

WICKED MESSENGER

**A KILLER'S
JOURNAL**

Bob Burden Presents

An All-New

***HIT MAN FOR
THE DEAD***

Novel

**SPECIAL Beta version-Marke XXIII
PEWVIEW and REVIEW Edition**

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**This EDITION is an Advanced Reading Copy and
Galley proof for review.**

CAUTION:
This book is intended for mature
audiences.

WARNING: Strong Language, gritty realism, vivid adult
situations and edgy characters.

LOG LINE

After losing his soul in a card game, a wayward, young adventurer takes up with a crew of vagabond serial killers roaming America, and administering one of the last, surviving rituals of the Spanish Inquisition, by avenging the wrongfully slain, and freeing their souls to pass on and find peace.

BY THE WAY...

This book is a truncated version of the original story, which was 330 pages long, and intended for a 8 to 12 episode Mini-Series.

I am planning on putting that version out as a very Limited, signed and numbered Edition Hardback for a Kickstarter or Gofundme. Contact me at wildcraft7@mindspring.com to get on our mailing list.

CHAPTER ONE

ASA NISI MASA

(WHISPERS IN THE SHADOWS)

If I had followed my better judgment always,
my life would have been a very dull one.

— Edgar Rice Burroughs

I heard the devil walking down the breezeway right past my motel room the other night. He was whistling, and by the sloppy, off-key notes, I could tell that he had probably been drinking again.

Whoever it was that he was coming for – poor soul - I send my sincerest condolences, but I'm glad that old, rascal devil passed me on by again.

Odd little fellow. At least the one I met. I'm told he can be in more than one place all at once, here – there – and all over - in his own personal multi-verse. I guess that's how he's able to get everything done. Or maybe... maybe everyone has their own

devil, and it's all like with the kind of trees that sprout up all over the place but have only one root system.

An old fortune-teller woman, a lovely lady that I got drunk with last summer before I wacked her, claimed she once did know the devil well – knew him some back in her carney/circus days - before she settled down. She related to me that the Devil comes every solstice, to gather all the lost, adrift and forgotten souls that are restless and wandering between the winds.

And I guess that means me, I remember thinking.

“He loves popping that bubble wrap,” she added, “he is keen on Karaoke, he is... and he cheats at solitaire!”

When she laid that last one on me I burst out laughing. At that she got cross with me and wouldn't tell me anything more. So, sorry but I don't get on well with touchy, thin-skinned people or those with a chip on their shoulder and I blew her away right then and there. As was my assigned mission.

Ah, such a demented, giggly little scamp though, not at all what one would expect. Such a sad little fellow. Sad and lonely... but still cunning, sneaky and condescending and - mark my words - none too bright. A bumbling, muttering wretch who was so easily duped and conned... which explains why I'm still here, running around loose... but I suspect there's more to it than that.

It seems I have a useful purpose after all.

That of an angel of vengeance, judgement and death.

All rolled into one.

Wow.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EYES HAVE IT

The day you die is just like
any other, only shorter.

Samuel Beckett

OK. Yeah. I really did it this time. Another fine mess I've gotten myself into.

I'm stuck here now in the attic loft of an abandoned, dilapidated, mildew-smelling waterfront warehouse.

And I'm totally fucked.

Down there on the main floor down below me, spooking around, is a desperate, brutal miscreant who is determined to annihilate, eviscerate and obliterate yours truly but any means necessary.

And I really need a break.

I clipped about seven or eight people in the last couple of hours, but there's still this one left. The problem is he's got

bullets and I've got none. Hell I don't even have the gun anymore.

When I reached in my shirt pocket for more bullets all I had was some lint and some of those boiled peanuts from Five Guys. And if I buy the farm, I don't think anyone will find that satchel of slabbed gold and silver coins I looted and stuck in the bushes...at least not until decades from now, when they put in a Walmart or something.

Well I wish I was back at the motel room watching cartoons or Turner Classic Movies but no, here I am, in this loft surrounded by, and navigating across all kinds of stored away junk and debris. Filthy, dark, dank and funky.... And with rats crawling around in the darkness...and bugs and mold. I can hear the rats sifting and sneaking around in the debris, but the bugs I can only imagine in my brain.

I flash my phone's light down at my left leg to the gash cut there by a sharp shard of sheet metal and have to wonder what kind of germs and viruses are breeding and gestating in there, or how many bugs or fleas or parasites are feasting on me.

Everything went great today until it all went wrong, in this rustic, New England, seaside haven and boat-docking estate out here in the middle of nowhere, the perfect hideout and headquarters for the three oligarchs that I was here for. Three fixers who masterminded the murders of over 100 people.

Well, I got all three right out of the gate, but then the henchmen and underlings (who were supposed to flee as soon as their bosses were whacked, but didn't) were a chore. But that's what I'm good at. Killing. and I got of them, all but one. This fucking guy.

Another bullet comes up through the floor way off over there, where the rats are fussing around and cutting up. OK. That means the guy's not right under me, but rather he's off 20 feet away over there. Using my cell phone flashlight I spot some kind of a busted up cast-iron boiler plate side-wall or door, just beyond that pile of rotting boat canopies. Sure, that might be good to get onto. Maybe I can make it. It looks like half of it's over here closer and the other half is off over there a ways.

Made it by tripping and dancing along on the rafters, and using my cell phone flashlight to navigate. Whew!

He heard me. All of a sudden he's right under me again, and sure enough, three shots come up through the floor. One ricochets off the boiler body-half I'm nestled in. Maybe I can get him to use up all his bullets and he'll go away? Probably not.

I think this guy is the dumb one. Yeah, I think I killed two of his brothers (the two smarter ones).

So I'm lucky, as I stand a better chance of outfoxing him, but unlucky because he's too dumb to know when to give up and quit. So I doubt he's giving up, even if he runs out of bullets and then has to chew through the ceiling from below. I pulled the ladder up behind me into the loft, so I'm safe from him for now, but he's holding all the cards and I've got a fistful of aces and eights.

"Rouuwfff!" I make a barking sound. And two more bullets come zinging up. One ricochets off a bundle of rebar next to me and almost hits me.

I'm thinking, sure, he's the guy with two brothers. Our girl on the inside reported on this bobo. His brothers were handsome but he was a beast, all gross, mean and ugly looking, with stray tufts of bristly hair here and there, sort of like a boar, she said. The kind of guy that a father blames the pool boy for.

Then a thought crosses my mind, that I hadn't considered. Her report also mentioned that she thought that he was "mentally retarded". So beside the moral question of killing a mentally afflicted person, the chance of him giving up and going away becomes dangerously diminished. And what if he goes somewhere and finds a ladder....

I look down one of a pair of dismembered pipes that come up from below, out of the floor – my floor that is – and his ceiling. I take a look and can see below. The lights are on. Floodlights. I can see his foot for a second.

I roll up my sleeve and make a loud farting sound by putting my mouth onto my arm and blowing. He moves a bit

here and a bit there, pensive, confused by the sound...and then looks up the pipe.

I get an idea.

I grab one of the rebars. (A rebar is a heavy steel rod with a waffled or grid-like surface, used to structurally fortify concrete.) These ones have been cut down to about five or six foot lengths. This one's really heavy so I need both hands to get it to a pipe.

Resting the rebar on the edge of the left pipe, I take one of the Five-Guys peanuts and drop it down the other pipe on the right. Once upon a time the pipes might have gone to the boiler plate I'm lying on right now, or been drainage for an AC unit or whatever. I peek down. There he is; he's looking up the pipe, I'm looking down. I make the farting sound again. A few seconds later, he fires a shot up the pipe.

I look down and he's looking up again. I see his eye.

This is it.

I let go of the rebar...and hope for the best.

THUNK!

The thunking sound sounds like I hit the jackpot. I look down the pipe. I don't see anything...for a minute, then I see blood. A puddle of blood growing and spreading out.

Got him.

I peek down through the trap door at the other end of the room. I see the body over there, the puddle of blood growing bigger around him. Headwounds bleed a lot.

I let the ladder down and walk over to view my handiwork. The rebar went right through his other eye and came out the back of his head. Sure. Sounded like it was going through a watermelon. Wow. I did things right for a change.

And yup, he's the ugly one. The mentally retarded one. Say hello to your evil brothers and the rest of your rotten gang of killers when you get to hell. These doofs gassed a village of 182 Kurds, gassed them accidentally, but laughed about it – laughed and drank toasts to it all... and then I saw the pictures...little kids, little toddlers, with their mother, they're holding onto her, and they vomited on themselves. Vomit even coming out their

little noses. I said, “Fuck that, these guys are going down.” I mean, even I got mad.

And that’s how it is in my vida loca.

A week and a half ago, I got offered this assignment, looked it over, accepted it and came to New England. I check the investigation up and down, and read over the various plans and possible scenarios. Then I spooked around town, reconnoitered their HQ: a big house looking down on the oceanside boathouses and, while they were having a big, drunken birthday party, I got inside, dressed as a chauffeur.

Probably should have brought in more of our guys, but I guess I was greedy. There is a bag of gold and silver coins that I hid and that I will now retrieve from some bushes, before our clean up crew comes in tomorrow to make the dead bodies disappear and harvest any other valuables lying around.

And that’s my deal with the outfit I work for. I can keep what I can get away with, and they loot the rest. Then the crew come in and cleans up the mess and gather up anything else of value. Then down to headquarters where they put it on eBay and Craigslist to blow it out. That’s how we finance this mess.

By the time the clean-up team gets here tomorrow I’ll be on my way south. Heading to Florida for a family reunion of sorts, with a stop in NYC to see the boss and catch up on a few things. Can’t wait. The City is my old stomping grounds and though I’m still pretty much banished and persona-non-grata from it now due to my regrettable and notorious past sins, I’ll be in and out before they hardly know I’m there.

CHAPTER THREE

SECRET ORIGIN

Go and look around with the idea in mind
that everything you learned in school
and college is wrong.

—H. B. Traven

And what about me then?

Sure.

Came from a good family, yup, but I was always a smart-ass, and I soon found out that it was way too easy to just get kicked out of that Ivy League, cookie-cutter world that was going to be my golden-ticket than It was to toe the line and fly straight. Sorry, my mistake.

I mean, I blew it bad.

Most of my family will not even talk to me now... but leaving that life was the best thing that ever happened to me really. And, at the time... and even more, later on... probably the worst.

Free of the college trap, I quickly made a lot of money. And a name for myself. And guess what? I was almost a millionaire by the age of 24. Did it on my own. No family money or loans. Nope. (Though a million is not what it used to be.)

But with fast wealth and notoriety comes a lot of fast enemies. And I made some doozies. The best that big money can

buy. And as time will tell, I was very good at that, making enemies.

So a few bad life-decisions later I was 86'd, totally broke, wanted for a murder I didn't commit (but I should have committed, just didn't get there in time) and then on the run.

I'd lost all my privileges in The City, the good guys and the bad guys were both after me, and I had to leave the country to save my skin.

For a few years I wound up wasting away in the Margaritaville World south of the border. And that's where I managed to make even more enemies... and... lose my soul in a card game, yep, lost my ratchet, bullet riddled, remnant of a soul... in a card game.

A poker game... Yes.

So the game was rigged to be sure, a midnight stud poker game with a cabal of local hoodlums and professional jerk-offs that I had befriended and not-so-wisely gone into business with during my two years as an expatriate and all-around rascal down in Tijuana and Matamoros. They got me. Drunk, drugged and fucked.

A realization of their treachery and fuckery hit me as I slid down and out, into the haze of my treason-induced stupor. Some pals, eh?

And I was fucked literally... which was, as I've since come to understand, a vital and counter-intuitive part of their soul-stealing ritual. At least the hoyden that seduced me was a smoking, hot dame. A Euro-trash Jezebel for sure, but what a knock-out. And sex freak.

The drugs, the ritual, the incredible fucking I got: that's how they stole my soul! That's how they fucking stole my one and only, ever lovin' soul.

And I've been looking for that bitch ever since. Not just because she was such a wonderful, sexually magnificent, hellcat of a lover, but I've come to believe that she's one person who may can totally reverse my misfortune. I'm told that she holds some secret from the ritual that may be my long-shot of a

salvation to get my fucking soul back, even if she herself, is totally unaware of it.

I still remember her face, sure... but a woman can change: her hair style, her look, her shape, but there was one thing I'll always remember, that vixen had *I'll Cry Tomorrow* tattooed over her choo-choo... and, if you see her, if you happen to run into her....

Anyways, the next day my housekeeper totally flipped out when I told her about all what had happened and how I felt strange now all of a sudden, told her how I felt so empty inside – and she adamantly informed me that those fuckers stole my soul – she was sure of it – and, since she had a thing for me I guess, she was totally tripping, and really insistent about helping me. And quick. I mean I thought it was just a really bad hang-over at first, but no, definitely I was fubar and snafu out the wazoo as my dad would have said.

So, she sent me to this old priest – a worn out, skid-row, but thoroughly amusing Catholic Priest, named Father Coughlin.

The area was run-down and he was already hammered when I got there at two in the afternoon, blotto and snoring away like a security guard.

The place was neat but crammed and stacked with stuff: old books, mementoes, magazines, tools, newspapers, yellow Post-It notes, ancient aluminum cookware, clothes hung up drying, a framed centerfold of a 1966 Playboy bunny... and lots of yo-yos. Yo-yos all over the fucking place.

He was kind of like a sloppy, growling, old Long John Silver type with a hoarse voice, an Irish accent and a great, well-kept moustache and sideburns.

My housekeeper had insisted that this old sky-pilot was my only chance. I shook my head. This sorry, old sot? Could this be my only hope and salvation? Figures.

She was sure that he was the only one in the area familiar with the old ways and the old gods: the gods and spirits and demons, from ancient Mexican times, from the times back before the Christians came to the Americas and laid down the law.

To hear him tell it, he had been down there, south of the border, for nearly 50 years working hard to bring salvation and redemption to all the forgotten, hopeless and lost miscreants who existed in the furthest edges of that civilization, and a man who as a hobby, had studied and learned the old ways, the ancient cures and legends and scriptures of the old gods.

The old gods?

“The old gods, yeah. And they’re still here all right, yes they are, sonny-boy...” he told me as he took another swig from the bottle of whiskey that I had brought along to loosen him up, “Biddin’ their time. Biddin’ their time.” He took another swig. “And son, they’ll be here when all of this shite is done and gone.”

“Shite?”

“All this crap. All of it. All the civilization... the Churches... and all the gas stations and pesticides... and cigarettes... it will be gone ya know. One day.”

I nodded sympathetically as if I agreed with him and as if I had absolutely no suspicions that he was bat-shit crazy. As I continued my story, I watched his face and eyebrows vacillate from amusement, to seriousness, to shock and then back to amusement.

So, when I finished telling him my account of the last two days – the card game, the soul bet, the fucking and the fuckery - he shook his head and pulled a crucifix out of a drawer, and as he did, I was also able to see, that the drawer also contained a large .455 calibre Webley revolver... and some candy bars. From a sliding compartment in the back of the crucifix, he took out a fat, immaculately rolled joint and lit it.

Sure, why not.

He explained that I was all messed up. Messed up bigtime. I got seriously concerned as I saw how intent and focused he became as we went over my story in Q&A. I was getting worried. I could feel it in now my bones, and I could feel it down to the soles of my shoes. *What the hell had happened to me?*

“Most likely you will never know it all.” He muttered as if he had read my thoughts. His demeanor was odd: one minute he hated me and the next he was my best friend. “But it’s good you came here.”

After the joint was halfway smoked down, he handed it to me for a hit.

“You’ll need this.” It had a strange scent, not just of pot, something else was in there. It was my first taste of the Yage. The Yage that would be part of my addiction... and my salvation latter on.

Yage. I remembered reading in a GF’s book that she kept in the john, about how the mystic/surrealist writer W. S. Burroughs had spent years looking for the legendary drug Yage, all over South America, in the barrios and the jungles and the bars.

And sure enough, this was the shit. High-test and lit. In just minutes I could feel the cooling, soothing rivers of Babylon washing over me and the feeling that nothing else mattered, like I was an embryo. I felt like the embryo in the 2001, A SPACE ODYSSEY poster.

A few minutes later he descended into a flurry of rapid gibberish that I strained and reached out to comprehend, as it was coming at me quite fast. Or I was too slow. I remember hearing that “though my soul was jinxed-up, bolloxed and banjaxed” that I had until the next solstice a few months away to dodge the mystic shit-storm and fuck-bullets coming right at me.

“The next Solstice? What the hell has tha...”

“Ah, ya start yer period, don’t ya know. Ha ha! Yeah, you start having...”

“Well fuck me running, I get periods?!”

“Nah, just havin’ a gas, just coddin’ ya me bucko, ha, ha... no, c’mere to me, see the solstice is when the devil comes to collect the souls.”

“Souls?”

“You lost yer bleedin’ soul right? That’s why yer here right? Right? To him, to that smelly, rank bastard, they’re *his* souls. His feckin’ souls now. For sure, he comes for the souls of the evil, the souls of the heretics and blasphemers, the suicides...

and like you, the souls of the lost! Comes for those souls wandering around out there, lost and be-fucked.”

“So I’m fucked.” I said, half believing him and half humoring him.

“It’s sorta like he’s the garbage truck, garbage truck come to pick up it alllll, not just the sinners and villains.... So fucked ye be.”

“But, ya know what, I don’t even feel...”

“Azz because ya soul is gone, lad. In bits. Gone and wandering around out there somewhere. You don’t feel nothin’ now do ya!?”

I took another pull on the whiskey. I was getting concerned and nervous. This was serious. He was right. I didn’t feel good, and I didn’t feel very much at all. My sense of smell, my sense of taste? Blotto. I couldn’t even hear very well. But most of all I couldn’t feel things. Even now, as concerned as I was, I was not panicked or terrified like I should be. I felt detached.

Detached and adrift.

“So I have four months to find it?” I asked.

“Aye, or head them off.”

“How?”

“That I cannot say for sure. The soul’s a funny thing. It may come back on its own - your soul - or you may only get it back bit by bit. I don’t know. Maybe. By good luck? By doing good works? By brushing after every meal and combing your hair nicely? I don’t know.”

“Where did it go? Where do I look for it?”

“It’s not that easy. It’s not like someone has it in a jar with holes poked in the lid. Hell, yer soul could be sitting across the room watching you right now.”

“That close?”

“Or down at the beach getting a suntan and a cold one. I dunna know.” He said shaking his head and then yawned and then began to reach back and fish around in the piled-up junk in the shadows behind him and pulled out a tired and ancient accordion with chipped keys and lovingly duct-taped bellows. He took it gently to his lap and played a few notes from Lady of Spain. “Now c’mere to this bud.” It was time for my lesson.

“So behold, the only remnant of Western Civilization that will probably be here a thousand years from now.” He said, chuckling and drunkenly holding up the tired and worn old accordion to me. “Now this, this the simple accordion... our devil ca’ na’ stand the sound of.” He said nodding and then playing few more notes. “Perhaps he finds its merry and whimsical sounds too annoying and unpleasant.” He played a chorus for me.

“So the devil can’t stand the fucking accordion?”

“Not one bit. He can’t stand bright sunshine, can’t stand jokes and can’t stand flatulence. Not one of it. And drunkards. See as long as you are drinking, as long as you are lit, and pissed... you’re safe as milk. The demons or ghosts or devils or whatever evil shite tha’ was after you, they won’t fuck with you.”

“So there is some form of hope then?”

He just shook his head as if annoyed by the question or my presence and worked the accordion a bit more.

He was thinking.

Then he opened his shirt and pulled out some sort of dangling amulet: silver, heavy, patinaed over into a dark, black shade as silver will do. It was about the size of a silver dollar, a little bigger and twice as thick. Then he handed it to me, so reverently, so gingerly - like it was nitroglycerine or something.

“This is for me?” I asked.

“Yes, wear this always me boy.” he mumbled. “I am so way too auld now to ever...” He squinted and shook his head. “Too bloody auld.” He seemed to be feeling sorry for himself, shaking his head and looking downward. “Fecking old... now just take this.”

“What is it do?”

He took another swig and winced in a smiling way.

“That you will see. That you will see.”

I nodded, with a patronizing face and a smirk. Then he smacked me on the knee and scolded: “None of that now! Pay attention ya wanker. This medal here is the cat’s pajamas, lad. Grand. Grand as they come.”

It was old, very old too. The inscription was worn and washed out and the only word I could make out was “Enviado”, which turned out to be Spanish for the word envoy, I think.

I nodded and gently put it around my neck.

I was waiting for him to hit me up for a C-Note, but you know, he never did.

“Ah! You are baptized anew. Look at ya, a born champion and a real winner!”

I stand up and look at myself in the cracked mirror across the room.

“And the accordion?” I ask.

“My son... yeh get your own fecking accordion. This one’s mine.”

He said. “And I may need it. I may need it some night soon.”

Was he for real? Or drunk and just fucking with me, who cares? I wanted to just blow the whole thing off and go home, but by the next evening it was all real all of a sudden.

As they came for me at twilight.

And the amulet, yes, it worked.

Killed the five guys they sent for me. The first one with my bare hands, and then three more with his gun, and the last one turned to stone in my hands when the amulet slid out of my shirt as we were struggling. Turned to stone.

Today I’m still wearing it, and the amulet still works. It’s better than my natural born “spider sense” and even watches over me when I’m asleep. One time I woke up and the thing was feeling sort of hot. Woke me just in time too. Almost had a Chinese Tong hatchet man slit my throat with a straight razor that night.

Over the years, I still never learned to play the accordion, though I often listen to the local Spanish stations now and then. And yes, it seems that the accordion sounds really keep the devil away, I mean, I’m still here, eh?

That night that the devil came walking by my room, I turned on the clock radio and tuned in a local Mexican station that had all that accordion music all the time, I had it on low so

as not to keep me awake, under a pillow on the other bed, but on, all night long.

Outfoxing the devil that first solstice was fun (more on that some other time) but then it all seemed a hollow and empty triumph as I wandered off looking for answers. None of the clerics, mystics or fortunetellers I encountered seemed to have an answer. All the covens and witchcraft clubs seemed to be just a lot of rich people having depraved and bug-nut sex parties. All the books: the forbidden, the sacred, the secret, or incunabular, were apocryphal gibberish, whimsical fantasies, and total dead ends.

I tried to make sense of it all, but it was useless.

Had all the mischief I've done, all the heartbreak I'd caused, and all the people I'd hurt and disappointed finally caught up with me now, come to bite me in the ass? There were a lot more worse, evil transgressors than me out there, and they were all alive and fine, going on with their daily lives.

I was drinking a lot - often drinking just to get to sleep - and it seemed to help for a while, but then I would wake up at night in a nightmare sea of all the swirling memories, shouting "No! No! I didn't do that!".

And then something curious happened one night. I was out of chips and circling the drain and I felt this was - for sure - my last night on earth. I mean why not give up? Why not just let the devil take me and be done with it? My survival instinct was wearing out and nothing else was working... when something else kicked in. Without thinking I bucked up and wound up saving a human life that night. More on that later too, but the life I saved was a goofy, argumentative little fellow with four fingers on one hand and six on the other.

And, skipping forward, that's how I fell in with HELPING HANDS, (AKA The Helping Hands Community Acceptance Corporation AKA The Be Kind To Flowers Club) which is actually this odd little rag-tag group of misfits, renegades, and killers: friendly, quirky, happy-go-lucky serial killers, who were roaming America dispatching all the murderers, psychopaths,

deranged lunatics – basically, killing all the killers who have fallen through the cracks and thought they’d gotten away with it.

I noticed that making these “settlements” seemed to help me. My “self” seemed to be coming back a little more with each one. And I was enjoying what I did. Eventually I noticed my sense of smell and taste coming back little by little, and remembering how much I missed them. But I’m still not all there. Maybe in a few years, maybe.

And that’s it. I’m stuck in between. Neither in nor out. In my own personal limbo, on the edge of the borderlands between life and death. A leaf in the wind. A snail crawling across the edge of a razor.

For now, I’m a semi-pro serial killer: a modern-day, saddle-tramp, cowboy assassin, riding with this motley outfit. Only for me, I’m killing the guilty. At least that’s what we all tell ourselves.

And boy it sure seems fun. I’m having a blast. I live outside the straight world, I carry a gun, I come and go as I please, and I have a secret life that all the squares that pass me on the sidewalk have no inkling of.

Now my friend Catamuso, (my dedicated and loyal assistant wit the four fingers, who is now assigned to me as a sort of personal squire, always helping me out here and there, now and then...) good old Catamuso, (and probably keeping an eye on me for the people upstairs...) he thinks... now he thinks we’re all actually working for the devil.

We argue about that now and then.

He may have a point, though. While at first glance, “avenging the wrongfully slain so their souls can pass on and find peace” sounds a lot like the Lord’s work, I imagine we’re sending a whole lot of people straight to Hell, yup, right down there on the express line. And wouldn’t that be helping the Devil? So is the Devil a bad guy...or just part of the whole ecosystem of the human condition?

He thinks that maybe God and the Devil together, have something up their sleeve and, in the end, we have no idea what that is. No idea. I just shook my head.

But we're filling up Hell for someone.

And brother, Hell ain't half full.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMER VACATION

If your path demands that
you walk through hell,
walk as though you own the place.

-tiny buddha

I hit Connecticut and leave my car there with our expert mechanic Jumbo in Greenwich and ride the train into The City. Jumbo is a Roma (Gypsy) but came here from Cuba in the Mariel Boat lift and Cuban auto mechanics are virtual magicians, who had kept the county's cars running without access to spare parts etc, are known throughout South America as the wizards of auto mechanistry.

I'm due for a vacation. I put in for this one 6 months ago, and it will be my first one in three years, my first one, actually, since I signed up with this flying circus of cut-throats, killers and ner-do-wells.

I want to see the boss, a guy called Jack Ketch. The main headquarters of our operation is a large building in midtown,

with no windows, no doors and about 200 Gypsies working away all day long.

You get in through a travel agent shop in the building next door. The building owns itself but there's still taxes and lots of expenses and so this is where the loot is sorted and disposed. It's sold on eBay, Craigslist and Etsy to unsuspecting buyers and the dross is donated to various charities.

So I have a beef with one of the other Travelers. I want to take it up with Jack before this guy get's someone killed, probably one of our own people.

If this was a movie, we'd all be dedicated and morally motivated assassins. In reality, beyond the façade, we're all just a bunch of rather greedy, infighting, klepto pirates and brigands being as competitive and as ruthless and as we can get away with.

There's an "inspector general" named Morrison who investigates any transgressions and anomalies but I have yet to meet him.

Turns out that Jack won't see me right now. I'm told he's out of town by one person, not feeling well by another and mad at me by my old friend Queenie (who's probably kidding me).

I do find out that a great white whale of ours, an insane mass-killer named Quickjohn, has been spotted in Florida. Florida's where I am heading next. This Quickjohn character is a maniac and has been tagged with a string of mass murder incidents – ferry boats sinking, buses going off cliffs, church roofs caving in – discos catching fire, all mysterious mass deaths.

One has to wonder what motivates a person like that. I jokingly mentioned, as he was being discussed around the water cooler, that he sounds like the Mothman Prophecies and got silence and blank stares for a second until the conversation resumed.

Even the police have no idea about him, but in my world there's a bounty on his head, and its just been upped to 50K!

But I got my vacation to focus on now, and where I'm going to sleep tonight. No way I'm getting back on the road or missing a chance to party in my old stomping grounds. So I decide to start here and stay a night or two in New York. I need to wind down, rest up and chill since I've "been on the wheel" day and night for like, five jobs in a row.

No way I'm staying in our headquarters building. The Gypsies will keep me up all night with their working and carrying on.

But there's some kind of convention in town and all the hotels are crazy high, so now I got to find a place to stay tonight. I take Queenie's assistant, Tinka, a cute little Rumanian Roma (Gypsy) girl out for lunch and for some afternoon delight but turns out that she's got a boyfriend now so I'm not crashing at her place.

Next I call Una, an ancient GF who has a nice pad down in the West Village. She's a well-off model but lives in the Meatpacking District on the edge of the West Village because she likes the atmosphere.

No luck. I leave a message.

Then I hit an old haunt, a bar on 9th and 40th that I used to hang out in back in the day; one of those dives that's perfect for a winter Sunday afternoon. I used to know a day bartender, a student girl from a good family who had a nice flat in Gramercy Park that her parents paid for. I'm figuring maybe I can shack up with her for a day or two while I'm here in NYC. Shit, no luck. She's going to school in Portland now. I'm striking out on every turn of the cards.

I have a couple of drinks there anyways, musing over the memories, and I start fading a bit. All the action over the last few days, the stress, all the driving, today's sex-ersizes of banging Tinka, and all the walking here in New York is catching up with me. And then I remember; Shit! I forgot my ice cream! Fuck a duck! I was due to get eight scoops! (We get a scoop of a very special ice cream for each soul we send to hell.)

Looks like I really need a summer vacation. Been fucking up too much lately. Really need to get my mind right. Well, looks

like we're starting it here in NYC (even though its just now the start of spring).

I make a couple "hail Mary" phone calls to local hotels, but they are all full or they are asking the insane, crazy prices for a room. Some kind of big event in town.

I go to a last-minute-hotel-room website, and they want to send me all the way over to the Meadowlands to find a reasonable room. It would probably take me two or three hours to cab or bus there through the rush hour traffic that's about to start up.

Then it dawns on me. Una. *She always has a key to her place hidden somewhere in the hallway outside her door.*

I can remember where she hides the key. And if not, what the hell – I can surely pick the lock. I know her well enough for that. Still, I'd rather use the key. I take a cab down to her apartment, down in the meatpacking district. On the way I stop at a liquor store and pick up a sixer of Una's favorite brand beer.

I bang on the door. Nothing. And the key's not in the place she used to have it. I think for a second. Sure, you know what? She probably hid it somewhere else around here. If she takes it with her, she always loses it, so probably she hid it in a new place. Probably some freeloader friend (some other freeloader friend other than me) or some Ding Dong dufus she brought home drunk one night saw her retrieve the key and she had to re-hide it.

Sure enough, I find her key under a mouse trap behind a plumbing pipe down the hallway. I recognize it because it's still got a little bit of the green sticker from the hardware store from when I made it for her.

I put a note on the front of her door: *Dear Una, I took the liberty of crashing here tonight because there's a convention in town and all the hotel rooms are nuts. So don't be freaked when you come in and find me here. I tried to call you and left a message. I just figured it would be OK. Signed Anthony.* I've found that if the girls call me Anthony instead of Tony, (like Robert instead of Bob, or Michael instead of Mike etc. when I'm

working with a fictitious name) I get more stature and I get more slack. Somehow the full-name-thing makes them sort of respect you more.

And when I'm staying with a girl, I usually leave them a C-Note or, sometimes, also a bouquet of roses when I leave. Which means when I come back in town, I take priority over other vagabonds and ne'er-do-wells who may be mooching at the trough.

I turn on the lights, look around, holler. No one home. I'm relieved to see that it's still her place and someone else is not living there.

Not much in the refrigerator. She's been gone a while. Some stuff is out of date.

Her bed is, as always, made tight and perfectly just like in the Marines, where you can bounce a quarter on it. Pretty good habit for a scatterbrain, artistic type.

I flop down on it, flip the TV on and start running through the channels. I hit a STAR TREK episode I've never seen before, and though its half over, I'm right into it. I am always thinking I've seen them all before over the years, but every now and then I run across one I've never seen.

After a while I doze off for a minute and then catch myself and bolt back awake. Now I'm thinking about going out tonight. Or maybe it's best to just sit here chilling all night, and watch some TV? That would be nice.

I look at the fan spinning slowly above the bed and it reminds me of the opening scene from Apocalypse Now. I envision myself getting drunk and smashing a mirror with my hand and rolling around and falling off the bed. Ah, the things we daydream. Maybe I'll have shrimp for dinner tonight at that place down on the corner where the waiter looks like Harrison Ford.

As soon as it gets dark though, the good old New York night scene beckons me. That's it. I'm in The City now, and I

have no choice. I'm not waiting for Una. I'll leave her another note on the pillow. I hop up and get ready.

I'm coming out of the shower drying off and I hear the lock on the door turning. There's the temptation to stand there naked, pulling the towel off as she comes in, and flinging it up on high like a toreador, but... what if she's in a bad mood or something? Or has a current boyfriend with her? A libertine like me learns these disastrous possibilities from experience.

But it's not her.

It's a girl, but not Una. Fuck.

"Hi."

She's curious but not shocked to see me standing there with the towel around my waist and hair messy and wet. She remembers to put the key back in the hiding spot in the hallway and comes back in, bolting the door behind her.

"I take it you know Una and you are not a burglar." I say, "What's your name?"

"I'm Laser Girl. You're Anthony then." My eyebrows raise. In response, she holds up the note from the door.

I nod.

She looks like maybe mid-twenties. Odd haircut but a cute, baby-face. I would have to get her nerd glasses off and let her hair down to make a full assessment.

"You gay?" she asks.

"No. I'm just crashing here for a minute." I smile. She's standing right in front of me now, looking me up and down. "I'm an old friend of Una's. I..."

She takes one more step forward and pulls my towel off. Just like that. Then she reaches down taking my junk in her hands – sees it's not hard, and says: "Yep, yer gay." As she turns and saunters away towards the fridge, laughing.

Amused, I shake my head and tuck the towel back on me. As she walks back from the fridge, she swigs from one of my beers and is bringing me one too. Our eyes are locked. I don't ask her where Una is or when she's coming back, as my not knowing may make me seem unnecessarily suspicious.

“Who told you to put that towel back on Anthony?” she says as she whips it back off. Her cavalier, whimsical ways lead me to conclude she’s an extrovert by nature.

Standing there naked now, I cock my head to one side. Then she cocks her head too. We both grin. I bring my body into hers - her cold belt buckle on my skin - and I gently grab her face. We’re both smiling. I remove her glasses with my other hand and let her hair down by pulling the nabob loose on the back of her hair.

Then its just like in the movies. She’s a different person now. She was a little shy, nerdy moppet at first glance, now transitioned into a delightful sex-pot with interesting curves, and those nice, shapely legs that all the girls in New York tend to have, as they all do a lot of walking here.

I think some girls dress dumpy or dress like a kid in order to deter all the horny jerk-offs on the streets. With her glasses off and hair down its like the Clark Kent/Superman superhero disguise routine. She comes in dressed all bland and ho-hum, then rips it off and there it is. The bride in disguise.

And this is her wedding night; a delightful and refreshing afternoon interlude.

CHAPTER FIVE

EXILE ON EASY STREET

Whatever gets you through the night...
John Lennon

A quiet evening at home is out of the question now. The night is young. The night is out there: a beast, biding its time and waiting. Waiting for us. Waiting to devour us. As the nights in New York city are wont to do.

“That was nice.” She says, laying there, lighting a joint and smiling dreamily at the ceiling.

“Excellent and refreshing.” I respond.

Pufffff...

“Am I your girlfriend now?”

“No, I won’t be around long enough to have any girlfriends, darling.” I say almost diplomatically. She makes a fake frown. “But... you can be my sidekick tonight.”

“Wow.” She smiles. “Sure.”

While this Laser Girl is not particularly my “type”, we do have such good chemistry. For the Bevis and Butthead types, it’s all about makeup and big boobs. But for me, good “chemistry” is the home run with bases loaded. You never know. Sometimes the most beautiful girl in the room turns out to be the biggest dud.

“I think my having a local guide tonight will come in handy... but I always like to get the rules down from the start.”

“The rules...”

“Yes. I’ll have to go over the rules for sidekick-ery with you now. As you surmise, I respect a girl who, errrr... gets down to business right out of the gate.”

“You mean a slut...”

“As you put it...trollp, strumpet, hussy, hoyden... but I prefer... adventuress...”

She smiles for a second as it all sinks in: that it’s all a game that I’m doing here, and then she raises her arms with mock delight and yells: “Yessss! Adventuress!”

I continue: “Sure, if we hadn’t got off to such a good start...”

“...you wouldn’t be volunteering to pick up the tab... and probably wouldn’t even be taking me out there with you tonight.” I receive her strategic mention of “the tab” with a smile. I have to assume that she’s not playing me, she’s just politely telegraphing to me that she is as broke as a joke.

“Yes. On the other hand, I realize that if I was just a homely, everyday schlub of a guy, I doubt that we’d be lying here right now, like two slowly cooling pizzas.”

“Touche!”

“Touche.”

She catches on quick.

I turn her towards me and give it to her eye-to-eye. “Here’s the deal: right now – right upfront. If you can’t go along with it all, that’s fine. No harm no foul. We just go our merry ways.”

She nods.

“OK, here it is. I buy all the drinks, cover charges, cab rides...now, I do have a corporate credit card, so... I’m not really going out of my way at all for you, see.”

She makes a crooked face and says: “I mean my cards are all maxed out. End of the month you know, and....”

“Too broke to pay attention.” I drop in.

It takes her a second to nod and laugh.

A few more seconds pass before I continue: “So tonight, you come along. And who knows? You may see some hot, young swinging dick...or a tempting corporate exec....”

She smiles. “Who just broke up with the girlfriend...”

“And boom, you got him. You’re gone. Yeah. All cool. All fine. Fine by me. Bang, bang I got mine. Good for you, I say. But...”

“But?”

“But if I see a girl, a girl I like... now you don’t get jealous! You just fade back and watch... or better yet, help me pick her up.” Her eyes get wider. She winks at me and nods. I smile and nod a wink at her.

She smiles back. “That’s cool!” So we have graduated from hit-and-run lovers into co-conspirators now and she just loves it.

“So, you still wanna come?” I ask.

She nods, now smiling like she’s giving into her darker side.

“And you’ll follow the rules?” I say sternly.

She nods her head sideways whimsically. “Sure! Maybe your girl’s gonna be Bi and we can all have fun, huh!”

“Sure.”

“Hell yah!” she says. “Wow! That’s the opposite of everything....” She smiles. “I like it.”

“Sorry but I’m probably the opposite of all the men you know.”

“Yeah, how is that?” she asks.

I shrug. “I just am.”

“I know! You’re an *alpha*!” she says delighted and self-absorbed.

“A what?”

“An alpha-male!”

I shake my head, “Girl, you got that from reading those women’s magazines at the hairdresser.”

“I don’t go to the hairdresser. I cut my hair myself.”

“Whatever.” I say, realizing it’s obvious she cuts her own hair.

I’m smiling inside. They don’t make girls like this everyday, do they? But then this is New York.

“Now the best bars are still expensive, I imagine. The finer establishments?”

“Mmmmm. Expensive places? ...I don’t have the clothes...”

“Yes, I want to go to a nice place. This early at night we can still get in and get a good seat at the bar. Order some food...”

“Right.”

I really have no interest in going to her dingey, grungy, punk, artist, loser clubs where everyone mulls around, pontificating about politics and whining about their life. I want to hit the golden world of glamor that only NYC has to offer on a Friday night, with all the beautiful people, 24-dollar drinks and meaningless chatter.

And it might be quite amusing to take this Calamity Jane girl to the Hoy-Palloi places and let her loose. But she’s not going to fit in at the better places dressed as she is now. Not in the artist/grunge/wastrel format. “Welllll...”

So, here comes the age-old “shopping game” at me again. *Let’s go shopping and buy me some clothes.*

Not going to happen though. See, the minute I take her shopping I’m no longer a “real man” but a mark or a client. But it’s not like she’s playing me. I’d say she’s doing it instinctively – she probably doesn’t even know she’s doing it.

“Now don’t you think it will be nice to dress up for a change, young lady?” I say in a fatherly tone as I’m pulling my pants on. “You know, you can go in *disguise*.”

“Disguise?”

“You’ll just wear something “Una”. Yes, your disguise is to be Una tonight!” I say, pointing to Una’s closet. “You’re a little smaller than her, yeah, but I’m sure you can make some of her things in there fit.”

She looks over at the closet and then back at me, smiling impishly.

“Una will never know.” I say and wave her towards the closet with a nudge of my head and say: “Tonight we hit the hi-life.”

The word “disguise” is a good hook. Why wouldn’t a crazy, young, art-school-girl just love dragging it up in a disguise and going out into the world in Mufti for a night of adventure.

When she comes out of the closet all dolled up now, I nod and smile. A perfect metamorphosis!

She sits down next to me on the bed and starts to buckle her footwear. She does her makeup, shifts her hair and we’re off. She’s done her eyes up like Cleopatra – way over the top – and looks quite sexy and exotic now; a magic transformation from her scruffy art-student look. Perfectly whore-ish, vampy and slutty but also wild, fresh and elegant looking, and I’m going to be proudly “wearing” her like a new Armani suit.

“By the way, what’s your real name?” I ask.

“They call me Laser Girl, but I’m Jonni. My name is Jonni Chiffon.”

“Cool.” Jonni Chiffon, an art student name for sure but I really like it and will enjoy using it to introduce her when the time arrives.

The first place we hit is called PHDs, right around the corner from Una’s flat. It’s a rooftop place. These rooftop bars are all the rage in New York now, rooftop bars on top of hotels or office buildings. It’s a nice place, and as you walk in the décor warns you instantly that it’s expensive.

Not a whole lot of people here yet. There’s a few people at the bar, looking tepid and self-conscious, a gaggle of girls off down the way having a birthday party, and a few businessmen left over from happy hour. We sit at the bar.

The bartender asks me if I want a bar tab and before I can say anything, Laser Girl butts right in, interrupting politely: “No, no. We’ll pay as we go.”

The “bar tab” deal - as she informs me - is this new scam I’ve never heard of before. A “bar tab” is now where you pay one price ahead of time – a rather huge price – but you get to drink all night.

When the bartender is out of earshot she explains: “The Bar Tab deal’s a slick trick! They take your card and charge like 500 bucks to start. Now you can drink all night on that, all the rest of the night for free – but that’s it. So – see - if you decide to go somewhere else after you have a few drinks, you got a big bill: 500 fucking dollars! That is, if you don’t notice it. If you do, you freak out and so you wind up staying here all night to get your money’s worth out of the 500 dollar bar tab. They keep you here that way.”

Wow. Laser girl has paid for herself already. “Good girl. We’re probably not going to be here that long. Hopefully.” I say. “I want to hit a number of places tonight.”

“Yeah. Nothing much is going on here.” She says.

“No, it’s early, but we’ll give it a chance. But yer right, look at this crowd. These people are squares.”

“Squares. Yeah.”

“Yup.”

“Might be fun to put some of them on, ya know, have some fun with them?” She suggests.

“I’m good at that!” I say, smiling like the cheshire cat.

I think there’s a chance for me to find something at one of these upscale “beautiful people” bars. Maybe not so much for her here. Not her kind of place. Maybe there’s a middle-aged boss guy with a gut and a wedding ring she can nail or maybe a shy, nerdy, office-boy kid with glasses and bad complexion.

After a few drinks and a platter of sliders, we decide to split.

I go to the bathroom first, and then I flirt with a girl on the way back.

When I make it back up to Laser-Girl at the bar, she's got a couple of suits-and-haircuts hitting on her. They're there on the left side of her, where I was sitting before, and so I belly up on her right, leaning into the bar and tossing down the last slider. One of the guys talking to her glances at me annoyed like I'm a drunk eating her food, (totally not realizing I came with her) and also fearing I'm moving in.

So let's have a little fun.

I butt into the conversation: "Excuse me miss?" pretending to be a stranger, and as she turns to me, I say, "Listen, hello there little darlin', um, I was sitting over there looking at you and, ya know, you're pretty cute, so I was wondering... well, I'd kinda like a blow job? Can we go down to my car? Wadaya say? Huh?"

She smiles broadly, catching on to the game I'm running. "Sure. What kind of car you got?" the two suitors are wide eyed and stunned.

"A Rolls-Canardly."

"Wow. Yeah, sure. Let's go!" she says. Then she says, "Wait a minute. Let me check your dick." And she gropes my epicenter. As she squeezes, she makes a deep purring sound. Goofing around I turn my head and cough.

As I help her put her jacket on, one of the civilians says: "Hey, Mr. Rolls, I work at a dealership, now... and I've never heard of a Rolls-Canardly? What kinda game..."

I smile. As we turn to walk away, I say with all seriousness and deadpan delivery. "Rolls-Canardly: Rolls down one hill and can-hardly get up the next!"

She stomps her foot and laughs with an uncontrollable shriek and almost trips on her high heel. The guy that was sitting to my left and was eavesdropping everything guffaws with laughter too.

The joke is so old and so corny that these dips have never heard it before. Funny how people don't tell jokes anymore. 20 years ago, people still told jokes. Often memorized verbatim and out of the PLAYBOY jokes section or from HEE-HAW. Now I worry if any of these kids even know what the fuck a joke is anymore.

I glance over my shoulder as we go around the corner and they are standing there staring at us. “We put on a show for them, eh?” she says.

“It’ll give ‘em something to talk about at work tomorrow.”

On the elevator down she says: “You like to put people on.”

“Oh yeah.” Seems that I have come up with a wonderful, fun way to keep her from zoning out with boredom in these nice, upscale bars.

So, we hit another rooftop bar. It’s right around the corner almost. The vibe is a lot more different now than when I was living here in the City before. Or maybe its that I have changed. There’s no doubt that I have changed. Now I’m outside looking in and seeing “monstropolis” for what it is. New York city, what a monstrous and banal grind of life.

As I sit there and look around at all the people, some dull and laconic, perhaps hungover from the night before, and some animated and hyperactive: people on Espresso, Red Bull, and other systemic stimulants however contraband, I feel glad that I escaped this madhouse and am no longer in “the grind”. These people all have money or make a lot of it, all are spending it, and all are here because this joint is perceived by everyone else as “the place to be”. One day it will all be over, and they will have very little or no memory of it. Just a blur.

As we sit and talk over an large order of shrimp cocktail, I learn from Jonni that she lives down the hall from Una, was molested by her history teacher when she was young, had her first lesbian tryst when she was 15 with her cousin during a sleepover at her grandmother’s funeral, and went to college to study Marxism but reading all the books made her head hurt so she majored in Art.

Her business card says Jonni Chiffon but that can’t be her real name. Like Una, she’s an artist, though she mostly makes money by walking dogs for a living. Gotta give it to her: she’s surviving in NYC on her wing and her prayer.

She's broke right now because she invested her life savings, (\$340) with a fellow club kid named Madame Butterfly, (though Una and several of her friends call him M Butterfingers because he's always on X and always dropping and breaking things).

The \$340 invention? "Mr. Butterfingers, I mean Butterfly Boy, is inventing a Death Ray!"

"A death ray...."

"...that can vaporize people."

"Vaporize?" I ask.

"Yes, its eco-friendly! Vaporizing leaves no remains to bother with, and all the resultant pollution you usually get with a corpse? All that is gone. Poof! They're vaporized."

"I get it." The New York artist community! An amazing phenomenon. It occurs to me that there is a whole sort of sub-culture of artistic and literary human curiosities in the city that exists in a world of its own rules, logic, and colorfully imagined phenomena.

Turns out that M. Butterfingers is a real prince, a genuine prince from Madagascar. "Though at night he turns into a princess!" She says, giggling a little. She's looking at me out of the side of her eye, for my reaction. I just turn my head sideways, nodding and smiling a little. "Ah, Butterfly. Yes. The transformation. I see." She giggles.

Under further discussion I learn that she is addicted to crossword puzzles, and she's afraid to sleep in her apartment right now because of a mouse - which ran across her face one night while she was asleep - so she's been house-sitting, and sleeping at Una's "until the mouse goes away."

"You ever think of getting a cat?"

"Oh, I'm too irresponsible to have a pet of any kind."

"Or you could borrow one?"

"But he might eat the mouse."

"That's the idea."

"Oh. Yeah."

Right off the bat I see my credit card has been overcharged on the first round: three drinks instead of two. I guess you can't blame these guys for trying. The bartender is deeply apologetic. I interrupt his apology. "Dude, it's too early to get away with this kind of shit. Wait till everyone's flying." He nods and walks off. Probably new here. A real pro would have given me a free round to shut me up.

She continues. "See, I first stayed with Una when I lost my TV clicker – ya know, the thing that changes the channels? And we became best friends."

"Yeah." Ok, I'm mystified. "So..."

"The TV..."

"I couldn't turn it off and I couldn't turn it down. You know, turn the sound down."

I think for a minute and take a sip from my drink.

"So, I stayed with Una for three days. Until I found it. That's how we became friends!"

"Couldn't you just have unplugged it?"

"I don't know..."

Soon I'm talking to an almost interesting dame on my other side of me. She's in investments and I'm picking her brain for any insider tip that might make sense. I figure 9 out of 10 "tips" are wrong turns, mostly intentional; to get you to buy something that's being pumped up before the wheels fall off and it goes down the drain.

She's OK-looking but I have no interest in her. She's not my type. But, who knows, one of her tips may stand out, and it might be interesting to hear about what junk they're pumping right now. It's going along well and all, but Laser is looking over my shoulder and then she orders a drink and points to me to pay. And I pay.

The girl asks, "so....Is she with you?"

"Yeah, pretty hot little thing, eh?"

"Is that your girlfriend?"

"She's my daughter."

"Your daughter. How... I mean how old are you?"

“Oh, I nailed her mother – my 3rd grade teacher – when I was nine. Nine years old. Uh huh.”

“*What?*”

“Sure. I can tell you now because the statute of limitations is up.” Utterly disgusted, the girl shakes her head and walks off with her drink.

Jonni laughs and slaps me on the back and says: “That was fab! You’re nuts. I love it. Ha! We love putting people on, don’t we! Yezzz!”

In moments, another empty beauty takes investment girl’s seat and soon we are talking. She’s a Broadway assistant stage-manager and a bit of a club kid, a night-life person and a trust fund baby. I ask her about the NYC clubs these days, but I’ve never heard of most of the ones she names.

“Good to know that Little Sister’s is still open. Maybe I’ll hit it later, maybe. What about The Barron?”

“Gone.” She says, saddened.

“Cielo?”

“Gone.”

“Ever hear of Finale? Number Eight? The Provocateur?”

“Sure, all gone. Finito. Toast.”

Her date comes over and taps her on the shoulder and she takes hers and his drinks off. As they walk off, he’s grilling her. “Who’s that guy?” “An old friend.” I hear her say.

The place gets going, and soon it’s spinning faster and faster, like some kind of a carnival ride. Over the next few hours, we sit there entertained and befuddled, as we watch the amusement park scene before us fill up and glut with all the beautiful people. But now it seems that everyone here knows each other, and I get no more nibbles on the fishing pole from any of the female strays and floaters.

Fairly hammered on her free drinks, Laser Girl falls halfway out of her chair before she catches herself. We better get out of here, I think. While she was dressed sorta sexy when we came in, the stagecoach is turning into a pumpkin here, and her clothes are loosening up and looking a little goofy now, her hair

is falling a bit, and her makeup's a little smeared here and there. Worst of all, she's making me look bad. Should I turn her loose? No, I've grown fond of her Calamity Jane personality and dig all the fun and laughs we're having, and can't bring myself to just leave her here.

"Where do you go to this time of night?" I ask.

"There's some... some other good places, sure... but – hey – I know where there's a good rave-party tonight – super hot partyyyyy! And I got a password to get in free."

She starts to tell me about her house DJ friend who will be overlording the rave now and how she nursed him back to health after he got injured by a carriage horse and how he was a criminal before he met her and some of his sexual adventures with her, but I cut her off with: "What time's it start?" I'm familiar with these floating parties that are held in a different basement or warehouse or soccer field every weekend but wondering how they've changed.

"It's already started!" she says looking at the clock on her phone.

So, a cab ride to Brooklyn. Brooklyn. Well, shit. We're going to be out all night. In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess.

CHAPTER SIX

CHASING MIDNIGHT

My heart to my mother,
my cock to the whores and
my head to the hangman.

Jean Genet
Our Lady of the Flowers

At the Rave.

There's a pretty long line at the front door – maybe like 40 or 50 people but this does look like a good party. There're some hot looking ladies in line – you know – the kind men like, and some are all dressed out: sexy costumes, space ladies, vampire costumes, strippers, party girls...some are just kids, some are swells, slumming it.

Laser Girl stares at the line, looking it up and down for a few ticks, and then takes me by the hand, off and away from the

front. Uh huh, I'm thinking – she's seeing too much competition in the line, too many hot chicks and so she wants to go home?

But no, she leads me around back where there's a whole other line - the VIP line she tells me - maybe 20 or so people long. The rear parking lot area is down two floors below the front area so there's a wooden stairs going up to the rear door.

Besides this line to get in, there are people lolling around smoking joints, talking, sitting on the car hoods, and laughing and cutting up.

We get in line and immediately a girl starts throwing up right in front of us.

Looking for the big dipper in the sky I see a shooting star going over. I feel my talisman around my neck but it's not hot. No danger ahead? But it could be wrong. Laser Girl whispers that she wants me to call her Jonni here.

Laser Girl lights a joint and offers me a hit. "No, I can't get high right now." I beg off. There's too many ghosts floating around loose in NYC..."

"What?"

"Any kinda pills, pot or mushrooms might get me leveled out enough to start seeing them or attracting them."

"So, are you a cop or a drug dealer?" Laser Girl asks me after a while.

"Why would you say that?"

"C'mon, I saw your gun. Under the pillow."

"Oh yeah." I shake my head at my carelessness.

"Mafia?"

"No, none of that." I smile and pat her on the head reassuringly. "I'm... more of a clergyman."

"A priest?"

"Sort of."

"Cool! Cool, I just fucked a priest!"

"More like a hit-man. For the Vatican maybe. On a mission from God." I say. I can see the gears in her mind working. "No, don't worry. I'm not here on the job. Just passing through."

She takes a jar of peanut butter from her purse and scoops a wad of it out with her finger, licking it into her mouth. She offers me some. No.

The line we're in leads up to a wide, rather rickety wooden staircase going up into the back of the building two stories, with a sort of small landing or back porch at the head of the stairs and then there's a door going into the building with a guy taking money there. The guy is dressed like an executioner, with a black hood and is built like Conan (The R. E. Howard character, not the talk show host). He has studio wrestler arms, a beer gut, and a cat of nine tails hanging from his waist.

On the landing is a rusty, old, dented 50-gallon-drum with holes punched inside and a simmering fire in its pits for warmth I assume. It's getting chilly now this time of night.

"Fake ID!" the Executioner shouts out, waving the fake ID up high for all in line to see, and throws it into the smoldering trash can. But then he lets the girl in anyways.

As we get closer in line to where the stairs start, two girls try to cut in line a few people up in front of us. Laser Girl shouts at them, "hey! No cutting!" They glance at her but just ignore her, like she's nothing.

Laser Girl gets pissed!

"Hey! Bitches! You cut in on me? I'll cut you!" She yells, as she pulls a hatchet - a small hatchet about 12 or 14 inches long - from her purse, and brandishes it at them. Stepping closer towards them, she tries to get a better shot at them, but they run away screaming.

However, the Executioner is striding down the steps now. He walks up to a frozen Laser Girl, and grabs her hatchet. He cocks back and throws the hatchet up at a tree - a big old elm - sticking it in good, about 20 feet up there.

"No hatchets!" he says to her, holding a scolding finger up and then goes back upstairs with no more ado. She takes her position back in the line next to me, all put back in her place. "It was them that started it." She murmurs, and then the stunned crowd starts clapping for her. The executioner is even clapping.

When we get up to the door, she gives him the password.

“That password was last week.” He says sternly. She looks a text up on her cell phone, holds up another password to him and he nods, letting us in.

We go in, passing in through the back door and entering right into a big, company-size restroom. It’s a men’s room – there are urinals and all – but there are a few girls in here too: actually girls all over, doing lines, smoking joints, and what sounds like one girl getting her boots knocked hard in one of the stalls.

The bathroom attendant – a giant, 6’7” Jamaican or Dominican guy – sits in a highchair by the row of sinks with his spread of merch laid out there on the counter below the mirror: candy, condoms, cigarettes, gum, vape stuff... a regular corner store. Jonni buys a cigarette for a dollar. A dollar for a single cigarette? But they do have her brand, Benson & Hedges Menthol Lights. He’s got it all.

Inside it’s a whirlwind-kaleidoscope of fantastic and madcap people. There’s normal people, swells slumming it and student types and the sightseeing kind. We stop at a stage where naked and half-naked girls are getting painted on by artists - some good artists, some drunken amateurs.

A topless girl on a unicycle swipes by us. Next I notice that we have some sexy, scantily clad girls swinging above on trapezes, and glistening with baby oil. As we move through the crowd, I spy a fire-eater, three vampires, two angels with huge wings, a Toreador, a guy dressed as a plumber, Han Solo walking arm in arm with a transvestite Chewbacca somehow wearing heels....

Then, right in front of us we come upon a scenario that, in all my years, I will never be able to “unsee”. Before us is a thick, mad-eyed, bull-dyke woman, dressed as Oliver Hardy with a bouncing strap on, who is giving it to a handcuffed, obviously gay young man dressed as Stan Laurel. She has poor Stan bent down over a pool table, as a gathering of random people watch, curious, amused, and taking sips from their drinks.

His makeup features tears coming out the sides of his eyes and a sad mouth drawn on his face in a scream mode.

We find a place at one of the bars and order drinks. Before the drinks even arrive, Jonni goes over to a table – a hi-top table with three bumble-bee people and a Lego character sitting at it – and tells them something, while pointing off across the room. They get up and leave, going in the direction she was pointing in. She sits down at the table and waves me over. I grab our drinks and join her.

The floor show continues before us. It occurs to me that I might do better solo in this place. I point to a table in the corner, in a dark alcove area and say: “Isn’t that Robert Redford over there, sitting there all alone?”

“The movie star?” and she’s off in that direction, without even saying goodbye. I smile, amused.

After a while, a swatch of normal looking people come up and are giving me the eyeball: I have a table with one person and five chairs. They are obviously here slumming, here tonight from up-town or from New Haven and are hoping that I will give up my table. Yeah, sure... but one of the girls looks pretty hot and is giving me the eye – maybe sincere, maybe to score the table – but I hold my hands out and say, “Hey folks, join me!”

I manage to rise up and pull the chair next to me out, proffering it in a gentlemanly fashion to the hot one.

They are “slumming it” and I explain that I am too, just visiting here in the big city and enjoying myself. The hot one warms to me, now understanding that “I am a stranger here myself”. I’m getting good eye contact from her. Now with a home base, the rest of her party goes out exploring and having fun while me and her hold the table down and “stay out of trouble”.

I’m making headway with the hot one, my looks are winning for a change (in NYC one’s looks are often not as powerful a card as one’s attitude), and she’s getting frisky and playing with her hair. She explains that her husband is waiting at home and she’s going to bring a stranger home to make love to her while he watches.

“Do you like me?” I ask, right up front. She looks me in the eye amused. Then I say, pointing at her twirling, “When a girl likes you, she plays with her hair.”

Startled, she realizes that she’s unconsciously twirling some strands of her curly, light brown hair with her left hand. She smiles.

She further explains that her husband (who is at home) wants her to bring home a well-endowed Black man... but I finish her sentence with “...but I will do?” I guide her hand under the table to my “manhood” which is now “getting there” with all the sexy talk. “Mmmm.” She purrs.

“Give it a minute,” I say. “you’ll see.”

She looks me in the eyes with her big brown eyes and we hold the stare as she fiddles with me.

After a minute I’m good, and I whisper, “that’s enough.” And I pull her hand away. She gropes back, but I pull it away again. “No.” I say with a winning smile. “We’ll save that for later.” She smiles. Sometimes women love to be told “No!” the sterner the better. And I never miss a chance to try it out on a new one. In college I used to practice saying no in front of a mirror. I’d stand there and say “No!” 30 different ways, just as an exercise. Of course I wasn’t always such an arrogant asshole, there was a time when I was shy about girls and terrified that I would go and say something fucked up or clumsy and blow it.

I explain to her that her husband doesn’t have to even see me. That she can tie her husband up in the closet and we can make a lot of noise so he can hear us but not see me.

“Oh, he’ll like that.” She says. She takes a picture of my bulge with her cell phone and texts it to her husband. I kid her about something I don’t quite remember now and – as she laughs – she knocks over my drink and it lands in my lap.

“Well, well. Oh well, I have to go to the bathroom anyways.” I say, kissing her and heading off. However, as soon as I stand up my aroused state makes me quite conspicuous.

A few yards from the table, I ask a waitress (that turns out to be a young boy in drag) to point me to the nearest bathroom. Smiling and high as a kite, he grabs my nipple and pinches it and

- looking down at my bulging crotch - asks if I need someone to “hold it for me while I pee.”

“Not right now.” I say, diplomatically disentangling myself from the young bouncer, who points off yonder and says, “Looks heavy. Are you sure?”

I walk off laughing broadly, but still not knowing exactly where the bathroom is.

Then I recognize a couple of landmarks: Oh yes. The bathroom in the back – back over there where we first came in, after coming up the back stairs.

On the way to the bathroom a robed Jedi Knight girl makes eye contact, and changes course right at me, as she looks intently into my eyes, and holds my stare. She’s short but simply gorgeous, with thick, flowing, golden-brown hair. I’m a sucker for thick hair and she’s got that girl from CHEERS beat, what’s her name again? Kristy? Kirstie something? She glances down at my manhood, still aroused some, and then looks back, deep into my eyes.

Holding my stare, she comes directly up on me, intentionally and dramatically plowing right into me. And as she does, she reaches down and grabs me there. Seems like the New York girls have gotten more grabby since I was here years ago. Startled I breathe in deeply and stand there as we’re eye-to-eye. “It’s all wet.” She says.

“Spilled my drink.” She grabs my waist and belt and pulls me closer to her and kisses me. Her eyes tell me she means business. “Listen,” I say. “I’m going to the can and clean up, and.... Dry off. Where are you sitting at?”

“OK.” She says, “I’m over there.” She points her thumb back over her shoulder to one of the back bars.

“OK, cool. I’ll see you in a minute.”

And I head off to the restroom. Halfway there I stop and think a second. She was getting pretty close, pretty quick. I pat my ass and my wallets still there and my cell phone is in its holster on my belt. False alarm.

I have to wait in line. There’s a long line. Mostly women are waiting for stalls, the men are using the urinals. I get talking

to a girl in a kimono with a Viking helmet. Time passes. Women take a long time to go, but now, we've been stopped here in our line for what seems like a long, long time. Eventually the Jamaican bathroom guy comes over shouting and bangs on the stall door. Two hot-looking lesbos, dizzy and twilighting, come out a few seconds later. "Go make out, out there!" he yells at them, pointing out the door towards the parking lot. "Fucking gat-dam people ha' to piss, you know!"

Joking around, I ask the Viking girl in front of me if she knows Hagar the Horrible. She frowns and stops talking to me. I'm losing it. I look in the mirror across the room, and even from a distance I'm looking shopworn, tired and my hair is sticking up wrong. I pat it down, but I still look like a drunk.

I notice that all the other people in line look 10 years younger than me.

Done and back in the main ballroom, I look around for the Jedi Girl but she's not at the back bar now.

And Laser Girl is no longer sitting with the Robert Redford lookalike.

I pull my cell phone out to call Laser Girl but... IT'S NOT MY CELL PHONE! Fuck! The phone in my hand is a piece of shit: cracked screen, five or ten years old, patched up here and there with various types of tape and the screen flickering with the music.

Motherfucker!

That girl. The Jedi. She got my phone. Pickpocketed me and slipped another, old, broke phone in its place. Shit. Fuck. All my shit's on my phone. Fuck. I can't kiss it goodbye. I've got to get it back. I look around.

What a dork I am, thinking that I'm such a hot-shot and all the girls are gonna automatically just fall in love with me. Shit. I don't see the Jedi Knight anywhere. Maybe she's gone and booked out of the club. I'm all over the place looking for her. Nothing. Nowhere. That sinking feeling. Man, I fucked up.

I can call it? I ask someone to use their phone. They look at me like I'm crazy and walk off in a huff, as if I just asked

them to kill their first-born child. I must look a mess and am feeling out of place as I notice again, that most of the people here are younger than me. Where's Jonni? I go back by the Robert Redford table and she's still not there.

"Where'd she go?"

He doesn't know. She went off to buy a cigarette and didn't come back. I go up to the DJ booth. I manage to get up there because of my apparent desperation and because the DJ's Jonni's friend and I remember his name.

He understands my plight, but no one has turned in a cell phone. He suggests they I can get another phone and download what was on my old one from "the cloud?" Fuck that. I want my phone.

"Sure, where do I get a cell phone this time of night anyways?" I murmur sarcastically. "Are there any 24-hour cell phone shops open now?"

He smiles and says: "Yeah." And he then says: "Oh sure. The bathroom back there. Go see Terrance." Pointing to the bathroom I just came from.

"Terrance?"

"Yeah, the bathroom guy. He's got "burner" phones and sometimes used ones for sale. Yeah! Go ask him!"

I walk into the bathroom and there's Terrance, with a couple of suburban chicks hitting on him and trying to score some free cigs. I'm standing there waiting to catch his eye and talk to him as the girls keep getting his attention. I look at myself in the mirror – what a sad sack – then my eyes drift down to the cell phones, he has five or six of them for sale, all setting there in a row above the cigarettes.

Then: My cell phone! My fucking cell phone. Right there. Second from the left.

I lose it. "Hey! Hey! That's my cell phone!" and as I reach for it, his hand shoots out and slaps my wrist.

"Hey!"

"That's my phone dude."

"Is MY cell phone now!" he says, laughing like the cola nut guy. "heh heh heh!"

Fuck!

“Fuck dude! That one there is mine. It’s got my pictures on it.”

“That phone there, I get 100 dollah for! I mean, how I know it yours? You got a hundred dollar? That’s how!” he laughs. “Eh, mon, I pay good money for that cell phone already. It mine now.”

“Now fuck, that’s...”

To prove its mine, I tell him the code to unlock it and he does. “Seeeee!” I say as it comes to life! He laughs. I reach for it, now having proved its mine. He pulls it back and holds it high. “Is now \$200.”

“What?!”

“I have-ah the code! Probably lots of good pictures on here, eh?”

I have the Sig P365 in the small of my back... but I don’t really want to escalate this, not with all his friends and fans around him here, and with his Conan the Executioner buddy just behind him outside on the landing. I know that’s a bad idea from general experience.

But I’ve got to get it back.

Got to figure out a plan.

I’m not going to pay him 200 dollars for my own cell phone. On general principle, I’m not going to pay him a fucking dime now.

“OK motherfucker. I’ll be back. My girl has all our cash on her! And we got the two-fucking-hundred! Lemme go get it! Just hold it – hold it, and

I’ll be right back.”

“Yah, yah! I hold it, monnnn.”

I turn and point at him with my finger, “You hold it, mon! Two hundred bucks. I’ll be right back. And no peeking!” I actually have the 200 on me but maybe Jonni knows him and can get it back for me? Maybe I can distract him while I grab my phone? One way or another I’ll need Jonni’s help to make something happen.

I go by the Redford look-alike's table. I explain my predicament. I lost my phone. I'm fucked. "I know how that can be. That's bad. She'll be back." He says reassuringly. He says it during a lull in the music, between songs. Holy shit. That's him. That voice. It is Robert Redford. The real one.

Cool.

But the phone, gotta get that phone... The fucking Sundance Kid. I murmur as I walk away. Holy fucking shit.

From up in the DJ booth (again) overlooking the place, I spot Laser Girl down there in the crowd. She's sitting at a table with a couple of other young ne'er-do-well club-kids. Her head is lolled back, and she's nodding out. The person to her left is also "pining for the fjords", a chubby Black club-kid in a kind in a butterfly outfit with wings and his face painted with white streaks. To her right is a guy with a pirate hat on crooked and talking a speeding blue streak to his two passed-out table mates. Laser Girl has a magic wand in her hand, a nice one, with sparkles and LEDs.

Making my way down below, I try to shake her awake and explain the plan. She's still woozy though. Out of the side of my eye, I see that the pirate is doing a coke spoon of blow from some kind of pendant he has sitting there on the table. I pick up the antique, silver, picture-pendant that is lying on the table with the face open and put it under Jonni's nose. "Sniff!" I command! "Jonni, sniff it! Snort that motherfucker!"

The pirate's head comes back down to eye level from his jolt, and he says "Hey!" reaching for his coke. I pull it back, away from his reach and with my other hand point my finger in his face and say, loudly, "HEY! Don't grab!"

He rocks back confused.

I say, "It's not polite!" as I set the neck pendant down on the table, a silver casing made from an old pocket watch. "There."

He goes to pick it up and take it back, but I stop his hand, taking a firm hold of it.

I point at the picture in the watch face of the pendant.
“That... is that your mother?”

He nods. “You are a mess,” I say with whatever scorn I can muster at this point in the long, long night. “You should be ashamed of yourself. A picture of your mother in your coke stash! Indeed.”

Laser Girl comes around and starts up back alive with a Calamity Jane whoop and a roll of her head. Alert now, I explain to her all about my loss. When she realizes it’s a stolen cell phone, she becomes as alert and alive as I am. To these kids these days, the loss of a cell phone is tantamount only to losing one’s soul... to losing one’s immortal fucking soul.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER...

I stick my finger in the ground
and spin the world around.

Rudy Ray Moore in DOLOMITE

So, my plan is simple. Laser Girl is to go into the bathroom, she buys a cigarette for a dollar (I have to give her a buck now, because she has no cash) and then she is instructed to back up herself up against the wall and light the cigarette. Right to the left of the door is a row of light switches on the wall. I explain. She is to lean against the switches with her whole body and then, when I come in – just when I pull out money to give to the Jamaican guy – she is to slide downward, pulling all the switches down with her, and pulling them into the off position, thus plunging the bathroom into darkness.

“Why don’t you just give him the two hundred dollars.”
She says, as we walk along.

“On general principle, I’m not going to give that greedy pig one red cent. Fuck him! He got greedy, I gave him a chance, but he’s lost his privileges now! And that’s it!”

The plan goes well.

As soon as the lights go off, I pull my left hand out of my pocket with a roll of quarters (that cost me 20 at the bar) and my knuckles wrapped in some of that black duct-tape-stuff that musicians use, and that I nabbed from behind the bar when the bartender went to get the roll... and I haul back and I clock the poor guy right on the jaw. Fast like a snake striking. Wham! Like I’m punching right through his head.

He howls out, and as the light come on, the quarters are splattering all over the floor, people are screaming, Terrance staggers back, back towards the door to the stairs in back and stumbles backwards over the door threshold out onto the porch area and the stairs going down.

Outside there’s like, only four or five people waiting to get in but they freak and flee back down the stairs, screaming and laughing.

I’m watching this like a Facebook video.

The Executioner there reaches out to grab the stumbling Terrance, but accidentally pokes him in the eye, and now the Jamaican howls and staggers back and falls ass-end into the big 50-gallon drum...

...which now tips over with his top-heavy weight, and rolls.

As the executioner slips, trying to grab out for the drum he – the executioner guy – goes over, slipping over the railing, with a yelp and then a howl of pain in the distance when he lands.

As the now top-heavy and rocking oil drum falls backwards and rolls – it rolls right down the staircase – clean but banging Terrance’s head against the posts that are holding up the railing as it goes down, people running down and jumping over the railing to escape the burning drum spitting sparks out the holes in the side with every thump.

A sight to see and a YouTube moment.

I look at Laser Girl across the room. She's wide eyed, wide awake and with a real WTF look on her face.

Gotta go. As I leave, I drag my arm, sweeping all the merchandise off the wash-basin area and onto the floor and shout: "Happy birthday everyone! Everything's free!" Cheers. Mayhem.

Laser Girl is bending down into the mob to score a pack of cigarettes, but I grab her by the scruff of the neck like you would a puppy and lift her up and out, as the bathroom denizens behind us melt into a scrambling, clawing mob. No way the Jamaican or the Executioner are going to make it back up and through that mélange of pandemonium any time soon.

I set her down outside and she says "That was poppin'! Wow! That was truly poppin'!"

She's looking at her cell phone as we scamper across the dance floor, holding her by her other arm. Cool. She got it all on her cell phone.

As we make it towards the front door to escape, a few bouncer-type security guys rush past us towards the bathroom area. It dawns on me that they may have security cameras in there, probably all over the place. And I don't have my security camera scrambler with me. As we move, I reach for my Sig, (now in my pocket) I chamber a round in the darkness as I'm movingwnies

o, and then put it back in my pocket.

When we get to the front door – we're making it out fine – and then one of the doormen – who's listening and nodding to his fucking earphone – reaches out for me and grabs ahold of my shoulder.

Then another doorman is on me and I'm struggling. I start sliding down to the ground. I don't like it. You never let them get you off your feet in a fight. I push one doorman off and back, and then I hit the other one – the one behind me, right into his face with my elbow. A lucky shot, I get him in the throat, and he starts choking and coughing.

Now the first one is back up, coming at me with an electric cattle prod a foot-and-a-half long in one hand and a big can of Mace in the other. It looks like they got me, but Jonni comes at him from behind me, screaming like a banshee and swinging another axe. Another fucking axe. Wow. I musta sure fucked that girl good, with her now jumping in here for me, like a tiger protecting her cubs.

She dives into him like a hellcat but tripping over the choking bouncer that's on the ground and they both – or all three- somehow roll into the crowd, flailing and knocking people over and around, all scrambling frantically.

The second bouncer rises up, squirting blood and screaming like a stuck pig. People are screaming and falling over each other as Laser Girl comes bolting out of the pileup like a Laser. She comes toward me and grabs my hand and we're off.

As she passes the screaming, clawing pile-up she reaches down and picks something up quick. Damn, she had to get her pack of cigarettes after all, I think.

As we head away from the maelstrom and the insane explosion of people fleeing the mayhem and bloodshed, I see the New Haven hot wife that had the kinky husband getting into a cab down the street with a Black stud in tow. Well, somebody's going to get laid tonight.

A little further we see some people getting in a car – an Uber: I can tell by the lighted sign on the dashboard – and I pull them out and throw Jonni in the back seat. They're squawking and so I hand them a hundred bucks and shout "Get another one folks! Got an emergency here!" pointing to the blood she has all over her now.

In the car, the Uber driver asks, "What's the emergency?"

When I don't say anything, she spouts out, "I gotta get him home and watch the Judge Wapner reruns! It's on in ten minutes." The Uber driver looks at me sort of confused and upset and I hand him a C-Note too. His face changes from outrage to delight and he says: "Where too?"

“Just drive.” I murmur and I reach for the 9mm in my pocket as I’m keeping an eye on some menacing security guys off into the distance behind us who are scanning around me and her.

“What?” he says as he’s turning the radio down.

“Just drive, he said!” she says, yelling over the music.

“I’ve seen that movie.” I say, almost under my breath.

“Karen Black and Bruce Dern. 1970 or 71.”

“Yeah, but Robert Towne too. The screen writer guy!” she says.

“Really, he wrote that?”

Smiling smartly, she lightly donks me on the forehead with her magic wand. Somehow, she still has it after all that, and it’s still in good condition.

“He acted in it.”

“No way.” Says the cabdriver.

“And with Jack Nicholson directing!” she adds as I notice we’re heading the right direction, heading towards the bridge. As we ride off into the night, I have a flashback and can see the cattle prod coming at me with the words “Con Ed” painted on it in silver paint, with lightning bolts surrounding it.

“How’d you get your fucking axe back?” I ask her.

“Oh, I always carry two now! They’re always taking them away from me.”

“Are you OK? What was all that blood? Are you hurt?”

“Oh, I’m good. I’m fine. I cut his ear off.” She says holding it up in the dark. I see the cab driver glance in his mirror and squint just as the streetlight hits the ear and lights it up. He shakes his head and says, “Some swell dame ya got there pal.”

Back at Una ’s now... but Una ’s still not home. “You know when she’s coming back?” I ask.

“No. she’s down in... Buck’s County. A modeling shoot.” She’s a model now, eh? “The photographer’s pretty cute. So, it may be a few more days.”

“Buck’s County, eh?”

“Hey, you talked to her right? About staying here?”

I exhale. “No. You got me.”

“Breaking and entering. That’s cool.” She looks at me kind of suspicious. “I figured you were a criminal.” She’s looking in Una’s refrigerator. She takes a couple of TV dinners out of the freezer and pops them in the microwave.

“Whew,” she says, “I won’t be able to go to that party again for at least a month.”

“Sure enough.”

“Hey. I’ll be right back.” And she goes out the door.

She’s gonna call the cops? Nope, she left her cell phone right here. I see it right there as I sit down in one of the high standing chairs around the big, long, marble top breakfast-counter in the center of Una’s kitchen.

I check Jonni’s phone, but its password protected. Driver’s license says her name’s Olivia Noomis. Muncie, Indiana. I light a roach that I find in the cellophane of her pack of Kools. I’m figuring, after tonight I need to settle down if I want to get to get any sleep at all. If the ghosts come tonight cause I’m high... fuck ‘em. I’m done.

As Jonni comes back in with a carton of eggs and a loaf of gluten free bread, I notice the ear setting on the other side of the purse – on the counter there.

I hold it up as she walks by me. Yep, it’s an ear Jeffrey. A human ear. I think to myself. “This for your scrapbook?” I ask, as she turns around from the eggs sizzling in the frying pan.

“I’m getting good. I took that fucker’s ear right off with the first swing.” She laughs. She takes it out of my hand and hold the ear up to her mouth: “Hello? Hello?”

“Yer lucky you didn’t split his skull.”

She looks at the ear, dangling between her fingers and shrugs. “Yeah.” Then, “If you weren’t drunk tonight, would you still have done all that?” she asks.

I think for a second. “Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Just before dawn I hear some rustling and look around.

Is Una home finally? I look around and don't see anything. No one there. Oh yeah, maybe a ghost.... Fuck him. Fuck all the ghosts. I'm sleeping. Go away ghost.

A minute later though, I sense someone still standing at the side of the bed. And the smell. Smells like burnt plastic and a gerbil cage. I look up and there's someone there. A ghost, homing in on me because I burned the roach earlier? As I roll over, away from the ghost, I bump into my phone, and it lights up.

I hear a gasp and a hick-up and I turn back, looking over my shoulder.

There's a skinny, weird looking Black guy on the other side of Jonni, a Black kid, probably in his teens or early 20s, with an Urkel looking face and glasses, standing there, with some kind of butterfly outfit on, a face painted in the Krumper style and with his junk hanging out. Is he the kid from the club that was at the table with the pirate? Jonni wakes up and is turning over in my direction, grumbling, "whuuuuu..."

"I think it's for you." I say to her and turn back away from the peculiar visitor.

She sees the butterfly boy club-kid and rapidly sits bolt upright, and he's standing there as he says, in a little boy voice, "My wee wee hurts. Make it betterrrr." She lets out a slight yell as she swings her magic wand at him – my back is to it all now, but I can imagine – and hits him, and he lets out a yelp, and takes off.

As he runs off, she scolds him, "Go Princess! Go now! You get out of here right now! Bad, bad Princess! Go away! Be gone!" As he's running out the door he's sobbing and she's screaming "Go! Fly! Fly away, oh nasty boy!" He knocks off one of his bigger butterfly wings and lets out a high pitched "Meep!" as he goes out the door.

Some way to start a vacation. Next day I'm heading south towards Florida.

At least I didn't get vaporized.

CHAPTER. 7 B

AND THOUGH
HIS SHOES
WERE SHINED,
HIS DAYS
WERE NUMBERED

I believe a young woman
is standing in a circle of lions
on the other side of the sky.

Kenneth Patchen

I wake to the sound of the maid pulling the door shut, after
peeking in and wanting to make up the room. I'm in a cheap but
clean Motel Six, at a expressway exit outside of Baltimore.

Had a stop to make yesterday in Hagerstown, would up
killing one other guy and getting my hands on a couple of nice,

samurai swords and a short box of slabbed golden-age comic books. Also half a bottle of Remi that I cunningly killed on the way down.

So I'm hung over.
And I was dreaming.

I've been dreaming a lot lately. Often about robots. This one was about robots.

I was trying to save a girl from the robots. She was screaming and kicking and they were ripping her clothes. One of the robots was smoking a pipe. I couldn't get to her, I couldn't save her. There was a force field or a rounded glass wall, a clear wall, between me and them.

The robots had her down good and were going at it. But then, before ya know it, she's liking it. Holy shit, she's in a frenzy, sweating and swearing and nutting to beat the band. I bang on the wall. Does she know what she's doing? But when she hears me she looks over at me in a lazy daze and gives me the finger.

I crumble into the wall with frustration and slide down to my knees. Then rise and walk away. The racket behind me fades and I realize I'm smoking the pipe. The robot's pipe. And it's a bubble pipe.

I look out the window but it's dark – a dark, miserable morning - and raining a little. I pop an Alka Seltzer, light a cigarette and flop back down on the bed.

So far, I've been working for Jack Ketch in his little murder club for three years now. I've been taking the assignments – the “settlements” – one after another – one, two, three... and I've had it. I want to come up with some investigations on my own. Do the whole operation. All me. I know I can do it.

Other “Travelers” do it. But not me. Not yet. I tried it back, a year and a half ago. Toledo, Ohio. Got yelled at. Didn’t work out anyways, and I got on the shit-list.

But that’s where the real money is. I’m a partner instead of a hired gun. Not just a cog in the machine. I know I’d be good at it. If I could just do one “inquest”, a inquest all on my own...and I could prove I could do it. Run my own show.

There’s more work- sure – investigating the case, planning it and a lot more time.

But that’s where QuickJohn is. On the other side of that rainbow. He is the treasure at the end of the rainbow. I’ve got to find him. Got to nail him. Got to bring him in.

I turn cartoons on.

I gotta get my own gig.

I go to the window and look out in the parking lot again, pulling the shades back a bit and they almost fall down on me. Hardly any cars left. I got in about 2AM. There was a dead mouse in the cabinet thing under the sink. I got the plastic, do-not-disturb door hanger and threw the mouse out into the parking lot. Either a cat got it or maybe it got stuck to the tire of one of the cars leaving.

Hey!

That’s why the maid kept waking me up this morning. I threw the do-not-disturb thingee out with the mouse!

See what great detective-ness I have!

CHAPTER EIGHT

...SAID THE JOKER TO THE THEIF.

The whole conviction of my life now rests
upon the belief that loneliness,
far from being a rare and curious phenomenon,
is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.

Thomas Wolfe

After a few stops and impromptu settlements, I'm crossing the Florida state line.

As I ride along and the day sails by, bit by bit... and I'm feeling good. Free, sharp and good. And I am alone. In this job one has to acclimate to being alone. accept loneliness. Accept the silence. Or you crack up.

Most of the time I'm on my own. Other than that curious Catamuso fellow, I don't really have any regular normal, human contact to speak of. And he's more of a foil than a friend. He's always ready to argue, stubborn, cantankerous, ever so touchy... but lately I've been able to break through now and then.

And no steady girlfriend. A GF's not a good idea for someone in this line of work. No, and not even a pet dog. I'm just living one day at a time, living on the road.

I see people die. In this job you see that up close. And I observe. As they lay dying – their life fading away – you see them truly alone. I can see them suddenly realize how alone they are at that moment. Alone when they realize that going to be gone and the rest are all staying here.

I see the look on their face as everything they know – everything they've ever done – fades away, vanishing, as if the floor beneath them is disappearing, and the world around them is vanishing, and they are being swallowed, swallowed alive and whole, into the rising walls of darkness.

Out of pure boredom I think on the concept of loneliness. Roll it over in my mind. Recall. Relive. Remember.

Soon it begins to haunt me and I can't get rid of it.
Loneliness.

For a few seconds I picture an ant. A lonely ant. A lonely, lone ant, lost and floating on a leaf, floating in the middle of the ocean...a hundred miles from anything, from land, an island, from the shipping lanes. A thousand miles from land. Baking in the sun. Conscious but doomed. And alone.

Just thinking about loneliness starts to bring back old memories.

Another Aunt.

When I was about eight or nine years old... that was a stormy time in my family. My parents were going at it like cats and dogs, and in the middle of all this, out of nowhere, here comes this crazy aunt of mine, swooping in like a guardian angel and pretty much kidnaping me.

Or maybe she sort of felt she was adopting me. Maybe she thought my parents were going to kill each other - sure seemed like that at times, and that she was rescuing me, grabbing me out of the line of fire.

Anyways my crazy aunt - my crazy lesbian do-gooder, ex-stripper, dog groomer and dog walker, political-activist-for-hire Aunt – my Aunt Maria (or Trixie as she was called by the denizens of her world) - scooped me up out of the whole family-world mess and then we were off and on the road. Off into the wild.

Escaping. Rolling the window down on her station wagon and feeling the wind on my face as the sun set in the distance and the dog joined me in the wind.

And for a 9-year-old, it was a wonderful wonderland. A surreal, story-book world of odd and excentric people, late night parties, watching strange acts of sexual depravity through a keyhole, occasionally living off of shoplifted food, and...getting scolded for pointing a loaded gun at a drag queen that was threatening my aunt's lover's Chihuahua with a switchblade.

I mean you just can't knife a dog for pooping onto a spread of pot laid out on double record-album cover. The switchblade had a comb for a blade, but I didn't know that. I don't think that the drag queen even knew that.

Sooo... seedy motel rooms, worn out, dog-eared, apartments in bad neighborhoods, sleeping in the car, sleeping on couches in the living rooms of Aunt Maria's long-lost friends, waking up on beaches, rooftops, in phone booths... we were always moving, always getting in trouble and always looking for the legendary big-money action that would solve everything.

I got to see Downtown Buffalo, Fort Smith Arkansas, the worst parts of Detroit, spent a month in a place in New Orleans called Algiers, then Bozier City, West Palm Beach, South Memphis, Oakland and Baltimore Maryland, out there by the race track.

Bot for an 9-year-old it was heaven. I didn't have to go to school any more. Home teaching. Sure. I learned things like Tarot cards, juggling, riding a unicycle, riding a horse, riding a goat, amateur falconry, Esperanto and holistic gardening. Almost every day was a erratic kaleidoscope of surreal, unpredictable, fast moving dramas, total WTFs, dirty jokes that I didn't entirely

understand but laughed along with, and a constant state of delightful amusement...

...then with long lapses of serene, self absorbed contemplation, deep thought, moments of clarity and stretches of peaceful playtimes.

I remember all that like a picture postcard: watching the world go by on a sunny day, looking out the window of a car on the way to the next city, exploring dark attics and damp basement looking for treasure, getting kissing lessons from a Creole girl a few years older than me, (and dreaming about it later and feeling my first-time hard-on), blowing the floating white dandelion seedlings off into the sunny day and chasing them along with Mariah's lesbian lover's chihuahua, barking jumping up and down and snapping up at them.

All those things are snapshots, preserved forever in my mind.

A supercharged carnival of my golden youth! Sure. Every kid should have one. Every time I see Amy Winehouse's MY TEARS DRY ON THEIR OWN video, I think back on those days and to that world and ohhhh, I remember them so fondly.

Shit.

The memories flash through my mind now: the laughter, the howls, the crying, the screams. The sound of people falling down the stairs, the wooden creak of a drawer, the peek of the red morning sunlight through a bullet hole in the window shade, the smile of a street peddler with ulterior motives, the look of fear in the face of a lost toddler, the sawdust on the floor of the bar and smelling the disinfectant in the morning as my aunt was looking for a waitress job. The time a carnival clown fell off the stage and shit himself. Sad. Sad, stinky clown.

And ohh, the smells, all the smells, all the smells come wafting back now. The smell of the German lady's cabbage cooking, the smell of the plastic kiddie wading pool, the smell of fireworks, the pungent smell of the working man, home from a day of labour, sitting down at the kitchen table for a cold glass of beer. The smell of worms run over by cars on a rainy morning.

It's all coming back to me now, like a movie trailer playing in my mind.

I remember the time I came out into the kitchen and a rat the size of a meatloaf was looking at me from on the sink and I shot at it with my cap gun. Getting in trouble for beating on a bully with my Aunt's strap-on dildo, and later doing dildo sword fighting with an Armenian kid down the hall who brought out his step-mother's dildo and challenged me to a duel. Surfing down a snowy hillside with all the other kids, all on garbage can lids. The sound of a gunshot in the room across the hall when "The Old Fag", as he was called, put a gun in his mouth and shot himself after he found out that "The Young Fag" left him for a city councilman. The time Mariah's lover took the pogo stick I found in the trash and was drunkenly jumping up and down in the kitchen and hit the ceiling, and then had to wear a neck brace for two weeks. The time a junkie convulsed and died down the end of the hallway and Japanese tourists (who had apparently been shanghaied by their travel agent into this dump hotel that we were staying in), were taking pictures of the dead guy with their camaras.

But back to loneliness, and maybe the feeling (the theory? the realization?) that perhaps...perhaps one is always...alone in the world. Yeah.

I remember that day. The first day that that feeling hit me, that feeling of doom – doom, fear and mortal terror - and that I was on my own. I remember it more than ever now. So long ago but still so vivid.

I remember that crazy argument; the yelling, the dishes and the liquor bottles flying against the wall, all the "bad words", face slaps, clothes torn....

See, it seemed that as long as we were challenged by fate, or on the ropes or on the run, or in some desperate situations... that everything was fine and dandy with the relationship between my aunt and her lover. Truly they loved each other, and it was a beautiful thing to see, even for an 9-year old. Love. Seeing love happen. I didn't know what love was, but – looking back on it - it made me feel good...that everything was OK. That I was safe. It made me feel that everything would work out somehow.

However when things got going really, really good, and everything was coming together and we were settled in and things were happy - day in and day out – it seems that that's when the hammer came down. That's when things went off the rails.

The trouble usually started with some humorous but sarcastic comments between the girls: pissy little remarks, then evolving into those sassy, hurtful, rude, words that burned and stung. Sometimes you can actually feel those words sting somebody, and you feel sorry for them.

So... we were all settled in there in Algiers, Algiers across the river from new Orleans, into an rather peaceful apartment building, full of single mothers with two jobs, potheads and their dealers, and a few bohemian artists and wanna-be rappers. Things were good.

Well, Wanda - my aunt's eternal lesbian lover of all the years- (I called her "Wonder Wanda" because some of her stripper costumes looked like Marvel superhero outfits) - Wanda comes home two days late (and stinking drunk)... two days late, for her own Birthday party.

Now the area we were staying in right there was Wanda's old childhood neighborhood: where she grew up, and half of Wanda's relatives were in our building or just around the corner. They treated me like family. Fat middled aged ladies gave me lollipops and muffins and their fat middle aged common law husbands with beard stubble, liquor breath, cigarette stink and food stained T-shirts hoisted me up in their arms and jostled me up and down. Out back one time, at a weekend barbeque grill and keg party, I got spun around by my ears by one of those tipsy characters.

Anyways; Aunt Mariah had engineered a big, swell party for her lover of lovers. She had balloons, the biggest, prettiest cake I'd ever seen, a singing telegram person, a joint the size of a small banana with Wanda's name on it. Chairs and tables were brought in from the neighbors...one of the hippy era potheads from down the hall even brought a 3-foot-tall artificial Christmas tree with decorations still hanging on it (and dropping off).

Well...everything but Wanda was there.

We were all waiting. Sat there waiting. Waiting for Wanda to come home from work at the strip club. All waiting.

When Wanda finally came home two days later, that cake was gone, the people gone, the giant joint all smoked up and only polaroids of people smoking it, the balloons hung limp, Wanda's favorite stripper/superhero outfit cut to ribbons with a pinking shears...but curiously the little hippy Christmas tree was still all there, intact and just fine.

The ensuing fight was legendary. It lasted forever - 20 minutes or so – a real knock-down, drag out donnybrook...
Wow.

It was a fight to remember. The neighbors were taking pictures, people from down the hallway yelling "Catfight! Catfight!", and everything that wasn't nailed down was swept up into watching the maelstrom of fury and bitter madness...until the cops got there.

The police took both of them off; Aunt Mariah and Wanda.

After all the broken plates and glasses and a few gun shots, I was under the bed, hiding; hiding where I always hid when the fur stared flying.

Finally I heard things settle down. The cops talking. And then they took 'em off, the cops did, and pulled the door closed behind them.

But I'm still there, under the bed. I'm playing with my toys and humming. Oh, I'm happy that things have quieted down now and it's all OK now. Happy.

Until I got hungry.

I came out from under the bed. Looked around. Whatta mess. Hungry. I started with some cake that was stuck to the side of the refrigerator and that the roaches couldn't have gotten to yet. Later I got hungrier.

There was blood everywhere. I walked around it. I knew from all the previous catfights, that blood was greasy and slippery.

Now, you have to understand. In view of the life I had been leading the previous six months, this “Birthday Brawl” seemed to be nothing all that unusual or any too serious.

But after a day or so, I began to get scared. First I got scared, then... I can remember it like a picture - I’m sitting there all alone, a toy fire-truck in my hand, and wham! It hits me. I’m feeling bad. A feeling of total loneliness, abandonment, worry...and even more so, a feeling of doom. Yes doom. For doom is the deepest part of loneliness – that sudden awareness of doom – awareness of your own personal...that inevitable, ever galloping doooooom. Doom is the Mariana trench of loneliness, yes the doom part of it is that. 100%!

And I can still feel that moment of awareness, see that exact moment when things hit me, I can see it in my mind – the afternoon sun coming in the window, the toy in my hand, a bug on the wall, the silence...and I’m sitting there, the dust lit in a beam of sunlight: and washing over in front of me in my moment of clarity.

Now I feel bad, I feel sick even... and I crawled back under the bed and I stayed there...until the next afternoon...until one of the relatives said, “Anthony! Where’s Anthony! Where the fuck is Anthony!”

I’d been in that room all by myself for days!

When heard something outside I ducked back under the bed and the door burst open and heavy feet came tromping in, and they found me there under the bed with a spoon in a jar of peanut butter in one hand, and the other reaching for a monstrous dildo I had been using to protect myself and keep the mice away.

And that was the end of my “Huckleberry Finn” era of childhood. The best of times and the worst of times. I went back to my parents who had grown together again had been looking for me everywhere.

Being a part of things being one with others... with your friends, your loved ones, your team, your classmates... is really

a sweet nectar of a feeling (that we seem to take for granted until it gets gone.)

But perhaps that's all an illusion: being part of things. Like money or fame or love: just illusions – a distractions - till death comes. but it's a good illusion and it keeps us going. Sure. Thank God for that.

Maybe the best illusion there is.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THROW ME YOUR BABY

What matters most is
how well you walk through the fire...
Charles Bukowski

Florida. Finally in Florida.

I managed to miss the family reunion. Spent my first night in Florida in my hotel getting drunk, ordering a pizza and watching old movies. Total meltdown. I've still carrying the idea that I'm on a vacation.

After a week and a half of travel, action, lust, looting untraceable valuables, shoot-outs, murders and a game of Putt-Putt, (some vacation) here I am, at this rather well-known central Florida college campus.

the sun's burnt most of the morning haze away now, and a pleasant, spring breeze is upon us. I walk around to get the feel of the place. Lots of pretty girls. A vague feeling of reminiscence for my old college days.

But I'm here to kill someone.

I'm hot on the trail of our most elusive and psychopathic serial killers in America, that guy named Quickjohn.

I stumbled on a clue, followed it here and now I'm ready to take this loon out. There's a big reward and a lot of prestige

involved in whacking this guy, though my chances of actually tracking him down are probably less than 1%!

Everyone in our little murder club have been trying to nail him for years and most have never got close enough to touch him or even see what he looks like. And I'm the rookie. I've only have had my "double-0 license" for about two years now.

But apparently he's a student here – or maybe a teacher? Under the name Marlow Killman. I'll find out.

Admissions office. The lady at the front desk is not supposed to do this, but I charm her enough to get her to pull the name up on her screen. That's it! Marlow Killman.

Cumon! Turn the screen more, lady. I'm thinking.

I'm as charming as a door to door salesman and good looks help too.

The lady smiles: "He's in our system, but the address and phone number are private information, sir."

"Well. I'm a private detective." I whip out a totally bogus detective ID with picture and gold badge. She looks at it but she's not budging.

The lady swivels in her seat, the office chair squeaking under her weight, looking to the other ladies at desks behind her. "MARTHA?" she yells.

As she turns, I nudge a notebook that tips her Big Gulp drink over, spilling it all in a flood of her desktop and keyboard. "Oops!"

Splash! Glug, glug, glug!

Flustered, she turns back to me. "Now look what you've done!" She looks around her workstation. "Patti, where are the towels?"

"What towels?"

"Paper towels."

And as her back is turned, I turn the screen on the computer so I can see it better and I grab her mouse.

I tap the KILLMAN, MARLOW E. on the list, and his personal info, address, phone numbers, etc., pop up. I slyly, quickly take a screen shot with my cell phone camera.

The lady comes over with the paper towels, and now they are both preoccupied with the flood. "Listen," I say, "I've got to get to a meeting, but

I'll be back in a bit. I'll bring you another soda."

"Damn right you will," she mutters under her breath as she cleans up the soda. "And some fries, too!"

"Sure eh, say... where is The Commons Apartments?"

"Right across the street, hun. Between Flagler Hall dorm and the Weatherby House. Just walk out the door. It's right there."

As I trip across the street I feel my amulet becoming warm now against my chest.

The Commons is an 5 story-tall, old, brown brick apartment building. Grad student and teacher housing.

Hmmmm.

At a mall down the street, I buy one of those big red stuffed bears with a happy-birthday ribbon on it and get one of those giant birthday cards.

I return to The Commons, pick the lock on the back door, and slip up the rear stairs.

Third floor. Room 312. I listen outside for a few minutes, and don't hear anything inside. It only takes me 15 seconds to skeleton-key the door, and I gingerly and silently open it.

As I'm working the knob, I see a girl out of the side of my eye, staring at me from down the hallway. I have the birthday stuff under my arm, and I lift my finger to my lips and shush her, like as if it's a real bona-fide birthday surprise and I'm not wanting her to spoil it. She smiles and goes off.

I'm in the room.

I listen. I turn on a device that will detect anything, even someone breathing. No one here. Whew!

It appears to be an ordinary student room. Nothing strange. It's at least a little messy (as a student's room is supposed to be) but somehow, also rather spartan... and almost museum-like.

I sit down and take a breath. What do I do? Sit here and wait for Quickjohn? Wait outside? But will he come in the back

door or the front? I could set up a camera. Stake out the front and put a camera on the rear door?

I wonder what classes he's taking?

Probably best to lay and wait here.

What if he has some sort of alert to tip him off that his inner sanctum has been breached.

I get up and look around. If this is his place there has to be some lethal devices, some traps, a few guns or knives.

But I find nothing.

The clothes in the closet don't look worn. The soap in the bathroom has been used to where the sharp edges are rounded, but it's dry and hard...and the towels are dry as straw. I don't think anyone has been in this room in a while.

Maybe Quickjohn has been out of town?

The fridge looks normal: stocked and full. I pick up a milk carton, smell it, swish it around: there's water – colored, white water – inside.

Milk goes bad, water doesn't.

There's something wrong here, something wrong with this picture... but I'm trying to figure out what the hell it is...

Maybe I will try to focus on what's not here, rather than what is.

Hmmmm. No computer here. No charging cords. No phone charger in the wall.

Then I find one thing that doesn't really fit at all.

There are some pictures on the wall and a poster of some school football players, actually a football-themed calendar. But then I see an expensively framed picture of Richard Nixon, and he's shaking hands with Spiro Agnew. The picture definitely looks like it has been Photoshopped. The tones and colors have been boosted, a new beautiful sunset sky added in, and... standing between and behind them, is a big, goofy yellow bird. It looks familiar, but it's not Big Bird from Sesame Street. Nice Photoshop job though.

It's Limu Emu! The fucking bird from the insurance ads.
WTF!

I reach over and lift the picture off the wall to get a better look. I'm thinking who the fuck would do this? Who would make this silly picture? Who would go to so much trouble and expense to frame this silly, fucked-up, totally goofy, decorative, nonsensical photo?

As I lift it off the nail on the wall, I hear a mechanical whirring and then a ticking sound. A dim LED light in each corner of the room starts flashing.

It dawns on me. The whole room is a set-up. A trap. For me? Well, for me or any other detective-type spooking around the room with a sharp eye.

As I book out, I spot an electronic keypad next to the door. It's flashing and making intermittent beeps. Of course I don't know the code.

I shudder as I make it out the front door. Made it out. Then down the hall and down the stairs and out the door!

I get across the street and down some. I'm standing there just looking at the building waiting for Quickjohn to show up or for the alarm to go off full blast... and BLAM! Right in front of me, the whole place blows up: there's an explosion. The air is sucked out of me, people scream, glass is flying.

I put some more distance between me and the building and watch from even further down the block. Debris has been blown out into the street and everyone's running past me.

It was a trap! A booby trap for me or anyone spooking around his flat. A death trap! He almost got me.

But he got everyone else. People go by me screaming, some bleeding, hit by glass or fragments.

Soon people inside the building are running out the doors, throwing their personal possessions out the windows, jumping out...the cops arrive...everything is so nuts now.

In my head I picture the giant red birthday teddy bear beginning to catch fire, his rubber nose melting and a toxic, chemical haze emanating from the thing.

I come closer back towards the building. A crowd is gathering. We're helping people and dragging their stuff across the street and all. Cars come by and honk, ignoring the fire, they just want us to get out of the way.

The cops push us back.

Another bystander points frantically up towards the roof. "They're trapped!" Another girl next to me screams, "Oh my God! Isn't that Rickey?"

Someone else says, "Look, there's kids up there!"

The cops are helping people out of the lower part of the building, but the people on the roof are fucked. I hear a siren in the distance. I sure hope it's a firetruck. They'll have a ladder. But there won't be time. I've seen how long it takes to deploy one of those things, and the streets are crowded.

I see one good option. "C'mon! Let's try and go get to at them from the building next door! C'mon!" A couple of the young jock types around me buck up and follow me.

As we get to the steps of the next-door building, the cops are evacuating the last few people out of it. As we trot up the front steps, one of the cops holds up his hands, shaking his head. "No, no one's going in."

The guy behind me starts tripping out on the cop, "My roommate's in there!!" another says: "We've gotta get them!" The cop shakes his head. "You stay here! I can't let you up."

Fuck that. I'm in the front and...as I turn as if to leave, putting a calming hand out toward the freaked out guys... then I spin back around with an uppercut and clock the cop hard as I can, right on the jaw.

He goes down, out cold. The freaked guy yells, "YESSSS!" and pumps his arm up and down like he's at a football game and his team just scored.

The girl behind us starts crying. As we're all going up the stairway, the girl is crying and saying something like, "But he was only doing his job!"

"He was only doing his job, and I was only doing mine," I murmur to myself.

When we get up to the roof, there are already a few people from this, the sister building up there, trying to figure out how to help. There's a lot of people over there on the roof of the burning building. The space between the buildings is too far for someone to jump.

Both apartment buildings are pretty big and have large, flat roofs.

There's signs of some construction work down at the other end of our roof. The space between the buildings isn't so bad if we just had something... I see some old oil drums, buckets from where the roof was being tarred, I guess, and a ladder... I grab two guys, and we go down and bring up a ladder.

We try sliding it over to the other roof, but when it gets too far out there, it almost falls down, into the alley below. One of the guys rooting through the leftover roof-tarring stuff comes up with a rope. We throw one end of the rope over, and tie the other end to our ladder, pulling that end over to the other side to make a bridge.

Flames and smoke are billowing up from behind them and also rising up out of the alley.

People begin to cross on the ladder, creeping on their hands and knees. A section of the roof behind them falls in and some of the people panic, rushing the ladder. I can see the ladder overturning, then everyone on it plunges horribly down into the smoke-filled alley between the buildings.

Shit.

They're pulling the ladder back up with the rope. Or trying to.

Off, down the other end of the roof towards the back of the building, spot a mother with her child, who has moved there to get away from the madness and flames towards the front.

She sees me coming toward her. She has found a spot near the rear of her buildings where the roofs are closer together, and she's on the edge, waving at me. She has a scarf on her head in an old-world way – perhaps maybe she's Spanish or Persian, but I can't tell for sure. Here in the back, the distance between the roofs is narrower. The ladder would work better back here. And maybe it's even jumpable...?

But the area of the roof behind her is really getting bad, with flames and smoke swirling up behind her, and up out of the alley between the two buildings. I glance back to the front, and they are still trying to pull the ladder back up with the rope.

I point at her baby and yell to the mother, "Throw!"

She hesitates. I plead with her, shouting with my hands cupped around my mouth.

Finally, the mother puts one foot up on the ledge, like she's going to jump across. She considers it...then she looks over her shoulder at the smoke behind her.

I yell again: "Throw the baby! C'mon! THROW! Throw him like a football!" I make a throwing motion like a quarterback. "I'll catch him!" I make a catching motion like a football player. She looks around her again.

"You can't jump with the baby!"

Finally now, she decides to throw the baby.

She rears back – throws it, heaving it with both hands as hard as she can –with just enough aim and oomph... The baby's flying through the air, flying, flying...but the baby catches on an unforeseen wire, hangs up – flips around some and then...

The mother is screaming.

And I'm like: NOOOOoooo.

And the baby flips around and around and falls down into the alley – into the fiery, smoky chasm between the two buildings.

I'm stunned. I feel sick – so bad... but I don't give up.

But she has.

She has, as any mother would want to do. The poor little mother is standing there – empty, stone-faced – all the life gone out of her. The fire is rising up behind her now.

I yell, "Lady! Lady! Jummmmp!" But she's frozen.

I see the mother's face – she has this 100-mile stare – she's looking right through me. The roof below her starts to give away, flames and smoke are coming up around her – but she's standing there motionless, frozen... and as the roof gives way below her,

she falls in: stiff, lifeless, emotionless... like a doll; she is falling into the burning building.

A man comes up behind me – he’s yelling. The flames are spreading to our building now.

All the other people from our roof and the ones who’ve made it over from the other roof, are moving toward the back of the building, to the iron fire escape that goes down on the backside of the building.

I’m one of the last ones going down. But there are too many people... as the person behind me gets on, I feel the fire escape shift a bit. A bolt pops loose – people are jostled, I look down at the surprise, fear, and mortal terror in the faces of the people below me. WTF, we’re all going to die.

Everyone’s screaming. There’s too many people behind me to go back up. I just sit down on the steps and wait for doom, my chin cradled between my hands and looking off across the campus quadrangle before me.

OK. The cops have come around, and people start coming off the bottom of the fire escape quicker, but gingerly, one at a time.

Now stretching off behind the building there’s like an open park – the college quadrangle – and crowds have gathered here and there, cars have stopped, some people have their hands up to their mouths, some are holding up their cell phones taking videos...

...as I’m sitting there, I notice one face in the crowd that doesn’t fit. Everyone else out across the quadrangle is riveted, horrified, shocked, or stunned.

But there’s one guy out there, leaning against a tree. A funny-looking guy. He’s way off there... but even from that distance, I can see that he has this grinning, sick smile on his face. And his posture, his stance, looks so different from everyone else down there...

...then I see him do it: he is eating the hair on his arm; biting it off. Just like Catamuso told me he did in the Firestone Tire store. Biting the fucking hair on his arm!

Shit! That's him! That's Quickjohn!

The line going down is moving better, and I start to head down now. The people below me are mostly off the fire escape, but not fast enough for me. When I'm close enough to the ground, I jump over the side of the railing. I leap, pulling my pistol and as I land, Quickjohn spots on me. He realizes that it's me – someone who's looking for him – and he takes off.

The two cops that were at the bottom have left, now that they have things moving, and have gone around to the front to help.

I've got him this time. I take aim. Steady my arm on the railing of the fire escape....

But I just don't have a clean shot. He fades into the crowd. I'm about to give chase...

Then I hear the BABY!

I hear the baby crying! The baby is alive. I make my way into the alley and there he is: hanging there about 12 feet up, his swaddling baby clothes caught on the jagged metal edge of distressed a vent.

I climb up on a dumpster and snag the little fellow.

As I walk out of the alley with the baby, surrounded by swirling smoke, someone takes my picture. I look around and Quickjohn is long gone now.

I hand the baby to some other police that have just come by, and GTF out of there.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

A GIRL IN THE MIRROR

Sex without love is as hollow
and ridiculous as love without sex.

Hunter S. Thompson

That night I hit it. Hit the streets. Hit the bars in town. I need a drink. The feel of youthful energy and the optimism of a new adventure is coursing through my electrical system.

I need people around me. I find a nice college bar and proceed to get hammered. The girls in this place are being pretty hard and I'm just having no luck at all. I guess I'm an older guy compared to most of the kids, and maybe I look like a teacher they hated or something?

I'm in no mood to be Romeo tonight. Feeling bad. I missed my chance at Quickjohn. Actually I totally blew it. And now he's gone, gone like a snake in the tall grass. I imagine he's a thousand miles away now. Off, a thousand miles in any direction. With a \$50,000 bounty on his head, that's a lot of dollars with wings on them, flying out the window. It might be years before he surfaces again. So, as I drown my sorrow in bottled hell, I resign myself to an all vacation summer. And, to being a total fuck-up.

So, I'm sitting there on a stool at the bar, eating fish and chips. I ask this girl next to me for the salt. "Bite me, you freak!" she says and starts laughing maniacally! I'm a little stunned but I start laughing too. She's drunk, and... I mean who uses the term "bite me" anymore.

"Foo da shah!" I say.

Her laughter arrests, her head bobbles ever so slightly and she turns and looks at me. "Foo da what?"

"It's glibberish."

"Glibbbbbb...."

"It's a new language. Sort of glib-gibberish."

She stares at me, her head cocked a little to the side, like a dog hearing a funny noise.

"Foo da shah?" I continue, "Means fuck that shit... sort of abbreviated and streamlined. It's a man-made language, sort of like Esperanto or Pig-Latin."

"Man made?"

"It was created in a lab, it did not naturally develop, unlike most languages... like languages which expanded and changed over centuries of evolution and natural selection."

"You mean like slang..."

"Or jive."

"Jive talking?"

I smile and begin my line of BS in earnest. "Now I know about this because I have a degree in etymology, the study of words... Jive and Jive talking are two different things. Jive is a language or dialect, whereas Jive Talking is obfuscating the truth and verbally running rings around someone to confuse them."

"Isn't Etymology the study of bugs?"

I smile and say, "See, a perfect example of 'Jive Talking' don't you see?"

She shrieks with an uncontrollable and an almost hysterical sort of delighted laughter, and turns towards her friends gabbing away, and whispers to them. The one sitting next to her leans back from the conversation and looks at me dourly, and as if I have two heads, laughs out loud and goes back to their girl talk.

Well, I fucked that one up. Now I'm a laughing-stock. I look around but the bar is crowded now. There's no other place to sit and I have a good spot at the bar.

I turn back to the girls. The one next to me laughs abruptly and uncontrollably at what one of the other girls has just said and laughs so hard she farts. She farts loud enough for me to hear. She looks over her shoulder a bit, not turning far enough around to make eye contact but to see – out of the corner of her eye – that I'm still there and facing her. She starts laughing maniacally again.

She farts again, this time loud and rudely, right at me, and all the girls laugh. All are looking forward and away from me but the one on the other end turns and sees my sour, grumpy face and – turning back – laughs so hard she almost falls out of her seat. What kind of fuckery is this? Are these girls farting at me now? What's becoming of this younger generation? Not very sexy is it?

I shake my head. "Foo da sha..." I murmur. A generation gap maybe.

It seems I often have a gen-gap problem in these college towns. You have to wonder what they are teaching these kids these days. But I do get to have fun messing with their heads now and then.

I look around the barroom.

Seems like all the hot girls are with guys. C'est la vie. Maybe it's just not my night.

For a moment I think about that apartment trap rigged to explode. A strange set up. Strange? I mean... did he live there and just know not to touch the picture? What if it malfunctioned or he set it off by accident? He could have blown himself up. Or maybe it was all just a trap.

At least now I know what Quickjohn looks like...sort of... And now he knows what I look like.

Maybe he has set up some other booby traps out there, somewhere in the town...

...maybe he's watching me right now...

...and my spider sense IS tingling...

I raise my eyes to the enormous, room-wide mirror over the bar.

I'm looking up at the mirror and into the "Where's Waldo" reflection of the horde of people behind me, and I'm scanning. Which one are you...?

Can I even recognize him if he's not biting the hair on his arm? I think so.

Then I see a nice-looking girl looking at me in the mirror, making eye contact. I smile. She smiles back with a nice, sly, smirk and a knowing wink. Whoever looks away first loses. She does, but then... she wins. She wins me. I turn and head her way, slowly carving through the crowd.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE GIRL'S GOTTA HAVE IT

Let's get out of these wet clothes and
into a dry martini.

Benchley

The girl's name is Tori.

A free spirit. She teaches dance sometimes and aerobics, and that night she taught me some tantra. She also waitresses, tends bar, is a dogwalker... but she is out of work now and selling pot for a living for now. Fine with me. Maybe I'll hang out with her here for a while. Shack up and take a little vacation here in town.

After we got done with the recreational passion of our romantic moonlight activities, she cooked me breakfast (at 2:30 in the morning), and since it was still early, we got out the wine and talked the night away, sitting there at her kitchen table.

It was like we were both just a couple of freshmen college students again. She was at least 28 or 30, maybe 35-years-old. She had wild, dirty-blond hair. Nice, full, thick, luxurious hair and a low hairline. Like Kathleen Turner. Yeah, like her.

“Ah, Tori! This is a breakfast of champions! Now look at this! We got fried eggs here, butternut squash, hummus, macadamia-nut brownies, corn flakes in kefir... what a feast!”

She smiles. “I aim to please.”

She’s a movie buff and we wind up playing a little drunken trivia game of hers. One of us picks a movie character, and the other would come up with someone that could beat or defeat the other in some sort of battle.

Like Hulk vs. Superman.

“Eraserhead!” she says.

“Wait a minute, girl. The last one you picked was Thanos, Dark Lord of the Universe.” She smiled. “And now Eraserhead?”

I had to think about it – Who would beat Eraserhead?
“How about Benny Blanco from the Bronx!”

“Perfect! I win!” she smiles and laughs.

“What?” I asked.

“Eraserhead wins! Yay, Eraserhead!”

“Now girl, how the fuck would Eraserhead ever beat Benny Blanco? Benny, he’s a tough New York gangster. He has guns and henchmen and shit!”

“Eraserhead walks up: he erases Benny Blanco’s head! Zooop! And just like that! Gone! That’s what Eraserheads do! They erase your head! Zooop!”

“No, no. Eraserhead, he sits there and looks at the radiator. He cuts up the man-made chicken....”

“But that’s your Eraserhead!”

“That’s everyone’s Eraserhead!” I say, betwixt, befuddled and drunkenly flabbergasted.

“My game – my Eraserhead!”

I had to say, she got me there. “OK, you win!” “What do I get?”

“A kiss.” I kiss her.

“I want more.”

I smile, and we’re heading back into the bedroom again. At 35, she’s at her sexual peak, so to speak – just like a horny 16-year-old boy is at his peak.

“Poor Eraserhead,” she says.

I smile. “Yeah, they cut his head off and made pencil erasers out of it.”

“Noooo, I mean the real guy. The one that played him in the movie.”

“His name was Jack Nice or something like that. Yeah, he died mysteriously. I read about all that when the new *Twin Peaks* thing came out again. Someone killed him, and they never caught him,” she said, lighting another joint.

“Well, maybe someone did.” Maybe me. Maybe I was in on the inquest and the settlement, back a few years ago, back then when I was starting out. But I can’t tell her about that. She’d think I was making it up anyways.

She offers me a joint. “No, darlin’. I can’t get high.”

“Piss test?”

“No, I actually have to get high sometimes on purpose. Sometimes for my work, see, but...”

“Well. Too late now.” She says.

“What?”

She nods at the plate of brownies that I just took another one of.

“It’s in the brownies. Fuck. I should have warned you.”

So, fuck it. “Well, in for a penny, in for a pound.” I reach out for her pipe.

WTF? Now I taste some of my Yage in the bowl.

“Damn girl! This is some of my stuff, right?”

“Oops again. Thought you wouldn’t mind.”

“I do.”

“Hey, I saw the gun in your pants. I thought you might be a cop. Soooo...then I saw that stuff too, so I figured I was wrong – that you’re a dealer, not a cop.”

Yage is an ancient herb, and in the hands of a master alchemist, and mixed with the right sub-elements, makes for a most perfect and quintessential formula. It came out of the Ural Mountains eons ago and was brought to the Americas by the Norse incursions in the centuries before Columbus. There are about 15 or 20 different methods and preparations for distilling and refining it into that which would give your mind wings...or – in some more dangerous mixtures – take the top of your head off.

We – The Travelers – can use many of the Yage formulas – but have our own special formula of it that no one else has – the best formula to “get in touch.” That’s our big secret. If you’re going to avenge the dead, you have to be able to connect with them. When we “get in touch”, we mean that we reach out over into the other side, into the borderlands. Our special words get in touch, meaning to get down with the Forlorns, finding out what really happened, conducting an investigation (inquisition, if you will). I take a hit and pass it to her.

“Well, I hope you like to dream. This stuff is the shit for that.”

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

STRANGE DREAM

Who has seen the wind?
neither you nor I,
but when the trees bow down their heads
the wind is passing by.

Yoko Ono

We're lying in Tori's bed. I'm Dozing off and getting that great feeling of peace, satisfaction, and fetal-like tranquility that a totally unanticipated romance can gift you. I'm thinking that I could get used to this for a while. Laid back, easy listening and the chemistry is good.

We came home and everything just happened. Everything just fell into place, just like we were putting together some IKEA furniture. No games, no tension, no playing coy.

Now sometimes the girl wants to be chased, maybe she wants someone else to be responsible; someone to blame if it all turns out wonky. You can't blame them as it probably goes

wonky most of the time. But then, maybe the stalling means they have something to hide. Then there's the "bird with the broken wing" syndrome: ohhh, her last boyfriend was a jerk... her father molested her... she hated her stepmother etc.. I don't know, maybe it makes them feel good to blurt it out, maybe it gives them more control over the situation or maybe they're just defective somewhere deep inside themselves. Maybe they need a pre-paid excuse if later on, things don't work out. Who knows what goes on in the hearts of the lovelorn.

And there's some dumb guy, panting like a dog with a T-Bone waving in his face. He gets a taste and goes running back to his buddies, nursing beers and watching the big screen in a sports bar.

All I know is I like the ones who just jump into the pool, laughing, naked and twerking away.

It's been a wacky couple of days and now I'm feeling it. I was looking forward to a good night's sleep. But now.... The Yage – our special formula of Yage – with all the special essential oils, mushrooms, botanicals, absinthe, adrenochrome, belladonna, and...a 'secret ingredient usually found in jellyfish...' (just kidding around on that last part) is hitting me... hitting me hard, mean, and fast.

Soon, I'm seeing the trails above my head and I'm getting "*touched*". Poked at. Getting the vibes. Hearing distant grumblings and whispers. Nudges and murmurs from the other side. From the borderlands.

Tori sits up, looks around like she's hearing it too, and flops back down. "Do you hear that?" she's higher than a kite, on my stuff but also quite receptive.

"Uh huh..."

"What's that?" she says, as a wave of grainy, wisping light dashes over our heads.

"That's stardust, baby." She's done it too, the Yage formula, and I have an idea exactly what she's seeing, but no idea what I meant by "stardust".

When you're a Traveler and you get high, particularly while on the Formula, but also high on anything, you're susceptible to "Forlorns" (the dead ones) hitting you up out of the blue, wherever you may be. You have one foot in this world – the real world – and one foot in the Borderlands and there's a banana peel in there somewhere, yah-suh.

I can feel it all coming down.
And... and I smell death now.

Something's in the room.

Something's above me but I can't look up. For a second, I see the reflection in the mirror of the dresser, reflections of hands and feet and tips cloth hanging down. I can see the shadow on the floor, a shadow of a body floating above, but can't bring myself to look up at it.

Oh, fuck it. I'm haunted again. A slowly forming vision approaches the bed. I sit up and reach out, but it's like the body is made of smoke, and swirls around my fingers floating... blowing.

I sit up on the edge of the bed. Tori is rising up behind me and looking over my shoulder.

"What is itttt...?" she says. "Do you hear that? I hear crying..."

"Everything's OK doll. Go back to sleep."

I sit up more. Somethings here. In the room. Someone needs me?

Or it could easily be the evil spirit that's restless – a murderer or something – not harvested and dragged down to hell yet.

I get out of bed.

"Don't go now... Are you leaving?" she says.

"I've got to get up... I've got to go do this now. Don't worry, I'll be here the whole time." She's totally stoned. The pot, and her first Yage trip is pulling her right into the scene. Best to just play it like everything's fine. "Mmm'kay..." she murmurs

sleepily and lies back down again, smiling on the blissful effects of the Yage and fading out.

The spirit of someone who needs me? I can feel that now.

Its here in the room with us. And the room is becoming a dreamworld now. And I'm in the dream. I look around and the bedroom has only one wall now, the wall with a window. Through the window, I see a little girl floating by. I walk to the window, look out for a second, and then crawl out the window into the bleak, dark dream landscape out there, a landscape that stretches off into oblivion.

A little girl.

There she is.

Over there crying.

She's on a bench, like a park bench or a bench at a bus stop.

A pretty little girl. I'm thinking that this case is probably a murder, maybe a murder to cover a sex crime of some kind. Who else but some pervert or serial killer would kill a cute, little, innocent girl like that?

I walk over and sit down next to her – careful not to spook her – and give silence a minute.

All the while I'm aware I'm dreaming this. That this is just a dream.

I wait for her to look at me.

“Hey there.” I say. She just looks at me. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Off behind us, I see Tori floating by. She's floating along like the Dude in Big Lebowski, in the surreal bowling scene. She waves at us. The Yage has got into her good now too, and she's caught up in our dream.

I try to talk to the little girl, but she's not talking yet. “What's your name? Did someone bring you here?” She shakes her head.

Now Tori floats right in front of me, flat like she's planking, but turning her head and smiling slightly.

“This is all a dream, right?”

“Yeah, baby.”

The little girl looks up at me now. Her mouth moves like she wants to talk. Perhaps a nice woman like Tori floating by with her flowing hair and smile and talking to me has made the little girl more comfortable.

“Talk to me, little lady.”

“I...”

“What happened? What did they do to you?”

“Where’s my Mommy?”

“Your Mommy’s not here.”

“Please, can you please tell my mom that I’m okay? Tell her that I’m here?”

“Honey, you’re not okay.”

She sobs.

“Whattttt...?”

“You’re not alive anymore.”

“Oh no...” she says in a soft, almost faint, little-child voice.

She sits silent for a bit, as what I said sinks in, correlates, and she realizes what’s going on.

My name is Anthony.” I say softly. “Can you tell me your name?” After a good while, the lost little girl leans over and whispers:

“Brittany.”

“Tell me your name, honey, your full name. I need your last name, too. Do you know it?”

“I am Brittany Gorkin.”

I nod. The little girl starts sobbing. I hold her in my arms. “Do you know who killed you? Who did this to you?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

Now I’m seeing myself from above, sitting there with her. I’m looking down at myself from above us, seeing myself and slowly my view pulls up and away.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR.

DEAD BAT

“How are the kids?”

“Doing well. I lost one the other day.”

“How’d that happened?”

“Playing with matches.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s alright I got four left.”

Dialogue from an old Roger Corman movie

Next Morning.

Tori’s place, while not a dump, is nothing fancy or glamorous, but even less so in the morning’s sobering light. Overflowing ashtray, dishes piled up in the sink, a line of hung-out-to-dry clothes and underwear running across the middle of the kitchen above my head. Somehow, I don’t remember any of this from the night before, but... I do feel right at home.

And I remember the bat. She has this bat. It was a big one. And it’s stuffed. Taxidermized. I remember smelling it last night

when she was in the other room. Hey, I was drunk. I was high. OK, I smelled it. So sue me. I smelled a dead bat.

It had this odd chemical smell. Like liverwurst and burnt motor oil and peppermint. I'm sure Catamuso would like to smell it. He loves to smell odd things. He may even be part bloodhound. He does have a big nose. His lifetime's big bucket-list dream moment is to someday go to New York City and smell the Statue of Liberty's feet.

Coffee.

This girl knows how to make coffee.

I'm on my laptop, researching the little girl. How do I spell her name? Brittany G-O-R-K-H-I-N... Britanie Gerchin... No, no hits. How about Gorkin....

I look up, and on her little kitchen countertop TV, I see myself. *"...and police are now looking for this man for questioning in connection with the explosion yesterday at the university..."* Damn security cameras. I stupidly didn't have my signal scrambler on yesterday.

I reach out over the table and turn off the TV just as Tori is coming through the door. She's in cutoffs, no top on and drying her hair. The cutoffs are old ones, and maybe she's gained a little weight, so she's bursting at the seams nicely. I look her up and down, checking out her nice tan Florida aerobics body. Yes, I could get used to this.

"Hello, tiger. How 'bout some breakfast now."

"Yeah. Anything but brownies, eh?"

"Yeah, I think we've had enough brownies..."

She hunches down to light a cigarette on the gas stove, and then leans down and kisses me. So easy going, so cheerful. A great gal.

"You dream loud, eh sugar..." she says.

"Yeah. That pot really got to me."

"That little girl – she was crying all night."

I turn around to her. The little girl. She remembers the little girl.

"She kept you awake? I'm sorry." I'm playing along.

“Baby, all that was a blast. What was that in your shit? DMT?

Mushrooms? I haven’t had a trip like that since my last divorce party.”

Good, she thinks it was all a trip. “Windex and baloney juice....” I say playfully.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Of course, I’m kidding you,” I say. “Listen. That was... that was a special top-secret formula.”

She smiles. “You had a good time last night. Didn’t ya?” OK! That’s more like it. “Yeah.” Yeah, let’s change the subject.

But then, “That’s so cool! We both had the same dream!”

I fluff it off now, make out like it’s nothing. “Now you can go tell all your new-age girlfriends about it!”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, and I’m sure that they’ll all go to bed tonight with – like – their biggest crystals and a clove of foxfire under their pillows.” I joke.

She’s done with her hair, and she looks over my shoulder at my laptop. “Who is that? Is that her?”

“The girl from last night? Yeah. This is her.”

“The girl from the dream last night. That’s her?” I nod.

I’m looking at Brittany Gorkin’s face on the screen. A 19-year-old coed from Towson, MD, killed in auto accident two weeks ago. Let’s see. Four kids dead in all – a car wreck on the way home from Spring Break at 2 AM. Alachua County, FL. This has to be her. Worth checking out. Could be a murder going on here. She came to me in the dream for a reason. A murder reason. But what’s the story. Human trafficking? Drugs? Maybe Quickjohn?

“Now, how is that her...” she asks. “Is that her mom?”

“Oh, ’at’s her all right, the little ghost girl from last night, all grown here. Yeah. See, last night she appeared to us as a little girl. After she was dead, she was scared, and – well...she became a little girl again. A little girl looking for her mommy. And this happens sometimes. People get freaked out when they’re dying.” I gotta keep talking. “It’s like guys that got shot in WWII would lay there dying and cry out for their mothers.

Big, tough Marines – and they would cry out Mommy on their last breath....Like they were little boys again. Ya know?”

“This girl’s dead, then.”

“Yeah.” I look up at Tori. “Now all this is secret stuff. Top secret.

So don’t tell anyone about this shit.”

“At’s fucked up.” She makes a funny face and scratches her arm. “Are you some kind of psychic investigator?”

“I dabble.”

“That’s creepy.”

“Well...” I take another sip of coffee. “...sometimes people get trapped between here and there. Sometimes they need help. Sometimes, maybe, they need something more.”

I’m looking at Florida now on Google Maps. Brittany died in Menlo, Florida. About 45 miles from where I’m at now. Only a half hour’s drive (the way I drive.)

“So that girl in the dream was a ghost. Really a ghost. Here in my house.”

“I think so...”

“Oh, shut that off. I can’t look at that stuff.”

“Awww. Don’t get spooked.” I make the laptop screen fold down some.

She leaves out of the room, her shoulders up, in an uptight posture and wringing her hands. “Ghosts! Yaaah!”

“You don’t believe all this shit, do you?”

“No! Not a bit of it! But I’m still going to get my old, family Bible out.”

“Baby, I was just kidding around. I’m sorry I freaked you out. Will you please stop tripping?”

“And my Kabbalah candle!” she says.

“And burn some thyme?”

“Does that help? I have sage!” she screams out to me from the other room.

“Yup. Always does it for me.”

The phone rings, an old hard-wired home phone. The way it rings brings back memories of earlier days and old B&W movies.

She picks up in the other room, cheerful at first, but then her tone of voice changes and my ears prick up. Something urgent. Something heavy. Something sad. She closes the door to the room while she's still talking, and as she gets close to the door, it sounds like she's about to start crying.

I sit there and look at the wall above the stove. I can see a darkened spot where something she was cooking got a little out of control. Between the dark area and the doorway, there's an outline of where a wall phone once was and then a holy water angel dish. There's a phone number or two written on the wall to the side of the wall phone shadow.

I get up and go to the stove and light my cigarette on the gas stove eye. I look closer at the ancient phone numbers on the wall. George Carlin? George Carlin's phone number is there. The George Carlin? It is a 310 number. California. Hollywood. Hm.

I sit back down at the table. I can hear the water dripping in the sink. I can hear her muffled conversation in the other room rising and falling, strained, troubled... not good. I don't know what's going on in there, but I feel bad for her. I realize that though I hardly know her, I care about her already.

I look back at the phone number on the wall. I imagine George Carlin sitting at this same table that I'm sitting at. I imagine him sitting right here in his underwear (like I am right now), drinking coffee, and smoking a joint. It's a nice thought, actually. He could have been on the road, done a little comedy-club show here in town, or maybe doing a summer-stock production... who knows.

After a while: quiet.

She's not talking anymore. I stand up and go to the bedroom door. I turn the knob and go in. She's sitting at a desk in front of a typewriter with a sheet of paper in the rollers and her face in her hands. I come over and touch her on the shoulder. "What happened?"

She throws her hands up in the air, shakes her head back and forth and goes over and flops down on her bed. Well shit.

I sit down at the desk. "What's the matter girl?" I say somewhat softly.

Turns out her mother just passed. She had cancer, but she died of a stroke. She was in Minneapolis. Dying in Minneapolis. Tory was going to see her but never got around to it. As she talks, I look over the letter in the typewriter on her desk. It's to her mother. She started it over a month ago.

Seems she had some issues or bad blood with her mother and her sisters. None of my business, just a glance into her life, a moment of curiosity, like the cigarette burn on the edge of her kitchen table... was it from George Carlin's cigarette? What did she cook him for breakfast in the morning? Did he take a bath or a shower?

I go over to the bed and lie down next to her. Put my arm around her. She takes my hand and pulls it into her comforting warmth.

I start humming a nameless lullaby and rocking her. "Tell me all about your mother, baby... tell me about a long, long time ago... and far, far away."

I booked out while she was at work that afternoon. She got called in to set up for a bartending at a banquet gig that night. I left her a note. I really enjoyed my time with her – what little it was – and I will be back if I can. As I drive off, I can picture her, a few days later, telling all her stoned friends about the little ghost girl...

But I stole her bat. The stuffed bat – I kidnapped it. I don't know why. Maybe an excuse to come back or something.

Fucking bat.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MENLO

You don't get explanations in real life.
You just get moments that are
absolutely, utterly, inexplicably odd.
Neil Gaiman

Menlo, Fla.

It's about five or six miles from the freeway exit to the edge of Menlo town.

Weather's cool, sunny, and pleasant. I'm eating a cold Chick-fil-A sandwich and polishing off a mostly melted, but still slightly cold milkshake. I'm breezing along with the radio playing, wearing my sunglasses and a smile.

I figure I'll scout around some before I find a motel.

Just a small, sad town. Menlo, Florida. Five or ten thousand people maybe.

A cement plant, a weed-infested drive-in parking lot where the drive-in screen fell down, but the rusty speakers are still on the poles, a defunct lead-smelting operation, a Waffle House, a deserted Putt-Putt... no Starbucks, no Walmart, not even a Chinese restaurant.

But there are ghosts here. Fresh ones.

Now I've got to find them.

I grab my tape recorder and start making some notes as I enter the outskirts. "Anthony Harken here. In Menlo, Florida, now. On an Inquest. Arrived 2:20 PM. Today is... April 14th. Or 15th. I am down here in this shit-hole town, investigating the death of one 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin.

She and three other students returning from Spring break...they all wound up dead. Paper says it was a car accident...but we're going to see about that. I suspect some kind of cover up. Maybe some local people killed them? The cops? Who knows...? From the clean looks of those kids, the pictures I saw on Facebook, all red cheeks and well-fed looking, it was probably not a meth or coke deal gone wrong. Those four kids did not – in any way - look like any kind of big drug dealers or even heavy users. But this is a drug running corridor area.... So, who knows. This might even be racial...one of the kids was Black or Indian. India Indian that is. Who knows? The Brittany ghost-girl has shown up – hit me up the other night - but I haven't seen any of the other kids yet."

The report loads up to the "cloud," and it's all right there, if anything happens to me.

Ya never know. You start spooking around in these little towns and they never find you again. Not that anyone would really miss me these days.

The town is a trip.

A wave of nostalgia for a bygone era mixed with a despondent "*land that time forgot*" feeling washes over me as I troll through the bleak and half-abandoned downtown. I'm creeping along, taking it all in. The old store windows. The broken sidewalks. Cracked walls. Peeling paint. Weeds growing in the corners and cracks in the pavement and the walls.

A flip-flop is sitting there in front of me, in the middle of the street, at the city's main intersection.

I sit there, staring at that flip-flop in the middle of the road under the red light. If I weren't so tired, I would probably wonder how it got there. I take a snapshot of the lonely flip-flop. To me, it's a picture, and in its own way a perfectly beautiful picture.

I take a lot of pictures. I'm good at it. Amateur, but good. "F-Stop Fitzgerald" is one of my Twitter names. It's a hobby, sure, but I often also like to use the photography angle as a cover. I have a picture scrapbook in the trunk titled LONELY THINGS. If I get caught snooping around, I show 'em my camera. I can make out like either I'm doing a Bridges of Madison County thing, or sometimes I'm a state or govt. inspector taking pictures. I even have some cool fake inspector credentials in the back.

Later, I'll head back and get a shot of the decrepit windmills at the deserted Putt-Putt while I'm here. Might spend an afternoon there and do a photo essay.

A dog trots by in a horrible condition. It has just given birth, but the puppy is stuck, only halfway coming out of the mother, and it's dead, just flopping around.

No picture of that.

It would depress me later. The kids these days thrive on all that dark stuff: skulls and the macabre "day of the dead" stuff. But I've seen enough horror and bad things just doing the job I'm doing now, and I don't need any more.

I remember when I was a kid, the neighbors had an uncle that sort of lived in the attic. When I found out he was a war hero, I went hard on getting him to tell me some of his old war stories. He never could. He was a man who had seen too much. Literally seen too much.

Then one day – this was some years later, and I was a teenager – he was in chemo and dying, and kinda dizzy on a lot of pain pills. Agent Orange had got him and got him good. I was sitting on the front porch with my new laptop, checking out the chat rooms (a big thing back then, and this was the first computer I owned) and some of the crazy porn I'd been hearing

about – and he comes staggering up on the porch and sits down next to me.

He was dying, and... he was drunk.

He started telling me about the war. He wasn't telling really, he wasn't confessing. I think he was like "downloading". Downloading all his memories and feelings and triumphs and regrets to me.

Like the dog, he knew he would die soon.

It was all over now, and there was nothing he could do about it. At the end of the rambling but vivid stories, he was shaken. Not crying with the tears all running down but with a look on his face like he need to cry but couldn't. Not now, not in a hundred years. Then silence for a while, and then he asked me if I could drive him down to the liquor store and take him trolling for whores down on Lincoln Street.

I told him I would be honored.

He wanted a certain skinny one called Dynamite, with a big Afro and a crazy laugh.

Sure, why not?

So back in Menlo, I turn off the main drag, down onto a side street. I pass by an empty lot with a marshy, infested-looking, stagnant pond, with an old beat-up mattress in the middle, and the delicate scent of raw sewage wafting in through the open window of my car. A Sargasso Sea of trash and debris.

Potholes. Kids playing in an abandoned refrigerator. A long defunct Blockbuster Video. I pass a guy in his bathrobe and bedroom slippers walking along, sipping on a cup of coffee. A now-skeletal Christmas tree is lying in an alley I pass, defined only by a few strands of tinsel and two ornaments.

This town is dead. They just haven't buried it yet. It's just lying here rotting away. Decomposing.

I find this museum-like feel of the town hypnotic: both haunting and kind of romantic. It's not the Saturday Museum feel of like when families come down on weekends or a school class visit feel. But an empty, silent, ethereal weekday afternoon when only two or three people are there in the whole museum –

or maybe no one at all. In college, I talked an interesting girl into skipping class with me, and we went to the museum. No one was there.

Since my regular girlfriend came by my room in the middle of the afternoons and took a nap in my sheets waiting for me to come back from my classes, the museum was a good place to have some extracurricular romance.

We had the place to ourselves. We smoked a joint, we kissed, we danced hand-in-hand, and she treated me to an impromptu strip tease – and when we finally made love in a backroom with crates and darkness all around us, it was one of the most romantic moments of my youth and of my long-gone student days. I remember that day with her there in the museum storeroom like it was yesterday, but ya know, I can't even remember a single lovemaking session with my main girlfriend at the time. Funny, isn't it.

We walked around the museum after. I remember all the exhibits – all frozen in time, in the air conditioning of the building, and the dust floating in the beams of afternoon sunlight stretching across the room, as time stood still for us. The exhibits had to have enjoyed the show we put on for them that day.

That moment that me and that girl had together that day was a museum display of sorts - in my mind - like a Polaroid snapshot; a brief crazy moment smeared on the long line of time. Just a spot. Don't blink, or you'll miss it. But a Polaroid snapshot none the less.

And our whole lives, everyone's life is really perhaps nothing more than a blink on the face of time: a cigarette smoked and tossed out the window of a moving car, a leaf in the storm, bumping down the gutter and circling the drain and gone. Just gone.

Eventually I'm past downtown and breezing through a broad, long residential area: a neighborhood – kids playing in the yards, water sprinklers, streets named after trees – and I take a turn down a residential, tree-lined street that leads back to the main drag.

Now I pull up to the light and there's some dildo's car, the driver sitting stopped there in front of me, texting.

He's sitting there, texting right through the green light. Yup. Here comes the yellow light. Fuck this guy. The doofus has his left turn signal on – but he's not turning, just sitting there like a turd in the punchbowl. Of course, he's badly situated and a big truck with a winch is parked on the side in the oncoming lane, so there's not enough room for me to just go around him, so I'm sitting there waiting. Waiting, waiting, waiting. What's going on? I look up at the light and it's green and then just turning to red. The guy's still just sitting there. He has no idea that I'm there right behind him. I'm getting livid, then infuriated.

I honk the horn!

He jumps up in his seat, and his frigging phone pops out of his hand and out the window of his car like a watermelon seed. It lands on the pavement, probably broken now. He still doesn't go. He doesn't turn around and look at me. He just sort of huffs and deflates; he's totally pissed. Good.

Fuck him. Then he gets out of the car.

He's a fatso guy with that steroid look: shiny face and a shaved, bald head, like a lot of bouncers you see at strip clubs and discos... ..but he's a cop.

He's got his cop tie pulled loose and his uniform shirt unbuttoned. No gun belt on. Looks like he's just off work - coming home in his own civilian car - but he's got the surly-cop smirk on his face. This is not going to end well. He glibly snaps up his phone and shoves it in his shirt pocket. I get out of my car, too. (You never want to be sitting down and vulnerable when a situation gets sticky.)

I tell him, like, "Hey. Sorry. I didn't know you were a cop... but you were sitting there for three or four green lights." As he comes at me, I see he has a lazy eye that sort of points off, that doesn't coordinate with the other eye. And a pointy head.

"Hey now, that was important police business I was on, boy," he says with rising antagonism.

Sure. Like I really believe him.

He reaches for his gun – or maybe the cuffs or baton – none of which are there now – because he left his service belt in

the car. I can smell whiskey and beer and Cheetos on his breath – and then he realizes that the belt’s not there, but the lifting motion tightens his clothing, tightening the pocket until the cell phone pops back out again and hits the ground right in front of me.

I reach down and pick up his cell phone while the drunken sod is still trying to figure out where his cuffs and gun are. I look at the cellphone’s screen. Angry Birds! “This is the important police business you were on?! Angry fucking Birds!!” I say, laughing my ass off.

As he realizes that he left his gun-belt on the seat of his car and he’s actually helpless – and that I just caught him with Angry Birds on his phone – his face contorts like he doesn’t know whether to scream or throw up. He’s a bit paralyzed and I’m pretty mad, so I just catch him with an uppercut to the jaw and knock him out cold – POW – just like that!

Now I’ve done it, I say to myself.

I look around. Total silence.

No one saw.

The sound of a TV coming out an open window. A dog barking in the distance. It’s a sleepy residential side street.

I bend down over him. A pulse. He’s still alive. I pull out his wallet. Philby. Marcus Wayne Philby. 28 years old. 5 foot 8. 235 pounds. His mouth is smiling in his ID picture, but his eyes are still sad. And out of sync.

I go back to my trunk and dig out some nice “magic tricks.”

I hit him with a hypo that will make him forget everything and should let him get a real good sleep. Rohypnol. I hate to waste it on this fucktard, but at least he will have amnesia.

I drag him into his car seat. I take a swig from his quart of single malt whiskey he has there in the seat – cheap stuff, BTW – and pour a little on him, then let the bottle leak all over the pavement. I feel a leak coming on myself, and think, “Hmmm, that will be a nice touch. It will look good if he wakes up; or someone finds him, and it looks like he pissed himself.”

I laugh as I piss on his lap a bit and some down onto the floor. Not too much now. Don't wanna overdo it.

Never pissed on anyone before.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

There are only three stories in literature:
A man goes on a journey, a stranger comes to town,
and Godzilla vs. Megashark.

Leo Tolstoy

Time to check in somewhere.

The Starlight Motel looks like a real trip.

In the front, there's a nice, neatly laid out garden of dead flowers and shrubs. A ring of painted rocks of various shapes and sizes circles the withered flowers and thriving weeds. There's a dry birdbath over to the left. Nice, big, shady, trees, all painted white around the first four feet of the trunk.

Cool.

Someone threw a pair of sneakers tied together by the shoelaces, onto the powerlines going from the street into the office. A hand-painted sign out front (that looks like it was done by a child with a lot of time and pride) announces that you can buy fireworks inside. Off to the left is another sign that leads to a petting zoo.

Very cool.

I love it. I gotta love this place.

This will be my headquarters, my base of operation for the next few days.

I like to stay in these cheap motels, you know, the ones with the vacancy signs and where you pull your car right up to the door and I can load all my stuff right in the room.

And also, where I can better hear anyone outside messing with my car at night.

And this place is all of that: paper sanitary cover for the toilet seat, mints on the pillow, a tiny bar of wrapped soap the size of two postage stamps. And the smell of emulsified dust – just like in an airport – where the daily vacuum cleaning reduced the dust particles to a microscopic level with a very distinctive scent and probably a slight level of health hazard.

There is no Hilton or Marriott in this town; maybe a Fairfield Inn back up by the expressway... but this is my kind of place. I have chosen well, and it's a beaut. The place is a dump, but if you don't like it, fuck you. If some girl I pick up at the bowling alley doesn't like it, fuck her. It's cheap and easy, and no security cameras.

The lady at the front desk is very short, probably having shrunk a good bit over the years. She has a wig that looks like it may be 20 years old. At least 10 years old. It has been primped, nudged, and lovingly reshaped so many times over the years that she now looks like Cousin Itt from the old Addams Family TV show.

The TV behind her is playing Wheel of Fortune.

\$39.95 a night, \$189 for a week.

Cool. I give her one of my fake IDs and pay in cash.

A choice of rooms?

The end room - the one on the right down there, with a view of the pool. Great. I'll have a view of the petting zoo out the side window. I also nail the room right above it too.

Cousin Itt is smoking filterless Camels. I didn't know you could even get those anymore. Behind her on the wall, I notice an old, yellowed picture in a Woolworth five-and-dime frame; a picture of a fat guy in a bunny suit holding a hatchet. The fat guy

has a certain demented smile on his face, and looks like an insurance salesman with a little Bill Murray thrown in. As a matter of fact, I think it is Bill Murray in a fat suit. I know it can't be, but I can't stop looking at it.

Do I want to rent a VHS tape player? No.

I notice a stack of rentable, junky-looking videotape players on a rickety rack at the end of the reception desk, then a library shelf full of VHS tapes, their labels faded and bleached of color from the Florida sun.

Cousin Itt was reading a comic book when I came in, but she slid it away under a newspaper. The edge of the comic sticks out, and it looks like an Archie comic. She thinks I didn't see it, but I did. I can imagine for a moment what it would be like to be reading a comic to pass the time in a motel office in the middle of nowhere – that comic; reading the rest of that very comic – *was what I had been looking forward to when I got back from lunch earlier this afternoon.*

Too lazy to pull the car up in front of the room right now, I walk down to my room.

Since I'm actually walking I get a good look at the girl in cutoffs lounging against the fence around the pool and drinking a Dr Pepper as I go by her.

She has flip-flops on. But I only see one on her. She actually has only one flip-flop on.

"Hey, I know where your other flip-flop is," I say as I walk by, and I'm totally not even looking at her.

I'm not Brad Pitt, but sometimes, women still go for me. Not every girl. Brad is for every girl, but for some, (and all too few mostly) I'm "*their type*."

Now the ones that do like me – if I pick up on it, I usually still have to run a little game. For their own good of course, I give them the cold shoulder at first, (instead of the whistling, leering wolf act) and I make a real effort to ignore them with a coldly pleasant, courteous, hello, while looking off the other way. Then I do a sort of do the hit and run thing, give them the come-on, then a curt brush off, and then back again.

It's a mating dance perhaps?

And if that gets things revving, then I'm on to something. If they go back to talking to their girlfriends, I'm through and out of there. But....

So maybe she'll follow me down to my room... or not.

Guess not. Maybe next time. Actually, she looks so high right now, she's probably too mellow to do much more than smile. But I can feel the smile on my back as I walk on down to my room.

We'll see.

I go in the room. The motel-room smell. Nonsmoking room, but it's sure been smoked in. A lot. A room like this would have had a crew of roofers staying in it last week, or maybe some seedy, old solitaire-playing traveling salesman. I plop down on the bed. It's good and hard. I like a hard, firm bed - good for my back, which is doing fine right now - but just stretching, I can crack my back in three places.

I think about the single flip-flop girl, her smooth tan skin, the way a hint of young chub pooched out over the front of her tight jeans, the strand of hair slinging around her face and stuck to the corner of her mouth. That whimsical smile in her eyes as she looked up from watching Crazy Rich Asians on her cell phone as I walked by.

I doze off. Just for a second now.

The last 24 hours have been fun. I drank a lot last night. Got high. Fucked a 35-year-old out-of-work aerobics instructor/wanna-be actress.

Beat up a cop. Got 4 or 5 hours of sleep last night... I drove all afternoon. And don't forget, a kinda interesting séance.

...just need 5 minutes.

About 3 hours later I wake up. What was I dreaming? Where am I? Did I lock the car? Was that girl in the walkway a

hooker – truck stop hooker maybe – or someone’s girlfriend? Or wife?

The car’s fine. Doors tight.

My car’s a tired, ragged-out old hooptie anyways, and that’s the way I like it. No one wants to break into my heap. Still, I have the car all rigged up to set some alarms off if someone tries to get inside.

No sign of the girl now.

The sun is setting, coming in at low angles – slipping down – a cooling star falling slowly into its own sunset. I light a cigarette and check things out around the pool.

A condom with a dead ant stuck to it is floating in the deep end. I shake my head. The light’s hitting it just right, and I take a picture of it with my cell phone.

A seagull sails over, drifting and gently rocking back and forth. Maybe there’s a dump nearby? Seagulls do love dumps.

I hear a TV off in the distance, in some room with the window open. A car rolls up on the other side of the fence around the pool, gravel crunching and radio music turning off. Mexican radio. Day workers. I smell a waft of pot smoke. I hear bottles rattling in a paper bag. Someone’s going to have a six-pack party in their room tonight...and watch the game.

Fuck it.

I go into town, drive around... grab a bite, float, ride, cruise, check things out.

Darkness is falling, creeping in all around me.

I’m rolling along. Nice and easy.

All is quiet on the Western Front tonight. I pass by a bar called the Collier Room with two drunken old hippies arguing outside. There’s a couple of cars at the VFW. Ah ha, a strip club, but all pretty dead and empty looking. Not worth a visit. Maybe it’ll all get better on the weekend.

I see the speed trap up ahead: cop car sitting like a waiting shark. I get a bad, sinking feeling as I drift by slowly. Cop lights

a cigarette just as I turn my head to look – it's not my new friend Philby though. Tall guy with hair and a Village People moustache.

I'm hitting the edge of the old city proper, and still no rich or upscale neighborhood. Maybe they don't have any in this town. Mayor probably lives in a double-wide.

Then some empty lots in rows. Barren lots of an unfinished subdivision, gone-belly-up-now. The lots are laid out with a few foundations here and there with sprouts of wiring and plumbing coming up out of them.

Past there and outside of town now.

Flat.

Florida flat. Just fields of sawgrass. No mountains or hills. There's some kind of small military base or instillation east of town, a shitty, half-assed junior college over there, a series of Quonset huts in a row, a local radio station with a small one-room structure under a sky-high radio tower.

I get the feeling of being free, free and able to just wander, the kind of feeling you so take for granted until you're locked up or lying in the hospital. I pull over and just sit there a bit, watching the wind plow across the sawgrass in waves.

I sit there in a state of distraction and the haze of a long-road dream state.

Am I a man of destiny? My destiny called, I went. How many others are there out there like me? Most people never go. Never hop off the merry-go-round. They stay safe, never choosing a destiny of their own.

Does that make me a good guy? Maybe I'm no knight in shining armor, after all. I was scared back there when the twin and his guy got into my building. And when the lady wouldn't throw her baby to me the idea of me taking a running jump across to the burning building. In my mind, I could see me hitting the wall and falling down into the abyss of flames and billowing, fucking smoke. No fudging it. I was scared. I was a

coward. After I got to my room that night and flipped on the TV I threw down on the bed and started shaking uncontrollably.

I have to wonder where my soul is. Where my soul is right now. Is it in a safe or a sacred cave? Or does some numb-nutz have it. Some kid who bought it off the Dark Net and keeps it under his bed hidden from his mother? I picture him poking holes in the lid so it can breathe and... he's been catching fireflies and has them in the jar too.

All dark now. Night has fallen and twilight is gone. As I drive through downtown again; things are beginning to come to life. Not entirely in a good way... but not all bad either. As I cross below the underpass, I see blue lights – cops pulling someone over. He's got some college kids. I pull over and watch for a while. Definitely a speed-trap town. It's a cottage industry in a lot of small towns. I hate speed traps. The cop doesn't like something one of the kids up against the car says and kicks his feet out from under him. The kid tries to crawl under the car. One of the girls starts laughing and the cop backhands her. She goes down and the cop grabs the kid going under the car by the feet, but the kid has a good grip on something under there. Then – wow - the girl has gotten back in the car somehow and is driving off and running over the cop's foot and maybe her friend's legs.

A hot mess. I shake my head and drive off.

I get back to the motel and someone is parking in the spot right in front of my room where I wanted to park. Fuck. I still haven't unloaded all my crap out of the trunk. Later, then. In a minute.

But the far-off parking spot is a blessing after all. As I walk the distance past the room that's two doors down from mine, there's the girl – the one from before, watching the Crazy Asians. Her curtains are pulled closed, but I can still see right between them, and there she is, lying on the bed, going at it with a vibrator and nutting like a fiend. Beautiful.

The female orgasm is perhaps my favorite fetish to voyeurize. It terrifies some men but me? I am addicted, I have to admit.

She definitely dropped acid or MDA by the looks of the way she's going at it. Should I knock? Ask for a cup of sugar?

I hear something and turn to the noise. It's my Forlorn, the lost little girl, the one that I met when I was so fucking high the other night at Tori's. She's there down past my room and the motel walkway, but just for a brief second. Now she's fading away the more I look at her....

Back in the room.

What a day. What a week. What a life.

I'm in Bum-fuck America. Middle of nowhere, in every way possible.

I'm here in Menlo Florida, haunted by a little ghost girl, smelling a petting zoo when I open my door, watching a girl in a shitty motel pleasure herself, beating up cops and pissing on them... Now how cool is all that, motherfuckers.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN.

WAFFLE HOUSE

Some of the worst mistakes of my life
have been haircuts.

Jim Morrison

Something wakes me up. In the middle of the night, I hear a noise from somewhere. Outside. Upstairs. Not sure.

I start thinking about all the good stuff still in the trunk of the car. I do have the alarms on, but you can never be too careful. There's a couple of weapons, some expensive electronic stuff, drugs, loot from the last job, comic books...

I check. The car is fine, but I decide to go ahead and bring most of the stuff into the room, then I smoke a cigarette outside. It's a nice night. I walk over to the petting zoo and then past it. A goat bleats at me.

This is my life.

I like being on the road. Always a new, strange place right around the corner. New people. New strangers.

The open road. The open road to nowhere. A blue-collar killer on the open road to nowhere. Yes.

I'm a leaf blowing in the wind...along with all the other leaves. Blowing in the wind, along with all the answers my friend. Drinking, chasing tail, arguing with customer service, wandering through a shopping mall in the middle of the afternoon, killing people, and looting their shit.

I am a modern-day cowboy. A saddle-tramp and a rolling stone. I'm the restless wind.

I AM the restless wind.

I have to stay on the move now. If ever I settle down, I get stale. The days start to fly by. Weeks. Whole seasons. You begin to fit in. You become an ordinary person. Another robot. Your life goes on and you're just sitting there watching it go by like an afternoon TV show. Like sands through an hourglass: so are the days of our lives.

Or is the TV watching you?

I look up at the night sky. The clouds are flying over now. A front is moving in. The air is a bit colder, and the breeze is picking up.

I decide to take a spin and run through the fucking town. Let's see it at night... maybe get a drink, maybe get a bite. Who knows, maybe get laid. No telling what kind of skanks are lurking around this town at this hour of the night.

I pass a bar that looks interesting. Just closing though. Some people in the parking lot. Just a couple of people but.... A hot chick or two, with guys though.

As I drive by the marshy side of a waterway, the frogs are croaking up a storm.

Wandering. I track it out to the expressway and go down an exit. There's a big Truckstop there. I pull in and sit there off from the trucks, off on the edge of the parking lot where no one will notice me. I sit and watch.

A few truckers are arguing. Drunk. Stupid. Angry.

A girl gets out of a truck's cab. I can't tell if she's naked from the waist down or has a thong on. Yep, it's a thong. They call them "lot lizards". Some more of them over there behind the building. Two more start strolling across the parking lot, talking and laughing.

It's like watching a TV show. Amusing, a great place to get rolled or catch the clap. I roll on.

Back in town, everything's gone to ground and quiet. They have rolled the sidewalks up.

There are some people at the Waffle House. I sail in and get a seat at the counter. One of the waitresses is eyeballing me and she beats the other girl to me with the setup: the knife and fork on a napkin.

Cool.

The menu, a smile, then a glass of water. Then another smile. Swell.

"Hello there, Princess." She doesn't reply, just smiles back, sort of shyly. Something about a girl getting shy gets me curious sometimes.

Not a bad-looking girl. Cute.

She could be giving me the eye for any number of reasons. Maybe she's just up for a spin tonight. Maybe she's sick of this place and wants to get out of town and I'm a "perfect stranger." Maybe she just broke up with her boyfriend. Or girlfriend. Maybe she's just broke. She's young so maybe she just wants to get away from her parents. She's probably not a virgin. Virgins are usually more giddy and silly. Then again, ya never know. I start sketching on some napkins, just doodling like I often do, and I'm drawing some horses and horse heads. Girls love horses.

I eat, I smile, I get my ice water refilled. She looks at my horse.

She turns up her nose with wrinkles and says, "I hate horses. They kicked me once," and turns away.

Just then some cops come in. Four of them. They're all laughing and joking. Probably high. My blood runs cold for a second when I notice Philby, the guy I clocked out when I first got to town, is one. He's almost right on me, as I turn, and his eyes meet mine. He looked right through me. Great! He doesn't recognize me!

I pay up and hit the road.

Outside, I remember that I wrote my phone number on one of the napkin sketches, but I forgot to give it to her.

I sit outside in my car. I sit there and watch.

Princess beats out another waitress again, this time to the cops, and is waiting on them now. She's flirty with them all and putting her hands on one cop's shoulder as she jokes and laughs with them.

I'm sitting there watching this. Can you believe that? I'm like a jealous high school boyfriend. I don't even have a little pint bottle to sip on like if I was in a movie.

Well shit...

Then, I see one of the other waitresses clean up my spot. She bundles the napkins with horses and my cell number on them up in her fist as she's talking over her shoulder to the cook behind her, and it all just gets thrown out.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT.

BEING WATCHED

Like a bowl of cereal with
water instead of milk....

Valiant Thor

I get back to my room and I'm still antsy.

I can't sleep. I can't find the 2nd bottle of the 18-year either right now, and so – WTF – I do some of the Yage I've got in my pocket. I mean, I'm on a job right now, so I'm not technically doing it recreationally. And I've got to get some sleep. You know, for the good of the job.

After I kill the Yage, I now find the bottle and have a swig. I turn on the TV, and there are reruns of The Love Boat *click* Home Shopping Network * click * some talk show about the warning signs of alcoholism... and I just turn the TV off when I hit that.

Still can't sleep, so it's time to hit the computer.

One good thing, the roofers or whoever stayed in this room before, they left a good load of shit in the refrigerator. A half loaf of Arnold Oat Nut bread, a six-pack of off-brand beer that I've never heard of, breakfast sticks, a bottle of Old Spice cologne, a packet of sliced baloney that's gone shiny and slimy, some double-A batteries, chocolate-flavored peanut butter, a tequila bottle with two fingers left, a whistle....

I crack one of the off-brand beers and sit down.

I search out up Brittany's Facebook page. Such a natural cutie. I watch a cellphone video she had posted of her vacation. Our 19-year-old Brittany Gorkin is walking out of a Vero Beach hotel room with her friends: apparently her boyfriend and another college-age couple that they are traveling together with. They are all happy and kissy, and loading vacation gear into a small SUV. Everyone is beautiful when they're 19. Sure. Most everyone.

There are shots of them on the beach, in a restaurant, partying, having fun...

Nice girl. Very big, beautiful eyes. So young. Still a little baby fat, shapely, bouncy, bubbly, carefree. The "carefree" reminds me of the phenomenon of how kids in college are still floating in a sort of anesthetized, happy, embryonic fluid of life. Floating and not having any idea of what it all is really like or the fucked-up shit that lies ahead. A small pet terrier dances around her feet as she loads her overnight bag into the car.

In one picture, Brittany is smiling at the camera as she shows off her tan and doffs her summery straw hat to display a new hairstyle. Nice legs. A dolphin tattoo on one ankle, a comical looking bat or vampire on the other. She had a bat on one of her T-shirts: a bat and the words "FLY BY NIGHT!" A cool design which I've never seen before.

Looking at this girl, knowing she is dead and gone but so alive in the pictures brings home the tragedy of it all. And how precious life is.

Next I check the accident report.

I'm in luck – the police department database is updating, and I find an open “back door” to hack in through, accessing the accident report and anything else I want to get into.

So the report seems fishy from the start. It sounds all made up. Things don't add up. Vague, confusing, circuitous. Implying that another vehicle hit them? Then sped away? But how do you conclude that if no one saw it? There is no supporting evidence entered into the report. The pictures are no good, poorly lit and some look like they have condensation or spit on the lens. And... well, fuck me running! Look who filed the report – Officer Philby! That dildo cop back there with the Angry Birds. Well, hello, Philby.

I do a google search for Officer Philby, Menlo Florida and get a hit on the city government website. A posed and artificially lit picture, probably taken at Glamour Shots in some shopping mall off down by the interstate.

A mite or tiny gnat lands on the screen and pulls me out of the computer trance I'm in. I try and thumb the gnat two or three times before I get him. The crushed gnat is right there, on Philby's smiling, fat face.

I hear the bear roar.

Shit, it almost 2 AM. I go out to get some air. Take a walk around.

Got a good Yage buzz going on now, and I'm feeling pretty mellow. There's a vending machine down the way. How about some dessert? I try to buy a candy bar but push the wrong button number and buy a comb. I try again. I'll try a Snickers, in honor of our boy Quickjohn. Hell, I'll try two.

I hear a slight whine, sort of like a balloon squeaking off air. It's to my left, off, down the breezeway, and I turn. I look and see a blue glow going around the corner. I look harder and I can see a blue glowing entity standing about 20 feet off from that corner, off in the darkness of the parking lot. But I can't see it when I look right at it - only out of the side of my eye.

This is what we call a “*Blue Louie*.” This is a kind of remnant of a Forlorn. It’s a haunted soul, but one who died a good while ago and is so old and diminished that it probably can’t remember who it once was or the specific, horrific event that caused it to remain in the Borderlands.

Britanny Gorkin? I don’t thing so. She’s still out there but not faded like this one.

Wooosh. Something gushes by me. the Blue Louie has made it all around the building and has come up from behind me.

This is perfectly normal and no cause for alarm. When you do the Yage, you have one foot in the real world, and one foot in the nethers.

These Blue Louies are sad things, and I’ve heard that there are ways to get rid of them, to put them out of their misery, but I’ve only been with the crew for a year or two and don’t know all the tricks.

I head back to the room, and I’m thinking.

I took Philby for a doofus when we first met: a comical, harmless, Barney Fife-type caricature, but maybe he’s the one covering up for whatever happened... or, if this was a murder, he could be protecting some local bigwig, or bigwig’s kid, or even another cop.

If so, there will be some clues somewhere.

On the way back to the room, I pass a room with a guy sitting there, watching TV with the curtains wide open. I’ve noticed that when a room is not occupied, the drapes are wide open and the beds are made, all nice and tight, and while you have to shut the drapes yourself when you check in, its odd for an occupied room to have the drapes wide open.

This guy just forgot? Looks like he’s watching porno when I glance, so I look back to where I’m walking.

I decide to have another cigarette before I go to sleep and to devour my 2nd candy bar in a quiet orgy of simple pleasures, so I go and sit by the pool and the petting zoo.

The bear is not looking good, but he's hanging in there. Its not a big bear, but not quite a baby.

I pull up one of the cheapo plastic chairs from the swimming pool and watch the bear. "Hi bear. Wanna sip?" I offer him the can of beer in my hand.

The bear roars and lunges at me. He has a lot of froth and slobber flinging from his mouth.

"Easy there, Ace."

I pick up the cigarette that flipped out of my mouth when the bear lunged, and I sit down in the beside-the-pool chair.

"Sorry, dude. No Heineken for you today."

The bear lumbers back to the other side of the cage as if he heard and understood me. I think sometimes animals do understand us – well, sort of. They just listen to the tones maybe.

After I finish the cigarette, I saunter back to the vending machines to get a soda. This is a good batch of Yage and I have a floating feeling as I walk. I feel like a feather, tripping down the sidewalk in the night breeze.

I try to not look when I go by the porno man's room, but on the way back he turns his head – I can see him turn out of the side of my eye – and without thinking, I turn and look. Now I can see that his face is awful: all sallow and cracked, and he has a damp, deathly pallor. The eyes are no more than ghastly sockets, hollow and rotten-looking, as if the eyeballs rotted and insects and birds ate the tasty eyes out of the head. He has a sick grin on his face and waves at me.

I've definitely got one foot in the Borderlands now.

These kinds of rotting ghosts are mostly harmless too but can be trouble sometimes. They are beyond the Blue Louies. These are the ones who never could be avenged, the ones who are not innocent, and are just hanging around waiting to go to Hell.

Satan comes every solstice to collect these souls (found that shit out the hard way actually), but he misses some sometimes. They are pretty harmless. All bumbling and wandering but they can still turn vicious on you, and they still give me the willies.

I go back to sit with the bear.

I'm pretty lonely, I guess.

"Hey there, fella. Full moon tonight." I say to him. Off in the distance a well-timed tire squeals and a glass-packed muffler revs and kaputters into the night. "Lotsa action going on tonight, amigo. We're missing it all, you know – the good stuff at least."

A voice out of nowhere says: "The good stuff's right here now, sweetie...." – but it's not the bear talking.

I look around behind me, and it's the girl from the room next door. The girl with one flip-flop. She is pulling another chair over to where I'm sitting. She sits down.

She has both her flip-flops now.

"Bear got bit by a raccoon," she says casually. "I told them it has rabies."

"And they don't want to hear it, huh?"

"No, they got someone coming for it."

"That's good. Poor thing's probably suffering."

She lights one of my cigarettes. She does it without asking and I take her being so familiar as a good sign.

"I saw you looking last night," she says.

I smile. "You were working on a good one there. It was a beautiful show. Better than Love Boat reruns."

She smiles. She's just woken up and her hair is nice and messy.

"The bear woke you?" I ask.

She smiles demurely and nods, looking me in the eye. She's coming on strong.

I scoot my chair over closer. Maintain silence. Sit there a second. I put my hand on top of her hand. She smiles. I lean into her and kiss her. She smiles more. Then we click and I start kissing her in earnest. She melts a bit and then gets more whipped up for a while. She pulls out and leans back and catches her breath.

My eyes wander to the left, and I notice the night-shift kid in the office is watching. Lit from below, (from his laptop

probably) he has a sad, frozen look on his face. Got to be a lonely job, night shift duty in this shithole town.

Watching us is just gonna make him feel even lonelier, but I can't help it.

She takes some more deep breaths and then stands up from her chair. She knows what she's doing. She knows what she's gonna do.

She slinks over to right in front of me – self-confident, majestic, brimming with lust – and straddles my lap, smiling and throwing her cigarette away over her shoulder. She descends into my lap and starts kissing me intently now, her hair cascading down on me, and her arms lazily wrapped around my shoulders. My mind goes in five different directions, one of which is; what happens if whatever boyfriend she has comes home or wakes up right now.

She draws back from the kissing, reaches in her shirt pocket, and pulls out a condom, waving it in my face and smiling.

Fuck the boyfriend. Fuck someone driving by seeing us. Fuck the cops driving by. Fuck the ghosts. Fuck the kid in the motel office; I've got a good hand here – a full house – and I'm going all in.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE.

JUST CALL ME ANGEL OF THE MORNING

No love is great
that makes the truth to suffer,
nor wiser words can fathom
all the racket hearts have borne.

Not Shakespeare

One thing about this wonderful new life of mine - the one thing that keeps me in the game - is the intrigue of not knowing what's going to happen next. I love that. Most of the time.

Next morning, everything's all fucked when I wake up.

The girl wants me to give her 200 bucks now. I'm half into a cup of coffee, and I almost spit-take the coffee as she tells me.

I have to laugh at myself. Some Romeo I am!

She gets mad. Thinks I'm laughing at her. I have to explain that I'm laughing at myself. Here I was last night,

thinking what a great lover I am, what an irresistible leading man I am...and now this.

But this is going to be tricky.

I'm right in the middle of a delicate operation here in Menlo, Florida. I can't have any squabbles or any sort of bad blood to fuck it all up – which can easily happen. If she threatens me, say with rape and calling in the cops, or it turns out she has a “manager,” ? What do I do then? Close it all down? Or do I kill both of them? I sure don't need some ding-dong pimp or boyfriend gunning for me. But, on general principal, I'm not giving her 200 roses either.

So... I have to talk her down now. Smooth things out. Make everybody happy. Make everything fair.

But I've definitely screwed up this time, with all the sensitive, dangerous, and valuable things stashed in my room and in the car, and sometimes on me. I don't need anyone snooping around in my room or tricking their way into it when I'm not there... or jumping me when I'm getting into my car. I don't need any jilted frail or macho, jealous boyfriend slashing my tires.

And also, I kinda like this girl.

I sit her down to talk to her. Gotta do this right. Gotta give her the lowdown.

“Listen girl, 200 is way too crazy for me. Now... you're worth that – don't get me wrong – and you're worth more! Sure, why not. But you have to look at it from my side too. For me, it all kind of becomes more than just fun and romance when it gets above a C-note.”

“What's a C-note?”

“A hundred bucks. A ‘C-note’ is a hundred bucks.” She rolls her eyes.

“Don't give me that,” I say, shaking my head. “Now listen to all this. I'm not going to give you the runaround, and I'm going to take my time to say all this.”

I light a cigarette, take a breath, and think about what I'm gonna say

“Ok, let me explain this misunderstanding. See, for me, babe – a hundred bucks – now, well... that works for me. See, I’m a good-looking guy and can manage on my own. Sure. I mean, get by without paying out money. But see, the \$100 gives me freedom. With a C-note it becomes business, not love. So I don’t have to worry about you getting possessive.” Strangely enough, she seems to be following me. That’s great. She lights a joint. “So, let’s make it easy. A hundred bucks. For you. Fine with me. Two hundred?”

She nods.

“Now another thing – I gotta tell you – if you are going to charge a person for something, you have to tell them up front. You get your hair done: the hairdresser will tell you how much it is first. It’s the American way.”

I put the cigarette out in the ashtray. She crushes the fire out of the joint and sets it on the side of the ashtray for later.

“Run those games on the other guys: they don’t ever get you off, right? And I may be mistaken – but I rarely am in this matter – you did get off last night. I mean all the buzzers and bells? Ya know?” She nods and smiles. “Now there’s something to be said for that. You’re a real, healthy, sensuous young woman, not some old dried-up biddy. You had a real good time with me last night, you got to admit. The doofs, they just jerk off in your vagina and run back to their wives or their girlfriends, and there’s nothing else to it.”

I take her leg into my lap and rub on her calf.

“Now thirdly, it can work out better for you sometimes.” I say.

“How is that?”

“A hundred bucks, that keeps it friendly. So then we’re friends. We can talk. Sit and watch the sunset with a six-pack of beer. Go see a movie in the afternoon. And if you don’t want to hang out you just open the door and split. So, fine, you take off – don’t hang out –no hard feelings. Right?”

She smiles. “Does all that make sense?” She shrugs.

I pull out a C-note and drop it in her lap.

“So now, it’s up to you. Up to you... if it was good for you, maybe you wanna go again sometime...ya know, off the books or whatever?”

She nods, stands up, and leaves. I’m sitting there – did it all work? Is she gonna be calling her boyfriend? The cops?

Then the door opens and she comes back in.

She sits down next to me and puts her hand on my leg. Looks up at me. Doesn’t smile but doesn’t frown either. Just this plain, vapid look on her face.

“OK. Now this one’s on the house?”

She nods slowly. “...but we do it my way this time.”

“Sure. What’s that?”

I guess I’ll find out.

It’s better to have good friends than bad neighbors.

CHAPTER THIRTY

AN AUTO GRAVE-YARD AFTERNOON

The process of delving into the
black abyss is to me the keenest form
of fascination.

H.P. Lovecraft.

Wow. Better than last night. Some dame here. A good one.

Afterwards she falls asleep. Just like last night. She's part Cherokee: the cheekbones, the blond hair, and the nice tan. I can't even wake her up. Yep. She's whupped. Unconscious and down for the count.

Her purse is lying there open, next to the bed, with a pack of cigarettes on top. I left mine by the pool or somewhere and I grab one of hers. Under the cigs I see a mean pair of scissors. Girl on her own's got to defend herself I guess. I carry her to her room and tuck her in nicely.

It's a fresh morning. So I go for a ride. As I start the car, Barry White is singing "Another Love TKO." I smile and shake

my head. That's business as usual for me: more irony and coincidence in a week than most people have in a year.

As I pass the Waffle House, I see some waitresses getting off for their shift change. But I don't see "Princess." I circle around and come back by for a second look. No. She is not among them.

I head over to the crash site. I stake it out and wait till the speed trap cop goes off to lunch. He should be at lunch for at least 45 minutes.

The crash site is a grassy area by the abutment of the overpass. The vehicle hit the abutment and bounced back onto the grass. Must have been going at a good clip.

I take a good, long look at the tire tracks, and find some car fragments in the grass. Blood and gore spots here and there, now turned to a cruddy copper-brown in color...it looks to me like the SUV hit the ground at an angle and hit on the two right-side tires first. I'm not sure what that means, but it brings up more questions than answers. Forensic studies of an accident scene can lead you in wrong directions and down dead ends very easily. The kids could have fallen asleep? Even a real pro can get all snarled up in misinterpreting evidence.

Next, I head out to the auto graveyard.

I finally find the wreckage of the car the kids were driving. "This is it." I climb around in it, up on the roof, look underneath. The smell of death – baked in the Florida sun for the last week – still clings to the car like an aura. My pendant feel warm.

The wreckage is all twisted up and a real holy mess. It's sickening to imagine that there were four people – four human beings – in this thing when it hit the wall at whatever-many-miles-an-hour.

Whoever was driving busted the steering wheel with their chest.

One head came through the windshield. Tires good: no blowout.

School notebook. Sunglasses. Blood. Hair. Hello Kitty keychain...

A couple of old record albums – Bowie, Doors, Meatloaf, Iggy, Steely Dan, Talking Heads... good taste in vintage vinyl. They still have the price sticker on them from a used record shop they probably hit on the way down. Receipt says Fantasyland Records in Atlanta. I've been there before.

There was an impact on the front left, and signs of paint from being hit by another car, but – curious – the paint from the other car has been mostly rubbed, scraped, and scratched off. That tells me something right there.

Then there are some things that don't jive with the accident report. That's not proof of anything yet, could be sloppy police work, but in my business, it keeps me going on this thing.

I'll take some of the personal items that I will need later. I recognize Brittany's straw hat, all crushed and twisted now, the same one she was wearing in her Facebook video.

I take a few more pictures and go home.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE.

CATAMUSO BUSTED

**Humans are creatures, who spend
their lives trying to convince themselves, that
their existence is not absurd.**

— Albert Camus

That afternoon I get a call from Catamuso; a voicemail, actually. He is in town, but he's in jail already. He was coming to hit me up about something and got caught in the speed trap. LOL. Knowing Catamuso, he started something with the cops, too. He can really get on people's nerves in a sometimes amusing and nutty way. His third wife set his bed on fire while he was sleeping in it. I think his nickname for her was Lamb Chop. Lamb Chop tried to incinerate him.

He got one free phone call from jail, and I was it. He didn't call our headquarters because I'm right here, and it might take them a while to get someone else down here.

Now I want to stay as invisible to the police as possible – off their radar screen – so I get the flip-flop girl to go in with the bail. As they come out, I see he’s already getting into it with her, arguing in front of some cops that are just coming up the steps to the station and he almost gets arrested again.

As we drive back to the motel, I catch Catamuso looking at the girl out of the side of his eye. She’s a sexy girl and dressed right. She has these tight cutoff blue-jean shorts, a tight T-shirt – and she smells really good.

After we drop her off, we go across town to the impound to get Catamuso’s car.

Catamuso is curious. “Who is that girl?”

“I don’t even know her name. I call her the flip-flop girl.”

“She’s not one of us, then.”

“No, no, no. I just keep forgetting to ask her name.”

“I want her. I must have her,” he says.

“Then why did you start an argument with her?”

He says nothing back to me, but he pulls out some lotion and starts rubbing it on his hands very methodically. “Old dishpan hands,” he says.

“What, er – you getting ready to feel her up now? Wanna be well prepared, huh?”

“You don’t even know her name.”

“Strange, isn’t it.” I smile. “Love is sure strange, don’t you think?”

“I am going to eat lunch.”

“I’ll drop you up here,” I say, pointing to the next intersection.

“There’s a Dairy Queen and a Krystal and a fish-and-chips place.”

“You have to buy me lunch now.”

“Why do I buy you lunch?” I chuckle, amused. “Why do I need to buy you lunch? Can’t you buy your own lunch?”

“You’re loaded. You are flush. Flush from that last score up in Connecticut two weeks ago... and you’re argue about buying me lunch?” I did score a lot of good stuff.

“Yeah, and I had to ‘correct’ some guys up there in New England. Were well-trained, top-notch guys. So, it is whoever

gets there first. The firstest with the mostest gets the bestest. And sure, I got the mostest.” I feel Catamuso frowning at me. “But I guess I can buy you lunch today, Catamuso. Certainly – as I enjoy your company, my friend, and I would be delighted!”

He smiles.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

JUNK IN THE TRUNK

She pulled one paperback down out of the top stack on the shelf, looked at it thoughtfully for a second and murmured:
“Gone with the Wind. Fucking story of my life, don’t ya know....”

Andromeda Jones.

It’s the middle of the afternoon and the restaurant is not crowded. Of course, Catamuso orders the most expensive thing on the menu. And a \$6.95 deluxe malted milkshake.

“Why did you come down here? What’s up?” I ask.

“This morning when I woke up in my hotel room, I looked out the window. A man dressed as an Egyptian Pharaoh is stood across the street in front of car lot. He was flipping a sign around, you see, trying to bring customers in. He looked like you from the distance, and so I thought of you.”

“I woke up this morning and looked out the window and saw a toilet seat hanging from a no-parking sign,” I reply.

“No omen there. Just public silliness.” Catamuso looked up from his food.

I smile. “No, never would I associate you, my dear friend, with a toilet seat. Just a coincidence.”

“I’m not sure I like what you just said.”

“Well, you’re saying a pharaoh in front of a car lot looks like me. Insulting? Sure. Totally insulting.”

“You know, there was a lot more good stuff in Hagerstown than we thought,” he says, changing the subject.

“You got up there again after me, then. What did I miss?”

“Frozen people.”

“Strange.” I think for a second. “Cryogenic?”

“Frozen. I don’t know ‘cryonetic.’ I don’t know what is that.” And then he added, “But I have one in the trunk.”

“Jeez.” Asking Catamuso WHY he has a frozen body in his trunk would have been confounding.

His milkshake comes.

“You crash in the other room tonight. Its right upstairs from me.” He knows that when I hole up in one of these cheap motels, I usually have a spare room to fall back on, or change up to, or sleep in if the neighbors are making too much noise or I want to confuse someone. My standard procedure.

“What’s the loot look like on this one, Harken?” asks Catamuso.

I smile and shake my head back and forth.

I take a sip of my coffee.

A few seconds pass.

Catamuso figures it out. “A girl is murdered? By who? What’s the loot Harken?”

“Don’t know. Don’t know yet. Might not be very much.”

We sit there silently a bit as the wheels in Catamuso's mind creak and turn.

"Quickjohn is here?" Catamuso guesses.

"No. No sign of him. Trail went dead back at the college there. He's probably in Alaska by now or Paris or Baghdad or somewhere far off."

"Shit. We had him."

"Or he could be here. I can almost feel him. Watching."

"Shit. Me too. I think. But what ever would he want in a silly place like this town?"

"Yeah, this is a no-where-ville. No, probably not here." I think for a minute: if I want to keep Catamuso around it might be wise to spice it up a bit. "This inquest may be something with drugs. Maybe your friends, the local cops. are involved. This is a speed trap town – as you found out – but also, a drug highway."

"Bastards. Count me in!" Catamuso has an axe to grind with the speed-trap cops here but he is also well aware that with drugs comes big blocks of cash and valuables. Many of our inquests result in meager loot and valuables to seize.

"You're going to do this investigation yourself too? Off the books?"

"Yeah. I told them I'm on vacation. Which I am. This job is just a hobby thing."

"You know – what we did last week, going for Quickjohn ourselves - that is not a proper procedure. You know I can get in trouble."

I nod. "Not if we win. Not if I hit paydirt."

Catamuso makes a face and tilts his head to one side, looking at his milkshake and stirring it with his straw.

"And I think Quickjohn will be back. Back for me."

"For you?" I nod.

"I saw him. Our eyes met."

"Tabernac." Catamuso mutters one of his foreign cuss words.

We sit there a minute, looking at each other. Catamuso says, "I'm still in that we catch him. I am with you Harken. On the books or off."

Good ole' Catamuso. I think to myself. I'm sure I will need him now and when the time comes.

Just by luck, I spot the "Waffle House Princess" girl – the waitress from the Waffle House – eating lunch with her girlfriends there across the room. We are making eyes. She smiles demurely. She looks a lot better now, with her hair down and not all done up for work and with a hairnet.

I smile at her. She smiles back. I take a sip from my glass. She takes a sip from her glass. I run my hand through my hair. She runs her fingers through her hair. Yup! She's up for it. And knowing that, now I have to mess with Catamuso's head. I can't help it.

So, I say: "I'm feeling good today, Catamuso."

He shrugs. He's chowing down on the food that has arrived.

"What?"

"I have the "kavorka" today, the lure of the animal. Today, my friend, I am irresistible to women."

"You smell?"

"No," I laugh. "I do it with my eyes. With a "come hither" look."

"Good."

"You don't believe me, do you."

"As usual. You are full of shit."

"Look around. Pick out a girl in here. Pick the best one. Let me show you how it works."

Catamuso looks around the room.

"Now don't point. Just tell me who she is. Describe her. And I will pick her up. I'll bet you lunch, double or nothing."

He looks around. All over the place. Princess and her friends are the only ones here that actually look interesting. He points towards her table.

"The blonde?"

"Sure," he says.

I smile and shake my head. "Now that's a hard one." I look at Catamuso as a slight smile draws across his face. "She's

the hottest girl in here. Did you have to pick the hottest girl in the whole town?"

"I doubt you have any chances with her. She is a nice one, Harken. What would she want with you?"

I let a few seconds tick by. I'm smiling at her. I whisper to Catamuso, "Now watch this..."

I beckon at Princess with my index finger and a stern but smirking look. She runs her fingers through her hair, smiling. She looks around her table, picks up her plate and her drink, hoists her purse over her shoulder, and comes walking seductively towards us.

She almost sits down next to me, but I extend my hand indicating for her to sit down next to Catamuso. I want to be able to look her in the eyes, and don't want Catamuso staring at her as he is wont to do.

"What's your name, Princess?" I ask.

She smiles and nods. "I like Princess. Princess is fine."

"Princess, I'm Anthony and this is my uncle Catamuso. I just got him out of jail."

"Oh my." She looks at him with apprehensive surprise and amusement, if not suspicion. "Jail?"

"I am not his uncle," says Catamuso, and leaves it at that, with no further explanation.

"Don't worry, he's no dangerous criminal." I look at Catamuso and smile. "He was arrested in one of your town's wonderful speed traps."

She smiles at Catamuso and pats him on the back. "Awww, poor baby."

I wink at her. "Let's do something today, you and me. Waddaya say? Do you have an opera in this town?" She smiles and shakes her head no. "A zoo?" She shakes her head. "A racetrack?"

"No, but they have a demolition derby over in Impaqua on Saturday night."

I nod approvingly.

"Saturday? Noooo. Let's go back to my hotel room now."

"Your hotel room. What's there?"

“A bed and a TV... and the TV’s broke.” I say matter-of-factly. Catamuso almost chokes on his food.

“Sure! Let’s go!” she says. Catamuso’s eyes roll at what I’ve just said, and he slurps up the last of his milkshake with a loud, throttling sound.

I’m loving it.

I can see Catamuso in the window, his eyes following me as we leave. He shakes his head and is probably wondering what the word “hither” means.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

MORNING OF THE MAGICIAN

love is a one way street
going in both directions.

Gilligan Remy

Afterward, the Princess splits, Catamuso comes up to the spare room upstairs, which is a mess now. “Sorry, I used up your room, amigo,” I say. “I really had to use this one. The girl in the room next door to mine downstairs might...”

“Yes. You had to do that then. No problem, Anthony.” The French in Catamuso – whatever French there is – is sympathetic to matters of love.

“OK.”

He grunts.

“Sad little town, eh?” I say.

“But I saw her boyfriend come home down there just now. The next door girl downstairs.”

“The flip-flop girl? Her boyfriend’s here?”

“I don’t know. The girl next door. Oui.”

Boyfriend? She did mention a boyfriend coming home, but I didn’t think much about it. And his stuff – some “guy stuff” – was in her room. Damn, I was going to try and set up/hire flip-flop girl to take care of Catamuso tonight, but with the newly arrived boyfriend around, I’ll have to put that in the cooler.

I need to take care of Catamuso somehow though; get him laid and squared away. I want him to stick around... plus, I owe him that. He’s the one assistant or “squire” that is always on the ball and always comes through. Sure has saved my ass a number of times and he has a real, strange sixth sense about things that I’ve learned to respect. But sometimes he just up and leaves at the drop of a hat. Never even says goodbye. One day he’s there, and the next he’s on his way to Las Vegas to play Keno or Montreal to play being a Mountie or to Stonehenge to say a prayer.

I send Catamuso downstairs to my other room to hop on my laptop and get to work. You wouldn’t know it just by looking at him, but he has become maestro on the keyboards (probably from surfing and breaking into obscure and exotic porn sites without paying) so he’s gotten pretty good at digging up dirt, cracking secure sites, peeking into bank accounts, utilizing closed-off government resources, and fucking with people who piss him off. Better than me.

I take a nap and doze off. Later I wake up with the feeling that something is in the room. I look around but there’s nothing there. Look out the window. No one outside there. Look in the bathroom. Under the bed.

I flop down on the bed again.

There, on the dresser...I see a white mouse, sitting up on his hind legs and staring right at me. Slowly, I move my hand to the ashtray on the nightstand, touch it, grab it, and then pitch it at the mouse as hard as I can. The mouse moves and dodges so fast I can’t tell which way it went, almost as if it disappeared into thin air, as the ashtray bursts into forty-three pieces on the wall.

Fuck it. Fucking shit! I'm not going to sleep in this room tonight. Let Catamuso have it.

I go downstairs to the other room. Catamuso's hot and heavy on the computer.

"Waddaya got, amigo?"

"These bobos write a lots of traffic tickets in this town." he replies.

"You bet. The highway outside there that runs in front of the hotel; it's a shortcut between the 301 and the other highway."

"They have lot of accounts here... and the Bitcoins they have too. Some Bitcoins."

"Bitcoins! I am amazed that they even know what a Bitcoin is in this town. You find any other unusual things? ...deaths, murders, fatal accidents?"

"Nothing unusual. Some things, you know."

Catamuso turns around in his chair and stares intently at the stuffed bat on the TV set.

He gets up and goes over. He doesn't touch it but bends down close to it, looking it over carefully.

"Bat?" he asks.

"Bat." I answer. "A souvenir."

"Of what then?"

"Of love. Of romance."

"What kind of romance?"

"A short one. AJust a day and a half."

He turns with a vacant look on his face.

"Sometimes the greatest love lasts only for a week or for a day." I say.

"Ahhh Harken. You have no hope for you."

"Anything on the girl's accident?"

"We're downloading all body and dashboard cams now."

"Look, I'll be back. Call me when you have something."

Going out the motel room door, I run into the flip-flop girl and her man. He's returned from his travels wherever, and they're just getting back from the grocery store.

I was expecting a big, burly, tattooed redneck, or a pit-bull faced thug of a motherfucker boyfriend, but this guy is a square:

a normal looking, everyday guy. He looks like a salesman. Probably a nice guy.

Unfortunately, he's smart enough to quickly pick up on the concept that something may be going on between me and her. He looks at her for a second. Then me.

She skillfully interrupts his train of thought by introducing him to me.

Archie. He's a magician by profession. Puts on magic shows for those fundraisers, those ones with phone-bank boiler-rooms that raise money for the underprivileged children and the Shrine clubs.

I'm happy for him – that he's got the hot girl – and sad for him because probably he's got more than he can handle. I can feel that he's not going to start anything with me just on suspicion.

Apparently, he is just passing through now; sort of came home to eat dinner and get laid, and he's on his way off to another job out on the road.

They go into the room, and I wander off to take a walk. I want to go to the deserted Putt-Putt and take some arty pictures of the defunct windmills. I like windmills. The cookies and the real ones both.

About half a mile down the 4-lane highway though, I see a baseball game going on and sit down to watch it. I forget about the windmills and put the photos off for now.

It's a good game and I'm getting into it, then 40 minutes later, flipflop girl comes up and sits down next to me. She must have seen me walk off in this direction maybe?

She has a melancholy air about her now. He's gone again. I guess its not much of a life for her: living in a shitty motel room, watching TV, getting high all day, and seeing Archie every week or so. Maybe watching VHS tapes on a rickety, old tape deck. Then walking down to the corner to eat where there's a choice of Arby's, Krystal, and the hotdogs rolling in the braiser machine and Big Gulp fountain drinks in RaceTrac.

But now I'm not into her anymore. Not right now. Maybe tomorrow. And I kinda knew that would happen. I like being a

backdoor man, but I hate to meet the boyfriend or the husband. It spoils it for me somehow.

“He’s gone?”

“Yeah.”

“He knows?”

“I told him you were a fag.”

“Great.” I grimace. “And it’s gay, not fag anymore.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. They changed it.”

Loneliness is a hard game. I put my arm around her, and we sit there in peaceful silence for a bit. After a while, she starts telling me her life story.

Her father used to hypnotize her when she was ten, and she went along with it as if it was a secret thing between them, a pretend game they played. At fourteen, she fell in love with Vanilla Ice and later that year, she tricked her way into one of his concerts, got back stage and nailed him. Her mother regularly fucked an inner-city basketball team behind her mother’s rich second husband’s back. Her little brother ran away from home and fell asleep on a railroad track and got his head run over. She has a crystal that protects her from all bad luck and evil influences but she can’t find it right now.

OK. That is about all I need to know. I don’t really want to hear any more. Love is funny. Sometimes the more you know about somebody, the less you want them.

Some of the best lovers, ones that I had the best time with and wound up feeling closest to, I just saw across the bar – our eyes meeting – lingering – two smiles and we go off together, quite often without any words at all. Do you get closer to someone if you don’t know their name? Is that kind of thing shallow or is it a more pure and perfect love?

That I shall leave a mystery.

Two people making love in the muddy, cold basement of a bombed-out Kosovo office building while bullets are flying, mortar shells are going off and dead bodies are lying around outside... they may have a more perfect, more beautiful lovemaking than some couple from Peoria in a Disneyland hotel

room bored out of their skulls with each other and taking advantage of the kids being down at the pool with their grandma and grandpa.

And then there's Woody Allen. When they asked him if sex was dirty, his answer: only if it's done right.

She rambles into her relationship, her boyfriend, their cooling and wobbling love affair, his gradual diminishing passion.

I can't handle it. I have to do something. I change the subject.

"Baby, that haircut..."

"What?"

I point to her purse and say, "Give me the scissors... and let your hair down girl." She has to be wondering how I know she has scissors in her purse, but pulls them out. "And a comb."

I cut her hair so that she has bangs now. I fluff it up and trim a bit more. It looks good. "Bangs 'er sexy. We men like bangs. Now get up and walk sexy for me..."

She walks but she just doesn't have it. I instruct her. "Grind those hips girl. Like you're trying to grind up a tomato between your thighs, that's it. Swing your hips. Yeah. Now you've got it."

"Really? That's all?"

"So easy huh. Now save that walk for the bedroom babe. Slinky. That's your new name you do it so good. Slinky."

I show her a few more things. I pull her denim cut-offs up tighter. "There ya go. Sew 'em up in back there so they're tight! So they're like a size or two too small."

"Won't that make me look fat?"

"Yes, of course, but fat in all the right places." She smiles. "Well, I'm turning you into a real sexpot."

"Sexpot. I like that." she says, rolling it around in her mind. She's probably never heard the term before.

"Now try it on him when he comes back in town. No guarantee, but I think that's got it."

I think I've created a monster. I hope.

Now I steer the conversation around to Catamuso. I want to set up a deal for her to go take care of him. I give her explicit instructions: “Just knock on the door – tell him you’re from next door - and ask for some sugar. Just wear this big white shirt, nothing else. Tell him I told you that he might have some sugar in there. If he blanks on you and won’t open the door for you, tell him there are some packets next to the empty coffee cup from Waffle House and for him to get them. On the nightstand. Once you get inside, ask if he speaks French, and could he translate something for you. When he says ‘What?’, you lift up your shirt and show him your kitty.”

“That’s a lot to remember.”

“And don’t forget to slink! You got it?”

She thinks about it for a tick. “Yeah, I got it now.”

She asks me if she’ll get a “C-note” again and I give her \$200. Good. I want it done right. Catamuso’s a horny little bastard and he does his job a whole lot better with the edge off.

And off she goes slinking and whistling, with a cute little-girl skip in her steps.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

WAVING AT STRANGERS

So, the darkness shall be the light,
and the stillness the dancing.

T. S. Eliot

The ball game ends an hour or so later, and the sun goes down as I walk back, alone, and slow.

When I get back to the motel I listen at the door, peek between the curtains to see if she's gone, and go in.

Catamuso's in a great mood now. He's whistling too, and has made himself a nice cocktail. Love and romance work wonders on the human condition. Not getting love for a while can create a form of psychological constipation. Humans should do it more often.

"We need to go get some ice for the man in my trunk." Catamuso announces. OK. I go with him. I don't want him getting in any more trouble out there by himself. He tends to argue with anyone. But Catamuso's car won't start, so we go in my car.

The RaceTrac is out of ice, so he considers buying packages of frozen food. I shake my head, too expensive and I find him another convenience store.

As he's loading the ice into my backseat, I see a cop go by, eyeballing us.

I saw a couple of those fucked up crush-sided cowboy hats for sale on a rack of hats inside the RaceTrac. I take Catamuso inside, but none of the hats fit him. He has a big head. Not unlike a pollywog.

"Catamuso, we have to get you a cowboy hat."

"But... I am not no fucking cowboy?"

"Yeah, but I am. Just ask Bobo He'll tell you I'm a cowboy. And as a cowboy I can ordain you a cowboy, too." (Bobo is a fellow Traveler, excellent killer, and another Mariel boat lift Cuban.)

"Yes?"

"All you have to do is go to Laredo and walk down the streets with your cowboy hat on."

"Long way from here?"

You don't have to do it right now, you just intend to do it. Someday."

"Tabernac!" he says. (That's some kind of French swearword he uses a lot.)

"A good hat will help you fit in. Disguise you. Camouflage you. From the cops. At a distance at least." He looks at me like maybe I'm trying to put something over on him. "Look, I'll pay for it." He nods OK and smiles a little.

After we get back and pack his trunk with ice – I don't want to even look at the thing - so he does the dirty work, and even sitting on the hood of his car I can smell the funk coming from the trunk.

Then we go to buy him a cowboy hat.

We roll along through another part of the downtown dismal-land. Most of the stores are boarded up here too but there are some signs of life: an old-school fix-it shop, a used bookstore, a Goodwill-type thrift store in an old Zayre's

building. The letters of the ZAYRE corporate logo are still up there. I haven't seen that Zayre's sign since I was a kid. I have to take a good picture of that. I wonder if one of the letters fell off or it was always called Zayre, but everyone pronounced it Zayres... Will have to check that one on the internet.

We find a Family Dollar store and there we find a wonderful squashed California cowboy hat that fits for the "buckaroo look." Catamuso also buys a box of last year's baseball cards. As we drive along, he's opening the packets, looking at the cards and throwing them out the window, one card at a time.

He says, "If you wave to strangers, you know...often they will wave back." He waves at some people on the street that don't notice him. When he's gone through all the B-ball cards he pulls out a nasty-looking blunt, lights it, and hands it to me.

"Have you ever been in love, Harken?"

"Everyone's been in love. Don't you think?" The weed is really smooth and almost perfumy. I look at it and nod with approval. He always has pretty good stuff.

"I think they fall in love with you" he says "and then one day, it's not good anymore. And they go on to another. Another man. Then they get tired of that man, then tired of men, all men, and they go onto something else they go. They go on to drugs or religion or sewing a lot of things."

"Watching TV?"

He nods. "Yes, I think so."

"You know what I think?" I ask.

He shrugs emphatically.

I smile and say, "I think... we are all just occupying time and space. Living through various specific sequences of time and events. We have no idea why we are here, what we are doing. You know, really...this world – for many of us – is all a series of ridiculous orders, silly chores, pointless rituals, and programmed behavior."

"Sure." Catamuso smiles. "A friend of mine was really into Uber, and one time he Ubered all the way to Hawaii..." Catamuso smiles more, "... and he drowned." A joke.

Where does he come up with these gags? That's not the kind of joke you read in the PLAYBOY joke section.

"Catamuso, you're just a little silhouette-o of a man..." He has to know that I've got a good buzz going from the joint, so a little bit of a rude jab won't bother him. In general, Catamuso is immune to cuts and insults of all kinds. Rolls off him like rain.

He reaches out and turns on the radio. The first few chords of "Bohemian Rhapsody" are just coming on. He smiles broadly.

"Pretty good there, man!" When you do a lot of Yage along with all the other shit we do - pot, liquor, mushrooms - strange coincidences just come at you out of nowhere."

When the part of the song that says "*little silhouette-o of a man*" comes on he understands and smile.

"Synchronicity is a bitch." I say. Catamuso shrugs. I'm pretty sure he has no idea what synchronicity is.

We stop at a red light and sit.

"Harken, why do you have such a beat up, old shit car?"

"I know, look at your car. Spiffy! It's a year and a half old, and it won't start."

"What? What is 'spiffy'?"

"Nobody's going to break into my old, piece-of-shit car. Nobody's going to steal my car. Nobody's going to expect a deadly and dangerous hit man to be driving around in this beat-up, old hooptie. But you know what? This car is perfect under the hood. Tip top mechanically. I got it fine-tuned, rally ready, and it'll blow the doors off that full-size creampie you got back there at the motel."

"I see it, Anthony - you got me there. That's good smarts." He tosses the last bit of roach out the window. "But what is 'spiffy'?"

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR.

KARAOKE NIGHT IN MENLO

A good shit is better
Than a bad fuck.

Carlos Garcia y Torriente

I get some sleep, a nap, and when I come out of my room all refreshed and yawning, Catamuso is doing some kind of feng shui/Pilates thing right there in the parking lot, in front of the animals in the petting zoo.

He sees me and heads in.

Coming back into my room he gently pats the stuffed bat on the head for good luck and then looks over the comic books I've got lying about. He picks up a slabbed book and tries to open it up.

"Whooah!" I exclaim and retrieve the book from him.
"You don't take it out of the case!"

"How do you read it then?"

"You don't. That's a collector's item. They are slabbed!"

"What is slabbed?"

“Slabbed means it’s been graded by experts and put in a sealed plastic case for collectors. They can’t touch it or even read it.”

“What the fucks.” He says with a confused look.

“It makes it a known quantity for collectors and investors as far as its condition and thus its value and in effect, making it more of a commodity than a delightful collectable. Of course, you can always crack it open, but...” I’m lecturing now and beginning to feel like a teacher or instructor.

“Let’s...”

“No!” and I take all the books up from him. And then I show him on my phone what these comics bring at some of the auction sites I use. “OK. Let’s go to these... Comicslink.com or Comicconnect.”

His eyes get wide when he sees what some of these books bring.

“You see?”

“You Americans are crazy.”

I shrug. I can’t argue with him there.

“I am going to see the movie tonight,” he says. He’s been talking up the new Bourne Identity movie that just came out.

“Harken. You want to come and see it?”

“Naw. There’s a bar or two in town I’m going to go hit later, maybe.”

“It’s still early now. Let’s have a drink first.”

“Got some good stuff, amigo. Glenlivet 18-year shit. Got a couple bottles of Remy VSOP from the Hagerstown settlement....”

“Remy.” He thinks some more. “That will be good.”

He drinks with me right through the time for his movie as we look at the comic book that aren’t slabbed. I only let him handle the lesser books, the lower-grade ones, but he’s still a little rough with them, so I pay to add an adult movie channel to the TV in my room.

Great. Now he’s horny and after a while we just have got to hit the bar down the street. But – oops! – a Seinfeld rerun comes on and he has to watch that, too.

The bar is full.

“Jackpot!” I say, looking at all the cars as we park. It’s Karaoke night at the bar, and there’s like fifty or sixty people there.

“Is a good night...?” asks Catamuso.

“Great! There were five cars parked here when I drove by last night.”

Inside, we continue to drink. We find an out of the way table in the back. Before he even sits down, Catamuso fixes his sights on a rather thick girl with a Star Trek T-shirt, sitting there in front of us with a flock of other girls. I saw her give him a glance and now he’s surely certain she is destined to be with him.

He says that he wants me to be his wingman and for me to take on one of the other girls, or at least charm them all and break the ice. But this assignment is not for me. I like shapely women, but Catamuso gets a little loose with his standards. Sometimes way out there and over the top. And after watching the Playboy Channel and putting away about four fingers of the Remy he’s a loose cannon. But all these girls have been to the Dairy Queen one too many times for me.

“Naw, you don’t need me, leave me out of it. I think you’re on your own with this one, amigo. But I have faith in you, my man! You have a virtual smorgasbord of girls there. Has to be one that you will hit it with.”

Catamuso simmers silently and watches them like a cat that’s eyeballing a passing mouse as it gets closer and closer. Then he throws up his hands and caves in. “Ah, this is making me nerves already. I say I just chill the fuck out and enjoy the music. Eh?”

As if on cue, a really bad singer begins croaking her take on

McARTHUR’S PARK.

“How do I become an Inquisitor then?” he asks.

“Believe me, you don’t want to become like me. It’s a real mess, it is.”

“But what if I do?”

“We will see.”

“How many have you killed now, Harken?”

“About as many as I haven’t.”

“You missed some, eh? I would never miss one,” says Catamuso.

“Some, you kill... some don’t kill.”

“When is that?” he says in a challenging tone.

“If someone is not guilty, for instance.” I shrug. “Or if someone is already dead, say they died before we get to him. Or if you can’t find the killer... then phffitt! No kill. Not every inquest results...”

“How is somebody not guilty, then? How does that happen?”

“In New York City, there was... well, a certain criminal lawyer; he got shot and tortured to death by one of his clients. A messy business. So he came to us – his unquiet spirit came to us – and he was beside himself, howling to have us set things straight. His murder was in all the papers, but then, he had a lot of enemies, and we couldn’t pin it on any particular one of them. So, the inquest failed. The killer skated.”

“He didn’t know who killed him?”

“No idea. Didn’t see him sneaking up behind him.”

The waitress comes up, and we order drinks and Catamuso orders two hot dogs. “In another lawyer related case, we judged that was actually all-right for the lawyer’s client to kill him.”

“What? You let the killers go?”

“That was my call. My decision. The lawyer had fleeced about half of the poor guy’s grandmother’s estate – something like three-quarters of a million dollars. He just put it all in his pocket. So, fuck it. We let the killer go...”

“He was pissed I bet.”

“Pissed. Yeah, we sent the lawyer straight to Hell. In effect he was the killer: he murdered himself.”

“That is how it can work then... Hmmm.”

“Sometimes there’s not enough evidence. You always have to be totally sure in this business,” I say.

Catamuso points his finger at me. “I think this thing here in Menlo is drug deal gone wrong. These cops are dirty.”

"I still think the cops must be in on it somehow." I say, just throwing it out there.

"Well, if we find him, find who it is, why not, maybe I can kill him?"

"You know the rules."

As if I've just said nothing: "I could be a good killer, Harken. I would be fantastic killer. I will spring and strike like a cat!" He gestures outward with his hand.

"For one thing, a killer has to be chosen. And Jack Ketch does the choosing, not me. And – for one thing - to be a good inquisitor – to travel around and do these investigations - you have to fit in."

"Fit in?"

"Not stand out. Sail invisibly through the crowds..."

"So?"

"...and you don't fit in."

"What...?"

"You just look odd. Out of place. And that accent? No. You'll stick out like a sore thumb." I shake my head. "And speaking of sore thumbs, four fingers on one hand and six on the other will be noticed."

"I keep my hands in the pocket."

"No-no-no, you have to blend in. Be invisible in the crowd."

I throw a wadded-up cocktail napkin at the back of the girl Catamuso was leering at. It hits her on the shoulder, bounces up in front of her, and lands on her table. She picks it up and looks at it. Looks over her shoulder at us, confused then glaring a bit.

I point to Catamuso, who now sits upright in surprise and apprehension. The woman throws the napkin back at him, hitting him harmlessly on the forehead. She turns away and resumes chattering with her girlfriends, and Catamuso turns and glares at me.

"You ruin it Harken."

"Maybe not. Let's wait and see."

"OK, OK. I take a wait and see attitude then."

We sit there a minute, saying nothing. Our drinks arrive.

A huge, muscle-bound, local guy from a table in front of us and to our left (but still next to, or behind the girls from where he could have seen the napkin thing) stands up and pulls over a chair and sits down next to Catamuso. He wouldn't have seen me throw the napkin but would have seen it hit the girl and then get thrown back at Catamuso.

"You're a couple of funny guys, eh?" the local says in a heavy Southern drawl. He's a burly, bristling, drunken, roughneck with thick arms and a Duck Dynasty T-shirt.

He pulls up to our table, and before he can say anything, I lean over some and look him in the eyes. "Sorry, I didn't catch your name?" I've found that for some reason the one who says the name thing in a confrontation usually wins. Not always – and in this case – I probably have a dog's chance in hell – but WTF, you cut the cards and see what you get.

His drunken head twerks back a bit at my words, as he takes a nasty, arrogant, snarling look at me. The cat has his tongue and he's confused. He simply doesn't know what to say after my polite but bold and seemingly fearless effrontery. I'm not usually like that, but after a few drinks... and then there's something that I find amusing and ridiculous about this Jethro Bodine doofus. I can't resist, but I'm ready if he makes a move.

We both stand up simultaneously, him kicking his chair back. We face off, and then Catamuso – scrawny, little, dog-eared, harmless-looking Catamuso – stands up between us with his finger raised and a haughty look on his face, as he pushes us away from each other and gets in the middle.

Then it dawns on me what he's up to. He's "cutting in." He is interrupting us – like he wants to fight the guy. But then he pushes the roughneck further back, gets between us and puts up his dukes against me, like he's defending the doofus-Jethro-drunk and now I'm the enemy and he's here to save the doofus.

I start laughing. The Jethro guy starts laughing, the girls, who are watching everything, are laughing, his friends at the table are laughing... the people on stage's song ended and I'm smiling.

The brute spins poor Catamuso around, his arm cocking back, Catamuso is about to grab his arm in some judo move, and

in the nick of time... the bouncer comes over and intervenes loudly and bluntly: "NO FIGHTING!"

Just then, three guys – the next karaoke act – are lit up on stage, and the first notes of "Bohemian Rhapsody" come over the speakers.

Cumon, that song again?

Now the ruffian and Catamuso both turn toward the karaoke singers on stage, transfixed. The two men who were about to fight, now seem to slowly ease into peaceful coexistence. After a tick they are talking back and forth between each other and pointing to the stage. They are apparently both big Queen fans, and obviously this is their favorite song.

They sit down, and both reverently listen to the song, occasionally singing along with their favorite parts, just like old friends. At one point, Catamuso – the "little silhouette-o of a man," turns to me and makes a funny, WTF face. I'm pulling my mouth down to keep from laughing at it all.

Pretty soon, Catamuso is buying his new comrade a drink. Not long after, the ruffian's friends have pulled their table over to us and the herd of big girls have joined us, too. Of course, Catamuso is buying everyone their drinks.

Then it dawns on me.

I smile, shake my head, and start laughing. OK, I get it now: The ruffian is a hustler! He's mooching drinks off of Catamuso! Drinks, then popcorn and then hot dogs all around, for him and all his friends.

We're strangers in town, and we're targetsHe's as big as a house, built like a linebacker, and I am thinking his game is that he starts a row with some random, unfortunate stranger from out of town or passing through... and gets his drinks bought for him free! Catamuso has a credit card and he does like being the life of the party for once, so he invites all his new friends in.

Even the bouncer. . Maybe the bouncer is in on it too.

Catamuso's putting it all on a company credit card, the three Bohemian Rhapsody guys win the contest and Catamuso gets the girl's phone number.

All's well that ends well.

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

WAFFLE HOUSE AGAIN

The supreme art of warfare is to
subdue the enemy without fighting.

Sun Tzu

Catamuso and I hit the Waffle House to eat and sober up some, (and for me to check in on Princess). The first thing I do is get a glass of water – no ice – and pop a couple of Alka Seltzers in.

“The cops – they always sit at this table?” I ask one of the waitresses, pointing at the table right next to ours, and where they sat before.

“There? Yeah. Unless someone is already sitting there, ya know.

Yeah.”

I get up and take another spot that’s closer to the door, and away from the “cop table.” Later, when no one is looking, I go over and slip a special ballpoint pen under the napkin dispenser, covering my actions by grabbing a napkin from the dispenser, and go back to my table. The pen will record their conversation. The cops should be in soon.

Princess is in a good mood and very attentive. I catch the other girls looking at me from time to time. She must have been talking me up to them.

From our interplay and the other girls talking between themselves about us, Catamuso begins to catch on that I knew

Princess from before. He's suspicious, then sullen, and then properly pissed. He loves to put one over on you, but the idea that someone could put one over on him is sheer anathema.

He glares at me. I smile back, gloating a little. He's about to say something nasty as I hold my finger up, shaking it in his face. "No, no, no! She has girlfriends, dude. They all like to smoke dope and party." He understands. They may like to smoke dope and party: however I don't know if they'll like Catamuso. Maybe. He surprises me sometimes. Strangely enough, Catamuso sometimes does quite well with the ladies. Counter-intuitive, kind of like with Kramer on SEINFELD. As a matter of fact, I've described him as a Kramer type to people before. Only not as tall.

Eventually the cops come bustling in and head to "their" table. One of them eyeballs Catamuso. "That's the one who pulled you over?" I ask. He nods. Catamuso is watching him, focused on his every move, every step, like a dog ready to pounce.

"How'd they get you, Catamuso? You drive like an old church lady."

Catamuso turns to me. "He got me for not slowing down all the way to the stop sign. There is no one around. No one around for a hundred miles."

"Well maybe not a hundred miles..." I add.

"But I did stop. I will get their dashcam."

"You mean dashcam video. You will request it at the station."

"Yes," says Catamuso, a little annoyed that I corrected him as he will only be able to get the video, not the whole camera.

"I am innocent! I will have the films. And will take it to court! Fucking bobos, I have had no ticket in 15 years! And I did stopped."

"When's your court date?"

"I don't know."

"Probably six months away. You're not going to come back for that." Catamuso grumbles. Shakes his head and looks over at the cops.

“See, that’s the way they get you.” I say. “Out-of-town plates. They just want you to pay the fine and go.”

“They got me, yeah.”

“Catamuso. Just go into their database and erase your fucking ticket!”

“Hah!” he exclaims. He looks back over at the cops nodding. He’s smiling like the Cheshire Cat, or maybe an angry, drunk pirate. “Yes!”

The cops sitting over there are looking back. They have no idea what he is smiling about, but they don’t like it. They just don’t like the looks of it all. And next they’re talking amongst themselves about us.

Now me, I never smile at cops. It’s like they can’t stand to see anyone obviously happy, and if they see you smiling, they immediately will be trying to figure out how to fuck your day up. Just leave ’em alone.

I weigh the possibilities of that wisdom ever absorbing into Catamuso’s brain if I tell him that. I shake my head: Nope! And spear another breakfast sausage link with my fork.

Sure enough, the cop who pulled Catamuso over comes sauntering up.

He’s not smiling.

“Hello, Officer Randall. Nice night out there, isn’t it,” Catamuso says to him.

Randall says, “I’ve got my eye on you,” and starts to walk off.

But Catamuso can’t leave it alone. “You know, sir, it is my opinion that using law enforcement activities just to raise money for the city government is total abomination. It is civil disgrace. It should be banned.”

The cop turns back around. He’s not glaring. He’s expressionless, which is even more disturbing to me than if he was smiling.

Catamuso continues. “When the mayor or the police chief tells you to write more tickets or else you lose a job...? You shouldn’t write more tickets.”

The cop’s head turns a little to the side, and he’s actually listening for a second now.

“A mayor or police captain who tells his men to do that, he’s no man, he is a little pussy-shit.”

The cop glances to the side, and then shakes his head ever so slightly.

“What you do with these people, these mayors, and police chiefs then? Maybe tar and feather the mayor is good? Ride them out of town on a rail? Or maybe, someone who is the really good person would want to just shoot them in the face.”

The cop glances at me now. I shrug as if to say: *“Hey, I just met this guy tonight at karaoke! I just gave him a ride!”* It seems churlish of me, but I have to maintain a separate peace with the local cops here, for the sake of the mission that I’m on.

At this point one of the other cops comes over and pulls Randall back towards the cop’s table, murmuring something. Something like “Not here, not now.”

We talk some more about the Bloch situation, how he’s so bloodthirsty and violent, about which waitresses would be perfect for Catamuso, and about the baseball season coming up. Then I get up and go to the bathroom.

When I come out Catamuso and Randall are going at it again like a couple of dogs barking at each other. It’s just exploding out loud – and everyone’s looking, even the people outside that were just leaving are looking in. There’s all kinds of yelling and screaming. As Randall goes for his baton, one of the other cops comes over and intercedes with Randall – and I grab Catamuso. They back down, disengage, and we all slink back to our respective tables.

We sit for a while and get some glances. Catamuso says “We come back and get the pen later.” As if he plans to leave and come back after the cops take off. Then he gets up and goes to the bathroom.

I look at Princess. As she’s reaching up to get some coffee filters and displaying her form, her nice ass, and legs for me. She feels me watching and turns her head and smiles like a figure skater. Gotta love it. She’s a gem in the rough for the Waffle House world.

Sure. Women can feel you looking at them. They are creatures of nature and have instinct and special gifts that men just don't have. Or maybe we subvert it just to function in the world. Probably most men don't ever know it exists.

I order a slice of pie. As it's just being set down in front of me, Catamuso walks by at a good clip, out of the bathroom and heading for the policemen's table.

As he passes me, I say to him "I'm gonna finish this p..." but he keeps walking, past me, wearing a determined, ornery face worthy of Danny Trejo.

Oh, boy.

I can't bring myself to watch.

I turn around and look anyway, just in time to see Catamuso tap the Randall cop on the shoulder. It looks like he says "*outside.*" and points his thumb over his shoulder towards the door, then he turns and walks out of the place. Well, the cop is a big guy. He's about a foot to a foot-and-a-half taller than Catamuso, but Catamuso's years of Judo and all. And he's best when he's drunk, like now. Fearless and instant.

Catamuso turns smartly and walks out the door.

The cop takes a sip of his coffee. He shakes his head. He stands up and heads towards the door. I'm sitting there about to eat my slice and watching all this. The rest of the cops are up and out the door after the first cop.

This is not good. First of all, I've got a job to do here in town. I don't want to fuck up the execution of that job with this bullshit. Catamuso didn't start it, no, but he's not waiting till the job's over to take care of his personal matters. Plus, I have a slice of hot, pecan pie and white ice cream. But aww.... What the fuck, a pal's a pal.

One for all and all for one, right?

I throw some money down, look up at Princess, who's watching and slightly fretting with the other girls, and I head on out.

I come out the door, look around, and the cops are all walking down to the far side of the building, away from the road.

The cops all turn the corner to watch the fight, but all suddenly stop and burst out laughing. I run down there. I'm still about ten feet behind the cluster of cops but I am able to see what's going on.

Catamuso is standing there in the middle of the alley with his dukes up, a look of fierce determination on his face, *and not one stitch of clothing on*. I was expecting to come up and see him wrapped around a drainpipe like a pretzel, but there he is, like some Greek statue in a roadrunner cartoon.

But the cops are all laughing their asses off. Then they start taking pictures with their cell phones. Even Officer Randall is laughing. He says "No way! No way in hell I'm fighting a naked-assed man. That dude is fucking crazy!"

One by one they put up their phones and turn and walk off to their squad cars, laughing. One of them pats me on the shoulder as he walks by. "Nice fucking friend you got there."

I go inside and finish my pie.

One of the waitresses is looking at video one of the cops must have sent her, a video of the "big fight" all on her cell phone already, and the others are gathered around her.

Ahhh. Pie.

And our listening pen.

As we drive away, Paul Simon's "*The Boxer*" is on the radio. "Catamuso, how do you do that?" I say, as I proffer my hand towards the radio. He shrugs like its nothing.

"Dude, you got your own special kind of Fight Club going on here. I like it. I like it."

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX.

LOOKING AT COMIC BOOKS

Life is not always a series of orderly things.
Sometimes it's like walking down the hallway
at three in the morning drunk on your ass and
- reaching out with both hands –
smearing shit on the walls....

The Sheriff of Nottingham

Next morning, I get out the comic books again. I have a relaxing drink and start going through them as I listen to the recordings of the cop conversations that I've downloaded on my laptop. I've always loved old comic books and movie posters and such. There's something about the art on the covers on old 1940s comics. Not only are they colorful and sort of simple and primitive, but they also give you a peek into the minds, the perceptions, the creativity of another era, into the mentality of a simpler, sometimes more honest, and more goofy time.

Batman #11! This is my favorite Batman cover of all time. Batman and Robin set against a background of giant playing cards punching out a totally sick looking Joker.

The appeal of the Joker is straight across the board these days.

Everyone likes him. In some ways, he's a bigger character than Batman.

I've often wondered what the big deal was.

I know that for me, killing one of my complexly batshit-crazy victims is a little sticky. I mean, if they don't feel any guilt, are they really guilty? Take someone with Down syndrome. Do they really have a good handle on what they are doing when they do something wrong? Are they really guilty of a crime that maybe they didn't intend or completely understand? In my job we have to use a lot of judgement and leeway with our settlements. This is definitely a conversation to confound Catamuso with sometime.

I start looking up recent auction sales. Wow. Some of these are really good books. There's some nice DCs and Marvel comics here, including the Human Torch/Submariner battle issues of Marvel Mystery Comics, but there's a lot of off-beat titles here too. Some Fox and MLJ comics and even more obscure titles like Whirlwind Comics, Punch Comics, Hyper Mystery, Speed Comics, Cyclone Comics... so cool to look at books I've never seen before.

The ballpoint pen recordings are yielding a mother lode. For a bit they talk about what I'm sure is the accident with the four spring-breakers. It turns out that the killer is probably Philby, the little fat guy with the Angry Birds on his phone.

He's talking about the pretty girl with the bat tattoo, and about what a shame it was because "she was so pretty." And how her face haunts him. He's had dreams about her. It's bugging him, because sometimes he wakes up in the morning in a cold sweat. He confesses that he went to her Facebook page the other night.

Nothing damning there but one of the other cops gives us what we want, what we need to lower the boom. "Yeah, but you

hadda do it. You fucked up, and you took care of it. Did the right thing,” says one of the other cops. We hear drinking glasses clink as the other cop salutes him.

Had to do what? Did the kids get out of line? Did the kids catch him doing something? He did something serious – murder no doubt – but how do you prove that? Did he kill all the kids, or just Brittany? I sorta doubt it was self-defense.

I love a mystery.

The recordings also tell me that Philby was not eating anything – did not order anything there at Waffle House last night - because it was past midnight, and he was going in for a yearly Police Department physical tomorrow afternoon, and he was fasting for to check on his diabetes. I had to play it back a couple of times because in the recording the first time, “fasting” sounded like “farting”.

The rest of the cops are pretty cavalier about the killing. None of them are too bright or savvy. Just regular working Joes, sitting around, eating breakfast at Waffle House. The killing sounds like it was nothing vicious: more of an accident – but for them, killing four kids was no big thing. Just something that happened.

An investigation can be fun, but it can be frustrating, and dangerous. At some point, you may have to either pull the trigger or walk away from it. This is where my being judge and jury is tricky. It’s usually all about motive. Murders for greed or theft or lust are the easy ones. An accidental death is not what we are going to execute someone for. Now if someone’s negligent? Drunk, high, impaired? That’s another thing that must be proven conclusively. A lot of people can drive fine with a few drinks in them, but then another person can become distracted when they’re totally straight and wind up killing someone.

I’m getting close on this case but there are still some pieces of the puzzle missing.

I’m going to have to do a “dance”. That’s the ritual or séance where I contact the dead ones. The Eastern Ritual. This is the hard part. The dangerous part. This is where the rubber hits

the road. At least for me. I'm going to have to talk to that little girl again and get to her as her adult self; the adult self that knows what happened.

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

A STEALTH RECONNAISSANCE

Truth is the ultimate power.
When the truth comes around,
all the lies have to run and hide.

Ice Cube

Next day, I hit Philby's apartment. I pick the lock, and go on in.

Since he's at his yearly physical, I figure that it will be easier and safer for me. Walking around in his gated apartment complex during the daytime, is safer than going there at night or on the weekend, when all the neighbors are home, and I might get spotted as someone out of place.

I hack into his desktop machine and go at it. It does appear that the speed trap business is good these days.

He likes taking pictures. Lots of pictures; some of regem drivel: him goofing around, selfies with dead bodies in the morgue; him with his parents and the family at Thanksgiving, getting blowjobs from college girls that he pulled over, him dressed up as Conan at a comic book convention....

Then I spot what I really need: his cell phone lying there on the charger. It's still on, so I don't need a password. I go to his pictures. Lots of pictures. Finally, I scroll to a shot of him at the accident. I'm taking pictures of his pictures with my own cell phone.

The wrecked SUV. Brittany's crumpled straw hat lying there in the background. Close-ups. Gruesome pictures. Philby and other officers posing with the wreckage. One of him with a dead body. Here's one: it looks like he's standing on a girl's neck and smiling. I'm pretty sure it's Brittany. There's another cop in the picture, off to the side, smiling and holding his own cell phone up and also getting the shot.

That gets me thinking. Maybe it's like he's standing on a "trophy kill". I can't be sure, but maybe it's more like he's putting his weight on her.

As for the booty, there's not much of value here in this apartment. He's just a working guy. All the electronics are cheap Walmart stuff. On the wall, a map of collector's state quarters. If he's monetizing his police job, he must have it all hidden really well somewhere, because it ain't here.

It's creepy sitting in his place – in another man's world – and looking at all his stuff. I'm fingering his personal things – things he never imagined anyone would touch. As appalling and disgusting as all this is, I have to wonder... what if I was born in this dying, shithole of a town and grew up here, and this was my only choice: being a speed-trap cop frisking college kids for their pot and pills, and getting blowjobs from drunken teenage girls – how fucked up would I have turned out?

Then a shock of awareness shudders through me. Something doesn't make sense. If he's off at the doctor's getting

a physical, what is his cell phone doing, sitting here on the charger next to the laptop?

I listen for a second, listen closely, and I hear a slight, distant wheeze, something like a snore...?

Gingerly, I look around.

My pendant is warming.

Tiptoe time. I look in the bedroom. No one is there. I look down from the bedroom mezzanine on the living room. No one there. Finally, as I go out on the rear porch balcony – there he is, inches from me - sound asleep in a lounge chair, with a beer in his hand and headphones on.

I freeze there and stare at him, transfixed. I can't move for a few seconds.

I'm torn between slipping back out silently, or maybe yelling "*BOO!*" as loud as I can in his ear and running away... or lifting the lounge chair up and dumping him over the railing.

But I leave.

I will choose the time and place.

Not now, in broad daylight and not in an apartment complex where everyone around knows him. I will wait and find the right moment. Make it count. And maybe throw a little irony in.

CHAPTER FORTY.

TWILIGHT IN A GARBAGE DUMP

“All things are strange
which are worth knowing.”

Catherynne M. Valente

Time for the “dance.” The dance, of course, is our “special phrase” for a séance of sorts: a talk with the dead. If we can get them to show up and talk. Sometimes they just fade on us in the middle of our inquest. And you’ve got to take your best shot with whatever you have. If you don’t have enough testimony or data and the Forlorns stop talking to you, you may have to close the whole thing down and hit the road.

This séance will involve burning some of the Forlorn’s personal possessions in a special procedure.

I can't very well conduct the magic show in my room or out in the parking lot. I'll need a special place, one with some privacy. Some seclusion.

I ask at the motel office: "Say, ma'am, I need a dump. I need to dump some garbage. Where do you do that around here?" I need a place where I can burn stuff, and all these little towns have a dumping place off in the woods somewhere, where people leave their tires and old sofas that they're too lazy to take to a proper dump.

"Go a mile and a half or so down 138. There's a gravel road on the right. Just go down it till you're there."

Down a gravel road to the dump. A lot of junk doesn't make it all the way there, and the road is littered randomly with tires, bundles of newspaper, and old shoes with weeds growing through them.

I set up my "altar": a rusty spin-basket from an old destroyed and bullet-riddled washing machine, planted atop a small pile of tires. I gather some kindling into it and bunch up some old newspapers. This is how we summon the Forlorns. This is how we see what the unquiet souls have to tell us. I put the girl's hat in there, her Hello Kitty keychain, a few locks of her hair, and all the stray items and bits of things that I pulled from the car, the personal things of hers, and of her friends.

I roll a big blunt of Yage and I sprinkle some on the burning pyre. This stuff really works... sometimes.

Sure, now and then I do the Yage myself, just for fun of it – we're not supposed to, but sometimes when you're dry, and it's all you have... and sometimes I see a lot of weird things when I do that shit. Sometimes I see these almost clear, see-through, curious, impish beings that look like amoebas – giant, watermelon-sized amoebas – running about all around me, but it's like they are in another dimension, and they swim right through me. Sometimes I see fragments from my past, not important events, but just little things from childhood, like riding my bike or running across the lawn and drinking water from the

barrel of my squirt gun; a green German Luger squirt gun. Sometimes I see the worms on the side of the road, coming out of the ground on a rainy day as I'm walking to the school bus stop at the corner of our subdivision. Sometimes I hear my mother crying in the other room. Sometimes I hear the pleasing sound of doves off in the distance as the day's sun goes down behind the trees. Often nothing special and even peaceful.

I look around, and off into the distance. I climb up the side of a tree to get a better view. Sawgrass and brush and trees as far as the eye can see. No houses on the horizon or kids hiding in the bushes or someone might spot my fire and come to investigate. I sit down in a big, discarded sofa-chair with the springs and stuffing coming out. Weeds and brush are growing up around me.

The Eastern Ritual is about to begin.

As the fire dims and twilight falls around me, I'm real mellow and feeling good. I'm buzzing and coasting. Contentment.

Contentment...

When I'm in Vegas, I like playing cards when I feel like this. When I'm in this perfect state of contentment, I'm a killer at the Blackjack table. Believe it or not, I can see a little bit into the future which comes in handy when you have a good hand, and you need to know what the dealer has.

I've figured it out: when we're born, our minds are like on broadband. It's like a needle's not in the groove of a record. Not in a single groove. Rather it's like your mind's perception is like a little sponge on the end of the stylus – and it's going over a whole lot of grooves, all at the same time, not just one groove, so not just the present, but also the ones around it, but also a bit into the future and the past.

The main groove that we get into as we grow up is the present – the moment we are actually living in. The other grooves around that single groove are the past and future.

So, the child – to interface with the world – if he wants to eat, or to grab something – to interface with the present moment

– he has to focus on that one groove that is the present. Get in the groove and ignore the rest; he has to turn off the other grooves, the past and the future.

And when I'm at the table, when I'm in the zone, and I "de-focus", when I step back, I can feel the cards that are coming – I swear it – I can feel when I need to double down, I can feel when the dealer's gonna go bust, or when I'm gonna make that straight. I'm living in the future – just a toe-dip into it – too. Crazy, huh?

The night is falling, and it is what they call magic hour: the time when the sun has gone down, but it isn't dark yet. The pendant I hung on a nearby branch is beginning to sway back and forth an earthquake is coming.

Off in the distance, they're stirring in the foliage and debris.

Ten minutes later I can see delicate, wispy shapes, faintly moving out there. Twigs crackle. A breeze comes up here and there from random directions. Dimly glowing eyes light up in the shadows.

My head rocks back as something ephemeral flits over me. I sense it on my face and head, and I feel it as my hair is lightly blown back.

The other side is opening up... The souls are whispering, rustling... gathering.

"Can you hear me?" There's no answer.

I wait a while.

Then a whisper: "Who are you?"

"I'm gonna help," I say. "I want to help you." I look around.

I can see them out there, but how will this all come off? I let it go for a minute and then I say "I need to know. I need to see what happened. Can you help me?"

I wait. I light a cigarette. I finish it.

"The car accident. I need to know what happened." Then I say "Is

Brittany with you?"

They're going to talk – I can feel it now.

I tell them "Just picture it in your mind. Think it. Try and think it out loud... from the beginning..."

It always takes a bit of time. I explaining to them what I want to do.

I explain to them why I can speak to them and why they can hear me.

They come around, after a while and they're whispering, murmuring closer and closer. Then talking up a storm out there.

Something approaches me. It's a shape. A shape made of ...darkness. The shape stops, wavers a bit and dims.

"We took a short cut," a voice says.

I sit up. I'm listening.

"It was late, we were trying to make Jacksonville by morning. Britto and Chip had a flight, so we were going a little fast, sure, but not crazy fast or anything."

"But that cop came out of nowhere, flying into us – like we were standing still." The words are coming faster now. "He was going to chase after the guy ahead of us, that just went by him, you know. In front of him...and he didn't see us."

Another voice breaks in. "A speed trap. He was waiting in a speed trap, and he is pulling out after that guy, the speeder that had just blown by us a minute ago! The damn cop just pulls out right in front of us without even looking. And we hit him hard. Our car flips... When I came to... I was lying there – under the car. Every breath I took hurt. I could feel my lungs filling up with something – blood! Blood it was. Oh, God... My friends were lying around me. They're all dead?"

The other voice comes back: "But Brittany – she was still alive. I could hear her making—" the voice starts choking up "—making these gurgling sounds - trying to say words. Then the cops are standing around her – but they weren't doing anything to help her."

"Then I began to, like, float upwards. Then I was above them. I hear them talking." He hesitates. "Then I see the cop put his foot on her, on Brittany – no! She's still alive! She's still

breathing! And then he brings all his heavy weight right down there on the side of her head, on her neck. “ “A bald, fat guy?” I ask.

“I heard her neck crunch. It crunched like celery or something, and

I heard this sad, sad, sad little gasp... as she gave up.”

“Was it a fat guy? The cop? A little fat guy? Pointy head?” I ask.

“Then I began floating up faster... And as I rose up, I heard a gunshot behind me. I looked down, and there was her little dog, lying dead on the grass. Her dog...they even shot her dog...”

After a while of silence, I ask “You’re sure that’s how it happened?”

No words. I look around. Did they leave?

All of a sudden, the former little ghost girl appears, an adult now, whisking up out of nowhere: right up in my face, transforming and growing sharper! I recognize her. It is Brittany.

“YESSS!”

Then she is gone.

“Don’t worry, guys I’ll take good care of this.” I murmur. Just like that, it is over. They’re gone.

I sit there a minute. I look around me at the garbage and debris as the light of the fire flickers on it all: an old sneaker with a skull-and-crossbones bleached out by the sun, an old wood-console record player like people used to have in their living rooms, a jumbled pile of coat hangers, a vein of old VHS tapes tied together with twine... all this meaningless stuff... and all the meaningless lives that go with them. There’s so much nothingness in the world, so much nothingness... if you just take time to stop and look, you can see it in all its beauty.

Yes. I think we have a case.

CHAPTER FORTY ONE.

TIME TO CELEBRATE

I can usually judge a lot about a fellow
by what he laughs at.

Wilson Mizner

That evening, Catamuso makes his detective presentation to me like a good assistant. So far, his investigation has uncovered a bit of a mess here in Menlo, Florida. Sifting between the conversation from the Waffle House last night and the data he has cribbed from the city's databanks, we have a better picture.

The city has been hanging by a thread financially these last 4 or 5 years, and the speed traps have been ramped up as one of their more promising revenue streams.

“There is also a little bit funny business going on – maybe stealing from impounded cars – a few lawsuits for that – some

incidents with drugs, mostly pot, I think... but I think they lost their franchise, a while back. Four or five years ago maybe.”

“Franchise...”

“The drugs. The drug lords. Lotsa drugs flowing through here in Florida. This place was once a pit stop on the ‘underground railroad’ until sometime four or five years ago.”

“Wonder what stupid shit these knuckleheads did to get it 86’d...” I say.

“Maybe because they use the drones now?”

“So this inquest was not... probably not a drug angle to it. Any sex?

Any scandals?”

“A few things. Some sex, drunk driving, a very few of ze murders covered up. Standard things. Nothing unusual. No, usual stuff. However... here’s the thing – there are a few concerned emails about our girl Brittany – rich family - and also how they will handle things if the parents of any of these dead kids came down to here or send investigators.”

“Ah, ha.”

“Now is the best part, Harken.” says Catamuso. “This is the dash cams!” He pushes the play on the computer desktop.

We study them for a while. Examine. Rewind. Slow motion. Blow it up.

One dashcam is missing some footage, the dashcam that would be directly on the murder scene: it was turned off or edited. But there is another one that has caught part of the scene from one of the cop cars that came up off to the side, so no direct picture, but Catamuso has enhanced the audio.

We clearly hear the other cops tell Philby that it’s his mess. That he has to do it. We even hear the “celery crack” of her neck and her wispy, little animal gasp.

That’s it.” I say. “That’s the death sentence. It checks out with everything the Forlorns told me. It’s Philby.”

Catamuso nods as his eyes are mystically drawn away from mine, wandering to the motel room dresser, and he fixes his gaze on Tori’s stuffed bat. His eyebrows rise up and down. He smells it.

“I borrowed it. It’s not mine.”

“What is it then?”

“A stuffed bat.”

“Smells funny.”

“It’s a stinky bat.”

“What does it do?” He sniffs it again.

“It stinks.”

He sets it back down, shakes his head a little and lights a cigarette.

He looks at me. “What we gonna do boss?”

“The die is cast, Catamuso. The gas is flooded. Philby is our man.

That’s it. Done deal. Mark it and strike it.”

I pace the room, thinking and firm with excitement.

“I have an idea... something I’ve been thinking about. It just might work. I’ll need to get a few more things, though. But if Amazon Prime actually works out here...” I’m pulling my cell phone out. “...and I’ll buy another few knick-knacks locally.”

“What we gonna do Harken?

It’s bad luck to talk about it. Might jinx it. I wonder what they want for that bear out there....”

We decide to celebrate and order a pizza. The pizza parlor is just now closed because their toilet overflowed, so we decide to hit the strip club down the street.

CHAPTER FORTY TWO

THE NAUGHTY NEGLIGEE

Every time I hear the word culture,
I reach for my revolver.

Herman Goring

The lights and garish facade outside promise a real den of sin and tons of lurid entertainment, but Naughty Negligee is actually a pretty grim place inside. Dark, pathetic, shoddy, snarky, poorly lit, outdated, and rickety furniture, cigarette burns everywhere and on everything, and a smell in the shadows like a cocktail of microwave-burnt plastic, liverwurst, hair weave, green Jell-O concentrate, and disinfectant.

It's shift-change time, and the girls are tipping out or just now dragging in. SHE RIDES by Danzig is playing as we walk in. Seems I hear it in every strip joint, but rarely do they do the honor of playing it as I enter.

After more than a few stiff drinks (on my tab of course), Catamuso is going off on cops again. Apparently, the idea of local governments using law enforcement and the speed traps to generate income instead of raising taxes is going to be our nation's downfall.

Now and then, the bouncer/doorman looks over at him with the old hairy eyeball.

“If they do these things, soon we will be like third world countries. Like Mexico! They have human heads found in the street. Bodies hanging from the overpass when you go to work in the morning. Bad shit is everywhere.”

“Look man, without a doubt, these speed-trap guys are a real bear, no pun intended (referring to the archaic term for such cops and their “Smokey the Bear” hats), but how will it become like Mexico here?” I ask. “Will we have to wear sombreros and ride around on burros?” I know better than to argue with Catamuso, so I just ask a question at this point. He spends a lot of time alone and has had a lot of time to think about this thing.

“Once they start to be pulling you over to make money? To keep their job? That’s where it all goes to hell. Bit by bit, one day traffic tickets to get money? And the next a bribe to make it go away, and one little thing then

the next, until they are working for all real criminals.”

It actually makes sense. The nature of gradual decay.

“If a police captain or a mayor says to give more tickets because the city needs money – because they gonna lose their jobs? Maybe the cop – if he’s a real man – maybe he should stick a gun in the mayor’s mouth and blow his head off!”

A cute girl has come up behind Catamuso and overhears the end of his tirade. Her eyebrows go up and down, but she’s going to give it a try anyway. I look up to her.

“Hi! I’m Bentley!” she says.

“Have a seat, Bentley.” I kick a chair out for her to sit in. Catamuso is eyeing her up and down, watching her every move but saying nothing.

“Sorry, my friend here was acting out a scene he saw on TV last night.” I say, explaining Catamuso’s dramatics and theatrics. She sits down and smiles. “Netflix?” Catamuso nods.

“Hi, I’m Bentley.” she says again.

“I’m sorry, Bentley.” I smile like a used car salesman and reach out to take and kiss her hand. “I’m... Mr. Dow, and this is Mr. Jones.” Catamuso shakes her hand.

“You’re from out of town, I guess.” she says.

“We’re in the industrial average business.”

“Hey! I think I’ve heard of you guys.”

I’ve been waiting for Catamuso to do something fucked up again, to start another fight, or insult someone... but he’s very placid and quiet tonight.

She kinda likes me (who can blame her) and chats me up, not paying any mind to Catamuso.

She’s talking a blue streak, flying on some kind of speed or Red Bull or coffee. She has a dog she got from the pound and she’s sure it has amnesia and can’t remember who it is. Then all the medicine the dog had to take and how much each thing cost... what food the dog likes and doesn’t like.

Ignored and dejected, Catamuso pretends to fall asleep. His head falls into his chest, and he lets out a loud snore. I go along with it. I reach out and tap him. “Wake up, wake up! Jones!”

Another girl sits down and begins watching what’s going on. “He might be narcoleptic.” She points at Catamuso.

“What’s that?” Bentley asks.

“It’s kind of like sleepwalking. Someone just falls asleep any time.” “I’ve heard of that stuff! It’s a medical condition.” says Bentley.

“And if you wake him up, he’ll die.” I add in.

“Oh dear!” she says.

“Wow!” I say. “Maybe we better get this fucker out of here! We don’t want him to die in your place. Bad press. Maybe he’s dead already.”

She touches him. Nothing. And then she kind of presses down on him, and then presses harder. And then he farts loudly! “Oh my!” she says.

The other girl immediately gets up and leaves us without even a goodbye.

Now, Fennix and Catamuso are good friends, and (according to Fennix), all you have to do is fart on a woman and she will fall in love with you. I shake my head. Most insane. So, this is what Catamuso is up to, I figure.

Anyways, she turns back to me and starts talking a blue streak again. Her dog was kidnapped by her old boyfriend who tried to train it to hunt and point, but it bit him, so he let it run off. Her car has a squirrel nest under the hood, and she can't bring herself to drive it because she's afraid of cooking the babies. Her roommate loaned her other roommate's boyfriend two thousand dollars for his band to promote their new record and she can't pay the rent this month. She just lost a cap on her tooth and thinks she swallowed it in her sleep because she can feel it in her stomach. She was writing her biography (at the age of 22), had finished 480 pages of it, and now her computer died. You know, talking up a storm, faster and faster like a merry-go-round whose gears are shot, or a little kid spinning around a maypole until he's so dizzy he falls out of his seat. That's exactly what happens now, right at the moment of her most emphatic point, she literally falls out of her seat. I look over at the seat and there's nothing the matter with it – but there she is, on the floor getting up. I reach over to give her a hand, but she slaps my hand away, and after she gains her feet, she hugs Catamuso. Now, bear in mind that he has not said ten words to her. The Fennix Scenario is working.

I buy Catamuso a table dance from Bentley. The dancer has a Band-Aid on her butt. To me, that indicates that she must be new to this. Almost every stripper you ever meet will always have a curling-iron burn on her ass. They have these hot-curler things that they use to curl their hair, but they all also love to leave lying around hot the dressing room, and it's only a matter of time – of hours, or even minutes, before a new girl sits on one, scarring her forever with a little cigarette butt-sized brown spot on her ass. Most of them only have one, but if you meet a dancer that has two, three, five of them – you've got a special commodity. Someone who has the IQ of a houseplant.

After two dances, they are in love. She kisses Catamuso right on the mouth (something that generally never happens in strip clubs) and then I grab her arm to get her attention, and I give her a C-note, telling her to take Catamuso into one of the VIP suites and give him the works. The VIP is a small, darkly lit series of rooms in back where supposedly anything goes.

Sometimes it's a scam and the guy gets nothing, but a hundred bucks in this place should get Catamuso to seventh heaven.

Now for my own fate. There she was, coming right at me after getting down off the back-stage – the “Las Vegas stage,” as the DJ called it; the front being the “Carousel stage,” and the one on the left that nobody's dancing on is God knows what.

As she walks toward me, she grinds her hips in almost predatory fashion, like a vixen approaching – or the girl in Cat People. Maybe she's not the prettiest, sexiest girl I've ever seen, but the attitude, the stance, the cadence of her walk...she's ringing all the bells and blowing all the whistles.

She comes over and pulls a chair out – but not to sit in the chair: she's just pulling it out of the way so she can sit in my lap. Then she picks up my drink, kills it and starts twirling a strand of her hair. If a girl likes you, she touches her hair, or plays with it or whatever. It's a “tell,” as they say in poker. She doesn't even know she's doing it, but it telegraphs her intentions.

“You're in the industrial-average business...” Word gets around fast. I nod. She picks up a napkin, unfolds it, and tucks it into her necklace as an impromptu bib, as she pulls over the basket of chicken wings that

Catamuso's girl ordered before. As she starts eating the chicken wings with one hand, she reaches down with the other and grabs my genitalia.

Just as I'm thinking that we probably should have come here earlier in our stay in Menlo, I hear a bloodcurdling scream rip out behind me.

I turn around and there's Catamuso's girl, running out of the VIP suite in nothing but her heels. She has a bloody nose, the blood's all down the front of her, and she has something in her hand above her head – and I think it's a gun.

As the object in her hand goes off and fires into the ceiling, I figure out that it is a gun! As it goes off, she freaks and throws it – spinning – up in the air. It's coming right at us, and I lean out to the left, almost coming out of my seat, reaching out my hand and catching it.

Catamuso comes out of the VIP suite now, holding up his pants. The bartender is turning back around after pulling out a ball bat from under the bar behind him.

The bouncer/doorman comes trotting out of the bathroom.

Catamuso has buttoned his pants, but he still hasn't zipped them up.

He can't. He's still in flagrante delicto. Hanging all out. Franks and beans. The bartender and bouncer coming at Catamuso both sort of stop in their tracks, transfixed.

"That thing's huge!" says my girl, as she sucks all the meat off another wing and the robotically spinning house spotlights shines on it for about half a second.

The bouncer murmurs something standing next to him, probably wondering how one should proceed against a man so exposed and yet well equipped.

"I've never seen a honker that big on a human being except in porno movies." says the girl, still casually killing the chicken wings.

"She pickpockets! My wallet! My gun! Tabernac! Where'd she go?" he shouts to me.

I guess she wasn't that much of a newbie after all. I spot his wallet on the floor and point for him to pick it up.

His yelling to me seems to break the "spell", and the two bouncer guys are coming for him. Catamuso, even with his dick out, is still one hell of a kung-fu judo-master motherfucker. It's a wonder to see him go at it.

I look at my watch as I casually take up a chicken wing too. In about sixteen seconds, he has them both on the floor: one moaning, the other crying. Both have bloody faces; one is literally squirting blood out of his nose with every heartbeat, and the other is staring at his hand where one of his fingers is bent obscenely back.

I go over to them and observe. "You guys have had it."

I toss the chicken bones over my shoulder, bend down, wipe my hands on the bouncer's tie and frisk him. sure enough, he's got a small, hammerless Smith & Wesson .38 - a Sentinel I think they call it - in a waistband holster in the small of his back.

I pull it out and throw it all the way across the room. The ball bat guy is probably not packing, but I frisk him anyways.

A customer walks in, right past the front-door kiosk where they take money. There's nobody there, so he just kind of wanders in and sits down at a table not far from us. As the newcomer's eyes adjust to the light, and he sees me and Catamuso standing over the bouncer and the bartender on the floor, he kind of freezes for a second, then calmly lights a cigarette, stands up and walks out.

The bouncer begins to get up, muttering, "You sonofabitch...!" and I kick him right in the face.

Two of the strippers come out of the dressing room. When they see the club's designated protectors lying on the floor with the shit kicked out of them, and me standing there, calmly lighting a cigarette, they let out a couple of high-pitched yelps, and run back into the dressing room.

Hmmm.

I toss Catamuso (who's finally got his tiger back in the tank and zipped up) the ball bat and I walk back into the dressing room. Time for the special damage control bankroll that I always seem to have to use the most when Catamuso's around.

The girls in the brightly lit dressing room stare at me, wondering what the hell is going to happen next. "Hey!" I yell real loud. They quiet down and I say "Listen, girls! Everything's going to be OK... OK... but I got one question: Did any of you call the cops?"

The new girl pulls out her cell phone (an old flip one) and says, "OK!

I'll call them now."

The house mom stands up and takes the phone from her. "We always handle our own shit around here, baby." Good. And then I take the phone from the house mom.

"OK, watch this!" I yell and pull out the wad and I walk around the room giving each one of the girls a hundred bucks. The House Mom I give two. "Now ladies, I'm not holding the place up or anything. Ya know, no stick-up guy's going to be

handing out hundred-dollar bills. This money is to just keep the peace and see that we all stay friends. No one is gonna talk about this, right?"

As I go out the door, I shake the girl's cell phone at her and say, "I'll give you this back in a minute, darling. Just everybody be cool. Everybody be cool and Fonzie now."

When I come out, Catamuso's sitting at the table, passing around a joint with the bouncer and bartender. Catamuso still has the bat in his lap, and the doorman's .38 revolver is sitting on the table in front of him. The house lights are on and nobody else is out here on the floor.

The bouncer looks up at me, and then the bartender looks at me.

Just a couple of working guys doing their jobs.

I'm standing there like the boss of things, and I boss Catamuso to give the bouncer back his gun. Catamuso picks the gun up, clicks open the cylinder, and drops all the bullets out into the palm of his hand.

Like any good, experienced revolver handler, he shakes it and looks in the cylinder to make sure all the bullets come out. When you don't pay attention to that - when you do it cavalierly - sometimes one of the five or six bullets in a revolver can hang up and stay in the gun... and then when someone pulls the trigger thinking it's empty...! Catamuso snaps the cylinder closed and hands it back to the guy. Then he throws all the bullets off into the rear corner of the room.

The doorman is a Russian and the other looks slightly Jamaican or Haitian. Both are over six feet, but no monsters, just born losers and pretty knocked around right now.

"Listen, guys. I'm sorry about my friend here. But the one thing we don't need to do right now is call the police. Or your boss. I mean, look..." - holding up Catamuso's wallet between two fingers and shaking it back and forth - "Fuckin' bitch stole his wallet and then grabbed his fuckin' gun. Fuckin'

pickpocket... But I'm not going to call the cops. And you're not going to call the cops."

Then I skillfully let some hints drop implying that we work for some big-time international cartel drug-dealers or something, just passing through. "So we both don't want any trouble or cops or nothin'."

I pull out my wad of hush-money cash that Jack gives me to carry, and peel off a couple of hundred-dollar bills and stick them in the bouncer's pocket, and then a couple of hundred-dollar bills in the bartender's pocket. Then I stick 200 more in the bouncer's pocket, pointing at his finger. "For the broken finger."

He shrugs agreeably.

I smile and give a thumbs up. "Our board of directors, they wouldn't like it if anybody fucked with us or got us tangled up in some dumbass, stupid bullshit. Tonight someone decided to pickpocket and roll the wrong guys. Hey, it happens. But right now, we all just gotta pick up the pieces as best we can and walk away from it all."

I hand the girl's cell phone to the bartender. "Now take this back there and tell those bitches, each and every one of them, to keep their fuckin' mouths shut about all this. Shut up for at least week or two. This story never happened, see?"

The nod and "yep..." me.

"And you sure don't want anybody to know that that this little scrawny-assed motherfucker, who is old enough to be both your fathers, kicked your motherfucking asses. You mark my words and listen to everything I said, motherfuckers. Agreed?" They both just sit there, nodding – and I grab the bartender and say, "Now look me in the eye and say you agree."

He looks up at me like a hurt little kid and says, "I agree." And as I reach out to the other one, he puts his hand up and looks me in the eyes and says, "Yes sir, I agree."

There you go. Yes, sir. I like to hear Yes, sir.

As we drive off, Catamuso counts the money in his wallet.

“Catamuso, that’s three fights you’ve been in these last couple of days. I mean, that’s a lotta violence and contention in three days.” “At least I win all my fights, Harken!”

He has a point.

CHAPTER FORTY THREE.

RIDING IN THE DEATH CAR

As we pull out onto the highway again, the rages of a drunken night fade into the first glints of morning light and behold, we wave to the shit-stained brides of dawn, now wandering off here and there, with their smiles and hot-mess attire: each with a Styrofoam cup of Dr. Pepper and cheap vodka.

WILD HIGHWAYS

Heading back to the motel, we drive by the town's speed trap. The speed trap is open for business and it's a blue-light-festival, with a couple of victims pulled over there.

As we pull in back at the motel (on the other side of town), I spot something funny.

"Is that your car?" I ask Catamuso.

We are driving in my car (his was leaking a bit from the frozen body in the trunk), and I see that there's someone monkeying around inside Catamuso's car.

Catamuso jumps out the door and is off and on it before I even completely stop the car. He's circling around to get behind the guy – behind the open door – then gingerly sneaking up the car hood of the car parked next to his and onto the roof.

I spot something bad.

There's a car off down the parking lot that looks suspicious: slowly pulling out of a parking spot with its lights off. He starts up towards Catamuso.

I have one gun in my pocket, a revolver in the glovebox, and one under the seat, but the one with the silencer is in the room. I take out my pocket gun and chamber a round. I slip out the open window, so I don't make any noise by opening the door.

Catamuso is now grabbing and pulling the burglar guy out of his car, manhandling him, and I'm hearing shit falling out of the car, clattering, and rolling. That's gotta make Catamuso mad, as it's his shit.

I'm coming up on the other guy, sneaking up, as he's sneaking up. I'm almost on him, I start to run at him, and I get hit from my right side by another guy. Tackled! I go flying against the front grill of a parked car. The funny thing is that the tackling guy, a big, beefy 300-pounder, hits the fender so hard that I think he cracks his skull. One way or another, he's out cold or dead, and the other guy is taking aim at Catamuso. I see the silhouette of a Luger in his hand. (I immediately want that Luger.)

I'm reaching for the mouse-gun in my pocket, a Ruger LC9 – but before I can get it out, Catamuso hits the Luger guy with a shovel. No idea where he got the shovel, if it was in his car, or whatever.

I glance into Catamuso's car looking for what's up with the guy who was burglarizing it, but his flattened, deformed face is scrunched forward into the window grotesquely with froth coming out of his mouth.

So.

We have a problem. It's 3 AM and we have three bodies to get rid of.

We place the three bodies in the trunk of the car that they came in. I'm driving Catamuso's car, and he's driving theirs to somewhere outside of town to get rid of the death car. I'm following so I can bring Catamuso back.

We're about eight miles outside of town, and we pick up a cop.

First, he's coming down the road toward us, right up on us. He passes us by.

Whew.

I glance in the rearview mirror and see him turning around and following us now.

He's holding back, following us like a shark. We come to an intersection, and we split up. I go off one way, and Catamuso the other. I speed off, wheeling it hard and fast, and drawing him after me. Soon I'm burning up the road and he's following me, but still at a safe distance back. It occurs to me that it's odd that he isn't on my bumper with sirens and lights flashing. He's probably calling his little buddies on his radio and setting a trap up ahead. We may be fucked. Actually, I may be fucked, and now Catamuso will have to come bail me out.

It's not the end of the world if I get arrested, as long as Catamuso doesn't get caught with the carload of bodies. That would sure throw a real monkey wrench into the inquisition that we're conducting.

After a few more miles, I look in my rearview mirror – and there's nothing there! I slow a little and take a better look. Did he turn his lights off? There's a full moon and still I don't see him back there. He must have got called to something more important or ran out of gas or something.

Then, like some bat out of hell, he's right beside me, all his lights and siren and even his cab lights on – and he's inside the cab, his head turning towards me and he's got no eyeballs in his eye sockets – he's one of them, a Blue-Louie motherfucker – one of the Damned, waiting for the solstice, and just having a little fun tonight fucking with me: nothing more than a phantasm – all in my head – cop car and all!

I look him right in the eyes – er, sockets – and I give him the finger and my war face, and he laughs maniacally and drives off – fading and disappearing as he goes.

After a while Catamuso calls. He's dumped the car, and he gives me directions to pick him up.

“They won't find those guys for a long time,” he tells me.

The Luger is a WWI dated DWM, has been re-blued but the magazine still matches. A nice souvenir from an engagement with a couple of fuck-faces who don't need this gun anymore.

CHAPTER FORTY FOUR.

A PERFECT SET-UP

I told you I was trouble,
You know that I'm no good.

Amy Winehouse

Next morning, Princess - the Waffle House girl - calls me and wants to hook up. Great!

How 'bout this afternoon? How 'bout we meet at her girlfriend's house? Great! Princess has her parents staying with her - in from out of town - and we can't hook-up at her house, and it's not going to be my room because the stuffed bat really "creeps" her out.

"Why? In what way?"

"Well, 'creeps' isn't right the right word, baby, but - I don't know - you like that thing... so much. I think you like it more... I think I'm a little jealous."

Jealous of a stuffed bat? WTF. That's a new one.

"And it smells funny." She takes a breath. "It sorta stinks."

“OK, your girlfriend’s place is fine. Two o’clock is fine. Sure.”

I leave early so I can stop at the Dollar Tree to get some batteries. I buy some other stuff, including a big, ridiculous plastic flower and some comically oversized novelty sunglasses that are bright orange and about a foot wide. I’m feeling frisky and choose to have some fun with her by showing up with a little flagrant bizarro.

So, I’m about to pull into the apartment complex of Princess’s girlfriend. My arm is out the window with a cigarette. I’m relaxed. Sitting back. Waiting for the oncoming traffic to go by.

So, I’m preoccupied. Not on point. I’m thinking about all my options: how am I gonna kill this Philby guy now? At night shift? Hit him while he’s asleep at home? During night or during daylight? It would be nice to step on his head and break his neck like he did that girl... but none of those are in the cards right now. I have a madcap scheme – something that I will be telling the gang about for years to come – and I’m going to do it. Fuck yeah, I’m going to do it. Fucking speed trap cops.

Lotsa traffic coming now. What... oh, a school is getting out down the street?

So, I’m sitting there waiting to turn in and thinking Oh, I hate the gangster that gets off on bullying everyone in his way, the child molester, the bank-ster who has a whistleblower murdered, the corporation that poisons a whole town in India to save 1.34 cents per unit... But man, there’s got to be a special place in Hell for the speed-trap cop!

As I finally turn into the parking lot and am then off the street, sirens suddenly come on out of nowhere. Cop! I look in my rearview mirror and it’s like ET has landed. Close Encounters of the Third Fucking Kind. Fuck me running! It’s Philby! My man! What are you doing in my rearview mirror?

I notice that even after the car is stopped the pendant which is now hanging from the rearview mirror is swaying.

He comes up to my driver side window and eventually says “Sorry sir, you didn’t have your turn signal on when you were pulling in –and sir, you failed to come to a complete stop back there, at the intersection of

Langley Highway and Mustard Street.”

I’m thinking; Great, he doesn’t recognize me from the other day.

But at the same time... I did have my turn signal on. It’s still on. I get a queasy feeling. It’s broad daylight and, of course, I’m not going to be able to take care of this doof right here and now.

“Officer, I’m sure I came to a full stop back there, this is...”

“I’m going to let you off with a warning this time. Now, is this a rental?”

“No, this is my car.” What’s he mean “rental”? No rental company would try to rent an old hooptie-mobile like what I’m sitting in.

“Could you step out of the car please, and show me your license and insurance card?”

As I start to come out, my new joke glasses that were on my lap and I was going to surprise Princess with, fall out on the pavement. I look down at them. He looks down at them, then he looks at me, kind of baffled. Like, what the fuck are those things? What’s a grown man doing with them?

As soon as I’m on my feet and going for my wallet, he hits me with a cheap shot! Philby swings a big haymaker at my jaw. BAM! Cold-cocked. “Thought I didn’t recognize you huh?” Shit.

I’m on the ground and he’s kicking me. Gets me in the head pretty hard.

“All right, shitbird! Here’s your warning!” as he kicks me again.

“Here’s your fucking warning!”

People from the apartment complex are coming out and gathering.

“You hear me, shitbird!? You hear me loud and clear?!”

It stops, and I kind of fade for a minute. I come to, and now Philby is going through my wallet and tossing various cards up in the air as he rifles through them. I have about 400 bucks cash left in there, and it's sure as shit gone now.

He has his phone cradled between his chin and his shoulder and he's talking to someone. "Naw, not a fed, not a private investigator. Card here says he's in burials and coffins. Name's Jack Ketch. See if you can run that quick and get back to me."

He throws the wallet over his shoulder and leans down, pressing a billy-club into me. "This is your first and final warning. It's time for you to get out of town now, shitbird! And not come back!"

As he walks away, he picks up his hat which has fallen off. I try to muster up and say "Dude! With a pointy, fucking head like that, you need to wear a hat! All the time!" but I'm on spin-dry cycle and the words just aren't coming right now.

I'm lying there a few minutes. The people from the apartments are all looking at me, but no one brings me a bottle of water or tries to help me up. I reach over and put the joke glasses back on. They're smashed up and kind of crooked on me. I stand up. For the sake of the audience, I dust myself off, try to straighten my glasses on my head – the kids are giggling – and reach in the car and pull out the joke flower. Now the adults are laughing, too. I mean, I've just had the shit kicked out of me, but I can still have a little fun, right?

I take the napkin with Princess's address on it out of my pocket and look at it. I walk down to the apartment, knock on the door and a latemiddle-aged Black lady answers. She looks at me for a second and shakes her head. "We ain't buying anything in this house, motherfucker. Now git." She lets the screen door shut and wanders back into the darkness muttering something about white people.

Princess... I guess Princess set me up.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE PRINCESS RETURNS

You think your pain and your heartbreak
are unprecedented in the history of the world,
but then you read.

James Baldwin

I come into my hotel room with a torn shirt, bleeding lip, and swollen a bit around the eye. My head is throbbing. I wonder if I should go to the hospital. No, in this town they would probably try to kill me there too. I look in the mirror and I call Catamuso to come down and check me over. I'm a mess. "No more pussy for you this trip. You ugly now. Heh heh. Ugly just like me." he says.

"The fucking Waffle House girl set me up!"

Catamuso mutters and shakes his head. He's using the liquor and Kleenex from the bathroom to clean me up and wipe the dried blood.

"The Princess, oh boy." He murmurs.

As if on cue there's a knock on the door. I go to open it, pulling my gun.

It's Princess!

I laugh and just slam the door in her face. She darts her foot out and stops the door from closing all the way. She pushes

it back open and comes in as I'm walking back to the bed to sit down.

"Hold it boy! You got to..."

"Yeah, what? What's next? You gonna have the local Klan come by and nail me to a burning cross now? Call the FBI? The CIA? Sure! Real nice girl! Can't wait."

Catamuso is enjoying the row like he's watching a scene on Days of Our Lives or some other soap opera.

"Look, I sure as hell did you a big favor, fuck face." she says irritated and lively.

"Sure. What? Didn't charge for the iced tea the other night?"

She turns and goes back out the door. Slamming it too.

I look over at Catamuso sitting on the bed and smiling. He shrugs.

I hear her crying on the other side. But I don't want to hear anything she's got to say. I'm going over to turn the deadbolt when she bursts back in again.

She puts her finger to her lips, in a shushing maneuver to silence me and sits down. She pulls out a joint and lights it.

She blows the smoke up into the room's stratosphere. She stares at me with grim and intent eyes. Now I want to hear what she has to say. Not saying I'm not going to laugh out loud, but let's hear it. "Ok. C'mon." I say.

"Fucking cops were going to kill you, motherfucker! KILL! K-I-L-L!"

Yuuuu... Philby and his guys. And they can get away with it in this town." "Ya don't say."

"You'd be dead as a donut right now..." "- or they would be -" I add.

"If'n it weren't fer me...an' buried out there in the sawgrass somewhere. Planted in a shallow grave until 20 years from now when they put in a new fucking Walmart."

"No shit!" I say sarcastically with mock amazement. "Sounds pretty bad."

“But I talked them out of it. And I did a sweet fucking job.”

“Yeah, right.” I smirk.

“Sure enough. Yessir. I started with a ‘how can I ever deal with them again if they murder someone’ angle.”

I look at Catamuso, sitting there working on a crossword puzzle that I started before, and instead of looking at me – ready to roll his eyes at whatever bullshit story she’s feeding us – I know he’s sitting there thinking about how he can approach banging her now that I’m probably out of the picture – ya know - after she set me up and all.

I pull out my phone which has just beeped with a text message and begin scrolling. “So, you’re fucking one of the cops then?” I say in the best amused tone I can muster. A regular Sherlock Holmes I am.

She walks over to the TV and picks up the stuffed bat and looks at it a tick, smells it, then sets it back down. She turns at me, rubbing her fingers on her pants, and smiles sarcastically. Her pep kicks in and she spits out, “Dude, I’m fucking all of them. I’m fucking all the fucking cops... ‘cept Elmo – see he’s a little light in the loafers, if ya know what I mean, but the whole buncha them. Sure! The chief on down.” Silence.

She looks around at both of us. She says “Whhatt!” loudly.

I rub my right hand down across my face and breathe in, as I shake my head with exasperation. Out of the side of my eye I notice Catamuso’s head bob a little as a thin, sly smile comes across his lips.

“What the fuck! I’m a slut! So what! And if you don’t like it, well, just fuck you.”

“Fuck me? Well, I guess you did already, didn’t you? Not that that means anything. To either of us obviously.” I find myself sounding kind of like the normal, pathetic guy now, and cringe a little deep inside.

She stands up and heads to the door. At the door she stops and then pivots around, pointing at me, “Look lover, I fuck who I want, when I want and how I want! Sorry, but I’ve been hooking

up with those douchebags since I was in high school, and you know what? I sell off most of the fucking pot the cops take off the fucking dipshit college kids that come short-cutting through town all the time! That's the deal. And someday I'm going to get out of this flat, worthless, dead-land of a nowhere town...."

"And the whole police force right behind ya...."

"Listen," now she's serious. "those knuckleheads are going to waste you. They are thinking yer here about the four dead college kids back a month ago. Like yer some relative or something."

"Maybe I am."

"Well I got them thinking you're a fucking insurance guy. An insurance guy the insurance company might come looking for? Yeah. So now they're going to wait till you're out of town. Make it look like a car accident, ya get me?"

I shrug and continue to scroll on my phone feigning cavalier and distracted disinterest.

"Don't you see the angle? I'm saving your life, lover!"

I shrug a so what. I see where she's coming from but also see that maybe she thinks I'm her ticket out of this dump of a town. Sure. She's just afraid to do it alone.

Not satisfied with my appearance of stoicism, she hauls off and slaps me across the face. She goes to slap me again and I reach out and grab her hand. I hold onto her for a second, stare into her eyes, and then turn her around and pull her arm up behind her. She snarls and tries to kick me in the balls by bringing her heel up behind her but hits my knee.

Then she reaches around with her free hand, over her shoulder, as if to scratch my eyes out.

I try to grab her other hand with my free hand and get a fistful of her shirt.

As she back-kicks me again, hitting my knee which almost gives out, I start going down, dragging her with me and rip the front of her shirt open. Wide open.

Catamuso gets up now and decides to go for a walk, making a walking motion with the first two fingers on his hand and mouthing his intentions.

She's cursing a blue streak.

I try to pull her up but the shirt rips more and she begins to roll out of it.

I pull her up by the remaining fragments of the shirt and get a grasp on both her hands.

She's panting. I can smell the liquor and pot on her breath. I pull her into me, closer – skin to skin. I even feel her heart beating.

Then – just like in the movies – we kiss.

I don't just kiss her; we both kiss simultaneously.

And it's the best kiss ever.

She spins her head away, revolting against her passion.

Now we're getting somewhere.

I take a handful of her hair in the back, yank it to get her attention and force her face back to me. As I try to kiss her again, she purses her lips and looks to the side with eyes frantic with both passion and self-confusion and fear. I give her a good yank on her hair, she looks me in the eyes now and melts in my arms, like M&Ms in the summer sun.

As we dwindle down onto the motel room bed, a certain, small part of me is aware that this is one of those rare, perfect moments in time that I will remember like a snapshot on my deathbed and the other half is a greedy, ruthless, craven animal, feral, wild and clawing into her heart and mind. For a moment I am a Fabio painting, a Fabio on the cover of a newsstand romance novel, hair in the wind, ship sails in the background, a puffy pirate shirt half open with the generic, beautiful woman in my, tan, sinewy arms.

Only later, on the freeway heading south to West Palm will it occur to me that I should have used a rubber, considering her familiarity with the town cops and who knows who else.

Afterwards she goes looking around on the floor for something. An earring? No. The joint. It's on the edge of the television, it's gone out, but a little bit of the TV's plastic casing is burned on the edge.

"Wow!" she says, "wow, wow, wow!"

I smile and reach for a cigarette from her pack.

“Now getting you out of town...we gotta figure that. They be watching. Them speed traps ‘r at both ends of town...”

My mind ponders.

I sure did fuck this job up. Fucked it up all on my own this time. Do I run off with my tail between my legs and leave it unavenged? Do I turn it over to another Traveler to score? Lots to think about.

Catamuso comes back in now. Probably spying all along through a crack in the drapes or listening at the door. If it was his friend Fennix out there, Fennix the sex fiend, he would have whipped it out and probably have been watching it all with great delight on the property’s security camera with Cousin It at the front desk as he went to town.

Catamuso goes over to the second bed, grabbing the TV clicker and plops down, all in silence and starts flipping the channels.

She looks over at me and shrugs.

“So, all is forgiven?” she asks me.

“Let’s just say, you made your point.” I really do dig her: my kind of woman – all woman, hardy, wild, robust, blunt, savvy, lusty... “You like me a little don’t ya?” I bluntly ask. “I mean, not like the cops or the quarterback on the football team...”

She smiles as if I’ve got her pegged now.

“Well, let’s see....” she drawls. “You are good looking – were good looking – I mean, ya do look like shit now - and you don’t talk too much. You carry a gun and are probably some kind of gangster or secret agent or something. You are a good lover. And you love animals.”

“Animals?”

She points at the stuffed bat.

“That’s a taxidermized bat,” I say, “Not a pet.”

“Yeah, but he probably was a pet, you know, and you loved him so much you had him stuffed, right? So, you’re sentimental too! I loooove that.”

That’s always the first problem with being a hit in bed. The goo-goo. She’s gone goo-goo now. Goo-goo eyed and rapturous. She’s taking inventory of me, looking it all over and gloating, thinking she has me P-whipped. And thinking about how the cops will react when they go back on the shelf next to the canned goods and no more blow jobs.

And it might be nice for me to hang out here for a while. But then I have the appointment in a few days. Probably have to skedaddle after I wrap up this Menlo settlement. Could I take her with me? Naw, some flowers don’t last too long when you take them out of their environment.

Catamuso speaks up. “It’s she.”

“What?” what the fuck is he talking about. Is he talking about her?

Can he read my mind now?

“Is a she bat,” Catamuso says, barely looking up from his puzzle.

“Is a female bat. Not a male bat.” WTF?

“Look for yourself.” He says amused.

She’s a bit startled.

Me too.

Why would anyone have examined the sex of a dead bat?

Catamuso, of course.

But who is he? she’s thinking.

By his somber, diminished tone I can tell he has lost all hope of having a “sexual adventure” with this girl now that she loves me again (or something like that).

“Fuck the bat, Catamuso. Now thanks to this young lady we are both alive.” I’m getting up. “If the local gendarmes had come gunning for us... how many cops they got down there, babe?”

Eight. Eight patrol officers, the chief, two desk sergeants....”

“So,” I continue. “Say four or five of them dirty coppers came bashing in our motel door while you and I are asleep or ambush us somewhere out there in the parking lot... it’s dead duck city for us, for sure.”

He nods.

She’s answering her phone and begins a chat with one of her girl friends.

“And now we got someone inside, sort of.” I add. “Yup. See, she’s a damn sharp cookie.”

“Right!” says Catamuso. “Let’s drink a toast to the power of the pussy!”

I agree.

Nodding, I walk across the room and I pull out our bottle of Remy from behind the TV where I hid it, and pour three good shots into the motel Styrofoam coffee cups, one for each of us.

Catamuso raises his cup in salute. “Here, here! To power of the pussies! Yes!”

We kill the shots and high-five.

As I handed her a cup, she whispered to me: “Why does he have six fingers?”

CHAPTER FORTY SIX

FOR A SPECIAL OCCASION

No clothes shall dress a man as
well as a good night's sleep.

Milo Madigan

At breakfast next morning, I go incognito. I do the “well dressed man disguise”: a glue-on moustache, eyebrows and a nice sport-coat. Some makeup on my battle scars.

“They gonna kill you Harken.” Says Catamuso. “Next thing, they gonna kill you. We gotta beat it outa here. The cop roughed you up to drive me out of town. Killing is a lotta trouble: messy, risky.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“But if you don’t go... if you don’t go... then they gonna kill you!” says Catamuso.

“Well I can’t ice the whole department here, but...” I think for a minute. “...but maybe if I can just get rid of Philby...”

“The rest will leave you alone.”

“They probably don’t like him very much. He’s kind of a nuisance....But what if I kill him and then they still might come after me.”

“Is a dilemma.” Our food arrives and we dig in. “So maybe we get someone else to kill him?”

“Yeah, but might be hard to bring another Traveler in on this. No money involved here. There’s no loot that these guys got.... and this inquest is not sanctioned. I’m freelancing.”

I sit there, thinking as the meal cools down.

Catamuso remarks, with delight, at how good my moustache, looks and that he wants one... and now he’s joking around that he wants a disguise, too, something more than just his cowboy hat.

Do I scarper out or I stay and do the settlement.

Philby killed the kids, or at least the girl. And he’s going to pay for that. Catamuso finishes, sits back and pulls out a cigarette, then twitching it, and telegraphing to me that he wants to get on the road, get outside so he can light it up. “I know who do we get to kill that fat fuck copper...”

“Who?”

“That bear! We feed him to the bear! That fucking bear that always slobberin’ and always making a whole lotta noise! Ay! I can’t sleep have to theme. Fucking bear!”

“Good idea,” I say. “The bear. How much do we pay him?”

CHAPTER FORTY RIGHT

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

Make no mistake. Life is not about profound meanings or undiscovered secrets, or the kindness of strangers. No! It's sensible shoes, comfort food and the Mall. And that's it, The Mall.

the savvy shoppers

It's a dull, dead night in Menlo.

It's a few days later.

I've been ensconced in the motel room, ordering pizzas, watching shows like the History Channel and TCM and sleeping with a cocked and loaded gun next to me on the night stand all the time. Princess brings me a late night breakfast a couple of times.

This will be my last night in town.

I'm gonna pin the rap in the bear. The fucking bear. The snarling, frothing, miserable beast going out of his mind with

pain from the rabies. The animal control people that were to come and take away never showed, or if they did, decided caution was the better part of valor and left.

I cruise around; say good-bye to the deserted Putt-Putt, the Waffle House, the strip club, the ZAYRE store, the cement plant...

The flip-flop that was in the middle of the downtown intersection is gone but not forgotten.

I'm tooling around the town, wearing a bear suit (Amazon Prime overnight) and working on the last half of the Glenlivet. I feel like a kamikaze that's ready for his first/last big mission, but who really wants to go to go back to his bunkbed and just stay there reading comic books.

No comic books tonight. I'm ready to hit it. Ready for my kamikaze mission.

I spot three little black kids fishing from a bridge. I slow down and say: "Hey kids..." the all turn, "Which way to the zoo?"

They throw the joint they're passing around into the water, turn to me sitting in the car, smoking a cigarette in the bear outfit and start laughing their asses off.

I drive downtown, speed trap coming up.

My car flies by Philby's spot at 80 miles an hour.

But no.

He's sitting there – no doubt three sheets to the wind – and with his face so deep in the cell phone that he doesn't even notice me going by.

Damn Angry Birds.

I circle back and drive by him again. No good. Should I stop in the middle of the road right in front of him? Honk? No. That would be too much. Might make him suspicious.

I do have a "Blender" in the trunk. I pass on by him again, driving into a parking lot, to get the Blender out. It's a high-tech cyber weapon that will scramble most any electronic devices that

I aim it at. I turn it to a frequency that will specifically disable his radio and cell phone, (but still, his car will still start).

I come up on the speed trap again, barely rolling, lights off, and as I drive by, I hit him with it. I go on around the block, and then come flying back by. I see Philby standing outside the car now, waving his phone up above his head trying to get a signal, and I start laughing.

I honk the horn and now he notices me. And I have my bear head on now. I'm going the wrong direction from what I will need to be going in for my big plan, so down the road, I turn around and come back by him, still flying. I brake hard, screeching right in front of his speed trap as he's scrambling into his car, and I take off flying.

After a while he's catching up with me, and we're burning down the road like two bats out of Hell. He catches up, and then I lose him.

Eventually I turn down into a trailer park.

He follows.

It's cat and mouse.

He comes driving around a corner and I'm sitting there right in front of him leaning out the window... but I'm on the other side of a cyclone fence from him.

In his headlights, he sees a man in a bear suit sitting in a car. I've got a liquor bottle in one hand and a cigarette in the other. I wave at him, flick the cigarette at him, give him the finger, and take off. He tries to find me, but I make it out of the trailer park and onto the road first.

A bit later, Philby's car pops out onto the road and he chases after me. I would love to have seen his face when he had me in the headlights back there, and I gave him the finger.

I slow down. I let him pull up alongside me. He is motioning and yelling and using his car's loud-speaker to yell at me. I lean towards him, putting my hand to my ear like I'm trying to hear him. He yells and yells. I give him the finger again and take off.

I'm really fucking with him, but it is getting old.

Eventually he has to catch me. It's part of the plan.

We're a good way outside of town. I pretend to run out of gas and coast to a halt on the side of the road. Behind me, Philby's cop car skids to a halt in a spray of gravel.

He jumps out, gets his fucking gun out, and falls prone onto the hood of his car, aiming his service revolver at me with both hands on it. As I step out of my car, I call out to him "You win! I ran out of gas! FUCK! I ran out of fucking gas!" Philby looks kind of astounded and quizzical as he sees the full body bear suit I'm wearing.

"Let me see your face!" he yells.

I take the head of the bear suit off.

"YOU!"

I shrug lackadaisically, "Ya got me!"

I'm cuffed and thrown in the back of the squad car. "Shit! I was leaving town, just like you said!"

"Drunk 'n' in a bearskin?"

"Yeahhh..." I say in a what's wrong with that tone of voice. "So what."

As soon as he shuts the door, I'm already picking the locks on the cuffs. Everything's going according to plan.

As we are coming up on that gravel road going off to the dumping area, I push a button on a remote-control device. In the distance, a great and bright explosion splits the air. Then a whole lot of explosions. The fireworks. I cleaned out the motel's entire stockpile and the show is great.

"Holy shit! What the hell is that!?" Philby exclaims.

There's smoke in the distance, coming up from the explosions. "Might be a plane crash," I say helpfully. "I dunno, terrorists? ISIS maybe?" he stops the car abruptly. "Been a lot of strange ISIS activity down south of here. They been pulling shit like this from Coral Gables to St. Augustine lately." Of course, that's all bullshit, but Philby's just the kind of person who would not be informed. He starts back up and makes a hard turn going down the side-road to the dumping area.

We cruise down the dirt road, the car rocking and the gravel crunching. Philby has his gun out and is peering into the darkness all around him ready to shoot any ISIS on sight.

We come up on the smoldering weeds just ahead of us, and Philby gets out to investigate.

“You sit tight now! Stay right there!” he barks at me.

“Don’t leave me here alone! I’m scared!” I slur drunkenly and with my hands behind me as if I’m still cuffed.

“Shut up!”

I make a menacing bear-like face and growl at him.

“Rrrrrawwwrrr!”

He goes off, wandering around in the garbage and the sawgrass with his flashlight looking for clues to terrorists, and I go to work. Every few ticks, I remote-control off another explosion in the distance to keep him occupied.

Finally, he comes back to the car, flustered and shop-worn, dirty from the weeds and the mud. “Damn! Just some damn fireworks! Kids!

Some kids with some fireworks.” He slouches sloppily into the driver’s seat.

“Ain’t no fuckin’ ISIS,” he says to me.

Only it’s not me in the back seat anymore.

“Fucking kids...” he mutters and drives off.

As he disappears down the road, I emerge from the bushes and stand there proudly relishing a plan well executed. My own car is close by, as the car I drove around in, while wearing the bear suit, was a hot-wired “borrowed” car.

So... as soon as he put me in the car, I picked my cuffs in the backseat – easy, like Houdini. The rabid, raccoon-bit bear? He’s now in Philby’s backseat. Yeah, it took some doing. Last night, I sprung the bear from the petting zoo – got him for \$150. Had to put him to sleep with a couple of injections. Planted the dozing bear in the bushes in the dump area that I led Philby to.

While Philby was off rubbernecking the explosions, I manhandled the groggy bear into the backseat of his squad car

(and that took some engineering), then I gave him a couple of shots amphetamines as a wake-up call.

I just figured it would be a nice touch to let the poor, doomed bear enjoy its last dinner in real style and go out in a blaze of glory befitting a great and noble beast.

Lastly, I bugged Philby's squad car with a tiny spy camera, so I could enjoy watching "the last supper" on my cell phone as that drunken ass-hat tries to pull a rabid fucking bear out of his backseat.

Not a bad deal... \$189 for a bear suit from Amazon Prime overnight. \$150 cash for a rabid bear and cage. \$180 worth of fireworks. Rabid bear devouring a crooked speed-trap cop: PRICELESS!!!

I can't look away. I watch Philby screaming and howling as he is being torn limb from limb by the bear, watching it all on my hidden camera inside the cab of his car. Ahhhh... modern technology!

I drive off into the wonderful night, laughing out loud. I drain the last drops of Glenlivet and toss the bottle.

I get a text as I get back to my motel room: "Nice work." Then I get a second text: "You know what you're doing. You're good. Just like me. We should be partners someday." And it was signed "Ricco Delamuerte."

Delamuerte? Shit, Quickjohn again.

THE END

EPILOGUE

Next day, I'm packing things up.

Catamuso's already gone. He took off in the night, probably on some mission to help some other Traveler clean up an emergency or mess somewhere out there over the rainbow. As usual, he leaves without saying goodbye. As always, a strange bird, that Catamuso.

I listen to my motel room wall hoping Flip-Flop is still there for one last tryst, but I can clearly hear that she's getting nailed (very well BTW) by her magician again. I guess that the new bangs and the sexy walk worked! So, I don't get a chance to say goodbye to her. But as I'm leaving Princess stops by and brings me a foot-long loaf of banana-nut bread that she made herself, special for me.

After she takes off, I sit there with the banana nut bread and a joint thinking about what I've done these last few days. What I have done, what I have learned. Nothing in particular.

Perhaps I have finally graduated from killer to artist with this one. Graduated to fucking artiste'. And my new medium is irony. Perhaps the irony of the "baptism" and the bear scenario for the speed trap "Smokey" is my new trademark? I know that this is not a proper "story", but more of a journal or log of my random and uproarious journey... but perhaps that's my story arc? From the random to the ironic?

As I'm packing up, I notice that the bat is gone now. Princess didn't take it. I had my eye on her and I think she pretty much hated that stinky bat.

No way Catamuso would have taken it. Not without asking me for it. And the cleaning lady hasn't made it to this room yet. I remember seeing it last night, but today its gone.

Very mysterious.

A month later, on one dreary, rainy night when I was sitting there in another shitty motel room, hammered and lonely, I called Tori to chat and maybe talk about old movies or something. I apologized to her about losing the bat. I told her I was only going to keep it for good luck for a while, and was going to send it back to her, but it just up and disappeared somehow.

She said she didn't know what the fuck I was talking about. She never had a fucking stuffed bat.

"That must have been some other girl, slugger," she said with a slightly surly tone.

I was too perplexed to even respond... so I shrugged and changed the subject.

Interesting.