

Mr. Angel

by Dino Parenti

I. Boxcars

Summer, 1988

Billy Moso pitched his smoke out the window then pulled hard into the Boxcars' parking lot. Within seconds he found himself in a swirling eddy of dust, viciously wiping at his eyes and cursing God for creating the state of Nevada in between coughing fits. In truth, he should have thanked the Maker--Chevy, that is--for getting him this far without a breakdown. One look confirmed he was book-ended by a hundred miles of desert in each direction, and nary a tow-truck in sight.

He killed the engine and just sat there for a while, quietly considering the sight before him through a grimy windshield of sand and ruptured insects. The parking lot was really just a hundred-and-fifty foot swath of dirt between a power transformer and a bank of blue port-o-potties, filled helter-skelter by trucks, big-rigs and motorcycles wherever their owners could shoe-horn them in. Apparently the concept of parking stripes had yet to be introduced in the Silver State.

Then he took a good long gander at the building.

For about five minutes he had no idea how to react. He simply stared as the sun beat on it like an incorrigible dog. In the end, laughter won out by a nose. Standing some fifty feet away in the middle of Nowhere, USA was the source of his best friend's gloating for the past year.

Ray Mortimer Jr., buddy and confidant through grade-school, high school and an abbreviated stint through the Higher Institute for Altered States, had a dream: To someday own a casino. And each time it came up Billy's response would be a simple variation on a theme: Bullshit... Yeah right... Bullshit... Sure... Bullshit... Whatever... Bullshit... etc, etc, etc.

Then he got a call one night.

It was Ray on a pay-phone somewhere on I-15, short of Barstow at just a hair past three in the morning. His clothes, some keepsakes and little heroin were packed in one suitcase. Another held about a hundred grand in cash. He said that he was finally doing it--that he had the land already picked out and had the blessing (and more importantly, the backing) of a handful of silent partners.

That had been over two-and-a-half years ago. In the subsequent time, Ray Mortimer Jr. faded from all sight and sound.

Eventually he reappeared--via postcard--this to reassure his family and Billy that he was well and good and not living on, or off, his knees. They've even managed a few phone conversations on occasion, but they were usually one-sided affairs, with Ray, having a certain aptitude for

embellishment, doing all the glossing.

And now he was here, seeing first-hand the culmination of year-long hype incarnate.

It was not to say that Boxcars' was a complete waste of human effort. It looked as if it started out life as a decent enough rest-stop and diner. The casino addition looked out of place only because its exterior finishes had not weathered to match the adjoining structure. All in all not a big place, maybe only a couple of dozen rooms to it, but it had potential. It even flirted with charm--as much as anything could in Nevada.

The place had the audacity to offer valet service, though the desperados parking the long-beds and Impalas looked every bit the type that could manage the job adequately without keys. One of them even had the unmistakable bulge of an ankle tracker flaring out his pants at the cuff. Another former yardbird in a flashy green blazer was testing the bounds of his acumen by working the door, and even from where Billy sat he could make out the shoddy prison ink on the guy's neck.

"Fuck," he groused, the notion belatedly washing over that he'd driven damn near an entire day for this.

He peeled himself out of the primed gray T-bird and stretched his gangly limbs for the first time since he left San Jose some ten hours earlier. His car--a piece-of-shit hand-me-down that ran on seven cylinders and a prayer--had stirred up more shit and grit than a Kuwaiti sand-storm, and at the beginning of a deep, fortifying breath Billy quickly found himself hacking his lungs out all over again.

Slowly he staggered his way to the front door of Boxcars', with it's satirical OPEN FOR BUSINESS sign, his eyes stinging and running like faucets. When he got there the doorman uttered a conditioned and horribly mangled "Welcome-to-Boxcars. Enjoy-your-stay." A smile trailed this exposition, and despite the coughing fit, Billy was compelled to snag his giggle before it found light. The guy had no front teeth.

He opened the glass doors for Billy and he stepped into a blast furnace.

"Sorry, AC's been out since Tuesday," the man behind the bar announced, a dead ringer for Scatman Crothers if there ever was one.

Billy cleared his throat and rasped, "You know it's Saturday, don't you?"

"Yup!" the old-timer chirped smartly, and gave the young visitor the largest, brightest smile he'd ever seen. He added: "Want a little something for that?"

"Just water, thanks," Billy managed, just before an after-shock of coughs seized him for another jolt.

The bar was packed like a fly-trap in August, much to his surprise, and as he jostled for position in the melee one of customers vacated a spot near the corner. Billy eased in and the barkeep-Albert by his name-tag-passed him a glass of water on a paper coaster.

"Heading to Vegas, young man?"

Billy took a long drink, then chuckled. "Would you believe after driving all night this was my intended destination?"

"That's a sad fact to have to admit. Even so, we're glad to have you. Go on ahead and pick any slot. Or chose a table if that's your fancy. They'll all shank you in the rear just as equally."

"Thanks, but actually I'm a friend of Ray's."

"Ray... Oh! You mean Boxcars! That's right, he said you was coming. Well, I don't right know where he is at the moment, but if you just hang out for a while I'm sure he'll surface as sure as the sun."

"I'll do that," Billy said, and thanked him.

He proceeded to side-saddle his stool in order to view the entire casino and hopefully catch Ray somewhere in the drove of dreamers and losers. He wasn't sure what to expect as he made his way across the desert, but he certainly didn't anticipate such business. Such activity.

The place was swarming. Bodies, mostly bikers and truckers, crowded the slots and tables like street pigeons, and those that weren't blowing their rent on chance were just as happy to squander it on straight shooters and watered-down cocktails. Quarter-slots were the choice of the day, and the nearby change machines were having their warranties tested to the limit. The three pay-phones near the kitchen sported ridiculously long lines; washouts anxious to reach their stand-by pokes, PO's, bookies or any kindred simpleton stoned enough to wire them a pile of cash on the spot. It certainly was a scene to behold, Billy thought. Mecca for low-brows and desert white trash.

A tall suit with a bad rug approached him at the bar then, shook his hand and officially welcomed him to opening night. Of all things! The joint came equipped with it's own celebrity greeter, some has-been character-actor who'd burned up his fifteen minutes some ten years back when TV sit-coms had an edge and were still funny. For the life of him, he couldn't remember the guy's name.

He soon grew tired of numbing his haunches on the stool, so he walked over to what amounted to the lounge area where a couple of dealers were taking a smoke. He interrupted a rather animated conversation in Spanish and asked if they knew where he could find the owner. His answer was a pair of bewildered shrugs with glares to match.

"Don't waste your breath. Hit, and stay is all they know, fella," advised a female voice from behind.

Billy turned and was rewarded with a vision: A blonde, perhaps twenty-three, with large caramel eyes and a top so low-cut it could turn any switch-hitter into a straight right-hander on sight. She was a cocktail waitress going by the drink tray and tip purse, and was quite possibly the sweetest piece of eye-candy he'd ever seen.

"Is that right? You know, I'd bet any dangling body part they also understand Pay-day," Billy quipped. He got all he could've asked for in return: A giggle and a jiggle.

"Shoot, even I know that one in Es-pa-nol," the girl drawled. It was thick and unbearably cute,

like molasses pouring from a jar. From Arkansas perhaps, or maybe the Carolina's.
"Anyways...What'll you have, stranger?"

"How did you know I was a rube?"

"Puh-lease. Folks come here intent on doing one or more of the following: Gamble, drink or pork. You fall under the category of other. To be frank, you look confused."/P

Billy smiled lecherously. "Good call, cupcake. You should've been a private-eye. I think you've missed your calling."

The girl sighed. "Right, right, whatever you say. Look, you want something to drink or not? I've got a beat to walk here."

"Okay okay, lady. No need to get hostile," Billy playfully chided. "That's a negative on the drink. The truth is I'm just looking for the owner. Mr. Ray Mortimer is a buddy of mine."

"Everyone around here is a buddy of his," she suggested rather acerbically, then before motioning him away with a shooing gesture: "He's behind you."

"He's what--"

Billy spun around and there was Ray standing a few feet away next to a ten thousand-dollar-grand-prize slot, looking no different save for a little more color on his face. He smiled grandiosely at Billy and opened his arms in a showy gesture of triumph. The bandages were gone from his right hand, Billy observed, exposing four fleshy nubs and a thumb.

It's how the place got it's name, Ray had once told him on the phone, much to Billy's assertions to the error.

His friend's response was simple and characteristic: Yeah, yeah, I know boxcars is a roll of twelve, professor. Six fingers, six dots on a die. You sweat the details too much, pal, you know that? No one else seems to have a problem with it.

They hugged in the middle of the casino floor, wiping away a few unbidden tears in the process. The guy had even put on a few pounds, Billy noticed during the embrace. Ray then suggested they adjourn to his private office behind the bar where cork-board walls would dampen the cacophony of man and machine to a buzz. There they would spend the rest of the day talking, reminiscing and laughing about anything and everything.

Towards the end of the evening Ray finally confessed to an overwrought portrayal of his establishment all those times on the phone. He also mentioned that he had a nice reserve of money put away that he could use to spruce the place up, but he had to save it for something else. Something special. When Billy pursued the details Ray dodged the inquiry and briskly changed the subject, but not before promising that some day he would tell him what it was all about.

Of course, neither had any inkling that Ray would pull the vanishing act yet again, this time for fifteen years.

Billy left just after midnight. In a way he was glad he had opted not to stay overnight. His friend had changed quite a lot temperamentally over the years, especially since that week in September nearly three years back when he parted ways with prudence and forty-percent of his digits. As the night had progressed he noted in Ray a certain dark preoccupation he seemed to revel in during the breaks in their conversation. Perhaps the Angel affair had triggered a kind of premature madness in his friend--the kind that afflicted his father who had been witness to the entire ordeal--and as he drove swiftly across a dark, two-lane highway back to California, he recalled the events leading up to his friend's trauma, and wondered how the hell he managed to come out of that nasty mess unscathed himself. Everything had gone wrong from the opening pitch. Ray's father wasn't even supposed to be there, but the meddling fool showed up anyway, much to everyone's surprise...

II. Jake's Steaks and Marty's Billiards

Fall, 1983. 5:45pm

The stately old bastard, all pleats, cashmere wool and crank, sat rigidly on a sullied vinyl chair, lips tight, his arms and legs crossed in strained anticipation. In truth he was just a stride past the big five-O; not exactly ancient by conventional standards, but his mug more than made up for the difference. His face was a painfully unrelieved mask, locked in a perpetual glower, and bearing all the snobbery and contempt of a man who had reached eight-digit income too early in life and has since been waiting for some degree of adulation he felt was rightly due.

The room he currently occupied was like none other he ever had the misfortune of finding himself in. It was an insult to his entire being, rank with the stench of domestic tobacco and mildew that made his nostrils crinkle something awful with every breath. A smutty bulb cast a miserable, befouling glow on everything, *not* that the decor warranted much more. Decorating the wall before him was a dog-eared poster of a nude, top-heavy woman in red high-heels fornicating with a Harley-Davidson. Furniture was sporadic and clearly second-hand in nature, strafed in places by stains that were, civilly speaking, suspect in origin. Hanging from a closet door like some tapestry straight out of a chrome double-wide was a black-velvet painting of Harry Callahan leveling a .44 at some unseen punk.

From the next room came the snap-crack of billiard balls breaking, followed by a chorale of jeering, savage laughter.

Marty's Billiards: Enough throw-backs to abolish the notion of Creationism once and for all. Why they had decided to meet in such a dump he did not know, but that though took second billing to what really echoed in his head at the moment: They were late. *Very* late. As if late could be anything *but* very. It was something Raymond Mortimer despised, such tardiness, because along with it came the inevitable froth: *Waiting*. And for about forty-five minutes now he's been doing just that, in the process missing two client meetings, his mid-afternoon third-of-a-fifth-of-scotch and a myriad of other things that unquestionably would have kept him out of a foul downtown fly-trap for the past three-quarters of an hour.

Still, considering the current circumstances--and the prospective clientele--he felt he could live with the tardiness. The rendezvous location on the other hand was completely unforgivable. A generous draught of dust motes greeted his every breath and each step stirred up a battalion of ghost turds in all directions like roaches. He desperately wanted to wait outside, away from the stale odor of ground-in smoke, but that only meant returning to this room and a second uneasy trek through the Cro-Magnon zoo that was the adjoining pool hall.

Another curt look at his watch. The action was automatic and accomplished nothing except to provoke the beginnings of a headache. It was then that the door opened and a dark, slender man entered the room.

Raymond leapt from the chair. "Who the devil are you?"

Momentary light-headedness, the sudden exertion causing his heart to flutter beyond its usual lethargic rate. Corporate life never demanded much in the way of movement, save the energy required to shake hands, sign his name and talk incessantly for hours on end. The latter was a genetic gratuity both his mother and father carried in spades. Thrown into this mix was a generous ladle of impatience, along with a good sense of mistrust and suspicion that at the moment bobbed to the surface like a week-old corpse. This was *not* the man he was expecting, and another prevailing characteristic--a penchant for excitability--was beginning to rear its ugly head before he stifled it.

This time firmer and more composed: "I'll ask you again, sir: Who the hell are you?"

The reply: "I heard you the first time, Mr. Mortimer."

The man at the door was quite tall, which only dredged up even more misgivings on Raymond's part. Though young in years, he seemed to display an acute sagacity for his age. His face was all angles and intensity, with a set of sharp, flaring ears not unlike those of an Egyptian cat. He also looked like one of those emasculate bookish types that frequented the theaters and art galleries of his neighborhood--all closely trimmed haircuts and wardrobes consisting of nothing but black. This however was *not* a \$2,000 Armani business suit standing in the shadows, and he knew that as sure as he could pick a Lippizaner from a rodeo pony. In all likelihood, he was dealing with a classic \$200 Sears and Roebucks.

"Where is Mr. Angel? It was my understanding that he would be the one coming. I don't deal with flunkies," Raymond snidely intoned. If this *other* misconstrued his meaning, he certainly wasn't going to lose any sleep over it.

The man laughed dryly. It was a sinister, disquieting sound.

"I'm not just muscle, as you probably think I am. I have a close relationship with Mr. Angel and he often sends me on errands like these. You can call me Santos."

Raymond stood pensively for a moment, gnawing at the inside of his cheek. Relegated to dealing with a subordinate was never an appealing exercise, especially when the lackey in question was no doubt hired for his greater proficiency with firearms than words. Admittedly it was a presumption, but one he felt safe in making though he would later admit to himself during a brief moment of sanity that this man seemed at the very least verbally competent. In fact, he was down

right eloquent for a Latino.

“Look here, Mr. Santos, I--“

“It’s just Santos, Mr. Mortimer.”

Raymond continued undeterred. “As I was saying, I am certain that this Mr. Angel has his full confidence in you, whatever it is you do. It is just that I am accustomed to doing business a certain way. No insult intended, but truth-be-told, I find third-party intervention offensive.”

A single snigger from the doorway: “That must be the hypocrisy I was told to watch out for.” A pause. “I was led to believe I was just meeting with junior. After all he arranged this call. Instead, I get you.”

Raymond straightened. “I am not here in place of my son. I am here to support him as his father. Now where is this Mr. Angel?”

Santos took a step towards Raymond who in turn took an involuntary step back. In the end no knife or gun was produced but the man dressed entirely in black did take an uninvited seat across from him.

“Sir, I’m not just some go-between. I’m more along the lines of...let’s see, how would someone of breeding put it? Ah, I know. Think of me as a kind of litigator. Third party involvement, or even fourth or fifth is commonplace in my trade. Discretion is just as important as results.” An impish, disconcerting smile crossed his lips, making him look even younger than his thirty-or-so years. It was the grinning face of a wolf that had not eaten in days. “Mr. Mortimer, if you don’t mind me saying so, you make the loan sharking trade sound very Chase-Manhattan. Mr. Angel isn’t that institutional. He prefers simplicity above all else.”

Raymond countered with an equally wry grin. “Oh, I would say he values chicanery just about as much.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t follow,” Santos replied evenly.

“My son has described your employer to me in keen detail and I have come to the conclusion that he is...dear me, how can I put this: Quite Chinese. As a matter of fact, in my course of work in the dirt-dealing trade I have come across many an Asian banker and developer, but I have yet to meet one whose surname ended in the consonant of ‘l’. So, for curiosity sake, how did your employer come by the name of Mr. Angel?”

Santos stopped smiling.

“He’s benevolent.”

Raymond’s turn to smile. “Benevolent? Is that suppose to be funny?”

“No. And neither is the fact that your son still owes him two-thousand dollars. You see, sir, along with being ever so practical, Mr. Angel is also patient. He likes Junior-he really truly does--but *it has* been over a month...”

Santos let his words trail off deliberately.

“Mister--*what-ever*, do you know who I am?” Raymond growled, his eyes boring into the man across from him like augers.

“Of course I--“

“I run the largest land developing company in the country, perhaps the world, depending on what trade journal you read. My name is synonymous with achievement and prosperity. My reputation is anchored in stone. Any number of powerful financiers the world over can provide testimony to this--people of impeccable standing, endowed in the ethics of deal-making, and who would be utterly mortified if they were to find I conducted business in such a rat-nest as this!”

His volume had risen steadily to a near-holler as he spoke, loud enough that surely everyone in the entire building had heard it, and in the end his voice had broken like a teenager’s. He paused to swallow and regain some manner of poise before continuing.

“My son is sole heir to this distinction. He graduated top third of his class at Dartmouth and works as a legal aid for the biggest lawyer in town--that blow-hard shyster Nolan Myer. He certainly makes enough to compensate a shylock with an identity crisis. Now my son has pledged to be here with your money at a quarter past five this evening, and his word is as good as gold. Granted, his time management skills are not up to par with most of the civilized world, but above all else I taught Ray to be honorable and true, and this is something I would stake my name and character against 'til the day they bury me. So please do not try to sucker-punch me with tactless innuendo. I’ve gone toe-to-toe with the world’s heavyweights in that regard, and frankly, sir, you would be swinging in the dark here.”

Santos raised his hands in mock surrender, his cold smirk returning anew.

“Whoa there, Mr. Mortimer, please don’t get ahead of yourself! This is a basic level matter. Business 101. I was sent here to collect a debt, so let’s just stick to that game plan for the time being, all right?”

Raymond leveled a finger at the man’s face. “You remember who you’re talking to. *Insolent second-stringer!* Do not lecture me in the art!”

“Fine. Forgive me. Five-fifteen did you say?”

“Precisely,” Raymond confirmed. He looked at the Jack Daniel’s wall clock hanging against faux-wood panel veneer, and for the first time since finding out of his son’s current financial dilemma, he began to worry.

The time read 5:58.

5:59

Billy Moso thought with a shudder, *This could so be me in twenty years.*

He watched with a sour blend of curiosity and nausea as another pair of gushy couples entered *Jake’s Steaks* and joined the two-dozen already yakking it up in the corner they had taken over.

Yet another one of those goddamn yuppie birthday parties the pub always seemed to have

towards the end of the week, right before the happy hour crowd sloshes in to plant their flag on the bar, the obligatory five-day surplus of complaints in tow. Regrettably, that time-honored little pastime was still a good four hours away and he and Ray Jr. would be long gone by then.

That is, if his highness ever decides to show up, Billy pondered.

They are--or now *were*--suppose to pool their money by four-forty-five so Ray could have it in the Angel's hands by fifteen-after-five. In the meantime Billy's own five-hundred-dollar contribution has been burning a steady hole in his pocket since its withdrawal that morning. It was an agonizing sortie to begin with, but not nearly so painful as the prospect of parting with it was. Still, he owed Ray--not in the financial sense that is, but a debt is a debt no matter how it's sliced.

Ray got him through college, simple as that. The problem wasn't academic--at twenty-one, Billy Moso was, and still is by all accounts an anemic, wiry-haired burnout, but not a stupid one. Ray Mortimer Junior's intervention came in the form of support. In fact, when it counted most he became quite the philanthropist--something his father would have stroked-out over if he ever caught his spawn in the act of charity. The formula was basic: If Billy needed a place to crash for the night, Ray provided it. If he needed a little pick-me-up now and again, Ray would score it. If he felt lonely or stressed, Ray got him laid--and no cheap street action either. It was strictly high-end ass all the way.

In exchange for his benevolence, all Ray demanded was an ear--a sounding board to bounce off an endless reserve of totally outlandish bullshit. The boasting was the worst of it--the things he said he was going to accomplish with Daddy's money, especially that jive about owning his own casino someday--but he was also a party. Funny in that addicting, charismatic way you couldn't help but like, and loyal to boot. In the end, a half-a-grand loan wasn't that big a sacrifice to make despite the low probability of said amount ever finding its way back into his savings account anytime soon. Ray could be generous at times, but he could also be the most incredible of tight-asses.

The cow-bell above Jake's front door jangled for about the ninetieth damn time in the last thirty minutes. This time a trio entered the establishment. The first two were obviously together, a couple of tall, stiff-in-the-spine gym-types who bee-lined straight for the hoopla in the corner. Billy wasn't sure what *their* story was but they both sported a clean-shaven spiffy look that was, in a word, non-threatening.

The third individual had followed them in, brushing by without a look. He walked in a slouch, his head tucked within the up-turned collar of a jacket too heavy for the current climate. He shuffled rudely past the hostess who attempted to offer him a table and headed directly for the bunks against the walls where Billy sat.

"Gone skiing?" Billy asked straight-faced. Ray took the seat opposite him.

"Skiing? The middle of friggin' September you ask me something like that. What's wrong with you?"

A typical greeting from Ray, though his initial impression implied a less volatile demeanor. Sandy hair, spectacles and general all-American good looks have managed to sway most others

to look beyond an apathetic, crass personality, but Billy welcomed it. Off the bat he had accepted Ray's cynicism as the perfect compliment to his sobriety, and as time went by he learned to dismiss the tough-guy act. In the end he figured that if you were given everything on a silver platter since birth, an attitude was all you had to call your own.

Billy chuckled. "Nothing's wrong, amigo, nothing. Everything's roses. Look, I'll do it fresh and from the top: How're you doing, Ray? You feeling sick or something?"

"I'm fine," Ray said fleetingly, then snapped to attention like a grunt. "How'd you get here--Rita drop you off?"

"Naw, man, took a cab like you asked. A God-damn shrine to Vishnu that thing was, let me tell you. Anyway I'll page Rita when we're done here. If she can forget for a minute how I looked at her sister, she'll take me home. But all that aside..." He leaned surreptitiously across the table... "did you get it?"

"Three-fifty," Ray answered without a beat. Billy reacted as if he'd been slapped.

"That's it? Christ, Ray, I thought Lou said--"

"Yeah, Billy, I know what Lou said. I just spent the last hour chewing his ass off about it. The mope sat there and took it like a statue. What can you do..."

Billy shook his head. "Some fence. What kind of side-show is he running out there? Every mutt on the street needs a cell-phone. *Every* one." A pause, then: "You mean to tell me he didn't buy one box? Not a one?"

This time Ray paused before answering. "Well, he bought two, then he fed me some line about owing this other buyer a favor--which, by the way, was total make-up on his end--then he...then he offered me fifty for my car speakers."

"They're worth four times that easily!" Billy cried, but got only a shrug for his effort. "Fifty-fucking-dollars! What an insult. You can't buy rice in China for that pittance. He's some piece of work that guy. Where does he find the stones, under-pricing, miserable wog..."

"He's got a pair on him, all right," Ray echoed. "We're through with that pirate though. When this thing with Angel is cleared up I'll go talk to Frank Knox at the tracks. Right now there's no time for that."

With a belated sigh he sat back against the booth and began to massage his temples. He looked used up at the moment--twenty-five going on eighty. The usual levity was gone from his eyes; presently there was only a grave sense of purpose there. He'd been chasing the ultimate score uphill and clawing all the way for months now, and was no better off for it. Of course he would downplay it for all concerned, but Billy knew the count. Knew it well enough. Sudden want of income had a harsh, debilitating effect on people, and the rich especially were no more immune to it than anyone else. And besides, Ray had no one to blame for it but himself. Duping his father into thinking he was a Dartmouth law-school graduate was one thing: Trying to fake legitimate employment without a steady stream of cash-flow was another issue entirely.

Making matters worse was Ray informing his father that he got a *job* at the Myer law firm so

soon after *graduation*. He only made that up to pacify the man, to keep him off his back, and it *worked*. In fact it pleased his father so much that he stopped shelling out an allowance altogether. Why bother? Junior was now a mature, independent man.

“This is some mess, Ray,” Billy sighed. “You’re still six-fifty short and time ain’t taking its time. Do you have anything else you can sell? We can go to Julio at the park. Fucking novice--the guy would buy snow in winter.”

All he got in return was that same unsettling look of determination. Several minutes passed and when Ray finally did reply, it was in a tone Billy was certain he never heard come from those lips.

“Tell me something, Bill: Do you ever listen to people talk?”

Billy hesitated, then cautiously answered: “I guess. I don’t know. In what way do you mean?”

“Eavesdropping,” Ray replied. “Wandering ears. Fly-on-the-wall shit. Bars and restaurants like this, they’re great for that sort of thing. Cafes too. Why do you think poet nancy-boys hang out at these joints? The cuisine? The goddamn ambience, or hoping against hope some agent with bad taste who’s on the troll snares you among all the other hopeful saps? For some, yeah sure, but mostly it’s for the spark. *Inspiration*, my friend. People share all kinds of private laundry to total strangers--juicy stuff, you know? Just get a counter between them and they open up like roses. It’s one of the mysteries of life. Let me give you an example: I overheard the owner here leak some very interesting dirt to this chick a couple of weeks ago./P

“You mean Jake?”

Ray nodded. “Uh-huh. Do you know what he told her? He said he stashes an emergency thousand bucks in this place somewhere away from the register. Told her it was for a rainy day or some other blase reason. *Balls*. It was all prologue for ‘let’s meet later sometime for a little game of hide-the-kielbasa.’ His eyes were down her blouse the entire time.”

“Yeah,” Billy snorted, “Jake’s a pisser that way.”

“Anyway, that’s a grand I’m talking here. *One thousand dollars*. That’s a pretty nice piece of change to just leave lying around. Now take into account all these people at the party here. Do they strike you as high-society? No. They’re middle-class like most other stiffes, but that’s not to say they’re broke. I mean they certainly aren’t eating here for their health, but they do intend to tank up before the night is over, and last time I checked Jake wasn’t giving it away.”

“*Okay...* So what?” Billy granted. He was completely oblivious of the fact they were now whispering. “You’ve established that Jake’s not a stupid business man. That’s good and swell for him, Ray. Now where is this all going?”

Ray scowled hard at Billy.

“Boy, Billy, I never considered you highbrow, but I never saw you as dense either. Do I need to spell it out for you? This is what I’m talking about:”

He leaned part-way across the table, zipped his jacket down and revealed with a quick wiggle the

butt of an automatic pistol protruding from his belt.

Billy's mouth came unhinged and hung like a dead leaf.

Ray prompted: "Is it starting to register now, Billy? Are you getting the picture loud and clear?"

"For the love of Christ, Ray, *are you high?!?*" Billy grumbled hysterically. "I mean-*fuck!* Look, I know the Angel doesn't exactly live up to his name, but I'm sure he won't drill you if you're a couple of days late. Come on, this is armed robbery, man. No slap on the wrist here. This is time for sure!"

"*Moron!* I'm already two weeks late! It's either today or I'll have to leave town, get it? Now I've thought this over good and hard and this is the only way--"

Billy shook his head emphatically. "That's shit and you know it! There's always another way. Let's just sit here and think about it, okay? We'll put our heads together and use some fuckin' sense. We'll order some cheesecake, how's that for starters? I know you like cheesecake, Ray, you ate the shit every day at Magnum's by the shore...*that's it!* God-dammit, that's it! Right under our noses the whole time: The gun, Ray. You can sell the gun. A piece like that, it'll fetch three-hundred easy."

"For crying out-loud, Billy... Listen to me: Calm down. I can't--"

"No, Ray, it'll work--"

"I can't sell this gun. The gun's off the table, okay? It belongs to my father, for the love of Christ. I snatched it from his night-stand this morning while he was asleep." He placed a pacifying hand on Billy's wrist. "Listen, I know you've tried to help--that's not lost on me--and I don't just mean with the money. I'll do this alone, okay, so just relax. Now I want you to do something--I want you to go to my house and wait. Tell my father...I don't know, tell him I'll be in time for dinner. I'll leave the gun with Lacy when I'm done here and pick it up in the morning before he wakes up. Then I'll pay off the Angel. Besides, this will probably go down a lot smoother if I went at it alone."

"Really? Have you ever done this kind of thing before?" Billy asked, but the answer to that was obvious. Ray just smiled.

"How hard can it be? Jake's grand plus whatever I can get from the free-love generation. I'm sure I can scrounge up a few hundred from these clowns. Look, you'd better get going now or--"

"I-I'll stay," Billy moaned. Now it was his turn to do the temple-rubbing bit.

Ray lowered his head to catch his friend's eyes. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah, I-I'm sure. I mean it's not like I'd be able to eat here anymore. Oughta pay rent, we're here so much. First door the fuzz knocks down after yours is mine."

"My man!" Ray whooped, and clapped Billy on the shoulder. The other took in a heavy breath.

"To the bitter end, I guess. When do we do go?"

Ray looked at his watch and mulled it over. Marty's was close by so there were still a few minutes they could spare. He signaled a waitress and gave Billy a reassuring smirk.

"Right after I have a cup of coffee."

6:13

"Your boy is really biding his time, Mr. Mortimer," Santos proclaimed, shattering an extended silence. "He's confident, that kid. A regular chip-off-the-old-block. That's quite the legacy you're leaving us."

Raymond abruptly ceased the staccato tapping he was beating on the table with his fingers and shot daggers at Santos.

"You've got a nerve, you know that? You know nothing about me," Raymond churned.

"Not true. Being vigilant and observant--among other things--is what I'm paid for. I do my homework, Mr. Mortimer." Santos' turn to stare down. "I didn't mean to insult you if that was your play. I only wanted to concede that with Ray Jr., confidence didn't skip a generation. That's all."

This cajoled a dry *humph* from Raymond.

"Do you get paid by Mr. Angel to brown-nose as well? Because I can tell you from experience that you have a flair. Bootlicks are a dime-a-dozen in my trade and they give out a particular odor that I've become adept at recognizing."

Santos glared at Raymond a little too hard for comfort. "I can see now where Ray Jr. got his mouth. It's a bad trait to have, a mouth like that. Used at the wrong time it can even be...detrimental. Possibly even catastrophic...

Raw, naked understanding exploded in Raymond's eyes, and this time when he stood he pushed away his chair so hard it crashed against the back wall of the room. His chin clearly trembled, but he was far beyond caring how he came off.

"You-you're not going to... *For God's sake, over a ridiculous two-thou--*"

"*Relax*, Mr. Mortimer. No one's *snuffing* anybody. Not tonight. You may have a problem swallowing this but I believe in a grace period as much as the next businessman. The truth is, your son still has nine days left. Nine opportunities, if you will, to settle his debt. Let's not get premature."

"Nine *days*? Nine *opportunities*? What is that--is that more underworld wit? Why don't you stop tap-dancing around. *Make some damn sense already!*"

"Tell me something, does Ray Jr. play any musical instruments?"

Raymond literally did a double-take. "*What?* Are you taking a poll? What does that have to do with any of this?"

Santos shrugged. "Nothing really. I just wanted to know if the boy had any hobbies where

manual dexterity is crucial.”

A pause. “He plays the violin. Actually, he only started a few months ago.”

“The violin,” Santos reflected. He made a gesture of playing one, fingering the air and drawing an imaginary bow. “Let me see if I have this right. First, is Ray right or left handed?”

Raymond’s response was flat and automatic. “Right.”

“That would mean that he fingers the strings with his left, making that hand the more important of the two, wouldn’t you agree?”

“I suppose,” Raymond mumbled, and at that moment he could no longer deny it: True fear had begun to claw its way up from the pit of his stomach. His shoulders sunk as his hands felt around for the supporting edge of the table. Santos watched all of this with quiet interest.

“There’s more than just a small debt at stake here for you, isn’t there? You need to save face, so when the next billionaire comes around to--“

“*He’ll be here!*” Raymond snapped. “And he’ll have your money! He *will*, dammit!”

“If you say so. I hope you’re right about that, Mr. Mortimer. For you and Ray Jr. both.”

Raymond locked squarely on the man.

“You’re Mr. Angel, aren’t you?”

The other chuckled. “Why would you say that? I’ve already given you my name.”

“You gave me *a* name. Christ, you talk like a goddamn bank president. You didn’t acquire that ability from stealing hubcaps and breaking knee-caps, I can tell you that, so stop jerking me around. Are you Mr. Angel?”

The black-clad man grinned as he reclined leisurely in his chair, clearly reveling in the moment. He crossed his arms, then saucily replied: “I cannot confirm or deny anything for my own sake. You’ll just have to be happy with *Santos*. But stop worrying yourself. Your son will not die tonight, I can promise you that, but he *will* be warned in a special way if he doesn’t come through with his due.”

“Look, just...just don’t hurt his hands,” Raymond appealed, as calmly as terror would permit. “He’ll never become a maestro, but there are other things he may want to do with his life and you’ll just limit that.”

“Nonsense. You don’t need hands to amass an empire, Mr. Mortimer. Just spunk, appetite, the willingness to lose everything... That’s enough to ante in. Little Ray is not wanting of any of those traits, least of all the last one. But, neither am I an unfair man. I have no desire to rob your son of his chance to play Carnegie Hall some day. No, no. We’ll start small. As a rule I’m very rudimentary and absolute when it comes to punitive matters, but, as you’ve said, he *is* the sole beneficiary. So I tell you what: I’ll make an exception for you both and slash the usual fine. There. Happy? This time, it will only cost Junior the small finger on his right hand. After that...*well*. We’ll take it as it comes.”

Above Raymond's head, like the cocking hammer of a gun, the clock's minute-hand clicked over another notch.

6:24

Ray Jr. downed the last of his coffee and grimaced. It was unusually strong and bitter for your average diner mud, and it only served to jar his nerves even more than they already were.

As he waited for the waitress to bring the coffee--a slothful bleach-blonde automaton in a smock and paper hat--another four couples had arrived and joined the social. He did a quiet head count and came up with thirty-three dupes, give or take. More than enough, he reassured himself. The haul looked to be larger than anticipated, but that did little to take the edge off. He was scared shitless, there was no other way around it, and as he reached for his jacket zipper he found he couldn't just snag it in one motion. Rather, he fumbled about as if reaching for a light-switch in the dark.

One of the party-goers dropped a quarter into the juke and a moment later the tavern was filled with Steppenwolf. This prompted Billy to rise. Ray, who had finally caught the elusive zipper, gave his friend a ruffled look.

"Hey, *hey*, wait a minute! Where're you off too? We gotta do this now or eat it."

Billy shuffled his feet uneasily. "I gotta drain it, man."

"You *what*?!? Billy, there's no time--"

"Give me a break, Ray, this is my first felony. You'd prefer I bust a valve in the middle of the job? Think how much fear *that* would instill."

Ray buried his face into his hands and crooned a profane melody. In the midst of his aria he came to the conclusion that someone in a past life had put a hex on his family name, and it had finally come time to settle up. Things were quickly adding up in the negative, and at the moment he wondered why lady luck had seen fit to smile on Billy's mother and not induced a miscarriage somewhere along the line.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind that the fortunate zygote in question attempted to place a tender hand on his shoulder which he roughly shrugged off.

"Just hurry the fuck up," Ray snarled.

Billy opened his mouth to refute but thought better of it. He started for the restroom in quick stutter-steps, giving Ray a wider than necessary berth. He dared not look back, convinced that if he did he might be staring down the business end of a Smith & Wesson automatic. That would have been all it took for him to dump his tank right there on Jake's dusty wholesale carpet.

He cornered sharply around a low jutting wall separating the dining area from the kitchen and slammed heedlessly into the men's room. A "WET FLOOR" sign almost took him out, but he juked right and practically leaped onto the urinal. His fly was down in a blur and he discharged a feral groan as the flood-gates gave way.

A good minute passed. Then another. The relief was so intense and overpowering that he almost failed to hear the bathroom door open and the sounds of heavy footsteps following behind it. His stream slowed to a sputter as terror began to take hold, and as the steps drew closer only one coherent image formed in his head: Ray and his nickel-plated friend-having decided that three's a crowd-had followed him in to punch his ticket for good.

A large shadow spilled across the tiled wall before him. An elephantine yawn and a bellowing clearing-of-the-throat reverberated like a cannon blast in the small lavatory, and Billy discovered to his consternation that he was unwittingly turning around for a look. Out of the corner of his eye he spotted a figure that was too large to be Ray's, and at once relaxed.

A middle-aged slab of beef stepped to one of the sinks and cast a lingering eyeball at his lanky neighbor. Billy's flow kick-started again and he acknowledged the new arrival with an arch of his brow. He thought to leave it at that but felt silence could throw suspicion, so he added a trite "How's it going" to his delivery.

The man--fortyish, grossly overweight and dressed in a brown sports coat with mismatching gray slacks--looked down on him as if he was a turd. He turned on the hot water and squinted into the mirror.

From his angle Billy could see the man's reflection, and what that streaked pane of glass threw back had the cantankerous look of someone who hated everybody in the world, beginning with himself--the type that practiced smiling in the mirror each morning in order to get by in the day.

"Damn noise... *Captain America* biker shit," the man muttered to himself. He seemed to be squeezing at some unseen nuisance above his right eye. "Free spirits... Born-to-be-wild. My *ass*. Oughta get a goddamn job. You buy that born-free child-of-nature bullshit?"

Caught totally off-guard, Billy realized about two seconds past normal reaction time that he was being addressed.

"Huh? Oh, I don't know. Never gave it any thought, I guess."

"Well, you should," the man retorted gruffly. If a bull-mastiff could talk, Billy theorized, this is exactly what it would sound like. "Your taxes pay for their lifestyle, whatever the hell they call it. Why work when they can get free government cheese and milk the first of every month off your sweat."

"Good point," Billy affirmed, a little too enthusiastically perhaps. He certainly could've done without the small talk, considering what he was about to partake in one room over, but neither did he want to just blow the guy off. Mercifully his answer seemed to satisfy the guy for the time being, so he refocused his attention on the giant mint before him. It didn't stop him from steeling occasional looks at the man however, strictly for observation purposes, and in the end his surveillance probably saved him and Ray five-to-ten at some maximum security hell-hole.

"Christ, what I wouldn't do to stamp out welfare for all time. Nothing would be too extreme," said the man as he continued his digital probing. He grimaced in discomfort as his portly fingers pinched away, then reacquired his familiar scowl. With the facial growth now licked he proceeded to remove his jacket and hung it on a wrought-iron hook by the door.

What Billy saw next shut off his bladder for good.

“Pounds add up with age, buddy-boy. Forget what the quacks tell you, there’s no way around it,” the man advised. He was referring to the shameless paunch he wore, but all Billy could zero on was the tight leather strap and holster that criss-crossed his generous torso, digging trenches into his fat like thin boa constrictors.

Sitting snugly in it was a black .38 revolver.

“Look what a few cold ones a day and eighteen years of paper-work did. Fucking barley, I tell ya. You know, you wouldn’t tell from looking at me, but only ten years ago I was quite the man of action. Then the Almighty added a marriage, some kids, threw in a mortgage and *presto*, you get the lovely specimen before you. What a goddamn swindle this life is.”

Billy’s heart raced at full throttle. All he wanted to do was sprint out of that room and high-tail it home, never mind Mr. Angel, and never mind Ray. The stakes have definitely changed and *every-man-for-himself* seemed to be the new order for the day.

The man began to dig through his pockets, uttering complaint after complaint that Billy hardly registered.

“You know, you get bogged down with a wife and kids...”

He drew out a collapsible night-stick first. Then came a pack of matches and a plastic lighter. Everything he pulled was immediately transferred into his more ample jacket pockets.

“...try as you may these jerk-off politicians talk and talk...”

Cigarettes--a crushed pack of Marlboro Reds--were excavated next. A yellowed handkerchief quickly followed which he promptly used to wipe his brow. It was the only thing that went back into the pants.

“...when perps use the same half-assed alibi each time, I tell you with all sincerity: You just wanna drop-kick Miranda into the next county and start breaking some bones...”

His wallet was last. This he tossed casually against the lavatory back-splash where it collapsed open. On one flap Billy could make out what appeared to be a family picture: An ornery, thickset woman flanked by two pre-teen grinning nightmares. The other flap held a jagged gold police shield.

“...day in and day out. You know what I’m saying here?”

“Yeah. *Sure*,” Billy mumbled distantly. His eyes were glued to the badge on the counter-top.

“You feeling all right, pal?” grumbled the cop.

“Me? Yeah. I...I’m fine, yeah sure.”

“Yeah, you would be. But I’m not. I haven’t been regular in a coon’s age, and when nature calls at my age you don’t argue with it. You’d probably better finish up there, son. The atmosphere’s about to become real unpleasant in here in a hurry.”

Billy didn't waste the opportunity. He did a quick shake, zipped up and hastened for the door.

"Hold up," boomed the cop, just as salvation was within reach. "You here for the festivities? You know Garcia the party-boy?"

A chill racked Billy in place and he abruptly tensed up to minimize its physical effect. Whatever saliva he had left evaporated in a micro-second, and for a moment he thought his heart had actually stopped. He closed his eyes, managing some degree of composure, then without turning around replied: "Nope. I can't say I know the guy."

There was a moment of horrible, prolonged silence, then the cop chuckled.

"Good for you. He's a prick!"

More throaty giggles, then Billy heard the draw-bolt to a stall door slam home.

He bumbled shakily out of there and found temporary support on the restrooms doorjamb. There he leaned for a moment, pondering all manner of scenarios from hold-ups, to surprises, to determined three-hundred pound cell-mates. He thought of his own current physique and shivered: Wouldn't be an hour at the gray-bar hotel before he'd be passed around like a roach.

As focus returned he noticed that on the walls around him was hung a lively adornment of streamers and party balloons. He hadn't paid attention to them before and now vaguely recalled that he *had* brushed a couple of the red balloons on his hasty way to the bathroom. Draped from the walls crown-molding was one of those cardboard foldable letter signs you can find at any supermarket. This one was apparently custom-made and bore the name of the man-of-the-hour:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY LUIS GARCIA!

There was something else tacked below this, on first glance appearing to be some manner of menu or newsletter. Closer scrutiny showed it to be a flyer printed on blue poster-paper. The lettering was large enough to read even from a good ten feet away, and what it said instantly got his legs moving again.

He pounced at the wall and ripped it down. From where he stood he could see the dining room and the nervously-hunched form of Ray at their table. His right hand was hovering about his chest, most likely hooked at the ready inside his jacket.

Billy half-jogged to the table, bumping into a waiter and a drink trolley in his path. The racket caused Ray to spin wildly around in his seat. His startled face was beaded with sweat.

"Jesus Christ, Bill! Could you have possibly taken any longer? I'm going out of my mind here!"

"Listen, Ray: We gotta split. Right now."

"Come again? Don't be getting cold feet on me."

"No, man, it ain't like that. The bathroom...y-you wouldn't believe it. There's a problem."

"*Yeah*. You're it!"

“Come on, Ray, I gotta tell you some--“

“You know, I don’t get you sometimes! All that valium and smack--I think it turned you into a fucking eunuch! Did you skin-pop in there? Don’t tell me you did cause--“

“*Will you for once listen to me Ray!*” Billy implored. He grabbed Ray under his arm to lift him but he shook loose.

“Don’t fucking touch me, Billy! We’re going to go through with this--I have to!”

“*WE HAVE TO GO!*” Billy snarled through gritted teeth, and this time he slammed the flyer on the table.

“What the hell is this?” Ray griped. He snatched the leaflet off his place-mat.

He glanced over it once, then took a moment to read it again slowly just to confirm the incredibility of it. He could feel Billy trying to tug him out of his seat again, but this time he didn’t fight it--couldn’t if he wanted to. The absurdity of it all had drained him of all will and energy.

His fingers lost their strength and the flyer floated to the ground. Even from the floor its words were clear, their mockery undeniable:

JAKE’S STEAKS
IS PROUD IN JOINING
THE 13th POLICE PRECINCT
IN WISHING OFFICER LUIS GARCIA
A HAPPY 39th BIRTHDAY!
½ OFF ALL DRINKS TO ANY
AND ALL OFFICERS OF THE
LAW WITH VALID ID!

The next thing Ray knew Billy was hurriedly guiding him through a thigh-bumping maze of chairs, tables and people, and out the front door. The day had been bright and warm when they had first come in, but since then dusk had pulled a cool violet quilt over the world. They cornered into the alley where Ray had parked his Benz. Billy took the keys out of Ray’s jacket and stuffed him into the passenger seat, then ran around front and got behind the wheel. On any other day Ray would have flipped at the sight of anyone behind the wheel of his ride, but he was in no condition to put up a fight.

The brand new engine, barely 273 miles old, came thunderously to life. Billy popped it into gear and left forty feet of burned rubber next to Jake’s dumpsters.

It was a good five minutes before anyone said anything. By then the combination of fabled German engineering and Billy’s lead foot had put some impressive distance between them and the diner. Ray did all the talking, or rather all the mumbling...an eerie mantra of the same phrase repeated over and over again through the strangest of smiles, and it made Billy’s skin crawl something awful. It was both rhythmic and insane, something haunting like Kurtz at the end of *Apocalypse Now*:

“...a fucking cop party...a fucking cop party...a fucking cop party...”

After 7:00...

For the past quarter hour, Raymond Mortimer Sr. performed a most impressive feat.

It wasn't an outward thing-something that any Joe on the street would notice at a glance. One would need to spend at a full day with Raymond Mortimer; endure a twelve-hour marathon of determined belittling, patronization and other assorted Type-A hysterics to truly understand the scope of what he was accomplishing.

Out of sheer will power and self-consciousness, Raymond was choking back a full-force conniption.

The heat had been steadily building over the course of the evening, ignited by a too-long stay in the most vulgar of rooms, followed by the arrival of what he first took to be a minion from a low-life street crew. Everything after that just served to stoke his agitation, not the least of which was the failure of his son to head to any strict timetable. Compounding this was an apparent messenger boy's smugness, leading to the all but certain revelation on his part that this was indeed Mr. Angel.

But the worst thing was the silence of the last fifteen minutes. This, along with the nipping thought that he and his son had been hoodwinked by a smooth-talking, artsy spic has kept him fuming in quiet rage. He could now feel anger as if it were another limb, one that steadily shoveled mounds of coal into an internal furnace. If he could he would crack open his skull and disinter the tormenting little gnome, but that would require action, and action would demonstrate weakness, and he was damned if he was going let Mr. Big-shot in a cheap black suit see his cards.

As it was, his company for the last hour was as cool as cool can be, leaving little if any doubt as to who was running the show. He would recline in his chair and occasionally gaze up at the plaster ceiling as if soaking in the rays on some Pacific island, not the smutty glow of an eighty-watt Sylvania. Periodically he would curl his fingers up to his face and examine his manicure. Oddly enough, for a man of his superficial appearance and manner, his hands looked rough and worn and his nails too grimy to go with the rest of the package.

This stimulated Raymond's curiosity some, and for the time being at least, quelled his fury. Upon further examination he noticed a ring on his right index finger and a little wave of optimism rippled over him. It was a cheap gum-ball-machine trinket, its *gold* bleaching away in places to a muted aluminum. A pawn-shop item at best--something a thug would wear proudly and cherish. There wasn't even a glass gem set into it as was the rule, but a plastic black bead with a green pattern engraved on its surface. After some more careful, subtle glimpses he identified the design as a four-leaf clover.

How appropriate, he thought. And how *encouraging*. This gave Raymond a small ray of hope, something to allay his certainty that this was in fact the head-honcho. Logic quickly intervened however. He had been around long enough to provide accurate judgments based solely on first impressions, and what he surmised, albeit grudgingly, was that the man who currently languishes across a table from him possesses the keys that so few have in the right balance to run things: He

is articulate, fearless and most importantly, patient.

“I know the proprietor here,” *Santos* said casually. “I can have him bring in some refreshments if you’d like. Nothing very good or healthy, I’m afraid. Just something to munch on to pass the time.”

Raymond said nothing. Instead he shot the man a wicked glower that screamed *FUCK YOU* loud and clear. He sat up and cupped a pair of liver-spotted hands to his face. A low moan rumbled from beneath that said more about his state of mind than he probably would have liked to, not that it mattered anymore. At this point all cardinal rules of business and tactics could be damned for all he cared. His fingers found the bridge of his nose and rubbed at the corners of his eyes. When he finally ceased the exercise there were a pair of delicate, red cobwebs encircling his irises. He looked worn down. He looked beat.

“Looks to me like a drink is in order, Mr. Mortimer. Or maybe a doctor,” *Santos* observed. He chased the remark with a chuckle.

Raymond lashed out: “You know something? You sound just like the kids today: Talk when you should shut up. And when you do you say the wrong things. No tact. No class. No *brevity*. Just long-winded strings of obscenities, limp exposition and no point. Goodness, I...”

A sigh. Then he shook his head. A hand started up to his eyes again but he intercepted it half way up. *Wonderful*, he thought. Now agitation was cutting in on the dance. *Not* the thing you want when someone’s taking inventory of your every move, he reminded himself, but only in jest.

“Damn. *God-damn*. You know, growing up I swore to myself I’d never lament about the next generation. I didn’t want to sound like my old man--S.O.B. champion of these United States. His pomposity was so unique, so grand in its scope, he was his own breed of...of *asshole*. The man had a monopoly on sweet-smelling excrement. Dumped it on me my entire life with no qualms. Hell, I know why he did it: He had to toughen me up. He had to prepare me for the predators of the world. I imagine he felt his role as father should be something akin to a drill instructor. Everything was an order barked viciously at me, and believe me I snapped to without complaint. In my home discipline was king, and despite my father’s cold method of delivery I employed this tool with Raymond because I’ve always felt children needed a strong hand in their early years. The young, they are so--*Christ!* Why am I talking to you about this? Rearing a child, taking such a responsibility, that’s something you’d know nothing about.”

Santos narrowed his eyes. “That’s kind of uncalled for, don’t you think?”

“Not in the least!” Raymond retorted, leaning into his antagonist for effect. “I’ve seen enough news reports and bread lines to know how people like you regard parenthood. Males such as yourself never stay around long enough to watch your seed born much less raise them. As a matter of fact I--you know, I’m willing to bet a fat pile of bills that you’ve left a long line of bastards in your wake, probably enough to populate a small classroom. What do you say, Mr. Santos. Mr. *Angel*. Are you game for my wager? Let us see, how does, say, two thousand dollars grab you?”

A tight, shadowy glower from *Santos*. The clock above filled the lull like an M-60.

Raymond prompted: “Well? No dice? Perhaps it’s two classrooms then. I’m sorry if I’ve underestimated your prowess. I can see how you may have sweet-talked any number of vulnerable young chippies to part their virtue for you. You *are* quite charismatic in a quasi-Mafioso way and you do present a stylized, theatrical sort of facade. I’m sure those traits, along with a little flash money, has helped you spread your inferior genetic material around like a cold. But that doesn’t make you a father. I mean, do you even *have* a concept as to what’s involved?”

More silence from *Santos*. Suddenly the air in the room thickened to motor oil consistency. Old man Mortimer’s tone had done an abrupt about-face from mockery to indignation in the last minute. His last question was almost a blubber.

Raymond slumped back into his chair with a groan, clearly spent. The rusted springs in his chair returned a protest of their own.

“When you first see them,” he continued, “all bloody, wailing like randy cats, I tell you: You swear to yourself you’d do anything for them. Then they come home, and for those first couple of years everything is perfect. The entire house smells of talcum powder. Everything is clean. Your wife radiates like a full moon. It’s *so*...

“Sure, you have to put up with the diaper mess and the sudden crying in the middle of the night, but you gladly deal with it because you know that someday they’ll grow up to make you proud. You just...you just know it in your gut.”

Santos considered the preceding with mild, weathering interest.

“Then they start to grow on you after that. *Fast*. If you’re lucky you manage to chalk up a couple of games of catch or watch a movie together before school all but permanently takes over the rearing process. Then for the next dozen years their heads are filled with theories, formulae, assorted devices designed to make them think alike, and all you can do is hope they’ve taken to heart just a fraction of what you’ve taught them. But it’s then that they begin to despise you. Their eyes have opened, you see, and it reaches a point where every penny you’ve made over a life-time is just one more obstacle they have to overcome to reach a point of self-identity. They never appreciate the energy and commitment that went into raising them, not until *they’ve* raised a--“

“Junior’s here,” *Santos* declared nonchalantly.

“*Ray?*” Raymond bolted from the chair, leaving a perfect imprint of his contours on the spongy vinyl.

Ray stood frozen by the door. He met his father’s staunch face with some glaring surprise of his own. He then panned around the room and saw *Santos’* frosty, grinning mug from across the table, and surprise quickly gave way to confusion.

Back to his father: “Dad, w-what are you doing here for pete’s sake? I asked you not to butt in. What’s going on here?”

“Good evening, sport,” *Santos* greeted.

“Dammit, where the hell were you?” Raymond barked simultaneously with *sport*. “You said

five-fifteen, right? I did hear you correctly?"

Ray shrugged. He hadn't quite taken enough in yet to be sure of anything. "Sorry, Dad. I had to stop...stop somewhere to get...to cash a check. Then there was some traffic..."

He wanted to build up on the story but the bull ran dry fast. The fact of the matter was he could've entered fifteen minutes earlier. As soon as Billy had driven them home he came straight here. All he wanted was a few minutes alone in the car to compose himself. Then he walked into this sit-com.

"This took an *hour*?" Raymond screeched.

"You know, I sometimes take the scenic routes during twilight myself--"

"You stay out of this!" Raymond snapped, cutting off *Santos* at the knees before the hammer could fall.

Ray looked askance at the other man. "Is that you, Sant--"

"Don't look at him, look at me!" the older Mortimer admonished. "How do expect to earn respect if you can't even keep an appointment with a felon? Do you know that I've been here for over an hour being entertained by *this*? And in this dung-heap no less! I can only pray meeting here wasn't your idea."

"Dad, don't jump to any conclusions. It's not like I hang here every night--"

"Oh, wonderful," Raymond lamented to the ceiling.

Santos saw a tiny gap and oozed in. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but can we get onto business matters, please?"

"Santos?" Ray cautiously approached. "Hey, I thought it was you! You threw me a second with your duds, man, but damn if it isn't you all right. That's pretty slick what you're wearing there. But, uh... Where's the boss?"

Raymond cut in.

"That's an interesting thing you just asked, son. I asked your chum here the same question when he walked in. You know what I got? An hour of posturing and intimidation. But I had this bag-man pegged early on. He's quite a good actor, actually. Too bad he chose to direct his talents along other lines. Unfortunately for him I'm not what your generation would call a *chump*. No indeed, Mr. Angel. Not even close. Ray, you know you didn't have to lie to me about this man being Oriental, or whatever. He's just a street grifter, a petty con-man. A *dough boy*. Believe me, there's nothing to him but--"

"No, no, no, dad, you got it all wrong. This isn't *Mr. Angel*. This is Santos. He's Mr. Angel's gardener."

"His *what*?" Raymond gasped.

"His *gar-de-ner*," the younger Mortimer accentuated, "That's all, Dad. Hey Santos, no offense

all right buddy?"

Santos smirked and capriciously waved it off.

"The gardener..." Raymond muttered to no one in particular.

Ray's swagger returned for a tentative visit. "Yeah, Dad. And you should see the hardware he uses. His tools, they must be Japanese or something. Some serious samurai shit, not some Joe's-hardware-junk you can pick up for a couple of bucks, am I right Santos?"

A pair of raised eyebrows was the tawny man's reply.

Ray went on. "I mean cool stuff. All chrome or silver. When the sunlight hits them they shine like mirrors. They look like they cost serious bank."

"My God," Raymond moaned. Fear, embarrassment, helplessness...they all struck at the same instant. His hands went to his sides out of security, as if the mere act would somehow keep him from toppling to the floor. He glanced over to his schmuck son, standing there with such an air of self-assurance, completely naive of his total naiveté, then switched his attention to the man who held all the aces in the room.

"A gardener. You told him you're a gardener?" he asked rhetorically.

For the first time all evening Mr. Angel sat forward and upright.

"Sometimes I *am*. Mostly tulips and roses. I hire out for any back-breaking labor. Brush clearing and so fourth. But I also enjoy other pursuits: Skeet shooting, sailing, traveling, gambling. *Chippies*."

"Goddamn, Santos!" Ray ejaculated. "The Angel must be paying you the mother-load. You gotta have the greenest fucking thumb this side of--"

Raymond jumped with surprising quickness.

"Shut up, Ray! Don't say another word to him! Do you have his money?!?"

He stepped between his son and Mr. Angel, his eyes and lips quivering with ungovernable panic. Desperately he searched his son's face for an answer--that bright flicker of arrogance that flashed in his pupils whenever control was at hand--but there was only confusion in his eyes, so large and doe-like just like his mother's.

"The money? Yeah, well I, uh... I need to talk to the Angel about that," Ray explained through nervous chuckles. "I'm almost there but not quite, know what I mean?" He looked past his father to *Mr. Angel*.

"Look, buddy-o, I was hoping we could talk about giving me an extension or something. Some kind of payment schedule we can work out? Come on, man. I know you can talk to the Angel for me. All this time with him, by now you've got to have his ear."

The man in the matte-black suit snickered. He folded his hands on the tabletop like a pre-schooler and flashed young Ray Mortimer Jr. a fat, lustrous smile.

“You mean Mr. Fung.”

Ray frowned. “Mr. *Who?*”

“Mr. Fung. See, sport, *he’s* actually the gardener. And a good one at that. But, he also has this secret little ambition: Acting. He got bit by the bug watching certain performers for the first time. Lee Marvin, Steve McQueen and the like. So every once-in-a-while whenever a new client comes around I let him indulge himself. Basically we switch roles: I spread fertilizer, and he plays Angel-for-a-day. Now don’t get the wrong idea here: Whatever business discussed still holds firmly, but each time you’ve been to my house you’ve talked financial transactions and shot the bull with the best horticulturist I’ve ever known.”

The silence that followed was resoundingly palpable. Color slowly drained from Ray’s face, and when he opened his mouth to respond not even a breath escaped.

Slowly, very gradually, he regained basic motor-control. He scanned the room for his father and found him standing off to the side of the room. His hands were at his hips, his head bent down and planted against a wall for support. There was no help to be found there. Raymond Mortimer Sr. was gone for the evening.

“Dad?” Ray whispered in vain. The reality finally dawned in.

He looked over to Mr. Angel and saw him reach into his black sports-coat. His expression was somber, almost apologetic. He laid something on the table and folded his hands again. Only after it caught the light from the bulb above did Ray recognize what it was. Despite what it portended, the all-chrome pruning shears still looked beautiful.

“Ray, why don’t you have a seat,” *Mr. Angel* suggested. “I think you and I need to discuss my extension policy. I’m afraid it involves some penalty payments.”

III. The Swinger’s Club

Spring, 2003

It was some drippy morning in April when Billy got the letter, a reply he never rationally expected to receive--certainly not after a dozen years have come and gone.

Someone had slipped it within the frame of the screen door, making it impossible to miss even for someone who, at the moment, held all the alertness of a hound dog on a sun-beat porch.

No more of that Burmese shit, *he promised himself*. Not ever again.

He was definitely feeling the throbbing afterglow of last night’s freak-show. His wife Rita was celebrating number thirty-nine and had invited over a throng of her actor-friends for an evening of overindulgence on all things distilled and inhalable. Now normally he’d pass on third party blow, but based on previous exposure to Rita’s eclectic entourage there was no way on God’s green Earth he was going to pass the time with a room full of vampires and latent beatniks on anything resembling a clear head.

He eased open the screen door just a crack, making a mental note to yet again remind fag

landlord Tyrell to replace that shredded mesh quilt before the first heat draws in the flies in hordes, then reached around and plucked the envelope free. The effort sent an ice-pick jab of pain through his head that arced from temple to temple.

When it finally subsided he gave a sidelong, squinty look at the correspondence in his hand. The odd, quasi-familiar name on the return address instantly jerked him to full attention and he almost howled. He wisely bit down on his lip instead, remembering that it was still early out, and just stared into space in quiet jubilation. It was hard to believe--no way it could be true--but there it was in black and white. All notions to the contrary notwithstanding, the man actually came through.

It was going on thirteen years since he had enlisted the services of one Aloysius Perry, P.I. to track down one Ray Mortimer Jr., dead or live. This he did as a matter of last resort, in spite of his better judgement and the unequivocal disdain from the Mortimer Estate. Perry, however, came highly recommended off the street as the guy in town that could find anything and anybody for a reasonable price. There was just one catch: He was meticulous. Painstakingly slow, in fact. The man worked with the velocity of glacier movement. It took Billy months of persistence just to get Perry to discharge what information he had gathered to that point, which was, in a nutshell, nothing. He hasn't heard jack from the dick since, never mind the fact he was still owed the last third of his fee.

The postmark was from Pittman, Nevada, and inside the envelope was a wrinkled sheet of paper. It looked to be a piece of office trash that had been plucked out of a can and carefully uncrumpled. Billy folded it open, spreading it against the wall to flatten it out. He read it over once. Then he cried. The letter was from a ghost, one that hasn't been seen or heard since he had paid a visit to a certain dream-oasis in the Nevada desert some other lifetime ago.

Once during that spell, perhaps two years after his first journey, he detoured southward on a drive back from seeing his family in Utah. He did it on a whim really, a sudden impulse to look in on a friend in order to touch base, recall old times, and because it was--as Bob Seger had once put it so simply and eloquently--good for the soul. When he arrived he found a gutted carcass of a building, boarded-up windows and zero evidence of life. Tumbleweed had taken over the lease, and it forged in and around what remained of the structure like a roach infestation. The Boxcars sign was gone; the wooden pole that once hoisted it had been severed at its midway point.

A missing persons report was filed immediately thereafter by his parents' estate, and even with considerable pull at a whistle's distance, it produced nothing. The police ceased any meaningful search efforts after several months. Ray was gone--for good, it seemed--until now. There was no question about it: The handwriting was definitely his.

A note had been scribbled on the page. It was a sheet of stationary--The Swinger's Club, it said on the header, whatever that was--and bore three hand-written sentences:

- Order new batch with red stripes.*
- Get on Mario's ass to trim hedges.*
- Put air in front right tire of #2.*

On the bottom right corner, in a frilly, womanly longhand that Billy knew for a fact to be

Perry's, he had written the following:

The Swinger's Club. 1313 Melville Ave--Pittman, Nevada. Upstairs, room #2. Ask for Joe Brown. Told you I'm good. Be along in a week to collect balance. Remember--better late than never. A.P.

He read it about a dozen more times, then slunk to the floor. What little strength he had when he awoke simply gave out. He hugged his knees to his chest and rocked on his ass like a sulking child, his eyes trained forward at the wall. It was how Rita would find him some two hours later.

For the next week he ran on a kind of emotional shorthand. He would skim through his daily routine with the merest of enthusiasm and effort; just enough to keep the dust off the merchandise, errand boys delivering and tempers in check. He had set his mind on going to Nevada--sooner rather than later--but the decision wasn't an easy one. Excitement and dread had begun a spicy little affaire d'amour in his head the moment he'd read Ray's note, and they've been going hot and heavy ever since. Sure, he was thrilled to have found a friend he had taken for dead for quite some time now, but there was also a sense of apprehension he couldn't deny...a feeling that he wasn't going to like what he would find at the end of Ray's rainbow.

The following weekend he took a Greyhound to Pittman. His enfeebled Pontiac had made the rounds of mechanics with little in the way of results the past year, and was in no shape to take a 400-mile jaunt through one of the most unforgiving stretches of highway on earth. It was just as well. He was in no condition to sit behind a wheel himself.

Ten hours later the bus crawled into a Nevada station just after six in the evening. The doors opened to the west where a scarlet sun clutched in vain to the horizon, and when Billy stepped out a warm gale rapped him across the cheek. Already he was at odds with the entire situation. He hated the damn heat.

A taxi that reeked of Lysol and Mary Jane delivered him to The Swinger's Club, at which time he was forced to cough up an extra five bucks for the trip. The cabby, a bigot meathead with a dour attitude and a puss to match, was new to the job and new to the town, but an old-hat when it came to a good fleece. Half-an-evening later the taxi's tires finally scraped curb in front of the right place.

Retarded fucking con, Billy almost said aloud when they stopped, and was glad he hadn't. The combination of disposition, bad tattoos and exorbitant musculature more than implied to a little time in the stir and a familiarity with its various administrations of pain and sodomy, so he held his piece. He gave the guy a ten and thanked him for the ride, then stepped out of the cab.

The sign before him said "The Swinger's Club," but it was anything but a night spot--that was, unless you were a divorced doctor or lawyer with a few bucks to spare and scant social prospects. Billy pulled Perry's note from his pocket and looked it over for the umpteenth time. Now things began to make sense, more or less. On any other occasion the pun would have been amusing, but not tonight.

The Swinger's Club was a driving range, one that evidently did the gross of its business during the daylight hours. From the street Billy could see some golfers hammering away their troubles with five-hundred-dollar clubs.

He crossed the street and parking lot towards the lone structure on the property. At the center of the two-story building was a low vestibule pop-out with a window in the center. A light was on inside, and to Billy it looked as good a prospect as any for some information.

He took the path between the building and the range. Trying to provide shelter from the sun was a trellice overhead with a network of dead vines intertwining the lattice. The path was at a higher elevation than the range, affording a good view of the fairway and the night's clientele. There were five people, all men, spread out evenly along the astro-turfed stalls. A constellation of golfballs dotted the field beyond, concentrated mostly in the areas between the fifty and hundred yard markers. In some places the piss-yellow sod looked as if it hadn't been watered since whitey was a contender.

Billy crossed over to the vestibule window and rapped on the glass. Sitting in the small cubicle, her nose affixed to the screen of a PC lap-top, was an emaciated creature of about fifty. She looked up and the dim flicker from the computer monitor illuminated a tortuous roadmap of veins, piercings and tattoos that came to an abrupt end at a deeply cleft chin. From there on up a tight bun of dull, brown hair stretched back her face so tightly it made her look porcelain. Cementing the illusions was the coat of make-up she had troweled on.

She turned back to the computer screen where a virtual chess-board awaited her next move.

"Range closes after ten, son."

Billy couldn't help but recoil at the woman's raspy tone. She sounded too much like Harvey Firestein.

"Uh...I'm not golfing."

"And I'm not buying anything if that's your mission, mister, so save the spiel."

"I'm not selling. I'm looking for someone."

The woman sighed. "And who do you think Lola Lanowitz can help you find?"

"Who?" Billy asked.

"That's me, sugar. Smoke?" She offered him the one she had just rolled, but he declined. This elicited a corrosive smile, betraying a set of misshapen, yellow teeth that were beyond any hope of salvage. The gesture added ten years to her mien in a snap. "Who're you looking for?"

Billy cleared his throat and said, "Ray Mortimer."

The entity that called itself Lola Lanowitz considered this for all of two seconds, her tongue undulating the inside of her cheeks like a bag of eels. Then she shrugged.

"Don't know him from Dylan, mister. Sorry."

"You sure? He's about my age and height, and has blue--"

"Hey! You deaf?" She snapped.

Billy retreated a step. "Sorry. I was just making sure I was covered. I've driven a long way and... Never mind."

The woman behind the glass offered punctuation with a death glare, then swiveled back around to resume her one-on-one against the mighty microchip. Billy suddenly felt like throwing every base variation of the female genitalia at her, but held fast. She had probably developed a tolerance to such attacks from perpetual bombardment and would just laugh him off the map. He also realized he had asked her the wrong name on the first go-around.

"Okay, then, how about Joe Brown. Know him?"

She blew out a dry raspberry. "Stubborn, shiftless pecker. Talks a big game but there's no stink to his farts. Upstairs, second door down. He was cleaning out his abode last time I checked."

"Right, thanks," Billy automated. He looked around, found the staircase to the right and headed off towards it.

"Tell him he needs to fill that fucking ball machine before morning, or hit the road! I don't give a horse's jock who got him this job!" shrieked the thing in the cubicle. Billy filed the request under things to remember, then took the steps two at a time.

The entire second floor was a long, curving balcony of large rooms with plate-glass fronts that overlooked the range. They were poor-men's luxury boxes, a trailer-park version of the kind found at any modern sporting arena that would cost a working stiff five years salary to rent for the season.

Billy walked to the first room, his hand sliding along the balcony's smutty glass railing, and paused there. A flaking metal number 1 dangled by its feet on a rusty nail in the center of the door. The lights inside were off, but he could easily make out an empty room with a long counter near the back wall.

He proceeded to the next room and saw a pale glow of light from deep inside. The door was slightly ajar and the distinct sounds of movement and rustling emanated clearly. This one had a new number 2 screwed into its face. Billy stepped to the threshold and knocked twice.

"Hello? Is Joe Brown here?"

From within a second room off the main entrance: "Did that boozier send you up here to break my balls? Tell that harlot I'll be down when I'm done!"

Billy pushed open the front door a bit and leaned in. He was rewarded with a flying cardboard box from the side room.

"Hey, pal, take it easy!" Billy yelped. The box missed his face by inches. "Look, man, I'm here on my own. No one sent me, okay? Not your boss anyway. Are you Brown?"

"Congratulations, you got me," the man replied gruffly, then broke something in the room made of glass. Some colorful expletives ensued, then: "What do you want?"

"To talk. Listen, don't throw any more shit. Can I come inside?"

The voice was louder this time, and so were approaching footsteps.

“Yeah, yeah you can come in, goddammit.”

Billy did. “Thanks, Mr. Brown. I’ve been through a lot to get here, let me tell you, and-“

Joe Brown emerged from the other room in a pair of faded jeans and spotty gray T-shirt. He was scratching furiously at the top of a platinum-blond crew-cut two-thirds on its way to total defoliation.

When he looked up he uttered a womanish squeal and put a knuckle to his mouth. Suddenly every pore on his arms pickled to gooseflesh. This wasn’t suppose to happen. It wasn’t. He was all but assured of the impossibility of discovery, and here someone did just that. It wasn’t the wrong someone however--the kind that wanted to plant the claw end of a hammer into his noggin. It was Billy Moso, and this fact summoned fourth a radiant, reckless grin he thought he had lost somewhere along the course to tonight.

Billy tried to move forward but couldn’t budge. He felt like he was about to jump out of a plane; his heart had become one of those oscillating little hammers on an alarm clock and it took a yeoman’s effort to keep the tears were they belonged. It was Ray, all right--the brash smile and six fingers confirmed as much--but it was also a complete stranger standing there before him, barefoot and beaming under a ceiling fan minus a blade.

Joe, or rather Ray, made the first move. He stepped to Billy gingerly, cautiously, as if also sensing the sudden trepidation in the air. When he was arms-length away he paused and held out his left hand. Something else Billy did not expect: A single tear had cut a ragged path down each of his friend’s cheeks.

“Hi, Billy. God knows how you found me. But I’m glad to see you all the same.”

Hesitation, thick and obvious, then: “Ray...where, why...”

Ray shook his head. “I’ll tell you everything. You look good, you know. Healthy. Strong. Happy even.”

Billy’s hand rose to meet Ray’s, and that was all it took. He lunged at Ray and embraced him, clutching desperately to him like a flotation device that threatened to be carried away by current.

Ray Mortimer, alias Joe Brown, and as of two minutes ago MIA to the world for the last fifteen years, hugged back. He did so for what he felt was an appropriate enough time, then tried to disengage himself. If anything, Billy’s grip around him tightened. After all these years of uncertainty and wonder, he felt deserved of a little back-end pay for all of his concern. A good hug wasn’t that much to ask for.

At last Billy abated some of the pressure and offered a choked-up apology. Nevertheless he kept an arm hooked resolutely around his neck just for assurance.

“Come on. Let’s talk,” Ray suggested. “We’ve got a lot of that to do.”

Billy nodded and wiped his nose. He detached himself from Ray who stepped to the wall behind the front door and flicked a light-switch.

The world suddenly turned cherry. The walls, fixtures and furniture-even the ceiling-was made of it. Ray walked behind the bar to fix himself a drink. He offered one to Billy who nonchalantly declined. He was completely numbed by it all, and to focus attention on any one thing was asking far too much of him at the moment.

"I know. It's weird for me too," Ray echoed. "Tell me: What are you thinking right now?" He poured himself another drink and took it to one of the two plushy armchairs by the window.

"I, uh, I...I don't know. Nothing, I guess. Believe that? I like the place though, Ray."

The space ran about twenty feet in each direction and held the warm charm of a parlor straight out of a Doyle or Christie novel. The only obvious deviation was the entire wall of glass overlooking the grounds and fairway. The rest of the room was sparsely decorated with old movie posters and several animal trophies, the most prominent being an impressive twelve-point buck that held watch from over the door with a pair of accusing, ebony eyes.

Perhaps Doyle and Christie were too regal a choice for the analogy, Billy decided in the end. The wood needed some serious sanding and the avocado shag carpet definitely had to go. A more apropos source of comparison might've been Hammett or Spillane.

Ray sipped his drink and pointed Billy to the other chair. He took the seat and together they both swiveled to face the golfers below. It just seemed like the appropriate thing to do.

"We all figured you'd been dead for some time. No one ever said it aloud. Not even your father," Billy said. He gazed blearily at the sea of red-striped golf balls beyond. "Your father, he...four years ago..."

Ray nodded. "I heard. Someone that rich invariably makes the six o'clock."

"I'm sorry, Ray. I guess... I suppose you can say I missed you too."

"The same. I'm sorry about...everything." He took another swallow of Cuervo. "A lot has happened to me, you know, and I've got reasons--some pretty valid ones--for my lack of presence all this time. But I think it's about time for you and I to catch up. You deserve that much just for finding me."

For the rest of the night they talked, the hours passing unnoticeably by like highway scenery on a long trip. Ray Mortimer, never to be accused of championing the cause for brevity, held nothing back. It started with Boxcars', and how that venture turned out to be just a temporary investment. After ten months he sold it to some East-coast money-counter for a joke. What the guy had in mind for a nothing building in the middle of a nothing expanse of land he did not know, or cared to know for that matter. He was just glad to get it off his hands. The entire enterprise was dead in the water soon as the novelty wore off.

After Boxcars' he invested what meager profits he had left into anything that would turn a dollar into two, legit and otherwise. Within a few months he met and befriended a couple of brothers, Donald and Ross Holden, and together they turned a years worth of cons, pyramid schemes and

shakedowns into a small fortune. It was a prosperous time for all involved, and for a few months at least, before the heat began to make its presence felt in earnest, he was content.

Deciding not to push their luck any further, they opted on cutting the pie three ways and going on their own. The Holden brothers made like bandits for Florida while Ray elected to stay and make his mark in the dessert. That was mistake number one. Mistake number two was arrogance and bad luck. Whenever he thought it would give him the upper hand, Ray would not hesitate to drop the Holden name to any hump just for the thrill. It was only a matter of time then until the wrong individuals got wind of this, those people being the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the guise of car thieves. They didn't even care about Ray Mortimer. The crooked son of a billionaire land developer was just the cherry on top. Their golden trophy was the Holden brothers. Apart from robbery, embezzlement and fraud, they were also wanted for the big "M" in New Mexico and Utah. Ray's only ticket out was full cooperation and a trip to the witness stand.

A new little problem came to light then. It was soon ascertained from a bevy of stoolies and dopers looking for handouts that the Holdens had some ties with the mob...some rather deep ties at that. A simple slap on the wrist and parole wasn't going to cut it for Ray. The brothers were looking at a sure life stint, and got exactly that. Now their friends the Italians wanted Ray's in return. That left him and the DA with one course of action: Good old witness-protection.

They assigned him to live in New Hampshire after the trial, the FBI reckoning in their infinite foresight that this would be one of the last states they would seek him out in short of Alaska. Along with the new, unassuming moniker of Joe Brown, they afforded him a new driver's license and social security number, a bit of fuck-you money and a job slinging hash at a local mom & pop road diner.

Needless to say, Ray told Billy, this didn't quite fit the master plan. Though beautiful to look at, the place was too rural, too cold and too white for his interests, and after only a couple of months into protection he ducked out of sight and returned to, of all places, Nevada. He had a theory of his own: The last place the wops would look for him was right under their fat noses. Besides, if he was ever to rebuild a business, and himself, being in close proximity to Sin-City was his best hope.

Ray settled back into the soft leather of his chair after finishing. His face and body painfully spelled exhaustion.

"They said Rome wasn't built in a day? I can sympathize," he suspired.

Billy blew a long and drawn-out whistle. He craned his neck to read the wall clock above an On the Waterfront poster and felt all kinds of gears and sprockets turn in his neck. There was a dull ache in his head and his feet were afire with pins and needles. Ray's Homeric tale took almost five hours to deliver and it was almost half-past two in the morning.

"I tell you, Bill, it was a crazy ride," Ray slurred. He had paused in the middle of his epic at least five times to tank up, and they were all doubles. "See, much of that time the Feds, they had all kinds of surveillance and taps going. Not just me, Ross and Donny, but a whole lot of the other organizations around. Everyone was becoming paranoid--acting all fidgety and weird, mastering the over-the-shoulder tango. It was funny, you know, like uh...like it was something out of a goddamn Pakula film. It was all such Big Brother bullshit..."

Another hundred-proof swig.

“Determined pricks. I couldn’t risk a phone call or even a letter until I got some breathing room, know what I mean? Then they had me. And the only out was to vanish. Severe all ties. Anyway, that’s in the past. The important thing: You’re here, I’m here, and I can more-or-less sleep with both eyes shut.”

Billy smiled. “Jesus, what a trip, man. Hey, I’m happy to see you, despite the conditions. I--cause you know, we’ve been like blood since I can remember. Then you disappeared, and your family and me assumed the worst, and--but I thought...” He hesitated a moment before continuing, not quite sure how to proceed.

“Remember when we last talked? Way back when. Back in Boxcars’. You said you had some money put away for something special. You also said--no, you promised--that you would tell me about it some day.”

“That I did,” Ray validated.

“Something special. Those were your words. But this is what I can’t figure: Why didn’t you use that cash to start over right after Boxcars’ died? I’ve known you forever and all you’ve ever wanted was that ridiculous casino. I bet what you had saved up could’ve gone a long way towards it. Pushed up the calendar three or four years in your favor even. So what happened? What’d you do with that stash? And please don’t tell me you suddenly developed a drug habit, because really, how banal.”

Ray’s face turned balefully somber for a second, then settled on a smirk. “All right. Promise is a promise. Step inside, please.”

He rose and disappeared into the room he was cleaning when the last person on earth he expected to see actually walked through his front door.

“What, you can’t tell me from the chair?” Billy cracked. He stood and followed nonetheless.

“Not this, my friend,” Ray called back. “I need visual aids. This is better seen than told.”

The second room was the neighboring “luxury box” that Ray or somebody else had remodeled to make the place larger and more livable. This one had a full bathroom instead of the bar in the back. There were boxes everywhere, some sealed with packing tape, but most open and overflowing with clothes and books. An old army cot settled any doubts as to the room’s intended function once the debris was cleared.

Ray pushed aside a weight bench that blocked the door to a spacious walk-in closet. A latch and open pad-lock hung from the jamb. He motioned for Billy to follow him in.

“You’re gonna love this,” he said, and his lack of humor more than made Billy nervous; it scared him in place. He stood uncertain before the closet door, then swallowed the lump in his throat and walked in headlong.

“Christ, Ray! What are you gonna do, storm a beach? I mean..I mean this is some extreme shit you’ve got here.”

The left wall of the closet described the standard rod and shelf with a full array of clothes arranged by texture and hue. The other wall was filled with guns, all of varying models and calibers, some hanging by straps, most mounted on hooks and pegs like awards. On the bottom shelf, running the entire six-to-seven foot length of the space were piles of ammunition boxes at least three packs high.

“Spoils of war, my friend,” Ray decreed, and not without pride. He was at the end of the closet working the combination dial of a large wall-safe. “Actually, I liberated most of these from the warehouse of a competitor a number of years back. This was when I still held the last name of a powerful real-estate mogul. I hid it for safe keeping cause, well, cause you never know. But the real score for me is in here.” The last statement wasn’t addressed to Billy at all.

The tumblers gave way and Ray pulled open the heavy iron door. He then stepped aside and motioned Billy over to have a look.

It was a deep capacity safe, about three feet in all directions and apparently custom-made. A little light bulb inset above provided sufficient illumination. There was an impressive pile of cash inside--several dozen stacks of twenties bound with rubber bands--but that wasn’t what corralled Billy’s attention with the force of a steel trap.

At the end of the compartment, beyond the money and stacks of heavy envelopes was a square glass jar. It was set directly under the light, looking eerily like an artifact on display in a museum. Inside was some thick brownish liquid, and suspended within it was a severed human finger.

“Oh my God,” Billy managed.

Ray smiled privately. The expression was almost nostalgic.

“It’s funny...he said those very same words. He was more passionate about it, though. And it wasn’t cheap. You were right about that one thing: The money I had saved, it could’ve gotten me where I wanted to go a lot sooner, but peace of mind took precedence. The rest of him is buried in a few dozen holes between here and Dallas. That’s what I was told anyway.”

There was a ring on the finger, below where the first knuckle use to be, and on its mounting was etched some manner of design. The angle it floated in prevented Billy from clearly seeing what that depiction was, but he would’ve bet the farm without any worries that it was a four-leafed clover.