

I Like A Little Bit of the Handsome Americans Myself

By Richard Lutman

ONE

The Cutbank Cool woke up laughing. In his dream J.R. had been telling him why the guitar case was so wet.

“Well, sir,” said J.R. with a bit of a drawl and swaying back and forth a beer clutched in his hand, “there was this guy who got tired of waiting so he just pulled it out, and there it was big as life pissing all over your guitar case. You should have seen it. You could have written a book about it.”

He fell over backwards with laughter, beer spilling over him then passed out next to the phone booth. A man with his shirt unbuttoned and one pocket turned inside out, tripped over J.R.’s outstretched arm and tumbled to the ground swearing. J.R. didn’t stir. The last thing Cutbank remembered in the dream was the phone ringing.

Still chuckling, he threw back the covers and jumped out of bed, hitting his shin on the cinder block that held up one end of the frame.

“Sonofabitch!” he said rubbing his foot. “Sonofabitch! Hey J.R., I thought you were going to fix this fucking bed?”

In the next room he heard J.R. playing hockey with a piece of petrified dog shit. The dog shit was all that was left of William Bendix, the old half-collie they once had who had run off, then been found frozen solid as a board by the railroad tracks.

“I thought dogs always lived forever,” J.R. had said, turning his head away as Cutbank buried the body. “I’ll miss him eating lettuce and left over Big Macs.”

“So will I.” said Cutbank. “He was a good dog.”

Cutbank opened the bedroom door and J.R. shot past him shouting.

“He sweeps around right wing—takes the puck—shoots—SCORES!! And they win it!”

“I thought you were going to fix the bed?” said Cutbank.

“I will.”

“When?”

“After the playoffs,” said J.R. “How’s that?”

Cutbank shook his head. “What was the final score?”

“Three to one. It was close for a while, but they broke it open with a couple of quick slap shots. The goalie didn’t have chance.”

The living room floor lay under a layer of dust. The trails the dog shit had made on its way to the goal looked like a spider web.

The two windows that faced the street were closed. A poster of the Mickey Mouse Club had been taped to the wall between the two windows. One corner curled inward.

J.R. leaned his hockey stick against the worn red sofa. He was sweating under the Washington Senators warm-up jacket. Underneath it he wore a Hawaiian tee shirt. He took his hand and brushed back his thinning blond hair. At five foot nine J.R. was three inches shorter than Cutbank with a large stomach. His wire-framed glasses sat on a small nose. The jeans he had tucked into his engineer boots were faded and covered with spots of white paint and grease.

“How about some breakfast before we start off?” said Cutbank.

“I’m going to have some tacos with hot sauce—put the day into the proper perspective,” said J.R. “Better than yoga and bean sprouts if you ask me. There’s a new Sgt. Fury comic you’ll want to look at. I picked it up yesterday.”

J.R. reached under the sofa and pulled out a comic with its cover torn in half.

“It’s not bad,” said J.R. “He beats the hell out of the Commies in this one.”

Cutbank took it from him and flipped through it. “There’s some pages missing,” said Cutbank.

“Yeah. I tore them out. They were really stupid.”

“How am I going to know what happened?” said Cutbank.

“It won’t make any difference. Good. Evil. You know how it is. It’s Sgt. Fury, afterall.”

Cutbank tossed the comic onto the sofa and went into the bathroom. One pane of the window had been scotch taped together. A dead plant J.R. had forgotten to water hung above it.

Out the window he saw the giant ice cream cone that had been built in the days when Boredemus, Indiana, had been the ice cream cone capital of the world. The sight of it was something J.R. never seemed to tire of over. After the WART radio antenna, it was the highest and best known structure in the county. Once it had been used in a movie about aliens who thought the cone was a transmitter and took it over. All the aliens had been killed except for one who had disappeared and might still be alive. After the movie was released the tourists came, some actually believing the movie. He and J.R. had made enough money from selling blown up alien parts they had scrounged from a junkyard to buy a year’s supply of peanut butter.

Cutbank put on the black tee shirt hanging on the back of the bathroom door, then combed his hair, making sure his sideburns were straight. When he finished he opened the door and looked at J.R. who stood in the middle of the room with his pants down. He was strapping a sausage to his leg.

“Heard about a man,” J.R. said, “who had a heart attack in a disco. He’d been dancing with all the women there who must have thought he was a real stud. When the ambulance guys took off his clothes there was a sixteen inch Italian sausage strapped to his leg.”

He pulled up his pants.

“Feels like the real thing,” he said patting his thigh as he walked about the room. “Yeah, just like it. I wonder what two would be like?”

“You about ready to go?” said Cutbank.

“Just let me make sure I got everything,” said J.R.

He emptied the contents of the warm-up jacket pockets onto the table next to the sofa; two plastic hand grenades, a handful of rusty ball bearings, nails, baseball cards, gum, a package of crumpled Camels, matches, and a cash register receipt.

“All there,” he said and stuffed the contents back.

They walked outside toward the car that was parked half on the sidewalk. The trunk of the 1964 white Falcon had been tied shut, the windshield was cracked, and the antenna was a coat hangar bent into a triangle. On the back bumper, a faded bumper sticker read ‘Vote for Dick.’

Cutbank hopped in and started the engine by inserting the other half of a broken key into the ignition slot. The engine sputtered and died. He turned the key again. The engine leaped into life, rocker arms clattering loudly.

“You check the oil?” said Cutbank.

“Yesterday. Nothing to worry about. We could drive to China if we had to and get us some Peking duck and noodles.”

J.R. sat gingerly on the seat. “To the dump and step on it, Sam,” he said.

Cutbank floored the gas pedal and the car jerked off the curb. He hit the brakes then shoved the gear shift into first. The car shot forward. A hubcap broke loose and bounced along the curb.

He slammed on the brakes, stopped the car, hopped out into the street and ran after the hubcap. On the sidewalk a man with a duffle bag over his shoulder intently watched as Cutbank caught up to the hubcap. He grabbed it, walked back to the car, opened the door and threw it into the back seat amongst the jumper cables and old beer cans. Then got back into the car.

“Fucking hubcap,” he said. “There must be something wrong with it.”

“Yeah,” said J.R. who was fiddling with the radio. “Have to weld it on next time.” He tuned in some static and turned up the volume. “That’s what the earth sounds like to an alien,” he said. “Just radio static.”

The lights changed and Cutbank headed the car toward the Airplane Diner.

“Quick, stop for a minute!” said J.R. “This thing pinches.”

Cutbank brought the car to a stop and J.R. got out. He stood by the open door and adjusted the sausage under his pants.

A woman waiting for a bus stared at him.

“Want a feel?” he said. “It’s eighteen inches long. The real thing. It’ll be good for you. Clean you right out and make your hair grow.”

The bus came and the woman got in, staring out the window at J.R. until the bus turned a corner.

Five years ago the Airplane Diner had been moved to the corner of Social and St. Ignatius Streets where a pickle factory once stood. The stainless steel structure looked like an airplane fuselage with small wings. After heavy rains the pickle residue still smelled. The move across town had taken all day and was memorialized by a brass plaque fastened to the south corner of the building. It had been part of a downtown revival that began and ended with the Airplane. Three blocks south and toward the center of Boredemus was the Volcano Theater and Spud’s Getty station.

Once Cutbank and J.R. spent a whole day counting the football glasses Spud gave away with every tank full of gas. When things got busy, Spud would sometimes let J.R. help pump gas. J.R. would tuck in his shirt, light up a Camel, take a few puffs, crush it out, kick the tire rack and begin making sure that each customer received a glass with the proper flourish.

Cutbank parked the Falcon in front of a fire hydrant and he and J.R. scrambled out. The Airplane was nearly empty and they watched an elderly couple examine their check, figure out the tip and rise. The red porcelain interior and its leather seats were brightly lit by neon lights.

On the wall above the cash register was a pair of black lace panties. “My first customer,” said Newt when anyone asked. “An Italian. Both of us went off almost at the same time. The last thing I remember, her soft cool fingers were rubbing my temples.”

“Porkwinder’s looking for you” said Candy the waitress with the purple-tinted hair and lizard tattoo just above her right breast. “You just missed him. He wants his money. Said something about it being his right.”

"A deal's a deal," said Cutbank.

"Yeah," said J.R. "We got our rights too."

"I was just telling," said Candy.

"That guy just won't leave us alone, will he?" said J.R.

Cutbank slid in next to J.R. in the front booth by the window.

"Usual?" said Candy.

"We're going to see The Handsome Americans," said J.R. "At the Nobility Hall. But first we've got to wash our socks. There's nothing worse than dirty socks."

"I've never heard of The Handsome Americans."

"Tell her, Cutbank."

"A band on the cuspidor of being great."

"Oh," said Candy/

"If it hadn't been for the Leather Rats they would have been more famous than anyone," said J.R. "They could have changed our lives and the world would have been a better place."

"Two orders of tacos with hot sauce and an order of French Toast," said Cutbank.

Candy walked to the window that opened into the kitchen.

"Double Hot Mex's and Frog Shingles," she said.

"Coming," said Newt's voice from behind the window. "Tell them Porkwinder's been looking for him."

"Already know," said Cutbank.

"You think they'll be good?" said J.R.

"Should be, said Cutbank. "After all they're the Handsome Americans."

"I hope so. The Handsome Americans," said J.R. "We're going to see The Handsome Americans. I met a guy once who had breakfast with the lead singer--sausage, eggs and coffee then he played a few licks and signed autographs. The guy hasn't been the same since. He wants to run for president."

"Is he coming back?" said Cutbank.

"Who?" said Candy.

"Porkwinder," said J.R.

"Just finished his breakfast and left," said Candy. "Didn't say anything else. No tip either; he's usually good for seventy-five cents."

"Mmmmmmm," said Cutbank as the food arrived.

TWO

Arnold Porkwinder checked himself in the bathroom mirror. It looked as though his hair was finally growing back after the treatments and his diet of frozen pizza and cauliflower hadn't worked; his stomach still bulged slightly over his brown leather belt.

He bent down to see under the stalls of the public toilets that had been constructed six months ago as part of the new Archie S. Dugmutter Memorial Pavilion. As a member of the Boredemus Civic Pride Committee, Porkwinder had been at the building's dedication and felt it was his duty to use the facility as much as possible. At the celebration, Dugmutter, who had saved the lives of twenty hamsters in an animal shelter fire, stood bare-headed as he looked out over the crowd in front of him. Then he stepped up to the microphone and read from the speech he had prepared.

"Visitors coming to a place without proper toilets is like having a Cracker Jack box without any prize in it," he said. "You won't ever buy another box. Therefore there can be no greater example of civic pride than public toilets which are clean and accessible to everyone regardless of their age, creed or color.

"For the first hour the toilets will be free. And I ask you not to clog the plumbing. I'd like to thank my wife. Now let us pray. Amen."

Then he lifted his head up and led the members of the Civic Pride Committee through the doors and into the new facility.

The vacant stall Arnold selected was next to the wall. He had learned a long time ago that the best place to look at baseball cards was in that particular stall of a public toilet. Searching his pockets he found a dime and put it into the slot, quickly turned the knob and entered. Turning to face the door he took off his second best checkered sport coat and hung it up on the broken hook then he lowered his pants and sat. As he got comfortable he reached into the pocket of his coat and took out the cards he'd just bought at the Rexall store next to the chili place. He slowly shuffled through the pack of seventy-five. He had sixty-eight of the cards already. Disgusted, he stuffed them back into the pocket. The coat fell from the hook, and the cards scattered over the floor in front of him.

"Hey, Willie Horton," said a voice two stalls over. "How about trading him for two of these?"

Porkwinder saw the movement of a hand and two cards appeared on the tile floor next to him.

"What do you say?" came the voice from the other stall. "Want to trade for these?"

Porkwinder pulled his pants up, not waiting to tuck in his shirt, gathered the cards together and

shoved them into his pants pocket. He flushed the toilet as if he had used it and came quickly out of the stall carrying his coat on his arm. Standing in front of the mirror he pushed his shirt in around his large stomach and watched the stalls behind him. The two cards still lay on the floor. He began to wash his hands.

A man came into the urinal and unzipped. He looked at Porkwinder.

"Whew!" he said. "Second best feeling in the world," then thinking for a moment, added. "Maybe the first because it doesn't ask for anything in return."

"Yeah," said Porkwinder. "I know what you mean."

"Damn fucking right," the man said and left.

Porkwinder reached for the paper towels, but there were none. He stood with dripping hands and looked at the hot air blower, then pressed and released the large silver button. Nothing happened. He pushed the button again. Still nothing. Disgustedly, he wiped his hands on his pants and went back outside.

Across the street a woman was hanging underwear and socks on a clothesline. She wore a thin cotton dress and silver cowboy boots. The dress blew tightly across her body and between her legs.

For a moment he didn't have to think about the Cutbank Cool and J.R. who owed him seven months rent. What money they had managed to earn was used to buy bologna, mustard, and ten pound cans of peanut butter. When a can was opened there was always two inches of oil that J.R. stirred with a stick.

"Come up for a Ritz cracker with peanut butter," J.R. would say. "Nothing sticks to the roof of your mouth like this peanut butter. It's a classic."

Once Cutbank had offered to trade him ten cases of pumpkin soup they had found by the side of the road for the rent. Porkwinder had declined.

"Pumpkin soup is a gourmet's delight," said J.R., who'd been in the next room watching wrestling. "You can eat it at any time, even for breakfast with your favorite cereal. Put a few crackers in it and you'd never know the difference."

"It's really not all that bad," said Cutbank.

"I've brought someone to look at the apartment," said Porkwinder.

"Hey J.R., we got guests."

J.R. came shuffling out of the next room with a blanket over him.

"Hey, Arnold," said J.R. "What do you think of this?" He threw off the blanket. He was naked

underneath.

Porkwinder looked at the woman again. She had finished hanging the wash and pushed the hair back from her face. .

“What are you staring at?” she said. “Get away from here before I call the cops!”

“Now wait a minute!” said Porkwinder.

“What are you anyway, a pervert? HELP! HELP! POLICE! I’M BEING RAPED!”

Porkwinder ran. When he finally turned to look, the woman was nowhere to be seen.

The eight-thirty siren at the main fire house blew and Porkwinder headed down the street to the Memorial Park where the parks department had constructed a series of recreational baseball card flipping areas. Each strip was eight feet long and four feet wide. For the convenience of the users, artificial grass had been placed where the flippers were to line up. The strips were surrounded by a wall painted to look like a stadium. Nearby was the abandoned hotdog stand and pizza place. The original plan had been to keep children off the street during the daytime hours. The plan hadn’t worked and most of the artificial turf had been torn up.

Porkwinder took out the cards from his pocket and knelt down. He pulled one from the pack and placed the second finger of his right hand across the top of the card. His thumb was angled across the center of the card. He let the card go. It blooped up then fell halfway to the wall. He took another and threw it hard. It went low and bounced off the wall.

“Ah so,” said Mr. Watanabe’s voice behind him.

He stood very straight in a light red kimono with a bottle of sake in one hand and a foot-long hotdog in a roll in the other. The hot dog was buried in mustard and relish. His bald head shone. On his feet he wore old black sneakers.

“You’re late,” said Porkwinder.

“Stop for breakfast. Need protein buildup.”

“I’m ready for you today,” said Porkwinder.

“Ah so,” said Mr. Watanabe again, nodding his head.

He crouched down beside Porkwinder, placing the hotdog by his knee then took a drink of sake. Once settled, he removed a card from a fold in his kimono and sighted along the edge of the cardboard. He held it lightly between the second and third fingers of his right hand.

He flicked the card outward. It scooted low and fell six inches from the wall.

“Ah so,” he said again and picked up the hotdog. He finished it in three bites. The long drink of

sake he took to wash it down made him burp.

Porkwinder inhaled and released his card. It sailed toward the wall, then suddenly fell straight down, landing well outside Mr. Watanabe's card.

"Sonofabitch," he said.

Mr. Watanabe got up and collected the cards.

"Again," said Porkwinder. "You can't win every time."

Mr. Watanabe knelt down, flicked his wrist and threw a leaner.

THREE

J.R. spooned the last of the tacos and hot sauce into his mouth. Licking his lips, he sat back and took out a plastic replica of a World War II hand grenade from his jacket pocket.

He pulled the pin, held it for a moment in his hand, then side-armed it across the room under a table. He ducked as the grenade exploded in a puff of acrid blue smoke. Slowly getting up he crouched low with an imaginary machine gun and charged the table.

‘POWPOWPOWPOW!’ he said and kicked the table over. ‘Takes care of that pillbox. Just like Sgt. Fury. How about a smoke, Ace?’

Cutbank took out a Camel from his pack and gave it to J.R. who put it into his mouth and lighted up. ‘What a life,’ he said.

Newt watched them from the kitchen door. A toothpick hung from his lips. His eyes were droopy and the front of his apron was covered with grease. ‘How many did you get this time?’

‘Whole pillbox full,’ said J.R.

‘That’s the way it really was,’ said Newt as he took the toothpick from his mouth. ‘Throwing grenades into pillboxes to kill the Japs. Just like John Wayne. KABOOM! KABOOM!’ Then he turned and went back into the kitchen. ‘KABOOM! KABOOM!’

‘You ever in a war?’ said Candy, turning the table upright. Her tight uniform rode up to show the birthmark on the back of her knee.

‘Failed the physical twice,’ said J.R. ‘Ate shredded wheat and water for a week. I was too overweight to serve my country properly.’

‘Humph!’ she said. ‘So now you have to come in here and throw plastic grenades so Newt will talk about the war. Don’t you have anything better to do?’

‘We had responsibilities once and even had to wear ties,’ said Cutbank. ‘We were assistants to the assistant in charge of packaging. Our job was to make sure that each multi-colored plastic Jesus had been properly placed in its decorative gift box. It was a very enlightening position.’

‘One day we decided we’d had enough of putting the plastic Jesus’ into their boxes. It was their eyes staring back at us that did it. Now we take things as they come and not worry about what happens. We’ve made it this far and life couldn’t be any better.’

‘You know something,’ said J.R. to Candy. ‘you remind me of Hamereen when you get mad. She taught me everything I know about sardines. A regular sardine gourmet she was. Sardines for breakfast

with cornflakes. At lunch with cottage cheese, and you know what cottage cheese can do to your stomach without sardines, and at dinner with half-cooked noodles. Sometimes she'd even let me eat the sardines from off her body, but that's a different story."

Candy snorted and stormed into the kitchen.

They could hear her rattling plates and banging pots. Newt came to the kitchen doorway and looked at J.R.

"What did you do this time?"

"Nothing," said J.R. "I was just telling her about sardines. She's a good girl. Give her a raise on me."

A man who held tightly to a briefcase came in and sat down at the counter. He was dressed in a blue-stripped seersucker suit and wore a red bowtie. A patch of brownish hair stood out from the side of his head. Two small round bandages covered his chin.

"I'd like a glass of water," he said. "With no ice."

Newt gave it to him. The man put his briefcase on the counter and opened it. Inside was plastic container full of dirt that was covered with Plexiglas. In the dirt were worms.

"I have to keep the soil moist," he said "otherwise they could die."

He took out a small eyedropper and filled it, then opened a small door in the box. He counted out fifteen drops then closed the door.

"Hackberry Feather," he said, holding out a card to Newt. The card had his name spelled out in tiny worms. "I represent Deluxe Worms. We're sponsors of the Tuba Hour. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

The worms had stopped moving.

"You know, a lot of people don't understand worms," said Hackberry. "There was this quarterback on a football team not far from here. Before each game he'd eat worms, if he ate forty-one, his team would score forty-one points, if he ate twenty, they'd score twenty. The worms he ate were ours. We got a lot of publicity.

"Worms are quite an investment and in some cases can be used quite effectively as a tax shelter. All you need is a little space, some dirt, love and the right kind of worms. Our worms."

"How much?" said J.R.

"For the basic starter kit, which includes fifty of the best Georgia Red worms, \$38.52, tax included. Prices go up from there,"

"What do you think?" said J.R.

"I don't know," said Cutbank. "Is there anything cheaper?"

“No. But I could have them packed in a sparkling gift box complete with instructions in six languages.”

“I had ants once,” said J.R. “but they got out.”

“You know who you should see,” said Cutbank. “Arnold Porkwinder. You can use our name. He’s got an office about four blocks from here on the left. He’s always looking for investments.”

“Yeah,” said J.R. “tell him that J.R. and the Cutbank Cool sent you over.”

“Yes, I will. Thanks,” said Feather reaching for his wallet. “What do I owe you for the water?”

“Sixty-eight cents,” said Newt.

“Can I have a receipt,” said J.R. “I can write it off. It’s billable.”

“Why sure,” said Newt. “Anything to oblige.”

Feather stood up and closed the briefcase. The worms still had not moved.

FOUR

Porkwinder looked dejectedly at the two baseball cards he had left. From the corner of his eye he could see Mr. Watanabe's head bobbing up and down over the 73 cards he'd just won.

"Uh oh," said Mr. Watanabe. "Pay check."

"You haven't cleaned me out yet, you little slant-eyed devil."

"Pearl Harbor," said Mr. Watanabe and tossed a card toward the wall. It slid close.

Porkwinder carefully aimed across the top of his card. He flipped and watched as it bounced back just behind the other card.

"You're just lucky," he said. "I'd beat you good if we were flipping long."

"Long, short, all same," said Mr. Watanabe. "Japanese invent baseball cards."

"They did not. Baseball cards are as American as hotdogs."

"Invent hotdogs, too."

Porkwinder grunted angrily and released the last card. It soared easily through the air then fell down on one corner two feet from the wall. Mr. Watanabe pushed up the right sleeve of his kimono and lightly released his card. It skidded past Porkwinder's.

"You take an I.O.U.?" said Porkwinder.

"Cash. Or credit cards. American Express accepted here."

Mr. Watanabe scurried to the cards and picked them up.

"You want to make fifty cents?" said Porkwinder.

"Fifty cents, ah so. Be rich American."

"Know where the Airplane Diner is?"

Mr. Watanabe nodded his head.

"I want you to see if two of my friends are there yet." He reached into his jacket pocket. "Sign this first. It's a W-2 form so I can put you on my payroll and charge it off."

"Sign nothing without lawyer. Good American."

"No sign," said Porkwinder. "No money."

Mr. Watanabe wrinkled his forehead.

"You have Mr. Watanabe by onions."

Porkwinder produced a pen, gave it to him and watched as he wrote his name in Japanese.

"Buy Cadillac, cruise for chicks," said Mr. Watanabe.

"I'll walk you over," said Porkwinder.

They crossed the street and stopped at the corner of Social and Kitchen. An open-backed truck full of crates marked "BIBLES" honked its horn at them then turned the corner.

"I'll wait here," said Porkwinder. "You go ahead. Just go in the door and look around. I'll know if they're inside."

Mr. Watanabe bowed and headed for the diner with quick steps.

J.R. stood at the cash register counting out pennies from his hand.

"Two dollars and thirty-one and a half cents for tacos and hot sauce is ridiculous," he said to Newt. "Who ever heard of a half-cent?"

"They add up," said Newt.

"I'll add you up," said J.R.

Mr. Watanabe opened the door and stared intently at J.R. and Cutbank.

"JAPS!" said J.R. and dropped the rest of the coins to the counter. "The Japs have landed. We'll all be murdered in our beds!"

He charged Mr. Watanabe with a loud yell. Mr. Watanabe bolted for the door with J.R. close behind.

Porkwinder stood on the bottom steps of the diner. Cutbank saw him and stopped. "I want my money," said Porkwinder close behind.

"Of course you do," said Cutbank. "Who doesn't want money."

"Eight hundred and four dollars and four cents," said Porkwinder.

"Is it that much?" said Cutbank.

"Yes."

"Then something will just have to be done," said Cutbank. "You can be sure of that."

"What?"

J.R. appeared holding Mr. Watanabe's kimono, sneakers and baseball cards.

"What do you think you're doing?" said Porkwinder. "We're talking business."

"He wants his rent," said Cutbank.

"Don't you have anything better to do, Arnold?" said J.R.

"I want those cards," said Porkwinder. "They're mine."

"Are they?" said J.R.

"Yes. I bought them this morning."

“Do you have a receipt?” said J.R.

“I don’t need a receipt! Said Porkwinder. “I want my money!”

“You can have the cards back for the rent,” said J.R. “plus interest and two jars of peanut butter.”

“What? Nothing. No deal. I want my money!”

“Whatever you say,” said J.R. and tossed the cards at Porkwinder. They scattered on the floor as J.R. and Cutbank shot past him to the street.

J.R. searched his pocket and took out a small bag of ball bearings, which he tossed on the sidewalk in front of the diner. Porkwinder’s right foot landed on them and he went down swearing.

Cutbank hopped into the car and started it, and J.R. leaped in after him. The car careened down the street, then stopped and lurched forward through a red light.

“The Handsome Americans, here we come,” said J.R.

Behind them Porkwinder was limping toward his car.

Mr. Watanabe was nowhere to be seen.

FIVE

Porkwinder's chrome-plated 1956 Buick Dynaflow with mud flaps burst into the lane of traffic in front of the Airplane Diner, a taxi screeched to a stop and the driver rolled down the window.

Porkwinder ignored the shouting and took off down the street after the Falcon.

J.R. reached into his jacket pocket and removed a handful of nails, which he threw out the window. Porkwinder swerved his car to the right, but wasn't quick enough, and it bounced to a stop with a flat front tire. He got out and angrily kicked the tire. A hubcap fell off and landed at his feet.

J.R. slouched down into the seat and lighted up a cigar, then took a puff.

"What a life," he said. "A good cigar and going to see The Handsome Americans. What more could you ask for?"

Cutbank slowed down and took a right, heading toward County 141 which ran west of Boredemus.

At the next intersection by the McDonalds a barefooted man in a short tan raincoat flagged them down and poked his head through the window. He held tightly to a battered cardboard box.

J.R. blew smoke in his face.

"I need your help," said the voice through the smoke. "I have to deliver this box. It's important."

"How important?" said J.R.

"Very."

"Will our lives depend on the delivery of that box?" said J.R.

"You could say that."

"What do you say, Cutbank?"

"I'd hate to think that we were the cause of anything," said Cutbank. "I wouldn't want that."

"Neither would I."

"You'll help, then?" said the man.

"Our ancestors came over on the Mayflower and we're good, hardworking Americans who respect our country," said Cutbank. "Of course we'll help you."

"Where are you headed?" said J.R.

"Thataway," he said, pointing down the road.

J.R. knocked ashes onto the man's bare feet.

"You're not one of those left-winged infrared egg suckers, are you?" said Cutbank.

"I like mine scrambled with spinach," said the man.

"A real aristocrat," said J.R. "I should have known."

"We're going as far as 141," said Cutbank.

"That ought to be far enough," said the man. He opened the door and seated himself in the back seat, placing the box on his knees.

"We're going to see The Handsome Americans," said J.R. "they're playing at the Nobility Hall."

"What happened to your shoes?" said Cutbank.

"I don't like shoes. They give you ingrown toenails, and ingrown toenails can make you insecure. I read about a man once who had to use a stall to piss if there was anyone else there. It was the angle of the nails that did it to him."

"I thought so," said J.R. "That explains a lot."

"Yes it does," said Cutbank.

"Cigar?" said J.R., twisting around to look at the man.

"I don't smoke."

"You from around here?" said Cutbank, who was studying him in the rearview mirror. "You seem familiar."

"I'm just passing through."

"What's in the box?" said J.R.

"I can't tell you."

"Why not?" said Cutbank.

"You wouldn't understand."

"We're very understanding," said J.R. "Why just the other day we invested in a fish cemetery and we send birthday cards to all our friends. We're the most understanding people you'll find. Ask around, you'll see."

"That does make a difference," said the man and carefully opened the box. "A nineteen thirty-seven Ladies Home Companion vibrator that still works."

He turned it on.

Cutbank laughed so hard he lost control of the car, it hit the curb and jumped onto the sidewalk in front of Bigalke's Beer, Wine, Ale and Deli. J.R. banged into the dashboard and the cigar squashed against his nose.

"Looks like this is the end of the line for me," said the man. He got out and stood in front of a restaurant window holding the vibrator.

Inside an old lady fainted into her bacon and eggs.

He ran down the street cackling. His coat flapped behind him. The vibrator shook in his hand.

Cutbank backed the car off the sidewalk and eased it back into traffic.

"I need a beer," said J.R.

"So do I."

Cutbank eased the Falcon into Bigalke's parking lot and they both got out.

"Hey, Harry," said J.R. as he came through the door. "We need ten cases of that four ninety-eight stuff. We're going to play golf at the new miniature course that just opened next to the municipal links. Then we're going to see The Handsome Americans after we wash our socks."

"Golf? What do you know about golf?" said Harry.

"It was invented in Scotland," said J.R. "My third cousin twice removed lives there."

"There's a special golf coupon in the paper," said Cutbank. "We've collected two hundred. That could be a record. We could even win a prize."

"Just tell your boy to load up," said J.R. "We'll wait."

"Ten cases ought to hold us for a while," said Cutbank.

"Should," said J.R. "unless the Martians land, then we'll all be done for."

"We'll rent a cart from the place next to it then go play," said Cutbank.

"An excellent idea," said J.R.. "I can practice using my mashie."

The boy finished loading

"Put it on our tab," said J.R.

"You still owe from the last time," said Harry.

"We're good for it," said Cutbank. "Just a few more days."

"Here's ten bucks," said J.R. "Go buy yourself a pizza." He tossed the bill at Harry and dashed for the car.

"Now wait...."

Cutbank climbed back into the car. J.R. lighted a cigarette, took a beer from one of the cases and resumed his seat.

Cutbank put the Falcon into gear and headed down Waldo Street toward the golf course. Behind them Harry shook his fist at the departing car.

The parking lot was empty and Cutbank brought the car to a stop next to the club house that was being redecorated with pictures of golf clubs.

Inside the building a man wearing a wetsuit held a bag of golf balls in his hand. The floor was wet under his feet.

"How about some used balls," said the man behind the counter. "Give you a good price. Top of the line."

"Maybe later," said J.R. "We want to play a few rounds."

"We'd like to rent a cart and some clubs," said Cutbank.

"Nine or eighteen?"

"What do you think, J.R.?"

"Just a driver and putter will do," said Cutbank. "A true test of our abilities."

"Car number eleven," said the man. "That's eighteen dollars unless you're a senior citizen, then it's only five. The clubs will be two dollars."

"Pay the man," said Cutbank.

"Of course," said J.R. "I got nine, unless you can change a hundred?"

"I'm good for five," said Cutbank.

"Just make sure you leave the brake on if you stop on a hill," said the man.

"Of course," said J.R. "Wouldn't think of doing anything else."

They walked back outside and put the clubs in the cart, then started it up and drove toward their car. J.R. opened the rear door and put two cases of beer in the back of the cart. He hopped on and Cutbank drove next door to the first tee of the miniature golf course.

"What do you think you're doing?" said the man from behind the counter as he ran toward them. "You can't take that cart in there!"

"We got our coupons," said J.R. and dumped them onto the ground. "We've been saving up."

"I don't care what you have!"

"We're entitled to play here," said Cutbank. "Do you know how hard it's been to collect 200 coupons?"

"I'm going to call the police."

"Go ahead then we can donate the coupons to them," said Cutbank.

J.R. dropped a ball to the ground and hit it at the man who ducked just as the ball went over his shoulder.

"I'll keep him busy," said J.R. "You tee off."

J.R. hit another ball. It struck the soda machine with a thwump. A root beer tumbled out.

Cutbank took a ball out of the bag and teed it up. He swung at it with a driver and the ball dribbled forward six feet before it stopped. He got back into the cart and drove it toward the ball, then got out and swung again. The ball shot off the end of the club into the netting at the far end of the course and dropped straight down onto the thirteenth fairway.

“Nice shot,” said J.R. who was hitting another ball at the clubhouse. “Have a beer. It will slow down your backswing.”

“Why thank you.”

The man had risen to his feet and was running for the telephone.

Cutbank climbed back onto the cart, put it into forward and smashed into a windmill in the middle of the course. It fell over, blades still turning. J.R. got out and took a putter from the bag. He raised the putter high above his head, took a full backswing and struck the ball hard. It ricocheted off the foot high backboard that made up the perimeter of the hole and came back at him waist high. He swung at the ball and caught it squarely with the shaft of the club. The ball hit a pile of stone that made up a waterfall and landed behind them on the second hole.

Cutbank put the cart in reverse and backed over the loop-the-loop, then stopped and climbed off. He selected a sand wedge, felt its weight, stepped up and hit the ball. It scooted off the club head and rolled to a stop.

“What do you suggest now?” he said to J.R.

J.R. stepped slowly out of the cart and pulled at a piece of the artificial turf. He held up a few strands and dropped them.

“No wind,” he said. “That makes for an extremely different sort of shot.”

Cutbank took a practice swing and then lined up next to the ball. He hit it hard. The ball went straight up, landed, and then bounced four times before rolling into the eleventh hole.

“Hole in one!” said J.R. “And the crowd goes wild!”

He jumped onto the cart and raced the engine. The air filled with thick blue smoke. Then the cart stopped with a clang. A rapidly growing pool of oil appeared under the rear wheels.

SIX

Porkwinder tightened down the last of the lug nuts on the wheel, rose and returned the jack to the trunk of the car. He wiped his hands on the large cloth bag he always kept in the back of his car, then got in and started the engine. Reaching down, he grabbed a tape and shoved into the tape deck under the dashboard. He turned it on and watched as the tape jammed and shot out at him.

He quickly pulled over into the bowling alley parking lot next to the dog food plant and got out. The air smelled of greasy horsemeat. He pulled the tape out of his player and tossed it to the pavement, then looked up to see Mr. Watanabe running at him with a bowling ball in one hand. He was dressed in a large red bowling shirt that flapped about him. Mr. Watanabe set up, pushed the ball away from his body, and took a first step then three more. His release and follow were perfect. The ball drifted right then spun back to center and right at Porkwinder. The tape caught Porkwinder's feet and he tripped and fell to the ground. The bowling ball struck his legs and stopped.

"Strike!" said Mr. Watanabe. "Grease up the cat, Zeke I'm coming back again." He was jumping up and down.

"What do you think you're doing?" said Porkwinder. "You work for me."

"Only place that have Mr. Watanabe's size," he said pointing at the bowling alley.

Porkwinder rose to his feet then angrily grabbed the ball and hurled it back at Mr. Watanabe, who dodged it. The ball bounced along until it struck a light pole. The pole rattled, then fell with a loud crash.

"Into the car, quick!" said Porkwinder as he sprung into the front seat.

Mr. Watanabe didn't move.

"What's the matter with you? I told you to get into the car."

Mr. Watanabe still didn't move.

"You want to make another fifty cents?" said Porkwinder.

"Who Mr. Watanabe kill?"

"Nothing like that. You come with me now and you'll get it."

"Seventy-five cents," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Fifty-five," said Porkwinder.

"Sixty," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Fifty-eight and one half."

"Residuals and life story to the 'Star' magazine," said Mr. Watanabe.

“Deal. You be my driver.”

“Don’t set the table Mabel,” said Mr. Watanabe. “I won’t be home tonight.”

He got into the car and slammed the door, then reached under the seat and moved the adjustment lever until Porkwinder’s knees were squashed against the dashboard. Mr. Watanabe put the gas pedal to the floor and shifted into gear. The Dynaflo squealed off.

“Wheelies,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“Take it easy,” said Porkwinder. “This was my father’s car. I’ve spent a lot of money on it. I still think of it as his. He believed that you could tell a lot about a man by the car he drove.”

Behind them a crowd was gathering around the fallen light pole.

“You see,” said Porkwinder as they approached the middle of the next block, “when my father wasn’t working as a number caller in a bingo parlor he used to listen to the New Reformed Jesus Hour on the radio then wax his car.”

“Ah so,” said Mr. Watanabe, dodging a dog that ran across the street.

“Never saw much of him except at meals,” said Porkwinder. “Nineteen forty-one issue meatball stew with white beans was his favorite. He had cases of it that some army buddy had given him. He’d eat a couple of cans as if it were nothing, then get up and read True Magazine. After he’d finish he’d cut out all the coupons and put them in a shoebox he kept in the closet.

“He used to make my sister and me write to the prisoners in the state pen so they wouldn’t become Commies when they got out.”

“Commies no like baseball,” said Mr. Watanabe. “Reggie, Babe Ruth, Shoeless Joe Jackson, Howard Cosell.”

“I used to give money to fight Communism and listen to Paul Harvey twice a day and at twelve-thirty on Saturdays,” said Porkwinder. “We’re looking for a white Falcon.”

Mr. Watanabe nodded his head up and down and blew the horn at an old lady who was trying to cross the street. She reached into her shopping bag and threw a banana at them.

“I found my first piece of chrome when I was seven,” said Porkwinder. “It was about the sharpest thing I’d ever seen. When I was twenty I decided to get into the chrome business on a full-time basis because of something Ed Sullivan once said about following what you believe in and eating right.

“After I became successful I planned to run for political office on the chrome ticket. Something that had never been done before. I didn’t get one vote. But that didn’t matter. It was the principle that counted. My business boomed. You’ll know the car when you see it.”

“Eyes peeled,” said Mr. Watanabe. “Not get away.”

“There are too many mega-vitamins and sexual aids on the market today and not enough chrome.

“If you watch a lot of TV, you’ll see lots of chrome. TV and chrome that’s where it all is.”

“TV bad. Rot mind,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“Stop here.”

Mr. Watanabe hit the curb as he brought the car to a stop in front of the Episcopal Salvage Bureau.

“Here’s three bucks,” said Porkwinder. “See if you can find something better to wear.”

Mr. Watanabe took the money and darted in the door. Porkwinder watched him through the dirty windows. Mr. Watanabe stopped in front of a table where pairs of pants were piled up. He grabbed a pant leg from the bottom of the pile and pulled, the pants came free and he stumbled backwards against the TV sets and toasters. He righted himself and put one leg into the pants, then the other. The pants he wore swallowed him up. The shirt he selected was too small and squeezed him making him look like a bowling pin. Next, he headed toward a large cardboard box where the shirts had been thrown. He searched through the box until he found a white shirt and put it on. Beside the shirt box was a table full of shoes. He pawed through them before selecting a pair. Against the back wall a three-legged bureau had been propped up with a stack of books. A sign above it read ‘Ladies underwear—assorted sizes—5 CENTS.’

Porkwinder saw Mr. Watanabe study himself in a mirror then he headed toward the checkout counter. The woman behind the counter stared at him, then handed back his change.

The door opened and Mr. Watanabe came out. The pants he wore were too large, and the shirt which he had put over the bowling shirt was too small. One shoe had no laces and the other had a loose heel, which flapped over the pavement as he walked toward Porkwinder’s car.

He climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Feel like new man now. What think? Look like John Travolta?”

“Where’s my change?” said Porkwinder.

“Buck eighty-one change. Mr. Watanabe keep quarter for expenses.”

“What?”

“Have high overhead.”

“As if I didn’t know better,” said Porkwinder, handing him a newspaper that lay folded in the back seat. “You better line your shoes with this. We’ve got a long day ahead of us. It’s important to have comfortable feet.”

SEVEN

The judge stared at J.R. and Cutbank then at the two policemen who flanked them. "What'd you shoot?" he said.

"Cutbank got a hole in one," said J.R. "I saw him. I'm going to write the PGA."

"The PGA?"

"Cutbank could get a trophy," said J.R.

"There are no trophies here," said the judge.

"Couldn't we take one of your pens with us," said J.R. "We'll need something to remember this day by."

The judge put on his glasses and looked over the papers in front of him. The courtroom was empty except for the two old women sitting in the back with shopping bags. One of them was snoring. The other was chewing gum. Outside the courthouse Porkwinder's car had stopped at a red light.

"We know what to do with people like you, don't we?" said the judge.

He leaned over the podium and pointed a long finger in the direction of J.R. The sleeve of his robe had begun to unravel.

"Send them to bed without any supper?" said J.R.

"Make them pick up chewing gum from movie theater seats?" said Cutbank.

"Real clowns, aren't you? Take them."

"I want a lawyer," said J.R.

"Do you now?"

"Yes," said J.R. "Can I borrow a dime to call one?"

"Enough!" said the judge, pounding his fist. "Get them out of here!"

The two policemen led them back outside to their car. One policeman got in with J.R., the other took Cutbank to a police cruiser.

"See you when you get out, Jake," said J.R.

"Yeah. Take care of yourself, Slick," said Cutbank. "And make sure you write your mother."

The door of the Falcon slammed shut and the cars pulled away.

"Where are we going?" said J.R.

The policeman said nothing.

"Do I have time to write home?" said J.R. "I want to tell my mother to make sure she feeds my

fish.”

The police cruiser turned into a drive-in theater near the railroad tracks that had been converted into an outdoor church. A sign over the entrance said: ONLY GOD SPOKEN HERE.

They passed through the aqua-colored entrance and a gate came down, which caused a card to slide out of a machine. The policeman took it and gave it to Cutbank. He looked at the card that had been handed to him. It read:

Am I going to Heaven?

(Now you can find out for yourself. Please check the appropriate box.)

Playing Backseat Bingo Eating All your Peas

Keeping the Ten Commandments Gifts to Charity

Doing One’s Best Leading a Good Life

Good Works Trying to Obey the Golden Rule

Tithing or Giving to the Church Church Membership

Regular Church Attendance Prayers

Fasting Baptism

Holy Communion Born of Christian Parents

Confirmation Penance

Extreme Unction Washing Your Hands Before Church Using Our Seven Step Strategy and

Set of 10 core Values

If you checked all the boxes, your journey to Heaven is assured. For all others seek extreme unction immediately and don’t forget that we are open seven days a week.

FOR QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS WRITE REV. WEED, BOX 144439A C/O GOD. PLEASE DROP IN BOX ON WAY OUT.

The cars bumped along, then stopped and faced the projection booth which had been converted into a pulpit complete with loudspeakers and flood lights. The Reverend Weed stood with his head bowed. He was dressed in a shiny white suit and wore purple wrap-around sunglasses. Over the pulpit another sign read: COLLECTIONS EVERY FIFTEEN MINUTES.

The loudspeaker snapped on.

“THE BIBLE HAS THE ANSWERS!” said Weed in a deep voice. ‘IT WILL AMAZE YOU!!!!’ Then in a lower voice, “If you want a red car ask for a red car and don’t complain when you get a blue one if you failed to be specific. Remember to write down the exact wording of your requests to God. It not only helps us to be specific, but it helps us to remember what we asked for. Hallelujah! He’s coming through the roof!

“And now remember my friends that body water can cure all illnesses. It has been scripturally documented and scientifically validated. For a free booklet just send

Nine dollars and fifty cents to cover postage and handling to the Reverend Weed, Box HEAVEN. Please allow four to six weeks for delivery.

“Remember—if God wants to ring your doorbell, he’ll know where the button is. Let us pray.”

The loudspeakers hummed. Near the entrance a man in a motorized wheelchair with a butterfly net in his hand came into view. He started to drive his wheelchair in circles waving the net at a white butterfly that was flying about his head.

Then a solemn and different voice announced: “Visitors will be interested in the Thrustmohr decorations adorning our modern and convenient tabernacle. A special anointing series for the sick plus musical fest will be held in ten minutes in the recreation room adjacent to our fully staffed cafeteria. All are welcome.”

Organ music filled the air.

The two policemen had gotten out of the cars and stood next to the Falcon.

“Don’t ever play golf in this town again,” one of them said.

“We won’t,” said J.R. “Never again. You can be sure of that.”

J.R. slid across the seat and positioned himself behind the steering wheel. Cutbank climbed in next to him. J.R. started the engine and the car shot off toward the exit then screeched to a stop at the card box.

“I checked them all,” said J.R. “It didn’t feel right leaving anything out.”

“I didn’t check any of them,” said Cutbank.

“You won’t go to heaven,” said J.R. breaking into laughter.

“Then let’s go to the laundromat for a grape soda and a Mounds,” said Cutbank. “We need to wash our socks.”

“You’re on,” said J.R.

The police cruiser followed them for the rest of the block, then turned off.

The man in the wheelchair had rolled up the card machine, taken a card, rolled forward, backed up once more and taken another card.

EIGHT

Five minutes after the police car had disappeared Cutbank pulled the Falcon off the road into the Violet A. Flomp rest area and got out. The rest area had been constructed with money the government had given the city of Boredemus when the ice cream cone plant had gone out of business. After a two-year battle, the town finally selected an eighth of an acre behind the landfill that bordered on a small yellowish stream named Turpentine Rush, after an early settler who had made turpentine and other spirits on its banks.

"I need a beer, and fast," said Cutbank.

"So do I," said J.R. and reached into the backseat.

Above them a bulldozer was pushing trash down the side of a hill where a picnic table and three rusting trash cans stood.

Hunched over the ground next to a small fire was a man was toasting marshmallows. He turned them until they were black, quickly pulled off the burnt skins and popped them into his mouth, then licked his fingers from palm to tips. He chewed the marshmallows slowly with his eyes shut, his throat moving up and down. He was small and hairy with big hands and long arms that stuck out of a yellow and blue flowered Hawaiian shirt. On his feet he wore sneakers with broken laces.

"Why, hello," he said. "Going my way?"

"Which way is that?" said Cutbank.

"I was heading to San Francisco, but I find I'm out of cigarettes."

"Have one of mine," said J.R., holding out the pack of Camels.

"I only like filter tips. Long mentholated filter tips."

"One of those, are you?" said Cutbank.

"I should hope so," said the man. "There's no other way to be."

He picked up the bag of marshmallows from the ground and put them into a knapsack that lay next to his feet. Then he rose and threw dirt on the fire, stirring it until there was no more smoke.

"I'm ready," he said staring at them, then started toward the car.

"Ready for what?" said J.R.

"Ready for anything."

"We haven't finished our beers," said J.R. "You'll have to wait until we do."

"How long will that be?"

"You can't rush a good beer," said Cutbank.

The man walked over to the Falcon and looked in the windows.

"Will we all fit in?"

"Little tight, but I think so," said Cutbank.

"Isn't that the way it always is."

Cutbank climbed in and pulled the door shut. J.R. finished his beer and joined him in the car. The man squeezed into the backseat.

"Like a beer?" said J.R.

"I don't really like beer all that much. It's too bubbly."

"What do you like, then?"

"Banana daiquiris."

"I should have known," said J.R.

"There's nothing wrong with banana daiquiris. Bananas are good for you."

"I'll take a beer anytime," said Cutbank.

"I'm Shepherd Windust, poet. My first book of poetry now sells for one hundred and eleven dollars in the rare book market, providing you can find it."

He opened the knapsack and held out a much worn book toward J.R.

J.R. opened it. One page had asterisks in each corner and one in the center. Another had "FUCK" written in large type surrounded by more asterisks. J.R. turned a third page and read:

he put

the bright

coins

into her ear

o

u

t

tumbled

cigarettes from her cunt

he reached in for the matches

“Who the fuck puts coins into a person’s ear for cigarettes,” said J.R.

“It’s a metaphor.”

“You know, don’t you, that there are certain machines” said J.R., “especially those in bus stations, that give you matches and no cigarettes. You have to see someone about getting a refund. You have it all wrong.”

“That’s not the way I meant it at all,” said Windust. “I don’t think you understand.”

“I do.” Said J.R. “I’m a big fan of poetry. Listen.”

‘Higgledy Piggedly

Oedipus Tyranos

Murdered his father, used

Mama for sex.

This mad debauch, not so

Incomprehensibly

Left poor Jocasta and Oedipus wrecks.’

Windust groaned.

“How about this one?”

“I don’t want to hear it. Will you please let me out?”

‘Higgledy Piggedly

Ivan the Terrible

Brought to his bedroom a

Girl in her teens.

Later she said to this

Sexagenarian

So that’s what ‘Ivan the

Terrible means.’

“I want you to let me out right now!”

“We’re not there yet,” said Cutbank

"I don't care. Just let me out!"

"You know what you should do?" said J.R. "You should go bowling three nights a week. Cleans you right out. Makes the blood really circulate. Roll a few frames and have a bowl of chili."

"LET ME OUT!"

Cutbank stopped the car. Windust got out and stood in the highway while the Falcon clattered off. He shook his head several times then held out his thumb.

NINE

"Fucking tourists," said Rex Magnum to himself as he leaned his six-foot-six inch body against the wall of the municipal parking garage for the man with a camera. In the street behind them Porkwinder's Buick backfired.

"Hey, look at that car," said Bailey Biggs. "I'll have to get a picture of it for sure. What do you think, honey?"

"It's too hot," said Lulu, the young girl who stood next to him. "I want to go back to the motel and lie down."

Bailey chuckled. "That's a wife for you. All excited to go somewhere, then wants to leave."

The Buick disappeared around the corner.

"You really a cowboy?" said Bailey's voice from behind the lens. "Never seen a real one before."

"Well, I sure as hell ain't no Chinaman."

"Hey, that's pretty funny. You hear that, honey," said Bailey. "Not a Chinaman. Hahahaha. Glad to meet you. My name's Bailey B. Biggs, tire salesman from Ft. Wayne. And that's my wife Lulu."

"Rex Magnum."

"How about one with my wife?"

He pushed Lulu forward. She didn't move and stood looking down at the pavement with her hands behind her back. Her small mouth was upturned at the corners. Her straw-colored hair stuck out from a blue bandanna, and the halter she wore fit tightly over her stomach.

"I don't want to," she said.

"Why not? It's only for a second or two," said Bailey. "Just a click and it'll be over."

"Do I have to?"

"It's for our scrapbook," said Bailey. "Don't you want to remember this moment? You don't mind, do you, Mr. Magnum?"

"Doesn't bother me."

"Go on," said Bailey. "Don't keep Mr. Magnum waiting."

Lulu walked slowly toward him.

"How's this," she said.

"Stand next to him, honey," said Bailey. "Closer. Closer. There. Now put you arm around her. That's it. Good. Good. Let me get another. Perfect."

"How about going back to my place and seeing my saddle," said Magnum in a low voice to Lulu.

"You can do all sorts of things on a saddle you can't do elsewhere. Think about it."

"You're gross," said Lulu and pulled away quickly.

"What's the matter?" said Bailey.

"Nothing," said Lulu.

"That looked pretty good," said Bailey. "I can hardly wait to have these pictures developed. I'll send you one."

"Do that," said Magnum.

"I want to go back to the car," said Lulu.

"Why?"

"I just want to."

She walked away. Magnum's eyes followed her.

"I'm sorry," said Bailey. "I really am. I don't know what happened. Usually she's not like this at all. Let me buy you a drink for your trouble."

"There's a place just down the street," said Magnum.

Bailey fell into step with Magnum's long easy strides. The bar they entered was deserted.

The paneling on one wall had several holes in it and the leather seats in some of the booths were torn. On the wall above the bar a Pabst Beer sign sputtered.

"Whaddayawant" said the bartender who squinted at them through a pair of thick glasses.

"A shot of redeye," said Bailey.

"Redeye?" said the bartender.

"Isn't that what all cowboys order in bars," said Bailey to Magnum.

"This guy a friend of yours?" said the bartender.

"He owes me a drink," said Magnum.

"Does he?"

"That's what I said. Now how about a couple of shots of your best whiskey."

The bartender took out a bottle with a plain white label on it and poured out two shot glasses, then placed them on the counter.

Bailey took a sip.

"Whew!" said Bailey. "That's pretty strong stuff!"

"It's not bad," said Magnum.

“Not bad,” said Bailey. “That’s another good one. Hahaha. You know, I still can’t believe you’re a real cowboy. How come you’re in a town like this?”

“It’s where the bus let me out. Good as any place,” said Magnum.

“This is just like being out west, isn’t it?” said Bailey.

“It’ll do. How old’s your wife?”

“Fifteen. I know she doesn’t look it, but people have been telling her that since she was eleven. She always seems to look older than she really is. She’s quite mature in many ways. Her secret is exercising and plenty of water.

“This is my second marriage. First one lasted almost twenty years. Lulu and I are on our honeymoon. She keeps me pretty busy.”

He finished his drink and Magnum ordered another.

“I didn’t order this,” said Bailey.

“I did,” said Magnum.

“What for?”

“Here’s to you,” said Bailey. “and your new wife.”

“Is this how cowboys do their drinking?”

“Only way there is. After a few more of these, we’ll go do some ropin’”

“Ropin’?” said Bailey.

“Sure my lariat’s all ready to go. Show you how it’s done. Just like in the movies.”

“I better go tell my wife.”

“Yeah. You better. Good idea. She can watch if she wants.”

Bailey straightened up from the bar, took a step and fell down. Magnum nudged him with a boot. Bailey didn’t move.

Magnum smiled and strode past the outstretched body to the street. He could see Lulu sitting in the car. He approached and tapped on the window. She looked at him.

“It’s your husband. We were having a couple of drinks and he passed out. Guess the excitement was too much for him. Is there anything I can do for you?”

Lulu winked.

TEN

J.R. and Cutbank stood in the doorway of the empty laundromat.

“Welcome to Jiffy Wash,” said J.R., reading from the orange and aqua signs that hung on the wall. “Your unattended, coin-operated, do-it-yourself laundry, open 365 days a year for your convenience.”

J.R. put his socks in the first washer then darted around the remaining machines, putting coins into the slots and turning each of them on.

“The sound of American ingenuity at work,” he said returning to Cutbank.

“Bring in and use your favorite bleach, bluing soap, and starch,” said Cutbank.

“Use as many machines as you need at the same time,” said J.R. as his eyes followed the signs around the room.

“Do your laundry in less than one hour. Always plenty of soft, hot water,” said Cutbank.

“If a machine is defective, please use another,” said J.R.

“Place an out of order sign on defective machine,” said Cutbank.

“Leave name and address in suggestion box for a prompt and courteous refund,” said J.R.

“I think some of the first words I learned to say were from the signs in a laundromat,” said Cutbank. “Every Monday my mother would haul me to the supermarket next door while the clothes were being washed. She always timed it so we got back just as the wash cycle was ending. Her timing was magnificent and one of the great mysteries of the world.”

A girl in a short denim skirt, boots and a sequined cowboy shirt peered in the door. Three trash bags full of clothes were at her feet. She was of medium height with brown hair and eyes.

“Look at that,” said J.R.

“I’m looking,” said Cutbank.

The girl held the door open with one of her bags then dragged in the other two. She straightened up and searched the wallet she held in her right hand.

“Do you have any change? I seem to be a little short.”

Cutbank and J.R. stepped toward her.

“What do you need?” said J.R.

“Quarters,” she said. “I’ve been saving them all week, but I needed cigarettes one night and used most of them up.”

“Quarters it is,” said J.R., putting his hand into his pocket and removed a handful, which he put on

the warped beaverboard table in the middle of the room.

“Take as many as you want.”

“Thank you.”

“You’ll have to wait a few minutes,” said J.R. “All the machines are being used.”

“All of them?”

“Yes. Can’t you hear it?” said J.R. “The heartbeat of a nation.”

“I’m going to be terribly late.”

“Let me buy you a candy bar and a soda while you’re waiting,” said J.R. “what would you like? The selection here is one of the best. Everything you need to start your day off right.”

“What am I going to do?”

“How about a Mounds and a grape soda?” said J.R. “The soda can taste like ink sometimes, but it’s not all that bad and it gets rid of the coconut taste.”

“There’s not another laundromat for blocks,” she said. “How could you possibly use all the machines? Who do you think you are?”

“I’m J.R. and that’s the Cutbank Cool. We’re on our way to see The Handsome Americans. We stopped in here so I could wash my socks because clean socks are important to the American way.”

“I don’t care about your clean socks! What am I going to do for clean clothing? I need clean clothes. I have to go to work in an hour and a half. You’re making me very angry and I don’t even know you.”

“What kind of work do you do?” said Cutbank.

“I sing at the Doowah Lounge from noon to one every Friday and Monday and sometimes on Wednesday. I want to be famous. I have to look my best. I’m the lovely and talented Darlene Darlene, Miss Chicken Parts of 1971. Perhaps you’ve heard of me?”

“I haven’t.”

“Nor have I,” said J.R.

“I’m sort of new in town.”

“You might as well just sit down and wait,” said Cutbank.

Darlene started to cry. “I thought today was going to be such a good day,” she said. “It was in my horoscope. Now look at me.”

“You look all right just the way you are,” said Cutbank.

“Do you think so?”

"Of course," said Cutbank. "I've been to eight circuses, three county fairs, six international festivals and you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

"Really?"

"Sure. I wouldn't kid you."

"Agreed," said J.R. "You look just fine."

Darlene Darlene stopped crying and looked at Cutbank.

"You're very nice. You really are. I can tell."

"Can you?" said Cutbank.

"Yes. I have an intuition about such things."

"Have you ever heard of The Handsome Americans? Said J.R. "Tell her Cutbank."

Cutbank lighted up a cigarette and was staring at Darlene Darlene, who fluttered her eyelids at him.

"I guess I better go check the machines," said J.R. "they seem to be stopping."

He rose and walked to the last washer, lifted the lid and looked in. When he had finished examining each one he returned holding a pair of white socks.

"All yours," he said. "The two on the end still have water in them and the yellow #8 hasn't shut off yet. #15 never went on and #7 leaks. The floor's pretty wet back there so watch out. What do you say we get going now? The Handsome Americans's are waiting."

"Must you go?" said Darlene Darlene.

"Yes, we must," said J.R.

"We have to," said Cutbank. "Or we're going to be late."

"Aren't you going to dry those socks," said Darlene Darlene.

"I just hang them out the window of the car," said J.R.. "They dry real quick that way."

"The Doowah Lounge," said Darlene Darlene. "Between noon and one. And I live two streets down. The motel by the gravel pit. Room 46A. I have my own bathroom and a microwave."

"I like microwaves," said Cutbank.

She smiled at him.

J.R. had gone out, opened the Falcon's door and grabbed a beer from one of the cases.

"He's waiting," said Darlene Darlene.

"Let him," said Cutbank.

ELEVEN

"You know," said Darlene Darlene," as she lay in bed. "My first lover had his left turn signal on when I met him. Left turn signals really got to me then. In his bedroom when we hit it just right this left turn signal he'd rigged up would start flashing. It was really something."

"You're really something," said Cutbank.

"Am I?" she said and turned her head to look intently at him. She still wore the cowboy hat. The toes of her boots made small pyramids under the sheets.

"Yes, you are."

"How do you mean?" said Darlene.

"As in special."

"Special?"

"Different," said Cutbank.

"Different, is it now? Can't you make up your mind?"

"I've already made it up."

She sighed. "Ooooooh, Cutbank."

"Can we do it again?"

"I'll be late for work," she said. "This job means a lot to me. I don't want to get a reputation for being late. Please don't get mad."

"I won't."

He fell silent.

"What are you thinking about?" said Darlene.

"Things," said Cutbank.

"Like what?"

"What it would be like to drink a bottle of mouthwash before we do it again. You see it all the time on TV and in the movies."

"Oh Cutbank, you say the sweetest things."

J.R. burst in, pointed a toy machine gun at them and fired.

"Not now, J.R!" said Cutbank as he sat up. "This isn't the time."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell you about it later."

“Now what am I meant to do?” said J.R. “First you leave me sitting in the car and now this,” he said and slammed the motel room door.

Cutbank climbed out of bed and dressed hurriedly.

“Where do you think you’re going?” said Darlene Darlene.

“I have to talk to J.R. It’s a game we play. There’s always this scene in a gangster movie where this couple is surprised in bed by a jealous boyfriend. It means a lot to J.R. to shoot.”

“Well, I think it’s stupid,” she said.

“You have to understand,” said Cutbank.

“I don’t. Don’t come back if you go.”

“I’ll be back. You just keep those boots on.”

“I told you,” said Darlene. “I won’t be here.”

“Sure you will.”

“I won’t. You’ll see.”

Cutbank closed the door. J.R. sat in the Falcon smoking a cigarette.

“Got another one of them?” said Cutbank.

J.R. took out a crumpled Camel from his pack and gave it to him. Cutbank lighted up.

“I’m sorry,” said Cutbank.

“Remember the time you spent with Pool Table Parrington?” said J.R.

“She’s not like that,” said Cutbank.

J.R. got out of the car and stood looking at the sky. An airplane flew above with a Pepsi sign that was tangled in itself. The plane yawed about.

“Shit,” said J.R.

“It’s not going to be all that bad,” said Cutbank. “Nothing’s going to stop us from seeing the Handsome Americans.”

“Won’t it?” said J.R. and flipped the cigarette to the ground.

“Nothing’s permanent,” said Cutbank. “You know that as well as I do.”

“That’s not it,” said J.R. “At least you could have played dead a lot better than you did. I got a reputation to keep up. I pumped you with ten rounds of .45 caliber ammo at close range.”

“Next time I’ll do better,” said Cutbank “I promise. You’re timing was just wrong, that’s all. You going to be all right?”

“I think I’ll hit some rocks for a while,” said J.R.

Cutbank watched him walk toward the gravel pit behind the motel. J.R. bent down, then straightened up, tossed a rock into the air and swung at it with a stick.

Darlene Darlene stood in front of the microwave oven that sat on a small white table next to the bureau with the cracked mirror.

“What are you doing?” said Cutbank. “Is everything all right?”

“I won’t get pregnant this way. I read about it in a magazine. Stand in front of a microwave for half an hour after lovemaking. That way nothing will happen.”

Cutbank looked at her.

“Well, it’s true.”

He closed the door, turned the microwave off and reached for her.

From the gravel pit he could hear the rocks clacking faster and faster off J.R.’s stick.

TWELVE

New Jersey Flemin' sipped his morning rum and coke and watched the girl with the long blond hair walk casually around the motel pool.

The sun was just getting warm. He pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead, and then closed his eyes. He counted to one thousand slowly, the time necessary for an even tan to start, put his glasses back on and opened his eyes. His skin was still pale except for the back of his very square hands.

The girl dove into the pool and swam with easy strokes, then stopped and hooked her arms on the edge of the pool across from him.

"Were you looking at me?"

"Of course," said New Jersey. "Let's have a drink. Then I can look at you some more."

She smiled, climbed out and stood in a dark silhouette against the sun. He could hear the water drip from her lithe body to the concrete then her feet padding across to him. She sat down.

"Thanks for the offer, but I have some good shit back in my room we can try instead and it won't give you a hangover."

"Sounds good." said New Jersey.

He tilted his glass up and the ice cubes bounced off his teeth, then clattered back into the glass as he sat it down on the small iron table.

"Just let me get my towel," she said.

"You don't need a towel unless there's nothing on underneath it."

She chuckled. "What do you expect me to wear after I shower?"

"Certainly not a towel."

She threw back her head and laughed. "You're OK. I'm in fifteen."

"Twenty-seven," said New Jersey. "Way down at the end."

"Mmmmm. Have to remember that."

"See that you do," she said.

He watched her walk ahead of him. Behind them the motel's buzzing red neon sign that read "ACANCY."

"We're here," she said.

She took the key from between her breasts and inserted it into the door, then turned the knob. The door swung open. The room looked the same as New Jersey's. Twin beds on a worn brown carpet

with several holes in it and matching wheat-colored bureaus with cloudy mirrors. The windows were covered with dusty Venetian blinds. The small closet had no doors. It held two dresses and three blouses.

“It’s not bad once you get used to it,” she said.

He walked to the bathroom and flushed the toilet.

“At least the toilet works in this one. The one in my room I’m never sure of. I’m New Jersey Flemin’, independent record producer from Bayonne, New Jersey. Maybe you’ve heard of me? I was written up in Rolling Stone a few years ago. I had a couple of underground hits.”

“Really?”

He came out of the bathroom and stood looking at her. She had wrapped the towel around her body. Her bathing suit lay in a pile on the floor. He smiled.

“It was mostly environmental stuff. A lot of natural sounds. When they were put together it was quite effective.”

“That sounds pretty interesting. I’d love to hear it sometime.”

“I’ve got a tape around somewhere. In one of the cuts you could hear the crickets then there were footsteps, a fly unzipping then a sound like a faucet. In the fadeout people were shouting ‘Help, help, help.’ Sold very well in the Midwest.”

“Muncie Charlotte,” she said. “But you can call me, Munchie and you can record me any time you want.”

New Jersey reached out his hand for her towel.

THIRTEEN

“Hey, J.R.?” said Cutbank from the door Darlene Darlene’s motel room. “We’re going to have a picnic.”

“What for?”

“Darlene Darlene wants one.”

“Well I don’t.”

“What’s wrong with a picnic?” said Cutbank.

J.R. put down his stick and came to where Cutback stood.

“I just hit about a million rocks. I don’t feel like a picnic right now.”

“A million?”

“Yeah. Give or take a few thousand. Really creamed a couple, too. Just took right off.”

“We’ll pick up what we need on the way to the Doowah Lounge.”

“You should have seen it,” said J.R. “It was really something.”

“Bet it was.”

“A million fucking rocks,” said J.R. “My hands are really going to sore. At least we won’t run out of beer. There’s nothing I hate worse than a picnic with no beer.”

“That’s for sure,” said Cutbank.

“Here,” said J.R., holding the sausage toward Cutbank. “Don’t need this anymore. It’ll be good for sandwiches.”

“There’ll be other times,” said Cutbank.

“Yeah, maybe there will be. Can I get some Peruvian Pilchard?”

“Of course.”

“And Ring Dings?”

“Why not?”

“Then what are we waiting for?” said J.R.

“Darlene Darlene’s not ready yet.”

“There were a couple I hit that I knew would be good ones—sounded just right. WHACK! WHACK!”

Darlene Darlene leaned against the side of the door and looked at Cutbank. She had put on lipstick and highlighted her eyes with violet eye shadow. Cutbank turned and walked toward her, picking up her guitar case from the floor. He carried it to the car and placed it on top of the beer cases in the back seat.

J.R. took his place behind the wheel. Cutbank held the door open for her as she slid in next to J.R. Then Cutbank climbed in beside her and closed the door.

“There’s an A&P on Goodly Street,” said Darlene Darlene. “It’s on the way. We can stop there.”

“We never go there,” said J.R. “I don’t like the muzak that’s played. I have a hard time concentrating on the tomatoes.”

“I think this time we can make an exception,” said Cutbank. “Have you decided on what you’re going to get?”

“Oh anything,” said Darlene Darlene “I’m not particular. The kind of thing you’d eat after singing and playing the guitar.”

“Boned chicken with Tabasco sauce,” said J.R. “with a Nehi root beer. Best stuff for you. Good for the sensory buds.”

They drove in silence. On the sidewalk next to them a girl passed in a skin tight tee shirt delivering pizza on roller-skates.

“I’ve got one for you,” said Darlene Darlene. “You must cross the river in a boat that will carry one animal or object besides yourself. You have a fox, a chicken, and a sack of corn. How do you get them across the river without giving the fox a chance to eat the chicken, or the chicken the chance to eat the corn?”

“I don’t know,” said Cutbank. “I’ve never heard this one before.”

“Neither have I,” said J.R.

“Take a guess,” she said. “Take a guess.”

“Have the fox eat the corn,” said Cutbank. “After that he won’t want to eat anything else.”

“Give them beer,” said J.R. “That’s what I’d do. Plenty of beer.”

“That’s not the answer.”

“What is it, then?”

“I can’t remember. I always forget it.”

“Then why tell the joke?” said J.R. “It’s no fun if you don’t know the answer.”

“But I do, I just forget it,” said Darlene Darlene.

“That’s stupid. You should write it down.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Come on you two,” said Cutbank. “I forget jokes, too.”

“Do you?” said Darlene Darlene.

“All the time.”

“How unconvertible,” said Darlene Darlene. “Go left here. The A&P isn’t much further. It will be on the right side with a big sign, you can’t miss it.”

“The first cockroach I ever saw was in the A&P in downtown Scranton,” said J.R. “Ran right through produce into cereals.”

“Ough,” said Darlene Darlene. “Cockroaches give me the shivers.”

“I remember how I used to catch them in my apartment,” said J.R. “I’d put some sugar out in a dish on the floor, then turn the lights out and sit in an armchair pretending to be asleep. I’d suddenly get up, turn the lights on and start wasting them. On a good night I’d kill a couple of hundred.”

FOURTEEN

“There!” said Mr. Watanabe, pointing to the Falcon in the A&P lot. “There!”

“That’s it,” said Porkwinder. “I’d know that car anywhere. Pull in! Pull in!”

Mr. Watanabe eased the Buick into the lot and brought it to a stop next to the Falcon.

“We have them now,” said Porkwinder. He got out of the car and peered in the window. Mr. Watanabe stood behind him.

“Come on.”

They walked to the entrance and put their feet on the rubber door mat. The door slid open with a whirl. The A&P was brightly lit. Polka music blared over the public address system.

“You go that way, and I’ll go this way,” said Porkwinder pointing to his left. “Don’t let them get away.”

Mr. Watanabe scurried off, leaving Porkwinder standing in front of the frozen food display.

He looked at the signs above the aisles, and then headed for the one that said peanut butter, jellies and preserves. The aisle was empty. A jar of apricot jam lay broken on the floor in a thick orange puddle.

Porkwinder stepped wide to avoid it and was hit in the legs by a shopping cart turning into the aisle.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going?” said the fat lady behind the cart. Her hair was in curlers. A cigarette hung from her lips. “You could have broken my eggs.”

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going,” said Porkwinder. “You were the one who hit me!”

“What did you say? I’ll show you where you’re going!”

She pulled the cart back and pushed it at him. Before he could gain his balance again she had hit him once more. He went down, his hand sliding through the apricot jam. The woman charged off swearing and calling for the manager,

Porkwinder rose slowly, his right hand covered with the sticky apricot.

“What’s going on here?” said a voice behind him.

Porkwinder turned around. The fat lady stood next to a man in a chartreuse blazer with “Orville” written over a pocket.

“She attacked me with her shopping cart,” said Porkwinder. “I was minding my own business.”

“I did not!” said the fat lady. “He was going the wrong way in the aisle.”

"You were, were you?"

"I was just looking for a couple of people I know," said Porkwinder. "I have to find them. It's important. Their car's outside."

"Have you some identification?"

"What?" said Porkwinder.

"Identification."

"What concern of that is yours?"

"Want me to call the police?"

"Police? I haven't done anything," said Porkwinder.

"Are you going to show me your identification or not?"

"All right. All right," said Porkwinder and dug into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet and gave it to Orville.

"Take it out of the wallet, please."

"This is ridiculous. See if I ever come here again. I'll write to the editor of the newspaper."

"Go ahead," said Orville.

"Don't you know who I am?" said Porkwinder.

"I don't care who you are. You just can't come in here like this and cause trouble."

"I wasn't doing anything. I know my rights!"

Orville studied the identification then took out a walkie talkie from his back pocket.

"Hey, Spike. I want you to check on one A. Porkwinder. 165392 South Zone Street. This city. I'll wait."

He stood poised with the walkie talkie to his ear. One hand held tightly to Porkwinder's wallet. The fat lady glared at Porkwinder.

"That's a roger," said Orville. "You're clean." He handed Porkwinder his wallet. "I suggest you find your friends, then leave as soon as you can. We don't like your kind around here. This a family supermarket."

"My kind? She was the one who ran into me. She knocked me over with her cart."

"Did you do anything like that?" said Orville.

"Of course not," said the fat lady. "I've been coming here for years."

"I'm sorry about this, ma'am. Just tell them at the checkout counter that the food you bought is on me."

The fat lady smiled and pushed her cart past them headed for the meat counter.

Mr. Watanabe poked his head around the corner of the aisle. "I find," he said.

"Who's that?" said Orville. "I've never seen him before."

"He works for me," said Porkwinder.

"Does he have any identification?"

"No. He was attacked and his clothes were taken."

"Is that right?" said Orville.

"Mr. Watanabe done over good. Maybe get pregnant."

"THAT'S IT! OUT RIGHT NOW!" said Orville.

"What about the people I'm looking for?" said Porkwinder.

"Look for them outside. I'll give you exactly one minute to get out of here. Then I'm going to call the police."

"See!" said Mr. Watanabe as J.R. and Cutbank came into view.

"Japs!" said J.R. "They're all over!" He opened a package of rolls on the shelf next to him and started throwing them at Mr. Watanabe.

"Quick! Run for the car," said J.R. "I'll hold 'em off."

Porkwinder picked up a roll from the floor and threw it at them. The roll missed and it bounced along the floor.

"Take cover," he said to Mr. Watanabe who had been dodging J.R.'s throws, then crouched down behind a freezer. The rolls stopped flying and the market fell suddenly quiet. J.R. was gone and the floor was littered with rolls. Orville was on the phone calling the police.

"Run for it!" said Porkwinder.

Mr. Watanabe rose and darted for the door with Porkwinder close at his heels. The Falcon was pulling out of the parking lot as they reached the Buick.

FIFTEEN

"You weren't kidding about that saddle," said Lulu. "Oh wow."

Magnum lighted a cigarette. The smoke went straight up and flattened out across the ceiling of his apartment.

"I can leave my husband if you want me to. We just got married. It happens all the time."

Magnum was silent.

"Isn't this just like the movies," said Lulu.

Magnum studied the smoke as it spread outward.

"I'm only fifteen, you know. I could get very pregnant from something like this. I think Bailey's queer or something. He hasn't gotten me pregnant yet. It's important to get pregnant. Don't you think so?"

Magnum took a long drag on the cigarette. Smoke covered his face as he exhaled.

"Do you think my breasts form a perfect "A" with my neck?" said Lulu. "Bailey was never sure. He even used a ruler once to check. It's very French if they do make a perfect "A." You're not French, are you? It wouldn't make any difference if you were. I just thought I'd ask."

Magnum crushed out the cigarette and lighted a new one.

"Are you going to take me away from here? After what we did that's the only thing you can do."

Magnum said nothing.

"I know a place we can go. The Poconos. We'll be safe there. We can stay at the place with the heart-shaped swimming pool and red satin sheets on the beds. I've seen the pictures. Who'd think to look for us there?"

Magnum put out the second cigarette.

"What's the matter? Did I say something wrong? Wasn't I any good? Say something. I'm not exactly inexperienced, you know. I'm a married woman. You can tell me. I'm good at keeping secrets."

Magnum stood up.

"Where are you going? Don't leave me here alone."

Magnum began to dress slowly. The buttons of his shirt snapped loudly as he squeezed them together. His belt buckle jangled off the zipper of his jeans as he tucked in his shirt.

"Why are you doing this to me? Lulu said, kneeling at his feet. "I mean it was wonderful, wasn't it?"

She started to cry. "I always cry at things like this, even in the movies or reading a book. I can't help it. Bailey never knows what to do when I cry."

Magnum sat in a chair that was covered with an old saddle blanket. He pulled on a pair of lizard skin boots which he had taken from among the row that stood neatly on the bureau. In the middle of the boots was a jar that held a set of bull balls.

"Am I going to see you again? What am I going to do if I can't. I'll kill myself. Then what would you do?"

Magnum poured out a glass of whiskey and sipped it while he looked out the window. In the street below a man in a battered top hat was walking a white duck on a long thin rope.

Magnum put the glass down and got his hat from the closet. He put it on his head and stood in front of the mirror looking at himself.

"You look nice. So handsome. But I guess all the girls tell you the same thing, don't they? Are you going to see another girl? I know I shouldn't be jealous, but I want to know anyway."

Magnum took a tin of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket and put a pinch between his lower lip and jaw, then chewed.

"Will you be coming back?"

He shot a stream of tobacco into the wastebasket.

Lulu rose quickly to her feet and blocked the door.

Magnum's jaws moved and he spat at her, the black stream hit her between the breasts and rolled down her stomach in the shape of a "Z."

SIXTEEN

"Where are you going so fast?" said Muncie as she rolled over to look at New Jersey. "We've just got started. You're not one of those freaks, are you who just use a poor helpless girl, then leave?"

"You're not helpless. Not at all. I just have to be at the Doowah Lounge."

"The what?" said Muncie.

"Heard about this girl who sings there."

"I sing," said Muncie.

"Do you?"

"Stick around and I'll show you what I can do," said Muncie.

"I'd like to, but I really have to go. It's important."

"More important than me?" said Muncie.

He kissed her.

"It's business. She could be just what I need for my next recording project We'll talk about your singing when I get back. You can count on it. She sings between twelve and one. There could be a lot of money to be made."

"Why didn't you say so.? I don't leave until Sunday," said Muncie.

"I'll remember that."

"See that you do."

He opened the door and walked over to his rusty red VW with a sun roof which he had left open. The backseat had been ripped out and replaced with two large speakers. The dashboard was full of knobs, switches and meters. He bent low to enter the car, then started the engine. The VW coughed into life and he drove it slowly through the parking lot and into the traffic. Without looking he reached into an old metal lunch box with Donald Duck on the front of it and took out a tape. He slipped it into the cassette and fiddled with the knobs. The beat of the bass made the VW hard to steer.

He turned left onto Equality Street and slowed down when he reached the front of the Dowah Lounge.

The tape ran out and the speakers hummed loudly above the clatter of the engine.

He parked and climbed out. The window of the pawn shop on the corner had been cracked. A man in rolled up shirt sleeves stared at it, then began to unroll tape which he placed over the crack. The Doowah was next to a shoe store, its windows full of dusty shoes that had been placed on a series of

steps

New Jersey opened the door of the Doowah and looked around. It was dark and smelled of stale beer. On the right hand wall was a deer's head surrounded by shelves packed with sports trophies and pictures of a bowling team. Underneath the shelves was a pitted shuffleboard carved with initials. The bartender, a girl with glasses, shuffled slowly in time to the music from the jukebox. A red bandanna covered her curlers.

To the left of the door a microphone had been connected to a small speaker that was fastened to the wall. The back of the room contained a pool table and a Space Invaders game which intermittently beeped and ka-chowed.

New Jersey leaned on the bar near the stage.

"I'd like a rum and coke," he said to the bartender. He watched her make the drink and bring it to him. "Where's the singer today?"

"Late."

There was a commotion at the door and J.R. and Cutbank entered. Cutbank held a guitar case. Behind him Darlene Darlene straightened her hat. J.R. took a quick survey of the bar then headed for the Space Invaders game.

Darlene Darlene walked to the bartender and ordered a glass of water, took a long drink then went to stand behind the microphone. She plugged her guitar into the amp that sat on the radiator and began to tune up. When she finished she stepped up to the microphone and started to sing in time to the strumming of the tiny sounding strings.

"This is a little something I wrote for my father. Eddie Mathews was his favorite baseball player.

Far a---away. Far a---way

Is Eddie Mathews

One of the NL's heavy hitters

In '53 he was top man

But now he's far a---way, far a---way."

J.R. scored a hit and the game exploded with a KATHUMP.

"Eddie, Eddie Mathews

We need you, Eddie Mathews

Heavy hitter that you are,

Far a---way, far, far a---way.”

The song ended and Darlene fumbled with the tuning pegs on the neck of the guitar.

“Now I’d like to play ‘The World is Waiting for a Sunrise,’” she said.

A man with a baseball cap and grease-covered overalls got up from his stool and began to sway back and forth to the music.

Magnum strode through the door of the Doowah and stopped. He winked at Darlene Darlene, then eased himself onto a stool by the side of the bar. The bartender had a draught beer waiting for him. Magnum reached into his pocket and slapped three quarters down on the counter.

“How’s she singing today?” he said to the bartender.

“Like she always does.”

Magnum took a long drink of the beer and closed his eyes as it went down his throat. He smacked his lips and shook his head.

“Hey you?” he said to the man in the baseball cap. “You?”

The man stopped his dancing, looked at him, grinned and took off his hat in a salute.

“Sit down. You’re blocking my view.”

“Wha?”

“Sit down!” said Magnum. “I can’t see!”

“See what?”

“Just sit down!”

The man put his hat back on his head and swayed toward Darlene Darlene.

“Do you know ‘Spanish Eyes?’”

She kept singing.

“Jesus wants me for a sunbeam,

A sunbeam.”

“Can’t you hear?” said Magnum.

“Yeah, I can hear,” said the man in the baseball hat. “What’s it to you?”

“I won’t tell you again,” said Magnum.

“Tell me what again?”

“To sit down!”

"I can't see if I sit down.

"A sunbeam, sunbeam

Jesus wants me for a sunbeam."

The song ended and Darlene Darlene took the guitar from her shoulder and placed it against the wall.

"Just sit tight," said Darlene Darlene, "and I'll be right back with more of your favorites."

The man with the baseball cap blocked her way to the bar.

"You gonna sing 'Spanish Eyes?'"

"I don't know it," said Darlene Darlene.

"You don't know 'Spanish Eyes'. Everybody knows 'Spanish Eyes'."

He began to sing.

"Spanish eyes. Spanish Eyes.

You got those Spanish eyes."

He took her arm and started to dance.

"Spanish eyes. Spanish Eyes.

You got those Spanish eyes."

Darlene Darlene looked quickly at Cutbank, who had put his beer down and was moving toward her.

"That's enough," said Cutbank and pulled the man's arm away. "I'll talk to her maybe I can get her to sing it. All right?"

"Yeah," said the man. "Just make sure she gets it right."

Darlene Darlene broke away.

"Hey you?" said Magnum. "You're still in my way. And so are you. I warned you."

Magnum rose to his feet and slammed his fist into the man's stomach and he went down, the baseball cap tumbling from his head. Turning away, Magnum shot his other fist into Cutbank's jaw. Cutbank staggered backward and fell against a table.

Before Magnum could hit him again, J.R. had taken a chair and brought it down onto Magnum's head. He crumbled to the floor and lay still.

"Are you all right?" said J.R. as he helped Cutbank to his feet.

Cutbank shook his head.

"I guess so. If this thing swells up anymore I'll have to eat with a straw."

"Poor baby," said Darlene Darlene and kissed him. "Poor, poor baby."

"Who is that guy?" said Cutbank.

"I don't know," said Darlene Darlene. "He's been coming here ever since I started singing. He keeps buying me drinks, which I don't want, and talking about a saddle he has in his room. He wants to show it to me in a big way. I think the two of you better get out of here. I can meet you later."

"There's a Kentucky Fried a couple of blocks away," said Cutbank. "We'll meet you there when you get done here."

"Excuse me," said New Jersey.

"Who the fuck are you?" said Cutbank. "Go away. Didn't you just see what happened? Whatever it is, we're not interested."

"How do you know? Here's my card."

He shoved it at Cutbank.

"I'm an independent producer," said New Jersey. "I can make your lady here a star. I think she's got something."

"I don't know," said Darlene Darlene. "I gotta get back and sing some more. My breaks almost up."

"I know what I'm talking about. Ask around. You'll see."

"Why don't you just get out of here," said Cutbank. "There's been enough trouble for one day."

"Yeah," said J.R. "Why don't you take a hike,"

"But I can help. I really can, if you'll only let me."

"Beat it!" said Cutbank.

"You're making a big mistake. I can make you all very rich. She'll never have to sing in a place like this again. Just give me a few minutes."

"No!"

"You heard what the man said," said J.R.

"All right. All right. But at least think about it. I'm going to be in town until Sunday."

J.R. took Cutbank by the shoulder and led him outside.

Magnum groaned.

SEVENTEEN

Magnum shook his head several times then rose unsteadily to his feet.

Darlene Darlene had begun to sing again. The bartender was bent over the table where the man in the baseball cap sat breathing heavily and shaking his head.

“What the fuck are you trying to do,” the bartender said to Magnum. “Put me out of business?”

“A place like this ought to be closed down,” said Magnum. “It’s not safe for a man to have a quiet drink anymore.”

“You started it,” said the bartender.

“Never would have happened if you’d watch the kind of people that come in here. Riffraff,” said Magnum. “Who hit me, anyway?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t watching,” said the bartender.

“Attacking a man while his back was turned with a chair,” said Magnum “I should sue.”

“Go ahead,” said the bartender.

“Real smart ass, aren’t you?”

The bartender shrugged.

“Where’s the other one?” said Magnum as he took a step toward the man in the baseball cap. The man in the baseball cap cringed.

“I would have gotten out of your way, Mister. Honest. Just don’t hit me again. I thought you were kidding. I really did. I didn’t mean for you to get mad.”

“You ever seen those two before?” said Magnum.

“No,” said the bartender.

“You better not be lying.”

“What if I am? Are you going to hit a lady?”

“Some lady,” said Magnum.

“You can always leave if you don’t like it here,” she said to him.

“Are you throwing me out?”

“That’s up to you.”

He surveyed the room, smiled at Darlene Darlene, then turned and put his elbow on the bar.

“How about a beer to show there’s no hard feelings?”

“All out,” said the bartender.

“So that’s the way it is, is it?”

The bartender didn’t answer. The man in the baseball cap had risen to his feet and was walking slowly around breathing deeply. His face was sweaty.

“Did you really have to hit me that hard?” he said to Magnum.

“How about a shot of whiskey,” said Magnum. He slapped a five dollar bill down on the bar. The bartender left it there.

“Isn’t my money any good here?”

“Has she sung ‘Spanish Eyes’ yet?” said the man with the baseball cap. “I don’t want to miss it. That guy was going to talk to her.

Spanish eyes. Spanish eyes.

Your Spanish eyes.....”

“I think you’ve had enough now,” said the bartender.

“How do you know?” said Magnum.

“It’s my job. If I say you’ve had enough, then you’ve had enough. I don’t want to call the police.”

“Police,” said the man with the baseball cap. “I don’t have clean underwear on. I’ll be arrested.”

Darlene Darlene was putting her guitar away.

“Hey?” said Magnum as he went toward her. “How about going to see my saddle?”

She snapped the lid of her guitar case shut and stood up.

“I’m serious,” said New Jersey. He stood by the door looking at her.

“Who are you?” said Magnum.

“New Jersey Flemin’ We’re talking business.”

“So were we.”

“I can really help you,” said New Jersey. “I know what I’m doing. You want to check me out; I can give you some people to call.”

“I don’t like to be rushed,” said Darlene Darlene. “I want to talk it over first.”

“Talk it over all you want. Call your mother, anyone.”

“He bothering you?” said Magnum.

“No.”

“You didn’t sing ‘Spanish Eyes’” said the man in the baseball cap.

“I will next time,” said Darlene Darlene. “I promise. Just for you.”

“She’ll sing it next time and just for me,” he said to the bartender. “How about one more?”

“Think it over,” said New Jersey. “I’m staying at the Watermelon Acres Motel. It’s not far from here. Room 27.”

He turned and went out.

Magnum reached down for Darlene Darlene’s guitar case.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Just helping.”

“I don’t want your help. I can manage myself,” said Darlene Darlene and snatched the case from his grasp.

“So you’re going to be like that, are you?”

“Yes. Now leave me alone!”

“You can tell your friends that Rex Magnum doesn’t forget. You understand?”

Darlene Darlene didn’t answer as Magnum stalked out the door.

EIGHTEEN

Magnum walked deliberately down the street toward his apartment. He climbed the stairs quickly and flung the door open.

Lulu had fallen asleep in the saddle. She woke up with a start and the light blanket fell from around her body.

“You came back. I just knew it.”

She got up and came forward to kiss him. He pushed her away, opened a cabinet drawer and took out his holster which he strapped around his waist, took the pistol from it and sighted down the barrel then spun the chambers of the six shooter before returning it to the holster. Then with a clean, quick motion, he lifted the saddle up to his shoulder.

“What are you doing? You can’t do that.”

Magnum said nothing.

“What am I going to do now?” said Lulu. “I don’t want to be left alone again. Please don’t!”

Slamming the door he strode back outside. There was the sound of a car backfiring and a large hot dog on wheels appeared from around the corner. It had BIG BILL’S DOGS written on the side in mustard-colored letters. Magnum stepped into the street with his pistol drawn. The hot dog screeched to a stop and the driver who was dressed as a mustard jar rolled down the window.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Magnum pointed his pistol at the mustard jar.

“I don’t want to have to use this,” said Magnum. “So don’t get any ideas, understand?”

The mustard jar nodded his head.

Magnum rested the saddle on the side of the hot dog then threw it over the middle of the brown curve and cinched it tight.

“You can’t do that!”

Magnum pulled the hammer of the pistol back, swung his leg across the saddle and kicked the side of the hot dog. The letter “D” broke loose and tilted downward.

“Follow that car,” said Magnum, pulling the pistol’s hammer back again with a loud click.

“What car?”

“Just shut up and drive!” said Magnum. “I don’t want to shoot you, understand?”

“You’re not going to get away with a stunt like this, you know?”

Magnum fired the pistol into the air. The mustard jar jumped and ducked back into the hotdog.

“Now go that way and don’t try anything.”

“Whatever you say.”

“That’s better. Take the next right.”

The hot dog slid around the corner into the street where the Doowah was located.

“Stop here,” said Magnum.

The hot dog squeaked to a stop and Magnum climbed off.

“Wait here and don’t try anything,” said Magnum. “I’ll be watching.”

He opened the door of the Doowah and walked in. The bartender looked up from her bowling magazine.

“What do you want?” said the bartender. “You’re not welcome here.”

“Where’d the girl go?” said Magnum.

“What girl?”

“The one who sings here. Where did she go?”

“I don’t know,” said the bartender.

“Does she have an address?”

“I didn’t hire her. The boss did.”

“Where can I find him?”

“He’s not here. Don’t know where he is right now.”

“Real helpful, aren’t you?”

The bartender didn’t answer. Magnum drew his pistol and emptied it at the line of bottles against the back wall of the bar.

“Now, I’ll ask you again!”

“All right! All right!” said the bartender. “I remember her saying something about going on a picnic at the town park.”

Magnum reached into his pocket and tossed a quarter at the bartender.

“That should cover it. And don’t get any ideas about calling the police.”

He turned and stalked out. The mustard jar leaned on the front fender smoking a cigarette.

“What was all that shooting about?”

“None of your business. Let’s get going.”

“Which way?”

“To the public park,” said Magnum.

“Public park?”

“Shut up and move out.”

Magnum took his place on the saddle while the mustard jar climbed into the hot dog and started the engine.

The bartender came to the door and watched the hot dog bounce off down the street. Magnum’s legs rhythmically kept time with the motion of the hotdog.

NINETEEN

“Something has to be done, Fulton” said Ephesus Totworth banging his hand down on the gray metal desk so hard the phone jingled. He hadn’t shaved and his face looked like it was out of focus. “The ratings stink. We can’t continue giving away balloons, golf balls, and autographed bowling shirts if people aren’t going to listen to us.”

The white paint on the cinder block walls had begun to peel and water from a nearby sink dripped into a brown coffee cup.

He reached for a tissue and blew his nose. “Cold doesn’t help, either.” His voice was nasally and rough sounding.

“I know what it’s like,” said Fulton. “You ought to take some of this,” he said and held out a bottle of Romilar CF.

“Does it work?” said Totworth.

“For almost anything, even warts.”

A sneeze shook Totworth’s body, then another. He wiped his eyes with the dry corner of the tissue.

“How long have you been with us now?”

“A while,” said Fulton.

“That’s what I’m talking about. It’s time for a change. We’re here to provide a service to our listeners.”

Totworth blew his nose again. The tissue ripped apart.

“Our play list was put together on the basis of a very detailed and extensive survey,” said Totworth. “It’s what our listeners want. What they demand.”

“Al Martino, Julius Larosa, Xavier Cugat,” said Fulton, “Kate Smith, Teresa Brewer, Liberace.”

“I like Liberace,” said Totworth. “I met him once in Gary.”

“Is he really as tall as he seems to be on TV?” said Fulton.

“I don’t think so,” said Totworth. “At least he didn’t appear that way. We need more. Something to really hit the mark, something to make people want to stay home and listen to us.”

He opened a drawer and took out a plastic covered report then held it up.

“Did you know that Boredemus is one couple away from reaching its one millionth marriage.”

“One millionth?” said Fulton.

"The statistics are right here. Marriage is American as hell, just like Richard Nixon and hotdogs."

"And apple pie," said Fulton.

"Exactly," said Totworth with a sneeze.

Fulton put his hands over his eyes and groaned.

"Are you all right?"

"I think I'm getting a headache," said Fulton.

"I know what I'm talking about," said Totworth.. "Demographics don't lie."

"I believe you," said Fulton, nodding his head. "I believe you."

"That's good. I'm glad you see it my way because I've figured out what we're going to do; we're going to cover that millionth marriage from coast to coast with you as the announcer. WART needs a new image. I think this will do it. It can't miss."

He sneezed once more.

"Coast to coast?" said Fulton.

"As of ten-o-three this morning all the necessary officials have been contacted. They're delighted to be of service. You'll go down in the annals of radio history?"

"I'd rather not," said Fulton.

"Why?"

"It's complicated," said Fulton.

"You're not a Commie, or anything like that, are you?" said Totworth.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"My parents are Republicans," said Fulton. "What about you?"

"Democrat. Someone has to do this show. Then what is it?"

"It's personal."

"More personal than the show?" Said Totworth. "You're not in any trouble are you because if you are I can make a few calls."

He shook his head

"Meatball Fulton isn't my real name."

"I thought it was something serious."

"It is to me."

"I don't care if you call yourself Spaghetti Joe," said Totworth. "The show must go on. Marriage is

what this country is all about.”

Meatball reached into his pocket for another bottle of Romilar and drank it down in one gulp as Totworth sneezed.

TWENTY

“Scenic,” said J.R. lighting up a cigarette as he gazed out over the picnic tables in a small grove of trees by the almost dry stream. “And with the distinct and memorable odor of trash.” Large blue metal cans overflowing with garbage had been placed next to each table. One had fallen over, spilling its contents onto the ground.

“This is just about my favorite spot in the whole world,” said Darlene Darlene. “Don’t you think so, too?”

“Of course,” said Cutbank.

“Right out of the pages of Modern Nature magazine,” said J.R.

“I just knew you’d like it,” said Darlene Darlene. “I get goose bumps just being here.”

She turned toward a table by a crumbling barbeque pit where Cutbank put the shopping bag.

“Darlene Darlene wants to show me around,” he said pulling her arm. “We’ll be back in a little while.”

“Yes,” said Darlene Darlene. “The sun is out. It’s a beautiful day and we’re away from that awful man in the bar. What could be better than that?”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said J.R.

He sat down and unbuttoned his shirt, then leaned back to face the sun. His skin was almost paper white

“Nothing like a little bit of sun on your pectorals,” said J.R.

Cutbank and Darlene Darlene wandered off toward the water fountain which stood in the middle of a cracked cement circle.

“Well,” said Darlene Darlene. “Here we are by the water fountain.”

Cutbank reached out and turned the knob. The fountain gurgled and sputtered.

“Guess it doesn’t work.”

“It never has that I remember,” said Darlene Darlene.

“You sang real well.”

“Think so?”

“Yes,” said Cutbank. “I used to sing, too and play the guitar. I had a terrible voice.”

“I don’t believe that,” said Darlene Darlene.

“It’s true. But you were really good.”

"Oh, Cutbank, you're so inconsistable."

She kissed him and they started back. J.R. was nowhere to be seen.

"J.R.? J.R.?" said Cutbank.

"What's the matter," said J.R. standing up in the stream bed. "Just looking for Italian Tuna. But I don't see any."

"Italian Tuna?" said Darlene Darlene.

"Yeah," said J.R. "Haven't you ever been a kid with a new fishing pole. Even minnows look like Tuna Fish. If you were lucky you could sell them to the Italians to put on their pizzas. I used to make about ten cents a week doing it around Scranton."

"I'm part Italian," said Darlene Darlene "and I've never heard of such a thing."

"You don't look part Italian," said Cutbank.

"On my father's side. I've got his feet. He was a wonderful man who worked in a ping pong ball plant. He was only fifty-one when he died. My mother never recovered."

J.R. laughed.

"What's so funny?" said Darlene Darlene.

"The things you say," said J.R. "You're a real original. You ought to be put on exhibit somewhere."

"I'm not a freak." She started to cry.

"I wish I'd never met either of you." She stamped her foot. "I want to go home right now!"

"We just got here," said Cutbank.

"I don't care. You're both picking on me."

"We're not picking on you," said Cutbank.

"Yes you are," she said. "I loved my father."

"Of course you did," said Cutbank. "Now stop crying, please. J.R. didn't mean anything."

"That's right," said J.R. "I have a father, too."

"So do I," said Cutbank. "They were both upstanding men who paid their bills on time, watered their lawns three times a week and took us to ball games."

"All right," Darlene Darlene said through her sniffles. "All right."

Cutbank kissed her.

"That was our first fight," she said in a serious voice. "I'm glad it's over."

"So am I. Now can we get back to the picnic?"

"Yes," she said. "I love picnics. Who were those people at the A&P?"

“Arnold Porkwinder and a Japanese spy,” said J.R. “Arnold’s our landlord. Real nice fellow if you know what I mean. Just watch out for that Jap, though.”

“Is he mad at you about something?” said Darlene Darlene.

“Why do you say that?” said Cutbank.

“He didn’t seem very pleased to see you.”

“That’s just the way he is.”

“What does he do for a living?” said Darlene Darlene.

“When he’s not bothering us,” said J.R. “he’s in the chrome business and owns a couple of apartment buildings.”

J.R. placed the contents of the bag on the table and sat down.

“Bologna, peanut butter, Ritz crackers, Twinkies, Nehi grape soda, cheese, ketchup, bread and plates. Looks pretty good,” he said. “Dig in while the beer’s still cold.”

TWENTY-ONE

Shepherd Windust sat down on a log that had fallen against the ruined wall of the Mazeppa Chewing Gum factory, just north of Boredemus off route 8094A. Through a hole in the bricks he could see the weeds and flowers growing over bits of glass that sparkled in the sun. The weeds crackled and swirled as if something was moving through them. He looked closer and could see a white shirt through the undergrowth.

“What’s going on down there?” said Windust in a loud voice.

The movement of the shirt stopped, then it straightened up. Windust found himself looking at Hackberry Feather. His tie was undone and his sleeves were rolled up to his elbows. His hands were covered with dirt and he was sweating heavily.

“Who are you?” said Feather.

“I am who I am. Found anything interesting?” said Windust.

“What concern is that of yours?”

“Just making conversation. Are you looking for buried treasure or burying a body?”

“None of your business,” said Feather.

“If that’s the way you feel,” said Windust. “I thought Boredemus was a friendly place.”

“I’ve had a rough day.”

“So have I,” said Feather.

“I guess that makes us even,” said Windust studying the bricks.

“I’m looking for worms,” said Feather.

“Worms?”

“Yes. What’s wrong with that? Have you ever looked for worms?”

“I can’t remember,” said Windust. “I had such a busy childhood.”

“I’m a worm salesman. The ones I was using for demonstration purposes died. I’m replacing them. I can’t sell anything that’s not alive. It’s not good for business.”

“I imagine it wouldn’t be,” said Windust.

“I could be fired,” said Feather.

“That wouldn’t be good. Need any help?”

“Sure,” said Feather. “Ever dug worms before?”

“I don’t like worms.”

"I felt the same way once," said Feather. "I remember when I first got to like worms. I had to dissect one in a biology class. It had six hearts. Imagine that! Best thing for the soil is worm droppings."

"You got a car?" said Windust.

"What do you want to know for?"

"Just asking."

"It's not mine. Belongs to the company I work for."

"It's yours to use, isn't it?"

"It is, but..." said Feather.

"That shouldn't make a difference," said Windust. "Tell you what? If I help you, will you give a me a lift to town?"

"There's a company policy against such things," said Feather.

"Look, I'm not going to beat you up or anything like that. I only want to get a pack of cigarettes."

"Hitchhikers are the ones you have to watch out for," said Feather. "You read about it all the time."

"Well, I'm not a hitchhiker. I just want cigarettes, then I'll be on my way. Do you want my help or not?"

Feather studied Windust through the hole in wall for a moment then wiped his own brow.

"You can get in around that way," said Feather, pointing to Windust's right. "There's an opening."

Windust followed the wall until he came to where Feather had pointed. The pile of bricks blocking his way were shoulder high.

"Just climb over," said Feather's voice from the other side.

Windust put his foot on the bricks, then one hand after another. He slowly made his way to the top of the pile, then climbed carefully down the other side.

"I'm Hackberry Feather,"

"Shepherd Windust," he said and shook the outstretched hand, which was damp with earth. Then wiped them clean on his trousers.

"This way," said Feather.

They walked about fifteen feet toward a clearing that Feather had made. His coat had been folded neatly on the ground. In the middle of the clearing the dirt had been turned over. Feather's worm cage lay on a large stone. Windust could see several worms wriggling in it.

"They're not Georgia Reds," said Feather, "but they'll do. You turn up the dirt and I'll grab the

worms. This is a pretty good place for them.”

“Is it?”

“Conditions couldn’t be better,” said Feather. “Plenty of moisture, rotted material and sun.”

Windust pushed the shovel into the earth. Feather’s hand shot out and he pulled at a worm.

“That’s a nice one,” he said, studying it. The worm thrashed about between his fingers. “It’s good and fat.”

He opened the top of the plastic cage and put the worm inside. It twisted violently, then dove from sight into the earth of the cage.

“I need to collect a few more, enough to fill my sample case,” said Feather.

“You really sell these things?” said Windust.

“Sure do. Not doing too bad, either. Why just this morning I picked up a lead from a couple of guys in a diner.”

“One wasn’t short and balding with a blue jacket, was he? said Windust. “The other would have been taller and wearing a black tee shirt?”

“You know them?”

“Not really,” said Windust. “They gave me a ride a while back. Never mentioned you, though.”

Feather studied the next shovelful of dirt. The sharp pointed tail of a worm twisted briefly in the air. Feather grabbed it and the worm lay twitching in the palm of his hand. Windust pushed the shovel into the dirt and turned it over. Three more fat worms wiggled. Feather quickly grabbed all of them and placed them into the sample case.

“That should be enough,” he said.

He picked up the sample case, grabbed his coat from the ground and started for the pile of bricks.

Feather watched Windust climb the bricks ahead of him, then scramble quickly down the other side.

“Car’s that way,” said Feather and started off toward where it had been parked. “I’m only going a couple of miles more. There’s a prospect I want to talk to in the trailer park. We do a lot of mail order, but whenever possible we like to check things out in person. We wouldn’t want the worms to go into the wrong domestic environment. It’s very important. A worm is a unique creature and we take great pains to provide them with good homes.”

Feather reached the car and placed his coat in the backseat, then took the shovel from Windust and placed it carefully in the trunk.

“What kind of work are you in?” said Feather.

“I’m a poet.”

“Are you? I’ll have to tell my wife about you. She loves poetry, especially Mother Goose.”

“I’m really not that kind of a poet,” said Windust.

“What kind are you, then?”

“I don’t write nursery rhymes.”

“You should, you know?” said Feather.

Feather climbed into the car, pushed the gas pedal down and turned the ignition. The engine raced. Windust got in next to him.

“Damn thing always sticks,” said Feather as he pumped the gas pedal then headed the car toward the highway.

Feather turned the car sharply and Windust slid across the seat and pressed against his thigh.

“What are you doing?” said Feather.

“You’re nice and firm,” said Windust. “Did you get that way from digging worms? I’ll bet you’re something in a bathing suit?”

“Oh my God!” said Feather. “You’re one of those.”

“I should hope so. I’ll send you my picture. I’m reading from a book of poetry dressed in feathers. It’s really something!”

Feather brought the car to a sudden stop and scrambled out onto the shoulder of the road. He stood looking at Windust through the windshield.

“What are you afraid of?” said Windust. “I think we’d be good together.”

Feather shook his head.

“Well, if that’s how it’s going to be. Ta ta, love. Think of me sometime,” said Windust as he placed himself behind the wheel and sped off.

Feather ran after the car for a few yards then stopped.

The highway was deserted. The sun beat down and he started to sweat.

A car shot by blowing its horn then a truck full of chickens in crates lurched past, feathers floating behind it. A station wagon coming from the other direction slowed as it approached. He saw an arm arc, then a bottle shattered at his feet, another flew over his shoulder. He heard laughter as the station wagon moved away. He could see the top of a small rise and looked backward where he saw a silver car speeding along toward him.

He stood in the middle of the road waving his arms as it approached. The car screeched to a stop. The driver stuck his head out the window and shouted at him in what sounded like Japanese, then got out and began jumping up and down.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” said Porkwinder. He had opened the car door and stood by the front bumper looking at Feather.

“My car was stolen,” said Feather. “I need a ride into town.”

“Likely story.”

“It’s true. It really is, I wouldn’t kid you. I have a reputation for honesty. I even won an award for it. A ten pound bag of Snow Cones.”

“Who stole it?” said Porkwinder.

“A guy named Windust. He was looking for cigarettes so he stole my car to go find some.”

Mr. Watanabe stared at him through the windshield.

“It’s true. I can give you a phone number to call. I stopped to replenish my supplies. It’s a company car. I could get into a lot of trouble. I have to get it back.”

“What do you think, Mr. Watanabe?” said Porkwinder.

“Pull fingernails out with pliers, then he talk.”

“Now just a minute,” said Feather. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Mr. Watanabe likes to joke now and then. He thinks he’s still back in Japan.”

“You give me all names of women in black book,” said Mr. Watanabe. “Then we go for ride.”

“I don’t have any black book,” said Feather. “And I don’t know any women. I’m a happily married man.”

“Make no difference. Mr. Watanabe can wait.”

“What business are you in?” said Porkwinder.

“Investments.”

“Oh?”

“The initial outlay is small, but the returns can be substantial.”

“Get in,” said Porkwinder. “I’m always looking for new investments. And don’t try anything because Mr. Watanabe will be watching.”

Mr. Watanabe followed Feather to the car and motioned for him to sit in the front seat.

“Now Mr.....?” said Porkwinder.

“Feather. Hackberry Feather. I’d give you one of my cards, but they were in my coat pocket, which

was in the car.”

“Never mind. Tell me about this investment business you’re in.”

“All the brochures were in the car along with my sample case.”

“Do the best you can,” said Porkwinder.

“The sample case really illustrates the full nature of the investment. You can fully judge the product for yourself.”

“That’s the only way to do things.” Said Porkwinder.

“What business are you in?” said Feather.

“Chrome,” said Porkwinder. “I’m Arnold Porkwinder.”

“Arnold Porkwinder? That’s funny, isn’t it?”

“What is?” said Porkwinder.

“I was going to come by and see you later today. I got your name from a couple of guys at the diner this morning.”

“STOP!” said Porkwinder. “STOP!”

Mr. Watanabe hit the brakes and the car spun. Feather fell against the dashboard.

“OUT!”

“What? I don’t understand. What did I do?”

“OUT!”

“Aren’t you interested in hearing what I have to say?”

“NO!”

Porkwinder opened the door and pushed him out. The door slammed and the car sped away, spitting pebbles into Feather’s face.

TWENTY-TWO

“Hey?” said J.R. in the middle of a bite of his sandwich. “Look at that.”

The hot dog came rolling into view.

“It’s that crazy cowboy,” said Darlene Darlene. “He’s found us.”

The motorized hot dog turned onto the grass and bounced toward them. Magnum stood up in the saddle and began to swing his lariat. Cutbank pushed Darlene Darlene under the table then dodged Magnum’s throw, which knocked the sandwich from J.R.’s hand.

“You fucker!” said J.R. He watched the circling hot dog then jumped off the table at Magnum and tipped it over. He missed and tumbled to the ground.

Cutbank who was crouching low beside Darlene Darlene, sprang at the hotdog. Magnum’s boot hit him in the stomach and he toppled over. The lasso left Magnum’s hand and neatly circled Darlene Darlene. She screamed and grabbed at the table as the hot dog backed up and stopped on Magnum’s command. Magnum leaped off and took a short piece of rope from his shirt pocket. He tied her ankles and wrists together, put his bandana in her mouth, then reached down and looped his arm under the rope and lifted her onto the saddle. He climbed behind up her and the hot dog started back across the park toward the road.

J.R. ran after it then stopped and headed back for Cutbank.

“You all right?” he said.

“That son of a bitch,” said Cutbank holding his stomach. “That fucking son of a bitch.”

He stood up slowly, took a deep breath and started for the Falcon. J.R. followed then took his place behind the wheel. Cutbank seated himself and slammed the door. The Falcon’s tires peeled as it shot off.

“Oh boy!” said J.R. “Just like the movies.”

“Yeah, just like them,” said Cutbank with a groan.

“You’re not going to get sick, are you?” said J.R.

Cutbank shook his head.

“We’ll get ‘em,” said J.R. “Just you wait and see.”

The hot dog turned left.

“Where the fuck’s he going now?” said Cutbank.

Magnum looked over his shoulder at the Falcon then drew his pistol and fired. J.R. swerved.

Magnum fired again. The bullet hit the front tire and the Falcon bumped to a stop. J.R. got out.

“Our last good tire and he has to shoot it!”

“The hell with the fucking tire!” said Cutbank. “He has Darlene Darlene!”

Porkwinder’s car came around the corner by the poultry market and headed toward them. J.R. saw the car coming and walked slowly into the street and stopped. The Buick yawed to the right and went up onto the curb.

“YOU!” said Porkwinder out the window. “YOU! RUN THEM OVER!”

Mr. Watanabe obediently put the car into reverse and aimed it at J.R.

“Jam in your jello, Arnold. I’m not moving. If you run me over it will be murder.”

“Murder? You’re the ones who are criminals.”

“What about you, you little gook, do you want to be a murderer, too?” said J.R.

“Mr. Watanabe no gook. Show you.”

He opened the door and began to dance about, chopping the air with hands. “Know how to dance, sexy.”

“Get back in here!” said Porkwinder. “Right now. Do you hear me?”

“We need your help, Arnold,” said J.R.

“Yes, we really do,” said Cutbank. “In a big way. I know we’ve had our differences, but this is an emergency you can’t ignore. An outrage against humanity.”

“A national disgrace,” said J.R. “Surely you can’t deny us.”

“There’s a cowboy on a hot dog we have to find,” said Cutbank. “He has something of great value and we want it back.”

“What is it?” said Porkwinder.

“I don’t think this is quite the time or place to discuss such matters,” said J.R.

“Oh, you don’t, do you?” said Porkwinder.

Porkwinder had taken the wheel and was heading the car straight at J.R.

J.R., Cutbank, and Mr. Watanabe jumped onto the curb, the Buick’s tires hit the cement with a loud hiss then Porkwinder turned and the car came back toward them.

“Can’t you do something?” said Cutbank to Mr. Watanabe. “He’ll kill us all.”

“Mr. McKinley, you better cash in your check,” said Mr. Watanabe.

They scrambled onto the hood of the Falcon as the impact of the Buick knocked the side mirror into the street.

"Now you've done it, Arnold," said J.R. "Our car's ruined."

"Car? A piece of junk, if you ask me."

"That car's been through a lot," said J.R. "It's an historical landmark. We're thinking of giving it to the Smithsonian."

"How do you expect us to find that hot dog now?" said Cutbank.

"I don't care about the hot dog," said Porkwinder. "I want my money."

Porkwinder backed the Buick away. The chrome on the hood had cracked and the bumper was pushed inward. Water from the crushed radiator ran out over the street.

One side of the Falcon had been caved in under the weight of the heavier car. The windows had shattered over the seat and a door was sprung open. Beer dripped loudly onto the floor of the backseat.

"Demolishing a man's car is one thing," said J.R. "Ruining beer is another. You're our witness, you saw what happened. I'm going to sue."

"Mr. Watanabe know nothing. Lips zippers."

"That figures," said J.R. "Anybody who eats raw fish has got to be strange. You sure you're not a commie?"

"Mr. Watanabe card carrying American citizen. Know names of all presidents. Washington, Lincoln, Tyler, Millard Fillmore."

"Can't we talk this over, Arnold?" said Cutbank.

Porkwinder glared at him.

The Buick's radiator hissed menacingly.

"I want my money," said Porkwinder.

"Exactly," said J.R. "Everyone wants money; don't you know that yet, Arnold?"

"Eight hundred and four dollars and four cents," he said and opened the Buick's door.

"That works out to about one hundred cases of beer," said J.R.

"I want my money," said Porkwinder.

"Let's settle this like gentlemen and make our country proud," said J.R. "I'll flip you for it."

"No," said Porkwinder. "The money is mine you owe it to me."

"We'll flip baseball cards until one of us is cleaned out. And no out of bounds."

"I'm not going to flip you for anything," said Porkwinder.

"Sure it is, Arnold and we understand that," said J.R.

"Come on, Arnold," said Cutbank. "What have you got to lose?"

"We'll even throw in our yacht and summer house next to the bowling alley," said J.R.

"What are you talking about? You don't have a yacht."

"Sure we do," said Cutbank. "We just never mentioned it before."

"I bet."

"Mr. Watanabe like yacht. Go fishing for bluegill."

"Watch out what you say, Nip," said J.R.

"You watch what you say. Mr. Watanabe responsible citizen. Boy Scout leader. Own two and one half cars and have one and three-quarter children."

"You're not married," said Porkwinder. "It wasn't on your W-2."

"Mr. Watanabe waiting for mail order bride from Sweden, then play backseat bingo."

"Why don't you be quiet!" said J.R.

"Don't talk to him that way," said Porkwinder.

"Why not?" said J.R.

"Don't you have any respect for anything?"

"We respect you, Arnold. I'm going to name my first son after you. Think of that. I can see it now."

"Bullshit! I want my eight hundred and four dollars and four cents."

"Of course you do," said J.R.

"We understand how you feel," said Cutbank.

"Yes," said J.R. "It's all a matter of economics."

"I'VE HAD ENOUGH!" said Porkwinder and lunged at J.R who stepped aside. Porkwinder staggered then regained his balance.

"Temper, temper," said J.R. and side stepped to his left. "We're just kidding."

"You're blowing this all out of proportion," said Cutbank. "We were just asking for help."

"Yeah," said J.R. "Don't you have any civic pride in helping others?"

"Of course I do," said Porkwinder.

"Then are we going to flip or not?"

"WATANABE!" said Porkwinder.

Mr. Watanabe jumped in front of J.R.

"Get the cards," said Porkwinder.

Mr. Watanabe darted back to the Buick, opened a door and returned with a stack of baseball cards.

TWENTY-THREE

“Look at the stats on this guy,” said J.R., studying the back of the card he held. “A .209 average with the Mets in 1970 and a couple of homers in fifty-one games. And what about this? No homers and thirty hits in seventy-four.”

“We don’t have all day, J.R.,” said Cutbank. “We have to find Darlene Darlene.”

“We will,” said J.R. “Just give me a few minutes. That’s all it should take.”

“Hmmmph,” said Porkwinder.

“In 1973 while playing for the Pirates he hit .223,” said J.R. “And in 1974 he was at .218.”

J.R. flipped the card. It slid close to the wall of a boarded up feed store.

Porkwinder grunted, then crouched low and released his card toward the wall. It blooped forward and fell short of J.R.’s card.

“You lose that one,” said J.R.

He rose and picked up the card.

“I’ve always wanted this guy’s card,” said J.R. “Hit .141 in 1970 with one homer and three runs batted in. In 1971 he had twenty-two hits and no triples for a .204 average.”

Porkwinder was huddling with Mr. Watanabe.

“None of that, Arnold,” said J.R. “It’s against international rules to consult with foreigners, especially Japs.”

Mr. Watanabe stiffened. “Mr. Watanabe good American citizen. Watch All Star wrestling and send away for six Chop-o-Matics.”

Mr. Watanabe flicked his wrist back and forth while Porkwinder watched him, then took a card from his pack and turned to face J.R.

“I want Cutbank to look at that card,” said J.R.

“What for?”

“I want to make sure that nothing has been done to it,” said J.R.

“What are you implying?” said Porkwinder.

“I want Cutbank to look at it, that’s all.”

“We have to go, J.R.,” said Cutbank. “We really do. I don’t know if there’s going to be time to check the card.”

“All right. All right,” said J.R. “One more flip, okay?”

Porkwinder knelt down on his right knee and the card go. It hit the wall and didn't bounce back.

"Nice toss," said J.R. "I'm not even going to be close. Ready to concede yet, Arnold?"

"Concede?" said Porkwinder. "You're the one who's about to lose the card."

"We'll see about that," said J.R. He shuffled loudly through his cards.

"J.R.?" said Cutbank.

J.R. removed a battered looking card which he flipped toward the wall. It floated silently through the air, stopped, fell and slid under the edge of Porkwinder's card.

J.R. got up and studied the two cards.

"I'm closer," he said. "It's all over now, Arnold."

Porkwinder glared at him and tossed a second card. It hit the wall hard and bounced back behind J.R.'s first card.

J.R. lighted a cigarette and blew a large smoke ring.

A car screeched to a stop and a door opened, then slammed. Shepherd Windust stood in the street looking at the wrecked cars.

"Well, well, look who's here," said J.R. "Arnold, I'd like you to meet Mr. Windust, world reknown poet."

Porkwinder said nothing and flipped another card.

TWENTY-FOUR

Meatball Fulton reached into his pocket for a bottle of Romilar CF. He loosened the cap and drank deeply.

“War wound,” he said looking at the Reverend Weed. “Makes the pain less.”

The reverend cracked his knuckles. “Which war?”

“Vietnam.”

“Oh, that one. Never there myself, but I know all about it, I’ve been doing a lot of reading. We shall have to compare notes sometime. I’ve been trying to imagine what it was like.”

The reverend stopped cracking his knuckles and leaned toward Fulton on his elbows.

“You’re doing a great thing for mankind,” he said. “May you find your pathway to heaven clear and bright as the bottom of an angel’s ass as he bows before our gracious Lord?”

“I understand,” said Fulton. “It’s just like Woodstock all over again.”

The reverend looked at him.

“Is it? I never thought of it that way.”

“You should,” said Fulton.

“Hmmmmmm.”

“Had to be there,” said Fulton.

“Were there really that many naked people?”

“Depends on who you were and what you mean by naked.”

“I see,” said Weed. “That puts things in a whole different light.”

“Yes. It does,” said Fulton.

“But getting back to what I was saying. This marriage will put that sacred institution back on the map. God’s love will be magnitudinous. Is that stuff you’re drinking any good?”

Fulton smiled.

“Just think, in this new age of communication what this will mean! The ejaculation of marriage will once again be sacred to the touch. Oh, Lord, bless us with thy benevolence and take our sins away to China.”

“That sounds pretty good,” said Fulton.

“And there among the yellow heathen may there be indulgence, for indulgence is the road to the Devil’s heart. Indulgence! Only in purity, body, and flavor may we live God’s life to the fullest.”

“Want to try some?” said Fulton. He held the Romilar toward Weed. “It’s peace, love, and cherry flavored.”

“Surely you must know what I’m talking about?” said Weed.

“I’m not sure.”

“Satellites!” said Weed. “That’s where it all is. Satellites, the heartbeat of the universe.”

“It will make you feel good,” said Fulton. “Let you see God.”

“In one swoop they can unite man and the great beyond in the sanctity of holy matrimony. Think of that! What transcendation.”

Fulton took another sip of the Romilar and put the bottle in front of Weed. He reached out, took the bottle and smelled the contents, then took a sip and smacked his lips.

“Now you’re cooking,” said Fulton.

“Did you know?” said Weed, “that David’s adulterous love for Bathsheba began when he found her bathing naked on a rooftop? And what of the Israelites in Egypt who marked their doors with lamb’s blood?”

“What about them?” said Fulton.

“They’re all connected, don’t you see? Marriage. David’s adulterous love. The blood of the lamb. Faith will be restored. Is there any more of that stuff?”

Fulton put his hand into the pocket of his field jacket and removed another bottle, which he passed to Weed.

“Yes,” said Weed. “To have been chosen for such an event is surely one of God’s great miracles.”

“You were convenient,” said Fulton. “WART is a block away and our ratings stink.”

“Look into your soul—what does it tell you? Is it better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman?”

“Whatever you say is all right with me,” said Fulton. “I have full authorization to tell you so.”

“When will things start?” said Weed.

“As soon as the lucky couple shows up.”

“I see,” said Fulton.

“The plan is to interrupt the local news and go nationwide with the coverage.”

Weed said nothing as he sat back in his chair, eyes glazed.

TWENTY-FIVE

“There!” said Mr. Watanabe pointing to his right. He ran into the street in front of the oncoming car and karate chopped and kicked at it. The car screeched to a stop.

Windust rolled down his window. “What the fuck?”

“You come out,” said Mr. Watanabe. “Or I come in and grab by onions!”

“The fuck you will!” said Windust and rolled up his window.

Mr. Watanabe lunged quickly at the car and grabbed at a door handle it opened and grabbed for Windust.

“All right,” said Windust who got out and stood in the street. “All right.”

“Who is this guy?” said Windust.

“Mr. Watanabe,” said J.R. “Don’t piss him off.”

“We need your car,” said Cutbank.

“But it’s not my car,” said Windust.

“You’re driving it, aren’t you?” said Cutbank.

“I am. But it still isn’t mine.”

“Whose is it, then?” said Cutbank.

“I can’t remember his name,” said Windust.

“I’m sure he’ll understand our predicament,” said Cutbank. “It’s an emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?” said Windust.

“Darlene Darlene,” said Cutbank.

“Who’s that?”

“Don’t you know?” said Cutbank. “She was Miss Chicken Parts of 1971.”

“And she sings at the Dowah Lounge,” said J.R. “You’d like her. Even Mr. Watanabe knows about her and he’s not even from around here. He works for Arnold.”

“Who?” said Windust.

“For me. Arnold Porkwinder.”

“Is that really your name?” said Windust.

“Well, at least it’s not Windust.”

“I’ll have you know that Windust is a very old and respected name.”

“So is Porkwinder.”

“Can you two stop for a minute?” said Cutbank. “There are more serious matters to discuss.”

“Like what?” said Porkwinder. “A person’s heritage is something important and nothing to make fun of.”

“Darlene Darlene,” said Cutbank.

“You’ve already told us about her,” said Windust. “What’s her heritage?”

“She’s from a solid and upstanding family who eat three meals a day. And now she’s been kidnapped,” said Cutbank. “We need the car to find her.”

“Now wait a minute,” said Windust.

“There isn’t any time to spare,” said Cutbank. “We have to find her before—”

“Before what?” said Windust.

“Before something happens to her,” said Cutbank.

“Yeah,” said J.R. “This cowboy’s got her.”

“He’s driving around on a hotdog,” said Cutbank.

“And a real mean fucker, too,” said J.R. “Tried to rope us like we were steers. And he shot out our last good tire.”

“You expect me to believe something like that?” said Windust.

“It’s true,” said J.R. “When we find him we’re going to let Mr. Watanabe lose.”

“It really is,” said Cutbank.

“Ask anyone, they’ll tell you,” said J.R. “He’s got a rope, boots and a six-shooter.”

“Don’t listen to a word they say,” said Porkwinder. “They owe me money and they’re not to be trusted.”

“The decision really isn’t mine to make,” said Windust.

“We’ll make it for you,” said Cutbank.

Mr. Watanabe had climbed into the car and was sitting behind the wheel. “All set,” he said. “Ready to go. Catch big hotdog.”

“Get out of there!” said Porkwinder.

“Don’t yell at him like that,” said J.R. “He’s only a foreigner who doesn’t know any better.”

“Mr. Watanabe like it here. Put in water bed and get some girls.”

“I’m not going to tell you again!” said Porkwinder.

“You no fun. He who sits in movie theater seat gets bubblegum on his ass,” said Mr. Watanabe as he opened the door and got out.

“That happened to me once,” said J.R. “I didn’t get it stuck to my ass, though. It got stuck to my shoe.”

“Did it?” said Cutbank.

“I had to get a whole new right shoe,” said J.R. “And it never fit me quite like the old one.”

“It didn’t?” said Cutbank. “You never told me that before.”

“Too tight,” said J.R.

“Shoes can be like that; don’t you think so, Arnold?”

Porkwinder didn’t answer.

“I had to buy a whole new a pair of shoes after that, but they never did fit right,” said J.R. “I paid a lot of money for them, so it just goes to show you. My feet were sore for months all because of some stupid bubblegum.”

“Enough! What about the car?” said Cutbank. “We’ll bring it back once we find Darlene Darlene.”

“I’d like a deposit to cover any damages,” said Windust.

“Damages?” said J.R. “It’s not even your car.”

“I feel responsible for it,” said Windust.

“Deal,” said J.R. and reached into his jacket pocket. He brought out a pencil and crumpled piece of paper. “Just sign here and make sure you read the fine print.”

“I’m not reading any fine print,” said Windust.

“The fine print is where it’s at,” said J.R. “You had your chance.”

“Fuck you!” said Windust.

Cutbank opened the door and sat behind the wheel. J.R. slid in next to him.

“You coming, Arnold?”

“I have an investment to protect in you two. I’m not going to let you out of my sight. I wouldn’t want you to get any ideas.”

“Ideas? Whatever do you mean?” said J.R.

Porkwinder said nothing and pushed Mr. Watanabe into the backseat ahead of him.

“What about you?”

“Think I’ll stay here,” said Windust. “I’ve got my cigarettes now and I feel a poem coming on.”

Cutbank turned the ignition key on, put the car in gear and started off.

TWENTY-SIX

New Jersey Flemin' looked at the man in the road, brought the VW to a quick stop, backed it up then opened the door for Hackberry Feather.

"Where you headed?"

Hackberry hesitated.

"What's the matter?" said New Jersey.

"I was brought up not to accept rides from strangers."

"I'm not a stranger. Here's my card with all the necessary contact information. I'm an honest businessman." He dug into his shirt pocket and produced a card.

"So am I," said Feather.

"What have you got to lose?"

"I'd rather walk," said Feather.

"Don't be silly. Do you want a ride or not? I don't have all day."

"I guess I really don't have a choice," said Feather. "My car was stolen. I have to get to the nearest phone."

"Well, keep an eye out, then," said New Jersey. "Just let me know when you see one and I'll stop."

Feather slid into the front seat.

The street was flanked by empty lots. Three of them had 'For Sale' signs which were just visible above the weeds. In one lot was a large wooden crate where a naked man stood and gave them the finger then began shouting and throwing grass.

New Jersey rolled down his window. "Fuck you, too!" he said. "Got to put people like that in their place."

"It was a company car," said Feather.

"What was?"

"The car that was stolen," said Feather.

"What company?"

"Deluxe Worms, Inc."

"Never heard of them," said New Jersey.

"We're very strong in rural areas," said Feather. "Why did this have to happen? I'm finished."

"It can't be that bad."

"It is," said Feather. "A company car just doesn't get stolen."

"How did it happen?" said New Jersey.

"I gave a guy a ride. He helped me dig some worms, so I thought he was all right, but he wasn't."

"Nothing wrong with that," said New Jersey.

"He wanted to send me his picture."

"One of those, eh?" said New Jersey.

"The worms could die. They need constant care. I'll have to pay for them if that happens."

"I guess you do have a problem," said New Jersey.

"There's a phone," said Feather pointing down the street.

New Jersey pulled the VW to the curb underneath a billboard with a ripped beer sign. Feather got out and stepped into the phone booth. He put a dime into the slot and it jingled out. He hit the coin return lever and put the dime in again. It jingled out once more. He shook the phone and tried again. Nothing happened.

"Damn!" he said. "Damn! It doesn't work. Now what am I going to do?"

"Isn't that the way it always is?" said New Jersey. "There'll be others."

Feather walked back to the car and seated himself.

"It's not the end of the world," said New Jersey.

"Yes it is. In such emergencies I'm meant to let my boss know immediately. I don't know how long I've been waiting because my watch stopped. Arrangements will have to be made. There are customers to service."

"I understand," said New Jersey. He drove in silence then said. "Do worms make any sort of noise?"

"Noise?" said Feather. "Not that I know of. They're really very quiet."

"What about when they move, fight, or mate?"

"They're clean and decent creatures," said Feather.

"Certainly when they're squashed there must be some sort of noise?"

"That's an awful thing to say," said Feather. "How would you like to be squashed?"

"I'm an independent record producer. Been thinking of recording some more environmental stuff to balance my catalogue."

"I don't think recording squashed worms would be a very good idea," said Feather.

"Who said anything about squashed worms?"

"You did," said Feather.

"It was just an idea."

"Anyway, who would buy that stuff?" said Feather.

"There's people out there who'd buy almost anything if you market it right."

"There's another phone," said Feather.

New Jersey eased the VW toward the phone booth by a barber shop. Through the window he could see a man in a raincoat reading a comic book as he waited for his hair to be cut. On the floor next to his bare feet was a cardboard box.

Feather climbed out of the VW and walked to the phone booth. He pushed in the door. The receiver had been torn away, leaving only a silver cable dangling from the phone box.

"Look at that! Another one that doesn't work! This isn't my day!"

"We'll find one," said New Jersey. "They can't all be broken."

"I hope not. I'll really be in trouble then."

"If worst comes to worst, I'll take you back to the motel I'm staying at and you can phone from there, only reverse the charges."

"I wouldn't think of doing it any other way," said Feather.

"Worms are essential to life, aren't they?" said New Jersey.

"Yes."

"That's why I thought of them," said New Jersey. "They're elemental. It wouldn't hurt to try and record them, would it? Think of the implications."

"No. I guess not. Just don't squash them," said Feather.

"I knew you'd see my point," said New Jersey. "Tell you what? Why don't you sell me a few worms and leave the rest to me. I'm going to be here until Sunday. I'll give you and your company the proper credit, of course."

"That would be nice," said Feather. "And certainly it would help get me off the hook. The basic starter kit is \$38.52."

"That sounds reasonable."

They turned a corner and saw the Buick and the Falcon.

"I know that car with the chrome," said Feather "I'd know it anywhere. The guy who was driving it gave me a ride then threw me out."

"Why did he do that?" said New Jersey.

“I met these two guys earlier who gave me his name as a lead. Somebody named Porkwinder. That’s his car. I guess he didn’t like worms.”

“Not everybody does,” said New Jersey. “Tell you what? Forget the phone.”

“But I have to let them know what happened.”

“If we find the car,” said New Jersey. “It won’t make any difference, will it?”

“No.”

“Well, then?”

“All right,” said Feather.

“I’ve got some recording equipment back at the motel. I want to show you what I can do. I want to get started right away. Just a few basics first, then I’ll work up from there. I think recording worms will be big.”

“I thought you said you were going to find the car?” said Feather.

“I am. It won’t take long. We’ll have the rest of the day to look for the car.”

Feather didn’t answer and was staring at a phone booth with a woman in it. She wore a bikini and held a small Pekinese dog on her arm. In front of her was a plastic bag full of coins.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Want to sit in front,” said Mr. Watanabe, climbing over the seat between J.R. and Cutbank who was driving.

“What the—? “ said Cutbank. The car swerved.

Mr. Watanabe fell backward.

“Fuck, Arnold, can’t you watch him? What’s the matter with you. Cutbank’s trying to drive?” said J.R.

“Yeah,” said Cutbank. “He could have killed us.”

“Mr. Watanabe want to drive.”

“You can’t. This isn’t your car,” said J.R.

“Not your car, either. Mr. Watanabe good driver. Tell,” he said pointing at Porkwinder.

“He’s my chauffeur.”

“I don’t care,” said J.R. “You stay there or I’ll feed you to the fish.”

“Mr. Watanabe like fish.”

“Just stay there. Understand?” said J.R.

Mr. Watanabe shook his head and put his front leg into the front seat. J.R. took hold of it and pushed it back. Mr. Watanabe toppled into Porkwinder’s lap.

“Watch out! What do you think you’re doing?” said Porkwinder as he shoved him away. Mr. Watanabe put his other leg over the seat.

J.R. grabbed the foot and bit Mr. Watanabe’s ankle.

“AIEEEE! MAMA MIA!”

Mr. Watanabe bounced up and down on the back seat holding his foot.

“What did you do that for?” said Arnold.

“He didn’t listen,” said J.R.

Mr. Watanabe was suddenly quiet then started flipping baseball cards at J.R.

“You fucking little slant,” said J.R. “I should have wiped the floor with you when I had the chance.”

Watanabe threw the cards back.

Cutbank brought the car to a stop. “That’s enough! How do you expect me to drive with all this going on?”

“Mr. Watanabe drive,” he said lunging for the front seat. “Nothing bother.”

"I won't tell you again," said Cutbank. "Keep your feet and baseball cards where they belong. Otherwise, you can get out right now."

Cutbank reached back and opened the door. Mr. Watanabe stared at it then looked back at Porkwinder, J.R., and Cutbank. They were expressionless.

"Mr. Watanabe be good."

"That's more like it," said J.R.

Mr. Watanabe pulled the door shut and sat very still. Cutbank started the car and headed toward the ice cream cone. Mr. Watanabe found Feather's briefcase where it had been jammed under the seat and was looking at it.

"Is that yours?" said J.R.

"Finders keepers," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Put it back," said J.R.

"Maybe full of girlie pictures," Mr. Watanabe clicked the latches. The lid sprang open.

"Worms!" said Porkwinder. "The whole thing's full of worms!"

"They jiggled. They jiggled. They jiggled," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Hey?" said J.R. "I bet they belong to that guy we met this morning."

"Yes, they must," said Cutbank.

"I bet this is his car," said J.R. "We gave him your name, Arnold because we thought you might be interested."

"I wasn't," said Porkwinder.

"Then you've met him?" said J.R.

"Yes."

"It's really quite a deal if you think about it," said J.R. "Worms are a good investment for the future. We're going to buy a dozen sets."

"A dozen?" said Porkwinder.

"It's big business, Arnold," said J.R. "Entrepreneurism—what this country is built on. We'll be just like you. Maybe we can work something out."

"Never!" said Porkwinder.

"We should let our lawyers handle it," said J.R. "What do you say, Arnold?"

"I wouldn't deal with you if you offered me a million dollars," said Porkwinder.

"What about two million?" said J.R. "I think we can raise that much."

"Where would you get that much money?" said Porkwinder.

"It's a secret," said J.R.

"If you've got that much money, then where's my eight hundred four dollars and four cents?"

"You always have a way of spoiling things, Arnold," said J.R. "You really do."

"I want my money!"

"Can't we talk this over later" said Cutbank. "We're almost there."

"Where?" said Porkwinder.

The ice cream cone came into view and Cutbank began to slow the car for the turn into the parking lot.

"Why are we stopping here?"

"Ever been inside, Arnold? It's an engineering marvel."

"I have better things to do," said Porkwinder.

"Then I guess you better wait here while we take care of business," said J.R.

"Business?"

"You'll see," said J.R.

Cutbank turned the car into the parking lot at the foot of the ice cream cone and stopped.

Four rusted girders held the cone upright. Worn metal stairs led into the dark interior, heads could be seen peering over the painted nuts and faded brown topping.

Cutbank opened the door, stepped out and crossed the parking lot toward the metal stairs. J.R. got out and stood by the car smoking a cigarette. He flicked it away and followed Cutbank up the stairs.

The circular steps that wound toward the top of the cone had no handrail. Every ten steps a small bench had been set into the side of the wall. Light bulbs, most of which were broken, hung on the wall in small cone-shaped holders.

"I used to know how many steps there were," said J.R. "but I've forgotten."

"I can't remember, either," said Cutbank.

Porkwinder puffed behind them.

"You're not really going to climb all these steps, are you?" said Porkwinder.

"You got a better idea?" said J.R.

"I think I'll wait in the car."

"Do whatever you want, Arnold," said J.R. "I'm going to start counting. One. Two. Three."

Mr. Watanabe stood in the entrance looking up at J.R. and Cutbank.

“Wait for Mr. Watanabe,” he said and scampered toward the steps.

“Thirty,” said J.R. “Thirty-one.”

Porkwinder grunted loudly followed climbing with slow steps.

“Fifty-six,” said J.R. “Fifty-seven. Fifty-eight. Just don’t look down, Arnold. Seventy. Seventy-one. Seventy-two. Seventy-three.”

Porkwinder had stopped climbing and was backing down to let a group of four people pass him. Above him Cutbank, J.R. and Mr. Watanabe disappeared from sight in a curve of the stairs.

“One-fifty-three. One-fifty-four.” J.R.’s voice echoed off the iron walls.

Porkwinder began climbing again. A very young boy ran past him and out the door. The was followed by an older man who was carefully descending the steps. He saw Porkwinder and shook his head at him. Once on the ground, the man stood for a moment looking back into the dark of the cone.

“Good luck,” he said then turned and went outside.

“Two-fifty-one. Two-fifty-two.” J.R.’s voice was getting fainter then it stopped. “Hey, Arnold? Where are you?”

“Here.”

“Where’s that?” said J.R. His head appeared far above him.

“What are you doing down there, Arnold?” said J.R.

“None of your business.”

“We’re almost there,” said J.R. “You better catch up. We’ll give you a couple of minutes, then we’re going to move on. So hurry up.”

J.R. fell silent. The only sound that could be heard in the cone was Porkwinder’s feet scraping on the steps.

“Can’t wait any longer, Arnold. We’re going on,” said J.R. “three hundred. Three hundred-one. Three hundred-two. Three hundred-three.”

Porkwinder hurried his steps.

“Nine-sixty. Nine sixty-one. Nine sixty-two. Nine sixty-three.”

Porkwinder looked up and saw Mr. Watanabe’s face staring at him from the doorway at the top of the cone.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it, Arnold?” said Cutbank. “You gotta dime?”

“What do you need a dime for?”

“It’s important,” said J.R. “You can put it on our account.”

"Your account! Who do you think you are? I nearly killed myself getting up here and you want me to give you a dime?"

"I wouldn't ask just anyone."

"It's an emergency," said Cutbank. "I'm out of change."

"You and your emergencies," said Porkwinder.

"Don't be such a spoil sport," said Cutbank.

"You always ruin everything," said J.R. "You really do. What would your mother think? "You keep my mother out of this."

"Then give me a dime," said J.R.

"All right. All right," said Porkwinder. He searched his pockets then held out a dime. Cutbank took it and put it into the slot of a large pair of metal binoculars that swiveled on a metal post.

"Ought to find them now," he said.

"What are you doing? I thought you said it was an emergency. I want my dime back," said Porkwinder.

"It is," said J.R. "Can't you see that?"

"Looking through binoculars is an emergency?"

"Oh, all right," said J.R. and rummaged through his pants pocket and gave a dime to Porkwinder who stared at it, then threw it to the ground.

"Now, now," said J.R.

"I see them," said Cutbank. "I see them. They're headed toward the railroad tracks. We got them now."

He pulled back from the binoculars and ran quickly down the stairs.

"Let's go, Arnold," said J.R. "You're holding things up again."

"There's not much time! Hurry!" said Cutbank.

"Hurry yourself!" said Porkwinder as he walked slowly toward the car. "What's so damned important about finding this girl, anyway?"

"She could be hurt or something worse," said Cutbank.

"Cutbank's in love," said J.R.

"I am not."

"You ready yet, Arnold?"

"Don't rush me."

"We've got to go right now, Arnold," said Cutbank and started the engine.

Porkwinder took his place in the back seat next to Mr. Watanabe.

"This time you stay put," said J.R. "Understand English?"

"Mr. Watanabe understand plenty. Rich American want nice Japanese woman? Five dollar. No questions asked."

"If he wasn't a friend of yours Arnold," said J.R. "I'd belt him one."

"You really in love?" said Porkwinder.

"What business is that of yours?"

"Yeah," said J.R. "We don't ask you stuff like that, do we?"

"I'll make it my business, and I'll ask him whatever I want until you pay me what you owe me."

"Oh, come on, Arnold," said J.R. "We've been through this before."

"And we will again until I get some satisfaction that you're going to pay me."

"Now, just a minute," said J.R. "We've got a list of things that have to be fixed in that apartment."

"Yes," said Cutbank. "By our calculations we don't owe you a cent."

"What?"

"Zero!" said J.R.

"That's right," said Cutbank. "The curtains in the bedroom are all wrong. The refrigerator door squeaks. And we don't like the color of the paint used in the kitchen."

"You what?"

"It doesn't match the stove."

"It doesn't match anything," said J.R. "Not even the toilet seat."

"And then there's the matter of the refrigerator," said Cutbank.

"What's wrong with it?" said Porkwinder.

"The light doesn't work and we can't see anything," said J.R.

"What do you know about apartments?" said Porkwinder. "Do you have any idea what it costs to keep a place like that nowadays?"

"Obviously more than you're willing to spend," said Cutbank.

"We have a pretty good idea of what you're doing, Arnold," said J.R. "We should report you."

"Yeah," said Cutbank. "We should."

"Go ahead," said Porkwinder. "You won't get anywhere."

"We'll see about that," said J.R.

“We sure will,” said Cutbank.

“We have enough to send you up the river for life,” said J.R.

“Like hell you do!” said Porkwinder.

“We want a new toilet seat,” said J.R.

“No.”

“What do you say, Mr. Watanabe?” said J.R.

“No use toilet seat.”

“There you are,” said J.R. “The perfect solution.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

“What’d I tell you?” said New Jersey as he stood in the doorway to his motel room. “I’ve got enough stuff here to fill a good-sized recording studio.”

The small room was crammed with microphones, tape decks, speakers and a control table which had been put up over one of the two beds that were in the room.

“Want anything to drink?” said New Jersey.

“I really think we ought to find my car,” said Feather.

“We will,” said New Jersey. “We will. I just wanted to show you what I was talking about.”

He flipped a switch, took a microphone from a stand and placed it over the toilet, then flushed it. A rushing sound roared over the speakers. He snapped the microphone off.

“What do you think, eh?” said New Jersey.

“I don’t know,” said Feather.

“Should work just fine with your worms.”

“I guess so,” said Feather

“You guess so?” said New Jersey.

“Well, it sounds like it would work.”

“You better believe it!” said New Jersey. “I’ve got a good feeling about this project. Now all I need are some worms.”

“I’ve got a sample case in my car,” said Feather “It’s full of worms. I could spare a few.”

“But your car’s not here,” said New Jersey. “Wouldn’t it be just as easy to dig them up?”

“Depends on where you dig,” said Feather.

“Are there any good places around here?”

“I’m sure there are,” said Feather. “Just have to look.”

“Think there’s be anything out front?”

“You just can’t go digging worms wherever you please, you know,” said Feather.

“Why not? Aren’t worms everywhere?”

“They are,” said Feather. “But one must be careful.”

“Why?”

“Because you must know where the right conditions are before you dig.”

“I don’t care about that,” said New Jersey. “I just want worms.”

“You can damage them easily if you’re not careful. I told you that I’ve got just what you’re looking for in my sample case. They’re not Georgia Reds, but they’ll do. Nice and fat, too.”

“How do you know?” said New Jersey.

“That’s part of the training we go through. I’m convinced a setup like yours will be able to pick up any sound they make. We just need to find my car.”

“You’re not just saying that?” said New Jersey.

“No.”

“And nothing else will work as well?” said New Jersey.

“I don’t think so.”

“What are we waiting for, then?”

“I don’t know,” said Feather

“You all set to go?”

“Let me go to the bathroom first,” said Feather

“Right through there.”

“Been holding all day,” said Feather.

“Know the feeling. Wait a minute. I want to record you. Keep the door open.”

“I’m not sure I can wait,” said Feather.

“You’ll have to.”

New Jersey turned on the tape deck and held the mic next to the open door.

“Okay,” he said.

The sound of Feather pissing into the toilet filled the room.

“Hey, that was pretty good,” said New Jersey. “You couldn’t do it again just to make sure I got it?”

“No,” said Feather. “Certainly not.”

Feather stood in the bathroom door zipping up his fly.

“Where do you think the car would be?” said New Jersey.

“I don’t know. It was pretty low on gas. Maybe we should try the gas stations first.”

“Good idea. Where will we start?”

“Just drive around, I guess, said Feather “until we find someone who remembers the car. Couldn’t miss it. A bright yellow Dodge driven by a man wearing a flowered Hawaiian shirt.”

“What if we don’t find the car?” said New Jersey.

“Then I’ll really be in trouble and you won’t have worms to record.”

“We’ll just have to find it, won’t we?”

“We certainly will,” said New Jersey.

“I couldn’t face my wife otherwise.”

“Been married long?” said New Jersey.

“Nineteen years. No children. But we’ve got a lot of worms, eleven cats and my wife raises fish.”

“Nineteen years is a long time.”

“I never thought about it much,” said Feather.

“I would have.”

“Then you don’t know what marriage is all about.”

Feather followed him out the door and into the car.

“Gas stations?” said New Jersey.

“Yes,” said Feather. “I’ll see that you get mileage.”

New Jersey backed the VW out into the parking lot and headed toward the street.

The pool in front of the motel was empty except for a half-submerged beer can.

TWENTY-NINE

“What do you want to know about the car for?” said the gas station attendant, bending down to look into the sun roof. Behind him a pile of tires had been loosely stacked against the wall by the air pump. “You cops?”

“No. Of course not,” said New Jersey.

“Got any identification?” said the attendant.

“What for?” said New Jersey.

“I want to see it.”

“I told you we’re not the cops,” said New Jersey.

“Then who are you?”

“We’re looking for a yellow car with a guy in a flowered Hawaiian shirt driving it,” said Feather. “You couldn’t miss him.”

“You got a draft card?” said the attendant.

“I’m too old for that sort of thing,” said New Jersey.

“Don’t you believe in fighting for your country. What are you anyway? I’m going to call the police.”

“You do that,” said New Jersey. “We’ll be waiting right here.”

“You don’t really mean that, do you?” said Feather.

“Why not?” said New Jersey. “I pay my taxes just like everyone else. Who does that guy think he is? I got my rights. I want my day in court. Invasion of privacy, that’s what this is all about.”

“Now what am I going to do?” said Feather. “First my car gets stolen and now were going to be arrested. I’ll lose my job for sure.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said New Jersey. “If you do get fired, I can always use a man like you.”

“Can you?”

“Of course. There’s a big future in the independent producer business.”

“Is there?” said Feather.

“Sure, look at me.”

“What would I be doing?”

“Lots of things,” said New Jersey. “The best way to learn a business is from the bottom up.”

“I’ve always liked music,” said Feather. “I used to play the ocarina.”

“Did you?”

"I was in a band with six others. I played the bass. We did well in nursing homes."

"Nursing homes?" said New Jersey.

"There was this one place that asked us back five straight weeks. We'd play at lunchtime just as everyone finished eating."

"Experience like that would certainly be an asset," said New Jersey.

"Would it?"

"Yes," said New Jersey. "How can expect to know what's going on unless you have the right kind of experience."

"That's true."

"Of course it is! I started out counting the number of chartreuse cars that were in a mall parking lot then sawed frozen fish into squares. I knew music from listening to the radio while I worked," said New Jersey. "I knew I could make better records so I saved my money until I had enough to go out on my own. I just quit one day. Made my first record a few months later. Did well in Dayton and Fargo. I was on my way."

A police car pulled up, its siren blaring.

"We're in trouble now," said Feather.

A policeman got out and approached the car. A second officer followed him.

"Let me see your license," he said.

New Jersey reached into his pocket for his wallet.

"What about you?"

"It's in my car," said Feather.

"Is it?" said the first policeman.

"It's been stolen," said Feather.

"What has?"

"The car," said Feather. "It had my wallet in it."

"Out! And spread 'em," said the first policeman.

"We haven't done anything," said Feather. "He's helping me to look for the car."

"Out!"

"I want my lawyer," said New Jersey.

"Do you now?" said the first policeman.

Feather opened the door. The policeman grabbed his arm and pushed him against the side of the

VW. A second officer opened the driver side door and pulled New Jersey out.

"I'm entitled," said New Jersey. The second policeman frisked him.

"You're clean," he said.

"So is this one."

"What's your game?" said the first policeman.

"Game?" said New Jersey. "We're not playing a game. We're looking for a stolen car. His car."

"That's the police's job," said the first policeman.

"We're just trying to do our civic duty," said New Jersey. "We didn't want to bother you. This is a very private matter."

"It's a company car," said Feather. "Something had to be done. I could get into a lot of trouble."

"You're in a lot of trouble already," said the first policeman.

"What are we charged with?" said Feather.

"Two counts of DWPFWL and one of AAO, paragraph 2a.1."

"What are those?" said New Jersey.

"I'll let the judge tell you," said the first policeman.

"Judge?" said Feather. "I'm ruined now for sure. I can't go to court."

"Sure you can," said the first policeman. "Make a man out of you."

"I'll never be able to face my wife again," said Feather.

"You should have thought of that before," said the first policeman.

"Isn't there anything to be done?" said Feather. "Can't we work something out?"

"Are you trying to bribe me?" said the first policeman.

"Nothing like that," said Feather. "I just thought."

The two policemen huddled for a moment.

"Since you brought it up, there might be a way. I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression of me."

"Of course not. We'll do anything," said Feather.

"Midgets," said the first policeman. "If you're willing to donate some money to the Indignant Policeman's Home for midgets, I'm sure the judge would take that into consideration. He respects men who appreciate midgets. It's really quite a good cause when you think about it."

"How much do you have on you?" said New Jersey.

"Nothing," said Feather. "My wallet was in the car."

“Just make sure you pay me back,” said New Jersey pulling out his wallet and opening it.

“I will.”

“It just so happens,” said New Jersey, “that I have some money that I don’t know what to do with.

Would fifty-five be enough?”

The first policeman shook his head. “I don’t know how the judge will feel about that. Sixty-two fifty.”

“Sixty,” said New Jersey.

“Sixty-two eighteen and half cents.”

“Sixty-two eighteen and one quarter cents.”

“Deal,” said the policeman. That’s most generous. I’ll talk to the judge myself. Once he sees your hearts were in the right place, I’m sure he’ll drop the charges.”

They watched as the police got into their car and drove off with its lights flashing.

THIRTY

"Faster! Faster!" said Mr. Watanabe from the backseat of the car. "They get away."

"What are you talking about?" said Cutbank. "You can't even see them."

"Suddenly shots rang out," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Will you be quiet!" said Cutbank. "I won't tell you again."

"Neither will I," said J.R.

"Have to go bathroom," said Mr. Watanabe. "Where next Howard Johnsons?"

"You'll have to hold it," said J.R.

"Cross your legs," said Cutbank.

"No wait. Must go now."

"Can't you train him any better, Arnold?"

Cutbank brought the car to a stop in front of an alley. Mr. Watanabe bolted out the door and stood behind some trashcans then returned.

"All right now," said Mr. Watanabe. "Let's go get 'em, Ace."

"Is everyone else all set?" said Cutbank.

"Yes," said Porkwinder.

"I'm hungry," said J.R. "Can't we stop someplace?"

"You just ate a little while ago," said Cutbank.

"I know, but I feel like a chicken enchilada," said J.R.

"We can't stop now," said Cutbank.

"Then let me out," said J.R. "I'll hitch back and meet you at the Airplane later."

The car didn't stop.

"Hey, come on," said J.R. "I really am hungry."

"Cross your legs," said Mr. Watanabe.

"How do you like that?" said J.R. "Already he thinks he's one of us. Is she really worth it, Cutbank?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Watanabe ready for anything," he said and hooked his leg over the front seat. "Want to be up front where action is."

"Arnold, I'm not going to tell you again about keeping him back there!" said Cutbank.

"Why don't you come back here and see if you can do any better?" said Porkwinder.

"I'm driving," said Cutbank.

"I'll switch with you," said J.R.

He turned in his seat, put his leg up and rolled over into Porkwinder's lap.

"Hey, watch it!" said Porkwinder. Mr. Watanabe scrunched against the side of the car.

"Now you, Arnold. I'll help you get started."

Porkwinder tried to put his foot over the seat.

"I'm stuck," he said.

"Just a minute," said J.R. He put his shoulder under Porkwinder's body and pushed. "Don't give up. Keep trying, Arnold."

"I am. I am."

J.R. grunted.

"It's no use," said Porkwinder. "I can't make it."

"I can't see out the back window," said Cutbank. "You'll have to do something quick."

"YEEEEOWWWW!" said Porkwinder and crashed into the front seat. "Who bit me?"

"Wasn't me," said J.R. "I wouldn't think of doing such a thing."

Mr. Watanabe stared out the window at a garbage truck that had fallen over on its side.

"Was it you?"

Mr. Watanabe didn't answer.

"It was, wasn't it?" said Porkwinder. "You're fired."

"How'd you like to work for me?" said J.R.

"Now wait a minute," said Porkwinder.

"You just fired him," said J.R.

"I didn't mean it," said Porkwinder.

"I see great managerial potential," said J.R. "Put him in a suit, give him a briefcase and who knows? You interested in going into management?"

"Mr. Watanabe want to be manager for sure."

"I'm thinking about opening up a chain of anchovy ranches. What do you say?"

"Forty sixty," said Mr. Watanabe.

"Now wait a minute," said J.R.

"Thirty seventy," said Mr. Watanabe

"You can't do that," said J.R.

Twenty eighty.”

“I was thinking of fifty fifty,” said J.R.

“Deal,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“I was kidding,” said Porkwinder. “I’ll give you a raise if you stay with me.”

“Want complete set of baseball cards as bonus,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“Agreed,” said Porkwinder.

“What about our deal?” said J.R. “You can’t back out now. I’ll sue.”

“Watanabe no care. I sue you back. Good for business. Make stockholder happy.”

The dirt road they had turned into paralleled the railroad tracks which were old and very rusty. Ahead they could see the hotdog where it had stopped next to the drive-in.

THIRTY-ONE

"Some idea you had," said New Jersey. "I've never seen so many gas stations in a town this small."

"Neither have I," said Feather. "But surely someone's got to remember the car."

"I hope so."

"You're not going to stop now, are you?" said Feather.

"All I can say is that something better turn up and fast."

"What about the worms?" said Feather.

"If I have to, I'll buy some at a bait shop," said New Jersey. "There's one just down the street from where I'm staying."

"What?"

"They're worms, aren't they?" said New Jersey.

"Yes."

"Well then?" said New Jersey.

"Bait shop worms are only good for fishing," said Feather.

"A worms a worm to me."

"How can you say that?" said Feather.

"That's just the way it is."

"Try this one," said Feather, pointing to Krobe's Union 76 station. Much of the faded white paint had chipped off the building and the front of the soda machine had been smashed in.

New Jersey brought the VW to a stop by a broken car wash machine.

"Let me do the talking this time," said Feather as he got out of the car.

"Yeahwhaddayawant?" said the mechanic who was wiping his hands with a dirty rag. A soiled Cleveland Indians baseball hat was perched on the top of his narrow head. He was very thin and hadn't shaved. His teeth were greenish colored.

"We're looking for a car that may have stopped here for some gas," said Feather. "Wouldn't have been too long ago."

"Whatkindofcar?"

"New model Dodge," said Feather. "Yellow four-door. Guy with a flowered Hawaiian shirt would have been driving it."

"Therewasayellowcarlikethatinherealittlewhileago."

"You've seen it, then?" said Feather.

"That's what the fuck I said four guys in it though no flowered shirt."

"You sure?" said Feather.

"Godman foreigner in the back seat."

"A Japanese?" said Feather.

"All look the fuckings same if you ask me."

"What did he say?" said New Jersey.

"It's the car all right, but someone else is driving it."

"I thought you said it was driven by a guy in a flowered shirt?" said New Jersey.

"That's what I thought," said Feather.

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know," said Feather. "Which way did they go?"

"Down the street then took a right at the light that'll be four bucks."

"Four bucks?" said Feather.

"My time is valuable."

"So is ours," said Feather.

"I'll call the cops."

Feather quickly backed up to the VW and got in.

"Let's get out of here. He's going to call the cops."

"What, again," said New Jersey. "What did you say to him?"

"I don't know," said Feather. "Just get going."

New Jersey started the engine and pulled the car into the street. "Uh oh," he said. "Look."

Feather looked back. The mechanic was running for his tow truck.

"He's going to follow us."

"Lose him," said Feather.

"In this?"

The truck careened out of the gas station and headed after them. Yellow lights flashed on the cab roof.

"Step on it," said Feather. "He's gaining."

"Shit!" said New Jersey.

"Turn in there," said Feather.

“Why should I?”

“Just do it, will you?” said Feather.

New Jersey swung the VW into a small alley between two buildings. The car bounced along into the street on the other side of the alley.

“That should do it,” said Feather.

“Do what?”

The tow truck had turned into the alley and stopped. Its front bumper had caught on the wall. They could hear the engine race as it shot back into the street. The bumper ripped off and fell into the mouth of the alley.

New Jersey quickly turned a corner, then another.

“Pretty slick,” he said. You’re not such a bad guy after all. You sure you didn’t say anything to that guy to get him so angry?”

“I just asked him if he’d seen the car,” said Feather.

“He’s crazy,” said New Jersey.

“He wanted four bucks for the information or he’d call the cops.”

“That’s swell,” said New Jersey. What’d he think we’re made out of money or something?”

The VW sped along the dirt road toward the railroad tracks.

THIRTY-TWO

“That should hold you,” said Magnum as he malevolently paced around Darlene Darlene where she lay tied to the railroad tracks.

She struggled against the knots of Magnum’s lariat.

“Where’s that boyfriend of yours now, eh?”

“UMMM,” said Darlene Darlene from behind the bandana that had been stuffed into her mouth.

“UMMM,” she said again twisting her head from side to side.

Magnum leaned against the side of the hot-dog and rolled a cigarette.

“What about you?” he said to the mustard jar. “Got anything to say?”

“I got no complaints. Sure beats driving around in that fucking hot-dog. It’s not air conditioned or anything.”

“Want a smoke?” said Magnum.

“Got my tobacco,” said the mustard jar.

He took a plug from somewhere in his costume and bit off a piece. His jaws moved slowly and deliberately.

“Rum cured,” he said. “When I was driving that thing I had it figured out how many chews made a mile. Ever hit a little kid in the eye with tobacco? Them little fuckers don’t like it. Take right off and don’t bother you no more. Things can get pretty boring, you know. Used to drive a Schlitz Beer can until it tipped over on me. Couldn’t see a fucking thing in that one.”

“Train ought to be along here anytime now,” said Magnum, tossing his cigarette to the ground.

“Aw, come on,” said the mustard jar. “I thought you were kidding.”

Magnum didn’t answer.

“Who’s that?” said the mustard jar pointing down the road. A car approached in a cloud of dust.

Magnum smiled then checked his pistol.

“What are you doing?” said the mustard jar. “You’re not going to use that again, are you?”

The car screeched to a stop. J.R., Cutbank, and Mr. Watanabe stepped out.

“The jig’s up,” said J.R. “You’re going back to the slammer for this one, Killer.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” said Magnum.

“Get the cuffs ready, deputy,” said J.R. to Mr. Watanabe.

“Keep away,” said Magnum, pointing his pistol at them. “I’ll use this if I have to.”

“Darlene Darlene,” said Cutbank. “What has he done to you?”

“MUMMPH!”

“Try anything and I’ll shoot,” said Magnum.

Cutbank took a step forward. A bullet from Magnum’s pistol spattered the dirt in front of his foot.

“MRRUMMPH!” said Darlene Darlene.

“I’m warning you!” said Magnum. “And tell the guy in the car to get out of there.”

“He’s not going to like that,” said Cutbank.

“Tell him!”

“Hey, Arnold?” said J.R. “This guy wants you out here.”

“I’m not getting out,” said Porkwinder. “I don’t want to be murdered by some crazy man.”

Magnum reached the car in three strides, opened the door, grabbed Porkwinder by the arm and pulled him out into the dirt.

“Get up!” he said. “and get over there with the others.”

Porkwinder got up, dusted himself off and took his place beside Mr. Watanabe.

“What do you think you’re doing?” said Porkwinder. “I’m a respectable citizen.”

“I don’t care who you are,” said Magnum. “Just shut up and don’t move.”

“Nice try, Arnold,” said J.R. “Can I smoke?”

“Just don’t try anything,” said Magnum.

“I wouldn’t think of it,” said J.R and reached into his pocket and removed a grenade. He smiled at Magnum and pulled the pin.

“You can’t fool me with that,” said Magnum. “It’s not real.”

“Isn’t it? I let this go and they’ll be picking up pieces of you for miles.”

“He’s not kidding,” said the mustard jar. “I’ve seen plenty of those in Vietnam. It looks real enough to me.”

“I’ll give you until three to drop you gun. ”

Magnum hesitated.

“One... Two....”

Magnum dropped his pistol and Mr. Watanabe darted for it.

“Catch,” said J.R. and tossed the grenade at him. The mustard jar ran so fast he tripped over his feet and fell to the ground with his hands over his head.

The grenade exploded with a loud bang in a cloud of smoke.

Cutbank ran to where Darlene Darlene lay on the tracks and took the bandanna from her mouth, then began to untie the ropes from around her body.

“Oh, Cutbank, you’re so expeditious,” she said.

She stood up and kissed him.

“All right, you varmint, reach!” said Mr. Watanabe pointing the pistol at Magnum. “It’s ninety-nine years or life for you.”

“Put that thing down,” said Magnum.

“Yeah,” said J.R. “It might go off.”

Darlene Darlene only sighed.

“You no get away now,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“Oh, Cutbank,” said Darlene as she kissed him again.

Mr. Watanabe circled the hotdog, keeping his eyes on Magnum.

“You better do something, Arnold. Someone might get hurt.”

“Me?”

“He’s yours, isn’t he?”

“Go for it, sucker,” said Mr. Watanabe to Magnum.

“Let me have the gun,” said J.R.

“Get away or Mr. Watanabe shoot.” He held the pistol to his head. Magnum began to run.

“You’ve done it now. He’s getting away,” said Cutbank.

“Call priest,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“We’re not going to call anybody,” said J.R. “So you can go right ahead and shoot yourself.”

“Mr. Watanabe know when beaten,” he said and threw this pistol down.

Cutbank grabbed it and fired a shot at Magnum.

“The next one won’t miss,” he said.

Magnum stopped and came slowly back toward them.

“What the fuck do you think you were doing?” said J.R.

“Just like in movies,” said Mr. Watanabe. “Action. Suspense. But first a big parade, then popcorn.”

“Oh, Cutbank, you’re so incontestable,” said Darlene Darlene.

Magnum stopped by the hotdog. The mustard jar stood behind him.

“Tie him up, Arnold,” said Cutbank.

“Me?”

“Make yourself useful,” said J.R.

“I don’t know how to tie anyone up.”

“Now is a good time to learn,” said J.R.

“Hold still,” said J.R. to Mr. Watanabe as he pulled at one of his shoelaces and gave it to Porkwinder.

“What do I do now?” said Porkwinder.

“Tie his hands together,” said J.R.

Porkwinder stared at the shoelace in his hand.

“I want you to know that I’m doing this against my will,” said Porkwinder. “I don’t have anything against you personally.”

He positioned himself behind Magnum and tied his hands together.

“Now you,” said Cutbank to the mustard jar.

“I didn’t do anything. That’s my hotdog he had. I don’t know what’s going on. I was just minding my own business.”

“What do you think, Mr. Watanabe?”

“Cut balls off, then no more rape Japanese women.”

“Hear that?” said J.R.

“I’m innocent,” said the mustard jar. “He threatened me with his pistol. I had no choice. He’s crazy. You must know that.”

“Should we let him go, Arnold?”

“This whole thing is ridiculous. All I want is my money.”

“Money?” said Darlene Darlene.

“Eight hundred and four dollars and four cents!” said Porkwinder. “That’s what’s owed me and I want it.”

“Oh, Cutbank, you never told me,” said Darlene Darlene.

“I meant to tell you.”

“But you didn’t,” said Darlene Darlene.

“I would’ve.”

“I don’t know what to think now,” said Darlene Darlene.

“I had other things on my mind, like rescuing you. I just forgot.”

“I want my eight hundred and four dollars and four cents,” said Porkwinder. “Somebody better pay

it.”

“Or what?” said J.R.

“You’ll see,” said Porkwinder.

New Jersey’s car bumped into view and came to a stop.

“There it is,” said Feather stepping out of the VW. “My car. We’ve found my car.”

“Your car?” said J.R.

“Yes. It belongs to the company I work for.”

“Are you sure?” said J.R.

“It’s my car! It was stolen from me by a guy in a Hawaiian shirt.”

“Oh him,” said J.R.

“Friend of yours?” said Cutbank.

“Certainly not,” said Feather.

“I’ll give you ten bucks if you take me back to town so I can go to the police,” said Porkwinder.

“What for?” said Feather. “You didn’t want to buy any of my worms and you threw me out of your car.”

“If I’d known who you were that never would have happened,” said Porkwinder. “Perhaps we can work something out? They owe me money,” said Porkwinder. “I need your car right away. We don’t have all day.”

“How much do they owe you?” said Feather.

“Eight hundred and four dollars and four cents.”

“Isn’t that interesting,” said New Jersey. “I was about to give this young lady that same amount if she’d sign a record contract with me. I’m an independent record producer.”

“I don’t know,” said Darlene Darlene. “That’s an awful lot of money. Besides, I’m going to get married.”

“Married?” said J.R.

“Yes. To Cutbank just as soon as we can. We’re going to the drive-in church across the street. Isn’t that the most wonderful news you’ve ever heard?”

A tow truck with its lights on roared down the road at them.

THIRTY-THREE

"I hope they come soon," said the Reverend Weed. "I'm so excited I can hardly wait. The one millionth couple to grace God's eyes with holy matrimony. And I'm the who'll marry them."

Fulton grunted and passed him a bottle of Romilar. The reverend drank and passed it back.

"I just hope nothing goes wrong," said Weed.

"Why should it?" said Fulton.

"You can never tell about things like this."

"Nothing's going to go wrong," said Fulton.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," said Fulton. "All you have to do is marry them, leave the rest to me."

Weed stepped up to a mirror that formed the stomach of a large yellow Virgin Mary statue. A small fountain trickled in front of it. "Do you think I look all right?"

"Yes. We're not going to be on television, you know. Here, have some more."

Fulton handed him the rest of the bottle of the Romilar bottle. Weed drank it down quickly.

"Damn," said Weed. "I have to go to the bathroom. It must be all that Romilar."

"Never seemed to bother me," said Fulton. "I'll hold things down."

"What if they come while I'm in the bathroom?"

"Don't worry about it. I won't let them get away," said Fulton.

"I won't be long," said Weed and walked hurriedly toward the rear of the drive-in.

Fulton took another bottle of Romilar from his pocket, opened it and finished it off in one swallow.

A yellow car and a VW followed by a tow truck with all its lights turned into the entrance of the drive-in and stopped. Doors opened and shut.

"Oh, Cutbank, how inquerchable," said Darlene Darlene as she leaned tranquilly against his elbow.

--"wherethefuckaremyfourbucks?" said the mechanic.

--"I want my eight hundred and four dollars and four cents!" said Porkwinder.

--"I want to get back to my motel," said New Jersey.

--"if this is Lamp Street," said Feather. "I've got a prospect the next over I have to see."

--"I'm hungry," said J.R.

--Mr. Watanabe want woman."

"Can't you all be quiet!" said Cutbank. "We're going to be married."

"I do," said Darlene Darlene.

"Welcome my children," said Fulton looking out at them. "And how are you today?"

"Ready to go," said Cutbank.

"That's nice," said Fulton and placed a microphone on a stand. "Testing. Testing. Test. One. Two. Test."

"What are you doing?" said Cutbank.

"You're going to be on radio," said Fulton.

"Radio?" said Cutbank.

"Didn't anybody tell you?" said Fulton.

"Oh, Cutbank, how extemporaneous," said Darlene Darlene. "Can I say hello to my mother?"

"Just step right up," said Fulton. "Don't be afraid. The microphone won't hurt you."

Darlene Darlene giggled, then said, "I'm going to wet my pants if you don't hurry."

"Hey, you back there," said Fulton. "Turn those lights off."

"Youtalkingtome?" said the mechanic.

"If that's your truck, yes. This a place of worship, not a carnival."

"Awrightawright," said the mechanic as he walked back to his truck. He climbed into the cab and shut the lights off.

"Thank you," said Fulton. "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today at three eighteen in the afternoon to join this man and this woman in matrimony so they can pay more taxes and have more babies."

"I want four," said Darlene Darlene. "All boys that look just like Cutbank."

"This isn't the time or place to talk of such things," said Cutbank.

"Do you?" said Fulton.

"I do" said Cutbank.

"And you?"

"I do," said Darlene Darlene.

"Then I pronounce you man and wife," said Fulton. "You may now kiss the bride. The request line is now open."

Cutbank kissed Darlene Darlene.

"Mmmmmmmmmmm," she said with a sigh as Cutbank released her.

"Look at the legs on that seal," said Mr. Watanabe. "Mr. Watanabe want to kiss next then make

whoopie.”

“No you don’t,” said J.R.

“Old Japanese custom.”

“But this is an American wedding,” said Cutbank.

“I’ve had enough,” said Porkwinder. “I WANT MY MONEY!”

“Please. This is a sacred place,” said J.R.

“MONEY! MONEY! MONEY!”

“Be quiet you awful man,” said Darlene Darlene. “If you don’t stop bothering my husband, I’ll call the police.”

“Do that.”

“Come on, Arnold, give them a break. They’re newlyweds. Where’s your conscience?”

“Someone’s got to pay,” said Porkwinder.

“Someone will, Arnold. I feel sure of it. What do you say Mr. Watanabe? Do you want to go see The Handsome Americans?”

“I like a little bit of The Handsome Americans myself,” said Mr. Watanabe.

“Do you?” said J.R.

“Yes.”

“Well, what do you know about that. There may be hope for you after all. Let’s get going. See you all later.”

“Yeah,” said Cutbank. “Tell them I said hello.”

“They don’t even know you,” said J.R.

“Tell them anyway.”

“Where do you think you two are going?” said Porkwinder.

“To see The Handsome Americans,” said J.R. “Want to come?”

“I’m not going to let you out of my sight until you pay me what you owe me.”

“What about you?” said J.R. to Feather.

“I have to be going.”

“At least give us a lift as far as you’re headed.”

“I guess I can do that.”

They turned and followed Feather to his car.

“Can you make a quick stop somewhere?” said J.R. “I want to get some sausage.”

"Whataboutme?" said the mechanic.

"What about you?" said J.R.

"Thatguyowesmefourbucks."

"I do not," said Feather. "I just asked for directions."

"Nothingscheap."

"I don't have any money on me right now," said New Jersey.

"Likehellyoudontyoufucker."

"Watch your language. There's a lady present."

"Fourbucksfourbucksfourbucks!"

New Jersey stood looking sadly at Darlene Darlene. "Sure you won't reconsider my offer?"

"I'm married now. Marriage and careers don't mix. You read about it all the time."

"Damn," he said. "We could have done all right together. What about you?" he said to the mechanic. "Can you sing?"

"I'vegotalotoftalentlisteningtotheradioalotandsingingintheshower."

"Well then why don't you come with me. I've got my equipment back where I'm staying. I'll make you a star. Can you play hubcaps? And don't worry about your four bucks. I'll see that it's taken care of."

The mechanic nodded and bent very low as he entered the VW. New Jersey turned on the ignition and the car clanked into life.

"Thank you," said Cutbank. "Thank you very much."

"Don't mention it," said Fulton. "Everyone in radio land wishes you the best."

"Oh, Cutbank this is the best wedding a girl could ever have."

Darlene Darlene walked to the tow truck and waited while Cutbank held the door for her. She climbed into the cab. Cutbank pulled the door open and scrambled in. He started the engine and drove away.

"Hey!" said Weed as he came out of the restroom. "What's going on here? What was that tow truck doing here?"

"Turning around," said J.R.

"Where can they be? It's getting late."

"I don't know," said Fulton.

Far down the road the lights of the tow truck began to flash.