1987

Revisiting the 20th century: tales of wonder and desperation

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Revisiting the 20th century: Tales of wonder and desperation

by

Michael Pearson King

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Approved:

Signature redacted for privacy

In Charge of Major Work
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Major Department
Signature redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1987
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AT THE HOSPITAL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE UNSUSPECTING VICTIM</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVERYTHING WAS GOING FINE UNTIL I SEEN THE BEARS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE HEMINGWAY BEARD</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE OLD WOMAN’S SHOPPING BAG</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSICAL CHAIRS</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARILYN</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This space reserved for ridiculous, sentimental, probably untruthful and definitely self-serving personal comments. Post No Bills.

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There are no so-called normal people. Everybody in the late twentieth century is either semi-paranoid, neurotic, deluded, schizophrenic or some combination of the above. What we think of as normal is the way we think people acted and felt in 1966 and they didn't act or feel that way back then either. (Pause.) Which is not to say that there is anything wrong with being mentally ill. There isn't. The reason so many people are undergoing therapy isn't because of their mental illness—they'd have more to worry about if they weren't mentally ill in the late twentieth century—it's because they feel uncomfortable with being psycho. (Smile.)

Dr. O.K. Tangerine on the Johnny Carson Show

***

Switch the channels on me; I don't care. The only real TV is playing in my head.
AT THE HOSPITAL

You are lying in a private room in a hospital. You came in for a physical. You feel fine, as well as you've felt in years. The room is not luxurious or even especially comfortable. A cheap vase of sweet-smelling yellow flowers, a rented radio, and a black, rotary-dial telephone crowd your Formica topped night stand. A color TV hangs from the ceiling across from your bed. The lights are turned off. A respirator, a heart-lung machine, and a small video camera connected to a monitor at the nurses' station sit against the wall in the shadow between your bed and the door. Whenever you move, the motor on the camera purrs and the camera adjusts itself to keep you perfectly in focus. On the other side of your bed, where the sunshine slants through the windows, an exercise bicycle and a Nautilus machine stand where the visitors' chairs used to be. There is no hand control on your bed to press to call a nurse. They took it away when they tired of your complaining. The TV and the radio both murmur softly.

You lie still, as if you are asleep, but your eyes are open. Your hair, what little there is, is white, your face is a mass of deep creases, and your watery eyes are sunk deep in their orbits, but your skin is a healthy pink. The telephone rings. You sigh, slowly turn your head without
ruffling the covers tucked up under your chin, and glare at
the telephone to make it stop ringing. It rings ten,
fifteen, twenty times, a shrill bill collector's ring, then
finally stops. You turn your head back towards the TV.

You have two doctors, the only two specialists who
would treat you. In order to protect themselves from a
malpractice suit, they won't tell you their names. They are
both big, heavyset men with thinning hair and thick
glasses. They look so much alike that it took you a long
time to tell them apart. They always rush into the room in
bloodstained surgical gowns, glance at the chart, nod and
whisper to each other, fire off three or four questions
without waiting for you to answer, and leave. They think
you are dying of an unknown disease. They don't know if it
is contagious.

Dr. A is the high-strung, guilt-ridden type. He
doesn't like to lose. His hands trembled and he couldn't
look you in the face when he gave you the bad news. He has
prescribed an experimental drug therapy and bed rest to slow
down the disease's progress while they run more tests and do
a literature survey. Dr. B is forceful and self-confident.
He likes to play the long shots. He told you matter-of-
factly that it would be a good idea for you to put your
papers in order. He has prescribed vitamins and exercise
three times a day to keep your resistance up in case they
diagnose the disease or discover a cure.

You are alone in the world. You never married. Your parents and brothers and sisters are all dead. Dozens of strangers claim to be your nephews and nieces. They have never been to see you in the hospital. They all think you are dead. You have never met any of them, but they all have produced wills which leave your estate to them even though you’ve never owned much of anything. Their lawyers hound you mercilessly, calling day and night. They have calm, emotionless voices, one almost indistinguishable from another, like the disc jockeys on public radio stations. Some accuse you of being an imposter and threaten you with jail. Others offer the details of burial arrangements that their clients will provide for you if you will only admit that you are dead and that their clients’ versions of the will are authentic. A few merely call to see if you are still claiming to be alive, your identity being a minor point since you’ll be out of the way soon enough. Regardless of their positions on the case, they all generate reams of documents tying up your estate.

You want to go home, but neither of your doctors will sign your release. Dr. B told you that the idea of leaving was suicidal and offered to recommend a psychiatrist. You were flabbergasted. When you tried to leave anyway, four burly male nurses in ill-fitting dirty-white clothing caught
you at the elevator, dragged you back to your room and took your clothes away. Dr. A told you that you needed to get a grip on yourself if they were going to be able to help you at all. You argued with him and the nurses, and finally yelled down the hall demanding your civil rights. Someone called the hospital administrator, a sallow complexioned man in a three-piece suit, who told you they had gotten a court order to keep you until you were well, so you had better make the best of it. That evening, when the nurses brought you your medication, they started tying you to the bed for the night.

Everyday in the hospital is the same. The menu rotates monotonously. Clear broth and red Jello for breakfast, lunch and dinner courtesy of Dr. A; cuts of rare meat and mixed, raw vegetables courtesy of Dr. B. The radio and TV programs come on and go off in their turn, one like another. The yellow flowers wilt and are replaced in the night while you sleep. Their scent never changes. Whenever you move, the camera motor purrs. The doctors step in for a minute and leave. The nurses come and go, asking the same questions and writing comments on your chart. You're here, you see what happens, but you can't keep it straight in your mind. You're not sure of how long you've been here anymore. You're not sure if any progress is being made. You're not even sure which doctor's orders you're
following. Your chart tells you nothing. Whenever you look at it, the letters in the words crawl randomly around the page like a swarm of tiny, two-dimensional insects.

Your doctors tell you that you're deteriorating; that there is nothing they can do. The nurses take away the exercise equipment and wheel the respirator and heart-lung machine up to the side of your bed. They check the color-coded dials and switches to make sure that the machines will be ready at a moment's notice. Several of the lawyers call, asking you to reconsider and admit the truth before it's too late. The flowers wilt, but no one replaces them. The water in the vase begins to exude a musty odor. A mortician tries to sneak into the room to look you over while you're taking a nap, but the squeaking of his shiny black shoes gives him away. He smiles a plastic smile, wipes his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief, sets his card on the night stand, and leaves without saying a word.

You lie here, straining your mind. You're beginning to wonder if, in some way, they all aren't right. You're certainly no judge of what's been going on. Why would they keep you here against your will if not for your own good? Why would the lawyers badger you if they didn't have some legitimate claim? Maybe there's some confusion in the records. Maybe they think you are someone else, a wealthy man with a large number of relatives who died of an unknown
disease. But they ran the tests on you. The doctors, nurses, and lawyers all call you by name. Maybe you're senile and are dying and just don't know it. But you feel fine. You have no nephews or nieces. Surely you would remember one.
THE UNSUSPECTING VICTIM

Johnny Powers, the hero of this story, is your average, run-of-the-mill private investigator with the usual accessories: fedora, trench coat, poor taste in clothes. He doesn't think very deeply and he doesn't like to help people. He's short on job skills, but he knows what people expect. He's in it for the money. Col. Coldlove contacted him when his wife, Veronica, didn't come home from her therapy session at Dr. Mindseye's office. (He's been worried about her lately. Her therapy hasn't been going well and she's still young enough to be easily taken advantage of. He loves her more than his servants, his horses, or his autographed picture of Gen. Patton. He doesn't know what he'll do if she isn't found.) "Find her and bring her home," he said. "I'll pay double your usual fee plus a bonus."

***

Eddie Angler, the villain in this story, is a stressed-out, overweight insurance salesman. He's in therapy with Dr. Mindseye because he thinks he's an accomplished mercenary. He was fired from his job after he broke into a house to verify the property on a homeowner's policy. A few weeks later his wife snuck off one night while he was watching Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, and he hasn't heard
from her since. (He canceled her health insurance, but he's holding on to her whole life. The actuarial tables are working against him, but who knows? Maybe there is a God.) He collects weapons of all kinds, subscribes to survivalist magazines and mail order catalogues, wears his hair in a crewcut so that his scalp is easier to stitch up, and goes on week-long solo training exercises in the city park. He's certain civilization has gone to hell (fighting in the jungles of Africa was more wholesome). He wants to escape to the wilderness. He's built a hideout in the basement of an abandoned mansion next to the city park. (He's going to run a water line off the fountain at the baseball diamond after the city finishes it next year.) He's stocked it with freeze-dried food, milk jugs of water, automatic weapons, crates of ammunition, and cases of plastic explosives. He's in the market for a love slave. He's seen Veronica G. Coldlove and has her on his mind.

***

Dr. Mindseye, the real nut case of this story, is an eminent psychiatrist who has cracked under the strain of his profession. He thinks world war three is going to start on Wednesday, the day after tomorrow, at 2:07 p.m. Central Standard Time. He's terrified. He doesn't want to die. (It's a dilemma. He's divorced and doesn't have any children. He isn't sure if he should be sad that he isn't
leaving his seed behind or happy that his children won’t have to face a nuclear holocaust.) He’s been pumping Eddie Angler for survivalist information during his twice-weekly sessions. Eddie, no dim wit, figured out the doctor’s prognosis and invited him to share his bomb shelter, provided he brings Veronica G. Coldlove along. Dr. Mindseye, against his best professional judgment, told Veronica a little white lie to ensure her cooperation. He’ll be there, he figures, in case Eddie Angler has any hanky-panky in mind. Besides, what choice does he have? It’s the only bomb shelter in town.

***

Veronica G. Coldlove, the damsel in distress in this story, is a beautiful, twenty-eight year old socialite married to a lecherous eighty year old man. She’s in therapy with Dr. Mindseye because she doesn’t find her husband sexually attractive anymore (he was so exciting when he was seventy) and he’s on to her problem when they hop into bed. Nothing has worked so far, but her therapy has taken a new turn. Dr. Mindseye suggested a psychodrama with a group of specially trained actors as a fantasy conditioning to teach her body to respond under adverse conditions. (Her husband would never approve, but she might as well try it. How could it hurt?) The fake kidnapping was exciting, and the surroundings are certainly bizarre--a
basement room lined with wooden crates of various sizes, boxes of backpacking food and jugs of water; an ornate brass bed with frilly, quilted covers sitting on the concrete floor in the center of the room--but the only actor present thus far (a jowly little man who acts like a concentration camp guard) doesn't turn her on at all.

1

It’s supper time at the basement hideout. Eddie Angler is busy demonstrating his culinary skills on a one-burner camping stove. (Thin Aire brand dehydrated stew. Just add water and simmer thirty minutes.) A peculiar odor, like the smell of Brillo pads boiling in Alpo dog food, is rising from the pot. Veronica G. Coldlove sits on the edge of the bed watching him (trying to figure out how being bored to death in a basement is possibly going to help her). Her high heels are laying on the floor. The skirt of her blue silk dress has ridden up around her hips, but she doesn’t care or hasn’t noticed. Her stomach is growling. Dr. Mindseye (still dressed in slacks, school tie and white coat) is pacing the far side of the room, periodically looking at his watch and muttering to himself. (It’s all he’s done since they arrived. He’s going through his canceled afternoon sessions one by one and commenting on his imagined versions of his patients’ monologues.)
Eddie, squatting over the camp stove, glances from the shadow between Veronica's thighs down her chorus line legs, thinking about the fun he'll have when they're tied to opposite sides of the bed, and licks his lips. He starts humming "The Girl From Ipanema."

"Is that stew really that good," Veronica asks. (The smell has finally reached her.)

"Oh, yes," Eddie says, looking up at her face for the first time in an hour and realizing what he's been missing. "It contains all the basic food groups, is low in cholesterol, has plenty of fiber, and has a vitamin supplement. If more people ate this stuff, insurance rates would go down. It ought to be ready now. Could you hand me those mess plates?"

Veronica hands him the plates and he divides the stew on to them one spoonful at a time. "Doctor. Dinner's ready," he says. "Bon appetit, Mrs. Coldlove."

3

Veronica tries a spoonful of the stew, spits it out, and throws the plate against a crate of plastic explosives. "I can't eat this slop," she says, stamping her foot on the floor. "I want real food. How can I concentrate on my therapy--"

Eddie stands up to face her, the top of his head level with her chin. "No one gives a damn about your therapy."
You can eat you food off the floor or go hungry." he says. (She can feel his breath on her cleavage.)

"I'm leaving," Veronica says. "You can't keep me here. I'm not afraid of your toy guns." She starts for the stairs. Eddie tackles her and hefts her up on his shoulder. (The smell of her skin is almost more than he can bear.) "Help me, doctor," she yells, as she tries to wriggle free. Dr. Mindseye stands watching with his hands in his pockets, trying to act like nothing unusual is going on. He winces when Veronica bites Eddie's neck and he slaps her. Eddie carries Veronica, kicking and screaming, to the bed and ties her down (taking care not to damage the goods).

Watching her struggle against the ropes (blue and red climbing cord with a tensile strength of 8,300 pounds), Eddie can't help running his hand over her belly. ("Strangers In The Night" is playing in his head.)

"You pervert! Stay away from me! You wait until the others get here. There won't be enough of you left to watch me make love to the man who kicks your ass."

Eddie smiles. (She's got a lot of spunk. He ought to break into Mindseye's office and take a look at her file.)

"What kind of food did you want?"

She turns her face away from him. "Chinese."

"All right, Veronica," he says, running his hand down
her leg, "Chinese it is. And if you promise to be good when I get back, I’ll untie you so you can eat it by yourself."

He turns to Dr. Mindseye. "Don’t untie her."

"Why didn’t you help me, doctor?" Veronica asks as she squirms around to try to get comfortable.

"I really shouldn’t say anything," Dr. Mindseye says. "Would you like for me to pull your dress down?"

"Please."

He pulls her dress down over her thighs and sits down on the edge of the bed. What can he tell her? He pulled her into this mess. He never realized that Eddie was so violent, but he can’t back out now. The day after tomorrow the world will go up in smoke. He’s saving her life. They’ll think of some way to deal with Eddie after it’s all over. He musters his best doctor’s voice.

"Remember, Veronica, that this is a psychodrama. It’s not real. My only role here is to observe your interactions. Everything that happens in the psychodrama is somehow a reflection of your emotional state." (That sounded pretty good. He’d read it somewhere.) "We have to let the psychodrama work itself out. Remember, I told you it had its risks."

"What if I need to pee?"

Dr. Mindseye shrugs.
"So I've gotten myself tied up in a basement at the mercy of a kook who's gone to get me take-out Chinese," she says, brightening. "What do you think it means?"

"What do you think, Veronica?"

She frowns and looks at the ceiling. "Is it that my inhibitions are holding me back? That my behavior patterns lock me into needless emotional confrontations where my inhibitions take over?"

Dr. Mindseye smiles. (The old answer-a-question-with-a-question never fails.) He picks up his mess plate and tries a spoonful of stew. (Not bad. Sort of like hospital food.)

"You know, doctor, this all kind of reminds me of my honeymoon at Nassau where I got scared and thought about running away. Of course, I was a lot younger then. I didn't really know what marriage was about--you know, sex and all that. I thought it would be like our engagement only we'd live together. I guess I was pretty naive. Do you think I've been harboring these feelings all this time?"

It's late afternoon at the basement hideout. Veronica G. Coldlove is leaning on a stack of crates against the wall. (It took her until mid-morning to convince Eddie to untie her. She feels a lot better since she washed up and changed clothes.) Eddie has been in and out all day, so she
hasn't had to deal with him much, and Dr. Mindseye has been sitting by himself in the far corner making notes. They've been here twenty-four hours and no one else has showed up. (Something better happen soon. Her disappearance is going to be hard enough to explain to her husband if she gets cured, let alone if she's still the same.) She's counted the crates along the walls: thirty large ones, sixteen medium sized ones, and forty-three small ones. There are sixty-two independent cracks in the ceiling. She's thought of looking in the crates, but she doesn't want to put herself in the position of having to beg to be untied when she needs to go to the bathroom. (What does that mean? Has she been fighting natural physical urges? She isn't really sure.)

Images of her husband stroking her with his soft, dry hands keep creeping into her mind. (She's laid out on their king-sized bed in a wisp of lace. She can hear Ella Fitzgerald singing "Summertime." Her eyes are closed, but she knows he's sitting beside her watching the expression on her face as his hands move over her.) The images are soothing to the point of sensuality, making her want to yell "When is something going to happen" before she needs to change her panties. Dr. Mindseye keeps promising her that some other actors are on the way (he doesn't know what's keeping them) but she's beginning to believe that the
waiting is part of the conditioning. It does seem like her expectations have been dropping as her frustration has been rising. Maybe she's been wanting too much all along and has been blocking against her own happiness.

Johnny Powers runs another red light as he speeds across town to the abandoned Barfield Mansion. He hasn't worked on the case in the day and a half since Col. Coldlove hired him (he's been letting his fees run up) and he only has one lead, but he hates to drive his red Corvette in second gear. He isn't sure what he's going to do when he gets to the mansion. He isn't even sure if Veronica G. Coldlove will be there. He doesn't put a lot of faith in the tip he got from the wino who works the ditches for aluminum cans around the perimeter of the park (Wild Irish Rose only buys so much information), but it's the only lead he has. And if Veronica (whose curvaceous near-nude picture taken at the beaches of Acapulco is taped to his sun visor) isn't being held against her will, he's not going to get involved. He doesn't do divorces (not after that close call tailing the city attorney at the Club De Noir).

He is sure of one thing. It's raining, which is a good sign. It always rains as he nears the end of a case. He pulls the brim of his fedora down against the rain (he never stops to put up his rag top in the middle of a case) and
takes a long pull of whiskey from the brown-bagged bottle laying beside him in the seat (to ward off the chill). He slows down to forty as he nears the old mansion (so as not to raise suspicion) and parks in front of the rusted iron gate to the driveway. The gate is slightly open and the chain is hanging to one side.

The Barfield mansion had once been the pride of the city, an immense romanesque structure with manicured lawns and intricate gardens spreading out over twenty acres. Now it lays in ruin, almost ready for the bulldozer, and its gardens are overgrown with common weeds and seedlings. The last heir donated it to the parks system as a tax write-off, or so the newspapers said. Johnny locks his whiskey in the glove box (you can't trust anyone anymore) and checks his pistol before he slips through the gate and starts up the weed-infested driveway. The rain has become a slow drizzle.

Eddie Angler lies hidden in the shadows on the second floor balcony directly above the double back doors, trying to decide on the most effective way to deal with any would-be rescuers. He's been up there for hours, keeping an eye on all the access points. (He learned how from reading Urban Guerrilla, an interdenominational magazine published in Lebanon.) He knows they're coming. He weasled the information out of Veronica. Yes siree, a general proof of
manhood all around and then she'll succumb to the victor's charms. She's the woman for him all right (type B stress factor, under thirty, no major illnesses or operations, parents and grandparents still living). Little does she know who the victor will be. He'll have to chain her to the bed for a while, of course, after he kills the doctor, but she'll come around in time. It'll be fun feeding her, changing her clothes, and watching her in the bathroom (he felt a rise in his pants), like having a child and a wife all rolled into one. He'll have to think of a way to get health and life coverage for her without tipping his hand, but that shouldn't be such a problem (he had the hideout covered on a rider on his marine policy).

He wishes that it would stop raining (he's just wearing camies and doesn't want to catch cold) and that the rescuers would arrive. (He's run out of hypertension medication and can't risk leaving. It would be just his luck for them to show up while he was gone. He'll make out all right. When the going gets tough, the tough get going. He hums a few bars of "From The Halls Of Montezuma.") He needs to win Veronica over. The doctor won't be any help keeping her here after he figures out that there's not going to be any world war three. He wonders how many rescuers there will be. They'll have to come this way; he boarded up all the other doors and windows. He'll have to take them out one at
a time, ninja style, so as not to make any noise and alarm anyone in the park. Sneaking around the mansion, garroting and stabbing, will really make a show for Veronica. She'll know what kind of man he is then. Even with this weather (weathermen are all liars; it's just another sign of the times) it's quite exciting. The Prudential commercial with the insurance agent leading the family through the jungle to safety flashes through his mind.

Johnny Powers follows the driveway around to the back of the mansion. The layout: dilapidated two-car garage surrounded by an overgrown hedge that more or less matches a hedge directly opposite; a flagstone patio in between leading from the double door under the balcony to a cobblestone stairway that descends to where the flower gardens once were; rogue bushes and wild-limbed fruit trees that block the view of the gardens beyond and the old boundary to the city park. There's a car in the garage, a two-door Impala. It's not Veronica's. She drives a Mercedes sports coupe. It's not Dr. Mindseye's. He drives a Volvo, or at least that's what Johnny's registration check indicated. Johnny steps onto the patio, trying to act nonchalant, like "Hey, I'm just site seeing," while he gives the back of the mansion the once over. Nothing unusual here. Your typical decaying, boarded-up mansion, except the
back door is ever so slightly ajar. For some reason, James Bond's theme music starts playing in his head.

10

As Johnny approaches the door, Eddie prepares to strike. (He has to keep himself from giggling. From looking at Johnny, Eddie figures he's been laying out a wad for health insurance that he's never going to get a chance to collect on.) He exhales and stops breathing. He clenches his Bowie knife in his teeth. Everything seems as if it is happening in slow motion. He waits until Johnny is in exactly the right spot under the balcony. (He marked it with a piece of tape.) He can hear Wagner's "Ride Of The Valkyries." He vaults the railing and comes down feet first. Johnny tries to sidestep him, but he doesn't quite get clear. They roll onto the slippery flagstone, struggling over the knife that Eddie has pulled from his bloody mouth.

11

Down in the basement, Veronica (lounging on the bed in a cotton print dress and bare feet) and Dr. Mindseye (sitting on a crate in scratchy brand-new casual clothes and staring at the wall) hear the commotion outside and look at each other, eyes wide. Veronica is thinking: The wait is over. The other players have finally arrived. Her heart is pounding. Her hands and feet are tingling. A strange, far
away smile creeps over her face. The doctor is thinking: The war is still an hour away. What has Eddie done? I should never have trusted him. If we’re discovered now, we’ll be blown to hell at the police station. His face goes white. His hands tremble. They rush up the steps and through the kitchen to the back double doors.

12

Out on the patio, the rain has finally stopped. Johnny and Eddie are blood splattered (from Eddie’s bleeding mouth) and winded (from their struggle on the ground). Johnny has just kicked the knife from Eddie’s hand and is drawing his pistol as Veronica and Dr. Mindseye burst through the double doors and stop, expressions of wonder and terror on their faces. Johnny catches a glimpse of them out of the corner of his eye and turns his head, recognizing Veronica from her picture. Eddie charges him and grabs his gun hand. They scuffle. The pistol goes off. “I got him! I got him!” Eddie yells. He prances around the patio giggling, blood dripping down his chin and soaking his shirt. Johnny curses. He shot himself in the foot. He grimaces as he eases himself down onto the flagstone. Eddie’s eyes bulge out of the sockets. He keels over, clutching his chest. “Are you all right, Mrs. Coldlove?” Johnny asks.

13

Veronica is ecstatic. She’s filled with a rush of
emotion, a heady mixture of disgust (at the scene she’s just witnessed), amazement (that this make-believe drama is so realistic), and gratitude (that Dr. Mindseye staged the whole thing for her) that culminates in a wonderful feeling of total control. She feels horny. She can hear Alberta Hunter singing "(My Man, He’s Such A) Handy Man." The new player isn’t much to look at, but who cares? It’s her fantasy and he can be anyone she wants him to be. "I’m so glad you’re here," she says to Johnny. She squats over him and starts unbuttoning his pants. His mouth drops open. He studies her eyes, not believing what’s happening. He feels dizzy and weak, his smashed foot pounding horribly in his shoe. (He’s never been shot before. His get-up is all theatrics. With his clientele, he rarely draws a gun.) He lies back, firmly grasping his gun in his hand. His mind goes blank while she’s kissing him.

Dr. Mindseye is in a panic. The events of the past few days are blurring in his mind, folding over into each other until he’s not sure what’s real. He looks from Eddie (twitching on the flagstone) to Johnny (Veronica over him pulling her panties off) then back to Eddie, trying to piece the images together. There’s less than an hour left until world war three. Veronica’s sex therapy seems to be coming along nicely. Eddie’s in shock and will die very shortly.
Dr. Mindseye is in a quandary as to what he should do. Should he try to help Eddie and get blown to bits at the hospital or should he let Eddie die and guarantee his own survival? He stoops over Eddie to have a closer look and his training takes over. He gives Eddie mouth-to-mouth resuscitation (he's turning blue) and heart massage, alternating back and forth (hardly noticing the sounds that Veronica is making just a few feet away from him) until Eddie's condition is stable.

When 2:07 comes and goes and world war three doesn't start, Dr. Mindseye goes into an hysterical rage, screaming and beating his head with his fists. By the time Veronica gets him calmed down, she knows what's really going on, and he's carrying on a conversation with two people who don't exist. She is flabbergasted (at her own naivete) and embarrassed (at her actions). She contemplates leaving them there to their own devices (Dr. Mindseye helplessly deranged, Eddie stable but unconscious, Johnny passed out and losing blood) before she comes up with a plan to salvage her reputation.

***

Johnny Powers (Veronica claimed that he saved her and the doctor) woke up in the hospital with no recollection of his sexual encounter with Veronica G. Coldlove. Col.
Coldlove paid his hospital bills and wrote him a generous check. His physical therapy was successful and he now walks without a limp. The publicity generated by the case still provides him with more easy work than he can handle. He's never found it to be in his best interests to question Veronica's version of the events. It still rains when he nears the end of a case.

***

Dr. Mindseye (Veronica claimed he went mad when Eddie tortured him after the kidnapping) went back to his practice after an extensive stay in a private hospital. His book, *Psychodrama as Sex Therapy: releasing your inhibitions and enjoying sex in your marriage*, has made him a regular on the lecture and talk show circuit, which has proven to be quite lucrative. Veronica G. Coldlove no longer sees him.

***

Eddie Angler (while still in the hospital recovering from his heart attack) was indicted on two counts of kidnapping and one count of attempted murder. At his preliminary hearing before a packed court room, he was found to be unfit to stand trial (his brain had been starved of oxygen while Dr. Mindseye decided what to do). His wife appeared as a witness for the prosecution (claiming he was faking his condition) and later took up with a sleazy reporter who interviewed her for a front page story.
Eddie was remanded to the state hospital for the criminally insane. His wife made a bundle off of his life insurance policy (she took advantage of the insanity clause) and never visits him. He sits all day in his bed, drooling, his mind flashing in and out of a fantasy that he's holding Veronica G. Coldlove in a wilderness hideout where he has a successful business selling insurance to survivalists.

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Veronica G. Coldlove was indeed helped by the supposed psychodrama she participated in. She now enjoys sexual relations with her husband (through an active fantasy life) and avoids the guilt of not wanting to make love with him by taking the initiative. She volunteers on the family crisis hotline, an new experience for her, and is active in civic affairs. She also discreetly takes on an occasional lover, making her happiness complete.
EVERYTHING WAS GOING FINE UNTIL I SEEN THE BEARS

Yeah, I was flying through the heart of darkness, cutting my wings on the ice, if you can dig that, man. The bitch my wife had let her hair down--once in a hundred years, I'm telling you--and she was firing the car up through the gears, throwing the tachometer needle into the red zone, spinning the speedometer needle back around to zero while I stood on the parking brake between the front seats with my back jammed against the sun roof hole and my arms stuck straight out flapping like I could get the car up off the ground in that snowstorm. It was a rush. The only rush I ever had sober. I could see baby Jesus off in the distance through the snow flakes clotted up around my eyes. I felt free, freer than I ever had since they started drug testing at the plant. The Goddamn You Can'ts have taken over the country--you can't take dope, you can't drive drunk, you can't have automatic weapons in your home, and you can't rob no Seven-Eleven without getting fried. Hell, you can't even smoke cigarettes anymore. They should've just said you can't be an American no more, cancelled everybody's passport and changed the name of the country on them with a felt-tip pen and given them all back. You know the country's gone to hell when my church-going, skillet-swinging old lady pops her cork and jumps in the car to help
me have some fun, even if it means blowing up the engine and
kissing her driver's license good-bye.

Yeah, fortuitous day. They damn sure brought this
family back together. I'd say she needed her meds changed
if she was on any meds, but that's neither here nor there.
I was hoping she'd find a brick wall or at least a trooper
road block and up the ante on this gig. My arms were
getting tired and I was getting bored. Then she slammed on
the brakes--she was trying a boot-leg turn--and we spun
around on the ice and double-flipped into a ditch. I landed
in a snowbank without a breath of air in me. It really got
my heart started, if you know what I mean. The old lady ran
over to me--she had a cut running from her forehead down
between her eye and nose that ended at her chin. It was
raining blood, sopping into her good coat. I gave her my
handkerchief--one of them big, colored ones with writing on
it. She dabbed at her face awhile and the bleeding stopped.

I stormed over to the car. I was pissed, man, you can
count on that cause that no-account chunk of worthless
American-made garbage had assaulted my wife. My wife. You
can't trust nothing with a computer in it, even if it's just
a door lock. The sucker was laying on its top. Gas was
leaking from around the fuel lines. I wrenched off the gas
cap and let the gas drain out in a big puddle all under that
car, then torched it. It made quite a fire. Would've been
three alarm in a residential zone. It just goes to show you
that a man ain’t weaponless as long as he’s got a match.

We got up on the road with our thumbs out, digging the
cold—I mean getting into the misery of it. The old lady
complained she didn’t feel too hot. The bleeding had
started back up, but I wasn’t worried. You know how face
cuts bleed. Make you think you’re dying. Right then a semi­
truck stopped to give us a ride. We was happy for it, but I
wasn’t surprised none. Truck drivers are All-American—
maybe the last real Americans, like the Indians used to be
before we killed them all off. The trucker asked us what
was wrong—he seen the fire—and I slumped over him like I
fainted, jerked his door open, and pushed him out. I hated
to do it. He seemed like a real nice fella. But you just
can’t trust any old stranger’s driving. Especially on a
night like that. He was screaming and yelling out on the
road, trying to run us down as we pulled away. He didn’t
have no coat on. I guess he was feeling mighty cold.

That was one fancy rig. There was a built-in stereo
and a mess of country tapes and a little TV set built right
into the dash. We got the Hank Williams cranked up and a
"One day at a time" rerun on the set and we was cruising.
Flying down the freeway, I mean. It reminded me of the old
days, when I was a kid and rode with my cousin. I got that
feeling in me, got the Word and it felt good. The old lady
had got quiet on me--which didn't surprise me none, the party always ran out of her early--and the seat felt wet. But it didn't bother me none--nothing could have--I was getting close enough to God to feel the Angels breathe and that truck was eating up the highway like a short snack. After a while the old lady laid her head in my lap. I thought she was getting romantic--that would've been a real kick--until I noticed she wasn't moving no more. I grabbed the collar of her coat, jerked her up and had a look at her. She didn't mind none, her eyes were rolled back in her head. I gave her a shove. She slumped back against the passenger's door and stared at me white-eyed. It really got me--like a knot had come up in my belly. I looked back on down the highway. The snow was coming in hard, flakes coming against the windshield like a swarm of flies lighting on a picnic. Then I noticed the blue lights flashing off in the distance and the flares firing up from the road. Yeah, buddy, everything was going fine until I seen the bears.
When Danny Hackworth stumbled in the front door at four o'clock in the morning, his wife, Susan Ownby, was waiting for him. She stood with her hands on her hips in the middle of the living room next to the coffee table. Her china-blue robe hung open over her transparent pink nightie; it wasn't Danny's favorite, but she looked good in anything. Long dark hair, big eyes, tall and lithe. "All leg" Danny liked to say when he described her. She was the perfect writer's wife--smart, independent, and hard working. The kind of woman that made everyone wonder what a loser like Danny had going for him and how he could possibly keep her when he was hanging out in bars and chasing anything in a skirt.

"What brought you in?" she said. "Need a change of clothes or were you going to rob my handbag?"

Danny was puzzled. He leaned against the door frame to steady himself. "Suse, what are you doing up? You know you get cranky if you don't get your rest," he said.

"Don't 'Suse' me. Get your clothes out of my closet and get out of my house."

Danny took a step into the room and the screen door clicked shut behind him. He didn't know what to say. He couldn't think of anything that he had done lately that was out of the ordinary. He certainly hadn't done anything to
hurt her. He looked at her carefully, trying hard to focus, then covered one eye with his hand so that there would only be one of her. He's always been proud of his powers of observation. They were the key ingredient to being a good writer, part of the "built-in bullshit detector" that the master had talked about. Susan's fists were clenched, her face was getting whiter by the second, and her eyes looked as if she had been crying. He started to go to her, to touch her, to say he was sorry for whatever he'd done, but he tripped on a throw rug and landed in a lump at her feet.

"What's wrong, Suse?" he asked, lifting his face out of the wadded-up rug.

"Herpes."

"Herpes?" He rolled over on his back so he could look up at her. "Where did you pick them up at?"

"Where do you think?" She pulled her robe closed and took a step back.

"But I don't have them."

"You wouldn't know anything was wrong with you unless someone cut your balls off."

"But what if it's not really herpes? Aren't they hard to diagnose?"

"Would you get up off the floor?" she yelled.

Danny crawled over to the sofa, climbed onto it, and sat up.
Susan took a deep breath. "It doesn’t make any difference, Danny. You can just add this to the bottom of the list. I’ve had it with you. You haven’t worked in years—"

"I’ve been writing," he said, trying hard to look earnest.

"You drink most of the day. You sleep with any woman who’ll let you. You spend too much money. You get in fights all the time. Frankly, Danny, it’s embarrassing being married to you. The only good thing that I can say for our marriage is that I probably wouldn’t have been so successful if you hadn’t been so worthless."

"But I’ve got to do everything just like he did. Can’t you see that?" he said, gesturing like a second-rate theatre actor.

Susan rolled her eyes. "That’s gotten so old, Danny. You’re nothing like Hemingway. My Uncle Eddie looks just like Winston Churchill. Does he run around claiming he’s a reincarnated British statesman? I should have known where things were going when you wanted everyone to call you Papa."

"That’s not the same thing, Suse."

"Isn’t it? At least anybody can see that Uncle Eddie looks like Churchill. Nobody even knows you’re a dead ringer for Hemingway. You don’t have the beard."
He held his face in his hands. "It is the beard, isn't it? That's the only thing that's missing. If I had the beard everything would fall into place. I'm sure of it."

Susan rubbed her temples and sighed. "Danny, what does the beard have to do with it? Your writing is just plain bad. You've written hundreds of pages and you don't get any better. What about all the great women writers?"

"They shave; they all shave. Or maybe it's like baldness. The trait for beards exists in great women writers but it's kept in check by female hormones."

"What am I doing standing here talking to you? What you need is a psychiatrist."

"So I'm deranged, huh? I'm not the one who's throwing her husband out on the street."

"Danny, just pack your bags and go."

He went into the bedroom. She stood in the threshold with her arms crossed and watched as he got out the old suitcase he thought he'd never need again after they got married and jerked his clothes off hangers and pulled them out of drawers and piled them in. After he forced the lid shut and latched it, he picked up his lucky rock, a smooth piece of red-veined quartz that he bought from a vender who swore that Hemingway had owned it, and shoved it into his pants' pocket. Then he started going through the dirty clothes hamper.
"Leave them," she said. "You can pick them up after they're washed."

"Thanks," he said, as if he were talking to no one in particular. "Where's my old Smith-Corona manual?"

"Back corner of the closet."

He dug out the typewriter, knocked some of the dust off, and set it on top of the suitcase. "You're overreacting, Suse. Tomorrow you're going to wish I was still here."

"Maybe, but love just isn't enough anymore, Danny. I don't know how I lasted this long. Give me your keys."

Danny fished his keys out of his pocket and dropped them into her outstretched hand. She reached into the pocket of her robe. "Here's the keys to the Lincoln."

"You don't have to."

"Take them. What are you going to do, walk? Don't be macho about it."

He shrugged and took the keys. "You've always been too good to me." He picked up the typewriter and the suitcase. She stepped out of the way as he started out of the bedroom.

"Danny."

"Yeah," he said over his shoulder.

"There's a gas card in the glove box."

Danny laid the suitcase down on the front seat passenger's side of the Lincoln Continental and set the
typewriter gently on top of it. After he slammed the door, he peeled the magnetic business sign off of it—"Fantasy Messenger Service—birthdays and special occasions"—stepped around to the driver's side and peeled off its partner, then set them on the front porch. He thought about going back into the house and saying something to make her change her mind, but he couldn't think of anything—anything that Hemingway would say—and he knew that once she had her mind made up she wouldn't change no matter how convincing his argument was, so he got in the Lincoln and drove off.

Danny caught a few hours sleep at the freeway rest stop overlooking Glower's Bay. When the sun glaring through the windshield woke him, he drove to Ricki Prescott's to get laid in hopes that it would make him feel better and help put his problems with Susan in perspective, but when he got to the beach cottage he was renting for her he realized that he never should have confided in her anything that he was afraid to tell Susan, especially that he was broke and in debt five thousand dollars to a loan shark. Ricki wasn't in the cottage and her clothes were gone. The cottage hadn't been much to look at when he'd rented it—there'd been sand everywhere and the furniture was salt-stained—but now it looked as if Ricki had held quite a going-away party before she left. Cigarette butts had been crushed out in the carpet, beer cans and half-filled cups crowded the end
tables, and the trash can in the kitchen overflowed on to the floor.

Danny found a warm beer on the kitchen counter and took a drink. She was just the kind of bitch, he thought, who would leave you with herpes to remember her by. He swung around and punched the wall. His hand sunk through the sheet rock. He winced as he tiptoed around in a circle holding his bruised fist against his chest. Well, what did he expect? He never got anything he didn’t deserve. Except Susan. He wandered through the cottage, looking for clues as to who had been there. In the bedroom he picked up a bottle of perfume that was on the floor next to the dresser. He opened it, took a whiff, and smiled. It was Susan’s. He’d brought it to Ricki so that Susan wouldn’t have to smell another woman’s fragrance. Not that she didn’t know what was going on, it just seemed like the right thing to do. He took out his lucky rock, poured the perfume on it, and put it back in his pocket. Then he drained the beer and left, leaving the door wide open with the key in it. He wasn’t going to get any writing done this morning.

Nine o’clock found Danny at Dirty Frank’s, a low-rent bar downtown. Frank, a baby-faced middle-aged man, was busy overseeing the morning cleanup and counting the previous night’s receipts. Even though the place was dead, Danny felt claustrophobic, as if he were locked in a trunk on an
airport baggage carrousel. When he leaned against the bar, he missed the counter with one of his elbows and barely caught himself before his face hit the scarred wood. He glanced around suspiciously, as if someone had jerked his arm, then tried to act as if nothing had happened. Frank snickered from behind the bar. "Still the night before, eh, Papa?"

Danny ordered a shot of tequila with a beer chaser and settled on to a bar stool. After Frank brought Danny his drink, he laid an envelope on the counter in front of him. "Maurice dropped this off for you yesterday afternoon."

"Did he say anything?"

"No, you know Maurice--always business. He stopped by on his way to show a house."

Danny tore open the envelope and tried to focus his bloodshot eyes to read the note inside. "Papa, you had fair warning. I've turned your account over to my collections department. Regards. Maurice." Danny crumpled up the note and set it on the bar. He was broke, his girlfriend had run off, he was staring down a divorce, and now the leg breakers were after him. He needed to take control. What would Hemingway do? Danny rested his head in his hands and tried to clear his mind. He saw Hemingway on the open savanna of Africa, surrounded, a carbine in one hand and a .45 automatic in the other, standing his ground, a broad grin on
his face. Danny knew his little problems wouldn’t even faze
the master. He’d flush out his enemies, beat them, and meet
a new woman in the meantime. It would make one hell of a
story and he wouldn’t even have to make it up. All he’d
have to do is remember it. Danny rubbed his chin. Even
without the beard a story like that could put him back on
his feet. Susan would surely take him back if he got
published. She could be proud of him then. He poured the
tequila into the beer and drank it down. He needed his
gun. Susan wouldn’t mind if he broke a window to get it.
This was a desperate situation. After all, she’d taken his
keys.

He motioned to Frank. "Put it on my tab," he said, and
he stumbled out the door.

Driving up the highway along the beach at ninety miles
per hour, watching the seagulls swoop down into the surf,
letting the Lincoln edge over the yellow line before he
pulled it back, Danny began to have second thoughts about
what he was doing. Maybe it was the sunshine or the fresh,
sea air or just the feel of the road as he sped along, but
he knew deep down that he didn’t really have a chance of
turning everything around. He might get his hands on some
money or a woman, but more than likely he was going to be
beaten to a pulp and he was certainly going to be divorced
and that was all that mattered. Even if the famous beard
suddenly sprouted on his face, which it wasn’t going to do, it would take a while for the power to build up and everything would be lost, including the opportunity to write the ass-kicker story, before he could do anything about it.

He reached across the seat and pulled the typewriter up close, pulled the Lincoln back into his lane, and typed his name on the platen. He never should have borrowed that money. He knew Maurice's reputation. He was Realtor of the Year. He always played hardball. Whether it was selling houses or collecting bad debts, nobody ever got over on Maurice Hobson. But who could take a little, skinny guy in a conservative suit seriously? He should have believed the truck driver with the broken arm who told him Maurice was a ju jitsu master.

Danny gunned the engine up a hill, squinting in the sun, both arms braced against the wheel to keep his head up. Hemingway faced the same problem. Hemmed in on all sides, unable to write, robbed of his power, he ended it all in Ketchum, Idaho. He still had the beard, but it must have lost its magic somehow. Danny topped the crest of the hill. A semitruck was coming up the other side. He laughed and shook his head. "The beard," he muttered, "it doesn't have anything to do with the beard." He pulled the typewriter into his lap, pushed his foot down on the gas pedal, and let the Lincoln ease over the yellow line into
the truck.

When Danny woke up in the hospital two days later, he knew he wasn't going to die because to die he'd have to feel better. Through the slit in the bandages wrapped around his face he could see the bottom half of the TV hanging from the ceiling across from his bed. His right arm was in a cast. He could move his left arm and his legs, but he felt like a slug doused with salt so he decided to lie still. The last thing he could remember was the tequila at Dirty Frank's. But as he slowly woke up and became more and more aware of the pain surging up through the drugs, he remembered the truck and realized that he was now as pathetic a mess on the outside as he had been on the inside. He heard the door open and made a futile attempt to turn his head.

"Finally awake, Papa?" he heard Maurice say.

Danny tried to shrink into the mattress. "I'm surprised at you, Maurice. I always thought you'd give a man a sporting chance," he heard himself say.

"Yeah, well, business is business. Nothing personal."

Danny didn't think he could scream, so he tensed up as best he could for the first blow.

"Can you see me?" Maurice asked.

Danny nodded slowly. He couldn't really see Maurice, but he knew what Maurice looked like when he was gloating and he figured that was close enough.
"You know, Papa, if that truck driver hadn’t been thrown clear and pulled you from the wreck, you would have gone up in the fire ball. You are one lucky bastard. And if there’s anything I know about it’s luck."

Danny could picture him adjusting his perfectly knotted tie or examining his manicured nails.

"That’s why I’m going to forgive your debt. It’s bad for business if you let people welsh on their loans, but it’s also bad for business if you kill people who don’t pay. Cuts down on the number of potential borrowers, which is something I can’t afford with the real estate market the way it is. I haven’t sold a house in a month."

Danny wasn’t sure he’d heard right, but he thought he might as well play along. "You always were a gentleman, Maurice."

"Don’t push it. If I had known you were going to drive so recklessly, I would have done something other than cut your brake lines."

"Brake lines!" Danny tried to sit up, but fell back on to the bed. "What are you talking about? That was my suicide, not a loan shark’s accident."

"You artsy types never give up, do you? It’s a nice story, though. Do me a favor and make sure it gets spread around town. I’ve got to run, Papa."

"Danny," Danny said.
"Whatever."

Danny heard the door open and close. He tried to remember if he had stepped on the brakes, but the last few seconds before the wreck were hazy. His heart was pounding in his throat. To have failed was bad enough, but for his suicide to have been attempted murder was completely humiliating. He couldn't even die like Hemingway, let alone do anything else like him. His writing had always been second-rate, he was a horrible shot and a poor fisherman, and he lost most of his fights. He knew now that he couldn't blame it on not having the beard. He sighed and stared at his little patch of ceiling. The worst part was what he had done to his marriage. He had taken as bad as he had given everywhere else. But there was nothing he could do about it now. He tried to decide what he would do when he left the hospital—he didn't have any job skills or even any discipline, for that matter—and as he worried over his problems he drifted off to sleep.

When Danny woke up again, a tall, balding man wearing a white coat was standing beside his bed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hackworth," he said. "I'm Dr. Catchcan. I did your plastic surgery."

"Plastic surgery?"

"Yes." The doctor smiled. He had a faraway gleam in his eye that reminded Danny of a used car salesman working
on a sixteen-year-old kid. "I'm not surprised you don't remember me. You were in pretty bad shape and your face was quite a mess. How do you feel?"

Danny didn't know what to say. He felt like a child in a front-row seat at his first horror movie moments before the first scary scene. Something wasn't right, but he knew he couldn't get up and walk away. His face was numb and he ached all over. He could remember Maurice's visit but he didn't know when it was. "All right, I guess. Why did I need plastic surgery?"

"Your situation was desperate, Mr. Hackworth. The lower half of your face suffered severe superficial lacerations. The scarring would have been horrible. Fortunately, I recently developed certain techniques that are extremely successful in these cases. We caught you just in time."

Danny didn't think that he quite understood the doctor, but he had a feeling he'd been had. "I see," he said.

"Good," Dr. Catchcan said, noticeably brightening. "We need to look at your face. Do you feel up to it?"

Danny didn't say anything. Dr. Catchcan took a small pair of scissors from a case in his coat pocket and carefully clipped the bandages from Danny's face with short, controlled strokes. "There we are," he said.

"Well?" Danny said.
Dr. Catchcan grabbed a hand mirror off of Danny's night stand and whipped it around in front of Danny's face. Danny looked in the mirror. Hemingway looked back. "What have you done to me!"

The doctor looked at him quizzically, but his expression seemed somewhat forced. "It's a hair implant, Mr. Hackworth. Is there something about it you don't like?"

"Who gave you the right to do this to me? I'll never get rid of him now."

"Calm down, Mr. Hackworth. You signed the forms. I admit the procedure was somewhat experimental, but it's a beautiful beard."

"I can't believe this," Danny said.

"I'm sure you'll like it after you get used to it. Just relax and don't think about it. After a few days it will feel like your own face."

"You don't understand--"

"I'll send a psychiatrist around if you would like someone to talk to."

"What's he going to be able to do?"

"That's the spirit, Mr. Hackworth. Give it some time. You've been through quite a lot. Your wife's waiting to see you, which should help to cheer you up." Dr. Catchcan started for the door. "By the way, it's still delicate, so don't comb it and try not to touch it for a few weeks."
Don't touch it for a few weeks, Danny thought. He didn't know if he'd ever be able to touch it. Why couldn't he have gotten five years in prison? Ten, even, would have been a better deal. Instead, he was trapped inside a man he could never measure up to and every time he looked in the mirror he'd be reminded of his own stupidity. A visit from Susan was all he needed now. She was probably bringing him his clean laundry. A civil little chat and off she'd go. Or worse yet, she felt sorry for him and wanted him to come home. Let bygones be bygones and all that happy crap.

Susan walked in, smiling. Her hair was pulled back in a bun and she wore a linen suit with a slit skirt and spike heels. She looked every inch the high-fashion business woman. When she saw him, she gasped and almost dropped the vase of flowers she was carrying.

"Don't rub it in," he said.

"It's amazing, Danny." she stood there nodding her head, the smile returning to her face. "I can't get over it." She set the flowers on the night stand and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Would you wipe that silly grin off your face and stop staring at me."

"I can't help it. You finally got what you wanted."

"It doesn't make any difference, Suse."

"What are you talking about?"
"You had me pegged all along. Hemingway had the beard when he killed himself, so the beard isn’t it."

"You’re just confused because of the accident, Danny. You’ll feel differently once you’re better."

He shook his head. "It wasn’t an accident, Suse. At least it wasn’t supposed to be."

The color drained from Susan’s face. She lit a cigarette without taking her eyes off him.

"So what are you going to do?"

"When I get out of here? Look for a job. I’m through trying to act like Hemingway. I never had him in me to begin with."

"I want you to come home," she said, "and you can come to work for the company."

"Delivering birthday greetings in a gorilla suit?"

Susan bit her lip. "It’s put a roof over your head and money in your pockets."

"I know, but things aren’t any different between us than they were the other night. Why do you want me to come back now?"

"Well," she said, picking at some lint on her skirt, "I’m sort of ashamed to admit it, but the accident and your not being around made me realize how much I need you. I’ve always provided for us. My succeeding when you continually fail makes me feel smarter, more successful than I really
am. Having you around feeds my ego."

Danny started laughing.

"It's not as bad as it sounds," she said. "I do love you, after all."

"This is great," Danny said. "All this time I've almost been feeling guilty you were feeding off my inadequacies. I don't know if we should get back together or run away from each other."

She looked him in the eye. "Will you come home?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I will. Our relationship ought to take care of any death wish I was harboring."

She kissed him. "I've got to get back to the office. It really is a fine beard, Danny."

"Think so?"

"Yes. Keep your herpes away from the nurses. I'll be back tonight."

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The first thing Danny did after he got home from the hospital and finished his convalescence was to pack up or throw out everything that reminded him of his former life. He listed his shotgun and fishing equipment in the classified ads and sold them to a retired farmer who was almost ashamed to pay so little for them. He drove his manuscripts to the dump so he wouldn't be able to change his mind before the garbage men came, and he boxed up his books
and took them down to the basement so he wouldn’t have to look at them for a while. He amazed Susan with his resolve—she hadn’t expected him to last a month—and although she subtly cracked the whip every now and again—"You promised to go easy on the booze, lover"—he could tell that she was proud of him. They grew closer with Danny around the house all the time. They sat on the porch in the evening holding hands and whispering. They were hot for each other at odd times of the day; Danny, because he wasn’t drunk or with other women, and Susan, because she felt they understood each other better than they ever had and because the beard was a turn on.

The second thing Danny did once he was well was to go to work for "Fantasy Messenger Service." He even found that he had a knack for playing the various characters. His gorilla had a certain animal happiness. His clown was charming as well as silly. His private detective was dangerous, yet wholesome. His Don Juan knew just how suggestive to be with the birthday girl at the office party. The phenomenon startled Danny. He’d had no idea that he might actually be able to act or that he might actually be good at anything, for that matter, with the little success that he’d had in life. But after awhile, try as hard as he might, he began to make little slips, and complaints started rolling in at the office. A clown had
told an off-color joke at the children's hospital. A gorilla made a lewd gesture at a woman at a Jay Cees' meeting. A private detective got in a fist fight at a hair cutters'. He couldn't seem to help himself. A situation would fall in place around him and no matter how he tried to extricate himself the result was always the same. There was no use fighting it, so he gave in and did whatever it was that he thought he was meant to do and at least enjoyed himself.

Susan started limiting the number of jobs he went on on the pretext that business was slow and the work needed to be distributed among all the actors, but he knew what it really meant; his escapades were the talk of the office. Their home life was wonderful, though. She seemed more pleased with him than she had been in years, almost starry-eyed, and she didn't say anything about the problems with his work.

Early one afternoon Danny's Don Juan drove up to Creston Heights, an exclusive neighborhood across the bay from the city, to deliver birthday greetings and a bouquet of roses to the wife of a gas company executive. She was a very attractive older woman who smiled embarrassedly when she opened the door. She had slim hips and a touch of grey in her dark hair. Danny threw himself into his role, used all of his best lines, and laid the roses in her arms with a flourish. She invited him in for a glass of wine. He
wished his gorilla suit were in the car. He had a premonition that she might get a kick out of it. When her husband came home unexpectedly, he found them grappling on the living room carpet.

That evening when Danny got home, Susan was pacing the living room floor. She glared at him and opened her mouth to speak, but he didn’t wait for her to start in on him.

"Okay, so I screwed up. Don’t tell me you’ve started getting jealous."

"Danny, you can screw every bar fly in the county for all I care. But this was business—my business—and I trusted you."

Danny ran a hand through his hair. "What do you want me to say, Susan? I’m the first one to admit I’m a loser. But I’ve made a lot of progress; you know I have. I’ve only slept with three or four clients. That’s not even a quarter of the opportunities I’ve had."

"One is too many, Danny. Do you think that slut’s husband is too embarrassed to tell anybody? Wait till she comes down with herpes. Do you think he’ll be too embarrassed to sue us?"

Danny grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "You’re lying. What are you really mad about?"

Susan stomped on the instep of his foot and slapped his face. "Don’t touch me. Don’t you ever touch me."
Danny grimaced, hobbled back a few steps, and knelt to untie his shoe.

Susan lit a cigarette. She inhaled deeply and exhaled a cloud of thick smoke. "So you've made a lot of progress. You really believe that?"

Danny looked up from massaging his foot. "Christ, Suse, you know about everything I've done since I've been out of the hospital. Judge for yourself."

"You want to prove yourself, really take a plunge?"

"I've got to hear this."

Susan's eyes sparkled. "Remember Gloria Hodges, the English teacher at the Martins' party who couldn't get over how much you look like Hemingway? She's been pestering me for you to give a talk to her senior English class."

"You call that a challenge? I could talk all day."

"As Ernest Hemingway?"

Danny's mouth dropped open. He stared at her, wondering if she was really serious. She smiled a big I-told-you-so smile and crossed her arms.

"What's the matter, Danny?"

He stood up and pointed at her with his shoe. "You're setting me up for failure. I've come too far now to risk falling back into that trap."

"What's so hard about it? If you've made so much progress, can't you act like Hemingway for an hour without
falling apart?" Susan sat down in an overstuffed chair. She was enjoying herself. Danny looked down at the carpet and shook his head.

"It's too traumatic, Suse. I've put all that behind me. There are too many bad memories--"

"Poor baby. What about my bad memories? Who's going to make them go away?"

Danny sat on the sofa and held his head in his hands. The blood pounding at his temples felt as if it were squeezing the moisture from his brain and making it pop out on his face as sweat. He needed to buy some time. "What would I talk about?"

"Put together some anecdotes from Hemingway's life and tell them from his point of view. Even you ought to be able to handle that."

He stroked his beard. The pounding stopped. "If I do this, whatever happens is your fault."

She smiled. "Oh, sure. Everything else has been my fault, hasn't it? Why don't you make yourself a drink, while I call Gloria and make the arrangements."

Over the next few days, Danny acted the good boy. He pulled together some anecdotes on Paris, on war, on bullfighting, and on writing. Susan helped him arrange them into a script and had her secretary type it up. He studied his lines, practiced gesture and speech pattern, and went so
far as to pick out the clothes he'd wear--worn tweed jacket, white shirt, khaki pants, and loafers--even though he never intended to go through with it. He worked on Susan at every turn, dropping hints that he just couldn't learn the material, implying that he was a changed man, promising that he wouldn't run around on her anymore, but she wouldn't budge.

The night before the talk, Danny couldn’t sleep. The prospects of forgetting his lines or stumbling or stammering didn’t bother him at all. He’d been making a fool of himself for years. But whenever he thought of speaking the lines, his actually saying them, he thought of himself--his stupidity, his blunders, his inadequacy--instead of Hemingway. It was like an old silent movie in the back of his mind--a slapstick comedy where he was the comic and the audience; where in the middle of each time-honored, proven routine he was groaning at its badness while trying to perform it and at the same time somehow change it so that the groans would turn to laughs. He was the guy on stage with the "kick me" sign on his back, chasing and kicking himself, trying to tear off the sign and juggle, groaning and trying to tell a joke. He couldn’t handle it. He thought about shaving off the beard, but he knew it wouldn’t matter. It was too late to back out honorably. Besides, he didn’t really know how badly his face was scarred. All he
needed was to spend the rest of his life single with a face that looked like chopped chicken. He watched Susan for a few minutes to make sure she was sound asleep, then he gathered up his clothes and sneaked out into the living room to get dressed. He took her automatic teller machine card and the keys to the Supra from her handbag before he left.

After a quick stop at an automatic teller machine, Danny got on the freeway headed out of town. He didn't know what he was doing and he didn't think it mattered. He was hoping somehow to get back his old identity, to become again that almost Hemingway searching for the talisman to make him whole, but he knew it wouldn't happen. He'd never been that man to begin with, no matter how familiar he seemed. As he approached the rest stop overlooking Glower's Bay, he felt as if he were being pulled down the exit ramp. He switched on his turn signal and began downshifting, gear by gear, until he sat in a parking place overlooking the sea. The gentle waves seemed to roll out like dark clouds pushing into the clear sky. As he sat there watching the waves he was overcome by the desire to drive by the scene of his accident. He doubled back to town and took the old road out. There were no cars on the road when he came to the crest of the hill and the moon was bright, but he felt his skin crawl as he crossed over into the oncoming lane for the drive down. His body tensed and his eyes clamped shut when
he came to the place where he had met the truck. When he opened his eyes, he was nearly to the bottom of the hill. He swung the car around in a wide U-turn and headed back to town in search of a twenty-four hour grocery store. Out at sea, the horizon was just beginning to glow.

When he pulled in at home, the sun was up and Susan was sitting on the porch wrapped in her robe waiting on him. He got out of the Supra and went and sat next to her.

"Where did you go?" she asked.

"I couldn’t sleep, so I went for a drive."

She took the beer from his hand and took a sip. It was warm and flat.

"I borrowed your bank card and made a withdrawal for you." He dug the teller machine card and a wad of bills out of his pocket and handed them to her.

She flipped through the money. "How much is here?"

"Five hundred."

"Five hundred?"

"That’s all the machine would give me."

She shoved the money and the card into the pocket of her robe and finished off the beer. "Why did you come back?"

"I don’t know," he said. "It just seemed like the thing to do."

Susan pushed her hair back out of her face. "You don’t
They went into the house to get ready. Danny's act was at nine o'clock. They showered and got dressed. Susan ate a poached egg and a piece of dry toast. Danny drank another beer. As the time passed, he moved slower, spoke slower, and said less words until he was reduced to sitting cross-legged on the floor staring at his script (Susan didn't believe he was actually reading it) and answering her in monosyllables. While she called the office to make sure the talk was still on, he went into the bathroom, vomited, rinsed his mouth out and, water splattered on his shirt and jacket, went out and sat in the Supra. She drove to the high school.

Once they were in the English classroom, Danny leaned against the wall to steady himself. He looked the students over. They weren't quite what he'd imagined in senior English. There were more punkers--girls dressed like kiddie hookers and boys like sideshow features--and more average-looking teenagers--greasy skin, pimply faces, hormones exuding through their clothes--than serious young students. Susan and Gloria exchanged a few words, although Danny didn't hear what they said, and then Gloria gave a short introduction and Susan gave him a push. He stumbled over his feet and wondered if he had remembered to tie his
shoes. The next thing he knew he was standing behind the lectern set up next to Gloria’s desk. He could feel the sweat trickling from his armpits. He wasn’t sure if he could speak. He closed his eyes, brought his fist to his mouth and cleared his throat, then opened his eyes and his mouth at the same time. He saw the students sitting at their desks watching him and he heard Hemingway’s voice. The words were coming out of his mouth and he suddenly realized that he was walking around the front of the room and gesturing. He wasn’t sure what he was saying but he could see their eyes following him. He looked for Susan but couldn’t find her. He felt dragged out, dizzy, confused, as if he had been stripped of anything that mattered and had no reason to take up space or breathe air any longer. The words, the expressions, the gestures were coming out of him as he topped the crest of the hill and saw the truck coming up the other side. The students laughed and he paused, stomped on the gas pedal, and eased over the yellow line. He hit the truck full force head on, smashed into the windshield and bounced back on to his feet in the classroom behind the lectern. He was standing in the road and the truck was gone and the car was gone. He was alone on the road in the classroom with the students and he felt somehow proud that he was dead and alive at the same time. He rested his hands on the lectern, took a deep breath and
smiled. Most of the students clapped politely. A few yawned. He walked towards the door and saw Susan standing there. Gloria grabbed his elbow. "Absolutely wonderful, Danny."

"Thanks."

Susan beamed.

"Let's get out of here," Danny said. He felt light-headed, almost queasy, as if he had just won a bad fight or at least gotten away without getting beaten up too badly. Susan grabbed his hand, her high heels tapping rapidly on the floor as she tried to keep up with his pace. He was moving fast, head up, his eyes peering around as if he were navigating a particular path down the hall and out across the parking lot to the car.

"You've got a real gift, Danny," Susan said. "With a little work, we could turn it into a money-maker."

He stopped and looked at her. "Maybe. I'll have to think about it. Give me the car keys."

When he started the Supra, he felt a primitive joy. He smiled slowly as he threw it into gear. He spun gravel coming out of the parking lot and raced over the back roads headed for home. As they flew along, the air scooped in through the open windows ruffled his beard and it felt good, as if the beard were really his own, not the final piece of a dead writer forced on to him by an opportunistic scalpel.
jockey. He dug his lucky rock out of his pocket, sniffed it, and tossed it out the window. It bounced off the hood of a parked car. Susan asked him what he was doing. He squeezed her hand and told her he didn't need it anymore.
Willy, the tall happy one given to black moods, stood in the window of the burned-out storefront watching the deserted street while his younger brother Turk and their buddy Slash, an ex-biker with an earring in his left nostril, sat on boxes and bitched about how badly they needed a fix—"the great escape" they called it—and about how hard it was to get good dope anymore. They were purists. No designer drugs or methadone for them. They wanted heroin with a capital H. The stuff that would keep the inside of your veins squeaky clean. They sat there scratching themselves like dogs with lice, occasionally standing up to wipe their noses with wadded-up handkerchiefs or to adjust their clothing—tucking in flannel shirts, rolling shirt sleeves up or down, brushing at imaginary dust on their worn jeans—or to pace a few steps through the rubble only to drift back to sit down. All the while Willy stood at the broken window, running his right hand back through his oily black hair like he'd die if he stopped and smoking Lucky Strikes with his left hand, lighting a fresh one off the butt of the last, but he never turned his head, never averted his gaze from the storefront across the street and three buildings down.

An old woman came out of Devon's Grocery, clutching the
wire mesh on the window to steady herself down the one step at the threshold, and, switching her shopping bag from her right to her left hand so that it was next to the wall, started down the sidewalk towards them.

"Slash," Willy said, "is that her?"

Slash rubbed his knuckles against his unshaven face.

"Is she wearing a camel coat like your ma's?"

"Yeah, but she don't look like much. A twelve-year-old kid could knock her over."

"What's she supposed to look like? It ain't Halloween. Let's take her."

"Give her a few more steps," Willy said. He felt for the .38 that was shoved in the back of his pants to make sure that his shirttail was covering it. In his mind he could see his mother, younger, with a touch of grey in her hair, the smell of the beauty shop filling the kitchen as she set the groceries on the table and pulled her coat off. "I've brought you a little treat," she'd say.

They rushed across the street, the March wind whipping through their loose clothes, and reached the old woman just at the moment they had planned.

"Nice and easy, lady," Willy said, whipping out the .38 and cocking it. "We don't want to hurt you. We just want the bag."

The three of them surrounded her, keeping back a few
yards and fidgeting from one foot to the other. Turk had a straight razor in his hand and Slash swung a short piece of lead pipe back and forth at his side. The old woman leaned back against the brick wall. "You boys are crazy," she said, clutching the handles of the shopping bag with both hands. "You take this bag, you won’t last the day. Even if I don’t tell, you’ve already been seen by too many people."

Slash sprang toward her, sunlight glinting off the pipe as he swung it up and around, and she crumpled to the pavement. Turk smacked him across the back of the head. "You crazy, man? What did you do that for?" Slash pivoted around to face Turk, but he saw the barrel of the .38 on him. The old woman groaned.

"Cool out," Willy said. "We can’t do anything about it now."

"You disgust me. You’d beat on your mother," Turk said.

"She should have kept her mouth shut."

"Shut up and grab the bag," Willy said. Sweat trickled down his face. "Let’s hope it wasn’t for nothing."

"What about the old lady?" Turk said.

Willy glanced down at her. She lay there, not moving, blood oozing from her blue-tinted hair onto the sidewalk and slowly winding down a crack that ran to the curb, and Willy saw Turk, seven years old, laid out by the monkey bars in
the playground by their house, another kid (was it Marty Timora?) standing over him with a bloody Coke bottle in his hand. Willy had picked up a chunk of brick.

"Grab the bag. We've been here too long."

Turk picked up the shopping bag and they ran back across the street into the burned-out storefront, Willy bringing up the rear. Turk kicked rubble out of the way to clear a space and dumped the bag onto the floor. A scary nervousness gave way to twisted grins as they dug through the pile of envelopes on their hands and knees, separating the money from the numbers tickets. As the money pile grew between them, they glanced back and forth at each other with bright watery eyes, the money not money anymore but weeks of fixes stretching out before them compacted in time to the fives, tens, and twenties mounded on the scorched tile.

Willy got up and dug a cigarette out of his pocket. "Let's get out of here."

"Let's split the money first," Slash said.

"No way," Turk said, the edge of his lip raising up into a snarl. "We've got to stick with the plan."

"You guys ain't going to fuck me over."

"Nobody's fucking anybody," Willy said. "How long do you think it'll take that old lady to draw a crowd? Take a hundred, go score, and we'll meet you at my crib. Then we'll split up the money and hit up. How tight we been,
"Okay, Willy, okay," Slash said. He counted one hundred dollars off of the pile. Turk shoved the rest of the money into a canvas book bag. "Your crib. I won't be long. You better be there," Slash said, pointing at Willy's chest.

"We'll be there already," Turk said, his left hand clutching the razor in his pocket.

When they got back out onto the street, the old woman was gone. "Christ," Turk said, "it couldn't have been ten minutes ago she was laying right there."

Slash had a sick look on his face and Willy could taste a terrible emptiness rising from his throat.

"There ain't no way she could have got up," Slash said.

"Then where the hell is she?" Willy said.

They walked across the street, trying to act nonchalant, sneaking glances up and down the block, looking for the old woman or whoever had moved her, but there was no one in sight. "She dropped right here," Turk said, pointing at the walk. "See, there's the crack."

"No way, man," Slash said. "Where's the blood?" They looked around on the sidewalk, but there was no blood anywhere. Willy squatted by the crack and tried to push his little finger into it, searching for the blood that had run
down it, but the crack was bone dry.

"This ain't right," Turk said.

"Let's get away from here. Don't tell nobody your business," Willy said, looking at Slash.

"Just worry about yourself, okay? Nothing better keep you from being at your place with the money."

Slash hurried off down the street, glancing furtively into doorways and alleys as he went along. Willy and Turk cut down an alley half a block up in the opposite direction and caught a bus two blocks over by the 12th street mosque.

* 

As Slash made his way to the run-down shopping strip six blocks up from Devon's, he couldn't get the old woman out of his mind. The whole thing just wasn't right. That old woman had gone down. She couldn't have walked away; he'd felt the force of the blow in the pipe. And if the mob guys had found her, they would have stormed the storefront to get their money back. Why did Turk care if he piped the old lady? It had to be a set up.

Slash scored the heroin within an hour. He didn't care about price. He dialed up dealers from the pay phone in front of the Ben Franklin five and dime until he got a hold of someone who could deliver immediately. He rattled around the phone booth, chain-smoking Kool 100's and leaning into the corner whenever he saw a suspicious-looking car. The
old lady had to be in on it. Willy must have cut a deal with her to get even with him and there he was with a hundred dollars of mob money in his pocket. The mob guys would find him and then there’d be no questions and no mob guys looking for them and he’d be in a garbage bag in an alley.

That had to be it. There couldn’t be any other explanation. Willy and Turk must have thought he was really stupid. Just another dumb biker. Well, they’d find out just how stupid he was. After the dealer drove off and Slash had the heroin tucked safely into his underwear, he walked up the strip to the True-Value hardware.

* 

At Willy’s two-room apartment, a hacked-up brownstone up on 38th street, Willy and Turk were sitting on the Good Will sofa listening to the pipes rumble through the dirty plaster walls.

"We got to do something about him," Turk said, digging absent-mindedly at the stuffing on the sofa’s back through a large cigarette burn hole.

"You’ve been watching too much TV."

"Do you trust him? What about the old lady? Where’d she go?"

Willy tapped at his forehead with an index finger. "So what does that mean? Use your head for Christ’s sake. We
split the cash and he's gone. It takes maybe ten minutes. There's nothing to connect that money with the mob. You think they dye it with invisible ink?" He shook his head. "You been hanging around Slash too long."

Turk slapped at his arm, trying to decide if the vein was too far gone to use. "I don't know, Willy. He's too jumpy. He's liable to say anything and if he brags about it he'll blame the whole thing on us."

"That's the risk." Willy threw an empty Coke can at the steel garbage can against the wall by the kitchenette. When the can hit home, metal ringing against metal, he remembered three months earlier when he'd been sitting in a jail cell--sweats, chills, diarrhea, two morons trying the good cop/bad cop routine on him--all because Slash had dropped a hot .22 automatic into Willy's coat pocket when the cops rousted them on a street corner. He'd been lucky a backlogged judge had put him back on the streets. "I'll make it up to you," Slash'd said. Willy pulled up his pants' leg and scratched the leg, working methodically from his ankle to just below his knee. "The money, on the other hand, is a whole nother thing. He nearly screwed it all up piping the old lady."

"That's what I'm saying. He's crazy. We can't trust him. He's probably going to claim we're cheating him anyway."
Willy stood up and started pacing. "So what do you want to do? Hold out on him or off him?" Willy's mind flashed back eight years to a deal gone bad when he'd still been a suburban kid running with a fast crowd, the barrel of a .45 in his face, tears running down his cheeks as he knelt on the pavement next to an overflowing dumpster in an alley. A biker with a sawed-off shotgun had turned it into a Mexican standoff. He pulled the .38 from the waist-band of his jeans and tossed it into his brother's lap. "You got the balls to pull the trigger? I don't want to hear anything else about it."

Turk shoved the pistol down between the seat cushions. Willy went to the refrigerator and got another Coke.

*  

When Slash showed up at the apartment he was as happy and calm as a fix can make a junky feel. All of the suspicion and violence seemed to be gone out of him—he even made a joke about "the disappearing grandma"—which worried Willy and Turk all the more. They both thought that Slash intended to put something over on them and they weren't going to divide up the money until they knew for sure. Turk stayed on the sofa next to the gun and Willy made small talk while he tried to figure out the tracks on Slash's emotional roller coaster. But Slash just sat in the greasy green chair with the torn upholstery and acted as natural and
genuine as he ever had on his better days. The longer they talked, the more convinced Willy became that he and Turk were just being paranoid; so even though they had originally decided to split the money and get rid of Slash as soon as possible, they changed their minds and opted for a fix first.

Slash pulled a plastic bag containing a bunch of paper packets from his shirt pocket and tossed it onto the trash covered coffee table. Willy got a glass of water and a tea spoon from the kitchenette, and Turk found an old syringe among the Coke cans, candy bar wrappers, and full ashtrays on the coffee table and wiped it off with his handkerchief. Willy opened a packet and looked at the powder inside. "Any good?"

"Half a packet," Slash said. He sat back, crossed his legs and lit a cigarette.

Willy scooped some water into the teaspoon, tapped in half a packet, and heated it with his Bic lighter until the powder dissolved. Turk handed him the syringe. He drew the fluid up, then tapped the syringe to eliminate the bubbles. "You want it?"

Turk tied his arm off with a shoe lace, slapped his arm a few times to get the vein up—"Stay up, you bitch," he muttered—stuck the needle in, depressed the plunger, and loosened the shoe lace.
"How's it feel?" Willy asked.

"Good. Real good." Turk handed the syringe to Willy, sat back and smiled. He eyes were already glazing. "You might want to go a little lighter. It feels kind of strong."

Willy used the rest of the packet anyway, then sat back and smoked a cigarette while the heroin kicked in. Turk got up, staggered to the kitchen sink and vomited. Willy began to feel nauseated.

"Christ, you two are light-weights," Slash said. "I did a whole packet." He began to laugh.

Turk stumbled back over and sat down. Willy's ears were ringing. There was a spot of blood at the corner of Turk's mouth. Willy was getting dizzy. Everything was slowing down. Slash just kept on laughing, but he sounded farther and farther away, until it was like the laughing was coming through the wall from next door. Turk slumped over on the sofa. Willy saw Slash standing with the book bag in his hand. "Think you could fuck me over," he said. "I know how to deal with rats. Rod-Elim--drops them right in their tracks." He laughed again, giant belly laughs that echoed inside Willy's head. "It was a nice try, though. I'll settle up with the old bitch when I find her."

Willy started to get up, but he began to crumple. He grabbed the coffee table with both hands and vomited. He
could see the old woman lying there on the sidewalk just as if she were in the room with them, her blood oozing through her hair and staining the collar of her camel coat, the metal in her teeth gleaming from her open mouth as she laughed. Slash pushed him back onto the sofa. Willy felt at his waistband for his .38, but it wasn't there. He looked down at his brother lying on the sofa next to him in a fetal position. He remembered Turk's first time, trying to talk him out of it, then helping him, the strangeness of his glassy eyes as they stumbled around on the driveway trying to play basketball, laughing at each other's missed shots, the lie they told their mother when she got home from church.

Slash tossed some money onto the coffee table. "Just so the mob guys know who did it," he said. Willy remembered the .38 and jerked it up from between the sofa cushions. Slash came over the coffee table at him, his feet slipping in the muck. Willy fired the gun and kept on firing until he realized the hammer was dropping on empty chambers. Slash lay on top of him. Willy was staring at the bug-filled light fixture hanging from the ceiling. The gun shots ringing in his ears became laughter: first Slash's, then Turk's, then finally the old woman's. He felt wet all over. He tried to turn to look at his brother, but all he
could see was the old woman with the camel coat walking down the street and packets of heroin raining from the sky.
When Jumping Jenny Juniper first woke up this morning, she was thinking about a recent "People in the News" article about herself. "Still America’s Dance Sensation" the title read. "At thirty-five, Ms. Juniper, with her curvaceous hard-muscled body, shoulder-length curly black hair, and large child-like eyes, is more easily recognized by more Americans than the President. In a field dominated by eighteen-year-olds, where even the best are washed up by thirty, she remains the undisputed master and role model." She lay in the warmth of her heart-shaped, king-sized bed next to Andy Spain, her twenty-year-old lover and dancing partner, and smiled. It was true. All true. That’s when she noticed that her right leg was missing. She got up and tried a few simple routines, dancing naked on the rose-colored bedroom carpet, but she couldn’t even tap, let alone fake her tango steps. She leaned against a mahogany dresser and looked up for a moment at her shadowy reflection in the mirrored ceiling.

"Sweetness darling," she said, "light of my life, have you seen my leg?"

Andy rolled over and pushed his black night mask up onto his close-cropped blond hair. "No, I haven’t," he said.
"Are you sure it isn’t tangled up in the covers?"

"Say," he said, looking her over in the dim light filtering through the pastel flower print drapes, "your leg’s missing. You better come back to bed."

"Come back to bed? Are you crazy?"

"Shshsh," he said. He pulled her down on top of him and cradled her in his arms. "It’ll be all right. You don’t do live performances anymore anyway. They can rig something up with the cameras, splice in old footage of your legs moving. You know, lights and mirrors and stuff."

She looked him in the eye. "It’s more than that, Andy," she whispered. "That leg was holding up the right side of my body. I want it back."

"What’s the big deal, honey?" He started rolling his hips. "You’ve still got all your working parts."

She knew what he had in mind, and even though she wasn’t really in the mood, she thought she owed it to him to try. But as she caressed his face with hers and ran her hand down his side, in her mind she saw the back of an anonymous person working at a desk in an office. Naked mannequins with tape recorders in their bellies that emitted small noises--whispering, burping, gum chewing--were sitting at the other desks. "But I want my leg back," she said.

Andy slid out from under her. "You’re always preoccupied with something," he said. "If you’re looking
for sympathy, call your agent. I'm taking a shower." He stalked into the adjoining bathroom.

Jenny sat up and examined her stump, hoping it might offer some clue as to where her leg had gone, but it was smooth and gracefully rounded with a cute, hairless mole part way down on the curve where the inside of her thigh had been. In fact, the stump looked just like it had always been there, even though she knew good and well that she had had two legs the day before. She heard the shower come on. She sat musing for a while, trying to remember if she'd had two legs when she got home the night before, but she couldn't remember. She resolved to ask Andy when he got out of the shower. He was difficult at times, but she could never really get angry with him. He always looked so fresh with his hair damp and his skin soft from the steam--like a little boy, her boy, who'd come running to her with tears in his eyes if he'd been teased or had scratched his knee.

"Ms. Juniper."

A frail old man with thin grey hair stood in the doorway to the bedroom. His face had a healthy glow. He wore an old-fashioned black suit with a starched collar. A gold watch chain hung from his vest. He didn't look dangerous and she was used to having people look at her body--you don't become America's dance sensation by wearing convent outfits--so she fluffed her hair and slid around on
the bed to face him.

"How did you get past the security system? Do you want my autograph?"

"Heavens, no," he said. "I'm Dr. Oil. I've come about your leg."

"Dr. Oil! The Dr. Oil? Is it that bad? My horoscope must be a humdinger today." She looked him over carefully, trying to remember what she'd heard Dr. Oil looked like. "Wait a minute," she said, eyeing him suspiciously. "How did you know? I haven't reported it to the police."

"They know. Everyone knows. It was on the radio and TV news this morning."

"Come on," she said, staring at him incredulously, "how could they know before me?"

"The victim's always the last to know," he said, smiling as politely as an old family doctor. "Is that the stump?" She nodded. "Let's have a look at it." He pulled a magnifying glass from his pocket and knelt down on one knee at the edge of the bed in one graceful motion. His soft, dry hand moved gently over her stump while he peered through the glass. He smelled faintly of baby powder and after shave.

"Well?" she said, watching his eyes.

"Beautiful stump," he said. "Totally seamless." He touched the mole. "And a very cute mole. Was it on your
leg when you had a leg?"

"Why no," she said, her brow furrowing, "now that you mention it--ouch!"

Dr. Oil held the mole up on the end of his index finger. "I thought so. It wasn't a mole at all. It's a fragment of burned skin."

Jenny rubbed the spot on her stump. "So what does it mean? What happened to my leg?"

Dr. Oil put the burned skin in a small plastic bag and, standing, clasped his hands behind his back and paced the room. "As a tentative hypothesis--very tentative--I'd say laser amputation."

"You mean somebody came in here last night and--"

He stopped in front of her and nodded. "But we didn't hear anything."

"You wouldn't, Ms. Juniper," he said, posturing like the eccentric professor he was. "Light doesn't make any noise."

Jenny cocked her head for a moment while that idea sunk in. "But why would anyone take my leg?"

"One step at a time, Ms. Juniper. I'm giving your case my complete attention. Worrying won't help." He walked to the window, pushed the drape back with two fingers and peered out. "Sorry about the way I acted," Andy said. Jenny
turned. Andy was leaning in the doorway to the bathroom, a white towel wrapped around his hips. The muscles of his arms and chest seemed huge in the cross light from the bath. "You know how grumpy I am when I wake up," he continued.

"Andy, this is Dr. Oil," she said, turning back to the window, but no one was there. She looked about the room. "Where'd he go?"

"You were the only one here when I got here," Andy said.

"He was here a minute ago."

Andy shrugged. "It wouldn't surprise me. Your missing leg would be right up his alley."

"Oh, Andy, how could this happen to me? What'll happen if I don't get my leg back?"

Andy sat down next to her and held her hands in his. "There's nothing to worry about, Jenny. If Dr. Oil's on the case, you'll have your leg back in no time. Besides, even if you don't get your leg back--which is not going to happen--you're the greatest." He nodded his head. "The promoters have to take care of you because you bring in so much money and you've got so many fans. So put it out of your mind. You can't do anything about it anyway. How about if I give you a massage?"

Jenny lay down on her stomach. Andy sat astride her
ass and started massaging her back, working his fingers rhythmically, lovingly, into the muscles along her spine. She slowly emptied her lungs, giving herself up to his hands, and her mind flashed to tape recorded noises and mannequins with their right legs cut off.

* 

After her usual late morning preparations--thirty minutes of yoga, bath, high carbohydrate breakfast--Jenny got dressed in her best blue silk suit (look your best and you’ll feel your best) and took a taxi downtown to see her long-time agent and advisor, Willy Vermouth, stopping along the way at a discount hospital supply outlet for a pair of crutches. When she got to Willy’s office, located in the lower east-side agent district, she was ushered right in by Willy’s ex-chorus-girl secretary.

"Hey, sweetheart," Willy said. He was wearing a half-mask--a Groucho Marx nose, glasses and mustache. He came around his Formica woodgrain desk with open arms. "You’ve really done it this time. It’s a prime-time bonanza. Have a seat. You must be exhausted. Let me take those crutches." He pushed her back into a squeaky, leather-look chair and leaned the crutches against his desk. "The phone just won’t stop ringing, Jenny. It’s like one of those old cash registers that they used to have in drugstores. Zow!" He jumped up in the air, shaking his fists over his head.
The few strands of hair that were combed over his bald spot fell down in front of Groucho's glasses and he raked them back into place with his fingers. "I got to get a grip on myself," he said, smoothing his white shirt back over his belly and tucking it into his plaid slacks. He dug through the pile of masks on his desk and switched to an Abe Lincoln forehead and nose with a beard hanging under it. He looked Jenny over and nodded solemnly. "But, hey, Jen, how are you making out, really? It must have been quite a shock. Are you holding up all right?"

"I still can't believe it, Willy." She looked down at the empty place in her skirt where her leg should have been. "I just hope the cops get my leg back while it can still be reattached."

"I bet you do."

"Dr. Oil came by this morning--"

"No kidding?"

"--and he doesn't seem too concerned."

"Maybe he's right, Jen. You're too close to this thing to think clearly." Willy sat down behind his desk and leaned forward on his elbows and clasped his hairy hands. The beard swung back and forth under his chin.

"I don't know. The way Andy's acting has me even more worried. He doesn't think it will affect my career at all." She rubbed the end of her stump and sighed.
"Listen to me, Jen. We've been together a long time. Have I ever led you wrong? No. Remember when NBC wanted you to dance to Muzak on that Christmas special? Hummm? I told you it would broaden your appeal with the aluminum siding and outdoor grill crowd and build up your following with the kids; that you couldn't dance jazz and rock forever and classical was too highbrow. Remember how I had to break into your apartment--you were living in that beat loft in the theater district then--and force you to go to the studio at gun point? Remember that? The next day when the reviews were in you were down on your knees right over there," he said, pointing to a four-drawer file cabinet with liquor bottles covering its top, "thanking me for looking out for you. Am I right or what?"

"You're right, Willy," she said, nodding. "You've always been right."

"I was looking out for you then, kid, and I'm looking out for you now." Willy leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on his desk. "This phone's been ringing off the hook, Jen. Every jerk who attracts more than fifteen percent market share wants you on his show. You! Not Prince Charles, not the President, not some rock-n-roller that still has zits and shaves once a week."

"But what will I do, Willy? I can't dance on one leg."

Willy picked up a half-smoked cigar from his ash tray
and clenched it between his teeth, which made him look like a hybrid between Lincoln and Sigmund Freud. "That's the beauty of it. They don't want you to dance, Jen. They want you to sit in a chair and answer questions. We got this great offer from the Ike Scream show. You'll make more money sitting for twenty minutes than you ever made dancing in an hour."

"The Ike Scream Show!" Jenny yelled. "Only washed-up old timers appear on that show. I'd be a laughing stock."

"Calm down, Jen." Willy pulled off the Lincoln mask and put on a P.T. Barnum. "Think of it as a vacation. When you get your leg back, we'll book you live all over the country and you'll make a comeback." He motioned with his hands to indicate quotation marks. "You'll make money coming and going."

Jenny felt dizzy. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She saw herself running down a filthy cobblestone street, zigzagging between rundown restaurants, ripping menus from diners' hands while they protested their amazement, trying to find one restaurant where she could read the menu. She hopped up onto her foot. "No! N-0. Absolutely not," she said, grabbing her crutches.

"Think about it," Willy said, as she stormed out the door. "What if they don't find your leg for a while? You've got to stay in the public eye."
Down on the street in front of Willy's office building, Jenny maniacally waved a crutch in the air to hail a cab. As a cab pulled over, a raggedy bag lady pushing a shopping cart wheeled by Jenny and cackled. "Nice, isn't it?" she said. "You can get one just like this at the A&P."

* 

After Jenny rode back to her posh, uptown townhouse and locked herself safely inside, she hobbled into the living room, only to find Andy practicing jazz steps to "Moonlight in Vermont" on the oval dance floor in the center of the room.

"It's in damn poor taste to rub it in," Jenny said, her eyes darting about as if she were looking for something to break.

"I'm not rich and famous," Andy said, coming out of a twirl. "I have to work for a living."

"But you're not a washed-up cripple either."

"Jenny," Andy said, shaking his head. He put his lucky terry-cloth robe on over his purple and gold warm-up tights and made Jenny a drink: four fingers of Scotch, three ice cubes, no water. He pushed the glass into her hand.

"You're not a washed-up cripple. You're overreacting."

"You don't know what it's like to have your leg flash before your eyes," she said, resisting his help in taking off her jacket and settling her onto a low, floral print
sofa.

"I know, Jenny," he said, tossing her jacket onto the back of a matching chair and walking around behind the sofa. "But investigations take time." He stood behind her and began rubbing her temples. "You'll get your leg back before you know it. In the meantime, you've got to try to relax, clear your mind. You don't have to worry about me. I've got a job lined up next week at Music City."

Jenny whipped her head around and glared up at him. "Andy."

He came back around the sofa and sat next to her. "It's only until you get your leg back, Jenny," he said, taking her free hand. "When you're ready to dance, I'll be right there with you. If it hadn't been for you, I'd still be in the chorus. I'm not going to forget that. Lighten up."

Jenny held her drink against her forehead. "That's what everybody says. It's no big deal. Don't worry about it. It's driving me crazy." She stomped her foot up and down on the beige carpet.

Andy cocked his head and studied her for a minute. "What did Willy say?"

"I still can't believe it, Andy. Willy wanted me to start doing second-rate talk shows. Can you imagine me on the Ike Scream Show?"
"Scream's show has one of the highest ratings in the country, Jenny. If you're going to capitalize--"

"I don't want to capitalize," she yelled. "I want my leg back!"

Andy grabbed her by the shoulders. "Jenny, listen to me. You can't just sit around feeling sorry for yourself. A trouper's got to keep on trouping. You need the exposure and there's nothing wrong with the money."

Jenny threw her drink in his face. "Listen to you? You sound just like Willy. I thought I was paying you."

Andy stood up and wiped his face on the sleeve of his robe. "You're out of control, Jenny." He turned his back on her and walked away. She thought about going to her medium, Madam Zafstrow, to talk with her dead mother. That always made her feel better, but somehow she didn't think it would make much difference today. Fifteen minutes later she heard the front door slam.

Jenny looked around the room at her sculptures, pieces acquired one at a time that marked her rise to fame in their cost, in the light from the crystal chandelier sparkling over the dance floor. She had never understood them, but she knew they were good. They were piles of carefully constructed geometric shapes and torched industrial objects in metals, glass and wood that were somehow supposed to be people, dancers mainly. They were all life-sized,
elongated, locked in peculiar poses, their surfaces reflecting or refracting light at odd places. As she looked quickly at each of them in turn, over and over again, their shapes softened, became fluid, until they were men and women--some fully-clothed, some in underwear or half-dressed--at first dancing and then finally milling about the room as if they were at a cocktail party, carrying on conversations, walking around her and touching her, admiring her in her immobile asymmetry. "There's a history lesson in this," a glass-headed young woman in redwood shorts said.

"Ms. Juniper."

Jenny shuddered, then glanced about the room.

"Over here. I hope I didn't startle you." Dr. Oil was standing directly in front of her. His black suit was rumpled and the tips of his starched collar were bent crookedly. He looked oddly tired.

"No, not at all," she said.

Dr. Oil bit his lower lip and muttered something to himself. "Don't lie, Ms. Juniper, it's very unbecoming. You've had a terrible day."

"Why are you here?" she said. Tears started in her eyes.

"Any reason your sculptures would want to get even with you?"

She glanced around at her sculptures, all resting in
their proper places, and back at Dr. Oil. "How did you know?"

He shook his head. "It's my business to know, Ms. Juniper. These cases often progress like this."

"Then what does it mean?"

He clasped his hands together and gazed down at her like a friendly minister. "It's a strange phenomenon, I know, but it's more common than you think." He ran his hands through his coat pockets as if he were looking for something, then shrugged. "Art objects can be so rude. They forget sometimes who's paying the bills. Set a blow torch over there." He pointed to an unobtrusive spot by the windows. "That usually calms them down."

"You know," she said, feeling for a moment sheepishly little girlish, "somehow you remind me of my father, although he doesn't look anything like you."

"I know. I remind everyone of their father. People find it reassuring. How's your stump? No problems with it, I hope?"

"No," she said, forcing a smile, "the stump's doing fine. But it's not a leg." Dr. Oil nodded his head and smiled desperately.

Jenny held her head in her hands and started twisting her hair around her fingers. "What do I do?" she asked, staring down at the red toenail displayed by her open-toed
shoe.

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. There's nothing you can do. Relax, Ms. Juniper, these things usually turnout better than one expects. In the meantime, try to be brave."

* 

After moping about her townhouse for several hours, Jenny pulled herself together, ate a Decoupage brand frozen dinner, and decided to go to Mrs. Arnold E. Wetblood III's thirtieth annual not-so-new-faces-but-definitely-the-right-sort-of-people party. She put on a stunningly simple deep-gold full-length ballgown, adding a pair of falsies to give her more cleavage and distract people away from her crutches, and had a few drinks to build up her courage while she waited for Andy to come home so she could apologize and he could escort her, but he never came. At ten o'clock she pasted her trademark rhinestone onto her left breast, put on her mink coat, and took a cab by herself.

At Mrs. Wetblood’s the party was in full swing. The valets had parked cars all over the west lawn next to the green house and smooth music laced with anonymous chatter wafted out from the ballroom. Jenny hobbled up the steps as best she could. She'd thought a staff member might help her, but evidently they were too busy to notice. When she got to the doorway, Mrs. Wetblood’s very proper head servant, Chillwell, wearing a rubber apron over his formal
attire, stepped into the threshold, blocking her way. "Your invitation, Madam," he said.

"Invitation? Don't you know who I am?" Jenny said, shifting her crutches to balance herself.

"I'm sorry, Madam. This is a private party."

"I'm surprised you don't know me by now, Chillwell, as many times as I've been here," Jenny continued, beginning to redden.

"Good evening, Lord and Lady Nosair," Chillwell said, stepping to one side to let them in as they slipped around Jenny. Four steps into the foyer they exploded. "That must have been last year's invitation," he muttered. He turned his attention back to Jenny. "Perhaps if you refreshed my recollection."

"I'm Jenifer Juniper," she said, arching her back and thrusting her chest out as best she could without unbalancing herself.

"Really, Madam, you should have chosen someone else. Everyone knows what the divine Ms. Juniper looks like."

"I am Jenifer Juniper."

"Very well, but you still need an invitation."

Jenny dug around in her coat, tottering back and forth until she finally found the invitation and shoved it into Chillwell's hand.

"Sorry for the inconvenience," he said, as he stepped
to one side so she could hobble in, but he didn’t sound sincere. "May I take your coat, Ms. Juniper?"

Jenny was still fuming when she entered the ballroom. She knew she shouldn't have come. She felt flushed, her crutches had rubbed her ribs raw, and the pressure of her crutches against her gown make her breasts bob every time she took a step. She needed a drink. At the north end of the ballroom the semi-famous Lester Silvester and his Orchestra were playing timeless smooth music and couples were dancing. At the south end of the ballroom, guests crowded hors d'oeuvre tables piled high with ornate displays of rare cheeses, giant prawns, whole smoked salmons, prime ribs, cut melons and fruits of all kinds, and handmade French pastries cascading down among ice sculptures and fresh flowers. Short-skirted cocktail waitresses wearing bow ties eased through the crowd, their high heels wobbling under the weight of huge trays covered with full glasses, and the barmen moved like medics at a natural disaster. Jenny worked her way slowly through the crowd surrounding the dance floor. The Orchestra played "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" and the dance floor filled with slow moving, closely held, murmuring couples. Jenny nearly bumped into her banker, James Minloan, who was deep in a conversation about variable-rate stock buyouts. She smiled, but he acted as if he didn't recognize her. She had never thought he could be
so rude, as friendly as he was at the bank, but she shook it off and hobbled along as carefully as she could.

As she neared one of the stainless steel portable bars, she realized that no one had spoken to her, not even to comment on her plight, and she began to feel uneasy. She stopped and, pivoting on her crutches, looked around the room for people she knew. She recognized dancers she had worked with long ago, television producers, agents, financial wizards, and even some of the idle rich. But no one, not even the cocktail waitresses, who usually asked for her autograph, had recognized her. The music and the talking going on around her seemed deafening. She felt faint. She hobbled over to a wingbacked chair against the wall and sat down, closing her eyes and covering her ears with her hands. She heard a pipe organ playing "Pop Goes The Weasel" and saw herself, full grown, playing musical chairs at a children's party. The air smelled of blown-out candles. The children, in party dresses or short pant suits, and she, in her golden ballgown, with colorful metallic cone hats on their heads, held hands and skipped around the outside of a ring of kitchen chairs. When the music stopped, the children rushed through the ring to sit down. But when they let go of her hands, her right leg disappeared, and she fell down and was put out of the game. Then the children got up, another chair was taken away, and
the music started again. She sat there on the floor watching them as they formed a ring, giggling and whispering. Then they started skipping again, their tiny black dress shoes kicking her and scuffing her dress as they skipped around the chairs as if she weren't in the way. But they didn't hurt, the kicks or being ignored; they felt comforting somehow.

Jenny opened her eyes and uncovered her ears. She felt like screaming. Off in the distance she thought she saw Dr. Oil in black tie and tails. She waved her hands back and forth in the the air and yelled his name. A number of men and women milling nearby turned and stared.

"Oh, there you are," Dr. Oil said in a soft, even tone that somehow carried through the crowd. Jenny felt a little relieved, but she kept her eyes on him as he made his way towards her. "Ms. Juniper, I presume," he said.

"Yes, it's me, Dr. Oil," Jenny said, grabbing his hand.

"I've been looking for you. But it's no wonder I couldn't find you."

Jenny clutched his jacket with both hands. "Can't you do anything?"

Dr. Oil was stooped and pale. "I suppose I should have warned you," he said sheepishly. "I always try my best, Ms. Juniper, but it seems anymore that I often help the process along rather than hinder it. I do, however, still win one
every now and again."

"I see," she said, swallowing hard. Her lip quivered. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, smearing her mascara. "Can anyone still recognize me?"

"Oh, I imagine Mr. Spain or Mr. Vermouth would still know you. They're both here tonight, by the way."

"They are?" she said. "Maybe I should go look for them." She hopped up onto her foot.

"Let me help you," Dr. Oil said. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the mascara from her cheeks.

"Thank you."

"Are you sure I can't be of any further assistance?"

"No," Jenny said. She trembled and goose bumps popped up on her arms. "Everything seems about right. I'm going to be on the Ike Scream Show."

"Congratulations. It's really not as bad as you think."

"I hope you're right," Jenny said. Dr. Oil smiled faintly, like a favorite grandfather, pressed his handkerchief into her hand and disappeared into the crowd. Jenny adjusted her crutches and hobbled off in search of her lover and her agent. As she passed a dessert table, the handkerchief fell from her hand, but she didn't notice she'd lost it until after she'd found Andy.
In the morning after I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. It's a ritual for me. It adds a certain structure to my life that I've come to expect and helps me to face the day. When I get there—I buy my paper at a little stand across the street—I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It's my mother's table actually—she's always had a table there, even before she was married—but she never has breakfast there. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. That's all behind me now, though, so there's no reason to talk about it.

This particular morning is quite beautiful. The sun is out, almost smiling, the sky is a story-book blue, and a few white clouds shaped like chaise lounges are moving lazily across it. The terrace is crowded with middle-aged ladies and bearded gentlemen dressed in turn-of-the-century fashions. Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed actor who looks remarkably like Sigmund Freud, takes my order—raw oysters with hot sauce and a cup of coffee—and I am just opening my paper to the op-ed page when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know in my mind that she is twenty. She is dressed in designer
jeans and a colorful cotton blouse. She is slender and very pretty in an artistic way—close-cropped dark hair, full red lips, a small Irish nose, and two earrings in her left ear. She wears no make-up, not that any amount of make-up could possibly cover up her black eye.

I can't help chuckling to myself behind my paper. It must have been some fight. The eye is swollen to nearly twice the size of the other. It is jet-black at the center and fades out to purple, then to pale blue, and finally to a greenish-yellow around the edges. Everyone is staring at her. The ladies are biting their lips and shaking their heads. The gentlemen are all nodding and a few are muttering to each other. The young woman seems cheerfully embarrassed, as if she gave more than she got. She blows me a kiss and winks coquettishly with her good eye.

It's funny how appearances can be deceiving. She seems like the gentle, soft-spoken type, but there must be a tiger hidden in her somewhere. She looks me straight in the eye and licks her lips. It's been a long time since I've gone out with a woman like her. Clips of porno movies start flashing through my mind. It's embarrassing. I get up to go speak with her—I want her phone number—but someone calls my name. I turn. The cafe manager, dressed like a monk, asks me if I still want my table. The ladies and gentlemen all tap their coffee cups against their tables and
yell "Here! Here! One or the other! One or the other!" I reply quickly, not even sure of what I'm telling him, but when I turn back around the young woman is gone. I go to her table. There are streaks of blood on the table top, and a note addressed to me is wrapped around a used tampon laying on her breakfast plate. I gingerly lift the note by one corner and try to read it, but the writing is illegible--red ink smeared with brown blood. Jeffery calls me. My breakfast has arrived and I return to my mother's table.

2

In the morning when I get up, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. When I get there I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. They always have my newspaper waiting there for me. It's my mother's table really, and her newspaper, but she never eats breakfast there. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. It's quite convenient for me to go there, as my mother always pays my bills.

This particular morning is quite beautiful, even if the sky is slightly overcast. The birds are flying around upside down, lugging stones up into the trees to build their nests, and everything has a fresh, clean smell from the rains that fell the night before. The terrace is crowded with men and women doctors in white coats with stethoscopes hanging from their necks. Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed
prison guard, takes my order—an English muffin pounded with a hammer, and a cup of coffee—and I am just opening my paper to the comics (I read the front page at home) when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know that she is twenty-five. She’s wearing a sleeveless sun dress. She is slender and very pretty in an artistic way—short auburn hair, high cheekbones, full red lips, and a model’s nose. She’s wearing a touch of make-up. Her left eye is black and her left arm is in a cast. She can’t be long out of the hospital.

The doctors are all watching her with a standard, clinical gaze. She averts her face and eats her breakfast furtively, as if eating were some terrible crime and she wanted to avoid attention. After she has cleaned her plate (the doctors nod knowingly) she pushes it away and picks up a baby from her lap and sets it on the table in front of her. The baby whimpers and motions toward her. She pulls the strap of her dress off her left shoulder, exposing her breast. The breast swells, bulging out over her casted arm until the tiny brown nipple is at the baby’s mouth. The doctors murmur. The baby sucks at the breast and begins to grow as the breast begins to shrink. I can see the woman’s heart pounding in her chest. The doctors lift the ends of their stethoscopes in the air like antennas to listen to her
heart beat. The baby grows into a man wearing an expensive tuxedo and a top hat while the woman's breast shrinks until it is nothing but a nipple attached to her chest. The man climbs down off the table and adjusts his tie. The woman smiles at him like a whipped dog that knows it's going to have to lick its master's hand come supper time. He backhands her across the face, knocking her from her chair onto the pavement. I wince and smile. I can't help myself. Watching them is horrifying yet satisfying, almost as if I can feel the pleasure of delivering the blow and the pain of receiving it. She clutches at his leg. He kicks free. The doctors all make notes on little pads sitting in front of them on their tables.

I don't know why, but I get up to go to her. Someone grabs my arm. I turn. The cafe manager, dressed in judge's robes, is speaking to me, but I can't make out what he's saying. I feel as though I'm at a mental hospital in a gulag. I jerk my arm away and turn back around but the woman and the man are gone. Jeffery ignores me and the doctors all stare at me and shake their heads.

In the morning after I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. When I get there I go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It's my mother's table really,
but she never eats breakfast. I used to have my own table, but it seems like I had to give it up for some reason, although I can't remember why.

This particular morning is quite beautiful, even if it is raining. Occasionally, there's a flash of lightning followed almost immediately by a deafening clap of thunder. The terrace is crowded with pimps dressed in cheap black suits with dark blue shirts and white ties and prostitutes dressed in kinky lingerie, and the rain isn't making anyone wet. I'm not particularly hungry this morning—I was out most of the night and ate breakfast before I went to bed—so I tell Jeffery, my waiter, an unemployed abortionist, to bring me a large glass of tomato juice with broken glass in it. I am just opening my paper to the lifestyles section (I read the comics at home) when I notice a woman sitting at my old table across the terrace. For some reason, I just know that she is thirty. She is dressed in a conservatively styled skirt and a plain white blouse. A gold, heart-shaped locket hangs on a chain around her neck. She is slender and looks as if she would be quite pretty in an artistic way—auburn hair pulled back out of her face, fair skin, high cheekbones, and full red lips. Her left eye is swollen shut, her nose is taped, and her upper lip is split on the left side. She's wearing a neck brace and her right arm is in a cast. It must have been some beating.
A strange feeling of dread creeps over me, as if my eyes were tunneling back into my head and my throat were swelling shut. I hide behind my paper. I can see that the pimps and prostitutes are all staring at her. The prostitutes all say in unison "horrible, horrible" and the pimps all answer in unison "you gotta do what you gotta do." The woman looks around at them and half-smiles, as if every mark were a badge of honor or as if she knew something that they would never know. She rips the locket from her neck, opens it, and holds it out, showing the picture inside to the crowd, but it's too far away for me to make it out. The pimps and prostitutes all smile knowingly. The woman sets the locket on the table and snaps her fingers. It disappears. She smirks at me, then scoops up a handful of scrambled eggs from her plate and throws it at me. It splats onto the table in front of me, only it's not scrambled eggs anymore, it's semen. The pimps and prostitutes all look at one another and nod their heads and start pelting me with their half-eaten breakfasts. Eggs, French toast, bagels, English muffins all turn to semen when they hit me. My clothes and newspaper are dripping with musty goo. I yell for help. The woman points at me and laughs. The cafe manager, dressed like a fire marshall, drags a heavy hose onto the terrace and hoses me down with gasoline. A pimp throws a lit cigar at me and I burst into
flames. I climb up on my table and scream, "I'm innocent! I'm innocent!" The woman strolls over and hands me an Oscar. The pimps and prostitutes applaud.

4

In the morning when I get up, generally around nine-thirty, I always go to a certain cafe to have my breakfast and to read the newspaper. When I get there, I pick up a paper that someone has left and go out on the terrace and sit at my table. It's my mother's table really, but she seldom has breakfast here so I usually have the table to myself. I used to have my own table, but I had to give it up. I didn't want to--having your own table at this cafe is sort of a tradition in my family--but I didn't have much say in the matter.

This particular morning is quite beautiful. The sun is already hot, and the day promises to be a scorcher, which should keep most people off the street and out of my way. The terrace is crowded with the usual assortment of late risers: retirees, wealthy professionals, and housewives downtown on shopping sprees. Jeffery, my waiter, a second-rate actor (I've seen him in a few plays), takes my order--a Danish and a cup of coffee--and I am just opening my paper to the want ads (I like to verify that there aren't any suitable jobs available before I read the news) when I notice my ex-wife, Marilyn, sitting at my old table across
the terrace. She must be doing quite well for herself; she’s wearing expensive casual clothes. She is still slender and pretty in an artistic way--close-cropped dark hair (I think she’s changed colors), high cheekbones, full red lips, and two earrings in one ear.

I slump behind my paper to avoid being seen and to block my view of her --the memories are bad enough. I thought she had stopped coming here for breakfast. I feel sick to my stomach, as if my wrists had been cut and my life were ebbing away. Petty little scenes from our marriage flash through my mind. I’m as embarrassed thinking about them as I would be if everyone on the terrace could see them. I glance around the sides of my paper to make sure no common acquaintances have spotted both of us (we divided up our friends along with everything else) when I realize just how ridiculous I’m being. I’ve done nothing criminal. I was pretty damn good to her most of the time, and it wasn’t easy, either. I’m overcome by the desire to speak to her. To prove myself right. To hear her tell me that I wasn’t a monster. I set my paper down and start towards her table. She looks up from the toast she’s buttering. I make a special effort to seem small and unthreatening. "Hello, Marilyn," I say.

She glances around the terrace as if she’s looking for someone in particular.
"Nothing to worry about," I say. "It's only me." She squints her eyes against the sun and stares at me. I feel as though for all my walking I'm not getting any closer. I pick up my pace.

"How have you been doing?" I call out, wanting to keep the conversation going since I've already started it.

She peers around, shrugs, and goes back to buttering her toast.

Sweat starts popping out on my face. "Marilyn! Marilyn!" I shout. "I'm over here! Look at me!" I reach into the pockets of my sports coat. "I brought you candy, flowers!" I run to her, panting. I'm cradling a box of chocolates and a bouquet of flowers in my arms like twin footballs, like newborn babies. She sets her knife carefully against the edge of her plate.

"Marilyn!" I yell. "Look at me!"

She glances around at no one in particular and starts eating her toast.