

Satan's Anvil

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by
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SATAN'S ANVIL

"Hell if I know," you say.

"What does that mean?" I ask. "Is that not you in these pictures?" I am already irritated with his answer. He's hiding something, and I want to know what it is.

"It's me," you answer looking closely at the three photographs he is holding in your face, "but I don't remember taking them." He pulls them away, and looks at them himself. He is so motherfucking nosey.

"How can you not remember?" I ask. "It's you! Your clothes are all off. This woman, a white woman, is lying there. She's naked, and you're naked. You appear to be having sex with her, judging by this little connection I see between you." I squint histrionically and point to the shadow that could almost be recognized as the base of his dick on one of the pictures. I want him to remember the sex and start bragging about it. Then maybe he'll spill the beans. "How can you not remember?! Her face isn't shown on any of these," I say, "but yours is on all of them."

"I don't know," you say. You wish he would stop pressing you for answers. He acts like a white man, all analytical and shit. If you don't know, you don't know.

"It sounds like you're not telling the truth," I say, hoping against hope that he would just come clean.

"I'm not lying," you answer. Juke gets on your fucking nerves at times. You look away hoping he'll change the subject.

He may act white, he looks anything but. He has that 'good' hair that folks envy, like an Indian. At his age, it's all white. And he's skinny. Frail is a better word. He's about six foot three, and he weighs about a hundred and fifty pounds. He looks like people you've seen

who have cancer. His ankles are twice their normal size because of fluid build-up, and he wears little slip-on shoes because that's all he can get on his puffy little feet.

"Well, who's the woman?" I ask.

"I don't remember, I tell you, I don't remember." He looks sick, real sick like he should be in a hospital. His sugar brown skin has a jaundiced pallor, and there are dark brown bags under his eyes. His cheeks are covered with little brown moles. Some of them are shaped like an ant's body parts, and are about as big. His bottom eyelids sag revealing the pink flesh under his eyeballs. His eyes are always too wet. He smiles, and his teeth are brown and crooked, and one of his top front teeth droops away from the gum. He looks terrible. You would think he would give up smiling.

"It sounds to me like you're just not telling," I say. I squirm in my chair. He is a stubborn cuss.

"Fine," you say, "I just ain't telling." Fuck him anyway. Them pictures ain't none of his business.

This approach isn't working. Maybe if I change the subject. "She looks a lot like that girl that jumped up on the stage the night we played in Champaign/Urbana. Do you remember her?"

"I remember," you answer, glad that he changed the subject. "Her name was Trudy."

"Trudy Miller." I could hear my voice turn nostalgic, "I sure wanted that little pink toe that night." I remember the gig, and I remember her. She was a college kid. Probably not more than 19. Very shapely, very intelligent. Acne on her chin. She studied physics, and wanted to be an astronaut.

"And she wanted you," you answer. "She liked the way you played the sax. You had the soprano out that night."

“I had the soprano *and* the tenor. But you’re right. She liked the soprano.” I was doing ‘My Favorite Things’ a-la-Coltrane.

“So what happened? How come she didn’t leave with you?”

“I got drunk. Was smoking that stuff,” I say. “I thought she left with you.”

“Not me,” you say. “I think she left with the Kong.”

“Probably so. That man screwed everybody that came within ten feet of him. I don’t know how he did it.”

“Women like drums,” you say, “and Kong was the king with those big ole monkey hands.”

He’s set up. Now the blind-side. “Did he take these shots?”

“How would I know that?” you ask. Damn him! Why don’t he forget them pictures.

“You were there!”

“Yeah, but I don’t remember. Where did you get them pictures, anyway?” you ask. You want him to stop pressuring you.

“I found them.”

“Found them? Found them where?” It’s working.

“In a shoe box under the bed at Dempsey’s house.”

“Dempsey died two years ago!”

“I know that.”

“And his house burned to the ground a month later!”

“I know that, too.”

“So what’s up with those?” you ask gesturing to the pictures. Damn, that was the wrong question.

“Actually,” I answer, “his daughter, Sharon, found the box under the bed the day after he died.”

“And?”

“It was wrapped up in brown paper with a string tied around it.”

“And?”

“It had a note on it telling Sharon to give it to me exactly two years after his death.”

“You going somewhere with this?” you ask. Just stay off the pictures.

“There was other stuff in the box.”

“Like what?”

“A letter.”

“To?”

“To me.”

“What did it say?”

“I’ll read it to you.” I reach under my chair and into a shoe box. I pull out an old wrinkled envelope. It’s brown like a government envelope with a clear address window.

“Is that the box?”

“That’s the box,” I answer. The letter itself as I pull it out is wrinkled and dirty and water stained. I unfold it and begin. “It says, ‘Dear Juke.’” I stop reading. I ask, “Did you know Dempsey was my brother?”

“I didn’t know you had a brother,” you say. “And I sure didn’t know that he was it.”

“It’s kind of a long story,” I say, “but the short version goes like this. I was at home one morning practicing on the tenor, doing my scales and arpeggios like I used to do, and the phone rings. This is twenty years ago, back before daddy died.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh,” you say. You wonder where this is leading.

“I answer it, and the dude on the other end asks if this is . . ., and he gives my birth name. Then he says that he is looking for a man about . . ., and he gives an age that is twenty years older than I was at the

time. So I said that would be my daddy, since I was a junior.”

“Yeah, uh-huh.”

“So the dude tells me that his daddy had just died, and he was going through his papers and discovered that his daddy had adopted him, that his daddy wasn’t his real daddy after all. And he said that he found a birth certificate with my daddy’s name on it. So naturally, I put the sax down, and sat for a minute.”

“Well, I guess so,” you say.

“So he said, if my daddy is the person whose name is on that birth certificate, that makes us brothers.”

“Humph!”

“That’s what I said. I stopped for a minute, then asked for the mama’s name. Her name was Cecilia Golden. I took his number and told him I would call him back. He was living in Seattle at the time. So I called daddy.”

“He must have dropped his teeth,” you say.

“Him? I’m the one who dropped his teeth. I figured dude had the wrong number or something. But I asked daddy, ‘hey, Joe, do you know Cecilia Golden,’ and he said yeah!”

“Kiss my ass!”

“Said she was a girlfriend he had way back when. Said it was a good thing Marie was dead, ‘cause she wouldn’t know how to handle news like this. And I told him that I guess not, ‘cause I was having a problem dealing with it.”

“Was he still hooked up with your mother at the time?”

“Yeah, he was still married to her. But she was dead by then, so I didn’t make too big a deal out of it. I called dude in Seattle back and welcomed him into the family. Daddy called him later, and over the next year or so, they got to know each other. When daddy died, dude

said he wanted to play at the funeral. I was shocked when I first met him, 'cause he looked like a trick baby. Thin nose. Thin lips. We played a couple of duets, him on bass and me on reeds. He was good, so we formed a group."

"How come you never told me and Kong?" Now you could put *him* on the spot.

"We thought that might not be good for the unity of the group."

"So all the years we played music together, y'all was living a lie."

"It wasn't exactly a lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either."

"So what about the letter?"

"Oh, yeah, the letter." I begin, "Dear Juke," then stop. I reach into the box and pull out some glasses and put them on. I adjust and fidget with them for what seems like a solid minute. They just don't feel right. The problem is that they are too big and they have a bow missing. Finally, I say, "Ok, that's better. Now where was I. Oh, yes, the letter." I pick the letter up, and begin to read, "Dear Juke, brother, home boy, my man, if you are reading this letter" I stop. "Why didn't you come to his funeral?"

Shit! The sudden question throws you off. "I . . . I don't know," you answer. "I don't remember."

"You seem to be having a lot of trouble with your memory today."

"Finish the letter so we can finish playing chess."

"Why weren't you at his funeral?"

"I forgot is all. I forgot." You could feel the temperature at your neck rising. You blurt out, "Damn, nigger, I didn't know he was your bother."

"You *did* know that he was your friend."

Goddamnit, that was it! "The nigger owed me money," you say.

"Oh? He owed you money? How much money did he owe you?"

“Twenty-five hundred dollars,” you try to make it sound like a lot of money.

“Twenty-five hundred dollars?” I repeat. I put a tone of mock wonder in my voice.

“Yeah,” you answer, “twenty-five hundred dollars.”

“Any change? Any pennies?”

“No change,” you say, “no pennies.” You know he’s being snide.

“And why do you suppose he didn’t pay you?”

“I guess he didn’t have no money.”

“And why was that, do you suppose?”

“Oh, I know why. He was giving it to his mother.”

“Which mother?”

“The new one. Cecilia Golden.”

“He found her?”

“He found her. He started looking for her after daddy’s funeral.”

“Where was she?”

“Living on lower Wacker Drive downtown. Living on the street.”

“How much money did she have?” I ask even though I already know the answer.

“None, she was flat broke.”

“So Dempsey gave her some of his.”

“The nigger gave her *all* of his.”

“And how much is all?”

“He took her off the street, cleaned her up, set her up in an apartment.” This was worse than the pictures.

“So the money he got from you, he used to help his mother.”

“Yeah.” You wanted to sound tough, put upon.

“And you begrudged him that money ‘til his dying day.”

“He owed me,” you say.

“I just wanted to be sure.” I reach into the box and pull out another envelope. This one is white and clean and new. I slide it across the table.

“What’s this?” you ask.

“The money he owed you.”

“I can’t take this.”

“You can’t give it back,” I say. “He’s dead.”

“That’s the reason I can’t take it. You keep it.”

“I can’t keep it. It’s not my money in any way.”

“I can’t take it,” you say, and you push it back across the table.

I look at it, then at him, then back at it. I lean to one side, and crack a fart. It is one of those high-pitched, squeaky ones that, strangely, reminds me of the squeaking brakes on an old fashioned streetcar, the ones that ran on State Street when I was a kid.

I loved those streetcars, especially the bells. There was something special about the clang of a State Street streetcar bell. When the driver pulled on that braided rope with the knot at the end, the clang rang out, and people reacted. They scurried to grab the smooth, vertical silver railing and pull themselves into the open back door of the dull red painted railcar. They scampered off the tracks in front of it. Sometimes, realizing they were about to pass their stop, they scrambled by fellow passengers to the open front door to hop off. If it was dry out and warm, the car routinely ran with both doors, front and back, open. When the bell clanged, chaos became order, indecision became decision, inaction became action. The clang of that bell was like magic.

I watched the wondrous effects of the clang from a little nook at the front of the car opposite the driver. I never knew what that little nook was for, but every time I got on the streetcar, I headed for that nook. Not every driver would allow someone to ride there if there was room

behind him in the body of the coach. Or sometimes someone else would have gotten there first. But on this day, I was lucky. There was so much to see from the front of a streetcar that I vowed many times to be a streetcar driver when I grew up.

“You bastard,” you say. You catch a whiff of his fart, and laugh. You fan the air with your hands.

“Me?” I say, “You’re the one who didn’t go to his funeral.”

“Man, what have you been eating?”

I catch a whiff. “Whew,” I laugh. “I stink.” I get up and walk around my chair fanning the air with my hands. After a few seconds, I sit back down.

“I need a drink after that,” you say. “What you got to drink?”

“I got some pop in the fridge, and there’s ice water.”

“I’m talking about whiskey, man, I want some whiskey.”

“Man, I stopped drinking years ago,” I say.

“Now come? A nigger that don’t drink ain’t no real nigger.”

“I guess I’m not a real nigger then, ‘cause I have long since given it up.”

“Not me,” you say, pulling a small brown bottle from your pant pocket. “I love it too much to give it up.” You hit the bottom of the bottle with the base of your palm, then spin the top off. “By the time I get to the bottom of this bottle, I will be charming, handsome, smooth, suave, debonaire, have a great sense of humor, and be a lot of fun to be out with. Plus, I will be bold, dashing, daring, brave, chivalrous, kind, . . . You get the picture.” You knock back a long swallow. “What about smoking?” you ask, wiping your mouth with the back of your hand. “You give that up, too?”

“I gave that up before I gave up drinking.”

“Why?!”

“Scared of cancer.”

“Cancer? Man, everybody’s got to die of something. What difference do it make if it’s cancer or a truck?”

“I can look out for a truck,” I say. “Whose move is it?”

The guy at the back of the streetcar wasn’t nearly so exciting. All he ever got to do was collect money, make change, and punch and pass out transfers. He was always harried and stressed. People argued with him. People crowded the space he worked in making it hard for him to move. He was so preoccupied with money and giving directions to this place or that, that he rarely if ever got to look around at the scenery. He never got to see the magic of the bell. In fact, from the back of the car, even the sound was fake. It was muted, shallow, watered down. The guy in the back worked hard.

On this particular day, mama and I were headed downtown. I was in the nook; mama was standing in the body of the coach. All of a sudden, a woman screamed. She was a white woman, blond. Her hair was done up in those tight little curls white women wore back then. She clutched her purse to her bosom. “He tried to pick my pocket,” she said of the brother standing next to her. He was dressed in a suit with a top coat over his arm. He wore a hat with a brim like the one Reverend King used to wear around that time, early in his career. The brother had a put-upon expression on his face, his glance darting from one passenger to the next, like he was the victim of a false accusation.

“Do something,” the woman said to the driver. I knew that he didn’t know what to do. She must have thought she was talking to the guy at the back of the streetcar. Maybe she was fooled by the fact they wore the same uniform. “Do something,” she said again. “He tried to rob me.”

Just then, a second brother stepped forward. “Move aside,” he said

in a booming voice, "I'm a police officer." I remember thinking, what a lucky coincidence. He was dressed like the first brother, King hat and all. "Let's get off here," he said. He grabbed the first brother by the shoulder pad and pulled him up at an awkward angle. "You're under arrest," he said. He gestured vaguely out the open front doors, "there's the police station now. Stop here," he said to the driver. The driver stopped.

I looked out at the block where we had stopped. I saw a shoe store and a cleaner and a tavern by the corner to the alley. I did *not* see a police station. I looked back at mama. As if having read my mind, she lip-synced to me, "there's no police station here," as she turned her head slowly, almost imperceptibly, from side to side.

The driver reached for the braided rope with the knot at the end. He yanked it hard. The clang rang out. As the coach eased forward, I looked back at the woman and the two brothers out on the sidewalk. They were leading her, one brother at each elbow, to the alley by the tavern.

"It's your move," you say, fishing around in your pockets. "Goddamnit, I forgot my cigarettes. You got any squares?"

I ignore the question and study the board. I touch my queen, then pull my hand back. I touch my queen-side rook. I pull my hand back.

"You have to move your queen," you say. "You got any squares?"

"I don't want to move my queen."

"But you touched it."

"So what?"

"You touch it; you move it."

"You always do that!"

"Do what?"

"If I touch it, suddenly we play by the you-touch-it-you-move-it

rule. But if *you* touch it, it's 'we niggers, we don't play by honky rules.'"

"You always the one trying to be like the honky," you say.

"Don't start that stuff again."

"Nigger, please."

"Please, what?"

"You the biggest Tom walking, and you gon' act like you ain't?"

"Getting an education don't make me no Tom."

"No, but sucking up do make you a Tom."

"I don't suck up," I say, "I just get along."

"Ok, you the biggest getting-along nigger I know."

"What's wrong with getting along?"

"You get along, you get walked on."

"So who are you supposed to be, one of the Last Poets or somebody?" I ask. Then I mimic him, "you get along, you get walked on."

"It's true," you say.

"Says who?"

"You said it."

"Me? When? I never said that!"

"You don't remember Nate Mathis, do you?"

"Yes, I remember him," I say. "He wanted to manage the group some years ago."

"That's right. What happened?"

"What happened when?" I ask.

"What happened back then with Mathis?"

"We fired him. *You* fired him."

"Why?"

"You thought he stole from us."

"That white boy *did* steal from us."

“He got his contract share.”

“You agreed to give him way more than he deserved just to get along with him.”

“That’s not what happened.”

“What happened then?”

“He got a higher percentage because he took a chance on a group that wasn’t very well known.”

“Oh, that’s the line he used.”

“Well, it was true. We weren’t very well known.”

“But that doesn’t give him the right to get more money,” you say.

“He took the money and ran.”

“He worked for that money.”

“He took advantage of a skinnin’, grinnin’ Uncle Tom.”

“Screw you, Piano Man.”

“No, Juke,” you say. “It’s fuck you. Not screw you.”

I look at the envelope on the table. I grab it, ball it up and throw it into his chest. “Take the money!” I say.

You put the wadded envelope back on the table. “I didn’t kill him,” you say.

The wagon was a Radio Flyer, red with white wheels. I used it to carry groceries. That was one of my little hustles. There weren’t as many cars back then, and a young brother could make some spending change by going to the local A&P and waiting to haul groceries loaded into brown paper bags to a customer’s house for them. A lot of people depended on it. Otherwise, they might have to take a taxi. Taxis were expensive.

Some of the guys who worked that hustle charged for the service, so much a block like a taxi. But I wanted to be nice. I took whatever the customer gave me. I got used. People thought I was a nice kid, but

on balance, I got smaller tips. The guys who charged, they were the real hustlers. I was like a debutante, a dabbler, in it just for the fun. I think I lasted about three weeks. By then, the fun was gone. I wanted the money, but my mother didn't want me to be that cold-blooded. She wanted me to stay a nice kid. That was the reason she bought me the wagon in the first place.

"You might as well have." I say, "you broke his heart, and that killed him."

"I loved him," you say. "I loved him like a brother."

"Then why did you have to break up the group?"

"The boy was a junky. That's what killed him."

"He was trying to support his mother."

"He was trying to support his habit," you counter.

"And his mother."

"Leave his mother out of this."

"But she was there," I say.

"She was in the way," you say.

"And that's the real issue, isn't it? He was spending more and more time with her, and less and less time with us."

"She's the one who fucking got him hooked."

I can feel my face grow rigid. This was news to me, if it was true. More likely, it was a lie.

"You didn't know that, did you?" You say, "the reason she was on the street in the first place is she was a junky her damn self."

"You lying."

You put your right hand in the air. "As God is my witness, the bitch got him hooked."

With my left index finger, I push the crumpled envelope to his edge of the table.

“Ok, Juke,” you say, “I’ll take the money. But I don’t take any pleasure in doing it.” You stuff the envelope into your shirt pocket.

They say a man don’t become a man until his father dies. I became a man almost twenty years ago. I didn’t want to do it, but I cried. I hadn’t cried for thirty years before, and I haven’t cried since. But that day I did it. Manhood is rough.

It’s not that Joe and I were always close-- it was the longest time before I could call him daddy-- but whether I can call him that or not, that’s who he was. And like it or not, for good or for ill, his genes are my genes; his history is my history.

He told me once that the month between Thanksgiving and the New Years was his favorite time of year, and that did something to me. It made me see him as something more than a rock. All he ever showed me was how hard he was. He thought that being hard was being a man. I wonder if that started when *his* daddy died. Anyway, he told me that down south every year, they killed and roasted seven turkeys during that month. The way he told it, it sounded like the high point of his life. He bought seven live turkeys for us only one year. Turkeys must have been cheap down south. But up north, they were too expensive to buy in that number. Joe just didn’t make that kind of money year after year.

But one year, he did it. I don’t even know where he bought them. They were delivered in three wood frame and chicken wire crates that we put in the basement. They were so big, they took up most of the space down there.

It hurt him to have to kill those birds. That’s how I knew he wasn’t the rock he wanted me to think he was. He had to steel himself once a week and twice on Christmas. He acted like he was killing people.

He sharpened a sickle-shaped knife on a stone, then walked down

the narrow flight of stairs to the dingy little basement where they began agitating as soon as he turned on the light. The light was dull, but it was bright enough for them to recognize him. He was their angel of death. Every time they saw him, one of them died. It was like a ritual neither of them wanted to perform, but they performed it anyway. He hated to kill them; they hated to die. And after it was over, it was like nothing ever happened. Except, of course, one of them was gone. But even that didn't seem to matter. They couldn't count, so they didn't miss him.

On the first day, Joe took me with him to watch. I watched only once. After that one time, he killed them alone. That first time, all seven birds flapped and thrashed in those crates, knocking their wings together because there wasn't enough room for them to move freely, bumping into each other, pecking each other. Almost as if it were an act of mercy, Joe picked the crate with three birds in it. He was going to kill one in order to give the other two room to breathe.

Turkeys are big, and turkeys are strong. Joe opened the lid about six inches, and the thrashing turned to pandemonium. Two of the birds tried to break for freedom. Flapping and clawing frantically, they pummeled the third one until it lay nearly helpless under their feet.

That was the one Joe wanted. The helpless one. The one that couldn't compete. Was this a microcosm of the law of the jungle? Predators do, after all, pick the halt and the lame. He waited until there was a natural separation in the cage— the two strong ones at one end, the third one helpless at the other— then, quick as a blink, raising the lid high enough to reach, he grabbed the weak one by the neck and snatched him out.

Now, he had to move with precision and speed. The two strong ones, seeing an exit, lunged for it. Joe slammed the lid hard on their

heads. The weak one, realizing death was near, flapped and clawed with renewed energy. Joe had to finish him off in order to not be injured himself. He grabbed the bird's neck in two hands like he would grab a stick. He held the knife securely with his ring and little fingers. Then, just like breaking a stick, he popped it's neck. I had expected the bird to stop thrashing, but it didn't. Joe folded the neck halves over the knife blade and held them fast with one hand as he snatched the blade through with his free hand. Then he let them go. This time, I was certain the bird was dead. It wasn't. The head lay on one side on the concrete floor, it's visible eye agape, it's beak moving, but unable to screech. The body ran around the basement in circles flapping its wings, bumping into walls and stairs and the chicken-wire cages. At one point, it stepped on its own head, and flipped it to the other side. Eventually, it ran itself into a corner and ran and flapped in place until it simply slowed down and stopped. By now, too, the beak was still and the grey, wrinkled eyelid was closed. The dance had stopped; the audience appeased. Death had finally come for real.

I sit staring at the chess board. "What about the group?" I ask.

"What *about* the group?"

"You broke us up."

"We were already broke up. Dempsey saw to that. I just told it like it was, and stopped pretending we could still do gigs together."

"We *were* doing gigs."

"We were *half* doing gigs."

"We had regular work."

"Small clubs every other weekend ain't regular work, and Dempsey missed half of those."

"He had problems."

"He was fucking high."

“We managed without him.”

“We were a three-man quartet. He was never there!”

“God bless America, Piano Man, you don’t just throw somebody aside just because they have a few problems.”

“That boy had more than a few problems.”

“And twenty-five hundred dollars didn’t bust you.”

“It was the fucking principle of it.”

“Principle!” I say. I thump my queen onto the board. “Check!”

You look at the board, then at him. “What is happening with us, man?”

“Nothing is happening with us.”

“Nothing you say. You just gave me your queen.”

I look at the board. “Crap,” I say. Then I turn my face to stone.

“Take her,” I say.

“Take the move back.”

“Take her, for God sake!”

“What is the problem?” you ask.

“The problem is you, Piano Man.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You think you’re such a big shot.”

“Why, ‘cause I don’t suck up-- I’m sorry-- get along?”

“What makes you so blessed high and mighty?”

“Nothing,” you say. “I just know I’m a man.”

“A man?”

“Damn right! And a *black* man at that!”

“What is so special about being a *black* man?”

“Come on, Juke! A black man is the strongest man on the face of the motherfucking planet,” you say. And honkies are scared to death of us! That’s why they’re trying to kill us all off, man, just like they

killed off all the Indians, ‘cause they was probably scared to death of them, too. That’s why they carved all them honky presidents on Mount Rushmore in the heart of Indian country. Call they self trying to humiliate some fucking body!”

“How are they trying to kill us all off?” I ask.

“You know how scared of us the are?”

“No, Johnny,” I say, “how scared of us are they?”

“One dead nigger can turn ten grown ass honkies into men. That’s how scared of us they are now and always have been. You’ve seen them pictures of a whole gang of honkies killing one nigger and them standing around all proud like they done done something worthy of preserving for posterity. They’re punks,” you say, “snotty-nosed punks who will hide in a gang or behind a badge or anywhere else rather than fuck with a nigger one-on-one.”

“So, how are they trying to kill us all off?”

“They see what we see. They see us taking over everything we get our black asses into. That’s why they don’t want to let us in nothing. First it was bicycles and boxing. Then it was basketball. Then football. Then baseball. Now it’s tennis and golf. And you can forget the whole music industry. We taking over everything physical. That’s why they trying to position the mental as superior to the physical. That way, they think they can still win the who-is-the-superior-man contest. What they don’t know is don’t nobody give a fuck about that shit but them. They in the contest alone.”

“Then how come you’re so proud to be black?” I ask.

“Because we know that a superior body *is* a superior mind, and visa-versa, and that the superior man is found on the inside, not on the outside. That’s what makes us so strong. They see America turning black, and they hate it. But fuck ‘em. ‘Cause next, we taking over all

the mental shit, too. This is just manifest destiny phase two. We taking over this country like them motherfucking killer honey bees.”

You chortle and take his queen with your knight. He scarcely notices.

“How are they trying to kill us all off?” I ask again.

“AIDS,” you say.

“AIDS?”

“AIDS.”

“You’re an idiot if you believe that.”

“You’re an idiot if you don’t.”

“Never mind *why* they would do that, . . .”

“I just told you why.”

“. . . but *how* would they do that?”

“I just told you that, too.”

“AIDS?”

“AIDS is germ warfare.”

“But we’re not *at* war.”

“*You’re* not at war. They are, and they are winning. This *is* the King Alfred plan in operation.”

“Winning what?”

“The war! They are taking Africa just like they took America, and for the same reason.”

“Namely?”

“AIDS is the new blanket with small pox.”

“And the reason,” I ask again.

“So white folks can live there.”

“White folks are already living there.”

“Not like they gon’ be.”

“Meaning what?”

“Right now, Africa is predominantly black. In fifty years, it will be predominantly white.”

“Based on what?”

“Read the newspapers, man. Niggers are dying in Africa in droves,” you say. “It’s your move.”

I look at the board. “Where’s my queen?” I ask.

“I took it.”

“You took my queen?”

“You gave her to me.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t think you would take her.”

“Well, she’s gone, and so is Africa,” you say. “But that’s ok, because niggers will survive. Our seed is strong, and his seed is dying. We the oldest people on earth, and they the youngest. Niggers tolerate the antics of honkies like a sage tolerates the antics of a teenager. We just wish they would grow the fuck up.”

I stare at the jagged arrangement of pieces on the board. “The part you forget,” I say, “is serendipity, and the role it plays in the grand scheme.” I take his knight with my bishop. “Check.”

“Ok,” you ask, “what role does it play?”

“None,” I say. “It just looks like serendipity to the untrained eye. This is all part of God’s plan.”

“So what are you talking about?”

“The race does not go to the swift.”

“Does the race go to the race that *thinks* it is the swift?”

“Nobody knows who the race will go to.”

“Did the good preacher tell you that?”

“King?” I ask. “No, I don’t think he ever said anything like that.”

“So what are you talking about?”

I remember the two brothers on the streetcar and wonder what

happened to that woman. They led her away like jailers leading away a convict. Did they kill her? Did they rob her? Did they rape her? All the above? None of the above? “I’m talking about white people are dying, too,” I answer.

“Not in the same numbers.”

“It’s not over, yet.”

“They already have a vaccine,” you say. “Made from eggs.”

“For AIDS?”

“Of course.”

“Then why aren’t they using it?”

“Not enough white people are dying. They hope that by then most black and yellow people will already be dead. China is next, you know.”

“China will fight back,” I say.

“It won’t matter,” you say, “‘cause warfare as we have known it on this planet has changed forever. Never again will there be on an open field two armies vying for victory.”

“Are you crazy?”

“No, it’s true,” you say. “This country has seen to that. The military of the United States of America is superior to all the other armies of the world combined. The term ‘world class’ as it relates to armies is meaningless, and everybody knows it. Not only that, but this situation ain’t likely to change anytime soon ‘cause no country on earth has the economic power to do the research and development needed to catch up.”

“So now what?” I ask.

“Now the field of battle has changed. It’s like the age of knights. Only now all the knights are on the same side. Knights were unchallenged for three hundred years. It took that long for someone to invent the crossbow. So now, in the absence of a latter day

crossbow, all wars will be guerrilla wars. There is only one arena where the U.S. military is ineffective, and that is among civilians. Therefore, necessarily, all wars will be wars of terror. Civilians have to learn to defend themselves, 'cause the state can't do it. They don't want you to know that, though. They want you to think everything is under control. That's what banning guns is about. And in time, with the passage of one or two laws, all violent acts will be acts of terror, and all crimes will be elevated to the status of threats to national security. All criminals will be considered enemy combatants, and all the normal laws that are in place to protect the defendant's rights will be worthless, 'cause all crimes will be tried by military tribunals."

"Who is this *they* you keep talking about?"

"Honkies," you answer. "Well, not all honkies, 'cause these moves won't benefit all honkies, not in the long run. It'll benefit only the rich and corporations, 'cause low level honkies can't see what's happening. They will be the same wage slaves and cannon fodder they've always been."

"What white folks are you talking about? Who are they? Where are they?"

"Used to be that slaves and indentured servants worked together for mutual freedom. But somewhere along the line, top honkies told bottom honkies they were better than niggers, and bottom honkies have been buying it ever since. Poor people have been divided, and are on the verge of being conquered unless these red neck honkies wake up. But they won't. They like feeling superior to somebody. They would rather feel superior than be free. Like always, niggers is on they own. They've seen to that."

"Who is this *they*?" I ask. "Does the president know about this?"

"Your president? The one who fancies himself a mighty oak, but

who in fact is barely a scrub? He's in on it!"

"Get serious!"

"I *am* serious," you say. "Hell, don't get me started. The man is a fool!"

"Who else?" I ask.

"Oh, I'm started now! Not only is he a fool, but he is an ignorant fool who has surrounded himself with other ignorant fools. Together, they are like the three blind mice wearing dark glasses trying to point the direction they want for the whole world to follow. They've got little teeny-weeny white canes pointed everywhere."

"Ok, ok," I say. "Who else?"

"Just watch him with that little demented smile of his. Listen to him. He talks like a fuckin' lawyer out of both sides of his mouth. Listen and remember. The half truths. The outright lies. The jumping to conclusions with little or no supporting evidence, or evidence gathered from unreliable or biased sources. They ought to impeach his simple ass. The security of the American people is in the hands of a mad man!"

"All right already! Who else?"

You take a deep breath. "I don't know," you answer. "If I knew that, I would be trying to stop them."

"You know," I say, "I think you're paranoid."

"Maybe I am," you say, "but does that mean that I'm wrong?"

"It means that anything you say is suspect. We are a great people," I say. "We built the pyramids, and taught the Greeks about democracy."

"So what?" you answer.

"There's Cush and the giant castles of Zimbabwe."

"And thousands of honkies studied in Timbuktu long before

Europe was out of the Dark Ages,” you say, “but so what? Knowledge of the past is good, if you can get it. Most of the history taught today is just some shit to further the honky’s agenda. But even knowledge of the past that is true can’t by itself save you from the tyranny of today.”

“What tyranny?!” I ask.

You ignore his question, and look at the board. You move your king one space to the left.

He has no answer, so I change the subject. “Kong called me this morning,” I say.

“He did?! How is he? I ain’t seen that nigger in twenty years. Where has he been?”

“Out in California in prison.”

“For what?”

“He got out just yesterday.”

“Is he ok?”

“He caught ‘Nita with some man and killed them both in a fit of rage.” I slide my rook over on a line with his king. “He blames you for it.”

“Me? Why me?”

“You’re the reason they had to go to California in the first place.”

“How so?”

I look up at him. “Everybody knows you were sleeping with her.”

“Is it my move?”

“It’s your move.”

You ponder the board and your options. You should have castled ten moves ago.

“So were you?”

“What, you want me to confirm what everybody knows?”

“Yes.”

You touch your rook, then pull your hand away. You touch your black bishop. “It’s no wonder Kong fucked around all the time. She was cute, but she didn’t know what to do.”

“You have to move your rook,” I say.

“Why?”

“You touched it.”

“We still playing by that?”

“Yeah, since I touched my queen.”

“Your queen is gone.” You line your black bishop up with a pawn to further block his rook.

“You’re cheating.”

“What?”

“You took my queen.”

“I told you to take your queen back. You didn’t. Now she’s gone.”

“Dang, Piano Man, play by the rules.”

“There ain’t no rules, nigger.”

“What do you mean? The world would be chaos without rules.”

“The world *is* chaos. That’s how you know there are no rules.”

“The world is in order. Governments are in control.”

“... of nothing,” you say. People sell their souls to get elected, then act like fools once they get in. Look at your president.”

“That’s the way democracy works.”

“Yes, but the process is chaos, not order. It is not governed by rules.”

“Well,” I say, “the rules are in place, but nobody follows them.”

“So, what’s the difference between no rules and rules that nobody follows?”

“There is a lot of difference.”

“Ok, let’s hear it.”

“If there were no rules, people would be killing each other in the streets.”

“People already are.”

“But not like they would be.”

“What else?”

“There would be wars all the time.”

“There already are. What else?”

“There would be no justice . . .”

“There already ain’t.”

“. . . and no recourse for people who have been done wrong.”

“Same answer.”

“But . . .”

“But what?”

“There have got to be rules.”

“Why?”

“Because without rules, there would be chaos.”

“This is where I came in.”

“But . . .”

“Look at it, Juke. Be a man, and look at it. The belief in rules is what keeps you a Tom. When you say get along, you don’t mean be nice. You mean follow what you perceive to be the rules governing the situation at the time. I don’t follow those rules, because I know they don’t exist. That’s why I am dangerous. That’s why niggers are dangerous. We don’t follow the white man’s rules. We know that they are made to exist in your mind by people who want to keep you and people like you a Tom.”

“So did you?”

“In fact,” you say, “there ain’t a rule or a law the honkie has ever made that a nigger is bound to obey. Not legal, not religious, not

social, not nothing. He don't follow them, so why should we? The president smokes dope, but jails is full of niggers that smoke dope. For him, it's just a campaign issue. For us, it's hard time in the big house. Honkies make rules that he says everybody should live by. But as soon as niggers start winning by those rules, he changes them. Honkies make rules and laws for honkies to win, and to keep niggers down. That's it. So the bottom line is that a nigger is supposed to do whatever he wants to do whenever he wants to do it. He supposed to make his own rules. Period. Fuck these honkies *and* all they laws."

"Did you *do* it?"

"Here's how they use them rules of theirs," you say. "A cop gave me a traffic ticket a couple of months ago for not signaling when I changed lanes. I was driving a cab for some extra money. In court, this cracker cop starts in giving all this aggravating stuff. He said I was speeding more than 20 miles over the speed limit, and that there were road workers present in the area. Then he starts making noises about maybe I shouldn't be allowed to have the driving privilege. And the judge is buying it!"

"Get out of here!" I say.

"So, I start getting scared. I tell the judge that I need this license because my livelihood depends on it. He was unmoved. Then I point out that the ticket shows that the traffic at the time of the offense was heavy and down to one lane, so I couldn't have been speeding. The judge grunted. Then I pointed out that the stop occurred at night on a holiday, so there weren't any road workers present. The judge grunted again, and looked at the cop. The cop hemmed and hawed. That's when I blurted out that the cop lied to the court. The judge grunted loud this time, and squirmed in his seat. That's when I told the judge he should hold the cop in contempt of court, put him in jail for

a few days. Folks in the courtroom was laughing now,” you say, “‘cause this was getting good. But the judge let him off the hook. Said he probably had a family and blah, blah, blah. Then I said I had a family, too, and he had no qualms about taking my livelihood. The people were murmuring to themselves now, and I was feeling it. I stepped back and said, ‘You honkies sure know how to stick together.’ Folks got real quiet. That honky stood up and pointed that gavel at me and said to get the fuck out of his courtroom before he held *me* in contempt.”

“No, he didn’t!”

“Yeah,” you say, “he did. As long as the law worked against me, he was cool with it. But as soon as I worked it against the cop, there was a problem.”

“Umph, umph, umph.” I shake my head. Then I ask again, “so did you do it?”

“Did I do what?”

“Did you sleep with her?”

“Oh, that,” you say. “It was politics.”

“What?”

“Kong had beat her up, and she wanted to get even with him.”

“Meaning?”

“She was being a politician.”

“And?”

“And I didn’t do it.”

I take his bishop with a knight, and he takes the knight with the pawn, opening the lane for the rook.

“He wants to come stay with me for a while. Says he wants to get even with you. He didn’t want me to tell you.”

“So why did you?”

“Maybe to see you squirm.”
“You won’t see me on Satan’s anvil.”
“Suppose he tries to kill you.”
“That boy is a bigger pussy than you. He wouldn’t even think it.”
I move my rook down to his pawn row. “I’m just telling you what he said.”
“Kong wants to kill me for fucking ‘Nita?”
“He said he might.”
“That means he might not.”
“What would you do if he tried?”
“I would kick that little nigger’s black ass, that’s what I would do.”
“He’s been in prison for a long time.”
“So what?”
“Prison makes you hard. He’s been pumping iron for twenty years. He doesn’t take any mess.”
“Well, neither do I,” you say.
“I remember the first gig we played with Kong.”
“The Peek-Inn,” you say.
“That’s right, in beautiful downtown . . . Where was it?”
“I don’t even remember.”
“He had those old, beat up, dilapidated, decrepit looking conga drums.”
“They didn’t even match.”
“People looked at him, then at them drums, and shook their heads. One woman out right laughed at him. Then we started playing.”
“Black Magic Woman.”
“One of your favorites,” I say.
“Then we hit the bridge.”
“Lord have mercy, we hit the bridge, and that nigger started hitting

them drums.”

“How long did he play?”

“At least fifteen minutes.”

“And the honey who laughed at him?”

“He put that bitch’s toes in the air!”

“Right there in the back seat of the car!” The two of you laugh.

“And you were cooking on that keyboard that night, too.”

“I love them keys,” you say. “They’re not like other instruments where you can bend the notes and all that nonsense.”

“Come on, man, bending notes is where the funk is.”

“On piano, it’s cut and dried, black and white.”

“Life isn’t like that,” I say.

“Playing piano ain’t like every day life,” you say. “It’s a different world. It is the world of the spirit. There is no grey. There is only black and white, right and wrong. The note you hit is the note you get. If you fuck up and hit the wrong key, it’s the wrong note. Ain’t no bending it back right.”

“Hell, that’s true with any instrument.”

“You can play only black keys if you want to, or you can play all white keys. But you get the best results if you play them one against the other. Chords and dischords. Damn, I love what I do. And I’m good at it.”

“You are such an ass,” I say.

“Piano keys are like people. I study people. I study people like I study piano. People don’t change, not really. And neither do piano keys. You can caress them, or you can thump them. Either way, they are who they are. They can have different names, B flat or A sharp, but the note is always the same. And if you play them right, even when you improvise, you get the outcome you’re after.”

“Well, I’ll give you this, you were hitting them right that night.”

“I had to to keep up with Kong.”

“Did you get that pussy, too,” I ask. The two of us laugh again.

“We had a lot of good times together,” you say.

“We had a lot of bad times, too.”

“The good times outnumber the bad.”

“The bad times were more intense.”

“Like when?” you ask.

“Like the time you stood up on the table in that little club in Oregon, and pissed on this guy’s wife.”

“Oh, yeah. I remember that one. I had been smoking some of that shit. I was airborne, and they were such dorks. We got run out of town after the crowd beat our asses for about a hour. But it really wasn’t my fault.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t your fault? Wasn’t that you standing up there, dick hanging out, pee running into this woman’s lap?”

“Well, yeah, but she provoked me,” you say.

“How so?”

“She was ugly,” you laugh. “The woman had a face like a cow.”

I laugh, too. “Being ugly is no reason to pee on somebody.”

“Yeah, but she was real ugly. Besides, she talked funny.”

“She just had some kind of accent.”

“That sure was a funny accent. And he thought she was the greatest thing.”

“Of course he thought that. She was his wife.”

“Well, my thought was piss on it, so I did.”

I learned a lot about Joe that November. More importantly, though, I think he learned a lot about himself. I think he learned that it was hard being a rock. And it was unnecessary. Rocks don’t make better

men. Maybe money wasn't the real reason we never again killed seven turkeys for Christmas. And maybe that's about the time I started calling him daddy.

"Then," I say, "there was the time the car stopped and it was raining and we had to walk five miles to the next town to get a tow truck."

"I remember that one, too. The tow truck hooked us up, drove a mile, then threw a rod its own self. Your horns got wet."

"I had to have half the valve pads replaced."

"One of Kong's drum heads cracked."

"And we couldn't even get another one wherever we were."

"And to top it all off, the gig had already been canceled. We just didn't know about it, yet."

"All four of us ended up with the flu driving back home, and we didn't have enough money to stop in a hotel."

"We drove for two days."

"Slept in the car."

"Ate peanuts and potato chips." The two of you sit pensive for a long moment.

"I know who that is in the picture," I say in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Ok, Juke, who is it?"

"It's 'Cilia Golden.'" I can feel my mouth curl into a wry smile.

Your heart quickens, but you show no emotion.

"You screwed his mother, didn't you?"

You look at him, but you say nothing.

"Deny it," I say. "Here, let me read the rest of the letter. 'Dear Juke, brother, home boy, my man, if you are reading this letter, I am probably dead. If I took my own life, I'm sorry. If I didn't, oh well, I should have. My life is consumed with shame, . . .'" I pause and look up at him. "' . . . and I need you to make it right for me. Piano Man

fucked 'Cilia.” My voice cracked, “I could never face him after that. He was my best friend. But he hated that I was helping my mother. Once I started using them drugs again, I was too weak to do it myself. Even now, I’m giving him a break. I’m giving him two years to die of natural causes or confess to you or something. If he hasn’t or doesn’t or whatever, fix it. Love, Dempsey.”

I take a deep breath, and let my head loll back. A tear streams cool down my cheek.

“Juke, man, I’m sorry. I didn’t know he was your brother.”

“You knew he was your friend.”

“And it’s not like she was *your* mother,” you say.

“I’ve known you all my life,” I say. “Do you remember Cora Hughs? She was in our class in seventh grade. She was a cute little black girl. Big tits, big ass legs. You raped her.”

“No,” you say, “I didn’t.”

“It was on the playground on the last day of school before summer vacation. You jumped her from behind. She laughed because she thought you were playing. You wrestled her down and pushed your hand into her pussy.”

“That was fifty years ago. I was young. I thought she wanted me to do it.”

“How could you think that?!”

“I don’t know. I was young.”

“*We* were young then. You were lean and fit.”

“I was still growing.”

“And Cora liked you up until that day. After that, she hated you.”

“No,” you say, “she still liked me. She just had to act like she hated me because of what I had done to her.” You pause. “I’ve always been misunderstood. When we were kids in kindergarten, there was a boy

named Moses who kept fucking with me. He would break my crayons, step on ants I was looking at, pinch me, you know, shit that he knew would make me cry. So I got even with him. I pushed him down the stairs.”

“You pushed him down the stairs for breaking your crayons?”

“See, even you don’t understand. Those were my favorite crayons. Those were my favorite colors. They were hot colors like orange and yellow and red, and he broke them for no reason at all.”

“I remember him,” I say. “His name was Moses Abraham, one of the few white kids still at that school back then.”

“The fall broke his hip. He never walked quite right after that, at least not for a long time. And his mama cried and his daddy cried and my mama and daddy didn’t cry but they apologized and all the teachers said it was an accident and all that. None of them ever knew, but I *wanted* to hurt that little punk. I wanted to hurt him, and I did.”

“You haven’t changed much over the years,” I say.

“I’ve changed,” you say. “I’ve gotten stronger.”

“You haven’t changed like the rest of us have. Not like me. I’ve mellowed out in a way that you haven’t, but I look bad. My hair is white; your’s has a few strands of grey. My skin is sagging; your’s is toned. My muscles have atrophied; you’re still cut. How do you do it?”

“Just lucky, I guess.”

“No, this is more than luck. I’m sixty-five and I look eighty. How old are you?”

You stop and think. “6 . . . 66,” you say.

“Yeah, but you look forty.”

“I told you, I’m lucky. It’s in the genes.”

“Genes my butt! And come to think of it, as long as I have known you, I’ve never met your parents.”

“Marion and Josephine,” you say. “They told me the day I was born, three fools danced in the street picking folks’ pockets.”

You remember Josephine.

“Shut your motherfucking mouth, and sit your skinny, good-for-nothing ass back down where I told you to sit.”

“But mama,” you had said, “I got to pee.”

“Shut the fuck up before I slap all the black off you.”

Your bladder ached and you could feel piss begin to trickle out. “Please, mama,” you said, and pinched off your dick through your pants.

Without looking up from her card game, she slashed a backhand straight into the side of your face. The sting of the pain and the noise of the slap ringing in your ear caused you to catch your breath. You lost your hold on your dick, and you could feel the water running down your leg and into your left shoe, soaking your sock.

Josephine cut her eyes at you with such loathing, the trickle burst into a torrent. The muscles in her lips and forehead and at the base of her jaw locked. Her nostrils flared. She reared back and swung again. This time, you saw stars and heard the sound of something hard and heavy hitting the floor.

You had a dream, and in the dream, the something hitting the floor was you. You wanted to see where the dream was going.

“Get up you Simple Simon motherfucker,” Josephine said. “Now I got to mop the fucking floor. I ought to send your punk ass to the Audey Home. Get the fuck up!”

You kept feeling a sharp pain over and over again in your rib cage. You opened your eyes, and Josephine was kicking you with the toe of her pointed shoe. Josephine was a motherfucker.

“The way you look isn’t natural,” I say. “Normal people don’t age

that slowly.”

“Then I guess I’m not normal,” you say. “I wonder how ole Cora is doing now.

“I saw her a couple of years ago,” I say. “I was in the old ‘hood visiting some folks, and I saw her sitting on one of those benches at a bus stop. She looked bad. Those big pretty tits were sagging to her stomach, and those big ole legs were huge old legs with varicose veins. She looked like she hadn’t had a bath.”

“That’s odd,” you say, “she used to want to be an Olympic synchronized swimmer.”

“How come you remember *that* so well?” I ask.

“I remember you was always the choirboy,” you say.

“I just wanted to live life right, that’s all.”

“I thought it was because you didn’t have no balls.”

“I had balls!”

“I know, you just never used them.”

“I just didn’t want to always be getting in trouble.”

“Neither did I.”

“But you always did. I always thought it was you that set fire to ole man Madison’s garage.”

“It wasn’t me,” you say.

“I think it was.”

“You accusing me?”

“Then who did it?” I ask.

“Michael Lee.”

“Now I know you’re lying.”

“How so?”

“Michael Lee was with me that day,” I say.

“All day?”

“All day.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” I say.

“Think back. It was a Saturday afternoon.”

“I remember,” I say, “about four o’clock.”

“Where were you?”

“I was at home.”

“With Michael Lee?”

“Yes.”

“Doing what?”

“We were playing something,” I say.

“Think hard.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You were building a radio.”

“That’s right! How did you know?”

“Michael Lee told me,” you say.

“Why would he tell you that?”

“He was my buddy, too,” you say. “He was using you for an alibi. He went to the bathroom while you were doing some soldering. He was gone for twenty minutes, but you were so into what you were doing that you never noticed.”

“Crap,” I say. “So what did he do? Sneak out of the bathroom window?”

“No, he walked out of the back door. He ran the two blocks to Madison’s house, set the fire, then ran back. He flushed the toilet, and you were never the wiser.”

“But folks say they saw you near there that afternoon.”

“I was there,” you say, “I watched him do it.”

“How come you never came forward?”

“He did it on a dare, and I’m the one who dared him. Besides, he was my friend.”

“Madison died in that fire.”

“That was an accident.”

“His death was no accident if the fire was no accident.”

“He was trying to save something.”

“His books,” I say. “He was trying to save his books.”

“Yeah, a bunch of old books.”

“They were first editions,” I say. “Some of them were signed. He had Richard Wright, Hemingway, letters from Dina Washington and Billy Eckstein.”

“Junk,” you say.

“They were priceless,” I say.

“But what’s the point?” You say, “I didn’t set it.”

“Madison was my friend.”

“Your point?”

“He was more than a friend,” I say, “he was a mentor. He’s the one who got me started playing sax.”

“Right, blame him,” you say.

“He gave me my first lessons, showed me the blues scale.”

“Are you going somewhere with this?”

I gather the three pictures, lean down, and reach them into the box. I straighten up. “I’m going to use my balls.”

“What are you going to do?” you ask.

I pull a revolver from beneath the table where I had it concealed after taking it from the box. It’s a Saturday night special, a snub-nosed .38. I point it directly at him. He squirms in his seat.

“Squirm, you bastard,” I say, “I want to see you wiggle as if you were sitting on Satan’s anvil.”

“Hey, man,” you say, “be careful with that thing.”
“Oh, I’ll be careful,” I say. “I’ll be real careful not to miss.”
“Can we talk about this?” you say.
“What’s to talk about?”
“Why are you doing this?”
“For what you did to Dempsey.”
“I didn’t do anything to Dempsey.”
“Then for being a hypocrite, for claiming to hate white folks, then screwing his white girl mama.”
“I never claimed to hate honkies.”
“Then why do you call them that?”
“That’s what they are. We niggers, they honkies. That’s the way it is.”
“Well, I hate it.”
“Hate what?”
“That word.”
“What word?”
“The H-word.”
“Honky?”
“Yes.”
“But you ain’t no honky! What the fuck difference do it make to you?”
“It makes a lot of difference.”
“That’s you ‘getting along’ again, playing by rules that don’t exist.”
“What’s that supposed to mean?”
“You think there is a symmetry here; hate the n-word, hate the h-word.”
“Yeah! Right!”
“It’s bullshit. There is no symmetry. Hating the word ‘honky’ don’t

make you a better nigger.”

“It makes you a better person.”

“And hating honkies don’t make you a worse nigger. It just makes you a nigger that honkies are scared of.”

“Your mind is twisted.”

“My mind? I’m not the one sitting here getting ready to shoot his best friend,” you say trying to raise up from your chair a little.

“Sit down!” I say, waving the gun in his face, “just sit down.”

“Juke, man, it’s cool. It’s cool. I wasn’t gon’ do nothing.”

“You screwed ‘Nita. You screwed ‘Cilia. Who else have you screwed?” My face feels flushed, then I narrow my eyes as I look deeply into his. “You didn’t screw my Gwen, did you?”

“Juke, she was my girl before she was yours.”

“I mean after she became my girl.”

You can feel the beads of sweat forming on your brow beginning to clump together preparatory to running down your face. “No,” you answer.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“Then I would have to kill you for real.”

“This ain’t for real?” you ask nodding your head towards the gun.

“It’s real,” I say, “but if for one second I thought you had slept with Gwen after she was mine, you would have been shot by now.”

“Gwen was a wonderful woman. Every day, I regret that we broke up.”

“You should have treated her better.”

“I didn’t treat her bad.”

“You treated her like dirt. That’s why she was so easy to . . .”

“Wait a motherfucking minute, nigger,” you say. “You didn’t fuck

her while she was still *mine*, did you?”

“Well, I . . . I . . .”

“You did!” you say, raising up again. “You bastard, I ought to kick your ass.”

“Don’t you dare,” I say waving the gun. “And it wasn’t like that.”

“How the fuck was it?”

“It just happened, that’s all.”

“Let me guess. You came by my house one day to practice, and she just happened to be lying there with her pussy gapped open, and you tripped on the rug, and the next thing you knew, there you was fucking her. Is that how it went down?”

“Well,” I say, “not exactly like that. I did come by to practice, but . . . Wait a blessed minute.”

“The end result was the same,” you say.

“Well, . . .”

“I’m the one who should be holding the gun.”

“It wasn’t like that! It wasn’t like that. I didn’t know.”

“You knew that I was your friend.”

Tears begin to well up in my eyes, “I’m sorry.”

You look at the gun, then you look at him. “It was a hundred years ago.”

“For what it’s worth, she missed you a lot,” I tell him.

“I know. She told me.”

I pause. “When did she tell you? She told me that she never talked to you again except at gigs or parties or in the studio.”

“We talked from time to time.”

“What does that mean?”

“We talked from time to time.”

“I heard you the first time. What I want to know is what does ‘from

time to time' mean?"

"Whenever she called."

"And when was that?"

"Every week or so."

"We were together for fifteen years before she died."

"Yeah, I know."

"You talked to her every week for fifteen years?"

"Fifteen years, seven months, two weeks and five days. She died three years, two months, three weeks and three days ago, two days after my birthday."

"You . . .! You loved her!"

"I still do," you say.

"But she was my wife!"

"Yes, I know. And if you shoot me, we'll be together in death."

He pushes the gun closer to your face, and you take a terrible chance. You lunge for the gun. The move catches him completely by surprise. You are surprised it works. His gun hand is relaxed, and you simply snatch it away. You turn the gun and point it at him.

"*Now*, mo-ther-fuc-ker. What your ba-lack ass gon' do *now*," you say.

I squirm and wiggle in my seat. I put my hands in front of my face, the palms towards him. "Don't shoot me," I say.

You heft the pistol, and it feels good in your hand like a well-balanced hammer. You flex your fingers around the butt. Damn, it feels good! You haven't held a pistol since you were an M.P. in the army. You make a chopping motion as if the pistol were a hatchet or hammer.

"Why shouldn't I shoot your black ass? You were gon' shoot me."

"I was joking. I wasn't really going to do it."

“I don’t believe you. So I can’t let you live.”

“Piano Man, please,” I cry getting down on my knees. “Please, don’t kill me.”

Aiming well to the left of his head, you fire the gun once. The bullet rips into the floor several yards behind him. He cringes and shakes uncontrollably.

“You want to run, don’t you? You got the drapetomania, don’t you, boy. Get off your fucking knees,” you say. “If you gon’ die, die like a man.”

“I’m scared,” I say.

“You are such a pussy.” You sniff the air. “Did you fart again?”

He shakes his head no.

“Nigger, you bet’ not o’ shit.”

I lean forward and cup my face in my hands.

“If you shit up in here, I’m gon’ . . . You already did it, didn’t you? Kiss my ass!” You raise the gun up, and bring it down sharply on his head. He grabs his head, and rolls onto his side. He takes one hand down, and looks at it. It is smeared with blood. A knot as big around as a quarter rises up. There is a gash on it that streams blood.

“You hit me!” I quiver.

“You damn right, I hit your funky ass. You lucky you ain’t been shot already.”

“Can I go to the bathroom and clean up?” I ask, pulling myself back upright.

“Hell, no!” you say. “I can’t let you out of my sight until I decide what I’m gon’ do.”

I wipe away the blood streaming into my eye. “I need medical attention,” I whine.

“Well, I’m really sorry about that, but medical attention is in short

fucking supply up in here.”

“Help me,” I whine.

“Gwen sure had your number.”

I look up at him.

“Yeah, that’s right. I fucked her. I fucked her every time I saw her. And you know why? ‘Cause you couldn’t get the job done right.”

I bury his face in my hands again sniffing, trying to avoid crying.

“She married you, but she always was my girl. We fucked every chance we got. On holidays, on weekends, any time she could get away. Hell, we fucked on your wedding night.”

“Stop,” I cry. “Please, stop.”

“You wanted the truth, now you’re gonna get it. Next time, be careful what you ask for. You were right. I used to slap her around a little bit. Nothing that would hurt her, though. She didn’t know it, but I wouldn’t have hurt her for the world. She didn’t know, so she was scared of me. That’s what made our fucking so intense. Her fear gave an edge to her lust, and she would fuck like a mad dog.”

“I hate you, Piano Man. I wish you had told me anything but that.”

“Yeah, she was a good one. I hated it when she died. As I recall, I didn’t make it to her funeral, either.”

Keeping the gun leveled on him, you get up and walk to the refrigerator.

“What you got to eat up in here? The prospect of having to shoot you is making me hungry.”

You see a bucket of take-out fried chicken and some bread. You scoop it up and close the refrigerator with your foot. You sweep the chess board and all the pieces onto the floor with a wave of your arm. You sit down, and prop your feet up on the table. You pull a leg from the bucket and bite into it. You chew it a few times, and swallow.

“Then there was ‘Nita,” you say biting again into the dark meat.

“You already told me about ‘Nita.”

“Did I say it was only one time? My bad! It was more than that. Lots of times, in fact. Maybe even hundreds before he killed her. You know the irony? Kong knew about it, and he hated it. But he hated himself more, because he knew that it was his own stupidity that drove her to me in the first place. And he loved her. He was crazy about that woman. I guess her taking another lover in California was more than he could deal with. But that’s ok. Gwen filled in real nicely after ‘Nita was gone.”

With your feet still propped up on the table, you rock you chair back onto the two back legs.

“Finally, there was Dempsey.”

“What about Dempsey?”

“His mama didn’t get him hooked on that shit, I did. I wanted to fuck her. She was kind of old.” You chuckle, “about as old as we are now, but so what? She had some nice tits. Problem was, son kept doing this cock block thing. No,” you stop yourself, “that’s not the way it went down.” The chair rocks back a little too far, and you have to catch yourself. “At first, she made me do it.”

“Oh, that was original.”

“She found out about me and ‘Nita. She threatened to tell Kong.”

“You weren’t afraid of Kong. He already knew.”

“But she didn’t know that Kong already knew. Besides, I pretended that I was afraid for ‘Nita. So we did it a couple of times. But then, she wanted to cut it off. Said she wouldn’t be able to handle it if we got caught. So she must have told Dempsey something, because that’s when he started playing the cock blocker. You know that nigger had the nerve to start talking about family values?”

“He was protecting his mother.”

“Fuck that! I wanted that pussy and he was in the way. And what? I’m gon’ let some honky in the White House or in Italy tell me who I can stick *my* dick in? Shi-i-it! I already told you, I don’t follow them honkies’ rules. I knew what that nigger liked, so I bought him some. After that, me and his mama had days and days and days of sinful bliss for the menial price of a few rocks now and then. And them pictures? He was so broke and strung out, he would do anything I told him to do. She begged me not to do it, but I forced him take pictures of me fucking his mama in the ass.”

You loll your head back remembering ‘Cilia, and the chair rocks back too far. You land hard bumping your head. You scramble to catch your balance, and right yourself. As you look around to see where he is, you feel a sharp pain on the crown of your head off to the left of center, and you hear a sound that you recognize as a piece of wood breaking. You feel yourself slump back to the floor. Your consciousness is consumed with the sharp pain in your head and the stinging smell of fresh shit.

You have no past and you have no future. There is only the present, the here and now. Oh, you remember things. You remember lots of things. You remember lots of things very clearly. But you don’t dwell on them. There are too many of them. Some of them are from a very long time ago like they were from another life or another lifetime. You view them only as you need to or as you are forced to. Here and now is where life is lived. Everything else is an abstraction, a dream.

Your first recollection is of swimming. The water is warm and salty. It’s dark, and the ground around the water is quaking. The water is no longer safe. You have to get out. You kick to propel yourself into the

tunnel. The tunnel is the exit. It quakes around you, threatening to cave in. The rocks rub against your face and shoulders and hips. You cannot breathe. The rocks are bruising your body. You kick and wiggle until the cave opens at your demand. Light! You're almost free! You give one last kick and you land on the beach like a slap on the ass. The air is cold. You inhale deeply and cry out in pain. You keep crying. The light is blinding. You want to rub your eyes, but you can't. You hurt all over, but it's ok. You made it. You're free. You still feel the water from the beach splashing in your face. You hear a voice, a man's voice.

"Wake up, you bastard."

You open your eyes. Juke is standing over you with an empty glass still dripping water, and the gun. Damn!

"*Now*, mo-ther-fuc-ker. What your ba-lack ass gon' do *now*," I say, mimicking him.

He's wearing different pants. You must have been out long enough for him to clean himself up and change clothes. At his feet, there is a broom handle broken in two places.

"I think you fractured my skull," you say.

"That is the least of your problems."

"You mean it gets worst than this?"

"Sure does," I say. "Look behind you."

You turn your head slowly. You see his shoes. They are black running shoes with white laces. Then his pants. Designer jeans. His t-shirt reads, "People are dying for me to be inside," under a picture of a jailhouse door. It's Kong.

You smile recognizing an old friend. "My man," you say. Then you realize that he is the one who hit you because of what you had said about Nita. Juke was too far away to get to you that quickly. You can

feel the smile fade. "It was you."

"I wished it had been a bat," Kong says, "or better yet, a tire iron."

"Come on, guys," you say, "you're not going to let a little thing like pussy break up a forty-year friendship, are you?"

"Gimme the gun," Kong says, holding his hand out to me.

Kong is short and wiry. His face is as dark as a brown medicine bottle. His head is shaved clean, and his Van Dyke beard and mustache are white. His hands and feet appear to be too big for his body, but they are agile and limber. The skin on the palms of his hands is dark and rough from playing drums.

"Me first," I say.

"Then shoot him."

"Juke, man," you say, "you ain't a killer. Don't do it."

"Shoot that nigger," Kong says. His voice is deep and gravelly from too many cigarettes.

"Kong," you say, "don't be so quick to go back to prison. 'Cause this time they'll fry you."

"Yeah, but it'll take them twenty years to do it. By then, I'll be dead anyway."

"Can we at least talk?" you say.

"About what?" Kong asks.

"We been talking," I say.

"About the wisdom of doing this," you say.

"There is no wisdom here," Kong says, "this is pure folly."

"You are playing right into the honkies' hand. Niggers killing niggers, again."

"Juke was gon' kill you anyway."

"No, he wasn't," you say, "Juke's a pussy."

"Yeah, but I *know* you ain't no pussy, and you would of shot him if

I hadn't of hit you on the head with that broomstick."

"I might have shot him," you say. "But being a pussy ain't no cause to get shot. I might *not* have done it. I might not have done it just to avoid playing into their hand."

"Ok," Kong says. "Now what?"

"Let's talk," you say. "Let's talk about Dempsey."

"The brother could play up some bass when he wanted to," Kong says.

"Yeah," I say, "when he wasn't on drugs."

"That part was a lie," you say.

"What part?" I ask.

"The part about me getting him back on drugs."

"Why should I believe that?"

"Because it's the truth."

"But you offered up the exact opposite just a little while ago as the truth," I say. "Why should I believe this version? Surely not merely to prevent you from getting shot."

"That would do for openers," you say. "But the other part is that I can prove it."

"Well, prove on," I say.

"Kong," you say, "weren't you with me that time when I went over to Dempsey's place and 'Cilia was there?"

"I don't remember," Kong says.

"Think back," you say, "it was in the summer time. They was high as a motherfucker."

"And?" Kong says.

"And 'Cilia said something that proves that she got him started back on that shit."

"What did she say?" I ask.

“She said to him, ‘Do you remember the first time we did this together?’”

“Meaning?” I ask.

“Meaning she got him started,” you blurt out.

“That don’t mean that at all,” Kong says.

“That’s the only thing it could mean,” you say.

“You are so full of mess,” I say.

“He’s full of shit is what he’s full of,” Kong says.

“Look, guys,” you say, “I may have fucked up some, but so what? That was a long time ago. Don’t time in grade count for nothing?”

“I just did twenty fucking years because of you,” Kong says. “Time in grade don’t count for shit.”

“I didn’t kill her,” you say.

“That’s what you said about Dempsey,” I say.

“Well, I didn’t,” you say.

“Neither did I,” Kong says. “But by then, she was completely fucked up.”

“*She* was fucked up?” You say, “you’re the one who did the killing, buddy boy.”

“It wasn’t me,” Kong says. “She was picking up guys left and right. Black guys, white guys, spicks, chinks, gooks, anybody and everybody. She took all comers.”

“But so were you, Kong,” you say.

“That’s different,” Kong says. “A nigger is ‘sposed to fuck who he can fuck.”

“But it’s different for a bitch?” you ask.

“Hell, yeah, it’s different for a bitch,” he says. “She ‘sposed to be at home saving it for her nigger.”

“Wake up and smell the coffee, Kong,” you say, “she was fucking

folks ‘cause you was fucking folks.”

“Yeah, and that’s why I shot the room up when I caught them. I was fucking folks ‘cause I liked to fuck. She was fucking them to get even with me.”

“Politics,” I say.

“Same thing,” you say, ignoring Juke’s remark.

“Not even,” Kong says. “I was fucking out of love of the art; she was fucking out of spite.”

“Would it have made any difference if she did it out of love of the art?” you ask.

“Yeah, it would have made a difference,” Kong says.

“Nigger, you a goddamn lie,” you say.

“I’m serious,” Kong says.

“Then you a lie and don’t even know it,” you say.

“No, really . . .,” Kong says.

“You mean to say that if she had come to you and said, ‘baby, I really love to fuck, and I want to have more niggers fucking me than just you,’ you would have been cool with that?”

“You damn right, I would have been cool with that,” Kong says. “We could have gone on the World Wide Web in search of folks. The house would have been full of bitches all the time.”

“You a lying motherfucker. Juke,” you say, “back me up here.”

“Kong is right,” I say, “politics ain’t beanbag. She screwed up. She got killed. Boom! That’s it.”

“I mean is Kong lying or what?”

“It doesn’t matter about the woulda, coulda, shoulda. She did it, and she died. That’s it!”

“Well, he didn’t have to kill her,” you say.

“I *didn’t* kill her,” Kong says.

“Say what?” you say.

“I didn’t kill the bitch.”

“Well, who did?” you ask. “And what about them twenty years you just did?”

“The clown I caught her with did it, and I did the time for being a good Samaritan.”

“Say *what?*”

“After I shot the room up, I went out front and sat in the car waiting for the punk to leave. I heard a shot. He came out running with his pants in his hands. I thought ‘Nita had shot at him to get him to leave. I jumped from the car and ran back to the house just in time to see him dump something in the bushes. I ran upstairs, and she was on her knees in the bed dead. He shot her in the back of the head while he was still fucking her.”

“That was cold blooded,” I say.

“She never saw it coming,” Kong says.

“So what did you do?” I ask.

“I called the cops. I pointed out where he threw the gun.”

“And?” you ask.

“The cop found the gun, wiped off the prints, and read me my rights.”

“They can’t do that,” I say.

“That’s what I told him,” Kong says.

“And?”

“I told him to go look for the real killer.”

“And what did he do?” I ask.

“He said why should I look for the real killer when I’ve got you,” Kong says.

“And?”

“And I said I didn’t do it.”

“And?”

“He said that I would be just another nigger in jail.”

“That creep!” I say.

“Cops do that all the time,” Kong says. “He closed a murder case in less than five minutes. The mayor gave him some kind of award.”

“Well, what did you do about it?” I ask.

“I pled down to a lesser charge so I would only get twenty years.”

“I mean what did you do about the injustice?” I ask.

“I took the first thing smoking out of California so I could hunt for the one who made her like that.”

“You did what?” you ask.

“I got out of Dodge,” Kong says.

“Wait one motherfucking minute,” you say. “You are ready to die foaming at the mouth in the gas chamber for killing me, but you gon’ let the cop get away clean?”

Kong stops for a minute, then throws his head back and shouts as loud as he can, “*Adieu!*”

“You going somewhere?” I ask.

“That’s what he said when they asked him if he swore to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. *Adieu*. The clerk thought he said, I do. He knew he was going to lie, so he sidestepped the oath. Cops call it testilying.”

“Yeah,” I say, “they testify at trials all the time.”

“Not *testifying*,” Kong says, “*testilying*.”

“You need to drill a hole in that cop and the badge he hides behind,” you say, “not in me. Besides, it wasn’t just me,” you say to Kong, cutting your eyes at Juke. “Juke fucked her, too.”

“You bastard!” Kong says to me.

“What about the guy who shot her?” I ask.
“See,” you say, “he can’t even deny it.”
“That’s a lie!” I say.
“A couple of times, we fucked her together,” you say.
“And when was this,” Kong asks.
“Any time you were off fucking somebody else.”
“Juke?” Kong says.
“He’s lying, Kong. He’s lying to save his butt.”
“Nita always did have a soft spot for you, Juke,” Kong says.
“I fucked her in the ass while he fucked her in the mouth,” you say.
“Yeah, but she never gave me the goods,” I say to Kong.
“Then we switched off,” you say.
“I’ll kill you if you did,” Kong says.
“If he didn’t get it, it wasn’t for lack of asking,” you butt in.
“Did you?” Kong asks me.
“Never,” I say. “Not ever.”
“You ain’t got to protect his feelings,” you say to Juke. “Cause he was pumping Gwen when I wasn’t.”
“That’s a motherfucking lie!” Kong says.
“And you know that nigger got a dick like a horse,” you say.
“Kong?” I say.
“No,” Kong says.
“She told me so herself,” you say. “He tried to push them ten inches down that poor girl’s throat.”
“Kong?” I say again.
“I already said, no.”
“But did *you* ever ask?” you say.
Kong stops.
“Did you?” I ask.

“Maybe once,” Kong says, “but I knew she would say no.”

“More like once a day,” you say. “And if she said no or didn’t feel like it, he took it!”

I turn the gun on Kong. “How do I know for sure she said no?”

“Shoot him!” you blurt out.

I raise the gun up like a hammer and thrust the barrel down in Piano Man’s direction and shoot.

The bullet clips the outside of your left thigh. It feels like scalding hot water or molten cinders being poured on your leg. The pain makes you know you’re alive.

Kong seizes the opportunity to try to jump me. I raise the hammer again. I wheel it down and shoot. The bullet rips the inside of Kong’s right thigh. Kong screams and spins to the floor. His sock is soaked and his shoe is filled with blood.

“Call a doctor!” you shout.

“Medical attention is in short fucking supply up in here,” I say.

“Not for me, punk, for him,” you gesture to Kong. “You busted an artery.”

Kong is lying on the floor holding his thigh with both hands. Blood is spurting between his fingers. “You shot *me!*” he says. “We were supposed to be in this together.”

“You shouldn’t have believed him,” I say to Kong. “I never touched Nita in my life.”

Kong nods a couple of times. “And I never touched Gwen,” he says. “Call a doctor.”

“I can’t,” I say.

“What do you mean, you can’t? Call a fucking doctor, you pussy ass motherfucker!”

“If I call a doctor, then I’ll have to go to jail.”

“Please,” Kong says. “I’m bleeding to death.”

“Sorry, guy,” I say, and shoot Kong in the chest. The spurting at his leg turns to a trickle.

“You playing right into the honky’s hand,” you say.

“I can’t save the race,” I say. “Only God can do that.”

“So now it’s my turn, I guess,” you say.

“Almost,” I say. “I just want you to squirm a little while longer.”

“I’m through squirming,” you say. “In fact, you’re the one who should be squirming.”

“I’m through squirming, too,” I say.

“Oh? You’re ok with going to prison?”

“I’m not going to prison.”

“You don’t know what you’re going to do with *one* body,” you say, “let alone *two*.”

I feel myself fidget for a moment. “I’ll think of something.”

“It’s too late for that. You need to get rid of Kong now.”

“I need to deal with you now,” I say.

“Ok, then, do it.”

I hesitate for a moment. “What should I do?” I ask.

“What?”

“What should I do?”

“You need me to tell you how to commit another murder?”

“What should I do about Kong?”

“You are such a pussy,” you say. “You got any lime?”

“Sure, in the fridge.”

“Quicklime you fool!”

“What’s that?”

“I guess that means no.”

“Help me!”

“You’re the one with the gun.”
“Shit,” I say, “shit, shit, shit.”
“I know you ain’t cussing.”
“Fuck you,” I say.
“Yeah, fuck me. But you better be thinking of some way to fuck that body.”
“Can we cut it up?”
“You can if you want to, but I ain’t cutting up nothing.”
“Well, what should I do?”
“You should call an ambulance to take it away. *That’s* what you should do.”
“No,” I say.
“Ok, that was my idea. What’s yours?”
“We can bury it.”
“Bury it where?”
“Somewhere out back.”
“Have you been in a daze all the time you have lived here? There is a concrete parking lot out back.”
“We can take it somewhere.”
“Where? And how we gon’ get there? I’m shot up, and you too weak to carry his body alone.”
I hesitate for another moment, then move towards the phone. I stop.
“We’ll say it was an accident,” you say. “They won’t know one way or the other. That way, you won’t do no inside time.”
I pick up the phone, then stop.
“911,” you say, “dial 911.”
I dial. “Somebody’s been shot,” I say after a moment. I look at Piano Man and hang up. “And someone else is about to be.”

“Can I at least get a cigarette?” you ask.

I go over to Kong. I pat his pockets. I reach into Kong’s pants pocket, and pull out a crumpled box of Salems. I flip them to him.

“I hate menthols,” you say. “Cold smoke ain’t smoke.” You tear off the filter, and put the cut end between your lips. “I always keep fire handy,” you say, patting your pockets. You pull out a butane lighter. You flick it. You suck the flame deep into the tip of the cigarette. You close your eyes, and inhale deeply. You feel the smoke circulating into your lungs, calming you, refreshing you. You open your eyes. I level the gun at him and pull back the hammer. I fire. I pull the hammer back again.

Instinctively, you turn your body to take the bullet in the right chest, away from the heart. You fall to the floor. The scalding heat of the bullet under your right nipple is comforting like a soothing balm. You feel your heart still pumping. Your breathing is shallow now because one lung is shutting down, filling up with fluid. You hear another shot and you flinch. You don’t feel another bullet. Did he miss? The white king is right in front of your face. The white king, bloodless, cold, the king of death.

You turn your head to see what he is doing. He is lying on the floor face up, his arms and legs spread out wide. An arc of blood pours from his right ear like cream from a porcelain pitcher, thick, rich, nourishing.

You clutch the white king in your hand, and press the base over the hole in your chest to stanch the flow. You hear an ambulance far in the distance. You can feel yourself sliding from the beach back through the tunnel and into the cool, salty blue water.

You know you are going to live.

LITTLE RED ROBIN HOOD

“New Orleans?!” the woman’s voice in the receiver shouted at him. “You called me at twelve . . .” the voice paused, “twenty-three in the dead of night on a Wednesday night to tell me you think you want to go to New Orleans!”

“Well,” he answered, “I’m not . . .”

“Listen, Andrew,” the voice said, “I thought we were going to get married next month.”

“We can still get . . .”

“We can’t get married if you give up your practice and go to New Orleans.”

The woman began to sniff.

“Molly,” he said, “I’m tired of Chicago. I’m tired of egotistical judges who only half know the law, and clients who won’t pay for services rendered.”

“Well, what about me, Andrew?” Her voice sounded thick with emotion. “I’m almost thirty years old, and I want to get married. And you’re almost thirty-five!”

“Then come with me.”

“And do what?!”

“Start over. I’ll get a job researching or something.”

“You can get a job researching in Chicago.”

“I know, but it doesn’t snow in New Orleans.”

His answer sounded weak, and he knew it. Why was this conversation so difficult? He had rehearsed it several times an hour all the while he was driving. “I’m leaving,” he was supposed to have said. “I’m going to New Orleans to work on a freighter and see the world.” What was so hard about that? Why was he mincing his words so?

“I can’t go off to New Orleans,” Molly said.

“Why not?”

“You know why not.”

“Because of Yvette?”

“That’s right, because of Yvette. And I don’t see how you could even consider leaving her.”

He sat on the side of the bed and pictured Molly and Yvette the way they had looked at breakfast this morning. Molly looked as short as a little girl as she stood at the stove stirring butter into the grits, her behind moving from side to side under her granny gown with each turn of her arm. Yvette sat at the table barely able to see over the edge and swung her legs back and forth in time with a nursery rhyme she sang to herself.

“I didn’t say I was leaving her,” he said. He shifted the phone to his left ear, and held it in place by hunching up his shoulder. Looking in the mirror above the dresser, he ran the backs of his fingers upwards along the side of his raisin-colored chin. He needed a shave.

“That girl loves you,” Molly said.

“I know.”

“And she’s only four years old.”

“I know.”

“And you know how little girls that age love their fathers.”

“I know, I know.”

“And you remember . . .”

“And I remember what I said I was going to do for you and her.”

He shifted around and leaned back against the headboard, then turned off the lamp on the nightstand by the phone.

“Then why are you trying to leave us?” Her voice grew high-pitched and whiny as she became less and less able to control her crying.

“Because I want . . .”

“I’ve stuck by you for five years, Andrew,” she whined. “And you said . . .”

“I know what I said.”

They paused for a moment. He could hear her blowing her nose in the background. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a soft, crumpled package of cigarettes. He worked the hole open with his finger and fished around until he found one last cigarette stuck way in the back. He tore the top of the package open to get at it.

He took a deep breath to try to muster up his courage, but he kept remembering his promise, a promise he made while he was still in law school. “We’ll get married as soon as I pass the bar and establish a decent practice,” he had said. “We are going to find the great American dream.” He must have been stupid to have made a promise like that.

“Do you remember the birthday party we gave for Yvette last year?” Molly asked. Her voice sounded far away as if she were not speaking directly into the mouthpiece.

“How could I forget?”

He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a butane lighter. He flicked it once, and a one-inch yellow flame leaped up, casting a pale light in the dark room. He sucked the flame into the tip of the cigarette, then clicked the lighter off and laid it on the nightstand.

Molly’s voice sounded stronger as she continued, “She was the prettiest thing there in her little white lace party dress and patent-leather shoes.”

“And the little silver bracelet I gave her,” he said. “Yeah, the one with all the little bells that she kept ringing in everybody’s ears.”

“And that little fuzzy, patchwork Afro of hers.”

“Well, she got it honest, straight from her daddy.”

“What can I say?” he chuckled. Then he wondered what was so funny. He was supposed to be trying to leave home!

“Do you know,” she continued, “that that girl cried for nearly an hour before the party because I told her you might not be able to see her blow the candles out? That was the day you worked late researching some case you had just gotten. I mean, she threw a fit.”

“You never told me that.”

“Honey, that girl loves you.”

They paused. He remembered the way Yvette ran and jumped into his arms when he had gotten home that night. “Daddy, Daddy,” she had said while hugging him around his neck.

“That was the year your mother gave her that set of kiddie books,” Molly said suddenly. “The Three Little Pigs, Mother Goose, and Little Red Riding Hood.”

He laughed aloud. “Yvette called it Little Red Robin Hood,” he said. “And she actually got mad to the point of crying when I told her that Little Red Robin Hood didn’t exist, that it was Little Red Riding Hood.”

“Yeah,” Molly said. “She’s bull-headed as hell sometimes.”

“But I guess she got that honest, too.”

“Meaning what?” she tried to keep the sweetness in her voice.

“Nothing.”

“Are you implying that I’m bull-headed?”

“No, honey. I’m simply saying that you can be tenacious to the point of . . .”

“Tenacious is bull-headed!”

“No, it isn’t.”

“To the point of what?”

“To a point bordering on . . .”

“Bullheadedness?” she cut in.

“Sometimes.”

“Then you *do* think I’m bull-headed,” she demanded.

He paused a long moment. “I wonder where she ever got the notion of Little Red Robin hood, anyway,” he asked.

“Well, obviously she’s heard of Robin Hood. And she’s heard of Little Red Riding Hood. And she simply got them mixed up.”

“Yeah, maybe she did.”

“And now back to my being bull-headed,” she said. “I’m the one who’s kept us together this long. If it weren’t for me, you’d be off somewhere in Mexico wasting your life away.”

“But she’s a smart little girl, you know?”

“I mean just like you did those two years before we met.”

“And sometimes I think that little girl must have been a Chinese sage in her last life.”

“Where was it you went anyway? Morocco? Algiers?”

“Tangier,” he answered.

“Tangier! Two years in Tangier sitting around doing nothing.”

“Some of the things that little girl says simply amaze me.”

“Two solid years! And the only thing you had to show for it was a handful of abstract poems and a battered pair of sandals.”

“For instance, do you know what she told me about Little Red Robin Hood?” he asked.

“What?”

“She told me that Little Red Robin Hood kept the wolf away.”

“Well, clearly she was confused again.”

“But was she?” he asked.

“What do you mean, but was she? Of course she was! The girl is

only four years old!”

“I know that.”

“Then how could you ask such a stupid question?”

“The question wasn’t stupid.”

“It most certainly was!”

“Why, because you didn’t understand it?”

“There was nothing to understand!”

“There was the wolf to understand,” he said.

“The wolf!?”

“Yes.”

“A wolf is a wolf.”

“That’s right,” he said. “And that’s why you have to keep pushing him back.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about the one thing I have to show for having stayed in North Africa for two years.”

“And what is that, pray tell?” she asked.

“I learned how to keep the wolf back.”

“Well, I certainly hope you keep the wolf back better than you write poetry.”

“It’s like this,” he said. “The wolf is that part of life that encroaches on everything and everybody.”

“Did you ever try to publish any of those poems?”

“No.”

“Why not? Some people like that fuzzy sounding stuff.”

“I just never did.”

He took a deep drag off his cigarette, and pulled the thick smoke into his lungs. The smoke tickled his throat as he exhaled slowly.

“So what’s this about the wolf?” Molly asked.

“I just told you,” he said. “The wolf is the bad guy in life. He encroaches on and vandalizes everything we do.”

“Like what?”

“Like everything,” he answered. “Big important things, little petty things, every everything.”

“That wasn’t an attempt at poetic spontaneity, was it?” she asked.

“Feeble, but yes.”

She paused, then said, “Give me an example.”

“All right,” he said. “Consider music. It takes three days to regain the ground lost from missing one day’s practice. The wolf will have encroached that far.”

“I’m not sure I understand.”

“It’s simple. Everything that we ever do tends to become undone in time.”

“So what are you saying?” she asked.

“I’m saying that this tendency of things to become undone is the work of the wolf.”

“And?”

“And you have to keep pushing him back.”

“In what way?”

“By redoing everything that he’s undone,” he said. “And that’s what I learned to do while I was in Tangiers. I learned how to get up every day and write poetry for two hours, even on those days when I didn’t really want to.”

“And you think Yvette knows about keeping the wolf at bay?”

“Well,” he said, “she talks as if she does.”

“Uh-huh.” Her tone was patronizing.

“I mean, she’s always saying something that’s, you know, deep. Like Little Red Robin Hood keeps the wolf back, or . . .”

“But, honey,” she said, “there is no Little Red Robin Hood. Little Red Robin Hood doesn’t exist, remember? You told Yvette that yourself.”

“I know,” he answered. “But I think she knew better. After all, she did insist that he was real.”

“Then, for God’s sake, who is he?” She said, “I mean, this conversation is getting ridiculous.”

“It’s like Yvette said, Little Red Robin Hood is the one who keeps the wolf back.”

“Oh, Jesus!”

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are.”

He took another long drag off his cigarette. Then, as he exhaled, he mashed the cigarette out in the ashtray by the phone. He was careful to smother each little orange spark.

He met Molly for the first time on his first day back in Chicago from his trip to Morocco. He was crossing the street from the Greyhound bus station when she approached him with a clipboard and pencil. He remembered that she struck him as being attractive in a perverse sort of way. She was short and dark, and her hair was done up like a little girl’s might be, with four braids like horns, one sticking out from each quadrant of her head. Each braid had a green rubber band tightly wrapped around its base, and a red plastic barrette clinging tenaciously to its tip. Standing there in old blue jeans and a sweat shirt, she reminded him of Farina in the old *Our Gang* series.

“Excuse me, sir,” she had said. “Can I get you to sign a petition to put Allen Lee on the ticket for alderman of the . . .”

“Who’s Allen Lee?” he asked still walking.

“My brother.”

He stopped and signed the petition, and she began looking around for someone else to approach. Her lips were pinched and the flesh between her eyebrows was furrowed.

“So do you want me to vote for him, too?” he asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “He can’t possibly win.”

“Then why bother getting him on the ballot?”

“To get the experience,” she said. “This time, our goal is to get him on the ballot. Next time our goal will be to get him into the office.”

She had a long face, and it struck him as being appropriate that someone as determined and stubborn as she would have a face like a mule.

“So why not wait until next time to get him on the ballot?”

“Because we might mess it up next time if we don’t practice now,” she answered. “We’ve planned the work, and now we’re working the plan.”

Apparently, the plan was a good one, because on his next try for the office, Allen won. Of course, Andrew remembered, his having been Allen’s campaign manager while he, Andrew, was in law school might have had something to do with it. In fact, it was at Allen’s victory celebration that Andrew had promised Molly the great American dream. What could have possibly been on his mind? Then he remembered. It was something Molly had said at the beginning of the evening. They had been seeing each other for nearly a year, and Molly had confided this was by far the happiest moment of her life. Only the great American dream in the sky could make her happier. That was when he kissed her deeply, made love to her on one of the campaign office tables, and made the promise. Shit! Was that it?! Was he going to let a flimsy-ass promise made while in the emotional throes of passion and a victory celebration bind him to an unwanted albeit

successful way of life for the rest of his life?! No way, Jose!

He sat bolt upright in the bed. “So how is the conference?” Molly asked.

“I didn’t go.” He tore through the crushed cigarette package looking for one last cigarette.

“You didn’t . . . Well . . . Well, where are you now?”

“In a hotel.” He fumbled through his pants pockets. He had smoked the last one.

“In a hotel?! Where?” she asked, “downtown?”

“No.” He fumbled through his shirt pocket again.

“But I thought you said the Barrister’s Guild was giving its annual . . .”

“We are,” he said, “and it’s tonight. But I decided not to go.”

“But why? I thought you were looking forward to going.”

“I don’t know. I just decided not to.”

They paused. This was it, his final chance to tell her it was over, to find the travel and adventure he had always read about and wanted to live, to resurrect the life of the poet in Morocco.

“So what time will you be home?” she asked.

His pulse quickened. He leaned over and turned the light back on. He looked around the room at the yellow print wallpaper in one corner beginning to peel, at the vivid blue drapes parted a little in the middle, at the finger prints around the light switch on the wall and the Please Don’t Disturb sign hanging on the doorknob. He looked at his face in the mirror, at his thick nose and dark lips, at the lump of muscle at the base of his jaw. He looked at his hair, grizzled now. And short. Too short to wear in the dread lock ponytail of the poet. He looked on the dresser at the cufflinks his daughter had given him for Christmas.

“Well?” Molly asked.

“I wouldn’t be able to get there before morning,” he said.
“Before morning?!” she asked. “Why not?”
“I’m in Cairo.”
“Egypt?!”
“Illinois.”
“What are you doing down there?”
“I was on my way to New Orleans.”
“And?”
“And I stopped to push the wolf back.”
“Is he back?”
“He’s never gone.”
“So will I see you in time for breakfast?” she asked.
He began buttoning his shirt. “Yeah,” he said, “I’ll see you in time for breakfast.”

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