BLIND WILLIE

Stephen King

1983: Gobless us every one.

6:15 A.M.

He wakes to music, always to music; the shrill beep-beep-beep of the clock-radio's alarm is too much for his mind to cope with during those first blurry moments of the day. It sounds like a dump truck backing up. The radio is bad enough at this time of year, though; the easy-listening station he keeps the clock-radio tuned to is wall-to-wall Christmas carols, and this morning he wakes up to one of the two or three on his Most Hated List, something full of breathy voices and phony wonder. The Hare Krishna Chorale or the Andy Williams Singers or some such. Do you hear what I hear, the breathy voices sing as he sits up in bed, blinking groggily, hair sticking out in every direction. Do you see what I see, they sing as he swings his legs out, grimaces his way across the cold floor to the radio, and bangs the button that turns it off. When he turns around, Sharon has assumed her customary defensive posture—pillow folded over her head, nothing showing but the creamy curve of one shoulder, a lacy nightgown strap, and a fluff of blond hair.

He goes into the bathroom, closes the door, slips off the pajama bottoms he sleeps in, drops them into the hamper, clicks on his electric razor. As he runs it over his face he thinks, Why not run through the rest of the sensory catalogue while you're at it, boys? Do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste, do you feel what I feel, I mean, hey, go for it.

"Humbug," he says as he turns on the shower. "All humbug."

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Twenty minutes later, while he's dressing (the dark gray suit from Paul Stuart this morning, plus his favorite Sulka tie), Sharon wakes up a little. Not enough for him to fully understand what she's telling him, though.

“Come again?” he asks. “I got eggnog, but the rest was just ugga-wugga.”

“I asked if you’d pick up two quarts of eggnog on your way home,” she says. “We’ve got the Allens and the Dubrays coming over tonight, remember?”

“Christmas,” he says, checking his hair carefully in the mirror. He no longer looks like the glaring, bewildered man who sits up in bed to the sound of music five mornings a week—sometimes six. Now he looks like all the other people who will ride into New York with him on the seven-forty, and that is just what he wants.

“What about Christmas?” she asks with a sleepy smile. “Humbug, right?”

“Right,” he agrees.

“If you remember, get some cinnamon, too—”

“Okay.”

“—but if you forget the eggnog, I’ll slaughter you, Bill.”

“I’ll remember.”

“I know. You’re very dependable. Look nice, too.”

“Thanks.”

She flops back down, then props herself up on one elbow as he makes a final minute adjustment to the tie, which is a dark blue. He has never worn a red tie in his life, and hopes he can go to his grave untouched by that particular virus. “I got the tinsel you wanted,” she says.

“Mmmm?”

“The tinsel,” she says. “It’s on the kitchen table.”

“Oh.” Now he remembers. “Thanks.”

“Sure.” She’s back down and already starting to drift off again. He doesn’t envy the fact that she can stay in bed until nine—hell, until eleven, if she wants—but he envies that ability of hers to wake up, talk, then drift off again. He had that when he was in the bush—most guys did—but the bush was a long time ago. In country was what the new guys and the correspondents always said; if you’d been there awhile it was just the bush, or sometimes the green.

In the green, yeah.

She says something else, but now she’s back to ugga-wugga. He knows what it is just the same, though: have a good day, hon.

“Thanks,” he says, kissing her cheek. “I will.”

“Look very nice,” she mumbles again, although her eyes are closed. “Love you, Bill.”

“Love you, too,” he says and goes out.

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His briefcase—Mark Cross, not quite top-of-the-line but close—is standing in the front hall, by the coat tree where his topcoat (from Tager’s, on Madison) hangs. He snags the case on his way by and takes it into the kitchen. The coffee is all made—God bless Mr. Coffee—and he pours himself a cup. He opens the briefcase, which is entirely empty, and picks up the ball of tinsel on the kitchen table. He holds it up for a moment, watching the way it sparkles under the light of the kitchen fluorescents, then puts it in his briefcase.

“Do you hear what I hear,” he says to no one at all and snaps the briefcase shut.

8:15 A.M.

Outside the dirty window to his left, he can see the city drawing closer. The grime on the glass makes it look like some filthy, gargantuan ruin—dead Atlantis, maybe, just heaved back to the surface to glare at the gray sky. The day's got a load of snow caught in its throat, but that doesn't worry him much; it is just eight days until Christmas, and business will be good.

The train-car reeks of morning coffee, morning deodorant, morning aftershave, morning perfume, and morning stomachs. There is a tie in almost every seat—even some of the women wear them these days. The faces have that puffy eight o'clock look, the eyes both introspective and defenseless, the conversations half-hearted. This is the hour at which even people who don't drink look hungover. Most folks just stick to their newspapers. Why not? Reagan is king of America, stocks and bonds have turned to gold, the death penalty is back in vogue. Life is good.

He himself has the Times crossword open in front of him, and although he's filled in a few squares, it's mostly a defensive measure. He doesn't like to talk to people on the train, doesn't like loose conversation of any sort, and the last thing in the world he wants is a commuter buddy. When he starts seeing the same faces in any given car, when people start to nod to him or say "How you doin today?" as they go to their seats, he changes cars. It's not that hard to remain unknown, just another commuter from suburban Connecticut, a man conspicuous only in his adamant refusal to wear a red tie. Maybe he was once a parochial-school boy, maybe once he held a weeping little girl while one of his friends struck her repeatedly with a baseball bat, and maybe he once spent time in the green. Nobody on the train has to know these things. That's the good thing about trains.

"All ready for Christmas?" the man in the aisle seat asks him.

He looks up, almost frowning, then decides it's not a substantive remark, only the sort of empty time-passer some people seem to feel compelled to make. The man beside him is fat and will undoubtedly

stink by noon no matter how much Speed Stick he used this morning … but he's hardly even looking at Bill, so that's all right.

"Yes, well, you know," he says, looking down at the briefcase between his shoes—the briefcase that contains a ball of tinsel and nothing else. "I'm getting in the spirit, little by little."

8:40 A.M.

He comes out of Grand Central with a thousand other topcoated men and women, mid-level executives for the most part, sleek gerbils who will be running full tilt on their exercise wheels by noon. He stands still for a moment, breathing deep of the cold gray air. Lexington Avenue is dressed in its Christmas lights, and a little distance away a Santa Claus who looks Puerto Rican is ringing a bell. He's got a pot for contributions with an easel set up beside it. HELP THE HOMELESS THIS CHRISTMAS, the sign on the easel says, and the man in the blue tie thinks, How about a little truth in advertising, Santa? How about a sign that says HELP ME SUPPORT MY COKE HABIT THIS CHRISTMAS? Nevertheless, he drops a couple of dollar bills into the pot as he walks past. He has a good feeling about today. He's glad Sharon reminded him of the tinsel—he would have forgotten to bring it, probably; in the end he always forgets stuff like that, the grace notes.

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A walk of ten minutes takes him to his building. Standing outside the door is a black youth, maybe seventeen, wearing black jeans and a dirty red hooded sweatshirt. He jives from foot to foot, blowing puffs of steam out of his mouth, smiling frequently, showing a gold tooth. In one hand he holds a partly crushed styrofoam coffee cup. There's some change in it, which he rattles constantly.

"Spare a lil?" he asks the passersby as they stream toward the revolving doors. "Spare me a lil, sir? Spare just a lil, ma'am? Just trying to get a spot of breffus. Thank you, gobless you, merry

Christmas. Spare a lil, my man? Quarter, maybe? Thank you. Spare a lil, ma'am?"

As he passes, Bill drops a nickel and two dimes into the young black man's cup.

"Thank you, sir, gobless, merry Christmas."

"You, too," he says.

The woman next to him frowns. "You shouldn't encourage them," she says.

He gives her a shrug and a small, shamefaced smile. "It's hard for me to say no to anyone at Christmas," he tells her.

He enters the lobby with a stream of others, stares briefly after the opinionated bitch as she heads for the newsstand, then goes to the elevators with their old-fashioned floor dials and their art deco numbers. Here several people nod to him, and he exchanges a few words with a couple of them as they wait—it's not like the train, after all, where you can change cars. Plus, the building is an old one; the elevators are slow and cranky.

"How's the wife, Bill?" a scrawny, constantly grinning man from the fifth floor asks.

"Carol's fine."

"Kids?"

"Both good." He has no kids and his wife's name isn't Carol. His wife is the former Sharon Anne Donahue, St. Gabriel the Steadfast Secondary Parochial School, Class of 1964, but that's something the scrawny, constantly grinning man will never know.

"Bet they can't wait for the big day," the scrawny man says, his grin widening and becoming something unspeakable. To Bill Shearman he looks like an editorial cartoonist's conception of Death, all big

eyes and huge teeth and stretched shiny skin. That grin makes him think of Tam Boi, in the A Shau Valley. Those guys from 2nd Battalion went in looking like the kings of the world and came out looking like singed escapees from hell's half acre. They came out with those big eyes and huge teeth. They still looked like that in Dong Ha, where they all got kind of mixed together a few days later. A lot of mixing-together went on in the bush. A lot of shake-and-bake, too.

"Absolutely can't wait," he agrees, "but I think Sarah's getting kind of suspicious about the guy in the red suit." Hurry up, elevator, he thinks, Jesus, save me from these stupidities.

"Yeah, yeah, it happens," the scrawny man says. His grin fades for a moment, as if they were discussing cancer instead of Santa. "How old's Sarah now?"

"Eight."

"Seems like she was just born a year or two ago. Boy, the time sure flies when you're havin fun, doesn't it?"

"You can say that again," he says, fervently hoping the scrawny man won't say it again. At that moment one of the four elevators finally gasps open its doors and they herd themselves inside.

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Bill and the scrawny man walk a little way down the fifth-floor hall together, and then the scrawny man stops in front of a set of old-fashioned double doors with the words CONSOLIDATED INSURANCE written on one frosted-glass panel and ADJUSTORS OF AMERICA on the other. From behind these doors comes the muted clickety-click of keyboards and the slightly louder sound of ringing phones.

"Have a good day, Bill."

“You too.”

The scrawny man lets himself into his office, and for a moment Bill sees a big wreath hung on the far side of the room. Also, the windows have been decorated with the kind of snow that comes in a spray can. He shudders and thinks, God save us, every one.

9:05 A.M.

His office—one of two he keeps in this building—is at the far end of the hall. The two offices closest to it are dark and vacant, a situation that has held for the last six months and one he likes just fine. Printed on the frosted glass of his own office door are the words WESTERN STATES LAND ANALYSTS. There are three locks on the door: the one that was on when he moved into the building, plus two he has put on himself. He lets himself in, closes the door, turns the bolt, then engages the police lock.

A desk stands in the center of the room, and it is cluttered with papers, but none of them mean anything; they are simply window dressing for the cleaning service. Every so often he throws them all out and redistributes a fresh batch. In the center of the desk is a telephone on which he makes occasional random calls so that the phone company won’t register the line as totally inactive. Last year he purchased a copier, and it looks very businesslike over in its corner by the door to the office’s little second room, but it has never been used.

“Do you hear what I hear, do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste,” he murmurs, and crosses to the door leading to the second room. Inside are shelves stacked high with more meaningless paper, two large file-cabinets (there is a Walkman on top of one, his excuse on the few occasions when someone knocks on the locked door and gets no answer), a chair, and a stepladder.

Bill takes the stepladder back to the main room and unfolds it to the left of the desk. He puts his briefcase on top of it. Then he mounts the first three steps of the ladder, reaches up (the bottom half of his

coat bells out and around his legs as he does), and carefully moves aside one of the suspended ceiling panels.

Above is a dark area which cannot quite be called a utility space, although a few pipes and wires do run through it. There's no dust up here, at least not in this immediate area, and no rodent droppings, either—he uses D-Con Mouse-Prufe once a month. He wants to keep his clothes nice as he goes back and forth, of course, but that's not really the important part. The important part is to respect your work and your field. This he learned in the Army, during his time in the green, and he sometimes thinks it is the second most important thing he's ever learned in his life. The most important is that only penance replaces confession, and only penance defines identity. This is a lesson he began learning in 1960, when he was fourteen. That was the last year he could go into the booth and say "Bless me father for I have sinned" and then tell everything.

Penance is important to him.

Gobless, he thinks there in the stale-smelling darkness of the utility space. Gobless you, gobless me, gobless us every one.

Above this narrow space (a ghostly, gentle wind hoots endlessly through it, bringing a smell of dust and the groan of the elevators) is the bottom of the sixth floor, and here is a square trapdoor about thirty inches on a side. Bill installed it himself; he's handy with tools, which is one of the things Sharon appreciates about him.

He flips the trapdoor up, letting in muted light from above, then grabs his briefcase by the handle. As he sticks his head into the space between floors, water rushes gustily down the fat bathroom conduit twenty or thirty feet north of his present position. An hour from now, when the people in the building start their coffee breaks, that sound will be as constant and as rhythmic as waves breaking on a beach. Bill hardly notices this or any of the other interfloor sounds; he's used to them.

He climbs carefully to the top of the stepladder, then boosts himself through into his sixth-floor office, leaving Bill down on Five. Up here he is Willie again, just as he was in high school. Just as he was in Vietnam, where he was sometimes known as Baseball Willie.

This upper office has a sturdy workshop look, with coils and motors and vents stacked neatly on metal shelves and what looks like a filter of some kind squatting on one corner of the desk. It is an office, however; there's a typewriter, a Dictaphone, an IN/OUT basket full of papers (also window dressing, which he periodically rotates like a farmer rotating crops), and file-cabinets. Lots of file-cabinets.

On one wall is a Norman Rockwell painting of a family praying over Thanksgiving dinner. Behind the desk is a framed studio portrait of Willie in his first lieutenant's uniform (taken in Saigon shortly before he won his Silver Star for action at the site of the helicopter crash outside of Dong Ha) and next to it is a blow-up of his honorable discharge, also framed; the name on the sheet is William Shearman, and here his decorations are duly noted. He saved Sullivan's life on the trail outside the 'ville. The citation accompanying the Silver Star says so, the men who survived Dong Ha said so, and more important than either of those, Sullivan said so. It's the first thing he said when they wound up in San Francisco together at the hospital known as the Pussy Palace: You saved my life, man. Willie sitting on Sullivan's bed, Willie with one arm still bandaged and salve all around his eyes, but really okay, yeah, he was cruisin, it was Sullivan who had been badly hurt. That was the day the AP photographer took their picture, the photo that appeared in newspapers all over the country … including the Harwich Journal.

He took my hand, Willie thinks as he stands there in his sixth-floor office with Bill Shearman now a floor down. Above the studio portrait and his discharge is a poster from the sixties. This item, not framed and starting to yellow at the edges, shows the peace sign. Below it, in red, white, and blue, is this punchline: TRACK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN CHICKEN.

He took my hand, he thinks again. Yes, Sullivan had done that, and Willie had come within an ace of leaping to his feet and running back down the ward, screaming. He had been positive that Sullivan would say I know what you did, you and your friends Doolin and O'Meara. Did you think she wouldn't tell me?

Sullivan had said nothing like that. What he'd said was, You saved my life, man, from the old home town and you saved my life. Shit, what are the odds? And we used to be so scared of the boys from St. Gabe's. When he said that, Willie had known for sure that Sullivan had no idea of what Doolin, O'Meara, and he had done to Carol Gerber. There was no relief in knowing he was safe, however. None. And as he smiled and squeezed Sullivan's hand, he had thought: You were right to be scared, Sully. You were right to be.

Willie puts Bill's briefcase on the desk, then lies down on his stomach. He pokes his head and arms into the windy, oil-smelling darkness between floors and replaces the ceiling panel of the fifth-floor office. It's locked up tight; he doesn't expect anyone anyway (he never does; Western States Land Analysts has never had a single customer), but it's better to be safe. Always safe, never sorry.

With his fifth-floor office set to rights, Willie lowers the trapdoor in this one. Up here the trap is hidden by a small rug which is Super-Glued to the wood, so it can go up and down without too much flopping or sliding around.

He gets to his feet, dusts off his hands, then turns to the briefcase and opens it. He takes out the ball of tinsel and puts it on top of the Dictaphone which stands on the desk.

"Good one," he says, thinking again that Sharon can be a real peach when she sets her mind to it … and she often does. He relatches the briefcase and then begins to undress, doing it carefully and methodically, reversing the steps he took at six-thirty, running the film backward. He strips off everything, even his undershorts and his black knee-high socks. Naked, he hangs his topcoat, suit jacket, and shirt carefully in the closet where only one other item hangs—a

heavy red jacket, not quite thick enough to be termed a parka. Below it is a boxlike thing, a little too bulky to be termed a briefcase. Willie puts his Mark Cross case next to it, then places his slacks in the pants press, taking pains with the crease. The tie goes on the rack screwed to the back of the closet door, where it hangs all by itself like a long blue tongue.

He pads barefoot-naked across to one of the file-cabinet stacks. On top of it is an ashtray embossed with a pissed-off-looking eagle and the words IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE. In the ashtray are a pair of dogtags on a chain. Willie slips the chain over his head, then slides out the bottom drawer of the cabinet stack. Inside are underclothes. Neatly folded on top are a pair of khaki boxer shorts. He slips them on. Next come white athletic socks, followed by a white cotton tee-shirt—roundneck, not strappy. The shapes of his dogtags stand out against it, as do his biceps and quads. They aren't as good as they were in A Shau and Dong Ha, but they aren't bad for a guy who is closing in on forty.

Now, before he finishes dressing, it is time for penance.

He goes to another stack of cabinets and rolls out the second drawer. He thumbs rapidly through the bound ledgers there, passing those for late 1982, then thumbing through those from this year: Jan-April, May-June, July, August (he always feels compelled to write more in the summer), September-October, and at last the current volume: November-December. He sits at his desk, opens the ledger, and flicks rapidly through pages of densely packed writing. There are small variations in the writing, but the essence is always the same: I am heartily sorry.

He only writes for ten minutes or so this morning, pen scratching busily, sticking to the basic fact of the matter: I am heartily sorry. He has, to the best of his reckoning, written this over two million times … and is just getting started. Confession would be quicker, but he is willing to take the long way around.

He finishes—no, he never finishes, but he finishes for today—and puts the current ledger back between those finished and all those yet to be filled. Then he returns to the stack of file-cabinets which serve as his chest of drawers. As he opens the one above his socks and skivvies, he begins to hum under his breath—not “Do You Hear What I Hear” but The Doors, the one about how the day destroys the night, the night divides the day.

He slips on a plain blue chambray shirt, then a pair of fatigue pants. He rolls this middle drawer back in and opens the top one. Here there is a scrapbook and a pair of boots. He takes the scrapbook out and looks at its red leather cover for a moment. The word MEMORIES is stamped on the front in flaking gold. It’s a cheap thing, this book. He could afford better, but you don’t always have a right to what you can afford.

In the summer he writes more sorries but memory seems to sleep. It is in winter, especially around Christmas, that memory awakens. Then he wants to look in this book, which is full of clippings and photos where everyone looks impossibly young.

Today he puts the scrapbook back into the drawer unopened and takes out the boots. They are polished to a high sheen and look as if they might last until the trump of judgment. Maybe even longer. They aren’t standard Army issue, not these—these are jump-boots, 101st Airborne stuff. But that’s all right. He isn’t actually trying to dress like a soldier. If he wanted to dress like a soldier, he would.

Still, there is no more reason to look sloppy than there is to allow dust to collect in the pass-through, and he’s careful about the way he dresses. He does not tuck his pants into his boots, of course—he’s headed for Fifth Avenue in December, not the Mekong in August, snakes and poppy-bugs are not apt to be a problem—but he intends to look squared away. Looking good is as important to him as it is to Bill, maybe even more important. Respecting one’s work and one’s field begins, after all, with respecting one’s self.

The last two items are in the back of the top drawer of his bureau stack: a tube of makeup and a jar of hair gel. He squeezes some of the makeup into the palm of his left hand, then begins applying it, working from forehead to the base of his neck. He moves with the unconcerned speed of long experience, giving himself a moderate tan. With that done, he works some of the gel into his hair and then recombs it, getting rid of the part and sweeping it straight back from his forehead. It is the last touch, the smallest touch, and perhaps the most telling touch. There is no trace of the commuter who walked out of Grand Central an hour ago; the man in the mirror mounted on the back of the door to the small storage annex looks like a washed-up mercenary. There is a kind of silent, half-humbled pride in the tanned face, something people won't look at too long. It hurts them if they do. Willie knows this is so; he has seen it. He doesn't ask why it should be so. He has made himself a life pretty much without questions, and that's the way he likes it.

"All right," he says, closing the door to the storage room. "Lookin good, trooper."

He goes back to the closet for the red jacket, which is the reversible type, and the boxy case. He slips the jacket over his desk chair for the time being and puts the case on the desk. He unlatches it and swings the top up on sturdy hinges; now it looks a little like the cases street salesmen use to display their knockoff watches and questionable gold chains. There are only a few items in Willie's, one of them broken down into two pieces so it will fit. There is a sign. There is a pair of gloves, the kind you wear in cold weather, and a third glove which he used to wear when it was warm. He takes out the pair (he will want them today, no doubt about that), and then the sign on its length of stout cord. The cord has been knotted through holes in the cardboard at either side, so Willie can hang the sign around his neck. He closes the case again, not bothering to latch it, and puts the sign on top of it—the desk is so cluttery, it's the only good surface he has to work on.

Humming (we chased our pleasures here, dug our treasures there), he opens the wide drawer above the kneehole, paws past the pencils and Chap Sticks and paperclips and memo pads, and finally finds his stapler. He then unrolls the ball of tinsel, placing it carefully around the rectangle of his sign. He snips off the extra and staples the shiny stuff firmly into place. He holds it up for a moment, first assessing the effect, then admiring it.

“Perfect!” he says.

The telephone rings and he stiffens, turning to look at it with eyes which are suddenly very small and hard and totally alert. One ring. Two. Three. On the fourth, the machine kicks in, answering in his voice—the version of it that goes with this office, anyway.

“Hi, you’ve reached Midtown Heating and Cooling,” Willie Shearman says. “No one can take your call right now, so leave a message at the beep.”

Bee-eep.

He listens tensely, standing over his just-decorated sign with his hands balled into fists.

“Hi, this is Ed, from the NYNEX Yellow Pages,” the voice from the machine says, and Willie lets out a breath he hasn’t known he was holding. His hands begin to loosen. “Please have your company rep call me at 1-800-555-1000 for information on how you can increase your ad space in both versions of the Yellow Pages, and at the same time save big money on your yearly bill. Happy holidays to all! Thanks.”

Click.

Willie looks at the answering machine a moment longer, almost as if he expects it to speak again—to threaten him, perhaps to accuse him of all the crimes of which he accuses himself—but nothing happens.

“Squared away,” he murmurs, putting the decorated sign back into the case. This time when he closes it, he latches it. Across the front is a bumper sticker, its message flanked by small American flags. I WAS PROUD TO SERVE, it reads.

“Squared away, baby, you better believe it.”

He leaves the office, closing the door with MIDTOWN HEATING AND COOLING printed on the frosted-glass panel behind him, and turning all three of the locks.

9:45 A.M.

Halfway down the hall, he sees Ralph Williamson, one of the tubby accountants from Garowicz Financial Planning (all the accountants at Garowicz are tubby, from what Willie has been able to observe). There’s a key chained to an old wooden paddle in one of Ralph’s pink hands, and from this Willie deduces that he is looking at an accountant in need of a wee. Key on a paddle! If a fuckin key on a fuckin paddle won’t make you remember the joys of parochial school, remember all those hairy-chin nuns and all those knuckle-whacking wooden rulers, then nothing will, he thinks. And you know what? Ralph Williamson probably likes having that key on a paddle, just like he likes having a soap on a rope in the shape of a bunny rabbit or a circus clown hanging from the HOT faucet in his shower at home. And so what if he does? Judge not, lest ye be fuckin judged.

“Hey, Ralphie, what’s doin?”

Ralph turns, sees Willie, brightens. “Hey, hi, merry Christmas!”

Willie grins at the look in Ralph’s eyes. Tubby little fucker worships him, and why not? Ralph is looking at a guy so squared away it hurts. Gotta like it, sweetheart, gotta like that.

“Same to you, bro.” He holds out his hand (now gloved, so he doesn’t have to worry about it being too white, not matching his

face), palm up. “Gimme five!”

Smiling shyly, Ralph does.

“Gimme ten!”

Ralph turns his pink, pudgy hand over and allows Willie to slap it.

“So goddam good I gotta do it again!” Willie exclaims, and gives Ralph five more. “Got your Christmas shopping done, Ralphie?”

“Almost,” Ralph says, grinning and jingling the bathroom key. “Yes, almost. How about you, Willie?”

Willie tips him a wink. “Oh, you know how it is, brother-man; I got two-three women, and I just let each of em buy me a little keepsake.”

Ralph’s admiring smile suggests he does not, in fact, know how it is, but rather wishes he did. “Got a service call?”

“A whole day’s worth. ‘Tis the season, you know.”

“Seems like it’s always the season for you. Business must be good. You’re hardly ever in your office.”

“That’s why God gave us answering machines, Ralphie. You better go on, now, or you’re gonna be dealin with a wet spot on your best gabardine slacks.”

Laughing (blushing a little, too), Ralph heads for the men’s room.

Willie goes on down to the elevators, carrying his case in hand and checking to make sure his glasses are still in his jacket pocket with the other. They are. The envelope is in there, too, thick and crackling with twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen of them. It’s time for a little visit from Officer Wheelock; Willie expected him yesterday. Maybe he won’t show until tomorrow, but Willie is betting on today … not that he likes it. He knows it’s the way of the world, you have to grease the wheels if you want your wagon to roll, but he still has a resentment. There

are lots of days when he thinks about how pleasant it would be to put a bullet in Jasper Wheelock's head. It was the way things happened in the green, sometimes. The way things had to happen. That thing with Malenfant, for instance. That crazy motherfucker, him with his pimples and his deck of cards.

Oh yes, in the bush things were different. In the bush you sometimes had to do something wrong to prevent an even greater wrong. Behavior like that shows that you're in the wrong place to start with, no doubt, but once you're in the soup, you just have to swim. He and his men from Bravo Company were only with the Delta Company boys a few days, so Willie didn't have much experience with Malenfant, but his shrill, grating voice is hard to forget, and he remembers something Malenfant would yell during his endless Hearts games if someone tried to take back a card after it was laid down: No way, fuckwad! Once it's laid, it's played!

Malenfant might have been an asshole, but he had been right about that. In life as well as in cards, once it's laid, it's played.

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The elevator doesn't stop on Five, but the thought of that happening no longer makes him nervous. He has ridden down to the lobby many times with people who work on the same floor as Bill Shearman—including the scrawny drink of water from Consolidated Insurance—and they don't recognize him. They should, he knows they should, but they don't. He used to think it was the change of clothes and the makeup, then he decided it was the hair, but in his heart he knows that none of those things can account for it. Not even their numb-hearted insensitivity to the world they live in can account for it. What he's doing just isn't that radical—fatigue pants, billyhop boots, and a little brown makeup don't make a disguise. No way do they make a disguise. He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, and so mostly leaves it alone. He learned this technique, as he learned so many others, in Vietnam.

The young black man is still standing outside the lobby door (he's flipped up the hood of his grungy old sweatshirt now), and he shakes his crumpled styrofoam cup at Willie. He sees that the dude carrying the Mr. Repairman case in one hand is smiling, and so his own smile widens.

"Spare a lil?" he asks Mr. Repairman. "What do you say, my man?"

"Get the fuck out of my way, you lazy dickhead, that's what I say," Willie tells him, still smiling. The young man falls back a step, looking at Willie with wide shocked eyes. Before he can think of anything to say, Mr. Repairman is halfway down the block and almost lost in the throngs of shoppers, his big blocky case swinging from one gloved hand.

10:00 A.M.

He goes into the Whitmore Hotel, crosses the lobby, and takes the escalator up to the mezzanine, where the public restrooms are. This is the only part of the day he ever feels nervous about, and he can't say why; certainly nothing has ever happened before, during, or after one of his hotel bathroom stops (he rotates among roughly two dozen of them in the midtown area). Still, he is somehow certain that if things do turn dinky-dau on him, it will happen in a hotel shithouse. Because what happens next is not like transforming from Bill Shearman to Willie Shearman; Bill and Willie are brothers, perhaps even fraternal twins, and the switch from one to the other feels clean and perfectly normal. The workday's final transformation, however—from Willie Shearman to Blind Willie Garfield—has never felt that way. The last change always feels murky, furtive, almost werewolfy. Until it's done and he's on the street again, tapping his white cane in front of him, he feels as a snake must after it's shed its old skin and before the new one works in and grows tough.

He looks around and sees the men's bathroom is empty except for a pair of feet under the door of the second stall in a long row of them—there must be a dozen in all. A throat clears softly. A newspaper rattles. There is the ffft sound of a polite little midtown fart.

Willie goes all the way to the last stall in line. He puts down his case, latches the door shut, and takes off his red jacket. He turns it inside-out as he does so, reversing it. The other side is olive green. It has become an old soldier's field jacket with a single pull of the arms. Sharon, who really does have a touch of genius, bought this side of his coat in an army surplus store and tore out the lining so she could sew it easily into the red jacket. Before sewing, however, she put a first lieutenant's badge on it, plus black strips of cloth where the name-and-unit slugs would have gone. She then washed the garment thirty times or so. The badge and the unit markings are gone, now, of course, but the places where they were stand out clearly—the cloth is greener on the sleeves and the left breast, fresher in patterns any veteran of the armed services must recognize at once.

Willie hangs the coat on the hook, drops trou, sits, then picks up his case and settles it on his thighs. He opens it, takes out the disassembled cane, and quickly screws the two pieces together. Holding it far down the shaft, he reaches up from his sitting position and hooks the handle over the top of his jacket. Then he relatches the case, pulls a little paper off the roll in order to create the proper business-is-finished sound effect (probably unnecessary, but always safe, never sorry), and flushes the john.

Before stepping out of the stall he takes the glasses from the jacket pocket which also holds the payoff envelope. They're big wraparounds; retro shades he associates with lava lamps and outlaw-biker movies starring Peter Fonda. They're good for business, though, partly because they somehow say veteran to people, and partly because no one can peek in at his eyes, even from the sides.

Willie Shearman stays behind in the mezzanine restroom of the Whitmore just as Bill Shearman stays behind in the fifth-floor office of Western States Land Analysts. The man who comes out—a man wearing an old fatigue jacket, shades, and tapping a white cane

lightly before him—is Blind Willie, a Fifth Avenue fixture since the days of Gerald Ford.

As he crosses the small mezzanine lobby toward the stairs (unaccompanied blind men never use escalators), he sees a woman in a red blazer coming toward him. With the heavily tinted lenses between them, she looks like some sort of exotic fish swimming in muddy water. And of course it is not just the glasses; by two this afternoon he really will be blind, just as he kept screaming he was when he and John Sullivan and God knows how many others were medevacked out of Dong Ha Province back in ‘70. I’m blind, he was yelling it even as he picked Sullivan up off the path, but he hadn’t been, exactly; through the throbbing post-flash whiteness he had seen Sullivan rolling around and trying to hold his bulging guts in. He had picked Sullivan up and ran with him clasped clumsily over one shoulder. Sullivan was bigger than Willie, a lot bigger, and Willie had no idea how he could possibly have carried such a weight but somehow he had, all the way to the clearing where Hueys like God’s mercy had taken them off—gobless you Hueys, gobless, oh gobless you every one. He had run to the clearing and the copters with bullets whicking all around him and body-parts made in America lying on the trail where the mine or the booby-trap or whatever the fuck it was had gone off.

I’m blind, he had screamed, carrying Sullivan, feeling Sullivan’s blood drenching his uniform, and Sullivan had been screaming, too. If Sullivan had stopped screaming, would Willie have simply rolled the man off his shoulder and gone on alone, trying to outrun the ambush? Probably not. Because by then he knew who Sullivan was, exactly who he was, he was Sully from the old home town, Sully who had gone out with Carol Gerber from the old home town.

I’m blind, I’m blind, I’m blind! That’s what Willie Shearman was screaming as he toted Sullivan, and it’s true that much of the world was blast-white, but he still remembers seeing bullets twitch through leaves and thud into the trunks of trees; remembers seeing one of the men who had been in the ‘ville earlier that day clap his hand to

his throat. He remembers seeing the blood come bursting through that man's fingers in a flood, drenching his uniform. One of the other men from Delta Company two-two—Pagano, his name had been—grabbed this fellow around the middle and hustled him past the staggering Willie Shearman, who really couldn't see very much. Screaming I'm blind I'm blind I'm blind and smelling Sullivan's blood, the stink of it. And in the copter that whiteness had started to come on strong. His face was burned, his hair was burned, his scalp was burned, the world was white. He was scorched and smoking, just one more escapee from hell's half acre. He had believed he would never see again, and that had actually been a relief. But of course he had.

In time, he had.

The woman in the red blazer has reached him. "Can I help you, sir?" she asks.

"No, ma'am," Blind Willie says. The ceaselessly moving cane stops tapping floor and quests over emptiness. It pendulums back and forth, mapping the sides of the staircase. Blind Willie nods, then moves carefully but confidently forward until he can touch the railing with the hand which holds the bulky case. He switches the case to his cane-hand so he can grasp the railing, then turns toward the woman. He's careful not to smile directly at her but a little to her left. "No, thank you—I'm fine. Merry Christmas."

He starts downstairs tapping ahead of him as he goes, big case held easily in spite of the cane—it's light, almost empty. Later, of course, it will be a different story.

10:15 A.M.

Fifth Avenue is decked out for the holiday season—glitter and finery he can barely see. Streetlamps wear garlands of holly. The big stores have become garish Christmas packages, complete with gigantic red bows. A wreath which must be forty feet across graces the staid beige facade of Brooks Brothers. Lights twinkle

everywhere. In Saks' show-window, a high-fashion mannequin (haughty fuck-you-Jack expression, almost no tits or hips) sits astride a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. She is wearing a Santa hat, a fur-trimmed motorcycle jacket, thigh-high boots, and nothing else. Silver bells hang from the cycle's handlebars. Somewhere nearby, carolers are singing "Silent Night," not exactly Blind Willie's favorite tune, but a good deal better than "Do You Hear What I Hear."

He stops where he always stops, in front of St. Patrick's, across the street from Saks, allowing the package-laden shoppers to flood past in front of him. His movements now are simple and dignified. His discomfort in the men's room—that feeling of gawky nakedness about to be exposed—has passed. He never feels more Catholic than when he arrives on this spot. He was a St. Gabe's boy, after all; wore the cross, wore the surplice and took his turn as altar-boy, knelt in the booth, ate the hated haddock on Fridays. He is in many ways still a St. Gabe's boy, all three versions of him have that in common, that part crossed the years and got over, as they used to say. Only these days he does penance instead of confession, and his certainty of heaven is gone. These days all he can do is hope.

He squats, unlatches the case, and turns it so those approaching from uptown will be able to read the sticker on the top. Next he takes out the third glove, the baseball glove he has had since the summer of 1960. He puts the glove beside the case. Nothing breaks more hearts than a blind man with a baseball glove, he has found; gobless America.

Last but not least, he takes out the sign with its brave skirting of tinsel, and ducks under the string. The sign comes to rest against the front of his field jacket.

FORMER 1 LT. WILLIAM J. GARFIELD, U.S. ARMY

SERVED QUANG TRI, THUA THIEN, TAM BOI, A SHAU

LOST MY SIGHT DONG HA PROVINCE 1970

ROBBED OF BENEFITS BY A GRATEFUL GOVERNMENT 1973

LOST HOME 1975

ASHAMED TO BEG BUT HAVE A SON IN SCHOOL

THINK WELL OF ME IF YOU CAN

He raises his head so that the white light of this cold, almost-ready-to-snow day slides across the blind bulbs of his dark glasses. Now the work begins, and it is harder work than anyone will ever know. There is a way to stand, not quite the military posture which is called parade rest, but close to it. The head must stay up, looking both at and through the people who pass back and forth in their thousands and tens of thousands. The hands must hang straight down in their black gloves, never fiddling with the sign or with the fabric of his pants or with each other. He must continue to project that sense of hurt, humbled pride. There must be no sense of shame or shaming, and most of all no taint of insanity. He never speaks unless spoken to, and only then when he is spoken to in kindness. He does not respond to people who ask him angrily why he doesn't get a real job, or what he means about being robbed of his benefits. He does not argue with those who accuse him of fakery or speak scornfully of a son who would allow his father to put him through school by begging on a streetcorner. He remembers breaking this ironclad rule only once, on a sweltering summer afternoon in 1981. What school does your son go to? a woman asked him angrily. He doesn't know what she looked like, by then it was four o'clock and he had been as blind as a bat for at least two hours, but he had felt anger exploding out of her in all directions, like bedbugs exiting an old mattress. In a way she had reminded him of Malenfant with his shrill you-can't-not-hear-it voice. Tell me which one, I want to mail him a dog turd. Don't bother, he replied, turning toward the sound of her voice. If you've got a dog turd you want to mail somewhere, send it to LBJ. Federal Express must deliver to hell, they deliver everyplace else.

"God bless you, man," a guy in a cashmere overcoat says, and his voice trembles with surprising emotion. Except Blind Willie Garfield

isn’t surprised. He’s heard it all, he reckons, and a bit more. A surprising number of his customers put their money carefully and reverently in the pocket of the baseball glove. The guy in the cashmere coat drops his contribution into the open case, however, where it properly belongs. A five. The workday has begun.

10:45 A.M.

So far, so good. He lays his cane down carefully, drops to one knee, and dumps the contents of the baseball glove into the box. Then he sweeps a hand back and forth through the bills, although he can still see them pretty well. He picks them up—there’s four or five hundred dollars in all, which puts him on the way to a three-thousand-dollar day, not great for this time of year, but not bad, either—then rolls them up and slips a rubber band around them. He then pushes a button on the inside of the case, and the false floor drops down on springs, dumping the load of change all the way to the bottom. He adds the roll of bills, making no attempt to hide what he’s doing, but feeling no qualms about it, either; in all the years he has been doing this, no one has ever taken him off. God help the asshole who ever tries.

He lets go of the button, allowing the false floor to snap back into place, and stands up. A hand immediately presses into the small of his back.

“Merry Christmas, Willie,” the owner of the hand says. Blind Willie recognizes him by the smell of his cologne.

“Merry Christmas, Officer Wheelock,” Willie responds. His head remains tilted upward in a faintly questioning posture; his hands hang at his sides; his feet in their brightly polished boots remain apart in a stance not quite wide enough to be parade rest but nowhere near tight enough to pass as attention. “How are you today, sir?”

“In the pink, motherfucker,” Wheelock says. “You know me, always in the pink.”

Here comes a man in a topcoat hanging open over a bright red ski sweater. His hair is short, black on top, gray on the sides. His face has a stern, carved look Blind Willie recognizes at once. He's got a couple of handle-top bags—one from Saks, one from Bally—in his hands. He stops and reads the sign.

"Dong Ha?" he asks suddenly, speaking not as a man does when naming a place but as one does when recognizing an old acquaintance on a busy street.

"Yes, sir," Blind Willie says.

"Who was your CO?"

"Captain Bob Brissum—with a u, not an o—and above him, Colonel Andrew Shelf, sir."

"I heard of Shelf," says the man in the open coat. His face suddenly looks different. As he walked toward the man on the corner, it looked as if it belonged on Fifth Avenue. Now it doesn't. "Never met him, though."

"Toward the end of my run, we didn't see anyone with much rank, sir."

"If you came out of the A Shau Valley, I'm not surprised. Are we on the same page here, soldier?"

"Yes, sir. There wasn't much command structure left by the time we hit Dong Ha. I pretty much rolled things along with another lieutenant. His name was Dieffenbaker."

The man in the red ski sweater is nodding slowly. "You boys were there when those helicopters came down, if I've got this placed right."

"That's affirmative, sir."

"Then you must have been there later, when …"

Blind Willie does not help him finish. He can smell Wheelock's cologne, though, stronger than ever, and the man is practically panting in his ear, sounding like a horny kid at the end of a hot date. Wheelock has never bought his act, and although Blind Willie pays for the privilege of being left alone on this corner, and quite handsomely by going rates, he knows that part of Wheelock is still cop enough to hope he'll fuck up. Part of Wheelock is actively rooting for that. But the Wheelocks of the world never understand that what looks fake isn't always fake. Sometimes the issues are a little more complicated than they appear at first glance. That was something else Vietnam had to teach him, back in the years before it became a political joke and a crutch for hack filmwriters.

"Sixty-nine and seventy were the hard years," the graying man says. He speaks in a slow, heavy voice. "I was at Hamburger Hill with the 3/187, so I know the A Shau and Tam Boi. Do you remember Route 922?"

"Ah, yes, sir, Glory Road," Blind Willie says. "I lost two friends there."

"Glory Road," the man in the open coat says, and all at once he looks a thousand years old, the bright red ski sweater an obscenity, like something hung on a museum mummy by cutup kids who believe they are exhibiting a sense of humor. His eyes are off over a hundred horizons. Then they come back here, to this street where a nearby carillon is playing the one that goes I hear those sleighbells jingling, ring-ting-tingling too. He sets his bags down between his expensive shoes and takes a pigskin wallet out from an inner pocket. He opens it, riffles through a neat thickness of bills.

"Son all right, Garfield?" he asks. "Making good grades?"

"Yes, sir."

"How old?"

"Fifteen, sir."

“Public school?”

“Parochial, sir.”

“Excellent. And God willing, he’ll never see Glory Fuckin Road.” The man in the open topcoat takes a bill out of his wallet. Blind Willie feels as well as hears Wheelock’s little gasp and hardly has to look at the bill to know it is a hundred.

“Yes, sir, that’s affirmative, God willing.”

The man in the topcoat touches Willie’s hand with the bill, looks surprised when the gloved hand pulls back, as if it were bare and had been touched by something hot.

“Put it in my case or my ball-glove, sir, if you would,” Blind Willie says.

The man in the topcoat looks at him for a moment, eyebrows raised, frowning slightly, then seems to understand. He stoops, puts the bill in the ancient oiled pocket of the glove with GARFIELD printed in blue ink on the side, then reaches into his front pocket and brings out a small handful of change. This he scatters across the face of old Ben Franklin, in order to hold the bill down. Then he stands up. His eyes are wet and bloodshot.

“Do you any good to give you my card?” he asks Blind Willie. “I can put you in touch with several veterans’ organizations.”

“Thank you, sir, I’m sure you could, but I must respectfully decline.”

“Tried most of them?”

“Tried some, yes, sir.”

“Where’d you V.A.?”

“San Francisco, sir.” He hesitates, then adds, “The Pussy Palace, sir.”

The man in the topcoat laughs heartily at this, and when his face crinkles, the tears which have been standing in his eyes run down his weathered cheeks. “Pussy Palace!” he cries. “I haven’t heard that in ten years! Christ! A bedpan under every bed and a naked nurse between every set of sheets, right? Naked except for the lovebeads, which they left on.”

“Yes, sir, that about covers it, sir.”

“Or uncovers it. Merry Christmas, soldier.” The man in the topcoat ticks off a little one-finger salute.

“Merry Christmas to you, sir.”

The man in the topcoat picks up his bags again and walks off. He doesn’t look back. Blind Willie would not have seen him do so if he had; his vision is now down to ghosts and shadows.

“That was beautiful,” Wheelock murmurs. The feeling of Wheelock’s freshly used air puffing into the cup of his ear is hateful to Blind Willie —gruesome, in fact—but he will not give the man the pleasure of moving his head so much as an inch. “The old fuck was actually crying. As I’m sure you saw. But you can talk the talk, Willie, I’ll give you that much.”

Willie says nothing.

“Some V.A. hospital called the Pussy Palace, huh?” Wheelock asks. “Sounds like my kind of place. Where’d you read about it, Soldier of Fortune?”

The shadow of a woman, a dark shape in a darkening day, bends over the open case and drops something in. A gloved hand touches Willie’s gloved hand and squeezes briefly. “God bless you, my friend,” she says.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

The shadow moves off. The little puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear do not.

"You got something for me, pal?" Wheelock asks.

Blind Willie reaches into his jacket pocket. He produces the envelope and holds it out, jabbing the chilly air with it. It is snatched from his fingers as soon as Wheelock can track it down and get hold of it.

"You asshole!" There's fear as well as anger in the cop's voice. "How many times have I told you, palm it, palm it!"

Blind Willie says nothing. He is thinking of the baseball glove, how he erased BOBBY GARFIELD—as well as you could erase ink from leather, anyway—and then printed Willie Shearman's name in its place. Later, after Vietnam and just as he was starting his new career, he erased a second time and printed a single name, GARFIELD, in big block letters. The place on the side of the old Alvin Dark glove where all these changes have been made looks flayed and raw. If he thinks of the glove, if he concentrates on that scuffed place and its layer of names, he can probably keep from doing something stupid. That's what Wheelock wants, of course, what he wants a lot more than his shitty little payoff: for Willie to do something stupid, to give himself away.

"How much?" Wheelock asks after a moment.

"Three hundred," Blind Willie says. "Three hundred dollars, Officer Wheelock."

This is greeted by a little thinking silence, but Wheelock takes a step back from Blind Willie, and the puffs of breath in his ear diffuse a little. Blind Willie is grateful for small favors.

"That's okay," Wheelock says at last. "This time. But a new year's coming, pal, and your friend Jasper the Police-Smurf has a piece of land in upstate New York that he wants to build a little cabana on. You capeesh? The price of poker is going up."

Blind Willie says nothing, but he is listening very, very carefully now. If this were all, all would be well. But Wheelock's voice suggests it isn't all.

"Actually, the cabana isn't the important part," Wheelock goes on. "The important thing is I need a little better compensation if I have to deal with a lowlife fuck like you." Genuine anger is creeping into his voice. "How you can do this every day—even at Christmas—man, I don't know. People who beg, that's one thing, but a guy like you … you're no more blind than I am."

Oh, you're lots blinder than me, Blind Willie thinks, but still he holds his peace.

"And you're doing okay, aren't you? Probably not as good as those PTL fucks on the tube, but you must clear … what? A grand a day, this time a year? Two grand?"

He is way low, but the miscalculation is music to Blind Willie Garfield's ears. It means that his silent partner is not watching him too closely or too frequently … not yet, anyway. But he doesn't like the anger in Wheelock's voice. Anger is like a wild card in a poker game.

"You're no more blind than I am," Wheelock repeats. Apparently this is the part that really gets him. "Hey, pal, you know what? I ought to follow you some night when you get off work, you know? See what you do." He pauses. "Who you turn into."

For a moment Blind Willie actually stops breathing … then he starts again.

"You wouldn't want to do that, Officer Wheelock," he says.

"I wouldn't, huh? Why not, Willie? Why not? You lookin out for my welfare, is that it? Afraid I might kill the shitass who lays the golden eggs? Hey, what I get from you in the course of a year ain't all that much when you weigh it against a commendation, maybe a

promotion.” He pauses. When he speaks again, his voice has a dreamy quality which Willie finds especially alarming. “I could be in the Post. HERO COP BUSTS HEARTLESS SCAM ARTIST ON FIFTH AVENUE.”

Jesus, Willie thinks. Good Jesus, he sounds serious.

“Says Garfield on your glove there, but I’d bet Garfield ain’t your name. I’d bet dollars to doughnuts.”

“That’s a bet you’d lose.”

“Says you … but the side of that glove looks like it’s seen more than one name written there.”

“It was stolen when I was a kid.” Is he talking too much? It’s hard to say. Wheelock has managed to catch him by surprise, the bastard. First the phone rings while he’s in his office—good old Ed from NYNEX—and now this. “The boy who stole it from me wrote his name in it while he had it. When I got it back, I erased his and put mine on again.”

“And it went to Vietnam with you?”

“Yes.” It’s the truth. If Sullivan had seen that battered Alvin Dark fielder’s mitt, would he have recognized it as his old friend Bobby’s? Unlikely, but who could know? Sullivan never had seen it, not in the green, at least, which made the whole question moot. Officer Jasper Wheelock, on the other hand, was posing all sorts of questions, and none of them were moot.

“Went to this Achoo Valley with you, did it?”

Blind Willie doesn’t reply. Wheelock is trying to lead him on now, and there’s noplace Wheelock can lead that Willie Garfield wants to go.

“Went to this Tomboy place with you?”

Willie says nothing.

“Man, I thought a tomboy was a chick that liked to climb trees.”

Willie continues to say nothing.

“The Post,” Wheelock says, and Willie dimly sees the asshole raise his hands slightly apart, as if framing a picture. “HERO COP.” He might just be teasing … but Willie can’t tell.

“You’d be in the Post, all right, but there wouldn’t be any commendation,” Blind Willie says. “No promotion, either. In fact, you’d be out on the street, Officer Wheelock, looking for a job. You could skip applying for one with security companies, though—a man who’ll take a payoff can’t be bonded.”

It is Wheelock’s turn to stop breathing. When he starts again, the puffs of breath in Blind Willie’s ear have become a hurricane; the cop’s moving mouth is almost on his skin. “What do you mean?” he whispers. A hand settles on the arm of Blind Willie’s field jacket. “You just tell me what the fuck you mean.”

But Blind Willie continues silent, hands at his sides, head slightly raised, looking attentively into the darkness that will not clear until daylight is almost gone, and on his face is that lack of expression which so many passersby read as ruined pride, courage brought low but somehow still intact.

Better be careful, Officer Wheelock, he thinks. The ice under you is getting thin. I may be blind, but you must be deaf if you can’t hear the sound of it cracking under your feet.

The hand on his arm shakes him slightly. Wheelock’s fingers are digging in. “You got a friend? Is that it, you son of a bitch? Is that why you hold the envelope out that way half the damned time? You got a friend taking my picture? Is that it?”

Blind Willie goes on saying nothing; to Jasper the Police-Smurf he is now giving a sermon of silence. People like Officer Wheelock will

always think the worst if you let them. You only have to give them time to do it.

“You don’t want to fuck with me, pal,” Wheelock says viciously, but there is a subtle undertone of worry in his voice, and the hand on Blind Willie’s jacket loosens. “We’re going up to four hundred a month starting in January, and if you try playing any games with me, I’m going to show you where the real playground is. You understand me?”

Blind Willie says nothing. The puffs of air stop hitting his ear, and he knows Wheelock is getting ready to go. But not yet, alas; the nasty little puffs come back.

“You’ll burn in hell for what you’re doing,” Wheelock tells him. He speaks with great, almost fervent, sincerity. “What I’m doing when I take your dirty money is a venial sin—I asked the priest, so I’m sure—but yours is mortal. You’re going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.”

Blind Willie thinks of a jacket Willie and Bill Shearman sometimes see on the street. There is a map of Vietnam on the back, usually the years the wearer of the jacket spent there, and this message: WHEN I DIE I’M GOING STRAIGHT TO HEAVEN, BECAUSE I SPENT MY TIME IN HELL. He could mention this sentiment to Officer Wheelock, but it would do no good. Silence is better.

Wheelock walks away, and Willie’s thought—that he’s glad to see him go—causes a rare smile to touch his face. It comes and goes like an errant ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

1:40 P.M.

Three times he has banded the bills into rolls and dumped the change into the bottom of the case (this is really a storage function, and not an effort at concealment), now working completely by touch. He can no longer see the money, doesn’t know a one from a hundred, but he senses he is having a very good day indeed. There

is no pleasure in the knowledge, however. There's never much, pleasure is not what Blind Willie is about, but even the sense of accomplishment he might have felt on another day has been muted by his conversation with Officer Wheelock.

At quarter to twelve, a young woman with a pretty voice (to Blind Willie she sounds like Diana Ross) comes out of Saks and gives him a cup of hot coffee, as she does most days at this time. At quarter past, another woman—this one not so young, and probably white—brings him a cup of steaming chicken noodle soup. He thanks them both. The white lady kisses his cheek with soft lips and wishes him the merriest of merry Christmases.

There is a counterbalancing side to the day, though; there almost always is. Around one o'clock a teenage boy with his unseen gang of buddies laughing and joking and skylarking all around him speaks out of the darkness to Blind Willie's left, says he is one ugly motherfuck, then asks if he wears those gloves because he burned his fingers off trying to read the waffle iron. He and his friends charge off, howling with laughter at this ancient jape. Fifteen minutes or so later someone kicks him, although that might have been an accident. Every time he bends over to the case, however, the case is right there. It is a city of hustlers, muggers, and thieves, but the case is right there, just as it has always been right there.

And through it all, he thinks about Wheelock.

The cop before Wheelock was easy; the one who comes when Wheelock either quits the force or gets moved out of Midtown may also be easy. Wheelock will shake, bake, or flake eventually, that's something else he learned in the bush, and in the meantime, he, Blind Willie, must bend like a reed in a windstorm. Except even the limberest reed breaks if the wind blows hard enough.

Wheelock wants more money, but that isn't what bothers the man in the dark glasses and the army coat; sooner or later they all want more money. When he started on this corner, he paid Officer Hanratty a hundred and a quarter. Hanratty was a live-and-let-live

type of guy who smelled of Old Spice and whiskey just like George Raymer, the neighborhood beat-cop of Willie Shearman's childhood, but easygoing Eric Hanratty'd still had Blind Willie up to two hundred a month by the time he retired in 1978. And the thing is—dig it, my brothers—Wheelock was angry this morning, angry, and Wheelock talked about having consulted a priest. These things worry him, but what worries him most of all is what Wheelock said about following him. See what you do. Who you turn into. Garfield ain't your name. I'd bet dollars to doughnuts.

It's a mistake to fuck with the truly penitential, Officer Wheelock, Blind Willie thinks. You'd be safer fucking with my wife than with my name, believe me. Safer by far.

Wheelock could do it, though—what could be simpler than shadowing a blind man, or even one who can see little more than shadows? Simpler than watching him turn into some hotel and enter the public men's room? Watching him go into a stall as Blind Willie Garfield and come out as Willie Shearman? Suppose Wheelock was even able to backtrail him from Willie to Bill?

Thinking this brings back his morning jitters, his feeling of being a snake between skins. The fear that he has been photographed taking a bribe will hold Wheelock for awhile, but if he is angry enough, there is no predicting what he may do. And that is scary.

"God love you, soldier," says a voice out of the darkness. "I wish I could do more."

"Not necessary, sir," Blind Willie says, but his mind is still on Jasper Wheelock, who smells of cheap cologne and talked to a priest about the blind man with the sign, the blind man who is not, in Wheelock's opinion, blind at all. What had he said? You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there. "Have a very merry Christmas, sir, thank you for helping me."

And the day goes on.

4:25 P.M.

His sight has started to re-surface—dim, distant, but there. It is his cue to pack up and go.

He kneels, back ramrod-stiff, and lays his cane behind the case again. He bands the last of the bills, dumps them and the last coins into the bottom of the case, then puts the baseball glove and the tinsel-decorated sign inside. He latches the case and stands up, holding his cane in the other hand. Now the case is heavy, dragging at his arm with the dead weight of all that well-meant metal. There is a heavy rattling crunch as the coins avalanche into a new position, and then they are as still as ore plugged deep in the ground.

He sets off down Fifth, dangling the case at the end of his left arm like an anchor (after all these years he's used to the weight of it, could carry it much farther than he'll need to this afternoon, if circumstances demanded), holding the cane in his right hand and tapping it delicately on the paving in front of him. The cane is magic, opening a pocket of empty space before him on the crowded, jostling sidewalk in a teardrop-shaped wave. By the time he gets to Fifth and Forty-third, he can actually see this space. He can also see the DON'T WALK sign at Forty-second stop flashing and hold solid, but he keeps walking anyway, letting a well-dressed man with long hair and gold chains reach out and grasp his shoulder to stop him.

"Watch it, my man," the longhair says. "Traffic's on the way."

"Thank you, sir," Blind Willie says.

"Don't mention it—merry Christmas."

Blind Willie crosses, passes the lions standing sentry at the Public Library, and goes down two more blocks, where he turns toward Sixth Avenue. No one accosts him; no one has loitered, watching him collect all day long, and then followed, waiting for the opportunity to bag the case and run (not that many thieves could run with it, not this case). Once, back in the summer of '79, two or three young

guys, maybe black (he couldn't say for sure; they sounded black, but his vision had been slow returning that day, it was always slower in warm weather, when the days stayed bright longer), had accosted him and begun talking to him in a way he didn't quite like. It wasn't like the kids this afternoon, with their jokes about reading the waffle iron and what does a Playboy centerfold look like in Braille. It was softer than that, and in some weird fashion almost kind—questions about how much he took in by St. Pat's back there, and would he perchance be generous enough to make a contribution to something called the Polo Recreational League, and did he want a little protection getting to his bus stop or train station or whatever. One, perhaps a budding sexologist, had asked if he liked a little young pussy once in awhile. "It pep you up," the voice on his left said softly, almost longingly. "Yessir, you must believe that shit."

He had felt the way he imagined a mouse must feel when the cat is just pawing at it, claws not out yet, curious about what the mouse will do, and how fast it can run, and what sorts of noises it will make as its terror grows. Blind Willie had not been terrified, however. Scared, yes indeed, you could fairly say he had been scared, but he has not been out-and-out terrified since his last week in the green, the week that had begun in the A Shau Valley and ended in Dong Ha, the week the Viet Cong had harried them steadily west at what was not quite a full retreat, at the same time pinching them on both sides, driving them like cattle down a chute, always yelling from the trees, sometimes laughing from the jungle, sometimes shooting, sometimes screaming in the night. The little men who ain't there, Sullivan called them. There is nothing like them here, and his blindest day in Manhattan is not as dark as those nights after they lost the Captain. Knowing this had been his advantage and those young fellows' mistake. He had simply raised his voice, speaking as a man might speak to a large room filled with old friends. "Say!" he had exclaimed to the shadowy phantoms drifting slowly around him on the sidewalk. "Say, does anyone see a policeman? I believe these young fellows here mean to take me off." And that did it, easy as pulling a segment from a peeled orange; the young fellows bracketing him were suddenly gone like a cool breeze.

He only wishes he could solve the problem of Officer Wheelock that easily.

4:40 P.M.

The Sheraton Gotham, at Fortieth and Broadway, is one of the largest first-class hotels in the world, and in the cave of its lobby thousands of people school back and forth beneath the gigantic chandelier. They chase their pleasures here and dig their treasures there, oblivious to the Christmas music flowing from the speakers, to the chatter from three different restaurants and five bars, to the scenic elevators sliding up and down in their notched shafts like pistons powering some exotic glass engine … and to the blind man who taps among them, working his way toward a sarcophagal public men's room almost the size of a subway station. He walks with the sticker on the case turned inward now, and he is as anonymous as a blind man can be. In this city, that's very anonymous.

Still, he thinks as he enters one of the stalls and takes off his jacket, turning it inside-out as he does so, how is it that in all these years no one has ever followed me? No one has ever noticed that the blind man who goes in and the sighted man who comes out are the same size, and carrying the same case?

Well, in New York, hardly anyone notices anything that isn't his or her own business—in their own way, they are all as blind as Blind Willie. Out of their offices, flooding down the sidewalks, thronging in the subway stations and cheap restaurants, there is something both repulsive and sad about them; they are like nests of moles turned up by a farmer's harrow. He has seen this blindness over and over again, and he knows that it is one reason for his success … but surely not the only reason. They are not all moles, and he has been rolling the dice for a long time now. He takes precautions, of course he does, many of them, but there are still those moments (like now, sitting here with his pants down, unscrewing the white cane and stowing it back in his case) when he would be easy to catch, easy to rob, easy to expose. Wheelock is right about the Post; they would love him. They would hang him higher than Haman. They would

never understand, never even want to understand, or hear his side of it. What side? And why has none of this ever happened?

Because of God, he believes. Because God is good. God is hard but God is good. He cannot bring himself to confess, but God seems to understand. Atonement and penance take time, but he has been given time. God has gone with him every step of the way.

In the stall, still between identities, he closes his eyes and prays—first giving his thanks, then making a request for guidance, then giving more thanks. He finishes as he always does, in a whisper only he and God can hear: “If I die in a combat zone, bag me up and ship me home. If I die in a state of sin, close Your eyes and take me in. Yeah. Amen.”

He leaves the stall, leaves the bathroom, leaves the echoing confusion of the Sheraton Gotham, and no one walks up to him and says, “Excuse me, sir, but weren’t you just blind?” No one looks at him twice as he walks out into the street, carrying the bulky case as if it weighed twenty pounds instead of a hundred. God takes care of him.

It has started to snow. He walks slowly through it, Willie Shearman again now, switching the case frequently from hand to hand, just one more tired guy at the end of the day. He continues to think about his inexplicable success as he goes. There’s a verse from the Book of Matthew which he has committed to memory. They be blind leaders of the blind, it goes. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. Then there’s the old saw that says in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Is he the one-eyed man? God aside, has that been the practical secret of his success all these years?

Perhaps so, perhaps not. In any case, he has been protected … and in no case does he believe he can put God aside. God is in the picture. God marked him in 1960, when he first helped Harry Doolin tease Carol and then helped Harry beat her. That occasion of sin has never left his mind. What happened in the grove of trees near Field B

stands for everything else. He even has Bobby Garfield's glove to help him remember. Willie doesn't know where Bobby is these days and doesn't care. He kept track of Carol as long as he could, but Bobby doesn't matter. Bobby ceased to matter when he helped her. Willie saw him help her. He didn't dare come out and help her himself—he was afraid of what Harry might do to him, afraid of all the kids Harry might tell, afraid of being marked—but Bobby dared. Bobby helped her then, Bobby punished Harry Doolin later that summer, and by doing these things (probably just for doing the first of them), Bobby got well, Bobby got over. He did what Willie didn't dare to do, he rolled with it and got over, got well, and now Willie has to do all the rest. And that's a lot to do. Sorry is a full-time job and more. Why, even with three of him working at it, he can barely keep up.

Still, he can't say he lives in regret. Sometimes he thinks of the good thief, the one who joined Christ in Paradise that very night. Friday afternoon you're bleeding on Golgotha's stony hill; Friday night you're having tea and crumpets with the King. Sometimes someone kicks him, sometimes someone pushes him, sometimes he worries about being taken off. So what? Doesn't he stand for all those who can only stand in the shadows, watching while the damage is done? Doesn't he beg for them? Didn't he take Bobby's Alvin Dark-model baseball glove for them in 1960? He did. Gobless him, he did. And now they put their money in it as he stands eyeless outside the cathedral. He begs for them.

Sharon knows … exactly what does Sharon know? Some of it, yes. Just how much he can't say. Certainly enough to provide the tinsel; enough to tell him he looks nice in his Paul Stuart suit and blue Sulka tie; enough to wish him a good day and remind him to get the eggnog. It is enough. All is well in Willie's world except for Jasper Wheelock. What is he going to do about Jasper Wheelock?

Maybe I ought to follow you some night, Wheelock whispers in his ear as Willie shifts the increasingly heavy case from one hand to the

other. Both arms ache now; he will be glad to reach his building. See what you do. See who you turn into.

What, exactly, is he going to do about Jasper the Police-Smurf? What can he do?

He doesn't know.

5:15 P.M.

The young panhandler in the dirty red sweatshirt is long gone, his place taken by yet another streetcorner Santa. Willie has no trouble recognizing the tubby young fellow currently dropping a dollar into Santa's pot.

"Hey, Ralphie!" he cries.

Ralph Williamson turns, his face lights up when he recognizes Willie, and he raises one gloved hand. It's snowing harder now; with the bright lights around him and Santa Claus beside him, Ralph looks like the central figure in a holiday greeting card. Or maybe a modern-day Bob Cratchit.

"Hey, Willie! How's it goin?"

"Like a house afire," Willie says, approaching Ralph with an easy grin on his face. He sets his case down with a grunt, feels in his pants pocket, finds a buck for Santa's pot. Probably just another crook, and his hat's a moth-eaten piece of shit, but what the hell.

"What you got in there?" Ralph asks, looking down at Willie's case as he fiddles with his scarf. "Sounds like you busted open some little kid's piggy bank."

"Nah, just heatin coils," Willie says. " 'Bout a damn thousand of em."

"You working right up until Christmas?"

“Yeah,” he says, and suddenly has a glimmer of an idea about Wheelock. Just a twinkle, here and gone, but hey, it’s a start. “Yeah, right up until Christmas. No rest for the wicked, you know.”

Ralph’s wide and pleasant face creases in a smile. “I doubt if you’re very wicked.”

Willie smiles back. “You don’t know what evil lurks in the heart of the heatin-n-coolin man, Ralphie. I’ll probably take a few days off after Christmas, though. I’m thinkin that might be a really good idea.”

“Go south? Florida, maybe?”

“South?” Willie looks startled, then laughs. “Oh, no,” he says. “Not this kid. I’ve got plenty to do around the house. A person’s got to keep their house in order. Else it might come right down around their ears someday when the wind blows.”

“I suppose.” Ralph bundles the scarf higher around his ears. “See you tomorrow?”

“You bet,” Willie says and holds out his gloved hand. “Gimme five.”

Ralphie gives him five, then turns his hand over. His smile is shy but eager. “Give me ten, Willie.”

Willie gives him ten. “How good is that, Ralphie-baby?”

The man’s shy smile becomes a gleeful boy’s grin. “So goddam good I gotta do it again!” he cries, and slaps Willie’s hand with real authority.

Willie laughs. “You the man, Ralph. You get over.”

“You the man, too, Willie,” Ralph replies, speaking with a prissy earnestness that’s sort of funny. “Merry Christmas.”

“Right back atcha.”

He stands where he is for a moment, watching Ralph trudge off into the snow. Beside him, the streetcorner Santa rings his bell monotonously. Willie picks up his case and starts for the door of his building. Then something catches his eye, and he pauses.

“Your beard’s on crooked,” he says to the Santa. “If you want people to believe in you, fix your fuckin beard.”

He goes inside.

5:25 P.M.

There’s a big carton in the storage annex of Midtown Heating and Cooling. It’s full of cloth bags, the sort banks use to hold loose coins. Such bags usually have various banks’ names printed on them, but these don’t—Willie orders them direct from the company in Moundsville, West Virginia, that makes them.

He opens his case, quickly sets aside the rolls of bills (these he will carry home in his Mark Cross briefcase), then fills four bags with coins. In a far corner of the storage room is a battered old metal cabinet simply marked PARTS. Willie swings it open—there is no lock to contend with—and reveals another hundred or so coin-stuffed bags. A dozen times a year he and Sharon tour the midtown churches, pushing these bags through the contribution slots or hinged package-delivery doors when they will fit, simply leaving them by the door when they won’t. The lion’s share always goes to St. Pat’s, where he spends his days wearing dark glasses and a sign.

But not every day, he thinks, now undressing. I don’t have to be there every day, and he thinks again that maybe Bill, Willie, and Blind Willie Garfield will take the week after Christmas off. In that week there might be a way to handle Officer Wheelock. To make him go away. Except …

“I can’t kill him,” he says in a low, nagging voice. “I’ll be fucked if I kill him.” Only fucked isn’t what he’s worried about. Damned is what he’s worried about. Killing was different in Vietnam, or seemed different,

but this isn't Vietnam, isn't the green. Has he built these years of penance just to tear them down again? God is testing him, testing him, testing him. There is an answer here. He knows there is, there must be. He is just—ha-ha, pardon the pun—too blind to see it.

Can he even find the self-righteous son of a bitch? Shit yeah, that's not the problem. He can find Jasper the Police-Smurf, all right. Just about any old time he wants. Trail him right to wherever it is that he takes off his gun and his shoes and puts his feet up on the hassock. But then what?

He worries at this as he uses cold cream to remove his makeup, and then he puts his worries away. He takes the Nov-Dec ledger out of its drawer, sits at his desk, and for twenty minutes he writes I am heartily sorry for hurting Carol. He fills an entire page, top to bottom and margin to margin. He puts it back, then dresses in Bill Shearman's clothes. As he is putting away Blind Willie's boots, his eye falls on the scrapbook with its red leather cover. He takes it out, puts it on top of the file-cabinet, and flips back the cover with its single word—MEMORIES—stamped in gold.

On the first page is the certificate of a live birth—William Robert Shearman, born January 4th, 1946—and his tiny footprints. On the following pages are pictures of him with his mother, pictures of him with his father (Pat Shearman smiling as if he had never pushed his son over in his high chair or hit his wife with a beer bottle), pictures of him with his friends. Harry Doolin is particularly well represented. In one snapshot eight-year-old Harry is trying to eat a piece of Willie's birthday cake with a blindfold on (a forfeit in some game, no doubt). Harry's got chocolate smeared all over his cheeks, he's laughing and looks as if he doesn't have a mean thought in his head. Willie shivers at the sight of that laughing, smeary, blindfolded face. It almost always makes him shiver.

He flips away from it, toward the back of the book, where he's put the pictures and clippings of Carol Gerber he has collected over the years: Carol with her mother, Carol holding her brand-new baby brother and smiling nervously, Carol and her father (him in Navy

dress blue and smoking a cigarette, her looking up at him with big wonderstruck eyes), Carol on the j.v. cheering squad at Harwich High her freshman year, caught in midleap with one hand waving a pom-pom and the other holding down her pleated skirt, Carol and John Sullivan on tinfoil thrones at Harwich High in 1965, the year they were elected Snow Queen and Snow King at the Junior-Senior prom. They look like a couple on a wedding cake, Willie thinks this every time he looks at the old yellow newsprint. Her gown is strapless, her shoulders flawless. There is no sign that for a little while, once upon a time, the left one was hideously deformed, sticking up in a witchlike double hump. She had cried before that last hit, cried plenty, but mere crying hadn't been enough for Harry Doolin. That last time he had swung from the heels, and the smack of the bat hitting her had been like the sound of a mallet hitting a half-thawed roast, and then she had screamed, screamed so loud that Harry had fled without even looking back to see if Willie and Richie O'Meara were following him. Took to his heels, had old Harry Doolin, ran like a jackrabbit. But if he hadn't? Suppose that, instead of running, Harry had said Hold her, guys, I ain't listening to that, I'm going to shut her up, meaning to swing from the heels again, this time at her head? Would they have held her? Would they have held her for him even then?

You know you would have, he thinks dully. You do penance as much for what you were spared as for what you actually did. Don't you?

Here's Carol Gerber in her graduation gown; Spring 1966, it's marked. On the next page is a news clipping from the Harwich Journal marked Fall 1966. The accompanying picture is her again, but this version of Carol seems a million years removed from the young lady in the graduation gown, the young lady with the diploma in her hand, the white pumps on her feet, and her eyes demurely downcast. This girl is fiery and smiling, these eyes look straight into the camera. She seems unaware of the blood coursing down her left cheek. She is flashing the peace sign. This girl is on her way to Danbury already, this girl has got her Danbury dancing shoes on. People died in Danbury, the guts flew, baby, and Willie does not

doubt that he is partly responsible. He touches the fiery smiling bleeding girl with her sign that says STOP THE MURDER (only instead of stopping it she became a part of it) and knows that in the end her face is the only one that matters, her face is the spirit of the age. 1960 is smoke; here is fire. Here is Death with blood on her cheek and a smile on her lips and a sign in her hand. Here is that good old Danbury dementia.

The next clipping is the entire front page of the Danbury paper. He has folded it three times so it will fit in the book. The biggest of four photos shows a screaming woman standing in the middle of a street and holding up her bloody hands. Behind her is a brick building which has been cracked open like an egg. Summer 1970, he has written beside it.

6 DEAD, 14 INJURED IN DANBURY BOMB ATTACK

Radical Group Claims Responsibility

“No One Meant to Be Hurt,” Female Caller Tells Police

The group—Militant Students for Peace, they called themselves—planted the bomb in a lecture hall on the Danbury UConn campus. On the day of the explosion, Coleman Chemicals was holding job interviews there between ten A.M. and four P.M. The bomb was apparently supposed to go off at six in the morning, when the building was empty. It failed to do so. At eight o’clock, then again at nine, someone (presumably someone from the MSP) called Campus Security and reported the presence of a bomb in the first-floor lecture hall. There were cursory searches and no evacuation. “This was our eighty-third bomb-threat of the year,” an unidentified Campus Security officer was quoted as saying. No bomb was found, although the MSP later claimed vehemently that the exact location—the air-conditioning duct on the left side of the hall—had been given. There was evidence (persuasive evidence, to Willie Shearman if to no one else) that at quarter past noon, while the job interviews were in recess for lunch, a young woman made an effort—at considerable risk to her own life and limb—to retrieve the UXB herself. She spent perhaps ten minutes in the then-vacant lecture hall before being led away, protesting, by a young man with long black hair. The janitor who saw them later identified the man as Raymond Fiegler, head of the MSP. He identified the young woman as Carol Gerber.

At ten minutes to two that afternoon, the bomb finally went off. Gobless the living; gobless the dead.

Willie turns the page. Here is a headline from the Oklahoma City Oklahoman. April of 1971.

3 RADICALS KILLED IN ROADBLOCK SHOOTOUT

“Big Fish” May Have Escaped by Minutes,

Says FBI SAC Thurman

The big fish were John and Sally McBride, Charlie “Duck” Golden, the elusive Raymond Fiegler … and Carol. The remaining members of the MSP, in other words. The McBrides and Golden died in Los Angeles six months later, someone in the house still shooting and tossing grenades even as the place burned down. Neither Fiegler nor Carol was in the burned-out shell, but the police techs found large quantities of spilled blood which had been typed AB Positive. A rare blood-type. Carol Gerber’s blood-type.

Dead or alive? Alive or dead? Not a day goes by that Willie doesn’t ask himself this question.

He turns to the next page of the scrapbook, knowing he should stop, he should get home, Sharon will worry if he doesn’t at least call (he will call, from downstairs he will call, she’s right, he’s very dependable), but he doesn’t stop just yet.

The headline over the photo showing the charred skull of the house on Benefit Street is from the Los Angeles Times:

3 OF “DANBURY 12” DIE IN EAST L.A.

Police Speculate Murder-Suicide Pact

Only Fiegler, Gerber Unaccounted For

Except the cops believed Carol, at least, was dead. The piece made that clear. At the time, Willie had also been convinced it was so. All that blood. Now, however …

Dead or alive? Alive or dead? Sometimes his heart whispers to him that the blood doesn’t matter, that she got away from that small frame house long before the final acts of insanity were committed there. At other times he believes what the police believe—that she and Fiegler slipped away from the others only after the first shootout,

before the house was surrounded; that she either died of wounds suffered in that shootout or was murdered by Fiegler because she was slowing him down. According to this scenario the fiery girl with the blood on her face and the sign in her hand is probably now just a bag of bones cooking in the desert someplace east of the sun and west of Tonopah.

Willie touches the photo of the burned-out house on Benefit Street … and suddenly a name comes to him, the name of the man who maybe stopped Dong Ha from becoming another My Lai or My Khe. Slocum. That was his name, all right. It's as if the blackened beams and broken windows have whispered it to him.

Willie closes the scrapbook and puts it away, feeling at peace. He finishes squaring up what needs to be squared up in the offices of Midtown Heating and Cooling, then steps carefully through the trapdoor and finds his footing on top of the stepladder below. He takes the handle of his briefcase and pulls it through. He descends to the third step, then lowers the trapdoor into place and slides the ceiling panel back where it belongs.

He cannot do anything … anything permanent … to Officer Jasper Wheelock … but Slocum could. Yes indeed, Slocum could. Of course Slocum was black, but what of that? In the dark, all cats are gray … and to the blind, they're no color at all. Is it really much of a reach from Blind Willie Garfield to Blind Willie Slocum? Of course not. Easy as breathing, really.

"Do you hear what I hear," he sings softly as he folds the stepladder and puts it back, "do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste?"

Five minutes later he closes the door of Western States Land Analysts firmly behind him and triple-locks it. Then he goes down the hallway. When the elevator comes and he steps in, he thinks, Eggnog. Don't forget. The Allens and the Dubrays.

“Also cinnamon,” he says out loud. The three people in the elevator car with him look around, and Bill grins self-consciously.

Outside, he turns toward Grand Central, registering only one thought as the snow beats full into his face and he flips up his coat collar: the Santa outside the building has fixed his beard.

MIDNIGHT

“Share?”

“Hmmmm?”

Her voice is sleepy, distant. They have made long, slow love after the Dubrays finally left at eleven o’clock, and now she is drifting away. That’s all right; he is drifting too. He has a feeling that all of his problems are solving themselves … or that God is solving them.

“I may take a week or so off after Christmas. Do some inventory. Poke around some new sites. I’m thinking about changing locations.” There is no need for her to know about what Willie Slocum may be doing in the week before New Year’s; she couldn’t do anything but worry and—perhaps, perhaps not, he sees no reason to find out for sure—feel guilty.

“Good,” she says. “See a few movies while you’re at it, why don’t you?” Her hand gropes out of the dark and touches his arm briefly. “You work so hard.” Pause. “Also, you remembered the eggnog. I really didn’t think you would. I’m very pleased with you, sweetheart.”

He grins in the dark at that, helpless not to. It is so perfectly Sharon.

“The Allens are all right, but the Dubrays are boring, aren’t they?” she asks.

“A little,” he allows.

“If that dress of hers had been cut any lower, she could have gotten a job in a topless bar.”

He says nothing to that, but grins again.

“It was good tonight, wasn’t it?” she asks him. It’s not their little party that she’s talking about.

“Yes, excellent.”

“Did you have a good day? I didn’t have a chance to ask.”

“Fine day, Share.”

“I love you, Bill.”

“Love you, too.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

As he drifts toward sleep he thinks about the man in the bright red ski sweater. He crosses over without knowing it, thought melting effortlessly into dream. “Sixty-nine and seventy were the hard years,” the man in the red sweater says. “I was at Hamburger Hill with the 3/187. We lost a lot of good men.” Then he brightens. “But I got this.” From the lefthand pocket of his topcoat he takes a white beard hanging on a string. “And this.” From the righthand pocket he takes a crumpled styrofoam cup, which he shakes. A few loose coins rattle in the bottom like teeth. “So you see,” he says, fading now, “there are compensations for even the blindest life.”

Then the dream itself fades and Bill Shearman sleeps deeply until six-fifteen the next morning, when the clock-radio wakes him to the sound of “The Little Drummer Boy.”