

Rest Stop

He supposed that at some point between Jacksonville and Sarasota he did a literary version of the old Clark-Kent-in-the-phone-booth routine, but he wasn't sure just where or how. Which suggested it wasn't very dramatic. So did it even matter? Sometimes he told himself the answer to that was no, the whole Rick Hardin/John Dykstra thing was nothing but an artificial construct, pure press agency, no different from Archibald Bloggert (or whatever his real name might have been) performing as Cary Grant, or Evan Hunter (whose actual birth name had been Salvatore something-or-other) writing as Ed McBain. And those guys had been his inspiration...along with Donald E. Westlake, who wrote hard-boiled "caper" novels as Richard Stark, and K. C. Constantine, who was actually...well, no one really knew, did they? As was the case with the mysterious Mr. B. Traven, who had written *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. No one really knew, and that was a large part of the fun.

Name, name, what's in a name?

Who, for instance, was he on his biweekly ride back to Sarasota? He was Hardin when he left the Pot o' Gold in Jax, for sure, no doubt. And Dykstra when he let himself into his canal-side house on Macintosh Road, certainly. But who was he on Route 75, as he flowed from one town to the other beneath the bright turnpike lights? Hardin? Dykstra? No one at all? Was there maybe a magic moment when the literary werewolf who earned the big bucks turned back into the inoffensive English professor whose specialty was twentieth-century American poets and novelists? And did it matter as long as he was right with God, the IRS, and the occasional football players who took one of his two survey courses?

None of that mattered just south of Ocala. What did was that he had to piss like a racehorse, whoever he was. He'd gone two beers over his usual limit at the Pot o' Gold (maybe three) and had set the Jag's cruise control at sixty-five, not wanting to see any strobing red lights in his rearview mirror tonight. He might have paid for the Jag with books written under the Hardin name, but it was as John Andrew Dykstra that he lived the majority of his life, and that was the name the flashlight would shine on if he was asked for his operator's license. And *Hardin* might have drunk the beers in the Pot o' Gold, but if a Florida state trooper produced the dreaded Breathalyzer kit in its little blue plastic case, it was Dykstra's intoxicated molecules that would wind up inside the gadget's educated guts. And on a Thursday night in June, he would be easy pickings no matter who he was, because all the snowbirds had gone back to Michigan and he had I-75 pretty much to himself.

Yet there was a fundamental problem with beer any undergraduate understood: You couldn't buy it, only rent it. Luckily, there was a rest stop just six or seven miles south of Ocala, and there he would make a little room.

Meanwhile, though, who was he?

Certainly he had come to Sarasota sixteen years before as John Dykstra, and it was under that name that he had taught English at the Sarasota branch of FSU since 1990. Then, in 1994, he'd decided to skip teaching summer classes and have a fling at writing a suspense novel instead. This had not been his idea. He had an agent in New York, not one of the superstuds, but an honest enough guy with a reasonable track record, who had been able to sell four of his new client's short stories (under the

Dykstra name) to various literary magazines that paid in the low hundreds. The agent's name was Jack Golden, and while he had nothing but praise for the stories, he dismissed the resulting checks as "grocery money." It had been Jack who'd pointed out that all John Dykstra's published stories had "a high narrative line" (which was agentese for a plot, as far as Johnny could tell) and suggested his new client might be able to make \$40,000 or \$50,000 a whack writing suspense novels of a hundred thousand words.

"You could do that in a summer if you found a hook to hang your hat on and then stuck to it," he'd told Dykstra in a letter. (They hadn't progressed to using the phone and the fax at that point.) "And it would be twice as much as you'd make teaching classes in the June and August sessions down there at Mangrove U. If you're going to try it, my friend, now is the time—before you find yourself with a wife and two-point-five children."

There had been no potential wife on the horizon (nor was there now), but Dykstra had taken Jack's point; rolling the dice did not get easier as one grew older. And a wife and kids weren't the only responsibilities one took on as time slipped quietly by. There was always the lure of the credit cards, for instance. Credit cards put barnacles on your hull and slowed you down. Credit cards were agents of the norm and worked in favor of the sure thing.

When the summer-teaching contract came in January of '94, he had returned it unsigned to the department head with a brief explanatory note: *I thought this summer I'd try to write a novel instead.*

Eddie Wasserman's reply had been friendly but firm: *That's fine, Johnny, but I can't guarantee the position will be there next summer. The man in the chair always gets right of first refusal.*

Dykstra had considered this, but only briefly; by then he had an idea. Better still, he had a *character*: The Dog, literary father of Jaguars and houses on Macintosh Road, was waiting to be born, and God bless the Dog's homicidal heart.

Ahead of him was the white arrow on the blue sign twinkling in his headlights, and the ramp curving off to the left, and the high-intensity arc-sodium lights illuminating the pavement so brightly that the ramp looked like part of a stage set. He put on his blinker, slowed to forty, and left the interstate.

Halfway up, the ramp branched: trucks and Winnebagos to the right, folks in Jaguars straight ahead. Fifty yards beyond the split was the rest stop, a low building of beige cinder block that also looked like a stage set under the brilliant lights. What would it be in a movie? A missile-command center, maybe? Sure, why not. A missile-command center way out in the boonies, and the guy in charge is suffering from some sort of carefully concealed (but progressive) mental illness. He's seeing Russians everywhere, Russians coming out of the damn woodwork...or make it Al Qaeda terrorists, that was probably more au courant. The Russians were sort of out as potential villains these days unless they were pushing dope or teenage hookers. And the villain doesn't matter anyway, it's all a fantasy, but the guy's finger is nevertheless itching to push the red button, and...

And he needed to pee, so put the imagination on the back burner for a while, please and thank you. Besides, there was no place for the Dog in a story like that. The Dog

was more of an urban warrior, as he'd said at the Pot o' Gold earlier tonight. (Nice phrase, too.) Still, the idea of that crazy missile-silo commander had some power, didn't it? A handsome guy...the men love him...looks perfectly normal on the outside...

There was only one other car in the sprawling parking area at this hour, one of those PT Cruisers that never failed to amuse him—they looked like toy gangster cars out of the 1930s.

He parked four or five slots down from it, turned off the engine, then paused to give the deserted parking lot a quick scan before getting out. This wasn't the first time he'd stopped at this particular rest area on his way back from the Pot, and once he'd been both amused and horrified to see an alligator lumbering across the deserted pavement toward the sugar pines beyond the rest area, looking somehow like an elderly, overweight businessman on his way to a meeting. There was no gator tonight, and he got out, cocking his key-pak over his shoulder and pushing the padlock icon. Tonight there was only him and Mr. PT Cruiser. The Jag gave an obedient twitter, and for a moment he saw his shadow in the brief flash of its headlights...only whose shadow was it? Dykstra's or Hardin's?

Johnny Dykstra's, he decided. Hardin was gone now, left behind thirty or forty miles back. But this had been his night to give the brief (and mostly humorous) after-dinner presentation to the rest of the Florida Thieves, and he thought Mr. Hardin had done a fairly good job, ending with a promise to send the Dog after anyone who didn't contribute generously to this year's charity, which happened to be Sunshine Readers, a non-profit that provided audiotope texts and articles for blind scholars.

He walked across the parking lot to the building, the heels of his cowboy boots clocking. John Dykstra never would have worn faded jeans and cowboy boots to a public function, especially one where he was the featured speaker, but Hardin was a different breed of hot rod. Unlike Dykstra (who could be fussy), Hardin didn't care much what people thought of his appearance.

The rest-area building was divided into three parts: the women's room on the left, the men's room on the right, and a big porchlike portico in the middle where you could pick up pamphlets on various central-and south-Florida attractions. There were also snack machines, two soft-drink machines, and a coin-op map dispenser that took a ridiculous number of quarters. Both sides of the short cinder-block entryway were papered with missing-child posters that always gave Dykstra a chill. How many of the kids in the photos, he always wondered, were buried in the damp, sandy soil or feeding the gators in the Glades? How many of them were growing up in the belief that the drifters who had snatched them (and from time to time sexually molested them or rented them out) were their mothers or fathers? Dykstra did not like to look at their open, innocent faces or consider the desperation underlying the absurd reward numbers—\$10,000, \$20,000, \$50,000, in one case \$100,000 (that last one for a smiling towheaded girl from Fort Myers who had disappeared in 1980 and would now be a woman in young middle age, if she was still alive at all...which she almost certainly was not). There was also a sign informing the public that barrel-picking was prohibited, and another stating that loitering longer than an hour in this rest area was prohibited—POLICE TAKE NOTICE.

Who'd want to loiter here? Dykstra thought, and listened to the night wind rustle through the palms. A crazy person, that was who. A person to whom a red button would start to look good as the months and years snored past with the sound of sixteen-wheelers in the passing lane at one in the morning.

He turned toward the men's room and then froze in midstep as a woman's voice,

slightly distorted by echo but dismayingly close, spoke unexpectedly from behind him. “No, Lee,” she said. “No, honey, don’t.”

There was a slap, followed by a thump, a muffled meat thump. Dykstra realized he was listening to the unremarkable sounds of abuse. He could actually see the red hand shape on the woman’s cheek and her head, only slightly cushioned by her hair (blond? dark?), bouncing off the wall of beige tile. She began to cry. The arc sodiums were bright enough for Dykstra to see that his arms had broken out in gooseflesh. He began to bite his lower lip.

“Fuckin’ hoor.”

Lee’s voice was flat, declamatory. Hard to tell how you could know immediately that he was drunk, because each word was perfectly articulated. But you did know, because you had heard men speak that way before—at ballparks, at carnivals, sometimes through a thin motel-room wall (or drifting down through the ceiling) late at night, after the moon was down and the bars were closed. The female half of the conversation—could you call it a conversation?—might be drunk, too, but mostly she sounded scared.

Dykstra stood there in the little notch of an entryway, facing the men’s room, his back turned toward the couple in the women’s room. He was in shadow, surrounded on both sides by pictures of missing children that rustled faintly, like the fronds of the palm trees, in the night breeze. He stood there waiting, hoping there would be no more. But of course there was. The words of some country-music singer came to him, nonsensical and portentous: “By the time I found out I was no good, I was too rich to quit.”

There was another meaty smack and another cry from the woman. There was a beat of silence, and then the man’s voice came again, and you knew he was uneducated as well as drunk; it was the way he said *hoor* when he meant *whore*. You knew all sorts of things about him actually: that he’d sat at the back of the room in his high school English classes, that he drank milk straight out of the carton when he got home from school, that he’d dropped out in his sophomore or junior year, that he did the sort of job for which he needed to wear gloves and carry an X-Acto knife in his back pocket. You weren’t supposed to make such generalizations—it was like saying all African-Americans had natural rhythm, that all Italians cried at the opera—but here in the dark at eleven o’clock, surrounded by posters of missing children, for some reason always printed on pink paper, as if that were the color of the missing, you knew it was true. “Fuckin’ little hoor.”

He has freckles, Dykstra thought. *And he sunburns easily. The sunburn makes him look like he’s always mad, and usually he is mad. He drinks Kahlúa when he’s in funds, as we say, but mostly he drinks b—*

“Lee, don’t,” came the voice of the woman. She was crying now, pleading, and Dykstra thought: *Don’t do that, lady. Don’t you know that only makes it worse? Don’t you know he sees that runner of snot hanging out of your nose, and it makes him madder than ever?* “Don’t hit me no more, I’m s—”

Whap!

It was followed by another thump and a sharp cry, almost a dog’s yelp, of pain. Old Mr. PT Cruiser had once more smoked her hard enough to bounce the back of her head off the tiled bathroom wall, and what was that old joke? Why are there three hundred thousand cases of spousal abuse in America each year? *Because they won’t...fuckin’...listen.*

“Fuckin’ hoor.” That was Lee’s scripture tonight, right out of Second Drunkalonians, and what was scary in that voice—what Dykstra found utterly terrifying—was the

lack of emotion. Anger would have been better. Anger would have been safer for the woman. Anger was like a flammable vapor—a spark could ignite it and burn it off in a single quick and gaudy burst—but this guy was just...dedicated. He wasn't going to hit her again and then apologize, perhaps starting to cry as he did so. Maybe he had on other nights, but not tonight. Tonight he was going for the long bomb. Hail Mary fulla grace, help me win this stock-car race.

So what do I do? What's my place in it? Do I have one?

He certainly wasn't going to go into the men's room and take the long, leisurely piss he had planned and looked forward to; his nuts were drawn up like a couple of hard little stones, and the pressure in his kidneys had spread both up his back and down his legs. His heart was hurrying in his chest, thudding along at a rapid jog-trot that would probably become a sprint at the sound of the next blow. It would be an hour or more before he'd be able to piss again, no matter how badly he had to, and then it would come in a series of unsatisfying little squirts. And God, how he wished that hour had already gone by, that he was sixty or seventy miles down the road from here!

What do you do if he hits her again?

Another question occurred: What would he do if the woman took to her heels and Mr. PT Cruiser followed her? There was only one way out of the women's room, and John Dykstra was standing in the middle of it. John Dykstra in the cowboy boots Rick Hardin had worn to Jacksonville, where once every two weeks a group of mystery writers—many of them plump women in pastel pantsuits—met to discuss techniques, agents, and sales, and to gossip about one another.

"Lee-Lee, don't hurt me, okay? Please don't hurt me. Please don't hurt the baby."

Lee-Lee. Jesus wept.

Oh, and another one; score one more. *The baby. Please don't hurt the baby.* Welcome to the fucking Lifetime Channel.

Dykstra's rapidly beating heart seemed to sink an inch in his chest. It felt as if he had been standing here in this little cinder-block notch between the men's room and the women's for at least twenty minutes, but when he looked at his watch, he wasn't surprised to see that not even forty seconds had passed since the first slap. It was the subjective nature of time and the eerie speed of thought when the mind was suddenly put under pressure. He had written about both many times. He supposed most quote-unquote suspense novelists had. It was a goddam staple. The next time it was his turn to address the Florida Thieves, perhaps he would take that as his subject and begin by telling them about this incident. About how he'd had time to think, *Second Drunkalonians*. Although he supposed it might be a little heavy for their biweekly get-togethers, a little—

A perfect flurry of blows interrupted this train of thought. Lee-Lee had snapped.

Dykstra listened to the particular sound of these blows with the dismay of a man who understands he's hearing sounds he will never forget, not movie-soundtrack Foleys but a fists-hitting-a-feather-pillow sound, surprisingly light, actually almost delicate. The woman screamed once in surprise and once in pain. After that she was reduced to puffing little cries of pain and fear. Outside in the dark, Dykstra thought of all the public-service spots he'd seen about preventing domestic violence. They did not hint at this, how you could hear the wind in the palm trees in one ear (and the rustle of the missing-child posters, don't forget that) and those little groaning sounds of pain and fear in the other.

He heard shuffling feet on the tiles and knew Lee (Lee-Lee, the woman had called him, as if a pet name might defuse his rage) was closing in. Like Rick Hardin, Lee was boots. The Lee-Lees of the world tended to be Georgia Giant guys. They were

Dingo men. The woman was in sneakers, white low-tops. He knew it.

“Bitch, you fuckin’ bitch, I seen you talkin’ to him, tossin’ your tits at him, you fuckin’ hoor—”

“No, Lee-Lee, I never—”

The sound of another blow, and then a hoarse expectoration that was neither male nor female. Retching. Tomorrow, whoever cleaned these restrooms would find vomit drying on the floor and one of the tiled walls in the women’s, but Lee and his wife or girlfriend would be long departed, and to the cleaner it would be just another mess to clean up, the story of the puke both unclear and uninteresting, and what was Dykstra supposed to do? Jesus, did he have the sack to go in there? If he didn’t, Lee might finish beating her up and call it good, but if a stranger interfered—

He could kill both of us.

But...

The baby. Please don’t hurt the baby.

Dykstra clenched his fists and thought, *Fucking Lifetime Channel!*

The woman was still retching.

“Stop that, Ellen.”

“*I can’t!*”

“No? Okay, good. I’ll stop it for you. Fuckin’ ...*hoor.*”

Another *whap!* punctuated *hoor*. Dykstra’s heart sank even lower. He would not have thought it possible. Soon it would be beating in his belly. If only he could channel the Dog! In a story it would work—he’d even been thinking about identity before making the evening’s great mistake of turning into this rest area, and if that wasn’t what the writing manuals called foreshadowing, then what was?

Yes, he would turn into his hit man, stride into the women’s room, beat the living shit out of Lee, then go on his way. Like Shane in that old movie with Alan Ladd.

The woman retched again, the sound of a machine turning stones into gravel, and Dykstra knew he wasn’t going to channel the Dog. The Dog was make-believe. This was reality, rolling out right here in front of him like a drunk’s tongue.

“Do it again and see what it gets you,” Lee invited, and now there was something deadly in his voice. He was getting ready to go all the way. Dykstra was sure of it. *I’ll testify in court. And when they ask me what I did to stop it, I’ll say nothing. I’ll say that I listened. That I remembered. That I was a witness. And then I will explain that that is what writers do when they’re not actually writing.*

Dykstra thought of running back to his Jag—quietly!—and using the phone in the console to call the state police. *99 was all it took. The signs saying so were posted every ten miles or so: IN CASE OF ACCIDENT DIAL *99 ON CELLULAR. Except there was never a cop around when you needed one. The closest tonight would turn out to be in Bradenton or maybe Ybor City, and by the time the trooper got here, this little red rodeo would be over.

From the women’s room there now came a series of thick hiccuping sounds, interspersed with low gagging noises. One of the stall doors banged. The woman knew that Lee meant it just as surely as Dykstra knew it. Just vomiting again would likely be enough to set him off. He would go crazy on her and finish the job. And if they caught him? Second degree. No premeditation. He could be out in fifteen months and dating this one’s kid sister.

Go back to your car, John. Go back to your car, get in behind the wheel, and drive away from here. Start working on the idea that this never happened. And make sure you don’t read the paper or watch the TV news for the next couple of days. That’ll help. Do it. Do it now. You’re a writer, not a fighter. You stand five-nine, you weigh

162 pounds, you've got a bad shoulder, and the only thing you can do here is make things worse. So get back in your car and send up a little prayer to whatever God looks out for women like Ellen.

And he actually turned away before an idea occurred to him.

The Dog wasn't real, but Rick Hardin *was*.

Ellen Whitlow of Nokomis had fallen into one of the toilets and landed on the hopper with her legs spread and her skirt up, just like the hoor she was, and Lee started in there after her, meaning to grab her by the ears and start slamming her dumb head against the tiles. He'd had enough. He was going to teach her a lesson she'd never forget.

Not that these thoughts went through his mind in any coherent fashion. What was in his mind now was mostly red. Under it, over it, seeping through it was a chanting voice that sounded like Steven Tyler of Aerosmith: *Ain't my baby anyway, ain't mine, ain't mine, you ain't pinning it on me, you fuckin' hoor.*

He took three steps, and that was when a car horn began to blat rhythmically somewhere close by, spoiling his own rhythm, spoiling his concentration, taking him out of his head, making him look around: *Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!*

Car alarm, he thought, and looked from the entrance to the women's room back to the woman sitting in the stall. From the door to the hoor. His fists began to clench in indecision. Suddenly he pointed at her with his right index finger, the nail long and dirty.

"Move and you're dead, bitch," he told her, and started for the door.

It was brightly lit in the shithouse and almost as brightly lit in the rest-area parking lot, but in the notch between the two wings it was dark. For a moment he was blind, and that was when something hit him high up on the back, driving him forward in a stumbling run that took him only two steps forward before he tripped over something else—a leg—and went sprawling on the concrete.

There was no pause, no hesitation. A boot kicked him in the thigh, freezing the big muscle there, and then high up on his blue-jeaned ass, almost to the small of his back. He started to scramble—

A voice above him said, "Don't roll over, Lee. I've got a tire iron in my hand. Stay on your stomach or I'll beat your head in."

Lee lay where he was with his hands out in front of him, almost touching.

"Come out of there, Ellen," said the man who had hit him. "We have no time to fool around. Come out right now."

There was a pause. Then the hoor's voice, trembling and thick: "Did you hurt him? Don't you hurt him!"

"He's okay, but if you don't come out right now, I'm going to hurt him bad. I'll have to." A pause, then: "And it'll be your fault."

Meanwhile, the car horn, beating monotonously into the night—*Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!*

Lee started to turn his head on the pavement. It hurt. What had the fucker hit him with? Had he said a tire iron? He couldn't remember.

The boot slammed into his ass again. Lee yelled and turned his face back to the pavement.

"Come out, lady, or I'm going to open up his head! I have no choice here!"

When she spoke again, she was closer. Her voice was unsteady, but now tending toward outrage: "Why did you *do* that? You didn't have to do that!"

"I called the police on my cell," the man standing above him said. "There was a trooper at mile 140. So we've got ten minutes, maybe a little less. Mr. Lee-Lee, do you have the car keys or does she?"

Lee had to think about it.

"She does," he said at last. "She said I was too drunk to drive."

"All right. Ellen, you go down there and get in that PT Cruiser, and you drive away. You keep going until you get to Lake City, and if you've got the brains God gave a duck, you won't turn around there, either."

"I ain't leaving him with you!" She sounded very angry now. "Not when you got that thing!"

"Yes, you are. You do it right now or I'll fuck him up royally."

"You bully!"

The man laughed, and the sound frightened Lee more than the fellow's speaking voice.

"I'll count to thirty. If you're not driving southbound out of the rest area by then, I'll take his head right off his shoulders. I'll drive it like a golf ball."

"You can't—"

"Do it, Ellie. Do it, honey."

"You heard him," the man said. "Your big old teddy bear wants you to go. If you want to let him finish beating the shit out of you tomorrow night—and the baby—that's fine with me. I won't be around tomorrow night. But right now I'm done fucking with you; *so you put your dumb ass in gear.*"

This was a command she understood, delivered in language familiar to her, and Lee saw her bare legs and sandals moving past his lowered line of vision. The man who'd sandbagged him started counting loudly: "*One, two, three, four...*"

"Hurry the hell *up*!" Lee shouted, and the boot was on his ass, but more gently now, rocking him rather than whacking him. But it still hurt. Meanwhile, *Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!* into the night. "Get your ass in *gear*!"

At that her sandals began to run. Her shadow ran beside them. The man had reached twenty when the PT Cruiser's little sewing-machine engine started up, had reached thirty when Lee saw its taillights backing into the parking area. Lee waited for the man to start whacking and was relieved when he didn't.

Then the PT Cruiser started down the exit lane and the engine sound began to fade, and then the man standing over him spoke with a kind of perplexity.

"Now," the man who'd sandbagged him said, "what am I going to do with you?"

"Don't hurt me," Lee said. "Don't hurt me, mister."

Once the PT Cruiser's taillights were out of sight, Hardin shifted the tire iron from one hand to the other. His palms were sweaty and he almost dropped it. That would have been bad. The tire iron would have clanged loudly on the concrete if he'd dropped it, and Lee would have been up in a flash. He wasn't as big as Dykstra had imagined, but he was dangerous. He'd already proved that.

Sure, dangerous to pregnant women.

But that was no way to think. If he let old Lee-Lee get up on his feet, this would be a

whole new ball game. He could feel Dykstra trying to come back, wanting to discuss this and perhaps a few other points. Hardin pushed him away. This was not the time or place for a college English instructor.

"Now, what am I going to do with *you*?" he asked, the question one of honest perplexity.

"Don't hurt me," the man on the ground said. He was wearing glasses. That had been a major surprise. No way had either Hardin or Dykstra seen this man wearing glasses.

"Don't hurt me, mister."

"I got an idea." Dykstra would have said *I have an idea*. "Take your glasses off and put them beside you."

"Why—"

"Save the lip, just do it."

Lee, who was wearing faded Levi's and a Western-style shirt (now pulled out in the back and hanging over his butt), started to take off his wire-rimmed glasses with his right hand.

"No, do it with your other one."

"Why?"

"Don't ask me questions. Just do it. Take 'em off with your left hand."

Lee took off the queerly delicate spectacles and put them on the pavement. Hardin immediately stepped on them with the heel of one boot. There was a little snapping sound and the delicious grind of glass.

"Why'd you do that?" Lee cried.

"Why do you think? Have you got a gun or anything?"

"No! Jesus, *no*!"

And Hardin believed him. If there'd been one, it would have been a gator gun in the PT Cruiser's trunk. But he didn't think even that was likely. Standing outside the women's room, Dykstra had been imagining some big hulk of a construction worker. This guy looked like an accountant who worked out three times a week at Gold's Gym.

"I think I'll walk back to my car now," Hardin said. "Turn off the alarm and drive away."

"Yeah. Yeah, why don't you do th—"

Hardin put a warning foot on the man's butt again, this time rocking it back and forth a little more roughly.

"Why don't you just shut up? What did you think you were doing in there anyway?"

"Teaching her a fucking les—"

Hardin kicked him in the hip almost as hard as he could, pulling the blow a little bit at the last second. But only a little. Lee cried out in pain and fear. Hardin was dismayed at what he'd just done and how he'd done it, absolutely without thought. What dismayed him even more was that he wanted to do it again, and harder. He liked that cry of pain and fear, could do with hearing it again.

So how far was he from Shithouse Lee, lying out here with the shadow of the entryway running up his back on a crisp black diagonal? Not very, it seemed. But so what? It was a tiresome question, a movie-of-the-week question. A much more interesting one occurred to him. This question was how hard he could kick old Lee-Lee in the left ear without sacrificing accuracy for force. Square in the ear, *ka-pow*. He also wondered what kind of a sound it would make. A satisfying one, would be his guess. Of course he might kill the man doing that, but how much loss to the world would that be? And who would ever know? Ellen? Fuck her.

"You better shut up, my friend," Hardin said. "That would be your best course of

action right about now. Just shut up. And when the state trooper gets here, you tell him whatever the fuck you want.”

“Why don’t you go? Just go and leave me alone. You broke my glasses, isn’t that enough?”

“No,” Hardin said truthfully. He thought a second. “You know what?”

Lee didn’t ask him what.

“I’m going to walk slow to my car. You come on and come after me if you want. We’ll do it face-to-face.”

“Yeah, right!” Lee laughed tearfully. “I can’t see shit without my glasses!”

Hardin pushed his own up on his nose. He didn’t have to pee anymore. What a weird thing! “Look at you,” he said. “Just look at you.”

Lee must have heard something in his voice, because Hardin saw him start to tremble by the light of the silvery moon. But he didn’t say anything, which was probably wise under the circumstances. And the man standing over him, who had never been in a fight in his whole life before this, not in high school, not even in *grammar* school, understood that this was really all over. If Lee had had a gun, he might have tried to shoot him in the back as he walked away. But otherwise, no. Lee was...what was the word?

Buffaloed.

Old Lee-Lee was buffaloed.

Hardin was struck by an inspiration. “I got your license number,” he said. “And I know your name. Yours and hers. I’ll be watching the papers, asshole.”

Nothing from Lee. He just lay on his stomach with his broken glasses twinkling in the moonlight.

“Goodnight, asshole,” Hardin said. He walked down to the parking lot and drove away. Shane in a Jaguar.

He was okay for ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Long enough to try the radio and then decide on the Lucinda Williams disc in the CD player instead. Then, all at once, his stomach was in his throat, still full of the chicken and potatoes he had eaten at the Pot o’ Gold.

He pulled over into the breakdown lane, threw the Jag’s transmission into park, started to get out, and realized there wasn’t time for that. So he just leaned out instead with the seat belt still fastened and vomited onto the pavement beside the driver’s-side door. He was shaking all over. His teeth were chattering.

Headlights appeared and swept toward him. They slowed down. Dykstra’s first thought was that it was a state cop, finally a state cop. They always showed up when you didn’t need them, didn’t want them. His second one—a cold certainty—was that it was the PT Cruiser, Ellen at the wheel, Lee-Lee in the passenger seat, now with a tire iron of his own in his lap.

But it was just an old Dodge full of kids. One of them—a moronic-looking boy with what was probably red hair—poked his be pimped moon of a face out the window and shouted, “*Throw it to your heeeels!*” This was followed by laughter, and the car accelerated away.

Dykstra closed the driver’s-side door, put his head back, closed his eyes, and waited for the shakes to abate. After a while they did, and his stomach settled along the way.

He realized he needed to pee again and took it as a good sign.

He thought of wanting to kick Lee-Lee in the ear—how hard? what sound?—and tried to force his mind away from it. Thinking about wanting to do that made him feel sick all over again.

Where his mind (his mostly obedient mind) went was to that missile-silo commander stationed out in Lonesome Crow, North Dakota (or maybe it was Dead Wolf, Montana). The one who was going quietly crazy. Seeing terrorists under every bush. Piling up badly written pamphlets in his locker, spending many a late night in front of the computer screen, exploring the paranoid back alleys of the Internet.

And maybe the Dog's on his way to California to do a job...driving instead of flying because he's got a couple of special guns in the trunk of his Plymouth Road Runner...and he has car trouble...

Sure. Sure, that was good. Or it could be, with a little more thought. Had he thought there was no place for the Dog out in the big empty of the American heartland? That was narrow thinking, wasn't it? Because under the right circumstances, anyone could end up anywhere, doing anything.

The shakes were gone. Dykstra put the Jag back in gear and got rolling. At Lake City he found an all-night gas station and convenience store, and there he stopped to empty his bladder and fill his gas tank (after checking the lot and the four pump islands for the PT Cruiser and not seeing it). Then he drove the rest of the way home, thinking his Rick Hardin thoughts, and let himself into his John Dykstra house by the canal. He always set the burglar alarm before leaving—it was the prudent thing to do—and he turned it off before setting it again for the rest of the night.