AN ORIGINAL NOVEL:  PUBLIC, LIKE A FROG

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AN ORIGINAL NOVEL: PUBLIC, LIKE A FROG

THESIS

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By

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CHAPTER I

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE

The motel room was large and luxurious, deep carpeted and paneled in dark, rich walnut. I felt like a peasant lad spending the night in a castle. Trips to the big city were rare for me, but this time I was on business. And I was so tired and drowsy that I would have to waste all the beauty of the room on sleep. I was even too sleepy to be excited about the next morning, which I vaguely regarded as the biggest moment of my life. The bed was long and low and clean and soft and warm and I was sleeping deeply in minutes.

I had driven, half asleep, for several hundred miles on a trip that hadn't begun until midnight, and the motel had been a most welcome sight. Now, beside a noisy, eight-lane freeway, I slept on the edge of a city of millions, while behind me lay the city of thousands that I called home. Beside me on the bed table my ancient, ungainly alarm clock clanked its way through the early morning hours. After three hours, it would wake me in time for my audition with the largest radio and television station in the Southwest. I hadn't been able to start my long drive until the midnight hour,
when I went off duty at the small television station where I
was chief announcer, a title I received because I was the
only full-time announcer the station had. Now I was summoned
for an audition, and for days I had been so excited I could
hardly live with myself.

The thought of working for a mammoth, big-city operation
was almost too much to hope for. I had no idea what I would
be doing, whether I would be good enough, whom I would meet,
what I would learn. But now there was no wondering; there
was only sleep.

At sunrise, the old alarm clock ground slowly into action
and began screaming me awake. I stumbled across the room, out
of my cozy bed, and throttled it. As I shaved before the wide
mirror in the glistening tile bath, I regretted having to
leave so soon the magnificent room I had paid for. At home,
my aging, forty-dollar-a-month apartment seemed like a slum
in comparison. I carefully put on my best shirt and tie and
my only suit, neatly cleaned and pressed for the occasion.
And, tossing my bag in the trunk of the car, I pulled back
onto the expressway. Ahead of me, I could see the towering
skyline of the city.

It looked so near, but it was over ten miles before I
was among the tall buildings. I thought back to my little
city and its insignificant profile. Its only tall building stood seven stories high, giving the city a phallic skyline. Ah, but this metropolis was grand, magnificent, majestic! Its man-made mountain peaks basked in the early morning sunlight with a thin, blue haze caressing their summits. The fast-moving expressway whirled me ever closer, until the towers were so near that I had to lower my head to see their tops through the windshield.

Turning off the expressway and moving in among them was like entering a maze of narrow canyons, the sheer walls reaching high above to a patch of blue. The cars moved bumper-to-bumper, and the horns echoed through the canyons. Crowds of people moved with the traffic lights, crossing in herds, and a rumble of engines accompanied the next change of lights, as the waiting cars took their turn to move. It was like a game of mass "may I?" without the going back, and there seemed to be an inordinate hurry about it all.

On the long, wide street below our seven-story skyscraper, there never seemed to be a hurry; people were in the habit of stopping to talk for several minutes when they met on their separate ways somewhere. But here, pedestrians were more apt to run over one another than exchange greetings. And the waiting cars strained at their bits, anxious for the signal
to plunge ahead to the next traffic light. Under my commanding foot, my usually docile beast became aggressive and acquitted itself well among its fellows.

There were grand hotels with uniformed doormen, lines of taxis, huge department stores, sparkling bars, clubs that advertised "girls, girls, girls," and had sexy pictures out front to prove it. There was steaming pavement and thousands of people walking it and the smell of asphalt and exhaust fumes from thousands of cars and delivery trucks and big, bright-colored busses that hugged the curbs and nudged their way through the traffic. There were glittering shop windows with impersonal mannequins in fresh, fashionable clothes, and marble-faced buildings and small trees and bushes in big concrete pots on the sidewalk. And there were immaculate blue-clad policemen calmly directing the chaotic traffic at each busy corner. And shoppers carried armloads of packages and paper sacks. And somehow there was the unexplainable smell of popcorn. Pigeons fluttered and cooed along the curbs and back and forth to the high cornices of the skyscrapers. I wondered if they were smelling the popcorn.

I was anxious about missing the street at which I was to turn, and I kept craning my neck at the little street signs, half hidden among the signal lights. The red, green, and
yellow didn't bother to tell me where to go, but simply whether to go, and I thought they could have been a bit more cordial. At last I spotted my street. The sign was so nearly hidden that I saw it barely in time to make the turn. I wheeled to the right, close to the toes of the crowded pedestrians waiting on the curb, and found myself face to face with the huge sign that proclaimed the call letters of what, for all I knew, was the most glorious station in the world. As I passed the building, a chill went through me.

The station was magnificent. The front of the sparkling new building was covered in shining marble and stately granite. Huge, tinted plate glass windows revealed a richly furnished lobby. And above the front door canopy, the gigantic neon sign blazed out the beautiful call letters. Could I walk into a palace such as that and really expect them to hire me? But then the traffic pushed me on, and I began looking for a place to park.

I have decided that an enemy takeover of the United States is an utter impossibility, since the invaders would never be able to find parking space. After circling numerous blocks and being diverted by several one-way streets, I realized that my time was growing short. Finally, I drove into a big parking garage, whose sign advertised parking for
only thirty-five cents an hour. The attendant motioned me out of the car, thrust half of a numbered ticket into my hand, and clipped the other half to my windshield. A young fellow in a tee shirt jumped into my car, slammed the door, and squealed away up a narrow, spiral ramp in a cloud of burning tires. I thought that he would have at least waited until he was out of my sight. As I turned away, I heard my tortured brakes squeal to an agonized stop on the floor above. Hesitating a moment to listen for shattering glass, I reluctantly walked outside. It was like stepping into the sunlight from the mouth of a mine. The inside of the garage had been dingy and greasy with exhaust smoke, and the sun on the sidewalk was blinding.

Hurried now like my fellow pedestrians, I walked briskly and waited at the bidding of the traffic lights. At last I stood before the Taj Mahal of broadcasting. I subdued my fears, inhaled, and walked inside. The splendor was staggering. The walls and floors were of marble, and they stretched away from me like a train depot. "Take the elevator to the basement," the pretty receptionist advised me when I approached her desk and inquired about the news department. At my little station, announcing and newscasting were done by the same people, but here the jobs were separate. No more grocery
store commercials for me; I wanted to be a full-time newscaster.

The elevator was painfully slow, and I was wondering how deep this basement was, when the doors silently parted to reveal a big, bright room full of desks and people guarded by another pretty receptionist. She smiled at me from behind her desk only a few paces in front of the elevator. I stepped out, introduced myself, and inquired about my appointment with the News Director. "Oh, yes, Mr. Upham is expecting you, but he's out at the moment. Won't you have a seat?" Thanking the girl, I settled into a soft, leather chair beside the elevator doors and began furtively looking about.

The room had almost the dimensions of a gymnasium, scattered with clusters of modern steel desks, each of which held a typewriter. Most of the desks were unoccupied, but several men in shirt sleeves sat typing. Large sound studios were visible through double glass windows, and there were numerous doors lining the walls. Interspersed among the windows and doors were hundreds of bronze plaques and framed certificates; they were awards from various agencies for outstanding news coverage.

High on the wall hung an imposing Western Union clock that flashed its red light and reset itself when it reached
the nine o'clock hour for my appointment. Then it began to build up the minutes past the hour—five, ten, twelve, thirty. "Would you like some coffee?" asked the receptionist.

"Very much," I coughed as my voice began hoarse and cracked, "very much, thank you." And I drank it slowly from the paper cup she brought. The cup added its own aroma to the quinine bitter taste of the inky black liquid. The steam began to penetrate my sinuses, and I realized that I hadn't had any breakfast. The medicine was welcome, and I followed it with a chain of cigarettes. As the pile of butts grew on the ash tray, I watched the clock and contemplated the Western Union's Naval Observatory time. My watch was two minutes off. I reset it, holding the stem until my time was accurate to the second. It would take thirty-five cents to repurchase the remains of my car. Ten-thirty. Busy newsmen came and went among the desks, some carrying sheafs of copy lately torn from typewriters and teletypes, some lugging cameras, lights, and sound equipment. Ten forty-five. In six hours, I was due at my desk in the station at home to begin preparing for my evening of commercials and newscasts. I wished I were behind it now, sharing jokes with the cameraman and engineers and announcers who wandered in and out at will. I would be wearing my slacks and a pastel blue shirt, and, when I was on
camera, there would be the same old clip-on tie and the frayed, gray suit coat whose trousers had long since worn out. I kept the old coat hanging in my office, since it was nondescript and no one could detect its constant reappearance on television. And the frayed spots and shiny places were invisible to the television camera, and it didn't have to match my green tie and blue shirts because we didn't broadcast in color.

Eleven o'clock. I began to wonder what had happened to the famous Toby Upham, whose name I had heard with reverence since I had become a small town radio announcer as a teenager. His deep voice was boomed all over the Southwest by fifty-thousand watts. He was held in awe by lesser broadcasters, and I was among the lesser of the lesser. I imagined him as a huge, barrel-chested man, dark and handsome, with a physique to match his deep, resonant voice. Our meeting had been only by long distance telephone, and my end of the conversation had been weak and stammering. I had hardly believed I was really talking to Him. But now I was more concerned with where the hell he was than what sort of appearance he had.

While I had sat waiting, several people had come in with various kinds of business. Now a pudgy little red-faced man stepped from the elevator and walked past the receptionist
without a word. He disappeared into an alcove beside her desk, and I went back to my clock watching and cigarette smoking. In a few moments, the receptionist entered the alcove, returned, and nodded, "Mr. Upham will see you now." I almost swallowed my cigarette. So this chubby little man was Toby Upham! I passed through the alcove into a softly-carpeted office paneled in deep brown walnut. Peering at me from behind a glowing mahogany desk sat Toby Upham. He was immaculately dressed in a stylish grey suit, finely-checked shirt, and a perfectly knotted silk tie of bright burgundy, and he looked as if he had just been patted and powdered. He was bright pink. Even his sandy hair had a pink hue, and his fattish countenance and neckless chin gave him the look of a florid, reclining toad. "Come in, my boy," he invited paternally, although he could not have been more than ten years my senior. "Have a seat." I approached the desk and extended my hand, introducing myself as confidently as possible. "You're the young fellow from downstate," he reassured himself, emphasizing my insignificance and, again, my youth. "So you want a job?"

While job hunting in years past, I had vowed never again to assume the posture of bowing and scraping that had characterized my earlier attempts, so I was careful not to give
unconditional agreement. In spite of my basic inferiority complex, I answered, "Yes sir, if you feel I'm right for your position, and if we're able to work out arrangements." His eyes narrowed at me through his heavy, black rimmed glasses. Without question, he wanted me on the defensive, and lost no time in putting me there. He ignored his two-hour tardiness, and he acted as if we had never conversed by telephone.

"What sort of experience do you have?" he fired quickly. Squelching the impulse to refer to his telephone call, I answered obediently, "Well, sir, I've been in broadcasting now for about seven years. I began as a radio announcer, I did some TV in the Army, and for the past two and a half years, I've had my present job of combination newsman-announcer on television."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-six, sir."

"I see. Married?"

"No sir."

"Now, you don't have to call me sir," he chuckled, leaning forward to me on the desk. "We're informal here. Just call me Toby. I'm also known as The Old Captain."

"Er, all right, Toby."
"You just come along with me, my boy," he said rising, "and we'll see about an audition." I got up and followed him from the office and through the newsroom, which he crossed in a rapid, stomach-first, Napoleonic walk, glancing now and then at the men at their desks. When he motioned me into a glassed-in studio, I entered and confronted a small, young, black-haired man seated beside a typewriter, microphone, and control panel. "Bill, this is Tim Collier; he's interested in working for us." Then he nodded to me, "This is Bill Martin; he'll take care of you, now." With that, he turned and left Bill and me smiling at one another across the studio.

"Well, hello, Tim," Bill greeted me, "let me get you some copy to read." I thanked him, and he entered the door into the wire room, returning with a sheaf of teletype copy. From it, I edited a newscast and delivered it into the mike while Bill operated the recorder. Toby returned and sat listening critically while my tape was played back.

After it was over, he looked at me and said, "Your voice and diction are perfect, but there's just something about it that sounds like Bryan, Texas." I wondered vaguely what Bryan, Texas sounded like, but didn't ask. "Come on into my office," said Toby, rising to leave the studio. I thanked Bill and followed the Old Captain's return march across the
newsroom. He reclined again behind the desk and frowned thoughtfully at me. Convinced that "Bryan, Texas" had meant that I was too rural for his staff, I waited for the polite dismissal, but after a pause, he nodded, "I think I can use you. When can you come to work?"

Suffering a mild seizure, I stammered, "Well, I suppose I should give two weeks' notice."

"Fine. I'll expect you on May the fifth." We stood, shook hands, and I left, hardly believing my emancipation. And driving back, I thought of leaving my job and my garage apartment.

I had been proud of the job at the Bryan television station, but the glory of the metropolitan radio and TV operation made it seem almost shabby. In the small pond, I had felt like a rather large fish; in the new and boundless waters, I knew how small I would be. But I was ready for the ocean. Probably, I mused, I would spend my first years there as an obscure behind-the-scenes reporter. It would be some time, I thought, before Toby would consider my apprenticeship over. Only then would I be ready to broadcast from the powerful fifty-thousand-watt radio station. And one day perhaps I would be back on television--this time in urban television.

I wondered what it would be like to live in the big city and be a very insignificant member of such a grand and
wonderful news department. As the mammoth skyline faded in
my rear-view mirror, I hummed to myself, and wondered.
CHAPTER II

PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD

The next two weeks flew by in a whirl of speedy preparations for moving, closing out local affairs, selling off surplus junk, and saying goodbye. I hardly had time to think about what a wonderful adventure I was headed for. There was a going-away party at the little TV station, and I showed my gratitude by getting gloriously drunk, much to the delight of my well-wishing friends. The morning after, the insistent old alarm clock broke into my sleep of happy inebriation to tell me that the time for leaving was at last at hand.

After a brief period of stumbling into walls and door facings, I downed several mugs of scalding black Louisiana coffee and began stuffing the last of my few belongings into the big sedan. The old springs sighed and bowed lower as I filled first the trunk, then the back seat. The only furniture I took was the squeaky old rocking chair. It had been a faithful companion through the nighttime hours of brooding through a haze of cigarette smoke at the scattered lights of the sleeping city. It almost filled the back seat, its frayed cushions dangling crazily and its cobweb covered underside
showing for the first time in years. The mature adult isn't supposed to cling to a security blanket, but the rocking chair was socially acceptable as long as no one knew how warmly I regarded it.

Last came the coffee pot, cool and dry enough now to sit beside me on the front seat, its warm aroma of chicory scenting the car. I left the keys on the coffee table, along with my last rental check and a goodbye note to the landlord, climbed in among my array of stuff, and eased the car gently onto the street. I had to stop for a last look at the old place, its friendly upstairs windows blinking out over the city. I would miss it. As I passed down the wide main street of the city, the familiar buildings seemed to smile gently, as if they had known all along that I would one day leave them for good. When I had left two weeks earlier, they had known that I was coming back. Then, on the open highway, I whizzed past the old thickets and trees and creeks and fences where I had gone so often to spy on the grazing deer. Heading north, I steered through the green, rustling post oaks, across creek and river bottoms always heading progressively upstream. Each hill that I topped was imperceptibly higher than the last. There were a few high, wispy clouds against the summer sky, and the morning sun was already building its
heat toward a scorching afternoon. Rabbits skittered through the velvety needle grass along the roadside, and black silhouetted buzzards glided high above on the day's first thermal updrafts. Cattle were bowed to the pasture grass, sagely ruminating together.

The highway was wide and black, and far ahead its hot pavement radiated rising heat that distorted the view and craftily promised shining pools that evaporated before I could reach them. I traveled at the sixty mile-per-hour limit, but other cars passed with a raging roar on their way to the big city, driven by driven men. And specks appeared among the rising heat and emerged from the evanescent water to grow into oncoming cars bound for other cities. And the moment of meeting brought a roaring whoosh and a powerful vacuum that pulled for an instant against my forward progress and threatened to entice me back with them. I thought of the reaction of my big, friendly station manager when I had told him I was leaving. "Tim," he had grinned, "I just don't know whether the big city's ready for you."

The tires skimmed along and the miles rushed by as rubber mated with asphalt and the sleepy hot red-dusty little towns fell away one by one. Then there was the broad, divided interstate highway for the last hundred miles, and the towns
disappeared back into the countryside, invisible except for the green and white sparkling signs that proclaimed their distant presence. But even on the straight and wide interstate, there was still the will o' the wisp water, perpetually eluding the probing hood of the car, tantalizing, melting away at the last moment.

"Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." It kept running through my mind. I would be Emerson's truth teller, a modern poet-journalist. The old ones had been limited by pen and paper and time and ignorance, but these hateful barriers were gone. Modern America! Where the truth could be flashed over the miles in word and picture in fractions of seconds! Space probes toward the moon and the planets. Sprawling cities. Instant communications. Education. Enlightenment. Peace. World brotherhood. If man could progress so far in technology, if there could be victory in national security, if there could be victory over physical suffering, could there not be victory over ignorance and hatred, could there not be victory over war and bigotry, could there not be victory for understanding and love? I would be a part of it! How staggering! No more the pen and paper. No more the delay of hand-borne letters, word of mouth, even daily newspapers. This is now! The 1960's.
The age of electronic enlightenment and goodness. And the truth shall make you free! I filled my lungs to bursting and there was a flutter in my throat. There was an order, there was a reason for everything. And there was a reason for me.

Junkyards. The last fifteen miles into the city was lined with them. And among the endless acres of rusty, wrecked cars sat greasy, tumble-down filling stations with dingy red and orange pumps and cut-rate prices painted awkwardly out front in three-foot letters that were altered now and then along with the rates, and leaning motels with peeling paint and vacancy signs, and clapboard taverns plastered with assorted metal beer signs, and old neon signs that looked good only at night, and dusty rutted parking lots, and a few shotgun houses that boasted their own wrecked cars in the weed-infested yard, and tall welcoming billboards that hid the trees, and for sale-signs and scattered overgrazed pastures, and junkyards forever.

The green center esplanade of the highway narrowed and disappeared, giving way to an aluminum-painted line of posts with a corrugated steel baffle rail to discourage cars from careening into oncoming traffic. The pavement became dirty and greasy from the heavy traffic, and the stately post oaks
all but disappeared; now and then there were scrubby black jack oaks and low, thorny mesquites that dared to thrive amid the abandoned cars and shoddy roadhouses. The surviving barbed-wire fences that had once held cattle were now only property markers, supporting signs that insisted on a particular brand of cake flour or warned motorists to "PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD." Railroad tracks appeared from nowhere and converged to race alongside the highway. Power lines and telephone wires became so numerous and crowded that the creosoted masts seemed too flimsy to support them. Traffic became heavier and more insistent and ill-mannered, and the signal lights began to assert their authority, halting the cars periodically for several minutes of surly obedience in fuming carbon monoxide. And my car waited too, belching exhaust along with its fellows.

Then we plunged into a tunnel of smoke-blackened steel girders—a massive truss bridge spanning the river that drained the big city. Its great height was necessary only occasionally, when the overflow pushed the muddy river out of its narrow banks and filled the wide river bottom with swirling flood waters. But now the docile stream meandered in a crooked, almost imperceptible current far below, almost hidden by the thick brush that overhung its steep banks.
The water was black, and as we passed above it, I got a fleeting smell of its stagnant sewage. Then we passed among mammoth buildings of dirty corrugated tin, towering smokestacks that emanated clouds of black and gray; we bumped across railroad sidings that admitted lines of boxcars to the city's industrial area. Through the haze I could make out the blue-tinted skyline of the city standing bright above the filth of its outskirts. The skyscrapers drew closer, and the cluster of buildings about me fell away and gave place to a strip of grass, as the expressway widened again and assumed an esplanade.

When the tall buildings loomed upon my left, I took an exit that led me onto a street to my right, leading away from the heart of the city. I would find a temporary room until I could locate a permanent lodging. For some fifteen blocks, I drove through rows of hock shops and bars. Then the street ended at a cross street and a small shopping center containing two bars, a grocery store, a liquor store, and a small cafe. I turned left and followed the cross street into a neighborhood of old residences. Here, there were trees overhanging the street, and most of the houses were not in too bad a state of repair. I stopped at the first one with a "Rooms" sign out front, left my car at the curb, and rang
the doorbell. My ring was answered by an elderly, white-haired lady whose ponderous bulk moved like jello in her print dress. "You want a room?" she asked before I could introduce myself. "For a week," I answered. "My name is . . . ."

"Follow me," she commanded, turning from the door into the darkness from which she had emerged. I opened the screen door and trailed her as she shuffled across a large, dusky living room with shades drawn--worn carpet, brittle brown wallpaper, and nondescript overstuffed furniture. We ascended a creaking stairway, walked down a wide hallway, and stopped before one of the doors. From a ring of keys that would have befitted a medieval jailer, she selected one and turned it in the tarnished brass lock. The room had a bed, a chest of drawers, a small mirror, one straight chair, a single window with an old paper shade, and a bare light bulb suspended by its cord from the ceiling. The dusty woodwork was dark with age, the walls were yellow with brown water circles here and there in the paper, the floor was partly covered by a brown carpet that looked like thick towsacking except in the few places where the pile remained, revealing a wine-colored Oriental imitation. "It's twelve dollars by the week or forty a month," she told me, her hands on her hips. It was pretty clean, and I handed her twelve dollars. "The
bathroom's at the end of the hall. Lock the door when you use it."
She shimmied back down the stairs, and I stood alone in my new home. It was one of the most depressing sights I had ever seen, but I knew I would need some time to find a really suitable place. It would have to do. I carried in my bag and some of my clothes. The rest I would leave locked in the car. I locked the room and drove back to the little cafe in the shopping center.

Inside, I was approached by the most beautiful waitress I had ever seen. Her long, flaxen hair just touched her shoulders, her deep blue eyes smiled straight ahead, and her clinging white uniform revealed ample breasts and wide, graceful hips. "Wha-chawnt?" she asked in a raspy drawl that shattered my vision.

"Chicken fried steak," I muttered, and ate it when it came.
CHAPTER III

SHEEP

Neon lights. As dusk descended, they began to blink on over the doors of bars, lounges, and stores in the neighborhood. And the dingy store fronts became things of wonder and beauty. High above, the eerie mercury vapor street lamps bathed the scene in the subtle blue glow of man-made moonlight. I wandered out of the cafe onto the sidewalk, lit a cigarette, and stood wondering how to spend the evening. I really felt a bit too rural and shabby to intrude upon anything so grand and cosmopolitan as one of the glittering bars, and the glycerine of the steak weighed so heavily upon my digestive system that I hadn't room for a beer, anyway. I decided to embark upon a program of self-education. A sort of geographical orientation.

I climbed into the car, drove away, and was hopelessly lost within fifteen minutes. Such a maze of streets, traffic lights, bars, apartment houses, and red lights and blue lights and green lights and purple and orange and yellow and I nothing but a country clod in a big, old car. I pulled to the curb, took out a city map, and tried to discover where
I was. I couldn't have been over five miles from my rooming house, but it took almost two hours for me to find it. I set my alarm early in case I got lost the next morning on my way to work. And defeated by my first encounter with the city, I crawled in among the lumps in the mattress.

This night, I was particularly anxious to knit up the ravelled sleeve of care, but sleep seemed never to come. Thoughts of the morning kept stealing in and fouling the sandman—the palatial newsroom, the Faroukesque employer—what would be asked of me? Sleep, gentle thing, beloved from pole to pole, gentle sleep from Heaven, slide the hell into my soul. Stairs creaking, roomers, I guess. Bedsprings right above, damn it. Oh, George, stop that, you know I'm not that kind of. Sleep. Woolies, that's it, count 'em, one, two, three, red light, stop. Buncha pedestrians crossing in front of the damn sheep, what the hell. Neon lights, DONT WALK, amber light, sheep ready, four, five, junkyard on the right, six woolies, ratty service station, regular twenty-three and nine-tenths cents a gallon, seven, junk yard, bar, traffic light, drive-in grocery, rooming house, eight, tomorrow, elevator, basement, newsroom, fat man, nine, Oh George, squeak, pedestrians, sheep, fat, lights, sleep, Wha-chawnit, chicken fried sheep, lost, lights, map, twelve dollars in advance, ten sheep waiting for WALK, sleep, squeak.
CHAPTER IV

ACT I.

The elevator doors parted like curtains, and I was on stage wishing for a broom to push. The Old Captain bowled over and greeted me, this time in a suit of iridescent brown. Then he escorted me about for introductions to cameramen, film processors, reporters, secretaries, and newscasters. Finally, we were back in the radio news studio with Bill Martin, who had recorded my audition. Bill was to have the job of breaking me in. I was surprised at being introduced to the radio news operation, since I had expected to be relegated to some dark corner from which I would have to "prove" myself, or something. Toby turned me over to Bill and disappeared.

Bill gave me a mild heart attack by telling me that I was to do a one-minute weather forecast which hit the air in only three minutes. Petrified, I took the air, my eyes alternating between my typed copy and the racing second hand of the clock. I got on rather well until I came to the relative humidity, which I gave in degrees instead of percent; quickly I compensated for this error by giving the
temperature in per cent instead of degrees. "That's OK, Tim," Bill smiled, "You'll make it next time."

Bill, I learned, was the father of four boys and a baby girl. "Well, we have a loose chipmunk at our house today;" he sighed.

"A loose chipmunk?"

"Yeah, it's our latest pet to escape into the woodwork. We've been looking for him for almost two days now, but I guess he's made a nest somewhere. He's not alone, though. There are three hamsters and a lizard that we've been looking for for over two months now. It's lucky the goldfish can't get out." Bill was so friendly and relaxed that he soon had me doing newscasts and weather without mixing the temperature and humidity. I was ecstatic. The most powerful radio station I had ever broadcast from before only carried for a fifty-mile radius; this one covered the entire Southwest. And it all seemed so easy. We carefully kept up with the news from the bevy of teletype machines in the next room, rewriting and updating the stories through the morning. But it was a slow day, and not much was happening in our city.

Shortly before my noon newscast, a short, kinky-haired, middle-aged man in horn-rimmed glasses entered the studio, carrying a paper carton of hot chili, a sack of potato chips,
and a soft drink, all of which he clutched dangerously against his immaculate shirt and tie. He wore a cynical, businesslike expression that melted into a grin when Bill introduced us: "Jim, this is Tim Collier; he's our new radio man. Tim, this is Jim Austin; he's in charge of giggles."

Jim giggled, "Humbug. Glad to meet you. You're sure you want to go through with this, now?"

"Well, I guess so," I said, shaking his hand. "If I can just remember that temperature comes in degrees and relative humidity in per cent. Bill's being very patient with me."

"That dirty old man? Why he's even got a loose chipmunk."

"He told me. But I'd spotted him for one of those first off." Jim was in charge of more than giggles. He was the Assistant News Director, and a good one. If he knew that fact, his knowledge was concealed behind a pleasant facade of giggles and grins, which, in turn, he tried vainly to conceal with a pretense of cynicism and gruffness. Jim was fond of denouncing such sentimental institutions as Christmas, Boy Scouts, grandmothers, General McArthur, and kindness. His favorite expression was "humbug," but he played an extremely unconvincing Scrooge. The giggles and grins were always creeping through to spoil his act. And, despite his best efforts, he was universally liked, both by his colleagues and by his listeners and viewers.
I soon learned that Jim was the gentle force that kept things going at our establishment. Toby, it seems, was susceptible to purple tantrums, and Jim was the only one in the department who could bring him out of one of these fits.

There was a large waste paper basket beside the door to Toby's office, and there were tales among the staff that the battered old receptacle had once played an important part in the tantrum syndrome. For years, it was said, when Toby would begin a tirade, he would burst from his door and kick the can spiraling across the room, trailing loose paper all the way. This crashing overture signalled the beginning of a stomping, screaming trip around the newsroom. During this fit, most of the staff would manage to escape into an adjoining room or up the elevator, but there was one poor fellow, a former staffer, whose desk was too close to Toby's door to permit the escape. After years of enduring, this tormented soul had carefully concealed a large concrete building block beneath the paper in the basket, thus terminating the kicking act for good and almost breaking The Old Captain's foot.

Jim's tactics, however, were much more soothing and certainly more diplomatic. Or, at least, they must have been. We never knew exactly what it was that Jim did; we would only see him follow the purple-faced boss into the inner sanctum
and close the door. Soon they would emerge smiling, and the storm would be over. Periodically, Toby would fire some junior member of the staff, who would then be reinstated after a closed-door session with Jim. Fortunately, Toby spent most of his time away from the office courting the favor of his superiors, and Jim saw to it that things ran properly. Jim made the assignments, instructing reporters and cameramen as to which newsworthy events to cover, and, in general, making the best use of the department's manpower. At the day's end, Jim supervised the writing and editing of the day's television film stories for the six-o'clock news. Toby would return just in time to rehearse and deliver the news on the air. Jim always tried to appear the slave driver, railing at the reporters, cameramen, and newscasters, and putting on his best air of hardened authority. He commanded respect, it was true, but just below the surface his irrepressible grins and giggles made our obedience a pleasure.

My shift on radio news ended after the noon newscast, and Jim and Bill filled the afternoon air time with their long, unrehearsed discussion show, complete with guests and telephone call-ins. Bill left me to my news at noon and went out for a snack. Jim remained in the studio while I was on the air. He sat across the desk from me, thoughtfully devouring his chili and reading material that he was
to discuss that afternoon. The chili was gone by the time I was off the air. "Come on," he said, "There's someone I'd like you to meet." I followed him back into the film room, where a ruddy young man sat busily reeling, cutting, and splicing film. As we entered, he looked up and greeted us with a smile. Jim introduced him to me as Andy Baker. "Since you're both new arrivals from the sticks, I thought you ought to get acquainted."

Andy, a husky young man in his early twenties, had a background that was even more pastoral than mine. He was from a tiny town some forty miles away where there was only a sprinkling of rickety, wooden buildings around a little square that had been laid out with great commerce in mind. "Yep," he grinned, "I'm from El Dorado. How about you?"

"Bryan." And I had to smile, too. "And we're no metropolis, either. Do you feel as lost in this city as I do?"

"Well, of course I'm an old hand here. Been here a little over two weeks now, so I know the place like the back of my hand—just as long as I don't have to leave this desk."

Jim giggled. "Tim, you just hang around with Andy this afternoon. You two can run any stories that break, and maybe you can do some rewrites while Andy edits the six o'clock film. I'm due on the air now, so don't you two
country boys get into any mischief." Still grinning, he left
us and sauntered back toward the radio studio.

"Two weeks, and you're already editing the six o'clock? How'd you get to be such a pro, Andy?"

"Learned it in college. Majored in Radio-TV at TCU, and I did some editing in the Air Force while I was in public
relations. You're an air man, aren't you?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, that's about all I know. Not a thing about photography, except that I took Polaroid
shots for my newscasts. I've got a lot to learn."

"Not as much as you think. If you're an air man, you've got it made. The only thing I ever did on the air was some
disc jockey work for a little Mississippi station close to the air base. It was a night show called 'Darkness on the
Delta with Dean.' They made me call myself 'Dean Angel'; did you ever hear such a name?"

"Well, no, but the show's no worse than my first one. I had to do a hillbilly thing known as 'Timothy's Texas Two-
Step Time.' How's that grab you?"

"Omigod. Well, I feel a little better about it. Say, where are you living?"

"In the most depressing hell hole I could have picked. And there's some guy named George in the room above who kept
me awake all night playing Valentino. It's over on the East side."

"Well, that's a coincidence. I've got a room on the East side, too, but the guy overhead is named Argyle, or something like that. You going to stay in yours long?"

"My gosh no; I'm vacating as soon as I can find a decent place."

"Why don't we throw in together and get a good apartment? I've already spotted some pretty nice places."

"Man, that sounds great! When do we start looking?"

That night, after pizza and beer at a dark place with naked ladies on the wall, Andy and I rented the first place we looked at. It was dazzling—a two bedroom garden apartment in a big east side complex with banana trees in the patio and girls in the swimming pool. We could hardly believe it. Carpeting, dishwasher, central heat and air conditioning, plush furniture, the works. We worked until late that night moving our moth-eaten belongings into our new palace, and I was a bit dismayed at how shabby my rocking chair looked amid the splendor. I stuck it back in my bedroom. Every night it rocked my soul in its bosom.

I cleared the sheep out of my old cubicle and bade my landlady goodbye. She fell on my neck and wished that the
wind would always be at my back and that God would always hold me in the palm of His hand and then she scrutinized the place to assure herself that I hadn't stolen any linens. Andy exchanged a similar farewell with his mother superior, a giantess whose two-hundred-pound bulk towered several inches over our heads. Another round of beer to celebrate our emancipation, and we were back in the castle. It was a newly-constructed place called "The Four Oaks," because there were, fortunately, four oaks in the front yard. There was a bubbling fountain in the patio, and when no one was looking, I tossed a penny into it and wished that I could be on television again. This time in the big city. It worked, the very next day.
CHAPTER V

THE SWARM

Appearing on television with a bee upon one's nose could hardly be described as an auspicious debut. How inglorious to begin my metropolitan career with a routine worthy of the Keystone Cops. Certainly, I hadn't expected to burst into stardom immediately; in fact, I had thought my arrival upon what I considered "big time" radio and TV would probably take years. But I had expected to make my reputation as a news reporter—not a comedian.

As junior members of the organization, Andy and I were the natural recipients of the most dubious assignments--of which there were many. Most of these wild goose chases turned out to be unworthy of broadcast and hence remained unknown to the public. But there was one unworthy story that got on the air. And, technically, it was my first time on big city television.

I was typing a rewrite on my sometimes typewriter (sometimes it belonged to someone else), and Andy was steeped in the pile of film that would eventually become his home, much like the familiar briar patch of old Brer Rabbit. Toby,
having just emerged from his six o'clock television newscast, was in a creative mood. Actually, he was always in a creative mood; but when all was well, his artistic instincts reached for more fantastic ideas. All was well this particular evening. The telephone was buzzing with matters not out of the ordinary; one of the calls that managed to find its way to Toby's ear was that of a small boy. The Old Captain usually had the wisdom not to dismiss anything as trivia without a hearing. That call got a hearing that sent Andy Baker and me on a strange errand.

Toby's stomach, followed closely by the man himself, strode to my side. "Collier," he commanded, "I want you and Baker to cover a bunch of bees."

I cursed my inexperienced ear for not listening close enough. Positive I had misunderstood him, I apologized and asked for a repetition.

A bit vexed, the Old Captain reissued the order: "A kid just called and said there's a bunch of bees hanging on a bush out in his front yard. You and Baker go do a story on them." The logic of all this completely escaped me. I understood the bases of feature news stories, but my rural upbringing obliterated the very thought of anything unusual about a swarm of bees.
"You want a bulletin on them, or just a standard lead story?" I asked.

"A feature," he said, handing me a scribbled address on a scrap of paper that bore the words: "bunch of bees." With that, he wheeled, leaving his bewildered underling alone.

Studying the note with fruitless intensity, I stumbled back toward the film editing room, from where I could hear the whirr of the reels as Andy happily rewound the film that had been used on the six o'clock news. Surprising him from behind, I announced, "Well, old man, we've just been assigned to cover a swarm of bees." I witnessed on Andy's face the same reaction Upham must have seen on mine.

"To cover a swarm of bees," he said, with a quizzical half-smile. "What're we gonna do with 'em?" He donned his coat, picked up his camera, and headed for the door.

"Damned if I know," I replied, and we wandered out to the mobile unit, climbed in, and drove away in the direction of an anonymous swarm of bees. It was a forty-five-minute drive into the far northernmost section of the city, but the late summer twilight still furnished plenty of illumination for the drama that was to follow. We drove in silence, each wondering what to do with the little honey makers when we found them, each too keenly aware of his responsibility to
consider giving up, each too green to pooh-pooh any order from the Old Captain.

"Hnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnn..."

It was a typical suburban development of flat, "ranch-style" homes. They were so similar in appearance that their house numbers assumed an air of distinction. And they were built on carefully-leveled lots from which the contractor had made certain to remove all trees. Powerful bulldozers had rooted their way across the landscape, leveling the soil, vegetation, and social strata. Then the houses had been planted like rows of radishes, too close together to be healthy, but radishes nevertheless. With marvelous commercial ingenuity, the builder had used four different roof colors: red, blue, brown, and green. His wife had probably insisted that the grey asphalt composition roofing gave the homes a cheap appearance. And it was perhaps her good taste that caused the soft-hearted contractor to relent and buy three different shades of brick. Any mathematician can visualize the boundless combinations possible in varying four roof colors and three brick colors.

We matched the number scribbled by Toby with the one on the front of a house with a blue roof and yellow bricks. Four little boys stood awe-stricken in the forty-five-foot-wide
front yard. They had the dazed look of Aborigines viewing the arrival of a white goddess. Little boys usually managed to shake off their amazement and replace it with an affected nonchalance. But the deity of an arriving newsman among small boys usually survives for at least five minutes. Feeling our importance, we alighted from our golden chariot, whose impressive whip aerials continued for a moment their regal swishing. The youngsters approached, but feared to get too near; they maintained a fixed distance from us like astronauts skirting a radioactive area. Without the faintest notion of what we were to do, we introduced ourselves. We exuded confidence. Basking in their admiring stares, we set to work.

The swarm of bees, it developed, were a disorganized bunch of renegades who probably hadn't even appointed a queen yet, and their scouts were away, perhaps searching for some trollop queen willing to forsake her unthinking subjects for another crown. A sorry and scraggly bunch they were, draped uncertainly from the brittle limb of a spindly live oak, which would begin to acquire a look of beauty about the time the house was reaching a state of decay. Poor things, their search for a suburban home had met with no more success than had that of thousands of humans in the neighborhood. They were too disgusted to be hostile, and I used my boyhood
bee-keeping experience to edge in for a closer look. Andy followed, his camera grinding away, and we began to seek the most spectacular angles from which to photograph the skinny swarm. Still with no ideas about what we would say on the air about the bees, we tried to do our best with the camera. I knew bees but not photography, but Andy knew the camera well. As I became more daring, so did Andy. While he focused in on the buzzing mass, I moved my hand into the picture to add viewing interest. Carefully, I moved in until I almost touched the bees. Then I took a stick and tried to lift one bee away from the crowd to be photographed individually. But none of the workers would accept our offer of fame. Shunning recognition, they clung together in precious anonymity. Each time I would entice one onto my stick, he would grasp it firmly as if to escape the teeming multitude. But when he felt himself slipping away from his fellows as I withdrew his perch, he would dart out at me angrily and then rejoin the bunch.

Finally, I decided to scoop some of the insects off together and spread them on the sidewalk, where Andy could get some individual shots of them. By this time, the onlooking boys had become as familiar with us as they were with their schoolmates. "Hey, I know," said one, "why don't you
use that piece of drain pipe!" Obediently, I seized a short length of tin gutter pipe that had toppled from the corner of the aging new home. Gently, I nudged the pipe into the murmuring swarm, immediately eliciting an affronted roar of protest. Quickly, I came away from the tree with a considerable number of dismayed transients, who were not at all pleased at being ousted from their rest stop. I moved to the sidewalk, holding the pipe level to retain all but a few escapees. Turning the tubular trap down onto the sidewalk, I started to shake my captives loose. Ah! But a quick-thinking party of their adventurers was already in the act of defeating me. With an angry hum, they emerged in force from the very end of the pipe that I held in my hands! Anticipating their instant encircling pincer movement, I surrendered at once. "Yike!" I shouted, throwing the lethal pipe skyward. Ripping my coat from my back, I dashed across the lawn, my spontaneous profanity dazzling my youthful companions.

"Goddamn!" I shouted, "Goddamn bees!"

"Gol-lee!" exclaimed one of the boys to his buddies as they ran along with me. "Ja'hear that, Jimmy?" They were impressed. The delighted Andy was gleefully filming the entire fiasco. At last, there was meet meat for his
photographic talents. With the alacrity and presence of mind of a master newsman, the puerile novice preserved the action as if it were a news story of major significance. I ran.

My speedy flight delivered me from the attackers and their tiny poisoned daggers. A few minutes later, we were driving away, leaving behind the little boys, now stunned into silence. Back at the station, I discovered a dead bee in my coat pocket—a fallen warrior who had made a glorious escape from suburbia. And, after Andy had breathlessly and laughingly spilled the whole story to Jim, the two of them insisted upon photographing the little soldier—on my nose. So they taped it there, its stinger removed with tweezers to prevent a posthumous revenge. I was not to play the role of reporter this night; I was an actor, in the finest tradition of Max Sennett. Sacrificing my all for the sake of the broadcast, I bowed to the artistic whim of the amused Jim, who wrote a tongue-in-cheek story featuring Andy's excellent film of my rapidly retreating derriere and a giant close-up of my already formidable proboscis, adorned with the departed bee. This inglorious travesty was my first appearance on the big city silver screen. But I didn't write home about it.
CHAPTER VI

PIE IN THE SKY

I was secretly pleased that my nose had made its television debut, since, after all, it composes such a great portion of my anatomy, and since I've always been rather fond of it, in a strange sort of way. But the next day, the rest of me followed my nose down the road to fame.

That morning, Toby had made no comment on the bee-on-the-nose story, and I was grateful. I had spent the morning under Bill's guidance, doing the radio newscasts. Bill had left for lunch, and I was ten minutes away from the noon newscast when Toby came in. "Collier, have you ever done any television?" I wondered why he kept forgetting that I had, but I simply replied in the affirmative. "Fine," he replied, "you'll do the twelve-fifteen TV newscast."

"But I don't get off the air here until thirteen minutes after twelve," I protested.

"Well, that gives you two minutes to get out of here, up the elevator, and into the TV studio. You'll be in Studio C. I'll be watching in my office." With that, he left, and I was in a panic. Realizing that I had no time to prepare a
newscast with pictures, I decided to do the entire thing on camera, using the same script I had prepared for my radio news. Never before had I ventured upon even the small-town screen without an hour's preparation, and the big-city baptism was to be upon ten minutes' notice. I sat shivering for a moment, then suddenly the nervousness was gone. If he didn't care, then, by God, I wouldn't either.

The second I was off the radio cast, I walked to the elevator and down the hall to television Studio C, told the crew I was there to do the news, sat behind the desk, and did it. Realizing how bad it must have been, I returned to the newsroom and Toby called me into his office. "I'm fired," I thought, "but what the hell?"

"Have you ever done any weather?" he asked, leaning far back and resting his chins on his shirt front.

"Only once, when our regular weather man was sick. And people told me it was the funniest thing they'd ever seen on TV."

"Do you think you can do a weather show?" The question was point blank, but I didn't dare answer no.

"Yes."

"Well, you're the new weekend weather man." And I was. After my first appearance, some sweet lady called in and said
that I looked like a lad who'd enjoy a piece of apple pie. She had even offered to bake me one, so the receptionist told me, but I never got any. And the lady had been right; I would have liked some.

At last, I was among those chosen people who periodically project their pie-hungry faces into homes smelling of apples which may either be figuratively baked or thrown, as the occasion demands. And, like my colleagues, I became a combination Soupy Sales and Little Jack Horner.
CHAPTER VII

I GAVE MY LOVE A CHERRY

Mrs. Murty was a toothless old lady who, upon occasion, would become so enamored with the wonderful world of radio and TV that she would make a special trip to our station to bring a fifty-cent box of "chocolate covered cherries for the boys." After I got accustomed to the idea, I usually ate them, but Jim always swore he wouldn't touch them if he had been starving. Before I ever saw Mrs. Murty, or tasted her slightly smudged candies, I was well acquainted with her. She was an excellent topic for conversation when religion, politics, and philosophy failed us. Even so, my first view of her in the flesh was one of the most incredible sights I've ever seen.

I had just begun my 11:55 radio newscast, imprisoned in a glassed-in studio which commanded a full view of the front of our newsroom. I was about halfway through my opening story when I glanced up and noticed Toby, my chubby little boss, running pell-mell through the assembly of desks; red-faced, he sped past my glass on his way to the men's room. I was a bit shaken, but having had that feeling myself, I
dismissed the matter and went on with the news. Thirty seconds later, I reached the mid-point of the newscast and cued the announcer for the commercial. During the commercial, I slipped quickly into the wire room to rip off the latest weather conditions, which had arrived while I was on the air. In the final seconds of the commercial, as I was shuffling papers and preparing to go back on, Jim burst into the studio and crawled under my desk.

"For godsake, Jim, whatinhell are you doing?"
"Just shut up and finish the newscast," he hissed.

Since there was only a few seconds and no time to argue, I had little choice but to comply. It was a strange feeling trying to ignore the fact that a grown man was cowering under my desk.

After struggling through the remainder of the broadcast, I peered under the desk again and asked Jim what had brought him to his hands and knees at that particular moment. "Shut up, goddamnit," he whispered,"and get under the desk! Hurry." I obeyed, weakly trying to ask him again. After we were both ensconced together amid the dust, Jim finally answered: "Mrs. Murty's here! Be quiet, and maybe you can get a look at her."

"Oh. Where'd Toby go?"
"The john."
After several minutes of suppressing giggles, Jim decided that we could chance a peek outside. "Okay," he said, "let's just peer up over the edge." We assumed Kilroy poses, noses over the lower sill of the soundproof glass windows. We were only whispering because it seemed the thing to do at the time.

"Ssssst, there she is."

"Hottamighty!"

Mrs. Murty was probably just under five feet tall. Her dingy, gray hair was short and frizzy. It swirled around her head as if she had been standing under a ceiling fan. Her little, darting eyes were recessed beneath bushy brows. No teeth. Gums that kept up a constant practice mastication. Mrs. Murty had tiny, stooped shoulders, upon which was draped a fuzzy, pink angora sweater. Her pleated, black skirt had been designed years earlier for the smart high school girl. She wore dirty tennis shoes. And her white bobby sox were turned down to expose a daring expanse of hairy legs. Although she looked like a geriatrics case, she moved with the speed of a girl—a phenomenon perhaps largely attributable to the tennis shoes. She craned forward, her neck outstretched like an anxious turtle, looking into every nook and cranny for Toby, Bill, Jim—or, as a last resort, anyone whom she had heard on the air. She was even checking the waste paper baskets and the desk drawers!
We were determined to retain our precious freedom this day. Jim and I huddled in our hideaway while she searched and I watched in amazement. She headed in the direction of the men's room. "Omigosh!" said Jim, "poor Toby." But moments later she was back, and we knew that she had decided to respect the sanctity of our excretory retreat. Soon she was gone--out the door, still jerking her head from side to side in search of one of the fugitives. And I knew the meaning of terror.

Thereafter, I joined the ranks of those who would go to any length--lying, cheating, stealing--to escape kindly old Mrs. Murty. Through the years, we hid in broom closets, took refuge in ladies' rest rooms, crouched amid the machinery of the film processors, flattened ourselves against walls, ran, dived, slid, vaulted, and oozed--all to avoid dear Mrs. Murty and her strange, halitosis-ridden friendship.

Where Mrs. Murty was concerned, camaraderie ended. Within the bounds of humanitarianism, any of us would unhesitatingly deliver one of our cohorts into her hands to buy liberty for ourselves. One of the limitations, albeit unspoken, was the code of hospitality which required us to rescue an inexperienced guest.

One day during the visit of a celebrity to our station, my self-sacrifice reached its peak. Sam Linkfelter,
nationally-known on radio and TV, had years earlier begun
his career at our station. Since we lesser broadcasters
nourished our feelings of importance on our position with
his alma mater, we considered him an extra-special guest.
On this particular visit, Mr. Linkfelter was lounging in our
newsroom for a moment while TV Studio "A" across the street
was being readied for a taping session with him. This most
humble and kind gentleman was surrounded by the junta, the
caballeros, the peones, and the probrecitos. At that time, I
was among the probrecitos. Anyway, we hangers-on were on-
hanging while the company executives monopolized the regal
circle and the noblemen vied for places at the right hand--
or even the left. Just before the coterie was to escort
Mr. Linkfelter across to the studio, the emergency struck!
Like electricity, the word spread that Mrs. Murty, intent
upon shaking hands with Mr. Linkfelter, was on her way down
the elevator!

Like an untried ensign mounting the bridge in the heat
of his first battle, I was warm for the fray! Ha! With the
alacrity of a panther, I grasped the situation and took
command. "I'll get rid of her!" I cried, "Quick! Get
Mr. Linkfelter into Toby's office!" Pulling on my coat, I
strode quickly toward the door, as the puzzled celebrity was
whisked out of sight. Not a moment too soon! I met Mrs. Murty
head-on at the door; with marvelous presence of mind, I said
amiably, "Oh, hello, Mrs. Murty. You must be here to see
Mr. Linkfelter. Come on with me; I'm on my way up there now."

Murmuring a recurring cycle of toothless thanks, she
followed me back into the elevator. As we ascended, my mind
raced frantically, casting about for some possible way to
rid myself of her and still keep her away from the unsuspecting
celebrity. I was oblivious to her prattlings, as the success
of my bold move began to appear more hopeless by the second.
Taking the most devious possible route through the sprawling
building, I exhausted all avenues except one remaining hallway,
while my desperation grew. I had already begun to consider
where to dispose of the body, when my salvation burst like a
flash upon the scene. Just as we neared the closed doors of
the elevator, one of our announcers, Johnny Rogers, rounded
a bend in the hall. Happily, Johnny wasn't headed for the
elevator; he had started to walk past it. Mrs. Murty and I
arrived in front of the elevator at the same moment that
Johnny did—and at that very instant, the elevator doors
opened. Within a fraction of a second, I made the heroic
decision to sacrifice Johnny. Nodding my innocent comrade
to a halt, I gestured in his direction: "And here's Johnny
now, Mrs. Murty; he'll take care of you from here on." With
that I disappeared into the closing elevator doors. Johnny,
a dapper and good natured young man, hadn't even had time to
speak. His bewildered expression haunts me yet.

Amazingly enough, Johnny and I remained friends after he
was victimized by my bravery turned cowardice. But we never
again spoke of Mrs. Murty, and I might have wondered whether
he had done away with her, except that her visits and her
phone calls were never interrupted for any length of time.

Long before this episode, even before Jim crouched under
my desk, I had spoken to Mrs. Murty by phone. It was during
the noon hour, and as freshman member of the staff, I was
alone in the newsroom, munching one of Ruby's ptomaine sand-
wiches. Ruby was the sweet lady who had been commissioned
by the management to sell the employees an endless diet of
overpriced pimento cheese and tuna sandwiches, along with an
occasional hot dog. While ruminating on the sandwich, I was
also trying to ruminate upon the one-o'clock newscast that I
was preparing to put on the air—all this, while answering
the phone and guarding the entrance to our journalistic
citadel.

When I answered Mrs. Murty's call, she sounded as if
she were almost a member of the fold: "Is Jim there?" she
asked.
"You mean Jim Austin, ma'am?"

"Certainly."

"No, ma'am, I'm sorry; he's out to lunch. May I take a message?"

"Well, let me speak to Bill Martin."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but he's out to lunch, too; I'd be happy to take a message."

"Well, just who is there?" she demanded.

"I'm the only one," I said, "but I'll be pleased to take a message." I didn't know what I was asking for; she accepted my offer:

"Yes, I wish you would take a message. This is Mrs. Murty. You tell them that the doctor says I'm dying . . ." I shuddered.

"How terrible," I thought, "and this poor lady is showing such courage . . ."

". . . of cancer," she added.

I shuddered again, and my heart began to ache for her.

". . . and tuberculosis," she said.

Oh! How much agony can one person bear? I wondered.

". . . and leukemia," she continued.

"Hmmm?"

". . . and heart trouble . . ."

I carefully took down each new disease.
"... and arthritis ... and asthma ... and pleurisy ...
... and bursitis ... and muscular dystrophy ... ."

She must have had the maladies memorized. After she finally concluded her verbal chamber of horrors, I asked, "Is that all?" Upon her affirmative reply, I assured her that I would faithfully relay the message to Jim and Bill.

Bill and Jim were perpetually hurried—and perpetually only seconds from being late. The first to arrive, still wiping his mouth, was Bill. As he dashed into the glassed-in studio, I made good my promise: "Bill, a Mrs. Murty called while you were out; she says to tell you she's dying of arthritis, asthma, bursitis, cancer, heart disease, leukemia, muscular dystrophy, and pleurisy." By then, I had alphabetized the list.

Bill nodded absently as he glanced over a sheaf of notes. "OK, Tim, thanks," he tossed over his shoulder, closing the studio door behind him. A little later, Jim came in. He was never as hurried as Bill. Still munching his dessert, a candy bar, he stopped to pass the time of day, which, incidentally, was only about three minutes before he and Bill were due on the air. My newscast was over, and the network was doing theirs before Jim and Bill were to begin their afternoon show.

"A Mrs. Murty called," I said.
"Dying," he answered. "Right?"

"Right."

"Been dying for years now," he explained. "Looks as if after all this time, she'd at least have the common decency to go ahead and die."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Some people."

But Mrs. Murty's empty promises of her imminent departure were probably her least spectacular antics. Not that her death wasn't spectacular; she even had one of our more sympathetic announcers lined up to be among her pallbearers, and another newsman, who was a lay minister, was to conduct her last rites. I'm surprised she didn't ask to be entombed beneath the newsroom floor. I soon found that her claims to fame were many—and most definitely varied. Her secret lover, she said, was none other than the President of the United States, who made secret rendezvous to whisk her away for a gay lark aboard the presidential jetliner. The affair, she said, was one-sided, however. Unfortunately, she really didn't care for him—just kept up a pretense to spare his feelings. We sympathized.

Mrs. Murty, bless her, was probably our most faithful listener and viewer. She apparently kept both the TV set and the radio tuned to our every word. And, by telephone,
she gave us a constant stream of replies. Most of her calls consisted primarily of a deliberately offhand mention that she was somehow among the major protagonists of some important news story we had been broadcasting. Her claims ranged over a wide variety of subjects, from ground-breaking to flash floods. Her far-fetched snatches of "inside" information seemed often to be a fitting bit of comic relief to punctuate some more serious event that had occupied the day.

There was, of course, the Friday afternoon when Mrs. Murty wandered vicariously into a bank robbery I had covered. Friday afternoon was the logical time to rob a bank (all budding hold-up men take note) because the tellers' windows were open late to receive the last-minute deposits that always flooded in before the banks all closed for the weekend. And, in the heart of the city, the tangle of rush-hour traffic and mobbing pedestrians creates a perfect jungle into which even an inexperienced heist man can escape with ease. This particular afternoon, one struggling young bank robber had made the most of the ideal conditions and escaped with a sizable haul from one of the tellers' windows in a large downtown bank only three blocks away from our newsroom. Hearing the emergency on the police radio channel, I figured to use my legs to beat the jammed and creeping traffic. I grabbed a small portable
two-way radio from which I could broadcast directly on the air through our base receiver. Hoisting the heavy unit, I sprinted the three blocks and was on the air, breathless but broadcasting, before other stations could get through the stalled traffic. On the scene, I discovered that the young criminal had confronted the frightened lady in the teller's booth and demanded, casually and softly, that she enrich his briefcase with small-denomination bills. The teller, bearing in mind the proportion of descretion to valor, complied without a word, and the robber and briefcase were soon outside the bank amid the multitudes on the street. He was long gone before I or the police had arrived.

After I had gathered all information available without being too obnoxious, I took Andy's first roll of film and dashed the three blocks back to the station in hopes of getting it processed in time for our six-o'clock TV newscast. It was an exhausting run. I threw the can of film to the processor and typed up the story as the film was being developed. Amid the shouting and rushing back and forth of producers, editors, writers, and janitors, we finally put the story together in time for the six o'clock edition.

Andy ran frantically up to the projection room with the prize as I hit the air on radio with the latest version of
the story. Finally, our hurry was over; we had made the deadline. I sat back in my chair for a moment of nicotine and relaxation. The robber would be caught, hours or months later, but meanwhile we could rest.

At that moment, a phone call. For me. Mrs. Murty. "Yes, Mrs. Murty, what can I do for you?"

"I thought I'd just let you know that I was right by that teller's window when that fella robbed it and I know who he is." She, of course, was at her home, which was nowhere near the bank; her information had come from our broadcast.

"Ohhh, really, Mrs. Murty? Who is the robber?"

"I'm not a-goina tell you!" (click)

I reached for the latest box of chocolate covered cherries she had sent us and popped the last one into my mouth.
CHAPTER VIII

THAT TRY MEN'S SOULS

Centuries ago, eccentric individuals were considered sacred by some cultures, and perhaps the ancients were right. We were acquainted with a regular crew of these holy ones who, for reasons of their own, had appointed themselves our supervisors, lovers, critics, advisors, or tormentors. Most of them were more tormentors than anything else, but we endured.

A strange trait common to most broadcasters is an innate kindness for anyone and everyone who professes to be a bona fide listener or viewer. My colleagues and I spent hours of our time handling an endless stream of telephone calls from people whom we privately grouped in the general classification of "cranks." With few exceptions, we were quite considerate of their wishes and opinions; we listened to the most outlandish suggestions and criticisms from all sorts of people who were moved to call us. Some of our callers were pathetic alcoholics; others were hopelessly lonely women who ached for companionship; some were perpetually concerned and often angry about the government, our programming, public morality, or any number of things.
There was an aging former radio announcer who called us regularly to correct our grammar or pronunciation, and, so far as I can recall, he was the only habitual caller whom we unanimously disliked. Perhaps it was his tone of superior sarcasm that aroused our feelings; perhaps it was his insult to our professional pride; or perhaps it was simply the fact that he was a former broadcaster himself that earned him our animosity. We had learned to cope with the most rabid, illogical, hysterical callers, but this fellow was none of these. Never was he irate; never did he call us names or shout. He simply crooned into the telephone with a sugar-coated bari-tone, while giving us deific advice in a thinly veiled attitude of contempt. We could have endured it if only he had been irate. He wasn't one to pick on any of us more than the rest, and we decided he must have had a schedule to remind himself which of us to call on a particular day. He usually got around to every man on the staff at least once every other week. We all knew and hated him well.

For several years, none of us ever retaliated. We simply bit our lips and fumed a chain of "yes sirs" while he criticized. And we all strove to extricate ourselves from the conversation as rapidly as possible. But at last his calls began coming more frequently, and our collective patience
started diminishing. For several weeks, he was the talk of the News Department, where all of us mumbled about him under our breath and even made him the topic of long, tension-releasing discussions. We had tried evading his calls, but he was crafty. When one of us lied about another not being there, he would simply shift his schedule and deliver his criticism to whoever had been unfortunate enough to answer the telephone.

Finally, we began to strike back. Jim began the assault by politely offering to pay the postage if the fellow would simply mail in his criticisms on a standard form. Our caller declined the offer, however, and said he would save Jim the expense by continuing the calls.

Desperation set in. Each of us racked his brain for some way to get back at him without resorting to screaming obscenities into the phone. And the frequency of his calls still increased. Our golden opportunity came one night after our ten o'clock news was over. While we relaxed at our desks, our Hungarian cameraman, Lazlo Bienecke, was giving us an impromptu lesson in his native language. The telephone rang. Lazlo answered. It was our nemesis, this time wishing to launch his critique upon Jim.

Since Lazlo was never on the air, we felt safe with him on the phone. "Tell him I'm gone," Jim whispered.
"Hiss gon alreddie from ze nussroom," Lazlo complied. There was a pause. "Teem, he vants to spick to you."

"Tell him I'm gone, too, Lazlo."

"Ant he also iss gone alreddie from ze nussroom. Now he vants to know who iss here."


"Oh, Jeem, "Lazlo rumbled in his gentle basso, "I coult not do zat." Lazlo was very shy, and we all tried without success to persuade him.

"By golly, I'll do it!" I exclaimed, aching to pull something on the heckler.

"Bot you cannot spick Hungarian," protested Lazlo.

"That's OK, Laz, it doesn't have to be real. Gimmie the phone, quick." And picking up the receiver, I began my best imitation of a voice recording played backwards: "Gorr

"What?" said the caller.

"Robtnoffkneef gloomploplf?"

"What? I can't understand you!"

"Glorbflubb roptklanva?"

"What language is that?"

"Floot."
"What the hell are you trying to pull? Who is this?"

I was reassured that he didn't know. "Wurbnork fleebensnock?"

"God damn it!" he screamed, as his baritone rose to a squeak, "Your manager will hear of this!" We all snickered on extension phones over the office. Our moment of triumph was at hand. With the phony Hungarian, we kept him screaming for almost five minutes before he finally slammed down the telephone in an apoplectic rage. He never called again. We all took Lazlo out and bought him drinks for the night.
THOU ART A SCHOLAR; SPEAK TO IT, HORATIO

Murphy was a ghost. He must have been. I had never had the experience of knowing one personally until he showed up, and he didn't fit the descriptions of apparitions that I'd heard before: he looked all too solid, for one thing, and he smelled entirely too real. Murphy was a tiny, nondescript, dessicated little creature who had the uncanny and supernatural ability to appear capriciously at any place and at any time. Murphy, complete with kinky blonde hair that was as unkempt as a random pile of bedsprings, sky blue eyes that reminded one faintly of a Scandinavian possum, the slight-stooped frame of a pipe cleaner figure, and a distinctive odor that is best left to the imagination, moved in strange ways. That is, he seemed to materialize wherever any of us went to cover a story--any kind of story. Murphy had no apparent means of transportation, and yet for years he repeatedly beat us in our best efforts to be first on the scene of stories all over the far-flung metropolitan area. And most of the time, Murphy had no visible means of support, either. None of us knew how he existed.
And there was no reason for Murphy. He was just there; that was his life's work—being there. Once when the governor made a rather spectacular arrival at the airport and all of the press were there in force, we suddenly noticed Murphy, standing amiably among the reception committee, expressionless as usual but dutifully shaking hands with the governor and his arriving party. Murphy's material body (I never saw him in his pure spirit form) was dressed in a shabby, wrinkled sport shirt and his only pair of trousers—a sort of burnt sienna tone of a style so long outdated and so inordinately huge that their heavy pleats made their occupant look as if he were wearing a barrel. I shuddered while Murphy solemnly bestowed his greetings upon the governor like a priest dispensing blessings. Suddenly the political glad-handing was over, and the gubernatorial party was packed into waiting limousines at the edge of the flight gate; and without even entering the terminal building, the officials were whisked away under motorcycle escort to one of the big downtown hotels and a noon luncheon. The governor's schedule had been extremely tight, and there was no time to lose. In anticipation of the speed of the motorcade, we were all prepared to make a quick trip downtown from the airport. We had parked our mobile unit along with the limousines, and when they departed, we
simply joined in and rode the tail of the motorcade into town, taking advantage of their motorcycle escort with the inflated feeling of importance that comes from riding in an official motorcade—even if you're an interloper.

As interlopers, we were pikers compared to Murphy. We'll never know how, but he was waiting on the curb in front of the hotel as the motorcade arrived. And since he was out of smelling distance, there actually seemed to be an air of serenity about him that even the odor couldn't dissipate.

Jim told of a time when one of the world's top ballet companies was performing at the city's largest coliseum. There were guards at each of the entrances who simply refused to let anyone pass to the backstage area without proper identification. Jim, who had come to interview some members of the cast, was standing in the wings after the curtains fell. Suddenly from nowhere, the mysterious Murphy was there, calmly congratulating the dancers on their fine performance. Jim was positive Murphy was not of this world.

It was Jim whose gullibility and good nature had inadvertently delivered our staff into Murphy's hands. It all began on a New Years' Eve, when parties are commonplace and violence is frequent. But a midnight wedding is rare. Whose midnight wedding? Murphy's.
Journalists are the perpetual targets for a steady bombardment of so-called "hot tips." The phone rings one of its hundred jangles during the day, and someone begins, "I've got an item here that I think you might be interested in." Years before I had joined the news staff, one such call came from Murphy. None of us could ever remember his full name—just Murphy. He called, Jim told me, to inform the news department that he was going to be the first man married in the brand new year and that we could have a cameraman present if we regarded the matter worthy of publication. To Jim's eternal dismay, the News Director did, in fact, regard the matter suitable fare for news—and Jim was the cameraman.

Jim showed up at the appointed place, the home of a Justice of the Peace who was to join together the happy couple. The bride, Jim always swore, was a female incarnation of Murphy himself. No one else was there, so Jim had to be a witness. He reminisced later about the night he had stood up for good old Murphy. The holy bonds were welded, and he put the dubious story on the air. But to our later chagrin, the real marriage was between Murphy and our news department. His new wife left him after the new year was only a few days old. But Murphy clung steadfastly to us.

The next word came through the Police Department. He had somehow managed to get a job as a cab driver, but got
seventeen traffic tickets in his first eight-hour day, which turned out to be his last day, too. From then on, Murphy's job was appearing everywhere our news staff went. He popped up in the midst of dignitaries; he appeared at bank robberies, automobile accidents, political gatherings, and even at remote interviews where he couldn't possibly have known we'd be. Why, I was even doing an off-beat story on an Easter egg hunt out in a distant suburb one Easter, when Murphy materialized at my side.

I suppose he bothered me more than he did any of the others on our staff. I would be in the midst of a radio newscast, and look up to see Murphy's limpid blue eyes gazing benignly at me through the studio glass. I got so edgy about this strange creature that I even found myself actually running from him. At the Easter egg hunt, I bolted away through the fresh April clover, scattering behind me several unsuspecting eight-year-olds.

My most spectacular escape, however, came at a serene Sunday art show in the spacious mall of a big shopping center. I had my eye in the view-finder of the camera, grinding away at an array of amateur paintings, when the old strange feeling began. It was a sort of crawly, tingling sensation on the back of my neck that had come to mean only that Murphy was
assuming his fleshly body somewhere in my vicinity. (It was all probably some sort of reaction to the smell.) Somehow, I never would see him walking toward me; instead, I always discovered him at my elbow. Pouf! There he was, this time peering knowingly at me from around a surrealist seascape.

Without thinking, I wheeled and dashed away from the small crowd of onlookers who were surveying my photographic efforts. Down the middle of the mall I ran, my heavy floodlight and power unit clacking together and cracking me on the thigh with every stride. I know it was silly. I even knew it then, but something made me keep on going. I didn't look back until I had reached the comparative safety of a men's rest room. I half expected him to come oozing out of one of the porcelain fixtures.

Looking back, I wonder why none of us ever asked Murphy about his spectacular mobility—but I guess it was really because, somewhere deep within, we all knew the truth. Murphy was a ghost.
CHAPTER X

THE COW TRADED

Though my steps were dogged by the phantom Murphy and the amorous Mrs. Murty, I began to feel at home in the big city. And the thing about it that seized my fancy more than any of its other wonders was its mammoth skyline at night. I found myself in awe of it at first. I felt like some diminuitive peasant lad who had just climbed an oversized beanstalk into a land of giants. And they stood majestically above me as I tiptoed around the city to avoid being discovered. I found myself glancing up now and then, with a sort of subconscious worry that one of the motionless titans would suddenly give in to a moment's caprice and squash me beneath a giant thumb. I survived, either because of my stealth or their forbearance. I skittered safely in and out around their huge feet, and they watched with tolerance.

Before long, the giants and I became friends. They gave a delicious sense of security, and I finally decided that they were my powerful but gentle protectors. Before my arrival in the city, I had found contentment in sheltering woods, friendly meadows, and quiet waters. Now that I had become a prisoner
in the land of motionless monsters of stone and steel, I was surprised to discover that familiarity brought smiles to their gigantic faces.

During the day, the giants passively allowed thousands of busy people to course through their viscera and surge around their feet. There was the blatant sound of traffic, the noise of construction, and the inaudible electricity of commerce and politics. And the giants were patient. They held their might in check like a troop of Gullivers, good-naturedly observing the tinhorn antics of the Liliputians. And the towers and columns basked in the hot Texas sun like brawny shoulders. And inside their bowels, tiny corporation executives toiled through each day, all the while with the delusion that they owned the colossus who contained them. The harried little men wasted their lives away on decisions over who owned which giant. And until nightfall, the constantly bartered titans suppressed the impulse to chuckle.

After dark, the giants and I could be alone together. The executive microbes subsided at dusk, and the gentle monsters could pass the night in peace. Each time I greeted them, they seemed to look down with a smile of relief.

"Hello, giants."

We could see each other for miles. So, no matter where I went, they were along to look out for me. I knew every
elevated spot around the city from where we could communicate more freely. What a warm feeling it was! On my way to and from assignments about the metropolis, I would often stop my mobile unit on a suburban hill for a chat with the glowing skyline. There stood the cluster of giants, wearing evening clothes that glittered with spectacular jewels—radiant neons in reds, blues, greens, yellows, whites—penetrating blues from huge mercury vapor lamps—ghostly white fluorescents bathing rows of windows in a lunar luminescence—and the red, flashing incandescent aircraft beacons atop the tallest of the monstrous creatures. Sometimes the giants spoke to me through a haze, like dimly seen spirits gathered for their own seance; other times, the titans were completely enshrouded by low hanging clouds that concealed their mysteries. The best nights were the clear ones. There would be a crystalline feeling to the air, and the placid behemoths would tower grandly against the black velvet of the night sky. I could almost see them, nodding gently at my greeting. Often in the midst of a long night’s work, I would find my way to the sidewalk outside the giant which was kind enough to accommodate me and my pursuits. Coffee breaks? No. Giant breaks. I would stroll silently along, looking up at the immense hulks above. I was blessed with their stupendous friendship. The
goliaths and I often felt sorry for the imperceptible executives who donated their lives and their digestive systems to determining ownership. The giants had really done me a rare service, by letting me be a companion—not an owner.
CHAPTER XI

CONTENT TO BREATHE HIS NATIVE AIR

In our news room, the police and fire radio receivers hung on the wall directly above my desk, and like most of the staff, I had developed an instinctive tolerance to their constant chatter. Our minds had the facility of tuning out everything of no consequence to us and somehow gleaning the important things from the seven separate and simultaneous conversations. Two of the channels were the frequencies of the Sheriff's Department and other sheriff's offices from surrounding counties; two others belonged to the busy Police Department; two belonged to the more taciturn Highway Patrol; and one was the radio alarm system for the vast Fire Department. The Fire Department had little to say, of course, beyond the broadcasting of fire alarms, but these were by nature much more spectacular than the average police call. For one thing, the fire alarm was always preceded by an actual series of electronic alarms which sounded like the much amplified mating of a buzzer and a jews harp. The whole mess had such an urgent sound that I sometimes had the vague impulse
to stand up shouting "Fire, fire!" It went off many times each day, but few of the fires being reported were newsworthy.

The alarm would say something sounding similar to, "Bzzzonnnnnmk-bzzzeeeeennnnk-bzzzzzonnnnnnk!" Then the fire dispatcher would issue instructions to whichever station was to answer the call, and less than thirty seconds later we could hear the captain in charge of that station answering from the seat beside his engine driver. And the most exciting part of it all was the sound of the siren audible behind the captain's voice and already building its pitch to a wail as the big, shiny engine roared away in a crescendo of speed and noise. It always amazed me that the entire engine company could be perched on the big truck and gone from the station inside of half a minute. And usually it wasn't very much longer before the captain would call back to record their official arrival time as the engine pulled to a stop and his men leaped off to their work. His next call was ordinarily the message that the fire was out and that the company was returning to its station. But sometimes the next transmission was the call for a second alarm, and perhaps there would be a third, or even more.

I was always impressed by the speed of the firemen, but never did I really appreciate their unbelievable departure
until one autumn day when dry grass and high winds had prompted us to do a feature story on grass fires. I had decided to make the feature complete with film of the fire company leaping to the engine and speeding away to the fire. I began that morning by getting acquainted with the members of the fire company and letting them know what madness I was up to.

Oddly enough, I have positively never met a fireman I didn't like; perhaps it is because they are a special kind of person who has the courage to act upon his boyhood dreams of being a fireman. And after all, perhaps the brave and young at heart are the best kind of people. These fellows, at any rate, were delighted to have me and were treating me to sandwiches and coffee in the fire house kitchen, when their alarm sounded. They scrambled for the engine, and I scrambled for my camera. Before I could put down my sandwich, pick up the camera, and set the exposure, they were gone! I simply could not believe it, as I stood with a sort of desolate feeling in the gaping front door of the empty fire house, listening to their waning siren.

I wandered about the empty fire house until they returned from the fire. Fortunately, it had been a minor one, and they were back in less than a half hour. Then they obligingly staged another departure for my camera. This time there was
no fire, but it was even more spectacular, since they all went upstairs and slid down the brass pole for me. It looked glorious on the air that evening.

Our news department heard many alarms every day from far-flung sections of the city, and so we seldom bothered to go to a fire unless it was given a second alarm. The only other kind of alarm that we would cover was any call to the downtown area amid the skyscrapers. Since some of the giants towered as high as fifty stories, any downtown call was always answered with an impressive fleet of engines, mile-long hook-and-ladder trucks, and sometimes the huge cherry-picker truck with its mammoth hydraulic derrick topped with a crow's nest for a man and equipped with a built-in high-pressure nozzle. Even most of the downtown alarms were of little consequence, but the Fire Department was always ready with its full force. And so were we.

After chasing down numerous downtown alarms of little note, I got my baptism of fire--mostly smoke, actually--on a sweltering July afternoon. Creeping in our mobile unit through the snarled traffic, Andy and I could distinguish a concentration of flashing red lights far down the street. High above them, a heavy cloud of thick, gray smoke was blossoming from the topmost story of one of the tall buildings. The
traffic was barely moving, as up ahead the police diverted
cars from the block they had sealed off. As Andy sat behind
the wheel, inching the wagon forward now and then, I craned
my neck to see all I could.

Finally, I could stand the slow pace no longer. I
grabbed camera, portable light, power unit, and recorder;
and leaving Andy to bring the station wagon, I got out and
ran down the sidewalk toward the fire. It was a two-block
run, weaving through hundreds of pedestrians on the sun-baked
sidewalk. The ungainly equipment slung from both shoulders
weighed some sixty pounds, and it clanked together and banged
against my sides as I ran. I was almost winded as I jogged
up to the police barricades. I excused my way through the
crowd of spectators, and the police let me through the ropes.

The streets were lined with massive fire engines, their
pumping motors roaring. The hot pavement was criss-crossed
with turgid hoses, and firemen were hastily unrolling others
in limp ribbons. I hopscotched through the maze of hoses
and across to the front door of the burning building, from
which a steady stream of people was pouring in a mass evacua-
tion. The whole operation was relaxed and orderly. The
businessmen carried satchels of money and papers; the secre-
taries bore folders full of records; waiters and porters were
bringing clothing and brown paper bags.
I pushed through the revolving door into the lobby, where there was a thin haze of smoke, and the evacuees were stepping gingerly through the shallow pools of water that stood on the marble floor. They were all coming down the stairs; the fire had immobilized the elevators. I entered the staircase and found myself ascending in the company of several firemen in rustling slickers. One of them told me that the fire was concentrated in the elevator engine room at the very top of the building. So the climb was to be fifteen and a half stories.

The stairs were narrow, and we had to turn sideways to get past the stream of people leaving the building. Some were laughing and joking with one another as we squeezed our way past them. Others were quiet and solemn, but they were all calmly intent on making their way down the stairway as rapidly as possible. My friends the firemen were laden with axes, chemical extinguishers, and gas masks, but my load must have been the heaviest, and I silently cursed the impedimenta as it clattered against the wall and bumped those on their way down.

We had made only about three stories when the whole mess began to seem inordinately heavy. The heat and smoke was becoming progressively intense. A couple of the firemen were
making friendly conversation by asking me what certain items of my equipment were, and I was trying to retain enough breath to answer. The straps that held the stuff seemed to cut through my coat and into my shoulders, and several times I had to stop to readjust the things. I have never so longed for an elevator.

At last we reached the fifteenth floor, and there was only a half floor to go to the elevator housing. The smoke by then was thick enough to be quite annoying, and I was beginning to choke. We dragged up the remaining spiral, and suddenly I stood at the door to the elevator housing. The firemen donned their masks and pushed their way into the room, where the visibility was almost down to zero. Coughing and gasping, I could barely see the flames across the room. I could distinguish the black and hazy forms of firemen working with extinguishers, and there were periodic flashes from electrical short circuits going off like flashbulbs. The smoke billowing from the room threatened to choke me, but I realized that I had climbed all those stairs to take movie film, so in I plunged.

The smoke was as devastating to me as tear gas, and I tried to hold my breath while I ground away with the camera. Within a few seconds, I could stand it no longer; my eyes
running, my lungs bursting, I stumbled back out of the door and down to the next landing, where I hung my head out of a tiny window. The air was heavenly—delightful; I drank it in as one would a tall, cool, iced julip. Finally, I knew I had to go back up and try for more film footage, so I filled my lungs, held my breath, and dashed back up the stairs into the smoke. This time I lasted a little longer, but I soon had to breathe. With the first breath, I again began to cough and sputter. Two more breaths and I was too agonized to go on. Back down the stairs I ran and thrust my head again into the blissful air. As I drew in my head and was turning around, I met a fire captain on his way up. "Well, how's it goin'?" he asked.

"Pretty good, I guess, but this damn smoke is killing me. I can only stand it long enough to get about fifteen seconds of film; then I'm shot."

"You come on with me," he said, "you can breathe that smoke."

"Oh, come on, now."

"No, really, I mean it. You just do what I tell you and come along."

"OK, I'm with you," I answered, seeing that he was quite serious. We approached the door into the smoke.
"All right, now. You just breathe real shallow. Don't take any deep breaths, whatever you do. And don't get excited; if you start breathing too fast, you've had it. Just breathe slow and shallow. Pace yourself and breathe regular, too. Now, how's that?"

"Well, I'll be darned! Now I know why they call you guys smoke eaters." I was amazed. My eyes still ran, but I found that I could actually breathe the smoke. It was just like inhaling a cigarette. For the first time, I realized that many of the firemen in the room were working without gas masks, and I remembered that I had often seen firemen working without masks in heavy smoke. But I had never before been observant enough to think anything of it. It was one of the most delicious sensations I had experienced, to be able to move around and work in such thick smoke.

I now realized that the electrical flashes were coming from a big wiring panel at one end of the room. The firemen cautioned me to stay clear of it, and I was glad to comply. I must have spent a half hour in the room taking film, but then I decided that I should somehow try to send back a live report for our radio news. I found the fire captain and thanked him, then went back down the stairs to the fifteenth floor. Most of the fire, they had told me, was confined in
the elevator housing. It had begun in the greasy exhaust ducting from a kitchen stove in a restaurant several floors below. Since it was well under control, I had plenty of information for the report. The only problem was finding a telephone.

Emerging from the stairway onto the smoke-filled fifteenth floor, I wandered down the hall, still practicing my smoke breathing. I thought perhaps I might find an abandoned office from which I could call in the report, and I was right. Finding a door standing open, I walked in and looked around for a telephone. There was one on the reception desk, but I decided to look for another by a window, where I could get some fresh air. There was an inner office with a window; I went in, opened the window, and settled comfortably beside the phone. I called in the report, being careful to add the spectacular detail that I was speaking from the fifteenth floor. I thought it must have been pretty impressive to hear a courageous reporter risking his life high atop a "burning building," but if anyone was impressed, I never heard about it.

The report over, I sat for a moment congratulating myself on a job well done and drinking in the fresh air while reloading my camera. Suddenly the telephone rang beside me. Its ringing seemed so unlikely that I sat staring at it for
a moment. Then, since I have been taught to always respond to buzzers and bells, I picked it up. "Hello?" I said uncertainly.

"I'd like an appointment for tomorrow afternoon," said a lady's voice.

"Well, er, I think you should call back later, ma'am. Right now, the building's on fire."

"Oh, come now, young man. This is Corona's, is it not?"

"Well, I guess so, but I'm not even sure. I'm just visiting, really."

"Now, you go ahead and put me down for tomorrow afternoon, I'm in a hurry."

"No, really, you don't understand. The building really is on fire."

"Yes, I know, you said that. Now just put me down for--"

"I can't. The place is on fire, and everyone has been evacuated."

"Nonsense. If the place is empty, what are you doing there?"

"Ma'am, I just came in for a breath of fresh air."

"On the fifteenth floor? Say, just who are you, anyway? Is this Corona's?"

"I'm a newsman, and I don't even know what place this is."
"What do you mean, a newsman? I called for an appointment, and I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, lady, this is impossible. You just call back later, OK?"

"Indeed not. I intend to take my business elsewhere."

Click. "Omigod," I thought as I got up to begin the long trip down, "I sure did somebody a favor. I wonder what this 'Corona's' is anyway." And I glanced at the lettering on their front door as I left. It was a hair removal salon. Heading back down the stairs, I absently hoped the indignant lady caller would be able to find another before things got out of hand.
CHAPTER XII

STATISTICS

In the big city, seldom does a twenty-four-hour day pass without some sort of police activity worthy of reporting as news. Sometimes there is much to report—significant or insignificant, tragic or comic. But always, police business means news. Any responsible newspaper or broadcasting station would feel disgraced if it were not on top of an important bit of news within a reasonably short time after the event. So bearing in mind that big stories usually break unheralded, journalists live with one ear cocked in the direction of the police station, the other toward the Sheriff's office, and the third trained upon the activities of the Fire Department. When I was permitted to leave my cloistered radio and TV studios to go after a story, I felt a constant awe for the full-time police reporters. They all wore hats, and I suspected that their headgear concealed the third ear.

The undisputed dean of the city's police reporters was a dapper and saturnine old fellow named Barry McAnders. Barry was the genial incarnation of Beelzebub himself. Second only
to his reporting prowess, his greatest prides were in his hard-nosed attitude toward all occurrences, his whole-hearted subscription to a life of hard liquor, and his incomparable skill at profanity. Profanity! His was pure poetry. Its unthinkable filthiness was a constant delight to lesser men. Barry's entrances to the police press room were worthy of a Miltonic passage. I could smell the smoking brimstone as Barry capered through the door. His hoofs didn't even seem to touch the floor as he greeted us oratorically: "Fellow pussy eaters!" How we admired that man! Thin he was, and the weathered hide hung loosely at his neck. His face was a pattern of lines that looked like the alluvial waste of an eroded farmland. Fiery little eyes sparked from amid the furrows. What he looked like without a hat, no one knew, for he never took it off. Black Homburg at a jaunty angle, always there. And below the loose leather of his jaws and neck, always a starched white shirt, and a bow tie that gathered in the skin like a rubber band around the neck of a paper sack. Even in the 1960's, he seemed like a character from the depression, thirty years before.

Barry was probably the most independent reporter I ever saw. He had been a nose and grindstone police reporter for the city's largest newspaper for over forty years, but now
he was in semi-retirement. He only did what he wanted to, it seemed, handling the most glorious assignments while the freshmen battled through the daily routine. But he deserved his elevated status, and everyone knew it. When Barry entered the press room, he was automatically in command. His stops there were infrequent, but he always gave those of lesser seniority a feeling that he still owned the place. He was like a delightfully evil sprite, returning to haunt his old habitat.

And there was George Parker, who lived there. The police press room was his home, and he left it only to visit his family or a pleasant bar. George even took pride in the dingy furnishings, and he somehow conned the city government into replacing some of the room's old overstuffed couches with other old overstuffed couches that would be more comfortable for sleeping. He was as constant as the day and night, and when it fell my lot to become my station's occasional police reporter, I came to enjoy his company. Both of us would arrive in an anesthetized state at about five o'clock each morning. And when we met in the hall, I often got the same feeling that Alice must have had as she hailed passers-by falling down the rabbit hole. George and I would stagger solemnly into the microscopic snack bar and silently
flip dimes to determine the buyer of two ungodly medicinal servings of chemical coffee in porous paper cups that imparted their cardboard taste to the black liquid. Then we would approach the sullen machine, which would dutifully spit out our coffee. Holding the scalding cups, we would shuffle into the adjacent dispatchers' room.

The dispatchers' room was indeed a wonderland, efficient and impressive. On either side of a long table sat six to ten people whose duty it was to take calls from citizens who phoned for police help. Down the middle of the table, a silent, moving belt carried their messages into the two radio dispatchers, whose microphones broadcast from the glass-enclosed adjoining room. The call-takers wore telephone headsets as they quickly wrote out the exact nature of each call and tossed the completed form onto the conveyer. In seconds, the paper was in the hands of a dispatcher, who broadcast a constant stream of calls to the officers in the patrol cars:

"Seventy-one, got a window peeper at 549 Collins."

And the reply of the car, "Seventy-one clear."

"Nine seventy-six, disturbance call at the OK Bar, 734 Elm."

"Nine seventy-six clear."
"Six twenty-two, unconscious person on the sidewalk in the 200 block of Main."

"Six twenty-two clear."

"Code Three" was the signal for all deliberate haste in answering a call; it meant that life was in danger. Red lights, sirens, and twenty miles per hour over the speed limit. In the city, danger came often:

"Eight forty-two, Code Three, a major accident on Central Expressway above University Drive."

"Eight forty-two clear," would come the reply, and before the patrolman in the car had closed the switch on his hand microphone, it would pick up the ascending wail of his siren. Minutes later, the officer's voice might be tensely calling for an ambulance, or perhaps more than one ambulance, perhaps a justice of the peace to investigate a death.

George and I and thousands like us dealt with tragedy often, but when we arrived, our thoughts were on ferreting out whatever there was to be reported and regarding the whole thing from as detached a viewpoint as we could achieve. The police were the same way, usually. No matter how deeply we cared for human life, it seemed that we preferred to make tragedies into statistics, dissipating the human element in them and transforming people into numbers.
"A nineteen-year-old high school girl became the city's eighty-ninth traffic fatality of the year in the early hours of the morning."

"An early morning shoot-out at a south side bar has added two additional gunshot deaths to this year's rapidly rising toll."

We played the numbers game and made ourselves forget the agony and heartsickness that accompanied each statistic. The forced forgetfulness had to serve us even out of the press room—even out of the studio, often as we had to be on the scene of unhappy stories, averting our eyes to miss the sight of a dead young man, whose mother would soon begin endless hours of weeping when she was informed of the untimely termination of her baby's life. "I just thought he was drunk," his girl friend would say to the investigating officers as she puffed a cigarette through her tears. "He was just lying there on the floor when I came in." And I would shuffle out into the hall and take note of the wallpaper and wonder vaguely if the next tenant of the room would know that the previous occupant had drunk himself into a stupor and been murdered in the bathroom. And I would wonder if the sobbing mother would ever realize how unutterably ugly it all was. Or if she would only wail over her boy's powdered and perfumed
corpse and question the death of such a precious child. And I would report, "City police are searching for the assailant who took the life of a twenty-two-year-old man last night in an east side apartment."
CHAPTER XIII

STONEHENGE

At the end of Main Street stood one of the foulest looking structures I had ever seen. It had the historical significance of yesterday's undershirt and the aesthetic appeal to match. Built during a statewide spurt of public works spending before the turn of the century, the County Courthouse was a carbon copy of the state's other ugly old buildings that emerged from the same pork barrel. If the architects who designed the mass abominations had been trying to start a trend that matched the popularity of the old Gothic cathedrals, they had certainly been over-financed and under-inspired. To this day, most of the old ruins survive, forming the "courthouse square," the mecca of every town in the state chosen as a county seat by the providential hand of politics. Politicians, as every God-fearing man will testify, move in strange and wonderful ways. A few of the musty, topheavy structures stand alone as mute monuments to the glory of politics. In their day, as now, public welfare projects were usually granted to the areas with the greatest concentration of money. Some of them still remain in lonely
little towns from which the money has long since fled. The people never came.

In tiny Texas towns that failed to flourish, the ghostly old structures stand silently in the geometric center of what was to have been a booming city. Perhaps a feed store, a ramshackle service station, and a grocery store linger half-heartedly around the bleak square. And the courthouse, with its dime-store design of dingy sandstone, looks expectantly down the half-deserted, ill-kept roads for the teeming multitude whose influx the builders predicted almost a century ago. And its sadly broken window panes have been replaced at random with rough-cut rectangles of cheap plywood. And its lonely gargoyles seem to welcome the siftings of friendly birds. And its old clock has long ago forgotten how to tell time, perhaps to spare the feelings of the aged building.

Ah, but the venerable stone temples have their pride. They are, after all, irrevocably the county courthouses and behind their dusty panes beats the heart of government, even in the remote towns. When no one is listening, they probably remind the dying frame store fronts around them that they are the Law, in those parts. The county judge, the county sheriff, the attorneys and the lawmen have offices here, and here the duly elected hold court. Men are tried for their lives in
rickety old courtrooms which come alive for a trial now and then. Those faithful to the name of Politics have continued to worship His ancient doctrinal decrees. So, the judges, sheriffs, peace justices, and clerks must drive from larger towns nearby to the blessed spot that got the building. Even prisoners, arrested in the larger towns, are given a trip to the county seat and imprisoned behind the bars of a pastoral vault that puzzles them. I have seen them give the old places the quizzical look with which our generations regard Stonehenge. And the prisoners perhaps wonder what strange cult built these well-planned ruins, and whether the old worshippers are about to revert to the practice of human sacrifice.

In the larger county seats, where prosperity has supplanted the raw rule of politics, the old buildings often survived through the sponsorship of some good-doing organization such as the Daughters of the American Indian Killers. These people are perpetually gathered around a giant caldron of bubbling pride. And between tossing in dried bats' wings and marinated frogs' teeth, the stirrers dip in an acid-proof spoon and slop out a bit of molten, greasy pride upon their community. The steaming liquid soon grows cold and hard in the open air, but it is usually sufficient to preserve such deserving health hazards as the old courthouse. I have seen
one that has even had its lawn mowed regularly, its wooden
doors replaced with plate glass, and the four faces of its
tower clock encircled with orange neon tubes, giving it the
nighttime glow of a three-story truck stop.

In our city, the County Courthouse was not so decorated.
Where its architect had omitted gargoyles, the pigeons took
over. Like most of the veteran county government buildings
of like age, it was of two sharply-contrasting colors of
native stone, rusty red and weak gray. It had stood the
elements rather well, and the Fire Marshal even had the
courage to maintain his office there. The building wasn't
without its modern conveniences, either; many of its windows
boasted bulging air conditioners. I always suspected that
the county judge wanted to do away with the place, in spite
of the air conditioners. But it would have been political
suicide for him to say so.

Across the street from the sullen old courthouse stood
the two-part hybrid annex known as the Records Building. It
sprawled six stories high over the entire abbreviated block.
I always thought of it as the Royal Palace, for in truth, it
housed a king.

King Joe. He sat on a throne in a well-lighted glassed-in
office. Surrounded by loyal members of his court, our
county sheriff spent his days making wise and just decisions—verbally to his right-hand men, and by telephone to anyone with whom he had business.

The days of the absolute monarchy have long since passed away, but the title of king is still suspect in this free land. If Joe Barker was a king, at least he was a benevolent and kind one who ruled with humility and unselfishness. I always thought of him as a sort of royal personage because of the way he ran the huge law enforcement agency that was his sole responsibility. And the jail—it was usually thought of more as Barker's jail than as the property of the county. Even the sheriff himself had come to have perhaps a bit stronger feeling of ownership than the voters would have wished, but the jail couldn't have been in better hands.

While the excitement of being a big city newsman was still upon me, I took great delight in being "on call." Toby was certainly happy to avail himself of the services of a young gullible such as myself, so I was on call almost every night. And the calls were frequent. Abe Fritz, our night editor, who delivered the ten o'clock news, was blessed with overactive adrenal glands. When the slightest emergency arose, the stimulating fluid began to course throughout his Lincolnesque frame, and soon my telephone would be ringing.
Usually, I would be called away from a placid conversation beside the apartment swimming pool. It was with the gravest air of importance that I would hurry away from what I fancied was the awestricken gaze of the other tenants. I was always willing to sacrifice my leisure, especially if others were watching. I rejoiced in striding briskly back through the poolside gathering on my way to the parking lot, having made an instant change from swim suit to business suit. I was convinced that I was envied by every boy and admired by every girl. Off I would go, plunging headlong into another fabulous adventure. Actually, though, the anticipated adventures usually failed to develop, and my spectacular exits most often sent me in search of elusive wild geese put to flight by Abe's adrenal secretions. It was upon one of these misdirected pursuits, however, that I first learned of Sheriff Joe Barker.

"Hey, Tim, there's a call for you."

"Excuse me, please." I nodded to several friends beside the pool and quickly headed for my apartment, prepared to utter the magic word, "Shazaam!" and emerge as Captain Marvel before the very eyes of the amazed onlookers. I have since concluded that the onlookers weren't really amazed; the boys nurtured little if any envy, and the girls were much more
interested in the boys who remained—not in one who was always dashing away.

This particular evening, Abe's adrenalin was justified; five prisoners had just escaped from the county jail. And, as if the jail break weren't sensational enough, the entire area was under a tornado warning. Because of the forecast, I had taken a mobile unit home and was prepared to rush to the scene if a tornado developed. But now, it seemed to Abe that everything was happening at once. His urgent calls usually sounded like the dying message of a valiant captain embroiled in a fatal battle: "Five prisoners just broke Barker's jail!" he shouted breathlessly into the phone.

"Migod!" I replied, without the faintest idea of what "Barker's jail" was; this was one of my first emergency calls, and they had not yet begun to affect me like the legendary wolf cry.

"I'll be in service in a minute," I assured him without stopping to ask what sort of establishment this "Barker's jail" was. "In service" meant that I would be off and running in the mobile unit while I communicated further by two-way radio. As I pulled on my trousers, I mused over what kind of jail he had been talking about, but my blind faith convinced me I must have misunderstood him. After bursting past the
crowd at the swimming pool, I was soon squealing out of the
long driveway, hoping those I was leaving could hear the speed
of my departure. "KP 5311 to KKA 966," I called.

"This is KKA 966," Abe answered breathlessly from the
microphone in the newsroom. "They were last seen heading
north."

"O.K., which way do you want me to go?"

"North! They're going north!"

"I was 10-4 on the direction," I replied (throwing in a
"10-4" now and then always added to the excitement). "I mean
which highway, which road?"

"Any of 'em will do. Just go north; I haven't the time
to find out exactly which highway. We've got reports of
possible tornadoes in the area." I went north as rapidly as
possible. Dusk was falling, and there was a red, dusty haze
in the air—the kind of haze that sometimes billows up from
the sandy plains of the Texas panhandle and rushes along
ahead of the advancing winds. It was as if the airborne
dirt were warning other lands to cling fast and avoid the
gusty peril that lifted it into the sky and transformed its
sedentary contentment into a life of swirling torment.
Widely spread droplets of rain were finding their way through
the dusty clouds to spatter on windshield and pavement and
give a fresh smell to the air, as if something great were about to happen. But I was cozy inside the mobile unit, and as I threaded the little station wagon through the traffic, I wondered what intrigue awaited me.

At the moment, one of the most intriguing questions was the gnawing wonder about "Barker's jail."

"KP 5311 to KKA 966," I called, and Abe answered with a tone of harried impatience. "Abe, I thought I'd better get a few of the facts from you before I get there."

"Get where?"

"Well, wherever I'm going. The North Pole, if you don't divert me along the way."

"What do you want to know?"

"Oh, how'd the break take place, who got away from what jail, and where are they going?"

"Well I'm still getting the facts by phone, but I think these five prisoners held a knife at the throat of one of the jailers and escaped with him as a hostage. They're headed north." North. Only two of them were headed that way, I found out later. The other three had been recaptured within a block of the courthouse. The five of them had collaborated on collecting razor blades, and one craftsman among the bunch had combined the blades with an old toothbrush handle to
fashion a deadly knife. The sheriff's officers had given them plenty of room as the desperate men emerged from the elevator onto the first floor. One of the escapees clinched the arm of a middle-aged jailer and held the handmade knife to the throat of the hostage. The spacious office was almost deserted; even the sheriff had gone home to his family. The deputies who remained knew enough not to bargain with the jailer's life. The escapees had edged their way through the office and out the front door of the courthouse. There had they split, and three had been recaptured before they had gone far. The remaining two, a couple of gentle but misguided young men, had ushered the frightened jailer into a nearby postal truck, which they stole handily from the post office across the street. The youngsters had released the hostage several blocks away. And in the northern outskirts of the city, they had abandoned the postal truck.

"Hey, Abe, don't you think I ought to know which highway to head for?"

Silence.

"Abe?"

Silence.

"KP 5311 to KKA 966."

Then the excited Abe: "There's one spotted on the east side!"
"Migosh, thought they were headed north."
"No, a tornado."
"You mean there's a tornado in on the east side?"
"Yeah. Head that way."
"What's the location of it?" I wheeled the wagon into the apron of a busy service station and turned around under the disapproving glare of the overworked attendants.
"Don't know. Head east!"
"Which way is east from here?"
"From where?"
"Evergreen Lane and Dalewood." Abe's answer was beyond my understanding. I asked an elderly gentleman who was waiting for a bus, and as he cocked his head in wonder. I followed his pointing finger. Several miles later, Abe called back and said the tornado had been a false alarm. Again, at his direction, I headed north.
CHAPTER XIV

AND PULLED OUT A PLUM

After a few more tedious miles in heavy traffic, Abe called me again. But this time he was reporting a drowning, not a tornado or an escaped prisoner. I had to detour again from the northward flight and follow a fantastic set of directions that got me so dizzy and lost that I felt like a white rat on his way through a maze. And all the while I wondered how far away the jail escapees were getting while I chased another prospective story. After almost an hour, I arrived at the scene of the reported drowning, a plush apartment complex populated mostly with the current run of young unmarried "swingers." I headed straight for the pool. It was an impressive thing, adjacent to a fancy private club room. All was quiet, and a few residents lounged about in small groups. If there had been a drowning, they were either taking it rather well or hadn't cared much for the victim. I hesitated to intrude on any of the private conversations, so was glad to see a chubby pink fellow in a swim suit come padding out of the club, fondling a tall, cool glass.
"Excuse me, sir. Have they already taken the drowning victim away?"

"Whathellyatalkinabout?"

"There was a drowning here, wasn't there?"

"Yastupidsunch. Thubastarduzjusdrunk not drownded."

"Thanks."

"Yastupidsunch."

"You, too."

The rain had subsided during my quest for the would-be drowning, but now it began in earnest, and leaving the apartment complex I could hardly see through the torrent's battle with the windshield wipers. By this time, I had completely lost interest in the escapees, although I had managed to recall the Sheriff's name and connect it with Abe's reference to "Barker's jail." With Abe's approval, I headed home. He would call me if hell broke loose. It didn't, and the two fugitives were still congratulating themselves on their freedom.

The next day, I met King Joe himself. He had called each station and newspaper to announce a marijuana raid, and I was excited to be our only reporter on the story. I had visions of bursting in upon an orgiastic smoking party, complete with nudes, soft lights, and wild music. But no, the raid was not to be so spicy. The target, so it developed,
was not a sin den but instead a single marijuana plant. This unsuspecting botanical criminal had been growing placidly in a suburban pasture for a number of months, while deputies lurked in the nearby woods and kept it under constant surveillance against the day when he who sowed it should return to reap. Had the truth been known, the seed that gave rise to the innocent-looking little sprout had probably emanated from the digestive system of some passing bird who was flying high on the stuff. If so, chances were the airborne planter hadn't really planned to revisit the scene of his deposit. Nevertheless, whether the plant's genesis had been crime or accident, its existence was illegal. And it would be an expedient time to sacrifice its young life even if doing so meant losing a possible arrest, because the publicity would let the voters know that the Sheriff's Department was doing something besides allowing jail breaks.

I entered the sheriff's office with a sort of wonder. It was a glassed-in space of about fifteen square feet in one corner of a huge outer office. I discovered that there was no special procedure for admittance; one simply walked through the larger room and entered the court of King Joe without knocking. There was a constant turnover of guests entering and leaving at will through the two doors of the
sheriff's little office. There was a dingy lime green carpet on the floor. The room was lined with enough straight office chairs to seat a dozen people. One wall had three windows that looked out over a side street to a small green area with benches and a fountain. Two other walls were mostly glass, and looked into the rows of desks in the outer office. Behind the desk, the wall was completely covered with framed photographs of politicians, celebrities, friends, and relatives, most of whom had autographed their pictures for the sheriff. The hundreds of pictures covered every inch of available wall space, even above the windows and behind the doors. The chairs in the room were steel, once painted gray to match the filing cabinets that stood here and there, but both chairs and cabinets were scarred and rusty. The desk was old and battered, too. It was piled with papers, paperweights, and telephones. Behind it sat the Sheriff.

Joe Barker was an immaculate little man who looked more like an aging insurance salesman than a lawman. He was approaching seventy, small and pale, pink and soft and clean shaven and neatly dressed in a dark suit and snap-brim hat. He was never known to remove the coat and hat. His features were large, wide, and slack, and his sturdy nose and flared nostrils gave him a look slightly equine. His voice was
perpetually soft and hoarse, and his eyes peered, a bit inde-
dependent of one another, from behind stylish, black-rimmed bifocals. I always had the feeling that one was looking into my very soul while the other glanced about to keep up with the rest of the world. As I hesitated at the door, those eyes penetrated me, and the hoarse voice said encouragingly, "Come in, come in."

I approached the desk, where the king reclined easily in his swivel chair. Before the eyes of the ten people who milled about the office, I introduced myself and did an uneasy stationary shuffle while we exchanged pleasantries. Fortunately, a deputy arrived with some business, and while he buzzed it into his master's ear, I gladly took a seat. I sat thinking such profound thoughts as how fortunate I was to be sitting instead of trying to find a leaning place among the autographed pictures. Several more newsmen arrived, and we were soon sardined into a couple of unmarked squad cars and on our way to the marijuana. I was in the back seat of the high sheriff's own car, jammed between two other newsmen. As we made our way from the heart of the city to the suburban narcotics patch, the king filled us in on details. While a deputy drove, the sheriff leaned his elbow on the front seat headrest and instructed us:
"Now, fellas, don't you be taking any pictures of me out there. Buddy and Jack found the stuff, and it's been their baby. And I don't expect headlines; I know my jail break is bound to blow hell outta this story anyway. But what the hell. We were getting tired of keeping this damn plant staked out, and we've decided whoever planted it probably isn't coming back for it."

And when we finally got to it, the thing sure didn't look worth coming back after. It was a scrawny little sprig less than a foot high wobbling in a weed patch at the edge of a grove of trees. It was near an overgrown trail, far from any road, and I wondered how the devil Buddy and Jack found it. The beer cans and rubber prophylactics scattered about testified to the pastimes most often pursued there. At our request, Buddy and Jack, two young plainclothesmen, squatted behind the little plant, grinning and sheepishly fondling its leaves for the cameras. Then our cameras ground away while the two shy deputies uprooted the offender with a huge shovel and socked it away in a plastic evidence bag. Then it was all over. We rode back downtown while making inconsequential jokes with the sheriff, and that evening, Buddy and Jack starred on all our local newscasts. The next day, they were immortalized in the newspapers: "SHERIFF'S
OFFICERS DISCOVER MARIJUANA." I've since learned that the weed sprouts voluntarily with embarrassing regularity in some parts of the Southwest, but what the hell.
The scapegoat marijuana plant had given its life for the Sheriff's Department, and its sacrifice effectively diverted public attention from the jail escape. Still, for the next several days the two young fugitives remained at large, while officers traced their northward flight through a series of stolen and abandoned cars. In spite of their youth, their progress had been cautious and slow. Using back roads, they had made their way only about four hundred miles. They had even waylaid a farmer, forced him to drive them through several towns in his pickup truck, then paid him for his gasoline with stolen money. Bidding him goodbye on a lonely road, they had given him directions to the nearest highway and run away into a nearby thicket. The police were put out with the farmer because he had driven all the way back to his hometown before reporting the incident to them.

In our city, the marijuana story was spectacular enough to occupy only a single day's news, and the manhunt returned to the limelight. Each day, we carried stories reporting that "Officers are still searching near the Oklahoma border
for the two young fugitives who escaped last week from the County Jail." Our department was on the alert for the expected capture, and Toby had decided that we would send a reporter to cover the story, whenever it happened. Andy and I had let him know that we were anxious to go, and both of us had our shaving supplies packed, along with a change of clothes. I even had my old Army combat boots ready, in case we should have to take to the woods and join the search. Andy was ready with his brogans and a pair of faded Air Force fatigues.

It was shortly before ten o'clock on a Saturday night when our phone rang. Abe was panting on the other end of the line to tell us that the capture had been made, just outside the tiny county seat of Baily County, just south of the river that marked the state line. "You guys get going," he said, "and I'll call you the details by radio after I'm off the ten o'clock news." Outside, our mobile unit was already loaded with cameras and sound equipment. I called Andy away from the swimming pool, where he was explaining to several girls the North American Air Defense System. We tossed our bags into the station wagon and were off.

This time, we knew where we were going, and I headed onto the wide, northbound Interstate Highway. The miles flew by,
and we talked excitedly of the capture. We had heard our station's ten o'clock radio report, telling that officers had closed in on the pair in a lonely expanse of brush country about twenty miles from where the farmer had dropped them. A few minutes after ten-thirty, when Abe had finished his television newscast, we heard his voice come crackling over our two-way radio. We were already over forty miles away, and our signal was beginning to weaken. "They've got them in Baily County Jail," he said, "That's in the town of Plainfield. Toby wants you to get some sound-on-film with them."

"Sound-on-film" is simply film taken with a sound camera and microphone. That meant that we were supposed to get some sort of interview. And that, of course, was before federal rulings decided that such open coverage with a prisoner tends to prejudice his case in court.

"Will do," replied Andy, blowing a cloud of his cigar smoke into the mike and closing the switch. "Migod, Tim, how the hell are we going to get an interview with the bastards?"

"Damned if I know, Andy. We may have to settle for a bit with the local sheriff or some young hero who was in on the capture."

"Yeah, the home town lawmen are usually pretty anxious to tell the world every exciting detail, but the prisoners have a taciturn streak once they're in a cell."
"Well, I hope these boys are in the talking mood. Otherwise, it might damage our reputation with the Old Captain as aggressive young reporters. If we could just find a good, talkative swarm of bees." Andy chuckled and settled down in the soft upholstery. We had a five-hundred mile drive ahead of us, and he would need to be rested for his turn at the wheel. The pavement swept past beneath us in the glare of the headlights. Their powerful beams stabbed ahead into the darkness, but without conquering it. Always several hundred feet ahead remained the curtain of black, and my vision stopped there. The oncoming cars gave no hint of where they had been or where they were headed; their lights only caused my dilated pupils to contract, dimming for a moment my perception of what lay ahead. The wind whistled faintly in our ears as it fanned past the wagon's partly open vent windows. Andy was asleep now, his knees propped against the dashboard, and I could barely distinguish his peaceful features by the dim instrument lights. I tried to concentrate on how we would get our interview, but I kept thinking of the two young captives.

They were from the same little town, just across the state line, and they must have been trying to get home. But why would a fugitive head for his own home, the very place
where he would surely be detected? They were young; perhaps they didn't think of that. And yet they had been cunning enough to elude their pursuers for five hundred miles and almost two weeks.

I drove below the speed limit. There seemed no hurry, as long as we arrived by around seven o'clock, when captors and captives would be awakening. Two hundred miles later, I left the Interstate and turned to the West. The towns became further apart, and the thick undergrowth closed in on the smaller highway. I wasn't sleepy, and Andy seemed to be enjoying his nap so thoroughly that I didn't wake him. By six o'clock, our crumpled map had directed me onto a narrow farm road that wound through gently rolling hills of corn and grain sorghum, alternating with deep creek beds covered with wild plum thickets, mustang grape vines, cedar, and black jack oak. We were nearing Plainfield. This was the kind of countryside where the two youthful criminals had grown up. They must have hunted quail and rabbit over hills like these and gathered wild grapes and plums for their mothers to turn into jams and jellies. And they must have risen before dawn with their fathers to feed the animals, milk the cows, and return to a warm kitchen for golden eggs and hot biscuits and sizzling smoked bacon and the tart sweet spreads from grapes and plums they had picked in the woods. And then
perhaps they had worked in the fields beside their fathers, with rags tied around their foreheads to absorb the sweat and keep it from their eyes. And fought the Johnson grass to give the corn and sorghum a chance, and mowed the weeds along the fence rows before they went to seed, and watched the tender shoots break through the earth and grow to towering stalks, and dropped their hoes to chase cottontails among the jungle of corn, and eaten the first sweet ears raw in the field, stripping away the green shuck and raking out the silk, and perhaps dreaded the harvest, when the day was long and hot in the field, and tied their shirt sleeves with cords at the wrist to keep out the dry dust and itchy chaff, and loved the long ecstatic plunge deep into a frigid irrigation tank, dusty forsaken clothes crumpled abandoned on the bank, and returned with poles and lines and hooks and tasty morsels for bass and crappie and catfish, and spent the night hunting bellowing bullfrogs with light and pole and gig, and grown to young manhood gone to the big city and ended up in jail, and ached and wished for the warmth of an old dog to love them and lick their faces and a sister who is learning to sew and blushes at the mention of the boy who drives the tractor on the next farm and a mother whose soft apron is made of a bright print flour sack and a father who is thin
and leathery and chews tobacco and delights in crumbling his corn bread in his buttermilk and little brothers who hang giggling upside down from chinaberry trees. And like a fox escaped the snare and ran and stole and threatened and headed for home thinking not of what would happen there or what would happen next week or tomorrow.

We bumped along over asphalt-patched chugholes now and the dawn was pink and blue. Andy stretched awake with a yawn and fumbled for a fresh cigar. "Helluva good sleep," he muttered.

"I'll say."

"Where are we? You should have waked me up."

"Plainfield, sack rat. There it is, in all its glory."
The little town was sprinkled at random on the broadest of the rolling hills. The white frame houses peeped at us from among the dewy greenery, and the sunrise tinted them pink, too. At the crest of the hill, the dingy, lonesome courthouse towered black against the pastel sky.

"Looks like the munchkin palace," Andy said, kindling his cigar and sending a blast of fragrant smoke up against the windshield.

"And that's where little Dorothy and her faithful mutt are being held prisoner. Beautiful, isn't it?"
"I hope Dorothy can wait until we've had some breakfast. Pancakes. I crave pancakes."

No pancakes. Or anything else, for that matter. We found the stately palace surrounded by vacant lots, a service station, a feed store, and a barber shop.

"Well I'll be damned! We're going to starve to death in this place!" It was not yet six o'clock, and we doubted that the jail would begin to stir before seven.

"Well, if you can stay alive on that cigar, we'll just wait in the wagon until the munchkins are up and munching."

"Migod, Tim, we'll both have ulcers at an early age at this rate. I just can't get used to abstaining from food."

"I sure would hate to be shut up in that place, Andy."
The barred jail windows were on the east side of the old courthouse, stacked for two stories above our heads.

"Me, too, but at least they'll have breakfast. Hang on and I'll go see if anyone's up." Andy got out and climbed the wide steps to the door beneath the sign: "BAILY COUNTY JAIL. SHERIFF A. O. BLACKBURN." He pushed, and it opened. He disappeared inside and was back in only a moment. "Come on, buddy, they're serving breakfast!" We locked our equipment in the wagon, dashed up the steps, then slowed down for a dignified entrance to the jail office.
"Come on in, boys," grinned a chubby, red-faced old man in a gray cotton work uniform. His sleeves were rolled up above the elbow, a mammoth ring of keys hung from his hip, and he, the jailer, was busy hustling trays of eggs and bacon onto a rolling serving cart. He wore a battered badge that showed its brass through the worn nickle plate. "Tom Dowdy's the name," he smiled, wringing our hands and nodding to a round little woman who stepped out of the kitchen to meet us, "and this is Maudie, my wife. We'uz just gettin' breakfast up, and there's plenty for the both of you.

"Pleased to meet you," his wife said, smiling shyly at our feet. Her kitchen adjoined the jail office, and the place had the air of a cozy living room instead of a prison. Their living quarters were on the other side of the kitchen, and we could see a vase of roses on their nightstand. The whole place was fragrant with the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee and the smoky smell of hickory-cured bacon. The trays were piled high with crisp toast, hash brown potatoes, and scrambled eggs.

"Maudie, you go on and take these fellers back in the kitchen, and I'll be on down as soon as I git these eats up to the boys." We thanked him and followed Maudie back into a kitchen bright with yellow floral wallpaper and white lace
curtains. She moved quickly about like a mother hen, clucking pleasantries and seeing that our plates were filled. "Honey," her husband called from upstairs, "George wants some more preserves. Could you put him some on a saucer, and I'll be down for it in a minute." She bustled over to get George's preserves. Heaping the sweet, red mass on a saucer, she excused herself and hurried the order up the stairs to the jailer.

"Land sakes!" she puffed as she returned to the kitchen, "that George is goin' to get so fat we won't be able to get him in the jail! Sometimes I think if I didn't feed him so good he'd stop gettin' drunk so much."

"For this kind of treatment, ma'am, I think I'd get myself arrested, too," said Andy, his eyes on the feast before us. In a few moments, Tom Dowdy was back with us. He breezed into the kitchen, sank into a chair, and scraped it up to the table under him. He grinned at us again, tucked his napkin in his collar, and chuckled at his wife, "Maudie, if you don't set down and stop doin' around this kitchen, you're goin' to waste away!" She shuffled back to the table and sat down, glancing quickly at us, then down to her plate. Tom Dowdy nodded to us all, and we bowed in unison. "Lord," he said, "we thank you for bringin' these two young men safely to our
table, and we thank you for the bountiful goodness you have bestowed upon us. We ask that you'd bless the boys upstairs, and help us to be better examples to 'em. And we thank you for what we're about to eat. Amen. Whew! OK, boys, pitch in." We did. "Well, I reckon the sheriff'll be here in a while, and he can tell you about all you want to know about them two boys. I know one thing sure, they was mighty hungry when they brought 'em in last night. Thought they'd never quit eatin' Maudie's chicken and dumplin's." His wife blushed.

Andy and I complimented the food and hospitality, and soon found ourselves talking about catfish with Mr. and Mrs. Dowdy, both of whom were avid fishermen. "Friend of mine," said the jailer, "used to all the time be tryin' to catch one of those big yella' cat. Kept at it for years, he did, always after one of the big'uns--you know, forty, fifty pound. Well, finally he took to skin divin', figured that'uz the best way to get one. Finally located one down on the bottom of Moss Lake, in the body of an old wrecked car somebody had shoved off in the water. Had his spear gun along, all right, but it took him about three weeks 'fore he could get a shot at the thing. Ever time he'd get up close to him, the old catfish'd roll up the window."

"Ohhh, that's terrible," I laughed.
"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," Andy snickered.

"He really ought, you know," said Mrs. Dowdy, "he's told that story to everybody in the county by now, and he's glad to have somebody from out of town that hadn't already heard it."

"Well, I guess you probably want to hear somethin' about them boys we got last night, specially if you're tired of my lyin'."

"Well," I said, "It's not that we're tired of the fish stories, but I suppose we had better get some information about them. How'd you get them?"

"Me and the sheriff was just drivin' along the road, and they come up outta the brush with their hands up. We wasn't even lookin' for 'em. We'uz goin' out to my brother-in-law's place fishin'."

"You mean they just gave themselves up? Just surrendered?"

"That's right. And we told 'em we ought'ta taken 'em on out there with us so we wouldn't miss 'em while they was strikin', but they was both so hungry we figured we better feed 'em before they both fainted. Dang it, they knocked us both out of a mess of bass, I know, cause Charlie Joe said they was sure hittin' just before sundown. By the time we got the boys back here in the jail house, they wa'nt no use in headin' back there, for it was already gettin' dark."
"They were pretty worn out, I suppose?"

"Oh, lord yes. They're both feelin' pretty good this mornin', though. The other boys was real quiet this mornin' so's not to wake 'em up. They was the last ones to get up for breakfast. Got 'em some clean clothes and a shave and shower."

"Do you think we could talk to them?"

"Don't see why not, if they're agreeable. I'll ask 'em, after we're done with breakfast." He did, they were, and we did.

Andy and I lugged the heavy camera and sound gear up the narrow stairs to the second floor. Following Tom Dowdy, we made our way down the passageway between the barred cells. Most of them were unoccupied. The only prisoners were in the cells next to the windows. Tom explained that "the boys" like the side where there was sunshine, fresh air, and a nice view of the countryside. "Well, George, you about sobered up, now?" he asked an elderly Negro man who sat reading a newspaper.

"Yessah, Mistah Tom, I'se feelin' a whole lot bettah afta Miz Maudie's breakfast."

"Well, you don't be gettin' up on your feet too much for a while. I'll bring you another paper after a while."
"Ah'm much obliged, Mistah Tom."

"Vern, you and Billy Bob ready for your visitors?" He inserted his key in the lock of a cell where two young men sat swinging their legs from the edges of their bunks.

"Might as well," one of them grinned, "gonna be sick anyway." The other didn't smile. He studied his swinging feet as we entered the cell and set our equipment on the concrete floor. The jailer introduced us, and Andy busied himself setting up the camera. I sat down on the edge of the cot beside Vern, the grinning one, and began explaining our interview. It was very like advising an accused of his rights. We would be careful, I said, not to air any of the interview that might prejudice the boys' case in court. We would simply ask them about their flight and the surrender the previous night. That was, in fact, all we could ethically put on the air. Anything about the nature of their offense would undoubtedly be prejudicial.

"Is that agreeable to both of you?"

Vern replied, "I don't think Billy Bob wants to say anything."

"You damn right I don't. We both done said too much already."

"Aw, chicken shit, they done caught us, can't do us no
harm. Might as well be famous. Hell, we ain't got nothin' else to look for, no way."

"You always talkin' so big, Vern, like you was a big man or somethin'. I'm just tired of this crap. I don't mean no offense to you fellas, it's just that Vern always thinks it's so damn funny and all. I just can't see it."

"Oh, that's all right," I answered, not quite knowing what to say to a captured fugitive.

"Hell, Billy Bob thinks he's still playin' football for Fulton High back home. Thinks football is like the "game of life," and it don't make any difference what happens as long as you play a good goddamn game. Billy Bob, don't you know we done lost? We done lost that game? And no matter what in hell happens now, we're still the losers, and there ain't no more wins in sight for us?" Vern's grin suddenly hardened, and he spat his words bitterly. Billy Bob's lip began a faint tremble. "Aw, I was just shittin' you, Billy Bob. It's OK, they ain't got us yet. You wanta get your interview, go ahead and get it. Hurry up. I'll do the talkin'. Billy Bob don't want to say nothin', do you, Billy Bob?"

"Naw, Vern. You go ahead and do the talkin' just like you done when we stuck up that fillin' station. You just go right ahead, and maybe we'll come out with more than goddamn seventeen dollars this time, just go on!"
"It was your friggin' idea, ole buddy, so don't you go bitchin' about it now. I'm gonna go ahead and get on TV, and you can do what the hell you please."

Andy gave the go-ahead signal, and we began. I warned the boys that we were about to turn it on. "Would you tell us, I said, "how you managed to escape from the big city jail?"

"Yessir," Vern answered, "I just split my comb handle and stuck some razor blades in it and made a knife, and I caught this jailer with it and made him get us out. That's all."

"And how did you manage to make it all the way to Plainfield?"

"Oh, me and Billy Bob just kept swipin' cars and runnin' 'em till they was out of gas, and we stayed pretty much on the back roads, and one time we got a fella to drive us a whole long way, but we had to make him do it, and then we got scared he'd tell on us pretty quick, so we took to the brush and come on through the country that way."

"How did you survive? What did you eat?"

"Oh, we stole some chickens and eggs and ate them plums and grapes out of the woods, when we could find em. That's about all."

"But why did you finally surrender?"
"We got tired. It was kinda fun when we first got loose, but there wasn't nobody to talk to. We just got tired."

"Do you know what happens to you now?"

"Well, I guess they haul us back to jail in the city. I guess that's what they're goin' to do."

"How do you feel about that?" I asked the question without thinking, then hated myself for it.

"Me? Mister, I don't give a god damn about nothin'! Nobody gives a damn about me, and I don't give a damn about a damn thing!"

"You just shut up," Billy Bob interrupted, "you damn runnin' off at the mouth again and makin' fools outta the both of us. When my mama sees all this stuff on television, whatta you think she's goin' to say? Ain't we give our mamas enough trouble already? Why can't you never be quiet? Mister, can't you just take what you got and go ahead on? Everybody goin' ta see all this and what are they goin' ta think about our mama and daddies, and my baby sister prob-ly won't even go to school no more, all that talk. Just leave us alone, just leave us alone?"

Andy shielded himself behind the camera while I muttered a sort of apology. Vern was silent now. He sat staring at the floor, his elbows on his knees. My forehead felt red and
hot and I wanted to get out of the place as soon as possible. We crammed our gear back into its boxes. Tom Dowdy, who had been watching through the bars, let us out, and we walked silently back down the stairs into the jail office. "Well, we're mighty pleased you all came," said the jailer as we said goodbye to him and his wife. Andy climbed behind the wheel and sped away, chewing violently on an unlighted cigar. We were silent as we drove down the farm road among the green fields and wild plum thickets.
CHAPTER XVI

THE DARKNESS SHALL COVER US

I was soon to be acquainted with a different city. The one that lives at night. Strange it is that thousands of residents of big cities never realize the extreme character change their home metropolis experiences when the hour grows late. In some quarters, blue-black shadows bring gloom to places of daytime gaiety. In others the dark hides ugliness, and neon lights make dirty unpainted bars into places of wonder. Lonely people wander through a new world of darkness and lights—glaring contrasts. And the people search for the glamor that escapes them when the sun is up and blanching brick, wood, sidewalk, and street—when the daylight reveals the tawdriness of their shadowy paradise. And in the dimness of the bar and cocktail lounge, wrinkled women bask in the red, blue, and green lights, and their years of pain are erased. Mascara, lipstick, lots of hair rinse and plenty of spray. Tight pants and sweaters to corral the tissue that has lost its firmness. "Now I'm beautiful again, as long as there's the night—hold the cigarette and puff gently—that's it—I don't feel so nervous as long as it's lighted—and maybe I'll meet somebody—"
And wrinkled men watch from behind a glass of beer:

"Man, look at the ass on that one. Bet she'd go in a minute. That's a helluva dog with her, though. Tell ya what: I'll flip out with ya to see which one gets the dog. Heh! Got a face that'd stop the Super Chief. You know, I remember one time in Kansas City—Hey! Suzie! How 'bout a couple more! Hell no, I'm buying this time. No, goddamn it, you got the last three rounds. Hey, I'll shoot you a game a pool for 'em. Awright?"

"No kiddn' honey, I betcha they'll be over here inside a' five minutes wantin' us to dance. I been in this place before. It won't be no time at all. I kinda like the one in the blue shirt—got class. See? They're gettin' up. Oh—yeah, but I bet they'll be back outa that damn pool room in five minutes."

And sad Cinderellas become plain again when the night is gone. And beer-drinking Prince Charmings stand and shave before cruel mirrors that reveal receding hairlines and growing, puffy-soft bags beneath unhappy eyes. And each belch brings the sour taste of the beer that was mellow in the night.
"You're the new overnight man, Collier!" announced Toby with an exaggerated pomp that seemed to require my thanks for the favor. The overnight shift, of course, was the most despised of them all. Arrive at eleven-thirty each night, and work 'til seven-thirty in the morning. But, feeling keenly my junior status, I had expected nothing better. I greeted the news with the enthusiasm one shows toward a dental appointment.

"When do I start?"

"Next week."

Between that time and the following week, I was to have the benefit of two shifts in tandem with the outgoing overnight man, who was to break me in. Ed Nichols was a brilliant, balding, wise-cracking bachelor, who was leaving the overnight shift for a more lucrative job with a public relations firm. Overjoyed at his emancipation from the dread overnight, Ed accorded me the consideration and respect he would have shown a condemned man: "Well, Tim, your main job is to see that nothing in the whole damn county happens without your knowing.
about it. You listen to the police, sheriff, and fire radios all the time. If you ever have to be away from them for even a minute, call all three headquarters just to make sure you haven't missed anything. And that includes making a round of calls after every newscast you do, so you'll know nothing happened while you were on the air."

I was to do the hourly radio news on our all-night music program, keeping my ears open between times and dashing out to cover any story that should develop. While I was away from the studio, the announcer on the music program would do my news for me. Ed recommended that I follow his practice of dropping in on each hospital emergency room and visiting the police dispatchers once a night just to keep in touch. He had made so many close friendships with the nurses and dispatchers that they often called us just to make certain that we hadn't missed some bit of information. I found the night people to be a pleasant but somewhat hardened group. They seemed almost insensible to human suffering, treating the injured, sick, and dying with detached efficiency. Whereas the police classified people according to age, race, physical description, and arrest record, the hospitals were interested in vital statistics, next-of-kin, and condition: good, fair, poor, serious, critical, or DOA. My business required names,
ages, and addresses, often obtained from a bloodstained driver's license. To preserve their sanity, the night people avoided thinking of souls, emotions, personalities.

Ed and I approached the emergency entrance of the huge county hospital where charity patients were handled, and where two or three "colored" ambulances were usually backed into the loading dock, having just discharged their emergency passengers. We were greeted by a faint unpleasant smell as we passed down a wide corridor lined with people waiting either for treatment or for a friend or relative who was being treated. They leaned uncomfortably against the greasy, yellowed plaster walls, squatted on their haunches, or sat cross-legged on the dirty, asphalt tile floor. They were mostly Negroes. Second in number were the Mexican Americans. Babies screamed or slept or nursed in their mothers' arms; besmudged children ran barefoot up and down the hall, shouting, giggling, and swerving now and then between their parents' legs. Many of them had been born in this very hospital. Most of them were illegitimate. Mercy Hospital.

Rounding a corner, we approached a long counter, gleaming beneath a row of bright fluorescents that contrasted sharply with the dingy, dim, incandescent bulbs pushing weakly against the darkness of the halls. Behind the counter,
several women were busy at their typewriters, carrying on the paper work of the emergency room. One of them came to meet us as we plopped our heavy movie cameras down on the counter. She was young, a woman in her late twenties, but her face was lined with crow's feet, and she had the look of an old battle-worn tom cat. She was painfully thin, and her little leathery arms were partly veiled by a flimsy purple sweater that hung like a cape from her bony shoulders. Her eyes were piercing—small, dark, and darting. "Hello, Ed, this must be your replacement," she smiled, scrutinizing my shoulders."

"This is Tim," he gestured, "and Tim, this is Billie." I was pleased to meet her.

"Well, I hope you'll make it by every night like Ed's always done. We get pretty damn lonesome around here at night."

"With all these people around?"

"Don't be funny. Not a soul to talk to. It's enough to drive you bats."

"I think I see what you mean."

"Well, Billie," Ed interrupted, "what's been going on tonight?"

"Oh, not much yet. The bars haven't closed yet, and they're not bringing in a hell of a lot of cases." It was
only a little past midnight, and on Saturday nights the bars were open until one in the morning. There were always a few shootings and stabbings in the bars, but most of the violence developed after the patrons had been forced to move their activities outside. The bartenders and bouncers were generally blessed peacemakers, but the state's liquor and beer laws required their counseling to end at a certain hour, and the drinkers inevitably got into mischief without group supervision. Out on the streets, they often became belligerants or dangerous drivers— or both. We followed their activities, although little of it was newsworthy. Only if they managed to kill themselves or someone else did they make news.

"I don't see why they don't let 'em keep the bars open all night," Ed grumbled, "then they could carry all the drunks peacefully home in the morning instead of letting them loose all at once."

"I wish to hell they would, too," Billie agreed, and from the hall emerged two sweating Negro ambulance attendants rolling a big, bleeding Negro man on a stretcher. "Shit. Here comes one now." Ed and I stepped aside as they wheeled the victim up to Billie's counter. The wounded giant was smiling and singing softly to himself!

"Mmmmm, see de gal wid de red dress on, she can do it all night long, Oh yeahhh, what I say, Mmmmm."
"OK," Billie barked, "What's the matter with you?"

"Oh, hello dere, honey. They ain't nothin' matter wid ole Rufus, no ma'am. Dis is Sattidy night, and they ain't nothin' wrong at all!" And his eyes wandered back to the ceiling lights. "Mmmmm, see de gal wid de diamong ring, she know how to shake dat thing."

"It's a gunshot wound, Billie," said one of the ambulance attendants, an immaculate young man in a white shirt and tie. He was clean-shaven, and his neatly-trimmed hair clung to his scalp like close-cropped wool. He looked as if he had been fresh scrubbed before the beads of sweat had begun to form. "We got him out of a bar at 1419 Beacon Street." Then laying a hand gently on the wounded man's shoulder, he said, "Come on, man, tell the lady your name and where you stay."

"Oh, my name Rufus. Dey all knows me, you knows me, man. I stays over on de west side."

"Sure, man."

Billie leaned out over the counter and looked down at the man. His face was spattered with blood. It had soaked his shirt and much of the white linen of the stretcher. "Now, Rufus, is that your first name or your last? What's your whole name?"

"Rufus R. Nelson, ma'am. Dey all knows me down dere."
"I'll bet they do. And what's your address? Where do you stay?"

"Oh, ma'am, I stays down dere on West Nineteenth Street. Dey all knows me."

"All right, Rufus. Let me see his driver's license, Joe. I'll get the stuff from it. Now, Rufus, who's your next-of-kin? You have a wife?"

"I stays wid Mattie Belle. She my woman. Mattie Belle ole Rufus' woman, yessah. Mmmm, see de gal wid de diamong ring." Two burly white policemen came in. They had been at the scene of the shooting and had followed the ambulance to the hospital.

"Rufus," one of them asked, "was it a woman shot you? Whad that woman do it for?"

"Where's he shot?" Ed whispered to Joe, the ambulance attendant.

"In the nose," Joe whispered back, making a face and pugging up the end of his own nose with his finger. "But he's not hurt. It was just a twenty-two shot out of a little ole pistol, and I think it's lodged in his cheek." As it developed, one of Big Rufus' girl friends had caught him out with his wife and shot him with the tiny pistol she carried in her purse.
"Who was that woman that shot you, Rufus?" one of the policemen asked.

"Oh, man, I don't want to make no trouble."

"She shot you in the face, and you don't want to make no trouble? What do you call trouble, anyway?"

"Man, what do you mean, shot me in de face?" Rufus grinned sleepily.

"She done shot you in the nose. Can't you even feel it?"

"Oh, you tellin' me a big 'un," Rufus mumbled, raising his huge bulk on one elbow and smiling at the officer.

"No, I'm not. You go ahead and feel it. Feel the end of your nose." Rufus fumbled for his nose and found it. He passed a gnarled finger over the bloody surface until it encountered the small-caliber puncture, which was still oozing a few drops of blood. As he felt, his eyes suddenly grew large and round, he inhaled rapidly and passed out. Joe caught him and eased his fall back to the stretcher.

"Take him in, Joe," Billie said. "Ed, you and Tim want some coffee? We got some doughnuts to go with it." We accepted, and she poured three steaming cups and joined us, placing the box of fresh doughnuts on the counter. She completed her forms from Rufus' driver's license. "I'm going to take the kids to the circus tomorrow."
"Yeah," said Ed.

"These are pretty good doughnuts, don't you think? Helluva lot better than that last batch we got. They must have been three weeks old."

"Tasted like it," replied Ed. I remained silent.

"Oh oh, give her room," Billie warned, cramming the rest of a doughnut into her cheek. We turned and stepped back as a young Negro woman was helped up to the counter. She was pregnant, and she moaned softly in a short, breathless rhythm. A ragged old Negro woman, her big, heavy arms about the young mother's shoulders, supported her anguished, shuffling steps. When they reached the counter, the old one relaxed her hold, allowing the young one to cling to the counter's edge. She leaned her swelling, heaving middle against the counter and clawed weakly at its formica surface with long, graceful fingernails.

"You have your card?" Billie asked coolly.

Silently, the old woman produced the plastic charity card and laid it on the desk. "She ready. She ready right now."

"Why didn't you bring her in sooner?" asked Billie, running the card through a machine that stamped its impression on a form.
"We didn't have no money fo' de cab, and they wont nobody to give us a ride. She ready right now." The laboring woman hung her head over the counter, and her low moans became progressively more hoarse and intense until they were scarcely more than short, rhythmic grunts. She was trying to stifle the sounds that were wrung from her throat.

"Is she married?"

"No'm."

"Who's the father?"

"He name Gilley."

"Where is he? What's his full name?"

"Ah don't know. He went."

"Where did he go?"

"Lawd, I don't know, Ma'am. He been gone long time. She ready now, she ready."

"I know that, but we need this information. Does she still live at the address on this card?"

"No'm, she stay with me now. Oh lawd, ma'am, she ready, she ready!" The old woman's lips curled back to expose gleaming white teeth, and her neck muscles stood out in relief as she tensed her body in sympathy with each successive grunt from the younger woman. My fingernails dug into my palms, and I wondered how Billie could be so detached, so cruel.
She, who had given birth to four children. The young woman's knees began to buckle, and the strong, bronze arms of her protector enfolded her as she began to slip from the counter. "You jus hol on, honey. I'se got you. I'se got you nice and close. You hol on. An' he's gonna be a boy, jus' like I tol' you. He gonna be a big, pretty boy!"

The young woman had held her eyes tightly closed, but now they widened in terror as she looked uncomprehendingly into the face of the husky old woman. "He comin', Aunt Mag, he comin' now," she rasped through clenched teeth, "my boy comin'!"

"God damn you white folks, get my baby a bed!" the old woman roared, tears bursting from her eyes. "It's awright, baby, it's awright, that boy OK!"

Billie was already at the swinging stainless steel doors of the emergency room, shouting for a stretcher. The bloody fluid was soaking through the cheap, cotton dress and dribbling to the tile floor as the attendants came banging through the doors with the stretcher. They moved to help the girl down onto the stretcher, but were stopped short by the old woman, who stood before them like a mountain, her eyes flashing fire. "You don' touch my baby," she warned. And, with the strength of a bear and the tenderness of a madonna, she gathered the
fainting mother into her massive bronze arms and laid her softly onto the stretcher. "It's OK, now, honey, you gonna have a big, pretty boy, jus' like Auntie Mag done tol' you."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, you'll have to wait outside," an attendant told her as they wheeled the stretcher toward the swinging doors.

"Yassah. I wait out heah," she said. Auntie Mag turned slowly and walked to the opposite side of the hall, where she took her place among the others who waited. She stood in silence, arms folded beneath her huge bosoms, eyes straight ahead, one shapeless shoe patting out a regular beat on the tile floor.

"Have another doughnut, Tim," Billie invited.

"No thanks, I left my cigarettes in the mobile unit. Be back in a minute."

"Here. Have one of mine."

"Thanks, no, gotta have my brand. You and Ed go ahead, I'll be back in a minute."

"The blood bother you, Tim?" Ed grinned.

"No, I just want my own cigarettes." I walked outside onto the loading dock and took my cigarettes from my pocket. Lighting one, I looked up to the night sky and inhaled deeply. The stars were out.
CHAPTER XVIII

FOR AN EYE

The life of a holdup man isn't worth a dime. It takes either a fool or a desperate man to risk his life for small stakes, but the night in the city is rare when there are less than two or three armed robberies at small grocery, drug, or liquor stores. "Minor armed robberies," they're called by the press, but how major they are to the nervous night clerks who know their very life depends upon their calmness. And how monumental to the steady stream of strange, ignorant men who grasp their guns and knives and stampede, one after another, into prison or death.

Sunday morning, bright and golden and powder blue and white and a police emergency call to a little chain grocery in the suburbs. And I with camera and car on my way there when the call went in for a homicide squad. I pulled the station wagon onto the parking apron in front of the neat little store. It was balmy and there was a gentle breeze and children played and shouted in pastel clothes in a little park across the way and inside the store the body of the clerk was already beginning to stiffen. He had been chubby

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and gray-haired and his wife and children were still in church. Two young patrolmen walked uneasily about the store while another questioned the shaken couple who had peered over the counter and found the dead clerk. It must have happened just after he had opened the store at seven o'clock that morning. Business had been bad for hours, and at last the old couple had dropped in shortly before noon. The tuna fish and cottage cheese they would have eaten for lunch still sat on the counter.

There is a way of discouraging small time armed robbers who have any thoughts at all about their life. Police in many large cities use this deterrent for a while now and then. But since it is extreme and apt to arouse harsh objections, the "shotgun squad" is used quietly and infrequently.

According to Texas law, it is perfectly legal to shoot and kill an armed robber, just as long as the executioner is still standing with at least one foot on the property on which the robber committed his crime. And that is precisely what members of a shotgun squad do. They kill armed robbers while keeping one foot on base.

This is how the game is played: an unmarked squad car drops a shotgun-armed plainclothesman at the store several hours before closing time; the officer hides in the back
room and waits. In the event of an armed robbery, the officer remains silent while the clerk pays off willingly. At the exact moment when the robber begins his retreat and puts three or four paces between himself and the counter, the clerk drops flat behind the counter as the hidden officer emerges with his shotgun already zeroed in on the robber. The officer is supposed to shout to the gunman to drop his weapon before surprising him with a load of buckshot.

I found out about the shotgun squad one night when the police dispatcher called for a robbery squad, a homicide unit, and a justice of the peace to the same address. Since a peace justice is only called to investigate a death, I hurried to the scene. It was a little open-front grocery. The robber was still there, with several big holes in his back. He was black, clean, muscular, and well-groomed. His jeans were patched and faded and his shirt was threadbare. An officer gently turned him over, and my eyes met the man's incredulous gaze. But he could not see me.
CHAPTER XIX

THE HOUNDS

"There's not a better animal alive than a coon dog," said Andy as he scrunched down comfortably in the seat of the station wagon. "They're loyal and dependable, do anything you tell 'em."

"Well, I've always liked most dogs, but my type is—oh, say something like a collie, or a cocker spaniel. They're sort of gentle, and seem to like people."

I was behind the wheel, easing the big new Oldsmobile gently through a pitch black alley in one of the city's rougher neighborhoods. We were not alone; hundreds of police patrol cars were combing the area. A pair of kids had held up a drug store several blocks away. They were after money and narcotics--mostly narcotics, but thousands of pills still lay scattered on the sidewalk where the two had spilled them as they fled. Two young patrolmen had confronted the robbers as they burst out of the front door, but the gunmen fired at the officers instead of stopping. They were desperate at an early age; both were eighteen. One shot had wounded one
of the policemen in the leg. He was at that moment undergoing surgery. He was twenty-one.

The boys had only one pistol between them. The unarmed one had surrendered moments later, but the one with the pistol was still running. An armed robbery doesn't usually bring on an intensive search. Armed robbers are usually picked up a leisurely several days or months after their holdup. But not if they shoot a policeman—even in the leg. In fairness to the police, their motive for instant retaliation is not purely that of revenge. Anyone who lives by the sword is usually keenly aware of the conditions most favorable for survival. Policemen are no exception; they know that a perpetually extreme reaction to an attack on one of their number will deter other such attacks. That night's particular meticulous pursuit was, then, a predictable course of action.

"A good coon dog knows where he is the minute you turn him loose; you don't have to tell him anything. Man, when I was just a kid, my dad and I used to run coons damn near every night. Close to sundown, the dogs would start whining around, 'cause they were ready to go, always ready to go."

"But what's the good of coon hunting? I mean you don't eat the coon after you've killed him. And you could use his hide, but nobody does; they just throw him to the dogs."
And even the dogs would rather eat out of a can. What's the use in it all?"

"Hell, Tim, it's sport! It's good for the hunters and it's good for the dogs."

"But pretty damn bad for the coon."

Where the alley entered the street, I stopped the wagon. There was little use in moving; we were in the dead center of the search, only three blocks away from the drugstore. As we talked, we both remained alert to the police radio receiver in our mobile unit. We were listening to the conversations of the police cars in our area. None of them had reported sighting the fugitive, but headquarters had kept them informed of his direction of travel from the telephoned complaints of citizens whose back yards he had run through. There had been a rash of false reports, too, from panicky people who were listening to the city's two "top forty" radio stations. Both of those sensational stations had mobile units in the area, too, and their young, excited reporters had gradually ballooned the description of the running boy to the stature and ferocity of King Kong on the loose. Their shouting "on-the-scene reporting" had, in addition, brought out numerous carloads of shouting teenagers, who noisily circled the blocks hoping to get in on the excitement.
Most of the houses in the neighborhood had been built in the 1930's, thirty years earlier; others were older. Where the old homes had been weeded out, there were clusters of small stores, bars, and brand new apartment complexes. The streets were lined with spreading sycamore trees that shut out the night's already anemic moonlight. Only the intersections were lighted, with dim old-fashioned street lamps high up on the utility poles; driving down a block was like entering a dark tunnel. We sat with our lights out, our two-way radio receivers turned low, and our windows open in spite of the cold. The open windows would let us hear the slightest noise in the neighborhood, the least flurry in the October leaves that had drifted curb deep under the big sycamores. Creeping grimly past was a constant procession of police cars, lights out. Two or three would inch by us every minute, a faint reflection glinting occasionally from polished chromium or glass, their soft rubber crunching muffled through the cushion of leaves. Inside our car, the police radio had been murmuring calls from all over the city, but suddenly its words touched us: "All east side units. Suspect sighted running west, on foot in the twelve-hundred block of Pierce Street."

That was our signal to move; the area was several blocks away. I pulled into the street without turning on the lights
and found myself moving rapidly down the block, a patrol car
in front and one in back. When we entered the twelve-hundred
block, there seemed to be no activity until closer scrutiny
revealed the shadowy outlines of at least twelve police cars.
Several were squatted quietly along both opposite curbs.
Others continued their incessant block circling, drawing the
noose inevitably tighter. To get out of the way, I pulled
quickly to the curb, where we sat waiting.

"Well, Andy, he's made ten blocks now. These dark streets
give him a pretty good advantage."

"Advantage, hell. He can see all those patrol cars,
can't he? As long as he's able to see them, there's no
corner in this world dark enough for him. Just lookin' at
all those cops is enough to scare the crap out of a full
grown swamp rabbit. That damn kid's probably so shook up he
won't have the sense to get away."

"Okay. I'll lay you odds this guy gets away."

"What's that anyway, wishful thinking?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I'll bet they don't take him."

"Okay, you're on--for a six-pack."

"No, Andy, not on this bet--just for nothing, just a
gentleman's bet, OK?"
"Hell, you're just afraid of buying the beer, but, all right, I'll go along with you. You can get a hell of a lot more beer drunk on a coon hunt than a manhunt anyway."

"There you are back to coon hunting again. And besides, I thought you just carried a hip pocket flask on a coon hunt."

"That's the way it used to be, but my buddy Joe Ritter's got a big ice chest in the back of his pickup, and man, we keep that thing full."

"But doesn't it get a little tiresome, making all those trips back to the truck for another beer?"

"We don't even leave the damn truck 'till the coon's treed. No sense in working yourself to death. That's a real gentleman's sport."

"You mean you just sit there on the tailgate and sop it up while the dogs do the work?"

"That's right, the better a hunter is, the less effort he has to put out."

"Then what's the use in it all? Damn it, I just can't understand how you can say it's 'good for the hunters and good for the dogs' when all you do is sit and drink, then follow the sound of a bunch of bloodthirsty hounds to the moment of truth with a mangy little raccoon who wasn't worth the trouble in the first place. I'd love to sit in the woods
and drink beer, or just sit in the woods, or just drink beer; why the hell do you have to get the poor raccoon involved?"

"Without the damn coon, it wouldn't be a sport. You just aren't a sportsman if all you want to do is sit in the damn woods and drink; now, what good is that?"

"Andy, you keep talking about 'good,' and I'm damned if I know what you mean. Right now, if you really want to know, I'd like to be sitting beside a campfire with an inexhaustible supply of beer. And the coons could do any damn thing they pleased. And the dogs could--chase cars, for a change, that's a lot more spectacular, anyway, than dashing through the underbrush after a scrawny little twenty-pound raccoon who never hurt a thing except maybe some eggs and chickens now and then. But my god! the dog I've got respect for is some little dried-up mutt who'd go charging out into the street and challenge a two-ton monster that makes him look like a termite. Now that takes courage!"

"Now that just shows how much you know about good dogs. Any damn dog that chases cars is just showing his ignorance, he's nutty!"

"God damn it, Andy, that's what they said about Don Quixote when he'd lay siege to a windmill. But the important thing, the real measure of the man, was that he thought the
damn things were dragons and that he had the fantastic bravery
to fight them, no matter how hopeless his chances seemed!"

"Hell, that's got nothing to do with--"

"And if there's a little dog now and then who decides
that automobiles are the mortal enemies of the world, and if
he has the guts to run out of his nice, safe front yard and
chase one of the gigantic things down the street, then at
least he's performing an act of courage based on his own
decision about the evil of the cars, instead of just follow-
ing the rest of the pack after a damn raccoon just because
he knows it will please the guy who feeds him."

"Man, you better see a doctor. A hunting dog or a watch-
dog is the only one worth having, and anybody who knows
anything about dogs knows that's true."

We followed the progress of the chase for over twenty-
six blocks and far into the early morning hours. The fugitive,
running, crawling, crouching beneath bushes, hiding in open
garages, flattening in gutters and flower beds, inching his
way through the broken glass, weeds, gravel, clotheslines,
fences, leaves, damp earth, asphalt, had survived past three
o'clock in the morning. As our tires crunched us through a
narrow alley, we heard the call: "714, got him on the ground,
1300 Santa Fe!"
"On the ground" was police jargon to indicate the officers had seen the man on foot and were pursuing him. We were waiting only a half block away. I peeled the wagon away down the street, leading a pack of patrol cars. In a matter of seconds, we were at a weed-infested vacant lot. Several police cars were nosed haphazardly into the lot at random angles, their doors standing open, the officers having left them for the chase on foot. Just as I pulled in among them, we heard the scattered crack, crack crack of thirty-eight caliber gunfire. Grabbing my portable light unit and movie camera, I jumped from the car and ran swishing through the weeds toward the sound of the shooting. I found myself in a line of uniformed policemen, sweeping abreast across the lot toward a tall hedge that stood black in the pale moonlight. We had to break the line as we ran around the edge of the hedgerow, and as we started up a narrow driveway, I found myself and one officer running ahead of the rest. Again we were blind as we ran up the drive between the hedge and the house; the overhanging hedge veiled the moonlight. I had just decided to turn on my floodlight, when there was an outbreak of shooting not fifty feet ahead of us, and there was the unmistakable whine of bullets whizzing near our heads. I dived forward into the gravel and landed with a skidding whop and
a clatter of camera, lights, and battery pack. And I heard the running policeman slam into the gravel beside me. There were only a few more shots as we crawled forward, and when they stopped, we rose halfway and ran, our heads down in a low crouch. In seconds, we came face to face with two panting policemen, standing straight and still. Both I and the officer by my side were so startled we almost fell backwards; one of the patrolmen we had confronted was a giant—a huge man as wide as an ox and standing at what I later discovered was six feet, seven inches. He still held a twelve-gauge, double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun against his shoulder, but his stance had slackened, and the formidable weapon was sagging its muzzle gradually toward the ground. "I didn't even shoot!" said the huge officer in consternation, "He did it himself. I just hollered 'drop it,' and he just looked at me kinda funny and stuck it in his mouth and . . ."

Our eyes fell from the muzzle of the unfired shotgun to the cold, leafy, thick St. Augustine grass, already damp with the early morning dew, and to the dying young man who had not gotten the narcotics he wanted that night and who lay on his back in the sparkling dew, his fist still clutching a cheap revolver, his features obliterated by the sacrifice of his own steaming blood, and his last few departing breaths exhal- ing with a bub-bub-bub-bub.
Andy was among the policemen who gradually converged on the scene, and as we left a few minutes later, he said, "You win, Tim. They didn't take him." We waded hip-deep through the whispering yellow grass of the vacant lot. The dew was turning a powdery blue, and frost was beginning to form.
"My boy, you go along to get along," said the Old Captain, leaning back in his chair and patting his stomach with satisfaction. It was Christmas Eve, and I was in his office to pick up my fifth of Scotch, a political present that was being distributed by my boss. Each of us had his choice of the finest Scotch or bourbon, our gifts each year from a friendly senator who never forgot us. "Let's see now, yours was Scotch, right?"

"Right," I said, and he leaned into the big cardboard box and drew out my neatly wrapped package. I admired the expensive label, "Boy, this is good stuff! Seems pretty blessed to receive."

"Yeah, the old boy knows who his friends are. You're working late tonight, right?"

"That's right. It's the midnight oil instead of Santa Claus for me."

The senator was a good man. We liked him. And we liked the congressmen, and the city council members, and the governor. I felt privileged and honored each time I interviewed
one of these great men; they always called me by my first name. I figured that any man in a high position who took such notice of one so small must be great and good indeed. We seldom ran stories that might have been embarrassing or offensive to the political officials. Our city was peaceful. There was little controversy in the government. There was little controversy in the city. Everyone got along.

There were railroad tracks that separated the South section of the city from the North. Another set of tracks divided the West from the East. In the heart of the city, those who lived south and west of the tracks were Negroes and Mexican Americans. Those who lived north and east of the tracks were Caucasians. They all got along. And they all went along. With living in their designated places.

The city's North and East were beautiful. There were luxurious, towering high-rise apartments whose wide picture windows looked out over the glittering skyline. There were fresh, green parks, finely landscaped, bright each spring with azaleas, wisteria, and redbud. There were placidly flowing streams, eddying into glassy ponds, whose smoothness was rippled only by snowy white ducks and swans. There were stately live oaks, assuring perpetual shade upon the carefully mowed grass. Streets were smoothly paved, neatly curbed,
well drained, regularly cleaned. Garbage was hidden away in cans concealed behind walls, and the garbage fairies came regularly and whisked it away. Here lived the mayor, the city councilmen, the congressmen, the senators, the businessmen. It was beautiful. They all got along.

At the tracks, the concrete pavement gave way to asphalt and gravel. The neat curbs and gutters were absent, and the rainy season sometimes brought flooding. Swans and ducks shunned the area, but rats didn't. Parks were few, and those few were surrounded by chain link fences to keep out the vandals. Their grass was worn away by hordes of playing children. There were trees: mimosa, sycamore, and thorny mesquite. The houses were painted and unpainted frame structures, jammed tightly together along dusty, unswept streets. And garbage reeked and rotted along streets and alleys, in yards and vacant lots, in open drainage ditches. There was greenery—tall weeds where grass might have been. There were community leaders here, too. But they led only this community. They were mostly teachers, preachers, and undertakers, a phenomenon perhaps indicative that the residents placed their greatest hopes upon learning, Jesus, and death. But they got along.

Every spring, we ran feature stories with colorful film on the beauty of the north and east sides. And now and then
we did a story showing how effectively and energetically some neighborhood improvement group was cleaning up the filth of the south and west sides. And we were particularly fond of hearing from some sainted Negro leader who denounced federal urban renewal and urged his people to make use of the wonderful American Free Enterprise System and bring themselves up to the standards of their white neighbors. It was nice to know that these backward people, some of them, were not content to wallow in their own ignorance and filth, that they would take the bull by the horns, pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, that they would go along.

And we ran stories on the "alarming increase in our crime rate" and even editorialized for more complete police protection. The Police Department, we pointed out, needed more men, more funds, better training programs.

But this was Christmas Eve, and everyone was happy. At the police station, there was a happy party with plenty of free drinks for the reporters; at the Sheriff's Department, there was an orgy in the press room, with free booze and patrol cars to shepherd home the inebriates. At City Hall, the mayor served us punch. We stopped by the County Judge's office to pick up our brown-wrapped bottles, paid for by the commissioners. There were press parties given by restaurants,
advertising agencies, local corporations. In paneled offices, our vice presidents clinked glasses with executives whose businesses sponsored our broadcasts. We ran year-end stories showing the phenomenal growth of our sponsors' stores and factories, bright news features with colorful views of downtown Christmas decorations, scenes of shoppers flipping coins into street corner Salvation Army kettles. Silver bells. It was a happy time.

In this lovely holiday season, the rich man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of philanthropy.

"Collier," Toby said, "I've got a Christmas Eve feature I want you to do. Pete Smelter, the automobile dealer who sponsors my newscast, called a few minutes ago. He and some of his employees are taking some baskets of food and presents out to a needy family whose little boy was killed yesterday by a car. Pete says he doesn't want his name played up much, just the family, so the viewers will chip in and help." He handed me a slip of paper. "Here's the address. They're going to be there with the food at four o'clock. You shoot film of the thing and write me a story. And, goddamn it, I don't want any tearjerker. None of this drippy stuff about the kid who was killed. You know what I mean?"
"Well— I'm not quite sure just how I can keep it from
sounding pretty morbid. It's just not the kind of thing that
mingles well with Christmas."

"Well, hell, I just want a straight story. Nothing
sentimental. Just tell the facts."

"OK," I said, and a bleakness crept over me as I turned
away. I threw the whiskey in my desk drawer. Bundling up
in my overcoat, scarf, and gloves, I took my camera and left.

Matching the scribbled address with the faded numbers
on an old house, I pulled the station wagon to a stop. The
paint was long gone from the place; the yard rustled with
dry grass; the dingy windows gaped like cloudy blind eyes.
I got out of the car to measure the amount of daylight with
my meter; I had to make sure the film would be good. The
sun was invisible behind a pallid, gray sky, and the frigid
wind bit through my overcoat as I read the meter. In a side
glance, I detected several ragged children peering at me from
a window of the old house. I did not look at them. When
they had disappeared, I turned the camera to the house and
took several feet of film. I would need the establishing
shot for my story. Shuffling around about the brightly painted
wagon, I debated whether or not to go into the house before
the arrival of the benevolent ones. I decided to wait in the
car, climbed in, and turned on the heater and the radio.
I sat listening to Christmas carols. 'Tis the season to be jolly, fa-la-la-la-la-la, God rest ye merry, 'round yon Virgin, dashing through the snow, joyful and triumphant, shineth the everlasting Light, he's got a bag that's filled with toys, may your days be merry and bright, the Little Lord Jesus, had a very shiny nose.

A long, glittering new sedan slowed in the muddy street and turned its chromium nose into the rutted driveway of the little shack. I sprang from the car and trained my camera on the limousine, as four middle-aged men began climbing out. They were dressed in rich, warm overcoats, silken scarves, soft gloves, and stylish felt hats. Pete Smelter was the driver. He was a big, soft, florid man, who smiled and nodded at my camera. I finished the shot and introduced myself. "Oh, you're Toby's man," he said in recognition, then his smile faded to funereal sobriety. "These pore folks. Christmas Eve, and just lost their baby boy. Hit by a car, you know." I knew. "Now, you want to be sure and get plenty of pictures of these pore folks. I'm not lookin' for any publicity for myself. Oh, let me introduce you to my boys." He collared a chubby little man who stood beside the car. "This is my sales manager, Ron Pullum. He's the one who did all the work, gettin' the donations together, and all. Ron,
get Charlie and George over here." Charlie and George came
over there. "These are two of my best salesmen, Charlie Horn
and George Striker. Boys, you know this fella, don't you?
See him all the time on TV, right?" Pete was right. They
were members of my fan club.

"Watch you all the time on Channel Three," said one.
"I'm on Channel Nine."
"That's right, that's right, Channel Nine, every night."

"Well, boys, let's get these things in there to that
pore family." The four of them hustled around to the rear of
the big car and began unloading bushel baskets of food. They
carried them up the creaky steps onto the front porch. The
children of the family had already opened the door and were
watching the approach of the heavy laden men. I filmed it
all, following the benefactors inside.

The tiny living room was sparsely furnished with dilapi-
dated furniture. A young couple sat stiffly on the couch.
Four small children watched us. Like young deer, ready to
run, they crouched against the tattered wallpaper. Pete and
his boys stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, holding
their baskets. An old man entered from the kitchen and intro-
duced himself to Pete, "I'm the grandaddy of the boy that
got killed, I'm her daddy." He indicated the young mother,
who continued to stare at the floor. "Y'all can just bring it back here in the kitchen," he continued, leading them to the greasy dinette set, "and just set it down here." I wanted to get out of that stifling place as quickly as possible, and since the grandfather seemed in authority, I began to get names from him. I had to have them for the story.

He gave them willingly and in great detail, then motioned me to a little photograph that stood upon a table. "That's the boy yonder, that's the one that got hit by that car. He was my grandbaby." He shuffled to the table and picked up the picture. The cheap frame was the kind you buy at a dime store with a picture of Lana Turner in it. Holding it up, he suggested that I might want to take a shot of it, while he displayed it. I took one and made my way back to the living room, where Pete, Ron, Charlie, and George stood reverently, their hats in their hands. When I entered, Pete approached the silent parents, cleared his throat, and expressed his sympathy and that of his boys. I filmed it.

Then I hurried out into the wagon and away down the windy street. The radio was still playing carols. "We three kings of Orient are, bearing gifts . . ." I lit a cigarette and rolled down my window to breathe the icy air. "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume . . ."
I took too long in writing up the story, and Toby was impatient. But he liked my finished product. Just the facts. Nothing drippy. Good shots of Pete and the boys.

This Christmas Eve seemed interminable. At six-thirty, I went on shift as the radio newscaster, and I numbly watched the teletypes for the news of the evening. There were fires, rapes, murders, auto crashes, racial violence, political charge and counter, the space race, the arms race, and our bloody crusade to save the Southeast Asians from themselves. And I reported it all. And I wrote the stories over and over again for my succeeding newscasts. And I watched the teletypes.

The humming, ringing, clattering teletypes were engaged in spreading wide the word of truth, the knowledge of which, we are told, is the key to freedom. Ye shall know of violence, bigotry, and bitterness, adeste fidelis. In New York, in Kansas City, in Chicago, in Los Angeles, in Dallas, the tele-types rang and riveted.

But teletypes cannot operate without operators. Humans. Amid the horror of the news, the key pushers up and down the line were sending mass Christmas greetings. Artists of the keyboard would, with X's and O's, create pictures of bells, Yule trees, candles, and crosses. And these works of teletype art were banged out one key at a time on my machines, as they
were simultaneously reproduced on hundreds of news machines across the United States. Then there would be more news. Then there would be more Christmas greetings. And all evening, the bells on the machines played an intermittent, monotone attempt at "Jingle Bells."

"Ding-ding-ding, Ding-ding-ding, Ding-ding-ding-di-ding."

And the darkness comprehended it not. "U. S. outposts near the demilitarized zone report repeated Communist violations of the two-day-old Christmas truce."

I thought of the inviting bottle in my lower desk drawer, courtesy the senator. And of Toby, patting his stomach, "You go along to get along, my boy." Pete and the boys, he was my grandbaby, you want me to hold his picture higher? just the facts, on the air, put it on, Billy Bob's on the television, Mother, jail break, Rufus is all right, marijuana plant, dig it up, put it on, coon dogs are always ready to go, always, shot a cop, then himself, bub-bub-bub, shotgun squad, he looked at me, at me, at me, a big pretty boy, God damn white folks, broke Barker's jail, ugly courthouse, skyscrapers, giants, people inside, little people, little people, sheep sheep, two, three, yastupidsunch, head north, sheep, like some apple pie, pie in the face, bee on the nose, Murphy, Mrs. Murty, sheep, ding-ding-ding, near the demilitarized
zone, south, north, the truth, east, west, railroad, get along, get along, go along, shall make ye, sheep, my boy, myrrh is mine, ding-ding-ding.

I left the din of the teletype room and walked out into the newsroom to my desk and the bottom drawer. It was dangerous to drink before going on the air. The tongue should be under complete control and the mind alert. "Thank you, Senator, thank you. We damn sure get along." I fumbled through the fancy wrapping and uncovered the golden-labeled bottle of dark, rich amber. "Ahhh! Beautiful, beautiful! To get along." I broke the seal, unscrewed the cap and turned it up. Oh, it was lovely, bitter smooth on my tongue and palate and long and burning down my throat and settling bump at the bottom and burning warming glowing. One more. All I dared, and it was more lovely. Back in the desk drawer.

As I walked back into the wire room, I noticed that "Jingle Bells" had stopped, and the bells were back at the business of ringing out the news. Passing the international wire machine, I heard its bell ring five times, the signal for an urgent bulletin to follow: I stopped and watched it begin.

BULLETIN . . . BULLETIN . . . BULLETIN:
APR763122465--THULE, GREENLAND--NORTH AMERICAN AIR DEFENSE COMMAND RADAR TRACKING STATIONS HAVE SIGHTED
AN UNIDENTIFIED FLYING OBJECT APPROACHING THE UNITED STATES MAINLAND AT A HIGH RATE OF SPEED. INTERCEPTOR AIRCRAFT ARE BEING SCRAMBLED TO ATTEMPT VISUAL CONTACT . . .

"Oh, God, on Christmas Eve . . ."

BUST ABOVE . . . BUST ABOVE . . . BUST ABOVE: INTERCEPTER FIGHTERS REPORT VISUAL CONTACT WITH UFO APPROACHING U-S. THE OBJECT IS IDENTIFIED AS A MINIATURE SLEIGH BEING PULLED BY EIGHT TINY REINDEER.

I stared at the copy, until the lettering faded into a watery blur. Just then Andy breezed in, finished with his long evening of film editing. "Damn, I'm glad that's over! Hey, what the Hell you cryin' about? Are you drunk on the Senator's liquor or something?"

"Santa Claus, Andy. Santa Claus. And Santa Claus shall make ye free!"

"You nutty bastard. Hurry up and finish your damn newscast so we can get the hell out of here."