

The Bachman Books

Stephen King

Why I Was Bachman

1

Between 1977 and 1984, I published five novels under the pseudonym of Richard Bachman. These were *Rage* (1977), *The Long Walk* (1979), *Roadwork* (1981), *The Running Man* (1982), and *Thinner* (1984). There were two reasons I was finally linked with Bachman: first, because the first four books, all paperback originals, were dedicated to people associated with my life, and second, because my name appeared on the copyright forms of one book. Now people are asking me why I did it, and I don't seem to have any very satisfactory answers. Good thing I didn't murder anyone, isn't it?

2

I can make a few suggestions, but that's all. The only important thing I ever did in my life for a conscious reason was to ask Tabitha Spruce, the college co-ed I was seeing, if she would marry me. The reason was that I was deeply in love with her. The joke is that love itself is an irrational and indefinable emotion.

Sometimes something just says *Do this* or *Don't do that*. I almost always obey that voice, and when I disobey it I usually rue the day. All I'm saying is that I've got a hunch-player's approach to life. My wife accuses me of being an impossibly picky Virgo and I guess I am in some ways-I usually know at any given time how many pieces of a 500-piece puzzle I've put in, for instance-but I never really planned anything big that I ever did, and that includes the books I've written. I never sat down and wrote page one with anything but the vaguest idea of how things would come out.

One day it occurred to me that I ought to publish *Getting It On*, a novel which Doubleday *almost* published two years before they published *Carrie*, under a pseudonym. It seemed like a good idea so I did it.

Like I say, good thing I didn't kill anybody, huh?

3

In 1968 or 1969, Paul McCartney said a wistful and startling thing in an interview. He said the Beatles had discussed the idea of going out on the road as a bar-band named Randy and the Rockets. They would wear hokey capes and masks a la Count Five, he

said, so no one would recognize them, and they would just have a raveup like in the old days.

When the interviewer suggested they would be recognized by their voices, Paul seemed at first startled . . . and then a bit appalled.

4

Cub Koda, possibly America's greatest houserocker, once told me this story about Elvis Presley, and like the man said, if it ain't true, it oughtta be. Cub said Elvis told an interviewer something that went like this: I was like a cow in a pen with a whole bunch of other cows, only I got out somehow. Well, they came and got me and put me in another pen, only this one was bigger and I had it all to myself. I looked around and seen the fences was so high I'd never get out. So I said, "All right, I'll graze. "

5

I wrote five novels before *Carrie*. Two of them were bad, one was indifferent, and I thought two of them were pretty good. The two good ones were *Getting It On* (which became *Rage* when it was finally published) and *The Long Walk*. *Getting It On* was begun in 1966, when I was a senior in high school. I later found it moldering away in an old box in the cellar of the house where I'd grown up-this rediscovery was in 1970, and I finished the novel in 1971. *The Long Walk* was written in the fall of 1966 and the spring of 1967, when I was a freshman at college.

I submitted *Walk* to the Bennett Cerf/Random House first-novel competition (which has, I think, long since gone the way of the blue suede shoe) in the fall of 1967 and it was promptly rejected with a form note . . . no comment of any kind. Hurt and depressed, sure that the book must really be terrible, I stuck it into the fabled TRUNK, which all novelists, both published and aspiring, carry around. I never submitted it again until Elaine Geiger at New American Library asked if "Dicky" (as we called him) was going to follow up *Rage*. *The Long Walk* went in the TRUNK, but as Bob Dylan says in "Tangled Up in Blue," it never escaped my mind.

None of them has ever escaped my mind-not even the really bad ones.

6

The numbers have gotten very big. That's part of it. I have times when I feel as if I planted a modest packet of words and grew some kind of magic beanstalk . . .or a runaway garden of books (OVER 40 MILLION KING BOOKS IN PRINT!!!, as my publisher likes to trumpet). Or, put it another way-sometimes I feel like Mickey Mouse in *Fantasia*. I knew enough to get the brooms started, but once they start to march, things are never the same.

Am I bitching? No. At least they're very gentle bitches if I am. I have tried my best to

follow that other Dylan's advice and sing in my chains like the sea. I mean, I could get down there in the amen corner and crybaby about how tough it is to be Stephen King, but somehow I don't think all those people out there who are a) unemployed or b) busting heavies every week just to keep even with the house payments and the MasterCard bill would feel a lot of sympathy for me. Nor would I expect it. I'm still married to the same woman, my kids are healthy and bright, and I'm being well paid for doing something I love. So what's to bitch about?

Nothing.

Almost.

7

Memo to Paul McCartney, if he's there: the interviewer was right. They would have recognized your voices, but before you even opened your mouths, they would have recognized George's guitar licks. I did five books as Randy and the Rockets and I've been getting letters asking me if I was Richard Bachman from the very beginning.

My response to this was simplicity itself: I lied.

8

I think I did it to turn the heat down a little bit; to do something as someone other than Stephen King. I think that all novelists are inveterate role-players and it was fun to be someone else for a while—in this case, Richard Bachman. And he *did* develop a personality and a history to go along with the bogus author photo on the back of *Thinner* and the bogus wife (Claudia Inez Bachman) to whom the book is dedicated. Bachman was a fairly unpleasant fellow who was born in New York and spent about ten years in the merchant marine after four years in the Coast Guard. He ultimately settled in rural central New Hampshire, where he wrote at night and tended to his medium-sized dairy farm during the day. The Bachmans had one child, a boy, who died in an unfortunate accident at the age of six (he fell through a well cover and drowned). Three years ago a brain tumor was discovered near the base of Bachman's brain; tricky surgery removed it. And he died suddenly in February of 1985 when the *Bangor Daily News*, my hometown paper, published the story that I was Bachman—a story which I confirmed. Sometimes it was fun to be Bachman, a curmudgeonly recluse à la J. D. Salinger, who never gave interviews and who, on the author questionnaire from New English Library in London, wrote down "rooster worship" in the blank provided for religion.

I've been asked several times if I did it because I thought I was overpublishing the market as Stephen King. The answer is no. I didn't think I was overpublishing the market . . . but my publishers did. Bachman provided a compromise for both of us. My "Stephen King publishers" were like a frigid wifey who only wants to put out once or twice a year, encouraging her endlessly horny hubby to find a call girl. Bachman was where I went when I had to have relief. This does nothing, however, to explain why I've felt this restless need to *publish* what I write when I don't need the dough.

I repeat, good thing I didn't kill someone, huh?

I've been asked several times if I did it because I feel typecast as a horror writer. The answer is no. I don't give a shit what people call me as long as I can go to sleep at night.

Nevertheless, only the last of the Bachman books is an out-and-out horror story, and the fact hasn't escaped me. Writing something that was not horror as Stephen King would be perfectly easy, but answering the questions about why I did it would be a pain in the ass. When I wrote straight fiction as Richard Bachman, no one asked the questions. In fact, ha-ha, hardly anyone read the books.

Which leads us to what might be well, not the reason why that voice spoke up in the first place, but the closest thing to it.

You try to make sense of your life. Everybody tries to do that, I think, and part of making sense of things is trying to find reasons . . . or constants . . . things that don't fluctuate.

Everyone does it, but perhaps people who have extraordinarily lucky or unlucky lives do it a little more. Part of you wants to think-or must at least speculate that you got whopped with the cancer stick because you were one of the bad guys (or one of the good ones, if you believe Durocher's Law). Part of you wants to think that you must have been one hardworking S.O.B. or a real prince or maybe even one of the Sainted Multitude if you end up riding high in a world where people are starving, shooting each other, burning out, bumming out, getting loaded, getting 'Luded.

But there's another part that suggests it's all a lottery, a real-life game-show not much different from "Wheel of Fortune" or "The New Price Is Right" (two of the Bachman books, incidentally, are about game-show-type competitions). It is for some reason depressing to think it was all-or even mostly-an accident. So maybe you try to find out if you could do it again.

Or in my case, if *Bachman* could do it again.

The question remains unanswered. Richard Bachman's first four books did not sell well at all, perhaps partly because they were issued without fanfare.

Each month paperback houses issue three types of books: "leaders," which are heavily advertised, stocked in dump-bins (the trade term for those showy cardboard displays you see at the front of your local chain bookstore), and which usually feature fancy covers that have been either die-cut or stamped with foil;" subleaders, " which are less heavily advertised, less apt to be awarded dump-bins, and less expected to sell millions of copies (two hundred thousand copies sold would be one hell of a good showing for a sub-leader); and just plain books. This third category is the paperback book publishing world's equivalent of trench warfare or . . . cannon fodder. "Just plain books" (the only

other term I can think of is sub-sub-leaders, but that is *really* depressing) are rarely hardcover reprints; they are generally backlist books with new covers, genre novels (gothics, Regency romances, westerns, and so on), or series books such as *The Survivalist*, *The Mercenaries*, *The Sexual Adventures of a Horny Pumpkin* . . . you get the idea. And, every now and then, you find genuine *novels* buried in this deep substratum, and the Bachman novels are not the only time such novels have been the work of well-known writers sending out dispatches from deep cover. Donald Westlake published paperback originals under the names Tucker Coe and Richard Stark; Evan Hunter under the name Ed McBain; Gore Vidal under the name Edgar Box. More recently Gordon Lish published an excellent, eerie paperback original called *The Stone Boy* under a pseudonym.

The Bachman novels were "just plain books," paperbacks to fill the drugstore and bus-station racks of America. This was at my request; I wanted Bachman to keep a low profile. So, in that sense, the poor guy had the dice loaded against him from the start.

And yet, little by little, Bachman gained a dim cult following. His final book, *Thinner*, had sold about 28,000 copies in hardcover before a Washington bookstore clerk and writer named Steve Brown got suspicious, went to the Library of Congress, and uncovered my name on one of the Bachman copyright forms. Twenty-eight thousand copies isn't a lot-it's certainly not in best-seller territory-but it's 4,000 copies more than my book *Night Shift* sold in 1978. I had intended Bachman to follow *Thinner* with a rather gruesome suspense novel called *Misery*, and I think that one might have taken "Dicky" onto the best-seller lists. Of course we'll never know now, will we? Richard Bachman, who survived the brain tumor, finally died of a much rarer disease-cancer of the pseudonym. He died with that question-is it work that takes you to the top or is it all just a lottery? -still unanswered.

But the fact that *Thinner* did 28,000 copies when Bachman was the author and 280,000 copies when *Steve King* became the author, might tell you something, huh?

13

There is a stigma attached to the idea of the pen name. This was not so in the past; there was a time when the writing of novels was believed to be a rather low occupation, perhaps more vice than profession, and a pen name thus seemed a perfectly natural and respectable way of protecting one's self (and one's relatives) from embarrassment. As respect for the art of the novel rose, things changed. Both critics and general readers became suspicious of work done by men and women who elected to hide their identities. *If it was good*, the unspoken opinion seems to run, *the guy would have put his real name on it. If he lied about his name, the book must suck like an Electrolux.*

So I want to close by saying just a few words about the worth of these books. Are they good novels? I don't know. Are they honest novels? Yes, I think so. They were honestly meant, anyway, and written with an energy I can only dream about these days (*The Running Man*, for instance, was written during a period of seventy-two hours and published with virtually no changes). Do they suck like an Electrolux? Overall, no. In places . . . welllll . . .

I was not quite young enough when these stories were written to be able to dismiss them as juvenilia. On the other hand, I was still callow enough to believe in oversimple motivations (many of them painfully Freudian) and unhappy endings. The most recent of the Bachman books offered here, *Roadwork*, was written between *Salem's Lot* and *The Shining*, and was an effort to write a "straight" novel. (I was also young enough in those days to worry about that casual cocktail-party question, "Yes, but when are you going to do something *serious*? ") I think it was also an effort to make some sense of my mother's painful death the year before -- a lingering cancer had taken her off inch by painful inch. Following this death I was left both grieving and shaken by the apparent senselessness of it all. I suspect *Roadwork* is probably the worst of the lot simply because it tries so hard to be good and to find some answers to the conundrum of human pain.

The reverse of this is *The Running Man*, which may be the best of them because it's nothing but story-it moves with the goofy speed of a silent movie, and anything which is *not* story is cheerfully thrown over the side.

Both *The Long Walk* and *Rage* are full of windy psychological preachments (both textual and subtextual), but there's still a lot of story in those novels-ultimately the reader will be better equipped than the writer to decide if the story is enough to surmount all the failures of perception and motivation.

I'd only add that two of these novels, perhaps even all four, might have been published under my own name if I had been a little more savvy about the publishing business or if I hadn't been preoccupied in the years they were written with first trying to get myself through school and then to support my family. And that I only published them (and am allowing them to be republished now) because they are still my friends; they are undoubtedly maimed in some ways, but they still seem very much alive to me.

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And a few words of thanks: to Elaine Koster, NAL's publisher (who was Elaine Geiger when these books were first published), who kept "Dicky's" secret so long and successfully to Carolyn Stromberg, "Dicky's" first editor, who did the same; to Kirby McCauley, who sold the rights and also kept the secret faithfully and well; to my wife, who encouraged me with these just as she did with the others that fumed out to be such big and glittery money-makers; and, as always, to you, reader, for your patience and kindness.

Stephen King
Bangor, Maine

RAGE
Richard Bachman

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A high school Show-and-Tell session explodes into a nightmare of evil...

So you understand that when we
increase the number of variables,
the axioms themselves never change.
-Mrs. Jean Underwood

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell,
My lessons all to you I'll tell,
And when my day at school is through,
I'll know more than aught I knew.
-Children's rhyme, c. 1880

Chapter 1

The morning I got it on was nice; a nice May morning. What made it nice was that I'd kept my breakfast down, and the squirrel I spotted in Algebra II.

I sat in the row farthest from the door, which is next to the windows, and I spotted the squirrel on the lawn. The lawn of Placerville High School is a very good one. It does not fuck around. It comes right up to the building and says howdy. No one, at least in my four years at PHS, has tried to push it away from the building with a bunch of flowerbeds or baby pine trees or any of that happy horseshit. It comes right up to the concrete foundation, and there it grows, like it or not. It is true that two years ago at a town meeting some bag proposed that the town build a pavilion in front of the school, complete

with a memorial to honor the guys who went to Placerville High and then got bumped off in one war or another. My friend Joe McKennedy was there, and he said they gave her nothing but a hard way to go. I wish I had been there. The way Joe told it, it sounded like a real good time. Two years ago. To the best of my recollection, that was about the time I started to lose my mind.

Chapter 2

So there was the squirrel, running through the grass at 9:05 in the morning, not ten feet from where I was listening to Mrs. Underwood taking us back to the basics of algebra in the wake of a horrible exam that apparently no one had passed except me and Ted Jones. I was keeping an eye on him, I can tell you. The squirrel, not Ted.

On the board, Mrs. Underwood wrote this: $a = 16$. "Miss Cross," she said, turning back. "Tell us what that equation means, if you please."

"It means that a is sixteen," Sandra said. Meanwhile the squirrel ran back and forth in the grass, tail bushed out, black eyes shining bright as buckshot. A nice fat one. Mr. Squirrel had been keeping down more breakfasts than I lately, but this morning's was riding as light and easy as you please. I had no shakes, no acid stomach. I was riding cool.

"All right," Mrs. Underwood said. "Not bad. But it's not the end, is it? No. Would anyone care to elaborate on this fascinating equation?"

I raised my hand, but she called on Billy Sawyer. "Eight plus eight," he blurted.

"Explain. "

"I mean it can be . . . " Billy fidgeted. He ran his fingers over the graffiti etched into the surface of his desk; SM L DK, HOT SHIT, TOMMY '73. "See, if you add eight and eight, it means . . . "

"Shall I lend you my thesaurus?" Mrs. Underwood asked, smiling alertly. My stomach began to hurt a little, my breakfast started to move around a little, so I looked back at the squirrel for a while. Mrs. Underwood's smile reminded me of the shark in *Jaws*.

Carol Granger raised her hand. Mrs. Underwood nodded. "Doesn't he mean that eight plus eight also fulfills the equation's need for truth?"

"I don't know *what* he means," Mrs. Underwood said.

A general laugh. "Can you fulfill the equation's truth in any other ways, Miss Granger?"

Carol began, and that was when the intercom said: "Charles Decker to the office, please. Charles Decker. Thank you."

I looked at Mrs. Underwood, and she nodded. My stomach had begun to feel

shriveled and old. I got up and left the room. When I left, the squirrel was still scampering.

I was halfway down the hall when I thought I heard Mrs. Underwood coming after me, her hands raised into twisted claws, smiling her big shark smile. *We don't need boys of your type around here . . . boys of your type belong in Greenmantle . . . or the reformatory . . . or the state hospital for the criminally insane . . . so get out! Get out! Get out!*

I turned around, groping in my back pocket for the pipe wrench that was no longer there, and now my breakfast was a hard hot ball inside my guts. But I wasn't afraid, not even when she wasn't there. I've read too many books.

Chapter 3

I stopped in the bathroom to take a whiz and eat some Ritz crackers. I always carry some Ritz crackers in a Baggie. When your stomach's bad, a few crackers can do wonders. One hundred thousand pregnant women can't be wrong. I was thinking about Sandra Cross, whose response in class a few minutes ago had been not bad, but also not the end. I was thinking about how she lost her buttons. She was always losing them-off blouses, off skirts, and the one time I had taken her to a school dance, she had lost the button off the top of her Wranglers and they had almost fallen down. Before she figured out what was happening, the zipper on the front of her jeans had come halfway unzipped, showing a V of flat white panties that was blackly exciting. Those panties were tight, white, and spotless. They were immaculate. They lay against her lower belly with sweet snugness and made little ripples while she moved her body to the beat . . . until she realized what was going on and dashed for the girls' room. Leaving me with a memory of the Perfect Pair of Panties. Sandra was a Nice Girl, and if I had never known it before, I sure-God knew it then, because we all know that the Nice Girls wear the white panties. None of that New York shit is going down in Placerville, Maine.

But Mr. Denver kept creeping in, pushing away Sandra and her pristine panties. You can't stop your mind; the damn thing just keeps right on going. All the same, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Sandy, even though she was never going to figure out just what the quadratic equation was all about. If Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace decided to send me to Greenmantle, I might never see Sandy again. And that would be too bad.

I got up from the hopper, dusted the cracker crumbs down into the bowl, and flushed it. High-school toilets are all the same; they sound like 747s taking off. I've always hated pushing that handle. It makes you sure that the sound is clearly audible in the adjacent classroom and that everybody is thinking: Well, there goes another load. I've always thought a man should be alone with what my mother insisted I call lemonade and chocolate when I was a little kid. The bathroom should be a confessional sort of place. But they foil you. They always foil you. You can't even blow your nose and keep it a secret. Someone's always got to know, someone's always got to peek. People like Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace even get paid for it.

But by then the bathroom door was wheezing shut behind me and I was in the hall again. I paused, looking around. The only sound was the sleepy hive drone that means it's Wednesday again, Wednesday morning, ten past nine, everyone caught for another day in the splendid sticky web of Mother Education.

I went back into the bathroom and took out my Flair. I was going to write something witty on the wall like SANDRA CROSS WEARS WHITE UNDERPANTS, and then I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There were bruised half-moons under my eyes, which looked wide and white and stary. The nostrils were half-flared and ugly. The mouth was a white, twisted line.

I Wrote EAT SHIT On the wall until the pen suddenly snapped in my straining fingers. It dropped on the floor and I kicked it.

There was a sound behind me. I didn't turn around. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply until I had myself under control. Then I went upstairs.

Chapter 4

The administration offices of Placerville High are on the third floor, along with the study hall, the library, and Room 300, which is the typing room. When you push through the door from the stairs, the first thing you hear is that steady clickety-clack. The only time it lets up is when the bell changes the classes or when Mrs. Green has something to say. I guess she usually doesn't say much, because the typewriters hardly ever stop. There are thirty of them in there, a battle-scarred platoon of gray Underwoods. They have them marked with numbers so you know which one is yours. The sound never stops, clickety-clack, clickety-clack, from September to June. I'll always associate that sound with waiting in the outer office of the admin offices for Mr. Denver or Mr. Grace, the original dipso-duo. It got to be a lot like those jungle movies where the hero and his safari are pushing deep into darkest Africa, and the hero says: "Why don't they stop those blasted drums?" And when the blasted drums stop he regards the shadowy, rustling foliage and says: "I don't like it. It's too quiet."

I had gotten to the office late just so Mr. Denver would be ready to see me, but the receptionist, Miss Marble, only smiled and said, "Sit down, Charlie. Mr. Denver will be right with you. "

So I sat down outside the slatted railing, folded my hands, and waited for Mr. Denver to be right with me. And who should be in the other chair but one of my father's good friends, Al Lathrop. He was giving me the old slick-eye, too, I can tell you. He had a briefcase on his lap and a bunch of sample textbooks beside him. I had never seen him in a suit before. He and my father were a couple of mighty hunters. Slayers of the fearsome sharp-toothed deer and the killer partridge. I had been on a hunting trip once with my father and Al and a couple of my father's other friends. Part of Dad's never-ending campaign to Make a Man Out of My Son.

"Hi, there!" I said, and gave him a big shiteating grin. And I could tell from the way he jumped that he knew all about me.

"Uh, hi, uh, Charlie. " He glanced quickly at Miss Marble, but she was going over attendance lists with Mrs. Venson from next door. No help there. He was all alone with Carl Decker's psychotic son, the fellow who had nearly killed the chemistry-physics teacher.

"Sales trip, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right. " He grinned as best he could. "Just out there selling the old books."

"Really crushing the competition, huh?"

He jumped again. "Well, you win some, you lose some, you know, Charlie."

Yeah, I knew that. All at once I didn't want to put the needle in him anymore. He was forty and getting bald and there were crocodile purses under his eyes. He went from school to school in a Buick station wagon loaded with textbooks and he went hunting for a week in November every year with my father and my father's friends, up in the Allagash. And one year I had gone with them. I had been nine, and I woke up and they had been drunk and they had scared me. That was all. But this man was no ogre. He was just forty-baldish and trying to make a buck. And if I had heard him saying he would murder his wife, that was just talk. After all, I was the one with blood on my hands.

But I didn't like the way his eyes were darting around, and for a moment just a moment-I could have grabbed his windpipe between my hands and yanked his face up to mine and screamed into it: *You and my father and all your friends, you should all have to go in there with me, you should all have to go to Greenmantle with me, because you're all in it, you're all in it, you're all a part of this!*

Instead I sat and watched him sweat and thought about old times.

Chapter 5

I came awake with a jerk out of a nightmare I hadn't had for a long time; a dream where I was in some dark blind alley and something was coming for me, some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along . . . a monster that would drive me insane if I saw it. Bad dream. I hadn't had it since I was a little kid, and I was a big kid now. Nine years old.

At first I didn't know where I was, except it sure wasn't my bedroom at home. It seemed too close, and it smelled different. I was cold and cramped, and I had to take a whiz something awful.

There was a harsh burst of laughter that made me jerk in my bed-except it wasn't a bed, it was a bag.

"So she's some kind of fucking bag," Al Lathrop said from beyond the canvas wall,

"but *fucking's* the operant word there."

Camping, I was camping with my dad and his friends. I hadn't wanted to come.

"Yeah, but how do you git it up, Al? That's what I want to know. " That was Scotty Norwiss, another one of Dad's friends. His voice was slurred and furry, and I started to feel afraid again. They were drunk.

"I just turn off the lights and pretend I'm with Carl Decker's wife," Al said, and there was another bellow of laughter that made me cringe and jerk in my sleeping bag. Oh, God, I needed to whiz piss make lemonade whatever you wanted to call it. But I didn't want to go out there while they were drinking and talking.

I turned to the tent wall and discovered I could see them. They were between the tent and the campfire, and their shadows, tall and alien-looking, were cast on the canvas. It was like watching a magic lantern show. I watched the shadow-bottle go from one shadow-hand to the next.

"You know what I'd do if I caught you with my wife?" My dad asked Al.

"Probably ask if I needed any help," Al said, and there was another burst of laughter. The elongated shadow-heads on the tent wall bobbed up and down, back and forth, with insectile glee. They didn't look like people at all. They looked like a bunch of talking praying mantises, and I was afraid.

"No, seriously," my dad said. "Seriously. You know what I'd do if I caught somebody with my wife?"

"What, Carl?" That was Randy Earl.

"You see this?"

A new shadow on the canvas. My father's hunting knife, the one he carried out in the woods, the one I later saw him gut a deer with, slamming it into the deer's guts to the hilt and then ripping upward, the muscles in his forearm bulging, spilling out green and steaming intestines onto a carpet of needles and moss. The firelight and the angle of the canvas turned the hunting knife into a spear.

"You see this son of a bitch? I catch some guy with my wife, I'd whip him over on his back and cut off his accessories."

"He'd pee sitting down to the end of his days, right, Carl?" That was Hubie Levesque, the guide. I pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them. I've never had to go to the bathroom so bad in my life, before or since.

"You're goddamn right," Carl Decker, my sterling Dad, said.

"Wha' about the woman in the case, Carl?" Al Lathrop asked. He was very drunk. I could even tell which shadow was his. He was rocking back and forth as if he was sitting in a rowboat instead of on a log by the campfire. "Thass what I wanna know. What do you do about a woman who less-lets-someone in the back door? Huh?"

The hunting knife that had turned into a spear moved slowly back and forth. My father said, "The Cherokees used to slit their noses. The idea was to put a cunt right up on their faces so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble."

My hands left my knees and slipped down to my crotch. I cupped my testicles and looked at the shadow of my father's hunting knife moving slowly back and forth. There were terrible cramps in my belly. I was going to whiz in my sleeping bag if I didn't hurry up and go.

"Slit their noses, huh?" Randy said. "That's pretty goddamn good. If they still did that, half the women in Placerville would have a snatch at both ends. "

"Not my wife," my father said very quietly, and now the slur in his voice was gone, and the laughter at Randy's joke stopped in mid-roar.

"No, 'course not, Carl," Randy said uncomfortably. "Hey, shit. Have a drink. "

My father's shadow tipped the bottle back.

"I won't slit her nose," Al Lathrop said. "I'd blow her goddamn cheatin' head off. "

"There you go," Hubie said. "I'll drink to it."

I couldn't hold it anymore. I squirmed out of the sleeping bag and felt the cold October air bite into my body, which was naked except for a pair of shorts. It seemed like my cock wanted to shrivel right back into my body. And the one thing that kept going around and around in my mind-I was still partly asleep, I guess, and the whole conversation had seemed like a dream, maybe a continuation of the creaking monster in the alley-was that when I was smaller, I used to get into my mom's bed after Dad had put on his uniform and gone off to work in Portland, I used to sleep beside her for an hour before breakfast.

Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother.

I came out through the tent flap, and my father turned toward me. The hunting knife was still in his hand. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I've never forgotten that my dad with a reddish beard stubble on his face and a hunting cap cocked on his head and that hunting knife in his hand. All the conversation stopped. Maybe they were wondering how much I had heard. Maybe they were even ashamed.

"What the hell do you want?" my dad asked, sheathing the knife.

"Give him a drink, Carl," Randy said, and there was a roar of laughter. Al laughed so hard he fell over. He was pretty drunk.

"I gotta whiz," I said.

"Then go do it, for Christ's sake," my dad said.

I went over in the grove and tried to whiz. For a long time it wouldn't come out. It was like a hot soft ball of lead in my lower belly. I had nothing but a fingernail's length of penis-the cold had really shriveled it. At last it did come, in a great steaming flood, and when it was all out of me, I went back into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. None of them looked at me. They were talking about the war. They had all been in the war.

My dad got his deer three days later, on the last day of the trip. I was with him. He got it perfectly, in the bunch of muscle between neck and shoulder, and the buck went

down in a heap, all grace gone.

We went over to it. My father was smiling, happy. He had unsheathed his knife. I knew what was going to happen, and I knew I was going to be sick, and I couldn't help any of it. He planted a foot on either side of the buck and pulled one of its legs back and shoved the knife in. One quick upward rip, and its guts spilled out on the forest floor, and I turned around and heaved up my breakfast.

When I turned back to him, he was looking at me. He never said anything, but I could read the contempt and disappointment in his eyes. I had seen it there often enough. I didn't say anything either. But if I had been able to, I would have said: *It isn't what you think.*

That was the first and last time I ever went hunting with my dad.

Chapter 6

Al Lathrop was still thumbing through his textbook samples and pretending he was too busy to talk to me when the intercom on Miss Marble's desk buzzed, and she smiled at me as if we had a great and sexy secret. "You can go in now, Charlie. "

I got up. "Sell those textbooks, Al."

He gave me a quick, nervous, insincere smile. "I sure will, uh, Charlie."

I went through the slatted gate, past the big safe set into the wall on the right and Miss Marble's cluttered desk on the left. Straight ahead was a door with a frosted glass pane. THOMAS DENVER PRINCIPAL was lettered on the glass. I walked in.

Mr. Denver was looking at *The Bugle*, the school rag. He was a tall, cadaverous man whg looked something like John Carradine. He was bald and skinny. His hands were long and full of knuckles. His tie was pulled down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. The skin on his throat looked grizzled and irritated from overshaving.

"Sit down, Charlie."

I sat down and folded my hands. I'm a great old hand-folder. It's a trick I picked up from my father. Through the window behind Mr. Denver I could see the lawn, but not the fearless way it grew right up to the building. I was too high, and it was too bad. It might have helped, like a night-light when you are small.

Mr. Denver put *The Bugle* down and leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hard to see that way, isn't it?" He grunted. Mr. Denver was a crackerjack grunter. If there was a National Grunting Bee, I would put all my money on Mr. Denver. I brushed my hair away from my eyes.

There was a picture of Mr. Denver's family on his desk, which was even more cluttered than Miss Marble's. The family looked well-fed and well-adjusted. His wife was sort of porky, but the two kids were as cute as buttons and didn't look a bit like John Carradine. Two little girls, both blond.

"Don Grace has finished his report, and I've had it since last Thursday, considering his conclusions and his recommendations as carefully as I can. We all appreciate the seriousness of this matter, and I've taken the liberty of discussing the whole thing with John Carlson, also. "

"How is he?" I asked.

"Pretty well. He'll be back in a month, I should think."

"Well, that's something."

"It is?" He blinked at me very quickly, the way lizards do.

"I didn't kill him. That's something."

"Yes." Mr. Denver looked at me steadily. "Do you wish you had?"

"No."

He leaned forward, drew his chair up to his desk, looked at me, shook his head, and began, "I'm very puzzled when I have to speak the way I'm about to speak to you, Charlie. Puzzled and sad. I've been in the kid business since 1947, and I still can't understand these things. I feel what I have to say to you is right and necessary, but it also makes me unhappy. Because I still can't understand why a thing like this happens. In 1959 we had a very bright boy here who beat a junior-high-school girl quite badly with a baseball bat. Eventually we had to send him to South Portland Correctional Institute. All he could say was that she wouldn't go out with him. Then he would smile. " Mr. Denver shook his head.

"Don't bother. "

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to understand. Don't lose any sleep over it. "

"But why, Charlie? Why did you do that? My God, he was on an operating table for nearly four hours-"

"Why is Mr. Grace's question, " I said. "He's the school shrink. You, you only ask it because it makes a nice lead-in to your sermon. I don't want to listen to any more sermons. They don't mean *shit* to me. It's *over*. He was going to live or die. He lived. I'm glad. You do what you have to do. What you and Mr. Grace decided to do. But don't you try to understand me."

"Charlie, understanding is part of my job."

"But helping you do your job isn't part of mine," I said. "So let me tell you one thing. To sort of help open the lines of communication, okay?"

"Okay..."

I held my hands tightly in my lap. They were trembling. "I'm sick of you and Mr. Grace and all the rest of you. You used to make me afraid and you still make me afraid but now you make me tired too, and I've decided I don't have to put up with that. The way I am, I can't put up with that. What you think doesn't mean anything to me. You're not qualified to deal with me. So just stand back. I'm warning you. You're not qualified. "

My voice had risen to a trembling near-shout.

Mr. Denver sighed.

"So you may think, Charlie. But the laws of the state say otherwise. After having read Mr. Grace's report, I think I agree with him that you don't understand yourself or the consequences of what you did in Mr. Carlson's classroom. You are disturbed, Charlie. "

You are disturbed, Charlie.

The Cherokees used to slit their noses . . . so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble.

The words echoed greenly in my head, as if at great depths. They were shark words at deep fathoms, jaws words come to gobble me. Words with teeth and eyes.

This is where I started to get it on. I knew it, because the same thing that happened just before I gave Mr. Carlson the business was happening now. My hands stopped shaking. My stomach flutters subsided, and my whole middle felt cool and calm. I felt detached, not only from Mr. Denver and his overshaved neck, but from myself. I could almost float.

Mr. Denver had gone on, something about proper counseling and psychiatric help, but I interrupted him. "Mr. Man, you can go straight to hell."

He stopped and put down the paper he had been looking at so he wouldn't have to look at me. Something from my file, no doubt. The almighty file. The Great American File.

"What?" he said.

"In hell. Judge not, lest ye be judged. Any insanity in your family, Mr. Denver?"

"I'll discuss this with you, Charlie," he said tightly. "I won't engage in-

". . . immoral sex practices," I finished for him. "Just you and me, okay? First one to jack off wins the Putnam Good Fellowship Award. Fill yore hand, pardner. Get Mr. Grace in here, that's even better. We'll have a circle jerk."

"Wh-

"Don't you get the message? You have to pull it out sometime, right? You owe it to yourself, right? Everybody has to get it on, everybody has to have someone to jack off on. You've already set yourself up as Judge of What's Right for Me. Devils. Demon possession. Why did I hit dat l'il girl wit dat ball bat, Lawd, Lawd? De debbil made me do it, and I'm so *saw-ry*. Why don't you admit it? You get a kick out of peddling my flesh. I'm the best thing that's happened to you since 1959. "

He was gawping at me openly. I had him by the short hair, knew it, was savagely proud of it. On the one hand, he wanted to humor me, go along with me, because after all, isn't that what you do with disturbed people? On the other hand, he was in the kid business, just like he told me, and Rule One in the kid business is: Don't Let 'Em Give You No Lip-be fast with the command and the snappy comeback.

"Charlie-"

"Don't bother. I'm trying to tell you I'm tired of being masturbated on. Be a man, for God's sake, Mr. Denver. And if you can't be a man, at least pull up your pants and be a principal. "

"Shut up," he grunted. His face had gone bright red. "You're just pretty damn lucky you live in a progressive state and go to a progressive school, young man. You know where you'd be otherwise? Peddling your papers in a reformatory somewhere, serving a term for criminal assault. I'm not sure you don't belong there anyway. You-'

"Thank you," I said.

He stared at me, his angry blue eyes fixed on mine.

"For treating me like a human being even if I had to piss you off to do it. That's real progress. " I crossed my legs, being nonchalant. "Want to talk about the panty raids you made the scene at while you were at Big U learning the kid business?"

"Your mouth is filthy," he said deliberately. "And so is your mind."

"Fuck you," I said, and laughed at him.

He went an even deeper shade of scarlet and stood up. He reached slowly over the desk, slowly, slowly, as if he needed oiling, and bunched the shoulder of my shirt in his hand. "You show some respect," he said. He had really blown his cool and was not even bothering to use that really first-class grunt. "You rotten little punk, you show me some respect. "

"I could show you my ass and you'd kiss it," I said. "Go on and tell me about the panty raids. You'll feel better. Throw us your panties! Throw us your panties! "

He let go of me, holding his hand away from his body as if a rabid dog had just pooped on it. "Get out," he said hoarsely. "Get your books, turn them in here, and then get out. Your expulsion and transfer to Greenmantle Academy is effective as of Monday. I'll talk to your parents on the telephone. Now get out. I don't want to have to look at you."

I got up, unbuttoned the two bottom buttons on my shirt, pulled the tail out on one side, and unzipped my fly. Before he could move, I tore open the door and staggered into the outer office. Miss Marble and Al Lathrop were conferring at her desk, and they both looked up and winced when they saw me. They had obviously both been playing the great American parlor game of We Don't Really Hear Them, Do We?

"You better get to him," I panted. "We were sitting there talking about panty raids and he just jumped over his desk and tried to rape me. "

I'd pushed him over the edge, no mean feat, considering he'd been in the kid business for twenty-nine years and was probably only ten away from getting his gold key to the downstairs crapper. He lunged at me through the door; I danced away from him and he stood there looking furious, silly, and guilty all at once.

"Get somebody to take care of him," I said. "He'll be sweeter after he gets it out of his system. " I looked at Mr. Denver, winked, and whispered, "Throw us your panties, right?"

Then I pushed out through the slatted rail and walked slowly out the office door, buttoning my shirt and tucking it in, zipping my fly. There was plenty of time for him to say something, but he didn't say a word.

That's when it really got rolling, because all at once I knew he couldn't say a word. He was great at announcing the day's hot lunch over the intercom, but this was a different thing joyously different. I had confronted him with exactly what he said was wrong with me, and he hadn't been able to cope with that. Maybe he expected us to smile and shake hands and conclude my seven-and-one-half-semester stay at Placerville High with a literary critique of *The Bugle*. But in spite of everything, Mr. Carlson and all the rest, he hadn't really expected any irrational act. Those things were all meant for the closet, rolled up beside those nasty magazines you never show your wife. He was standing back there, vocal cords frozen, not a word left in his mind to say. None of his instructors in *Dealing with the Disturbed Child*, EdB-211, had ever told him he might someday have to deal with a student who would attack him on a personal level.

And pretty quick he was going to be mad. That made him dangerous. Who knew better than me? I was going to have to protect myself. I was ready, and had been ever since I decided that people might-just might, mind you-be following me around and checking up.

I gave him every chance.

I waited for him to charge out and grab me, all the way to the staircase. I didn't want salvation. I was either past that point or never reached it. All I wanted was recognition . . . or maybe for someone to draw a yellow plague circle around my feet.

He didn't come out.

And when he didn't, I went ahead and got it on.

Chapter 7

I went down the staircase whistling; I felt wonderful. Things happen that way sometimes. When everything is at its worst, your mind just throws it all into the wastebasket and goes to Florida for a little while. There is a sudden electric what-the-hell glow as you stand there looking back over your shoulder at the bridge you just burned down.

A girl I didn't know passed me on the second-floor landing, a pimply, ugly girl wearing big horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a clutch of secretarial-type books. On impulse I turned around and looked after her. Yes; yes. From the back she might have been Miss America. It was wonderful.

Chapter 8

The first-floor hall was deserted. Not a soul coming or going. The only sound was the hive drone, the sound that makes all the schoolhouses the same, modern and glass-walled or ancient and stinking of floor varnish. Lockers stood in silent sentinel rows, with a break here and there to make room for a drinking fountain or a classroom door.

Algebra II was in Room 16, but my locker was at the other end of the hall. I walked down to it and regarded it.

My locker. It said so: CHARLES DECKER printed neatly in my hand on a strip of school Con-Tact paper. Each September, during the first home-room period, came the handing out of the blank Con-Tact strips. We lettered carefully, and during the two-minute break between home room and the first class of the new year, we pasted them on. The ritual was as old and as holy as First Communion. On the first day of my sophomore year, Joe McKennedy walked up to me through the crowded hall with his Con-Tact strip pasted on his forehead and a big shit-eating grin pasted on his mouth. Hundreds of horrified freshmen, each with a little yellow name tag pinned on his or her shirt or blouse, turned to look at this sacrilege. I almost broke my balls laughing. Of course he got a detention for it, but it made my day. When I think back on it, I guess it made my year.

And there I was, right between ROSANNE DEBBINS and CARLA DENCH, who doused herself in rosewater every morning, which had been no great help in keeping my breakfast where it belonged during the last semester.

Ah, but all that was behind me now.

Gray locker, five feet high, padlocked. The padlocks were handed out at the beginning of the year along with the Con-Tact strips. Titus, the padlock proclaimed itself. Lock me, unlock me. I am Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

"Titus, you old cuffer," I whispered. "Titus, you old cock-knocker."

I reached for Titus, and it seemed to me that my hand stretched to it across a thousand miles, a hand on the end of a plastic arm that elongated painlessly and nervelessly. The numbered surface of Titus' black face looked at me blandly, not condemning but certainly not *approving*, no, not *that*, and I shut my eyes for a moment. My body wrenched through a shudder, pulled by invisible, involuntary, opposing hands.

And when I opened my eyes again, Titus was in my grasp. The chasm had closed.

The combinations on high-school locks are simple. Mine was six to the left, thirty right, and two turns back to zero. Titus was known more for his strength than his intellect. The lock snapped up, and I had him in my hand. I clutched him tightly, making no move to open the locker door.

Up the hall, Mr. Johnson was saying: ". . . and the Hessians, who were paid mercenaries, weren't any too anxious to fight, especially in a countryside where the opportunities for plunder over and above the agreed-upon wages . . ."

"Hessian," I whispered to Titus. I carried him down to the first wastebasket and

dropped him in. He looked up at me innocently from a litter of discarded homework papers and old sandwich bags.

" . . . but remember that the Hessians, as far as the Continental Army knew, were formidable German killing machines . . . "

I bent down, picked him up, and put him in my breast pocket, where he made a bulge about the size of a pack of cigarettes.

"Keep it in mind, Titus, you old killing machine," I said, and went back to my locker.

I swung it open. Crumpled up in a sweaty ball at the bottom was my gym uniform, old lunch bags, candy wrappers, a month-old apple core that was browning nicely, and a pair of ratty black sneakers. My red nylon jacket was hung on the coat-hook, and on the shelf above that were my textbooks, all but Algebra II. Civics, American Government, French Stories and Fables, and Health, that happy Senior gut course, a red, modern book with a high-school girl and boy on the cover and the section on venereal disease neatly clipped by unanimous vote of the School Committee. I started to get it on beginning with the health book, sold to the school by none other than good old Al Lathrop, I hoped and trusted. I took it out, opened it somewhere between "The Building Blocks of Nutrition" and "Swimming Rules for Fun and Safety," and ripped it in two. It came easy. They all came easy except for Civics, which was a tough old Silver Burdett text circa 1946. I threw all the pieces into the bottom of the locker. The only thing left up top was my slide rule, which I snapped in two, a picture of Raquel Welch taped to the back wall (I let it stay), and the box of shells that had been behind my books.

I picked that up and looked at it. The box had originally held Winchester .22 long-rifle shells, but it didn't anymore. I'd put the other shells in it, the ones from the desk drawer in my father's study. There's a deer head mounted on the wall in his study, and it stared down at me with its glassy too-alive eyes as I took the shells and the gun, but I didn't let it bother me. It wasn't the one he'd gotten on the hunting trip when I was nine. The pistol had been in another drawer, behind a box of business envelopes. I doubt if he even remembered it was still there. And as a matter of fact, it wasn't, not anymore. Now it was in the pocket of my jacket. I took it out and shoved it into my belt. I didn't feel much like a Hessian. I felt like Wild Bill Hickok.

I put the shells in my pants pocket and took out my lighter. It was one of those Scripto see-through jobs. I don't smoke myself, but the lighter had kind of caught my fancy. I snapped a light to it, squatted, and set the crap in the bottom of my locker on fire.

The flames licked up greedily from my gym trunks to the lunch bags and candy wrappers to the ruins of my books, carrying a sweaty, athletic smell up to me.

Then, figuring that I had gotten it on as much as I could by myself, I shut the locker door. There were little vents just above where my name was Con-Tact-papered on, and through them I could hear the flames whooshing upward. In a minute little orange flecks were glaring in the darkness beyond the vents, and the gray locker paint started to crack and peel.

A kid came out of Mr. Johnson's room carrying a green bathroom pass. He looked at the smoke belching merrily out of the vents in my locker, looked at me, and hurried down to the bathroom. I don't think he saw the pistol. He wasn't hurrying that fast.

I started down to Room 16. I paused just as I got there, my hand on the doorknob, looking back. The smoke was really pouring out of the vents now, and a dark, sooty stain was spreading up the front of my locker. The Con-Tact paper had turned brown. You couldn't see the letters that made my name anymore.

I don't think there was anything in my brain fight then except the usual background static-the kind-you get on your radio when it's turned up all the way and tuned to no station at all. My brain had checked to the power, so to speak; the little guy wearing the Napoleon hat inside was showing aces and betting them.

I turned back to Room 16 and opened the door. I was hoping, but I didn't know what.

Chapter 9

" . . . So you understand that when we *increase* the number of variables, the axioms *themselves* never change. For example-'

Mrs. Underwood looked up alertly, pushing her harlequin glasses up on her nose. "Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?"

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

Chapter 10

Sanity:

You can go through your whole life telling yourself that life is logical, life is prosaic, life is sane. Above all, sane. And I think it is. I've had a lot of time to think about that. And what I keep coming back to is Mrs. Underwood's dying declaration: *So you understand that when we increase the number of variables, the axioms themselves never change.*

I really believe that.

I think; therefore I am. There are hairs on my face; therefore I shave. My wife and child have been critically injured in a car crash; therefore I pray. It's all logical, it's all sane. We live in the best of all possible worlds, so hand me a Kent for my left, a Bud for my right, turn on *Starsky and Hutch*, and listen to that soft, harmonious note that is the universe turning smoothly on its celestial gyros. Logic and sanity. Like Coca-Cola, it's the real thing.

But as Warner Brothers, John D. MacDonald, and Long Island Dragway know so

well, there's a Mr. Hyde for every happy Jekyll face, a dark face on the other side of the mirror. The brain behind that face never heard of razors, prayers, or the logic of the universe. You turn the mirror sideways and see your face reflected with a sinister left-hand twist, half mad and half sane. The astronomers call that line between light and dark the terminator.

The other side says that the universe has all the logic of a little kid in a Halloween cowboy suit with his guts and his trick-or-treat candy spread all over a mile of Interstate 95. This is the logic of napalm, paranoia, suitcase bombs carried by happy Arabs, random carcinoma. This logic eats itself. It says life is a monkey on a stick, it says life spins as hysterically and erratically as the penny you flick to see who buys lunch.

No one looks at that side unless they have to, and I can understand that. You look at it if you hitch a ride with a drunk in a GTO who puts it up to one-ten and starts blubbing about how his wife turned him out; you look at it if some guy decides to drive across Indiana shooting kids on bicycles; you look at it if your sister says "I'm going down to the store for a minute, big guy" and then gets killed in a stickup. You look at it when you hear your dad talking about slitting your mom's nose.

It's a roulette wheel, but anybody who says the game is rigged is whining. No matter how many numbers there are, the principle of that little white jittering ball never changes. Don't say it's crazy. It's all so cool and sane.

And all that weirdness isn't just going on outside. It's in you too, right now, growing in the dark like magic mushrooms. Call it the Thing in the Cellar. Call it the Blow Lunch Factor. Call it the Loony Tunes File. I think of it as my private dinosaur, huge, slimy, and mindless, stumbling around in the stinking swamp of my subconscious, never finding a tarpit big enough to hold it.

But that's me, and I started to tell you about *them*, those bright college-bound students that, metaphorically speaking, walked down to the store to get milk and ended up in the middle of an armed robbery. I'm a documented case, routine grist for the newspaper mill. A thousand newsboys hawked me on a thousand street corners. I had fifty seconds on Chancellor-Brinkley and a column and a half in *Time*. And I stand here before you (metaphorically speaking, again) and tell you I'm perfectly sane. I do have one slightly crooked wheel upstairs, but everything else is ticking along just four-o, thank you very much.

So, them. How do you understand *them*? We have to discuss that, don't we?

"Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

I'm the sane one: I'm the croupier, I'm the guy who spins the ball against the spin of the wheel. The guy who lays his money on odd/even, the girl who lays her money on black/red . . . what about *them*?

There isn't any division of time to express the marrow of our lives, the time between

the explosion of lead from the muzzle and the meat impact, between the impact and the darkness. There's only barren instant replay that shows nothing new.

I shot her; she fell; and there was an indescribable moment of silence, an infinite duration of time, and we all stepped back, watching the ball go around and around, ticking, bouncing, lighting for an instant, going on, heads and tails, red and black, odd and even.

I think that moment ended. I really do. But sometimes, in the dark, I think that hideous random moment is still going on, that the wheel is even yet in spin, and I dreamed all the rest.

What must it be like for a suicide coming down from a high ledge? I'm sure it must be a very sane feeling. That's probably why they scream all the way down.

Chapter 11

If someone had screamed something melodramatic at that precise moment, something like *Oh, my God, he's going to kill us all!* it would have been over right there. They would have bolted like sheep, and somebody aggressive like Dick Keene would have belted me over the head with his algebra book, thereby earning a key to the city and the Good Citizenship Award.

But nobody said a word. They sat in utter stunned silence, looking at me attentively, as if I had just announced that I was going to tell them how they could all get passes to the Placerville Drive-In this Friday night.

I shut the classroom door, crossed the room, and sat behind the big desk. My legs weren't so good. I was almost to the point of sit down or fall down. I had to push Mrs. Underwood's feet out of the way to get my own feet into the kneehole. I put the pistol down on her green blotter, shut her algebra book, and put it with the others that were stacked neatly on the desk's corner.

That was when Irma Bates broke the silence with a high, gobbling scream that sounded like a young tom turkey getting its neck wrung on the day before Thanksgiving. But it was too late; everyone had taken that endless moment to consider the facts of life and death. Nobody picked up on her scream, and she stopped, as if ashamed at screaming while school was in session, no matter how great the provocation. Somebody cleared his throat. Somebody in the back of the room said "Hum!" in a mildly judicial tone. And John "Pig Pen" Dano slithered quietly out of his seat and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

They looked up at me from the trough of shock.

"This," I said pleasantly, "is known as getting it on."

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and somebody asked somebody else if something had exploded in the chemistry lab. While somebody else was saying he didn't know, the

fire alarm went off stridently. Half the kids in the class started to get up automatically.

"That's all right," I said. "It's just my locker. On fire. I set it on fire, that is. Sit down."

The ones that had started to get up sat down obediently. I looked for Sandra Cross. She was in the third row, fourth seat, and she did not seem afraid. She looked like what she was. An intensely exciting Good Girl.

Lines of students were filing out onto the grass; I could see them through the windows. The squirrel was gone, though. Squirrels make lousy innocent bystanders.

The door was snatched open, and I picked up the gun. Mr. Vance poked his head in. "Fire alarm," he said. "Everybody . . . Where's Mrs. Underwood?"

"Get out," I said.

He stared at me. He was a very porky man, and his hair was neatly crew cut. It looked as if some landscape artist had trimmed it carefully with hedge clippers. "What? What did you say?"

"Out." I shot at him and missed. The bullet whined off the upper edge of the door, chipping wood splinters.

"Jesus," somebody in the front row said mildly.

Mr. Vance didn't know what was happening. I don't think any of them did. It all reminded me of an article I read about the last big earthquake in California. It was about a woman who was wandering from room to room while her house was being shaken to pieces all around her, yelling to her husband to please unplug the fan.

Mr. Vance decided to go back to the beginning. "There's a fire in the building. Please-"

"Charlie's got a gun, Mr. Vance," Mike Gavin said in a discussing-the-weather tone. "I think you better-"

The second bullet caught him in the throat. His flesh spread liquidly like water spreads when you throw a rock in it. He walked backward into the hall, scratching at his throat, and fell over.

Irma Bates screamed again, but again she had no takers. If it had been Carol Granger, there would have been imitators galore, but who wanted to be in concert with poor old Irma Bates? She didn't even have a boyfriend. Besides, everyone was too busy peeking at Mr. Vance, whose scratching motions were slowing down.

"Ted," I said to Ted Jones, who sat closest to the door. "Shut that and lock it.-"

"What do you think you're doing?" Ted asked. He was looking at me with a kind of scared and scornful distaste.

"I don't know all the details just yet," I said. "But shut the door and lock it, okay?"

Down the hall someone was yelling: "It's in a locker! It's in a Vance's had a heart attack! Get some water! Get . . ."

Ted Jones got up, shut the door, and locked it. He was a tall boy wearing wash-faded Levi's and an army shirt with flap pockets. He looked very fine. I had always admired

Ted, although he was never part of the circle I traveled in. He drove last year's Mustang, which his father had given him, and didn't get any parking tickets, either. He combed his hair in an out-of-fashion DA, and I bet his was the face that Irma Bates called up in her mind when she sneaked a cucumber out of the refrigerator in the wee hours of the night. With an all-American name like Ted Jones he couldn't very well miss, either. His father was vice-president of the Placerville Bank and Trust.

"Now what?" Hannon Jackson asked. He sounded bewildered.

"Um." I put the pistol down on the blotter again. "Well, somebody try and bring Pig Pen around. He'll get his shirt dirty. Dirtier, I mean."

Sarah Pasterne started to giggle hysterically and clapped her hand over her mouth. George Yannick, who sat close to Pig Pen, squatted down beside him and began to pat his cheeks. Pig Pen moaned, opened his eyes, rolled them, and said, "He shot Book Bags."

There were several hysterical laughs this time. They went off around the room like popping corn. Mrs. Underwood had two plastic briefcases with tartan patterns on them, which she carried into each class. She had also been known as Two-Gun Sue.

Pig Pen settled shakily into his seat, rolled his eyes again, and began to cry.

Somebody pounded up to the door, rattled the knob, and yelled, "Hey! Hey in there!" It looked like Mr. Johnson, who had been talking about the Hessians. I picked up the pistol and put a bullet through the chicken-wired glass. It made a neat little hole beside Mr. Johnson's head, and Mr. Johnson went out of sight like a crash-diving submarine. The class (with the possible exception of Ted) watched all the action with close interest, as if they had stumbled into a pretty good movie by accident.

"Somebody in there's got a gun!" Mr. Johnson yelled. There was a faint bumping sound as he crawled away. The fire alarm buzzed hoarsely on and on.

"Now what?" Harmon Jackson asked again. He was a small boy, usually with a big cockeyed grin on his face, but now he looked helpless, all at sea.

I couldn't think of an answer to that, so I let it pass. Outside, kids were milling restlessly around on the lawn, talking and pointing at Room 16 as the grapevine passed the word among them. After a little bit, some teachers-the men teachers-began shooing them back toward the gymnasium end of the building.

In town the fire whistle on the Municipal Building began to scream, rising and falling in hysterical cycles.

"It's like the end of the world," Sandra Cross said softly.

I had no answer for that, either.

Chapter 12

No one said anything for maybe five minutes-not until the fire engines got to the high

school. They looked at me, and I looked at them. Maybe they still could have bolted, and they're still asking me why they didn't. *Why didn't they cut and run, Charlie? What did you do to them?* Some of them ask that almost fearfully, as if I had the evil eye. I don't answer them. I don't answer any questions about what happened that morning in Room 16. But if I told them anything, it would be that they've forgotten what it is to be a kid, to live cheek-by-jowl with violence, with the commonplace fistfights in the gym, brawls at the PAL hops in Lewiston, beatings on television, murders in the movies. Most of us had seen a little girl puke pea soup all over a priest right down at our local drive-in. Old Book Bags wasn't much shakes by comparison.

I'm not taking on any of those things, hey, I'm in no shape for crusades these days. I'm just telling you that American kids labor under a huge life of violence, both real and make-believe. Besides, I was kind of interesting: Hey, Charlie Decker went apeshit today, didja hear? No! Did he? Yeah. Yeah. I was there. It was just like *Bonnie and Clyde*, except Charlie's got zitizes and there wasn't any popcorn.

I know they thought they'd be all right. That's part of it. What I wonder about is this: Were they hoping I'd get somebody else?

Another shrieking sound had joined the fire siren, this one getting closer real fast. Not the cops. It was that hysterical yodeling note that is all the latest rage in ambulances and paramedic vehicles these days. I've always thought the day will come when all the disaster vehicles will get smart and stop scaring the almighty shit out of everyone they're coming to save. When there's a fire or an accident or a natural disaster like me, the red vehicles will rush to the scene accompanied by the amplified sound of the Darktown Strutters playing "Banjo Rag." Someday. Oh, boy.

Chapter 13

Seeing as how it was the school, the town fire department went whole hog. The fire chief came first, gunning into the big semicircular school driveway in his blue bubble-topped Ford Pinto. Behind him was a hook-and-ladder trailing firemen like battle banners. There were two pumpers behind that.

"You going to let them in?" Jack Goldman asked.

"The fire's out there," I said. "Not in here."

"Did you shut ya locka door?" Sylvia Ragan asked. She was a big blond girl with great soft cardiganed breasts and gently rotting teeth.

"Yes. "

"Prolly out already, then."

Mike Gavin looked at the scurrying firemen and snickered. "Two of 'em just ran into each other," he said. "Holy moly."

The two downed firemen untangled themselves, and the whole group was preparing

to charge into the inferno when two suit-coated figures ran over to them. One was Mr. Johnson, the Human Submarine, and the other was Mr. Grace. They were talking hard and fast to the fire chief.

Great rolls of hose with shiny nozzles were being unreeled from the pumpers and dragged toward the front doors. The fire chief turned around and yelled, "Hold it! " They stood irresolutely on the lawn, their nozzles gripped and held out before them like comic brass phalluses.

The fire chief was still in conference with Mr. Johnson and Mr. Grace. Mr. Johnson pointed at Room 16. Thomas Denver, the Principal with the Amazing Overshaved Neck, ran over and joined the discussion. It was starting to look like a pitcher's mound conference in the last half of the ninth.

"I want to go home!" Irma Bates said wildly.

"Blow it out," I said.

The fire chief had started to gesture toward his knights again, and Mr. Grace shook his head angrily and put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to Denver and said something to him. Denver nodded and ran toward the main doors.

The chief was nodding reluctantly. He went back to his car, rummaged in the back seat, and came up with a really nice Radio Shack battery-powered bullhorn. I bet they had some real tussles back at the fire station about who got to use that. Today the chief was obviously pulling rank. He pointed it at the milling students.

"Please move away from the building. I repeat. Will you please move away from the building. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. We will have buses here to pick you up shortly. School is canceled for-

Short, bewildered whoop.

' . . . for the remainder of the day. Now, please move away from the building."

A bunch of teachers-both men and women this time-started herding them up toward the road. They were craning and babbling. I looked for Joe McKennedy but didn't see him anywhere.

"Is it all right to do homework?" Melvin Thomas asked tremblingly. There was a general laugh. They seemed surprised to hear it.

"Go ahead." I thought for a moment and added: "If you want to smoke, go ahead and do it. "

A couple of them grabbed for their pockets. Sylvia Ragan, doing her lady-of--the-manor bit, fished a battered pack of Camels delicately out of her purse and lit up with leisurely elegance. She blew out a plume of smoke and dropped her match on the floor. She stretched out her legs, not bothering overmuch with the nuisance of her skirt. She looked comfy.

There had to be more, though. I was getting along pretty well, but there had to be a thousand things I wasn't thinking of. Not that it mattered.

"If you've got a friend you want to sit next to, go ahead and change around. But don't

try to rush at me or run out the door, please."

A couple of kids changed next to their buddies, walking quickly and softly, but most of them just sat quiet. Melvin Thomas had opened his algebra book but couldn't seem to concentrate on it. He was staring at me glassily.

There was a faint metallic *chink!* from the upper corner of the room. Somebody had just opened the intercom system.

"Hello," Denver said. "Hello, Room 16."

"Hello," I said.

"Who's that?"

"Charlie Decker."

Long pause. Finally: "What's going on down there, Decker?"

I thought it over. "I guess I'm going berserk," I said.

An even longer pause. Then, almost rhetorically: "What have you done?"

I motioned at Ted Jones. He nodded back at me politely. "Mr. Denver?"

"Who's that?"

"Ted Jones, Mr. Denver. Charlie has a gun. He's holding us hostage. He's killed Mrs. Underwood. And I think he killed Mr. Vance, too."

"I'm pretty sure I did," I said.

"Oh," Mr. Denver said.

Sarah Pasterne giggled again.

"Ted Jones?"

"I'm here," Ted told him. He sounded very competent, Ted did, but at the same time distant. Like a first lieutenant who has been to college. You had to admire him.

"Who is in the classroom besides you and Decker?"

"Just a sec," I said. "I'll call the roll. Hold on."

I got Mrs. Underwood's green attendance book and opened it up. "Period two, right?"

"Yeah," Corky said.

"Okay. Here we go. Irma Bates?"

"I want to go *home!*" Irma screamed defiantly.

"She's here," I said. "Susan Brooks?"

"Here. "

"Nancy Caskin?"

"Here. "

I went through the rest of the roll. There were twenty-five names, and the only

absentee was Peter Franklin.

"Has Peter Franklin been shot?" Mr. Denver asked quietly.

"He's got the measles," Don Lordi said. This brought on another attack of the giggles. Ted Jones frowned deeply.

"Decker?"

"Yes."

"Will you let them go?"

"Not right now," I said.

"Why?" There was dreadful concern, a dreadful heaviness in his voice, and for a second I almost caught myself feeling sorry for him. I crushed that quickly. It's like being in a big poker game. Here is this guy who has been winning big all night, he's got a pile of chips that's a mile-high, and all at once he starts to lose. Not a little bit, but a lot, and you want to feel bad for him and his falling empire. But you cram that back and bust him, or you take it in the eye.

So I said, "We haven't finished getting it on down here yet."

"What does that mean?"

"It means stick it," I said. Carol Granger's eyes got round.

"Decker-"

"Call me Charlie. All my friends call me Charlie."

"Decker-"

I held my hand up in front of the class and crossed the fingers in pairs. "If you don't call me Charlie, I'm going to shoot somebody."

Pause.

"Charlie?"

"That's better." In the back row, Mike Gavin and Dick Keene were covering grins. Some of the others weren't bothering to cover them. "You call me Charlie, and I'll call you Tom. That okay, Tom?"

Long, long pause.

"When will you let them go, Charlie? They haven't hurt you."

Outside, one of the town's three black-and-whites and a blue state-police cruiser had arrived. They parked across the road from the high school, and Jerry Kesslering, the chief since Warren Talbot had retired into the local Methodist cemetery in 1975, began directing traffic onto the Oak Hill Pond road.

"Did you hear me, Charlie?"

"Yes. But I can't tell you. I don't know. There are more cops coming, I guess."

"Mr. Wolfe called them," Mr. Denver said. "I imagine there will be a great deal more

when they fully appreciate what's going on. They'll have tear gas and Mace, Dec . . . Charlie. Why make it hard on yourself and your classmates?"

"Tom?"

Grudgingly: "What?"

"You get your skinny cracked ass out there and tell them that the minute anyone shoots tear gas or anything else in here, I am going to make them sorry. You tell them to remember who's driving."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" He sounded angry and impotent and frightened. He sounded like a man who has just discovered there is no place left to pass the buck.

"I don't know," I said, "but it sure beats panty raids, Tom. And I don't think it actually concerns you. All I want you to do is trot back out there and tell them what I said. Will you do that, Tom?"

"I have no choice, do I?"

"No, that's right. You don't. And there's something else, Tom."

"What?" He asked it very hesitantly.

"I don't like you very much, Tom, as you have probably realized, but up to now you haven't had to give much of a rip how I felt. But I'm out of your filing cabinet now, Tom. Have you got it? I'm not just a record you can lock up at three in the afternoon. Have you got it?" My voice was rising into a scream. "HAVE YOU GOT THAT, TOM? HAVE YOU INTERNALIZED THAT PARTICULAR FACT OF LIFE?"

"Yes, Charlie," he said in a deadly voice. "I have it."

"No you don't, Tom. But you will. Before the day's over, we are going to understand all about the difference between people and pieces of paper in a file, and the difference between doing your job and getting jobbed. What do you think of that, Tommy, my man?"

"I think you're a sick boy, Decker."

"No, you think I'm a sick boy, *Charlie*. Isn't that what you meant to say, Tom?"

"Yes..."

"Say it."

"I think you're a sick boy, Charlie." The mechanical, embarrassed rote of a seven-year-old.

"You've got some getting it on to do yourself, Tom. Now, get out there and tell them what I said. "

Denver cleared his throat as if he had something else to say, and then the intercom clicked off. A little murmur went through the class. I looked them over very carefully. Their eyes were so cool and somehow detached (shock can do that: you're ejected like a fighter pilot from a humdrum dream of life to a grinding, overloaded slice of the real meat, and your brain refuses to make the adjustment; you can only free-fall and hope that sooner or later your chute will open), and a ghost of grammar school came back to me:

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