RIBALD EXCUSES

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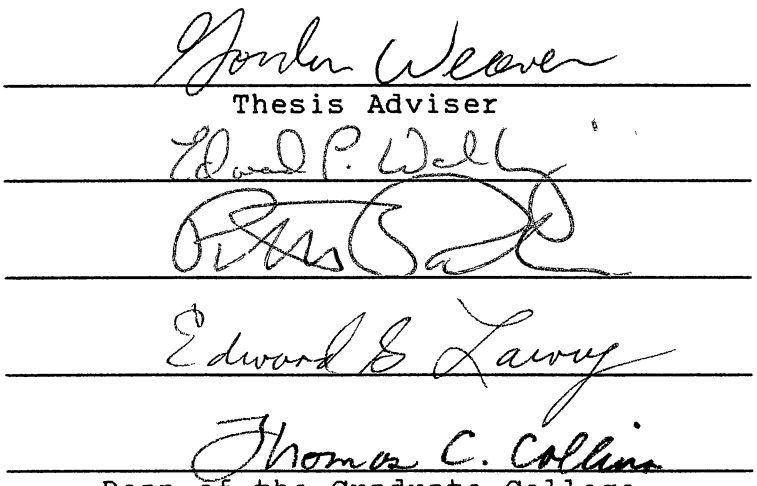

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A scholar and teacher of the first order, philosophy

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Episodes in Ribald Excuses that have appeared, or shall appear elsewhere in other versions, include the following: "Unities," The Iceman, Thomaston, ME, Conservatory of American Letters, 1990; "Directions," Midland Review, Stillwater, OK, Oklahoma State University, Spring, 1990; "Boots," Midland Review, Stillwater, OK, Oklahoma State University, Spring, 1991; and, "If Folks Knew," Journal of American Culture, Summer, 1991.

Thorp Springs Press, Austin, TX, intends to publish Ribald Excuses in 1992.

PREFACE

Ribald Excuses is a short-short story cycle focusing on the life of a modern man--an artist called Malone--and contemporary America. The stories are episodic, and intended to be allegorical. While the viewpoint characters vary among stories, the cumulative effect of the whole account is intended to reflect Malone's life, a life of exercises in the ways of faith and joy. The faith lies in possibilities of human awareness, the joy in prospects of some kind of saving grace.

While the focus of narration may be on Malone, much of the action in these stories concerns a viewpoint character known only as "an aging hippie" (1), a lawyer. In many ways, the stories are as much about the lawyer as they are about Malone--the lawyer's understanding of his own world and that of Malone's--how, and to what extent, the lawyer accepts or condones Malone's character.

The differences in Malone's world and that of the lawyer's might serve to--as Kenneth S. Lynn observes about the character, Simon Suggs, Jr., Esq.--"satarize social chaos in an attempt to impose a coherence upon it" (Comic 175). Lynn analyzes Joseph B. Baldwin's ribald character, Suggs, who is a version of the original Captain Simon

Suggs depicted by Johnson Jones Hooper. Lynn's work often notes that Southwestern humor frequently involves such bad-boy (Mal-one) stories about the likes of Suggs, narrated by the gentleman or lawyer (Mark Twain). Another similar example is the work of George W. Harris, whose often-malicious character, Sut Lovingood, is observed by the cooly detached gententleman, the narrator, George. Lynn observes that "Harris violates Sut's character and puts into his mouth cogent opinions about life, in particular politics, which are nothing more than the comments of a southern gentleman transposed into the vernacular" (Comic 192). The same kinds of comments are made by Malone in Ribald Excuses. And further, Lynn writes that "what keeps Sut's mind [and Malone's, cf. "Boots" (9)] from disintegrating is the relief that jokes afford him" (193). Malone wonders what would become of the human condition without jokes.

As a short-short story cycle, Ribald Excuses might be considered similar in structure to F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Pat Hobby Stories, in which the character Pat Hobby is the focus of the collection. Similar work includes Mark Costello's The Murphy Stories. Another is Sherwood Anderson's accounts of George Willard in Winesburg, Ohio. In these three short-story cycles, the foci are on central characters, as Ribald Excuses focuses on Malone. However, that focus on a single central character may be the only thing Ribald Excuses has in common with those fine

collections. That is to say, each of the collections has its own unique effect, achieved in its own particular way. Other similar collections of short, episodic fiction like Ribald Excuses--while perhaps not focused on a single character --include Richard Brautigan's Revenge of the Lawn and Amado Muro's collected stories. These are contemporary works; however, the tradition of short fiction reaches to very early beginnings. The Arabian Nights is such a short fiction (Burton), as is Boccaccio's Tales from the Decameron. Even the fifth-century Gesta Romanorum speaks episodically "Of Excuses Which Are Not to be Admitted in Extreme Cases" among its many short-short stories (Swan). Second-century B.C. had its Greek short-short collection in Milesiaka, perhaps the first so-called novel (Aristides). I am amused and confounded by those who call the episodic short-short a new genre (Shapard and Thomas xiii, 228-58). Collected short-shorts are, indeed, an old story, a genre of long tradition.

Ribald Excuses is not a collection of randomly conceived stories, tales, or anecdotes. Neither is it a novel in the sense that it is a single long narrative with a unifying plot. It is a carefully considered and created series of episodes designed to reveal the particular worlds of particular characters, especially that of Malone. Yes, it is that simple; if I can do that, I have reached what I see as my goal.

The stories may seem to be disconnected in the sense

that one neither necessarily seems to lead to another, nor follow. However, that episodic story cycle is consciously and purposefully designed to achieve a structure, a frame, which takes the reader rapidly from one point of focus to another. Lynn observes that although George W. Harris uses the frame device of enclosing his stories within the language of the gentleman, George, there is a much closer identification between Harris himself and the sadistic Sut Lovingood (Lynn 192). I, however, do not claim that kind of identification with Malone. Regarding the framework of Ribald Excuses, though, I suggest that the clearest way to understand the sequence of the stories is to accept the proposition that the stories are presented in a sequence which is, simply, suitable, plausible, and probable, considering the 10-year period mentioned in "Boots" (5), and in the years that precede and follow.

Through such short-short stories about Malone's life, the reader is challenged to put together a larger picture. In that respect, Ribald Excuses is like Winter Gardens, a collection of short episodes about the place, family, friends, and experiences of several generations of fellows named John Richard--no last name (Harp). But in that collection, place is probably the most unifying characteristic.

Perhaps the first notable characteristic of Ribald Excuses (like many of the other works cited) is the brevity of its episodes. Brevity serves several important

purposes, not the least of which is the possibility of enhanced clarity. Length, somehow by its nature, seems--especially in fiction narrative--to contribute to reader boredom, if not an often-protracted, even confused, structure. Of such short-short stories, Gordon Weaver suggests judgment about their validity be assigned "with respect to a pretty simple standard: is it a 'story' or not"? (229). I hope the brevity in Ribald Excuses tends to clarify not only meaning but structure--the sense of a beginning, middle, and end--in that the narrative takes a reader from a particular view to another perspective with little ado. An ancient formula for brevity puts it this way: brevity is knowing how to present great things as small, and small as great, with the result, as Ernst Robert Curtius explains, that "the enlargement of small things effects more precisely the art of raising acts and personal traits above their real dimensions" (492). In Ribald Excuses, that is what I am trying to do--raise acts and personal traits above their real dimensions. In these ways, I hope Ribald Excuses approaches, or even achieves, the allegorical.

In order to achieve what I am calling the allegorical, I seek situations in which characters play parts for their own purposes, and not necessarily because their actions are initiated or controlled by logic or physics. In other words, I like to deal with the skeleton effect, or the prisoner-of-war effect I find in human

character: take away the flesh, the support, and what is left? Who are these people, what do they want, and why? Exactly how do they operate?

The stories are constructed around traditional conventions of tension, climax, and resolution. While conditions of the physical world may vary, human volition seems to be more constant--the attitudes, feelings, opinions, and beliefs. Human character and behavior seem to remain more spiritually based, often neither rationally nor physically necessary. Thus the action--what is actually happening in an episode--is more spiritual, based on non-empirical conceptual relationships such as faith and joy. I hope the action in Ribald Excuses totally eludes analysis of the physical world as a basis for motivation or understanding. I encourage exploration of the human volition, that mysterious irrational playground of human achievement between instinct and intuition, between science and philosophy. If fiction reveals wisdom, it is in how characters behave, and perhaps why.

These Ribald Excuses are written with a great deal of care in observing an important aspect of fictional conventions, the voice of the storyteller or the narrative persona, perhaps best described by Wayne C. Booth in his The Rhetoric of Fiction (149 ff.). By voice I mean the attitudes, feelings, opinions, and beliefs of the teller of the story which, in all fiction, is not necessarily the person named in the story's by-line, or even that of the

story's viewpoint character. That is what makes it fiction, of course.

The essence of the stories in Ribald Excuses is the action associated with, primarily, Malone's kind of character--of faith and joy. The attitudes are optimistic, feelings generous, opinions strong, and beliefs incorrigible. The stories' viewpoint characters vary basically between Malone himself, as in "Hotel, Mexico" (48-54), "Unities" (72-78), "A Walk in the Park" (79-84), and "A Medal" (100-106), and characters who might be considered his biographers or friends. Such biographer/friend viewpoint characters include the aging hippie in "Boots" (1-10) and the old man from down home in "If Folks Knew" (129-34). While the viewpoint characters might change from story to story, the consistent voice of the entire collection is intended to be one of faith in human potential, and joy in the idea that life is a gift.

As an example of the way I want faith and joy to work in this collection, I point to "No Help" (85-92). The story's action simply involves Malone's threatening to kill a restaurant worker if that worker and his pals do not leave Malone's friend, Bert, alone and unharmed. Malone takes that action, I submit, because he has enough faith in his own awareness to know if he does not intervene firmly, his friend will be harmed. The risk Malone takes in such a maneuver--patently criminal conduct--is, in Malone's mind, outweighed by the prospect

that, otherwise, Bert might be killed. Malone chooses to take the risk of being caught in a criminal act because he finds ample faith in his ability to get by with it, and joy in the idea that both he and Bert may then, simply, continue their lives. In the sense that life is a gift, Malone seems to have no compunction about readily and vigorously protecting not only himself--his own life--but those of his friends. Those compelling motives--faith in his own awareness, and joy in life as a gift to be treasured--constitute what I believe are the moving forces in the action of these stories about Malone.

The particular narrative stance I take with Ribald Excuses centers on the expressionistic, as opposed to the other three approaches described by M.H. Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp: impressionistic, objective, and propagandistic (3-29). Abrams describes expressionistic writing as simply the writer's version of reality. But in order to clarify that a bit more, I draw on Herbert Read's definition of the expressive: "to express subjective emotional experiences as opposed to the recording of impressions derived from the external world" (158). While Read suggests no extent to which an expressionist mimes the external world, his definition does suggest the source of an expressionist's version of reality derives simply from responses to the external world. In Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, James Agee provides an explicit example of expressionistic technique:

> The most I can do--hope to do--is to make a number of physical entities as plain and vivid as possible, and to make a few guesses, a few conjectures; and to leave to you much of the burden of realizing in each of them what I have wanted to make clear of them as a whole; how each is itself; and how each is a shapener [shaper]. (110)

I like Agee's work, his expressionistic stance, and hope Ribald Excuses is of that same stuff as Agee's "shapeners." The imagination, hopefully, makes it work. Wallace Stevens, in The Necessary Angel, puts it this way: "In life what is important is the truth as it is, while in arts and letters what is important is the truth as we see it" (147). I am quick to admit the ways I see life are neither always clear nor complete, for which testimony Ribald Excuses may stand as evidence.

Expressionistic or not--by any approach--how we find the value in fiction is the same way we go about finding value anywhere: decisions and judgments are made, according to Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff in The Modern Researcher, "around criteria elaborated by knowledge, skepticism, faith, common sense, and intelligent guessing" (188). That kind of sensible analytic criteria--should, I hope, help Ribald Excuses to not only make sense, but be interesting.

By sense and interest I mean the values in Ribald

Excuses might be found in a collective way, like the revelation in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts, when the voice from the gramophone says "dispersed are we who have come together. But let us retain whatever made that harmony" (196). The parson explains: "we all act all parts" (197). That sense of harmony or integration marks, I believe, the most effective fiction. I hope some of that harmony and integration is apparent in Ribald Excuses.

If some of the conventions and devices I have mentioned somehow work to produce something more than the sum of their parts, then fiction such as Ribald Excuses might draw focus on helping to make both writer and reader "one of the people on whom nothing is lost" (James 659). That is a lot to expect, but I like the idea, and I know Malone would like it. Another thing Malone probably would like is a trip to Canterbury, with some tales along the way--a thing like Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, one of the most dynamic of short-fiction collections. In the perennially contemporary spirit of Chaucer, then, let the stories continue. In the prologue and narrative of his "Tale of Sir Thopas," Chaucer, evidently, plays himself in a rare appearance, speaks in his own voice as a pilgrim to Canterbury. The prologue ends as the host addresses the storyteller, Chaucer, anon:

> "Since other folk have spoken, it's your turn;
> Tell us a mirthful tale, and that anon."

"Mine host," said I, "don't be, I beg, too
stern,
For of good tales, indeed, sir, have I none,
Save a long rhyme I learned in years agone."
"Well, that is good," said he; "now shall we
hear
It seems to me, a thing to bring us cheer."
(180)

Anon: 'tis my turn to try to tell some tales--hardly a long rhyme--from years agone which will, I hope, bring good cheer.

Reed Harp

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CONTENTS

BOOTS

The first time I saw Malone was in Austin. I asked him about his boots, and he said the boots he had on were no boots, but that he had a pair of boots he didn't wear, a real pair of boots, and so forth. We could have been hippies, I suppose, but Malone always claimed his hair wouldn't grow any longer than about two inches which, he said, disqualified him as a hippie. Mine came on out well below the collar in those days, so now maybe I can pass as an aging hippie. I'll just lean back here, get comfortable, and tell you a little bit about Malone, and one thing and another, mainly about Malone, or about his boots. I'm not sure. And there is more, but maybe some other time.

I might be wrong, but I figure everyone knows Malone. I mean, Malone is not exactly benign. His story is an old one, and not all that sad, either, and one he'd tell if he could, or perhaps if he wanted to. It's mostly about joy that comes along with a little faith in every heart, especially in this one--close to Malone's--or in anyone's close enough to know him as a friend. He spread some attitude, all right, and some language, some art, style.

They named him Quintilian Xavier Malone, mostly known

as just Malone. Signed his name Q.X. Malone, circled the X. if he wanted to be left alone, and figured folks ought to know what that meant--hotel rooms, final versions of anything. Guess the plan was to call him Quin, but that sounded too much like Gwyn--good fight-training. So it was just Malone, and Papa, and later, Pops. But I hear he didn't like that, didn't like anything but Malone.

There came a point early when he didn't do Miami, Houston, L.A., of any of the other big ones, especially never New York, ever. Just too much trouble in those places, he said, if he even rated them as places. Yes, I believe he called them situations, or was it propositions.

And no, he couldn't hear the 'phone from out on the back porch, where he often worked naked except for the safety goggles and headphones, pounding on a rock sculpture his size, listening to the Ink Spots: Oh, if I didn't care, more than words can say . . . . He sipped from a jug on the floor, something red, through about four feet of surgical tubing. At night, too, especially when he worked late, he observed no formalities about peeing off the back porch balcony.

Lord only knows why he ever did such things, or why he might ever have to come up with any ribald excuses for just being who he was over the years, and where he was--what and where he had to do. He meant well, he often said, but just didn't want to think about ever explaining any of it, and refused to believe he'd ever have to. Hell

of a note when he claimed his chief goal was staying alive and out of jail, and keeping his people alive and out of jail, and the bad guys alive and out of jail so he wouldn't have to testify or stand trial. He had to work at it just as hard as he had to work at art, he said. He wanted to make art.

He found a living in art--shapes, sounds, words. But he always said it took time, good time too often taken by friends, relatives, neighbors, bums, or hoodlums along the trail. Malone took great pride in managing to stay out of the way more than anyone he knew, stay alone, busy, happy.

Misery aplenty pervaded Malone's world, or at least he thought it did, since, there for a while, he was given to the concluding remark, what miseryyy. The natives, he said, need solitude and art. Malone saw himself as out to help build a national reserve of both--solitude and art--but, sure enough, found some resistance. He found the work ethic in that land focused too frequently on what he called simple greed, or was it lust for power--something along those lines. He claimed evangelically that ignorance came from what he called random want, which left too little good work time, not enough recreation. He claimed a lot of confusion came from what he called stupid attempts at legislating morality. Social fragility, he said, came from vanity and fashion that couldn't identify values. A spiritual void got eagerly filled by what he called the church of lesser spirituality. On the rare

occasions he got evangelical, he could make little sense, and be ever so pedantic and bombastic, and raise hell so he'd seem like an idiot. Maybe he was. But that was when I first knew him.

Back then, he would come on with this stuff about how the form chased its function, the shape didn't find content. Now there's a thing, he'd say, content without shape. It threw a lot of people. Intent got confused with style--that was it, that kind of fun, he called it. But most of that was the tequila, probably. If pressed, though, he probably would deny all of this--deny, deny, deny. He wouldn't want to begin to tell about any abuse of freedom or liberty he was involved with, or any breaches of civil decency, or any ignorance of human dignity that accompanied selfish pursuits of child-like egoism. Now, I'm preaching. No, that's elevated language that draws more attention to words than to what they say, and should be, of course, avoided. Malone knew that, about all of that. He always tried to be a suitable sort of fellow, sure enough.

And then, there was the matter of the boots, his grandfather's boots. And these were not the boots I asked Malone about. They were the boots he told me about. It went like this. When his grandfather died the summer before Malone got to town, Malone went down to the home place for the sorting, and the burial. The family gathered in a three-bay garage and divvied his

grandfather's things. What they didn't take they sold. Amid all that, Malone found a claim check for a pair of boots, his grandfather's boots. He put it in his wallet.

By the next summer, Malone wanted those boots, but didn't know enough from the ticket to find even the city. Shop's name wasn't on it, either, just Malone. Boots ready Thursday 4-26. Al.

Malone told me that every time he cleaned out his wallet he wondered about those boots. Eventually, finding them became an obsession. Actually, it was after a long summer-afternoon nap--he said he had to find them.

Malone's mother, he said, thought he was talented. Most of his friends thought he was weird. He was. But he wasn't crazy.

It rained when he arrived, rained when he left. Ten years in between, all too dry. He was flush when he arrived, flush when he left. Ten years in between, damned near destitute. An honest man he was when he arrived, an honest man when he left. Ten years of perjury and damned-near perjury, and all the rest.

About half-way through the tour, year five or so, at one of those times when the truck plates needed renewal, it was at the courthouse we ran into Grover Jackman, retired criminal lawyer in what Malone called the truest sense, retired and criminal. That late on a Friday, courthouse action slowed--time and space to walk through the big rock building with old Grover. Malone was

delighted with the way Jackman remained constantly and consistently incoherent, a picture, some picture, of what 50 years in the pursuit of justice can do for a person. Malone observed that the old man missed a considerable bunch, a notable number, of short black whiskers just under his nose, the scrapings of an old functional drinker who didn't bother about getting the razor all that close to his schnozzola.

"Well, Grover, what do I need to know about this place?" Malone asked, as we looked around at empty courtrooms.

Grover rocked on his heels, looked out a high window, fixed his old blue cataracted eyes on Malone. "Perjury."

"And what do you make of this?" Malone showed Jackman the claim ticket.

"Al Hernandez, Sixth and Trinity. Makes nice saddles, too."

Simple enough, like magic, eh? Frightened Malone a little. The next day, Malone said he walked right in and found the boots. Reconditioned. $27.

When he asked Al why he didn't sell them, Al said, "No way."

Malone kept them on the closet floor, then in a box on the closet floor, later in a plastic bag on the top shelf, then in the plastic bag in a box in the garage. About five years. Of course, he wanted those boots, in order, he said, to prove who he was. He claimed they did

that. He said he could look at those boots and know who he was, where he came from, and what all that meant. He never shined them, never put them on. They were his grandfather's boots and they spoke to who he was. Just like that.

More than several times, Malone refused to be dead, insisted on not being a victim, and avoided institutions. He knew who he was. He figured he had to recognize everything and choose only little in such a place, Earth. Life on the surface had its limits, he said. He couldn't have everything he wanted, and he didn't want everything. Some things he wanted no part of, not the least of which was drunk women who wanted to . . . play around.

And, why would anyone sleep with a .44 mag strapped to his chest? Simple, he said: to keep that dangerous son of a bitch away from the house. Finally had to turn the bastard's threats the other way--promise to be sitting in his back seat the next time the sucker went to the ice house for a jug of milk, and all that. Oh, yeah, it worked. Sucker moved to Indonesia and never came back. Malone didn't know whether he was bluffing or not. Said he never would.

He had but few desires. Wanted to play Lawrence of Arabia in a black-and-white 16-mm hand-held version. Wanted to fly North American-Rockwell P-51 Mustangs against the Luftwaffe out of England with a wingman named Joe, a slow-speaking, long-faced guy from Tennessee who

flew fast cover and wasn't afraid of full deflection of the controls at top-end with all six 50s locked on and two-or-so ME-109s at his six-o'clock, who liked to whistle while he worked and get it all done in under 15 seconds. Wanted to play wide receiver for the Philadelphia Eagles against the Dallas Cowboys on Thanksgiving Day in Texas Stadium at Irving, and to beat Charlie Waters deep, between the hashmarks--go in standing up. Wanted the Croix de Guerre and the Blue Max, and yes, the Medal of Honor. Wanted to perform successful brain surgery under a tent somewhere in China in the 20s, in a slow rain. Wanted to break the four-minute mile, and to make a stock 1953 Studebaker do 150. Wanted to know what happened at Woodstock, and at Willie Nelson's Whichever Annual Fourth of July Homecoming Celebration and Picnic near Dripping Springs Texas in the summer of 1975. Wanted to be--expected for a long time to be called to serve as--president of the United States of America. He wanted to make art.

And he wanted just one dance with Grace Kelly, a waltz, and to have breakfast at a place called Tiffany's.

He had a thing about sounds. He sat up one evening under a tree, bigger than life, and sort of catalogued the sounds he wanted to hear. I recall some of them: a thousand horses at full cavalry charge; a tall ship in gale wind at its last moments of full sail; an F-15 Eagle cutting an eight-G turn in damp air at sea level, at the

beach.

Change human nature? He said he couldn't really want that because he couldn't do that--not to so qualify all his wants, though. Without this business of having to dicker with good and evil, whatever, he wondered, would become of the infamous human condition? Like jokes, the condition, he said, always stands a chance of becoming passé. The only viable stance left for him seemed to be a sort of, what he called a phenomenological kiss-off kind of semiology, an often-symbolic logic celebrating self-evident truth which, he discovered soon enough was, whithall, pretty nearly totally socially and otherwise unacceptable. So he strove for suitable. Of course people thought he was crazy.

He understood a little history--that what happened before W.W. II was mostly altogether what he called convoluted, and that the 40s were frightening and joyful, the 50s pathetic, the 60s embarrassing enough, the 70s humiliating, and the 80s a time that might have passed quietly. He knew tales of ignorance and confusion, fragility and intimidation, but feared most a world wherein jokes might, sure enough, become passé. Yeah, that jokes might go out with the human condition was a real concern. Then what? He really, though, wanted to make art.

So when he left town, he left with what I am sure was a sense of discretion and discernment--perhaps some of the

only spoils worth hauling out. He left in his own truck, not out on the highway with a bag over his shoulder or along a highline under cover of darkness, although both, he said, seemed fairly plausible, even attractive. And, he could always come back--of that there never was a doubt.

He'll show up from time to time.

And yes, the boots. On his trip home, he took a jaunt to the coast. He explained that he built a funeral pyre, a boot bier, he called it, and pushed it out in the bay, watched it glow with the moon. From there he went out into the desert--the nagual, he called it--for what he said was some recreation, and to plan art. He said he figured he'd grown up, and was ready to play his own games.

Old Grover Jackman died that summer. Yep, the one who fell into the grease pit. And he probably thought he was the last of the old-timers.

ANTONE'S

Next to the likelihood of getting caught in a drug bust, finding a parking space at Antone's was the biggest setback about the place--open all night, downtown, hugest dancefloor in town, finest, blackest bands and blackest with-it crowd in gold and diamonds ever. Once in, once past the review of a couple of the largest Joe Frazer look-alikes ever, the soul could glide, safe in a world of dollar setups, rhythm and blues.

Malone picked me up early, so we could get on down, as he said, get on down to Antone's, get a parking place, get in, get set, and be ready to "encounter" the great Jimmy Lee. Malone called him J.L., and reminisced through sundown traffic about how he played an old yellow Fender bass with J.L. in the early days when Antone's was just a coffee shop with an ice cream bar under fluorescent lights. He recalled their first gig there for ten bucks apiece--just the two of them--and with no crowd at all, until about midnight, when a bus load of deaf-mutes flooded the place. Malone howled with laughter, pounded on the steering wheel of the delicate old Karman-Ghia.

"There," he said, "suddenly, was that sea of faces, all those people tapping rhythm on the tables, really

tuned in to our fine stuff. We played a whole set before Antone told us they were from the state school and couldn't hear. So Jimmy Lee put on his sunglasses, turned to me and said, 'If they can't hear, then let's play blind,' and we did."

"How did you ever get in with Jimmy Lee?"

"I heard the Fabulous Thunderbirds that winter down to the Rome Inn, and decided I had to play bass somewhere. So I hung out at the Chicken Shack after hours 'til I met J.L., who needed a bass, and we did the spring and summer up and down the strip. We even broke down for one gig at the Peppermint Lounge and laid in a black-box drummer, you know, a device that keeps rhythm any way you want it--a kind of robot. J.L. called the thing Helen for some weird reason I never understood and he never explained."

Malone whipped the Ghia into the alley next to Antone's, in under a rusty, barely visible No Parking sign so battered by truck traffic it seemed part of the brick wall.

"This'll get it," he said, nodding at the sign. "All right. Let's do J.L."

We were in, and quiet, and drinking sloe at the bar, when the warmup band melted away to a long pause. A revolving crystal ball threw tiny bits of light in a slow circle. The bar was an orderly stack of bottles and mirrors behind a hardwood rail a good 50 feet long. The crowd sat, talked, kissed, giggled, smelled good. Some of

the finest clothes--certainly the best-fitting--I ever saw. We sat at Antone's First Church of River City Blues, the gospel of J.L. about to be made known.

I expected applause when J.L. took the stage with his several musicians. But, no. It was too cool to clap. J.L. sat, wrapped around a microphone, guitar in lap, and with dark glasses, a cigar, and a fine straw street hat. For a full five minutes the tall scrub-board player gave rhythm on the board with his head back, while the band clapped softly, joined by the crowd, softly. The talking stopped, the place moved. Only the place moved, though, and no one of the hundreds stood until a bass line that broke plaster came under the scrub-board with drum rim-shots that all ran into a full-tilt, get-down rhythm-and-blues freight train coming through the south side of church, pushing and hauling soul like it was bound to deliver the rock of ages clean up the Mississippi and across to the Potomac and onward in a restitution that would shake the very Gold Coast clear back to what the Greeks called Egypt. That kind of reverb, indeed, blows off the skin, exposing meat and bone of some uniform human color--happens, too, in the soul and mind when things like that do finally and rarely occur.

I was also amazed to see the rhythm somehow upside down or backwards. That is, the energy of what seemed like ten-thousand beautiful men and women thrust upward on the down-beat, slightly syncopated--a wonderful variation

on the way the world appears to work. Malone sat quietly at the bar, expressionless. From sweet to powerful, we were doing J.L., non-stop.

Between tunes, I asked Malone what this meant to him.

"Liberty."

After about three more of those 15-minute R-and-B experiences, J.L. and the bunch needed a break. J.L. mumbled something in the mike as Malone stood and walked toward the bandstand. Malone stopped about 40 yards from the band while the crowd grew quiet.

"Jimmy Leeeeeeeeeeeeeee," Malone roared beautifully.

J.L. stood, pushed back his straw hat, squinted into the bright lights, leaned into the mike, and uttered, "Maloooooooooone."

Backstage, on a dimly lighted portable wetbar amid a clutter of extra tables and chairs, J.L. placed a bottle of uncorked red wine. Malone reached across the bar to meet J.L.'s gentle high-five. J.L. took the first drink from the bottle, and passed it to Malone. Malone set the bottle down next to J.L.'s wallet, opened on the bar. While Malone gently removed cards and things from the wallet, J.L. drank. Malone's wallet was opened on the bar when J.L. returned the bottle. The men simply went through each other's wallets thoroughly and quietly, no talk. They pocketed their wallets, took the bottle, and wandered off toward the back door, where they stood facing each other close together, and talked quietly. After a

while, they joined hands--arms up at the chest--touched foreheads, and parted.

"Let's go," Malone whispered as he strolled by.

We wandered through the dancehall and out the front doors into brisk spring night air and the sounds of light downtown traffic. A full moon hung over the Capitol Building, where nothing was happening.

In a stride down the sidewalk to the alley, a turn into the darkness, a few steps farther to the Ghia, Malone was quiet. As we touched the doorhandles, a fellow in jeans, tennis shoes, T-shirt, and baseball cap, appeared at Malone's door.

Startled, Malone stopped. "Hello, buddy," Malone said gently, confidently.

"You can't park here, scumbag. Can't you read the sign?"

Malone stood still as the man came to him and took his arm.

Malone's was not an arm to take that way in such a dark alley after such a R-and-B session with a man such as Jimmy Lee. Not that night. As Malone decked the first guy, two other clones appeared from the darkness, on Malone like spiders. They were decked, too, in what seemed like no more that a single second. Another one of the same description ran to the end of the alley and disappeared.

Just as Malone finished carefully lining up the three

unconscious bodies in a protected spot by the dumpster, a car screeched into the far end of the alley, red and white lights flashing. Two sheriff's deputies approached us with saw-offs, saying to get our hands up or be blown away. We did.

"What seems to be the trouble, officer?" Malone asked, with hands on his head.

"You just messed up three deputies on a drug-bust detail, son, and now you're going down to the place. Put these on real easy, like you know what you're doing." The handcuffs sparkled as he dangled them in our faces.

"I don't think so, son," Malone said. "I don't think the high sheriff wants his personal artist in jail. I believe you better call the man and ask him if he wants Malone in his jail tonight. A little consultation here might just pay off. These other drug-sniffing children over here by the dumpster have blown it, so it's your turn. I don't wear these things."

"You move and I'll blow you in half."

While the other deputy loaded the three quiet ones into the back seat, the leader stood in the door of the patrol car talking to the high sheriff in person. The lone fourth one on foot stayed gone.

"All right," the lead said. "So I don't take you in."

"You still got the man on the horn, there?"

"Yes, I do, if it's any of your business."

"Tell him to pop down to the Liberty Lounge tomorrow night. I'm doing a set with Jimmy Lee at nine, and we can talk about that rock fish he wants for his sauna."

The deputy muttered quietly in the mike, with lights shining on us, the shotgun leveled. "I'll see you around," he said as he stepped into the car that backed out of the alley at top speed, turned, and burned rubber.

Malone stretched, shuffled his hair with open hands, and said, "Let's get something to eat. Man, I'm hungry."

I don't know what the little girl said, or what they talked about, or why Malone would want to sit down on the pier with her every morning and fish the way they did. For three mornings--since we'd been there--I found Malone with that little girl down at the pier. They laughed and talked and fished. In fact, I never heard Malone laugh like that. Something about that little girl really delighted him.

The girl's family--and I don't even remember their name, now--camped about a hundred yards from where Malone and I parked our camper down at Red Fish Bay Marina. And that was some time ago, back in the late 70s, I guess. We went down there to wade-fish--reds and trout in the back bay--and just to enjoy the world at Red Fish Bay, a place Malone said suited him fine. But, Malone also said there was a chance we'd meet a fellow from Rockport who had a boat for sale--a possibility--something about 40 feet long with a sail and engine, but in pretty bad shape. Malone said he'd talked to the fellow by telephone, and told him we'd be at Red Fish Bay Marina that week. The fellow was supposed to be tieing up another boat at Port Aransas sometime that week, and was to come over to Red Fish Bay

to see Malone about the other one back at Rockport. The fellow, I believe, was on some kind of a boat trip down the coast to Brownsville, where he was involved with another boat headed for Mexico, or something. He was some sort of boat trader or dealer.

But, about that little girl. Her folks were a nice couple in their forties, quiet, having a good time camping and fishing. They didn't seem to mind that Malone talked and laughed with the little sweetheart at meals there in the marina. There were no other campers around that late in the summer, and we all enjoyed one another's company around the long wooden table. The good people at Red Fish Bay Marina maintained a small grill, grocery, a good stock of beer and wine, lots of bait and tackle, a lighted pier, and campgrounds with a single cold-water shower. While the area regulars gathered there before five a.m. for coffee and talk, Malone was out on that pier with the little girl, fishing and laughing. She was about 12 years old, maybe 11, with long wavy blond hair, and jeans. There was nothing extraordinary about her--just a nice, plain child, well-mannered, good-natured. Nothing extraordinary, at all. Malone never even said anything about her.

By 10 every morning, Malone and I were waist-deep in that saltwater, murdering trout and reds. We did well at fishing. Malone got a big charge out of warning me about the <u>sand guts</u>, and in making great preparations to avoid

losing our catches to the hammerhead sharks. He insisted we hang our catches on stringers attached to floating milk jugs a good 30 yards from our bodies, while fishing. And he was right. Those hammerheads would come in on a string of fish so hard that, if the catch was hanging around my waist, the shark attack could cut me up and even knock me down in the water. It happened once, even after Malone warned me, but I got off light, and went to the milk-jug plan. Malone hated those sharks, and taught me to hate them, too.

We enjoyed the break. I never saw Malone in a better mood. And, as planned, the fellow called about the boat, and drove up about sundown in a Toyota pickup, and wearing a green polyester leisure suit, dirty blond hair--perhaps his own--and too many teeth. But he did have a wrecked 40-footer on the ground at Rockport, and within what Malone thought was reach, at least for a project during the winter. They talked, and seemed to be making a deal. We drank late with the fellow, and talked boats. He decided to spend the night at Red Fish Bay Marina, in his pickup.

As usual, Malone started the day early at the pier with that little girl, but was back pretty soon looking for the fellow in green. Green, the boatman, decided to fish, and was up the way quite a distance, moving nearly out of sight, wade-fishing with a fury. He returned to the marina later that evening with a string of trout and

reds. About dark, Malone suggested we escort the fellow back to Port Aransas, have a bite to eat, and see him off for Brownsville.

We had seafood platters, and Green bought.

His boat was the white, long, slick sort. And we never really determined whether it was his boat or not. He wouldn't really show us through the thing, so we stood at the slip while Green mouthed about this and that.

Malone grew quiet. Green continued, as if he were trying to break a record for nonstop nonsense about boats, life, himself, his trip, and this, that, and the other. Malone interrupted him.

"What about the little girl?"

Water lapped loudly against the side of Green's white slick boat. Green gazed into that water.

"Well?" Malone asked.

I didn't follow the action, but somehow suspected there was some get-down, South Texas, freestyle, river-bottom asskicking about to occur. I could not imagine what might cause Malone to put on his downtown crystal-clear U.S. Marshall I-truly-care-for-you-but-you're-gonna-die-hard voice. It was the same voice he used to talk about sharks, and some woman he used to know, and some other things he seemed to have no doubts about.

"Hey," Green uttered. "She was asking for it."

"That's not what she told me."

"What does she know?"

Malone was silent for several minutes. "Tell you what. I'll see about that boat you've got down at Rockport sometime, say, next month. For now, until your crew gets back to the boat here, I guess there's not much for you to do except maybe think about that pretty little girl, eh?"

"You know, I didn't do anything with her. I just talked to her a little bit, and she seemed to like it."

"What, just some dirty stuff, sort of, huh?"

"Yeah, sure," Green said.

Malone was silent for quite a while. "Yeah, well, where I come from we call people like you terrorists, jerks, assholes, child molesters, you know, and a lot of other stuff I'm sort of too tired to list."

Green laughed. "Yeah, I've been called all those things, and more."

"Well, I wonder this," Malone replied. "I wonder what kind of navigator you are. I mean, you know how to sell boats, molest children, buy seafood platters, talk a lot. I'm just wondering how well you might be able to handle a boat like this in the dark with no navigation equipment. Is that possible?"

"There's always the stars," Green giggled.

It became astonishingly apparent that no matter what Malone said, Green could not be insulted, intimidated, shamed, threatened, or the like. The guy was unconscious, standing there talking, unconscious, impervious, stupid,

or bluffing.

Malone said to Green, "You know, I don't seem to be able to touch a nerve of decency in you, fellow. You act like you don't know what I'm talking about with the little girl. And if you do know what I'm talking about, you're putting me on. Got an answer for that?"

"No, I don't know what you're talking about."

"O.K., then, let's navigate."

"What do you mean?"

Malone took a deep breath. "Let's get on your boat, and let me kick all the radios and navigation equipment to bits, then we'll leave you on the boat so you can get the engine started while we set your lines loose from the slip here, and you can drive out of this marina, out into the Gulf, and have a good time."

The fellow frowned and resisted when Malone took his arm and led him onto the boat. I waited. I heard the crashes of things breaking, and the engine start. Malone emerged from a small door, jumped to the dock, and we took loose the lines.

As the boat pulled away slowly, I asked Malone what he told the fellow, what was happening?

"Simple," Malone said. "He's going to drive out of this marina into the Gulf, and simply disappear. I'm going to Rockport next month, and there will not be a trace of him left. I will never see him again. I will never even hear his name, or see his footprints, or know

in any way that he ever was. We came to an agreement."

"You've got to be kidding."

"Oh, no."

I was more than a little dumbfounded, but Malone seemed confident, lucid, at ease.

He spoke as we walked back to the sand. "Let's get some poles, bait, a net, and all that, and some wine, and something to munch on, and get ourselves over to that high pier there under the lights, and fish all night, what do you say?"

I consented, but we never mentioned the green fellow in the white boat. He mushed out of the marina and did not return that night, or more exactly, had not returned at nautical dawn when we started back to Red Fish Bay. And Malone was delighted to be away from the sharks on the high, dry pier where everything was well-lighted, and where he seemed to be so comfortable and to have such fun fishing. We waved to a couple of baffled-looking guys we saw wandering around as if they were looking for a boat. That, I guess, was about three a.m. And they wandered off.

On the sandy road to Red Fish Bay Marina, Malone said we'd get back just in time for him to fish for a while with the girl. And he asked me if I'd like to go down to Rockport the next month to pick up that boat, because he was going to take it out of there on a trailer and see what could be done with it up-country, and deal with Green

in some other dimension.

He smiled at me. "I only suggested the girl was my sister, and old slick Green told me I could have the Rockport boat. He was eager to leave as I helped get him ready for his Gulf celestial navigation exercise, yes, eager, and probably hoping for a little <u>divine</u> intervention."

DOING TIME

It was a misty fall morning about sunup. It was Malone on the 'phone.

"How long does it take you to wake up, anyway? How many cups of coffee do you average?"

"I haven't started the count this morning, actually. I was just beginning to get at it when you called."

"Keep an eye on that number," Malone whispered. "And when you get tanked up on that stuff, come on over and help me drink some more."

"What are we doing?"

"We're just doing time. Oh, and think about this. How long do think it would take you to die of a heart attack because you drank too much coffee and smoked too many cigarettes too early in the morning?"

"I'll think about it."

It took a while for me to wake up, have some breakfast, and get over to Malone's. I felt silly about going over there. What could he want? Why did he call? Why was I going over there? It looked like the possibility of a wasted day, something I didn't need.

Malone said he needed a little help with this and that, and that I had nothing better to do, no better way

to spend the day, than to hang out. He said I needed to hang out and to quit watching the clock. He asked me to hold some rope while he went to the other end of it and did something in a fumbling way, tried to tie the pieces together in some kind of fancy braid I couldn't figure.

We fooled around like that for a while in his huge workshop, surrounded by pottery, and sculpture, and lumber, and all the rest of the stuff Malone liked to surround himself with, and boat parts.

"What are you drinking, Malone?"

"Mescal to slow things down, and coffee to speed things up."

"How long you think you can do that?"

"Until about five this afternoon, I figure."

Malone's brick kiln hissed gently, heating the workshop, baking something with gas at heaven knows what temperature. Malone often boasted he could take that thing beyond cone-10 in record time, burn a hole in the universe.

He whittled a while on something, and pulled a while on something else, and so on, and sipped on that stuff in the old Thermos that served as his cup. The coffee water was on in the corner, ready for instant mixtures of all sorts of stimulants and depressants in bottles, jars, bags, whatever. The sign over the coffee/booze bar read Drug Abuse Central.

"How long do you think it would take me to whip your

arse?" Malone said softly.

"Oh, on a good day, maybe 30 seconds."

"Wrong. It would happen in two one-hundredths of a single small second."

"That's pretty rapid."

"Oh, yeah. But, now, how long do you think it takes to get a divorce?"

"What, six months?"

"Wrong. It takes exactly fifteen years, because that's how long it takes her family to accept you if you're perfect. And if you're not perfect and you want to get out, it takes the same fifteen years for them to forget it. Fifteen years for a divorce."

"Oh, Malone. Let's talk about something nice. Like, how long you think it takes to read Moby Dick?"

"Let's see, ten pages a day . . . I don't know, and besides it's episodic, isn't it, and you can lose your place, right, or I can lose mine? So, I don't know. That's a Bible question, anyway. You know, it depends or it doesn't."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on how much you want to cooperate."

"Cooperate?"

"Yeah, like, you know, go along with the program."

"I don't follow."

"It's like this, you know. What's the gestation period for an elephant?"

"Three years."

"Right. You're a genius. But, how long can you go without paying your gas bill?"

"Thirty days."

"There you are, biblical stuff, for sure."

We couldn't see the sun. I didn't have a watch. Malone didn't have a watch. And, the clock on his wall was gone. I didn't want to ask the question.

Malone stretched. "How long you think it takes to go bankrupt? I'll tell you. It takes five minutes to declare, then you wait seven years, and it never happened, or is it ten? It takes seven or ten years to be bankrupt, but no time at all to go bankrupt, because at some time, it never happened. You like that? It's one of those things that never happened after it has, you know? Like arms for hostages, or tit for tat, or like veterans benefits, or hospitalization insurance. You must have insurance to be treated, anyway. It's like they can kill you but they can't eat you, because that's against the law. Sure. So, it seems to me <u>that</u> I am positing something here <u>that</u> somehow makes sense--does <u>that</u> make sense?--a sort of foregrounding or backdropping in broad strokes <u>that</u> paint a kind of arcane liberation ontology as nascent drunk."

He slowly fell of the stool without spilling his drink.

"What have you been reading, man?"

"The stars, my own palms, and, when I can work up the nerve, Time. I put on those aqualungs there for that magazine, and run about 20 percent oxygen out of that green tank, and it somehow breaks those rashes of anxiety attacks that come on as they do from time to time, fairly acutely in a chronic way, you might say, or I might say, or it might be said."

"What's the matter with you, Malone? You in trouble?"

"No, it's just that sometimes I really don't know what to say. I mean, it doesn't bother me to think, but it can be a pain to say things sometimes. And my clock has wound down about what to say."

"Say about what?"

"Awareness, I guess. What can be said about awareness?"

"Whoa, Malone. You're losing me."

"No, it's simple. When the awareness goes away it feels better, and that just takes a little time, huh? So, what can you say about that?"

"Well, do you know how long it takes to go from deep orbit through a trajectory around the back side of the moon one time and back to Earth's atmosphere? About ninety hours, that's what."

"Let's see." He reached for a little calculator, and punched some buttons. "Ninety hours. That would be one every fifteen minutes, let's see, 360 cigarettes, or 18

packs. That's damned near two cartons."

"I'll tell you an old joke, Malone. It's about hogs. Guy says hogs are so smart you probably could teach one to roll a cigarette. His buddy says, yeah, but that could take some time. Guy says, sure, but what's a little time to a hog?"

"Better watch it, or you'll have the Humane Society all over you for that kind of stuff, these days."

There was a timid knock on the door, and Malone went to see. He picked up a large platter of sandwiches from the steps and brought them to our place in the center of the room. We ate, and spent the rest of the afternoon talking about time and times, our times, old times, sometimes, anytime, and so on. And he carved what he called a flying saucer out of a chunk of that Christmas-time firewood starter that burns flames of many colors. And he set it afire, and we watched through the mescal as it hissed and flamed itself to ashes on the concrete floor.

Malone stretched. "Time to check." He eased over to the kiln and make preparations to open the beast. Asbestos gloves, goggles, some tools, some work, and some time it took him to shut her down and get set to move the door back. "It's about five o'clock."

The vault stood open as Malone stood back. I peered in to see four shelves of ribs, maybe eight racks of beef ribs done to what looked like perfection.

"Twelve hours at cone-four. Ribs," Malone beamed.

"'Tis art."

"So, go on, get out of here. Go home and get ready to come back about seven. We're having ribs tonight. You've never met Steve and Janet, and their kids."

"No, Steve who?"

"Steve Jackson, an old writing buddy, a guy I lost track of over the years, a guy who has been in the big house, up the river, out of commission. He's been doing time, and he got out yesterday, and he's on his way around to see what's left of his world."

"How much time did he do?"

"Enough."

"Why was he in?"

Malone shrugged. "Must have failed to show proper respect."

So, since I practice a little law from time to time, I'm supposed to know what's good for the community, and I'm supposed to be able to recommend people to serve on this and that committee for this and that thing. I wanted to surprise them, so I recommended Malone serve as a member of the county historical commission advisory board.

If anyone could raise questions and take new and interesting perspectives on the issues, it was probably Malone, I figured. His presence would be healthy for the likes of that bunch who and which I shall refrain here from describing in much detail, except to make clear they had, as I saw it, what might be called limited perspective due, probably, to limited perception.

The first meeting was a casual family gathering for the weekend in rental cabins down at Big Waller State Park, where the board gathered in order to get acquainted and to begin informal historical sensitivity discussions. Instead of limited perspective, I might say members of the board represented some, perhaps, peculiar, if not self-serving, maybe esoteric, certainly idiosyncratic perspectives, all of which were responsible in their own ways on some scale or another.

It was fine. It was certainly fine. I don't mean to sound as if I have anything against historical commissions, or the like, because I don't. They certainly happen. If I was concerned, it was about which direction the commission was looking, and in relation to which other direction, and so on, as in what kind of perspective. I worried about perspective a bit because, without it, what the hell?

And who shows up to cover the fricking private exclusive absolutely supposed-to-be-quiet-and-informal gathering of dignitaries advising the historical commission but Steve Jackson, journalist, with his wife Janet and their two children. There he was, in cabin five, right in the big middle of the whole thing, with notepad, recorder, camera. Again, O.K., so it's not a secret society, but what the holy hell? Malone said he didn't invite Jackson, and no one else admitted inviting him. Jackson said it was public knowledge. O.K., public knowledge. What a concept.

There were sessions on Saturday morning before lunch, and before the evening meal, both early enough for changes of appropriate clothing, grooming, posturing, and with plenty of time for being seen strolling near the water, or drinking moderately, and being delighted about how keen the kids roasted wieners and marshmallows. I don't want to sound factitious, but, hey.

About time to leave late Sunday morning, and a brick

comes sailing through Malone's windshield. We heard the crash, went out to look, but couldn't tell from where it came. Right through the windshield of his lovely old Ghia the nice big red brick sailed, and landed on the seat, picture-perfect just under the steering wheel. The perfect brick-through-windshield number was studied by all in attendance, as if it were some sort of historical event, which it was, if not simply art.

Malone said nothing. But, he somehow began to look very much like a bird. I mean, his neck got longer, yes, longer, and his eyes smaller, and more to the sides of his head. His sharp nose grew sharper, and his ears seemed to flatten against the sides of his head in a way that made him appear to be going faster than he really was. He moved ever so slowly, though, around the Ghia, and behaved admirably, that is, calmly.

The brick incident was history by Christmas. Malone was admirable, too, at the board meetings. He remained calm, constructive, moderate in behavior and language, so much so he actually--now that I think of it--disappointed me. I expected more indignation, confrontation, perhaps even some rage.

He voted against every motion the board raised. He said they meddled. He said they piddled. He said they absolutely were not going to move the cemetery because, he said, we should let the past lie, especially the dead past, especially dead people. But, he did not discuss it

in meetings or debate. He only voted. I couldn't quite figure Malone on all that. I simply expected more action.

Like an old politician, Malone was on the telephone one evening before Christmas, calling around those holiday greetings. I sat down with him as he dialed Steve Jackson. He listened intently for a fairly long while as Jackson, I suppose, spoke. He finally told Jackson to come on over, right then, right away.

"Anything going on here I should know about?" I asked.

"Stick around. I need a witness."

Jackson came in and took a seat.

"Repeat what you told me over the 'phone, Jackson."

"I said I threw the brick through your windshield, because you were messing around with my wife down at Big Waller."

"No, I wasn't, Steve, and I'll whip you if you say it again. I'm real tired of messing with people like you, so listen to me, I'll tell you what you need to know. Like to have a cold beer?"

Steve started up off the couch.

Malone turned. "I said <u>listen</u>, so sit down and be quiet."

Jackson sat.

Malone returned with three cold beers. "Don't know what's going through your head, Steve. But, tell you what, you need to straighten it out. I've really got no

patience with you. And don't answer me or talk back because I'm not finished.

"You know, Steve, it's kind of a historical proposition. Too much time passes between the opportunities we take to tell one another what a really rotten job we're doing. Take your journalism situation, there. You're supposed to know what's going on, aren't you. You know, I could fix it so you print exactly what I tell you about the historical commission and all that, and a bunch of other stuff. Oh, yes, that's done daily. But, no, I'm not interested in that. Let me speak historically.

"What are your children going to think of you, your life, what you've accomplished? I'll tell you. Not much, because you ain't doing much with your life. You're the perfect candidate, Steve, for a suicide mission. I mean, you don't have a relationship with your wife, and your kids will never be proud of you. You need to do something big, something really risky, with a big payoff. You need it bad, Steve, if you follow one god-damned thing I'm saying. If you don't follow me just say so, and you leave. No, you don't leave. And be quiet.

"O.K., so how about you take your pad and your camera and your recorder down to South America and find out who's destroying the rain forests, and stop them. How about you seeing what can be done about television programming, and do it. How about you discover the crooked, lazy, ill-

informed sumbitch judges and lawyers who screw up the justice system, and take them public. You know, prove it. How about you get medical and legal care for everyone in the country, not as a privilege of wealth, but as a basic human right? How about you put a stop to the toxin being dumped here and there all over this wonderful planet. How about you come up with an energy policy for this great land. And then, we'll talk about who you think is messing with your wife, if you insist."

Jackson moved.

"I'm not through. You might ask why don't I do all that? Reason is, because I'm not crazy like you, Jackson. I'm not suicidal like you are. You're something, Jackson. You have the capability, the gall, to run around worried about infidelity while you're, at once, shunning global problems. Not many of us can do that. Warm fuzzy, Jackson, is the easy part. But <u>global</u> warming? Now there is a problem. You have some idea what I'm getting at here? Don't answer, you <u>dasn't</u>.

"Let me put it this way, before I begin to get too tender to talk. Why come to me? Why make me be the one to do you in, Jackson? You need it bad, but why me? Why would you want me to break your neck, when there are professionals, real professionals, in need of work around the world. Why, in Houston, Jackson, you can have your own neck broken for fifty dollars. Or, in the same place, you could have yourself killed without there being a mark

on your body. Why me? If you want to die, go get killed by some power-structure hit man because you caught some high-ranking son of a bitch with his hand in the cookie jar.

"You go get busy with that cookie jar, Jackson, and get yourself killed well--do all that, and I'll carve a bust of you, Jackson, and I'll talk with the historical commission about where they want to stick it. Let's make a little history.

"And, you know, if you could stop drug traffic, man, you'd not only have my attention like you do now, but you'd have my admiration. And, I wouldn't worry about any brick coming through the windshield of my sweet and innocent old Karman-Ghia.

"Let it not be said there never was opportunity to save the world, Jackson, because there is. All you have to is just go for it. It's just a matter of perception, Jackson, you know, whether you see it or don't, and a matter of what you figure you've got to lose by doing something about it. And, I figure you have nothing to lose. Don't answer.

"Now, what I want you to do after you leave here in about two minutes, is make plans to come over here to my house to a nice little Christmas party next Thursday, with Janet. She is a wonderful woman, Jackson, I feel sure. And she deserves a hell of a lot more from you than you are delivering. And if you want some real, real heavy

response from me, you just give me the slightest excuse or opportunity to take you clean down big-time, and I will.

"The other thing I'd like for you to understand, is that, by noon tomorrow, there will be one-hundred and fifty dollars American in my mailbox out there, in cash, by check, or money order. If it's not there, I will take my windshield out of your ass. Take your beer and leave. See you Thursday, and happy holiday season to you and yours."

Jackson left.

Malone turned to me. "Hope I didn't say anything out of line?"

OFFERINGS

About the only thing left was for Malone to come up with right at two-thousand dollars, all he needed to pay bills so he could leave town. The planning business led nowhere. People simply said one thing and did another. And the cost of living down at the coast, and the good weather coming, and the peace of mind for at least a few months, made sense, even to the conscience, a demanding partner.

Instead of hocking or selling everything, he figured on some shrewd action, some fast turn-around, something, anything that might turn up at someplace like Johnson's. The beautiful people touted it as a fashionable trading spot--antiques, furniture, collectibles--and a place to keep secret.

Any secrecy lifted when Malone discovered the place was owned by Marsha--a long-lost childhood sweetheart, fetching in a white cotton <u>fiesta</u> and with all that dark curly hair and silver. She was cagey about the contact--stood, arms folded, smiling until Malone recognized her--as if she, too, were not surprised. Old chemistry remained active, if only in traces and flashes, as they chatted comfortably and sipped house mint tea in huge

blown glasses full of ice.

By sundown, the white fiesta slipped over brown shoulders, smoothly replaced by a halter and shorts with her back turned to Malone as he stood in the bedroom smelling that cavern and the garlic-shrimp cooling on a platter at the table-for-two against a high window. The wine breathed. She wrapped herself in a long thin skirt and a ceremonial-like shawl, revealing notable cleavage. Malone was had, and so was she. They knew what they were doing, Malone was sure.

She tried nearly everything imaginable to please him nearly all night. At dawn, still semi-interested, he mused at the wrecked room, throw-rugs scattered before antiques and pre-Columbian stuff--a room full of characters with long heads, doing strange things to one another in relief. And Marsha was more than a little sarcastic about his . . . passivity when she immodestly, vigorously brushed her teeth, wiggling, flopping, suggesting, still, that he could, after all, take care of himself.

But she did not seem hurt, only impatient. And Malone could still smell it. Whatever it was--the garlic, the wine, malted Scotch--he could not identify. It neutralized his body, his being, but not his mind. Somehow, not his mind. Maybe, he guessed, it was a bad tooth, a molar or something that caused her that odor--or was it an aroma? Her hair smelled good. Was it her skin?

Something smelled, and so powerfully it lowered Malone's critical primal blood pressure.

She had no problem, though. And she had no problem, either, downing a mess of eggs and coffee--stretching long brown lovely legs under the glass table.

"So, what do you want, Malone?"

"Actually, a couple-of-thousand cash would do me this month. I've been preoccupied with getting out of town."

"That's no problem. You want to borrow that from me, no problem."

Malone stirred his coffee, considering, while pea gravel crushed under the weight of an Olds Ninety-Eight. The unexpected presence of that car at the window suddenly reassured Malone he was in a strange place, not home. He watched Marsha slip into a robe, out the door, to the driver sitting calmly behind sunglasses. As she stood at the car door, arms folded, behaving calmly, Malone toured the foyer, noticing the Yucatan memorabilia.

Malone heard the car door, saw the driver walking down the lane, off the place. Marsha came out of the bedroom with her hair tied back, looking like a beautiful woman. She slid those legs under the glass table and poured Malone more coffee. "Here's two-thousand." She put two small stacks on the table--worn tens, flat, each with a thin rubber band. "Will that hold you?"

"I'll pay you back in a few days." Malone could sell instead of hock. The cash looked better, and the junk was

too much trouble to haul, especially to a sand-eaten, mildew-ridden, salt-sprayed costal cabin.

"Good," she said. "Now, I've got to go to work. I'll be away two nights, and then I'll see you back here for dinner. Make yourself at home."

The cash made it easier for Malone to take care of business. His stuff sold fast while she was away. And, during those two days, between the selling and cleaning out his desk, he camped at Marsha's. Thai sticks in the freezer, hashish in the butter dish, coke in the dresser, a safe in the closet floor, an empty box of .25-auto ammunition in the nightstand. Plenty of blended beans for the coffee grinder, silk sheets, and that Olds Ninety-Eight sitting in the gravel, locked, plain, empty, dusty, white-on-yellow, out-of-state.

She brought back a bottle of Courvoisier five-star, and as she opened it, Malone put two stacks of bills on the table in front of her--stacks like the ones he took. She put it in her jeans, left front, and removed a nickel-plated pistol from the right.

"Furniture business getting rough?" Malone nodded at the Berretta on glass.

"Oh, that. The cocaine dealer's little weapon of choice." She poured brandy.

"Where have you been, if I may ask?"

"Actually, I've spent the last couple of days in pay telephone booths. Look, sweetheart, you don't think

furniture is what I do, really, do you? Don't get me wrong. I don't sell the junk, I just finance it. You know, investments. Double-the-money stuff. Put ten-thousand cash in today and I deliver twenty back to you next week. That kind of thing, but ten, minimum."

"You're pretty straightforward about it, aren't you." Malone chuckled while she slipped out of the sandals and jeans, pulling her long T-shirt down low as she wrapped graceful fingers around the snifter.

"Coffee's on. We'll mix it with Kahlua."

"What happened to the guy in the Olds?"

"Oh," she said, "he's a driver, or was a driver. Fool. All he had to do was keep his heart rate at 70 and the speedometer at 55--Miami to L.A.--and make another five-thousand. Rubber gloves, no key to the trunk, spare and tools in the back seat, a thousand in his pocket. Zero fatality rate."

"So that's the transport, huh?"

"Sure, even since my grandfather ran moonshine--same deal--and Dad, same furniture business. And if there's a wreck, just split. The car doesn't break. It's chromed, sealed, customized, locked, not a number on it, cold plates. Cops go no reason."

"Why do you tell me this?"

"Because there's five-thousand in it for you if you want to drive. Just park it at an address and walk. Return flight paid. Think about it and give me an answer

after I get showered. And we can eat." She flipped her hair and kissed him on his bald spot, swished the snifter across terrazzo floors on soft brown legs, a remarkable sight from the rear.

Malone stretched.

She came out a little damp, but looked neat in her sienna jumpsuit and curly hair he remembered as strait--huarache sandals not white socks, silver serpent necklace not little gold cross, and with something in her hand certainly not a valentine.

"I won't do it," he said.

"Good. I thought you might be a fool, but I'm very pleased to see you're not. She put five stacks on the table--like the others--and brought coffee from the kitchen. They sipped, and glanced at the money. It was Amaretto Malone tasted, not Kahlua. "It's a loan, Malone --poetry, huh? You can pay it back whenever, if you want to. You're the first person who's ever paid back a loan. You're unusual. I planned on never getting the two-thousand back--can live without it--but you surprise me. I trust you."

"You're more than kind, Marsha."

"Now," she said, "give me one more short trip--got to make a quick call--and, when I get back, we eat. Let's go for enchiladas."

When she left, Malone took the five-star but left the stacks. He still couldn't figure that smell, but knew the

Gulf breeze would blow it away, the brine cut it from his throat, his being--and with some time and distance--whatever it was. It was not that he knew better. He knew better, all right, about sex, drugs, and money. But about Marsha, he just did not know--probably never could. And that was enough to keep his blood pressure where it belonged, his mind on the coast, out of there, before things became any more . . . questionable.

HOTEL, MEXICO

What is this, the Maltese Taco? A little embarrassing, the ceiling fan and wooden blinds. There are parrots in the lobby, and those fruit trees, and all the seeping, weeping walls, and fungus in the shower. I've slept nearly six hours. Will I have enough gas money to get back, and will that damned Chevrolet run those roads again? Sure. American tobacco never tasted any better--makes Monterrey seem almost like home. Yes, the X. in Q.X. Malone is circled in the hotel register.

Did Aunt Bell and Uncle Willie stay in this room in the 40s? I believe so. They must have. I can feel it, or whatever. I can just think so. Why not. Did Carlos Castaneda ever stay in this room? Who cares. He would deny it if he had, or swear he had when he hadn't, or say he did if I wanted to believe it. Castaneda's stuff is true, but it didn't happen. This hotel, Mexico, is happening, but it doesn't seem true. Whatever. So it takes a long time to wake up, and I like to sit awhile on the toilet, feeling like some fine old Indian woman who's just sold all her lizards and has a long way to walk to get home. And it is getting dark.

Nourishment time. Lay in a base of mescal, cover it

with three fingers of apple juice, mix it with a little brewer's yeast, and chase it with watered-down T-bird. High-protein, but the legs won't move. I'll lay into some of that shoe-sole beefsteak later in the night, when its well-done. Where's the sunset? Under a volcano? Where's the renunciation I need, drove a thousand miles to find, to make? It's here, I can feel it, or I can believe it. It's here, like death, like an unmarked grave in the rocks of those tall mothers to the west. It's moving around out in those hills. I can drink to that.

To begin with, until the entire Congress, at least, is arrested for obstructing justice, I can see no way we may ever govern ourselves, if that's the plan. Maybe the night lights of Monterrey seem brighter than they should because I can't feel my feet touch the street. Maybe the giant church is a nice place to sit, outside, and watch the maidens in white parade for the boys in black under the shifting eyes of the parents who will pass judgment on the potential sons-in-law. Maybe. Justice will be there. They'll forget their own names before they'll forget who's messing with their daughters.

And if I've got the nerve to enter the <u>pulqueria</u>, I've got to remember to never look at the girls. Don't even look. And if I did rent that whole <u>hacienda</u> with servants for $68 a month, how could I keep from dying in the courtyard of acute, chronic diarrhea? Could I ever titrate enough Mexican tomatoes to build up an immunity to

amebic dysentery?

Lost? Hell, no, I'm not lost. That's an American flag, or more precisely, a United States flag there in the sun. Maybe they'll have some doughnuts. And I can see the marketplace, so I've got a marker. I can always come back. I don't know whether it's a curio shop or the U.S. Embassy. If they've got doughnuts, it doesn't matter. But protein, for now. And, sure, it's O.K. to just chop the stinking fish in half and throw the parts in that boiling water. Call it soup, sure. Only, thanks, I'll just have some tortillas and a Coke. Good.

"Hey, mister, want a joint, some grass?"

Sure, if it's from the other side of the mountain, and greener, and, no, have a nice day. No pone su manos a mi corpus, gracias. He would get, say, five from me, probably twenty for turning me in to the police, who would get as much as they could from anyone dumb enough to bail me out.

What did I say? Mi español no es muy fuerte, o claro.

I don't see any DC-3 runways around here. When Aunt Bell and Uncle Willie came in here, they said they did it in a DC-3, with chickens, and peasants, and a pilot with a ball cap on backwards. And from here, they went to Puerto Vallarta before Liz and Richard knew the way. And they wore suits, white clothes that got cleaned while the parrots muttered, clothes that reappeared with the towels

and the Carta Blanca, the thousands of Margueritas that floated in and out of the meticulous groutwork in the hotels of many colors, in the 30s, and the 40s, and the even-still-Maltese 50s.

How could I forget the Capitan? The federales checked every space in the Chevy when I crossed at Laredo. With clearance from the first beer-salesman-looking-outfit, he turned, said I was 'ta-bueno and, "And, you will remember the Capitan." Right. Ten bucks for the Capitan, not enough to buy the Shinola needed to give his Sam Brown belt even a light coat. How could I forget. Have a nice day. Yes, I renounce, Bubba. Thanks, I needed that. It makes me feel a whole lot better, right away. It makes me feel so good I can hardly wait to do it again at the in-country checkpoint.

Flat tire? Not on my life. I do a flat tire while Pablo, there, in his deuce-and-a-half, does a whole transmission on the ground. I need one of those dayglow-tape crosses for my windshield. I do, I really do, and for sure, without any jokes, absolutely.

How long had that woman stood there by the road in the middle of nowhere with that lizard for sale, holding him like treasure by the tail while I rode the wind with a mouthful of cactus candy she couldn't afford and probably wouldn't eat because she knows better? She eats the nopales, those little cactus-flower pods taken at just the right time of year, and in religious ceremonies so complex

I couldn't understand them even if they were outlined like the organization chart of the Texas Railroad Commission, which is such a wondrously complex thing Noam Chomsky couldn't even get it.

Lock the car? They take the whole car, retail the wheels and tires, and give the carcass to someone in need of a home. Engine parts go to relatives. U.S. State Department policy to improve that situation--poverty, impecuniousness, vacuity about the belly--is a dose of name-calling and blaming that reduces the ambient desert free-air temperature a whole four degrees and narrows the perennially proposed free-trade zone by three inches per day for every paragraph of bullshit per communique. I guess it's bullshit. How would I know? Call it intuition. But it's not politics.

No, I won't accept nomination for the presidency from my party or any other. And that's final. Of Mexico or any other place or thing.

Soon, some other day, I will find my way to the fresh-water lake I see here below Guadalajara, in the mountains of the great state of Jalisco. Aunt Bell and Uncle Willie's Guide to Mexico for the Motorist, undated, says, If you have never awakened mornings with the soft strain of strummed guitars floating through your window; if you have not known the heavy fragrance of a thousand orange trees in bloom; if you have never stood among broadleafed banana trees laden with yellow fruit while

high above you towered snowclad mountains; if you have not walked amid places redolent with the historic associations of unnumbered centuries; if you have not heard the crescendo chords of strolling troubadours singing Mexican songs on a moonlight night; if you have experienced none of these, you have some pleasant pages in the Book of Life awaiting you in that Land of Romance below the Rio Grande.

Uncle Willie told me, when you hook into one of those giant sailfish off the sunny coast, you'll have the experience of a lifetime. He said they come out of the water and wobble through the air for way more than a mile or five. And you keep a straw rooster on you roof to ward off the diablo, and an iguana in your porch rafters for the same reason.

So, I came down to renounce. So, what it has to be that I have to renounce is, let's say, our ability to govern ourselves, or my ability to govern myself. But I knew that. So, I now need to renounce it. Then where do I stand? If I walk away from my ability to govern myself, I will, nevertheless, be governed. It will just be by someone or something else. I knew that. But it's better than that, clearer. What it means is that I'm out of control and it's not my fault. Sounds like an excuse, but it isn't. I mean, as a proposition, it's not too weak to be an excuse, but rather, it is the truth which seems like an excuse. Like being born, you can't help it, whether it's in the U.S.A. or not.

Disregarding the actual border, as Sister Angelina said about Our Lady of Guadalupe, the 20-mile trip into Texas up to Encinal was really about a large hamburger. It was a U.S. hamburger for, I believe, one dollar U.S. It was filling, and I shall remember the Capitan.

DIRECTIONS

Even through a glazed plastic window from the back seat of the old Beech, Malone could look across the service ramp--four planes away--and see Sandra had it over her husband Sam. Ernie stood between them in the hangar door, like a referee, while Sandra waved her arms and got her face down at Sam's. Showgirl legs. The short skirt and long red hair added to her already nearly-a-head-taller dominance of the airplane guys--she, contentious at least, and like a chysanthemum in peat moss, some domesticity down to the aerodrome. What a _pistol, cowgirl, she-bitch mother-monster_ raking old Sam. She glowed from eighty yards, livid, disappearing into the hangar while Ernie led Sam out to the Beech like showing him to a neutral corner for the mandatory eight-count in a great _agon_ magically promoted by Malone's _anima-of-animas_. It was a little confusing.

The Quiet One in the Continental had arrived, poised at the Beech wingtip, ready for transport to the Ruidoso racetrack. Time to "cheat death," as Sam was fond of saying. Darkness gathered on the hills as Sandra sped away in their old station wagon--out the new road that, instead of by the county dump, wound through the heart of

the fashionable little resort.

To The Quiet One, Sam introduced Malone as his "associate"--no response but her body language, legs about as long as Sandra's, running smooth off the front seat, with slim briefcase in lap, and grey suit too fine and tight for wrinkles--for snakes--and red, red lips. The V-tail Beech Bonanza served as The Quiet One's aircraft of choice. But Ernie and Sam had mumbled about its aging gear, and hers, Sam calling it "worn but probably reliable."

Malone took that certain breath for takeoff, with intermittent images of Sandra--Sandy, as Sam called her --home mixing pancakes or something for their two little boys. Beechcraft 4242-Bravo came off long, got its feet up, and chased the rosie sundown in a slow climb at about three-quarter bore. Had to stay smooth for The Quiet One, but Sam never dallied with takeoffs. And with paying passengers, he skipped the death bit.

No charts onboard, nothing for Malone to do except watch the gyros and recall Sam's familiar directions to Ruidoso: "Drive west 'til you hit the mountains, turn right and look for an oval on the ground." Malone knew Ruidoso wasn't hard to find, even with the track lights off. He didn't know <u>what</u> The Quiet One knew, and he knew Sam didn't know, because Sam told him he didn't know, and that he didn't want to know: "It's ugly," Sam said. "Whatever it is, it's got to be too ugly."

In New Mexico, The Quiet One slipped into a motel somewhere, while Sam and Malone got burgers in the grey airport deli with plastic Pepsi menu above the grill. Malone considered just ordering the menu itself, a nice cream plastic, slightly warmed. But, he didn't know how Sam might take that, since his sense of humor fluctuated like his sense, like his Sandy, like his directions for operating the airplane.

"The Beech handles like a 150 Cessna. Just keep the nosewheel down through about 75, tug her off one time real easy, and let her go flat-out 'til she shows a hundred--then ease her up and grab the gear. Nail a hundred--glue it--and she climbs like a bitch. I'll get the radio."

Malone's directions complete--high-performance, single-engine, night, visual rules--left unsaid that, as Sam often mentioned, the plane, or whatever, handles like . . . Sandy. Sam often compared things with Sandy--<u>the strangest damned things</u> that never reminded Malone of Sandy. And then, there always came the final rap--that it was time to go out again and cheat death. He said Sandy didn't find that funny.

Sam sipped the last bit of coffee from the saucer and threw on that old football jacket like something from 1955, ducktails and all, even smelling of Vitalis. He couldn't help being German-Canadian--born that way. And Malone couldn't believe that's <u>why</u> he was the way he was. And where he found Sandy--Seattle or somewhere--<u>heaven</u>

only knows. Malone couldn't figure how she ever could have initiated production of those kids by or with him. The truth, Malone figured, was that it wasn't that Sandy wouldn't take Sam, but that Sam seemed too ignorant of her to actually love that woman. She was formidable--a woman Malone figured would get what she wanted, sooner or later, even from a brilliant jerk like Sam.

The ham-fisted sonofabitch bruised Malone's wrist when he flipped the control yoke over and said, "There, it's yours, and I got no controls on this side, so fly the thing, and keep your head out of the cockpit. But watch the numbers." Probably the way he dealt with Sandy--a Sandy Malone suspected had been cheating death with Sam for some time, and who could be solid gone when the Beech got home--if the Beech got home. The dark takeoff came loud, fast-shadows, lights, beacons, blurs--in a dull-red cockpit. It showed a hundred, all right, plus, before Malone got her in any kind of steady climb--a screaming rocketsled of a light plane pulling up through clear desert sky--a magic time-machine, pulsing quasar, hauling a couple of benches with a couple of small-time life-pirates up through nine-thousand feet before either of them realized they'd forgotten to set the directional gyro. That little wet-compass on the ceiling didn't cut it in a hard climb.

It didn't help, either, that Sam-son flipped on the landing light to surprise Malone about what a big prop the

sumbitch sported--Sam joking about the size of Malone's eyes . . . "pie pans." And before the chuckle ended, a radio voice asked the aircraft southbound for El Paso to identify. Sam disregarded. Radio voice again, "Identify. Aircraft southbound for El Paso at nine-thousand, identify--you are entering Mexican airspace. Identify and say your intentions. Identify."

Sam disregarded for a few seconds, exchanging dumb looks with Malone, before keying the mike.

"Albuquerque Center, Beechcraft 4242-Bravo, for radar ident."

"42 Bravo, Albuquerque. Say your location."

"Albuquerque, 42-B, southbound out of Ruidoso for San Antonio at nine-thousand."

"42-B, Albuquerque. Come to nine-zero and report."

"42-B heading nine-zero."

"42-B. Radar ident., sir. You are one-mile from Mexican airspace. Say your intentions--do you wish to file?"

"42-B for vectors to San Antonio, and g'day, sir."

And the vectors came, and the admonitions about not wanting to meet the Mexican Air Force . . . Sam explaining how the Mexicans like to use three 105s to put a plane down--one in front blowing fire in the windscreen, and one on either side--all slightly high and "coming down like they know what they're doing."

42-B found San Antonio lights--close enough to make

the home airport up the way. Sam got to cheat death again when the down-and-locked gear light wouldn't come on. He tested the lock by skimming down the runway at near cruise in an eerie soft-shoe, touching a wheel-at-a-time to see if they'd hold. They did. 42-B landed, and Malone completed his checkride by taxing to the ramp.

"Wish Sandy could have seen that," Sam muttered. "Wish Sandy could appreciate the flyin' game a little more. She don't trust me, ya know--takin' these rich, bored, racetrack-junkie beauties around in the night skies."

Malone taxied. The rollout took all 5,00 feet of runway, and it was a way back to the ramp.

"Sandy gets nervous when I take The Quiet One or Smokey somewhere. Say, Malone, why don't you go with me tomorrow when I take Smokey out to the track? It might make Sandy feel better, since I've got to stay in the same motel with that crazy broad for a night, then bring her back. That's the deal. I'll pay for our room, huh--yours and mine? Makes Sandy real nervous when I'm gone like that. Don't know what direction she might take--me chauffeuring those dames."

"Speak of direction, Sam, you realize we landed downwind. It's changed hard since sundown--winds aloft must be a hundred from the north."

"So, it's snowing in Canada, huh, and all that--and somewhere a bird chirps."

Ernie stood under the fueltank lights, waiting for 42-B--and at that wee hour--like a harbinger. Malone suddenly wondered, even worried, about Sandy, but let it go.

Sam fueled the wingtanks, set up the Beech for Smokey's trip at sunrise. Ernie loitered like a coyote. Malone stretched, and wondered what the hell was going on, while a slick Piper-6, big engine loping, rumbled over the ramp, headed for the active, with its rotating beacon looking like business. A single figure in a baseball cap held the left seat behind tinted glass.

"Who's out in the Piper this time of night, Ernie?"

"Hey, Sam, I let go of those keys earlier this evening, but didn't really keep up with when the thing was leaving, you know?"

"That bunch of cowboys--damned ranch work this time of night?" Sam climbed into the Beech and got unicom radio. "Say what, big Piper, this is Sam on the ramp. You ranchin' tonight, or what? Over."

"Might say I'm rodeoin' tonight, big fella."

"Say again?"

Long pause, while the Piper ran up for takeoff.

"Goin' out to cheat death, big fella. Drive out west to the mountains, turn right, and find an oval track on the ground."

The Piper roared, lifted off, and climbed into the black.

"Damn, that's Sandra," Sam shouted at Ernie.

Sam came to ground like a snake, and shoved Ernie across the ramp, holding him against the control-shack wall.

"Tell me all about it, big Ern, all about it."

"Hey man, it was supposed to be a joke. But she really did want lessons, so we flew a bit, and she got real good, real fast. She can fly the sumbitch, man--got the first permit, no sweat--said she'd tell you. And you didn't know nothin' about it, nothin'?"

Sam eased back to the pumps and stood still, alone, silent. Malone kept his distance. Ernie waited. Nothing but north breeze moved for some time.

"Hey, Ernie." Sam calmly motioned Ernie to the Beech. "You take Smokey to the track when the sun comes up. And, Malone, you need to go home to your wife. Get in bed with her. Stay there for a couple days. You nearly got our asses busted tonight, and you better think about that. I'm going back out to New Mexico."

Ernie stepped back from the Beech, but was motioned up to the door when the engine started. Sam leaned across the seat.

"She got the winds aloft?"

"Yeah, Sam, I'd say she knows which way the wind blows."

Sam slammed the door and stayed leaned over, fooling with the instrument panel. He let the engine run while he

worked with the gear light or something--fuse box. He'd taxi a ways and stop, taxi and stop. Went the wrong direction one time, but turned and worked his way out to the active.

Malone chatted with Ernie a while about Sam's Sandy, and how Sam so often said a plane is like Sandy, how it flies itself, and how Sam's forever giving directions about being firm-but-gentle with a plane, flying it like it's a woman, and warning it'll "bust your ass if you don't pay attention."

Malone left, a little dizzy--went the wrong direction, took the wrong road to town and had to turn around at the dump and find the new gate. He saw 42-B lift off short, tease roadsigns in a tight turn west at full bore, blowing red fire, big prop taking a bite, going for it, cheating death, hauling it out in what Malone knew was the only direction left for that lucky death-cheating ham-fisted German-Canadian bandit sonofabitch vacuum-brain with feathers on his back.

Malone wanted to meet Smokey, though--see some of what makes a misunderstood, long-legged redhead sweat-fly rental junk so she can take a hot airplane cross-country at night with no charts into winds aloft, to claim a guy like Sam.

IF IT PLEASE THE COURT

It seemed Malone's life was pretty well settled, stable. He was making money, having what appeared to be a nice time, and, for a longer period of time than I'd ever seen, he seemed . . . quiet. I watched him with his quick fists kill flies on a big punching bag out in the shed one evening, and believed him when he told me he was centered, integrated, unified, and had reached what any philosopher might call the goal, what the tofu people call togetherness.

I couldn't see any way it would disturb him to be called as a character witness for a mutual friend of ours who was going through a custody suit. Malone was among five people I'd lined up to speak the usual stuff about our buddy who was getting taken apart by his mean ex-wife and her perfectly obscene low-rent lawyer.

And, the kid wanted to be with his dad. And the kid was 14, so it was lining up to be just a formality. The mother insisted, though, on a jury. I wasn't sure how it might fall out.

I just swore all my witnesses as a group, and entered a plea for dismissal with a petition for the kid to live with his dad--ready for the judge's signature. My plea,

as I told our buddy and all his witnesses, simply said everyone in our camp agreed, all things equal, there was no reason for a 14-year-old not to live with his dad if he wanted.

Malone makes a good witness for anybody's case. He's the kind of person a jury can listen to, confident he's telling the truth. I mean, when Malone puts on a white shirt and a nice dark tie, and a blue jacket, and gets a close shave and a good shampoo, he is truth, jury truth.

In my opening argument, I simply made the motions, and read the statement that all my witnesses agreed the kid could live with his dad. I tried to simplify it for the court, her lawyer, her, the whole bunch. Our case was simple, and I didn't expect much rebuttal.

And so it was when Malone took the stand, my first witness. If Malone ever were, or could, or would be intimidated, her lawyer was the guy to do it. This, I expected, would not be the place, since the case was so shallow. Longest neck I've ever seen on an attorney, and the most complicated kind of complexion, the kind that's either purposefully been frozen or burned just enough to change the surface. Vulgar is not quite the right way to characterize his personality, his demeanor in court, but rather, he was the personal type who acted as if he knew Malone. He looked as if he knew Malone. He gave the impression to that courtroom that he knew Malone before the questioning began. He nodded at Malone, sort of

winked, tilted his head and smiled with a pause or two and a couple of hesitant steps before he strolled up to the witness stand where Malone sat like Abraham by-god Lincoln.

"You've been sworn, Mr. Malone. I remind you you're under oath to tell the truth. The perjury laws of this state prescribe heavy fines and or jail sentences for the felony called perjury. That's lying under oath, Mr. Malone. And I trust you will not do that, because, as an officer of this court, I make it my responsibility to see that you will tell the truth to this court or suffer the consequences prescribed by law."

I was a little surprised, if not embarrassed, by that crap from Neck. The judge even blushed a little, and motioned for Neck to get on with it.

Neck went through some notes from his jacket and casually returned them as he smiled again and approached the stand.

"When was the first time you smoked <u>marijuana</u>?"

The proverbial dead silence. Oh, no, not one of these things. No. Please. From proverbial, the silence got something like what they call mythic down at the college, something everyone could get into, and did, even the judge.

Malone smiled, looked at the judge, and back at Neck. "I've given my testimony in a statement earlier that was, I believe, submitted to this court, your honor."

"O.K., Neck continued, "let me start over, Mr. Malone. Please tell the court what you do for a living. What is your livelihood?"

"Vulture," Malone said, aside, softly.

"Excuse me, sir. I didn't hear your answer. Would you speak louder?"

"Sculptor, sir. I am a sculptor."

Neck continued. "Now, please answer the question I asked you earlier about marijuana."

The judge answered. "Your testimony is recorded, Mr. Malone."

"Please answer the question," Neck said.

The judge looked down.

"This is one sad pastiche," Malone uttered in a low voice.

"What did you say, Mr. Malone? What was your answer?"

"I said, sir, I occasionally teach."

"Very well, we understand you're a sculptor and that you occasionally teach. Now, would you please answer my question about marijuana, Mr. Malone?"

No help from the judge, and I didn't feel like objecting--couldn't, despite all the training. Probably wanted to see the show, irresponsibly sat there with my mouth open, wanting it to play out. I wanted in on the circus, the stupidity, obscenity, total lack of sense. And I somehow didn't feel like trying to save Malone or

anyone else. I was quiet.

Malone looked out the window, relaxed, with a faint smile.

"When was the first time you smoked marijuana, Mr. Malone?" Neck repeated.

Malone turned again to the judge, disregarding Neck. "Your honor, I won't take the Fifth Amendment here. I will answer all the questions. My answer to the question is that I wouldn't know marijuana if you put it out here in front of me."

The judge was silent.

Neck went at it again. "Mr. Malone, that is not an answer to my question, but I would challenge you to a lie-detector test if that is your testimony."

"This whole thing is an anecdote," Malone said, under his breath.

"Again, Mr. Malone, I did not hear your answer," Neck said.

"I said, sir, if it please the court."

"If it please the court, what, Mr. Malone?"

Malone turned to the judge again. "Your honor, I feel it is my duty to warn the court that I have trained myself to beat a lie detector, and I enter that statement as my testimony before this court."

"What does that mean, Mr. Malone?" Neck asked.

"Your honor, I have answered the question."

Neck stepped back. "I have warned you about perjury,

Mr. Malone. Could you now tell me how long you have known the defendant in this case?"

"I don't know the defendant in this case."

"Then why are you here?"

"I gave my testimony."

I approached the bench and asked for a word with the judge and Neck in chambers. No deal. The questioning continued.

"You deny that you know the defendant?" Neck asked.

"Yes, I deny that."

"But, Mr. Malone, you have given testimony to this court that you believe the defendant's son should be able to live with him. What do you mean, you don't know him?"

"My testimony says I believe that a 14-year-old should be allowed to live with his dad if he wants to, all things equal, as they say. That's what my testimony says."

"Do you realize that you are verging on, if not in contempt of, this court?" Neck asked.

"Sure."

"Sure? What kind of answer is that?"

"I said, sure, I understand about contempt. I answered your question."

I approached the bench and asked for a discussion in chambers, and go it.

Neck and the judge did all the talking. The judge was probably on Valium. Neck pointed an angry finger at

me and said something inane I don't quite remember.

We returned to the testimony, with orders from the judge to, simply, proceed. I even had time to step into the restroom and straighten my tie. Can't remember what the judge said. Neck was irate.

Neck seemed to get hold of himself, and approached Malone again. "About your role here as a character witness, Mr. Malone, is there anything we might know about you that would support your testimony here for the defendant?"

"Not really. And if there are no further questions, I've really go to run, fellows. Your honor?"

The judge got rubbernecked, and finally, after what looked like an aerobic head-exercise routine, said, "If there are no further questions, the witness is excused."

Neck sat down, glaring at me.

Malone smiled at Neck. "Are you sure you have no further questions, because I want to be sure you're satisfied. I'll answer any and every question you have, sir, gladly."

Neck only gazed at Malone, as if breathing were difficult.

The judge seemed a little confused.

The jury sat like a painting.

Malone eased down the side aisle and out the side door, and the court took a recess.

"What in the hell did you think you were doing,

Malone?" I chuckled.

Malone smiled, and stepped into a hallway offset on the first floor. He looked, for a moment there, like some statue of his own making, something that, as impossible as it might sound, would grace the courthouse.

"I had a dream last night, man," he said. "I don't think I'm awake yet. But it went like this. You see, I dreamed I was playing Fender electric bass with James Taylor singing 'Something in the Way She Moves' at Carnegie Hall, when Carly Simon came on stage. When we finished the tune, the Archbishop of New York remarried them on stage, with their daughter standing between them. I just wasn't up for court today. Sorry."

UNITIES

Where the hell, that jungle smell?--those washed-out caliche arroyos, gullies, the mountains where blood spills over cocaine or confusion, where children's limbs get blown off by toys. Just farmers, families, far away while in my face, making me tired for revolution. Talk, talk, talk. Rhetorical excrement sprays horizontally while slow noon rail soaks straight down into ground nobody owns, but which everybody loves and works, for whatever nourishment.

The fatigue of argument, the tedium of tolerance in negotiations for human dignity, this battered language and the weight of evidence that covers and droops flowers with sputum, the promises--mountains and deserts of human excuse--make me, Malone, of all people, tired, plain tired. Negotiation has got to be the blessed mother of profound, creative profanity, another way of discussing the terms of one's own surrender. But hark, a pleasant day.

What a pleasant day in winter--school out, no one around campus. The walk was particularly nice, even interesting with no one around, as that happens so seldom. Could have been Galveston Beach, 1967, just north of the city, high tide. No, not that, not now.

Clear sky stayed blue all the way across and down into the full green trees around the library and between the clean red rowed brick schoolhouses. No breeze, but no breeze worked that day, that time, with clean, cool air for so few in such a big place, so green and blue and brown.

Home will be a good place to rest, to get off the legs that draw so much concern into the knees, like so much whiskey settled there and causing a kind of tendonitis. But it's the bones that rub together that hurts like hell from working on concrete floors with no arch supports in those thin shoes--like fighting battles and thinking that will win a war. Yeah, home will be a good place to rest--home to rest, like the thousands who swim, walk, fly from one party to another, who ram out in homebuilt armored cars--from communism to Eskimo Joe's hamburger and be-seen place, asking about wet T-shirts, looking for action, for home.

Fraternity party platforms stood on the green, racks like the empty set of a daredevil-biker scene, like cookie sheets where people baked or cooled, as they do at tractor pulls and similarly moronic sufferings or celebrations, and as if they witness some kind of metamorphosis. Such places rattle, and are prone to get stomped and collapsed by enthusiastic souls for some reasons we might know and most we never will.

But, an enthusiastic soul there remained, or had just

arrived--a man or a boy there in the distance stood, stomping one leg on a giant platform facing some bleachers. Cleanup crew? No tools, no companions. He posed a question, maybe even an idea.

Lots of questions and new ideas, though, get slammed back on the other side of the great and giant brass brain doors today, this week, nearly and pretty very absolutely often these days. New ideas may wait. Some old ideas must get well and be strong, recover, get smart and defend themselves in this short-blade knife fight with the genitalia criticism, and the re- and the pre-construction theorists--schools of gab that never read the screed, even criticize it before it's written--all in the holy democratization of disassociated fantasy, as if it's a human right--offering, so deceptively, only <u>new vocabulary</u>. Fundamentally, it usually turns out opponents are not even arguing about the same thing--the same action that causes dictators to get head-shot--assassinated, as they say--and pregnancy.

That fellow/man-boy swayed and rocked on the platform, the democratic platform in the center of the large wooden stage under that large blue democratic sky. He held something to his face with his right hand, what he, presumably, believed to be a microphone. He was singing. He sang and swooned there alone on the stage, no accompaniment, no apparent melody either, a singer without a band.

As he droned, another drone came, that of a small airplane approaching from the south, single-engine--and it towed a sailplane or a glider. As they banked away from campus, the cable came loose and it climbed, the one without an engine, the plane without an engine.

The walking stopped, and there came a good gaze around a campus with no people--just the singer without a band--and up, at the plane without an engine. And as that situation came clearer, there was a drone in the near distance--an outdoor pay telephone rang, and rang again, several times, no one to answer.

An exhaust vent blew suddenly, nearby--a ground-grate heaving air from the empty library, the locked library--hot air, to accompany the singer and the distant drone of the single-engine plane, and the telephone. On down the way in the same direction as the plane without an engine--then, while stopping and looking up at it from the crosswalk--the plane without an engine went silently out of sight, the vent quit, and the singer without a band held the pay telephone in his microphone hand, apparently listening, talking. This place, then, probably, was not the place to be, nor was any other so readily suitable except, perhaps, the clouds. Now, there was a place to be on a day like that, the clouds, just above the pole without a flag. How many times those salutes dropped briskly to that flag so that singers do not need bands, need not show proof of band--so that there are no

questions such as, Do you now, or have you ever before, had a band?

The man-boy returned to stage, bowed, resumed his act in the distance. Turning away from the singer without a band, and walking, shuffling between buildings again, there was found nearly absolute silence. It felt right to be alone in order to avoid loneliness. The distractions on the mall made for loneliness, yes. The sun came warm, while lighting a time and place for being left alone like a wrong number, out of wind, off the hook, without people, without a band, engine, books, ideas, answers, tolerance, even profanity.

The plodding roar of a crowd, though, approached from the rear--people came, some kind of people, running. Quickly, they passed on the wide trail, leaving only time to see them from the rear--10 wonderful, gasping blond co-eds in jogging gear and pony tails, all pony tails--jogging down the path and around the way, gone.

Fatigue persisted, increased in intensity as the prospect of home grew stronger. The intensity also mounted--conflicting ideas, the nearness of death, the precariousness of this human race, dreams of escape, hope, passion--feeling like Woody Allen, then Dudley Moore, or Jimmy Carter, then, like Aristotle figuring unities, and then like someone-or-another self. It worked, being alone in time, place, and action with Woody, Dudley, Jimmy and Itso. Action is considered the most important element,

but time is especially needed. The place was too much. Something was then discovered, something about audience, maybe plot, structure. But something was missing . . . unity.

Up the sidewalk and in through the big door, and onto the sunlit daybed against the high bare windows, the wrap went down, sleep seemed possible, imminent--about to feel like Hemingway trying to die on his mother's back porch, or Henry James, who <u>did</u>, on his own, with his transcriptress banging on the Remington. More than sleep, the idea of nothing meant more--nothing on the mind, nothing--just sleep, rest, imitation death, imitation departure, a fall, no thoughts at all. The old daybed thus helped make all that grief and fatigue much closer, more focused. Sleep came while the ceiling hovered, that tall ceiling, and while neatly dressed--shoes and hat--knowing revolution would continue, and knowing, too, it could end, and while listening to a singer without a band, and counting blonds.

After all, folks are doing the best they can, even the means ones. And sure enough, they'll have what they want, even by not doing anything until they have to. And, the knees get well with rest, more unified at the joint, right in there where the bones rub together. A 15-minute nap once in a while doesn't hurt, either. The revolution will always be there. It's a work-job, but worth the effort, because the price of eternal vigilance is always

liberty, especially so far away from the front lines.

A WALK IN THE PARK

Old Man Weather took notes. Too cold to leave the cottage for long--minus four, free-air. Barometric pressure four-tenths from the top of the brass scale. Gusty winds blew crusty chunks of snow from trees and tiles. Two lamps against the engine block of a V-8 two-door in the driveway, nosed down between buildings, crippled. Plenty of powdered milk and oatmeal in the cabinets, and some sugar cookies for the little boys, and some vodka for Papa for no reason at all, and some soda water for Mom, and some smoked oysters for later. Clean roof gutters awaited the thaw, standing open like grails ready for the sterilizing acid snow. At the shadows' edges far out near the back fence, the ghosts of Amundsen and Scott embraced, exhausted, doing what they had to do. Not even the radio gave, not even short wave.

Elements waited, held patient with a kinetic quietness needed to make the week, as sun might return chaos to its course like some petulant Chinese warlord who'd just heard analects of Confucius for the first time. And the wind would lay so bugs could move again. A mail truck banged along the curbs near crystallized trashcans --a curious little government wagon hauling post to a

quartering tailwind that shifted the load in such a light rear end. Like a snow rabbit, the blond-pink service doe sprung her rubber-bound packet open on the porch and dropped a large envelope in the box just beyond arm's reach from an open door--a letter.

Retrieved through foggy glass and empty juice bottles at the doormat, the letter touched down in the kitchen, with children's things on the counter there--diapers, and cereal, and small plastic graduated medicine beakers that gauge breath from one moment to the next. Slow motion played well amid loose shoes and bread twisties, rubber nipples and Mom's earrings. With a simple rip at the stamped end, it opened--from cousin Lucy, who'd just been able to tell her world she'd been left, lo, for three months. He left a note, and nobody heard a thing from him--solid gone, and after 15 years.

The children wanted to know about Lucy, but about what? What to say to those little boys about that? Anything, everything, to say there makes traps, even prison of language, where rehabilitation is impossible. Aunt Lucy was just alone, beyond words, beyond the range of that frozen coupe in the driveway, beyond the warm carpets of a cottage where her welcome stood, but out of reach. The handwriting seemed too good, too determined. What to do, call? Say what?

A call came--Bud, to announce he'd moved off campus with another 19-year-old part-timer. What fun. Half an

hour, collect, to extol the graces of a BA in any liberal art. The familiar words went out over frozen lines along borrow-ditches to Southland so sunny the vision had blurred--the eyes, the prize. Plans get made, but too far away to develop when supervision blows away like flakes of frozen hope, bearing only abandoned volition. Promises prevail long enough to make indigestion probable with the next taste of whatever, the manna missing, the milk and honey in foil packets suitable for microwave. Extended family, indeed. Easy does it on the vodka, though. A couple is all right.

Role model? Papa? The little boys fought with their new dog--some hope coming through, some genes making pattern, giving life, death, some dignity--even celebrating some injuries. The little one--just starting to talk--strapped a pillow on his back and said parachute as he back-handed the chow square-away in the mouth. The bigger one climbed on the lavatory, balanced delicately, hanging Christmas ornaments in the toothbrush rack, delighted.

Lucy and Bud got themselves strung out like ornaments waiting for the Second Coming--not to settle for one Epiphany, not knowing any grace but the stuff in perfume ads. The smell will tell, or is it the new furniture, or the Trans-Ams? Maybe something happens with the tennis shoes that inflate at the ankles to keep the brains from settling. Time for a drive on Cynic Loop, but the two-

door was frozen. Lucy and Bud frozen at the wheel could be enough this week. It would get sat out like a long thaw about to puddle. Family news made like that bitter-cold weather--enough oxygen, just hard to get a breath. Had to make like chickens with those beaks under wings, breathing feather-warmed air. Something to noses-to-rumps in the snow, cooperatively surviving.

Ski masks hid the little boys' faces as they pulled air into their small lungs--air warmed by 100-percent Dacron. They only played with the masks, but looked too much like British Special Services as they made the doorways of the cottage. But they lived in some peace on their part of Earth, with some goodwill to some--innocent, ignorant, blessed little children who would go their ways, and would be out there in dry air, with no degrees, if left alone. And maybe they could breathe, after all.

Sundown came early, supper late. Time for a walk--a couple of belts and a walk. A couple is all right. So, Papa went to the streets for a while, away from Lucy's letter, Bud's call, the boys and their quiet Mom. A white moon lit housetops blue, giving concrete and asphalt the same attention. In that light, so may trees look right as places to sleep. But, no. Most are best for Easter Fires. From different angles, it's learned there are only a few trees suitable as places to sleep--those places too high for an adversary's jump but low enough for a clumsy fall--and suitable places to die right, alone.

Such a tree heard Papa's whole story--about how much he loved Lucy and Bud and the boys and their Mom--a tree in the park only blocks away in the white night on a frozen grass carpet. It had no leaves for an audible answer, just stood in its genetic splendor, the only response. It towered, incapable of its own defense or participation, or any overt recognition of that pacing and stumbling by the instinctual critter under its arms, that mumbling in languages so pitifully concocted as to only approach sense, making little. The language rang insignificant like the message. So Lucy was alone and Bud adrift, and the boys in need of a better role model, and their Mom more attention. It did not seem to affect the tree. Despite the analysis and appraisal, things remained in order, intact, on course. The tree seemed not surprised to hear about Lucy and the rest--seemed to care, but only as a resonator, some kind of complicated encoder, of Papa's intuition--and about the visit. That tree was a place to be, but the instinct pointed Papa home, while his intuition limited further questions. Somehow embarrassed, he put on his sunglasses and trudged back.

On touching the cold aluminum doorhandle, he felt deathly alone, knew his family was alone, like Lucy and Bud, like the tree, the planet--dealing with the chemistry of existence, a scheme on the roll. What to do, how to do, why to do, seemed like important moot questions in an important moot drama. What, how, and why <u>would</u> <u>be</u> history

in just a moment, every moment, each awful small moment.

The little one had just come off the pot, and stood helpless, hands against the wall, legs spread, calling to be wiped. Still bundled against the cold, Papa acknowledged, and lumbered into the warm bathroom, towering over the little fella whose pants certainly were down. Without a word, Papa handed the boy a roll of tissue, smiled and stepped back into the hall darkness to observe. With natural ease, the boy knew what to do and did it solo, and for the first time, with little difficulty, his own way.

Mom said "Hi," moving into the hallway like a silhouette of Cleopatra, Desdemona, Joan by-god d'Arc, or just herself, mother superior. She'd made more cookies. Papa felt better, and told her so. She did, too, and said so. The barometer had fallen to slightly above normal. Someone went to a lot of trouble to build that cottage right against the cold, and it stood, appreciated. Papa would scratch letters to both Lucy and Bud sometime that night. Then, he and Mom would slide smoked oysters onto a cookie tray, jab them each with a toothpick and, knowing what and how to do after that, watch for sunup while the boys bundled into a new year, altogether killing some more time. They would talk of taking the coupe out to Yosemite in the spring, where they and the boys would camp out with the stars and mellow air in some rugged rift cut by mindless ice awhile ago.

NO HELP

Malone climbed the dirty outside stairs toward late-morning sunlight on the worn wooden porch of Bert's place, a sanctuary-like spot that suited Bert's kind of soul, remotely at the center of things, far above ground, temporary, expendable, functional. Malone felt a dangerous mixture of vulgarity, ignorance, and holiness, translated into too much trust in one's fellow man. This encounter, Malone knew, was like a few pages of testimony buried in some district court basement, given under duress.

Bert's living in such a ghetto rathole showed Malone a kind of scary faith Bert played with, the kind, Malone knew, can get a nice ex-minister and social worker killed. What the hell Bert was up to this time, Malone couldn't exactly figure. Had to be some more of what Malone regarded as sacrificial, stuff that made Bert happy and Malone more than a little nervous.

Bert always went it on his own, a person Malone found hard to help. Even before Bert was <u>called</u>, and even before his beautiful Lebanese wife and their two precious daughters, Malone knew Bert as an element of some leading edge, independent and not just a little headstrong. Bert

always had a nose for what Malone knew as progressive social reform and idealistic sorts of holiness that led him in and out of ten years in the ministry, the way Malone watched him go in and out of school, finally with honors. He resigned as pastor of a nice little congregation when he got steady flack about some selections in his church library. Malone wanted to forget that, though, since it ended up costing him a house trailer, a broken hand, and a few other things, helping Bert. And Bert took off for a degree in social work, commuted home weekends from his flop-house apartment near the university.

As Malone expected, Bert's door stood open. They hugged, lifetime friends. Bert's long arms and fine, athletic frame always amazed Malone, who never knew Bert to be in anything but Olympic shape, what Malone knew as a power that carried Bert to the old Fourth Army heavyweight boxing championship, and in and out of pulpits. His fine features, that straight nose, never touched. Always said he knocked them out in the first few seconds in order to keep them from suffering. Bert's graciousness and gentle nature always got Malone's respect, what made Bert known as a <u>wonderful person</u>.

"Brought some fine old Irish, Bert, something you always like to pour over a little ice cream, eh?"

"I'll be right back, Malone. Going to get some good vanilla down at the corner."

When Bert left, Malone felt like closing the windows, did close the door and turn the bolt as Bert descended the stairs. High humidity in a ratty university neighborhood always made Malone uneasy--too many bicycles, not enough money, dingy wash hanging forever damp. Nothing wrong with the student life, Malone knew, like he understood it as a neighborhood cops knew better than cabbies did. And crazies, and people who used to be somebody, or somebody else, or wanted to be somebody else, Malone knew, too. Bert asked for it, wanted to help these people and their better-off clones and counterparts in the suburbs. But Malone couldn't see that crazy was all right, the way Bert handled it. Malone figured crazy meant something in need of rapid repair, not quite so much support and patience. Malone also knew he was wrong about that, just hadn't figured why. He admitted to rarely getting past the mess-with-my-life-and-I'll-do-you school of social counseling that worked so well for so long, the school of universal understanding and deep personal commitment.

The monastery like apartment stood sparse, orderly, near spotless, like Bert always lived, as a place Malone knew had purpose, sacrifice, dignity, faith, and dry wooden floors. The clean white pallet-bed sprawled neatly under screened windows opening to a roof spotted with empty wine bottle and syringes.

Too much time passed, way too much for Bert to just get ice cream.

The porch shook as Malone watched Bert come up the stairs, a torn paper bag with ice cream in one hand, his other hand over his face. An extraordinary amount of blood stained Bert's shirt, trousers, and tennis shoes. Malone held the door, silently. Bert put the ice cream in the freezer, and leaned into the sink.

"Broke my nose, Malone."

"How? What the hell happened?"

"I'll be all right."

"Sure you will, Bert. Let's see."

"It's just my nose." Bert held a cold towel on his face while he eased onto the pallet, silent.

Malone took a seat at the breakfast table, facing him. "When you get the bleeding stopped, I want to know what the hell happened."

"I'm all right. It's the other guy. I might have killed him, I hit him so hard. Before I knew it, I hit him up side the head with a right hook. He went down fast and didn't move."

"What the hell happened?"

"He came at me with about a nine-inch French kitchen knife--a cook or somebody from the restaurant down the alley. A couple of them watched from inside, all wrecked on speed or something, but like mixed with horse tranquilizer. The guy wasn't too swift--knocked me into the fence. Broke my nose. He stabbed at me with that knife three times--actually tried to cut me up. I kept

telling him to stop it. I was no help to that man."

"Oh? You helped him by not letting him kill you--saved him from life without parole, or worse."

"There must be other ways to help people like that, though, Malone."

"I'm sure you're right, Bert. And, do they know where you are, know you live up here?"

"Sure, I see them all the time. They stay wrecked. I've never spoken with them, but they know I live up here."

"That's not so good, Bert, not so good at all."

Two policemen spoke through the screen, asking if either man knew what happened in the alley. About all the blood, Bert told them he ran into the bathroom door. They smiled, and as they walked away one calmly suggested dynamite works better. Malone followed them downstairs and got a badge number and name, and the police dispatcher's telephone number.

"How bad is that guy in the alley?" Malone asked.

"Ambulance just hauled him off. Looked pretty bad. You want to call later, we'll know something. We're going to the hospital now. Could be some serious criminal charges if that guy talks, or if he dies."

Malone found Bert looking into the bathroom mirror, took a seat at the table and watched him. About half the Irish was gone. With no warning, Bert swirled around, his head down, both hands on his face as he let out a long

scream. His knees hit the door and he went to his elbows. Malone bolted to help Bert roll over on his back.

"Jesus, Bert. Now what?"

"Just set my nose."

"You could kill yourself like that. You don't need to be setting your own nose. For heaven's sake, who do you think you are? Can't you let anybody help you?"

Bert giggled, eased to his feet. "It feels better. I'm a lucky man, yes, blessed in so many ways."

"No, you're an ignorant sonofabitch, Bert."

Bert wouldn't let Malone help him to the table. They had ice cream and Irish, and Bert went to sleep in clean white clothes on the pallet. Malone locked the apartment and went to a pay telephone, called the station and waited.

Cop said, "They put 60 stitches in the guy's head--split open from his chin to the part in his hair. They're letting him out, but he wouldn't talk. No charges, yet."

Malone finished the Irish while Bert slept. A Black Madonna icon, the only wall-art, watched, glowed, reflected, responded to Malone's hope she would negotiate for the souls of those travellers. Malone sipped, Bert wheezed as the sun got low.

"Come on, Malone, I'll buy us some good soup. Let me get straightened out here, and I'll be ready to go."

"Fine, Bert. You get ready, and I'll take a little walk. Be back in a few minutes. I'll just get a little

air."

Down the alley, quiet, like the peace and faith of Bert's world, floating across street filth, Malone carried something of his friend's abstractions toward the greasy screen doors. He tried to put himself in Bert's shoes, understand how it must feel to help, really help people. He knocked, and a young man responded from the kitchen.

"May I talk with the fellow who was hurt earlier today?"

"That's me." A tall young man stepped into the alley, a huge white bandage nearly covering his head and face.

"I'm just a visitor here, but I was concerned to see you taken away in the ambulance. You going to be all right?"

"Yeah, man, and so what's it to you?"

Malone smoothly popped the .45 slide, and pressed the barrel tip to dark freckled skin between the cook's eyes.

"My name is Quintilian Xavier Malone, and I'm a close personal friend of the guy who <u>did</u> you this afternoon. He lives right upstairs there, you know?"

The young man's head slid slowly down the wall as he peed in his pants and went to his knees. "I'm a Christian, mister. I'm a Christian. Please, mister."

Malone kept the barrel pressed between his eyes. "Anything happens to my friend, any little accident, any little problem, I'll <u>return</u>. You're responsible for that

man's happiness, now, you see? Any little thing happens to him, and . . . . And I want you to understand exactly what I'm saying, before it happens, so, you got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Super. So now your life has some purpose, doesn't it."

"Yes, sir."

Upstairs, Bert was ready for soup, looking like a missionary, and with only a little swelling. He always told Malone he never wanted any help, just wanted to spend the wholeness of his life doing for others in that holy way of his, taking care of his fellow man with the kindness, understanding, and patience Malone so sincerely admired.

DIAGNOSES

The vocabulary was so rich, so extraordinary, I even began to take a few notes. Such conversations are rare in my experience, and the air was full of what seemed like wisdom, or at least the fallout of some unusual minds. Perhaps it was May at the river, or something in the watermelon. Riverbottoms have a way, it seems, of evoking something profound, and those echoes along the banks of the old Sabinal seemed profound, even original, and maybe even true, and just maybe interesting. Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of the powwow was that everyone seemed to make sense.

I can't recall how the conversation started, or if there was a direction in it, or whether it was an argument or only random observations. It was just a gathering of friends at the river, with children, potato salad, and the rest. And, there was not a singular beverage going around, so that what I'm talking about here, the brilliance, was not coming out of any particular kind of bottle.

The talk got so intense voices were raised in order to overcome the noise of all those children left to the vast grassy slopes where they played, rolled, romped, and

wrestled.

Malone said it, life, is a gift, a simple gift. We didn't ask for it, and we owe nothing in return for it, since nothing is expected in return because it's a gift.

The physician said life is a matter of ignorance, a series of mistakes based on little information, no ultimately discernable process, and on models and theories we only think we understand. He said it's a randomly driven time-space phenomenon to which we may only react, seldom anticipate with any degree of real accuracy. Something like that.

But the social worker said life is a matter of confusion, and if we concentrate on our thoughts and feelings we'll discover some cause and effect, some relativity in the process, and be able to construct a version of reality with which we can live fairly comfortably. Sounded pretty jerky to me.

The journalist-type--or was he an aspiring politician--made some case for fragility, how life is a matter of singular personal isolation, and something about the importance of self-respect. He muttered about conscience, and human volition, and other individualistic kinds of things. Whatever.

But, the seminarian, of course, spoke of anxiety, and how some kind of grand acceptance is the secret to understanding life and to beating the intimidation we seem to naturally feel about the universe. He stressed

intimidation a lot.

There was one other, the writer from Chicago, who talked about culture and how it shaped our lives. Or was it the other way around? Culture this, culture that.

Malone rolled his head at the breaks, repeating that life is only a gift, and that we do nothing to deserve it, and can only appreciate it however we can, or something like that.

The discussion, while seeming pretty quasi-intellectual at first, was not strained, and took on progressively more characteristics of a genuine gathering of minds. The confidence and clarity of those voices rose to meet the power of any I ever heard.

I won't try to reconstruct the arguments, but I can report they all seemed to have some unusual ring of truth. And, I was sober. It may have been the barometric pressure, or, as I said, the watermelon. Yes, I believe they all ate some of the same watermelon.

They seemed, as a group, simply immune to falsehood or confusion. Bright people. Bright, beautiful people, except for Malone. Well, he's not exactly ugly, either. But, Malone was surrounded with people who, during those moments at the river, seemed to be fairly transcendental compared to the earthy, casual, rather simplistic Malone with his life-is-a-gift line. While probably not the most beautiful person in the group, Malone was neither probably the brightest. But the contrast made for a kind of action

and reaction in the conversation that moved toward some high awareness, if not what seemed to be plausible answers, and the like.

Some kind of commotion up the riverbank drew attention, silenced the conversation. A crowd stood, gathered in the distance around a youngster on the ground.

The physician said, "Oh, no," and started a steady jog toward what looked like, indeed, an accident of some kind. The others followed slowly, Malone trailing, carrying his folding lawn chair and drink.

"Get an ambulance," the physician ordered. "This looks like a broken neck, for sure. Probably more than a head injury, so nothing to drink for him now, no. Do not touch him. Do not move him. Everyone please stand far back, and I mean far back. Tommy, don't you dare move, young man. We'll take good care of you. You just lie there and relax, and don't move a muscle. Just take it easy."

What had been a group of intense, brilliant conversationalists in matters of life, were now no more than so many petrified onlookers as the boy, Tommy, lay helpless on his back, looking straight up into a clear evening sky.

The chaos ensued. The mother was comforted, the other youngsters questioned, the food taken in, with the pacing, the waiting for the ambulance. Malone sat at a distance, in his folding chair, with his drink, cap low,

legs extended. After a while, he rose, circled his chair a few times, finished off the drink, placed the glass on the ground, and headed for the scene of the accident, Tommy.

Malone went to his knees about five yards from Tommy. He went down on his elbows, and stretched out on his belly, crawled slowly toward Tommy. Nobody said a word.

Malone whispered. "Don't move, Tommy. It's O.K., it's Mr. Malone crawling up beside you, guy. We can just talk a little bit if you want to."

The boy was silent. The physician was among the several people watching, the closest, the most tense.

Malone's chin was on the ground not a foot from Tommy's face. "So, you might be a little hurt, here, eh, Tommy? Hey, guy, that happens sometimes. But you've got yourself together, pal, and, hey, you're in one piece and doing fine. Does your neck hurt?"

"Yes," Tommy replied, quietly.

"Well, at least you can feel it, now, can't you."

"Yes."

"How about this skinned-up arm. It hurt?"

"Yeah, it stings."

"O.K., pal, we'll put something on it in a little while, something to cool it off."

The boy lay perfectly still, barely moving his lips when he spoke.

"O.K., Tommy, how about we work together a little

bit, here. How about you just tilt your head a little, if you want to, and look over here toward me."

The youngster tilted his head ever so slightly to the left.

"How about you look over there at the doc, now."

Tommy barely turned his head to the right, and looked up at the doctor.

"Now, pal, you want to look up at the top of those trees behind you?"

The kid did, barely.

Malone put his open hand above Tommy's chest. "You see my hand, here, over your chest?"

They boy's head moved down only slightly as he looked at Malone's hand. "Sure."

The ambulance backed up to within two feet of the boy's head.

Malone didn't move. "Would you ask them to turn off that damned engine. The exhaust fumes are a little strong."

Ambulance attendants, the doctor, Malone and the boy on the ground, a mob standing around, and a cool breeze made for what seemed to be an impossible mess out of which the boy could never be removed.

Malone spoke. "Tommy, you want to stand up, now, and let me help you into the ambulance, so you can take a little ride with your mother down to the hospital, so they can take some pictures of you?"

Tommy slowly rolled over on his side, toward Malone, as Malone scooted away while helping the boy to his knees. They stood together and walked to the ambulance where the boy's mother put her arm around the youngster and helped him work his way into a seat at the back.

Malone looked at the ground as the ambulance crept away. "His neck is not broken."

Malone turned to the other youngsters. "You knuckleheads better believe Tommy was lucky, huh? Now, see, you've go to watch out about fooling around. You've got to watch the hell out where you're going, now, don't you. You kids are fine. Just take it easy, now, all right. You're O.K. Tommy is O.K."

Malone turned to me. "It's about time we get ready to go set out those trotlines. Who knows, we might get lucky. We might pull up some stuff we've never seen before--something with which we might not know what to do."

A MEDAL

So far, all right. It's a nice gathering. Good party. Nice people. Everything is just fine. No alcohol for me. I, Malone, am strange enough sober. Drunk, Malone scares mothers, wives, colleagues, strangers, even friends. Who else? Anybody. The signs were elusive, which is what made them signs, not banners. The effects were subtle. No response to dinner invitations. Nothing private. There always had to be a crowd before those fearful ones would come near.

Or was this just the imagination. Had paranoia settled into the deepest cracks in the being, or did we have a pisser here, a rancorous, ill-tempered, ill-natured, impatient, irreverent son of a bitch with an attitude? Was it incorrigibility? Now, that sounds better, to be incorrigible. But against what? The list of what's been screwed away was no longer or weightier than the usual, probably. But what does that mean? Nothing. It depends, right?

So, when in doubt, do nothing. Let it go. Was this morality, or some sort of misdirected sense of justice? The list of transgressions was long. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?

It would be a rough sentence.

No problem. No problem. Just relax and do not be too critical of the fellow woman, man, plan. The living ones are easier to deal with than the dead ones. The sense of history is the sense of justice, a sense of revenge, a sense of learning from mistakes? Bullshit. But, let it go.

Never could wear a necktie. Always looked like a disappointed light-heavyweight contender. Boot heels always wore more on the outsides. I.Q. made Alan Sheppard look like a monkey. Identity crisis? Maybe. Incorrigible? Probably. A mother pulled her children back into their bedroom play area. It was only a trip to the bathroom. No one would be hurt. Clear the hall, Malone is coming. Oh, no.

Just a glance at the dog and it stopped barking. Just a glance at the children and they stopped running in the house. Just a glance, nothing heavy, no glare, no tension, no malice.

A nice lady in the kitchen set the coffee cup down on the counter instead of offering it hand-to-hand. Nice-looking fellows in madras ducked their heads on the pass-by. Was there a reputation that preceded the presence? No, couldn't be. Was there something stuck to the upper lip, in the hair, on the collar, about the nose?

It was no great omen to slip down on a bathmat in the shower. No great omen it was for Maalox to cause

indigestion. No sign of anything unusual that being able to back up a loaded 12-foot trailer into a slip sized for a Volkswagen was no big problem. Being able to go all the way down on either leg and back up, blindfolded, without losing the balance constituted nothing unusual for a cream-of-the-crop, last-test-before-going-overseas extremely aggressive W.W. II fighter pilot. Any meanness seemed to be only part of the inner-ear mechanism. Hearing things could get it going. Seeing things was a little different, depending on the shape, direction, and speed, especially those parabolas.

Never could play those parlor games with the pieces missing. Or the erector sets with pieces missing, no chance. Dominos caused great distress. Pinochle or the like, with cards, absolutely out of the realm of possible activities.

Exclusions generated exclusions. Acceptance of the whole was O.K., but not all the parts. Maladjustment could be the name for this. Neurosis, at least. Was this stuff of contention the stuff of art? Must be. Not the beautiful stuff? Not the melodic, typical, senseless, boring, trite, vague, false, evasive, cynical stuff? May we say it like it is, or at least the way it would appear to be, without corrigibility? May we be incorrigible? Probably not, and have any friends. Friends? Oh, yeah.

"Ja, gut." The blond guy took a drink and a dip in the onion stuff.

"Oh, certainly," he said so sincerely, "I was in the German army when I was only 16. I was recruited into the Waffen SS as only a child. Certainly. Oh, and the Waffen Schutzstaffel was the infantry branch, not the concentration camp service."

"Did you see any action?"

"Very little, in terms of time. I had only been in six months then I was captured at Normandy during the invasion."

"How did that happen."

"Oh, it was very simple. We were just overrun by some very mean guys in green tanks with white stars, and all their friends with rifles coming behind."

"Normandy."

"Oh, certainly."

"How did you get to this country?"

"I escaped from a P.O.W. train when the French were sending us back to Austria. I had the SS tattooed serial number removed from under my upper left arm with a butcher knife in a barn somewhere in Southern France by a sympathizer, a tattoo man."

"And how did you get to this country."

"Oh, I hopped a boat to South America, and later worked my way up to the States."

"That's been about 40 years?"

"Oh, certainly. And I have never been back to Deutschland."

Visions of Uncle Charlie as Normandy Beach fertilizer moved with visions of his daughters, the fair-haired wavy ones given graduate educations by the government, moved with visions of mean guys in green tanks with white stars and a 16-year-old Nazi with his hands over his head. I could hear the crackling of magnificent 8-mm Mauser rifles as the Sherman tanks rolled over them, butts in the street and barrels on the curb, for miles and miles along the byways of the Third Reich, Patton's message.

The German people are beautiful people, the war history. Mozart, Bach, Wagner, and the others, may still be heard even in Paris or Dachau, no matter who is listening, having dinner in full SS uniform with his children and beautiful wife, resting up for another day's executions, no matter who is listening.

Good judgment still prevailed. No alcohol. There should be a Medal of Honor for that feat. There should be a Medal of Honor for the recognition of banality. No action should be required. Nothing can stop banality. It is probably the most powerful force on earth, the most powerful narcotic, big mistake. But those mean guys in green tanks with white stars, it is said, were not sober. It is said nobody was sober at Normandy. It is said. It was heard.

Whoa. Get out of here. Go to the kitchen, the back porch, the driveway, the street. Get out of here, now.

"Excuse me."

"Oh, certainly."

Let us be beautiful. Let's see, the muses, all nine. And, the stages of Greek architecture, what, doric, and the rest. Let's see. Certain elegance in mathematics is always a clean idea. The elegance in two and two make four is enough to calm the soul, oh, certainly. But, the idea of balance was probably the most important idea at that moment, in that driveway, in that street outside the peaceful gathering. Balance was important, yes, oh, certainly.

The grasp of history slipped, with images rushing and fading. The need to throw something pressed hard on the psyche. The need for balance pressed hard. Through the back door, balanced, calm, to the enclosed porch with washer and dryer. A laundry room was the perfect place to wait for history to go away, the shelf a perfect place to set the little coffee cup. But where the little coffee cup looked welcome, there was an unsheathed genuine U.S. Marine Corps combat knife lying slightly dusty by the canned goods. Now, there is balance in that blade. Seemed like two feet long and maybe 14 pounds.

The blond guy walked in with his drink, head back. He went to the window, elegantly set his drink on a stand, pulled one side of his fine jacket back slightly, peered out the window. "Seems to be a beautiful night."

The knife took one turn and lodged straight and hard into the blond pine wall at his throat.

"Excellent," he said.

"I ought to get a medal."

"Oh, certainly."

A strong arm reached gently around the loveable old stormtrooper's waist, and the party was rejoined.

JULIE, PASSING

Julie died of pneumonia at age 68, peacefully, alone, in her sleep, in her salon-like apartment surrounded by mementos of her acting and singing career. She died the way she lived, with what is often called style.

It was common knowledge Malone was always her favorite. They went back more than 30 years. They were even called an item. Malone dreadfully called their relationship something like two ships that passed in the night. Julie apparently saw it differently. She dropped anchor, if that's the corny analogy, and Malone set sail. Something like that, because the cornier it sounds, the more accurate it probably is. They were Bogie and Bacall, Tracy and Kat, the others, and more.

Surprising to me, her will named me executor of her estate. The instructions were simple, and she was cremated. Single with no children, she left practically everything to the Little Theatre, for them to do with what they wanted, which probably meant an auction that could finance their operations for a good ten years.

Give this to Malone was written on a card stuck in a cassette tape in her desk drawer. I delivered the tape to Malone, and we listened to it in the shade of his workshop

porch.

It was from her telephone-answering machine, from years ago, a call from Malone. It started with, "This is Malone," and a long pause, and continued.

"I'm down at Red Fish Bay, and I don't know for how long, or where I'll go from here. I need to apologize for a few things, and that's why I've called.

"I'm sorry I wrecked your car.

"I'm sorry I gave you athlete's foot.

"I'm sorry I didn't give you more flowers.

"Those bullet holes in your bathroom ceiling won't cause any trouble. There's enough insulation in the attic to sort of seal the holes against the air, or whatever. They didn't go out the roof. But, I'm sorry about that. I should have taped over them, or rubbed some soap in them to cover them up. But anyway.

"I believe your 12-string can be fixed. It's just the neck.

"But, I really wish you would get rid of all those little things in the high windows, those little things everywhere, little, what, nicknacks, whatever the hell you call them, little things. They really make me pretty crazy. I wish you would get rid of them.

"And if you don't stop putting pesticides on your dog you're going to kill the damned thing. Those things you spray and shake on that damned dog are toxic like hell. They're made for the soil, not his canine ass. You're

going to kill that dog.

"Well, anyway, I'm sorry I didn't get you more flowers.

"But, hey, there is no way we're ever going to get along. You tell me to go on out back and type on my little typewriter and write my little stories. Hey. Either you're awfully mean or you're awfully unaware of what's going on, what I'm trying to do.

"Sometimes you really irritate the hell out of me.

"And how did you ever get to be such a business expert? You may have missed your calling.

"Too bad you can't talk back to me on this tape, huh? Well, I didn't call to ream you out, I just called to apologize for a few things I probably ought to apologize for, huh? Sorry I shoved you in the Gulf that night. I didn't know the tide was out.

"I'm doing most of the talking here, I suppose. Not that you're not a good conversationalist. Right. For someone who does not listen, you're great. But, I don't mean to be nasty. I'm not trying to start anything.

"It's just that I can't work at your place. And if I can't work, I'm dead. It's not exactly that your place is the problem, it's that the place is not arranged, set up, and the like, for work. It's made for observation, like a box seat. And if you don't get rid of those throw-rugs or rough up that floor, you're in for a liability suit like you can't imagine the first time somebody falls down for

real. And the same thing goes for those stupid cloth folding chairs.

"The reason I called, I guess, is because I love you. But, you're too damned perfect. You're not a bit ugly. You're not a bit obsessive or compulsive, vindictive, belligerent, impatient, or the like. Just too damned perfect. Only, I'm out here on the rough edge, and I'm not sure I really need your company. And don't drink champagne. It makes you stupid. Stay with Russian vodka and just be drunk.

"And, you've got too much furniture in your bedroom.

"You've already told me what to do about myself, I know. And I remember all of it. Some of it was good, and some of it will never, ever occur. Like, how am I supposed to grow hair when I'm bald-headed? I know a little hair on top looks good, but I ain't got any. That's pretty simple. And how am I supposed to have a grand life insurance policy when I can't afford one?

"And, no, I do not lose weight in the winter.

"I'm sorry I didn't apologize more about these things, and the rest. But I know I'm in trouble when I have to apologize a lot, or talk a lot like this."

The tape ended.

We took a break. Malone walked down by the pond in his big hat, with his big drink.

"What the hell am I supposed to do?" Malone asked, nearly in tears.

"Hey, buddy, shake it off. I've got just the answer for you. You were in the will."

"Oh, boy. What now?"

I stacked the manuscripts on the table. "A novella, 30 poems, and six one-act plays. And that's just a small part of the literary properties, unpublished, that Julie left for you to edit before it is submitted for publication."

"You've got to be kidding."

"No, she wanted you to edit this before it goes out, and only you. There's no money in it for you. She must have really loved you, huh?"

"Why me? You mean she wrote all this stuff?"

"Sure did."

"I never said she was dumb."

"When you screw up, Malone, you really screw up. I've looked through this stuff, and I guarantee you, it's first rate. Something missing, son, in your character-judgement functions, there. Something sure missing. The most beautiful woman on earth, and probably wrote you under the table, and you got to go quibble with her about her nicknacks? If she never called you a fool, then I will. It's not often a man like you finds an older woman like that, and especially with the kind of money she inherited.

"And another thing," I continued. "While you were messing around with your rocks and clay, Julie went off to

St. Louis and got a doctorate in literature. She never used the PhD in any context but the most formal academic settings. She never taught. She just came back south and resumed her Little Theatre career as if she'd been away at a sanitorium for a while, or something. I never heard about it, and if I didn't, I figure damned few, if any, ever heard about her academic pursuits."

Malone stood silent for a long while. "But her car has been in that same driveway for more than 30 years."

"That's not where the mileage occurred."

"Well, I'll be damned."

"Sorry you dumped her, now, buddy?"

"Hardly. You ever hung out around those graduate schools?"

"Well, you might want to notice the dedication in this collection, the novella, the poems, and the plays, as she suggests they be printed, all in one volume."

Malone read aloud. "<u>This work is dedicated to Quintilian Xavier Malone, who taught me how to get the job done</u>."

Malone wiped his eyes. "Just hang out for a while here. I'll be back in a minute and we can have some lunch."

He returned in a bit with a funny looking palm-sized rock and some hand tools. As we ate, he messed with the rock, pushing on it from one angle and another with one tool and another, gouging and carving.

After he put the dishes in the sink, he picked up the manuscripts and carefully set them in his study. He handed me the rock.

"Where is she buried?" he asked.

"Her ashes are in a niche in the wall at Sunset."

"Put that rock in the niche, will you?"

"What the hell is it, Malone?"

"A butterfly, man, what do you think?"

AN EMPTY SEAT

Steve Jackson was supposed to be doing pretty well as a public-relations man for big-money promoters with some stuff in the Cayman Islands, Arizona, a shopping center out by the hospital, investments in anything that would bring 20 percent or better, he said, and a city in Florida, yes a whole city that was somehow an amusement park first, or was it last.

Steve had settled down, or was it _in_, a lot. Seemed to want to stay married to Janet, or was it someone else --no it was, yes, still Janet, his wife. Seemed he wanted to do something in the world that mattered. Seemed he wanted to be friends with his old, what, buddy Malone. Steve smoked a pipe now, with a curved stem, and ended most comments with _you know_, not the _O.K._ from some years before.

Steve's _baby_--a new recycling center with all sorts of sorters, crushers, disposers, extractors, refiners, and refinishers--stood ready for sweeping the last time before its grand opening. The new-carpet and whatever toxic-base-paint smell could never be removed from that fine white sandstone and glass thing they called the office and gallery. Yes, an art gallery in the front office area

Steve's people call the solarium, as if there were no garbage on the place, and that all could be made beautiful, or whatever. Understanding the fine blend of community service, public responsibility, profit, showbusiness, and general goodwill stood beyond the scope of public-private joint money operations, stood beyond the scope of the congressmen involved in the financing, beyond the scope of the extent to which these people would go to come up with something groovy.

The Malone Bird sat sullen on a wooden block in the center of the airy solarium, sculpted to near rightness in a hurry, and with a dull chisel. But The Bird didn't have a plastic ring-tab six-pack thing embedded in his neck. That could have been done easily, of course, anytime before the clay dried. That could have been done just as easily as old Malone could have been fired, too, decommissioned, so to say, and given the bird in a big way. But, The Bird of clay was fine, made by Malone for Steve's people. The bird seemed to say, Have your people get with my people and we'll send a man around to save a FAX before we crunch the numbers and come up with the bottom line at this point in time. He was a sort of abstract eagle-parrot cross, whatever, so if he could talk, it would have to be responsibly, sensibly. Subtlety embedded in the base of the sculpture, though, was, indeed, the bottom line, a short piece of television cable discreetly plunged into the fowl's very rectum.

No, there was no bitterness about the project. No, there was an understanding about what the new plant, Spring Creek, did, was, could be, represented, and all the other symbols of which it was not. What Spring Creek was not was something that could prevent the manufacture and distribution of the garbage it recycled. The Bird might even flutter some night, calling myriad mice, rats, possums, coons, and the rest on over to Spring Creek for their own version of the recycling game. No, Steve's people called it a magnificent piece of art, The Bird, a wonderful addition to the community, a setpiece for what the plant was all about. So it was done. The Bird was given, the plant or project, or whatever it was, stood ready for its grand opening.

Steve spoke fast over the telephone. "Tomorrow night, Malone. It's tomorrow night, and its's black tie. You got some tails, I suppose. If you don't, just go down to that tux shop, you know, by the ice rink, and put it on our tab. The fricking Governor will be at our table, and your seat is directly across from his. Yes, Malone, you get to sit across from the Governor, have dinner with the bloody Governor, you know."

"How can I explain this to you, Steve? You see, I have what you might call a previous engagement for tomorrow night."

Long silence. "Malone, you must be kidding."

"No, Steve, Maguire and I are having dinner with our

old college art teacher, Mr. Dobbs. It's been set for a while, now, and Maguire and I are going to clean out his rain gutters and do some other stuff around his place, and have dinner. Sorry to miss the Governor."

"You've got to be kidding."

"You don't need me there, Steve. The Bird will do."

"Malone, this means an awful lot to my people."

"Steve, I know, but I just can't make it."

"Look, Malone. This means an awful lot to my people, and it should mean a lot to you, and your potential involvement in the Florida project coming up in the spring."

"Don't get me started, Steve."

Dobbs was pleased to hear about The Bird. Said he'd go take a look sometime. Maguire filled in some missing pieces about his stint in Vietnam. He refused to fly anymore B-52 bomb runs, and put his .45 on the commander's desk. Expecting a summary court-martial, he was surprised to be made the Caribou wing commander and instrument instructor for the group. He wrecked six Caribous, but lost no crew members. His only war injury was when he fell out of a cot and got a black eye his last night in-country.

Dobbs laughed about his major run-in with the fourth wife. He said he thought she was serious right up until the minute she was committed. Said she was always 20 steps ahead of him, and so convincing she could have

prevented World War II, and laughed harder when he realized we were talking about Vietnam. He wouldn't talk about what happened to him in Korea, or about losing his chair in art down at the college on account of not being able to show up because he was home trying to keep a blanket around the woman. But we all three turned away together, fast, from such war stuff and on to the wine, and the weather, and the "grander prospects of humanity," as Dobbs likes to phrase it.

The gutters were clean, the garage door fixed, the furniture moved around the way Dobbs wanted it. Maguire was always a hoot, and Dobbs never looked better. Good friends.

A nasty telephone message from Steve was the only thing waiting back home that evening on the tape. Steve said his people were not pleased with the empty seat across from the Governor. He said "birdman's" part in the Florida project was "put on hold," and that if it ever got picked up there would have to be one hell of a contribution, "something with some real meat, something eclectic, whacked out, and definitely funky."

Early the next morning Steve answered the telephone at Spring Creek, where the opening continued.

"Just what did your people have in mind for my part in the Florida project?" Malone asked.

"It's an amusement park, Malone, sort of right in the big middle of this new city thing we're calling New Town."

"Amusement park. New city thing."

"Absolutely."

"O.K. So, I need to come down there this morning and do some finishing inspection and so forth on The Bird. I'll just slip in and take a look to be sure all is well. I mean, I don't need to see your people, and they don't need to see me. I just want to check The Bird one more time. And, Steve, I'll do something about getting together a proposal for something big for Florida, right away. Something that will impress your people, O.K.?"

It was not difficult to reach and tend The Bird. Plenty of people around, but no one seemed interested in The Bird. No adjustments were necessary, except to add the tiny bit of clay to the smooth space just below that right eye. The tiny tear-shaped bit stuck cleanly to The Bird's face, as if it had just fallen from the obscure eye, if birds could weep.

About Steve's people, now there are some snakes that would attract The Bird. About snakes, now there's a Florida idea. No, about the people in the office, Steve's people, what could they need now? There, on yon party table, a whole hotdog, displayed like an Andy Warhol thing, with no one around. It drew like Excalibur. It shown like The Statue. It had <u>Steve's People</u> magically inscribed on its supernatural aura like <u>The Bonds of Holy Matrimony</u> engraved on a cheap cake cover. A weeny, a frank, a dog. Steve's people. Florida amusement park. A

whole city.

Steve would find the note taped to a package at the receptionist's desk. In the package, the lone supernatural weeny.

Steverino. For Florida. This can be handled any way you and your people wish. It can be the centerpiece of the Florida New Town and its amusement park. You can stick it anywhere you think might be appropriate, any size or angle. Malone.

How tacky it all seemed on the drive home. How tacky the tear of The Bird. How tacky the weeny. How silly Steve's people, and the recycling plant, Spring Creek. And how tacky to keep building cities, a New Town, especially on the swamps of Florida, the way cities have been built since the Sea-bees brought home steel-reinforced concrete with Lucky Strike reds. What amusement, methinks.

Maguire drove up in Mr. Dobbs' old Dodge. "Break out your tools, Malone, and let's tune this thing and change the oil. I called back over to Dobbs' this morning to thank him for the evening, see if there was anything else we could do, and sure enough."

When it was all done, Maguire gave the old car a salute. "Hell, I'd carry the old buzzard to work everyday on my back, what he's done for me and you."

"I agree. And, by the way, Maguire, you never explained why they put you on Caribou duty."

"To take small-arms fire . . . fly contour landings into short jungle strips cut by hand . . . haul pigs and barbed wire for the army. They were trying to kill me, man, because I didn't go along with their program. Are you serious? I flew an <u>empty</u> <u>seat</u>."

JACK'S BUSINESS

I normally do not call on a lot of people--hell, anyone--when I am in what I see as trouble. There is usually a way, or I find a way, to pretty well handle nearly every situation in which I find myself. In that ability to operate I take great pride, and find enough confidence and assurance. There are answers, there are reasons, and there are solutions to problems. I find them, I work them, I succeed in keeping my act together because I work at it, and I work at it very well. I'm a damned good lawyer. I like to think of myself as a can-do guy. That's my business.

Why I called on Malone, I can not say, except that, at the time, I guess I just needed someone to talk to about our mutual friend, Jack, whose letter sat before me when Malone came in the office. It was after hours around sunset, my favorite time of day, a time when I understand things best, perhaps. But Jack had me baffled.

I read the short letter to Malone. It was, simply, a suicide note. I was the executor of Jack's estate. It said he had <u>ended his life</u> in the Gulf of Mexico. With it, Jack sent a photocopy of the note he left in a totebag on the boat. The note was to the captain of the fishing

boat and to the sheriff. It explained to the sheriff that the captain and his crew were not responsible for what happened. He explained that his personal effects, his car papers, and a copy of his will, were in the bag. His car was parked at the boat's slip. I had been on the telephone to the boat's captain, and with the sheriff, and they had no questions.

Jack drove to the coast, chartered a fishing boat to take him out about 20 miles or better, beyond the shelf. He fished for a while, drank from a bottle of vodka he brought, reached in his bag and brought out an anchor he handcuffed to his foot. He walked to the fantail with his totebag, pulled out a pistol on a lanyard attached to the heavy totebag, sat on the rail, shot himself in the head, and fell into the water. No way they could recover the body.

Why? There was no trace of why Jack would do such a thing. His will was in order, a simple, direct, holographic will witnessed and dated properly by two people we all knew, and from some months before. The will called for cremation, and for everything left to his wife. No problem. But why did he kill himself? His wife said she had no idea. She had already left town.

Not a clue. And why the Gulf? Why the anchor? Terminal disease? Apparently, no one knew of a thing wrong with Jack. Authorities at the coast were not interested in an inquest. Neither was I. Neither was his

wife. So Jack was just gone, what we call solid gone. And, pretty damned clean, too.

"What do you want to know?" Malone asked.

"I want to know why he did it." I went down the list. No body, no reason, no good-bye, no disease we knew of, no remorse, no nothing. "Why?"

"What's in it for his wife?" Malone asked.

"Nothing."

"Did he gamble?" Malone asked.

"You know he was no gambler."

"Was somebody after him? Did he know something, see something? Was it his wife? How unhappy were they?"

"How unhappy do you have to be? Or, what do you have to know, or have to see to do yourself in? I can't imagine. Not with Jack."

Malone walked around the office, looked out the window, walked around the office, looked out the window. "AIDS?"

"Jack?"

"Well?"

"Why not syphilis? Why not a tumor? Why not some god-damned attitude he came up with in the night about something we couldn't imagine," I mused. "It could have been any or all of that."

"Why do you believe there must be a reason for Jack to have killed himself?"

"All right, Malone, now don't be getting weird on

me."

"Well? What business is it of yours?"

"When a man dies, especially a man like Jack, and the way he did it, Malone, there must be answers. I must know why, or at least have some clue. I mean, really, Malone."

"Really, what?"

"Hey, now don't get weird."

"No, I won't get weird. I'm just asking questions like you are asking questions. Mine are just different questions about the same thing."

"Jack was only 39."

"You say he was 39. His birth certificate might say he was 39. His cells have been around for about 15-billion years, you know."

"You're getting weird."

"No, I'm not. I find it weird that we don't talk about that little time span very much at all."

"That's true, Malone. It's true like it's true Jack is dead. So what does that tell us?"

"Maybe it tells us we've got more going on here than we can quite know about--I won't say understand."

"No. I don't think so, Malone. Look, you want to go down to the coast with me this weekend? I want to go talk to that boat crew, and get that totebag from the sheriff. Hell, Jack's wife doesn't even want the car, so I need to see what they're going to do with that."

"No, I do not want to go down to the coast with you,

not on that business."

"Well, you're a hell of a lot of fun, Malone."

"What, do you want to go dredge the Gulf? You want to resuscitate old Jack and find out why he did himself?"

"O.K., O.K."

"I'll tell you what you ought to do about Jack, and that's not one single thing."

"O.K., so you want to play this hard-core. It's easy to just walk away, I suppose. But, Malone, every man's death has got to mean something, has got to make some kind of sense in the order of things. Jack can't get off that lightly. It just can't happen that way."

"You want to bet?"

"No, Malone, there's something we don't know. And at least, as executor of his estate, I have a duty to find out what happened."

"Who cares?"

"There you go, Malone, getting definitely weird."

"Oh, no. So, tell me who cares."

"I do."

"You're just curious."

We laughed. We knew we had better laugh, then.

"The last thing I need, Malone, is some pseudo-philosophical discussion with you about death and dying, and all that. You're just impossible, and I guess that's mainly why I'm talking with you about all this Jack business. I mean, where else could I find the devil's

advocate to just drop in on me and tell me the things I don't want to hear? This is just business, Malone."

"Who's business is the question?"

"Well, you read the letter, then. And put yourself in my place, and see how you feel."

"No. I don't want to read Jack's letter, and I don't need to put myself in your place to tell you how I feel. I feel fine. So Jack killed himself."

"Are you really a hard-core type Malone? I don't believe for a second you are. No, and now I wonder why you play these games with me. You know what I have to do."

"I told you, you don't have to do anything."

I was tapped out with what to do, not only with Jack but now, with Malone. Talking with Malone about this was like talking to a dead man. No movement.

"When I ask who cares, I'm not being hard-core."

"What do you call it, Malone?"

"I don't call it. That's the point. I don't call it."

"What do you call <u>that</u>?" Malone uttered, pointing out the window at the sliver of moon and bright star nearby.

"There you go, the weirdness."

"No. No."

"No what?"

"Look, Jack killed himself, and I believe he did a pretty damned good job of it. He did all the work for

you. You might be pleased."

"Pleased, I'm not. It's not my job to be pleased."

"I'm not sure you know what your job really is."

"Well, Malone. You're so brilliant, just what do you recommend I do in this case? Just what, exactly."

"Repeat after me, and believe. What happened to Jack is none of my business."

"Come on, Malone."

"No, don't repeat after me. Let me just tell you outright. What happened to Jack is none of your business, absolutely none of your business. It's <u>Jack's</u> <u>business</u>."

IF FOLKS KNEW

I was passing through Malone's hometown, and couldn't resist the urge to stop and talk with someone. I saw an old-timer go in an insurance company at opening time, and figured that was as good a place as any to stop in and just play around with what people knew or might say about my friend, Malone.

The place had an Air-Conditioned sign in the window, which made it more attractive than a service station on that morning, that hot summer morning in that country where greenhouses are unnecessary, where feed and food grow as far as the eye can see, where humidity gets so high it's not even discussed.

With the introductions over, I felt I had known the old-timer all my life. He was not a bit bashful about talking, so I listened.

"You know, if folks knew the Malones the way we did in those early days, why, it just might make a difference. The way they came up, I mean. Now, that's been a long time back, since before the war. Of course, after the war, the bomb, everything seems to be different. Not everything, but, sure enough, the Malones, and a lot of other folks.

"About Quin, now. I knew his grandfather real well. Yeah, his grandfather had a pocketwatch just like mine. And he wore a street hat like mine, too. I knew him pretty well, and his son, Quin's dad. Quin now, you know, is in San Antonio, and has been since he left the Lower Country. Been doing all right, I suppose, between there and Austin.

"But if folks just knew how those boys got along down here back when, it would, well, it would just make me feel better. When you feel like you know what makes something tick, now there's something worth jawing about.

"You take Quin. A lot like his dad, who was a lot like his dad, my friend. Quin comes down now and again. And when he walks out of that drugstore, you'd swear it was his grandfather. Same walk, and I figure the same kind of fellow, from what I can tell. Of course we don't hear much about Quin. You don't have to hear much when you look him in the eye. I'd always double-check whatever I heard about him. I've heard some stuff, but it's not all bad. Just makes you wonder sometimes. That's why I'm telling this, because if folks knew the Malones the way we did, and how they came up . . .

"You see, Quin's dad came right out of a tradition his father, my friend, brought down here from Mississippi and Alabama back when Model-Ts were just getting on the road. He drove down to Texas looking for black dirt. And he always had a little boxing club, straight-out, don't

you see, and not like those mean smokers where they fight brutal. No, my friend always taught the boys how to box, Queensbury Rules, too. He'd make them come up to scratch in broad daylight. And they boxed fair.

"Quin's dad was the best. He was the oldest, but not the biggest. He always won against the army boxers from Fort Clark, and I mean right out in the open over behind the lumber yard. Had a nice ring over there, and it was good sport, and yes, some money changed hands.

"And when the Depression came, it was Quin's dad saw to it the family had meat and baby food. He'd take that Plymouth coupe into San Antonio and come back at night with a trunkload. Feed the neighbors, too, quite often. Those Malones were good people. But like I hear about Quin, now, you don't want to mess with him too much. He's got some kind of justice built in that don't bend much, and don't flare 'til it's pushed on up past the limit. Same with the others.

"No, they good people. My friend, though, died just after the war. That was after a couple of his boys didn't come home from the big one. He's the one who disappeared in that sinkhole, you might remember. Yeah, some people saw it, but it's still hard to believe. Just disappeared in a puff of dust. But anyway, I watched Quin's dad raise his boys, and yes, I remember Quin. He was a good boy, hard worker.

"I watched those boys work with their dad, building

the first high television antenna in town. Why, Quin's dad had cable television for the neighborhood. Everybody hooked up. But before they got the antenna up, we'd go over to Malone's and watch the Tuesday-night fights. So much snow on the tube, it would help to squint. The living room was full of men and their boys watching the fights. The women and girls made cake, and we'd watch the 'Gillette Cavalcade of Sports' from Madison Square Garden in New York City. Quin's dad always made his boys watch those matches. And he made them watch 'The Three Stooges,' too. Every time. And I don't believe there was a time those boys didn't watch 'Tom and Jerry.' I know Quin's dad never missed that one. Now me, I liked 'Mickey Mouse,' but those Malones never had much to do with that. Those boys played out in my pasture, but they wouldn't come in when I told them 'Mickey Mouse' was on.

"No, I hear Quin is doing pretty well. You hear things, you know. But if folks only knew. I don't know what that high-altitude flying will do to anybody, if there's anything to that. Just have to discount a lot of what's said about those Malones, because I never knew any of them to do anything without a reason. Oh, they did some things, yeah, but they had reasons. They're Welsh or Irish, but they claim to have some French blood, I believe. And, if left alone, I mean not riled, they could be downright refined.

"But I don't know, since the war. More than that, it

seems like the war was just part of a thing that was going to happen, anyway. I mean, that big space telescope don't work, after all. But anyway, a lot of good things have happened in my short life, too. Are we still having a Beat Generation? I hear something about that? And somebody said this is the Me Generation. Yeah.

"Well, no, about Quin. He sure reminds me of my friend, his grandfather. I never could get too close to Quin's dad, but I know for sure he made those boys watch the Tuesday-night fights. He'd sit them down in front of that television and put his hands on their shoulders.

"'Listen, boys,' he'd say. 'Listen.'

"He'd always say, 'Love you boys. Listen.' And those boys sat, watching, hearing every fight."

You both know the rules of the New York State Boxing Commission. I want a good, clean fight tonight. If you knock your opponent down, I want you to step back. And when I tell you to go to a neutral corner, you go there and wait. I don't want any butting, or hitting below the belt. No rabbit punches. When I tell you to break, I want you to break clean. Are you ready to fight? O.K., when the bell rings, come out fighting. May the best man win. Now, touch gloves and go to your corners.

"Of course, that was different from 'The Three Stooges,' don't you see. That referee reminds me a lot of my friend, Quin's dad's. You know, one time, he told me there was a code that came across from the border, the

desert. Said there were four things you never let go of --your horse, your hat, your pistol, your woman. At first, I thought he was kidding, some kind of joke.

"No I reckon whatever happens to Quin, he could explain it if he wanted to. I wouldn't doubt that, because . . . if folks only knew how those people came up. And, you know, that antenna is still over there, still standing just like the day they put it up. Yeah, they made a mess of ice cream that afternoon, and both channels came in perfect. They hooked me up, and once I could see 'Mickey Mouse' real clear, well, that was about the time I stopped watching it."

SAVING GRACE

Time tells, he thought. As he looked around the place, it--and he--became smaller, dingier, somehow less of what he ever hoped or dreamed would or could be. His face in the mirror showed no surprise or revelation, or the like. His nothingness persisted, prevailed, and grew as if he finally, since his very birth awhile ago, gathered something about his own obscure being.

The white sculpture rested, let go on the heavy wooden table last month to wait. The thing's shape remained more than a little illusive, still, even after several months. So, to escape shape, Malone worked in words, and found the long poem presented more schematic difficulty than did the sandstone. Would this work ever amount to anything? Or would it ever just end? Could it be finished? Any saving grace? He might still be working in the stone if he hadn't browsed through that Joseph Conrad stuff, all that duty and honor, and more duty, things to be done. The poetry came hard, the end cloudy.

Into his limited field of vision that week drifted the old photo of his recon squadron at graduation, a hundred-or-so young fellows from another pinch of life, from somewhere on the fringe of ignorance with some straw

to grasp through pale, wasted years on an embarrassing planet. Old Malone never knew bitter, always checked himself there, or thought so--just consistently aware. He didn't forget, but couldn't quite remember. He could look at himself in the mirror now and see the whole organization chart of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, plus a full-color overlay of the planet Earth's ecological condition, all held down at the corners by piles of Supreme Court opinions. If he were losing his mind, it had been a lengthy enough process, nothing in a hurry. He knew that. The mirror image came clear to his foggy vision. He trembled, ready for a trip.

Right out of that old army photo came the faces of Mike and Jerry. He'd go see them, yes. After 35 years, only a couple of flashes about them, businessmen down the way, people to drop in on, guys who might be worth looking up. In the picture, they all stood proud. Mike went to engineering school, and Jerry made it in trucking.

To the Greydog, clean-shaven, with one bag, and with a new package of disposal razors, and his Instamatic camera, and his Gideon, the one book, he supposed, that should travel, unread as it remained. Malone looked forward to staying close-shaven, to shave every day, maybe twice a day, knowing that a fellow can go nearly anywhere with minimum hassle if he's clean-shaven. He wanted some pictures, too. But, his face needed attention, since it seemed to play such an important part in his world--as if

only his face remained, fading fast. His face, the mirror, the photo, his own reflection and the reflections of a lifetime, needed trimming, shaving, making. Like his life, his face either needed shaving or removal, certainly tending. He'd travel, trying to find a place for his face, perhaps in pictures, other mirrors, with informed companions, in some framework, some perspective to dull the edge of self-consciousness shrouding his vision for so long--a shroud Malone knew would grow if not checked. He avoided his own reflection in the giant bus window, and looked through the morning light on fields where Earth people scraped around, in whatever ways, for whatever reasons.

Far down the interstate, a city bus took him around the big loop to Mike's Southside engineering firm. But, no, Mike had long-since retired, and was home, up in the neighborhoods where Malone found him in his garage, working on an old Chevy truck, its engine spread across the floor.

"A little red in the face, ain't you, Mike?"

"Alcoholic now 25 years, big son."

"Suppose this engine will start when you stick it back in?"

"Bet my life on it."

"How come it'll start, Mike? Magic?"

"No magic. Every part the right size in the right place, and the sumbitch'll run--all there is to it.

Figured that out 25 years ago."

Mike's Mrs. got pictures of them standing in front of the garage. They had biscuits, cream gravy, and blackeye peas before Malone left. Mike seemed amused and pleased. He talked like John F. Kennedy, like the Bible, like he had a scheme, all right. He was clean-shaven, made engines work. On up the road now, though, back north to find Jerry.

From the downtown bus depot, Malone called the biggest truck repair ad in the Yellow Pages--got the big-rig service manager in the back. Yes, he knew Jerry--said he could be found in those alleys down behind the police station, or maybe inside the station sleeping it off. Malone found Jerry in 15 minutes, up under a bridge. Walked up on him with both hands showing, called his name, and Jerry smiled big from under a huge straw hat.

"Well, if it ain't some figment of my uneasy past. Malone, you no-good hobo, what the hell you doing in a place like this, my front yard?"

Down on his knees, Malone took a sip from Jerry's sacked wine.

"You got no teeth left, Jerry, you silly lookin' bastard."

"Nothing to eat, Malone, but I've still got an appetite."

"Jesus, son, where's your wife and kids? I heard you were a family man, a trucker and all."

"That I am, Malone, soon as I decide to ask her if I can go back home. I was right in the middle of wiring our new garage when she told me to get out and stay out. That's been 17 years, and I'm going back, too. I'm getting ready to go on back and finish that wiring job--stopped at the dryer connection."

"Now, what happened?"

"Well, I was doing fine, until I got to the dryer. Couldn't figure out how all that electricity was supposed to run that thing. I got all messed up of a sudden, sort of went nuts, wasn't right, you know? I couldn't figure how, under the sun, that electricity was supposed to make that thing turn and get hot and all that. But, I've been working on it, and I'm about ready to go back and wire it up."

Malone looked out over the city and had a deep breath.

Jerry spoke at his side, working some tinfoil out of a paper bag. "See that little mountain range out there, Malone? That there is what keeps this the safest place on earth. That's the escarpment, like a reflector dish that sends the evil rays back out into space--reflects them away from here, keeps me real good."

Malone watched Jerry line his hat with tinfoil and place it securely on his old head, only a little of the shiny showing around his ears, over his dark, clean-shaven face.

"You feeling O.K., huh, Jerry? Safe?"

"Oh, hell yeah, Malone. And I know I can wire that garage, no problem."

They went up the street for cream gravy, blackeye peas, and fried chicken. Jerry put the bones in his paper sack, with a ten-spot from Malone. Outside, they got a guy to take their picture.

On his way back to the bus station, Malone felt he was having an "Old Testament" attack. No question he'd been occupied with some subconscious scheming about his work, some of his reasons for taking the trip. Couldn't figure, though, quite yet, exactly what happened with Mike and Jerry, but knew it was "Old Testament." Like, Jesus wasn't around--any of that salvation still a new story. Both those bastards sounded like prophets to Malone, even smelled like what prophets must smell like, like poets. And Jerry, with his this-and-that under the sun.

For the first time in many years, Malone flipped through the Gideon while the bus nosed and hissed its way out to the interstate. Lo, and sure enough, it was John F. Kennedy, he remembered, who liked "Ecclesiastes" . . . that business about there being a time for this and that, to reap and sow.

Whatever wisdom may be, it is far off and most profound--who can discover it? Who knows the explanation of things? Wisdom brightens a man's face and changes its hard appearance.

It was an "Old Testament" attack.

Adding one thing to another to discover the scheme of things--still searching but not finding. The wise heart will know the proper time and procedure, for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

Malone couldn't wait to get back home and grow a beard, store the mirrors, send off the film so he could put up pictures of Mike and Jerry, and read some more "Ecclesiastes." That army picture had to go, too. He certainly understood all this "Ecclesiastes" stuff came well before Jesus, and wondered whether Jesus changed any of it. Probably not--couldn't do such a thing and keep it all between the same covers. Could there be a big time warp between "Ecclesiastes" and Jesus, like 25 years on the bottle for Mike, 17 years under the bridge for Jerry, or much, much longer? What about that warp, what happens between things, times, people?

He found special fascination in "Ecclesiastes" about the work proposition, and the rest, the folly, and the advice to enjoy while there's time. He especially liked that part about the light being sweet, and how it pleases the eyes to see the sun--that however many years a man may live, let him enjoy them all.

The sculpture would come, and the poetry. There is a time for everything--a time to search and a time to give up. Nothing about salvation. Conrad went back on the

shelf. And the thesaurus traveled nicely through free air, sailing on the wind, under the sun, right into the dumpster. Malone could stay home for a while, now, and with his face, do a little reading, and with some saving grace.

THE LAST STOP

The last time I saw Malone was in San Antonio. He had just moved out of a dump on the North Side, and was living in his grand motorcoach, and on his way to South Padre to start yet another life of some kind. This time, he said, there would be no distractions. He intended to write, and to write, and to write. Straight fiction, he said, straight fiction.

He fired up that big V-8 and let her purr. The dew rolled down her creamy sides, and her exhaust manifold popped and crackled as it heated. Faintly blue exhaust smoke became clear, and she smelled of lubrication and scrubbed rubber, the window glasses so clean. He was proud it was a three-quarter-ton, and had no rear-end noise.

Malone even wore a shirt with a white collar, and with his sideburns cut to the proper length, showing a textbook jaw, properly shaved. With those sunglasses and new sandals, Malone looked the dude, the artist, the man nothing could stop.

As we rolled across the North Side, over brick streets, by parks, sleeping homes, through Monte Vista and on to San Pedro Avenue, Malone muttered about the

paperwork he needed to pick up at the courthouse--something about the coach papers. We planned to get that done, then have a nice breakfast before he took me back to my place and hit the open road.

I thought it was more coach paperwork he muttered about, but, no, it was poetry on his mind. He gently pounded on the steering wheel to emphasize his frustration with poetry. Poetry now, today, this <u>stuff</u>, he called it. He said it was trite. He said it keeps doing the same thing the same way it has for too long, and that it has come to represent itself, only. I believe that was the gist of it. It was something flat like that, something short, something selfish, trite, Malone said, that took no risks. That was it, no <u>risks</u>. He said he wanted to write fiction with a risk, and that taking a risk is as good an excuse as any for trying to accomplish something, anything. He was cooking, but nowhere near his evangelical mode. He sounded more like the contrite one, the lucky one, the forgiven one who had a few more chances left to take, room for a few more mistakes, a few more excuses that might play out to the next scene without too much fuss.

Apparently, he was on a roll, because he came out of that courthouse with the paperwork he needed, and with no hassle. He was a man on the move. He walked not briskly, but with velocity, not directly to the coach, but in what I swear seemed more like a trajectory.

"Why fiction?" I asked, over breakfast.

"I'm sculptured out."

"But why fiction?"

"It's a way to touch and go, bump and run, a way to trip through the debris of what we call truth without falling down or hitting something. It's an act of faith. It's what happens when I can't see what's in front of me, but can still manage to continue the trip. It's magic. Stuff just happens with fiction, stuff that allows us to continue, somehow to continue."

"Sure."

"Oh, you've got to believe."

"Believe what?"

"Believe we can continue. What if we couldn't continue? If we followed a totally reasonable, logical path, we would probably be stopped cold, with no hope of continuing this great adventure."

"Whatever, Malone. You sound like you know what you're talking about, but I'm not so sure I follow."

"You've go to believe," he repeated, as if I were supposed to understand.

We buckled into the coach, pulled out onto San Pedro, and hit the back of a city bus stopped in the right lane, dead still. I simply didn't see it. Malone evidently, certainly didn't see it. There was no time to touch the brakes. We hit the rear of that bus and bounced back about three feet. Must have been doing close to 30 miles

an hour.

Malone turned off the engine. "You O.K.?" he asked.

"Fine, and you?"

"O.K."

Parts and panels dropped from the big city bus--plastic, aluminum, glass, chrome, bits and pieces slowly falling and continuing to fall off the back of the bus, until the engine was exposed.

We got out and waded carefully through the parts, up to the back of the bus, where things continued to fall off as its huge engine idled.

"Stay back," Malone warned. "This damned thing is not finished."

For what seemed like several minutes, the bits and pieces continued to fall off the bus. Stuff was falling off it even along the sides. And something dropped into the engine, was hit by something turning, and thrown up in the compartment with a bang, as the engine continued to idle smoothly.

We both turned at the same time to check the front of Malone's coach. Not a mark, not a dent, not a sign of the collision. Several more pieces of the bus fell off as we stood between the vehicles, waiting for some sense of conclusion to what seemed to be the longest disassembly of a city bus I could possibly imagine.

Malone even told me a story while the bus continued to fall apart. He said he saw a Mexicana Airlines DC-9

drag in over the fence at San Antonio International one hot summer day, continue to float down the runway, and continue, and continue, until there was no runway left. It hit the grass at the far end, and slid into a fence. Malone mimicked the voice of the air-traffic controller in the San Antonio tower. "Mexicana 53, you all through, now?"

Malone slapped his leg, laughed. I managed a chuckle. It was apparent the bus had no passengers.

"Better turn on your hazard lights, Malone. Or you'll get it from the rear."

He reached in the cab and started the blinkers. "This reminds me of when old Judge Jackman sideswiped my grandfather's Buick while it was parked along the curb. No, it's like the time by grandfather came in late with that Buick and hit the shed out back where he kept it parked. Remember, I told you about that. The shed collapsed on the Buick and the milk cow, and . . .

Suddenly, at the rear corner of the disassembling bus, appeared a short thick black man with wavy white hair and a full beard. He wore the uniform of a city bus driver, but he seemed, in that morning haze, to be an aborigine tribesman standing silently, gazing at us.

Malone stopped short, slowly raised his hands toward the busman, as if to show him he had no weapons as much as to greet him with a faint, "Good morning, sir."

The busman stood still, silent.

"What a hell of a thing, huh?" Malone muttered toward the busman. Why, I've seen some things I haven't seen, but I've never seen anything I didn't see like I didn't see the back of this bus. No, sir, I simply didn't see this bus until I hit it."

Another piece of aluminum fell to the pavement.

"This must be the last stop, huh?" Malone continued, pointing to some giant metal buildings in the near distance, through the trees just around the corner. "That's the city busbarn, there, isn't it?"

The busman stood still, silent.

"Sure, you were just a turn away from the barn when the back of this bus sort of up and came apart on you, huh? Must have stopped here in front of the library to let the students cross. No light, but there must be many accidents here with that crosswalk and four lanes of traffic, huh? I was on my way fishing. And, I mean I fish to eat, not all for sport these days. Yeah, on my way down to the Big Salty this morning. Yes, sir."

Malone turned to me, as if I might be of some help, or as if it might be my turn to say something. I was silent.

The busman walked slowly between the vehicles, keeping his distance from both of us. He folded and locked his arms across his chest and gazed at the back of the bus for what seemed like too long. He turned slowly and gazed at Malone's coach. He looked back at the bus,

and then at us. "You guys better be moving along before the police come around."

EPILOGUE

You might wonder what happened to Malone. He's O.K. He said he was sorry he never rode a train they call the City of New Orleans--be gone 500 miles 'fore the day is done. Fond of trains, Malone said he wanted to highball the last freight out of the station, the one they call that Last Train to Glory--yep, highball it, flat out, full bore--across the high deserts, through the woodlands, by the shore, up, out, and away to the land of real rhetorical consequence and real beer, cold and free, and where peace and justice are synonymous, and coffee stays hot and free. But before he did that, he said he wanted to cross the High Divide in winter westbound at a sub-zero creep in a boxcar with some old Mexican named Jesus.

He had some plans. He said he wanted to flyfish the upper Columbia in early spring. And he wanted to come face-to-face with a grizzly precisely at the timberline, precisely at sunset somewhere in the Canadian Rockies.

He said he wanted to take Pancho Villa, beat the old coyote to Zacatecas--be waiting for him there with three French 75s, only three. Claimed he only needed 10 men to do the job--two on each gun, three on guard duty, and himself standing on the highest point of that desert

rockpile. He said he could see Pancho's dust three days out. Said he wanted to teach Pancho to read.

He was deeply sorry about the loss of the good ship Edmund Fitzgerald.

When he left, he reminded me I can get anything I want at Alice's Restaurant.

He'll get along. But he harbors a deep and abiding aversion to automatic transmissions, foreign cars, milk in a plastic jug, and window air-conditioners.

He will always have a Welcome mat at his front door, and an On-the-Air sign above his bed.

There was one other thing. He said he wanted to bring in The Devil for questioning--getting closer every day. He said he knows Captain America personally and very well, and that Captain America assures him he saw The Devil in Dallas in a '69 Eldorado Cadillac, gold in color, with the 500-cubic-inch engine and the front-wheel drive. Captain America said he chased The Devil out of Dallas, north, along the guardrails of Upper Texas and into the oblivion of a Southern Oklahoma evening, bound hard for Kansas and on to the Bad Lands. Captain America assured Malone The Devil was on the scared run, trapped in North America. Malone said Stan and Josie Donner are backing up the West Coast--no way past them. He said Jeannie Winter stands between old Lucifer and the Atlantic. And to the North, Gordon Lightfoot holds the Canadian line. Down South, with his back to the Rio Bravo, looking for action,

always looking for action, hasta Malone. The net closes.

I asked Malone what he would do if he caught Satan.

"Oh, can't tell. Seems to me he might be losing his grip. We'll just go out back and have a little chat. Maybe talk some reparation, huh?"

VITA

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