

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAWRENCE

BLOCK



THE TRIUMPH
OF EVIL



The Triumph of Evil

Lawrence Block



“Talk in French when you don’t know the English for a thing, turn out your toes as you walk, and remember who you are.”

—THE RED QUEEN

“All that is required for the triumph of evil is for good men to do something wrong.”

—MILES DORN

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When the doorbell rang, he was sitting at the kitchen table drinking tea and watching baby birds. A pair of robins had nested in the eaves over the kitchen window. The eggs had hatched a week ago, and since then he had found himself spending hours at a time watching them. There was little drama in it, no cuckoo egg in the robins' nest, no cats to be warded off, only the constant feeding and attendance by the parent birds and the steady growth and development of the young.

He set his cup down and went to the door, thinking that it would be the girl. "You're early," he said, drawing the door open.

There were two men on the step, and the taller man's brow wrinkled at Dorn's words. "Then you expected us?"

"No."

"You are Mr. Dorn? Miles Dorn?"

"Yes."

"And you are expecting someone?"

"In an hour, perhaps."

"Then we have time for a conversation," the taller man said. "May we come in?"

"Of course."

He led them to the living room. The two sat on opposite ends of his couch, an empty cushion between them. Above and between their heads was a framed print, an English fox hunting scene. It had been there when he took the house, and although it was not to his taste he had decided against removing it. He liked its incongruity—this shabby southern town, this squat house of concrete block and stucco with its motel furniture and plasterboard walls, and this glorified representation of the unspeakable in pursuit of the inedible.

The smaller man lit a cigarette, and Dorn caught the odor of Turkish leaf. It triggered memories. Once all cigarettes had smelled thus.

The taller man said, "You were not expecting us; yet if our presence surprises you, you hide well."

"I am rarely surprised." He wondered about the man's accent. It was slight, and had echoes of no particular place, as if this man, like Dorn, had had frequent changes of nationality. The man had a broad forehead, dark brown hair slicked down, heavy brows, large nostrils, a dark and somewhat olive complexion. The smaller man, who had not yet spoken, looked at once Latin and Oriental, and yet was almost certainly not a Cuban Chinese. Dorn thought it likely that these men would have something to do with Cuba and hoped he was wrong. The smaller man had very precise features and flat dark eyes and small hands. Dorn had learned that men of this sort were usually quite good with knives.

"You expect the unexpected," the tall man said.

"In a sense."

"It was not overly difficult to find you. This is a pleasant town. Trees and flowers. Well-kept lawns. Children playing in the streets. Do you own this house?"

"I rent it."

"I'm sure you're happy here."

"I've become comfortable."

"It's a common dream, don't you think? A house of one's own on a quiet street in a sleepy town. But dreams. Like smoke, easy to perceive and difficult to grasp firmly."

"I do have an appointment."

“Of course. It is your time that I am wasting, and I apologize. You will want to know who we are. My name is Vanderson, Leopold Vanderson. This is my associate, Mr. Robert Brown.”

“My pleasure.”

“Ours as well. But more than pleasure, I think, for all of us. We have something for you, Mr. Dorn.”

His eyes stayed on Vanderson but he concentrated on the smaller man, Brown, studying him out of the corner of his eye, looking for any sign of tension. If they meant to kill him, it would be Brown who would do the killing. He did not bother to wonder why they might want to kill him. Too many people had reasons of varying degrees of urgency. Dorn kept his eyes on Vanderson and let his mind work out what his body would do if Brown moved or changed expression. Brown was at least ten and probably fifteen years younger than Dorn, presumably armed, and apparently in good condition. If they meant to kill him, Dorn thought, they would very likely succeed.

“A piece of work,” Vanderson said.

“I’ve retired.”

“Do any of us ever really retire? I often wonder this myself. Dreams, you know. And smoke.”

“What do you want of me?”

“You’ll travel some. Meet with some people, assist in some arrangements. There’s a project planned. Nothing unlike things you’ve done over the years.”

“I’m not really interested.”

“There’s a bit of money in it for you. A thousand now, just for a handshake. And more to come. A good deal more if things go well enough. A fair sum even if they don’t.”

“I have no need of money just now.”

“You could judge that better than I. My understanding is otherwise.”

“I’m afraid I’m not interested,” he said again. “And if I were—”

“Yes?”

“I don’t know who you are.”

Vanderson nodded. “A problem. I could show you my driver’s license or a letter of reference from my pastor, but that wouldn’t be much help, would it? I might mention some names.”

“Oh?”

“James Travis. Erno Vacek. Miller Harris.” These were names Dorn had used at one time or another. Vanderson studied Dorn’s face and looked disappointed. “You are unimpressed?”

“I assumed you knew something about me. I haven’t been Miles Dorn long enough for you to come looking for me under that name.”

“Hans Neumann, then.”

“Then you know a great deal about me. Still—”

“Other names. I might mention Gregorio Santresca, for example.”

“What about Santresca?”

“Does he know where you are? And would you want him to?”

Dorn considered this. “I don’t think he cares much. Santresca could probably find me himself if he wanted to. Why would he want to?”

“To kill you.”

“Of course, but why?”

“To even a score.”

“He has cause, I suppose. But if his mind works that way he has a long list, and I’d be nowhere near the top of it.” He got to his feet. “I don’t mean to be impolite, Mr. Vanderson, Mr. Brown, but I am expecting someone. As you know. And I know nothing about you, I still know nothing about you, and

am not looking for work at the present time.”

“You’ve retired.”

“Exactly.”

“There is a letter. A letter for you. Robert has it. You might want to read it.”

Brown took the letter from his inside jacket pocket. He handed it carefully to Dorn, as if it were very important that the letter not be wrinkled. Dorn unfolded it. A dozen lines, handwritten on the letterhead of a Holiday Inn in Tampa.

He read it through twice and looked up, faintly puzzled. “All of this—money, names, veiled threats and allusions. All of that foolishness when you had something so much more persuasive at your disposal. I am assuming that this is genuine.”

“Of course.”

“And not written under duress. And that I could verify it with no difficulty.”

“Of course.”

“And yet you chose to hold it in reserve.”

“Not exactly.” Vanders smiled. It was a more open smile than Dorn had had from him. “You might regard the offers and threats as a test. If they had moved you, you would never have seen the letter or heard from us again. You understand? If money could buy you or threats coerce you, you would not be right for our purposes.” A flash of the smile again. “We only want that which it is most difficult for us to have. Some men strike this attitude with women.”

“Or with almost anything.”

“Yes.”

He considered. “If Heidigger is a part of this, that does change things. In a fundamental way. Still—”

“Yes?”

“As I told you. I have retired. I haven’t wanted work. I haven’t wanted ... that sort of life.”

“And you are comfortable here?”

“Yes, I am.”

“I wonder, though,” Vanders said. “I wonder how much a man can decide whether or not he wants the sort of life that has been his. There is a saying to the effect that a man may change his shoes but must walk forever upon the same two feet. How much can we change ourselves, do you suppose? It is an interesting question.”

“I have thought often about it. Quite often.”

“It takes long thought.”

Brown lit another cigarette. Dorn felt an unaccustomed longing for tobacco. He had given it up almost two years earlier on a doctor’s advice, and couldn’t recall the last time he’d felt such an urge or craving for a cigarette. It amused him.

“This piece of work,” he said. “It would help to know more about it.”

“What I said earlier was true enough. The work would be similar enough to things you’ve done before. What would be involved, really, would be not so much a single act or action as an ongoing association. There is a country that might be inclined to change its government. It is easier, I think, for a country to change its government than for a man to change his life.”

“Is there CIA involvement?”

“In a sense. A community of interests on the part of some Agency people. You could call it that. Certainly nothing official. I believe you’ve worked with them in the past.”

“And at cross-purposes, on occasion.”

"It wouldn't be a factor."

"Perhaps not." He thought for a moment. "I presume you wish an answer, and that there is some sort of time factor involved. When would all of this begin?"

"Tomorrow."

"That soon."

"You would talk to Heidigger tomorrow. As far as when your particular role would turn active, I couldn't say."

"Yes. I would have to think about this."

"Understandable."

"I have no phone. If I could reach you perhaps this evening."

"We will be in transit, unfortunately. But there is a number you could call at nine-thirty tonight." He took a blank memo slip from a leather case and uncapped a fountain pen and jotted down a number from memory. He waved the slip so that the ink could dry before handing it to Dorn. The number looked European, and the seven was crossed.

"The line is presumably untapped, but we take the usual precautions as a matter of course. Please call collect. As close to nine-thirty as possible."

"What name shall I use?"

"Mine will do."

"Leopold Vanders."

"Yes." The two stood up abruptly, as if in response to a subtle signal. "I believe that's all. Please call, wherever your thinking leads you. And I hope you'll decide affirmatively. There is something I would like to respond to in you. We could probably exchange some absorbing stories, you and I. Not that we even have the will, but the capacity exists."

As they reached the door, Dorn said, "The country in question wouldn't be Cuba, would it? Because I wouldn't want to be involved if it were Cuba. I really can't work with those people."

"No. Nor I, if it comes to that. Obviously I can't tell you the country, but it's not Cuba."

"I suppose I would guess Haiti, if I were guessing."

"You ought to be allowed one guess. Not Haiti. A more substantial country than Haiti, I would say. And that, actually, is all I will say. Good-day, Mr. Dorn."

"Mr. Vanders. Mr. Brown."

Their car was at the curb, a late Ford station wagon with Florida plates. Brown drove. Dorn watched the car disappear from view. He looked at his watch. She was late, which was as well. Just a few minutes late so far. He thought of canceling her lesson. Did he want company or solitude right now? It was hard to say.

Neither Cuba nor Haiti. It could, he decided, be any place at all. Africa, South America. He read the local newspaper on an infrequent basis and made no attempt to keep up with things. Not that this sort of affair would likely be predictable through published news stories.

Did no one retire? Was it so impossible to change one's feet, so futile to change one's shoes?

He had fresh tea made when she rang the doorbell. How fresh she looked, he thought, as he often did. How young, how untroubled.

"I almost didn't come," she said.

"Then I should have had to drink both cups of tea."

"I can't have a lesson, really. I mean, I can't pay you. Not today, at least. I'll probably have the money next week, and I could pay you then, but I can't be positive, see."

“It doesn’t matter. Come in the kitchen, see my baby birds.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “I was thinking about them the other day. They’re all right?”

“They seem to be.”

She sipped at her tea after exclaiming over the birds. “Oh, it’s peppermint,” she said.

“Spearmint, actually.” And then in German, “I found it growing in the yard. It makes nice tea, don’t you think?”

They went on talking idly in German. She had a surprising facility for the language, doubly surprising in that she seemed quite without motivation for learning it. She was his only pupil, one of three who had responded to a note he’d hung on the bulletin board at the Student Union. The other two were young men, both interested in learning French as preparation for a year at a French university. He had given them several lessons each before discovering that the lessons bored him immeasurably. Since he had undertaken them as an antidote to boredom, there was little point in continuing them.

But when Jocelyn came, there was an immediate mutual sense of mental stimulation. She was planning no junior year in Cologne or Munich. Indeed, she had already dropped out of the university and continued to live in town and spend time on the campus only because there was nothing else she cared to do.

“I would like to learn a language,” she had told him. “Only I can’t decide which one. French, German, Spanish, Serbo-Croat. Was Russian on the list, too? I can’t remember.”

“Yes, Russian also.”

“I think it would be sensational to know Serbo-Croat, but what would I do with it? I don’t suppose I could ever find anyone to talk to.”

“Only in Yugoslavia.”

“Is that where you’re from?”

“Yes, from Croatia.”

“How do you pronounce your first name? Is it Anglicized or what?”

“It was originally Mee-lesh. There was a diacritic mark over the s. But I pronounce it Miles. It’s simpler for everyone, and after all this town is rather far from Croatia.”

“Miles from Croatia. What language should I learn? What language would you most enjoy teaching?”

He told her it ought to be one she liked the sound of, and spoke paragraphs of each. In the other languages he said nothing significant, but in German he found himself saying, “You have spun gold for hair and pink cream for skin. Were I not beyond such things I would lift your skirt and spend hours kissing your pudenda.”

After she had selected German and had a first lesson, he found himself wondering at his words. Such private jokes were not usual behavior for him.

In the months that followed he found himself taking increasing pleasure in the time they spent together. She came once a week at the start, then increased to Tuesdays and Fridays. Although the lessons were theoretically to last an hour, she generally stayed the full afternoon. He charged her five dollars a lesson. He would have been happy to forgo payment—ten dollars a week was an expense to her, and of no importance to him—but he had been careful not to suggest this lest it alter the structure of their relationship. She was the only friend in his present life and he did not want to do anything that might deprive him of that friendship.

Her facility with German impressed him. She retained vocabulary easily and had a remarkably good accent. A Prussian might have been as apt to take her for a Swabian, perhaps, as for an American.

“I may not be staying here much longer,” she said at one point. “I don’t know.” She switched abruptly to English. “The thing is, my father found out that I dropped out.”

“You hadn’t told him?”

“No. I suppose I should have, but somehow I couldn’t get around to it. We don’t communicate very well. We did once, I think, but something happened to us. It’s funny, the way things happen to people.”

“Was he very upset?”

“I’m not sure. I talked to him on the phone. Just last night, as a matter of fact. He went right into the heavy father number, but I think that may have been just a reflex. *Der gross Vater*. It doesn’t translate, does it? It just means grandfather. Both of my grandfathers are dead. I have one grandmother living. I’m sure I told you that.”

She had told him many things about herself—age, family background, childhood experiences. He had told her about different places he had been without disclosing much about the person he had been while in those places. It was a special sort of conversation, the information serving primarily as a vehicle for the words and phrases themselves. One could not pass hours chatting about an aunt’s peaches on an uncle’s table. She spoke of classes and boyfriends and movies and things she had done as a child. She lived in Connecticut. Her father manufactured beads for dress manufacturers. Her mother was secretary-treasurer of the local chapter of the League of Women Voters, and had collected funds for Biafran relief. She had a brother in high school. A sister two years older than she had drowned seven years ago at Cape Cod. She had had a dog for several years in Connecticut. Now she had a cat named Vertigo. She often talked about the cat and had several times said she might bring it to Dorn’s house. She had never done so.

On one occasion Dorn told her of a town in Slovenia where he had spent a day and two nights twenty-five years ago. He described the town and talked about the Slovene language and the local architecture. He told her of the meals he had eaten there, and of the wine, which was good but extremely tart. He did not tell her that he and two other men had gone to the burgomaster’s house in the middle of the second night. They searched the house but could not find the man. They knew he was there. Dorn held the wife’s arms while a man named Gotter hit her in the breasts and belly with his fists. She wept but insisted her husband was not home. Dorn went into one of the bedrooms where a child had been sleeping. He brought the little boy out and told the woman he would put out the boy’s eyes. It wasn’t necessary to do this. The burgomaster was in a steamer trunk in the cellar. They had seen the trunk earlier but had not thought to open it—it looked too small to hold a man and the lock was rusted. They smashed the lock and took the burgomaster out of the trunk. He was a small plump man who wept soundlessly until Dorn shot him in the center of the forehead. They left immediately. Gotter wanted to rape the wife—the widow. Violent death acted as a sexual stimulant upon him. Dorn was never able to understand this. But on that occasion there was simply no time, and Gotter was disciplined enough to repress his lust.

Now Jocelyn was saying that she might go to Washington for the weekend. “There’s a peace demonstration,” she said in German, not having to hesitate for the noun. “Friends of mine are driving up, and I might go with them.”

“A peace demonstration?”

“A memorial for Landon Waring.”

“He was killed?”

“It was all over yesterday’s paper, and on the radio all the time.”

“I haven’t seen a paper in several days. He was what? A Black Panther?”

“I’m not sure whether he was a Panther or just worked with them. He was in Jacksonville for a rally. Why would he come to the South? It seems so suicidal. The Gestapo killed him. Isn’t that funny—vocal call them that, the police, but in the middle of a conversation in German.”

“The police killed him?”

“The official lie is that he was trying to escape, and that he grabbed a pig’s gun.” Back to English. “I can’t see how that could possibly go down with anyone. Even the Silent Majority has to know better than to believe it. He was a beautiful man, you know. I saw him speak once. Everybody’s being killed. The kids I know, we were talking, and there’s all this paranoia. Like it’s a conspiracy. I don’t know if it is or if it’s just the way the whole country is going in two different directions, and each side hates the other side. There was a riot in Jacksonville last night. They had the National Guard. First the Gestapo and then the Brownshirts. I don’t know, I just don’t know. You want to do something, but you wonder what’s the point, what good will it do. Like what good does it do to put one more body in Washington when no one pays any attention anyway. What good does it do.”

“I don’t think you should go.”

“Why do you say that?”

He smiled. “For selfish reasons. Landon Waring is just a name to me, and a dead man’s name in this bargain. You are a friend. It could be dangerous for you, and to no purpose.”

“They can’t kill everybody.”

“No, of course not.”

“Sometimes I feel guilty because I didn’t go to Chicago. Of course I was only seventeen but I could have gone, some friends of mine did go. Nothing happened to them. The guilt—I don’t feel guilty because I didn’t go, but because I’m secretly glad that I didn’t go. If that makes any sense. Sometimes I wonder what Megan would be doing now. She would be twenty-one, but she’s fourteen forever now and there’s no way to guess who she would have grown into. She was always two years older than me and now she’s frozen at fourteen while I get older and older. That’s how death takes people away from you. It steals the people they would have been.” She gave her head a sudden shake. “I’m sorry, Miles. This is terrible. I was very down last night and I keep slipping back into it. Let’s talk about something else. I don’t know what. The baby robins? Anything.”

Not long before she left, she said, “What’s that smell? I keep noticing it.”

He had to consider. “Oh. A Turkish cigarette.”

“You haven’t started smoking?”

“No. I had a visitor earlier today.”

“A student?”

She didn’t know he had no other pupils. “Not a student,” he said. “He smoked I think two cigarettes. The smell of Turkish leaf lingers.”

“At first I thought it was grass.”

“Marijuana?”

She nodded, and he laughed at the thought.

“You’ve never tried it?”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t even drink coffee. A glass of wine at dinner, that’s all.”

“And spearmint tea.”

“And spearmint tea.”

“Maybe you should try it, someday.”

“You use it?”

“Sometimes. Not often. So many people like to be high all the time.” She caught her knee with her folded hands. Her expression turned impish. “I could turn you on,” she said. “If you ever wanted.”

“Don’t you suppose I’m too old for that?”

“You never seem old to me.”

There was something hard to read in her eyes. He shifted position. He said, “I thank you for the offer, but I don’t think I’ll accept it.”

“It’s a good feeling. And it lets you, oh, get into yourself, sometimes in new ways.”

“Is that good?”

Her face clouded. “It depends what you find. But if you find something bad, you tell yourself *I’m high, it’s just the drug, and when I get straight again it won’t apply.*”

“And that works?”

“For me.”

“I was with several men once who used hashish. I mean that they used it in my presence, but I didn’t partake. They didn’t seem to be affected by it, and yet I gather they were very high.”

“I had hash once.”

“It’s the same idea as marijuana, isn’t it?”

“Well, like an orchestra is the same idea as a tin whistle. It’s tons stronger. Where was this, that you were?”

“Morocco. No, Tunis.”

“It must have been total dynamite. Tunis? What were you doing there?”

“Negotiating. There was an interest in mineral rights.”

“You were with some corporation or something?”

“I represented them. Just in that series of negotiations. Nothing came of it.”

She said, “I wonder about you, you know. For hours at a time. About your life. Who are you. You can’t paint all of these pictures, but I can never quite see you in any of the pictures.”

“There’s really nothing to see.”

“Just a sweet quiet man who drinks mint tea.”

“And watches robins.”

“You know-”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said. She got to her feet. “I can’t even pay you today and look, I stayed three hours almost four. I guess I better go.”

There was a brief moment when he could have asked her to stay for dinner. He recognized the moment and willed himself to let it pass.

“I’ll be over Tuesday, then.”

“Yes, good. And don’t worry about the money. Please.”

“I should have it by then.”

“If you don’t, it’s no matter.” He walked her toward the door. “I may be out of town,” he said. “I can’t be sure, and I don’t know how long I would be away.”

“The Turkish cigarette?”

“Yes. Something I might have to do.”

He thought of the man who had smoked the Turkish cigarettes, and of the letter from Heidigger in Tampa. Jacksonville. Washington. His mind jumped through cities and time.

He said, “A favor.”

“What?”

“One I’ve no right to ask. And can’t honestly explain. Don’t go to Washington tomorrow.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Call it a feeling I have. I’ve learned to live on my intuition. I find it more reliable than pure reason. You’ve said your presence won’t affect the demonstration any more than it in turn will affect policy. Indulge an old man. Spend the weekend here.”

She looked at him. “All right,” she said finally.

Twice more before the sky darkened he went to the kitchen window to watch the robins. The amount of work required of the parent birds was prodigious. They were constantly flying off and returning with worms to be thrust into gaping mouths.

He wondered why they bothered. Because they were robins, he thought, and that was what robins did.

Could they think, he wondered. Could they in any sense muse on the instinct, the irresistible urge to fill up the planet with copies of themselves? He decided they could not. The musers, the ponderers would miss too many worms. They would build shaky nests. Cats would stalk them and pounce upon their reveries. And their seed would die, while less intellectual birds killed off the more thoughtful worms.

A wave of wholly unreal sadness enveloped him. “What shall I wish you?” he asked the birds speaking aloud in English. “A long fruitful stupid life? Or fatal insight into the avian condition? Eh?”

He cooked some spaghetti. He used a bottled sauce, cooking a few sprigs of garden herbs into it. He drank a small glass of dry white wine with his supper.

Would she have enjoyed sharing this meal with him? Or would such an intimacy have made them nervous with each other?

A few minutes after nine he left his house and walked downtown. A neighbor, trimming a private hedge with electric shears, waved to him as he passed. Dorn returned the greeting. At times he wondered what the neighbors thought of him. Probably they supposed he was doing something vaguely scholarly. A foreigner, a refugee, settled in a college town. No trouble, quiet, keeps to himself. Had they invented a role for Jocelyn? He smiled at the thought.

At nine-thirty he placed the call from a telephone booth in the hotel lobby. He told the operator his name was Leopold Vanders. A woman with a Latin accent answered on the third ring and accepted the call. The operator rang off. Dorn waited, saying nothing.

A man’s voice said, “Mr. Vanders? I hope your decision is favorable.”

“It is.”

“Can we see you tomorrow? It would be three times better that way.”

“Yes, I understand that.”

“You received a letter today. The food is good there.”

“All right.”

“Until then.”

The line went dead. He held the receiver for a moment, then replaced it. The voice was not one that he recognized. He was fair-to-good at American accents but would have had trouble placing this one with assurance. Kansas? Oklahoma?

He left the hotel. He walked the several blocks to his house and noted the spring in his step, the increased vitality. Did one ever retire?

The dining room of the Holiday Inn in Tampa at three in the afternoon. Until then.

Heidigger had a cowl of longish white hair around the edges of his large bald head. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses, a short-sleeved white shirt open at the throat, dark blue trousers, and blue crepesoled canvas shoes. His face and arms were deeply tanned. His smile showed several gold teeth.

"Miles Dorn," he said. "Miles Dorn, Miles Dorn. Am I really to call you that?"

"It suits me."

"Miles Dorn. You know, I think it does. There is a thick, blunt honesty to it. Miles Dorn. Miles Dorn. Yes, it works. I believe you've lost weight, haven't you? I, on the other hand, have found some." He patted his belly. "But I am more at ease with it. I thought recently of those times in my life when I was thin. Never gaunt, mind you, but thin. Genuinely thin. I was also miserable, or in deep trouble. Often both. So I cannot regret my paunch. You did eat, I trust."

"Yes." He had taken a table downstairs and ordered a sandwich and iced tea. While he waited for a young woman passed his table and repeated a three-digit number twice. After he had finished his sandwich he went to the room that matched that number. Heidigger, alone, admitted him.

"Do you like my room, Miles Dorn? In the past few years, I have discovered Holiday Inns. The most extraordinary institutions! There is at least one in any American city you could possibly have occasion to visit. The most unlikely places have them. And you know what is so remarkable about them? Not merely that they are clean and comfortable. One expects that in this country. The big cars you know. The soft seats in theaters. And the American bathroom. God, the American bathroom! I've heard it attributed to the Puritan heritage, a pathological absorption with cleanliness. Nonsense. Americans simply have an honesty that enables them to admit that human beings piss and shit and ought to be able to do so under the best possible circumstances. American toilet paper. I could write a monograph on American toilet paper. Have you ever stopped to think that this is quite possibly the only place in the world where a man can actually look forward to the prospect of wiping his asshole?"

"I hadn't, but I'm sure the thought will never be far from my mind. Eric, is this room clean?"

"Clean? Oh. Electronically? Yes, it's absolutely clean. Spotless. Unquestionably. Where was I? Yes! The institution of the Holiday Inn. It's my point that it is not the quality of these establishments that recommends them to me, or even the delicious impersonality of them, which in itself is such an absorbing commentary on the culture. Do you know what it is? It is their uniformity. Their uncanny uniformity. They are all the same. It doesn't matter where you go. St. Louis. Detroit. Tampa. San Francisco. Is there a Holiday Inn in Willow Falls, South Carolina?"

"I believe there is. Near the turnpike entrance. I have never been in it."

"You don't have to. Look around you. What you see here you would see there. No important differences. Take my word for it."

"Be assured that I do."

"Even the food is the same. Under no stretch of the imagination could it be called good. You could no more call it good than you could call it bad. It is Holiday Inn food, of a piece with everything else. But do you see how wonderful this is? Wherever I go, it is as if I have not traveled at all. My home is a room in a Holiday Inn, and as it is quite impossible to tell one of them from another, it is as if I am always at home in any city in the country. It has not yet happened, but some morning I will awake and not know what city I am in. I will call the desk to ask them. 'I know this is the Holiday Inn, my dear. Be so good as to tell me which Holiday Inn. What city? What state?' It will happen."

Heidigger could not be hurried, nor did Dorn much want to hurry him. One could hardly fail

respond to the man's effervescence. His unflinching good humor never deserted him. It was present all times, while he stole, murdered, deceived, betrayed, subverted, and ruined. Dorn had often felt that it might be an important component in the man's habit of survival, which viewed rationally was difficult to explain. Their trade was capriciously hazardous in the best of circumstances. When one had Heidigger's genius for picking losing sides, one became singularly unattractive to insurance companies.

"Miles? You indulge me. You pay close and uncomplaining attention however far afield my conversation wanders. More than that, I cannot avoid flattering myself with the feeling that you actually enjoy listening to me."

"I actually do, Eric."

"Do you know something? I like you." He said this as if he found it remarkable. "I don't know you are aware of this, but I once came very close to having you killed."

"In Prague."

"Prague? No. Oh, yes, then, but that was something else, that was not what I was thinking of. In Prague I would have killed you if the opportunity had come up, but it simply didn't. No, this was another time and another place, and I don't think I'll tell you where or when, but the suggestion was made to me that you ought to be terminated. A very strong suggestion from someone in a position to put forward suggestions strongly. Yet the matter was left to my discretion. I have never regretted the decision I made. I assure you I do not regret it now."

"Then I owe you my life, Eric. Eh?"

Heidigger stared for a moment, then laughed. He held his paunch in his hands and roared.

Heidigger said, "One wonders how much to tell someone. It varies with the person and with his role and with so many other situational factors. What elements need discussion? Money? With the least important men that is the most important topic to discuss. With you it is not. There is money here, Miles, Miles Dorn. We shall all feather our nests with this one. Which reminds me. Here. Take it. It is a token, an earnest, a guarantee of operating funds. It is only a thousand. Don't be shy, take it."

"I haven't said I'm in."

"But you are, aren't you? How easy is it for you to get out now? Don't look at me that way, that is not a threat; it is a practical statement. Consider. You want to know more before deciding. I want to say nothing to an uncommitted man. A stalemate? Not at all. You can change your mind and throw the money back. I can lie. Think. You have not been away from this so long, your head has not rusted. Think. Take the money. That's better."

"Now. Of course you must know about the area of operations. It is not Cuba. I understand that was a point of some concern to you."

"Yes."

"So." Heidigger threw himself into a chair, propped his elbows on its arms, made a steeple of his index fingers. "The country's name is immaterial. Not completely so, not ultimately, but in terms of giving you the situation, of highlighting it for you. So instead of naming our target area, I will tell you some things about it which I consider pertinent. Agreed?"

"Why not?"

"Good." A huge smile, gold teeth glittering. "We are concerned with a country which after a lengthy period of stability has been moving more and more into a state of revolutionary ferment. For decades almost all political opinion was religiously centrist. Now this is no longer the case. The left and right expand at the expense of the center."

“Leftist activity stems from two principal areas. As is almost invariably the case, the universities play a central role. There is a bookishness about the university radicals, but as their militancy increases this is less and less a factor. Further, there is a larger and larger circle of nonuniversity youth who look to the university radicals for political direction.

“Now. This country is biracial. The white population exists to a certain extent at the expense of the black population. The blacks have begun to depart from centuries of conditioning. They are becoming more vocal. As militancy becomes more and more a habit, the demagogues of the black left become increasingly extreme. Again a part of this process of polarization, if you will.”

“That always happens,” Dorn said. “I assume the black population constitutes a majority.”

“No. Ten or fifteen percent. No more, although of course their birth rate is higher.”

“Of course. Ten or fifteen percent. That surprises me.”

“Higher in certain areas, of course.”

“Yes. That does surprise me. I had been about to name the country and puncture your balloon. Instead it is I who am deflated.”

Heidigger beamed. “No pins in my balloon, please. This is more than good theater, Miles. How easily your name fits into my speech! You’ve chosen well. More than good theater, though. There’s a method to it.

“To continue. The rightist reaction of the white *lumpenproletariat* is easily imagined. The instinctive response is racist and anti-intellectual. They begin by living in terror of a black take-over. Simultaneously, and in much the same way, they dread the economic effects of a communist or quasi-communist revolution. Their preferred racial status permits them to see themselves as middle-class and the bourgeoisie is invariably counterrevolutionary. Consider Cuba. The middle-class shopkeepers and professionals did not realize until they had helped the man to power that their own instincts are counterrevolutionary. Here, largely because of the racial situation, the reaction is more immediate. Here the militancy is just now emerging on a broad basis. Before the present, rightist activity was cultist. It was on the fringes. Now the lines are more clearly drawn. An effective demagogue has not yet surfaced on the right, but there are more and more confrontations with the university radicals. More and more groups forming with a broad base. There has been no consolidation of these groups but that is only a question of time.”

Dorn started to say something, but Heidigger showed his palm. “Another aspect is sectional. The southwestern fourth of the nation is its economic and political center. The rest of the country, the whites in the rest of the country, consider the southwesterners to be almost a separate tribe. A different nation. This is most strongly felt in the northwest, where the black concentration is greatest and where all of the obvious responses are intensified for the white lower class. It is also true throughout the East, and in rather a special way. There are entrenched economic interests in the East that feel almost completely alienated by that core of southwestern money power. These people think of the southwest as Jew-influenced and pandering to the blacks at the expense of the rest of the country.”

“What about the economy, Eric?”

“A long tradition of prosperity. Thirty years of noteworthy growth and stability. But a surprising incidence of poverty nevertheless. Black poverty, of course. White poverty in many areas, but more especially in the depressed northwest.

“Within the past two years, the economy has found its way into a state of chaos. Riotous inflation. Increasing unemployment, particularly black unemployment. Shares dropping off badly on the principal exchanges. This is a highly industrialized country, as you’ve perhaps gathered.”

“Yes. It’s also a Chinese puzzle. I can’t think of what name to put to it.” He touched his chin, the side of his nose. “I scarcely | even read newspapers, you know. I’ve lost all touch with international politics.”

“Then let me tease you some more. Certain things have occurred which would even make the page of whatever sort of newspaper you have in Willow Falls, South Carolina. Did you ever think you would come to live in a town with such a name, by the way? Certain events, I say, which if they ring no bells—this is a presentation, Miles, rather than a guessing game, though I can appreciate your temptation to play—certain events that may point up the directions the country is taking, the directions it might be coerced to take in the future.

“Politically, the national establishment is essentially oligarchic. One of these ruling families—the orientation is left-centrist—has produced several charismatic political leaders, each of whom in a particular way managed to appeal to disparate portions of the local population. Two of them have been killed. Among the blacks, there have been considerably more liquidations, especially in the lower levels. But again there have been two very important murders recently, both of them removing dynamic and charismatic leaders who managed to mobilize their followers effectively without approaching the extreme positions of their rivals. You see the pattern, of course.”

“From your words, it’s unmistakable. These are the men who threaten the process of left-right polarization.”

“Exactly so. Is that all? No. One final bit of information. The country has a long heritage of imperialism. It has a few remaining colonies and attempts to maintain a hold over them. This is to prove ultimately impossible, but in the meanwhile the country further depletes itself economically warring against guerrillas far from home.”

“As the French did in Indo-China,” Dorn said. “And learned not to do in Algeria.”

“An excellent parallel. Now this military drain on national resources is universally deplored. The left opposes it as colonialist. The blacks oppose it for a variety of reasons. The right does and does not oppose it—they want it to end, they resent what it costs them, but their attitudes are largely formed in reaction to the attitudes of the left. Anything the left opposes they can scarcely help endorse. The military is like all armies everywhere, they would only give up this war if they could find a better one.

“Now. To come quickly to the point. I could give you more background but it would be purposeless. I want you first of all to put all guesses to the identity of the country from your mind.”

“That’s easily done. I’m at a standstill in that respect.”

“And, taking as accurate my description of the situation, tell me what you think could happen.”

Dorn got up, walked to the window. He looked down at traffic and tried to focus his mind on the country they had been discussing. He had some trouble doing this because he found it slightly less fascinating than the fact that Heidigger was giving him so much background information, without constructing such a theoretical case. He resisted the impulse to take this as ego food. Instead he was realistic enough to know that any employment of his services would be on a fairly low level. He was a tactician and not a strategist. He did not make policy. He was not to be consulted about policy. He was a common pirate, good with a cutlass, useful in tight places. But one did not ask him which ship he was on board. Why all of this theater? Heidigger was naturally theatrical but usually had a purpose for what he did. Where was the purpose hiding?

Reluctantly he turned from the window, dragging his mind back to the question. “All right,” he said. “The answer I can give, the only answer I can give, is implicit in the question. In your presentation there are too many things left out. We have not discussed what the Russians will do, what the Americans will do, what the Chinese will do. We have not established in what sphere of influence the

country lies. So I must rule out all these areas, and any relevant factor in these areas could completely determine where my answer should be. But that doesn't matter because this is a game or presentation or whatever you choose to call it."

"You seem hostile."

"A little. I feel like a child reciting poems for family friends."

"I told you there was a method."

"All right. A scenario, then. The left will increase its provocations. They will be credited with some terrorism. If they do not think to perform it themselves, some equivalent of the Reichstag will go up in flames, with equivalent results. The left will not be able to focus its power. Its support base is far too small, and it will continue to be deprived of effective leadership, presumably through a continuation of the present policy of murder. The left will shrink and fragment itself even as it grows more extreme and militant. Am I reciting competently?"

"Oh, yes. You read with expression and carry yourself well."

"Thank you." It was silly, but he felt his hostility ebbing. "An effective demagogue will surface on the right. He will be well-financed—he had better be damn well-financed—by the dissident eastern financial interests, the ones who I gather have money and power but have had neither long enough to feel comfortable with them." He stopped for breath, bored with this performance, weary of his role in it. "When he emerges, the rightist fringe will abandon their little groups and quietly merge under his standard. His program will be anti-black and anti-Red and anti-intellectual. He will talk a great deal about the nation's destiny and rightful place in the world. He will blame the failure to liquidate the guerrillas on treason in high places. He will—the devil with him, I'm not going to write his fucking speeches, Eric."

"Go on."

"If it works, he will mobilize the *lumpenproletariat*—why does no other language have that word? It's essential. He will draw his strength from this group. His secondary strength will come from the large portion of the populace that is basically apolitical in more normal times. They will see him as a respite from chaos. The southwestern oligarchy will oppose him ineffectively and timidly until they discover they can no longer afford to oppose him. The more hardheaded ones will be killed. The Jews, if they've learned anything, which is perhaps doubtful, will come here or go to Israel. Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing." He spread his hands. "Shall I go on? He will appeal to the military. They may comprise much of his initial support. The southwestern money interests will think they can control him, just as his original financial supporters will think. If he's at all good, they will be wrong. He will repress the blacks, he will kill off the university radicals—I don't have to go on with this. The obvious parallel is Germany. The Weimar Republic. I wasn't around at the time, but what you've drawn is a word-picture of the Weimar Republic. If the man is Hitler, then he can be Hitler."

Heidigger was nodding encouragement. "Now the country," he said. "I know you have been feeling like a trained seal, Miles. You'll soon see why. Have you any ideas about the country?"

Dorn worried his lower lip. "Yes, I do," he said. "They came to me while I was talking. I think I know the country."

"Yes?"

"This is annoying. If I'm wrong, I will sound ridiculous. You see, I have not made any attempt to keep up with international politics. I have no idea what it's like over there politically or economically."

"I understand."

“I take it for granted that there are some purposeful inaccuracies in your story. That the blacks and the whites are not necessarily Negroes and Caucasians, for example. And that other elements have been rearranged in similar fashion.”

“Go on. You fascinate me right now, Miles.”

“Do I? The catch is that I am sure I would not care to operate there, and I am fucking certain you wouldn’t. I don’t think you could if you wanted to.”

“Tell me the country. Now it’s you who is being theatrical. Tell me the country.”

Dorn said, “Israel. They’ve got their own country now, so there’s no sound reason why the Jews can’t be fascists just like anyone else. The native Arabs are the blacks in your parable. The neighboring Arabs are the colonial guerrillas. I know nothing of their economy or politics, but the conditions you describe could conceivably exist there. And it explains another thing, damn it.”

“What?”

“Your presentation. There has to be a payoff. All this can’t lead up to some African shithole that I’ve never heard the name of. It has to be outrageous; that’s obviously why we’re going through this intricate dance step. There are more outrageous things than Eric Heidigger engineering a fascist putsch in Israel, but I’d hate to have to list them.”

“It’s not Israel.”

“No?” Dorn was surprised. “You didn’t laugh.”

“I was too staggered by the thought. Your mind does make nice jumps. King of the Jews! What a delicious notion. No, the situation is not right there at all, politically or economically. But it is an amazing thought, and I would not like to bet heavily that the conditions might not be right in five years or ten. Not that they’re likely to invite us to come in.”

“Do I have to guess again?”

“No.” Heidigger bounced to his feet. “No! Enough guessing. I would be distraught if you guessed right. There was some trickery in my little speech. Not what you suspected—the blacks are black and the whites are white. Part of my deception was geographic. I turned the country upside down and backward. That is our objective, is it not? To turn the country upside down and backwards?”

“So the intellectual center—”

“Is not the southwest but the northeast. And the depressed area is not the northwest but the southeast. And the demagogue’s financial backing comes not from the East but from the West.” Heidigger’s eyes flashed. Beads of sweat dotted his head. He was speaking louder and more intensely.

“And the two charismatic left-centrists were brothers, and one of them was assassinated by an Arab and the other by a Cuban sympathizer. And the cops put down another of the niggers Wednesday.”

“Do you see why I had to go through all that hypothetical drivel? Because otherwise you would have thought of a million reasons why it can’t happen. The shit a man never sees is the shit he is standing in. That’s why the Jews didn’t get out of Germany. They were too close to it. They were in the middle of it. They were up to their necks in shit before anyone even suggested opening a window.”

“But you took the facts and wrote the script, Miles Dorn. You can’t say it can’t be done. You just said *how* it can be done.” He threw himself down in the chair again. He folded his arms, put his left foot on his right knee. “It can be done,” he said, his voice at whisper level now. “Everything’s right. Everything. It will fall in our laps.”

Dorn was white. He was shivering, and could barely keep his balance. The floor seemed miles away. Miles from Croatia. Vertigo. That was her cat’s name, Vertigo.

“In our laps,” he heard Heidigger saying. His voice seemed far off, faint, filtered. “The United States of America. In our laps.”

THREE

It had been perhaps twenty years since Dorn read *Der Fragebogen*, but whole passages of it were etched on his mind. The book was an autobiography couched in the form of an acerbically whimsical response to a questionnaire prepared at the war's close for an Allied denazification program. The author was Ernst Von Salomon, Walther Rathenau's assassin and a highly placed writer and editor in Goebbels' propaganda ministry.

Dorn, a Croat, had spent the war years with Ante Pavelic, killing Serbs and Titoist partisans. He had not been subject to any equivalent of denazification. It had simply been necessary for him to leave Yugoslavia. Yet there had been much in Von Salomon's arrogant apologia that struck chords then that echoed twenty years later.

Now, hunched on an aisle seat of a speeding Greyhound bus, he particularly recalled one passage. Von Salomon, a fascist activist since the twenties, discussed the dismay with which he and several close friends regarded the Hitler regime during its first years. These were young men, Von Salomon and his friends. Idealists. Patriots. Visionaries. They despised the Austrian corporal and his Brownshirts. How then to explain their subsequent acts?

"Together we swore an oath. There were two things we would not do. We would not commit suicide and we would not leave the country."

Dorn had never made the mistake of crediting *Der Fragebogen* with any particular relationship to truth. One did not, after all, cultivate a reverence for truth in the ministry of propaganda, nor did one learn credulity in Dorn's life schools. But that three-sentence explanation, awful in its simplicity, had an irresistible ring to it. From a simple negative decision against death and emigration all the rest of his life flowed like water.

Dorn could scarcely remember being a young man. He had never been an idealist, a patriot, a visionary. Thoughts of both death and departure were oddly comforting.

But survival was a habit he had acquired, and flight a habit he had given up. He was not given to oaths, but he, like Von Salomon, recognized two things he would not do. He would not commit suicide, and he would not leave the country.

A ten-minute rest stop somewhere in Georgia. Dorn used the lavatory, shut himself in a stall. The toilet bowl was stained, the seat's plastic cover cracked, the floor filthy. The toilet paper dispenser provided little squares of airmail stationery one at a time. The American bathroom, indeed!

(Before he left Heidigger, during a conversational lapse, Dorn had suddenly said, "But they have no bidets." And to Heidigger's blank look he had explained, "The American bathrooms that you praise have bidets. They have no bidets. Perhaps that could be embodied in our leader's program.")

Heidigger had bounced up. "But there is a bidet! In my very bathroom. In this Holiday Inn." Dorn said he hadn't noticed it.

"Go in now. See for yourself."

"I'll take your word for it."

"But there is no need to take my word for it. Take ten steps and see for yourself. If you were a young lady, I would invite you to have a complimentary douche, but at least you may see for yourself."

He had laughed sharply, laughter that Heidigger had not understood. "Eric," he had said at length. "Eric, I am not going to examine your bidet. I am going to trust you that there is a bidet in your bathroom. Eric, if I cannot trust you on the matter of a bidet in a bathroom, then we are in serious

trouble.”)

He sat on the toilet and read capsule biographies, written on plain typing paper in a feminine hand. Written with a fountain pen—Leopold Vanders also used a fountain pen, albeit a different one. Was that to be a trademark of the movement? He hadn't seen a fountain pen in years, wasn't aware that they still manufactured them.

John Lowell Drury.

Senior senator from New Hampshire. Kennedy loyalties and political philosophy. Democrat. Presidential aspirant. Late but strong antiwar stand. Early antipollution stand. Economic left-centrist. Strongest support from non-radical students. Insignificant black support. Good image with white middle class. Record acceptable to organized labor. Effective speaker, frequent university appearances. Speedy termination advised, preferably via identifiable leftist. This cover may be transparent. Age: 49. Married. One child. Residence: (Washington): 2115 Albemarle; (Berlin, New Hampshire): 114 Carrollton Place ...

Emil Karnofsky.

Director, National Brotherhood of Clothing Workers. Member, national board, AFL-CIO. Jew. First major labor leader to take antiwar position. Union membership chiefly black, Puerto Rican. Respected by colleagues but regarded as New York Jew leftist. Termination advised to foster solidarity in labor circles. Strongly recommend termination via natural causes or accident. If unavoidably otherwise political motivation must not be suggested. Age: 77. Widower. Three children, eight grandchildren ...

William Roy Guthrie.

Three term governor of Louisiana. Presidential candidate, Free American Party, 1964, 1968. Sectionalist demagogue with minor racist appeal. In industrial Midwest. Controlled alcoholism. Insufficient stature and character for national leadership. Political program neopopulist, negative. Termination advised to allow his personal following in the southeast to flow into the movement. Termination of Guthrie must precede termination of Theodore. Thrust may come from black extremists or university radical. This cover should be opaque. Age: 57. Married. No children ...

Waller Isaac James.

First term mayor of Detroit. Black. Economic and social moderate. Foreign policy views unstateside. Enjoys near total support of black constituency plus strong support of white power structure professionals, intellectuals. Relationship improving with white working class. Efficient administrator. Termination acceptable via black extremists or white racists, though latter slightly preferable. Termination ideally to be as dramatic as possible. Perhaps family could be included. Age: 47. Married. Five children ...

Patrick John O'Dowd.

Second term mayor of Philadelphia. Liberal Republican. National aspirations. Charismatic. Sociopolitical radical, economic conservative, National appeal to youthful left centrists. Strong secondary black appeal. Focal point of white working class hailed throughout eastern seaboard. Termination recommended but not urgent. Natural or accidental termination advised. Age: 47. Married ...

Henry Michael Theodore.

Vice President, United States of America. An intuitive political amateur with an instinctive

appreciation of centrist and right centrist anxieties. A refined demagogue. Romanian ancestry, original name Teodorescu. Theodore's moderate right-centrist stance and his extraordinary success focusing white middle class discontent make his termination a quintessential ingredient in movement policy. It should be scheduled at least one and no more than three months after Guthrie's termination. Terminal thrust must be unmistakably via large scale leftist conspiracy. Involvement should extend to both black and white radicals. N.B. It is imperative that the terminal cover be wholly opaque. Not only must there be no official or unofficial suspicion of movement involvement, but there can be no evidence of any involvement that is not absolutely identifiable as leftist and/or black. Age: 60. Married. One child, one grandchild ...

He paused on his way out of the men's room to wash his hands with liquid soap. As he dried them a steam of hot air, a wall scribble caught his eye.

"If you are not part of the solution," he read, "you're part of the problem."

Heidigger had said, "If you could take them in order, so much the better. But it's not vital. Only the Guthrie goes before Theodore."

"I imagine there are other lists."

"Not on this level of priority. There will be a great many smaller incidents which we will help develop. Riots, confrontations. But I should be surprised if half of what occurs during the next six months is our work. All of this"—a hand flung out to indicate the world—"would eventually come pass without us. We lend it direction."

"You expect these six in six months?"

"Just the first four. O'Dowd is less important than the others. If you can't get to him in hot weather you might almost as well skip him entirely."

"I thought he was supposed to go quietly."

"So they say. It hink he should go out loud, that he's only worth taking out if it makes the nigger burn down Philadelphia. Hot weather for Walter Isaac James, of course. Anyway, figure six months lead time. And then the date for Theodore is mid-October. You come as close to that as you can, but no later than the last week of the month."

"The election is next year."

"What a quick mind! But some states hold off-year gubernatorial elections."

"Oh."

"And the bigger our man wins, the better he looks next year."

"I gather I don't get to learn his name."

"Not today. But don't shoot any governors except for Guthrie. Just to be on the safe side."

"I don't know if I can do all these."

"It's what you do, Miles, and you do it as well as anyone I have ever known."

"I have been known to miss."

"Not often."

"And these are not six nonentities. There's not only security in front but the certainty of a steno afterward. The Vice-President, for Christ's sake."

"No one's safe if you want him. No one on earth. Who knows this better than you?"

He acknowledged this with silence, then looked thoughtfully at Heidigger. His voice softened. "Why should I do this, Eric? You expect me to do it. You and I both sit here expecting that I will do it. Why is this so?"

“You’ll act for the good of the country. To preserve the American Way of Life. Bathrooms and Holiday Inns.”

“The question was serious.”

“So was the answer. Do you know what happens if we don’t act? Do you know? Chaos. Literally chaos. The trends continue. Polarization increases. The left retains certain strengths. The right is splintered to lose control. The economy goes completely to hell. The center evaporates like piss on hot iron. The cities erupt. Pointless bloodbaths. Utter disorder. That is the alternative, Miles Dorn. The mistake everyone makes is to believe that the alternative to change is preservation of the status quo. And this is so rarely true. The alternative to change is another sort of change. You know this.”

“No, I don’t know it. Perhaps it is true—”

“It is.”

“—But I do not know it. I have no politics, Eric. You know that. I do not act out of principles.”

“Who does, in our line?”

“You do. You have standards, you have a set political frame of reference. I do not.”

“Then perhaps that is why you can do this sort of thing so much better than I. I can point. You can act. Perhaps that is why.”

“But why do I do it? Why, Eric?”

“Because it is how you are defined, how you define yourself. You do it because it is what you do.”

“Like robins.”

“I don’t hear you.”

“Nothing,” he said. “A private thought.”

“Enjoy your private thoughts. It’s a free country.”

Back on the bus, head flung back, half in and half out of sleep, he played with private thoughts while the bus coursed northward through a free country.

A governor, a senator, a labor leader, two mayors. A vice-president. Worms to feed my baby robins. Men to nourish worms.

If you are not part of the solution, then you must be part of the problem.

FOUR

Monday noon she rang his bell. He was not surprised to see her. He had been expecting her ever since he read the morning paper. “Oh, God,” she said.

She was ashen-faced, trembling. He took her arm. “You know about it.”

“I read about it, yes.”

“I wasn’t supposed to come until tomorrow. If you’re busy—”

“I have a completely free afternoon. Come in.”

“I have the five dollars.”

“You’re being hysterical. Come inside. Now sit down. Would you like anything? Tea? A glass of wine?”

“No,” she said. She took hold of her upper arms, hugged herself, shuddered. She sighed heavily. Then she said, “I’m all right now.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like some wine?”

“No.” Her eyes found his face. In German she said, “Your intuition saved my life.”

“Oh, now.”

“Fourteen of them. Dead. Fourteen kids dead. It was never fourteen before. But when it was four at Kent State, everybody said, ‘God, it was never four before.’” She had returned to English. “And thirty-five wounded. One of them was from here. You know that, you saw the paper. What you don’t know was that he was a friend of mine. They didn’t put that in the paper. ‘Jon Yerkes, 20, who was shot through the wrist and is expected to lose the use of his right hand, was a friend of Jocelyn Perry.’ Is my friend. He’s still alive. He just doesn’t have a right hand any more. He played the guitar. *Played*. Not *plays*. You need two hands to play a guitar. God, I can’t relate to that. I was up all night. We were all up all night. Kids went around smashing windows because they couldn’t think of anything else to do. Nonviolent kids went around the campus smashing windows. I can’t relate to any of this. Look, Ma, my right hand. Oh.”

She got to her feet. “I said I was all right. I’m not. I think I have to throw up.”

Was it one of Heidigger’s? Or did it just happen?

A confrontation. Students and National Guard. Some students broke the demonstration’s nonviolent code, shouted insults, hurled rocks. (Student radicals? Or plants?) A couple of guardsmen used their rifle butts on demonstrators. (Because it was necessary? Because they couldn’t take the pressure? Or because they were following private orders?) More students responded with rocks. A shot was or was not fired from the crowd. (Was there a shot? Was it a student who fired it?) A guardsman fired a shot in return, killing a student. Then there was definitely gunfire from the crowd, from several points in the crowd, and the guard returned fire. Fourteen students dead, dead. Thirty-five wounded. Look, Ma,

It could have happened by itself, Dorn knew. As it had happened before, as it would happen again. Spontaneously, a flash flood, a fire in a hayloft.

Or it could have been handled by three men after a scant hour’s planning.

Which?

He didn’t know that it mattered.

“I might have been standing next to Jon Yerkes. We would have been together. I could have been between him and that bullet.”

“You could have stayed here and walked in front of a bus. Don’t torture yourself with hypotheses.”

“I can think you saved my life if I want to.”

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- <http://unpluggedtv.com/lib/Savage-Drift--Monument-14-Series--Book-3-.pdf>
- <http://redbuffalodesign.com/ebooks/Caroline-s-Child---Dr--Texas--Heart-of-Texas--Book-2-.pdf>
- <http://kamallubana.com/?library/Blind-Man-s-Alley--A-Novel.pdf>
- <http://twilightblogs.com/library/Placing-the-Suspect-Behind-the-Keyboard--Using-Digital-Forensics-and-Investigative-Techniques-to-Identify-Cyber>
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