

Shame Among the Spirits

By
Robert Cantrell

*“Oh, then, at last relent; is there no place
Left for repentance, none for pardon left?
None left but by submission; and that word
Disdain forbids me, and my dread of shame
Among the Spirits beneath, whom I seduced
With other promises and other vaunts
Than to submit, boasting I could subdue
Th’ Omnipotent”.*

Paradise Lost

Chapter One

The signature, “Wm.T. Capps M.D.” was unreadable. He slashed it as he always had, a haphazard series of loops whizzing across the bottom of the letter his secretary, Janelle, held out for him. Janelle felt uncomfortable dealing with this matter while they kept his patient waiting right there. She noticed that Capps seemed less punctilious about such things in the last few months.

Today he suddenly buzzed her desk wanting to know about some inconsequential letter, and wanting to “send it out immediately”, in spite of the fact that he was in the middle of a therapy session with a plump hen of a lady named Lorella Smith.

Returning to his patient he asked, solicitously, “Do you cry?”

With middle-aged women tears were usually so close to the surface that he could almost always tap them at will and predict what the response to that question would be within only slight variation. He could use this at the appropriate place midway in a fifty-five minute appointment to begin to bring things to a cathartic head so as to have some sort of session closure by the top of the hour. “Bringing them in for a three-point landing.”

As the gray, powdery lady spoke on, Capps desperately wanted a cup of coffee, and he hoped Janelle had not passive-aggressively forgotten to make the afternoon pot. Capps was caffeine addicted, and he hated it when there was only clear hot water and the boxes of yuppie decaf tea, which Janelle had been leaving out more and more obviously for him of late.

“Oh yes, doctor”, Mrs. Smith said softly, her eyes welling and seeking his for permission. It was at this moment, precisely, that he could either open this sluice gate and deal with it, or at least note it, bottle it, and resolve to mine it later, at the next session.

“If you don’t want to hear an answer, don’t ask a question”, he heard the ghostly voice of his favorite old instructor, and that, plus the guilt of his coffee addiction, swung him out into the current of her emotions. His eyes met her eyes and held; her tears welled up and fell.

“It’s my daughter, Doctor. I’m so unhappy because she’s so unhappy.”

“Your daughter?” A simple echo was all that was called for here, no matter what the noun.

"Well", she said, getting a diaphragm full of air as she warmed to it. "It's really her husband. She says he's never really been right since he got back from Viet Nam, you know?"

Though the patient didn't know it, Capps knew about her daughter. More specifically, he knew the son-in-law, Boyer, "Bird Dog", Fuller.

"Were you in Viet Nam, Doctor? I'll bet not, your too young, right?" she said, flirting an old lady flirt. "Were you in the war?"

"Yes ma'am. I was there, but just for a few months." The war had been winding down by then, 1971, with Nixon and Kissinger and the shape-of-the-table-talks going on in Paris, and it had actually been seven and a half humid months before they had finally pulled his whole psychiatric hospital unit out, lock, stock, and lithium. He could dimly hear the oriental street noise and feel the tropical stickiness of the air. Quickly, he chided himself because no more than three minutes into what was her release, here he was already back on his own personal side of his brain, and mildly resentful that they could not possibly finish with any aplomb before ten after.

"It really messed some of those fellows up, didn't it? Like my son-in-law."

"Oh...,its tough for me to say what it might have done to other guys. I was always in Saigon, in the city; it was just kind of like being in Dallas on a bad Saturday night." This was an old line for Capps, by way of explanation, and also helped decelerate the woman's monologue.

He could excuse himself for being late to the next patient by explaining that he had gone long with this patient. People understood that. It is a hopeful thing for them, in terms of their therapist's potential for compassion, or at least for long-

suffering. But there was no way he could say, “Hey, I’m late because I wanted a cup of coffee and a cigarette, uninterrupted by some neurotic bullhocky, O.K.?” He knew that wouldn’t play well, even in the graceless Nineteen-Nineties, even in Abilene, Texas.

It had not been until he was in his mid-forties, after several years of private practice there in Abilene, that he had begun to face his own mid-life crisis. He began to realize that the things that a younger person needs in order to build a normal ego, like having a reputation as a good listener, are not necessarily the same things that a slightly paunchy fifty year-old needs anymore. Or wants.

Though there were still times when the problems that an occasional patient brought to him were intrinsically interesting, there seemed to be fewer issues in his work that he cared about in any primary, emotionally connected way. But by that time, he was committed to the tune of twenty-five years of training and practice, a big house and family to support and a whole raft of professional responsibilities. If he had suddenly acknowledged that he didn’t want to listen any more, and walked away from his “normal life” to look for whatever he did need, he would likely have been labeled as insane. By now however, time had worn some, if not all, of the edges off the crisis, and he was reasonably comfortable day to day.

“He just treats her so badly, Doctor”, Mrs. Smith’s voice caught on a rough spot, dragging his attention back. “And what am I supposed to do? I mean I just lay there all night and worry and worry and worry.”

And come in here and worry my ass about it. He held these more cynical observations silent. *Well, it’s your money, lady.*

Capps knew the woman's son-in-law from their country club. Boyer Fuller was a very successful commercial insurance agent, slightly older than Capps. They played golf together from time to time though they weren't what could be called close friends. "Bird Dog", as he still liked to be called, had been a forward air artillery controller in Viet Nam, flying around in a Cessna 0-1 "Bird Dog" spotter plane, and he had thoroughly enjoyed every minute of the time he had spent buzzing around there playing pagan god.

Fuller still wore the old white satin flying scarf and aviator sunglasses that he had affected then, and he still had a plane, now a twin engine executive job with pressurized cabin, velour seats, and every flashy tackismo gadget he could cram into it, including a succession of slender, young secretaries, to whom he still referred as "targets of opportunity". He'd had four or five of these over the last few years, at least that Capps was aware of, and he didn't treat his wife any worse than any other man who had more or less forgotten that they even had a wife. Capps also knew, however, that this spouse didn't do badly herself, materially or socially. Maybe it was a perverse relationship, but she was holding her own in it.

Capps' own day to day equanimity, given the exigencies at the heart of the rat race, was quite good. Inertia, as much as anything else, protected him from grosser mistakes like sexual affairs or other potentially expensive and destructive hobbies. He was generally convivial, with no cloud of depression on the gentle horizon of his own life.

Every morning for years he had faithfully read the Abilene Daily Record in the office. He scanned it completely, front to back, editorials, want ads and all, every

weekday morning, Monday through Friday, before the first patient's appointment, as a part of his coffee ritual. It was a small city paper and didn't take long. Along with the other sections and features, he had long ago developed the habit of reading the obituaries every day; just, he told himself, to make sure that none of the people for whom he was responsible, by virtue of their having sought him out as a physician, and his having accepted them as patients, had blown their brains out, or died at an early age in any strange one car accidents and the like.

Once or twice there had been an uncomfortably familiar name there in the familiar and formal block letters in the usual place on the bottom inside of page three of the paper. So far, however, there had been no real negative external feedback about these few. They had been people for whom family was either totally absent, or as in some cases, the family was the real basis of their problems. Families were sometimes around, but just too relieved to be rid of their flaky, pain in the ass, nutzoid relative to think of causing any problem about it for the doctor.

"Aw, Cousin Irv, he was just crazy," they would say with a grin, and let it go. "Nothing anybody could have done." The doctor would have nodded silently and discretely with relief had he been there in the tract houses of his patient's families at those times to hear. Nonetheless, to be a psychiatrist and have a patient under your care up and off themselves was still considered what, in the very best English clubs would be called, "poor form", and for manifold, if secondary, reasons the good doctor did his day to day best to see to it that no one slipped the leash of life while he was on the other end. The psychiatric profession has much collective experience in trying to determine the degree of a depression, especially its potential for

lethality. Thus there exists another litany, the loosely organized pattern of questions about intention and means, which at some point every depressed patient was suffered to answer, and the doctor, low on caffeine or not, suffered to ask and to hear. Capps ran Mrs. Smith through this litany so subtly that she didn't really realize it. Mrs. Smith didn't need a psychiatrist, thought Capps as they proceeded, she needed a ma jong set.

Since Mrs. Smith seemed more worried about how her son-in-law was treating her daughter socially than in sheathing the old bare bodkin herself, she rumbled out of the office on schedule, thanking Capps for being so compassionate. "Such a good listener," taking her latch hook, her balloon purse, her varicosities and her anxieties, back to the suburbs. She had refused to be ushered all the way through the door to the outer office however, till he had responded to one last question, a recurring one with Mrs. Smith. "Doctor, don't you think I need an antidepressant? Edwina Buntz said her doctor put her on that new Prozac and she feels sooooo much better.

"I really don't think so ... not at this point. Mrs. Smith. You see", he began the tape of another fairly pat explanation, "A lot of people who are depressed....sad,.... are not having any kind of chemical imbalance that would be leveled out by a pill. Most people just haven't gotten themselves right with the universe in some way, and I feel bad, just when they need all their wits to figure it out and move on ahead, putting them on some pill that's just likely to make them foggy and slow. It's just harder then for them to work their actual problems out." It was a simpler way of

discussing what was termed “locus of control”, the degree to which our fate lies in our own hands.

“Oh. You’re sure?”

“I really think so. We’ll keep an eye on it and see, O.K.?”

“So you mean maybe later then?”

“I’ll see you next week, Mrs. Smith.”

She seemed placated, at least movable, but he knew that the fact that he had left open the possibility of a prescription seemed to satisfy her most. Gratis he added. “I think that you’d do more good by getting a good hobby and letting your daughter handle her own business. She’s grown up now, you know? And you do have a life of your own that you need to live.” She gave a wan smile and nodded in response to his parting question as to whether she thought she could get along O.K. till next week, as she toddled off through the door and out into Janelle’s tender and expert hands.

This only left Capps time to mix a less than satisfying cup of instant from the small jar he kept in his desk drawer for emergencies. He was still slurping it, trying to justify the burns on his tongue to himself in some way, when Janelle’s, “I know you’re in there drinking coffee but you’ve got a patient and I’m bringing them in”, sounding knock broke in softly over the air conditioning whirl. She could read his mind and his signature; he could read her moods, and her knocks.

There was the expected pause of a couple of seconds, and then the door opened and she stood aside, like a hotel doorman, ushering in a plainly dressed man, a little younger than Capps, perhaps in his early forties. The man wore a cheap

sport coat, and a pair of very weary cowboy boots. The fellow, Capps told himself immediately however, was certainly not a cowboy. That was a simple deduction however, mainly because in all his years as a psychiatrist in Abilene, Texas, he had never seen one even semi-real cowboy in his office, nor as a psychiatrist, at the hospital E.R.

Also, because in the attempt at combing his hair, though the fellow had used some kind of grease, which Capps imagined a cowboy certainly might, he had shaped up too much of a pompadour, with the sideburns a bit too long and full for the West as well. The man's roots were somewhere in the South. There were other things about the man's physical appearance that Capps generally noted in summing him up, and some were indeed real cowboy traits. The wiry, lean man wore his shirt buttoned all the way up to his slightly protuberant Adam's Apple, and buttoned all the way down on the wrists, like any cowboy worth his salt. Buttoning up in sun-baked Abilene was a sensible habit, learned by generations of working cowboys through long experience with "Shorty got his face et up" kind of skin cancers. But, Capps thought, over time, it was a habit which had simply been picked up by many men who worked constantly outside in all sorts of occupations; light truck haulers, pump supply and repair, ranchers and the many common laboring oil field personnel. There is an old joke around Abilene; it's a plea that you, "Don't tell my gray old momma I'm oil field trash. She thinks I've got a *good* job playin' piano in a whorehouse."

Above the leathery, baked skin of the backs of his hands and lower wrists, for just an inch or two, Capps could see the fish belly whiteness of his arm. There was

just a touch of sallowness to the skin, but they were arms that always had sleeves rolled down. Capps also noticed just a flash of what he thought might be a scar of some kind on the man's left wrist. This was certainly a high-milage kind of guy in any event. In the used-car lot of life, his windshield sticker would have read: "Radio good...engine needs work...brakes fair."

The man nonetheless looked somehow familiar, but Capps couldn't make any specific connections. "*East Texas white trash*," thought the doctor as he smiled and extended his hand.

"Hello Mr....?" The question fell abortively between them. He glanced for assistance at Janelle who still stood in the doorway holding the knob, daring him and his thick cup of caffeinated to be irritated at the slight smile she smiled as she let him swing for just a second, just a heartbeat.

"Mr. Troy Perkins," she said.

"Buddy", said the man, extending his own hand to Capps. His voice was not deep, but throaty, hoarse like a much older man, perhaps from too many Camels. To Capps, it made him somehow seem larger than his objective height of about five foot seven or eight.

"Mr. Perkins,.... Buddy", the doctor echoed pleasantly, if a bit stupidly, he thought. "Come on in. Sit down, sit down. Thank you Janelle," he said with an almost imperceptible, one cornered, ten-point snarl of a smile at Janelle as she handed him the cream-colored manila jacket. He knew this held two pieces of paper; a completed information sheet, and the first blank page, for his notes, with the date already written neatly in the upper part of the left corner.

"Well, Mr. Perkins, what brings you in to see us today?" Capps asked. The man's eye sockets were deep set, and there were crow's feet lines in his face even when he wasn't smiling.

"I usually go by Buddy."

"Alright then. What can I do for you Buddy?"

"Oh. Well, I'm not sure", Perkins began in a familiarly tentative manner.

Well, neither am I, buckaroo, but its your dime, or actually, the State's, thought Capps.

"The Vocational Rehab Department sent me. I just got to talk to somebody I guess. I got to get my life together," Perkins ventured trustingly.

Oh, is that all? You want fries with that? thought Capps. "Well, let's see what we can do", he said. "What's the major issue you're having?"

"Well, it's all been going on so long I can't really get it all separated," continued Perkins. Then he stopped again, looking around at the diplomas and certificates on the walls of the office. He was clearly ill at ease.

"Where are you from?" asked Capps.

"I was born in Texarkana, but I lived all around", Perkins offered. Capps noted that the heels on his scuffed and seam-broken boots were walking heels, not taller riding ones, and that the back of the right one was markedly more rounded than the left. *Probably done a lot of driving.*

"What kind of work you do?" This could be an embarrassing question if put to such a man at a cocktail party, because it was almost certain that he wouldn't talk about his latest takeover acquisition, or the latest Guggenheim grant.

“That’s why I came. I’m on disability.” A flat statement of fact. He had had some time to come to terms with it. “I had to go down and see the fellow at the Vocational Rehab. I think he wants to talk to you, too. Probably call you or send you a letter, I guess.”

“O.K. then... What’s up?”

“I dunno. I guess he wants to know if I’m crazy or not.”

“Am I supposed to be able to tell him that?” asked Capps, sitting back with a grin, feeling uncomfortably coy even as he said it. Perkins was either crude enough not to notice, or sophisticated enough not to show it if he did.

“That’s what I’m here for isn’t it?” Perkins asked.

“Um...well, I think,” he began, shaping as he went, “that probably the reason I’m involved here, at all, has something to do with figuring out...between us...if there might be something that would be good work for you.” He himself mistrusted any sentence that started with “Um...well.”

“Well hell, ain’t that guy an employment counselor? Ain’t that his job?” rejoined Perkins.

“Yeah, in a way it’s his job...” Capps paused a moment, and then went on. “But a job for you, a good one, has to have two sides, two things that go to make it up, right? One side, you have to have whatever training it takes to do the work. That’s his job, to know whether you have a particular skill set to turn a particular wrench, you know?” Perkins sat impassively, waiting. “But,” Capps continued, “even if you have the skills, been to the school or apprenticed or whatever, if you don’t want to do the work, it still isn’t a good job. Right?”

"Doc, do you always like what you do?"

"Eh, you know....mostly, yes. But what the man wants me to find out, to discuss with you, is what you want to do. It won't do him any good to put you in a job or a school if you don't want to be there. Right?"

"That's true for anybody, ain't it?"

"Sure, exactly", said Capps summed up, with a bit of relief. "See, it's not a question of crazy here."

"So, if I don't find something I like to do out there..." he pitched a nod out the window to fry on the asphalt griddle, "does *that* make me crazy?"

"Well" answered Capps, "it certainly makes you not fit in with what's going on around you, and that, I guess when you come right down to it, is what the powers that be call crazy, or close enough to it, anyway."

"Huhm", Perkins nodded acknowledgement. "I used to know what I wanted to do." Perkins gaze was years away. Capps chose a relatively expansive silence. Seconds passed. "I wanted to have my own garage, once", Perkins finally said softly. "That was when I was a kid. I had an Uncle who had his own place. He worked when he wanted to, went fishing if it got too hot to suit him."

"Did you ever do any work like that? On cars, I mean"

"Oh....not really. I mean, I worked on cars a little, when I was a kid. I guess I was pretty good at it. I even worked for Uncle Johnny for a little while. He's the one with the garage."

"What happened?"

“Aw, he wouldn’t let me go fishing with him.” Perkins grinned slightly, showing that one of his front lower teeth was missing. Capps nodded slowly, but said nothing. “I mean, why should he get to go fishing and make me stay back there in the bays and work my ass off?”

“How old were you then?”

“Oh, about, fifteen, maybe sixteen. You think that’s crazy?”

“No,” answered Capps, quietly but firmly. In his mind he appended, *Not for a snot-nosed kid of fifteen its not*. It was too early to challenge such a fundamental issue. “So what do you normally do? What did you do before you were disabled?” Capps waited for the answer to this specific question. Long pause. Bad sign.

“I done a lot of things. I worked on the oil rigs. That’s where I got hurt last.”

“What happened?”

“It’s my back.”

No shit, thought Capps. Backs are a bitch for doctors of all kinds, psychiatrists included.

“But before that I drove a truck.”

“Trucks?” Capps waited to hear more about that but it didn’t seem Perkins had much with which to embellish it.

“Yeah, you know, trucks. I cooked some, worked in a parts store,...bunch of things.”

“Uh huh. Other things.” Capps fished for other work history, building the man’s curriculum vitae in his mind. “Were you ever in the military?”

“I’s in the Army.”

“Any vocational training with them? What was your MOS?” Capps wanted to know if the government might have given Perkins a “military occupational specialty” that might be of help.

“Eleven bravo. Infantry.”

“Any overseas time anywhere?”

“Viet Nam.”

“Uh, huh. But no vocational training?” Perkins shook his head. “And where are you living now?”

“I’m living down at a motel right now. But I think I’m gonna have a place next week.”

“Are you married? Family?”

“Divorced.”

“Long?”

“Oh, I don’t even know where they are now.”

“Kids?” Capps coaxed.

“Yeah. Three kids. Two girls and a boy.” There was suddenly affect and hesitation in his voice, unlike when he had easily written himself out of the world of working people with the flat, “I’m disabled”. A human connection of some kind, noted Capps, jotting down the single word, “Kids”, on the blank sheet in the folder, almost doodling it in messy block printing.

“How long since you’ve seen them?”

“Oh, Lord, it’s been...six, maybe eight years. Wife got remarried. Kids are nearly grown now, I guess. Last I heard, second hand, oldest girl was pregnant. She may have already had it by now. I don’t know.”

“How long were you married?”

“Off and on, it was fifteen years.” Perkins’ eye, out the window, carried the story; the fights, the shouting, the tears, the decision, the few good times, the many bad ones, the final dissolution, and the rebuilding and going on; for her perhaps, thought Capps, but not for him. “Married/off and on” went onto the clean white sheet in the folder.

“What was it that broke you up?”

“Whew ... lots of thing.” Capps waited. The pause got longer than is comfortable in casual conversation. Capps did what he was paid to do and remained silent.

“I don’t know,” began Perkins again, “We were always fighting about something. Money, we fought a lot about money because I wasn’t working steady. The Army disabled me in Nam. It was hard to find work without a clean discharge paper when I got back. I hung around, busted up a few bars,” he went on.

Capps’ own worst problem when he was transitioning from his Army service to civilian life had been deciding what color the office drapes would be.

“Money...whatever. I’d get all mad, you know? It’s like, for one thing...like my wife never did seem to tolerate any of my friends,” Perkins explained, “But then, I guess there wasn’t anything much to like about them, really.” Perkins laughed grimly and focused short, as though seeing the faces of his running buddies. “We

used to get together and drink and smoke dope, and Connie...that was my wife, she'd come busting in and get all over me right there in front of them because there wasn't money for gas or for the groceries."

"Did you have trouble with alcohol?" Capps asked. Anyone in the Western world who deals with people's health, and their lives, and their souls, knows that day in, day out, the big enemy is still plain old demon rum.

"No, not really. I mean I drank my share, don't get me wrong Doc. But....nah.", Perkins pursed his lips and shook his head in a way that made Capps doubt alcohol was this man's foremost problem.

"I think maybe I got into more trouble smoking than drinking."

"Smoking? Marijuana you mean?"

"Yes sir."

"Trouble with the law?"

"No. Law never cared much about it, I guess. They never gave me any hassle, anyway."

"Any hard drugs? Needles?"

"No, sir", he said emphatically. "Never did cocaine or heroin."

"Not when you were younger?" It was partly a test to understand Perkins' rhetorical framework. Capps wanted to know if words like "never" meant never to this man, or alternatively any number of other things like, "Oh, well, yeah, if you mean..."

"Nope, Doc"

"Not even when you were in the military?"

“Nope. Not even in the Nam,” he said, with the first sharpness Capps had heard in his voice. “And I’ll tell you there was plenty of it there.”

“Did you ever get into wrecks or anything, accidents, smoking, drinking?” Capps challenged Perkins slightly, partly to get simple vocational history, but again, also to see his reaction to what was basically an authoritarian interrogation.

“Yeah, a couple. This one wreck, one time, I don’t really know if it was the dope. I got sideways in an eighteen-wheeler with an overload of pizza cheese in the back. Out between Monahans and El Paso and it went over with me. I thought I had really screwed up then.”

“What happened?”

“Truck went over on its side doing about seventy. Lost the whole load, you know? It was my brother-in-law’s truck. He was pissed-off for sure.”

“Had you been smoking when you went over?” Capps asked, trying to hold the train of thought on its tracks.

“Well, no, as a matter of fact I hadn’t smoked any at all that day. It was a short haul. Midland to El Paso. I think the problem is that that stuff stays with you a little. You know, builds up in your system. It’s not like whiskey. You drink whiskey and get drunk and no matter how bad, if you don’t die outright, when the hangover’s gone, you’re out of it and it’s out of you. But with the smoke, even you smoke a little, and it stays a while. Smoke one night and it’s gone next day, but smoke two nights in a row and a little of it is still with you the next day. I’d smoke three or four or five days in a row on the road and finally it would be there all day even when I took a

day off from smoking. I'd come into the terminal and I'd still be kind of stoned. Dispatchers start to give you a hard time about it sometimes."

Perkins rambled on about what was essentially one long country and western song of a life. Capps glanced at the clock and noticed that they were near the end of the hour.

"Our hour is just about up, Mr. Perkins." Capps said.

Perkins snapped upright, rising with an apology, "I'm sorry Doc, I didn't mean to get to talking but..."

"No, no. That's what we're here for, right?" reassured Capps with his hand gently guiding Perkins by the elbow toward the door. We can pick up there next week, O.K.?"

Chapter 3

The next day Capps got to his office reasonably early, had his coffee, read the paper, and even read a little more in Paradise Lost before he went about the day's business. Finishing up some medical staff forms he chuckled as he thought of the similarity between Milton's dwarf devils glumly conferring in Pandemonium and the current administration of the hospital.

He did have a number of patients on anti-depressants and some on chronic medication for things like schizophrenia or mania. Most of these he could see every couple of months for fifteen or twenty minutes just to see if their medications seemed to be working, to put a little dot on the more or less subjective scale of global function he kept on his patients. Mister A. is coming unwrapped, he's down from a sixty to the forties on the scale of global functioning. More meds? Different meds? Miss W is not keeping her appearance up like before. Perhaps a conversation with the family about possible new stresses building up? It was a lot easier to intervene early than late. He saw a few patients for counseling basic neurotic problems like obsessive-compulsions and a few more whose families just couldn't put up with their personality disorders, pain in the ass relatives without support and commiseration. "Misery doesn't just love company, it demands it", he would say to Retta.

At about three o'clock on Sunday he and Retta were working in the flower garden on shady side of the house the sun was at its hottest and sweat was running down Capps' nose and making his glasses slip. He saw, from where he knelt

more or less screened by the edge of the house, an old car, a beat up green Mercury Cougar, with many thousands of miles on it, slowly moving along the street in front of their house. He could not see the driver's face clearly, just a glimpse, but he had a sudden small jolt of recognition as he believed it was the face of Buddy Perkins. He could not be sure at that distance, but at about that time Retta stood up, shielding her eyes with her hand to see who was in the car, which was now almost stopped in the middle of the street. She was holding a hand spade to which she had obviously been applying herself. Whoever it was in the car, seeing her rise, brandishing her tool, just flipped a lethargic wave and drove slowly down the block and on around the corner.

It was always disconcerting for him to think of his patients being in his personal sphere. The man had been a long way off, and Capps wasn't at all sure it was Perkins. If it were him, he was probably just cruising around this prosperous neighborhood looking for work, just coincidence. If it didn't happen again, he would just write it off as such. After all, it was the middle of the day. It was, all things considered, a typical week in Capps' life.

Capps had forgotten Buddy Perkins over the last week, and he had to read back over the few notes he had made on him, before Perkins came in for his two o'clock appointment. It was not his intention to bring up having seen Perkins over the weekend. First because he was not sure it had even been him, and second

because he worried that if he indicated even generally where he really lived, some day, someone like this fellow, might for some reason come over to visit. He thought it prudent to listen for any information that might explain it away, but to offer nothing himself.

"Hello, Mr. Perkins, how are you?" He noticed it was 2:03.

"I'll make it, I guess." said Perkins cheerfully.

"How was your week?"

"Not bad, Doc. I moved out of the motel. Got me a place of my own." This was an extremely good piece of news to Capps' way of thinking, as it could give more of a sense of rootedness. "I'm staying out on the east side, R.V. park. It ain't much, but the owner's an old lady, lives off in Ft. Worth or someplace, doesn't want to have to check on it, and they said if I sort of look after it I can get my rent knocked way down. There's nothing much to look after though. Nobody much out there so I don't have to work too hard at it. It's pretty good. I can have a place to keep my clothes and my box of stuff and all. It leaves me time to look for a little yard work or light hauling or something during the day, over in the nice neighborhoods, you know?"

"Well, that's wonderful. I'm glad" said Capps, mildly relieved at this confirmation of his assumption. So he could assume Perkins hadn't specifically known it was his house he passed on Sunday. "So you're already sort of working then?"

"Well, no." Perkins quickly began to explain. "I mean this really ain't work. I can't be really working cause of my back. If I get a job, they'd cut off my benefits, and Doc, I can't make it without my benefits. Uh, Doc,..., you won't mention any of that to my counselor or anything, will you? I mean I thought what we say here stays pretty private, don't it?"

Capps found himself mildly irritated at this request for his complicity. He recognized the short circuit between his personal feelings and what he was trying to understand about this patient. Like an electrical short, it built up heat that needed to be dissipated. "Can we get back to the stuff we were talking about last week? I'd like to get to know a little bit more about you, generally, if it's alright. I need to know some more objective information right now, for the records, O.K.?"

"Sure, Doc. Shoot." Perkins eyes gleamed and Capps was immediately aware of the difference in the perceptions that the two of them had. He wanted to get to know more about Perkins in order to do his job; Perkins just thought that perhaps somebody wanted to know something about him.

"Let's start with your most recent history and work back."

"Back to where?" Perkins asked.

"Far back as we get. Doesn't matter right now", guided Capps, "So you're living on the east side now, and you're seeing the Voc Rehab guys. How long have you been in Abilene?"

"Oh...God, must be nearly ten years now. That's off and on."

"Where were you living before the motel? How long were you at that motel, anyway?"

"Well, see, I had been working for this 'ol boy out on some of his rigs." In Abilene, "rigs" meant some form of labor in the oil well business, though it could be anything from being a highly paid drilling foreman, to one of the semi-inert, usually alcoholic, night watchmen.

"What were you doing on the rigs?"

"I was just doing general work, you know, loading pipe and doing some driving and stuff. I worked all over, in the Patch and over toward Hobbs. I lived in Hobbs for about three years. That's the longest in one place. I've been back here for about, oh, three or four months now."

"When did you get hurt? What happened?"

"I was loading some pipe and an 'ol boy dropped his end, you know?" Perkins shook his head and smiled sardonically, holding his hands palms up in a gesture that said helplessly, "So what are you supposed to do if the other guy fucks up?"

"Did it fall on you"

"Naw. I just tried to reach down and grab it. Reflex, I guess. Pretty stupid though. I reached down and the weight of that pipe hit my arms and all of a sudden I felt something go, Pop! in my back. Down here, you know." Perkins said this as he turned about a quarter of the way around in his chair to show Capps the area of his sacroiliac joint, patting it with his fingers as he did. Capps noted that as he turned

back, Perkins' eyes were suddenly focused on his own and there was a stiffness to his torso that he had not displayed up to that point.

"I went to an ol' doctor the company sent me to, but he just said I pulled something. Must have torn something, he said. He didn't even do no x-rays Doc. Shouldn't he 'a done some x-rays? See what was wrong?"

"I don't know much about backs", Capps said, "But usually x-rays don't show very much. The kinds of things that get torn up are not the things that show up. Usually."

"Oh." said Perkins in a tone that said he had heard that explanation before and was just testing a second opinion.

"I went to a chiropractor, and he said he'd take x-rays. But the company wouldn't pay for it so I didn't get them."

"So you've been with that company for several years? Just in different places? Is that right?"

"Well, no. I only been with them for about three weeks when I got hurt, as a matter of fact."

"Who did you work for in Hobbs? For, what...three years?"

"I didn't work for nobody regular for no three years. I just said I lived in Hobbs for three years. Nearly three."

"But have you been doing oil field work for all that time?"

"Well, off and on. But I done other things, some, too. I was a cook for a while in Hobbs. I cooked some outside of town here too, back five years ago, maybe six.....yeah it was six years ago."

Capps glanced at the clock. He was surprised that they had only been at this for about ten minutes.

"What was going on, say, ten years ago." Capps often found that this was a more practical tack than attempting at this point to follow the whack-a-mole trail directly.

"Ten years, '81. Oh, back then...., I remember that one, yes sir! I was in this real bad wreck. I was in the hospital nearly a year, nearly all of that year. That's really where I probably hurt my back to begin with, you think maybe, Doc?" Again Perkins fixed Capps eye, watching, waiting for the response.

"There isn't any way for me to know." Capps felt wrong that he had even the faintest trace of defensiveness in his voice. He took the offensive. "So tell me about it. What did happen?"

"You mean the wreck?"

"Yeah. That the truck wreck?"

"No, different one, car wreck."

"Oh?"

"The actual wreck, wasn't much to tell. I fell asleep, slid on the ice. It was in January or February, I remember. I think I sort of woke up just as that Chevy was

about to hit that old tree. Saw a flash, next thing I knew I was in a hospital in Tyler, Texas with all kind of tubes and wires in me. Plaster all over. Broke both legs and a bunch of ribs. They had to take out my spleen, too.”

“What were you doing just before the wreck.”

“I told ya’ Doc, I think I musta’ fell asleep, I don’t remember.”

“No, no.” Capps corrected the question. “I don’t mean that day or anything, I mean what kind of work, where were you living... all that.”

“Oh, yeah. I sure as hell remember that. My old lady and I had just split up. I mean once and for all. We had been on again off again for a long time. She finally took the kids and left. I remember that. Right before Christmas, too.” Capps chest felt tight as he imagined the scene.

“How many kids did you have? Or, I guess it’s, how many do you have?”

“Three.”

“That’s right, you told me that. I’m sorry...”

“Aw, that’s O.K. Doc. Two girls and the littlest one’s a boy. I ain’t seen them since then but once or twice. Last time I heard, the oldest girl was going to have a baby herself. I don’t know what ever come of it.”

“Didn’t you have to pay child support?”

“I’ was supposed to, but I admit I never was real good about it. Connie dunned me for a while, but back then you could get away with not paying better than you can today. But Connie’s a good looking woman and she got married a few

years later and I didn't hear no more from her. That's why I didn't know too much about the kids. I didn't want to get Connie stirred up at me."

"What do you think finally broke you up, you and your wife? You mentioned money last time." Capps pursued the track. They were now about half an hour into the session, and he didn't feel so oppressed and bogged down now. There was a flow and a rhythm developing. He could have used a cup of coffee, but otherwise he was doing alright as he sat back to listen passively to what he figured would be a fairly large emotional chunk. Perhaps it would even fill the rest of the session.

"Aw, I don't know. You know how women are. You can't live with 'em." Then, to Capps' chagrin, he was silent. Somewhat desperate not to lose the momentum, Capps pushed in.

"Did you fight about money? A lot of couples fight about money nowadays. He had asked that question for two reasons. First was because it would give him an idea of what Perkins' working status had been then, even before the wreck. After all, they were ultimately dealing with his employability.

The second reason, however, was to help continue the narrative.

"Yeah, by then we were fighting about nearly everything. But yeah," Perkins volunteered almost cheerfully, "I guess money was one big thing. When we first got married, first few years, Connie's momma could look after the kids, so Connie worked. She's a beautician and she made good money. We did all right. Saving up for a house and everything. But her momma got sick. She had cancer for a long time and it all changed. Instead of her taking care of the kids, Connie had to take care of

them and her momma too. We'd just had the youngest, the boy, just before her momma got sick. So Connie couldn't work much any more. It started to get pretty bad. We had to give up on the idea of the house and all."

"What kind of work were you doing."

"Me?"

Capps let him stew in it for a moment, if there was something in which he was stewing.

"Yeah. What were you doing?" Implicitly the sentence ended with, "*...While Connie was taking care of three small kids and a sick mother.*"

"Most of the time I was driving. Long distance, you know, over the road."

Jumping back to fit a piece into the puzzle, Capps interrupted the flow. "That was when you had your wreck?"

"No. I told you, I was in a car when I wrecked bad. I had a wreck in a big rig once through", he volunteered again, almost brightly, with a trace of a smile on his lips. "Remember I told you, that's when I let the pizza cheese get over on its side on me." He displayed the straightness of the slide with his hand cleaving space and sighting with one eye, "right down the white line, whew!. State cops said they hadn't ever seen nothing like it."

"And you weren't hurt then?"

"Aw, just scratched up mostly. I got my leg caught down between the door and the seat and it broke one little old bone in there, but that wasn't nothing. I was

on the down side of the thing, skidding down that road. Nothing between me and the road but the driver's side window. That sucker didn't break. I mean it cracked all up, but it didn't break out. If it had busted out I would have just got ground away, smeared along the road, big red wet spot, I guess."

"You kept working then, after that, driving?"

"Naw, I quit. You see, I thought I ought to be home with Connie more. We were still trying then. She was always afraid when I was out on the road anyway. I thought I could find a job somewhere there at home, round Texarkana, so I hung it up.

"But it didn't make any difference, after all?"

"Nope, they left anyway. I cried. Lord, Doc, I cried."

"You really missed them, huh?" It was not so much a reflective question as a truly empathetic response from one human to another.

"Well," Perkins said, eyes averted, "I can't say I was all that good a family man, you know."

"Yeah, sometimes it's tough."

"Yeah, but Doc... I don't know, for a long time I really guess I had been pretty much separated from them anyway."

"Separated?"

"Yeah. You know how it is, I mean I drank probably more than I should have, and smoked too."

“Smoked? You mean the marijuana? We had started to talk about that before, last week. So you think that had a lot to do with your problems?”

“Yeah, smoking that dope. I started that when I was in Nam.” So many of the soldiers Capps had seen as patients used of some kind of drug or other, whether alcohol, marijuana, speed, or heroin. Perkins continued, now raising his head, and quietly looking Capps in the eye. This felt like confession, like the working out of something that had been balled up in a raveled knot for a long time.

“When I got back, it really wasn’t any big deal. I mean I wasn’t ever a junkie or nothing. I’d just drink some, but mostly what I liked to do was get a little bit high. Connie and I used to get high all the time when we were young. She gave it up mostly though, when the kids came.

“I still smoked a little around the house, and that kind of got to be a friction between us. Her folks would come over sometimes to see the kids and all and she didn’t like them to smell it, you know?”

“You fought about it?”

“No, not really. She didn’t really give me much hard time about it. She knew there wasn’t nothing much to it. I mean she’d still take a toke herself sometime when the kids were at her momma’s or something, when it was just us.

“But what happened, I guess, was she was just kind of uncomfortable about it with her folks and all, so she just started going over there to their house to visit, mostly. You know, always taking the kids over there and all. That was all right with me, I mean we wasn’t fighting about it or anything.

"I remember once too, I went in to kiss the girls good night, you know, tuck them in, and I'd been smoking some of this really rough old chicken shit road weed and when I leaned over to kiss them my oldest girl she jerks her head away and she says 'P.U. Daddy, you smell bad! What is that?' She was only about four, I remember. I really tried not to smoke it around them, you know. I'd go off somewhere and get high, wouldn't come home until after they was in bed."

"So they knew you smoked marijuana?"

"Oh, yeah, Connie, and I guess the kids, but nobody would never say nothing. We'd just sort of pretend it didn't happen. I mean, it's no big deal. It's not like I was doing heroin or anything. I was working, so it wasn't no big deal."

"You were working? What were you doing then?"

"Back then...? Let's see, I was painting houses some, and I did some sheet rocking. You ever hang sheetrock, Doc?"

"Nope, can't say I have."

"I'm here to tell you, it's a bitch. Holding that shit up all day. It's pretty simple to do though, really. We'd get high and it really made it go faster. Or maybe it just made it seem like it went faster."

"You ever think about doing it now?"

"Hanging dry wall? Nooo, I'm too old and stove up." Perkins grinned good-naturedly and turned his head and looked out the window as he said this. Capps

nodded a couple of times and said nothing for a moment. "I was driving part of that time, too. Long haul, over the road."

"And you never had any problem with that, I mean the drinking or smoking and driving?"

"Naw. I didn't drink that much, and a lot of the long haulers smoke dope. It's like with the dry wall, it makes it go faster. Not that you actually drive faster. Maybe even slower cause you sure as hell don't want to get pulled over with the cab all smelling evil. If you just time it all right, it's O.K."

"Time it?"

"Yeah, you go pick up your rig all straight and get through the traffic...I used to drive out of Texarkana and mostly go to the west coast and back. I worked it out so I started taking the longer runs up to San Francisco and Washington state, and that way I could cut up through Amarillo and catch Forty, not have to go through those border patrol stations over on I-10. They got to using dogs in them stations, you know? But if you just not try to get all ahead of yourself, wait till you're out in the open flats, there ain't much out there to hit. Driving mostly at night."

"Doesn't put you to sleep?" Capps' own personal experience with marijuana had been limited, though he had tried it at a party or two when he was in residency. He had gone through college before it had become widespread and popular and there hadn't been much time for it in medical school in the mid-sixties. There had been only one time since then, when he was in the service, that proved to be

remarkably clear in his memory, but mostly he remembered only vaguely low lights and sedation associated with smoking marijuana.

“Well sure, Doc. I mean if you smoked a whole big ‘ol bomber it would stone you sure. But mostly you just take a toké or two every once in a while. It actually kind of keeps you more awake that way. ‘Tucson to Tucumcari, Tehachapi to Tonopah’, like the song, Doc. It’s a long flat motherfucker out there. Seem like you be driving forever sometimes.”

“How long would you be out? I mean away from home?”

“Oh, it’d depend, might be five, maybe six days at a time, sometime.”

“Did you miss your family then?”, Capps wondered. Perkins stopped, this apparently being a sensitive issue for him.

“Well, yeah” he said, giggling uncomfortably. “All drivers get to missing momma, you know? And the kids.”

“What did your wife think of all that time gone?”

“Connie? Well... it made pretty good money, I was mostly driving for her brother Butch. He owned eight or ten rigs. So I guess it was pretty much O.K. with her. Especially after we’d been married awhile. She spent a lot of time with her family, you know?”

“Yeah, you said that.”

“And she was having to take care of her momma too. I just kind of got in the way, things like that.”

"Would you spend time together when you were at home?"

"Oh, sure. I mean it'd take me a day or two to sleep off a run before I'd be much company, but then..., sure we'd be together for a while. If she wasn't off with her momma or something."

"You'd be on the road a lot, and then you weren't seeing much of each other when you got home either?"

"Well, like I said, Doc., It'd take a couple, three days for me to get rested up."

"You'd sleep for three days at a pop?" Capps allowed a touch of incredulity to show clearly, challenging Perkins to strip another layer back.

"Pretty much. I wasn't exactly sleeping, but after I been out there for a while I'd be all red eyed and stupid for a while."

"Red eyed and stupid?"

"That dope does it to you, you know?"

"But you weren't smoking that much, were you?"

"You know, that stuff is different than whiskey. You get drunk, even real drunk on whisky on Saturday, and Monday you'll be O.K. Smoke don't get you nasty raving drunk the same, but if you do it day after day, it must build up in you or something. You smoke for a week or two every day and you're still fucked up for a few days after that. You stop smoking, like, the day before you get home and you feel like you're straight arrow and you walk into where there are a bunch of people don't smoke at all, like Connie's family, or the kids, and it's just like...." he paused,

looking for a phrase, "...it's just like you was still thinking they were all looking at you."

"Looking at you?"

"Yeah, looking at you like you was still stoned or something."

"Maybe they were just looking at you because they hadn't seen you for a while." This seemed possible to Capps, but he was aware of the sense of paranoia that Perkins described, and he was interested in hearing Perkins continue his description of the feeling.

"Maybe, but it was real creepy anyway. For a while I was just only comfortable if I was with somebody I knew smoked too, you know? But you get to looking around and there really ain't all that many folks smoke a whole lot of dope. Oh, everybody smoked once in a while, but there wasn't anybody left to hang out with all the time, like when you were a kid. I got to where I just as soon stay off by myself, off away from everybody." He stopped for a moment reflecting. "But you know what Doc?", he said with what sounded like the rising voice of an insight, "It got to where it'd get so boring, you know, lonesome, without them that way, that I'd light up a joint to get through the day. Just like a damned old dog chasing its tail or something." He laughed, softly and shook his head at the thought. "The real problem, Doc, is that once you seen the cartoons in color, its hard to go back and settle for black and white." He looked up and there was a pause.

"How old were you when you got married?" Capps continued the dialog.

“Me and Connie? Let’s see, it was before I went in the army, so that would be 1970. I quit school about then. Connie she was already out of school. She was working at her aunt’s beauty shop, so she already quit school.”

“So when was it you went in the army?” Capps knew in a usual kind of therapeutic or counseling situation he would have certainly delved deeply into the history of Perkins’ personal relationships, but he reminded himself that this was a more directed series of utilitarian interviews, all with the ultimate purpose of getting this guy off the dole, therefore he steered back toward vocational history.

“I got my draft notice in the middle of ’70. I thought, shit boy, at least you’ll get to see some of the world. I was all excited, you know? And where does ol’ Uncle Sugar send my young ass? Ft. Polk, Louisiana. Ain’t spit’s worth of difference in there and Texarkana. Stayed there after basic for infantry school, too. I remember the drill sergeants give the one’s going to infantry a dime each, to catch the bus, you know? By Christmas I was in country. Viet Nam, 1st Air Cav.”

“Did you do much time in the bush?”

“Some. Seemed like right at first we was out some, but those fellas was winding it down by then and pretty soon we was all just tucked up in camp. That was us, “Tucked Up and Fucked Up, Ninth of the First”.”

Capps could easily imagine what Perkins was describing in his economical style. By the time he had been sent to Viet Nam himself, in 1971, for young Americans, the war was clearly no longer about geo-political issues. Certainly people were still dying, all the historical trademarks of a war were no doubt present,

but drugs, racial conflicts, and discipline problems were out of control due to the concentration of young men stuck together and then told in louder or softer voices that they were, at least for the time being, useless. Cocky, unreasonable, edgy nineteen and twenty year-olds, given guns and ready access to drugs of all kinds, kept inside barbed wire for a long time, in a hot, sweaty place.

“That where you started using drugs?”, he asked.

“Yeah, there just wasn’t much to do, and everybody was so... just so... nervous, you know? It kind of kept everybody calm like. They couldn’t make us fight anybody, but they wouldn’t let us just go on home.”

Capps remembered most of his own time there only vaguely, all of it having been spent entirely within the city limits of Saigon. By now, all his images of the orient were blurred together, and it was difficult for him to remember all of the olive green presence in Saigon specifically, to separate it out from the rest of the neon machine-gun oriental street scenes in his memory, to bring it to clarity through the veil of a mid-American medical practice, many barbecues, malls, suburban landscaping, Bluebird and Brownie meetings, patients, and a couple of hundred different movies that had been washed over his mind since, some of them set in the orient.

Capps had been drafted immediately out of his residency, which had come as no shock to him. Though he was not particularly political, most of his young peers came from more liberal arts backgrounds and were rarely conservative or nationalistic. Many were active in the anti-war movement. Like essentially one

hundred percent of all young psychiatrists in training at the time, he agreed it was obvious that this war had become irrational.

The problem was that in attempting to deal with the huge numbers of behavioral problems cropping up in Viet Nam in those stagnant, waning years, the military had had to draft a whole new cadre of psychiatric therapists. None of these younger people had any inherent ties to the military, indeed, most of them saw the Army as the real enemy at that time, and none of them had any vested interest in keeping troops in the combat zone. To send someone back to their unit was often tantamount to a sentence of addiction, assault, or even death. Sending them home salved the conscience, it was a blow against the Empire.

His family was very traditional and not especially imaginative in their values, and assumed that in the larger sense, one simply served the country when it came your time to go. He hadn't felt going into the military, or even to Viet Nam itself, at least to practice psychiatry, represented any great transgression against morality. That, and the fact that he assumed he would not be in any personal danger had made it simpler for him to acquiesce gracefully to the Army's summons.

Capps had already been tired of the medical routine by the time he finished residency, and the chance to take a break from it, to travel personally to where all the news had been made for the last six or seven years had actually been intriguing to him.

He had arrived in what he came later to think of as “Gawd’s own sauna” in December of 1970 and been assigned to a large military hospital downtown in the capitol.

His “section” or working group had consisted, for the most of the time, of himself, another recent draftee, George Prestwick out of Georgetown Med School and Columbia’s Ivy League residency program, and an older, crew-cutted, career Army psychiatrist named Boone. The domestic myth that they created for themselves, their glue as private humans, made them Capps, Columbia, and the Colonel, Inc.

The three of them had been able to work through the animosity that often separated the older and the younger, the “lifer” and the “short timers” in most of the other areas of the military there. Though they certainly hadn’t agreed on everything, they had a relatively peaceful tour together.

He still spoke with Prestwick once every year or two, at conferences and such. Capps and Retta had even stayed with him and his wife, Mimi, twice when they had been in Washington, D.C., Prestwick’s home town, where he had settled comfortably back in to, “Keep our leaders and representatives from going publicly crazy”.

Capps’ clearest memories of Viet Nam were of sitting in the empty mess hall of the hospital in the humid mornings, smoking, and drinking coffee with Prestwick as they reviewed cases, and generally, but futilely, tried to come to terms with the situation around them.

They usually had a huge stack of charts to work through, and he and Columbia would often vocalize their despair at not being able to do an “appropriate” job with so many patients. That, plus the heat and the sirens and other noises from the street below the windows often kept Capps awake nights.

The veteran Colonel Boone had suggested soft aviation ear plugs and a “cooler”, preferably containing real quinine water and gin, before retiring. Capps found that though this regime did work as well as anything, unfortunately nothing was foolproof.

“Did you get any sleep last night, Cappsy?”, Prestwick would ask. “You look like shit. You doing O.K.?”

“Oh, yeah.” Capps sighed. “I’ll make it. Jesus, these charts breed like rats.”

Yeah, I know”, sighed Prestwick, “What’s the point?” Then for the hundredth time he insisted, “I mean, I might understand worrying about sending those guys back to their units if we were fighting dirty old Nazi werewolves of something... and if the thing were in the balance. Now we could talk about that. But my God, Cappsy, did you see the paper today? Those guys in Paris are arguing about the shape of the damned table. Its Big-Endians and Little-Endians, its satire. Are we supposed to go along with that kind of behavior?”

Dragging the first chart off the top of the stack, Capps flipped it open without enthusiasm. “Huhm, ‘On or about’”, he began to mechanically read the formulistic military report, “Nineteen year old Specialist Four reported by company

commander....article fifteens...aggressively insubordinate behavior.... Drug usage after repeated admonitions..."

"Insubordination? Aggression? Drug use? No! Not in our Viet Nam", said Prestwick at perhaps the five hundredth chart they had reviewed that could essentially have just been mimeographed. "So what did this particular bad boy do?"

Capps read a little farther, and said as he yawned, "Assaulted his platoon first sergeant with an entrenching tool."

"Ooh, bad choice, poor form. 'Cub Scout Jumps Godzilla with Pocket Knife'. Anybody hurt?"

"The Spec. wound up with forty-two stitches. There's a dental note appended too. Guy's upstairs in the holding ward now."

"Oh, I know who that is. Little guy, Bronx accent, although he wasn't talking too clear when he came in." They were both silent for a moment. Cigarette smoke drifted upward in the still, thick air.

"So what are you going to recommend?" asked Capps, tapping off his cigarette ash.

"Me? I thought he was yours", said Prestwick.

"Nope", said Capps with an ironical smile, pointing to the heading information of the file. "George P., Captain Columbia himself, says it right here."

"Fuck." Prestwick let his chin settle between his hands, which were themselves supported on forearms, themselves supported on the table of

indeterminate, green, plasticoid material. Smoke drifted upward around him, into his eyes, yet he ignored it. Capps had already opened the next chart, which was however, clearly headed, "Wm. T. Capps, Capt. M.C. USAR". Before Prestwick had even responded to the previous problem, he already had the idea of the next file basically outlined for himself.

"Cappsy, lets just send 'em all home. Certify all of them before they get addicted, or shot, or before they fuck somebody else up."

"Crazy or not, here we come, huh?"

"Well, what's crazy? Who's to say?" said Prestwick, stretching and looking up at the dull white acoustic tile of the ceiling.

"We are, unfortunately," said Capps without really applying himself to the question, and pointing vaguely to the stack of charts. It was too early in the morning, he hadn't slept well enough, and he hadn't yet pumped himself up on enough coffee to be very philosophical.

"Right. Right! That's just it," waxed Prestwick. "We have the keys! They gave us the keys!" He was obviously getting agitated. Boone had also warned them that agitation this early in the Indochinese day could lead to full blown heat rash by nightfall.

"I'm serious Cappsy, do rational people subject themselves to this shit? Do they let other people be subjected to it if they have the keys to turn it off?" Capps stopped reading the chart he held in his hands.

"I hear you George, but you gotta have some style, show some tact here. O.K. Let's declare the whole damned 1st Air Cavalry to be behaving irrationally..."

"Makes sense to me..."

"Yeah, right. And yes, I'm with you", Capps went on, "It really does make sense. But you know who really does get sent home then. Yeah, you know don't you? That's right, Capps and Columbia, slack of jaw, and dim of eye on big time doses of vitamin T." "Vitamin T" was Thorazine, used much more there than "Vitamin H", Haldol, specifically because Thorazine *did* cause major sedation. Many guys would never even remember the flight from Saigon to the continental U.S. or, "CONUS". They just got too excited about something one night in-country, and literally, the next thing they would remember was coming more or less out of it in a V.A. hospital someplace like Bayonne, New Jersey. "And if we go, that just leaves Boone and a bunch of lifer G.P.s", concluded Capps, with an archly superior air.

They were both, by that time following a course of least psychic pain for themselves, and both of them were quite adept at "impersonally" and "objectively" counseling a significant number of these young Americans safely out of the country to a veritable underground railroad system of V.A. clinics and hospitals, halfway houses, drug rehabilitation, and other psychiatric programs.

"Oh, Fuck me raw." Prestwick had muttered and stubbed out his cigarette, immediately lighting another. Tapping the chart of the maimed Spec. 4 upstairs he said, "Well, this particular Cub Scout is on the bus back to the Bronx." He rapidly and firmly wrote a notation in the chart. He muttered under his breath as he wrote,

"I could get this guy sent home on his dental work alone." Then loudly assuming the locked jaw of the typical lifer sergeant, he parodied the religiously militant aphorism that was then making the rounds in the field among the equally frustrated combat troops; "Give'em all a G.D. Section 8, let God sort 'em out". He had then signed the chart with a flourish.

Suddenly, Capps realized that Perkins had been talking the entire time, telling "war stories" no doubt, and he had to glance guiltily over at the clock to see how long his own memories had occupied him. The clock showed only a couple of minutes, though it could have fooled Capps. He was embarrassed, though Perkins seemed not to have noticed at all as he talked on.

".... And I won three hundred dollars."

"You won three hundred dollars?" Capps tried to recoup his grace by trying to listen attentively now to whatever story it was that Perkins was telling. There were only a few minutes left in the session. Capps felt like a schoolboy waiting for the end of class on a spring day. He wanted a cup of coffee.

"Yeah. Most I ever won at anything." Perkins poured out excitedly. "On the shavetail....we called him 'U. Ass. Grant cause his last name was Grantman or something like that."

"And you bet on him?" Capps hoped to use what scrap of information he had gotten to try to buy his way back gracefully into the flow of the conversation without having to admit his lapse of attention.

“Yeah, you know, the pool. His daddy was a genuine West Point general, and I think cause he was a baby ring knocker too, he thought he had to get his licks in before they called the whole game.”

“So you won a bet? Yeah? How?”

“Like I said, I had the date in the pool on when he’d get his ass shot off.” Though Capps had certainly been no big fan of the average combat officer, and though he knew the extent of callousness that had affected men under those circumstances, it stopped him for an instant to think of such a lottery actually being run, and actually paying off.

“The only luck I ever had, Doc.” Perkins defended himself. “Even the Captain kept telling him to lay low and take it easier but he just had to try to drag our asses all over the fuckin’ swamp.”

“And....?”

“Finally got blowed up.” Perkins paused for a moment. He could tell Capps was searching his face. “Bad luck for him.” he explained economically, his eye straying out the window.

“Good luck for you?” added Capps, his voice almost involuntarily implying his reproach of Perkins’ callousness.

Again, Perkins seemed not to notice the tone. “The next guy they sent, to replace him, had a lot more sense. Just hunkered down and waited.”

You got there in ’71? So you got back middle of ’72? What did you do when you got out, I mean what kind of job?” Capps thought he could just touch on that

now and use it to start next week's session, as they were about out of time for the day.

"Well, doc, I tell you, I didn't get out right away when I got back. I was supposed to be in this program for a while so it took a while."

"Program?"

"Yeah, drug program. See, I got sent out of Nam six, seven months after I got there. Didn't matter cause it was just wasted time anyway, right? All that, the whole thing?"

"Wait a minute, stop, I'm getting lost here." said Capps, his interest only now piqued. There were only eight or nine minutes until his next patient would arrive.

"What about this program. What happened?"

"Well, Doc, you know how it was, over there. I got to fooling around with some bad types and next thing you know I got hauled in for doing pot and they sent me to the hospital."

"Hospital?"

"Yeah, the big one in Saigon. To the looney bin. Anyway, they kept me there for about a week, and some guy come up and he said I could go back to my unit, all that raft of shit with the non-coms, or, he said if I didn't want to do that, I could just go on home, to a drug rehab program. Eight weeks he said, and then out. Shit yeah, Doc I told him to get me outta there. So they sent me back to California."

A cold chill ran down Capps' neck. He looked at Perkins more closely than he had yet. It had been twenty years since he had been there in Viet Nam, and since Perkins had been there, in Saigon. There had been hundreds of faces. He scrambled back into his mind to try to place this particular one, but as familiar as the story sounded, it had been replayed so many times then that he simply could not remember if Perkins had been one of his patients or not.

After all, there had been three doctors on his team alone, and there had been seven different teams, so there was only a one in twenty chance that Perkins had been on his service. And the dates may not even be precise either, he thought, perhaps they had missed one another.

All of this to the good, Capps still could not get over a powerful new feeling; the feeling that he did know Buddy Perkins, that he had indeed been the one who had offered a scared, ignorant young kid a choice. Whether he would like to go back to Hell and have the Devil himself on his case for months, or whether he might prefer to go lie on the beach in California for a few of weeks instead?

"When exactly was this? Do you remember the month you left, came home?"

"It was, let's see, it must have been April, May, I don't know. Its always hard for me to remember time from over there, cause the year's so different, you know? It would be in my records. I got the papers."

"Huhm", was all Capps said for a moment. "So what happened when you got back home, to California?" he went on.

“Well, I was in this rehab program, at that big army hospital in San Francisco. But I didn’t need it. I was O.K., you know? Well, I was already pissed off at them so I told them to go fuck themselves. They gave me a kind of Bad.... General Discharge.” He paused again, self-consciously.

“You know Doc, I always thought that’s maybe where most of my real problem started, right there. I mean, you ever try to get a job in Texarkana, Texas with an Army discharge says your crazy?

I ‘d have done alright if hadn’t been for that. I should have gone back to my unit, finished my time. There in Nam. Only had a few months left. I could have done that standing on my head. They should have known to send me back to my unit.”

The hands of the clock showed that their time was up for the day, which was just as well, because Capps’ mind was moving no faster than those hands were, crawling across his memory, trying to recover this face. He was torn because he wanted to know if he had really been the broker of Perkins’ shabby bargain back then. On the other hand, he was terrified of what he would feel if suddenly the face did appear to him clearly, in its version of years ago.

“Well, uhm. Our time’s up today Mr. Perkins, er, Buddy. Lets...let’s pick up next week, O.K.?” He stood, and numbly offered Perkins his hand. He ushered him out the door to Janelle’s desk. He spent the short walk surreptitiously looking at Perkins’ profile, memorizing it as it was now, because he knew that he would certainly be searching for it in his memory.

Chapter 4

The week was vexing for Capps, as he found his mind more and more monopolized by thoughts of Viet Nam, and Buddy Perkins and what the man's life had been like since then. His dream images faded from Milton's ethereal clouds to gritty film noir over the few days after his last interview with Perkins. He had found himself becoming more and more distracted from his office patients and his hospital duties.

That evening as they sat at the table after dinner, Retta said, "You look wired, boy. Been drinking that old devil coffee again?"

"It's just patients."

"What can I do? How about a shoulder rub?"

"Oh, Yeah Right there."

"I can feel the knot. You O.K.?"

"Yeah, it's just patients."

He holed up in his study earlier than usual, and he spent very little time with his two girls. Both of them went to the study at one time or another during the evening, only to come back out very shortly. Looking over her shoulder back at the door, Audrey frowned brown at Retta before she shrugged and lifted back into her own pastel world. There were certainly no cross or harsh words, but Retta noticed that there were no jokes for them either, which was unusual. Still for now she trusted her husband to let her as close as he needed her to be, and she kept her peace.

He did not come to bed with the usual rhythm that they had, through long custom, evolved. Usually, she would be the first to begin to get ready for bed and he would follow fairly quickly, getting into bed just after she had settled herself.

Tapping on the frame of the study door she said, “I think I’ll call it. Are you coming to bed?”

He said a distracted, “Good night”. She lay in bed for almost an hour before she heard him come into the darkened room. He drew her to him, embracing her from behind, drawing comfort from her like some child’s Teddy Bear.

The next day, he skipped lunch, and stared out the window of his office, a cup of coffee cooling to tepid in front of him before he even thought to apply himself to it. Looking out over the small parking lot, its yellow makings faded by the sun, etched away by incessant prairie winds, he could see the red sand and dull green creosote bushes blend off into the vague distance. He told himself that Perkins might have lived the same life, day for day, year for year, even if he had not had to carry the weight of a psychiatric discharge around with him.

And then, thought Capps turning back around to his desk to look at the jacket of Perkins’ folder, there are those that don’t get killed, and on the other hand don’t get over the stiff-necked arrogance of adolescence. It becomes a tiny focused arrogance; a command and kingship over what’s in one’s own shoes. But without the ability to put it aside and begin to cooperate with the world, nothing ever gets built. The shoes, the kingdom, become shabbier and shabbier and shabbier.

And any excuse will keep the walls at the borders of the shabby kingdom up and strong. It might be that your parents didn't love you enough, or that you're different from the people around you in some way so you "need" to defend against "them". And, as in the case of a lot of immature kids, in fact, in just about every generation, somebody might have paid you by the month to get shot at in a war. Somebody had sent you marching through Georgia, or to Flanders Fields, somebody had put you in the nose of a B-24. Somebody had paid you to fly around in a Huey with a .30 caliber machine gun acting like fucking Zeus with his thunderbolt, before you had even figured out how to get along with the neighbors and with the boss. War is a tough act to follow.

All that was bad enough, confusing enough, thought Capps, but for Buddy Perkins, twenty-five years of bad roads, and lonely nights, and cheap whisky had clouded the issue. Still, he felt it was his duty, somehow, to tease out the main strand from this twisted knot of life that Perkins had been living. It was like walking down the street and feeling the unanswerable need for hitting every crack in the sidewalk. He could feel anxiety rising in the face of his questions about Perkins. Capps was going to have to have answers somehow, some kind of resolution. It was only a matter of time, he told himself, before the anxiety would be sufficient to force him to act, in some possibly stupid way, to lessen it.

The week Perkins had first come in, Capps had finally gotten around to beginning John Milton's Paradise Lost. One night he was certain that Milton, and perhaps too many barbecued ribs, had been responsible for a series of remarkably colorful and blissful dreams. There was not so much a specific content, just falling through the gulf between

Heaven and Hell, stopping off on Earth in between, and the pure sensation of walking in a pristine place; walking barefoot in Eden.

By the night after Perkins second visit, the grandeur and the ethereal qualities were replaced by a simple intense feeling of infinite desolation. Empty loneliness forever. Desolate windblown sand, or deep, gritty blackness. He was dragged down into the regions of the poem where Sin and Death guard the gates of hell. Between there and Heaven, between there and the gentle blissful Earth that Capps had walked the nights before in his dreams, he now remembered and now felt, “a dark Illimitable ocean, without bound, without dimension, where length, breadth, and height, and time, and place are lost, where eldest Night and Chaos, ancestors of Nature, hold Eternal anarchy...” Retta heard him cry out softly in his sleep.

Retta Capps had never seen her husband as agitated as he was during the week after his last interview with Perkins, about which he had told her nothing. Thus she had no clue to go on. She considered and discarded the idea that he was having an attack of the middle-aged crazies, that there might be another woman in the picture. The way he treated her did not speak of such a problem. Though he was agitated, he did not turn her away, nor did he try to hold her unnaturally close. Though he did not articulate it, she sensed however that he was gently trying to give her some part of the voiceless problem to hold, and she did what she could, ready to listen, but still he remained taciturn.

At the office, Janelle tried to get him to respond in some way to her for help. She pushed the issue. “Hey, you’re off coffee as of today. I took the stuff out of your desk, too.”

“Janelle...” he whined.

“Uh uh, you’re getting too ragged. You know your socks don’t match? And your eyes just barely do. Nope, no more of that bug juice for you. Chamomile, got it?” It was her way of trying to bring whatever it was to the surface so that he could exorcise it. Though she described herself as “just the secretary around here”, after years of his close dependence upon her, Janelle was a significant part of Capps’ professional personality, literally as important as a lobe of his brain, and a major part of his defenses against the world.

He realized that he had no real reason for not telling at least Retta what was in his mind. Even medical discretion could reasonably trust the privacy of their relationship. Retta served as his therapist, as he was the therapist for others. But this time his pride reacted the same as if a wrong name had shown up in the obituaries. It was actually worse, because this time, the man he’d killed was still above ground.

“Perkins, Troy “Buddy”, aged 46 or, maybe 47”, he visualized the terse, special black-bordered announcement. “Services pending, (near future), nobody presiding. He served in the Army and never did anything after that. He is survived by no one. Donations may be sent in lieu of flowers to the Wm. T. Capps Memorial Fund for the Stupid and Meddlesome.”

This was not the proverbial mistake that the doctor had buried; this one was still walking around, talking, dragging through yet another month, another year, of loneliness and pain. Yet he knew exactly what Retta would say. Being rational as well as intelligent and sensitive, she would tell him that he could not, and should not, take so much of Perkins’ life on his own shoulders. She would point out, if she had all the pieces of information, that he could not even be sure that he was the one responsible for sending

the man back with a psych discharge. She would finally point out that, first and last, Perkins had made his own life, and that it wasn't certain that he himself considered it all that painful. But something, a reverse of obsession, a compulsion to silence, strangled any cry out to her.

As he lay in the darkness in the small hours of the night, Capps could not get the look of the man's eyes out of his mind, could not get away from the tone in his voice, the tiny crack in it as he spoke of his lost family, now forever out of his hearing. If there was something he could bring himself to do, to talk it all out with Retta, or a professional colleague, to confess it to Perkins, something, anything, he knew he would have begun to feel better as though he had had a boil that had been lanced. But the corruption in his spirit continued to build, nonetheless, and rather than discharge to the surface, it spread inward and deeper. He began to feel that absolution would only be undeserved escape, that some nameless and thus limitless penance was surely due.

Still, he obsessed with somehow tracking down the military records of that specific time, and quietly trying to piece it all back together, to see what the real problem had been, the objective story, or at least the Army's version. But for one thing, he was not all that confident that the version the military would have committed to record would really be all that objective and sensible, would contain as it must, both rationality and compassion to be true. It might be his own, official, version, an echo of his own mind, if he found it, and he wasn't all that certain that at that time, at that age, and in that place, he had actually possessed both the rationality and the compassion required to produce truth or wisdom.

Secondly, he told himself, there was only scant chance that any such detailed records still existed at all. He had tried, a few years before, to obtain the barest of information about his own service records in order to facilitate a V.A. loan on some real estate. After six of the most bureaucratically frustrating months he had ever experienced he had finally just accepted the military archivists final, terse letter telling him that “Many of the records in question had been moved to storage facilities in St. Louis and regrettably, there had been a fire which had destroyed a tremendous number of personnel action records, and significantly disrupted acquisition and retrieval of many others.” Third, he reminded himself briefly, they weren’t his records.

He thought of Colonel Boone, the senior officer who had worked with George Prestwick and himself. Boone had been gray-headed, probably in his late fifties then. Capps didn’t even know if he was still alive. Again, he felt the reticence to discuss Perkins with anyone, the strange compulsion of embarrassed silence. And Boone, though he would likely have been non-judgmental, would be the single person in the world with the most focused “I told you so.” Had Perkins been seen by him in 1972, he would have almost certainly been sent back to his unit. He would have finished his tour, gotten his Honorable Discharge, and now be going home from the garage every night to Connie and the kids.

Capps wrestled with these things all Thursday night. On Friday morning, he left the newspaper scattered about the office in the morning. Janelle had started to scold him about it, but had caught herself, and he noticed the fact that she had laid off him more than if she had laid into him.

On Saturday, Retta was pleased at the fact that even after another poor night of sleep, he seemed brighter and volunteered to help her with putting up the fence around the flower garden at the side of the house, something they had discussed for months but had not as yet gotten around to doing.

“If I can take the van, I’ll go over to Barton’s and get the pickets and stuff, O.K.?”

“Sure.” She had been pleased to see him less distracted. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“No.” He said simply. “You finish getting the bed trimmed up and I’ll fetch the stuff.”

“Uh huh.” She had grinned and nodded. “I get it, I work out in the blazing, torrid, sweltering sun, while you go to get the...now what is it? Oh, yes, all that heavy old ten-inch picket fence.” She swatted him on his way, happy that he wasn’t so morose.

Capps drove toward the garden supply place intentionally keeping his mind empty, but one thing kept intruding, as it had since he had looked it up two days before; the address of the R.V. park where Perkins now lived. A street map had shown it was only a single turn from his regular path to go by that place which he kept trying to imagine.

He made that turn when it came, as though it had been his only mission. He drove the next mile, looking at addresses on the gas stations and the wrecking yards and the drilling supply companies, many of which had been shut down and abandoned since the collapse of the oil industry. The road was a forlorn one, even on a sunny Saturday morning.

Finally he came to the right address. There was a rusting and poorly maintained sign proclaiming it to be the “Rocket R.V. Park, Hookups/Overnighters”. It was difficult to discern that there was any active business at the place, as it basically consisted of about 2 or 3 acres of flat dusty red land, fenced minimally in cattle wire from the surrounding dusty flat red land. There was a small building of some sort near the road, which had boards across two windows, and one exposed side window that was scarred with B.B. gun pox. There were two or three apparently junked cars and one large camper on jacks.

Besides two totally derelict and crumbling trailers there was one run down Air Stream at the back of the lot, rust streaks on its dull silver sides, with a single electric wire patched out to it from a nearby utility pole. Beside it sat an old gray green Mercury Cougar. The right front quarter panel was rusty and mismatched. He was sure it was the one he and Retta saw on their street the week before. The wind whipped up a small bulge of dust that blew across this yard. There was no movement apparent inside or outside the dull aluminum packet.

Capps pulled Retta’s van off the opposite side of the broken tarmac of the road, amongst several very used cars on an otherwise seemingly deserted lot. He sat about fifty yards from the trailer with the engine idling. He started to put the van in gear at least four different times to leave, but eventually he decided instead to cut the engine. It had seemed incongruous, working away there, ready to brightly take him where ever he demanded at the touch of a button, to power up the air conditioner to just the right level of comfort, to play the bright music that Retta left in the tape deck, if he wanted.

With the engine dead nothing moved, or thought of moving. The sand shifted a bit, the few tufts of ugly gray and brown grass wave futilely, and the sun glinted harshly off the roof of the trailer.

It began to grow uncomfortable in the closed van. Capps noticed that a thin layer of sweat was forming on his forehead and his upper lip. He thought about opening the window, but then decided to leave it closed.

He could hear the clicks of the seconds from the little battery clock that Retta preferred to use instead of the dashboard digital. She sometimes waited to pick the girls up when they got out of school and she didn't like to have to keep turning the key on to check the time. Capps didn't have any idea what it was he was waiting for, so he didn't know how long it might take.

He could see the side of the trailer where the door was. Outside there were a few pieces of junk on the ground; an old tire rim, an ancient and rusted bicycle frame, a broken wooden box. Perhaps ten yards from the door, there was an old scorched fifty-five gallon oil drum that had the odd scraps of metal and wood sticking up out of it. There were several glass bottles, soda pop, beer, jars and such, some broken and jagged in the sand like giant burrowing insects. There was what looked like a moldering stack of newspaper up against the gapped and bent skirting at the base of the Air Stream.

Capps could see through the flimsy curtains in the window, completely through to the light of the window on the opposite side, the one nearest the big highway. There was no movement inside that he could discern, except that of the curtains themselves when the wind patted them in their windows. Although there was not much worry of someone running the fifty yards off the curve of the interstate and then all the way on into Perkins'

place, the lights from every one of the cars and trucks that came down that side of the highway, every night, all night, would shine into the windows there. Capps thought that he would go mad if he had been subjected to that alone.

That sense of infringement, of never being left alone, however, blended for Capps into the feeling of intense loneliness. He almost cried, suddenly missing his wife and girls. He told himself that they were only ten minutes away, that all he had to do was to turn the key and flee to them, but still he sat in the quiet of the hot morning. He looked at the old car and the tin box and the thin curtains and a drop of liquid rolled down his cheek.

He told himself, "*It's only sweat.*" It dropped off his face and onto his arm.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he sensed some motion within the trailer. Something had passed in front of the light window opening for an instant. Then Capps saw the door pop open. There was a second's delay and he quietly slid down very low in the seat of the van. He felt that he was not conspicuous, parked as he was across the road, but he was nevertheless terrified that Perkins would walk briskly over to the van, knock on the window and say, "Well hi, doc! What're you up to?"

Instead however, Perkins emerged torporously from the dwelling, carrying a shallow cardboard box on which was piled an indiscriminant pile of trash. Pieces of paper and other light objects fell or were blown off the makeshift tray as he headed for the oil-drum trash can. As the man shoved the lot into the can, Capps could see at least two shapes of quart liquor bottles. "Ay, caramba," he muttered to the dashboard. "And I'm supposed to find him a job. Shit."

Out in the sun, Perkins scratched his jaw, and hiked up the loosely fitting khaki pants he wore, slowly putting his now free hands over his forehead like a visor. He did not spend a great deal of time surveying his domain, but turned and slowly made his way back to the trailer, stretching his back and stopping to pop his neck to both sides on the way.

Capps saw the door shut, drop back open a bit and then slam once, then a second time before it closed all the way. He sat for a moment longer, then he reached up and turned the key, shoved the gearshift into first, and slid around onto the tarmac, shielding his departure with a cloud of red dust.

That night, late in the still hours, the moon rode low in the west, a ruddy half disc that felt neither of waxing nor waning, but of unnatural constancy. It was as though its light was not cast to the Earth, but rather upon some other stage or sphere of the universe, somewhere over the vaguely threatening horizon. The air around the house was as unstimulating as if it too had lain down to sleep with the rest of the night world. Capps however, was not in his bed. He was standing by the window of his kitchen, looking out, and listening to the sound of a night bird. He could not tell, even with the window wide open before him, how far away the singer was. There was a glass of water in his hand, and it shimmered with some silvergold fluorescence of its own as though the moon, having turned her attentions elsewhere had at least left this small aliquot of her light behind. The walls and cabinets were washed in this liquescent bath, and seemed almost to be hung with curtains and tapestries of light. Small figures danced along the walls as on the marble frieze of some Greek temple. They were old and new and young and old and he saw them at once faintly through the lambency of the light of which they were made

and then in an instant they stood out cruelly sharp and clear. He could not make out the meaning of their dance nor understand the signals they were trying to get across to him no matter how hard he concentrated.

As he stood mesmerized by the glow, it suddenly came to him that the birdsong had fallen silent. A breeze rustled the curtains, but it wasn't cooling or comforting. It seemed as if some spirit, some malevolent thing, was approaching, was near the sleeping house. He saw the blur of the shape of a figure crouched low and running as it cast a coruscating shadow in crossing the window light.

Suddenly, his gut clenched as he heard, softly but unmistakably, the sound of a door opening and closing. It was on the wrong side of the house to be Retta or the girls. The evil breeze now stirred the hairs on the backs of his arms and caused the sudden faint sheen of sweat to give him a chill. He listened, frozen, not quite knowing what to do. The house in its suburban enclave had always seemed so secure that he often left at least the back doors unlocked, more from simple sloth than from trust. He knew that Retta was more assiduous about this than he was, but she had long ago given up nagging him about this habit. "OK, but if someone comes in and steals us, you have to cook your own breakfast" she had chided only a couple of mornings before.

Now he could sense movement on the air from within the dark threshold of the hall. Through the kitchen doorway he heard a slight scuffing sound, and just caught the flicker of a worn boot-heel disappearing from the moonlight of the living room into the hallway blackness, and then what might have been the sound of constricted breathing. His mind raced. He had prevailed in the old argument with Retta about keeping a gun, "for protection". Now the moment was here and he understood the major practical

objection; “You’re not a ‘gun’ kind of guy,” she had pointed out. He understood what she meant now, as he stood rooted, doubting whether even if he could quietly get through the house, which would mean going toward the intruder, even if he could get to the automatic in the bedside stand, if he would be able to operate it, and if he *could* make it function, what then?

The breathing was moving now, and his mere panic turned to sudden terror as he realized that it was moving on deeper into the sleeping house, toward their bedroom, where Retta lay asleep, and to the girls’ rooms in the same hallway. As by some magic, the green-gold light from the glass in his hand began to grow and fill the kitchen. He made his feet move to follow the intruding phantom. The hallway was long, a deep but narrow tunnel, and he could see on its walls as he passed, first the square frames of the darkened chiaroscuro portraits of their family, then ancient and crude symbols, objects from nature, stars and crudely graven trees and finally writhing shapes of humans. The light in his hand pulsed and had gradually turned from the gold of light and air to the green of earth and sap to the blue of water and then on to the red of subterranean fires. Just as this happened, he could see, up ahead, cast on the shadow of this cavern in which he found himself, the shadow, huge and black, of the other, the intruder in the dark, the sum of all his terrors.

Retta and his daughters were there, in thin white nightgowns, their hair, all now longer and looser than he remembered flowed down their shoulders and over their breasts in this red firelight. The intruder was between them and where he stood. At first it seemed a small man, almost a gnome or goblin, scrawny and furtive, but as he watched it began to grow to match its own shadow. He could see its back grow large and hairy and with a

powerful hump of shoulders. The beast's hands now clenching and unclenching, reaching out toward the girls, who stood almost sacrificially still. Then he cried out, and the beast turned, flinging a net that wrapped around his shoulders, pinioning him. He saw its grotesque head, a full nine feet high, the foam flecked around its snout, the nostrils flaring, with horns, sharp and menacing. As it turned and strode toward him where he stood petrified, Retta's hand was suddenly there on his shoulder.

"Billy. Billy, wake up!" He was no longer in the echoing cavern, but it took him a moment to realize that he was in fact in his own bedroom, sitting up, the damp sheet coiled around him and Retta shaking him, calling him back to awareness. He looked at her stupidly in the square of dim light from the moonlit window. "Bill. Hey. Wake up." She shook him again. "You were dreaming."

"Huh?"

"You must've had a whopper of a nightmare. Are you OK? You were shouting...in your sleep."

"Uh..yeah?"

"Yeah, are you OK?"

"Yeah...yeah." His heart was still racing, his skin freezing cold, and for an instant he actually thought he might vomit, but it passed. "Wow. That was...wheew, wow."

"What was it? What happened?"

"Nightmare." He looked around the peaceful room, smelled the reassuring fragrance of Retta's perfume and powder, listened to the stillness. He heard a mockingbird somewhere outside, now the only sound, though it made his heart skip a beat and he did not for a moment trust its tranquility. He tried to remember enough to tell

her what had happened, but the simple telling could not convey the sick horror it had engendered, and even as he searched for the feeling, the vision faded.

“I don’t deserve you” he whispered, his eyes closed and clinging to her, his cheek buried in her hair.”

“Shhh. Shhhh. You’re OK. Its alright. Its alright.”

Chapter 5

When he came into the kitchen the next morning he was momentarily disoriented, seeing it in bright, wholesome, morning sunlight.

“You had another nightmare, babe.” Retta came and hugged him, laying her head against his chest.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“What was it about?”

“I can’t remember. I was in here, and the light was funny, and then it was like I was in some maze or tunnel someplace. That’s all I can remember. But it was scary. Did I wake you up?”

“You don’t remember us talking?”

“You mean last night? Nope.”

“I’m getting worried about you.”

“I know. I know I’m off.”

“Anything I can help with? You need to talk?”

He sat down at the table, and closed his eyes for a moment, as the kitchen resumed its normal feel. “It’s just patients. Nothing different. I’ll be OK, but it’s good to know you’re in my corner.” He embraced her around the waist, laying his head against her stomach as she stood next to his chair, and she stroked his hair.

“Well I am. I’m going to the school for PTA this morning. You want me to pick you up for lunch? Get you out of that office? Janelle called. She’s worried about you, too.”

“Janelle called you?”

“Yep. She said to come get you out of there.”

“Wow, I must be a real pain in the ass if she called. I guess I’m busted.”

“So, lunch?”

“Okay. I should be through by noon.”

“Anything bad this morning?”

“No,” he chuckled, “unless you call an hour with Lorella Smith bad. She may hit me with her purse or something.”

“Well duck if she swings and I’ll pick you up at noon.”

He felt better, but nightmare still left its mark for the rest of the morning in a small tightness deep in his chest and his bowels.

With Retta and Janelle babying him along he did reasonably well the rest of the week and until the next Tuesday. When he had been in college, he had once been in a production of “As You Like It.” All of that feeling came flooding back to him, making him cringe a bit inside, when he held out his hand and greeted Perkins for his Tuesday afternoon appointment, because his first words that day felt precisely as he had remembered his first lines in the play had felt: If he could get through those words he was pretty sure he could at least keep it together.

“Well, how has your week been?” Capps asked, he hoped nonchalantly, as they sat. Perkins himself looked bad, nervous and hung over.

“Pretty good. How ‘bout you, Doc. Been working hard? You look like you stayed up all night.”

“Yeah, sometimes I do that.” He answered, smiling and shaking his head. Then swinging the light back on Perkins he asked. “Did you have your voc rehab appointment this week?”

“Yeah.”

“So what’s new on that front.”

“Nothing’ much. They still ain’t found me a job. Mr. Terry is a good ‘ol boy but I think they’re putting a squeeze on him up there.”

“Terry, your voc counselor? Why? What are they doing?”

“Aw, Mr. Terry is real nice and all but he says that I’ve got to decide on one of the things they got there now, cook, back to painting, warehousing, stuff like that. Got to decide pretty soon, next week or two, or they’re going to cut me off. I think he’s O.K., Mr. Terry, but I think there’s somebody up the line putting pressure on him. Goddamned fuckers,” he muttered. “Sorry, Doc.” He followed immediately, his covering smile tight.

“So who exactly do you think the bad guys are?” Capps was thankful that Perkins was full of matter about something, because he knew he could keep him talking for the whole hour if there was anger enough, and thus spare himself the efforts of any further active posing that he was in control of the interview or of himself.

“Aw, you know, just like everywhere. Got to be some big shot motherfucker telling folks what they have to do.” Perkins’ jaw was already clenched. Capps didn’t protest the anger and Perkins apparently took that as license to unload. “I mean Doc, I don’t get that much goddamned money, you know? Just four hundred bucks a month.

Hell that's barely enough for a man to live on. You ever try to live on four hundred a month?" Capps mind froze exactly as it had on stage when he had lost his place in the Shakespeare script. Capps had just enough time to feel his heart skip a beat and to swallow dryly in preparation for trying to discuss his financial situation relative to this fellow, when suddenly Perkins saved his bacon by not caring about the answer.

The question, Capps realized, had been purely rhetorical and Perkins now pressed on with his growing tirade. Capps was stunned that he had come so close to answering the \$400 question and not, as was called for by usual professional procedure, calmly directing the conversation back to the patient's side of the court. That was fundamental to his trade as to be second nature, and suddenly it was stripped away. He felt vulnerable.

"But you know Doc," continued Perkins tersely, after reflecting for a brief second, "It seems like there always been that kind wherever I go. Back home, the army, working, now here with these guys at the Voc Rehab, it's always the same. Somebody has to get into a man's life and screw it all up." Perkins voice was rising now and Capps' full attention was returned to him as he noticed that there were tears welling up his eyes, tears of anger, tears of rage. It seemed that in only that short time, he had gone from a normal if somewhat dull individual to the edge of hysteria.

"You feel like people are trying to direct you...?". Perkins just appeared annoyed at the lame reflection.

"If they would just leave me alone I'd be best off. I keep trying to tell them that, but they all know better than a man what a man needs in his life and what he don't. It ain't fair, Doc!" He seemed to be struggling with himself and he pulled his composure back a bit. "I'm just telling you, it ain't fair. They did it to me in school... the principal

came down all nice like and told me it would be better for me if I left high school. Fuckers did it to me in Viet Nam. Dragged my young ass over there, I never asked to go but they said I had to. Then I would have stayed, I mean I wasn't all that messed up. I thought about it a lot, Doc. I would have stayed.... done my time, come home, been able to get a job and stuff, but some sumbitch over there, some high and mighty sumbitch thinks it's best for *me* to go home and dink with those fairy-assed drug counselors. Fuckin' counselors, that's all I ever had in my life is counselors. They're supposed to help you, right? I mean counselors? They're supposed to counsel? They had them in school and it didn't do any good, I didn't get through that. They had them in the Nam and I didn't get through that, and now they got them here, Voc Rehab guys...." He broke off, clenching and unclenching his jaw. Again, as he sat in purely defensive silence, Capps was afraid of the man physically.

"You know Doc, I had all this counseling in my life and I got exactly zero to show for it. I got nothing, no family, no job... I got all the papers from all the counseling. That's all I got."

"You save all your records?"

"I got everything, remember, I told you that.", he said, calming somewhat, adding sarcastically, as he nodded at the several certificates and diplomas on the wall, "I always thought I might hang them up on my wall, you know?" Capps found himself suddenly even more self-conscious. Perkins went on, "I got my high school records. Connie, she worked in the school office the year I dropped out and she xeroxed them."

When I was in the service, when they sent me back to California I had this big old manila envelope, thick envelope, all my service records, article fifteens and medical records and stuff.”

Capps froze at what he was hearing. Perkins went on, “I had them all, you know when they send you home medivac they make you stay in a cot all the way back, fifteen fucking hours. Nam to the P.I. to California, and they just stuff your records into your cot with you. When I got back I said fuck it, I took another ol’ boys records off his chest while he was sleeping. I was going to give them those, and I lay on top of mine. Turned out, nobody really give a shit if you had records or not, nobody ever ask me for nothing, so I threw his away a while later, kept mine. Got them, my school stuff, medical records from my wreck, divorce papers, got it all. That’s all I got Doc, just paper. No wife, no house, no kids, just that stuff.”

“Do you ever read them? Look them over?” Capps ventured.

“Nah, Doc. It’s all just mostly gobbledygook, you know. Big shots talking. I just keep them cause that’s all I’ve got for all these years. Like some guys cut off ears, you heard about that? Well, all that stuff is kind of like my ears that everybody, all the assholes in charge always been cutting off me and shoving up my ass.” At least Perkins had calmed himself down by now. He had done it himself, for Capps was certainly in no condition to calm anyone down.

For the rest of the hour, he had kept the conversation general, giving Perkins room to ventilate, and had not required anything of himself.

When Perkins had left, he had walked him only to the door of his inner office and asked him to check with Janelle on the way out for his next appointment.

Capps had leaned against the inside of the door with his back to it and felt his body shaking. He almost vomited from the tension. He went quickly to the window. He lifted one of the thin blind slats and watched until Perkins appeared in a moment, and stopped to light a cigarette, taking three matches from the book before he succeeded in the wind. Perkins then walked to his old Mercury and got in. A puff of white smoke marked the ignition for Capps, who could not hear through the window, and then the sad vehicle slowly pulled out and through the parking lot, reminding Capps of some bent old man with his head hung down and his hands in his pockets.

Capps turned back around and slumped on the couch. The man had the records. At any point, Capps imagined it, in a drunken rage, Perkins could leaf through them, come across Capps' name as *the* "sumbitch" who counseled him back from the war. Capps remembered the potential for violence he had on his face today. And the worst of it was, if Perkins crept up behind him and strangled him. Capps felt that he would be more or less justified in having done so. Perkins' whole failed life was weighed down, anchored to the thin red dust and the scraggly weeds, by the heavy chains of those records.

All his life, Perkins had been piling up page after page of the things, divorces and disabilities, and what he must understand by now was that the more of those pages you had, the easier it was to get the next sad page; a capitalism of failure. Capps detested the idea that he was included in that mass of papers. It made him feel emotionally naked and exposed to some kind of potential harrowing.

That evening, he had gone for a long walk in the desert at dusk, rejecting Retta's offer to go with him, as she often did. By later in the evening, towards nine, he was

restless again. The kids were giggling on the phone, playing music a bit too loud, and his study felt like a prison in the opulence he felt he didn't deserve. He went out, taking his own car and just drove the county roads that more or less ringed the town, rolling the window down and letting the warm air rush around him.

By ten thirty, he was still circling the outskirts of the town and he had come to a stoplight on a relatively quiet street that led back into the business district. As he sat at the crossroads, weighed down by his soul, there appeared and disappeared in front of him, Perkins' old car, funky right front fender and all, as it swept through the light, perpendicular to his own aimless road. As the light changed, Capps turned right to follow. He thought about slipping over to a parallel street, but there were no parallel streets at that point. So he just trusted to his luck and followed on, hoping not to be seen.

He hoped that Perkins might pull up to some cozy little church or A.A. meeting and be greeted by a bunch of similar people in a warm golden haze of conviviality. Or that he might even have some back street rendezvous, perhaps with a married woman like in the country and western songs, but at least someone to hold him for a night. But Perkins' itinerary seemed as lost in the lead as Capps' own in the following. He seemed to be driving aimlessly, much as Capps himself had been doing before, more or less circling through a given ten or twelve block area once, twice, three times. Finally Perkins' car pulled up into the parking lot of a small place called the Green Frog Lounge.

Capps decided firmly again that he had no business following the man; whatever fortune or futility he was about was his own business. He turned back down the quiet street and headed for home.

Chapter 6

The next morning being awake when the light in the bedroom had gone from dull black to soft gray, Capps had gone ahead and driven to the office early.

Now Capps' attempt at keeping himself aligned with rationality consisted of plowing through the stack of charts that Janelle had left discretely about four inches from the dead center of his desktop. There was a subtle red ribbon tied around them, and a large yellow sticky note on the front proclaiming "UNFINISHED, THEREFORE UNBILLABLE". "Deft touch, that", thought Capps, appreciatively. "Next, she'll be spiking the chamomile with tranques."

Usually he would make the simple notes at the end of an interview, taking perhaps a minute or two to make a note on a case in progress. On the more difficult problems, where he needed time to think he knew that he should not usually delay for more than a day or two, otherwise his memory for patients' exact phrases and nuance of tone began to decay. In his twenty years of experience, for the majority of cases, having any very extensive written record was not really all that useful, only once in a great while did it ever prove crucial. But Janelle needed them done, so he pressed on.

He did what he thought was a decent number of the charts, completing them, right down to the scrawl of mostly loops that he called his signature. He was about to quit when he heard the morning newspaper thump against the outer office door. It was as good an excuse as any, he thought, to stop. He retrieved the paper and came back into his

office, sitting on the sofa to begin scanning the front page. War and rumor of war, politics and scandal, the usual reassuring potpourri greeted him.

He skimmed through the baseball news briefly, noting that his Texas Rangers had given another one away in the late innings. He had thought of sending some sort of note to the team's front office, suggesting that they apply for tax-exempt status as a charitable organization.

He moved on to the funnies, reading only the real, funny "funnies" and leaving the soap operas, like "Juliette Jones" alone for yet another forty years.

He bounced through the want ads, as he always did. Something in his lower middle class background always found comfort in the fact that he could always sell encyclopedias, or learn to cook at a truck stop, though he realized that he couldn't be a mechanic or a legal secretary or a dental assistant without further training. He had always maintained, whenever Janelle caught him looking over these classifieds, that, "Knowing the job market around here helps me to know what stresses people are under."

"Right", she would say, adding, "Your lunchbox will be ready when you leave, big guy."

He could hear Janelle rattling with the front door just as he turned to the obituaries, his usual last stop. He quickly hid the contraband java. As she came in and said good morning through the inner door he was scanning down the four or five names that were printed in stark black letters.

"You're here early. Still having problems sleeping?" she asked with genuine concern.

"Yeah, but I'll be O.K., Just a touch of the floppiness."

He saw the names of the first three deceased in the obituaries, Burke, Abbott, Kowzloski, all in their seventies or eighties. None that he recognized as patients.

From out in the front office she asked, “Did you get to those charts? I hope I left them where you could see them.” He looked at the last two names in the obits. Priesmeyer, a Navy vet in his sixties, and Stone, retired janitor, aged ninety one.

“I got started on them,” he responded through the doorway, doing a bad FDR impersonation, “And I firmly believe that they will yield, in time, to perseverance, and a little good old fashioned American pluck.”

She smiled to hear him fall back to himself. She went to her desk to open the books for the day.

Surreptitiously, Capps took another slurp off his now semi-cold, convenience store coffee. He was about to make the conscious effort to close the paper up neatly to deposit it in the trash, when he saw the small dark print of a third page story heading, “State Worker Murdered in East Side Office”. The fact that it was about a murder on the East Side drew him, as he had been in that area the night before, and it intrigued him to think that he might have been nearby while something dramatic was happening. He read on.

“Police have no leads,” the story ran, “in last night’s slaying of State Office of Vocational Rehabilitation counselor Harmon C. Terry. Mr. Terry, a twenty-six year veteran with the office here, was apparently working late in his office when an unknown assailant shot him in the head with a large caliber weapon. Suicide has been ruled out. The victim’s wallet had been rifled, and robbery is suspected as the motive.”

He could feel his heart pound as he remembered the look of internalized rage he had seen on Perkins' face more than once now. He started to reach for the phone to call the police, but even as he started to punch 911 he set the receiver back in the cradle.

"Wait", he told himself firmly. "What are you doing? Why are you calling the cops? To tell them that Perkins killed Terry? Why? Just because he was in the same square mile?" In the silence, with his hand still on the phone he continued the debate with himself. *"But he was there, and there is a connection between him and Terry. Sure, that doesn't mean that he was the one who killed him, but shouldn't I at least let the cops know? Let them sort it out?"*

"Sure...Throw them to the cops, let them sort it out. Psych them all, let the Army sort them out. Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out. Hasn't this guy got enough trouble as it is? You think the cops are going treat him nice, or even fair? A guy like him? I'm supposed to be on his side, for God sake, aren't I?", he asked the wall. *"Jeeze! With friends like me, who needs enemies?"*

Capps was almost crying at this point. The phone buzzed in his hand and he jerked his arm back as if it had been the strike of a rattler.

It was Janelle. "Mrs. Cumby just called to cancel her nine o'clock. She rescheduled already though."

"What happened?" Capps asked, glad to have something else, even Mrs. Cumby's eternal neurosis, on which to focus for a moment. He was leaping from stone to stone in a rushing stream of emotions as wild speculations and connections threatened to sweep him away.

“She said her cat was sick and she had to take it to the vet. Bad for kitty, good for you. You can finish some more of those charts. Or maybe just lay down. I’ll wake you up for your ten o’clock, if you can get a little nap in.” Capps was grateful, but his mind was racing.

“No...not right now. Listen Janelle, would you get me George Prestwick’s number?”

“Prestwick, Washington, right?”

“Yep. I need to talk to ‘ol Cap’n Columbia. I think his number is in the Rolodex on a blue card. What time is it in Washington now?”

In the time it took Janelle to get through to Prestwick’s office, Capps had gone over to the stack of schlock that accumulated under the guise of “professional mail” every day. Included among the throw-away journals, the blatant lobbying, and the advertisements, were dozens of flyers concerning conferences and continuing medical education programs all over the country. He seemed to remember one that he had noticed a while back that was going to be put on at Georgetown Medical School in the very near future. He rifled through the pile and found the one he was looking for. It had only caught his attention because the topic had seemed so bizarre, being on “The History of Prefrontal Lobotomy”. It was “in honor of the hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of Egaz Moniz’ birth”. He was the guy who had gotten the Nobel Prize for originally figuring that scrambled brain was better than boiling brain, and for having thechutzpah to actually stick a knitting needle up some poor schmuck’s nose to try it out as a cure. Capps also occasionally thought of Prestwick whenever he saw material out of Washington.

“Dr. Prestwick’s office on line two. Listen, do you want me to cancel any more today? I think we’d be O.K. rescheduling.”

“No, Janelle. But I do want you to cancel Friday afternoon. And get me a ticket to D.C. roundtrip. Leave early Friday afternoon, get back Sunday night, O.K.?”

“Washington. Friday, Sunday. Got it.” He and Janelle had worked together for so long that that was all it would take for it to be done.” Hotel, too?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think I’ll need one.”

He tapped line two on the phone. “Hello, Georgie?”

“One moment, please”, said the secretary at the other end.

“Mad Dog, how’re ya?”, Prestwick’s East Coast accent came over the line.

“Well, actually and factually...I’m kind of fucked up.”

“Yeah, I told you, all that dust and bad Texas whiskey. What’s up?”

“I need some help. Need a favor or two.”

“Shoot.”

“First of all, I’m coming to D.C. Friday. You going to have any time off?”

“I can make some. You going stay with us, right?”

“That’d be good if it’s O.K.”

“No prob. What’s up?” Prestwick persisted.

“I’m not sure. I have this patient, and it’s real complicated and I’d like to have someone to talk to about it. I’d rather talk with you there though, it’s really too weird to get into on the phone.”

“Sounds great, maybe I should arrange to be out of town after all. Go to the Bahamas, leave you the key,” laughed Prestwick grimly.

“Oh, yeah...”

“What?”

“Another favor.”

“Haven’t done the first one for you yet.”

“You familiar with the Viet Nam Memorial, right, ever been down to it?”

“I’ve been by it. Yeah, I know where it is.”

“I know this is a pain in the ass, but it might be important to me, O.K.? Would you go down there and look through the names around mid seventy- two...”

“We’re not on it Mad Dog, I checked...” interrupted Prestwick. He never could help himself in those situations.

“Look, asshole, just go down there and look for somebody named Grant or Grantman, Grantly, something like that. If there are more than one, get them all. The guy I’m looking for would have been a Lieutenant... West Pointer. Killed in action. Father was a general, I think. Has to be some record on a guy like that. Find out whatever you can, O.K.? I’ll explain it when I get there. You still work Friday afternoons?

“Same stand. These guys get crazier and crazier every week. Here I am trying to sail this bathtub, but there are just too many idiots in it here with me. I’m thinking about putting in an annex in the Coat Room over on the Hill, give out goat gland extract and tranquilizers. Big balls and steady nerves, that’s all these guys need. I’m telling ya, Cappy, there’s crazies at the wheel.”

He continued, quickly confirming Capps' request. "O.K., Grant, or something like it...Looie, KIA, mid seventy-two, West Point, daddy was a general." Capps could envision Prestwick jotting down those notes as he repeated them.

"Great, I'll take a cab over to your office from the airport."

"See ya Friday, Mad Dog."

Chapter 7

Janelle had accepted Capps' decision to go to Washington on such short notice, about like she would have reacted to his having snuck a small elephant into his office. His cover story about going to the lectures on lobotomy were equivalent in her mind to an attempt to hide the elephant by painting it by hand to match the wallpaper.

However, since she knew that he had been in touch with his friend Prestwick in D.C., and that he was also a psychiatrist, she felt comfortable that he was at least not just running off some isolated pier somewhere. She held her peace and made his late reservations for the conference, which was to be held Saturday and Sunday, made his reservations to Dulles International, and calmly, even with a touch of sham pride in her voice, cancelled his Friday afternooners with the story that, "The doctor has to go to Washington on short notice". The patients from Friday were basically all middle-aged flag wavers whose neuroses mostly centered around the fact that "things were just going all to hell nowadays", and to them, the excuse sounded mysterious, and yet responsible enough to forgive their doctor his absence. They would mention it to each other in the Safeway with knowing nods Friday evening, and compare notes on it favorably at church the following Sunday morning. "Washington, eh?... Our doctor might be involved in 'negotiations'".

"Their doctor" was in fact almost unable to negotiate finding a cab by the time he arrived in Washington, having relaxed his rule of never having more than

two drinks at any one time. He usually didn't drink when he flew, but the world was becoming such an odd place by then anyway. He felt such a strange anxiety, as the small plane had settled onto its course from Abilene to the big hub airport at Dallas, that he had more or less unconsciously accepted the stewardess' offer of a mixed drink. Rum and orange juice. That seemed wholesome. Then another, and before he knew it he had transferred to the big plane for the trip on to the East Coast, and on to rum and cokes. By then his logic about it consisted of this; rum was dark, and it was cloudy outside. Normally he would have suggested therapy for anyone thinking that way, "But what the hell", he thought, "Good ol' Columbia will be there to keep me from falling down."

As he sat heavily and unsteadily onto the massive leather sofa in Prestwick's inner office he apologized. "Sorry, old man. I mean about coming to your opulent office in such a state." The elegant building in which it was located was older than anything in Abilene except the railway station, and about twice as big.

"No, no. Think nothing of it." Prestwick rattled merrily, "As a matter of fact, you just sit there and give me about ten minutes to sweep stuff under the rug here, and I'll take you over to my favorite bar and proceed to catch up with your inebriate young ass. It's Friday, right?"

George Prestwick knew everybody. His father and his grandfather had been psychiatrists in Washington, D.C., and his great-grandfather a GP there before that. They had comfortable contacts all up and down the Eastern Power Corridor. "*For God sake*", thought Capps, looking at the pictures on the wall as Prestwick finished up his loose ends, "*These guys have been the shrinks to the stars*". For instance,

during World War II, George's father, while still a callow young analyst, and his grandfather, then on the Georgetown faculty, had been involved up to their spatz in the secret White House debates surrounding the deployment of the first two atom bombs.

Prestwick had never mentioned anything specific in all the time they had known each other, but Capps could not help but believe that after four generations of collecting skeletons, these guys must have a lot better file than the F.B.I. at all but its most paranoid. The Prestwicks knew everybody. George's family had chosen Columbia for his residency because its New York connections expanded his circle even further. At 26 he had already known "everyone" in Washington.

They settled into a comfortable booth at a bar called Solly's and Prestwick said greetings and introductions to Solly, and to the regular bartender, and started the tab.

"O.K. so what's the deal?" asked Prestwick, swizzling his first cocktail. "Oh, yeah, I got some stuff for you on your guy, Grantland."

"You don't remember a guy named Perkins do you? Troy Perkins?" Capps asked.

"Perkins, from where?" Capps realized that Prestwick hadn't even been given a rag to sniff before he was put on the trail.

"Oh, yeah", clarified Capps, "from Viet Nam. He was maybe a Spec. Four."

"Corpsman? Patient? What? I don't remember much about the help, ya know?" Prestwick's tour had been based on noblesse oblige as well as the draft.

"This guy was a patient. I keep thinking I remember him but I really don't know for sure.

"Patient of yours, or of mine?"

"Who knows? I just know that he probably came through our unit, the timing is right, and he got boarded out for doing drugs."

"No.! Not from Viet Nam! You don't mean it." Said Prestwick with a theatrical drop of the jaw. "Solly!" He pointed to their glasses again as he invited Capps to continue.

"Well, this guy comes into my office about a month ago, last appeal Vocational Rehab evaluation; George, I think I was the one that sent him home back then."

"So? Did he thank you? What did he have to say about it? That would be interesting, after all this time."

"I haven't had the guts to tell him, and he doesn't seem to remember it specifically, I mean me or anything particular. But this guy.... I mean his life has just been one long fucked up country and western tears in your beer song, man. Since then, since he got shipped out. And he's pissed at whoever did it. According to him, they... or I guess I should say I... but maybe you... fucked his life up by tagging him a crazy. No job, no family, lives in a crackerbox on the back side of town."

"Wow. And you're not even talking D.C. What the hell is the back side of Abilene, Texas like, anyway?"

"Pretty fuckin' grim, Ace."

“So there’s something else here though, right? This Grant stuff. So what’s going on? Solly!” Prestwick called, raising a finger without looking around.

“O.K. this is where it begins to get weird. I have really, really, really, gotten screwed up about this. It’s gotten to me, you know? I go to sleep and I see images of run down, junked out trailers and empty highways, and my soul just feels like lead. I see his wife and his kids...”

“You’ve talked to them?”

“No! That’s what I’m saying. That’s what’s so goddamned weird. I see them. I’ve never met them in my life, but I swear I see them, and then they melt away and there’s nothing but this huge hole. I can’t get my own shit together.”

“How’s your practice going?”

“I’m keeping things patched together, but my secretary is basically carrying me. If anything really tough came in right now I’d funk it for sure, just up my hands and say, ‘So? What the fuck do you expect me to do about it mister?’”

They both began to laugh. It started as a guilty, stifled laugh at a funeral that you can’t stop, and at that moment Solly arrived with the next round which only precipitated a new surge till they were both well into tears and runny noses before they could get breath back.

“Yes sir, I’m sure glad I could help you with your little problem here, Cappsy,” wheezed Prestwick, settling back, getting his breath. Noting the new round on the table again he said with a flourish, “Ah, just what we need here, more clown fuel! O.K., proceed.” He was now more or less seriously listening again.

“So the other night I was following this guy...”

"Following him? You mean like *following* following?"

"Well, yeah. Actually I was out driving around and happened to see his car go past at this intersection, and I followed him."

"Oh, well, at least that's not following following, right?"

"Wrong. Cause I was out driving around in the first place in the middle of the night...."

"....because you couldn't sleep because of this guy." completed Prestwick.

"Which is back to following following!"

"Yeah, right!"

"So what happened?"

"So I follow him around town and nothing happens and I get bored and I finally go on home."

"But...."

"But...the next morning I read in the paper, page four or five, little story, that the guy who is this Perkins' voc rehab counselor got shot in the back of the head in his office. His office is more or less in the area where I was following the guy around."

"Whoa! You think he did it?"

"Ah, there's the rub. I don't know."

"Had he been fighting with the guy? Anything?"

"Nope. Nothing. Never said anything except that the guy was nice to him. I went back and reviewed the referral from the dead guy and there's nothing much in

it. Of course I think it was written pretty early on in their relationship, so who knows.”

“Call the cops?”

“I don’t know what the cops are like here in the big city, but back home they’re pretty task oriented, you know? I mean, I don’t know for sure if I have any real reason to call them in on this guy.”

“And because they may well just chuck him away, guilty or not cause he’s a down and outer, and he’s already got a tough enough life, and you’re the one who caused it to begin with?”, intoned Prestwick.

“Yes sir, that’s pretty much the shot.” That was the harsh version, the confessional version that Capps needed to share with someone in order to begin to let some of its pressure off his shoulders. Janelle had been right in her feeling that this trip might begin to do some good.

“O.K.” said Prestwick, puffing out his cheeks and pausing for a moment to marshal his thoughts. “You say you don’t know if the guy was yours in Nam?”

“No, I’m not sure. But what’s the difference.”

“Well, for one thing, it may be me who’s the one that needs confession, right? Mighta been mine? Solly!”

“O.K. so you’re the asshole. Now what? Same problem in principle. Pure coincidence.” They paused to move empties and get their next round settled.

Prestwick supplied the next link, “And this guy Grantland...?”

“Grant. Yeah, that’s the other thing. You got some stuff?”

“Yeah. Interesting set of folks. Your guy’s name was Thomas W. Grantland. Had to be him. I have a friend who works at the Point, I called him and he looked it up in their archives. They keep a lot of stuff on their boys, especially this kid.”

Prestwick groped in his suit pocket for a small black leather notebook and opened it, running his finger down the page as he read the data off. “Grantland, Thomas W., West Point class of ’71, his father was also West Point, class of ’37 LT. General Patterson W. Grantland, now retired. Another son, your boy’s brother, also Point, class of ’67, now a full bird colonel at the Pentagon. Anyway, Thomas Grantland got to Viet Nam in early ’72, took command of a unit of the 9th of the 1st Air Cav and the next thing you know, on ...” here he checked the notes again, “April 27th, 1972, was KIA at approximately 1900 hours, while leading troops near a place called Qui Tran.”

“Anything about his death, I mean exactly how he died?”

“I don’t think they have the actual report, or maybe they do but it wasn’t in the archive. The guy was given the Silver Star, posthumously, though. They looked at each other and raised their glasses, full of irony, “There’s just a brief report appended to that, but they’re not too objective when they hand out medals, ya know? Also got the Purple Heart, posthumously.” Another toast, and a call for another round.

“So what’s the deal with him, with this Grantland?” asked Prestwick, his interest piqued by scotch and mystery.

"Probably nothing, maybe just more of the bad rap, but Perkins said he had won three hundred dollars by picking the right date in a pool on this guy's getting croaked."

"That's cold."

"Like ice. And, he apparently had a gripe against Grantland for taking them out of garrison, out on patrols."

"April of '72? I'd have a gripe with the guy, too."

"Perkins said the unit thought the guy was just trying to get his licks in."

"His old man a general, big brother probably saw some thick shit earlier on? Yeah I can imagine. And you think your...pardon me...our...Perkins maybe fragged him?"

"Don't know. I'm trying to figure this thing out. Anything helps, you know? But the guy got a Silver Star and the Purple Heart. That doesn't sound like he got fragged."

"Who knows? Family like his, anything's possible."

"You think?"

"Well, the guy at the Point has the alumni list too and if you really want we could go visit the brother, maybe find the old man too, if he's still around."

"Go see them?"

"Sure, no problem." Prestwick knew everybody.

"I don't know how I'd go about it. I mean I can't open a can of worms here, ask about the possibility of murder. If you think the Abilene police are self righteous, imagine what these guys would be like on poor old Buddy Perkins."

“O.K., we were shrinks in Nam. We’re doing a study about survivors?”

“You back me up?”

“Sure. It’s true. We were, and we are, right?” explained Prestwick.

“Technically”, admitted Capps. “O.K. Make your calls. If I’m going do this, I’ve got to get in touch with them now while I still have all this artificial courage on board.”

Prestwick rang up the guy at West Point and got the private phone number in Maryland of the Grantland family home, which he was also informed, had been in the family since before the Civil War. The brother, Col. Norton Grantland was listed, as well as Lt. Gen. P.W. Grantland, (ret), at the same address. It was also listed as Thomas Grantland’s home of record.

Prestwick then stood by while Capps did his dead level best to sound sober as he got the Colonel on the line, spoke with him for a moment, and was invited to come to the family home, “up the river” in Maryland, the next evening.

Through a falling Saturday dusk, they drove up to the open gate of the Grantland family’s estate. They were watched over by two stone eagles, whose wings were spread in fierce display. It occurred to Capps that at the entrance to this particular family’s domain, they were the real thing, not some attempt at faux Early American patriotism by way of plastic totem. These grounds had seen generation after generation of Grantlands, since before the time of the Civil War, bred to the defense of the Republic. As they drove the long way from gate to house Capps could

well imagine innumerable well planned and executed boyhood ambushes of visitors and seniors. The cutting of the puppy teeth of America's true warrior class occurred in the wooded acres still surrounding the house.

The Colonel and his lady, casually dressed, ushered them in to the tidy old two-story brick home. It was clear from what Prestwick had found from his sources that this Grantland would inevitably take general rank soon, and that he was simply completing the long, perfect, apprenticeship that led in each generation to taking into one's hands the power to level mountains. Had he lived, the younger Grantland, Troy Perkins' platoon leader, would have been on the same path.

"Tom was absolutely outstanding." The Colonel spoke crisply but with obvious affection about his long dead younger brother, when they had settled into his study with brandy in hand, the gentle Maryland dusk settling slowly outside in the trees. The room, like the rest of the house was an active repository of military history and testimony. Large trophy cases held velvet trays of medals and decorations. There were pictures of at least three Presidents with Grantlands in uniform. The swords, pistols, and flag fragments were the real thing, at some point or other having been transformed from their simple elemental substances of wood and iron and cloth, into weapons and symbols to kill and be killed for, by the addition of sweat, terror, and men's blood.

"I was in the senior class at the Point when Tom came up. Had him in Beast Barracks. I kicked the holy living shit out of him every way I could think of and he didn't bend an inch. He was the best of us." Capps could not help but be impressed at this admission.

According to Mrs. Grantland, the older man, referred to as “The General”, was now confined to a wheelchair, having suffered a stroke within two years of retiring in 1979. It was possible that he would be able to come downstairs later.

There were two younger Grantlands in training, the Colonel’s sons, and the nephews of the fallen Thomas W., one fifteen and the other almost eighteen. The older one was in line to begin West Point the next summer at his own freshman Beast Barracks.

Also there, was a thick featured, iron-gray old man, perhaps thirty years older than the Colonel. His hands were noticeable for their massive, callused palms, and for the number of scars that criss-crossed the backs of his arms. There was also a large scar on the side of his neck. His name was John Godfrey, and he was an old military retainer of the ancient stamp. He was referred to as Sergeant Godfrey, or addressed, with obvious deference, as “Top”, by the Colonel.

As the dusk turned to full darkness, Mrs. Grantland rose to light the house and attend to domestic duties. Shortly after that, the two boys wheeled their grandfather into the still dim study where the men were talking over their brandy.

P. W. Grantland had been forty-two years in the Army, and even in a wheelchair, with his fierce fixed stare he still looked more like one of the stone eagles at the gate than like a nursing home candidate. He and Godfrey and the boys watched in silence while the three other men compared their various experiences, in what would certainly be the only war in which the two doctors would ever be involved.

“For you guys, the real soldiers, I mean,” said Capps, his gesture including the old men, “just how frustrating was it, the last half of the war?”

“After Tet? It was a bitch, plain and simple”, said The Colonel directly. “It was like night and day. I got there in '67 and it was still what we had been taught about at the Point, a real Army. But later...after we were told to dig in....”

The old man muttered something unintelligible from his chair, only one side of his face moving. The boys leaned down to try to hear what it was their grandfather was saying, but to no avail as he was once again stony silent.

“We were just sitting around, and it fell apart, from corps on down it just fell totally apart before our eyes.”

“Rabble!” muttered the old man, his eyes not clearly focused on the others. Capps stiffened slightly, but from the lack of response from the rest, it appeared that to them this must be familiar, generic, behavior for the old man.

“It was just so different,” said the Colonel. I did three separate tours, '67, '71, and back again in '74 as an attaché”. He vaguely indicated a couple of trophy cases in a darkened corner of the room. “Last one really didn’t count, didn’t do jack....sat on my butt in Saigon the whole time.”

Prestwick slipped a significant look at Capps and they smiled at one another. Grantland noticed and immediately attempted to smooth what he perceived as a grievous error. “I mean, if I had been in the medical corps it would have been different....but for a troop commander, it was no place to be. Tom and Dad worked like hell, pulled all kinds of strings to get him a combat slot even that late in the war.”

“Ought to hang ‘em. No sense to it.” The General muttered from his wheel chair, his right eye jerking convulsively and tearing up. One of the boys put a hand on his grandfather’s shoulder and the old man became calm again.

“May I ask what exactly happened in the field, to your brother, I mean? The Point’s archives just said killed in action.”

Colonel Grantland sat quietly for a moment, collecting his thoughts. Capps noted at that moment another velvet tray of decorations. There were very few compared to the others he had seen about, and he recognized the Silver Star and the Purple Heart among them. These were the record, the only traces left of Thomas W. Grantland.

“Master Sergeant Godfrey...”

“Sarn’t Godfrey!” echoed the General, his head lifting slightly.

“Sir!”, came the barked response.

“Top, why don’t you tell Doctor Capps what happened?” the Colonel requested. Then before Godfrey could begin, he gently cut him off to explain, “Sergeant Godfrey had originally served with Dad when they were both starting out. Dad was a second lieutenant in the Philippines in ’39 when Godfrey made buck sergeant. They went through the Pacific campaign together. By the end of the war Dad was a major and he kept Sergeant Godfrey assigned to him. That’s one of the perks the Point gives you if you’re in a family like ours. Washington recognizes that you’re in it for the long run, and it helps to have your own people. Good ones.” Godfrey certainly seemed to take no offense at the explanation.

“They went through Korea and then when Dad first went to Viet Nam in ’63 Godfrey went with him. By the time I got there Sergeant Godfrey knew a lot about keeping your ass in one piece, knew as much about fighting Charlie as any Caucasian guy, I guess. Dad detailed him to wet nurse me my first tour. That’s the way it goes, you know, when you first get there. He kept me alive long enough to teach me a hell of a lot about soldiering. Enough to stay alive on my own. Enough to take the fight to Charlie.”

Capps understood that the Army considered these men to be precious commodities, and though there was much they could be taught in the classrooms on the Hudson, it was equally imperative to get them properly fledged by experienced hands in actual combat.

The boys stood silent, the old man muttered something that might included the word “Tommy.”

“Same thing with Tommy. Sergeant Godfrey was detailed to his unit when he took over in ’72. It was such a problem then, though. When Dad and I started out, we had a reason for being there, a military mission. Everybody took care of everybody else. Guys in the foxholes weren’t white or black, they were just O.D. green and blood red. You didn’t have many discipline or morale problems, early on.”

“Discipline! Goddamned rabble!” Capps couldn’t tell whether the laconic nature of the old man’s interjections stemmed from senility or from precision after forty odd years of experience and twenty more of enforced reflection.

“Sergeant Godfrey told us, told Dad and I, that it was really tough on Tommy. The big problem for him was that there was nothing to do for someone with his training.” Capps could imagine the frustrations of having been bred full of these martial juices and having these footsteps to walk in and being told to sit and be quiet, told to spend your time dealing with barracks fistfights and demoralized deadheads. Watching your spiritual sword rust in its scabbard before it had ever been truly blooded.

“Of course...” stressed Colonel Grantland, almost formalistically, “If that’s the order then that’s what you do, period.” Capps wondered if it had been for his benefit or perhaps it was for the two young cadets.

“Tom was just using his command discretion to its fullest limits, nothing beyond the book. Correct, Sergeant?”

“That is correct, sir,” affirmed the old soldier.

“Most small unit commanders, by that time, elected to man their own wire and that’s about it. No one going out beyond garrison at night, just let Charlie have the run of the place. The guys in Paris were giving it away anyhow.” explained the Colonel.

The old man’s good fist thrashed and pounded clumsily on the arm of his wheelchair at this mention.

“Tom just thought it best in the long run for morale if the troops had something to do besides lay around and shoot dope. I think he was correct, from an objective standpoint. He and Godfrey and the others like them were losing one out of every eight troops to heroin or discipline problems, some of those were getting

sent home in bags just as if they'd been shot, so he figured if he could give them something to keep them busy, he might be saving their lives." Capps filed this away for later unraveling as it ironically paralleled the thinking he had been doing about Buddy Perkins.

The Colonel went on, "Like ship captain's have crews scrub decks or having troops building bigger and better latrines, that sort of thing. But Tommy wasn't an engineer at heart, he was a warrior, so he insisted that his area be patrolled well, at least locally.

"He didn't just send other people out to do that stuff, either, he led them out, two nights out and one night in. Anybody else was every third night at most, if they went out at all, so he was putting his own ass out there on the line. That's what he was trained to do, and he did it. Sergeant Godfrey was there when he was killed." The Colonel turned and nodded to Godfrey, who was already standing. The two boys were standing at the back of the General's wheelchair like some young honor guard.

"He hadn't really been there very long," Godfrey began in a voice hoarse with a lifetime of shouted command, "Just a couple of months, long enough to get a rotation started. We thought it was working, the men were responding, coming out of the hole, you know? But then we were on another routine patrol, to keep Charlie from getting close enough to mortar us at night. Tactically correct.

"We were going out a little farther than usual, taking it to the enemy, so we had started earlier in the day. We'd already been on the boot for two hours when we started to take fire from a tree line across a paddy. Sun was going down, behind

their backs, and with the glare off the water in the paddy we could hardly look that direction, let alone direct fire from any distance.

“There were two smaller terraces between the one we were on and the one where the NVA was concentrating. There was another terrace, connected at a right angle to the one the enemy already held and he was developing his troops around that flank and onto the other terrace in order to have us enfiladed. The Lieutenant could see that the key to the position was where they were trying to join up two groups, trying to set up some automatic weapons. He knew it, he showed me, and told me to form up a squad to put pressure on that point.

It was in a tree line about a hundred meters off through the grass and the paddies. Light was bad, getting dark. First squad started up and simply let themselves get beaten back.

“They just didn’t understand it like the Lieutenant did. The longer they waited, the more the position would pressure them. The position had to be taken as quickly as possible to prevent more losses in the long run, so the Lieutenant ordered another squad up and this time he did just exactly what he was drawing his pay for, he led ‘em out himself. I could see him coming up for us from where I lay, stuck up under the second dike with a couple of men from the first squad. Here they came, The Lieutenant in front, over the top, classic charge, the men coming up over the horizon behind him, following right behind him with tremendous covering fire.

Our people were moving well, they were beginning to get close enough to pressure the enemy, make him desperate. We were on Charlie’s wire now, and he wasn’t going to be able to stop us. Then just that instant, I saw the Lieutenant’s face

by the light of a red tracer that passed above his shoulder. His head was thrown back, he was shot clean through. All of a sudden he just pitched over on his face, and was gone. Dead when he hit the ground.”

Capps thought of Milton’s stately march, “And from about him fierce effusion rolled of smoke and bickering flame and sparkles dire.” The old Sergeant’s tale was no less heroic, in its own way, but perhaps from an even older, more Homeric song of war.

“Thing that was so bad about it” the old soldier explained, “As terrible as it was, was that he had already managed to break the enemy position up. They couldn’t regroup before we could get air lifted out. We’d won, enemy firing was just ragged covering fire.” Capps noted that he was not the only one in the room to have listened so closely to the story. The two boys were standing as though they were at attention, even though he was sure they weren’t aware he was observing them.

The Colonel delivered the epilog. “Some little gook son of a bitch got off a random shot, on the run probably, and we lost one of the guys who would have commanded in the next war, a Patton, a Stonewall Jackson. Bang, just like that.” Then he too fell silent. It would surely remain among the legendary tales of that house.

“Goddamned rabble. Hang ‘em. Mutinous, treacherous dogs! Came the ejaculation from the old man that broke the silence.

“Now Dad...”, Capps thought Colonel Grantland was seemingly caught momentarily off guard and uncomfortable with this, as he had not been with the old

man's earlier general denunciation of the situation. "Dad and Sergeant Godfrey started out together in the Philippines. Dad here has seen it all, haven't you Dad?"

"What?" came the sharp reply.

"You and Godfrey in the Philippines!" shouted his son, gently.

"Philippines, goddamned Jap bastards", he muttered at a standing lamp, and there suddenly reappeared a simple old man in a bath robe in his wheelchair. "Hang 'em all. Bastards!" The Colonel motioned to the boys, who gently tucked the old man's lap robe in and then wheeled him out of the study. "Good night, boys. Good night, sir," said the Colonel. The General did not reply.

Capps and Prestwick stayed for one more brandy and then began their way back to town.

"Well?" asked Prestwick as they drove home through the Washington suburbs.

"I don't know any more than I did when I started. That was some story."

"Like a John Wayne movie script. You think it had anything to do with the boy's exit wound maybe being in his chest, do you."

"If it was, that might say a lot, but that's not necessarily what happened. Since I don't know, it doesn't do anything more for me. I still worry that Perkins is a creep and that he's a killer too, but I still don't have any real reason to believe it."

"And you're still going to give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Right."

"And in the meantime while you're dicking around here like Sherlock Holmes, Junior, if he is a killer, and he kills again..."

"I know, I know. I still don't know what to do. Any suggestions?"

"You got any other background on the guy? You got his work record?"

Whatever you're going to get about his service record? How about his home town?"

"What about it? I'm supposed to waltz into his old home town and start asking his family and friends a bunch of goofy questions, and that's not getting into the guy's business? Right."

"But maybe his business needs to be gotten into....by somebody, you know?"

"I'm just stuck. I think I need to be nosey, but the only way I'll know I need to be nosey or not... and maybe the answer is "not", remember... is to be nosey in the first place."

"So what's the worst thing that could happen? The old folks call him up and say you've been asking about him and, what, he comes in pissed and you lose a state welfare referral patient."

"And maybe he brings me up on harassment charges, or the state board says something about ethics, like why didn't I let the police handle it if I thought what I thought, or why didn't I just leave the poor guy's affairs alone. They aren't going to give a shit about my conscience. All they care about is my professional activities. And there is one other scenario, you know. The old folks at home call and tell him I'm asking around and one morning I'm found face down at my desk with the back of my head oozing into the trash can."

"Oops."

"Yeah, oops."

"I'd get a gun, for sure."

"I've got a gun. Remember, yippee ti yo, I'm from Texas, ma'am. But listen to this shit, would you? Two trained, middle-aged psychiatrists talking like a couple of barrio kids. 'Hey homeboy, if the sucka puts a move on ya, ya ice 'em down'. Shit."

"O.K.," said Prestwick in a new burst of speed in the mental pursuit. "O.K., tomorrow I'll call a guy I know over at Walter Reed. Maybe we can find our way into the files at the Institute of Pathology. I think they have all the autopsy reports from Nam there. Maybe we can at least find something, like a between the shoulder blades entrance wound on Young Alexander the Great there."

"Even that...is still not enough to absolutely say that Perkins did it."

"If it comes down like that though, it would certainly not leave you with your guard down, right?"

"Yeah...O.K. Let's do it. Maybe it'll help me to figure my next move."

"Right now," said Prestwick brightly, "Our next move is to pick up Mimi at Solly's and depending on how fucked up we all get, maybe go out to dinner. I assume you're tired of Ranger Bob's Burger Barn there in Abilene?"

The next morning found them walking, heavy of head and queasy of stomach, through room after room after room of what had to be the creepiest stuff Capps had ever been around. The Armed Forces Institute of Pathology is one of the true big - time repositories of medical knowledge and specimens in the world. They've been in the business for a long time, they are world wide, with a big budget, and they do everything from routine laboratory testing for run of the mill medical practice in the military, to serving as consultants to private docs from all over the country and the

world in deciding the nature of a particular germ or tumor. Their file of pathology specimens is unmatched.

Capps was now headed to the “gross pathology” archives through two centuries of “gross” anatomical specimens, everything from two headed sherpas, to Walter Reed’s own personal and ultimately fatal burst appendix, all waiting in several large, quiet, dark basement rooms, floating silently forever in their various bottles and jars of formaldehyde.

Capps had hated human anatomy class. He had hated autopsies. All he remembered about the six-month ordeal was that he had gone around smelling like formalin the whole time. He went to his parents home for dinner one night when they were having guests in to meet “their boy in medical school”, and he had looked down during a casual conversation with one of his mother’s friends and noticed that he still had a fairly large piece of greasy yellow human fat sticking to the top of his black, fuzzy sock.

Now they were met by a pathologist named Maurice “Mole” Foster. Foster was a Colonel in the regular medical corps and Capps was not surprised to hear he had gone to medical school with Prestwick. That was why he came in on a Sunday morning as a favor. They walked on through the silently watching gross specimens, and on to the record rooms. There were, in spite of attempts to computerize as many records as possible, hundreds of thousands, possibly millions of files on every conceivable problem here, from the clap to brain tumors. Foster spoke to a crisp young WAC for a minute or two explaining what they needed. She went directly to a file cabinet like those used to catalog libraries, and immediately pulled out a long

wooden drawer. She flipped through the records and brought back a card to Foster, who showed it to Prestwick and Capps.

“Grantland, Thomas W. 2nd LT. 441-34-8879 DOB 4/5/49 KIA 5/27/72 Summary, medical. Autopsy.” There was a small, penciled check by the word autopsy.

“Yep, he had an autopsy. Don’t know where it was done but the record is there”, said Foster. “Specialist, can you find this one for us, please?”

“Yes, sir. With all the Agent Orange stuff over the last few years that section is still not too dusty.”

She led them through row after claustrophobic row of racks, floor to ceiling, of records of dead men, men shot to death, burned in flaming aircraft, exploded and even gassed in the first world war, or dead of fever in Cuba or the Philippines. Documents about pieces of men, parts of them gathered and more or less grouped with their original owners, some jackets thin due to being only the record of “Hand, right, unidentified”, that had somewhere, sometime held another hand, or “Head, face obliterated” that had once cradled on some soft bosom.

They went on and on through the rows and finally came out into a more open, modern area, with work-tables and good lighting. The WAC referred to the card and its identifiers. She went unerringly to a place in the midst of a shelf and thumbed through the edges of perhaps ten charts. Then she looked at the card again and repeated the process, starting farther to one side and going through perhaps twenty-five charts this time.

“It’s not here sir. It’s out.”

"Out? You mean somebody has it out already? Got any idea who?" asked Foster.

"Could be out for review. Was this person exposed to Agent Orange or have a suit or anything pending with the government?" she asked.

"Nope. Nothing pending.

The Specialist records clerk went back to the original cataloging area and went through yet another file. Finally she came back to the knot of physicians and said, "That chart looks like it's been checked out since 1973, sir. There's no telling where it is by now. The signature on the sign out card isn't anyone I even recognize."

Foster took the yellowed card she held out for his inspection. "Colonel T.P. Formby. He was the head of the path section here. But Jesus guys, that's been years ago. Formby's been dead for fifteen years. I know, I did his autopsy myself, one of my first here. The chart you're looking for, it's gone, could be anywhere, or nowhere, which is more likely after all this time. Sorry, George," he said to Prestwick.

"Aw, it's O.K. Mo, nothing critical. My boy here is just doing a paper on the long term follow up adjustment reactions of survivors and this was just a cross the "T", dot the "I" sort of thing.

"What's the story on these folks, the...Grantlands." Foster asked, pursuing the concept, rechecking the name on the card. "They doing O.K.? All these years,... a long time."

“Oh, yeah, they’re O.K. strong, old military family. Two or three other West Pointers in the surviving pack. A big dog Colonel, retired Lieutenant General, they’ll probably wind up in jars here themselves in time”, said Capps minimizing his disappointment at their futile search.

“No idea where the chart might be....why it might have been checked out and not returned?” asked Prestwick again. Foster led the two men away from the Specialist after giving her their thanks for her efforts.

“Your boy didn’t have a drinking problem, or drugs? Nothing like that? There are a few charts, same deal, military families, some still on active duty and stuff, younger kid gets screwed up on dope or gets his throat cut in a whore house and somebody comes over from the Pentagon and the record just sort of disappears forever. Nothing really immoral as far as I’m concerned, just the Army trying to keep its pants up. Kind of like in a family, you know?”

“No,” said Prestwick, shaking his head, “nothing like that. This guy was apparently a good scout. Straight arrow. At least as far as we know. Eyewitness saw him go down leading a charge against an enemy emplacement. Mo, what we needed to know was if he might have been shot in the back.”

“Fragged? Without the record you just won’t ever know. But if he was an Academy man and his folks are all regular Army, that certainly would qualify as dirty laundry. Probably worse than buying it in a good Christian whorehouse somewhere. And you know they’re not going to tell you if they know, the family that is, even if you are a psychiatrist....especially if you’re a psychiatrist.” Now he poked Prestwick’s ribs. There was a glint in his eye that told the pair that Foster knew

there was bullshit involved somewhere, but apparently, on the strength of his career in the Army, and probably because the search had come up dry in his own orchard, he was willing to overlook it. “But like I say, you’ll probably never know now.”

Chapter 8

It was raining when they came up out of the ground at the Institute, and as they drove to the airport in Prestwick's Rolls.

"You know I saw our old Colonel, old John Boone. You remember, Uncle Boonie? He died not long ago."

"No kidding? Sorry to hear that. He was a good old man. What did he die of?"

"Lung cancer. You know he used to smoke those unfiltered like a chimney."

"If I remember, we all did."

"Yeah, well, with him it wasn't just for rakish effect. He kept at it long enough and it got him."

"So where did you run into him?"

"At a barbecue over in Virginia a couple of years ago. We got together a few times, ya know, at Solly's...I went over and saw him a few times near the end, when he was sick."

"So what did he think of you and your act?"

"We got along pretty well, actually. He stayed in the Army, retired with forty years, hung around emeritizing at Walter Reed and the new fed med school.

"You know he tried to get a project off the ground to debrief all the folks that served in the psych department during the war. Said the Army couldn't have cared less. He couldn't even find the records of all the psychiatrists that went over. The

Pentagon gave him some kind of list, but he said he personally knew more guys who had gone than were on it.”

“Debriefing?” asked Capps. Military terminology had never been his forte’.

“Yeah, you know, just talk with folks like us and see if we had any constructive comments. Did anybody ever ask you about what you thought, or if you had any words of wisdom based on your singularly distinguished six months and what, twenty days?”

“Twenty two. Remember, I got there on a Tuesday, you didn’t get there till Thursday if I remember correctly, so I *was* the senior officer. I’ll thank you to remember that in future, Captain Prestwick”, Capps said, doing his best Colonel Blimp impression. “And no, nobody gave a shit what I thought. You?”

“Nope, just the standard form thanks of the grateful nation. Nobody asked anything about next time.”

“Next time?” said Capps. Prestwick just looked back over at Capps and rolled his eyes.

“So did Boone have any words of wisdom to impart?”

“As a matter of fact,” said Prestwick, turning from the wheel at a stoplight to make eye contact for an instant, “He did. One time after about half a dozen of Solly’s scotches, he said that if he was going to be around when the next big one happened, and if they would listen to him, he would tell them to bear two things in mind.”

“Yeah?”

“The first, on the up front end, was to try to find some way of getting people who were not natural killers, if absolutely pressed to it, to actually be able to do it

without waiting the split second that made the difference in being a corpse or a winner. He said if you're gonna get some kid to shoot another kid, you'd better at least teach him to do it without flinching, cause if the other side has taught it to his kids first, they'll win in the gunfight until we get the idea into our heads, or rather, until we get the idea of delaying for even a fraction of a second, *out* of our heads. 'We always seemed to have a lot of that kind of deaths early on', is what he said.

"Yeah, I can imagine him saying that. I can hear him saying it. He was pretty much by the book", commented Capps, as he listened to the old man's voice in his memory.

"Well, think about it. First Bull Run was right over there", Prestwick said, gesturing vaguely across the Potomac." Imagine how many kids came face to face with that just in those few hours."

"The quick and the dead."

"Exactly. And Boone knew what he was talking about. Did you know he was a GMO at the Kassarine Pass AND a battalion surgeon at Chosan Reservoir? Imagine that. They only turned him into a shrink to help deal with the psywar stuff the Chinese pulled in Korea. He had done a lot of real doctoring, and soldiering. And you know he never beat us over the head with that when we tried to give him our hippie guff in Saigon.

He said, it was amazing but as far as he could tell, but by the time the next one comes around, they will have forgotten everything again. That was the second thing. That's why he wanted to try to debrief everybody, get it all down someplace. He said that the *real* downside that they always forget about is the fallout of humans

trashed, that we have to deal with for thirty years, like our boy Perkins there. Most of 'em, like this guy,... probably has little to do with any real trauma. Sure, I imagine its nasty to see guys blown apart, but mainly, the deep problem is it's just another thing to blame for not growing up.

"Boone said after the Civil war we diffused it in the wilderness...the frontier, after World War I it concentrated in Paris and the like. We didn't have that many because we weren't in it that long, but look what it did to the Brits. After World War II we cranked up the VA, institutionalized it, but not very well. But by Vietnam we forgot it again. Forgot to think about those long consequences beforehand again.

"Like most other vices, I guess, drinking too much...sneaky sex...gambling, declaring war doesn't begin to take its real cost until all the excitement is over and nobody's in the mood to deal with the cold leftovers and full ashtrays. These guys here sure don't have any sense of history about stuff like that," he said, pointing to one of the congressional office buildings on their way to the airport. "I know, I analyze a lot of 'em. I really don't think most of them are capable of factoring in that part of the long run when they think about American interests. That's where the money is in this thing, metaphorically speaking that is. Boonie was right. I mean, these guys up here have to be able to pull the trigger, for sure, sometime. But they really ought to watch all that 'Best Years of Our Lives' stuff and think about it again real hard before they do it again. Might slow'em down just enough to keep'em out of the more marginally stupid wars, at least." Prestwick drove him up to the door of the airport terminal, as the gray skies had continued to pour down a summer rainstorm. "Good luck, Mad Dog. Let me know if there's anything I can do. Call me

back if it gets real good, or real bad, O.K.?" Capps closed the door of the Rolls and waved goodbye.

He made it to Dallas by one o'clock and then searched out and caught a hayseed airline's 1 P.M. twin prop to Texarkana. He sat looking out at the homogenous green and brown East Texas countryside rolling along under them, his mind scanning the anonymous wastes of his planning for the immediate future. He would just see what to do when he got there.

When Capps arrived in Texarkana it was his vague plan to rent a car and try to find Connie Perkins. She would be the least likely, he imagined, to call up her ex with a report of such a visit. The problem was, he didn't know exactly what it was he was going to ask her, if and when he found her. And beside, Perkins had said she had changed her name, or at least he had said that she had remarried, which he assumed would be the same thing. He knew she was a beautician, or at least had been at one time, so he looked in vain for any hair salon or manicure shop that might be open on a dead dragging, hot, summer Sunday afternoon in what was really still a small southern town. He drove up and down the main streets with no luck. He was almost relieved, because he still didn't have the faintest notion of how he would introduce himself to her, or exactly what he would ask.

He determined that if nothing better occurred to him, he could always use the truth, to wit, that he was doing a vocational rehabilitation evaluation on Perkins, and he just wanted any general background he could get. He was amazed at how the truth could be so shaky. But then he had to admit that this was probably "truth" with a lower case "t".

He had absolutely no luck with physically searching, nor with the ten or so calls he made to beauty shops listed in the phone book. There were only two answers, one a woman who apparently ran her small shop in her front parlor, which Capps thought charming, but who was either so senile or so deaf that their conversation, though pleasant, had been fruitless. The other was an answering machine which declared that Verleen was out but that if you left a message, she was sure, “We could get together to do you. Afternoons are best, Hon, and I do curls, perms, dye jobs, just anything you need, darlin’. My girl will curl your girl.” Beep.

He had just made up his mind to write it all off, and get back to the local airport to get home at some reasonable hour, when he noticed, there on the highway heading out of town, a sign over a large, neatly kept tin building. It read “Texarkana Garage”, and there was a fat man in baggy overalls doing something there by the front door. Capps pulled in almost reflexly.

“Johnny Perkins?... Excuse me, sir, are you Johnny Perkins?” he said, getting out of the car. “I’m looking for a Mr. Johnny Perkins. Is this his place?” The man stared at him for a moment, taking in his suit and the car he drove.

“Naw”, he said. “Johnny lives over in Hooks. That’s about ten miles.” He pointed on down the road out which Capps had been headed.

Capps remembered the one time he and Prestwick had decided to sample the down side of Saigon. They had decided that they could get a little bit of the strong “Thai Stick” marijuana to smoke on a weekend that they had off. Capps was totally in the dark about how to go about getting the stuff. Prestwick knew everybody, even then, even there.

“Cappsey, Cappsey, Cappsey. Look, son,” he said, putting an arm dipped in friendly condescension around Capps’ shoulder as they stood, dressed in civvies, on a busy street corner in the neon glow of the early but already cacophonous Saigon night. “Your problem is that you think you’ve got to know the whole song before you start singing. Not so. Not so.” Prestwick was sage from the several Scotches they had had in order to prepare for their big adventure. “You just gotta know the first note. Then you sing it as it comes, right?”

Then he had whirled, and seemingly without taking any particular sort of aim had pointed to the first Vietnamese street bopper wearing sunglasses at nine o’clock on a Friday night and bellowed, “Tuan! Hey Tuan!”

The streetbop had sort of pulled up short, mainly as Prestwick had now thrown a heavy arm around his much smaller oriental shoulder. “You’re Tuan, aren’t you?”

“No, I not Tuan.” said the Bop, but he and Prestwick were grinning at each other, about twelve inches apart, nodding at each other as well.

“Oh, I thought you were Tuan....but you know Tuan, don’t you? Little short guy? Wears pants.”

“Tuan! Ya, I know Tuan.” The Bop nodded his head animatedly, following Prestwick’s example. They grinned and nodded and sort of shook their hands around in the air at each other, and then Prestwick said, “Do you know where Tuan is? My buddy and I need to talk to him.”

It was just a question now of the Bop figuring out whether it was dope or girls or boys or what these gringos wanted. And then for the two of them, to just

listen to the song closely enough as it went along to tell at any point whether this Tuan was a good Tuan who would do good business or whether he was one of the bogus Tuans or Nguyens or even a manic Phoc who would lead them too far from the main drag and try to roll them.

As it turned out, they had simply walked about ten yards up the street with this first guy who introduced them to “real live Broadway Tuan”, who had supplied their request in about thirty seconds out of his left front pocket, and offered them girls and heroin to boot. They had paid him, and taken their “big score” to go, getting quietly paralyzed in an air-conditioned hotel suite, listening to rock and roll music, sipping ice cold beer from room service, bitching and generally bugging the war for a couple of days. They had considered and rejected compensated female companionship, knowing as much as they did about the STD’s of the city. That office was next one down from Psych. But part of the adventure now was the gaining of the shit.

Prestwick had told him then, “You can find anybody in the world, as long as they don’t mind being found. Just start with the first guy and go from there. Everybody knows everybody within five rings.”

“I’m Johnny Perkins”, said the thin, knobby boned old man, when Capps found his place on the main and only drag in Hooks, Texas. He was standing by the front of his workshop, which was only about twenty yards from what Capps assumed was his house. “What can I do for you? We’re closed today. It’s Sunday, I was just lockin’ up the boat.”

“No sir, that’s O.K. I don’t need a mechanic. My name is Capps, Bill Capps.”

He held out his hand and the old man shook it, obviously wondering if he was a revenue agent or a salesman of some kind. “I, uhm...I’m working with a fellow named Buddy Perkins, he any relation?”

“You working with Buddy?” The old man clearly did not understand, from the tone of his voice. It said he didn’t put together someone dressed like Capps partnering with someone like his nephew. “What kind of work you and Buddy doing?” Now there was open suspicion in his voice.

“Well, we’re not exactly working together. I mean, I am working for the Vocational Rehabilitation Department and I’m working with Buddy, as a...client.”

“Aw. O.K.” Now things seemed to fit, and also not to be of any surprise to Uncle Johnny. “What can I do for you?” he said in his slow drawl.

“Well, I’m not exactly sure. My job is to try to help Buddy get settled someplace, get some kind of work, you know?” The old man’s lips pursed on his toothless gums and he nodded his head to indicate that he knew exactly what Capps meant. “And I just wanted to get some background information, you know, just regular stuff about his childhood and all.”

“He still ain’t got a job. That don’t surprise me none.”

“I understand he worked for you for a little while, when he was a teenager.”

“Yeah, well, I guess you could call it that. He was mostly just another one of them little punks smoking that dope. Lay up someplace so I couldn’t find him if I needed anything done.” Though the fact that Perkins had possibly been using marijuana before he had gone into the service didn’t exactly surprise Capps, he still

filed it peripherally anyway, not only for its information about Perkins' habits, but more importantly as one point on the line of his veracity.

"Did he know anything about cars, I mean fixing them, mechanic work?"

"Naw, he never would sit still and listen to anybody long enough to learn anything. He'd get the first thing wrong and from then on all it was just arguing. He'd get all mad, break the next thing, y'know?"

"I understand he quit because you wouldn't let him go fishing with you on the hot days," grinned Capps, pointing to the boat in the shed. The older Perkins' eyes narrowed and he thought for just an instant.

"I don't exactly reckon he quit. What actually happened was one day he got mad, like I told you, he'd get too rambunctious and all, so he got mad and I called him down about it, and the little sonofabitch reached over and picked up a big ol' fish knife and come at me with it." Capps remained silent, but his expression asked Johnny to go on. "He cut me pretty bad." The old man pulled down his shirt collar and below his prominent Adam's Apple there was a jagged purplish scar, now faint with age and blended among the wrinkles on the man's old turkey neck. "I don't know, if one of the other boys hadn't been here an' pulled him off, why I think he just might have killed me."

"What happened? I mean I see you're O.K., but what happened to him then?"

"Aw, he run off but the police picked him up a few days later. Somebody saw him down there behind the bus station in Texarkana with blood a running all down his arms. He punched out a window or something. Cut his wrists up real bad, like to

died. Far as I was concerned he could have gone right ahead and done it for all I cared.”

“Did you press charges? Anything like that?”

“Aw, you know how it is. His daddy was my brother and my sister-in-law took to crying and carrying on. I told her she needed to watch him or he was going hurt somebody. He was just about seventeen then, I think, and by the time the lawyers would have got through, he would have been eighteen and they would have let him go anyway. That’s what the police said. So it weren’t no use anyway.”

“Did he stay around here?”

“Yeah. He was away for a while, hospital and all, but then he come back. He wasn’t in school anymore so he just spent most of his time sniffing around after that little girl he married.”

“That would be Connie? He told me about her.”

“Yeah. She wern’t a bad little girl neither. She’s just like all them young ones, though. She thought Buddy’d turn out to something if he just had a good woman to settle him down, y’know?”

Capps did indeed know of variations on perhaps a hundred such attempts in his own professional experience, women he had treated who had started off relationships with that same idea. So far, to his recollection however, the score remained the same; Up to No Good, 100, Good Women, 0.

“They got married and had a baby right away, and then I think Buddy went into the service. He was in Vet’ Nam, you know”, said the old man.

“Yes, I knew about that.”

"D'you know they kicked him out of there, said he's crazy?"

"I knew about his discharge, yes."

"Even the Army says you're crazy, you *must* be crazy." Capps remained silent. "He come back after that and he just mostly laid up again. He wouldn't hardly hit a lick of work. Connie had a couple of more little kids and working too, an Buddy just laying up. Connie's brother Butch helped him out some. Butch was running a trucking line and Buddy drove some."

"He told me about that."

"He was off and on at that for long time. Finally he got fired, cause even Butch couldn't put up with him no more, even for his own sister's sake, y'know. Then Connie left town. She'd been taking care of her momma. Momma had cancer I think, and she finally died, and wasn't long after that that Buddy got fired and screwed up so bad and she just up and shucked him and left town altogether. He tell you about the wreck?"

"He told me about a couple. Which one? The one with the pizza cheese? He said he had that one and then he was also in a car wreck, too, I think."

"Aw, that eighteen wheeler deal wasn't that bad. I mean it ruined the trailer and it cost Butch all kinds of money, but that's just a truck, you know?"

"Yeah, as long as nobody got hurt, right?"

"Right." Said Mr. Perkins, nodding gently in their common understanding of things. "But I told Butch he done right to fire him after that. I mean that wasn't the only thing. Some times Buddy'd miss work and stuff, so it had been going on a long time when Butch fired him. Buddy wasn't really a very good driver anyway. Then

he had that bad wreck and all. I told Butch anybody would be a fool to drive in a car with him."

"He said he fell asleep and slipped on the ice one night."

"Well, I don't know about that now, but I think he must have been drinking, cause I remember when the Highway Patrol called, thinking there weren't no other reason for it. It's right out here between here and Texarkana. You seen how straight that road is, and it weren't no ice or snow or nothing. Ran smack into a big old pine tree. Like to tore the car in two. I went out and towed what was left of it back in next morning, and I couldn't figure why they crashed right there."

"They? Was someone else with him?"

"Butch. Connie said Buddy came over and asked Butch to go over to Texarkana with him. Butch was such a nice feller he couldn't ever bring himself to just tell Buddy to piss on off, I guess cause he felt like he was still his brother-in-law. I told Butch he's crazy to hang out with him, right after firing him. Hell, and I'm his uncle. Figured he'd pull a goddamned fish knife on Butch or something. Done just as bad though, I guess."

"What happened to Butch?"

"Wreck killed Butch outright. He's right over there across the road in the cemetery there. You can see his stone right there by that little old tree. Burton Pinkner, that was his real name, Burton, not Butch."

Capps stood for a few more minutes talking with Johnny Perkins in the shade of the East Texas pecan trees that covered his front yard and shopfront. Then, bidding the old man thanks and farewell, he started back to his car.

He stopped, however, as his hand touched the door handle. He looked up across the road and saw Butch Pinkner's headstone, the smooth, silent side toward him. He walked across the small blacktop road and to the front yard of the Hooks First Baptist Church. The cemetery was just to the side of the church and Capps walked across the unmown rows of graves.

The silence of the lowering heat of evening was accentuated by the buzzing of insects as they plied their trade among the small wild flowers and stiff, brown, ankle high broom grass. He stopped when he stood in front of the grave that Perkins had indicated. It read "Burton Pinkner May 7, 1947-February 2, 1980". Underneath which it proclaimed, "Loving Husband and Father, taken from us too early by fate". Capps wondered whether here in this bucolic world there was a wife, or perhaps a sibling, perhaps Connie Pinkner Perkins herself, who had written that line from the heart, or whether it was just a standard phrase that could be selected from dozens. Capps noticed that in the next grave was a woman who had died in 1967, at, he quickly calculated, age eighty-seven. Her stone read, "Mother is resting with Jesus".

The light was failing as he left the graveyard and made his way back to the rental car, to the Texarkana airport, to Dallas/Ft Worth, and a connecting flight home.

Chapter 9

Capps got back into Abilene late on Sunday night. Retta fixed him a hot dinner and sat in her light silk robe in the kitchen with him as he ate.

"How are George and Mimi?"

"You know Georgie. Washington would come unglued without him."

"Is Mimi still Mimi?"

"Oh yes, only more so, if that's possible."

Retta had met them both on a couple of occasions and she thought Mimi Prestwick was one of the most oddly attractive women she had ever met. The most fascinating thing about Mimi in Retta's eyes was her utter and total uselessness.

"The girl wears it well though", she would say with grudging admiration.

While Mimi was the only child of a rich and languid social couple of the purest Anglican strain, Retta was of more practical, earthy, Gaelic stock. She took quiet pride in the fact that if she was dependent on her husband in any way, it was only insofar as his share of raising their children was concerned. In her own right she could deal with whatever the world might have chosen to throw at her.

"How were things here? he asked. "The girls OK?"

"They're fine. I think Audrey's a little nervous about starting school. "

"Really? I thought it would be easy since Vivian is already there."

"Viv teases her. She knows all the buttons. They got into an absolute screaming hissy Friday night."

"Yeah? They OK?" Capps managed for at least a moment to pull his attention home.

"Oh, yes. By Saturday whatever it was had blown over. I think it was over hair. They went to a party together Saturday night. They're fine. I think their latest plot is to get us to get Viv a car. Audrey says it will kill two birds with one stone about our not having to drive them around anymore."

" I don't like the 'killing birds' part. Let's not just yet. Its...too early."

" Vivian is really safe and sane. We're going to need to do something about it at some point. It would help me. Gwen called the other day and wants me to come back a do some shifts. And you don't need to extra stress of driv..."

"I'm fine. Let's don't get them a car quite yet."

"Billy,..."

"Not right now. Just... let it go."

The tension hung for a few heartbeats. Then Retta eased it down. "OK, I guess I'll keep doing my Mimi," she said lightly, kissing the air with a languid moue, "for a while.

“Besides....”, she said, good naturally parodying Mimi with a flip of her own thick reddish brown hair, “I happen to know that she’s not all natural...better living through plastics, if you know what I mean.”

Mimi Prestwick made no secret of the fact that she, personally, had no business with wrinkles or sags and that she had the best cosmetic surgeon in Washington D.C. on constant retainer. She and Prestwick had grinned mischievously at each other as the two couples had sat giggling over after-dinner drinks one night, and as Mimi had talked about, “the old family plastic surgeon”.

“Georgie keeps his wife calmed down, and he keeps me firmed up.”

“Tit for tat, huh.” Capps had commented dryly, causing Mimi to snort half a martini through her artistically sculpted little nose and nearly lose a bright blue contact lens from laughing so hard.

Capps at least seemed a little less nervous, distracted, to Retta when they went to bed. She sent a silent thank you to George and Mimi Prestwick for being there for her husband.

In the morning Capps was sufficiently rested that Janelle felt comfortable with a full Monday’s schedule for him. One of the early patients had been Mrs. Cumby, who’s cat had gotten sick and who had had to reschedule. She had been talking with her friend who had been one of the Friday reschedules.

“I was reading , Doctor Capps, about those, what do you call it’s, those lobotomies. I mean Janelle told Gerta Potts that you’d gone to Washington to tell them about those lobotomies and all, and I read about them in the Monthly Home Book and I was wondering, with my problems and all, I mean how I just never can

get a wink of sleep and all and how I'm sooo tired all the time, I was wondering Doctor Capps, if you thought maybe one of these lobotomy things might do me some good?" Capps froze. Mrs. Cumby saw him turn and look out the window, doubtless considering the issue deeply. He cleared his voice before he turned back to her. He was such a sensitive man, she thought, seeing just the faintest trace of what she knew was a tear in his eye. But he covered these deep feelings well, and somehow managed what she saw was a brave trace of a smile over it all.

"Mrs. Cumby," he said, a firm now look on his face, but his emotions obviously about to overcome him, "I think..." here he coughed and cleared his throat for the pronouncement, as she hung closely onto every word, "I think we should keep a lobotomy...in mind." She saw it was especially difficult for him to control his emotions as he said this. "But," he said, now taking a deep breath and calming himself, "I don't think we need to move to that kind of thing just yet."

"Oh lady, give me a knitting needle and about five minutes and you'll never worry about the price of kitty litter again", was what he wanted to shout at her with a gleeful grin, however Dr.Capps was, above all, still a responsible guy. But Mrs. Cumby had made his morning, and Janelle noted how much better he was with all the A.M.s than the last week.

In the middle of the afternoon however, he came to her desk and flipped the schedule to the next day, scanning down the names of appointments. He went outside for a five-minute walk, which he often did between patients to relieve tension, then pace back in to his inner office and not five minutes later stalked back to her desk.

“Janelle, can we NOT get the air conditioning guys to fix that hum. How many times do we have to tell them? Can you get them back out here? What, are they freakin’ deaf?”

On Tuesday morning Janelle noticed that her boss was in the office early, and that he had cranked up the coffee pot, extra strong. She looked behind her to make sure it didn’t slip out of the pot and attack her at her desk. Capps had his caffeine shakes again, and said little to her as she greeted him.

By the afternoon, she was really concerned about him again. At one point, she put her hand gently on his forehead to see if he had a fever, as the only time she had seen people look that way was when her kids were running a high temp. He looked at her strangely, but said nothing. Actually, he thought, her hand felt cool, and when she was back at her desk, he took the opportunity to wash his face in cold water.

Capps casually sat, behind his desk, when he saw the minute hand of the clock face cross the line in its route to two o’clock. He could have sworn he heard it ticking, except it was a silent electric sweep. He tried to open a journal or two, something he often did to fill the gaps between patients, but his attention span was no more than it took to look at the index.

He heard the muffled sound of someone entering the outer office and the sound of footfalls near his door. He breathed deeply and let his shoulders drop out of his ears. There was Janelle’s familiar tap at the door and in a moment, he and Perkins were sitting face to face, knee to knee in the two “talking chairs”. How they had gotten there, Capps hardly knew.

Then he looked at Perkins and his tension turned to surprise. Perkins looked very much like he remembered his own face looking in the mirror when he had washed his face. Dark circles under his eyes, pallid skin, faint tremble to the hands until they gripped the armrests just a bit too hard. And there again was the clenching and unclenching of the jaw. Capps had been so buried in his own self, in his own reactions, guilts, and general emotionality, that he had forgotten to consider what Perkins might look like by now, assuming he had recently been carrying around an even heavier conscience.

He assumed that all multiple killers were cold blooded and that they all carried it off with nonchalance. "Too many movies, too much T.V." he told himself.

"My God, what if he confesses to me right here? The man looks like he might crack open any minute. Well, maybe that'll be better, yeah."

"Doc...I got somethin' that I gotta tell you."

"My God, he is. Oh, shit. Here it comes." Though he felt like his head might explode, in actuality his own face, had he been able to see it, hung more or less quietly stupid.

"Doc... I ain't got no more money, I mean to come see you any more. I got a letter from the Voc Rehab people. They said I'm all out of benefits." He said this as he handed Capps a letter in an envelope. Capps noticed that the envelope had been raggedly torn open, which seemed foreign to him, after all the years of Janelle's opening his own business correspondence with a sharp letter opener.

He pulled the one-page letter out. It was on State letterhead, and in short, to the point prose, told Perkins that his case was being dropped..."for lack of progress

and cooperation". It was signed by Harmon Terry. The date on Terry's letter was eight days ago, two days before he was killed.

It was almost as if Perkins were daring him to mention that Mr. Terry was dead. Dead with his brains splattered all over his desk. Capps did not rise to challenge the clench of Perkins' jaw.

"Can you believe that, Doc? I mean, can you believe that shit. They ought to know I can't get no regular work. I done tried for nearly ten years. What do they want out of me, blood?"

"What does Mr. Terry say?" It slipped out before Capps could stop it. He froze, unable to lift his head to meet Perkins' eye.

"The letter says I'm finished there, ... I ain't been back to see him. What's the point? Anyway, I don't think he really wrote that. It has his signature, but I think it's all those big fish upstairs that did it. How the hell am I supposed to live. Doc, I really just don't know sometimes if any of it's worth it." Perkins was suddenly quiet, very still and inward.

"So what are you going to do now?" Capps asked, neutrally, with no trace of admonition or impatience in his voice. Or at least, he hoped not. Perkins remained silent, staring at the carpet.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I got some friends in Ft. Worth. I called them up and I'm supposed to go find them tonight to see if they got anything for me. I mean I have to move from my place by the end of the week if that old landlady asks about it. I just been paying by the week and I'm flat tapped out. Like I say, I can't afford to come see you any more either."

“Well...” groped Capps, “I really don’t like to do things like that. I’ll tell you what, I really would prefer if maybe we saw each other again, maybe even for just one more session, no charge. Make me feel better to kind of see how you’re going to do.” Capps felt like his best defense was a good offense.

Perkins looked at him, and the look in his eyes said that this was perhaps the only rope left for him in the entire world, that this contact was holding him solid, and that it had better not be bullshit if it came to it. There was gratitude in his eyes, but it could not completely overwhelm the distrust, or the deeper wells of sadness that Capps saw there. Sadness, and also, Capps sensed, at a still deeper level, constant, intense anger.

He stood and put his hand out to Capps, who was startled by the abruptness of it. He almost flinched involuntarily. Quickly rising however, he took Perkins’ hand.

“Mr. Perkins... Buddy, look you don’t have to rush out you know. There’s still the rest of the hour....”

“No Doc, I’m a charity case and I know it. And besides, I don’t think I got all that much more to say.”

“Well...., alright”, said Capps, not knowing whether to be relieved or terrified that Perkins would be leaving, would be out of his sight, could be out of his life. There were still too many questions, and no more real answers than before.

“But I’m serious, I don’t mind seeing you one more time”, he said. Perkins still had hold of his hand and now, looking him directly in the eye with that mongrel, unreadable expression, he slowly and emphatically said, “Yeah Doc, maybe we’ll see

each other one more time.” Then he turned and was gone before Capps could gather his wits.

“That was a short one”, said Janelle. “When I asked him about next session he said he couldn’t afford to see you any more, and that he’d call if he was coming back. Is that O.K.?” Janelle asked about anyone who determined to stop their therapy, to make sure that Capps was at least aware of it when it happened. “Did you hear me? About Mr. Perkins? Doctor Capps?”

Capps snapped around to her question and she repeated the situation, and Capps acknowledged it. But in his mind he was already hours and miles away. Pillar of the community and responsible guy that he was, Dr. William T. Capps was planning a criminal trespass.

Chapter 10

That evening, Capps said little to Retta when he got home.

“How was your day?”

“I’m good.”

She noticed that he seemed not so much unnaturally agitated as unnaturally controlled. At dinner he spoke to the girls, quietly but with nothing in his voice which invited conversation, and it seemed that he went out of his way to help her clear the supper dishes, which was something about which he was ordinarily remiss.

At just about “good dark” as they said on the plains, he began to get restless, pacing the darkened living room. He looked out the big front picture window at the last trailing edge of silver blue iridescence below the wide cape of midnight blue, still dotted with only the first, boldest stars. A couple of times Retta knew he was fingering his car keys, with his hands stuck down in his pockets. She also knew that he was so preoccupied that he didn’t notice that she noticed. This, as much as anything, made her feel that whatever it was that had his attention, it probably wasn’t another woman, waiting somewhere out in the darkening town. Retta Capps was a grown woman, and she was also realistic person. It being anything else though, as difficult as it was for her to see him in such apparent pain, she still agonized that her best decision was to sit still at least a while longer and wait to see if he would need her. She knew however that this situation, whatever it was, was

beyond anything they had ever faced before. She thought about how she might begin to intercede.

“Billy...” she looked up from her book a moment later, but saw that he was gone. He had opened and closed the front door so quietly that she hadn’t heard. She heard his car start in the driveway and she walked to the window in time to see him pull out of the drive and head off to the East. All she could do then was wait.

In the car, Capps was still on a cusp concerning what it was he was actually setting about. He could visualize himself inside Perkins’ trailer, in fact, the heart of the problem was that even despite his best conscious efforts, he could no longer see himself *not* being inside the trailer. He had a flashlight, and even a short flat heavy length of metal he had picked up on the roadside on his way home from work to use as a prybar.

Then in an instant, as though the image of Capps the Cat Burglar had been but painted on air, he felt himself come back to what he considered his “right mind”, and the image disappeared. He was a local middle-aged professional, simply out for a night drive with his nerves and his anxieties. But even though the immediate and compelling image had faded, he noticed that he was still headed generally East, answering a soundless call.

When Capps was little he liked chocolate, now he liked vanilla. He could not possibly remember the time, the exact moment, and how it felt, when his mind crashed over from common old chocolate to more sophisticated vanilla. But he clearly did know a specific moment of such conversion that had occurred as he had talked to Perkins just before he had left the office that afternoon. The idea that

Perkins had all his papers in his trailer, and Capps knowing Perkins was going to be gone to Ft. Worth for the night, had to be some sort of convergence.

Up to that point the idea of the existence of the putative records was repellant to Capps because of the possibility that while he stood passively by, Perkins might stumble on to the secret that Capps felt was naked and exposed and screaming. But then, all of a sudden, through no conscious decision, it was as though the polarity had been flipped 180 degrees, and as horrified as Capps had been by the papers, he was, of an instant, equally drawn to them. His fixation and his resolution had become at that instant and from that moment on, to obtain the damned and damning paper, and to deal with it however he saw fit then. He recognized and accepted the fact that what he was resolved to do was not the behavior of a reasonable guy any more, bordering as it did, on the fascist, and certainly crashing through the fences of simple legality.

He left the lighted part of the city behind, the clean, ordered, suburban side of town where there were people going about their activities openly and briskly, without any apparent self-consciousness. He drove on into the dark edges, where street-lights and good souls were fewer and farther between.

He was two people, the one observing and commenting on the other. The rational one, however, wasn't driving, and he kept unconsciously making turns, of which, at the same time he was somehow nonetheless aware.

He knew the pattern he was driving, and yet he was truly surprised when he found himself having pulled up across the road again from Perkins' place. The small

lights of the RV park were in disrepair and dim to begin with, so he was shrouded safely in the night, certainly so as long as he stayed on his side of the road.

He watched quietly, as even this seemed to feed the rat of his compulsion at least enough crumbs to keep it still, to keep it from actually gnawing away inside his brain and his chest. As he watched he saw that the entire place was dead calm, no movement, no people, not even a dog barking. He could also see that Perkins' car was not there, or at least it wasn't where he had seen it parked before. The lights in the trailer were out.

Again he surprised himself by getting out of the car. The dome light coming on with a nuclear explosion and the angry buzzing of the warning indicator, which he was sure would split his skull, reminded the brute, fixated part of him that he had left the keys in the ignition.

The higher, observing angel stopped him for a moment after he had gotten the keys out and shut the door to stop the screaming alarm and the blinding light from inside. He saw the keys in his hand as though they had somehow materialized there. He realized that even his car, the silent unthinking thing, had called them to his attention, reminding him that it was there, and also reminding him that he could get right back in and use those keys.

He looked again across the silent darkness and watched for another moment. A car came by, its lights spotting him like a deer on a country road, but he turned away from the light, and as it passed, his heart became acclimated to the higher rate at which it had now been reset.

He walked almost mechanically across the warmth rising off the tarmac and heard his footsteps in the silence as he crunched onto the cooler gravel of the other side. Only twenty yards now lay between him and the door of the darkened trailer.

At this point the rational part of his mind was suddenly enlisted again by the part that had carried him this far on its hairy back. The rational man now joined the stalker, "Look, if you're gonna do this, do it right", he said under his breath.

He slid into the darkness on his left, thirty or forty yards, to give the front door a wide berth. He re-approached and looked around the other side of the trailer.

He was rewarded for his extra effort in two ways. First, his impression of abandonment was reinforced as he saw no lights and no car on this, the darker side, and second that he found there was a back door.

There were no steps up to this door. A low, wide, unkempt bush grew right next to the trailer to camouflage his shape from the distant people on the highway. Though it lay on the side where the highway headlights played intermittently on the trailer, in the gaps of several long seconds between cars, this side was darker by far than the front, even more anonymous. On their way to El Paso and California, the car people were on a different path, a different planet almost. He was very secure in his invisibility, or at least in his uninterpretability in those minds, set as they were on coast-to-coast frequencies. No one would ever stop for his tiny shadow, moving around an old trailer fifty yards off the main highway.

Nonetheless, he waited for the darker dark between cars and then smoothly swung around by the bush. Concealed beside it, it was a simple thing to fit the prybar under the edge of the door.

He was about to pop it open when he froze. "Damn it! I said do it right." He stopped.

He laid his head against the trailer for several seconds, listening for movement. Then he moved to the small window on that side of the trailer, and again waiting for a spell of darkness, he popped his head up by the edge of the sill and looked in, hooding his eyes up against the torn and flaccid screen wire with his hands. There was no movement and the only light was a red dot, which he assumed was some kind of appliance, perhaps the smoke alarm, if a shabby dwelling like this had such amenities. He returned to his prybar.

Yet again he suddenly put it down. He pulled the new white and blue cloth garden gloves from his back pocket, where he had stuffed them on his way out the door. He had bought them, along with the pickets for the fence, the Saturday he first sat outside this very place. He had not used the gloves since he bought them, but he had noticed as he left tonight that he had certainly left them in a convenient spot for this purpose.

Then with the gloves and the crowbar, as he felt he was all suited up to go ahead by forcing his way in, the higher mind spoke within him again, "Try the door, fool."

He reached up and turned the knob. There was a loud pop, which sent his heart into the next gear, but the door swung slightly open, and there was no challenge from inside in the next five seconds as he crouched frozen there.

He could see the next rays of headlights approaching from a still distant, but implacable truck, as it rumbled up the road toward him like a lone mechanical buffalo. He was frozen for an instant between going back, into the bush, or ahead, into the dwelling.

He went ahead, quickly slipping in through the door and pulling it closed just as he saw the interior of the small trailer lit up by those passing lights.

Nothing moved. He stood and listened. He was in a combination living room/kitchen. He could make out the shapes of a couch against the far wall, a bulky chair, and a small kitchen table. The uneven floor covered partly with linoleum and partly with musty shag carpet. The old refrigerator hummed loudly along like some giant insect in the darkness, but otherwise he perceived himself to be quite alone.

Still without showing any light himself, he looked into the open door of the only other room in the trailer. In the dim light of the next passing car, he thought could see an unmade bed, and what looked like a small pile of clothes scattered about on it.

He waited for another passing highway car to light the place again and he began to think of where to find what sought. As sparsely appointed as the place was, it should not be hard, he thought. There simply didn't seem a logical place for papers and such in the main room, unless they were in a kitchen cabinet, so he surmised they must be in the bedroom.

This was good because with only a tiny window there, on the side of the distant highway, he could risk using his small flashlight. He turned on his keychain penlight, still shielding even most of its tiny light with his hand. He had never once used the little light. His wife made fun of the tacky old oil company promotion keychain, but for this, breaking and entering that is, the little light was just the perfect tool at the perfect time.

Even if Perkins hadn't told him that he had not lived here long, Capps would have known. The cardboard boxes/ hung things ratio, or the springs and mattress set on the floor with no bedframe, or the empty walls would have told him.

There was a low lamp table by the head of the mattress. On it was a bottle of cough syrup and a teaspoon. A half used package of Dentine gum (the large pack), several of the crumbled individual wrappers of the now departed gum, and a copy of the little Abilene Thrifty Trader classified ads.

There was the stub of a candle which, along with the spoon, made Capps think of cooking up hard drugs, but there was the cough syrup to explain the spoon, which on closer inspection proved to be sticky, not burned. The candle, he suddenly realized, may have been burned at some point due to lack of electricity. The grinding fridge with the red eye light in the other room told him the current was on now. But there was a very strong wave of feeling in Capps of someone laying in an enforced darkness without even the light of a candle, watching the room light up from the highway every ten or twelve seconds, hour after hour.

He let his finger pressure off the penlight button. The tiny window with its flimsy curtain admitted a magic lantern lace of chioriscuro light through its mouth,

white and gray playing over the otherwise seemingly black paneled surface of the room, sweeping always left to right, left to right, because of the curve in the highway.

Turning the pen light back on, and risking a bit more of it for exploration, Capps took a general look around. The room was quite small, perhaps ten feet by eight, more properly a cubicle, a cell, monastic or penitential. In the closet he could see the shapes of a scant few clothes hanging, a couple of shirts, a couple of pairs of brown work pants, a cheap looking jacket on a wire hanger, and a sad and wrinkled tie. He continued his survey.

Under the edge of the bed he could not help but notice the corner of the familiar graphics of a popular, fairly hard-core men's magazine.

Capps continued his look around Perkins' room. He opened the drawers of the cheap dresser in the corner. Though he was aware that to most of the people who lived on the planet, this room, with its electric light (even intermittently), running water and refrigeration would be a palace, he was struck with the squalor and poverty compared to the average middle American dwelling. Capps suddenly sensed that Perkins lacked a need to have things, material objects. Perhaps he wouldn't have even known what to do with more.

The mirror was missing from its frame on the chest. Capps noticed that there were no mirrors at all in the room, and he thought pityingly about how Perkins would not be the kind of person who would want a mirror. He was arrested midway through the condescending thought however, that anyone who ended up in a place like this would not want to look at themselves. He realized the irony when he

framed himself up between the useless metal brackets, in his imagination, where the mirror had once been. He knew he certainly wouldn't have wanted to confront his own image just then.

Then he noticed the edge of a cardboard box, under some clothes that had apparently been flung willy-nilly into the closet. It was about a foot high and two feet square.

He crouched next to it and moved the covering of dirty clothes that buried it. Inside he could see in a more or less neat stack, a pile of various kinds of papers and forms, along with a few pictures and such. There was a clear plastic sandwich baggie with a few seeds and stems, all that remained of what had once been a Perkins' smoke stash.

There was a small piece of pink ribbon, stuffed into the side of the stack of papers and a newspaper clipping or two showed an edge from the pile in the bottom.

Here in this small, dark closet, in a rented trailer, on the decaying edge of a dusty little town, apparently lay the entire history of Troy, "Buddy", Perkins' life.

Capps began carefully to lift papers by the corner, clumsy in the gloves, but glad that they were new and almost spotless as yet. There was no need to bring dirt with him to mark his intrusion, he thought.

He tried not to be too much of a simple voyeur, and the higher side kept telling him to look for official appearing papers only. He could not help seeing, however, that one of the clippings was a faded picture of a woman, who in the dim and uncertain light appeared young and light haired with two small children. Capps

didn't have the emotional strength to read the caption, but he took comfort that in the picture, they all appeared to be smiling about something.

He saw a stapled set of official looking papers and pulled them out. The letterhead was that of the Texas Department of Corrections, the date May, 1985. They were release papers and parole instructions for Perkins from the prison at Huntsville, where, they said, he had served two years, ten months of a two to five year sentence for armed robbery. Parole conditions had to continue until July 1988. At which time, Troy Perkins was "fully free to choose his own path in society". So ended the personal edict.

Though this document gave Capps more confidence in his suspicions about Perkins' potential for criminality, he realized that reading it had put him over a serious edge. He was no longer there to retrieve property in which he too had an interest. This was plain snooping through other people's things. He pushed it back neatly in the stack.

Then he gently got under that and was rewarded by finding a vaguely familiar type of manila envelope. He slid it partway out of the stack and turned the corner up. The little penlight showed that it said "Department of Defense" with other identification, irrelevant now, to Capps. He noted its approximate position in the pile and then gently slid it out.

In the center was handwritten, in ink now faded, "Perkins, T. Sp/4, RVN, via Clark AFB, MATS, Med 4301, Travis AFB". These were the papers Buddy Perkins had sequestered under his blanket when he had flown from Vietnam to Travis Air

Force Base in California in the summer of 1972, in a different time and in a different world. No one at all had cared about them then.

The close and intimate crackling of the envelope as Capps opened it sounded like a raging fire compared to the soft, far away whoosh of the highway and the blind eternal hum of the refrigerator in the other room. He slid the packet of papers, perhaps an eighth of an inch thick, out of the covering.

He recognized the basics, such as a DD 214, the basic service resume. Every soldier had one of those. But next he found copies of Article 15's, disciplinary actions. It was about like finding a stack of old traffic tickets in someone's stuff. He read the complaints on the first two, failure to complete duty and reporting late to a formation. He noted that they were both signed "T. W. Grantland, 2nd Lt USA".

He flipped through a few other papers that lay on the stack, training and general medical records, such as the records of all the vaccines that Perkins had been given before he had been shipped out. He had done reasonably well in his early training. At least there were no Article 15's in the stack from before he was in-country.

Capps noted that a copy of Perkins' original induction screening aptitude exam papers were among the stack, and that he had scored 128 on the section called General Technical. Capps was surprised, as that section was generally assumed to be the equivalent of the standard Stanford-Benet I.Q. test and showed that Perkins, for all his awkwardness, was certainly no constitutional cretin; no one had dropped him on his head when he was a baby.

Capps continued to search page after page. He came, out of temporal sequence, suddenly, upon something that he recognized as Perkins' actual military discharge decree.

Capps' own discharge, which had come, as though out of the blue in the mail one day, three or four years after he had done his last day in the actual army, was the standard, handsome, simulated parchment document with the president's simulated signature; a "testimonial of honest and faithful service". He was used to seeing them in hallways and on den walls of people's homes all his middle-American life.

Like some deformed child however, this one of Perkins' was a very unattractive document. "*What does one expect?*" said Capps to himself, "*All the trappings of failure?*" Garlands of flowers for victory, defeat can dress herself any way she will.

The drab document said in essence that the conditions of Perkins' separation from the service were to be understood as "Less Than Honorable", and were justified by, "his persistent lack of cooperation on his own behalf and that of the U.S. Army. Particularly, continued failure to complete drug rehabilitation."

"So", thought Capps, "*He screwed himself.*" He could have done the peaceful, safe time at the rehab program in California and he would have probably still been given an Honorable Discharge. It didn't take much to get one, he thought, just not being totally and aggressively stupid. It was the man's own fault, then.

That was, he realized, another smoothed over version of the precise truth. Perkins may have stimulated much of his own problem, and done precious little to

stop it, but if Capps, or someone very much like him had not acted in a very particular way, at a very specific and vulnerable time, Perkins would not have ultimately had to carry what amounted to a pink triangle on his breast for the rest of his life.

Capps continued to rummage through the old military papers. Some of them were on pre-xerox, onion-skin paper stock and seemed quite brittle to the touch. The light of the flashlight formed a surrealistic hood of brilliance and shadows on the pages and the smudged and poorly carbon-copied text was already difficult enough to read in some places anyway.

Finally, Capps came to one of the thin yellowish sheets which was headed, "3rd Field Hospital, Saigon, RVN" and carried in the right upper corner the date, "9 June, 1972". He instantly recognized this as his place, his time.

Capps' hand trembled as he laid the rest of the stack of papers to the side, careful to keep them in some order so that he could put the whole pile back together again.

He even straightened one small corner of something sticking out of the discard pile. He looked to see how far he was from the bottom of the stack that remained in his hand. Perhaps only another eight or nine pages altogether. The stapled onionskin that he was holding took two of those pages. He looked carefully at the heading again, and reread the date. Finally he sighed and looked down at the first line of the text.

It was a discharge summary from the psych unit of the hospital. He had to squint to read the fuzzy type. The generic prose of all medical discharge summaries

rolled past so that he couldn't know if he, or someone else, had spoken the words into a transcriber's tape recorder all those years ago.

It read: "The patient is a twenty year old Caucasian male, admitted on 6/1/72 from his unit aid station after having been found unconscious and essentially pulseless in his cot. At the time he was found, there was a needle and syringe on the cot with the patient, the residue in which subsequently tested 4+ positive for opium alkaloid, presumably high-grade heroin.

"He was resuscitated by field personnel from a reported blood pressure of 40/0, and maintained on oxygen there. He apparently responded quickly to Naloxone reversal, but he had been in the shocklike state for an unknown period of time before he was found, and was therefore transferred to this facility for further acute management and for medical and/or psychiatric follow-up as needed.

"Upon admission to this facility, he was awake but still somewhat lethargic and it was not known at that time whether this was simply the residual effect of his intoxication or whether it might represent some degree of hypoxic sequelae. He was given another dose of Naloxone and his sensorium cleared somewhat more.

"By the next day he was cleared by neurology and was well enough for interview and was noted to be essentially cooperative. He was aware of time place and person and showed no evidence of gross psychotic ideation.

"On formal mental status exam he was oriented, and completed serial sevens, long term, and short term memory exams without trouble. He had no apparent flight of ideas or pressured speech to indicate a manic state. He completed proverbs

well, with no concrete thinking and showed normal affect, making a diagnosis of schizophrenia unlikely.

“He denied current suicidal or homicidal ideation” the report continued, “but this examiner noted increased tension in his voice when this was pursued, in spite of his repeated denial, and as in all such cases, the possibility of suicidal intent in his drug overdose cannot be definitively ruled out.

“He elected not to discuss his military history extensively, and much of this was obtained from his company personnel records. He was noted to have several Article 15’s for the use of marijuana while both off and on duty, however it was noted that there was no testimony from any of his superiors that he had ever been known to use heroin in the past, or to associate with those known to use the drug. This was taken into consideration at the time of his fitness for duty evaluation and it was determined that taking the overall picture into account, the best course for the patient will be to return him to CONUS for voluntary enrollment in a substance abuse program, and that a further decision about retention in service can be deferred until after such counseling and treatment are completed.”

So far, Capps still couldn’t tell, though the flat prose was certainly familiar. That, he thought, might be because of his familiarity with the styles of his colleagues. It could have been him, or it still could have been Prestwick for all he knew. It probably wasn’t Colonel Boone, he thought, as he would have been more likely to recommend keeping Perkins in-country, sending him back to duty.

He, or one of his colleagues, had felt compelled to mention a change of affect when the subject of suicidal, but also homicidal, ideation had been brought up in the

exam, which was only a few weeks after Grantland had died. Had Perkins been tense about that? What had come close to home? Capps still didn't know any more about the true story of Lt. Grantland's death, and therefore, no more about Perkins' capacity for killing now.

But then he remembered that he held a singular document in his hands, one over which he had obsessed for weeks now, and he quickly flipped over to the second of its sheets. On that abbreviated page there was the very tag end of the summary describing a diagnosis of "Substance abuse, marijuana, heroin, ETOH". Next was a medication regime, "Librium 10-25 mg every six hours PRN for symptoms of ETOH withdrawal". That was more or less standard, thought to prevent seizures, and had rarely been required in actual practice, as most of these men had had sufficient time in the Saigon hospital to have progressed to full blown DTs if they were going to do so, before they were put on the plane home.

And then there at the end, standing separated from the rest of the text, at the level of the middle of the page, was the typed name and the written signature of the responsible officer.

The typing, the quality of the paper, and the fact that it was apparently either a bad xerox or an old fashioned carbon copy left the typed name so blurred that it was difficult, especially in the raw flashlight, to tell exactly what it said, which was certainly acceptable to Capps. But there, beneath the illegibly typed name, boldly standing out to him like nakedness on a city street, was the unmistakable loopy signature. "Wm T. Capps, Capt, M.C. USAR"

His mind was frozen. It was here, his name was here for Perkins to find, sooner or later. And now, since they had been reintroduced, Perkins would know. He could put a name to a face now, and he would know. And he would surely exact vengeance. That is, if he was a violent man. That was something about which Capps still only had suppositions and guesses. Was he becoming paranoid? Was he perhaps just weaving an elaborate tale with a perfectly innocent man at the center?

But then, Perkins had done prison time for armed robbery. On the other hand though, that reinforced his suppositions about Perkins' likely treatment by Texas law enforcement, and therefore he had to be even more careful, more certain, or else his meddling could once again easily cripple this simple man. Capps searched his memory to see if he had ever asked Perkins directly about prison time. He hadn't, and besides, Capps supposed that it wasn't necessarily his business.

Suddenly he heard a loud snap as the world was flooded by light from the unshaded bulb in the ceiling fixture. It leapt out and washed the dirty, thinly paneled walls in a harsh and garish brightness. Troy Perkins stood there in the doorway.

Chapter 11

“Doc?” Capps noticed that Perkins relaxed slightly out of the crouch he was in as he saw who the intruder was. Perkins’ body however, was still mostly screened by the doorframe. “Doc? What are you doing?”

It was, Capps realized, a very good question, asked without anger, with perhaps the slightest trace of hurt in the voice. Capps knew it was time for his entrance, but he hadn’t the faintest notion of his next line. He looked up at Perkins stupidly.

“Uh...” He heard his voice quiver with even that unintelligent monosyllable. “Uhm....Mr. Perkins....uh.”

Perkins was polite enough to wait upon an answer, in spite of the fact that Capps knelt there like a prisoner at the block, with personal papers in his hands and spread out across the floor.

“Well,” sighed Capps, finally giving it up. “I broke into your place.” There was really nothing about the solidity of honest confession that appealed to him at that second. Still, that was his answer.

“Couldn’t be to rob me, I got nothing to steal,” said Perkins, offering at least the faintest glimmer of a path of humor for them to follow out of this foggy social awkwardness.

“Oh no, Mr. Perkins...” began Capps.

“Doc, why don’t you just call me Buddy, O.K.? I mean, it don’t look like we got any secrets, does it?” He said this as he nodded to the stack of papers in Capps’ hands. “If you wanted to look at that stuff you could have just told me, I’d have brought it in to your office. It’s just all that stuff I told you about.”

“Yeah...Buddy...I can see that.” Capps already felt cheap again, felt that he was already off the road of honest restitution and redemption. In spite of Perkins’ offer, made in all apparent simplicity, to expose his life to open view, here the cynical doctor had been sitting with those very papers in the illicit dark, trying to weave the information that they might, or might not, contain into some sort of sinister web for his own purposes.

“I just wanted to know more about you.” Again the answer felt only marginally honest, in spite of its exact veracity. “I thought you were going to be in Ft. Worth tonight. I just wanted to know more about you.”

“Oh.” There was perhaps thirty seconds of silence. Capps tried nonchalantly to begin putting the stack of papers back more or less the way they had been. He got as far as sliding the military papers back into their manila envelope when he noticed Perkins attention definitely focus on exactly which papers he was looking at.

As he tried to smoothly set that packet aside, Perkins, who was still leaning against the outside of the doorframe with his entire right side hidden said wistfully, “Yeah, those folks in Ft. Worth weren’t even there. I drove all that way and I never could find them. The address they give me was wrong, must have been, not a house or nothing. Doc, did you ever have friends to do something like that to you?”

“Well Buddy, I’m sure they just made a mistake or something, don’t you? I mean, do you think somebody was playing a trick on you or something?”

Eyeing the papers scattered about, Perkins said, “I don’t know Doc. I really just don’t know. But then I just don’t hardly know what to believe any more. I don’t think Bobby’n them were trying to fool with me, not being there. More likely, Doc, they just plain old forgot about me, forgot I was coming. I mean they weren’t real close friends or anything, just some folks I met. I didn’t have my hopes up too high, you know?”

“Yes.” Said Capps, nodding in agreement, but he noticed that Perkins, for all his apparent outward calm, was certainly agitated about something, as there were the beginnings of tears in his eyes.

Capps started to rise, and as he did so he noticed that Perkins slid slightly more behind the doorframe, and also that his right hand remained behind his back.

Capps stomach did a flip as he realized that he was alone, with a man he believed to be a multiple murderer, who very well might have a gun or knife behind his back. More than that, he suddenly realized, if Perkins shot him dead right there, he would be perfectly justified in having done so. Nothing more than eradicating a sneak thief and prowler. In that part of the country, though the situation would certainly arouse much talk and newspaper coverage because of who he, the deceased had been, the fact was that the legal benefit of the doubt in such cases of breaking and entering almost always went to the tenant, who was assumed merely to have defended life and property. *If you shoot someone, make sure you kill him. If you kill him, make sure to drag him onto your property before you call the cops.*

Capps felt stupid. He felt the way he had always imagined he would feel had he found himself in the instant before drunkenly crashing a car into some stationary object. He felt as stupid as he would have felt had he found himself falling toward his death from, say, a roller coaster ride somewhere in some little backwater circus. He wanted to vomit.

“So, what was it you wanted to know so bad, Doc?” Perkins backed up just enough to give Capps implicit leave to rise. “Doc, I’ll be happy to talk to you, you know, about whatever. I mean I’m really kind glad you’re here. It’s kind of like I get the free session, right? And I can still see you on Tuesday, if I want?”

Capps saw an opportunity to put himself back on even social footing by putting off the role of criminal, and resuming that of therapist. “Sure, Buddy’, he said.

“Yeah, Doc. It’s like...like....like a housecall!” Perkins laughed at this and Capps joined him. Capps noticed however, when he tried to exploit the moment to move out of the confines of the bedroom, Perkins leaned in just a bit more, effectively blocking anything less than a directed effort to get past him. Capps stood still, exposed in the garish light of the bedroom bulb. Again there was awkward silence. Perkins seemed to be trying to decide something.

“Doc,” he said, again serious and with an unsteady voice. “Doc I gotta talk to you. Talk to somebody, you know? I was thinking about it all the way back from Ft. Worth. Something...or I swear I’m just going to quit.”

“Well,” suggested Capps, “Can we go into the other room there and sit down?” Perkins glanced back over his shoulder without moving. Again he seemed to be

deciding something. Finally, he said, "O.K., Sure, Doc. Come on in here. Let's sit and talk." Perkins' movements were somewhat awkward and Capps realized that it was in order to be able to keep facing him. Capps' indignation about this was blown away like so much smoke when he reflected that if the situation were reversed, if he had found Perkins going through his personal things, in his bedroom in the middle of the night, that is, assuming that the police were not already screaming to a halt outside, he would certainly be keeping a constant and wary eye on the man.

"Sit down, Doc." Perkins offered him one of the two mismatched, vinyl covered kitchen chairs, in fact pulling it out for him, with one hand, as a waiter in a good restaurant might. When Capps was sitting, Perkins backed the step or two over to the only stuffed chair in the room, a ragged and moth eaten affair, which sat between the kitchen and the front door, the light from the bedroom cutting his body diagonally, his face and upper body remaining in shadow. Sitting with his face to the raw light, Capps asked, almost brightly, "So..., what do you want to talk about?", much as he did day after day in his comfortable suburban office. Perkins' face came forward and around to him and by the set of his jaw again, Capps could tell already that he had done something wrong.

"You know Doc, this is my house," Perkins started quietly, but his voice rose as he warmed to it, "My house you come into here, snooping around. It's my house. I know I don't have much, got no fancy suits or car or office or nothing, but by God I got my place here.....At least till the end of the week, anyway." He said this with a sardonic laugh. "Now don't you think that since it's my house and all," he paused to

let the “and all”, sink further in, “Since it’s my house and all, maybe for once...I can ask the questions, run things, you know?”

“Seems like all my life, people been asking me things, waiting with some kind of look or other, for me to answer up. Always somebody, school, the army, the cops, somebody think for some goddamned reason they got to be in the charge of me.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Perkins. It was rude of me to assume...”

“Buddy. Call me Buddy, O.K.? I already asked you once. Buddy. Not Clarence or Maurice or anything, just plain old Buddy. It’s not a hard name to remember.

‘Except, you know, I don’t think anybody does remember it. My family doesn’t, my wife, she don’t. My kids....” He clearly had tears in his eyes at this point. Capps was thinking of how he could get past and to the door somehow, perhaps even by rising as though to comfort him. But at that second, the rage came again into Perkins’ voice as his eyes went hard and fixed Capps. “Nobody remembers me. Not my doctor, not nobody. I could just die here in this little old pissant trailer and nobody’d know until I went ripe and start to smell bad!

“You know Doc, I’d done O.K., hadn’t always been some sumbitch telling me what to do...telling me wrong. Telling me for them, not for me.

“Easier to run the damned school if we didn’t have ol’ Buddy Perkins in the class, maybe be better for him to learn a trade. Can’t learn no trade cause he won’t fuckin’ part his hair the way the boss wants it parted. Won’t kiss ass like he wants it kissed! You hear what I’m say in’ Doc?”

“Yeah, Buddy I hear you. You really are mad, I can tell.” Capps started to move forward on the chair. At this small movement however, Perkins straightened up like a bolt and his hand clearly grasped something behind his back.

“No shit I’m mad! What the fuck, Doc, did you go to all that school to learn that kind of crap? You really are mad...”, Perkins parodied Capps reflective statement back to him. From Perkins tone, Capps would not have been surprised to find himself looking into the maw of a pistol at that second. Again, he realized, it would have been justice.

“Sheeeit”, drawled Perkins. “You know Doc, I may be a hard case, I may be a down and out kind of guy, but you, Doc, you take the cake. You are really sad. You and all them others like you. Goddamned world is full up to here of ‘em. Mad? You’re damned right I’m mad! Wouldn’t you be? People always trying to tell you what to do? Big fuckin’ experts....you do like they tell you cause you don’t always have much choice, you know, and because they’re supposed to be the experts, supposed to be looking out for you, make things come out right for you. For you! Not one of them I ever met cared a plug nickel about me. Just covering their own asses. Do what they do so they don’t feel guilty about sucking in those big fat paychecks. Well, I got no paycheck, Doc. No paycheck, no house come Friday, no friends. I ain’t got nothing.” He paused for only an instant to get another breath. Capps desperately tried to think of a way to even the conversation. “And don’t try to tell me different neither, Doc. You and I both know it’s true. I got nothing. Nothing! So I got nothing to give a shit about. And you know what they say Doc,” again the cynical laugh started up to Perkins eyes, “You can’t hurt a man who don’t give a shit.

You ever heard that Doc?" Even in the dimness, Capps could see the muscles of Perkins forearm as he tensed it behind him in the chair.

"Yeah. Yeah I have." Capps admitted.

"Well, you are looking at a man who don't give a shit."

Again he paused, again his eyes filled, the corded muscles of the forearm relaxed a bit. "Doc, that's not exactly true. That's what it was I wanted to talk to you about...Yeah, more counseling..." He seemed to be debating with himself. "But, God, I just need to talk to somebody about it. I ain't got nothing much good to care about, Doc, and I've done some bad things in my time Doc... some things other folks would think was really bad, I guess. And sometimes my conscience won't let me alone about them, you know? Seems like there's no way to get any peace. Well, Doc, that's not necessarily true either, there are ways, all kinds. Lord, Doc, I'm just so much of a fuckup I can't even get any of them right, yet." He sat looking inward for a moment, rubbing the back of his own neck. Capps was left speechless, helpless.

Perkins burst out again, "But goddamnit, like I said, if people just left me alone I wouldn't a' done any of them. None of those things. They only goddamned got what they deserved, that's all, pushing people around. But why was it always me Doc? Why was it always me they put against that old wall?"

"I don't know, Buddy." Capps answered feebly.

"Hey, Doc, you want to smoke some weed with me?"

"No thanks, Buddy."

"You never do that kind stuff, huh?"

"Well, no...I mean it's not...."

"O.K. so you do smoke dope. Great, I'll roll us a bomber, and for the first time, maybe you can come to hear me where I live."

"I really don't want to", Capps was protesting, feeling unnecessarily prudish somehow even as he did.

"It's really something you ought to do, one more time in your life.", Perkins said encouragingly.

"No, I'd really rather not...but thanks."

"Like I say, it might be the last chance you get in your whole life. You never know." Capps could see the muscles that ran down Perkins arm as they disappeared behind his back.

"I really couldn't enjoy it right now."

"What? You got the old paranoid attack, Doc? Pressure? We talking pressure? Yeah, that's what it feels like, mostly, out there. What's the matter Doc, you can't take a little pressure?"

"Well, O.K., I'll have a... toke, sure, why not.? And we can talk."

"Sorry Doc, I don't have any. Flip side of pressure is letdown. Sorry to disappoint you."

Suddenly Capps realized that that was why Perkins was back home. That he had probably gone to Ft. Worth to score in some minor deal for more smoke. Smoke to dull the pain of boredom and loneliness. Smoke perhaps paid for with money taken from Harmon Terry's wallet. "Bobby" and them hadn't showed, so Perkins had crawled back a nervous and bitter hundred miles here to Abilene, feeling abandoned by even the lowest of the pack.

“Sometimes Doc, you just have to learn to live with disappointment...or just go on ahead and die.”

“What is it you’re talking about, Buddy?” Capps heard himself croak out through his fear.

“What were you looking through my military records for Doc? Those are mine. They’re private. And the pictures of my family....” Capps’ hands felt dirty. He only noticed now that he still had the ridiculous cotton garden gloves on. They had blue cuffs and there were even little flowers printed faintly on them. They felt as damp now as if he had plunged his hands into water.

He didn’t care if Perkins killed him on the spot, he could not stand to have the gloves on for another second. He stripped them off and let them drop gently to the floor between his legs. Perkins noticed this and understood its significance.

“See Doc, see what it’s like to have something on your mind. On your conscience. You just can’t sit there, you got to do something about it, right? Right? You just had to take off them gloves. Well I know how you feel Doc. I truly do. There been times when I done them things....them things and I just couldn’t sit there any more. I just had to do something to stop it, stop all that....stuff going on inside.” He clutched and slowly tore at the front of his own shirt with one hand. “Like your hands must have been itching, except I’d be feeling that way all over, on the inside even, kind of like I need to do something, scratch the inside of my brain, turn it off, but I can’t get in there to it, you know?”

At that moment, Capps felt himself living on borrowed time. He believed that in order to have any chance of getting out of the little trailer alive, he would have to press forward through the morass somehow, would have to bottom the situation out to begin the climb out of it. He decided to try to press Perkins about the deaths.

“What happened in your car wreck? I mean did something run you off the road?”

“My wreck? Why do you want to know about that?” asked Perkins, with obvious annoyance. “The hospital records from Tyler were all in there,” He nodded toward the bedroom. “Didn’t you get your hands all over them, too? Didn’t you read all about me? Huh?”

“That’s all about your injuries, Buddy. The broken bones and all. I know it must have been a bitch....”

“You don’t know shit! I was in plaster and wires and shit....Man they even had a piece of wire stuck right there through my knee, I mean they didn’t cover it up or nothing, just left it sticking out there where I could see it sticking out. You can’t look at that Doc, it makes you sick, but there wasn’t anything else I could do, couldn’t move or nothing for the fuckin’ plaster. Just lay there and look at that wire sticking out of me. Doc, I was in hell. That was plain and simple hell. I didn’t mean to be there. But I did it wrong.”

Suddenly, as though some college chemistry exercise had miraculously clicked over into crystal form in front of Capps’ eyes, another line of thinking shoved its way to the top of his consciousness. Up to now, the immediate danger

was all Capps had in his mind because raw fear took up so much space there and he was dealing with the probable gun behind Perkins back as only a problem. But suppose, he reasoned in that instant, that Perkins had in fact killed Grantland, shot him in the back years ago, out there in the confusion and the lowering darkness. No way he would be caught, or at least the chances would be small, and he would have known it. Then only a couple weeks later according to the record, he's found with a spike in his arm when apparently he'd never even done any heroin before. Just the next step in getting high? Or perhaps, in the heat, and sleeplessness, and the building inner turmoil at having killed the young officer, just perhaps, it was a suicide attempt.

In the crush of the time and circumstance, however, it had been pushed through the system into as simplistic a niche as the system could manage for it. In spite of his own notation, it had just been processed through as "another" case of drug abuse. If there were to be repercussions, he thought, there was at least some justice to the fact that it would be himself who would bear them. Himself, and perhaps Burton Pinkner, and Harmon Terry, and Tommy Grantland, and who knew if there had been others. But his problem now was to find a way out.

"Buddy, do you have problems sleeping?" It was reflex, it was the litany.

"What? What the fuck do you care about whether I sleep or not. I mean I sit up here in this goddamned rathole every night till dawn and nobody gives a shit. I don't even have a T.V. to keep on Doc."

His Uncle Johnny had given him the benefit of the doubt about his intent with the fish knife and everyone had written the blood on his arms off to an

attempt to break out a window. But both arms? His Uncle had said, “blood running down his arms”. Had he meant exactly that? Both arms? On both sides from another earlier suicide attempt then? Perhaps even that far back, Perkins was a walking killer, but a killer who could not live with the act itself. Had he first attempted to escape his guilt and pain in the days after he had tried to kill his uncle?

There was no way for Capps to see Perkins’ right wrist now, as it was still behind him in the chair. “Buddy, I know you’re sad...” Perkins started to react, but Capps cut him off. “Yeah, I know you’re mostly mad. I guess I would be too, but you’re sad sometimes too, right?”

There was no answer for a moment, then a vague and muttered, “Well, yeah, of course.” The tone was sincere and for a moment Capps considered following the tone, but he snapped back to his more secure path.

“Buddy, are you ever so sad you think about killing yourself?”

“Why?” Perkins asked instantly, with cynicism and suspicion. “You think I ought to? Is that it? Another piece of advice? Counseling, huh?” He suddenly shoved his hand deeper behind him in the chair, but then stopped with it there as Capps once again responded quickly and tightly, “No. No. Nobody has any advice for you, Buddy. You have to make your own decisions. No man can tell another one what to do about that kind of thing.” Capps was balanced on a wire between the old wisdom that he was right about that, and a dawning hope that he was wrong. It might now, he realized, make the difference between his own life and death.

The car wreck in 1980....that would mean simply that Butch Pinkner had been murdered, but also that Buddy had simply tried to be efficient with his own death at the same time. Capps was transported in his mind back to the East Texas road trying to imagine what had happened.

"You said you wound up in the hospital because you did it wrong. Did what wrong? Buddy...." There was a pause. Perkins' face was sunk back in shadow now. "Buddy, what did you do wrong?" There was more silence. Capps could hear Perkins breathing like he had been running a little.

"Buddy? Buddy...were you trying to kill yourself? You were in hell because you hadn't been able to kill yourself, to get away from it? From Butch?" There was still silence. If Perkins broke down, Capps tried to be poised to either jump him or try for the door. The problem was that he didn't think he had the resolve to do either one nor adequate control of his frozen muscles.

His best course, his strongest weapon, was neither in flight or struggle. He thought of the serpent in Eden, the subtlest beast of the field, whispering death in a sleeping ear for his own malign ends.

"Buddy, do you feel so sad that you were thinking of killing yourself?" He could still hear Perkins breathing and there was the tiniest squeak of a whimper from the darkness.

"Yes" came a whisper.

"You've been thinking about it again, recently? I mean since...say for the last week or two?" Perkins' head came up again. The breathing changed subtly. It was still tight, tense. But now there was suddenly no trace of the whimper.

Perkins' face leaned toward Capps again out of the darkness and again Capps could see the sharp squint of the eyes and the set of the jaw in high relief of darkness and light.

"Yes, I have", came the almost guttural response. "I'm not going to let nobody else run me again. I can't let myself get put up against the wall again." His eyes glittered as though he had a fever. Capps could see the beads of sweat standing on his forehead where the light and shadow split his face in two.

"Buddy," started Capps, terrified, knowing that he was about to push out into the middle of the thick, reeking waters of darkness and that he might be sucked down into them himself along with Perkins. "Buddy, have you thought about how you would do it?"

"What? Do what?" Perkins asked. The tone in his voice said he knew he was on a slope, but that perhaps if he ignored it, he would not slide backward into a fall.

"You said you had been thinking about killing yourself..."

"Did I? Did I say that?"

"Yes..."

"You sure that wasn't you saying that? Saying that for me, again. Goddamned sumbitches."

"How would you do it, Buddy. Do you know how you would kill yourself?" Capps felt less vulnerable, like he was less of a target, but he felt that way perhaps, he thought, because there was somehow less of him for Perkins to

have attacked. The target he now presented wasn't as wide as a man, he was only as wide as the serpent.

For an instant he thought that if he succeeded in getting control, of once again dominating Perkins, of being the system's coil around him, that he might be able to get him to some hospital, start him on some kind of therapy.

But at almost that same instant he felt that all drop away. He didn't feel any compassion for Perkins, he didn't see any hope or future for him, and he certainly didn't want to have to go through the papers in the other room with him, now or ever. There was nothing left now of Capps in his own mind but cold scales and coils of muscle.

"Fold above fold, a surging maze; his head crested aloft and carbuncle his eyes", the poet had written, as though of him.

A coat of cold dull greasy scales felt the breathing of the man in the other chair, a flicking tongue tasted the acrid scent of his fear. But at the same instant the fear turned back on Capps as he tasted the resurgence of Perkins' anger, of his will, of his humanness, and his continuing power, even now, to crush the head of the snake even as the serpent bruised man's heel.

"Yeah, I know how I'd do it", came Perkins' reply, flatly, without any sense of strangeness at the words, "One shot to the head." Now Capps knew for certain what was behind the man's back in the chair.

"And do you have a gun?" He asked, setting the play's next act in motion.

"Yeah, Doc, I do." Perkins' arm, the one that had been discretely behind him came out and revealed a chromed pistol. Capps could see that the hammer

was pulled back. He fancied that he could see the bullets in the chambers, but he reasoned that in such poor light his fear must be painting in parts of the dim picture.

“Yeah, Doc”, repeated Perkins dully, “I got this.” He pointed the gun directly at Capps’ face. “That’s what it looks like Doc..., I mean the real end of it. How does it look from there, huh?” Capps was silent, not out of any bravery, but on the contrary because his throat muscles would not move. At that moment, he couldn’t even swallow.

“Yeah Doc,” said Perkins, sighting along the barrel, his one open eye meeting Capps left eye directly over the sights of the pistol, “I thought about it. About killing myself. It’d be a good idea, don’t you think?.... Doc, I asked you, don’t you think that’d be good?... You going to counsel me, or what?”

“I...I don’t think that’s up to me to say.”

“Horse shit! You guys always got plenty to say. What’s the matter now? It’s cause your ass is in the chair now. Now its your back up against the goddamned wall, ain’t it. Now somebody asking you the questions and you got to answer up. How do you feel? What do you want? Who do you think you are?.... Who the fuck do you think you are!?”

Perkins leaped out of the chair, clutched Capps’ collar and jammed the end of the pistol barrel roughly against the side of Capps’ skull, directly in front of his left ear. Capps could just catch a glimpse of the scars on the right wrist, before he involuntarily squinted his eyes shut against the coming blast. As he felt the hard metal cut into his temple, Capps felt as though the blood was being

damned up in his heart, as though it was filling with each beat, but that nothing was coming out of it to let off that growing pressure. Five, six, seven beats and he felt as though it was growing inside his chest. It was a child's balloon, getting larger and tighter with each beat, near the point where he thought it would explode and spray the walls with the red gore of his life.

"I asked you a question...who the fuck do you think you are?...Coming in here and looking at my things and get into my papers and trying to crawl in here into my brain!" Perkins pushed the muzzle of the gun hard against Capps' ear. "That's what it feels like, Doc. I know, I mean I know what this part feels like, I've done this a hundred times. When it's dark and still and I can't get no peace I get to here. I know what this part feels like..."

He moved slowly back to his chair, keeping Capps level covered, "I know what it feels like right up to there..."

He felt exactly as though Perkins had dunked his head under water and held him there till he was about to pass out. Capps let out his breath. Perkins heard the explosion of breath and laughed at Capps. "You don't like that, do you? It don't feel good does it? I don't like it either. I don't like it when you do that to me. When any of you did it to me. All of you, all my life, always did the same thing to me."

"Buddy...." Capps had regained some of his composure, his head no longer spinning as it had when the gun was directly against his temple. At that moment there had been only two states of existence, alive, or, as Capps imagined

it, dying, in a tremendous red flash and a horrible kick to the side of the head.

Now his back was a tiny bit off the wall. "Buddy, what're we going to do?"

"I don't know, Doc. The way I see it, I got some options here. You know, it feels good. I usually don't get any options, I just get told, you know?"

"Way I see it, I could let you go out of here and we both go about our business. That'd maybe O.K. except...." Perkins eyed Capps and Capps felt as though he could see the thoughts in his head. "Yeah, maybe we could just both go on our ways.. What do you think of that, Doc? Is that what a sane man would do?"

"I'd sure vote for it", said Capps, trying not to sound the least bit flippant as he said it.

"I don't know, Doc. I think maybe I'd counsel us different." Capps saw a malevolent grin on Perkins' face, and his blood ran cold again. "I think maybe I'll shoot you and drag you back in there into the bedroom and then call the cops. I think that would be more fun than I've had in a long time." He aimed again with one eye along the thick barrel of the pistol, the hammer still back at full cock, his finger on the trigger.

Capps could not continue to focus on that finger after he thought he saw it twitch slightly in the dim half-light. He tried to keep his external composure, but inside his mind was as unfocused as a frightened child, screaming from a night terror. He simply waited for the flash.

"The other thing....", Perkins said softly, "The other thing I could do, would be to kill me." Capps' eyes came open and he looked at Perkins under his

brows. "Oh yeah, I can see that the high class section'd go for that. Just fix everything right up... Except Doc, you know, I don't think any body would go to my funeral, and that kind of puts a damper on that idea. Listen, if I kill myself, will you go to my funeral?" Capps was frozen silent. "Doc, I asked you another question there."

Perkins now put the gun to his own temple and looked at Capps questioningly. He spoke very slowly and clearly now. "I want to know, Doc, if I kill myself right here and now, will you go to my funeral? I mean it'd be the least you could do, wouldn't it?"

Capps turned his face slightly away. Suddenly there was a tremendous flash and a boom louder than anything Capps had ever heard. His heart stopped and then rumbled in his chest as he whirled fully back around.

Perkins sat grinning, the smell of cordite and burned hair enveloping them. The muzzle of the gun was now just a bit higher and the aim was up past the side of his head. Capps could feel a tiny rain of particles come down on his face, and he assumed that was something from where the bullet tore through the ceiling.

"That's what it'd sound like, Doc." This far out on the edge of town, Capps knew no one would notice even such a sound as a gunshot or two. Perkins clearly didn't care. "Course we wouldn't know what it'd actually look like, would we, Doc?. One of us won't ever know that, right? One of us stays and one of us goes, right? I mean that's about the size of it?"

Suddenly Perkins' eyes got larger and his smile a bit broader. "You know, there's another play we hadn't thought of. I could do you and just let you rot right there, and I could do me and just rot right here in this old chair. Better than going back to hell, better than moving again to another noplacel. And it brings everything out even, sort of."

"Why kill me?" Capps tried to tell himself that it was reason and not just a pleading tone in his voice even as he said this, but he sounded and felt like a whipped dog.

"Don't you deserve it? I mean, look back at your life Doc, isn't there anything you've done to deserve it. Look me in the eye and tell me you've never done anything to deserve me blowing you away." Perkins met his eye confidently, and in a couple of seconds Capps turned his head away from his gaze. Capps was beyond being able to rationalize with Perkins. There was only one door now and the writing above it was in a language he could not read. He knew it said either "Pity", or "Madness", and Perkins held the key to the door.

Suddenly, Perkins shoulders sagged, and his jaw went slack. His eyes looked dim and tired.

"Buddy", Capps said softly, "I haven't been thinking about killing myself. You have. I'm going to get up now. Whatever you're going to do...well...you're going to do. I've already meddled with your life enough and I'm sorry. I'll...see you Tuesday."

He stood slowly. Though Perkins' face was a blank mask, the muzzle of the big handgun still followed a spot on Capps' head, the distance still only about five feet. It was eight or nine feet to the front door of the trailer.

"Doc...." Came Perkins' voice, but Capps began to walk slowly, and directly, to the door. His feet, he noted had become numb, as had the tips of his fingers and the area around his lips. Hyperventilation he thought. He reached for the doorknob. "Tuesday", he heard Perkins mutter behind him.

There was another tremendous boom from there where Perkins sat, and also a tremendous slap on the dark paneling in front of Capps. Suddenly he could see a hole the size of a quarter in the doorframe not a foot from his head where the sharper black of the clean night air shone through. He had cringed with the shot, but as soon as he realized that he hadn't been hit, he took the next step and his hand was on the knob.

"Doc..." came the voice, again with a choking in it, "Doc...help me." Capps stood rooted with fear with his hand on the knob and listened to his own next breath.

"I can't help you, Buddy. I...I just don't have it in me. And I don't know if anybody does. I'm sorry." He breathed again and turned the knob, popping the door open. As he opened it he heard the sound of the hammer cocking back again behind him. He breathed one more time and stepped outside. Though he knew that his back was clearly visible to Perkins, he stopped and breathed again. He knew that he was a perfect silhouette target standing there on the step in front of the door. Regardless, he stood still and pulled the much cooler, living air

into his lungs and noticed the shimmer of the few lights in the area,, the movement of the headlights on the highway, the stars in the dirty black velvet of the prairie sky.

He heard a low moan, and then he was splashed with red lightning, for an instant, from the doorway behind him. Then it was silent in the shadowed darkness. The sound of the gunshot had been remarkably contained within the little trailer, he thought.

Capps considered whether to return, to see what had happened, to clean up the papers, to retrieve his gloves from the floor. Somehow though, he felt those things would have been a kind of sacrilege. He owed Buddy Perkins at least the honest residual presence of another human being.

He nodded his head at that, as he realized that he wouldn't be within ten miles of whatever Potter's Field they laid Perkins in. That is, whenever they found him, which might not be for a long time.

Chapter 12

As he walked away from the trailer, Capps was surprised at his own calmness. He couldn't tell any longer which of the two beings, the higher angel, or the hairy beast, was in control. He felt very much, however, as though he was watching himself walk under the pale electric light, listening from above as his feet crunched once again through the gravel, hearing every individual piece of the grinding that made up the whole sound.

He suddenly found himself sitting inside his car again, with the door closed, surrounded by the safe darkness, as though he fast-forwarded through bits and pieces. The glare of the dome light was already only memory on his retina, the sound of the buzzer, which he knew must've had its say, now only echoing in the cave of his memory.

Looking down at his hand, he saw that his keys were in it. He flashed the penlight a couple of times, very close to the soft burgundy velvet seat-cover, making a tiny pool of the deep red color in the gray and black of the otherwise darkened car. He

stared at this, watching as it seemed almost to spread and congeal, until his next breath, which he suddenly realized he needed, shook him from his stupor.

He raised his head and looked around. The silence and the loneliness of the place were as complete as before, still without any more signal of humanity than was made by the anonymous highway traffic which swept along, completely unfazed, far away out on the interstate. No traffic dignified this road where Capps sat, no action occurred on the other side at the door of what was now a silver sepulcher.

Capps waited, two, five, then ten minutes. He didn't know what it was he was waiting for, perhaps to see someone pull up and go in, perhaps to see someone come out, but nothing moved except the stiff tufts of sage that rocked gently in the melancholy night wind.

Finally he put the key into the switch and started the engine. The roar of it, any other time totally unremarkable, came out of the silence like something from a different world, which in a way, Capps reflected, it was. It was from a different world and it could take him back to that other world, that other existence. He listened for a moment to the argument of the engine, as the big car sat impotent and unengaged.

Then he pulled the gear-shift lever back and felt the car start to roll. His heart jumped as it took him a second to realize fully that he must still control the movement he had started, that he was expected to direct the vehicle wherever it would go. Beyond getting back up on the tarmac road, and slowly starting down its dark length, however, he suddenly realized that he really didn't quite know where that would be.

He followed the road on in the direction he was already headed, comfortable so long as he didn't have to contend with more turns or exits or decisions for the moment.

He pushed the button on the door handle that lowered the window, and felt the soft rush of warm air throw his hair all around on his scalp. He breathed great lungfulls again, and it seemed that his head was clearing after having been trapped in a room full of some obtunding gas.

In the near distance, he could see the lights in the windows of the business district looming ahead on his horizon. He made for these as in a trance, feeling them as good as any goal. He had no clear destination, so he drove on, looking for some sign in the turns he was coming to in the brighter part of the city ahead.

“And what now?” he heard himself say out loud. He thought of his home, his daughters asleep, Retta waiting up for him to return. But now those most familiar images felt foreign and strange beyond his grasp, almost repellent. With no clear reason when he questioned himself, he knew that as forcible as the bonds that drew him to them might be, just as he had lost himself, so too, he had lost them. Whatever future he was headed for now, it couldn’t be back to that house and those people, that comfortable home and those beloved.

Capps found himself on the same circular route he had followed as he had trailed Perkins on the night of Harmon Terry’s death. He silently addressed the dead man.

“Well, Mr. Terry....Harmon...can I call you Harmon? ...Well, he’s dead. Buddy’s dead. I’m sorry I didn’t know what was going on the night you died, but at least now he’s dead.” Capps suddenly realized that though he was having this tete a tete with Terry’s ghost, and assuring him that all was well with the world, or at least with the solid one, he still did not know if Perkins had had anything whatsoever to do with the killing.

“Of course he did it. Of course he did!” He pounded the side of his fist on the steering wheel and heard his voice rising loud in the car, as though to shout down any trace of uncertainty before it gained a foothold in his mind.

After a circuit or two of the several blocks, Capps’ eye was caught by the red and green neon sign over the front door of the Green Frog Lounge. He could feel layers of loneliness; if Perkins’ tawdry tomb was the center of oblivion, the inside of this car was merely lonely, and even the empty streets still a bit less lonesome. Perhaps the inside of the bar would somehow be one step closer to connection with other people. The garish light in the darkness reached out with some promise of help. He pulled up into the broken asphalt lot in front.

There were two front doors, the regular windowless entrance for customers, and another, smaller doorway, by the corner of the building, covered with mesh wire and bars like a jail cell. An inner door itself was open in there, and in the light inside he could see that it must be used as the storeroom for cases of liquor and metal kegs of beer. The anonymous silhouette of a man stood framed in it, looking out from behind the bars at the bugs that assaulted the neon. He didn’t show any movement or sign of acknowledgement as Capps got out of his car and walked past to the regular entrance.

Inside, the place was like a thousand other small bars in Texas, dirty linoleum floor, cigarette machine by the front door, pool tables in a smaller room off the back. It was late by now, past midnight, and a weeknight, so there were only a couple of patrons shooting pool, one youngish man with long lank hair and a dirty tee shirt, and the other, unshaven, wearing a faded cowboy style shirt with mother of pearl buttons, the sleeves cut raggedly away at the shoulders. The one in the tee shirt looked up briefly, menacing

even in his indifference, and then back down at the game of pool they were playing. Further back in the dim recesses there was only one other figure, facing away in the shadows of a booth, with several empty bottles dimly visible on the table in front of him. Capps made his way awkwardly to the bar. There was a country and western song on the jukebox, something from the 1950's about bad roads and lost love, set to the moan of a pedal steel guitar.

The hard, shriveled woman waiting tables took an intentional moment to watch a shot or two of the totally uninteresting game before she slowly walked down to the end of the bar where Capps stood.

"Can I help you?" the old lady asked, as though she figured Capps was a lost tourist rather than a potential customer.

"Uh..." said Capps, not ready to be called on even that promptly, "Scotch?" She continued to look at him steadily, no question, no statement in her eyes. "Ice." Capps blurted out. "Scotch with some ice, O.K.?"

"Scotch rocks", she muttered as she turned to the bartender. He took a moment to come out of his lean against the back sink to pour the drink, making Capps feel that somehow fifty-odd years wasn't old enough to be here ordering a grown-up adult beverage. The feeling galled him slightly and the anger riled him up out of his dead numbness.

He paid for the drink at the bar and took it over to sit in a nearby booth. When the old lady and the bartender went back to the other end of the bar, following the sound of the pool balls clicking, it left him more or less alone, sitting down, in a quiet place, with a drink in front of him.

The tension was having its way with his body, as his stomach rose and settled, the hair on his neck stood up, and he felt a cold wind where there was none. Capps was rattled again as Perkins came unbidden to drink along with him, sitting suddenly in the booth there across from him, pompadour, sideburns, skinny neck, protuberant Adam's apple and all. Capps discretely if nervously raised his glass to the image. *"You're dead. At least I think you're dead....Yeah, you're dead."* Perkins' ghost said nothing, in fact seeming to pay little attention to Capps at all.

Capps finished his first scotch, and excusing himself, walked back up to the bar to get a refill. Over the course of the next couple of hours, he repeated this process, between snippets of commentary at the ghost, four or five times.

He had brought back his change from one of these trips and suddenly noticed a quarter, lying face up, on the table in front of him. "You know what I ought to do?" he mumbled. "I ought to...I mean I really ought to call the cops or somebody. Tell'em you're out there. Somebody needs to go find you, cover you up or something. Bury you! That's what they gotta do, bury you." The old lady glanced around at the low mumbling coming from Capps' booth but said nothing, as such monolog conversations were not that uncommon there at the Green Frog.

"You're gonna start to stink." For an instant Capps' stomach churned as he thought he caught just a whiff of putrescine and cadaverine, the unmistakable smells of death and decay. His soul plummeted as he had the terrifying thought that it was he himself who stank, that the old lady and the pool shooters knew he smelled that way, and that he might never be free of the reek of death again. But as quickly as his

heart had begun to speed up, the stench passed. He saw a trace of the malevolent grin on Perkins' face.

He looked down at the quarter again. There was a phone booth, the old-fashioned kind with a hinged door that you could swing closed for privacy, not ten feet from where he sat. Perkins' face was now sad, as though he wanted to have something but could not get it.

"You want me to call somebody, don't you?" Capps whispered soto voce. Oh, man...oh, man, don't you know? If I call, they'll know it was me." His voice rose slightly as he tried to reason with the ghost. "Sure they will. They'll know, and then we'll have to talk to them." Capps could literally feel the sweat starting to come. It was going to be the theater stage again, and he didn't know the right lines. "I don't want to tell them all about you. I mean, O.K. I fucked you over, O.K. but I don't want...to have to..." By now there were tears running down his cheeks. He wiped them off and wiped his nose with the back of his sleeve. "I don't want to."

He stared into space again for a moment, the old lady walked by glancing down at him. As long as the drunks were reasonably peaceful she didn't much care.

Capps got up unsteadily and shuffled slowly to the phone booth, sat down on the little seat and drew the door closed. Once inside, he would have much preferred it if the damned light hadn't come on with the closing of the door. What was the point; either you were on the damned public talk radio in front of God and everybody, or you were on a goddamned floodlit stage, naked from the waist down. "Can't be helped", he moaned aloud as he turned the quarter over and over in his

hand. He saw Perkins standing outside the door, unconcerned, someone waiting his turn to make a call.

“I can’t leave you there. I mean, just leave you?” he said to Perkins through the glass. He reached up and felt the hardness of the black plastic receiver, saw his own reflection in the side glass. The fan that was supposed to keep the air moving in the booth wasn’t working. Capps felt sweat run down his face and into his collar. He heard the singular sound as the receiver came up out of its cradle. The quarter was solid, slippery, almost heavy in his other hand as he raised it. Suddenly he knew that the silver in this particular 1986 D quarter had come down all the centuries from the melting of the thirty pieces of Judas’ pay. He saw the background of the ubiquitous phone company instructions on the instrument’s square body. It was funny how he had never noticed exactly what the writing said. “After all”, he told himself, “You always think you know what it would say, like it’s really for foreigners or something.” He looked again. He thought for the faintest split second that the writing said, “Lift receiver, insert self in slot.”

He clutched the quarter, no more than six inches from the coin slot, a decision waiting to be made. He stopped with the receiver off the hook and close enough to his ear that he would have been able to hear the dial tone. Then he set it back down again. What do you do when there is a perfect balance between the pulls of the yes and the no of obsession? The ass starved to death between the bales of hay. Capps sat blankly in the sweltering box, the quarter forgotten in his hand. His heart thudded in his chest and his breath came tight and shallow.

Buddy Perkins' death meant nothing to the world. His body would be found, though how long it would take was truly anyone's guess. Even if it wasn't discovered, if the old lady who owned the R.V. park died that day, and the property went, unseen, to some distant and disinterested heir, only to be sold in a couple of years to some institution who would not even take the time to look into the rusted and dilapidated trailer before pushing it down into a mass of metal and plastic and cardboard; even if it was never opened again, deep within it the bone and rotting hair of Perkins' atoms, and the disintegrating white cotton gloves with the little blue flowers, would still eventually rejoin the earth. It was entirely possible however, that no human would ever ask again where he had gone, and almost certain that none would personally care. In the stillness of the phone booth, Capps realized that to think otherwise was to be hypocritical. He slowly put the quarter back into his pocket and opened the phone booth door with a squeak, still sitting in the fetid box.

He sat for some time, about to work up the courage to ask Perkins what it was like to be dead when a wave of panic swept over him. He stood and suddenly slammed his open hand into the glass of the door, spidering it, cutting the palm of his hand. "Go away! Just...go away. Go away." The waitress and the bartender started down the bar and the two pool shooters converged on him. They were both still carrying their cues and one of them had his raised to shoulder level. Capps lurched out of the phone booth, desperate to find fresh air, but the two barred his way and he swung his bleeding fist ineffectually at them. The bartender had reached him by now and he tried to find a way, any way, out of the box they formed around him. They scuffled, with the pool shooters hopping and bobbing to the side, looking for an

opening to use the butt- end of their cues on him. His chest felt like it would explode, his mind was a hazy wave of flame. He struck out again blindly. Suddenly two huge hands took him by the upper arms like some powerful machine and held him pinioned, immobile as if in a vice. In the sudden stillness he focused on the face in front of him.

“Hey, Mister, we’re closing. You don’t gotta go home, but you can’t stay here. Mister...you hear me? You want us to call the cops? Drag you to the drunk tank?” the waitress shrilled. Her associates from the pool table looked as though they would have been quite pleased if Capps had been the least bit belligerent to the old harridan, as it would give them the excuse to try out their cues again off the official surface, but Capps was no longer uncooperative, just stupidly uncommunicative. When she had finally made herself understood he looked around, bumping into the edge of the table, reaching back to sweep up his half empty glass and drain it quickly, toasting everyone, the old lady, the pool players, and of course, Perkins. He smiled stupidly at the corporeal patrons, ignored the spirit, and marched unsteadily through the door, out to the parking lot. Standing in the faint heat still rising from the old asphalt, he looked completely around in all directions. There was nothing, nothing and no one in the coal-sack darkness just beyond the dim neon radius.

The cut on his hand was superficial and it had already stopped bleeding. The night heat seemed intense now and he found himself suddenly stinking of sweat. He was no fit company for civilized people, so he pulled the car out into the deserted

street and did another couple of loops of the pattern around the area with the windows down to breathe the fresher air and clear his head.

Without thinking about it, he found himself headed down streets and roads that led him away from the light, out to the edge of the city, to the darker county roads in the ranch country. He drove faster and faster as he left the bright island of the city behind.

There were no other cars on these roads at two A.M. and he drove more or less down the center of the lanes, ignoring left and right convention. It seemed easier to let the weight of his footrest on the gas pedal than to hold it up. It was too difficult to think about the fine-tuning of the pedal, keep his hand on the wheel, and his eye on Perkins, all at the same time. The spirit sat beside him for a moment, then it would move and be tiny, on the dashboard in the reflection of the dash lights. Then it seemed to be sitting on the hood outside the windshield, looking unconcerned at the increasing speed and paying little attention to Capps.

It came to Capps that perhaps he could go fast enough to dislodge Perkins, to tear away the cloudy substance by the force of the wind of his passage. The window was down and Capps had his left hand out, planeing like a wing in the tremendous blast of air passing by the window, feeling the changes in temperature from warm to cool for an instant, and then back to vaguely cool again as he came to low stretches in the otherwise high, flat road. He was sure that only a little more speed would whip Perkins to shreds, though the spirit seemed not the least concerned at sixty-five. Capps pressed the accelerator farther down, focusing closely on Perkins' reaction.

Suddenly the explosion he had been subconsciously dreading actually occurred. There was a flash of movement and a blur of white. Perkins disappeared in an instant, but contrary to Capps' expectations there was a very substantial and material thump. Capps was confused and not a little shocked by the large spider web of a crack that appeared high in the windshield, just where he had been focused on Perkins.

The confusion lasted the second necessary for him to find himself leaving the road at a rare curve. He was so stunned by the suddenness of it that his muscles were frozen. Mentally he felt himself sagging and letting go of the situation. For an instant, he was just waiting fatalistically for an impact in the dark. His thoughts were strangely clear. He was doing at least seventy-five miles an hour, so he knew it would be a major pop when it came.

But then, purely by fate, the car found its masterless self on what was simply more level, hardpacked, caliche ground, just as God and Charlie Goodnight had left it there, and except for the small creosote scrubs, not qualitatively different from the domesticated asphalt of the road. Hubris had just begun to set in on Capps. The car, though still completely out of his control, seemed to be getting discernibly quieter, perhaps down from the bang to the bump stage, thought Capps. Then came the bump.

The middle of the front bumper took on an old crooked wooden post in a ranch barbed wire fence. As he clipped it off and went on through to the equally flat pasture on the other side, he heard a strange whining sound. It was the sound of the barbed wire

strands all the way up and down the line for a quarter of a mile pulling off the posts and singing like a set of giant, crazed, steel guitar strings.

When the car finally came to a bucking stop he relaxed, but immediately stiffened out of his slump to grab the keys and turn them off. Something in his mind had been altered, perhaps by the ticking sound of the hot engine, now ominous and quiet under the hood, and trapped under the taut barbed wire as well. He felt sticky wetness on his face and something was running into his eye. A numbed kind of pain came over the eye and he assumed he had a cut there, though he could not remember what he might have hit, whether sun visor or steering wheel. He sat for a moment, looking out into the blackness in front of him, pierced and painted now for a hundred yards by the tunnel of raw white light of the car's high beams, revealing only more of the scrub brush and the red sand and beyond that, eternity.

He started to open the door, but in the headlights he could see how tightly the wire had stretched across the hood, and around the front of the car, and even around the front part of the driver's side door. He stopped and thought about it, and he could find no reason not to believe that if Providence had spared him from a crash, then perhaps the same Providence would smile on his now most admittedly humble efforts to extricate himself the simple way. He tried the key in the ignition again.

The engine leapt to life. He could not, of course be sure about the radiator, and the windshield was cracked, but there was nothing that sounded as though it was actually bent up or stuck into the engine compartment, and if the fenders hadn't been crushed down over the tires or something, he thought, he could at least back up enough to get out

and look it all over. If the wires had sounded the least bit musical on the way in, they certainly did not on the way out.

He backed out toward the still deserted road, and leaving the headlights on, he opened the door and more or less fell out, staggering to the front of the car by leaning on it and walking hand over hand down the front left fender. The paint job looked like hell, like a giant rake had been run across it, but that was no concern to Capps. The fenders and tires were intact, and the dent in the bumper and the hood did not extend into the radiator. The window had a large crack in it however, and in the light that came from the inside of the car, he could also see a faint red stain at the top of the windshield.

For a moment he couldn't understand it. If, he thought, Perkins had exploded into ethereal smoke, what was the stain? Then he heard a rustling from behind him out in the scrub, and a strange, thin, bleating. He saw the keychain in his hand, and pushing the button on the flashlight he turned very tentatively to find the source of the sound. Perhaps the tiny light was aces for B and E, but for search and rescue he found its tiny beam inappropriate and unnerving. He proceeded more by sound than by sight, tripping over the low brush as he staggered around seeking the source of the intermittent rustling noise.

Finally, after a couple of minutes and a couple of falls of his own, he came upon a large lump of something, lying on the ground, which, on his approach suddenly thrashed back and forth, but nonetheless stayed in the same place. At first, in the ridiculous light, he thought perhaps he had come upon a great brown caterpillar trying to wiggle out of its cocoon. Suddenly however, as it moved again, he could see a pair of eyes and ears and it fell into its proper place. It was one of the many deer that lived thereabout, struggling to

rise to its feet, but with what was an obviously broken back, unable to move its hind legs. Capps walked around to the animal's head, giving it a wide berth as he did so. The terrified beast struggled all the more as he approached.

"Hey," he addressed it softly, "It's O.K. fella. I won't hurt you." But even as he said it, he realized that he had in fact already left it with its spine broken, dying in pain on the dirty red earth. He fell to his knees in front of the deer. As it thrashed again, he could see that the skin was peeled away almost completely from the ribs on the right side, leaving a huge bleeding wound.

The animal made a thin, whistling cry, and Capps couldn't tell if it came from its throat, or directly from its wounded side. A spasm swept over the deer's hind quarters and its head was pulled back as though a giant hand was bending it double, then it flopped forward, and lay still, panting and looking, Capps thought, directly at him.

Capps felt as though the hand which was torturing the deer had suddenly reached into his abdomen and squeezed his stomach. He vomited stale scotch and bile, much of it running down his chin. "What have I done to you?" He was crying, weeping great tears, and he wiped the vomit and the sweat and the dirt and the tears more or less off his face with his shirt-sleeve. "Oh, what....what have I done to you?" The animal shook with another spasm and Capps' heart was torn by the sound of yet another whimpering cry.

He started to reach out, to touch the animal, but that only occasioned more struggle which could only be causing more pain, so he sank back down to his knees again.

He looked around and nearby he saw a rock, roughly the size of his closed fist. He crawled on hands and knees to get it and scrambled back. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry", he panted, trying to keep his stomach in its rightful place, "I'm sorry." He raised the stone and brought it down on the deer's head, aiming directly between the ears. But due to the struggles of the animal and to his own drunken state, he only managed to hit the bridge of the deer's nose, feeling the ineffectual bogginess of the blow, where he had hoped for the sharp, crisp cracking of skull bone. The animal froze, as though stunned, as though to say to Capps, "What do you want of me now? What are you trying to do? Haven't you done enough already, Mister? Can't you just go away and leave me to my pain, please!"

Capps leapt jerkily to his feet and stumbled back to his car, the lights of which still shone futilely into the distance of the prairie night, off in the opposite direction. He leaned heavily against the car's trunk, but as soon as he was still, the ruined deer thrashed loudly again in the darkness forbidding Capps even the moment to rest.

If only, he thought, he had the metal pry bar he had used earlier to break into Perkins' trailer. At the thought of the earlier events however, it was as though the deer had suddenly dragged itself to his feet, clutched his leg and accused him of his cruelty. He turned a complete 360 degree circle, looking for something, anything, to give him an idea of what to do.

He saw the trunk lid again when he stopped dizzily. The trunk held no tools, but he knew it had a spare tire, and with the spare was a jack, and with the jack was the straight heavy lug wrench. He fumbled with the lock and dropped the keys in the dark once, cursing because he didn't have the flashlight, which was on the keyring, with which

to find them. Finally, he found them, after first clutching a handful of thorns and crying out to the sky in his pain and his rage and his shame and his frustration. He got the trunk open and in the tiny light there he shoved things aside until he found the tire iron.

He staggered back to where the animal lay and before it had a chance to move again, he raised the metal bar, and this time brought it down exactly in the center of the skull, directly between the eyes. He slammed it down again, and again, in the same place, until there was a softly palpable groove in the skull, and the deer didn't move, or make a sound, or breathe.

As the deer was released from its pain, exactly so, it seemed that a pressure and a pain lifted from Capps' heart. He knelt in the dirt, the tire tool limply laying across his fingers, and he cried, and he laughed, and he spit out bile, and he wiped away tears and the mucous running from his nose.

He didn't know how much later he rose, emptied and weak and a little refreshed. Throwing the tire iron into the trunk and slamming it, he got back into the car and pulled back onto the road.

The moon was a sickly sliver, and Capps knew that it was not many more hours till first light. Again he drove without particular destination. He was very much aware that he was alone now, that Perkins had apparently blown away in the wind of his speed. Capps kept looking over at the passenger's seat, and in the mirror, and once he even stopped in the dead middle of the road to open the door and got out to look quickly on the top of the car when he thought he might have heard a bump that he couldn't explain. But Perkins was nowhere to be seen, nor to be sensed.

Perhaps it was curiosity that guided Capps, but he soon found himself unmistakably directed back toward the trailer park.

“But this is such a cliché”, he thought. He cruised slowly down the road and didn’t stop, for fear that he might be seen, though the chances of that, at three o’clock in the morning, on that side of town, were minimal to say the least. Nonetheless he was somewhat relieved to see that he must’ve closed the trailer’s door, or it had swung closed on its own, “Or maybe Perkins closed it behind him on his way out”, Capps giggled nervously to himself. There was, at any rate, no cluster of police cars around the trailer, and he relaxed a bit.

He was getting to the point where the worst of the scotch was wearing off, and his head was no longer so light and cloudy. He looked at his own eyes in the mirror seeing the small cut over his eyebrow, and the dried blood on his eyelid. He got most of the crusted blood off with his shirtsleeve, driving slowly as he wiped and looked in the mirror.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of red and blue lights in the mirror and his heart froze as he realized that a police car had snuck up behind him while he was rolling fifteen erratic miles an hour, and that it was him that they were signaling to stop. He was too sober by now to even think of fleeing, but he was almost sick again as he thought about the questions he would have to answer about the corpse in the trailer. He pulled over to the side of the dark road and stopped, cutting off the engine, sagging backward against the seat, waiting for what he feared was coming next.

No one moved in the police car for perhaps five minutes, though the blinking lights had given Capps a splitting headache by that time. He assumed they were checking license numbers and such.

Then he saw movement as the door of the cruiser opened, and a uniform approached, brilliant flashlight in hand, its beam sweeping Capps' car as the man approached. Then the light shown directly in Capps' eyes, blinding him as it was clearly meant to do.

"Could I have you step out of the car, sir?" The voice was neither harsh nor deferential. Capps opened the door and breathed a sigh of thanks that he had had at least this much time to sober up before he had to answer their questions.

"May I see your driver's license, please?" Again, the tone was not belligerent, yet it brooked no alternatives. Capps pulled out his wallet, noting that the light moved to follow the movement of his hands, and then back to his face. He opened the wallet and pulled the small laminated card out of it, offering it to the officer.

"Doc? Doctor Capps? I thought that was you. Remember me and my partner? We brought that big Indian in to the E.R. the other night, remember?" The light swung back to the windshield of the police car and Capps could see the other officer only faintly, but well enough to recognize the young man who had had the busted nose.

"Oh, yeah." Said Capps, trying to be social, "How you fellas doing?"

"We're O.K. Doc. You look pretty bad though. What happened to your windshield? You O.K.?"

“Yeah,” said Capps, “I ran into a deer out there”, he indicated the dark edge of town, “I’d been out.... about a patient”, he lied, “and I was just on my way home.”

“Well, you know you can’t be driving around... with that windshield like that, it’s liable to blow on in on you. You maybe been drinking a little bit, Doc?” The young officer asked. His tone, however, was clearly non-threatening. Capps realized that he was trying to be an ally, probably, he supposed out of deference for his performance with Lawchitty.

“Well, yeah, I had one or two, but that was a while ago. I hit the damned deer and ran into a fencepost, but I’ll be alright.”

“Going straight home? You only got about three more blocks, you think you can manage that?”, the officer asked, jotting down what Capps was sure was his address off the license.

“I won’t get into any more trouble, officer, I assure you.” Capps felt the officer was giving him the benefit of the doubt because he knew that Capps was a responsible guy, and because he knew he could always find such a stable member of society.

“Hang on just a minute, Doc. Don’t leave, O.K.?”, he said, turning back to his car. He got in, probably checking any tickets, and it occurred to Capps, also checking on any reports of hit and run. He returned in no more than a minute or two.

“O.K. Doc. Why don’t you just go on home and get cleaned up, alright?” The fellow handed him back his license.

“You bet.” Capps felt elated that he had been given a free slip out of the trap. He got back into his car, calling out through the window, “Thanks.”

He started the car and began to pull away, thinking of which direction he should turn off, but he soon realized with a sinking feeling that the policemen intended to follow him, and they knew his address. He did not want to go to his house. He did not want to see Retta or his children, but he couldn't think of any way around at least pulling up into the driveway. He was suddenly terrified that they intended to walk him up to the door and turn him directly over to Retta. That would require explanations to her, and he just didn't want to give them.

Then the lights on the top of the cop car flashed on again, and Capps knew they had gotten the news about Perkins and it was all over. But just as he started to slow down and pull over, the other car swung off the road, did a U-turn, and as the guy on the passenger's side waved to him, sped away in the opposite direction, obviously to answer another call, leaving him on his own with the empty road.

Capps turned at the next place that seemed to be a state road out of town. With the weak light of the late rising crescent moon on his right, he picked up speed and headed away from the lights of downtown, leaving Abilene behind, seeing it getting smaller and smaller in his rearview mirror until finally it was swallowed up and lost in the dark.

All he really noticed on the road was that the new moon, as it rose, had the strange and distinct appearance of three dimensionality, it looked for all the world like a slice of a big white billiard ball hanging in the sky, like in science fiction movies of the moons of other planets. Otherwise there was just him and the darkness and the dim lights on the dashboard until the first light of dawn.

The full light of day found him washing his face in the men's room of a little café in a small town. The town had only the one main street, which was the other end of the

same secondary road upon which he had started hours ago. It wasn't anywhere near an interstate as far as Capps could tell, as he came back out and sat in a booth by the window, watching a couple of pickups and even a tractor glide slowly past. Down the street he could see what must be the small post office, because a stocky woman was raising the flags on the flagstaff in front. He noticed without much surprise that under the U.S. banner, the smaller one was the Oklahoma state flag.

He was in a small café, with one teenaged waitress, a skinny old man cooking, visible in the back through the short order window, and a couple of old men drinking coffee and talking familiarly with the two café staff. There was a bulletin board, spattered with handwritten 4x8 cards advertising garage sales and free kittens and several business cards also tacked up. There was a rack for the paper by the door, and Capps noticed a cardboard sign in the front window neatly lettered in black marker, "Relief cook wanted". On that original-sin morning-after, Adam had been the first guy to begin to look at the help wanted ads. *"...with labor I must earn my bread – what harm? Idleness had been worse; my labor will sustain me."*

Capps noticed that it was nearly eight-thirty by the Coca-Cola clock on the wall. Janelle would be in the office by now, but she would not yet be worried about where he was. He often got held up this late on morning rounds at the hospital.

"Can I get you a cuppa coffee?", the young waitress asked brightly. If his cut face and dirty clothes were in any way offensive, she gave no indication.

"Yes. Yes, please", he said, turning his cup upright and watching as she poured the thickly brewed, fresh, brown liquid into it.

“You know what you want...or do you need some more time?” she asked. Capps stared at her for a second as he deciphered this.

“Uhm..” he said, realizing that she was asking what he wanted for breakfast, “uh, scrambled eggs.”

“You want the special? You get two eggs, toast, hashbrowns and a side of bacon or ham.”

“Yes, ma’am. Uhm, I’ll have the bacon.” This was not too difficult for him. The air seemed light and fresh, the light clear and clean.

“O.K.” she said as she turned, “comin’ right up.” She took the small slip from her order pad and laid it in the window. The old man glanced up at it and then his head was down again as he moved from side to side over the grill, which was out of Capps’ sight.

One of the coffee drinkers directed a question to the man at the grill in back. “Well you think they ought fire old Simmons or not?” This was apparently part of an ongoing conversation.

The cook stopped his lateral movement, but keeping his eye down on his work he said slowly, “Aw, I don’t know.”

“You don’t think they ought to get rid of him?” the questioner persisted. “I think he’s crazy.”

“I just don’t know. I don’t keep up with all that stuff, politics an’ all.” He serenely went back to his eggs, or more specifically Capps’ eggs. Capps was pleased that he had not taken his mind off his task to become involved in some sort of small town

political debate. Here was a man who had his priorities of here and now well in hand. Somehow it made Capps feel at ease.

The waitress brought his plate and refilled his cup. He ate, savoring the taste of the eggs on the toast, and especially the coffee. He noticed that it was fifteen till nine. In a few minutes, the first patient of the day would be coming into the front door of the office to check in. They would expect that he would be along any minute. Janelle would, too. He looked out the window, feeling the growing heat of the sun as the light fell on his arm.

He pulled his wallet discretely out of his back pocket and inventoried the contents. He had one hundred and twenty-six dollars in cash. There were gasoline credit cards, and there were two other general credit cards. He knew he could use them to get essentially anything he needed, but he resolved that he must be careful because the bills would go to Retta. He resolved to go to the post office when he finished his breakfast and get a post card to send, telling her that he was all right, but that he didn't know exactly where he was headed, and that for now she should not try to find him. Later in the morning he would make a brief call from a pay phone to Janelle. Even without explanations, that would be enough keep the police out of it.

Back in Abilene they would say he had gone crazy, but to him, to have gone back, to have continued to meddle in other people's lives was the insane way. His voices had told him that much.

“You want some more coffee?” the waitress asked from across the room, holding up the glass pot. He saw the hands of the clock as they touched nine. Capps looked down at the stubby white china cup.

“Yes...please. You make good coffee here.” Janelle would be making calls, but that was now her business. He had a hundred and twenty six dollars, minus the bill for today’s breakfast special, and a nice tip. He looked down at his plate. The old man’s eggs and toast were good, and they certainly wouldn’t poison anyone. And they came to you clean with no strings, only a side of hashbrowns.

The End

