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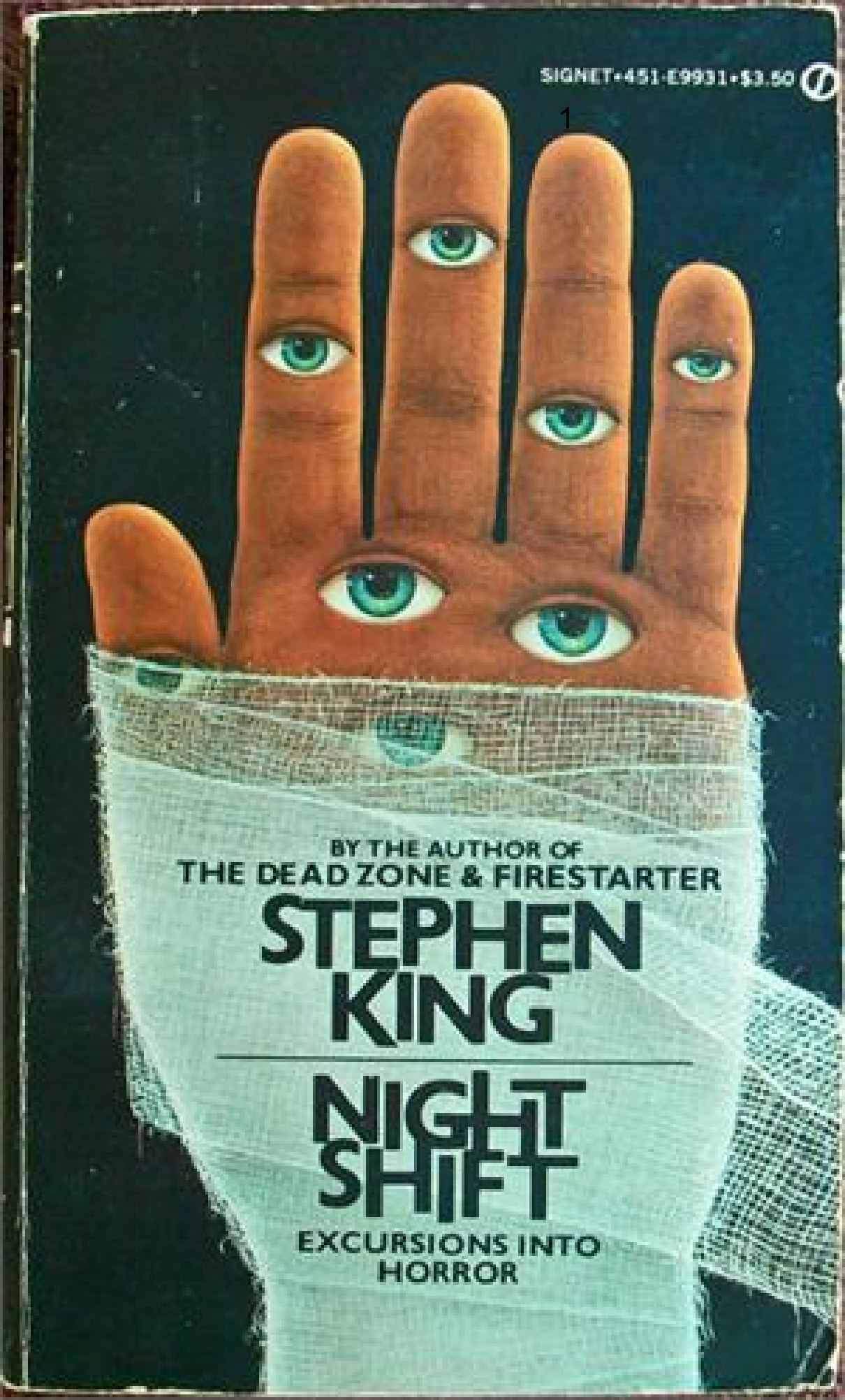


BY THE AUTHOR OF
THE DEAD ZONE & FIRESTARTER

STEPHEN KING

NIGHT SHIFT

EXCURSIONS INTO HORROR

Stephen King - Chattery Teeth

Chattery Teeth
by Stephen King

Looking into the display case was like looking through a dirty pane of glass into the middle third of his boyhood, those years from seven to fourteen when he had been fascinated by stuff like this. Hogan leaned closer, forgetting the rising whine of the wind outside and the gritty spick-spack sound of sand hitting the windows. The case was full of fabulous junk, most of it undoubtedly made in Taiwan and Korea, but there was no doubt at all about the pick of the litter. They were the largest Chattery Teeth he'd ever seen. They were also the only ones he'd ever seen with feet -- big orange cartoon shoes with white spats. A real scream.

Hogan looked up at the fat woman behind the counter. She was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY on top (the words swelling and receding across her enormous breasts) and about an acre of jeans on the bottom. She was selling a pack of cigarettes to a pallid young man whose long blonde hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a sneaker shoelace. The young man, who had the face of an intelligent lab-rat, was paying in small change, counting it laboriously out of a grimy hand.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Hogan asked.

She looked at him briefly, and then the back door banged open. A skinny man wearing a bandanna over his mouth and nose came in. The wind swirled desert grit around him in a cyclone and rattled the pin-up cutie on the Valvoline calendar thumb-tacked to the wall. The newcomer was pulling a handcart. Three wire-mesh cages were stacked on it. There was a tarantula in the one on top.

In the cages below it were a pair of rattlesnakes. They were coiling rapidly back and forth and shaking their rattles in agitation.

"Shut the damn door, Scooter, was you born in a barn?" the woman behind the counter bawled.

He glanced at her briefly, eyes red and irritated from the blowing sand. "Gimme a chance, woman! Can't you see I got my hands full here? Ain't you got eyes? Christ!" He reached over the dolly and slammed the door. The dancing sand fell dead to the floor and he pulled the dolly toward the storeroom at the back, still muttering.

"That the last of em?" the woman asked.

"All but Wolf." He pronounced it Woof. "I'm gonna stick him in the lean-to back of the gas-pumps."

"You ain't not!" the big woman retorted. "Wolfs our star attraction, in case you forgot. You get him in here. Radio says this is gonna get worse before it gets better. A lot worse."

"Just who do you think you're foolin?" The skinny man (her husband, Hogan supposed) stood looking at her with a kind of weary truculence, his hands on his hips. "Damn thing ain't nothin but a Minnesota coydog, as anyone who took more'n half a look could plainly see."

The wind gusted, moaning along the eaves of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo, throwing sheaves of dry sand against the windows. It was getting worse, and Hogan could only hope he would be able to drive out of it. He had promised Lita and Jack he'd be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

"Just take care of him," the big woman said, and turned irritably back to the rat-faced boy.

"Ma'am?" Hogan said again.

"Just a minute, hold your water," Mrs. Scooter said. She spoke with the air of one who is all but drowning in impatient customers, although Hogan and the rat-faced boy were in fact the only ones present.

"You're a dime short, Sunny Jim," she told the blonde kid after a quick glance at the coins on the counter-top.

The boy regarded her with wide, innocent eyes. "I don't suppose you'd trust me for it?"

"I doubt if the Pope of Rome smokes Merit 100's, but if he did, I wouldn't trust him for it."

The look of wide-eyed innocence disappeared. The rat-faced boy looked at her with an expression of sullen dislike for a moment (this expression looked much more at home on the kid's face, Hogan thought), and then slowly began to investigate his pockets again.

Just forget it and get out of here, Hogan thought. You'll never make it to L.A. by

eight if you don't get moving, windstorm or no windstorm. This is one of those places that have only two speeds -- slow and stop. You got your gas and paid for it, so just count yourself ahead of the game and get back on the road before the storm gets any worse.

He almost followed his left-brain's good advice... and then he looked at the Chattery Teeth in the display case again, the Chattery Teeth standing there on those big orange cartoon shoes. And white spats! They were the real killer. Jack would love them, his right brain told him. And tell the truth, Bill, old buddy; if it turns out Jack doesn't want them, you do. You may see another set of Jumbo Chattery Teeth at some point in your life, any thing's possible, but ones that also walk on big orange feet? Huh-uh. I really doubt it.

It was the right brain he listened to that time... and everything else followed.

The kid with the ponytail was still going through his pockets; the sullen expression on his face deepened each time he came up dry. Hogan was no fan of smoking -- his father, a two-pack-a-day man, had died of lung cancer -- but he had visions of still waiting to be waited on an hour from now. "Hey! Kid!"

The kid looked around and Hogan flipped him a quarter.

"Hey! Thanks, m'man!"

"Think nothing of it."

The kid concluded his transaction with the beefy Mrs. Scooter, put the cigarettes in one pocket, and dropped the remaining fifteen cents in another. He made no offer of the change to Hogan, who hadn't really expected it. Boys and girls like this were legion these days -- they cluttered the highways from coast to coast, blowing along like tumbleweeds. Perhaps they had always been there, but to Hogan the current breed seemed both unpleasant and a little scary, like the rattlers Scooter was now storing in the back room.

The snakes in piss-ant little roadside menageries like this one couldn't kill you; their venom was milked twice a week and sold to clinics that made drugs with it. You could count on that just as you could count on the winos to show up at the local plasma bank every Tuesday and Thursday. But the snakes could still give you one hell of a painful bite if you got too close and then made them mad. That. Hogan thought, was what the current breed of road-kids had in common with them.

Mrs. Scooter came drifting down the counter, the words on her tee-shirt drifting up and down and side to side as she did. "Whatcha need?" she asked.-Her tone was still truculent. The West had a reputation for friendliness, and during the twenty years he had spent selling there Hogan had come to feel the reputation was more often than not deserved, but this woman had all the charm of a Brooklyn shopkeeper who has been stuck up three times in the last two weeks. Hogan supposed that her kind was becoming as much a part of the scene in the New West as the road-kids. Sad but true.

"How much are these?" Hogan asked, pointing through the dirty glass at what the sign identified as JUMBO CHATTERY TEETH -- THEY WALK! The case was filled with novelty items

-- Chinese finger-pullers, Pepper Gum, Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder, cigarette loads (A Laff Riot! according to the package

-- Hogan guessed they were more likely a great way to get your teeth knocked out), X-ray glasses, plastic vomit (So Realistic!), joy-buzzers.

"I dunno," Mrs. Scooter said. "Where's the box, I wonder?"

The teeth were the only item in the case that wasn't packaged, but they certainly were jumbo, Hogan thought -- super-jumbo, in fact, five times the size of the sets of wind-up teeth which had so amused him as a kid growing up in Maine. Take away the joke feet and they would look like the teeth of some fallen Biblical giant -- the cuspids were big white blocks and the canine teeth looked like tentpegs sunk in the improbably red plastic gums. A key jutted from one gum. The teeth were held together in a clench by a thick rubber band.

Mrs. Scooter blew the dust from the Chattery Teeth, then turned them over, looking on the soles of the orange shoes for a price sticker. She didn't find one. "I don't know," she said crossly, eyeing Hogan as if he might have taken the sticker off himself. "Only Scooter'd buy a piece of trash like this here. Been around since Noah got off the boat. I'll have to ask him."

Hogan was suddenly tired of the woman and of Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo. They were great Chattery Teeth, and Jack would undoubtedly love them, but he had promised -- eight at the latest.

"Never mind," he said. "It was just an -- "

"Them teeth was supposed to go for $15.95, if you c'n believe it," Scooter said from behind them. "They ain't just plastic -- those're metal teeth painted white. They could give you a helluva bite if they worked... but she dropped 'em on the floor two-three years ago when she was dustm the inside of the case and they're busted."

"Oh," Hogan said, disappointed. "That's too bad. I never saw a pair with, you know, feet."

"There are lots of 'em like that now," Scooter said. "They sell 'em at the novelty stores in Vegas and Dry Springs. But I never saw a set as big as those. It was funnier'n hell to watch 'em walk across the floor, snappin like a crocodile. Shame the old lady dropped 'em."

Scooter glanced at her, but his wife was looking out at the blowing sand. There was an expression on her face which Hogan couldn't quite decipher -- was it sadness, or disgust, or both?

Scooter looked back at Hogan. "I could let 'em go for three-fifty, if you wanted 'em. We're gettin rid of the novelties, anyway. Gonna put rental videotapes in that counter." He closed the storeroom door. The bandanna was now pulled down, lying on the dusty front of his shirt. His face was haggard and too thin. Hogan saw what might have been the shadow of serious illness lurking just beneath his desert tan.

"You could do no such a thing, Scooter!" the big woman snapped, and turned toward him... almost turned on him.

"Shutcha head,'' Scooter replied. "You make my fillins ache."

"I told you to get Wolf -- "

"Myra, if you want him back there in the storeroom, go get him yourself." He began to advance on her, and Hogan was surprised -- almost wonder-struck, in fact -- when she gave ground. "Ain't nothm but a Minnesota coydog anyway. Three dollars even, friend, and those Chattery Teeth are yours. Throw in another buck and you can take Myra's Woof, too. If you got five, I'll deed the whole place to you. Ain't worth a dogfart since the turnpike went through, anyway."

The long-haired kid was standing by the door, tearing the top from the pack of cigarettes Hogan had helped buy and watching this small comic opera with an expression of mean amusement. His small gray-green eyes gleamed, flicking back and forth between Scooter and his wife.

"Hell with you," Myra said gruffly, and Hogan realized she was close to tears. "If you won't get my sweet baby, I will." She stalked past him, almost striking him with one boulder-sized breast. Hogan thought it would have knocked the little man flat if it had connected.

"Look," Hogan said, "I think I'll just shove along."

"Aw, hell," Scooter said. "Don't mind Myra. I got cancer and she's got the change, and it ain't my problem she's havin the most trouble livin with. Take the darn teeth. Bet you got a boy might like 'em. Besides, it's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again."

He looked around, his expression helpless and musing. Outside, the wind rose to a brief, thin shriek as the kid opened the door and slipped out. He had decided the show was over, apparently. A cloud of fine grit swirled down the middle aisle, between the canned goods and the dog food.

"I was pretty handy myself, at one time," Scooter confided.

Hogan did not reply for a long moment. He could not think of anything -- quite literally not one single thing -- to say. He looked down at the Jumbo Chattery Teeth standing on the scratched and cloudy display case, nearly desperate to break the silence (now that Scooter was standing right in front of him, he could see that the man's eyes were huge and dark, glittering with pain and some heavy dope... Darvon, or perhaps morphine), and he spoke the first words that popped into his head: "Gee, they don't look broken."

He picked the teeth up. They were metal, all right -- too heavy to be anything else -- and when he looked through the slightly parted jaws, he was surprised at the size of the mainspring that ran the thing. He supposed it would take one that size to make the teeth not only chatter but walk, as well. What had Scooter said? They could give you a helluva bite if they worked. Hogan gave the thick rubber band an experimental tweak, then stripped it off. He was still looking at the teeth so he wouldn't have to look into Scooter's dark, pain-haunted eyes. He grasped the key and at last he risked a look up. He was relieved to see that now the thin man was smiling a little.

"Do you mind?" Hogan asked.

"Not me, pilgrim -- let er rip."
Hogan grinned and turned the key. At first it was all right; there was a series of small, ratcheting clicks, and he could see the mainspring winding up. Then, on the third turn, there was a spronk! noise from inside, and the key simply slid bonelessly around in its hole.
"See?"
"Yes," Hogan said. He set the teeth down on the counter. They stood there on their unlikely orange feet and did nothing.
Scooter poked the clenched molars on the lefthand side with the tip of one horny finger. The jaws of the teeth opened. One orange foot rose and took a dreamy half-step forward. Then the teeth stopped moving and the whole rig fell sideways. The Chattery Teeth came to rest on the wind-up key, a slanted, disembodied grin out here in the middle of no-man's-land. After a moment or two, the big teeth came together again with a slow click. That was all.
Hogan, who had never had a premonition in his life, was suddenly filled with a clear certainty that was both eerie and sickening. A year from now, this man will have been eight months in his grave, and if someone exhumed his coffin and pried off the lid, they'd see teeth just like these poking out of his dried-out dead face like an enamel trap.
He glanced up into Scooter's eyes, glittering like dark gems in tarnished settings, and suddenly it was no longer a question of wanting to get out of here; he had to get out of here.
"Well," he said (hoping frantically that Scooter would not stick out his hand to be shaken), "gotta go. Best of luck to you, sir."
Scooter did put his hand out, but not to be shaken. Instead, he snapped the rubber band back around the Chattery Teeth (Hogan had no idea why, since they didn't work), set them on their funny cartoon feet, and pushed them across the scratched surface of the counter. "Thank you kindly," he said. "And take these teeth. No charge."
"Oh... well, thanks, but I couldn't..."
"Sure you can," Scooter said. "Take 'em and give 'em to your boy. He'll get a kick out of 'em standin on the shelf in his room even if they don't work. I know a little about boys. Raised up three of 'em."
"How did you know I had a son?" Hogan asked.
Scooter winked. The gesture was terrifying and pathetic at the same time. "Seen it in your face," he said. "Go on, take 'em."
The wind gusted again, this time hard enough to make the boards of the building moan. The sand hitting the windows sounded like fine snow. Hogan picked the teeth up by the plastic feet, surprised all over again by how heavy they were.
"Here." Scooter produced a paper bag, almost as wrinkled and crumpled about the edges as his own face, from beneath the counter. "Stick 'em in here. That's a real nice sportcoat you got there. If you carry them choppers in the pocket, it'll get pulled out of shape."
He put the bag on the counter as if he understood how little Hogan wanted to touch him.
"Thanks," Hogan said. He put the Chattery Teeth in the bag and rolled down the top. "Jack thanks you, too -- he's my son."
Scooter smiled, revealing a set of teeth just as false (but nowhere near as large) as the ones in the paper bag. "My pleasure, mister. You drive careful until you get out of the blow. You'll be fine once you get in the foothills."
"I know." Hogan cleared his throat. "Thanks again. I hope you... uh... recover soon."
"That'd be nice," Scooter said evenly, "but I don't think it's in the cards, do you?"
"Uh. Well." Hogan realized with dismay that he didn't have the slightest idea how to conclude this encounter. "Take care of yourself."
Scooter nodded. "You too."
Hogan retreated toward the door, opened it, and had to hold on tight as the wind tried to rip it out of his hand and bang the wall. Fine sand scoured his face and he slitted his eyes against it.
He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and pulled the lapel of his real nice sportcoat over his mouth and nose as he crossed the porch, descended the steps, and headed toward the customized Dodge camper-van parked just beyond the gas-pumps. The wind pulled his hair and the sand stung his cheeks. He was going around to the

driver's-side door when someone tugged his arm.
"Mister! Hey, mister!"
He turned. It was the blonde-haired boy with the pale, ratty face. He hunched against the wind and blowing sand, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt and a pair of faded 501 jeans. Behind him, Mrs. Scooter was dragging a mangy beast on a choke-chain toward the back door of the store. Wolf the Minnesota coydog looked like a half-starved German shepherd pup -- and the runt of the litter, at that
"What?" Hogan shouted, knowing very well what.
"Can I have a ride?" the kid shouted back over the wind.
Hogan did not ordinarily pick up hitchhikers -- not since one afternoon five years ago. He had stopped for a young girl on the outskirts of Tonopah. Standing by the side of the road, the girl had resembled one of those sad-eyed waifs in the UNICEF posters, a kid who looked like her mother and her last friend had both died in the same housefire about a week ago. Once she was in the car, however, Hogan had seen the bad skin and mad eyes of the long-time junkie. By then it was too late. She'd stuck a pistol in his face and demanded his wallet. The pistol was old and rusty. Its grip was wrapped in tattered electrician's tape. Hogan had doubted that it was loaded, or that it would fire if it was... but he had a wife and a kid back in L.A., and even if he had been single, was a hundred and forty bucks worth risking your life over? He hadn't thought so even then, when he had just been getting his feet under him in his new line of work and a hundred and forty bucks had seemed a lot more important than it did these days. He gave the girl his wallet. By then her boyfriend had been parked beside the van (in those days it had been a Ford Econoline, nowhere near as nice as the custom Dodge XRT) in a dirty blue Chevy Nova. Hogan asked the girl if she would leave him his driver's license, and the pictures of Lita and Jack. "Fuck you, sugar," she said, and slapped him across the face, hard, with his own wallet before getting out and running to the blue car. Hitchhikers were trouble.
But the storm was getting worse, and the kid didn't even have a jacket. What was he supposed to tell him? Fuck you, sugar, crawl under a rock with the rest of the lizards until the wind drops?
"Okay," Hogan said.
"Thanks, man! Thanks a lot!"
The kid ran toward the passenger door, tried it, found it locked, and just stood there, waiting to be let in, hunching his shoulders up around his ears. The wind billowed out the back of his shirt like a sail, revealing glimpses of his thin, pimple-studded back.
Hogan glanced back at Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo as he went around to the driver's door. Scooter was standing at the window, looking out at him. He raised his hand, solemnly, palm out. Hogan raised his own in return, then slipped his key into the lock and turned it. He opened the door, pushed the unlock button next to the power window switch, and motioned for the kid to get in.
He did, then had to use both hands to pull the door shut again. The wind howled around the van, actually making it rock a little from side to side.
"Wow!" the kid gasped, and rubbed his fingers briskly through his hair (he'd lost the sneaker lace and the hair now lay on his shoulders in lank clots). "Some storm, huh? Big-time!"
"Yeah," Hogan said. There was a console between the two front seats -- the kind of seats the brochures liked to call "captain's chairs" -- and Hogan placed the paper bag in one of the cup-holders. Then he turned the ignition key. The engine started at once with a good-tempered rumble.
The kid twisted around in his seat and looked appreciatively into the back of the van. There was a bed (now folded back into a couch), a small LP gas stove, and several storage compartments where Hogan kept his various sample cases, and a toilet cubicle at the rear.
"Not too tacky, m'man!" the kid said. "All the comforts." He glanced back at Hogan. "Where you headed?"
"Los Angeles."
The kid grinned. "Hey, great! So'm I!" He took out his just-purchased pack of Merits and tapped one loose.
Hogan had put on his headlights and dropped the transmission into drive. Now he shoved the gearshift back into park and turned to the kid. "Let's get a couple of things straight," he said.

The kid gave Hogan his wide-eyed innocent look. "Sure, dude -- no prob."
"First, I don't pick up hitchhikers as a rule. I had a bad experience with one a few years back. It vaccinated me, you might say. I'll take you through the Santa Clara foothills, but that's all. There's a truckstop on the other side -- Sammy's. It's close to the turnpike. That's where we part company. Okay?"
"Okay. Sure. You bet." Still with the wide-eyed look.
"Second, if you really have to smoke, we part company right now. That okay?"
For just a moment Hogan saw the kid's other look (and even on short acquaintance, Hogan was almost willing to bet he only had two): the mean, watchful look. Then he was all wide-eyed innocence again, just a harmless refugee from Wayne's World. He tucked the cigarette behind his ear and showed Hogan his empty hands. As he raised them, Hogan noticed the hand-lettered tattoo on the kid's left bicep: DEF LEPPARD 4-EVER.
"No cigs," the kid said. "I got it."
"Fine. Bill Hogan." He held out his hand.
"Bryan Adams," the kid said, and shook Hogan's hand briefly.
Hogan dropped the transmission into drive again and began to roll slowly toward Route 46. As he did, his eyes dropped briefly to a cassette box lying on the dashboard. It was Reckless, by Bryan Adams.
Sure, he thought. You're Bryan Adams and I'm really Don Henley. We just stopped by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo to get a little material for our next albums, right, dude?
As he pulled out onto the highway, already straining to see through the blowing dust, he found himself thinking of the girl again, the one outside of Tonopah who had slapped him across the face with his own wallet before fleeing. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.
Then a hard gust of wind tried to push him into the eastbound lane, and he concentrated on his driving.
They rode in silence for a while. When Hogan glanced once to his right he saw the kid was lying back with his eyes closed -- maybe asleep, maybe dozing, maybe just pretending because he didn't want to talk. That was okay; Hogan didn't want to talk, either. For one thing, he didn't know what he might have to say to Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A. It was a cinch young Mr. Adams wasn't in the market for labels or Universal Product Code readers, which was what Hogan sold. For another, just keeping the van on the road had become something of a challenge.
As Mrs. Scooter had warned, the storm was intensifying. The road was a dim phantom crossed at irregular intervals by tan ribs of sand. These drifts were like speed-bumps, and they forced Hogan to creep along at no' more than twenty-five. He could live with that. At some points, however, the sand had spread more evenly across the road's surface, camouflaging it, and then Hogan had to drop down to fifteen miles an hour, navigating by the dim bounceback of his headlights from the reflector-posts which marched along the side of the road.
Every now and then an approaching car or truck would loom out of the blowing sand like a prehistoric phantom with round blazing eyes. One of these, an old Lincoln Mark IV as big as a cabin cruiser, was driving straight down the center of 46. Hogan hit the horn and squeezed right, feeling the suck of the sand against his tires, feeling his lips peel away from his teeth in a helpless snarl. Just as he became sure the oncomer was going to force him into the ditch, the Lincoln swerved back onto its own side just enough for Hogan to make it by. He thought he heard the metallic click of his bumper kissing off the Mark TV's rear bumper, but given the steady shriek of the wind, that was almost certainly his own imagination. He did catch just a glimpse of the driver -- an old bald-headed man sitting bolt-upright behind the wheel, peering into the blowing sand with a concentrated glare that was almost maniacal. Hogan shook his fist at him, but the old codger did not so much as glance at him. Probably didn't even realize I was there, Hogan thought, let alone how close he came to hitting me.
For a few seconds he was very close to going off the road anyway. He could feel the sand sucking harder at the rightside wheels, felt the van trying to tip. His instinct was to twist the wheel hard to the left. Instead, he fed the van gas and only urged it in that direction, feeling sweat dampen his last good shirt at the armpits. At last the suck on the tires diminished and he began to feel in control of the van again. Hogan blew his breath out in a long sigh.
"Good piece of driving, man."

His attention had been so focused he had forgotten his passenger, and in his surprise he almost twisted the wheel all the way to theIleft, which would have put them in trouble again. He looked around and saw the blonde kid watching him. His gray-green eyes were unsettlingly bright; there was no sign of sleepiness in them.
"It was really just luck," Hogan said. "If there was a place to pull over, I would... but I know this piece of road. It's Sammy's or bust. Once we're in the foothills, it'll get better."
He did not add that it might take them three hours to cover the seventy miles between here and there.
"You're a salesman, right?"
"As rain."
He wished the kid wouldn't talk. He wanted to concentrate on his driving. Up ahead, fog-lights loomed out of the murk like yellow ghosts. An Iroc Z with California plates followed them. The van and the Z crept past each other like old ladies in a nursing-home corridor. In the corner of his eye, Hogan saw the kid take the cigarette from behind his ear and begin to play with it. Bryan Adams indeed. Why had the kid given him a false name? It was like something out of an old Republic movie, the kind of thing you could still see on the late-late show, a black-and-white crime movie where the traveling salesman (probably played by Ray Milland) picks up the tough young con (played by Nick Adams, say) who has just broken out of jail in Gabbs or Deeth or some place like that --
"What do you sell, dude?''
"Labels."
"Labels?"
"That's right. The ones with the Universal Product Code on them. It's a little block with a pre-set number of black bars in it."
The kid surprised Hogan by nodding. "Sure -- they whip 'em over an electric-eye gadget in the supermarket and the price shows up on the cash register like magic, right?"
"Yes. Except it's not magic, and it's not an electric eye. It's a laser reader. I sell those, too. Both the big ones and the portables."
"Far out, dude-mar." The tinge of sarcasm in the kid's voice was faint... but it was there.
"Bryan?"
"Yeah?"
"The name's Bill, not m'man, not dude, and most certainly not dude-mar."
He found himself wishing more and more strongly that he could roll back in time to Scooter's, and just say no when the kid asked him for a ride. The Scooters weren't bad sorts; they would have let the kid stay until the storm blew itself out this evening. Maybe Mrs. Scooter would even have given him five bucks to babysit the tarantula, the rattlers, and Woof, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog. Hogan found himself liking those gray-green eyes less and less. He could feel their weight on his face, like small stones.
"Yeah -- Bill. Bill the Label Dude."
Bill didn't reply. The kid laced his fingers together and bent his hands backward, cracking the knuckles.
"Well, it's like my old mamma used to say -- it may not be much, but it's a living. Right, Label Dude?"
Hogan grunted something noncommittal and concentrated on his driving. The feeling that he had made a mistake had grown to a certainty. When he'd picked up the girl that time, God had let him get away with it. Please, he prayed. One more time, okay, God? Better yet, let me be wrong about this kid -- let it just be paranoia brought on by low barometer, high winds, and the coincidence of a name that can't, after all, be that uncommon.
Here came a huge Mack truck from the other direction, the silver bulldog atop the grille seeming to peer into the flying grit. Hogan squeezed right until he felt the sand piled up along the edge of the road grabbing greedily at his tires again. The long silver box the Mack was pulling blotted out everything on Hogan's left side. It was six inches away -- maybe even less -- and it seemed to pass forever.
When it was finally gone, the blonde kid asked: "You look like you're doin pretty well, Bill -- rig like this must have set you back at least thirty big ones. So why -- "
"It was a lot less than that." Hogan didn't know if "Bryan Adams" could hear the

edgy note in his voice, but he sure could. "I did a lot of the work myself."
"All the same, you sure ain't staggerin around hungry. So why aren't you up above all this shit, flyin' the friendly skies?"
It was a question Hogan sometimes asked himself in the long empty miles between Tempe and Tucson or Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the kind of question you had to ask yourself when you couldn't find anything on the radio but crappy synthopop or threadbare oldies and you'd listened to the last cassette of the current best-seller from Recorded Books, when there was nothing to look at but miles of gullywashes and scrubland, all of it owned by Uncle Sam.
He could say that he got a better feel for his customers and their needs by traveling through the country where they lived and sold their goods, and it was true, but it wasn't the reason. He could say that checking his sample cases, which were much too bulky to fit under an airline seat, was a pain in the ass and waiting for them to show up on the conveyor belt at the other end was always an adventure (he'd once had a packing case filled with five thousand soft-drink labels show up in Hilo, Hawaii, instead of Hillside, Arizona). That was also true, but it also wasn't the reason.
The reason was that in 1982 he had been on board a Western Pride commuter flight which had crashed in the high country seventeen miles north of Reno. Six of the nineteen passengers on board and both crew-members had been killed. Hogan had suffered a broken back. He had spent four months in bed and another ten in a heavy brace his wife Lita called the Iron Maiden. They (whoever they were) said that if you got thrown from a horse, you should get right back on. William I. Hogan said that was bullshit, and with the exception of a white-knuckle, two-Valium flight to attend his father's funeral in New York, he had never been on a plane since.
He came out of these thoughts all at once, realizing two things: he had had the road to himself since the passage of the Mack, and the kid was still looking at him with those unsettling eyes, waiting for him to answer the question.
"I had a bad experience on a commuter flight once," he said. "Since then, I've pretty much stuck to transport where you can coast into the breakdown lane if your engine quits."
"You sure have had a lot of bad experiences, Bill-dude," the kid said. A tone of bogus regret crept into his voice. "And now, so sorry, you're about to have another one." There was a sharp metallic click. Hogan looked over and was not very surprised to see the kid was holding a switchknife with a glittering eight-inch blade.
Oh shit, Hogan thought. Now that it was here, now that it was right in front of him, he didn't feel very scared. Only tired. Oh shit, and only four hundred miles from home. Goddam.
"Pull over, Bill-dude. Nice and slow."
"What do you want?"
"If you really don't know the answer to that one, you're even dumber than you look." A little smile played around the corners of the kid's mouth. The homemade tattoo on the kid's arm rippled as the muscle beneath it twitched. "I want your dough, and I guess I want your rolling whorehouse too, at least for a while. But don't worry -- there's this little truck stop not too far from here. Sammy's. Close to the turnpike. Someone'll give you a ride. The people who don't stop will look at you like you're dog-shit they found on their shoes, of course, and you might have to beg a little, but I'm sure you'll get a ride in the end. Now pull over."
Hogan was a little surprised to find that he felt angry as well, as tired. Had he been angry that other time, when the road-girl, had stolen his wallet? He couldn't honestly remember.
"Don't pull that shit on me," he said, turning to the kid. "I jjjave you a ride when you needed one, and I didn't make you beg for it. If it weren't for me, you'd still be eating sand with your thumb out. So why don't you just put that thing away. We'll -- "
The kid suddenly lashed forward with the knife, and Hogan felt a thread of burning pain across his right hand. The van swerved, then shuddered as it passed over another of those sandy speed-bumps.
"Pull over, I said. You're either walking, Label Dude, or you're lying in the nearest gully with your throat cut and one of your own price-reading gadgets jammed up your ass. And you wanna know something? I'm gonna chain-smoke all the way to Los Angeles, and every time I finish a cigarette I'm gonna butt it out on your fuckin dashboard."

Hogan glanced down at his hand and saw a diagonal line of blood, which stretched from the last knuckle of his pinky to the base of his thumb. And here was the anger again... only now it was really rage, and if the tiredness was still there, it was buried somewhere in the middle of that irrational red eye. He tried to summon a mental picture of Lita and Jack to damp that feeling down before it got the better of him and made him do something crazy, but the images were fuzzy and out of focus. There was a clear image in his mind, but it was the wrong one -- it was the face of the girl outside of Tonopah, the girl with the snarling mouth below the sad poster-child eyes, the girl who had said Fuck you, sugar before slapping him across the face with his own wallet.

He stepped down on the gas-pedal and the van began to move faster. The red needle moved past thirty.

The kid looked surprised, then puzzled, then angry. "What are you doing? I told you to pull over! Do you want your guts in your lap, or what?"

"I don't know," Hogan said. He kept his foot on the gas. Now the needle was trembling just above forty. The van ran across a series of dunelets and shivered like a dog with a fever. "What do you want, kid? How about a broken neck? All it takes is one twist of the wheel. I fastened my seatbelt. I notice you forgot yours."

The kid's gray-green eyes were huge now, glittering with a mixture of fear and fury. You're supposed to pull over, those eyes said. That's the way it's supposed to work when I'm holding a knife on you -- don't you know that?

"You won't wreck us," the kid said, but Hogan thought he was trying to convince himself.

"Why not?" Hogan turned toward the kid again. "After all, I'm pretty sure I'll walk away, and the van's insured. You call the play, asshole. What about that?"

"You -- " the kid began, and then his eyes widened and he lost all interest in Hogan. "Look out!" he screamed.

Hogan snapped his eyes forward and saw four huge white headlamps bearing down on him through the flying wrack outside. It was a tanker truck, probably carrying gasoline or propane. An air-horn beat the air like the cry of a gigantic, enraged goose: WHONK! WHONK! WHONNNK!

The van had drifted while Hogan was trying to deal with the kid; now he was the one halfway across the road. He yanked the wheel hard to the right, knowing it would do no good, knowing it was already too late. But the approaching truck was also moving, squeezing over just as Hogan had tried to squeeze over in order to accommodate the Mark IV. The two vehicles danced past each other though the blowing sand with less than a gasp between them. Hogan felt his rightside wheels bite into the sand again and knew that this time he didn't have a chance in hell of holding the van on the road -- not at forty-plus miles an hour. As the dim shape of the big steel tank (CARTER'S FARM SUPPLIES & ORGANIC FERTILIZER was painted along the side) slid from view, he felt the steering wheel go mushy in his hands, dragging farther to the right. And from the corner of his eye, he saw the kid leaning forward with his knife.

What's the matter with you, are you crazy? He wanted to scream at the kid, but it would have been a stupid question even if he'd had time enough to articulate it. Sure the kid was crazy -- you only had to take a good look into those gray-green eyes to see it. Hogan must have been crazy himself to give the kid a ride in the first place, but none of that mattered now; he had a situation to cope with here, and if he allowed himself the luxury of believing this couldn't be happening to him -- if he allowed himself to think that for even a single second -- he would probably be found tomorrow or the next day with his throat cut and his eyes nibbled out of their sockets by the buzzards. This was really happening; it was a true thing.

The kid tried his level best to plant the blade in Hogan's neck, but the van had begun to tilt by then, running deeper and deeper into the sand-choked gully. Hogan recoiled back from the blade, letting go of the wheel entirely, and thought he had gotten clear until he felt the wet warmth of blood drench the side of his neck. The knife had unzipped his right cheek from jaw to temple. He flailed with his right hand, trying to get the kid's wrist, and then the van's left front wheel struck a rock the size of a pay telephone and the van flipped high and hard, like a stunt vehicle in one of those movies this rootless kid undoubtedly loved. It rolled in midair, all four wheels turning, still doing thirty miles an hour according to the speedometer, and Hogan felt his seatbelt lock painfully across his chest and belly. It was like reliving the plane-crash -- now, as then, he could not get it through

his head that this was really happening.
The kid was thrown upward and forward, still holding onto the knife. His head bounced off the roof as the van's top and bottom swapped places. Hogan saw his left hand waving wildly, and realized with amazement that the kid was still trying to stab him. He was a rattler, all right, Hogan had been right about that, but no one had milked his poison sacs.
Then the van struck the desert hardpan, peeling off the luggage racks, and the kid's head connected with the roof again, much harder this time. The knife was jolted from his hand. The cabinets at the rear of the van sprang open, spraying sample-books and laser label-readers everywhere. Hogan was dimly aware of an inhuman screaming sound -- the long, drawn-out squall of the XRT's roof sliding across the gravelly desert surface on the far side of the gully -- and thought: So this is what it would be like to be inside a tin can when someone was using the opener.
The windshield shattered, blowing inward in a sagging shield clouded by a million zig-zagging cracks. Hogan shut his eyes and threw his hands up to shield his face as the van continued to roll, thumping down on Hogan's side long enough to shatter the driver's-side window and admit a rattle of rocks and dusty earth before staggering upright again. It rocked as if meaning to go over on the kid's side... and then came to rest.
Hogan sat where he was without moving for perhaps five seconds, eyes wide, hands gripping the armrests of his chair, feeling a little like Captain Kirk in the aftermath of a Klingon attack. He was aware there was a lot of dirt and crumbled glass in his lap, and something else as well, but not what the something else was. He was also aware of the wind, blowing more dirt through the van's broken windows.
Then his vision was temporarily blocked by a swiftly moving object. The object was a mottle of white skin, brown dirt, raw knuckles, and red blood. It was a fist, and it struck Hogan squarely in the nose. The agony was immediate and intense, as if someone had fired a flare-gun directly into his brain. For a moment his vision was gone, swallowed in a vast white flash. It had just begun to come back when the kid's hands suddenly clamped around his neck and he could no longer breathe.
The kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., was leaning over the console between the front seats. Blood from perhaps half a dozen different scalp-wounds had flowed over his cheeks and forehead and nose like war paint. His gray-green eyes stared at Hogan with fixed, lunatic fury.
"Look what you did, you fuck!" the kid shouted. "Look what you did to me!"
Hogan tried to pull back, and got half a breath when the kid's hold slipped momentarily, but with his seatbelt still buckled -- and still locked down as well, from the feel -- there was really nowhere he could go. The kid's hands were back almost at once, and this time his thumbs were pressing into his windpipe, pinching it shut.
Hogan tried to bring his own hands up, but the kid's arms, as rigid as prison bars, blocked him. He tried to knock the kid's arms away, but they wouldn't budge. Now he could hear another wind -- a high, roaring wind inside his own head.
"Look what you did, you stupid shit! I'm bleedin!"
The kid's voice, but farther away than it had been.
He's killing me, Hogan thought, and a voice replied: Right -- fuck you, sugar.
That brought the anger back. He groped in his lap for whatever was there besides dirt and glass. It was a paper bag with some bulky object -- Hogan couldn't remember exactly what -- inside it. Hogan closed his hand around it and pistoned his fist upward toward the shelf of the kid's jaw. It connected with a heavy thud. The kid screamed in surprised pain, and his grip on Hogan's throat was suddenly gone as he fell over backward.
Hogan pulled in a deep, convulsive breath and heard a sound like a teakettle howling to be taken off the burner. Is that me, making that sound? My God, is that me?
He dragged in another breath. It was full of flying dust, it hurt his throat and made him cough, but it was heaven all the same. He looked down at his fist and saw the shape of the Chattery Teeth clearly outlined against the brown bag.
And suddenly felt them move.
There was something so shockingly human in this movement that Hogan shrieked and dropped the bag at once; it was as if he had picked up a human jawbone, which had tried to speak to his hand.
The bag hit the kid's back and then tumbled to the van's carpeted floor as "Bryan Adams" pushed himself groggily to his knees. Hogan heard the rubber band snap... and

then the unmistakable click-and-chutter of the teeth themselves, opening and closing.

It's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track, Scooter had said. I bet a man who was handy could get 'em walkin and chompin again.

Or maybe just a good knock would do it, Hogan thought. If I live through this and ever get back that way, I'll have to tell Scooter that all you have to do to fix a pair of malfunctioning Chattery Teeth is roll your van over and then use them to hit a psychotic hitchhiker who's trying to strangle you: so simple even a child could do it.

The teeth clattered and smacked inside the torn brown bag; the sides fluttered, making it look like an amputated lung, which refused to die. The kid crawled away from the bag without even looking at it -- crawled toward the back of the van, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it. Blood flew from the clots of his hair in a fine spray.

Hogan found the clasp of his seatbelt and pushed the pop-release. Nothing happened. The square in the center of the buckle did not give even a little and the belt itself was still locked as tight as a cramp, cutting into the middle-aged roll of fat above the waistband of his trousers and pushing a hard diagonal across his chest. He tried rocking back and forth in the seat, hoping that would unlock the belt. The flow of blood from his face increased, and he could feel his cheek flapping back and forth like a strip of dried wallpaper, but that was all. He felt panic struggling to break through amazed shock, and twisted his head over his right shoulder to see what the kid was up to.

It turned out to be no good. He had spotted his knife at the far end of the van, lying atop a litter of instructional manuals and brochures. He grabbed it, flicked his hair away from his face, and peered back over his own shoulder at Hogan. He was grinning, and there was something in that grin that made Hogan's balls simultaneously tighten and shrivel until it felt as if someone had tucked a couple of peach-pits into his Jockey shorts.

Ah, here it is! The kid's grin said. For a minute or two there I was worried -- quite seriously worried -- but everything is going to come out all right after all. Things got a little improvisational there for a while, but now we're back to the script.

"You stuck, Label Dude?" the kid asked over the steady shriek of the wind. "You are, ain't you? Good thing you buckled your belt, right? Good thing for me."

The kid tried to get up, almost made it, and then his knees gave way. An expression of surprise so magnified it would have been comic under other circumstances crossed his face. Then he flicked his blood-greasy hair out of his face again and began to crawl toward Hogan, his left hand wrapped around the imitation-bone handle of the knife. The Def Leppard tattoo ebbed and flowed with each flex of his impoverished bleep, making Hogan think of the way the words on Myra's tee-shirt -- NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY -- had rippled when she moved.

Hogan grasped the seatbelt buckle with both hands and drove his thumbs against the pop-release as enthusiastically as the kid had driven his into Hogan's" windpipe. There was absolutely no response. The belt was frozen. He craned his neck to look at the kid again.

The kid had made it as far as the fold-up bed and then stopped. That expression of large, comic surprise had resurfaced on his face. He was staring straight ahead, which meant he was looking at something on the floor, and Hogan suddenly remembered the teeth. They were still chattering away.

He looked down in time to see the Jumbo Chattery Teeth march from the open end of the torn paper bag on their funny orange shoes. The molars and the canines and the incisors chopped rapidly up and down, producing a sound like ice in a cocktail-shaker. The shoes, dressed up in their tony white spats, almost seemed to bounce along the gray carpet. Hogan found himself thinking of Fred Astaire tap-dancing his way across a stage and back again; Fred Astaire with a cane tucked under his arm and a straw boater tipped saucily forward over one eye.

"Oh shit!" the kid said, half-laughing. "Is that what you were dickerin for back there? Oh, man! I kill you, Label Dude, I'm gonna be doin the world a favor."

The key, Hogan thought. The key on the side of the teeth, the one you use to wind them up... it isn 't turning.

And he suddenly had another of those precognitive flashes; he understood exactly what was going to happen. The kid was going to reach for them.

The teeth abruptly stopped walking and chattering. They simply stood there on the slightly tilted floor of the van, jaws slightly agape. Eyeless, they still seemed to peer quizzically up at the kid.

"Chattery Teeth," Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., marveled. He reached out and curled his right hand around them, just as Hogan had known he would.

"Bite him!" Hogan shrieked. "Bite his fucking fingers right off!"

The kid's head snapped up, the gray-green eyes wide with startlement. He gaped at Hogan for a moment -- that big expression of totally dumb surprise -- and then he began to laugh. His laughter was high and shrieky, a perfect complement to the wind howling through the van and billowing the curtains like long ghost-hands.

"Bite me! Bite me! Biiiite me!" the kid chanted, as if it were the punchline to the funniest joke he'd ever heard. "Hey, Label Dude! I thought I was the one who bumped my head!"

The kid clamped the handle of the switchblade in his own teeth and stuck the forefinger of his left hand between the Jumbo Chattery Teeth. "Ite eel" he said around the knife. He giggled and wiggled his finger between the oversized jaws. "Ite eel Oh on, ite ee!"

The teeth didn't move. Neither did the orange feet. Hogan's premonition collapsed around him the way dreams do upon waking. The kid wiggled his finger between the Chattery Teeth one more time, began to pull it out... then began screaming at the top of his lungs. "Oh shit! SHIT! Mother FUCKER.'"

For a moment Hogan's heart leaped in his chest, and then he realized that, although the kid was still screaming, what he was really doing was laughing. Laughing at him. The teeth had remained perfectly still the whole time.

The kid lifted the teeth up for a closer look as he grasped his knife again. He shook the long blade at the Chattery Teeth like a teacher shaking his pointer at a naughty student. "You shouldn't bite," he said. "That's very bad behav -- "

One of the orange feet took a sudden step forward on the grimy palm of the kid's hand. The jaws opened at the same time, and before Hogan was fully aware of what was happening, the Chattery Teeth had closed on the kid's nose.

This time Bryan Adams's scream was real -- a thing of agony and ultimate surprise. He flailed at the teeth with his right hand, trying to bat them away, but they were locked on his nose as tightly as Hogan's seatbelt was locked around his middle. Blood and filaments of torn gristle burst out between the canines in red strings. The kid jackknifed backward and for a moment Hogan could see only his flailing body, lashing elbows, and kicking feet. Then he saw the glitter of the knife.

The kid screamed again and bolted into a sitting position. His long hair had fallen over his face in a curtain; the clamped teeth stuck out like the rudder of some strange boat. The kid had somehow managed to insert the blade of his knife between the teeth and what remained of his nose.

"Kill him!" Hogan shouted hoarsely. He had lost his mind; on some level he understood that he must have lost his mind, but for the time being, that didn't matter. "Go on, kill him!"

The kid shrieked -- a long, piercing fire-whistle sound -- and twisted the knife. The blade snapped, but not before it had managed to pry the disembodied jaws at least partway open. The teeth fell off his face and into his lap. Most of the kid's nose fell off with them.

The kid shook his hair back. His gray-green eyes were crossed, trying to look down at the mangled stump in the middle of his face. His mouth was drawn down in a rictus of pain; the tendons in his neck stood out like pulley-wires.

The kid reached for the teeth. The teeth stepped nimbly backward on their orange cartoon feet. They were nodding up and down, marching in place, grinning at the kid, who was now sitting with his ass on his calves. Blood drenched the front of his tee-shirt.

The kid said something then that confirmed Hogan's belief that he, Hogan, had lost his mind; only in a fantasy born of delirium would such words be spoken.

"Give bme bag by dose, you sud-of-a-bidtch!"

The kid reached for the teeth again and this time they ran forward, under his snatching hand, between his spread legs, and there was a meaty chump! sound as they closed on the bulge of faded blue denim just below the place where the zipper of the kid's jeans ended.

Bryan Adams's eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. His hands rose to the level of his shoulders, springing wide open, and for a moment he looked like some strange Al

Jolson imitator preparing to sing "Mammy." The switchknife flew over his shoulder to the back of the van.

"Jesus! Jesus! Jeeeeeee -- "

The orange feet were pumping rapidly, as if doing a Highland Fling. The pink jaws of the Jumbo Chattery Teeth nodded rapidly up and down, as if saying yes! yes! yes! and then shook back and forth, just as rapidly, as if saying no! no! no!

" -- eeeeeeEEEEEEEE -- ''

As the cloth of the kid's jeans began to rip -- and that was not all that was ripping, by the sound -- Bill Hogan passed out.

He came to twice. The first time must have been only a short while later, because the storm was still howling through and around the van, and the light was about the same. He started to turn around, but a monstrous bolt of pain shot up his neck. Whiplash, of course, and probably not as bad as it could have been... or would be tomorrow, for that matter.

Always supposing he lived until tomorrow.

The kid. I have to look and make sure he's dead.

No, you don't. Of course he's dead. If he wasn't, you would be.

Now he began to hear a new sound from behind him -- the steady chutter-click-chutter of the teeth.

They're coming for me. They've finished with the kid, but they're still hungry, so they're coming for me.

He placed his hands on the seatbelt buckle again, but the pop-release was still hopelessly jammed, and his hands seemed to have no strength, anyway.

The teeth grew steadily closer -- they were right in back of his seat, now, from the sound -- and Hogan's confused mind read a rhyme into their ceaseless chomping: Clickety-dickety-clickety-clack! We are the teeth, and we're coming back! Watch us walk, watch us chew, we ate him, now we 'II eat you!

Hogan closed his eyes.

The clittering sound stopped.

Now there was only the ceaseless whine of the wind and the spick-spack of sand striking the dented side of the XRT van.

Hogan waited. After a long, long time, he heard a single click, followed by the minute sound of tearing fibers. There was a pause, then the click and the tearing sound was repeated.

What's it doing?

The third time the click and the small tearing sound came, he felt the back of his seat moving a little and understood. The teeth were pulling themselves up to where he was. Somehow they were pulling themselves up to him.

Hogan thought of the teeth closing on the bulge below the zipper of the kid's jeans and willed himself to pass out again. Sand flew in through the broken windshield, tickled his cheeks and forehead.

Click... rip. Click... rip. Click... rip.

The last one was very close. Hogan didn't want to look down, but he was unable to help himself. And beyond his right hip, where the seat-cushion met the seat's back, he saw a wide white grin. It moved upward with agonizing slowness, pushing with the as-yet-unseen orange feet as it nipped a small fold of gray seat-cover between its incisors... then the jaws let go and it lurched convulsively upward.

This time what the teeth fastened on was the pocket of Hogan's slacks, and he passed out again.

When he came to the second time, the wind had dropped and it was almost dark; the air had taken on a queer purple shade Hogan could not remember ever having seen in the desert before. The skirls of sand running across the desert floor beyond the sagging ruin of the windshield looked like fleeing ghost-children.

For a moment he could remember nothing at all of what had happened to land him here; the last clear memory he could touch was of looking at his gas-gauge, seeing it was down to an eighth, then looking up and seeing a sign at the side of the road which said:

SCOOTER'S GROCERY & ROADSIDE
• ZOO • GAS • SNAX • COLD BEER •
SEE LIVE RATLLESNAKE's!

He understood that he could hold onto this amnesia for a while, if he wanted to; given a little time, his subconscious might even be able to wall off certain dangerous memories permanently. But it could also be dangerous not to remember. Very

dangerous. Because --

The wind gusted. Sand rattled against the badly dented driver's side of the van. It sounded almost like

(teeth! teeth! teeth!)

The fragile surface of his amnesia shattered, letting everything pour through, and all the heat fell from the surface of Hogan's skin. He uttered a rusty squawk as he remembered the sound

(chump!)

the Chattery Teeth had made as they closed on the kid's balls, and he closed his hands over his own crotch, eyes rolling fearfully in their sockets as he looked for the runaway teeth.

He didn't see them, but the ease with which his shoulders followed the movement of his hands was new. He looked down at his lap and slowly removed his hands from his crotch. His seatbelt was no longer holding him prisoner. It lay on the gray carpet in two pieces. The metal tongue of the pull-up section was still buried inside the buckle, but beyond it there was only ragged red fabric. The belt had not been cut; it had been gnawed through.

He looked up into the rear-view mirror and saw something else: the back doors of the van were standing open, and there was only a vague, man-shaped red outline on the gray carpet where the kid had been. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., was gone. So were the Chattery Teeth. They look like hicks from Fargo, North Dakota, standing there in the electric purple light, which had overspread these empty lands west of Las Vegas. They were clamped shut on a thick wad of the kid's long blonde hair.

The Chattery Teeth were backing up.

The Chattery Teeth were dragging Mr. Bryan Adams away to Nowhere, U.S.A.

Hogan turned in the other direction and walked slowly toward the road, holding his nitro head straight and steady on top of his neck. It took him five minutes to negotiate the ditch and another fifteen to flag a ride, but he eventually managed both things. And during that time, he never looked back once.

Hogan got out of the van slowly, like an old man afflicted with a terrible case of arthritis. He found that if he held his head perfectly level, it wasn't too bad... but if he forgot and moved it in any direction, a series of exploding bolts went off in his neck, shoulders, and upper back. Even the thought of allowing his head to roll backward was unbearable.

He walked slowly to the rear of the van, running his hand lightly over the dented, paint-peeled surface, hearing and feeling the glass as it crunched under his feet. He stood at the far end of the driver's side for a long time. He was afraid to turn the corner. He was afraid that, when he did, he would see the kid squatting on his hunkers, holding the knife in his left hand and grinning that empty grin. But he couldn't just stand here, holding his head on top of his strained neck like a big bottle of nitroglycerine, while it got dark around him, so at last Hogan went around.

Nobody. The kid was really gone. Or so it seemed at first.

The wind gusted, blowing Hogan's hair around his bruised face, then dropped away completely. When it did, he heard a harsh scraping noise coming from about twenty yards beyond the van. He looked in that direction and saw the soles of the kid's sneakers just disappearing over the top of a dry-wash. The sneakers were spread in a limp V. They stopped moving for a moment, as if whatever was hauling the kid's body needed a few moments' rest to recoup its strength, and then they began to move again in little jerks.

A picture of terrible, unendurable clarity suddenly rose in Hogan's mind. He saw the Jumbo Chattery Teeth standing on their funny orange feet just over the edge of that wash, standing there in spats so cool they made the coolest of the California Raisins.

Nine months later, on a clear hot summer day in June, Bill Hogan happened by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo again... except the place had been renamed. MYRA'S PLACE, the sign now said. GAS • COLD BEER • VIDEO'S. Below the words was a picture of a wolf -- or maybe just a Woof -- snarling at the moon. Wolf himself, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog, was lying in a cage in the shade of the porch overhang. His back legs were sprawled extravagantly, and his muzzle was on his paws. He did not get up when Hogan got out of his car to fill the tank. Of the rattlesnakes and the tarantula there was no sign.

"Hi, Woof," he said as he went up the steps. The cage's inmate rolled over onto his

back and allowed his long red tongue to dangle enticingly from the side of his mouth as he stared up at Hogan.

The store looked bigger and cleaner inside. Hogan guessed this was partly because the day outside was not so threatening, but that wasn't all; the windows had been washed, for one thing, and that made a big difference. The board walls had been replaced with pine-panelling that still smelled fresh and sappy. A snackbar with five stools had been added at the back. The novelty case was still there, but the cigarette loads, the joy-buzzers, and Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder were gone. The case was filled with videotape boxes. A hand-lettered sign read X-RATED IN BACK ROOM • "B 18 OR B GONE."

The woman at the cash register was standing in profile to Hogan, looking down at a calculator and running numbers on it. For d moment Hogan was sure this was Mr. and Mrs. Scooter's daughter -- the female complement to those three boys Scooter had talked about raising. Then she lifted her head and Hogan saw it was Mrs. Scooter herself. It was hard to believe this could be the woman whose mammoth bosom had almost burst the seams of her NEVADA is GOD'S COUNTRY tee-shirt, but it was. Mrs. Scooter had lost at least fifty pounds and dyed her hair a sleek and shiny walnut-brown. Only the sun-wrinkles around the eyes and mouth were the same.

"Getcha gas?" she asked.

"Yep. Fifteen dollars' worth." He handed her a twenty and she rang it up. "Place looks a lot different from the last time I was in."

"Been a lot of changes since Scooter died, all right," she agreed, and pulled a five out of the register. She started to hand it over, really looked at him for the first time, and hesitated. "Say... ain't you the guy who almost got killed the day we had that storm last year?"

He nodded and stuck out his hand. "Bill Hogan."

She didn't hesitate; simply reached over the counter and gave his hand a single strong pump. The death of her husband seemed to have improved her disposition... or maybe it was just that her change of life was finally over.

"I'm sorry about your husband. He seemed like a good sort."

"Scoot? Yeah, he was a fine fella before he took ill," she agreed. "And what about you? You all recovered?"

Hogan nodded. "I wore a neck-brace for about six weeks -- not for the first time, either -- but I'm okay."

She was looking at the scar, which twisted down his right cheek. "He do that? That kid?"

"Yeah."

"Stuck you pretty bad."

"Yeah."

"I heard he got busted up in the crash, then crawled into the desert to die." She was looking at Hogan shrewdly. "That about right?"

Hogan smiled a little. "Near enough, I guess."

"J.T. -- he's the State Bear around these parts -- said the animals worked him over pretty good. Desert rats are awful impolite that way."

"I don't know anything about that part."

"J.T. said the kid's own mother wouldn't have reckanized him." She put a hand on her reduced bosom and looked at him earnestly. "If I'm lyin, I'm dyin."

Hogan laughed out loud. In the weeks and months since the day of the storm, this was something he found himself doing more often. He had come, it sometimes seemed to him, to a slightly different arrangement with life since that day.

"Lucky he didn't kill you," Mrs. Scooter said. "You had a helluva narrow excape. God musta been with you."

"That's right," Hogan agreed. He looked down at the video case. "I see you took out the novelties."

"Them nasty old things? You bet! That was the first thing I did after -- " Her eyes suddenly widened. "Oh, say! Jeepers! I got sumpin belongs to you! If I was to forget, I reckon Scooter'd come back and haunt me!"

Hogan frowned, puzzled, but the woman was already going behind the counter. She stood on tiptoe and brought something down from a high shelf above the rack of cigarettes. It was, Hogan saw with absolutely no surprise at all, the Jumbo Chattery Teeth. The woman set them down beside the cash register.

Hogan stared at that frozen, insouciant grin with a deep sense of deja vu. There they were, the world's biggest set of Chattery Teeth, standing on their funny orange

shoes beside the Slim Jim display, cool as a mountain breeze, grinning up at him as if to say, Hello, there! Did you forget me? I didn't forget YOU, my friend. Not at all.

"I found 'em on the porch the next day, after the storm blew itself out," Mrs. Scooter said. She laughed. "Just like old Scoot to give you somethin for free, then stick it in a bag with a hole in the bottom. I was gonna throw 'em out, but he said he give 'em to you, and I should stick 'em on a shelf someplace. He said a traveling man who came in once'd most likely come in again... and here you are."

"Yes," Hogan agreed. "Here I am."

He picked up the teeth and slipped his finger between the slightly gaping jaws. He ran the pad of the finger along the molars at the back, and in his mind he heard the kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., chanting Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me! Were the back teeth still streaked with the dull rust of the boy's blood? Hogan thought he could see something way back in there, but perhaps it was only a shadow.

"I saved it because Scooter said you had a boy."

Hogan nodded. "I do." And, he thought, the boy still has a father. I'm holding the reason why. The question is, did they walk all the way back here on their little orange feet because this was home... or because they somehow knew what Scooter knew? That sooner or later, a traveling man always comes back to where he's been, the way a murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime?

"Well, if you still want 'em, they're still yours," she said. For a moment she looked solemn... and then she laughed. "Shit, I probably would have throwed 'em out anyway, except I forgot about 'em. Course, they're still broken."

Hogan turned the key jutting out of the gum. It went around twice, making little wind-up clicks, then simply turned uselessly in its socket. Broken. Of course they were. And would be until they decided they didn't want to be broken for a while. And the question wasn't how they had gotten back here, and the question wasn't even why. The question was this: What did they want?

He poked his finger into the white steel grin again and whispered, "Bite me -- do you want to?"

The teeth only stood there on their super-cool orange feet and grinned.

"They ain't talking, seems like," Mrs. Scooter said.

"No," Hogan said, and suddenly he found himself thinking of the kid. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A. A lot of kids like him now. A lot of grownups, too, blowing along the highways like tumbleweed, always ready to take your wallet, say Fuck you, sugar, and run. You could stop picking up hitchhikers (he had), and you could put a burglar-alarm system in your home (he'd done that, too), but it was still a hard world where planes sometimes fell out of the sky and the crazies were apt to turn up anyplace and there was always room for a little more insurance. He had a wife, after all.

And a son.

It might be nice if Jack had a set of Jumbo Chattery Teeth sitting on his desk. Just in case something happened.

Just in case.

"Thank you for saving them," he said, picking the Chattery Teeth up carefully by the feet. "I think my kid will get a kick out of them even if they are broken."

"Thank Scoot, not me. You want a bag?" She grinned. "I got a plastic one -- no holes, guaranteed."

Hogan shook his head and slipped the Chattery Teeth into his sportcoat pocket. "I'll carry them this way," he said, and grinned right back at her. "Keep them handy."

"Suit yourself." As he started for the door, she called after him: "Stop back again! I make a damn good chicken salad sandwich!"

"I'll bet you do, and I will," Hogan said. He went out, down the steps, and stood for a moment in the hot desert sunshine, smiling. He felt good -- he felt good a lot these days. He had come lo think that was just the way to be.

To his left, Woof the Amazing Minnesota Coydog got to his feet, poked his snout through the crisscross of wire on the side of his cage, and barked. In Hogan's pocket, the Chattery Teeth clicked together once. The sound was soft, but Hogan heard it... and felt them move. He patted his pocket. "Easy, big fella," he said softly.

He walked briskly across the yard, climbed behind the wheel of his new Chevrolet van, and drove away toward Los Angeles. He had promised Lita and Jack he would be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

QUITTERS, INC.

Morrison was waiting for someone who was hung up in the air traffic jam over Kennedy International when he saw a familiar face at the end of the bar and walked down.

'Jimmy? Jimmy McCann?'

It was. A little heavier than when Morrison had seen him at the Atlanta Exhibition the year before, but otherwise he looked awesomely fit. In college he had been a thin, pallid chain smoker buried behind huge horn-rimmed glasses. He had apparently switched to contact lenses.

'Dick Morrison?'

'Yeah. You look great.' He extended his hand and they shook.

'So do you,' McCann said, but Morrison knew it was a lie. He had been overworking, overeating, and smoking too much. 'What are you drinking?'

'Bourbon and bitters,' Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lighted a cigarette. 'Meeting someone, Jimmy?'

'No. Going to Miami for a conference. A heavy client. Bills six million. I'm supposed to hold his hand because we lost out on a big special next spring.'

'Are you still with Crager and Barton?'

'Executive veep now.'

'Fantastic! Congratulations! When did all this happen?' He tried to tell himself that the little worm of jealousy in his stomach was just acid indigestion. He pulled out a roll of antacid pills and crunched one in his mouth.

'Last August. Something happened that changed my life.' He looked speculatively at Morrison and sipped his drink. 'You might be interested.'

My God, Morrison thought with an inner wince. Jimmy McCann's got religion.

'Sure,' he said, and gulped at his drink when it came. 'I wasn't in very good shape,' McCann said. 'Personal problems with Sharon, my.dad died - heart attack - and I'd developed this hacking cough. Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those are like?'

'Yeah.' He had worked at Crager and Barton for eighteen months before joining the Morton Agency. 'Get your butt in gear or get your butt out.'

McCann laughed. 'You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer. He told me to quit smoking.' McCann grimaced. 'Might as well tell me to quit breathing.'

Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

'Did you quit?' He asked.

'Yes, I did. At first I didn't think I'd be able to - I was cheating like hell. Then I met a guy who told me about an outfit over on Forty-sixth Street. Specialists. I said what do I have to lose and went over. I haven't smoked since.'

Morrison's eyes widened. 'What did they do? Fill you full of some drug?'

'No.' He had taken out his wallet and was rummaging through it. 'Here it is. I knew I had one kicking around.' He laid a plain white business card on the bar between them.

QUITTERS, INC.

Stop Going Up in Smoke!

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

'Keep it, if you want,' McCann said. 'They'll cure you. Guaranteed.'

'How?'

'I can't tell you,' McCann said.

'Huh? Why not?'

'It's part of the contract they make you sign. Anyway, they tell you how it works when they interview you.'

'You signed a *contract?'*

McCann nodded.

'And on the basis of that -'

'Yep.' He smiled at Morrison, who thought: Well, it's happened. Jim McCann has joined the smug bastards.

'Why the great secrecy if this outfit is so fantastic? How come I've never seen any spots on TV, billboards, magazine ads -'

'They get all the clients they can handle by word of mouth.'

'You're an advertising man, Jimmy. You can't believe that.'

'I do,' McCann said. 'They have a ninety-eight per cent cure rate.'

'Wait a second,' Morrison said. He motioned for another drink and lit a cigarette. 'Do these guys strap you down and make you smoke until you throw up?'

'No.'

'Give you something so that you get sick every time you light -'

'No, it's nothing like that. Go and see for yourself.' He gestured at Morrison's cigarette. 'You don't really like that, do you?'

'Nooo, but -'

'Stopping really changed things for me,' McCann said. 'I don't suppose it's the same for everyone, but with me it was just like dominoes falling over. I felt better and my relationship with Sharon improved. I had more energy, and my job performance picked up.'

'Look, you've got my curiosity aroused. Can't you just -' 'I'm sorry, Dick. I really can't talk about it.' His voice was firm.

'Did you put on any weight?'

For a moment he thought Jimmy McCann looked almost grim. 'Yes. A little too much, in fact. But I took it off again. I'm about right now. I was skinny before.'

'Flight 206 now boarding at Gate 9,' the loudspeaker announced.

'That's me,' McCann said, getting up. He tossed a five on the bar. 'Have another, if you like. And think about what I said, Dick. Really.' And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the escalators. Morrison picked up the card, looked at it thoughtfully, then tucked it away in his wallet and forgot it.

The card fell out of his wallet and on to another bar a month later. He had left the office early and had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it - 237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks over; it was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe, just for chuckles -When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison's yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor, and that spelled money. Lots of it.

He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the chairs along the walls, reading magazines. Business types, all of them. Morrison went to the desk.

'A friend gave me this,' he said, passing the card to the receptionist. 'I guess you'd say he's an alumnus.'

She smiled and rolled a form into her typewriter. 'What is your name, sir?'

'Richard Morrison.'

Clack-clackety-clack. But very muted clacks; the typewriter was an IBM.

'Your address?'

'Twenty-nine Maple Lane, Clinton, New York.'

'Married?'

'Yes.'

'Children?'

'One.' He thought of Alvin and frowned slightly. 'One' was the wrong word. 'A half' might be better. His son was mentally retarded and lived at a special school in New Jersey.

'Who recommended us to you, Mr Morrison?'

'An old school friend. James McCann.'

'Very good. Will you have a seat? It's been a very busy day.'

'All right.'

He sat between the woman, who was wearing a severe blue suit, and a young executive type wearing a herring-bone jacket and modish sideburns. He took out his pack of cigarettes, looked around, and saw there were no ashtrays.

He put the pack away again. That was all right. He would see this little game through and then light up while he was leaving. He might even tap some ashes on their maroon shag rug if they made him wait long enough. He picked up a copy of *Time* and began to leaf through it.

He was called a quarter of an hour later, after the woman in the blue suit. His nicotine centre was speaking quite loudly now. A man who had come in after him took out a cigarette case, snapped it open, saw there were no ashtrays, and put it away looking a little guilty, Morrison thought. It made him feel better.

At last the receptionist gave him a sunny smile and said, 'Go right in, Mr Morrison.'

Morrison walked through the door beyond her desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavy-set man with white hair that looked phoney shook his hand, smiled affably, and said, 'Follow me, Mr Morrison.'

He led Morrison past a number of closed, unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with drilled white cork panels. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk, but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison's left -a tall man with iron-grey hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

'I'm Vic Donatti,' the heavy-set man said. 'If you decide to go ahead with our programme, I'll be in charge of your case.'

'Pleased to know you,' Morrison said. He wanted a cigarette very badly.

'Have a seat.'

Donatti put the receptionist's form on the desk, and then drew another form from the desk drawer. He looked directly into Morrison's eyes. 'Do you want to quit smoking?'

Morrison cleared his throat, crossed his legs, and tried to think of a way to equivocate. He couldn't. 'Yes,' he said.

'Will you sign this?' He gave Morrison the form. He scanned it quickly. The undersigned agrees not to divulge the methods or techniques or et cetera, et cetera.

'Sure,' he said, and Donatti put a pen in his hand. He scratched his name, and Donatti signed below it. A moment later the paper disappeared back into the desk drawer. Well, he thought ironically, I've taken the pledge.

He had taken it before. Once it had lasted for two whole days.

'Good,' Donatti said. 'We don't bother with propaganda here, Mr Morrison. Questions of health or expense or social grace. We have no interest in why you want to stop smoking. We are pragmatists.'

'Good,' Morrison said blankly.

'We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you. We recommend no special diet. And we accept no payment until you have stopped smoking for one year.'

'My God,' Morrison said.

'Mr McCann didn't tell you that?'

'No.'

'How is Mr McCann, by the way? Is he well?'

'He's fine.'

'Wonderful. Excellent. Now . . . just a few questions, Mr Morrison. These are somewhat personal, but I assure you that your answers will be held in strictest confidence.'

'Yes?' Morrison asked noncommittally.

'What is your wife's name?'

'Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey.'

'Do you love her?'

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatti was looking at him blandly. 'Yes, of course,' he said.

'Have you ever had marital problems? A separation, perhaps?'

'What has that got to do with kicking the habit?' Morrison asked. He sounded a little angrier than he had intended, but he wanted - hell, he *needed* - a cigarette.

'A great deal,' Donatti said. 'Just bear with me.'

'No. Nothing like that.' Although things *had* been a little tense just lately.

'You just have the one child?'

'Yes. Alvin. He's in a private school.'

'And which school is it?'

'That,' Morrison said grimly, 'I'm not going to tell you.'

'All right,' Donatti said agreeably. He smiled disarmingly at Morrison. 'All your q~estions will be answered tomorrow at your first treatment.'

'How nice,' Morrison said, and stood.

'One final question,' Donatti said. 'You haven't had a cigarette for over an hour. How do you feel?'

'Fine,' Morrison lied. 'Just fine.'

'Good for you!' Donatti exclaimed. He stepped around the desk and opened the door. 'Enjoy them tonight. After tomorrow, you'll never smoke again.'

'Is that right?'

'Mr Morrison,' Donatti said solemnly, 'we guarantee it.'

He was sitting in the outer office of Quitters, Inc. ,the next day promptly at three. He had spent most of the day swinging between skipping the appointment the receptionist had made for him on the way out and going in a spirit of mulish co-operation - *Throw your best pitch at me, buster.*

In the end, something Jimmy McCann had said convinced him to keep the appointment - *It changed my whole fife.* God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity. Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down to the filter. Too damn bad if it's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

The wait in the outer office was shorter this time. When the receptionist told him to go in, Donatti was waiting. He offered his hand and smiled, and to Morrison the smile looked almost predatory. He began to feel a little tense, and that made him wa~t a cigarette.

'Come with me,' Donatti said, and led the way down to the small room. He sat behind the desk again, and Morrison took the other chair.

'I'm very glad you came,' Donatti said. 'A great many prospective clients never show up again after the initial interview. They discover they don't want to quit as badly as they thought. It's going to be a pleasure to work with you on this.'

'When does the treatment start?' Hypnosis, he was thinking. It must be hypnosis.

'Oh, it already has. It started when we shook hands in the hall. Do you have cigarettes with you, Mr Morrison?'

'Yes.'

'May I have them, please?'

Shrugging, Morrison handed Donatti his pack. There were only two or three left in it, anyway.

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes, which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Tobacco crumbs spilled. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained on his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

At last Donatti ceased pounding. He picked up the pack, a twisted and battered ruin. 'You wouldn't believe the pleasure that gives me,' he said, and dropped the pack into the wastebasket. 'Even after three years in the business, it still pleases me.'

'As a treatment, it leaves something to be desired. Morrison said mildly. 'There's a news-stand in the lobby of this very building. And they sell all brands.'

'As you say,' Donatti said. He folded his hands. 'Your son, Alvin Dawes Morrison, is in the Paterson School for Handicapped Children. Born with cranial brain damage. Tested IQ of 46. Not quite in the educable retarded category. Your wife -,

'How did you find that out?' Morrison barked. He was startled and angry. 'You've got no goddamn right to go poking around my -'

'We know a lot about you,' Donatti said smoothly. 'But, as I said, it will all be held in strictest confidence.'

'I'm getting out of here,' Morrison said thinly. He stood up.

'Stay a bit longer.'

Morrison looked at him closely. Donatti wasn't upset. In fact, he looked a little amused. The face of a man who has seen this reaction scores of times - maybe hundreds.

'All right. But it better be good.'

'Oh, it is.' Donatti leaned back. 'I told you we were pragmatists here. As pragmatists, we have to start by realizing how difficult it is to cure an addiction to tobacco. The relapse rate is almost eight-five per cent. The relapse rate for heroin addicts is lower than that. It is an extraordinary problem. *Extraordinary.'*

Morrison glanced into the wastebasket. One of the cigarettes, although twisted, still looked smokeable.

Donatti laughed good-naturedly, reached into the wastebasket, and broke it between his fingers.

'State legislatures sometimes hear a request that the prison systems do away with the weekly cigarette ration. Such proposals are invariably defeated. In a few cases where they have passed, there have been fierce prison riots. *Riots,* Mr Morrison. Imagine it.'

'I,' Morrison said, 'am not surprised.'

'But consider the implications. When you put a man in prison you take away any normal sex life, you take away his liquor, his politics, his freedom of movement. No riots - or few in comparison to the number of prisons. But when you take away his *cigarettes* - wham! bam!' He slammed his fist on the desk for emphasis.

'During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr Morrison.'

'Could we get to the treatment?'

'Momentarily. Step over here, please.' Donatti had risen and was standing by the green curtains Morrison had noticed yesterday. Donatti drew the curtains, discovering a rectangular window that looked into a bare room. No, not quite bare. There was a rabbit on the floor, eating pellets out of a dish.

'Pretty bunny,' Morrison commented.

'Indeed. Watch him.' Donatti pressed a button by the window-sill. The rabbit stopped eating and began to hop about crazily. It seemed to leap higher each time its feet struck the floor. Its fur stood out spikily in all directions. Its eyes were wild.

'Stop that! You're electrocuting him!'

Donatti released the button. 'Far from it. There's a very low-yield charge in the floor. Watch the rabbit, Mr Morrison!'

The rabbit was crouched about ten feet away from the dish of pellets. His nose wriggled. All at once he hopped away into a corner.

'If the rabbit gets a jolt often enough while he's eating,' Donatti said, 'he makes the association very quickly. Eating causes pain. Therefore, he won't eat. A few more shocks, and the rabbit will starve to death in front of his food. It's called aversion training.'

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

'No, thanks.' He started for the door.

'Wait, please, Morrison.'

Morrison didn't pause. He grasped the doorknob . and felt it slip solidly through his hand. 'Unlock this.'

'Mr Morrison, if you'll just sit down -'

'Unlock this door or I'll have the cops on you before you can say Marlboro Man.'

'Sit down.' The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

Morrison looked at Donatti. His brown eyes were muddy and frightening. My God, he thought, I'm locked in here with a psycho. He licked his lips. He wanted a cigarette more than he ever had in his life.

'Let me explain the treatment in more detail,' Donatti said.

'You don't understand,' Morrison said with counterfeit patience. 'I don't want the treatment. I've decided against it.'

'No, Mr Morrison. *You're* the one who doesn't understand. You don't have any choice. When I told you the treatment had already begun, I was speaking the literal truth. I would have thought you'd tipped to that by now.'

'You're crazy,' Morrison said wonderingly.

'No. Only a pragmatist. Let me tell you all about the treatment.'

'Sure,' Morrison said. 'As long as you understand that as soon as I get out of here I'm going to buy five packs of cigarettes and smoke them all on the way to the police station.' He suddenly realized he was biting his thumb-nail, sucking on it, and made himself stop.

'As you wish. But I think you'll change your mind when you see the whole picture.'

Morrison said nothing. He sat down again and folded his hands.

'For the first month of the treatment, our operatives will have you under constant supervision,' Donatti said. 'You'll be able to spot some of them. Not all. But they'll always be with you. *Always.* If they see you smoke a cigarette, I get a call.'

'And I suppose you bring me here and do the old rabbit trick,' Morrison said. He tried to sound cold and sarcastic, but he suddenly felt horribly frightened. This was a nightmare.

'Oh, no,' Donatti said. 'Your wife gets the rabbit trick, not you.'

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

Donatti smiled. 'You,' he said, 'get to watch.'

After Donatti let him out, Morrison walked for over two hours in a complete daze. It was another fine day, but he didn't notice. The monstrousness of Donatti's smiling face blotted out all else.

'You see,' he had said, 'a pragmatic problem demands pragmatic solutions. You must realize we have your best interests at heart.

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatti, was a sort of foundation - a non-profit organization begun by the man in the wall portrait. The gentleman had been extremely successful in several family businesses - including slot machines, massage parlours, numbers, and a brisk (although clandestine) trade between New York and Turkey. Mort 'Three-Fingers' Minelli had been a heavy smoker - up in the three-pack-a-day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor's diagnosis: lung cancer. Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

'We try to keep as close to breaking even as possible,' Donatti had said. 'But we're more interested in helping our fellow man. And of course, it's a great tax angle.'

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offence and Cindy would be brought to what Donatti called 'the rabbit room'. A second offence, and Morrison would get the dose. On a third offence, both of them would be brought in together. A fourth offence would show grave co-operation problems and would require sterner measures. An operative would be sent to Alvin's school to work the boy over.

'Imagine,' Donatti said, smiling, 'how horrible it will be for the boy. He wouldn't understand it even jf someone explained. He'll only know someone is hurting him because Daddy was bad. He'll be very frightened.'

'You bastard,' Morrison said helplessly. He felt close to tears. 'You dirty, filthy bastard.'

'Don't misunderstand,' Donatti said. He was smiling sympathetically. 'I'm sure it won't happen. Forty per cent of our clients never have to be disciplined at all - and only ten per cent have more than three falls from grace. Those are reassuring figures, aren't they?'

Morrison didn't find them reassuring. He found them terrifying.

'Of course, if you transgress *a fifth* time -'

'What do you mean?'

Donatti beamed. 'The room for you and your wife, a second beating for your son, and a beating for your wife.'

Morrison, driven beyond the point of rational consideration, lunged over the desk at Donatti. Donatti moved with amazing speed for a man who had apparently been completely relaxed. He shoved the chair backwards and drove both of his feet over the desk and into Morrison's belly. Gagging and coughing, Morrison staggered backward.

'Sit down, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said benignly. 'Let's talk this over like rational men.'

When he could get his breath, Morrison did as he was told. Nightmares had to end some time, didn't they?

Quitters, Inc., Donatti had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven, and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings. The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

'And the tenth?' Morrison asked, his mouth dry.

Donatti shook his head sadly. 'Then we give up, Mr Morrison. You become part of the unregenerate two per cent.'

'You really give up?'

'In a manner of speaking.' He opened one of the desk drawers and laid a silenced .45 on the desk. He smiled into Morrison's eyes. 'But even the unregenerate two per cent never smoke again. We guarantee it.'

The Friday Night Movie was *Bullitt,* one of Cindy's favourites, but after an hour of Morrison's mutterings and fidgetings, her concentration was broken.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked during station identification.

'Nothing . . . everything,' he growled. 'I'm giving up smoking.'

She laughed. 'Since when? Five minutes ago?'

'Since three o'clock this afternoon.'

'You really haven't had a cigarette since then?'

'No,' he said, and began to gnaw his thumb-nail. It was ragged, down to the quick.

'That's wonderful! What ever made you decide to quit?'

'You,' he said. 'And. . . and Alvin.'

Her eyes widened, and when the movie came back on, she didn't notice. Dick rarely mentioned their retarded son. She came over, looked at the empty ashtray by his right hand, and then into his eyes: 'Are you really trying to quit, Dick?'

'Really.' And if I go to the cops, he added mentally, the local goon squad will be around to rearrange your face, Cindy.

'I'm glad. Even if you don't make it, we both thank you for the thought, Dick.'

'Oh, I think I'll make it,' he said, thinking of the muddy, homicidal look that had come into Donatti's eyes when he kicked him in the stomach.

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house. No windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and licked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month, Donatti had said. Eighteen hours a day during the next two - but he would never know *which* eighteen. During the fourth month, the month when most clients backslid, the 'service' would return to twenty-four hours a day. Then twelve hours of broken surveillance each day for the rest of the year. After that? Random surveillance for the rest of the client's life.

For the rest of his life.

'We may audit you every other month,' Donatti said. 'Or every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, *you won't know.* If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice. Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke, it'll taste awful. It will taste like your son's blood.'

But they couldn't be watching now, in the dead of night, in his own study. The house was grave-quiet.

He looked at the cigarettes in the box for almost two minutes, unable to tear his gaze away. Then he went to the study door, peered out into the empty hall, and went back to look at the cigarettes some more. A horrible picture came: his life stretching before him and not a cigarette to be found. How in the name of God was he ever going to be able to make another tough presentation to a wary client, without that cigarette burning nonchalantly between his fingers as he approached the charts and layouts? How would he be able to endure Cindy's endless garden shows without a cigarette? How could he even get up in the morning and face the day without a cigarette to smoke as he drank his coffee and read the paper?

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Donatti. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann. How could he have done it? The son of a bitch had *known.* His hands trembled in their desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette. He caressed it, fondled it. What was that old slogan? *So round, so firm, so fully packed.* Truer words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

27

Had there been the slightest noise from the closet? A faint shifting? Surely not. But -Another mental image - that rabbit hopping crazily in the grip of electricity. The thought of Cindy in that room -He listened desperately and heard nothing. He told himself that all he had to do was go to the closet door and yank it open. But he was too afraid of what he might find. He went back to bed but didn't sleep for a long time.

In spite of how lousy he felt in the morning, breakfast tasted good. After a moment's hesitation, he followed his customary bowl of cornflakes with scrambled eggs. He was grumpily washing out the pan when Cindy came downstairs in her robe.

'Richard Morrison! You haven't eaten an egg for break-fast since Hector was a pup.

Morrison grunted. He considered *since Hector was a pup* to be one of Cindy's stupider sayings, on a par with *I should smile and kiss a pig.*

'Have you smoked yet?' she asked, pouring orange juice.

'No.'

'You'll be back on them by noon,' she proclaimed airily. 'Lot of goddamn help you are!' he rasped, rounding on her. 'You and anyone else who doesn't smoke, you all think ah, never mind.'

He expected her to be angry, but she was looking at him F with something like wonder. 'You're really serious,' she said. 'You really are.'

'You bet I am.' *You'll never know* how *serious. I hope.*

'Poor baby,' she said, going to him. 'You look like death warmed over. But I'm very proud.'

Morrison held her tightly.

Scenes from the life of Richard Morrison, October-November:

Morrison and a crony from Larkin Studios at Jack Dempsey's bar. Crony offers a cigarette. Morrison grips his glass a little more tightly and says: *I'm quitting.* Crony laughs and says: *I give you a week.*

Morrison waiting for the morning train, looking over the top of the *Times* at a young man in a blue suit. He sees the young man almost every morning now, and sometimes at other places. At Onde's, where he is meeting a client. Looking at 45s in Sam Goody's, where Morrison is looking for a Sam Cooke album. Once in a foursome behind Morrison's group at the local golf course.

Morrison getting drunk at a party, wanting a cigarette -but not quite drunk enough to take one.

Morrison visiting his son, bringing him a large ball that squeaked when you squeezed it. His son's slobbering, delighted kiss. Somehow not as repulsive as before. Hugging his son tightly, realizing what Donatti and his colleagues had so cynically realized before him: love is the most pernicious drug of all. Let the romantics debate its existence. Pragmatists accept it and use it.

Morrison losing the physical compulsion to smoke little by little, but never quite losing the psychological craving, or the need to have something in his mouth - cough drops, Life Savers, a tooth-pick. Poor substitutes, all of them.

And finally, Morrison hung up in a colossal traffic jam in the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horns blaring. Air stinking. Traffic hopelessly snarled. And suddenly, thumbing open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment, then snatched one and lit it with the dashboard lighter. If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself defiantly. I told her to get rid of all the damn cigarettes.

The first drag made him cough smoke out furiously. The second made his eyes water. The third made him feel light-headed and swoony. It tastes awful, he thought.

And on the heels of that: My God, what am I doing?

Horns blatted impatiently behind him. Ahead, the traffic had begun to move again. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray, opened both front windows, opened the vents, and then fanned the air helplessly like a kid who has just flushed his first butt down the john.

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and. drove home.

'Cindy?' he called. 'I'm home.' No answer.

'Cindy? Where are you, hon?'

The phone rang, and he pounced on it. 'Hello? Cindy?'

'Hello, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said. He sounded pleasantly brisk and businesslike. 'It seems we have a small business matter to attend to. Would five o'clock be convenient?'

'Have you got my wife?'

'Yes, indeed.' Donatti chuckled indulgently.

'Look, let her go,' Morrison babbled. 'It won't happen again. It was a slip, just a slip, that's all. I only had three drags and for God's sake *it didn't even taste good!'*

'That's a shame. I'll count on you for five then, shall I?'

'Please,' Morrison said, close to tears. 'Please -He was speaking to a dead line.

At *5p.m.* the reception room was empty except for the secretary, who gave him a twinkly smile that ignored Morrison's pallor and dishevelled appearance. 'Mr Donatti?' she said into the intercom. 'Mr Morrison to see you.' She nodded to Morrison. 'Go right in.'

Donatti was waiting outside the unmarked room with a man who was wearing a **SMILE** sweatshirt and carrying a .38. He was built like an ape.

'Listen,' Morrison said to Donatti. 'We can work something out, can't we? I'll pay you. I'll-'

'Shaddap,' the man in the SMILE sweatshirt said.

'It's good to see you,' Donatti said. 'Sorry it has to be under such adverse circumstances. Will you come with me? We'll make this as brief as possible. I can assure you your wife won't be hurt. . . this time.'

Morrison tensed himself to leap at Donatti.

'Come, come,' Donatti said, looking annoyed. 'If you do that, Junk here is going to pistol-whip you and your wife is still going to get it. Now where's the percentage in that?'

'I hope you rot in hell,' he told Donatti.

Donatti sighed. 'If I had a nickel for every time someone expressed a similar sentiment, I could retire. Let it be a lesson to you, Mr Morrison. When a romantic tries to do a good thing and fails, they give him a medal. When a pragmatist succeeds, they wish him in hell. Shall we go?'

Junk motioned with the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb.

The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

He looked in. Cindy was there, looking around bewilderedly.

'Cindy!' Morrison called miserably. 'Cindy, they -'

'She can't hear or see you,' Donatti said. 'One-way glass. Well, let's get it over with. It really was a very small slip. I believe thirty

seconds should be enough. Junk?'

Junk pressed the button with one hand and kept the pistol jammed firmly into Morrison's back with the other.

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

When it was over, Donatti put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and said, 'Are you going to throw up?'

'No,' Morrison said weakly. His forehead was against the glass. His legs were jelly. 'I don't think so.' He turned around and saw that Junk was gone.

'Come with me,' Donatti said.

'Where?' Morrison asked apathetically.

'I think you have a few things to explain, don't you?'

'How can I face her? How can I tell her that I. . .I . . 'I think you're going to be surprised,' Donatti said.

The room was empty except for a sofa. Cindy was on it, sobbing helplessly.

'Cindy?' he said gently.

She looked up, her eyes magnified by tears. 'Dick?' she whispered. 'Dick? Oh . . . Oh God . . .' He held her tightly. 'Two men,' she said against his chest. 'In the house and at first I thought they were burglars and then I thought they were going to rape me and then they took me someplace with a blindfold over my eyes and. . . and. . . oh it was *h-horrible -'*

'Shhh,' he said. 'Shhh.'

'But why?' she asked, looking up at him. 'Why would they -'

'Because of me,' he said 'I have to tell you a story, Cindy -'

When he had finished he was silent a moment and then said, 'I suppose you hate me. I wouldn't blame you.'

He was looking at the floor, and she took his face in both hands and turned it to hers. 'No,' she said. 'I don't hate you.'

He looked at her in mute surprise.

'It was worth it,' she said. 'God bless these people. They've let you out of prison.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Yes,' she said, and kissed him. 'Can we go home now? I feel much better. Ever so much.'

The phone rang one evening a week later, and when Morrison recognized Donatti's voice, he said, 'Your boys have got it wrong. I haven't even been near a cigarette.'

'We know that. We have a final matter to talk over. Can you stop by tomorrow afternoon?'

'Is it -,

'No, nothing serious. Book-keeping really. By the way, congratulations on your promotion.'

'How did you know about that?'

'We're keeping tabs,' Donatti said noncommittally, and hungup.

30

When they entered the small room, Donatti said, 'Don't look so nervous. No one's going to bite you. Step over here, please.'

Morrison saw an ordinary bathroom scale. 'Listen, I've gained a little weight, but -'

'Yes, seventy-three per cent of our clients do. Step up, please.'

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one seventy-four.

'Okay, fine. You can step off. How tall are you, Mr Morrison?'

'Five-eleven.'

'Okay, let's see.' He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. 'Well, that's not too bad. I'm going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. Use them sparingly and according to directions. And I'm going to set your maximum weight at. . . let's see . .

He consulted the card again. 'One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I'll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can't make it, as long as you call in advance.'

'And what happens if I go over one-eighty-two?'

Donatti smiled. 'We'll send someone out to your house to cut off your wife's little finger,' he said. 'You can leave through this door, Mr Morrison. Have a nice day.'

Eight months later:

Morrison runs into the crony from the Larkin Studios at Dempsey's bar. Morrison is down to what Cindy proudly calls his fighting weight: one sixty-seven. He works out three times a week and looks as fit as whipcord. The crony from Larkin, by comparison, looks like something the cat dragged in.

Crony: Lord, how'd you ever stop? I'm locked into this damn habit tighter than Tillie. The crony stubs his cigarette out with real revulsion and drains his scotch.

Morrison looks at him speculatively and then takes a small white business card out of his wallet. He puts it on the bar between them. You know, he says, these guys changed my life.

Twelve months later:

Morrison receives a bill in the mail. The bill says:

QUITTERS ,INC.

237 East 46th Street

New York, N.Y. 10017

1 Treatment $2500.00

Counsellor (Victor Donatti) $2500.00

Electricity $ .50

TOTAL (Please pay this amount) $5000.50

Those sons of bitches! he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to. . . to

Just pay it, she says, and kisses him.

31

Twenty months later:

Quite by accident, Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Introductions are made all around. Jimmy looks as good, if not better than he did on that day in the airport terminal so long ago. Morrison has never met his wife. She is pretty in the radiant way plain girls sometimes have when they are very, very happy.

She offers her hand and Morrison shakes it. There is something odd about her grip, and halfway through the second act, he realizes what it was. The little finger on her right hand is missing.

THE BOOGEYMAN

'I came to you because I want to tell my story,' the man on Dr Harper's couch was saying. The man was Lester Billings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

'I can't go to a priest because I'm not a Catholic. I can't go to a lawyer because I haven't done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all.'

Dr Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Billings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpselike on his chest. His face was carefully set.. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

'Do you mean you actually killed them, or -'

'No.' Impatient flick of the hand. 'But I was responsible. Denny in 1967. Shirl in 1971. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it.'

Dr Harper said nothing. He thought that Billings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whisky.

'They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right.'

'Why is that?'

'Because

Billings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. 'What's that?' he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

'What's what?'

'That door.'

'The closet,' Dr Harper said. 'Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes.'

'Open it. I want to see.'

Dr Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside, a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny goloshes. The New York *Times* had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

'All right?' Dr Harper said.

'All right.' Billings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

'You were saying,' Dr Harper said as he went back to his chair, 'that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?'

'I'd go to jail,' Billings said immediately. 'For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms.' He smiled at nothing.

'How were your children murdered?'

'Don't try to jerk it out of me!'

Billings twitched around and stared balefully at Harper.

'I'll tell you, don't worry. I'm not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn't love me. I know you won't believe me. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Just to tell will be enough.'

'All right.' Dr Harper got out his pipe.

'I married Rita in 1965 - I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denny.' His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a wink. 'I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn't mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy.

'Rita got pregnant just a little while after Denny was born, and Shirl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1969, and Denny was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That's what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth-control stuff doesn't work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children tie a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than they. Don't you find that's true?'

Harper grunted non-commitally.

'It doesn't matter, though. I loved him anyway.' He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child to spite his wife.

'Who killed the children?' Harper asked.

'The boogeyman,' Lester Billings answered immediately. 'The boogeyman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them.' He twisted around and grinned. 'You think I'm crazy, all right. It's written all over you. But I don't care. All I want to do is tell you and then get lost.'

'I'm listening,' Harper said.

'It started when Denny was almost two and Shirl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two-bedroom place, see. Shirl slept in a crib in our room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn't have a bottle to take to bed any more. Rita said don't make an issue of it, let it go, let him have it and he'll drop it on his own. But that's the way kids start off bad. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be sissies. Can you imagine waking up some morning and finding your kid - your *son* - is a sissy?

'After a while, though, when he didn't stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn't stop crying I'd give him a whack. Then Rita said he was saying "light" over and over again. Well, I didn't know. Kids that little, how can you tell what they're saying. Only a mother can tell.

'Rita wanted to put in a nightlight. One of those wall-

plug things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on it. I wouldn't let her. If a kid doesn't get over being afraid of the dark when he's little, he never gets over it.

'Anyway, he died the summer after Shirl was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. "Boogeyman," the kid says. "Boogeyman, Daddy."

'I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap her around a little, but I didn't. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

'That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shirl would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and sniffle. I tell you, sometimes I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

'Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I'd check on Denny. I told her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

'I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had. . . had sunk. Back of the legs, the head, the a-the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy, like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantel. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful, I loved that kid.'

Billings shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. 'Rita was screaming her head off.

She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that -'

'Did you know it was the boogeyman then?' Harper asked quietly.

'Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away.'

'What was that?'

'The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut, see. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. 3 A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?'

'Yes. What happened then?'

Billings shrugged. 'We planted him.' He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

'Was there an inquest?'

'Sure.' Billings's eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance.

'So me back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. Crib death, he called it! You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old!'

'Crib death is most common during the first year,' Harper said carefully, 'but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better -'

Bulishit!' Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

We moved Shirl into Denny's old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus, I loved having the kid in with us. But you can't get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse. "Don't go out so far! Don't go there! It's got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago! Don't go over your head!" Even to watch out for sharks, before God. So what happens? I can't even go near the water now. It's the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can't overprotect kids. And you can't coddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny's crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump, though. I didn't want my girl to get any germs.

'So a year goes by. And one night when I'm putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. "Boogeyman, Daddy, boogeyman, boogeyman!"

'That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door, open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.'

'Did you?'

'No.' Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. 'How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I *had* to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish. . . look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren't married.'

Harper said, 'On the other hand, look how easily *you* went to bed with *her.'*

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. 'Are you trying to be a wise guy?'

'No, indeed,' Harper said.

'Then let me tell it my way,' Billings snapped. 'I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life, if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life, with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that, but I'm not one of them.'

'Okay,' Harper said.

'Okay,' Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought, and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

'Would you like that open?' Harper asked.

'No!' Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh. 'What do I want to look at your overshoes for?

'The boogeyman got her, too,' Billings said. He brushed at his forehead, as if sketching memories. 'A month later. But something happened before that. I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick - the hall light was on - and. . . she was sitting up in the crib crying and. . . something *moved.* Back in the shadows, by the closet. Something *slithered.'*

'Was the closet door open?'

'A little. Just a crack.' Billings licked his lips. 'Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like "claws". Only she said "craws", you know. Little kids have trouble with that "I" sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling.'

'Crawset?' Harper said.

'Huh?'

'Crawset . . . closet. Maybe she was trying to say "closet".'

'Maybe,' Billings said. 'Maybe that was it. But I don't think so.I think it was "claws".' His eyes began seeking the closet door again. 'Claws, long claws.' His voice had sunk to a whisper.

'Did you look in the closet?'

'Y-yes.' Billings's hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

'Was there anything in there? Did you see the -'

'I didn't see anything!' Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out, as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul: 'When she died I found her, see. And she was black. All black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes, they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals, all shiny and awful, like live marbles, and they were saying it got me, Daddy, you let it get me, you killed me, you helped it kill me . .

His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent, ran down the side of his cheek.

'It was a brain convulsion, see? Kids get those sometimes. A bad signal from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone, and I know a kid don't just get convulsions because their brain frigged up. You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where *it* was.'

He whispered, 'I slept on the couch. With the light on.,

'Did anything happen?'

'I had a dream,' Billings said. 'I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn't . . . couldn't quite see, in the closet. It made a noise. . . a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. *Tales from the Crypt,* you remember that? Christ! They had a guy named Graham Ingles; he could draw every god-awful thing in the world - and some out of it. Anyway, in this story this woman drowned her husband, see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. 'He was all rotted and black-green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night, I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws. . . long claws .

Dr Harper looked at the digital clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said, 'When your wife came back home, what was her attitude towards you?'

'She still loved me,' Billings said with pride. 'She still wanted to do what I told her. That's the wife's place, right? This women's lib only makes sick people. The most important thing in life is for a person to know his place. His. his.. .uh.

'Station in life?'

'That's it!' Billings snapped his fingers. 'That's it exactly. And a wife should follow her husband. Oh, she was sort of colourless the first four or five months after - dragged around the house, didn't sing, didn't watch the TV, didn't laugh. I knew she'd get over it. When they're that little, you don't get so attached to them. After a while you have to go to the bureau drawer and look at a picture to even remember exactly what they looked like.

'She wanted another baby,' he added darkly. 'I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not for ever, but for a while. I told her it was a time for us to get over things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted to go to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You couldn't go into town to see the Mets unless her folks would take the kids, because my mom wouldn't have anything to do with us. Denny was born too soon after we were married, see? She said Rita was just a tramp, a common little corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn't that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a cor. . . to a prostitute. How your pri. . . your penis has just a little tiny sore on it one day and the next day it's rotting right off. She wouldn't even come to the wed-ding.'

Billings drummed his chest with his fingers.

'Rita's gynaecologist sold heron this thing called an IUD - interuterine device. Foolproof, the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman's . . . her place, and that's it. If there's anything in there, the egg can't fertilize. You don't even know it's there.' He smiled at the ceiling with dark sweetness. 'No one knows if it's there or not. And next year she's pregnant again. Some foolproof.'

'No birth-control method is perfect,' Harper said. 'The pill is only ninety-eight per cent. The IUD may be ejected by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and, in exceptional cases, by evacuation.'

'Yeah. Or you can take it out.'

'That's possible.'

'So what's next? She's knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been God's will. *Piss.'*

'The baby came at the end of the year after Shirl's death?'

'That's right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Billings. I didn't want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I'd been through a lot.

'But I warmed up to him, you know it? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me, for one thing. Denny looked like his mother, and Shirl didn't look like anybody, except maybe my Grammy Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

'I'd get to playing around with him in his playpen when I got home from work. He'd grab only my finger and smile and gurgle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his old dad. You believe that?'

'Then one night, here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid's crib. Me! Kids don't appreciate presents until they're old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and all at once I realize I love him the most of all. I had another job by then, a pretty good one, selling drill bits for Cluett and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one, we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

'And too many closets.

'That next year was the best one for us. I'd give every finger on my right hand to have it back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a quiet street with nice neighbours. We were happy,' he summed up simply. 'I asked Rita once if she wasn't worried. You know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said not for us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.'

Billings looked morbidly at the ceiling.

'Last year wasn't so good. Something about the house changed. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn't like to open the closet door any more. I kept thinking: Well, what if it's in there? All crouched down and ready to spring the second I open the door? And I'd started thinking I could hear squishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

'Rita asked me if I was working too hard, and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to rny stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me, I was glad to get out. I started to think, see, that it lost us for a while when we moved. It had to hunt around, slinking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Smelling for us. It took a year, but it found us. It's back. It wants Andy and it wants me. I started to think, maybe if you think of a thing long enough, and believe in it, it gets real. Maybe all the monsters we were scared of when we were kids, Frankenstein and Wolfman and Mummy, maybe they were real. Real enough to kill the kids that were supposed to have fallen into gravel pits or drowned in lakes or were just never found. Maybe . .

'Are you backing away from something, Mr Billings?'

Billings was silent for a long time - two minutes clicked off the digital clock. Then he said abruptly: 'Andy died in February. Rita wasn't there. She got a call from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year's and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back that night.

'Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time - two months. I had a very good woman who stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.'

Billings licked his lips. 'The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny, too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks claims it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to, after Denny and Shirl.'

'But you did move him, didn't you?' Dr Harper asked.

'Yeah,' Billings said. He smiled a sick, yellow smile. 'I did.'

Silence again. Billings wrestled with it.

'I had to!' he barked finally. 'I had to! It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get bolder. It started . . .' He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. 'Oh, you won't believe it. I know what you think, just another goofy for your casebook, I know that, but you weren't there, you lousy smug head-peeper.

'One night every door in the house blew wide open. One morning I got up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coat closet and the front door. Was it going out? Coming in? I don't know! Before Jesus, I just don't know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken . . . and the sounds . . . the sounds...

He ran a hand through his hair. 'You'd wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you'd say, "It's only the clock." But underneath it you could hear something moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy, because it wanted you to hear it. A slimy sliding sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound, like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase banister. And you'd close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it. .

'And always you'd be afraid that the noises might stop for a little while, and then there would be a laugh right over your face and breath of air like stale cabbage on your face, and then hands on your throat.'

Billings was pallid and trembling.

'So I moved him. I knew it would go for him, see. Because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of the night and finally, when I got up the cojones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. "The boogeyman, Daddy. . . boogeyman.

wanna go wif Daddy, go wif Daddy."' Billings's voice had become a high treble, like a child's. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face; he almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

'But I couldn't,' the childish breaking treble continued, 'I couldn't. And an hour later there was a scream. An awful gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran, in, I didn't even turn on the light, I ran, ran, *ran,* oh, Jesus God Mary, it had him; it was shaking him, shaking him just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a

scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard . .

He trailed off, and then his voice clicked back into an adult range. 'I heard it when Andy's neck broke.' Billings's voice was cool and dead. 'It made a sound like ice cracking when you're skating on a country pond in winter.'

'Then what happened?'

'Oh, I ran,' Billings said in the same cool, dead voice. 'I went to an all-night diner. How's that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was already dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of one ear. Only a drop, really. And the closet door was open - but just a crack.'

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the digital clock. Fifty minutes had passed.

'Make an appointment with the nurse,' he said. 'In fact, several of them. Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

'I only came to tell my story,' Billings said. 'To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and. . . they swallowed it. Course they did. That's just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew. Rita. finally. . . knew .

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

'Mr Billings, there is a great deal to talk about,' Dr Harper said after a pause. 'I believe we can remove some of the guilt you've been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it.'

'Don't you believe I *do?'* Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

'Not yet,' Harper said quietly. 'Tuesdays and Thursdays?'

After a long silence, Billings muttered, 'Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.'

'Make an appointment with the nurse, Mr Billings. And have a good day.'

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly, without looking back.

The nurse's station was empty. A small sign on the desk blotter said: 'Back in a Minute.'

Billings turned and went back into the office. 'Doctor, your nurse is -,

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

'So nice,' the voice from the closet said. 'So nice.' The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

'So nice,' the boogeyman said as it shambled out. It still held its Dr Harper mask in one rotted, spade-claw hand.

39

THE LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER

I got Katrina's letter yesterday, less than a week after my father and I got back from Los Angeles. It was addressed to Wilmington, Delaware, and I'd moved twice since then. People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. Her letter was rumpled and smudged, one of the corners dog-eared from handling. I read what was in it and the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room with the phone in my h8nd, getting ready to call Dad. I put the phone down with something like horror. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Was I going to call him and tell about Katrina's letter so soon after we'd been in L.A.? To do that might very well have killed him.

So I didn't call. And I had no one I could tell. . . a thing like that letter, it's too personal to tell anyone except a wife or a very close friend. I haven't made many close friends in the last few years, and my wife Helen and I divorced in 1971. What we exchange now are Christmas cards. How are you? How's the job? Have a Happy New Year.

I've been awake all night with it, with Katrina's letter. She could have put it on a postcard. There was only a single sentence below the 'Dear Larry'. 'But a sentence can mean enough. It can do enough.

I remembered my dad on the plane, his face seeming old and wasted in the harsh sunlight at 18,000 feet as we went west from New York. We had 'just passed over Omaha, according to the pilot, and Dad said, 'It's a lot further away than it looks, Larry.' There was a heavy sadness in his voice that made me uncomfortable because I couldn't understand it. I understood it better after getting Katrina's letter.

We grew up eighty miles west of Omaha in a town called Hemingford Home - my dad, my mom, my sister Katrina, and me. I was two years older than Katrina, whom everyone called Kitty. She was a beautiful child and a beautiful woman - even at eight, the year of the incident in the barn, you could see that her cornsilk hair was never going to darken and that those eyes would always be a dark, Scandinavian blue. A look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

I guess you'd say we grew up hicks. My dad had three hundred acres of flat, rich land, and he grew feed corn and raised cattle. Everybody just called it 'the home place'. In those days all the roads were dirt except Interstate 80 and Nebraska Route 96, and a trip to town was something you waited three days for.

Nowadays I'm one of the best independent corporation lawyers in America, so they tell me - and I'd have to admit for the sake of honesty that I think they're right. A president of a large company once introduced me to his board of directors as his hired gun. I wear expensive suits and my shoe-leather is the best. I've got three assistants on full-time pay, and I can call in another dozen if [need them. But in those days I walked up a dirt road to a one-room school with books tied in a belt over my shoulder, and Katrina walked with me. Sometimes, in the spring, we went barefoot. That was in the days before you couldn't get served in a diner or shop in a market unless you were wearing shoes.

Later on, my mother died - Katrina and I were in high school up at Columbia City then - and two years after that my dad lost the place and went to work selling tractors. It was the end of the family, although that didn't seem so bad then. Dad got along in his work, bought himself a dealership, and got tapped for a management position about nine years ago. I got a football scholarship to the University of Nebraska and managed to learn something besides how to run the ball out of a slot-right formation.

And Katrina? But it's her I want to tell you about.

It happened, the barn thing, one Saturday in early November. To tell you the truth I can't pin down the actual year, but Ike was still President. Mom was at a bake fair in Columbia city, and Dad had gone over to our nearest neighbour's (and that was seven miles away) to help the man fix a hayrake. There was supposed to be a hired man on the place, but he had never showed up that day, and my dad fired him not a month later.

Dad left me a list of chores to do (and there were some for Kitty, too) and told us not to get to playing until they were all done. But that wasn't long. It was November, and by that time of the year the make-or-break time had gone past. We'd made it again that year. We wouldn't always.

I remember that day very clearly. The sky was overcast and while it wasn't cold, you could feel it *wanting* to be cold, wanting to get down to the business of frost and freeze, snow and sleet. The fields were stripped. The animals were sluggish and morose. There seemed to be funny little draughts in the house that had never been there before.

On a day like that, the only really nice place to be was the barn. It was warm, filed with a pleasant mixed aroma of hay and fur and dung, and with the mysterious chuckling, cooing sounds of the barnswallows high up in the third loft. If you cricked your neck up, you could see the white November light coming through the chinks in the roof and try to spell your name. It was a game that really only seemed agreeable on overcast autumn days.

40

There was a ladder nailed to a crossbeam high up in the third loft, a ladder that went straight down to the main barn floor. We were forbidden to climb on it because it was old and shaky. Dad had promised Mom a thousand times that he would pull it down and put up a stronger one, but something else always seemed to come up when there was time . . . helping a neighbour with his hayrake, for instance. And the hired man was just not working out.

If you climbed up that rickety ladder - there were exactly forty-three rungs, Kitty and I had counted them enough to know - you ended up on a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-littered barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow. And then you could jump off the beam and fall seventy feet straight down, with a horrible hilarious dying swoop, into a huge soft bed of lush hay. It has a sweet smell, hay does, and you'd come to rest in that smell of reborn summer with your stomach left behind you way up there in the middle of the air, and you'd feel . . . well, like Lazarus must have felt. You had taken the fall and lived to tell the tale.

It was a forbidden sport, all right. If we had been caught, my mother would have shrieked blue murder and my father would have laid on the strap, even at our advanced ages. Because of the ladder, and because if you happened to lose your balance and topple from the beam before you had edged out over the loose fathoms of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

But the temptation was just too great. When the cats are away. . . well, you know how. that one goes.

That day started like all the others, a delicious feeling of dread mixed with anticipation. We stood at the foot of the ladder, looking at each other. Kitty's colour was high, her eyes darker and more sparkling than ever.

'Dare you,' I said.

Promptly from Kitty: 'Dares go first.'

Promptly from me: 'Girls go before boys.'

'Not if it's dangerous,' she said, casting her eyes down demurely, as if everybody didn't know she was the second biggest tomboy in Hemingford. But that was how she was about it. She would go, but she wouldn't go first.

'Okay,' I said. 'Here I go.'

I was ten that year, and thin as Scratch-the-demon, about ninety pounds. Kitty was eight, and twenty pounds lighter. The ladder had always held us before, we thought it would always hold us again, which is a philosophy that gets men and nations in trouble time after time.

I could feel it that day, beginning to shimmy around a little bit in the dusty barn air as I climbed higher and higher. As always about halfway up, I entertained a vision of what would happen to me if it suddenly let go and gave up the ghost. But I kept going until I was able to clap my hands around the beam and boost myself up and look down.

Kitty's face, turned up to watch me, was a small white oval. In her faded checked shirt and blue denims, she looked like a doll. Above me still higher, in the dusty reaches of the eaves, the swallows cooed mellowly.

Again, by rote:

'Hi, down there!' I called, my voice floating down to her on motes of chaff.

'Hi, up there!'

I stood up. Swayed back and forth a little. As always, there seemed suddenly to be strange currents in the air that had not existed down below. I could hear my own heartbeat as I began to inch along with my arms held out for balance. Once, a swallow had swooped close by my head during this part of the adventure, and in drawing back I had almost lost my balance. I lived in fear of the same thing happening again.

But not this time. At last I stood above the safety of the hay. Now looking down was not so much frightening as sensual. There was a moment of anticipation. Then I stepped off into space, holding my nose for effect, and as it always did, the sudden grip of gravity, yanking me down brutally, making me plummet, made me feel like yelling:

41

Oh, I'm sorry, I made a mistake, let me back Up!

Then I hit the hay, shot into it like a projectile, its sweet and dusty smell billowing up around me, still going down, as if into heavy water, coming slowly to rest buried in the stuff. As always, I could feel a sneeze building up in my nose. And hear a frightened field mouse or two fleeing for a more serene section of the haymow. And feel, in that curious way, that I had been reborn. I remember Kitty telling me once that after diving into the hay she felt fresh and new, like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time - sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing - but since I got her letter I think about that, too.

I climbed out of the hay, sort of swimming through it, until I could climb out on to the barn floor. I had hay down my pants and down the back of my shirt. It was on my sneakers and sticking to my elbows. Hayseeds in my hair? You bet.

She was halfway up the ladder by then, her gold pigtails bouncing against her shoulderblades, climbing through a dusty shaft of light. On other days that light might have been as bright as her hair, but on this day her pigtails had no competition - they were easily the most colourful thing up there.

I remember thinking that I didn't like the way the ladder was swaying back and forth. It seemed like it had never been so loosey-goosey.

Then she was on the beam, high above me - now I was the small one, my face was the small white upturned oval as her voice floated down on errant chaff stirred up by my leap:

'Hi, down there!'

'Hi, up there!'

She edged along the beam, and my heart loosened a little in my chest when I judged she was over the safety of the hay. It always did, although she was more graceful than I was . . . and more athletic, if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about your kid sister.

She stood, poising on the toes of her old low-topped Keds, hands out in front of her. And then she swanned. Talk about things you can't forget, things you can't describe. Well, I can describe it. . . in a way. But not in a way that will make you understand how beautiful that was, how perfect, one of the few things in my life that seem utterly real, utterly true. No, I can't tell you that. I don't have the skill with either my pen or my tongue.

For a moment she seemed to hang in the air, as if borne up by one of those mysterious updraughts that only existed in the third loft, a bright swallow with golden plumage such as Nebraska has never seen since. She was Kitty, my sister, her arms swept behind her and her back arched, and how I loved her for that beat of time!

Then she came down and ploughed into the hay and out of sight. An explosion of chaff and giggles rose out of the hole she made. I'd forgotten about how rickety the ladder had looked with her on it, and by the time she was out, I was halfway up again.

I tried to swan myself, but the fear grabbed me the way it always did, and my swan turned into a cannonball. I think I never believed the hay was there the way Kitty believed it.

How long did the game go on? Hard to tell, But I looked up some ten or twelve dives later and saw the light had changed. Our mom and dad were due back and we were all covered with chaff. . . as good as a signed confession. We agreed on one more turn each.

Going up first, I felt the ladder moving beneath me and I could hear - very faintly - the whining rasp of old nails loosening up in the wood. And for the first time I was really, actively scared. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it, but the beam was closer and seemed safer. Three rungs from the top the whine of pulling nails grew louder and I was suddenly cold with terror, with the certainty that I had pushed it too far.

Then I had the splintery beam in my hands, taking my weight off the ladder, and there was a cold, unpleasant sweat matting the twigs of hay to my forehead. The fun of the game was gone.

I hurried out over the hay and dropped off. Even the pleasurable part of the drop was gone. Coming down, I imagined how I'd feel if that was solid barn planking coming up to meet me instead of the yielding give of the hay.

I came out to the middle of the barn to see Kitty hurrying up the ladder. I called: 'Hey, come down! It's not safe!'

'It'll hold me!' she called back confidently. 'I'm lighter than you!'

'Kitty -'

But that never got finished. Because that was when the ladder let go.

It went with a rotted, splintering crack. I cried out and Kitty screamed. She was about where I had been when I'd become convinced I'd pressed my luck too far.

The rung she was standing on gave way, and then both sides of the ladder split. For a moment the ladder below her, which had broken entirely free, looked like a ponderous insect - a praying mantis or a ladderbug - which had just decided to walk off.

Then it toppled, hitting the barn floor with a flat clap that raised dust and caused the cows to moo worriedly. One of them kicked at its stall door.

Kitty uttered a high, piercing scream.

Larry! Larry! Help me!'

I knew what had to be done, I saw right away. I was terribly afraid, but not quite scared out of my wits. She was better than sixty feet above me, her blue-jeaned legs kicking wildly at the blank air, then barnswallows cooing above her. I was scared, all right. And you know, I still can't watch a circus aerial act, not even on TV. It makes my stomach feel weak.

But I knew what had to be done.

'Kitty!' I bawled up at her. 'Just hold still! *Hold still!'*

She obeyed me instantly. Her legs stopped kicking and she hung straight down, her small hands clutching the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder like an acrobat whose trapeze has stopped.

I ran to the hayrnow, clutched up a double handful of the stuff, ran back, and dropped it. I went back again. And .again. And again.

I really don't remember it after that, except the hay got up my nose and I started sneezing and couldn't stop. I ran back and forth, building a haystack where the foot of the ladder had been. It was a very small haystack. Looking at it, then looking at her hanging so far above it, you might have thought of one of those cartoons where the guy jumps three hundred feet into a water glass.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

'Larry, I can't hold on much longer!' Her voice was high and despairing.

'Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on!'

Back and forth. Hay down my shirt. Back and forth. The haystick was high as my chin now, but the haymow we had been diving into was twenty-five feet deep. I thought that if she only broke her legs it would be getting off cheap. And I knew if she missed the hay altogether, she would be killed. Back and forth.

'Larry! The rung! It's letting go!

I could hear the steady, rasping cry of the rung pulling free under here weight. Her legs began to kick again in panic, but if she was thrashing like that, she would surely miss the hay.

'No!' I yelled. 'No! Stop that! Just let go! Let go, Kitty!' Because it was too late for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except blind hope.

She let go and dropped the second I told her to. She came straight down like a knife. It seemed to me that she dropped forever, her gold pigtails standing straight up from her head, her eyes shut, her face as pale as china. She didn't scream. Her hands were locked in front of her lips, as if she was praying.

And she struck the hay right in the centre. She went down out of sight in it - hay flew up all around as if a shell had struck - and I heard the thump of her body hitting the boards. The sound, a loud thud, sent a deadly chill into me. It had been too loud, much too loud. But I had to see.

Starting to cry, I pounced on the haystack and pulled it apart, flinging the straw behind me in great handfuls. A blue-jeaned leg came to light, then a plaid shirt . . . and then Kitty's face. It was deadly pale and her eyes were shut. She was dead, I knew it as I looked at her. The world went grey for me, November grey. The only things in it with any colour were her pigtails, bright gold.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opened her eyes.

'Kitty?' My voice was hoarse, husky, unbelieving. My throat was coated with haychaff. 'Kitty?'

'Larry?' she asked, bewildered. 'Am I alive?'

I picked her out of the hay and hugged her and she put her arms around my neck and hugged me back.

'You're alive,' I said. 'You're alive, you're alive.'

She had broken her left ankle and that was all. When Dr Pederson, the GP from Columbia City, came out to the barn with my father and me, looked up into the shadows for a long time. The last rung on the ladder still hung there, aslant, from one nail.

He looked, as I said, for a long time. 'A miracle,' he said to my father, and then kicked disdainfully at the hay I'd put down. He went out to his dusty DeSoto and drove away.

My father's hand came down on my shoulder. 'We're going to the woodshed, Larry,' he said in avery calm voice. 'I believe you know what's going to happen there.'

'Yes, sir,' I whispered.

'Every time I whack you, Larry, I want you to thank God your sister is still alive.'

'Yes, sir.'

Then we went. He whacked me plenty of times, so many times I ate standing up for a week and with a cushion on my chair for two weeks after that. And every time he whacked me with his big red calloused hand, I thanked God.

In a loud, loud voice. By the last two or three whacks, I was pretty sure He was hearing me.

They let me in to see her just before bedtime. There was a catbird outside her window, I remember that. Her foot, all wrapped up, was propped on a board.

She looked at me so long and so lovingly that I was uncomfortable. Then she said, 'Hay. You put down hay.'

'Course I did,' I blurted. 'What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there.'

'I didn't know what you were doing,' she said.

'You must have! I was right under you, for cripe's sake!'

'I didn't dare look down,' she said. 'I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time.'

I stared at her, thunderstruck.

'You didn't know? Didn't know what I was doing?' She shook her head.

'And when I told you to let go you. . . you just *did it?'*

She nodded.

'Kitty, how could you do that?'

She looked at me with those deep blue eyes. 'I knew you must have been doing something to fix it,' she said. 'You're my big brother. I knew you'd take care of me.'

'Oh, Kitty, you don't know how close it was.'

I had put my hands over my face. She sat up and took them away. She kissed my cheek. 'No,' she said. 'But I knew you were down there. Gee, am I sleepy. I'll see you tomorrow, Larry. I'm going to have a cast, Dr Pederson says.'

She had the cast on for a little less than a month, and all her classmates signed it - she even got me to sign it. And when it came off, that was the end of the barn incident. My father replaced the ladder up to the third loft with a new strong one, but I never climbed up to the beam and jumped off into the haymow again. So far as I know, Kitty didn't either.

It was the end, but somehow not the end. Somehow it never ended until nine days ago, when Kitty jumped from the top storey of an insurance building in Los Angeles. I have the clipping from the L.A. *Times* in my wallet. I guess I'll always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots of people you want to remember or theatre tickets from a really good show or part of the programme from a World Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work. The headline reads: *CALL GIRL SWAN-DIVES TO HER DEATH.*

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. She was going to go to business college in Omaha, but in the summer after she graduated from high school, she won a beauty contest and married one of the judges. It sounds like a dirty joke, doesn't it? My Kitty.

While I was in law school she got divorced and wrote me a long letter, ten pages or more, telling me how it had been, how messy it had been, how it might have been better if she could have had a child. She asked me if I could come. But losing a week in law school is like losing a term in liberal-arts undergraduate. Those guys are greyhounds. If you lose sight of the little mechanical rabbit, it's gone for ever.

She moved out to L.A. and got married again. When that one broke up I was out of law school. There was another letter, a shorter one, more bitter. She was never going to get stuck on *that* merry-go-round, she told me. It was a fix job. The only way you could catch the brass ring was to tumble off the horse and crack your skull. If that was what the price of a free ride was, who wanted it? PS, Can you come, Larry? It's been a while.

I wrote back and told her I'd love to come, but I couldn't. I had landed a job in a high-pressure firm, low guy on the totem pole, all the work and none of the credit. If I was going to make it up to the next step, it would have to be that year. That was *my* long letter, and it was all about my career.

I answered all of her letters. But I could never really believe that it was really Kitty who was writing them, you know, no more than I could really believe that the hay was really there . . . until it broke my fall at the bottom of the drop and saved my life. I couldn't believe that my sister and the beaten woman who signed 'Kitty' in a circle at the bottom of her letters were really the same person. My sister was a girl with pigtails, still without breasts.

She was the one who stopped writing. I'd get Christmas cards, birthday cards, and my wife would reciprocate. Then we got divorced and I moved and just forgot. The next Christmas and the birthday after, the cards came through the forwarding address. The first one. And I kept thinking:

Gee, I've got to write Kitty and tell her that I've moved. But I never did.

But as I've told you, those are facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building, and that Kitty was the one who always believed the hay would be there. Kitty was the one who had said, 'I knew you must be doing something to fix it.' Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. She's printed her return address in the upper left corner of the envelope, the place she'd been staying at until she jumped. A very nice apartment building on Van Nuys. Dad and I went there to pick up her things. The landlady was nice. She had liked Kitty.

The letter was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have got to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding addresses. She must have got tired of waiting.

Dear Larry

I've been thinking about it a lot lately. . . and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down.

Your,

Kitty

Yes, I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting. I'd rather believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten. I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run.

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now. When I close my eyes and start to drift off, I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched, her arms swept up behind her.

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there.

THE LEDGE

'Go on,' Cressner said again. 'Look in the bag.'

We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep-cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque sling chair where Cressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one at all sat, there was a brown shopping bag.

'If it's a payoff, forget it,' I said. 'I love her.'

'It's money, but it's not a payoff. Go on. Look.' Re was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an onyx holder. The air-circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown on which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one, 500 carat, dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn't sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. All twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten bills to a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

'Twenty thousand dollars,' he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. 'Okay.'

'It's for you.'

'I don't want it.'

'My wife comes with it.'

I didn't say anything. Marcia had warned me how, it would be. He's like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He'll try to make you a mouse.

'So you're a tennis pro,' he said. 'I don't believe I've ever actually seen one before.'

'You mean your detectives didn't get any pictures?'

'Oh, yes.' He waved the cigarette holder negligently. 'Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?'

'If you say so.'

He'll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It's the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he'll have you hitting out at where you think he's going to be, and he'll get you someplace else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

'I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat, Mr Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other's wife.'

I started to answer but decided not to.

'Did you enjoy San Quentin?' Cressner said, puffing lazily.

'Not particularly.'

'I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I'm correct.'

'Marcia knows about it,' I said, and immediately wished I hadn't. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft lobs for him to smash back.

'I've taken the liberty of having your car moved,' he said, glancing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn't a window

at all: the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding-glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that, a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

'This is a very pleasant building,' Cressner said. 'Good security. Closed-circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby, I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away.' He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8.05. 'At 8.20 the same employee will call the police from a public phone booth concerning your car. By 8.30, at the latest, the minions of the law will have discovered over six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tyre of your trunk. You will be eagerly sought after, Mr Norris.'

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

'These things will happen unless I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call.'

'And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is,' I said. 'No deal, Cressner, I don't know. We set it up this way just for you.'

'My men had her followed.'

'I don't think so I think we lost them at the airport.'

Cressner sighed, removed the smouldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a sliding lid. No fuss, no muss. The used cigarette and Stan Norris had been taken care of with equal ease.

'Actually,' he said, 'you're right. The old ladies-room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely vexed to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so old they never expected it.'

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the bus station; that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in ~ny savings account. Two hundred dollars and a Greyhound bus could take you anyplace in the country.

'Are you always to uncommunicative?' Cressner asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

'Marcia advised it.'

A little more sharply, he said: 'Then I imagine you'll stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife could be when she's a little old grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head? I understand that possession of six ounces of heroin could get you forty years.'

'That won't get you Marcia back.'

He smiled thinly. 'And that's the nub of it, isn't it? Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have fallen in love. You have had an affair. . . if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motels an affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?'

'I can understand why she got tired of you,' I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. 'You know, I rather like you, Mr Norris. You're vulgar and you're a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgement of character is lax. But you do have a certain. . . verve. Which is why I've set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that lam fond of wagering.'

'Yes.' Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea on a balcony forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

'I don't like my wife very much,' Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. 'That's no secret. I'm sure she's told you as much. And I'm sure a man of your experience knows that contented wives do not jump into the hay with the local tennis-club pro at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, whey-faced little prude, a whiner, a weeper, a bearer of tales, a -'That's about enough,' I said.

He smiled coldly. 'I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing our beloved. It's 8.16. Are you nervous?'

I shrugged.

'Tough to the end,' he said, and lit his cigarette. 'At any rate, you may wonder why, if I dislike Marcia so much, I do not simply give her her freedom -'

'No, I don't wonder at all.'

He frowned at me.

'You're a selfish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That's why. No one takes what's yours. Not even if you don't want it any more.

He went red and then laughed. 'One for you, Mr Norris. Very good.'

I shrugged again.

'I'm going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you lose, you lose your life.'

I looked at the clock. I couldn't help it. It was 8.19.

'All right,' I said. What else? It would buy time, at least. Time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialled a number.

'Tony? Plan two. Yes.' He hung up.

'What's plan two?' I asked.

'I'll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the. . . offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don't call, he will get in touch with the police.'

'Not very trusting, are you?'

'Be sensible, Mr Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars on the carpet between us. In this city murder has been committed for twenty cents.'

'What's the bet?'

He looked genuinely pained. 'Wager, Mr Norris, wager. Gentlemen make wagers. Vulgarians place bets.'

'Whatever you say.'

'Excellent. I've seen you looking at my balcony.'

'The screen's off the door.'

'Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is this: that you walk around my building on the ledge that juts out just below the penthouse level. If you circumnavigate the building successfully, the jackpot is yours.'

'You're crazy.'

'On the contrary. I have proposed this wager six times to six different people during my dozen years in this apartment. Three of the six were professional athletes, like you-one of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his TV Commercials than his passing game, one a baseball player, one a rather famous jockey who made an extraordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with extraordinary alimony problems. The other three were more ordinary citizens who had differing professions but two things in common: a need for money and a certain degree of body grace.' He puffed his cigarette thoughtfully and then continued. 'The wager was declined five times out of hand. On the other occasion, it was accepted. The terms were twenty thousand dollars against six

months' service to me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of the balcony and nearly fainted.' Cressner looked amused and contemptuous. 'He said everything down there looked so small. That was what killed his nerve.'

'What makes you think -'

He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. 'Don't bore me, Mr Norris. I think you will do it because you have no choice. It's my wager on the one hand or forty years in San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only added fillips, indicative of my good nature.'

'What guarantee do I have that you won't double-cross me? Maybe I'd do it and find out you'd called Tony and told him to go ahead anyway.'

He sighed. 'You are a walking case of paranoia, Mr Norris. I don't love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a pittance to me. I pay four times that every week to be given to police bagmen. As for the wager, however . . .' His

I thought about it, and he left me. I suppose he knew that the real mark always convinces himself. I was a thirty-six-year-old tennis bum, and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marcia applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew, and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough - especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don't care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Maria Cressner. I had fallen for her after two nine-o'clock tennis lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of Stan Norris luck, all right. After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood, I had fallen like a sack of mail for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else, as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me in if I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

'I want to know one thing,' I said.

'What might that be, Mr Norris?'

'Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a welsher or not.'

He looked at me directly. 'Mr Norris,' he said quietly, 'I never welsh.'

'All right,' I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up, beaming. 'Excellent! Really excellent! Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr Norris.'

We walked over together. His face was that of a man who had dreamed this scene hundreds of times and was enjoying its actuality to the fullest.

'The ledge is five inches wide,' he said dreamily. 'I've measured it myself. In fact, I've stood on it, holding on to the balcony, of course. All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought-iron railing. You'll be chest-high. But, of course, beyond the railing there are no handgrips. You'll have to inch your way along, being very careful not to overbalance.'

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window . . . something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

'Ah, I see you've noticed my wind gauge,' Cressner said jovially. 'Actually, it's the other side which gets the prevailing wind; so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually this is a fairly still night. I've seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five . . . you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship, in the crow's nest. And it's quite mild for this time of year.'

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with the wind,

that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

'Have you got a coat?' I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

'Alas, no.' The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8.32. 'And I think you had better get started, Mr Norris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good boy but apt to be impulsive. You understand.'

I understood all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner's tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out on to the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

'Bon soir,' Cressner said behind me, but I didn't bother to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn't look down. Not yet. I began to do deep-breathing.

It's not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale, you ~row a distraction out of your mind, until there's nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the money with one breath and Cressner himself with two. Marcia took longer - her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game, that maybe Cressner never welshed, but he always hedged his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing; I'd be so much scarlet sludge splattered for a block of Deakman Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building sloped away like a smooth chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those matchbox models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. If you fell that far, you would have plenty of time to realize just what was happening, to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you'made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an overripe watermelon.

I could understand why that other guy had chickened out. But he'd only had six months to worry about. I was staring forty long, grey, Marcia4ess years in the eye.

I looked at the ledge. It looked small, I had never, seen five inches that looked so much like two. At least the building was fairly new; it wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself until I was standing on the ledge. My heels were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest-high, and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the door, smoking, watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do.

'Call,' I said, holding on to the railing.

'What?'

'Call Tony. I don't move until you do.'

He went back into the living room - it looked amazingly warm and safe and cosy - and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture, really. With the wind, I couldn't hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. 'Taken care of, Mr Norris.'

'It better be.'

'Goodbye, Mr Norris. I'll see you in a bit. . . perhaps.'

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marcia one last time, her light-brown hair, her wide grey eyes, her lovely body, and then put her out of my mind for good. No more looking down, either. It would have been too easy to get paralysed, looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up until you lost your balance or just fainted from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot, right foot.

51

I began to move to the right, holding on to the balcony's railing as long as I could. It didn't take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge, those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony, and for a moment I didn't think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches, hell, that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a foot off the ground instead of 400 feet, you could breeze around this building in four minutes flat, I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah, and if you fall 'from a ledge a foot off the ground, you just say rats, and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot further and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up, allowing the palms to rest against the rough stone of the apartment building. I caressed the stone. I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me, snapping the collar of my jacket against my face, making my body sway op the ledge. My heart jumped into my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was leaning over the balcony, watching me.

'Enjoying yourself?' he asked affably.

He was wearing a brown camel's-hair overcoat.

'I thought you didn't have a coat,' I said.

'I lied,' he answered equably. 'I lie about a lot of things.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nothing . . . nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare, eh, Mr Norris? I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grow tired, and if they should give way . . .' He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it, and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then, a faint and sickening plop. Cressner chuckled.

He had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic nibbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A torrent of terror wanted to rush in and drown me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the lighted bank sign, which now said: 8.46, Time to Save at Mutual!

By the time the lighted numbers read 8.49, I felt that I had myself under control again. I think Cressner must have decided I'd frozen, and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle towards the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness bit at my skin like an auger. My thin jacket billowed out behind me as I shuffled along. I moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this, I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8.52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem - the ledge went right around, making a square corner - but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, praying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait for ever and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and, clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I tottered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I slid a step further along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear.

Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that if one of them had hit the stone face of the building, I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return

52

to the wall instead of sending down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high-voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner, leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He was smiling, in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

'Just keeping you on your toes,' he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I couldn't have spoken above a croak anyway. My heart was thudding crazily in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along, just in case he was thinking about leaning out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep-breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city bulked above me. On the left, only the dark circle of the lake, with a few pinpricks of light which floated on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky, and I made it around with no trouble. And then something bit me.

I gasped and jerked. The shift of balance scared me, and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. No not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hateful eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city; they're as common as cab drivers who can't change a ten. They don't like to fly, and they give ground grudgingly, as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh, yes, and you're apt to find their calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally irritating, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was in his, and I was nearly helpless, and he seemed to know it. He pecked my tired right ankle again, sending a bright dart of pain up my leg.

'Get,' I snarled at it. 'Get out.'

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was obviously in what he regarded as his home; this section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A muted cheeping from above.

I cricked my neck as far back as it would go and looked up. A beak darted at my face, and I almost recoiled. If I had, I might have become the city's first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon, protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again, and now blood was flowing. I could feel it. I began to inch my way along again, hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don't scare, not city pigeons, anyway. If a moving van only makes them amble a little faster, a man pinned on a high ledge isn't going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backpedalled as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now; the bird was pecking at raw flesh . . . and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, rocking me to the limit of balance; pads of my fingers scraped at the bland stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner couldn't have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought-iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

53

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and held on as if they would never let go.

Peck.

The pigeon was staring up at me almost smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when he had ushered me out on to the balcony on the other side of the building.

Gripping the iron bars more tightly, I lashed out with a hard, strong kick and caught the pigeon squarely. It emitted a wholly satisfying squawk and rose into the air, wings flapping. A few feathers, dove grey, settled back to the ledge or disappeared slowly down into the darkness, swan-boating back and forth in the air.

Gasping, I crawled up on to the balcony and collapsed there. Despite the cold, my body was dripping with sweat. I don't know how long I lay there, recuperating. The building hid the bank clock, and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly rolled down my sock. The right ankle was lacerated and bleeding, but the wound looked superficial. Still, I would have to have it taken care of, if I ever got out of this. God know what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble on a tied bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars' worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly into the darkened pent-house opposite Cressner's. Barren, empty, unlived in. The heavy storm screen was over this door. I might have been able to break in, but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it off no longer, I slipped over the railing and back on to the ledge. The pigeon, a few feathers worse for wear, was standing below his mate's nest, where the guano was thickest, eyeing me balefully. But I didn't think he'd bother me, not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away - much harder than it had been to leave Cressner's balcony. My mind knew I had to, but my body, particularly my ankles, was screaming that it would be folly to leave such a safe harbour. But I did leave, with Marcia's face in the darkness urging me on.

I got to the second short side, made it around the corner, and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now that I was getting close, there was an almost ungovernable urge to hurry, to get it over with. But if I hurried, I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got me again on the fourth corner, and I slipped around it thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half4rozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle), sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building, warm yellow light spilled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bank sign glowing like a welcome-home banner. It was 10.48, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to welsh. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11.09 when I put first my right hand on the wrought-iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggled over the top, collapsed thankfully on the floor. . . and felt the cold steel muzzle of a *.45* against my temple.

I looked up and saw a goon ugly enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

'Excellent!' Cressner's voice said from within. 'I applaud you, Mr Norris!' He proceeded to do just that. 'Bring him in, Tony.'

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Going in, I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living-room fireplace, sipping brandy from a goblet the size of a fish-bowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt-orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror on the other side of the room. The hair was dishevelled, the face pallid except for two bright spots of colour on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse, because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and fell over it, pulling it down on

top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back, I sat up and managed: 'You lousy welsher. You had this planned.'

'Indeed I did,' Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantel. 'But I'm not a welsher, Mr Norris. Indeed no. Just an extremely poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don't do anything . . . ill-advised.' He put his fingers under his chin and tittered a little. He didn't look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on its muzzle. I got up, suddenly feeling more frightened than I had on the ledge.

'You fixed it,' I said slowly. 'Somehow, you fixed it.'

'Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money is over there. You may take it and go.'

'Fine,' I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The .45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up, and walked towards the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I'd had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner: I was going to make it.

Cressner's voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

'You don't really think that old lady's-room dodge fooled anyone, do you?'

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. 'What do you mean?'

'I told you I never welsh, and I never do. You won three things, Mr Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the country morgue.'

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

'You didn't really think I'd let you have her? he asked me pityingly. 'Oh, no. The money, yes. Your freedom, yes. But not Marcia. Still, I don't welsh. And after you've had her buried -'

I didn't go near him. Not then. He was for later. I walked towards Tony,. who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice: 'Shoot him, please.'

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand, and it struck him hard. I hadn't been using my arms and wrists out there, and they're the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug, and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel. He went down with a single very weary grunt, looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said, 'Stop right there, or you're dead.'

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around, his cosmopolitan world-weary act had curdled a little around the edges. It curdled a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

'She's not dead,' he said quickly. 'I had to salvage something, didn't I?' He gave me a sick, cheese-eating grin.

'I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker,' I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life, and this man had put her on a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbled around Tony's feet. 'That,' he said, 'that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about -,

'I'll make you a bet,' I said slowly.

He looked from the barrel of the gun to my face. 'A -'

'A bet,' I repeated. 'Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there.'

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. 'You . . .' he whispered.

'These are the stakes,' I said in my dead voice. 'If you make it, I'll let you go. How's that?'

'No,' he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

'Okay,' I said, and cocked the pistol.

'No!' he said, holding his hands out. 'No! Don't! I. . all right.' He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out on to the balcony. 'You're shaking,' I told him. 'That's going to make it harder.'

'Two million,' he said, and he couldn't get his voice above a husky whine. 'Two million in unmarked bills.'

'No,' I said. 'Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I'm serious.'

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I; you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white-knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

'Please,' he whispered. 'Anything.'

'You're wasting time,' I said. 'It takes it out of the ankles.'

But he wouldn't move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, moaning. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 11.29.

I didn't think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn't want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his centre of gravity, his dressing gown billowing into the night.

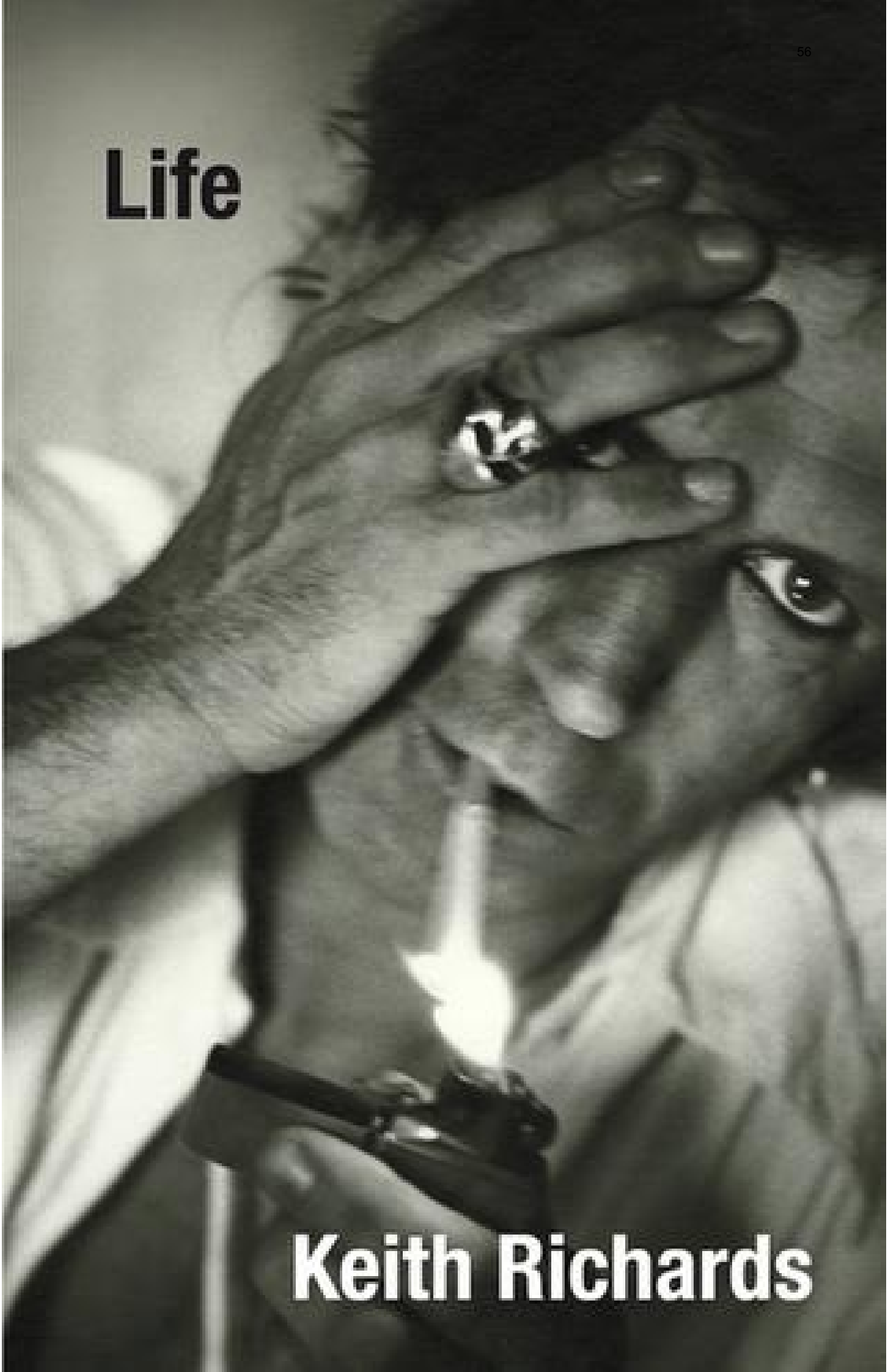
He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12.01, almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn't come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember thinking the wind was on his side, when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he's out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any further.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I break into the other penthouse, I'll shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the other side of the building, I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12.44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's .45 in my hand. Just on the off-chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welshed on a bet.

But I've been known to.


Life
Keith Richards

I didn't find out for ages about Mick and Anita, but I smelled it. Mostly from Mick, who didn't give any sign of it, which is why I smelled it.

The old lady comes back at night complaining about the set and about Donald and blah blah blah. But at the same time, I know the old lady, and the odd time she didn't come home at night, I'd go round somewhere and see another girlfriend.

I never expected anything from Anita. I mean, hey, I'd stolen her from Brian. So you've had Mick now; what do you fancy, that or this? It was like Peyton Place back then, a lot of wife swapping or girlfriend swapping and… oh, you had to have him, OK. What do you expect? You've got an old lady like Anita Pallenberg and expect other guys not to hit on her? I heard rumors, and I thought, if she's going to be making a move with Mick, good luck to him; he can only take that one once. I've got to live with it. Anita's a piece of work. She probably nearly broke his back!

I'm not that jealous kind of guy. I knew where Anita had been before, and where she'd been before that with Mario Schifano, who was a successful painter. And with this other guy who was an art dealer in New York. I didn't expect to put any reins on her. It probably put a bigger gap between me and Mick than anything else, but mainly on Mick's part, not mine. And probably forever.

I gave no reaction at all to Mick about Anita. And decided to see how things would pan out from there. It wasn't the first time we'd been in competition for a bird, even for a night on the road. Who's going to get that one? Who's Tarzan round here? It was like two alphas fighting. Still is, quite honestly. But it's hardly the basis for a good relationship, right? I could have given Anita shit for it, but what was the point? We were together. I was on the road. By then I was so cynical about that stuff. I mean, if I'd stolen her off Brian, I didn't expect Mick not to knock her off, under the direction of Donald Cammell. I doubt whether it would have happened without Cammell. But, you know, while you were doing that, I was knocking Marianne, man. While you're missing it, I'm kissing it. In fact, I had to leave the premises rather abruptly when the cat came back. Hey, it was our only time, hot and sweaty. We were just there in, as Mick calls it in "Let Me Down Slow," the afterglow, my head nestled between those two beautiful jugs. And we heard his car drive up, and there was a big flurry, and I did one out the window, got my shoes, out the window through the garden, and I realized I'd left my socks. Well, he's not the sort of guy to look for socks. Marianne and I still have this joke. She sends me messages: "I still can't find your socks."

Extract from Animal Farm-George Orwell

There was a deadly silence. Amazed, terrified, huddling together, the animals watched the long line of pigs march slowly round the yard. It was as though the world had turned upside-down. Then there came a moment when the first shock had worn off and when, in spite of everything — in spite of their terror of the dogs, and of the habit, developed through long years, of never complaining, never criticising, no matter what happened — they might have uttered some word of protest. But just at that moment, as though at a signal, all the sheep burst out into a tremendous bleating of —

'Four legs good, two legs *better*! Four legs good, two legs *better*! Four legs good, two legs *better*!'

It went on for five minutes without stopping. And by the time the sheep had quieted down, the chance to utter any protest had passed, for the pigs had marched back into the farmhouse.

Benjamin felt a nose nuzzling at his shoulder. He looked round. It was Clover. Her old eyes looked dimmer than ever. Without saying anything, she tugged gently at his mane and led him round to the end of the big barn, where the Seven Commandments were written. For a minute or two they stood gazing at the tatted wall with its white lettering.

'My sight is failing,' she said finally. 'Even when I was young I could not have read what was written there. But it appears to me that that wall looks different. Are the Seven Commandments the same as they used to be, Benjamin?'

For once Benjamin consented to break his rule, and he read out to her what was written on the wall. There was nothing there now except a single Com- mandment. It ran:

ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL

BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS