

Duke Is Dead

1. *Duke Is Dead*

"We could just set the bowl on the porch," Doris said.

"Sure we could. And the next kid who comes by will walk off with ten pounds of candy. Plus the bowl."

"It's just a shake-down anyway."

"I'm not sure I follow, baby."

"They're eighteen years old, they think a costume is a baseball cap turned sideways. They mumble trick or treat like it's a threat."

"Well, it is."

"I'm just saying I'm sick of it is all. "

Another Halloween in Frogtown. I'm not saying Doris's expectations are unreasonable, generally speaking. She's thinking kids in bunny suits, fairy princess gear, cowboys and firemen and what have you. Norman Rockwell stylistics. We've got something else going on.

It's the sniff of loot in the air. Enough sugar out there to kill off a football stadium full of diabetics. All you do is go knock knock knock, hold out your pillow case and say the magic words. Trick or treat. Sweet deal, especially if you're a kid who doesn't get too many sweet deals.

Once, foolishly, we figured we'd escape Halloween and take a long meal at a restaurant. We returned to find the oak in the front yard draped with toilet paper and egg yolk dripping down the siding. Some genius had scrawled, "Wear candee, Fatman?" in permanent marker on the front door.

Now I jump in with both feet. Jack O' Lanterns on the front steps. Creepy dungeon sounds pumped outside via hidden speakers. A fog machine. Police tape lining the sidewalk.

I've got a monk's robe that I wear, along with a pair of plastic bolts that I glue to my temples. I smear on some whiteface, rub mascara around my eyes and I'm good to go.

Doris has a Wicked Stepmother thing going on. Black cape, black dress that's more R than PG. A lot of missing bodice fabric. "Love your costume," I say every year.

"I know you do, Charles."

I take this as an invitation to do a little fumbling around, to get into her costume, which she tolerates to a point, encourages even, until a little fist pounds on the door and Doris announces, "Tricks and treats for you later, Uncle Fester."

Some things you can't hide beneath a robe. Ask any monk.

"How late are we open?" Doris asks.

"Ten more minutes. Maybe twenty. There aren't that many kids."

Mostly they head for better pickings; the rich neighborhoods around Summit Ave. There you're not talking about Bits o' Honey and Sweet Tarts. It's candy bars, and not necessarily Fun Size. The stuff of urban legends.

"What was that?" Doris asked.

I shrugged. "Sounds like somebody threw a pumpkin at the door."

"You think you should check?"

"I'm trying to enjoy the holiday."

"What if the candle is still burning?"

"What candle?"

"Inside the pumpkin."

"It's not."

"Say it landed in all those dried leaves."

"It didn't."

"And the whole house goes up in flames."

"What a lot of imagination you got, baby."

"Charles. Go check."

I sighed. There is no point arguing with Doris beyond a point. She makes up her mind and only a fool stands in her way. I am not that fool.

I swept open the door so she could investigate. "You tell me, sugar. What do you see?"

Her eyes did something peculiar. Bulged. Popped.

I looked myself.

"Ha ha. That's a new one. Somebody's always raising the bar."

A body in a dark suit was stretched out, face down, on the stoop. A knife handle stuck out of the middle of its back. Something like blood oozed around the blade.

"Okay, buddy," I said. "You get an extra Snickers for this one."

He didn't move. I looked around for kids hiding behind a tree. I figured there'd be video posted on Facebook inside five minutes. Freaked out homeowner gets Halloween surprise.

I gave him a nudge with my foot. Still nothing. I bent down to get a closer look.

"Duke!" I said. "Duke Black! Okay Duke. You got me going, pal."

We go back. We hung in the same playgrounds. Then our paths diverged. He went on to become that high-priced attorney you call when you're guilty as sin. And I... well, it's a long story.

I waited for him to jump to his feet. For a big guy, Duke is limber. Then he'd laugh in that deep, bottom-of-the-barrel way of his, pound me on the back and declare, "Ha! Got you, Fatman!"

"Okay, Duke. Joke's over," I said.

Doris knelt beside him. She put a couple fingers to his neck. "All the jokes are over for Duke."

"What do you mean?"

"Duke is dead."

2. "Our Children Are Our Future"

"You think we should cover him up?" Doris asked.

"We should call nine one one."

"Sure. But it's disrespectful, leaving him out in the open."

"Yo, it's Fatman," a pack of hooligans called out. Except for my mother, Doris is the only one who calls me Charles. And my mother is dead. "Trick or treat!"

"Now what?" Doris said.

"Give me the candy bowl. I'll head them off."

She ducked in the house.

Too late. The kids were at the stoop.

"Mr. Man, good evening," the tallest of them said. "You have certainly turned it up for Halloween this year! My goodness, that body almost appears to be real!"

"Yeah, almost." I knew I was being played, but there's only so much you can say to a kid who's too polite.

There were five of them. They all had the same costume: a Cub Foods bag pulled over their heads with slits for their eyes.

"Here's the candy, Charles," Doris said.

I grabbed the bowl and stepped over Duke. "Tell you what, guys. Let's just split this up and call it quits for tonight." I shook the candy straight from the bowl into their pillow cases.

They glanced from me to Doris. "Mister Fatman, sir, have you no chill?"

"What about the other children, Sir Fats?"

"Dear Mister Fatster, our children are our future!"

We all had a laugh over that.

"We will take these as a favor to you and your bride, Mister Fathead, and distribute them at the rec center. Thank you as well, ma'am," the tall kid said. "Mister Man, again, we appreciate you doing it quite large out here."

"Stick to the treats, guys," I said. "The tricks..." I pointed at Duke's body. "They don't always work out."

"Just hope that thing's a hologram," the shortest of the bag boys said.

"Nobody flexing on Fatman, my dude!" My lanky pal then said to me, "Quite lifelike, Mister Fatness. Congratulations."

"You get what you pay for."

"You must have your cake up, then, certainly." He held out a hand for me to shake. "We hope you two enjoy your evening."

Then they scattered as the first cop car pulled to the curb.

3. Enter Roscoe

"Fatman. Now what?"

Roscoe hitched up his belt as he shambled up the walk. He was working against gravity. The slope of his belly, the weight of his Glock, plus the handcuffs, Taser, flashlight, ammo, God knows what else: the natural direction for it all was downward.

"So Sherlock Holmes wasn't available, apparently."

"I didn't even hear that."

Roscoe and I go back, too. He grew up in the neighborhood with me and Duke. Schooled at St. Agnes. Probably still has the nuns' knuckle marks in the back of his head to prove it. I made it a point to keep my nose clean. *Yes, sister. No, sister. I certainly will, or, I certainly won't.* Whatever. Even then Duke had a knack for the artful reply that kept the good sisters at least partially baffled. But they routinely frog-marched Roscoe into the hallway for re-education. For the first few years he came back in tears. As he grew older the tears turned to a smirk. Needless to say, he ended up in law enforcement.

"Hey, Doris," he said, beaming at her. "Great costume."

"Same to you," she said. Doris would flirt with a rock. That's just how she is.

"Try putting your eyes back in your head," I told Roscoe.

"Have I ever asked what she's doing with you?"

"It's been mentioned."

Constantly. It's one of the wonders of the world. I try not to dwell on it, but it's like keeping your tongue away from a broken tooth.

"Anyway, what we got here?"

"You're not going to like this."

"A normal day on the job, what do I see that I like?"

I stepped aside so he had a view of the stoop.

I hadn't turned off the fog machine. Duke's body was partially obscured by haze. The sound track had reached the insane laughter section.

"This is all really touching, Fatman. Now what? You going to give me a candy bar?"

"Maybe you want to do something like investigate? That still part of your job description?"

"Yeah. Let me get out my magnifying glass and tweezers."

Roscoe edged past me. "Nice job with the steak knife. And this blood stuff."

He groaned as he got down on one knee. "Where you get this? Stiffs R Us?"

He poked at Duke's body. "Wait," he said. "You mean...?"

Roscoe leaned over to get a look at the face.

"Fatman, it's Duke!"

"You think I don't know?" I looked again. The eye you could see was still open, but Duke wasn't taking anything in.

Roscoe staggered to his feet, lurched toward the bushes. He vomited loudly, then pulled out his radio and called for backup and an ambulance.

4. The Missing Blade

"It's like Christmas out there," Doris said.

"I don't get it." Roscoe cleaned himself up over our kitchen sink. I got a cup of coffee for each of us.

"All the lights."

A fire truck, plus an ambulance and a half dozen cop cars blocked off the street. Blinking reds and blues from all of them.

"Duke would appreciate this," Roscoe said.

"The billable hours. The law and order part, sort of."

"He was more on the disorder side."

"He got a lot of guys off," Doris said.

"A lot of guilty guys."

"Whoever did Duke is gonna wish Duke was around to defend him."

"Except for the part about paying Duke's bill."

"How much would you pay to stay out of prison?" I said. "What's unreasonable?"

"You got a point there, Fatman."

Roscoe took his coffee to the kitchen table. It's a booth in a nook that looks out on the backyard. I can just barely squeeze in myself. Roscoe wasn't doing much better. His running-down-the-perps days were long gone.

"Shouldn't you be investigating?"

"Nah. We got guys for that."

Doris slid along the bench to the window. I perched on the edge beside her.

"Duke," I said. "Jesus. Stabbed in the back. Who would do that?"

"A million guys," Roscoe replied. "Guys who were so guilty, no amount of money would keep them out of jail. Guys who got off but their lives were ruined anyway. Guys who just hated Duke's guts."

"He was a likeable guy."

"You think so. I think so. Sometimes. But we're remembering. Duke, the kid sitting in Sister Alberta's class. Duke Black. Alphabetically speaking, always right up in the front of the class. Right were you can't get away with anything, except he still got away with a lot. Me, caught every time. Sometimes I thought my skull would cave in. The way those nuns would zonk you. They must have had punching bags in the convent. I don't see how you could do it without practice."

"Duke wasn't much for the rules."

"Duke and the rules had a relationship. But with people? Not so much, not really. Argumentative, though you can't hold that against him given the occupation. Arrogant, sure, but who could blame him? Nobody else like Duke."

"He had his qualities," Doris said. "The ladies loved him."

"A certain kind of lady, sure," Roscoe replied.

Doris cocked her head but didn't rise to the bait. "Where are you going to start?" she said. She's one for an agenda, action items. Her trains run on time.

"I'm just a cop, honey. Where would you start?"

"I'm just a wicked stepmother."

"Great dress, by the way," Roscoe said.

"Yeah, you said that," I reminded him.

"Have I ever asked you, sweetheart, what you're doing with this guy?"

"You said that, too. She's heard it before. Trust me. It's a mystery of nature."

"It's not so mysterious, Roscoe." This accompanied by a look from Doris that made Roscoe's ears go red.

"Yeah, listen to the lady," I added.

"I..." He stopped. Silence. "You got some sugar for this?" Roscoe said at last.

"Over on the counter. Spoons are in the drawer next to the sink."

The hardware on Roscoe's belt clattered against the bench. He groaned as he stood, then limped toward the counter. He opened the drawer then stood there without moving.

"All the spoons in the dishwasher?" Doris asked.

"It's not that," Roscoe said.

"What, you're looking for the silver?" I said.

"You always keep your steak knives in here?" Roscoe said without turning.

"It's the utensil drawer. Where else we supposed to keep them?"

"You know you're missing one?"

Roscoe grabbed one of the knives from the drawer. Without saying anything more he headed for the front door.

5. Stabbed in the Back

I followed Roscoe to the door. Another cop stopped me there, some kid who looked barely old enough to shave. But he was bulked up with a bullet-proof vest and who knows how many years of pumping iron. When he said, "I'll have to ask you to remain inside, sir," I didn't quibble.

Roscoe stood over Duke's corpse. There was a photographer at work, some cops going through the bushes with their flashlights. They had pulled the plug on the fog machine, but the spook track was still playing. Screaming, moaning, chains dragging over cement. Nobody seemed to notice.

I turned it off.

A few minutes later Roscoe came back inside.

"Let's have a word, Fatman," he said.

"What?"

"In the kitchen, okay? Between you and me."

"You and me and me," said Doris.

Roscoe sighed. "Okay."

We settled around the kitchen booth again.

"You mind if I ask you a question?"

"What is this?" I said. "You sneaking up on a Miranda?"

"I'm talking to you, okay? You're not under arrest. This is not an interrogation. We go back and I'm trying to do you a favor. If you're not too thick-headed to recognize it. I'm trying to figure something out here."

"We are, too," Doris said. "A dead guy shows up on our stoop."

"Yeah, well, it happens. Trust me. The thing about the dead guy is this. He's got a knife in his back, right? And the knife, in case you noticed, is the same as this one."

"First marriage," I said. "You get some nice stuff."

Roscoe held up one of our steak knives. "Yeah, good knife. Sturdy. Quality handle. Cut a lot of serious meat with this thing."

"I don't like where this is going," Doris said.

"I just got this out of the drawer, where you told me to find a spoon. Nice wooden tray you got to hold these."

"Yeah?"

"One is missing. Looks like I could find it in Duke's back."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm not saying anything. I'm hoping maybe you're saying something."

"Like I stabbed Duke? Jesus, Roscoe. That would be like stabbing my brother. If I had a brother."

"You read the paper, Fatman? People do it every day."

"People do, but I don't."

"Speaking as your pal, it would be good if you had an alibi."

6. A Portion of the Truth

"You mind if I ask a few questions, sir?"

Roscoe disappeared into the swarm of police outside. Every cop on the force was in my front yard. They stood around in small clusters, like this was a cop reunion and the party favor was a corpse.

"Sure, sure, come in. I got nothing to hide."

"Who said you had anything to hide? Of course you don't." He gave Doris a once-over, doing his best not to linger on the obvious. "Evening, ma'am," he said.

"Doris," she said.

"Robert Hutch. Detective."

Nearly everyone looks like a kid to me these days. Hutch too, except that there was something else at work. He still had his hair, which he combed straight back, Dracula style. He was in the early stages of cop paunch. Mistrusting him came easy.

"Charles," I said. "But if you call me that nobody will know who you're talking about. On the street it's Fatman."

"I think I'll go with Charles, sir, it's all the same to you."

"Your momma raised you right, Robert."

"Not really, but that's a long story."

"Looks like you've got quite a night ahead of you," Doris said. "You sit down and I'll get some coffee."

"Let me turn on the fire," I said.

I've got a little gas fireplace in the parlor. I hit the switch and the fake logs lit up. It's a cozy room. A pair of leather chairs, a love seat, a couple lamps and a coffee table covered with magazines and books. It could be 1910 when you're sitting there. There's not even a radio.

"Go ahead, sit by the fire. Get the full treatment."

Doris returned with a tray. She's a distracting gal, which at the moment was a plus. She spent some extra time leaning over Hutch as she delivered his coffee. He couldn't decide which way to look.

Doris and I settled on the love seat. She put a hand on my knee. "So, what can we tell you?" I asked.

"Just the basics for now."

I told him about the night. The trick or treaters. The thump at the door. Opening it up to Duke, dead.

"You knew he was dead?"

"I thought it was a joke."

"A body on the steps?"

"It's Halloween. It's Frogtown. A lot happens."

"So you figured out it wasn't a joke."

"Doris felt for a pulse."

"You've got medical training?"

"Experience. I can usually tell if a man has a pulse."

Doris can say things in a certain way. Hutch did his best to keep a straight face.

"I looked and his eye was still open. There was blood on his lips." She didn't mention the knife.

"You knew the deceased?"

"We went back," I said. "Grade school."

"You were friends."

"Friends? I don't know that Duke had friends exactly. He had people he knew. A lot of people he knew. But with Duke, everything was ..."

"What?"

"Business. You know what I mean? He was your best pal, buying you drinks, giving you this or that. But you took it for an investment. Future considerations."

"What are we talking about here exactly, Charles?"

"Duke was in the information business. He knew this. You knew that. He knows a little more than you do and he wins. Every time Duke wins his star shines a little brighter. Until eventually he wins just by walking into the room. He shows up and you lose."

"You're saying that made people bitter?"

"No, no, everybody loved Duke. Loved to be around him. He had stories. Every dumb crime in the last forty years, Duke had a monologue about it. He could have done stand-up, except that it would have paid bananas compared to what he was making. Every

thug and gangster in the city, Duke had a personal relationship with him. Or her. Race, color, creed, it didn't matter.

"But you know all that. You're a cop. More than one guy on the force would have stuck a knife in his back. Which isn't even to mention the county prosecutor."

Hutch shrugged. "Duke Black was a worthy adversary."

"Duke kicked some ass. May he rest in peace."

"Were you expecting him?"

"To show up dead on my stoop?"

"At your house. You invited him over?"

"We flew at different altitudes. Duke had a champagne and caviar thing going on. This is more of a bottle-of-beer operation."

"You got no idea why he'd show up dead at your door?"

Doris gave me a look.

"I don't have a clue."

Which was not entirely the truth.

7. Below the Fold

"You think they're ever going to be done out there?" Doris asked.

"Just killing their shift," I said. "You ready for more coffee?"

Doris and I had a few cups with Roscoe and Hutch. We switched to bourbon after they left. Up, down. They canceled each other out. We hadn't slept. It's hard to close your eyes with a corpse and a platoon of cops outside your door.

I pushed back the curtains. Dawn wasn't that far off. The birds started to make some noise.

Duke's body was in a bag. The cops stood in clumps of three or four, nursing gas station coffee. A few of them fanned the grass with their flashlights, still on the lookout for evidence.

"You think they'll find anything?"

"Can't rule it out. But it's not like it's Moriarty versus Sherlock Holmes out there."

A car with a loose muffler rumbled down the street. It stopped. The door squeaked open. A newspaper smacked against our stoop. "You think Duke made the front page?" Doris wondered.

"The question is, above the fold?"

As usual, the paper was in the bushes. I peeled off the plastic bag, scanned the front page. Lucky Duke wasn't alive to see that he wasn't on it. I checked the B section. There he was, one column down low on the page.

The mighty fall so quickly.

"So?" Doris asked.

"Just the facts. 'Noted criminal lawyer Alphonse "Duke" Black dead in Halloween slaying. Found with a knife in the back in St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood. Clients

included a collection of the city's most notable criminal suspects dating back three decades, a virtual who's-who of high-profile perpetrators. Police say no arrests so far. But no shortage of suspects, allows police spokesman."

"Do they mention..."

"What?"

"You know."

I did.

8. The Restless Dead

I settled my head on Doris's lap. It's a tight fit on the love seat but I make it work. She ran some fingers through what remains of my hair.

In visual terms, I used to have more to offer. Hair, sweet Jesus, you could have grabbed a handful and lifted me off the ground. Of course back then you wouldn't have been lifting quite as much. Then one thing led to another. Potato chips to beer, beer to brownies, brownies to pie ala mode. There may have been some marijuana in there, fueling binges. I woke up one day and weighed, well, let's not dwell on the particulars. I had come to be the man, you could say, I was intended to be.

Doris plucked a hair from my ear.

"Ouch!"

"Don't be such a baby."

"Why did you do that?"

"Hair in your ears. Really, Charles. It makes you look like an old man."

"I am an old man."

"No, you're not. Anyway, here's another."

"Ouch!"

"It's for your own good."

There's no arguing with the woman. "Just warn me, okay?"

"I did."

She went back to my scalp, thank God. The gas fire still licked at the ceramic logs. I started drifting off.

"Charles," she said. "Who killed Duke?"

That brought me back. "I don't know, baby. Honest."

"You got no idea?"

"It's like Roscoe said. A thousand guys could have done it. Not to mention the women."

"He had a reputation. With the women, I mean. Great while it lasted and then, boom, it's over."

"The latest chiquita."

"He was getting older."

"I didn't notice that the girlfriends were."

"Myself, I like a mature woman."

"Of course you do, Charles." She slipped a hand under my shirt. "Considering the rewards."

"I'm living, for one."

"I'm not that vindictive."

I'm not so sure, but I let it slide.

"Somebody living, I'm not so concerned. I mean, tough luck, shouldn't have happened, nobody deserves, et cetera. But Duke threw in with some rough customers. He had to know that the wheels could fly off any of those guys. And if they did, well, you're in for a crash."

"But what if...?"

"Yeah?"

"...they're..."

"Not exactly living."

"And the portal is open again?"

Her hand froze on my chest. She grabbed some hair and tugged without thinking.

"Jesus!"

"Oh, sorry."

"I don't see how they'd get out. Not so soon anyway."

"That was a lot of concrete."

"But what else do they have to do? Think about getting out. Think about settling scores."

"Duke gave them a big score to settle."

"So did we," I said.

"Mostly you."

"I don't know that the dead would slice it so fine."

9. The Dead, Double Crossed

The double-cross was Duke's idea.

The trouble started, like so much trouble does, when the government swooped in to help us. The idea was to build a rail line from St. Paul to Minneapolis. Before it was all over there was a billion dollars worth of tearing up, digging down, taking this out, putting that up. Foundations cracked, buildings shifted, the ground moved beneath our feet.

Who knew how all that would play out?

You take the world to be what it seems to be. Sky above. Dirt and rock below. The works of man filling the space between.

No surprise that it turned out to be more complicated than that.

Maybe there is a heaven up there, where fat little angels fly in circles. From personal experience I can tell you that there is a world beneath our feet where the not-quite dead exist.

They are not happy.

They believe — rightly, wrongly, who knows? — that if they settle the old grudges left over from their time on Earth they will be satisfied. If they are satisfied they will become fully dead, which they believe would be a happier state of affairs.

Back to the rail line. All that digging and jouncing and foundation-cracking opened a portal to the underworld. The vengeful dead escaped through a fissure beneath Ivan's Auto Repair on University Avenue. Nothing that followed was pretty.

My mechanic Ivan himself got crushed when one of the dead kicked out a car lift and dropped my Volvo on him. Next a local eccentric named The Colonel got stuck like a bug to his dining room table with a military saber from his collection. A neighborhood psychic got pitched from a fortieth floor window. She didn't see that coming.

That was just the start.

The cops did not rally behind the idea that the dead were on a murder spree. I stepped in to investigate. I've got a little trust fund and time on my hands. I am — people say this both as a compliment and an insult — a "neighborhood figure."

Hence I came to the attention of the dead, many of whom had previously been neighborhood figures. The dead tried to get me off their case by kidnapping Doris.

We did some negotiating in the underworld. The truth is, it's tough to negotiate with the dead. They don't have a long list of interests. Mostly it's vengeance, vengeance, vengeance. That's why I called in Duke.

The dead had a top-notch legal team. No surprise there. I think it's fair to say that Duke enjoyed the challenge. They harangued each other for what seemed to be days, though of course it was impossible to tell in the perpetual gray of the underworld. When finally they reach an agreement, the dead insisted that I sign in blood, literally, for the return of Doris.

In return Duke promised them limited access to the topside for the purpose of settling grudges. But as soon as we got back to the surface, he commandeered a cement truck from a train-line construction crew. Lubricating the deal with a stack of Franklins, Duke arranged for several tons of cement to fill the basement at Ivan's Auto, sealing off the portal.

I pointed out to Duke that double-crossing the dead could be a bad career move. "Fatman," he said, "these are bubbles in the champagne of life."

Too bad for Duke that his bubbles had burst.

The question was whether it was the dead who popped them.

(For the complete story on Fatman and Doris in the underworld, see Fatman Descends, the previous portion of the Fatman trilogy.)

10: Exit Doris, Enter...

I told Doris she should call in sick, but she's not a call-in-sick kind of gal. She works in logistics and collections thereof. When Doris wants your money, you might as

well just hand it over on the first call. She's going to get it anyway. You can put her off, but you can't win.

It's not just a job with her. She features herself on the side of the angels. I found this tough to fathom in the early days of our relationship. I'd side with the deadbeats, suggest that they were gulled by unscrupulous operators into dumb purchases, bad loans.

"Did they ever hear about reading the fine print?"

"Believe it or not, baby, there are people who don't read the fine print."

"How about not being a sucker? Anyone tell them about that?"

"We're talking about people who aren't deep thinkers. They sign on the dotted line and that's it. They're not about tomorrow."

"Well, I'm tomorrow."

"I know you are."

"A deal is a deal."

"I never doubted."

Duke's double-cross of the dead left her in a moral quandary. They had kidnapped Doris, dumped her in a back-channel of their dank world, left her eating scavenged Cheetos and Fritos and squatting in the dirt. But Duke had made a deal with them and then at his first opportunity did the exact opposite. Instead of limited freedom they got tons on cement dumped on them. All for her benefit.

"Say they do a twist-off on me," Doris asked. "Could I really complain?"

A twist-off being the dead's signature move, an emphatic way of settling a grudge. They twist your head off your body. One thing the dead are not is weak.

"Sure you could complain. What did you have to do with it? You're strictly in damsel-in-distress territory."

"I'm not a damsel in distress."

"Of course you're not. But still."

She got up from the love seat, stretched her hands up over her head and then touched her toes. That's a trick no longer up my sleeve. Doris is supple but she's not spindly. She's got things to hold on to. No need to mention that she drives me more than a little nuts.

I dabbed at the patch of drool she left on my shirt. She's a messy sleeper. It's cute, sort of, but you need a deep supply of pillowcases if you've got Doris in your life.

"I'll call in for you," I said. "Who expects you to come in to work if you've spent the night with a corpse and a bunch of cops?"

"I do. I expect me to come in to work."

"Honestly, baby, you don't look so perky."

"They don't hire me for perky. I'm on the phone."

"Okay. Okay." It's pointless arguing with the woman.

She brushed, gargled, sprayed, dabbed. Then she stepped over what remained of the bloodstain on the stoop and was gone for the day.

Which accounts for why I was alone when Duke stopped by about noon.

11. *Duked*

I am a lunch-at-the-stroke-of-noon kind of guy, however much of an effort it is to wait until then. I roasted a chicken, mashed some potatoes, put together a salad. I don't figure that a splash of wine is going to kill me, and anyway, how sharp does my thinking usually need to be? So I poured a tumbler of vinho verde, which in my opinion goes well with rosemary and garlic on seared chicken skin.

Since it's lunch, I go light on dessert. A bit of chocolate, maybe an orange, strong coffee to battle the wine. Then it's on to the afternoon, which is largely given over to planning dinner. When she walks in the door, Doris expects a glass on wine on the counter and the smell of a hot meal simmering on the stove. Given what that gal can do with a fork and knife, it's among the wonders of the world that she's not a size twenty.

I was carrying my dishes to the sink when I heard another smash against the door, the back door this time. I figured it was a bird hitting the glass. They do that sometimes. Except that this sounded like a pterodactyl.

I opened the door.

There was a figure in a navy pin-stripe suit with a knife sticking out of his back, apparently dead on my doorway.

I leaned in for the close-up and saw that it was Duke again.

Then his hand shot out and grabbed my ankle.

I couldn't help but scream.

Before I shut my mouth Duke was on his feet. That well-deep laugh exploded from his expansive gut. "Ha ha. Gotcha, Fatman," he said.

"Jesus, Duke. You trying to kill me?"

"*Embrazo, amigo!*" Duke exclaimed. He pulled me into his clutches. Though I was not completely at ease hugging a guy I figured for dead, nonetheless I did what was expected. My hand got hung up on the sticky knife still plunged into his back.

"Didn't the cops take that as evidence?" I asked.

"In consideration of everything else that is occurring at the moment, I don't think that's question number one," said Duke.

"Good point."

"How about if I come inside? The neighbors might have some concerns."

"Right."

I held open the door, and had another look at the blood slick emerging from Duke's knife wound.

"Just finishing up lunch," I said. "You hungry? Thirsty?"

"Not anymore," Duke said. He slid onto the kitchen booth, grimacing when he got hung up on the knife. "Hmm. Not used to that yet," he explained.

I tried to play this as just one more event in the day. Wake up. Make lunch. Eat. Yap with dead guy. "You're looking good, Duke. Considering."

"It hasn't been twelve hours."

"Still, your color. Not so bad, really."

He got up and went to the mirror on the wall. Duke tugged at his nose, pulled his jaw from one side to the other. "I've had living clients who looked worse. But I'm not figuring the long-term is all upside, cosmetically speaking."

"You don't mind my asking," I said, "what brings you by? You're up from the underworld or what?"

"Fatman," said Duke. "I need some help."

11. The Dead Are on a Schedule

"Sorry to put it this way, Duke. But help? A good mortician, sure. Assuming you're going open casket. Even so, you're dead. Do you care?"

"Even a dead guy likes to look good. But that's not why I'm here."

"So?"

Duke cracked his knuckles, then stopped to look at his hands, as if the sound surprised him. "Funny what works and what doesn't. The joints — snap, crackle, pop, just like always. But I don't think I'll ever take a crap again. Not that I miss it. I mean, what a lot of trouble. Talk about your non-billable hours. No appetite whatsoever."

"That knife in your back bothering you?" I asked. "I could pull it out."

"I don't think you can. Of you could, but my bet is it would reappear."

"Seems like it gets in the way."

"Yeah, awkward. But it's not killing me. Not anymore."

"I don't know where to start, Duke. There's a lot to talk about here."

"I should have brought the slide show. Sort of like a vacation trip. That's what you have in mind?"

"Sorry, but everybody wants to know."

"You don't want to know."

"That bad?"

"No, it's just not what it's cracked up to be."

"I don't know, Duke. Death seems to be a pretty big deal."

"Sure, if you're living. Then it happens and eh, you're dead. It's like my clients, the guys so guilty not even I could get them off. Your guy who's never been to prison, it's a big deal, scariest thing in the world, he'll do anything to stay out. The guy who's been, okay, back to the joint, he's in, he'll be out, he's got pals there, the old gang, literally. Another stop on the train of life."

"Yeah, but it's not another stop. It's the stop."

"So you believe. Go ask the Buddhists."

"What, they're right?"

"How should I know? I been dead twelve hours. Give me a break, okay?"

"Still, you're dead. You're back. You've seen things. At least give me a taste."

"The thing is, I'm on a schedule here. I got some business to conduct and I don't have until the end of time."

"You don't?"

"That's just one more popular misconception. Do me a favor, Fatman. Shut up for a minute, no offense, and let me explain."

12. Concerning Eternity

"Okay, so I'm dead. Knife in the back. Whamo. Lights out."

"Why my door? You got thousands of doors in the city. What were you doing in Frogtown?"

"I was coming to see you."

"Excuse me, Duke. I'm happy to see you. Living, dead, whatever. But when's the last time you dropped by?"

He twisted his ear while he thought about it. "Maybe when we were kids."

"That's what I was thinking. So why last night?"

"I've had visitors."

Usually Duke is a straight-shooter. The language might get florid but you're not guessing what he means to say.

"We all have visitors. The paper guy. The mail man. People stop by. What are you saying?"

"Between a dream and the real deal. I'm not sure myself."

"So..."

Questions: not always the best way to get answers. People tell you what decide to tell you. The smart thing, mostly, is to shut up.

Duke tapped his fingers on the table, distracted.

"Those guys from the underworld. They want to talk."

"Who?"

"The lawyers. Graydon. Pimlipper."

They were the legal team from below. Duke went round and round with them, negotiating for Doris's release. The hours weren't billable, but nobody seemed to care. Doris and I huddled in the dust while they went on about access to the world of the living, terminations versus warnings and adjustments, total annual interventions, et cetera.

"What did they want?"

"Take a guess."

"They weren't happy."

"That's one way to put it. They said if they got half a chance they'd carve me up like a pumpkin. Along with you and Doris."

"As good as their word. They got you on Halloween. Perfect."

"I'm not so sure."

"What's to wonder about?"

"I don't think they were really there."

"Then who was?"

"What are the dead but an idea, Fatman?"

"You're here."

"If Pimplipper and Graydon could have carved me up right then, they would have. But they didn't have the corporal ability, if you know what I mean."

"I don't get it."

"They weren't actually there. They were an idea, an idea of themselves that landed in my bedroom. More than a dream, less than a house call."

"You're saying they didn't stick a knife in your back?"

"I'm saying I don't know. I don't think so."

"So why were you at my door?"

"The living got no patience. That's one thing you can say for the dead. Everything takes as long as it takes."

"That's not an immense relief, I said.

13. Last Will and Testament

"You sure you don't want something to drink?" I asked Duke. "Glass of wine? Might do you good."

"Forget it. I'm not hungry. I'm not thirsty. I haven't pissed since yesterday. Considering the size of my prostate, it's not like I forgot."

"Still. It might settle you down."

"Who says I need to settle down?" He gave me his Duke-for-the-defense glare. No point in arguing.

"No offense."

He shrugged.

"You still didn't say why you were at my door."

"To warn you. That Pimplipper and Graydon might be dropping by."

"You said they weren't really there."

"Okay. That doesn't mean the underworld is shut down for good. Those are two cunning stiffs. They get halfway out today, who says they can't get all the way out tomorrow?"

Instead of holding my eye he glanced down at his fingernails.

"What else?"

"What do you mean what else?"

"There was more."

He paused. "Maybe there was. Can't get anything past you, Fatman."

"You can. You just have to try harder."

"A premonition. I suppose that's what it was."

"Premonition of what?"

"I had a feeling. That's all I'm saying. I started thinking, what does it cost me to tune up the will?"

"What do you mean, the will?"

"Last will and testament. That will."

"What about it?"

"Do I have brothers, Fatman?"

"No."

"Sisters?"

"You were an only child."

"Thank God. Anyway. Wife? No. Kids? None that I know about. A few gals, but gold diggers when you get right down to it."

"I don't need the money. I got my own."

I had an uncle who left me his farm out in Eden Prairie, the last stand of open land in the midst of a suburban wasteland. I stayed in the old farm house for a night and knew the Green Acres scene was not for me. Peace. Quiet. Not my style. I sold the place off to a developer. I live off the interest.

"Who's talking about you?" Duke said. "Sure, you don't need it. You got your Frogtown *palacio*."

"So?"

"Doris."

"What about Doris?"

"A gal should have her own little stash. Sure it's all working out now, you and her. Though what she sees..."

I held up a hand to stop him. "It's bad enough I hear this from the living. I don't need it from a dead guy."

"It's a mystery, Fatman. If you were Clooney, sure. But you're no Clooney."

"I got my charms."

"Doubtless. But well hidden."

"What's the point, Duke?"

"I left her everything."

"Everything?"

"Okay, not everything. A few bucks go to the maid, the butler, the paperboy. Then the cook, my trainer, the lawn guy, the handyman, my personal assistant. But mostly everything."

I stopped to wonder why the idea of Doris loaded did not make me happy. We might not love the world we inhabit, but that doesn't mean we want it to change.

"How is this going to look? You show up dead on my doorstep with my knife in your back and the money goes to Doris? How do we explain this?"

"We've all had a few bad breaks lately."

"But why?"

You think the dead would be past surprise, but Duke gave me a look.

"You mean she never told you?"

"Told me what?"

14: *Thirty Mil. Give or Take*

What is jealousy, really?

Why is it that for ourselves we have no desire to be utterly possessed by another; that we want not only a romantic history but a *rich* romantic history — and simultaneously prefer to know little (or, better still, nothing at all!) regarding the liaisons of our mates?

Did I believe a woman of Doris's qualities had no romantic past? No, of course not! Did I do whatever was necessary to avoid thinking about it? Certainly! It was one more folder in my things-I-don't-think-about file.

To wit: Will my heart stop ticking tomorrow? Will I be dropped by cancer? Will my savings be gobbled in the next, inevitable crash?

Was Duke smirking? Maybe he was. It was hard to tell. His usual expression in bemusement, a close cousin to the smirk.

What did he have to smirk about? I'm no Valentine, sure, but ditto for Duke. He runs fifty pounds heavy, and that's a kind estimate. You could dress him in a circus tent. Then there's the matter of the bald skull, the salami nose, and those beady, scheming eyes.

My God, what did Doris see in him? Everyone says that about her and me. But really! I've got a heart! I empathize! I listen when you speak! I feel your pain! I shut up now and then and let you get a word in edgewise!

In fairness to Duke, he *is* loaded. I've got my little stash, enough to finance a Frogtown life. Cute bungalow, but there's a dealer who works the corner. Convenient to downtown, but also convenient to street hookers and slumlords. I would prefer to be more generous than I am — I recognize that my, oh, *thriftiness* is a fault rather than an endearing characteristic — but that is not who I am. I come from flinty people who lived with the expectation that even if today was more or less okay, tomorrow could be immeasurably worse. Therefore, prepare, conserve, husband. Squeeze pennies until Lincoln bleeds.

Duke was more of the Midas type. He turned Jacksons into Franklins. He lived with the certainty that he could give away a hundred today because a thousand would walk through the door tomorrow.

Question is, who dumped whom? Did Doris tell Duke to take a hike, or did he find her — in some unthinkable, impossible, idiotic way! — inadequate?

It took me less than a heartbeat to entertain the thoughts above, plus a few more that I'm ashamed to admit to.

Okay, so I'm not ashamed.

To reduce this to its basic primate level, I was pained — pained in the my-head-hurts, I'm-swept-by-nausea, my-very-dick-is-feeling-necrotic manner — to imagine Duke in the carnal embrace of my own, dear Doris. Those thick, ugly lips stuck to her face, that tongue (a little gray now, but once pink and glistening) pressed into her various parts.

Let me reduce this to a single word.

Yuch.

I said, "How much did you leave her?"

"It's not like a number in an account. It's property, it's stuff that goes up and down. Office buildings. Bitcoins. Mutual funds. Art. It's going to take a platoon of accountants to square this away."

"Roughly?"

"I'm guessing now. Thirty mil. Give or take five or ten, maybe more."

"Fifty?"

He shrugged. "I haven't been following the business page since I croaked. But yeah, sure, maybe. You should have married her while you could, Fatman. Assuming. Now? The pre-nup's gonna be a killer."

15. Will You Still Love Me...

I know a couple lyrics from a couple thousand songs.

Such as: *Will you still love me tomorrow?*

If, say, your baby has just inherited thirty million bucks.

"When will she find out?" I asked Duke.

"You mean, 'Is there still time to get hitched before she finds out?'"

"That's not what I asked."

"As her counsel — not that I am, but you put aside the mortality issue and I'm still a member of the bar — I'd advise her not to enter into any relationship that would compromise her financial autonomy. In short, she'd be nuts to marry you, Fatman. Nonetheless, to your point. Get me in the ground. Find the will. Get the executor off his ass. Might take a couple weeks for her to figure out that she's loaded."

"Truth is, I don't need the money. I got enough."

"Ha ha. That's a good one. Enough. You've got a couple thousand a month you pull from some raggedy-ass account, plus so-called Social Security. Great. Better than the neighbors. You're the bullfrog in a small pond. But you're still a frog. Doris is going to be a princess. Plenty of characters going thinking they got her glass slipper."

"I felt better when you were alive."

"I did too."

"How long ago was this? You and Doris."

"Don't go making yourself miserable, Fatman."

"I'm asking for a timeline, not a sex tape."

"Before you met her. Before you knew she existed. She's still something. But back then...?"

"I've seen pictures."

"Sure, pictures. I'm talking about... she walked in a room, time slowed down. The air got heavy."

"You're laying it on a little thick."

"I'm underselling, pal. I don't mean to rub your nose in it, Fatman. But it's an odd thing, don't you think? Recalling sex you had with somebody who's now rotting away. From her perspective. A lot of contradictions there."

"Among the problems."

"You're telling me."

Duke disappeared into his own thoughts. At least that's what I figured. Maybe his brain clicked off sometimes, being that he was dead. Maybe he ran out of juice and needed to recharge.

The clock up above the refrigerator ticked off the seconds. Sleet chattered against the window screens.

"I'm having a cup of coffee," I said to break the silence. "I don't suppose you...?"

Duke waved me off.

"As I was saying, Fatman..."

"Let's give Doris a rest. This is already more than I want to think about."

"No, no. Something else. I need your help."

I put the kettle on the stove. "You ask me, you're beyond that."

"It's not so simple."

"The funeral?"

"I left directions. The whole deal at St. Agnes. High Mass. Clouds of incense, bells, choir, orchestra, Knights of Columbus to carry the coffin, the whole bucket of crap."

"Then what?"

"One thing I don't want. I don't want to be another version of Pimplipper and Graydon. I don't want to be stuck down there with the eternally pissed-off dead."

"You can avoid it?"

"That's why I'm here."

16. Giving the Undead the Slip

"Okay, Duke, you're here. I'm guessing right, the medical examiner thinks you're there, on a steel table downtown. For all I know he's weighing your liver right now."

"No need to get hung up on details. For our purposes, I'm here. Frankly, I think I'm more here than there. The Duke on the slab isn't talking back."

"Excuse me, Duke. I got to wonder if I'm dreaming."

"You only get so far questioning the order of the universe, Fatman. I'm here. I got business to conduct. Let's stick with what we know for sure."

Duke brushed at his suit coat. Bits of leaf and grit were stuck to the pinstripe wool. "Jesus, I'm a mess," he said.

"GQ isn't showing up. As far as I know. What do you need from me?"

"Here's my understanding. This can go two ways. One is, I get my loose ends tied up. The important ones anyway. The people I loved, they know I loved them. The people I didn't? I settle those scores. I close out the books. I'm dead. Next stop, judgment. Or nothing. A little fuzzy. Might be some wiggle room there."

"Where's this coming from? They got HR in the beyond?"

"How do I know?" He shrugged. "Why do we know to breathe? We know. That's the important thing."

"If your ledgers aren't square?"

"That's why I'm here. I leave a mess and I'm like all the rest of them in the underworld. Not quite living, not quite dead. Can't rest until you've settled up. Can't get out to settle up. Classic Catch 22. "

"Plus, you got guys, you give them half a chance, they'll dump tons of concrete down your rat hole. Guys who will keep you trapped forever in the underworld."

"I should have done what instead? Let them keep Doris for eternity? Leave those lunatics free to settle their so-called scores?"

"Just making an observation. That you promised one thing and did another."

"Not for the first time."

"You don't want to get stuck with them down there. Is that the deal?"

"I'm sure we could work something out. But I'd rather be dead. In the one hundred percent dead sense."

"You working on a time line?"

"Seventy-two hours."

"How'd they settle on that?"

"Biblical deal. They had Jesus on the same time card."

"Lucky they don't have you wrapped in sheets with a stone at the door."

"I don't know how long this suit's going to hold up."

"What's the beef you're settling?"

"You kidding me? My beef? I got a knife in my back. It's your classic who-done-it situation."

"I don't see what I can do."

"We need a plan, Fatman."

17. The Usual Suspects

"You got three days to find the guy who killed you. We're already half-way through day one," I said to Duke. "You need help or a miracle?"

"One thing I need is a positive attitude."

"I like that in a dead guy," I said.

"I'm starting to wonder if I came to the right place." He started to push himself out of the kitchen booth.

"Okay, okay. Sit down. Let's figure this out. I'll get some paper. We'll make a list. Guys who wanted to whack you."

"Better grab a ream."

I got a legal pad and settled across from Duke. He drummed his fingers on the table.

"You got to stop that. Time is passing. I get it."

"Alright." He squirmed in his chair, tried to reach around to the knife in his back.

"That thing bothering you?"

"Not as much as you'd think. I'd give it a wiggle maybe, if I could reach it."

"You want me to try?"

"I don't know. Seems personal."

I got up. The blade was buried to the hilt, just to the left of his spine. "Nice job, whoever did it. Looks like he nailed your heart."

"You got to go, I'll say this, it wasn't a lingering death."

"Painful?"

"You hit your thumb with a hammer, that's painful. This was more like getting a bank vault dropped on your head. Massive insult. Whole different category. Lots of lights going off. Sparks flying everywhere. Then nothing. For a while anyway."

I reached for the handle, then stopped. "I'm thinking, what about prints? Maybe I shouldn't touch this."

"You got a crime lab back in the pantry? Anyway, it's not the actual knife. Not any more than this is my actual body. My actual body, well... The autopsy. What a mess. I'm an idea. A representation. Sorry to go metaphysical on you, Fatman, but I'm a manifestation of a spiritual presence. Your basic not-altogether-friendly ghost."

I grabbed the handle and gave it a jiggle. "How's that?"

Duke groaned a bit. "That's great, Fatman. Jesus. A little more up and down, okay?"

His chin dropped to his chest. He flattened his hands on the tabletop.

"I can't tell you how good that feels."

I shook the handle. I tried not over-analyze what I was doing, but let's say it raised some issues.

"Duke," I said at last. "I got to tell you. This knife?"

"Yeah?" This came out as a gasp.

"When Roscoe was here? While your body was still on the stoop? He noticed that one of our steak knives was missing. He seemed to think it's the one in your back."

18. *The Lie in Alibi?*

Duke's chin jerked up off his chest.

"That's your knife in my back?"

"We're missing a knife. Wüsthof. Quality blade. Same as the one in your back. Could be a coincidence."

"That sound a little unlikely to you?"

"If I were a cop, yeah, sure."

"I'm talking as a normally intelligent human being?"

"It raises some issues."

"You got an alibi?"

"I was right here, passing out Halloween candy."

"So you got a bunch of costumed kids knocking on the door. You know how to find any of them?"

"They were in costumes. They had bags on their heads. How should I know who they were?"

"Exactly."

"Doris was here."

"Good! That's great, Fatman."

"I'm hearing some skepticism."

"She's the beneficiary of my estate, she's here in a Frogtown love shack with her unemployed boyfriend and guess who gets a knife in his back."

"Duke, you don't think..."

"In my career I saw a lot of things I wouldn't have thought. You want to hear my number one rule?"

"I don't know."

"Here it is. People are crazy."

"Yeah."

"Sit down, Fatman."

I dropped into the seat across from Duke. I felt like I weighed a million pounds.

"Look me in the eye."

I did. For a corpse his color could have been worse. It was like he'd been popped in the eye a week ago and the bruise was starting to fade.

"Now tell me neither you nor Doris shanked me."

"If I had a Bible I'd get it out. I didn't stab you. Doris didn't stab you. Who did, I don't know. But it wasn't us. We were here, inside, together. It sounded like a tree fell against the door."

He stared at me. The clock ticked on the wall. Sleet continued to rattle against the windows. I wanted to look away. I knew that I shouldn't. I felt like a germ under a microscope.

What Duke was looking for exactly I don't know but at last he seemed to find it.

"I believe you," he said. "If I'm wrong it won't be the first time. I'm going with my gut, Fatman."

"An impressive tool."

"You should talk."

"So where do we start?"

"We're talking about half the world. Guys who got a gripe with me. Guys who got a gripe with you. Guys who got a gripe with Doris. Guys happy to set you up so you can dangle on a hook. And that's just the living. Can't rule out the dead. They got a more legit beef than the living."

"Doris and I don't deserve this. We're innocent."

"You want to hear rule number two?"

"No."

"Nonetheless. Nobody's innocent."

19. *To Name a Few Suspects...*

"We've got to start somewhere," I said to Duke.

"My worry is, we're trying to apply rational thought. This then that. Maybe we're dealing with a nut case. I was walking by, a little birdy whispers in Mister Whacko's ear and bang, I'm dead."

"Except it's my knife from my kitchen."

"You're at the front door, nut case sneaks in through the back, steals a knife, plants it in the first guy he sees. Me."

"Maybe. But not much of a path for investigation. Sherlock Holmes doesn't start with the idea that life is a series of meaningless events."

"What if it is?"

"The clock is ticking here, Duke. Let's compromise. Some of life is meaningless events. Most, maybe. Some of it is cause and effect. We're going to act as if we're in the cause and effect category here. Unless you've got a better idea."

"This is why I'm here, Fatman. You might be wrong, but I respect your thinking."

"Let's start with your three top candidates. Guys where you'd say, okay, I don't really blame him."

"Just three?"

"I'm not trying to insult you."

"I'm going by category. Cop. Criminal. Nut. One each. That sound reasonable?"

"Okay. Cop?"

"Roscoe."

"Roscoe! Duke, that's like saying your brother pulled the plug. Grade school, high school, all the time since. I just don't think..."

"Don't go sentimental on me now. Here's the deal. Roscoe's partner, Buzzcut."

"The one who's in jail? Lou Buzcuso?"

"Same. Married to Roscoe's daughter."

"Ginny. Sure. Cute kid."

"Yeah, fun couple. Lot of stuff going up Ginny's nose. In and out of treatment. Major capital requirements, keeping her nose tuned up. Owes money to half the dealers in town."

"Let me guess. Including some of your clients."

"Unfortunately. You remember Little Phil?"

"Fat kid in the fedora. Pink Town Car."

"Same. Roscoe is on vacation. Buzzcut is working alone. Does a traffic stop on Little Phil. Rolling through a stop light, some crap like that. Searches the vehicle. Finds ten thousand in the trunk. Grabs the dough from Little Phil, Ginny pays off her dealers, everybody's happy."

"Except for Little Phil."

"Buzzcut tells Little Phil that ten thousand is cheap compared to what gets unleashed if he breathes a word. Might have worked, except that Little Phil is a geeky

dude. Those tiny video cameras? Little Phil has one in his trunk. Buzzcut is on Candid Camera. So Buzzcut, Little Phil and I make a deal. The TV stations don't get the video. Little Phil gets his ten thousand back plus interest. Then you got attorney fees. And future considerations."

"Huh?"

"Sort of a get-out-of-jail-free card. An informal deal, let's say."

"Seems like there's a lot of blame to go around."

"Hard to say who Roscoe loves more. Buzzcut or his daughter. So instead of blaming either one of them, he blames me."

"So he sticks you?"

"This isn't paint-by-numbers, Fatman. I don't have the whole thing laid out. But it seems a little convenient, doesn't it? First copper on the scene. What, he's just passing by?"

"Jesus. Roscoe."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I still got criminals and nuts."

20. You Remember Boom Boom Calhoun?

"What next?" Duke asked. "Nuts or criminals?"

"There's a big difference?"

"Considerable, in my experience. Your nut might get wrapped up in crime, but it comes as a surprise. No plan. Guided by voices. A humble guy who's overwhelmed. Crazy solutions to manageable problems. Whereas the type of criminal I got in mind, the world exists for no purpose other than to serve his interests. You got something he wants? It's not yours, it's his. He can't understand why you're standing in his way."

Duke scratched at the back of his neck. He gave me a pained look and squirmed in his seat.

"You sure there's nothing I can get you?" I asked.

"My skin, Fatman? It feels like a bad suit. Like I don't fit in my body. We take a lot for granted on the day-to-day."

"Maybe some coconut butter? Doris has a cabinet full of potions."

"This isn't an over-the-counter problem. Best thing, ignore it. Keep our eye on the prize."

"I'm ready." I tapped my pen on the legal pad ahead of me.

"Okay. Criminal. You remember Boom Boom Calhoun?"

"Used to run with that motorcycle club."

"Gang is more like it. Los Locos."

"Clubhouse on Western, right? They had a war with... who was it?"

"The BPMs. Beer, Pussy, Motorcycles. A colorful bunch in their own right. Also Deadhead and his posse. A sector that consumes a lot of legal services."

"Which ones were your clients?"

"All of them."

"You can do that?"

"Common enemy. Their legal problems were with the government. Being how guilty they were, they needed top-end representation. Out of court, they had a beef, their first thought ran more to guns, not lawyers. Generally we worked things out."

"What about Boom Boom?"

"I tell you the whole story on these guys it will take all day. Just write him down for now."

I already had a column labeled Cop with Roscoe's name written below. I added another column headed Criminal and put Boom Boom in his place. "So who's our nut?" I asked.

"Halloween, on my way to your place, who did I notice?"

"Maybe this isn't the time for Twenty Questions."

"Jogger."

"Lot of people jog."

"In a sombrero. Wearing overalls. And flip-flops."

"That narrows it down."

"Edgar Schlaminski."

"Eccentric, sure. But killer? That's a stretch."

"When's the last time you talked with him?"

"Beyond how's-it-going-Edgar? Never. But the guy looks like a lamb. Those big empty eyes."

"Another client. His parents died, I was executor."

"They could afford you? That little bakery did that well?"

"Of course they couldn't afford me. The way it worked was, I walked in, the old man pinched doughnuts right out of the grease for me. Dropped them in powdered sugar. Burn your mouth, they were that hot. 'For you, Duke Black,' he'd say. Never let me pay. When he asked I couldn't say no."

"The old doughnut trick."

Duke shrugged. "It worked."

"Not with Edgar?"

"Hard to make the paranoid happy. Edgar thought I was cheating him."

"Well?"

"Jesus, Fatman. How about some respect? I cut my fee by two-thirds."

"Not cheap enough?"

"We had words. His words were revealed to him via the Archangel Michael. Which was tough to argue against."

"Duke," I said. "I talk to you, I feel I haven't been living. The big feelings, people have them about you."

"They've got feelings about you, Fatman. For example, Doris. That makes up for a lot. Not to mention you're living."

21. *She Smelled Greenbacks*

"Women," I said to Duke. "You want a column for them?"

"We're talking about a parade here, Fatman."

"The majorette then."

"I'm a man who loves too much. Was, anyway. That's the problem."

"I need a name."

Duke tugged at his ear. A piece of it came off in his fingers. "Hmm," he said, looking at it. "Guess I've got to be careful. You got a trash can here?"

"Under the sink."

He pushed himself out of his chair. I still had problems with the knife sticking out of his back.

"Jenny Lately," he said as he returned to the booth.

"Complicated."

"Tell me."

"I take her for a society babe, not a homicidal maniac."

"Who says it's either-or?"

"She's still married to...?"

"Leo. For now. But Jenny is not a for-better-or-worse kind of gal and Leo has had his problems. Investment trouble."

"Who hasn't?"

"You know how it is with fifth generation wealth. They think, I was born rich, I must be brilliant. They actually believe it's their native wit that earns them insider deals, invitations to sit on this board and that board. In Leo's case, the museum."

"He's still on that?"

"For now."

"Meaning?"

"Leo bought into a Madoff-style deal. Unbelievably great returns, year after year. The key word being unbelievably."

"He got toasted?"

"Of course he did."

"He must have had a few million in the mattress."

"You live that kind of life, the millions don't last. Especially if you got a sweetheart like Jenny helping out."

"What's this got to do with you?"

"I was a little mixed up with the museum myself. Their new theater space? The Black Box?"

"I thought that referred to the color."

"It's a little joke. A three million dollar joke, which is how much it cost me to get my name on it. I ran into Jenny at the gala, the director's lunches, that sort of thing."

"How old is Leo? Hundred and fifty?"

"Probably not a day over eighty."

"And she's what? Forty?"

"She's been tuned up. Fifty maybe."

"You're telling me that you and Jenny...?"

"I thought she loved me for my soul, Fatman!"

Duke's face twisted up. He stuck his fists into his eyes. He moaned.

"Duke. I... I don't know what to say."

He pulled his hands back and slapped them on the tabletop. "Ha, Fatman. Really. Heartache wasn't what killed me."

"Waste all the time you want to waste. It's not me heading for the underworld."

"Okay, okay. I figured she was looking to step off the sinking ship and onto the dock. She's a sweet kid..." He paused at that. "Not really. She a schemer. But she knows a few tricks that she wasn't practicing on Leo. Acrobatics. We had some good times. Well, I had some good times. Maybe it was work for her."

"Did Leo know? Could be he's your man."

"Leo has trouble keeping track of his meds, let alone his wife."

"Still."

"Plus, he's got some other issues. Like felony theft."

"What does he need to steal?"

"At the museum. He helped himself to some drawings. Who knows what he thought. It's not like you can sell them in a bar. I come very close to feeling sorry for Leo."

"In short the Litley family is a little stressed, maybe not making the best decisions."

"I haven't even mentioned the kids. Some of them older than Jenny. Whatever part of the family fortune hasn't disappeared in the so-called investment deal, she's blowing on shopping trips in New York, Paris, Tokyo. Plus they have suspicions that Leo's bed is not her sole port-of-call."

"Maybe one of the kids."

"They wouldn't know which end of the knife to use. Now we're talking sixth generation wealth."

"I have some trouble featuring Jenny as a hit gal. Wouldn't she hire the pool boy to do it?"

"She's hands-on. Get her fired up, there's no stopping her. I thought we were having laughs while she waited for Leo to die. The pre-nup wasn't stingy. She had a good lawyer."

"You?"

"Who else? But now she's looking at the suit on the investment deal. The felony rap. That can probably be smothered if Leo produces the pieces and coughs up a generous donation, but there's got to be some quality lawyering the goes into that."

"You again?"

"Probably. Too bad I won't be around for those billable hours."

"Jenny figured she'd trade you for Leo?"

"She said I was so much more vigorous. So alive. That I made her feel loved. I brought out the passion in her that had been buried for such a long time. Et cetera."

"You bought that?"

"We had some quality sack time, but I don't kid myself. She smelled greenbacks. I smelled trouble. I told her I thought it was time to let things cool down, maintain at least the pretense of propriety."

"What did she say?"

"Let propriety be damned. To quote directly. Her theory was divorce, remarriage. After a decent waiting period. Like ten minutes. I said I wasn't on board."

"And then?"

"You know how it is with these types. A little pinch of the lips. A little narrowing of the eyes. It's not like she shouted, 'I'll kill you, you prick!' But I figured there was going to be trouble. Not knife-in-the-back trouble, but something. A woman like Jenny is used to getting what she wants. And if she doesn't..."

Duke shook his head. He was quiet for a while. Then he said, "Fatman, you mind giving that knife a jiggle again?"

22. The Reality Problem

Duke went quiet again except for some low moaning as I jiggled the knife in his back. He let his head sink down to the tabletop.

Sleet collected in the corners of the windows. Most of the trees were bare. Somebody had smashed a pair of pumpkins on the sidewalk.

"All Souls Day," I said to Duke.

He groaned.

"Day after Halloween. All Souls Day."

"That's me," he managed. "All soul."

"Except you're still feeling something. I should hook this knife up to a vibrator."

"Could you?" Duke wondered.

"Forget it."

He let his head slump against the table again.

There was so much to think about that I tried not to think at all, which was impossible.

Roscoe. Edgar. Boom Boom. Jenny. One was as likely as the other, and all of it based on a hunch.

"Sorry to say, Duke. You got enough troubles. But your situation?"

"Yeah."

"It's forcing me to question... How do I put this? The nature of reality. If you know what I mean."

"It's a lot of bite off. A tumbler of Scotch would help. Some premium weed. Both. Not that I'm interested, not anymore. But you, maybe you could use some."

You put your hand on a knife that's already in somebody's back, and it's not so hard to imagine putting it there yourself. Duke knocks on the door. I pull out my steak knife. Bam!

Like stabbing a watermelon, except there's the blade amid the pulsing mass inside poor Duke. He crashes into the front door. Bang!

He slumps to the stoop. The knife handle sticks in the air, like the flag on Iwo Jima. Death beats out life again. Duke's cheek droops against the concrete. I stare for a moment at the blood that pools around the handle. Then I retreat inside.

"Did you do it?" Doris asks. "It is done?" *It* representing everything we want, and everything we refuse to call by its name. Murder. Murder for a pot of money.

Except that this isn't what happened.

Except that it seems real enough.

When a dead guy has stopped by to chat and is now sitting at the kitchen table, what is truly impossible?

At that Doris walked through the door.

23. What Was Going on Behind Her Eyes?

"Honey, I'm home!" Doris yelled. This started out as an ironic nod to the world of Blondie and Dagwood. She's been doing it for so long now that the joke has evaporated.

"Wait right there, baby." To Duke I said, "Just stay put. I want to ease her into this."

"She's a tough nut, Fatman."

"Still."

I pushed through the swinging door. Doris was hanging up her coat.

"You're home early."

"Not too early for a glass of wine."

"Coming right up." I pecked her cheek.

She said, "That all you got?" Doris stepped on my toes to hoist herself up, then grabbed my wattles and kissed me. I don't know what she was doing with her tongue. Counting my teeth, maybe. Playing hackysack with my tonsils.

"Good day?" I asked, once she detached.

"Reeled in sixty thou and thought, hey, give yourself a present, girl. Go home early."

"Sixty thousand in bad debt?"

"Ten here, fifteen there. It adds up."

"What are you telling them? You'll murder their kids?"

"As if they'd care, most of them. It's a trade secret, Charles."

She was still on my toes. She grabbed my belt and leaned back. "Where's that wine, baby? I'm thinking celebration."

"Something you ought to know?" I said.

"What, we're out of wine?"

"No, not that. We've got company."

She gave me a suspicious look. "Company? Where you hiding them?"

"In the kitchen. He, not they. Actually, Duke."

"Duke is dead."

"Yeah, that's true."

"He's undead?"

"Not exactly. He's got three days to figure out who killed him."

"What, it's like a grace period?"

"If he puts it together he can just be dead. If he doesn't, yeah, he's undead."

"Stuck down in the underworld?"

"That's how it seems."

"Sounds like something Pimplipper and Graydon cooked up. Those undead lawyers evening up the score."

"It's a little fuzzy. It's not like Saint Peter handed him the manual."

"Where is he?"

"In the kitchen."

"We've got to help him."

"Sure we do. One thing, baby. He left you some money."

"Money?"

"In his will."

"That's sweet. I mean it's tragic. But it's the thought."

"Maybe fifty million."

That stopped her cold. She stepped off my toes and let go of my belt. Doris got a far away look just then. I tried to figure out what was going on behind those eyes. Failed. She patted my stomach and said without looking at me, "We better talk to him."

24. Head Like a Beehive

"Doris," Duke said. "You're looking good."

"I'd say the same, but..."

"Considering. It could be worse."

"You're the glass half-full type. You were."

"I'm hopeful."

My theory had been that death is a simplifier. Looking at Duke I had to wonder. Something awkward was stuck between him and Doris. What, I couldn't say.

"Fatman mentioned the will?"

"Can't take it with you?"

"What you hear is true."

At that the conversation bumped up against whatever the past was between them.

"Should I leave?" I asked. Petulantly, you could say.

"Grow up, Fatman," Duke said. "You think Doris wasn't alive until she met you?"

"I don't want to hear about it is all."

Truth is, I didn't have that much of a life before I met Doris. Sure, there were women. A few. But I was killing time, pre-Doris.

Maybe love is all about endorphins, dopamine, the brain chemistry that one gal triggers and another does not. Maybe it's spiritual, impossible to explain with science. Doesn't matter. We're talking about the difference between stumbling down a cowpath in the dark and cruising a well-lit superhighway. When I met Doris I knew.

She was holding a pool cue in a bar. She wore a black dress. She had pulled her hair back into a tight bun. She looked like a nun who had taken a very wrong turn. Severe, luscious, trouble. There's more to the story, but that's enough for now. We'll get to it eventually.

Duke said, "Major regrets, you die, you start adding them up. The fog clears. Among the most major of my regrets is..."

"Let's stop," Doris said.

"My head was like a beehive. The buzz of temptation. Quantity instead of quality."

"When you were living we didn't get anywhere, talking about this," said Doris.

"I'm not living."

"That's my point. Charles says you got three days."

"More like two and a half."

"Then let's not waste time on the past." Doris said.

I held out our sheet of suspects. She squinted as she read. "Are you kidding?" she said. "This is what you've got?"

Duke shrugged.

"So where do we start?" she asked.

Duke stopped to consider.

"Fadilah," Duke said.

"The psychic?" I didn't add, *Are you kidding?*

"You got a better idea?" Duke asked.

To which the answer was, No.

25: She Stacked Up All the Whys

Fadilah. Her actual name was Tashandra Wilson. I'd known her since she was in diapers.

She took over from her aunt, Leona, after the dead pitched Leona through the window of her forty-third floor apartment. I encountered her in the underworld, Leona was, like all the rest of them, rage-filled and bent on vengeance. Her appearance wasn't great, either. Leona looked like what she had been: a big woman who had hit the pavement head first at a hundred miles an hour.

I'm not a skeptic, I'm not a promoter. Leona had certain abilities. Maybe it came to nothing more than that, unlike most people, she listened to what you said. As a professional matter she was obliged to listen. My theory is, she figured out the why behind what you were saying. Then she stacked up all the whys and come up with a plausible, *What's next?*

I hadn't yet seen Tashandra in her professional capacity. Mostly I remembered her as a skinny kid in cornrows, all elbows and knees, skipping along ahead of Leona. Leona moved with the gravitas of a queen who had just survived as assassination attempt, to which Tashandra played court jester.

"I can drive," Doris said.

"I'll meet you there." Duke didn't move from his chair.

"You just appear?" I asked.

"Something like that. I'm still getting the hang of it. There must be rules but I haven't figured them all out."

"Can we watch?" Doris asked.

"That isn't how it works. You go on ahead. I need to concentrate."

26. *Please. Shut up.*

Doris is an impatient driver on a good day. When she's agitated, the whole world is in her way. She leaned on the horn a couple of times before we hit the light at University Avenue.

"You're a little worked up," I said.

She didn't take her eyes off the road.

"You want to talk about it?"

Silence.

"I mean, it's upsetting. The old boyfriend shows up dead. Suddenly you're rich. You've got to figure..."

"Charles?"

"Yes?"

"Please?"

"What?"

"Be quiet please."

Sleet piled up in the street. The train rolled down the beside us. We watched it. There were a few passengers. We stared at them. Some stared back.

Other people. They've all got their lives. Mine is as insignificant to them as theirs are to me. Ciphers. I felt Doris edging into that category. So much had changed in so little time.

Feed my heart to the dogs. It would be a relief.

Doris made the left at Victoria. She ran through the gears. We pulled up around the block from Fadilah's. She's in one of those old frame houses that managed to survive

along the busy street. Everything else is piles of cinder block or brick, most of it Asian restaurants, or auto repair shops or nail studios. Not much to look at. Fadilah's place was a mess of Victorian filigree that could have used some paint. A whiff of decay hung on it.

The sign stuck in the front yard read,

Lady Fadilah
The Past. The Present. The Future.
Preparation. Reconciliation.
No Appointment Necessary.

We parked on the sidestreet and walked around to the front. The sleet under foot was the same as ball bearings. I took two steps and fell hard. My head banged on the cement.

Doris hovered over me. "Charles," she said. "You can't go killing yourself now." She seemed to spin around a bit. I had to blink a couple of times before she stayed put.

"Just help me up."

"This is a bad start."

"Let's stay up-beat, baby. Leave the predictions to the professionals."

"You think Duke is going to show up?" Doris brushed off my coat.

"What else has he got on his schedule?"

We hooked arms and minced up the steps to Fadilah's door.

27. Haze of the Past

"Tashondra! You're all grown up!"

"Mister Fatman, no disrespect, but you gotta call me Fadilah. In case other people hear."

"No problem. You're trying to run a business here. Hard habit to break. I remember you..."

"I know. Everybody does. One of my business development obstacles. That's what they tell me at entrepreneur class."

"They got classes in this?"

"Not in psychic, specific, but you know, Mister Fatman, it's just one more business. All your typical problems. Marketing, billing, customer satisfaction."

"You change the place much after your mother, well, you know..."

"After she passed?"

"If that's what you call it."

"Almost passed."

"Anyway."

My memory hadn't kept up with the actual Tashondra. She was still tall and lanky, but filled out in distracting ways. She wore her hair in an Angela Davis halo that you don't see much anymore, plus a dark business suit and a white open shirt.

"I like what you did with the place," Doris said. "Spiritual but not..."

"A cartoon. Took it down a few steps. Had to. Momma was so old school. That red velvet wallpaper. The crystal ball. Really. The clothes. Looked like she fell off a gypsy wagon. Can't blame her. Give the people what the people want. Now, people looking for a professional relationship. They want your leather chairs, your antique Persian rug. Tasteful."

"But they still want to know the future," I said.

"Pre-reality visualization, Mister Fatman. That's what we call it now."

At that Duke appeared.

28: I Got a Business I'm Running

I'll say this for Fadilah. A dead guy materializes with a knife in his back and she did not scream, she did not gasp, she did not even blink. "Mister Duke," she said. "I wonder what brings you by?"

"You know each other?" I asked.

"Mister Duke and my momma did a lot of business. Back when they were alive."

"Leona knew things," Duke said with a shrug. "A hundred bucks with Leona went farther than a thousand with some of the blockhead PIs I used to hire."

"She had a lot of respect for you, too, Mister Duke," Fadilah said.

"I don't know she's so happy with me these days."

"That's between you and her. You got time to sort that out is what I hear."

"I got time and I don't have time."

"How's that?"

"Maybe Leona didn't get the same deal."

"What deal you talking about?"

"I got three days to figure out who killed me. Actually, not even two and a half. I'm on the clock right now. I figure it out and I'm dead dead. I don't and I'm down there with Leona. Waiting to escape. Nursing my grudges."

"Undead."

"That's it."

"You sure that's so bad? Might not be great but it's something."

"Why is everybody so afraid of nothing?" Duke said. I wasn't sure if he was talking to us or talking to himself. Usually he spoke like he was addressing a full twelve-person jury plus alternates.

"All the things you ever worried about, gone. The dandelions, the interest rate, the dripping faucet, all the world's scheming babes — you don't care. You can't even begin to care. It is no longer on your docket. You're not even a molecule in the blackness of space. You're done."

"You know that?" Doris asked. "You know that for a fact?"

"I'm saying I know. When you're right you're right and you know it."

"When you were wrong you thought you were right," Doris added.

Me, I've got a shades-of-gray mentality. I believe there are a hundred ways to be right, a thousand ways to be wrong, and often enough you don't know which side of the fence you've come down on anyway. I wondered what point Doris thought she was making.

"You all got a lot of opinions," Fadilah said. "But you mind I ask what brings you by? You want to engage my services, or you want to stand around in the foyer and shoot the breeze? Don't mean to be harsh, but I got a business I'm running here."

30. Weight of History

"We're here to do business, Tashondra," said Duke.

"Fadilah."

"Right. Sorry."

"You don't mind me asking? But you dead, Mister Duke. How you gonna pay?"

Duke patted his back pocket. Nothing. He swatted at the breast pocket of his coat. Nothing again.

"Everybody says you can't take it with you," Fadilah said.

"Fatman? Doris?" he said.

"What are we talking about here, Fadilah?" Doris asked. She squeezes a dollar hard.

"Usual rate is a hundred per hour. Plus twenty-five each additional client. One hour minimum. Looks like a hundred fifty. Cash is best but your major credit card is okay. Pre-paid."

"What, you get people running out the door?" Doris wondered.

"Everybody don't always like what they hear."

I handed Fadilah a Visa card. Resentfully. Duke died rich, Doris would have his dough, and I end up with one fifty on my plastic.

Fadilah ran the card and said, "Come with me."

We followed her down a narrow hallway. Beat-up wainscoting met up with cracked plaster walls painted a dead shade of green.

"Lot of history back here," Fadilah said. "At first I thought, freshen it up, girl. Make it yours. But you know, Momma Leona took it over from her momma, and before that I don't even know. You got all those things been happening here, one generation on top of the next. Could be going back a hundred years. Could be more. Powerful things all coming down in this old room. I felt Momma whispering in my ear, *Leave it be, child*. You don't want to mess where you don't gotta mess, speaking in spirit terms now. So I thought, yeah, let it be. What you see is what you see. What you feel deep down in your bones, now that's something else."

She opened the door and let us pass.

31. Then Everything Went Black

Fadilah was right. There was a feeling in the room.

I got the same jolt long ago, wandering in the Andes. The bus stopped in a village at fourteen thousand feet. I was woozy from lack of oxygen. People streamed toward a squat church on the square.

It was a Catholic church, but what was going on didn't get the Pope's seal of approval. An open fire burned near the altar. The walls were black with smoke. There were flowers, flowers everywhere. A sheep or a llama or some other hooved creature bleated for a while up front, behind the mob of people. Then the bleating turned into a gurgling that was followed by silence. The air was thick with the smell of people packed shoulder to shoulder, and the perfume of flowers, and the woodsmoke that rose to the ceiling and then sunk again. Then the singing started, more like a chant than a song, in an language I didn't recognize. I could barely breathe. Anyone with a single brain cell could feel that something powerful was happening, something outside the normal understanding of how the world works.

"It's a little bare in here," Doris said.

"Yeah, you thinking crystal ball, big dusty rug, velvet curtains, maybe some spooky stuff on the shelf. Human skulls, crazy shit. Pentagrams on the floor, maybe look like they drawn in blood. The usual. Then what you got instead is this."

"It works, that's the thing," said Duke. "You walk in not knowing what the real deal is, then you stand here and this is it."

"For a dead man, you got enthusiasm," Fadilah said.

If the floor had ever been varnished it was a long time ago. A round, spindly table stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by four mismatched chairs. An old army blanket, thrown over a curtain rod, blocked the light from the sole window. The plaster that fell from the walls stayed where it landed. The walls were like the inside of a lantern glass, smudged to sepia, darker toward the ceiling.

"No use us standing around, staring at nothing. You all take a load off and we'll get down to business."

Fadilah shut the door. Just pulling out the chairs in the empty room made a racket.

"We got to hold hands. That's the way it's done."

We took hold of each other.

"For a man who done passed, you got some warm digits there, Mister Duke," she said.

"Okay. Now what?" said Doris.

"Calm down, honey. Now we got to breathe. In and out. Got to get it synced up."

I fell into a rhythm with Doris and Fadilah.

"You ain't breathing, Mister Duke."

"Don't really need to."

"You want to try?"

Duke made some snorting noises. "I don't think that's going to work," he said.

"Okay, we got to work around. Close your eyes. Shut your mouths. Stop your thinking. We gonna sit here 'til you do, so don't make it cost Mister Fatman any more than it got to. You all imagine that somebody hitting a switch."

The churning in my head slowed. I can't explain how it worked. *This is the next thing to death*, I thought. Then everything went black.

31. *Cosmos Don't Got Much Schedule*

"Charles. *Charles.*"

I was at the bottom of a well. The voice came from a long way up.

"Wha...?"

"Snap to, baby."

Doris slowly came into focus.

"When are we starting?"

"We're done. It's time to go."

"Why didn't you...?"

Doris put her face a few inches from mine and looked into my eyes. The rest of the room wobbled up and down. I focused on her eyes, the way you look out at the horizon if you're seasick. You try to pick a point that's steady.

Whether Doris was that point anymore I didn't know.

She's not a kid. She's showing some wear. Crows-feet, some loosening in the eyelids, sagging and bagging. Still. She looks at me and I know I've been seen. Tell me what I wouldn't do for her! I thought about Duke and his money — Doris's money now. I wished I could make it all disappear. What good would it do us?

Us?

Or her?

We had everything we needed. Cozy little roof over our heads. Quality grub. Wheels. Wine. The garden out back. What more did we want? What would fifty mil buy us but trouble? A bunch of good-time buddies with their hands out. Relatives appearing from out of the woodwork. The inevitable question about whether the money was hers or ours. A genius would give it all away, but has anybody ever been that smart?

"What happened?" I asked.

"You been gone on a trip," Fadilah said.

"I don't think I moved."

"A big trip to the blackness."

"That's it. A pinpoint of light and everything else was..."

"Nothing. Ain't that right?"

"I don't..."

"You had a lot of say about it. All you did. Regular altar call here. Speaking in tongues."

I looked at Duke. Usually he's got a glint in his eye. He knows something you don't. He knows a lot you don't. Now he seemed like he'd been smacked in the head with a two by four. Dazed. Swimming in his thoughts, which were I guess darker even than mine.

"What now? What did we say? What did you see?"

"I'm still figuring."

"How long is that going to take?" asked Doris. You can find more patient people, as I mentioned.

"We standing here at the corner of Living and Dead, and it ain't like the bus that comes by runs on a schedule, you know what I mean." Fadilah pulled her blouse back into place. She looked like she'd been wrestling in her clothes.

"I got things I seen, things I ain't seen, things I don't know yet what they mean."

"What?" said Duke. "For one fifty Fatman ought to be hearing something more definite. We're looking for direction here. I've got a schedule."

"You got a schedule, Mister Duke. The cosmos don't got much schedule. Whatever time it takes, that what it takes."

32. Head Gonna Explode

"Throw me a bone here, Fadilah," said Duke. "You say we were all jabbering. You must have some ideas."

"No point muddying the waters." Fadilah tucked in her blouse. She pulled her skirt back into place.

"When you plan on getting back to us?"

"When I make some sense outa this. You got a complicated case."

"What makes this any more complicated than anything else you got going?"

Fadilah rolled her eyes, which was an impressive procedure. Her pupils disappeared. "Most people, what they want to know is, will I be happy? Does my man love me? Am I gonna get better from this sickness or that? I tell them what they want to hear. Don't make much difference.

"What you got is a specific problem with a specific answer. Like, who put a knife in my back. And you got about a million people who maybe did it. No offense.

"So you come in here and lickety-split you want the truth. I got all three of you yappety-yapping. Don't know what to take serious and what to ignore.

"Picture I get is, nobody's behind you on the night of. Boom, you got a knife in your back. What am I supposed to make of that?"

Traces of spittle appeared now on Fadilah's lips. Her eyes bugged out. She began to shiver and sweat.

“Everybody wants to think the past is the past and the truth is the truth but there ain’t nobody who really knows what either of those things are for certain. Might as well all be a dream. Probably most of it is.

“I get this picture. Kids running this way and that, crazy on candy, screaming like banshees. I got all the things you saw that you don’t even know you saw. The things you maybe imagined and never saw.

“Then Mister Duke you in a tunnel of red that goes to black. Some characters looking down at you. Local figures. Bubble Man. That midget gal with the pipe. Mr. Flip Flop. Fatman himself.

“And you want me to make sense of this on a schedule? On a schedule?! Ain’t even nobody behind you far as I see and you got a knife in your back and you dead, dead, dead before you even hit the ground.

“Excuse me but yeah, I got some figuring to do, you don’t mind. I got a world of figuring I need to do cause ain’t none of this makes no kind of sense at all.”

Fadilah took a deep breath. A shudder went through her and her head dropped to the table.

"What now?" said Doris. "We call an ambulance?"

I put a finger on her neck and felt around for a pulse. "She's still breathing. She'll be okay."

"We're going to leave now," I said to her. "You get any ideas, give me a call."

She moaned and grunted. Her head rocked back and forth.

"It’s all part of the show," said Duke. "She’ll be fine."

The sleet had turned to snow. Big flakes fell. It was dark now. The train whooshed by. A single set of footprints marked the sidewalk.

"What now?" I said.

"I was living, I'd say let's go get a drink. But I show up in public, people are going to have questions. What about your place? We need a strategy."

"I thought this was our strategy. Consulting Fadilah."

"We need a better strategy."

"Obviously," said Doris.

33. Her Man Friday

"You want a drink?" I asked Doris.

"I want a bottle." She let her head fall back on the sofa.

I turned on the fire. Flame licked the fake log.

"I'm thinking whiskey. A little ice."

"How about nuts? Maybe some cheese? There's a baguette, right?"

Doris doesn't let much stand in the way of a meal. Or a snack. Why she's not the size of a piano I don't understand. She's got appetites, let me put it that way. I made up a plate, brought her a drink.

The whiskey was gone in a heartbeat. "Charles," she said. "What about another?"

"Sure, baby."

I needed some time to think anyway.

Everybody believes they want to hit the jackpot. Quit the job. Stop worrying about money. Blow it when you feel like it. Except that everything changes.

For instance, getting Doris another drink. I've gotten her a couple thousand drinks over the years. I've put meal after meal on the table. Truth is, Doris can barely fry an egg. Her idea of cooking is to start an argument with her ingredients. It all goes downhill from there. She wonders why the recipe insists on, say, milk. What would happen if you left it out? Who says water wouldn't be just as good? Then she puts the fruit of her labors on the table and is enraged. Why don't they build some flexibility into these so-called recipes, she wonders. What kind of fascist writes this crap? And so on.

Now that she's a multi-millionaire-in-waiting, what am I? Her Man Friday? She could hire a platoon of Top Chefs to fetch her bon-bons. A day ago she needed me. Now she doesn't. I love plying her with this and that. I love to watch her eyes widen as she hovers over my pico de gallo with a freshly fried and salted tortilla chip in her hand. Ole! Now I can't help but wonder. Am I a sucker? A replaceable sucker at that? Who's to say Brad Pitt won't be sniffing around in a couple weeks?

Okay, I thought. I'll ask her. You. Me. Duke's millions. How are we going to handle this? Your money? Our money? Are we in this together or what?

By the time I got back from the kitchen Duke had appeared. So much for that conversation.

35. Turn Off the Fire

The way it works is that Duke shows up in a corner when your back was turned. You don't see him come, you don't see him go. He settled on the sofa, which wasn't so easy, considering. He propped his elbows on his knees and leaned forward.

"I don't know about the fire," he said.

"What, too warm?"

"More the association. Brimstone and so forth."

"I can turn it off."

"I'd appreciate that."

"I'd get you a drink, but..."

"Save it. No point."

I tried to figure the look Doris was giving him. Couldn't.

"You want to start with the characters Fadilah named?" I asked.

"You got a better idea? Plus, it was your one fifty. Might as well pretend we're getting something for it."

"I say we scratch Mister Bubbles," Doris said.

"Who *is* Mister Bubbles?" Duke asked.

"One thing he isn't is a back-stabber. Local color. You go to a neighborhood meeting, it starts getting a little tense. You know, drug dealers versus vigilantes.

Prostitutes versus irate moms. He gets out his bubble pipe and blows bubbles. Ridiculous but distracting. He's all about keeping the peace. If he put a knife in your back, you're worse than your reputation."

"I was worse than my reputation."

"Still."

"Then what about the midget with the pipe?" I asked.

"I don't know she could reach that high," said Doris. "Unless she was on a ladder. Anyway, I know her."

"Another character?" Duke wondered.

"Same league as Mister Bubbles. But yeah. You might remember her from a few years back. Pimp beating one of his hookers on Victoria. Midget gal gets off the bus at University, sees what's going on. Pimp doesn't look twice at a midget smoking a pipe. She kicks him in the back of the knee with the Doc Martens she always wears. Drops him. Then kicks him in the head a couple dozen times until the cops show up. She might have got a medal except the use of force seemed excessive even to the cops. They did a nice write-up in *Women's Press*."

"Sounds like violent tendencies," said Duke. "I don't see that we should write her off."

"She looks rough, but she's a cream puff," Doris said. "She volunteered at the food shelf. The deal with the pimp, it pushed some buttons for her. Abuse issues. Her Doc Martens had a mind of their own, that's how she described it. Unless you spent your time punching out prostitutes, she wasn't coming after you."

"Who does that leave?" Duke asked.

"The sombrero dude."

"You know this guy too, right?"

"His family ran a bakery on University," I said. "Old school. Doughnuts, long-johns, bismarks, that kind of thing."

"Stop, Fatman," Duke said. "You're making me wish I was alive. I remember that place. When we were kids. Roly-poly German guy and his wife?"

"Yeah, yeah. She ran the register, he worked the back. Covered in flour. Carried the fresh doughnuts out on big steel trays. Your lucky day if you walked in when they were fresh from the grease."

"Winter days," said Duke. "The windows had a half inch of ice frozen to them. The smell of the place, Jesus. If you could put that in a bottle."

Duke tugged at his shirt collar. Something always seemed to be pinching or binding. "Tell me about the man in the hat."

34. *He Wore a Sombrero*

Re: what is normal?

Some rich old babe who totes a teacup yorkie in her purse, feeding it from the table at a three star restaurant, talking to it as if it were one of the family: is she not nuts?

Except that you cut the rich a few miles of slack. She might never have done purposeful work in her life, might be six generations removed from the robber baron who had the wit to make some dough, might all but have a tail at this stage of the game, yet you assume, because she pulled up in a BMW, that she is not smack out of her mind. If you are the head of a foundation with a budget to make, you solemnly nod your head as she trots out dizzy theories concerning this and that.

Different story for the man in the sombrero.

He was in his fifties by now, delicate, gangly, fresh-faced, with clear blue eyes that could just as well have opened a portal to outer space. He covered his face with a protective layer of zinc oxide. There were a lot of things out to get him. He needed protection.

We all saw him in the streets, running, running, running, no matter the season. Sure, a lot of people run every day. Not many of them run, however, in flip flops, overalls and a sombrero. When he passed me on the sidewalk I'd nod. "Yo, Edgar." Edgar Schlaminski.

"Fatman," he replied, as though he were checking me off a list. I didn't bother to ask why he was running. He was running from the things that were after him. There were a lot of them.

Decades ago, back when his parents were still alive and the bakery was a fixture on University, his father pulled me aside and said, "Fatman, maybe you talk to my Edgar?"

He handed me a fresh doughnut without giving it a thought. Handing out pastries was as natural to him as breathing.

The sugar dropped like snow on my jacket. "Sure," I said. "Of course. About what? Why? Not that it's a problem, but..."

I was maybe ten years older than Edgar. We knew each other but we weren't pals. Schlaminski the Elder shrugged. "Maybe he respect you. That's what I think. I think you are a substantial young man."

It's true, I was indeed substantial even then. Schlaminski balanced a platter of pastries in his hand. I pointed to a cake doughnut and raised an eyebrow. "Sure, sure," he said. "Eat!"

"You talk to Edgar about, ahhh..." He stopped.

I waited.

"Maybe you can fill me in a little more."

I finished the doughnut. I was young then. I could have eaten a couple dozen.

"He worries me, the boy. He is, what you say...?"

35. *A Wall of Scribbles*

Schlaminski the Elder wasn't a native speaker, but then Shakespeare might have found himself at a loss for words to describe Edgar.

"Just go talk to the boy," Schlaminski said at last. "Maybe you have an idea."

This was in the days before there was a therapist on every corner. We all knew Edgar was odd, but that struck us like any other fact. Sun comes up in the east, thunder follows lightning. The village eccentric? Every place had at least one.

"When?" I asked.

"Now?"

"Where is he?"

Schlaminski nodded toward the stairway. They lived above the bakery. "Here," he said, handing me the platter of pastries. "Take this."

I climbed the flour-dusted stairs.

The door was open. I stepped into a tidy parlor. Floral wallpaper. Doilies on the chairs. Violets blooming on a table near the window. Heat from the bakery ovens rose through a grate in the floor.

"Edgar?"

I heard him coughing in a room down the hall.

"Edgar, it's Fatman. I got doughnuts."

I finished another one. Edgar still hadn't appeared.

"You don't come out I'm going to eat all these doughnuts."

"I'm sick of doughnuts."

"Don't break my heart, Edgar."

"You finish them."

I gave that some thought. There were a dozen left. "You trying to kill me?"

"I'm trying to write. You're not helping."

"What you writing?"

He opened the door. Greasy hair hung over one eye. He was still in his pajamas. He looked like he hadn't slept in days and smelled like a hamper of dirty clothes.

"You know what I'm writing?"

I had a couple inches and a few dozen pounds on him, but he made me nervous.

"It's just a question."

"That's right."

"Okay. Come in."

He shut the door behind me and turned the lock. The walls were covered with shelves stacked with notebooks, each of them labeled with a pair of dates. Beginning and end.

"What you got going on here, Edgar?"

"A library. Here. Take a look." He reached up and grabbed a volume. He handed me the open notebook. The pages were filled with tiny cursive script.

"Go ahead. Read."

His handwriting looked like ants crawling across the page. Orderly but unintelligible.

"Maybe you ought to read it to me," I said. I handed the notebook back to him.

He took a couple steps toward the window, where the light was better. "December seven, nineteen seventy four, eight fourteen am, Pearl Harbor Day, I am looking out the window. On the street, a cat. Three gray birds on the wire. Newspaper blows down the

street. The bus stops. Eight sixteen am. Newspaper: survivor from the USS Arizona. Fly caught in spider web between the windows. Six people waiting for bus. Eight eighteen am. Radio from the ..."

"I think I get the idea, Edgar."

"It's my life."

"Everybody's life is sort of boring. Don't feel bad."

"I'm trying to remember. Nobody can remember everything."

"Why would you want to remember everything?"

"How many times you think you're going to live, Fatman?"

"Once will probably have to be enough."

"What's the point if you forget it all?"

"Nobody forgets it all. The interesting stuff you remember."

"So you think."

"And if you forget...?"

"You might as well not be alive."

"You're writing every bit of trivia down, you might as well not be alive. You could go out, do something worth remembering. Pick up a girl. Have a beer. Get a decent meal. Write about that. A few sentences, you're in, you're out, you're ready for the next thing. The next real thing."

"You're saying this isn't real?"

"Maybe it's not so meaningful."

"Who's to say what's meaningful?"

"Yeah, okay, you're right. If it's meaningful to you, sure, scribble away. But you're worrying people. Your dad. He sent me up here. He wants me to do something."

"You're doing something. Good. It's meaningful?"

"No. It seems pointless."

"It is."

"Okay."

I still had the tray of doughnuts in my hand. I broke off a piece of a doughnut covered in powdered sugar. Schlaminski was a genius; his pastries were like a drug.

"Go ahead, Edgar, at least have a doughnut. You're not going to pick up girls or hang around in bars, treat yourself to a doughnut anyway. Your old man, he's the Leonard Bernstein of doughnuts. Let's show a little respect. By the way, you got any milk?"

"Leave me alone." He put back his notebook. Edgar sat on his bed. He pulled his knees up to his chin and buried his face.

"So, you had a good chat?" his father asked later.

"We talked."

"You talked some sense at the boy?"

"I tried."

"And..."

"He's not so interested in sense."

Schlaminski tugged at his nose, which wasn't a small job. "He kills my heart, this boy. Are we put on Earth for a purpose? If we are, what is his purpose? Can you tell me that, Fatman?"

"If I were that smart I'd be rich," I said.

37. I'm Not that Kind of Snot Bag

"And the night I croaked, Edgar was there?" Duke said.

"He went running past."

"He doesn't really run," Doris added. "It's more a shuffle. The flip flops."

"The sombrero doesn't help either."

"You think somebody was wearing an Edgar costume?" Doris asked. "Mean, but funny, sort of."

"Definitely an inside joke."

"Trouble is, I don't see why he'd have it in for me," Duke said. "Except for what you said, I got no idea who he is."

"I don't know Edgar needs a reason. Not the way you or I might need a reason."

"Maybe we should make a housecall," Duke said. "The personal approach, that could shake out the truth. Especially when the corpse asking the questions is the guy you killed."

"Innocent until proven guilty, right?" I asked.

"Technically, sure. But who's not guilty?" Duke laughed, which set loose an odor, something like the smell of a freshly-turned dirt.

"For an idea, you got some odd smells coming off you, Duke," I said.

"What isn't complicated?"

"You know where he lives?" Doris asked.

"Same place. He kept the building after his parents died. Rents out the ground level to a nail salon. He's still upstairs."

"I'll meet you there."

"You need the address?"

"Don't worry. I'll find it."

39. Not that Kind of Snot Bag

Doris got behind the wheel. It's easier on me to let her drive. Not easier on the rest of the world, since she's got a lead foot and a heavy hand with the horn. Generally speaking, you are not driving fast enough if Doris is on the road. Her language as she's strangling the steering wheel is, let's say, colorful.

"You think Edgar's the guy?" Doris wondered. "Jesus, these lights last forever," she muttered. The train sped past. It ate her up to see other people get places while we stood still.

"Could be. I doubt it. Not much cause, considering all the effect."

"But as you said, no telling what seems like a reason to Edgar."

"I don't mind the world making no sense. But as a story it doesn't work."

"We're going to die before this light changes." She made the left against the red.

We shot down University Avenue.

I don't bother to comment.

With me, a lot goes unsaid. If there's a bush, I beat around it.

"You feel like you won the lottery?" I asked.

"Do I feel different? Is that what you're asking, Charles?"

"A lot could be different. You don't need to work anymore."

"I need the money in hand before I quit my job."

"You could be living on Summit Avenue."

"I don't know I'm that kind of snot bag, honey. Why complicate what doesn't need to be complicated? All of a sudden it's the pool boy, the cleaning lady, the gardener, the cook. You might as well be coaching a basketball team."

"Lots of people going to be sniffing around." I tried to sound casual. Something caught in my throat.

"Charles. What are you getting at?"

"I'm wondering. Ever since we've been together, people ask, what's she doing with him? Sure, I joke about it. But it gets to me. And now?"

She didn't answer as quickly as I wanted. I could hear some grinding of the mental gears.

Doris turned onto St. Albans to park since all the slots on University got whacked when they put in the train. "Oh, Charles," she said finally. "It's only money."

Given it was maybe fifty million bucks, I did not figure *only* was a word that necessarily applied.

38. Ringing Edgar's Bell

The snow and sleet that covered the sidewalks glinted under the street lights. If you didn't mind six months of cold or filthy, frozen slush piled beside the sidewalk, then the place had its charms. The sharp smell of acetone from the nail salon drifted into the street. Beside the door leading to the upstairs apartment was a hand-lettered card in a brass frame that read:

Edgar Schlaminski

Consultant

Mnemonic Services

Doris stabbed the buzzer with a gloved finger. We waited. She punched it again.

"Who is it?" Edgar called.

"It's Fatman, Edgar. You remember me?"

"And Doris. You know. Red hair. I used to come in the bakery. Your dad called me Firecracker."

Edgar opened the door as far as the security chain allowed. He peered around the door's edge.

"Fatman," he said. "I don't get so many visitors."

"If you make them stand on the street and talk through a crack in the door I can see why."

"You want to come in?"

"It has to be warmer in there," Doris said.

He opened the door.

"Maybe you've got a cup of coffee?" Doris tucked her hands under her crossed arms.

Edgar turned and walked up the stairs. We followed.

A trail ran through the dust on the steps. Mother Schlaminski would die again if she had to see this. Edgar held open the door for us at the top of the stairs.

Except for the hygiene level, the place was unchanged. Same fussy wallpaper, same doilies on the arm chairs. Edgar's diaries had escaped from his room and now covered the living room walls as well.

"You get much company, Edgar?"

For that I got a what-the-hell-are-you-even-talking-about look.

Before Edgar could reply, Duke walked in the door.

"Who are you?" Edgar said. "How did you get in?"

"You don't know who I am?" Duke said. "You sure about that?"

"Why should I know who you are? You're one more guy in a suit."

Duke turned around to show him his back. "Unlike most guys in a suit, I also got a knife in my back."

"Halloween is over."

"Maybe. But this isn't a costume. It's a permanent condition. Go ahead. Give it a jiggle."

Duke edged toward Edgar, knife handle first. "Go on," he said. "No need to be shy."

"Let's not start on that again," I said to Duke.

"Just a little one. Go on."

Edgar grabbed the handle and gave it a gentle shake.

"Come on, Edgar, put some muscle in it."

When he did, Duke groaned.

"Okay," I said. "That's enough. Jesus."

"What's your problem, Fatman?"

"I thought you were on a schedule."

"As far as I can tell, it's the one pleasure I've got left."

"Nonetheless. How about if we get down to business?"

"Edgar," said Duke. "Let me explain my problem. Somebody stuck this knife in me last night. Left me dead on Fatman's stoop. You with me so far?"

"I wish I was. Usually people say I'm the crazy one."

39. *You Can Take Suspicion Too Far*

"The knife. Seems real. Right?" said Duke.

"Maybe it's on some kind of harness. You got it strapped on."

"You're suspicious. I like that. If I still had a practice I'd get you on investigations. Your average guy, he believes everything you tell him."

"Give him a choice, your average guy will lie to you just for fun. Professionally speaking," Doris said.

"Doris is in a tough racket," Duke told Edgar. "Logistics. Collections. She's a sweetheart really."

"Your average guy lies for fun," Doris said again.

"Anyway, we're getting off the point. Which is, for starters, I'm dead. Go ahead. Poke around," Duke said, stretching his neck. "See if you can find a pulse."

Edgar pushed a couple fingers up against Duke's neck, moving them around when he came up with a blank.

"Nothing. Am I right?"

"Maybe you're some kind of yoga master. You can control this stuff."

"I like a suspicious guy, Edgar, but you can take it too far. Beyond a point it can get in your way. Try this. Look into my eyes. Take a good hard look."

Edgar did as he was told.

"Those look like the eyes of a living person? Something there. Or not there. The spark of life. You see yourself alive in the eyes of others. Isn't that how it works? But you look into my eyes and what do you see?"

"I don't know," said Edgar.

"You see I'm dead. You feel it in your bones."

"Okay. Let's say you're dead."

"While we're at it, let's get back to the fact that somebody killed me."

"Why would they do that?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out."

"You've got enemies? You owe people money?"

"People owe me money. And sure, I got enemies. Anybody who's been alive ought to have a few. I got a lot. I was really alive."

"I don't think I have enemies."

"That's not our problem right now, Edgar. My problem — our problem — is, somebody wanted to kill me."

"I don't see why this is my problem."

"Normally it wouldn't be. But we got reports, Edgar."

"Reports?"

"Reports that you were in the vicinity. In the area where I got stabbed. People saw you running by."

"How did they know it was me?"

"A guy in overalls, flip flops a sombrero. Sound like you?"

"That could describe a lot of people."

"Where? Cancun?"

"Actually, you don't see that many sombreros in Mexico," said Doris. "Remember when we were there, Charles?"

"I think we're getting distracted, babe."

"Back to the basics," said Duke. "Halloween. You were out. Is that right, Edgar?"

"Okay. I was out."

"Running."

"More of a jog."

"Jogging. So you left your house and you turned which way?"

"Don't you have to read me my rights?"

"Do I look like a cop? I'm not even alive, for Christ's sake. I'm just trying to get some facts here."

"I don't have to talk to you."

"That's true, Edgar. You don't have to talk to me. But if you don't I have other resources."

"What do you mean?" He looked at me and then Doris, as if we could help him.

"Even if you're not totally accepting the fact that I'm dead, which I am, but anyway, the dead have powers."

"You keep saying that."

"I'm asking you as a consideration, an act of courtesy. Instead of busting directly into your brain."

40. He's Got Habits

"Busting into my brain?" said Edgar. Duke got his attention with that one. "What do you mean?"

"I don't have to ask. That's what I mean."

"Really?" I said. I'm not ashamed of my thoughts. At least not all of them. Sure, some aren't fit for public consumption. There are things I wouldn't tell you to your face. "You can read people's minds?"

Duke gave me a stern look. "For the purposes of our conversation now, let's say that's true." He turned to Edgar. "Don't make me do things I don't want to do."

"Okay. Okay. Halloween. Same as usual. Down to the street. Turn right. Past the bank. Past the fire station. Down to Lex, another right. Over the bridge, right on Front, along the cemetery. Through the gate."

"You run through the cemetery?"

"A little creepy," Doris said.

"Nobody bothers you. I take a couple laps, then go back toward the tracks."

"The railroad?"

"There's a hole in the fence. Then through the mall."

"What do the guys at the mosque make of that?"

"You got a problem with the Muslims?"

"None at all. So then..."

"Yeah, Down Milton, turn on Charles."

"Past Fatman's house. That's what you're saying."

"I got habits."

"Obsessions?"

"I thought you were a lawyer."

"Was."

"Not a psychiatrist."

"Excuse me. I'm wondering who stuck a knife in my back."

"You're a jerk but I didn't do it."

"You still keep your diaries, Edgar?" I asked.

He gestured at the notebooks that snaked around the room. "What does it look like?"

"Why don't you get out the entry for Halloween?"

"Those are my private thoughts."

"You showed me once before. You remember that? It wasn't so private. You did this. You did that. This or that happened."

"Then you'll leave?"

"Sure we will," said Duke. "Sure. We're not accusing you of anything. It's more like we're eliminating suspects."

"There's a difference?"

"Jesus, Edgar, just get the book, okay?" Duke snapped.

41. Let's Get that Creep Out of Here

I followed Edgar as he shuffled down the hall to retrieve his diary. We passed the bedroom that his parents had occupied. The bed was made. Lace curtains hung in the window. A lamp on the bedside table put out a low-watt glow. It was like the room where Tolstoy died, kept untouched as a museum. Old man Schlaminski went first, dead of a clogged up heart. A broken heart took Mother Schlaminski a couple months later. Her hair brushes and some bottles of cheap perfume were arranged on the dresser.

Edgar caught me at the doorway.

"What you doing, Fatman?"

"You mom and dad, they were decent people, Edgar. I was just thinking that. You were lucky you had them as long as you did."

What was going on behind those blue eyes I have no idea. I could have been looking into a hole cut in a frozen lake.

"Let's go read this and get that creep out of here," Edgar said.

We headed back to the parlor.

Duke and Doris were arranged hip to hip on the sofa.

He could have been a school kid standing ahead of the class. He put his heels together and held the book out ahead of his face. He squirmed without moving his feet..

"You want the whole day?"

"How many pages is that?" Duke asked.

"Twenty?"

"How about the evening hours, say eight through nine?"

Edgar flipped through the pages. "I'm just guessing. I don't write by the hour."

"Just give me something here, Edgar. Unless you'd rather I read it myself."

He cleared his throat. "Night. Moon. Sliver. Leaves dead underfoot. Step step step. Monsters in the street."

"What?" said Duke.

"Also, angels. Pirates. Clowns. Ghosts. Candy on the sidewalk. Kids. Kids. Smash. Pumpkin. Candles. The smell. Fire from burning leaves. Home. Up the steps. One two three four..."

Edgar went on in this vein. A litany of the banal.

"Stop," Duke said finally. "Sorry Edgar. I run out of steam easy. A lot of people say that about me. No patience. You were just out jogging around."

"That's what I said."

"Another day. Same as usual."

"They're all the same."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Don't be. I'm not."

Duke put his hands on his knees and pushed himself upright. "Have a good night, Edgar."

"What's next?" Doris said.

44. Night One with Doris

Doris and I stood alone on University Avenue. Duke was there and then he wasn't.

"How does he do that?" Doris wondered.

"He's not the only guy who isn't here," I said.

Used to be that Frogtown's streets were occupied. Not by people you wanted to know, unless you were a crack head, a dealer, a prostitute or a john. Then the bottom fell out of that economy. The dealers who weren't imprisoned either wised up, wore out or died. Ditto for the crack heads. Now the light rail track forms a wall between one side of the street and the other. You can fire a cannon down the sidewalk and not run much risk of hitting anyone. The emptiness leaves you wondering if you missed the memo about the end of the world.

The breeze picked up as the snow and sleet stopped. Snow drifted down the empty street. Awnings flapped. My nose, which is not a delicate instrument, felt like it was getting cut off my face by the wind.

"What are we doing?" I asked Doris.

"I don't know. Waiting for Duke?"

"We don't have to wait here. He can show up wherever."

We headed back to the car. Doris slipped her arm through mine. Her touch reminded me of the simple old days, back before she was an heiress in waiting.

Have I mentioned how we met?

There's a bar down the street from my place. You walk into the joint and every head turns. This is the old white guard, people who have watched the waves of immigrants crash on Frogtown's shore. First it was the Vietnamese, then the Hmong, then the Africans, the Somalis and Ethiopians, all of them taking their turn to open restaurants, clothing stores, tailor shops, nail salons, groceries. Next it will be the Iraqis and the Afghans, and who knows after that. All of them with their languages, their garb, their customs which you now have the opportunity to contemplate.

No problem! You ask me, all men are brothers. I've had some entertaining nights in the Hmong bar on Dale, bending elbows with Blong, Chou, Bee and the rest of the guys. Most of them barely crack five feet, and where they put the alcohol is anybody's guess. They approach drinking the way they approach work. They don't leave the job half done.

I'm getting off the point here.

On the night I met Doris I walked into the the bar down the street, endured the inevitable gawking and glaring, grabbed a stool, arranged my girth, and motioned for a beer.

43. So Enticing. So Out of Place

The bartender — need I say? — was a white guy who looked like he and sunlight had no real relationship. He filled a glass and set it down before me wordlessly.

I noticed a woman who was running the pool table. Everyone noticed the woman running the pool table. Doris, of course. There was a lot stuffed into that package.

The hair: a flame-colored tangle. You could lose a couple hands in there. The eyes: you know they're sizing you up, sorting out fools in less time than it takes to blink. The lips: like plumped up pillows on a well-made bed. The overall effect being one of mischief, a short fuse, trouble come calling in a couple dozen different ways.

Sports babble came from the televisions. The ambience was your basic sullen drunkedness. Not much in the way of idle chatter. From the pool table: Tick. Click. Whack! Doris did not have a delicate touch.

The argument started the way these things do. People say alcohol is the cause. In my opinion it goes back farther than that. What brings you to a place like the world's unfriendliest bar? Loneliness plus laziness. You're sick of listening to the clock tick at home. You're short on the ambition that would take you to a place with music, or art, or dance. To disguise the lame nature of your choice, a beer. Why not one more? Maybe a

game. Pool will do. A quarter on the table. Grab a cue. Chalk. Wait. One more beer. Finally, you're on.

And now you're up against a female who should not be near such a place. To digress again, she's like the police decoys who used to work the neighborhood in john stings. So nicely put together. So enticing. So out of place. Is it your lucky day, Mister John, or are you a moron to believe it can be so? The answer being B, not A. A lot of men get that wrong.

Thus Doris. I didn't know her name then.

Her just-beaten opponent skulked off toward the bar. Next up! This one wore a stained t-shirt with ripped off sleeves. Unlaced work boots. A homemade tattoo on his bicep that was hard to make out. Maybe a human skull, maybe a baked potato.

"Go ahead," she said. "Break."

46.

Tick. Click. Whack! An explosion.

Brute strength: there's a lot to be said for it if you need to move a ton of bricks. If you want to put a ball in a little hole, however, there are other strategies.

Thonk, thonk, thonk. Doris ran the table, put away the eight ball, batted an eye and said, "Next up."

"One more," her opponent said.

"What's your name?" Doris asked.

"Jimmy."

She looked him over. It took a while. "Jimmy, we got people in line here," she said at last.

"One more won't kill anyone." He offered a menacing grin at a kid leaning against the wall with a cue stick in his hand.

The kid shrugged. "I got time."

"Okay," Doris said.

Rack, break, boom, nothing, Doris: thonk thonk thonk. The same.

"Okay," said Doris. "Next up."

"One more."

"Jimmy. I think you're done."

"I'm not done until I say I'm done."

"I seriously doubt that."

"No one ever taught you how to mind your tongue?"

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. I don't think I heard you."

"I said, you got a lot of attitude for such a little thing."

"I'm trying to understand. Is that a threat?"

"I'm telling you what's on my mind. You feel threatened, that's not my problem."

Most people don't confront a bully, especially one the size of a refrigerator.

I suppose that explains why Jimmy was caught so flat-footed.

Doris clobbered Jimmy above the ear with the heavy end of the cue. Probably Mickey Mantle swung a bat harder. But that was like making a distinction between getting hit by a truck and hit by a train. Jimmy, briefly, put on a stunned expression. Then blood began to spout. His eyes rolled back.

After Jimmy hit the ground, Doris turned to the bartender. "You want to call the cops?" she said.

"I think I'll call his wife."

"That's better or worse?"

"Hard to say."

"You still want to play?"

The kid with the cue stick had to think about that.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Sure, let's play. I bet you've got a better attitude than Jimmy."

"I sure do, ma'am."

"You can call me Doris," she replied.

She let him take a few shots, chatted him up a bit, pretended it was a game. It wasn't, but still. She was nice of her to pretend.

45. She Likes a Big Man

Jimmy snorted now and then. Somebody asked, "You think we should call an ambulance? That's a lot of blood."

"You get that with your head wound," the bartender said. "His old lady'll clean him up good enough."

"Should we move him at least?"

"He's out of the way where he is."

We all went back to doing what we had been doing. Drinking. Mostly not talking to each other. I glanced Jimmy. He blinked, then swatted at his pocket and made to reach inside it.

What he had in there I had no idea. Nothing, maybe.

I slid off my stool, walked over to him, put a foot on his wrist and let my weight settle on it.

My weight, as I've mentioned a time or two now, is not inconsiderable. I was not surprised to feel a bone snap beneath my foot.

I suppose this was painful. Injury stacked atop insult and all of that. He growled, cursed and passed out again.

Doris noticed. "You've got good balance for a big man," she said.

"He was going for his pocket."

"If you say so," she said. "Thanks."

I stood there for a while, watching her with Jimmy's arm beneath my foot.

Doris went back to the pool table. Eventually Jimmy's wife appeared, along with a wiry young man who looked like he knew something about crystal meth.

"Jimmy," she said. "Can you hear me?"

He groaned.

"I brought Wade along. We're going to take you home."

He groaned again.

They got him on his feet and dragged him out the door.

Doris sat down next to me. "Let me buy you a drink," she said. "For services rendered."

A while later I said, "Let me buy you one. For the show."

When she asked I gave her the name on my birth certificate.

"Charles," she said. "Charles. I like a big man, Charles."

"Lucky for me," I said.

No need to go into the details concerning the rest of that night. Let me say that the memory is a treasure, a wonderment, and proof of God's mercy and kindness. This world may not be just, but sometimes, I must admit, we get more than we necessarily deserve.

46. You Ought to Knock

Uh. A little distracted there. The simple old days, when we minded our own business in my Frogtown love shack. I cooked what she wanted, when she wanted it. She needed a drink? Bottoms up! Not to mention the oil dribbled on her little piggies, rubbed between her toes, spread over the soles of her feet, this going on for hours, until she mumbled, "You can stop, baby. Really."

And now...

The future.

Best not to think about that.

Try not to.

Impossible.

I parked the car, opened Doris's door. She said, "What I want is some sleep."

"Let's get inside. Maybe a little taste of Glenlivet."

"Bed is enough for me."

I opened the door. Duke was already sitting at the kitchen table.

"You take the scenic route?" he asked.

"Duke," I said. "I know it's been rough. The murder. The stress. Clock ticking and all of that. But this is our home. You ought to knock."

"*Tu casa es mi casa*, right?"

"It's the other way around."

"A technicality. Plus time's wasting. I don't have forever. I had seventy-two hours. Now it's not even forty-eight."

"I got to go to work tomorrow. Which means I need some sleep," said Doris.

"You never have to work again. Call in sick. Quit. Buy the company. None of it matters," said Duke. "You're free."

"I'm not free until I'm free. I don't go to work, I don't get paid. I know that check is coming. All these millions, so far it's just talk."

Doris gave me a peck on the top of the head. "'Night, Charles," she said. "You ought to get some sleep, too. You can't think if you don't sleep."

She left us alone in the kitchen.

"She's a hard-headed woman, Fatman. Not entirely reasonable."

"You want to pick your battles."

We thought about that for a while.

"So, scratch Edgar," I said.

"Why would we do that?"

"Were you listening to him? That catalogue of non-events. ' Smell of candles. Fire of leaves.' All the rest of it. Unless you're saying he bored you to death and the knife was just the frosting on the cake."

"What I'm saying is, who tells the truth? That's what he told us. What he actually did, we don't know."

"Why would he stab you? Name a single reason."

"Because I'm successful and he's in some loony tunes library of his own creation. Because I had everything I ever wanted and he's had nothing he ever wanted. Because he sits in his dead parent's house while I drive a BMW and wear Italian suits. Jesus, some days I could have killed myself. You know how we grew up. Lard and sugar sandwiches, for Christ's sake. Patches on our pants. Some days I looked in the mirror and asked, Who is that jerk? The answer being, a different guy. A new man. I was Edgar, I could stick a knife in my back. No problem."

"Where do we go with that?"

"Without any evidence, nowhere. I'm hypothesizing now. I'm constructing a possible reality. In the light of what we know. Though we're basically in the dark."

"What's our next move?"

"Why don't we talk to Roscoe?"

47. No Pulse? No Problem!

"You want to get in the car or you want to appear?" I asked Duke.

"You know where Roscoe is?"

"Maybe his house. If he's working, who knows."

"Let's try the house. I'll ride with you. We can chat. You got bucket seats in this heap, right?"

"It's a Volvo. Luxury automobile."

"Yeah, back when? Nineteen ninety seven?"

"Ninety six. It's dependable."

"Fatman. Tell me this. What in life is truly dependable?"

"Okay, most of the time it works."

"You say so."

Duke climbed in. He arranged himself so that the knife handle was in the space between the two seats. His head ended up on my shoulder.

"Like I'm on a high school date," I said.

"Cozy." Duke put his hand on my thigh. "You don't mind if I..."

I slapped his hand. It felt like a piece of putty.

He laughed. Hollow sounding, but a laugh. "Ha. Can still get a rise out of the Fatman."

I turned on Sherburne Avenue. Roscoe's house was west of Dale, behind the bank. "Aren't cops supposed to live in the suburbs?" Duke asked. "A little rough here."

"His parents' house. Same deal as Edgar. They died, left him the place. Been here all his life. Can't imagine living anywhere else is what he says."

"It takes that much imagination?"

"For Roscoe, yeah. He's still got his mother's Hümme collection on the sideboard. All those big-eyed porcelain kids."

"No wife?"

"Too much of a momma's boy. Couldn't find a woman who wanted to compete."

"This a neighborhood or a nuthouse?" Duke said.

"Little of both."

The dusting of snow buried most of the litter. Street light reflected from the snow stuck to the bare tree branches. Kids had worn away the sod in most of the yards, leaving a patch of dirt behind chainlink fences. But now, briefly, the yards were spotless, white. You don't mind navigating sidewalks that some people are too lazy to shovel, you could say this is the best time of the year. Nobody sitting on the curb, nursing a forty. Too cold to stand around arguing in the street. The illusion of tranquility.

I pulled up outside Roscoe's house. His dad worked at the rail yard that used to be at Minnehaha and Dale. The shops got ripped down decades ago, but the little houses the workers built for themselves are still standing, sort of.

A light shone behind Roscoe's front window. Roscoe had shoveled his sidewalk, which made him an overachiever on his block.

"What you think?"

"He's home," Duke said.

"You're sure?"

"I know."

"Okay. So what's our plan?"

"Who says we need a plan? We knock on the door. We invite ourselves in. Roscoe gets us a drink because that's the kind of guy he is. We sit on the couch. Talk about whatever. Wait for him to ask, 'So what brings you boys by?' Or words to that effect."

"Yeah, he might have some questions about what brings you by. Considering the mortality issue."

"So far, Fatman, people are understanding. They're accepting of the dead from what I can tell."

"You give people a chance, they get used to anything."

I turned off the engine. We knocked on Roscoe's door.

48. *The Dead Are on a Schedule*

"So, Halloween wasn't enough? You celebrating Day of the Dead now, Fatman?" Roscoe looked boozy and bleary. His t-shirt could have used some bleach. "Good costume on your buddy," he said.

"No costume, Roscoe. It's me, Duke. In the flesh. Sort of."

"Right. And I'm Alan Funt. Duke is dead. Maybe you should think twice, dissing the deceased."

"Roscoe. You're supposed to be observant. This look like a mask? I'm not Duke, who the hell am I?"

"You got your three basic types of old white guys. Your skinny guys with the gray beard. Your fat guys in Carhartts and baseball caps. Your fat guys in suits. You, pal, are category three. Fat white guy in suit."

"Jesus, Roscoe, wipe the alcohol out of your eyes. Take a look."

He struggled to focus. "You ought to wear a suit, Fatman. You're screwing up my categories."

"It's Duke, Roscoe." To Duke I said, "Maybe you should show him the knife."

Duke sighed. "The Doubting Thomas maneuver. Okay. If I must."

Duke turned around.

Roscoe squinted at the blade. "I don't have my glasses," he said.

"Go ahead, give it a tug. You're a professional. You know something about stabbings, right?"

"I'm a cop. I'm not the coroner."

"Still. Give it a wiggle."

Roscoe grabbed the handle. "Yeah, this looks like your knife, Fatman. Bad luck it ended up where it did. Lot of explaining ahead of you."

"How much you been drinking, Roscoe?" I asked.

"A little. Not that much."

"Takes the edge off?"

"I got a lot of edge."

"Maybe. But you got a dead guy in your foyer. You're taking it pretty well."

"What am I supposed to do? Get out the garlic and crucifix? Things are what they are."

"I can work with that," Duke said.

"You might as well sit down," Roscoe said. "What you want? Beer? Wine? Something serious?"

"Okay, beer," I said.

"What about your pal?"

"Really, Roscoe. It's Duke. Call me by my name."

"Sure buddy. What you having?"

"Nothing. Since I've been dead, nothing. No eating. No drinking. No breathing. Nothing."

"Cheap date, right, Fatman? Come in the kitchen. No point walking back and forth."

"When your parents pass, Roscoe?" I asked.

"My mom, nineteen seventy nine. The old man six months later. Broken heart."

"Looks like you didn't change a thing."

"No reason," he said. "It works."

It did, if you were a historical re-enactor. Fluorescent fixture on the ceiling. Formica. Linoleum. Harvest gold stove and refrigerator. Dark stained wood cabinets. Microwave the size of a steamer trunk.

"Takes me back," I said.

"The good old days. Back when dead guys stayed dead."

Roscoe handed me a can of Hamm's.

"They still make this?"

"Sure they make it."

Duke drummed his fingers on the table.

"What," said Roscoe. "You dead guys got a schedule?"

"Truth is, yeah, we do."

49. *Box Full of Grievance*

"I had seventy two hours to figure out who killed me," Duke told Roscoe. "Right now, I got..." He pushed back his French cuff to check his Rolex. The hands were locked in place at eight forty seven — the time he got stabbed.

"You got the time?" Duke asked.

Roscoe glanced at the clock on the stove. "Eleven oh five."

"Less than forty two hours."

"Then what?"

"Down into the underworld."

"Tough gig," said Roscoe. "Nobody happy down there. Considering what a mess they make when they get out. That psychic tossed from the highrise. The Colonel stuck to the dining room table with his sword."

"You're forgetting Ivan," I said.

"Oh, yeah, the mechanic. The one got your car dropped on him."

"Took forever to get the car back from impound."

"Evidence." He shrugged. "That's the way it goes. You get caught up in the mess, tough luck for you."

"Not that it did any good. Ivan squashed. Nobody charged."

"Somebody wanted to settle a score."

"Who doesn't?" said Duke.

Roscoe emptied his glass. "I got a couple dozen scores I wouldn't mind settling."

"You want that to be the only thing on your mind when you open your eyes in the morning?"

"Who says it's not?"

"You think it's going to make you happy, getting even. It's what the lawyer racket is all about. Then you win your case, you settle your score, somebody goes to jail, maybe you get a suitcase full of money. You think that makes people happy?"

"More or less. From what I can tell. Good and evil, sorted out, everything in its place. Same with the cop business, except for the money."

"You want to know the truth, Roscoe? It's a box in everybody's head that needs to be filled. The grievance box. Soon as you empty it out, people fill it up again. People love to feel aggrieved. They can't get enough of it."

"Death didn't brighten you up, pal."

"You don't have to die to notice this. I was part of the grievance industrial complex. The lawyers, the judges, the investigators, the court reporters, the clerks and law librarians, the paralegals, the BMW sales guys."

"The BMW salesmen?"

"Where would they be without lawyers?"

"They're not living off cops."

"My point is, justice and happiness are not the same thing."

"You came all the way back from the dead to tell me that?"

"It's not that far. And no. I got to figure out who killed me."

"I thought you weren't interested in justice."

"I'm interest is not making the underworld my permanent address."

50. Top Guy in the Afterlife?

"Maybe it's a trap," Roscoe said. "Maybe the point isn't to figure out who did you in."

"You're a cop. I was a lawyer. The truth sets you free, right? Though I've got my doubts."

"That's what I'm talking about. What if who killed you is irrelevant? You're dead anyway, right? You less dead if you figure out who stuck Fatman's knife in your back?"

"Hold on," I said. "We don't know it's my knife. It's a knife like some knives I happen to own."

"And you're missing one, right? Kind of an odd coincidence, wouldn't you say?"

"Odd stuff happens every day."

"Yeah, maybe the knife fairy has a special treasure chest of Wüsthofs and she sprinkles them around. One just happened to end up in Duke's back."

"This is why people hate cops, Roscoe. It's the cynicism."

"Goes with the job."

He grabbed the bottle of Beam from the table and poured himself four fingers. "As I was saying, suppose you forget about who done you wrong? You're dead. You got some time on Earth, who knows why. Maybe you should consider your life. Set some things right. Finding the guilty, hunting them down, it's a lot of negative energy."

"Who am I talking to here? Timothy Leary? You sure that's just bourbon?"

"Have it your way. Why do you think you escape the underworld if you find the guy who did you? You get a memo or what?"

"You know some things after the lights go out. Why? That I don't know. But I know. Is it any crazier than anything else? You're nothing. You're born. All of a sudden you got needs, desires, opinions. Consciousness, more or less. Depending. And then, whamo, nothing again. The strangeness of it, Roscoe. That's what I'm talking about. Why not the underworld? Why shouldn't there be a way to escape it?"

Roscoe knocked back half his bourbon. "Maybe the point of finding who shanked you is to forgive him or her. Why not eliminate the unnecessary work? You don't need to know who did it to make your peace. Put out an all-points forgiveness."

Duke seemed to consider this. He squirmed in his chair, then tugged at his lapels to rearrange his suit.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"You mind giving that handle a little shake, Fatman. I doesn't feel right."

"Since when does a knife in your back feel right?" Roscoe asked.

I sighed. Twist, gasp, groan. "How's that?" I asked.

"Just a little more."

"Let me get a camera," Roscoe said. "Looks like a new niche for the gay porn sites."

"Okay. Thanks, Fatman. Someday you'll be dead, Roscoe."

"No argument there."

Duke pulled himself up straight in his chair. He fixed Roscoe with those not-quite-living eyes of his. He bored in as if he could look inside Roscoe's skull. Back when Duke was alive this was an intimidating move. Now that he was dead it was something else again.

"Roscoe," he said at last. "I wonder if you've got anything else to tell me?"

51. It's nothing personal. Well, actually, it is.

"What you mean, do I got something else to tell you," said Roscoe. "What else you think I got to say?"

Roscoe did a good imitation of sobriety. He slurred his words only slightly.

"Excuse me, Roscoe. Believe me, it's nothing personal." Duke paused. "Well, it is. You get stabbed, you do take it personally. What I'm saying is, I can understand."

"Understand what?"

"Some days, I could have murdered myself."

"I don't get this."

"Of course you don't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you're not me. You get up in the morning, you look in the mirror, what you see?"

"A guy who needs a shave. A guy who needs more sleep."

"A guy who grew up to be a cop. You wanted to be a cop, what, all your life?"

"Sure. My dad was a cop. My uncle was a cop. Half the family, cops."

"Your reach, your grasp, same thing."

"I suppose."

"No real contradiction between how you were raised and what you became."

"What I just said. The family business. Except we didn't own it."

"Lucky for you. It would be you paying a settlement every time some knucklehead gets thumped by the coppers."

"I'll say."

"But me. Different deal. The old man was a garbage hauler."

"Sure. I remember."

"Honest work, somebody's got to do it, so on and so forth. Still. He gets home on a summer day, it's not like he's been bathing in Chanel Number Five. Garbage juice. You get splashed, you're a human landfill. The crap he'd bring home. 'Too good to throw away! Can't believe the things people toss!' The backyard looked like a lunatic hoarder had taken over. Which was the shape of things. Nuts. Or to be slightly more understanding, the product of his environment. Grew up poor. Died poor. Except he had so many possessions we needed three thirty-yard dumpsters to settle his estate."

"This isn't news, Duke. I remember."

"Sure." Duke closed his eyes. I figured he was wallowing in the past.

When his eyes stayed closed I started to wonder.

"Duke!" I said. "You still with us?"

Roscoe grabbed his shoulder and shook him.

"What?" Duke said. His eyes popped open. They didn't focus at first.

"Your dad. Your old house," I said.

"Oh yeah. You haven't had a reverie until you're dead and have a reverie. Wow."

"I can wait," I said.

"How you wanted to kill yourself, you were saying," said Roscoe. "I don't get it. What you got to be unhappy about?"

"Okay. Let me fill in all the blanks."

54. *Suit of Bloody Rags*

"Fill me in, said Roscoe as he shook the cubes in his bourbon. "I love to hear about the problems of guys with too many women, too many cars. More money than you know what to do with. Go on, break my heart."

"You wake up, Roscoe, there's no contradiction between how you were raised and what you are. Whereas..."

"You want to haul garbage, you could probably find work. Even dead. Plenty of room in that industry."

"I'm saying I see myself the way the old man would see me. Standing there in his crapped up overalls, holding some junk he just yanked from a garbage can. A broken lamp. A vacuum missing its wheels. Treasure! Just need a little attention! And now will you look at Mister Silk Stocking lawyer. Doesn't own a wrench. Wouldn't know how to sharpen a saw. Standing there in his Italian shoes and his Italian suit, billing four hundred bucks an hour at the friends and family rate. Makes more in a week's work than I make in a year and isn't he special?"

"Duke, you father has been dead for what? Thirty years? He's not thinking anything about you."

"Maybe he's waiting in the underworld."

"True. Can't rule that out. Given the evidence. Nonetheless. He had his life, you had yours."

"It had its contradictions."

"Maybe you're focused on the wrong ones."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I can tell you what I think. Question is, you want to know?"

"I can't wait."

"I know what you're going to say. Everyone deserves the best lawyer he can buy. American justice system is based on making the prosecutor prove your guilt. You're an instrument of justice. Am I leaving anything out?"

"A few things, but I get the point."

"But you represented guys so guilty their own mothers wouldn't pay for their lawyer for them. Guys who paid you with blood money. Money from drugs, money from killings. That's what you're wearing on your back. A suit of blood-soaked rags. The pictures on your walls, they ought to be portraits of the innocents your clients slaughtered. Guys entitled to a robust defense. Whatever you want to call it. However you want to justify it. One thing about you being dead, Duke. Some guys who ought to go to prison are going to end up there. Assuming there's not another genius like you waiting in the wings."

"You sound like you're taking it personally, Roscoe."

"I didn't stick a knife in your back, if that's what you mean. But I don't necessarily hold in against the guy who did."

52. *Sharing a Coffin*

"Now what?" I asked Duke.

We were back in my ride. Duke arranged himself with the knife blade between the bucket seats. His head ended up on my shoulder again.

"Maybe this would be easier if you leaned forward," I said.

"Seat belt won't reach."

"You need a seat belt?"

"The warning chime will drive us nuts."

"Buckle it behind you."

"No, this is good."

"It's like sharing a coffin, you want to know the truth."

"Why with the negatives? We're talking. We're working together. We got a project here, Fatman."

"True. But you're still dead."

"What's the difference? My heart's not beating, okay. I'm not breathing. Don't need to eat or drink. Sex? I don't think I'm interested. Anyway, most gals wouldn't go for it." He stopped to think about this. "A few, maybe. There are some characters out there. In my experience. But you look at it from your point of view, did you ever care about my lungs? We shared thoughts, we compared notes. We communicated. We're still doing that. So what if I'm dead?"

"People see it as a barrier."

"People! Most people, you put death in a package, you get a celebrity endorsement, you buy an ad at Superbowl halftime, they'll line up to hand you their credit card. New and improved! Gluten-free! All natural! That's most people for you. I thought we were operating on a higher level."

"Stay where you are."

"Thanks."

"I got to get some sleep," I said.

I keep regular hours. Breakfast at seven, lunch at the stroke of noon, dinner at six thirty. Bed by ten.

"We got work," Duke said.

"Don't you sleep?"

"I don't know. Not yet. It doesn't seem necessary."

"There's the difference between you and me."

"To name one."

"You want me to drop you off somewhere?"

"I like the companionship, Fatman. Wandering around the city, dead, I don't know. Sounds bleak. I'll go home with you."

"Nothing's going to be happening there. Doris is already snoring. I'm right behind her."

"Snoring, yeah. A bit of a drooler, too, as I recall. She used to look so innocent in the morning with that trickle running down her cheek."

I let that pass. It was enough to know that Doris's accounts would be stuffed with Duke's money. I didn't need to hear about the rest.

I parked, then waited while Duke worked his way out of the car. In the kitchen I asked, "Can I get you anything? A book? You want to watch a movie?"

"You're in my position. Last hours on Earth. As far as I know. What movie you want to watch? What book do you want to read? Seems, I don't know, *paltry*, doesn't it?"

"I'm up at six thirty. I'll see you then."

I heard him pacing. For a while it sounded like he was rearranging the furniture. I fell asleep.

My bladder isn't what it used to be. I make it until two, I'm lucky. I woke up, stared at the ceiling, hoped I would fall asleep again. Didn't. Got up.

There was Duke, standing in the corner of the room, eyes wide open, watching us sleep.

53. *You Want Sordid?*

I nodded at Duke. He nodded back. Apparently the dead are not easily embarrassed. I thought of telling him to stand in the corner in some other room, but there wasn't any point in waking Doris. I didn't know how she'd feel about this. Shrug and fall back into sleep, or go volcanic?

I don't claim that I know Doris inside and out. I'm not sure Doris knows Doris inside and out.

I went to the bathroom and got back into bed. I tried not to think about Duke standing there. Not so easy. Eventually I fell asleep. I woke at six thirty, the usual. Duke was gone.

I smelled coffee brewing.

I put on a robe and slippers.

In the kitchen I found Duke, pushing the plunger down on my French press.

"Finally," he said.

"What happened to not eating and drinking?"

"This is for you, pal. For Doris if she ever wakes up. You want toast? A couple eggs?"

"I can get it."

"I'm not contagious. Sit down."

Duke put a cup of coffee ahead of me.

Doris shuffled in. She's not what you would call a morning person. Her hair was a mess. She wore a ratty blue robe and pink fuzzy slippers.

"Coffee?" Duke said.

She mumbled something. Duke set down another mug.

"We got cream?" Doris asked.

Duke sung a few bars about how she was the cream in coffee, the salt in his stew, his necessity, he'd be lost, et cetera. He put the cream on the table with a flourish.

"How come the liveliest person in the kitchen is the deadest?" Duke asked.

"How come there's so much talking at this hour?" Doris wondered.

"We got business to take care of."

"I've still got to work."

"Don't worry. I took care of it."

"What do you mean, you took care of it."

"I called in sick for you. Said you were too ill to talk. You won't be in today for sure. Maybe not tomorrow."

"You're kidding."

"I am not."

"How am I..."

"You could buy the company fifty times over and still have money left. A day of work is not as important as..."

"I told you this before. When I have the money in hand I'll stop worrying. Right now all I have is a promise. Which is not the only promise you ever made to me."

"That was different."

"You want to explain how?"

Doris was awake now. A flush spread up from her chest to her neck and then across her cheeks. A thermometer stuck in boiling water, that was what occurred to me.

"You want to clue me in?" I asked.

"Why don't you tell him," Doris said.

"Ah, we had a misunderstanding. Matrimonially speaking."

"What?" I looked from Duke to Doris and back again.

"She believed I proposed."

"'Will you marry me.' That sounded like a proposal. In English. Maybe you were speaking a different language. Maybe I'm too literal minded. Stupid me."

I wondered if Duke would end up with two knives in his back. Looking at Doris, I also wondered if she knew more than she was letting on about how the first one got there.

"It wasn't my finest hour. I said that already. More than once."

"You were spending some fine hours. But not with me."

I put down my coffee cup. "Before we go on," I said, "maybe you should explain what this is all about."

"Sure," said Doris. "You like sordid, you'll love this."

54. A Small Misunderstanding

"We really got to go into this again?" Duke asked. "It was bad enough while I was living."

"Not so bad, I think," Doris said.

"I'm trying to make it up."

"The short version, that's enough," I said. "No need for the last detail."

"Duke and I ran in the same circles. Your bad debt and criminal crowd, some overlap there. Not a society bunch. But money, sure, everybody had money. Everybody loved a party."

"The parties, Fatman," Duke said. "Liquor flowing like the Mississippi. Coke. Weed. You name it. Dancing until the sun came up. The women. As if beautiful women were the only kind God ever made. Which is where I met Doris."

"That party with the guy running for governor," said Doris. "The guy caught fondling the teenager in the pool. That's where we met. Which figures."

Duke winced. "That crowd, you get rough spots. Things happen that shouldn't happen. Judges and lawyers, public officials, now you ask them, they weren't there, they didn't inhale, their pants were never down around their ankles. Lucky for them the cellphone video didn't exist. Your rich and powerful would be the broke and indicted."

"We drank, we danced, we did this and that..." said Doris. She had a far-away look.

"Really, baby, the thising and thating, I don't need to hear it."

"We had some good times is what I'm saying. In fairness."

"You know we did," said Duke.

"Next thing I know I'm on my way to Isla Mujeres. Swinging in a hammock. Sunrise on the beach. I was a kid. Easily impressed."

"All due respect, you were never *easily* impressed."

"Maybe I didn't seem like it."

"I tend to go with Duke here, baby," I said.

"That's the patriarchy for you. One thing leads to another and another. Isla Mujeres, Paris. Paris, Duke's penthouse, before the place on Summit Avenue. I moved my things, all of it in crummy boxes."

"I said, 'Throw it away, sugar, throw it all away. We'll buy new stuff.' Of course that didn't fly. You remember what you said?"

"Money. It was all new to me. The boss brought me along to the parties because I was a pretty face."

"You had other features," Duke said.

"Can we get back to the story here?" I asked.

"So we're standing on the balcony. City stretched out below us. Sun is going down. Mister Romance gets out the tiny box. Engagement ring. Diamond the size of an ice cube."

"I don't know that I specifically said, 'Will you marry me?'"

"Maybe we could get a transcript. But on the basis of the evidence. Man hands over little hinged box. Gold ring. Big diamond. What was I supposed to think? You wanted to do my taxes?"

"I'm saying it was a misunderstanding. I've got faults, sure. I've been too generous, and more than once."

"Yeah, that's your big problem. People don't understand your willingness to give of yourself. In so many ways."

"As I was saying, a misunderstanding."

"So let me tell you how this so-called misunderstanding got straightened out," said Doris.

"We really got to go through all this again?" said Duke.

55. The Prisoners Don't Want Anyone to Escape

Anyone who's had chickenpox understands the competing desires. Scratch: yes! Near orgasmic relief. Scratch: no! Scars, scabs, infection. I wanted Doris to shut up. I wanted her to go on. Not that my opinion mattered. No stopping her now.

"We're living in Duke's penthouse," Doris said. "The diamond on that ring, people told me, 'Keep that hand in your pocket, sweetheart. Somebody gonna cut your finger off to take that thing.' I'm feeling like Cinderella. Considering where I came from."

"Look, Doris. Me and Fatman, we both know," said Duke. "No indoor toilet. Strangling chickens with your bare hands. You had some tough breaks, you had some good luck. Look in the mirror, will you? That face, women would pay millions."

"I'm telling you how I felt. Like I won the lottery. Like my prince had come."

"Maybe we can move the story along is what I'm saying."

"It takes as long as it takes."

Duke sighed, which is saying something for a guy without functioning lungs.

"I tell the gals at work and they can't get enough. Every detail, they got to know. He got down on his knees, really? Was he wearing a suit? A nice suit and he gets down on his knees? Wool or polyester? A rug on the balcony, or regular old cement? I thought they were as happy for me as I was happy for me. We were making six twenty five an hour, we all had nothing, and it was like I was climbing over the prison wall. I was escaping. Of course I didn't figure that the prisoners never really want anyone else to escape.

"So the girls say they're taking me out. A girl's night. Big celebration. They're buying this time. After I'm hitched to Mister Money Bags I can pay them back. I call Prince Charming and tell him I'll be late, no need to wait up, just pray I don't come home with nasty tattoos."

"Maybe I'll get a breath of fresh air," said Duke.

"Don't leave for the good part."

"I think I know where this is headed," I said.

"Of course you do. That's the best kind of story. Where all your suspicions are confirmed."

"Sometimes people like a surprise."

"Not really."

"Do us a favor, Doris. Bring it on home," said Duke.

"You remember The Little Wagon? Journalists' bar. Minneapolis. The barmaids would congratulate you on the correct use of the subjunctive. Our office was right around the corner.

"Happy hour. Cocktail weenies in a steam tray. Chicken wings. One round, two rounds, three rounds, then who's counting. I don't feel so good. Cocktail weenies swimming in tequila sunrises. The girls call a cab, Mary Beth jumps in with me, says she'll make sure I get to the door. A legit concern. Off to the penthouse.

"I stab the door with my key. Mary Beth holds me up. The door opens and we both fall inside. Mary Beth lands on me, which is like getting pinned by a beluga. I say to her, 'Let me just tell Duke I'm home. He's in bed.' Which strikes us as hilarious. We laugh and laugh.

"Of course Duke is in bed. Of course he is doing what he is doing, which has nothing to do with sleeping. And everything to do with a girl whose ankles are up around her ears."

"You made your point," Duke said. "You made your point quite a while ago. Don't you see that's why I'm here? I'm here to square things away. I could have gone a lot of places for help."

"I don't really think so."

"Okay. Maybe not. But still. This is going to work out for you."

Doris and I stared into our coffee for a while.

Then Doris said, "So what's our plan?"

56. Department of Cost Benefit, Venereal Division

"Wait," I said. "I got a question."

Doris and Duke looked up, as if they were both surprised to see me there.

Betrayal: it gives birth to the strong emotions, no matter which end you're on. Doris grabbed her robe and pulled it tight around herself. She looked at me and I saw tears in her eyes. The Duke that got away! Whether these were tears of rage or grief I couldn't say.

"What?" Duke said.

"I don't get it."

"What's not to get?"

"You got Doris on the hook. Wedding bells ringing. Why mess it up? One babe more or less, what difference can it possibly make? What was she? Girl number four hundred and fifty seven? Your cost-benefit analysis, it doesn't make sense."

Duke slipped off his dead Rolex and spun it on his index finger.

"We're different people, Fatman. You're the guy in the cave, tending the fire. I'm the guy with the spear, taking down the mastadon."

"You're the guy with the gun, shooting himself in the foot."

"You're not seeing it from my perspective."

"The Great Inseminator point of view," said Doris.

"I'm not saying I was right or wrong. I'm explaining myself, okay?"

"Maybe you could be honest about it."

"Who wants to hear honesty?"

The answers being, no one and never. Spare us the whole truth and nothing but. Portions thereof, sure. The flattering parts. But precise totality? Who needs to get crushed under that bank vault?

"I was a guy who grabbed what was there," said Duke. "That girl, Jesus, I don't remember her name. Maybe I never knew it. I saw in her what she saw in me. An opportunity. Perfect for each other, for that moment. I'm not the guy who says, 'If A leads to B, and C might result in Doris discovering me and Miss Whoever-She-Is in flagrante,

then, no way, Jack, I'm keeping my *pantalones* buttoned up.' That is not who I am. Or was."

"Then why give me the ring? Why start up a happy-ever-after fantasy?" Doris asked.

"You think anyone's mind is orderly?" Duke asked. "You think I can't believe two contradictory things at once? I'm not even getting started at two. Why do I want the girl? Why do I want a fresh strawberry from a bowl? Because it's sweet. Because it reminds me of all the other strawberries I've ever had. Because it is a version of the best strawberry I ever had."

"You remember?"

"Sure. Hot summer night. Roscoe and I stole them together. Stuffed them down until we were sick. Now that was some vomit."

"It's too early for this." Doris pushed her coffee cup away.

"Life is messy is what I'm saying. You get perspective, once it's over."

57. It Wasn't Me

"I'm gonna watch the sun come up," Duke said. "Not that many chances left."

"Let's not go negative," I said. "We got time."

"Some. Either way, who knows."

"You want a coat? A hat?"

"I'm not cold, I'm not warm. All that's over. For now."

Duke stood on the deck, staring toward the Capitol. The sky turned pink behind the bare branches of the ginko trees. The fruit had turned yellow and dropped to the sidewalk, where it got crushed into a stinking mess.

"You coming with us?" I asked Doris.

"Sounds like Duke decided I'm sick today."

"You could say it was a mix up."

"They'll think I'm a flake. If I'm really in line for his money, he's right, it doesn't matter whether I show up."

"You think that's real?"

"Maybe. Probably. He's trying to set things right. In his way. Which was never strictly logical."

"What's the logical part?"

"Charles, I'm telling you this because you asked. Maybe you don't want to hear."

I didn't, not really. "Go ahead," I said.

"Once he got his pants back on, he said I was the love of his life. The only love of his life. He begged me to reconsider. I'm talking tears, Charles. Blubbing. A real mess."

"You believed him?"

She banged a spoon inside her coffee cup, stirring. She shrugged.

"Despite the girl in your bed?"

"Duke Black can believe a hundred contradictory things at once and his head isn't anywhere near exploding. He could believe he loved me more than he would ever love anyone again. And he could believe that while he was shtupping some bimbo he picked up in the two hours while I was gone."

"And you agreed to marry him."

"Charles, I'm not saying I made one hundred percent sense. It was exciting, being with Duke. Things happened. People know him. They hate him, they love him, either way he's happy. He's a figure in the world. You're with him you're a figure, too. You're on a stage and the lights are on you. You're interesting, even if you've never been interesting before in your life. You love him for that. You hate him because you're an accessory."

"You never mentioned this."

"The complicated emotions, Charles. Hard to explain. To be with Duke, it's one of those bargains with the devil. I didn't want to live that way."

"He's the express train. I'm the local."

"I belong on the local."

"Still. You're going to be loaded. Assuming."

"Yeah. There's that," Doris said.

Duke stood like a post as the light from the rising sun smacked him in the face.

"I got to ask you, baby. You didn't put that knife in his back. Did you?"

"I thought about it more than once."

She patted my hand and got up from the table.

"But no. It wasn't me."

I wanted to believe her.

61. The Scales in His Eyes

"Hey!"

The sun was up above the trees now. Duke was still on the deck. He held his arms out like he was walking in the dark.

"Fatman!"

I opened the door. Duke seemed to be admiring the sunrise. There was a lot going on up there. A purple haze toward the horizon. Then a layer of rose and pink, and a deep blue above, with the moon floating around overhead too. The clapboard steeple of the church across the way turned gold in the light. You could figure God was in His heaven, if you went in for that sort of thing.

"Nice morning," I said.

"Help me, for Christ's sake!"

"What?"

"I can't see a thing!"

Duke still had his hands stretched out, like he was doing a zombie walk. He staggered toward the edge of the deck.

“Stop!” I said as he pitched over the edge.

I slid across the snow-glazed planks in my slippers. Duke was down face-first in the sleet and snow from the night before. The knife handle still stuck from his back.

“Duke, hold on, I’m coming.”

I lowered myself off the deck slowly. Grass and gingko berries stuck through the snow. I got a hand in Duke’s armpit and pulled him upright.

“You okay?”

He groaned.

“Jesus, Fatman. Am I okay? I’m blind. I’m covered with these stinking berries.”

“What do you mean, blind?”

“What does it usually mean? I can’t see. I came out here, everything was okay. Sun comes up. Not bad for Nature. Then it’s like somebody hit the dimmer switch.”

“Let me take a look.”

I grabbed his chin with one hand and brushed away the snow on his face with the other. Duke blinked a few times, as if that might help.

“Hold still,” I said.

I waved my hand in front of him. He stared straight ahead. People talk about the light in someone’s eyes, that sparkle of wit. I had seen it fading in Duke’s eyes. Now it was gone. A cloudy film covered his pupils.

“Can you see anything?”

“Shapes. A few shades of gray. That’s it.”

“Let’s get you inside.”

I led him around to the steps and back into the kitchen. I turned off the light, thinking that might help.

“This better?”

“A little. Maybe.”

“You got any ideas? What this is about?”

“How should I know? Paul on the road to Damascus, it’s the opposite.”

“You’re losing me.”

“Didn’t you pay any attention in school?”

“The mumbo-jumbo, it never appealed.”

“Paul, smitten from his ass. The scales lifted from his eyes. Washes his sins away and so forth. This is the other way around.”

“What you want to do?”

“I’m going with my gut here, Fatman. Put me in a dark closet. Shut the door. Give me a couple hours. Get me some sunglasses.”

“What about the time? You’re on the clock.”

“The wheels are coming off here, pal. My resources, I’ve got to use them wisely.”

I led Duke to the closet next to the front door. I pushed aside the coats hung there to make room for him.

“You want a chair?”

“I can stand. It’s all the same.”

He stood like a soldier at attention, his hands at his sides and that absence in his milky eyes.

“Give me a couple hours,” he said.

“I’m shutting the door now.”

I wondered what I would find when I opened it.

62. Maybe She’s Disgusted

“Duke leave?”

Doris wore Doc Marten’s and a black leather jacket. She was ready for something.

“He’s in the closet.”

“Seriously?”

“He went blind.”

“So he’s in the closet?”

“He thinks it might help.”

“Why?”

“Why what? Why did he go blind or why is he in the closet?”

“Either one. Both.”

“He was watching the sunrise, staring at the sun.”

“He’s not a vampire.”

“Who knows what’s on his high-risk list. Maybe it was the sun. Maybe something else entirely. Anyway, he can’t see.”

“Standing in the closet is going to help?”

“Baby, I don’t know. I don’t think we can take him to a doctor.”

“Clock’s ticking.”

“I know. He knows. It was his idea, the closet.”

“Wouldn’t be his first dumb idea.”

“It’s not our call.”

“So we just sit around and wait for him to come out?”

“You got a better plan?”

Doris gets a lot across in a glance. She drops her head slightly and fixes you with a look that communicates complicated ideas. She’s frustrated, sure. Also disappointed. Maybe, actually, a little disgusted. By the random nature of life. By the fecklessness of men in general, by Duke and perhaps me in particular. She’s a take-charge gal who wants to stick to the agenda, dot a couple hundred i’s, cross every t in the book and get it all done before lunch.

Instead, this. Staring at a closet door.

“You want a cup of coffee?”

“Jesus,” she replied.

“I take that for a yes.”

“How about a couple eggs and toast? As long as we’re just killing time.”

*

After the eggs I broiled a couple grapefruit with brown sugar and butter. Next I whipped up some corn bread. Doris, as I mentioned, is a woman with appetites. She gets distracted, which can be a good thing.

We were on to another pot of coffee when I heard the closet door open.

“Fatman!”

“I’m coming!”

Duke lurched down the hallway. He banged into the wall, straightened himself out, blinked furiously, took a few more steps.

I grabbed him by both arms and pulled him toward me. “Look at me, Duke,” I said.

Bright-eyed wasn’t a term that applied. Less dead was more like it. He stared at me. I fought the urge to look away.

“You can see?”

“Better. Good enough.”

“Is it going to last?”

“How should I know? I think I’m coming apart here, Fatman. Look at this.”

He tugged at his thumbnail. It came off like the petal of a flower.

“You want to keep going?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“We can stop. You can rest. You can wait until...”

“No, Fatman. I mean it. I don’t think it’s an option. It’s...”

I waited. He looked like he was drifting off. “What? It’s what?”

“Like dying. It’s not a choice. This isn’t a choice anymore.”

Doris grabbed my arm.

“You got sunglasses?” Duke asked.

Doris pulled a pair of RayBans from her jacket. “Here.”

He slipped them on. She brushed a crushed gingko berry from his lapel.

“Those things smell awful,” Doris said.

“I don’t know that it’s all the berries.”

“One more reason to get going. Where.”

“Boom Boom, I think,” said Duke. “Boom Boom.”

58. I’m Talking about Passion

“I’ll ride with you,” Duke said.

He walked like he had rocks in his shoes. The pasty skin, the RayBans over the failing eyes, the knife in his back: a lot was wrong with Duke.

"What do we have so far?" Doris said as I pulled away from the curb. "Nothing?"

"Not nothing," said Duke. "We got a feel."

"For what?"

"The hostility. Edgar hates my money. Roscoe hates my success."

"Hate is a little strong," I said. "Not as in hate-you-enough-to-kill-you."

"Fatman. All due respect. What do you know about people hating you enough to kill you?"

"I've missed that in my life."

"There's worse," Duke said. "Nobody wants to pull the plug on you, maybe you're not trying hard enough."

"You don't get murdered, you're a failure?"

"I'm not criticizing."

We drove another half block in silence.

"Okay, I am. What's life without the big emotions? I'm talking about passion, Fatman. Tears. Rage! Screwing others. Saving their asses. Love. Sex! Jesus, Fatman. Life is a glass, you can fill it with anything! Skim milk. Glenlivet."

"Better calm down, Duke," Doris said. "We don't know how much gas you got left."

"Yeah," he said. "Right." He let his chin settle on his chest.

"Boom Boom," Duke said after a while. "There was a passionate guy."

"A passionate nutcase."

"You remember him back then?"

"Sure. Him and Los Locos. The Eighties."

"The brains of the operation. Inasmuch."

"Clubhouse on Western. Always a dozen motorcycles lined up at the curb."

"I had a retainer deal. Couple thousand a month to take their calls. Had to insist that they pay in cash."

"Instead of what?"

"Crystal meth."

"Coin of the realm."

"Then he bought the Black Widow."

"The Widow put the dive in dive bar."

"Great re-po location," Doris said. "Before I moved on from straight up collections. Mister Deadbeat drives up. Figure he's putting back a beer every ten minutes. Wait an hour, jack the car. No muss, no fuss. Taxi time."

"You miss it?" Duke wondered,

"Yeah. Sometimes. The elemental nature. You took what's mine, I'm taking it back. You jack a deadbeat's car, you feel like you're doing something real. It's not just a bunch of numbers."

"Reality," said Duke. "Seems a little vague right now. In light of..."

"What?"

“Everything.”

“You’re talking crazy, you got a lot of competition. Take your worm, you cut it in half, instead of one dead worm you got two living worms. To name one example.”

“This feels different.”

“Tell it to the worm.”

“Okay. Enough.”

I turned onto Minnehaha. We were closing in on Dale before any of us spoke again.

“Boom Boom, call him what you will...”

“Homicidal maniac seems fair.”

“I’m looking forward to this. Gusto. He had it. I ever tell you how he shot up my car? Him and Deadhead.”

“Deadhead. Deadhead in the underworld?”

“Before he killed himself.”

“An accident. The ricochet.”

“Give a moron a gun and stupid things happen. Boom Boom I thought was smarter. Nonetheless. I’m on 94, here comes a motorcycle with a fat white guy and a skeleton hanging on to his belt.”

“How did the shooting start?”

“Enthusiastically. They both had guns.”

59. A Logical Reason!?

“Boom Boom and Deadhead shooting at you? What’s the motive?”

“Motive? Fatman, you might as well ask why the weather is. You’re operating in the world of reason, whereas Boom Boom...”

“Still.”

“Okay. Boom Boom and his associates had their pharmaceutical business. Crank, Ecstasy, weed, coke. Plus related industries. Money laundering, assault, murder, theft. So you got your typical concerns. Do-gooders picketing the clubhouse, calling license numbers into the cops. City inspectors citing my clients for missing garbage can lids. Noise complaints. What have you.”

“Good for you, right?”

“You never come out on this stuff. A big criminal case, the client looking at decades in the slammer, sure, you make some dough. But this nibbled-by-ducks harassment, you can’t charge enough. You’re up against lifer bureaucrats. They got more time than God.

“Everything they got going — murder, mayhem, underage girls, you name it — and what it comes down to is excessive police service. Like a hangnail in the middle of a hurricane. Too many calls, they seize your property. Los Locos’ clubhouse gets seized.”

“They get a different clubhouse, right? What’s the problem?”

“Again, logic.”

"Sorry."

"Turns out Los Locos are sentimental guys. Lot of history in the old clubhouse. Drunken fights, gang rapes, extortion, ODs, hilarious drug trips. When the city changed the locks and boarded the windows, they took it hard."

"What does this have to do with shooting up your car?"

"Guys like Boom Boom, they don't assume they have a hand in creating their problems. It's all about what others do to them. The way Boom Boom sees it, he paid me all this money and still they lost the clubhouse. Overlooking the fact that he and his pals aren't in prison. As they should have been for a couple hundred reasons."

"But guns on the freeway?" said Doris. "That seems..."

"Extreme? You put two armed, cranked-up fools on a Harley Davidson going eighty miles an hour and what is really extreme?"

"They shot at you or just waved the guns?"

"Shot. In consideration of the broken glass. But you give the wheel a crank and next thing, you got a motorcycle skidding across two lanes of traffic. You got knuckleheads tossed up in the weeds. Alive, sort of. But with a future that includes pins, traction, plenty of rehab."

"You call the cops?"

"Bad for business. I brought Boom Boom some flowers in the hospital. Black roses. We had a chat. I thought he understood."

"Maybe not," Doris said.

"This was years ago. But still. There are matters we could discuss."

60. Stake Out at the Widow

As usual, Duke had his head on my shoulder as we closed in on the Black Widow.

I watched Doris in the rear view mirror. Of course I've wondered before what she's thinking, but mostly in the spirit of casual curiosity. The actual texture of Doris' thoughts: I choose to believe they are generally accepting, tolerant at bare minimum. Beyond that, who wants to know?

But now? Tomorrow she could be Midas-level wealthy. I could be Mister Formerly Acceptable. She met my eye briefly, looked away again.

"Don't get too close," Duke said. "Park in the grocery store lot."

"What is this? A stake out?"

"Maybe. For a while. We see who comes, who goes."

I pulled up between a pair of Camrys at the Asian grocery on the corner. We had a view of the side and back doors.

"Maybe you should try sitting up straight," I said to Duke. "We'd attract less attention."

"Don't worry. This is good."

"For you."

"What? You uncomfortable?"

"A little, yeah."

"You've got to get in touch with your feelings, Fatman. Is it the guy-guy thing, fear of intimacy?"

"More that you're dead-living thing. It's creepy, sort of."

"That's deadism."

"I doubt you're a protected class."

"Not yet."

Time passed. Fifteen minutes. A half hour. Nothing much happened. People gathered on the corner. A bus came. They got on. At the Widow, nothing.

"This is the best use of the time?" I asked.

"You got a better idea?"

"Maybe I'll go inside, get a cup of coffee," I said.

As I reached for the door, Duke said, "Wait."

A black Suburban with tinted windows pulled up in the Widow's lot.

"There," said Duke.

The door opened. The guy who slid out wore his hair in a scraggly ponytail. He pulled a cane out from behind the seat and stabbed at the asphalt a couple times, as if he didn't trust it to stay in place.

"What," said Doris. "This a bar or adult daycare?"

"That, my friends, is Boom Boom Calhoun. The years have not been so kind. The motorcycle accident. The liver damage. Hepatitis C. Maybe some dementia. But then how would you know."

"I'm having trouble seeing a homicidal desperado here, Duke."

"A sick snake is still a snake," he replied.

Boom Boom limped inside the Black Widow.

"Let's wait a minute," said Duke. "Let him get comfortable."

A few minutes later I spotted a familiar figure in a sombrero jogging up to the widow's door. Edgar hit the doorbell, waited, stepped inside.

"What's that about?" I asked.

"Look again," he said.

A black Crown Vic parked beside the Suburban. Roscoe got out, rang the bell, and disappeared inside the Widow.

61. *The Unusual Suspects*

"Boom Boom, Roscoe and Edgar all happen to be in the Widow?"

"The unusual suspects," said Doris.

"What do you figure? Do we go in and sweat them all?"

"You never get an honest answer from a gang. You separate them, talk to them one by one, let them trip themselves up," said Duke. "You got to figure they'll all lie, but what are the chances they tell the same lie? That's how you start."

"So what do we do?" I asked.

"We wait. Let Roscoe and Edgar do whatever they're doing. Then we have a session with Boom Boom."

"We sit here?"

"I'm the guy with the schedule."

"So we sit. We wait. Roscoe and Edgar leave. Then what?"

"You can overthink things. We ring the bell. He hits the buzzer, the door opens, we walk upstairs. We take it from there."

"And you say what?"

"You want a script? I figure I say, 'Hey Boom Boom, maybe you heard, I'm dead.' That's an ice-breaker."

"This is going to work out, Charles," Doris said.

"Baby, I admire your certainty. We know he's crazy. He's probably armed. I can think of a couple ways it doesn't work out."

She grabbed my shoulders and squeezed. "Relax, Charles," she said. "Relax." She's got tricks, techniques. She pinches here, presses there. My mind goes blank and all that's left is a dull buzz.

Time passed.

"You got a beautiful thing going here, Fatman," Duke said out of nowhere.

"Wha..."

I could barely make my mouth move.

"You got what every man wants, whether he knows it or not."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. What's she doing with me."

"No. That's not what I'm saying. You got qualities, Fatman. Maybe not so much in the Clark Gable department. I mean, look at you. But you are who you are. You're reliable. You're conscientious. You worry. You're the kind of guy who will sit here outside the Widow and worry on my behalf. Who does that anymore?"

He turned to Doris. "Am I right or what?"

She took a beat longer to answer than I might have liked and when she spoke her answer struck me as somewhat vague. "Charles has many qualities," she said.

"Exactly. That's what I mean. You got qualities, Fatman."

At that the door to the Widow opened. Edgar came out first. Something bulged in his pocket. He looked right, then took off left at a jog. A minute later Roscoe walked out with a package in his hand. He drove off in his Crown Vic.

As Roscoe turned the corner Duke pulled his head off my shoulder and announced, "Okay. Let's hit it." He pulled himself out of the car and limped toward the Widow. Doris and I hurried after him.

62. Five Versions of Death

"Yo, Mr. Fatman!"

Five boys sauntered toward us. Their faces were hidden deep inside their black hoodies. I figured they were the same five comedians from Halloween. No way to stop it.

"Mr. Fatbootyman! We are shocked to see you so far from where you stay. Why the big moves?"

I sighed. "Business, gentlemen."

"At the Black Widow, Deacon Fats? Goodness. What exactly are you looking for? Pharmaceuticals? Previously-owned merchandise?"

"Thanks for your interest, lads," I said. "The team and I are exploring opportunities. Can't say more than that. I'm sure you understand."

"Certainly. You're a businessman. We are members of a syndicate as well, my dude! We appreciate your stance on snitching. We are working ourselves to prevent it."

"Yes, sir, Mister Immensity," said the shortest of the bunch.

It was like talking to five versions of Death. They were lost inside those hoodies.

"A team, you said? Why, we know all about that. We have our own teams here in the neighborhood, our own sets, our cliques. I recognize you and the Misses Fats — hello, ma'am! — but this other team member? That's a real G, sir. Is he not the body from your stoop?"

"One and the same. So glad you IDed me. Duke Black, at your service gentlemen."

"Duke Black?" said their ringleader. In an aside to his teammates, "This mother thinks he's Duke Black."

They turned to him and took a hard look.

"The Duke Black?"

"Accept no substitutes, boys."

"The Duke Black got my uncle off?"

"Depends on who your uncle was. I got quite a few uncles off."

"Rashahn Johnson?"

"AKA Li'l Ray?"

"That's the one."

"Misunderstanding with a handgun. Accidental discharge. Bystander injured."

"Wheelchair for life."

"Unfortunately. Li'l Ray learned a valuable lesson."

"Cost my grandmama a lot, I know that."

"The good things in life never come cheap. Remember that."

"Mister Black, sir? Why you still wearing your costume?"

"No problem at all, gentlemen. You see, it's not a costume. I'm dead. Stabbed to death. Go ahead, try to pull out the knife."

"Really, Duke," I said. "Not this again."

Duke turned his back to the kids. "Just give it a little wiggle. It won't bite."

The shortest of them reached up, set a finger on the handle and gave it the slightest push.

"You can shake it around a bit."

"Naw dude, Mr. Black, it's cool."

"Go on, it's just a knife. I won't be any less dead."

"You dead, we dead, everybody dead. Except for Mr. Fats and his better half. But I'm still not leaving fingerprints on a knife I never cut you with."

68. I Got A Zen Thing

I pressed the buzzer beside the door of the Black Widow. Nothing, then a burst of static.

"What you want?" Boom Boom's voice crackled over the cheap speaker.

"Boom Boom! It's me, Duke Black!"

"I doubt it."

"I can understand that."

"I saw the obit."

"Not wrong, as far as it goes."

"So you're dead."

"Yes and no. Dead in terms of not breathing, not eating. Your normal bodily functions, yeah, I don't have them. But I get around. You talk to me, I talk to you. The same old Duke in a lot of ways."

"I thought I was rid of the same old Duke."

"It's a complicated world, Boom Boom."

"How do I know this isn't a trick?"

"You want me to say the secret password? How about the name of that sixteen year old? The one you said lied to you about her age? Angelique Scronmeister, right?"

"I don't know what's going on here."

"You don't have to know what's going on, Boom Boom. You just have to open the door."

"What if I don't?"

"I'm asking you as a courtesy. As we've agreed, I'm dead. You think I need you to open the door? I want to come in, I come in. Death doesn't need an invitation."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. The door buzzed. Duke jerked it open. A long, steep staircase led to the second floor. Boom Boom stood on the landing with a pistol in his hand.

"Good to see you, buddy," Duke yelled up. "And armed at that. Some things don't change."

"What's good about that?"

"You die, it's a comfort to think the world goes on the way it always has. Makes you think, really, you're not missing so much. Might be more interesting being dead."

"You saying that for a fact?"

"Haven't been dead that long. I can only say so much. But on the evidence to date, it has its pluses, its minuses. Don't need to eat, which frees up time. Then again, I enjoyed

a meal. I got this Zen detachment thing going on, which is liberating. But then, to be realistic about it, I enjoyed wrestling with the world. I wasn't a Zen kind of guy."

"You never seemed to have a problem with the material world," Boom Boom observed. "The money. The babes. A snoot full of quality blow."

"I'm on a different plateau now. For better or worse."

"This your posse?"

"You know Fatman? His fiancé, Doris?"

"By reputation. The underworld caper. If you believe that."

"No problem either way," I said.

"You going to invite us up, or we going to spend all morning shouting at each other?"

Boom Boom tucked his pistol under his belt in the back of his pants. "Sounds like I can't stop you."

64. *Guy Thinks You're a Sap*

"Nice office you got here," Duke said.

"You think?"

"Defendable. Might be important in your line of work."

"Never liked people sneaking up on me," Boom Boom said.

"I were you, I wouldn't either," Duke said.

The stand-out features in Boom Boom's office were a pair of heavy steel doors. One led to the stairway that opened on the street. Another I assumed was a connection to the bar. Both had steel bars that dropped into heavy duty brackets, like a medieval castle. The sole window could be closed off with metal shutters. Boom Boom had a short-barrelled shotgun propped in a corner, behind a scarred oak desk covered with piles of paper. The shelves were stacked with VHS porn.

"Go ahead, have a seat. What can I do for you? Not so much, I'm figuring. Considering. The dead don't want for much, right?"

"I'm in limbo here. Not really living. Not completely dead. The details, Boom Boom, I don't have the complete picture."

"Limbo is for your unbaptized dead babies."

"I never took you for a theologian."

"Even if you're not listening, some things stick. A cave full of dead babies waiting forever." Boom Boom shook his head.

"Who knows?"

"Right."

"Maybe we should move this along," Doris observed. "In consideration of the time."

"The dead got a schedule?" said Boom Boom.

His ponytail I already mentioned. His hair was somewhere between gray and yellow. He had a rearranged look, like he had been in an accident and the parts were

pounded roughly back into place. The eyes didn't quite line up. The nose tilted toward the window. Healthy wasn't the first word that came to mind. But his fingers looked like tree roots. If he wrenched a chunk from the oak desktop with his bare hands I wouldn't have been surprised.

"Yeah, the clock's ticking," Duke told Boom Boom. "I had seventy-two hours."

"To do what?"

"Find out who killed me."

Something flickered over Boom Boom's lips. Amusement maybe. "You don't say."

Doris noticed it too. "This is funny?" she said.

"No, no, course not. Not funny at all. You don't make it, what happens?"

"Into the underworld. With your old pal, Deadhead. Locked up, usually. Hoping for the day when there's a breach, when you can get out to settle old scores."

"What's wrong with that? The waiting, sure, that's bad. But settling scores?"

"Not my idea of eternity. Dreaming of revenge. Better to be at peace, don't you think?"

"You want me to be honest?"

"Take a shot. See how it feels."

"Happiest moments of my life, settling scores. Bringing justice. Say a guy thinks you're a sap, he doesn't have to pay you for five thousand bucks worth of crank. Talking theoretically."

"Of course."

"You try to be reasonable. You offer him options. Extended payment plans. Opportunities to work off the debt. He says basically drop dead, excuse the language. Maybe you have the boys bring him by the office, you explain the situation in a straight-forward manner. He still doesn't understand. You got to exercise the arts of persuasion."

"Okay, we get the point," said Doris.

"I'm trying to say something about my life here."

"Maybe you think I'm a therapist," Doris said. "I'm not."

"I didn't think you were a therapist. I'm thinking..."

I held up a hand. If Boom Boom finished the sentence odds were high he'd have a boot in his mouth and several fewer teeth. Doris, provoked, is not subtle. Plus she has training.

"Back to the matter at hand," I said. "Duke's got..." I checked my watch... "maybe thirty-two hours left. We don't know if they're on Central Standard Time or what."

"I'm just saying..."

"Don't," said Doris.

"I got serious questions, Boom Boom," said Duke. "Questions about this knife in my back."

65. Look Within

"What am I supposed to know about the knife in your back?" Boom Boom said.

"You know me," Duke said. "I'm not an angry guy. I accept the world as it is. I want to be at peace. I don't feature myself brooding for eternity, thinking, *if only I could bust out of the underworld, stop by Boom Boom's joint, maybe rip his lungs out*. Those steel doors wouldn't count for much."

"You'd have to get out."

"True enough. But it happens. Look at the mess Deadhead made when he got out."

"Deadhead was one crazy dude."

"You betting I wouldn't be?"

"Like you say, you always been reasonable. Overpriced, but reasonable."

"When I was living. My view is, we think we know who we are, but we never know who we will become. Can't see the future, Boom Boom. Victims of events. Sitting in my office, up there in the clouds, looking out over fifteen or twenty miles of real estate, beautiful Italian wool covering my butt, pretty girls bringing me coffee, money rolling in by the wheelbarrow, sure, I was a reasonable guy. You talk to me, I talk to you, we meet somewhere in the middle. Maybe more my end of the middle than your end of the middle, but that's why I don't come cheap. Say instead I'm squatting in the dust in the underworld, still got a knife in my back, suit hasn't been cleaned for years, no coffee babes, no money, no good-things-of-life, I'm still reasonable? Philosophical? I don't know, Boom Boom. Maybe I'm consumed by frustration and rage. Maybe I'm looking to settle old scores."

"You're saying I'm the guy who stabbed you?"

"I'm exploring that idea."

"I got to say, this hurts me, Duke. We had some beefs, no denying. The money I paid you and still they tore down the clubhouse. That wasn't right."

"Sometimes you got to look within, Boom Boom. I know this isn't a popular idea. We all want to blame somebody else for our misery. We all want to feel persecuted."

"Who wants to feel persecuted?"

"You kidding me? Everybody. All the time. The major religions, what are they based on? Persecution. Martyrs. They didn't get any respect yesterday, which is why they're burning you at the stake today. Justifies everything. So basic I can't believe I even got to explain."

Doris reached over and patted Boom Boom's gnarled hand. "This is like a get-out-of-jail free card. Stop and think about it. You tell us now what happened. Duke has what he needs. All he needs is to finish up the story of his life. To find out how the story ended. Can't be gibberish. You tell the truth and he's free. No worries for you that he bust out of the underworld and come looking for you. You're never going to get a better deal."

"Trouble is, it wasn't me. Duke, you know that. Unless this is another one of your double crosses."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Doris asked.

Boom Boom looked to Duke. What passed between them I can't say.

"I didn't do it."

"Tell us this, Boom Boom. Our top three candidates. You. Roscoe. Edgar. All three of you in this room a half hour ago. You want us to believe that's a bizarre circumstance?"

One thing to say for career criminals: they can sell a lie without missing a beat. "We got a book club."

That was good for a laugh.

"Sure. Crime. Procedurals. We got an interest. Your Elmore Leonard. Your Walter Mosley. More on the literary end. I order the books. Amazon. Used. A couple bucks each. Those guys are no good with computers. They pick them up from me."

"I been in this type of business for a very long time," Doris said. "And that is the most..."

"Fascinating is a word," I offered. "Fabulous. Fantastical. And that's just a few of the Fs."

"Yeah. Others could apply."

"Believe it or not. I don't care. It's the truth. I didn't stick a knife in Duke's back. Far as I know, neither did Roscoe or Edgar. Maybe," he said to Duke, "you got to look within. As you were saying."

To that Duke offered no reply.

66. The Dead Don't Get a Manual

I got the heat going in the car, not that Duke cared. He set his head on my shoulder again.

I said, "I don't see where we go from here."

I waited. Duke said nothing in reply.

I don't now that you ever get comfortable with a corpse leaned up against you. No body heat. No sound or motion of breathing. Duke's eyes were wide open. I watched to see if he'd blink. He didn't.

"We screw up the time?" I asked Doris.

"What do you mean?"

"Duke. I'm not sure he's here."

"He's here."

"Really here."

"He's got more than a day left."

"Assuming. It's not like he got a guarantee."

"He seemed sure."

Doris grabbed his shoulder and shook it. "Duke," she said.

Nothing.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I'm supposed to know?"

“We wait I guess.”

Time passed. The sun made its low arc across the southern sky.

People came and went from the grocery store lot.

“What do we do with him? I mean, if this is it,” I asked Doris. “His actual body, it must still be in the morgue. We set whatever this is on a park bench, will he just disappear?”

Now Doris wasn't talking either. I looked around. A thin stream of drool ran down her chin. I settled back in my seat. I might have dozed off myself.

When Duke gave my thigh a hard squeeze I snapped back.

“Jesus!”

“No. Just me.”

“You were saying. Where do we go from here?” Duke acted as if he hadn't missed a beat.”

“It's almost dark. We blew the whole afternoon.”

“I'm sinking, Fatman. I figured seventy-two good hours. I didn't plan on the wheels coming off along the way.”

“Nobody told you anything?”

“It's more like a ghost whispers in your ear. They don't hand you a manual. *You and Your Dead Body* or whatever. You get a a feeling. Not a hundred percent accurate, obviously.”

"A feeling," Doris repeated.

"I haven't been dead a half dozen times before. I'm figuring this out, okay?"

“You want to sit here and explore our feelings?” Doris said. “Or you want to move on?”

“I'm not so sure," Duke said.

“Well, I explored my feelings about you enough for one lifetime.”

“Give me a break here. We had our moments.”

"I could leave," I said. “You two could settle what you need to settle.”

“That was settled that long ago,” Doris said.

“I'm trying to reopen the file. Reconsider, baby.”

“The name is Doris.”

Duke sighed and sunk against my shoulder. The car's heater whined. Bits of sleet bounced off the windshield.

"All right," Duke said. "Let's try Fadilah again. Maybe get her to open a line to the underworld.”

72. You Looking Rough

“Pleasure to see you again, Mister Duke," Fadilah said. "Wondered how long it would take.”

"Looking good as usual, Fadilah," Duke said.

"Sorry to say, you looking rough yourself."

"Apparently the dead got a half life."

She wore a well-tailored business suit with a white shirt, same as before. She was taller than me and Duke. Looking up at her unsettled me.

"Just guessing now," Fadilah said. "You not getting anywhere."

"Wouldn't say that," Duke replied. "We've made the rounds. Had some meaningful conversations. Gathered information. Which we're weighing."

"You got so much, maybe you want to tell me why you're here." She had excellent teeth, set off by her dark skin and lipstick the color of blood. Sardonic was the word for her grin. "You want some coffee?"

"No need."

"Same with Momma Leona," Fadilah said.

"You got a line in to Leona?" Duke said.

"That's putting it a little strong. Not like we're yapping on the phone. More an intersection-of-consciousness deal."

"You think she might have a clue?" I asked. "Assuming you can... intersect?"

"Not like it's ordering up pay-for-view on HBO, Mister Fatman. More like the weather. Maybe it snows, maybe it doesn't. Can't set your watch by it. Only one way to find out."

I handed her my credit card.

She went to a desk in the corner and swiped the card through a reader. "Two hundred, Mister Fatman."

"Wasn't it a hundred?"

"You're wanting the contact-the-dead package this time."

"Don't sweat the nickels and dimes, Fatman. A hundred bucks to Doris, that's gonna be loose change."

"A hundred bucks to me is still a hundred bucks."

"Relax, Charles," Doris said.

"I'm trying."

Fadilah handed back my credit card. "Let's step into the back room," she said. She flipped the door sign so it said *Closed*, then locked the door and turned off the lights.

Duke followed behind her. The blood oozing around the blade in his back looked like it was drying.

73. Talking about Everything

"Go ahead, take a seat," Fadilah said. We were back at the rough table in her back room.

"You got a feel back here," Duke said. "That time-is-stopped feel."

"Like I said. My momma got it from her momma and nobody changed a thing. The plaster wants to fall, it falls. The walls crack, they stay cracked. We got an understanding."

"With what?" Doris asked.

Fadilah gestured vaguely toward the ceiling. "Whatever makes the sun come up in the morning and go down at night. The forces of nature. The organization of this world. What you see and don't see and what you can't never even begin to guess at. I'm talking about everything. That's what we got an understanding with."

"Sounds like you got your bases covered," Doris said. If she can't put a hand on it she's not interested.

Fadilah tapped her watch. "Might feel like time has stopped, but truth is it's marching right along. You got an hour on your card, Mister Fatman. I'm ready when you are."

"Here's the problem," Duke said. "I got the living, they got some beefs with me. More suspects than time, unfortunately. I got the dead who maybe got a faulty understanding of my motives. They don't step outside their dead bodies and wonder what the world looks like to anybody else."

"That's the world for you," Fadilah said. "Living and dead."

"Amen. The living, you can find them, explain, apologize, try to make things right. That's bad enough. The dead, a whole different story."

"You got that right," said Fadilah.

"The normal guy, he's stuck, dealing with the dead. To name just one example. There was a girl."

"Here we go," said Doris.

"A little slack here, okay? Nursing student. Still had those white dresses back then."

"Please," said Doris.

"Fatman, those dresses. You remember. Excuse me, ladies. Kind of a jack-in-the-box deal. You turn the crank, the door springs open. Pop goes the weasel."

"What are you talking about?" Doris said. "Memories? How they work?"

"What? No. I'm talking about getting that white uniform to fall to the floor. Anyway. Sweet girl. We had a little thing. I moved on, maybe she didn't. Should have called her. Didn't. Another case where things are more important to somebody else than they are to you. You got obligations to another human being but it slips your mind."

"You're surprising me now," Doris said.

"Maybe my heart is deeper than you think."

"True about everybody," Fadilah said.

"Saw her again a couple years later. She said, 'You should have called. You should have let me know.' There I am, the man who unleashed a couple million words at a couple thousand jurors, no idea what to say. The look in her eye. Not grievance so much as *disappointment*. That she had been diminished. Another way of being stabbed, left dead. I should have thrown myself at her feet."

"Not for the first time," Doris said. "But why wallow in it now?"

"She's dead, that's my point. Stroke. Bang! Call the hearse. Now that grievance is moved to a place where, how do you set it right? You live long enough, you got your situations with the living, you got your situations with the dead."

"Everyone who ever walked through the door, that's why they're here," Fadilah said.

"Exactly," Duke replied.

69. Can't Tell You to Leave

"I wonder, Fadilah, if you can get your momma on the horn."

Duke was like a fish thrown up on shore. The gleam and glisten was dying in him by the minute. Seventy two hours looked like a stretch.

"When she was living my momma wasn't an on-your-schedule type female," Fadilah said. "More your do-what-I-want-when-I-want type."

"But you communicate with her?"

"Depends what you mean, communicate. Not like she swings by, kicks her shoes off and we chat."

"Nonetheless. You got a line in," said Duke.

"It's a feeling, like she's right around the corner. Face up to the window, like that."

"My thinking is, maybe it's the living knocked me off, maybe it's the dead."

"I understand you got issues in the underworld."

"You heard?"

"A feeling, like I say. Vibrations."

"There are people, former people, they could put a knife in my back they probably would. I wouldn't blame them. Don't need to. Time to get past that."

"You think my momma can say?"

"I'm working on intuition now. I'm in a post-logic position here."

"You ask me, this whole world always been post-logic."

"I'm saying all the bets are off. You think the world operates by a few rules anyway. What goes up must come down. So on and so forth. Watch this."

He unbuckled the dead Rolex from his wrist and tossed it in the air. Then it hung there, suspended.

"I'm standing on the threshold. No telling what's true and what's not."

"You figure my momma floats up through the floorboards and says who bumped you off?"

Duke held out his hand. The watch fell into it. "I don't know. What can't happen?"

"Mister Duke, I got my own opinions. Maybe we can take care of your problems right here and now."

Duke gave Fadilah a look that I couldn't decode.

"What are you saying?" Doris asked.

"I think that Mister Duke and I got some business, transacting on our own. Mister Fatman, it's your card and your money. I can't properly tell you leave the room."

"But you're suggesting?"

She pushed back her chair and walked to the door. She had a way of moving, solemn, queenly even, that left me thinking there was no space for discussion. I looked at Doris. Her brow twitched just enough to let me know that we were leaving without a fuss.

Fadilah closed the door behind us. Doris and I walked single file down the decrepit hallway.

70. Big Stack of Wrong

University Avenue was dimly visible behind the sheer curtains in Fadilah's waiting room. A train swept past. Snow swirled over the asphalt. Doris stood at the window with her back to me.

"You know what I think?" she asked.

Let's just say a reply was unnecessary.

"We been led around by our noses, Charles. Something isn't right."

Nobody enjoys being thwarted or deceived, but Doris is not your average nobody.

"Baby, we started with a body on our stoop. From there we went to talking to a dead guy in our kitchen. The somethings that aren't right, it's a tall stack by now."

"Fadilah knows something. She doesn't want us to know."

"No argument there. But what?"

"Like you say, it's a tall stack. I don't know."

She paused.

"I hate not knowing."

"Baby, I never doubted."

We listened to the traffic. The radiators hissed and clanked. I took Doris's hand and traced along her fingers. I know a few tricks. Acupressure. Poke here, poke there. You open the interior valves and things start to flow.

Doris closed her eyes. Her breath came more slowly.

"This will be over," I said. "One way or another."

"You think Duke is going to figure it out?" She sounded like she was about to drift off.

I shrugged. "He ends up in the underworld, that's a tough break. Either way, Duke's going to be gone. More or less. We'll be dealing with the leftovers."

"The money."

"I worry."

"I know you do, Charles."

"That it will change everything."

"It's only money. It can change the things we want it to change."

"Who says?"

"We can decide what we want, what we don't want. We can examine our lives."

"We want to do that? The unexamined life, it was working out."

"That's you, Charles. Mister Be-Here-Now. It's still the Sixties for you. *Que sera sera* and all that. Maybe this is liberation from the plodding. We make some decisions. Get somewhere."

"Who says I want to be liberated? Who says we aren't somewhere right now? All the stupid little things I want to say I say. All the stupid things you want to say, I listen to them. That's what happiness is."

"It's stupid little things I say to you?"

"Not one hundred percent, baby. But how profound is anyone? One percent profundity rate, that gets you in Einstein territory. So what if love is a wallow in the ordinary?"

"Maybe you got to take the romance up a notch, Charles."

Fadilah's heels clicked on the old floorboards. She led Duke back into the room.

"I do believe we are done here now," Fadilah announced. "The rest is up to Mister Duke."

How to read what was behind his dead eyes I didn't begin to know.

71. Chumps in the Dust

"You want to ride with us?" I asked Duke. Duke walked like he had gravel in his shoes.

"Maybe we should get you a walker," Doris said.

"I'm dead. I'm not old."

"Still. You fall, you going to get up again?"

"Let me take your arm, okay?"

Doris and I each took a side. Duke latched on to my arm. Whatever was happening with his legs, he still had a fearsome grip.

"How much time we got?" Duke asked.

"Your watch still dead?"

He pushed up his sleeve to reveal the Rolex. "Eight forty seven. As always."

"Say you got twenty six hours, tops."

Duke stopped to check his watch again.

"Damn," he said. "The hands just fell off. Twelve thousand dollar watch and the hands fall off?"

"What you mean?"

"Look."

He held up his wrist. The gold hands had fallen to the bottom of the bezel.

"Hard to say what the message is here, Duke."

"My bet is it's those pricks Graydon and Pimlipper."

"The lawyers in the underworld?"

"You did double cross them," Doris said.

“I had a choice? They would have kept you in down there forever.”

“You told them you’d keep the portal open. Then you filled it with cement.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let the door open so those guys could come and go? They would have been settling their stupid grievances all day long. A total blood bath.”

“Not their point of view.”

“Anyway, they’re not in charge of anything. They’re chumps sitting in the dust.”

“You think this comes from higher up?” I asked.

“Vanity of vanities, Fatman. Dust to dust. Et cetera. There’s a precedent.”

“Your feet hurt?”

“Nothing hurts. My feet don’t work so hot, but they don’t hurt.”

“Maybe you just want to appear. Not bother walking.”

“Takes a lot of energy. Which I don’t have.”

“Okay. Let’s get to the car.”

Fadilah lost her parking when the light rail went in. My car was around the corner. We had another half block. It seemed like a couple miles.

I held the door for Duke, tucked a hand under his armpit to steady him as he eased into the seat. He took up his usual position. His head, my shoulder. An odor came from him now. I had some trouble getting the ID on it at first. Then it struck me: the smell of a fresh-dug hole in black dirt.

“You tell me where we’re headed,” I said to Duke.

In reply, nothing.

“Duke, where to?”

He didn’t move, he didn’t breathe. All that came from him was that whiff of the grave.

“Now what?” I said to Doris.

“No point in driving around with...” She searched for the word. “...this.”

“We go home?”

She shrugged. “It’s supper time.” Doris takes her three squares seriously.

“Duke’s clock is ticking.”

“He’s not hearing it. You can’t wake him up.”

“What do we do with him?”

“Pull into the garage. Leave the side door open. When he comes around he can let himself in. Or...”

I waited. “Or what...”

“We can figure that out when we need to.”

72. Lost My Brows

“You hungry?” Doris asked. “I could make...hmm...”

She pulled open the refrigerator door and pretended to take stock. We both know this is a sham.

“...grilled cheese sandwiches...or...”

She has no intention of cooking anything ever. Now and then I call her bluff. “Yeah, sounds great, baby,” I’ll say. Then she’ll work her magic.

For Doris the stove has one setting: incinerate. Cranks up the heat, toss some butter at the skillet, slap down a few pieces of bread with cheese and wait for the smoke detector to go off.

At this point, depending on mood, I might say, “You had a long day, sugar. Why don’t I take over?” Or maybe I’ll let her proceed to the scorched bread and unmelted cheese stage. And she might say, “Would you?” Or, “No, I’m doing it now!” Meaning, “Next time don’t be a sap. You’re going to eat this thing!”

I handed Doris a glass of wine and said, “You sit down and be beautiful, baby. Let me take care of you.”

She gave me a pat above the belt. “You know how to do it right, Charles,” she cooed.

I whipped up a little something. An omelette. Goat cheese and tarragon. A dusting of chives and black pepper. Chunks of yam browned in butter with a maple syrup glaze on the side. A petite salad. Avocado. Tomato. Another splash of wine.

“There you go, honey.”

“Honey?” she said. “If we had corn bread, sure, but no, I don’t think so.”

You put a fork in Doris’s hand and she’s got a one-track mind.

“Term of endearment. The honey part.”

She gave me a blank look.

Half way through the omelette she slowed down enough to say, “Something’s not right here, Charles.”

“Too much pepper?”

“No. Duke. Fadilah. Boom Boom. Everything.”

“Not arguing. But specifically?”

“We’re not any closer to settling this.”

“Not true. We know about their book club.”

“As if that’s true.”

“Just because it’s crazy doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

“Please, Charles.”

“Yeah.”

“Those looks. Lot of looks going on. Boom Boom and Duke. Fadilah and Duke. I feel like we’re in a play and we’re the only ones who don’t know our lines.”

“What do we do?”

She poked at her plate. “Play it out. See where it goes.” She poked some more. “I hate seeing where it goes.”

I know she does.

“Maybe he’s done.” I said. “Maybe we go out to the car in the morning and there isn’t anything there. Would that be better?”

“We started this. I want to finish it. Whatever *it* is.”

“The best thing, get some sleep. Nothing we can do now anyway.”

Doris drained her glass of wine.

I was cleaning up the dishes when I heard the door rattle.
 Doris sighed. I turned the knob.
 “I woke up alone in the dark and I thought...”
 Duke looked relieved.
 “We didn’t know what to do with you. We figured...”
 I stopped. Something was off. Wrong, but subtle. When you’re talking about a two-day old corpse, the fine distinctions can be tough to recognize.
 “Your eyebrows, Duke. Your eyelashes.”
 “What?”
 “They’re gone.”
 He put a hand up to his brow. He shrugged. “It happens. Not mission critical.”
 “Sit down,” I said.
 “I’m okay.”
 “Doris and I been talking.”
 “Sure.”
 “We get a feeling...”
 “Oh?”
 “That...”
 Before I could finish, Duke went blank again. He was still standing, but that was it. No movement. No breath. His lips parted, as if ready to speak, but all his eyes said was No Sale.
 I looked at Doris. “Let’s get some sleep,” I said.

73. He’s No Parrot

I never sleep through the night. Classic old-guy problem. Wake up. Consider my bladder. Think I can ignore it. Can’t. Shuffle to bathroom. Return. Churn briefly. Fall asleep. Repeat.

I woke up. Opened an eye. Looked for Duke in the corner. Was relieved not to see him there. Stuck my head in the kitchen on the way back from the bathroom. Duke stood there in that state of suspended animation, his eyes wide open in the gloom. We left a night light on for him. For all I knew he could see in the dark just fine. Then again, who knows? Maybe he was looking at an eternity of dark. Turning on the night light seemed like the decent thing to do.

Doris was still drooling on her pillow when I woke up for good. I headed to the kitchen in my slippers.
 “Duke,” I said.

In response, nothing. There was no evidence that he had so much as blinked since the night before.

I got some bacon going, floated four eggs in the bacon grease, dropped bread in the toaster, sliced a couple oranges, loaded the french press. As the toast popped up, Doris

appeared in her ridiculous a.m. get-up. The fuzzy slippers, the shapeless blue robe, the tangle of hair. In the morning she does not put on a happy face, nor does she spread sunshine all over the place.

She glanced at Duke. "Maybe you should put a towel over his head," she said. "It's a lot to take, first thing."

"He's not a parrot."

"Turn him around at least?"

"Just sit down. Look out the window."

Fat clots of snow drifted from the low clouds. Peaceful, sort of, in the way that it hides the messy details. The litter, the sagging roofs, the rusting cars parked on the street, the gestalt of relentless decay. I thought about setting Duke on the porch to let the snow blanket him as well.

I put a plate and a cup of coffee ahead of Doris. I don't expect meaningful communication from her at this hour.

After she knocked off her eggs she said, "Maybe he's got twelve hours left."

"Until he comes around, I don't see what we do."

"If he comes around. What's our plan B?"

"Plan A, plan B, it's all the same. We wait."

"One thing I hate..."

"Let me get you more coffee, baby."

We read the paper. We watched the snow fall.

Around ten, Duke shook himself. As if he had not missed a beat, he said, "Jen. Jen Lately."

"Where you been?" I asked.

"The tunnel of light, you heard about that?"

"It's true?"

"Malarkey. My experience to date. Not white. Paisley. Black light. Total psychedelia. Like Timothy Leary is God. Frightening. Peaceful. Excuse me for saying, Fatman. But transcendent. One with the cosmos. The ego dissolved and so forth."

"Sounds...groovy. You think it lasts?"

"What does?"

Duke took a few lurching steps toward the door. "Jen. Do I need to mention? We don't have all the time in the world."

74. Hand Me My Member

"Oh no," I said as I pulled off Lex into the Jimmy Lee Rec Center lot.

"Trouble? Cops?"

"Those kids again."

"Shouldn't they be in school?" Duke said.

"Yes and no."

"What's that mean?"

“Yes if they’re actually kids. No if...”

“If what?”

“You get a feeling about them?”

“How we supposed to feel?” Doris wondered.

“Funny how they show up. Like they’re part of this deal.”

“Take it from me, Fatman,” Duke said. “You can’t worry about everything you don’t understand. Not in this situation.”

“Everything I don’t understand. Which is everything.”

“Help me out of here, will you?”

Duke maneuvered the knife in his back around the seats. I opened his door. Doris held up my overcoat for him. We brought it along figuring he could wear it like a cape to hide the knife in his back.

“Honored guests!” the tallest kid called out from inside his hoodie. The five of them stood beside the rec center door.

I lifted a hand as a luke-warm greeting.

“Again, Sir Fats, we wonder what brings you and your associates our way?”

“Lads,” I said. “How about we deep six the irony?”

“We have our style, sir.” He sounded offended. It was hard to tell.

“Doubtless, gentlemen. You mind if I ask who you represent?”

“More what than who, sir.”

“Either way.”

“With your permission, Señor Grande, I need to go big on you. Huge even.”

“You sure you kids shouldn’t be in school?” Doris asked.

“Your loveliness, school does not require our attendance. You could say we are hall monitors. Of a type. We represent... how to put it?”

“The ineffable,” said the smallest of them.

“Vocabulary points,” said Doris.

“The package is not the product, ma’am.”

“Chill, brother. No need for contention. Say we’re guides. Though we don’t guide exactly. More like, we watch. We monitor your progress.”

“What progress?” Doris asked.

“Not always clear in the moment. Revelation has its own schedule.”

Duke took this in quietly. He pulled my overcoat around himself as if suddenly chilled.

“Anyway, you and your posse attend to your business, Mister Fatman. Not our job to distract.”

He pulled the door open and waved us through. When I looked back again they were gone.

To the kid at the counter Duke said, “Three for the pool.”

“Eighteen dollars.”

“He’s got it,” Duke said, nodding at me.

“For a public pool?”

“No time to quibble,” Duke replied. “Just pay the man.”

“What happened to serving the people?” I asked.

“You could use some exercise, the way you look,” the kid said to me. “Him especially.”

I followed Duke to the locker room. He stashed his shoes, rolled up his pants legs and padded across the slick tiles. Doris waited for us beside the pool. A school of swimmers churned at the water.

“The humidity,” said Duke. “Normally I’d say it’s good for the skin.”

“Now?”

“Feels like everything is going slack.”

“Let’s make this quick. You see Jen?”

“Give me a minute. This isn’t so easy.”

Duke stood with his toes hanging over the edge of the pool and squinted at the expanse of water.

“Damn,” he said.

“What?”

“I think my dick just fell off.”

“Jokes, Duke,” I said. “This isn’t the time.”

“That’s it, there,” said Doris, pointing at a pink nub in the water.

“I wasn’t using it,” Duke said. “But still...”

“We can’t just leave it in the pool,” Doris said.

At that a swim-capped head rose from the lane at our feet. She stopped and peered at us through her fogged up goggles. Then she yanked them off and said, wide-eyed, “Duke Black? That can’t be you.”

“Jen,” he said. “What a pleasant surprise. You mind handing me my member?”

75. The Enemy-to-Friend Ratio

“What?” said Jen. She pulled off her goggles. Her gaze was in the steel-cutting category. Blue lasers. She focused on Duke and I wondered if he would dissolve.

“I’m missing a part. Over there,” Duke said, pointing.

Jen looked down. I expected disgust but what I saw was indifference. With the back of her hand she swept Duke’s flesh, if it could still be called that, into the pool gutter. It bobbed away in the current.

“I don’t think you need it, Duke.” She took another close look at him. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m dead, Jen.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“You don’t seem surprised,” Doris said.

“I’m surprised he lived as long as he did. Given the enemy-to-friend ratio.”

“Nobody seems much surprised,” Doris continued. “Boom Boom, Edgar, Roscoe. The dead are a part of your day-to-day?”

“Have we met?” Jen asked. She climbed out of the pool.

Duke did the intro. The gals made a quick appraisal of each other. Jen looked like she worked the pool hard every day. Only a nitwit would pick a fight with her, but then you could say the same about Doris. Jen tugged at her swim cap. She was blonde with plenty of hair.

In Duke's description, I was "an associate."

"Duke has so many interesting *associates*," Jen said, lingering on the word. She grabbed a towel and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"I was thinking we could chat," Duke said.

"Here?"

"I'm short on time, Jen."

"Looks like it."

We moved to a corner back from the pool. Duke appeared deader than usual standing next to Jen.

"No hard feelings," Duke began.

"I wouldn't go that far."

"I mean, if you stuck this knife in my back."

"What are you talking about?"

Duke shrugged off my overcoat and let it fall to the floor. He turned around to give Jen a view.

"I read the paper. Don't the police generally remove the evidence?"

"It doesn't pay to get hung up on the technicalities here, Jen. I'm here, I'm there. I'm here and there. The morgue. The pool."

"This isn't the first time I've wondered what's real about you, Duke," she said.

"What's real about anyone, Jenny? What about you? Society matron or..."

She laughed, winked at Doris and patted Duke's arm all at once. "We had a few moments," she said. "Good and bad. Not all of them appropriate for the society pages. Sorry to say, Duke, but it looks like the good moments are mostly behind you."

"More complicated than you think. The flesh is weak, but the spirit? I feel doors opening. Revelation. Tranquility. Words fail."

"That's a first," said Jen.

"I'm past blaming. Innocence and guilt, I don't care. Knowledge. I'm about knowledge. Finding who did it. Knowing why. Coming to an understanding."

"That's quite a change."

"Death does that to you."

"You used to inhabit a more...hmmm...physical plane."

"No need to get into all that now," Doris said.

"Much as I would like to reminisce, Jen, Doris is right. I got a time problem. Six, maybe seven hours left. Then..."

"Then what?"

"Who knows? A blank slate. A black hole. The River Styx. The Pearly Gates. None of the above. No way to tell. Before then, I need to figure out who put the knife in my back."

"You think it's me?"

“The thought occurred.”

“I’m insulted, Duke. I’m a knife-in-your-chest type of woman. If I did it, you’d know. There’s some work I wouldn’t hire out.”

“I told Fatman as much.”

She fixed me with those eyes. What she meant to get across wasn’t clear, but it felt risky to look away.

“Now Duke,” Jen said, “if you want to hear reasons why someone would want to put a knife in you, I can help you there.”

She pulled a hand out from under her towel and held up her index finger.

“One. You always had to come out on top. You win, someone else loses. Life isn’t that kind of game, Duke.”

“Two. You buy yourself affection. The big meal. The big ring. The spotlights shining. You’re big and in comparison everyone else becomes small.”

“Three.”

“You going to have enough fingers?” Doris asked.

“This is the Cliff’s Notes version. Three. The greediness. Nothing was ever enough. One Mercedes? Why not two? A bottle? Why not a magnum? Some people step lightly. Others clomp around like Bigfoot. Which one do you think you are?”

“Four.” A blotch of color rose from her swimsuit and up her neck.

“I think I get the point. Me versus the world.”

“Exactly. The question for you, Duke, isn’t who killed you. It’s why did so many people want to. Finding the actual killer seems beside the point.”

76. Drive, He Said

“Not much help,” I said.

We stood outside the rec center. My socks got wet in the locker room. Duke didn’t care about that but I did.

“Yes and no,” Duke replied. “Like being at an honest version of your own funeral. Instructive. Except your typical dead guy isn’t counting the hours.”

“You die, you shouldn’t have to worry about time,” I said. “Doesn’t seem fair.”

“Who says anything has to be fair?” said Doris.

“Let’s stop thinking about it then,” Duke said. “Let’s take a drive.”

“You serious?” I asked.

“The rest is up to me,” said Duke. “So I’m told.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Don’t worry. Let’s get out of here,” he said. “Take in some nature.”

“I don’t see how that helps.”

“You don’t have to worry about it, Fatman. Not anymore.”

I started the car. “Which way?”

“Summit Avenue. That makes sense.”

“I don’t see how.”

"Charles," said Doris.

"You sure you're okay?" I asked.

"Of course I'm not okay. I got a knife in my back. I died a couple days ago."

Not to mention that he looked worse by the minute. His skin had gone gray. The signal to his extremities seemed to be going out over bad wire. He lurched.

Duke sighed. "Let's go past my old place. Your place, Doris, if you want to keep it."

We rolled along that line-up of old robber baron joints, piles of brick and stone built by characters who stripped the forests, built the railroads, bought low, sold high. They came to roost here, in not-so-cozy palaces where you could billet a couple platoons and still have room left over for the help.

"Slow down," said Duke.

"Which one is it again?"

"There." He pointed at a brick castle. A couple turrets, a crenellated parapet, a front door that could have held off a prolonged assault.

Snow kept falling from the low clouds.

"Pull over, Fatman. Let's take a walk through."

"You're calling the shots."

"Not really, but no need to dwell on that. Go ahead, park under the *porte cochere*."

"What?"

"The side of the house," said Doris. "Under the roof."

I wasn't inside the place and already I felt over my head.

Duke put his thumb on a scanner beside the door. Lights blinked, things beeped and clicked. The door popped open. The hallway light went on automatically.

"What you think?"

"It's a lot to take in."

"No, really."

"You actually want to know?"

"Go ahead."

Where to start? With the fat little angels carved into the ceiling beams? The rugs no doubt hand knotted by Pakistani children? The dining room table on which you could dissect an ox? What about the fireplace, big enough for a cord of firewood? Great spot for an *auto de fe*!

"I don't know, Duke. Seems a little... I don't know... *vast*? It worked for you?"

"Worked, yeah, I suppose that's the word. It was a job, being Duke Black. Entertaining. Put a couple hundred people in here. Fundraisers. Keeping the skids greased, the wheels turning."

"Looks exhausting. The dusting alone."

"I had people. You should keep them on."

"People? How many?"

"Exactly? Christ, I don't know. You'd have to ask my man."

"I have to ask your man to find out how many people we got?"

"Somebody has to. You, Doris. Probably Doris. I'm not sure this is your deal, Fatman."

77. Inside the Chamber of Regret

"Come on upstairs," said Duke.

You could have driven a Jeep up the stairway, which was carved with climbing vines and flowers, plus birds and squirrels, mice, some unidentifiable bugs.

"Who built this place?" I asked.

"Timber baron. Wiped out most of northeast Minnesota. Blanking on his name." He took a few steps. "Blanking on a lot now."

He looked at me. What I saw in his eyes was now, finally, frightening.

"Let's make this quick."

We reached a balcony. The light that remained in the day entered through a skylight. The bedrooms opened off a balcony.

"Here," he said. "The master bedroom. Looks out over the garden. You remember?" he asked Doris.

"Hard to forget," she said.

Too bad about that.

"Paul Bunyan the architect?" I asked, changing the subject for my own sake. The king-size four-poster, the tannenbaum-ready fireplace, a sofa and a pair of chairs, a desk, a couple dressers, side tables, footstools: you name it, it was somewhere in this sea of a room.

"Original equipment?" I asked.

"Except for the four-poster. Take a look."

At first glance I figured it was covered with more vines and blossoms. Yes, that. But also a kama sutra's worth of copulation, carved with surgical precision. I looked more closely at the vines. Instead of blossoms... Well, no need to get into all of that. Presiding over it was a Venus on a center panel. I moved in for a closer look.

"Is this...?"

"I wondered if you'd notice."

Doris leaned in. "Duke," she said. "When did you..."

"After, obviously."

"I don't know if I should be..."

"You don't have to think one thing or the other. You can leave it, you can sell it, you can chop it up for toothpicks. It was for me. It's yours now."

It was hard to know whether to look closer, set time aside to study, or to reach for the anti-bacterial hand soap.

"Flattered," said Duke. "You could be flattered. You want to know when my clock really stopped? When it ended between us."

"I don't think your clock ever really stopped, Duke. I saw you in those society fundraiser photos. Attorney Duke Black with model What's-Her-Name. Duke Black with local society darling Tina Von Roundheel. You weren't drowning in tears."

"I had a life to live. Time doesn't stop. Until it does. But it wasn't the same."

"I can leave," I said. "You got things to settle, settle up. If I'm standing here, however, you got to have some respect. I don't need to hear this."

Doris looked up at me. She opened her mouth, started to say something, stopped.

"I'm sorry, Charles," she said at last.

Sorry not being a word that often drops from Doris's lips, she caught me by surprise. She took hold of my elbow and squeezed.

"I'm trying to explain myself here, Fatman," said Duke. "It's not about you. It's about me. My clock is winding down, buddy. Whatever I got to leave behind, it's got to be now. Or never."

We stood there silently together, looking and not looking at Duke's bed.

"Come on," he said finally. "There one more thing I got to do."

78. Take Me to the River

"Wish I had time to stop by the office," Duke said.

"Other direction."

"Yeah, I know."

We were headed west on Summit, toward the river.

"Most people, they'd be happy to be done with the office," I said.

"Look out the windows, you can see North Dakota from there. You're never lord of all you survey. But you can pretend."

"You going to tell us what Fadilah said?" Doris asked. She was in the backseat again.

Duke turned slightly to face her. "I'll get to that. I need..." He stopped.

"What?" said Doris.

"A better setting. Not a rattletrap automobile. No offense, Fatman."

There wasn't any point in rising to the bait.

At Duke's direction I turned on River Boulevard and took it slow through the curves that followed the Mississippi bluff.

"You want to pick it up a bit, pal?" Duke said. "You're not taking grandma back to the nursing home. I don't have all the time in the world."

I sped up enough to keep him quiet.

I turned on the drive that led down to the river. The headlights caught the bare branches of the trees as we descended. The road was dusted with snow. No one else had driven down this way. The river was invisible, another strand of black in the dark.

I parked on the edge of the empty lot. The headlights hit the far shore.

"Let's get out," said Duke.

"It's cold out there."

"Don't argue with me now. Trust me, I'm never going to ask you to do another thing."

I wasn't so sure about that, but I did what he asked.

Duke led us toward the edge of a drop that looked over the water. He staggered as he walked. I grabbed one of his elbows. Doris took the other.

"You going to be okay?" she said.

"Okay?" Something rumbled in his chest as he considered. Laughter. Fear. Both most likely. "I assure you I'm not going to be okay. In the sense of your normal living person. But okay in the sense of a guy who's been dead for three days? Yeah. Maybe. We're going to see."

Duke lifted up his arms and into the darkness, to the extent that he was able, he roared, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury!"

79. You Knew?

"Duke," said Doris. "There are no ladies and gentlemen of the jury."

"I'm summing up."

One of his eyelids twitched. He shivered.

"You cold?" I asked.

"No, it's not that. I... I don't know."

"Why are we here, Duke?" said Doris.

"I'm making it up as I go. It's like the rest of life, except we're talking minutes instead of years."

"We're giving up on solving this?" I asked. "The killer, we don't care?"

"There wasn't anything to solve. Never was."

Doris grabbed my arm. I looked at Duke, then at the river beyond and the far shore that rested in a clot of shadow.

Finally Doris said, "You knew all along who did it?"

"Let's walk upstream," said Duke.

"Go ahead. Lead the way."

"Give me a hand, will you? My feet aren't working so hot."

Doris and I each took one of his arms. He wobbled through the snow-crueted leaves along the river bank. We didn't get far before he said, "Okay, good enough."

Bare cottonwoods towered over us. The clouds were breaking up now. A few stars poked through.

A tree had fallen beside the path. "Let's sit," said Duke. "I don't know how long I'll be standing."

I brushed off the snow. We sat facing the water. I waited for him to start talking again. He leaned his head on my shoulder. "Duke," I said.

He stirred, lifted his head. "Yeah, okay, you don't have to yell. I'm right here."

"Nothing to solve," said Doris. "You going mystical on us again?"

"There's nothing to solve because... this is a lot to explain. I hope we got time."

"Because what?"

"Because I knew all along who did it."

He went quiet again.

"Duke," Doris said. "Stop fooling around."

"Okay. Jesus. You never had much patience. You know that, right? The guy who did it was..."

He stopped again. He gasped.

80. We Made a Bet

"You're looking at him," said Duke. "Duke Black killed Duke Black."

He stared out at the dark river.

"You mean that figuratively, right?" I asked. "As in, the things I did got me murdered?"

"Mostly I'm a literal guy."

"You stuck a knife in your own back? I don't even see how you do that."

"I ever tell you about a client of mine, one of Boom Boom's pals? Suicide with a pistol. Shot himself twice in the heart. An automatic. But still. Commitment. That's what we're talking about."

"Commitment or no, I don't get it."

"Unlike you, Fatman, I'm not a stiff old geek. Yoga for years."

"You're kidding," said Doris.

"Ashtanga. Reach around to my back, no problem. Held the knife there, then slammed my back against Fatman's door. Bang. Skewered. Dead."

We both looked at him. Something funny was happening with Duke's lips. A smile, electrical misfires, it was hard to say.

Questions swarmed. Before I could get started Doris jumped in.

"Why?" she said. "I don't begin to see why."

"It was Pimlipper. Treacherous old prick. When we were negotiating in the underworld."

"He convinced you to kill yourself?"

"We made a bet."

"You're not serious."

"He was talking about forks in the road. The scuttlebutt about the alternatives. On one hand, the underworld. On the other..."

“This isn’t one of those harem of virgins deals I hope?” Doris said. “Some jihadi fantasy?”

“...on the other, the high road.”

“Heaven?”

“Maybe that’s not the word. Pimplipper got going on the grandeur of eternal emptiness. Peaceful. Powerful. Dark. Water to the ocean, into the vastness, all of that. The clarity of the cold, the purity.”

“That sounded better than the joint on Summit? A line up of Jen Litelys?” I said.

“You had to be there. Pimplipper was the top man in his day. He told you black was white and you stopped to think about it. Pimplipper told me the only thing I didn’t have was nothing.”

"I'm not following."

"Think about it. That house. The staff. You turn your back for a minute, you got bricks falling down around your ears. Contractors. Workmen. Silver service walking out the door. And that's just the house. We're not talking about the vacation property, the boats, the cars."

"I thought you had a plane."

"Don't get me started on the plane. Don't get me started on the office. Investigators. Secretaries. The accountant, the web guy. The IRS. The financial adviser. The buildings, the tenants. Christ. This is the last thing I should think of right now."

"You want the money because it will set you free and the next thing is it's the opposite. You're working for the money. The money is your boss. With the money comes the Jenn Litelys. All of them with their needs, their expectations. Ten thousand bucks here, ten thousand there, you don't notice, it's just numbers, except that there's an idea attached. There's a question."

"What?"

"Why are we here!"

This echoed off the water and the bluffs. "Jesus, Duke, take it easy," I said.

"You asked."

“What was the bet?” Doris asked.

“Pimplipper said I didn’t have the balls to find out which way I’d go. That I was floating along in an unexamined life.”

“That’s an observation, not a bet.”

“This was the deal. I do myself in on Halloween. Big holiday for Pimplipper and his pals. Cosmic understanding was how he put it. I achieve that before the Final Determination...”

“What?”

“His term. I should have asked a few more questions. But you get the drift. I figure things out, the elevator’s going up. It goes down, Pimplipper steps aside and I’m top litigator for the undead.”

“Sounds more like a trap than a bet,” Doris said.

“The dead bastard, he has all day to scheme. Anyway, next thing I knew he had me signing in blood.”

"You were sick of it, why didn't you just give it all away?"
 "Fatman," Duke said. "You're disappointing me now."

81. That's Why I'm Here

"How many years you think it would take to give away everything I got?" Duke said. "I'm not talking a Frogtown flophouse and beater automobile, Fatman. These are serious assets."

"You stick a couple thousand bucks in your pocket, you book a flight to Uruguay. You forget about it."

"The IRS would never let me rest. They want their cut served on a platter."

"You hire a team of lawyers."

"I wanted peace. Not aggravation."

"So you stick a knife in your back? That strike you as an extreme solution?"

"Since when have I been a moderation-in-all-things guy?"

"This is a perfect Duke Black moment," said Doris.

"Why the huffy tone?" said Duke

"Is there something wrong with living your life? Being grateful for the things you're given? The money isn't good enough for you. The things that money can buy aren't good enough. I wasn't good enough. Who do you think you are, that you never can settle?"

"I told you I was wrong about you. Here, let me get down on my knees and tell you again."

Duke threw himself off the bench. He wrapped his arms around Doris's legs and buried his face in his lap.

"I was wrong I was wrong I was wrong," he said.

"Stop it," Doris said. She kicked him away.

Duke landed on his side in the snow and leaves. He coughed, then slowly pulled himself up onto his knees and hands.

"Jesus, Duke." I helped him back onto the log. "Sit down."

Doris stared straight ahead.

"I'm trying to set things right here. It's what I have left," said Duke. "You could try to meet me halfway."

"I don't want to be a prop in your little show," said Doris. "Again. You can't even die without turning it into a performance."

"You could have some respect for the stiff who's turning you into a queen."

"Did I ask you to?"

"It's too late to do anything about it now. The wheels are in motion."

"It's mine whether I want it or not."

"Afraid so."

"This is another deal you've made for me. Tough luck if I don't like it."

"Who doesn't like thirty million bucks? Fifty for all I know. Maybe more."

"You, apparently. If anything you said so far is true."

"Doris," I said. "Duke."

"This isn't your battle, Charles."

I knew better than to say anything to that. We sat in silence. Some kind of animal chattered in the brush.

"Okay," Doris said at last. "We've got questions to answer. We don't have much time. Assuming any of this is true."

"Go ahead," said Duke. "Ask. That's why I'm here."

82. Why with the Lie?

"Why the lie?" Doris said. "Why did you run us in circles?"

"You look at it the wrong way, sure, it doesn't make much sense."

"There's a right way to look at manipulating your friends?"

"Consider the motive."

"To play me and Charles like puppets?"

"Give me some credit."

"For what, exactly?"

"Wanting to be with you. Trying to settle."

"Most people," Doris said, "they would pick up the phone. Invite us to dinner. We'd eat, we'd talk, we'd start nodding off. Charles and I would promise to return the favor. Maybe we would, maybe we wouldn't. That's what most people would do. Most people would not stick a knife in their own back, claim it was murder and drag us along on a phony hunt for a phony killer."

"Most people!" Duke spit out the words. "Since when am I most people? Most people! They count the days until they retire. Then they wait to die. They gobble their pills, they tell you about their aches and pains, they grouse about Social Security and they slowly roll into their graves. Most people."

"This isn't a courtroom, Duke. No one is paying you to create a straw man. It's not Duke Black versus the normal person. It's not an argument. It's the end of your life. Period. No appeal."

"It *is* an argument," Duke said. "Everything is an argument. I pick up an apple, I'm arguing against the orange. I do *this* and it's an argument against everyone who ever did *that*. I chose not to dodder into old age. I chose not to be a shriveled, yammering fool in diapers. I *am* making a case."

"Oh, of course you are. Duke Black is conducting an argument with the universe," Doris declared. "Because Duke Black does not have the humility to accept his fate. Wealth is oppressive. Life is oppressive. If it's what the normal person must accept, then Duke Black will not accept it! Pimplipper didn't make a bet with you. He just buried you in your own hubris."

Duke turned to me. "This isn't going the way I figured."

"Maybe that's not surprising," I said.

"I tried to go through my life lightly, Fatman. You know what I mean?"

"Sorry, Duke. We've walked heavy on the earth, you and me both."

"But playfully. Appreciating the joke in it. Most people..."

"There you go again."

"Don't see the humor."

The clouds broke and the moon came out. The light landed on the water and shimmered there. We could have been lost in the woods. Not that either of us cared to be in such a place. That went double for Doris. The cold crept into my bones.

"I don't know how much longer I can sit here," I said.

"You don't have to. It won't be long now," Duke said. He leaned his head on my shoulder again. I felt whatever remained inside him twitching against me.

83. Duke Black Did Not Go Gently

"Duke," I said.

He jumped a bit.

"You sleeping?"

"No. Drifting. Like dreaming. Except more..."

I lost him again. "What? More what?"

"Deep, Fatman. That's all I can say. Deep. Right here. Now. My life, the memory of it. At a thousand miles an hour."

"I don't get it."

"You can't."

"Wait. One more thing."

"I don't know. It's like talking when you're high. Doesn't work so hot."

"Boom Boom and Edgar and Roscoe. Why were they together at the Widow?"

"Book club."

"It's too late to joke."

"You're telling me."

"Those three?"

"The four of us. For years. Mysteries. Procedurals. The classics. *Crime and Punishment*. *The Trial*. P.D. James. Conan Doyle. Henning Mankell. Nesbø. You name it. Professional interest, me, Roscoe, Boom Boom. Edgar, he brought the paranoid perspective. Helpful. Sometimes. Sometimes just nuts."

"They were acting?"

"Participating. Living the fiction. Ten thou each to play the part, but that's what friends are for."

"Jenny?"

"A joker. For me. She'd do anything. I mean that. Jesus. The things she did."

"This is beyond crazy." Whether Doris was more angry or confused I couldn't say. "Manipulative. Self-aggrandizing."

"Yeah. Sure. But memorable. Right? Talk about it for years. Duke Black did not go gently. Sucked you in, left you puzzling. You will not forget."

"Everybody will be forgotten," said Doris.

"Some more quickly than others. I'm doing what I can."

"What about the knife from our drawer?"

"The one in my back? Roscoe broke in and grabbed it a couple days before. Years on the force. He's got skills. I figured it was a touch. Get everybody up on their toes."

"Why, Duke?" Doris asked. "Why did you drag us into this?"

"I said."

"There has to be more."

He put a hand on her knee. "I loved Fatman. In a way. You don't believe it, but I loved you. You never know what's in the heart of anyone else. You can't imagine. What they remember. What they forget. You don't know how important you are, how insignificant you can be. I wanted a chance to explain, to balance the scales. With money. With time. Like this."

"This was crazy," said Doris.

"Sue me. It's what I could imagine."

"Who wins the bet?" I asked.

"What bet?"

"You or Pimplipper?"

"No way to know," Duke mumbled. "Not yet. It wasn't so much of a bet. More of an exploration. A trip I was willing to take. Pimplipper happened to be there. I appreciated his line of patter, professionally speaking. But what he did was, he turned on what was already inside me. I'm an explorer, Fatman. Not of some stupid mountain or slimy river. My territory for now, death."

He lifted his head off my shoulder. The effort cost him. Duke twisted toward Doris and leaned in to kiss her forehead. Instead he landed hard against her head. Duke was shorting out. Doris put a hand on his and sat still as he settled against her.

"Jesus," Duke whispered. "This is something. This really... Ah... If you knew..."

I looked at him. His eyes darted behind the closed lids.

I grabbed his shoulder and squeezed. "What, Duke? If we knew what? What is it?"

"I... I... I..." he said.

I wasn't surprised when those five kids appeared in their black hoodies. They kicked through the dead leaves and snow in high-tops that gleamed in the moonlight.

"Gentlemen," I said.

"Sir," said their leader. "Ma'am."

"That's all? No jibes or jokes?"

"The time for that is past," he said. His voice had changed. The street-brat mockery was gone and in its place was Charlton Heston-style Old Testament gravitas.

Duke still leaned up against Doris.

“What do we do with him?” I asked.

“Duke Black’s hour is upon him.”

“We can’t just leave him here.”

“The remains of Duke Black are not your concern.”

“You’ll take care of it? I never asked. Who are you guys?”

“We are who we are.”

“Not no rap group, that what you mean,” said the shortest, still willing to yank my chain.

“Duke. Which way is he headed? Up? Down? Can you say?”

“Duke Black goes where he must.”

“That’s a little indefinite, fellas.”

“In general you know not neither the day nor the hour. The time nor the place.

Duke Black knew the time. He was up by half.”

“Figures,” said Doris.

The tallest of them took Duke’s head. The others grabbed an arm or a leg. They lifted him as if he were weightless. Then they carried Duke on the path that led upstream.

Doris and I watched until they disappeared in the darkness.