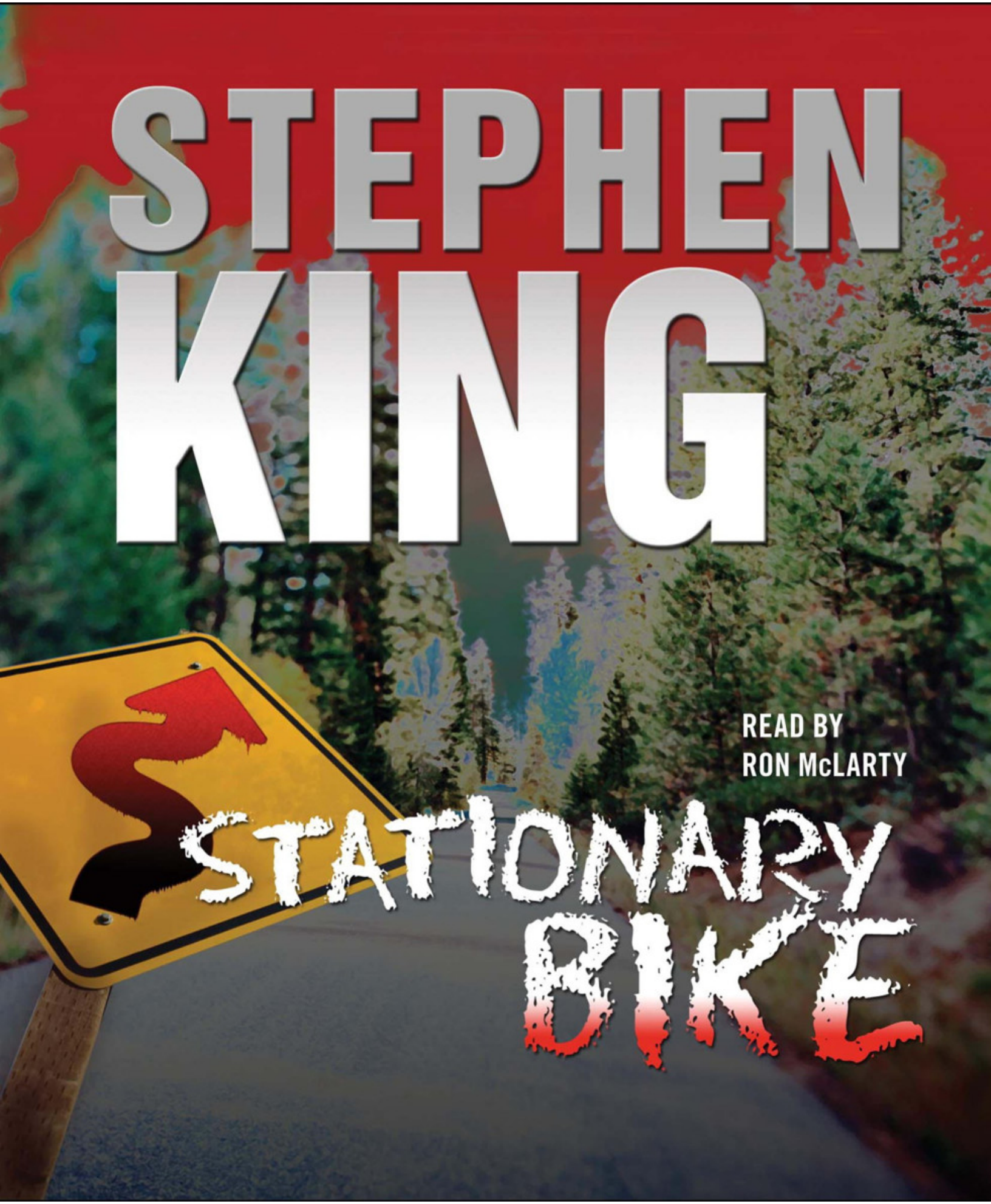
STEPHEN
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RON McLARTY
STATIONARY
BIKE

STATIONARY BIKE

Stephen King

I. Metabolic Workmen

A week after the physical he had put off for a year (he'd actually been putting it off for three years, as his wife would have pointed out if she had still been alive), Richard Sifkitz was invited by Dr. Brady to view and discuss the results. Since the patient could detect nothing overtly ominous in his doctor's voice, he went willingly enough.

The results were rendered as numeric values on a sheet of paper headed METROPOLITAN HOSPITAL, New York City. All the test names and numbers were in black except for one line. This one line was rendered in red, and Sifkitz was not very surprised to see that it was marked CHOLESTEROL. The number, which really stood out in that red ink (as was undoubtedly the intention), read 226.

Sifkitz started to enquire if that was a bad number, then asked himself if he wanted to start off this interview by asking something stupid. It would not have been printed in red, he reasoned, if it had been a good number. The rest of them were undoubtedly good numbers, or at least acceptable numbers, which was why they were printed in black. But he wasn't here to discuss them. Doctors were busy men, disinclined to waste time in head-patting. So instead of something stupid, he asked how bad a number two-twenty-six was.

Dr. Brady leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together on his damnably skinny chest. "To tell you the truth," he said, "it's not a bad number at all." He raised a finger. "Considering what you eat, that is."

"I know I weigh too much," Sifkitz said humbly. "I've been meaning to do something about it." In fact, he had been meaning to do no such thing.

"To tell you more of the truth," Dr. Brady went on, "your weight is not so bad, either. Again, considering what you eat. And now I want you to listen closely, because this is a conversation I only have with my

patients once. My male patients, that is; when it comes to weight, my female patients would talk my ear off, if I let them. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Sifkitz said, attempting to lace his fingers across his own chest and discovering he could not do it. What he discovered—or rediscovered, more properly put—was that he had a pretty good set of breasts. Not, so far as he was aware, part of the standard equipment for men in their late thirties. He gave up his attempt to lace and folded, instead. In his lap. The sooner the lecture was begun, the sooner it would be done.

"You're six feet tall and thirty-eight years old," Dr. Brady said. "Your weight should be about a hundred and ninety, and your cholesterol should be just about the same. Once upon a time, back in the seventies, you could get away with a cholesterol reading of two-forty, but of course back in the seventies, you could still smoke in the waiting rooms at hospitals." He shook his head. "No, the correlation between high cholesterol and heart disease was simply too clear. The two-forty number consequently went by the boards.

"You are the sort of man who has been blessed with a good metabolism. Not a great one, mind you, but good? Yes. How many times do you eat at McDonald's or Wendy's, Richard? Twice a week?"

"Maybe once," Sifkitz said. He thought the average week actually brought four to six fast-food meals with it. Not counting the occasional weekend trip to Arby's.

Dr. Brady raised a hand as if to say Have it your way … which was, now that Sifkitz thought of it, the Burger King motto.

"Well, you're certainly eating somewhere, as the scales tell us. You weighed in on the day of your physical at two-twenty-three … once again, and not coincidentally, very close to your cholesterol number."

He smiled a little at Sifkitz's wince, but at least it was not a smile devoid of sympathy.

“Here is what has happened so far in your adult life,” Brady said. “In it, you have continued to eat as you did when you were a teenager, and to this point your body—thanks to that good-if-not-extraordinary metabolism—has pretty much kept up with you. It helps at this point to think of the metabolic process as a work-crew. Men in chinos and Doc Martens.”

It may help you, Sifkitz thought, it doesn’t do a thing for me. Meanwhile, his eyes kept being drawn back to that red number, that 226.

“Their job is to grab the stuff you send down the chute and dispose of it. Some they send on to the various production departments. The rest they burn. If you send them more than they can deal with, you put on weight. Which you have been doing, but at a relatively slow pace. But soon, if you don’t make some changes, you’re going to see that pace speed up. There are two reasons. The first is that your body’s production facilities need less fuel than they used to. The second is that your metabolic crew—those fellows in the chinos with the tattoos on their arms—aren’t getting any younger. They’re not as efficient as they used to be. They’re slower when it comes to separating the stuff to be sent on and the stuff that needs to be burned. And sometimes they bitch.”

“Bitch?” Sifkitz asked.

Dr. Brady, hands still laced across his narrow chest (the chest of a consumptive, Sifkitz decided—certainly no breasts there), nodded his equally narrow head. Sifkitz thought it almost the head of a weasel, sleek and sharp-eyed. “Yes indeed. They say stuff like, ‘Isn’t he ever gonna slow down?’ and ‘Who does he think we are, the Marvel Comics superheroes?’ and ‘Cheezis, don’t he ever give it a rest?’ And one of them—the malingerer, every work-crew’s got one—probably says, ‘What the fuck does he care about us, anyway? He’s on top, ain’t he?’

“And sooner or later, they’ll do what any bunch of working joes will do if they’re forced to go on too long and do too much, without so

much as a lousy weekend off, let alone a paid vacation: they'll get sloppy. Start goofing off and lying down on the job. One day one of 'em won't come in at all, and there'll come another—if you live long enough—when one of 'em can't come in, because he'll be lying home dead of a stroke or a heart attack."

"That's pleasant. Maybe you could take it on the road. Hit the lecture circuit. Oprah, even."

Dr. Brady unlaced his fingers and leaned forward across his desk. He looked at Richard Sifkitz, unsmiling. "You've got a choice to make and my job is to make you aware of it, that's all. Either you change your habits or you're going to find yourself in my office ten years from now with some serious problems—weight pushing three hundred pounds, maybe, Type Two diabetes, varicose veins, a stomach ulcer, and a cholesterol number to match your weight. At this point you can still turn around without crash-diets, tummy-tucks, or a heart attack to get your attention. Later on doing that'll get harder. Once you're past forty, it gets harder every year. After forty, Richard, the weight sticks to your ass like babyshit sticks to a bedroom wall."

"Elegant," Sifkitz said, and burst out laughing. He couldn't help it.

Brady didn't laugh, but he smiled, at least, and leaned back in his chair. "There's nothing elegant about where you're headed. Doctors don't usually talk about it any more than State Troopers talk about the severed head they found in a ditch near the car accident, or the blackened child they found in the closet the day after the Christmas tree lights caught the house on fire, but we know lots about the wonderful world of obesity, from women who grow mold in flaps of fat that haven't been washed all the way to the bottom in years to men who go everywhere in a cloud of stench because they haven't been able to wipe themselves properly in a decade or more."

Sifkitz winced and made a waving-away gesture.

“I don’t say you’re going there, Richard—most people don’t, they have a kind of built-in limiter, it seems—but there is some truth to that old saying about so-and-so digging his grave with a fork and spoon. Keep it in mind.”

“I will.”

“Good. That’s the speech. Or sermon. Or whatever it is. I won’t tell you to go your way and sin no more, I’ll just say ‘over to you.’”

Although he had filled in the OCCUPATION blank on his income tax return with the words FREELANCE ARTIST for the last twelve years, Sifkitz did not think of himself as a particularly imaginative man, and he hadn’t done a painting (or even a drawing, really) just for himself since the year he graduated from DePaul. He did book jackets, some movie posters, a lot of magazine illustrations, the occasional cover for a trade-show brochure. He’d done one CD cover (for Slobberbone, a group he particularly admired) but would never do another one, he said, because you couldn’t see the detail in the finished product without a magnifying glass. That was as close as he had ever come to what is called “artistic temperament.”

If asked to name his favorite piece of work, he likely would have looked blank. If pressed, he might have said it was the painting of the young blond woman running through the grass that he had done for Downy Fabric Softener, but even that would have been a lie, something told just to make the question go away. In truth, he wasn’t the kind of artist who had (or needed to have) favorites. It had been a long time since he’d picked up a brush to paint anything other than what someone commissioned him to paint, usually from a detailed ad agency memo or from a photograph (as had been the case with the woman running through the grass, evidently overjoyed that she had finally managed to beat static cling).

But, as surely as inspiration strikes the best of us—the Picassos, the Van Goghs, the Salvador Dalis—so it must eventually strike the rest of us, if only once or twice in a lifetime. Sifkitz took the crosstown bus home (he’d not owned a car since college), and as he sat

looking out the window (the medical report with its one line of red type was folded into his back pocket), he found his eye again and again going to the various work-crews and construction gangs the bus rolled past: guys in hardhats tromping across a building site, some with buckets, some with boards balanced on their shoulders; Con Ed guys half-in and half-out of manholes surrounded by yellow tape stamped with the words WORK AREA; three guys erecting a scaffold in front of a department store display window while a fourth talked on his cell phone.

Little by little he realized a picture was forming in his mind, one which demanded its place in the world. When he was back to the SoHo loft that served as both his home and his studio, he crossed to the littered nest beneath the skylight without even bothering to pick the mail up off the floor. He dropped his jacket on top of it, as a matter of fact.

He paused only long enough to look at a number of blank canvases leaning in the corner, and dismiss them. He took a piece of plain white pressboard instead, and set to work with a charcoal pencil. The phone rang twice over the course of the next hour. He let the answering machine pick up both times.

He worked at this picture off and on—but rather more on than off, especially as time passed and he came to realize how good it was—over the next ten days, moving from the pressboard to a piece of canvas that was four feet long and three feet high when it seemed natural to do so. It was the biggest surface he'd worked on in over a decade.

The picture showed four men—workmen in jeans, poplin jackets, and big old workboots—standing at the side of a country road which had just emerged from a deep stand of forest (this he rendered in shades of dark green and streaks of gray, working in a splashy, speedy, exuberant style). Two of the men had shovels; one had a bucket in each hand; the fourth was in the process of pushing his cap back from his forehead in a gesture that perfectly caught his end-of-the-day weariness and his growing realization that the job

would never be done; that there was, in fact, more of the job needing to be done at the end of each day than there had been at the beginning. This fourth guy, wearing a battered old gimme-cap with the word LIPID printed above the bill, was the foreman. He was talking to his wife on his cell phone. Coming home, honey, nah, don't want to go out, not tonight, too tired, want to get an early start in the morning. The guys bitched about that but I brought 'em around. Sifkitz didn't know how he knew all this, but he did. Just as he knew that the man with the buckets was Freddy, and he owned the truck in which the men had come. It was parked just outside the picture on the right; you could see the top of its shadow. One of the shovel guys, Carlos, had a bad back and was seeing a chiropractor.

There was no sign of what job the men had been doing in the picture, that was a little beyond the left side, but you could see how exhausted they were. Sifkitz had always been a detail-man (that green-gray blur of forest was very unlike him), and you could read how weary these men were in every feature of their faces. It was even in the sweat-stains on the collars of their shirts.

Above them, the sky was a queer organic red.

Of course he knew what the picture represented and understood that queer sky perfectly. This was the work-crew of which his doctor had spoken, at the end of their day. In the real world beyond that organic red sky, Richard Sifkitz, their employer, had just eaten his bed-time snack (a left-over piece of cake, maybe, or a carefully hoarded Krispy Kreme) and laid his head down on his pillow. Which meant they were finally free to go home for the day. And would they eat? Yes, but not as much as he did. They would be too tired to eat much, it was on their faces. Instead of eating a big meal they'd put their feet up, these guys who worked for The Lipid Company, and watch TV for a little while. Maybe fall asleep in front of it and then wake up a couple of hours later, with the regular shows gone and Ron Popeil on, showing his latest invention to an adoring studio audience. And they'd turn it off with the remote and shuffle away to bed, shedding clothes as they went without so much as a backward look.

All of this was in the picture, although none of it was in the picture. Sifkitz was not obsessed with it, it did not become his life, but he understood it was something new in his life, something good. He had no idea what he could do with such a thing once it was finished, and didn't really care. For the time being he just liked getting up in the morning and looking at it with one eye open as he picked the cloth of his Big Dog boxers out of the crack of his ass. He supposed when it was done, he would have to name it. So far he had considered and rejected "Quittin' Time," "The Boys Call It a Day," and "Berkowitz Calls It a Day." Berkowitz being the boss, the foreman, the one with the Motorola cell phone, the guy in the LIPID cap. None of those names were quite right, and that was okay. He'd know the right name for the picture when it finally occurred to him. It would make a cling! sound in his head. In the meantime there was no hurry. He wasn't even sure the picture was the point. While painting it, he had lost fifteen pounds. Maybe that was the point.

Or maybe it wasn't.

II. Stationary Bike

Somewhere—maybe at the end of a Salada tea-bag string—he had read that, for the person who aspires to lose weight, the most effective exercise is pushing back from the table. Sifkitz had no doubt this was true, but as time passed he more and more came to believe that losing weight wasn't his goal. Nor was getting buffed up his goal, although both of those things might be side-effects. He kept thinking of Dr. Brady's metabolic working stiffs, ordinary joes who were really trying their best to do their job but getting no help from him. He could hardly not think of them when he was spending an hour or two every day painting them and their workaday world.

He fantasized quite a lot about them. There was Berkowitz, the foreman, who aspired to have his own construction company someday. Freddy, who owned the truck (a Dodge Ram) and fancied himself a fancy carpenter. Carlos, the one with the bad back. And Whelan, who was actually sort of a goldbrick. These were the guys whose job it was to keep him from having a heart attack or a stroke. They had to clean up the shit that kept bombing down from that queer red sky before it blocked the road into the woods.

A week after he began the painting (and about a week before he would finally decide it was done), Sifkitz went to The Fitness Boys on Twenty-ninth Street, and, after considering both a treadmill and a StairMaster (attractive but too expensive), bought a stationary bike. He paid an extra forty dollars to have it assembled and delivered.

"Use this every day for six months and your cholesterol number's down thirty points," said the salesman, a brawny young fellow in a Fitness Boys T-shirt. "I practically guarantee it."

The basement of the building where Sifkitz lived was a rambling, multi-room affair, dark and shadowy, bellowing with furnace noise and crammed with tenants' possessions in stalls marked with the various apartment numbers. There was an alcove at the far end,

however, that was almost magically empty. As if it had been waiting for him all along. Sifkitz had the deliverymen set up his new exercise machine on the concrete floor facing a bare beige wall.

“You gonna bring down a TV?” one of them asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Sifkitz said, although he had.

He rode the stationary bike in front of one bare beige wall for fifteen minutes or so every day until the painting was finished, knowing that fifteen minutes was probably not enough (although certainly better than nothing) but also knowing it was about all he could stand for the time being. Not because he got tired; fifteen minutes wasn’t enough to tire him out. It was just boring in the basement. The whine of the wheels combined with the steady roar of the furnace quickly got on his nerves. He was all too aware of what he was doing, which was, basically, going nowhere in a basement under two bare lightbulbs that cast his double shadow on the wall in front of him. He also knew that things would improve once the picture upstairs was done and he could start on the one down here.

It was the same picture but he executed it much more quickly. He could do this because there was no need to put Berkowitz, Carlos, Freddy, and Whelan-the-goldbrick in this one. In this one they were gone for the day and he simply painted the country road on the beige wall, using forced perspective so that when he was mounted on the stationary bike, the track seemed to wind away from him and into that dark green and gray blur of forest. Riding the bike became less boring immediately, but after two or three sessions, he realized that he still wasn’t done because what he was doing was still only exercise. He needed to put in the red sky, for one thing, but that was easy, nothing but slop work. He wanted to add more detail to both shoulders of the road “up front,” and some litter, as well, but those things were also easy (and fun). The real problem had nothing to do with the picture at all. With either picture. The problem was that he had no goal, and that had always bugged him about exercise that existed for nothing more than its own sake. That kind of workout might tone you up and improve your health, but it was essentially

meaningless while it was going on. Existential, even. That kind of workout was only about the next thing, for instance some pretty lady from some magazine's art department coming up to you at a party and asking if you'd lost weight. That wasn't even close to real motivation. He wasn't vain enough (or horny enough) for such possibilities to keep him going over the long haul. He'd eventually get bored, and lapse into his old Krispy Kreme ways. No, he had to decide where the road was, and where it was going. Then he could pretend to ride there. The idea excited him. Maybe it was silly—loony, even—but to Sifkitz that excitement, though mild, felt like the real deal. And he didn't have to tell anyone what he was up to, did he? Absolutely not. He could even get a Rand-McNally Road Atlas and mark his daily progress on one of the maps.

He was not an introspective man by nature, but on his walk back from Barnes & Noble with his new book of roadmaps under his arm, he found himself wondering exactly what had galvanized him so. A moderately high cholesterol number? He doubted it. Dr. Brady's solemn proclamation that he would find this battle much harder to fight once he was post-forty? That might have had something to do with it, but probably not all that much. Was he just ready for a change? That felt like getting warmer.

Trudy had died of a particularly ravenous blood-cancer, and Sifkitz had been with her, in her hospital room, when she passed on. He remembered how deep her last breath had been, how her sad and wasted bosom had heaved upward as she drew it in. As if she had known this was it, this was the one for the ages. He remembered how she'd let it out, and the sound it had made—shaaaah! And how after that her chest had just stayed where it was. In a way he had lived the last four years in just that sort of breathless hiatus. Only now the wind was blowing again, filling his sails.

Yet there was something else, something even more to the point: the work-crew Brady had summoned up and Sifkitz himself had named. There was Berkowitz, Whelan, Carlos, and Freddy. Dr. Brady hadn't cared about them; for Brady, the metabolic work-crew was just a

metaphor. His job was to make Sifkitz care a little more about what was going on inside him, that was all, his metaphor not much different from the mommy who tells her toddler that “little men” are working to heal the skin on his scraped knee.

Sifkitz’s focus, though …

Not on myself at all, he thought, shaking out the key that opened the lobby door. Never was. I cared about those guys, stuck doing a never-ending clean-up job. And the road. Why should they work so hard to keep it clear? Where did it go?

He decided it went to Herkimer, which was a small town up by the Canadian border. He found a skinny and unmarked blue line on the roadmap of upstate New York that rambled there all the way from Poughkeepsie, which was south of the state capital. Two, maybe three hundred miles. He got a more detailed plat map of upstate New York and thumbtacked the square where this road began on the wall beside his hasty … his hasty what-would-you-call-it? Mural wasn’t right. He settled on “projection.”

And that day when he mounted the stationary bike, he imagined that Poughkeepsie was behind him, not the stored television from 2-G, the stack of trunks from 3-F, the tarped dirt-bike from 4-A, but Po’-town. Ahead of him stretched the country road, just a blue squiggle to Monsieur Rand McNally, but the Old Rhinebeck Road according to the more detailed plat map. He zeroed the odometer on the bike, fixed his eyes firmly on the dirt that started where the concrete floor met the wall, and thought: It’s really the road to good health. If you keep that somewhere in the back of your mind, you won’t have to wonder if maybe a few of your screws got loose since Trudy died.

But his heart was beating a little too fast (as if he’d already started pedaling), and he felt the way he supposed most people did before setting out on a trip to a new place, where one might encounter new people and even new adventures. There was a can-holder above the stationary bike’s rudimentary control panel, and into this he’d slipped a can of Red Bull, which purported to be a power drink. He was

wearing an old Oxford shirt over his exercise shorts, because it had a pocket. Into this he'd placed two oatmeal-raisin cookies. Oatmeal and raisins were both supposed to be lipid-scrubbers.

And, speaking of them, The Lipid Company was gone for the day. Oh, they were still on duty in the painting upstairs—the useless, marketless painting that was so unlike him—but down here they'd piled back into Freddy's Dodge, had headed back to … to …

"Back to Poughkeepsie," he said. "They're listening to Kateem on WPDH and drinking beers out of paper bags. Today they … what did you do today, boys?"

Put in a couple of culverts, a voice whispered. Spring runoff damn near washed the road out near Priceville. Then we knocked off early.

Good. That was good. He wouldn't have to dismount his bike and walk around the washouts.

Richard Sifkitz fixed his eyes on the wall and began to pedal.

III. On the Road to Herkimer

That was in the fall of 2002, a year after the Twin Towers had fallen into the streets of the Financial District, and life in New York City was returning to a slightly paranoid version of normal … except in New York, slightly paranoid was normal.

Richard Sifkitz had never felt saner or happier. His life fell into an orderly four-part harmony. In the morning he worked on whatever assignment was currently paying for his room and board, and there were more of these than ever, it seemed. The economy stank, all the newspapers said so, but for Richard Sifkitz, Freelance Commercial Artist, the economy was good.

He still ate lunch at Dugan's on the next block, but now usually a salad instead of a greasy double cheeseburger, and in the afternoon he worked on a new picture for himself: to begin with, a more detailed version of the projection on the wall of the basement alcove. The picture of Berkowitz and his crew had been set aside and covered with an old piece of sheet. He was done with it. Now he wanted a better image of what served him well enough downstairs, which was the road to Herkimer with the work-crew gone. And why shouldn't they be gone? Wasn't he maintaining the road himself these days? He was, and doing a damned good job. He'd gone back to Brady in late October to have his cholesterol re-tested, and the number this time had been written in black instead of red: 179. Brady had been more than respectful; he'd actually been a little jealous.

"This is better than mine," he said. "You really took it to heart, didn't you?"

"I guess I did," Sifkitz agreed.

"And that potbelly of yours is almost gone. Been working out?"

"As much as I can," Sifkitz agreed, and said no more on the subject. By then his workouts had gotten odd. Some people would consider

them odd, anyway.

“Well,” said Brady, “if you got it, flaunt it. That’s my advice.”

Sifkitz smiled at this, but it wasn’t advice he took to heart.

His evenings—the fourth part of an Ordinary Sifkitz Day—he spent either watching TV or reading a book, usually sipping a tomato juice or a V-8 instead of a beer, feeling tired but contented. He was going to bed an hour earlier, too, and the extra rest agreed with him.

The heart of his days was part three, from four until six. Those were the two hours he spent on his stationary bike, riding the blue squiggle between Poughkeepsie and Herkimer. On the plat maps, it changed from the Old Rhinebeck Road to the Cascade Falls Road to the Woods Road; for awhile, north of Penniston, it was even the Dump Road. He could remember how, back at the beginning, even fifteen minutes on the stationary bike had seemed like an eternity. Now he sometimes had to force himself to quit after two hours. He finally got an alarm clock and started setting it for six P.M. The thing’s aggressive bray was just about enough to … well …

*

It was just enough to wake him up.

Sifkitz found it hard to believe that he was falling asleep down in the alcove while riding the stationary bike at a steady fifteen miles per hour, but he didn’t like the alternative, which was to think that he had gone a little crazy on the road to Herkimer. Or in his SoHo basement, if you liked that better. That he was having delusions.

One night while channel-surfing, he came across a program about hypnosis on A&E. The fellow being interviewed, a hypnotist who styled himself Joe Saturn, was saying that everyone practiced self-hypnosis every day. We used it to enter a work-oriented frame of mind in the morning; we used it to help us “get into the story” when reading novels or watching movies; we used it to get to sleep at

night. This last was Joe Saturn's favorite example, and he talked at length about the patterns "successful sleepers" followed every night: checking the locks on the doors and windows, maybe, drawing a glass of water, maybe saying a little prayer or indulging in a spot of meditation. He likened these to the passes a hypnotist makes in front of his subject, and to his line of patter—counting back from ten to zero, for instance, or assuring the subject that he or she was "getting very sleepy." Sifkitz seized on this gratefully, deciding on the spot that he was spending his daily two hours on the stationary bike in a state of light to medium hypnosis.

Because, by the third week in front of the wall-projection, he was no longer spending those two hours in the basement alcove. By the third week, he was actually spending them on the road to Herkimer.

He would pedal contentedly enough along the packed dirt track that wound through the forest, smelling the odor of pine, hearing the cries of the crows or the crackle of leaves when he rolled through occasional drifts of them. The stationary bike became the three-speed Raleigh he'd owned as a twelve-year-old in suburban Manchester, New Hampshire. By no means the only bike he'd had before getting his driver's license at seventeen, but inarguably the best bike. The plastic cup-holder became a clumsily made but effective hand-welded ring of metal jutting over the bike-basket, and instead of Red Bull it contained a can of Lipton iced tea. Unsweetened.

On the road to Herkimer, it was always late October and just an hour before sunset. Although he rode two hours (both the alarm clock and the stationary bike's odometer confirmed this each time he finished), the sun never changed its position; it always laid the same long shadows across the dirt road and flickered at him through the trees from the same quadrant of the sky as he traveled along with the manufactured wind of his passage blowing the hair back from his brow.

Sometimes there were signs nailed to trees where other roads crossed the one he was on. CASCADE ROAD, one said.

HERKIMER, 120 MI., read another, this one pocked with old bullet-holes. The signs always corresponded to the information on the plat map currently tacked to the alcove wall. He had already decided that, once he reached Herkimer, he'd push on into the Canadian wilderness without even a stop to buy souvenirs. The road stopped there, but that was no problem; he'd already gotten a book titled Plat Maps of Eastern Canada. He would simply draw his own road on the plats, using a fine blue pencil and putting in lots of squiggles. Squiggles added miles.

He could go all the way to the Arctic Circle, if he wanted to.

One evening, after the alarm went off and startled him out of his trance, he approached the projection and looked at it for several long, considering moments, head cocked to one side. Anyone else would have seen very little; up that close the picture's trick of forced perspective ceased working and to the untrained eye the woodland scene collapsed into nothing but blobs of color—the light brown of the road's surface, the darker brown that was a shallow drift of leaves, the blue-and gray-streaked green of the firs, the bright yellow-white of the westering sun to the far left, perilously close to the door into the furnace-room. Sifkitz, however, still saw the picture perfectly. It was fixed firmly in his mind now and never changed. Unless he was riding, of course, but even then he was aware of an underlying sameness. Which was good. That essential sameness was a kind of touchstone, a way of assuring himself this was still no more than an elaborate mind-game, something plugged into his subconscious that he could unplug whenever he wanted.

He had brought down a box of colors for the occasional touch-up, and now, without thinking too much about it, he added several blobs of brown to the road, mixing them with black to make them darker than the drifted leaves. He stepped back, looked at the new addition, and nodded. It was a small change but in its way, perfect.

The following day, as he rode his three-speed Raleigh through the woods (he was less than sixty miles from Herkimer now and only eighty from the Canadian border), he came around a bend and there

was a good-sized buck deer standing in the middle of the road, looking at him with startled dark velvet eyes. It flipped up the white flag of its tail, dropped a pile of scat, and was then off into the woods again. Sifkitz saw another flip of its tail and then the deer was gone. He rode on, giving the deer-shit a miss, not wanting it in the treads of his tires.

That night he silenced the alarm and approached the painting on the wall, wiping sweat from his forehead with a bandanna he took from the back pocket of his jeans. He looked at the projection critically, hands on hips. Then, moving with his usual confident speed—he'd been doing this sort of work for almost twenty years, after all—he painted the scat out of the picture, replacing it with a clutch of rusty beer cans undoubtedly left by some upstate hunter in search of pheasant or turkey.

"You missed those, Berkowitz," he said that night as he sat drinking a beer instead of a V-8 juice. "I'll pick 'em up myself tomorrow, but don't let it happen again."

Except when he went down the next day, there was no need to paint the beer cans out of the picture; they were already gone. For a moment he felt real fright prod his belly like a blunt stick—what had he done, sleepwalked down here in the middle of the night, picked up his trusty can of turp and a brush?—and then put it out of his mind. He mounted the stationary bike and was soon riding his old Raleigh, smelling the clean smells of the forest, relishing the way the wind blew his hair back from his forehead. And yet wasn't that the day things began to change? The day he sensed he might not be alone on the road to Herkimer? One thing was beyond doubt: it was the day after the disappearing beer cans that he had the really terrible dream and then drew the picture of Carlos's garage.

IV. Man with Shotgun

It was the most vivid dream he'd had since the age of fourteen, when three or four brilliant wet-dreams had ushered him into physical manhood. It was the most horrible dream ever, hands down, nothing else even close. What made it horrible was the sense of impending doom that ran through it like a red thread. This was true even though the dream had a weird thinness: he knew he was dreaming but could not quite escape it. He felt as if he'd been wrapped in some terrible gauze. He knew his bed was near and he was in it—struggling—but he couldn't quite break through to the Richard Sifkitz who lay there, trembling and sweaty in his Big Dog sleep-shorts.

He saw a pillow and a beige telephone with a crack in the case. Then a hallway filled with pictures that he knew were of his wife and three daughters. Then a kitchen, the microwave oven flashing 4:16. A bowl of bananas (they filled him with grief and horror) on the Formica counter. A breezeway. And here lay Pepe the dog with his muzzle on his paws, and Pepe did not raise his head but rolled his eyes up to look at him as he passed, revealing a gruesome, blood-threaded crescent of white, and that was when Sifkitz began to weep in the dream, understanding that all was lost.

Now he was in the garage. He could smell oil. He could smell old sweet grass. The LawnBoy stood in the corner like a suburban god. He could see the vise clamped to the work-table, old and dark and flecked with tiny splinters of wood. Next, a closet. His girls' ice-skates were piled on the floor, their laces as white as vanilla ice cream. His tools hung from pegs on the walls, arranged neatly, mostly yard-tools, a bear for working in his yard was

(Carlos. I am Carlos.)

On the top shelf, far out of the girls' reach, was a .410 shotgun, not used for years, nearly forgotten, and a box of shells so dark you could barely read the word Winchester on the side, only you could

read it, just enough, and that was when Sifkitz came to understand that he was being carried along in the brain of a potential suicide. He struggled furiously to either stop Carlos or escape him and could do neither, even though he sensed his bed so near, just on the other side of the gauze that wrapped him from head to foot.

Now he was at the vise again, and the .410 was clamped in the vise, and the box of shells was on the work-table beside the vise, and here was a hacksaw, he was hacksawing off the barrel of the shotgun because that would make it easier to do what he had to do, and when he opened the box of shells there were two dozen of them, fat green buggers with brass bottoms, and the sound the gun made when Carlos snapped it closed wasn't cling! but CLACK! and the taste in his mouth was oily and dusty, oily on his tongue and dusty on the insides of his cheeks and his teeth, and his back hurt, it hurt LAMF, that was how they had tagged abandoned buildings (and sometimes ones that weren't abandoned) when he was a teenager and running with the Deacons in Po'-town, stood for LIKE A MOTHERFUCKER, and that was how his back hurt, but now that he was laid off the benefits were gone, Jimmy Berkowitz could no longer afford the bennies and so Carlos Martinez could no longer afford the drugs that made the pain a little less, could no longer afford the chiropractor that made the pain a little less, and the house-payments—ay, caramba, they used to say, joking, but he sure wasn't joking now, ay, caramba they were going to lose the house, less than five years from the finish-line but they were going to lose it, si-si, senor, and it was all that fuck Sifkitz's fault, him with his fucking road-maintenance hobby, and the curve of the trigger underneath his finger was like a crescent, like the unspeakable crescent of his dog's peering eye.

That was when Sifkitz woke up, sobbing and shaking, legs still in bed, head out and almost touching the floor, hair hanging. He crawled all the way out of the bedroom and started crawling across the main room to the easel under the skylight. Halfway there he found himself able to walk.

The picture of the empty road was still on the easel, the better and more complete version of the one downstairs on the alcove wall. He flung it away without a second look and set up a piece of two-foot-by-two pressboard in its place. He seized the nearest implement which would make a mark (this happened to be a UniBall Vision Elite pen) and began to draw. He drew for hours. At one point (he remembered this only vaguely) he needed to piss and could feel it running hot down his leg. The tears didn't stop until the picture was finished. Then, thankfully dry-eyed at last, he stood back and looked at what he had done.

It was Carlos's garage on an October afternoon. The dog, Pepe, stood in front of it with his ears raised. The dog had been drawn by the sound of the gunshot. There was no sign of Carlos in the picture, but Sifkitz knew exactly where the body lay, on the left, beside the work-table with the vise clamped to the edge. If his wife was home, she would have heard the shot. If she was out—perhaps shopping, more likely at work—it might be another hour or two before she came home and found him.

Beneath the image he had scrawled the words MAN WITH SHOTGUN. He couldn't remember doing this, but it was his printing and the right name for the picture. There was no man visible in it, no shotgun, either, but it was the right title.

Sifkitz went to his couch, sat down on it, and put his head in his hands. His right hand ached fiercely from clutching the unfamiliar, too-small drawing implement. He tried to tell himself he'd just had a bad dream, the picture the result of that dream. That there had never been any Carlos, never any Lipid Company, both of them were figments of his own imagination, drawn from Dr. Brady's careless metaphor.

But dreams faded, and these images—the phone with the crack in its beige case, the microwave, the bowl of bananas, the dog's eye—were as clear as ever. Clearer, even.

One thing was sure, he told himself. He was done with the goddam stationary bike. This was just a little too close to lunacy. If he kept on this way, soon he'd be cutting off his ear and mailing it not to his girlfriend (he didn't have one) but to Dr. Brady, who was surely responsible for this.

"Done with the bike," he said, with his head still in his hands. "Maybe I'll get a membership down at Fitness Boys, something like that, but I'm done with that fucking stationary bike."

Only he didn't get a membership at The Fitness Boys, and after a week without real exercise (he walked, but it wasn't the same—there were too many people on the sidewalks and he longed for the peace of the Herkimer Road), he could no longer stand it. He was behind on his latest project, which was an illustration a la Norman Rockwell for Fritos Corn Chips, and he'd had a call from both his agent and the guy in charge of the Fritos account at the ad agency. This had never happened to him before.

Worse, he wasn't sleeping.

The urgency of the dream had faded a little, and he decided it was only the picture of Carlos's garage, glaring at him from the corner of the room, that kept bringing it back, refreshing the dream the way a squirt of water from a mister may refresh a thirsty plant. He couldn't bring himself to destroy the picture (it was too damned good), but he turned it around so that the image faced nothing but the wall.

That afternoon he rode the elevator down to the basement and remounted the stationary bike. It turned into the old three-speed Raleigh almost as soon as he'd fixed his eyes on the wall-projection, and he resumed his ride north. He tried to tell himself that his sense of being followed was bogus, just something left over from his dream and the frenzied hours at the easel afterward. For a little while this actually did the job even though he knew better. He had reasons to make it do the job. The chief ones were that he was sleeping through the night again and had resumed working on his current assignment.

He finished the painting of the boys sharing a bag of Fritos on an idyllic suburban pitcher's mound, shipped it off by messenger, and the following day a check for ten thousand, two hundred dollars came with a note from Barry Casselman, his agent. You scared me a little, hon, the note said, and Sifkitz thought: You're not the only one. Hon.

Every now and then during the following week it occurred to him that he should tell someone about his adventures under the red sky, and each time he dismissed the idea. He could have told Trudy, but of course if Trudy had been around, things would never have gotten this far in the first place. The idea of telling Barry was laughable; the idea of telling Dr. Brady actually a little frightening. Dr. Brady would be recommending a good psychiatrist before you could say Minnesota Multiphasic.

The night he got the Fritos check, Sifkitz noticed a change in the basement wall-mural. He paused in the act of setting his alarm and approached the projection (can of Diet Coke in one hand, reliable little Brookstone desk-clock in the other, oatmeal-raisin cookies tucked away safely in the old shirt pocket). Something was up in there, all right, something was different, but at first he was damned if he could tell what it was. He closed his eyes, counted to five (clearing his mind as he did so, an old trick), then sprang them open again, so wide that he looked like a man burlesquing fright. This time he saw the change at once. The bright yellow marquise shape over by the door to the furnace room was as gone as the clutch of beer cans. And the color of the sky above the trees was a deeper, darker red. The sun was either down or almost down. On the road to Herkimer, night was coming.

You have to stop this, Sifkitz thought, and then he thought: Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow.

With that he mounted up and started riding. In the woods around him, he could hear the sound of birds settling down for the night.

V. The Screwdriver Would Do for a Start

Over the next five or six days, the time Sifkitz spent on the stationary bike (and his childhood three-speed) was both wonderful and terrible. Wonderful because he had never felt better; his body was operating at absolute peak performance levels for a man his age, and he knew it. He supposed that there were pro athletes in better shape than he was, but by thirty-eight they would be approaching the end of their careers, and whatever joy they were able to take in the tuned condition of their bodies would necessarily be tainted by that knowledge. Sifkitz, on the other hand, might go on creating commercial art for another forty years, if he chose to. Hell, another fifty. Five full generations of football players and four of baseball players would come and go while he stood peacefully at his easel, painting book covers, automotive products, and Five New Logos for Pepsi-Cola.

Except …

Except that wasn't the ending folks familiar with this sort of story would expect, was it? Nor the sort of ending he expected himself.

The sense of being followed grew stronger with every ride, especially after he took down the last of the New York State plat maps and put up the first of the Canadian ones. Using a blue pen (the same one he'd used to create MAN WITH SHOTGUN), he drew an extension of the Herkimer Road on the previously roadless plat, adding lots of squiggles. By now he was pedaling faster, looking over his shoulder often, and finishing his rides covered with sweat, at first too out of breath to dismount the bike and turn off the braying alarm.

That looking-back-over-the-shoulder thing, now—that was interesting. At first when he did it he'd catch a glimpse of the basement alcove, and the doorway leading to the basement's larger rooms with its mazy arrangement of storage stalls. He'd see the Pomona Oranges crate by the door with the Brookstone desk alarm

on it, marking off the minutes between four and six. Then a kind of red blur wiped across everything, and when it drained away he was looking at the road behind him, the autumn-bright trees on both sides (only not so bright now, not with twilight starting to thicken), and the darkening red sky overhead. Later, he didn't see the basement at all when he looked back, not even a flash of it. Just the road leading back to Herkimer, and eventually to Poughkeepsie.

He knew perfectly well what he was looking back over his shoulder for: headlights.

The headlights of Freddy's Dodge Ram, if you wanted to get specific about it. Because for Berkowitz and his crew, bewildered resentment had given way to anger. Carlos's suicide was what had tipped them over the edge. They blamed him and they were after him. And when they caught him, they'd—

What? They'd what?

Kill me, he thought, pedaling grimly on into the twilight. No need to be coy about it. They catch up, they'll kill me. I'm in the serious williwags now, not a town on that whole damn plat map, not so much as a village. I could scream my head off and no one would hear me except Barry the Bear, Debby the Doe, and Rudy the Raccoon. So if I see those headlights (or hear the motor, because Freddy might be running without lights), I would do well to get the hell back to SoHo, alarm or no alarm. I'm crazy to be here in the first place.

But he was having trouble getting back now. When the alarm went off the Raleigh would remain a Raleigh for thirty seconds or more, the road ahead would remain a road instead of reverting to blobs of color on cement, and the alarm itself sounded distant and strangely mellow. He had an idea that eventually he would hear it as the drone of a jet airplane high overhead, an American Airlines 767 out of Kennedy, perhaps, headed over the North Pole to the far side of the world.

He would stop, squeeze his eyes shut, then pop them wide open again. That did the trick, but he had an idea it might not work for long. Then what? A hungry night spent in the woods, looking up at a full moon that looked like a bloodshot eye?

No, they'd catch up to him before then, he reckoned. The question was, did he intend to let that happen? Incredibly, part of him wanted to do just that. Part of him was angry at them. Part of him wanted to confront Berkowitz and the remaining members of his crew, ask them What did you expect me to do, anyway? Just go on the way things were, gobbling Krispy Kreme donuts, paying no attention to the washouts when the culverts plugged up and overflowed? Is that what you wanted?

But there was another part of him that knew such a confrontation would be madness. He was in tiptop shape, yes, but you were still talking three against one, and who was to say Mrs. Carlos hadn't loaned the boys her husband's shotgun, told them yeah, go get the bastard, and be sure to tell him the first one's from me and my girls.

Sifkitz had had a friend who'd beaten a bad cocaine addiction in the eighties, and he remembered this fellow saying the first thing you had to do was get it out of the house. You could always buy more, sure, that shit was everywhere now, on every streetcorner, but that was no excuse for keeping it where you could grab it any time your will weakened. So he'd gathered it all up and flushed it down the toilet. And once it was gone, he'd thrown his works out with the trash. That hadn't been the end of his problem, he'd said, but it had been the beginning of the end.

One night Sifkitz entered the alcove carrying a screwdriver. He had every intention of dismantling the stationary bike, and never mind the fact that he'd set the alarm for six P.M., as he always did, that was just habit. The alarm clock (like the oatmeal-raisin cookies) was part of his works, he supposed; the hypnotic passes he made, the machinery of his dream. And once he was done reducing the bike to unrideable components, he'd put the alarm clock out with the rest of the trash, just as his friend had done with his crack-pipe. He'd feel a

pang, of course—the sturdy little Brookstone certainly wasn't to blame for the idiotic situation into which he'd gotten himself—but he would do it. Cowboy up, they'd told each other as kids; quit whining and just cowboy up.

He saw that the bike was comprised of four main sections, and that he'd also need an adjustable wrench to dismantle the thing completely. That was all right, though; the screwdriver would do for a start. He could use it to take off the pedals. Once that was done he'd borrow the adjustable wrench from the super's toolbox.

He dropped to one knee, slipped the tip of the borrowed tool into the slot of the first screw, and hesitated. He wondered if his friend had smoked one more rock before turning the rest of them down the toilet, just one more rock for old times' sake. He bet the guy had. Being a little stoned had probably stilled the cravings, made the disposal job a little easier. And if he had one more ride, then knelt here to take off the pedals with the endorphins flowing, wouldn't he feel a little less depressed about it? A little less likely to imagine Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan retiring to the nearest roadside bar, where they would buy first one pitcher of Rolling Rock and then another, toasting each other and Carlos's memory, congratulating each other on how they had beaten the bastard?

"You're crazy," he murmured to himself, and slipped the tip of the driver back into the notch of the screw. "Do it and be done."

He actually turned the screwdriver once (and it was easy; whoever had put this together in the back room of The Fitness Boys obviously hadn't had his heart in it), but when he did, the oatmeal-raisin cookies shifted a little in his pocket and he thought how good they always tasted when you were riding along. You just took your right hand off the handlebar, dipped it into your pocket, had a couple of bites, then chased it with a swallow of iced tea. It was the perfect combination. It just felt so good to be speeding along, having a little picnic as you went, and those sons of bitches wanted to take it away from him.

A dozen turns of the screw, maybe even less, and the pedal would drop off onto the concrete floor—clunk. Then he could move on to the other one, and then he could move on with his life.

This is not fair, he thought.

One more ride, just for old times' sake, he thought.

And, swinging his leg over the fork and settling his ass (firmer and harder by far than it had been on the day of the red cholesterol number) onto the seat, he thought: This is the way stories like this always go, isn't it? The way they always end, with the poor schmuck saying this is the last time, I'll never do this again.

Absolutely true, he thought, but I'll bet in real life, people get away with it. I bet they get away with it all the time.

Part of him was murmuring that real life had never been like this, what he was doing (and what he was experiencing) bore absolutely no resemblance whatever to real life as he understood it. He pushed the voice away, closed his ears to it.

It was a beautiful evening for a ride in the woods.

VI. Not Quite the Ending Everyone Expected

And still, he got one more chance.

That was the night he heard the revving engine behind him clearly for the first time, and just before the alarm clock went off, the Raleigh he was riding suddenly grew an elongated shadow on the road ahead of him—the sort of shadow that could only have been created by headlights.

Then the alarm did go off, not a bray but a distant purring sound that was almost melodic.

The truck was closing in. He didn't need to turn his head to see it (nor does one ever want to turn and see the frightful fiend that close behind him treads, Sifkitz supposed later that night, lying awake in his bed and still wrapped in the cold-yet-hot sensation of disaster avoided by mere inches or seconds). He could see the shadow, growing longer and darker.

Hurry up, please, gentlemen, it's time, he thought, and squeezed his eyes closed. He could still hear the alarm, but it was still no more than that almost soothing purr, it was certainly no louder; what was louder was the engine, the one inside Freddy's truck. It was almost on him, and suppose they didn't want to waste so much as a New York minute in conversation? Suppose the one currently behind the wheel just mashed the pedal to the metal and ran him down? Turned him into roadkill?

He didn't bother to open his eyes, didn't waste time confirming that it was still the deserted road instead of the basement alcove. Instead he squeezed them even more tightly shut, focused all his attention on the sound of the alarm, and this time turned the polite voice of the barman into an impatient bellow:

HURRY UP PLEASE GENTLEMEN IT'S TIME!

And suddenly, thankfully, it was the sound of the engine that was fading and the sound of the Brookstone alarm that was swelling, taking on its old familiar rough get-up-get-up-get-up bray. And this time when he opened his eyes, he saw the projection of the road instead of the road itself.

But now the sky was black, its organic redness hidden by nightfall. The road was brilliantly lit, the shadow of the bike—a Raleigh—a clear black on the leaf-littered hardpack. He could tell himself he had dismounted the stationary bike and painted those changes while in his nightly trance, but he knew better, and not only because there was no paint on his hands.

This is my last chance, he thought. My last chance to avoid the ending everyone expects in stories like this.

But he was simply too tired, too shaky, to take care of the stationary bike now. He would take care of it tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, in fact, first thing. Right now all he wanted was to get out of this awful place where reality had worn so thin. And with that firmly in mind, Sifkitz staggered to the Pomona crate beside the doorway (rubber-legged, covered with a thin slime of sweat—the smelly kind that comes from fear rather than exertion) and shut the alarm off. Then he went upstairs and lay down on his bed. Some very long time later, sleep came.

The next morning he went down the cellar stairs, eschewing the elevator and walking firmly, with his head up and his lips pressed tightly together, A Man On A Mission. He went directly to the stationary bike, ignoring the alarm clock on the crate, dropped to one knee, picked up the screwdriver. He slipped it once more into the slot of a screw, one of the four that held the left-hand pedal …

… and the next thing he knew, he was speeding giddily along the road again, with the headlights brightening around him until he felt like a man on a stage that's dark save for one single spotlight. The truck's engine was too loud (something wrong with the muffler or the exhaust system), and it was out of tune, as well. He doubted if old

Freddy had bothered with the last maintenance go-round. No, not with house-payments to make, groceries to buy, the kiddies still needing braces, and no weekly paycheck coming in.

He thought: I had my chance. I had my chance last night and I didn't take it.

He thought: Why did I do this? Why, when I knew better?

He thought: Because they made me, somehow. They made me.

He thought: They're going to run me down and I'll die in the woods.

But the truck did not run him down. It hurtled past him on the right instead, left-side wheels rumbling in the leaf-choked ditch, and then it swung across the road in front of him, blocking the way.

Panicked, Sifkitz forgot the first thing his father had taught him when he brought the three-speed home: When you stop, Richie, reverse the pedals. Brake the bike's rear wheel at the same time you squeeze the handbrake that controls the front wheel. Otherwise—

This was otherwise. In his panic he turned both hands into fists, squeezing the handbrake on the left, locking the front wheel. The bike bucked him off and sent him flying at the truck with LIPID COMPANY printed on the driver's-side door. He threw his hands out and they struck the top of the truck's bed hard enough to numb them. Then he collapsed in a heap, wondering how many bones were broken.

The doors opened above him and he heard the crackle of leaves as men in workboots got out. He didn't look up. He waited for them to grab him and make him get up, but no one did. The smell of the leaves was like old dry cinnamon. The footsteps passed him on either side, and then the crackle abruptly stopped.

Sifkitz sat up and looked at his hands. The palm of the right one was bleeding and the wrist of the left one was already swelling, but he

didn’t think it was broken. He looked around and the first thing he saw—red in the glow of the Dodge’s taillights—was his Raleigh. It had been beautiful when his Dad brought it home from the bike-shop, but it wasn’t beautiful any longer. The front wheel was warped out of true, and the rear tire had come partly off the rim. For the first time he felt something other than fear. This new emotion was anger.

He got shakily to his feet. Beyond the Raleigh, back the way he’d come, was a hole in reality. It was strangely organic, as if he were looking through the hole at the end of some duct in his own body. The edges wavered and bulged and flexed. Beyond it, three men were standing around the stationary bike in the basement alcove, standing in postures he recognized from every work-crew he’d ever seen in his life. These were men with a job to do. They were deciding how to do it.

And suddenly he knew why he’d named them as he had. It was really idiotically simple. The one in the LIPID cap, Berkowitz, was David Berkowitz, the so-called Son of Sam and a New York Post staple the year Sifkitz had come to Manhattan. Freddy was Freddy Albemarle, this kid he’d known in high school—they’d been in a band together, and had become friends for a simple enough reason: they both hated school. And Whelan? An artist he’d met at a conference somewhere. Michael Whelan? Mitchell Whelan? Sifkitz couldn’t quite remember, but he knew the guy specialized in fantasy art, dragons and such. They had spent a night in the hotel bar, telling stories about the comic-horrible world of movie-poster art.

Then there was Carlos, who’d committed suicide in his garage. Why, he had been a version of Carlos Delgado, also known as the Big Cat. For years Sifkitz had followed the fortunes of the Toronto Blue Jays, simply because he didn’t want to be like every other American League baseball fan in New York and root for the Yankees. The Cat had been one of Toronto’s very few stars.

“I made you all,” he said in a voice that was little more than a croak. “I created you out of memories and spare parts.” Of course he had. Nor had it been for the first time. The boys on the Norman Rockwell

pitcher's mound in the Fritos ad, for instance—the ad agency had, at his request, provided him with photographs of four boys of the correct age, and Sifkitz had simply painted them in. Their mothers had signed the necessary waivers; it had been business as usual.

If they heard him speak, Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan gave no sign. They spoke a few words among themselves that Sifkitz could hear but not make out; they seemed to come from a great distance. Whatever they were, they got Whelan moving out of the alcove while Berkowitz knelt by the stationary bike, just as Sifkitz himself had done. Berkowitz picked up the screwdriver and in no time at all the left-hand pedal dropped off onto the concrete—clunk. Sifkitz, still on the deserted road, watched through the queer organic hole as Berkowitz handed the screwdriver to Freddy Albemarle—who, with Richard Sifkitz, had played lousy trumpet in the equally lousy high school band. They had played a hell of a lot better when they were rocking. Somewhere in the Canadian woods an owl hooted, the sound inexpressibly lonely. Freddy went to work unscrewing the other pedal. Whelan, meanwhile, returned with the adjustable wrench in his hand. Sifkitz felt a pang at the sight of it.

Watching them, the thought that went through Sifkitz's mind was: If you want something done right, hire a professional. Certainly Berkowitz and his boys wasted no time. In less than four minutes the stationary bike was nothing but two wheels and three disconnected sections of frame laid on the concrete, and so neatly that the parts looked like one of those diagrams called "exploded schematics."

Berkowitz himself dropped the screws and bolts into the front pockets of his Dickies, where they bulged like handfuls of spare change. He gave Sifkitz a meaningful look as he did this, one that made Sifkitz angry all over again. By the time the work-crew came back through the odd, ductlike hole (dropping their heads as they did so, like men passing through a low doorway), Sifkitz's fists were clenched again, even though doing that made the wrist of the left one throb like hell.

“You know what?” he asked Berkowitz. “I don’t think you can hurt me. I don’t think you can hurt me, because then what happens to you? You’re nothing but a … a sub-contractor!”

Berkowitz looked at him levelly from beneath the bent bill of his LIPID cap.

“I made you up!” Sifkitz said, and counted them off, poking the index finger out of his right fist and pointing it at each one in turn like the barrel of a gun. “You’re the Son of Sam! You’re nothing but a grown-up version of this kid I played the horn with at Sisters of Mercy High! You couldn’t play E-flat to save your life! And you’re an artist specializing in dragons and enchanted maidens!”

The remaining members of The Lipid Company were singularly unimpressed.

“What does that make you?” Berkowitz asked. “Did you ever think of that? Are you going to tell me there might not be a larger world out there someplace? For all you know, you’re nothing but a random thought going through some unemployed Certified Public Accountant’s head while he sits on the jakes, reading the paper and taking his morning dump.”

Sifkitz opened his mouth to say that was ridiculous, but something in Berkowitz’s eyes made him shut it again. Go on, his eyes said. Ask a question. I’ll tell you more than you ever wanted to know.

What Sifkitz said instead was, “Who are you to tell me I can’t get fit? Do you want me to die at fifty? Jesus Christ, what’s wrong with you?”

Freddy said, “I ain’t no philosopher, Mac. All I know is that my truck needs a tune-up I can’t afford.”

“And I’ve got one kid who needs orthopedic shoes and another one who needs speech therapy,” Whelan added.

“The guys working on the Big Dig in Boston have got a saying,” Berkowitz said. ” ‘Don’t kill the job, let it die on its own.’ That’s all we’re asking, Sifkitz. Let us dip our beaks. Let us earn our living.”

“This is crazy,” Sifkitz muttered. “Totally—”

“I don’t give a shit how you feel about it, you motherfucker!” Freddy shouted, and Sifkitz realized the man was almost crying. This confrontation was as stressful for them as it was for him. Somehow realizing that was the worst shock of all. “I don’t give a shit about you, you ain’t nothing, you don’t work, you just piddle around and make your little pitchers, but don’t you take the bread out of my kids’ mouths, you hear? Don’t you do it!”

He started forward, hands rolling into fists and coming up in front of his face: an absurd John L. Sullivan boxing pose. Berkowitz put a hand on Freddy’s arm and pulled him back.

“Don’t be a hardass about it, man,” Whelan said. “Live and let live, all right?”

“Let us dip our beaks,” Berkowitz repeated, and of course Sifkitz recognized the phrase; he’d read The Godfather and seen all the movies. Could any of these guys use a word or a slang phrase that wasn’t in his own vocabulary? He doubted it. “Let us keep our dignity, man. You think we can go to work drawing pictures, like you?” He laughed. “Yeah, right. If I draw a cat, I gotta write CAT underneath so people know what it is.”

“You killed Carlos,” Whelan said, and if there had been accusation in his voice, Sifkitz had an idea he might have been angry all over again. But all he heard was sorrow. “We told him, ‘Hold on, man, it’ll get better,’ but he wasn’t strong. He could never, you know, look ahead. He lost all his hope.” Whelan paused, looked up at the dark sky. Not far off, Freddy’s Dodge rumbled roughly. “He never had much to start with. Some people don’t, you know.”

Sifkitz turned to Berkowitz. “Let me get this straight. What you want —”

“Just don’t kill the job,” Berkowitz said. “That’s all we want. Let the job die on its own.”

Sifkitz realized he could probably do as this man was asking. It might even be easy. Some people, if they ate one Krispy Kreme, they had to go and finish the whole box. If he’d been that type of man, they would have a serious problem here … but he wasn’t.

“Okay,” he said. “Why don’t we give it a try.” And then an idea struck him. “Do you think I could have a company hat?” He pointed to the one Berkowitz was wearing.

Berkowitz gave a smile. It was brief, but more genuine than the laugh when he’d said he couldn’t draw a cat without having to write the word under it. “That could be arranged.”

Sifkitz had an idea Berkowitz would stick out his hand then, but Berkowitz didn’t. He just gave Sifkitz a final measuring glance from beneath the bill of his cap and then started toward the cab of the truck. The other two followed.

“How long before I decide none of this happened?” Sifkitz asked. “That I took the stationary bike apart myself because I just … I don’t know … just got tired of it?”

Berkowitz paused, hand on the doorhandle, and looked back. “How long do you want it to be?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Sifkitz said. “Hey, it’s beautiful out here, isn’t it?”

“It always was,” Berkowitz said. “We always kept it nice.” There was an undertone of defensiveness in his voice that Sifkitz chose to ignore. It occurred to him that even a figment of one’s imagination could have its pride.

For a few moments they stood there on the road, which Sifkitz had lately come to think of as The Great Trans-Canadian Lost Highway, a pretty grand name for a no-name dirt track through the woods, but also pretty nice. None of them said anything. Somewhere the owl hooted again.

“Indoors, outdoors, it’s all the same to us,” Berkowitz said. Then he opened the door and swung up behind the wheel.

“Take care of yourself,” Freddy said.

“But not too much,” Whelan added.

Sifkitz stood there while the truck made an artful three-point turn on the narrow road and started back the way it came. The ductlike opening was gone, but Sifkitz didn’t worry about that. He didn’t think he’d have any trouble getting back when the time came. Berkowitz made no effort to avoid the Raleigh but ran directly over it, finishing a job that was already finished. There were sproinks and goinks as the spokes in the wheels broke. The taillights dwindled, then disappeared around a curve. Sifkitz could hear the thump of the motor for quite awhile, but that faded, too.

He sat down on the road, then lay down on his back, cradling his throbbing left wrist against his chest. There were no stars in the sky. He was very tired. Better not go to sleep, he advised himself, something’s likely to come out of the woods—a bear, maybe—and eat you. Then he fell asleep anyway.

When he woke up, he was on the cement floor of the alcove. The dismantled pieces of the stationary bike, now screwless and boltless, lay all around him. The Brookstone alarm clock on the crate read 8:43 P.M. One of them had apparently turned off the alarm.

I took this thing apart myself, he thought. That’s my story, and if I stick to it I’ll believe it soon enough.

He climbed the stairs to the building's lobby and decided he was hungry. He thought maybe he'd go out to Dugan's and get a piece of apple pie. Apple pie wasn't the world's most unhealthy snack, was it? And when he got there, he decided to have it a la mode.

"What the hell," he told the waitress. "You only live once, don't you?"

"Well," she replied, "that's not what the Hindus say, but whatever floats your boat."

Two months later, Sifkitz got a package.

It was waiting for him in the lobby of his building when he got back from having dinner with his agent (Sifkitz had fish and steamed vegetables, but followed it with a creme brulee). There was no postage on it, no Federal Express, Airborne Express, or UPS logo, no stamps. Just his name, printed in ragged block letters: RICHARD SIFKITZ. That's a man who'd have to print CAT underneath his drawing of one, he thought, and had no idea at all why he'd thought it. He took the box upstairs and used an X-Acto knife from his work-table to slice it open. Inside, beneath a big wad of tissue paper, was a brand-new gimme cap, the kind with the plastic adjustable band in back. The tag inside read Made In Bangladesh. Printed above the bill in a dark red that made him think of arterial blood was one word: LIPID.

"What's that?" he asked the empty studio, turning the cap over and over in his hands. "Some kind of blood component, isn't it?"

He tried the hat on. At first it was too small, but when he adjusted the band at the back, the fit was perfect. He looked at it in his bedroom mirror and still didn't quite like it. He took it off, bent the bill into a curve, and tried it again. Now it was almost right. It would look better still when he got out of his going-to-lunch clothes and into a pair of paint-splattered jeans. He'd look like a real working stiff … which he was, in spite of what some people might think.

Wearing the LIPID cap while he painted eventually became a habit with him, like allowing himself seconds on days of the week that started with S, and having pie a la mode at Dugan's on Thursday nights. Despite whatever the Hindu philosophy might be, Richard Sifkitz believed you only went around once. That being the case, maybe you should allow yourself a little bit of everything.