

INHERITING DUST: Parts 1 to 9

by

Joseph Gray Carson

Part 1

It's the tail end of another languid Austin afternoon, and I was half-dead tired and brain-dead drunk, so I ordered the piss-thinnest beer I could and ordered myself to nurse it. Kay set it down in front of me right when Fat John came in and so I bought one for him, too, before he could ask.

“You're a good guy, Jake.”

“No shit, you guys are gonna break me.”

Which was a lie. For the first time in my life, the one thing I didn't have to worry about was money. It's what started all this, though, what had led me from Boston to this cheap dive in downtown Austin, where I had already started to merge with the broken drunks who hung out there. It hadn't taken me long; there had been a plan once, but after a while drinking had become an end in itself. That cool Texas spring night, though, it was like something had clicked, and I was about to change, to get back on the road I'd been traveling before I'd gone down this particular detour.

I took my beer down to the end of the bar and sat down—there was no table or even bar service here; you had to go up to the register and place your order, even if you were just sitting six feet away. I thought about shooting a game, but figured that with the cocaine hangover shakes, I wouldn't even be able to hold the cue. I looked at Kay's hands, steady and quick. She must have kept some in reserve from last night and had a bump before coming to work. I think maybe I should ask her but remind myself that cocaine was never really the drug for me, and she probably wouldn't give me any, anyway. That was the kind of woman she was; last night had been fun, parked in her car hitting the cheap grade-B cut Colombian powder off each other's fists; and then had come the too-long, unfulfilled sex in the back seat of her Cutlass-rock-hard, skin-blistering sex without orgasm was the drug's worst side effect by far. I had only gone out with Kay to her car after closing that night because she asked me, and around women I am nothing if not weak.

In the bathroom, I took an anemic piss and sparked a joint and took a draw on it, not so much for the THC but in the hopes that someone would come in and catch me. You see, that was part of the plan, was to get caught. Only by getting caught, I figured, could I return to the plan and continue the search.

I was searching for my old man. There, I've said it. No big deal. I wasn't complicated about it; I wasn't in some kind of emotional turmoil about the long-lost father, etc. I hadn't even asked myself any of the questions about why I wanted to find him, why I was doing it this way. It had been a reflex since this whole thing was started-by his money, to be specific. I felt like I owed it to him.

The money had come from him, but it hadn't said why he had sent it. It had come in a package to my little place near Massachusetts Avenue in Boston. I was inching along towards a master's degree in Art History when the brown package had arrived. I opened to find a key, a cashier's check for four hundred thousand dollars, and a note from my Dad. I had never spoken with him in my life, not that I remember, and I only pictured him from

photographs. He didn't sign the note but I recognized the handwriting from an unsent postcard to his brother that Mom had kept, and that I still had.

When I got the package I didn't know what to do. There was no explanation in the note, just a word of condolence about Mom, who had died six years ago, when I was nineteen and just starting college, and a gesture that he hoped this would help get me established in the world. The package had been forwarded from my previous address, in Montana, but I didn't know how he would have gotten that, either.

It couldn't have come at a better time. Or worse. I went to my bank and deposited a quarter of it, then got a cashier's check for the remainder and went to another bank to open an account and deposit another hundred thousand, and I did that three times, at which point I paid off my credit card, my student loan, put new tires on my car and got ready to leave Boston, but not before I got rat-faced drunk and posted a note on my thesis advisor's door telling him to take his latest comments on my thesis draft and shove them straight up his ass. I realized somewhere between the time I entered the third bank and the time I was peeling off three hundred-dollar bills for the car's new tires that I no longer gave a rat's ass about my education. I had walked over to Maggie's place and told her that I was leaving for a while, that I had no choice, and that I didn't think things were working out anyway. In my memory, that's the part that I think about least. She nodded calmly, and before I left we had a bout of tear-filled sex, but we both seemed relieved. I had been drinking for a while, and between benders and working on a thesis there was no time for kindness and sensitivity, which I had never been good at anyway. I could be charming with enough whiskey and THC in me, but not kind. There wasn't much to me underneath the surface, but that surface was now rich.

The last thing I did before I left town was to talk to an old friend of mine, Aaron Cohen. I walked up the three flights to his place and he let me in. There were a couple of others around, sad little junkies with needles lying around on the floor, and even though I

had thick shoes I was careful. I didn't really care what I put in my body, but I sure as hell cared how I put it there.

“Aaron, how you doing?”

“Jake, Jakey, what's happening?”

Some people on the floor responded to my presence, but not many, maybe two out of the half-dozen that were either up getting hits or down on the floor, loving the world on the dirty carpet with the barren sunlight shining in.

“I need some stuff, Aaron.” I didn't know where I was going, so I bought some tabs of codeine, a couple of eightballs, and two ounces of semi-kind. He offered me meth and tar and I turned them both down. I had been to the liquor store, gassed up the car and tore up my lease and left a note for the landlord saying to sell it all if he wanted, I didn't care-I left three thousand dollars in cash with the note. The only thing I'd taken with me was Felicia, a tiny one-year-old cat who resembled nothing so much as a cotton ball with a couple of ink stains, who I almost left with a fellow grad student but decided I needed someone to talk to. And eventually she came to accept a life of the highway and cheap motels as calmly and readily as I did.

Aaron offered to get me set up with a new drivers' license, just in case, with all of the stuff I was taking, and so I let him make the phone call while I bought just enough horse for myself and snorted it, which is a waste, as any junkie won't hesitate to tell you, but I just don't cotton to needles, and I happily languished in the late afternoon light. Aaron ran the little place, and so he and I went back behind the locked door to his apartment, nicer than the front room he kept reserved for friends and customers.

“Taking off, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I liked Aaron a lot; we had been friends since undergrad at the University of Montana. I was from North Dakota and he was from Boston, and somehow he had decided he wanted to be a nature boy and come to the Rockies. The nature he found was mostly in

the form of a particular herb which one can get as easily and cheaply in Missoula as anywhere. We experimented nature's way together, from marijuana to mushrooms to mescaline. He liked 'shrooms, but I never cared much for the psychoactives. I wasn't looking for drugs to give me another reality, just to make this one more interesting, bearable. It wasn't until Boston that he got into anything synthetic, and eventually nature's way gave way to the needle's way. When I got to Boston two years later, after working at a job and a destined-to-fail relationship in Missoula, I finally settled on grad school and found myself at Boston University.

Meeting up with Aaron again rekindled my interest in mind alteration, and I entered a few new worlds in my first year of grad study and the following summer, during which I accumulated debts and habits. Then the fall of my second year came, and eight months of relative sobriety and abstention from anything hard had purged my system of even the most residual side effects. That's when the money had come; I had been sitting at my computer that night, actually working on a piece for my thesis, and sipping a little Yukon Jack and getting sick to my stomach from it and trying not to think about what I was going to do with the check for almost a half-million dollars that was sitting on my kitchen table like a bill I put out to remind myself to pay it, like it's nothing, just a magazine or catalog I'll get to tomorrow. I got up from my desk, looked at the check, sat down and thought through every reason why this money wasn't real-I couldn't think of any-and then I went through every reason why I shouldn't do what I was burning to do, and I couldn't think of any, then, either, so I got out.

And the last step was going to Aaron to renege on whatever promise I had made myself eight months ago. I remembered telling myself I would be mostly clean until I got my thesis done, then maybe a month of celebration, then into the real world and those desires would fade. But I had walked out, down the steps of the College of Arts and Sciences building, the whole time wondering if I'd be back, whether I would come crawling

back when I realized life was not an adventure, that you couldn't just run away and chase something elusive, that wasn't practical.

Drugs helped. They could kick away loneliness and aimlessness as easily as the apple falls to the earth. Once you knew what each one did to you, you were your own puppet as long as money and the body didn't get too worn thin. You could construct any individual on the inside that you wanted to suit the situation. You know it won't last, but you tell yourself it's temporary. You're delaying the intervention of some future, sober, sensible self. You need them, for a time. I did now.

Part 2

Aaron and I had straightened out eventually during that night, had entered the eye of the hurricane where lucidity lies just this side of a brutal, restless sleep. When he asked me where I was going, I didn't tell him about the money, just said I'd gotten something from the old man and that I was going looking for him. Aaron knew as much as I did about my Dad — nothing. Mom had shunted off every question I ever raised about him and his family; if I persisted or got indignant, she would break down, and I gave up. After a while I stopped trying.

When I was a kid, of course, I imagined that he was a spy or — better yet — an astronaut who was serving in a top-secret NASA mission and was living in a satellite that we weren't being told about. In Missoula I had some second-hand brushes with the underbelly of the country—Aaron and I frequented bars where people would come through for a while then be gone again, and you'd hear rumors about a lot of shady things. Shady. One of my mother's words, a quaint magazine word. Shady is some romantic idea of crime; having some tweaking punk use a roll of quarters to perform plastic surgery on your face because you made a bet you couldn't cover... shady begins to fade as an accurate descriptor.

Someone once handed me a picture of someone and asked if I'd seen them. Maybe he was a cop, but I had this back-of-the-throat feeling they weren't looking for this guy to

put him in jail. Thing is, I knew the guy in the picture. I'd been playing pool against him five minutes ago. I had thought he was just in the john, that we might have another game when he came back out. I scrutinized it, handed it back, said no, shrugged and took a long pull on my bottle of whatever. The guy was a good pool player, and I was sorry to never see him again. Mostly because I still owed him five bucks, and he had promised to help me on my double-banks.

And so as I lay on my back on Aaron's couch toggling between cartoons and news on television, I rambled a lot about how maybe my life was in danger, that there was a code in my father's note, that there was something I had to do. I went on about that for a long while, and Aaron proved himself my friend by listening and not saying much while the heated frenzy of my brain discharged a thousand dope-fueled scenarios until I finally realized that my voice was just in my own head, and I had fallen asleep...

Back in Austin, my joint nearly exhausted and my head in a nice but cobwebby cloud, I threw the roach into the toilet and flushed it. Still no one came in, but in a way I was relieved-I didn't really feel like working any angle right now except getting rid of my headache. A couple more beers, I thought, and then stumble back to Felicia and the South Congress Motel, where twelve hours of sleep and a couple of cups of coffee at the Magnolia Café would put me back to functioning; a plate of migas at El Sol y La Luna crept its way into my imagination and I wanted them right then, knowing that by the next day the thought of food would be revolting.

Pete was at the bar, a harmless old drunk with his Case gimme cap who always quietly downed Bud Lite pounders, three an hour, until he'd finally fall off his stool and trickle out the door. I sat down next to him because I knew he wouldn't want to talk. The TV above the bar was showing a basketball game; I got to be honest, I like sports the same way I like video games: it's a fine way to waste a couple of hours but I really couldn't care less about stats, trades, playoff chances. However, sports is the lingua franca of barrooms in

every corner of the country, so I found that I'd picked up a remarkable facility with faking interest.

Kay stepped over towards me. "Can I buy you a shot?"

"I don't know. How's my speech?"

"Howzh my shpeesh..." There was much about Kay that I was not attracted to, but something about the way she'd look you straight in the eye and not wait a blink before mocking you with a perfectly straight look, that was—to this semi-masochist, at least—an incredible turn-on.

"Then you can certainly buy me a shot. Thank you, dear."

In Boston, I had gotten on the road just as soon as the guy showed up with my fake ID. It looked good, from Ohio, with the picture he had come over to take the night before. I gave him the five hundred bucks we had agreed on and then got ready to head out; a pricey piece of work, but he guaranteed that a surface-scratching check on the license would actually return a clean bill of health from the fine people in motor vehicles out of Columbus. I had drunk a cup of coffee out of the pot I brewed for Aaron before I left, a hazy and warm memory of the year in Missoula we had lived together. I always used to make the pot, drink a cup and leave the rest for him. He never seemed to recover from these bouts as easily as I did. Not that I wasn't feeling a queasy film over me or that there wasn't a knocking just over my right temple, but I felt ready for the road. I gathered up Felicia, cleaned up after her where she had used one of Aaron's plants as a litter box, and took off.

My only clue was the postmark on the envelope I had been sent: Buda, Texas, and so I was on my way there when I left Aaron's. Only I knew it would take a while to get there, and my plan hadn't really settled in. I was celebrating my newfound wealth. I wanted to see how hard money like that is to spend.

The truth is, it's damn hard. I can see if you're out buying new houses, new cars, artwork and toys, but even twenty thousand dollars, the only amount I had taken with me, was hard to spend on the road, eating at hash houses and drinking in roadside bars,

occasionally dropping two hundred on a small-town whore when I just didn't feel like sleeping alone. I kept the cash and some travelers' checks under the seat, right next to a little .25 that Aaron had given me as a going away present. He suspected the territory I was riding into. I couldn't imagine running out of drugs, but if I did, that would be all right. Everything was all right.

And so my trek to Austin, the nearest city to Buda that seemed like a reasonable base of operations, was long and circuitous, full of binges and hangovers, rundown motels and long stretches of empty highway. I had decided to go to Austin, the nearest city to Buda that seemed remotely interesting. I had heard good things about Austin, but I wasn't interested in jazz clubs or the software industry or quality of living, at least not the quality of living they talked about in *Money* magazine. I was interested in drugs. It seemed to me that the only place a shadowy man whose own ex-wife won't talk about him could get four hundred thousand spare dollars to send to his son was in the drug business. And besides, even if I didn't find him, the ride could be fun.

My plan was dangerous, probably, stupid at the very least, but I have never had a creative approach to solving problems, so I just went with my first instinct. I would go to bars, pull out a joint in the bathroom and wait for someone to come in. I would then offer to share and see where the conversation went. Most of them took a toke and thanked me. Some took out some of theirs and we both shared. One guy over in the southeast part of town, the barrio, offered to sell, and he was the one I'd been waiting for. I told him I was new in town, was hoping to get set up for personal use, possibly some friends. Probably because I was a gringo in Hispanic bar, he figured that I was a narc, and no way in hell would he pipe me into his network. But he told me to check out the Showdown, that a lot of business took place in and around there, and guy with ears could find the people he was looking for.

And so I ended up at the Showdown, had been a regular now for six weeks or so, and still my radar had detected nothing unusual, but perhaps my plan had slipped a little, and I

was simply no longer a man on a mission but just another barfly ticking off the days. Perhaps I needed it. I had been surprised that I had done any of this so far. But all that had happened was Fat John had come into the john four times and toked up with me on different occasions, and Troy had come in twice and turned me down, but gave me the smile that said he could tell a story or two about pot. If there was a dealer around the place, he either didn't pee or wouldn't deal to a stranger. I knew some guys wouldn't, but I've found if a dealer finds you doing something, he's going to want to impress by showing you his assortment, showing you what he has to offer, or at least telling you a story about what he could get for you. Dealers know they're worshipped, and they love every minute of it. It's not just money that makes people risk that kind of prison; it's also the love and respect. A dealer who weighs and doesn't cut and makes sure it's good and gives you samples of new stuff is a treasure to find and keep. I hated leaving Boston, but I knew it was time. If I had stayed in Boston, I would have done something regrettable, like burned out my nose or my liver, but out here on the road all I would do is something stupid. For me, doing something stupid isn't regrettable. It's expected.

Part 3

It was gonna be another night without much sleep, I figured that pretty quick after Kay closed the Showdown and I set out on the mile and a half towards pleasant thoughts of Felicia and a lukewarm Busch tallboy back at the South Congress Motel, where I wouldn't be the only person stumbling in. Generally, I'd get there at 2:45 or so, and you'd listen to late-night drunken flesh-slapping, or fighting, or both, and so I figured instead I'd grab something to eat and give the other drunks a chance to settle into a sobering sleep.

I stopped at the Magnolia Café on the way south, the Capitol dome sticking straight up behind me. I could see it if I were able to adjust my vision that well against the amber downtown lights through the dope-film across my eyes, but I didn't bother. I knew it was there. I figured maybe I should go for a visit one of these days, just like I should go to some

of the art galleries strewn around downtown. That was the kind of thing I had done in Boston, but nothing from those days seemed relevant now. Maybe someday, but not now. This guy who was staying at the South Congress in the room two doors down, Max—who knows what his real name was, he always just said, “folks call me Max,” whatever that means—was at the Magnolia when I got there, nursing a cup of ink-black coffee in my favorite booth—in the corner with a view of the street and the whole restaurant, perfect for people-watching—and more because it was my favorite booth than because I wanted to talk to Max, I slid in opposite him, my body squeaking against the crimson naugahyde. Someone entering the frame of his dead-man's stare startled him, and half his cup wound up on the table. It took him a second to recognize me. We knew each other pretty well but always under rather drunken circumstances—or, better put, during one of our various benders—so I never knew if he'd remember me from one meeting to the next.

I was feeling riled up between the legs—that non-discriminating half-drunk lust—and was glad to see that Rebecca was the waitress for our booth. She was my favorite waitress, and the combination of my favorite booth and my favorite waitress pushed a smile onto my face, and made the thought of Max bearable. It was her eyebrow-ring that drove me wild, and her pale face and black lips and... whatever color her hair was each night. A kind of a deep cherry tonight, and I told her that. Electric auburn, she corrected, then smiled at me warmly, and I stared back at her, waiting for that flicker of excitement to be exchanged between us.

She cleaned up Max's spilled coffee while I ordered, though, and so the flicker never came, and I doubted it ever would, but her smile at me and the way she knew I liked my coffee sugar-no-cream was enough for me. It would get me through the night. I had gotten worked up earlier, thinking about Kay, thinking that tonight I wouldn't snort so much of her coke and could actually finish, but despite a couple of looks my way, she had hurried us all out of the bar pretty quick, and so it looked like another night of just me in front of the

television, but with Rebecca's smile I had plenty to go on. I tried to focus away from her and on Max.

“Motherfuckers,” he was saying, had said twice now.

I suppressed a sigh, turned it into a yawn, not that it would have mattered. A central drawback to talking with alcoholics is that they don't recognize the subtleties of others' expressions—this is its advantage, too, of course. “Who's that, Max?”

He got right to it—the sons of bitches down at Curly's who cut him off again, some new bitch who didn't, etc., etc. I knew this would last awhile, get louder and louder in his retelling until Rebecca would have to come over and ask us to be quiet or leave.

Didn't take long, tonight. I liked staying on her good side, figured getting him out of there would give some points with her, maybe, being a sensitive enough guy to take care of this sunken-eyed old soak, and so I just nodded, paid her for our coffee—trying to get another look, but she shuttled off to another table of rowdies that needed a warning—and took off south back to our haunt. I'd been there about as long as him, but Max was a regular. He was on the ninth week of about his sixth stay. He'd married some woman who lived over on South Fifth, but it sounded like either he'd get drinking or she'd get drinking and the next thing you knew, there were shotguns and sirens and one of them having to find someplace else. It was her place, sounded like, so Max would bring his single taped-together lime-green suitcase over to his home-away-from-home. He could hold things together enough for two, three days out of the week that he could do day-labor kinds of stuff, make enough for rent and Bud pints, which he normally got at Curly's until they closed him down, at which point he would get from me. A word of advice: unless you're a masochist, never give an alcoholic the impression that you are willing to give them free booze. But, for this and many other reasons, I've suspect that I am a masochist at heart.

I handed him a 40 back at my place, a not terribly cold one, either, but at that point he was no longer interested in the gourmet side of the drinking experience. He took it and pulled a long one, then poured some into a plastic Texaco mug I handed to him. He

collapsed into the guest chair, a beat-up white dinner table chair that sat next to the folding plastic tray that served as the TV stand. Felicia got up on my lap the minute I got home and started her little love-fest thing where she buries her claws in my thigh and purrs—if you've got a cat you know what I'm talking about it. It hurt like a motherfucker but I loved the hell out of that cat so I let her do it. Once Max had finished up on the motherfuckers, he moved on to the bitches, and like any drunk worth his salt and lime, there was a long line of those, too. There was a new bitch at Curly's that cut him off just because he was threatening to rip some guy's balls off if he asked him to move because of his pool game again, and after a few sobby curses against his wife for causing all this in the first place, Max settled in on his final lap of vitriol, lashing out against this fucking climate, this fucking state, this fucking country ... until he had about half his second 40 left and I could steer him out the door and down the pavement towards his room.

I got down to my underwear and grabbed another tallboy from my ice bucket, which was just a plastic kids' pail I'd found driving down I-35 on my way to Austin, and which was now more of a tepid-water bucket than an ice bucket. I turned up the fan that was blowing cooler and cooler air through the room. I got a waft of chicken thighs frying with onions and peppers, figured another of my neighbors was fixing a 3 a.m. snack, and got semi-hungry—nothing's better than fried onions and peppers on a tortilla at the end of a long night, but the effort involved, firing up my electric pan, chopping up the shriveled pepper and onion I had stuffed in my bottom drawer, all seemed like more work than I wanted to invest in something I might not be able to hold down anyway.

So I lay down with Felicia instead, promising myself a big breakfast at the Magnolia tomorrow—chorizo and eggs, with lots of corn tortillas, hot sauce and Dos Equis. Felicia arched her back and swept her tabby tail across me—she was all white except her tail and a little monk's crown on her head. She never really said anything except when she was hungry, but at night I'd lay down to read or watch TV and she'd just throw that tail across my face, over and over again, to tell me she was happy to see me. I always figured cats were about the

smartest things on this planet, getting what they needed from us without sacrificing their integrity the way a dog did with all that slobbery groveling behavior, and getting through this world without sacrificing your integrity is no mean feat.

Besides, Felicia was the best—how many cats would have traveled halfway across the country and hardly ever complained except when she had to take a crap? Plus, sometimes it'd be real hot and she'd go sleep in the bathtub—I figured 'cause the porcelain was nice and cool—and I'd wake up sometimes and be feeling lonely or whatever and go get her and drag her out to the bed and shove her up against me just so I could hold something, and most mornings I'd wake up and she'd be right there still, in my arms, her tongue hanging out from the heat. That's something, I think, anyway.

Nothing was happening on TV, so I picked up a book and was hoping that eventually it would put me to sleep, but I wasn't able to focus so good. You know how sometimes you think you're pretty sober and then head to bed and realize you're not and think you should maybe get up and wait for a while or eat something or whatever? I picked a book off a stack I'd gotten from a professor who had been living next door and opened it at random. I read the line “The only thing prettier than ladies is an I-beam painted bright yellow” and looked at the front cover of the book but the name or whatever didn't really stick, didn't really even register. I kept reading for a while, absorbing nothing, when there was a sharp, rapid knock that threw my heart into my throat.

I figured at first it was a knock on one of the other doors—Jesus Christ, someone knocked on any of the 24 doors in that fucking place, and it sounded like it could've been yours—but then it came again and since now I was sitting up I could tell it was from right outside. Max looking for another, I figured, and told my heart to settle down. The body always seemed like one big chemical committee to me, so I made a request that the adrenaline, which had so helpfully infiltrated the organization, kindly return to its rightful place so that I would manage to sleep sometime that week.

I heard my name, then—the name I was using—and recognized the voice, but not the tone, and I jumped up, my previous request to the board now entirely ignored. The tap-tap-tap didn't quit, so I couldn't tell if my footsteps were audible or not, but I tiptoed toward the door. A thousand scenarios run through your brain when you hear the bartender you banged last night knocking on your door, some good, some less so. Even though my heart was still going, I put on a calm face, convinced myself in a moment that she was coming for a second round, a flattered anticipatory smile curling across my mouth, and opened the door.

What I would remember later is that even though I saw the blood, saw the ashen color of her face, I wouldn't lose my hopeful, seductive smile for a while yet. Inappropriate, of course, but it didn't occur to me to change my expression for a while. My brain went into a jumble.

But some central part of me struggled to stay on task, process the situation and try to deal with it. Anyone who ever tells you they sobered up instantly is a liar. You don't sober up instantly, no matter what. When you open your piss-yellow, smoke-stained front door and see a gutshot woman, you figure that's something that's gonna sober you up. But it doesn't. Your mind still runs to weird places. For a second you wonder if the sight of the apple-red blood trickling over her fingers is going to make you sick, then you wonder if while you've had the door open the damn cat has gotten out, then you finally realize that you need to take her inside, and that you need to run hot water, and that you need to use every towel you've got left in the room, and that you're not operating quickly enough, and that you've got a very, very long night still in front of you.

Part 4

I brought Kay into the room and slammed the door shut. She crumpled and her weight poured into me, but I managed not to topple backwards, grabbed her from behind and maneuvered her to the bed. Felicia went running under the bed as I undid Kay's shirt

and threw it open. Her eyes were glassy and bloodshot, and I could hear her heart beating at well over a hundred beats a minute. The coke, which maybe was good, because she probably wasn't feeling much pain.

“Hold still. Can you hear me?”

Her eyes focused on the wall, then on me, and she nodded. I looked at the wound. I was wrong. She hadn't been shot. She'd been stabbed. The hole was a nice, neat slice, in and out—she must not have been expecting it. The blood had mostly stopped, which was a good sign. She wasn't about to bleed to death at this rate. But I had to get her calmed down before she had a coke-induced heart attack, and get the wound clean.

“You're gonna be okay. Just try to take deep breaths, all right?”

She focused on me again and took a deep breath. “Jake...”

“It's all right. I'm just going to get a towel and clean you up some, okay?”

“Okay.” She took another deep breath and coughed. A red bubble floated up through her wound and popped, releasing a trickle of blood which flowed across her scarlet-crusting stomach.

I went into the bathroom to grab my towels and paused at the toilet in case I needed to be sick. I took a deep breath and looked at myself in the mirror. I was as pale as she was. The tan I'd gotten in the south had drained from my face. I ran hot water and soaked one towel, then went back into the room. Kay was looking at the TV blankly, her hands visibly trembling. When I put the hot wet towel on her she jumped, but I got most of the blood off her skin.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?” I asked when I was done.

“I'm not sure I really know.” Her eyes were darting across the room.

“Focus,” I said. I'd gotten used to dealing with coke addicts.

“Sorry,” she said, and tried to keep her eyes on me. “I need a drink.”

I did too, and so I grabbed my half-empty bottle of cheap scotch from the cupboard, unscrewed the top and handed it to her. She took a long swallow, choked on it a bit but held

it down. She held onto the bottle, and I could feel the scotch burn warm her. A bit of color flowed back into her face almost instantly.

“Here,” I said, and took the bottle from her. After a quick drink, I took another towel, poured a few shots of scotch on it, then put the towel in her hand and placed it on her wound. Her back tensed and she yelled, but she bit down on her lip to keep it in and held it there. “Hospital?”

She shook her head. “No fucking way.”

“All right, I'll go down to Randall's and get some gauze and shit when they open at seven, so just hold that there and tell me what happened. The last time I saw you, you were throwing us all out, now you got a fucking hole in you.”

“Is it bad?”

“Outside of a nostril or an anus, holes in the body usually aren't good. But I'd maybe take the week off from aerobics class. How do you feel?”

“I feel... hungry. Really fucking hungry.”

“I'll make you something,” I said, and I put water on the hot plate for instant soup. She wanted me to go out and bring her back a couple of Whataburgers, but I told her soup would be better for her, and by that time my adrenaline was starting to fade, and I just wanted to sleep. But I made her soup while she told me the story of this, her third knife cut. Once was by a boyfriend who left a scar across her left tit in a wild drunken swipe; another time was a customer who had stuck a penknife into her ass as she walked by—it still hurt when she sat for too long, she said. And then this.

“I was just walking to my car. He must have come up on me from behind, but I never heard him at all.”

“You'd had a couple of blasts?”

“Bump or two when cleaning up was really all, I swear. I wanted to get some sleep. He came up as I got my keys out, the first thing I felt was him grab for my bag, and I felt this sharp pain and this warmth; I guess that was the blood as it started coming. You were

the closest thing I could think of.” She was looking almost normal again, just a bad, shell-shocked version of normal, her stringy black hair spilling over the pillow. Despite the scotch in my hand and in my gut, I was as sober as I'd been for a long time.

“Why didn't you go to the hospital?” I took a slug from the bottle and passed it to her. She drained it.

“Christ, sitting in a bright fluorescent room for two hours reading *Marie Claire*, that would have killed me for sure. I could still drive, I figured I wasn't about to die. Is it still bleeding?”

I shook my head. “What did he get?”

“Just my tip money tonight, still, sixty fucking bucks. I don't know why the fucker had to cut me, though, Jesus.” She turned and grimaced. “Thing is, I heard him toss my bag down, so he must have just grabbed the cash and run, but I guess I was too panicked at the time to grab it.”

“What else was in there?”

“Just my ID and shit, I was thinking maybe I should drive back down there and grab it. I feel pretty good, actually.”

“When the coke wears off, you're gonna crash for a long time,” I said.

“I guess, but I don't want to have to replace my ID and all that. I'll come right back.” She started to get up, but I took her shoulders and set her back down. She didn't fight me, just looked at the scotch bottle and tipped it up, hoping for a last drop. I went over to the counter and opened another bottle and handed it to her.

“I'll go. Give me your keys, my car's out of gas.”

She took a solid pull on the bottle and looked at me, her eyes bright with relief.

“Thanks, babe.”

She gave me the keys to her Cutlass and I left with a strange feeling of desire and irritation. I was surprised to see that my hands were shaking so bad it took me almost thirty

seconds to get the key in the ignition. In the months since leaving Boston, I had seen a couple of stabbings in bar fights, but from afar. A trauma surgeon I was not cut out to be...

The drive was short. At 4 a.m., there wouldn't have been much traffic on Guadalupe but took Leon Street out of habit. I made it to the Showdown parking lot in about ten minutes. It didn't take me more than thirty seconds to find her bag; I saw it in the arc of the headlights as I pulled in behind the bar, a canvas book bag type thing. I grabbed it and drove back to the motel, another ten minutes at most.

I'm a little OCD, I admit, but that's not the reason I mention the specifics of how long the trip took me. The reason I mention it is I would always be amazed at how quickly she was able to get dressed, grab my stash of good weed, cash and traveler's checks and hot-wire my car. And she and someone else even had time to smoke a cigarette each—one Camel and one Parliament were smoldering in the ashtray when I got back. They even took the rest of my liquor, except for three cans of Busch, which I cracked and promptly drank while I checked her bag and found it full of lipstick that had never been used and a wallet that still contained the picture of the model family it had had when she bought it. It also gave me time and clear-headedness to realize that the set of keys she had given me were not the keys I had seen her with the night.

I was into my second tallboy when Felicia decided to pop out from under the bed and let out one of those long meows that sounded exactly like “dumbass.”

Part 5

It isn't every day you're robbed blind, especially by a good con. I had been robbed before, of a couple hundred bucks outside a roadside bar in Tennessee by a group of mullet-haired good ol' boys, and hookers had made off with about three or four hundred, total, when I was feeling trusting and didn't hide my pocket money before getting down to business. But this was something else entirely, and as I cracked another beer and scratched

at the arched ridge of Felicia's back, I couldn't figure out whether I was infuriated or awed by the lengths she went to pull off the job.

I was sitting there, consciously wondering which of these emotions I was feeling more acutely — and coming to the realization that exhaustion was my overriding concern — when I heard the sound of a car engine outside the door, and not for the first time, cursed my perpetually liquor-soaked mental processes. I ran for the door only because I felt like I should at least make a go of it, but saw what I expected to see — the tail lights of Kay's car making a left onto Congress and heading north. I took her keys and threw them, but they landed far short of the mark. I could make out two people in the car as it went under a streetlight, but I couldn't even tell if Kay was one of them. For a second, the thought of getting in my car and following them occurred to me, but I knew by the time I got onto the street they would have turned off on Barton Springs or Riverside or any side road. Besides, I told myself, I was in no shape to drive anyway.

Besides, came the answer back, they stole your car. Remember?

Oh. Right. And, I suppose, by extension, the five thousand dollars I'd had hidden in an envelope up under the passenger seat. They might find it, might not, but it was still a loss. And it was just a little under four thousand that had been in a thick roll of fifties in a sock in my backpack — they'd found that pretty easily, and I admit that I was at least somewhat grateful that they didn't ransack the place.

So nine thousand dollars . . . plus the car, which I'd paid twelve hundred cash for at a truck stop in Norman, Oklahoma. So the final tally was about ten grand she got me for. That's one expensive coke-fuck.

But I wasn't mad, was too tired to be mad, was actually rather impressed that she'd gone to the trouble of stabbing herself just to pull off the job—with a little effort, I'm sure she could have gotten me out of there without taking that extra step, but the blood had sort of fried my critical thinking powers, never my strong suit anyway. So she was either a good criminal or a method actor or both. All I wanted was to drink a little more until I could pass

out and sleep through the oncoming morning heat. In the afternoon I could go take a cool shower, run to some banks, get a few transfers, shower up and put on the decent clothes and in an hour have a new car and plenty of cash. So, ultimately, not much harm done.

And I still wasn't mad when I realized that it was Sunday. That was no big deal. I had an ATM card for each of my accounts, and could dry up every machine in south Austin if I needed to. And then I wasn't even all that mad when I finished off the last Busch and realized that because it was Sunday, I wouldn't be able to get another six-pack at the Chevron station until noon, another four and a half hours away. In Texas, like much of the south, the Baptists ensure that you can't get drunk until they suffer through church and can get drunk, too. And when I saw my ounce of hairy homegrown bud was still rolled up in a pair of threadbare white socks, the scale of my mood finally tipped toward the positive.

The big question of the day was what I was going to do at two o'clock, when the Showdown opened. What if she was there? When they weren't paying her to be a bartender, she was paying them to be a customer. I shook off the thought. She wouldn't be there; she clearly wasn't that stupid. But at least one other person was in on it. I looked at the Parliament and tried to be all Columbo about it, but aside from the fact that whoever smoked it wasn't wearing lipstick, I couldn't really tell much. But it maybe wouldn't hurt to look around and check brands on the smokers, although that wasn't exactly a smoking gun. Smoking Parliaments in Austin might make you an ironic hipster, but it didn't make you a crook. However, Dave would be working, and he liked me. Maybe I could finagle Kay's home address out of him...

I put the afternoon's possibilities as much out of my mind as I could, took a few hits on a joint rolled from fresh bud, and got into a methodical frame of mine. Time for inventory. Starting in the bathroom, I checked everything they might take. I didn't have a whole lot, but I'd been staying there long enough that I'd really moved in. Nothing out of place in the bathroom, except my razor blade cartridges, those expensive things they gouge ten bucks out of you for four of them. Assholes.

My main stash of currency in the drawer was gone, and a couple of twenties out of yesterday's pants that had been hanging over the back of a chair, and my watch, but I had paid twelve bucks for it, so it was no loss. I rummaged through everything in my backpack that I had set over in the corner. It contained the important stuff—Felicia's cat treats, old and forgotten keys, a bunched-up towel that read Igloo's Tavern, a place I know nothing about and have never been. And then in a pocket hidden in the stitching there was the manila envelope folded in half that contained a thick packet of essential documents—an address book, bank books, etc. I felt better seeing it, then gave in to the impulse to take it out and check the contents. Everything seemed to be there, including both fake passports (perhaps I was just paranoid when I got the things, but for three hundred bucks I figured having the option of being Canadian couldn't hurt), and the associated drivers license (Missouri) and social security card.

I felt better going through this stuff, but into the slow-moving morass of my brain there slipped a black, twitchy anxiety. I flipped back through the envelope's contents, then dumped it all out on the floor and combed through it, piece by piece, until what was a dark spot in my brain had consumed it. There was something missing. I searched the room, for the sake of thoroughness, but that was an exercise. I had taken it out yesterday afternoon to look at, which I did periodically, thinking I'd find some clue I had missed, and knew I put it back. I ruled out every other possibility before I let the one I didn't want cohere...

They took the unsigned note from my father that had accompanied the cashier's check.

They had taken my father's note. And just my father's note. And they had refolded the envelope. And then put it back into the hidden compartment. Kay and the Parliamentarian had taken cash, drugs, a car, and—with time to smoke a couple of cigarettes while I was on a twenty-minute errand—a handwritten note from my father. For a moment I got really, really pissed. I paced the room for a few minutes talking myself out of breaking

something just for the sake of breaking something. Until I realized that it wasn't anger I was feeling at all.

It was fear.

Part 6

The next day was another run-of-the-mill July afternoon in south Texas—meaning miserable. Maybe I was just too much of a north-of-the-Mason-Dixon boy. Boston is not a bad introduction to the tortures of a hot, sticky summer day, but I guess I just spent enough time holed up in the dark cool stacks of Mugar Library not to notice. I lingered in the A/C of the Chevron, where I took so long with the cooler door open looking at the six-packs that I got yelled at by the mouth-breathing pre-teen behind the register. I ducked around back and downed a Mickey's big mouth by the dumpster before walking back to the hotel.

Felicia shot past me as soon as the door opened, and on her tail was a wave of heat that had built up in the room. She shot me the look I called The Queen Is Not Pleased, and with an overly dramatic flick of her tail from moribund to her typical flag-flying shimmy, she headed out towards the tepid pool to lie on the concrete in the shade of the No Lifeguard on Duty sign. I wasn't far behind her, pulling off my jeans and putting on a pair of threadbare nylon shorts I should have been too embarrassed to wear in public.

A couple of kids—Pedro was the older one I think but I'd never seen the younger one before—were playing with an assortment of action figures in the corner by the fence, using a coiled hose and a bit of seeping water as, I gathered, an unstable volcano. I nodded to Pedro and he nodded back in that distracted distrustful way kids do with strange adults. Pedro was used to seeing me like this by now, though—chasing the shade across the cement while pouring a six of malt liquor down my throat, until I could finally go inside and sleep through the rest of the afternoon, awaiting sundown when everyone without AC in the city would throw their windows open and belch that stifled heat back outside.

That afternoon was different. I didn't pass out. I drank and drank as Pedro and his friend banged away at their action figures, until they abruptly leave them in a heap near the gate and take off on their bikes. I thought of the future, tried to project its possibilities. I saw myself going to the Showdown, talking to Dave, heading to Kay's, confronting her. As the Mickey's took hold, scenarios unfolded on my inner movie screen, played themselves out, and as I got drunker and drunker, played themselves out with violence. I knew I wouldn't, but the movie satisfied me and passed the time. They had gotten away with the .38 that'd been in the glove compartment, but in Texas you don't really have to worry about not being able to replace your handgun. Besides, I had one of those little Raven .25s in my backpack still. It was around Mickey's number four or number five that I decided I would take it with me.

At about two in the afternoon I went inside, Felicia with me. She knew the routine—I would take a long cold shower and then, because I am a pushover, wipe dry the newly cooled tub, and she would lie in there. Some afternoons I joined her.

I took the bus to the Showdown because I felt a perverse need to make myself angrier over having had my car stolen. I could have easily walked in the time it took me to locate a bus stop, figure out the schedule, and wait for the right bus to come along. When it did, I was lucky that because of the heat the city made the buses free to keep cars off the road and stave pollution. Admirable, yes, but also necessary, because I had forgotten to bring any change. Why I was deliberately irritating myself I didn't know, but when I got to the Showdown I was exhausted, pissed off and feeling the beginnings of the malt liquor hangover that was soon to come. I told myself that a couple of beers with Dave would put things right.

I am horrifyingly punctual and drastically overestimate the amount of time it takes me to do anything, so I still got there early. The Showdown was one of those bars where there are people outside waiting for the bartender to open up, so I had to get there a half-hour early to avoid seeing anyone and have a chance to talk to Dave in private. I had gotten

the notion that I would tell him exactly what happened. When you drink a lot, it's important to make sure you don't overestimate the depth of your relationship with a bartender, but it's difficult to tell yourself that when you're drunk. I had been working out elaborate lies to ask for Kay's address, but my brain couldn't pick anything that sounded convincing. I didn't know much about Dave's story, but at first blush he didn't strike me as a guy who would just ask why I hadn't gone to the cops.

I walked around to the rear parking lot. There was a little beer garden out back, and Dave would have the back door open. There was a fence that was open during business hours, but even at night it was never locked. I undid the latch and walked inside, shutting the gate behind me so the opening-jumpers wouldn't pull into the parking lot and think they'd opened early. "Dave?" I called out as I walked towards the building. Generally, the bartenders were milling around the rear hallway between the cooler and the bar, and with how narrow the hallway was I didn't want to startle him if I suddenly appeared right next to him outside the cooler or something. I took off my sunglasses and rubbed my eyes, which were having a hard time coming into focus.

The back door was open. I leaned in and looked down the hall. The cooler door stood open. I could hear Stevie Ray's "Little Wing" playing in the bar, the volume low but the sound brittle without all the bodies and cigarette smoke to absorb the treble. "Dave?" I stood there at the door for a little bit. I reached out and pulled on it, let it fall shut with a medium bang, thinking that would get his attention.

The music stopped. I could hear the jukebox thinking and then picking a new song, and the opening stiletto snare of Tom Petty's "Breakdown" started. I walked forward and leaned ahead so I could see most of the bar. Nobody. I turned and took another step and looked into the cooler, with Dave's name on my lips.

I said his name, instinctively, when I saw him, when I saw that he was looking at me. I heard his name in my ears, and it took a few seconds before my brain registered that he wasn't going to answer. That he would never answer to his name again.

What I would remember later—forever, in fact—was the fact that he was smiling. Despite his bent, pulverized nose, and the metal rim of a beer keg which had plunged into the back of his neck at the base of his skull when he fell, he still had a lopsided, uncharacteristic shit-eating grin, as if this wasn't so bad. As if worse things could be imagined.

Part 7

We are animals of patterns, creatures of habit. I'm no exception. The routines of my life had shifted since I'd left Boston, but they were still routines. You can prepare yourself for something traumatic as long as you like, in whatever manner you like, but in the end it won't make a whit of difference. In the end, we react to new stimuli in ways that we would never have expected.

I'd seen three dead people in my life, the first two having been made up and laid out in coffins in their best suits—you got the idea from funerals that death wasn't bad, just a little stuffy. What you don't get in those settings is the smell, for one—in the bitter dry cold of the walk-in cooler, the animal-metallic smell of blood pushed its way up my nose and set off the adrenaline alarms. There was no smell of decay yet, and while in the cool air that wasn't surprising, I saw that Dave still had some residual color on his cheeks. Pallor mortis, rigor's complexion cousin, only took twenty minutes to turn the skin to ash. He had just died.

He'd just been murdered, a verb that implied a subject, a murderer, who at the moment couldn't be far away, who could even be...

Inside the bar.

I grabbed for my .25 as I finished puking up the last bit of Mickey's in my stomach. I'd been through the bar twice and called Dave's name. If the killer were there, he'd have had no reason not to kill me while I was horking up my guts, so he was undoubtedly gone. But that didn't make the anxiety of stepping back out of the cooler any easier.

Move, I kept telling myself. *Movemovemovemovemove*. I went to the bar and got a clean towel and wiped my face. I looked at myself in the Budweiser mirror behind the bar. Pale, unshaven, but no worse than the packs of Drag rats who walked up and down the street, so I could blend in. Customers would start coming in, John or Teddy or Susan any minute now, and I was determined not to make this my mess. All it would take is one car to pull up, one person at the door waiting to come in and this would be my mess—it'd be long hours with Austin's finest getting this one sorted out, and considering I was a guy with a gun who had come to the bar early looking for Dave, I couldn't imagine I wouldn't be of special interest to their investigation. I looked at the towel and told myself I should wipe away any of my fingerprints, but I couldn't remember what I had touched, and it was a bar, for Christ's sake, there were fingerprints everywhere—no spot on any wall had escaped having at least one hand pressed against it for stability and support while waiting for the bathroom, or helping a friend off the floor.

So I threw the towel down on the bar and went to the front door. I unlocked the single bolt (being very happy not to have to fish through a dead man's pockets for a key) and let myself out the front door onto the street. It was a chance, I knew. Most of the regulars pulled around back, but out front anyone walking down the street or driving by could see me. I slipped out into the heat and walked down the street. A Drag rat, a girl about sixteen with a handful of piercings in her lip and a kitten on her shoulder, asked me if I had a cigarette. I scratched the kitten's head and gave her a five, then went into a Circle K to buy a bottle of water before heading back to the hotel. Thankfully, I didn't have much to pack, and even though I knew I'd be spending the evening with a chair against the door and a gun in my hand, I somehow was comforted by at least the idea of a good night's sleep

Then I went to get Felicia. When I checked out, I gave Sonia at the front desk what I imagined was a smile similar to the one Dave had on his face at the end, and after half a six-pack of Red Dog that I drank while waiting for the cab to take us to the train station, I knew that the name I'd use on the train would be Dave.

Part 8

The I-10 west across the mesquite-webbed desolation of west Texas is such a brutal drive it makes even El Paso a welcome sight. The exhaustion that overtakes as you enter the city after the long drive is soothed, a bit, by the knowledge that Las Cruces is within a few hours reach, that even though you'll wake up filmed by the dust and oil-smoke of El Paso, by mid-morning you'll be sitting at a plastic table outside a bar in Mesilla drinking a can of Dos Equis, a lime wedge shoved in, a pinch of salt. The desert of New Mexico didn't depress me the way the desert of Texas did, for reasons I never figured out. I still loved west Texas, though, for what it was—it energized me with motion, the need to press on, find water, trees, life. I looked at the cows standing isolated and wind-blown, drowning in a sea of mesquite, and I felt sorry for them. When they first brought cattle to Texas, they killed all the prairie dogs so the cattle wouldn't drop a foot down into a burrow, topple over and bust a leg. But turns out the prairie dogs controlled the mesquite, and without the prairie dogs the bushes' low dense snarl overtook the landscape. Watching the cattle slowly zig-zag their way through the webbed umber-colored ground was like watching giants navigate a poorly designed garden maze.

I stopped shaking about four hours after leaving Austin, that was a relief. I had been forced to stay around 60 because I was afraid if the shakes got really bad I would jerk myself off the road. Especially driving an unfamiliar car, although it was holding up rather well so far. Something had fallen out from beneath outside Johnson City, and when I started the car after stopping to take a piss in Fort Stockton, white smoke had plumed out from under the hood. But the smoke went away, and whatever had fallen out didn't seem to be vital—I admit to being a terrible car owner—and so I kept on. Besides, I knew nothing about the car, only that this guy Pete had it for sale outside his house on the way to the train station. I had to hit three ATMs to get the \$1200 he was asking for it, but I still made it out of town before the train would have left, and I had started to get nervous about traveling with so

many people all crowded together. The loneliness of West Texas requires the loneliness of driving alone.

Unless you counted the cat. I occupied myself in the radio-less, cramped Escort by talking to Felicia and trying to find a name for the car, something I had never done before but seemed perfectly reasonable.

“You don't like Humphrey, pick something else.”

I didn't say I didn't like it, she was saying. Name it that if you want.

“Isaac?” I was going up in the alphabet.

Isaac is fine, too. Christ, just pick something, I'm bored.

When your cat is bickering with you in your head, it's time to take a hard look at yourself. Fortunately, the car had lost its rear-view mirror. Busted off while a girl was climbing on top of him when they were parked over at Barton Springs, Pete had told me in what was almost certainly a lie, but by acting suitably impressed by his cavalcade of fictional sexual conquests I was able to pay him \$200 less than he was asking originally.

Having a set of wheels had enabled me to drive down I-35 to Buda before heading west. I didn't know why. It was what I expected, a nice-enough looking small Texas town, all but comatose on an early Sunday evening. I drove slowly past the post office, where my father had sent the now-stolen note, but the squat plain government building divulged no secrets. Robbed and witness to a murder that may or may not have been related, that was the sum total of my Austin experience, if you didn't count the quantities of man- and nature-made chemicals I had sent into my system. I needed somewhere else to go. Was this search for my old man just an excuse to waste the rest of my life in dive bars? Leaving central Texas no closer to my goal than when I'd arrived, I was almost disgusted by my own laziness and weakness, but that will only get you so far, so I put it out of my head barreled ahead.

Made it into El Paso at four-thirty in the morning and crashed at a Super 8, where I woke up the franchise owner, an Indian named Dinesh Far whose mouth was stuck in a

perpetual yawn the entire time. I slept until checkout at 11 and hit the road, stopping in Las Cruces for a chile relleno and a couple of tamales bought from a roadside taqueria, then onward. I told myself I'd sleep by the roadside if I needed to, but benzedrine isn't just for truckers, so I was able to keep on, even though my brain was scattered in a hundred different directions. I kept feeling like I was perpetually trying to constrain my thoughts to the task of driving, but sleep would have been impossible. The second-day hangover had left my throat burnt and barren despite the gallons of water I drank, and a haze of nausea hung over the air, over everything I did.

It was a miserable day, but the next day it cleared. I woke the next morning a bit cocaine-gritty, but clear of the immediate grips of alcohol, which has a pull that leaves all drugs save heroin and nicotine envious of its addictive power. It's good to step away from the bottle's embrace sometimes, just to catch your breath—you know you'll be back, but it's good to be able to take a piss that doesn't smell like whiskey, to enjoy the sight of the sun in the morning, to not have the headaches and fatigue you're always running from.

I was feeling so good that by the time I hit Mesa, California and rode into those deep valleys studded with silent white wind turbines like giant broken pinwheels, like markers of the dead, that I decided to find a pay phone and call Aaron. I had promised to check in from time to time, and even though I knew I couldn't tell him about finding Dave over his certainly-tapped phone, I wanted his advice, and I believe that something in his voice would calm me down, would help me see the next step.

He wasn't there, hadn't been there for several days. "Do you have any idea—" None. Some girl, sounded my age but could've been anything. "Or when—" Nothing. He'd probably gone somewhere—anywhere—to score, something he usually did every couple of weeks. Usually it was an overnight trip somewhere, but occasionally he would be gone for a week. I never asked; he never offered. I didn't want to know where; he didn't want me to.

It disappointed me not to talk to him, but I told myself I'd call from LA. I desperately wanted a drink but instead smoked a joint and drank a Coke in a highway rest

stop and when I was good and stoned I got out and called an old friend of mine in San Francisco. I got hold of her, told her I'd be there sometime the next day, was going to drive up 101, ocean-gaze. She said I could stay there, on the couch, and I got directions and we hung up. I walked back to the car excited and nervous. My friend Laura was smart, down-to-earth, and could eviscerate with just a few well-chosen words. I was glad to have her as a friend; the strange part was that she had also been my wife.

“Come on,” I said to Felicia. “Let's go see mommy.”

Part 9

“Edmund.”

When you haven't heard your real name for a while, it takes you a moment to remember that it's you, and it seems to bridge the time since you've last heard it, so that within those two syllables I'd stepped back about three years. Laura also had a way of saying my name, as well as many other things, which somehow expressed dissatisfaction yet bemused acceptance, as if every mistake I'd made was tattooed on my skin for her to see, for her to take in and pronounce upon by way of that one simple word.

The second thing she did—a close second—was grab Felicia from my arms, cradle her like a baby and coo in Latin very seriously to her. Laura had studied Latin as part of her legal training and had used baby-talking it to the cat as a kind of mnemonic device when we first had gotten her. For Felicia, though, this was a ticket straight back to kittenhood, and who doesn't like a trip down memory lane? Felicia let loose with a purr like a diesel engine, although the jealous part of me thought it was probably also the air conditioning in her apartment, which was a relief.

Laura leaned in and kissed Felicia's head, and then looked up at me, a long critical gaze. “You've taken good care of her. But you know you actually have to do that for yourself, too.”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“You look like cobwebby shit.”

“That feels accurate.”

“You want to take a shower?” she asked.

“Is that a recommendation?”

“More like an order. Go wash the death-glaze off, you're scaring me. If you don't look better when you come back out I'll call an ambulance” She pointed down a short hallway. “First on right.” And then she spun around on one foot and headed into the kitchen, the sound of Felicia's internal motor still resonating in the air.

So I did my best to wash off the road in Laura's guest bathroom—like all guest bathrooms, there was an impersonal air about it, an eclectic combination of bad gifts and accessories that had been retired from the master bathroom like star ballplayers sent down to the minors. Guest spaces in houses always depressed me—they're always a bit sterile; attempts are made at making them pleasant, but they don't receive the attention and care given to the more trafficked areas of the house, and the room itself seems to know this, resigned to second-class status.

There were many things I recognized—the toothbrush holder, the soap dish, the white plastic shampoo-and-shower-gel-holding utility rack hanging around the neck of the shower nozzle—all things that had been in her bathroom in her apartment in Boston when she'd lived there, when we'd lived there, and now they were here, set aside for the occasional guest, while the master bathroom must have held the new things, the things she enjoyed now, just as her bed held another. I looked at myself in the mirror and realized this was the room I belonged in—not to be thrown out, thankfully, but on a lower rung. Recognizing one's place in the structure of things is never good for mental health, so I did my best to put the thought aside. Besides, it was nicer than anywhere I'd washed myself for a long time, and I was warmed by the familiarity of Laura's housekeeping as I was by the hot water and steam—the precise arrangement of half-used shampoos and shower gels in the tub, the toilet paper roll folded under, the towels with their precise color arrangement.

When I came back into the living room, Laura held out a watered-down whiskey to me, glowing gold in the late-morning sun through the window. “I assume some things still haven't changed?”

“Some things obviously have.” I took the glass.

“Changing you isn't my business anymore,” she said and reached out and ran her hand through my mussed hair, which I had begun to comb in the way she had always liked before I realized what I was doing and purposefully undid the work, reverting to the who-gives-a-rat's-ass do I had been affecting of late. Felicia was still purring contentedly, lulled into a half-sleep like only recitation in a dead language can do, but when I reached out to scratch her neck she looked at me lovingly—she thought she was finally back home, that she was a kitten again being adored by the pair of humans who had picked her up from the Rescue League and brought her home to spoil her like only a young couple can. Her happiness sent one of the deepest shudders of sadness through me I had ever felt. Coming off uppers and seeing your ex-wife after a long drive of wistful staring at the ocean will loosen up the sap in the toughest of men, and I am not the toughest of men. I felt tears coming, and so did what I had always done—diluted the thought with a substantial taste of whiskey.

“Good bourbon,” I said.

She sat down on the couch, nestling Felicia into her lap. “Frank enjoys booze, like you, with some differences—he cares what brand he drinks, he only drinks it in the evening, and not even every evening at that.”

“Poser,” I said, and she laughed. There is a friendship between those who have loved and tortured each other that is impenetrable to anyone else. The course of a love ending produces a blistering series of emotions that leaves you exhausted, the other person having become a focal point for a bundle of hopes, fears, disappointments, in the world and in ourselves, that produces a survivor complex in those left. Laura got through it by becoming a better person. I got through it by not staying sober, an approach to dealing with the world

that I don't recommend, but then again I don't need to—it's an approach that seems to recommend itself.