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Oasis Deluxe

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OASIS DELUXE

by

John Ziebell

Bachelor of Arts
University of Wisconsin, Madison
1980

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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Department of English
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Examination Committee Member

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ABSTRACT

Oasis Deluxe

by

John Ziebell

Professor Douglas Unger, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This creative dissertation, submitted for partial fulfillment of requirements for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing degree, is a novella-length work of fiction set in Las Vegas, Nevada. My aesthetic intent was to construct a contemporary story around an unobtrusive but directive narrative voice that privileges multiple perspectives while uniting them into a coherent whole, and I hope the spirit of that goal is recognizable in the final product.

While this work is not cumulative in terms of content, it does represent a narrative and structural sensibility I have developed during my years of study at this institution. In the end, the manuscript's best qualities reflect the influence of numerous friends, mentors and colleagues who have been generous with insights and guidance; its failures are mine alone.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe everybody, but most especially my long-suffering spouse, DeAnna Beachley. XOXOXO.

I am also deeply indebted to my Big Four at UNLV, friends and mentors without whom this enterprise would never have been realized, etc. These giants of the academy are, in alphabetical order: Dave Hickey, Claudia Keelan, Doug Unger and Richard Wiley.

Finally, I would like to extend special thanks to Andrew Kiraly and Geoff Schumacher of Las Vegas Mercury for their leap of faith in giving significant portions of this manuscript a home as Oasis Deluxe: a Literary Serial.
The casino valet station was a still life lit by halogen on the second morning of January. Nothing moved but the exhaust coiling up from the two cabs that idled at the curb with their parking lamps on. Shane Kelleher took an insulated cup from a shelf behind the stand and sipped cooled coffee, thinking that the scene would make a pretty good photograph. She replaced the cup and then walked slowly across the empty parking lanes to the edge of the port cochere, walking to keep her knees from stiffening rather than with any immediate goal in mind.

It was a few minutes before six. The sky was beginning to pale and there were broken clouds overhead, milky spills edged in violet and green from the lights of Strip casinos. Gusting wind sent empty plastic cups and cigarette butts and porn pamphlets scurrying down the cold gray street. In the winter months the casino issued nifty blue warmup suits to the people who worked valet parking and tonight hers was barely adequate. Her breath hung in small misty clouds on the cool air. A Metro black and white rolled slowly past, both cops eyeballing her as she stood under the lights with her hands on her hips. Shane yawned, stretched, rose onto her tiptoes. Another year in Las Vegas.

Silence, and then commotion. Heels on concrete, blocky platform soles, four sets. The sound was not unlike an arrhythmic clattering of hooves. The women—girls, actually—who owned them stepped into the night, glass doors swinging shut behind them. They were just leaving the club: wild hair, tight pants, barely contained cleavage.
Their laughter carried on the crisp morning air like bright chatter of coins spilling from a slot machine. Roberto, the guy Shane shared the graveyard shift with, was up. He took the ticket, got the keys from the stand and trotted off for their car.

The phone in Shane’s pocket shivered against her thigh. She pulled it out and checked the name in the little window. It was her best friend Special, calling from L.A.

“Hey, girl,” Shane said.

“Happy New Year.” Special sounded sleepy. “What time is it, anyway?”

Special traveled in that leather and leopard-print crowd herself. She lived near the beach and was working at an upscale lingerie boutique while she waited for her parents to die.

“Almost six.”

“Damn. I slept all day.”

“Here’s a news flash,” Shane said. “It’s six a.m. That’s six in the morning.”

Silence over the phone as Special processed that data. Roberto pulled up in a shiny black all-wheel-drive behemoth and dropped gracefully to the pavement. Shane watched the girl in leather pants count out two bills. She knew just by looking at Roberto that the bills were ones; the higher the denomination, the toadier he got, and even within range of those tits he was acting distant. The clubbers climbed into the rig, each to her own door. It didn’t look like the easiest thing they’d done all night. Why anyone in the city needed a gas-guzzling vehicle capable of crossing the Sahara was beyond her. Especially people in shoes like that. And cheap tippers, too.

“I wanted to thank you for the book,” Special said.
“You’re welcome.” Merry Christmas, babe: Van Gogh’s letters, hardcover, barely used. Special had sent Shane a jade green La Perla thong and brassiere with the price tags still attached, nearly three hundred bucks for the set. Shane was nearly certain she’d stolen it from the boutique, really hoped so, but was afraid to ask. The wide black vehicle drove past her and across the empty lanes she saw a good looking guy in a loose blue blazer standing at the valet station.

“Got to go, S. I’m up, and he’s cute.”

“Still waiting for your prince to come and get his car parked?”

“Any millionaire will do. Hey, thanks for the underwear.”

“Call me back,” Special said.

“Good morning,” Shane said to the man at the valet station. “Can I help you?”

The guy was smiling. Smilers were usually winners and Shane felt safe dropping the “sir” that the casino suits wanted them to use. He was good looking except for his unkempt beard, early thirties at a guess, olive skin and dark eyes and crisp black hair. He was trying a bit too hard in the fashion department, though; the too-large blazer looked expensive, but didn’t work with loose jeans and All Stars.

“Hi.” The guy held out an orange ticket. “Can you get this for me?”

“That’s the very thing I’m here for.”

She took a single key on a leather fob from its numbered hook behind the stand and dropped the guy’s half of the valet ticket into the box. He was looking around, right to left and then back again.

“I’ll be right back.”
"Sure," the guy said in a distracted tone.

Sure. Shane saw the day crew coming through the doors; this would be the last car of her shift. She hotfooted it to the far end of the valet lot. The car was a brown convertible with the kind of skinny euro tires that suburban kids trying to look hip put on their moms' Satums. The brown car seemed sleeker than standard rice rockets and had a nicely retro insignia on each fender, silver arrows crossing the rectangular fields of air intakes. She didn't know what kind it was. In an eight-hour shift she sometimes drove more than a hundred cars and didn't know much about any of them.

This one had been parked for a while and her breath bloomed white on the windshield glass as soon as she slipped behind the wheel. Cold leather seats, a cold steering wheel. Shane turned the key and the engine caught immediately. Weird keyboard music filled the car: no, an accordion, Jesus, it was way too early for that. She killed the CD player, let the car warm up a bit, then put it in gear and ran it back to the valet stand. The guy in the blazer was pacing back and forth at the curb. She pulled up and got out, one hand on the open door.

"So what kind of car is this?"

He looked almost surprised, as if maybe he'd rented some vehicular fantasy at the airport and had forgotten for a moment exactly what it was called.

"The real expensive kind," he said. He smiled again.

Shane stood there until he finally figured out it was him she was waiting for. He ran down the window to stare up at her as she swung the door shut.

"So..." the guy started to say.

"Sir?"
“Shit.” Like he was talking to himself. “Sorry, I need to tip you, don’t I.”

He patted his jacket pockets, then reached into the one on the left-hand side and came up with a handful of checks, casino chips. Her guy stared down at them for a moment, as if he’d forgotten they were there. He fingered through them, selected one, tucked it into her waistband where the buckle of her belt would be if she wore one. She let him get away with it, though she probably would have broken his thumb a year ago. This was Las Vegas, and things passed for courtesy that wouldn’t work anywhere else.

“Thanks,” she said.

The brake lights never even flashed as the brown car accelerated into the street and headed east, picking up speed as it went. Shane pulled the check from her waistband. They weren’t supposed to be used anywhere off the gaming floor, but what the hell. A twenty would have been a very good tip; she stared down at her open palm where the disc lay, pink and black, redeemable for one thousand dollars cash at any cage in the casino. That, she thought, certainly made for a different kind of day.

Shane’s condo was on the near east side and the best thing about it, on these cold winter days, was the garden tub in the master bathroom. The window beside it looked into the branches of the windblown Australian pine beside the building. Shane let the taps run while she made a pot of tea, then carried that and the morning paper back to the foaming bath. She lounged in the tub until she had gone from the front page of the paper all the way through the classifieds. Her skin was hotly aglow. She stepped out of the water thinking, Special: shit, she’d forgotten to call Special back.
Special had gotten her name from born-again hippie parents who obviously thought its cuteness far outweighed the hell their daughter would suffer between the ages of, say, five and eighteen. Shane was just a girl named after a stupid western; while that sucked badly enough it could have been far, far worse. Jesus, she thought, the things they do to us. She was putting her pajamas on when the telephone rang, and assumed it was Special:

“Hey, let’s change our names for the New Year.”

A moment of silence. Surprise: the caller was Phillip Hayes, the rank and file’s mole in Human Resources at the casino, a gay black lawyer who was the first friend she had made in Las Vegas. His voice was low, rushed.

“When I hang up,” Phillip said, “don’t answer the phone again.”

“What’s with the drama?”

“The people upstairs were just here, talking to Ciccinelli.”

The term ‘upstairs’ was figurative, since the management office suite was actually on the ground floor behind the main casino cage. The name Ciccinelli was real, though. It belonged to a former cop from New Jersey who worked as a hatchet man for the suits. He was the guy who fired people.

“And this has something to do with me?”

“The DB7,” Phillip said.

“The what?”

“The Aston Martin,” he added, as if that should explain everything.

“Exactly what the hell are you talking about?”
"A sports car. It’s English. You wouldn’t get a lot of them in any given year, I think they only ever made like a thousand."

"I didn’t know they still did stuff like that in England. Like build cars, I mean."

"This one was brown," Phillip said, continuing as if she hadn’t spoken.

Brown convertible. That’s it, she thought; the asshole figured out he gave me a thousand dollar casino check and he wants it back. Rotten luck, but she’d live with it.

"You remember it, right?" Phillip asked. "Roberto said it was the last car that went out on your shift."

Shane hated life’s small, mean-spirited epiphanies. She should have sensed that the whole scene, all of it, was as wrong as the fit of the guy’s jacket. Shit, shit, shit. No doubt a slot cheat, or something equally glamorous.

"Listen, do you think you would recognize the guy who drove away?"

"You’re trying to tell me he wasn’t the owner, aren’t you," Shane said.

"The owner was in a suite all night, top floor. And it was comped."

The whole situation could probably get worse but she had no idea how. Shane tried to pour another cup of tea from the thermal carafe but it was dry. She trapped the phone between her ear and shoulder to button her pajama top the rest of the way and tried to sound nonchalant when she spoke again.

"I turned the car over to the guy who had the ticket."

"He had the owner’s jacket, too. Want to know what else was in the pockets?"

"I don’t care, Phillip. What am I supposed to do?"

"For right now, you’re supposed to not answer the phone. They’re in a real big hurry to fire you."
"They can't fire me. I mean, why wouldn't I give him the car? You know this town. It’s the retail clerks who wear Armani knockoffs and drive leased Benzes."

"This dude cruised away in a car worth a hundred and fifty grand and it wasn’t his. Somebody’s getting fired. You can appeal it and maybe get the job back later, but right now you walk. Get used to the idea."

"Bullshit."

"This is Nevada. They can do whatever they want to, it’s all clauses in the waivers you signed when you took the job."

"I don’t believe this is happening “

"Remember," Phillip whispered into the phone, “what I told you."

But when the telephone rang, a few minutes later, Shane picked it up.

Ray Partain pushed his hands deep into his pockets as he crossed the street separating the casino from its self-park ramp. There was a nasty wind out of the west and low skies that promised rain. Ray had on his best sport coat, gunmetal silk with a discreet blue check. It was one of two he owned, both custom cut in Hong Kong during better times and too light for Las Vegas in January. Everything else he wore, except the old steel diver's watch— blue work pants, generic polo shirt and Hush Puppy slipons— came from the same store, a place on Maryland Parkway that sold deeply discounted seconds and unseasonables.

"Hey, Ray."
Kevin Lowell was waiting for him near the bell stand. They’d known each other forever, had gone away to the same college right out of high school. Kevin was doing well now; his suit was deep gray with a subdued stripe and his cologne smelled expensive. The watch he consulted was platinum, thin as a quarter.

“Kevin.”

Ray assumed he was meant to recognize Kevin’s glance as one of mild displeasure.

“Jesus, don’t you own a tie?”

“What ever happened to ‘Thanks for coming down here on such short notice, Ray, especially on a Friday’?”

“Thanks for coming down. You know I appreciate it.”

“And?”

“I’m in a bind. I’ve got a big spender from LA ready to sue us into Chapter 11 and a security liaison who’s an idiot. I need you to go in there with me and pretend you know what’s going on in the surveillance business.”

“Surveillance? Casinos wrote the book on it. Don’t ask me.”

“I mean outside, in the real world. Ciccinelli, he’s one of the security liaisons, thinks we’ve got somebody inside who’s setting up car thefts. They want a woman who works here followed. Find out where she goes, who she meets, that kind of stuff.”

“I’m just a bagman, Kevin. I deliver stuff, I pick stuff up, I never ask questions. And this isn’t the kind of mess you deal with, anyway.”

“Like I said, I’m in a bind. You’ve got a background in this shit and I know you. Want me to beg for a little help?”

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"All right," Ray said. "Tell me the story."

"Let me buy you a cup of coffee. We're supposed to be upstairs in twenty minutes."

"What's upstairs," Ray asked.

"Leonard Alvin Davis," Kevin said.

The suite that Leonard Alvin Davis occupied was as close to heaven as the casino could provide, far enough up that Ray imagined he could see California. The balcony offered an unobstructed view of the mountains to the west and Davis took a moment to stare at them through the sliding doors. He was a rangy guy with satiny black skin and a shaved head. He wore black trousers and a crisp white shirt and was trying on jackets from a selection that a butler had brought up on a wheeled rack.

"I hate a got-damned thief," Davis said. "And I tell you what else I hate: I come here, park a car worth one hundred and fifty grand, and your so called security never bothers to think people might try to steal it."

Ray stood at parade rest just inside the doorway, eyes straight ahead. Kevin Lowell had introduced the security liaison who'd been waiting for them, one Michael Ciccinelli: silver hair, a cheap blue suit, black ankle-high brogans so ugly they had to have come from a police supply shop. A portly man, his ruddy cheeks a toper's roadmap of busted capillaries. Ray couldn't remember the last time he'd met anyone who was such a perfect stereotype. He waited for Ciccinelli or Lowell to bring up the fact that the thief could not have driven the car away without surrendering the ticket that had been handed...
personally to Leonard Alvin Davis; neither did, but Ray assumed he was not alone in appreciating the irony.

“How come there’s no Zegna here? Was a Zegna jacket they got off me, brand new.”

The butler murmured something. Davis, head turned, pretended to notice Ray for the first time.

“You the outside guy?”

“Ray Partain.”

“Good. I don’t have any people here,” Davis said “and I got to count on what you’d call the expertise of the locals. I want this fucker that stole my car found.”

“Maybe nobody mentioned this yet, but your car left here at six in the morning and was probably out of town at six fifteen.”

“I don’t care about the car, it’s insured. There was a bag in the back, though, that’s what I need. You know this cartoon about power girls, something like that? “

“Not exactly,” Ray said

“Three bigheaded white chicks with buggy eyes?”

Ray shrugged.

“There’s a kid’s backpack in there, got that cartoon all over it. One of these”—his dismissive gesture seemed to include Kevin, Ciccinelli, the butler with the jackets and the room service waiter who was wheeling in a cart— “can fill you in on what their shit looks like exactly.”

“Sure,” Ray said.
"If there's any way that bag can come back undamaged and unused I'll be especially grateful."

Davis found a jacket that he apparently disliked less than the others, dark and slick with the kind of lapels all the lawyers wore on television. He checked the price tag and reached behind himself with both arms so the butler could help him on with it.

"I'm not going to tell you how to do your work, but this ain't hardly rocket science. Maybe you don't want to hear..."

"It's probably an inside job," Ray said.

Davis looked at him through narrowed eyes, arms in the jacket sleeves and his head lowered. He finished putting the jacket on and stared at Ray. He looked tough that way, with his head tipped to one side; Ray wondered if he practiced that look in the mirror, mornings.

"You're thinking that already?" Davis asked.

"Thing like this, it's always an inside job."

Ray tried to sound sincere, as if he believed. In the gold-veined mirrors on the wall of the suite he saw reflected the resentful beady stare and pinched mouth of the former New Jersey cop, Ciccinelli.

"All right. You follow the valet parker. This bitch..."

"Actually," Kevin Lowell interrupted, "she's got a perfect record up to now and has quite a few friends on the staff."

"This bitch," Davis continued, "was probably in on it with the guy drove my car off. That's how I see it, anyway. You know how much a car like that is worth?"

"I think you mentioned it already," Ray told him.
“Good.” He looked at Ray. “I want that bag back.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Yeah. Was there something else you want to ask me?”

“I guess not,” Ray said after a moment’s hesitation.

“All right then.”

Davis turned, shooed the waiter away, and poured himself a cup of coffee from the stainless pot on the cart. The cups were delicate, and he took care not to spill. Ray assumed they were all dismissed.

It was a quiet ride down in the elevator. Ciccinelli had given Ray a file folder that had passport-size photos and personal data on Shane Kelleher, the valet attendant they all wanted to scapegoat. Ray didn’t say anything until he and Kevin were outside, standing under the port cochere as a throng of wellfed Midwesterners in loudly embellished sweatsuits began spilling from a tour bus. At least Ray thought they were Midwesterners, though it kept getting harder and harder to tell.

“How long are you going to humor that pair of dickheads,” he asked.

“I’ll humor Davis as long as I have to,” Kevin Lowell said.

Just about his every exposure to the machinations of the corporate world reminded Ray why he’d dropped out of Dartmouth to join the Navy and see the world.

“Who is he, anyway? Some television star?”

“Davis? A front. Represents some big money, I think drug dealers out of LA who don’t understand how tight the industry is. He’s trying to put a casino deal together, if he
can tie up with somebody who can get him a license. It’s an idiotic plan and it’s sure
going to fail, but it may not fail before a lot of cash gets spent.”

“And what plan would that be?”

“An airship casino.”

Ray wasn’t sure he’d heard Lowell correctly.

“Say what?”

“Airship. You know, a rigid, a zeppelin. Like the Hindenberg. Modern materials,
though, with more space and an uninterrupted casino floor. Everybody who’s gambling
will be able to look around at the architecture, the skeleton of the ship, because the air
bladders are above and below. The restaurants and bars and rooms are right under the
casino deck and have windows that let you look down at the town. It’s a great idea. If
you...”

“The Hindenberg,” Ray said carefully, “was a disaster. That’s what we call things
that end badly. It’s only famous because a bunch of people died.”

“That was kind of how Davis got the idea, the disaster theme. There were plans to
build the Titanic Hotel a couple years back, a full scale replica of the ship with gift shops
in the attached iceberg.”

“And he thinks investors will put up money for that kind of thing?”

“They’ve backed stupider plans,” Kevin Lowell said, “although I’ll admit I can’t
think of one at the moment. He’s got an option on the dump behind us, that old Hughes
property. The real estate got to be worth more than the building and they’re taking it
down. Davis is here for the implosion.”
Older casinos were being leveled all the time now, to make space for whatever somebody had money to put up. None of them had really mattered to Ray since the Landmark, which he'd liked because it reminded him of The Jetsons. The city was harshly Darwinian in that regard. There was no history to preserve, since nothing was real except money. Dated ersatz was an embarrassment, best suited for demolition. Ray stopped at the striped crosswalk that led over to the ramp where he had parked.

"So what am I supposed to do now?"

"Well, you could find the guy who stole the car."

"You know who solves crimes, Kevin? Cops do. That's it. The rest of it's all television, just make-believe."

"You were a SEAL. You hunted down war criminals, for fuck sake. This is a challenge?"

The war criminal gig, like military life in general, had been infinitely more boring than it sounded. Still better than a job, though, Ray could say that much. His team roamed the squares and narrow streets of Bosnian cities dressed in the castoff clothing of refugees, their rucksacks packed with radios and surveillance gear and MP5 submachine guns. They kept tabs on dozens of self-proclaimed torturers and gang rapists and mass murderers in case the politicos living on U.N. per diem in The Hague's four-star hotels wanted to indict them for crimes against humanity. It was the unfulfilled mission, the task they failed to accomplish, that still had a rank taste.

"I couldn't even begin to explain how little that has to do with this."

"Well," Kevin said, "why not keep Leonard Alvin Davis entertained? Collect the money. He seems happy you're helping out, and if he's happy we're all happy."
“And you’re sure this is legal,” Ray said.

“I called the lawyers. Hell, Ray, this might feel like an open city, but there’s no individual rights here. We do whatever we want. People go through drug tests and psychological screening to get jobs cleaning urinals.”

“You never would have bragged about shit like that when you were trying to be a Marxist at Dartmouth.”

“You know what happened? I got a job, which is something you might consider. The blossom of youth is starting to wear off your weary ass, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Yeah. I guess so.”

Kevin paused, shook his head. He ran his palms back along the sides of fancy haircut. He had the look of a man working up to an apology and Ray decided he could at least save him from that.

“Tell me one thing,” he said. “What do you really want out of all this?”

“Follow the woman, all right? If she leads you to a brown Aston Martin, call me. If not, take your money and shut up. Are we clear on this?”

“Crystal,” Ray said.

Kevin hesitated for a moment. Then:

“What were you going to ask him in there? Davis?”

“I wanted to ask what kind of an asshole buys a car worth a hundred and fifty grand. But I didn’t.”

“I thought it was something like that.”

Ray started across the zebra striped walkway and slowed after a step or two. He turned around, walking backwards with his hands in his pockets.
“Hey Kevin. You know what I thought about when you called me this morning? Remember the cornfield?”

Kevin Lowell stared back at him, a bewildered look.

“Cornfield? Where, in New Hampshire?”

“Never mind,” Ray said.

Inside Gabriel’s space the Aston Martin gleamed beneath arc lights hung from the metal rafters as Luke’s sidekick eased it toward the twin metal ramps of the yellow Ryder rental. Luke was Vietnamese, and although he and Gabriel had done a lot of business together neither really trusted the other. Luke had a gun in the right rear pocket of his jeans, a revolver, not an automatic like everyone used in the movies these days. Gabriel had been in the Army for three years and guns still scared him. He was proud of the fact that he’d never touched one after basic training. He thought it was a shame that grand theft auto, as clean a crime as there was in the old days, had grown as tainted as class three felonies.

Gabriel’s garage was in a strip of mini-warehouses that lay right in the flight path of the jets that shuttled passengers in and out of Las Vegas. McCarran ran twenty-four hours a day and it ran steadily, the busiest airport he’d ever been around. The noise level was always fairly high but on overcast days the clouds directed the whine of the engines groundward until the shrill howling cut conversations short. Outbound traffic trailed enough turbulence to set off car alarms in the parking lot of the bar across the street, and
when it rained the metal skin of the building seemed to sing in sympathy with the
turbines churning overhead.

Luke— not his real name, but an approximation of what he was called in his
native tongue— wore jeans and a white undershirt and didn’t look like the cold had any
effect on him whatsoever. Gabriel and Luke and Billy Reed, standing behind them,
watched the car climb into the box of the truck. Luke shoved the ramps back into place as
his assistant got out from behind the wheel and began chocking and strapping the car
down. He was skinny too. He worked fast, throwing the metal chocks around as if they
were weightless. When he was done he jumped to the floor and sailed a yellow CD like a
frisbee to Gabriel.

“We don’t listen to that shit,” he said.

Luke pulled the truck’s door down, threw the locking lever across and slapped on
a padlock. His cohort walked around the truck and got in behind the wheel. Luke smiled
and flipped Gabriel off.

“This was good news, man, really good. When do I hear from you again?”

Gabriel returned the salute.

“I don’t have anything working. Probably be three or four days, you know?”

“Call me. If you happen to run across any new eight- series BMWs, I’m paying a

“You’re number one on my list.”

Luke climbed into the cab, swinging the door shut behind him. The big engine
rumbled and the truck crept slowly toward the street.

“Those fuckers are weird,” Billy Reed said from behind him.
“But they pay,” Gabriel said absently. He checked the watch that banded his wrist above the black driving gloves he wore, a battered plastic Timex: six forty-two. That was bad discipline, keeping a clouted car around for over twelve hours, but the Aston Martin had been an opportunity that he couldn’t pass up. He looked at the CD in his hand, the one Luke’s assistant had tossed him: *Accordion Knights*. He shoved it into his jacket pocket and pulled the overhead door halfway down, leaving enough space to get the Honda out.

Billy was sitting on the car’s hood in a pawnshop motorcycle jacket, part of his rough and tumble ensemble. He usually wore a Hard Rock Casino number because he wanted people to think he was cool enough to be a regular there; Billy was odd where appearances were concerned. He’d put something sticky in his thinning hair that kept it from lying flat; it had looked worse before it began to recede so fast, when he wore it in the kind of pseudo-samurai topknots you still saw sometimes on convenience store clerks and guys sitting alone at bus stops.

Gabriel took the fold of money from his left front pocket, peeled off ten twenties and handed them to Billy. He watched him handle the cash, holding it tightly for just a moment before tucking it into his jeans. Gabriel was certain, absolutely sure, that it was already spent.

“Thanks, man,” Billy said.

“No problem.”

They’d met in the Stardust sports book, about a year and a half ago. Gabriel was filling in as a runner, laying off large coin for a couple guys who were black-booked and couldn’t step through the doors of any casino. Billy was working at the book, trying to
make his way as a sports bettor on the side, beating his head against a five-year record of continuous failures. Gabriel would come across the guy every so often; the first thing he saw, every time, was the doom in his eyes.

He figured Billy not necessarily as a mark but as a guy who’d need money almost constantly, and that had proved too true. For Billy gambling was not about points or odds, it was about winning, and for him winning was about being right. He had such a fanatical devotion to all sports that it was painful for Gabriel to watch him place bets. He bet on favorite players, on teams he thought deserved a break, against people he didn’t like. In the end he based wagers on anything except the propositions with the highest mathematical probability of winning money. His integrity was certain; it was the rest of the world that, time and time again, proved both wrong and unfair.

Being right had cost him; Billy had no credit cards, no savings, couldn’t rent an apartment from anyone who ran background checks. He lived hand to mouth, one heartbeat from the street. The day he lost a paycheck on a sure thing or blew a timing belt in the piece of shit Honda he’d be done. The fragile balance of fiscal survival would tip irrecoverably in the wrong direction.

“You ready to get out of here,” Gabriel asked him.

Billy shrugged.

“I suppose,” he said, as if it really didn’t matter to him where he was at that particular point in time.
Billy drove his trashed old Prelude like a maniac, right foot flat down on the gas and his left ready to stomp the brakes. The car was a pale sunblasted blue, its interior trashed: ragged seats, sunvisors wrenched from their sockets, rearview mirror dangling drunkenly on a busted bracket. The door was missing from the glovebox so cassettes and gas receipts and other trash kept slipping from its open maw to the floor. Whenever any of that shit dropped around his feet Gabriel kicked it under the seat. The thing he hated most about this arrangement was having to sit in Billy’s mess.

“So you got anything more coming up?” Billy asked.

He’d been right; the two hundred was already gone.

“I’m not sure. Nothing as easy as that one for a while, though.”

Gabriel was thinking about the briefcase that had been in the trunk of the Aston Martin. Spoils of war, like other things these jobs had provided, most of it fenced via his cousin Hector: lighters and cellular phones, laptop computers, the Persol sunglasses he wore, drugs, alcohol. He had a catalogue of Las Vegas CDs collected almost exclusively from stolen Lexuses—Frank Sinatra, Wayne Newton, Steve and Edie, and now even Tommy Partain. Once they found 10mm Glock that Billy had held onto for a couple weeks. Gabriel had stopped by Billy’s apartment one night and caught him playing with it in front of the television, putting the red bead of its laser sight on characters he didn’t like. Billy had been pissed when Gabriel drove him a mile east and tossed the gun into the storm sewer.

“Those things are registered someplace, every one of them. Gun laws, you hear about that shit on TV? They’ve been doing it for a while. Hang onto that and you’re
telling the cops 'Here I am, the dumb shit that kept this thing with a serial number from the Mercedes I stole.'"

Get rid of him, Gabriel thought. But he needed a driver to take him to and from jobs, somebody to cruise the Metro radio frequencies, somebody just smart enough to handle a car and a scanner and a two-way radio at the same time. Billy worked cheap and was always available, which were two really strong points in his favor; at the same time he was making Gabriel more nervous every day. Quick check for the pulse of Billy's rambling soliloquy:

"... cops and my fucking baseballs...."

Back on topic, talking about the theft of his baseball collection again. Six, seven days ago now. He'd owned a mess of them, baseballs, some in clear plastic cubes, some sealed in archival sacks, some slotted neatly into multi-compartmented cases so you could carry them around and show them to other baseball aficionados. Some of the balls were signed and others not, some new and some used and some so obviously cheap forgeries that they wouldn't fool most kids. Billy estimated the value of his collection not by what its component elements would bring at auction but in terms of the potential worth he truly knew it had, numbers wrought by some indefinable process and criteria of evaluation he alone could understand.

Billy's voice was getting louder; he was used to talking to himself while he drove. He even worked himself up into rabid frenzies, a process that Gabriel found fairly unsettling at times.

"Six thousand dollars worth of baseballs." Billy was almost shouting, the big vein throbbing in his forehead. "Collectibles, all one of a kind, and the cops won't do a thing."
Gabriel tried to imagine Billy—totally manic, this guy who was probably hyperactive in
his sleep—telling cops in the neighborhood where he lived how they should handle their callouts. It was not a pretty picture.

“I told you, man, just sit down and shut up when you have to deal with Metro.”

When Billy was upset his face darkened as his blood pressure rose and his voice slipped into a whining bellow that was painful to hear. And this pissed him off, this thing with his baseballs.

“They wouldn’t even send detectives out or take fingerprints. I told them how much those baseballs were worth. I told them to look for that guy Lewis who moved out last week, he knows where I kept them.”

Billy’d shown those baseballs to everyone who’d ever entered his apartment, he was that proud, and Gabriel figured some mook had probably believed him when he said they were worth that much. Actually, he could probably find the whole works in a trash bag outside a pawnshop downtown, dumped by a disappointed thief.

“Did you check any of the pawn places?”

“These were collectors items,” Billy said. His voice had gone sulky now. “They’re all sold off for big money. What pisses me off most is those cops. All the fuckers did was filled out a report and you know... .”

These rants could go on forever, once he got started.

“Billy,” Gabriel said, “be careful you don’t miss my turn.”

He didn’t. In front of Gabriel’s place Billy hit the hazard switch and they both got out. Billy popped the trunk. Something smelled funny in there, Gabriel thought; probably all those fast food wrappers and empty soda cans had something to do with that, plus God
only knew what stage of mold was growing inside the ratty blue gym bag. He lifted out
the Louis Vuitton attaché case. There was a kid’s cartoon backpack in there too.

“You sure you really want this thing?”

“Yeah. I’m giving it to my niece,” Billy said.

“Listen to me. Anything in that bag? Schoolbooks, papers, shit like that? It gets
burned. Hear me, man? Don’t you just pitch it in the dumpster.”

“Where am I supposed to burn it?”

Jesus.

“Forget it. Give me the fucker. Right now.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Billy said.

Gabriel looked at the Honda’s right rear taillight, the one that wasn’t flashing.

“When did that quit working?”

“I’m not sure,” Billy said.

That was the kind of thing that was going to send him to prison someday, Gabriel
knew, some small stupid act on someone else’s part. But you couldn’t get mad at Billy; it
did absolutely no good.

“You know that auto parts store by Hector’s house, the one with the guys on the
sign?”

“Sure.”

“You meet me there tomorrow at twelve-thirty—no, Sunday at twelve-thirty, and
I’ll have him fix it up. All right?”

“Sure,” Billy said again.

__________________________
Gabriel carried the Vuitton attaché case into his apartment wrapped in a plastic trash bag. He had a couple options where it was concerned. The first was easy: pry the latch open, take whatever it contained as a gift and dumpster the evidence behind the Raley's two blocks away. On the other hand, he could try to pick the lock to get at its contents and lay off the fancy briefcase for a few hundred bucks as well. He could also keep the thing; it was slick, a nice design, and he’d never spend the money to buy one for himself.

He took it into the kitchen and laid it on the big table and hunted up his tools: a heavy paper clip, a nail file, and some kind of implement with a tiny hook on one end that he couldn’t imagine an intended use for. He’d read a book on lockpicking once and had tried to practice the craft at the time, but it required a level of devotion that he didn’t own. Locks were simple in their essence and unimportant in the end; they kept people away from things, but had no value in themselves. They could be gutted with a dent puller, opened with an electronic key that jiggled tumblers until they all fell free, cracked with a chisel and a hammer if all else failed.

When he’d peeled off his gloves Gabriel unbuckled the Timex and threw it into the kitchen trash can, then changed into sweatpants and a tee shirt and old moccasins. He got a beer from the refrigerator and uncapped it. Odd; there was something in the air, a hint of decay. He hated the thought of that, of something spoiled in his house. He checked the garbage under the sink, then the drain to make sure he’d run the disposal.
What else: the refrigerator? Well, that could wait. Maybe the briefcase was full of cash,
thousand dollar bills, and he’d be out of town forever. He’d just drop the keys in the mailbox and let the bimbos in the rental office figure out what smelled bad.

Gabriel sat in a straight chair and arranged the tools off to the right the way they did at the dentist’s office and pulled the briefcase toward him. As he moved it the release gizmo of the single latch sank beneath the pressure of his thumb. The latch came open sweetly, quieter but as solid sounding as a Mercedes door. That left him feeling pretty stupid; he’d assumed it was locked, had never even checked. But people could carry cash in an open case just as easily as a locked one, he figured. He raised the flap and leaned forward to peer into the case and lunged backward with the chair clattering across the linoleum floor as both his hands rose quickly to cover his face.

Rasputin likes to survey the front portion of his domain best from the eave of the roof just above the front window, behind the downdrooping branches of the tree that fills the miniscule walled courtyard. The tree is a Russian olive and when the wind tosses its slender shapely leaves their silvery bellies shine in the bands of sunlight arrowing down through broken clouds. Most afternoons are fairly quiet in the courtyard, with the exception of the mockingbird that bobs and weaves and runs the scales of its appropriated calls, occasionally dropping from the safety of densely lapped branches to sample the olives scattered on the ground beneath it.

Rasputin is missing some teeth and has a notch out of one ear and limps sometimes when his left foreleg stiffens up. He’s relatively sound for an aging cat but is still ready for retirement; his adventuring days are behind him now and he prefers to lie in
peace on the roof, or on neatly folded clothing piled on his mistress’ bed, or, particularly
in the late mornings, on the radiant sunwarmed expanse of paving blocks outside the
sliding glass doors on the back side of the house.

In his youth— this was long ago, years, when he was whip-thin and still had his
testicles and his first family of humans— he’d been called Velcro Diablo, a name that
came from his ability to descend curtains face first, cling to chairs by the paired
centermost claws of a single paw and cross the entire width of the couchback sideways
with his body parallel to the floor. Now he is named after a man who in real life
apparently possessed at least seven of the nine lives felines allegedly own, although as a
cat he has no real sense of narrative parallels, insights into history or appreciation of the
taxonomic irony.

The door opens and Nicola steps out into the tiny courtyard directly below
where he lies. She came in late from LA and has just woken up; an agesofterned man’s
undershirt hangs loose around her body, off one shoulder, pale against dark skin. The
bright strands in her hair almost sparkle in the afternoon sun. Her narrow hips flare inside
the thin fabric as she bends to pick up the newspaper. She turns, adjusts her glasses, looks
up at Rasputin. Her eyes are green.

“Don’t fall asleep up there,” she says, “or you will fall,” and the fact that she says
this in French is of absolutely no concern to Rasputin, who deigns to understand little
other than his most recent given name and that only if there is food involved. A gust of
wind flows through the wrought iron gate; branches creak and loose panes in the garage
window rattle and hem of Nicola’s thin cotton shirt eddies upward around her hips to.
momentarily reveal the soft mound of her sex, shaved pornstar smooth.

Shane Kelleher stared from her drafting stool down at the photographs spread across the floor of the small loft that some developer had optimistically labeled the second floor of her condominium. The upside of being fired, temporarily or not, was that she had time to do whatever she felt like.

She had been a sculptor as an undergraduate, an expert in wood-fired ceramics. She had gone to Japan to study and ended up running a kiln there for a year, a naborigama, the no-shit seven step dragon furnace. Which was not bad, she still believed, for a white girl from Long Beach. There had been no time for anything of an artistic nature in San Francisco, the most beautiful place she’d ever lived. Fourteen-hour days were the rule, five years of them. Sometimes she’d never see sun: at work while it was still dark, calls and meetings all day, home so late the good restaurants had stopped delivering.

But that was past. And she’d changed her focus as soon as she got a feel for Las Vegas. She had the space and the time to do things here. Ceramics didn’t feel right for this place, didn’t make sense. The city seemed to embrace indeterminacy and thrive on fragmentation, a catalogue of narratives that resisted assembly: it was a photo kind of place, she decided. Absolutely photo. A few weeks after she’d started working as a valet she sold her Macintosh stereo components and drove to LA to buy cameras.

Over the last two years she’d used Hasselblads and Nikons and plastic Dianas and Holgas and some others that she couldn’t remember. She feared the gear addiction that
seemed to affect many photo people, especially males, and whenever a piece of
equipment felt comfortable she sold it. Currently she had an old Leica M-2 rangefinder.
The camera fit her mood. She’d been looking through stuff from the big press agencies of
the sixties: Magnum, SIPA, Gamma-Liaison. The glory years of magazine work, shot by
the legends of the documentary trade. And they weren’t even all men. Shane was sorting
her own prints into piles of reasonably successful and less than when the phone began to
ring.

Shane looked at the window behind her: shit, it was late, dark outside. She found
the portable under a sweatshirt and walked to the loft rail, where she could lean over and
listen to the answering machine below. There had been two messages yesterday from a
guy she used to date in San Francisco, a banker with the impossible name of Kenton
Payne, and she wasn’t taking any chances. The machine clicked: Phillip’s voice. She
thumbed the portable to life.

"Here I am, real time. Go."

"I’ll be by in a little while. I told Nicola we were coming over."

"I’m not in the mood."

"She likes you. It’ll be your good deed for the day. And we need to talk, anyhow."

"Twenty minutes," Shane said “at least. I mean it.”

Then, since she had the telephone in her hand, she hit three and the pound sign.

"You never called me back,” Special said.

"Listen to this shit: I got fired for giving some guy a car he had the ticket for."

"Great. You can catch the ten-ten flight, Southwest, there’s a kickin’ party in
Manhattan Beach tonight."
My best friend. Shane thought.

"Maybe next week. I'm working on some other stuff and I've got to go out pretty soon, anyway."

"Is this the dating kind of out?"

"Ha. There's this French babe who lives here, Phillip calls her the rogue sociologist. She came over here to do research and totally bailed, never went back for the fall semester of wherever she was at. Anyway, there are parties at her place all the time. People toss money into this really weird ceramic pyramid to pay her rent. She doesn't know if she still has a job, the way I understand it."

"What do you mean, still has a job?"

"Wherever she teaches. It's not like the shitty gigs we have. Professors get away with that kind of stuff all the time."

"Not where I went to school."

Oh, right. Special had been in college for a brief period of time, allegedly to study theatre, and she knew just enough about her alma mater to discuss its sports teams with men who might be interested. The only class-related assignment she ever attempted was still on her old Powerbook, a single sentence she'd actually shown to friends once when she was drunk: This paper will discuss fashion options available to costume design professionals in the days when Shakespeare roamed the earth.

"Special, you can't count half a semester of dorm parties as actually going to Stanford. Did you ever even meet a professor when you were there?"

Special, triumphant:

"I was dating a professor there," she said.
"I've got to go," Shane told her.

Phillip's car cruised smoothly through a firm yellow signal and as the lights of the cars on the cross street edged his features and made the lenses of his glasses glow eerily Shane framed his profile in the Leica's finder and pressed the shutter release. It was a long exposure, a quarter of a second, and the buzz of the slow-speed escapement caught his attention.

"What's that all about?"

"Just getting some film. Not to panic."

Phillip's eyes went to the mirror. He was careful about how he dressed, about his appearance.

"Is the razor rash going to show up? I hate how that looks."

They caught the red at the next light and Phillip took off his little oval glasses with their spidery frames and laid a forearm along the windowledge and turned toward her with a smile. She framed him in the viewfinder and got a shot he was evidently more comfortable with, though the light was so bad she knew it wouldn't turn out. She thanked him and stowed the camera in her bag so that he'd put his glasses back on to drive.

They crossed Desert Inn headed north and turned into a neighborhood of houses that had been built in the sixties, low ranches and bungalows with sizeable yards that supported old foliage. The streets were narrow and the cars parked along the curbs were mostly older, their colors paled by the sun. Grayed sidewalk tiles ran along like rows of
crooked teeth where the roots of trees had buckled them, and that was another way to
date the area; new developments had no sidewalks at all.

The whole scene was as nostalgic as Las Vegas got and Shane was sure it
wouldn't last too much longer. A lawyer had just bought the house next door to Nicola’s,
on the side opposite the lesbian elementary school administrators, and there was a new
Volvo parked in the driveway of the home on the corner. Phillip pulled up along the curb.
They got out of the car and went up the walk to the tiny enclosed courtyard. The gate was
rarely latched; they passed through it, coming under the gaze of the dun-striped cat that
lay lazily at the edge of the roof.

Nicola Rade, hostess: five and one-third feet even, green-eyed, wild hair streaked
pale over tawny skin. She wore a long dark skirt slit most of the way up one side and a
cropped top of pale blue batiste. Her right hand held a glass and the other rested on
Shane’s arm.

“Alison is an attorney,” Nicola said.

Shane nodded. So many of them were, these culture dogs. She smiled at the
woman anyway.

“That’s a beautiful blouse.”

Alison sniffed, angled her head. A tall woman, slender.

“Thanks. I’m sorry, what was it you did again?”

Actually, a tall woman, slender and resentful.

“I park cars,” Shane said.
"She's a photographer," Nicola told the attorney. "That one is hers, in the living room, you can just see it from here. I was her mannequin. Not so bad, hmm?"

Shane couldn't tell whether Nicola was commenting on the craft or her body, which was indeed the finer of the two. Alison the lawyer shifted her eyes from the print on the living room wall back to Shane. Nicola turned, sidled sideways, faded toward the hallway. Damn her.

"Very nice. But photography's not really a career option for you, I take it?"

Jesus, Shane thought, these people expended so much effort being bitchy in a bemused sort of way. This was what she'd left behind in San Francisco. Check out, e.g., the rock on the lady lawyer's finger: married to a guy making ten times her clout, something that must piss her off on a daily basis but also something she could never abandon. Shane did covet the silk blouse, but it wasn't like she couldn't go buy one for herself.

"I've had careers. Here, take a look at this." Shane hooked her pinkie into the corner of her mouth and pulled back and out to show Alison the gold and amalgam filigree that webbed her rearmost teeth. "Attractive, huh? I ground my teeth in my sleep so much I cracked my molars."

"I see." The lawyer sipped her wine.

"This was San Francisco," Shane said. "My rent was like twenty-four hundred a month, I was living in Marina, and I couldn't tell you what color the walls were. I worked seventy hours a week and didn't leave the house on weekends. In The City you could have anything delivered: food, cigarettes, alcohol, sex, whatever. My physician scripped
me blue pills to get to sleep and white ones to get to work and something else entirely for depression.”

Alison, unimpressed:

“And you were in...?”

“I was in the action. Right in the middle. That’s what I wanted instead of law school.” Smile. “Excuse me, there’s my date, I’ve got to catch him for a moment.”

Phillip was at the kitchen table with some people she had seen before but did not know, looking at Nicola’s Polaroid prints. She was just back from California and had a couple stacks of them. Nicola loved Polaroids. She’d once made some daft theoretical argument about their inherent mechanical honesty over other photo media, but Shane was pretty sure that was all a dodge. She just loved the way they spit out pictures.

“Pretend you can’t wait to get home and ravish me,” she whispered into Philip’s ear.

“I hate it when you do this shit.”

A tall man she’d seen before, one of the university crowd, leaned forward to pin one of the pictures to the tablecloth with a finger.

“Hey, you know who that is?”

He sorted more prints from the stack, three of them. Nicola and an older man in a beret, both smiling as they sat shoulder to shoulder behind a diminutive table with a round marble top, a café’s blue-messaged front windows visible behind them.

“You know who that is?” the guy asked. “That’s Jacques Derrida.”

He looked around the table at them all.

“Jacques Derrida,” he said again.
“Yeah,” somebody else agreed.

The tall man picked up one of the Polaroids and headed into the living room.

“Who’s Jack Derrida,” a tall guy with spiked hair asked the kitchen in general.

“Some friend of Nicola’s,” Shane told him.

When Ray had chased runaways and illegal aliens he’d leased cars by the month from a place on Boulder Highway where everything sold for five grand or less, so he could change his vehicular profile at will. Now he drove the only thing he owned, a white Ford pickup that looked like every second truck on the road. When the brakelights flashed on the car Shane Kelleher was riding in he shut off the truck’s main beams and eased up to the curb. He watched them go into the house. He waited. He checked his watch. Ten minutes seemed like an eternity. This was not, he reflected, a job for a grown man.

It certainly wasn’t what he’d signed on for. He and his old friend Kevin had a good working relationship, but he owed Kevin, that much was for sure. He worked maybe thirty, forty days a year for the casino and made enough to live fairly well. Kevin had gotten him the interview and his military record had gotten him the job: a former SEAL, that’s exactly who they wanted to show up on the doorstep of deadbeats who had outstripped their lines of credit. They could trust him to deliver money too—he was fairly presentable, and able to get a concealed handgun permit—but he spent most of his time collecting.
Not that anyone talked about it. He was paid as a contract specialist in management training. He flew to places—over half the fifty states, Hong Kong and Singapore, Mexico City—and knocked on doors. He'd been lied to and blustered at, but never threatened; nor did he threaten any of them. In the end the deadbeats paid up almost invariably, though not because of anything he did. They paid because they couldn't stay away. They needed Las Vegas, needed the city the way other humans needed other particular vices. In the end, they paid so they could come back for more.

Ray had gone through the file that Ciccinelli had given him on Shane Kelleher. She was staring thirty in the eye, had a BFA from Long Beach and an MA from Reed College. She had lived in Japan for a year and taught poor kids for a year and, before she moved to Las Vegas to be a casino valet, had worked one job for five years in San Francisco. She listed her employer as S. Kelleher, a limited partnership. Title: consultant. Income: about $60K and 'considerations', whatever those were. She'd have been damned near homeless living on that in San Francisco. In the black and white photographs that had come with the file her eyes were lighter shade of gray than her skin. Her hair had been black then, short, a tough look; it was dyed platinum now, long enough for its ends to lick at her shoulders when she turned her head.

Lights flashed across the off-side window of the Ford. Another car drove past, a faded wreck that turned around in a driveway down the way and came back to park on the opposite side of the street. There were probably fifteen cars parked along the curbs but he knew the guy who got out of this one and crossed the road without looking, a portfolio of some sort under one arm. It was Billy Reed. Ray couldn't remember the last
time he'd seen Billy. But hey, he decided, if Billy Reed could walk into that house, anybody could.

At the front of the house a small iron gate opened into a courtyard crowded with green. The space was its own compact jungle, like the botanical study zone in a zoo without parrots and lizards.

“Hey,” Ray said to the cat on the roof.

The cat blinked. Ray listened; the noise level in the house was fairly high. He turned the knob and opened the door to a back so wide that his first thought was bouncer. But when the guy started to turn he had to make sure things were out of the way of his belly, and when he got all the way around Ray saw thick glasses and a shiny, benevolent face.

“You a virgin,” the guy asked.

“Would that mean I get to pick first, or last?”

The guy maneuvered a plaster pyramid on a rolling office chair around himself and parked it in front of Ray. He lifted off the top and Ray could look down into the structure at a jumble of bills and shining coins.

“In the spirit of true camaraderie we gladly accept your donation to help defray the living expenses of Nicola Rade, the new age troubadour, intellectual free spirit and your hostess for the evening.”

Ray still carried the Special Officer badge that he’d used when tracking down runaways and was tempted to flash it now, but dug into his pocket for his money clip.
instead. He figured five bucks would probably buy a pretty good lunch for the kind of
person who rented out their house for parties.

"The lady thanks you," the big man said.

"Tell her she’s welcome."

When Ray saw Billy again he was standing near the kitchen table talking to Shane
Kelleher. She was looking up at him as if she were interested in what he had to say. Odd,
Ray thought, how the only two people he could name in a house full of forty were talking
to each other. When Ray was a SEAL he’d once worked a security detail honchoed by a
crusty Master Chief named W.C. Greene and still recalled the old sailor’s maxim on
serendipity: “You see anything that looks like a coincidence on your watch, get your
weapon off safety post fucking haste.”

I’m with you on that one, W.C.

He edged along the wall to the far end of the living room and saw, through the
open door to the bath in the hallway, a tub full of ice and beer. He got a Bass and used the
opener tied to the towel rack to uncap it and reflected that at least his five bucks had
bought him one decent beverage.

“Hey, Billy, that you?”

Tall, not a bad looking guy but somehow vacant as he scanned the area around
him. It always seemed to take Billy’s eyes an extra few moments to focus.

“Shit, Ray Partain. What’s going on, Ray?”
Billy was the kind of local nobody liked to discuss. He was from Chicago and had been in town five years and had gambled away, to Ray’s knowledge, at least a car and a condominium. He’d been into shylocks, into the casinos when they let him go too deep on his credit cards. Ray’s first job for Kevin had been to meet Billy’s grandfather between flights at LAX to pick up a personal check for sixty-four hundred dollars. “Next time that little shit digs this kind of hole,” the old man had said, “break his knees or whatever it is you do. Anything short of killing him, don’t call me again.” Ray hadn’t hit the old man, who’d been at least in his seventies, but he was tempted.

“Who you working for now, Billy?”

Ray had gotten Billy a job at one of the sports books a few years back, had Kevin talk one of his cohorts into trying him out; it hadn’t worked. From there Billy had gone to the gambling press, then for a while to typing line updates and injury reports into a computer for one of the big betting services. Billy was the kind of guy who would not leave Las Vegas until it killed him.

“Man, my last gig kind of went bad, you know? Shit, I couldn’t put up with it anymore.”

Billy’d gone shifty all of a sudden, rubbing his palms on his jeans as his eyes roamed around like pinballs. Not working anywhere at all, Ray thought. Billy could function in a social way, but at the same time he wasn’t all there.

“Hey, are you here to see the psychic?”

“I didn’t know they had one.”

“Yeah, she’s supposed to be here someplace, I haven’t found her yet. Ray, I got to tell you what happened to my baseballs.”
Ray listened. Billy laid out the whole scenario: the background on his collection, the theft, the disrespect shown him by the cops. Ray nodded as Billy talked. He was looking for Shane Kelleher and finally saw her in the living room. She was standing with a black guy and two other women, evidently comparing new shoes.

"You got a raw deal," Ray said automatically when he realized Billy had stopped talking.

"I get a lot of raw deals, Ray. I never really got a break in my life. It's a lot like Prince, you know what I mean?"

The ability to come up with those odd non-sequitors, that was the thing he had forgotten about Billy.

"Not exactly."

"Prince. He called himself The Artist for a while, but he's back to Prince again."

Shane had moved; she stood in profile to him now, centered in the arch that led to the living room. She was speaking to someone out of sight behind the wall. She talked with her hands, bracelets flashing on one wrist as she gestured, fingers splayed on the hand that held the green bottle. A strand of pale hair fell forward to shape a sine across her right cheek and she brushed it absently away.

"You know who Prince is, right?"

"I know who you mean, Billy, I don't know what you mean."

"I mean it's like that for Prince, never getting a break. He's just trying to do what he believes, the kind of music he wants to play. And he's excellent, a genius, but the record guys won't leave him alone. They want to tell him what to do, control everything,
and they're all just getting rich off of him. They won't even let him re-release some of his old songs."

The fact that Billy's downtrodden icon of unfair play was a billionaire or better would never enter into his equation. There were times, Ray thought as he looked at Shane standing in the archway, when he really wished he still smoked cigarettes. Billy leaned forward in the chair, hands together and forearms resting on his spread knees.

"So do you like him, man? Prince?"

And that seemed like a pretty odd way to phrase the question. Billy had never been the most well-adjusted of souls but now, in the years that had passed, he seemed to have slipped even further out of synch with the rest of the world.

"I think Little Red Corvette is a pretty good song," Ray admitted.

Billy had his cogent moments; he wasn't unaware that he had, somehow, lost his audience.

"It was good seeing you, Ray. I need to go find the psychic now," Billy told him.

"Excuse me," the black man said, "sorry, did someone say your name was Partain?"

"Yeah. I'm Ray Partain."

"How many Partains are there in Las Vegas?"

He was nervous, uncertain, ready to be embarrassed; all the usual signs, Ray thought, were present.

"I have no idea. I know of a couple for sure," Ray told him.
"I was just wondering if you’d be related to Tommy Partain, or know him. Tommy Partain the accordion player?"

Lie.

"As a matter of fact."

"As a matter of fact you know him?"

Lie, lie, lie.

"As a matter of fact we’re related. He’s my father,” Ray said.

This was when they were most unbearable, true accordion fans. They would literally swoon, sometimes. Their eyes would get misty. You could watch it happen.

"His son. Wow, I can’t believe this. You’re the kid, then, right? The little boy with the crewcut on the cover of Accordion Knights."

That, Ray thought, is what I really love about the town. All those goddamned memories.

"Yeah,” he said. “I’m the kid with the crewcut.”

Shane was standing near the door when Ray caught up to her.

“I wanted to say thanks.”

“And what have I done for you?”

“You were talking to Billy Reed. Tall guy, funny hair?”

“Oh, that guy. Yeah, he thought I was the psychic.”

“You were nice to him. A lot of people get sort of abrupt. I’ve known him for quite a while.”
"You say that like he's some kind of retard. He's got an attention deficit problem, it's not all that uncommon."

That year of teaching poor kids, Ray thought. He had known Billy for long enough to recognize the flaws in her diagnosis, but he wasn’t going to address it.

"This is going to sound weird, but can I talk to you? Out here on the patio?"

She looked at him for a moment. Her eyes were very pale, their irises the color and diameter of newly minted nickels. Then she slid the door open and stepped through. Ray followed her.

"You smoke?"

"Not any more."

"I know what you mean." She gestured toward the back wall. "There's usually a fat kid peeking into the yard over there, trying to see if anybody's getting naked in the tub."

"I don't really know how to put this," Ray told her, "but they're checking up on you. The casino is. They want to know for sure whether you had anything to do with that car being stolen."

She stared at the wall for a while longer and then turned, slowly.

"Who exactly is checking up on me?"

"I guess that would be me. I'm the guy who's waiting to see if you lead me to your partner in crime."

Shards of reflected light shone in her pale eyes.

"You're following me for casino fucking security," she said, "nosing around in my personal life, and you've got the nerve to stand there and tell me about it?"
“Why not? You didn’t help steal the car, did you?”

“No.” Then, after a long moment: “But I could have.”

“Look,” he said, “I’m trying to make this easier on both of us, all right? This will pass, believe me. You’ll probably have your job back in a couple weeks.”

“I just don’t know what to do with you,” Shane Kelleher said to him.

“She doesn’t mean that,” another voice said.

Ray watched her step outside, a dark woman in a slit skirt. A rich voice, the sparkle of teeth and jewelry.

“He’s a private eye or something,” Shane said, “sent to spy on me.”

The woman stepped under the light. Her skin was dark and smooth and her green eyes looked very bright against it. Her eyeglasses had trendy tortoise frames. She raised one hand, slender fingers pushing back a tangly disarray of dark hair veined with tints of gold and red. She had a lean body and the posture, Ray noticed, of a someone who had spent some formative years balancing books on her head, or whatever they did instead at finishing schools these days. She reached forward and tugged at his beard, a firm grip.

“I like that,” she said. Her voice was low, throaty, her accent lush.

“Thank you.”

“So you are a detective?”

“No. Just a common thug,” Ray said.

“Jesus,” Shane said. She walked back into the house.

‘Thug.” The woman paused, considering. “I don’t know that word.”

“Ruffian. Gangster, maybe.”

“Apache,” he thought she said. “Do you have a gun?”
"No. I don’t like them," Ray lied.

"Too bad. The boy in the house behind shoots at my poor cat with a BB rifle. I wanted to shoot back at him with something. Just a warning, you know."

Ray looked at her.

"You’re not from around here," he said mildly, "are you."

She smiled, a wicked flash of teeth.

"I am from Martinique. Then France, and now here."

She pulled a flattened pack of cigarettes from the pocket of her skirt and shook one free, fat and unfiltered. She held it toward him, raised in her hand like an offering.

"So," she said, "are you going to be bad with me, detective?"

"It’s just Ray. And no thanks, I quit."

She shrugged, handed him her matches, and waited for him to be a gentleman.

It was late. The party was breaking up, stray guests looking out onto the patio to say goodnight. They sat with their feet in the hot tub, watching water boil blue up around their calves. Ray had his pants legs turned up, Nicola’s skirt was gathered high up around strong thighs.

"So what did you do then?"

"Used to find runaways. Everybody runs away to Las Vegas, or at least a bunch of them do, but it’s a fairly easy city to find lost kids in. They don’t have anywhere to go, the kind of options people do in San Francisco or Los Angeles."

"And you quit that too."
“It’s a shitty job, tracking down kids. You can’t win. Bad as things are on the streets, a lot of them had real reasons to get away. And the people qualified by the state to make decisions on what happens to them when they get picked up are a bunch of losers too. I couldn’t stand that part of it any more.”

“And you work for the casinos now. You stay in Las Vegas because you love it?”

“Not exactly. I hate it quite a bit, actually.”

“But then why?”

“Why stay? It’s a long story.” Ray said.

“Nicola? Long distance,” a voice from inside called.

She held up a forefinger, touched it to Ray’s lips, and stepped inside to take the phone. She was speaking French and Ray was listening to the music of the language if not the words and it was another couple of minutes before he got off his ass and put on his shoes and walked to the street in front of the house to find that the car Shane Kelleher had come to the party in was gone.

Gabriel wasn’t a regular at the auto parts store so he hadn’t guessed how busy it would be on a Sunday just after noon. The lines were short, but each task seemed to take forever. They all involved extensive searches, first on the computer and then in the back room. When he reached the front of the line he dropped the note Hector had scrawled on the counter. The man there chanted the stock number of the taillight bulb like a mantra to his computer screen and then looked up at Gabriel.

“Be right back.”
Gabriel turned and walked from the counter over to the big window at the front of the store where Hector stood with Billy. Hector was a lean guy with veined ropy forearms who wore baggy black pants and a short sleeved white shirt buttoned to the neck. He had a bandanna of sheer blue nylon wrapped around his head. Hector peeled the cellophane off a toothpick and stuck it in his mouth. Billy was telling an inattentive Hector the story of his attempts to see a psychic about his stolen baseballs when he lost his train of thought completely, just like that.

“Hey, shit, there she is.”

Hector didn’t move. Gabriel raised his gaze and on the far side of the parking lot he saw the valet, the blonde who’d fetched the Aston Martin for him. She was standing next to her car, waiting for a black dude to walk over from where he’d parked. Jesus, that was some piece of shit she drove, an ancient gold Cadillac as big as the ark.

“Well look who’s here.”

“I thought she was the psychic,” Billy said.

“I’m talking about that blonde over there, not the psychic or whoever.”

Across the lot the blonde and the black guy walked into the restaurant together.

“Yeah, that’s her.”

Gabriel turned to look at Billy. Sometimes watching him could help you figure out what he was talking about.

“You were just telling us it was a black chick, the one you thought was the psychic.”

“Nicola. She’s not black, exactly. She’s from the Caribbean someplace. No, I thought she was the psychic too. Shane,” Billy said.
“What?”

“Her name is Shane. The blonde over there, I mean. Like the western.”

“What western?”

“How the fuck should I know? I’m just telling you what she said,” Billy seemed honestly confused. “Is there something you don’t understand here, Gabe?”

Hector gave Billy a long, long look from beneath heavy eyelids and then spit the toothpick he was sucking onto the floor and turned away in disgust. Gabriel liked his cousin Hector well enough, but the guy had shit for patience, especially where Billy was concerned. Gabriel followed Hector through the door and poked him in the arm with a forefinger.

“Do me a favor and just fix the asshole’s taillight, all right? Then we follow that blonde home when she gets done with lunch. I want to know where she lives.”

Hector didn’t say anything, just raised his eyes as he unwrapped a new toothpick. Gabriel walked back inside and over to where he’d left Billy.

“Okay. Now back up,” Gabriel told Billy slowly, “and start this story from the beginning again.”

“So this guy Kevin Lowell,” Shane was saying as they sat at a table near the restaurant’s front window, “he’s one of the top suits, right?”

“Close,” Phillip said.

“He asked me out once, you know? I mean, not out out, because of course he’s married, but if I wanted to maybe hit San Diego for the weekend. Just like that, no shit.
So I'm thinking I should call him up and refresh his memory on that incident and maybe get my job back."

Phillip leaned back in his chair, as if actually considering the proposition's merits for a moment.

"You've probably had stupider ideas at one time or another," he said, "but I guess those were all before I met you, huh?"

"Okay, you're the lawyer. Tell me how I can come out of this looking all right. There's got to be some way."

"Forget the job. It's not like you can't get another one here, unless of course you start trying to blackmail the executives of the only industry in town. Think about this for a minute. You figure these people don't talk to each other?"

"It's not about getting another job. It's about not getting fired. They're having me followed."

"By Tommy Partain's son. I still can't believe that, can you?"

"Phillip, I don't care if he's the son of Jesus Christ, all right? They can't just have me followed all over the place. I didn't do a damned thing to get canned and it matters to me, even if I never do park cars in this town again."

At a table across the way a woman's voice was raised adenoidally in complaint, the sound cutting off trailing conversations like the sweep of a cleaver's blade. Shane looked up; it was hard not to. From behind the woman had beautiful hair but even that feature lost its gloss when she stood up and turned to leave. It was obvious she ate too much. She had coarse skin and bad teeth and a webbing of harsh lines had been etched into her face by a lifetime spent achieving displeasure.
"I don’t know why they couldn’t substitute the sauce from the salmon special," the woman said as she passed them. She looked numb, befuddled by the inability to fulfill her wishes. "I mean the meal is my experience, that’s what I’m paying for..."

"No," the man with her said. His voice seemed weary, the tone of someone who’d been here too many times before. "You’re paying for the food and a place to sit, Ruth Ann. The rest is just shit people let you get away with."

"Tell me something," Phillip said. "Why is it your people can never order off a menu?"

"My people?"

"Women in restaurants."

"Don’t ask me stuff that’s philosophically complex," Shane said, "I’m just a chick from the suburbs. Nice stab at changing the subject, though."

"Why don’t you just forget about this for a week? It will go away, Shane. Problems always do, or we find new ways to ignore them. That’s one of the great things about this city."

"I was in Caesars the other night with Michelle, you know, Cocktail Michelle? We both worked graveyard and went across the street after. Anyway, we go through the door and literally run into these three party chicks. They’re drunk, blitzed on X, and they pick me out of the whole crowd to take their picture. And why?"

"They sensed you were an artiste," Phillip said.

"Because they know they can give me a camera and I won’t take off running with it. They can look at me and tell that. I am not the kind of person who steals cars."

The waiter stopped at their table with his pad and they both ordered.
“Could you leave the tomatoes off mine, please,” Shane asked him.

“Sure,” the waiter said.

“But here’s the thing,” Shane told Phillip, “I never thought of myself that way. When I was growing up, all through high school and college, whenever I saw myself in the mirror? I was always the coolest person I knew.”

Ray met Kevin on his turf, one of the steak houses, the priciest restaurant in the casino that was open for lunch.

“They don’t even like us to comp our families here,” he said to Ray when he came through the doorway and found him at the bar.

“Relax, I won’t eat much. Have a beer.”

“Club soda, Steve,” Kevin told the bartender.

“I’ve just got this thing about windows,” Ray said. “That’s the reason like this place. If I’m in a room with windows I can pretend I’m not in a casino.”

Kevin shook his head.

“It’s a changed science, Ray. Look at what you’ve got in Las Vegas these days. The biggest hotels in the world, six of the top ten. Family entertainment, the best live shows in America and restaurants as good as those in New York.”

“Your family entertainment is day care, you had no choice. Live shows don’t use any live musicians, since the corporations fired them all. Those restaurants just share signage copyrights with places in New York; the food comes off the same trucks that stock your buffets.”
Kevin smiled.

"You're an anomaly, my friend. Most people are glad to be here. Some actually think it's pretty great."

"Yeah. That's what the newspapers keep telling me."

The bartender brought Kevin's water and another pint for Ray. Kevin got out his wallet, the long kind designed to carry paper currency unfolded so it stayed nice and crisp. He laid a ten on top of the receipt. The moment the bill came to rest, or so it seemed, the lacquered French nails of the hostess touched Kevin's shoulder.

"Nice to see you again, Mr Lowell." She had two menus in her hand. "The waitress will bring your drinks."

"Thank you, Veronica."

Kevin had developed the skill of checking nametags without appearing to shift his eyes, Ray thought; years back he'd never been able to remember the names of half the students on their dormitory floor.

"This is Mr Partain," Kevin said as he stepped away from the bar, "an associate and a friend of mine."

That was good enough for a brilliant smile, so nice that Ray felt the better for it even if it was unearned. Veronica of the perfect shining teeth led them to a table with a window all its own that looked out over pedestrian traffic on the Strip. It wasn't more than forty degrees outside but people were walking around in shorts and T-shirts. The low pressure cell had blown through during the night and the sky was an unblemished monochromatic blue. Neither of them opened a menu when the waitress arrived at the table; salmon special for Kevin, burger for Ray.
“So listen to what your pal Davis told me.”

“He’s still here, huh?”

“Yeah. It looked like the weather was going to delay the demolition, the implosion, but it’s on again.”

“What, he can’t find his way back if he goes home to LA for the weekend? And they trust this guy with money?”

“You want to hear the story, or just keep trying to bait me?”

“The story,” Ray said.

“So Davis is seeing this lady who sells luggage in the airport shops. You know the kind of place I’m talking about, expensive as hell. She gives him a briefcase, it’s a Vuitton Moskova, supposedly worth six hundred bucks. Pretty fancy. Then, the next morning, she makes him lunch before he takes off. I don’t know, I suppose she wants him to save money, start taking her to Catalina for the weekends. Anyway, there goes Mr Self Importance, carrying a tuna sandwich around in his brand new briefcase.”

“Uh huh.”

“So I’m a bore now, is that it?”

“Jesus, Kevin, I’m listening. Quit being so touchy.”

“He ends up leaving that sandwich in his briefcase from like Tuesday to Thursday. He’s not used to carrying the thing so he forgot he locked it in the trunk of the Aston Martin. For safekeeping, you know. By the time he remembers what’s in there it’s a freaking biohazard. He has to have the car detailed to get the stink out.”

“So instead of getting his ass kicked for wrecking his overpriced birthday gift, he tells the old lady it got stolen in Las Vegas and claims the insurance money.”
Kevin, philosophical:

“`You’ve got to try and appreciate the story for its value as farce, not for who it lets off the hook.”

“That’s the big difference between us. You give him the benefit of the doubt because he’s rich, even though you know he’s a piece of shit. I give the benefit of the doubt to the valet. She didn’t have anything to do with that car. You should fire me and put her back to work.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair; the waitress herself, rather than a runner, had arrived with plates. Ray wasn’t used to his food appearing magically, as if the kitchen had already known what he would order.

“You’re still on the clock. But I’ll tell you, they think she might be clean after all. Ciccinelli does.”

“I never thought I’d agree with him.”

“Seems the other guy on that shift came to work the next day wearing a brand new TAG watch. An expensive one, not the budget model with the quartz innards. Or so they tell me.”

“People make sixty grand a year parking cars,” Ray said, “they can maybe afford a couple grand for a watch.”

“Well, Security thinks it’s worth talking to him about. It seems like a lot of disposable income for the week after Christmas.”

Ray looked down at the burger in front of him. It was perhaps the most nicely presented burger that he’d ever been served, the plate garnished with bright origami reduced by exquisite knifework from five vegetables.
"I meant to ask about Tommy, the other day."

"Pretty much the same," Ray said. He appreciated the effort, though. He was used to Tommy being a subject that nobody was comfortable with.

"You still go over there?"

"Every Monday afternoon."

"Is there ever any change?"

"Nothing good. But thanks for asking."

Kevin stared over his salad at Ray, fork glowing in the parallelogram of light that angled across the table from the base of the window beside them.

"And you were wrong, Ray, about that other thing. It wasn't a cornfield. It was wheat. It was a wheatfield and it was near Belgrade, Nebraska. That's what I remember."

It's getting truly dangerous out there, in the world behind the house. The fat kid who lives directly behind Nicola had gotten a ladder somewhere and could climb to the top of the wall and rest his BB gun on the topmost step to fire. Rasputin knows to watch the top of the wall, to watch for the twin yellow uprights of the ladder to rise above the rows of block.

Nicola caught the fat kid shooting into her yard at him two days ago and had flown into a rage. She threw plums that left dark splats like blood on the wall. She carried a chair through the yard and climbed onto it to speak in loud, clear tones to the boy’s parents. She raised hell and, for a day or so, that worked. The ladder was gone and the gun was gone and the danger, so it seemed, was gone too. That was a time of ease for
Rasputin, the full range of his domain recovered. He lay on the paving blocks in the sun and ate grass and prowled through the dirt smelling where birds had landed and bathed themselves with wingbeaten dust.

On Monday morning he follows his usual routine and reaches the traditional time to switch sides of the house, east to west, when new noises are carried to his ears from behind the wall that hides the fat child’s home. Something heavy, dragging on concrete. Rasputin, wary, slinks behind the hot tub. He digs a nest of dry leaves and waits for an end to those sounds that make him so uneasy.

They do come to an end, and some time later he gets up to traverse the yard, heading for the plastic spa supply bin that will take him to the fence that will take him to the roof. The dust is soft, the overgrown wheatgrass along the patio’s edge gentle as it grazes his flanks when he parts it. Rasputin picks up his pace as he nears the bin, his body unconsciously judging the trajectory of the leap. He’s almost off the ground when an alien noise in the higher frequency registers makes him spin just as thwack a ragged hole appears in the side of the blue plastic bin.

Rasputin is totally defensive. He’s moving fast, forced into the terrestrial escape route. Again there’s the thrumming sound of contracting surgical bands and the brutal thwack as something busts chunks off the stuccoed wall of the house and whistles away to rebound again off the wall that separates Nicola’s yard and Stern’s. Rasputin is a streak of brindled taupes, rounding the corner of the house to safety.
Shane was a couple days late on her January bills, which was probably a good thing after all; everyone got two payments, since she didn’t know when she’d have the money to make more. She had savings, and few expenses as it was, but had grown up being overly frugal. At a little after ten she stood at a counter in the post office and put the last stamps on her envelopes. She dropped them in the slot. Too early for lunch; coffee, though, would be nice. She stepped outside and put on her sunglasses.

The branch post office was in a strip mall near her house and she was walking along the storefronts toward where she’d left her car when an old Nissan in the throes of reconstruction eased up alongside her. She was passing in front of the blank mirrored windows of some failed enterprise when the Nissan began checking its hydraulics. The car was primer-mottled and had tiny little tires and the two guys inside it were watching the car’s reflection in the plate glass windows as it rose and fell and leaned. When she passed the car it crouched down in the rear and leaned to the left and lifted its right front tire up off the pavement like the hoof of a trained pony.

“Hey guerra,” the passenger said.

His tone was conversational, she thought, not really the way men spoke when they were about to, for instance, remark on the quality of your ass. She ignored it anyway.

“Yo, Shane,” the voice said then.

She looked at the head framed in the space of the downwound window. Mirrored sunglasses crossed the face like a silvery bandit’s mask and when the man took the glasses off she saw it was him, the guy who had driven away in some rich dude’s jacket and Aston Martin.
“Nice,” she said, “but not quite the ride I saw you in last time, is it.”

The car quickly settled back down onto four tires. Shane began walking away.

“So you remember me.”

Shane, in her best drop-dead voice:

“No shit.”

“Hey, you sound upset.”

The car eased backwards, pacing her in reverse.

“You got me fired,” she said, “you cholo fuck.”

The compact weight of the Leica rode against her hip like a weapon. The 35mm lens had a stubby lever on the barrel that, when pulled straight down, set focus at six feet. And in daylight, say a crisp f/16 kind of morning, distance estimates could be close rather than perfect. She swung the camera up, centered the lens on his face and thumbed down the shutter release.

“Hey, you can’t take my picture.”

“Because you don’t have your shitty fake beard on? Think I’ll finger you for the law? You don’t get your picture in the post office for stealing cars, asshole.”

He didn’t say anything, but the driver, who looked like a pretty bad guy, asked him in Spanish if he wanted the gun under the seat—la Glock. She leaned down, into the car, staring right past her thief at the one behind the wheel.

“Hey. Yeah, vato, what’s your name? How about letting me take your picture, Hector? Out here beside your car. You can show me all the tricks it does, all right?”
Ray was driveway buttoning up the Porsche’s top when he heard his name. He turned; Nicola stood at the foot of the driveway. She had a silk scarf tied beneath her chin but strands of her hair had worked themselves free to stream like tattered silk in the wind.

“I found you,” she said.

“I guess you did. This is a surprise.” He looked down the street but the only cars visible belonged to the neighborhood, vehicles he knew. “How did you get here?”

“The bus. I like to take the bus, even though it is not always easy. It stops three blocks that way.”

Nicola pointed east. He had a vague notion that the city had buses, and that some of them ran past the area, but couldn’t have pointed to a bus stop to save his life.

“I looked for you in the telephone book. And I have my map,” Nicola said. She did, too, in her hand, the fat spiralbound kind that cab drivers used. “Shouldn’t I have come? Are you a hermit, maybe?”

“No. It’s good to see you. I just don’t get much company.”

Nicola shrugged, then smiled. She wore old jeans and a sleek zippered white top and a short leather jacket. Her sunglasses and shoulder bag and blocky shoes were all black, and coming from the bus stop she must have seemed to Ray’s neighbors like the most fashion forward homeless person in the city. He couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone walk down his street without a dog on a leash.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“For a ride. I’ve got an appointment in a while.”

He hadn’t run the Porsche in a couple months and the car did not seem happy about that fact. It coughed and wheezed when started and the timing was off just enough.
to make lope at idle. Occasional threads of blue smoke wound out of the pipes. The car was an early 80s cabriolet, red with tan leather, and in addition to a tune-up it needed a wash and wax and a new set of tires.

"It's a very nice car, isn't it."

"Yeah, wonderful. It's running rough again, which means I have to pay this Nazi in Henderson a fortune to tune the fucker up."

"You don't like it?"

"It's not mine to like," he said. "Come on inside, let me get you something. Hot tea."

"I thought you had an appointment."

"I've got all day. There's no specific time I have to be anywhere."

"Then we should go for a drive," she said, "with the top down. I want to ride through Las Vegas in a convertible."

The whole nature of the low unsigned building was unmistakably institutional. There were two vans with wheelchair lifts parked near the neon sign that read Office and ramps leading to the doors. Ray drove around to the west side of the building and parked the Porsche facing the third window from the front and shut it down.

"I shouldn't be long. Fifteen minutes at the most."

From where they were parked Nicola could see too many dumpsters near the rear of the building, one of them green and closed with chains and marked with oversized biohazard trefoils. The Porsche was the only car parked on the side of the building.
Nicola took a book from her bag—*Reframing Health Behavior Change with Behavioral Economics*—but closed it after reading the same page twice. She did not wear a watch but thought it had been ten minutes, at least, before she surrendered to curiosity. Inside the front entry of the building there was a woman in starched whites behind a desk.

Nicola smiled at her, pleasant.

"Partain? The man who just came in?"

The foyer was empty and clean and echoed hollowly when she spoke.

"To your left," the nurse behind the desk said.

Down a short hallway there were double doors that led to a dayroom of sorts where ten or twelve elderly people were scattered around in wheelchairs or on hard chairs at the game tables or on couches beneath a wall-mounted television. Ray Partain was squatting beside a man in a wheelchair. There was no physical evidence from which to deduce whether the man was family or not because he bore little similarity whatsoever to Ray Partain. His thin body was shapeless and unmaintained in loose white clothing, hair cropped so close his scalp shone through. His skin had the fine-grained gray look of a photograph but went almost translucent when he turned his head through the light to look in her direction. His pale eyes matched Ray’s in color but showed nothing save the blankness of endless unremembered years and she realized that the man was staring not at her but at the noise that had accompanied her entrance.

Ray stood and touched the man’s shoulder and walked over to where she stood in the doorway. He sat on a blue plastic bench beside the door and waited while the thickbodied nurse unlocked the wheels of the chair.

"You wanted to know why I stay."
“Who is he,” Nicola asked, although she was shrewd enough to know the answer already.

“That’s Tommy Partain, the Accordion King. My father,” Ray said. He paused for a moment, then went on. “There was a time, a few years back, when he recognized his car. Or at least we think he did. I always try to park near his window so he can see me pull up, but it’s been a long time since he showed any interest.”

“Is there anything they can do? A different place, perhaps with more money?”

He shook his head. He leaned forward on the bench and rested his elbows on his knees.

“It’s degenerative. They’re surprised he’s lasted this long. No, someday soon his whole system will just stop running.”

The nurse spun the chair on its near wheel, turning Tommy Partain toward them a last time; blank eyes passed them by with the movement of his chair and she propelled him out of the room.

“I still always wait a bit,” he said, “just in case. Because you never know.”

The house where Ray lived was set back well from the street. The stuccoed wall that surrounded it ran along the sidewalk, so there was plenty of room in the front yard for the willow trees and two fat palms that formed a sort of grove into which the house was set. It was a wide low cinderblock affair that must have seemed futuristic when the early H-bomb tests were going on. It had metal-mullioned windows that wrapped around the corners and a flat overhanging roof that angled up slightly from the rear. The chimney
rose like a belltower from one of the short walls, tapering upward to an orange tile cap. The perimeter of the yard was thick with bushes and vines climbed the privacy walls but the stretches of lawn were a dull dead tan.

“Come on inside,” he said.

Nicola followed him. The door was unlocked. The right side of the house, from the entryway, was one large space: Mexican tile floors, stylized ceiling beams of clear redwood that spanned the room without joints. The furniture mostly leather and lightly stained wood, Eisenhower modern. The dining area looked out at the pool behind the house through two sets of sliding glass doors. Nicola walked up to the fireplace, so tall she could almost stand inside it, and her voice echoed up the flue when she spoke.

“It smells good in here.”

“I’ve been burning juniper at night. They cut it up in the mountains. It’s nice, isn’t it.”

There were built-in bookcases and shelves and cabinets of oiled redwood. The kidney-shaped coffee table was blue formica, a wonderfully retro piece. The area rug beneath it was a silvery blue, and the faded drawn drapes with their sagging valances must have matched it at one time. Nicola’s eyes gave the art on the walls a single jaded scan; there wasn’t even anything worth being offended by. Ray passed through a pair of louvered doors. She saw kitchen appliances as they swung shut.

She roamed the hallway to the left of the entryway. A bathroom, fairly clean and uncluttered. First bedroom: what remained of the Accordion King, boxes and stacked vinyl albums and accordions, five, six, seven of them in fantastically vibrant carrying cases. Pictures on the walls, Tommy Partain and everybody. She recognized Wayne
Newton, Tom Jones, Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis; there were dozens more. Beneath the lingering tang of juniper Nicola smelled dust, mouse turds, decay.

She didn’t go any farther. In the main room again she circled the leather couch to small desk set against the far wall. There was a laptop computer on the desk, open. There were two fountain pens and a cell phone and a Rolex Submariner and, almost as if it belonged on the same field as those other objects, a black angular pistol with a matte finish. She scanned the titles of the books rowed across the desktop between two rocks: *Paradise Lost, Finnegans Wake, The Castle.*

“All your books have two words in the title.”

“I never noticed,” he said from the kitchen.

*Gravity’s Rainbow.* It was eerie. Nicola turned away from the desk and her heels tocked solidly on the tile floor as she crossed to the kitchen where gelid western light streamed in the big windows to shine off the art deco trim of old white-enameled appliances. Ray was staring out across the pool that she saw now was covered with aged canvas. A bottle of Glenmorangie dangled by its neck from his right hand.

“You want some,” he asked.

“May I have a glass?”

“You speak awfully perfect English when you want to, professor.”

“I learn correct grammar from reading the language. That is not as uncommon in other countries as in yours. Idiom is harder, though.”

He turned and looked at her for a moment and took two rocks glasses down from the cupboard. He pulled the refrigerator door open by its rocketship handle and got two ice cubes for each glass from the stamped aluminum tray in the top compartment.
“So why did you take me along,” Nicola asked.

“I’m not sure.”

“Have you taken many people there? To see your father?”

He shook his head.

She had already decided to seduce him, that was why she was there. The poignancy that flavored the air around them made it that much easier. Their lips met, then their teeth and tongues; her buffed nails curled into the backs of his arms. In what seemed like only a matter of minutes his hands had parted her sleek unzippered top; she knelt and watched his stomach tighten under the warm touch of her breath as she pressed her breasts together with his thickening cock snug between them.

At seven in the evening it was dark and Gabriel was making his rounds, folds of twenty dollar bills in both front pockets. The Aston Martin had been such a wonderful stroke of luck that he returned to the scene of that crime first, but Roberto had nothing for him. He visited two more casinos with the same results. Gabriel had four or five scouts in the valet ranks around town, people paid to think about him when they parked high-end imports, new, that belonged to people from the west side. He never asked for much; the name on the registration, an approximate odometer reading, a current address from a business card or receipt. Every so often his spies come up with stuff that made his life run a little more smoothly: gate codes, garage opener frequencies, serial numbers off the new security keys.

“Hey. My man Gabriel.”
“James. What say, brother?”

The temperature had dropped into the thirties when the sun went down and James’ shaved head was capless in the cold. His scalp was waxed and with his sunken cheeks and deepset eyes and the dark arrow of whiteman-hater goatee beneath his lower lip he looked like a warrior, even in a pale blue valet jacket with gold-piped seams.

“I say two words you really love: Range Rover. Got less than seven thousand miles on it if you move fast.”

“Tell me more.”

“I knew you’d be glad to see me. Everybody know you are the monster dog of high dollar Limey motor vehicle theft.”

Gabriel didn’t like the sound of that ‘everybody knows’ bit. Not at all.

“Who the fuck is everybody and what do they know, exactly?”

James guffawed, a short bark that echoed off the concrete walls and pillars and the canopy suspended over the check-in parking area.

“Story on the street, babe, is you drove straight out of the Venetian VIP lot in some fat cat’s Aston fucking Martin. The James Bond car, you dig? Some real juju there, Gabriel.”

“It’s bullshit. I haven’t even been near that place in a year,” Gabriel said. “But I like the sound of what you’re saying.”

“The Rover? Yeah. Got a keyless alarm system, and the man likes to use a Club on the wheel.”

“And?”

“The price on this one going to be significantly higher. In advance, too.”
Gabriel pushed off, wiped his palms together, shook a smoke out of his pack as he started to walk away.

"Unlike you to waste my fucking time, James," he said over a shoulder.

"Want to see what you’re paying for?"

Gabriel turned. James drew a hand from his pocket and held it low, palm out, so he could eyeball the black plastic object in a ziploc bag. Gabriel had always featured himself a quick study and he flashed on this immediately: spare key holder, one of those rectangular boxes glued to a magnet that a forgetful driver could stick onto the backside of a bumper or the upper regions of a wheel well. Thank God for bad habits; it was almost impossible to lock your keys in a car anymore, but somebody had learned about that black box on daddy’s knee and still believed it was better to be safe than sorry.

"Fresh from the left rear wheel well. Even if they miss this they’ll think it come loose crossing railroad tracks or something."

Gabriel smiled. His good mood had returned, finally; his day was looking up.

"There aren’t any railroad tracks in neighborhoods where people drive Range Rovers."

"No shit?"

Now they were both smiling.

"You got an address to go with that truck?"

"Course I do. That’s why the whole package costs you a thousand flat."

"Get the fuck out," Gabriel said.

"In advance, remember. I stand to lose income on this one. I’m fireable, say you get caught and rat my ass out."

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Gabriel, silent, stuck the smoke in the corner of his mouth and dug for matches.

"Think about it," James told him. "Goddamn goods are gift wrapped. All you got to do is get in and drive away. And don’t think about working me down. You ain’t the only person in this car business. I just made you the offer today because I actually like your ass. It’s called right of first refusal."

"Don’t tell me. You’re in law school."

"Fuck, no. Lawyers, shit, you can hire lawyers. I’m getting an MBA."

Gabriel didn’t tell James that there were plenty of MBAs working as assistant managers in the mall these days. He didn’t check his pockets, either; he knew what they contained, almost to the penny, in the way of cash. He unlatched the bracelet of his TAG Heuer and slipped it off his wrist.

"Mechanical TAG, worth fifteen hundred used. This one’s a couple days out of the box."

"That’s fake."

"How do you know, Mr MBA? Come on, tell me."

"Fake."

"Like shit. Look at the second hand. See how smooth this is? That’s a genuine jeweled Swiss movement, brah, handmade, with an automatic wind mainspring. Beauty. See how the second hand sort of jerks from one mark to the next on that piece of crap you got on? Quartz movement, runs on a battery and costs about five bucks, wholesale. That’s how you tell."

James was thinking about it.
“What the hell were you going to do with the cash, anyway?” Gabriel asked. “Buy clothes, they’ll be out of fashion before you have to set this thing ahead for Daylight Savings.”

James stared at Gabriel for a long moment, as if he were making a final assessment of the ripoff potential this situation had. Then he took the watch and put it on, handing Gabriela Seiko with a cracked crystal and gold plating worn through to steel. Gabriel was going to have to be careful with those watches; he only had two left from eight Hector had found one day after he caved in the window of an express courier van with a ball peen hammer.

“We cool?”

James nodded.

“You never heard of me, that right?”

“I don’t even know your name,” Gabriel said.

Their palms slapped together and Gabriel, bagged key now in hand and the cigarette still unlit in his mouth, began whistling as he walked toward his car.

Shane was shooting photographs, as the afternoon waned, at a park south of the airport where Hector and his friends could show off their vehicles on the grass. They strutted and posed, baggy pants and tight shirts and black shoes, wiping imaginary dustmotes from their paintjobs with chamois leather. The women who were there all seemed ready to bust out of cheap tight clothing. There were puffy clouds floating across
the sky and whenever one veiled the sun Shane began to shoot, her thumb sore from winding the Leica’s advance lever.

“Hey, Ansel Adams.”

This from a stringy mean little dude named Sal, who wore a green hat with a bright feather in the band and its brim turned down in front. Sal was smiling and poking his cronies, proud to know the name of any photographer despite his confusion about gender and genre. The bobbing green hat looked tyrolean, a hat that was ready to traverse the Alps.

“Ansel was a boy,” Shane said.

The look that crossed Sal’s face wasn’t pleasant. She had to remind herself that these were not the kind of guys who were used to being corrected. And it didn’t help that she was female; the sluts parading around on spikes were entertainment, their wives and girlfriends stayed at home.

“Okay,” Sal said, “Picture Bitch, then.”

Hector said something and Sal raised his hands in either apology or surrender, she wasn’t sure. Hector’s loose short sleeved white shirt was worn untucked but buttoned to the neck and as he leaned against his car he lifted the hem of the shirt with one hand to show the molded plastic grip of the Glock against a flat tattooed stomach. He pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and stared straight into the camera, perfectly still as he waited for her to release the shutter.

“Thanks,” she said to him.

Hector nodded.
Xavier. God she loved the name. Shirtless in the cold air, nipples like rivets, his tattoos were far more intricate than those of the others. He hugged himself, leaning forward and screwing his shoulders down toward his hips until his body in its contortions took on the look of a marbled and blueveined Weston pepper, one dark eye peering up from a bent elbow's contours. She pressed the shutter release and wound the camera and pressed it again. When Xavier decided that they were done he simply uncoiled himself and moved away.

Then they were all moving, as if they'd sensed a signal from the environment itself to which she was not attuned. Putting shirts and jackets on, slanting stares in her direction. She was not unaware that when most of these guys looked at her they were thinking first about giving it to her one way or the other and if it weren't for Gabriel, more honky than honky in his Dockers and Ralph Lauren shirt but still a sort of royal among them, somebody would have done it whether she'd welcome him or not.

“So where’s your wife,” Shane asked.

He smiled.

“No me. No way.”

Shane wound film back through the camera, opened the baseplate, dropped the cassette into her hand. She knew the photographs would look good. When she printed them they would convey the sense that a bond had developed between her and these subjects, though in reality she did not understand a thing about them. Her high school Spanish was more embarrassing than useful. She could not decode the tattoos they wore or the signs they made with their fingers. These were people who lived a mile from where
she did and they might have been Bantu for all she understood of their culture. She turned back to Gabriel.

"Girlfriend, then." He shrugged. Shane packed the film away in her shoulder bag.

"You're unattached? You expect me to believe that?"

He stretched lazily and folded his empty beer can flat with big square hands and seemed to be watching her hips as he spoke.

"What about you? How'd you end up parking cars in that place, anyway?"

"It was exactly what I wanted," Shane said. "Do your job and don't think about it when you go home."

"That's what you want? What did you do before?"

"I made a shitload of money before."

Gabriel stood. He smiled, flashing those great teeth, and turned up the palms of his hands.

"Money's good. How'd you make it?"

"Art. I helped start a business that contracted works from artists— single prints from hot artists, we had the best luck with photographers and painters— and created a limited edition run, say a few thousand copies, sold them to people who wanted the real thing but didn't have the money to pay for it. We had Jeff Koonz, Damien Hirst— do you know these names?"

"No, but that's okay. Keep going."

"Lots of photographers— Newton, that one was a coup, Salgado, people about their weight. We did digital prints from paintings and gelatin silver for the photographs,
great quality. People had a chance to buy real pieces for a few thousand dollars. Business was great."

"But you quit. Pissed off, huh? Me, it’s usually the people. After a few years of trying I figured, hell, I’m just not the employee kind of guy."

Shane found she’d wound the camera strap tight around her wrist and now she let it untwist itself, the suspended camera body spinning silver and black, silver and black in a patterned turning. Her own voice sounded distant and the story just seemed to wander out of her.

"I was the art person. My only interest in the project was the art, but it really was about business. The partners who understood that, the ones who liked business and computers and money, they’re all doing fine. For me the whole thing was pretty much a nightmare. I was over my head. I’m not a people manager, I’m no good with numbers. We were a bunch of smart college kids who got a crash course in corporate survival and I was, as the saying goes, found wanting."

There was silence when Shane stopped speaking and then sound crept in to interrupt, car doors opening, closing. Around them Gabriel’s friends and extended family and neighbors were getting ready to leave, packing their guns and beer and slatterns and pit bulldogs into their vehicles.

"Remind them about tomorrow," Shane said, "please."

She wanted some closeups, the males and their cars; she planned to hang a plain dark background in her garage, model the setup with a single quartz hot light; she was after bleak highlights, grainy middle ranges and shadow black as tar. Gabriel looked at
He dropped the crushed can onto the grass and wiped his hands on his pants and walked among them for her, leading the way, her Virgil of the lowriders.

He still owns the night.

Rasputin lets the night breeze bring information to where he stands, poised on the roof’s edge. He’s under siege in the daylight hours, unable to move with safety. The fat child has a slingshot formed of tubular aluminum and the accuracy of the thing is amazing. If he’d practiced with it, he could have knocked Rasputin flat with the first real shot he took. The kid uses ballbearings for ammunition in the slingshot. They’ve put holes into the bin that holds the hose, have chipped notches into the edges of the redwood planks on the spa’s privacy fence. Still, Rasputin’s been safe in the dark, so far.

But the kid is moving now.

The noises come from behind the wall. This is what the kid does during the daylight hours: he drags a metal chair from beside the umbrella table and sets its back against the wall, then stacks a plastic crate on top of that. It’s a precarious perch, but gets him high enough to aim over the ledge. To Rasputin’s ears, that sounds like the process the fat kid is repeating now. He flexes and springs; his feet touch the wall, all four of them, almost simultaneously.

Rasputin trots along the top of the wall, taking time to look down. In the yard next door Stephen Stern, the attorney, has the plump babysitter bent over the wrought iron table beside the pool; her pants are around her ankles and he’s working away with his breathing out of control, hands groping her soft white hips as she turns her head, stifles a
yawn, peeks at her wristwatch. His flesh makes an interesting sound slapping against her overpadded loins.

Then the fat kid's head appears over the back wall. Rasputin knows what he can see and what he can't; he's looked down on the fat kid many times after dark. He reaches the joining of the walls and turns left. The kid's arms appear, elbows paddling to gain purchase on the walltop. The aluminum frame of the slingshot winks in the glare of the anti-crime light his parents have installed near their pool. There is a hesitation in his movements just before he falls. He doesn't even call. That's unusual; he's a loud child, as a rule. There is a hesitation, a rasping insuck of breath, the slap of his body on concrete. Then the sound of ballbearings, released from the grasp of his fist, as they ping and dance and roll across the textured surface of the pool apron.

Rasputin shifts his ass and settles himself at an angle across the wall so he can cross his forelegs and let his paws dangle over into the fat kid's yard. He stares at the child until lights came on in the rear of the house some time later. The female parent steps through the sliding door. She's trying to stand on spilled bearings and is frozen by panic at the same time, palms held outward and fingers spread, her mouth shaped to scream although no sound comes out.

Rasputin is still there when the ambulance arrives. The siren stops a block or so away but he can see the pulse of its lights as it pulls up in front of the house. He's cleaned himself by then, and chewed at the feathery hair that grows between the pads of his toes. He lies with his forelegs crossed and his head raised, watching the paramedics strap the intubated boy onto a gurney. One of them holds the IV bags aloft as they go back into the house through the open door. The female parent stands with her hands to
her face sounding a series of undulating moans that last, each one, for as long as she had breath.

They all go in after the gurney. The doors close. After a while the ambulance blips its siren once and pulls away. Rasputin drops lightly to the ground from the top of the wall and walks slowly, with a measured dignity, across his regained domain to the patio where the spa motor churns blue water around the edges of the tub. The glass door to the house slides open and two unclothed figures step into the darkness, wineglasses shining in the glow of the candle beside the spa.

Rasputin raises his nose to the wind; Stern, the lawyer, and his babysitter are gone, but their scent lingers, lingers.

Water splashes in the spa.

“You can’t hold your breath that long,” Ray says.

Another splash; a tongue of water laps over the spa’s rim and slops downward. Rasputin takes two disdainful sideways steps, turns with a sinuous elegance, saunters toward the open sliding door.

“But I can come up for air,” Nicola tells him.

The ambulance reaches the arterial two blocks away and as it turns toward the nearest hospital the siren comes on. The sound makes Nicola reach for her glasses and put them on. Although there’s nothing to see, she and Ray both stare in the direction of the rising wail until it fades to blend with the noises of the city.
“Excuse me, baby,” Gabriel said to the black stripper who was massaging his shoulders, “I’ll be back in a minute.”

The phone rang again as he passed the stage in long strides, and again before he could get to the men’s room door. It started to ring a fourth time and he punched the button, holding the phone to his ear as the door swung shut and cut the decibel level in half. He loved everything about titty bars except the miserable jukeboxes.

“Hey.”

“Gabriel?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s me. Shane.”

Jesus, how the fuck did she get this number.

“How are you?”

“It’s your turn. I want to photograph you tonight, I’ve got the stuff set up in the garage at my place. How does that sound?”

“Sure,” Gabriel said easily, “I’ll be there.”

“Great. Maybe, what, eightish?”

“That’s good.”

Silence over the line, then, and it got tougher as it went on. What the hell else was he supposed to say?

“You want me to bring anything over?” he asked.

“No, that’s all right.”

“Great. I’ll see you then.”
He stared down at the phone. Bastard. Hector wouldn’t give that number out. But she’d gotten it some way. He dropped the phone into his shirt pocket and was almost out the door when it rang again. This time he checked the window to see if he knew the number calling him; Billy.

“What the hell have you been?”

“I was putting in my parleys.”

“You’re back on the clock,” Gabriel said. “My place, nine, be there.”

“He’s harmless,” Nicola said.

They were at dinner and talking about Billy. Nicola wore flipflops and jeans blown out at one knee and a silky white undershirt against which the dark ghosts of her aureoles revealed themselves when her breasts moved inside it. The cavernous sandwich restaurant they were sitting in was almost empty, only one other table taken.

“What do you mean,” Ray asked, “harmless?”

“He’s a confused boy. He gambles away all his money. Who’s going to hurt him?”

She was finishing his chips, her salad demolished.

“He’s not working, and Billy needs money to bet. If he can’t bet he dies, he’s like a shark that way. What I’m worried about is him being tied up with some assholes who can get him in trouble.”

Nicola shook a cigarette loose from her pack and lit it with an NYPD Zippo.
"What they talk about in those brochures, the fun stopping," she said. "He needs to take the twelve steps. The American way, isn’t it?"

The kid behind the counter, the only employee there except for a stout girl making lazy figure eights on the tile floor with a mop, was hurrying toward their table. He had a long way to come from the counter in front and seemed a bit winded when he got there.

"Excuse me, this is a nonsmoking facility, ma’am," he told Nicola.

Ray watched her invoke the power of language: she stared up at the waiter and smiled, all teeth, then started babbling something in French.

"No smoking," the kid said again.

She agreed, nodding as the words tripped out through her lips. She smiled at him, leaned forward, touched his wrist, turned back to Ray. He didn’t understand a word she was saying. The kid shook his head and backed away. Nicola smoked.

"He’s a really sweet boy, though."

"That kid?"

"No, Billy. He gave me a briefcase, you know? Very expensive. When he came to my house for the first time, he thought I was a psychic. Someone had thrown it out."

"The briefcase?"

"Yes. It smelled like food had gone bad inside it, but it only needed to be cleaned."

Ray stared at the tips of his forefingers, pressed together twelve inches from his eyes.

"What kind of expensive briefcase was this?"

“I’ve got to go,” Ray said.

Shane had been stood up in high school, where she was not a cheerleader, and in college, and in graduate school—but that was by another woman, a failed experiment all the way around—and in San Francisco as well, so there was no rational reason for Gabriel’s non-appearance to bother her so much. After nine, now, and he hadn’t called; she had brought the portable phone down to the garage just in case.

The gray backdrop was still stapled to the wall, her Caddy still parked on the street. She had the hot lights set up but, when she thought about it, she hadn’t really planned too much on how she’d photograph him. She didn’t even know for sure if there were film in the Leica. But you sure know where the condoms are, she said to herself, you slut, and turned, already smiling, toward a figure ducking under the overhead door that was open a few feet up from the ground for air.

Not Gabriel though; a slighter figure, khakis and a black shirt and an impassive Aztec face. Sal, with his green Alpine hat perched forward and angled to the right. He had a sinuous walk, like a snake erect.

“Hey, Sal,” she said, although her heart seemed to be rising fairly high in her chest and it wasn’t exactly easy to get the words out. She didn’t like Sal much and she thought, then, about just how unfavorable the situation was with him suddenly a part of it.
Sal seemed unconcerned, as he walked toward her, about the background paper crumpling beneath his street shoes. He was silent and coldeyed and moved unhurriedly, hands thrust deep into his pockets. When he reached the table she’d set up he stood beside it and went into the ritual of selecting a cigarette from the box in his pocket and lighting it with a wooden match. He extinguished the match with a jet of silver exhaled smoke and put it into his other pocket. Then he looked at her again.

“T’m waiting for Gabriel. He should be here any minute,” she said.

Sal shook his head.

“Ansel Adams,” he said.

“I guess that’s me.”

“No,” Sal said, “I don’t think so.”

Sal smoked for a while. He put the cigarette out halfway and returned what was left of it to the box and took a step toward her. He had the look of a man on a singular mission. Shane had never been assaulted, sexually or otherwise, but there wasn’t much work in imagining such a thing; ugly, she thought, this could get ugly. Her right fist gathered the woven nylon camera strap and choked up on it. The Leica and its dual-range Summicron weighed just under two pounds but the package was compact and could deliver a good degree of impact swung at the end of a strap. She had decided to give Sal one more step before caving in his head when the door set into the side of the garage swung open and three steady taps sounded on the wall.

She couldn’t hear what words Sal used, under his breath; he was half-turned, wary.

“Excuse me,” Ray Partain said
He had a long black flashlight in his right hand, a cop flashlight that he shifted easily to his left as he walked toward them. He was staring straight at Sal, eyes flat as standing pools of rain.

“What was that? You speak fucking English?”

Sal stared back at him, silent.

“Hey...” Shane began.

“I’m not talking to you yet.” He pulled a badge in a leather holder from his jacket pocket, gold flashing in the light.

“You know what this is? I want some ID, right now.”

Shane saw the look on Sal’s face; he’d probably be back to kill her just for witnessing this humiliation. He got out his wallet and handed it slowly to Ray Partain. Partain opened the wallet one-handed and looked up at Sal over the top of it.

“Salvador Padilla. What kind of wants and warrants are out on your ass, Salvador?”

“None,” Sal said.

“That your green Toyota out there?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes sir.”

“Your operator’s license expires at the end of the month, Mr Padilla. Be sure you get that taken care of.” He handed Sal the wallet. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

Sal glanced at Shane one last time, malevolent, and used the side door going out.

Partain watched him go.
"I hope I didn’t interrupt something for you there."

"I thought you weren’t a cop," Shane said. "Where’d you get the badge?"

"Back pages of a gun magazine. Nineteen bucks, I think. Some are cheaper, but I got the one that looks closest to the kind Metro has."

"You sure have the act down."

He shrugged.

"It’s from watching a lot of television. I thought I did pretty well," he said. But he swung that flashlight handily as he paced the width of the garage. "So what were you doing out here with the sociopath, anyway?"

"Can you ask a question that’s not infuriating?"

"Okay. Where’s your gangbanger boyfriend who hangs out with Billy Reed?"

"Gabriel?"

"That’s his name? Great. Now try for a location."

"Probably stealing another car," she said.

"So he’s the one, huh. The pretty dude, drives the BMW? I thought you weren’t in on this shit. I told them you weren’t, those casino people."

"I’m not. The information sort of came to me after the fact, if you need to know."

"Okay," Ray said, "there’s a couple problematic questions I won’t ask."

Shane’s hand was around the casino check, nestled in the pocket of her jeans where it had ridden comfortably for the last few days.

"Hey, when you find him? Give him this," she said. "My life’s been in the shitter since I got the thing."
Flicked by her thumbnail, the disc spun through the air end over end, flashing pink and black, pink and black into Ray’s open palm. He looked at the check then at her.

“You need it more than he does.”

“Toss it to a bum,” she said, “I don’t give a shit.”

“They’ll give you your job back. I can make them do that much.”

“Go away. Please, just go away.” She raised both her hands, palms out. “All I want to do is sleep, all right? And thanks for showing up at the opportune moment but I’m pissed off at you for that too, I should be old enough to take care of myself by now. Christ, I don’t even know why I’m talking to you. Leave, would you? I’ve got to clean this up.”

Ray dug a creased business card from the pocket of his jeans and laid it on the table she had set up to hold the photographic equipment she’d never even brought down to the garage. Then he turned, headed for the door, paused to look back at her when he reached it.

“Get over that asshole. He’s not the guy for you.”

Gabriel, kicked back in the passenger seat of Billy’s ride, was thinking about Shane as they crossed town. He wondered how upset she’d been when he hadn’t shown up for those photographs. Maybe he would give her a call when this all wound up, just to see if she’d still speak to him. He liked her hair with those black eyebrows, the dimple in the middle of her chin, the way she walked. He especially liked the do-me-here tattoo that
showed on her back when she bent forward, a bluish triangle thing that pointed straight
down the crease of her ass.

“Try those guys again,” Billy said, like he was in the habit of offering tactical
advice in these situations.

Gabriel dialed the cellular and held it to his ear. The phone at the other end rang
once and was picked up. Gabriel could hear voices, talk radio.

“You on your way,” he asked the silence.


“See you then.” He shut the phone. “He’ll be here before breakfast.”

They were on the west side; gated condominiums, not too fancy, the kind of place
where people loved owning above their means. Stealing a truck worth seventy grand from
a garage was one thing; driving it off a glorified public lot was another, and one he liked
better. They came in the back side of the complex, idling in the left turn lane until an
oncoming Ford turned right into the drive. They followed the Ford straight through the
gate.

“Give him some room. Let him get ahead of us. You want to go straight, here, and
turn left at the second building up ahead.”

Billy did. Gabriel had spent hours mapping this out; they’d gone over it four, five
times, then had dinner and went over it again. Gabriel checked his most recent TAG;
twenty minutes past midnight. Perfect.

“How many times you set it off?” Billy asked.

There were several ways to beat auto alarm systems but Gabriel preferred the
simplest of them all: get the owner to shut the thing off.
“Twice last night and twice the night before. One am, two am, four am, like that. The guy’s neighbors must hate him by now. I’ll bet he was on the phone with the dealer first thing this morning, making an appointment to get it checked out. There’s no way he’ll leave the thing on tonight.”

He’d run past the car, planted one foot on the bumper and pushed off with it, more than enough pressure to start the alarm bleating; by the time anyone got to their windows to look down at the lot he was a dark shape lost in the shadow of the buildings. Nobody in these neighborhoods moved quickly at night, especially where mere property was concerned. They had some of the best Metro response time in the city. Cops got paid to handle that stuff. That was what gated communities were all about.

“How do you get in?”

“I’m a jogger, man. I jog up the trail in the wash and come through the fence right between those buildings, there’s a gate for the health conscious residents to use. People run here at four in the morning, did you know that? This is the best place in the world for a thief.”

Billy checked his watch.

“What if the alarm’s on anyway?”

“Then we come back another night. What’s the hurry? I’m telling you, Billy, you don’t have the constitution for this. Learn to relax, my friend.”

“Sure,” Billy said.

He was driving with his knees, beating the cracked rim of the steering wheel with his fingers; Gabriel hated that, the noise like a machine gun, but let Billy go; if he couldn’t make noise he talked, and that was worse. This late at night his favorite topics
were alien abductions and masturbation, two subjects he was very committed to and discussed, at least in Gabriel’s opinion, far too candidly.

“Right here. One loop around this place and either pick me up or follow me out. I’m right there: first row, second stall, the Range Rover. All right?”

“The gray one?”

“Pewter. You see any other Range Rovers in here?”

“Take it easy.”

“Once around, that’s three minutes. Pick me up or follow me out.”

“I got it, man. Every time, you get all nervous like this.”

Gabriel wore jogger’s attire, tights and running shoes and a baggy cotton sweatshirt. He pulled the dark blue cap down to his eyebrows and got out of the Honda.

Billy drove off in first. Gabriel checked his environment. Nobody moving, no shadows in the windows, no odd lights. He sidled up to the Range Rover and eyeballed the panel through the driver’s side window: no alarm, the red light was off.

There was room for everything he might need in the elastic belt that fit snugly beneath the loose sweatshirt: modified screwdriver, Leatherman tool, a compact plastic flashlight with a red LED bulb that came on when you bit down on it, the radio and a can of compressed air with a wand attachment for blowing dust from those hard to reach spots. The radio earplug ran out of his sweatshirt neck. He had nothing to say to Billy; all he wanted from the radio was a warning if the law rolled on them, enough time to start running if everything went to shit.

His hands trembled, just a touch. He waited for a moment, slotted the key and actually held his breath when he turned it. Excellent. He reached in to give the lock on
The Club a two minute shot of compressed air from the inverted can, watching frost foam from the keyway, then fed the reground screwdriver into the slot and turned it, hard. No go. He grabbed the shaft of the screwdriver with the Leatherman pliers and cranked. Frozen metal gave with a pop and the entrails of the lock spilled loosely to the floor mats dripping sweat. He had to credit the greens for that success, Gabriel reflected; the environmentally correct dust-blaster cans seemed to work better than the stuff banned for having Freon in it. He fed in the key he’d gotten from James, turned it, smiled when the engine caught immediately. A minute and a half later he was making the gate, Billy behind him in the Prelude. Now all he needed was a busy lot, a place to park and check the Rover for a lojack transmitter.

When Shane finally walked into her living room from the garage and set the Leica on the desk she saw the red light flashing on her message machine and hit the play button. She’d thrown the portable at the wall after Ray Partain had left, saw it shatter into a thousand plastic pieces and only then realized what she’d done; those irrational displays of temper, she’d always thought, were not in her genetic makeup. The phone machine cycled, beeped:

“Shane? Kenton here. Listen to me: please try not to still be angry about the Monica thing, all right? I’m…”

She was too tired to shut him off. Still angry about the Monica thing? Monica? Jesus, she’d almost felt bad about dumping that jerk, and two years later it turns out she had cause? Other than the fact he was insufferable? Kenton was still talking. The
machine used a digital chip that could hold half an hour of messages, unfortunate in this situation because Kenton had always been an overly wordy dude.

"...trying to make you some money. A good deal of money, actually. I still consider you a friend..."

The arrogance of that bastard. Kenton certainly was no real prize. Nor was he the only straight guy in San Francisco, although there were times when he might have been the only one readily available. And banking, shit: friend is not a word that occurs in the vocabulary sets of those people.

"... and I'd like to talk to you very soon about a financial matter. Please, trust me on this..."

Kenton was tall, over six feet, and had the body of a marathon runner. He wore little glasses and expensive suits and paid sixty dollars to have his thinning hair trimmed. Rumor had it he'd moved an elderly aunt to Daly City from Palisades and rolled over enough money on the sale of her house to buy his Marina flat. Trust? Like a scorpion, you fucker.

"... thing. Remember those stock options you asked me about? The ones I told you to hold on to? Listen,..."

Her stock options. How long had she rented that safe deposit box for? Ten years, she thought. Christ, I hope I didn’t scrimp on that. She threw her jacket onto the couch and shoved the blue chair out of the way and bent to open the fireproof safe that she kept in the corner behind it. Kenton’s voice followed her across the room.

"...the rest of your original partners went public some time ago, as you may know, and now there’s some talk about acquisition..."
Oh my God.

"...and I’d be glad to broker those options for you. The time is right, and since I know you’ve got no fond feelings for..."

San Francisco, a fat yellow legal size envelope. Goddamn, she’d been anal back then: bank folder, bank files, bank papers, rent receipt, the safe deposit box paid up for another eight years. She could picture with perfect clarity the stack of options, the certificates themselves, lying in that flat drawer.

"...the people you used to work with, I’d be glad to handle the deal. I think you could realize a significant bit of profit from this..."

She flipped open her Powerbook and punched the button and began dying, or that was how it felt, as the machine ground slowly to life. Phillip, she thought then; Phillip had a cable modem, he was always out there on the foreskin of technology. Phone: all over the garage floor, bitch. She ran to the one on the kitchen wall, had to think to remember the number. Kenton was talking, still talking in the other room. Glad to handle the deal my ass.

Five rings on the other end, six. Message machine.

"Phillip? Phillip, pick up the phone. 911, no shit."

Moments later, a click.

"Shane?"

"You’ve got to check something for me online, the business news."

"This is really a bad time. I’ve got company."

"Jesus, Phillip, if your boyfriend leaves I’ll come over and blow you myself. Please. This will take five minutes, maximum."
“Shane...”


Acquisitions; indeed. The stock options that they’d given themselves with such gleeful abandon, the original partners, were golden. Shane remembered the five of them sitting around restaurant tables, drinking to excess on their new American Express card with no idea where they’d get money to pay the bill, somebody saying shit, we all deserve another ten thousand shares and how about that now. In the end it was almost anticlimactic. Phillip was still asking her questions when she hung up the telephone.

“Fuck me,” Shane said in a quiet voice.

She picked up the handset again and dialed.

“Hey, remember that millionaire we talked about?” Shane told Special’s answering machine. “I don’t need one anymore’”

Gabriel knew something had gone wrong the moment he stepped through his apartment doorway. He saw from the corner of one eye the blur of a fat man moving and as he turned he turned into a heavy stinging blow that snapped his head sideways and sent a shower of lights dancing across his field of vision. A weapon of some kind, and it landed again; a tooth gave somewhere inside his numbed face and couldn’t breathe momentarily for the blood and then he was on the floor without remembering exactly the process that had taken him there. He opened an eye and saw a shoe heavy enough to have a steel toe headed in the direction of his privates and curled himself into a ball thinking
fuck, if I'd ever have gotten a damned gun I could at least shoot myself right now.

The lock on Billy's apartment door was loose in the jamb, sloppy. Ray raised his right foot and rested the sole of his shoe on the door below the lock and had just started to apply pressure when it popped. The door swung wide, knocking over an aluminum bat that had been leaned against the wall.

Christ, the guy lived in a cave. There was huge TV on milk crates, the volume muted, the flashing of its bright screen lighting the dim interior of the room. Ray pulled open the drapes that covered the single window. A chair, some dirty clothes, an old couch strewn with comic books and skin magazines and sporting journals. In the dining area there was a small table covered with tabloids and gaming publications, charts and statistics torn from the newspapers, notebooks filled with cramped handwritten figures and commentary. The sink was full of dirty forks, maybe ten of them, and the trash can stuffed with dozens of crushed green boxes from supposedly healthy microwave dinners.

The bedroom walls were papered with centerfolds, two or three years worth of augmented favorites, mostly blonde, staring down at a rumpled single bed surrounded by T-shirts and dirty socks. Ray backed out of the room and leaned against the doorframe. He took a deep breath and walked back into the main room. Check the clock: close to ten. He pushed the door shut and decided that the chair looked safer than the couch. He sat down and leaned back, closing his eyes for a moment while he waited for Billy to show.
It was rain that he heard, the sound that woke him. It hardly ever rained in Las Vegas but had rained often along the Adriatic coast, especially in winter, and that was the hissing he thought he recognized. But it was Billy’s apartment that swam into focus when he opened his eyes; the noise was a clock radio somewhere in the house, tuned to static. Ray was struggling to get out of the chair when the door banged open and if he’d been carrying his pistol he’d have shot Billy dead.

“Shit. Ray. I thought you were the guy who stole my baseballs.”

Billy picked up the aluminum bat and leaned it in the corner. Then he paused, turned, tipped his head.

“What are you doing here, anyway, Ray?”

Worst case scenario: Billy would actually start to believe that Ray had stolen the goddamned baseballs, catch up the bat, cave in his head, sic transit gloria.

“You know what I’m here for, Billy. Either you or your pal Gabriel got that backpack out of that Aston Martin, and you’re the guy I can put my hands on.”

“I never expected you to turn on me, Ray. Not you.”

“Billy? What the fuck are we talking about, here? I want to return some goods you took out of a stolen car. Explain the personal problem, because I don’t see it.”

Billy was sulking now. He stood up, though, went past Ray into the bedroom. Ray stepped up to the door. He watched Billy open the closet and take out a black trash bag that sat alone on the floor. That got him feeling a bit cranky; if he’d gone another twenty feet last night he’d be sleeping in his own bed.

“What the hell is in it, Billy?”

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Billy Reed looked up at Ray and shook his head. He pulled the backpack out of the trash bag.

"I don't know."

"Don't try to bullshit me. Not this morning."

"I swear to God. I thought money at first and I was going to open it, but then I figured if it's not, you know, if it's something else... ."

Ray unzipped the backpack. Inventory time: six silver rectangles and a Beretta nine. The bricks were about the size a stack of bills would be, a lot of bills, and the weight felt right, but they were shrinkwrapped so tightly in some kind of opaque and seemingly indestructible material that it was impossible to get a feel for what they were composed of. Ray had to go with money, because he didn't like any of the alternatives at all. He pulled out the Beretta and checked the chamber; a live round up the pipe. He wasn't sure who he wanted to shoot at the moment but in the general confusion of the day the weapon felt good, a thing he knew. There was comfort in the potentially lethal weight hanging along his leg. It was like having a friendly rattlesnake in his hand.

"You don't believe me," he said to Billy as he put the gun and the bricks back in the bag, "but this is the luckiest day of your entire adult life."

"Right," Billy said.

"Look at yourself." Ray grabbed one of the Misses January and peeled her off the wall, taking a chain of others along, a drooping centerfold trail that crossed Billy's messy cot. "Look at this place. Jesus, Billy, you're thirty-five years old. I don't remotely have my shit together but you make me look like a fucking genius, don't you."

He was a step behind the conversation, Billy, still staring at the fallen angels.
“Let me read your horoscope,” Ray said. “Pretty soon this cat Davis is going to find out who grabbed his car. He’ll send people looking for Gabriel, just because that’s the kind of guy he is. If those people connect you to him they’re going to hurt you, bad, because that’s the kind of people they are. They won’t give a shit what you tell them. It’s simple: be gone. You still got family in Chicago, right?”

“Yeah.”

Ray held up the thousand dollar check, pink and black. The casinos didn’t all use the same colors, but nobody put pink on cheap ones.

“You know what this is?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s all on you now, nobody else to blame. You cash this in, get a cab to the airport, get on the first flight out of town, come back in six months. Or you can walk into the sports book and put it down on another one of your sure things. Are you up to speed on this? If you lose this time, you might die. So go ahead. Take the fucker.”

Billy did.

And of course it wasn’t until Ray pulled into the driveway that he noticed the good news hot from truck’s gas gauge, the needle bouncing below the E; that ended the night nicely. He carried the backpack into the house and punched the play button on his answering machine as he walked past. The recorded time code sounded, seven minutes ago, followed by Shane’s voice.

“Okay, Ray, you gave me this card and I’m using it. They sent a limo to pick me up, Ciccinelli did, he said something about finding whoever boosted the Aston Martin. So
I don’t really know why I called you, but if you figure it out I guess you’ll know what to do about it, won’t you.”

Ray had to cross the main casino floor to access the room elevators. At six-twenty in the morning there were people already at the slots, although the noise was subdued, distant. Two cocktail waitresses circulated through the banks of machines swinging their empty trays like tambourines. The air in the place seemed almost fresh. At a table marked off with velvet ropes, serious men were playing serious poker; there were four of them still sitting in, and all had the look of people who had not slept.

Ray worked his way to the ground floor of the tower where Davis was staying. He’d never really needed to get past any of the security personnel, particularly carrying a black plastic trash bag. He figured the best thing he could do was bluff.

“Partain,” he said to the guy at the desk next to the elevators. “I’m heading up to the Davis suite.”

The guard looked dubious, but checked his terminal. Then he smiled, stepped clear, walked over to the open car and ran his card through the reader.

“Okay, Mr Partain. Push the button with the big number and it will take you straight to the top.”

Ciccinelli opened the door when Ray banged on it at six twenty-five. He was wearing what looked like the same suit and he stared at Ray for a long time before stepping aside to let him in. Davis was pacing the room with a paisley silk robe over his
black trousers, and Shane was against the far wall with her arms folded. She wore
warmup pants and a loose black top and looked surly but still attractive for the hour.

“What the hell are you all doing up this early?”

“The implosion,” Davis said. “Supposed to go off in a little bit, here.”

He saw that the car thief was there too, Gabriel, huddled on the couch. For a
moment Ray felt some sympathy for him. The left side of his face was a ripening bruise;
his nose was skewed, his mouth torn at one corner. Ciccinelli walked back around the
couch so he could look at Ray across Gabriel’s seated form, as if by standing he had
somehow prevailed.

“An inside job, like I told you.”

“Beat a confession out of him yet?”

“No, but we’ll get one. I had a guy in Metro run him and he’s got priors for theft.
I want him for... .”

Ray looked at Shane, eyes locking across the room.

“You recognize this guy?” he asked her.

“No,” she said. “I told them that.”

The whole dialogue had apparently lost the interest of Davis so Ray dragged
black plastic off the backpack and held it up and heaved it onto the couch, opposite the
end where Gabriel was sitting. It bounced once and Davis stared from it to Ray and then
back again.

“Who had this,” he asked.
“Just a local joker who steals whatever’s not nailed down. Targets of opportunity, you might say. He doesn’t even live in the same zip code as your valet over there. You wanted that bag, here it is. Your car’s in the wind, though, long gone.”

Ciccinelli:

“How the hell did you get that? From who?”

“Whom,” Ray said. “I sure didn’t find it listening to you. Davis, is that yours? You want the thing or not?”

Davis opened the bag and counted the packages and checked their ends and edges for integrity. He picked up the Beretta and hefted it in his hand. Ray had taken the round out of the chamber but at that moment the knowledge didn’t make him feel a bit more comfortable. They could do anything, up here, these people. they could throw him right over the rail if they felt like it. Ray knew that much. It only made sense that they’d know the same thing, even more so.

“You have what you want, there,” Ray asked him.

Davis nodded.

“I’m not going to bring up another thing,” he said. “You’ll get a check from my people.”

“I’m working for Kevin Lowell, not you.”

Then Ray looked at Gabriel, slumped against the bed.

“Come on,” he said, “get up.”

He helped the man to his feet. He didn’t really seem too much worse for the wear; he could walk, he could see, he could probably talk. Ray got him moving in the general direction of the door and turned to Davis and Ciccinelli.
"I'll get rid of this one for you too," he said.

The two of them walked out of the room together.

"Hey," Gabriel said.

"Shut up," Ray told him, "and keep walking."

In the elevator he pushed the button for the fifth floor.

"I'm not going out through the lobby. You're welcome to, if you'd like."

Gabriel shook his head. When the elevator stopped Gabriel followed Ray across the ballroom lobby and through a set of unmarked doors that led to a walkway spanning the gap between the casino and the self parking ramp. The walkway was open and the wind was cold as they crossed.

"You always park on the top level?"

"Not in the summer."

"Yeah. Same with me."

On the top floor of the parking ramp Ray paused and looked over the concrete rail toward the defunct property upon which Leonard Alvin Davis hoped to build a casino based on the explosion and burning of a passenger airship that had taken place more than six decades ago. The signs had been torn down, the trim gone, most of the building glassless; without a name it had no history, no presence. There were dim lights on inside gutted curtainless rooms, as if the structure were in mourning for itself. Ray saw the crews still working outside the fence.

"What's going on?"
“They’re knocking the building down.”

“You know what’s going up in its place?”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Ray said, “as long as something does.”

The streets had been closed off. The red and blue rotors of the Metro cruisers marked the boundaries of the safety zone. The demo crews were checking their fence line every few minutes and with spotlights so bright that the black print was visible on the yellow hazard tape. Ray looked east, at an angle between hotel towers; in the distance, in a slot of sky, he saw the sun slipping above the horizon.

“People don’t make a big deal of watching these blow up any more, do they?”

“It’s not a very unique event, these days.”

“When my parents first moved here,” Gabriel said, ”there used to be bomb parties at all the casinos. You could stand on the high points all around town and watch the nukes go off at the test site. They announced the tests in the papers and bartenders used to name mixed drinks after them.”

“I’ve heard all those stories.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel said.

“So who boosted that idiot Davis’ jacket for you,” Ray finally asked.

Gabriel was holding the side of his face. He’d sure looked better, Ray reflected, not all that long ago.

“Is that his name? A hooker stole it. I sent her up there, told her to pretend she got the wrong room, oh my, etcetera.”

“Friend of yours?”
"We got to talking in the bar one night. It was the first time I ever tried that, you know? I thought it went off like a fucking charm, but it cost me a fortune. I had to toke the bell captain, the girl, the guy who fingered the car, shit, everybody. I don’t think I made a dime off the damned thing."

"I hope you’ve got enough stashed to get out of town."

"Who’s looking?" Gabriel asked. "They don’t have the girl."

"You don’t have the picture yet, genius? Somebody snitched, whoever your inside guy is. The guy that said ‘Hey, man, you should see this car.’ All they’ve got to do is have another chat with him. It’s just luck that you didn’t get down here over that balcony rail and I think you know it."

"Bullshit," Gabriel said, voice muffled by his swelling face.

"Get with the program. These guys are drug dealers. Davis might seem like a moron, but he won some turf wars to get here. And do you really think somebody who can buy an Aston Martin couldn’t have a shithead like you shot if he felt like it?"

Gabriel started to speak, then shook his head. He turned and started walking.

Shane had seen them on the ramp from the windows on the top floor, their figures small but recognizable in the harsh crime lights that ringed the uppermost parking level like an arena. She crossed at the casino level and took a parking elevator to the top floor. By the time she stepped out Ray Partain was alone, staring at the doomed casino to the west with his forearms resting on the concrete parapet. The building was somber, its
windows showing soft light. Workmen with clipboards stood where the entrance used to be in the harsh wash of a trailer-mounted spotlight.

“Hey,” Shane said.

He looked over one shoulder.

“Good morning.”

“You’re not going to jump or anything, are you?”

“Me? Not hardly. Did they rehire you?”

“I have no idea. They’re all busy watching all this out the window. I sort of walked out when I figured that my presence was no longer required.”

“That was smart,” he said. “They’ll give you the job back if you want it. I’ll call Kevin first thing tomorrow if you’d like.”

“I’m not really worried about it. I wanted to thank you, though.”

“For what?”

“I don’t know. I’m not even sure what went on up there, what any of that shit was about.”

“It’s about here, this place. Always. Where are you from, anyway?”

“California. Long Beach.”

“You miss it very much?”

“Sometimes. I miss the ocean. Just the surf, especially at night, you know how it sounds?”

He smiled.

“What’s so funny?”

“How it sounds. Let me tell you something.”
“Sure.”

“I was coming back from the east coast one time, we were driving through Nebraska. Flat as hell and it goes on forever, you know? I was asleep over on the passenger side and I had this dream, a dream about the ocean. Surf, that’s the sound I kept hearing. Then I started to wake up and I could still hear it, the sound. I thought, cool, I’m waking up on a beach somewhere. But damn, why is the ground so shaky? I open my eyes and we’re driving through this wheatfield, the guy I was with fell asleep at the wheel. There was green all around, whipping past us as we banged across the furrows, green everywhere.”

She leaned against the parapet, beside him.

“Sorry,” he said. “I started thinking about that the other day, and it seemed like I couldn’t get it out of my head until I told somebody.”

“You’re an interesting guy, Ray Partain.”

She saw him through the camera’s finder window, lit in harsh chiaroscuro like the protagonist of a film noir by the sodium vapor lamp on a pole just above them. She pressed the release, felt the soft click of the shutter. Then the lamp overhead went out, along with all the rest that circled the ramp’s uppermost level. She felt the impact of the implosion before its flash had registered in her brain, a palpable shift in the air around her. The sensors on the lights around the ramp, she realized, had mistaken the blast for the rising sun. The windows of the defunct casino glowed orange as the whole building seemed to deflate, gathering in around its core, and disappear.

The dust cloud rose and swelled, approaching them at speed. Ray rested the flat of his hand on the small of her back, just that, and guided her to the Porsche. They pulled
the doors closed as the white dust surged over the parapet, settling like snow on the windshield. She couldn’t be sure if what coated her teeth, tasting of the past, was dust or ash or both.

“You missed the picture,” he said.

“That’s not the kind of thing I do,” she told him.

They sat in silence for a while. Then Ray started the car and turned on the wipers.

Their blades cut a pair of overlapped arcs through the pale particulate that had settled to coat the windshield. There were still remnants of the blast drifting down from the sky. She saw coppery highlights bleeding along the car’s chrome trim; the real sun, making its appearance at last. She leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes, just for a moment, hearing her own voice as if from a distance:

“So what now.”

“I suppose I could buy you breakfast,” Ray said.

She turned her head. He was coated in fine pale dust and looking right at her.

They both stank of the history that had sifted into their hair and clothes. The interior of the red convertible was much too small, Shane thought, for two grown adults.

“You know,” she said. “I’ve got some money. Let me buy you breakfast.”

“They wanted me to give you the Presidential Suite for the weekend,” Kevin said, “but I told them you’d rather have some beer coupons because you felt homier with the bingo ladies.”
Ray and Kevin were drinking in the casino’s private bar, where VIPs could get away from the democratic noise that pervaded the main floor. It was lower in the building than Leonard Alvin Davis’ room had been, but much more nicely appointed. Ray slipped the check into his pocket and leaned back in his chair as the waitress presented herself along with their snifters of cognac, smiling. She was dressed much better than the women carrying trays downstairs and her scent lingered momentarily in her wake as she moved slowly away.

“Do you make them bend over like that?”

“There’s no cash here. Drinks are free to whoever we let in, so the girls only get tips.”

“Women. They’re called women, Kevin. You used to know that.”

Kevin leaned forward.

“Take as much moral high ground as you want,” he said. “Look at her— she’s beautiful, twenty-two years old, has some college. Those tits cost her eight grand and they look like medicine balls. Now you convince me that the specific term of address the lady prefers is an issue.”

“What don’t you love about this job, Kevin?”

Kevin leaned back again, sipped from his snifter. Ray did the same. The cognac was mellow, a slow swelling heat that engulfed the palate.

“Sorry. It’s been a long week,” Kevin said. “And to top it off, fucking Nicola Rade was in town again.”

Even without the adjective her name had a jarring note as Kevin spoke it. Ray’s tongue seemed to trip over itself, hurrying thoughts into words.
“Did you say Rade? The sociologist?”

Kevin looked up.

“You know her?”

“Yeah. I mean, I think so. She’s on leave from the Sorbonne or something, I met her at a party.”

“The Sorbonne?” Kevin laughed. “Maybe in her youth. I think she went there, now that you mention it. But she’s private sector. Her findings may be published by the academic presses, but that’s always secondary.”

“And she does what, exactly?”

“Oh, fills in as the antichrist. Right now she’s the top name in problem gaming studies. The studies that run contrary to ours, that is. Her name even shows up in the local papers, and we control them. The dailies, at least.”

“Who does she work for?”

“She’s a consultant, she works for whoever pays her. The studies she does, think about it. Anybody who’s against gaming would love to have her on board if they could afford her. Think tanks, PACs. Your religious hypocrites love throwing stones, and they’ve got a lot of money to piss away.”

“And that’s something you think is somehow unfair?”

Kevin swirled cognac in his snifter, drained the amber liquid, shrugged.

“Calling the issue ‘problem gaming’ is like saying ‘problem heroin addiction’. How could gambling ever not be a problem? Our position has always been that it’s controllable here, unlike anywhere else. People like Rade redirect the argument, not because it’s basically flawed, but because they like us as targets. We’ve been sacred for
so long that we're a morass of untouched material for them. And Rade, she's got access to great data sets. I don't know where she finds the people for her studies, but her models are impeccable. Unfair? I'd say both Rade and I appreciate her studies as theoretical entertainments, but they're irrelevant in any real way."

"If none of it matters, what's she after?"

"After? Jesus, Ray, how does your mind work? She's after what everybody else in the world is after, except you. She wants to be a big name, go to conferences for free, have her air fare paid. And she wants to get rich. Check out her New York address, they showed her getting home from the airport on the news tonight. She's living in the same building that John Fucking Kennedy Junior did, before he started the flying lessons."

"That doesn't sound like the same person I met."

"Watch the news next Thursday," Kevin said. "That's when her report comes out, and I think she'll get plenty of air time."

Ray picked up Kevin's phone, a sleek gray plastic lozenge. He flipped it open and dialed Nicola's phone number with his thumb.

The number you have dialed, etc.

Disconnected.

Thomas "Tommy" Partain, 71
Noted Local Musician
The Las Vegas music community lost one of its all time greats on Wednesday when Thomas “Tommy” Partain, bandleader and accordion virtuoso, passed away at age 71. The ‘Accordion King’, as Partain titled himself in the wake of his 1960 breakthrough album, was a regular on stages up and down the Strip for nearly forty years.

In addition to seven albums that included 1960’s Accordion King and the hit 1966 LP Tommy Partain and his Accordion Knights, which reached #12 on the Billboard charts, Partain was a renowned entertainer who donated both time and money to many local charities. His television show, which ran in Las Vegas in the early 1970s, hosted national musical celebrities as well as showcasing local talents. “Through the 1980s,” renowned music critic Anthony Valentine maintains, “Tommy Partain singlehandedly kept the accordion alive.” In later years, Partain appeared less frequently on the stages that had given him his start, spending much of his time on more lucrative Hollywood film productions.

For the last eleven years, Partain struggled against a debilitating long-term illness that virtually forced him into seclusion. His wife Marilyn was killed in an auto accident in 1979. Partain is survived by a son, Raymond, of Las Vegas, and daughter, Marianne, of Hilo, Hawaii. A memorial fund has been established to fund area hospice facilities.

Ray had just closed the boot of the Porsche and was walking around from the front when a Lincoln limo pulled up across the bottom of the driveway. He watched the
limo, standing there in the driveway with his hands on his hips, until a rear door opened
and Nicola Rade got out. She wore a snug black skirt that showed her legs to good
advantage and ends of her hair licked at the shoulders of the matching jacket as she
walked up the drive. Even her shoes looked like they had come from out of town.

“Good to see you, Nic. I was wondering if you’d be back.”

“I was sorry to hear about your father.”

“I noticed the flowers you sent to the service. That was nice of you.”

She took off her dark glasses and bit at one of the earpieces with those sharp
white teeth. They both started to speak at the same time.

“Pardon” she said, accenting the word.

“No,” Ray said, “go ahead.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking,” she said.

“I guess I don’t either. But if I figure it out, I’ll give you a call.”

“I only stopped for a minute. I’m on my way to Los Angeles. I thought you might
want to come with me.”

“I guess I’ll pass, thanks.”

She shrugged. It was a perfectly elegant gesture that expressed nothing, and she
let it speak for her.

“Bonne chance,” Ray said, “Nicola.”

He watched her walk back to the limosine with not a little longing, that sweet,
supple stride, her back and shoulders perfectly aligned. She did not turn, or wave. The
limo drove to the next corner and turned. Ray stared after it, tossing the car keys in his
hand, again and again, listening to the chittering sound they made when they landed in
his palm. The front door of the house opened; he caught the keys, a final time, and unlocked the Porsche. He undid the latches of the convertible top and powered it back into the rear of the passenger compartment. It was warm enough, as long as the sun stayed out, to drive with it down.

"Who was that?" Shane asked.

She was in the doorway, watching him, a scuffed leather bag in her hand.

"Nicola."

"No shit? Did you say we saw her on the news?"

"No, I kind of forgot that."

Shane walked down the steps and opened the car door, then closed it again and reached in through the open top to drop her bag into the back.

"Damn, I always wanted one of these. I'm driving first."

"Go ahead."

"You're not getting all pouty over there, are you? Did she offer to fly you off to Paris or something?"

"Just LA," Ray said.

"Want to go after her?"

"No, " Ray said. "I think I should stick with you. We've got that Chinese zodiac thing going for us, after all. Meant to be."

She smiled.

"I always wanted a man who could put his trust in restaurant placemats."

Shane got behind the wheel. She started the car. The sun was straight overhead when they pulled out of the driveway and headed south. They drove underneath jets
bringing fresh money and its owners to the city and then west past industrial sites and businesses and scattered houses on big lots with a few parcels of open land among them. It was cool with the top down, but Shane was enjoying herself and Ray wanted to give her a few more miles of it.

"Turn left up ahead," Ray said, "at the light."

"I know you’re from here, but this is not the freeway entrance, babe."

"It’s the back way out, the old highway. Goes past the historic site of the Mint 400, among other things."

"I’m sure you’ll tell me what that is."

"No," he said after a pause, "I don’t think I will. You’ll have to research it yourself."

The old highway was straight and smooth and empty. Shane kicked the pedal down and smiled. As the Porsche rocketed along the shimmering two-lane road they could look across at all the traffic moving parallel to them, between Las Vegas and L.A, on half a dozen crowded high speed lanes. Ray had gotten the car tuned and the pipes let out a pleasant throaty rasp when Shane backed off the gas.

A car, up ahead. The day seemed to settle hard around Ray as he watched it grow nearer, nearer. It was as if the air blowing through the passenger compartment had gone suddenly toxic. There was nothing around but scrub and sand, ditches and low rises, the freeway off to the right and mountains to the left. He felt a knot grow hard in his stomach; this was like driving along at night, in the middle of nowhere, and watching the flares and emergency beacons and cold blue police flashers at an accident you know will be fatal and unforgettably ugly grow unavoidably closer as the miles ticked under your
tires.

"Slow down."

Billy's car. Undeniably Billy's car, the sunblasted Honda, slewed off the road at a steep angle. It looked eminently derelict, backgrounded by greasewood and low shrubs, the driver' side window rolled down. Something seemed to have gone wrong with the right front tire, the fender on that side thumped solidly into a mound of rustcolored dirt. It had been there for some time; it was mudsplashed from the storm that had passed through two days before.

"What is it," Shane asked.

It had been something, that storm, rare for winter. They'd sat outside watching bright ropes of lightning flicker downward from lowbellied clouds. Later she had been astride him, wind moaning along the walls of the house and rain tapping at its windows, when the power transformer on a pole one hundred feet away exploded in a brilliant flash of blue. She arched in surprise, then shivered, the pleasure unexpected, her body edged in the cold color of that arcing light, shuddering, radiant.

"Nothing." Ray turned in his seat to watch the car go by. "Drive."
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