

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 rings the bell will walk off with ten pounds of candy. Plus the bowl."

"Whoever takes it won't be in a costume 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. "

"Some of them have costumes."

"Don't make excuses."

Another Halloween in Frogtown. I'm not saying Doris's expectations are unreasonable, generally speaking; they just don't make sense in our neck of the woods. She's thinking cute kids in bunny suits, fairy princess gear, cowboys and firemen and what have you. Norman Rockwell Halloween stylistics. Whereas we've got something else going on.

It's the sniff of loot in the air. Enough sugar free and loose to kill off a football stadium full of diabetics. All you've got to do is go knock knock knock, hold out your pillow case and say the magic words. Trick or treat, sucker. Sweet deal, especially if you're a kid who doesn't get too many sweet deals on the other three hundred and sixty four days of the year.

Once, foolishly, we figured we'd escape Halloween and take a long meal at a restaurant. When we returned we found 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. So much for outfoxing feral youth.

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 some 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 some little fist pounds at 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. A kid might be afflicted with some apples and oranges from the up-scale nuts and berry crowd, but there's a chance of a major pay-off. Hershey bars. Moon Pies. The stuff of urban legends. You could call child protection on a parent who takes the kids trick or treating in our part of town.

"What was that?" Doris asked.

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

"You think you should check?"

"I don't want to be mad right now. I'm trying to enjoy the holiday."

"What if the candle is still burning?"

"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 this time."

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. *"That Thing Look So Natural"*

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

"We should call nine one one."

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

"Yo, Fatman," a pack of hooligans bellowed. 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.

"Whoa, Fatman," the tallest of them said. "You got the holiday spirit for sure this time. That body, man, looks real almost."

"Yeah, almost."

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.

"You trying to kill us with all this sugar?"

"You ain't got not apples or bananas?"

"We trying to live healthy, Fatman."

"You're playing me, right?"

A chorus of laughter. "Course we are."

"We be about living. Healthy for somebody else."

"Good to concentrate on the basics," I said. "Otherwise..." I nodded toward Duke's corpse.

"Man, that good, Fatman. That thing look so natural."

"You get what you pay for."

"Ain't that it. You have a good one, F."

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 everything 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 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. Red and blue lights blinked from all of them.
"Duke would appreciate this," Roscoe said.
"The law and order part, sure."
"He was more on the disorder side."
"He got a lot of guys off."
"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 too much better. His running-down-the-perps days were behind him.

"Shouldn't you be outside, investigating?"

"Nah. They 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 have done 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 where you can't get away with anything. Poor Duke, sometimes I thought his skull would cave in. The way those nuns would zonk him with their knuckles. They must have had punching bags in the convent. I don't see how you could do that without practice."

"He wasn't much for the rules."

"He just hadn't learned how to work them yet. Duke and the rules had a fine relationship once he got into the law business. But likeable, no 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."

"So where do you start?" Doris asked.

"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 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 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. So 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 played on the sound system. There was screaming, the sound of chains dragging over cement. Nobody seemed to notice.

I went inside and turned off the sound.

A few minutes later Roscoe came back inside.

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

"What?"

"In the kitchen, okay? This is 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 just 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 kind of 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 little wooden tray you got to hold these."

"Yeah?"

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

"What are you saying?"

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

"You saying 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. The Tightening Noose

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

Roscoe had disappeared into the swarm of cops outside. Every cop on the force seemed to be in my front yard. They stood around in small clusters, like it was a cop reunion at which there happened to be 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 over the obvious. "Evening, ma'am," he said.

"Doris," she said.

"Robert Hutch. Detective."

Nearly everyone looks like a kid to me these days. Hutch looked like a kid at first glance, but there was something else at work. He still had his hair, which he combed straight back, Dracula style. There were wrinkles around his eyes, like he spent too much time squinting. I didn't have to work at mistrusting him.

"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, if 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 some 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 can happen."

"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 way 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. For 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 that 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?"

"I don't know that he ever crossed the threshold. We sort of 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. Sly and discreet, but a look nonetheless. *

"I don't have a clue."

Which was not exactly a lie.

** (Footnote: Duke and I had been involved in a caper. It's a long story. The powers-that-be decided to build a light rail line through my neighborhood. The digging opened up a portal to the underworld, from which the vengeful dead escaped. The dead kidnapped Doris. Duke made a not-entirely-on-the-up-and-up deal to get her back. Get the whole story [here](#).)*

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 right outside your door.

I pushed back the curtains. Dawn wasn't that far off. The birds were starting 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 below the fold.

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, 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 made 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. I was gangly, all elbows and knees. 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 these binges. I woke up one day and weighed, well, let's not dwell on the particulars. I had come to be an impressive figure. 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. Double-Crossing the Dead

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. Not that people are so much interested in going from St. Paul to Minneapolis, or from Minneapolis to St. Paul. We're parochial people for the most part, happy enough to float around in our little orbits. But once the smell of money filled the air, common sense got suffocated.

Before it was all over the project involved 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 — who could even begin to imagine — how all that would play out?

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

It's more complicated than that.

Maybe there is a heaven up there, where fat little angels play cute little instruments, and the sun shines blindingly. Maybe that's true. From personal experience I can tell you for sure that there is a world beneath our feet where the not-quite-one-hundred-percent 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's surface they will be satisfied. And if they are satisfied they will become fully dead. Which they believe would be a happier state of affairs, assuming happier is a term that can be applied to the dead.

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.

Ivan himself got crushed when one of the dead kicked out a car lift and dropped my Volvo on him. Next a local eccentric (trust me, not the only one!) 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.

Needless to say 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 some 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. Because we had been pals back when we were all breathing, the dead tried to get me off their case by kidnapping Doris.

We did some negotiating in the gloomy 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 they got limited access to the topside for the purpose of settling grudges. But as soon as we got back to the surface, Duke 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 just bubbles in the champagne of life."

Too bad for Duke that his bubbles had all burst.

10: Exit Doris, Enter...

I said to Doris that she should call in sick, but she's not a call-in-sick kind of gal. She works in collections. 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? Did anyone tell them about that?"

"We're talking about people who don't have anything. They want all the bright and shinies that everyone else has. They sign on the dotted line and they don't think that much about tomorrow."

"Well, I'm tomorrow."

"I know you are."

"I think 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, gray world, left her eating Cheetos (the dead aren't foodies!) and squatting in the dust. 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 did a twist-off on me," Doris asked more than once in the months following. "Could I really complain?"

A twist-off is a signature move for the dead, an emphatic way of settling a grudge. They can twist your head right 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 off the love seat, stretched her hands up over her head and then touched her toes. There's a trick that is no longer up my sleeve. Doris is supple but she's not a stick. She's got things to hold on to. No need to mention that she drives me more than a little crazy.

I dabbed at the patch of drool she left on my shirt. She's a messy sleeper. It's cute, sort of, but you've got to have 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. Go look at yourself."

"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 was finishing up lunch. I'm regular in my habits. Lunch at the stroke of noon, however much of an effort it is to wait until then. I had roasted a chicken, mashed some potatoes, put together a salad. I don't figure that a half glass of wine at noon is going to kill me, and anyway, how sharp does my thinking need to be? So I had a splash of vinho verde, which in my opinion goes well with the rosemary and garlic on the slightly seared chicken skin.

Since it's lunch, I go light on dessert. A bit of chocolate, maybe an orange, strong coffee to counteract the wine. Then it's on to the afternoon, which is largely given over to planning dinner. Doris has come to expect a glass on wine on the counter and the aromas of a hot meal bubbling away on the stove when she walks in the door. She's an enthusiastic eater. Given what that gal can do with a fork and knife, it's one of 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 running into the glass. They do that sometimes. Except that this sounded like a pterodactyl.

I opened the door and could not help but mutter, *Not this again.*

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, as happily as if he were still alive.

"*Embrazo, amigo!*" Duke exclaimed. He pulled me into his clutches. Though I was not completely at ease hugging a dead guy, 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 bloodslick emerging from Duke's knife wound.

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

"Not anymore," Duke said. He leaned back on the kitchen chair, 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. Meet 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?"

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

11. *The Dead Are on a Schedule*

"Sorry to put it this way, Duke. But looks to me like you're past human help. A good mortician, sure. Assuming you're going open casket. Even so, how much do you care, really? You're dead."

"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. I'm a two-egg, hashbrowns, stack-of-bacon man. Bucket of coffee. Doctor said I was killing myself. Ha ha! What did he know? Turns out I didn't have to do the job myself. Somebody else did it for me."

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

"Actually, I don't think you can. Of you could, but it would just reappear."

"Seems like it gets in the way."

"Yeah, it's a little awkward. But it's not killing me." He stopped to think this over. "Well, 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. *Here I am in the tunnel of light. Okay, this next one is of me at the Pearly Gates. And that guy, he's a little fuzzy, I gotta get a new camera, he's St. Peter and hey, this is the exact moment of judgment!* That's what you have in mind?"

"Sorry, but it's a trip we're all taking. 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 some pals there, the old gang, literally. Another stop on the train of life."

"Yeah, you gotta admit there are differences. Like, it's not another stop. It's the stop."

"So you believe. But 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. You've got to clue me in. 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."

"I thought you did have until the end of time."

"That's just one more popular misconception. Do me a favor, Fatman. Just 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 what he meant to say.

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

"This is embarrassing."

"I thought maybe you'd be past that."

"You could say in my dreams. In my room at night. Somewhere between a dream and the real deal. I'm not sure myself."

"So..."

Asking questions: not always the best way to get answers. People tell you what they've decided to tell you. The smart thing, sometimes, 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. Pimplipper."

They were the legal team from below. Duke went round and round with them. I thought the negotiations would never end. Given that both of them were dead, they weren't in any rush. They seemed to be having a great time, negotiating with Duke for Doris's release. For Duke it was something different than locking horns with some kid in the county prosecutor's office. 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."

"Sounds like they were 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?"

"But you're here."

"For the moment, sure. But this is a special circumstance. 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 they tossed through space. And that landed right 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. But 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."

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

"Let me tell you a few things about being dead, Fatman. I'm not hungry. I'm not thirsty. I haven't pissed since yesterday, and trust me, 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, and I knew there no sense in arguing.

"No offense."

He shrugged.

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

"To warn you. That Pimlipper and Graydon might be stopping by."

"But you said they weren't really there."

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

I didn't believe him. I took Duke to be a professional liar, right up there at the top of the game. Still. 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. I can't get anything past you, Fatman."

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

"I had a premonition. I suppose that's what it must have been."

"Premonition of what?"

"What do you think? You noticed, maybe I've had some lifestyle changes lately?"

"You knew?"

"I had a feeling. That's all I'm saying. 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?"

"Who do I have, Fatman? Brothers?"

"No."

"Sisters?"

"You were an only child."

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

"So what are you saying? 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 and have lived off the interest ever since.

"Who's talking about you?" Duke said. "Sure, you don't need it."

"So then?"

"Doris."

"What about Doris?"

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

"It's bad enough I listen to this from the living, but from dead guys..."

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

"I've got my charms."

"Doubtless. But well hidden."

"What's the point, Duke."

"So I left her everything."

"Everything."

"Okay, not everything. I left a few bucks from my maid, the doorman, the paperboy. But mostly Doris."

"I'm not saying she doesn't deserve it. But Duke. Why Doris? And how do you think this is going to look? You show up dead on my doorstep with my knife in your back and all the money goes to Doris? How do you figure I'm going to explain this?"

"Let's say we've all had a few bad breaks lately."

"But why?"

You think nothing would surprise the dead, but Duke gave me a look. "You mean she never told you?"

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. But at the same time (and all considered, rational opinions pushed aside for the moment) we prefer to know very little (or, better still, nothing at all) regarding the liaisons of our current mates? Why are we so thick-headed?

Of course there is the issue of invidious comparison. That mistakes were made, that there were better candidates for the position, but for one reason or another they did not stay on the job. Maybe they didn't understand that things would not get better, that Bogart, Clooney, Nicholson, Kennedy were currently occupied, dead or otherwise unavailable. Or maybe we did not quite comprehend that Marilyn or Angelina were not waiting in the wings for us either. We all wheel and deal. We all try to trade up. We all have our not-so-reasonable dreams. That's what makes youth so confusing, so cruel.

So, am I a fool? Did I believe a woman of Doris's qualities had no romantic past? No, of course not! And yes, I did whatever was required to avoid considering it. I put that subject in the vast category of things-I-don't-think-about. To wit: Will my heart stop ticking tomorrow? Will I be felled by cancer? Why my savings be gobbled completely in the next, inevitable crash?

Was Duke smirking? Maybe he was. It was hard to tell. His usual expression in bemusement, which is a close relative of the smirk. Anyway, 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 his bald head, and his big nose, and those beady, scheming eyes. My God, what could Doris possibly have seen in him? It's what everyone says 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, however, he *is* loaded. I've got my little stash, which is sufficient for 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. Squirrel away.

Duke was more of the Midas type. If he touched a Jackson it became a Franklin. He lived with the certainty that he could give away a hundred today because a thousand would likely walk through the door tomorrow.

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

It took me considerably less than a second to entertain all 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 tick, 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 various properties, 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."

"But roughly?"

"I'm guessing now. But conservatively? 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 going to be a killer."

15. *Will You Still Love Me...*

I know a couple lyrics from a couple thousand songs. But until you find yourself in a specific situation, you never stop to think how true so many lyrics are.

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

This after your baby has just inherited maybe fifty 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 have to 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've 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. Great. Better than the neighbors. You're the king of the small pond. But Doris is going to be playing in the bigs. Gonna be a lot of sniffing around."

"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 about a timeline. I don't want the sex tape."

"Before you met her. Before you knew she existed. Let me tell you, just speaking about the corporal presence, she's still something. But back then...?"

"I've seen pictures."

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

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

"I'm underselling, pal. Now I'm a dead guy who used to be in her life. 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. A lot of contradictions there."

"It's not your only problem."

"You're telling me."

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

The clock up above the refrigerator ticked off the seconds. Sleet fell and 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."

"I wish I were. It's not so simple."

"The funeral?"

"I left directions. The whole deal at St. Agnes. High Mass. Clouds of incense, bells, choir, Knights of Columbus as pallbearers, 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 vengeful dead."

"You can avoid it?"

"That's why I'm here."

16. *Giving the Undead the Slip*

"That's why you're here. Okay. But you don't mind me asking, what does *here* mean exactly? We're talking, you're here, but I'm guessing right, the medical examiner thinks you're there, on a steel table downtown. For all I know they're weighing your liver right now."

"Yeah, it's complicated. We don't need to get hung up on details. For our purposes, I'm here. It's not a Casper the Friendly Ghost situation. I don't walk through walls. As far as I know. There are some incongruities. Like the knife in my back. That I'm here and I'm there. Frankly, I think I'm more here than there. The Duke on the slab isn't talking back."

"You're more of a spiritual presence, that's what you're saying?"

"Spiritual? I don't know I'd go that far. I got business to conduct, that's the point. I got things I need to take care of." Duke gestured toward his suit coat. Bits of leaf and grit were stuck to the pinstripe wool. His tie was pulled loose, but still around his neck. "These are the tools in my box," he said. "I could use a few more."

"What do you need from me?"

"Here's my understanding. There are two ways you can go. One is you got all your loose ends tied up. The important ones anyway. The people you loved, they know you loved them. The people you didn't? You settled those scores. You didn't die thinking I should have told him this and I should have told her that. Your ledgers are squared away and you're ready to close the books."

"That happens?"

"More often than you would think, apparently."

"Who told you that? There's a HR department in the beyond?"

"Why I know I can't tell you. I know. That's the important thing."

"And if your ledgers aren't square?"

"That's why I'm here. Then you're like Pimlipper and Graydon and all the rest of them in the underworld. You're not quite living, you're not quite dead. You can't rest until you've settled up. And that's easier said than done."

"You got guys dumping tons on concrete down your rat hole, keeping you trapped inside."

"Alright, it wasn't my proudest moment."

"It was a classic double cross."

"I should have done what instead? Let the dead murder whoever they want? Let them get to you and Doris?"

"I'm not saying it was a perfect situation. I'm saying you promised them one thing and you did another."

"Not for the first time, either."

"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. That seems much simpler."

"You working on a time line?"

"I've got three days and three nights."

"How'd they settle on that?"

"It's a biblical deal. They had Jesus on the same time card."

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

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

"What's the beef you've got to settle?"

"Are you kidding me? What's my beef? I got a knife in my back. I got no idea who did it. I find out, I can close out my account. I don't, I'm stuck with the undead."

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

"That's what we've got to figure out. We need a plan, Fatman."

17. The Usual Suspects

"You got three days to find the guy who killed you. And we're already half-way through day one," I said to Duke. "I don't know if you need help or you need a miracle."

"One thing I need is a positive attitude."

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

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

"Okay, okay. Sit down. Let's start figuring this out. Let me get some paper. We'll start making a list. Guys who wanted to whack you."

"Better grab a ream."

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

"You got to stop that. I don't need to be reminded. Time is passing."

"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. Like a chipped tooth, the way you want to poke it with your tongue. I'd give it a wiggle maybe, if I could reach it."

"You want me to try?"

"I don't know. Seems kind of 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 for it, 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. A massive insult. Whole different category. Hugely surprising. Lots of lights going off. Like somebody snapped the main line and the sparks are flying everywhere."

I reached for the handle, then stopped. "I'm thinking, what if there are 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... An autopsy. What a mess. Right now I'm an idea. A representation. Sorry to go all metaphysical on you, Fatman, but I'm a manifestation of a spiritual presence. A not-so-friendly fucking 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?"

"It could be a coincidence. We're missing a knife. Wusthof. Nice knife. Same as the one in your back. No connection."

"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. 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 do crazy shit."

"Yeah."

"Sit down, Fatman."

I went back to my chair, across the table from Duke. I dropped in the seat. I felt like I weighed a million pounds.

"Look me in the eye."

I did. Duke looked good for a corpse, but otherwise his color was off. 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 here 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 but 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. But I'm going with my gut, Fatman."

"It's an impressive tool."

"You should talk."

"So where do we start?"

"At first I thought we started with me and all the characters who might want to do me. But now 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. Setting you up so you can dangle on the hook. Real comedians. And that's just the living. You can't rule out the undead. Who knows how many of them there are or what their crazy beefs might be."

"All I did was open the door and there you were. We 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.

"What I worry about 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 this whacko's ear and bang, I'm dead."

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

"Nut case breaks into your house, steals a knife, plants it in the first guy he sees. Me."

"Maybe you're right. But it's 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 stacked on top of each other. 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. Maybe you're 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?"

"For starters. I'm not trying to insult you."

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

"Okay. Cop. I'm going with Roscoe on this one."

"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, a fun couple. Lot of stuff going up Ginny's nose. In and out of treatment. Some 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?"

"The fat kid in the fedora. With the pink Town Car."

"Exactly. Roscoe is on vacation. Buzzcut is out working alone. Does a traffic stop on Little Phil. Rolling through a stop light or some crap like that. Searches the vehicle. Finds ten thousand in the trunk. He 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 the shit storm that will be unleashed if he breathes a word. Might have worked, except that Little Phil is out on bail on federal charges. And he's a geeky little dude. You know how the cops have video cameras pinned to their uniforms? Little Phil has one in his trunk. Buzzcut is on Candid Camera. So we make a deal. Little Phil pleads to a minor charge, turns over the video, the feds get a juicy takedown on the locals."

"Roscoe loves his partner almost as much as he loves his daughter. He doesn't blame his daughter or that moron, Buzzcut. He blames me."

"Why did he have to stick you with my knife?"

"This isn't paint-by-numbers, Fatman. I don't have the whole thing laid out. But why did he notice it was your knife? We go back with Roscoe, but he's no investigative genius. Seems a little convenient, doesn't it. Then he's the 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 girlfriends."

20. Let's Start with Knuckleheads

"Now what? Knuckleheads or gold-diggers?"

"Knuckleheads?"

"Perps. Persons of interest. The accused. Dopes who get caught. Hope I'm not bursting any bubbles here, Fatman, but we're not talking about geniuses. These are guys who figure murder is a clever solution to their problems."

"Okay then, knuckleheads."

"Jesus, where to start?"

Duke's gaze drifted toward the ceiling. "When's the last time you scrubbed up there?"

I looked up. Once upon a time the ceiling had been white. I painted it myself. When, I couldn't tell you. A long time ago. These old houses didn't come with ceiling fans. You want to get rid of the smoke from, say, a big steak that you're searing in butter on cast iron skillet, you open the window, open the door and hope for the best.

"You came by to discuss home hygiene? I thought you had bigger problems. But if you want, sure, let's scrub the ceiling."

"Alright. You been reading the paper?"

"Sure. I'm maybe the last guy in Frogtown who gets it. But yeah, every day."

"Antonio Romero. That name ring any bells?"

"Sounds kind of poetic."

"He's an imaginative guy. Say you owe him ten thousand for a load of meth and coke. He'll come up with some creative payment incentives."

"Last year about this time his business partner, Larry Rimaster, figures he can put Antonio off a couple days, then a couple weeks, then a couple months. You can get the wrong idea about Antonio. You walk in his door and you're breaking his heart if you won't take a glass of wine, a cup of coffee, a line of coke three inches wide and a foot long. Something. Anything."

Everything is *con su permission*, or *disculpe me*. It's easy to think that he's got a heart and a normally functioning brain.

"That's probably what Larry thought right up to the point that Antonio and his buddy Domingo pushed him into a straight-backed chair, zip-tied him in and began to make polite inquiries regarding where Larry kept his cash.

"As they sliced off his toes one by one.

"No point going into the whole thing, but Antonio got his money and Larry wound up as a waste disposal problem. Antonio and Domingo wrap him in a carpet, cut open a mattress, stuff the carpet inside, then carry the whole mess down to Domingo's F150. So far so good.

"Then they drive to the Holiday on Rice Street, buy a pair of plastic gas tanks and fill them at the pump. Antonio's theory is he'll go around to the back, load Larry in the dumpster, douse the mattress with gas, toss a match and poof, Larry's gone.

"Except that Larry's a big guy, plus there's the carpet and the mattress. They can't lift it all into the dumpster. They put Larry down next to it and torch him there. The fireball looks like somebody's called in an airstrike. Everybody is calling the cops. They pick up Antonio and Domingo in about five minutes. Antonio's first call is to me.

"The cops got surveillance video from the station, eye witnesses, photos of Larry's toes, which they find in Antonio's apartment, plus a couple more cubic yards of evidence. I tell him, 'Antonio, I'm the best lawyer money can buy, but I'm not a magician.'

"He says, 'Four hundred dollars an hour, you are saying I can not dream of magic?'

"You can dream about naming some names for the prosecutor and moving quick before Domingo makes the deal himself. We hang most of this thing on him. You get out after a few years. Everybody's happy except Domingo's pissed, not to mention whoever else you name. Maybe we get you to serve the time out of state.'

"He says, 'I am not this type of *gusano*.'

"Suit yourself, Antonio,' I say. 'But then you're going to be the type of *gusano* who spends twenty years in prison.'

"Let's just say the trial did not go well. Antonio, like the crazy fuck he is, blamed me. The last thing he said to me before they hauled him off was, 'I am very sorry, Don Duke, that our relationship should come to this, but despite the large amounts of money I have given you, still I am going to prison. I regret most deeply that I must have you killed. It is my hope that you will forgive me.'"

"Duke," I said. "Compared to you I feel I'm not really alive. Friends, enemies. People have feelings about you."

"They've got feelings about you, Fatman. Maybe not so emphatic. That's not all bad. Plus Doris. That makes up for a lot. Not to mention you're living."

"Trouble is, this doesn't explain why it's my knife in your back."

"Maybe that's a red herring. It's not like you've got the only set of Wusthof blades in the world. Trust me on this: all sorts of crazy stuff happens. And not much of it is what you think."

21. *Gold-digger*

"Women," I said to Duke. "Who's the leading candidate?"

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

"The majorette, then. You got three days, not three years."

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

"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 some problems with the knife sticking out of his back.

"Here's your name," he said as he returned to the table. "Jenny Litely."

"Jenny Litely? Complicated."

"Tell me."

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

"Who says it has to be an either-or deal?"

"She's still married to what's-his-name?"

"Leo Litely. Yeah, sure. For now. But Jenny is not a real for-better-or-worse kind of gal and Leo has had his problems."

"Like what?"

"Leo had a little investment trouble."

"Who hasn't?"

"You know how it is with fifth generation wealth."

"Not my crowd."

"They think they were brilliant to be born rich. 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 the time being."

"What's that mean?"

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

"He got toasted?"

"Immolated."

"But he must have had a few extra million laying around."

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

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

"How old is Leo? A hundred and forty?"

"That's just how he looks. Probably not a day over eighty."

"And she's what? Forty?"

"She had some tuning up. But you're not far off."

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

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

At that Duke's face twisted up. He stuck his fists into his eyes. An animal sound came from him.

"Jesus, Duke," I said. "I... I don't know what to say."

He pulled his hands back and slapped them on the tabletop. "Ha, Fatman. That time I really did get you!"

"Going ahead. Waste all the time you want to waste. It's not me heading for a permanent home in 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. At least I had some good times. Maybe it was work for her."

"Did Leo know? Could be he's the killer."

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

"Still."

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

"He needs to steal anything?"

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

"So the Litely family is a little stressed, maybe not making the best decisions."

"I haven't even mentioned the kids. All 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. And they have their suspicions that Leo's bed is not her sole port-of-call."

"Sounds like the kids are suspects."

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

"You know Jenny better than me, obviously. But I have some trouble featuring her as an assassin. Wouldn't she hire the pool boy to do it?"

"She's hands-on. Get her fired up and there's no stopping her."

"You got her fired up?"

"I didn't realize. I thought we were having a little fun while she waited for Leo to die. They had a pre-nup, but it wasn't stingy. The kids get their cut, but she got a bigger cut. 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 going to be some quality lawyering the goes into that."

"You again?"

"Would have been. Too bad I won't be around for those billable hours."

"So let me put this together. Jenny figured she'd trade you for Leo?"

"She didn't put it that way. She's a classy customer. She said I was so much more vigorous. That I made her feel loved. I brought out the passion in her that had been buried for such a long time. So on and so forth."

"Did you buy that?"

"Oh, I don't know, Fatman. I suppose some of it was true. I am more vigorous than Leo, but that's not saying so much. We had some quality sack time, but I don't take that for Jenny's prime motivation. 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."

"What was her reaction?"

"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 twisted 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 made some wordless noise in reply."

"Day after Halloween. All Souls Day."

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

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

"Could you?" Duke wondered.

"Forget it, pal. I'm not going there."

He let his head slump against his hands again.

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

Roscoe. Antonio. Jenny. It wasn't much to go on. One was as likely as the other, and it was based on nothing more than Duke's hunch. The only evidence was the blade in Duke's back. The cops had the actual knife, just as the medical examiner had Duke's actual body. This thing in my hand was real enough to touch, but not real at all.

"Sorry to lay this on you, Duke," I said. "You got enough troubles. But your situation?"

"Yeah."

"It's forcing me to question... How do I put this? What can exist. What can't. Sorry to say this, but the nature of reality. If you know what I mean."

"That's a lot to bite off without a tumbler of scotch. Or maybe some premium weed. Both. Not that I'm interested anymore. But you, sounds like you could use some."

With my hand on the handle, it was possible to imagine putting the knife into Duke's back. I could see myself doing it. Doris could have called him, invited him to stop by. For old time's sake. Not to rekindle the relationship, not exactly. But tell him that I was out of town, that it would be cozy to sit around the fireplace, watch the gas flames flare around the artificial logs, reminisce. While I wait in the shadow of the pine tree in the front yard. Maybe I'm in a costume. As Santa Claus. Or Alfred Hitchcock. Or William Howard Taft, to whom I bear a slight resemblance.

Duke knocks on the door. I push aside my Taftish watch fob to extract the steak knife from my suit coat. Bam! And it's in. Like stabbing a watermelon, my fist pressed up against the fine wool of Duke's suit. There's my blade, at play amidst the tender pulsing mass of Duke's organs. I give it a twist, the better to open a gash that can't be sealed. All this in an instant. And then, propelled by the impact, by his own astonishment, by the body's instinct to flee such grave offense, Duke crashes into the front door. Bang! But this is his last act. There is nothing left in him. He slumps now to the stoop and lands with the knife handle stuck in the air, like the staff of a flag planted to declare conquest. Death has defeated life. Again. Duke's flaccid cheek droops against the cold concrete. I stare for a moment at the blood that pools around the handle. Then I retreat inside, where Doris asks, "Did you do it? It is done?" The word *it* representing everything we desire, and everything that we refuse to call by its own correct name. Murder. Murder for a pot of money.

Except that none of this happened.

Except that it seems real enough. Except that it might have.

With my hand on the blade I was not so quick to declare anything impossible.

At that Doris walked in the door.

23. *Honey, I'm Home!*

"Honey, I'm home!" Doris always yells this when she returns from work. It started out as an ironic nod to the world of Blondie and Dagwood. But 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 pretty 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 a 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 was thinking we could celebrate."

"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? So where you hiding them?"

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

"Duke is dead."

"Yeah, that's true."

"He's undead?"

"Not yet. 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 some deal Pimplipper and Graydon cooked up. Those undead lawyers evening up the score."

"It's a little fuzzy. He knows but he doesn't know why he knows. 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. But one thing, baby, you might as well know. 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 looked at her and tried to figure out what was going on behind those eyes. I had no idea.

She patted my stomach and said without looking at me, "I think we better talk to him."

24. *The Next Step*

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

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

"Considering. It could be worse."

"I like that about you, Duke. You're a glass half-full guy. You were."

"Still am. I'm hopeful."

"But you need some help."

"That's why I'm here."

"Charles told me about the will."

"What they say about how you can't take it with you?"

"I'm sure people try."

"It doesn't do you any good."

"I don't know if that much money will do me any good."

"Give it away then. It's yours. You can decide. I never found that it hurt. Give ninety percent away and you'll still have enough. More than enough."

"We had some good times. You were always a gentleman, Duke."

"Not always."

"I wasn't complaining."

"Should I leave?" I asked.

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

"I don't think that. I just 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. Not legions. But I wasn't ever lonely for long.

In comparison, I was just filling the time, pre-Doris. Maybe it's a brain chemistry issue, endorphins, dopamine, who knows what; maybe it's spiritual, beyond biology. It's the difference between being on a cowpath in the dark and a well-lit superhighway. You know it when it happens, and it doesn't happen every day, or even every decade. When I met Doris I knew. And still I can't get enough of it. Five minutes after I met her I knew.

She was holding the mike in a karaoke bar, singing *I Did It My Way*. She wore a black dress. She had pulled her hair straight back into a tight bun. She looked like some type of nun who had taken a wrong turn, severe, luscious, trouble. I grabbed the mike from her, sang *It Was a Very Good Year*, and the rest, if not history, at least explained why we were now standing in my kitchen together, side by side, talking to Duke.

He said, "I don't know why we didn't stick together."

"You were distracted. A few too many other possibilities."

"My head was like a beehive back then. The buzzing of constant temptation. Quantity beating out quality."

"Too late to stir all that up again," said Doris.

"I got other problems now."

"Charles said. Three days."

"We've got to start someplace but I don't see where," I said.

"Fatima," Duke said.

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

"You got a better idea?" Duke asked.

To which the honest answer was, No.

25: *Went to the Fortune Teller...*

Fatima. Her actual name was Tashandra Williams. She took over from her aunt, Leona, after the dead pitched Leona from her forty-third floor apartment downtown. It wasn't a tidy operation. They tossed Leona through the glass. When Duke, Doris and I encountered her in the underworld, she was, like all the rest of them, rage-filled and bent on vengeance. Her appearance wasn't great, either. Duke had the blade in his back; Leona

showed all the unfortunate effects of hitting the street at one 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 paid attention to what you said. As a professional matter she was obliged to listen, to figure out the why behind what you were saying, to stack 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 was a heavy woman and not especially happy even while alive, so she moved with the gravitas of a queen who had just survived an 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. I think there are some rules but I haven't figured them all out. It's more discreet than driving around. Which is probably good. Considering."

"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 in the best of circumstances. When she is agitated, the world is in her way. Before we hit University Avenue she had leaned on the horn a couple of times.

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

She didn't take her eyes off the road.

"You want to talk about it?"

Silence.

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

"Charles?"

"Yes?"

"Please?"

"What?"

"Be quiet please."

Sleet was starting to pile up in the street. The train rolled down the track ahead of us. We watched it. There were a few passengers. Some of

them stared back at us. Other people. They've all got their lives. Mine is as insignificant as theirs are to me. They're ciphers. But that Doris was now, too? Feed me heart to the dogs. It would be a relief.

She made the left at Victoria. She ran through the gears. We pulled up around the block from Fatima's. She's in one of those old frame houses that somehow 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. It's not much to look at. Fatima's place was a mess of Victorian filigree. It could have used some paint — there was a slight whiff of decay on it. The sign said,

Lady Fatima

The Past. The Present. The Future.

Preparation. Prevention. Reconciliation.

No Appointment Necessary.

We parked on the sidestreet and walked around to the front. The sleet-covered sidewalk might as well have been filled with ball bearings. I took two steps and fell, fast and hard. My head clonked on the cement.

Doris hovered over me. "You okay, Charles? You can't go killing yourself now."

She spun around a bit. I had to blink a couple of times before she stayed put.

"I'll be okay. Just help me up."

"This isn't off to a good start."

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

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

"Sure. What else does he have to do?"

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

27. Haze of the Past

"Tashondra! You're all grown up!"

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

"No problem. You're trying to run a business here. Hard habit to break. I remember you..." "Tashondra! You're all grown up!"

"Mister Fatman, no disrespect, but I gotta ask you call me Fatima. 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 the entrepreneur classes."

"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 Leona, well, you know..."

"After she passed?"

"If that's what you want to call it."

"Not quite but almost."

"Anyway."

My memory hadn't kept up with the actual Tashondra. She was still tall and lanky, but she had filled out in some 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. I took it down a few steps. Had to. Leona was so old school. That red velvet wallpaper. The crystal ball. Really. All those clothes that looked like she pinched them from a pypsy wagon. Can't blame her. That was what people wanted. Now, they looking for a professional relationship. They want your leather chairs, your Persian rug hand hand knotted by kids."

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

"What I call it is pre-reality visualization."

At that Duke appeared.

28: I Got a Business I'm Running

It was a confidence booster to see Tashondra react to Duke's appearance. A dead guy shows up 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 auntie 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," Tashondra 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, two and 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 it out. Looking for revenge."

"Undead."

"That's one way to put it."

"You sure you wouldn't rather be undead? Maybe it's not so 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. But this was sotto voce, a little wobbly.

"All the things you ever worried about, gone. The dandelions, the interest rate, the dripping faucet, all the world's scheming babes — you just don't care. You can't even begin to care. It is no longer on your docket. I'm going cosmic on you all now. You're not even a molecule in the blackness of space. I mean, it is o-v-e-r."

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

"Okay, I'm guessing."

"You didn't get the memo. The angels didn't clue you in."

"I'm making a reasonable assumption."

"I used to love your certainty, Duke," said Doris.

"When you're right you're right."

"When you were wrong you thought you were right, but it could be charming. Sometimes."

I didn't know how to take this. I'm not a black and white kind of guy. 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 kind of point Doris thought she was making.

"You all interesting people," Tashondra said. "You all got a lot of opinions. But you mind my asking what brings you by here? You want to engage my services, or you want to stand around in the foyer and shoot the breeze? Sorry to put it that way, but I got a business I'm running here."

29. *The Weight of History*

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

"Fatima."

"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 say you can't take it with you," Fatima said. "Now we know."

"Fatman? Doris?" he said.

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

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

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

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

I handed Fatima a Visa card. Resentfully, I was surprised to discover. Duke died rich, Doris would have his dough, but I ended up with one fifty on my plastic. It didn't seem right.

Fatima ran the card and then said, "Come with me."

We followed her down a narrow hallway. It was E.A. Poe-ish, the way the walls closed in on us. Beat-up wainscoting met up with cracked plaster walls painted a dead shade of green.

"Lot of history back here," Fatima said. "At first I thought, freshen it up, girl. Make it yours. But you know, Auntie 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 after the other. Could be going back a hundred years or more. Powerful things all coming down in this room back here. I felt like Leona be 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. That's why what you see in here, it's old school, for sure."

She opened the door and held it for us.

30. *Fade to Black*

We filed through the doorway. Then we stood there, none of us sure what to say.

There was a feeling in the room.

I got the same jolt decades ago, wandering in the Andes. The bus stopped in a village built at fourteen thousand feet. I was already a little woozy from lack of oxygen. People streamed toward a squat little church off the square. Having no better idea I followed them inside.

This was a Catholic church, but the things going on there didn't have the Pope's seal of approval. Smoke from open fires had blackened the walls. A fire burned now near the altar. And there were flowers, flowers everywhere. A sheep or a llama or some other hooved creature bleated for a while somewhere 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 the people backed 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 a language that wasn't Spanish. I didn't know what this was, or what it was about. I could barely breathe. My attempts at logical thought came to nothing. But anyone with a single brain cell could feel that something was happening in this space, something outside our normal understanding of how the world works. This all came back to me as Fatima closed the door behind us.

"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 wall, maybe look like they be drawn by somebody dipping their finger 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 enthusiastic," Fatima said.

The floor was bare. If the boards 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. Plaster had fallen from

the walls and remained where it landed, mixed in with decades of candle-wax stalagmites. Maybe once the walls were white, but now they were like the inside of a lantern glass, a smudge of brown that got 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."

Fatima shut the door. Noise was amplified in the empty space. Just pulling out the chairs made a racket. We sat. Fatima joined us at the table. Doris sat across from her. Duke was at her left, I was to her right.

"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 fingers there, Mister Duke," she said.

"Now we got to breathe. In and out. Got to get it synced up."

I don't know if I heard it or felt it. Doesn't matter. In that space the sound of our breathing turned into something unearthly.

"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 be hitting a switch."

That's just what I saw. A hand turning an old brown plastic knob. My mind turned to black. How long we sat there I have no idea.

31. *Cosmos Got It's Own Schedule*

"Charles. *Charles.*"

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

"Wha...?"

A hand was on my shoulder now, shaking me.

"Snap to, baby, we're done."

It was Doris. She slowly came into focus.

"When are we starting?"

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

"Why didn't you...?"

I didn't know what to think. Doris put her face a few inches from mine and looked into my eyes. The rest of the room wobbled up and down, as if the law of gravity had been suspended. 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 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," Fatima 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." Fatima 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, Fatima," said Duke. "You say we were all jabbering. You must have some idea."

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

"When do 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 whatever else you got going?"

Fatima rolled her eyes, which was an impressive procedure. Her pupils disappeared. She looked like a dark-skinned version of a Greek statue. "Most people, what they want to know is, will I be happy. Do my man love me. I gonna recover from this sickness or that. Yes yes and yes. True enough. Tell people what they want to hear. No harm done.

"But 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 mighta done it. No offense.

"So you come in here and lickety-split you want to know who did it, that ain't what I like to call ob-vi-ous. Got all three of you yappety-yapping. Don't know what to take serious and what to ignore.

"Picture I get is, ain't nobody behind you. Boom, the knife be there. The lady here wondering if she knew about this big pile of money, if she had any idea. Cause if she did then who's to say she mighta told Mister Fatman here. And maybe he, but no, he wouldn't, he ain't that kind of gentleman."

Flecks of spittle appeared now on Fatima's lips. Her eyes bugged out slightly. She began to shiver. At the same time sweat popped out on her brow.

"You got Mister Fatman wondering if he woulda done it, if he coulda done it. Seeing himself coming outa the trees, sneaking up, bang it's in and there you are, all over in a second. Except why, why he do that? Maybe he

know about the money, too. Maybe she told him and that's how it is. He don't remember and he think he do and nobody knows no more what happened and what didn't happen because the past be gone like it never existed except that it roll on into the now and the future and you try to make sense of that next thing you know your head gonna explode and you still don't know what you doing there to begin with, what you doing on the Fatman's stoop on Halloween except you got a note, a note from somebody that ain't really clear except it says Very Important Business in big red type look like it printed by some kind of moron who holding the pen in his teeth and it tell you this address which turn out to be Mister Fatman's and you stand in the dark for a while where all these kids be running this way and that, that way and this, crazy on candy, screaming like banshees, adults here and there but not too many it being Frogtown after all and what the parents be doing really, sure enough it ain't watching the kids, so you got these few crazy village elders stalking around, like that dude in the sombrero with his overalls tucked into his big boots, and that fat little midget gal smoking a pipe and that man blowing bubbles and then, bang, you dead, you in a tunnel of red that go to black and you want me to make sense of this shit 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 shit that makes no kind of sense at all."

Fatima took a deep breath at last. The spittle stopped spraying. 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." I wondered if this was just a way for Fatima to stop trying to make sense.

"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.

"Yeah, she'll be fine," said Duke.

The sleet had turned to snow. Big flakes fell in the darkness. The train whooshed by. A single set of footprints marked the sidewalk.

"What now?" I said.

"If 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 got some leads. Mister Sombrero. The fat gal. The bubble dude."

"The note," said Doris.

"You didn't mention that," I said.

"There's been a lot happening," Duke replied.

"Ain't that the truth," I said, though for a reason I couldn't put my finger on I suspected it was not.

33. The Unusual Suspects

"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 baquette, 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 thinks they want to hit the jackpot. Quit the job. Stop worrying about money. Blow it when you feel like it. Except that everything changes.

Take the simple act of 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 whatever glop she has created on the table and is enraged. Why don't they build some flexibility into these so-called recipes, she wonders. What kind of fascist is drawn to the work. And so on.

But now that she's a multi-millionaire 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 George Clooney 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? Is it your money or 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.

The way it worked apparently is that Duke showed up in some corner when your back was turned. You didn't see him come, you didn'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?"

"Nah, I don't care about that. More the association."

"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. She flipped her hair, stretched her arms over her head. Was she flirting with a dead guy?

"You want to start with the characters Fatima 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 the hell *is* Mister Bubbles?" Duke asked.

"One thing he isn't is a back-stabber. He's a character. 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 starts blowing bubbles. 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 fat 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 neighborhood character?" Duke wondered.

"Not in the same league as Mister Bubbles. But yeah. You might remember her from a few years back. Pimp beating one of his hookers down on Victoria. Midget gal got off the bus at University, saw what was 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*. The pimp tried to press assault charges but that wasn't going anywhere."

"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 at heart," Doris said. "I volunteered with her at the food shelf. We used to talk. The deal with the pimp, it pushed some buttons for her. Abuse issues as a teenager. Apparently the midget thing with some guys, it drives them nuts. She felt like she was settling scores. Though that came to her afterward. At the time she said she didn't have a thought in her head. Her Doc Martens had a mind of their own, that's how she felt about it. Unless you spent the earlier part of the evening punching out prostitutes, I don't think she was coming after you."

"Who does that leave?" Duke asked.

"The sombrero dude."

"I assume you both know this guy, too."

"Of him," said Doris.

"Same," I added. "More of mysterious figure. His family used to run a bakery on University. 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, right?"

"Yeah, yeah. She ran the register, he worked the back. Used to bring the fresh stuff out on those big steel platters. Your lucky day if you walked in when they were fresh out of 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."

"What would you call it?" Doris said. "The Fat German's Bakery? I don't know the ladies are lining up to dab that behind their ears."

"I'm telling you, the flowery stuff is a dead letter file for your average guy."

"Who says perfume is for men? It's for other women. Ladies know men are dead to the senses. At least you're actually dead. You've got an excuse. Whereas Charles is exceptional in certain regards. He notices."

"Yeah, Fatman is a paragon." Duke paused to tug at his shirt collar. He never looked comfortable now. Something seemed always to be pinching or binding. "Tell me about the man in the hat."

34. *He Wore a Sombrero*

You live in a neighborhood for decade after decade and you lose track of the craziness. Whatever you see day after day becomes your definition of normal. It's true regardless where you live. I don't know that the rich are any less crazy than the poor. Some rich old babe who totes around 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 insane? Except that you cut the rich a few miles of slack. They might have inherited it all, they might be six generations removed from whatever robber baron in their family had the wit to make money, they might all but have tails at this late stage of the game, yet you assume, because they pull up in a BMW, that they are not smack out of their minds. And if you are the head of a non-profit agency with a budget to make, you will solemnly nod your head as they trot out their dizzy theories concerning this and that.

Different story for the man in the sombrero.

He was in his fifties by now, lanky, gangly, fresh-faced, with clear blue eyes that could just as well have opened a portal to outer space. His face glistened, this because he rubbed himself with a protective layer of Vaseline. There were a lot of things out to get him. He needed to protect himself.

Everyone saw him in the streets, running, running, running, all year round. Sure, a lot of people run every day. Not many of them run, however, in huaraches, overalls and a sombrero. Sometimes he'd pass me on the sidewalk and I'd nod at him. "Yo, Edgar." That was his name, Edgar Schlaminski. "Fatman," he replied, as though he were checking me off a list. I never bothered to ask why he was running. He was running from all the things that were chasing him. And 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 any apparent 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 held 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. It was all I could do to stuff my hands in my pocket.

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

35. A Wall of Scribbles

Schlaminski searched for the term to describe his son. It wasn't coming. He wasn't a native speaker, but then again Shakespeare might have found himself at a loss for words. Edgar wasn't an easy character to sum up.

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

This was in the age 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. Back then you didn't assume there was much you could do about it.

"When?" I asked.

"Why not 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 arms of the chairs. Violets blooming on a table near the window. The heat from the bakery ovens rose through a grate in the floor. The air was thick and with the smell of baked sugar.

"Edgar?"

I heard him coughing in a room down the hall.

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

I took a bite of another as I waited for Edgar to come out. I finished it and he still hadn't appeared.

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

"Go ahead, Fatman," he called back. "I'm sick of doughnuts."

"Don't break my heart, Edgar."

"You finish them."

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

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

"What you writing?"

Finally he opened the door. Greasy hair hung over one eye. He was still in his pajamas. The smell was of unwashed clothes. He looked like he hadn't slept in days.

"You want to 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. It took my eyes a while to adjust to the dim light. He had pushed the narrow sagging bed into a corner. The walls were covered with shelves, which were stacked with neat rows of notebooks, each of them labeled with a pair of dates. Beginning and end.

"What you got going on here, Edgar?"

"It's a library. Here. Take a look." He reached up and grabbed a volume. Edgar flipped through the pages. They were filled with tiny cursive script. He handed me the open notebook. "Go ahead. Read it."

I squinted at the text, pulled it up closer to my face. None of that made any difference. His handwriting looked like ants crawling across the page. Orderly but unintelligible.

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

He took a couple steps toward the window. "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. A newspaper blowing down the street. The bus stops. Eight sixteen am. Newspaper story about a 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, but 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."

"If you're writing every bit of trivia down you might as well not be alive. You could go out, do something that you would remember. Pick up a girl. Have a beer. Get a decent meal. Then write about that. Maybe you don't spend all day doing it. 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?"

"I'm saying maybe it's not so meaningful."

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

"Yeah, okay, you're right. If it's meaningful to you to write down how many breaths you take per hour, then sure, scribble away. But this is how you want to spend your life? You're worrying people. Your dad. He sent me up here. He wants me to do something."

"You're doing something. Good for you. It seems 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 of dough, lard and sugar. 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, you can treat yourself to a doughnut anyway. Your old man, he's the Leonard Bernstein of the deep-fat fryer. Let's show a little respect here. By the way, you got any milk in the fridge?"

"You're the one letting your life get away from you, Fatman. You're stuffing your face. You think that's why we're on Earth?"

"I don't know, Edgar. Maybe not. But you think we're here to scribble crap other people can't read in notebook after notebook?"

"Leave me alone." He put back his notebook. Edgar then sat on his bed, pulled his knees up to his chin and buried his face. I didn't see that I was going to get any further with him.

I grabbed the rest of the doughnut, then set the tray down on Edgar's writing desk. A notebook was open. A fountain pen was tucked between the pages.

Back in the bakery his father asked, "So, you had a good chat?"

"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 was a considerable instrument. "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?"

"Nobody is that smart," I said.

37. I'm Not that Kind of Snot Bag

"And the night I croaked, Edgar was there?"

"He went running past," I said.

"He doesn't really run," Doris added. "It's more a fast shuffle. It's hard to run in sandals."

"I don't think the sombrero helps either."

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

"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 might shake out the truth. Especially when the corpse asking the questions is the guy you killed."

"He's innocent until proven guilty, right?" I asked.

"Technically, sure. But who's not guilty?" Duke laughed, which set loose a dead odor that came from deep within him.

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

"What isn't complicated?" he asked.

"You know where he lives?"

"Same place. Parents are dead, but he kept the building. 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."

Doris got behind the wheel. She's impatient, as I mentioned. It's easier on me to let her drive. Not easier on the rest of the world, since she has a heavy hand with the horn. She's not afraid to ride your bumper if your speed is insufficient. 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. Screw it." She made the left against the red. We shot down University Avenue.

I don't bother to comment on her driving any more.

I'm not the type of person who blurts things out. I weigh my words. Too much so, probably. In my world, a lot goes unsaid, or is said indirectly. 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 my 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."

"Lot of people going to be sniffing around." I tried to sound casual, but something caught in my throat.

"Charles. What are you getting at?"

"I'm wondering. You and me. 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 gears inside her head. Doris turned onto a sidestreet. They killed all the parking on University when they put in the train. "Oh, Charles," she said finally. "It's only money."

Given that it was maybe fifty million bucks, I figured it was money and a whole lot more.

38. *Ringling Edgar's Bell*

The sun had gone down around six. The snow and sleet that covered the sidewalks glinted under the street lights. If you didn't mind six months of cold, and filthy, frozen slush piled up alongside the sidewalk, and the chance that your pipes would freeze on the nights when it hit twenty below, 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. The sliver of Edgar's face that I could see answered the question of why I so often saw him running. Things were chasing him.

"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 pushed the chain loose and opened the door. "Okay, come in."

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

Without saying anything more, Edgar turned and walked up the stairs. We followed.

If Edgar had swept the steps, it hadn't been in the past ten years. A trail ran through the dust. If Mother Schlaminski had been able to see this, Edgar would be in big trouble. He held open the door for us at the top of the stairs.

It was the same place I remembered. The fussy wallpaper, the doilies on the arm chairs. But nothing had been cleaned since who-knows-when. Edgar had stacked his diaries along the walls.

"You get much company, Edgar?"

He gave me a what-the-hell-are-you-even-talking-about look. That sheen of Vaseline covered his features. He wore the usual overalls, but had parked his sombrero on top of a lamp.

Before he 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. "Are 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. "I am one more guy in a suit. But unlike most of them, 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 back 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 were. Usually people say I'm the crazy one."

39. *You Can Take Suspicion Too Far*

"The knife. That 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 is in a tough racket," Duke told Edgar. "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 nothing. "Nothing. 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. He moved his head from one side to the other, all the while looking in Duke's eyes.

"Do those look like the eyes of a living person? Hard to put a finger on. But there's something there. Or, something not there. The spark of life. The reflection of life. You see yourself come alive in the eyes of others. Isn't that how it usually works? But you look into my eyes and what do you see?"

"I don't know," said Edgar. He sounded like he didn't trust his own judgment.

"You see I'm dead. You feel it in your bones. Isn't that the truth?"

"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 have reports, Edgar."

"What kind of reports?"

"Reports that you were seen 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 and a sombrero. Sound like you?"

"That could describe a lot of people."

"Where? In Mexico?"

"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."
"Let's get back to the basics. You were out on Halloween. Is that right, Edgar?"
"Okay. I was out."
"Running."
"More of a jog actually."
"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 ascertain 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 would help him. I felt bad for him but I wasn't going to stop Duke. Who, in any case, could not be stopped.
"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. I can answer my questions without getting an answer from you."
"Is that true?" I asked, alarmed. I'm not ashamed of my thoughts. At least not all of them. I mean sure, some aren't fit for public consumption. There are things I would not tell you to your face. I'm not an open book, but then who is? "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. I got to the street. I did the same thing I always do. I turned right. Past the bank. Past the fire station. All the way to Lex, then

another right. Up, over the bridge, right on Front, all the way to the cemetery. Another right, through the gate."

"You run through the cemetery?"

"That's a little creepy," Doris said.

"That's your opinion. It's quiet. Nobody bothers you. I take a couple laps, then go back toward the tracks."

"The railroad?"

"There's a hole in the fence. I get out there and run through the mall."

"What do the Muslims at the mosque make of that?"

"I don't comment on what they were. They don't comment on what I wear. You got a problem with the Muslims?"

"None at all. So then..."

"Yeah, I jog down Milton, I turn on Charles."

"Past Fatman's house then. That's what you're saying."

"I've been doing it for years."

"That's true," I said. "I don't see you every night. But it's your route."

"I got habits."

"Obsessions. Would you call them obsessions?"

"I thought you were a lawyer."

"So I was."

"Not a psychiatrist."

"Excuse me if I wonder who stuck a knife in my back."

"Well it wasn't me. "Why would I do such a thing."

"You still keep your diaries, Edgar?" I asked.

He gestured at the notebooks snaking 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 really. More like a catalogue of activity. 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."

"I don't see the difference."

"Jesus, Edgar, just get the book, okay?" Duke snapped.

41. *Let's Get that Creep Out of Here*

He shuffled down the hall to the same room he had occupied as a kid. I could resist. I followed him there. I passed another bedroom. It must have been the room his parents once 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. My guess was nothing had been moved after his mother died. Old man Schlaminski went first, dead of a clogged up heart. Mother Schlaminski passed from a broken heart a couple months later. Her hair brushes and a few bottles of cheap toilet water were still 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."

I have no idea what was going on behind those blue eyes. It was like looking into a hole drilled into a frozen lake. Maybe Nature tries to tell you something, but who knows what it is?

"Let's go read this and get that creep out of here," Edgar said.

I followed him back to the parlor.

Duke and Doris were arranged hip to hip on the sofa, apparently expecting Edgar to stand before them and recite.

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. It was painful to behold.

"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 thrown on the sidewalk. Kids. Kids. Kids. Smash. Pumpkin. Smell of candles. Fire of leaves. Home. Up the steps. One two three four..."

Edgar went on in this vein for another few minutes, which doesn't sound like a long time unless you're listening to someone else's grocery list.

"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.

42. In the World's Unfriendliest Bar

Doris and I stood alone on University Avenue. Duke had disappeared at the top of the steps. By now neither one of us thought to remark on his comings and goings. He was here. He wasn't. That was the way it was.

Used to be that the streets were occupied. Not by people you really wanted to know, unless you were a crack head, a dealer, a prostitute or a john. But busy nonetheless. Then the bottom fell out of that economy. The city bought up the porn theaters at Dale and University and turned them into empty lots. They bought up the strip club and made that into a cop shop. The dealers who weren't imprisoned either wised up, got killed by rivals or died of related causes. Ditto for the crack heads. Now the Avenue was quiet. The light rail track formed a wall between one side of the street and the other. Immigrants still ran the restaurants along the strip, but nobody was making a fortune. Street parking got whacked when the rail line went in. You could fire a cannon down the sidewalk and not run much risk of hurting anyone. The sense of emptiness there could creep up on you, and leave you wondering if you missed the memo about the end of the world.

The breeze picked up when the snow and sleet stopped. Now the snow drifted down the empty street. The awnings flapped in the breeze. My nose, which is not a delicate instrument, felt like it was being 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. I think she did it mostly to keep herself from slipping on the icy sidewalk.

Still, 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. A lot of people describe it as the world's unfriendliest bar. I'm not arguing. You walk in the joint and every head — every old white head, to be specific — turns. You wonder what you did to earn such apparent loathing from people you don't know. 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 more blacks, plus the Africans, the Somalis and Ethiopians, all of them taking their turn to open restaurants, clothing stores, tailor shops, nail salons, whatever the market would bear. Next it will be the Iraqis and the Afghanis, and who knows what after that. All of them with their impenetrable languages, their garb, their customs which you now have the opportunity to contemplate.

No problem! You ask me, all men can be brothers. I've had some entertaining nights in the Hmong bar on Dale, bending elbows with Blong, Dai, Chou, Bee and the rest of the guys. Most of them barely crack five feet, and where they put the alcohol they pour down 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.

So I walked into the world's unfriendliest bar, grabbed a stool, arranged my girth upon it, and motioned for a beer.

43. So Enticing. So Out of Place

The bartender — need I say it? — was an old white guy himself, unhealthy in the complexion department, sagging at the waistline, his belt buried in blubber, ears flapping loosely, as if he were slowly making the shift from elephant to man. He filled a glass and set it down before me wordlessly.

I noticed a woman who was running the pool table. Everyone, I'm sure, noticed the woman who was running the pool table. Doris, of course. Then as now, she was petite, but there is a lot stuffed into that package.

The hair: a 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 various forms.

Sports babble came from the televisions, one at each end of the bar. The ambience being one of sullen drunkenness, there wasn't much idle chatter. From the pool table, this: Tick. Click. Whack! Another ball slammed against the pocket. Doris did not put a ball away delicately. It died of internal injuries before it disappeared under the table.

The argument started the way these things so often do. You could say that alcohol is the root, but in my opinion it does back farther than that, to the thing that brings you to a place like the world's unfriendliest bar in the first place. It's loneliness that is mired in laziness. You're sick of listening to the clock tick at home, but lacking in the ambition that might take you to a place with music, or art, or dance. And so, instead of civilization, this. Then, to disguise the unsatisfactory nature of your decision, a beer. Another. Maybe a game. Pool will do. A quarter on the table. Pick a cue. Chalk. Wait. One more beer. Chalk. Finally, the game.

And it is against this female who should by all rights not be anywhere near such a place. To digress again for a moment, she's like the police decoys who worked the neighborhood in john stings. So nicely put together. So enticing. So out of place. Is it your lucky day, Mr. John, or are you a moron to believe it can be so? The answer being B, not A. But who doesn't want to believe he's charmed?

Thus Doris. Though 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 the sleeves ripped off. 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."

44.

Tick. Click. Whack! An explosion. Give a big man a pool cue and balls will fly, violently if not purposefully. They rolled around for a very long time, though none happened into a pocket. Doris pretended to size up the table. Knowing what I know about her now, she took a glance and had what she needed.

Thonk, thonk, thonk. She ran the table, put away the eight ball, batted an eye and said, "Next up."

"One more," her opponent said.

"You got people in line here," Doris replied.

"One more won't kill anyone." He offered a menacing grin at a gangly 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."

"I think you're done."

"I'm not done until I say I'm done."

"I seriously doubt that."

"No man at home to teach you how to mind your tongue?"

"What?"

"I said, you got a lot of attitude for such a little thing."

"Tell me this. You think you're threatening me?"

"I'm telling you what's on my mind. You feel threatened, that's not my problem."

He sneered, smirked. Ugly expressions that, along with his size, had probably gotten him what he wanted many times before.

I suppose that's why he wasn't prepared for what happened next.

Doris flipped her cue stick and grabbed the end with both hands.

Maybe Mickey Mantle swung a bat harder, but she couldn't have been far behind. She caught him above the ear. He had an instant to look at her in wonder, before the blood began to spout and his eyes rolled back.

After he 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'm guessing you've got a better attitude than our friend here."

"You're right about that, 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 kind to pretend.

The fellow on the floor snorted now and then. Somebody asked, "You think we should call an ambulance? That's a lot of blood."

"You always get that with a cut to the head," 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 watching the games, drinking, mostly not talking to each other. Next time I glanced at the man on the floor, he blinked, he snorted. He swatted at his pocket and made to reach inside it.

What he had in there I had no idea. Maybe nothing.

I didn't think it was a good idea to make a bet on that. 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 said, is not inconsiderable. I was not surprised to feel a bone or two 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. Thanks," she said.

I stood there for a while, watching her with his arm beneath my foot.

Eventually she finished her game. Eventually his wife showed up, along with a wiry young man who looked like he knew something about crystal meth.

"Ralph," 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."

I gave her the name on my birth certificate. "Charles," she said.

"Charles. I like a big man, Charles."

"Lucky for both of us. We're in the right place."

No need to go into the details concerning the rest of that night. Let me just say that the memory is a treasure, a wonderment, proof of God's mercy and kindness. I invoked His name more than once that night.

46. *You Ought to Knock*

Uh. A little distracted there, remembering the simple old days, when Doris and I minded our own business in my Frogtown love shack. I cooked her what she wanted, when she wanted it. She needed a drink? Snoogums, 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.

I tried not to think about it.

I parked the car, opened Doris's door. She said, "All I want to do is go to sleep."

"Let's get inside. Maybe a little taste of Glenlivet."

"Bed is enough for me."

I opened the door and Duke was already sitting at the kitchen table.

"You take the scenic route?" he asked.

"I know you've been through some hard times. 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. What do I have now? Not even forty-eight."

"I got to go to work tomorrow. Which means I got to get 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 of all of that."

"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 draped her coat over a kitchen chair and left us alone at the table.

"She's a hard-headed woman, Fatman. Not completely reasonable."

"You don't want to pick a fight with her."

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've 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. I looked in the mirror and saw myself through the eyes I used to have. The eyes of a kid in Frogtown, Fatman. Lard and sugar sandwiches, for Christ's sake. Patches on my pants. 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."

"So what's our next move?"

"We better go 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.

"I feel like I'm on a high school date," I said.

"Cozy." Duke put his hand on my thigh. "You don't mind if I..."

"What the hell!"

He laughed. A hollow sort of laugh, but a laugh. "Ha. Can still get a rise out of the Fatman."

I turned on Sherburne Avenue. Roscoe's house was just west of Dale, behind the bank. "Cops are supposed to live in the suburbs." Duke said. "A little rough here."

"It was 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.

I had to think about that. "Little of both. Looks good tonight, though."

The dusting of snow buried most of the litter in the street. Street light reflected off 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 the chainlink fence. But now, briefly, the yards were spotless, white. You don't mind freezing your ass and navigating sidewalks that the neighbors are too lazy to shovel, 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 of Roscoe's house and left the motor running. His place was a small worker's cottage. Roscoe's dad worked at the rail yard that used to be at the corner of Minnehaha and Dale. The yellow brick shops got ripped down decades ago, but the little houses the workers built for themselves are still standing, albeit slowly falling in on themselves.

A dim 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."

"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."

"I think he might wonder what brings you by. Considering you're dead."

"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 a little bleary, a little boozy. He wore a t-shirt that could have used some bleach. His paunch lapped over his sweatpants. "Good costume on your buddy," he said.

"No costume, Roscoe. It's me, Duke. In the flesh. Or my former flesh."

"Yeah, and I'm Alan Funt. Duke is dead. Maybe you should think twice, making fun of the recently deceased."

"You're a cop, Roscoe. You're supposed to be observant. Does this look like a mask? If I'm not Duke, who the hell am I?"

"You got your three types of basic old white guys. Your skinny guys with the gray hair and 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 good look."

He struggled to focus. "You ought to wear a suit, Fatman. You're screwing up my categories."

"It's Duke, Roscoe," I said. "Maybe you should show him the knife."

Duke sighed. "The Doubting Thomas move. 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. Duke. Call me Duke."

"Sure buddy. What you having?"

"Nothing. Since I've been dead, nothing. No eating. No drinking. No breathing. Nothing."

"Cheap date, right Fatman? Come on 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 stuck in the Carter years. Fluorescent fixture on the ceiling. Formica. Linoleum. Harvest gold stove and refrigerator. Dark stained wood cabinets. A 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 busy schedule?"

"Truth is, yeah, we do."

49. *Box Full of Grievance*

"I got seventy two hours to figure out who killed me," Duke told Roscoe. "And 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."

"Maybe I got forty two hours left."

"Then what?"

"Down into the underworld."

"Hmm," said Roscoe. "Tough gig. Didn't seem like anybody was happy down there. At least considering what happened when they got out. What a mess. That psychic tossed from the highrise. The Colonel skewered on his dining room table with his sword."

"You're forgetting Ivan," I said.

"Oh, yeah, the mechanic. One of the dead guys dropped your car on him."

"I never did get the car back from impound."

"Evidence." He shrugged. "That's the way it goes."

"Who wants to spend eternity with those guys?" Duke said.

"Seemed like all they wanted to do was settle scores. Then again, it might be satisfying. I got a couple dozen scores I wouldn't mind settling."

"You want that to be the only thing you got on your mind when you open your eyes in the morning?"

"Ha, ha. Who says it's not?"

"You think it's going to make you happy, getting even. Take it from me, people delight in their grievances. It's what the lawyer racket is all about. Then you win your case, you settle your score, somebody goes to jail or you get a suitcase full of money. But you think that makes people happy?"

"From what I can tell, yeah, it does. They feel like the cosmic scales have been balanced. Good and evil, sorted out, everything put in its place. The general idea behind the cop business, too."

"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 really had an effect on you, pal."

"What you mean?"

"You're sounding like Jesus Christ. Turn the other cheek. That's what you're saying? Forgive and you will be forgiven. So on and so forth."

"I didn't know you were paying attention back in school."

"It seeps in regardless."

"Yeah, well, I didn't have to die to notice this. It was my business. The beefs of others made *me* happy. I was part of the grievance industrial complex. The lawyers, the judges, the investigators, the court reporters, the army of clerks and law librarians, the paralegals, the BMW salesmen."

"The BMW salesmen?"

"Where would they be without lawyers?"

"You got a point. They're not living off cops."

"I'm saying justice and happiness are not the same thing, that's all."

"Now that I could have told you. But 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 interested in not spending the rest of time in the underworld."

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. We believe the truth sets you free, right? Though as I say, I have some doubts."

"That's what I'm talking about. What if who killed you is irrelevant? You're dead anyway, right? You gonna be less dead if you know 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 Wusthofs and she sprinkles them around. And one just happened to end up in Duke's back."

"This is why people hate cops, Roscoe. It's the cynicism."

"It goes with the job." He grabbed the bottle of Jim Beam from the table and poured himself four fingers worth. "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? Jesus Christ or Timothy Leary? You sure that's just bourbon?"

"Have it your way. Why do you think you'll 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. I can't tell you why I know. I know. In the range of nutball facts about existence, 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 on the individual. And then, whammo, 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. So 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. Might make you the top guy in the afterlife."

Duke seemed to consider this. He squirmed in his chair, 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. It seemed wrong, twisting the knife in his back. It was the way he gasped as soon as I got a hand on it. Twist, gasp, groan. "How's that?" I asked.

"Just a little more."

"Let me get a camera," Roscoe said. "This looks like a new niche for the gay porn sites."

"Okay. Thanks, Fatman. Someday you'll be dead, Roscoe."

"That we're agreed on."

Duke pulled himself up straight in his chair. He fixed Roscoe with those not-quite-living eyes of his, bored in as if he were trying to look through 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. No Reverie Like a Dead Reverie

"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 was slurring his words, but only slightly.

"Excuse me, Roscoe. Believe me, it's nothing personal." He 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."

"No, of course not."

"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 and your grasp, same thing."

"I suppose."

"No real contradiction between how you were raised and what you became."

"What I just said. I landed in the family business. Except we didn't own it."

"Lucky for you. It would be you paying the settlement every time some knucklehead gets thumped by the cops."

"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 know how it smells. 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 some lunatic hoarder had taken over. Which was the fact of the matter. He was nuts. Or to be slightly more understanding, he was 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. Your backyard, it was like a department store for the insane."

"Exactly." Duke closed his eyes, remembering.

When they 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. I mean, you're right there."

"I don't know that sounds so good," said Roscoe.

"You try it once, you'll feel different."

"You were saying how you wanted to kill yourself. Makes me wonder about our investigation."

"Doesn't seem you're killing yourself on that either."

"I'm still don't get it. What you got to be unhappy about?"

"Okay. I see I got to fill in all the blanks."

52. A Suit of Blood-Soaked Bills

"Sure. What do I got to be unhappy about? Exactly," said Duke.

Roscoe shook the cubes in his bourbon. "Women. Cars. Nice clothes. Maybe not this suit anymore, but generally speaking. More money than you know what to do with. Name in the paper. Good seat at the fancy restaurants. I don't see the problem."

"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. Always room in that industry."

"I'm saying I can't help sometimes but see myself the way the old man would see me. Standing there in his crapped up overalls, holding some damn thing he'd just yanked from a garbage can. A broken lamp. A vacuum missing its wheels. Treasures! 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 three hundred dollars an hour. Makes more in a week's work than I make in a year and isn't he special? Isn't he now?"

"Duke, you father has been dead for what? Thirty years? He's not thinking anything about you."

"Unless he's waiting in the underworld."

"Yeah, I suppose we can't rule that out. Given the evidence. Nonetheless. He had his life, you had yours."

"I know that. It had its contradictions."

"Maybe you're focused on the wrong ones."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You want to know what I think, I'll tell you what I think. Question is, you want to know?"

"Go ahead. 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 I happen to know you represented scumbags. Guys so guilty their own mothers wouldn't pay for a lawyer for them. Guys who paid you off with blood money. Money from drugs, money from killings. That's what you're wearing on your back. It's a suit made out of blood-soaked rags. The pictures on your walls, there should be a court order, they should be portraits of the innocents that your clients murdered. Guys entitled to a robust defense. Whatever you want to call it. However you want to justify it. One thing about your 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 it against the guy who did."

52. Sharing a Coffin

"Now what?" I asked Duke.

We were back in my Volvo. Duke arranged himself so that the knife blade was between the bucket seats. That meant his head was on my shoulder.

"Maybe it would be easier if you leaned forward," I said.

"The 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 okay for you?"

"A little like sharing a coffin, you want to know the truth."

"It's not that bad! We're talking. We're working together. We got a project here, Fatman."

"That's true. But you're still dead."

"You think of it, 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 if my lungs

were working? We shared our thoughts, we compared notes. We communicated. We're still doing that. So what if I'm dead?"

"Most people see it as a barrier."

"Most people! Most people, if you put death in a package, you got a celebrity endorsement, you bought an ad at Superbowl halftime, they'd be lining up to hand you their credit card. New and improved! Gluten-free death! 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 looked so innocent in the morning with that trickle of drool running down her cheek."

I let that pass. It was enough to think 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? 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 paltry, doesn't it."

"I don't know, Duke. It's too late for me to think anymore. Do what seems right. 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 Like 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 go on this. Shrug and fall back to 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, as 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, not drinking?" I asked him.

"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've 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 certainly 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. This isn't the only thing you ever promised 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 spread across her cheeks. A thermometer stuck in boiling water, that was the comparison that 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 like this."

54. A Small Misunderstanding

"We really got to go into this again?" Duke asked. "I felt 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. "I don't need the last detail."

"Duke and I ran in the same circles. Your bad debt and criminal crowd, you can imagine, 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 at flood. 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 one who got arrested for fondling the teenager in the pool. That's where we met. Which figures."

Duke winced. "You had your rough spots. Things that happened that shouldn't have happened. A lot of judges and lawyers, a lot of public officials, pretending now they weren't there, they didn't inhale, their pants were never down around their ankles. Good thing the cellphone video hadn't been invented. A lot of the 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, I don't need to hear about thising and thating."

"We had some good times is what I'm saying. In all 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."

"With 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 to Paris. Paris to Duke's penthouse. 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 some other features," Duke said.

"Can we get back to the story here?" I asked.

"So we're standing on the balcony. The city is stretched out below us. The 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 on that. But on the basis of the evidence. Man hands over little hinged box. Gold ring. Huge 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

If you've had chickenpox, you understand the competing desires. Scratch: yes! Nearly 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.

"So we're living in Duke's penthouse," Doris said. "The diamond on that ring, it's so big I can barely lift my hand. People on the street said, 'Keep that hand in your pocket, sweetheart. Somebody gonna cut your finger off to get 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 until you were eight. Strangling chickens with your bare hands. You had some tough breaks, you had some good luck. Look in the mirror, will you? A face like yours, 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."

"This takes as long as it takes."

Duke sighed, which takes some doing 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? It was like an interrogation. 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 to see someone else escape. Not unless they're escaping themselves. But that's another story.

"So the girls say they're taking me out. We're going to have a girl's night. Big celebration. They're buying this time. Then after I'm hitched to Mister Money Bags, I can pay them back. Definitely! Of course! So I call my 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.

"What do you need fresh air for? Don't leave for the good part, Duke?"

"I think I know where this is headed," I said.

"Of course you do. But isn't that the best kind of story? The kind where all your suspicions are confirmed?"

"I think people like a surprise."

"That's where you're wrong."

"Okay, Doris, do us a favor and bring it on home," said Duke.

"You remember The Little Wagon? Journalists' bar, downtown Minneapolis? The kind of place where the barmaids would congratulate you on the correct use of the subjunctive? Our office was right around the corner.

"So we head for the Wagon. Happy hour. Two for one everything. Cocktail weenies in a steam tray. Chicken wings. One round, two rounds, three rounds, then who's counting. All of a sudden I don't feel so good. Cocktail weenies making a repeat performance. The girls call a cab, Mary Beth jumps in with me, says she'll make sure I get to the door. And we're off to the penthouse.

"I'm stabbing the door with my key. Mary Beth is holding 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 his 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."

Doris and I stared into our coffee for a while.

Then Doris said, "So what's our plan?"

56. *Life Is Messy*

"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 of it you're on. Doris grabbed her robe and pulled it tight around herself. She looked at me and I saw tears in her eyes. Whether these were tears of rage or grief — the Duke that got away! — I couldn't tell.

"What?" Duke said.

"I don't get it."

"What's not to get?"

"I'm not saying this just because Doris is sitting here."

"You're an honorable guy, Fatman. That's why I'm here."

"Maybe."

"Cut me some slack, okay?"

"What I don't get, Duke, is, you got Doris on the hook. Ring on her finger. Wedding bells ringing. Why do you mess it up? One babe more or less, what difference could it make to somebody like you? What was she? Girl number four hundred and fifty seven? Your cost-benefit analysis, it doesn't make sense to me."

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."

"Seems to me you're the guy with the gun, shooting himself in the head."

"You're not seeing it from my perspective."

"The great inseminator point of view," said Doris.

"I'm not saying I was right. I'm not saying I was wrong. I'm explaining myself, okay?"

"Maybe you could be honest about it."

"I'm trying. Who wants to hear someone being honest?"

I thought about that. The answer being, no one and never. Not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Parts of it, sure. The flattering parts. But spare me the precise totality. Who needs to be crushed under that bank vault?

"I was a guy who took what was ahead of him," said Duke. "I didn't live by second and third thoughts. I grabbed what was there. That girl, Jesus, I don't remember her name. Maybe I never knew it. What I saw in her is

what she saw in me. She was an opportunity for me. I was an opportunity for her. We were wolves in the world. Perfect for each other, for that moment. I didn't stop to think how it would work out. I didn't say, well, 'If A leads to B, and C inevitably results in Doris walking in the door to discover 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."

"So then why give me the ring? Why let me believe in a happy-ever-after fantasy?"

"You got all this self-knowledge," I added. "Why not use it?"

"You think anyone's mind is so orderly?" Duke asked. "You think I can't believe two contradictory things at once? Two?! 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."

"This is taking a bad turn."

"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. "Hard to say how many more chances I'll get."

"Let's not go negative," I said. "We got a lot of time left."

"Some. Either way, who knows. No sunrise in the underworld, that's for sure. But the alternatives? Sunrise? No telling."

"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 go in anyway, tell them it was a mix up."

"They'll think I'm a flake. I'll go with it. If I'm really in line for his money, he's right, it doesn't much matter whether I show up or not."

"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."

"Go ahead." I didn't, but it seemed weak to turn back.

"Later he said I was the real love of his life. The only real love of his life. He begged me to reconsider. I'm talking about tears, Charles. Blubbering. A real mess."

"You believed him?"

She banged a spoon inside her coffee cup, stirring. "I did."

"Despite the girl in your bed?"

"He's right about himself. 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 fucking some bimbo he picked up in the two hours while I was gone."

"But you said yes when he asked you to marry him."

"Charles, I'm not saying I made one hundred percent sense during this time either. I loved him. It's exciting, being with Duke. Things happen. People know him. They hate him, they love him, either way he's happy. He's a figure in the world. If 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 for a minute before in your life. You're special, and you love him for making that true. You hate him because you're never sure if you're just one more piece of his collection."

"You never mentioned this before. Not any of it."

"These are the complicated emotions, Charles. I didn't understand it myself. I knew I didn't want to live that way. That much I understood. No matter how much he says he loves you, you can never trust him. Living with Duke, it's another one of those bargains with the devil."

"You got off the express train and on to the local. That's what I'm hearing."

"I belong on the local."

"But you're going to be loaded. Assuming."

"Yeah. There's that," Doris said.

Duke stood still as 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. Whoever did it, it wasn't me."
I wanted to believe her.

58. *Boom Boom Calhoun*

"So, what's our plan?" Doris asked. She was dressed now. Cossack style boots. Those jeans that might as well be tights. She can still pull that off. A motorcycle jacket. Duke and I spent a minute taking this in.

"Well?" she said.

"We dealt with the part that made sense. Roscoe. Edgar. We got a finger on the cosmic with Fatima."

"And we got what? Nothing?" Doris said.

"Not nothing. We got a feel."

"What did we get a feel for?"

"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."

"Don't take this wrong, Fatman. But what do you know about people hating you enough to kill you?"

"I don't feel it's something I've been missing in my life, if that's what you mean."

"It wasn't the worst thing," Duke said. "You remember Boom-Boom Calhoun?"

"The motorcycle gangster?"

"Sure. Used to run with Los Locos. Back in the Eighties."

"Dawn of time."

"They had that clubhouse on Western. Always a dozen motorcycles lined up at the curb. They had me on retainer. Couple thousand a month just to take their calls. Had to explain at the beginning that I wanted my pay in cash, not crystal meth."

"Tough call."

"Then he bought the Black Widow."

"I haven't been in that place in years."

"Good move. The surgeon general couldn't keep track of all the ways it's bad for your health."

"Great re-po location," Doris said. "Mister Deadbeat drives up, he walks in, you figure a beer every ten minutes. You give him an hour, let him self-medicate, then you jack the car. No muss, no fuss. Taxi time."

"When I think of all I did for Boom Boom, it breaks my heart."

"That he's not in prison?" Doris asked.

"No. The way he shot up my car. Him and Deadhead."

"Deadhead. The Deadhead in the underworld?"

"The same. Before he shot himself in the head."

"It was an accident. The ricochet."

"You give a fool a gun and stupid things happen. Boom Boom I thought was smarter. Nonetheless. I'm on 94, I see this motorcycle with a fat white guy and this skeleton hanging on to his belt."

"Boom Boom and Deadhead?" Doris said.

"The same."

"How did the shooting start?"

"Enthusiastically. They both had guns."

59. A Logical Reason!?

"I mean, Boom Boom and Deadhead are shooting at you? What's the motive?"

"The motive? Fatman, you might as well ask the weather why it is what it is. You're operating in the world of reasonable thought, whereas Boom Boom..."

"Still."

"Okay. Boom Boom and his associates were in the street-level pharmaceutical trade. Crank, Ecstasy, some weed, coke. Plus vertically integrated into related industry. Money laundering, assault, murder, theft and so on. Then your typical goes-with-the-territory concerns. Do-gooders picketing their clubhouse, calling license numbers into the cops. City inspectors citing them for missing garbage can lids. Noise complaints, what have you."

"Bad for Boom Boom, 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."

"So what was the beef?"

"Excessive police calls. Everything they've got going on, murder, mayhem, underage girls, you name it, and it comes down to excessive police calls. Like having a hangnail in the middle of a hurricane. There's a law, you have too many police calls, you don't cooperate with an army of bureaucrats, they seize your property. So Los Locos' clubhouse got seized."

"So they get a different clubhouse, right? What's the problem?"

"Again, you're applying 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. Good times. 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 more about what others have done to them. So by Boom Boom's lights, I had not done enough for him. He paid me all this money and still they lost the clubhouse. Despite the fact that he and his pals weren't in prison as they should have been for a couple hundred reasons."

"They pull out the guns on the freeway," said Doris. "They start shooting. Both of them?"

"Guns blazing, as I mentioned. Did I have bullet-proof glass? No. An oversight on my part. Had I armored the doors? No. Did I nearly crap my pants? I am not ashamed to say yes. Did these two maniacs even nick me?"

"Well?"

"You put two cranked-up fools on a Harley Davidson going sixty-miles an hour while shooting at a lawyer in a BMW, you know what happens next? They bust some glass. You get some holes in your trunk. The rear seat takes a beating. Then their motorcycle goes down. They slide across two lanes of traffic and get tossed up in the weeds. Alive, sort of, both of them. But a future that includes titanium pins, traction, rehab, crutches."

"Not to mention an attempted murder rap."

"I'm not a call-the-cops individual. I figured okay, just rewards. Boom Boom looks at me cross-eyed again, he'll have a worse accident. I brought him some flowers in the hospital. Black roses. We had a chat. I thought he understood."

"Maybe not," Doris said.

"Let's say there are matters we could discuss."

I drove us to the Black Widow. Duke was in the front seat once more with his head on my shoulder.

I watched Doris in the rear view mirror. I've wondered before what she's thinking, but in the spirit of casual curiosity. I never worried about it. The actual texture of Doris' thoughts: I chose to believe that they were generally accepting, more or less favorable, tolerant at bare minimum. Beyond that, who can say? Who truly wants to know? But now that everything could change — she could be Midas-level wealthy tomorrow, I could be the Mister Formerly Acceptable — I wanted to know more and was sure I understood much less. 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? It make you uncomfortable?"

"A little, yeah."

"You've got to get in touch with your feelings, Fatman. Is it the guy-guy thing, head on the shoulder, fear of intimacy?"

"More that you're dead. It's creepy, sort of."

"That's deadism."

"I don't think you're in a protected class."

"Maybe not now."

Time passed. Fifteen minutes. A half hour. Nothing much happened. People gathered on the corner. A bus came. They got on. At the Black Widow, nothing.

"Is this 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. An old man slid down from the driver's seat to the pavement. His hair was 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. "Is 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 tell."

"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.

"You want to chat him up?" I asked.

"Let's wait a minute. 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 Duke.

"Take another look," he said.

A black Crown Vic parked beside the Suburban. Roscoe got out, rang the bell, and disappeared inside.

61. *The Unusual Suspects*

"I don't get it. 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 confront 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'll 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?"

"Unless you got a better idea."

"Me, no. I got no place to be. I've got all day. But you. The clock's ticking. You want to wait in a parking lot?"

"I don't want to. But I can't think of a better place to be. Roscoe, Edgar and Boom Boom all happen to show up in the same place at the same time. You tell me where else I ought to go."

"Okay. We sit. We wait. Roscoe and Edgar leave. Then what?"

"You can overthink things. We ring the bell. There's probably an intercom. You say, Boom Boom, it's Fatman. Me and Doris. He knows who you are. He asks you what you want. You tell him you got a business proposition, you figured he would be interested. He hits the buzzer, the door opens, we walk upstairs. Then we take it from there."

"And you say what?"

"What do you want? A script? I say, I don't know. Hey Boom Boom, maybe you heard, I'm dead. That's an ice-breaker."

Doris patted my shoulder. "Don't worry, Charles. This is going to work out," she said.

"Baby, I admire your certainty. But we know he's crazy. He's probably armed. I can think of a dozen ways this could go bad."

She grabbed my shoulders and squeezed. "Relax, Charles," she said. "Relax." She's got tricks, techniques. She's like an acupuncturist who has moved beyond needles. She pinches here, presses there. My mind goes blank and all that's left is a pleasant dull buzz.

Time passed. How much I couldn't say.

"You got a beautiful thing going here, Fatman," Duke said out of nowhere.

"Wha..."

I could barely make my mouth move.

"You've 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 Cable 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 walked toward the Widow at a brisk pace. Doris and I hurried behind him.

62. *Five Versions of Death*

"Mister Fatman! What brings you out on this fine morning, sir?"

Five boys sauntered toward us, their faces hidden deep inside their black hoodies. I figured they were the same bunch from Halloween, and I figured I knew where this would go. We'd be swallowed in ironic politesse again. No way to stop it..

"Business, gentlemen," I said.

"At the Black Widow, Squire Fats? What an exciting line of business you must be involved in. 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."

"Exactly. We appreciate your position. Mum's the word. Don't worry about us."

"No, sir, Mister Immensity," said the shortest of the bunch. This was like talking to five versions of Death. They were lost inside those hoodies.

"A team, you said, Lord Fatness? What an excellent way to put it. We have our own teams here in the neighborhood. I recognize you and the Misses Fats — top of the morning to you ma'am! — but this other team member? 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. "*The* Duke Black?"

"Accept no substitutes, boys."

"The Duke Black got my uncle off?"

"Depends on who your uncle was. Quite a few uncles were not guilty after I got done with them."

"Rashahn Johnson?"

"AKA Baby Ra?"

"That's the one."

"Misunderstanding with a handgun. Accidental discharge. Bystander injured, unfortunately. I'm sure he learned a valuable lesson."

"Cost him a lot, that's for sure."

"The good things in life are never cheap. Remember that, boys."

"You mind me asking, 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."

"Don't want to."

"Go on, it's just a knife. I won't be any less dead."

"You're dead, we're dead, everybody's dead. Goes without saying. Except for Sir Fats and his better half."

He turned to his partners. "Our education awaits us," he said. "And your team has business, too." Then he reached up suddenly, grabbed the blade and tried to yank it from Duke's back.

"Ahh," Duke groaned. "That's the spirit."

The knife stayed put. The boy looked at his hand. It was smudged now with coagulated blood.

"Damn!" he said. "Damn!" He took off at a sprint, his pals close on his heels.

63. This Zen Thing I Got Going

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."

"You're dead. I saw the obit."

"That's not wrong, as far as it goes."

"So you're agreeing with me. 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 read the obit and 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, wasn't that it?"

"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, Boom Boom. As we've agreed, I'm dead. You think I need you to open the door? I want to come in, I come in."

There was a long 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. "Armed I see. Some things don't change. Perfect."

"What's good about that?"

"Okay, it's solipsistic. You die, it's a comfort to think the world goes on the way it 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 and minuses. Don't need to eat, which frees up time. Then again, I enjoyed a meal. I've got this Zen detachment thing going on, which you could call 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. For better or worse."

"Who's 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.

"Come on up then. Sounds like I can't stop you."

64. *Say a Guy Thinks You're a Sap*

"Nice little office you got here," Duke said.

"You think so?"

"Looks defensible. Might be important in your line of work."

"I 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 thick brackets, like a medieval castle. The sole window could be closed off with metal shutters. Boom Boom had a shotgun propped up in the corner, behind a scarred oak desk that was covered with piles of paper. He used the shelving for stacks of VHS porn films.

"Go ahead, have a seat. What can I do for you? Not so much, I'm figuring. Considering. The dead don't want for that much, right?"

"I'm in limbo here. Not really living. Not completely dead."

"That's not limbo, technically speaking. Limbo is for your unbaptized dead babies."

"I never took you for a theologian. You were holding out on me."

"Even if you're not listening, some things stick in your mind. You think about it, a cave full of dead babies waiting to be hauled to heaven."

"Who knows?"

"Right, who knows?"

"Maybe we should move this along," Doris observed. "In consideration of the time."

"The dead are on a schedule?" said Boom Boom.

He was interesting to take in. The ponytail I already mentioned. His hair was gray with a yellow tinge. His features looked rearranged, like he had been in an accident and the parts were pounded roughly back into place. His eyes didn't quite line up. His nose tilted toward the window. Healthy wasn't the first word that came to mind when you looked at the color of his skin. He had powerful forearms, however, and I guessed that with his bare hands — his fingers looked like roots from an ancient tree — he could wrench a chunk from the oak desktop.

"You wouldn't think it, but yeah, the clock's ticking," Duke told Boom Boom. "I got seventy-two hours."

"To do what?"

"Find out who killed me."

A faint smile flickered over Boom Boom's lips. "You don't say."

Doris noticed it too. "This is funny?" she said.

"No, no, course not. Seventy-two hours or what?"

"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. Vengeance. My guess is, it's overrated. Better to be at peace, don't you think?"

"You want me to be honest?"

"Take a shot. See how it feels."

"Some of the 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 now."

"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 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, does not present a pretty picture. Plus she has training. "Back to the matter at hand," I said. "Duke's got..." I checked my watch... "maybe twelve hours left. And we don't know how they figure daylight savings time. Let's not get off the track."

"I'm just saying..."

"Don't," said Doris.

"I got some serious questions, Boom Boom," said Duke. "Questions about the knife in my back."

ADDS START HERE

70.

"I'm supposed to know about the knife in your back?" Boom Boom said.

"I'm not an angry guy," Duke said. "The world, I accept it. 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.*"

"You'd have to get out."

"True enough. But it happens. Look at the mess Deadhead made when he busted loose."

"Deadhead. That's 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'll become. Can't see the future, Boom Boom. All of us, victims of events. Sitting in my office, up there in the clouds, looking out over fifteen or twenty miles of real estate, Italian wool covering my butt, pretty girls bringing me coffee, money rolling in by the wheelbarrow load, 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 didn'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."

"This hurts me, Duke. We had our beefs, no denying. The money I paid 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. You tell us what happened. Duke finishes up the story of his life. He finds out how the story ended. You tell the truth and he's free. He's not in the underworld. He'll never bust out. You got nothing to worry about. Best deal you'll ever get."

"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. Except for Duke, nobody I know was there when he died."

"Tell us this, Boom Boom," Doris said. "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 coincidence?"

One thing for career criminals: they can manufacture a lie without missing a beat. "We got a book club."

That was entertaining. Something like a grin twisted Boom Boom's lips too.

"Sure. Crime. Procedurals. We got an interest. Your Elmore Leonard. Your Walter Mosley. More on the literary end. I order the books. Amazon. Used. Couple bucks each. Roscoe, Edgar, 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. Fucked up," Doris offered.

"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, "maybe you got to look within. As you were saying."

To that Duke offered no reply.

71. The Dead Don't Get a Manual

I got the heat going in the car, not that Duke cared. Again with the shoulder, the head. Like driving around with your high school girlfriend, if she were a corpse.

"I don't see where we go from here," I said.

I waited. Duke did not reply.

You never really get comfortable with the dead leaned up against you. No body heat. No sound. no swell of breath. 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 anymore."

"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, does 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 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 sure about that," Duke said.

"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.

"So we reopen the file," said Duke. "Allow some room for reconsideration, baby."

"The name is Doris."

Duke sighed. The car's heater whined. Bits of sleet bounced off the windshield.

"All right," Duke said. "Let's try Fatima again. Ask her to open a line to the underworld."

72. I handed the psychic my credit card

"Pleasure to see you again, Mister Duke," Fatima said. "Wondered how long it would take."

"Looking good as usual, Fatima. You got a timeless quality. The physical package, maybe thirty-five. But the eyes. Old as Eve."

"Too bad your living men don't put it so pretty. Sorry to say, Mister Duke, you looking rough yourself."

"Apparently the dead got a half life."

Fatima wore a well-tailored business suit with a white shirt, same as before. She had a few inches on both me and Duke.

"Just guessing now," Fatima said. "You aren't getting anywhere."

"I wouldn't say that," Duke replied. "We made the rounds. Had 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 coffee?"

"No need."

"Same with Momma Leona. She used to love a cup. Black as Satan's soul, as she put it. Guess she can find out if she's right about that," Fatima said.

"You got a line in to Leona?" Duke said.

"That's putting it a little strong. We're not yapping on the phone. More an intersection-of-consciousness deal."

"A feeling?" Doris asked.

"Like she's here but she's not here."

"You think she might have a clue?" I asked. "Assuming you can... intersect?"

"Not like it's ordering 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. "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."

Fatima handed back my credit card. "Let's step into the back room," she said. She flipped the door sign so it said *Closed*. She locked the door and turned off the lights.

Duke followed her. The blood oozing around the blade in his back looked like it was drying.

73. Another way of being stabbed.

"Go ahead, take a seat," Fatima said. We were at the rough table in her back room.

"You got a feel 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.

Fatima 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 Doris can't put a hand on it she's not interested.

Fatima 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, sad to say. 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," Fatima 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 Fatima.

"The normal guy, he's stuck, dealing with the dead."

"You know better than most," Fatima allowed. "You been to the underworld."

"That's your extreme case. I'm talking your normal living-dead problem. To name 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."

"Not that fantasy," 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 now?" Doris said. "Memories? How they work?"

"What? No. I'm talking about that white uniform falling 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 they slip your mind."

"You're surprising me now," Doris said.

"Maybe my heart is deeper than you think."

"True about everybody," Fatima 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 an army of the living and an army of the dead."

"Everyone who ever walked through the door, that's why they're here," Fatima said.

"Exactly," Duke replied.

Fatima drummed her nails on the battered table top. "Mister Fatman, I'm asking you to give me and Mister Duke some privacy now."

"But it's my dime!"

"Spirits don't care none about that."

74. We got a post-logic deal.

University Avenue was dimly visible behind the sheer curtains in Fatima'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."

"Fatima 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."

Fatima's heels clicked on the old floorboards. She led Duke back into the room.

"I do believe we are done here now," Fatima announced. "The rest is up to Mister Duke."

How to read what was behind his dead eyes I didn't begin to know.

75. Damn. The hands just fell off

"You want to ride with us?" I asked Duke. He 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 elbow. Whatever was happening with his legs, he still had a fearsome grip.

“How much time we got?” Duke asked.

“Check your watch. You figure it stopped when you died?”

He pushed up his sleeve to reveal the dead Rolex. “Eight forty seven.”

“It’s eight forty seven somewhere. We got daylight savings time in there. We don’t know how they play that in the underworld. Say you got twenty six hours, tops.”

Duke checked 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.

“What's the message here, Duke?”

“My bet is it’s those pricks Graydon and Pimplipper.”

“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. Total blood bath.”

“Not their point of view.”

“Anyway, they’re chumps sitting in the dust.”

“Maybe this is from higher up,” I said.

“Vanity of vanities, Fatman. Dust to dust. Et cetera. The big guy making the same old point. Could be.”

“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.”

“That takes a lot of energy. Which I don’t have.”

“Okay. Let’s get to the car.”

Fatima 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. An odor came off 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 faint 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.”

76. Where my eyebrows?

“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. She cranks up the heat, throws some butter at the skillet, slaps down a few pieces of bread with cheese and waits 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, course black pepper. On the side, chunks of yam browned

in butter with a maple syrup glaze. A petite salad. Avocado. Tomato (good for the prostate!). 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. Fatima. 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. Fatima 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 opened the door.

“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. “We might as well get some sleep,” I said.

77. 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. Stuck my head in the kitchen on the way back from the bathroom. Duke stood there in that state of suspended animation, 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, maybe he was looking now at an eternity of dark.

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 even 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. Fuzzy slippers, shapeless blue robe, tangle of hair and swollen eyes. At this hour she does not 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.”

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, all the relentless decay otherwise so evident, briefly disguised. I thought about setting Duke on the porch to let the snow do its job on him.

I put a plate and a cup of coffee ahead of Doris. I don’t expect much from her at this hour.

After she knocked off her eggs she said, “He’s got twelve hours left. Maybe.”

“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 Litely.”

“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 going mystical on you, Fatman. But transcendent. The ego dissolved. One with the cosmos and so forth.”

“Sounds...groovy. You think it lasts?”

“What does?”

Duke took a few lurching steps toward the door. “Do I need to mention? We don’t have all the time in the world. Let’s find Jen.”

78. Zombie Town It’s Not

“You really think Jen bumped you off? I don’t feature that as society-babe style.”

Duke arranged himself in the Volvo. As usual, he’d fit the knife handle in the gap between the seats. Doris sat in the back.

“You mind giving the handle a shake?” Duke said to her.

She sighed. There’s not much Doris does half way. She grabbed the knife handle. The car rocked as she worked the blade. Duke’s head flopped around on my shoulder. He made sounds that frankly I did not care to hear.

“Thanks,” he gasped.

I pulled the car out of the garage.

“How much you know about society babes, Fatman?” Duke said.

“Okay, nothing.”

“You get distracted by the chintz. The four sets of forks. The greenhouse behind the mansion. But a gal like Jen, she takes care of the necessities while keeping up appearances. Steely, that’s the word. Put a knife in your back? If that’s what the situation demands, sure, no problem. Pull up the white gloves and get it done.”

“So we find her,” said Doris. “We chat. She tells us nothing. Makes up some dizzy story. Gives you a look. We leave. We got nothing. He said, she said. You done her wrong. She done you wrong. How’s it going to be different than Roscoe or Edgar or Boom Boom?”

Duke said nothing for so long that I wondered if he had drifted back into that tunnel of paisley light.

“Maybe it’s not so simple as we think,” he said. “You got your habits of mind. The law racket, what’s it about? Us versus them. Guilty. Not guilty. Adversarial. Whereas...”

“What?” said Doris.

“Last night.”

“You were a stone. You were gone.”

“I was there. I was somewhere else. Both things at once.”

“Zombie town. That’s what it looked like.”

“Doris, please. I’m trying to tell you something. It’s not all about who put the knife in my back. It’s reconciling. Settling the books. Understanding the debits and the credits. Seeing the big picture. Accepting the complexity.”

“I thought this was a who-dun-it. Not a we-all-dun-it.”

“I’m working that out.”

I glanced at the rearview mirror. Doris crossed her arms over her chest. She greets ambiguity with a scowl.

“Where do we find Jen?” I asked.

“What’s the time?”

“Eleven,” Doris said.

“Jimmy Lee.”

“The rec center? You kidding me? Saint Paul Athletic Club I’d believe.”

“The pool. They got that moss-filtration system. Organic, sort of. Easy on the skin, she says. A woman of her age, that's a big deal. Worth mixing it up with the masses.”

“You say so. Just try to stay with us until we get there.”

“To be straight with you, Fatman, the other side has it's appeal.”

79. Hand Me My Member

“Not them again,” I said as I pulled off Lex into the Jimmy Lee lot.

“Trouble? Cops?”

“Those kids.”

“Shouldn't they be in school?” Doris asked.

“Yes and no,” Duke said.

“What's that mean?”

“Yes if they're actually kids. No if...”

“If what?”

“You get a feeling about them?” I said.

“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 handle 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 blade in his back.

“Honored guests!” the tallest kid called out from inside his black hoodie. The five of them stood beside the rec center door.

I lifted a hand in 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,” the little guy said.

“Chill, my 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 a schedule of its own.”

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 with an elaborate gesture. 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.

“Eighteen? For a public pool?”

“No time to quibble,” Duke replied. “Just pay the man.”

“What happened to serving the people?” I asked.

“Way you all look,” the kid said, “you could use some exercise. Him especially. Should be double for him.”

I followed Duke to the locker room. He stashed his shoes, rolled up his trouser legs and padded across the slick tiles. Doris waited for us beside the pool. A school of swimmers flailed 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.”

"Who's joking?"

"How's your dick fall in the pool?"

"Boxers."

“That’s it, there,” said Doris, pointing at a pink nub bobbing 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?”

80. 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 a blonde with a lot 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 over for 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. It’s 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.”

“We don’t 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.”

“Limited help,” I told Duke.

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 wouldn't be counting the hours.”

"You die, you shouldn't have to worry about time," I said.

"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're 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 to gray. The signal to his extremities seemed to be going out over bad wire. He lurched.

Duke leaned his head against my shoulder and sighed. "Let's go past my 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: home sweet home.

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 cochère."

"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. A 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!

"Maybe it's 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. 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."

82. Entering the Chamber of Regret

"Come upstairs," said Duke.

You could have driven a jeep up the stairway. It was carved with climbing vines and flowers, plus birds and squirrels, mice, 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 frightening.

"Let's make this quick."

We reached a balcony that overlooked the vast parlor. The light that remained in the day entered through a skylight.

"Here," he said. "The master bedroom. You remember?" he asked Doris.

"Hard to forget," she said.

Too bad about that. "Wait," I said. "There was a penthouse. Where Doris caught you with..."

"*Pied-à-terre*," Duke replied. "Love nest. This was always the main unit."

"Who was the architect?" I asked. "Paul Bunyan?" 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 bedroom.

"Why the home tour?" I asked. "We don't have better things to do?"

"I don't think we do," Duke said.

Doris stared at the bed, like she hadn't seen it before.

At first I noticed only that like the stairway it was carved with vines and blossoms. But instead of blossoms, rendered with surgical precision were...

Well, no need to get into the exact, familiar details. In the end we are all children and at heart we hate to share.

A Venus was carved on the center panel of the headboard. I moved in for a closer look.

"Is this...?"

It was Doris.

Doris leaned in. "Duke," she said. "When did you..."

"After, obviously."

"I don't know if I should be..."

"You don't have to be one thing or the other. You can leave it, you can sell it, you can chop it up for toothpicks. It was for me. A remembrance. A reminder. It's yours now."

I couldn't decide whether to look closer or to reach for the anti-bacterial soap.

"Flattered," said Duke. "You could be flattered. You want to know when my clock stopped? My clock 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 darling Tina Von Roundheel. You weren't drowning in tears."

"I had a life to live. Time doesn't stop. Until it does. It wasn't the same. That's what I'm saying."

"I can leave," I said. "You two got things to settle, settle up. If I'm standing here, however, you got to have some respect."

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 arm and squeezed.

"I'm trying to explain myself here, Fatman," said Duke. "It's not about you. It's about me. My ticker is winding down, buddy. Whatever I got to leave behind, it's got to be now. I'm telling you something about my soul. What was trivial, what was deep, what was real. There was nothing more real than this. Can you have the decency to listen?"

We stood there silently together, all of us lost in our thoughts.

"Okay," Duke said finally. "One more thing."

"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, I could see North Dakota. You're never lord of all you survey. But I could pretend."

"You going to tell us what Fatima 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 in a rattletrap automobile. No offense, Fatman."

There wasn't any point in rising to that bait.

At Duke's direction I turned on River Boulevard and took it slow through the curves that follow 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 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."

"Fatman. Don't argue. 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. "In the sense of your normal living person, no. For a guy who's been dead three days? Yeah. Maybe. I'm on the edge of something here. We're going to see. I'm okay, I'm doomed, who knows?"

Duke lifted up his arms. Into the darkness, to the extent that he was able, he roared, "Ladies and gentlemen of the jury!"

84. You knew all along?

"Duke," said Doris. "There are no ladies and gentlemen of the jury. You know that, right?"

"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. There never was."

Doris grabbed my arm. I looked at Duke, then at the river beyond and the far shore in its 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-crusting 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'm out of steam."

I brushed off the snow. We sat facing the water. I waited for him to start talking again. "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're 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 any patience."

He stopped again. He gasped.

“The guy who killed Duke Black was...”

85. The Pimplipper Deception

"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 always were...flexible," said Doris.

"Ashtanga. You should try it, Fatman. Reach around to my back, no problem. Held the knife there, then slammed my back against your 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 Pimplipper. 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 consider it. Pimplipper said 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 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 my unconsidered 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. I win. It goes down, Pimplipper steps aside and I'm top litigator for the underworld."

"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."

86. *Why Not Uruguay?*

"How many years you think it would take to give away everything I got?" Duke said. "I'm not talking a Frogtown flophouse and junker automobile, Fatman. These are serious assets."

"You set up an offshore account, stick a couple thousand bucks in your pocket, you book a flight to Uruguay. Forget about the rest."

"Tell that to the IRS. They want their cut served on a platter."

"You hire a team of lawyers."

"That sounds like peace?"

"So you stick a knife in your back instead?"

"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 her 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 groaned, then slowly pulled himself up onto his hands and knees.

"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 show," Doris said. "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?"

"You, apparently."

"Doris," I said. "Duke."

"This isn't your battle, Charles."

I knew better than to reply. 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 a single word of this is true."

"Go ahead," said Duke. "Ask. That's why I'm here."

87. *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 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'm taking a chance on understanding my death instead of letting it fall on me. 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. Not much time left," Duke said. I felt his muscles twitching against me.

88. *Up? Down? Can You Say?*

"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 and 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."

"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 is 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.

89. *That's a Little Indefinite, Fellas*

I wasn't altogether 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 moon light.

"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? 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 place nor the hour. 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.