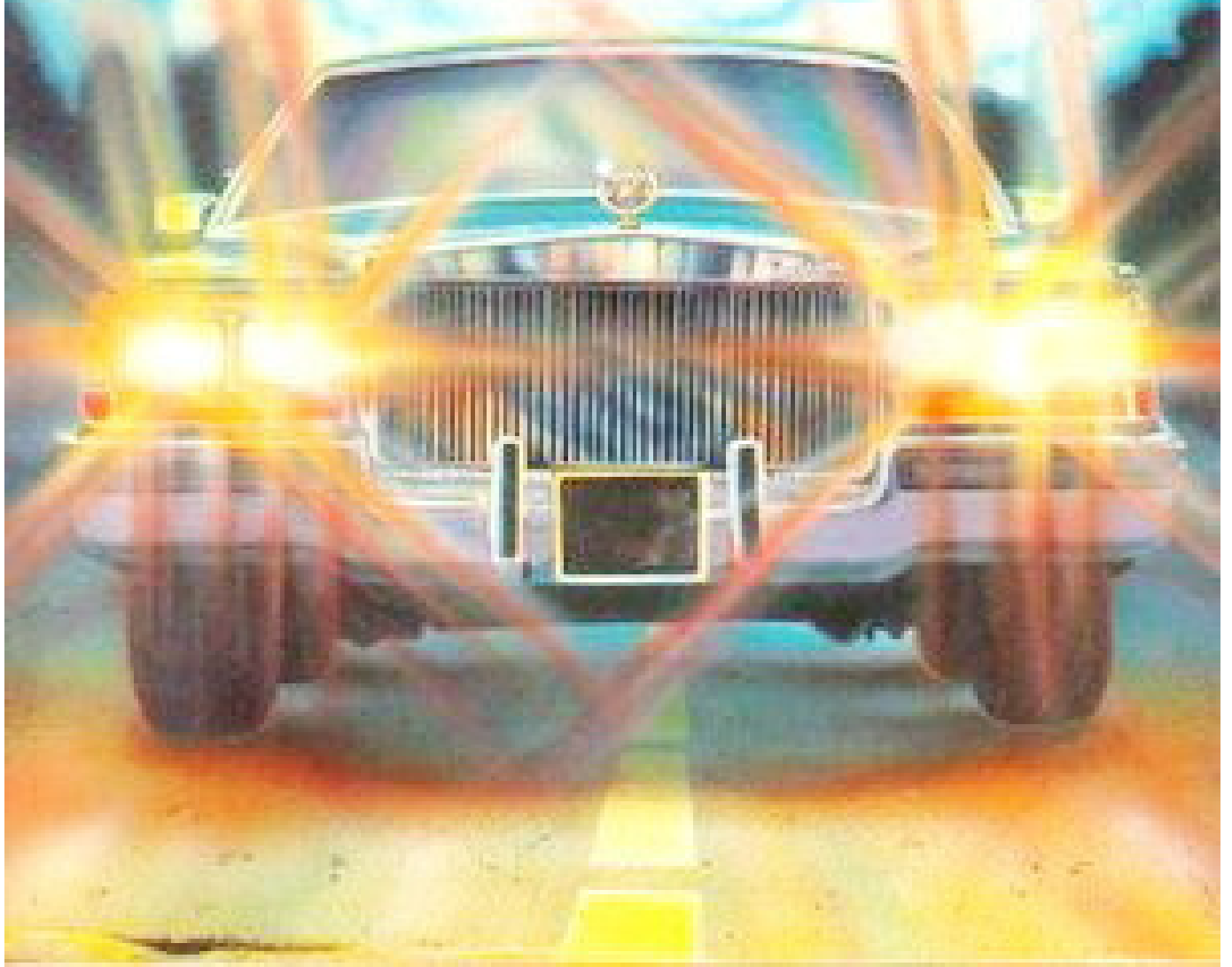


Stephen King

DOLAN'S CADILLAC



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Revenge is a dish best eaten cold.

—Spanish proverb

I waited and watched for seven years. I saw him come and go—Dolan. I watched him stroll into fancy restaurants dressed in a tuxedo, always with a different woman on his arm, always with his pair of bodyguards bookending him. I watched his hair go from iron-gray to a fashionable silver while my own simply receded until I was bald. I watched him leave Las Vegas on his regular pilgrimages to the West Coast; I watched him return. On two or three occasions I watched from a side road as his Sedan DeVille, the same color as his hair, swept by on Route 71 toward Los Angeles. And on a few occasions I watched him leave his place in the Hollywood Hills in the same gray Cadillac to return to Las Vegas—not often, though. I am a schoolteacher. Schoolteachers and high-priced hoodlums do not have the same freedom of movement; it's just an economic fact of life.

He did not know I was watching him—I never came close enough for him to know that. I was careful.

He killed my wife or had her killed; it comes to the same, either way. Do you want details? You won't get them from me. If you want them, look them up in the back issues of the papers. Her name was Elizabeth. She taught in the same school where I taught and where I teach still. She taught first-graders. They loved her, and I think that some of them may not have forgotten their love still, although they would be teenagers now. I loved her and love her still, certainly. She was not beautiful but she was pretty. She was quiet, but she could laugh. I dream of her. Of her hazel eyes. There has never been another woman for me. Nor ever will be.

He slipped—Dolan. That's all you have to know. And Elizabeth was there, at the wrong place and the wrong time, to see the slip. She

went to the police, and the police sent her to the FBI, and she was questioned, and she said yes, she would testify. They promised to protect her, but they either slipped or they underestimated Dolan. Maybe it was both. Whatever it was, she got into her car one night and the dynamite wired to the ignition made me a widower. He made me a widower—Dolan.

With no witness to testify, he was let free.

He went back to his world, I to mine. The penthouse apartment in Vegas for him, the empty tract home for me. The succession of beautiful women in furs and sequined evening dresses for him, the silence for me. The gray Cadillacs, four of them over the years, for him, and the aging Buick Riviera for me. His hair went silver while mine just went.

But I watched.

I was careful—oh, yes! Very careful. I knew what he was, what he could do. I knew he would step on me like a bug if he saw or sensed what I meant for him. So I was careful.

During my summer vacation three years ago I followed him (at a prudent distance) to Los Angeles, where he went frequently. He stayed in his fine house and threw parties (I watched the comings and goings from a safe shadow at the end of the block, fading back when the police cars made their frequent patrols), and I stayed in a cheap hotel where people played their radios too loud and neon light from the topless bar across the street shone in the window. I fell asleep on those nights and dreamed of Elizabeth's hazel eyes, dreamed that none of it had ever happened, and woke up sometimes with tears drying on my face.

I came close to losing hope.

He was well guarded, you see; so well guarded. He went nowhere without those two heavily armed gorillas with him, and the Cadillac

itself was armor plated. The big radial tires it rolled on were of the self-sealing type favored by dictators in small, uneasy countries.

Then, that last time, I saw how it could be done—but I did not see it until after I'd had a very bad scare.

I followed him back to Las Vegas, always keeping at least a mile between us, sometimes two, sometimes three. As we crossed the desert heading east his car was at times no more than a sunflash on the horizon and I thought about Elizabeth, how the sun looked on her hair.

I was far behind on this occasion. It was the middle of the week, and traffic on U.S. 71 was very light. When traffic is light, tailing becomes dangerous—even a grammar-school teacher knows that. I passed an orange sign which read DETOUR 5 MILES and dropped back even farther. Desert detours slow traffic to a crawl, and I didn't want to chance coming up behind the gray Cadillac as the driver babied it over some rutted secondary road.

DETOUR 3 MILES, the next sign read, and below that: BLASTING AREA AHEAD * TURN OFF 2-WAY RADIO.

I began to muse on some movie I had seen years before. In this film a band of armed robbers had tricked an armored car into the desert by putting up false detour signs. Once the driver fell for the trick and turned off onto a deserted dirt road (there are thousands of them in the desert, sheep roads and ranch roads and old government roads that go nowhere), the thieves had removed the signs, assuring isolation, and then had simply laid siege to the armored car until the guards came out.

They killed the guards.

I remembered that.

They killed the guards.

I reached the detour and turned onto it. The road was as bad as I had imagined—packed dirt, two lanes wide, filled with potholes that made my old Buick jounce and groan. The Buick needed new shock absorbers, but shocks are an expense a schoolteacher sometimes has to put off, even when he is a widower with no children and no hobbies except his dream of revenge.

As the Buick bounced and wallowed along, an idea occurred to me. Instead of following Dolan's Cadillac the next time it left Vegas for L.A. or L.A. for Vegas, I would pass it—get ahead of it. I would create a false detour like the one in the movie, luring it out into the wastes that exist, silent and rimmed by mountains, west of Las Vegas. Then I would remove the signs, as the thieves had done in the movie—

I snapped back to reality suddenly. Dolan's Cadillac was ahead of me, directly ahead of me, pulled off to one side of the dusty track. One of the tires, self-sealing or not, was flat. No—not just flat. It was exploded, half off the rim. The culprit had probably been a sharp wedge of rock stuck in the hardpan like a miniature tank-trap. One of the two bodyguards was working a jack under the front end. The second—an ogre with a pig-face streaming sweat under his brush cut—stood protectively beside Dolan himself. Even in the desert, you see, they took no chances.

Dolan stood to one side, slim in an open-throated shirt and dark slacks, his silver hair blowing around his head in the desert breeze. He was smoking a cigarette and watching the men as if he were somewhere else, a restaurant or a ballroom or a drawing room perhaps.

His eyes met mine through the windshield of my car and then slid off with no recognition at all, although he had seen me once, seven years ago (when I had hair!), at a preliminary hearing, sitting beside my wife.

My terror at having caught up with the Cadillac was replaced with an utter fury.

I thought of leaning over and unrolling the passenger window and shrieking: How dare you forget me? How dare you dismiss me? Oh, but that would have been the act of a lunatic. It was good that he had forgotten me, it was fine that he had dismissed me. Better to be a mouse behind the wainscoting, nibbling at the wires. Better to be a spider, high up under the eaves, spinning its web.

The man sweating the jack flagged me, but Dolan wasn't the only one capable of dismissal. I looked indifferently beyond the arm-waver, wishing him a heart attack or a stroke or, best of all, both at the same time. I drove on—but my head pulsed and throbbed, and for a few moments the mountains on the horizon seemed to double and even treble.

If I'd had a gun! I thought. If only I'd had a gun! I could have ended his rotten, miserable life right then if I'd only had a gun!

Miles later some sort of reason reasserted itself. If I'd had a gun, the only thing I could have been sure of was getting myself killed. If I'd had a gun I could have pulled over when the man using the bumper-jack beckoned me, and gotten out, and begun spraying bullets wildly around the deserted landscape. I might have wounded someone. Then I would have been killed and buried in a shallow grave, and Dolan would have gone on escorting the beautiful women and making pilgrimages between Las Vegas and Los Angeles in his silver Cadillac while the desert animals unearthed my remains and fought over my bones under the cold moon. For Elizabeth there would have been no revenge—none at all.

The men who travelled with him were trained to kill. I was trained to teach third-graders.

This was not a movie, I reminded myself as I returned to the highway and passed an orange END CONSTRUCTION * THE STATE OF NEVADA THANKS YOU! sign. And if I ever made the mistake of confusing reality with a movie, of thinking that a balding third-grade teacher with myopia could ever be Dirty Harry anywhere outside of his own daydreams, there would never be any revenge, ever.

But could there be revenge, ever? Could there be?

My idea of creating a fake detour was as romantic and unrealistic as the idea of jumping out of my old Buick and spraying the three of them with bullets—me, who had not fired a gun since the age of sixteen and who had never fired a handgun.

Such a thing would not be possible without a band of conspirators—even the movie I had seen, romantic as it had been, had made that clear. There had been eight or nine of them in two separate groups, staying in touch with each other by walkie-talkie. There had even been a man in a small plane cruising above the highway to make sure the armored car was relatively isolated as it approached the right spot on the highway.

A plot no doubt dreamed up by some overweight screenwriter sitting by his swimming pool with a pina colada by one hand and a fresh supply of Pentel pens and an Edgar Wallace plot-wheel by the other. And even that fellow had needed a small army to fulfill his idea. I was only one man.

It wouldn't work. It was just a momentary false gleam, like the others I'd had over the years—the idea that maybe I could put some sort of poison gas in Dolan's air-conditioning system, or plant a bomb in his Los Angeles house, or perhaps obtain some really deadly weapon—a bazooka, let us say—and turn his damned silver Cadillac into a fireball as it raced east toward Vegas or west toward L.A. along 71.

Best to dismiss it.

But it wouldn't go.

Cut him out, the voice inside that spoke for Elizabeth kept whispering. Cut him out the way an experienced sheep-dog cuts a ewe out of the flock when his master points. Detour him out into the emptiness and kill him. Kill them all.

Wouldn't work. If I allowed no other truth, I would at least have to allow that a man who had stayed alive as long as Dolan must have a carefully honed sense of survival—honed to the point of paranoia, perhaps. He and his men would see through the detour trick in a minute.

They turned down this one today, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth responded. They never even hesitated. They went just like Mary's little lamb.

But I knew—yes, somehow I did!—that men like Dolan, men who are really more like wolves than men, develop a sort of sixth sense when it comes to danger. I could steal genuine detour signs from some road department shed and set them up in all the right places; I could even add fluorescent orange road cones and a few of those smudge-pots. I could do all that and Dolan would still smell the nervous sweat of my hands on the stage dressing. Right through his bullet-proof windows he would smell it. He would close his eyes and hear Elizabeth's name far back in the snake-pit that passed for his mind.

The voice that spoke for Elizabeth fell silent, and I thought it had finally given up for the day. And then, with Vegas actually in sight—blue and misty and wavering on the far rim of the desert—it spoke up again.

Then don't try to fool him with a fake detour, it whispered. Fool him with a real one.

I swerved the Buick over to the shoulder and shuddered to a stop with both feet on the brake-pedal. I stared into my own wide, startled eyes in the rear-view mirror.

Inside, the voice that spoke for Elizabeth began to laugh. It was wild, mad laughter, but after a few moments I began to laugh along with it.

*

The other teachers laughed at me when I joined the Ninth Street Health Club. One of them wanted to know if someone had kicked sand in my face. I laughed along with them. People don't get suspicious of a man like me as long as he keeps laughing along with them. And why shouldn't I laugh? My wife had been dead seven years, hadn't she? Why, she was no more than dust and hair and a few bones in her coffin! So why shouldn't I laugh? It's only when a man like me stops laughing that people wonder if something is wrong.

I laughed along with them even though my muscles ached all that fall and winter. I laughed even though I was constantly hungry—no more second helpings, no more late-night snacks, no more beer, no more before-dinner gin and tonic. But lots of red meat and greens, greens, greens.

I bought myself a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

No—that's not quite right. Elizabeth bought me a Nautilus machine for Christmas.

I saw Dolan less frequently; I was too busy working out, losing my pot belly, building up my arms and chest and legs. But there were times when it seemed I could not go on with it, that recapturing anything like real physical fitness was going to be impossible, that I could not live without second helpings and pieces of coffee cake and the occasional dollop of sweet cream in my coffee. When those times came I would park across from one of his favorite restaurants or perhaps go into one of the clubs he favored and wait for him to show up, stepping from the fog-gray Cadillac with an arrogant, icy blonde or a laughing redhead on his arm—or one on each. There he would be, the man who had killed my Elizabeth, there he would be, resplendent in a formal shirt from Bijan's, his gold Rolex winking in the nightclub lights. When I was tired and discouraged I went to Dolan as a man with a raging thirst might seek out an oasis in the desert. I drank his poisoned water and was refreshed.

In February I began to run every day, and then the other teachers laughed at my bald head, which peeled and pinked and then peeled and pinked again, no matter how much sunblock I smeared on it. I laughed right along with them, as if I had not twice nearly fainted and spent long, shuddering minutes with cramps stabbing the muscles of my legs at the end of my runs.

When summer came, I applied for a job with the Nevada Highway Department. The municipal employment office stamped a tentative approval on my form and sent me along to a district foreman named Harvey Blocker. Blocker was a tall man, burned almost black by the Nevada sun. He wore jeans, dusty workboots, and a blue tee-shirt with cut-off sleeves. BAD ATTITUDE, the shirt proclaimed. His muscles were big rolling slabs under his skin. He looked at my application. Then he looked at me and laughed. The application looked very puny rolled up in one of his huge fists.

“You got to be kidding, my friend. I mean, you have got to be. We talkin desert sun and desert heat here—none of that yuppie tanning-salon shit. What are you in real life, bubba? An accountant?”

“A teacher,” I said. “Third grade.”

“Oh, honey,” he said, and laughed again. “Get out of my face, okay?”

I had a pocket watch—handed down from my great-grandfather, who worked on the last stretch of the great transcontinental railroad. He was there, according to family legend, when they hammered home the golden spike. I took the watch out and dangled it in Blocker’s face on its chain.

“See this?” I said. “Worth six, maybe seven hundred dollars.”

“This a bribe?” Blocker laughed again. A great old laughter was he. “Man, I’ve heard of people making deals with the devil, but you’re the first one I ever met who wanted to bribe himself into hell.” Now he looked at me with something like compassion. “You may think you understand what you’re tryin to get yourself into, but I’m here to tell

you you don't have the slightest idea. In July I've seen it go a hundred and seventeen degrees out there west of Indian Springs. It makes strong men cry. And you ain't strong, bubba. I don't have to see you with your shirt off to know you ain't got nothin on your rack but a few yuppie health-club muscles, and they won't cut it out in the Big Empty."

I said, "The day you decide I can't cut it, I'll walk off the job. You keep the watch. No argument."

"You're a fucking liar."

I looked at him. He looked back for some time.

"You're not a fucking liar." He said this in tones of amazement.

"No."

"You'd give the watch to Tinker to hold?" He cocked his thumb at a humongous black man in a tie-dyed shirt who was sitting nearby in the cab of a bulldozer, eating a fruit-pie from McDonald's and listening.

"Is he trustworthy?"

"You're damned tooting."

"Then he can hold it until you tell me to take a hike or until I have to go back to school in September."

"And what do I put up?"

I pointed to the employment application in his fist. "Sign that," I said. "That's what you put up."

"You're crazy."

I thought of Dolan and of Elizabeth and said nothing.

“You’d start on shit-work,” Blocker warned. “Shovelling hot-patch out of the back of a truck and into potholes. Not because I want your damned watch—although I’ll be more than happy to take it—but because that’s where everyone starts.”

“All right.”

“As long as you understand, bubba.”

“I do.”

“No,” Blocker said, “you don’t. But you will.”

And he was right.

*

I remember next to nothing about the first couple of weeks—just shovelling hot-top and tamping it down and walking along behind the truck with my head down until the truck stopped at the next pothole. Sometimes we worked on the Strip and I’d hear the sound of jackpot bells ringing in the casinos. Sometimes I think the bells were just ringing in my head. I’d look up and I’d see Harvey Blocker looking at me with that odd look of compassion, his face shimmering in the heat baking off the road. And sometimes I’d look over at Tinker, sitting under the canvas parasol which covered the cab of his ‘dozer, and Tinker would hold up my great-granddad’s watch and swing it on the chain so it kicked off sunflashes.

The big struggle was not to faint, to hold onto consciousness no matter what. All through June I held on, and the first week of July, and then Blocker sat down next to me one lunch hour while I was eating a sandwich with one shaking hand. I shook sometimes until ten at night. It was the heat. It was either shake or faint, and when I thought of Dolan I somehow managed to keep shaking.

“You still ain’t strong, bubba,” he said.

“No,” I said. “But like the man said, you should have seen the materials I had to start with.”

“I keep expecting to look around and see you passed out in the middle of the roadbed and you keep not doing it. But you gonna.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. If you stay behind the truck with a shovel, you gonna.”

“No.”

“Hottest part of the summer still coming on, bubba. Tink calls it cookie-sheet weather.”

“I’ll be fine.”

He pulled something out of his pocket. It was my great-granddad’s watch. He tossed it in my lap. “Take this fucking thing,” he said, disgusted. “I don’t want it.”

“You made a deal with me.”

“I’m calling it off.”

“If you fire me, I’ll take you to arbitration,” I said. “You signed my form. You—”

“I ain’t firing you,” he said, and looked away. “I’m going to have Tink teach you how to run a front-end loader.”

I looked at him for a long time, not knowing what to say. My third-grade classroom, so cool and pleasant, had never seemed so far away ... and still I didn’t have the slightest idea of how a man like Blocker thought, or what he meant when he said the things he said. I knew that he admired me and held me in contempt at the same time, but I had no idea why he felt either way. And you don’t need to care, darling, Elizabeth spoke up suddenly inside my mind. Dolan is your business. Remember Dolan.

“Why do you want to do that?” I asked at last.

He looked back at me then, and I saw he was both furious and amused. But the fury was the emotion on top, I think. “What is it with you, bubba? What do you think I am?”

“I don’t—”

“You think I want to kill you for your fucking watch? That what you think?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, you are. Sorriest little motherfucker I ever saw.”

I put my great-granddad’s watch away.

“You ain’t never gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die. You dyin. You know you are, and still you won’t move into the shade. Why? Why you pulling this crap on your system?”

“I’ve got my reasons.”

“Yeah, I bet you do. And God help anyone who gets in your way.”

He got up and walked off.

Tinker came over, grinning.

“You think you can learn to run a front-end loader?”

“I think so,” I said.

“I think so, too,” he said. “Ole Blockhead there likes you—he just don’t know how to say so.”

“I noticed.”

Tink laughed. “Tough little motherfucker, ain’t you?”

“I hope so,” I said.

I spent the rest of the summer driving a front-end loader, and when I went back to school that fall, almost as black as Tink himself, the other teachers stopped laughing at me. Sometimes they looked at me out of the corners of their eyes after I passed, but they had stopped laughing.

I’ve got my reasons. That’s what I told him. And I did. I did not spend that season in hell just on a whim. I had to get in shape, you see. Preparing to dig a grave for a man or a woman may not require such drastic measures, but it was not just a man or woman I had in mind.

It was that damned Cadillac I meant to bury.

*

By April of the following year I was on the State Highway Commission’s mailing list. Every month I received a bulletin called Nevada Road Signs. I skimmed most of the material, which concerned itself with pending highway-improvement bills, road equipment that had been bought and sold, State Legislature action on such subjects as sand dune control and new anti-erosion techniques. What I was interested in was always on the last page or two of the bulletin. This section, simply titled The Calendar, listed the dates and sites of roadwork in each coming month. I was especially interested in sites and dates followed by a simple four-letter abbreviation: RPAV. This stood for repaving, and my experience on Harvey Blocker’s crew had showed me that these were the operations which most frequently called for detours. But not always—no indeed. Closing a section of road is a step the Highway Commission never takes unless there is no other choice. But sooner or later, I thought, those four letters might spell the end for Dolan. Just four letters, but there were times when I saw them in my dreams: RPAV.

Not that it would be easy, or perhaps even soon—I knew I might have to wait for years, and that someone else might get Dolan in the meantime. He was an evil man, and evil men live dangerous lives. Four loosely related vectors would have to come together, like a rare conjunction of the planets: travel for Dolan, vacation time for me, a national holiday, and a three-day weekend.

Years, maybe. Or maybe never. But I felt a kind of serenity—a surety that it would happen, and that when it did I would be prepared. And eventually it did happen. Not that summer, not that fall, and not the following spring. But in June of last year, I opened Nevada Road Signs and saw this in The Calendar:

JULY 1-JULY 22 (TENT.):

U.S. 71 MI 440-472 (WESTBND) RPAV

Hands shaking, I paged through my desk calendar to July and saw that July 4th fell on a Monday.

So here were three of the four vectors, for surely there would be a detour somewhere in the middle of such an extensive repaving job.

But Dolan... what about Dolan? What about the fourth vector?

Three times before I could remember him going to L.A. during the week of the Fourth of July—a week which is one of the few slow ones in Las Vegas. I could remember three other times when he had gone somewhere else—once to New York, once to Miami, once all the way to London—and a fourth time when he had simply stayed put in Vegas.

If he went ...

Was there a way I could find out?

I thought on this long and hard, but two visions kept intruding. In the first I saw Dolan's Cadillac speeding west toward L.A. along U.S. 71

at dusk, casting a long shadow behind it. I saw it passing DETOUR AHEAD signs, the last of them warning CB owners to turn off their sets. I saw the Cadillac passing abandoned road equipment—bulldozers, graders, front-end loaders. Abandoned not just because it was after knocking-off time but because it was a weekend, a three-day weekend.

In the second vision everything was the same except the detour signs were gone.

They were gone because I had taken them down.

It was on the last day of school when I suddenly realized how I might be able to find out. I had been nearly drowsing, my mind a million miles away from both school and Dolan, when I suddenly sat bolt-upright, knocking a vase on the side of my desk (it contained some pretty desert flowers my students had brought me as an end-of-school present) to the floor, where it shattered. Several of my students, who had also been drowsing, also sat bolt-upright, and perhaps something on my face frightened one of them, because a little boy named Timothy Urich burst into tears and I had to soothe him.

Sheets, I thought, comforting Timmy. Sheets and pillowcases and bedding and silverware; the rugs; the grounds. Everything has to look just so. He'll want everything just so.

Of course. Having things just so was as much a part of Dolan as his Cadillac.

I began to smile, and Timmy Urich smiled back, but it wasn't Timmy I was smiling at.

I was smiling at Elizabeth.

*

School finished on June 10th that year. Twelve days later I flew to Los Angeles. I rented a car and checked into the same cheap hotel I had used on other occasions. On each of the next three days I drove into the Hollywood Hills and mounted a watch on Dolan's house. It could not be a constant watch; that would have been noticed. The rich hire people to notice interlopers, because all too often they turn out to be dangerous.

Like me.

At first there was nothing. The house was not boarded up, the lawn was not overgrown—heaven forbid!—the water in the pool was doubtless clean and chlorinated. But there was a look of emptiness and disuse all the same—shades pulled against the summer sun, no cars in the central turnaround, no one to use the pool that a young man with a ponytail cleaned every other morning.

I became convinced it was a bust. Yet I stayed, wishing and hoping for the final vector.

On the 29th of June, when I had almost consigned myself to another year of watching and waiting and exercising and driving a front-end loader in the summer for Harvey Blocker (if he would have me again, that was) a blue car marked LOS ANGELES SECURITY SERVICES pulled up at the gate of Dolan's house. A man in a uniform got out and used a key to open the gate. He drove his car in and around the corner. A few moments later he came back on foot, closed the gate, and relocked it.

This was at least a break in the routine. I felt a dim flicker of hope.

I drove off, managed to make myself stay away for nearly two hours, and then drove back, parking at the head of the block instead of the foot this time. Fifteen minutes later a blue van pulled up in front of Dolan's house. Written on the side were the words BIG JOE'S CLEANING SERVICE. My heart leaped up in my chest. I was watching in the rear-view mirror, and I remember how my hands clamped down on the steering wheel of the rental car.

Four women got out of the van, two white, one black, one Chicana. They were dressed in white, like waitresses, but they were not waitresses, of course; they were cleaning women.

The security guard answered when one of them buzzed at the gate, and unlocked it. The five of them talked and laughed together. The security guard attempted to goose one of the women and she slapped his hand aside, still laughing.

One of the women went back to the van and drove it into the turnaround. The others walked up, talking among themselves as the guard closed the gate and locked it again.

Sweat was pouring down my face; it felt like grease. My heart was triphammering.

They were out of my field of vision in the rear-view mirror. I took a chance and looked around.

I saw the back doors of the van swing open.

One of them carried a neat stack of sheets; another had towels; another had a pair of vacuum cleaners.

They trooped up to the door and the guard let them inside.

I drove away, shaking so badly I could hardly steer the car.

They were opening the house. He was coming.

*

Dolan did not trade in his Cadillac every year, or even every two—the gray Sedan DeVille he was driving as that June neared its end was three years old. I knew its dimensions exactly. I had written the GM company for them, pretending to be a research writer. They had sent me an operator's manual and spec sheet for that year's model. They even returned the stamped, self-addressed envelope I had

enclosed. Big companies apparently maintain their courtesy even when they're running in the red.

I had then taken three figures—the Cadillac's width at its widest point, height at its tallest, and length at its longest—to a friend of mine who teaches mathematics at Las Vegas High School. I have told you, I think, that I had prepared for this, and not all my preparation was physical. Most assuredly not.

I presented my problem as a purely hypothetical one. I was trying to write a science fiction story, I said, and I wanted to have my figures exactly right. I even made up a few plausible plot fragments—my own inventiveness rather astonished me.

My friend wanted to know how fast this alien scout vehicle of mine would be going. It was a question I had not expected, and I asked him if it mattered.

"Of course it matters," he said. "It matters a lot. If you want the scout vehicle in your story to fall directly into your trap, the trap has to be exactly the right size. Now this figure you've given me is seventeen feet by five feet."

I opened my mouth to say that wasn't exactly right, but he was already holding up his hand.

"Just an approximation," he said. "Makes it easier to figure the arc."

"The what?"

"The arc of descent," he repeated, and I cooled off. That was a phrase with which a man bent on revenge could fall in love. It had a dark, smoothly portentous sound. The arc of descent.

I'd taken it for granted that if I dug the grave so that the Cadillac could fit, it would fit. It took this friend of mine to make me see that before it could serve its purpose as a grave, it had to work as a trap.

The shape itself was important, he said. The sort of slit-trench I had been envisioning might not work—in fact, the odds of its not working were greater than the odds that it would. “If the vehicle doesn’t hit the start of the trench dead-on,” he said, “it may not go all the way in at all. It would just slide along on an angle for awhile and when it stopped all the aliens would climb out the passenger door and zap your heroes.” The answer, he said, was to widen the entrance end, giving the whole excavation a funnel-shape.

Then there was this problem of speed.

If Dolan’s Cadillac was going too fast and the hole was too short, it would fly across, sinking a bit as it went, and either the frame or the tires would strike the lip of the hole on the far side. It would flip over on its roof—but without falling in the hole at all. On the other hand, if the Cadillac was going too slowly and the hole was too long, it might land at the bottom on its nose instead of its wheels, and that would never do. You couldn’t bury a Cadillac with the last two feet of its trunk and its rear bumper sticking out of the ground any more than you could bury a man with his legs sticking up.

“So how fast will your scout vehicle be going?”

I calculated quickly. On the open highway, Dolan’s driver kept it pegged between sixty and sixty-five. He would probably be driving a little slower than that where I planned to make my try. I could take away the detour signs, but I couldn’t hide the road machinery or erase all the signs of construction.

“About twenty rull,” I said.

He smiled. “Translation, please?”

“Say fifty earth-miles an hour.”

“Ah-hah.” He set to work at once with his slip-stick while I sat beside him, bright-eyed and smiling, thinking about that wonderful phrase: arc of descent.

He looked up almost at once. “You know,” he said, “you might want to think about changing the dimensions of the vehicle, buddy.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?”

“Seventeen by five is pretty big for a scout vehicle.” He laughed. “That’s damn near the size of a Lincoln Mark IV.”

I laughed, too. We laughed together.

*

After I saw the women going into the house with the sheets and towels, I flew back to Las Vegas.

I unlocked my house, went into the living room, and picked up the telephone. My hand trembled a little. For nine years I had waited and watched like a spider in the eaves or a mouse behind a baseboard. I had tried never to give Dolan the slightest clue that Elizabeth’s husband was still interested in him—the totally empty look he had given me that day as I passed his disabled Cadillac on the way back to Vegas, furious as it had made me at the time, was my just reward.

But now I would have to take a risk. I would have to take it because I could not be in two places at the same time and it was imperative that I know if Dolan was coming, and when to make the detour temporarily disappear.

I had figured out a plan coming home on the plane. I thought it would work. I would make it work.

I dialed Los Angeles directory assistance and asked for the number of Big Joe’s Cleaning Service. I got it and dialed it.

“This is Bill at Rennie’s Catering,” I said. “We got a party Saturday night at 1121 Aster Drive in Hollywood Hills. I wanted to know if one of your girls would check for Mr. Dolan’s big punch-bowl in the cabinet over the stove. Could you do that for me?”

I was asked to hold on. I did, somehow, although with the passing of each endless second I became more and more sure that he had smelled a rat and was calling the phone company on one line while I held on the other.

At last—at long, long last—he came back on. He sounded upset, but that was all right. That was just how I wanted him to sound.

“Saturday night?”

“Yes, that’s right. But I don’t have a punch-bowl as big as they’re going to want unless I call across town, and my impression was that he already has one. I’d just like to be sure.”

“Look, mister, my call-sheet says Mr. Dolan ain’t expected in until three P.M. Sunday afternoon. I’ll be glad to have one of my girls check out your punch-bowl, but I want to straighten this other business out first. Mr. Dolan is not a man to fuck around with, if you’ll pardon my French—”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” I said.

“—and if he’s going to show up a day early, I got to send some more girls out there right away.”

“Let me double-check,” I said. The third-grade reading textbook I use, *Roads to Everywhere*, was on the table beside me. I picked it up and riffled some of the pages close to the phone.

“Oh, boy,” I said. “It’s my mistake. He’s having people in Sunday night. I’m really sorry. You going to hit me?”

“Nah. Listen, let me put you on hold again—I’ll get one of the girls and have her check on the—”

“No need, if it’s Sunday,” I said. “My big punch-bowl’s coming back from a wedding reception in Glendale Sunday morning.”

“Okay. Take it easy.” Comfortable. Unsuspicious. The voice of a man who wasn’t going to think twice.

I hoped.

I hung up and sat still, working it out in my head as carefully as I could. To get to L.A. by three, he would be leaving Vegas about ten o’clock Sunday morning. And he would arrive in the vicinity of the detour between eleven-fifteen and eleven-thirty, when traffic was apt to be almost non-existent anyway.

I decided it was time to stop dreaming and start acting.

I looked through the want ads, made some telephone calls, and then went out to look at five used vehicles that were within my financial reach. I settled for a battered Ford van that had rolled off the assembly line the same year Elizabeth was killed. I paid cash. I was left with only two hundred and fifty-seven dollars in my savings account, but this did not disturb me in the slightest. On my way home I stopped at a rental place the size of a discount department store and rented a portable air compressor, using my MasterCard as collateral.

Late Friday afternoon I loaded the van: picks, shovels, compressor, a hand-dolly, a toolbox, binoculars, and a borrowed Highway Department jackhammer with an assortment of arrowhead-shaped attachments made for slicing through asphalt. A large square piece of sand-colored canvas, plus a long roll of canvas—this latter had been a special project of mine last summer—and twenty-one thin wooden struts, each five feet long. Last but not least, a big industrial stapler.

On the edge of the desert I stopped at a shopping center and stole a pair of license plates and put them on my van.

Seventy-six miles west of Vegas, I saw the first orange sign: CONSTRUCTION AHEAD * PASS AT YOUR OWN RISK. Then, a mile or so beyond that, I saw the sign I had been waiting for since...

well, ever since Elizabeth died, I suppose, although I hadn't always known it.

DETOUR AHEAD 6 MILES

Dusk was deepening toward dark as I arrived and surveyed the situation. It could have been better if I'd planned it, but not much.

The detour was a right turn between two rises. It looked like an old fence-line road which the Highway Department had smoothed and widened to temporarily accommodate the heavier traffic flow. It was marked by a flashing arrow powered by a buzzing battery in a padlocked steel box.

Just beyond the detour, as the highway rose toward the crest of that second rise, the road was blocked off by a double line of road cones. Beyond them (if one was so extraordinarily stupid as to have, first, missed the flashing arrow and, second, run over the road cones without realizing it—I suppose some drivers were) was an orange sign almost as big as a billboard, reading ROAD CLOSED * USE DETOUR.

Yet the reason for the detour was not visible from here, and that was good. I didn't want Dolan to have the slightest chance of smelling the trap before he fell into it.

Moving quickly—I didn't want to be seen at this—I got out of the van and quickly stacked up some dozen of the road cones, creating a lane wide enough for the van. I dragged the ROAD CLOSED sign to the right, then ran back to the van, got in, and drove through the gap.

Now I could hear an approaching motor.

I grabbed the cones again, replacing them as fast as I could. Two of them spilled out of my hands and rolled down into the gully. I chased after them, panting. I tripped over a rock in the dark, fell sprawling, and got up quickly with dust on my face and blood dripping from one palm. The car was closer now; soon it would appear over the last

rise before the detour-junction and in the glow thrown by his high beams the driver would see a man in jeans and a tee-shirt trying to replace road cones while his van stood idling where no vehicle that didn't belong to the Nevada State Highway Department was supposed to be. I got the last cone in place and ran back to the sign. I tugged too hard. It swayed and almost fell over.

As the approaching car's headlights began to brighten on the rise to the east, I suddenly became convinced it was a Nevada State Trooper.

The sign was back where it had been—and if it wasn't, it was close enough. I sprinted for the van, got in, and drove over the next rise. Just as I cleared it, I saw headlights splash over the rise behind me.

Had he seen me in the dark, with my own lights out?

I didn't think so.

I sat back against the seat, eyes closed, waiting for my heart to slow down. At last, as the sound of the car bouncing and bucketing its way down the detour faded out, it did.

I was here—safe behind the detour.

It was time to get to work.

*

Beyond the rise, the road descended to a long, straight flat. Two-thirds of the way along this straight stretch the road simply ceased to exist—it was replaced by piles of dirt and a long, wide stretch of crushed gravel.

Would they see that and stop? Turn around? Or would they keep on going, confident that there must be an approved way through since they had not seen any detour signs?

Too late to worry about it now.

I picked a spot about twenty yards into the flat, but still a quarter of a mile short of the place where the road dissolved. I pulled over to the side of the road, worked my way into the back of the van, and opened the back doors. I slid out a couple of boards and muscled the equipment. Then I rested and looked up at the cold desert stars.

“Here we go, Elizabeth,” I whispered to them.

It seemed I felt a cold hand stroke the back of my neck.

*

The compressor made a racket and the jackhammer was even worse, but there was no help for it—the best I could hope for was to be done with the first stage of the work before midnight. If it went on much longer than that I was going to be in trouble anyway, because I had only a limited quantity of gasoline for the compressor.

Never mind. Don't think of who might be listening and wondering what fool would be running a jackhammer in the middle of the night; think about Dolan. Think about the gray Sedan DeVille.

Think about the arc of descent.

I marked off the dimensions of the grave first, using white chalk, the tape measure from my toolbox, and the figures my mathematician friend had worked out. When I was done, a rough rectangle not quite five feet wide by forty-two feet long glimmered in the dark. At the nearer end it flared wide. In the gloom that flare did not look so much like a funnel as it had on the graph paper where my mathematician friend first sketched it. In the gloom it looked like a gaping mouth at the end of a long, straight windpipe. All the better to eat you with, my dear, I thought, and smiled in the dark.

I drew twenty more lines across the box, making stripes two feet wide. Last, I drew a single vertical line down the middle, creating a grid of forty-two near-squares, two feet by two and a half. The forty-third segment was the shovel-shaped flare at the end.

Then I rolled up my sleeves, pull-started the compressor, and went back to square one.

The work went faster than I had any right to hope, but not as fast as I had dared to dream—does it ever? It would have been better if I could have used the heavy equipment, but that would come later. The first thing was to carve up the squares of paving. I was not done by midnight and not by three in the morning, when the compressor ran out of gas. I had anticipated this might happen, and was equipped with a siphon for the van's gas tank. I got as far as unscrewing the gas-cap, but when the smell of the gasoline hit me, I simply screwed the cap back on and lay down flat in the back of the van.

No more, not tonight I couldn't. In spite of the work-gloves I had worn, my hands were covered with big blisters, many of them now weeping. My whole body seemed to vibrate from the steady, punishing beat of the jackhammer, and my arms felt like tuning forks gone mad. My head ached. My teeth ached. My back tormented me; my spine felt as if it had been filled with ground glass.

I had cut my way through twenty-eight squares.

Twenty-eight.

Fourteen to go.

And that was only the start.

Never, I thought. It's impossible. Can't be done.

That cold hand again.

Yes, my darling. Yes.

The ringing in my ears was subsiding a little now; every once in awhile I could hear an approaching engine ... and then it would subside to a drone on the right as it turned onto the detour and

started around the loop the Highway Department had created to bypass the construction.

Tomorrow was Saturday... sorry, today. Today was Saturday. Dolan was coming on Sunday. No time.

Yes, my darling.

The blast had torn her to pieces.

My darling had been torn to pieces for telling the truth to the police about what she had seen, for refusing to be intimidated, for being brave, and Dolan was still driving around in his Cadillac and drinking twenty-year-old Scotch while his Rolex glimmered on his wrist.

I'll try, I thought, and then I fell into a dreamless sleep that was like death.

*

I woke up with the sun, already hot at eight o'clock, shining in my face. I sat up and screamed, my throbbing hands flying to the small of my back. Work? Cut up another fourteen chunks of asphalt? I couldn't even walk.

But I could walk, and I did.

Moving like a very old man on his way to a shuffleboard game, I worked my way to the glove compartment and opened it. I had put a bottle of Empirin there in case of such a morning after.

Had I thought I was in shape? Had I really?

Well! That was quite funny, wasn't it?

I took four of the Empirin with water, waited fifteen minutes for them to dissolve in my stomach, and then wolfed a breakfast of dried fruit and cold Pop-Tarts.

I looked over to where the compressor and the jackhammer waited. The yellow skin of the compressor already seemed to sizzle in the morning sunshine. Leading up to it on either side of my incision were the neatly cut squares of asphalt.

I didn't want to go over there and pick up that jackhammer. I thought of Harvey Blocker saying, You ain't never gonna be strong, bubba. Some people and plants take hold in the sun. Some wither up and die ... Why you pulling this crap on your system?

"She was in pieces," I croaked. "I loved her and she was in pieces."

As a cheer it was never going to replace "Go, Bears!" or "Hook em, horns!" but it got me moving. I siphoned gas from the van's tank, gagging at the taste and the stink, holding onto my breakfast only by a grim act of will. I wondered briefly what I was going to do if the road-crew had drained the diesel from their machines before going home for the long weekend, and quickly shoved the thought out of my mind. It made no sense to worry over things I couldn't control. More and more I felt like a man who has jumped out of the bay of a B-52 with a parasol in his hand instead of a parachute on his back.

I carried the gasoline can over to the compressor and poured it into the tank. I had to use my left hand to curl the fingers of my right around the handle of the compressor's starter-cord. When I pulled, more blisters broke, and as the compressor started up, I saw thick pus dripping out of my fist.

Never make it.

Please, darling.

I walked over to the jackhammer and started in again.

The first hour was the worst, and then the steady pounding of the jackhammer combined with the Empirin seemed to numb everything—my back, my hands, my head. I finished cutting out the last block

of asphalt by eleven. It was time to see how much I remembered of what Tinker had told me about jump-starting road equipment.

I went staggering and flapping back to my van and drove a mile and a half down the road to where the road construction was going on. I saw my machine almost at once: a big Case-Jordan bucket-loader with a grapple-and-pincers attachment on the back. \$135,000 worth of rolling stock. I had driven a Caterpillar for Blocker, but this one would be pretty much the same.

I hoped.

I climbed up into the cab and looked at the diagram printed on the head of the stick-shift. It looked just the same as the one on my Cat. I ran the pattern once or twice. There was some resistance at first because some grit had found its way into the gearbox—the guy who drove this baby hadn't put down his sand-flaps and his foreman hadn't checked him. Blocker would have checked. And docked the driver five bucks, long weekend or not.

His eyes. His half-admiring, half-contemptuous eyes. What would he think of an errand like this?

Never mind. This was no time to be thinking of Harvey Blocker; this was a time to be thinking of Elizabeth. And Dolan.

There was a piece of burlap on the steel floor of the cab. I lifted it, looking for the key. There was no key there, of course.

Tink's voice in my mind: Shit, a kid could jump-start one of these babies, whitebread. Ain't nothin' to it. At least a car's got a ignition lock on it—new ones do, anyway. Look here. No, not where the key goes, you ain't got no key, why you want to look where the key goes? Look under here. See these wires hangin' down?

I looked now and saw the wires hanging down, looking just as they had when Tinker pointed them out to me: red, blue, yellow, and

green. I pared the insulation from an inch of each and then took a twist of copper wire from my back pocket.

Okay, whitebread, lissen up 'cause we maybe goan give Q and A later, you dig me? You gonna wire the red and the green. You won't forget that, 'cause it's like Christmas. That takes care of your ignition.

I used my wire to hold the bare places on the red and green wires of the Case-Jordan's ignition together. The desert wind hooted, thin, like the sound of someone blowing over the top of a soda bottle. Sweat ran down my neck and into my shirt, where it caught and tickled.

Now you just got the blue and the yellow. You ain't gonna wire em; you just gonna touch em together and you gonna make sho you ain't touchin no bare wire wither own self when you do it neither, 'less you wanna make some hot electrified water in your Jockeys, m'man. The blue and the yellow the ones turn the starter. Off you go. When you feel like you had enough of a joyride, you just pull the red and green wires apart. Like turnin off the key you don't have.

I touched the blue and yellow wires together. A big yellow spark jumped up and I recoiled, striking the back of my head on one of the metal posts at the rear of the cab. Then I leaned forward and touched them together again. The motor turned over, coughed, and the bucket-loader took a sudden spasmodic lurch forward. I was thrown into the rudimentary dashboard, the left side of my face striking the steering bar. I had forgotten to put the damned transmission in neutral and had almost lost an eye as a result. I could almost hear Tink laughing.

I fixed that and then tried the wires again. The motor turned over and turned over. It coughed once, puffing a dirty brown smoke signal into the air to be torn away by the ceaseless wind, and then the motor just went on cranking. I kept trying to tell myself the machine was just in rough shape—a man who'd go off without putting the sand-flaps down, after all, was apt to forget anything—but I became more and more sure that they had drained the diesel, just as I had feared.

And then, just as I was about to give up and look for something I could use to dipstick the loader's fuel tank (all the better to read the bad news with, my dear), the motor bellowed into life.

I let the wires go—the bare patch on the blue one was smoking—and goosed the throttle. When it was running smoothly, I geared it into first, swung it around, and started back toward the long brown rectangle cut neatly into the westbound lane of the highway.

*

The rest of the day was a long bright hell of roaring engine and blazing sun. The driver of the Case-Jordan had forgotten to mount his sand-flaps, but he had remembered to take his sun umbrella. Well, the old gods laugh sometimes, I guess. No reason why. They just do. And I guess the old gods have a twisted sense of humor.

It was almost two o'clock before I got all of the asphalt chunks down into the ditch, because I had never achieved any real degree of delicacy with the pincers. And with the spade-shaped piece at the end, I had to cut it in two and then drag each of the chunks down into the ditch by hand. I was afraid that if I used the pincers I would break them.

When all the asphalt pieces were down in the ditch, I drove the bucket-loader back down to the road equipment. I was getting low on fuel; it was time to siphon. I stopped at the van, got the hose ... and found myself staring, hypnotized, at the big jerrican of water. I tossed the siphon away for the time being and crawled into the back of the van. I poured water over my face and neck and chest and screamed with pleasure. I knew that if I drank I would vomit, but I had to drink. So I did and I vomited, not getting up to do it but only turning my head to one side and then crab-crawling as far away from the mess as I could.

Then I slept again and when I woke up it was nearly dusk and somewhere a wolf was howling at a new moon rising in the purple sky.

*

In the dying light the cut I had made really did look like a grave—the grave of some mythical ogre. Goliath, maybe.

Never, I told the long hole in the asphalt.

Please, Elizabeth whispered back. Please ... for me.

I got four more Empirin out of the glove compartment and swallowed them down. “For you,” I said.

*

I parked the Case-Jordan with its fuel tank close to the tank of a bulldozer, and used a crowbar to pry off the caps on both. A ‘dozer-jockey on a state crew might get away with forgetting to drop the sand-flaps on his vehicle, but with forgetting to lock the fuel-cap, in these days of \$1.05 diesel? Never.

I got the fuel running from the ‘dozer into my loader and waited, trying not to think, watching the moon rise higher and higher in the sky. After awhile I drove back to the cut in the asphalt and started to dig.

Running a bucket-loader by moonlight was a lot easier than running a jackhammer under the broiling desert sun, but it was still slow work because I was determined that the floor of my excavation should have exactly the right slant. As a consequence, I frequently consulted the carpenter’s level I’d brought with me. That meant stopping the loader, getting down, measuring, and climbing up into the peak-seat again. No problem ordinarily, but by midnight my body had stiffened up and every movement sent a shriek of pain through my bones and muscles. My back was the worst; I began to fear I had done something fairly unpleasant to it.

But that—like everything else—was something I would have to worry about later.

If a hole five feet deep as well as forty-two feet long and five feet wide had been required, it really would have been impossible, of course, bucket-loader or not—I might just as well have planned to send him into outer space, or drop the Taj Mahal on him. The total yield on such dimensions is over a thousand cubic feet of earth.

“You’ve got to create a funnel shape that will suck your bad aliens in,” my mathematician friend had said, “and then you’ve got to create an inclined plane that pretty much mimes the arc of descent.”

He drew one on another sheet of graph paper.

“That means that your intergalactic rebels or whatever they are only need to remove half as much earth as the figures initially show. In this case—” He scribbled on a work sheet, and beamed. “Five hundred and twenty-five cubic feet. Chicken-feed. One man could do it.”

I had believed so, too, once upon a time, but I had not reckoned on the heat ... the blisters ... the exhaustion ... the steady pain in my back.

Stop for a minute, but not too long. Measure the slant of the trench.

It’s not as bad as you thought, is it, darling? At least it’s roadbed and not desert hardpan—

I moved more slowly along the length of the grave as the hole got deeper. My hands were bleeding now as I worked the controls. Ram the drop-lever all the way forward until the bucket lay on the ground. Pull back on the drop-lever and shove the one that extended the armature with a high hydraulic whine. Watch as the bright oiled metal slid out of the dirty orange casing, pushing the bucket into the dirt. Every now and then a spark would flash as the bucket slid over a piece of flint. Now raise the bucket ... swivel it, a dark oblong shape against the stars (and try to ignore the steady throbbing pain in your neck the way you’re trying to ignore the even deeper throb of pain in

your back) ... and dump it down in the ditch, covering the chunks of asphalt already there.

Never mind, darling—you can bandage your hands when it's done. When he's done.

“She was in pieces,” I croaked, and jockeyed the bucket back into place so I could take another two hundred pounds of dirt and gravel out of Dolan's grave.

How the time flies when you are having a good time.

*

Moments after I had noticed the first faint streaks of light in the east I got down to take another measurement of the floor's incline with the carpenter's level. I was actually getting near the end; I thought I might just make it. I knelt, and as I did I felt something in my back let go. It went with a dull little snap.

I uttered a guttural cry and collapsed on my side on the narrow, slanted floor of the excavation, lips pulled back from my teeth, hands pressing into the small of my back.

Little by little the very worst of the pain passed and I was able to get to my feet.

All right, I thought. That's it. It's over. It was a good try, but it's over.

Please, darling, Elizabeth whispered back—impossible as it would have been to believe once upon a time, that whispering voice had begun to take on unpleasant undertones in my mind; there was a sense of monstrous implacability about it. Please don't give up. Please go on.

Go on digging? I don't even know if I can walk!

But there's so little left to do! the voice wailed—it was no longer just the voice that spoke for Elizabeth, if it had ever been; it was

Elizabeth. So little left, darling!

I looked at my excavation in the growing light and nodded slowly. She was right. The bucket-loader was only five feet from the end; seven at most. But it was the deepest five or seven, of course; the five or seven with the most dirt in it.

You can do it, darling—I know you can. Softly cajoling.

But it was not really her voice that persuaded me to go on. What really turned the trick was an image of Dolan lying asleep in his penthouse while I stood here in this hole beside a stinking, rumbling bucket-loader, covered with dirt, my hands in flaps and ruins. Dolan sleeping in silk pajama bottoms with one of his blondes asleep beside him, wearing only the top.

Downstairs, in the glassed-in executive section of the parking garage, the Cadillac, already loaded with luggage, would be gassed and ready to go.

“All right, then,” I said. I climbed slowly back into the bucket-loader’s seat and revved the engine.

*

I kept on until nine o’clock and then I quit—there were other things to do, and I was running out of time. My angled hole was forty feet long. It would have to be enough.

I drove the bucket-loader back to its original spot and parked it. I would need it again, and that would mean siphoning more gas, but there was no time for that now. I wanted more Empirin, but there weren’t many left in the bottle and I would need them all later today ... and tomorrow. Oh, yes, tomorrow—Monday, the glorious Fourth.

Instead of Empirin I took a fifteen-minute rest. I could ill-afford the time, but I forced myself to take it just the same. I lay on my back in the van, my muscles jumping and twitching, imagining Dolan.

He would be packing a few last-minute items in a Travel-All now—some papers to look over, a toilet kit, maybe a paperback book or a deck of cards.

Suppose he flies this time? a malicious voice deep inside me whispered, and I couldn't help it—a moan escaped me. He had never flown to L.A. before—always it had been the Cadillac. I had an idea he didn't like to fly. Sometimes he did, though—he had flown all the way to London once—and the thought lingered, itching and throbbing like a scaly patch of skin.

*

It was nine-thirty when I took out the roll of canvas and the big industrial stapler and the wooden struts. The day was overcast and a little cooler—God sometimes grants a favor. Up until then I'd forgotten my bald head in consideration of larger agonies, but now, when I touched it with my fingers, I drew them away with a little hiss of pain. I looked at it in the outside passenger mirror and saw that it was a deep, angry red—almost a plum color.

Back in Vegas Dolan would be making last-minute phone calls. His driver would be bringing the Cadillac around front. There were only about seventy-five miles between me and it, and soon the Cadillac would start to close that distance at sixty miles an hour. I had no time to stand around bemoaning my sunburned pate.

I love your sunburned pate, dear, Elizabeth said beside me.

“Thank you, Beth,” I said, and began taking the struts over to the hole.

*

The work was now light compared to the digging I'd done earlier, and the almost unbearable agony in my back subsided to a steady dull throb.

But what about later? that insinuating voice asked. What about that, hmmm?

Later would have to take care of itself, that was all. It was beginning to look as if the trap was going to be ready, and that was the important thing.

The struts spanned the hole with just enough extra length to allow me to seat them tightly in the sides of the asphalt which formed the top layer of my excavation. This was a job that would have been tougher at night, when the asphalt was hard, but now, at mid-morning, the stuff was sludgy-pliable, and it was like sticking pencils in wads of cooling taffy.

When I had all the struts in, the hole had taken on the look of my original chalk diagram, minus the line down the middle. I positioned the heavy roll of canvas next to the shallow end of the hole and removed the hanks of rope that had tied it shut.

Then I unrolled forty-two feet of Route 71.

Close up, the illusion was not perfect—as stage make-up and set-decoration is never perfect from the first three rows. But from even a few yards away, it was virtually undetectable. It was a dark-gray strip which matched the actual surface of Route 71 exactly. On the far left of the canvas strip (as you faced west) was a broken yellow passing line.

I settled the long strip of canvas over the wooden understructure, then went slowly along the length of it, stapling the canvas to the struts. My hands didn't want to do the work but I coaxed them.

With the canvas secured, I returned to the van, slid behind the wheel (sitting down caused another brief but agonizing muscle spasm), and drove back to the top of the rise. I sat there for a full minute, looking down at my lumpy, wounded hands as they lay in my lap. Then I got out and looked back down Route 71, almost casually. I didn't want to focus on any one thing, you see; I wanted the whole picture—a

gestalt, if you will. I wanted, as much as possible, to see the scene as Dolan and his men were going to see it when they came over the rise. I wanted to get an idea of how right—or how wrong—it was going to feel to them.

What I saw looked better than I could have hoped.

The road machinery at the far end of the straight stretch justified the piles of dirt that had come from my excavation. The asphalt chunks in the ditch were mostly buried. Some still showed—the wind was picking up, and it had blown the dirt around—but that looked like the remnants of an old paving job. The compressor I'd brought in the back of the van looked like Highway Department equipment.

And from here the illusion of the canvas strip was perfect—Route 71 appeared to be utterly untouched down there.

Traffic had been heavy Friday and fairly heavy on Saturday—the drone of motors heading into the detour loop had been almost constant. This morning, however, there was hardly any traffic at all; most people had gotten to wherever they intended to spend the Fourth, or were taking the Interstate forty miles south to get there. That was fine with me.

I parked the van just out of sight over the brow of the rise and lay on my belly until ten-forty-five. Then, after a big milk-truck had gone lumbering slowly up the detour, I backed the van down, opened the rear doors, and threw all the road cones inside.

The flashing arrow was a tougher proposition—at first I couldn't see how I was going to unhook it from the locked battery box without electrocuting myself. Then I saw the plug. It had been mostly hidden by a hard rubber O-ring on the side of the sign-case ... a little insurance policy against vandals and practical jokers who might find pulling the plug on such a highway sign an amusing prank, I supposed.

I found a hammer and chisel in my toolbox, and four hard blows were sufficient to split the O-ring. I yanked it off with a pair of pliers and pulled the cable free. The arrow stopped flashing and went dark. I pushed the battery box into the ditch and buried it. It was strange to stand there and hear it humming down there in the sand. But it made me think of Dolan, and that made me laugh.

I didn't think Dolan would hum.

He might scream, but I didn't think he would hum.

Four bolts held the arrow in a low steel cradle. I loosened them as fast as I could, ears cocked for another motor. It was time for one—but not time for Dolan yet, surely.

That got the interior pessimist going again.

What if he flew?

He doesn't like to fly.

What if he's driving but going another way? Going by the Interstate, for instance? Today everyone else is ...

He always goes by 71.

Yes, but what if—

“Shut up,” I hissed. “Shut up, damn you, just shut the fuck up!”

Easy, darling—easy! Everything will be all right.

I got the arrow into the back of the van. It crashed against the sidewall and some of the bulbs broke. More of them broke when I tossed the cradle in after it.

With that done, I drove back up the rise, pausing at the top to look behind me. I had taken away the arrow and the cones; all that

remained now was that big orange warning: ROAD CLOSED * USE
DETOUR

There was a car coming. It occurred to me that if Dolan was early, it had all been for nothing—the goon driving would simply turn down the detour, leaving me to go mad out here in the desert.

It was a Chevrolet.

My heart slowed down and I let out a long, shuddering breath. But there was no more time for nerves.

I drove back to where I had parked to look at my camouflage job and parked there again. I reached under the jumble of stuff in the back of the van and got the jack. Grimly ignoring my screaming back, I jacked up the rear end of the van, loosened the lug-nuts on the back tire they would see when

(if)

they came, and tossed it into the back of the van. More glass broke, and I would just have to hope there had been no damage done to the tire. I didn't have a spare.

I went back to the front of the van, got my old binoculars, and then headed back toward the detour. I passed it and got to the top of the next rise as fast as I could—a shambling trot was really all I could manage by this time.

Once at the top, I trained my binoculars east.

I had a three-mile field of vision, and could see snatches of the road for two miles east of that. Six vehicles were currently on the way, strung out like random beads on a long string. The first was a foreign car, Datsun or Subaru, I thought, less than a mile away. Beyond that was a pick-up, and beyond the pick-up was what looked like a Mustang. The others were just desert-light flashing on chrome and glass.

When the first car neared—it was a Subaru—I stood up and stuck my thumb out. I didn't expect a ride looking the way I did, and I wasn't disappointed. The expensively coiffed woman behind the wheel took one horrified glance and her face snapped shut like a fist. Then she was gone, down the hill and onto the detour.

“Get a bath, buddy!” the driver of the pick-up yelled at me half a minute later.

The Mustang actually turned out to be an Escort. It was followed by a Plymouth, the Plymouth by a Winnebago that sounded as if it were full of kids having a pillow-fight.

No sign of Dolan.

I looked at my watch. 11:25 A.M. If he was going to show up, it ought to be very soon. This was prime time.

The hands on my watch moved slowly around to 11:40 and there was still no sign of him. Only a late-model Ford and a hearse as black as a raincloud.

He's not coming. He went by the Interstate. Or he flew.

No. He'll come.

He won't, though. You were afraid he'd smell you, and he did. That's why he changed his pattern.

There was another twinkle of light on chrome in the distance. This car was a big one. Big enough to be a Cadillac.

I lay on my belly, elbows propped in the grit of the shoulder, binoculars to my eyes. The car disappeared behind a rise ... reemerged... slipped around a curve... and then came out again.

It was a Cadillac, all right, but it wasn't gray—it was a deep mint green.

What followed was the most agonizing thirty seconds of my life; thirty seconds that seemed to last for thirty years. Part of me decided on the spot, completely and irrevocably, that Dolan had traded in his old Cadillac for a new one. Certainly he had done this before, and although he had never traded for a green one before, there was certainly no law against it.

The other half argued vehemently that Cadillacs were almost a dime a dozen on the highways and byways between Vegas and L.A., and the odds against the green Caddy's being Dolan's Cadillac were a hundred to one.

Sweat ran into my eyes, blurring them, and I put the binoculars down. They weren't going to help me solve this one, anyhow. By the time I was able to see the passengers, it would be too late.

It's almost too late now! Go down there and dump the detour sign! You're going to miss him!

Let me tell you what you're going to catch in your trap if you hide that sign now: two rich old people going to L.A. to see their children and take their grandkids to Disneyland.

Do it! It's him! It's the only chance you're going to have!

That's right. The only chance. So don't blow it by catching the wrong people.

It's Dolan!

It's not!

"Stop it," I moaned, holding my head. "Stop it, stop it."

I could hear the motor now.

Dolan.

The old people.

The lady.

The tiger.

Dolan.

The old—

“Elizabeth, help me!” I groaned.

Darling, that man has never owned a green Cadillac in his life. He never would. Of course it’s not him.

The pain in my head cleared away. I was able to get to my feet and get my thumb out.

It wasn’t the old people, and it wasn’t Dolan, either. It was what looked like twelve Vegas chorines crowded in with one old boy who was wearing the biggest cowboy hat and the darkest Foster Grants I’d ever seen. One of the chorines mooned me as the green Cadillac went fishtailing onto the detour.

Slowly, feeling entirely washed out, I raised the binoculars again.

And saw him coming.

There was no mistaking that Cadillac as it came around the curve at the far end of my uninterrupted view of the road—it was as gray as the sky overhead, but it stood out with startling clarity against the dull brown rises of land to the east.

It was him—Dolan. My long moments of doubt and indecision seemed both remote and foolish in an instant. It was Dolan, and I didn’t have to see that gray Cadillac to know it.

I didn’t know if he could smell me, but I could smell him.

*

Knowing he was on the way made it easier to pick up my aching legs and run.

I got back to the big DETOUR sign and shoved it facedown into the ditch. I shook a sand-colored piece of canvas over it, then pawed loose sand over its support posts. The overall effect wasn't as good as the fake strip of road, but I thought it would serve.

Now I ran up the second rise to where I had left the van, which was just another part of the picture now—a vehicle temporarily abandoned by the owner, who had gone off somewhere to either get a new tire or have an old one fixed.

I got into the cab and stretched out across the seat, my heart thumping.

Again, time seemed to stretch out. I lay there listening for the engine and the sound didn't come and didn't come and didn't come.

They turned off. He caught wind of you at the last moment anyway... or something looked hinky, either to him or to one of his men ... and they turned off.

I lay on the seat, my back throbbing in long, slow waves, my eyes squinched tightly shut as if that would somehow help me hear better.

Was that an engine?

No—just the wind, now blowing hard enough to drive an occasional sheet of sand against the side of the van.

Not coming. Turned off or turned back.

Just the wind.

Turned off or turned b—

No, it was not just the wind. It was a motor, the sound of it was swelling, and a few seconds later a vehicle—one single vehicle—

rushed past me.

I sat up and grabbed the wheel—I had to grab something—and stared out through the windshield, my eyes bulging, my tongue caught between my teeth.

The gray Cadillac floated down the hill toward the flat stretch, doing fifty or maybe a little more. The brake lights never went on. Not even at the end. They never saw it; never had so much as the slightest idea.

What happened was this: all at once the Cadillac seemed to be driving through the road instead of on it. This illusion was so persuasive that I felt a moment of confused vertigo even though I had created the illusion myself. Dolan's Cadillac was hubcap-deep in Route 71, and then it was up to the door-panels. A bizarre thought occurred to me: if the GM company made luxury submarines, this is what they would look like going down.

I could hear thin snapping sounds as the struts supporting the canvas broke under the car. I could hear the sound of canvas rippling and ripping.

All of it happened in only three seconds, but they are three seconds I will remember my whole life.

I had an impression of the Cadillac now running with only its roof and the top two or three inches of the polarized windows visible, and then there was a big toneless thud and the sound of breaking glass and crimping metal. A large puff of dust rose in the air and the wind pulled it apart.

I wanted to go down there—wanted to go down right away—but first I had to put the detour to rights. I didn't want us to be interrupted.

I got out of the van, went around to the back, and pulled the tire back out. I put it on the wheel and tightened the six lug-nuts as fast as I could, using only my fingers. I could do a more thorough job later; in

the meantime I only needed to back the van down to the place where the detour diverged from Highway 71.

I jacked the bumper down and hurried back to the cab of the van at a limping run. I paused there for a moment, listening, head cocked.

I could hear the wind.

And from the long, rectangular hole in the road, the sound of someone shouting ... or maybe screaming.

Grinning, I got back in the van.

*

I backed rapidly down the road, the van swinging drunkenly back and forth. I got out, opened the back doors, and put out the traffic cones again. I kept my ear cocked for approaching traffic, but the wind had gotten too strong to make that very worthwhile. By the time I heard an approaching vehicle, it would be practically on top of me.

I started down into the ditch, tripped, landed on my prat, and slid to the bottom. I pushed away the sand-colored piece of canvas and dragged the big detour sign up to the top. I set it up again, then went back to the van and slammed the rear doors closed. I had no intention of trying to set the arrow sign up again.

I drove back over the next rise, stopped in my old place just out of sight of the detour, got out, and tightened the lug-nuts on the van's back wheel, using the tire-iron this time. The shouting had stopped, but there was no longer any question about the screaming; it was much louder.

I took my time tightening the nuts. I wasn't worried that they were going to get out and either attack me or run away into the desert, because they couldn't get out. The trap had worked perfectly. The Cadillac was now sitting squarely on its wheels at the far end of the excavation, with less than four inches of clearance on either side.

The three men inside couldn't open their doors wide enough to do more than stick out a foot, if that. They couldn't open their windows because they were power-drive and the battery would be so much squashed plastic and metal and acid somewhere in the wreck of the engine.

The driver and the man in the shotgun seat might also be squashed in the wreckage, but this did not concern me; I knew that someone was still alive in there, just as I knew that Dolan always rode in back and wore his seatbelt as good citizens are supposed to do.

The lug-nuts tightened to my satisfaction, I drove the van down to the wide, shallow end of the trap and got out.

Most of the struts were completely gone, but I could see the splintered butt ends of a few, still sticking out of the tar. The canvas "road" lay at the bottom of the cut, crumpled and ripped and twisted. It looked like a shed snakeskin.

I walked up to the deep end and here was Dolan's Cadillac.

The front end was utterly trashed. The hood had accordioned upward in a jagged fan shape. The engine compartment was a jumble of metal and rubber and hoses, all of it covered with sand and dirt that had avalanched down in the wake of the impact. There was a hissing sound and I could hear fluids running and dripping down there someplace. The chilly alcohol aroma of antifreeze was pungent in the air.

I had been worried about the windshield. There was always a chance that it could have broken inward, allowing Dolan space enough to wriggle up and out. But I hadn't been too worried; I told you that Dolan's cars were built to the sorts of specifications required by tinpot dictators and despotic military leaders. The glass was not supposed to break, and it had not.

The Caddy's rear window was even tougher because its area was smaller. Dolan couldn't break it—not in the time I was going to give

him, certainly—and he would not dare try to shoot it out. Shooting at bullet-proof glass from close up is another form of Russian Roulette. The slug would leave only a small white fleck on the glass and then ricochet back into the car.

I'm sure he could have found an out, given world enough and time, but I was here now, and I would give him neither.

I kicked a shower of dirt across the Cadillac's roof.

The response was immediate.

“We need some help, please.

We're stuck in here.”

Dolan's voice. He sounded unhurt and eerily calm. But I sensed the fear underneath, held rigidly in check, and I came as close to feeling sorry for him right then as it was possible for me to come. I could imagine him sitting in the back seat of his telescoped Cadillac, one of his men injured and moaning, probably pinned by the engine block, the other either dead or unconscious.

I imagined it and felt a jittery moment of what I can only term sympathetic claustrophobia. Push the window-buttons—nothing. Try the doors, even though you can see they're going to clunk to a full stop long before you could squeeze through.

Then I stopped trying to imagine, because he was the one who had bought this, wasn't he? Yes. He had bought his own ticket and paid a full fare.

“Who's there?”

“Me,” I said, “but I'm not the help you're looking for, Dolan.”

I kicked another fan of grit and pebbles across the gray Cadillac's roof. The screamer started doing his thing again as the second bunch of pebbles rattled across the roof.

“My legs! Jim, my legs!”

Dolan’s voice was suddenly wary. The man outside, the man on top, knew his name. Which meant this was an extremely dangerous situation.

“Jimmy, I can see the bones in my legs!”

“Shut up,” Dolan said coldly. It was eerie to hear their voices drifting up like that. I suppose I could have climbed down onto the Cadillac’s back deck and looked in the rear window, but I would not have seen much, even with my face pressed right against it. The glass was polarized, as I may already have told you.

I didn’t want to see him, anyway. I knew what he looked like. What would I want to see him for? To find out if he was wearing his Rolex and his designer jeans?

“Who are you, buddy?” he asked.

“I’m nobody,” I said. “Just a nobody who had a good reason to put you where you are right now.”

And with an eerie, frightening suddenness, Dolan said: “Is your name Robinson?”

I felt as if someone had punched me in the stomach. He had made the connection that fast, winnowing through all the half-remembered names and faces and coming up with exactly the right one. Had I thought him an animal, with the instincts of an animal? I hadn’t known the half of it, and it was really just as well I had not, or I never would have had the guts to do what I had done.

I said, “My name doesn’t matter. But you know what happens now, don’t you?”

The screamer began again—great bubbling, liquid bellows.

“Get me outta here, Jimmy! Get me outta here! For the luvva Jaysus! My legs’re broke!”

“Shut up,” Dolan said. And then, to me: “I can’t hear you, man, the way he’s screaming.”

I got down on my hands and knees and leaned over. “I said you know what h—”

I suddenly had an image of the wolf dressed up as Gramma telling Red Riding Hood, All the better to hear you with, my dear... come a little closer. I recoiled, and just in time. The revolver went off four times. The shots were loud where I was; they must have been deafening in the car. Four black eyes opened in the roof of Dolan’s Cadillac, and I felt something split the air an inch from my forehead.

“Did I get you, cocksucker?” Dolan asked.

“No,” I said.

The screamer had become the weeper. He was in the front seat. I saw his hands, as pale as the hands of a drowned man, slapping weakly at the windshield, and the slumped body next to him. Jimmy had to get him out, he was bleeding, the pain was bad, the pain was turrible, the pain was more than he could take, for the luvva Jaysus he was sorry, heartily sorry for his sins, but this was more than—

There was another pair of loud reports. The man in the front seat stopped screaming. The hands dropped away from the windshield.

“There,” Dolan said in a voice that was almost reflective. “He ain’t hurting anymore and we can hear what we say to each other.”

I said nothing. I felt suddenly dazed and unreal. He had killed a man just now. Killed him. The feeling that I had underestimated him in spite of all my precautions and was lucky to be alive recurred.

“I want to make you a proposal,” Dolan said.

I continued to hold my peace—

“My friend?”

—and to hold it some more.

“Hey! You!” His voice trembled minutely. “If you’re still up there, talk to me! What can that hurt?”

“I’m here,” I said. “I was just thinking you fired six times. I was thinking you may wish you’d saved one for yourself before long. But maybe there’s eight in the clip, or you have reloads.”

Now it was his turn to fall silent. Then:

“What are you planning?”

“I think you’ve already guessed,” I said. “I have spent the last thirty-six hours digging the world’s longest grave, and now I’m going to bury you in your fucking Cadillac.”

The fear in his voice was still reined in. I wanted that rein to snap.

“You want to hear my proposition first?”

“I’ll listen. In a few seconds. First I have to get something.”

I walked back to the van and got my shovel.

*

When I got back he was saying “Robinson? Robinson? Robinson?” like a man speaking into a dead phone.

“I’m here,” I said. “You talk. I’ll listen. And when you’re finished I may make a counter-proposal.”

When he spoke, he sounded more cheerful. If I was talking counter-proposals, I was talking deal. And if I was talking deal, he was

already halfway to being out.

“I’m offering you a million dollars to let me out of here. But, just as important—”

I tossed a shovelful of gritty till down on the rear deck of the Cadillac. Pebbles bounced and rattled off the small rear window. Dirt sifted into the line of the trunk-lid.

“What are you doing?” His voice was sharp with alarm.

“Idle hands do the devil’s work,” I said. “I thought I’d keep mine busy while I listened.”

I dug into the dirt again and threw in another shovelful.

Now Dolan spoke faster, his voice more urgent.

“A million dollars and my personal guarantee that no one will ever touch you ... not me, not my men, not anyone else’s men.”

My hands didn’t hurt anymore. It was amazing. I shoveled steadily, and in no more than five minutes, the Cadillac’s rear deck was drifted deep in dirt. Putting it in, even by hand, was certainly easier than taking it out.

I paused, leaning on the shovel for a moment.

“Keep talking.”

“Look, this is crazy,” he said, and now I could hear bright splinters of panic in his voice. “I mean it’s just crazy.”

“You got that right,” I said, and shoveled in more dirt.

*

He held on longer than I thought any man could, talking, reasoning, cajoling—yet becoming more and more disjointed as the sand and

dirt piled up over the rear window, repeating himself, backtracking, beginning to stutter. At one point the passenger door opened as far as it could and banged into the sidewall of the excavation. I saw a hand with black hair on the knuckles and a big ruby ring on the second finger. I sent down a quick four shovelfuls of loose earth into the opening. He screamed curses and yanked the door shut again.

He broke not long after. It was the sound of the dirt coming down that finally got to him, I think. Sure it was. The sound would have been very loud inside the Cadillac. The dirt and stones rattling onto the roof and falling past the window. He must have finally realized he was sitting in an upholstered eight-cylinder fuel-injected coffin.

“Get me out!” he shrieked. “Please! I can’t stand it! Get me out!”

“You ready for that counter-proposal?” I asked.

“Yes! Yes! Christ! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

“Scream. That’s the counter-proposal. That’s what I want. Scream for me. If you scream loud enough, I’ll let you out.”

He screamed piercingly.

“That was good!” I said, and I meant it. “But it was nowhere near good enough.”

I began to dig again, throwing fan after fan of dirt over the roof of the Cadillac. Disintegrating clods ran down the windshield and filled the windshield-wiper slot.

He screamed again, even louder, and I wondered if it was possible for a man to scream loud enough to rupture his own larynx.

“Not bad!” I said, redoubling my efforts. I was smiling in spite of my throbbing back. “You might get there, Dolan—you really might.”

“Five million.” It was the last coherent thing he said.

“I think not,” I replied, leaning on the shovel and wiping sweat off my forehead with the heel of one grimy hand. The dirt covered the roof of the car almost from side to side now. It looked like a starburst ... or a large brown hand clasping Dolan’s Cadillac. “But if you can make a sound come out of your mouth which is as loud, let us say, as eight sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet, then I will get you out, and you may count on it.”

So he screamed, and I shoveled dirt down on the Cadillac. For some time he did indeed scream very loudly, although I judged he never screamed louder than two sticks of dynamite taped to the ignition switch of a 1968 Chevrolet. Three, at most. And by the time the last of the Cadillac’s brightwork was covered and I rested to look down at the dirt-shrouded hump in the hole, he was producing no more than a series of hoarse and broken grunts.

I looked at my watch. It was just past one o’clock. My hands were bleeding again, and the handle of the shovel was slippery. A sheaf of gritty sand flew into my face and I recoiled from it. A high wind in the desert makes a peculiarly unpleasant sound—a long, steady drone that simply goes on and on. It is like the voice of an idiot ghost.

I leaned over the hole. “Dolan?”

No answer.

“Scream, Dolan.”

No answer at first—then a series of harsh barks.

Satisfactory!

*

I went back to the van, started it up, and drove the mile and a half back down to the road construction. On the way I tuned to WKXR, Las Vegas, the only station the van’s radio would pull in. Barry Manilow told me he wrote the songs that make the whole world sing,

a statement I greeted with some skepticism, and then the weather report came on. High winds were forecast; a travellers' advisory had been posted on the main roads between Vegas and the California line. There were apt to be visibility problems because of sheeting sand, the disc jockey said, but the thing to really watch out for was wind-shear. I knew what he was talking about, because I could feel it whipsawing the van.

Here was my Case-Jordan bucket-loader; already I thought of it as mine. I got in, humming the Barry Manilow tune, and touched the blue and yellow wires together again. The loader started up smoothly. This time I'd remembered to take it out of gear. Not bad, white boy, I could hear Tink saying in my head. You learnin.

Yes I was. Learning all the time.

I sat for a minute, watching membranes of sand skirl across the desert, listening to the bucket-loader's engine rumble and wondering what Dolan was up to. This was, after all, his Big Chance. Try to break the rear window, or crawl over into the front seat and try to break the windshield. I had put a couple of feet of sand and dirt over each, but it was still possible. It depended on how crazy he was by now, and that wasn't a thing I could know, so it really didn't bear thinking about. Other things did.

I geared the bucket-loader and drove back up the highway to the trench. When I got there I trotted anxiously over and looked down, half-expecting to see a man-sized gopher hole at the front or rear of the Cadillac-mound where Dolan had broken some glass and crawled out.

My spadework had not been disturbed.

"Dolan," I said, cheerfully enough, I thought.

There was no answer.

"Dolan!"

No answer.

He's killed himself, I thought, and felt a sick-bitter disappointment. Killed himself somehow or died of fright.

"Dolan?"

Laughter drifted up from the mound; bright, irrepressible, totally genuine laughter. I felt my flesh lift itself into large hard lumps. It was the laughter of a man whose mind has broken.

He laughed and he laughed in his hoarse voice. Then he screamed; then he laughed again. Finally he did both together.

For awhile I laughed with him, or screamed, or whatever, and the wind laughed and screamed at both of us.

Then I went back to the Case-Jordan, lowered the blade, and began to cover him up for real.

*

In four minutes even the shape of the Cadillac was gone. There was just a hole filled with dirt.

I thought I could hear something, but with the sound of the wind and the steady grumble of the loader's engine, it was hard to tell. I got down on my knees; then I lay down full-length with my head hanging into what remained of the hole.

Far down, underneath all that dirt, Dolan was still laughing. They were sounds like something you might read in a comic book: Hee-hee-hee, aaah-hah-hah-hah. There might have been some words, too. It was hard to tell. I smiled and nodded, though.

"Scream," I whispered. "Scream, if you want." But that faint sound of laughter just went on, seeping up from the dirt like a poisonous vapor.

A sudden dark terror seized me—Dolan was behind me! Yes, somehow Dolan had gotten behind me! And before I could turn around he would tumble me into the hole and—

I jumped up and whirled around, my mangled hands making rough approximations of fists.

Wind-driven sand smacked me.

There was nothing else.

I wiped my face with my dirty bandanna and got back into the cab of the bucket-loader and went back to work.

The cut was filled in again long before dark. There was even dirt left over, in spite of what the wind had whipped away, because of the area displaced by the Cadillac. It went quickly... so quickly.

The tone of my thoughts was weary, confused, and half-delirious as I piloted the loader back down the road, driving it directly over the spot where Dolan was buried.

I parked it in its original place, removed my shirt, and rubbed all of the metal in the cab with it in an effort to remove fingerprints. I don't know exactly why I did that, even to this day, since I must have left them in a hundred other places around the site. Then, in the deep brownish-gray gloom of that stormy dusk, I went back to the van.

I opened one of the rear doors, observed Dolan crouched inside, and staggered back, screaming, one hand thrown up to shield my face. It seemed to me that my heart must explode in my chest.

Nothing—no one—came out of the van. The door swung and banged in the wind like the last shutter on a haunted house. At last I crept back, heart pounding, and peered inside. There was nothing but the jumble of stuff I had left in there—the road-arrow with the broken bulbs, the jack, my toolbox.

“You have got to get hold of yourself,” I said softly. “Get hold of yourself.”

I waited for Elizabeth to say, You’ll be all right, darling ... something like that ... but there was only the wind.

I got back into the van, started it, and drove halfway back to the excavation. That was as far as I could make myself go. Although I knew it was utterly foolish, I became more and more convinced that Dolan was lurking in the van. My eyes kept going to the rear-view mirror, trying to pick his shadow out of the others.

The wind was stronger than ever, rocking the van on its springs. The dust it pulled up from the desert and drove before it looked like smoke in the headlights.

At last I pulled over to the side of the road, got out, and locked all the doors. I knew I was crazy to even try sleeping outside in this, but I couldn’t sleep in there. I just couldn’t. So I crawled under the van with my sleeping bag.

I was asleep five seconds after I zipped myself into it.

*

When I woke up from a nightmare I could not remember—except there had been hands in it, clutching at my throat—I found that I had been buried alive. There was sand up my nose, sand in my ears. It was down my throat, choking me.

I screamed and struggled upward, at first convinced that the confining sleeping bag was earth. Then I banged my head on the van’s undercarriage and saw flakes of rust silting down.

I rolled out from under into a dawn the color of smutty pewter. My sleeping bag blew away like a tumbleweed the moment my weight was off it. I gave a surprised yell and chased twenty feet after it before realizing it would be the world’s worst mistake. Visibility was

down to no more than twenty yards, and maybe less. The road was totally gone in places. I looked back at the van and it looked washed-out, barely there, a sepia photograph of a ghost-town relic.

I staggered back to it, found my keys, and got inside. I was still spitting sand and coughing dryly. I got the motor going and drove slowly back the way I had come. There was no need to wait for a weather report; the weather was all the jock could talk about this morning. The worst desert windstorm in Nevada history. All roads closed. Stay home unless you absolutely have to go out, and then stay home anyway.

The glorious Fourth.

Stay in. You're crazy if you go out there. You'll go sandblind.

That I would chance. This was a golden opportunity to cover it up forever—never in my wildest imaginings had I suspected I might get such a chance, but it was here, and I was taking it.

I had brought three or four extra blankets. I tore a long, wide strip from one of them and tied it around my head. Looking like some sort of crazed Bedouin, I stepped out.

*

I spent all morning carrying chunks of asphalt up from the ditch and placing them back into the trench, trying to be as neat as a mason laying a wall ... or bricking up a niche. The actual fetching and carrying was not terribly difficult, although I had to unearth most of the asphalt blocks like an archaeologist hunting for artifacts, and every twenty minutes or so I had to repair to the van to get out of the blowing sand and rest my stinging eyes.

I worked slowly west from what had been the shallow end of the excavation, and by quarter past noon—I had started at six—I had reached the final seventeen feet or so. By then the wind had begun to die and I could see occasional ragged patches of blue above me.

I fetched and placed, fetched and placed. Now I was over the spot where I calculated Dolan must be. Was he dead yet? How many cubic feet of air could a Cadillac hold? How soon would that space become unable to support human life, assuming that neither of Dolan's two companions was still breathing?

I knelt by the bare earth. The wind had eroded the impressions of the Case-Jordan's treads but not quite erased them; somewhere beneath those faint indentations was a man wearing a Rolex.

"Dolan," I said chummily, "I've changed my mind and decided to let you out."

Nothing. No sound at all. Dead for sure this time.

I went back and got another square of asphalt. I placed it, and as I started to rise, I heard faint, cackling laughter seeping up through the earth.

I sank back into a crouch with my head forward—if I'd still had hair, it would have been hanging in my face—and remained in that position for some time, listening as he laughed. The sound was faint and without timbre.

When it stopped, I went back and got another asphalt square. There was a piece of the broken yellow line on this one. It looked like a hyphen. I knelt with it.

"For the love of God!" he shrieked. "For the love of God, Robinson!"

"Yes," I said, smiling. "For the love of God."

I put the chunk of asphalt in neatly next to its neighbor, and although I listened, I heard him no more.

*

I got back to my place in Vegas that night at eleven o'clock. I slept for sixteen hours, got up, walked toward the kitchen to make coffee,

and then collapsed, writhing, on the hall floor as a monstrous back spasm racked me. I scrabbled at the small of my back with one hand while I chewed on the other to stifle the screams.

After awhile I crawled into the bathroom—I tried standing once, but this resulted in another thunderbolt—and used the washstand to pull myself up enough so I could get the second bottle of Empirin in the medicine cabinet.

I chewed three and drew a bath. I lay on the floor while I waited for the tub to fill. When it was, I wriggled out of my pajamas and managed to get into the tub. I lay there for five hours, dozing most of the time. When I got out, I could walk.

A little.

I went to a chiropractor. He told me I had three slipped discs and had suffered a serious lower spinal dislocation. He wanted to know if I had decided to sub for the circus strongman.

I told him I did it digging in my garden.

He told me I was going to Kansas City.

I went.

They operated.

When the anesthesiologist put the rubber cup over my face, I heard Dolan laughing from the hissing blackness inside and knew I was going to die.

*

The recovery room was a watery tiled green.

“Am I alive?” I croaked.

A nurse laughed. “Oh, yes.” His hand touched my brow—my brow that went all the way around my head. “What a sunburn you have! My God! Did that hurt, or are you still too doped up?”

“Still too doped up,” I said. “Did I talk while I was under?”

“Yes,” he said.

I was cold all over. Cold to the bones of me.

“What did I say?”

“You said, ‘It’s dark in here. Let me out!’” And he laughed again.

“Oh,” I said.

*

They never found him—Dolan.

It was the storm. That flukey storm. I’m pretty sure I know what happened, although I think you’ll understand when I tell you I never checked too closely.

RPAV—remember that? They were repaving. The storm almost buried the section of 71 which the detour had closed. When they went back to work, they didn’t bother to remove the new dunes all at once but only as they went along—why do otherwise? There was no traffic to worry about. So they plowed sand and routed up old paving at the same time. And if the ‘dozer operator happened to notice that the sand-crusting asphalt in one section—a section about forty feet long—was breaking in front of his blade in neat, almost geometric pieces, he never said anything. Maybe he was stoned. Or maybe he was just dreaming of stepping out with his baby that evening.

Then came the dumpsters with their fresh loads of gravel, followed by the spreaders and rollers. After them the big tankers would arrive, the ones with the wide sprayer attachments on the backs and their smell of hot tar, so like melting shoe-leather. And when the fresh

asphalt had dried, along would come the lining machine, the driver under his big canvas parasol looking back frequently to make sure the broken yellow line was perfectly straight, unaware that he was passing over a fog-gray Cadillac with three people inside, unaware that down in the darkness there was a ruby ring and a gold Rolex that might still be marking off the hours.

One of those heavy vehicles would almost surely have collapsed an ordinary Cadillac; there would have been a lurch, a crunch, and then a bunch of men digging to see what—or who—they had found. But it really was more tank than car, and Dolan's very carefulness has so far kept anyone from finding him.

Sooner or later the Cadillac will collapse of course, probably under the weight of a passing semi, and the next vehicle along will see a big broken dent in the westbound lane, and the Highway Department will be notified, and there will be another RPAV. But if there aren't Highway Department workers right there to see what happens, to observe that the heavy weight of a passing truck has caused some hollow object under the road to collapse, I think they will assume the "marsh-hole" (that is what they call them) has been caused by either frost, or a collapsed salt-dome, or possibly a desert temblor. They will repair it and life will go on.

*

He was reported missing—Dolan.

A few tears were shed.

A columnist in the Las Vegas Sun suggested that he might be playing dominos or shooting pool somewhere with Jimmy Hoffa.

Perhaps that is not so far from the truth.

*

I'm fine.

My back is pretty much okay again. I'm under strict orders not to lift anything which weighs over thirty pounds without help, but I've got a good bunch of third-graders this year, and all the help I could want.

I've driven back and forth over that stretch of road several times in my new Acura automobile. Once I even stopped, got out, and (after checking in both directions to make sure the road was deserted) took a piss on what I was pretty sure was the spot. But I couldn't produce much of a flow, even though my kidneys felt full, and when I drove on I kept checking the rear-view mirror: I had this funny idea, you see, that he was going to rise up from the back seat, his skin charred to a cinnamon color and stretched over his skull like the skin of a mummy, his hair full of sand, his eyes and his Rolex watch glittering.

That was the last time I was on 71, actually. Now I take the Interstate when I need to head west.

And Elizabeth? Like Dolan, she has fallen silent. I find that is a relief.