

THE SHAFT



DAVID J. SCHOW

"It's raw, it's rough, and it's not for wimps ... A damn fine book"
AFRAID MAGAZINE

The Shaft

The Kenilworth Arms is a mongrel apartment building in down-town Chicago, built and re-built, its rooms divided and sub-divided; in some ways it seems to have a strange life of its own - a *very* strange life.

Jonathan is a commercial artist, running to the city after a bad relationship; Cruz is a drug dealer running from an accidental death in Miami; Jamaica is a prostitute, running from her life. They could not have chosen a worse place to run to.

When the deaths begin, they go almost unnoticed, so deep in degradation is the apartment block steeped. But the Kenilworth Arms and its horrific occupant need blood for their survival, and the trickle soon becomes a flood. In Chicago there are many ways of death - as Jonathan, Cruz and Jamaica are about to find out...

'Schow is the chap who first coined the term *splatterpunk*, and his second novel is every bit as splattery and punkish as his first.'

-The Times

'Pumped up with manic intensity and shoved right into your face. It works.'

-Locus

'It's raw, it's rough, and it's not for wimps... A damn fine book.'

-Afraid Magazine

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Time heals no wound;

It merely cauterizes the scars.

Chicago is Hell, and Hell is freezing tonight.

Boner uncaps his bigmouth silver marker. PUNK DEATH SQUADS BONER A#1, he writes across the port window of the El car, drowning the other proclamations there.

Marginally female, a ragbag watches in fear from the far end of the car, eyes like wet black seed body a huddle of scarves and threadbare castoffs. She gathers her shopping-bagged junk closer and shuffles for the door before the guy writing on the windows can notice her and work some pet violence. She has a lot of trouble hanging onto all her garbage while battling the handle of the hat that connects the cars. Nothing on the El moves or works with subtlety.

Boner signs off with a flourish; his mark. The newer El cars are some kind of graffito-resistant aluminum from Japan. Paint pens, Outliners, nearly anything hoses right off. It'll be fun outfoxing progress. It always is.

He has already dismissed the ragbag from his notice. She represents zero potential for gain or sport. Neither does the wino passed out in his own chunky vomit. No goodies; no cash. Boner recognizes the stench of hydrochloric acid and recycled green beans. The puke mixes with the black slush tracked across the floor of the car. Finding traction is a big challenge.

Nobody rides the late trains if they can avoid it.

Car by car the train bucks over a junction, dislodging clots of snow; Boner fancies he can hear the snapping of electricity. The fluorescents let him preen. He peers past the *fuck-yous* and gang codes and spiderweb ruptures marring the window's thick plastic. He slips off his mylar shades and cracks his gum.

He is gaunt and ectomorphic, blade-thin with prominent, red-rimmed aquamarine eyes - a feature that never fails to startle citizens who expect dark eyes on a nigger. His hair is a quarter-inch of buff dyed bristle. It does little to conceal the two parallel crescent scars on the back of his head, souvenir of a childhood ritual he survived. Thin wrists, long fingers, no nails except for the pinky, which tapered, spatulate. His Adam's apple is the size of a golf ball. He is gangly despite his layers of clothing and his down moustache tells strangers he really isn't very old. Little three-point space separate each of his front teeth. When Boner smiles it is not a pretty display. Boner rarely smiles while on the prowl.

His split lip from the fight still stings. He can't sneer so he keeps his face neutral and frozen, and death to anyone who fails to notice how sullen and pissed off he is. Tonight he is wearing his red-laced combat boots, and a shredded Levi vest over a biker jacket with a pyramidal green leather back. Studs and chains hold everything in concert. He jingles when he walks, like a belled ocelot. Stay clear or else pain. Inscribed on the industrial denim are arcane mojo. KILLER PUSSY. D.R.I. STONER'S EVIL. No one comes close enough to read.

Boner was worse than bad.

He grins at his reflection, then grimaces as a dot of bright red blood interrupts the maroon scab on his lower lip. His gloves are fingerless, so he dabs, squinting at the blood as though trying to decode it. Then he touches the fingertip to his tongue.

The world was black scuffmarks, and dark snowmelt that stank of burning tires, and a wind howling off Lake Michigan that bludgeoned the chill factor down to minus twenty and falling, and the sharp sparking of the third rail in the night, and a wino unconscious in a bog of his own barf. Boner thinks Chicago is pretty cool.

He hustles out a bescummed hash pipe and fires up the button in the brass bowl. His lungs grab

harsh full pull without spasming to drive out the dense fumes. His eyeballs tingle; his brain spells relief.

Smokables, shootables, snortables - Boner is a connoisseur by virtue of broad mercantile involvement. He vends the best, only and always, because he is connected, notorious, and coveted. You be illing? If you don't know Boner, you don't know shit. He smiles at the thought, more cautiously. His lips holds. The cold helps anesthetize the slow throb of pain there.

Light glances off the ice crust on the township sign as the El lumbers past. Only locals know the sign reads OAKWOOD and boasts population stats a decade out of date. All Boner cares to know about Oakwood is that it is the hub of a cluster of woodsy suburbs for the highballers who pull the nine-to-fiver in the skyscrapers downtown. Old houses, here. A lot of Frank Lloyd Wright and tree-lined avenues and cutesy names intended to confer a feeling of turn-of-the-century stability. Too goddamned many churches and not nearly enough bars. In fact, Oakwood is a dry township, which means you can't buy so much as a beer at the 7-11. To Boner the drink racks in the convenience market coolers look comically crippled. On a street map, Oakwood is a dead rectangle of upscale real estate completely engirded by bars, liquor stores and nightspots - the surface streets forming Oakwood's border are a literal dividing line. Your right to drink begins and ends on the double yellow strip. Boner thinks this is a big giggle. So do the entrepreneurs holding the alcohol licences on the leeward side, all around.

But somebody has to staff the dry 7-11's, and collect the garbage of the wealthy, and provide the reaffirmation of caste, so the State Street El tracks form another of Oakwood's many dividing lines. To the south - the other side of the tracks, yes - is the scullery in this house of the privileged. Even the township, no matter how pristine, has its low-rent quadrant, and Oakwood has Garrison Street.

Boner lives on Garrison Street. It puts him within striking range of Oakwood High School, one of his principal sources of income. Business is good.

He unleashes a cloud of acrid smoke and thinks about bashing the wino, since it is nearly time to debark. A quick laugh, as a sign-off. Two steps and he jacks his boot hard into the wino's midsection. Yeah. The man contracts with a woof. *Urrg*. Bile bubbles from his slack mouth. It steams in the chill air of the car. Still alive. *What a miracle*, thinks Boner.

He writes EAT ME on the wino's forehead with the silver marker, stepping daintily to avoid getting vomit or puke on his boots. Next stop is his. He scoots off.

As far as he knows, wino-tagging is his own unique innovation.

The Garrison Street station is deserted at three in the morning. What a surprise. The front door glass has been replaced with industrial plastic, still intact so far, but one door is cocked open against the fierce wind on a broken closure arm. Some frustrated commuter has ripped the receiver out of the payphone again. Boner doesn't check the slot for change. What for? He is holding more than five hundred bucks in cash, in neat fifties.

No one is sleeping in the shelter of the station tonight. Or dead.

Boner sucks the last of the life from the hash button, then stows the pipe. Its warmth leaches through his pocket. He keeps the pipe in his left Levi pocket. The right holds his Mexican switch, a white bone handle housing a seven-inch, double-edged vampire fang. In his upper pocket are his silver pen and his Zippo. His belt features several dozen keys on a chain pull, plus the leash to a zipper billfold with Harley wings. Mounted against the small of his back beneath his coats he carries a large Special Forces survival knife. Somewhere within the leather he also packs a coil of razor wire on ring handles. His mirrored tong shades hang now from a button slit. Boner is wearing enough metal to freak out an airport alarm system twice over.

Besides the five hundred bucks in mad money, Boner's biker wallet contains a letter-perfect fake ID for Illinois State, three attorney cards for emergencies, American Express from his boss, ditto, and

smattering of Polaroids: Here is Cynder, going down on him (from above, out of focus). Here she spreading her legs for the lens. Here she is with a wine bottle jammed up her twat, fucking the mix whiskey and codeine that made her so photogenic in the first place...

Snapshot: Here is Boner, crunching alone through a four-foot snowpack to the building on Garrison Street. Too much party. He is tired and has to piss.

The building is four stories of ancient red brick befouled by a dandruff of dirty snow. Thin stalactites of cloudy ice hang to frame the east doorway. Above the door, vague shadows suggest the name in granite intaglio beneath. KENILWORTH ARMS.

Boner does not bother with keys. The east door is usually open. So much for security. The foyer is no warmer than the tarmac of Garrison Street, unplowed and cold as the balls of a corpse. He notices names on strips of embossing tape, pressed into slots on the vandalized gangbox. Not his. He does not check for mail.

Dead ahead, a loose caul of musty carpet patches the narrow stairway. It is the color of dust except for a dark, wet stain on the second and third steps that looks like blood. Boner's boots leave clean footprints all the way up to the second floor landing.

In his wake, sleet slashes in through the skewed east door and makes that weird keening it reserves for after hours. The old building shifts and creaks. Boner thinks of thumping around inside a palsied dinosaur finally setting down to die. It is no longer called Kenilworth Arms on the lease forms. Long in advance of Boner's residence it was bought out by a corporate realtor. Currently it is administered by a grubby foreign landlord whose cubbyhole door, in the basement, reads BUILDING MANAGER. One day the realtor will vend the property, or flatten it for redevelopment. Until that day, Kenilworth Arms will continue to slip through the cracks. Boner appreciates this. He shares a kinship with anything that survives on the outskirts of polite civilization.

He hears water dripping.

Kenilworth's single-wide elevator is rocky, claustrophobic, unsafe. It has been stalled at the second floor for weeks, reeking of Lysol and cat urine. From Two, you had to hike up anyway. The stairs are not a configuration original to the building; they seemed tacked on, too narrow, with oversharpened corners. Boner can touch the walls to either side as he ascends. A fat person could not make it. The cheap paint smothering the wallboard is blackened from all the hands before him.

Down the second floor hallway Boner can see the elevator doors are open a crack. The forty watt bulb inside has burned out or, more likely, been broken. In addition to the urine smell, the air wafting down the corridor carries the thick miasma of fried food, plus an odor like dirty socks that makes Boner think of jail.

Up one more confined flight. Boner's on top, on Three. Technically the basement level is a floor but no one seems interested in documenting this with room numbers.

Across from the dented elevator doors on Three is a little table holding a coffee can containing plastic flowers shrouded in dust. Above this, an oval mirror is miraculously unbroken. Up here the floorboards groan with the sound of incontinent old men squeezing out painful farts. TVs babble mindlessly, ceaselessly, hot deals on used cars in the predawn. Halfway down the hall one of the yellow bulbs is dead. Boner passes through the pool of darkness and hangs a right past a head-high column of icebox doors built into the wall. Most of these have been nailed up. Some still open and close. They were installed during a time when the iceman could make his deliveries without dragging huge drippy blocks over your nice kitchen linoleum.

The icebox doors no longer have a function. Nobody makes linoleum floors anymore.

Because Kenilworth has been subdivided so often, its schematic of rooms has mutated from the original blueprint. Today it is a haphazard warren of so-called 'studios' and 'singles' littered with sealed doorways, casement windows that slide up to reveal plywood or brick, and interior walls

unexpected angles and locations. Boner must unlock two doors to enter 307. The first is thin masonry, decades younger than the building's vintage paneled doors. It opens into what was once the common hallway of a large one-bedroom apartment. When opened, the door totally blocks the little passage. Boner has to dance around and shut it before he can proceed. Enclosing each end of the passage is another door, secured by a cheesy knob lock, strictly for show. Boner can slip it with a comb. Behind the far door lives a plump, stringy woman who keeps cats and works, Boner thinks, as a part-time telephone operator. He has never been interested enough to ask. What would he gain? As it does for most, the building is merely a downscale way station. From here, people either moved up-market, or were cast in TV-gray oblivion.

Boner's neighbor got the half of the original apartment containing the kitchen. He got the half with the bathroom.

Not a bad trade off. What she uses for a bathroom is probably a nightmare, and Boner prefers not to cook. Instead of a kitchen, he got an extra closet. From the tall corner windows overlooking the intersection of Garrison and Kentmore, he knew he'd also gotten the original living room.

He has to force his own inside door. It is unbelievably tight tonight - as though the frame had decided to shrink an inch all around.

Inside, the wall switch does nothing but click. And click. Fergus the super - building manager - has been dicking around, turning on too many things at once again. The breaker box is in a basement corridor near the laundry room. This has happened too many times for Boner to raise a decent man and before he fixes the lights he still has to piss. Boner believes that dope has made his bladder contract to the size of a pack of Luckies.

It stinks inside. Like ammonia or stale hamburger; like toilet leakage. Terrific. If the sewage pipes have frozen, ice plugs would have to be torched out. If the plumbing and electrical foulups are related... well, then maybe this whole firetrap could be history by morning. A good conflagration would warm everybody's buns for sure.

Boner's aquamarine eyes adjust to the darkness as he picks his way around the corner. The windowshades across the room are matte white rectangles, backlit by the luminescent combination of streetlamps and reflective snow. Boner can see the shadow-shapes of his bed, his dresser, his ghetto blaster, even the little space heater on the floor, plugged into a temporarily useless socket.

There is a silver glow of ambient light in the bathroom. Boner knows the window next to the bathtub does not open to the outside world. The light he sees is residual, akin to the afterimage of a flashbulb, yet faint and cold, with an organic quality that makes him think first of dead fireflies fading out, then of ghosts.

Boner's bladder is hollering for relief. He sweeps aside the shower curtain and unholsters his weapon. He will whizz in the tub so as not to miss the toilet in the bad light. Look out below. He cannot really perceive his own arcing stream of pee.

The tub is even darker, as though clogged up with black water. Boner wonders if this is what stinks so much. He imagines the largest turd in the world, bilirubin-black, coiled up in his very own bathtub, smelling richly enough to steam the windows. Waiting, as the world's largest, to have its picture taken perhaps. Boner thinks again of his Polaroids.

He giggles. While his laugh is still echoing off the bathroom tiles there comes a flurry of fast, dancelike motion in the tub. One of Boner's fingers is bitten off and swallowed, along with the tip of his cock.

Boner falls backward, piss and now blood squirting, his legs atangle in his dropped jeans. The pain of amputation slugs in. The arm he throws out to balance himself is seized by a wet mouth and oval shape of a football. Needle fangs slide through the ligatures of his wrist, slipping between the fibrous bones to mesh with a silver razor hiss. Arm-first, Boner is snapped back toward the tub, keys jangling, rills of blood coursing down the inside of his jacket sleeve. He cannot see the blood but he can feel

His dick feels as though an icepick has been jammed through it. More blood. He remembers the wind
fresh puke, how body heat made it steam when it came out.

Boner does not have a lot of time to ponder these sensations individually. In five seconds he will be
dead.

His boots thud into the wall hard enough to wake people in the basement. Before he can cut loose
his first yelp his face is engulfed by something cool, chamois-soft and blubbery, packed in an inch of
sliding goo. His last thought is of the gel they use to pack Spam. It doesn't smell so great, either.
Boner is reeled in.

Past that, it was no contest.

TWO

The window panels on the Greyhound bus were made out of some kind of tough plastic. Scratch patterns stood out in three dimensions, causing passing city lights to halate and issue rainbow coronas. Just now, the streetlamps of anonymous towns were not coming too frequently. There was no moon tonight and beyond the windows it was dead dark.

'No.'

Jonathan stripped off his featherweight headphones. He disliked cutting off music before it was finished, but he had lapsed into a doze and now the outer rims of his ears were throbbing. Truncating music was a matter of personal control; when it was done for you, it was called commercial radio. The regret he felt as he poked the STOP button was trivial but genuine. Tangerine Dream ceased to exist in the mid-bridge. Jonathan had been rotating the Walkman's batteries. Long haul, no spares, poor foresight. When you need to conserve your batteries you should at least stay awake for the performance.

The running noise of the bus soared into his ears, unmuffled and crisp. They were cruising at a dull and steady fifty-five in the slow lane. Jonathan's overhead reading light was off and no other passenger cared to differ this late at night. Their driver was a robot, a professional white-line jockey who had not uttered a syllable past his pro forma departure spiel about all the things you were not supposed to do on a Greyhound bus.

All there was: Night and blackness and time and bus noise, and Jonathan, all by himself now.

'No.'

He remembered the last time he had slept with Amanda.

Wine with dinner always felled them both on workdays. They had snuggled for an hour before coasting down into sleep. He thought he had undressed her. Sometime after midnight he had awakened and gone to work on her. Their progression had become almost ritualistic.

He scooted down, turned on his side, and insinuated his first and middle fingers between her legs, gently. Amanda slept soundly on her back - a trick Jonathan could never duplicate - and he was in a position that allowed him to monitor the meter of her unconscious respiration, even her very heartbeat. He set up a soft rhythm, rubbing, using his saliva as a buffer, teasing the periphery of her perception for half an hour or so, until he could tell she was floating up from sleep to vague doze.

His first reward came in the tiny moan that escaped her, and the way her legs drifted apart across the cool blue sheets to permit him better access. This was the time when pressure and tempo became important.

Her clitoris fattened beneath his fingers, swelling up firm and prominent as she began to assist him with sleepy, tidal movements. Another fifteen minutes passed. Jonathan watched the digital clock tick over as Amanda was jolted through a pleasantly fuzzy, half-asleep orgasm.

Now his index finger was inserted and he kept the beat with his thumb, feeling her contractions *bam bam bam*, the familiar fluttering in the ring of vaginal muscle. He saw her fingers grip the sheets and tighten, then relax as the afterburn warmed her extremities. Fingers, toes, forehead hot now, body demanding breath. When she rolled over, cocking one leg, she was so wet that Jonathan's fingers barely recorded the friction of her rotating pussy.

His erection was excruciating by now.

He guided her ass slightly higher. She was in focus enough to help him. Only just. She arched her back.

'I don't know why I love it so much this way,' she had told him so long ago. Before they had moved in together, back when it was imperative for them to hump their brains out every single night, no gaps

Every time she mentioned this, and she mentioned it almost every time, her admission was seasoned with her characteristic guilt. 'I don't know why I like it; I just... I jusst...' She usually dissolved in sibilance, far beyond words.

Amanda loved being entered from behind - her spine arched, face hugging the mattress, hands hanging on, her splendid rump pointed perkily up at her lover. She could never articulate why she favored this position over all contenders. It was a thing of sensation, not logic. Or her mind just refused to analyze it. Sometimes it was possible for Jonathan to nail down isolated details: The comfortably possessive grip of his hands on her hipbones; the optimum penetration; the freer rhythm that came from bearing straight into her instead of heavily atop her. But mostly, Amanda treated this as an exceedingly guilty pleasure. Maybe Mommy had warned her this was something nice girls did not do. Or worse, maybe Amanda had told herself this.

Jonathan could never fathom who Amanda thought she was apologizing to. She had discovered a position that made her senselessly happy. Thousands had not.

He remembered sliding into her, feeding those first few inches with no thrust at all, and the last thing he had anticipated was her voice. Amanda's voice, in the dimness, resolving to wakeful clarity to tell him *no*.

Amanda enjoyed waking up in a state of sexual high-burn. He was not taking advantage of her sleeping vulnerability; no way. No fucking way. If she even thought that, she would have stopped the sequence much earlier. She had pounced and taken Jonathan by sleepy surprise just as many times before. More. Predawn was one of their mutually approved favorite times for lovemaking. It offered a nice buffer of sleep, a couple of hours to either side, followed by the deeper slumber of the satiated.

'No.'

Lately their bedwork had become sporadic, by rote, sometimes almost a matter of resigned duty. An exterior reflection of internal problems that Jonathan had hoped would never find their way into the kingsized that he and Amanda had agreed to share for two straight, monogamous years.

He was, he saw, a fool.

Here he sat, northbound on a Greyhound redeye in the middle of the night, with a truly Olympian hard-on straining against the button fly of his 501s... with dead batteries. He was thankful for the dark, which obviated public embarrassment. He was not thankful for the night, because it made him think endlessly of the last time he had slept with Amanda... and not made love.

It had happened the night Jonathan had hoped to jump their lives back on track.

That night, it had not been a *Dinner from Hell*. That was what he had come to call the stiff social intercourse they shared on their nights out - a mostly spidess meal punctuated by migraine-inducing silences and overpolite nonconversation. No. That night, things had gone swimmingly. No argument, almost no snapping. Amanda had even laughed out loud once or twice, and it hurt him to think that he might be responsible for stealing the laughter from her eyes.

Back at their place he had drawn her a hot bath dense with oil and scented bubbles. She sank in to the tip of her nose and simmered for half an hour. She surfaced just to kiss him with a mouthful of Cabernet Blanc. When she stepped from the tub to the shower stall, he joined her. They lathered each other in familiar ways and she ducked out first, to change CDs on the player in the living room. He emerged from a cloud of steam, wound into a towel. She wore her favorite blue silk robe, her hair from damp and shaggy. The robe's hem brushed the floor, but the topography emphasized by its sheer, slinky fabric was almost too much for any mortal man to bear.

They were tired. At least this was detente. She instructed him to lay on his stomach, on the cool blue sheets, and she straddled him to work the kinks from his back with strong and practiced fingers. Her crisp, close pubic thatch teased his butt. Then he did her. She suffered a touch of Marfan Syndrome, a looseness of ligaments at the joints. It was perpetual bother. She could pop her entire

skeleton like a trucker cracking his knuckles. Her shoulders and hands ached much of the time. Jonathan feared incipient arthritis. In ten more years those joints would begin to swell.

For her to rub him down was a matter of caring, of saying *I still love you despite our problems*. For him to rub her was a matter of knowing from experience what to massage, and how rough to be with each area, because she was hurting.

Afterward, they had fallen asleep, entwined in each other's arms, and a stranger would have said that these were two people in love.

Until Jonathan was halfway inside of her, gliding easily into the embrace of her musky orchid cunt. Until she told him no.

'No, Jon. Don't. Hurts.'

He backed off, reining himself, fighting not to be a Visigoth about how badly he wanted her just at that moment. He parted her vulva with his thumbs, so gently, and tried again. No strain. She was wet as a thunderstorm.

'No.'

She had jerked down and away. It was a definite physical rebuff. She had not meant that his anger hurt. She had not meant not now but in a minute.

Jonathan popped free of her and felt a speck of moisture strike his cheek. His treacherous cock had catapulted a droplet of her lubrication right into his face. It was damned near symbolic.

Amanda had meant no. Period.

And Jonathan had suddenly seen himself as ludicrous. An absurd man on his knees with a hard-on jutting toward space like a cruise missile with no target to blow up.

Useless then, useless now.

The Greyhound's tilt-seat was a classic, slickly grimed in the manner of a doorjamb that had suffered a million filthy hands. A disinfectant tang lingered in the cabin. It persistently reminded Jonathan of a bar men's room in Mexico. Dingy place. He had logged an unlovely half-hour or so there, hooting into the big porcelain megaphone, in another life. No hard liquor since that adventure, no thanks. Just some wine, or beer with lime at dinnertime. Amanda had smoked dope to relax for as long as he had known her. Jonathan had found that if he smoked enough to get dizzy, it made him frisky, then leadenly tired, and he would spend the next day and a half with a sore throat. He lacked any taste for the permutations - hash, bong, half-and-half. Amanda was a browser, a sampler who used drugs infrequently and socially. She only did coke at parties. Jonathan thought sucking powder up your nose in order to be groovy was genuinely repulsive. His drug of choice was caffeine, plus the other white death, refined sugar. Jonathan was a coffee achiever.

Smoking dope helped Amanda knock down some of the barriers she habitually cast in the path of her own sexual pleasure. She almost never orgasmed easily; it took caring effort and a commitment of time from both partners. Most of the guys in her past had never given half a damn about working at it. Accordingly, Amanda had matured thinking herself to be frigid, or otherwise personally at fault. She seemed most fulfilled when she could blame both herself and her partners, with the bad old world of large thrown in for filler.

More than a hint of meanness there, Jonathan accused himself. Egg her on by telling her she enjoyed being a victim. What an understanding fellow you are.

The erosion of their relationship had become palpable at the point where Amanda insisted on smoking a joint before fucking. Rainwater patters against a marble tombstone and at last begins to wear the epitaph to unreadability.

Unbidden, a parade of images from the past marched through his head. Mostly silly. The way she used to playfully grab his ass in the supermarket, or merely tell him what a cute butt he had. The winter drive to Birmingham during which they held a crazily civil discussion on how movies are rated.

while his hand was delving into her khaki shirt and making her nipples come to attention. Or Amanda grinning like a gremlin and going down on him at four in the morning, midway through a night flight to LAX. The groping and giggling in the clothing store changing booths at the mall. The *oh-so-salacious* phone calls at work. Hawking computer mainframes had never appealed to Jonathan's romanticism. That one evening he had sulked home - he was to quit two days later - and found Amanda waiting in his bed, wearing the most maddening black lace nightgown conceivable. The way she had smiled and said, 'Jonathan? Do me a favor...?'

They began playing house shortly after that one.

He snapped to. Bus. Night. He was wallowing.

It wasn't just the sex, of course. He was dwelling on that aspect because the sex had been so good between them, and it had been so goddamned long since he had made love to her. To anybody. They had suffered a few bouts of generic lovemaking as their relationship burned down. It had plowed on, grim and unsatisfying, for nearly a year. Somewhere along the line they'd given up making love and settled for having sex. Problems replaced caring.

Just now he was randy enough to turn goofy whenever a pretty waitress smiled at him.

Sex wasn't it. Nothing was it. It was... it was so damned complicated, so tangled, that trying to pinpoint a specific catalyst or culprit would trivialize everything they had shared. Right this minute it had gifted Jonathan with a Clydesdale of a cluster headache that felt like a cinderblock being dropped on top of another cinderblock. It overran the left side of his skull, causing his eye to tear and his nose to drip. There was sweat in his eyebrows. The pain was consuming, and past meditating away. Time to grab for the Excedrin.

He twisted his rucksack around on the vacant seat beside him, unzipped the largest pocket and pulled out a half-empty bottle of Calistoga water that still fizzed. He had an apple and some Hydro cookies left, lost amid the cassette cases and other junk down in the pack - his Nikon plus zoom loaded with color film at a thousand ASA, his toilet kit, his address book, a flap pouch protecting his dense, dark pilot shades. The bottle's twist-cap went *fssss*. He dry swallowed three of the white pills. The fourth got stuck. He tilted the bottle to his lips and felt the pill disintegrate in the grip of his throat. He tried to relax, eyes shut.

Nope.

It had all gotten perverted. It had all turned so complex. There were so many beginnings and endings to it that it was impossible to he it into a nice, knotty, front-to-back narrative.

Once upon a day he had phoned Amanda at work. Just to make contact, hear her voice, ask her how she was.

'Pregnant.' She had said it just so, on purpose, and hung up on him.

After that had come the argument. Doom-laden, with dug heels, it started with talk of abortion, salaries, and practicality. It ended with nebulous notions of what constituted growth in a relationship between two human beings. Amanda wept a lot. Jonathan thought he had won the argument.

Jonathan lost.

Sharp she was, canny and diverse. It frustrated Jonathan that the apparent goal of her life was to subjugate all that made her unique, to melt into the commonweal and become what his good buddy Bash had dubbed one of the Butt People.

Said Bash: People who watched titty channels and hung out at the Silver Bullet. People who reproduced irresponsibly and nattered about their desire to get back in shape someday. People who thought winning a lottery would solve all their problems. People to whom life improvement meant affording a more expensive pickup truck. People who counted on God to fix their plumbing, their shortcomings, their existences, because they were too lazy. Lite Beer people. The massmind, the calculatedly ignorant, the lower spiritual castes. The sort of good folks who under the rig

circumstances would happily form lynch mobs and book-burning parties.

The Butt People.

Amanda's upbringing had been different. Children had always been a part of her scenario. But too many birthdays had passed for maternity to remain a foggy, sometime-but-not-now notion. She slid down into an exitless panic. Jonathan thought seriously for a while about playing Daddy to some small someone. He was shocked to realize he did not despise kids as much as he feared he might. The miniature human beings were intriguing.

They were the most intriguing, he found, when they belonged to somebody else, when they could be observed at will with the repulsive parts edited out.

Too many friends insisted too fervently that everything changed when you became a parent. No big surprise there. Jonathan heard the solidarity of the trapped, seeking to seduce him. He asked Amanda why. Her response had been heated, cast in steel.

'Because it's what people do.'

Not enough, not for Jonathan, who did not believe in building families by accident, the way a pioneer constructs a shelter not out of choice, but out of necessity. And that was not enough for Amanda.

It had been a slow income year, and Amanda had gotten an abortion. Jonathan wondered if he would ever be forgiven for his complicity.

Amanda chanced upon a gray hair, then another. Then a stretch mark or two on her thighs. Jonathan noticed varicose veins on his own ankles. He did not mention them. For Amanda, a time bomb had begun ticking. The prospect of whether she had actually pinpointed a flaw in her mirror was a no-win exchange. If he noticed, it hurt her. If he pretended not to, she felt overlooked. And if he did nothing, held at neutral, her eyes silently damned him one more time.

She stopped smiling. She erected an automatic denial response against any proposal of Jonathan. She entrenched for a long tug of war. This irritated Jonathan. Waste pestered him. He reluctantly supplied whatever pressure was required to keep the tension equalized. Nobody was going to bud. There were egos to be preserved. He thought of the joke about the self-protecting fuse - the one that protects itself by crisping the entire circuit rather than burning out.

Lovemaking? Call it nightmarish.

So now Jonathan's cute butt was Chicago-bound, with Texas dwindling to the rear, Tangerine Dream tapes to supply a highway soundtrack, and pills for the headaches that whacked chrome spikes into his brain. He brooded about the end. The damage Amanda could wreak upon him with a look, or a stolen silence. He moped about the practiced and incomparable way they had moved together, melded into one seamless, primal being, giving and receiving pleasure. Two folded into one.

'Take the job,' she had told him. 'Sure. Go have fun with Bash.' Jonathan fancied he heard the whack of a gavel. 'You will anyway, right? You can probably make some money, so why not? Get away from me because I'm such a bitch, anyway.'

There came times when the acid certainty in her voice made him want to start flinging wild haymaker blows. 'Well.' He had shrugged, still frustrated. 'What about you?'

'What about me? Don't make any big sacrifices on my behalf.' Her tone said: *You fucked up again, ace. What you should have asked was what about US? See? You don't really give a damn.*

They could predict each other so well. Why wasn't that a good thing, a healing, strengthening positive thing, instead of the nastiest form of ultimate weapon?

And where do you get off being so goddamned naive? a tiny, impish voice shot back.

Chicago offered work. Chicago offered distance.

Jeffrey Holdsworth Chalmers Tessier - of the New Orleans Tessiers - was burly and bearded, sloppily shouldered and large of tooth. His eyes were a mellow golden-brown, radiant, absorbent, constant

storing input on his mental video recorder. His line was freelance graphics, his patter rapidfire and ceaseless, and he had been Jonathan's best friend of record since their first encounter at a university film club meeting in 1977. Jonathan had been chasing an architectural degree, Jeff had been loafing away a liberal arts scholarship. Somewhere amidst the womanizing and pool-playing he acquired the nickname Bash. He still maintained a loving hold on his Deep South accent. He told Jonathan that Amanda had been a 'shayme.' To Bash, ladies might come and ladies might go, but there were always more ladies, and if the universe worked right Jonathan would forever be able to blubber on his best friend's shoulder.

Male bonding was critical to Bash's diagnosis of the world. Give him a screening of *The Man Who Would Be King* or *Heartbreakers*, with Nick Mancuso and Peter Coyote, and he gladly slid into Nirvana. Bash's life was not hampered by marriage or kids or health insurance or devolving into a Burt Reynolds Person. Such worries never seemed to be on his plate.

'So blow town, Fed Ex your rosy red asshole up here, and help me steal some of Capra's capital, m'boy.' He pronounced it *boah*. He always talked like that. 'I'm snug in a position at Rapid O'Graphics, snug enough to swing my considerable personal influence and even more awesome charm. Hell, you're a shoo-in as soon as I say so. Think of it as your first step on the Big Ladder of Life, from Ronald McDonald to Dom Perignon.'

Bash had even sprung for bus fare.

Jonathan was no computer salesman; at least he and Amanda had agreed on that. He warmed to the idea of breaking Rapid O'Graphics under the wing of someone as big and loud and life-embracing as Bash. For now, he'd had his fill of bleakness and ashes.

That, at least, was his rationalization. There was no way to express it that did not make him seem petty, self-serving and brutal. It was the ancient pep talk: We need to separate for our own good. A venerable old standard that had already failed to work for millions of dissatisfied customers.

There was, as it turned out, a single event in Jonathan's memory. The event he could point to and say this is what split and splintered them, a nasty and mordant thing like a caustic chemical sloshing around in his mind and burning the emotions there.

Northward rolled the Greyhound bus, ignoring one small town after another, preparing to hurdle the line into a new state.

The cluster headache still sheeted Jonathan's vision with wetness. He closed his eyes, ringing down his own personal nightfall. A tear streaked freely along his cheekbone. He thought once more of the most horrible thing he had done to Amanda, the woman he still loved.

THREE

Cruz made it to the rail just in time to see Chiquita destroy an umbrella table, face-first, five stories below. She missed the pool by a good ten feet. Until he saw her brains splatter all over the sun deck, he hadn't realized the bimbo had had any.

Cruz would see her fall thousands of times more before his life was over. His ears were crackling constantly and he had a headache. Over the cabin com, Captain Falstaff of Eastern Airlines announced to the passenger complement of the 737 that there was turbulence coming; they should belt up. Cruz sat gripping the armrests. One was loose. He stared out over the starboard wing and wondered how these double plastic windows could possibly get marked up on the outside. Was the wind shear that nasty thirty thousand feet up? He thought of fat gremlins riding the wingtips and working their alien vandalism.

He got a pillow, he gulped aspirin, he marveled at the fact that less than six hours ago, his life had been pretty goddamn smooth. He tried not to worry about dying, but that was stupidly optimistic. A day of six hours ago, and Rosie's party...

Cruz was still watching Chiquita fall. Down and over, one lull turn, then splat into the apron of the hotel pool.

Rosie humped across the suite on his burn leg while the party's zombies were still puzzling out what had gone down. Besides Chiquita. Cruz was hanging so far over the rail he almost got sucked over. His mouth was agape and a snow-white droplet of saliva unmoored from his lip and tumbled. Same trajectory.

The party had definitely cratered.

'Back off the rail, Cruz, c'mon now.' A textbook of cool in a shitstorm, that Rosie. He was Emilio, the big fixer. He caught a fistful of Cruz's flapping aloha shirt and hustled him off the balcony and into the only empty bedroom of the presidential suite. A lot of coke was smeared across Cruz's upper lip and most of his right cheek; he looked like a punk in a cheap Santa Claus getup to whom some attacker had dealt a hard lefthanded slap. He had been drinking and snorting all day. Now his eyes had filled with something a bit more potent and permanent, and he was drunk on it. He clomped fumblingly along, letting Rosie lead him.

'Yee-HAH,' somebody said. 'Rawwww-hide?'

The suite's other two bedrooms were noisily taken; five in one, a trio in the other, all sweaty, higher than helium and fucking like minks. Seven other mouth breathers were still gawping at the eleven-minute replay of the Star Wars videotape on the big Proton monitor. Most of them had lent applause to Chiquita's brain-dead strip act. The kicker to the act was her jump. Most of the droids laughed. But now half of them had managed to forget she had ever existed at all.

So much glossy black hair, Cruz thought. Her feather earrings. Emilio had paid for the diamond on her front tooth. Her dark Brazilian eyes. All of it had impacted with concrete at about seventy miles an hour. Stone defeats flesh.

'Rosie, she...' Cruz hadn't collected his wits. He squeezed his eyes shut, blinking out white grit, then sniffed mightily as tears freed and rolled. 'Fuckin' jumped.'

'Shut up a minute.' Rosie lent the idiots in the next room a quarter-second of disgusted checkup. No one would pull any shit for at least five minutes. On the video the special effects fireworks had revved up. He slammed the door and in three crooked strides got right in Cruz's face. Cruz was still staring at the shut door, wondering where Rosie had got to.

Rosie was notorious for his efficiency. Efficiently, he yanked Cruz nose-to-nose and backhanded

him twice, bouncing him off the wall with a split lip. His footing went away. A tiny cloud of cocaine dust hung between them as Rosie hauled him back up.

'Stupid,' he muttered. 'Why didn't you keep your jaws wired? What the fuck is wrong with you?' He stomped his good foot, then rushed his hand through his thinning bronze hair. His businessman's taste was perfect. He needed to blow off his mad, and had only moments in which to stitch this rancid mess into order.

'Asswipe needledick birdshit! Goddamnit!' One more slap, more a cuffing, an admonishment. 'What the fuck's sake did you tell Chiqui to jump when you knew she was stupid enough to do it?'

'Didn't tell her.' Cruz's slur betrayed his brain's impaired ability to track. 'Dared her.'

'Wonderful. I'm sure Emilio will appreciate that.' He backed off and rubbed his face, winding up with his hands in a prayerlike attitude as he doped out a plan. Cruz could see Rosie prioritizing.

Any second now would come the sound of sirens.

'*Olcay*. Five minutes for them to come unglued about the meat pie all over the terrace. Ten minutes for them to guess which balcony, unless somebody up here has already bitched about the party noise. He assumed yes. He rummaged inside his Verri Uomo double breasted jacket - two large, retail, easy and emptied his leather billfold. Into Cruz's trouser pocket he wedged a fat wad of Franklin notes, both double. Then he fished up a cloth-covered ampule, holding it beneath Cruz's nose and crushing it with his thumb and forefinger.

'Oh... fuck!' Cruz convulsed sharply and held his nose as if his sinuses had just snapped aflame. His skull was on the verge of explosive decompression.

Rosie stepped back. Vomit on his Guccis would be too uncool.

While Cruz fell to his knees to hock and gag, Rosie continued. 'Cops will turn over the whole building. It's not them you have to fret. It's Emilio. Know what will happen if Emilio rolls in and you're still here?'

Bap on the side of the head. Cruz looked up. He was hurting but his senses were home. He nodded sickly, his black brush cut bobbing. Lucidity had met him like a hit and run wreck. 'One of those dia-tone dickheads in the next room will tell Emilio I told Chiqui - dared Chiqui to jump. And then I'll get off the balcony.'

'And, my boy, if you are stupid enough to still be here when Emilio shows, I will fucking help him toss you. You know how things are. How they have to be.'

Cruz knew, and nodded. Affirmative.

When he found his Numero Uno squiff spread all over the deck on Cruz's dare, Emilio would be torqued. He hated interruptions in his sex life. Cruz could envision Emilio storming in. Catching him with a warm tit in one hand and a cold Chivas in the other, sucking up the complimentary blow and watching Star Wars. Playing nonchalant. Yeah, Emilio would have his bones broken in alphabetical order for appetizers. The party would crank. Cruz would bounce out the window and join Chiquita the way peanut butter joins jelly when you squish the bread together.

'You've gotta tear ass outta here, pronto.' Rosie was not making a funny. 'Wipe off your face. Hail the cab downstairs. Get the fuck to Miami International. Call me.' He fast-drew one of his cards. Cruz knew it read Ross M. Westervelt - Business Investments Counselor. He scribbled a number on the obverse. Cruz felt absurdly honored. At last he was privy to one of Rosie's top-secret emergency numbers.

Rosie spot-checked his Rolex Presidential. 'Call at exactly five o'clock. You're catching a plane.'

Time seemed to be accelerating now, and Cruz had no mouth for this new taste. 'Rosie - listen to me, man. She was on the rail before I could get ahold of her... and... I didn't mean she should jump seriously, but she was on god knows how many mikes of that shit Telstar brought in from -'

'Cruz.'

'- that shit was not stepped on, Rosie... and she was way over her ceiling for chemical input, if you know what I mean, and -'

'Cruz.'

'I wasn't fucking serious, Rosie!'

Rosie hit him again, not so hard. Cruz copied and understood.

'Cruz. We have no time for this. And I don't have time for a speech. I like you. You're a prime runner and I don't want to see you become hotpatch for the Don Schula Expressway. I know a fellow Chi. You can hole up there.'

Rosie was the only person Cruz had ever known who could call it Chi and not sound like a imbecile. It sounded natural, coming from Rosie, who Cruz saw as old fashioned, yet someone to look up to, to emulate. Rosie had this pet expression: When the shit starts flying, be careful you don't inhale any. Cruz caught himself using it one day, and it sounded natural for him, too.

'I'll grease Emilio out. Couple of months, no heat, I'll bring you back in. Emilio will chill down when he gets a new bitch. But right now you've got to get out of here, before the shit starts flying.'

Cruz returned a sad grin. 'Don't wanna inhale none.'

'Don't go to your apartment. Hear me, now.'

'But Rosie, what about all my stuff, and-'

Rosie overrode. 'No and no. Don't even stop at a 7-11 for a bubble water. Phone no one. Go straight to the airport and don't do anything except stay low till five o'clock. Then call me. By then I'll have tickets straightened out. After that, you were never here this afternoon, despite what the dummi outside will say. They're wasted and I'm not. You were never here. I need half an hour to cook up a plausible excuse as to your absence, but don't worry about that.' He glanced at his watch again. 'O first five minutes are gone. You're outta here, kiddo. Now.'

Cruz's hand sought his pocket, where the thickness of cash bills bulged.

'No buts,' said Rosie. 'Git.'

No tears, no strain. Cruz shut the door quietly behind. He was a pro, too.

By the stroke of midnight Cruz was freezing his cojones off at O'Hare Airport, already thinking that alien turf truly gobbled the canary.

He tried to sip turbid automat coffee. It seared his tongue. The PA announcements were absurd. Nondenominational Sunday morning services will be held at 6:30 in the chapel, basement level. Baggage claim was in the next area code from where the Eastern flight had debarked. He had no bag to claim, and no idea of where to wander. He'd never been a fugitive before.

This airport had a chapel, for fuck's sake.

He thought of his cab ride to Miami International, a nervous trip that let him savor the tang of one hundred proof paranoia - utter, bug-eyed, a distillate of all the fear he had known in twenty-one years walking the surface of the planet. He saw the cabbie notice his frequent glances out the back window and sat rubbing his palms against his pantlegs.

He imagined the telephone at his duplex ringing, ringing with one of Emilio's bad boys on the calling end, sniffing. He built a fantasy picture of Emilio's iron-pumping goon brigade turning his home inside-out. There went the Audio Technics turntable, the one with the twelve-pound professional deejay platter and the solid carbon Black Widow tonearm. Crunch. There went the CDs. *Crack, crack, crack*. The belly of his Aqua III waterbed would be gutted by Buck knives. Splooch. He saw his

wardrobe systematically shredded asunder. His collection of gas station and bowling shirts, with names embroidered in red on the pocket ovals, none of which had ever seen a day of working class labor... all gone now. Emilio's apes loved destruction almost as much as straight rape and no-frills murder.

It would all come to pass if Rosie's story sprang a leak. If Emilio tipped.

Cruz had locked eyes with Emilio's lady through a freebased cloud of blur. His line: 'You're probably wasted and stupid enough to jump off, Chiqui. Go on. I dare ya.' Snappy patter that had changed his life in an instant.

He had tried to estimate five stories of height when the 737 had lifted from the runway. Terminal velocity was thirty-two feet per second. Had Chiquita achieved it before her dazzling smile and bone-bait body had flattened into a meatbag of pulverized bones?

Five o'clock. His hands had been shaking when he dialed Rosie's secret number. Relays dealt with the call; the timbre of the ring abruptly changed and answered within one buzz.

'Cruz. Okay, listen. Number's routed through to my earphone. Emilio probably has the station's phones bugged, and I don't have time to sweep and fry the exterior taps just for one call.'

Cruz had watched Emilio's debugger do just such a trick once. His equipment kicked a megavolt surge through the phone lines. Phone company equipment handled six volts, which is why you could never kill anyone by dumping a phone into their bathtub. The surge did to the line taps what a blowtorch does to a strand of hair.

'A first class ticket is waiting for you at Eastern. It's prepaid. Had to messenger it to the desk. Used a two-stage, filtered credit card so it can't be traced back to me.'

'First class? Whoa, Rosie, I -'

'Don't kiss my butt. It was a last-minute booking. No coach seats were open. How much money did you give you?'

Cruz never lied to Rosie, not about anything crucial. 'Seventeen hundred. I had another two-hundred in my back pocket when -'

'Right.'

Right. Bash Chiquita hit the pool apron and broke. Blood reddened the pool runoff gutter near where used to be her scalp. Her hair spread out like crimson seaweed in a shock corona around the disintegrated crockery of her skull. Cruz kept seeing the picture. It never got boring.

'Buy what you need. Don't buy anything ostentatious. Let my man in Chi do that for you. I'll call him once I know you're in the air.'

'What name is the ticket under?'

'Ramon Aguilar.' Rosie spelled it out. Cruz had been typecast as a greaser again. 'Copy?'

Cruz recited the spelling.

'Now get your ass over to the gift shop and buy a shoulder bag. Toothbrush, toilet kit, you know. Buy a razor. When you're in the air, lose the moustache. Buy some magazines and junk. Maybe a camera, so you don't board the plane naked. We don't want anybody to remember you had no baggage.'

'Rosie. I -' There seemed to be a big script Cruz needed to work his way through, for the benefit of his mentor. A lot needed saying.

'Shut up. Check your pockets. Any blow or pills, flush it down the john in the men's room. Don't be holding when you board. Hear me, now.'

'Yeah, right.' There was a gram vial on a gold dogtag chain around his neck. His hand sought its shape beneath his shirt. He actually managed a tiny smile. Rosie's sheer competence was loosening him up.

'You don't need to think about what happened to Chiqui until a lot later. Just remember you weren't even here.'

'What about the other dudes at the party?'

~~The hissing whine of cellular interference made them both wince. Perhaps Rosie had driven her Porsche beneath an underpass.~~

'Simple to keep them loaded,' Rosie said. 'Asked if any of them recalled seeing you lately. Most of 'em wondered why you weren't at the party.'

Cruz nodded. *Fucking droids.*

'So far so good, kiddo. Try not to fuck up, hm?'

The last thing Cruz wanted was to rack the receiver, to break that vital connection with Rosie. Already he felt bleakly isolated, cut off and scared... and he was not even clear of Florida yet.

'Hey, wait! What's the name of the guy I'm supposed to meet in Chi? Chicago, I mean.'

'Not your problem. He'll find you.' The hardball mien of Ross Westervelt shucked away. 'Only one brand of dingdong would wear an aloha shirt into a blizzard. Chuck it. Spill something on it. Lose it. Buy a shirt; buy a jacket - a heavy coat, if you can find one. Go to the white zone outside the Eastern baggage claim and loiter until you're picked up.'

Cruz wanted to interject, to give back something significant. 'Thanks.' That was all he got out. He felt like crying.

'Let's just hope nobody loses dick skin over this, kiddo. You go now. I'm already gone.'

'Hey, wait.'

Rosie held on the other end for one beat, two...

'Shit's flying, old man. Don't inhale none.'

There was a quick, breathy snort that might have been laughter under better circumstances. Then the connection was severed.

Cruz had toddled forth to play secret agent. He tasted the differences between purgatory and paradise, the tiger and the Lady... steerage and first class. There was no way he was going to trash his coke vial. It had been a gift from Rosie, along with the novelty dog tags in solid 24K. He was not about to throw it away... or empty it. Certain miniscule disobediences could validate your own control over your life. Cruz maintained this sort of rigid self discipline by deciding not to toot anything until after he was on the plane.

He was most jazzed by the boarding call that permitted him, as a first class passenger, to board ahead of the rabble, just after the feeps and children. The normal passengers (the cheapskates) were thus compelled to stare at him sitting in his extra-wide seat, giving the hostess his drink order while they were still jostling and grunting and packing themselves in. The first class hostess, whose name was Tawny, had legs that could tempt mere human men to commit vehicular homicide. She seemed to have a shorter uniform skirt than the coach stewardesses. Tawny smiled without end at everything, every dumb executive bon mot, every crumb of leering chat, each conversational triviality. Her teeth were so perfect you had to stare hard to see the lines separating them. Up in the front of the plane, the service was linen and glass instead of paper napkins and plastic cups. Tawny constantly and happily recharged Cruz's *cuemavaca*. It never did hit bottom. He was dismayed to discover, as he attempted the shave Rosie had suggested, that he had gotten quite blitzed.

The jet slam-danced over pockets of turbulence en route to colder northern climes. The alcohol Cruz had dumped down suffered a head-on collision with the adrenaline blow-back from Chiquita's swan dive. He cut his upper lip with the safety razor. At the sight of his blood in the 737's stinky chemical bathroom, his metabolism finally tossed the towel and he spent the next fifteen minutes vomiting into the oblivion pit of the airline toilet. The stench of the blue freshener kept him heaving long after he was empty. With jittering hands he did two medium lines from the coke vial to stabilize, then asked Tawny if she could scare up a *bandaid*.

Of course she could. Right away. Smile.

Cruz's genetic makeup had never favored body hair. His chest was as unhirsute as that of the average Japanese. His moustache had been one of the great triumphs of his late teens, though he had never been able to coerce it into being more ambitious and to travel, say, down toward his chin perhaps to seed a beard. He had been proud of what he had been able to raise.

Gone now; razed rather than raised. A little something turned into nothing. One more check drawn on Cruz's pride account, made out to Emilio and payable on demand.

He rinsed down and dabbed his face with water, pale and still shaking. The mirror did not lie: You have the pallor of a ghost in need of a strong fix. He applied the *bandaid* to his upper lip; his lower lip still hurt from where he'd bitten it when Rosie smacked him. He had been too high to feel genuine pain then. Now was rawly different.

He slumped on the still open toilet seat and rubbed his face hard to urge forth blood and bring back some color. Amazing, how your whole fornicating life could unravel in fast-mo. If Emilio even suspected him, Cruz's life would not be worth the sock on a wino's foot.

Would Emilio see why Cruz had blown town? No, Rosie said he'd deal with that one.

Cruz ached to punch the rewind button on the whole day. Go back and change the story in the telling so that it was exactly the same... except that it would leave that dumb cunt Chiquita alive and him on the ground in Miami instead of midair, somewhere over Tennessee.

His aloha shirt was besmirched with puke. He balled it up on the stainless steel micro-counter. After swabbing out his pits and smearing on deodorant, he wriggled into a pink Miami Vice T-shirt he had purchased at the airport's souvenir shop. It was crisp and stiff. No airport ever seems to stock clothing without slogans or signs on it. He had picked up a sweatshirt that read LIFE'S A BITCH, THEN YOU DIE. He reversed it so the white seam stitching showed and pulled it on. He thought of Boris Karloff in his sheepskin jersey in *Son of Frankenstein*. Start a trend.

He stuffed his aloha shirt into the blue nylon gym bag he'd bought. It read NIKE TEAM in cheery silkscreening. He didn't want to throw away the shirt; he'd gone unexpectedly sentimental about it. Maybe he could keep it, save it, wear it on his eventual return home... if everything worked out. Already the idea of flying in the opposite direction was swooningly seductive. Sometimes the future was just one big come-on.

Captain Falstaff announced their gradual descent into

Chicago. Local landing time would be 10:45 PM. Tawny smiled and checked his belt. She had never had a boyfriend who was a blond hunk, probably a karate instructor. Cruz wondered if she smiled that way when Kung Fu was banging the tits off her.

Did people this cheery ever have sex?

Upon touchdown at O'Hare, Cruz found himself reluctant to surrender the warm cocoon of the airplane. It would be another link severed. There were two edges to the blade Cruz was riding: For every ounce of homesickness, he knew Emilio was that much farther away.

He wondered what Emilio was doing, right this minute, as he searched in vain for clocks in an unfamiliar terminal. He felt absurdly glad he had kept the coke vial, the aloha shirt. They reaffirmed his identity when he felt he might be losing his mind.

Chicago had only looked good from thirty-three thousand feet up. During descent, the patches of snow and ice dotting the night-time landscape grew ever more ominous. How many times, he wondered, had a scab of runway ice frozen at the right place to wreck a plane? The only thing that might slow down a gigantic, ass-skidding jumbo jet might be a nice, solid building full of people. Maybe that was why they called them terminals.

Back in Miami he had swapped four hundred in cash for a cherry Minolta 35 mm camera. He weighed down one end of the Nike bag. Big airports always had a gift shop plus other, more serious venues, generally labeled shoppes so customers would expect astronomical prices. A card of A

batteries costing a buck could run four or five times that in an airport gift shop. The cheap ones. Cruz had used the camera to smuggle his coke vial on board, tucking it into the film bay and handing the Minolta over for hand inspection at the metal detector. No problem.

He supposed he could teach himself how to operate the camera sometime. Fill those hours.

Most of the Eastern passengers retrieved their baggage from the assigned carousel and evaporated. He felt the air traveler's usual stab of worry: *Would the sentries at baggage claim request a ticket for luggage he had carried onto the flight?* It had never happened in the nearly one hundred air trips Cruz had taken, but he always thought of it. Strange. He smiled in passing at the uniforms, the same way he'd smiled at the armed and unsmiling folks back in Miami, the ones staffing the metal detector. Who, me, guilty?

Electronic-eye doors ground slowly apart and Cruz got his first whiff of Chicago.

No new snow was falling; that condition had permitted Cruz's flight to land on time. He saw snow bulldozed onto a row of curbed cars. It gradated from white to gray to slushy black at the bottom of a four-foot pack. The air smelled like engine lubricant. The wind had at him, blasting, wind-tunnel cold, rattling the heavy sliding doors in their tracks. Unmelted flakes lifted from the snowpack and swirled in the air, grains of albino sand. The in-flight weather update had let everyone know that the wind-chill factor was minus twenty and dropping. Cruz's first inhale felt like tossing back a straight shot of Everclear. Once fully outside, with the cold carving through his sweatshirt, he inhaled again. His nose hairs froze together. They thawed when he exhaled. Now they were damp, icing up even faster with his next breath.

He had seen his breath condense before. The twin plumes of vapor jetting from his nostrils were the consistency of locomotive steam. That seemed weird and a bit thrilling. He leaned on a trashcan to check the traffic in the white zone. It was the surface temperature of the moon, and touching it was like immersing his bare hand in liquid oxygen.

Cruz was just beginning to feel truly lost and miserable when a flawless 1971 T-top Corvette sliced through the slush and nosed its way into the available curbspace. It was beaded with water and its billowing exhaust was the same color and density as Cruz's breath.

The horn beeped twice, curtly. Cruz bent down to look and saw his own face in mirrored glass. Then the passenger window buzzed down and he got his first glimpse of Rosie's Chi-town pal, Bauhaus.

FOUR

'Lookee here what the dawg drug in. Jesus H. in a Handi-Van!'

Road weariness prevented Jonathan from turning fast enough; his spine was compressed into the infamous Greyhound S-curve. His grip on his rucksack relaxed. He untensed a notch, in the manner of a gunslinger just prior to the whirl and the killing draw. No flash of gunmetal tonight, though. He knew the voice too well.

'Naw, on second thought, Jesus Christ was better nourished. And uglier.' Body warmth and an enormous shadow blocked the cold air flowing toward Jonathan from the depot's automatic doors.

'You mean I won't get any movies made about me?'

Jonathan let his smile come.

'Cleaver of Love Rated R!' Big hands lit on Jonathan's shoulders and massaged roughly. 'I want two tickets now.'

Jeffrey Holdsworth Chalmers Tessier spun Jonathan, who was weightless as a marionette in the clutches of the larger man, and enveloped him in a raucous bear hug incorporating mucho macho, back slapping and incoherent grunts of welcome. Jonathan saw the brown German shepherd pupils widen in the image of a friend too long absent. Jeffrey's horsey grin infected him pronto.

'The Bash man,' Jonathan said. He felt an absurd sense of family, hugging Bash there in the terminal.

Bash retrieved Jonathan's surplus baggage, an overstuffed olive drab sport duffel with red leather straps. Bash had always been big in the shoulders, strong in the arms, and he was wearing a dark green overcoat that made his frame appear even larger. Beneath the sweeping, cloak-like hem Jonathan saw faded black denims and scuffed rock climbing boots with bright green laces.

'C'mon, ace - you loiter around this garbage dump much longer and I might feel sorry for you. Give you some spare change.'

As if cued, Jonathan snapped to and noticed where he was, apparently for the first time. Beyond them a black dude in a ragged fatigue jacket meandered out of the men's room. He was barefoot. The soles of his feet looked ashy and frostbitten. From the john spilled retching noises, amplified by the tile acoustics. Then the door pulled itself shut and deadened the sounds.

Wherever he glanced in the terminal, his gaze was thrown back with hair-triggered urban hostility as though the denizens of the depot resented being noticed at all. Jonathan met that glare too many times in too few moments. He felt all eyes in the cavernous room shifting to him, the alien, the outsider, the interloper with his newish boots and clean face. Unblinking, they watched him, and found him lacking.

'Fuck these assholes,' Bash said. 'Half of 'em will be dead by morning.' The man who had left the bathroom was drifting past their position to the left. 'Ain't that right, jerkoff?'

'Tol' bitch hom my money,' said the bum, correcting course and weaving off toward the payphones.

To Jonathan it looked as though Bash's mere presence had physically repelled the bum. He kept staring at the bum's feet, which were calcified, rotten, irretrievable. If someone tapped Jonathan for spare change just now, he would stand and stare moronically. Fine. He was too drained. No batteries. Let Bash shield him for a while.

Jonathan shook his head. It did not clear. He was wearing the depleted and off-kilter expression of a person just roused unduly from sleep. 'Hi there,' he said.

'Hi your ownself,' Bash returned. 'Welcome to Hell. This way to the riverboat.'

He led the way to a Toyota longbed with an all-weather hauling shell and snow chains.

Bash. Why Bash? It fit Jeffrey's character sketch snugly enough without a linear explanation. Bash. It sounded like this big man. Everyone Jonathan had ever known had come attached to some sort of nickname... except, of course, his own self. Amanda had been Cookie and Green Eyes and Gorgeous depending on how sexy the phone chat had to sound. They both addressed the shorthaired terrier neighbor as Dog Face even though his tags announced him as Doc. Amanda called her cat Pookie; its real name was just as cloying. While sloughing through pick-up electives in Classic Philosophers and Anthro 101A at the University of Louisiana, Jonathan would gang over to Grizzly's Tavern to tip back Mason jars of beer with Bash and Stretch and Fungo and Mad Max... and apart from Jonathan, he had never been called anything else. In grade school he had been Jonathan-plus-initial, to differentiate him from all the other Johns in the classroom. He fit in with the plague of Mikes and Jeffs and Cathys and Debbies, all boringly named in those fabulous Sixties; he supposed he was lucky not to have been named Glyph or Rainbeaux or Sativus. His real last name was stunningly prosaic.

Just Jonathan. Hey you, shithead. Yeah, you.

He thought now that everyone possessed another name, an alternate face. Sometimes you caught a glimpse of the flip side of a person you thought you knew five-by-five. Sometimes it wasn't pretty. Some people spent lifetimes not seeing the ugliest aspects of those closest to them.

Bash was talking about beer, deftly manhandling the truck's stick shift and correcting whenever they began to hydroplane or slide ass-backwards in the slush. Jonathan hung on.

'... how you say, interesting local breweries close by the city. That's the single aspect of provincialism I enjoy. Regional beer. Can't wait to introduce you to Quietly.'

'Who's she?'

'No. Quietly Beer.' Bash was a good comedian; he paused to let it sink in.

'Quietly Beer.' Jonathan couldn't stop his face from breaking an honest smile. It felt unfamiliar, almost hurt. 'Quietly Beer?'

'Absurd, ain't it?' Bash was grinning like a talkshow comic. 'You haven't let Jesus into your heart, or anything dumb like that, since the last time I saw you. Have you?'

'No. I like beer fine.'

It was wine Jonathan could not bring himself to drink any more. He had invested the last parts of his twenties in carefully cultivating a casual taste for basic wines. He enjoyed knowing what to order when restaurants did not have his first choice. No longer, not now. He did not drink wine anymore because...

'Gotta give you the skinny on Quietly Beer,' Bash was saying. 'You'll laugh till you cough up a lung.'

Jonathan nodded. The smile set on his visage like drying cement. The smooth, velvet undertow of memory dragged him under and tried to drown him one more time. It had made him weep on the bus and locked his throat shut just now.

Jonathan did not drink wine anymore because...

It was one of their last Dinners from Hell, and it was going badly. Too many ossified silences.

Jonathan thought you could always tell married couples in restaurants. They're the ones not talking to each other, paying more attention to their plates than their partner's eyes. Ditto for established relationships - the ones heading at high speed for the septic tank of spoiled human emotions.

This goddamn meal will cost fifty bucks, exclusive of tip, Jonathan thought, and Amanda has got her brat knob turned up full crank. She doesn't care. And neither of us can taste the food.

Tonight Amanda ran her full menu: She was getting old. She was getting fat, wasn't she? She wasn't making enough money. Jonathan didn't care that her job in home mortgages was not paying enough and never would. Jonathan didn't care about anything but Jonathan. Nobody had ever truly fallen in love with her, her alone. Nobody ever would. She was closing fast on thirty and had not yet reproduced. If Jonathan cared he would have done something by now. She hated her entire fucking life.

And - *oh yes* - Jonathan didn't really care. Did he?

At which point he was supposed to protest that yes, he gave a damn. Several damns. His concern had ruined his meal.

But she cut him off, certain he cared not at all, and by the by, I've been thinking a lot about suicide lately.

Forever unspoken, her accusation was that she was nailed to a cross she loathed, and Jonathan was the guy holding the hammer and spikes. Amanda despised culpability, even for her own lot in life.

He knew what was coming out of her mouth next.

'You don't want to hear this shit, Jonathan. Why don't you just tell me to fuck off?'

Too goddamn easy. It was exactly what she wanted. If she could goad him into saying those words then he could be blamed for terminating their relationship. One more little death. Amanda's view of the hostile and destroying world devoted to crushing her would be reinforced another degree if she could successfully drive someone as tolerant as Jonathan to the boiling point of rage.

Amanda was an on-off smoker, a knuckle popper. She picked at scabs until they bled anew.

Jonathan would never give her the satisfaction of easy rage. Allowing her to piss him off would not solve any of their problems. He told her this.

'Oh, great. So you're saying that I'd be happy if I could make somebody who cares about me give up? Terrific.'

His hands vised shut on air. It was like trying to build a computer from ectoplasm. Or fuck tears.

No, he told her. But it seemed as if she could only be fulfilled if life was as miserable as she persisted in believing it was. She nurtured her unhappiness because it was familiar turf, and bitching was easier than actually doing something, taking action. He expected her to snap back with the usual rejoinder: *Never mind, Jonathan; it's no big deal, right? You don't care, you don't understand and you never will.*

Instead, she tossed half a glass of white Bordeaux in his face. Maybe she had been watching too many movies that week. A bit of televisual melodrama.

He spluttered while she stomped out. Ambient conversation in the restaurant switched instantly of.

The atonic white wine seeped past his eyelids with a disinfectant sting. He heard Amanda walk away while his eyes flooded. Everyone was looking, all right. Somewhere behind him he heard a laugh, abrupt and feminine. Then came hushed whispers. None sounded sympathetic.

He had not let Amanda's party line gnaw at him. *Congratulations. You won. Big fucking deal.*

He mopped his face. Their waiter brought a fresh napkin. Jonathan ordered a cappuccino. Maybe he could sit here until all the witnesses finished their meals and went home. Five minutes later he was drier and no longer blushing. The cappuccino tasted like barium. He overtipped.

He walked all the way home, fifty minutes of putting one foot in front of the other, thinking, then brooding, then fuming.

When he used his keys to unlock the deadbolts he found the security chain latch engaged. He smiled to himself. Then he kicked the door brutally just to the right of the knob, snapping the chain and tearing the screws from the lintel like pimentos blowing free of a thrown hors d'oeuvre.

She would be expecting him to tarry guiltily by the bedroom door. They could exchange more meaningful silences, more useless apologies, and proceed with the erosion of their lives. One more

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