PROTECT HER . . . PROTECT YOURSELF
A NOVEL

THESIS

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By

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Tom Randolph, the narrator of this short novel, is a recently divorced university instructor. The setting of the novel is inner-city Dallas, where Tom has leased an apartment after leaving his suburban home. Frustrated by a tenacious affection for his former wife Sharon and disgust at her remarriage to a drunken ranch laborer, Tom marries a muddled eighteen-year-old girl, Faye. When Faye is abducted, Tom assents to Sharon's request to return to him. Tom buries an unrecognizable corpse he thinks is Faye, and Sharon's new "husband" (a bigamist) is killed in a brawl. After Tom and Sharon's remarriage, Faye reappears as a street-corner missionary.
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CHAPTER I

My morning paroxysm of coughing (it had been so severe that I had even retched once) had left a residuum of pain in my chest, so I thought I would wait a bit before having a smoke. The early air had helped my lungs more than once to recover from the sensation of being pumped full of helium or krypton or argon through the agency of some ineffable maniac armed with some formidable bellows, so I stepped out into the drizzle with my cup of coffee.

I held the steaming cup in front of my face, sipping occasionally, and watched the velocity of the drizzle increase until I would have called it rain, had there been anyone around for me to identify anything as anything to. The nature of the precipitation changed into a freezing rain that hissed at its contact with the sodden boards of the balcony until enough had accumulated without melting. Then it began to fall still harder and made a measured rattling sound as the balcony was glazed in a meteorological futility.

It was going to be a blank rather than a dark day. The sky was muffled with odd-colored clouds that were not really grey, but weren't really any other color I know of, either. A white dog loped through the parking lot to the street, throwing baffled glances over his shoulders at his motivating principle, the tiny pellets of ice that were flying at him from
the northwest. He was looking for shelter, certainly, but it made an amusing tableau if one imagined the dog was trying to outrun the ice, and I did.

Going inside for another cup of coffee, I thought of my long holiday that had begun the previous afternoon, and of the imminence of Christmas (tidings of comfort and joy), and felt quite festive for a moment. I even considered having popcorn for breakfast (it was twenty past nine), until I remembered that I had a hangover and considered that I should have something more customary and substantial, even if the thought of eating anything but popcorn made me feel that I would puke on the tea kettle.

Unspeakable as it was to watch the white bacon fat turn grey in the cast-iron skillet, and wild as the Congo rhythm in my questionable head was, I was still pleased to think that for more than three weeks no one would call me "sir," while choking and trying very hard not to cry because he/she was going to fail freshman composition. No eighteen-year-old faces would glower at me for what seemed like a long time. I meant to be entirely certain of that, by providing myself with food, alcohol, and tobacco enough for the entire vacation before grade reports were mailed. All I wished was that my telephone number had been unlisted. But that was my fault. The telephone company had been very reasonable on that point, except in wanting more money for extending the privilege. Phone calls weren't so bad, though. I had actually chuckled the
night before, when I answered the phone and recognized the
voice of one of my most singular scholars calling me a suck
of shit and informing me that "all English teachers sucks."

I dropped slices of stale wheat sandwich bread into the
chambers of the toaster (the second-best one from my marriage--
it had been presented to me upon the physical dissolution of
that arrangement), thinking I might go for a walk (or a slide--
or a blunder) after breakfast and two or three buffered ano-
dynes. Not really inclined to consume another entire cup of
coffee, I was splendidly unconcerned when I spilled half of
it while conveying it to the dining table. The carpet was
rented, and it would dry.

The apartment looked bare, even austere, even with five
bookcases, a console stereo, and a record cabinet pushed
against the walls of the living-dining room. I think it must
have been the absence of cats to trip over so that I might
impale myself on wicked, acicular potted plants. It felt good
to be able to spill coffee or maim myself through my own efforts
and on my own responsibility. And not having anyone whom I
was obliged to fail to please being displeased about it in my
presence was not unwelcome.

I made a sandwich of my bacon and buttered toast as a
means of conserving movement until the aspirin I'd gobbled
took effect and made my stomach hurt, so that I would not
notice overmuch the gnomes who were conducting a saturnalia,
or sales meeting, in the recesses of my cranium. I did not
believe that tomato juice would have any sanitary effects on one of my hangovers, but I had some in the refrigerator and was willing to try it, so I swallowed two tumblers of it, though I knew it meant that I would be eating antacid tablets within half an hour.

The application of eyedrops removed much of the red and most of the yellow from the whites of my eyes, and I found myself able to breathe inaudibly after administering nasal spray. Twenty minutes of puzzling though not entirely unpleasant convulsions in my back under a hot shower were followed by a minute ravaging of my face with a dull disposable razor. I put on my oldest clothes and felt fit for as well as inclined to indolence.

I opened the curtains and moved a dining chair in front of the record cabinet, where I had put a glass of Irish whiskey and water, an ashtray, and the first musty volume of a 1906 edition of *Les Miserables*, and sat down to watch the progress of the ice storm to *Il Trovatore*.

I found both relief and mortification in the knowledge that the woman who by law had been my wife until three weeks ago was about to become a bride again, this time to an untidy, unlettered, possum-faced hillbilly who was occasionally a bass player in a progressive country band and, as far as I could tell, spent the rest of his time being interested in Sharon's new career as a legal secretary. It seemed that one marriage should be enough for anybody; one had been more than
enough for me. But there was something (optimism, perhaps) almost admirable in being able to extract and assimilate all that was nonessential (and nonsensical) from an intolerable situation, and then in finding another one on which to waste one's time.

The situation was not easy to understand, and I think it would have seemed as sordid as it was if it had had anything more to do with me. But I didn't have to understand it or be peripherally involved in it any longer. I would never again find a photograph of a Texas longhorn tacked to my front door, something one of my more pleasant colleagues had considered a rare jest.

The ice had obscured the cracked asphalt of the parking lot. Lighting a cigarette (the first timid inhalation didn't hurt too much), I was pleased at the thought that no one in Dallas could be playing miniature golf or reclining by a swimming pool. Visible, conspicuous absurdity would be at a minimum while the ice lasted. Some would try to drive, of course, and would have demonstrated to them how much they really were in control of their existences, and they would attribute what happened only to ice and poor judgment.

Victor Hugo found his way back into a bookcase before too long. I hadn't read him since the fifth grade, so it might have been just as well to leave him at the used bookstore. As always, when able to do as I pleased, I was pleased to do nothing, or at least nothing more than drink whiskey,
smoke cigarettes, listen to Verdi, and look out the window.

My neighbors either were sleeping late or had left for the holidays. The silence was exquisite, especially to one accustomed to listening to a banjo, a moaning nymphomaniac, and Libyans who played soccer indoors. If they were gone, the ice would keep them away for a while. Even missionaries could be expected to be pious bacteria in their own cultures on such a fine day. There would be no I-eat-guess-what-for-a-nickel grins telling me how God loved me and didn't really want to do bad things to me when He decided I ought to become a corpse. Isolation, I thought, should be palpable and prohibitive a little more often.

There would have been no point in closing the curtains. I didn't want to anyway, since I wanted to continue to watch the ice storm. But I also didn't want to watch the skidding spectacle of a ridiculous woman who undertook to drive a twenty thousand dollar automobile on two inches of ice and who transported into her ex-husband's parking lot a species (Texan) of man who wore a straw cowboy hat. What, I wondered, in the name of all that was meaningless, could she want? Not me, of course. I could be comfortable about that.

Sharon stepped on the brake, and the white 1973 Mercedes 450 SL turned halfway around and stopped with the back end buried in the hedge that separated my apartment house from another apartment house. She accelerated so that the wheels could spin themselves into the ice, making it more difficult
to move the car by any means, which might have become uncomfortable for her companion, since he wasn't coming into my apartment so long as I was alive and occupying it.

The conversation I could see was animated, if not august. Sharon shook her finger under the brim of the cowboy hat and got her face slapped so that she fell back against the door on the driver's side. It took me a moment to stop looking for my shoes and sit down again, to remember who I wasn't anymore. It had been an odd feeling, anyway. Sharon had worn braces when we met in the seventh grade and wasn't considered attractive enough to annoy, so I hadn't any practical experience at chivalry. I wondered what the Redcrosse Knight (if he'd ever been married) might have done to someone in a straw cowboy at who boxed his ex-wife's jaws.

Sharon put her hand over her face (which was probably as red as her hair at the moment), and leaned forward on the steering wheel until the horn my former father-in-law had installed in order to humiliate me began to play "La Cucaracha." It was being claxonned for the third time when Sharon was pulled away by the hair, her hands still over her face. I didn't get up.

The smoke of burning diesel fuel continued to loom above the hedge when Sharon got out of the car. Someone didn't want that fellow in the car to get cold. Plowboots didn't go very well with the rabbit coat Red had bought her for Christmas one year so that he might remind me that used car
dealers made enough money to buy such things for daughters who were married to English teachers. It didn't take her long to cross the parking lot and disappear under the balcony, but she could walk on ice better than most.

She was crimson and smiling when she passed the window. It was hard to decide to get up and open the door when she pounded on it. I went on gazing at the ice storm until Sharon got in front of the window, hugging herself and stamping her feet, then pointing imperiously at the door.

"Hi, Tom."

"Sharon." We stood and looked at one another until both of us became embarrassed, and then I looked past her at her betrothed, drawling to somebody on the citizen's band radio Red had presented to us for our eighth wedding anniversary because he knew I would detest it. If Sharon's rustic beau had not been in the car, I might have gone downstairs, taken the microphone, and broadcast a denunciation of the people by whom my wife had come to enjoy being called "good buddy."

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." I stepped back to let her in, wondering if she had irrevocably divorced her mental existence as well as me. It was hard to imagine. She had seemed so devoted to all that for fourteen and a half of the last fifteen years. She slipped on the ice and fell on one knee as she started in.

"Godfuckyamn!"

A proper response eluded me (it is hard to talk to
people sometimes), so I helped Sharon to her feet and waited for her to determine whether her coat had been torn. Apparently satisfied, she damned the ice, the balcony, her shoes, the door sill, and broken kneecaps before her disquisition fell to an indistinct and comic mutter.

She turned her back to me and indicated she wanted me to help her out of her coat, which amounted to her worrying herself out of it as soon as I had taken hold of it.

"Don't hang it up, Tom. I can't stay that long."

Sharon's plowboots were a dull yellow and didn't go any better with her white corduroy overalls and brown pullover than they had with the coat. I had worn a similar pair of boots one summer when I worked for the Park Department, and I couldn't remember any advantage I derived from them, except that they were ponderous and I had spent the entire summer not being in a hurry. At least she hadn't tucked the legs of the overalls into the boots. There were things which even I could be excepted to object to, and some of them had become things I no longer had to put up with.

"Well--sit down," I said, and moved my chair back to the dining table. Sharon looked at me for a moment as if puzzled and got up from the sofa (I was glad she didn't comment on its having only one arm) and came to the table and stood looking at a chair until I got up and pulled it out for her. She had never desired that kind of ceremony at home (although she wasn't at home now), and I couldn't help thinking that she
hadn't had assistance in sitting down since the last time I had assisted her. It had been six months.

"You're kind of crowded."

"I don't notice it much. Will you have a drink?"

"No. We've ... there's a bottle in the car."

I wondered what it was a bottle of. I had been around Texans of a certain class and had observed the quality of liquor (conjecturing it to be of about the same level of potability as armadillo urine) they habitually consumed. But of course if Sharon were paying for it, or charging it and letting Red pay for it. ... Remaining in his place (a barnyard), her cavalier wouldn't be riding in a Mercedes Benz or punching a woman with a Master's degree in history, or at least would not be doing so with her consent. That Sharon might be providing him with cognac was a hideous idea.

I suppose the anguish and disgust brought about by contemplating a pint bottle of Courvoisier being tilted under a straw cowboy hat must have shown in my face, because Sharon looked concerned and asked if I were still angry with her, or if I had decided I loathed her.

"I'm glad," she said, putting her hand on my knee. "You looked funny for a minute."

"I felt funny."

"You aren't sick?"

"No." It was hard not to say that I was no sicker than anyone else and less so than many. "I may be catching a cold."
"You ought to be taking something for it."
I looked at the glass of Irish whiskey and water and then back at Sharon.
"That stuff never helps."
"Nothing ever does."
"Well, get some rest, anyway. You're off now, aren't you?"
"Yes. Since yesterday afternoon."
"When do you start back?"
"The twelfth."
Sharon acted as though she were uncertain of something. I was always glad when I could see that someone else was. She looked down, squeezed my knee, spread her hand out and looked at her nails, shook her head, put her tongue in the cheek her intended had struck, looked up and blinked, pushed her hair back, pulled up one leg of her overalls and crossed her legs, looked out the window, picked up my package of cigarettes from the table and shook two onto the table and one onto the floor, and leaned forward as I held the disposable butane lighter. She pecked on the table with her nails as she sucked inexpertly on the cigarette. I had never seen her smoke—at least not successfully. She had tried once, in the morning, and we had coughed connubially and felt very close to one another.
Her lips were very dry, and when she tried to remove the cigarette, the paper on the filter stuck to them, and her
hand slid down the cigarette and detached the burning part, which stuck to her fingers. She hopped up and flicked her hand. I got up and trampled on the smoldering nap of the carpet and then withdrew to fetch some first aid cream as she softly whined an obscene jargon I could tell she hadn't mastered yet, since she had to stop and think and whine in a kind of working-class vocalise until she thought of an appropriately filthy phrase.

Sharon held her hand out, and I daubed it with the white ointment. She sniffed, apologized for her language, resumed her seat at the table, and sipped from my drink.

"I guess you never heard me talk that way."

"I guess not. I think I'd remember."

I watched another series of nervous motions, with the addition of a particular examination of her two burned fingers and quivering mouth that wanted to say something, if it could ever remain in one configuration long enough to form the first word.

"Tom?"

"Yes?" It was impossible not to wish she would say whatever it was quickly. There was no reason to suspect that any communication she had to make to me could be very important. I'd listened to Red's cocky little attorney often enough to understand that our business was concluded and paid for.

"I don't like to ask."

"Well, what?"
"Can you let me borrow a little money?"

"Money?"

"Just until payday?"

"You don't have any money?"

"I'm flat."

Her mouth was quivering again. I could tell she really didn't like to ask, which was something, though it didn't quite balance my aversion to listening. For the past six months, she had been making almost as much money as I made. I wondered what she could have done with her settlement of eighteen hundred dollars in so short a time. But I didn't ask. It wasn't my affair.

"Why don't you ask Red? He's still your father."

"He and mama are in Acapulco."

"Call them."

"I can't very goddamn well call them if I don't know where they're staying, can I?"

"I don't suppose so."

"Well, where else can I get it?"

I nodded at the window. "From your demon-lover."

"He's broke, too."

"That's probably as it should be. You could pawn something."

"What? What have I got that's worth anything?"

"I don't know. Your television?" I felt conciliatory. Her wedding ring suggested itself to me, and I didn't want
her to think of that.

"We already sold it. We're renting one now."

"I don't know, Sharon. Isn't it a little odd?"

"I wouldn't ask if there was anybody else. Please, Tom. It's just hard to get started again. Just until payday. Please. I've got to eat, don't I?"

"So does he," I said, pointing at the window. "And I think you can appreciate my objections to feeding him."

"You won't be. He eats at the ranch."

"He eats where?"

"At the ranch where he works."

"Oh. I thought he was a musician."

"That's just extra."

"I see. A shovel probably suits him."

"He looks after the stock."

"That's what I meant." Just extra was just making an impression on me. The man (I use the term because it conveys no distinction, only differentiation) had two jobs, and Sharon still couldn't support him. I did nothing "extra," which was, after all, why I had the money I was about to give (or lend, in her terminology) to her so that she might not think of selling her wedding ring. I wanted her to keep it, for some reason. And her shoveler probably wouldn't mind not having to buy one.

"Red and Dorothy won't be gone that long, will they? Their vacations always last about four days, and they come
right back so they can be prosperous and miserable at home."
"Tom, I'm hungry!"

"Will you stay for lunch, then?" I asked, as soon as I'd heard the first tortured notes of "La Cucaracha."

Sharon put her head down. She was close to tears from what someone in an eighteenth-century novel would have called vexation. I don't know what to call it. "Please don't, Tom. I've got to go. You don't understand. You just don't know."

Her voice broke, and it made me feel mean, particularly when I thought that my tardiness in throwing my money away might cause her to be clouted again, and I didn't want that. I knew there was only a certain number of times he could hit her before I would go downstairs, trying to remember what I'd done in my last fight, thirteen years before, when I was fifteen. I seemed to remember winning it, but I couldn't be certain.

"Well, Sharon, how much do you think you need?"

"Twenty dollars?" There was still some alarm, or uncertainty, in her eyes, but her taut, flushed face had dissolved into a truly pretty smile. The braces had done their work, but not miracles. Sharon still had noticeable (though not extreme) bunny teeth, which I had always liked. I knew her eyes would change, too, when she passed from knowing I was going to give her the money to having it tucked safely in her overalls. I would have to be quick to see their expression, though, and I knew I might even have to follow her outside
to get her coat back on her.

I guess I knew I would give it to her as soon as she asked for it. Her declared hunger, though implausible, had called forth an alacrity to let myself be swindled (she was certainly her father's child), even if it meant subsidizing a good time for her imbecile, who would probably pound her if I didn't. And she was already so far away from me. I didn't know what she might be capable of. It may be that I had read too many naturalistic novels, but I seemed to see all Sharon's inevitable, sordid declension, at least until she got so low as the Dallas Rescue Mission on Commerce Street, from which three toothless, yodeling derelicts had issued one night and climbed onto the hood of the Mercedes and yammered and made disgusting face at us through the windsheild while we waited for a traffic light to change.

Sharon folded her hands in her lap as I produced my wallet and put a twenty dollar bill on the table. She tucked her head down again and murmured, "Thank you, Tom," as she reached for it and stuffed it into a little pocket in the bib of her overalls. "I'll be by Friday evening to pay you back," she said. The transformation was complete. Her eyes were innocent and happy. She looked very much like someone I ought to know. There was an unfamiliarity, though, one I couldn't seem to account for. It shouldn't have been physical, and I don't think it was. A devotion to predictability lasting for eight and a half years made that rather unlikely. Something,
though, was different about at least one of us.

"All right." I bobbed my head for lack of anything even remotely intelligent or appropriate to say.

We both knew she was leaving as soon as she could do so without being so rude that neither of us could ignore it, so when we both hopped up like pieces of hurried clockwork, the dialogue had already been invented, edited, and agreed upon.

"It's awful to run like this, Tom--but I've just got to. Cowboy's waiting."

"I understand," I said, following her to the sofa and picking up her coat. I held it as she thrust her arms into it, thinking of her boyfriend's name, which to the literal-minded and unsympathetic person who preferred ideal to actual nonsense suggested an immature bestiality.

His time was obviously important to him, because he went to work on the horn again, which made me want to pick Sharon up and run to the car and put her in so that I wouldn't have to listen to it any more. It may only have been that they had other places to panhandle from other people who didn't have any better sense than to give them money. I suspected, though, that I alone enjoyed that distinction, since if Sharon was being allowed to tell the truth, Red was out of town.

"Thanks again, Tom," Sharon said, as I followed her onto the balcony. She squeezed my arm, and her pretty expression was marred with relief. "Bye!"

I stood and shook as she slipped down the balcony to the
stairs, muttering appropriately as she nearly fell, or as her white mittens stuck to the ice-covered railing. The straw cowboy hat pivoted slowly, trained on her as she walked across the parking lot. The diesel-burning Mercedes had idled long enough to replace the fragrant, pristine frigidity of the air with the reminder of how much of my life had smelled like a bus terminal.

Sharon helped herself into the car and unbuttoned her coat. It was impossible to imagine that the succeeding movements had any purpose other than the transfer of a twenty dollar bill. So he didn't even trust her to put the car in gear. I hoped it wasn't really stuck. I didn't want to have to go downstairs and help her push.

It was an incomplete picture. Sharon looked all right, but I thought her hillbilly should be chewing on something properly rustic, such as a hayseed or a horse turd, and I knew which he could find most readily at that time of the year.

As I had thought, the Mercedes had been maneuvered so expertly that it wouldn't move. After a short consultation, Sharon got out and poured a sack of cat litter under the back tires, then wadded up the empty sack and threw it in the hedge. It looked conspicuous. The ice storm had at least half-covered the rest of the garbage on the premises, and the part of the hedge where Sharon threw the sack had partially thawed from the exhaust.
Sharon, I realized at the last moment, had gotten something material from her relationship with Cowboy. Flowers would have been doubtful and perfume was out of the question from a man whose natural element was ordure. Dinners must have consisted of whatever Sharon would buy him at whatever restaurants had the poor taste to serve him. Some truck stops had showers for their patrons. I hoped Sharon took him to one occasionally. Cowboy's offering to his beloved expressed his character (and probably his notions concerning affairs of the private parts, as well), eloquently. It was a bumper sticker that bore the legend, "Let's rodeo."
CHAPTER II

I hacked and hewed with the scraper at the ice on the windshield, chattering oaths about elderly automobiles that required more than half an hour's attention on a cold morning before they could be driven. Limbs from a row of immense bushes or strange little trees (I am no botanist) at the back of the apartment house had been bent to the pavement by the ice, but I couldn't hear ice clicking against ice anymore because of the choking idle of the engine.

These meticulous preparations for an ill-advised excursion into an uncertainty were not due only to a newspaper, but a newspaper had provided the impetus necessary for a decision. Newspapers were not an essential part of my life. I don't know why I hadn't cancelled the subscription a pock-faced, pubescent thug had bullied me into, unless it had been that I didn't want to make the effort of an unnecessary phone call, of making myself be civil to someone with whom I didn't absolutely have to talk. I don't even know that I would have looked at a newspaper had one been on the ice in front of my door where one should have been. More often than not, I simply put them into the industrial trash receptacle by the street, realizing as I slipped through potato peelings and shredded pantyhose that I would probably need the rubber
band I wasn't going to remove from the paper before I disposed of it.

But for some reason, the absence of a Sunday Dallas Morning News irritated me. It so irritated me that I became determined to read even the Elegant Living section and the weekly guide to television programs I wouldn't have considered watching even if I hadn't left the television for Sharon to sell. So I shaved and dressed and drank a cup of coffee, thinking of when, as a junior high school student, I had thrown papers because my father had thought my doing so would confer character and spending money on me without his interference, and how, on a similar Sunday morning, I had gone to the railroad tracks and thrown one hundred twenty papers without so much as cutting the wire around the bundles. Listening to the radio, I learned that it was eighteen degrees and that my life would be transfigured if I would only listen for half an hour.

I encountered my newspaper on the back stairs. It was contributing to the entertainment and edification of my fellow man, so I thought I would still buy another one rather than ask for the return of the original. Halfway down the stairs, the remnant of a man in part of a blue overcoat was perusing the Elegant Living section, massaging the grey stubble on his grimy neck as he contemplated badly reproduced photographs of ugly debutantes. The neck of a green bottle protruded from the memory of a pocket in the overcoat. He heard me and looked
around and up. He had a rapid, humorous, irresponsible face, a face crafty and ingratiating enough to disarm anybody who might think it worthwhile to disapprove of him. It was a calculating face, and its calculations had deposited it on my back stairs when it was eighteen degrees. I could see that he was wearing two pairs of trousers. The legs of the inner pair were longer than those of the outer, and blue denim was visible through holes in grey khaki.

I got to my car by the front stairs. I had turned around and gone the other way because of an unwillingness to be a participant in a dispute with a ragpicker who had purloined my newspaper and was comfortably blocking the stairs. Even though my poor-white Protestant upbringing demanded that I be fiercely and implacably sorry for him, I wasn't. He had obviously grown venerable in his calling; therefore, he had only his own poor judgment or faulty timing to blame. All the other ragpickers in the neighborhood had liquidated their accumulations of aluminum cans, soft-drink bottles, and other plunder, parked the grocery carts they had pushed away from supermarkets in the spring, gotten drunk, and secured lodgings in the county jail for the winter. I had made a left turn past one of them at Lemmon and Oak Lawn as he directed traffic while urinating in the street.

I should never have left Farmer's Branch. These shabby images of the Absolute would never have appeared there. I should have sent Sharon home to Red and Dorothy and kept the
house I had been a slave to for three years without ever liking it, submitting to the embarrassed, solicitous good will of the welder and the high school track coach who were my next-door neighbors. But Sharon had said she wanted the house, and all I had wanted was out, so I had leased my apartment simply because it was for lease and I happened to look at it.

Six months in the neighborhood had not made me familiar with it. I knew the location of a questionable cafe from having driven past it on my way to the Interstate to get to the university, but I was about to be a customer for the first time. Since the end of August I had been taking my meals at school on weekdays and usually assembled something at home on Saturdays and Sundays. Before that, my appetite had suffered for a while. But with the semester over, I had relaxed. I did not feel like cooking or washing dishes, and I certainly did not want to wait to eat until after I had been to the bookstore and the supermarket.

The cafe was an old, flat-roofed little box of a building. There was a high, rectangular window on either side of the door that one approached by a single concrete (or discrete, given its condition) step adjacent to the sidewalk. On the windows were old advertisements for brands of cigarettes no one had smoked for some years. One still-popular brand was represented, although by an advertisement I could remember having seen as a child. A jaunty penguin, one wing extended
in welcome, invited one to "Come in. It's K00L inside."

Inside, it was still a questionable (however cool) place. I wished for the relative comfort and safety of the Denny's I used to patronize in Farmer's Branch. But I was hungry, so I hung my coat on an old wooden rack beside the juke box and walked through thick strata of cigarette smoke and smoking grease to a booth. Settling into a depression of broken springs and patched upholstery, I took a folded cardboard menu from the metal holder, in front of which were grouped bottles of ketchup and tabasco sauce, sugar and paper napkin dispensers, and massive salt and pepper shakers. I was squinting at the splashed, indistinct type on the dirty cardboard, trying to decide which of the numbered breakfasts I didn't want as much as I had when I came in when an angular, slipshod, saturnine waitress shuffled up and swabbed at the table with a coarse grey towel, took her fingers out of a glass of water as she put it in front of me, and poised the stub of a knife-sharpened pencil above a stained and dog-eared check pad.

"What kin I gitcha?"

"A number three breakfast."

"How you want the aiggs?"

"Scrambled."

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

"Okay," she exhaled wearily and began to bawl at the cook as she turned and trudged away from the table.
I saw a stack of newspapers on the end of the counter and got up to buy one to look at while I waited for my breakfast. Either I had made my resolution to read the paper in a moment of thorough exasperation or the front page diminished my enthusiasm. There was a story about a man who had graduated from the state boy's home at Gatesville, the state penitentiary at Huntsville, and the state mental hospital at Terrell. He had stolen a pickup truck on Saturday afternoon and, dressed in a Santa Claus costume, had given a ride to two little girls in Mesquite. No one seemed to expect them back for a while.

A cup and saucer detonated on the table, and the waitress filled them both with coffee. I arrested a spoon in its progress toward the wall and got up to look for cream. A little tin pitcher was handed back without comment from the row of cowboy hats hunched over plates at the counter. Cream and sugar didn't help the coffee much, except to make it look a little less unpleasant. I put napkins between the cup and saucer to absorb some of the superfluous coffee and cringed as the waitress came back and rattled a bowl with a box of corn flakes in it onto the table and slammed a half-pint carton of milk beside it. I shoved the bowl against the wall and drank the milk.

A thick, heavy oval platter of bacon, eggs, and hash browns came spinning across the table, and a biscuit tumbled out of a little basket. The eggs were yellow, white, and brown, and the entire meal had been served in half an inch of grease,
The biscuits were almost done and only a little cool; the elastic bacon could be drained on napkins; hash browns were by nature greasy; but the eggs were entirely unacceptable. I was puzzled. Not getting what I knew better than to expect usually affected me that way. It was odd.

"Ever'thang awright?" the waitress asked softly and kindly as she shoved my check under my left hand. I had been looking down at the platter, and all that occurs to me to explain her sympathetic discourse is that she must have thought I was praying.

"Yes, thank you." She returned my smile. Her teeth looked like the scrambled eggs, like they would liquefy and run out of her mouth and disgust me. I was glad to have her sympathy, though. It got me another cup and saucer of coffee and some margarine for my biscuits. At least my sense of humor was functioning. It seemed that I could be amused by everything but the eggs and the Dallas Morning News. But the juke box caught me unawares, as I was inserting margarine into a damp, doughy biscuit. In tomcat harmony, two bumpkin berserkers began whining in praise of alcoholism and adultery, a popular southwestern program for getting the most out of ignorance and degradation. A cowboy hat got up from the counter, paid its check, put on its denim jacket, poked a toothpick into its long, hollow face, and went out.
Sitting with a cigarette and a cup of coffee after a meal is the best part of a meal, but not in an atmosphere that oozes grease and country and western music. I put two quarters under the edge of the platter and left the newspaper in the booth without seeing MANIAC, p. 6. Bobbing, perfunctory glances rippled through the row of cowboy hats along the counter as I paid my check.

The second-hand bookstore was something of a miracle, if only because the lot it occupied had not yet been perceived as a good spot on which to construct a self-service car wash. It was an old frame house, painted a dull red, and it looked as if it should have commanded a view of a grain field in Nebraska, built three generations ago and forgotten not long after. The front door was set back from a protruding wing at the end of a long porch of unpainted, decomposing planks on the north side of the building. Going in by the front door, one passed through a wide hallway (one of thirteen rooms—not including the office or attic—that had bookshelves for walls) to the office window where the money tray (it was all there had ever been of a cash register) was kept under the counter next to a loaded set of ancient dueling pistols no one had ever known to be fired.

Sharon and I had known Kirns nearly as long as we had known one another. The bookstore had been our sanctuary from Dallas, Independent School District. We had been welcome any time we wanted to read rather than go to school and take
a chance on being shot or stabbed or beaten to death or raped in a bathroom (either of us) while we weren't being taught anything by all the people who didn't know anything to teach anybody. And when we wanted books and felt like working a little, Kirns gave us $1.25 per hour in credit for sweeping, dusting, putting books on shelves, emptying the mouse traps and setting them again, and trying to persuade the customers to pay for what they left with. Kirns always said he thought we were nice kids and never seemed to notice when we went upstairs. At least he never said so, but one year when the weather turned bad he moved a little gas space heater from one of the bookrooms to the attic.

I usually looked in on Kirns on Sunday mornings. Kirns was an ex-convict, a frightened, introspective man with fantastic (perhaps) notions of police proceedings. He had told me that for a long time after his release (he served a little less than four years for statutory rape—"a little tramp," he assured me anxiously on a number of occasions) that he couldn't stand for a door to be shut. Now he couldn't stand one that wasn't locked. He didn't like to leave the store much, and it had been a long time since he'd had to. Sharon and I had done much of his marketing for him since we'd been in the ninth grade. Kirns didn't eat much, which was fortunate for him when we hadn't much money, since he didn't make much more than his rent. Shopping had originally consisted of our taking a small amount of change and whatever soft drink
bottles had been left by customers during a week and doing our best for him at the supermarket five blocks up the street.

Getting in the back door was no problem. Besides a hundred books of our choice, Sharon and I had been presented with keys on the occasion of our wedding. Kirns rode to Sharon's parents' church with us, and we stopped at a Salvation Army store and bought him a coat and tie for $4.50. Sharon had leaned into the back seat and helped him with the tie, despite the piteous, inarticulate noises he produced and the hopelessly furtive gestures he made. Finally, he had writhed in the last pew when everybody kept turning around and whispering, trying to determine just who he thought he was and being outraged that he had no better reason for being there than an invitation from the bride and groom. This did not surprise me, since Red and Dorothy (each the child of sharecroppers) seemed to have suborned most of the guests to question the fitness of "that boy . . . the son of a common laborer" to marry their daughter.

Kirns was the first thing I saw when I stepped in. He was sitting on a folding metal chair, his legs crossed, his hands shoved into the pockets of last year's sweater (this year's sweater was in one of the giftwrapped boxes I was carrying). I knew he was genuinely glad to see me (although he was always puzzled at seeing me without Sharon), even if the uncomfortable, mobile smile he forced onto his old, sad hound's face didn't show it.
"Merry Christmas, Kirns."

"Hello, Tommy. Today Christmas?"

"Tomorrow."

"Guess there's no point in opening up, then."

I put the packages on a table next to the old, broken printing press so that Kirns would have plenty of room in which to be surprised at the sweater, slippers, and after shave lotion he was about to see for the ninth consecutive year. Kirns just didn't know what to say, except that I might look in some boxes under the counter, where he'd put some things he thought I might be interested in.

A burning sensation made me realize that I had swallowed more grease at breakfast than I had supposed. I plunged my hands into my pockets, searching for antacid tablets, but I didn't have any. It hurt quite a bit, but a lifetime of public school cafeterias, fast-food restaurants, and the culinary machinations of my ex-wife had inured me to that particular mode of suffering.

I always moved away from Kirns' little curtained-off room at the side of the office. Contrary to some ordinance about sleeping regularly at one's place of business, Kirns indeed slept there (although very irregularly, since he was afflicted with bad dreams) on an old cot of discolored, stitched-up canvas. And sometimes women came to see Kirns. They came sometimes when they had nothing better to do, and when Kirns could afford for them to come. It was sad for Kirns, I thought, that
any of the old horrors I had ever seen there could ever have had anything better to do. There was less chance of anybody's being embarrassed if I went to another room when I first came in, listening to happy rodents rustling in boxes of mildewed periodicals while Kirns settled up and said goodbye.

One had apparently been seeing Kirns not long before I had come in. At least there was something in the sleeping room that made vaguely feminine noises as it bumped around. I was particularly careful not to look at something that I knew would depress me until I stood up and put Kirns' Christmas present to me--Marchand's three-volume biography of Byron--on the counter. There was no longer any reason not to turn around and look at whatever there was to look at, and when I did, it was so ghastly that I couldn't help continuing to look.

Knots of grey and black hair tumbled from a head bent to oversee gnarled, spotted fingers clawing at the hooks of a garter belt and a torn red stocking. A tight-fitting, thread-bare paisley-print mini-skirt was pulled up to reveal most of a stringy leg bent at an enormous knee. She looked up at me with her vicious, staring alcoholic's eyes, and her chin, mottled and wrinkled and pendulous like an old gobbler's, swung itself slowly into motionlessness. Then she chattered something in shrieking, Hispanic intonations at Kirns.

"I didn't say nothing about cab fare," Kirns told her.

"How do I suppose' to git home, ol' man?"

"Go on out of here, now. I paid you already."
She was oblivious of gender, number, case, person, tense, voice, and mood in the bilingual fragments of sentences in which she enumerated Kirns' shortcomings while she put on an orange windbreaker and picked up the round wicker sewing basket she seemed to be using for a purse. She left the door open when she went out and fell down the steps. Kirns was embarrassed. He went over and shut the door.

"Find anything you like, Tommy?" I had turned away so that Kirns might think (or would at least be able to pretend he thought) I hadn't heard or seen anything, and I didn't notice his approach. Stealth was in character for him, though, and he wore slippers at all times to make it easier and more effective.

"Well, yes. But I wouldn't feel right about taking it. You could make some money on this."

"No," he said, glancing at the title and rubbing his chin. "People don't care nothing about Byron anymore. It'd just sit on the shelf 'til somebody stole it."

"Well, thank you, Kirns. It's a fine present." Kirns knew what to save for me because I had given him a list of authors, titles, and subjects. He had, of course, never read Byron. He loved and respected and was even afraid of books, but he had no use for their contents. His reading matter consisted of the garbled, prurient captions under indecent photographs in subrosa magazines. I'd seen part of his
collection once. Some representative titles were *Organ Grinders*, *Booby Traps*, *Enema Sex*, *Discipline and Desire*, *Rape*, and *Southern Belles in Bondage*.

Kirns crept back to the table by the printing press and began to unwrap his gifts. Doing it, he sounded like the rodents in his magazines, tentative and desultory, though pleased. He smiled when he opened the after-shave and sniffed it, put on the new sweater and slippers, and took the old ones into his sleeping room. Throwing anything away was impossible for Kirns. No one had ever asked him for a bread wrapper he didn't have, and he had supplied a long succession of shoplifters with bags and boxes to carry merchandise away in. The wrapping paper from his gifts, covered with fat, whiskered, jovial heads guffawing at nothing unless at all the other identical guffawing heads, was folded and in a box under the table, although Kirns probably hadn't wrapped a gift in thirty-five years.

"Well, Kirns, I'm on my way to the store. What can I bring you?"

He screwed the cap back onto the after-shave lotion and replaced the tired, timid, vacant smile with a contraction of his bushy, anarchic eyebrows into a puzzled, timid, vacant attempt at concentration. "Just a second. Let me see what I'm out of." He went into the sleeping room, which was also his pantry and part of his kitchen. Surrounded by a saucepan, a teakettle, a loaf of stale bread, and a few cans of chili,
potted meat, and spaghetti, a cracked cast-iron hot plate sat on a shelf above Kirns' cot. The sink was at the opposite end of the office from the refrigerator, on which a destitute artist Kirns knew had painted a red and turquoise thunderbird. The toilet was outside in a shed attached to the house. Kirns frequently had trouble getting into it on cold mornings. Someone usually lodged in it for the night and got angry if Kirns awakened him by pounding on the door. One enterprising itinerant had decided to set up a concession and had made a fair living from Kirns' emergencies until I liberated the toilet by pouring ammonia under the door.

"I don't need nothing for today, Tommy. Sharon brought me a pail of stew the other day, and I'm still eating on it. Just--you know what I eat." Kirns had come back into the office holding out a limp ten-dollar bill. I had tried to refuse to take his money before, but he had plaintively insisted that he didn't want charity. He knew now, of course, that he would find the money again when he opened his loaf of bread. It wasn't that Kirns really disliked charity. But he seemed to understand or intuit that he couldn't expect anybody to like his liking it.

"Did Sharon seem to be doing all right?"

Kirns turned his head away, as though he had been caught in a lie by somebody who could do something about it. "Yeah, pretty good. She didn't stay long, though. Somebody was
waiting on her. Playing that funny horn on the car. She
brought me a little pail of stew."

"She didn't say anything was wrong?"

Kirns shook his head and seemed to be trying to draw it
into the sweater so it wouldn't show. He wouldn't look at me.
My marriage had been a source of happiness for him, and I
think he resented my divorce. It certainly didn't leave him
much happiness, so when he had recently become more uncommuni-
cative than usual, I took his apologetic taciturnity for an
involuntary reproach. I hoped he wasn't like that to Sharon.
I suspected she had the inarticulate to deal with often enough
as it was.

Even though Kirns' hesitant disapproval was only the ex-
pression of his bewilderment at things not being as he thought
he'd known they always would be, I couldn't help being a little
offended. My family had always been clannish and had taught
me to resent any particular interest in my life by a stranger,
which meant anybody not related to me by blood, or my wife,
assuming I could keep one. When my divorce had become final,
some of my colleagues had given a party to celebrate my reas-
sumption of bachelorhood. My colleagues told me the next day
that I was the only person invited who hadn't come.

I didn't see any way I could help Kirns. It was his own
fault that he had any adjustment to make, and he would have
to make it alone, just like anybody else.
CHAPTER III

I deposited Kirns' groceries on the table and put his milk in the refrigerator when I found him asleep, burrowed into a boar's nest of dirty bedclothes, wearing his new sweater. I didn't see his slippers on the floor by the cot, so I assumed he was probably wearing them too. The scented atmosphere of his sleeping room indicated that he might have shaved, but his face was lost in the tumbled cot, so it was impossible to be sure.

It seemed that I never went into a supermarket without forgetting something. I was nearly home when I remembered the fragment of a bar of soap that had disintegrated in the shower that morning.

The ice in the Seven Eleven parking lot turned my car half around, whereupon I decided it was sufficiently parked.

For six months I had watched the neighborhood's denizens not struggling against their unpleasant environment, and while I knew I would never have much use for things that didn't happen in Farmer's Branch, such things interested me. I can't say that I had ceased to be surprised. The edge, though, was certainly gone from any encounter I might have with the unlikely and undesirable. It was the exasperation that I no longer felt. The embarrassment remained.
But the girl didn't embarrass me much. Pummelled women are not so uncommon. If she'd been wearing a coat I probably wouldn't have spoken to her. She was sitting on a newspaper on the concrete platform, hugging herself and shaking violently. I found it hard to start a conversation with a strange girl whose face had been bloodied. She looked up after a moment and said, "Hey."

"Hello. You seem to be hurt." I knew it couldn't have sounded very comforting, but it occurred to me that she might not care much for my sympathy. And I frequently communicate by understatement. She looked like the pictures I'd seen of Rosa Luxemburg.

"Yeah, some," she said. Her breath came and went in whistles and shudders. One lens was missing from the bent wire frames of her glasses. They looked as though they had nothing to do with her face, as though she'd found them and put them on for a joke.

"You need to see a doctor."

"No."

"Why not?"

"Don't want to. Can't afford one."

"Well, can I call somebody?"

"No."

"Then I can take you home."

"I can't go."

"Somewhere else, then."
"There's not anywhere else."

"Well, you can't sit here and freeze."

"I kind of thought I would."

Now I had been about to go in, buy my soap, and drive away so she could sit there and freeze. But her last comment seemed almost like an attempt to be funny. I rather thought so, even if it was impossible to tell from her red and purple poker face. I am convinced of my ability to take a great deal, but I knew that humor would be out of the question if anybody ever gave me a beating like that.

"Why don't you go in the store?"

"I did. But the man said I had to leave because I wasn't buying anything."

"Come on. I'm going to buy something. I guess he won't throw me out." I helped her up and kept her from slipping down again. "Do you want your newspaper?"

"No. Some old guy gave it to me to sit on."

"Well, that was fifty cents worth of being nice."

"He got two out at the same time and threw this one at me."

I held the door for her, and she ducked in and kept her head down. The clerk had been talking volubly to a customer but quit talking to turn and scowl at us as we came in. He was a petulant-looking little man with light, receding hair and a quivering line across his face for a mouth. He wore an orange and white polka dot smock over a white shirt with
a button-down collar and a little, sudden blue bow tie. Down one aisle, two brittle old women were shoplifting and stopped putting cans of soup into the immense handbags they carried to observe that Dallas apparently contained unnatural ruffians who gratified awful propensities by trying to beat young girls to death. A fat man (who had daughters, by God) waiting at the counter for the instant of noon so he could pay for the three cases of cheap beer he'd stacked there turned and chewed a damp, discolored cigar stub at me.

"You want to pay for that, too?" the clerk asked when I had put three bars of soap on the counter and gotten out my wallet.

"What?"

He pointed an answer, and I turned around. My new friend had a mousetrap in her hands, her head still down as she turned the mousetrap over, examining it minutely.

"Did you want the mousetrap?" I asked her.

"Huh? No." She looked surprised at herself and put it on the counter.

"We've decided against the mousetrap," I told the clerk.

He made a new face, one in which the features drew up and became more objectionable from their new proximity to one another. As I made a face in return, I could hear one of the old women buzzing to the other that I'd "beat all the sense out of that poor girl." The clerk made my change, popped a paper sack in my face, and shoved the sack across the counter.
"My name's Faye," she said as we slipped sideways out of the parking lot. A bus driver driving on the wrong side of the street made furious, indecent gestures at me as we approached each other, so I moved over and drove on the wrong side of the street proper to me.

"Are you getting warm?"
"Yeah. Makes it hurt more."
"Don't you think you need to go to the hospital?"
"I don't want to."
"Did you report this to the police?"
"No." She didn't raise her voice to say it, but the shorter intervals between the whistling breaths made me understand that it was an emphatic negative. "You didn't tell me your name."

"I'm sorry. It's Tom."
"Can you give me something to eat?"
"Of course."

I heard a rattling noise and looked over. She was patiently trying to open a bag of corn chips she'd taken from one of the bags in the back seat. She put one in her mouth and chewed a few times with her eyes closed before she folded the top of the bag and returned it to the back seat.

"What's wrong."
"They hurt my mouth. They're salty."

I began to wonder if she were really hurt seriously. She'd been so calm, except for the involuntary tears caused
by the ravages of a corn chip. For all I knew she might have been placidly hemorrhaging while trying to eat the corn chips. But she seemed to have her senses and didn't want medical attention. And I didn't much want to explain to hospital personnel and police officers that I had only found her.

The bowl of tomato soup was cool, and the bread Faye had pinched into it was saturated.

"Can you eat it all right?"
"Yeah."
"Who did you have a fight with?"
"My old man."
"You're married?"
"Huh? No. I mean the dude I live with."
"Oh. It looks like he had most of the fight."
"Yeah. I didn't want to. Then I couldn't."
"Why don't you throw him out?"
"He threw me out. Part of the way down the stairs, too."
I couldn't help wondering if a fist fight made any more sense than a divorce. But I couldn't imagine ever striking Sharon. Not in Farmer's Branch. Suburban censure is an awful thing.

"Had you been sitting in front of the store long?"
"Since before daylight."
"Your friend gets up early to fight."
"Stays up late. It was right after I got home from work. About two-thirty."

"What did you do all morning?"

"I crawled off and went to sleep on a porch, but a dog in the house started going crazy. Then a bald man opened the door and told me I couldn't sleep there--I'd freeze to death. He said to go on before he called the police. So I went in that store."

"And nobody paid any attention to you?"

"Well, the clerk said get out, and later some dyke asked me if I wanted a ride, and the old man threw me that paper, and then you came. Have you got any milk?"

"What was the fight about?" I asked as I poured milk into a plastic tumbler.

She shook her head. "I don't know. He started on me as soon as I came in and gave him my money. He must've been high. He never did it before."

"How long have you known him?"

"Couple months."

"Why did you give him your money?"

"He didn't have any. He got laid off about three weeks ago. He fixes motorcycles. Listen--would you let me take a bath? I kind of need one."

"All right."

"I guess I'll have to put these clothes back on."

"I can give you something. It will be pretty baggy, though."
"That's okay. But my stuff'll still be dirty."

"There's a laundry room downstairs. I was going to wash later anyway."

"Are you all right?" I called. I had been arranging cans of soup and vegetables in the kitchen cabinets when Faye shut off the water, splashed into the tub, and groaned.

"Yeah."

I had been wondering at my sudden acquaintance with Faye, and now I wondered, rather critically, how many men and boys had been captivated by that monosyllable. It no longer seemed so impossible as I would have thought.

Faye had been in the bathtub for some time. I assumed it was because the hot water made her feel better. She took so long that she got through before I had expected her to and materialized in the kitchen door with about a foot of a grey and white striped caftan (a gift from my humorous former mother-in-law--I had never worn it) gathered in one hand and a white towel wrapped around her wet hair. Set off by the towel, her face seemed quite round (some of the spherical quality could be ascribed to swelling) and friendly and minimally pretty. She was lost in the caftan.

"How old are you, Faye?"

"Me? Eighteen--since last week."

"How long has it been since you've lived with your parents?"

"A long time. More than two years."
Faye's parents were mildly surprised when the police kept bringing her back when she ran away. While she was gone for the fourth time, her father (a salesman) had been transferred by his company, and he and her mother had moved to Oregon without her. Faye didn't think they'd left without knowing she wasn't with them, but she couldn't be certain. Going home after a miscarriage and a case of hepatitis, she had found strangers in her house. She'd gotten her parents' forwarding address from the Dallas office of her father's firm and had written to them several times without getting an answer.

I sat down at the dining table and handed her a cup of cocoa. "I don't keep marshmallows," I apologized. "They make my teeth angry."

"That's okay."

"Do you feel any better?"

"Yeah. A lot."

"You said you got home at two-thirty. Do you work nights?"

"Yeah. At Dmitri's."

"What is Dmitri's?"

"It's a bar. A topless place."

"You dance there?"

"Yeah. I wait tables too."

"Do you like that?" I think being puzzled made me ask a perfectly normal question that seemed in this case wholly inappropriate. She didn't look as if she had the physique for
such work. But I didn't know. I'd only been in a topless bar once, but the dancer I'd seen had been striking as she yawned and tottered up and down the stage.

"It's okay. I make good money, but I get real tired. And sometimes a customer gets out of hand."

"How does a customer do that?"

"Oh, most of 'em just pinch and poke too hard. But one time one of 'em waited outside and tried to rape one of the girls. A real screwball. Dmitri shot him."

"Were you ever bothered?"

"Oh, no. Not there. I'm not pretty enough. Anyway, my old man used to come take me home. So I've been lucky."

"Until now."

"Yeah."

"How long have you been doing this?"

"About six months."

"What did you do before that?"

"I was a kind of missionary. At least I guess you'd call it that." She stopped for me to comment. I frequently find myself with nothing to say. This was one of those times. All I could think of was the two Mormons who had recently told me in my own apartment that they would testify against me on the Last Day because I'd heard the truth and declined to follow it. Showing them out, I said I meant to try plea bargaining. "It was a religious deal called the Children of Light family.
I passed stuff out at street corners and in front of bars and asked for donations. That's how I got on at Dmitri's when I quit the family. I'd tried to convert some of the girls. They got Dmitri to give me a job and make the family's boss quit coming around all the time trying to get me to come back."

I had read about the family's boss in one of the Dallas papers. His name was Father David Abraham. He was a middle-aged businessman who had abandoned his wife and children to propagate his ideas about God and love. His disciples (mostly runaways) lived in old, decomposing houses in the inner city and got all the brown rice they could eat in exchange for forcing pamphlets onto drunks for a contribution to their family. Father David Abraham lived simply. He walked barefoot among his followers, wore a white robe exactly like those of his two bodyguards, and was driven around in a nondescript mid-sized automobile. He visited his establishments weekly, collecting paper sacks of money and delivering rice and incoherent homilies. He remained in Dallas, even though his hysterical wife, who was suing him for nonsupport, followed him around with a pistol. When his movement became nationwide, he sold franchises.

Father David Abraham had suffered Faye to come unto him, and she found herself issuing pamphlets to lost souls outside bars, modeling studios, pornographic bookstores, pornographic theaters, and all-night coffee shops.
One night Faye made her final attempt to establish her Father's paradise in Dallas. She had just been liberated from jail on a vagrancy charge and she was depressed. When two men in coats and ties stopped to talk to her in front of a modeling studio where she was trying to save whores, she thought they were police officers. But they had seemed genuinely interested in God's love and read Faye's pamphlet. They said they wanted to hear more about it, so Faye went to a coffee shop with them. After they had eaten (Faye had only coffee), they made contributions to the family and offered Faye a ride back to her station in front of the modeling studio.

But they didn't take her back there. They got onto Central Expressway and drove to Plano and raped her in a boxcar. She hadn't protested because she thought she could convince them she'd really meant what she'd said about love.

"I really believed that stuff."

I nodded.

"I wasn't even mad at 'em."

"You should have been."

"I know. But I didn't think so then."

The two men took back their money, and they took Faye's money too. Then one held her and the other burned her with his cigarette lighter. And all she wished was that they hadn't stuffed her underclothes into her mouth. Then she could have told them that she wasn't angry . . . that it hurt . . . that God loved them.
CHAPTER IV

Faye had told me, as she scribbled the address on the index card I gave her, that I'd "better look out" when I did what I was about to do. According to her, her "man" was a personage better left alone. I was to look out particularly for the crowbar he liked to swing at the heads of men who took an interest in Faye.

I concurred that he must have kept the crowbar for just such an unpleasant purpose as dispatching rivals, because a crowbar seemed an unlikely implement for motorcycle maintenance. I had stopped to look at the machine parked at the bottom of the stairs and thought about it.

The apartment was above what hadn't been a business machine store for some time, so if I were clubbed, there would be no witnesses, no one to refuse to help me if I called for help, which I probably wouldn't do. I was alone and taking my chances, just like anybody else. I didn't believe in violence, but if attacked, I couldn't be passive. On the other hand, I couldn't expect to be very effective. There couldn't be a standard method of self-defense against crowbars. And even if I won and atomized this fellow, I couldn't expect to be accepted socially at the penitentiary. Not with an M.A. in English.
The door was ajar and came open as soon as I tapped on it. As there was no immediate sign of the crowbar or of anyone to crack my head with it, I looked in. The windows had been covered with aluminum foil, which made it hard to distinguish anything not in the direct path of the sunlight admitted by the open door. Holding my breath, I stepped inside, switched on the light, and shut the door. The debris of a guitar lay scattered on the floor, and I stepped through it, feeling conspicuous and defenseless as I held the laundry basket and paper sack I'd brought.

A low coffee table had been turned over in front of a sofa with green upholstery. The floor was littered with a box of crackers, a can of pork and beans with a spoon in it, part of a quart bottle of wine, some cigarette papers, some red capsules, the other lens of Faye's glasses, and the corpse of a black and white cat. The cat's head had been crushed. The cold, tainted air indicated that the cat's demise had occurred at about the same time as Faye's fight—two and a half days before. I put the lens in my coat pocket.

It was impossible to determine from the physical condition of the bed whether anybody was in it, but I couldn't detect any movement, so I went into the bedroom and opened the sliding door of the closet. Faye hadn't been modest when she'd said she didn't have many clothes. I found three more pairs of jeans, a short suede jacket, a long lavender gown
Faye wanted it particularly—she wore it to work), two pairs of heels (also for work), and a pair of boots.

In the dresser I found some small, slightly convex discs of tinsel over cardboard, several pastel g-strings, four pairs of pantyhose, a few articles of underclothing, three pull-overs, two T-shirts with mottoes on them ("Contents Under Pressure" and "Nowhere Else But Dallas"), a pair of long white gloves, a yellow garter, a black choker, and a shoebox containing a few pieces of costume jewelry. The incense burner in the form of an owl was on top of the dresser as Faye had said it should be, but it did not contain the sixty-odd dollars (mostly in change) I was supposed to find in it.

Everything else Faye wanted was in the the bathroom. I switched on the light and was startled by a raucous whining noise. Whirling around, I saw what must have been Faye's "man" dressed and at his ease in the bathtub. He was unpleasant to look at. He'd had a red beard and a red, curly pony tail and still had some of each. The bare patches made me feel uneasy, as though they were significant and I ought to have known why. His face was locked in a grimace at more light than he'd probably seen in some time.

He wasn't much bigger than Faye and didn't look capable of doing much damage to anybody but Faye except with a crowbar. The grimace and much of his attention went away in a moment, and he looked very peaceful, which I associated with the syringe on the edge of the bathtub.
"What the fuck do you want?" he asked equably.

"Faye's things."

"How come?"

"She's moving out." I opened the paper sack and began to fill it from the medicine cabinet. There were a few cosmetics and things such as contraceptive foam. Putting it in the sack, I wondered if it would be suggestively ungallant of me to remember to bring it to Faye.

"She kin come back," he said, wallowing around and apparently becoming even more comfortable. "I ain't mad no more."

I have said that I am not violent, but it was hard not to react, at least by putting in the plug and turning on the hot water, a substance the sour air in the bathroom made me think he hadn't been familiar with lately. But I had decided not to provoke him in any way. I freely admit that at first the notorious and terrible crowbar had been on my mind. Now, even after having seen how miserably negligible he was, I still had to think of Faye. I didn't want to come home from terrorizing freshmen some day and find Faye dripping down the walls because she hadn't wanted to fight. Faye had said he usually carried a knife in one of his boots, which were then crossed at the ankles and propped against the wall above the tap.

"Well, I'll tell her you said so." I was mortified at the knowledge that Faye, whose innate good nature was disturbingly like the nebulous and nonsensical program of universal
love she had spent so long trying to pester into human refuse, would be glad to know he wasn't mad no more.

"Might as well leave 'er stuff here."

"She wants me to bring it to her."

"She'll be back."

"Then she can bring it back with her when she comes."

"She loves me." He gurgled, hacked, and expectorated on his shirt.

"How nice for you."

He seemed to be trying to concentrate and succeeded just as far as a suspicious squint. "Who the fuck 're you?"

"I'm not anybody," I said, dropping a package of tampons in the sack.

"Good thing you ain't."

"I guess it is."

"I'm bad."

"I can tell you are."

He nodded his head and closed his eyes in some combination of satisfaction and narcosis. "Don't take no shit from no-body."

I couldn't think of a properly conciliatory response to this, so I proceeded to my last article of business, the one most likely to cause trouble. "Faye said she had some money here."

"I needed it."

"All of it?"
"They ain't but a little bit left. Some change. Think she wants it?"

"No. I guess she'd want you to keep it."

"I got to eat."

"Of course you do. Well, I seem to have everything. I'll be on my way now."

"Tell Faye I love 'er an' come on home."

"I certainly will."

It seemed unlikely, but perhaps I really would have been in danger if it hadn't been for the syringe Faye's money had filled, but there was no doubt that Faye thought so, because I could see her bruised, anxious face peeping through the plastic drapes of my front window as I drove into the parking lot. She seemed to expect me to be able to get back, but was apparently uncertain about the condition I would be in when I did.

"How'd it go?"

"All right. But you're broke," I said, putting the basket and sack on the dining table.

"I kind of thought I would be. What about my grass?"

"I forgot to ask."

"Oh." She was disappointed, and I think she knew that I hadn't really forgotten, that I disapproved of marijuana and didn't want her smoking it around me. "How was Rusty?"

"Half-conscious."
"He didn't get after you?"

"No."

"What was he doing?"

"Lying in the bathtub."

"High?"

"Yes."

"What'd he say?"

"Not much that was intelligible."

"Boy, were you lucky."

"That's what he said." I took the lens from my pocket and handed it to her. She took off her glasses and fumbled for a moment at trying to fix them, but couldn't see well enough without wearing them.

"Can you do this?"

"I think so." I got the eyeglass repair kit I'd had since high school from a cabinet in the bathroom and sat down to work while Faye felt through her wardrobe. She seemed happy and announced her intention of going back to work in a couple of days.

"You don't have to go back to work."

"Why not? Dmitri said I could. I called him while you were gone. Don'tcha want me to?"

"It doesn't matter. You can if you want. But you don't have to."

"I'm just so used to making my own way. My head gets funny if I don't work."
"All right." I turned the pin tight with the minute screwdriver and held Faye's glasses out to her. It took her a minute to realize what they were. "They seem to be fixed. Maybe they were just loose when the lens fell out."

"Great!" Faye put them on and grinned at me. It made me feel strange. The only grinning I could remember having been done at me repeatedly had been done by Red's stained dentures, which also made me feel strange. Something was quite a bit different, though, as it had to be. The quality of the grin . . . the quality of the strangeness--it's hard to say.

Faye took the basket and sack into the bedroom and began hanging things in the closet and putting things in the drawers we had cleared out for her use in the chest. I sat down to smoke a cigarette, and she went to put her cosmetics and contraceptive foam in the bathroom. I thought of the ugly tableau of her apartment, of the differences between us, and of whether the hesitancy I felt came from pride. But I was not particularly proud of being an instructor of English at a university, though I liked my work. And I had wondered for a long time if pride could have anything to do with being cowed and domesticated in the suburbs--eyeless in Farmer's Branch.

It wouldn't matter in this neighborhood. I knew that it was only when living between a welder and a high school track coach that I couldn't have an eighteen-year-old topless dancer move in with me and expect to be left in peace. The ladies in
Farmer's Branch would not have asked Faye to play tennis or come to Tupperware parties.

Faye expressed herself in grins, giggles, monosyllabic slang when it would do, and either vague, slow astonishment or quizzical childishness when phrases or sentences were necessary. She was quiet and liked to read, having done well in school until her circumstances had made school irrelevant. Crime and Punishment, however, gave her trouble from the beginning. As each new character was introduced, the invariable question was, "How do you say this dude's name?" It took no more than having Razumikhin and Svidrigailov spelled aloud to exasperate me. Altogether, the book was "strange--really."

The ice was beginning to melt, so I thought I would take Faye out for a hamburger. I didn't much want to be seen by the public with her until her face healed (the silent hostility from people who assumed I had beaten her made me impatient and nervous), but I also didn't want to cook and wasn't about to allow Faye to do so. She had insisted the night before that she felt well enough to prepare dinner, and I had finally assented. Then, speechless, I had watched her put some water in a saucepan, peel the paper from a can of ravioli, put the can of ravioli in the saucepan, and put the saucepan on the stove. She seemed surprised when I mentioned plates. She was used to eating from the can. It had always kept her from spending her money buying dishes or her time washing them, she explained.
CHAPTER V

It was only five-thirty, but the whores were already out. Night would be a fact in about fifteen minutes, and I realized that the night was proper to whores, but it still seemed too early. It may have been the mercantilist alacrity of their pimps in not wanting to let twenty-five dollars get away that bothered me. I'm not sure.

Faye stopped to talk to one of the whores she knew, and I put my hands in my pockets and scanned the intelligence that had been attached to the front of the bar. Dmitri's. Topless Exotics (I wondered if anybody had ever really associated the exotic with Faye's plain, bright, ironic face). 4 P.M.--2 A.M. No Cover. No Loitering.

It seemed to me that I might be loitering, or that somebody in one of the patrol cars that were circling the block might think I was, so I strolled over to Faye and was introduced to the whore. My approach had been noted, and I think the whore must have thought I was either a client or a vice officer, because her face became a hard, alluring, noncommittal mask, concealing whatever she might have thought there was to conceal in a whore's face. But when Faye proclaimed me to be her "man" (I'd been trying to negotiate for a term a little more circumspect or a little less silly), the whore became quite cordial, shook my hand, and smiled at me with
her painted, pinched-up face. When she asked, "How yew?" I could imagine that she honestly would have been glad at a favorable report on the state of my existence.

Faye no longer thought of whores as lost, agonized souls limping through a bad dream, but she still liked to talk to them. This one (I hadn't heard her name) told Faye the sordid, silly news of the street, which consisted for the most part of complaints about business not being good lately. A good deal of pressure (moral, I believe) had lately been exerted by the community, and it looked like the whores would once again have to move across the slums to Bryan Street. Their pimps never smiled anymore.

A white Mercury parked a little way down the lot, and at some signal that was imperceptible to me, the whore walked toward the car. Faye took my arm and guided me to the entrance of Dmitri's. Behind us, I could hear the whore asking, in what seemed more like a weary exigency than anything else, "Whatcha doin'?"

We passed from the illuminated ugliness of the walk in front of Dmitri's, a nude modeling studio, a pornographic bookstore, a pornographic theater, a liquor store, and a drive-in grocery into the darkened anteroom of the bar. In the anteroom were a pay telephone, a cigarette machine, and, tacked to the actual entrance, a placard containing the information that it was a crime to keep and bear arms in an establishment where alcoholic beverages were sold. I opened this second
door, and Faye stepped into the previously muffled madness of a rock and roll record.

Spavined, shrieking exotics came bouncing up to hug and kiss Faye. They snorted and giggled in a circle around her. Occasionally, a face was turned to smile at me, or perhaps only about me. I couldn't tell whether the prevailing reaction to me was approval or only amusement.

"Check tables, girls," a sinister voice muttered into a microphone. Faye's colleagues hurriedly sorted out their trays and scuttled off.

I turned to Faye and saw that she was talking to me. All I heard, though, was the grumbling uproar of customers and the incomprehensible rock and roll lyrics. I made gestures indicating my inability to hear her, so Faye took my arm, and I found myself ushered behind the bar into the august presence of Dmitri. He was a big, sullen man with a fuzzy black mustache. Dmitri wiped his powerful, hairy hand on a bar towel that was tucked into the waist of his trousers and wrung his greetings. When he told me to "take care of that kid" (Faye), he was smiling. But he still managed to make it sound like a threat. Faye told him my name again, along with my occupation. My relationship to Faye was all that had made much of an impression.

"You teach school, huh?"

"Well, I get paid for it. I'm not sure I teach anybody anything."
A shrivelled, excited little man came stumbling up to the bar, a triumphant leer on his face, waving what resembled in the uncertain light a computer card. Dmitri cut off his belly laugh and, wiping his hands again, made a stately progress to confront the old man at the cash register. Dmitri took the card, turned it over, and handed it back. "You got to sign it, buddy," he said in the clenched, sinister mutter from which I never knew him to deviate. I don't think he could otherwise have accomplished speech. A prayer from Dmitri would sound as though he didn't mean to stand for any nonsense.

"What is this?" I asked Faye.

"That's Marvin. He comes in the first of every month with his Social Security check. Spends it all, too. He likes to lick people."

"How does he live if he spends all his money here?"

"His wife gets Social Security too."

"Oh."

Our drinks came ("on the house!" with a magnificently tragic gesture from Dmitri), set on the bar by an incredible specimen Faye addressed as Precious. She was a former dancer who had pulled herself up by her g-string until she became Dmitri's working-class concubine. Precious helped Dmitri run the bar and acted as housemother to an itinerant assemblage of miserable young women. I looked at the Black Russian I'd ordered, wondering what it would be like (it was certainly black, and in a very small glass—I was afraid of it), and
Faye sipped her Tequila Sunrise.

Precious cashed Marvin's check for him and made change for the can of beer he ordered at intervals in the alternately indecent and incoherent oration he made to her. It seemed that the impassive and the inarticulate could not have any kind of serious confrontation. Marvin took his can of beer and found an unoccupied seat beside the stage, staring up at somebody else's unfortunate granddaughter and demanding that she come sit on his face, which she did. The two rows of alternating orange and blue floodlights in the ceiling above the stage produced a ghastly effect on his withered features as they were enveloped.

I had to go to the men's room.

Dmitri propelled me around the corner past the bar and pointed out the bathroom door, reminding me that Faye had had a hard time, and that I should be nice to her. He couldn't get any decent help to replace her.

I held my breath at the urinal. Somebody had vomited on the wall recently. Condoms had gone up to half a dollar since the last time I'd noticed. As always, the fine print in the advertisements appealed to hygiene and chivalry—"Protect her . . . protect yourself." On the wall above the cascading stool, quite a few of the tiles had been removed. I wondered if somebody had been trying to escape.

"I've got to go change," Faye told me when I got back to the bar. "Where do you want to sit?"
"Out of everybody's way, if possible."

"China Doll," Dmitri rumbled into the microphone by the cash register. "We got China Doll up for you. Make some noise, gentlemen."

"Okay. Come on." Faye led me through a labyrinth of chairs, tables, and legs in blue jeans and cowboy boots thrust into the doubtful path until we got nearly to the door. Then we went up three steps and turned to our left, where there was a row of booths beneath the mirror that ran the length of the wall.

Faye pecked my cheek and went away to change into her work clothes. I looked at China Doll (who was Costa Rican) over one shoulder for a while, then turned and watched her in the mirror. The place was insufferably noisy (a speaker throbbed just above my head), and its atmosphere was saturated with perfume and cigarette smoke. I felt uncomfortable, even disoriented, and found myself searching for something to look at that didn't move. I located a motionless cowboy hat with a drunken face below it. But the face was brooding at me, even before I began to stare at it.

"Whatchewlookin' at?" he finally sputtered.

"I'm sorry?" I said, leaning toward him.

"Fuck yew."

"What?" I didn't understand. I wasn't even certain that it was me he was menacing. I was about to decide to do nothing and see if he would go away when Dmitri, taking one of his
frequent reconnaissance strolls through his establishment, pulled the cowboy out of his chair by the collar.

"I ain't done nothin'," the cowboy protested.

"And you ain't going to do no more of it, neither. Not in my place," Dmitri said, already pushing him toward the door.

"What happened?" Dmitri inquired across the table, inscrutable, implacable, and obviously mean as hell.

"I really don't know. He just got nasty. He didn't have any reason I know of."

"Well, kid, you got to get used to people talking. They don't come to my place to act like schoolteachers."

"All right. Thanks for the help."

"Just a punk. Punks I ought to let the girls put out."

He got up and resumed his stately, watchful tour.

It wasn't as if Dmitri's girls didn't look as if they would be more than adequate in a brawl. But that Dmitri thought I had to be protected from someone he considered unworthy of much attention or effort was hard to take. I seemed to be nothing more than the man who wouldn't have fist fights with Faye.

I had nodded at three gyrating waitresses in succession as they had leaned over their trays, their flesh lunging at me from the lingerie tops they were wearing, and asked, "You doin' all right?" Then I had shaken my head at one who held out an immense glass half-filled with money and asked if I would care to contribute to something called the voluntary cover charge.
China Doll had had conniptions to one record in comparative decency. I was watching her extract herself from the sequined pullover she'd been wearing when yet another waitress stooped over me. She peered into my face for a few seconds before something caused her to stand up and back away. "Mr. Randolph!"

"Oh, hello, Miss ... Hughes." I was always glad when I remembered one of my former students' names, especially one who had failed.

"How are ya?"

"Fine. I hope you're doing well." She wasn't bright enough to understand the irony I couldn't help, but she seemed to have forgotten the rage and despair she'd felt when she began to suspect that she wouldn't be around the university long enough to have either a teaching certificate or a marriage license conferred on her, even after she'd done her hair, unbuttoned her dress to the navel, and sat in the conference chair in my office extravagantly crossing her legs and suggesting that surely there was something she could do to pass with a C.

Even former students who hung halfway out of the window of a passing automobile and made retching noises at me made me less uncomfortable than the friendly ones. Even the letters and phone calls I received regularly were easier to take. I returned Miss Hughes' smile, remembering when I had stood around the corner from my classroom one morning to smoke a
cigarette and heard her at the door enumerating to a class-
mate all the unimaginable enormities I committed when I went
home in the afternoon and got under my rock, where everything
was damp and cool and smelled funny.

Miss Hughes sat down across from me and observed that I
was about the last person on earth she would have expected to
encounter in Dmitri's. She was overwhelmingly pretty. I
wished I had passed her.

"I came with a friend," I explained.

"Faye. You're up, Faye. Put your hands together for
Faye, gentlemen."

I turned around and saw Faye leaning intently over the
juke box, selecting her music. She looked a great deal dif-
erent in the lavender gown, white gloves, and black choker,
but the effect was incongruous rather than exotic. Not quite
like a child wearing grown-up clothes, but more like that than
anything else. Faye's assumption of sophistication was only
one more illusion Dmitri's offered in bad taste to those who
otherwise would have rejected it altogether. Faye set her
tray on the ledge that ran around the stage and took her
glasses off and put them on the stage with her money and her
Tequila Sunrise. I saw the yellow garter as she pulled up
her gown to climb from a chair onto the stage. She waved at
me and began to stride up and down the stage (still not the
least bit exotic), pulling up her gown so that a customer
might deposit the dollar bill he'd waved at her.
"You know Faye?" Miss Hughes was incredulous. My knowledge of Faye was the only article of my knowledge of anything that had ever much interested her.

"Yes. Would you excuse me a moment?" I didn't want to explain, so I got up to go to the men's room again. I didn't want to do that either, but I could do it without conversation if I were lucky.

I was at the bar finishing a second drink when Faye came up breathlessly and pulled the gown back over her head. "I've got to check my tables," she said. "See you at two."

"We've missed you, Faye."

Faye was exhausted from her first night back at work, and I was not used to being hooted at when at 1:45 A.M. I tried to pass through a phalanx of whores by saying, "Excuse me, ladies." So I was not in a kindly temper when I turned around to look at the representative of whoever was presuming to have been missing Faye. The voice that alternated between a quiet resonance and a hiss was a good one for frightening children. His appearance, which was apparently so imposing to his adherents—well, as tired as I was, I felt like cackling at him. He was really a little man (although the white robe he wore made it impossible to determine just how little) with long pale hands full of knuckles. He had a luxuriant head of turban and a black beard wrapped impeccably around his face. He stood
(toes protruding from under the hem of his robe) watching us with a mournful smile, flanked by two heavyweight disciples.

"You don't have to listen to this," I said, squeezing Faye's arm. "Let's go."

Father David Abraham's lips disappeared, disapproving of me, into his beard. "Who is this person, Faye?"

"This is Tom," Faye murmured, putting her arm around my waist and holding her face against my chest.

"Tom, you say. I say Tom won't do. I can't approve of him, Faye."

"I don't depend on your approval," I said.

"Don't interrupt. Don't interfere. Faye is no concern of yours."

"You're mistaken."

"No, you are. Faye means something to me."

"I've heard."

"To you she represents only the flesh," he pontificated, ignoring me. "Now I don't approve of that—at least not outside the family. Why don't you pick out one of these?" he asked, indicating the circle of whores who had gathered in hopes of seeing a fight. They made noises that affirmed their availability. "One you can't corrupt with your filthy excuse for a soul." The whores sensed an insult and muttered things. "I'll even pay for it." One asked to see his money. "I'll even pray for you. But I don't expect it to do much good. There are things the Lord denies even to me. Bless His name!"
"Bless His name," came mumbling at me over both his shoulders.

"Why did you desert us, Faye?"

Faye couldn't talk, and I almost couldn't. I knew that in a minute the unintelligible sounds I was suppressing would resolve themselves into speech if he persisted in goading me.

"Come on, Faye."

A scrawny arm slipped out of the sleeve of his robe as he raised his hand to stop us. It worked—mainly, I think, because I was unwilling to let him touch me. "You're about to see what's important to Faye. Faye! Come back to us!"

"Yes, Faye, come back!"

"Come back, Faye!"

Dmitri ushered out the last of his customers, squinted at the scene, and withdrew again into his sanctum of pathetic indenceny. A small crowd of whores and hillbillies milled around us, one of the hillbillies speculating about how much sense it took to walk around in the sheets off your bed. Father David Abraham's Christian warriors stood swatting at their gowns as the whores tried to resolve a wager about what was under them by direct investigation.

"Will you stand out of our way?" I asked.

"You must stand out of my way. My way is the only way, and nobody stays in it for very long. Leave Faye to her family. I'll let you go, if you go quickly. And above all, shut your nasty mouth. I won't listen to much more."
I took my hands out of my pockets--to point with, maybe. I don't know. Father David Abraham ducked, cringed, and squealed at his attendants. "Om! Og!"

Om and Og moved to my side and stood, looming, waiting for more elaborate instructions. Whores babbled and hillbillies muttered. Two pimps in immense, white snap-brim hats strolled up from the drive-in grocery and observed that religion wasn't particularly good for business. A patrol car stopped in the middle of the parking lot.

"You lose, spinach-chin," I observed.

"You're wrong, friend. You don't understand a spiritual commitment."

"I understand that they're usually made for somebody by somebody else who doesn't have to live with the misery of trying to take the spiritual seriously."

Father David Abraham clasped his hands in front of him and raised his face, sad, silent, pensive, to pray through the atmosphere of sewage, automobile exhaust, and fried foods. It wasn't fair. Someone who thought he was Robespierre or Bismarck and tried to act accordingly would be locked up. But this was hopeless. He was an establishment of religion.

"Faye!"

"I don't believe in that stuff anymore," she said, her face still pressed against my shoulder.

"What? What did you say to me?"

I believe he was trying to put on an imposing face, but it only made his eyes look crossed.
"She said she doesn't believe in that stuff anymore," I said.

"I didn't speak to you."

"No, you didn't. But I don't see why I ought to wait for an invitation to address you."

"You will see," he muttered, swallowing his lips again. "Faye, what does this mean? Have you lost God?"

"Now that's childish," I said. "Do you mean you think somebody can lose God like a checkbook or a set of car keys?"

"You're responsible for this! Go away while you still can."

"Faye might fall down. She's leaning on me, you see."

"Faye has the Almighty to lean on!"

"Faye has tried that."

"Om! Og!"

I turned to face one of the pacific thugs (the little one—he was about six-four) and the other hit me on the back of the neck. The blow did not produce unconsciousness, although I couldn't remember sitting down on the walk. I was conscious of Faye kneeling down and holding my head in her hands and calling my name. I can remember the odd wish to reassure her, to tell her that I was indeed still Tom. I heard one of the hillbillies proclaim Father David Abraham to be a "beard-headed mother-fucker." Then I heard a clatter of high-heeled boots and the efforts of the two police officers to separate the sacred and the profane. I saw three strange figures in robes
and handcuffs getting into patrol cars. And finally, there was the whore who got into a pickup truck with one of the hillbillies while the police were occupied. She looked absolutely radiant as the pickup turned into the street.

I was hauled to my feet by a grinning, blond colossus who told me not to worry, that I couldn't be expected to "whup angels--'specially three of 'em." It was hard to convince the hillbillies that we didn't require an escort, that there wasn't anybody else for them to maul. My head was hurting quite a bit as I shook hands with all of them, and all I could think of was getting a cup of coffee and some aspirin before I tried to drive very far.

The whores showed a remarkable delicacy in gathering at the other end of the walk while I got oriented and tried to persuade Faye that I wasn't going to develop brain fever. She had transformed herself into the familiar again, and I was glad. The lavender gown would have been hard to face while I sat on the sidewalk. Boots, blue jeans, and the coat I'd bought her made it easier to reassure her plaintive features.

"You gonna be okay?" she whined.

"Yes. Just let me stand here a minute. Will you mind stopping for coffee on the way home?"

"Not if you want to."

"I think it would be likely to help a little."

"What're we gonna do?"

"When?"
"He won't let this slide. He doesn't give up."

"Oh? Well, I don't know if there is anything to do. Wait and see what he does, I guess."
CHAPTER VI

I was depressed. It seemed odd that I felt no anger, although I was anything but happy. My upbringing demanded that I be mortified with shame. But I had spent the day in mere embarrassed silence. Faye had also been very quiet all day and had cried some. Now she was perched on the sofa with her legs tucked under her, trying to make something of Victory. I guess she'd been quiet first because she felt responsible and then because I hadn't been able to think of anything to say to her except to ask if she wanted lunch. I'm sure that she thought I was furious, but I couldn't help not talking.

That morning I had finally associated something with the loss of hair experienced by Faye's old boyfriend. It had been the first of a series of penicillin shots my scowling family physician's nurse had administered to us. I had vetoed Faye's timid proposal that we go to the free VD clinic.

I got up to respond to the tap on the door without considering that there was nobody I cared to see. Seeing Sharon did not surprise me. Even seeing her bandy-legged escort did not surprise me. I think I was not much interested.

"Hi, Tom. Are you busy?"

"I guess not."

"This is Cowboy."

"I'm afraid there isn't a thing I can do for him."
"Who ast ya?" he demanded, weaving at me. He had apparently been drinking most of the day and had become so warm that he was strolling around in twenty-three-degree weather in his shirt. He had perspired (for about two weeks, it seemed) so that great damp circles had spread under the arms of his cowboy shirt (red, with a scattering of rampant white buffalo). "We been daincin'," he added.

"Cowboy, this is my ex-husband Tom. Tom, shake hands with Cowboy."

"Do you mean you've taught him how?"

"Le's go, Shar'n," he said, turning uncertainly and shaking her arm.

"Wait a minute! Tom, don't be that way. I brought your money back to you. Won't you invite us in?" she asked, smiling and tilting her head so that she saw Faye sitting on the sofa and wondering what was happening to me. "Who in the hell is that?"

"That's Faye. Would you like to come in and shake hands with her?"

"What's she doing here?"

"She's reading."

"Where did you find her?"

"At a Seven Eleven."

When Sharon's eyes blinked rapidly, it meant she was getting angry. Her face would turn red in a minute, and she would express her displeasure, although less eloquently than
in the past. But for now her face was still very white, and I got the familiar impression of its being almost transparent, that I could see behind it, even if nothing worth seeing were behind it.

"Are you going to invite us in or not?"

"Couldn't you tie him outside someplace?"

"Now you jist looky here," Cowboy began. Sharon thrust her arm in front of him and he stopped. I wondered if she had managed to take him in hand, or if he were just less prodigal of abuse when drunk.

"Look, Tom. I wouldn't talk if I had some homely little snatch squatting on my sofa tearing up my books."

"You don't have any books, Sharon. They're all in boxes in Kirns' attic. He won't try to sell them and get back the money he couldn't afford to give you for them because he hopes you'll want them back some day. He can't believe that being literate embarrasses you now."

"Got any beer?" Cowboy demanded. I think that for a moment he had forgotten who I had been. He smirked at me and winked at Faye. "Hey, there, lady."

"Hey, man," Faye said. I turned around and saw that she was grinning. She looked puzzled at the face I made. The practices of misanthropy and deceit were new to her. I had tried to explain the advantages, but I don't think she believed me, even though she knew better.

"Tom, it's not very comfortable out here. Cowboy left
his coat in the car.

"Let 'em in. It won't hurt anything."

"All right," I said. "Come in. But I'm not giving a party."

Cowboy stumbled in, proclaiming, "We done been to a party. Them folks had a whole kag o' beer."

Sharon came in behind him and shut the door. "We've got some beer in the truck. Should I go down and get it?"

"We've got some," Faye said, popping up and going into the kitchen.

Faye was eminently hospitable. She served beer in plastic tumblers and produced tortilla chips and guacamole when Cowboy affirmed himself to be so hungry he could eat the ass out of a skunk. A few minutes at the guacamole and several of the buffalo on Cowboy's shirt were green and white.

He seemed to become amazingly comfortable in my apartment, muddy boots thrust onto the coffee table while he recounted a memorable fight to me.

"So I fin'ly taken a wraynch and bust 'im up side 'is head." This had been the culmination of a two-hour battle with broken bottles and ice picks.

Cowboy must certainly have been dancing, and it is doubtful he had danced enough to suit him. He couldn't keep his boots still anymore than he could control their movements. When he learned that Faye was a dancer, it was more than he could resist. He got up, threw off his hat, made an awful, ponderous
stomping pirouette, and fell over the coffee table, emptying his glass of beer on the carpet. I damned him for an insufferable oaf, and Sharon knelt by him, trying to gather his splayed, astonished extremities into some kind of upright position.

"Do you think you can pick him up all by yourself?

"Shut up, Tom."

Cowboy's hat had landed with the crown up. It looked something like an upended coal scuttle. Faye looked surprised when I stepped on it. I shrugged at her. I knew it was not a particularly nice or daring thing to do, but it didn't bother me much.

"Thank I'm gonna be sick," Cowboy moaned.

"Sharon, get him out of here."

"I can't. You'll have to help me."

I had objections to touching him. If only he had collapsed in a barnyard, I thought, the dung beetles could have rolled him away. But beer was more than enough to have on the carpet.

"Get him under the arms," Sharon told me.

"No. Not even if he'd had a bath this month."

"It'll be your fault if he throws up, then."

My responsibility was not so clear to me as it was to Sharon. But I had already been considering how I might haul him downstairs without being too disgusted. His boots were out of the question; they needed scraping. So there didn't
seem to be any less objectionable way than to pull him by the wrists.

"Turn me loose!"

I grappled with his flailing arms, unable at first to secure them. Sharon tried to help me and got one of her breasts punched. She stood up and backed away, whimpering threats about the indecorous things she'd do to Faye (who had wanted to be sympathetic) if Faye presumed to touch her.

"Jist you wait," Cowboy said, as I managed to control both his wrists. I was not frightened by the threat. He was talking to Sharon.

"Come along, Sharon," I said as I began to pull Cowboy toward the door. She wrapped her coat around her and sniffed.

"Nice to meet you," Faye said.

Sharon got in a hurry and almost stumbled over the silver-clad toes of Cowboy's boots (bone background with turquoise thunderbirds). "Why don't you just knock me down, asshole?" I pretended she was talking to Cowboy, even though it was me she blinked her eyes at.

It was hard to keep my balance on the stairs. Cowboy was sick on his shirt and sputtered at length through the residue of vomit in his mouth about my parents, with whom he was not acquainted. Sharon wouldn't look at me. She followed with her head down and one hand inside her coat, pressing her breast.

"I hope you'll let me put him in back."

"No, in the cab. He'd get cold."
"He stinks."

Sharon sniffed again and shook her head as she opened the door.

"Climb up here, Cowboy," I said. "You can listen to the radio." I reached in and turned on the ignition (the key had been left in it). The announcer introduced "It Wasn't God Who Made Honky-Tonk Angels," and Cowboy crawled, uncertainly eager, into the seat.

Sharon and I stared at one another across the hood for a minute before she dropped her eyes. "Did you have any purpose other than conviviality for bringing this clown here? You could have mailed the money."

"I needed to talk to you," she said as she resumed sniffing. "I couldn't come by myself. I'm sorry. I just couldn't get away."

"Well, you can talk now. What is it?"

She shook her head. "I've got to get him home."

"You're going to put him in the house?"

"I'm taking him to the ranch. He sleeps there when he's got to be at work early in the morning."

"Don't bring him back here."

"What about her?" she asked, flinging her hand up and back. "Do you think I can talk to you with that little cunt sitting around grinning at us?"

"Use the telephone."

Congratulating herself on the wisdom of having divorced
a man she couldn't come to with a problem, Sharon opened the door of the pickup and let the music out. Cowboy had turned up the volume before leaving consciousness to those who would stand for it. I was angrily and indecently commended to Faye just before Sharon slammed herself inside with the noise and odor.

I walked to the front of the building to check my mailbox. There was a bill from a book club, an advertisement for a set of records, a publisher's catalogue, and a soiled letter with my name misspelled. As I turned to go up the stairs, a grey Buick drove slowly by, Om, Og, and Father David Abraham staring at me from it. I stared back at them, wondering how I had been located. I did not think it was an accident. Father David Abraham turned around in the back seat and bared his teeth at me through the windshield. His clasped hands were making odd movements. I couldn't tell whether he was trying to pray or conjure, and I doubt if it made any difference to either one of us.

"You were really married to that chick all that time?"
"Yes."
"She sure got herself somebody different," she said, grin and epigrin pulling at her features.
"Your friend drove by just now."
"Who?"
"The fellow with the turban and the thugs."
"You're kidding!" Faye cringed, and the alarm in her face
was obviously there for me. She seemed much more impressed by him than I was. All I could think to do was to start walking around with a stick or see about a peace bond.

"Don't be upset."

"You don't know him. He doesn't like to lose."

"No one likes to. But everybody does."

"Not him. You don't understand. If he wants something. . . . You be careful. He might do anything."

"It's too melodramatic, Faye. Anybody can do anything. But I don't think he'd get himself locked up. He has too much to be free and selfish and silly for."

"He wouldn't do it himself. Were Om and Og with him?"

"Aren't they always?" Faye had told me that they had been college football players who hadn't made it as professionals. When they ran out of football coaches to worship, they attached themselves to Father David Abraham.

"They wouldn't mind going to jail for him."

"Well, I guess it's nice to have people devoted to you."

"It's not funny!" Faye's face looked severe for a moment, but it was an effort she couldn't sustain.

"But if I can't do anything to prevent what he's going to do, I can't worry." I tore open the letter. It was from my scholar who called and wrote regularly. He had lost his position as trainer for the university athletic department when he failed my grammar and composition course. The letter bore the intelligence that I was "a peace of dogshit that is
to harsh on athletes and that better get ready to meet his maker."
CHAPTER VII

Faye had insisted on pushing a separate cart at the supermarket. She had selected perhaps twenty cans of vegetables and prepared foods when she located the cornbread mix. Holding a box of it to read the directions, she looked unhappy.

"Faye?" I'd asked. "Aren't you going to eat with me anymore?"

"This isn't for me. Don't worry."

I couldn't understand what she was doing. Her happiness at finding cornbread sticks already made at the delicatessen counter baffled me. Cornbread was not elaborate. Faye knew it was no problem for me to make.

Faye's purchases were checked and packaged separately, and she left them in the car when we carried what I'd bought up to the apartment. I was given instructions about the disposal of the goods in the car while Faye and I, putting away our food, dodged one another in the tiny kitchen.

So I was searching for the Ace of Spades, the sack of canned food and cornbread in the back seat and ten quarters in my coat pocket, deposited there by Faye so that the Ace of Spades might purchase a draught of vintage. I had first stuck my head into a pool hall off Hall Street and found myself confronted by a number of languid, hostile black faces. Then, since he was not panhandling in a place where he used to be
significant, I was to look for him at a liquor store two blocks down the street, where he was usually good for a pint of something or other per day. If he had left, he would be at home unburdening himself of a sinister combination of MD 20-20 and Smirnoff gin.

I turned into the chopped-up asphalt of the liquor store's parking lot and had to bounce around to the back of the building to find what looked like the only available parking space. A man in a pair of faded, dirty overalls was sitting on a concrete block he'd pulled away from a line of them against the crumbling foundation of the toppling clapboard wall of the store. Sitting on it, but about to fall over on his back, he tilted his head and ruined old body at the same angle as the bottle to what would have been the plane of the parking lot if it hadn't been so broken up.

The Ace of Spades finished the half pint of gin, examined me with his puzzled yellow eyes, and screwed the top onto the empty bottle. His dexterity was taxed; it took him a while. Then he stood up (it took him several attempts) and began to shove the bottle at the side of his overalls. Failing to find a pocket, he slipped the bottle between the overalls and his skin (he had no shirt), and when he'd taken a few shuffling steps toward me, the bottle fell down the leg of his overalls and rested on top of one of his cracked and discolored cowboy boots. Astonished, he looked down at it for a moment, then gave an experimental kick that almost made him fall down. The
bottle rebounded from the front bumper of my car and shattered on the edge of a segment of broken asphalt.

"Oh, Cap'm. Oh, Cap'm," he moaned.

"It's all right. You didn't hurt anything but your bottle."

"Hit was empty," he pronounced with satisfaction.

"Do you know Faye?"

"Did she use' to work fo' me?"

"No. She sent you some groceries."

"I do know 'er, Cap'm. She nice to a po' ol' man. What you say her name is?"

"Faye."

"Faye. Faye," he repeated smiling, pleased, I think, at the sound of the name. "How she doin'?"

"She's fine. She couldn't come because she works tonight. I can take you home if you want me to--so you won't have to carry your groceries."

He lurched around the front of the car, mumbling his disinclination "to tote no damn' groceries noplace," and began trying to open the door. I'd locked it when Faye got out in front of Dmitri's, thinking Hall Street was a good place to pay attention to the little security one could ever arrange. It hadn't been a bad idea, either. While I had waited for a red light to change, a whore had clattered in ten inch heels over to my car, tried the door on the passenger side, and slapped the window, the glossy gouts of her cerise lips shrieking, "Let's fuck!" I shook my head vigorously, but finally had
to bellow, "I'm broke!" to disengage her. The light changed and I drove off. The whore stood in the street shouting, "You kiss my black ass!"

Ace looked tragic. He didn't have a great deal of self-confidence, and he looked as if he thought the door wouldn't open only because it was he trying to open it. I waved him off, pulled up the shaft of the lock, and opened the door for him. He had trouble finding the seat (it was there every time until he turned around to aim himself at it), banged his head against the top of the car, and tried to close the door while he sat with one foot still on the asphalt.

Once he had struggled inside and I had gotten out and gone around to shut the door properly, I turned my car around (there wasn't much room—it involved shifting from drive to reverse and back again several times), turned into the street, and drove past the government housing project that was falling down twenty years after it had been built.

I felt self-conscious about the sensation I caused by driving Ace through that neighborhood, particularly when young boys threw rocks at my car and pedalled away on bicycles. I also felt self-conscious about driving with my window down when it was twenty-eight degrees. Ace's alcoholic breath made ventilation desirable.

Ace told me he thought I should turn right at the next intersection, although he wasn't certain. I turned into the right lane and pulled up next to a patrol car at a red light.
The window in the patrol car was down (I don't know why), and a police officer was looking at me, aghast, from about three feet away.

"My great uncle," I explained. "We're on our way to tea with Mayor Folsom."

The police apparently jogged Ace's memory. He smacked his old catfish mouth and sighed. "I was big-time who' pimp, Cap'm. You know dat?"

"I've heard." I had heard all about him from Faye. He had given up a career in armed robbery to become a pimp who dabbled in narcotics before leaving Dallas to work out of New Orleans, Kansas City, and finally Chicago as a contract killer. Having prospered, he retired. He was driving home to Dallas in a new Lincoln, carrying around two hundred thousand dollars in cash with him. His money and car were taken from him at a motel in Arkansas, and he had received a beating that would probably have been fatal had there been anything in his head that could have sustained a serious injury.

Faye had discovered Ace in front of Dmitri's. Destitute, he had once come trying to get back into the business of being a pimp. In his overalls, he had made extravagant promises of money and drugs to any whore who would work for him and give him fifty cents. Then he had threatened the other pimps with a water pistol, warning them to leave his territory. They were embarrassed and called the police. Faye found him when he was released from jail and gave him some money.
Ace had burrowed into his unfortunate reverie and was not to be recalled from it until I absolutely had to have further directions in order to get to where he went through some of the motions of pretending to live. I hoped he could remember where it was. He eventually came as close to consciousness as he was ever likely to get, and the directions he gave proceeded from a sullenness I hadn't noticed in him.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Aw, Mama cut me las' night."

"Do you mean with a knife?"

"Naw, hit was a bottle she bust."

"But why?"

"Ain't no why. Dat wine jus' make her crazy."

"Has she done it before?"

"She git after me 'bout ever' day, seem like, Cap'm. She jus' don't usually connec'."

"Why do you stay with her?"

"I love 'er, Cap'm," he said with quiet reverence.

I parked my car in the street in front of the three-story edifice that contained Ace's love nest, got out and helped him from the car, picked up the sack of canned food, and followed him as he shambled up the icy walk. He had much less trouble than I in walking on ice. I think it must have been because it never occurred to him to worry about falling down. I had serious objections to breaking my neck, particularly in the service of my fellow man, and slipped to one knee every few steps.
Ace pulled open the frame of a screen door and told me to be careful of the stairs. Some had partially or entirely ceased to exist, and others were covered with ice, and there were four half-flights of them to negotiate in order to present ourselves and the groceries to Ace's inamorata. Each step was a grey, glazed menace.

"You makin' it, Cap'm?"

"Yes," I gasped.

"Watch dem damn steps."

"I am."

"Jus' a few mo'."

I scrambled onto the landing, breathing like a winded dog. Ace pushed on his door, and I could hear the brick that had kept it closed scrape and tumble over the warped floorboards.

He put a spatulate finger with a pearl-colored nail to his lips, signifying that I was to follow him quietly. I tried, but the floor made more noise than the stairs, even if it wasn't quite at the point of disintegration. Inside, pieces of rags had been tossed on the floor and draped over a few pieces of crippled furniture. The walls were yellow in some places and brown in others. The air was scented by a delicate suspension of dust and perspiration and nausea.

"We kin sit de sack in here, Cap'm," he whispered.

I followed him across the protesting floor to the kitchen. It was furnished only with a table and two chairs. Faye hadn't sent anything that was perishable or not already cooked. She
would have known there was neither stove nor refrigerator. I thought how a landlord in a college town would love to own such a palce.

A stumbling noise, followed by a series of preparatory retches, sent Ace scurrying out of the kitchen, his face paralyzed with apprehension. I could hear him sympathizing with his lady's distress and inveighing against the evil nature of the grape. She responded in a disturbingly familiar, strangled staccato with a comment that comprehended age, race, sex, profession, and mental faculties.

"Now, Mama," Ace coaxed, "we got comp'ny. You ac' nice, now, an' I'll git us a jug in a little spell."

So far as I knew, I had never seen the woman known as Mama Sota. I knew that she had been one of Ace's whores in the old days and had become an addict when he began to dispense heroin. She had been discarded by the community when Ace left for New Orleans to kill people. When everyone knew she always had something no one ever wanted, she was left with a habit she couldn't support and turned to something even the police and courts couldn't overlook (white slavery), finally spending some time in the penitentiary. Getting out, she had found Ace in his decline, and they had been together ever since.

Like a happy bridegroom, Ace came leading her into the kitchen, holding up her scrawny arm. She kept trying to pull it away, giggling and calling him a stupid nigger. Ace, with an affectionate, proprietary grin all over his face, told her
to come ahead on and be introduced to that pretty little thing's young gentleman, who had brought them some eats.

"Mama, shake han's wif Cap'm."

"I seen you before. I don't 'member where, though. You live around here?"

"No." She really had seen me, only a few days before. She was the old wreck I'd seen at the bookstore. "At least not very close by." I felt miserable. I don't know whether it was for Kirns or for me.

Ace had been burrowing in the sack, extracting cans and identifying their contents by an examination of the pictures on the labels. "Yams . . . chicken 'n' dumplin's . . . an' co'nbread, Mama!" Since he stopped with these, I assumed they were the evening menu. I thought it was time I left, before Faye's kindness had me attending to them with a towel folded over one arm.

"Well, I guess I ought to go and leave you to your dinner," I said, hoping I didn't sound as anxious as I felt.

"Why, Cap'm--stay an' eat a bite. Dey's a-plen'y," he said with a proud, sweeping gesture indicating hard work well rewarded by the Almighty at one's table.

"Faye and I had dinner before we left the house. I couldn't eat a thing," I lied, hoping I did it well enough to conceal my embarrassment. Faye would have eaten with them if they had asked her.
"Would jopen these here cans for us? My han's is no good," Mama Sota said, placing on the table the can opener she'd pulled from a little tangle of rusty implements in a drawer and holding up her hands. Most of the ring finger on her left hand was gone, and her right hand had been paralyzed somehow, contracted and withered until it was not nearly as big as the other one, the fingers drawn into permanent fixity against her palm or one another.

"Of course." She poked Ace on the back of the head with a cornstick, and when she got his attention, made him take the cornstick and a spoon. "Can I do anything else?"

"Not if y'ain't eatin'," Mama said, already sputtering cold chicken broth in Ace's direction and stopping her mouth with a cornstick. Ace was gnawing on an immense yam. He held the yam to his mouth with one hand and the spoon he had been provided with at his side in his other hand. They both looked as if they could dine without any further assistance, so I placed the ten quarters (the ones Faye had said she'd throw out the window if I didn't take them) on the table and tried to get quietly out to the landing. I wasn't quiet, but their repast was not disturbed. On the landing I experienced a momentary faintness, and then an exasperation that didn't go away. I still had to get down those stairs.

I rested at the first two landings, and at the last one I stopped to read an article of revolutionary graffiti: "All white people have 24 hours to get off the planet." Then I
started down, the front door in sight. Every treacherous step made torturous, threatening noises. Some cracked under my weight, and I imagined myself falling into some unspeakable urban netherworld of stairwells populated by entities from H. P. Lovecraft short stories.

How Ace and I had ever stepped on it going up I cannot imagine, because it didn't even make a preliminary complaint when I thought I had stepped on it. I suppose there wasn't enough of it left to make a noise, and I had been descending too quickly for a safety that didn't exist even in possibility. My left foot was gone, and I swung forward and to my right, grasping when the banister broke, and I heard something else break as I landed on my hands and knees.

Pain does not bring out the best in me, if there is any wonderful quality in me that can be produced or provoked by anything external. Obscene oaths wouldn't do. I had forsworn them since I'd had the poor judgment to relent and take Sharon downtown the night before a Texas-Oklahoma football game. We'd been caught in the crowd and stood next to a young woman with a bottle of Jack Daniels in her hand who had bawled, "Oklahoma sucks!" in our ears for twenty minutes.

Maybe, I thought, I could sing "The Eyes of Texas" until somebody heard me, thought I'd lost my mind, and came to help me. Calling out to Ace didn't occur to me, but he couldn't have lifted me or been trusted to go across the street to the telephone.
I crawled backwards until I could reach around and try to extricate myself. The stair crumbled easily. I had caught my foot against a two-by-four, which was probably the only sound piece of wood in the house.

When I got my dangling ankle out of the hole, I sat with my eyes blinking from the perspiration that had run into them. There was still the problem of standing up and hopping down seven more steps and out to my car. I didn't think a lot of my chances, but I had to take them, just like anybody else. Crawling was out of the question; I couldn't keep my ankle properly elevated. So I stood up and leaned against the damp, musty sheetrock of the wall. My hair as well as my face was wet, and I suppose I became lightheaded, because I can remember supporting myself against the wall with my head and trying to pull a splinter out of my hand.

I hopped headlong down the remaining stairs and hit the screen door. With all my weight hitting the door, the hinges were torn out of the frame, and I rode the door like a sled halfway to the street. I thought being outside was an improvement, however small. Then I passed out for the first time.

As soon as I saw my car, I realized that something was wrong with it and that I could not even attempt the manifest foolishness of dragging myself to it and driving myself to a hospital. It was surrealistic. The car looked as if it had partially dissolved into the curb. Both tires on the passenger side had been cut.
I lay on the door, keeping my ankle elevated by holding onto the end of my trouser leg behind my back. I knew there was a telephone stall across the street, but I didn't really expect to remain conscious long enough to get to it.

A very old black man stopped the grocery cart full of aluminum cans, soft drink bottles, old clothes, and a litter of brown puppies he was pushing at the end of the walk and looked at me, his head (in a fedora much too large for him) extended, as if he wasn't certain what I was, and no part of him other than his head would have anything to do with curiosity about a broken white man lying on a screen door on the sidewalk. The puppies yapped and he turned around and played with them for a moment, then looked back at me, as if he hoped I wouldn't be there this time.

I noticed how baggy his old clothes were (maybe he had something in the basket that would fit him better) as he came shuffling up the sidewalk toward me. His eyes moved only when his head did. They seemed to have faded into the aged immobility of his face.

He stood a few feet away and looked down at me thoughtfully. I raised my head until I could see something quizzical struggling vainly around the expressionlessness. "I'm all right," I panted. "Having a little trouble with my leg--but it's nothing to worry about." When I looked up again, he was gone, and the cart was no longer in front of the walk.
I knew I couldn't lie there all night, so I had to try to do something else I thought I couldn't do--get across the street to the telephone. I turned on my side and swung my legs until I could sit up facing the street, and with both hands and one foot pushed and straightened myself into a standing position. I was dizzy when I got up, and more so when I had hopped down the walk and leaned over the roof of my car, looking across the street.

A whore was on the telephone, grinning as she conveyed whatever she had to convey to whoever would listen to it, punctuating the atmosphere with a stabbing hand. I groaned and put my head in my arms on top of the car. Broken legs and loquacious whores. And a street to hop across if she ever got through. I wondered if whores had anything other than pimps, penicillin shots, and legal fees to talk about. Maybe this was just a way of passing the time. Standing around looking available and ready had to get boring, especially to a mentality that wanted a circus or a twenty-dollar bill to engage it.

I moved around to the back of my car, preparing to hop across the street and ask the whore if I could use the phone for a moment, to tell her I would pay her just for hanging up the receiver. I went hobbling across and just made it to a green garbage drum, on which a sticker enjoined passers-by to "Keep Dallas Beautiful." The whore turned around and stared at me while she continued to talk. It occurred to me
that trusting one's survival to the humanity of a whore was unwise, but I had no choice. Her eyes raked over me, an un-tidy, crippled pedestrian.

"Will you be through any time soon?" I gasped.

"What? Jus' a minute," she said into the phone. "What you want, man?"

"I need to use the telephone."

"Go fuck you'se'f," she muttered, turning her back on me.

"Please," I said, hopping up to the stall. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm hurt and..." I had reached for the stall and had inadvertently touched her arm. Although I had already been falling when she struck me on the side of the face with the receiver, the whore apparently thought she was responsible, especially for the cry of pain I emitted when I fell on my ankle. She dropped the receiver, picked up her purse, and disappeared around the corner.

I could hear a voice squawking, "Tina!" when the swinging receiver came close to me. I watched it for a moment, tried to make some determination of distance and timing, and finally lunged for it. I can't remember whether I was even able to touch it. I don't think I was.

I can remember being quite disturbed at not waking up in a hospital. I looked at my wrist and missed my watch. My wallet was beside me instead of being in my pocket. Someone had replaced the phone in its cradle. And my car no longer looked lopsided. The other two tires had been cut.
CHAPTER VIII

It was a lucky thing, I thought, as I stumped on crutches across the street, that I had hurt my left leg, the one I didn't need in order to drive. So I could still pick up Faye when she got off work. I had no trouble jaywalking, because the few whores who hadn't moved across town didn't attract much traffic. One of the whores who had remained was standing at the curb, discussing something with her pimp. It must have been important, because the pimp had a handful of bleached hair and was shouting. He must have had trouble communicating with her, because he punched her in the side of her face. She fell to her knees, sobbing hysterically. The pimp continued to make his point.

Precious and two police officers were in the anteroom. I felt odd at seeing much of anything, especially something like alarm, in her big, habitually empty doll's eyes. She lowered her head when she'd looked at me for a moment. Both police officers turned to confront me.

"This him?"
Precious nodded.
"What's wrong?" I asked.
"Faye."
"Where is Faye?"
"You her husband?"
"Yes. Why?"

"Faye's gone!" Precious wailed.

"Gone where?" The only light in the anteroom was the line of lighted plastic squares that spelled "Cigarettes" on the machine. Yet every detail seemed plainer than mere daylight would have made possible. The composition was Ashcan, but the treatment was in the gloomy clarity of the Dutch.

Precious shook her head. "She was on break and put her clothes on and went down to the store for a Dr. Pepper, and somebody forced her into a car and drove off."

"Then somebody must have seen it happen."

"One of the girls outside. She said Faye gave one little yelp, and then she was gone. But all she saw was that it was some guy in a big blue car."

I'd never held a whore's ignorance against her, always assuming it had made her one in the first place, and then had made her a successful one. But now all my tolerance dissolved into a dull detestation of all the misery and violence and disease on the street.

"How long you known this girl?" one of the officers asked me, pen poised over the stenographer's pad on which he'd written my name, age, sex, race, address, telephone number, and occupation.

"Just about a month."

Precious broke down and bawled like a wolf.

"You know of anybody who'd have a reason to do this?"
I told them all I knew about Faye's acquaintances. It seemed as though they had all wanted to kill her at some time. One of the whores had already been fetched in to assure the police that I hadn't (on crutches) overpowered and abducted my own wife.

The door was pushed open, and the anteroom was filled with shouting, orange and blue light, frantic music, and cigarette smoke. Dmitri appeared, holding onto the shirt collar of an unruly patron who hadn't quite lasted until closing time. The customer was walking out on his knees, sweating face thrown back in an expression of inebriated ecstasy, fingers snapping above his head, chanting, "I'm getting kicked out! Hey! I'm getting kicked out!" As they passed, I heard Dmitri's muttering observation that the patron was so drunk he couldn't find his ass with both hands.

Dmitri shoved him out onto the sidewalk, then came back in and put his hand on my shoulder. He did it awkwardly; perhaps it was because he didn't mean to push me anyplace. "Come on, kid," he said, moderating his growl. "Have a drink."

"You can go ahead," one of the police officers told me. Dmitri began pulling me inside, but I held onto the door frame.

"Come on, kid. They got your phone number. They'll let you know. Come on. You can't do nothing."

I let go of the door, and Dmitri led me to the bar, kicking an outstretched leg out of our way. The man attached to the
leg got up looking fierce, saw Dmitri, and resumed his seat, putting his legs carefully under his table.

"What you drink, kid? I forget." He waved one of his dancers from behind the bar. She trotted into the bathroom.

Dmitri poured scotch I didn't ask for over a scoop of ice pellets. It was not good scotch, but he was not being thrifty with me. He just didn't keep good whiskey. It was Dmitri's theory that most of the customers didn't know what they had when they got it, and the ones who did couldn't do anything about it. So a customer who ordered scotch and water got a drink made with bar scotch. One who paid a dollar more for Chivas Regal and water got the same thing.

"I guess there wasn't anybody to help her."

"Look. I'm tending bar when it happens. I don't know nothing about it 'til the girls tell me she's gone." He turned on the microphone by the cash register and told his customers that it was closing time. The customers did not respond with their usual shout of derision accompanied by stomping and pounding on tables. They left in quietly drunken knots of awkward, absurd politeness, offering wads of bills to the dancers, who wouldn't take them. All the dancers were crying, especially the obese girl with tattoos who was storming up and down the stage to the final rock and roll record, batting tears away with her long, black, greasy eyelashes. Faye had been popular.
Dmitri followed the last customer to the door and locked it after him, then reached behind the juke box and switched on the lights, illuminating the damp, sticky carpet and discolored walls. I put the scotch on the bar. It tasted like soap. Dmitri was not so impressive without the assistance of gloom. He looked tired, insignificant, insecure, and not at all like Stalin.

"You ain't going to drink this?" he asked, indicating with part of his mustache the glass on the bar. I shook my head.

He removed the sip-stick, dropped it into one of the garbage cans behind the bar, and got a new one. "No sense wasting it," he explained, sipping it. I nodded. The dancers continued to move around, wiping tables and cleaning ashtrays. Gypsy, the morning's last dancer, had not dressed. Her flesh heaved as she mopped viciously at puddles of beer with a bar towel. Dmitri took a bank bag and a pistol from under the bar and opened the cash register. He stuffed the money into the bag. Faye had told me that Dmitri waited until he was at home with the door locked and the pistol still within his reach before he counted the day's proceeds. Even Precious was not allowed to be present while Dmitri was with his money.

"Can you drive okay?" Dmitri squinted as he talked to me, as if trying to determine whether I would rob him, and where he would shoot me if I did.

"Yes."
"We're leaving pretty soon."

"All right. Can I get out?"

"Key's in the door. Go lock after him," he said to Precious. "It's a shame, kid. Terrible. I couldn't do nothing."

"Good night."

"Night," he muttered.

The patrol cars were gone from the parking lot. Precious put her hand on my arm as I hoisted myself out the door. "I'll call you if we hear anything."

"Thank you."

Most of the whores had left the sidewalk, but a few were huddled together, laughing at something on the corner. I wasn't really very interested, but I looked. Mama Sota stood with one foot on a fire plug, her short paisley skirt held up around her waist. In overalls, a bow tie attached to a T-shirt, and a green felt derby, the Ace of Spades strutted around her, waving a little yellow cane from the State Fair midway. He stopped and tapped Mama's thigh, then poked her in a breast. She slapped the cane away and screamed at him.

I got to my car in the parking lot across the street (Dmitri's required two). Two very clean and apparently happy young men were sitting cross-legged on the hood of my car. Both were playing guitars and humming. I got in and started the engine. One leaned around into the window and spoke. "Have
you heard the good news? You don't have to die anymore. You can surrender your life to the Lord Jesus Christ." They both jumped down when I put the car in gear. "We love you!" they shouted after me.

It began to drizzle half-frozen rain. My windshield wipers swept the moisture in soiled streaks across my field of vision so that I couldn't have seen a stop sign if I had been looking for stop signs. The police officer said that people who paid no attention to what they were doing when they drove in bad weather made him angry. He said people like me ran over little children. I suppose he meant the ones who play in the street at three o'clock on January mornings. It took a great deal of self-control for me not to ask him why he wasn't looking for Faye.

The phone was ringing when I got home. I hobbled desperately to the coffee table and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Would you lick my balls?" my former scholar asked. I listened to him shout for a few seconds, then hung up and went to shut the door. Sitting on the sofa, I held the chartreuse halter top and g-string Faye had bought the day before. The phone rang again.

"Yes?"

"Tom?"

"Yes, Sharon?"
"Did I wake you up?"
"No."
"Can you talk?"
"I suppose so."
"You sound sick."
"I broke my ankle."
"How?"
"Falling down some stairs."
"Can I come see you?"
"Now?"
"Oh, no. In the morning. Around ten."
"If you want to."
"You're sure it won't inconvenience you?"
"I'm sure."
"Is that girl there?"
"No."
"Well, see you after while. Take care of your ankle."
"All right. Good night, Sharon."
"Night."

I tried to go to bed but found it impossible. The walls between apartments consisted of a piece of panelling tacked to each side of a series of two-by-fours. I had just pulled my left leg onto the bed and settled back when I heard bed springs and choking moans on the other side of the wall. Anyway, the pillow was scented with Faye's perfume. One little yelp.
I had to get up. I went back into the living room, mixed a drink, and turned on the radio to listen to "Music Through the Night." The announcer said he was about to play Satie's "Flabby Preludes for a Dog."
I had been beheaded (I don't know by whom or for what reason) and was walking around trying to balance my head on my neck, trying to look inconspicuous and asking people if they'd seen Faye. So the pounding on my door resulted only in the substitution of one bad dream for another. I had at least spent more than half my life trying to get used to Red and Dorothy, although trying to deal with them was no easier than trying to deal with the phantoms of a legitimate nightmare.

Red's white suit emphasized his six-foot two-inch penguin physique, and a white Panama hat was jammed down over one of the red wigs he never could seem to put on straight. He held Sharon's arm in one hand and the leashes of his two crazed Dobermans in the other. Dorothy was carrying two large suitcases. Sharon had her hands in her pockets.

"Hi, Tommy! Look what I broughtcha!" Red bawled in his loud, twanging monotone. I suppose I should have known something was wrong, that Red had or was in danger of having something he didn't want. It would be something I didn't want either, but Red meant for me to have it before I knew exactly what it was or just how much I didn't want it. It couldn't have been anything else. I had never known Red to commit an intentionally honest act. Anyway, he didn't like me, which I
didn't take personally, since he didn't like anybody but himself.

I stood back, expecting the worst, but not really caring much. Red dropped the leashes and the Dobermans sprang at me. I punched one in the head, and it was just enough to deter it. The dogs sniffed around for a few seconds. Then Ophelia jumped onto the dining table and lay down, stupidly surveying the room. Hamlet trotted over to the stereo and lifted a hind leg.

"Red, stop that son of a bitch!"

"Now, Hamlet, be a good boy. He's just a puppy, Tommy."
The dog was four years old. Red called him a puppy when he was uncontrollable away from the car lot. When neighbors around the car lot complained of dogs that roared at and chewed on them, he responded, "I got these dogs to protect me. They're not pets." Red had paid about half a dozen settlements to parents whose children had been attacked, and once, when Red had been held up, the dogs got under a used Mercedes while Red surrendered his bank bag to the armed robber.

"Where is she?" Sharon demanded, returning from the bedroom.

"Who?"

She pulled me into the kitchen, whispering furiously. "That ignorant little snatch who was here the other night."

"She's gone."

"Where?"

"I don't know."
"When's she coming back?"

"I don't guess she is."

"Why not?"

"Because she's probably dead." I was pulled into the bedroom, where I explained.

"Oh. Well, can I come back?"

"I guess so."

Sharon took my hand, and we went back into the living room. Red had planted himself in the middle of the sofa, forcing Dorothy into the uncomfortable armchair. The Dobermans were sitting in two of the dining chairs. Sharon and I sat down at the table with them.

"That's a summer suit, Red," I observed. Dorothy smiled archly in his direction.

"I like it," he said, grinning.

"Well, you're not at home. At least take that silly hat off."

"Oh, beg pardon!" he shouted, in an exaggerated apologetic tone, putting the hat beside him on the sofa. Being reminded of his lack of taste and manners delighted him. He was enchanted by the knowledge that he could make so much money being such an asshole. That he could do so in the United States made him patriotic. He ran up the Stars and Stripes every morning as soon as a customer drove into the lot.

"The wig, too."

"Now, Tommy."
"Who'd like some coffee?" Sharon asked.

"I sure would," Red honked.

"You drink instant coffee, don't you, Tom?" Dorothy asked sweetly.

"Yes."

"No, thank you." In some ways, Dorothy was harder to take than Red. Dorothy had been the one to object to Sharon's marrying me. Red had been disappointed when he'd had to support Dorothy in her aversion to my commonness. He had only wanted Sharon out of his house and supported by somebody else. Now, instant coffee seemed to confirm Dorothy's opinion of me as a crude young man whose education had been ineffective.

I had to wonder at her sudden tolerance of me, even though I knew she could tolerate almost anything. She didn't care when Red ran around town introducing fat whores as his wife in restaurants. She hated Red and had made a point of telling me she hadn't slept with him since Sharon was conceived. Red paid the bills, provided her with a new Cadillac every year (she didn't care for foreign automobiles), and left her alone to pretend she was a lady.

Sharon brought Red's coffee to him in a brown mug on a white plastic saucer. He poured a little of the coffee into the saucer, blew on it, puckered his wrinkled, rubicund, outrageous old face, and began to consume the coffee in protracted sucks.
"You know, Tommy, I knew Cowboy wasn't no good. I told Sharon not to marry him."

"You old fart," I said. "You probably paid for the wedding and wore that hat to it."

"He did," Dorothy said, nodding at him in distaste.

"I filed for divorce this morning," Sharon said.

"And I had to pay for it," Red moaned.

"You can pay for the rest of it, too," I told him.

"But I paid for the last one."

I was awake before Sharon was, before the alarm went off. In a moment Sharon stirred, murmured, raised her head from my chest, opened her eyes, drowsily wished me good morning, and vomited all over both of us.
"You seemed upset at dinner," I observed.

"Just nerves," Sharon chattered.

It had been a mild day. Late in the afternoon the sky had been littered with nondescript birds fluttering noisily in a sinuous lane toward the northeast, offering the illusion that they were going someplace. Sharon and I had been quite comfortable in light coats all day as we had attended to some articles of business.

So we were surprised when we came out of the Mexican restaurant and found a freezing north wind as we walked to the Mercedes. I already had indigestion, and my throat still hurt from the jagged segment of tostada I had swallowed when a man dressed as the Cisco Kid sauntered up to our table and, swarthy and grinning, asked, "You folks enjoying your dinner?" Then he had backed away, twirling both his pistols at us.

Sharon and I had been remarried that morning. Her divorce did not have to run its course, nor was she a widow, although Cowboy was dead. He'd been stabbed to death in a bar, fighting over somebody else's wife. Sharon had shown me the obituary from the newspaper. Tucker Breedlove, 31, progressive country musician, survived by the wife Sharon hadn't known about.

We had been embarrassed in the County Clerk's office the day before. We were not related by blood or adoption, but the
question "Either of you divorced?" was discomfiting. I paid another fee, and the secretary gave us our free gift package. Sharon got yet another disposable douche, and I knew I probably would be able to use the Bufferin.

The abortion had taken place only a week before, but Sharon seemed almost recovered from it. Her pallor was nearly gone, and her appetite was returning. Even Red was happy. He'd underwritten the abortion and offered me fifty dollars. I scorned him, and we settled for five hundred above the damages my property had sustained. A fool and his wife's money are soon parted, and Cowboy had been prodigal. Most of the furniture had been sold, and Sharon had used her divorce settlement to make a down payment on the pick-up truck. But Red had paid that off and turned a nice profit on it.

Cowboy's death had curtailed a number of plans he and Sharon had made. Sharon had asked me tentatively if she and I might attend any of several important events: the rattlesnake hunt, the prison rodeo, the chili cook-off, or the cow chip throwing contest. I declined, and when she seemed unhappy about it, I tried to pacify her by allowing her to listen to country and western music on the radio. A bellowing baritone was performing something called "Waltz Across Texas."

I had never believed in ghosts, so when I stopped at the red light in the left turn lane, and she peered in from the median with her plain, bright, ironic face, I knew that there had been a mistake. I wondered whose mangled, decomposed
remains I had buried while Dmitri and his retinue looked on
in mourning. Dmitri had behaved as though a coat and tie
were a straight jacket, and long, loud gowns were visible
beneath pea-jackets. Most had sobbed at the barbaric service
the nondenominational minister had read so badly.

"Hey, Tom."

"Hello, Faye."

"Tom, she's supposed to be dead."

"Hush."

"How are you?"

"I'm all right, Faye. How are you?"

"Why aren't you dead?" Sharon demanded, leaning across
the seat. "You tell me that!"

"I'm just great, just great. I found my faith again."

"I see. But why couldn't you tell me?"

"Contacts with our past lives aren't in the best inter-
est of the family," she recited.

"But Faye—-we were married. We are married."

"Oh, Jesus! She's not dead!"

"Marriage is an artificial institution that a godless
society tries to shove down our throats."

"She isn't dead," Sharon whimpered.

"I guess you wouldn't want one of these," Faye said,
holding out a pamphlet. On the cover was a photograph of
Father David Abraham, his lips curled into his beard in a
snarl. Below the photograph was the caption, "Persecuted
for Righteousness' Sake."

"No."

"And you wouldn't have anything you could give the family? A little contribution?"

"No."

"Well, okay," she said, patting my arm. "We love you."

Then she walked back to the car behind her.

A green arrow materialized on the traffic light stand and I turned left. I saw a diesel sign on a gas station and drove in. Two immense men were standing behind a grey Buick as the attendant filled its tank. Father David Abraham turned around in the back seat and smiled at me. Noticing Sharon, he licked his lips, winked, and gave me the finger.

I got out to go to the men's room, thinking of this maniac's responsibility for Kirns. Kirns had not only been unhappy when I told him about Faye. He was nervous, given the nature of his long-ago offense. When a policeman who saw a light in the bookstore at five A.M. pounded on the door to determine the reason for the light, it was more than Kirns could stand. I had been surprised to learn that at least one of the dueling pistols functioned.

Leaving the men's room, I was seized by the arm. I turned around, and in the dim light I saw a middle-aged woman dressed in a sheet, a pistol in her hand.

"I'm going to kill the bastard," she hissed.

"Who?"
"My husband. In that car. In the turban."

"How nice."

"Isn't it? But you wouldn't tell him?"

"Certainly not."

Either Om or Og was trying to talk to Sharon when I got back to the Mercedes, but she'd closed the power windows and locked the doors. "Somebody's about to get shot," I said quietly, my hand in my coat pocket. Om or Og backed away to his own car.

Sharon let me in after I paid the attendant. The disciples were conferring with their master. A white form approached them across the lot. I pulled into the street, an eye out for Tucker Breedlove.