitation cherry pie. The staple American repast.

It wasn't the food that attracted him to such places, it was the suspense. He liked it when mommies and daddies burdened with screaming kids took a moment to glance over at him. The solitary middle-aged male. There was always something vaguely threatening about such a man in a family place (is he queer? does he molest children? is he wife-dumped and lonely?) and he enjoyed their contempt, wondering if in fact they suspected what he was really all about.

Black turtleneck, black jeans, black Reeboks, black gloves and a black hairpiece to cover his balding dome.

Myrna's apartment house.

Up the back stairs.

Smells of fish, pizza, marijuana.

Sounds of television, heavy metal, domestic argument.

Sight of hallway walls in need of paint, apartment door numbers hanging askew, kid's red trike sitting unused.

Look left. Look right.

All clear.

He put his gloved hand to the doorknob. Unlocked. He let himself in.

The place, as always, smelled acridly of a vague gas leak she always claimed not to notice. The place, as always, was a mess, cheap merry furniture covered with cigarette burns and stains, and littered with magazines that ran to *Soap Opera Stars* and *True Detective*. She claimed she picked the place up frequently. He'd never seen any evidence of that.

He stood in the darkness of the tiny living room, right in front of a plastic crucifix that glowed green when the lights were off, listening to the shower run. Yellow light outlined the bathroom door.

She was inside. Waiting.

The knife came up in his hand from the sheath attached to his belt.

He took four steps to the door. He was beginning to smell the dampness from the shower. The scent of steam.

He opened the door, pushed inside.

If anything, the bathroom was a bigger mess than the living room. Half-empty jars, bottles, tubes, and spray cans of deodorant,

hair gel, hair spray, toothpaste and much more covered every available surface. The toilet bowl was rusty and the once-white sink a gritty gray. The mirror in which his face appeared was cracked right down the center and the petite pink wastebasket overflowing with tampon boxes and used Kleenex.

The shower curtain was plastic and white. He could see the silhouette of her body against it. She soaped her bountiful breasts and then let her hand drop to the thatch of pubic hair she kept neatly trimmed.

His loins ached.

But this was not his mission tonight. It never was on the final night.

"You're out there, right?" shouting so she could be heard above the blasting water.

"Right."

"This kinda scares me. You know, the way it usually does."

He said nothing.

"I guess it's just when you throw back the curtain and I see that phony rubber knife in your hand. Once I get over that part, it's okay."

"How was wrestling tonight?"

"The Cowboy won. He's a real stud."

"Did you wear the Poet's shirt?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Did you like it?"

"It's all right. Kinda tight around the boobs, though."

"You ready?"

"Just like usual, huh? I mean, you throw back the curtain and then pretend to start stabbin' me and then we go into the bedroom and get it on, right?"

"More or less."

She was quiet for a time. "You sound kinda — funny tonight."

"Long day at the office."

"I'm gettin' scared." Pause. "I don't know if I want to do this."

He said nothing.

"You hear me?"

"I heard you, Myrna."

"I think I'd like you to leave. Like right now, all right?"

He said nothing.

"You're scaring the hell out of me. In about ten seconds, I'm going to start screaming."

But he was faster than that. Much faster.

Before she could even form a scream, he had the curtain thrown back and the knife plunged deeply into the flesh between her sumptuous breasts.

For a moment, he allowed himself the luxury of a look at her face. Even wet and without makeup, the resemblance was startling.

He stabbed her thirty-eight times.

In bed that night, they watched the late news. Kate, rumpled from a hard day with her two sons but as always still beautiful, said, "Listen." She sat up, her breasts loose beneath the silk of her Poet's shirt.

"What?"

"Ssssh." She nodded to the TV set.

He put down his Tom Clancy novel and stared at the screen. Another prostitute had been found brutally slain in her apartment shower. This was the third such killing in three years. The newscaster finished the story by saying, "Police are intrigued by the resemblance of Myrna Tomkins with the other victims, all of whom bore a very strong likeness. A police psychiatrist speculates that the murderer is killing the same woman again and again."

Myrna's photograph flashed on TV. He looked at it and then looked over at Kate. The two women could have been sisters, maybe even twins. It was not easy, finding prostitutes who looked so much like his wife.

But he had no choice. Five years ago, shortly after he saw Kate and her lover in the park, Kate surprised him by dropping the man and devoting herself entirely to their relationship. A fling, really, nothing more. How badly he wanted to forgive her but he couldn't, not quite — until he got the idea for the surrogate killings.

Now, whenever his rage and jealousy at the remembered affair got very bad for him, he began his search for a look-alike hooker.

He spared Kate and their two fine sons the ugliness that he knew still to be within him.

Kate said, "God, it's so scary, knowing somebody like that is out there."

He leaned over and kissed her tenderly. "You don't have anything to worry about, Kate."

She looked at him skeptically. "I wish I was as sure of that as you are."

He kissed her on the cheek again, patted her hand, and went back to his novel.

DARK WHISPERS

When I was young I read all the juvenile delinquent novels I could find. I admired especially — and still do — THE AMBOY DUKES by Irving Shulmar — and virtually all of Hal Elson's novels. Later, Harlan Ellison brought his own particular anger and fire to the form and produced what is for me his best true novel, RUMBLE, a book that holds up well today. I always regretted that I never got to do a juvenile delinquent tale. Today's gangs are so far removed from my experience that I wouldn't even consider writing about them. But when I was invited by my good friend Richard Chizmar to be in one of his anthologies, I decided to write the sort of Manhunt piece Ed McBain collected in his book THE JUNGLE KIDS, a story equal parts fury and melancholy, a McBain specialty.

The store had one of those bells that tinkled when you walked in. It also had one of those owners who never looked happy to see teenagers, especially unfamiliar teenagers.

Gabe Malley came in, nodded, and started looking around. The place intimidated him. It was big and sunny and obviously everything sold here was expensive. It was unlike the dingy shops in Gabe's neighborhood.

"Help you?" the man said. He was short and bald and wore the sort of apron a shoe repairman might. He also wore a red necktie which told you instantly that he wasn't just some employee. He was the owner.

"Just looking, I guess."

"For anything in particular?"

Gabe shrugged. "TV set, I guess."

The man looked Gabe over. Gabe was a tall, lean kid with brown hair, neat if a little long, and an appealing but not handsome face. He had dark, sad eyes and the few girls at school who paid him much attention always wondered what had put the sadness there. "Your parents send you or something?"

"Uh, yeah. My Dad." Of course, Gabe's Dad had been dead the past four years.

The man eased up a little. He took a roll of Tums from somewhere in his apron and flicked one into his mouth with his thumb.

"TV set for your bedroom or something like that?" the man said.

"Uh, yeah. For my bedroom. Kind of a birthday present." For his bedroom, right. Mom slept in the only bedroom, he always slept on the fold-out couch in the living room.

"How old you going to be?"

"Fifteen." Gabe shrugged, as if turning fifteen was not exactly a major accomplishment. Of course it would have been for his sister Karen. She hadn't made fifteen at all.

"Got a daughter your age," the man said. There was warmth in his voice now. Gabe felt bad about lying to the guy.

The front door bell rang again. A middle-aged couple came in. "We're looking for a home entertainment center — TV, stereo, tape deck, everything," the woman said. She sounded excited.

"Be with you in a minute, kid," the store owner said, and turned his complete attention to the couple.

For the next ten minutes, Gabe looked around. The store was laid out in three sections: TVs, stereo and tape gear, and home video equipment.

Gabe spent most of the time examining the TVs. Or pretending to. He was really checking out the home video stuff but he didn't want the owner to notice this.

Not that the owner was paying any attention. He was practically going down on the middle-aged couple. They had made him positively ecstatic — positively keening — by asking him about the most expensive Zenith home entertainment center the man had ever put on the floor.

Gabe took this opportunity to wander into the rear of the store. Beyond a partition, he saw a small office-like area with two desks and phones; a work bench with three picture tubes on it and the smell of burning solder in the air; and the alarm system. Over the

past two weeks — ever since he'd decided what he was going to do — he'd studied the various kinds of alarm systems he'd found out about at the public library. The most modern kind was the digital key pad system which would be, in the parlance of computer hacks, difficult to "defeat." In fact, a downright bitch. Then there were the two dominant older systems that were still much in use today, the door switcher mechanisms which were deceptively easy to "defeat" but which a guy could screw up and get himself busted over. And the photo cell mechanisms. Glancing around the rear area, he checked first at the back door. And saw what he was looking for. The TV store was secured by a photo cell system.

His work done back here, he wandered up front again. The store owner was now downright evangelical about the pluses of the Zenith home entertainment center. If Christ were alive today, this was no doubt the one He'd choose for His own condo.

Gabe didn't notice the camera till last. It was partially hidden, for one thing, behind a much larger and more formidable camera, one that looked as if it would do everything except maybe wash your car for you.

The little black camera, the tiny one that looked as if it would sit comfortably right in Gabe's hand, was exactly what he'd been hunting for.

Not that he made a move toward it.

Not that he even let his eyes linger very long on it.

For now, it was enough to know that he'd found what he was looking for. And that it was sitting right there.

Waiting for him.

He walked to the front of the shop. Only when he put his hand on the doorknob did the owner seem to notice that Gabe was leaving. "Didn't find anything, huh?"

Gabe shrugged. "Maybe I'll stop back."

"Sure, kid," the owner said. He winked at Gabe. "You have a happy birthday."

Then he was caught up again in the ecstasy of selling the big Zenith rig.

On the bus home, Gabe stared out the window as the good neighborhoods of venerable brick apartment buildings and fashionable glass-and-steel high rises gave way to his own neighborhood,

the drab and crumbling inner city outpost that was the last bastion against the onslaught of not only blacks, but now Vietnamese and Central American refugees as well. Most the cars parked along the curb resembled hulking animals dying out rusty deaths. Most of the old people and junkies and winos and garden variety crazies shambling along the streets also resembled dying animals. This was his neighborhood. His mom was up to three deadbolts on the apartment door at night and she kept talking about getting a gun. Ever since Karen had died, his mom had become a trembling old lady.

When he stepped off the bus, he caught a glimpse of the silver Mercedes just darting down an alley.

Gabe checked his watch. Almost five.

The silver Mercedes would just now be starting its nightly rounds.

The bastard.

"Honey?"

"Uh-huh." Gabe knew what was going to come next: *You mind if I don't feel like cooking tonight, if I just heat like a TV-dinner in the microwave?*

"You mind if I don't feel like cooking tonight, if I just heat like a TV-dinner in the microwave?"

"That's fine, Ma."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure."

She stuck her head out of the bathroom. White vampire toothpaste foamed around her mouth. She was in her white slip. She was very pretty in a fragile way. She was only thirty-four. She should date. Gabe always told her that, how the neighborhood kids always told him what a fox he had for an old lady, and what a waste it was that she didn't date. She always said she'd think about it.

"You sure?" she said again with the toothpaste foaming around her mouth.

He smiled at her. She was cute just the way Karen had been cute.

He thought of the silver Mercedes again.

The bastard.

He did his homework. That was one thing about Gabe. He was determined to someday get out of this neighborhood. Karen had always been so proud of him. She didn't care that some of her

friends thought her little brother was kind of a geek, so lonely and unto himself and always poring over science fiction paperbacks and being real tongue-tied and embarrassed whenever they teased him about taking them out and things like that. When he was nine, he'd told her that he would someday be a writer and make a lot of money like Stephen King and then he'd buy Mom and her this huge big mansion to live in. They'd have a swimming pool and neat cars and Karen would no longer be ashamed to have her friends over. Even by neighborhood standards, their apartment was a pit.

He did his homework.

He sat in the living room with the TV on low playing some old black and white sitcom, and studying about how General Lee in the Civil War had marched 10,000 of his men across the Potomac River, and how the average age of the soldiers had been twelve and how most of them had to fight without shoes or blankets to keep them warm at night, and how many of them died from disease and starvation rather than wounds.

He tried to imagine what it would be like to be a twelve-year-old soldier, fighting and dying.

At first, it was unimaginable, almost a silly concept when you thought about it.

But then he thought of the silver Mercedes.

Maybe being a twelve-year-old soldier was hard to imagine.

But being a fifteen-year-old soldier wasn't.

In the bathroom, he washed up and put on clean clothes — a black shirt and jeans — and then he went into his mother's room.

She whimpered. Every night. That was the only word for it. Whimpering. Ever since Karen had died. She dragged through her waitress job every day and then came home and was in bed within an hour or so. Sleeping. Whimpering.

Now she lay somewhere between sleep and waking, some troubled purgatory in which her loss of Karen was worse than ever.

Over and over she said Karen's name, dark whispers in the dark room that smelled of cheap perfume and cigarette smoke.

He went over to her and sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand and held it.

The older he got, the more she was his daughter than his mother.

He leaned over and kissed her damp forehead. She stirred slightly, starting to come awake and then falling with a childlike sigh deeper into sleep once more.

No point in waking her.

He let himself out, leaving a vague note about where he was going, careful to lock the front door behind him.

Ghosts and phantoms rode the city bus, the urban old and the urban poor with night jobs and desperate meaningless errands. In the weary yellow bus light, eye sockets were blank and reaching hands seemed to be bone with no flesh, and mouths that yawned emitted screams that only other ghosts and phantoms could hear, like those whistles only dogs are attuned to. If you looked closely at the faces of the passengers, you could see evidence of diseases, leprosy perhaps. Or so it seemed to Gabe.

The driver listened to a scratchy portable radio that bass-thumped rock and roll on a golden oldie station. He had Elvis Presley sideburns so no wonder he didn't want to hear Heart or Prince or any of the singers Gabe liked.

Gabe got off a block from the TV store where he'd been this afternoon.

Five minutes later, he was in the alley behind the TV shop, using a burglary tool he'd fashioned himself in shop at school.

Seven minutes later, he opened the back door. The stench of burning solder was still in the air.

Moonlight through the front window created deep shadows.

He stood in the doorway. He would not move inside yet. He had to defeat the photo cell system.

He located the transmitter and then the receiver. Both were hung at angles on opposite walls. A stupid thief would barge right in, walk straight through the invisible beam, and have the police nailing his ass to the wall inside of ten minutes.

Gabe, who was not really a thief, let alone a stupid one, got down on his hands and knees and crawled under the angle of the invisible beam. Because the beam was so narrow, he didn't have to dog-walk far.

Then he stood up and walked without any sense of panic to the front of the store, plucked the small hand-held camera from its display shelf, and then got down on his hands and knees to crawl back under the beam once more.

Gabe was the only passenger. He sat far in the back. A fat woman with her hat at a cute angle drove the bus. He'd noticed that

she'd had a small flower tattoo on the top of her right hand. As he was dropping his tokens in the coinbox, she'd given the camera a long, curious stare.

Now, as Gabe sat in the back of the bus, he felt the powerful bus engine throb beneath him. The whole floor vibrated with its power. The air smelled of diesel fuel. For some reason, it was a smell Gabe actually sort of liked.

The driver let him off on a busy street corner. Two apartment buildings shot straight up into the black night. At their front doors limos and Porsches dropped off people who appeared to be, in equal parts, elegant and impatient. They flung greetings to their respective black doormen — who were all got up in what looked to be light opera military costumes — and then they flung themselves inside the bright fortresses of their apartment buildings. You could see them waiting for an elevator in the brilliant interior light. They looked like beautiful creatures in display windows.

Gabe went in back of the first apartment building to an oak tree that sat next to the long row of dumpsters. On the June air, the smell of garbage was sweet and sour simultaneously.

Clutching his camera, Gabe shot up the tree with the skill of a gymnast. He went all the way to the top. By the time he reached the leafy branch that angled out over the alley, his face and arm pits were sticky with sweat.

He crawled out on the branch and sat there for a few minutes, letting his sweat dry in the breeze, and watching the fifth floor condo window directly across from him.

He had come here every night for the past three nights. To this tree. Out on this branch. Waiting for the night he'd have the camera and could get the videotape he needed.

They did the same thing every night. And in the same way. Gabe considered this kind of weird, actually. Why would a man have a mistress if sex was going to get just as predictable as it presumably was with his wife?

There they were now, in the window.

Same old stuff.

Sleek gray-haired guy stripped down to red bikini briefs, bit of a pot jiggling as he crossed the room.

Voluptuous — maybe too voluptuous — bottle blonde also stripped down to matching red bikini briefs, wonderful sumptuous breasts swaying slightly as she walked over to him.

All this seen through sheer curtains. The same kind of gauzy look skin magazines liked to use with their nude layouts.

The guy and woman came together with porno film urgency.

And then, a few minutes later, it was over.

The guy was hardly a great lover.

Gabe shut off the camera and started down the tree. Getting down was always spookier than getting up. He had this fear of getting entangled and pitching over backward. Broken back. Crippled for life. That kind of thing.

He got down with no problem.

The underground parking garage was next. Going down the tunnel leading to the garage, the temperature felt as if it had dropped ten degrees.

He smelled car oil and dead exhaust fumes and gasoline. All these odors coming from a variety of new cars that ran to Lincolns and BMWs.

He had no trouble finding the silver Mercedes sedan. He got a wide shot first, so you could easily identify the garage itself. Then he got a close-up of the car, including the personalized plate that read: SEXY. That was obviously how the guy saw himself. Sexy.

What a fucking ego.

One last thing to do now. Go around to the front of the building and get a nice shot of the lobby area with the name of the building clear across the top of the frame.

When Gabe whipped out the camera from behind his back, the doorman gave him this funny look and actually started lunging toward him. That's why Gabe had saved this for last. Because he knew he'd probably have to haul ass.

He got the shot he wanted and started running down the street, the doorman shouting after him.

Gabe caught the last bus of the night. After making its last stop, this bus would go to the city barns where it would be cleaned up and gassed up for the next day.

This time Gabe sat up front. This time the driver was a skinny woman instead of a fat one.

"Nice camera," she said. "I've got a granddaughter now so I'm savin' up for one of those. A lot less hassle than film."

"Yeah," Gabe said. "Yeah."

When he got off the bus, she said to him, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." She smiled. "With the camera, I mean."

Knowing what she wanted, he smiled right back at her.

Gabe finished up near midnight, the manilla envelope neatly addressed, the videotape tucked safely inside. He put three strips of tape around the envelope for extra safety.

He sat and stared at it.

God, was the guy in the silver Mercedes going to be pissed when his wife told him what she'd received in the mail. After Karen died from the cocaine she'd taken, all Gabe could think to do was find the guy who'd sold it to her. That's how he'd learned about Morrow, the man in the silver Mercedes. That's how Morrow could afford such a car. Preying on teenagers like Karen.

He tried not to think of how she'd looked there at the last, the eyes glazed, the spittle silver on her small pink mouth, her body jerking almost angrily. In terror, he'd called an ambulance but by the time it arrived, it was too late. Karen lay in his arms jerking and crying and clinging to him even though her eyes seemed not to recognize him at all. Then she was very still and he knew she was dead and then he could not cry at all. He was just cold and empty and the siren came loud and close, and in the bedroom his mother began sobbing. She did not quit sobbing for long days afterward.

Gabe's first thought had been to kill Morrow. But he knew he'd get caught. Somehow, somehow, he'd screw up and get caught. And then what would happen to Mom? She had nobody except Gabe.

So Gabe started asking more questions about Morrow. What kind of guy was he? What did he do for kicks? And eventually he found out what a real shrew of a wife the guy had and the mistress Morrow kept in this condo.

Thanks to the videotape Gabe had taken tonight, the wife was about to find out about the mistress. All about the mistress.

He heard the whimpering, then.

The mewling sounds his mother made in her lonely, desperate sleep.

Gabe got up and went into her room and sat on the edge of the bed and held her hand tenderly and looked down on her sleeping.

He wiped away the sweat from her forehead.

He listened to her dark whispers in the dark room.

Karen. Karen. Karen.

It was true, he thought, and for some reason now he felt very lonely: she wasn't as much his mother any more as she was his daughter.

He kissed her on the forehead and went back to the living room.

He sat up till dawn drinking coffee and then he took the package to the mailbox.

ED GORMAN is the author of twelve novels and three dozen stories. He is now concentrating his career on mainstream suspense novels, the first of which was the widely acclaimed NIGHT KILLS.

Gorman has won the Shamus award and been nominated for both the Edgar and the Agatha. *The San Diego Union* recently noted that Gorman is "One of today's best crime writers." Gorman lives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa with his wife Carol, who is also a novelist.

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