

# HAIR OF THE DOG: A BIZARRE DETECTIVE STORY

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## Chapter 1

All right, Rooks, dammit, looks like you're going to stay on my back till I tell it. I reckon you're old enough to learn the way things are. But if you get me running off at the mouth, we'll be up till daylight. Well, I'm in the talking mood if you're in the listening mood, because I'm going to take my time and tell it the way I damn well please, like you aren't even up there. Don't worry. I'll keep my voice low. You listening? Can you hear me okay? Okay, then.

It was in early August. One day—that's all it took. The sun was scorching hot up till noon when the clouds suddenly turned black and the rain came down in torrents. I was standing at my office window, watching everything going on in Knoxville. Most of uptown—Gay Street, Market Street, the Tennessee River, the houseboats, the Front Street slums, lumber mill, gravel factory, and meat packing plant—is right there, spread out before me like a meal even I can't ever finish. You can see the blue Smoky—Mountain ranges from my window, too, I watched the wavering curtain of rain come from there—at first a haze, then a deluge. That's pretty much the way everything happened that day. From the misty haze around her head when I saw her standing in the doorway, to the flood of perdition that gathered, drop by drop, behind our every step. I was leaning with my elbow braced against the middle bar of the window frame, my hand moiling around in my hair, smoking a White Owl cigar, and the rain dashing against the pane in front of my face, when I had this feeling that someone might be staring at the back of my head. She was.

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When I turned around I saw her standing tall and almost skinny, a little stoop—shouldered like a country girl, in the doorway. Her long, honey blond hair clung wet to her cheeks and her neck. A faint steamlike mist hovered around her head. Her eyes were huge and cow brown, her cheeks slightly hollow; her nostrils flared with forced breathing, her small moist mouth puckered.

While she tried to get her breath, I had me a good look before she finally spoke. A green uniform stuck like cellophane against every curve and joint of her body; it opened at her white throat, rain sparkled on the V of flesh between her small breasts, and it ran down her arms; one blue—veined hand clutched a soggy pack of Kools, and in the other she held a red billfold; the rain had even defined the dimples in her knees. She wore no stockings, and the rain dripping from her formed a puddle around her red shoes. She stared at me as though she was trying to answer a vague question that was itching at her mind.

"Warm as a woodshed in here," she said. She had a melodious, countrified voice.

"Well, pull up a log and sit a spell."

"I got to be back 'dreckly." She sat in the swivel chair and I leaned on the sill. "You're mighty high up."

"I like the view. The climb helps me reduce. Better than pushups."

She was looking at me so closely that I got the cigar going enough to cloud my face,

because I'm shy as I can be.

"Are you really a private dick?"

"In a manner of speaking. I find stray dogs and lost

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children."

"That's it. That's the very thing I want you to do."

"Bird dog or fox terrier?"

"She's twelve years old and has wavy yellow hair the color of country butter and she looks like me in the mirror. He run off with her two years ago, and he makes her get up and preach at the faith—healing services in this tent he carries around. Now he's back and Troy—he's my brother—said he saw him this morning in the Market house."

"Don't sound like I'll be looking for a dog."

"Troy said he had one of them, too. A huge German police dog."

"Sounds like this is going to be my last case."

"Are you through being a smart aleck?"

"Any time you say, lady," I said, working up another cloud.

"I'm not a lady. I work in a knitting mill sewing buttons on the trap doors of union suits. I gotta get back 'dreckly and make my quota. So you reckon you want to take this up?"

"Why not? I'm just passing the time, as it is."

"Till when?"

"Till something happens. Now here you come out of the rain and ask me to track down something besides a stolen dog, and I reckon something'll happen now."

She uncurl'd her fist and extracted a soggy, bent Kool from the package. "I garn'tee you it will."

I got my cigar red and leaned over and put it up to her cigarette. I felt the heat from the V of flesh between her breasts. She had an aroma of moist earth and grass, devoid of

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bottled stink. Her eyes flickered up and caught me looking. "Keep you mind above your belt, Mister Swaggerty."

"Yes, ma'am." I leaned on the sill again, and she started to cross her legs but decided not to.

"He's crazy to boot. I really mean it. Just wait and see. I mean, don't set there looking at me. Get started if you want the job. The police don't. They're too busy directing traffic. I talked to 'em till I'm blue in the face and they actually thought I was trying to snow them. You find him and you'll see what I mean. He never cracked a smile in his whole Bible—slapping life. Are you religious?"

"Being alive's my religion."

"You pulling my leg?"

"No ma'am. I'm listening to you. Who's he?"

"Lucius. The Reverend Lucius Satterfield. He just come down from heaven long enough to destroy all us lowlife sinners, then he's going back when it's over. And that's what I'm married to. So we got to find him 'fore he creates more hell than she can live through—her, and us, too."

"And she is . . ."

"My little girl, Avis. The most beautiful creature that ever walked this earth. Thirteen years of pure gold. He speaks and it comes out of her mouth. Because when he stutters

and people laugh at him, he goes stark raving mad——foams at the mouth.”

“How in the world did you ever get hooked up with him?”

“To save my soul. Now they ain’t much of anything else left of me.”

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“There’s a lot left over. Just needs warmed up.”

“Listen, you big lummo I got three brothers so you better shut up.”

“You trying to say I ain’t handsome?”

“No, you’re kind of cute in the face——even if you are nine feet tall. That curly black hair . . . you keep getting me off what I come for.”

“Well, now the way I get it, your husband took your little girl and run off with her two years ago, and now he’s been seen in Knoxville, so the thing is to find him, but the main thing is you want your daughter back.”

“And the strangest part of it is, why did he come back, because he must know how hard we been looking for them these past two years. And that seeing——eye dog. Troy said he was wearing black glasses, too, so he must be playing blind. It’s got me beat, I tell thee.”

“Well, the door’s open. Let’s go.”

“No, you go and start. Troy and Lennis——my other brother—— are already looking. I got to get back to the factory ‘fore they take a notion to fire me. When we find her, I got to have a job to support us and get her back in school. I’ve had two years of bitterness and being resentful and despair, and I’m tired of it.”

There was a sooosh sound when she got up. We looked at the wet imprint of her on the chair seat. I grinned and she laughed, but there was too much sadness in it.

“Mize well laugh now ‘fore it all starts . . . “

“And maybe later, too,” I said.

“I sure hope so. If you don’t find them and he gets away

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again, something else’ll happen and you can see it from this window if you keep watching.”

I looked through the window at my back. The rain had stopped. All Knoxville was steaming. The sun was sucking all the moisture out of the ground, the trees and the concrete. I saw the Gay Street bridge and knew what she meant.

“You really love her that much?”

“And more.”

“I’d dive from the window and rescue you.”

“You’d get wetter than I am now.”

“It’d pass the time.”

“Yeah, all of it. Besides, living’s your religion, you said awhile ago.”

“That’s why I have to find Avis. So you won’t drop out of the congregation.”

“I’ve been at the rail at least once a week since he kidnapped her. It would be as easy as dropping a nickel in the collection plate.”

“Speaking of money . .

“How much am I going to pay you? I’m not sure, but I don’t think I’ll have to pay you a red cent. It’ll depend on how things turn out.”

“You making it a gambling proposition?”

“I reckon you could put it that way. If what you want is something to happen, then I

reckon you're going to get it, in more ways than one. You can chicken out if you want to. Nobody says you have to do it." She looked at me like she had me under a microscope and that's how I felt, too.

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"You got a lot of gall, Mrs. Satterfield. Well, give me a dime and I'll be satisfied for the time being."

"What for? Another White Owl? That one's smoked down to the band."

"It makes me feel sad when they get smoked down . . . No, to take a bus over to the garage in Lonsdale where my car's being fixed."

"Lonsdale's where I live. Here's your dime. I swa'an, I never heard tell of a detective like you before," she smiled.

"I like that gold filling."

"Makes me feel like an old lady."

"When you smile you look younger."

"I smile to keep from crying. I'd better go now. Here's a picture of Avis and Lucius. That's me on the left with my arms crossed. You get your car and go see my oldest brother, Wade Corum. He works in that packing house yonder across the river. He knows what all you need to know to get started. You do what you can till three—thirty. Then come by the Chicamauga Mills and pick me up and we'll hunt together and see what happens. We to find him 'fore he takes the notion to go again."

She stood in the dim hail at the top of the stairs and I leaned in the doorway.

"Meanwhile, it's back to the trap doors for y, huh?" I wanted to see if I could turn that smile into a laugh, because I tell you how I feel about life—it's all a bunch of variations on the same joke, and what we ought to do is just die laughing.

"You're awful sweet, Mr. Swaggerty, but I can laugh just so much."

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She squinted her large eyes and bit her lip and crushed the pack of Kools in her hand. Suddenly, she spun and ran down the steps. I listened to her heels strike the bare wooden stairs as she went down to the blistering streets.

I wasn't kidding about the stray dogs. After two years of playing detective, I had very little more to do. But it had passed the time. From three o'clock that afternoon until three o'clock the next morning, the time did not pass that suffocatingly hot day—it was murdered in cold blood.

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I floated stodgily under the sun that beat down, through waves of heat shimmering over the pavement on Gay Street. I tried to think the way a detective is supposed to think. Of the facts. Objectively. Dispassionately. For one thing, Mrs. Satterfield had me wondering. She seemed as simple as a mountain stream, but I felt an undercurrent around my ankles and it tended to carry me along that day.

My problem was simple enough. To find a faith—healer who stutters and a thirteen—year—old child evangelist, and to avoid a German police dog trained to chew sinners—a shortcut to hell.

What I couldn't figure, and she couldn't either, was what the reverend Lucius Satterfield was doing back in Knoxville, when he must have known that his wife's brothers would run him down, shoot him down if they had to, to get that child for her. To find that out I'd have to look up some of his relatives and fellow soul—savers. But first I'd have to see

her brother, Wade Corum, who she said would get me started in the right direction. So I took a bus to the garage and got in my little green '37

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Dodge and whipped across town toward South Knoxville to the Smoky Mountain Packing house.

When I was a kid growing up in Knoxville, I used to walk the railroad tracks that ran along a cut in the side of the cliff behind our house, which was in fact a mansion. I'd stand outside the gate in the barbed wire fence and watch the boxcars bulging with cattle back into the yards, and I'd watch them unload and prod the cows into the slaughter house. It scared the rampaging daylights out of me to hear the rifles go off inside and hear the bawling cut short. It always made me have to go. I drove into the vast parking lot and eased my little Dodge between a mauve Cadillac and a black Thunderbird. I needed to find a john now, too.

As I entered the building, a secretary looked up from a green metal desk. She was about to give me one of those disdainful glances they've got such a big supply of, but when she looked up at how big I was, she just stared. She sucked violently at her filter—tip cigarette, then threw back her head, spit out the smoke at the ceiling, and said, "What can I do for y?"

"I'm looking for a man."

"Aren't we all?"

"say, we watch the same Late—Nite movies, don't we?"

"Who's the man?"

"Wade Corum. Okay if I see him a minute?"

"He's working right now."

"Well, I figured that, but . . .

"You might sneak in for a second. But don't let the foreman catch you." She flipped her head toward the hallway. A tall man

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in a white, knee—length, blood—stained coat stood in the doorway of an office.

"Where is he?" I really needed to ask her where the john was. It was like I was still a kid and they had let me in the gates.

"You go outside in that nice scalding sun and you meander through the buildings along that winding road, and you veer to the left till you come to a door that says 'Smoke Room' over it. He's in there——smoking hams."

It was so hot there didn't seem to be any air, and I waded through a gelatinous mass. The walls huddled close together as I walked along the driveway, past one door and corridor after another, glimpsing rows of white—jacketed women, bent over assembly line belts conveying chopped, sliced, ground components of cattle and pigs. Mrs. Satterfield, I imagined, would be sitting now among other women, bent over a sewing machine, sewing buttons on union suits. When I picture life posturing before that mirror, that's what it's wearing.

The smoke room seemed shut off from the rest of the plant. It was behind the stockyards and so close to the river, a coal smoke pall hung over the buildings uptown. I saw my own office window, reflecting the sun, looking down on me across the river like a yellow eye.

The wail of the shed and the door were very old, almost black with wear, weather, age.

And the glass in the door had a thick film of dust. The knob was coated, white porcelain, almost cool on my palm. It creaked rustily when I turned it, and the hinges squealed like a mouse as the door swung open upon a

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concrete floor of an outer room, but the acrid, nostril—stinging odor of stale hickory smoke, of aging hams, salt and greasy knives, and human sweat and some other thick sweet smell overwhelmed me even out there. A weak light gleamed in a room beyond a heavy wooden door that stood ajar.

I heard the loud, quick buzzing of many flies, but I couldn't see them. A large, wooden chopping table was in the middle of the narrow room, so I didn't see him at first because the table blotted him out. My eyes followed the angle of a shaft of mote—swarming sunlight that burned through the glass in the door behind me. I broke part of it, feeling it burn into the small of my back, and the rest fell on his back. He was on his knees, his left shoulder leaning against the huge table, and on his shirt were flecks of blood, and his broad shoulders were hunched, his arms drawn in, and it seemed his hands were clasped in front of him, his balding head bowed. At first, I was startled and bewildered by his peculiar position, but then it seemed he must be praying for the recovery of his niece. I crouched in the low doorway, the door pulled almost to, my hand still on the knob. I was waiting for him get done. But he didn't move. I coughed to let him know I was there. No response. Then I looked down shyly at the floor. The blooded pawprints of a dog made a pattern on the concrete. My few drops had dripped from its teeth among the stains. My knees went weak and the sun burned through the glass on my back, and a chill bristled out from my spine and into my body, even to the lobes of my ears and into the bones of my knees.

I started to say, "Wade," but it stuck in my throat like

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hard candy, and I couldn't breathe because there wasn't any air in the room. I went to him and bent over him and saw his hands twisted between his knees. On his neck was a swarm of flies, and they flew up in my face as I put my arm over his shoulder and slid my hand under his shirt and felt his cold chest, but I couldn't feel his heartbeat. Then I felt his wrist and there wasn't any pulse. I knelt on the concrete and touched the paw—prints and they were dry as bone. I got up and backed out and turned with my hand on the cool porcelain knob and softly shut the door like leaving a cathedral. As I turned again, my shoes made a loud rasping scrape in the loamy, graveled dirt. The blood of other prints had been absorbed by the dust.

The burnished reflection of the sun on my office window a mile across the river, up over the roofs and tree tops, still looked down at me. For two years I had passed the time, standing there behind that window, looking down and out and around, absorbing every detail, gazing maybe at the sun on this glass in the door.

I walked away from the dead man. All I had to do was go back and use the secretary's phone and call the police and I would be shut of the whole thing. But that's not what I did.

I found a restroom just off the driveway. I opened the booth door and saw the manager's white—smocked back. He turned and said, "Hold your horses, mister." He glanced over his shoulder at me, then abruptly back around and looked up into my face. "You look like a Swaggerty."

"I am."

"Whose boy are you?"

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"Virginia's. She died two years ago."

"So I heard. She was a fine woman."

"I know." I didn't know him from Adam.

"So," he said, finishing, turning, coming out the booth, looking up at me, and thrusting his hands into the pockets of the long white jacket. "You're Virginia's boy. You really grew up, didn't you?"

"Sure did. Aged, too."

"How old are you by now?"

"Thirty—two."

"Good God amighty! Seems like only a few years ago you stood at the gate out there, squinting your eyes in the sun, picking at a scab on your knee. I knew your dad awful well, too. Used to sit up in the projection booth with him at the Crystal . .

"Pardon me, sir, but I better . . .

"Oh. Sorry. You go right ahead. Help yourself, boy. got work to do anyhow. Come by and see me sometime."

I closed the booth door.

"I'll do that, sir, first chance I get. Glad to meet you."

"Well, this ain't exactly the country, club, but . . . Here on business?"

"Come to see a man."

"See him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Good. Well, take it easy, boy."

"I'll sure do that, sir."

Never saw the joker again. As I took the pause that

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refreshes, I read the writing on the wall: YOU HOLD THE FUTURE OF THE WORLD IN YOUR HAND.

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## Chapter 2

I felt sick as I thought of having to tell Mrs. Satterfield about her brother. I wanted to help her for damned sure now. Things weren't as simple as they seemed. But it was getting towards time for the factory to let out. I never dreaded a thing so blamed much in all my bland days.

I drove past some kind of tent in a field there in South Knoxville, and on up a hillside so I could swing down and around in front of the house I was born and raised in—which didn't belong to me anymore—to see if they'd hurt it yet with bulldozers. The thought of that made me sicker.

The hell of it was, it was my own fault. If I hadn't been pinned down on my back in a Panama hospital with malaria—I got it piddling around in the jungle among the weirdies, me included—

—I could have kept up the payments on the mortgage. But mother was sick, too, and dying, so she let it go. And that broke her heart. The moment she realized she didn't even own the bed she was dying in, she did die.

That's why I came home. But it was an excuse, too—for one last look at the house while looking final at her, and to walk again through Knoxville.

That walk that evening in October was what did it. I realized then that in all the time I had been wandering, I hadn't really been any place but right there, in that smoke—black town. And I got the feeling that whatever it was I had been looking for, I'd find it here—for good or bad.

Well, that was what was going to happen before three o'clock in the morning.

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There was the house, with the city laid out below it across the river. And they were laying it low. The yellow bulldozer had rammed her tight brick wall, and there gaped a hole like a cannon blast. I imagined my aristocratic mother, sitting with her aristocratic legs crossed by the fireplace, turning calmly, looking across the spacious living room at the hole in the wall and looking at the man who had made it with his yellow machine, and saying coolly, with her aristocratic intonations, "Now just what the hell do you think you are doing?" I laughed with a good feeling of her. But when I saw one of the columns, still fastened to the porch ceiling, broken and bent like it was kneeling, begging for mercy, well, to be frank with you, I cried, feeling guilty, bitter and remorseful.

I drove across the Gay Street bridge toward the factory to tell Mrs. Satterfield that her brother had been chewed to rags and molasses by a German police dog. My 295 pounds of flesh, my six foot, seven inches of vertical bone, my lower lip like always in a pout, and those hamhocks clutching the sweet little green '37 Dodge, I felt the tears trickle down my cheeks.

When I pulled up in front of the factory, the sky was red as raspberry juice. The outside of the uniform factory looked no different from the packing house. Dirty red brick, rows of grimy windows, silver, diamond wire fences, black stacks belching lung—blackening smoke, and a sprinkling of guards who know there's nothing to guard, so they look at you when you walk up as though you're to blame for something they ain't hit on the name for yet. Course, when I get right up on them and they realize I really am what they thought they saw coming, they look

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up and get this quietly hysterical belligerence, and the one says, "The factory ain't open to tourists."

"I'm looking for a woman I don't know too well. When all them green dresses come flocking through this gate, I might miss her, so do you mind if I go in and spot her?" I looked down at him, condescendingly.

"I mind. Sure, I mind. I'm told to guard this gate.

That's my job. So I guard the gate. You would, too, if this were your job, but it ain't. It's your duty. So, mind? Sure, I mind." He looked up at me resentfully, because he was a very little man, aware of his own unimportance.

"Who you looking for, buddyroe?"

Behind me, another man, not quite as small, was leaning against the fender of a black taxi. He was dressed in black from toe to crown, and wore a bill—cap with some silver mish—mass stuck on the front. He had his hands in his pockets, rattling change. On his squirrel face was the kind of grin that it dawns on you isn't a grin but a grimace, and his big teeth didn't help none. But he was dark complected and handsome in an ugly, Bogart way.



I went over and leaned over him with one hand planted firmly on his fender, the other cocked on my hip, my eyebrows raised. "Are you really aching to know, bugaloo?" I asked, since I couldn't see why he would be.

"Look, Eiffel Tower, I been to Paris and I was a sergeant in the tank corps that skinned Rommel the Fox, so don't try to make me timid, 'cause I ain't. Now who is it you want to see? I know ever' lint—head in there."

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"Bet you didn't have much of that white lightnin' out there on the Sahara."

"I didn't have my sister out there to look after either. She works in yonder, sewing trap doors on them union suits put out by this factory 'peanut' over there's guarding the gate to. Man, she's got three brothers who'd rather keep her up than see her stitch her life away in there, putting seams in her face. But what do care?"

Why do people always talk to me like I was a monument with a sympathetic ear and then end up asking me, resentfully. "What do

Y2 care?"

"Care? That's according to whether that sister of yours is Mrs. Satterfield."

"Corum. Arabel Corum. We don't claim that Bible—slapping, daughter—stealing, wife—worrying bastard. Yeah. That's her. What y want with her?"

"Let's get in your taxi a minute."

"And have you break my springs?"

"No. Your heart."

"Huh? Look, wise alley—"

"Get in and I'll tell you about it."

Looking at me the way an arrogantly bewildered, bucktoothed, grin—grimacing man can, he went around the hood and got in as I slid in beside him.

"Okay, Shoot."

"You're the one that saw Lucius Satterfield in the market house with the dog, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Playing like he was blind. How did——"

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"And Wade Corum was your brother?"

"Yeah. He's the honest worker in the family. Ne, I'm the runt and of the con man, and, Lennis, he's the tall pretty one. Was?"

"I found your brother in the smoke room where he works. That dog had been there, and it got him."

I let that sink in. The man, also, sank in——and the man that rose to the surface again was different. The grimace was gone, and there were only the buck teeth, sad buck teeth, struck with consternation. And the eyes were little signals of sadness, blinking inside the strange intimacy of the public vehicle. He did one of those little things people need to do at such times, abstractly pushed the flag down, and held it there, while the meter dropped a pile of ticks upon the floor of the car.

He didn't speak, maybe because the women were pouring out of the doors of the factory now, swarming toward the fence like green fireflies in the shimmering heat of the afternoon over the gravel. He knew I would have to tell it to Arabel, and probably he did not want to hear it told twice. Once would be enough to sharpen the murderous edge he must have felt in those tanks on the Sahara desert.

The guard swung the gate open with an expression of grave purpose on his face, and I watched the women gush through. Some of them the worst wrecks in the world, stunned by years of routine mechanical labor and stained with sweat, a few the most hauntingly beautiful women you ever laid lecherous eyes on, with imperfections that make Greek relics often lovelier than they would be being perfect. And Arabel Satterfield, standing out in

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the moil of green uniforms and vericose veins, was one of the beauties. Break her nose and bust off her arm and you have a Greek statue, if a statue is what you want.

But if what you want is a woman around thirty years old with eyes that burn everything else out of your vision, like fire in a sedgefield, whose hair is like honey dripping from the hive, whose mouth looks like a thing that, touched to the quick, could come alive in the dark, then that was her coming toward me now. And I was with the rhythm of her body as it swung outward and forward from the floating flower bowl of her hips. That's something else I used to do---write poetry.

"Don't tell her yet," her brother said, putting his hand on my knee. "Wait till I get her over to Lennis' house."

"Good idea, Troy."

"Tell us all at once, then we can start out after him and that dog." Finally, it struck him.

"Say, who in the hell are you?"

"Frank Swaggerty. I do a little detective work. Your sister hired me at noon to find Satterfield and her daughter."

Arabel saw us, and seeing me, her face lit up with hope and anticipation. She broke into a run. I tell you, to see a woman like that come running into a ditch of sorrow is a sickening sight. They so innocently don't know what you know, and you wonder if maybe you aren't in the same fix.

I gave her a smooth snow job and she got in the car with Troy and I followed them across town to Buzzard's Roost where Lennis had his bootlegging establishment. Buzzard's Roost is a squalid colored section strung out along the side of a ridge in

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Lonsdale. We stopped at a big white house with all kinds of red trimming and a lot of yard junk---orange flamingoes stewed around like a birthday cake. And next to it was an Indian graveyard.

By the time we got there, she'd caught on, and she came running to my window before I had the emergency brake pulled to keep from rolling back down the steep hill.

"What happened to Wade?" her face was broken now, without any resemblance to a Greek statue.

Troy blew his horn and yelled, "Lennis, come out here!"

I couldn't get out of the car. She had me pinned in. In my little green shell, I felt helpless, which I was. What would I do but tell her? So I did, clutching the wheel, looking at her through the small car window. When I was done, she turned abruptly and sank upon the running board and cried her eyes out. Tiny wisps of lint clung to her honey hair. I picked them out with my big bungling fingers.

The sun sank behind the trees on the ridge, and a colored lady in a rocking chair on the porch across the dirt road made the silence creak. It was going to be a Negro twilight with fireflies and June bugs. A black wasp sawed around a sunflower next to a pen where

some bird dogs slept.

Lennis and Troy were beside Arabel when I told it, and I answered the same questions over and over till we were all quiet. And Lennis, a tall, handsome man in his forties, wearing a western shirt and sharply creased pants and a pearl gray hat of the Thirties style, leaned against the back door with his hand on Arabel's shoulder, gazing up the side of the ridge. Troy sat on the fender with his legs dangling stiff, and after a while he

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started striking his fist into his palm.

"Why should he do it?" I was supposed to be a detective and that seemed the first official question.

"I don't know," said Troy.

"I don't know," said Lennie.

And Arabel finally said, "I just don't know."

But it did one thing. It made them push away from the car into positions that suggested action. Lennis sighed. "Okay, Troy. Let's find him and let's kill him."

"You don't have to tell me a damned thing, Lennis."

Arabel rose. She looked pretty mean herself. "We've 3.2k to find him. If he'd do a thing like that, no telling what's going on in that crazy head of his."

Troy looked at me. "Lucius should have been locked up in Lyon's View a long time ago."

"If he hurts Avis, I'll kill him with my own bare hands." Arabel turned and looked at me.

"Well, I sure got you into it, didn't I?"

"Well, it's one way to pass the time. I gotta earn that dime you gave me."

"That man never hurt a flea before. Something awful wrong must've happened to him in the last two years."

"Arabel, you stay with Mildred tonight," said Lennis.

"You go take a flying leap in the lake, Lennis. I'm going with Y2l all."

"You get in that houses"

"How about the cops, Lennis?" said Troy.

"No, that'd scare him off. We gotta keep it quiet. He

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might be so far gone he'll try something with Avis."

"Lennis, we've got to find them," Arabel nervously brushed her hair back from her face.

"Listen now, go in the house. Troy, you get all the taxis in your company out hunting for him. Tell them to keep their radio systems open. I'll call in my runners and get them out looking. I can even get those cops I pay protection to. Any ideas, Mr. Swaggerty?"

"Just a thought. We might try the places where his rela—tives live."

"I got that in mind."

"How about the revival and faith—healing meetings being held tonight? It being Wednesday night. Mind like his—even after doing that to Wade—he might want to bless out the world's sinning ways."

"I got that in mind."

A woman came out on the porch and stood under the red scalloped trimming. She was wiping her hands on an apron, but she was wearing shorts and she looked pretty tough.

"What's the matter down there, Lennis? I guess you know you got three damn orders to deliver before I can put supper on the table."

“Shut up and go in the house.”

“I’m riding with you, Troy,” said Arabel.

“You’re going in the house with Mildred. You take you a cold shower and eat and rest yourself. We’ll get ‘im. By God, we’ll get ‘im. I’ll burn ever’ inch of rubber off them tires till I get ‘im and I kill ‘im.”

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“You better get hold of me. You hear?” said Troy. “You take one end and I’ll take the other and we’ll carve in towards his belly button.” There were flicks of foam at the corners of his mouth.

“Come in the house, Troy, and get you a gun for that dog. Them things is quick and quiet as copperheads.” Lennis looked at me. “You own a gun?”

“You’ll need one.”

“I had that in mind.”

Lennis went up the walk. He turned on the high porch steps. “Arabel, dammit, come on in the house.”

“No. I want to know where Avis is and know she’s safe before I sleep tonight.”

“Get yourself up here, I said. Likely as not, he’s looking for you, too. Probably you more than anybody. So get in here and you and Mildred lock all the doors and windows and my bird dogs’ll warn you if anybody comes around.”

They were barking now. I had gotten out of the car, and they seemed to object to my bulk upsetting their preconceived notions about what a human may be expected to look like.

The dirt—floored, chicken—wired pen was next to a creek where there was a thick bank of honeysuckle and apple trees, and the smell of it was good.

I told her, “Go on, Mrs. Satterfield. You’ll be better off in there. Seems like that husband of yours is mean enough to do anything.”

“He used to say he was some day gonna destroy all the evil,

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mocking people in Knoxville.”

“Let’s hope he’s got himself next on the list. Go on in now.”

“Well . . .

She went up the flagstone walk, viciously snapping the heads off daisies as she passed. I figured I was going to end up being shook up over that woman.

Lennis and Troy came out and they took turns kissing her on and cheek, leaning over with one arm across her back and the other hand holding a revolver out at their sides. She went in and stood behind the screen door and watched us.

“Here.” Lennis gave me a pugnosed automatic. “Don’t hesitate to use it,” he said, like he had his doubts about me.

“Ever kill a man?” asked Troy, contemptuously. The grimace had risen to the surface again, but the blood veins in his eyes were something new.

“No. Never felt inclined.”

“Well, incline yourself,” said Lennis. “‘Cause, ‘fore daylight somebody’s gonna be dead as three o’clock.”

I felt inclined to agree.

Lennis was in control of the situation. “Now, I called all my runners and they’ll meet me down on the highway. We’ll take North Knoxville. Troy, you take West Knoxville.

Swaggerty, you’re on your own. Just roam. You might go by Arabel’s house. He may be

laying for her there. 316 Buckeye Street. Got that?"

"Yeah. And if he's there?"

"Don't play hero. Always a chance he'll get loose. Just call Troy's cab company next door——Mrs. Cabbage's. Then go back

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and keep low."

"Okay, chief."

We drove off in three directions. It seemed to me like we were three kids playing a summer game. The only thing is we didn't have to use our imaginations. And when you say, "Bang! You're dead!," you're in no condition to say, "No, I killed you first. Fall down, dammit."

\* \* \*

Nothing much ever happens to me, but I never like thinking over situations I'm caught up in. I reckon that's why I get so caught up in them. When a thing's about to happen, there's too many alternatives to worry the hell out of a body. And alternatives are hell because you get started thinking about the wrong moves you've made and the seven or eleven possible right ones you should be on the verge of making and——pow!——the next move has made itself without you, and all that swampy thinking has landed you up to your nostrils in quicksand.

The thing is I never been really involved in anything more than knee deep in my life. I've just skimmed along the surface of the world and it's been all one never-ending picture show. Last twenty years I been all over the world, even in Labrador—— Merchant Marines, Army, odd jobs of any stripe or category you want to call off. I even spent a year at Harvard——which makes you wonder about this Southern way of talking I have. From what I just told you, you'd think I'd talk different. But I can't help it. Get me around certain kinds of people and I end up talking the way they do. Gives me a good feeling. I be around you much longer, Rooks, and see if I don't talk like a Yankee

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myself.

But as I was saying, before I interrupted myself, I've never been sucked into anything to where I felt it was happening to me and I was being mixed in with other people's lives. Considering the size of me, that was a neat trick. Stuff like good and evil, guilt and innocence, sorrow and happiness——I've seen all that from the front row. I must say now that life fascinates the hell out of me.

During the two years in Knoxville after my mother died, I felt like I had come to a dead end, a brick wall. I was bored to the core, and I felt I would die bored, spend eternity yawning, strolling through the universe, yawning. After thirty——two years, I had caught life in the act, red-handed. I caught it rehearsing before a mirror, and it was so ridiculous I nearly laughed my ass off. Or like you're a wiseacre of a little popcorn fat brat and one day you go up to the screen and touch it and the people are flat and their eyeballs are as big as your head, and you say, "Huh!"

The point it, it ain't nothing but a movie that's true——but you gotta be up on the screen yourself to feel it's real. Well, that afternoon, when my own mysterious past and somebody else's mysterious present began to merge, I felt the slow tickle of excitement, and I began to breathe again the old rarified air of the unusual. Like I was both up there——eighteen feet tall, and out front——flickering across the screen, and watching too. I

was falling, that is, for the same old act.

And as I say, it tended to knock me winding. That tiny Dodge steering wheel nearly broke like a pretzel in my huge,

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hammy hands. When I get inside nervous energy in me, it's got to burn itself out on something outside, so sometimes I damage property.

I can't keep my voice any lower, Rooks.

If what Lennis and Troy wanted was somebody fool enough to do the wrong thing in such a way as to have it turn out all right, then I was the one. It's something I have a knack for.

When I was little, my mother used to send me for cantaloupe and, since I was usually in a trance or groggy from seeing the same movie three times, I'd come home lugging a watermelon. She'd raise thunder till it dawned on her that watermelon was what she really had a hankering for all the time.

The house was brown, not with paint, but with age and weather and neglect. In that lavender twilight, it looked tranquil. There was something malignant about the way it looked, too. But the way Mrs. Cabbage, a little dumpling with a helmet of braided grey hair, sat there, pushing herself off into a three-inch swing with the tips of her toes, I had the feeling that nothing could go wrong with a woman who looked like her around. Like she'd tucked everything in for the night and it's better to drop off to sleep d'reckly.

I parked in front under a sycamore tree. There was a spigot in the yard and two rose bushes with the roses dead. I went up the broken walkway. I saw a lawnmower parked in some tall grass at the side of the house, and imagined Arabel in a sundress out cutting grass after supper. There was a small wooden trellis covered with morning glories right beside where the swing hung close to the porch ceiling. It hadn't been let down in several

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years from the way the chains were rusted.

I opened the door and strolled on in. The living room was cool and dim. All the furniture was very old, musty but polished, with doilies on the divan. In the middle of the room was a coal heater with ornate fenders. I went down the hall toward the bathroom. Over the tub, clothespinned to the towel rack, hung a small pair of light blue panties, with a piece of the lace trimming torn loose.

In the kitchen she had a wood stove with silver trimming. A green alarm clock ticked on top of the warmer, a bras faucet dripped in the sink, and a horsefly buzzed from the light cord to the table. On the table was a blue coffee cup with grounds in the bottom and lipstick smeared on the rim and a Kool mashed out in the saucer.

I went back into the hall and opened the bedroom door. Laid out on the chenile bedspread was a man, dead to the world in sleep. A huge, silver black—smudged German police dog lay across his chest with its snout in the man's sweaty damp armpit. Red holes glared out of the man's thinboned face, and the earpieces of a pair of black glasses lay gently between two of his fingers.

The dog's head shot up. Its eyes flared open on me. My knees turned to buttermilk, and as the dog's lips curled up over its teeth in the yellow light of the bedroom, the man rose on his elbows and turned his head toward me.

I slammed the door and pulled on the knob. My heart was wound up tight in my chest

like a yo—yo, then it flipped and spun and plopped at the end of the string in the bottom of my empty stomach. I've always had a puking, mortal fear of vicious dogs.

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And this dog was bigger than me.

the bedsprings swayed, creaked and shook as the dog leaped at the door and landed with its full weight on its front paws. The jar vibrated from my hands to my teeth. I heard the man rise, too, the springs popping. He came to the door just before the dog started again. It flung itself on the door with flurries of scratching and low growls. There was a hiss of spit on his tongue and teeth as his claws raked the wood. The man pulled on the porcelain knob, but I managed to hold the door. How in the hell did I get into these situations?

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### Chapter 3

“W—w---who uh—uh—uh are yuh—yuh—you?” I hear the spit flying from his sputtering lips. I didn't see any point in telling him. “W-w—un-what are yuh-uh you d—d-d—d-doing in here? . Whu—whu-whu whur is sh—sh—sh-sh-she? . . . You know duh—duhdon't you? . . . You, you, yuh-yuh you be—be-be been luh—luh-luh layin' up with huh—huh—huh—her, ain't, ain't you?” My head was near the crack in the door as he sprayed it and the dog growled and clawed at it furiously.

I wasn't sure who he was talking about and didn't care. I just wanted to get out of there and they could finish their nap, for all I cared.

Then I remembered the automatic. But if I let go to reach into my hip pocket, he might exert a sudden wrench of energy and get the door open just enough for that dog to squeeze through and climb up my legs and sink its teeth neatly in my throat. That horsefly took a notion just then to walk around the grooves in my ear. I rubbed my shoulder against my ear and the fly got down on my hand and washed himself.

Looking down at the floor, I saw the gray talons of the dog's paws shoot under the door. Darkness was thickening in the room and my blood was congealing in my veins. When I felt a prickling sensation flow through my forearms and into my wrists, I knew my hands would be asleep in a few d'recklies and I'd be a gone gosling. I know it's unbecoming, but at such moments I have to go. If I was going to reach for that gun I'd better do it now, before I couldn't feel the knob any more.

I took one hand from the knob, vaguely aware that the man

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was babbling something beyond the door, splattering it with stutter spit. Fumbling for the gun in my right hip pocket, I encountered nothing but my empty wallet. Quickly, I shifted hands. The dog was whining now, frustrated in its deep need to snap its jaws into me.

Then I had the pug—nosed automatic in my st'inging hand. I may wander through the world in a self—precipitated, romantic fog, but by gravy I got a wide enough streak of cynicism in me to doubt the potency of a weapon. I snagged my fingernail pinching the clip out while holding the little killer in the same hand. The tiny, lethal, dog—stopping pellets weren't in there.

What Lennis had handed me may as well have been a play— pretty, and sure as God made little green apples and large dogs, i was a dead duck, because I felt the door swing open as easily as if no one was pulling on the other end. Which they weren't. The dog didn't rush through the opening. The room was empty, the bed was bare, the window was wide open.

Nrs. Cabbage leaned out a window, screaming her head off. “Lucius Satterfield, you git that wild dog out of this neighborhood! Right this very instant! You hear me I said, git it away from here!” If Lennis and Troy were on the other side of town, they could have heard that.

I sighed and wilted in my tracks. From my head to my tracks it takes a while for me to wilt plumb to my standing feet. By that time, I saw his shadow on the shade in the front door. The screen door whined open with the dog pawing at it, and the yo—yo did a fancy spin this time, because there I was with an empty gun, wilted, erroneously thinking they had cut out, when actually

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they’d only come around after me.

Something in me that doesn’t like the absurd acrobatics of human behavior rejected the alternative of jumping into the bedroom for a change of sides on the same knob—pulling. I favored making a beeline for the bathroom. The dog was in the hall, leaping toward me, like he was shot out of a cannon, his eyes shining in the dark from the light hitting them through the bedroom window, just as I stumbled into the tiny bathroom and busted my shin against the toilet seat. I spun like a drunken top and threw my 295 pounds against the door as the dog slammed into it.

The door had a hook and eye contraption for fixing privacy and I fiddled with that quite awhile before I got it secure. Then I sat down on the toilet seat and, comparatively speaking, relaxed. I even permitted myself the luxury of contemplating the trim blue panties clipped to the towel rack, until I realized that the hook wouldn’t hold against the shoulder ramming it was getting from the outside.

He started mumbling again, sputtering like a truck spinning in slush.

“Hey!” I yelled, “Why you trying to sic that dog on me? You better barrel out of here! Your brothers—in--law are looking high and low for you. They catch you here, you’ll wish you hadn’t tried so hard to get in here, after somebody you don’t even know.”

“Yuh-you you know wh-wh—whur sh—sh-she is. Now tell tuh—te—te—te tell me wh—wh—whur sh—sh—she is, and I’ll guh—guh—guh go. Hi—hi—hi—hi ain’t, ain’t rest—essss—tin till hi—hi—hi—

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hi fuh—fuh—fuh—ind her.”

“She’s with Lennis and he’s got a gun out for you.” “You be—be—been suhh-uhhh-leeee-pin inthuh-at bed with her whi—whi— while hihhi wuuuu—uz gone, ainnnn’t you?”

“I ain’t touched her. I just met her today.”

“You knu—know wh—whu—whur sh-sh--sh—she is, a—a—and hi—hi-hi’—um gonna puh—p—puh—puht this de—de—dog on you ti—ti—till you tuh—tuh—tell.”

He kept on raving about how I was trespassing in his house, and hi—hi—damn it—I told him it was more Arabel’s than his since he had been gone two years, and he said I’d been on top of Arabel in his momma’s bed, defiling it, that he was born in it and we’d stained it with sin. That she let me loll in his momma’s bed with her so I’d help her do it, that it wasn’t Wade at all that done it, but me. I couldn’t figure out which her he was referring. A man out of his mind gets that way. The whole world is in his head, including ypj, so he figures you ought to know what’s going on in it as well as he does. But since you don’t know, that’s what gives you the feeling of how crazy he is.



He said that if I don't open up he was going to break in and let that dog do to me what he did to "him" if I didn't hurry up and tell him where we had "her" hid. I told him, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about," and he said he had "her" locked in the back room and "he" saw "her" going off toward some midway and that's where "you all" met "her" and took "her" off and hid "her."

"I don't know where she is." I told him. "We thought y had her."

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"Kuh—kuh—kuh—keep—kee—keep on luh—luh—lyin'. Go ahead. Hi—hi—hi-hi done fuh—fuh—ound a wuh—wuh—way to ge—ge—it in there. Suh-suh—suh-in suh—suh—om more, whi—whi—ile hi—hi—h guh—guh—it in there." He lowered his voice and told the dog to stay there and not move. It kept scratching, clawing at the wood, cutting splinters out of it. And I realized how loose in the brain he must have been to call his man—killing, seeing—eye dog after the mother of Jesus, because that's what he called her—Mary.

The faint sound of his hands scraping along the wall came through the plaster as he moved away into the kitchen. Maybe in odd moments he even called himself Jesus, because he sure sounded like a man who had nailed himself to a cross, not to save but to doom all sinners. I heard him crash into the table and knock the coffee cup onto the back porch. The situation wasn't satisfied with being incredible. It had to add a touch of the commonplace to contrast things. Because while me and the dog waited for him to find whatever he was feeling for in his everlasting darkness, I heard a woman's voice far up on the hill singing forlornly the immemorial night cry for her child, Herrr—man! Her—mannnnn! Come to supper, Herman!" And just outside the tiny window over the tub, a firefly winked as if to say, "I told you so," and a June bug sawed the limb I was perched on.

He rattled around on the back porch awhile, then I heard him start back, and I looked at the window. It was so narrow I couldn't have gotten my leg through. So I did one of those things mortals do while they wait idly for the fatal stroke. I flushed the toilet just to make a sound—a futile gesture of

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escape.

His hands whispered along the wall again as the dog retched up another bone—chilling fit of growling. Suddenly, a sharp, splitting crash shook the door and the thin, iron blade of a hatchet came through the wood. That's when I panicked. I jumped in the tub and cocked the gun back to throw, and then I saw a plunger leaning under the sink and I reached down and grabbed it, ready to flail hell out of the dog before it got in the tub with me.

But then I heard a car come roaring down into the holler, and another one gunning behind it, and it sounded like a whole fleet of them. The last minute rescue. It seemed right silly. The hatchet slammed again into the wood and stuck there. Feet and claws stumbled and scurried in the hail, and the Reverend Lucius Satterfield was yelling, "Hi—hi—hi—hi'll ufh—ufh—fuh—ind you, buh-buh—buh—rother! Hi—hi-hi-hi'ii muh-muh—make you tuhtuh—tell! Guh-guh—guh—od, God will sh—sh—sh—ooow muh—muh—me whu—whu—whur— you are! He—he-eeee'il shu—shu--shed He—he—his uh—uh—uh—venge--vengeful lu—iu—i—i—ght on A—a—a—viss in the dar—dar—dark—neessss," on out into the back yard.

I looked out the window. There was still enough light to see him and the dog running, with the dog barking and him holding to the leash. But the dog didn't know the way of clotheslines, and it caught Lucius right under the neck and flipped his heels into the air and landed him on his back in the wild grass. The dog was still running and Lucius had hold of the leash so it helped pull him up and they went on running into the alley with him yelling for the dog to keep going. They went up into a yard

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on the other street and the dog got him around a red tricycle and up the sloping driveway onto the upper street until the houses eclipsed them.

\* \* \*

The walls and the floors shook with the sudden inrush of many men running and shoving, their voices filling the house, and I heard Lennis outside the door yell, "Come out of there, goddamn your hide!"

But I didn't unhook the bathroom door right away. They pounded on it and rattled the knob, but I just let them rattle awhile. Then I opened the door and the house lights and a slew of flashlights blazed in my face, and many faces stared at me. grinned sheepishly.

"Kilroy was here," I said.

They didn't much go for that. Besides, the other men had never seen me before and they were stunned by the sight of me, looking up at the way my hair was brushing the door frame.

"Now just what the hell do you think you're doing?" Lennis stood spread—legged in front of the men who were crowded up against the walls of the hallway. He didn't like the way things had turned out.

"If you all head out lickidy split out the back door through those houses, you might run 'im down."

Lennis ran into the kitchen, yelling, "Hey, Troy! You out there?"

"Yeah!"

"Didn't you see 'im?"

"No. Ain't he in yonder?"

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"Take off up to the other street. Swaggerty let 'im get away." Lennis and Troy went out the back door. "Let's go, boys. You two go back to the cars and cut around the block." His voice faded up the hill.

"He's afoot," I said, leaning in the doorway. "Blind as a hoot—owl, but Mary sees for 'im. Sees good what he wants chewed up."

"Mary who?"

"Mary the dog."

"Good God!"

"That's what fixin' to say."

"Push back out into the front yard, men. Get a move on. We'll drag the neighborhood. Get those cars moving. Some of you go up on Virginia Avenue and look among the houses." Lennis herded the men back out into the front yard.

A faint yell came down from the hill at the back—a trip and sprawl kind of yell.

"That sounded like Troy."

"It got him."

"What got him?"

“The tricycle. Lucius got his on the clothesline.” “You needn’t sound so cute about it.” “Cute? Cute, hell. I’m glad to be still in one piece.” Lennis walked through the living room, me straggling behind. “Why,” he said, opening the screen door, “didn’t you shoot the son—of—a,” letting it slam in my face, “bitch?” “Because,” I said, shoving out on the screen door till it slapped the front wall of the house, “somebody handed me a pug—

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nosed automatic without any sonofabitchin’ bullets in it.” I pulled the door to and let the screen slam back.

“Quit tearing down the house. Whata you mean, no bullets?”

“Skip it. It was fun while it lasted. How did you know I was here?”

“Mrs. Cabbage called Troy about a prowler.”

The headlights and some spotlights from about thirty cars, mostly souped—up Fords, glared over the yard at the house. Mrs. Cabbage stood under the sycamore tree, heaving her bosom and looking around nervously at all the men milling around and all the cars racing their motors.

“Lennis Corum, you git all them cars off my yard. Ever’ one of my tulip bulbs is busted.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Cabbage. We’re going right now.”

“Whur’s Lucius? I see you hooked that prowler. Big, ain’t he? Thought I didn’t see you come sneaking up in the yard and go in the house, did you? I got scared for poor little Lucius and him blind and just with that dog, so I called up Troy right away.” She squinted her eyes up at me. “Think you’d find anything in there? Poor little Arabel ain’t got nothing that’s worth stealing.”

“We wasn’t after him, Mrs. Cabbage. It was Lucius. Say, did you see anything of Avis?”

“No. I asked him whur she was at and he said he was looking for her.”

“Looking for her?”

“He thinks somebody kidnapped her from him,” I said.

“Maybe it was you,” Mrs. Cabbage said, pushing at my arm

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with her fingers. “You don’t look right to me.”

“Hey, Lennis!” someone yelled from behind the glare of the lights. “We better get moving if we’re gonna catch that bas—tard!”

“You cut out that cussin’ in my yard, boy!”

“Get your cars out on the streets, men, and start roaming. Keep your radios on. Things have taken a turn.”

The cars began to roar and the lights began to swing and sweep across the house fronts and the trees. Neighborhood dogs were barking and joining up with each other, and people were coming around.

“Wait a minute,” Lennis said, leaning on the fender of his dark blue Ford. “Avis ain’t with him?”

“No. He thinks we got her hid. I’m supposed to be Arabel’s sugar—daddy, and we took Avis away at some midway somewhere.”

“Well, I’ll be doggone. Now you listen to me, you two—ton Sherlock Holmes. You keep away from my sister. Just you do your job and——”

“I ain’t touched her, buddy.”

"You better not. Just keep looking for him."

"He's looking for me now."

"Good. Things ought to jell soon."

"Or jam, if that dog gets hold of me."

A cop came out in front of Lennis' lights.

"They looking for you, buddy."

"Who is?"

"Well, I'm supposed to be. A woman out at the Smoky Noun— tam packing house described you. Said you was looking for Wade

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just before they found 'im."

"It's okay, Lester. My sister hired him to get in my way."

"You better duck when you see a cruiser."

"That's what I had in mind."

"Let's get rolling," said Lennis, slapping the cop on the arm and giving me one of those looks he's good at.

Lerinis drove away over the hill, the police car following him. The echoes from the other cars rumbled all over the hill. I could see my Dodge now, little in the darkness.

Mrs. Cabbage and me were alone.

"Lordy, Lordy, I got to go feed my cat." She waddled across the yard and went up on her porch, gave me a quick look and went into the house.

\* \* \*

I got in the car and sat still awhile, trying to collect myself. For one thing, there was the aftersmell of forty—'leven suppers hanging on the hot air and my juices were eating the lining out of my stomach.

When I put the automatic in the glove compartment, my hand came across a little bag. It had leftover banana candy in it. started the car rolling slowly, and I ate the candy for supper. Then I lit a White Owl and went puffing along across town on Central Avenue. I figured I'd cruise around uptown awhile and see what I could see.

At a red light uptown, I saw a slender woman in a soft, clinging, blue and white polka dot dress step down from a bus. Lordy, Lordy, the way she stepped down from that bus! She crossed in front of my headlights, and she was looking wildly

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around at the people walking along in front of the stores. It was Arabel. I honked, and she looked at the car and recognized it, and walked around on the other side. Horns blared behind me because the light had turned green.

She put her hand on the handle and looked back at the car behind me and yelled, very unladylike, "Blow it out your---" The horn cut off the unladylike end of it. With a tough yank on the door, she flounced it on the seat.

"Lennis is crazy as hell if he thinks I'm about to sit in the kitchen with Mildred and wait. Well, don't just look at me. Get this overgrown kiddie car movingi"

I did.

"Where to?" I asked.

"If I knew where, I'd—Oh, just roll. We are going to find her," she said very slowly, through her teeth. "You hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Then her voice was sad. "I ought to go by the funeral home and see Wade, but I can't face that now. Avis is gonna be asleep in bed beside me before I think of another thing tonight."

But I gave her something else to think about. I told her about my little chat with her husband.

"But where is she?"

"He don't know."

"How did he get blind?"

"He didn't say. But that dog can see okay for both of them."

"You got that gun, ain't you?"

And I told her. I'd forgot to get bullets from Lennis.

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"Don't you carry a gun anyway?"

"To hunt stray dogs with?" Then I got a weird feeling in my knees. A stray dog was looking for me now. I told her about that, too.

"That's really funny." She snickered.

"Well, that's one way of putting it."

"But that means Avis is out loose, all alone in the world." She began to cry. "Oh, Lordy mercy What next?"

After a while with her eyes full of tears, she started looking again. She pointed at a Mercury crossing an intersection at the Gay Street bridge. "There goes one of Lennis' cars

- . . I know. Let's head across the bridge to South Knoxville. One of the girls was telling me at the fact'ry 'bout this tent Otis Ailor's got set up over there, preaching and healing. Him and Lucius used to run a faith—healing tent over in Lonsdale. Maybe he's seen Lucius."

"Well, dammit, if we find Lucius, Lennis'll make him tell where he lost her. I don't even know what town they were in."

"Well——"

We went across the bridge toward a big moon. South Knoxville is flung out over about seven hills. It still has a lot of what we used to call jungle, where the kids used to play Tarzan and Jane. We did things the movies left out. They did, I mean, because I was chubby even then and they always elected me cannibal chief, like they felt they needed to explain how I got so chubby. So naturally I didn't get to play treehouse with Jane. I told all this to Arabel. And I pointed up the side of the cliff at my old house. A shaft of moonlight fell through the

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half—torn roof and out a hole in the wall, veiled by some leaves.

"I think that's right sad." She looked at me in the misty green flow of the dashboard lights. "And I think you're a sweet man and you drive a sweet little car."

The cliffside dropped steep, then sloped smooth, lush thickness of green vines covering it with the large leaves, looking soft and summery. She hadn't been long out of the bathtub because she had the scent of Palmolive fresh on her. And there was little pearls of sweat on her temples where she had her hair pulled back. She lit a Kool, leaned back and kept her eyes flicking from one side of the street to the other.

"Where's that tent, Mrs. Satterfield?"

“Corner of Dandridge and Sevier.”

“Ain’t that the field where the Barnum and Bailey circus used to pitch its tents?”

“Now ain’t it?”

“Funny place to hold a faith—healing jamboree.”

“Jamboree is right. You ever seen one of those foot—stom—pin’, arm—flingin’, ground—shakin’ sin purges go through a crowd like castor oil?”

“Nope. One of those few things I never got involved in.”

“Well, if you’d seen your little girl turn from a sweet, heavenly angel of six to a bewildered, shy, wild-eyed woman—child of eleven, you’d think it was funny all right. And do you think she ever knew what was going on when he made her get up and repeat what he’d told her? Not that she memorized it. Just he talked it ever’ minute of the day, night and morning, bending over her where she lay in her bed, leaning

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‘crossed the table, spraying her with spit as he ranted, taking her for long walks down those lonely railroad tracks at sundown, talking, stuttering a blue streak, and her sitting there in the tent or shack turned tabernacle, three and four nights a week, right up under that sprinkler system of salvation he sprays on the multitudes. Because one night when the grown—ups got to yelling and jerking more than ordinary, she jumped up on the bench and started yelling, calling on Jesus to wash her sins away. All six little sweet golden years of them, when she never done one thing I ever needed to spank her for, even if I would. And so he felt what she was doing to the crowd, how her voice, high—pitched and yelling, went through the people like an electric current, and he jumped down from the rickety platform and scooped her up in her white organdy dress and held her straight up over his head till she screamed and yelled the glory—glories so long and loud her eyes bulged and her mouth frothed like she’d been bit by a rabid dog. I tell you, Mr. Swaggerty, then’s when I saw what evil was.

“Not that faith—healing’s evil. It’s good for some people. No, that little child not knowing what she was doing, and being sucked into seven years of that, of starting it, keeping it going, and causing people to yell, ‘It’s a miracle!’ That’s what they done that night. And I knew then and there that the religious fire that made me surrender my soul to Jesus and my body to Lucius Satterfield was blasphemy.

“So by now, what religion I got is my own brand and it’s just between me and the Nan up yonder. Yeah, people think it’s funny, that don’t know. Faith—healing and holy rolling—it’s all

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like a sideshow, and they ain’t nothing strange ‘bout it going full blast where tigers once jumped through flaming hoops and thirty clowns climbed out of the same Austin.”

\* \* \*

I could hear the preacher yelling.

“There she blows.”

Puny red, green, and blue lights glowed on a cord between the two central poles holding up a flop-eared tent, probably war surplus, once used to house malarial Tennessee volunteers in Cuba. The early model cars parked in the grass facing the tent, surrounding it, reminded me of the spectacle of Lennis’ patrol converging on Arabel’s house in the holler. But these car lights were out. Weak, bare bulbs lighted the inside, where warped gray benches were lined drunkenly over the sawdust, jam-packed with working folk. One

look and that was obvious—the faces, and closer up, the hands of the men and women, and the swollen legs of the mothers and the aged, sad, but beautiful faces of some of the children.

I nestled my sweet little Dodge in between a '38 Chevrolet and a battered, home—painted orange Hudson. Fireflies blinked in the dark around the tent. Some men stood outside leaning on the ropes, smoking, talking quietly.

A lean, raw—faced man, with glazed, staring eyes and a halo of gnats swimming around his head, stood on a platform, flailing the thick, hot air.

“That him swatting gnats with his bare hands?”

“Yeah. Trying to bust their ear drums. Lord, forgive me, but I can’t like it. I think of Avis and it throws my stomach

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for a loop.”

“How we gonna wade through all that to ask him about Lucius?”

“He’s running out of breath. Pretty soon he’s got to breathe in for a change. That face of his is already red as a pickled beet.”

“I won’t tell you what he said, because frankly, I couldn’t translate it. But if you’re dying to know, I once read where they’re getting so they can pick up sound waves still in the air from hundreds of years—even Jesus’s sermons. Maybe they’ll pick up Otis Ailor’s sermon and play it back to us in 1990. Personally, I’ll wait till they tune in on the original Sermon on the Mount.

So we sat in the car and I listened to her sigh now and then with impatience and I inhaled the aroma of her body, which wasn’t of rain now, but of a woman whose body is sweetly warm. Honest to God, all I wanted to do was to take hold of her nervous hands and run my fingers along her wrists. Lennis could go where that preacher in there was sending all those people.

But she was thinking of Avis, and of getting out of that car as soon as Otis had gone as far as he could. The “amens, brother,” and “bless Jesus,” “yes, Jesuses,” and “Lordy, Lordies” were rising to higher pitches, and folks were jumping up like a snake had crawled under the benches on the sawdust, and one woman waved her flesh—jangling arms good—bye to Satan and hello to Jesus, and a man took to shaking, and people came into the aisles with heads thrown back and eyes rolling or clenched tight, and they moved toward the platform and fell to their knees in the

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sawdust and formed a convulsive line to be healed of various afflictions. Frankly, I was a little in awe of it. And they all began to sin “Wash me whiter than snow.”

“Maybe I can catch him before he starts.”

Arabel got out of the car and I got out and followed her. Passing one of the cars, I saw a young girl and a boy curled up in each other’s unafflicted limbs, their mouths glued together in the smoldering darkness, doubling the August heat.

We wove among the crowd on the inside of the tent. I could tell by the way she breathed that she smelled what I did, but that it meant fear, anger and despair to her—the canvas, the sawdust, and the simmering stew of human sweat. Harmless dogs were in there, too, some barking, some blinking in dog—founded amazement. Toward the front, a clot of writhing bodies blocked us, and Arabel jabbed me with her elbow and nodded her head toward a little girl in white with a mane of tangled, sweaty, clinging blond hair. She

was wedged between a fat woman in a purple dress and an old man with a tired sneer on his face. I got the idea——Avis of about six years ago. Arabel's face trembled, but she didn't cry. I gently put my hands on her waist, smelling her hair, guiding her through the mob under the yellow haze and the bellied sag of the canvas.

Then we were at the edge of the slap—dab platform. The nails were still shiny and the pine still pine smelling. She looked up at the man who paced frantically across the boards, making them rattle under her hands.

"Otis" she yelled, trying to be heard over the ecstasy of the singing. "Otis"

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"He turned, neither in nor out of this world, it seemed, and jounced across the stage to us.

"Why, Arabel Satterfield, is that you?"

"You seen Lucius?"

"Lucius? Is Lucius back in town?"

"Then you ain't heard from him?"

"No. Bring him over here, Arabel. And Avis. The glory of Jesus is burning bright here tonight, sister. I'm glad you're here. Come on up here and be with us tonight . . . Are you washed in the blood, mister?" His eyes nailed me to the sawdust.

"No, but I came close to it."

"Are you saved, brother?"

"Not yet."

"Let's go," Arabel said, pushing back against me in such a way that I just let her push awhile.

Otis leaned down and caught hold of her arm. "I can see you done backslided, sister. Come under Jesus's wing tonight."

"You let go of me, Otis Ailor!"

"I can't hear what you said, sister."

"She said to get your cotton—pickin' hands off of her." I pulled her away from him and we ducked under a tent flap and double—timed it to the car.

"Well, I reckon you seen it now," she said, adjusting her rayon, polka dot dress under her as she slammed the door.

"I reckon I have."

"Get this thing moving."

I backed out, spinning the wheels in the sawdust, swinging the car back onto the macadam. We rolled down the hill away from

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salvation, and we had turned up a street I knew very well. We were coasting under the trees past houses where the lawns had been freshly mowed and the juice of cut grass was sweet smelling in the car and jasmine musk hung on the air, when I felt the bump—bump—flapping of a flat tire and the pull of the wheels toward the curb. I stopped the motor idling.

"I think we got us a flat tire."

I got out and looked and we has us a flat tire. The street was quiet as sleep. She got out and leaned over me where I squatted beside the squashed rubber. She put her warm hands on my shoulders and her hair grazed my ear. "I swa'an! You and your car!"

Suddenly she stiffened, her fingertips touching my shoulders, her head held to one side, listening. "You hear some-thing?"



I rose and looked over into the jungle of honeysuckle and oak trees along the cliffside and back at the rise of the hill we'd come over. What I heard was crickets and a nightbird in the trees and footsteps scraping somewhere under the low branches of trees down the sidewalk, and the faint scratch and flurried clicking of a dog's paws hurrying toward us.

"It's him!" I grabbed her arm.

"Now don't scare me, Mr. Swaggerty. Listen——"

"Look!"

They were coming toward us, thick, dark shapes, about a block away, the dog straining at the leash.

"I

"Let's get in the car," she screamed. "That dog! That dog, Frank. Oh, that dog!"

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We got in the car and I made it go as fast as it could with the tire flat. The wheel wobbled violently in my hands. In the rear view mirror, I saw them running, the blind man stumbling, the dog's legs churning wildly, flashing in the moonlight that leaked through the trees.

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#### Chapter 4

"Please make it go faster!" Arabel was hysterical. "Please, Frank. I never saw a dog like that. It'll get us if we don't hurry! Hurry! Hurry, hurry!"

"It's bogging down, Arabel. It won't take much more. If we can just get a little further."

"What'll we do? They're running as fast as we're moving!"

"There it is!"

My house was still standing, half ruin, half the way it was. Some of the walls lay crumbled like trash on the ground but some rooms looked strong and safe. I turned the car into the yard and it jolted and hobbled up to the wide front steps. The front door leaned against a tree, ghost—white in the moonlight. And through a huge gash in the roof, light flooded the vestibule. The wide stairway to the upper rooms hung at a slant, still clinging to the wall. But I didn't have time to feel sad.

"Can you run, Arabel? Are you too scared to run?"

"No. I can. But can't we lock the doors and stay in the car?"

"He could break the windows enough for the dog to crawl in. We've got to make it inside the house."

I stopped the car right at the bottom steps with the head— lights aimed into the house.

"Get out and run inside!"

I kicked the door open and met her in front of the car. The lights showed the helpless terror on her face and the wild desperation in her eyes. She tripped on the shutters that had been ripped from the windows and thrown on the steps. I pulled

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her up and carried her through the doorless front entrance.

"We can't get up those stairs, Frank. They're just hanging by a hair!" I set her down. "My legs won't hold me up!"

"Yes, they will! Run up those steps! They'll hold you!"

"But you'll be down here alone, and they'll——"

"Go!"

She went up the stairs, bracing herself against the broken wall, clutching at the ripped

wallpaper. Long sheets of it came off in her hands as she stumbled up, her feet slipping in the loose plaster on the steps. The high stairway swayed under her weight and I heard the joints rasping against the strain.

I looked back and there was Lucius and the dog, black in the glare of the car lights. The lights shattered my vision, but I could see well enough to find loose boards on the floor. I threw them wildly, panting, going, "Huh! Huh! Huh!" One of them hit the dog and it yelped like a pup. Let him reach me and he'd be a long way from a pup.

She was on the upper landing now, looking down, her arms hugging herself convulsively, because hot as it must have been outside our skins, she was probably freezing to death from fear—— like me.

"Run up, Frank! Run, run, run! It'll hold!"

I doubted that, but there was nowhere else to run to. All the doors were stacked against one of the walls. Halfway up the steps, I jerked my head around to see where the dog was and saw it reach the bottom step and scramble up, its paws clawing at the torn wallpaper that lay across the steps. The staircase shuddered beneath me and swayed with a loud tearing sound. That's

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what I wanted it to do, but not before I got to the second story. On the first landing, I fell on my hands and busted my knees on the edge of a step.

Arabel stood on the upper landing, leaning over, reaching for me with a rail post in her hand.

"Grab hold, Frank! Grab this! I'll pull you up! Hurry up! It's coming up behind you!"

"I know it, Arabel! Goddamnit, I know it!"

I fumbled with the end of the post she held, I felt a sudden powerful pull and my knees struck the edge of the floor and my fingernails dug into the wallpaper. She grabbed the back of my collar, letting go of the post, and pulled the coat up tight under my arms as I crawled up and over the edge of the floor, feeling the jar when the staircase crashed below. I lay at her feet in the grainy plaster, my own feet hanging over the edge.

The rush of my breath ached in my throat, but I got myself into a sitting position and looked down. In the lights from my sweet little Dodge, dusty smoke rolled upward from under the collapsed staircase. Lucius stood coughing in the doorway with the broken leash dangling at his side. The dog rose jumping and snarling out of the moiling dust.

"You all right, Frank?"

I looked up. She was leaning against the wall, her dress smudged with white plaster, her hair wild, her eyes wild and her mouth wild and she was panting, too.

I looked down into the ruins of the hallway. "Lucius Satterfield, you get out of my house! I was born and raised here

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and you're trespassing."

"Wuh—wuh—we'll get up there suh-suh—somehow. Yuh-yuh, yuh—yuh all can't ge—ge—get away from mum—mum—mum—me. Yuh—yuh, you tell mum—mum—mum—me whur sh—she, she is a-a—and hi—hi—hi won't let Muh-muh—Mary bother you."

"What's he mean——Mary?"

"Mary was the——mother of——Jesus t—t—till h—h—he turned her into a German police d—d—dog." I realized I was stuttering from lack of breath and I got tickled.

“Laugh! Luh—luh—luh—laugh, you fuh—fuh—fuh—foul---hi—hi—hi— hi’ll get up there”

“Go away! My mother said I couldn’t play with you, you white trash Pharisee”

“Sh—sh—sh—she’s with yuh—yuh, yuh—you, is—is—isn’t she?” He stumbled in the debris, his head rolling on his shoulders, trying to locate my voice. The dog was barking now, running about, scattering dust and trash under his feet.

“Where’s Avis, Lucius? Please tell me where she is”

“Yuh—yuh, yuh—you all took her. De—de—de, de, de—don’t lie. Hi—hi—hi—hi—hi know you come a—a—a and took her away.”

“No we didn’t either. We can’t find her either. Where were you all? Please, Lucius!”

“You’re one, too!”

I thought of the back stairway leading up from the kitchen. I got up and stumbled in the dark to the end of the hail.

“Frank, where are you?” Arabel turned to follow me.

“Stay there.”

Lucius continued to yell. Let him keep on yelling. Troy or

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Lennis or one of the cars would find us if he kept it up and that dog kept barking. The back staircase had been torn down. I was actually grateful now to those workers.

I went back and told Arabel that they couldn’t get up. “We’re safe now. Let him holler.”

“Wuh-wuh-wuh-wuh-whur’s Avis! Hi-hi-hi—hi ain’t quittin’ til I fuh—fuh—fuh—find her.”

“She ran away from you. Is it any wonder?” Arabel was screaming, “You’re out of your mind, Lucius! Now don’t nobody know where she is!”

“Are you ly—ly—ly—lyin’ to me?”

“No. I swear.”

“Do you suh—suh--sssss-suhwear buh-buh—buh—b—b, b—by Je—jeje—sus’ sssss name?”

“Yes. Yes. I tell you I don’t know. The only way we can find her is to do it together. You do something with that dog and help us, instead of——”

“Yuh—luh—yuh—you want to help me find her? Hi—hi—hi—hi want to k—k—k—kill her.”

“Lucius! Why? No, Lucius! Please!”

He kept raving about how she’d come back to the filth that’d spawned her. Said he was going to walk the streets of Knoxville till he found her, and then he was going to kill her and have peace again.

“Don’t hurt her, Lucius. She’s just a child. She don’t know . . . she’s a helpless child.”

“No, no, she ain’t. Sh—sh—sh—she’s a huh—huh—huhore, le—le, le—like you. Come here, Nuh—muh—mary. Come here, guh—guh—guh—

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girl.”

He stopped down with the bright light behind him and spread his arms, calling the dog. It came out of the smoke and hugged up against him inside his arms. He caught the broken leash and rose and held to the short leather thong and pulled the dog out onto the porch and they were blurred as they moved close to the lights.

“I’ll cut your heart out, Lucius Satterfield! If you touch one hair on her head, I’ll cut your

heart out!”

I pulled Arabel back from the edge of the drop. “They’re leaving now, Arabel. They’re gonna leave us alone.”

“He don’t know either. She’s lost somewhere all alone with him trying to find her. Did you hear him, Frank? He said he was going to find her and kill her.”

“Don’t worry, Arabel. We’ll get ‘im. Somebody must have heard that racket. He acted like he was leaving, but he might be laying for us out there. So you rest awhile, till somebody comes and helps us get out of here.”

The idea was, I kinda wanted to be alone with her in what was left of my old home. She buried her face in my chest and I hugged her while she cried, and we coughed from the dust. I guided her along the hallway toward a window the moonlight was pouring through. Then it was blotted out by clouds.

“It’s gonna rain,” I said. “It’ll cool things off.” Her body was hot against me as we went slowly, awkwardly into the room I had lived in when the house was mine. Well, it was still mine as long as some of it still held up.

My room hadn’t been touched. The floors gleamed except

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where the rug had been. I had that in my office and some of the furniture was in the rented room I had across town.

She sat on the floor beside the dusty window. I sat with the window at my back and heard large drops of rain spatter on the glass. We sat quietly. Then we heard the rain hitting the trees and the windowpane and the roof and we listened to it come down. The colored lights of the city gleamed through the rain across the river, and I thought I heard the bawling of cattle in their stalls echo along the cliffside. She stiffened and stopped breathing when she heard the dog barking in the distance, but that faded, and after a while all we heard was the rain and our own breathing.

The dim lights of the moon, glowing through thin clouds, fell through the window on her hand. I put my hand on hers and moved closer toward her. My huge shadow lay on the floor where the rug had been.

She talked about Avis with a trembling in her voice. She was very worried, and sad, and tired and angry.

“I’m sorry I got us into this, Frank. I shouldn’t have felt the way I did about you.”

“What? Felt how about me?”

“I can’t tell you now. But I didn’t ever dream it would turn out this way.”

“I used to dream——in this very room. Yeah, I used to dream here. And the rain, too. And snow. And leaves falling in the fall.”

“This is your house, isn’t it?”

“Used to be. They’re going to make a used car lot of it.”

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“Even wrecked like it is, it’s sure better than any house people ever lived in.”

“Well, it’s from my momma’s side. They were rich in lumber, and somehow they went down. Came along a grandfather, I think, that drank and gambled the floor out from under him. And my daddy’s daddy, who was just a dirt farmer, but who was behind a hand of cards more than behind a plow, crossed poker chips with my momma’s daddy, and there went the mansion. So my daddy inherited it. My momma was a hard-headed romantic. Living in that house was all she knew about living. So daddy let her move back

in after ten years away from it, and let her pay rent. Well, she couldn't even do that, but what she could do, she did. Married the landlord, my daddy, who ran a movie theater on Market Street. Place hot and stinky as a cockpit, but the steamy incubator of a world of the imagination for me when I was little. Well, she ran him out of his mind and into drinking, supporting the Hub saloon, with her talk of the glorious past, and how he ought to bring it back. He didn't have any trouble re—issuing *Gone With The Wind*, but about all he could do for the glory of the past was keep the grass mowed. Then one fine summer night, he waded into the Tennessee River and climbed onto a sandbarge and two years of floating landed him finally in a Chicago canal. My mother, meanwhile, kept the mansion out of pride, hoping I would someday make a pile of money and redeem 'our side' of the family from shame, she being the offspring of a two hundred—year—old name that existed now only on historical markers. So here we are, trespassing on a used car lot."

"Just don't let 'em get that sweet little Dodge of yours."

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"Oh, no. We gonna use that to hunt for Avis."

"Now why would you do that?"

"I like you. I'd cover this whole damn country with you——looking for her. She must be something wonderful to have you for a mother and to make you feel about her the way you do."

"I tell you, Frank, if I don't find her or if he——Frank, I'll just kill myself, that's all there is to it. She's all I ever cared to live for."

"Why did you marry that lunatic? A girl like you."

"'A girl like you.' A girl like what?"

She was in my arms now, very small and soft in the soft dress and her long, smooth neck warm under my fingers.

"A girl like I never met before. Much as I've been around this world, I never knew a woman like you. Who works and sacrifices and who's still lovely after so much working and worrying. Oh, I've been around them, but never——"

"Never what?"

"This close."

"Lucius would damn us to hell."

"Lucius has given us enough hell for one night."

"We ought to get up and go find Lennis and Troy and start——"

Her mouth! My God, her mouth! In that room where I had dreamed of such a woman, not only movie stars and heiresses and sophisticated world—wearied women of foreign cities, but sometimes more intensely of such women as her, whose mouth and whose sweet quivering tongue——and not anywhere in the world had I known——yes, once, once in Galveston, a very young whore and I had forgotten her. That was a long way off and a long time ago.

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I put my hand inside the silky rayon dress and it slipped inside her brassiere, with the rain dashing on the windowpane at the back of my head. The moon of memory got suddenly bright and I saw the bare walls of the bare room I had left 16 years ago when I realized one day that to live in this world I would have to finally cut the navel cord my mother had me leashed to. My other hand moved up her nylons and my fingers trembled on her

soft woman's flesh, and it was just like running up those stairs again for both of us. He had called her a whore, but she was the only woman other than a whore I had ever touched. Women always want to mother me, because being twice as big as most men I seem like a child to them. Arabel was a mother, but, letting my huge hands go slowly, slowly up to her soft belly, she was not a mother to me. Thanks, Lucius, thanks, and thanks be to your dog for chasing her into my little boy's room in that falling house. We were a man and a woman together.

But not quite. I hate to say it, but Lennis took that soft, sweet moment out of all the dull, hard moments in the history of creation to roar into the yard and yell, "Surround the house, men!"

Arabel rose quickly, her mouth moist from my mouth, her eyes flickering as she listened.

"That's my brother. It's Lennis."

"Yes. It's Lennis. You got anything against me throwing rocks at him?"

She laughed. I had not expected that. It sounded as new as sudden rain in the trees on a bright, moonlit night. I laughed, too. In fact, we ended up giggling.

"Hey! Did you hear something?" Lennis' voice was serious

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and low in the hallway downstairs.

We rose, falling against each other, clinging for support.

"Wait, Frank, honey."

"What?"

"I want to know. Did you mean what you said?"

"I didn't say it yet. If it wouldn't sound so funny coming out of a big ox like me, I'd say that I love the hell out of you, honey."

"No, I mean——You do?"

"I want to bless you."

"Who's that up there?" Lennis yelled loud enough to wake the dead.

"No, I mean Avis. When you said——"

"Sure. Right now. We'll start right now."

"And not sleep till we drop. Okay?"

"Okay." I kissed her.

We walked to the edge of the hallway and I looked down at the top of Lennis' head.

"Hey, buddy—roe, did you wipe you feet before you came in the house?"

\* \* \*

Wake the hell up, Rooks. Well, you were so quiet I thought you'd dropped off to sleep. Come on down here and the strain of trying to hear me won't put you to sleep. Now I can talk right in your ear. Better? Okay.

Well, it looked like a used car lot already. All the lights glaring at the house the way they did in Arabel's yard at twilight. It was ten o'clock now——my bedtime. But first we had to

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find Avis and tuck her in. That was going to take some time. Lennis had a fit when we told him he'd just missed his prey again. And looked suspiciously at us, wound up for another fit in another direction, but Arabel cut his water off quick.

"Now listen here, Lennis, you shut your trap and quit looking at me that way. Frank

saved my life.”

“Don’t you believe it, Lennis. She saved mine. And a girl that can pull a 295 pounds stumble—bum up out of thin air is a girl you don’t wanna sass too much.”

“Nan, I’ve seen ‘bout enough of you tonight. You just trot on home and let her brothers take care of her.”

“Hush, Lennis. I’ll go home if you’re so damn hot about it, but let him take me and you all keep looking. Only Lucius don’t know where Avis is.”

“Don’t you know he’s lying?”

“No, but you go on and find him and we’ll see what’s what.”

Lennis and his armada spread once more out into the city. It so happened he had some shells for the automatic in his car. It was nice to have them now that I probably wouldn’t need them. While Arabel brushed the plaster dust from her dress and I tried not to go off the deep end watching the way her hands pressing over the dress brought out the curves of her body, I pumped up the tires Lucius had let the air out of, using a bicycle pump I kept in the back. She got some hillbilly music on the car radio, and then she leaned on the fender and I got weak watching her comb her long hair in the cool drizzle the rain had turned into, and me pumping till I near busted a gut.

“I don’t mind no sleep,” I said, as we crossed the bridge

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again with mist rolling under it over the Tennessee River——more aimless wandering——”but reckon we could pause till I plug up this tunnel that’s boring through my innards?”

She laughed.

“Laugh, why don’t you?”

“Okay, Dick Tracy, I reckon I better feed you. Head on towards my house but keep looking as you go. Shoot fire, she might even be at the house now——waiting for rue to come home.”

“I’m looking at that police car coming down the street. It may be one of Lennis’ hired hands, but if it ain’t——” I turned right, into some Negro slums. I love to watch Negroes standing around on the streets in front of pool halls and cafes and sitting on the front steps and a real homemade gal high steppin’ it through a bunch of studs. That’s how it was when we cruised through that Negro neighborhood. And it was just after the rain in the early August night. And Negro scents that go to your head like a swig of muscatel. The police car didn’t follow.

There’s still a lot of jungle in Lonsdale, too, and some of what might pass for a country atmosphere——patches of corn and tomatoes and string beans and hollyhocks and dandelions in the yard and honeysuckle lolling over the fence, and chicken coops out back with the chickens ghostly in the hedgeberry trees with the moonlight shifting through, and dressed up cars parked in the rutted place in front of the house and porch swings still, and always one or two dogs taking it cool in the middle of the tar— topped road, where fences, keeping in one cow or one horse, run along on the red clay bank across the ditch.

So when we saw a big ol’ thicket of ripe blackberries

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nodding over a fence with the raindrops on the berries twinkling in the moonshine, she said, “Lookie yonder, will you First blackberries I’ve seen this summer. Shows you how

beat down you get from fact'ry work. How'd you like some blackberries with top cream poured over 'em?"

"I want you to hush. Eatin' blackberries is how I want to spend heaven."

"Pull up by that mailbox and let's get out and pick us a few."

"I think they's somebody sitting on the porch acrost the road, behind them vines."

I stopped the car and we got out.

"They won't mind."

Fireflies blinked and glowed in the yard across the road and along the red clay bank among the blackberry briars. The vines grew up tight strings nailed from the floor to the ceiling of the porch, and behind them, people were swinging and talking low and smoking cigarettes, and the living room window was aglow with the television show. We crossed the road, her heels clicking on the hardtop. The way things had been going, I was expecting, and I reckon she was, too, to see Lucius and Nary come leaping down the field slope through the clover, but the vapor from the rain was all that moved along the ground.

"What're we gonna put 'em in?" I whispered, straddling the ditch where some water trickled, my shoes stuck in the red clay.

She squatted on the edge of the road across the ditch with her dress held out in a basket shape. I thought that was right

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cute, especially when she tossed back her head to get her hair away from her face. My hair got stuck in the briars over my head, which is how high they'd grown. The berries were wet and big as my thumb and so ripe they fell into my palm when my fingers touched them.

When I turned to pitch about the tenth handful into her lap, I got a misty glimpse of a woman, standing on the edge of the porch across the road.

"Is that Arabel Satterfield over yonder?" Her husky voice cut through the quiet.

Arabel had a berry about to put in her mouth but she just held it there and turned her head. "Who's that?"

"It's Majel Hollis. Is that your voice, Arabel?"

"Well, hidi, Majel. I thought that was your house." She still held dress that way.

"Hey, listen, honey," the woman said, coming off the porch along the flagstones toward the road, "I been tryin' an' tryin' to get you. I went by your house awhile ago, looking for you. You know your husband's back in town?"

"I sure as hell do." Arabel held to the bumper of the car to pull herself up, holding her dress to keep the berries from spilling, her pink slip showing across her knees. She turned to meet the woman, who was now in the middle of the road. A husky woman with her pin curlers glittering in the moonlight.

I stayed astraddle the ditch, stuck in the mud, gobbling blackberries.

"Well, honey, that ain't all. I seen Avis, too."

There went Arabel's berries, rolling down and around her

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feet. She caught hold of the woman's arms and they tromped all over the berries. I come down off the bank, jumping the ditch, and the woman saw me over Arabel's shoulder and she stepped back a little.

"Lordy, who's that big man you got with you?" Her being a big woman, I reckon she



never expected to see a man more her size than what she was used to.

"Avis! You saw Avis! Where? Where at, Majel?"

"Well, honey, I's fixin' to tell you, if you'd stop squeezing me to death." She laughed loud and high, sharing Arabel's joy. "Over on Cherry Street at the midway. I's so surprised to see her walking along, I nearly jumped out of my skin."

"Frank! Frank, did you hear what Majel said?" She dug her fingernails into my arm and held to the woman's wrist with her other hand.

"I told you we'd find her." I felt cheated that I hadn't found her for Arabel.

"When, Najel? When was it?"

"Less than an hour ago."

"You reckon they've closed up yet?"

"Law', no! They's half the girls from the fact'ry over yonder, having the best ol' time!"

"Why didn't you hold onto her? Dammit, Majel, you know I been grieving my heart out for two years, trying to find out where he took her."

"I called her name, but she kept on walking like she'd seen a leper, and then she just vanished into thin air, 'fore I could get to her. But don't you worry now. He's probably found her by

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now."

"Who? Lennis?"

"Lennis? No, honey, her daddy. I seen him on the street as we's coming home. Did you know he's got blinded since he left Knoxville? The pitiful thing's got to have a dog to lead him around. It near broke my heart to see——"

"You didn't tell 'im, did you?"

"Well, he asked me if I'd seen her and I figured she'd got lost from him, so 'fore I thought, I told him where I seen her, and he——honey, I plum forgot he run off with her that time. I——"

"Come on, Franks"

But I was already in the car and had the motor running.

Arabel got in the car and slammed the door. "Majel, you ain't got good sense!"

"Well, hells' bells, Arabel, you think I ain't got nothing to do but keep track of ever' body troubles? I work ten hours a day and I——"

Najel held to the door as the car started to move. We left her standing in the middle of the road still talking.

"Frank, if we don't get there before Lucius does——"

"I know, honey, I know. I'm squeezing ever' ounce of juice out of this thing."

We cut across town on two wheels with the rubber scalding the pavement and the traffic lights zooming over our heads like lightning bugs.

"To think she was there all the time at that midway and us trying to find Lucius, when she was no more'n three blocks from the fact'ry. I could even see the tents and the ferris wheel

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from the window, and me calmly sewing trapdoors on union suits, and her probably riding that ferris wheel all day long. She used to ride it out at Chilhowee park and Lucius would have to drag her off of it, screaming bloody murder, and— oh, Lord, Frank, he's——he knows where she is, and us out picking blackberries." Her voice trembled with fear

and astonishment and anger. Her lips were purple from the blackberries and I still had the taste of them in my mouth. I felt guilty.

She rolled against her door and against me and held like a drowning person to the gearshift, and me trying to keep us from running into the ditches and crashing into trucks in front of us.

And you might know that not one of Lennis' whiskey runners or Troy's taxicabs was in sight. But I had the gun loaded now and I wasn't in any mood to let anything stop me. I was dead determined this time to get that child for her.

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## Chapter 5

We parked in sawdust again in the midst of what looked to be another used car lot. The smell of sawdust and recent rain, and tents and animals and sultry human bodies, and cotton candy and hot dogs was strong in the air even before we got out. We walked fast, me holding her hand to keep her from going off wildly in six directions at once.

"Hold onto me now, Arabel. That dog is somewhere in this crowd and he's liable to be on us 'fore we know it. Just keep looking around you and don't lose control of yourself. I know how you feel, honey, but we got to be calm and search this place with our wits keen. Stop that crying now. You can't see with your eyes full of tears."

"I feel like a chicken with its head cut off," she said, squeezing my hand to let me know she wasn't going to act like one.

We went over every inch of that midway, watched the ferris wheel go round twice, tried to see the faces in the tilt—a—whirl, waited till they skinned back the caterpillar, watched the dodg'ems, pushed through the crowds watching the geek eat chickens live and spit up the guts on the back of his hand and hurl the heads at the hecklers.

We looked among the children hanging over the monkey pen and looked among the crowd standing around the motorcycle pit, coughing at the exhaust smoke and blinking at the sparks, and we barged in on the fortune teller who called us sons—of—bitches, till we had looked everywhere but the sideshow. The ticket taker wouldn't let us in till the barker had finished his harangue to

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the crowd. So we stood in front of a bunch of people who were clustered around the platform outside the tent.

He was luring the open—mouthed, frog—eyed people with a sample of the freaks on the inside. For a moment we got caught up in his ranting and in the monster he kept pointing to—a headless shape covered by a white sheet, surrounded by huge jugs of what he called blood—long, coiled tubes jutting out from under the sheet where the head should have been.

Pale, delicately blue—veined hands and dirty, bare feet were all that stuck out from under the sheet. A bird's claw design clutched a quartz ball at the ends of the arms and the legs of the chair. The hands curved over the balls at the ends of the armrests, and one hand twitched and wore a turquoise ring. The blood bubbled in the jars.

The barker looked like a gypsy—tall, skinny, with dark skin, black eyes, slick black hair combed close to his skull—and he wore a tight, double—breasted, gray, pin—striped suit and black and white shoes with points to the toes. And as he talked and as he gestured, the rings he wore and his black eyes glittered in the colored lights that hung on cords between the sharp tent poles. And back of him as he moved, lurid, fading banners

fluttered in the little night breeze that had come up—— freaks fluttering on the banners—— petrified man, hermaphrodite, armless, legless fat man, two——headed pony, sword swallower, monster fetuses in formaldehyde. The people around us forced our bodies together.

“I’m getting sick, Frank. That thing without a head! Look at that blood trickling into her neck! And that man looks like a

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snake. His skin looks greasy and his eyes are so cold——like black ice.

“She can’t help it, folks!” yelled the barker. “She was born this way! She come into this cruel world without any head. She is ninety——nine percent helpless. Her life hangs by the hair. Only the miracles of modern science and the grace of God have kept the blood beating in her frail body. Blood is her only food——blood sold to us by poor, homeless, wandering tramps who were so hungry they had to sell their blood. Only your generosity can keep her alive. The midway can’t afford to keep those bottles full. Four gallons a day must go into that poor girl’s body. I know you folks are aware of those animals screaming over there and you feel a little nervous. Imagine how she must feel! It is the blood they smell. You can’t smell it because you are human, but at night when the lights are out and the tents and the rides are empty, they cry for it. By the grace of God she can’t hear them, but she is human and we can only imagine that she must sense, must feel the restlessness of the animals. She cannot live much longer. This is your one and maybe your only opportunity to see her up closer on the inside. When you come back tomorrow she may not be with us. Some of you may doubt she is alive even now. Watch those pitiful hands twitch with the grateful beating of blood in her body. That’s no electric current doing that. You there, you, big fellow! Come up here and touch her and testify to the folks that she is alive!”

His black eyes stared into me as he came down on the steps of the platform, pointing at me.

The people looked up at me.

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“Let’s go, Frank!” Arabel pulled on my hand.

“Go ahead, buddy! She’s harmless!” someone yelled, his own flesh crawling, most likely. Arabel screamed in my ear, I turned, and her mouth was open, her teeth blue with berry stain, and she sent a long scream up into the air over the midway. I saw the dog’s long silver snout, the lips curled back over the red, glistening gums, the teeth glowing in the colored lights and a leather thong around her neck was pulled taut by a hand sticking out of the crowd.

The crowd twisted, stirred and surged back, people screaming and yelling as the dog leaped up the steps. The gypsy turned on the steps and ran and spun around on the platform and staggered back against the headless woman’s chair, and one of the jugs got jolted off its stand and it shattered beside the chair and the red fluid gushed on Lucius’ feet as he came up behind the dog, the dog pulling at the leash and him stumbling. The sheeted thing rose suddenly like a jack—in—the—box when the jar fell, its arms spread and it pushed back against the chair. The dog’s snout darted into the folds of the sheet and its teeth ripped it.

The gypsy was nimble on his feet and they were all zigzagging around up there, and then he hit the dog on the head with his fist and kicked Lucius between the legs, making him

double up and clutch at the chair. Lucius still held the leash.

But the dog had the sheet in its mouth and it ripped it off the body it hid, and first a golden mass of hair, the head thrown back, emerged. A girl jumped up on the seat of the chair, her arms swinging at nothing and everything, knocking the jugs down crash on the floor.

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Lucius caught the gypsy's coattails with one hand, a long knife held high, poised to plunge, in the other hand. The gypsy kicked and turned, his whole body limp and loose with fear. The light glanced off Lucius' black glasses as he flung back his head, yelling a nasal, spit—garbled flood of gibberish.

And the dog snapped at the girl's bare feet. She was frozen with fear and mashed her tiny body against the back of the chair, the chair quivering backward on two legs. And then Arabel's fingernails finally drew blood and she got her throat unclogged of shock and fear and horror enough to scream, "Avis! Avis! Avis! Avis!"

Two cops got up on the platform before I could even see them go up. They struggled with Lucius and he struggled with the dog's leash because he'd gotten tangled up in it. The gypsy whirled on the edge of the platform and fell over onto the sawdust at our feet. He thrashed around as though in a fit and then he crawled under the platform and I saw him run into the tent.

The crowd made a great roar, falling in against itself, a mass confusion of faces and limbs and scattering of sawdust. The cops struck the dog with their pistols and one of them fired, but the bullets sputtered and splintered into the planks. Then Lucius lost his balance and fell and pulled the dog down after him.

Arabel tried to break away from me to get up on the platform to Avis, but I held her tightly to me. And one of the cops had Avis around the waist. She kicked her legs out over the platform. "Rago! Rago! Rago!" she screamed. She cursed the cop and bit his wrist and he slapped her.

Lucius was pulling the dog under the platform. The other cop

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came down the steps after Lucius, but the crowd had surged in again and he got tangled up in it.

All this took about three minutes, then it calmed down. The cop had Avis gripped tightly around her waist. Her long, blonde hair flared out wildly around her hot face. The mauve, silk blouse she had on was pulled up under her tiny breasts, and her tight blue jeans had slipped down over her hips, the white of her panties showing above a wide, black belt with green, blue and red studs on it, and her navel showing in the white flesh of her belly. She gritted her teeth and her large blue eyes burned. Even so, she was the most beautiful, wild, little creature I had ever seen.

A siren came, louder and louder, until it burst into the midway area, and a patrol car rolled, bounced across the sawdust and skidded in the mud at the platform. Two cops jumped out.

I glanced around for some sign of Lucius and the dog. All I saw were the black glasses—smashed into the sawdust, blood from the jugs dripping on them through cracks in the platform.

"Get back, you twos Get back with the crowds" yelled one of the new cops. And he started pushing with both hands. But I was rooted to the spot.

Arabel put her face up to him, her eyes full of tears, "I'm her mother! I'm her mother, you hear?" Well, he was deaf if he couldn't.

"Whose mother? That little girl's up there?"

"Yes, damn you! Get the hell out of my way!"

She jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow, and I let go and slipped in the mud trying to catch her again. The cop was doing a

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polite sidestep, but she didn't even notice because she pushed him against the edge of the platform, knocking his cap down over his face. She went up the steps, mad as a bumblebee, into the arms of a cop up on the platform. The other cop had Avis in his lap on the chair now and he was trying to keep her fingernails away from his face. I went up the steps, trying to catch Arabel.

"Let her go to her," I told the cop. He was trying to keep her away from the chair. "She's the child's mother."

"You her daddy?" "No. That was him with the dog."

He stepped aside to let irabel pass. "Hey, Earl! Did you find that bastard with the dog?"

"They took off, Ralph!"

"Well, get after 'em, goddamnit! And find that barker, too!"

Arabel reached out to touch Avis. But the girl drew back over the arm of the chair, still held tightly in a double vise, clasped in the cop's arms and clamped between the knees. She shut her eyes and shook her head and screamed, "Rago! Rago! Ragol!"

"You better leave her alone, lady! That dog must have bit her! She's gone howild!"

"Bit her! Avis, did it bite you?"

"No. She just acts that way. The little bitch is trying to gouge my eyes out!"

"You call my child a bitch and I'll bust your head wide open!"

"Get her in the car, Cecil!" yelled the cop who seemed in charge of the chaos. "Get her away from her. Now, lady, keep away from her. You may be her mother, but if you want to see her you'll have to come to the juvenile home. They's too much hell

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going on here. Just calm down now. You can see her later." The cop named Cecil carried Avis down the steps, trying at

the same time to keep Arabel's hands off her. I grabbed Arabel and held her. "Now, honey. Let him take her. We'll go to the juvenile and see her there."

She didn't resist. She sank against me, and I held her while two of the cops got in the car, one behind the wheel, the other in the back with Avis. The doors slammed and the wheels spun in the mud and sawdust and then the car shot forward and got going through the crowd.

"Now what started this?" The cop in charge looked up at me as though he thought he had the right man.

"Man, can't you see she's sick? Let me take her home."

"No! Take me to see Avis"

"Okay, honey. Okay, honey, just don't worry."

"Who was the man with the dog?"

"The wrath of God. Ain't that obvious?"

"Hey, you want me to drag you around this midway a few times?"

"You'd just wear yourself out."

“You look like the guy we’re looking for. Were you over at the——”

“Yes, but I was trying to track down the man you just let get away.” The cop named Earl came loping along between some tents, and when the cop standing before me turned and looked at him, Earl spread his arms and shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

“Couldn’t find hide nor hair of any of them” he yelled.

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“Look. We’ll be at the juvenile home. Could I talk to you there?”

“Yeah, go on. I’ll call Cecil and he can ask you some questions. Things are so wild I won’t get away from here for an hour.”

I took Arabel to the car and she fluttered back against the seat like a butterfly pinned in a frame alive.

“Did you see the way she looked at me?” She was slow, sluggish with the horror of seeing it again in her mind. Then she breathed in jerks and her face trembled. “W—w—what’s wrong? Something’s w—w—wrong! What was s—s—she doing like th—th—that?”

“We’re going to see her, honey. Now try to get hold of yourself. Both of you are in a state of shock. Ever’ thing’ll fall to pieces between you.”

“Oh, Frank! If you only knew. If you only knew.”

I didn’t ask her if I only knew what, because she was slowly getting calm. As calm as you could expect of a woman who had just seen what she had just seen.

By the time we got over there, Arabel was fairly calm. The juvenile home sets on a mound—like hill that’s completely covered with green leafed vines. It’s a cold, brick building inside a diamond wire fence with barbed wire running along the top at an angle, and although very few kids try crawling up that fence, the vines do, and they spill down the hill to the edge of the street. The driveway up to the gate was lighted by weak, naked bulbs strung through the trees.

“How do we get in? The place looks closed up.”

The windows were barred. You don’t have to commit a crime to

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get in there. Some kids just commit the crime of getting conceived in the wrong bed, and this place becomes a way station between what they had for a mother and a charitable institution.

We parked beside the police car and got out and walked to the gate. Crickets sang in the trees around us. It was swelteringly hot.

Arabel pushed a buzzer beside the gate. “I’ve been here before. Used to come to see Troy and Lennis before they grew up and got to be respectable crooks. Wade——Wade used to bring me. never broke a law——God or She put her hand to her throat. Wade was something else on her mind. “And one time . . . I ended up here, for a few weeks.”

“You?”

A door opened, and a stout woman appeared in the doorway with a pale orange light behind her.

“What do you want?” She weaved her head about, trying to see us. Then she came down the walk, stopping every few steps. The sight of me got into her tone of voice.

“What do you want? It’s nearly midnight. No visiting now.”

“I’m Avis Satterfield’s mother,” said Arabel.

“Well, maybe you can do something with her. Never in all my born days seen a child so

wild.” She scratched among a bunch of keys on a ring and unlocked the gate. “You must be the people them policemen are waiting to see.”

She stopped and looked back and up at me over her shoulder. “You her father?”

“No, ma’am. Just a friend of the family.”

“Must be some family.”

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She led us down a passageway to an octagon where four corridors met. It was a pool of very pale gold. The two cops leaned against the two—toned wall, dark green below, light green above, smoking cigarettes, their palms riding their pistols. There were two closed doors painted silver with wire meshes over the windows in them.

Arabel stopped at the edge of the octagon and blinked her eyes and looked at Avis. She sat drawn into herself on a long bench that stretched the length of one wall. She had her head back against the wall; her eyes were staring up at the ceiling.

Her blue jeans were so tight that her knuckles were shaped out perfectly in her pockets. One of the legs was cocked up and the sole of her bare foot rested on the edge of the bench. The mauve silk blouse hung loosely on her, ripped down one side, showing her ribs and the white of her brassiere and the soft curve of her breast. The red and green glass studs on her black belt glittered.

The stout woman stood in front of one of the silver doors with her flabby breasts. Her lips looked like they had never tasted anything but lemons. Planted right in front of Arabel, staring down at her, was a tall, thin woman with her arms crossed over her flat chest. Her blue—tinted hair flared out around her head.

The two cops had been watching us come down the dark corridor. “Okay, buddy, you and the lady ready to tell us what brought all this on?”

“I’ll tell you ever’thing I know, but let her see her daughter. How about it? Hasn’t seen her in two years.”

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“Okay, you’ll do. Who is Rago? She keeps screaming Rago. Nothing but Rago.”

I backed into the corridor a ways so I could get them out of there. The walls and the floor were bare and moist with humidity. I leaned against the wall where I could watch Arabel with Avis. I told the cops everything I knew, and when one of them recognized me, I had to elaborate on the packing house incident. But I kept watching all the time what was going on between Arabel and Avis.

Nothing was. For a whil’e, Arabel tried to get close to her, and I could hear her mothering voice murmuring. But Avis pulled her legs up against her breasts and gripped her knees, her hair falling down over her arms.

The stout woman stayed in front of the door and the thin one in the middle of the octagon. They both looked disgusted and took turns saying stuff like, “Speak to your mother, Avis,” and “Can’t you even speak to your mother, you little hellion?” with “mother” sounding as nasty as “hellion,” and Arabel would look up sharply at them, hurt in her eyes and then she’d go on talking softly to the head of blonde hair. Finally, she sat beside her on the polished bench and kept trying to touch Avis’ hair and her wrists and to stroke her feet, but she would flinch and huddle in the corner.

When I looked again, Arabel was at one end of the bench and Avis at the other. The two women glanced at them, whispering. And Avis had sat up now, her legs stuck out stiff

and spread apart, her bare heels on the floor, her shoulder blades propped on the low back of the bench, arms, crossed, and the ring shining

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in the yellow light.

Arabel just looked at her, bewildered and hurt, and she would glance at me and I looked between the two cops at her and Avis, and the cop who wasn't talking would look around to see what I was looking at. Our talking was the only sound, except I heard the echo of a girl's coughing ring along a corridor behind one of the silver doors, and one of the matrons heard it, too.

Cecil kept showing me the bites and scratches Avis had given him, saying, "She kept grabbing at my cods, trying to put me out of commission." He was little in awe of it, but laughing.

I heard a hiss sound and looked into the octagon again. Avis held a burning match in one hand a box of them in the other. She let it burn down to her fingers. Arabel and the two women watched her. From the look on their faces, I reckon they thought she was going to let it burn into her flesh, but she dropped the curled, black stub on the floor.

"You pick that right up!" The tall matron spoke slow, through her nose, pointing at the floor.

Avis didn't even look at her. She took another match from the box and popped it into flame on the ruby stud on her belt, her body still propped in that slanted position. And she let it burn the same way.

The tall one stepped toward her. "You give me those matches!"

Avis stuck the match out toward the woman's stomach. She did a quick little dance backward. Avis snapped another match.

"You want me to stop her?" said one of the cops from the edge of the light. Not Cecil. He knew better.

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"She is in our care now," the tall one said. "If her mother'd just go on home, we might could handle her."

"Let her go ahead," the stout one said. "She'll run out d'reckly and then we'll take her inside."

"A fine job you done of raising that little brat," Cecil said to me.

"I told you. I'm not her daddy. He's the one with the dog. The one you oughta be out trying to find, before he sics that dog on somebody else of before Lennis or Troy shoot him down."

"You hear him, Jack? Now he's trying to tell us how to do our job."

"No. No. Hell no." I was exasperated now. My stomach growled for food.

The cops looked at me.

Cecil said, "What did you say?"

"Nothing," I said. "Not a damn thing."

We watched Avis strike the matches, hold each one till it sputtered at her fingertips and then drop it at her feet. All six of us watched her, fascinated, each time sure she was letting it burn into her flesh. She stared at the matches very seriously as though this was what we had brought her here to do.

Then the matches were all black and cold around her feet, and she closed the box very carefully as though it were a miniature coffin and the viewing was over, and then she



flipped it at the tall matron and it hit her where her breasts should have been and bounced and plopped on the marble floor. The two women, looking a little scared, moved slowly in on her, and

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pounced on her as Arabel rose, trembling, putting her hands out to touch her.

"Need any help?" Jack said, laughing.

"You two apes get out of here," the stout one said. She fumbled at the door and opened it. They went into the ward, and the door slammed and they were gone.

She didn't say anything on the ride across town. I drove her to her house on Buckeye Street and parked where I had before. I reached in front of her and got the automatic out of the glove compartment.

"He may be around here someplace. I'm gonna get you safe and locked in the house before I go."

We walked in the moonlight up the path to the dark porch, and I opened the door, and she still didn't speak. She went right to the bedroom and laid on the bed and kicked her shoes off and crossed her arms over her face and cried softly. I looked in all four rooms and on the back porch to make sure. Then I went back to the bedroom and looked down at her.

"Want me to make you some coffee?" She didn't say anything but I couldn't hear her crying anymore. The moonlight fell across her through the window. I could see the side of Nrs. Cabbage's house, milky white. Then she took her arms down and looked up at me.

"You still haven't eaten anything, have you?" She smoothed back her hair, her mouth open a little and moist.

"That's what my stomach keeps saying."

She reached out and took my hand. "Poor little thing."

"Poor little thing? With all you got on your mind, you

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calling me poor little thing?"

"Hush. If I don't stop thinking about it, I'll go stark, staring made. Stay with me awhile."

She swung her legs around and sat on the edge of the bed and pulled herself to her feet, holding my hand. "I'll fix us something to eat 'fore we both drop in our tracks."

She walked listlessly in the kitchen. She hadn't even turned on the lights, but the moonlight glowed softly in the rooms.

"You lock the front door?"

"Yeah."

She pulled the light cords and the kitchen was bright, a little closed—in place with another day just getting born outside.

"You know how to build a fire?"

"Yeah."

I built a fire in the cook stove while she got the coffee ready to boil.

"Now what else?" She stood in the middle of the kitchen with her thumb between her teeth thinking. Then she looked around in the cupboard. "Salt and pepper."

"Salt, with pepper on it. Sounds good."

"I'll look in the icebox." She went out on the porch, and I stood behind the screen door and looked at the way the moon was shining in the mimosa tree in the back yard.

“Here’s some pinto beans I can warm up. And a couple of pork chops. I tell you what. I’ll just fix us a real supper.”

“At one o’clock in the morning?”

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“Why not? Ever’thing else’s turned upside down.”

“True.

“You like to have some nice sliced tomatoes and some onions fresh out of the ground with some corn bread?”

“Does a chicken have feathers?”

“Come help me round up some fresh tomatoes.”

I went out on the porch and followed her into the yard. The grass was wet and the crickets were singing.

“Watch the clothesline,” she said, ducking it. I ducked too, thinking of Lucius. Up sand down behind the houses, all the back yards were lifeless, pearl gray in the moon. I felt the gun in my hip pocket. She glanced around, too, watching the shadows to make sure they didn’t move.

Just under the limbs of the mimosa tree the little garden patch started. Fluffy pink and purple blossoms lay in the grass and among the tomato plants. Everything smelled strong and fresh and good.

“Is that green beans growing up those sticks?”

“Un—huh. And I got lettuce and they was some strawberries but they’re all gone now. And over by the coal house is some poke greens but they take too long to cook. “I’m hungry as a wolf myself. You, too?”

“Now ain’t I?”

“You come Sunday and I’ll fix us the best Sunday dinner in all Knoxville. Just you and me and Avis.”

“I’ll be right here.”

She squatted among the tomato plants and her hands moved among the leaves and she had her head to one side, trying to find

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some ripe tomatoes. I sat on my heels beside her in the soft earth. The aroma of her hair and of the tomato vines was too much. Too much! “Man, o’man, it sure smells good out here!”

“See if you can find some nice onions over yonder, ‘stead of breathing on my neck. I’m about to lose my balance.”

I stooped among the plants, looking for the green spears of onions.

“Did you hear something?”

I stopped and listened, an onion plant dripping dirt from my hand. ft

“Naw. Just us, scratching in the ‘mater patch.”

“Let’s go in.”

She had one tomato in her upturned hand and three laid out along the inside of her arm up against her belly. Under the mimosa tree she stopped and looked around. Not looking for a sign of Lucius and the dog, but letting the night soak into her.

“Frank, don’t it seem like we’re the only two people awake in the whole city?”

I smiled and nodded and kissed her cheek.

While she fried the pork chops, I sat at the table and drank coffee and watched her walk about the kitchen. She got the oven hot and made us a batch of cornbread. I had to slice the tomatoes and wash the onions. We ate and didn't talk mush—just felt each other near. And she'd get a faraway look in her eyes and notice me looking at her and say, "What's you looking at?"

"You."

And we wondered why we hadn't heard from Lennis and Troy and then we thought maybe they hadn't heard about us finding Avis at

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the midway.

"Well, let's not talk about it," she said. "Tomorrow I'll go get Avis, and 'fore too long ever—thing'll be all right."

She got down some peach preserves and we had some with country butter on the crisp cornbread.

"You think you ought to stay alone here tonight?"

"What do you think? You think he'll try——?"

"Never can tell. Look at your hands. You can hardly light that cigarette."

"Well, dammit, you're supposed to light a woman's cigarette for her."

"I know it. I just like to watch the way you do it."

"I hope you get your eyes full."

"You go like this . . . "I tried to imitate her. "And I get butterflies."

"Aw, shoot a monkey, Frank. You lie like a——"

"Well, I do. Do I make you feel any certain way?"

She looked at me through the smoke. "You make me feel you ought not to stay here much longer."

"Come over here."

"What for?" But she was getting up, dragging on the cigarette. When she got under the light, she threw back her head and blew the smoke up at the bulb, and reached up and yanked the cord.

I put my hands on her waist and drew her down on my lap.

"Let's us just sit here in the dark," she said.

We sat quietly, and I ran my hands up and down her back and over her ribs and she hugged me around my neck.

"Your breath smells like peaches and cornbread."

"Well, I been eating cornbread and peaches."

"You have, haven't you? Do I smell of peaches and cornbread?"

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tlyour bresth smells like peaches and cornbread."-

"Yeah. And you got the smell of the whole summertime on you.

"I wish you'd quit sneaking your hands down there. If you'd just go ahead and put 'em back there, maybe your big o' heart'd stop pounding against me so hard."

I did what she told me.

"I wish it would rain again. It's so sticky, and I'm so tired and weary and sad and blue. I'd just love to lay on the bed and listen to it rain—to' ease my jangled nerves."

"Maybe if we lay on the bed and listen hard enough, like when we used to lay our ears on the tracks to hear the vibrations of the train coming, maybe it yill rain."

“Well, I can see I’m gonna have to get up off your lap.” She got up and blew cigarette smoke in my face.

She was facing the front door with her back to me and I saw it stiffen.

“What is it, honey?”

Her hand reached back and her fingers clawed into my shoulders. “Look! Standing on the porch,” she said in a deep husky whisper.

I looked. The bent, black shape of a man stood at the window in the door. Suddenly, another shape rose up beside him in the gay light; its pointed ears were black and sharp, and it was looking in, trying to see us. I heard the shrill screech of claws on the glass.

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## Chapter 6

I ran to the front door, pulling the automatic out of my hip pocket.

“Be careful, Frank!”

“Lucius, I got a gun here! If you don’t quit rattling that doorknob, I’m gonna shoot right through this keyhole!”

“He—he—he—it’s you, is it?”

“I wants to bless you!”

“Whun—whun—whun—ur’ s my d—d—d-daughter? Hi—hi—hi—hi got t—t—t--t--to, to find her. Sh—sh—sh—she can’t r—r—r--run loose in the world. Hi—hi—hi—tell you, sh—sh—sh—she can’t run lu—lu—lu— loose in the wor—world.”

“She’s in the juvenile. Listen, Lucius, you better give up on this. You gonna get yourself killed.”

“Hi—ti—ti d—d—d—done, guh—guh, guh—got——” All this stuttering is getting on my damn nerves——just remembering it. I believe in telling a thing the way it was, but if I keep trying to imitate Lucius’ way of talking, I’m going to run out of breath before I can get it all told.

So I’ll just tell you what he finally got said, but you can imagine how nerve—wracking it was listening to that at three o’clock in the morning. Especially with what he had to say about his life with Avis.

So what he said was, “I done got myself blinded. Reckon I don’t care ‘bout dyin’. But first I got to rid this world of Avis. Avis . . . Avis . . .” Sounded like he was spellbound by the name itself. “When I done that I can get me what rest I deserve. I won’t mind being blinded. I deserve that, too. You

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tell Arabel to come to the door.”

“What’s he stuttering about now?”

I looked back down the hall at Arabel. She stood in a flood of moonlight that fell through the bathroom window over the tub and hit her along the hips and glowed right through that blue and white polka—dot dress, and I saw her legs as plain as daylight.

“He wants you to come to the door. Come ahead. He can’t hurt you. It’s locked and I got the gun ready.”

“Just keep it away from e or I might use it on him.”

Lucius was trying to calm the dog. It kept wanting to scratch a hole in the door and its paws made screeches on the glass like chalk on a blackboard. “Get down from theret Mary You mind mel!” Then he whispered, “Arabel, you there?”

She was by my side, looking through the glass, when he put his face to the pane

suddenly, and she stepped back.

"I heard you walking to the door, so why don't you speak to me?"

She whispered to me, "He don't look the same in those dark glasses. First time I've really laid eyes on him in two years. His face's thinner."

"Just like a woman—or a wife—to notice a thing like that," I told her.

"What do you want, Lucius?"

"That's a just place for it to end. Being as how it all started there. Ain't it, Arabel?"

"What'd that mean?" I asked Arabel.

"Nothing I need to tell you now. Just make him get gone,

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Frank."

"Is that whur she is, Arabel?"

"But don't shoot less'n he tries to break in.

"He seems calmer."

"A man like him—calm' is just clouds bunching up before thunder and lightnin'."

So I said to Lucius, "Lucius, I'm giving you a count of ten to back off that porch and get gone with that dog of yours! I don't want to see hide or hair of either one of you!"

"I ain't deaf. You needn't shout. Arabel? Arabel, you listenin'?"

"I'm right here. You better light out before Lennis and Troy come by. They probably heard by now 'bout that crazy man at the midway."

"You think I'm crazy?"

"Well, ain't you?"

"I reckon I am, but she's crazier than I am. You let me in and you let me talk to you awhile and I'll tell you something you never dreamed of. Because you think she's pure, don't you?"

"Damn you, you keep your mouth off my child."

"She's mine, too. But she's the devil's more'n anybody's. You better listen to me, because if Lennis gets me 'fore I get her, you'll find out the hard way. I just figure you ought to know. You ought not to go on living in ignorance of it, being as how you keep making her out to be an angel."

"That's sure as hell what Y2 always said she was. I just said that she was a child and I loved her. You don't really think I'm crazy enough to let you in this house with that dog, do

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you?"

"I ain't aiming to hurt you or that lover of yours. The devil can wait for you two. But Avis—she ain't fit to live."

"You and that dog killed Wade. Don't let me get close to you, Lucius. I'm liable to cut loose and——"

"I hated it about Wade. He was like the rest of you Corums, but I swear I didn't mean it. He started in choking me and I couldn't hold Mary off of him. You let me in and talk awhile, and I'll tie Mary to the post out here. And when you've heard me out, you won't want to stop ups. Even you will know why it's got to be done."

Arabel looked at me. "Frank, you reckon we could let him come in?"

"He's tying up the dog. Without her he'd be harmless. It's Avis he's after. Let's let him in. Better than having them out loose, not knowing when he might jump out of the dark."

She said to him, "You got it tied up?"

"She's tied. Can I come in?"

I opened the door and just enough for him to squeeze in. He was breathing hard, and as he came in between us I caught a whiff of his breath. Foul as an open grave.

"You'll see . . . You'll see . . ." he kept saying, low and monotonous.

The dog barked and growled and I shut the door on it.

"Whur are you all?"

I said, "We're standing beside you."

"Let's go in the kitchen away from that barking," she said.

"You reckon you could take holt of my hand, Arabel?"

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"Where's the light of God you used to walk in?"

"Please don't mock me, Arabel. I'm old and feeble 'fore my time."

"I ought to use that automatic on you."

"I know. I know. But let me tell you and you'll see." He had his hands out in the darkness, feeling the air like

it was made of rubber. Arabel took one of his hands and I took the other. We led him down the hail and around the corner and into the kitchen where it was bright.

"That dog'll wake up the whole neighborhood," Arabel said. But it was us that got waked up.

We got him settled in a straight chair at the table. He laid his hands on the edge. Arabel and me stood on the other side, looking down at him. I saw us mirrored very tiny in his black glasses.

"I thought you dropped your glasses at the midway," I said.

"I carry spares. I'm always breaking them."

The look of pity on Arabel's face made me aware that I didn't feel any hate or meanness toward him myself.

"I can feel you all standing over me. Let's us just sit at the table."

"You like to have a cup of coffee, Lucius?"

"Well, I ain't eat me anything in three days almost." She poured us three cups of coffee and we sat around the

table. The scraps from our meal were still on the table, cold and greasy. He felt for his coffee and got a hold of it good and raised the cup to his lips.

She said, "It's hot, Lucius."

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"I feel it." He blew on the steam and took a sip and sighed from way down deep inside him. "You all ready to hear me tell it?"

"Don't tell me no lies now, Lucius."

"Did you ever know me to lie, Arabel?"

"I don't reckon you ever did, Lucius. I can't accuse you of that, anyway."

It sounded like a wife and husband, with her wanting to know what he was doing out so late.

"Then here's how it was." He took a long gulp of the coffee and said, "Ahh. That's good. That's real Arabel coffee." She smiled, shyly. "Well, I don't have to tell you why I took her away from you."

"I reckon I know. You heard me talking to her. She was getting old enough to wonder

and worry. She had nightmares about all those people with cancer and goiters and the little girls with polio she had to put her hands on—and all the sins she heard people testify to.”

“You never would believe the light of God was in her, that Jesus’ healing touch was in her little hands. I believe it yet. It was there. She was pure then. But something happened. But I wasn’t gonna let you ruin her, make her doubt her calling.”

“You never would believe she wanted to be like other children, would you? You——”

“I know. I know. But the way of Jesus is lonely. She might have been all right. But Wade said he was going to take her away from me, and Lennis said he’d shoot me down like a dog if I didn’t stay away from you all. So I took her and went to

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Mississippi, and we traveled the country, preaching the gospel and healing the afflicted. And they listened to me because they wanted to hear her, too, and come under her healing power. For six or seven months we was happy in the light of the Lord’s grace.”

“Didn’t she cry for me?”

“I won’t say she didn’t. You put doubts in her mind. But it was me It was me that caused it all to come out!”

“What? What did you do?”

Lucius was trembling so 1-iard he had to set the coffee cup down. I couldn’t take my eyes off of him. He was dark from traveling in the sun, and he had beautiful temples and a sensitive mouth and I imagined that he’d been handsome at one time in his strange way. He sat in the same chair where Arabel was sitting on my lap when she saw his shadow at the door.

Listening to them talk, I felt left out, like an intruder. My head ached with the strain of trying to understand what he was stuttering, and as he got into it, it got worse, high and shrill, like a bird out of its mind.

“Don’t cry, Lucius. You don’t want Mr. Swaggerty to see you crying, do you?”

“I ain’t crying.”

I lit a White Owl and watched Arabel light up a Kool and we listened to him.

“I didn’t cry even then. Because when a man falls so low he loses Jesus’ grace, he knows in his heart that a river of tears ain’t gonna move his Lord. What I had to do was written in the Book. And I done it. I went into the kitchen and jabbed my eyes

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out. For if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out. But it was both eyes that damned me, and I plucked them out and threw them in the sink. And they said when they found me naked on the floor I was all over with blood. I felt clean then, till they told me I wouldn’t die.”

Arabel’s eyes were locked, and her mouth was open with smoke curling out of it and the cigarette trembled in her fingers and fell into her lap. She didn’t even move, and I didn’t move either for a second, watching it burn into her dress. Then I fumbled for it in her lap and caught it by the fire end and flung it on the top of the stove. Then I held her hand tight.

“Your eyes! Your own eyes, Lucius! Why?”

“I’m going to tell you why. One night in Savannah, she asked me to undo the little white organdy dress she wore at the meeting. We walked a long way in the cold December

night to the rooming house and her fingers were numb and I thought she was freezing to death. They wasn't no heat in the room and she was shivering and her teeth chattered and her lips were blue. I undid her dress and it slipped down her legs to the floor and she stepped out of it and the way she stepped out of it, oh, God, oh, Jesus, when I saw the way she stepped out of it. I knowed that the devil had stepped his icy feet across the threshold of my soul, and I felt the cold wind of wings rushing past me and I knowed that Jesus had left me to myself. I made her get down and pray with me and we prayed nearly an hour and her begging me to let her get in the bed and wrap up in the quilts. So finally I put her in the bed and rolled her up tight in the quilts, and I went out and walked in the dark, and it commenced to snow, but I

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kept on walking, and at daybreak I come back and sat in a chair by the bed and watched her sleep till she opened her eyes, and when saw me sitting there I reckon she had a feeling that morning of what I hadn't been able to get off my mind. Because the devil was in my soul now, walking up and down in it with them icy feet chilling me to the spine. And a month later I got in the bed with her, and she opened up her arms like she'd been waiting for me all that time, like she'd felt my eyes on her ever since that first morning and she seemed glad that it was finally happening. She didn't fight me, Arabel. No more'n I fought you the night you——”

room

“ Lucius

But she spoke to me, low and hard, every word clear. you go another step, Frank Swaggerty.” I turned. Her eyes stared right into me

“Don't

her eyes scared me worse than I had been since day before, when she came into my office with down her body. The silence was like a huge The jabbling tick of the alarm clock came from

three o'clock the

the rain dripping

breathing thing.

the warmer over the stove.

I couldn't move. Moths were knocking their brains out and

“Shut up Stop it!” Arabel shot up out of the chair and

backed screaming against the stove. I didn't go near her. You don't touch a person when they're like that.

“My own daughter . . . my own daughter .

murmured. And I saw sweat glisten under the lower rim of his black glasses.

I got up and went toward the door. I had to get out of that

That look in

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bursting their wings against the naked light bulb over the table and a huge June bug crashed and crashed and crashed against the screen, trying to get in, till it flopped back on the dark porch outside.

Lucius' head was bowed, his chin dug into his chest and his hands gripped the table edge,



the fingers white against the bone. “Arabel? Arabel, will Jesus forgive me? Is there any hope of having His love again? Will He ever deliver me from this darkness I brought on myself?”

Arabel panted, pressing her hair back tightly along the sides of her head. “I don’t know about Jesus, Lucius. But I can deliver you.” She sat down, staring at me. “Sit down, Frank. I reckon now’s the time to tell you—to tell you both. And you needn’t give Lucius that pitiful look.”

I sat down and heard the chair creak under my weight. The room seemed to get smaller because my body seemed to swell as though I had been bitten by snakes and spiders. I started up a fast sweat. Something very vague was being focused in my mind and I had a feeling of dread.

“You remember where you first met me, don’t you, Lucius? But Frank wasn’t there—not that he would have remembered. They found me out with some boys who’d stole a car and they put me in the juvenile. And that Sunday, Lucius come and preached to us. I listened to you, and I said yes, I wanted to give my heart to Jesus, but that I wasn’t ready yet. And one of the boys they caught me with laughed at the way you stuttered and they laughed at me. That night, Wade came to see me and he called me a whore and said I ought to get Troy to pimp for me. And even Lennis

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said I wasn’t any count, that since Momma and Daddy died they’d tried to raise me tight and have one of us turn out worth something. So I decided to rid them of me, and when they let me go, I stole some money from Wade while he was asleep and I got on a bus to Galveston. I was going to get a job and live with my mother’s sister. They said she was in the hospital with TB. So I walked the streets looking for work and a place to live, and one night on Post Office Street a man was in this cafe and he told me where I could stay cheap. There was a house full of girls there, even some Mexica’ns, and when I found out what they did at night, I didn’t give a damn. Well, I did, but that’s how I felt, because I thought that must have been what I was born to be. They told me a ship was in and how I could get some easy money. I didn’t claim to be, cherry then, but I wasn’t a whore either—till they brought a young man to my room.”

She didn’t have to tell the rest and, when she looked at my face, she knew she didn’t, but she went on anyway and I let her. I just sat there and pulled my sticky clothes away from my skin.

“He told me he hadn’t ever been in a whorehouse before. I was his first one, and I told him he was my first one, and he was just as scared at I was. He was sweet and gentle and he said, ‘Let’s play like we’re not even in this house. Let’s play like we’re in my house in Knoxville, in my room upstairs.’ Because he’d tried and he couldn’t do it. ‘It’s the idea of the money,’ he said. So I said forget about the money, because I liked him and I didn’t want to spoil it either. Not that I was just dying to make love, but I liked him because of the way he acted and talked, but when you’re in a whorehouse you can’t just hold

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hands, so I said, ‘Yes, let’s play like we aren’t even here.’ After it was over, he said that it was wrong, that I was a sweet girl and I ought to go home and get married and live, a good life. Because I told him about you, Lucius, that you wanted to bring me to Jesus, and he said, ‘Go home and find him, and forget this town. But don’t ever forget me.’ I didn’t tell him where I lived because I was afraid it would get back to my brothers. He

took me to the bus station and gave me all the money he had made on the ship and he said, 'This is not for what we did together. This is because I want you to go home and not be what you started out to be tonight.' Then he went to Venezuela and I came back to Knoxville and went to the church where you were preaching and I went to the front to be saved and you laid your hands on me and——so now I'm saving you, Lucius. Avis is not your child."

Lucius' hands lay palm up on the table. "Then who's is she? That boy's?"

"She's mine," I said. Arabel looked at me and her eyes were bright with tears she was starting to shed. "She's ours," I said.

"I wasn't sure, Frank. I wasn't sure. You don't look the same."

"Reckon not. But I am the same. I thought about you on the way to Venezuela, but then I thought you might have a baby, so I tried to forget. Because that's the way I was."

Lucius' hands came together and he threw back his head and the light glared down on his face. "Then my eyes. My eyes—— I—I—" He rose, swaying over the table, and the chair scraped against the linoleum when he stepped back.

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"Where you going, Lucius? You don't have to go right yet. Rest awhile."

"I rested all I'm able. Good—bye, Arabel. God bless you."

Arabel reached across the table and fumbled with his hand.

"No . . . No . . . " he said. "I got to walk by myself. Jesus will take my hand now and lead me up out of the valley of the shadow of death." He turned, and it seemed he turned with an everlasting slowness, and he reached out and put his hands on the wall and he felt along it and went into the dark hallway.

I looked up at the bright bulb, at the moths flitting against it, and didn't move. He stopped just outside the kitchen, his back towards us.

"But Avis——she——she is evil, Arabel. Don't bring her home into my mother's house. Let her go."

"She's my child, Lucius. She's my burden now. She needs her mother."

"She don't need no mother. Let her find that man. He's her kind. Forgive me, Arabel, and forgive her, but don't go near her •"

"Lucius, promise me you won't hurt her."

"No. I reckon things are different now she ain't my daughter. So my sin and hers is separate now."

"Where'll you go? Take the house, Lucius. I'll move away. Stay here where you were born, and forget all about us."

"No, I can't forget. I'm gonna go on preaching salvation. They can laugh. I don't care. I'll stand on every street corner in the country and I'll preach His word. I'll stutter His word, but it'll be God's love I'm preaching. But she's evil past

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saving. Did you ever hear of a child so mean it would set fire to a dog? So Nary'll still want to find her. But we'll go away."

He went on into the living room, feeling his way in the dark. But he didn't stumble over anything. I heard the door open and the dog begin to bark and growl again.

"Hush," he said. "Hush it, Mary. It's all right now, girl. We're free of her now, girl."

Arabel stood in the kitchen doorway, giving me a questioning look.

"Let him go, Arabel. He4 knows what he wants to do. Can't you see he's got peace now?"

More peace than he's had in a long time."

I got up out of the chair and there was a schoosh sound. It reminded me of Arabel in my office dripping rain, and I started to laugh but I caught it and it came out more like a sob. Then we heard the cars coming.

She ran to the front of the house. "Come back in, Lucius Don't go out there! He's out in the yard, Frank!"

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## Chapter 7

I ran to the front door and got there just as she opened

it. In the flood of car lights swooping down on the house, flashing across the front of it, I saw Lennis' face and a gun rise up for the aim and heard it go off and saw the red sparks. The lights were so bright, Lucius was just a blur, falling.

"Get the dog, Troy

The dog had pulled the leash out of Lucius' hands and it had run in among the cars. The guns started firing and I heard the dog yelp like a pup.

Lucius' body lay on the ground and Lennis stood over it. Arabel pushed Lennis aside and knelt over Lucius. Where Lennis had stood, the black glasses were smashed in the grass.

"What's the matter with you?" Lennis stood over Arabel, the gun smoking in his hand.

Troy ran into the lights, shouting, "I hit that goddamned dog, but it kept running."

"It's okay, Troy. I shot this bastard."

"You shot the wrong man," I said, kneeling beside Arabel. The eyeless red sockets stared at the dark sky.

"Well, if it ain't Lucius, who the hell is it?"

"Hush, Frank, hush", said Arabel, crying, taking my hand.

"Is he dead or not?" asked Lennis, trying to find some purpose in our kneeling there.

"Yes," said Arabel. "Are you proud, Lennis?"

"What's the matter with her?" asked Troy.

"You tell me and we'll both know."

"Go, Frank, go," she whispered. "Park on the hill up on the

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next street and wait til ever'body's gone——then come back. Please come back. Please come back, honey. Please don't run off."

"You want me to come back?"

"Yes. Yes. Yes. You've got to be with me. But go. Lennis is mad. No telling——"

"All right. I'll go up there and wait."

"What are you two mumbling about? I thought I told you to stay away from her, Swaggerty."

"I'm going. aust leave her alone, Lennis. She's had enough for one night."

"Listen, you son—of—a——"

"Lennis! Let him go! Please. For my sake."

"All right. Get in that damn car of yours and get away from here. I'm gonna be looking for you."

"I won't be hard to find." I was mad enough to flail hell out of him, but for her sake I got sheepishly in my car and drove away.

From the hill, I could look down through the houses and the trees and see the lights.

Some of the cars went away and several cop cars came with sirens screaming and an

ambulance came and lights blazed in all the houses all around the holler and on the hill, with the neighborhood dogs barking, and it was an hour before they all went away. When I came back down and got out of the car, Mrs. Cabbage in an old nightgown and her hair wild like a rat's nest was going up the steps to her porch. She stood on the porch and looked at me.

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"She run me off. Lennis made me promise to stay with her, but she cussed me out and told me to go home. If you're that same prowler that was here this evening, you can go on in and murder her in bed. If you don't, that dog will——so it don't make no difference. I've washed my hands of that Corum crowd. They can all go to the bad place." She went in and slammed the door and snuck up to the window to watch me.

I could see the blood on the grass in the moonlight. All those cars had sure tore up that yard. The front door was unlocked.

I went in quietly, the way I had the evening before. The bedroom door was open and she was on the bed with the moonlight on her, coming through the window. I hadn't ever seen anybody tremble the way she was. She looked up at me, her eyes glazed.

"Fra—Fra—Frank." She tried to control her voice but couldn't. "I—I—I c—c—can't be still. I can't stop it."

I sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her up and hugged her. Her whole body shook.

"I'm cold. I'm cold, honey. I'm fuh—fuh—freezing. What's the matter with m—m—me? Hug me, honey. Huh—huh—hug me tight! Stop me. I can't s—s—stand it."

I lay down beside her and held her against me, rubbing my hands all over her trembling body. Then I got up and unbuttoned her dress and got it off, feeling it soft, moving over her soft skin, but I didn't want to struggle with the slip so I broke the fabric and got it off, and then I got the other things off, even the hose. Then I got out of my clothes and got on the bed with her again and kissed her all over and she began to calm down.

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"No, Frank. No, we shouldn't do it. Not now. Not tonight——not after to——" But she clung to me and pressed her body against me and kissed me.

"Yes, we are, Arabel. Because of what's happened. We're not children anymore. We're going to finish what we started thirteen years ago."

We did, too. And she didn't stay calmed down, but she stopped trembling. And it was the only clean, good, and pure thing we ever did in our lives.

I don't think she slept a wink for thinking of Avis. She started to turn me out of her bed after she'd got calmed down. Ain't nothing better than the time after making love to calm a woman down.

She said, "Get up, Frank. It ain't right, what we're doing. And Avis lying up there in that juvenile home, wanting her momma."

"Well, I'm her daddy, so I don't see any sin in it."

The moon made the side of Mrs. Cabbage's house look ghostly and the grass was silvered over with dew and little bowl-shaped, fine-spun spider's webs. The moon hung huge over a hill that arched like a cat's back, and at the top and on the slope were many trees and some houses that looked cut out and pasted on the starry wallpaper of the sky. I want you to know how beautiful it was that night. Because that was the last night I spent in Knoxville.

"Look out yonder, Arabel, at that full moon."

"I can't see out. You're so big I can't see out."

She came crawling over me to the open window and just lay

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across my waist with her elbows on the sill where a bee lay dead, with her long fingers on her cheek. I laid one hand on her other cheek and it was blissful.

"Look at that moon! Look, look! The clouds, the clouds, and, oh, that star! Can you smell how it is outside?"

"Yeah. Honeysuckle and jasmine."

A hollyhock, big as Arabel's face, nodded above her head. "That ol' moon sure is peaceful with the clouds riding across it. What are you doing?"

"Nothing." So I kept my hand still.

"You go on in on the devanet."

"Why, honey, I couldn't get my leg on that little ol' thing.."

"I just don't feel right, Frank."

"Seems like to me you felt pretty good, little while ago."

"You hush! I just can't sleep in the same bed with you."

"Why not, I'd like to know? I'm too big?" I have to admit it—it hurt my feelings.

She turned on my waist and moved over my body till her mouth reached mine. "No, because I love you."

"Good gosh a—mighty, Arabel! I love the livin' fire out of you. Listen here, I'm just a stumblebum impersonating a private detective, and I'm thirty—three years old in October. I don't reckon I started growing up till tonight, and I'll probably keep on crying out loud at movies, but you reckon we might go over to see Avis in the morning and see what she thinks of us getting married?"

Arabel clung to me like a wet leaf when I said that.

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After we got calmed down again, I asked her something that had been preying on my mind. "Arabel, how come you knew who I was when you came to my office yesterday? Did you really remember me that clear all those years?"

"I wasn't sure. A few months ago I was standing in front of the popcorn stand waiting for a bus, and you walked by and it give me the funniest feeling. You looked so damn much like you owned the town—in your sweet, shy way, I mean—that I asked the popcorn man if he knew who you was. And he laughed real big and said, 'Yeah, that's Frank Swaggerty. The world's greatest private eye.'

"I remembered your name was Frank, but I still wasn't sure. Then when I heard about Lucius, I was so bitter I wanted to get you in on it, and if it was going to be anybody get hurt, I hoped it would be you, and I just wanted to see how you'd look at your child, and if you remembered me, and I don't know what all was going on in my mind."

"I just wondered."

"I feel a draft," she said, giggling. I put both my hands on her down there. I could smell her mingled with honeysuckle and jamsine and wet grass and the sheets and the old mattress on the bed where Lucius was born and the old, woody, little bit musty smell of the house.

"It's awful late," she said, sleepily.

"Awful early, you mean."

I felt the early morning air come through the screen and tingle on my toes. If I wasn't the most contented man in the world that morning!

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But I couldn't keep from thinking certain things about Avis. And I reckon that's what kept Arabel tossing and turning on the mattress until the cobwebs on the grass glimmered gently in the sun and a rooster crowed somewhere in Mrs. Cabbage's corn patch.

Arabel was full to the brim of two kinds of joy—joy in a big man who had come to her across thirteen years of toil and despair and joy in finding again the child he had given her. And also new sorrow—overseeing a wrecked human being, who had in his strange misery and guilt made her miserable, cut down by her brother.

Afraid, too, maybe, as I was, that that dog would come back, bleeding and howling, whimpering and whining, because its master was dead and his blood was still on the porch from me stepping in it on the grass and tracking it, and because it had lost its chance to get the child who tormented it.

And Arabel was thinking of being a mother again, or really a mother now for the first time, to the little girl she'd lost long before its supposed father had taken it away.

Thinking, too, though, as I was, sleepless beside her love—soft and worry— weary body, our eyes stinging with no sleep, of that face and those eyes and that voice screaming for Rago, the Gypsy.

And wondering whether he had been her lover—she who was only thirteen but who knew more about the world's sins, pouring in agony from endless mouths, than either of us would ever know, blessed as we were with ignorance and only the knowledge of hope. I dreaded the responsibility of being a father to a child who knew so much more and so little less than I did, but I was

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full, too, of the promise of love—love with the woman beside me and with the child who lay that night in a cell in the juvenile home. In that love—warm, sleepless bed, there was a feeling of rebirth and of a future that could be just as terrible as it could be glorious.

That's why we couldn't sleep, as the rooster must have slept, until it woke other people in that neighborhood, but only startled us out of a stupor.

We didn't speak as we got up and dressed in the pale morning light, and only after a few cups of coffee in the kitchen with the wood stove warm beside the table, did we speak at all, nervously wondering how it was going to be, facing Avis with the truth, and Avis facing us with whatever truth she had for us.

She found one of Lucius' old razors and I shaved at the kitchen sink with water she had heated on the stove, while she pressed my pants and shirt, standing barefooted in her slip at the ironing board.

She washed at the sink, too, because she didn't want to waste time heating enough water to take a bath in the tub.

I watched her pull the freshly ironed, blue cotton dress over her head and smooth it down over her body and pull on her stockings that had a run in one of them and then comb her hair in front of a mirror she had propped on the sill over the sink, listening to the electric crackle as the comb swept through her hair. It was going to be a hot, dry day.

"Is that somebody knocking at the front door?" She stopped the comb in her hair and

listened.

I heard it and got up.

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"I hope it's not the police this early." She went through the hail to the front door and came back with Troy walking behind her.

Troy looked at us. He didn't have to ask anything. "All I got to say to you, Frank Swaggerty, is—you better treat her good, you hear?"

"We're getting married, Troy, so shut up."

"Married! You aren't birdin' me, are you?"

"Like it or lump it, it's true. Now have some coffee with us and then you can carry us 'over to the juvenile."

"That's what I come about."

Troy poured some coffee and leaned against the sink and blew at the steam, squinting his eyes. I sat down again and Arabel put her hands on my shoulders. She was looking at the look on Troy's face and I felt her stiffen.

"She broke loose."

"She done what?"

"The matron put her in the shower and went to get her a dress to put on and when she came back, the shower room was full of steam but Avis was gone."

"How? How did they let her get away like that?"

"She was just gone. She had to climb over that high wire fence to get out but she done it. She got over. And she didn't have a stitch of clothes on. The matron took her clothes, so she just went flying off in her birthday suit."

"Oh, good God in heaven! Did they go look for her?"

"Yeah. Not a trace of her anywheres. The matron said she acted like something wild—— said she was afraid of Avis. She

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never used to be that way, Arabel. They's something pretty damn bad got into her these past two years."

I got up and held Arabel's hands. "I'll find her."

I reckon the calm but highly emphatic way I said that tended to annoy Troy. "You ain't got a doubt in this world you're gonna find her. Now what makes you so sure?"

I stopped in the doorway and looked at him, and something about his cocky buck teeth made me want to change the expression of his face. "Because I'm her real father."

His lower lip drooped and his buck teeth just sorta hung in his mouth. But then he got tickled and started pointing his finger at me. "Man a' man, what a clown you turned out to be!"

\* \* \*

I ain't gonna string this out with a detailed account of what all I did during the next three weeks. But that little Dodge ended up with her tires bald and booted and the radiator boiled over more times than once and the sun raised paint blisters on the roof, and sometimes it rained and she shone like a new dime.

But most of the time it was caked with dust and bird droppings where I'd parked it under the trees in some small town square or on some residential street where I slept with my knees under my chin in the back seat.

I ate on the go——pork and beans out of a can, loaf of light bread propped up in the seat,

Milky Way in creeks in the early a.m., shaved by the rear—view mirror with cold water, so I had a whole collection of cuts, but I didn't fuss with my clothes at all—wrinkled and shiny in the seat.

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My eyes got so bloodshot and my face so red from the sun and my walk so lopsided from grogginess, people in those small towns stepped off the curb or onto the grass when they saw me coming, and cops and deputies followed me all over town with their palms riding their pistols. I'd try to talk to people and they'd just back off and turn and trot briskly away, and if they backed against a wall, they'd do a short roll and push off.

Then the guardians of hearth and home would catch me in the grocery store or a drugstore or the courthouse latrine and want to know what I was fixing to do there in Chattanooga, there in Florence or Shetfield or Huntsville, Alabama, or there in Orange—burg, South Carolina.

Because I figured they'd go south. "They" because I had a feeling that she'd find Rago much more quickly and easily than I'd find her. I ran down every midway or carnival I could find trace of. The colored posters on the sides of barns and deserted cou'ntry stores and ancient filling stations were like road signs for me.

I was wandering, like I had been wandering years ago when I got that ship in Baltimore that was carrying oil to Venezuela via Galveston, but that the men told me was carrying vaseline to the Virgin Islands, which I believed.

Only this time, I was not just passing the time. I had a purpose that at the end of three weeks had turned into an obsession that had me wildly swinging my arms for balance like on the edge of a cliff.

It got so I looked so wild—eyed wouldn't nobody cash a check for me, and I was eating wild grapes and apples and anything wild

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I could eat, and then I ran out of gas four miles from the city limits of Waycross, Georgia. I hit on the idea of swapping a bushel of apples for a gallon of gas.

I picked them at a rural junkyard that was surrounded by a flock of apple trees and the man at a one-pump filling station gave me a gallon of gasoline for them. I got into Waycross at ten o'clock and wired Arabel for some money.

I was weak from hunger and about to fall on my face from lack of sleep and I reckon I was on the verge of delirium. I put the gun in my pocket and walked aimlessly around the town because even the condition I was in I wasn't wasting any time.

I came to a railroad crossing at the city limits and stood close to a coal train rushing by to get some of that breeze it was working up. And a bum waved to me from a pile of coal. The caboose went by and I saw the tent in a field near a row of squalid houses, and it was surrounded by old cars and lightning bugs and sedgegrass trampled down.

I was so tired and hot that walking through the field seemed like wading knee—deep against the current of a mountain stream. As far as my mind was concerned I was back in Knoxville at the revival meeting Arabel had taken me to. I felt lonely as the very hell and I wanted more than anything else in this world to touch her the way I did that night as we moved through the crowd.

I stooped through the opening where the tent flaps were tied back like the wings of a giant brown moth, and the glare of the huge naked electric bulbs with gnats and moths



flitting around them stung my red eyes. I stood behind the rear row of benches in the sawdust where old men and women had spit tobacco and snuff juice and listened to the sudden, solemn jubilations of the congregation.

I couldn't see clearly the girl who was preaching on the platform but I knew it was Avis——just the white haze of her dress beneath the yellow haze of her hair as her head rolled and her eyes rolled and her high——pitched small child's voice piercing the smoldering heat of the tent and the lights and the bodies pressed together.

Rago stood behind her, tall, thin, dark, with a violin held limp at his side. Now and then he'd say amen with a distracted look on his face, the look some drummers have when they're idle and the tenor saxophone is wailing and keening.

I sat down beside a woman with a couple of half-naked babies in her lap and a wad of snuff in her cheek. She had brown stains at the corners of her thin, sunken mouth, and gray hair stuck out in wisps from her skull like cobwebs.

I didn't even think, at last I've found her, because I couldn't think. Thoughts wouldn't harden in the thick molasses of my brain, and it was like a dope——drunken dream must be, my eyes only mirrors reflecting the moth——like wavering of the white haze and the butterfly wavering of the yellow haze, shimmering beyond the heads under the glaze of the lights, hanging like flames from the belly of the tent.

But the shrill voice stirred around in the molasses like an electric current.

"Jesus, I tell you, Jesus, Jesus is here with us tonight in this very tent——uh——and His heart is bleeding upon the sawdust——uh——and it is bigger than this tent——uh——it is wider

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than this field——uh, it is burning hotter than the night——uh, and the stars are His eyes——uh, and He moves, oh, He moves——uh, he moves, Jesus moves——uh——He moves among us like a wild spirit——uh, trying to get into our hearts——uh.

"He's trying——uh to get in——uh, oooooooooo, Lord Jesus, Jesus, sweet Jesus, oh, don't you know He's trying——uh to get in——uh to our hearts——uh, because——uh only if He can get in——uh to our hearts——uh can He stop the bleeding——uh, ooooo the awful bleeding——uh, oh, sweet Jesus, for us Jesus, for us, oooooooooo, don't you know He's bleeding——uh tonight——uh, for us——uh, oooooooooooooo!

"Open, open, open——your hearts——uh to Jesus——uh and let Him——uh come in——uh——open your filthy, sin——rotten hearts——uh, let the poison——uh pour out——uh onto the sawdust——uh and let Him in——uh——open your filthy, sin——rotten hearts——uh——your hearts——uh are sewers——uh full of the filth——uh of your sins——uh, let Him wash you whiter than snow!"

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## Chapter 8

They were all swaying and heads were jerking and nodding, and some people popped up like jack——in——the boxes and yelled, "Yes, Lord I'm a sinner helibound! My heart is black and my soul is rotten to the core!"

And some sat still as statues like the woman next to me; her mouth hung open with a little puddle of spit forming between her lips and her gums, and eyes that were like marbles.

And the first thing I knew was I was moving, too, partly about to keel over from just plain bone——aching weariness, partly because I felt it, too, didn't think it, just felt it, felt it ebb against me like the surf on a shore and I was an object dropped on the sand and the

tide was pulling me into its vast rhythm and I didn't even resist, because that would have taken thought.

To think, wait now, this ain't the way I go, don't try to snow me, because I know better. To think, it ain't in me, this feeling ain't right, not for me, but I was only feeling and I felt myself being pulled into it and it wasn't me anymore—it was us, we were swaying and the blood was throbbing and jerking in us like blood in a frog's leg when you put the current to it.

And she was the current in us all, her shrill, electric voice crackling and scaring in the smoldering musk of human sweat and human misery, and that shrill voice put its molten fingers on our sores, where the pus was, under the scab where the poison festered, where the devils's nectar had corrupted our blood and we let it seep into every foul crevice of our souls.

Let the rot putrify every God—formed limb and tissue and vein and every inch of quivering flesh till worse than Job we

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all, all went crippled and crawling like vermin through the swamp of this world, when all we had to do was let Jesus' sweet blood pour into our hearts and clean out with roses and lilies the maggot—ridden places where each of us cowered like lice.

"Come, come unto me," she screamed to us, and our ears rang like struck brass with the hope of salvation, of peace and rest and heaven and glory, yes, Jesus, yes, Lord, yes—I'm coming, Jesus.

"I want to testify here tonight to the sins I have committed. The poison in my heart is coming up in my throat. I tell you, it's strangling me—I can't breathe. You don't know! You don't know what a sinner stands before you.

"When I was a young man I coveted my mother's body and I dreamed corruption, and God stood on one side of my bed and Lucifer stood on the other side of my bed, and God said, shut your eyes, boy, and go from this house and wander the earth and be restless on the earth until the image of your mother is burned from your eyes by years of wandering.

"And the devil said, stay, stay, stay, have you not seen the look in your mother's eyes, for she has looked upon you and she has dreamed, too, of corruption in the night, and I said, no, no, and I ran away into the world and wandered.

"And I came to a place where there were women who sold their bodies and I was afraid and I came into a room where a young girl lay, and there was corruption between us and poison flowed in that room, a poison flower sprang from that seed, and I, I wandered the earth again, until I came again to the place where I began, and I beheld that flower—that flower sent its poison out

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in a smell of innocence that kills----"

Then I came out of it and this is all made up because I must have been in a trance, but I remember the feeling of it, and I reckon I was a little conscious because I was not only caught up in what she was pretending to be, but, aware still of what she was.

It stopped when I opened my tight—squeezed eyes and beheld her there on the platform, on her knees in that white organdy dress, her yellow hair glimmering and her eyes rolled back and her arms outspread, and I heard her yell, "Hear him, Jesus! Hear him all ye sinners! Oh, praise Jesus, praise Jesus!"

Rago helped her down off the platform, and in that fitful light she started toward me with

those child's arms spread and those small, little more than child's breasts shaped out by the dress drawn taut across them, and I was out of the trance just enough to realize why I had come and to know that if she got close enough she would recognize me, that in that crowd and confusion she might get away.

But I had started something. They had got me going in my crazed weariness, and now I had set a few off, too. The yellow magnet had them in her field and drew them to her like nails pulled crazily out of place, then straight and strong toward her.

But she started backwards, her arms up, and the people were drawn in toward her until they had her up against the platform. Then Rago reached down and pulled her up and she knelt on the edge and told them to form a line over yonder, and they did, weeping and yelling and muttering.

And all this time, the woman next to me was shaking my hand

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and patting my hip, giving me a gummy smile, while the babies bellered and squalled. She had tears in her eyes. She was really happy for me and for herself, because I had dropped my burden and she was relieved, too.

And I knew then why it all was. This was a bath, a huge bath and baptism—a baptism that happened to many of them every time, and many of them came every time to get clean. And that woman with the snuff stains at the corners of her mouth, plugging up the little red balloon, near to bursting baby faces with her nipples, was washed whiter than snow.

It was the only way she knew how to get clean, and the thing was she wanted to be clean. It didn't matter that that child, who didn't know what she was doing or saying, but who had seen enough and heard enough to say and do it right, had dipped her in the blood of the lamb.

But was she, the child, clean? Had she ever felt whiter than snow? Maybe after being with Rago, as she had been with Satterfield, she needed this, too. And I would know after she had finished healing the lame and the diseased who stood in the line, whose miraculous recovery washed clean the ones on the benches. Only some were on the ground in the sawdust and some were standing whirling in their tracks, and most were both in and out of this world.

But when I got outside and stood behind a pick—up truck that had been hauling cows, I saw another way to be both in and out of this world. Two kids, who had probably been dragged to the meeting by their parents, were having traffic with the devil in the goldenrod.

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I sat on the fender of the model—T and waited for the bath to get done. If they had a car, I would have to face them right there, among the stragglers, and as weak as I was . . . But they waited until everyone had gone, until the last one had shaken their hands, and the last one, who probably owned the tent, gave them a wicker basket. Then he drove away in a late model Buick, and Avis and Rago began to walk away from the tent toward the railroad tracks.

The tent was dark and empty now. Dust had settled over the field from the cars, and people were walking through the long grass, shaded by magnolia trees, to the row of dark houses, where lights came on, mellow and lonely. As I got to the road, following Avis and Rago, the fireflies were blinking all around, the clouds were drifting swiftly across

the face of the moon, making it dark, so I could follow without being seen.

They went off the road and walked down the tracks. I cut through some honeysuckle vines and blackberry briars into a field above the tracks. Avis' white dress was pale green in the light of the semaphore. Rago carried the small basket in the crook of one arm and helped her balance herself with his other hand as she walked the railroad track and he walked the ties. She looked down at her feet and held her free arm out, moving gracefully in the muggy night air.

Their voices were a low murmur, hers soft and childish, his deep and gentle, and she giggled and he laughed. They stopped suddenly and walked very slowly, because I think they thought they heard something in the grass along the top of the red clay bank over their heads. I crouched in the grass and waited.

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"Just a stray hound dog," Rago said, as though he liked the idea, and I heard them move on.

A train came along, pulling boxcars, and I skidded down the clay bank and squatted beside the tracks. The smell of the train was strong and flinty in my nostrils. When the train passed, I wanted to be suddenly there, only four feet from them. But I looked under the train, through the blur of quick flicking wheels and I saw them go up a low bank and into the grass and then her white dress got dim at the edge of some trees. The caboose went by and a man in overalls spit over the railing and I got sprayed. The yellow light gobbled him up and I was alone on the tracks. The train whistle howled far down the tracks where the lights of Waycross glowed metal blue on the sky.

I went over the opposite bank and got on a path and followed it into the trees toward some lights. When I got in the dark under the trees, I heard rain fall on the leaves above me. Ahead were some small cabins. Between them I saw a sign rigged up of many tiny red bulbs that said: AUTOCOURT. Everything was blurred by the rain and by the strain on my eyes from no sleep. I was so dead tired and hungry that I didn't know I was wading ankle deep in a stream behind the cabins till I started up the slope and felt my trousers clinging to my ankles and heard the squish—squa—shing sound my soles made on the grass.

I was thinking I had lost them. But I came around the corner of a cabin and heard a screen door open and saw a man run out into the rain toward the intersection where a car stood on the narrow highway. It was Rago. I let him go on, because I didn't want to have to use the gun. I waited till I couldn't see

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him running through the sheets of rain.

My heart beat hard. I didn't know what I would say to her or what I would do, but I had the screen door open and was going in, thinking only that she was my child and she was going to meet her father.

The door was very low because they hadn't built it for me and the room was as small as a nursery. The bed ran along most of the wall across from the door. She sat in the middle of the bed with the sheet twisted under her and the gray—black striped mattress showing. Her slender back was half toward the door. The white organdy dress was unbuttoned to her waist, and her long yellow hair fell down and curled over the white of her brassiere. Her legs were crossed. All around her, small change lay in the wrinkled folds of the sheet and glittered under the unshaded bulb that hung on a black cord from the ceiling.

“What’s the matter, ‘fraidy cat, scared of the rain?” She didn’t turn, thinking I was Rago come back. Cigarette smoke curled out from the side of her hair and wound around her head. She ran her fingers greedily over the money loose on the bed——dimes, nickels, pennies, quarters, half—dollars. He’d probably taken the few bills there were and had left the change for her to play with. The wicker basket lay crushed on the floor at my feet. In the quiet room with the rain drumming on the roof, the money made a sad, musical sound. Rain leaked from the mildewed roof and fell on the iron rail at the foot of the bed, bounced off onto the floor, making two separate sounds. Soft little squeals of animal pleasure came from the child on the bed. She held a fistful of change over her empty hand and

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cascaded the money.

“Undo me, Rago, honey.” She flung herself on her stomach and the rusty springs shook and heaved. In the same movement, she flung her arm out and watched the change in her hand slide over the bare mattress. She cocked her other arm behind her head with the cigarette between her fingers, the turquoise ring on one of them. There was something strange about the smell of the smoke. She was on her stomach with her head toward the wall where a roach crawled at an angle toward the ceiling.

I put my knee on the edge of the mattress between her splayed out legs, looking at her thin, but shapely legs, at the briar scratches on her ankles and at the pearl of sweat in the hollows behind her knees. I leaned over her and reached for the white buttons at the small of her back where the elastic band of her panties showed. There were a few freckles just beneath her brassiere strap. As my fingers fumbled with the buttons, I smelled the mattress. It stunk of old urine and the ruin of a thousand roadside copulations, and I smelled the innocent sweetness of her hair and recognized the sweet odor of her cigarette. I wanted to slap it out of her hand as though she held a wasp in the joints of her small fingers, but without even deciding it, I was pretending, playing a game with her, so I went on with it.

“I hate this shitty little dress, but the bastards have to have me virgin white so they can rub their eyes up against me like I wore the wings of aesus . . . Ouuuueee!! You’re dripping cold rain on my back.”

Suddenly, she stiffened and something in her coiled tight.

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She knew Rago’s fingers that well, and I was buttoning her up. Swiftly, she rolled over on her back. Her blue eyes looked up at me through wisps of yellow cotton candy. She flipped the cigarette at my face. The red tip shot past my ear, and then she drew her leg back, cocked over her chest, and her foot shot into my face. The blow stunned me but I caught her ankle as she tried to wriggle off the bed, yelling, “Rago! Rago!”

Her head hung over the edge of the bed, her hair spread out over cigarette butts and ashes on the floor. I grabbed her by the nape of her neck and pulled her up and pushed her back on the bed and pressed down on her shoulders. She hissed and snarled and spit in my face.

“Stop that yelling, girl! If he comes back I’ll shoot him. You want me to shoot him?”

“No! No! Don’t shoot Rago! Please don’t shoot Rago!”

“You gonna hush? You gonna quit kicking and lay still?”

“Yes, I’ll quit.”

We both panted. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked down at her.

"I seen you some place before. You were at the juvenile, weren't you?"

"That's right. You remember me?"

"You a damn detective?"

"Yes."

"They sent you to drag me back?"

"I don't want to have to drag you."

"You ain't gonna take me back, are you?"

"I been looking all over creation for you. I'm taking you

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back to your mother."

"I'll run off again—the first chance I get. Rago'll come and find me. I hate her and I hate my daddy. What if I was to kill them in their sleep?"

"Satterfield is dead."

"Goody, goody. I'm tickled to death to hear it."

"You really mean it, don't you?"

"You damned right. I hate the ground they walk on. Did they kill that dog, too?"

"No. It's still loose—hut looking for you, I reckon." She shuddered and frowned and clawed at the sheet. "Oh,

please don't let it find me, mister. I'll be good. Just please keep it way from me."

"I want to take care of you, if you'll let me."

"But if you make me go back, it'll get me."

"I won't let it."

"Listen here, mister. If you'll let me go and won't hurt Rago, you can have all this money on the bed."

"Why do you do it, Avis? Do you mean any of it—or you feel it yourself, what you say to them?" I didn't believe she ever did, but I hoped that up there, for a while, she was different.

"Oh, you was there, wasn't you? You was the giant that stood up at the back of the tent and confessed your sins. You were just tricking me, wasn't you?"

"Do you mean what you say?"

"Huh? Oh, yes, yes. I'm really a good girl. Rago is good, too. We roam around the country, trying to save people from their sins. Ask Rago when he comes."

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"Lying little—Get up. I'm taking you out of here." I stood up beside the bed, but she didn't move. She lay on her back and looked up at me, her eyes wild like a little fox. "I said, get up. We're going home, do you hear me? Your mother's been waiting two years to see you, just to touch you. I promise I won't tell her about this—where I found you. How can you live in this sewer?"

"I don't see nothing wrong with it."

I looked around the room. All around the floor—cigarette butts. "You think I can't smell what you been smoking?" The necks of whiskey and beer bottles stuck out from under the edge of the bed. Dust and lint puffs lay fat on the floor. The bureau drawers were open—his dirty shirts hung out and her underwear stuck out like a pink tongue. I watched two more cockroaches. Banana peelings and scraps of food had been thrown down on the floor with abandon. "This place looks and stinks like a cesspool."

"It don't bother me . . . Please don't take me back, mister  
"You get yourself up from there and come with me. A few weeks back home with your mother and you'll forget you ever saw this place. You'll forget all about Rago. You'll—  
—74'd been glancing about the room, and when I looked down at her again, her arm was flinging something white off the edge of the bed. The white dress was pulled up under her breasts and she was naked from her ribs down, and her legs were spread.  
"You can do it to me. Rago won't care. If you'll just go away when you're done with it."  
Her hand reached toward me.

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I grabbed it before her fingers could touch me. "Avis, I'm your father!"  
As I leaned over, reaching for her dress to pull it down, to cover her awful nakedness, I heard the screen door open. I pivoted and caught his fist in my stomach, but when I drew back, his white teeth gritted, I saw a long knife in his hand. The blade glistened red in the harsh electric light. I sank to my knees, catching hold and pulling on the sheet as I fell, and the money rolled around my head on the floor. He kicked me and slammed the door. I was sinking into a black whirlpool. I floated around and around on the edge of a suction pulling me down. But I could hear them talking, and I kept rising and sinking.  
"Nobody heard us," she said. "Let him lay there. He'll be dead in a few minutes. We don't have to go right yet, Rago. He's crazy as a geek. Said he was my damn daddy. Let's just push him under the bed."

"Get up from that bed and let's get out of here. I don't like to look at him."

"Well, push him under the bed then. I don't want to go now. Let's stay awhile. Look what I got for you, honey. Ain't you been wanting to all day long?"

The voices faded as I went down again. Then I felt them pushing me, rolling me over, his sharp—toed shoes kicking me, and something hard scraping against my side, and her small, hot hands pressing against my chest. She was squatting beside me and I saw the yellow haze of her hair against the naked light, and his legs moving, and then it was dark in the room, then I heard the

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springs creak over me and I couldn't breathe, and then it was dark in my head, everything stopped.

When I woke, I knew my eyes were open and that I could see, but the light was out. I moved my hand over the floor and there wasn't a dry place there.

I thought I would never finish crawling, dragging myself from under the bed, but I did, and I pulled myself up on my knees and I could see them, lying in the moonlight on the bed. They were naked—his dark skin next to her small, white body. My hand was numb, but I got a good enough hold on the pug—nosed automatic.

I rested my hand on the edge of the mattress and put the automatic against his ribs. The cold metal nose may have felt to him in his sleep like the wet nose of that dog. It startled him in the hot room and his body jerked. I pulled the trigger. In that little playhouse of a cabin that noise was everything there was. His chest heaved once, his arm fell over the edge of the bed and a cold cigarette dropped from his fingers.

Her yellow hair rose from the mattress and hung suspended in the moonlight. Holding to the mattress, I pulled myself up and stood over the bed. I fired into the bed, into the bed because I don't think I meant to hit her. As though the bullets were a violent gesture to Lucius. The cotton batting sputtered around her body as she tossed on the mattress—

wiggling, writhing, springing, bouncing, whirling around in the milky glow.  
Then I fell back on the floor and I saw her leap naked over my body in the darkness. I lay there on my back under a great weight, thinking and hoping that I was dying, that I would never

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wake up again, that I had finished forever.

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All right, Rooks, it belongs to you, too, now. You wanted it and you have it, straight from the jackass's mouth. So don't give me any more of that Mickey Mouse about how you're a poor homeless bastard and the world gives you the purple shaft every— time you turn around.

Now you won't have to ask me who she is when she drives by again tomorrow in that sweet little '37 Dodge. When Meese hit you in the kidney with the bu'tt of that shotgun, I thought, well, hell, if he wants to know that bad, if just smoking half the cigarettes and getting halves of the Milky Ways she pitches into the ditch grass ain't enough for him, I'll just tell the little worry wart the whole damned thing.

So now you know how come a guy like me ends up swinging a sickle, trimming grass on the highways of Georgia in the July sun. Oh, you got it, too, boy, I can see that. I can tell by the way you talk, by the way you listen. And you're young enough to have it bad. Now quit pulling at my arm. I know you ain't satisfied—you got to drain ever' last drop out of me, don't you?

She come down to Waycross and I told her. Maybe I shouldn't have told her every nasty detail, but by then I'd come to where I reckoned what a body didn't know might have a way of hurting them. So she sat there in that hick Georgia country jail and I told what a monster we had spawned in that Galveston whorehouse thirteen years ago. Lennis didn't come down, because he was at Petros for killing Lucius.

They showed her and Troy the cabin where they found me and

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she saw enough with her own eyes to make the telling of it seem ordinary. Then she told me something.

She took my big hands and laid them on her hard belly and said, "I'm pregnant. 'Fore long I'll be full to the brim with another you." I was still pretty weak from the knife and only a few hours out of the hospital, but that made me weaker, weak with a warm joy. She'll be near 'bout Avis age when I get out 'less they reduce it for good time. So we named it Grace, and that explains the little raven-haired, blue-eyed child that sits beside Arabel in the Dodge.

The reason it's only twelve years is because she went to my cousin at the packing house and he come down there in late August before the trial with the famous lawyer we have in Knoxville, a big fellow like me with a red nose, and a silk handkerchief in his breast pocket, and cousin Kemp said, "Well, Frank, I brought you that ham I promised you in the john that day."

Because they argued I hunted Rago down a purpose, to kill him. The thing was, he was from Waycross, and that didn't do me any good. But that lawyer got up in court and went on so about how I was a victim of circumstances that he had the whole sardine—packed courtroom dabbing at their eyes and him crying right along with them, and me thinking, you said it, brother. Only I was my own victim. That dog of Lucius's was only the dog



inside me that finally got out and bit me again. Because in that room, where I first touched Arabel in my old home that's now a used car lot, I got bit a long time before that by the dog of romanticism.

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And speaking of dogs, you've seen the warden's silver—gray German police dog, haven't you? Well, the first time I ever saw it, I was in the latrine and I felt something wet on my bare ankle and looked down behind me and there that dog was—licking my ankle for all he was worth. Blamed if that dog don't near 'bout break its leash when it sees me, wanting to lick me from head to toe like I'm some all day sucker.

So I've been bit and cured—cured by the hair of the dog that bit me. And I can tell you been bit, too, Rooks. Because I know what's going on in that 'skull of yours. That when you've put in your time next month for that car—stealing you done, and you hit the road again, you're gonna be thinking all the time 'bout how you might sometime join up with a midway in Savannah or some damn place and run across Avis—if that dog that's still loose ain't found her first—and keep her up till dawn, in a tent in some field, listening to the strange tales she could tell, because you was bit a long time ago, too. What you want to keep your eyes open for is a dog with some hair on it.