

# S T E P E I T E EE ILE

**A ovel i Six Pa t**



NO L

arrie

□ alem□s Lot

he hining

he tand

he ead Zone

irestarter

ujo

K O :

he unslinger

hristine

ycle of the erewolf Pet ematary

he alisman (with Peter traub)

t

yes of the ragon Misery

he ommyknockers

K O :

he rawing of the hree

he ark alf

K L :

he aste Lands Needful hings

erald □s ame

olores laiborne

nsomnia

ose Madder

he reen Mile

esperation

K O :

izard & lass

ag of ones

M N

age

he Long alk

oadwork

he unning Man

hinner

he egulators

OLL ON Nightshift

ifferent easons

keleton rew

our Past Midnight Nightmares and

reamscapes NON- ON

anse Macabre

NPL Y

reepshow

at □s ye

ilver ullet Maximum Overdrive Pet ematary

olden Years

leepwalkers

he tand

his edition first published in reat ritain in 998 by Orion

n imprint of Orion ooks Ltd

Orion ouse, pper t Martin's Lane, London 9

opyright Š 996 tephen King

llustrations Š 996 Mark eyer

he right of tephen King to be identified as

the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the opyright, esigns and Patents ct 988.

ll rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior

permission of the copyright owner.

P catalogue record for this book is available from the ritish Library

N 0 7 8 6 6

his is a work of fiction.

Names, characters, places and incidents either are products of the writer's imagination, or are used fictitiously.

ny similarity to real persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed in reat ritain by

lays Ltd, t ves plc

# I t o u tio

go through cycles of insomnia - a fact that won't surprise people who've read the novel chronicling the adventures of alph oberts - and so try to keep a story handy for those nights when sleep won't come. tell these to myself as lie in the dark, writing them in my mind just as would on a typewriter or a word processor, often going back and changing words, adding thoughts, deleting clauses, making up the dialogue. ach night start over at the beginning, getting a little further before drop off. y the fifth or sixth night 've usually got whole chunks of prose memorized. his probably sounds a little nuts, but it's soothing□ and as a time-passer, it beats the shit out of counting sheep.

hese stories eventually wear out, just as a book will after it's been read over and over again. (" hrow it out and buy a new one, tephen," my mother would sometimes say, turning an irritable eye on a well-loved comic book or paperback. " hat one's read to rags.") hen it's time to look for a new one, and during my bouts of sleeplessness, hope a new one will come soon, because sleepless hours are long hours.

n 99 or '93, was working on a bedtime story called " hat ricks Your ye." t was about a man on death row - a huge black man - who develops an interest in sleight-of-hand as the date of his execution draws near. he story was to be told in the first person, by an old trusty who wheeled a cart of books through the cell blocks, and who also sold cigarettes, novelties, and little notions like hair tonic and airplanes made out of waxed paper. t the end of the story, just before his execution, wanted the huge prisoner, Luke offey, to make himself disappear.

t was a good idea, but the story wouldn't work for me. tried it a hundred different ways, it seemed, and it still wouldn't work for me. gave the narrator a pet mouse that rode on his trolley, thinking that might help matters, but it didn't. he best part of it was the opening: " his happened in

93 , when the state pen was still in vans Notch□ and the electric chair, of course - what the inmates called Old parky." hat worked, it seemed to me; nothing else about it did. ventually discarded Luke offey and his disappearing coins in favor of a tale about a planet where people for some

reason turned into cannibals when it rained□ and still like that one, so hands off, y'hear?

hen, about a year and a half later, the death-row idea recurred to me, only this time with a different slant - suppose, thought, the big guy was a healer of some sort instead of an aspiring magician, a simpleton condemned for murders that he not only did not commit but had tried to reverse?

hat story was too good to play with at bedtime, decided, although did begin it in the dark, resurrecting the opening paragraph almost word for word, and working out the first chapter in my mind before beginning to write. he narrator became a death-house guard instead of a trusty, Luke

offey became John offey (with a tip of the *chapeau* to illiam aulkner, whose hrist-figure is Joe hristmas), and the mouse became□ well, Mr. Jingles.

t was a good story, knew that from the first, but it was a tremendously hard story to write. Other things were going on in my life that seemed easier

- the teleplay for *The Shining* miniseries was one - and was holding onto *The reen Mile* by my fingernails. felt as if were creating a world almost from scratch, as knew almost nothing about life on death row in the border

outh during the epression. esearch can remedy that, of course, but thought that research might kill the fragile sense of wonder had found in my story - some part of me knew from the first that what wanted was not reality but myth. o pressed on, stacking words and hoping for a kindling, an epiphany, any sort of garden-variety miracle.

he miracle came in a fax from alph icinanza, my foreign rights agent, who had been talking with a ritish publisher about the serial-novel form harles ickens had employed a century ago. alph asked - in the dismissive way of one who doesn't expect the idea to come to anything - if might be interested in trying my hand at the form. Man, leaped at it. understood at once that if agreed to such a project, would have to finish *The reen Mile.* o, feeling like a oman soldier setting fire to the bridge across the ubicon, called alph and asked him to make the deal. e did, and the rest you know. John offey, Paul dgecombe, rutal owell, Percy

etmore□ they took over and made the story happen. t was most severely cool.

*The reen Mile* had a kind of magical acceptance which never expected; thought, in fact, that it might well be a commercial disaster. he feedback from the readers was wonderful, and this time even most of the

critics went along for the ride. think owe a lot of the book's popular acceptance to my wife's perceptive suggestions, and a lot of its commercial success to the hard work done on its behalf by the people at utton ignet.

he experience itself, however, was mine alone. wrote like a madman, trying to keep up with the crazy publishing schedule and at the same time trying to craft the book so that each part would have its own mini-climax, hoping that everything would fit, and knowing 'd be hung if it didn't. wondered a time or two if harles ickens had felt the same way, just sort of hoping the questions raised in the plot would answer themselves, and suppose he did. ortunately for him, od handed out a little more to old

harles in the talent department.

remember thinking a time or two that must be littering the ground behind me with the most outrageous anachronisms, but there turned out to be remarkably few. ven the little "hot comic" featuring Popeye and Olive Oyl turned out to be dead on the money: following the publication of Part 6, someone sent me an offprint of just such a comic, published around 9 7.

n one memorable panel, impy is putting the boots to Olive and eating a hamburger at the same time. osh, there's nothing like the human imagination, is there?

ollowing *The reen Mile s* successful publication, there were a lot of discussions about how - or *if -* it should be issued as a complete novel. he part-by-part publication was a sore point with me and some readers as well, because the price was very high for a paperback; about nineteen dollars for all six installments (considerably less if bought at a discount store). or that reason a boxed set never seemed like the ideal solution. his volume, a trade paperback available at a more sane price, seemed to be the ideal solution. o here it is, mostly as it was published ( did change the moment where Percy etmore, bound in a straitjacket, raises one hand to wipe the sweat from his face).

t some point 'd like to revise it completely, turn it into the novel it can't quite be in this format, and issue it again. ntil that time comes, this will have to do. 'm glad so many readers

enjoyed it. nd you know, it turned out to be a pretty good bedtime story, after all.

- tephen King

*Bangor, Maine February6,1997*

# Fo e o : A Lette

October 7, 99

ear onstant eader,

Life is a capricious business. he story which begins in this little book exists in this form because of a chance remark made by a realtor have never met. his happened a year ago, on Long sland. alph icinanza, a long-time friend and business associate of mine (what he does mostly is to sell foreign publishing rights for books and stories), had just rented a house there. he realtor remarked that the house "looked like something out of a story by harles ickens."

he remark was still on alph's mind when he welcomed his first houseguest, ritish publisher Malcolm dwards. e repeated it to dwards, and they began chatting about ickens. dwards mentioned that ickens had published many of his novels in installments, either folded into magazines or by themselves as chapbooks, ( don't know the origin of this word, meaning a smaller-than-average book, but have always loved its air of intimacy and friendliness). ome of the novels, dwards added, were actually written and revised in the shadow of publication; harles ickens was one novelist apparently not afraid of a deadline.

ickens's serialized novels were immensely popular; so popular, in fact, that one of them precipitated a tragedy in altimore. large group of

ickens fans crowded onto a waterfront dock, anticipating the arrival of an

nglish ship with copies of the final installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* on board. ccording to the story, several would-be readers were jostled into the water and drowned.

don't think either Malcolm or alph wanted anyone drowned, but they were curious as to what would happen if serial publication were tried again today. Neither was immediately aware that it has happened (there really is nothing new under the sun) on at least two occasions. om olfe published the first draft of his novel *Bonfire of the anities* serially in *Rolling Stone* magazine, and Michael Mc owell *The Amulet, ilded Needles, The*

*Elementals,* and the screenplay *Beetlejuice)* published a novel called

*Blackwater* in paperback installments. hat novel - a horror story about a

outhern family with the unpleasant familial trait of turning into alligators - was not Mc owell's best, but enjoyed good success for von ooks, all the same.

he two men further speculated about what might happen if a writer of popular fiction were to try issuing a novel in chapbook editions today - little paperbacks that might sell for a pound or two in ritain, or perhaps three dollars in merica (where most paperbacks now sell for $6.99 or $7.99).

omeone like tephen King might make an interesting go of such an experiment, Malcolm said, and from there the conversation moved on to other topics.

alph more or less forgot the idea, but it recurred to him in the fall of

99 , following his return from the rankfurt ook air, a kind of international trade show where every day is a showdown for foreign agents like alph. e broached the serialization chapbook idea to me along with a number of other matters, most of which were automatic turndowns.

he chapbook idea was not an automatic turndown, though; unlike the interview in the Japanese Playboy or the all-expenses-paid tour of the altic

epublics, it struck a bright spark in my imagination. don't think that am a modern ickens - if such a person exists, it is probably John rving or

alman ushdie - but have always loved stories told in episodes. t is a format first encountered in *The Saturday Evening Post,* and liked it because the end of each episode made the reader an almost equal participant with the writer - you had a whole week to try to figure out the next twist of the snake. lso, one read and experienced these stories more *intensely,* it seemed to me, because they were rationed. You couldn't gulp, even if you wanted to (and if the story was good, you did).

est of all, in my house we often read them aloud - my brother, avid, one night, myself the next, my mother taking a turn on the third, then back to my brother again. t was a rare chance to enjoy a written work as we enjoyed the movies we went to and the programs *Rawhide, Bonanza. Route 66)* that we watched together; they were a family event. t wasn't until years later that discovered ickens's novels had been enjoyed by families of his day in much the same fashion, only their fireside agonizings over the fate of Pip and Oliver and avid opperfield went on for years

instead of a couple of months (even the longest of the *Post* serials rarely ran much more than eight installments).

here was one other thing that liked about the idea, an appeal that suspect only the writer of suspense tales and spooky stories can fully appreciate: in a story which is published m installments, the writer gains an ascendancy over the reader which he or she cannot otherwise enjoy: simply put. onstant eader, you cannot flip ahead and see how matters turn out.

still remember walking into our living room once when was twelve or so and seeing my mother in her favorite rocker, peeking at the end of an

gatha hristie paperback while her finger held her actual place around page 0. was appalled, and told her so ( was twelve, remember, an age at which boys first dimly begin to realize that they know everything), suggesting that reading the end of a mystery novel before you actually get there was on a par with eating the white stuff out of the middle of Oreo cookies and then throwing the cookies themselves away. he laughed her wonderful unembarrassed laugh and said perhaps that was so, but sometimes she just couldn't resist the temptation. iving in to temptation was a concept could understand; had plenty of my own, even at twelve.

ut here, at last, is an amusing cure for that temptation. ntil the final episode arrives in bookstores, no one is going to know how *The reen Mile* turns out□ and that may include me.

lthough there was no way he could have known it, alph icinanza, mentioned the idea of a novel in installments at what was, for me, the perfect psychological moment. had been playing with a story idea on a subject had always suspected would get around to sooner or later: the electric chair. "Old parky" has fascinated me ever since my first James

agney movie, and the first eath ow tales ever read (in a book called *Twenty Thousand* Years *in Sing Sing,* written by arden Lewis . Lawes) fired the darker side of my imagination. hat, wondered, would it be like to walk those last forty yards to the electric chair, knowing you were going to die there? Mat, for that matter, would it be like to be the man who had to strap the condemned in□ or pull the switch? hat would such a job take out of you? ven creepier, what might it add?

had tried these basic ideas, always tentatively, on a number of different frameworks over the last twenty or thirty years. had written one successful novella set in prison *Rita ayworth and Shawshank Redemption),* and had sort of come to the conclusion that that was probably it for me, when this

take on the idea came along. here were lots of things liked about it, but nothing more than the narrator's essentially decent voice; low-key, honest, perhaps a little wide-eyed, he is a tephen King narrator if ever there was one. o got to work, but in a tentative, stop-and-start way. Most of the second chapter was written during a rain delay at enway Park!

hen alph called, had filled a notebook with scribbled pages of *The*

*reen Mile,* and realized was building a novel when should have been spending my time clearing my desk for revisions on a book already written

*Desperation -* you'll see it soon, onstant eader). t the point had come to on *Mile,* there are usually just two choices: put it away (probably never to be picked up again) or cast everything else aside and chase.

alph suggested a possible third alternative, a story that could be written the same way it would be read - in installments. nd liked the high-wire aspect of it, too: fall down on the job, fail to carry through, and all at once about a million readers are howling for your blood. No one knows this any better than me, unless it's my secretary, Juliann ugley; we get dozens of angry letters each week, demanding the next book in the *Dark Tower* cycle (patience, followers of oland; another year or so and your wait will end, promise). One of these contained a Polaroid of a teddy-bear in chains, with a message cut out of newspaper headlines and magazine covers: release the next dark tower book at once or the bear dies, it said. put it up in my office to remind myself both of my responsibility and of how wonderful it is to have people actually care - a little - about the creatures of one's imagination.

n any case, 've decided to publish *The reen Mile* in a series of small paperbacks, in the nineteenth-century manner, and hope you'll write and tell me (a) if you liked the story, and (b) if you liked the seldom used but rather amusing delivery system. t has certainly energized the writing of the story, although at this moment (a rainy evening in October of 99 ) it is still far from done, even in rough draft, and the outcome remains in some doubt.

hat is part of the excitement of the whole thing, though - at this point 'm driving through thick fog with the pedal all the way to the metal.

Most of all, want to say that if you have even half as much fun reading this as did writing it, we'll both be well off. njoy□ and why not read this aloud, with a friend? f nothing else, it will shorten the time until the next installment appears on your newsstand or in your local bookstore.

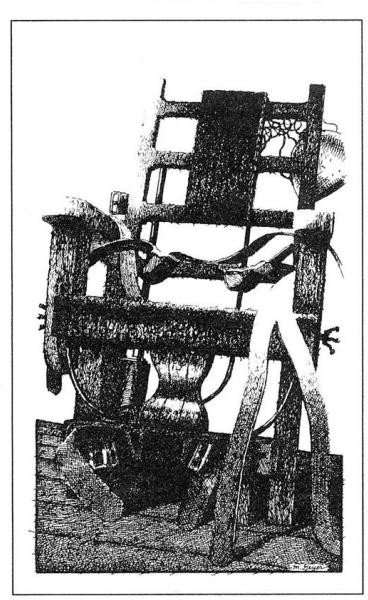
n the meantime, take care, and be good to one another.

- *Stephen King*

# Pa t e

he wo

ead irls



# 1

his happened in 93 , when the state penitentiary was still at old Mountain. nd the electric chair was there, too, of course.

he inmates made jokes about the chair, the way people always make jokes about things that frighten them but can't be gotten away from. hey called it Old parky, or the ig Juicy. hey made cracks about the power bill, and how arden Moores would cook his hanksgiving dinner that fall, with his wife, Melinda, too sick to cook.

ut for the ones who actually had to sit down in that chair, the humor went out of the situation in a hurry. presided over seventy-eight executions during my time at old Mountain (that's one figure 've never been confused about; 'll remember it on my deathbed), and think that, for most of those men, the truth of what was happening to them finally hit all the way home when their ankles were being clamped to the stout oak of "Old

parky's" legs. he realization came then (you would see it rising in their eyes, a kind of cold dismay) that their own legs had finished their careers.

he blood still ran in them, the muscles were still strong, but they were finished, all the same; they were never going to walk another country mile or dance with a girl at a barn-raising. Old parky's clients came to a knowledge of their deaths from the ankles up. here was a black silk bag that went over their heads after they had finished their rambling and mostly disjointed last remarks. t was supposed to be for them, but always thought: it was really for us, to keep us from seeing the awful tide of dismay in their eyes as they realized they were going to die with their knees bent.

here was no death row at old Mountain, only lock, set apart from the other four and about a quarter their size, brick instead of wood, with a horrible bare metal roof that glared in the summer sun like a delirious eyeball. ix cells inside, three on each side of a wide center aisle, each almost twice as big as the cells in the other four blocks. ingles, too. reat accommodations for a prison (especially in the thirties), but the inmates would have traded for cells in any of the other four. elieve me, they would have traded.

here was never a time during my years as block superintendent when all six cells were occupied at one time - thank od for small favors. our was

the most, mixed black and white (at old Mountain, there was no segregation among the walking dead), and that was a little piece of hell. One was a woman, everly Mc all. he was black as the ace of spades and as beautiful as the sin you never had nerve enough to commit. he put up with six years of her husband beating her, but wouldn't put up with his creeping around for a single day. On the evening after she found out he was cheating, she stood waiting for the unfortunate Lester Mc all, known to his pals (and, presumably, to his extremely short-term mistress) as utter, at the top of the stairs leading to the apartment over his barber shop. he waited until he got his overcoat half off, then dropped his cheating guts onto his two-tone shoes. sed one of utter's own razors to do it. wo nights before she was due to sit in Old parky, she called me to her cell and said she had been visited by her frican spirit-father in a dream. e told her to discard her slave-name and to die under her free name, Matuomi. hat was her request, that her death warrant should be read under the name of everly Matuomi. guess her spirit-father didn't give her any first name, or one she could make out, anyhow. said yes, okay, fine. One thing those years serving as the bull-goose screw taught me was never to refuse the condemned unless absolutely had to. n the case of everly Matuomi, it made no difference anyway. he governor called the next day around three in the afternoon, commuting her sentence to life in the rassy alley Penal

acility for omen - all penal and no penis, we used to say back then. was glad to see ev's round ass going left instead of right when she got to the duty desk, let me tell you.

hirty-five years or so later - had to be at least thirty-five - saw that name on the obituary page of the paper, under a picture of a skinny-faced black lady with a cloud of white hair and glasses with rhinestones at the corners. t was everly. he'd spent the last ten years of her life a free woman, the obituary said, and had rescued the small-town library of aines

alls pretty much single-handed. he had also taught unday school and had been much loved in that little backwater. librarian dies of heart failure, the headline said, and below that, in smaller type, almost as an afterthought: *Served Over Two Decades in Prison for Murder.* Only the eyes, wide and blazing behind the glasses with the rhinestones at the corners, were the same. hey were the eyes of a woman who even at seventy-whatever would not hesitate to pluck a safety razor from its blue jar of disinfectant, if the urge seemed pressing. You know murderers, even if they finish up as old

lady librarians in dozey little towns. t least you do if you've spent as much time minding murderers as did. here was only one time ever had a question about the nature of my job. hat, reckon, is why 'm writing this.

he wide corridor up the center of lock was floored with linoleum the color of tired old limes, and so what was called the Last Mile at other prisons was called the reen Mile at old Mountain. t ran, guess, sixty long paces from south to north, bottom to top. t the bottom was the restraint room. t the top end was a -junction. left turn meant life - if you called what went on in the sunbaked exercise yard life, and many did; many lived it for years, with no apparent ill effects. hieves and arsonists and sex criminals, all talking their talk and walking their walk and making their little deals.

right turn, though - that was different. irst you went into my office (where the carpet was also green, a thing kept meaning to change and not getting around to), and crossed in front of my desk, which was flanked by the merican flag on the left and the state flag on the right. On the far side were two doors. One led into the small . . that and the lock guards (sometimes even arden Moores) used; the other opened on a kind of storage shed. his was where you ended up when you walked the reen Mile.

t was a small door - had to duck my head when went through, and John offey actually had to sit and scoot. You came out on a little landing, then went down three cement steps to a board floor. t was a miserable room without heat and with a metal roof, just like the one on the block to which it was an adjunct. t was cold enough in there to see your breath during the winter, and stifling in the summer. t the execution of lmer Manfred - in July or ugust of '30, that one was, believe - we had nine witnesses pass out.

On the left side of the storage shed - again - there was life. ools (all locked down in frames criss-crossed with chains, as if they were carbine rifles instead of spades and pickaxes), dry goods, sacks of seeds for spring planting in the prison gardens, boxes of toilet paper, pallets cross-loaded with blanks for the prison plate-shop□ even bags of lime for marking out the baseball diamond and the football gridiron - the cons played in what was known as he Pasture, and fall afternoons were greatly looked forward to at old Mountain.

On the right - once again - death. Old parky his ownself, sitting up on a plank platform at the southeast corner of the store room, stout oak legs, broad oak arms that had absorbed the terrorized sweat of scores of men in the last few minutes of their lives, and the metal cap, usually hung jauntily on the back of the chair, like some robot kid's beanie in a uck ogers comic-strip. cord ran from it and through a gasket-circled hole in the cinderblock wall behind the chair. Off to one side was a galvanized tin bucket. f you looked inside it, you would see a circle of sponge, cut just right to fit the metal cap. efore executions, it was soaked in brine to better conduct the charge of direct-current electricity that ran through the wire, through the sponge, and into the condemned man's brain.

# 2

93 was the year of John offey. he details would be in the papers, still there for anyone who cared enough to look them out - someone with more energy than one very old man whittling away the end of his life in a

eorgia nursing home. hat was a hot fall, remember that; very hot, indeed. October almost like ugust, and the warden's wife, Melinda, up in the hospital at ndianola for a spell. t was the fall had the worst urinary infection of my life, not bad enough to put me in the hospital myself, but almost bad enough for me to wish was dead every time took a leak. t was the fall of elacroix, the little half-bald renchman with the mouse, the one that came in the summer and did that cute trick with the spool. Mostly, though, it was the fall that John offey came to lock, sentenced to death for the rape-murder of the etterick twins.

here were four or five guards on the block each shift, but a lot of them were floaters. ean tanton, arry erwilliger, and rutus owell (the men called him " rutal," but it was a joke, he wouldn't hurt a fly unless he had to, in spite of his size) are all dead now, and so is Percy etmore, who really was brutal□ not to mention stupid. Percy had no business on lock, where an ugly nature was useless and sometimes dangerous, but he was related to the governor by marriage, and so he stayed.

t was Percy etmore who ushered offey onto the block, with the supposedly traditional cry of ' ead man walking! ead man walking here!'

t was still as hot as the hinges of hell, October or not. he door to the exercise yard opened, letting in a flood of brilliant light and the biggest man

've ever seen, except for some of the basketball fellows they have on the

down in the ' esource oom' of this home for wayward droolers 've finished up in. e wore chains on his arms and across his water-barrel of a chest; he wore legirons on his ankles and shuffled a chain between them that sounded like cascading coins as it ran along the lime - colored corridor between the cells. Percy etmore was on one side of him, skinny little

arry erwilliger was on the other, and they looked like children walking along with a captured bear. ven rutus owell looked like a kid next to

offey, and rutal was over six feet tall and broad as well, a football tackle who had gone on to play at L until he flunked out and came back home to the ridges.

John offey was black, like most of the men who came to stay for awhile in lock before dying in Old parky's lap, and he stood six feet, eight inches tall. e wasn't all willowy like the basketball fellows, though - he was broad in the shoulders and deep through the chest, laced over with muscle in every direction. hey'd put him in the biggest denims they could find in tores, and still the cuffs of the pants rode halfway up on his bunched and scarred calves. he shirt was open to below his chest, and the sleeves stopped somewhere on his forearms. e was holding his cap in one huge hand, which was just as well; perched on his bald mahogany ball of a head, it would have looked like the kind of cap an organgrinder's monkey wears, only blue instead of red. e looked like he could have snapped the chains that held him as easily as you might snap the ribbons on a hristmas present, but when you looked in his face, you knew he wasn't going to do anything like that. t wasn't dull-although that was what Percy thought, it wasn't long before Percy was calling him the ijit - but lost. e kept looking around as if to make out where he was. Maybe even who he was. My first thought was that he looked like a black amson□ only after elilah had shaved him smooth as her faithless little hand and taken all the fun out of him.

' ead man walking!' Percy trumpeted, hauling on that bear of a man's wristcuff, as if he really believed he could move him if offey decided he didn't want to move anymore on his own. arry didn't say anything, but he looked embarrassed. ' ead man - '

' hat'll be enough of that,' said. was in what was going to be offey's cell, sitting on his bunk. 'd known he was coming, of course, was there to welcome him and take charge of him, but had no idea of the man's pure size

until saw him. Percy gave me a look that said we all knew was an asshole (except for the big dummy, of course, who only knew how to rape and murder little girls), but he didn't say anything.

he three of them stopped outside the cell door, which was standing open on its track. nodded to arry, who said: ' re you sure you want to be in there with him, boss?' didn't often hear arry erwilliger sound nervous - he'd been right there by my side during the riots of six or seven years before and had never wavered, even when the rumors that some of them had guns began to circulate - but he sounded nervous then.

' m going to have any trouble with you, big boy?' asked, sitting there on the bunk and trying not to look or sound as miserable as felt - that urinary infection mentioned earlier wasn't as bad as it eventually got, but it was no day at the beach, let me tell you.

offey shook his head slowly - once to the left, once to the right, then back to dead center. Once his eyes found me, they never left me.

arry had a clipboard with offey's forms on it in one hand. ' ive it to him,' said to arry 'Put it in his hand.'

arry did. he big mutt took it like a sleepwalker.

'Now bring it to me, big boy,' said, and offey did, his chains jingling and rattling. e had to duck his head just to enter the cell.

looked up and down mostly to register his height as a fact and not an optical illusion. t was real: six feet, eight inches. is weight was given as two-eighty, but think that was only an estimate; he had to have been three hundred and twenty, maybe as much as three hundred and fifty pounds.

nder the space for scars and identifying marks, one word had been blocked out in the laborious printing of Magnusson, the old trusty in

egistration: *Numerous.*

looked up. offey had shuffled a bit to one side and could see arry standing across the corridor in front of elacroix's cell - he was our only other prisoner in lock when offey came in. el was a slight, balding man with the worried face of an accountant who knows his embezzlement will soon be discovered. is tame mouse was sitting on his shoulder.

Percy etmore was leaning in the doorway of the cell which had just become John offey's. e had taken his hickory baton out of the custom- made holster he carried it in, and was tapping it against one palm the way a man does when he has a toy he wants to use. nd all at once couldn't stand to have him there. Maybe it was the unseasonable heat, maybe it was

the urinary infection heating up my groin and making the itch of my flannel underwear all but unbearable, maybe it was knowing that the state had sent me a black man next door to an idiot to execute, and Percy clearly wanted to hand-tool him a little first. Probably it was all those things. hatever it was, stopped caring about his political connections for a little while.

'Percy.' said. ' hey're moving house over in the infirmary.' ' ill odge is in charge of that detail - '

' know he is,' said. ' o and help him.'

' hat isn't my job,' Percy said. ' his big lugoon is my job.' 'Lugoon' was Percy's joke name for the big ones - a combination of *lug* and *goon*. e resented the big ones. e wasn't skinny, like arry erwilliger, but he was short. banty-rooster sort of guy, the kind that likes to pick fights, especially when the odds are all their way. nd vain about his hair. ould hardly keep his hands off it.

' hen your job is done,' said. ' et over to the infirmary.'

is lower lip pooched out. ill odge and his men were moving boxes and stacks of sheets, even the beds; the whole infirmary was going to a new frame building over on the west side of the prison. ot work, heavy lifting. Percy etmore wanted no part of either.

' hey got all the men they need,' he said.

' hen get over there and straw-boss,' said, raising my voice. saw arry wince and paid no attention. f the governor ordered arden Moores to fire me for ruffling the wrong set of feathers, who was al Moores going to put in my place? Percy? t was a joke. ' really don't care what you do, Percy, as long as you get out of here for awhile.'

or a moment thought he was going to stick and there'd be real trouble, with offey standing there the whole time like the world's biggest stopped clock. hen Percy rammed his billy back into its hand-tooled holster-foolish damned vanitorious thing - and went stalking up the corridor. don't remember which guard was sitting at the duty desk that day - one of the floaters, guess - but Percy must not have liked the way he looked, because he growled, 'You wipe that smirk off your shitepoke face or 'll wipe it off for you' as he went by. here was a rattle of keys, a momentary blast of hot sunlight from the exercise yard, and then Percy etmore was gone, at least for the time being. elacroix's mouse ran back and forth from one of the little renchman's shoulders to the other, his filament whiskers twitching.

' e still, Mr. Jingles,' elacroix said, and the mouse stopped on his left shoulder just as if he had understood. 'Just be so still and so quiet.' n

elacroix's lilting ajun accent, *quiet* came out sounding exotic and foreign

- *kwaht.*

'You go lie down, el,' said curtly. ' ake you a rest. his is none of your business, either.'

e did as said. e had raped a young girl and killed her, and had then dropped her body behind the apartment house where she lived, doused it with coal-oil, and then set it on fire, hoping in some muddled way to dispose of the evidence of his crime. he fire had spread to the building itself, had engulfed it, and six more people had died, two of them children.

t was the only crime he had in him, and now he was just a mild-mannered man with a worried face, a bald pate, and long hair straggling over the back of his shirt-collar. e would sit down with Old parky in a little while, and Old parky would make an end to him□ but whatever it was that had done that awful thing was already gone, and now he lay on his bunk, letting his little companion run squeaking over his hands. n a way, that was the worst; Old parky never burned what was inside them, and the drugs they inject them with today don't put it to sleep. t vacates, jumps to someone else, and leaves us to kill husks that aren't really alive anyway.

turned my attention to the giant.

' f let arry take those chains off you, are you going to be nice?'

e nodded. t was like his head-shake: down, up, back to center. is strange eyes looked at me. here was a kind of peace in them, but not a kind was sure could trust. crooked a finger to arry, who came in and unlocked the chains. e showed no fear now, even when he knelt between

offey's treetrunk legs to unlock the ankle irons, and that eased me some. t was Percy who had made arry nervous, and trusted arry's instincts. trusted the instincts of all my day-to-day lock men, except for Percy.

have a little set speech make to men new on the block, but hesitated with offey, because he seemed so abnormal, and not just in his size.

hen arry stood back ( offey had remained motionless during the entire unlocking ceremony, as placid as a Percheron), looked up at my new charge, tapping on the clipboard with my thumb, and said: ' an you talk, big boy?'

'Yes, sir, boss, can talk,' he said. is voice was a deep and quiet rumble.

t made me think of a freshly tuned tractor engine. e had no real outhern

drawl - he said, not *Ah -* but there was a kind of outhern construction to his speech that noticed later. s if he was from the outh, but not of it. e didn't sound illiterate, but he didn't sound educated. n his speech as in so many other things, he was a mystery. Mostly it was his eyes that troubled me - a kind of peaceful absence in them, as if he were floating far, far away.

'Your name is John offey.'

'Yes, sir, boss, like the drink only not spelled the same way.' ' o you can spell, can you? ead and write?'

'Just my name, boss,' said he, serenely.

sighed, then gave him a short version of my set speech. 'd already decided he wasn't going to be any trouble. n that was both right and wrong.

'My name is Paul dgecombe,' said. ' 'm the lock super - the head screw. You want something from me, ask for me by name. f 'm not here, ask this other, man - his name is arry erwilliger. Or you ask for Mr.

tanton or Mr. owell. o you understand that?'

offey nodded.

'Just don't expect to get what you want unless we decide it's what you need - this isn't a hotel. till with me?'

e nodded again.

' his is a quiet place, big boy - not like the rest of the prison. t's just you and elacroix over there. You won't work; mostly you'll just sit. ive you a chance to think things over.' oo much time for most of them, but didn't say that. ' ometimes we play the radio, if all's in order. You like the radio?'

e nodded, but doubtfully, as if he wasn't sure what the radio was. later found out that was true, in a way; offey knew things when he encountered them again, but in between he forgot. e knew the characters on *Our al Sunday,* but had only the haziest memory of what they'd been up to the last time.

' f you behave, you'll eat on time, you'll never see the solitary cell down at the far end, or have to wear one of those canvas coats that buttons up the back. You'll have two hours in the yard afternoons from four until six, except on aturdays when the rest of the prison population has their flag football games. You'll have your visitors on unday afternoons, if you have someone who wants to visit you. o you, offey?'

e shook his head. ' ot none, boss,' he said. ' ell, your lawyer, then.'

' believe 've seen the back end of him,' he said. ' e was give to me on loan. on't believe he could find his way up here in the mountains.'

looked at him closely to see if he might be trying a little joke, but he didn't seem to be. nd really hadn't expected any different. ppeals weren't for the likes of John offey, not back then; they had their day in court and then the world forgot them until they saw a squib in the paper saying a certain fellow had taken a little electricity along about midnight.

ut a man with a wife, children, or friends to look forward to on unday afternoons was easier to control, if control looked to be a problem. ere it didn't, and that was good. ecause he was so damned big.

shifted a little on the bunk, then decided might feel a little more comfortable in my nether parts if stood up, and so did. e backed away from me respectfully, and clasped his hands in front of him.

'Your time here can be easy or hard, big boy, it all depends on you. 'm here to say you might as well make it easy on all of us, because it comes to the same in the end. e'll treat you as right as you deserve. o you have any questions?'

' o you leave a light on after bedtime?' he asked right away, as if he had only been waiting for the chance.

blinked at him. had been asked a lot of strange questions by newcomers to lock - once about the size of my wife's tits - but never that one.

offey was smiling a trifle uneasily, as if he knew we would think him foolish but couldn't help himself. ' ecause get a little scared in the dark sometimes,' he said. ' f it's a strange place.'

looked at him - the pure size of him - and felt strangely touched. hey did touch you, you know; you didn't see them at their worst, hammering out their horrors like demons at a forge.

'Yes, it's pretty bright in here all night long,' said. ' alf the lights along the Mile burn from nine until five every morning.' hen realized he wouldn't have any idea of what was talking about - he didn't know the

reen Mile from Mississippi mud - and so pointed. ' n the corridor.'

e nodded, relieved. 'm not sure he knew what a corridor was, either, but he could see the 00-watt bulbs in their wire cages.

did something 'd never done to a prisoner before, then - offered him my hand. ven now don't know why. im asking about the lights, maybe.

t made arry erwilliger blink, can tell you that. offey took my hand

with surprising gentleness, my hand all but disappearing into his, and that was all of it. had another moth in my killing bottle. e were done.

stepped out of the cell. arry pulled the door shut on its track and ran both locks. offey stood where he was a moment or two longer, as if he didn't know what to do next, and then he sat down on his bunk, clasped his giant's hands between his knees, and lowered his head like a man who grieves or prays. e said something then in his strange, almost outhern voice. heard it with perfect clarity, and although didn't know much about what he'd done then - you don't need to know about what a man's done in order to feed him and groom him until it's time for him to pay off what he owes - it still gave me a chill.

' couldn't help-it, boss,' he said. ' tried to take it back, but it was too late.'

# 3

'You're going to have you some trouble with Percy,' arry said as we walked back up the hall and into my office. ean tanton, sort of my third in command - we didn't actually have such things, a situation Percy

etmore would have fixed up in a flash - was sitting behind my desk, updating the files, a job never seemed to get around to. e barely looked up as we came in, just gave his little glasses a shove with the ball of his thumb and dived back into his paperwork.

' been having trouble with that peckerwood since the day he came here,'

said, gingerly, pulling my pants away from my crotch and wincing. ' id you hear what he was shouting when he brought that big galoot down?'

' ouldn't very well not,' arry said. ' was there, you know.'

' was in the john and heard it just fine,' ean said. e drew a sheet of paper to him, held it up into the light so could see there was a coffee-ring as well as typing on it, and then tossed it into the waste basket. ' ead man walking.' Must have read that in one of those magazines he likes so much.'

nd he probably had. Percy etmore was a great reader of *Argosy* and *Stag* and *Men s Adventure.* here was a prison tale in every issue, it seemed, and Percy read them avidly, like a man doing research. t was like he was trying to find out how to act, and thought the information was in those magazines. e'd come just after we did nthony ay, the hatchet-killer -

and he hadn't actually participated in an execution yet, although he'd witnessed one from the switch-room.

' e knows people,' arry said. ' e's connected. You'll have to answer for sending him off the block, and you'll have to answer even harder for expecting him to do some real work.'

' don't expect it,' said, and didn't□ but had hopes. ill odge wasn't the sort to let a man just stand around and do the heavy looking-on. ' 'm more interested in the big boy, for the time being. re we going to have trouble with him?'

arry shook his head with decision.

' e was quiet as a lamb at court down there in rapingus ounty,' ean said. e took his little rimless glasses off and began to polish them on his vest. 'Of course they had more chains on him than crooge saw on Marley's ghost, but he could have kicked up dickens if he'd wanted. hat's a pun, son.'

' know,' said, although didn't. just hate letting ean tanton get the better of me.

' ig one, ain't he?' ean said.

' e is,' agreed. 'Monstrous big.'

'Probably have to crank Old parky up to uper ake to fry his ass.'

' on't worry about Old parky,' said absently. ' e makes the big 'uns little.'

ean pinched the sides of his nose, where there were a couple of angry red patches from his glasses, and nodded. 'Yep,' he said. ' ome truth to that, all right.'

asked, ' o either of you know where he came from before he showed up in□ efton? t was efton, wasn't it?'

'Yep,' ean said. ' efton, down in rapingus ounty. efore he showed

up there and did what he did, no one seems to know. e just drifted around,

guess. You might be able to find out a little more from the newspapers in the prison library, if you're really interested. hey probably won't get around to moving those until next week.' e grinned. 'You might have to listen to your little buddy bitching and moaning upstairs, though.'

' might just go have a peek, anyway,' said, and later on that afternoon did.

he prison library was in back of the building that was going to become the prison auto shop - at least that was the plan. More pork in someone's

pocket was what thought, but the epression was on, and kept my opinions to myself - the way should have kept my mouth shut about Percy, but sometimes a man just can't keep it clapped tight. man's mouth gets him in more trouble than his pecker ever could, most of the time. nd the auto shop never happened, anyway - the next spring, the prison moved sixty miles down the road to righton. More backroom deals, reckon. More barrels of pork. asn't nothing to me.

dministration had gone to a new building on the east side of the yard; the infirmary was being moved (whose country-bumpkin idea it had been to put an infirmary on the second floor in the first place was just another of life's mysteries); the library was still partly stocked - not that it ever had much in it - and standing empty. he old building was a hot clapboard box kind of shouldered in between and locks. heir bathrooms backed up on it and the whole building was always swimming with this vague pissy smell, which was probably the only good reason for the move. he library was L-shaped, and not much bigger than my office. looked for a fan, but they were all gone. t must have been a hundred degrees in there, and could feel that hot throb in my groin when sat down. ort of like an infected tooth. know that's absurd, considering the region we're talking about here, but it's the only thing could compare it to. t got a lot worse during and just after taking a leak, which had done just before walking over.

here was one other fellow there after all - a scrawny old trusty named

ibbons dozing away in the corner with a ild est novel in his lap and his hat pulled down over his eyes. he heat wasn't bothering him, nor were the grunts, thumps, and occasional curses from the infirmary upstairs (where it had to be at least ten degrees hotter, and hoped Percy etmore was enjoying it). didn't bother him, either, but went around to the short side of the L, where the newspapers were kept. thought they might be gone along with the fans, in spite of what ean had said. hey weren't, though, and the business about the etterick twins was easily enough looked out; it had been front-page news from the commission of the crime in June right through the trial in late ugust and eptember.

oon had forgotten the heat and the thumps from upstairs and old

ibbons's wheezy snores. he thought of those little nine-year-old girls - their fluffy heads of blonde hair and their engaging obbsey wins smiles - in connection with offey's hulking darkness was unpleasant but impossible

to ignore. iven his size, it was easy to imagine him actually eating them, like a giant in a fairy tale. hat he *had* done was even worse, and it was a lucky thing for him that he hadn't just been lynched right there on the riverbank. f, that was, you considered waiting to walk the reen Mile and sit in Old parky's lap lucky.

# 4

King otton had been deposed in the outh seventy years before all these things happened and would never be king again, but in those years of the thirties it had a little revival. here were no more cotton plantations, but there were forty or fifty prosperous cotton farms in the southern part of our state. Klaus etterick owned one of them. y the standards of the nineteen- fifties he would have been considered only a rung above shirttail poor, but by those of the thirties he was considered well-to-do because he actually paid his store bill in cash at the end of most months, and he could meet the bank president's eyes if they happened to pass on the street. he farmhouse was clean and commodious. n addition to the cotton, there were the other two c's: chickens and a few cows. e and his wife had three children:

oward. who was twelve or thereabouts, and the twin girls. ora and Kathe.

On a warm night in June of that year, the girls asked for and were given permission to sleep on the screen-enclosed side porch, which ran the length of the house. his was a great treat for them. heir mother kissed them goodnight just shy of nine, when the last light had gone out of the sky. t was the final time she saw either of them until they were in their coffins and the undertaker had repaired the worst of the damage.

ountry families went to bed early in those days - "soon as 'twas dark under the table," my own mother sometimes said - and slept soundly.

ertainly Klaus, Marjorie, and owie etterick did on the night the twins were taken. Klaus would almost certainly have been wakened by owser, the family's big old half-breed collie, if he had barked, but owser didn't. Not that night, not ever again.

Klaus was up at first light to do the milking. he porch was on the side of the house away from the barn, and Klaus never thought to look in on the girls. owser's failure to join him was no cause for alarm, either. he dog held the cows and the chickens alike in great disdain, and usually hid in his

doghouse behind the barn when the chores were being performed, unless called□ and called energetically, at that.

Marjorie came downstairs fifteen minutes or so after her husband had

pulled on his boots in the mudroom and tromped out to the barn. he started the coffee, then put bacon on to fry. he combined smells brought owie down from his room under the eaves, but not the girls from the porch. he sent owie out to fetch them as she cracked eggs into the bacon grease. Klaus would want the girls out to get fresh ones as soon as breakfast was over. xcept no breakfast was eaten in the etterick house that morning.

owie came back from the porch, white around the gills and with his formerly sleep-puffy eyes now wide open.

' hey're gone,' he said.

Marjorie went out onto the porch, at first more annoyed than alarmed.

he said later that she had supposed, if she had supposed anything, that the girls had decided to take a walk and pick flowers by the dawn's early light.

hat or some similar green-girl foolishness. One look, and she understood why owie had been white.

he screamed for Klaus - *shrieked for* him - and Klaus came on the dead run, his workboots whitened by the half-full pail of milk he had spilled on them. hat he found on the porch would have jellied the legs of the most courageous parent. he blankets in which the girls would have bundled themselves as the night drew on and grew colder had been cast into one comer. he screen door had been yanked off its upper hinge and hung drunkenly out into the dooryard. nd on the boards of both the porch and the steps beyond the mutilated screen door, there were spatters of blood.

Marjorie begged her husband not to go hunting after the girls alone, and not to take their son if he felt he had to go after them, but she could have saved her breath. e took the shotgun he kept mounted in the mudroom high out of the reach of little hands, and gave owie the. they had been saving for his birthday in July. hen they went, neither of them paying the slightest attention to the shrieking, weeping woman who wanted to know what they would do if they met a gang of wandering hobos or a bunch of bad niggers escaped from the county farm over in Laduc. n this think the men were right, you know. he blood was no longer runny, but it was only tacky yet, and still closer to true red than the maroon that comes when blood has well dried. he abduction hadn't happened too long ago. Klaus

must have reasoned that there was still a chance for his girls, and he meant to take it.

Neither one of them could track worth a damn - they were gatherers, not hunters, men who went into the woods after coon and deer in their seasons not because they much wanted to, but because it was an expected thing.

nd the dooryard around the house was a blighted patch of dirt with tracks all overlaid in a meaningless tangle. hey went around the barn, and saw almost at once why owser, a bad biter but a good barker, hadn't sounded the alarm. e lay half in and half out of a doghouse which had been built of leftover barnboards (there was a signboard with the word *Bowser* neatly printed on it over the curved hole in the front - saw a photograph of it in one of the papers), his head turned most of the way around on his neck. t would have taken a man of enormous power to have done that to such a big animal, the prosecutor later told John offey's jury□ and then he had looked long and meaningfully at the hulking defendant, sitting behind the defense table with his eyes cast down and wearing a brand-new pair of state-bought bib overalls that looked like damnation in and of themselves. eside the dog, Klaus and owie found a scrap of cooked link sausage. he theory - a sound one, have no doubt - was that offey had first charmed the dog with treats, and then, as owser began to eat the last one, had reached out his hands and broken its neck with one mighty snap of his wrists.

eyond the barn was etterick's north pasture, where no cows would graze that day. t was drenched with morning dew, and leading off through it, cutting on a diagonal to the northwest and plain as day, was the beaten track of a man's passage.

ven in his state of near-hysteria, Klaus etterick hesitated at first to follow it. t wasn't fear of the man or men who had taken his daughters; it was fear of following the abductor's backtrail□ of going off in exactly the wrong direction at a time when every second might count.

owie solved that dilemma by plucking a shred of yellow cotton cloth from a bush growing just beyond the edge of the dooryard. Klaus was shown this same scrap of cloth as he sat on the witness stand, and began to weep as he identified it as a piece of his daughter Kathe's sleeping-shorts.

wenty yards beyond it, hanging from the jutting finger of a juniper shrub, they found a piece of faded green cloth that matched the nightie ora had been wearing when she kissed her ma and pa goodnight.

he ettericks, father and son, set off at a near-run with their guns held in front of them, as soldiers do when crossing contested ground under heavy fire. f wonder at anything that happened that day, it is that the boy, chasing desperately after his father (and often in danger of being left behind completely), never fell and put a bullet in Klaus etterick's back.

he farmhouse was on the exchange - another sign to the neighbors that the ettericks were prospering, at least moderately, in disastrous times - and Marjorie used entral to call as many of her neighbors that were also on the exchange as she could, telling them of the disaster which had fallen like a lightning-stroke out of a clear sky, knowing that each call would produce overlapping ripples, like pebbles tossed rapidly into a stilly pond. hen she lifted the handset one last time, and spoke those words that were almost a trademark of the early telephone systems of that time, at least in the rural

outh: ' ello, entral, are you on the line?'

entral was, but for a moment could say nothing, that worthy woman was all agog. t last she managed, 'Yes, ma'am. Mrs. etterick, sure am, oh dear sweet blessed Jesus, 'm a-prayin right now that your little girls are all right - '

'Yes, thank you,' Marjorie said. ' ut you tell the Lord to wait long enough for you to put me through to the high sheriff's office down efton, all right?'

he rapingus ounty high sheriff was a whiskeynosed old boy with a gut like a washtub and a head of white hair so fine it looked like pipe- cleaner fuzz. knew him well; he'd been up to old Mountain plenty of times to see what he called 'his boys' off into the great beyond. xecution witnesses sat in the same folding chairs you've probably sat in yourself a time or two, at funerals or church suppers or range bingo (in fact, we borrowed ours from the Mystic ie No. range back in those days), and every time heriff omer ribus sat down in one, waited for the dry crack that would signal collapse. dreaded that day and hoped for it, both at the same time, but it was a day that never came. Not long after - couldn't have been more than one summer after the etterick girls were abducted - he had a heart attack in his office, apparently while screwing a seventeen year-old black girl named aphne hurtleff. here was a lot of talk about that, with him always sporting his wife and six boys around so prominent come election time - those were the days when, if you wanted to run for something, the saying used to be " e aptist or be gone." ut people love a hypocrite, you know - they recognize one of their own, and it always feels

so good when someone gets caught with his pants down and his dick up and it isn't you.

esides being a hypocrite, he was incompetent, the kind of fellow who'd get himself photographed petting some lady's cat when it was someone else

- eputy ob Mc ee, for instance - who'd actually risked a broken collarbone by going up the tree where Mistress Pussycat was and bringing her down.

Mc ee listened to Marjorie etterick babble for maybe two minutes, then cut her off with four or five questions - quick and curt, like a trained fighter's flicking little jabs to the face, the kind of punches that are so small and so hard that the blood comes before the sting. hen he had answers to these, he said: ' 'll call obo Marchant. e's got dogs. You stay put, Miz

etterick. f your man and your boy come back, make them stay put, too.

ry, anyway.'

er man and her boy had, meanwhile, followed the track of the abductor three miles to the northwest, but when his trail ran out of open fields and into piney woods, they lost it. hey were farmers, not hunters, as have said, and by then they knew it was an animal they were after. long the way they had found the yellow top that matched Kathe's shorts, and another piece of ora's nightie. oth items were drenched with blood, and neither Klaus nor owie was in as much of a hurry as they had been at the start; a certain cold certainty must have been filtering into their hot hopes by then, working its way downward the way cold water does, sinking because it is heavier.

hey cast into the woods, looking for signs, found none, cast in a second place with similar lack of result, then in a third. his time they found a fantail of blood splashed across the needles of a loblolly pine. hey went in the direction it seemed to point for a little way, then began the casting-about process again. t was by then nine o'clock in the morning, and from behind them they began to hear shouting men and baying dogs. ob Mc ee had put together a jackleg posse in the time it would have taken heriff ribus to finish his first brandy-sweetened cup of coffee, and by quarter past the hour they reached Klaus and owie etterick, the two of them stumbling desperately around on the edge of the woods. oon the men were moving again, with obo's dogs leading the way. Mc ee let Klaus and owie go on with them - they wouldn't have gone back if he'd ordered them, no matter how much they dreaded the outcome, and Mc ee must have seen that - but

he made them unload their weapons. he others had done the same, Mc ee said; it was safer. hat he didn't tell them (nor did anyone else) was that the

ettericks were the only ones who had been asked to turn their loads over to the deputy. alf-distracted and wanting only to go through to the end of the nightmare and be done with it, they did as he asked. hen ob Mc ee got the ettericks to unload their guns and give him their loads, he probably saved John offey's miserable excuse for a life.

he baying, yawping dogs pulled them through two miles of scrub pine, always on that same rough northwest heading. hen they came out on the edge of the rapingus iver, which is wide and slow at that point, running southeast through low, wooded hills where families named ray and

obinette and uplissey still made their own mandolins and often spat out their own rotted teeth as they plowed; deep countryside where men were apt to handle snakes on unday morning and lie down in carnal embrace with their daughters on unday night. knew their families; most of them had sent parky a meal from time to time. On the far side of the river, the members of the posse could see the June sun glinting off the steel rails of a

reat outhern branch line. bout a mile downstream to their right, a trestle crossed toward the coal-fields of est reen.

ere they found a wide trampled patch in the grass and low bushes, a patch so bloody that many of the men had to sprint back into the woods and relieve themselves of their breakfasts. hey also found the rest of ora's nightgown lying in this bloody patch, and owie, who had held up admirably until then, reeled back against his father and nearly fainted.

nd it was here that obo Marchant's dogs had their first and only disagreement of the day. here were six in all, two bloodhounds, two bluetick hounds, and a couple of those terrierlike mongrels border

outherners call coon hounds. he coonies wanted to go northwest, upstream along the rapingus; the rest wanted to go in the other direction, southeast. hey got all tangled in their leads, and although the papers said nothing about this part, could imagine the horrible curses obo must have rained down on them as he used his hands - surely the most educated part of him - to get them straightened around again. have known a few hound-dog men in my time, and it's been my experience that, as a class, they run remarkably true to type.

obo shortleashed them into a pack, then ran ora etterick's torn nightgown under their noses, to kind of remind them what they were doing

out on a day when the temperature would be in the mid-nineties by noon and the noseeums were already circling the heads of the possemen in clouds. he coonies took another sniff, decided to vote the straight ticket, and off they all went downstream, in full cry.

t wasn't but ten minutes later when the men stopped, realizing they could hear more than just the dogs. t was a howling rather than a baying, and a sound no dog had ever made, not even in its dying extremities. t was a sound none of them had ever heard *anything* make, but they knew right away, all of them, that it was a man. o they said, and believed them. think would have recognized it, too. have heard men scream just that way, think, on their way to the electric chair. Not a lot - most button themselves up and go either quiet or joking, like it was the class picnic - but a few. sually the ones who believe in hell as a real place, and know it is waiting for them at the end of the reen Mile.

obo shortleashed his dogs again. hey were valuable, and he had no intention of losing them to the psychopath howling and gibbering just down yonder. he other men reloaded their guns and snapped them closed. hat howling had chilled them all, and made the sweat under their arms and running down their backs feel like icewater. hen men take a chill like that, they need a leader if they are to go on, and eputy Mc ee led them. e got out in front and walked briskly ( bet he didn't *feel* very brisk right then, though) to a stand of alders that jutted out of the woods on the right, with the rest of them trundling along nervously about five paces behind. e paused just once, and that was to motion the biggest man among them -

am ollis - to keep near Klaus etterick.

On the other side of the alders there was more open ground stretching back to the woods on the right. On the left was the long, gentle slope of the riverbank. hey all stopped where they were, thunderstruck. think they would have given a good deal to unsee what was before them, and none of them would ever forget it - it was the sort of nightmare, bald and almost smoking in the sun, that lies beyond the drapes and furnishings of good and ordinary lives - church suppers, walks along country lanes, honest work, love-kisses in bed. here is a skull in every man, and tell you there is a skull in the lives of all men. hey saw it that day, those men - they saw what sometimes grins behind the smile.

itting on the riverbank in a faded, bloodstained jumper was the biggest man any of them had ever seen - John offey. is enormous, splay-toed

feet were bare. On his head he wore a faded red bandanna, the way a country woman would wear a kerchief into church. nats circled him in a black cloud. urled in each arm was the body of a naked girl. heir blonde hair, once curly and light as milkweed fluff, was now matted to their heads and streaked red. he man holding them sat bawling up at the sky like a moonstruck calf, his dark brown cheeks slicked with tears, his face twisted in a monstrous cramp of grief e drew breath in hitches, his chest rising until the snaps holding the straps of his jumper were strained, and then let that vast catch of air out in another of those howls. o often you read in the paper that "the killer showed no remorse," but that wasn't the case here. John offey was torn open by what he had done□ but he would live. he girls would not. hey had been torn open in a more fundamental way.

No one seemed to know how long they stood there, looking at the howling man who was, in his turn, looking across the great still plate of the river at a train on the other side, storming down the tracks toward the trestle that crossed the river. t seemed they looked for an hour or for forever, and yet the train got no farther along, it seemed to storm only in one place, like a child doing a tantrum, and the sun did not go behind a cloud, and the sight was not blotted from their eyes. t was there before them, as real as a dogbite. he black man rocked back and forth; ora and Kathe rocked with him like dolls in the arms of a giant. he bloodstained muscles in the man's huge, bare arms flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed, flexed and relaxed.

t was Klaus etterick who broke the tableau. creaming, he flung himself at the monster who had raped and killed his daughters. am ollis knew his job and tried to do it, but couldn't. e was six inches taller than Klaus and outweighed him by at least seventy pounds, but Klaus seemed to almost shrug his encircling arms off. Klaus flew across the intervening open ground and launched a flying kick at offey's head. is workboot, caked with spilled milk that had already soured in the heat, scored a direct hit on

offey's left temple, but offey seemed not to feel it at all. e only sat there, keening and rocking and looking out across the river; the way imagine it, he could almost have been a picture out of some piney woods Pentecostal sermon, the faithful follower of the ross looking out toward

oshen Land□ if not for the corpses, that was.

t took four men to haul the hysterical farmer off John offey, and he fetched offey don't know how many good licks before they finally did. t didn't seem to matter to offey, one way or the other; he just went on

looking out across the river and keening. s for etterick, all the fight went out of him when he was finally pulled off - as if some strange galvanizing current had been running through the huge black man ( still have a tendency to think in electrical metaphors; you'll have to pardon me), and when etterick's contact with that power source was finally broken, he went as limp as a man flung back from a live wire. e knelt wide-legged on the riverbank with his hands to his face, sobbing. owie joined him and they hugged each other forehead to forehead.

wo men watched them while the rest formed a rifle-toting ring around the rocking, wailing black man. e still seemed not to realize that anyone but him was there. Mc ee stepped forward, shifted uncertainly from foot to foot for a bit, then hunkered.

'Mister,' he said in a quiet voice, and offey hushed at once. Mc ee looked at eyes that were bloodshot from crying. nd still they streamed, as if someone had left a faucet on inside him. hose eyes wept, and yet were somehow untouched□ distant and serene. thought them the strangest eyes

had ever seen in my life, and Mc ee felt much the same. 'Like the eyes of an animal that never saw a man before,' he told a reporter named

ammersmith just before the trial. 'Mister, do you hear me?' Mc ee asked.

lowly, offey nodded his head. till he curled his arms around his unspeakable dolls, their chins down on their chests so their faces could not be clearly seen, one of the few mercies od saw fit to bestow that day.

' o you have a name?' Me ee asked.

'John offey,' he said in a thick and tear-clotted voice. ' offey like the drink, only not spelled the same way.'

Mc ee nodded, then pointed a thumb at the chest pocket of offey's jumper, which was bulging. t looked to Mc ee like it might have been a gun - not that a man offey's size would need a gun to do some major damage, if he decided to go off. ' hat's that in there, John offey? s that maybe a heater? pistol?'

'Nosir,' offey said in his thick voice, and those strange eyes - welling tears and agonized on top, distant and weirdly serene underneath, as if the true John offey was somewhere else, looking out on some other landscape where murdered little girls were nothing to get all worked up about - never left eputy Mc ee's. ' hat's just a little lunch have.'

'Oh, now, a little lunch, is that right?' Mc ee asked, and offey nodded and said yessir with his eyes running and dear snot-runners hanging out of his nose. ' nd where did the likes of you get a little lunch, John offey?'

orcing himself to be calm, although he could smell the girls by then, and could see the flies lighting and sampling the places on them that were wet.

t was their hair that was the worst, he said later□ and this wasn't in any newspaper story; it was considered too grisly for family reading. No, this got from the reporter who wrote the story, Mr. ammersmith. looked him up later on, because later on John offey became sort of an obsession with me. Mc ee told this ammersmith that their blonde hair wasn't blonde anymore. t was auburn. lood had run down their cheeks out of it like it was a bad dye-job, and you didn't have to be a doctor to see that their fragile skulls had been dashed together with the force of those mighty arms. Probably they had been crying. Probably he had wanted to make them stop.

f the girls had been lucky, this had happened before the rapes.

Looking at that made it hard for a man to think, even a man as determined to do his job as eputy Mc ee was. ad thinking could cause mistakes, maybe more bloodshed. Mc ee drew him in a deep breath and calmed himself. ried, anyway.

' ellsir, don't exactly remember, be dog if do,' offey said in his tear- choked voice, 'but it's a little lunch, all right, sammidges and think a swee' pickle.'

might just have a look for myself, it's all the same to you,' Mc ee said. ' on't you move now, John offey. on't do it, boy, because there are enough guns aimed at you to make you disappear from the waist up should you so much as twitch a finger.'

offey looked out across the river and didn't move as Mc ee gently reached into the chest pocket of those biballs and pulled out something wrapped in newspaper and tied with a hank of butcher's twine. Mc ee snapped the string and opened the paper, although he was pretty sure it was just what offey said it was, a little lunch. here was a bacon-tomato sandwich and a jelly fold-over. here was also a pickle, wrapped in its own piece of a funny page John offey would never be able to puzzle out. here were no sausages. owser had gotten the sausages out of John offey's little lunch.

Mc ee handed the lunch back over his shoulder to one of the other men without taking his eyes off offey. unkered down like that, he was too

close to want to let his attention stray for even a second. he lunch, wrapped up again and tied for good measure, finally ended up with obo Marchant, who put it in his knapsack, where he kept treats for his dogs (and a few fishing lures, shouldn't wonder). t wasn't introduced into evidence at the trial - justice in this part of the world is swift, but not as swift as a bacon-tomato sandwich goes over - though photographs of it were.

' hat happened here, John offey?' Mc ee asked in his low, earnest voice. 'You want to tell me that?'

nd offey said to Mc ee and the others almost exactly the same thing he said to me; they were also the last words the prosecutor said to the jury at offey's trial. ' couldn't help it,' John offey said, holding the murdered, violated girls naked in his arms. he tears began to pour down his cheeks again. ' tried to take it back, but it was too late!'

' oy, you are under arrest for murder,' Mc ee said, and then he spit in John offey's face.

he jury was out forty-five minutes. Just about time enough to eat a little lunch of their own. wonder they had any stomach for it.

# 5

think you know didn't find all that out during one hot October afternoon in the soon-to-be-defunct prison library, from one set of old newspapers stacked in a pair of Pomona orange crates, but learned enough to make it hard for me to sleep that night. hen my wife got up at two in the morning and found me sitting in the kitchen, drinking buttermilk and smoking home-rolled ugler, she asked me what was wrong and lied to her for one of the few times in the long course of our marriage. said 'd had another run-in with Percy etmore. had, of course, but that wasn't the reason she'd found me sitting up late. was usually able to leave Percy at the office.

' ell, forget that rotten apple and come on back to bed,' she said. ' 've got something that'll help you sleep, and you can have all you want.'

' hat sounds good, but think we'd better not,' said. ' 've got a little something wrong with my waterworks, and wouldn't want to pass it on to you.'

he raised an eyebrow. ' aterworks, huh,' she said. ' guess you must have taken up with the wrong streetcorner girl the last time you were in

aton ouge.' 've never been in aton ouge and never so much as touched a streetcorner girl, and we both knew it.

' t's just a plain old urinary infection,' said. 'My mother used to say boys got them from taking a leak when the north wind was blowing.'

'Your mother also used to stay in all day if she spilled the salt,' my wife said. ' r adler - '

'No, sir,' said, raising my hand. ' e'll want me to take sulfa, and 'll be throwing up in every comer of my office by the end of the week. t'll run its course, but in the meantime, guess we best stay out of the playground.'

he kissed my forehead right over my left eyebrow, which always gives me the prickles□ as Janice well knew. 'Poor baby. s if that awful Percy

etmore wasn't enough. ome to bed soon.'

did, but before did, stepped out onto the back porch to empty out (and checked the wind direction with a wet thumb before did - what our parents tell us when we are small seldom goes ignored, no matter how foolish it may be). Peeing outdoors is one joy of country living the poets never quite got around to, but it was no joy that night; the water coming out of me burned like a line of lit coal-oil. Yet thought it had been a little worse that afternoon, and *knew* it had been worse the two or three days before. had hopes that maybe had started to mend. Never was a hope more ill-founded. No one had told me that sometimes a bug that gets up inside there, where it's warm and wet, can take a day or two off to rest before coming on strong again. would have been surprised to know it. would have been even more surprised to know that, in another fifteen or twenty years, there would be pills you could take that would smack that sort of infection out of your system in record time□ and while those pills might make you feel a little sick at your stomach or loose in your bowels, they almost never made you vomit the way r. adler's sulfa pills did. ack in '3 , there wasn't much you could do but wait, and try to ignore that feeling that someone had spilled coal-oil inside your works and then touched a match to it.

finished my butt, went into the bedroom, and finally got to sleep. dreamed of girls with shy smiles and blood in their hair.

# 6

he next morning there was a pink memo slip on my desk, asking me to stop by the warden's office as soon as could. knew what that was about - there were unwritten but very important rules to the game, and had stopped playing by them for awhile yesterday - and so put it off as long as possible. Like going to the doctor about my waterworks problem, suppose.

've always thought this "get-it-over-with" business was overrated.

nyway, didn't hurry to arden Moores's office. stripped off my wool uniform coat instead, hung it over the back of my chair, and turned on the fan in the corner - it was another hot one. hen sat down and went over

rutus owell's night-sheet. here was nothing there to get alarmed about.

elacroix had wept briefly after turning in - he did most nights, and more for himself than for the folks he had roasted alive, am quite sure - and then had take Mr. Jingles, the mouse, out of the cigar box he slept in. hat had calmed el, and he had slept like a baby the rest of the night. Mr. Jingles had most likely spent it on elacroix's stomach, with his tail curled over his paws, eyes unblinking. t was as if od had decided elacroix needed a guardian angel, but had decreed in is wisdom that only a mouse would do for a rat like our homicidal friend from Louisiana. Not all *that* was in

rutal's report, of course, but had done enough night watches myself to fill in the stuff between the lines. here was a brief note about offey: "Laid awake, mostly quiet, may have cried some. tried to get some talk started, but after a few grunted replies from offey, gave up. Paul or arry may have better luck."

" etting the talk started" was at the center of our job, really. didn't know it then, but looking back from the vantage point of this strange old age ( think all old ages seem strange to the folk who must endure them), understand that it was, and why didn't see it then - it was too big, as central to our work as our respiration was to our lives. t wasn't important that the floaters be good at "getting the talk started," but it was vital for me and arry and rutal and ean□ and it was one reason why Percy etmore was such a disaster. he inmates hated him, the guards hated him□ everyone hated him, presumably, except for his political connections, Percy himself, and maybe (but only maybe) his mother. e was like a dose of white arsenic sprinkled into a wedding cake, and think knew he spelled disaster the start. e was an accident waiting to happen. s for the rest of us, we would have scoffed at the idea that we functioned most usefully not as the guards of the condemned but as their psychiatrists part of me still

wants to scoff at that idea today - but we knew about getting the talk started□ and without the talk, men facing Old parky had a nasty habit of going insane.

made a note at the bottom of rutal's report to talk to John offey - to try, at least - and then passed on to a note from urtis nderson, the warden's chief assistant. t said that he, nderson, expected a O order for

dward elacrois ( nderson's misspelling; the man's name was actually

duard elacroix) very soon. O stood for date of execution, and according to the note, urtis had been told on good authority that the little

renchman would take the walk shortly before alloween - October 7th was his best guess, and urtis nderson's guesses were very informed. ut before then we could expect a new resident, name of illiam harton. " e's what you like to call "a problem child," " urtis had written in his backslanting and somehow prissy script. " razy-wild and proud of it. as rambled all over the state for the last year or so, and has hit the big time at last. Killed three people in a holdup, one a pregnant woman, killed a fourth in the getaway. tate Patrolman. ll he missed was a nun and a blind man."

smiled a little at that. " harton is 9 years old, has *Billy the Kid* tattooed on upper l. forearm. You will have to slap his nose a time or two, guarantee you that, but be careful when you do it. his man just doesn't care." e had underlined this last sentiment twice, then finished: " lso, he may be a hang-arounder. e's working appeals, and there's the fact that he is a minor."

crazy kid, working appeals, apt to be around for awhile. Oh, that all sounded just fine. uddenly the day seemed hotter than ever, and could no longer put off seeing arden Moores.

worked for three wardens during my years as a old Mountain guard;

al Moores was the last and best of them. n a walk. onest, straightforward, lacking even urtis nderson's rudimentary wit, but equipped with just enough political savvy to keep his job during those grim years□ and enough integrity to keep from getting seduced by the game. e would not rise any higher, but that seemed all right with him. e was fifty- eight or -nine back then, with a deeply lined bloodhound face that obo Marchant probably would have felt right at home with. e had white hair and his hands shook with some sort of palsy, but he was strong. he year before, when a prisoner had rushed him in the exercise yard with a shank whittled out of a crate-slat, Moores had stood his ground, grabbed the

skatehound's wrist, and had twisted it so hard that the snapping bones had sounded like dry twigs burning in a hot fire. he skatehound, all his grievances forgotten, had gone down on his knees in the dirt and begun screaming for his mother. ' 'm not her,' Moores said in his cultured outhern voice, ' ut if was, 'd raise up my skirts and piss on you from the loins that gave you birth.'

hen came into his office, he started to get up and waved him back down. took the seat across the desk from him, and began by asking about his wife□ except in our part of the world, that's not how you do it. ' ow's that pretty gal of yours' is what asked, as if Melinda had seen only seventeen summers instead of sixty-two or -three. My concern was genuine he was a woman could have loved and married myself, if the lines of our lives had coincided - but didn't mind diverting him a little from his main business, either.

e sighed deeply. 'Not so well, Paul. Not so well at all.' 'More headaches?'

'Only one this week, but it was the worst yet - put her flat on her back for most of the day before yesterday. nd now she's developed this weakness in her right hand - ' e raised his own liverspotted right hand. e both watched it tremble above his blotter for a moment or two, and then he lowered it again. could tell he would have given just about anything not to be telling me what he was telling me, and would have given just about anything not to be hearing it. Melinda's headaches had started in the spring, and all that summer her doctor had been saying they were 'nervous-tension migraines,' perhaps caused by the stress of al's coming retirement. xcept that neither of them could wait for his retirement, and my own wife had told me that migraine is not a disease of the old but the young; by the time its sufferers reached Melinda Moores's age, they were usually getting better, not worse. nd now this weakness of the hand. t didn't sound like nervous tension to me; it sounded like a damned stroke.

' r. averstrom wants her to go in hospital up to ndianola,' Moores said. ' ave some tests. ead -rays, he means. ho knows what else. he is scared to death.' e paused, then added, ' ruth to tell, so am .'

'Yeah, but you see she does it,' said. ' on't wait. f it turns out to be something they can see with an -ray, it may turn out to be something they can fix.'

'Yes,' he agreed, and then, for just a moment - the only one during that part of our interview, as recall - our eyes met and locked. here was the sort of nakedly perfect understanding between us that needs no words. t could be a stroke, yes. t could also be a cancer growing in her brain, and if it was that, the chances that the doctors at ndianola could do anything about it were slim going on none. his was '3 , remember, when even something as relatively simple as a urinary infection was either sulfa and stink or suffer and wait.

' thank you for your concern, Paul. Now let's talk about Percy etmore.'

groaned and covered my eyes.

' had a call from the state capital this morning,' the warden said evenly. ' t was quite an angry call, as 'm sure you can imagine. Paul, the governor is so married he's almost not there, if you take my meaning. nd his wife has a brother who has one child. hat child is Percy etmore. Percy called his dad last night, and Percy's dad called Percy's aunt. o have to trace the rest of this out for you?'

'No,' said. 'Percy squealed. Just like the schoolroom sissy telling teacher he saw Jack and Jill smooching in the cloakroom.'

'Yep,' Moores agreed, 'that's about the size of it.'

'You know what happened between Percy and elacroix when elacroix came in?' asked. 'Percy and his damned hickory billy-club?'

'Yes, but - '

' nd you know how he runs it along the bars sometimes, just for the pure hell of it. e's mean, and he's stupid, and don't know how much longer can take him. hat's the truth.'

e'd known each other five years. hat can be a long time for men who get on well, especially when part of the job is trading life for death. hat

'm saying is that he understood what meant. Not that would quit; not with the epression walking around outside the prison walls like a dangerous criminal, one that couldn't be caged as our charges were. etter men than me were out on the roads or riding the rods. was lucky and knew it - children grown and the mortgage, that two-hundred-pound block of marble, had been off my chest for the last two years. ut a man's got to eat, and his wife has to eat, too. lso, we were used to sending our daughter and son-in-law twenty bucks whenever we could afford it (and sometimes when we couldn't, if Jane's letters sounded particularly desperate). e was an out- of-work high-school teacher, and if that didn't qualify for desperate back in

those days, then the word had no meaning. o no, you didn't walk off a steady paycheck job like mine□ not in cold blood, that was. ut my blood *wasn t* cold that fall. he temperatures outside were unseasonable, and the infection crawling around inside me had turned the thermostat up even more. nd when a man's in that kind of situation, why, sometimes his fist flies out pretty much of its own accord. nd if you slug a connected man like Percy etmore once, you might as well just go right on slugging, because there's no going back.

' tick with it,' Moores said quietly. ' hat's what called you in here to say. have it on good authority - the person who called me this morning, in fact - that Percy has an application in at riar, and that his application will be accepted.'

' riar,' said. hat was riar idge, one of two state-run hospitals. ' hat's this kid doing? ouring state facilities?'

' t's an administration job. etter pay, and papers to push instead of hospital beds in the heat of the day.' e gave me a slanted grin. 'You know, Paul, you might be shed of him already if you hadn't put him in the switch- room with an ay when he hief walked.'

or a moment what he said seemed so peculiar didn't have a clue what he was getting at. Maybe didn't *want* to have a clue.

' here else would put him?' asked. ' hrist, he hardly knows what he's doing on the block! o make him part of the active execution team - ' didn't finish. ouldn't finish. he potential for screw-ups seemed endless.

'Nevertheless, you'd do well to put him out for elacroix. f you want to get rid of him, that is.'

looked at him with my jaw hung. t last was able to get it up where it belonged so could talk. ' hat are you saying? hat he wants to experience one right up close where he can smell the guy's nuts cooking?'

Moores shrugged. is eyes, so soft when he had been speaking about his wife, now looked flinty. ' elacroix's nuts are going to cook whether

etmore's on the team or not,' he said. ' orrect?'

'Yes, but he could screw up. n fact, al, he's almost *bound* to screw up.

nd in front of thirty or so witnesses□ reporters all the way up from Louisiana□ '

'You and rutus owell will make sure he doesn't,' Moores said. ' nd if he does anyway, it goes on his record, and it'll still be there long after his statehouse connections are gone. You understand?'

did. t made me feel sick and scared, but did.

' e may want to stay for offey, but if we're lucky, he'll get all he needs from elacroix. You just make sure you put him out for that one.'

had planned to stick Percy in the switch-room again, then down in the tunnel, riding shotgun on the gurney that would take elacroix to the meatwagon parked across the road from the prison, but tossed all those plans back over my shoulder without so much as a second look. nodded. had the sense to know it was a gamble was taking, but didn't care. f it would get rid of Percy etmore, 'd tweak the devil's nose. e could take part in his execution, clamp on the cap, and then look through the grille and tell an ay to roll on two; he could watch the little renchman ride the lightning that he, Percy etmore, had let out of the bottle. Let him have his nasty little thrill, if that's what state-sanctioned murder was to him. Let him go on to riar idge, where he would have his own office and a fan to cool it. nd if his uncle by marriage was voted out of office in the next election and he had to find out what work was like in the tough old sunbaked world where not all the bad guys were locked behind bars and sometimes you got your own head whipped, so much the better.

' ll right,' said, standing up. ' 'll put him out front for elacroix. nd in the meantime, 'll keep the peace.'

' ood,' he said, and stood up himself. ' y the way, how's that problem of yours?' e pointed delicately in the direction of my groin.

' eems a little better.'

' ell, that's fine.' e saw me to the door. ' hat about offey, by the way? s he going to be a problem?'

' don't think so,' said. ' o far he's been as quiet as a dead rooster. e's strange - strange eyes - but quiet. e'll keep tabs on him, though. on't worry about that.'

'You know what he did, of course.' ' ure.'

e was seeing me through to the outer office by then, where old Miss

annah sat bashing away at her nderwood as she had ever since the last ice age had ended, it seemed. was happy to go. ll in all, felt as if 'd gotten off easy. nd it was nice to know there was a chance of surviving Percy, after all.

'You send Melinda a whole basket of my love,' said. ' nd don't go buying you an extra crate of trouble, either. t'll probably turn out to be

nothing but migraine, after all.'

'You bet,' he said, and below his sick eyes, his lips smiled. he combination was damned near ghoulish.

s for me, went back to lock to start another day. here was paperwork to be read and written, there were floors to be mopped, there were meals to be served, a duty roster to be made out for the following week, there were a hundred details to be seen to. ut mostly there was waiting - in prison there's always plenty of that, so much it never gets done.

aiting for duard elacroix to walk the reen Mile, waiting for illiam

harton to arrive with his curled lip and illy the Kid tattoo, and, most of all, waiting for Percy etmore to be gone out of my life.

# 7

elacroix's mouse was one of od's mysteries. never saw one in

lock before that summer, and never saw one after that fall, when

elacroix passed from our company on a hot and thundery night in October

- passed from it in a manner so unspeakable can barely bring myself to recall it. elacroix claimed that he trained that mouse, which started its life among us as teamboat illy, but really think it was the other way around. ean tanton felt the same way, and so did rutal. oth of them were there the night the mouse put in its first appearance, and as rutal said, " he thing 'us half-tame already, and twice as smart as that ajun what thought he owned it."

ean and were in my office, going over the record-box for the last year, getting ready to write follow-up letters to witnesses of five executions, and to write follow-ups to follow-ups in another six stretching all the way back to ' 9. asically, we wanted to know just one thing: were they pleased with the service? know it sounds grotesque, but it was an important consideration. s taxpayers they were our customers, but very special ones.

man or a woman who will turn out at midnight to watch a man die has got a special, pressing reason to be there, a special need, and if execution is a proper punishment, then that need ought to be satisfied. hey've had a nightmare. he purpose of the execution is to show them that the nightmare is over. Maybe it even works that way. ometimes.

' ey!' rutal called from outside the door, where he was manning the desk at the head of the hall. ' ey, you two! et out here!'

ean and gazed at each other with identical expressions of alarm, thinking that something had happened to either the ndian from Oklahoma (his name was rlen itterbuck, but we called him he hief□ or, in arry

erwilliger's case, hief oat heese, because that was what arry claimed

itterbuck smelled like), or the fellow we called he President. ut then

rutal started to laugh, and we hurried to see what was happening. Laughing in lock sounded almost as wrong as laughing in church.

Old oot- oot, the trusty who ran the food-wagon in those days, had been by with his holy-rolling cartful of goodies, and rutal had stocked up for a long night - three sandwiches, two pops, and a couple of moon pies.

lso a side of potato salad oot had undoubtedly filched from the prison kitchen, which was supposed to be off-limits to him. rutal had the logbook open in front of him, and for a wonder he hadn't spilled anything on it yet. Of course, he was just getting started.

' hat?' ean asked. ' hat is it?'

' tate legislature must have opened the pursestrings enough to hire another screw this year after all,' rutal said, still laughing. 'Lookie yonder.'

e pointed and we saw the mouse. started to laugh, too, and ean joined in. You really couldn't help it, because a guard doing quarter-hour check rounds was just like that mouse looked like: a tiny, furry guard making sure no one was trying to escape or commit suicide. t would trot a little way toward us along the reen Mile, then turn its head from side to side, as if checking the cells. hen it would make another forward spurt.

he fact that we could hear both of our current inmates snoring away in spite of the yelling and the laughter somehow made it even funnier.

t was a perfectly ordinary brown mouse, except for the way it seemed to be checking into the cells. t even went into one or two of them, skipping nimbly in between the lower bars in a way imagine many of our inmates, past and present, would envy. xcept it was *out* that the cons would always be wanting to skip, of course.

he mouse didn't go into either of the occupied cells; only the empties.

nd finally it had worked its way almost up to where we were. kept expecting it to turn back, but it didn't. t showed no fear of us at all.

' t ain't normal for a mouse to come up on people that way,' ean said, a little nervously. 'Maybe it's rabid.'

'Oh, my hrist,' rutal said through a mouthful of corned-beef sandwich. ' he big mouse expert. he Mouse Man. You see it foamin at the mouth,

Mouse Man?'

' can't see its mouth at all,' ean said, and that made us all laugh again. couldn't see its mouth, either, but could see the dark little drops that were its eyes, and they didn't look crazy or rabid to me. hey looked interested and intelligent. 've put men to death - men with supposedly immortal souls

- that looked dumber than that mouse.

t scurried up the reen Mile to a spot that was less than three feet from the duty desk□ which wasn't something fancy, like you might be imagining, but only the sort of desk the teachers used to sit behind up at the district high school. nd there it did stop, curling its tail around its paws as prim as an old lady settling her skirts.

stopped laughing all at once, suddenly feeling cold through my flesh all the way to the bones. want to say don't know why felt that way - no one likes to come out with something that's going to make them look or sound ridiculous - but of course do, and if can tell the truth about the rest, guess can tell the truth about this. or a moment imagined myself to be that mouse, not a guard at all but just another convicted criminal there on the reen Mile, convicted and condemned but still managing to look bravely up at a desk that must have seemed miles high to it (as the judgment seat of od will no doubt someday seem to us), and at the heavy-voiced, blue-coated giants who sat behind it. iants that shot its kind with guns, or swatted them with brooms, or set traps on them, traps that broke their backs while they crept cautiously over the word victor to nibble at the cheese on the little copper plate.

here was no broom by the duty desk, but there was a rolling mop-bucket with the mop still in the wringer; 'd taken my turn at swabbing the green lino and all six of the cells shortly before sitting down to the record-box with ean. saw that ean meant to grab the mop and take a swing with it.

touched his wrist just as his fingers touched the slender wooden handle. 'Leave it be,' said.

e shrugged and drew his hand back. had a feeling he didn't want to swat it any more than did.

rutal tore a corner off his corned-beef sandwich and held it out over the front of the desk, tweezed delicately between two fingers. he mouse seemed to look up with an even livelier interest, as if it knew exactly what it was. Probably did; could see its whiskers twitch as its nose wriggled.

' w, rutal, no!' ean exclaimed, then looked at me. ' on't let him do that, Paul! f he's gonna feed the damn thing, we might as well put out the welcome mat for anything on four legs.'

' just want to see what he'll do,' rutal said. ' n the interests of science, like.' e looked at me - was the boss, even in such minor detours from routine as this. thought about it and shrugged like it didn't matter much, one way or another. he truth was, kind of wanted to see what he'd do, too.

ell, he ate it - of course. here was a epression on, after all. ut the *way* he ate it fascinated us all. e approached the fragment of sandwich, sniffed his way around it, and then he sat up in front of it like a dog doing a trick, grabbed it, and pulled the bread apart to get at the meat. e did it as deliberately and knowingly as a man tucking into a good roast-beef dinner in his favorite restaurant. never saw an animal eat like that, not even a well-trained house dog. nd all the while he was eating, his eyes never left us.

' ither one smart mouse or hungry as hell,' a new voice said. t was

itterbuck. e had awakened and now stood at the bars of his cell, naked except for a pair of saggy-seated boxer shorts. home-rolled cigarette poked out from between the second and third knuckles of his right hand, and his iron-gray hair lay over his shoulders - once probably muscular but now beginning to soften - in a pair of braids.

'You got any njun wisdom about micies, hief?' rutal asked, watching the mouse eat. e were all pretty fetched by the neat way it held the bit of corned beef in its forepaws, occasionally turning it or glancing at it, as if in admiration and appreciation.

'Naw,' itterbuck said. 'Knowed a brave once had a pair of what he claimed were mouse-skin gloves, but didn't believe it!' hen he laughed, as if the whole thing was a joke, and left the bars. e heard the bunk creak as he lay down again.

hat seemed to be the mouse's signal to go. t finished up what it was holding, sniffed at what was left (mostly bread with yellow mustard soaking into it), and then looked back at us, as if it wanted to remember our faces if we met again. hen it turned and scurried off the way it had come, not pausing to do any cell-checks this time. ts hurry made me think of the

hite abbit in *Alice s Adventures in Wonderland,* and smiled. t didn't pause at the door to the restraint room, but disappeared beneath it. he

restraint room had soft walls, for people whose brains had softened a little.

e kept cleaning equipment stored in there when we didn't need the room for its created purpose, and a few books (most were westerns by larence Mulford, but one - loaned out only on special occasions - featured a profusely illustrated tale in which Popeye, luto, and even impy the hamburger fiend took turns shtupping Olive Oyl). here were craft items as well, including the crayons elacroix later put to some good use. Not that he was our problem yet; this was earlier, remember. lso in the restraint room was the jacket no one wanted to wear - white, made of double-sewn canvas, and with the buttons and snaps and buckles going up the back. e all knew how to zip a problem child into that jacket lickety-larrup. hey didn't get violent often, our lost boys, but when they did, brother, you didn't wait around for the situation to improve on its own.

rutal reached into the desk drawer above the kneehole and brought out the big leather-bound book with the word visitors stamped on the front in gold leaf. Ordinarily, that book stayed in the drawer from one month to the next. hen a prisoner had visitors - unless it was a lawyer or a minister - he went over to the room off the messhall that was kept special for that purpose. he rcade, we called it. don't know why.

'Just what in the orry do you think *you re* doing?' ean tanton asked, peering over the tops of his spectacles as rutal opened the book and paged grandly past years of visitors to men now dead.

'Obeyin egulation 9,' rutal said, finding the current page. e took the pencil and licked the tip - a disagreeable habit of which he could not be broken - and prepared to write. egulation 9 stated simply: ' ach visitor to

lock shall show a yellow dministration pass and shall be recorded

*without* fail'

' e's gone nuts,' ean said to me.

' e didn't show us his pass, but 'm gonna let it go this time,' rutal said.

e gave the tip of his pencil an extra lick for good luck, then filled in 9: 9

p.m. under the column headed time on block.

' ure, why not, the big bosses probably make exceptions for mice,' said. ' ourse they do,' rutal agreed. 'Lack of pockets.' e turned to look at the wall-clock behind the desk, then printed 0:0 in the column headed time off block. he longer space between these two numbers was headed name of visitor. fter a moment's hard thought - probably to muster his limited spelling skills, as 'm sure the idea was in his head already - rutus

owell carefully wrote steamboat willy, which was what most people called Mickey Mouse back in those days. t was because of that first talkie cartoon, where he rolled his eyes and bumped his hips around and pulled the whistle cord in the pilothouse of the steamboat.

' here,' rutal said, slamming the book closed and returning it to its drawer, 'all done and buttoned up.'

laughed, but ean, who couldn't help being serious about things even when he saw the joke, was frowning and polishing his glasses furiously. 'You'll be in trouble if someone sees that.' e hesitated and added, ' he wrong someone.' e hesitated again, looking nearsightedly around almost as if he expected to see that the walls had grown ears, before finishing: ' omeone like Percy Kiss-My- ss-and- o-to- eaven etmore.'

' uh,' rutal said. ' he day Percy etmore sits his narrow shanks down here at this desk will be the day resign.'

'You won't have to,' ean said. ' hey'll fire you for making jokes in the visitors' book if Percy puts the right word in the right ear. nd he can. You know he can.'

rutal glowered but said nothing. reckoned that later on that night he would erase what he had written. nd if he didn't, would.

he next night, after getting first itterbuck and then he President over to lock, where we showered our group after the regular cons were locked down, rutal asked me if we shouldn't have a look for teamboat

illy down there in the restraint room.

' guess we ought to,' said. e'd had a good laugh over that mouse the night before, but knew that if rutal and found it down there in the restraint room - particularly if we found it had gnawed itself the beginnings of a nest in one of the padded walls - we would kill it. etter to kill the scout, no matter how amusing it might be, than have to live with the pilgrims. nd, shouldn't have to tell you, neither of us was very squeamish about a little mouse-murder. Killing rats was what the state paid us for, after all.

ut we didn't find teamboat illy - later to be known as Mr. Jingles - that night, not nested in the soft walls, or behind any of the collected junk we hauled out into the corridor. here was a great deal of junk, too, more than would have expected, because we hadn't had to use the restraint room in a long time. hat would change with the advent of illiam harton, but of course we didn't know that at the time. Lucky us.

' here'd it go?' rutal asked at last, wiping sweat off the back of his neck with a big blue bandanna. 'No hole, no crack□ there's that, but - ' e pointed to the drain in the floor. elow the grate, which the mouse could have gotten through, was a fine steel mesh that not even a fly would have passed. ' ow'd it get in? ow'd it get out?'

' don't know,' said.

' e *did* come in here, didn't he? mean, the three of us saw him.' 'Yep, right under the door. e had to squeeze a little, but he made it.'

' osh,' rutal said - a word that sounded strange, coming from a man that big. ' t's a good thing the cons can't make themselves small like that, isn't it?'

'You bet,' said, running my eye over the canvas walls one last time, looking for a hole, a crack, anything. here was nothing. ' ome on. Let's go.'

teamboat illy showed up again three nights later, when arry

erwilliger was on the duty desk. Percy was also on, and chased the mouse back down the reen Mile with the same mop ean had been thinking of using. he rodent avoided Percy easily, slipping through the crack beneath the restraint-room door a hands-down winner. ursing at the top of his voice, Percy unlocked the door and hauled all that shit out again. t was funny and scary at the same time, arry said. Percy was vowing he'd catch the goddam mouse and tear its diseased little head right off, but he didn't, of course. weaty and disheveled, the shirttail of his uniform hanging out in the back, he returned to the duty desk half an hour later, brushing his hair out of his eyes and telling arry (who had sat serenely reading through most of the ruckus) that he was going to put a strip of insulation on the bottom of the door down there; *that* would solve the vermin problem, he declared.

' hatever you think is best, Percy,' arry said, turning a page of the oat opera he was reading. e thought Percy would forget about blocking the crack at the bottom of that door, and he was right.

# 8

Late that winter, long after these events were over, rutal came to me one night when it was just the two of us, lock temporarily empty and all the other guards temporarily reassigned. Percy had gone on to riar idge.

' ome here,' rutal said in a funny, squeezed voice that made me look around at him sharply. had just come in out of a cold and sleety night, and had been brushing off the shoulders of my coat prior to hanging it up.

' s something wrong?' asked.

'No,' he said, 'but found out where Mr. Jingles was staying. hen he first came, mean, before elacroix took him over. o you want to see?'

Of course did. followed him down the reen Mile to the restraint room. ll the stuff we kept stored there was out in the hall; rutal had apparently taken advantage of the lull in customer traffic to do some cleaning up. he door was open, and saw our mop-bucket inside. he floor, that same sick lime shade as the reen Mile itself, was drying in streaks. tanding in the middle of the floor was a stepladder, the one that was usually kept in the storage room, which also happened to serve as the final stop for the state's condemned. here was a shelf jutting out from the back of the ladder near the top, the sort of thing a workman would use to hold his toolkit or a painter the bucket he was working out of. here was a flashlight on it. rutal handed it to me.

' et on up there. You're shorter than me, so you'll have to go pretty near all the way, but 'll hold your legs!'

' 'm ticklish down there,' said, starting up. ' specially my knees.' ' 'll mind that.'

' ood,' said, 'because a broken hip's too high a price to pay in order to discover the origins of a single mouse.'

' uh?'

'Never mind.' My head was up by the caged light in the center of the ceiling by then, and could feel the ladder wiggling a little under my weight. Outside, could hear the winter wind moaning. 'Just hold onto me.'

' got you, don't worry.' e gripped my calves firmly, and went up one more step. Now the top of my head was less than a foot from the ceiling, and could see the cobwebs a few enterprising spiders had spun in the crotches where the roof beams came together. shone the light around but didn't see anything worth the risk of being up here.

'No,' rutal said. 'You're looking too far away, Paul. Look to your left, where those two beams come together. You see them? One's a little discolored.'

' see.'

' hine the light on the join.'

did, and saw what he wanted me to see almost right away. he beams had been pegged together with dowels, half a dozen of them, and one was gone, leaving a black, circular hole the size of a quarter. looked at it, then looked doubtfully back over my shoulder at rutal. ' t was a small mouse,' said, 'but that small? Man, don't think so.'

' ut that's where he went,' rutal said. ' 'm just as sure as houses.' ' don't see how you can be.'

'Lean closer - don't worry got you - and take a whiff.'

did as he asked, groping with my left hand for one of the other beams, and feeling a little better when had hold of it. he wind outside gusted again; air puffed out of that hole and into my face. could smell the keen breath of a winter night in the border outh□ and something else, as well.

he smell of peppermint.

*Don t let nothing happen to Mr. ingles,* could hear elacroix saying in a voice that wouldn't stay steady could hear that, and could feel the warmth of Mr. Jingles as the renchman handed it to me, just a mouse, smarter than most of the species, no doubt, but still just a mouse for a' that and a' that. *Don t let that bad un hurt my mouse,* he'd said, and had promised, as always promised them at the end when walking the reen Mile was no longer a myth or a hypothesis but something they really had to do. Mail this letter to my brother, who haven't seen for twenty years? promise. ay fifteen ail Marys for my soul? promise. Let me die under my spirit-name and see that it goes on my tombstone? promise. t was the way you got them to go and be good about it, the way you saw them into the chair sitting at the end of the reen Mile with their sanity intact. couldn't keep all of those promises, of course, but kept the one made to

elacroix. s for the renchman himself, there had been hell to pay. he bad 'un had hurt elacroix, hurt him plenty. Oh, know what he did, all right, but no one deserved what happened to duard elacroix when he fell into Old parky's savage embrace.

smell of peppermint.

nd something else. omething back inside that hole.

took a pen out of my breast pocket with my right hand, still holding onto the beam with my left, not worried anymore about rutal inadvertently tickling my sensitive knees. unscrewed the pen's cap onehanded, then poked the nib in and teased something out. t was a tiny splinter of wood which had been tinted a bright yellow, and heard elacroix's voice again,

so clearly this time that his ghost might have been lurking in that room with us - the one where illiam harton spent so much of his time.

*ey, you guys!* the voice said this time-the laughing, amazed voice of a man who has forgotten, at least for a little while, where he is and what awaits him. *Come and see what Mr. ingles can do!*

' hrist,' whispered. felt as if the wind had been knocked out of me. 'You found another one, didn't you?' rutal asked. ' found three or four.'

came down and shone the light on his big, outstretched palm. everal splinters of wood were scattered there, like jackstraws for elves. wo were yellow, like the one had found. One was green and one was red. hey hadn't been painted but colored, with wax rayola crayons.

'Oh, boy,' said in a low, shaky voice. 'Oh, hey. t's pieces of that spool, isn't it? ut why? hy up there?'

' hen was a kid wasn't big like am now,' rutal said. ' got most of my growth between fifteen and seventeen. ntil then was a shrimp. nd when went off to school the first time, felt as small as□ why, as small as a mouse, guess you'd say. was scared to death. o you know what did?'

shook my head. Outside, the wind gusted again. n the angles formed by the beams, cobwebs shook in feathery drafts, like rotted lace. Never had been in a place that felt so nakedly haunted, and it was right then, as we stood there looking down at the splintered remains of the spool which had caused so much trouble, that my head began to know what my heart had understood ever since John offey had walked the reen Mile: couldn't do this job much longer. epression, or no epression, couldn't watch many more men walk through my office to their deaths. ven one more might be too many.

' asked my mother for one of her hankies,' rutal said. ' o when felt weepy and small, could sneak it out and smell her perfume and not feel so bad.'

'You think - what? - that mouse chewed off some of that colored spool to remember elacroix by? hat a *mouse -*

e looked up. thought for a moment saw tears in his eyes, but guess

was probably wrong about that. ' ain't saying nothing, Paul. ut found them up there, and smelled peppermint, same as you - you know you did.

nd can't do this no more. *won t* do this no more. eeing one more man in that chair'd just about kill me. 'm going to put in for a transfer to oys'

orrectional on Monday. f get it before the next one, that's fine. f don't,

'll resign and go back to farming.'

' hat did you ever farm, besides rocks?' ' t don't matter.'

' know it doesn't,' said. ' think 'll put in with you.'

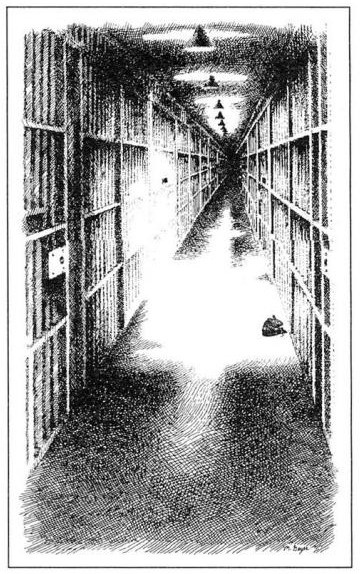
e looked at me close, making sure wasn't just having some sport with him, then nodded as if it was a settled thing. he wind gusted again, strong enough this time to make the beams creak and settle, and we both looked around uneasily at the padded walls. think for a moment we could hear

illiam harton - not illy the Kid, not him, he had been " ild ill" to us from his first day on the block - screaming and laughing, telling us we were going to be damned glad to be rid of him, telling us we would never forget him. bout those things he was right.

s for what rutal and agreed on that night in the restraint room, it turned out just that way t was almost as if we had taken a solemn oath on those tiny bits of colored, wood. Neither of us ever took part in another execution. John offey was the last.

# Pa t T o

he Mouse On the Mile



# 1

he nursing home where am crossing my last bunch of t's and dotting my last mess of i's is called eorgia Pines. t's about sixty miles from

tlanta and about two hundred light-years from life as most people - people under the age of eighty, let's say - live it. You who are reading this want to be careful that there isn't a place like it waiting in your future. t's not a cruel place, not for the most part; there's cable , the food's good (although there's damned little a man can chew), but in its way, it's as much of a killing bottle as lock at old Mountain ever was.

here's even a fellow here who reminds me a little of Percy etmore, who got his job on the reen Mile because he was related to the governor of the state. doubt if this fellow is related to anyone important, even though he acts that way. rad olan, his name is. e's always combing his hair, like Percy was, and he's always got something to read stuffed into his back pocket. ith Percy it was magazines like *Argosy* and *Men s Adventure;* with rad it's these little paperbacks called *ross okes* and *Sick*

*okes*. e's always asking people why the renchman crossed the road or how many Polacks it takes to screw in a lightbulb or how many pallbearers there are at a arlem funeral. Like Percy, rad is a dimwit who thinks nothing is funny unless it's mean.

omething rad said the other day struck me as actually smart, but don't give him a lot of credit for it; even a stopped clock is right twice a day, the proverb has it. "You're just lucky you don't have that lzheimer's disease, Paulie," was what he said. hate him calling me that, Paulie, but he goes on doing it, anyway; 've given up asking him to quit. here are other sayings - not quite proverbs - that apply to rad olan: "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink" is one; "You can dress him up but you can't take him out" is another. n his thickheadedness he is also like Percy.

hen he made his comment about lzheimer's, he was mopping the floor of the solarium, where had been going over the pages have already written. here's a great lot of them, and think there's apt to be a great lot more before am through. ' hat lzheimer's, do you know what it really is?'

'No,' said, - but 'm sure you'll tell me, rad.'

' t's for old people,' he said, and then burst out laughing, hucka- hucka-hucka-*huck*!, just like he does over those idiotic jokes of his.

didn't laugh, though, because what he said struck a nerve somewhere. Not that have lzheimer's; although there's plenty of it on view here at beautiful eorgia Pines, myself just suffer the standard oldguy memory problems. hose problems seem to have more to do with *when* than *what*. Looking over what have written so far, it occurs to me that *remember* everything that happened back in '3 ; it's the order of events that sometimes gets confused in my head. Yet, if 'm careful, think can keep even that sorted out. More or less.

John offey came to lock and the reen Mile in October of that year, condemned for the murder of the nine-year-old etterick twins. hat's my major landmark, and if keep it in view, should do just fine. illiam " ild ill" harton came after offey; elacroix came before. o did the mouse, the one rutus owell - rutal, to his friends - called teamboat

illy and elacroix ended up calling Mr. Jingles.

hatever you called him, the mouse came first, even before el - it was still summer when he showed up, and we had two other prisoners on the

reen Mile: he hief, rlen itterbuck; and he Pres, rthur landers.

hat mouse. hat goddam mouse. elacroix loved it, but Percy etmore sure didn't.

Percy hated it from the first.

# 2

he mouse came back just about three days after Percy had chased it down the reen Mile that first time. ean tanton and ill odge were talking politics□ which meant in those days, they were talking oosevelt and oover - erbert, not J. dgar. hey were eating itz crackers from a box ean had purchased from old oot- oot an hour or so before. Percy was standing in the office doorway, practicing quick draws with the baton he loved so much, as he listened. e'd pull it out of that ridiculous handtooled holster he'd gotten somewhere, then twirl it (or try to; most times he would have dropped it if not for the rawhide loop he kept on his wrist), then re-holster it. was off that night, but got the full report from

ean the following evening.

he mouse came up the reen Mile just as it had before, hopping along, then stopping and seeming to check the empty cells. fter a bit of that it would hop on, undiscouraged, as if it had known all along it would be a long search, and it was up to that.

he President was awake this time, standing at his cell door. hat guy was a piece of work, managing to look natty even in his prison blues. e knew just by the way he looked that he wasn't made for Old parky, and we were right - less than a week after Percy's second run at that mouse, he Pres's sentence was commuted to life and he joined the general population.

' ay!' he called. '' here's a mouse in here! hat kind of a joint are you guys running, anyway?' e was kind of laughing, but ean said he also sounded kind of outraged, as if even a murder rap hadn't been quite enough to knock the Kiwanis out of his soul. e had been the regional head of an outfit called Mid- outh ealty ssociates, and had thought himself smart enough to be able to get away with pushing his half-senile father out a third-story window and collect on a double-indemnity whole-life policy. On that he had been wrong, but maybe not by much.

' hut up, you lugoon,' Percy said, but that was pretty much automatic. e had his eye on the mouse. e had re-holstered his baton and taken out one of his magazines, but now he tossed the magazine on the duty desk and pulled the baton out of its holster again. e began tapping it casually against the knuckles of his left hand.

' on of a bitch,' ill odge said. ' 've never seen a mouse in here before.' ' w, he's sort of cute,' ean said. ' nd not afraid at all.'

' ow do you know?'

' e was in the other night. Percy saw him, too. rutal calls him

teamboat illy.'

Percy kind of sneered at that, but for the time being said nothing. e was tapping the baton faster now on the back of his hand.

' atch this,' ean said. ' e came all the way up to the desk before. want to see if he'll do it again.'

t did, skirting wide of he Pres on its way, as if it didn't like the way our resident parricide smelled. t checked two of the empty cells, even ran up onto one of the bare, unmattressed cots for a sniff, then came back to the

reen Mile. nd Percy standing there the whole time, tapping and tapping, not talking for a change, wanting to make it sorry for coming back. anting to teach it a lesson.

' ood thing you guys don't have to put him in parky,' ill said, interested in spite of himself. 'You'd have a hell of a time getting the clamps and the cap on.'

Percy said nothing still, but he very slowly gripped the baton between his fingers, the way a man would hold a good cigar.

he mouse stopped where it had before, no more than three feet from the duty desk, looking up at ean like a prisoner before the bar. t glanced up at

ill for a moment, then switched its attention back to ean. Percy it hardly seemed to notice at all.

' e's a brave little barstid, got to give him that,' ill said. e raised his voice a little. ' ey! ey! teamboat illy!'

he mouse flinched a little and fluttered its ears, but it didn't run, or even show any signs of wanting to.

'Now watch this,' ean said, remembering how rutal had fed it some of his corned-beef sandwich. ' don't know if he'll do it again, but - '

e broke off a piece of itz cracker and dropped it in front of the mouse.

t just looked with its sharp black eyes at the orangey fragment for a second or two, its filament-fine whiskers twitching as it sniffed. hen it reached out, took the cracker in its paws, sat up, and began to eat.

' ell. 'll be shucked and boiled!' ill exclaimed. ' ats as neat as a parson on parish house aturday night!'

'Looks more like a nigger eating watermelon to me,' Percy remarked, but neither guard paid him any mind. Neither did he hief or he Pres, for that matter. he mouse finished the cracker but continued to sit, seemingly balanced on the talented coil of its tail, looking up at the giants in blue.

'Lemme try,' ill said. e broke off another piece of cracker, leaned over the front of the desk, and dropped it carefully. he mouse sniffed but did not touch.

' uh,' ill said. 'Must be full.'

'Nah,' ean said, 'he knows you're a floater, that's all.'

' loater, am ? like that! 'm here almost as much as arry erwilliger!

Maybe more!'

' immer down, old-timer, simmer down,' ean said, grinning. ' ut watch and see if 'm not right.' e bombed another piece of cracker over the side.

ure enough, the mouse picked that one up and began to eat again, still ignoring ill odge's contribution completely. ut before it had done more

than take a preliminary nibble or two, Percy threw his baton at it, launching it like a spear.

he mouse was a small target, and give the devil his due - it was a wickedly good shot, and might have taken " illy's" head clean off, if its reflexes hadn't been as sharp as shards of broken glass. t ducked - yes, just as a human being would have - and dropped the chunk of cracker. he heavy hickory baton passed over its head and spine close enough so its fur ruffled (that's what ean said, anyway, and so pass it on, although 'm not sure really believe it), then hit the green linoleum and bounced against the bars of an empty cell. he mouse didn't wait to see if it was a mistake; apparently remembering a pressing engagement elsewhere, it turned and was off down the corridor toward the restraint room in a flash.

Percy roared with frustration - he knew how close he had come - and chased after it again. ill odge grabbed at his arm, probably out of simple instinct, but Percy pulled away from him. till, ean said, it was probably that grab which saved teamboat illy's life, and it was still a near thing. Percy wanted not just to kill the mouse but to *squash* it, so he ran in big, comical leaps, like a deer, stamping down with his heavy black workshoes.

he mouse barely avoided Percy's last two jumps, first zigging and then zagging. t went under the door with a final flick of its long pink tail, and so long, stranger - it was gone.

*Fuck!* Percy said, and slammed the flat of his hand against the door.

hen he began to sort through his keys, meaning to go into the restraint room and continue the chase.

ean came down the corridor after him, deliberately walking slow in order to get his emotions under control. Part of him wanted to laugh at Percy, he told me, but part of him wanted to grab the man, whirl him around, pin him against the restraint-room door, and whale the living daylights out of him. Most of it, of course, was just being startled; our job on lock was to keep rumpus to a minimum, and rumpus was practically Percy etmore's middle name. orking with him was sort of like trying to defuse a bomb with somebody standing behind you and every now and then clashing a pair of cymbals together. n a word, upsetting. ean said he could see that upset in rlen itterbucks eyes□ even in he President's eyes, although that gentleman was usually as cool as the storied cucumber.

nd there was something else, as well. n some part of his mind, ean had already begun to accept the mouse as - well, maybe not as a friend, but

as a part of life on the block. hat made what Percy had done and what he was trying to do not right. Not even if it was a mouse he was trying to do it to. nd the fact that Percy would never understand how come it wasn't right was pretty much the perfect example of why he was all wrong for the job he thought he was doing.

y the time ean reached the end of the corridor, he had gotten himself under control again, and knew how he wanted to handle the matter. he one thing Percy absolutely couldn't stand was to look foolish, and we all knew it.

' oises, foiled again,' he said, grinning a little, kidding Percy along.

Percy gave him an ugly look and flicked his hair off his brow. 'Match your mouth, our- yes. 'm riled. on't make it worse.'

' o it's moving day again, is it?' ean said, not quite laughing□ but laughing with his eyes. ' ell, when you get everything out this time, would you mind mopping the floor?'

Percy looked at the door. Looked at his keys. hought about another long, hot, fruitless rummage in the room with the soft walls while they all stood around and watched him□ he hief and he Pres, too.

' 'll be damned if understand what's so funny,' he said. ' e don't need mice in the cellblock - we got enough vermin in here already, without adding mice.'

' hatever you say, Percy,' ean said, holding up his hands. e had a moment right there, he told me the next night, when he believed Percy might just take after him.

ill odge strolled up then and smoothed it over. ' hink you dropped this,' he said, and handed Percy his baton. ' n inch lower, you woulda broken the little barstid's back.'

Percy's chest expanded at that. 'Yeah, it wasn't a bad shot,' he said, carefully re-seating his headknocker in its foolish holster. ' used to be a pitcher in high school. hrew two no-hitters.'

' s that right, now?' ill said, and the respectful tone of voice (although he winked at ean when Percy turned away) was enough to finish defusing the situation.

'Yep,' Percy said. ' hrew one down in Knoxville. hose city boys didn't know what hit em. alked two. ould have had a perfect game if the ump hadn't been such a lugoon.'

ean could have left it at that, but he had seniority on Percy and part of a senior's job is to instruct, and at that time - before offey, before elacroix

- he still thought Percy might be teachable. o he reached out and grasped the younger man's wrist. 'You want to think about what you was doing just now,' ean said. is intention, he said later, was to sound serious but not disapproving. Not *too* disapproving, anyway.

xcept with Percy, that didn't work. e might not learn□ but we would eventually.

' ay, our- yes, know what was doing - trying to get that mouse!

hat're you, blind?'

'You also scared the cheese out of ill, out of me, and out of them,' ean said, pointing in the direction of itterbuck and landers.

' o what?' Percy asked, drawing himself up. ' hey ain't in cradle-school, in case you didn't notice. lthough you guys treat them that way half the time.'

' ell,don't like to be scared,' ill rumbled, 'and work here, etmore, in case you didn't notice. ain't one of your lugoons.'

Percy gave him a look that was narrow-eyed and a touch uncertain.

' nd we don't scare them any more than we have to, because they're under a lot of strain,' ean said. e was still keeping his voice low. 'Men that are under a lot of strain can snap. urt themselves. urt others.

ometimes get folks like us in trouble, too.'

Percy's mouth twitched at that. " n trouble" was an idea that had power over him. Making trouble was okay. etting into it was not.

'Our job is talking, not yelling,' ean said. ' man who is yelling at prisoners is a man who has lost control.'

Percy knew who had written that scripture - me. he boss. here was no love lost between Percy etmore and Paul dgecombe, and this was still summer, remember - long before the real festivities started.

'You'll do better,' ean said, 'if you think of this place as like an intensive-care ward in a hospital. t's best to be quiet - '

' think of it as a bucket of piss to drown rats in,' Percy said, 'and that's all. Now let me go.'

e tore free of ean's hand, stepped between him and ill, and stalked up the corridor with his head down. e walked a little too close to he President's side - close enough so that landers could have reached out, grabbed him, and maybe headwhipped him with his own prized hickory

baton, had landers been that sort of man. e wasn't, of course, but he

hief perhaps was. he hief, if given a chance, might have administered such a beating just to teach Percy a lesson. hat ean said to me on that subject when he told me this story the following night has stuck with me ever since, because it turned out to be a kind of prophecy. ' etmore don't understand that he hasn't got any power over them,' ean said. ' hat nothing he does can really make things worse for them, that they can only be electrocuted once. ntil he gets his head around that, he's going to be a danger to himself and to everyone else down here.'

Percy went into my office and slammed the door behind him.

'My, my,' ill odge said. ' in't he the swollen and badly infected testicle.'

'You don't know the half of it,' ean said.

'Oh, look on the bright side,' ill said. e was always telling people to look on the bright side; it got so you wanted to punch his nose every time it came out of his mouth. 'Your trick mouse got away, at least.'

'Yeah, but we won't see him no more,' ean said. ' imagine this time goddam Percy etmore's scared him off for good.'

# 3

hat was logical but wrong. he mouse was back the very next evening, which just happened to be the first of Percy etmore's two nights off before he slid over to the graveyard shift.

teamboat illy showed up around seven o'clock. was there to see his reappearance; so was ean. arry erwilliger, too. arry was on the desk. was technically on days, but had stuck around to spend an extra hour with

he hief, whose time was getting close by then. itterbuck was stoical on the outside, in the tradition of his tribe, but could see his fear of the end growing inside him like a poison flower. o we talked. You could talk to them in the daytime but it wasn't so good, with the shouts and conversation (not to mention the occasional fist-fight) coming from the exercise yard, the chonk-chonk-chonk of the stamping machines in the plate-shop, the occasional yell of a guard for someone to put down that pick or grab up that hoe or just to get your ass over here, arvey. fter four it got a little better, and after six it got better still. ix to eight was the optimum time. fter that you could see the long thoughts starting to steal over their minds again - in

their eyes you could see it, like afternoon shadows - and it was best to stop.

hey still heard what you were saying, but it no longer made sense to them. Past eight they were getting ready for the watches of the night and imagining how the cap would feel when it was clamped to the tops of their heads, and how the air would smell inside the black bag which had been rolled down over their sweaty faces.

ut got he hief at a good time. e told me about his first wife, and how they had built a lodge together up in Montana. hose had been the happiest days of his life, he said. he water was so pure and so cold that it felt like your mouth was cut every time you drank.

' ey, Mr. dgecombe,' he said. 'You think, if a man he sincerely repent of what he done wrong, he might get to go back to the time that was happiest for him and live there forever? ould that be what heaven is like?'

' 've just about believed that very thing,' said, which was a he didn't regret in the least. had learned of matters eternal at my mother's pretty knee, and what believed is what the ood ook says about murderers: that there is no eternal life in them. think they go straight to hell, where they burn in torment until od finally gives abriel the nod to blow the Judgment rump. hen he does, they'll wink out□ and probably glad to go they will be. ut never gave a hint of such beliefs to itterbuck, or to any of them. think in their hearts they knew it. here is your brother, his blood crieth to me from the ground, od said to ain, and doubt if the words were much of a surprise to that particular problem-child; bet he heard bel's blood whining out of the earth at him with each step he took.

he hief was smiling when left, perhaps thinking about his lodge in Montana and his wife lying bare-breasted in the light of the fire. e would be walking in a warmer fire soon, had no doubt.

went back up the corridor, and ean told me about his set-to with Percy the previous night. think he'd waited around just so he could, and listened carefully. always listened carefully when the subject was Percy, because agreed with ean a hundred per cent - thought Percy was the sort of man who could cause a lot of trouble, as much for the rest of us as for himself.

s ean was finishing, old oot- oot came by with his red snack-wagon, which was covered with handlettered ible quotes (" P N for the LO shall judge his people," eut. 3 :36, " nd surely your LOO of your lives will require," en. 9: , and similar cheery, uplifting

sentiments), and sold us some sandwiches and pops. ean was hunting for change in his pocket and saying that we wouldn't see teamboat illy anymore, that goddam Percy etmore had scared him off for good, when old oot- oot said, ' hat's that'ere, then?'

e looked, and here came the mouse of the hour his ownself, hopping up the middle of the reen Mile. e'd come a little way; then stop, look around with his bright little oildrop eyes, then come on again.

' ey, mouse!' he hief said, and the mouse stopped and looked at him, whiskers twitching. tell you, it was exactly as if the damned thing knew it had been called. 'You some kind of spirit guide?' itterbuck tossed the mouse a little morsel of cheese from his supper. t landed right in front of the mouse, but teamboat illy hardly even glanced at it, just came on his way again, up the reen Mile, looking in empty cells.

' oss dgecombe!' he. President called. ' o you think that little bastard knows etmore isn't here? do, by od!'

felt about the same□ but wasn't going to say so out loud.

arry came out into the hall, hitching up his pants the way he always did after he'd spent a refreshing few minutes in the can, and stood there with his eyes wide. oot- oot was also staring, a sunken grin doing unpleasant things to the soft and toothless lower half of his face.

he mouse stopped in what was becoming its usual spot, curled its tail around its paws, and looked at us. gain was reminded of pictures had seen of judges passing sentence on hapless prisoners□ yet, had there ever been a prisoner as small and unafraid as this one? Not that it really was a prisoner, of course; it could come and go pretty much as it pleased. Yet the idea would not leave my mind, and it again occurred to me that most of us would feel that small when approaching od's judgment seat after our lives were over, but very few of us would be able to look so unafraid.

' ell, swear,' Old oot- oot said. ' here he sits, big as illy- e-

rigged.'

'You ain't seen nothing yet, oot,' arry said. ' atch this.' e reached into his breast pocket and came out with a slice of cinnamon apple wrapped in waxed paper. e broke off the end and tossed it on the floor. t was dry and hard and thought it would bounce right past the mouse, but it reached out one paw, as carelessly as a man swatting at a fly to pass the time, and batted it flat. e all laughed in admiration and surprise, an outburst of sound that should have sent the mouse skittering, but it barely twitched. t

picked up the piece of dried apple in its paws, gave it a couple of licks, then dropped it and looked up at us as if to say, Not bad, what else do you have?

oot- oot opened his cart, took out a sandwich, unwrapped it, and tore off a scrap of bologna.

' on't bother,' ean said.

' hat do you mean?' oot- oot asked. ' in't a mouse alive'd pass up bologna if he could get it. You a crazy guy!'

ut knew ean was right, and could see by arry's face that he knew it, too. here were floaters and there were regulars. omehow, that mouse seemed to know the difference. Nuts, but true.

Old oot- oot tossed the scrap of bologna down, and sure enough, the mouse wouldn't have a thing to do with it; sniffed it once and then backed off a pace.

' 'll be a goddamned son of a bitch,' Old oot- oot said, sounding offended.

held out my hand. ' ive it to me.' ' hat - same sammitch?'

' ame one. 'll pay for it.'

oot- oot handed it over. lifted the top slice of bread, tore off another sliver of meat, and dropped it over the front of the duty desk. he mouse came forward at once. picked it up in its paws, and began to eat. he bologna was gone before you could say Jack obinson.

' 'll be *goddamned!* oot- oot cried. ' loody hell! imme dat!'

e snatched back the sandwich, tore off a much larger piece of meat - not a scrap this time but a flap - and dropped it so close to the mouse that

teamboat illy almost ended up wearing it for a hat. t drew back again, sniffed (surely no mouse ever hit such a jackpot during the epression - not in our state, at least), and then looked up at us.

' o on, eat it!' oot- oot said, sounding more offended than ever. ' hat's wrong witchoo?'

ean took the sandwich and dropped a piece of meat - by then it was like some strange communion service. he mouse picked it up at once and bolted it down. hen it turned and went back down the corridor to the restraint room, pausing along the way to peer into a couple of empty cells and to take a brief investigatory tour of a third. Once again the idea that it was looking for someone occurred to me, and this time dismissed the thought more slowly.

' 'm not going to talk about this,' arry said. e sounded as if he was half-joking, half-not. ' irst of all, nobody'd care. econd, they wouldn't believe me if they did.'

' e only ate from you fellas,' oot- oot said. e shook his head in disbelief, then bent laboriously over, picked up what the mouse had disdained, and popped it into his own toothless maw, where he be gan the job of gumming it into submission. 'Now why he do dat?'

' 've got a better one,' arry said. ' ow'd he know Percy was off?'

' e didn't,' said. ' t was just coincidence, that mouse showing up tonight.'

xcept that got harder and harder to believe as the days went by and the mouse showed up only when Percy was off, on another shift, or in another part of the prison. e - arry, ean, rutal, and me - decided that it must know Percy's voice, or his smell. e carefully avoided too much discussion about the mouse itself - *himself*. hat, we seemed to have decided without saying a word, might go a long way toward spoiling something that was special, and beautiful, by virtue of its strangeness and delicacy. illy had chosen us, after all, in some way do not understand, even now. Maybe

arry came closest when he said it would do no good to tell other people, not just because they wouldn't believe but because they wouldn't care.

# 4

hen it was time for the execution of rlen itterbuck, in reality no chief but first elder of his tribe on the ashita eservation, and a member of the

herokee ouncil as well. e had killed a man while drunk - while both of them were drunk, in fact. he hief had crushed the man's head with a cement block. t issue had been a pair of boots. o, on July seventeenth of that rainy summer, *my* council of elders intended for his life to end.

isiting hours for most old Mountain prisoners were as rigid as steel beams, but that didn't hold for our boys on lock. o, on the sixteenth,

itterbuck was allowed over to the long room adjacent to the cafeteria - the

rcade. t was divided straight down the middle by mesh interwoven with strands of barbed wire. ere he hief would visit with his second wife and those of his children who would still treat with him. t was time for the good-byes.

e was taken over there by ill odge and two other floaters. he rest of us had work to do - one hour to cram in at least two rehearsals. hree, if we could manage it.

Percy didn't make much protest over being put in the switch room with Jack an ay for the itterbuck electrocution; he was too green to know if he was being given a good spot or a bad one. hat he did know was that he had a rectangular mesh window to look through, and although he probably didn't care to be looking at the back of the chair instead of the front, he would still be close enough to see the sparks flying.

ight outside that window was a black wall telephone with no crank or dial on it. hat phone could only ring in, and only from one place: the governor's office. 've seen lots of jailhouse movies over the years where the official phone rings just as they're getting ready to pull the switch on some poor innocent sap, but ours never rang during all my years on lock, never once. n the movies, salvation is cheap. o is innocence. You pay a quarter, and a quarter's worth is just what you get. eal life costs more, and most of the answers are different.

e had a tailor's dummy down in the tunnel for the run to the meatwagon, and we had Old oot- oot for the rest. Over the years, oot had somehow become the traditional stand-in for the condemned, as time- honored in his way as the goose you sit down to on hristmas, whether you like goose or not. Most of the other screws liked him, were amused by his funny accent - also rench, but anadian rather than ajun, and softened into its own thing by his years of incarceration in the outh. ven rutal got a kick out of Old oot. Not me, though. thought he was, in his way, an older and dimmer version of Percy etmore, a man too squeamish to kill and cook his own meat but who did, all the same, just *love* the smell of a barbecue.

e were all there for the rehearsal, just as we would all be there for the main event. rutus owell had been "put out," as we said, which meant that he would place the cap, monitor the governor's phoneline, summon the doctor from his place by the wall if he was needed, and give the actual order to roll on two when the time came. f it went well, there would be no credit for anyone. f it didn't go well, rutal would be blamed by the witnesses and would be blamed by the warden. Neither of us complained about this; it wouldn't have done any good. he world turns, that's all. You can hold on and turn with it, or stand up to protest and be spun right off.

ean, arry erwilliger, and walked down to he hief's cell for the first rehearsal not three minutes after ill and his troops had escorted

itterbuck off the block and over to the rcade. he cell door was open, and Old oot- oot sat on he hief's bunk, his wispy white hair flying.

' here come-stains all over dis sheet,' oot- oot remarked. ' e mus' be tryin to get rid of it before you fellas boil it off.' nd he cackled.

' hut up, oot,' ean said. 'Let's play this serious.'

'Okay,' oot- oot said, immediately composing his face into an expression of thunderous gravity. ut his eyes twinkled. Old oot never looked so alive as when he was playing dead.

stepped forward. ' rlen itterbuck, as an officer of the court and of the state of blah-blah, have a warrant for blah-blah, such execution to be carried out at twelve-oh-one on blah-blah, will you step forward?'

oot got off the bunk. ' 'm steppin forward, 'm steppin forward, 'm steppin forward,' he said.

' urn around,' ean said, and when oot- oot turned, ean examined the dandruffy top of his head. he crown of he hief's head would be shaved tomorrow night, and ean's check then would be to make sure he didn't need a touch-up. tubble could impede conduction, make things harder.

verything we were doing today was about making things easier.

' ll right, rlen, let's go,' said to oot- oot, and away we went.

' 'm walkin down the corridor, 'm walkin down the corridor, 'm walkin down the corridor,' oot said. flanked him on the left, ean on the right.

arry was directly behind him. t the head of the corridor we turned right, away from life as it was lived in the exercise yard and toward death as it was died in the storage room. e went into my office, and oot dropped to his knees without having to be asked. e knew the script, all right, probably better than any of us. od knew he'd been there longer than any of us.

' 'm prayin, 'm prayin, 'm prayin,' oot- oot said, holding his gnarled hands up. hey looked like that famous engraving, you probably know the one mean. ' he Lord is my shepherd, so on 'n so forth.'

' ho's itterbuck got?' arry asked. ' e're not going to have some

herokee medicine man in here shaking his dick, are we?' ' ctually - '

' till prayin, still prayin, still gettin right with Jesus,' oot overrode me. ' hut up, you old gink,' ean said.

' 'm prayin!'

' hen pray to yourself.'

' hat's keepin you guys?' rutal hollered in from the storage room. hat had also been emptied for our use. e were in the killing zone again, all right; it was a thing you could almost smell.

' old your friggin water!' arry yelled back. ' on't be so goddam impatient!'

'Prayin,' oot said, grinning his unpleasant sunken grin. 'Prayin for patience, just a little goddam patience.'

' ctually, itterbuck's a hristian - he says,' told them, 'and he's perfectly happy with the aptist guy who came for illman lark. chuster, his name is. like him, too. e's fast, and he doesn't get them all worked up. On your feet, oot. You prayed enough for one day.'

' alkin,' oot said. ' alkin again, walkin again, yes sir, walkin on the

reen Mile.'

hort as he was, he still had to duck a little to get through the door on the far side of the office. he rest of us had to duck even more. his was a vulnerable time with a real prisoner, and when looked across to the platform where Old parky stood and saw rutal with his gun drawn, nodded with satisfaction. Just right.

oot- oot went down the steps and stopped. he folding wooden chairs, about forty of them, were already in place. itterbuck would cross to the platform on an angle that would keep him safely away from the seated spectators, and half a dozen guards would be added for insurance. ill

odge would be in charge of those. e had never had a witness menaced by a condemned prisoner in spite of what was, admittedly, a raw set-up, and that was how meant to keep it.

' eady, boys?' oot asked when we were back in our original formation at the foot of the stairs leading down from my office. nodded, and we walked to the platform. hat we looked like more than anything, often thought, was a color-guard that had forgotten its flag.

' hat amsupposed to do?' Percy called from behind the wire mesh between the storage room and the switch room.

' atch and learn,' called back.

' nd keep yer hands off yer wiener,' arry muttered. oot- oot heard him, though, and cackled.

e escorted him up onto the platform and oot turned around on his own

- the old vet in action. ' ittin down,' he said, 'sittin down. sittin down, takin

a seat in Old parky's lap.'

dropped to my right knee before his right leg. ean dropped to his left knee before his left leg. t was at this point we ourselves would be most vulnerable to physical attack, should the condemned man go berserk□ which, every now and then, they did. e both turned the cocked knee slightly inward, to protect the crotch area. e dropped our chins to protect our throats. nd, of course, we moved to secure the ankles and neutralize the danger as fast as we could. he hief would be wearing slippers when he took his final promenade, but 'it could have been worse' isn't much comfort to a man with a ruptured larynx. Or writhing on the floor with his balls swelling up to the size of Mason jars, for that matter, while forty or so spectators - many of them gentlemen of the press - sit in those range-hall chairs, watching the whole thing.

e clamped oot- oot's ankles. he clamp on ean's side was slightly bigger, because it carried the juice. hen itterbuck sat down tomorrow night, he would do so with a shaved left calf. ndians have very little body- hair as a rule, but we would take no chances.

hile we were clamping oot- oots ankles, rutal secured his right wrist. arry stepped smoothly forward and clamped the left. hen they were done, arry nodded to rutal, and rutal called back to an ay: ' oll on one!'

heard Percy asking Jack an ay what that meant (it was hard to believe how little he knew, how little he'd picked up during his time on

lock) and an ay's murmur of explanation. oday *Roll on one* meant nothing, but when he heard rutal say it tomorrow night, an ay would turn the knob that goosed the prison generator behind lock. he witnesses would hear the genny as a steady low humming, and the lights all over the prison would brighten. n the other cellblocks, prisoners would observe those overbright lights and think it had happened, the execution was over, when in fact it was just beginning.

rutal stepped around the chair so that oot could see him. ' rlen

itterbuck, you have been condemned to die in the electric chair, sentence passed by a jury of your peers and imposed by a judge in good standing in this state. od save the people of this state. o you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?'

'Yeah,' oot said, eyes gleaming, lips bunched in a toothless happy grin. ' want a fried chicken dinner with gravy on the taters, want to shit in your

hat, and got to have Mae est sit on my face, because am one horny motherfucker.'

rutal tried to hold onto his stem expression, but it was impossible. e threw back his head and began laughing. ean collapsed onto the edge of the platform like he'd been gutshot, head down between his knees, howling like a coyote, with one hand clapped to his brow as if to keep his brains in there where they belonged. arry was knocking his own head against the wall and going *huh-huh-huh* as if he had a glob of food stuck in his throat.

ven Jack an ay, a man not known for his sense of humor, was laughing.

felt like it myself, of course did, but controlled it somehow. omorrow night it was going to be for real, and a man would die there where oot-

oot was sitting.

' hut up, rutal,' said. 'You too, ean. arry and oot, the next remark like that to come out of your mouth will be your last. 'll have an ay roll on two for real.'

oot gave me a grin as if to say that was a good 'un, oss dgecombe, a real good 'un. t faltered into a narrow, puzzled look when he saw wasn't answering it. ' hat's wrong witchoo?' he asked.

' t's not funny,' said. ' hat's what's wrong with me, and if you're not smart enough to get it, you better just keep your gob shut.' xcept it *was* funny, in its way, and suppose that was what had really made me mad.

looked around, saw rutal staring at me, still grinning a little. ' hit,' said, ' 'm getting too old for this job.'

'Nah,' rutal said. 'You're in your prime, Paul.' ut wasn't, neither was he, not as far as this goddam job went, and both of us knew it. till, the important thing was that the laughing fit had passed. hat was good, because the last thing wanted was somebody remembering oot's smart- aleck remark tomorrow night and getting going again. You'd say such a thing would be impossible, a guard laughing his ass off as he escorted a condemned man past the witnesses to the electric chair, but when men are under stress, *anything* can happen. nd a thing like that, people would have talked about it for twenty years.

' re you going to be quiet, oot?' asked.

'Yes,' he said, his averted face that of the world's oldest, poutiest child.

nodded to rutal that he should get on with the rehearsal. e took the mask from the brass hook on the back of the chair and rolled it down over

oot oot's head, pulling it snug under his chin, which opened the hole at

the top to its widest diameter. hen rutal leaned over, picked the wet circle of sponge out of the bucket, pressed one finger against it, then licked the tip of the finger. hat done, he put the sponge back in the bucket. omorrow he wouldn't. omorrow he would tuck it into the cap perched on the back of the chair. Not today, though; there was no need to get oot's old head wet.

he cap was steel, and with the straps dangling down on either side, it looked sort of like a dough boy's helmet. rutal put it on Old oot- oot's head, snugging it down over the hole in the black headcovering.

' ettin the cap. gettin the cap, gettin the cap,' oot said, and now his voice sounded squeezed as well as muffled. he straps held his jaw almost closed, and suspected rutal had snugged it down a little tighter than he strictly had to for purposes of rehearsal. e stepped back, faced the empty seats, and said: ' rlen itterbuck, electricity shall now be passed through your body until you are dead, in accordance with state law. May od have mercy on your soul.'

rutal turned to the mesh-covered rectangle. ' oll on two.'

Old oot, perhaps trying to recapture his earlier flare of comic genius, began to buck and flail in the chair, as Old parky's actual customers almost never did. 'Now 'm fryin!' he cried. ' ryin! ryyyin! *eeeaah!* 'm a done tom turkey!'

arry and ean, saw, were not watching this at all. hey had turned away from parky and were looking across the empty storage room at the door leading back into my office. ' ell, 'll be goddamned,' arry said. 'One of the witnesses came a day early.'

itting in the doorway with its tail curled neatly around its paws, watching with its beady black oilspot eyes, was the mouse.

# 5

he execution went well - if there was ever such a thing as 'a good one' (a proposition strongly doubt), then the execution of rlen itterbuck, council elder of the ashita herokee, was it. e got his braids wrong - his hands were shaking too badly to make a good job of it - and his eldest daughter, a woman of thirty-odd, was allowed to plait them nice and even.

he wanted to weave feathers in at the tips, the pinfeathers of a hawk, his bird, but couldn't allow it. hey might catch fire and burn. didn't tell her that, of course, just said it was against regulations. he made no protest,

only bowed her head and put her hands to her temples to show her disappointment and her disapproval. he conducted herself with great dignity, that woman, and by doing so practically guaranteed that her father would do the same.

he hief left his cell with no protest or holding back when the time came. ometimes we had to pry their fingers off the bars - broke one or two in my time and have never forgotten the muffled snapping sound - but

he hief wasn't one of those, thank od. e walked strong up the reen Mile to my office, and there he dropped to his knees to pray with rother

chuster, who had driven down from the eavenly Light aptist hurch in his flivver. chuster gave he hief a few psalms, and he hief started to cry when chuster got to the one about lying down beside the still waters. t wasn't bad, though, no hysteria, nothing like that. had an idea he was thinking about still water so pure and so cold it felt like it was cutting your mouth every time you drank some.

ctually, like to see them cry a little. t's when they don't that get worried.

lot of men can't get up from their knees again without help, but he

hief did okay in that department. e swayed a little at first, like he was lightheaded, and ean put out a hand to steady him, but itterbuck had already found his balance again on his own, so out we went.

lmost all the chairs were occupied, with the people in them murmuring quietly among themselves, like folks do when they're waiting for a wedding or a funeral to get started. hat was the only time itterbuck faltered. don't know if it was any one person in particular that bothered him, or all of them together, but could hear a low moaning start up in his throat, and all at once the arm was holding had a drag in it that hadn't been there before. Out of the corner of my eye could see arry erwilliger moving up to cut off he hief's retreat if itterbuck all at once decided he wanted to go hard.

tightened my grip on his elbow and tapped the inside of his arm with one finger. ' teady, hief,' said out of the corner of my mouth, not moving my lips. ' he only thing most of these people will remember about you is how you go out, so give them something good - show them how a ashita does it.'

e glanced at me sideways and gave a little nod. hen he took one of the braids his daughter had made and kissed it. looked to rutal, standing at

parade rest behind the chair, resplendent in his best blue uniform, all the buttons on the tunic polished and gleaming, his hat sitting square-john perfect on his big head. gave him a little nod and he shot it right back, stepping forward to help itterbuck mount the platform if he needed help.

urned out he didn't.

t was less than a minute from the time itterbuck sat down in the chair to the moment when rutal,called ' oll on two!' softly back over his shoulder. he lights dimmed down again, but only a little; you wouldn't have noticed it if you hadn't been looking for it. hat meant an ay had pulled the switch some wit had labeled mabel's hair drier. here was a low humming from the cap, and itterbuck surged forward against the clamps and the restraining belt across his chest. Over against the wall, the prison doctor watched expressionlessly, lips thinned until his mouth looked like a single white stitch. here was no flopping and flailing, such as Old oot-

oot had done at rehearsal, only that powerful forward surge, as a man may surge forward from the hips while in the grip of a powerful orgasm. he

hief's blue shirt pulled tight at the buttons, creating little strained smiles of flesh between them.

nd there was a smell. Not bad in itself, but unpleasant in its associations. 've never been able to go down in the cellar at my granddaughter's house when they bring me there, although that's where their little boy has his Lionel set-up, which he would dearly love to share with his great-grampa. don't mind the trains, as 'm sure you can guess - it's the transformer can't abide. he way it hums. nd the way, when it gets hot, it *smells*. ven after all these years, that smell reminds me of old Mountain.

an ay gave him thirty seconds, then turned the juice off. he doctor stepped forward from his place and listened with his stethoscope. here was no talk from the witnesses now. he doctor straightened up and looked through the mesh. ' isorganized,' he said, and made a twirling, cranking gesture with one finger. e had heard a few random heartbeats from

itterbuck's chest, probably as meaningless as the final jitters of a decapitated chicken, but it was better not to take chances. You didn't want him suddenly sitting up on the gurney when you had him halfway through the tunnel, bawling that he felt like he was on fire.

an ay rolled on three and he hief surged forward again, twisting a little from side to side in the grip of the current. hen doc listened this time, he nodded. t was over. e had once again succeeded in destroying

what we could not create. ome of the folks in the audience had begun talking in those low voices again; most sat with their heads down, looking at the floor, as if stunned. Or ashamed.

arry and ean came up with the stretcher. t was actually Percy's job to take one end, but he didn't know and no one had bothered to tell him. he

hief, still wearing the black silk hood, was loaded onto it by rutal and me, and we whisked him through the door which led to the tunnel as fast as we could manage it without actually running. moke - too much of it - was rising from the hole in the top of the mask, and there was a horrible stench.

' w, man!' Percy cried, his voice wavering. ' hat's that smell?'

'Just get out of my way and stay out of it,' rutal said, shoving past him to get to the wall where there was a mounted fire extinguisher. t was one of the old chemical kind that you had to pump. ean, meanwhile, had stripped off the hood. t wasn't as bad as it could have been; itterbuck's left braid was smouldering like a pile of wet leaves.

'Never mind that thing,' told rutal. didn't want to have to clean a load of chemical slime off the dead man's face before putting him in the back of the meatwagon. slapped at he hief's head (Percy staring at me, wide- eyed, the whole time) until the smoke quit rising. hen we carried the body down the twelve wooden steps to the tunnel. ere it was as chilly and dank as a dungeon, with the hollow plink-plink sound of dripping water. anging lights with crude tin shades - they were made in the prison machine-shop - showed a brick tube that ran thirty feet under the highway. he top was curved and wet. t made me feel like a character in an dgar llan Poe story every time used it.

here was a gurney waiting. e loaded itterbuck's body onto it, and made a final check to make sure his hair was out. hat one braid was pretty well charred, and was sorry to see that the cunning little bow on that side of his head was now nothing but a blackened lump.

Percy slapped the dead man's cheek. he flat smacking sound of his hand made us all jump. Percy looked around at us with a cocky smile on his mouth, eyes glittering. hen he looked back at itterbuck again. ' dios,

hief,' he said. ' ope hell's hot enough for you.'

' on't do that,' rutal said, his voice hollow and declamatory in the dripping tunnel. ' e's paid what he owed. e's square with the house again. You keep your hands off him.'

' w, blow it out,' Percy said, but he stepped back uneasily when rutal moved toward him, shadow rising behind him like the shadow of that ape in the story about the ue Morgue. ut instead of grabbing at Percy, rutal grabbed hold of the gurney and began pushing rlen itterbuck slowly toward the far end of the tunnel, where his last ride was waiting, parked on the soft shoulder of the highway. he gurney's hard rubber wheels moaned on the boards; its shadow rode the bulging brick wall, waxing and waning;

ean and arry grasped the sheet at the foot and pulled it up over he

hief's face, which had already begun to take on the waxy, characterless cast of all dead faces, the innocent as well as the guilty.

# 6

hen was eighteen, my ncle Paul - the man was named for - died of a heart attack. My mother and dad took me to hicago with them to attend his funeral and visit relatives from my father's side of the family, many of whom had never met. e were gone almost a month. n some ways that was a good trip, a necessary and exciting trip, but in another way it was horrible. was deeply in love, you see, with the young woman who was to become my wife two weeks after my nineteenth birthday. One night when my longing for her was like a fire burning out of control in my heart and my head (oh yes, all right, and in my balls, as well), wrote her a letter that just seemed to go on and on - poured out my whole heart in it, never looking back to see what 'd said because was afraid cowardice would make me stop. didn't stop, and when a voice in my head clamored that it would be madness to mail such a letter, that would be giving her my naked heart to hold in her hand, ignored it with a child's breathless disregard of the consequences. often wondered if Janice kept that letter, but never quite got up enough courage to ask. ll know for sure is that did not find it when went through her things after the funeral, and of course that by itself means nothing. suppose never asked because was afraid of discovering that burning epistle meant less to her than it did to me.

t was four pages long, thought would never write anything longer in my life, and now look at this. ll this, and the end still not in sight. f 'd known the story was going to go on this long, might never have started.

hat didn't realize was how many doors the act of writing unlocks, as if my ad's old fountain pen wasn't really a pen at all, but some strange

variety of skeleton key. he mouse is probably the best example of what 'm talking about - teamboat illy, Mr. Jingles, the mouse on the Mile. ntil started to write, never realized how important he (yes, *he)* was. he way he seemed to be looking for elacroix before elacroix arrived, for instance - don't think that ever occurred to me, not to my conscious mind, anyway, until began to write and remember.

guess what 'm saying is that didn't realize how far back 'd have to go in order to tell you about John offey, or how long 'd have to leave him there in his cell, a man so huge his feet didn't just stick off the end of his bunk but hung down all the way to the floor. don't want you to forget him, all right? want you to see him there, looking up at the ceiling of his cell, weeping his silent tears, or putting his arms over his face. want you to hear him, his sighs that trembled like sobs, his occasional watery groan. hese weren't the sounds of agony and regret we sometimes heard on lock, sharp cries with splinters of remorse in them; like his wet eyes, they were somehow removed from the pain we were used to dealing with. n a way - know how crazy this will sound, of course do, but there is no sense in writing something as long as this if you can't say what feels true to your heart - in a way it was as if it was sorrow for the whole world he felt, something too big ever to be completely eased. ometimes sat and talked to him, as did with all of them - talking was our biggest, most important job, as believe have said - and tried to comfort him. don't feel that ever did, and part of my heart was glad he was suffering, you know. elt he *deserved* to suffer. even thought sometimes of calling the governor (or getting Percy to do it - hell, he was Percy's damn uncle, not mine) and asking for a stay of execution. *We shouldn t burn him yet,* 'd say *t s still hurting him too much, biting into him too much, twisting in his guts like a nice sharp stick. ive him another ninety days, your honor, sir. Let him go on doing to himself what we can t do to him.*

t's that John offey 'd have you keep to one side of your mind while finish catching up to where started - that John offey lying on his bunk, that John offey who was afraid of the dark perhaps with good reason, for in the dark might not two shapes with blonde curls - no longer little girls but avenging harpies - be waiting for him? hat John offey whose eyes were always streaming tears, like blood from a wound that can never heal.

# 7

o he hief burned and he President walked - as far as lock, anyway, which was home to most of old Mountain's hundred and fifty lifers. Life for he Pres turned out to be twelve years. e was drowned in the prison laundry in 9 . Not the old Mountain prison laundry; old Mountain closed in 933. don't suppose it mattered much to the inmates - wars is walls, as the cons say, and Old parky was every bit as lethal in his own little stone death chamber, reckon, as he'd ever been in the storage room at old Mountain.

s for he Pres, someone shoved him face-first into a vat of dry-cleaning fluid and held him there. hen the guards pulled him out again, his face was almost entirely gone. hey had to him by his fingerprints. On the whole, he might have been better off with Old parky□ but then he never would have had those extra twelve years, would he? doubt he thought much about them, though, in the last minute or so of his life, when his lungs were trying to learn how to breathe exlite and lye cleanser.

hey never caught whoever did for him. y then was out of the corrections line of work, but arry erwilliger wrote and told me. " e got commuted mostly because he was white," arry wrote, "but he got it in the end, just the same. just think of it as a long stay of execution that finally ran out."

here was a quiet time for us in lock, once he Pres was gone. arry and ean were temporarily reassigned, and it was just me, rutal, and Percy on the reen Mile for a little bit. hich actually meant just me and

rutal, because Percy kept pretty much to himself. tell you, that young man was a genius at finding things not to do. nd every so often (but only when Percy wasn't around), the other guys would show up to have what

arry liked to call "a good gab." On many of these occasions the mouse would also show up. e'd feed him and he'd sit there eating, just as solemn as olomon, watching us with his bright little oilspot eyes.

hat was a good few weeks, calm and easy even with Percy's more than occasional carping. ut all good things come to an end, and on a rainy Monday in late July - have told you how rainy and dank that summer was?

- found myself sitting on the bunk of an open cell and waiting for duard

elacroix.

e came with an unexpected bang. he door leading into the exercise yard slammed open, letting in a

flood of light, there was a confused rattle of chains, a frightened voice babbling away in a mixture of nglish and ajun rench (a patois the cons at old Mountain used to call *da bayou*), and rutal hollering, ' ey! uit it! or hrissakes! uit it, Percy!'

had been half-dozing on what was to become elacroix's bunk, but was up in a hurry, my heart slugging away hard in my chest. Noise of that kind on lock almost never happened until Percy came; he brought it along with him like a bad smell.

' ome on, you fuckin rench-fried faggot!' Percy yelled, ignoring rutal completely. nd here he came, dragging a guy not much bigger than a bowling pin by one arm. n his other hand, Percy had his baton. is teeth were bared in a strained grimace, and his face was bright red. Yet he did not look entirely unhappy. elacroix was trying to keep up with him, but he had the legirons on, and no matter how fast he shuffled his feet, Percy pulled him along faster. sprang out of the cell just in time to catch him as he fell, and that was how el and were introduced.

Percy rounded on him, baton raised, and held him back with one arm.

rutal came puffing up to us, looking as shocked and nonplussed by all this as felt.

' on't let him hit me no mo, *m sieu*,' elacroix babbled. *S il vous plaît, s il vous plaît!*

'Let me at im, let me at im!' Percy cried, lunging forward. e began to hit at elacroix's shoulders with his baton. elacroix held his arms up, screaming, and the stick went whap-whap-whap against the sleeves of his blue prison shirt. saw him that night with the shirt off, and that boy had bruises from hristmas to aster. eeing them made me feel bad. e was a murderer, and nobody's darling, but that's not the way we did things on

lock. Not until Percy came, anyhow.

' hoa! hoa!' roared. ' uit that! hat's it all about, anyway?' was trying to get my body in between elacroix's and Percy's, but it wasn't working very well. Percy's club continued to flail away, now on one side of me and now on the other. ooner or later he was going to bring one down on *me* instead of on his intended target, and then there was going to be a brawl right here in this corridor, no matter who his relations were. wouldn't be able to help myself, and rutal was apt to join in. n some ways, you know, wish we'd done it. t might have changed some of the things that happened later on.

' ucking faggot! 'll teach you to keep your hands off me, you lousy bum- puncher!'

hap! hap! hap! nd now elacroix was bleeding from one ear and screaming. gave up trying to shield him, grabbed him by one shoulder, and hurled him into his cell, where he went sprawling on the bunk. Percy darted around me and gave him a final hard whap on the butt - one to go on, you could say. hen rutal grabbed him - Percy - mean - by the shoulders and hauled him across the corridor.

grabbed the cell door and ran it shut on its tracks. hen turned to Percy, my shock and bewilderment at war with pure fury. Percy had been around about several months at that point, long enough for all of us to decide we didn't like him very much, but that was the first time fully understood how out of control he was.

e stood watching me, not entirely without fear - he was a coward at heart, never had any doubt of that - but still confident that his connections would protect him. n that he was correct. suspect there are people who wouldn't understand why that was, even after all 've said, but they would be people who only know the phrase *reat Depression* from the history books. f you were there, it was a lot more than a phrase in a book, and if you had a steady job, brother, you'd do almost anything to keep it.

he color was fading out of Percy's face a little by then, but his cheeks were still flushed, and his hair, which was usually swept back and gleaming with brilliantine, had tumbled over his forehead.

' hat in the hrist was *that* all about?' asked. ' have never - have

*never!* - had a prisoner beaten onto my block before!'

'Little fag bastard tried to cop my joint when pulled him out of the van,' Percy said. ' e had it coming, and 'd do it again.'

looked at him, too flabbergasted for words. couldn't imagine the most predatory homosexual on od's green earth doing what Percy had just described. Preparing to move into a crossbar apartment on the reen Mile did not, as a rule, put even the most deviant of prisoners in a sexy mood.

looked back at elacroix, cowering on his bunk with his arms still up to protect his face. here were cuffs on his wrists and a chain running between his ankles. hen turned to Percy ' et out of here,' said. ' 'll want to talk to you later.'

' s this going to be in your report?' he demanded truculently. ' ecause if it is, can make a report of my own, you know.'

didn't want to make a report; only wanted him out of my sight. told him so.

' he matter's closed,' finished. saw rutal looking at me disapprovingly, but ignored it. ' o on, get out of here. o over to dmin and tell them you're supposed to read letters and help in the package room.'

' ure.' e had his composure back, or the crack-headed arrogance that served him as composure. e brushed his hair back from his forehead with his hands - soft and white and small, the hands of a girl in her early teens, you would have thought - and then approached the cell. elacroix saw him, and he cringed back even farther on his bunk, gibbering in a mixture of

nglish and stewpot rench.

' ain't done with you, Pierre,' he said, then jumped as one of rutal's huge hands fell on his shoulder.

'Yes you are,' rutal said. 'Now go on. et in the breeze.'

'You don't scare me, you know,' Percy said. 'Not a bit.' is eyes shifted to me. ' ither of you.' ut we did. You could see that in his eyes as clear as day, and it made him even more dangerous. guy like Percy doesn't even know himself what he means to do from minute to minute and second to second.

hat he did right then was turn away from us and go walking up the corridor in long, arrogant strides. e had shown the world what happened when scrawny, half-bald little renchmen tried to cop his joint, by od, and he was leaving the field a victor.

went through my set speech, all about how we had the radio - *Make Believe Ballroom* and *Our al Sunday*, and how we'd treat him jake if he did the same for us. hat little homily was not what you'd call one of my great successes. e cried all the way through it, sitting huddled up at the foot of his bunk, as far from me as he could get without actually fading into the corner. e cringed every time moved, and don't think he heard one word in six. Probably just as well. don't think that particular homily made a whole lot of sense, anyway.

ifteen minutes later was back at the desk, where a shaken-looking

rutus owell was sitting and licking the tip of the pencil we kept with the visitors' book. ' ill you stop that before you poison yourself, for od's sake?' asked.

' hrist almighty Jesus,' he said, putting the pencil down. ' *never* want to have another hooraw like that with a prisoner coming on the block.'

'My addy always used to say things come in threes,' said.

' ell, hope your addy was full of shit on that subject,' rutal said, but of course he wasn't. here was a squall when John offey came in, and a fullblown storm when " ild ill" joined us - it's funny, but things really *do* seem to come in threes. he story of our introduction to ild ill, how he came onto the Mile trying to commit murder, is something 'll get to shortly; fair warning.

' hat's this about elacroix copping his joint?' asked.

rutal snorted. ' e was ankle-chained and ole Percy was just pulling him too fast, that's all. e stumbled and started to fall as he got out of the stagecoach. e put his hands out same as anyone would when they start to fall, and one of them brushed the front of Percy's pants. t was a complete accident.'

' id Percy know that, do you think?' asked. ' as he maybe using it as an excuse just because he felt like whaling on elacroix a little bit?

howing him who bosses the shooting match around here?'

rutal nodded slowly. 'Yeah. think that was probably it.'

' e have to watch him, then,' said, and ran my hands, through my hair.

s if the job wasn't hard enough. ' od, hate this. hate *him.*

'Me, too. nd you want to know something else, Paul? don't understand him. e's got connections, understand *that,* all right, but why would he use them to get a job on the reen fucking Mile? *Anywhere* in the state pen, for that matter? hy not as a page in the state senate, or the guy who makes the lieutenant governor's appointments? urely his people could've gotten him something better if he'd asked them, so why *here?*

shook my head. didn't know. here were a lot of things didn't know then. suppose was naive.

# 8

fter that, things went back to normal again□ for awhile, at least. own in the county seat, the state was preparing to bring John offey to trial, and

rapingus ounty heriff omer ribus was pooh-poohing the idea that a lynch-mob might hurry justice along a little bit. None of that mattered to us; on lock, no one paid much attention to the news. Life on the reen Mile was, in a way, like life in a soundproof room. rom time to time you heard mutterings that were probably explosions in the outside world, but that was

about all. hey wouldn't hurry with John offey; they'd want to make damned sure of him.

On a couple of occasions Percy got to ragging elacroix, and the second time pulled him aside and told him to come up to my office. t wasn't my first interview with Percy on the subject of his behavior, and it wouldn't be the last, but it was prompted by what, was probably the clearest understanding of what he was. e had the heart of a cruel boy who goes to the zoo not so he can study the animals but so he can throw stones at them in their cages.

'You stay away from him, now, you hear?' said. ' nless give you a specific order, just stay the hell away from him.'

Percy combed his hair back, then patted at it with his sweet little hands.

hat boy just loved touching his hair. ' wasn't doing nothing to him,' he said. 'Only asking how it felt to know you had burned up some babies, is all.' Percy gave me a round-eyed, innocent stare.

'You quit with it, or there'll be a report,' said.

e laughed. 'Make any report you want,' he said. ' hen 'll turn around and make my own. Just like told you when he came in. e'll see who comes off the best.'

leaned forward, hands folded on my desk, and spoke in a tone hoped would sound like a friend being confidential. ' rutus owell doesn't like you much,' said. ' nd when rutal doesn't like someone, he's been known to make his own report. e isn't much shakes with a pen, and he can't quit from licking that pencil, so he's apt to report with his fists. f you know what mean.'

Percy's complacent little smile faltered. ' hat are you trying to say'

' 'm not *trying* to say anything. *have* said it. nd if you tell any of your□ friends□ about this discussion, 'll say you made the whole thing up.' looked at him all wide-eyed and earnest. ' esides, 'm trying to be your friend, Percy. word to the wise is sufficient, they say. nd why would you want to get into it with elacroix in the first place? e's not worth it.'

nd for awhile that worked. here was peace. couple of times was even able to send Percy with ean or arry when elacroix's time to shower had rolled around. e had the radio at night, elacroix began to relax a little into the scant routine of lock, and there was peace.

hen, one night, heard him laughing.

arry erwilliger was on the desk, and soon he was laughing, too. got up and went on down to elacroix's cell to see what he possibly had to laugh about.

'Look, ap'n' he said when he saw me. ' done tame me a mouse!'

t was teamboat illy. e was in elacroix's cell. More: he was sitting on elacroix's shoulder and looking calmly out through the bars at us with his little oildrop eyes. is tail was curled around his paws, and he looked completely at peace. s for elacroix - friend, you wouldn't have known it was the same man who'd sat cringing and shuddering at the foot of his bunk not a week before. e looked like my daughter used to on hristmas morning, when she came down the stairs and saw the presents.

' atch dis!' elacroix said. he mouse was sitting on his right shoulder.

elacroix stretched out his left arm. he mouse scampered up to the top of

elacroix's head, using the man's hair (which was thick enough in back, at least) to climb up. hen he scampered down the other side, elacroix giggling as his tail tickled the side of his neck. he mouse ran all the way down his arm to his wrist, then turned, scampered back up to elacroix's left shoulder, and curled his tail around his feet again.

' 'll be damned,' arry said.

' train him to do that,' elacroix said proudly. thought, *n a pig s ass you did*, but kept my mouth shut. ' is name is Mr. Jingles.'

'Nah,' arry said goodnaturedly. ' t's teamboat illy, like in the pitcher- show. oss owell named him.'

' t's Mr. Jingles,' elacroix said. On any other subject he would have told you that shit was hinola, if you wanted him to, but on the subject of the mouse's name he was perfectly adamant. ' e whisper it in my ear. ap'n, can have a box for him? an have a box for my mous,' so he can sleep in here wit me?' is voice began to fall into wheedling tones had heard a thousand times before. ' put him under my bunk and he never be a scrid of trouble, not one.'

'Your nglish gets a hell of a lot better when you want something,' said, stalling for time.

'Oh-oh,' arry murmured, nudging me. ' ere comes trouble.'

ut Percy didn't look like trouble to me, not that night. e wasn't running his hands through his hair or fiddling with that baton of his, and the top button of his uniform shirt was actually undone. t was the first time 'd seen him that way, and it was amazing, what a change a little thing like that

could make. Mostly, though, what struck me was the expression on his face.

here was a calmness there. Not serenity - don't think Percy etmore had a serene bone in his body - but the look of a man who has discovered he can wait for the things he wants. t was quite a change from the young man 'd had to threaten with rutus owell's fists only a few days before.

elacroix didn't see the change, though; he cringed against the wall of his cell, drawing his knees up to his chest. is eyes seemed to grow until they were taking up half his face. he mouse scampered up on his bald pate and sat there. don't know if he remembered that he also had reason to distrust Percy, but it certainly looked as if he did. Probably it was just smelling the little renchman's fear, and reacting off that.

' ell, well,' Percy said. 'Looks like you found yourself a friend, ddie.'

elacroix tried to reply - some hollow defiance about what would happen to Percy if Percy hurt his new pal would have been my guess - but nothing came out. is lower lip trembled a little, but that was all. On top of his head, Mr. Jingles wasn't trembling. e sat perfectly still with his back feet in elacroix's hair and his front ones splayed on elacroix's bald looking at Percy, seeming to size him up. he way you'd size up an old enemy.

Percy looked at me. ' sn't that the same one chased? he one that lives in the restraint room?'

nodded. had an idea Percy hadn't seen the newly named Mr. Jingles since that last chase, and he showed no signs of wanting to chase it now.

'Yes, that's the one,' said. 'Only elacroix there says his name is Mr.

Jingles, not teamboat illy. ays the mouse whispered it in his ear.'

' s that so,' Percy said. ' onders never cease, do they?' half-expected him to pull out his baton and start tapping it against the bars, just to show

elacroix who was boss, but he only stood there with his hands on his hips, looking in.

nd for no reason could have told you in words, said: ' elacroix there was just asking for a box, Percy. e thinks that mouse will sleep in it, guess. hat he can keep it for a pet.' loaded my voice with skepticism, and sensed more than saw arry looking at me in surprise. ' hat do you think about that?'

' think it'll probably shit up his nose some night while he's sleeping and then run away,' Percy said evenly, 'but guess that's the rench boy's lookout. seen a pretty nice cigar box on oot- oot's cart the other night.

don't know if he'd give it away, though. Probably want a nickel for it, maybe even a dime.'

Now did risk a glance at arry, and saw his mouth hanging open. his wasn't quite like the change in benezer crooge on hristmas morning, after the ghosts had had their way with him, but it was damned close.

Percy leaned closer to elacroix, putting his face between the bars.

elacroix shrank back even farther. swear to od that he would have melted into that wall if he'd been able.

'You got a nickel or maybe as much as a dime to pay for a cigar box, you lugoon?' he asked.

' got four pennies,' elacroix said. ' give them for a box, if it a good one, *s il est bon.*

' 'll tell you what,' Percy said. ' f that toothless old whoremaster will sell you that orona box for four cents, 'll sneak some cotton batting out of the dispensary to line it with. e'll make us a regular Mousie ilton, before we're through.' e shifted his eyes to me. ' 'm supposed to write a switch- room report about itterbuck,' he said. ' s there some pens in your office, Paul?'

'Yes, indeed,' said. ' orms, too. Lefthand top drawer.' ' ell, that's aces,' he said, and went swaggering off.

arry and looked at each other. ' s he sick, do you think?' arry asked. 'Maybe went to his doctor and found out he's only got three months to live?'

told him didn't have the slightest idea what was up. t was the truth then, and for awhile after, but found out in time. nd a few years later, had an interesting supper-table conversation with al Moores. y then we could talk freely, what with him being retired and me being at the oys'

orrectional. t was one of those meals where you drink too much and eat too little, and tongues get loosened. al told me that Percy had been in to complain about me and about life on the Mile in general. his was just after

elacroix came on the block, and rutal and had kept Percy from beating him half to death. hat had griped Percy the most was me telling him to get out of my sight. e didn't think a man who was related to the governor should have to put up with talk like that.

ell, Moores told me, he had stood Percy off for as long as he could, and when it became dear to him that Percy was going to try pulling some strings to get me reprimanded and moved to another part of the prison at the very least, he, Moores, had pulled Percy into his office and told him that if he

quit rocking the boat, Moores would make sure that Percy was out front for

elacroix's execution. hat he would, in fact, be placed right beside the chair. would be in charge, as always, but the witnesses wouldn't know that; to them it would look as if Mr. Percy etmore was boss of the cotillion. Moores wasn't promising any more than what we'd already discussed and 'd gone along with, but Percy didn't know that. e agreed to leave off his threats to have me reassigned, and the atmosphere on lock sweetened. e had even agreed that elacroix could keep Percy's old nemesis as a pet. t's amazing how some men can change, given the right incentive; in Percy's case, all arden Moores had to offer was the chance to take a bald little renchman's life.

# 9

oot- oot felt that four cents was far too little for a prime orona cigar box, and in that he was probably right - cigar boxes were highly prized objects in prison. thousand different small items could be stored in them, the smell was pleasant, and there was something about them that reminded our customers of what it was like to be free men. ecause cigarettes were permitted in prison but cigars were not, imagine.

ean tanton, who was back on the block by then, added a penny to the pot, and kicked one in, as well. hen oot still proved reluctant, rutal went to work on him, first telling him he ought to be ashamed of himself for behaving like such a cheapskate, then promising him that he, rutus

owell, would personally put that orona box back in oot's hands the day after elacroix's execution. ' ix cents might or might not be enough if you was speaking about *selling* that cigar box, we could have a good old barber- shop argument about that,' rutal said, 'but you have to admit it's a great price for *renting* one. e's gonna walk the Mile in a month, six weeks at the very outside. hy, that box'll be back on the shelf under your cart almost before you know it's gone.'

' e could get a soft-hearted judge to give im a stay and still be here to sing " hould old acquaintances be forgot," oot said, but he knew better and rutal knew he did. Old oot- oot had been pushing that damned

ible-quoting cart of his around old Mountain since Pony xpress days, practically, and he had plenty of sources, better than ours, thought then.

e knew elacroix was fresh out of soft-hearted judges. ll he had left to

hope for was the governor, who as a rule didn't issue clemency to folks who had baked half a dozen of his constituents.

' ven if he don't get a stay, that mouse'd be shitting in that box until October, maybe even hanksgiving,' oot argued, but rutal could see he was weakening. ' ho gonna buy a cigar box some mouse been using for a toilet?'

'Oh jeez-Louise,' rutal said. ' hat's the numbest thing 've ever heard you say, oot. mean, that takes the cake. irst, elacroix will keep the box clean enough to eat a church dinner out of - the way he loves that mouse, he'd lick it clean if that's what it took.'

' asy on dat stuff,' oot said, wrinkling his nose.

' econd,' rutal went on, 'mouse-shit is no big deal, anyway. t's just hard little pellets, looks like birdshot. hake it right out. Nothing to it.'

Old oot knew better than to carry his protest any further; he'd been on the yard long enough to understand when he could afford to face into the breeze and when he'd do better to bend in the hurricane. his wasn't exactly a hurricane, but we bluesuits liked the mouse, and we liked the idea of

elacroix having the mouse, and that meant it was at least a gale. o

elacroix got his box, and Percy was as good as his word - two days later the bottom was lined with soft pads of cotton batting from the dispensary. Percy handed them over himself, and could see the fear in elacroix's eyes as he reached out through the bars to take them. e was afraid Percy would grab his hand and break his fingers. was a little afraid of it too, but no such thing happened. hat was the closest ever came to liking Percy, but even then it was hard to mistake the look of cool amusement in his eyes.

elacroix had a pet; Percy had one too. elacroix would keep his, petting it and loving it as long as he could; Percy would wait patiently (as patiently as a man like him could anyway), and then burn his alive.

'Mousie ilton, open for business.' arry said. ' he only question is, will the little bugger use it?'

hat question was answered as soon as elacroix caught Mr. Jingles up in one hand and lowered him gently into the box. he mouse snuggled into the white cotton as if it were unt ea's comforter, and that was his home from then until□ well, 'll get to the end of Mr. Jingles's story in good time.

Old oot- oots worries that the cigar box would, fill up with mouse-shit proved to be entirely groundless. never saw a single turd in there, and

elacroix said he never did, either, anywhere in his cell, for that matter.

Much later, around the time rutal showed me the hole in the beam and we found the colored splinters, moved a chair out of the restraint room's east corner and found a little pile of mouse turds back there. e had always gone back to the same place to do his business, seemingly, and as far from us as he could get. ere's another thing: never saw him peeing, and usually mice can hardly turn the faucet off for two minutes at a time, especially while they're eating. told you, the damned thing was one of od's mysteries.

week or so after Mr. Jingles had settled into the cigar box, elacroix called me and rutal down to his cell to see something. e did that so much it was annoying - if Mr. Jingles so much as rolled over on his back with his paws in the air, it was the cutest thing on od's earth, as far as that half-pint

ajun was concerned - but this time what he was up to really was sort of amusing.

elacroix had been pretty much forgotten by the world following his conviction, but he had one relation - an old maiden aunt, believe - who wrote him once a week. he had also sent him an enormous bag of peppermint candies, the sort which are marketed under the name anada Mints these days. hey looked like big pink pills. elacroix was not allowed to have the whole bag at once, naturally - it was a five-pounder, and he would have gobbled them until he had to go to the infirmary with stomach-gripes. Like almost every murderer we ever had on the Mile, he had absolutely no understanding of moderation. e'd give them out to him half a dozen at a time, and only then if he remembered to ask.

Mr. Jingles was sitting beside elacroix on the bunk when we got down there, holding one of those pink candies in his paws and munching contentedly away at it. elacroix was simply overcome with delight - he was like a classical pianist watching his five-year-old son play his first halting exercises. ut don't get me wrong; it was funny, a real hoot. he candy was half the size of Mr. Jingles, and his whitefurred belly was already distended from it.

' ake it away from him, ddie,' rutal said, half-laughing and half- horrified. ' hrist almighty Jesus, he'll eat till he busts. can smell that peppermint from here. ow many have you let him have?'

' his his second,' elacroix said, looking a little nervously at Mr.

Jingles's belly. 'You really think he□ you know□ bus' his guts?' 'Might,' rutal said.

hat was enough authority for elacroix. e reached for the half-eaten pink mint. expected the mouse to nip him, but Mr. Jingles gave over that mint - what remained of it, anyway - as meek as could be. looked at

rutal, and rutal gave his head a little shake as if to say no, he didn't understand it, either. hen Mr. Jingles plopped down into his box and lay there on his side in an exhausted way that made all three of us laugh. fter that, we got used to seeing the mouse sitting beside elacroix, holding a mint and munching away on it just as neatly as an old lady at an afternoon tea-party, both of them surrounded by what later smelled in that hole in the beam - the half-bitter, half-sweet smell of peppermint candy.

here's one more thing to tell you about Mr. Jingles before moving on to the arrival of illiam harton, which was when the cyclone really touched down on lock. week or so after the incident of the peppermint candies

- around the time when we'd pretty much decided elacroix wasn't going to feed his pet to death, in other words - the renchman called me down to his cell. was on my own for the time being, rutal over at the commissary for something, and according to the regs, was not supposed to approach a prisoner in such circumstances. ut since probably could have shot-putted

elacroix twenty yards one-handed on a good day, decided to break the rule and see what he wanted.

' atch this, oss dgecombe,' he said. 'You gonna see what Mr. Jingles can do!' e reached behind the cigar box and brought up a small wooden spool.

' here'd you get that?' asked him, although supposed knew. here was really only one person he *could* have gotten it from.

'Old oot- oot,' he said. ' atch this.'

was already watching, and could see Mr. Jingles in his box, standing up with his small front paws propped on the edge, his black eyes fixed on the spool elacroix was holding between the thumb and first finger of his right hand. felt a funny little chill go up my back. had never seen a mere mouse attend to something with such sharpness - with such *intelligence.* don't really believe that Mr. Jingles was a supernatural visitation, and if have given you that idea, 'm sorry, but have never doubted that he was a genius of his kind.

elacroix bent over and rolled the threadless spool across the floor of his cell. t went easily, like a pair of wheels connected by an axle. he mouse

was out of his box in a flash and across the floor after it, like a dog chasing after a stick. exclaimed with surprise, and elacroix grinned.

he spool hit the wall and rebounded. Mr. Jingles went around it and pushed it back to the bunk, switching from one end of the spool to the other whenever it looked like it was going to veer off-course. e pushed the spool until it hit elacroix's foot. hen he looked up at him for a moment, as if to make sure elacroix had no more immediate tasks for him (a few arithmetic problems to solve, perhaps, or some Latin to parse). pparently satisfied on this score, Mr. Jingles went back to the cigar box and settled down in it again.

'You taught him that,' said.

'Yessir, oss dgecombe,' elacroix said, his smile only slightly dissembling. ' e fetch it every time. mart as hell, ain't he?'

' nd the spool?' asked. ' ow did you know to fetch that for *him*,

ddie?'

' e whisper in my ear that he want it,' elacroix said serenely. ' ame as he whisper his name.'

elacroix showed all the other guys his mouse's trick□ all except Percy.

o elacroix, it didn't matter that Percy had suggested the cigar box and procured the cotton with which to line it. elacroix was like some dogs: kick them once and they never trust you again, no matter how nice you are to them.

can hear elacroix now, yelling, *ey, you guys! Come and see what Mr.*

*ingles can do!* nd them going down in a bluesuit cluster - rutal, arry,

ean, even ill odge. ll of them had been properly amazed, too, the same as had been.

hree or four days after Mr. Jingles started doing the trick with the spool,

arry erwilliger rummaged through the arts and crafts stuff we kept in the restraint room, found the rayolas, and brought them to elacroix with a smile that was almost embarrassed. ' thought you might like to make that spool different colors,' he said. ' hen your little pal'd be like a circus mouse, or something.'

' circus mouse!' elacroix said, looking completely, rapturously happy.

suppose he *was* completely happy, maybe for the first time in his whole miserable life. ' hat just what he is, too! circus mouse! hen get outta here, he gonna make me rich, like inna circus! You see if he don't.'

Percy etmore would no doubt have pointed out to elacroix that when he left old Mountain, he'd be riding in an ambulance that didn't need to run its light or siren, but arry knew better. e just told elacroix to make the spool as colorful as he could as quick as he could, because he'd have to take the crayons back after dinner.

el made it colorful, all right. hen he was done, one end of the spool was yellow, the other end was green, and the drum in the middle was firehouse red. e got used to hearing elacroix trumpet, *Maintenant, m sieurs et mesdames! Le cirque présentement le mous amusant et amazeant!* hat wasn't exactly it, but it gives you an idea of that stewpot

rench of his. hen he'd make this sound way down in his throat - think it was supposed to represent a drumroll - and fling the spool. Mr. Jingles would be after it in a flash, either nosing it back or rolling it with his paws.

hat second way really was something you would have paid to see in a circus, think. elacroix and his mouse and his mouse's brightly colored spool were our chief amusements at the time that John offey came into our care and custody, and that was the way things remained for awhile. hen my urinary infection, which had lain still for awhile, came back, and

illiam harton arrived, and all hell broke loose.

# 10

he dates have mostly slipped out of my head. suppose could have my granddaughter, anielle, look some of them out of the old newspaper files, but what would be the point? he most important of them, like the day we came down to elacroix's cell and found the mouse sitting on his shoulder, or the day illiam harton came on the block and almost killed ean

tanton, would not be in the papers, anyway. Maybe it's better to go on just as have been; in the end, guess the dates don't matter much, if you can remember the things you saw and keep them in the right order.

know that things got squeezed together a little. hen elacroix's O papers finally came to me from urtis nderson's office, was amazed to see that our ajun pal's date with Old parky had been advanced from when we had expected, a thing that was almost unheard of, even in those days when you didn't have to move half of heaven and all the earth to execute a man. t was a matter of two days, think, from the twenty-seventh of October to the twenty-fifth. on't hold me to it exactly, but know that's

close; remember thinking that oot was going to get his orona box back even sooner than he had expected.

harton, meanwhile, got to us later than expected. or one thing, his trial ran longer than nderson's usually reliable sources had thought it would (when it came to ild illy, *nothing* was reliable, we would soon discover, including our time-tested and supposedly foolproof methods of prisoner control). hen, after he had been found guilty - that much, at least, went according to the script - he was taken to ndianola eneral ospital for tests. e had had a number of supposed seizures during the trial, twice serious enough to send him crashing to the floor, where he lay shaking and flopping and drumming his feet on the boards. harton's court-appointed lawyer claimed he suffered from 'epilepsy spells' and had committed his crimes while of unsound mind; the prosecution claimed the fits were the sham acting of a coward desperate to save his own life. fter observing the so-called 'epilepsy spells' at first hand, the jury decided the fits were an act.

he judge concurred but ordered a series of pre-sentencing tests after the verdict came down. od knows why; perhaps he was only curious.

t's a blue-eyed wonder that harton didn't escape from the hospital (and the irony that arden Moore's wife, Melinda, was in the same hospital at the same time did not escape any of us), but he didn't. hey had him surrounded by guards, suppose, and perhaps he still had hopes of being declared incompetent by reason of epilepsy, if there is such a thing.

e wasn't. he doctors found nothing wrong with his brain - physiologically, at least - and illy "the Kid" harton was at last bound for

old Mountain. hat might have been around the sixteenth or the eighteenth; it's my recollection that harton arrived about two weeks after John offey and a week or ten days before elacroix walked the reen Mile.

he day our new psychopath joined us was an eventful one for me. woke up at four that morning with my groin throbbing and my penis feeling hot and clogged and swollen. ven before swung my feet out of bed, knew that my urinary infection wasn't getting better, as had hoped. t had been a brief turn for the better, that was all, and it was over.

went out to the privy to do my business - this was at least three years before we put in our first water-closet - and had gotten no further than the woodpile at the comer of the house when realized couldn't hold it any longer. lowered my pajama pants just as the urine started to flow, and that

flow was accompanied by the most excruciating. pain of my entire life. passed a gall-stone in 9 6, and know people say that is the worst, but that gall-stone was like a touch of acid indigestion compared to this outrage.

My knees came unhinged and fell heavily onto them, tearing out the seat of my pajama pants when spread my legs to keep from losing my balance and going face-first into a puddle of my own piss. still might have gone over if hadn't grabbed one of the woodpile logs with my left hand.

ll that, though, could have been going on in ustralia, or even on another planet. ll was concerned with was the pain that had set me on fire; my lower belly was burning, and my penis - an organ which had gone mostly forgotten by me except when providing me the most intense physical pleasure a man can experience - now felt as if it were melting; expected to look down and see blood gushing from its tip, but it appeared to be a perfectly ordinary stream of urine.

hung onto the woodpile with one hand and put the other across my mouth, concentrating on keeping my mouth shut. did not want to frighten my wife awake with a scream. t seemed that went on pissing forever, but at last the stream dried up. y then the pain had sunk deep into my stomach and my testicles, biting like rusty teeth. or a long while - it might have been as long as a minute - was physically incapable of getting up. t last the pain began to abate, and struggled to my feet. looked at my urine, already soaking into the ground, and wondered if any sane od could make a world where such a little bit of dampness could come at the cost of such horrendous pain.

would call in sick, thought, and go see r. adler after all. didn't want the stink and the queasiness of r. adler's sulfa tablets, but anything would be better than kneeling beside the woodpile, trying not to scream while my prick was reporting that it had apparently been doused with coal- oil and set afire.

hen, as was swallowing aspirin in our kitchen and listening to Jan snore lightly in the other room, remembered that today was the day

illiam harton was scheduled on the block, and that rutal wouldn't be there - the roster had him over on the other side of the prison, helping to move the rest of the library and some leftover infirmary equipment to the new building. One thing didn't feel right about in spite of my pain was leaving harton to ean and arry. hey were good men, but urtis

nderson's report had suggested that illiam harton was exceptionally

bad news. his man just doesn't care, he had written, underlining for emphasis.

y then the pain had abated some, and could think. he best idea, it seemed to me, was to leave for the prison early. could get there at six, which was the time arden Moores usually came in. e could get rutus

owell reassigned to lock long enough for harton's reception, and 'd make my long-overdue trip to the doctor. old Mountain was actually on my way.

wice on the twenty-mile ride to the Penitentiary that sudden need to urinate overcame me. oth times was able to pull over and take care of the problem without embarrassing myself (for one thing, traffic on country roads at such an hour was all but nonexistent). Neither of these two voidings was as painful as the one that had taken me off my feet on the way to the privy, but both times had to clutch the passenger-side doorhandle of my little ord coupe to hold myself up, and could feel sweat running down my hot face. was sick, all right, good and sick.

made it, though, drove in through the south gate, parked in my usual place, and went right up to see the warden. t was going on six o'clock by then. Miss annah's office was empty - she wouldn't be in until the relatively civilized hour of seven - but the light was on in Moores's office; could see it through the pebbled glass. gave a perfunctory knock and opened the door. Moores looked up, startled to see anyone at that unusual hour, and would have given a great deal not to have been the one to see him in that condition, with his face naked and unguarded. is white hair, usually so neatly combed, was sticking up in tufts and tangles; his hands were in it, yanking and pulling, when walked in. is eyes were raw, the skin beneath them puffy and swollen. is palsy was the worst had ever seen it; he looked like a man who had just come inside after a long walk on a terribly cold night.

' al, 'm sorry, 'll come back - ' began.

'No,' he said. 'Please, Paul. ome in. hut the door and come in. need someone now, if ever needed anyone in my whole life. hut the door and come in.'

did as he asked, forgetting my own pain for the first time since 'd awakened that morning.

' t's a brain tumor,' Moores said. ' hey got -ray pictures of it. hey seemed real pleased with their pictures, actually. One of them said they may

be the best ones anyone's ever gotten, at least so far; said they're going to publish them in some biggety medical journal up in New ngland. t's the size of a lemon, they said, and way down deep inside, where they can't operate. hey say she'll be dead by hristmas. haven't told her. can't think how. can't think how for the life of me.'

hen he began to cry, big, gasping sobs that filled me with both pity and a kind of terror - when a man who keeps himself as tightly guarded as al Moores finally does lose control, it's frightening to watch. stood there for a moment, then went to him and put my arm around his shoulders. e groped out for me with both of his own arms, like a drowning man, and began to sob against my stomach, all restraint washed away. Later, after he got himself under control, he apologized. e did it without quite meeting my eyes, as a man does when he feels he has embarrassed himself dreadfully, maybe so deeply that he can never quite live it down. man can end up hating the fellow who has seen him in such a state. thought arden Moores was better than that, but it never crossed my mind to do the business had originally come for, and when left Moores's office, walked over to lock instead of back to my car. he aspirin was working by then, and the pain in my midsection was down to a low throb. would get through the day somehow, reckoned, get harton settled in, check back with al Moores that afternoon, and get my sick-leave for tomorrow. he worst was pretty much over, thought, with no slightest idea that the worst of that day's mischief hadn't even begun.

# 11

' e thought he was still doped from the tests,' ean said late that afternoon. is voice was low, rasping, almost a bark, and there were blackish-purple bruises rising on his neck. could see it was hurting him to talk and thought of telling him to let it go, but sometimes it hurts more to be quiet. judged that this was one of those times, and kept my own mouth shut. ' e all thought he was doped, didn't we?'

arry erwilliger nodded. ven Percy, sitting off by himself in his own sullen little party of one, nodded.

rutal glanced at me, and for a moment met his eyes. e were thinking pretty much that same thing, that this was the way it happened. You were cruising along, everything going according to oyle, you made one

mistake, and bang, the sky fell down on you. hey had thought he was doped, it was a reasonable assumption to make, but no one had *asked* if he was doped. thought saw something else in rutal's eyes, as well: arry and ean would learn from their mistake. specially ean, who could easily have gone home to his family dead. Percy wouldn't. Percy maybe couldn't. ll Percy could do was sit in the corner and sulk because he was in the shit again.

here were seven of them that went up to ndianola to take charge of

ild ill harton: arry, ean, Percy, two other guards in the back ( have forgotten their names, although 'm sure knew them once), plus two up front. hey took what we used to call the stagecoach - a ord panel-truck which had been steel-reinforced and equipped with supposedly bulletproof glass. t looked like a cross between a milk-wagon and an armored car.

arry erwilliger was technically in charge of the expedition. e handed his paperwork over to the county sheriff (not omer ribus but some other elected yokel like him, imagine), who in turn handed over Mr. illiam

harton, hellraiser *extraordinaire*, as elacroix might have put it. old Mountain prison uniform had been sent ahead, but the sheriff and his men hadn't bothered to put harton in it; they left that to our boys. harton was dressed in a cotton hospital johnny and cheap felt slippers when they first met him on the second floor of the eneral ospital, a scrawny man with a narrow, pimply face and a lot of long, tangly blond hair. is ass, also narrow and also covered with pimples, stuck out the back of the johnny.

hat was the part of him arry and the others saw first, because harton was standing at the window and looking out at the parking lot when they came in. e didn't turn but just stood there, holding the curtains back with one hand, silent as a doll while arry bitched at the county sheriff about being too lazy to get harton into his prison blues and the county sheriff lectured - as every county official 've ever met seems bound to do - about what was his job and what was not.

hen arry got tired of that part ( doubt it took him long), he told

harton to turn around. harton did. e looked, ean told us in his raspy bark of a half-choked voice, like any one of a thousand backcountry stampeders who had wound their way through old Mountain during our years there. oil that look down and what you got was a dullard with a mean steak. ometimes you also discovered a yellow streak in them, once their backs were to the wall, but more often there was nothing there but

fight and mean and then more fight and more mean. here are people who see nobility in folks like illy harton, but am not one of them. rat will fight, too, if it is cornered. his man's face seemed to have no more personality than his acne-studded backside, ean told us. is jaw was slack, his eyes distant, his shoulders slumped, his hands dangling. e looked shot up with morphine, all right, every bit as coo-coo as any dopefiend any of them had ever seen.

t this, Percy gave another of his sullen nods.

'Put this on,' arry said, indicating the uniform on the foot of the bed - it had been taken out of the brown paper it was wrapped in, but otherwise not touched - it was still folded just as it had been in the prison laundry, with a pair of white cotton boxer shorts poking out of one shirtsleeve and a pair of white socks poking out of the other.

harton seemed willing enough to comply, but wasn't able to get very far without help. e managed the boxers, but when it came to the pants, he kept trying to put both legs into the same hole. inally ean helped him, getting his feet to go where they belonged and then yanking the trousers up, doing the fly, and snapping the waistband□ harton only stood there, not even trying to help once he saw that ean was doing it for him. e stared vacantly across the room, hands lax, and it didn't occur to any of them that he was shamming. Not in hopes of escape (at least don't believe that was it) but only in hopes of making the maximum amount of trouble when the right time came.

he papers were signed. illiam harton, who had become county property when he was arrested, now became the state's property. e was taken down the back stairs and through the kitchen, surrounded by bluesuits. e walked with his head down and his long-fingered hands dangling. he first time his cap fell off, ean put it back on him. he second time, he just tucked it into his own back pocket.

e had another chance to make trouble in the back of the stagecoach, when they were shackling him, and didn't. f he thought (even now 'm not sure if he did, or if he did, how much), he must have thought that the space was too small and the numbers too great to cause a satisfactory hooraw. o on went the chains, one set running between his ankles and another set too long, it turned out, between his wrists.

he drive to old Mountain took an hour. uring that whole time,

harton sat on the lefthand bench up by the cab, head lowered, cuffed

hands dangling between his knees. very now and then he hummed a little,

arry said, and Percy roused himself enough from his funk to say that the lugoon dripped spittle from his lax lower lip, a drop at a time, until it had made a puddle between his feet. Like a dog dripping off the end of its tongue on a hot summer day.

hey drove in through the south gate when they got to the pen, right past my car, guess. he guard on the south pass tan back the big door between the lot and the exercise yard, and the stagecoach drove through. t was a slack time in the yard, not many men out and most of them hoeing in the garden. Pumpkin time, it would have been. hey drove straight across to

lock and stopped. he driver opened the door and told them he was going to take the stagecoach over to the motor-pool to have the oil changed, it had been good working with them. he extra guards went with the vehicle, two of them sitting in the back eating apples, the doors now swinging open.

hat left ean, arry and Percy with one shackled prisoner. t should have been enough, *would* have been enough, if they hadn't been lulled by the stick thin country boy standing head-down there in the dirt with chains on his wrists and ankles. hey marched him the twelve or so paces to the door that opened into lock, falling into the same formation we used when escorting prisoners down the reen Mile. arry was on his left, ean was on his right, and Percy was behind, with his baton in his hand. No one told me that, but know damned well he had it out; Percy loved that hickory stick. s for me, was sitting in what would be harton's home until it came time for him to check into the hot place - first cell on the right as you headed down the corridor toward the restraint room. had my clipboard in my hands and was thinking of nothing but making my little set speech and getting the hell out. he pain in my groin was building up again, and all wanted was to go into my office and wait for it to pass.

ean stepped forward to unlock the door. e selected the right key from the bunch on his belt and slid it into the lock. harton came alive just as

ean turned the key and pulled the handle. e voiced a screaming, gibbering cry - a kind of ebel yell - that froze arry to temporary immobility and pretty much finished Percy etmore for the entire encounter. heard that scream through the partly opened door and didn't associate it with anything human at first; thought a dog had gotten into the yard somehow and had been hurt; that perhaps some mean tempered con had hit it with a hoe.

harton lifted his arms, dropped the chain which hung between his wrists over ean's head, and commenced to choke him with it. ean gave a strangled cry and lurched forward, into the cool electric light of our little world. harton was happy to go with him, even gave him a shove, all the time yelling and gibbering, even laughing. e had his arms cocked at the

elbows with his fists up by ean's ears, yanking the chain as tight as he could, whipsawing it back and forth.

arry landed on harton's back, wrapping one hand in our new boy's greasy blond hair and slamming his other fist into the side of harton's face as hard as he could. e had both a baton of his own and a sidearm pistol, but in his excitement drew neither. e'd had trouble with prisoners before, you bet, but never one who'd taken any of us by surprise the way that

harton did. he man's slyness was beyond our experience. had never seen its like before, and have never seen it again.

nd he was strong. ll that slack looseness was gone. arry said later that it was like jumping onto a coiled nest of steel springs that had somehow come to life. harton, now inside and near the duty desk, whirled to his left and flung arry off. arry hit the desk and went sprawling.

*Whoooee, boys!* harton laughed. *Ain t this a party, now? s it, or what?*

till screaming and laughing, harton went back to choking ean with his chain. hy not? harton knew what we all knew: they could only fry him once.

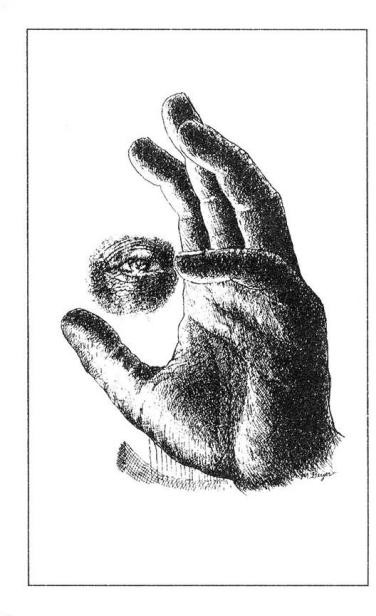
' it him, Percy, hit him!' arry screamed, struggling to his feet. ut Percy only stood there, hickory baton in hand, eyes as wide as soup-plates.

ere was the chance he'd been looking for, you would have said, his golden opportunity to put that tallywhacker of his to good use, and he was too scared and confused to do it. his wasn't some terrified little renchman or a black giant who hardly seemed to be in his own body; this was a whirling devil.

came out of harton's cell, dropping my clipboard and pulling my.38. had forgotten the infection that was heating up my middle for the second time that day. didn't doubt the story the others told of harton's blank face and dull eyes when they told it, but that wasn't the harton saw. hat saw was the face of an animal - not an intelligent animal, but one filled with cunning□ and meanness□ and joy. Yes. e was doing what he had been made to do. he place and the circumstances didn't matter. he other thing saw was ean tanton's red, swelling face. e was dying in front of my eyes. harton saw the gun and turned ean toward it, so that 'd almost certainly have to hit one to hit the other. rom over ean's shoulder, one blazing blue eye dared me to shoot.

# Pa t T ee

offey's ands



# 1

Looking back through what 've written, see that called eorgia Pines, where now live, a nursing home. he folks who run the place wouldn't be very happy with that! ccording to the brochures they keep in the lobby and send out to prospective clients, its a " tate-of-the-art retirement complex for the elderly." t even has a esource enter - the brochure says so. he folks who have to live here (the brochure doesn't call us "inmates," but sometimes do) just call it the room.

olks think 'm stand-offy because don't go down to the room much in the day, but it's the programs can't stand, not the folks. Oprah, icki Lake, arnie ilson, olanda - the world is falling down around our ears, and all these people care for is talking about fucking to women in short skirts and men with their shirts hanging open. ell, hell - judge not, lest ye be judged, the ible says, so 'll get down off my soapbox. t's just that if wanted to spend time with trailer trash, 'd move two miles down to the

appy heels Motor ourt, where the police cars always seem to be headed on riday and aturday nights with their sirens screaming and their blue lights flashing. My special friend, laine onnelly, feels the same way.

laine is eighty, tall and slim, still erect and clear-eyed, very intelligent and refined. he walks very slowly because there's something wrong with her hips, and know that the arthritis in her hands gives her terrible misery, but she has a beautiful long neck - a swan neck, almost - and long, pretty hair that falls to her shoulders when she lets it down.

est of all, she doesn't think 'm peculiar, or stand-offy. e spend a lot of time together, laine and . f hadn't reached such a grotesque age, suppose might speak of her as my ladyfriend. till, having a special friend

- just that - is not so bad, and in some ways, it's even better. lot of the problems and heartaches that go with being boyfriend and girlfriend have simply burned out of us. nd although know that no one under the age of, say, fifty would believe this, sometimes the embers are better than the campfire. t's strange, but it's true.

o don't watch during the day. ometimes walk; sometimes read; mostly what 've been doing for the last month or so is writing this memoir among the plants in the solarium. think there's more oxygen in that room,

and it helps the old memory. t beats the hell out of eraldo ivera, can tell you that.

ut when can't sleep, sometimes creep downstairs and put on the television. here's no ome ox Office or anything at eorgia Pines - guess that's a resource just a wee bit too expensive for our esource enter

- but we have the basic cable services, and that means we have the

merican Movie hannel. hat's the one (just in case you don't have the basic cable services yourself) where most of the films are in black and white and none of the women take their clothes off. or an old fart like me, that's sort of soothing. here have been a good many nights when 've slipped right off to sleep on the ugly green sofa in front of the while

rancis the alking Mule once more pulls onald O' onnor's skillet out of the fire, or John ayne cleans up odge, or Jimmy agney calls someone a dirty rat and then pulls a gun. ome of them are movies saw with my wife, Janice (not just my ladyfriend but my *best* friend), and they calm me. he clothes they wear, the way they walk and talk, even the music on the soundtrack - all those things calm me. hey remind me, suppose, of when

was a man still walking on the skin of the world, instead of a moth-eaten relic mouldering away in an old folks' home where many of the residents wear diapers and rubber pants.

here was nothing soothing about what saw this morning, though.

Nothing at all.

laine sometimes joins me for M 's so-called arly ird Matinee, which starts at :00 a.m. - she doesn't say much about it, but know her arthritis hurts her something terrible, and that the drugs they give her don't help much anymore.

hen she came in this morning, gliding like a ghost in her white terrycloth robe, she found me sitting on the lumpy sofa, bent over the scrawny sticks that used to be legs, and clutching my knees to try and still the shakes that were running through me like a high wind. felt cold all over, except for my groin, which seemed to burn with the ghost of the urinary infection which had so troubled my life in the fall of 93 - the fall of John offey, Percy etmore, and Mr. Jingles, the trained mouse.

he fall of illiam harton, it had been, too.

'Paul!' laine cried, and hurried over to me - hurried as fast as the rusty nails and ground glass in her hips would allow, anyway. 'Paul, what's wrong?'

' 'll be all right,' said, but the words didn't sound very convincing - they came out all uneven, through teeth that wanted to chatter. 'Just give me a minute or two, 'll be right as rain.'

he sat next to me and put her arm around my shoulders. ' 'm sure,' she said. ' ut what happened? or heaven's sake, Paul, you look like you saw a ghost.'

*did,* thought, and didn't realize until her eyes widened that 'd said it out loud.

'Not really.' said, and patted her hand (gently - so gently!). ' ut for a minute. laine - od!'

' as it from the time when you were a guard at the prison?' she asked. ' he time that you've been writing about in the solarium?'

nodded. ' worked on our version of eath ow - ' ' know - '

'Only we called it the reen Mile. ecause of the linoleum on the floor.

n the fall of '3 , we got this fellow - we got this *wildman* - named illiam

harton. Liked to think of himself as illy the Kid, even had it tattooed on his arm. Just a kid, but dangerous. can still remember what urtis

nderson - he was the assistant warden back in those days - wrote about him. " razy-wild and proud of it. harton is nineteen years old, and *he just doesn t* care." e'd underlined that part.'

he hand which had gone around my shoulders was now rubbing my back. was beginning to calm. n that moment loved laine onnelly, and could have kissed her all over her face as told her so. Maybe should have. t's terrible to be alone and frightened at any age, but think it's worst when you're old. ut had this other thing on my mind, this load of old and still unfinished business.

' nyway,' said, 'you're right - 've been scribbling about how harton came on the block and almost killed ean tanton - one of the guys worked with back then - when he did.'

' ow could he do that?' laine asked.

'Meanness and carelessness,' said grimly. ' harton supplied the meanness, and the guards who brought him in supplied the carelessness.

he real mistake was harton's wrist-chain - it was a little too long. hen

ean unlocked the door to lock, harton was behind him. here were guards on either side of him, but nderson was right - ild illy just didn't

care about such things. e dropped that wrist-chain down over ean's head and started choking him with it.'

laine shuddered.

' nyway, got thinking about all that and couldn't sleep, so came down here. turned on M , thinking you might come down and we'd have us a little date - '

he laughed and kissed my forehead just above the eyebrow. t used to make me prickle all over when Janice did that, and it still made me prickle all over when laine did it early this morning. guess some things don't ever change.

' - and what came on was this old black-and-white gangster movie from the forties. Kiss *of Death,* it's called.'

could feel myself wanting to start shaking again and tried to suppress it. ' ichard idmark's in it,' said. ' t was his first big part, think. never went to see it with Jan - we gave the cops and robbers a miss, usually - but remember reading somewhere that idmark gave one hell of a performance as the punk. e sure did. e's pale□ doesn't seem to walk so much as go *gliding* around□ he's always calling people 'squirt'□ talking about squealers

how much he hates the squealers□ '

was starting to shiver again in spite of my best efforts. just couldn't help it.

' lond hair,' whispered. 'Lank blond hair. watched until the part where he pushed this old woman in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs, then turned it off.'

' e reminded you of harton?'

' e *was* harton,' said. ' o the life.'

'Paul - ' she began, and stopped. he looked at the blank screen of the (the cable box on top of it was still on, the red numerals still showing 0, the number of the M channel), then back at me.

' hat?' asked. ' hat, laine?' hinking, *She s going to tell, me ought to quit writing about it. That ought to tear up the pages ve written so far and just quit on it.*

hat she said was ' on't let this stop you.'

gawped at her.

' lose your mouth, Paul - you'll catch a fly.' ' orry. t's just that□ well□ '

'You thought was going to tell you just the opposite, didn't you?'

'Yes.'

he took my hands in hers (gently, so gently - her long and beautiful fingers, her bunched and ugly knuckles) and leaned forward, fixing my blue eyes with her hazel ones, the left slightly dimmed by the mist of a coalescing cataract. ' may be too old and brittle to live,' she said, 'but 'm not too old to think. hat's a few sleepless nights at our age? hat's seeing a ghost on the , for that matter? re you going to tell me it's the only one you've ever seen?'

thought about arden Moores, and arry erwilliger, and rutus

owell; thought about MY mother, and about Jan, my wife, who died in

labama. knew about ghosts, all right.

'No,' said. ' t wasn't the first ghost 've ever seen. ut laine - it *was* a shock. ecause it was *him*.'

he kissed me again, then stood up, wincing as she did so and pressing the heels of her hands to the tops of her hips, as if she were afraid they might actually explode out through her skin if she wasn't very careful.

' think 've changed my mind about the television,' she said. ' 've got an extra pill that 've been keeping for a rainy day□ or night. think 'll take it and go back to bed. Maybe you should do the same.'

'Yes,' said. ' suppose should.' or one wild moment thought of suggesting that we go back to bed together, and then saw the dull pain in her eyes and thought better of it. ecause she might have said yes, and she would only have said that for me. Not so good.

e left the room ( won't dignify it with that other name, not even to be ironic) side by side, me matching my steps to hers, which were slow and painfully careful. he building was quiet except for someone moaning in the grip of a bad dream behind some closed door.

' ill you be able to sleep, do you think?' she asked.

'Yes, think so,' said, but of course wasn't able to; lay in my bed until sunup, thinking about *Kiss of Death.* 'd see ichard idmark, giggling madly, tying the old lady into her wheelchair and then pushing her down the stairs - " his is what we do to squealers," he told her - and then his face would merge into the face of illiam harton as he'd looked on the day when he came to lock and the reen Mile - harton giggling like

idmark, harton screaming, *Ain t this a party, now? s it, or what?* didn't bother with breakfast, not after that; just came down here to the solarium and began to write.

hosts? ure.

know all about ghosts.

# 2

' *oooee, boys!* harton laughed. *Ain t this a party, now? s it, or what?*

till screaming and laughing, harton went back to choking ean with his chain. hy not? harton knew what ean and arry and my friend

rutus owell knew - they could only fry a man once.

' it him!' arry erwilliger screamed. e had grappled with harton, tried to stop things before they got fairly started, but harton had thrown him off and now arry was trying to find his feet. 'Percy, hit him!'

ut Percy only stood there, hickory baton in hand, eyes as wide as soup- plates. e loved that damned baton of his, and you would have said this was the chance to use it he'd been pining for ever since he came to old Mountain Penitentiary□ but now that it had come, he was too scared to use the opportunity. his wasn't some terrified little renchman like elacroix or a black giant who hardly seemed to know he was in his own body, like John offey; this was a whirling devil.

came out of harton's cell, dropping my clipboard and pulling my.38.

or the second time that day had forgotten the infection that was heating up my middle. didn't doubt the story the others told of harton's blank face and dull eyes when they recounted it later, but that wasn't the harton

saw. hat saw was the face of an animal - not an intelligent animal, but one filled with cunning□ and meanness□ and joy. Yes. e was doing what he had been made to do. he place and the circumstances didn't matter. he other thing saw was ean tanton's red, swelling face. e was dying in front of my eyes. harton saw the gun in my hand and turned ean toward it, so that 'd almost certainly have to hit one to hit the other. rom over

ean's shoulder, one blazing blue eye dared me to shoot. harton's other eye was hidden by ean's hair. ehind them saw Percy standing irresolute, with his baton half-raised. nd then, filling the open doorway to the prison yard, a miracle in the flesh: rutus owell. hey had finished moving the last of the infirmary equipment, and he had come over to see who wanted coffee.

e acted without a moment's hesitation - shoved Percy aside and into the wall with tooth-rattling force, pulled his own baton out of its loop, and brought it crashing down on the back of harton's head with all the force in his massive right arm. here was a dull *whock!* ound - an almost hollow sound, as if there were no brain at all under harton's skull - and the chain finally loosened around ean's neck. harton went down like a sack of meal and ean crawled away, hacking harshly and holding one hand to his throat, his eyes bulging.

knelt by him and he shook his head violently. 'Okay,' he rasped. ' ake care□ him!' e motioned at harton. 'Lock! ell!'

didn't think he'd need a cell, as hard as rutal had hit him; thought

he'd need a coffin. No such luck, though. harton was conked out, but a long way from dead. e lay sprawled on his side, one arm thrown out so that the tips of his fingers touched the linoleum of the reen Mile, his eyes shut, his breathing slow but regular. here was even a peaceful little smile on his face, as if he'd gone to sleep listening to his favorite lullaby. tiny red rill of blood was seeping out of his hair and staining the collar of his new prison shirt. hat was all.

'Percy,' said. ' elp me!'

Percy didn't move, only stood against the wall, staring with wide, stunned eyes. don't think he knew exactly where he was.

'Percy, goddammit, grab hold of him!'

e got moving, then, and arry helped him. ogether the three of us hauled the unconscious Mr. harton into his cell while rutal helped ean to his feet and held him as gently as any mother while ean bent over and hacked air back into his lungs.

Our new problem child didn't wake up for almost three hours, but when he did, he showed absolutely no ill effects from rutal's savage hit. e came to the way he moved - fast. t one moment he was lying on his bunk, dead to the world. t the next he was standing at the bars - he was silent as a cat - and staring out at me as sat at the duty desk, writing a report on the incident. hen finally sensed someone looking at me and glanced up, there he was, his grin displaying a set of blackening, dying teeth with several gaps among them already. t gave me a jump to see him there like that. tried not to show it, but think he knew. ' ey, flunky,' he said. 'Next time it'll be you. nd won't miss.'

' ello, harton,' said, as evenly as could. ' nder the circumstances, guess can skip the speech and the elcome agon, don't you think?'

is grin faltered just a little. t wasn't the sort of response he had expected, and probably wasn't the one would have given under other circumstances. ut something had happened while harton was unconscious. t is, suppose, one of the major things have trudged through all these pages to tell you about. Now let's just see if you believe it.

# 3

xcept for shouting once at elacroix, Percy kept his mouth shut once the excitement was over. his was probably the result of shock rather than any effort at tact - Percy etmore knew as much about tact as do about the native tribes of darkest frica, in my opinion - but it was a damned good thing, just the same. f he'd started in whining about how rutal had pushed him into the wall or wondering why no one had told him that nasty men like ild illy harton sometimes turned up on lock, think we would have killed him. hen we could have toured the reen Mile in a whole new way. hat's sort of a funny idea, when you consider it. missed my chance to make like James agney in *White eat.*

nyway, when we were sure that ean was going to keep breathing and that he wasn't going to pass out on the spot, arry and rutal escorted him over to the infirmary. elacroix, who had been absolutely silent during the scuffle (he had been in prison lots of times, that one, and knew when it was prudent to keep his yap shut and when it was relatively safe to open it again), began bawling loudly down the corridor as arry and rutal helped

ean out. elacroix wanted to know what had happened. You would have thought his constitutional rights had been violated.

' hut up, you little queer!' Percy yelled back, so furious that the veins stood out on the sides of his neck. put a hand on his arm and felt it quivering beneath his shirt. ome of this was residual fright, of course (every now and then had to remind myself that part of Percy's problem was that he was only twenty-one, not much older than harton), but think most of it was rage. e hated elacroix. don't know just why, but he did.

' o see if arden Moores is still here,' told Percy. ' f he is, give him a complete verbal report on what happened. ell him he'll have my written report on his desk tomorrow, if can manage it.'

Percy swelled visibly at this responsibility; for a horrible moment or two,

actually thought he might salute. 'Yes, sir. will.'

' egin by telling him that the situation in lock is normal. t's not a story, and the warden won't appreciate you dragging it out to heighten the suspense.'

' won't.'

'Okay. Off you go.'

e started for the door, then turned back. he one thing you could count on with him was contrariness. desperately wanted him gone, my groin was on fire, and now he didn't seem to want to go.

' re you all right, Paul?' he asked. ' unning a fever, maybe? ot a touch of the grippe? ause there's sweat all over your face.'

' might have a touch of something, but mostly 'm fine,' said. ' o on, Percy, tell the warden.'

e nodded and left - thank hrist for small favors. s soon as the door was closed, lunged into my office. Leaving the duty desk unmanned was against regulations, but was beyond caring about that. t was bad - like it had been that morning.

managed to get into the little toilet cubicle behind the desk and to get my business out of my pants before the urine started to gush, but it was a near thing. had to put a hand over my mouth to stifle a scream as began to flow, and grabbed blindly for the lip of the washstand with the other. t wasn't like my house, where could fall to my knees and piss a puddle beside the woodpile; if went to my knees here, the urine would go all over the floor.

managed to keep my feet and not to scream, but it was a close thing on both counts. t felt like my urine had been filled with tiny slivers of broken glass. he smell coming up from the toilet bowl was swampy and unpleasant, and could see white stuff - pus, guess - floating on the surface of the water.

took the towel off the rack and wiped my face with it. was sweating, all right; it was pouring off me. looked into the metal mirror and saw the flushed face of a man running a high fever looking back at me. undred and three? undred and four? etter not to know, maybe. put the towel back on its bar, flushed the toilet, and walked slowly back across my office to the cellblock door. was afraid ill odge or someone else might have come in and seen three prisoners with no attendants, but the place was

empty. harton still lay unconscious on his bunk, elacroix had fallen silent, and John offey had never made a single noise at all, suddenly realized. Not a peep. hich was worrisome.

went down the Mile and glanced into offey's cell, half-expecting to discover he'd committed suicide in one of the two common eath ow ways either hanging himself with his pants, or gnawing into his wrists. No such thing, it turned out. offey merely sat on the end of his bunk with his hands in his lap, the largest man 'd ever seen in my life, looking at me with his strange, wet eyes.

' ap'n?' he said.

' hat's up, big boy?' ' need to see you.'

' in't you looking right at me, John offey?'

e said nothing to this, only went on studying me with his strange, leaky gaze. sighed.

' n a second, big boy.'

looked over at elacroix, who was standing at the bars of his cell. Mr. Jingles, his pet mouse ( elacroix would tell you he'd trained Mr. Jingles to do tricks, but us folks who worked on the reen Mile were pretty much unanimous in the opinion that Mr. Jingles had trained himself), was jumping restlessly back and forth from one of el's outstretched hands to the other, like an acrobat doing leaps from platforms high above the center ring. is eyes were huge, his ears laid back against his sleek brown skull. hadn't any doubt that the mouse was reacting to elacroix's nerves. s watched, he ran down elacroix's pants leg and across the cell to where the brightly colored spool lay against one wall. e pushed the spool back to

elacroix's foot and then looked up at him eagerly, but the little ajun took no notice of his friend, at least for the time being.

' hat happen, boss?' elacroix asked. ' ho been hurt?'

' verything's jake,' said. 'Our new boy came in like a lion, but now he's passed out like a lamb. ll's well that ends well.'

' t ain't over yet,' elacroix said, looking up the Mile toward the cell where harton was jugged. *L homme mauvais, c est vrai!*

' ell,' said, 'don't let it get you down, el. Nobody's going to make you play skiprope with him out in the yard.'

here was a creaking sound from behind me as offey got off his bunk. ' oss dgecombe!' he said again. his time he sounded urgent. ' need to

talk to you!'

turned to him, thinking, all right, no problem, talking was my business.

ll the time trying not to shiver, because the fever had turned cold, as they sometimes will. xcept for my groin, which still felt as if it had been slit open, filled with hot coals, and then sewed back up again.

' o talk, John offey,' said, trying to keep my voice light and calm. or the first time since he'd come onto lock, offey looked as though he was really here, really among us. he almost ceaseless trickle of tears from the corners of his eyes *had* ceased, at least for the time being, and knew he was seeing what he was looking at - Mr. Paul dgecombe, lock's bull- goose screw, and not some place he wished he could return to, and take back the terrible thing he'd done.

'No,' he said. 'You got to come in here.'

'Now, you know can't do that,' said, still trying for the light tone, 'at least not right this minute. 'm on my own here for the time being, and you outweigh me by just about a ton and a half. e've had us one hooraw this afternoon, and that's enough. o we'll just have us a chat through the bars, if it's all the same to you, and - '

'Please!' e was holding the bars so tightly that his knuckles were pale and his fingernails were white. is face was long with distress, those strange eyes sharp with some need could not understand. remember thinking that maybe *could ve* understood it if hadn't been so sick, and knowing that would have given me a way of helping him through the rest of it. hen you know what a man needs, you know the man, more often than not. 'Please, oss dgecombe! *You have to come in!*

*That s the nuttiest thing ever heard,* thought, and then realized something even nuttier: was going to do it. had my keys off my belt and was hunting through them for the ones that opened John offey's cell. e could have picked me up and broken me over his knee like kindling on a day when was well and feeling fine, and this wasn't that day. ll the same,

was going to do it. On my own, and less than half an hour after a graphic demonstration of where stupidity and laxness could get you when you were dealing with condemned murderers, was going to open this black giant's cell, go in, and sit with him. f was discovered, might well lose my job even if he didn't do anything crazy, but was going to do it, just the same.

top, said to myself, you just stop now, Paul. ut didn't. used one key on the top lock, another on the bottom lock, and then slid the door

back on its track.

'You know, boss, that maybe not such a good idear,' elacroix said in a voice so nervous and prissy it would probably have made me laugh under other circumstances.

'You mind your business and 'll mind mine,' said without looking around. My eyes were fixed on John offey's, and fixed so hard they might have been nailed there. t was like being hypnotized. My voice sounded to my own ears like something which had come echoing down a long valley.

ell, maybe *was* hypnotized. 'You just lie down and take you a rest.'

' hrist, this place is crazy,' elacroix said in a trembling voice. 'Mr.

Jingles, just about wish they'd fry me and be done widdit!'

went into offey's cell. e stepped away as stepped forward. hen he was backed up against his bunk - it hit him in the calves, that's how tall he was - he sat down on it. e patted the mattress beside him, his eyes never once leaving mine. sat down there next to him, and he put his arm around my shoulders, as if we were at the movies and was his girl.

' hat do you want, John offey?' asked, still looking into his eyes - those sad, serene eyes.

'Just to help,' he said. e sighed like a man will when he's faced with a job he doesn't much want to do, and then he put his hand down in my crotch, on that shelf of bone a foot or so below the navel.

' ey!' cried. ' et your goddam hand - '

jolt slammed through me then, a big painless whack of something. t made me jerk on the cot and bow my back, made me think of Old oot shouting that he was frying, he was frying, he was a done tom turkey. here was no heat, no feeling of electricity, but for a moment the color seemed to jump out of everything, as if the world had been somehow squeezed and made to sweat. could see every pore on john offey's face, could see every bloodshot snap in his haunted eyes, could see a tiny healing scrape on his chin. was aware that my fingers were hooked down into claws on thin air, and that my feet were drumming on the floor of offey's cell.

hen it was over. o was my urinary infection. oth the heat and the miserable throbbing pain were gone from my crotch, and the fever was likewise gone from my head. could still feel the sweat it had drawn out of my skin, and could smell it, but it was gone, all right.

' hat's going on?' elacroix called shrilly. is voice still came from far away, but when John offey bent forward, breaking eye-contact with me,

the little ajun's voice suddenly came clear. t was as if someone had pulled wads of cotton or a pair of shooters' plugs out of my ears. ' hat's he doing to you?'

didn't answer. offey was bent forward over his own lap with his face working and his throat bulging. is eyes were bulging, too. e looked like a man with a chicken bone caught in his throat.

'John!' said. clapped him on the back; it was all could think of to do. 'John, what's wrong?'

e hitched under my hand, then made an unpleasant gagging, retching sound. is mouth opened the way horses sometimes open their mouths to allow the bit - reluctantly, with the lips peeling back from the teeth in a kind of desperate sneer. hen his teeth parted, too, and he exhaled a cloud of tiny black insects that looked like gnats or noseeums. hey swirled furiously between his knees, turned white, and disappeared.

uddenly all the strength went out of my middsection. t was as if the muscles there had turned to water. slumped back against the stone side of

offey's cell. remember thinking the name of the avior - hrist, hrist,

hrist, over and over, like that - and remember thinking that the fever had driven me delirious. hat was all.

hen became aware that elacroix was bawling for help; he was telling the world that John offey was killing me, and telling it at the top of his lungs. offey was bending over me, all right, but only to make sure was okay.

' hut up, el,' said, and got on my feet. waited for the pain to rip into my guts, but it didn't happen. was better. eally. here was a moment of dizziness, but that passed even before was able to reach out and grab the bars of offey's cell door for balance. ' 'm totally okey-doke.'

'You get on outta here,' elacroix said, sounding like a nervy old woman telling a kid to climb down out of that-ere apple tree. 'You ain't suppose to be in there wit no one else on the block.'

looked at John offey, who sat on the bunk with his huge hands on the tree stumps of his knees. John offey looked back at me. e had to tilt his head up a little, but not much.

' hat did you do, big boy?' asked in a low voice. ' hat did you do to me?'

' elped,' he said. ' helped it, didn't ?'

'Yeah, guess, but *how? ow* did you help it?'

e shook his head - right, left, back to dead center. e didn't know how he'd helped it (how he'd *cured* it) and his placid face suggested that he didn't give a rat's ass - any more than 'd give a rat's ass about the mechanics of running when was leading in the last fifty yards of a ourth of July wo- Miler. thought about asking him how he'd known was sick in the first place, except that would undoubtedly have gotten the same headshake.

here's a phrase read somewhere and never forgot, something about "an enigma wrapped in a mystery." hat's what John offey was, and suppose the only reason he could sleep at night was because he didn't care. Percy called him the ijit, which was cruel but not too far off the mark. Our big boy knew his name, and knew it wasn't spelled like the drink, and that was just about all he cared to know.

s if to emphasize this for me, he shook his head m that deliberate way one more time, then lay down on his bunk with his hands clasped under his left cheek like a pillow and his face to the wall. is legs dangled off the end of the bunk from the shins on down, but that never seemed to bother him.

he back of his shirt had pulled up, and could see the scars that crisscrossed his skin.

left the cell, turned the locks, then faced elacroix, who was standing across the way with his hands wrapped around the bars of his cell, looking at me anxiously. Perhaps even fearfully. Mr. Jingles perched on his shoulder with his fine whiskers quivering like filaments. ' hat dat darkie-man do to you?' elacroix asked. ' addit gris-gris? e th'ow some gris-gris on you?'

poken in that ajun accent of his, *gris-gris* rhymed with *pee-pee.*

' don't know what you're talking about, el.'

' evil you don't! Lookit you! ll change! ven walk different, boss!'

probably *was* walking different, at that. here was a beautiful feeling of calm in my groin, a sense of peace so remarkable it was almost ecstasy - anyone who's suffered bad pain and then recovered will know what 'm talking about.

' verything's all right, el,' insisted. 'John offey had a nightmare, that's all.'

' e a gris-gris man!' elacroix said vehemently. here was a nestle of sweat-beads on his upper lip. e hadn't seen much, just enough to scare him half to death. ' e a hoodoo man!'

' hat makes you say that?'

elacroix reached up and took the mouse in one hand. e cupped it in his palm and lifted it to his face. rom his pocket, elacroix took out a pink fragment - one of those peppermint candies. e held it out, but at first the mouse ignored it, stretching out its neck toward the man instead, sniffing at his breath the way a person might sniff at a bouquet of flowers. ts little oildrop eyes slitted most of the way closed in an expression that looked like ecstasy. elacroix kissed its nose, and the mouse allowed its nose to be kissed. hen it took the offered piece of candy and began to munch it.

elacroix looked at it a moment longer, then looked at me. ll at once got it.

' he mouse told you,' said. ' m right?'

*Oui.*

'Like he whispered his name to you.' '*Oui*, in my ear he whisper it.'

'Lie down, el,' said. ' ave you a little rest. ll that whispering back and forth must wear you out.'

e said something else - accused me of not believing him, suppose. is voice seemed to be coming from a long way off again. nd when went back up to the duty desk, hardly seemed to be walking at all - it was more like was floating, or maybe not even moving, the cells just rolling past me on either side, movie props on hidden wheels.

started to sit like normal, but halfway into it my knees unlocked and dropped onto the blue cushion arry had brought from home the year before and plopped onto the seat of the chair. f the chair hadn't been there, reckon would have plopped straight to the floor without passing o or collecting two hundred dollars.

sat there, feeling the nothing in my groin where a forest fire had been blazing not ten minutes before. *helped it, didn t* ? John offey had said, and that was true, as far as my body went. My peace of mind was a different story, though. *That* he hadn't helped at all.

My eyes fell on the stack of forms under the tin ashtray we kept on the corner of the desk. block report was printed at the top, and about halfway down was a blank space headed *Report All nusual Occurrences.* would use that space in tonight's report, telling the story of illiam harton's colorful and action-packed arrival. ut suppose also told what had happened to me in John offey's cell? saw myself picking up the pencil -

the one whose tip rutal was always licking - and writing a single word in big capital letters: M L .

hat should have been funny, but instead of smiling, all at once felt sure that was going to cry put my hands to my face, palms against my mouth to stifle the sobs - didn't want to scare el again just when he was starting to get settled down - but no sobs came. No tears, either. fter a few moments lowered my hands back to the desk and folded them. didn't know what was feeling, and the only clear thought in my head was a wish that no one should come back onto the block until was a little more in control of myself. was afraid of what they might see in my face.

drew a lock eport form toward me. would wait until had settled down a bit more to write about how my latest problem child had almost strangled ean tanton, but could fill out the rest of the boilerplate foolishness in the meantime. thought my handwriting might look funny - trembly - but it came out about the same as always.

bout five minutes after started, put the pencil down and went into the

. . adjacent to my office to take a leak. didn't need to go very bad, but could manage enough to test what had happened to me, thought. s stood there, waiting for my water to flow, became sure that it would hurt just the way it had that morning, as if were passing tiny shards of broken glass; what he'd done to me would turn out to be only hypnosis, after all, and that might be a relief in spite of the pain.

xcept there was no pain, and what went into the bowl was clear, with no sign of pus. buttoned my fly, pulled the chain that flushed the commode, went back to the duty desk, and sat down again.

knew what had happened; suppose knew even when was trying to tell myself 'd been hypnotized. 'd experienced a healing, an authentic Praise Jesus, he Lord s Mighty. s a boy who'd grown up going to whatever aptist or Pentecostal church my mother and her sisters happened to be in favor of during any given month, had heard plenty of Praise Jesus,

he Lord s Mighty miracle stories. didn't believe all of them, but there were plenty of people did believe. One of these was a man named oy

elfines, who lived with his family about two miles down the road from us when was six or so. elfines had chopped his son's little finger off with a hatchet, an accident which had occurred when the boy unexpectedly moved his hand on a log he'd been holding on the backyard chopping block for his dad. oy elfines said he had practically worn out the carpet with his knees

that fall and winter, and in the spring the boy's finger had grown back. ven the nail had grown back. believed oy elfines when he testified at

hursday-night rejoicing. here was a naked, uncomplicated honesty in what he said as he stood there talking with his hands jammed deep into the pockets of his biballs that was impossible *not* to believe. " t itch him some when thet finger started coming, kep him awake nights," oy elfines said, "but he knowed it was the Lord's itch and let it be." Praise Jesus, he Lord

s Mighty.

oy elfines's story was only one of many; grew up in a tradition of miracles and healings. grew up believing in gris-gris, as well (only, up in the hills we said it to rhyme with *kiss-kiss)* stump-water for warts, moss under your pillow to ease the heartache of lost love, and, of course, what we used to call *haints -* but did not believe John offey was a gris-gris man. had looked into his eyes. More important,' had felt his touch. eing touched by him was like being touched by some strange and wonderful doctor.

*helped it, didn t ?*

hat kept chiming in my head, like a snatch of song you can't get rid of, or words you'd speak to set a spell.

*helped it, didn t ?*

xcept *he* hadn't. *od* had. John offey's use of ' ' could be chalked up to ignorance rather than pride, but knew - believed, at least - what had learned about healing in those churches of Praise Jesus, he Lord s Mighty, piney-woods amen corners much beloved by my twenty-two-year- old mother and my aunts: that healing is never about the healed or the healer, but about od's will. or one to rejoice at the sick made well is normal, quite the expected thing, but the person healed has an obligation to then ask why - to meditate on od's will, and the extraordinary lengths to which od has gone to realize is will.

hat did od want of me, in this case? hat did e want badly enough to put healing power in the hands of a child-murderer? o be on the block, instead of at home, sick as a dog, shivering in bed with the stink of sulfa running out of my pores? Perhaps; was maybe supposed to be here instead of home in case ild ill harton decided to kick up more dickens, or to make sure Percy etmore didn't get up to some foolish and potentially destructive piece of fuckery ll right, then. o be it. would keep my eyes open□ and my mouth shut, especially about miracle cures.

No one was apt to question my looking and sounding better; 'd been telling the world was getting better, and until that very day 'd honestly believed it. had even told arden Moores that was on the mend.

elacroix had seen something, but thought he would keep his mouth shut, too (probably afraid John offey would throw a spell on him if he didn't).

s for offey himself, he'd probably already forgotten it. e was nothing but a conduit, after all, and there isn't a culvert in the world that remembers the water that flowed through it once the rain has stopped. o resolved to keep my mouth completely shut on the subject, with never an idea of how soon 'd be telling the story, or who 'd be telling it to.

ut was curious about my big boy, and there's no sense not admitting it.

fter what had happened to me there in his cell, was more curious than ever.

# 4

efore leaving that night, arranged with rutal to cover for me the next day, should come in a little late, and when got up the following morning,

set out for efton, down in rapingus ounty.

' 'm not sure like you worrying so much about this fellow offey,' my wife said, handing me the lunch she'd put up for me - Janice never believed in roadside hamburger stands; she used to say there was a bellyache waiting in every one. ' t's not like you, Paul.'

' 'm not worried about him,' said. ' 'm curious, that's all.'

' n my experience, one leads to the other,' Janice said tartly, then gave me a good, hearty kiss on the mouth. 'You look better, at least, 'll say that. or awhile there, you had me nervous. aterworks all cured up?'

' ll cured up,' said, and off went, singing songs like " ome, Josephine, in My lying Machine" and " e're in the Money" to keep myself company.

went to the offices of the efton *ntelligencer* first, and they told me that urt ammersmith, the fellow was looking for, was most likely over at the county courthouse. t the courthouse they told me that ammersmith had been there but had left when a burst waterpipe had closed down the main proceedings, which happened to be a rape trial (in the pages of the

*ntelligencer* the crime would be referred to as 'assault on a woman,' which was how such things were done in the days before icki Lake and arnie

ilson came on the scene). hey guessed he'd probably gone on home. got some directions out a dirt road so rutted and narrow just about didn't dare take my ord up it, and there found my man. ammersmith had written most of the stories on the offey trial, and it was from him found out most of the details about the brief manhunt that had netted offey in the first place. he details the *ntelligencer* considered too gruesome to print is what mean, of course.

Mrs. ammersmith was a young woman with a tired, pretty face and hands red from lye soap. he didn't ask my business, just led me through a small house fragrant with the smell of baking and onto the back porch, where her husband sat with a bottle of pop in his hand and an unopened copy of *Liberty* magazine on his lap. here was a small, sloping backyard; at the foot of it, two little ones were squabbling and laughing over a swing.

rom the porch, it was impossible to tell their sexes, but thought they were boy and girl. Maybe even twins, which cast an interesting sort of light on their father's part, peripheral as it had been, in the offey trial. Nearer at hand, set like an island in the middle of a turdstudded patch of bare, beatup- looking ground, was a doghouse. No sign of ido; it was another unseasonably hot day, and guessed he was probably inside, snoozing.

' urt, yew-all got you a cump'ny,' Mrs. ammersmith said.

' llright,' he said. e glanced at me, glanced at his wife, then looked back at his kids, which was where his heart obviously lay. e was a thin man - almost painfully thin, as if he had just begun to recover from a serious illness - and his hair had started to recede. is wife touched his shoulder tentatively with one of her red, wash-swollen hands. e didn't look at it or reach up to touch it, and after a moment she took it back. t occurred to me, fleetingly, that they looked more like brother and sister than husband and wife - he'd gotten the brains, she'd gotten the looks, but neither of them had escaped some underlying resemblance, a heredity that could never be escaped. Later, going home, realized they didn't look alike at all; what made them seem to was the aftermath of stress and the lingering of sorrow.

t's strange how pain marks our faces, and makes us look like family.

he said, 'Yew-all want a cold drink, Mr -?'

' t's dgecombe,' said. 'Paul dgecombe. nd thank you. cold drink would be wonderful, ma'am.'

he went back inside. held out my hand to ammersmith, who gave it a brief shake. is grip was limp and cold. e never took his eyes off the kids

down at the bottom of the yard.

'Mr. ammersmith, 'm lock superintendent at old Mountain tate Prison. hat's - '

' know what it is,' he said, looking at me with a little more interest. ' o - the bull-goose screw of the reen Mile is standing on my back porch, just as big as life. hat brings you fifty miles to talk to the local rag's only full- time reporter?'

'John offey,' said.

think expected some sort of strong reaction (the kids who could have been twins working at the back of my mind□ and perhaps the doghouse, too; the ettericks had had a dog), but ammersmith only raised his eyebrows and sipped at his drink. ' offey's *your* problem now, isn't he?'

ammersmith asked.

' e's not much of a problem,' said. ' e doesn't like the dark, and he cries a lot of the time, but neither thing makes much of a problem in our line of work. e see worse.'

' ries a lot, does he?' ammersmith asked. ' ell, he's got a lot to cry about, 'd say. onsidering what he did. hat do you want to know?'

' nything you can tell me. 've read your newspaper stories, so guess what want is anything that wasn't in them.'

e gave me a sharp, dry look. 'Like how the little girls looked? Like exactly what he did to them? hat the kind of stuff you're interested in, Mr.

dgecombe?'

'No,' said, keeping my voice mild. ' t's not the etterick girls 'm interested in, sir. Poor little mites are dead. ut offey's not - not yet - and

'm curious about him.'

' ll right,' he said. 'Pull up a chair and sit, Mr. dgecombe. You'll forgive me if sounded a little sharp just now, but get to see plenty of vultures in my line of work. ell, 've been accused of being one of em often enough, myself. just wanted to make sure of you.'

' nd are you?'

' ure enough, guess,' he said, sounding almost indifferent. he story he told me is pretty much the one set down earlier in this account - how Mrs.

etterick found the porch empty, with the screen door pulled off its upper hinge, the blankets cast into one corner, and blood on the steps; how her son and husband had taken after the girls' abductor; how the posse had caught up to them first and to John offey not much later. ow offey had been

sitting on the riverbank and wailing, with the bodies curled in his massive arms like big dolls. he reporter, rack-thin in his open-collared white shirt and gray town pants, spoke in a low, unemotional voice□ but his eyes never left his own two children as they squabbled and laughed and took turns with the swing down there in the shade at the foot of the slope. ometime in the middle of the story, Mrs. ammersmith came back with a bottle of homemade root beer, cold and strong and delicious. he stood listening for awhile, then interrupted long enough to call down to the kids and tell them to come up directly, she had cookies due out of the oven. ' e will, Mamma!' called a little girl's voice, and the woman went back inside again.

hen ammersmith had finished, he said: ' o why do you want to know? never had me a visit from a ig ouse screw before, it's a first.'

' told you - '

' uriosity, yep. olks get curious, know it, even thank od for it, 'd be out of a job and might actually have to go to work for a living without it.

ut fifty miles is a long way to come to satisfy simple curiosity, especially when the last twenty is over bad roads. o why don't you tell me the truth,

dgecombe? satisfied yours, so now you satisfy mine.'

*Well,* could say, *had this urinary infection, and ohn Coffey put his hands on me and healed it. The man who raped and murdered those two little girls did that. So wondered about him, of course - anyone would. even wondered if maybe omer Cribus and Deputy Rob Mc ee didn t maybe collar the wrong man. n spite of all the evidence against him wonder that. Because a man who has a power like that in his hands, you don t usually think of him as the kind of man who rapes and murders children.*

No, maybe that wouldn't do.

' here are two things 've wondered about,' said. ' he first is if he ever did anything like that before.'

ammersmith turned to me, his eyes suddenly sharp and bright with interest, and saw he was a smart fellow. Maybe even a brilliant fellow, in a quiet way. ' hy?' he asked. ' hat do you know, dgecombe? hat has he said?'

'Nothing. ut a man who does this sort of thing once has usually done it before. hey get a taste for it.'

'Yes,' he said. ' hey do. hey certainly do.'

' nd it occurred to me that it would be easy enough to follow his backtrail and find out. man his size, and a Negro to boot, can't be that hard to trace.'

'You'd think so, but you'd be wrong,' he said. ' n offey's case, anyhow. know.'

'You tried?'

' did, and came up all but empty. here were a couple of railroad fellows who thought they saw him in the Knoxville yards two days before the

etterick girls were killed. No surprise there; he was just across the river from the reat outhern tracks when they collared him, and that's probably how he came down here from ennessee. got a letter from a man who said he'd hired a big bald black man to shift crates for him in the early spring of this year - this as in Kentucky. sent him a picture of offey and he said that was the man. ut other than that - ' ammersmith shrugged and shook his head.

' oesn't that strike you as a little odd?'

' trikes me as a *lot* odd, Mr. dgecombe. t's like he dropped out of the sky. nd he's no help; he can't remember last week once this week comes.'

'No, he can't,' said. ' ow do you explain it?'

' e're in a epression,' he said, *that s* how explain it. People all over the roads. he Okies want to pick peaches in alifornia, the poor whites from up in the brakes want to build cars in etroit, the black folks from Mississippi want to go up to New ngland and work in the shoe factories or the textile mills. veryone - black as well as white - thinks it's going to be better over the next jump of land. t's the merican damn way. ven a giant like offey doesn't get noticed everywhere he goes□ until, that is, he decides to kill a couple of little girls. Little *white* girls.'

' o you believe that?' asked.

e gave me a bland look from his too-thin face. ' ometimes do,' he said.

is wife leaned out of the kitchen window like an engineer from the cab of a locomotive and called, *Kids! Cookies are ready!* he turned to me. ' ould you like an oatmeal-raisin cookie, Mr. dgecombe?'

' 'm sure they're delicious, ma'am, but 'll take a pass this time.' ' ll right,' she said, and drew her head back inside.

' ave you seen the scars on him?' ammersmith asked abruptly. e was still watching his kids, who couldn't quite bring themselves to abandon the

pleasures of the swing - not even for oatmeal-raisin cookies. 'Yes.' ut was surprised he had.

e saw my reaction and laughed. ' he defense attorney's one big victory was getting offey to take off his shirt and show those scars to the jury. he prosecutor, eorge Peterson, objected like hell, but the judge allowed it. Old eorge could have saved, his breath - juries around these parts don't buy all that psychology crap about how people who've been mistreated just can't help themselves. hey believe people *can* help themselves. t's a point of view have a lot of sympathy for□ but those scars were pretty ghastly, just the same. Notice anything about them, dgecombe?'

had seen the man naked in the shower, and 'd noticed, all right; knew just what he was talking about. ' hey're all broken up. Latticed, almost.'

'You know what that means?'

' omebody whopped the living hell out of him when he was a kid,' said. ' efore he grew.'

' ut they didn't manage to whop the devil out of him, did they,

dgecombe? hould have spared the rod and just drowned him in the river like a stray kitten, don't you think?'

suppose it would have been politic to simply agree and get out of there, but couldn't. 'd seen him. nd 'd *felt* him, as well. elt the touch of his hands.

' e's□ strange,' said. ' ut there doesn't seem to be any real violence in him. know how he was found, and it's hard to jibe that with what see, day in and day out, on the block. know violent men, Mr. ammersmith.' t was harton was thinking about, of course, harton strangling ean

tanton with his wrist-chain and bellowing *Whoooee, boys! Ain t this a party, now?*

e was looking at me closely now, and smiling a little, incredulous smile that didn't care for very much. 'You didn't come up here to get an idea about whether or not he might have killed some other little girls somewhere else,' he said. 'You came up here to see if think he did it at all. hat's it, isn't it? ' ess up, dgecombe.'

swallowed the last of my cold drink, put the bottle down on the little table, and said: ' ell? o you?'

*Kids!* he called down the hill, leaning forward a little in his chair to do it. *Y all come on up here now n get your cookies!* hen he leaned back in

his chair again and looked at me. hat little smile - the one didn't much care for - had reappeared.

' ell you something,' he said. 'You want to listen close, too, because this might just be something you need to know.'

' 'm listening.'

' e had us a dog named ir alahad,' he said, and cocked a thumb at the doghouse. ' good dog. No particular breed, but gentle. alm. eady to lick your hand or fetch a stick. here are plenty of mongrel dogs like him, wouldn't you say?'

shrugged, nodded.

' n many ways, a good mongrel dog is like your negro,' he said. 'You get to know it, and often you grow to love it. t is of no particular use, but you keep it around because you *think* it loves *you*. f you're lucky, Mr.

dgecombe, you never have to find out any different. ynthia and , we were not lucky.' e sighed - a long and somehow skeletal sound, like the wind rummaging through fallen leaves. e pointed toward the doghouse again, and wondered how had missed its general air of abandonment earlier, or the fact that many of the turds had grown whitish and powdery at their tops.

' used to clean up after him,' ammersmith said, 'and keep the roof of his house repaired against the rain. n that way also ir alahad was like your

outhern negro, who will not do those things for himself. Now don't touch it, haven't been near it since the accident - if you can call it an accident. went over there with my rifle and shot him, but haven't been over there since. can't bring myself to. suppose will, in time. 'll clean up his messes and tear down his house.'

ere came the kids, and all at once didn't want them to come; all at once that was the last thing on earth wanted. he little girl was all right, but the boy -

hey pounded up the steps, looked at me, giggled, then went on toward the kitchen door.

' aleb,' ammersmith said. ' ome here. Just for a second.'

he little girl - surely his twin, they had to be of an age - went on into the kitchen. he little boy came to his father, looking down at his feet. e knew he was ugly. e was only four, guess, but four is old enough to know that you're ugly. is father put two fingers under the boy's chin and tried to raise

his face. t first the boy resisted, but when his father said 'Please, son,' in tones of sweetness and calmness and love, he did as he was asked.

huge, circular scar ran out of his hair, down his forehead, through one dead and indifferently cocked eye, and to the comer of his mouth, which had been disfigured into the knowing leer of a gambler or perhaps a whoremaster. One cheek was smooth and pretty; the other was bunched up like the stump of a tree. guessed there had been a hole in it, but that, at least, had healed.

' e has the one eye,' ammersmith said, caressing the boy's bunched cheek with a lover's kind fingers. ' suppose he's lucky not to be blind. e get down on our knees and thank od for that much, at least. h, aleb?'

'Yes, sir,' the boy said shyly - the boy who would be beaten mercilessly on the play-yard by laughing, jeering bullies for all his miserable years of education, the boy who would never be asked to play pin the ottle or Post Office and would probably never sleep with a woman not bought and paid for once he was grown to manhood's times and needs, the boy who would always stand outside the warm and lighted circle of his peers, the boy who would look at himself in his mirror for the next fifty or sixty or seventy years of his life and think *ugly, ugly, ugly.*

' o on in and get your cookies,' his father said, and kissed his son's sneering mouth.

'Yes, sir,' aleb, said, and dashed inside.

ammersmith took a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiped at his eyes with it - they were dry, but suppose he'd gotten used to them being wet.

' he dog was here when they were born,' he said. ' brought him in the house to smell them when ynthia brought them home from the hospital, and ir alahad licked their hands. heir little hands.' e nodded, as if confirming this to himself. ' e played with them; used to lick rden's face until she giggled. aleb used to pull his ears, and when he was first learning to walk, he'd sometimes go around the yard, holding to alahad's tail. he dog never so much as *growled* at him. ither of them.'

Now the tears were coming; he wiped at them automatically, as a man does when he's had lots of practice.

' here was no reason,' he said. ' aleb didn't hurt him, yell at him, anything. know. was there. f hadn't have been, the boy would almost certainly have been killed. hat happened, Mr. dgecombe, was *nothing.*

he boy just got his face set the right way in front of the dog's face, and it came into ir alahad's mind - whatever serves a dog for a mind - to lunge and bite. o kill, if he could. he boy was there in front of him and the dog bit. nd that's what happened with offey. e was there, he saw them on the porch, he took them, he raped them, he killed them. You say there should be some hint that he did something like it before, and know what you mean, but maybe he *didn t* do it before. My dog never bit before; just that once. Maybe, if offey was let go, he'd never do it again. Maybe my dog never would have bit again. ut didn't concern myself with that, you know. went out with my rifle and grabbed his collar and blew his head off.'

e was breathing hard.

' 'm as enlightened as the next man, Mr. dgecombe, went to college in

owling reen, took history as well as journalism, some philosophy, too. like to think of myself as enlightened. don't suppose folks up North would, but like to think of myself as enlightened. 'd not bring slavery back for all the tea in hina. think we have to be humane and generous in our efforts to solve the race problem. ut we have to remember that your negro will bite if he gets the chance, just like a mongrel dog will bite if he gets the chance and it crosses his mind to do so. You want to know if he did it, your weepy Mr. offey with the scars all over him?'

nodded.

'Oh, yes,' ammersmith said. ' e did it. on't you doubt it, and don't you turn your back on him. You might get away with it once or a hundred times□ even a thousand□ but in the end - ' e raised a hand before my eyes and snapped the fingers together rapidly against the thumb, turning the hand into a biting mouth. 'You understand?'

nodded again.

' e raped them, he killed them, and afterward he was sorry□ but those little girls stayed raped, those little girls stayed dead. ut you'll fix him, won't you, dgecombe? n a few weeks you'll fix him so he never does anything like that again.' e got up, went to the porch rail, and looked vaguely at the doghouse, standing at the center of its beaten patch, in the middle of those aging turds. 'Perhaps you'll excuse me,' he said. ' ince don't have to spend the afternoon in court, thought might visit with my family for a little bit. man's children are only young once.'

'You go ahead,' said. My lips felt numb and distant. ' nd thank you for your time.'

' on't mention it,' he said.

drove directly from ammersmith's house to the prison. t was a long drive, and this time wasn't able to shorten it by singing songs. t felt like all the songs had gone out of me, at least for awhile. kept seeing that poor little boy's disfigured face. nd ammersmith's hand, the fingers going up and down against the thumb in a biting motion.

# 5

ild ill harton took his first trip down to the restraint room the very next day. e spent the morning and afternoon being as quiet and good as Mary's little lamb, a state we soon discovered was not natural to him, and meant trouble. hen, around seven-thirty that evening, arry felt something warm splash on the cuffs of uniform pants he had put on clean just that day.

t was piss. illiam harton was standing at his cell, showing his darkening teeth in a wide grin, and pissing all over arry erwilliger's pants and shoes.

' he dirty sonofabitch must have been saving it up all day,' arry said later, still disgusted and outraged.

ell, that was it. t was time to show illiam harton who ran the show on lock. arry got rutal and me, and alerted ean and Percy, who were also on. e had three prisoners by then, remember, and were into what we called full coverage, with my group on from seven in the evening to three in the morning - when trouble was most apt to break out - and two other crews covering the rest of the day. hose other crews consisted mostly of floaters, with ill odge usually in charge. t wasn't a bad way to run things, all and all, and felt that, once could shift Percy over to days, life would be even better. never got around to that, however. sometimes wonder if it would have changed things, if had.

nyway, there was a big watermain in the storage room, on the side away from Old parky, and ean and Percy hooked up a length of canvas firehose to it. hen they stood by the valve that would open it, if needed.

rutal and hurried down to harton's cell, where harton still stood, still grinning and still with his tool hanging out of his pants. had liberated the straitjacket from the restraint room and tossed it on a shelf in my office

last thing before going home the night before, thinking we might be needing it for our new problem child. Now had it in one hand, my index finger hooked under one of the canvas straps. arry came behind us, hauling the nozzle of the firehose, which ran back through my office, down the storage- room steps, and to the drum where ean and Percy were paying it out as fast as they could.

' ey, d'jall like that?' ild ill asked. e was laughing like a kid at a carnival, laughing so hard he could barely talk; big tears went rolling down his cheeks. 'You come on s'fast guess you must've. 'm currently cookin some turds to go with it. Nice soft ones. 'll have them out to y'all tomorrow

- '

e saw that was unlocking his cell door and his eyes narrowed. e saw that rutal was holding his revolver in one hand and his nightstick in the other, and they narrowed even more.

'You can come in here on your legs, but you'll go out on your backs, illy the Kid is goan guarantee you that,' he told us. is eyes shifted back to me. ' nd if you think you're gonna put that nut-coat on me, you got another think coming, old hoss.'

'You're not the one who says go or jump back around here,' told him. 'You should know that, but guess you're too dumb to pick it up without a little teaching.'

finished unlocking the door and ran it back on its track. harton retreated to the bunk, his cock still hanging out of his pants, put his hands out to me, palms up, then beckoned with his fingers. ' ome on, you ugly motherfucker,' he said. ' hey be schoolin, all right, but this old boy's well set up to be the teacher.' e shifted his gaze and his darktoothed grin to

rutal. ' ome on, big fella, you first. his time you cain't sneak up behind me. Put down that gun - you ain't gonna shoot it anyway, not you - and we'll go man-to-man. ee who's the better fel - '

rutal stepped into the cell, but not toward harton. e moved to the left once he was through the door, and harton's narrow eyes widened as he saw the firehose pointed at him.

'No, you don't,' he said. 'Oh no, you d - '

*Dean!* yelled. *Turn it on! All the way!*

harton jumped forward, and rutal hit him a good smart lick - the kind of lick 'm sure Percy dreamed of - across his forehead, laying his baton right over harton's eyebrows. harton, who seemed to think we'd never

seen trouble until we'd seen him, went to his knees, his eyes open but blind.

hen the water came, arry staggering back a step under its power and then holding steady, the nozzle firm in his hands, pointed like a gun. he stream caught ild ill harton square in the middle of his chest, spun him halfway around, and drove him back under his bunk. own the hall,

elacroix was jumping from foot to foot, cackling shrilly, and cursing at John offey, demanding that offey tell him what was going on, who was winning, and how dat *gran fou* new boy like dat hinee water treatment. John said nothing, just stood there quietly in his too-short pants and his prison slippers. only had one quick glance at him, but that was enough to observe his same old expression, both sad and serene. t was as if he'd seen the whole thing before, not just once or twice but a thousand times.

*Kill the water!* rutal shouted back over his shoulder, then raced forward into the cell. e sank his hands into the semi-conscious harton's armpits and dragged him out from under his bunk. harton was coughing and making a glub-glub sound. lood was dribbling into his dazed eyes from above his brows, where rutal's stick had popped the skin open in a line.

e had the straitjacket business down to a science, did rutus owell and me; we'd practiced it like a couple of vaudeville hoofers working up a new dance routine. very now and then, that practice paid off. Now, for instance. rutal sat harton up and held out his arms toward me the way a kid might hold out the arms of a aggedy ndy doll. wareness was just starting to seep back into harton's eyes, the knowledge that if he didn't start fighting right away, it was going to be too late, but the lines were still down between his brain and his muscles, and before he could repair them, had rammed the sleeves of the coat up his arms and rutal was doing the buckles up the back. hile he took care of that, grabbed the cuff-straps, pulled harton's arms around his sides, and linked his wrists together with another canvas strap. e ended up looking like he was hugging himself.

' oddam you, big dummy, how dey doin widdim?' elacroix screamed. heard Mr. Jingles squeaking, as if he wanted to know, too.

Percy arrived, his shirt wet and sticking to him from his struggles with the watermain, his face glowing with excitement. ean came along behind him, wearing a bracelet of purplish bruise around his throat and looking a lot less thrilled.

' ome on, now, ild ill,' said, and yanked harton to his feet. 'Little walky-walky.'

*Don t you call me that!* harton screamed shrilly, and think that for the first time we were seeing real feelings, and not just a clever animal's camouflage spots. ' ild ill ickok wasn't no range-rider! e never fought him no bear with a owie knife, either! e was just another bushwhackin John Law! umb sonofabitch sat with his back to the door and got kilt by a drunk!'

'Oh my suds and body, a *history lesson!*' rutal exclaimed, and shoved

harton out of his cell. ' feller just never knows what he's going to get when he clocks in here, only that it's apt to be nice. ut with so many nice people like you around, guess that kind of stands to reason, don't it? nd you know what? Pretty soon you'll be history yourself, ild ill. Meantime, you get on down the hall. e got a room for you. Kind of a cooling-off room.'

harton gave a furious, inarticulate scream and threw himself at rutal, even though he was snugly buckled into the coat now, and his arms were wrapped around behind him. Percy made to draw his baton - the etmore

olution for all of life's problems - and ean put a hand on his wrist. Percy gave him a puzzled, half-indignant look, as if to say that after what harton had done to ean, ean should be the last person in the world to want to hold him back.

rutal pushed harton backward. caught him and pushed him to arry.

nd arry propelled him on down the reen Mile, past the gleeful

elacroix and the impassive offey. harton ran to keep from falling on his face, spitting curses the whole way. pitting them the way a welder's torch spits sparks. e banged him into the last cell on the right while ean,

arry, and Percy (who for once wasn't complaining about being unfairly overworked) yanked all of the crap out of the restraint room. hile they did that, had a brief conversation with harton.

'You think you're tough,' said, 'and maybe you are, sonny, but in here tough don't matter. Your stampeding days are over. f you take it easy on us, we'll take it easy on you. f you make it hard, you'll die in the end just the same, only we'll sharpen you like a pencil before you go.'

'You're gonna be so happy to see the end of me,' harton said in a hoarse voice. e was struggling against the straitjacket even though he must have known it would do no good, and his face was as red as a tomato. ' nd until

'm gone, 'll make your lives miserable.' e bared his teeth at me like an angry baboon.

' f that's all you want, to make our lives miserable, you can quit now, because you've already succeeded,' rutal said. ' ut as far as your time on the Mile goes, harton, we don't care if you spend all of it in the room with the soft walls. nd you can wear that damned nut-coat until your arms gangrene from lack of circulation and fall right off.' e paused. 'No one much comes down here, you know. nd if you think anyone gives much of a shit what happens to you, one way or another, you best reconsider. o the world in general, you're already one dead outlaw.'

harton was studying rutal carefully, and the color was fading out of his face. 'Lemme out of it,' he said in a placatory voice - a voice too sane and too reasonable to trust. ' 'll be good. onest njun.'

arry appeared in the cell doorway. he end of the corridor looked like a rummage sale, but we'd set things to rights with good speed once we got started. e had before; we knew the drill. ' ll ready,' arry said.

rutal grabbed the bulge in the canvas where harton's right elbow was and yanked him to his feet. ' ome on, ild illy. nd look on the good side. You're gonna have at least twenty-four hours to remind yourself never to sit with your back to the door, and to never hold onto no aces and eights.' 'Lemme out of it,' harton said. e looked from rutal to arry to me, the red creeping back into his face. ' 'll be good - tell you 've learned my

lesson. *□ □ ummmmmahhhhhhh -!*

e suddenly collapsed, half of him in the cell, half of him on the played- out lino of the reen Mile, kicking his feet and bucking his body.

' oly hrist, he's pitchin a fit,' Percy whispered.

' ure, and my sister's the hore of abylon,' rutal said. ' he dances the hootchie-kootchie for Moses on aturday nights in a long white veil.' e bent down and hooked a hand into one of harton's armpits. got the other one. harton threshed between us like a hooked fish. arrying his jerking body, listening to him grunt from one end and fart from the other was one of my life's less pleasant experiences.

looked up and met John offey's eyes for a second. hey were bloodshot, and his dark cheeks were wet. e had been crying again. thought of ammersmith making that biting gesture with his hand and shivered a little. hen turned my attention back to harton.

e threw him into the restraint room like he was cargo, and watched him lie on the floor, bucking hard in the straitjacket next to the drain we had once checked for the mouse which had started its lock life as teamboat

illy.

' don't much care if he swallows his tongue or something and dies,' ean said in his hoarse and raspy voice, 'but think of the paperwork, boys! t'd never end.'

'Never mind the paperwork, think of the hearing,' arry said gloomily. ' e'd lose our damned jobs. nd up picking peas down Mississippi. You know what Mississippi is, don't you? t's the ndian word for asshole.'

' e ain't gonna die, and he ain't gonna swallow his tongue, either,' rutal said. ' hen we open this door tomorrow, he's gonna be just fine. ake my word for it.'

hat's the way it was, too. he man we took back to his cell the next night at nine was quiet, pallid, and seemingly chastened. e walked with his head down, made no effort to attack anyone when the straitjacket came off, and only stared listlessly at me when told him it would go just the same the next time, and he just had to ask himself how much time he wanted to spend pissing in his pants and eating baby-food a spoonful at a time.

' 'll be good, boss, learnt my lesson,' he whispered in a humble little voice as we put him back in his cell. rutal looked at me and winked.

Late the next day, illiam harton, who was illy the Kid to himself and never that bushwhacking John Law ild ill ickok, bought a moon- pie from Old oot- oot. harton had been expressly forbidden any such commerce, but the afternoon crew was composed of floaters, as think have said, and the deal went down. oot himself undoubtedly knew better, but to him the snack-wagon was always a case of a nickel is a nickel, a dime is a dime, 'd sing another chorus but don't have the time.

hat night, when rutal ran his check-round, harton was standing at the door of his cell. e waited until rutal looked up at him, then slammed the heels of his hands into his bulging cheeks and shot a thick and amazingly long stream of chocolate sludge into rutal's face. e had crammed the entire moon-pie into his trap, held it there until it liquefied, and then used it like chewing tobacco.

harton fell back on his bunk wearing a chocolate goatee, kicking his legs and screaming with laughter and pointing to rutal, who was wearing a

lot more than a goatee. 'Li'l lack ambo, yassuh, boss, yassuh, how*doo* you do?' harton held his belly and howled. ' osh, if it had only been ka- ka! wish it had been! f 'd had me some of that - '

'You *are* ka-ka,' rutal growled, 'and hope you got your bags packed, because you're going back down to your favorite toilet.'

Once again harton was bundled into the strait jacket, and once again we stowed him in the room with the soft walls. wo days, this time.

ometimes we could hear him raving in there, sometimes we could hear him promising that he'd be good, that he'd come to his senses and be good, and sometimes we could hear him screaming that he needed a doctor, that he was dying. Mostly, though, he was silent. nd he was silent when we took him out again, too, walking, back to his cell with his head down and his eyes dull, not responding when arry said, ' emember, it's up to you.'

e would be all right for a while, and then he'd try something else. here was nothing he did that hadn't been tried before (well, except for the thing with the moon-pie, maybe; even rutal admitted that was pretty original), but his sheer persistence was scary. was afraid that sooner or later someone's attention might lapse and there would be hell to pay. nd the situation might continue for quite awhile, because somewhere he had a lawyer who was beating the bushes, telling folks how wrong it would be to kill this fellow upon whose brow the dew of youth had not yet dried□ and who was, incidentally, as white as old Jeff avis. here was no sense complaining about it, because keeping harton out of the chair was his lawyer's job. Keeping him safely jugged was ours. nd in the end, Old

parky would almost certainly have him, lawyer or no lawyer.

# 6

hat was the week Melinda Moores, the warden's wife, came home from

ndianola. he doctors were done with her; they had their interesting, newfangled -ray photographs of the tumor in her head; they had documented the weakness in her hand and the paralyzing pains that racked her almost constantly by then, and were done with her. hey gave her husband a bunch of pills with morphine in them and sent Melinda home to die. al Moores had some sick-leave piled up - not a lot, they didn't give you a lot in those days, but he took what he had so he could help her do what she had to do.

My wife and went to see her three days or so after she came home. called ahead and al said yes, that would be fine, Melinda was having a pretty good day and would enjoy seeing us.

' hate calls like this,' said to Janice as we drove to the little house where the Mooreses had spent most of their marriage.

' o does everyone, honey,' she said, and patted my hand. ' e'll bear up under it, and so will she.'

' hope so.'

e found Melinda in the sitting room, planted in a bright slant of unseasonably warm October sun, and my first shocked thought was that she had lost ninety pounds. he hadn't, of course - if she'd lost that much weight, she hardly would have been there at all - but that was my brain's initial reaction to what my eyes were reporting. er face had fallen away to show the shape of the underlying skull, and her skin was as white as parchment. here were dark circles under her eyes. nd it was the first time

ever saw her in her rocker when she didn't have a lapful of sewing or afghan squares or rags for braiding into a rug. he was just sitting there. Like a person in a train-station.

'Melinda,' my wife said warmly. think she was as shocked as was - more, perhaps - but she hid it splendidly, as some women seem able to do.

he went to Melinda, dropped on one knee beside the rocking chair in which the warden's wife sat, and took one of her hands. s she did, my eye happened on the blue hearthrug by the fireplace. t occurred to me that it should have been the shade of tired old limes, because now this room was just another version of the reen Mile.

' brought you some tea,' Jan said, 'the kind put up myself. t's a nice sleepy tea. 've left it in the kitchen.'

' hank you so much, darlin,' Melinda said. er voice sounded old and rusty

' ow you feeling, dear?' my wife asked.

' etter,' Melinda said in her rusty, grating voice. 'Not so's want to go out to a barn dance, but at least there's no pain today. hey give me some pills for the headaches. ometimes they even work.'

' hat's good, isn't it?'

' ut can't grip so well. omething's happened□ to my hand.' he raised it, looked at it as if she had never seen it before, then lowered it back into her lap. ' omething's happened□ all over me.' he began to cry in a

soundless way that made me think of John offey. t started to chime in my head again, that thing he'd said: *helped it, didn t ? helped it, didn t* ? Like a rhyme you can't get rid of.

al came in then. e collared me, and you can believe me when say was glad to be collared. e went into the kitchen, and he poured me half a shot of white whiskey, hot stuff fresh out of some countryman's still. e clinked our glasses together and drank. he shine went down like coal-oil, but the bloom in the belly was heaven. till, when Moores tipped the mason jar at me, wordlessly asking if wanted the other half, shook my head and waved it off. ild ill harton was out of restraints - for the time being, anyway - and it wouldn't be safe to go near where he was with a booze- clouded head. Not even with bars between us.

' don't know how long can take this, Paul,' he said in a low voice. ' here's a girl who comes in mornings to help me with her, but the doctors say she may lose control of her bowels, and□ and□ '

e stopped, his throat working, trying hard not to cry in front of me again.

' o with it as best you can,' said. reached out across the table and briefly squeezed his palsied, liverspotted hand. ' o that day by day and give the rest over to od. here's nothing else you can do, is there?'

' guess not. ut it's hard, Paul. pray you never have to find out how hard.'

e made an effort to collect himself.

'Now tell me the news. ow are you doing with illiam harton? nd how are you making out with Percy etmore?'

e talked shop for a while, and got through the visit. fter, all the way home, with my wife sitting silent, for the most part - wet-eyed and thoughtful - in the passenger seat beside me, offey's words ran around in my head like Mr. Jingles running around in elacroix's cell: *helped it, didn t ?*

' t's terrible,' my wife said dully at one point. ' nd there's nothing anyone can do to help her.'

nodded agreement and thought, *helped it, didn t* ? ut that was crazy, and tried as best could to put it out of my mind.

s we turned into our dooryard, she finally spoke a second time - not about her old friend Melinda, but about my urinary infection. he wanted to know if it was really gone. eally gone, told her.

' hat's fine, then,' she said, and kissed me over the eyebrow, in that shivery place of mine. 'Maybe we ought to, you know, get up to a little something. f you have the time and the inclination, that is.'

aving plenty of the latter and just enough of the former, took her by the hand and led her into the back bedroom and took her clothes off as she stroked the part of me that swelled and throbbed but didn't hurt anymore.

nd as moved in her sweetness, slipping through it in that slow way she liked - that we both liked - thought of John offey, saying he'd helped it, he'd helped it, hadn't he? Like a snatch of song that won't leave your mind until it's damned good and ready.

Later, as drove to the prison, got to thinking that very soon we would have to start rehearsing for elacroix's execution. hat thought led to how Percy was going to be out front this time, and felt a shiver of dread. told myself to just go with it, one execution and we'd very likely be shut of Percy etmore for good□ but still felt that shiver, as if the infection 'd been suffering with wasn't gone at all, but had only switched locations, from boiling my groin to freezing my backbone.

# 7

' ome on,' rutal told elacroix the following evening. ' e're going for a little walk. You and me and Mr. Jingles.'

elacroix looked at him distrustfully, then reached down into the cigar box for the mouse. e cupped it m the palm of one hand and looked at

rutal with narrowed eyes.

' hatchoo talking about?' he asked.

' t's a big night for you and Mr. Jingles,' ean said, as he and arry joined rutal. he chain of bruises around ean's neck had gone an unpleasant yellow color, but at least he could talk again without sounding like a dog barking at a cat. e looked at rutal. ' hink we ought to put the shackles on him, rute?'

rutal appeared to consider. 'Naw,' he said at last. ' e's gonna be good, ain't you, el? You and the mouse, both. fter all, you're gonna be showin off for some high muck-a-mucks tonight.'

Percy and were standing up by the duty desk, watching this, Percy with his arms folded and a small, contemptuous smile on his lips. fter a bit, he took out his horn comb and went to work on his hair with it. John offey

was watching, too, standing silently at the bars of his cell. harton was lying on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling and ignoring the whole show. e was still "being good," although what he called *good* was what the docs at

riar idge called *catatonic.* nd there was one other person there, as well.

e was tucked out of sight in my office, but his skinny shadow fell out the door and onto the reen Mile.

' hat dis about, you *gran fou?* el asked querulously, drawing his feet up on the bunk as rutal undid the double locks on his cell door and ran it open. is eyes flicked back and forth among the three of them.

' ell, tell you,' rutal said. 'Mr. Moores is gone for awhile - his wife is under the weather, as you may have heard. o Mr. nderson is in charge, Mr. urtis nderson.'

'Yeah? hat that. got to do with me?'

' ell,' arry said, ' oss nderson's heard about your mouse, el, and wants to see him perform. e and about six other fellows are over in

dmin, just waiting for you to show up. Not just plain old bluesuit guards, either. hese are pretty big bugs, just like rute said. One of them, believe, is a politician all the way from the state capital.'

elacroix swelled visibly at this, and saw not so much as a single shred of doubt on his face. Of *course* they wanted to see Mr. Jingles; who would not?

e scrummed around, first under his bunk and then under his pillow. e eventually found one of those big pink peppermints and the wildly colored spool. e looked at rutal questioningly, and rutal nodded.

'Yep. t's the spool trick they're really wild to see, guess, but the way he eats those mints is pretty damned cute, too. nd don't forget the cigar box. You'll want it to carry him in, right?'

elacroix got the box and put Mr. Jingles's props in it, but mouse he settled on the shoulder of his shirt. hen he stepped out of his cell, his puffed-out chest leading the way, and regarded ean and arry. 'You boys coming?'

'Naw,' ean said. ' ot other fish to fry. ut you knock em for a loop, el

- show em what happens when a Louisiana boy puts the hammer down and really goes to work.'

'You bet.' smile shone out of his face, so sudden and so simple in its happiness that felt my heart break for him a little, in spite of the terrible thing he had done. hat a world we live in - what a world!

elacroix turned to John offey, with whom he had struck up a diffident friendship not much different from a hundred other deathhouse acquaintances 'd seen.

'You knock em for a loop, el,' offey said in a serious voice. 'You show em all his tricks.'

elacroix nodded and held his hand up by his shoulder. Mr. Jingles stepped onto it like it was a platform, and elacroix held the hand out toward offey's cell. John offey stuck out a huge finger, and 'll be damned if that mouse didn't stretch out his neck and lick the end of it, just like a dog.

' ome on, el, quit lingerin,' rutal said. ' hese folks're settin back a hot dinner at home to watch your mouse cut his capers.' Not true, of course -

nderson would have been there until eight o'clock on any night, and the guards he'd dragged in to watch elacroix's "show" would be there until eleven or twelve, depending on when their shifts were scheduled to end.

he politician from the state capital would most likely turn out to be an office janitor in a borrowed tie. ut elacroix had no way of knowing any of that.

' 'm ready,' elacroix said, speaking with the simplicity of a great star who has somehow managed to retain the common touch. 'Let's go.' nd as

rutal led him up the reen Mile with Mr. Jingles perched there on the little man's shoulder, elacroix once more began to bugle, *Messieurs et mesdames! Bienvenue au cirque de mousie!* Yet, even lost as deeply in his own fantasy world as he was, he gave Percy a wide berth and a mistrustful glance.

arry and ean stopped in front of the empty cell across from harton's (that worthy had still not so much as stirred). hey watched as rutal unlocked the door to the exercise yard, where another two guards were waiting to join him, and led elacroix out, bound for his command performance before the grand high poohbahs of old Mountain Penitentiary. e waited until the door was locked again, and then looked toward my office. hat shadow was still lying on the floor, thin as famine, and was glad elacroix had been too excited to see it.

' ome on out,' said. ' nd let's move along brisk, folks. want to get two run-throughs in, and we don't have much time.'

Old oot- oot, looking as bright-eyed and bushytailed as ever, came out, walked to elacroix's cell, and strolled in through the open door. ' ittin

down,' he said. ' 'm sittin down, 'm sittin down, 'm sittin down.'

his is the real circus, thought, closing my eyes for a second. his is the real circus right here, and we're all just a bunch of trained mice. hen put the thought out of my mind, and we started to rehearse.

# 8

he first rehearsal went well, and so did the second. Percy performed better than could have hoped for in my wildest dreams. hat didn't mean things would go right when the time really came for the ajun to walk the Mile, but it was a big step in the right direction. t occurred to me that it had gone well because Percy was at long last doing something he cared about. felt a surge of contempt at that, and pushed it away. hat did it matter? e would cap elacroix and roll him, and then both of them would be gone. f that wasn't a happy ending, what was? nd, as Moores had pointed out,

elacroix's nuts were going to fry no matter who was out front.

till, Percy had shown to good advantage in his new role and he knew it.

e all did. s for me, was too relieved to dislike him much, at east or the time being. t looked as if things were going to go all right. was further relieved to find that Percy actually listened when we suggested some things he could do that might improve his performance even more, or at least cut down the possibility of something going wrong. f you want to know the truth, we got pretty enthusiastic about it - even ean, who ordinarily stood well back from Percy□ physically as well as mentally, if he could. None of it that surprising, either, suppose - for most men, nothing is more flattering than having a young person actually pay attention to his advice, and we were no different in that regard. s a result, not a one of us noticed that

ild ill harton was no longer looking up at the ceiling. hat includes me, but know he wasn't. e was looking at us as we stood there by the duty desk, gassing and giving Percy advice. iving him advice! nd him pretending to listen! uite a laugh, considering how things turned out!

he sound of a key rattling into the lock of the door to the exercise yard put an end to our little postrehearsal critique. ean gave Percy a warning glance. 'Not a word or a wrong look,' he said. ' e don't want him to know what we've been doing. t's not good for them. psets them.'

Percy nodded and ran a finger across his lips in a mum's-the-word gesture that was supposed to be funny and wasn't. he exercise-yard door

opened and elacroix came in, escorted by rutal, who was carrying the cigar box with the colored spool in it, the way the magician's assistant in a vaudeville show might carry the boss's props offstage at the end of the act. Mr. Jingles was perched on elacroix's shoulder. nd elacroix himself? tell you what - Lillie Langtry couldn't have looked any glowier after performing at the hite ouse. ' hey love Mr. Jingles!' elacroix proclaimed. ' hey laugh and cheer and clap they hands!'

' ell, that's aces,' Percy said. e spoke in an indulgent, proprietary way that didn't sound like the old Percy at all. 'Pop on back in your cell, old- timer.'

elacroix gave him a comical look of distrust, and the old Percy came busting out. e bared his teeth in a mock snarl and made as if to grab

elacroix. t was a joke, of course, Percy was happy, not in a serious grabbing mood at all, but elacroix didn't know that. e jerked away with an expression of fear and dismay, and tripped over one of rutal's big feet.

e went down hard, hitting the linoleum with the back of his head. Mr. Jingles leaped away in time to avoid being crushed, and went squeaking off down the reen Mile to elacroix's cell.

elacroix got to his feet, gave the chuckling Percy a single hate-filled glance, then scurried off after his pet, calling for him and rubbing the back of his head. rutal (who didn't know that Percy had shown exciting signs of competency for a change) gave Percy a wordless look of contempt and went after el, shaking his keys out.

think what happened next happened because Percy was actually moved to apologize - know it's hard to believe, but he was in an extraordinary humor that day. f true, it only proves a cynical old adage heard once, something about how no good deed goes unpunished. emember me telling you about how, after he'd chased the mouse down to the restraint room on one of those two occasions before elacroix joined us, Perry got a little too close to he Pres's cell? oing that was dangerous, which was why the

reen Mile was so wide - when you walked straight down the middle of it, you couldn't be reached from the cells. he Pres hadn't done anything to Percy, but remember thinking that rlen itterbuck might have, had it been him Percy had gotten too close to. Just to teach him a lesson.

ell, he Pres and he hief had both moved on, but ild ill harton had taken their place. e was worse-mannered than he Pres or he hief had ever dreamed of being, and he'd been watching the whole little play,

hoping for a chance to get on stage himself. hat chance now fell into his lap, courtesy of Percy etmore.

' ey, el!' Percy called, half-laughing, starting after rutal and elacroix and drifting much too close to harton's side of the reen Mile without realizing it. ' ey, you numb shit, didn't mean nothin by it! re you all ri - '

harton was up off his bunk and over to the bars of his cell in a flash - never in my time as a guard did see anyone move so fast, and that includes some of the athletic young men rutal and worked with later at oys'

orrectional. e shot his arms out through the bars and grabbed Percy, first by the shoulders of his uniform blouse and then by the throat. harton dragged him back against his cell door. Percy squealed like a pig in a slaughter-chute, and saw from his eyes that he thought he was going to die.

' in't you sweet,' harton whispered. One hand left Percy's throat and ruffled through his hair. ' oft!' he said, half-laughing. 'Like a girl's. druther fuck your asshole than your sister's pussy, think.' nd he actually kissed Percy's ear.

think Percy - who had beat elacroix onto the block for accidentally brushing his crotch, remember - knew exactly what was happening. doubt that he wanted to, but think he did. ll the color had drained from his face, and the blemishes on his cheeks stood out like birthmarks. is eyes were huge and wet. line of spittle leaked from one comer of his twitching mouth. ll this happened quick - it was begun and done in less than ten seconds, 'd say.

arry and stepped forward, our billies raised. ean drew his gun. ut before things could go so much as an inch further, harton let go of Perry and stepped back, raising his hands to his shoulders and grinning his dank grin. ' let im go, 'us just playin and let im go,' he said. 'Never hurt airy single hair on that boy's purty head, so don't you go stickin me down in that goddam soft room again.'

Percy etmore darted across the reen Mile and cringed against the barred door of the empty cell on the other side, breathing so fast and so loud that it sounded almost like sobbing. e had finally gotten his lesson in keeping to the center of the reen Mile and away from the frumious bandersnatch, the teeth that bite and the claws that catch. had an idea it was a lesson that would stick with him longer than all the advice we'd given him after our rehearsals. here was an expression of utter terror on his face,

and his precious hair was seriously mussed up for the first time since 'd met him, all in spikes and tangles. e looked like someone who has just escaped being raped.

here was a moment of utter stop then, a quiet so thick that the only sound was the sobbing whistle of Percy's breathing. hat broke it was cackling laughter, so sudden and so completely its own mad thing that it was shocking. *Wharton*, was my first thought, but it wasn't him. t was

elacroix, standing in the open door of his cell and pointing at Percy. he mouse was back on his shoulder, and elacroix looked like a small but malevolent male witch, complete with imp.

'Lookit him, he done piss his pants!' elacroix howled. 'Lookit what the big man done! us' other people wid 'is stick, *mais oui* some *mauvais homme*, but when someone touch him, he make water in 'is pants jus' like a baby!'

e laughed and pointed, all his fear and hatred of Percy coming out in that derisive laughter. Percy stared at him, seemingly incapable of moving or speaking. harton stepped back to the bars of his cell, looked down at the dark splotch on the front of Percy's trousers - it was small but it was there, and no question about what it was - and grinned. ' omebody ought to buy the tough boy a didy,' he said, and went back to his bunk, chuffing laughter.

rutal went down to elacroix's cell, but the ajun had ducked inside and thrown himself on his bunk before rutal could get there.

reached out and grasped Percy's shoulder. 'Percy - ' began, but that was as far as got. e came to life, shaking my hand off. e looked down at the front of his pants, saw the spot spreading there, and blushed a dark, fiery red. e looked up at me again, then at arry and ean. remember being glad that Old oot- oot was gone. f he'd been around, the story would have been all over the prison in a single day. nd, given Percy's last name - an unfortunate one, in this context - it was a story that would have been told with the relish of high glee for years to come.

'You talk about this to anyone, and you'll all be on the breadlines in a week,' he whispered fiercely. t was the sort of crack that would have made me want to swat him under other circumstances, but under these, only pitied him. think he saw that pity, and it made it worse with him - like having an open wound scoured with nettles.

' hat goes on here stays here,' ean said quietly. 'You don't have to worry about that.'

Percy looked back over his shoulder, toward elacroix's cell. rutal was just locking the door, and from inside, deadly clear, we could still hear

elacroix giggling. Percy's look was as black as thunder. thought of telling him that you reaped what you sowed in this life, and then decided this might not be the right time for a scripture lesson.

' s for him - ' he began, but never finished. e left, instead, head down, to go into the storage room and look for a dry pair of pants.

' e's so *purty*,' harton said in a dreamy voice. arry told him to shut the fuck up before he went down to the restraint room just on general damned principles. harton folded his arms on his chest, closed his eyes, and appeared to go to sleep.

# 9

he night before elacroix's execution came down hotter and muggier than ever - eighty-one degrees by the thermometer outside the dmin readyroom window when clocked in at six. ighty-one degrees at the end of October, think of that, and thunder rumbling in the west like it does in July. 'd met a member of my congregation in town that afternoon, and he had asked me, with apparent seriousness, if thought such unseasonable weather could be a sign of the Last imes. said that was sure not, but it crossed my mind that it was Last imes for duard elacroix, all right. Yes indeed it was.

ill odge was standing in the door to the exercise yard, drinking coffee and smoking him a little smoke. e looked around at me and said, ' ell, lookit here. Paul dgecombe, big as life and twice as ugly.'

' ow'd the day go, illy?' ' ll right.'

' elacroix?'

' ine. e seems to understand it's tomorrow, and yet it's like he *don t* understand. You know how most of em are when the end finally comes for them.'

nodded. ' harton?'

ill laughed. ' hat a comedian. Makes Jack enny sound like a uaker.

e told olfe ettermark that he ate strawberry jam out of his wife's

pussy.'

' hat did olfe say?'

' hat he wasn't married. aid it must have been his mother harton was thinking of.'

laughed, and hard. hat really was funny, in a low sort of way. nd it was good just to be able to laugh without feeling like someone was lighting matches way down low in my gut. ill laughed with me, then turned the rest of his coffee out in the yard, which was empty except for a few shuffling trusties, most of whom had been there for a thousand years or so.

hunder rumbled somewhere far off, and unfocused heat lightning flashed in the darkening sky overhead. ill looked up uneasily, his laughter dying.

' tell you what, though,' he said, ' don't like this weather much. eels like something's gonna happen. omething bad.'

bout that he was right. he bad thing happened right around quarter of ten that night. hat was when Percy killed Mr. Jingles.

# 10

t first it seemed like it was going to be a pretty good night in spite of the heat - John offey was being his usual quiet self, ild ill was making out to be Mild ill, and elacroix was in good spirits for a man who had a date with Old parky in a little more than twenty-four hours.

e *did* understand what was going to happen to him, at least on the most basic level; he had ordered chili for his last meal and gave me special instructions for the kitchen. ' ell em to lay on dat hotsauce,' he said. ' ell em the kind dat really jump up your t'roat an' say howdy - the green stuff, none of dat mild. at stuff gripe me like a motherfucker, can't get off the toilet the nex' day, but don't think gonna have a problem this time, *n est- ce pas?*

Most of them worry about their immortal souls with a kind of moronic ferocity, but elacroix pretty much dismissed my questions about what he wanted for spiritual comfort in his last hours. f 'dat fella' chuster had been good enough for ig hief itterbuck, el reckoned, chuster would be good enough for him. No, what he cared about - you've guessed already, 'm sure - was what was going to happen to Mr. Jingles after he, elacroix, passed on. was used to spending long hours with the condemned on the

night before their last march, but this was the first time 'd spent those long hours pondering the fate of a mouse.

el considered scenario after scenario, patiently working the possibilities through his dim mind. nd while he thought aloud, wanting to provide for his pet mouse's future as if it were a child that had to be put through college, he threw that colored spool against the wall. ach time he did it, Mr. Jingles would spring after it, track it down, and then roll it back to el's foot. t started to get on my nerves after awhile - first the clack of the spool against the stone wall, then the minute clitter of Mr. Jingles's paws. lthough it was a cute trick, it palled after ninety minutes or so. nd Mr. Jingles never seemed to get tired. e paused every now and then to refresh himself with a drink of water out of a coffee saucer elacroix kept for just that purpose, or to munch a pink crumb of peppermint candy, and then back to it he went.

everal times it was on the tip of my tongue to tell elacroix to give it a rest, and each time reminded myself that he had this night and tomorrow to play the spool-game with Mr. Jingles, and that was all. Near the end, though, it began to be really difficult to hold onto that thought - you know how it is, with a noise that's repeated over and over. fter a while it shoots your nerve. started to speak after all, then something made me look over my shoulder and out the cell door. John offey was standing at *his* cell door across the way, and he shook his head at me: right, left, back to center. s if he had read my mind and was telling me to think again.

would see that Mr. Jingles got to elacroix's maiden aunt, said, the one who had sent him the big bag of candy. is colored spool could go as well, even his "house" - we'd take up a collection and see that oot gave up his claim on the orona box. No, said elacroix after some consideration (he had time to throw the spool against the wall at least five times, with Mr. Jingles either nosing it back or pushing it with his paws), that wouldn't do.

unt ermione was too old, she wouldn't understand Mr. Jingles's frisky ways, and suppose Mr. Jingles outlived her? hat would happen to him then? No, no, unt ermione just wouldn't do.

ell, then, asked, suppose one of us took it? One of us guards? e could keep him right here on lock. No, elacroix said, he thanked me kindly for the thought, *certainement,* but Mr. Jingles was a mouse that yearned to be free. e, duard elacroix, knew this, because Mr. Jingles had - you guessed it - whispered the information in his ear.

' ll right,' said, 'one of us will take him home, el. ean, maybe. e's got a little boy that would just love a pet mouse, bet.'

elacroix actually turned pale with horror at the thought. little kid in charge of a rodent genius like Mr. Jingles? ow in the name of *le bon Dieu* could a little kid be expected to keep up with his training, let alone teach him new tricks? nd suppose the kid lost interest and forgot to feed him for two or three days at a stretch? elacroix, who had roasted six human beings alive in an effort to cover up his original crime, shuddered with the delicate revulsion of an ardent anti-vivisectionist.

ll right, said, 'd take him myself (promise them anything, remember; in their last forty-eight hours, promise them anything). ow would that be?

'No, sir, oss dgecombe,' el said apologetically. e threw the spool again. t hit the wall, bounced, spun; then Mr. Jingles was on it like white on rice and nosing it back to elacroix. ' hank you kindly - *merci beaucoup*

- but you live out in the woods, and Mr. Jingles, he be scared to live out

*dans la foręt.* know, because - '

' think can guess how you know, el,' said.

elacroix nodded, smiling. ' ut we gonna figure this out. You bet!' e threw the spool. Mr. Jingles clittered after it. tried not to wince.

n the end it was rutal who saved the day. e had been up by the duty desk, watching ean and arry play cribbage. Percy was there, too, and

rutal finally tired of trying to start a conversation with him and getting nothing but sullen grunts in response. e strolled down to where sat on a stool outside of elacroix's cell and stood there listening to us with his arms folded.

' ow about Mouseville?' rutal asked into the considering silence which followed el's rejection of my spooky old house out in the woods. e threw the comment out in a casual just-an-idea tone of voice.

'Mouseville?' elacroix asked, giving rutal a look both startled and interested. ' hat Mouseville?'

' t's this tourist attraction down in lorida,' he said. ' allahassee, think.

s that right, Paul? allahassee?'

'Yep,' said, speaking without a moment's hesitation, thinking od bless

rutus owell. ' allahassee. ight down the road apiece from the dog university.' rutal's mouth twitched at that, and thought he was going to queer the pitch by laughing, but he got it under control and nodded. 'd hear about the dog university later, though, imagined.

his time el didn't throw the spool, although Mr. Jingles stood on el's slipper with his front paws raised, clearly lusting for another chance to chase. he ajun looked from rutal to me and back to rutal again. ' hat dey do in Mouseville?' he asked.

'You think they'd take Mr. Jingles?' rutal asked me, simultaneously ignoring el and drawing him on. ' hink he's got the stuff, Paul?'

tried to appear considering. 'You know,' said, 'the more think of it, the more it seems like a brilliant idea.' rom the comer of my eye saw Percy come partway down the reen Mile (giving harton's cell a very wide berth). e stood with one shoulder leaning against an empty cell, listening with a small, contemptuous smile on his lips.

' hat dis Mouseville?' el asked, now frantic to know.

' tourist attraction, like told you,' rutal said. ' here's, oh dunno, a hundred or so mice there. ouldn't you say, Paul?'

'More like a hundred and fifty these days,' said. ' t's a big success. understand they're thinking of opening one out in alifornia and calling it Mouseville est, that's how much business is booming. rained mice are the coming thing with the smart set, guess - don't understand it, myself.'

el sat with the colored spool in his hand, looking at us, his own situation forgotten for the time being.

' hey only take the smartest mice,' rutal cautioned, 'the ones that can do tricks. nd they can't be white mice, because those are pet-shop mice.'

'Pet-shop mice, yeah, you bet!' elacroix said fiercely. ' hate dem pet- shop mice!'

' nd what they got,' rutal said, his eyes distant now as he imagined it, 'is this tent you go into - '

'Yeah, yeah, like inna *cirque!* o you gotta pay to get in?'

'You shittin me? *Course* you gotta pay to get in. dime apiece, two cents for the kiddies. nd there's, like, this whole city made out of akelite boxes and toilet-paper rolls, with windows made out of isinglass so you can see what they're up to in there - '

'Yeah! Yeah!' elacroix was in ecstasy now. hen he turned to me. ' hat ivy-glass?'

'Like on the front of a stove, where you can see in,' . said.

'Oh sure! at shit!' e cranked his hand at rutal, wanting him to go on, and Mr. Jingles's little oildrop eyes practically spun in their sockets, trying to keep that spool in view. t was pretty funny. Percy came a little closer, as

if wanting to get a better look, and saw John offey frowning at him, but was too wrapped up in rutal's fantasy to pay much attention. his took telling the condemned man what he wanted to hear to new heights, and was all admiration, believe me.

'' ell,' rutal said, 'there's the mouse city, but what the kids really like is the Mouseville ll- tar ircus, where there's mice that swing on trapezes, and mice that roll these little barrels, and mice that stack coins - '

'Yeah, dat's it! at's the place for Mr. Jingles!' elacroix said. is eyes sparkled and his cheeks were high with color. t occurred to me that rutus

owell was a kind of saint. 'You gonna be a circus mouse after all, Mr. Jingles! onna live in a mouse city down lorida! ll ivy-glass windows!

urrah!'

e threw the spool extra-hard. t hit low on the wall, took a crazy bounce, and squirted out between the bars of his cell door and onto the Mile. Mr. Jingles raced out after it, and Percy saw his chance.

*No, you fool!* rutal yelled, but Percy paid no attention. Just as Mr. Jingles reached the spool - too intent on it to realize his old enemy was at hand - Percy brought the sole of one hard black workshoe down on it. here was an audible snap as Mr. Jingles's back broke, and blood gushed from his mouth. is tiny dark eyes bulged in their sockets, and in them read an expression of surprised agony that was all too human.

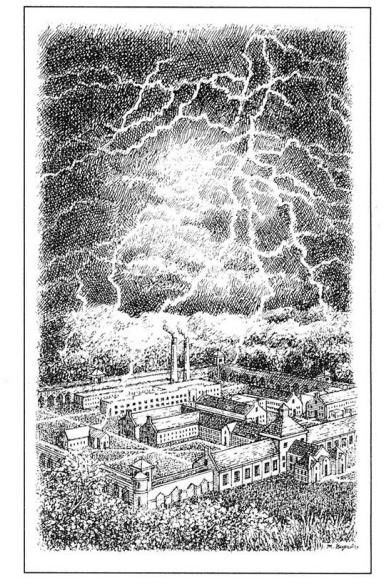
elacroix screamed with horror and grief. e threw himself at the door of his cell and thrust his arms out between the bars, reaching as far as he could, crying the mouse's name over and over.

Percy turned toward him, smiling. oward the three of us. ' here,' he said. ' knew 'd get him, sooner or later. Just a matter of time, really.' e turned and walked back up the reen Mile, not hurrying, leaving Mr. Jingles lying on the linoleum in a spreading pool of his own blood.

# Pa t Fou

he ad eath of

duard elacroix



# 1

ll this other writing aside, 've kept a little diary since took up residence at eorgia Pines - no big deal, just a couple of paragraphs a day, mostly about the weather - and looked back through it last evening. wanted to see just how long it has been since my grandchildren, hristopher and anielle, more or less forced me into eorgia Pines. ' or your own good, ramps,' they said. Of course they did. sn't that what people mostly say when they have finally figured out how to get rid of a problem that walks and talks?

t's been a little over two years. he eerie thing is that don't know if it *feels* like two years, or longer than that, or shorter. My sense of time seems to be *melting,* like a kid's snowman in a January thaw. t's as if time as it always was - astern tandard ime, aylight aving une, orking-Man

ime - doesn't exist anymore. ere there is only eorgia Pines ime, which is Old Man ime, Old Lady ime, and Piss the ed une. he rest□ all gone.

his is a dangerous damned place. You don't you think it's only a boring dangerous as a nursery school at naptime, but it's dangerous, all right. 've seen a lot of people slide into senility since came here, and sometimes they do more than slide - sometimes they go down with the speed of a crash-diving submarine. hey come here mostly all right - dim-eyed and welded to the cane, maybe a little loose in the bladder, but otherwise okay - and then something happens to them. month later they're just sitting in the room, staring up at Oprah infrey on the with dull eyes, a slack jaw, and a forgotten glass of orange juice tilted and dribbling in one hand. month after that, you have to tell them their kids' names when the kids come to visit. nd a month after that, it's their own damned names you have to refresh them on. omething happens to them, all right: eorgia Pines ime happens to them. ime here is like a weak acid that erases first memory and then the desire to go on living.

You have to fight it. hat's what tell laine onnelly, my special friend.

t's gotten better for me since started writing about what happened to me in 93 , the year John offey came on the reen Mile. ome of the memories are awful, but can feel them sharpening my mind and my awareness the way a knife sharpens a pencil, and that makes the pain

worthwhile. riting and memory alone aren't enough, though. also have a body, wasted and grotesque, though it may now be, and exercise it as much as can. t was hard at first - old fogies like me aren't much shakes when it comes to exercise just for the sake of exercise - but it's easier now that there's a purpose to my walks.

go out before breakfast - as soon as it's light, most days - for my first stroll. t was raining this morning, and the damp makes my joints ache, but hooked a poncho from the rack by the kitchen door and went out, anyway.

hen a man has a chore, he has to do it, and if it hurts, too bad. esides, there are compensations. he chief one is keeping that sense of eal ime, as opposed to eorgia Pines ime. nd like the rain, aches or no aches.

specially in the early morning, when the day is young and seems full of possibilities, even to a washed-up old boy like me.

went through the kitchen, stopping to beg two slices of toast from one of the sleepy-eyed cooks, and then went out. crossed the croquet course, then the weedy little putting green. eyond that is a small stand of woods, with a narrow path winding through it and a couple of sheds, no longer used and mouldering away quietly, along the way. walked down this path slowly, listening to the sleek and secret patter of the rain in the pines, chewing away at a piece of toast with my few remaining teeth. My legs ached, but it was a low ache, manageable. Mostly felt pretty well. drew the moist gray air as deep as could, taking it in like food.

nd when got to the second of those old sheds, went in for awhile, and

took care of my business there.

hen walked back up the path twenty minutes later, could feel a worm of hunger stirring in my belly, and thought could eat something a little more substantial than toast. dish of oatmeal, perhaps even a scrambled egg with a sausage on the side. love sausage, always have, but if eat more than one these days, 'm apt to get the squitters. One would be safe enough, though. hen, with my belly full and with the damp air still perking up my brain (or so hoped), would go up to the solarium and write about the execution of duard elacroix. would do it as fast as could, so as not to lose my courage.

t was Mr. Jingles was thinking about as crossed the croquet course to the kitchen door - how Percy etmore had stamped on him and broken his back, and how elacroix had screamed when he realized what his enemy

had done - and didn't see rad olan standing there, half-hidden by the

umpster, until he reached out and grabbed my wrist. 'Out for a little stroll, Paulie?' he asked.

jerked back from him, yanking my wrist out of his hand. ome of it was just being startled - anyone will jerk when they're startled - but that wasn't all of it. 'd been thinking about Percy etmore, remember, and it's Percy that rad always reminds me of. ome of it's how rad always goes around with a paperback stuffed into his pocket (with Percy it was always a men's adventure magazine; with rad it's books of jokes that are only funny if you're stupid and mean-hearted), some of it's how he acts like he's King hit of urd Mountain, but mostly it's that he's sneaky, and he likes to hurt.

e'd just gotten to work, saw, hadn't even changed into his orderly's whites yet. e was wearing jeans and a cheesy-looking estern-style shirt.

n one hand was the remains of a anish he'd hooked out of the kitchen.

e'd been standing under the leave, eating it where he wouldn't get wet.

nd where he could watch for me, 'm pretty sure of that now. 'm pretty sure of something else, as well: 'll have to watch out for Mr. rad olan.

e doesn't like me much. don't know why, but never knew why Percy

etmore didn't like elacroix, either. nd *dislike* is really too weak a word. Percy hated el's guts from the very first moment the little renchman came onto the reen Mile.

' hat's with this poncho you got on, Paulie?' he asked, flicking the collar. ' his isn't yours.'

' got it in the hall outside the kitchen,' said. hate it when he calls me Paulie, and think he knows it, but was damned if 'd give him the satisfaction of seeing it. ' here's a whole row of them. 'm not hurting it any, would you say? ain's what it's made for, after all.'

' ut it wasn't made for you, Paulie,' he said, giving it another little flick. ' hat's the thing. hose slickers're for the employees, not the residents.'

' still don't see what harm it does.'

e gave me a thin little smile. ' t's not about *harm,* it's about the *rules.*

hat would life be without rules? Paulie, Paulie, Paulie.' e shook his head, as if just looking at me made him feel sorry to be alive. 'You probably think an old fart like you doesn't have to mind about the rules anymore, but that's just not true. *Paulie*.'

miling at me. isliking me. Maybe even hating me. nd why? don't know. ometimes there is no why. hat's the scary part.

' ell, 'm sorry if broke the rules,' said. t came out sounding whiney, a little shrill, and hated myself for sounding that way, but 'm old, and old people whine easily. Old people *scare* easily.

rad nodded. ' pology accepted. Now go hang that back up. You got no business out walking in the rain, anyway. pecially not in those woods.

hat if you were to slip and fall and break your damned hip? uh? ho do you think'd have to hoss your elderly freight back up the hill?'

' don't know,' said. just wanted to get away from him. he more listened to him, the more he sounded like Percy. illiam harton, the crazyman who came to the reen Mile in the fall of `3 , once grabbed Percy and scared him so bad that Percy squirted in his pants. *You talk about this to anyone,* Percy told the rest of us afterward, *and you ll all be on the breadlines in a week.* Now, these many years later, could almost hear rad

olan saying those same words, in that same tone of voice. t's as if, by writing about those old times, have unlocked some unspeakable door that connects the past to the present - Percy etmore to rad olan, Janice

dgecombe to laine onnelly, old Mountain Penitentiary to the eorgia Pines old folks' home. nd if that thought doesn't keep me awake tonight, guess nothing will.

made as if to go in through the kitchen door and rad grabbed me by the wrist again. don't know about the first one, but this time he was doing it on purpose, squeezing to hurt. is eyes shifting back and forth, making sure no one was around in the early-morning wet, no one to see he was abusing one of the old folks he was supposed to be taking care of.

' hat do you do down that path?' he asked. ' know you don't go down there and jerk off, those days are long behind you, so what do you do?'

'Nothing,' said, telling myself to be calm, not to show him how bad he was hurting me and to be calm, to remember he'd only mentioned the path, he didn't know about the shed. ' just walk. o clear my mind'

' oo late for that, Paulie, your mind's never gonna be clear again!' e squeezed my thin old mares wrist again, grinding the brittle bones, eyes continually shifting from side to side, wanting to make sure he was safe.

rad wasn't afraid of breaking the rules; he was only afraid of being caught breaking them. nd in that, too, he was like Percy etmore, who would never let you forget he was the governor's nephew. 'Old as you are, its a miracle you can remember *who* you are. You're *too* goddam old. ven for a museum like this. You give me the fucking creeps, Paulie.'

'Let go of me,' said, trying to keep the whine out of my voice. t wasn't just pride, either. thought if he heard it, it might inflame him, the way the smell of sweat can sometimes inflame a bad-tempered dog - one which would otherwise only growl - to bite. hat made me think of a reporter who'd covered John offey's trial. he reporter was a terrible man named

ammersmith, and the most terrible thing about him was that he hadn't known he was terrible.

nstead of letting go, olan squeezed my wrist again. groaned. didn't want to, but couldn't help it. t hurt all the way down to my ankles.

' hat do you do down there, Paulie? ell me.'

'Nothing!' said. wasn't crying, not yet, but was afraid 'd start soon if he kept bearing down like that. 'Nothing, just walk, like to walk, let go of me!'

e did, but only long enough so he could grab my other hand. hat one was rolled closed. 'Open up,' he said. 'Let Poppa see.'

did, and he grunted with disgust. t was nothing but the remains of my second piece of toast. 'd clenched it in my right hand when he started squeezing my left wrist, and there was butter - well, oleo, they don't have real butter here, of course - on my fingers.

' o on inside and wash your damned hands,' he said, stepping back and taking another bite of his anish. 'Jesus hrist.'

went up the steps. My legs were shaking, my heart pounding like an engine with leaky valves and shaky old pistons. s grasped the knob that would let me into the kitchen - and safety - olan said: ' f you tell anyone squeezed your po' old wrist, Paulie, 'll tell them you're having delusions. Onset of senile dementia, likely. nd you know they'll believe me. f there are bruises, they'll think you made them yourself.'

Yes. hose things were true. nd once again, it could have been Percy

etmore saying them, a Percy that had somehow stayed young and mean while 'd grown old and brittle.

' 'm not going to say anything to anyone,' mutered. ' ot nothing to say.' ' hat's right, you old sweetie.' is voice light and mocking, the voice of a

lugoon (to use Percy's word) who thought he was going to be young forever. ' nd 'm going to find out what you're up to. 'm going to make it my business. You hear?'

heard, all right, but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of saying so. went in, passed through the kitchen ( could now smell eggs and sausage

cooking, but no longer wanted any), and hung the poncho back up on its hook. hen went upstairs to my room - resting at every step, giving my heart time to slow - and gathered my writing materials together.

went down to the solarium and was just sitting at the little table by the windows when my friend laine poked her head in. he looked tired, and, thought, unwell. he'd combed her hair out but was still in her robe. e old sweeties don't stand much on ceremony; for the most part, we can't afford to.

' won't disturb you,' she said, ' see you're getting set to write - '

' on't be silly,' said. ' 've got more time than arter's got liver pills.

ome on in.'

he did, but stood by the door. ' t's just that couldn't sleep - again - and happened to be looking out my window a little earlier□ and□ '

' nd you saw Mr. olan and me having our pleasant little chat,' said.

hoped seeing was all she'd done; that her window had been closed and she hadn't heard me whining to be let go.

' t didn't look pleasant and it didn't look friendly,' she said. 'Paul, that Mr.

olan's been asking around about you. e asked *me* about you - last week, this was. didn't think much about it then, just that he's got himself a nasty long nose for other people's business, but now wonder.'

' sking about me?' hoped didn't sound as uneasy as felt. ' sking what?'

' here you go walking, for one thing. nd *why* you go walking.'

tried to laugh. ' here's a man who doesn't believe in exercise, that much is clear.'

' e thinks you've got a secret.' he paused. ' o do .'

opened my mouth - to say what, don't know - but laine raised one of her gnarled but oddly beautiful hands before could get a single word out. ' f you do, don't want to know what it is, Paul. Your business is your business. was raised to think that way, but not everyone was. e careful.

hat's all want to tell you. nd now 'll let you alone to do your work.'

he turned to go, but before she could get out the door, called her name.

he turned back, eyes questioning.

' hen finish what 'm writing - ' began, then shook my head a little.

hat was wrong. ' *f* finish what 'm writing, would you read it?'

he seemed to consider, then gave me the sort of smile a man could easily fall in love with, even a man as old as me. ' hat would be my honor.'

'You'd better wait until you read it before you talk about honor,' said, and it was elacroix's death was thinking of.

' 'll read it, though,' she said. ' very word. promise. ut you have to finish writing it, first.'

he left me to it, but it was a long time before wrote anything. sat staring out the windows for almost an hour, tapping my pen against the side of the table, watching the gray day brighten a little at a time, thinking about

rad olan, who calls me Paulie and never tires of jokes about chinks and slopes and spicks and micks, thinking about what laine onnelly had said.

*e thinks you ve got a secret. So do .*

nd maybe do. Yes, maybe do. nd of course rad olan wants it. Not because he thinks it's important (and it's not, guess, except to me), but because he doesn't think very old men like myself should have secrets. No taking the ponchos off the hook outside the kitchen; no secrets, either. No getting the idea that the likes of us are still human. nd why shouldn't we be allowed such an idea? e doesn't know. nd in that, too, he is like Percy.

o my thoughts, like a river that takes an oxbow turn, finally led back to where they had been when rad olan reached out from beneath the kitchen eave and grabbed my wrist: to Percy, mean-spirited Percy etmore, and how he had taken his revenge on the man who had laughed at him.

elacroix had been throwing the colored spool he had - the one Mr. Jingles would fetch - and it bounced out of the cell and into the corridor. hat was all it took; Percy saw his chance.

# 2

*No you fool!* rutal yelled, but Percy paid no attention. Just as Mr. Jingles reached the spool - too intent on it to realize his old enemy was at hand - Percy brought the sole of one hard black workshoe down on him.

here was an audible snap as Mr. Jingles's back broke, and blood gushed from his mouth. is tiny black eyes bulged in their sockets, and in them read an expression of surprised agony that was all too human.

elacroix screamed with horror and grief. e threw himself at the door of his cell and thrust his arms out through the bars, reaching as far as he could, crying the mouse's name over and over.

Percy turned toward him, smiling. oward me and rutal, as well. ' here,' he said. ' knew 'd get him, sooner or later. just a matter of time,

really.' e turned and walked back up the reen Mile, leaving Mr. Jingles lying on the linoleum, his spreading blood red over green.

ean got up from the duty desk, hitting the side of it with his knee and knocking the cribbage board to the floor. he pegs spilled out of their holes and rolled in all directions. Neither ean nor arry, who had been just about to go out, paid the slightest attention to the overturn of the game. ' hat'd you do this time?' ean shouted at Percy. ' hat the hell'd you do this time, you stoopnagel?'

Percy didn't answer. e strode past the desk without saying a word, patting his hair with his fingers. e went through my office and into the storage shed. illiam harton answered for him. ' oss ean? think what he did was teach a certain french-fry it ain't smart to laugh at him,' he said, and then began to laugh himself. t was a good laugh, a *country* laugh, cheery and deep. here were people met during that period of my life (very scary people, for the most part) who only sounded normal when they laughed. ild ill harton was one of those.

looked down at the mouse again, stunned. t was still breathing, but there were little minute beads of blood caught in the filaments of its whiskers, and a dull glaze was creeping over its previously brilliant oildrop eyes. rutal picked up the colored spool, looked at it, then looked at me. e looked as dumbfounded as felt. ehind us, elacroix went on screaming out his grief and horror. t wasn't just the mouse, of course; Percy had smashed a hole in elacroix's defenses and all his terror was pouring out.

ut Mr. Jingles was the focusing point for those pent-up feelings, and it was terrible to listen to him.

'Oh no,' he cried over and over again, amid the screams and the garbled pleas and prayers in ajun rench. 'Oh no, oh no, poor Mr. Jingles, poor old Mr. Jingles, oh no.'

' ive im to me.'

looked up, puzzled by that deep voice, at first not sure who it belonged to. saw John offey. Like elacroix, he had put his arms through the bars of his cell door, but unlike el, he wasn't waving them around. e simply held them out as far as he could, the hands at the ends of them open. t was a purposeful pose, an almost urgent pose. nd his voice, had the same quality, which was why, suppose, didn't recognize it as belonging to

offey at first. e seemed a different man from the lost, weepy soul that had occupied this cell for the last few weeks.

' ive im to me, Mr. dgecombe! hile there's still time!'

hen remembered what he'd done for me, and understood. supposed it couldn't hurt, but didn't think it would do much good, either. hen picked the mouse up, winced at the feel - there were so many splintered bones poking at various spots on Mr. Jingles's hide that it was like picking up a fur-covered pincushion. his was no urinary infection. till -

' hat are you doing?' rutal asked as put Mr. Jingles in offey's huge right hand. ' hat the hell?'

offey pulled the mouse back through the bars. e lay limp on offey's palm, tail hanging over the arc between offey's thumb and first finger, the tip twitching weakly in midair. hen offey covered his right hand with his left, creating a kind of cup in which the mouse lay. e could no longer see Mr. Jingles himself, only the tail, hanging down and twitching at the tip like a dying pendulum. offey lifted his hands toward his face, spreading the fingers of the right as he did so, creating spaces like those between prison bars. he tail of the mouse now hung from the side of his hands that was facing us.

rutal stepped next to me, still holding the colored spool between his fingers. ' hat's he think he's doing?'

' hh,' said.

elacroix had stopped screaming. 'Please, John,' he whispered. 'Oh Johnny, help him, please help him, oh *s il vous plaît.*

ean and arry joined us, arry with our old deck of irplane cards still in one hand. ' hat's going on?' ean asked, but only shook my head. was feeling hypnotized again, damned if wasn't.

offey put his mouth between two of his fingers and inhaled sharply. or a moment everything hung suspended. hen he raised his head away from his hands and saw the face of a man who looked desperately sick, or in terrible pain. is eyes were sharp and blazing; his upper teeth bit at his full lower lip; his dark face had faded to an unpleasant color that looked like ash stirred into mud. e made a choked sound way back in his throat.

' ear Jesus Lord and avior,' rutal whispered. is eyes appeared to be in danger of dropping right out of his face.

' hat?' arry almost barked. *What?*

' he tail! on't you see it? he *tail!*

Mr. Jingles's tail was no longer a dying pendulum; it was snapping briskly from side to side, like the tail of a cat in a bird-catching mood. nd

then, from inside offey's cupped hands, came a perfectly familiar squeak.

offey made that choking, gagging sound again, then turned his head to one side like a man that has coughed up a wad of phlegm and means to spit it out. nstead, he exhaled a cloud of black insects - *think* they were insects, and the others said the same, but to this day am not sure - from his mouth and nose. hey boiled around him in a dark cloud that temporarily obscured his features.

' hrist, what're those?' ean asked in a shrill, scared voice.

' t's all right,' heard myself say. ' on't panic, it's all right, in a few seconds they'll be gone.'

s when offey had cured my urinary infection for me, the 'bugs' turned white and then disappeared.

' oly shit,' arry whispered.

'Paul?' rutal asked in an unsteady voice. 'Paul?'

offey looked okay again - like a fellow who has successfully coughed up a wad of meat that has been choking him. e bent down, put his cupped hands on the floor, peeked through his fingers, then opened them. Mr. Jingles, absolutely all right - not a single twist to his backbone, not a single lump poking at his hide - ran out. e paused for a moment at the door of

offey's cell, then ran across the reen Mile to elacroix's cell. s he went, noticed there were still beads of blood in his whiskers.

elacroix gathered him up, laughing and crying at the same time, covering the mouse with shameless, smacking kisses. ean and arry and

rutal watched with silent wonder. hen rutal stepped forward and handed the colored spool through the bars. elacroix didn't see it at first; he was too taken up with Mr. Jingles. e was like a father whose son has been saved from drowning. rutal tapped him on the shoulder with the spool.

elacroix looked, saw it, took it, and went back to Mr. Jingles again, stroking his fur and devouring him with his eyes, needing to constantly refresh his perception that yes, the mouse was all right, the mouse was whole and fine and all right.

' oss it,' rutal said. ' want to see how he runs.'

' e all right, oss owell, he all right, praise od -!' ' oss it,' rutal repeated. 'Mind me, el.'

elacroix bent, clearly reluctant, clearly not wanting to let Mr. Jingles out of his hands again, at least not yet. hen, very gently, he tossed the spool. t rolled across the cell, past the orona cigar box, and to the wall.

Mr. Jingles was after it, but not quite with the speed he had shown previously. e appeared to be limping just a bit on his left rear leg, and that was what struck me the hardest - it was, suppose, what made it real. hat little limp.

e got to the spool, though, got to it just fine and nosed it back to

elacroix with all his old enthusiasm. turned to John offey, who was standing at his cell door and smiling. t was a tired smile, and not what 'd call really happy, but the sharp urgency 'd seen in his face as he begged for the mouse to be given to him was gone, and so was the look of pain and fear, as if he were choking. t was our John offey again, with his not-quite- there face and strange, far-looking eyes.

'You helped it,' said. ' idn't you, big boy?'

' hat's right,' offey said. he smile widened a little, and for a moment or two it *was* happy. ' helped it. helped el's mouse. helped□ ' e trailed off, unable to remember the name.

'Mr. Jingles,' ean said. e was looking at John with careful, wondering eyes, as if he expected offey to burst into flames or maybe begin to float in his cell.

' hat's right,' offey said. 'Mr. Jingles. e's a circus mouse. oan live in ivy-glass.'

'You bet your bobcat,' arry said, joining us in looking at John offey.

ehind us, elacroix lay down on his bunk with Mr. Jingles on his chest.

el was crooning to him, singing him some rench song that sounded like a lullaby.

offey looked up the reen Mile toward the duty desk and the door which led into my office and the storage room beyond. ' oss Percy's bad,' he said. ' oss Percy's mean. e stepped on el's mouse. e stepped on Mr. Jingles.'

nd then, before we could say anything else to him - if we could have thought of anything to say - John offey went back to his bunk, lay down, and rolled on his side to face the wall.

# 3

Percy was standing with his back to us when rutal and came into the storage room about twenty minutes later. e had found a can of paste furniture polish on a shelf above the hamper where we put our dirty

uniforms (and, sometimes, our civilian clothes; the prison laundry didn't care what it washed), and was polishing the oak arms and legs of the electric chair. his probably sounds bizarre to you, perhaps even macabre, but to rutal and me, it seemed the most normal thing Percy had done all night. Old parky would be meeting his public tomorrow, and. Percy would at least appear to be in charge.

'Percy,' said quietly.

e turned the little tune he'd been humming dying in his throat, and looked at us. didn't see the fear 'd expected, at least not at first. realized that Percy looked older, somehow. nd, thought, John offey was right.

e looked mean. Meanness is like an addicting drug - no one on earth is more qualified to say that than me - and thought that, after a certain amount of experimentation, Percy had gotten hooked on it. e liked what he had done to elacroix's mouse. hat he liked even more was

elacroix's dismayed screams.

' on't start in on me,' he said in a tone of voice that was almost pleasant. ' mean, hey, it was just a mouse. t never belonged here in the first place, as you boys well know.'

' he mouse is fine,' said. My heart was thumping hard in my chest but made my voice come out mild, almost disinterested. 'Just fine. unning and squeaking and chasing its spool again. You're no better at mouse-killing than you are at most of the other things you do around here.'

e was looking at me, amazed and disbelieving. 'You expect me to believe that? he goddam thing *crunched!* heard it! o you can just - '

' hut up.'

e stared at me, his eyes wide. ' hat? hat did you say to me?'

took a step closer to him. could feel a vein throbbing in the middle of my forehead. couldn't remember the last time 'd felt so angry. ' ren't you glad Mr. Jingles is okay? fter all the talks we've had about how our job is to keep the prisoners calm, especially when it gets near the end for them, thought you'd be glad. elieved. ith el having to take the walk tomorrow, and all.'

Percy looked from me to rutal, his studied calmness dissolving into uncertainty. ' hat the hell game do you boys think you're playing?' he asked.

'None of this is a game, my friend,' rutal said. 'You thinking it is□ well, that's just one of the reasons you can't be trusted. You want to know the

absolute truth? think you're a pretty sad case.'

'You want to watch it,' Percy said. Now there was a rawness in his voice.

ear creeping back in, after all - fear of what we might want with him, fear of what we might be up to. was glad to hear it. t would make him easier to deal with. ' know people. mportant people.'

' o you say, but you're *such* a dreamer,' rutal said. e sounded as if he was on the verge of laughter.

Percy dropped the polishing rag onto the seat of the chair with the clamps attached to the arms and legs. ' killed that mouse,' he said in a voice that was not quite steady.

' o on and check for yourself,' said. ' t's a free country.' ' will,' he said. ' will.'

e stalked past us, mouth set, small hands ( harton was right, they *were* pretty) fiddling with his comb. e went up the steps and ducked through into my office. rutal and stood by Old parky, waiting for him to come back and not talking. don't know about rutal, but couldn't think of a thing to say. didn't even know how to think about what we had just seen.

hree minutes passed. rutal picked up Percy's rag and began to polish the thick back-slats of the electric chair. e had time to finish one and start another before Percy came back. e stumbled and almost fell coming down the steps from the office to the storageroom floor, and when he crossed to us he came at an uneven strut. is face was shocked and unbelieving.

'You switched them,' he said in a shrill, accusatory voice. 'You switched mice somehow, you bastards. You're playing with me, and you're going to be goddam sorry if you don't stop! 'll see you on the goddam breadlines if you don't stop! ho do you think you are?'

e quit, panting for breath, his hands clenched.

' 'll tell you who we are,' said. ' e're the people you work with, Percy□ but not for very much longer.' reached out and clamped my hands on his shoulders. Not real hard; but it was a clamp, all right. Yes it was.

Percy reached up to break it. ' ake your - '

rutal grabbed his right hand - the whole thing, small and soft and white, disappeared into rutal's tanned fist. ' hut up your cakehole, sonny. f you know what's good for you, you'll take this one last opportunity to dig the wax out of your ears.'

turned him around, lifted him onto the platform, then backed him up until the backs of his knees struck the seat of the electric chair and he had to

sit down. is calm was gone; the meanness and the arrogance, too. hose things were real enough, but you have to remember that Percy was very young. t his age they were still only a thin veneer, like an ugly shade of enamel paint. You could still chip through. nd judged that Percy was now ready to listen.

' want your word,' said.

'My word about what?' is mouth was still trying to sneer, but his eyes were terrified. he power in the switch room was locked off, but Old

parky's wooden seat had its own power, and right then judged that Percy was feeling it.

'Your word that if we put you out front for it tomorrow night, you'll really go on to riar idge and leave us alone,' rutal said, speaking with a vehemence had never heard from him before. ' hat you'll put in for a transfer the very next day.'

' nd if won't? f should just call up certain people and tell them you're harassing me and threatening me? *Bullying* me?'

' e might get the bum's rush if your connections are as good as you seem to think they are,' said, 'but we'd make sure you left your fair share of blood on the floor, too, Percy.'

' bout that mouse? uh! You think anyone is going to care that stepped on a condemned murderer's pet mouse? Outside of this looneybin, that is?'

'No. ut three men saw you just standing there with your thumb up your ass while ild ill harton was trying to strangle ean tanton with his wrist-chains. bout that people *will* care, Percy, promise you. bout that even your offsides uncle the governor is going to care.'

Percy's cheeks and brow flushed a patchy red. 'You think they'd believe you?' he asked, but his voice had lost a lot of its angry force. learly *he* thought someone might believe us. nd Percy didn't like being in trouble.

reaking the rules was okay. etting caught breaking them was not.

' ell, 've got some photos of ean's neck before the bruising went down,' rutal said - had no idea if this was true or not, but it certainly sounded good. 'You know what those pix say? hat harton got a pretty good shot at it before anyone pulled him off, although you were right there, and on harton's blind side. You'd have some hard questions to answer, wouldn't you? nd a thing like that could follow a man for quite a spell.

hances are it'd still be there long after his relatives were out of the state capital and back home drinking mint juleps on the front porch. man's

work-record can be a mighty interesting thing, and a lot of people get a chance to look at it over the course of a lifetime.'

Percy's eyes flicked back and forth mistrustfully between us. is left hand went to his hair and smoothed it. e said nothing, but thought we almost had him.

' ome on, let's quit this,' said. 'You don't want to be here any more than we want you here, isn't that so?'

' hate it here!' he burst out. ' hate the way you treat me, the way you never gave me a chance!'

hat last was far from true, but judged this wasn't the time to argue the matter.

' ut don't like to be pushed around, either. My addy taught me that once you start down that road you most likely end up letting people push you around your whole life.' is eyes, not as pretty as his hands but almost, flashed. ' especially don't like being pushed around by big apes like this guy.' e glanced at my old friend and grunted. ' rutal - you got the right nickname, at least.'

'You have to understand something, Percy,' said. ' he way we look at it, you've been pushing us around. e keep telling you the way we do things around here and you keep doing things your own way, then hiding behind your political connections when things turn out wrong. tepping on

elacroix's mouse - ' rutal caught my eye and backtracked in a hurry. '*Trying* to step on elacroix's mouse is just a case in point. You push and push and push; we're finally pushing back, that's all. ut listen, if you do right, you'll come out of this looking good - like a young man on his way up

- and smelling like a rose. Nobody'll ever know about this little talk we're having. o what do you say? ct like a grownup. Promise you'll leave after

el.'

e thought it over. nd after a moment or two, a look came into his eyes, the sort of look a fellow gets when he's just had a good idea. didn't like it much, because any idea which seemed good to Percy wouldn't seem good to us.

' f nothing else,' rutal said, 'just think how nice it'd be to get away from that sack of pus harton.'

Percy nodded, and let him get out of the chair. e straightened his uniform shirt, tucked it in at the back, gave his hair a pass-through with his comb. hen he looked at us. 'Okay, agree. 'm out front for el tomorrow

night; 'll put in for riar idge the very next day. e call it quits right there. ood enough?'

' ood enough,' said. hat look was still in his eyes, but right then was too relieved to care.

e stuck out his hand. ' hake on it?'

did. o did rutal. More fools us.

# 4

he next day was the thickest yet, and the last of our strange October heat. hunder was rumbling in the west when came to work, and the dark clouds were beginning to stack up there. hey moved closer as the night came down, and we could see blue-white forks of lightning jabbing out of them. here was a tornado in rapingus ounty around ten that night - it killed four people and tore the roof off the livery stable in efton - and vicious thunderstorms and gale-force winds at old Mountain. Later it seemed to me as if the very heavens had protested the bad death of duard

elacroix.

verything went just fine to begin with. el had spent a quiet day in his cell, sometimes playing with Mr. Jingles but mostly just lying on his bunk and petting him. harton tried to get trouble started a couple of times - once he hollered down to el about the mousieburgers they were going to have after old Lucky Pierre was dancing the two-step in hell - but the little

ajun didn't respond and harton, apparently deciding that was his best shot, gave it up.

t quarter past ten, rother chuster showed up and delighted us all by saying he would recite the Lord's Prayer with el in ajun rench. t seemed like a good omen. n that we were wrong, of course.

he witnesses began to arrive around eleven, most talking in low tones about the impending weather, and speculating about the possibility of a power outage postponing the electrocution. None of them seemed to know that Old parky ran off a generator, and unless that took a direct lightning- hit, the show would go on. arry was in the switch room that night, so he and ill odge and Percy etmore acted as ushers, seeing folks into their seats and asking each one if he'd like a cold drink of water. here were two women present: the sister of the girl el had raped and murdered, and the

mother of one of the fire victims. he latter lady was large and pale and determined. he told arry erwilliger that she hoped the man she'd come to see was good and scared, that he knew the fires in the furnace were stoked for him, and that atan's imps, were waiting for him. hen she burst into tears and buried her face in a lace hanky that was almost the size of a pillowslip.

hunder, hardly muffled at all by the tin roof, banged harsh and loud. People glanced up uneasily. Men who looked uncomfortable wearing ties this late at night wiped at their florid cheeks. t was hotter than blue blazes in the storage shed. nd, of course, they kept turning their eyes to Old

parky. hey might have made jokes about this chore earlier in the week, but the jokes were gone by eleven-thirty or so that night. started all this by telling you that the humor went out of the situation in a hurry for the people who had to sit down in that oak chair, but the condemned prisoners weren't the only ones who lost the smiles off their faces when the time actually came. t just seemed so *bald,* somehow, squatting up there on its platform, with the clamps on the legs sticking off to either side, looking like the things a person with polio would have to wear. here wasn't much talk, and when the thunder boomed again, as sharp and personal as a splintering tree, the sister of elacroix's victim gave a little scream. he last person to take his seat in the witness's section was urtis nderson, arden Moores's stand-in.

t eleven-thirty, approached elacroix's cell with rutal and ean walking slightly behind me. el was sitting on his bunk, with Mr. Jingles in his lap. he mouse's head was stretched forward toward the condemned man, his little oilspot eyes rapt on el's face. el was stroking the top of Mr. Jingles's head between his ears. Large silent tears were rolling down

el's face, and it was these the mouse seemed to be peering at. el looked up at the sound of our footsteps. e was very pale. rom behind me, sensed rather than saw John offey standing at his cell door, watching.

el winced at the sound of my keys clashing against metal, but held steady, continuing to stroke Mr. Jingles's head, as turned the locks and ran the door open.

' i dere, oss dgecombe,' he said. ' i dere, boys. ay hi, Mr. Jingles.'

ut Mr. Jingles only continued to look raptly up at the balding little man's face, as if wondering at the source of his tears. he colored spool had been

neatly laid aside in the orona box - laid aside for the last time, thought, and felt a pang.

' duard elacroix, as an officer of the court□ ' ' oss dgecombe?'

thought about just running on with the set speech, then thought again. ' hat is it, el?'

e held the mouse out to me. ' ere. on't let nothing happen to Mr.

Jingles.'

' el, don't think he'll come to me. e's not - '

'*Mais oui*, he say he will. e say he know all about you, oss

dgecombe, and you gonna take him down to dat place in lorida where the mousies do their tricks. e say he trust you.' e held his hand out farther, and 'll be damned if the mouse didn't step off his palm and onto my shoulder. t was so light couldn't even feel it through my uniform coat, but

sensed it, like a small heat. ' nd boss? on't let that bad 'un near him again. on't let that bad 'un hurt my mouse.'

'No, el. won't.' he question was, what was supposed to do with him right then? couldn't very well march elacroix past the witnesses with a mouse perched on my shoulder.

' 'll take him, boss,' a voice rumbled from behind me. t was John

offey's voice, and it was eerie the way it came right then, as though he had read my mind. 'Just for now. f el don't mind.'

el nodded, relieved. 'Yeah, you take im, John, 'til dis foolishment done - *bien*! nd den after□ ' is gaze shifted back to rutal and me. 'You gonna take him down to lorida. o dat Mouseville Place.'

'Yeah, most likely Paul and will do it together,' rutal said, watching with a troubled and unquiet eye as Mr. Jingles stepped off my shoulder and into offey's huge outstretched palm. Mr. Jingles did this with no protest or attempt to run; indeed, he scampered as readily up John offey's arm as he had stepped onto my shoulder. ' e'll take some of our vacation time. on't we, Paul?'

nodded. el nodded, too, eyes bright, just a trace of a smile on his lips. 'People pay a dime apiece to see him. wo cents for the kiddies. in't dat right, oss, owell?'

' hat's right, el.'

'You a good man, oss owell,' el said. 'You, too, oss dgecombe. You yell at me sometimes, *oui*, but not 'less you have to. You all good men

except for dat Percy. wish coulda met you someplace else. *Mauvais temps, mauvaise chance.*

' got something to say to you, el,' told him. ' hey're just the words have to say to everyone before we walk. No big deal, but it's part of my job. Okay?'

*Oui, monsieur,* he said, and looked at Mr. Jingles, perched on John

offey's broad shoulder, for the last time. ' u *revoir, mon ami,* he said, beginning to cry harder. *le t aime, mon petit.* e blew the mouse a kiss. t should have been funny, that blown kiss, or maybe just grotesque, but it wasn't. met ean's eye for a moment, then had to look away. ean stared down the corridor toward the restraint room and smiled strangely believe he was on the verge of tears. s for me, said what had to say, beginning with the part about how was an officer of the court, and when was done,

elacroix stepped out of his cell for the last time.

' old on a second longer, hoss,' rutal said, and checked the crown of

el's head, where the cap would go. e nodded at me, then clapped el on the shoulder. ' ight with versharp. e're on our way.'

o duard elacroix took his last walk on the reen Mile with little streams of mingled sweat and tears running down his cheeks and big thunder rolling in the sky overhead. rutal walked on the condemned man's left, was on his right, ean was to the rear.

chuster was in my office, with guards inggold and attle standing in the corners and keeping watch. chuster looked up at el, smiled, and then addressed him in rench. t sounded stilted to me, but it worked wonders.

el smiled back, then went to chuster, put his arms around him, hugged him. inggold and attle tensed, but raised my hands to them and shook my head.

chuster listened to el's flood of tear-choked rench, nodded as if he understood perfectly, and patted him on the back. e looked at me over the little man's shoulder and said, ' hardly understand a quarter of what he's saying.'

' on't think it matters,' rutal rumbled.

'Neither do , son,' chuster said with a grin. e was the best of them, and now realize have no idea what became of him. hope he kept his faith, whatever else befell.

e urged elacroix onto his knees, then folded his hands. elacroix did the same.

*Not Pčre, qui ętes aux cieux,* chuster began, and elacroix joined him.

hey spoke the Lord's Prayer together in that liquid-sounding ajun rench, all the way to *mais déliverez-nous du mal, ainsi soit-il.* y then, el's tears had mostly stopped and he looked calm. ome ible verses (in nglish) followed, not neglecting the old standby about the still waters. hen that was done, chuster started to get up, but el held onto the sleeve of his shirt and said something in rench. chuster listened carefully, frowning.

e responded. el said something else, then just looked at him hopefully.

chuster turned to me and said: ' e's got something else, Mr.

dgecombe. prayer can't help him with, because of my faith. s it all right?'

looked at the clock on the wall and saw it was seventeen minutes to midnight. 'Yes,' said, 'but it'll have to be quick. e've got a schedule to keep here, you know.'

'Yes. do.' e turned to elacroix and gave him a nod.

el closed his eyes as if to pray, but for a moment said nothing. frown creased his forehead and had a sense of him reaching far back in his mind, as a man may search a small attic room for an object which hasn't been used (or needed) for a long, long time. glanced at the clock again and almost said something - would have, if rutal hadn't twitched my sleeve and shaken his head.

hen el began, speaking softly but quickly in that ajun which was as round and soft and sensual as a young woman's breast: *Marie! le vous salue, Marie, oui, pleine de grâce; le Seigneur est avec vous; vous ętes bénie entre toutes les femmes, et mon cher ésus, le fruit de vos entrailles, est béni.* e was crying again, but don't think he knew it. *Sainte Marie,O ma mere, Mčre de Dieu, priez pour moi, priez pour nous, pauv pécheurs, maint ant et ŕ l heure□ l heure de nôtre mort. L heure de mon mort.* e took a deep, shuddering breath. *Ainsi soit-il.*

Lightning spilled through the room's one window in a brief blue-white glare as elacroix got to his feet. veryone jumped and cringed except for

el himself; he still seemed lost in the old prayer. e reached out with one hand, not looking to see where it went. rutal took it and squeezed it briefly. elacroix looked at him and smiled a little. *Nous voyons -* he began, then stopped. ith a conscious effort, he switched back to nglish. ' e can go now, oss owell, oss dgecombe. 'm right wit od,'

' hat's good,' said, wondering how right with od el was going to feel twenty minutes from now, when he stood on the other side of the electricity.

hoped his last prayer had been heard, and that Mother Mary was praying for him with all her heart and soul, because duard elacroix, rapist and murderer, right then needed all the praying he could get his hands on. Outside, thunder bashed across the sky again. ' ome on, el. Not far now.'

' ine, boss, dat fine. ecause ain't ascairt no more.' o he said, but saw in his eyes that - Our ather or no Our ather, ail Mary or no ail Mary - he lied. y the time they cross the rest of the green carpet and duck through the little door, almost all of them are scared.

' top at the bottom, el,' told him in a low voice as he went through, but it was advice needn't have given him. e stopped at the foot of the stairs, all right, stopped cold, and what did it was the sight of Percy

etmore standing there on the platform, with the sponge-bucket by one foot and the phone that went to the governor just visible beyond his right hip.

*Non,* el said in a low, horrified voice. *Non, non,* not him!'

' alk on,' rutal said. 'You just keep your eyes on me and Paul. orget he's there at all.'

' ut - '

People had turned to look at us, but by moving my body a bit, could still grip elacroix's left elbow without being seen. ' teady,' said in a voice only el - and perhaps rutal - could hear. ' he only thing most of these people will remember about you is how you go out, so give them something good.'

he loudest crack of thunder yet broke overhead at that moment, loud enough to make the storage room's tin roof vibrate. Percy jumped as if someone had goosed him, and el gave a small, contemptuous snort of laughter. ' t get much louder dan dat, he gonna piddle in his pants again,' he said, and then squared his shoulders - not that he had much to square. ' ome on. Let's get it over.'

e walked to the platform. elacroix ran a nervous eye over the witnesses - about twenty-five of them this time - as we went, but rutal,

ean, and kept our own eyes trained on the chair. ll looked in order to me. raised one thumb and a questioning eyebrow to Percy, who gave a little one-sided grimace, as if to say *What do you mean, is everything all right? Of course it is.*

hoped he was right.

rutal and reached automatically for elacroix's elbows as he stepped up onto the platform. t's only eight or so inches up from the floor, but you'd be surprised how many of them, even the toughest of tough babies, need help to make that last step up of their lives.

el did okay, though. e stood in front of the chair for a moment (resolutely not looking at Percy), then actually spoke to it, as if introducing himself: *C est moi,* he said. Percy reached for him, but elacroix turned around on his own and sat down. knelt on what was now his left side, and

rutal knelt on his right. guarded my crotch and my throat in the manner have already described, then swung the clamp in so that its open jaws encircled the skinny white flesh just above the ajun's ankle. hunder bellowed and jumped. weat ran in my eye, stinging. Mouseville, kept thinking for some reason. Mouseville, and how it cost a dime to get in. wo cents for the kiddies, who would look at Mr. Jingles through his ivy-glass windows.

he clamp was balky, wouldn't shut. could hear el breathing in great dry pulls of air, lungs that would be charred bags less than four minutes from now laboring to keep up with his fear-driven heart. he fact that he had killed half a dozen people seemed at that moment the least important thing about him. 'm not trying to say anything about right and wrong here, but only to tell how it was.

ean knelt next to me and whispered, ' hat's wrong, Paul?'

' can't - ' began, and then the clamp closed with an audible snapping sound. t must have also pinched a fold of elacroixs skin in its jaws, because he flinched and made a little hissing noise. ' orry,' said.

' t okay, boss,' el said. ' t only gonna hurt for a minute.'

rutal's side had the clamp with the electrode in it, which always took a little longer, and so we stood up, all three of us, at almost exactly the same time. ean reached for the wrist-clamp on el's left, and Percy went to the one on his right. was ready to move forward if Percy should need help, but he did better with his wrist-clamp than 'd done with my ankle-clamp. could see el trembling all over now, as if a low current were already passing through him. could smell his sweat, too. t was sour and strong and reminded me of weak pickle juice.

ean nodded to Percy. Percy turned back over his shoulder - could see a place just under the angle of his jaw where he'd cut himself shaving that day

- and said in a low, firm voice: ' oll on one!'

here was a hum, sort of like the sound an old refrigerator makes when it kicks on, and the hanging lights in the storage room brightened. here were a few low gasps and murmurs from the audience. el jerked in the chair, his hands gripping the ends of the oak arms hard enough to turn the knuckles white. is eyes rolled rapidly from side to side in their sockets, and his dry breathing quickened even more. e was almost panting now.

' teady,' rutal murmured. ' teady, el, you're doing just fine. ang on, you're doing just fine.'

*ey you guys!* thought. *Come and see what Mr. ingles can do!* nd overhead, the thunder banged again.

Percy stepped grandly around to the front of the electric chain his was his big moment, he was at center stage, all eyes were on him. ll, that was, but for one set. elacroix saw who it was and looked down at his lap instead. would have bet you a dollar to a doughnut that Percy would flub his lines when he actually had to say them for an audience, but he reeled them off without a hitch, in an eerily calm voice.

' duard elacroix, you have been condemned to die in the electric chair, sentence passed by a jury of your peers and imposed by a judge of good standing in this state, od save the people of this state. o you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?'

el tried to speak and at first nothing came out but a terrified whisper full of air and vowel-sounds. he shadow of a contemptuous smile touched the corners of Percy's lips, and could have cheerfully shot him right there.

hen el licked his lips and tried again.

' sorry for what do,' he said. ' give anything to turn back the clock, but no one can. o now - ' hunder exploded like an airburst mortar shell above us. el jumped as much as the clamps would allow, eyes starting wildly out of his wet face. ' o now pay the price. od forgive me.' e licked his lips again, and looked at rutal. ' on't forget your promise about Mr. Jingles,' he said in a lower voice that was meant just for us.

' e won't, don't worry,' said, and patted elacroix's clay-cold hand. ' e's going to Mouseville - '

' he hell he is' ' Percy said, speaking from the corner of his mouth like a yardwise con as he hooked the restraining belt across elacroix's chest. ' here's no such place. t's a fairy-tale these guys made up to keep you quiet. Just thought you should know, faggot.'

stricken light in el's eyes told me that part of him *had* known□ but would have kept the knowledge from the rest of him, if allowed. looked at Percy, dumbfounded and furious, and he looked back at me levelly, as if to ask what meant to do about it. nd he had me, of course. here was nothing *could* do about it, not in front of the witnesses, not with elacroix now sitting on the furthest edge of life. here was nothing to do now but go on with it, finish it.

Percy took the mask from its hook and rolled it down over el's face, snugging it tight under the little man's undershot chin so as to stretch the hole in the top. aking the sponge from the bucket and putting it in the cap was the next, and it was here that Percy diverged from the routine for the first time: instead of just bending over and fishing the sponge out, he took the steel cap from the back of the chair, and bent over with it in his hands.

nstead of bringing the sponge to the cap, in other words - which would have been the natural way to do it - he brought the cap to the sponge. should have realized something was wrong, but was too upset. t was the only execution ever took part in where felt totally out of control. s for

rutal, he never looked at Percy at all, not as Percy bent over the bucket (moving so as to partially block what he was doing from our view), not as he straightened up and turned to el with the cap in his hands and the brown circle of sponge already inside it. rutal was looking at the cloth which had replaced el's face, watching the way the black silk mask drew in, outlining the circle of el's open mouth, and then puffed out again with his breath. here were big beads of perspiration on rutal's forehead, and at his temples, just below the hairline. had never seen him sweat at an execution before. ehind him, ean looked distracted and , as if he was fighting not to lose his supper. e all understood that something was wrong, know that now. e just couldn't tell what it was. No one knew - not then - about the questions Percy had been asking Jack an ay. here were a lot of them, but suspect most were just camouflage. hat Percy wanted to know about - the *only* thing Percy wanted to know about, believe - was the sponge. he purpose of the sponge. hy it was soaked in brine□ and what would happen if it was not soaked in brine.

hat would happen if the sponge was dry.

Percy jammed the cap down on el's head. he little man jumped and moaned again, this time louder. ome of the witnesses stirred uneasily on their folding chairs. ean took a half-step forward, meaning to help with

the chin-strap, and Percy motioned him curtly to step back. ean did, hunching a little and wincing as another blast of thunder shook the storage shed. his time it was followed by the first spatters of rain across the roof.

hey sounded hard, like someone flinging handfuls of goobers onto a washboard.

You've heard people say "My blood ran cold" about things, haven't you?

ure. ll of us have, but the only time in all my years that actually felt it happen to me was on that new and thunderstruck morning in October of

93 , at about ten seconds past midnight. t wasn't the look of poison triumph on Percy etmore's face as he stepped away from the capped, clamped, and hooded figure sitting there in Old parky; it was what should have seen and didn't. here was no water running down el's cheeks from out of the cap. hat was when finally got it.

' dward elacroix,' Percy was saying, 'electricity shall now be passed through your body until you are dead, according to state law.'

looked over at rutal in an agony that made my urinary infection seem like a bumped finger *The sponge is dry!* mouthed at him, but he only shook his head, not understanding, and looked back at the mask over the

renchman's face, where the man's last few breaths were pulling the black silk in and then blousing it out again.

reached for Percy's elbow and he stepped away from me, giving me a flat look as he did so. t was only a momentary glance, but it told me everything. Later he would tell his lies and his half-truths, and most would be believed by the people who mattered, but knew a different story. Percy was a good student when he was doing something he cared about, we'd found that out at the rehearsals, and he had listened carefully when Jack

an ay explained how the brine-soaked sponge conducted the juice, channelling it, turning the charge into a kind of electric bullet to the brain. Oh yes, Percy knew exactly what he was doing. think believed him later when he said didn't know how far it would go, but that doesn't even count in the good-intentions column, does it? don't think so. Yet, short of screaming in front of the assistant warden and all the witnesses for Jack an

ay not to pull the switch, there was nothing could do. iven another five seconds, think might have screamed just that, but Percy didn't give me another five seconds.

'May od have mercy on your soul,' he told the panting, terrified figure in the electric chair, then looked past him at the mesh-covered rectangle

where arry and Jack were standing, Jack with his hand on the switch marked mabel's hair drier. he doctor was standing to the right of that window, eyes fixed on the black bag between his feet, as silent and self- effacing as ever. ' oll on two!'

t first it was the same as always - the humming that was a little louder than the original cycle-up, but not much, and the mindless forward surge of

el's body as his muscles spasmed.

hen things started going wrong.

he humming lost its steadiness and began to waver. t was joined by a crackling sound, like cellophane being crinkled. could smell something horrible that didn't identify as a mixture of burning hair and organic sponge until saw blue tendrils of smoke curling out from beneath the edges of the cap. More smoke was streaming out of the hole in the top of the cap that the wire came in through; it looked like smoke coming out of the hole in an ndian's teepee.

elacroix began to jitter and twist in the chair, his mask-covered face snapping from side to side as if in some vehement refusal. is legs began to piston up and down in short strokes that were hampered by the clamps on his ankles. hunder banged overhead, and now the rain began to pour down harder.

looked at ean tanton; he stared wildly back. here was a muffled pop from under the cap, like a pine knot exploding in a hot fire, and now could see smoke coming through the mask, as well, seeping out in little curls.

lunged toward the mesh between us and the switch room, but before could open my mouth, rutus owell seized my elbow. is grip was hard enough to make the nerves in there tingle. e was as white as tallow but not in a panic - not even close to being in a panic. ' on't you tell Jack to stop,' he said in a low voice. ' hatever you do, don't tell him that. t's too late to stop.'

t first, when el began to scream, the witnesses didn't hear him. he rain on the tin roof had swelled to a roar, and the thunder was damned near continuous. ut those of us on the platform heard him, all right - choked howls of pain from beneath the smoking mask, sounds an animal caught and mangled in a hay-baler might make.

he hum from the cap was ragged and wild now, broken by bursts of what sounded like radio static. elacroix began to slam back and forth in the chair like a kid doing a tantrum. he platform shook, and he hit the

leather restraining belt almost hard enough to pop it. he current was also twisting him from side to side, and heard the crunching snap as his right shoulder either broke or dislocated. t went with a sound like someone hitting a wooden crate with a sledgehammer. he crotch of his pants, no more than a blur because of the short pistoning strokes of his legs, darkened. hen he began to squeal, horrible sounds, high-pitched and ratlike, that were audible even over the rushing downpour.

' hat the hell's happening to him?' someone cried. ' re those clamps going to hold?'

' hrist, the *smell!* Phew!'

hen, one of the two women: ' s this normal?'

elacroix snapped forward, dropped back, snapped forward, fell back. Percy was staring at him with slack-jawed horror. e had expected *something,* sure, but not this.

he mask burst into flame on elacroix's face. he smell of cooking hair and sponge was now joined by the smell of cooking flesh. rutal grabbed the bucket the sponge had been in - it was empty now, of course - and charged for the extra-deep janitor's sink in the corner.

' houldn't kill the juice, Paul?' an ay called through the mesh. e sounded completely rattled. ' houldn't - '

'No!' shouted back. rutal had understood it first, but hadn't been far behind: we had to finish it. hatever else we might do in all the rest of our lives was secondary to that one thing: we had to finish with elacroix. ' oll, for hrist's sake! oll, roll, roll!'

turned to rutal, hardly aware of the people talking behind us now, some on their feet, a couple screaming. *uit that!* yelled at rutal. *No water!* No *water! Are you nuts?*

rutal turned toward me, a kind of dazed understanding on his face.

hrow water on a man who was getting the juice. Oh yes. hat would be very smart. e looked around, saw the chemical fire extinguisher hanging on the wall, and got that instead. ood boy.

he mask had peeled away from elacroix's face enough to reveal features that had gone blacker than John offey's. is eyes, now nothing but misshapen globs of white, filmy jelly, had been blown out of their sockets and lay on his cheeks. is eyelashes were gone, and as looked, the lids themselves caught fire and began to burn. moke puffed from the open

of his shirt. nd still the humming of the electricity went on and on,

filling my head, vibrating in there. think it's the sound mad people must hear, that or something like it.

ean started forward, thinking in some dazed way that he could beat the fire out of el's shirt with his hands, and yanked him away almost hard enough to pull him off his feet. ouching elacroix at that point would have been like rer abbit punching into the ar- aby. n electrified ar- aby, in this case.

still didn't turn around to see what was going on behind us, but it sounded like pandemonium, chairs falling over, people bellowing, a woman crying *Stop it, stop it, oh can t you see he s had enough?* at the top of her lungs. urtis nderson grabbed my shoulder and asked what was happening, for hrist's sake, what was happening, and why didn't order jack to shut down?

' ecause can't,' said. ' e've gone too far to turn back, can't you see that? t'll be over in a few more seconds, anyway.'

ut it was at least two minutes before it was over, the longest two minutes of my whole life, and through most of it think elacroix was conscious. e screamed and jittered and rocked from side to side. moke poured from his nostrils and from a mouth that had gone the purple-black of ripe plums. moke drifted up from his tongue the way smoke rises from a hot griddle. ll the buttons on his shirt either burst or melted. is undershirt did not quite catch fire, but it charred and smoke poured through it and we could smell his chest-hair roasting. ehind us, people were heading for the door like cattle in a stampede. hey couldn't get out through it, of course - we were in a damn prison, after all - so they simply clustered around it while elacroix fried *Now m fryin,* Old oot had said when we were rehearsing for rlen itterbuck, *m a done tom turkey)* and the thunder rolled and the rain ran down out of the sky in a perfect fury.

t some point thought of the doc and looked around for him. e was still there, but crumpled on the floor beside his black bag. e'd fainted.

rutal came up and stood beside me, holding the fire extinguisher. 'Not yet,' said.

' know.'

e looked around for Percy and saw him standing almost behind parky now, frozen, eyes huge, one knuckle crammed into his mouth.

hen, at last, elacroix slumped back in the chair, his bulging, misshapen face lying over on one shoulder. e was still jittering, but we'd seen this

before; it was the current running through him. he cap had come askew on his head, but when we took it off a little later, most of his scalp and his remaining fringe of hair came with it, bonded to the metal as if by some powerful adhesive.

'Kill it!' called to Jack when thirty seconds had gone by with nothing but electric jitters coming from the smoking, man-shaped lump of charcoal lolling in the electric chair. he hum died immediately, and nodded to

rutal.

e turned and slammed the fire extinguisher into Percy's arms so hard that Percy staggered backward and almost fell off the platform. 'You do it,'

rutal said. 'You're running the show, after all, ain't you?'

Percy gave him a look that was both sick and murderous, then armed the extinguisher, pumped it, cocked it, and shot a huge cloud of white foam over the man in the chair. saw el's foot twitch once as the spray hit his face and thought *Oh no, we might have to go again,* but there was only that single twitch.

nderson had turned around and was bawling at the panicky witnesses, telling them everything was all right, everything was under control, just a powersurge from the electrical storm, nothing to worry about. Next thing, he'd be telling them that what they smelled - a devil's mixture of burned hair, fried meat, and fresh-baked shit - was hanel No. .

' et doc's stethoscope,' told ean as the extinguisher ran dry. elacroix was coated with white now, and the worst of the stench was being overlaid by a thin and bitter chemical smell.

' oc□ should □ '

'Never mind doc, just get his stethoscope,' said. 'Let's get this over□ get him out of here.'

ean nodded. *Over* and *out of here* were two concepts that appealed to him just then. hey appealed to both of us. e went over to doc's bag and began rummaging in it. oc was beginning to move again, so at least he hadn't had a stroke or a heart-storm. hat was good. ut the way rutal was looking at Percy wasn't.

' et down in the tunnel and wait by the gurney,' said. Percy swallowed. 'Paul, listen. didn't know - '

' hut up. et down in the tunnel and wait by the gurney. Now.'

e swallowed, grimaced as if it hurt, and then walked toward the door which led to the stairs and the tunnel. e carried the empty fire extinguisher in his arms, as if it were a baby ean passed him, coming back to me with the stethoscope. snatched it and set the earpieces. 'd done this before, in the army, and it's sort of like riding a bike - you don't forget.

wiped at the foam on elacroix's chest, then had to gag back vomit as a large, hot section of his skin simply slid away from the flesh beneath, the way the skin will slide off a□ well, you know. done tom turkey.

'Oh my od'' a voice didn't recognize almost sobbed behind me. ' s it always this way? hy didn't somebody tell me? never would have come!'

*Too late now, friend,* thought. ' et that man out of here,' said to ean or rutal or whoever might be listening - said it when was sure could speak without puking into elacroix's smoking lap. ' et them all back by the door.'

steeled myself as best could, then put the disc of the stethoscope on the red-black patch of raw flesh 'd made on el's chest. listened, praying would hear nothing, and that's just what did hear.

' e's dead,' told rutal. ' hank hrist.'

'Yes. hank hrist. You and ean get the stretcher. Let's unbuckle him and get him out of here, fast.'

# 5

e got his body down the twelve stairs and onto the gurney all right. My nightmare was that his cooked flesh might slough right off his bones as we lugged him - it was Old oot's done tom turkey that had gotten into my head - but of course that didn't happen.

urtis nderson was upstairs soothing the spectators - trying to, anyway

- and that was good for rutal, because nderson wasn't there to see when

rutal took a step toward the head of the gurney and pulled his arm back to slug Percy, who was standing there looking stunned. caught his arm, and that was good for both of them. t was good for Percy because rutal meant to deliver a blow of near-decapitory force, and good for rutal because he would have lost his job if the blow had connected, and maybe ended up in prison himself.

'No,' said.

' hat do you mean, no?' he asked me furiously. ' ow can you say no? You saw what he did! hat are you telling me? hat you're still going to let his *connections* protect him? fter what he *did*?'

rutal stared at me, mouth agape, eyes so angry they were watering. 'Listen to me, rutus - you take a poke at him, and most likely we all go.

You, me, ean, arry, maybe even Jack an ay. veryone else moves a rung or two up the ladder, starting with ill odge, and the Prison

ommission hires three or four readline arneys to fill the spots at the bottom. Maybe you can live with that, but - ' cocked my thumb at ean, who was staring down the dripping, brick-lined tunnel. e was holding his specs in one hand, and looked almost as dazed as Percy. ' ut what about

ean? e's got two kids, one in high school and one just about to go.'

' o what's it come down to?' rutal asked. ' e let him get away with it?' ' didn't know the sponge was supposed to be wet,' Percy said in a faint,

mechanical voice. his was the story he had rehearsed beforehand, of course, when he was expecting a painful prank instead of the cataclysm we had just witnessed. ' t was never wet when we rehearsed.'

' w, you sucker - ' rutal began, and started for Percy. grabbed him again and yanked him back. ootsteps clacked on the steps. looked up, desperately afraid of seeing urtis nderson, but it was arry erwilliger.

is cheeks were paper-white and his lips were purplish, as if he'd been eating blackberry cobbler.

switched my attention back to rutal. ' or od's sake, rutal,

elacroix's *dead*, nothing can change that, and Percy's not worth it.' as the plan, or the beginnings of it, in my head even then? 've wondered about that since, let me tell you. 've wondered over the course of a lot of years, and have never been able to come up with a satisfactory answer. suppose it doesn't matter much. lot of things don't matter, but it doesn't keep a man from wondering about them, 've noticed.

'You guys talk about me like was a chump,' Percy said. e still sounded dazed and winded - as if someone had punched him deep in the gut - but he was coming back a little.

'You *are* a chump, Percy,' said. ' ey, you can't - '

controlled my own urge to hit him only with the greatest effort. ater dripped hollowly from the bricks down in the tunnel; our shadows danced

huge and misshapen on the walls, like shadows in that Poe story about the big ape in the ue Morgue. hunder bashed, but down here it was muffled.

' only want to hear one thing from you, Percy, and that's you repeating your promise to put in for riar idge tomorrow.'

' on't worry about that,' he said sullenly. e looked at the sheeted figure on the gurney, looked away, flicked his eyes up toward my face for a moment, then looked away again.

' hat *would* be for the best,' arry said. 'Otherwise, you might get to know ild ill harton a whole lot better than you want to.' slight pause. ' e could see to it.'

Percy was afraid of us, and he was probably afraid of what we might do if he was still around when we found out he'd been talking to Jack an ay about what the sponge was for and why we always soaked it in brine, but

arry's mention of harton woke real terror in his eyes. could see him remembering how harton had held him, ruffling his hair and crooning to him.

'You wouldn't dare,' Percy whispered.

'Yes would,' arry replied calmly. ' nd do you know what? 'd get away with it. ecause you've already shown yourself to be careless as hell around the prisoners. ncompetent, too.'

Percy's fists bunched and his cheeks colored in a thin pink. ' am not - '

' ure you are,' ean said, joining us. e formed a rough semicircle around Percy at the foot of the stairs, and even a retreat up the tunnel was blocked; the gurney was behind him, with its load of smoking flesh hidden under an old sheet. 'You just burned elacroix alive. f that ain't incompetent, what is?'

Percy's eyes flickered. e had been planning to cover himself by pleading ignorance, and now he saw he was hoist by his own petard. don't know what he might have said next, because urtis nderson came lunging down the stairs just then.

e heard him and drew back from Percy a little, so as not to look quite so threatening.

' hat in the blue fuck was *that* all about? nderson roared. 'Jesus hrist, there's puke all over the floor up there! nd the smell! got Magnusson and Old oot- oot to open both doors, but that smell won't come out for five damn years, that's what 'm betting. nd that asshole harton is *singing* about it! can hear him!'

' an he carry a tune, urt?' rutal asked. You know how you can bum off illuminating gas with a single spark and not be hurt if you do it before the concentration gets too heavy? his was like that. e took an instant to gape at rutus, and then we were all howling. Our high, hysterical laughter flapped up and down the gloomy tunnel like bats. Our shadows bobbed and flickered on the walls. Near the end, even Percy joined in. t last it died, and in its aftermath we all felt a little better. elt *sane* again.

'Okay, boys,' nderson said, mopping at his teary eyes with his handkerchief and still snorting out an occasional hiccup of laughter, 'what the hell happened?'

' n execution,' rutal said. think his even tone surprised nderson, but it didn't surprise me, at least not much; rutal had always been good at turning down his dials in a hurry. ' successful one.'

' ow in the name of hrist can you call a direct-current abortion like that a success? e've got witnesses that won't sleep for a month! ell, that fat old broad probably won't sleep for a year!'

rutal pointed at the gurney, and the shape under the sheet. ' e's dead, ain't he? s for your witnesses, most of them will be telling their friends tomorrow night that it was poetic justice - el there burned a bunch of people alive, so we turned around and burned *him* alive. xcept they won't say it was us. hey'll say it was the will of od, working *through us.* Maybe there's even some truth to that. nd you want to know the best part? he absolute cat's pajamas? Most of their friends will wish they'd been here to see it.' e gave Percy a look both distasteful and sardonic as he said this last.

' nd if their feathers are a little ruffled, so what?' arry asked. ' hey volunteered for the damn job, nobody drafted them.'

' didn't know the sponge was supposed to be wet,' Percy said in his robot's voice. ' t's never wet in rehearsal.'

ean looked at him with utter disgust. ' ow many years did you spend pissing on the toilet seat before someone told you to put it up before you start?' he snarled.

Percy opened his mouth to reply, but told him to shut up. or a wonder, he did. turned to nderson.

'Percy fucked up, urtis - that's what happened, pure and simple.' turned toward Percy, daring him to contradict me. e didn't, maybe because he read my eyes: better that nderson hear *stupid mistake* than *on purpose.*

nd besides, whatever was said down here in the tunnel didn't matter. hat mattered, what always matters to the Percy etmores of the world, is what gets written down or overheard by the big bugs - the people who matter.

hat matters to the Percys of the world is how it plays in the newspapers.

nderson looked at the five of us uncertainly. e even looked at el, but

el wasn't talking. ' guess it could be worse,' nderson said. ' hat's right,' agreed. ' e could still be alive.'

urtis blinked - that possibility seemed not to have crossed his mind. ' want a complete report about this on my desk tomorrow,' he said. ' nd none of you are going to talk to arden Moores about it until 've had my chance. re you?'

e shook our heads vehemently. f urtis nderson wanted to tell the warden, why, that was fine by us.

' f none of those asshole scribblers put it in their papers - '

' hey won't,' said. ' f they tried, their editors'd kill it. oo gruesome for a family audience. ut they won't even try - they were all vets tonight.

ometimes things go wrong, that's all. hey know it as well as we do.'

nderson considered a moment longer, then nodded. e turned his attention to Percy, an expression of disgust on his usually pleasant face. 'You're a little asshole,' he said, 'and don't like you a bit.' e nodded at Percy's look of flabbergasted surprise. ' f you tell any of your candy-ass friends said that, 'll deny it until unt hody's old gray goose comes back to life, and these men will back me up. You've got a problem, son.'

e turned and started up the stairs. let him get four steps and then said: ' urtis?'

e turned back, eyebrows raised, saying nothing.

'You don't want to worry too much about Percy,' said. ' e's moving on to riar idge soon. igger and better things. sn't that right, Percy?'

' s soon as his transfer comes through,' rutal added.

' nd until it comes, he's going to call in sick every night,' ean put in.

hat roused Percy, who hadn't been working at the prison long enough to have accumulated any paid sick-time. e looked at ean with bright distaste. ' on't you *wish*,' he said.

# 6

e were back on the block by one-fifteen or so (except for Percy, who had been ordered to clean up the storage room and was sulking his way through the job), me with a report to write. decided to do it at the duty desk; if sat in my more comfortable office chair, 'd likely doze off. hat probably sounds peculiar to you, given what had happened only an hour before' but felt as if 'd lived three lifetimes since eleven o'clock the previous night, all of them without sleep.

John offey was standing at his cell door, tears streaming from his strange, distant eyes - it was like watching blood run out of some unhealable but strangely painless wound. loser to the desk, harton was sitting on his bunk, rocking from side to side, and singing a song apparently of his own invention, and not quite nonsense. s well as can remember, it went something like this:

' ar-be-cue! Me and you!

tinky, pinky, phew-phew-phew!

t wasn't illy or Philadelphia Philly, it wasn't Jackie or oy!

t was a warm little number, a hot cucumber, by the name of elacroix!'

' hut up, you jerk,' said.

harton grinned, showing his mouthful of dingy teeth. *e* wasn't dying, at least not yet; he was up, happy, practically tap-dancing. ' ome on in here and make me, why don't you?' he said happily, and then began another verse of ' he arbecue ong,' making up words not quite at random. here was something going on in there, all right. kind of green and stinking intelligence that was, in its own way, almost brilliant.

went down to John offey. e wiped away his tears with the heels of his hands. is eyes were red and sore-looking, and it came to me that he was exhausted, too. hy he should have been, a man who trudged around the exercise yard maybe two hours a day and either sat or laid down in his cell the rest of the time, didn't know, but didn't doubt what was seeing.

t was too clear.

'Poor el,' he said in a low, hoarse voice. 'Poor old el.' 'Yes,' said. 'Poor old el. John, are *you* okay?'

' e's out of it,' offey said. ' el's out of it. sn't he, boss?'

'Yes. nswer my question, John. re you okay?'

' el's out of it, he's the lucky one. No matter how it happened, he's the lucky one.'

thought elacroix might have given him an argument on that, but didn't say so. glanced around offey's cell, instead. ' here's Mr. Jingles?'

' an down there.' e pointed through the bars, down the hall to the restraint-room door.

nodded. ' ell, he'll be back.'

ut he wasn't; Mr. Jingles's days on the reen Mile were over. he only trace of him we ever happened on was what rutal found that winter: a few brightly colored splinters of wood, and a smell of peppermint candy wafting out of a hole in a beam.

meant to walk away then, but didn't. looked at John offey, and he back at me as if he knew everything was thinking. told myself to get moving, to just call it a night and get moving, back to the duty desk and my report. nstead said his name: 'John offey.'

'Yes, boss,' he said at once.

ometimes a man is cursed with needing to know a thing, and that was how it was with me right then. dropped down on one knee and began taking off one of my shoes.

# 7

he rain had quit by the time got home, and a late grin of moon had appeared over the ridges to the north. My sleepiness seemed to have gone with the clouds. was wide awake, and could smell elacroix on me. thought might smell him on my skin - barbecue, me and you, stinky, pinky, phew-phew-phew - for a long time to come.

Janice was waiting up, as she always did on execution nights. meant not to tell her the story, saw no sense in harrowing her with it, but she got a clear look at my face as came in the kitchen door and would have it all. o

sat down, took her warm hands in my cold ones (the heater in my old ord barely worked, and the weather had turned a hundred and eighty degrees since the storm), and told her what she thought she wanted to hear. bout halfway through broke down crying, which hadn't expected. was a little ashamed, but only a little; it was her, you see, and she never taxed me with the times that slipped from the way thought a man should be□ the way

thought should be, at any rate. man with a good wife is the luckiest of

od's creatures, and one without must be among the most miserable, think, the only true blessing of their lives that they don't know how poorly off they are. cried, and she held my head against her breast, and when my own storm passed, felt better□ a little, anyway. nd believe that was when had the first conscious sight of my idea. Not the shoe; don't mean that. he shoe was related, but different. ll my *real* idea was right then, however, was an odd realization: that John offey and Melinda Moores, different as they might have been in size and sex and skin color, had exactly the same eyes: woeful, sad, and distant. ying eyes.

' ome to bed,' my wife said at last. ' ome to bed with me, Paul.'

o did, and we made love, and when it was over she went to sleep. s lay there watching the moon grin and listening to the walls tick - they were at last pulling in, exchanging summer for fall - thought about John offey saying he had helped it. *helped Del s mouse. helped Mr. ingles. e s a circus mouse.* ure. nd maybe, thought, we were all circus mice, running around with only the dimmest awareness that od and all is heavenly host were watching us in our akelite houses through our ivy-glass windows.

slept a little as the day began to lighten - two hours, guess, maybe three; and slept the way always sleep these days here in eorgia Pines and hardly ever did then, in thin little licks. hat went to sleep thinking about was the churches youth. he names changed, depending on the whims of my mother and her sisters, but they were all really the same, all

he irst ackwoods hurch of Praise Jesus, he Lord s Mighty. n the shadow of those blunt, square steeples, the concept of atonement came up as regularly as the toll of the bell which called the faithful to worship. Only

od could forgive sins, could and did, washing them away in the agonal blood of is crucified on, but that did not change the responsibility of is children to atone for those sins (and even their simple errors of judgement) whenever possible. tonement was powerful; it was the lock on the door you closed against the past.

fell asleep thinking of piney-woods atonement, and duard elacroix on fire as he rode the lightning, and Melinda Moores, and my big boy with the endlessly weeping eyes. hese thoughts twisted their way into a dream.

n it, John offey was sitting on a riverbank and bawling his inarticulate mooncalf's grief up at the early-summer sky while on the other bank a freight-train stormed endlessly toward a rusty trestle spanning the

rapingus. n the crook of each arm the black man held the body of a naked, blonde-haired girlchild. is fists, huge brown rocks at the ends of those arms' were closed. ll around him crickets chirred and noseeums flocked; the day hummed with heat. n my dream went to him, knelt before him, and took his hands. is fists relaxed and gave up their secrets.

n one was a spool colored green and red and yellow. n the other was a prison guard's shoe.

' couldn't help it,' John offey said. ' tried to take it back, but it was too late.'

nd this time, in my dream, understood him.

# 8

t nine o'clock the next morning, while was having a third cup of coffee in the kitchen (my wife said nothing, but could see disapproval large on her face when she brought it to me), the telephone rang. went into the parlor to take it, and entral told someone that their party was holding the line. he then told me to have a birdlarky day and rang off□ presumably.

ith entral, you could never quite tell for sure.

al Moores's voice shocked me. avery and hoarse, it sounded like the voice of an octogenarian. t occurred to me that it was good that things had gone all right with urtis nderson in the tunnel last night, good that he felt about the same as we did about Percy, because this man was talking to would very likely never work another day at old Mountain.

'Paul, understand there was trouble last night. also understand that our friend Mr. etmore war, involved.'

' spot of trouble,' admitted, holding the receiver tight to my ear and leaning in toward the horn, 'but the job got done. hat's the important thing.'

'Yes. Of course.'

' an ask who told you?' o can tie a can to his tail? didn't add.

'You can ask, but since it's really none of your beeswax, think 'll keep my mouth shut on that score. ut when called my office to see if there were any messages or urgent business, was told an interesting thing.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. eems a transferral application landed in my basket. Percy etmore wants to go to riar idge as soon as possible. Must have filled out the application even before last night's shift was over, wouldn't you think?'

' t sounds that way,' agreed.

'Ordinarily 'd let urtis handle it, but considering the□ atmosphere on

lock just lately, asked annah to run it over to me personally on her lunch hour. he has graciously agreed to do so. 'll approve it and see it's forwarded on to the state capital this afternoon. expect you'll get a look at Percy's backside going out the door in no more than a month. Maybe less.'

e expected me to be pleased with this news, and had a right to expect it.

e had taken time out from tending his wife to expedite a matter that might otherwise have taken upwards of half a year, even with Percy's vaunted connections. Nevertheless, my heart sank. month! ut maybe it didn't matter much, one way or the other. t removed a perfectly natural desire to wait and put off a risky endeavor, and what was now thinking about would be very risky indeed. ometimes, when that's the case, it's better to jump before you can lose your nerve. f we were going to have to deal with Percy in any case (always assuming could get the others to go along with my insanity - always assuming there was a we, in other words), it might as well be tonight.

'Paul? re you there?' is voice lowered a little, as if he thought he was now talking to himself. ' amn, think lost the connection.'

'No, 'm here, al. hat's great news.'

'Yes,' he agreed, and was again struck by how old he sounded. ow

*papery*, somehow. 'Oh, know what you're thinking.'

No, you don't, arden, thought. Never in a million years could you know what 'm thinking.

'You're thinking that our young friend will still be around for the offey execution. hat's probably true - offey will go well before hanksgiving, imagine - but you can put him back in the switch room. No one will object.

ncluding him, should think.'

' 'll do that,' said. ' al, how's Melinda?'

here was a long pause so long might have thought *d* lost *him*, except for the sound of his breathing. hen he spoke this time, it was in a much lower tone of voice. ' he's sinking,' he said.

inking. hat chilly word the old-timers used not to describe a person who was dying, exactly, but one who had begun to uncouple from living.

' he headaches seem a little better□ for now, anyway□ but she can't walk without help, she can't pick things up, she loses control of her water while

she sleeps□ ' here was another pause, and then, in an even lower voice,

al said something that sounded like ' he wears.'

' ears what, al?' asked, frowning. My wife had come into the parlor doorway. he stood there wiping her hands on a dishtowel and looking at me.

'No,' he said in a voice that seemed to waver between anger and tears. ' he *swears*.'

'Oh.' still didn't know what he meant, but had no intention of pursuing it. didn't have to; he did it for me.

' he'll be all right, perfectly normal, talking about her flower-garden or a dress she saw in the catalogue, or maybe about how she heard oosevelt on the radio and how wonderful he sounds, and then, all at once, she'll start to say the most awful things, the most awful□ words. he doesn't raise her voice. t would almost be better if she did, think, because then□ you see, *then□*

' he wouldn't sound so much like herself.'

' hat's it,' he said gratefully. ' ut to hear her saying those awful gutter- language things in her sweet voice□ pardon me, Paul.' is voice trailed away and heard him noisily clearing his throat. hen he came back, sounding a little stronger but just as distressed. ' he wants to have Pastor

onaldson over, and know he's a comfort to her, but how can ask him?

uppose that he's sitting there, reading cripture with her, and she calls him a foul name? he could; she called me one last night. he said, ' and me that *Liberty* magazine, you cocksucker, would you?' Paul, where could she have ever heard such language? ow could she know those words?'

' don't know. al, are you going to be home this evening?'

hen he was well and in charge of himself, not distracted by worry or grief, al Moores had a cutting and sarcastic facet to his personality; his subordinates feared that side of him even more than his anger or his contempt, think. is sarcasm, usually impatient and often harsh, could sting like acid. little of that now splashed on me. t was unexpected, but on the whole was glad to hear it. ll the fight hadn't gone out of him after all, it seemed.

'No,' he said, ' 'm taking Melinda out square-dancing. e're going to do- si-do, allemand left, and then tell the fiddler he's a rooster-dick motherfucker.'

clapped my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing. Mercifully, it was an urge that passed in a hurry.

' 'm sorry,' he said. ' haven't been getting much sleep lately. t's made me grouchy. Of course we're going to be home. hy do you ask?'

' t doesn't matter, guess,' said.

'You weren't thinking of coming by, were you?

ecause if you were on last night, you'll be on tonight. nless you've switched with somebody?'

'No, haven't switched,' said. ' 'm on tonight.'

' t wouldn't be a good idea, anyway. Not the way she is right now.' 'Maybe not. hanks for your news.'

'You're welcome. Pray for my Melinda, Paul.'

said would, thinking that might do quite a bit more than pray. od helps those who help themselves, as they say in he hurch of Praise Jesus,

he Lord s Mighty. hung up and looked at Janice. ' ow's Melly?' she asked.

'Not good.' told her what al had told me, including the part about the swearing, although left out cocksucker and rooster-dick motherfucker. finished with al's word, *sinking,* and Jan nodded sadly. hen she took a closer look at me.

' hat are you thinking about? You're thinking about *something,* probably no good. t's in your face.'

Lying was out of the question; it wasn't the way we were with each other.

just told her it was best she not know, at least for the time being.

' s it□ could it get you in trouble?' he didn't sound particularly alarmed at the idea - more interested than anything - which is one of the things have always loved about her.

'Maybe,' said.

' s it a good thing?'

'Maybe,' repeated. was standing there, still turning the phone's crank idly with one finger, while held down the connecting points with a finger of my other hand.

' ould you like me to leave you alone while you use the telephone?' she asked. ' e a good little woman and butt out? o some dishes? Knit some booties?'

nodded. ' hat's not the way 'd put it, but - ' ' re we having extras for lunch, Paul?'

' hope so,' said.

# 9

got rutal and ean right away, because both of them were on the exchange. arry wasn't, not then, at least, but had the number of his closest neighbor who was. arry called me back about twenty minutes later, highly embarrassed at having to reverse the charges and sputtering promises to 'pay his share' when our next bill came. told him we'd count those chickens when they hatched; in the meantime, could he come over to my place for lunch? rutal and ean would be here, and Janice had promised to put out some of her famous slaw□ not to mention her even more famous apple pie.

'Lunch just for the hell of it?' arry sounded skeptical.

admitted had something wanted to talk to them about, but it was best not gone into, even lightly, over the phone. arry agreed to come. dropped the receiver onto the prongs, went to the window, and looked out thoughtfully. lthough we'd had the late shift, hadn't wakened either

rutal or ean, and arry hadn't sounded like a fellow freshly turned out of dreamland, either. t seemed that wasn't the only one having problems with what had happened last night, and considering the craziness had in mind, that was probably good.

rutal, who lived closest to me, arrived at quarter past eleven. ean showed up fifteen minutes later, and arry - already dressed for work - about fifteen minutes after ean. Janice served us cold beef sandwiches, slaw, and iced tea in the kitchen. Only a day before, we would have had it out on the side porch and been glad of a breeze, but the temperature had dropped a good fifteen degrees since the thunderstorm, and a keen-edged wind was snuffling down from the ridges.

'You're welcome to sit down with us,' told my wife.

he shook her head. ' don't think want to know what you're up to - 'll worry less if 'm in the dark. 'll have a bite in the parlor. 'm visiting with Miss Jane usten this week, and she's very good company.'

' ho's Jane usten?' arry asked when she had left. 'Your side or Janices's, Paul? cousin? s she pretty?'

' he's a writer, you nit,' rutal told him. ' een dead practically since

etsy oss basted the stars on the first flag.'

'Oh.' arry looked embarrassed. ' 'm not much of a reader. adio manuals, mostly.'

' hat's on your mind, Paul?' ean asked.

'John offey and Mr. Jingles, to start with.' hey looked surprised, which

had expected - they'd been thinking wanted to discuss either elacroix or Percy. Maybe both. looked at ean and arry ' he thing with Mr. Jingles - what offey did - happened pretty fast. don't know if you got there in time to see how broken up the mouse was or not.'

ean shook his head. ' saw the blood on the floor, though.'

turned to rutal.

' hat son of a bitch Percy crushed it,' he said simply. ' t should have died, but it didn't. offey did something to it. ealed it somehow. know how that sounds, but saw it with my own eyes.'

said: ' e healed me, as well, and didn't just see it, *felt* it.' told them about my urinary infection - how it had come back, how bad it had been ( pointed through the window at the woodpile 'd had to hold onto the morning the pain drove me to my knees), and how it had gone away completely after offey touched me. nd stayed away.

t didn't take long to tell. hen was done, they sat and thought about it awhile, chewing on their sandwiches as they did. hen ean said, ' lack things came out of his mouth. Like bugs.'

' hat's right,' arry agreed. ' hey were black to start with, anyway. hen they turned white and disappeared.' e looked around, considering. ' t's like

damned near forgot the whole thing until you brought it up, Paul. in't that funny?'

'Nothing funny or strange about it,' rutal said. ' think that's what people most always do with the stuff they can't make out - just forget it. oesn't do a person much good to remember stuff that doesn't make any sense. hat about it, Paul? ere there bugs when he fixed you?'

'Yes. think they're the sickness□ the pain□ the hurt. e takes it in, then lets it out into the open air again.'

' here it dies,' arry said.

shrugged. didn't know if it died or not, wasn't sure it even mattered.

' id he suck it out of you?' rutal asked. ' e looked like he was sucking it right out of the mouse. he hurt. he□ you know. he death.'

'No,' said. ' e just touched me. nd felt it. kind of jolt, like

electricity only not painful. ut wasn't dying, only hurting.'

rutal nodded. ' he touch and the breath. Just like you hear those backwoods gospel-shouters going on about.'

'Praise Jesus, the Lord is mighty,' said.

' dunno if Jesus comes into it,' rutal said, 'but it seems to me like John

offey is one mighty man.'

' ll right,' ean said. ' f you say all this happened, guess believe it.

od works in mysterious ways is wonders to perform. ut what's it got to do with us?'

ell, that was the big question, wasn't it? took in a deep breath and told them what wanted to do. hey listened, dumbfounded. ven rutal, who liked to read those magazines with the stories about little green men from space, looked dumbfounded. here was a longer silence when finished this time, and no one chewing any sandwiches.

t last, in a gentle and reasonable voice, rutus owell said: ' e'd lose our jobs if we were caught, Paul, and we'd be very goddam lucky if that was all that happened. e'd probably end up over in lock as guests of the state, making wallets and showering in pairs.'

'Yes,' said. ' hat could happen.'

' can understand how you feel, a little,' he went on. 'You know Moores better than us - he's your friend as well as the big boss - and know you think a lot of his wife□ '

' he's the sweetest woman you could ever hope to meet,' said, 'and she means the world to him.'

' ut we don't know her the way you and Janice do,' rutal said. ' o we, Paul?'

'You'd like her if you did,' said. ' t least, you'd like her if you'd met her before this thing got its claws into her. he does a lot of community things, she's a good friend, and she's religious. More than that, she's funny. sed to be, anyway. he could tell you things that'd make you laugh until the tears rolled down your cheeks. ut none of those things are the reason want to help save her, if she can be saved. hat's happening to her is an *offense,* goddammit, an *offense.* o the eyes and the ears and the heart.'

' ery noble, but doubt like hell if that's what put this bee in your bonnet,' rutal said. ' think it's what happened to el. You want to balance it off somehow.'

nd he was right. Of course he was. knew Melinda Moores better than the others did, but maybe not, in the end, well enough to ask them to risk

their jobs for her□ and possibly their freedom, as well. Or my own job and freedom, for that matter. had two children, and the last thing on od's earth that wanted my wife to have to do was to write them the news that their father was going on trial for□ well, what would it be? didn't know for sure. iding and abetting an escape attempt seemed the most likely.

ut the death of duard elacroix had been the ugliest, foulest thing had ever seen in my life - not just my working life but my whole, entire life

- and had been a party to it. e had all been a party to it, because we had allowed Percy etmore to stay even after we knew he was horribly unfit to work in a place like lock. e had played the game. ven arden Moores had been a party to it. " is nuts are going to cook whether

etmore's on the team or not," he had said, and maybe that was well enough, considering what the little renchman had done, but in the end Percy had done a lot more than cook el's nuts; he had blown the little man's eyeballs right out of their sockets and set his damned face on fire.

nd why? ecause el was a murderer half a dozen times over? No.

ecause Percy had wet his pants and the little ajun had had the temerity to laugh at him. e'd been part of a monstrous act, and Percy was going to get away with it. Off to riar idge he would go, happy as a clam at high tide, and there he would have a whole asylum filled with lunatics to practice his cruelties upon. here was nothing we could do about that, but perhaps it was not too late to wash some of the muck off our own hands.

' n my church they call it atonement instead of balancing,' said, 'but guess it comes to the same thing.'

' o you really think offey *could* save her?' ean asked in a soft, awed voice. ''Just□ what?□ suck that brain tumor out of her head? Like it was a□ a peach-pit?'

' think he could. t's not for sure, of course, but after what he did to me□ and to Mr. Jingles□ '

' hat mouse was seriously busted up, all right,' rutal said. ' ut *would* he do it?' arry mused. *Would* he?'

' f he can, he will,' said.

' hy? offey doesn't even know her!'

' ecause it's what he does. t's what od made him for.'

rutal made a show of looking around, reminding us all that someone was missing. ' hat about Percy? You think he's just gonna let this go down?' he asked, and so told them what had in mind for Percy y the

time finished, arry and ean were looking at me in amazement, and a reluctant grin of admiration had dawned on rutal's face.

'Pretty audacious, rother Paul!' he said. ' air takes my breath away!'

' ut wouldn't it be the bee's knees!' ean almost whispered, then laughed aloud and clapped his hands like a child. ' mean, voh-doh-dee-oh-doh and twenty-three-skidoo!' You want to remember that ean had a special interest in the part of my plan that involved Percy - Percy - Percy could have gotten ean killed, after all, freezing up the way he had.

'Yeah, but what about after?' arry said. e sounded gloomy, but his eyes gave him away; they were sparkling, the eyes of a man who wants to be convinced. ' hat then?'

' hey say dead men tell no tales,' rutal rumbled, and took a quick look at him to make sure he was joking.

' think he'll keep his mouth shut,' said.

' eally?' ean looked skeptical. e took off his glasses and began to polish them. ' onvince me.'

' irst, he won't know what really happened - he's going to judge us by himself and think it was just a prank. econd - and more important - *he ll be afraid to say anything.* hat's what 'm really counting on. e tell him that if he starts writing letters and making phone calls, *we* start writing letters and making phone calls.'

' bout the execution,' arry said.

' nd about the way he froze when harton attacked ean,' rutal said. ' think people finding out about that is what Percy etmore's really afraid of.' e nodded slowly and thoughtfully. ' t could work. ut Paul□ wouldn't it make more sense to bring Mrs. Moores to offey than offey to Mrs. Moores? e could take care of Percy pretty much the way you laid it out, then bring her in through the tunnel instead of taking offey out that way.'

shook my head. 'Never happen. Not in a million years.' ' ecause of arden Moores?'

'Mat's right. e's so hardheaded he makes old oubting homas look like Joan of rc. f we bring offey to his house, think we can surprise him into at least letting offey make the try. Otherwise□ '

' hat were you thinking about using for a vehicle?' rutal asked.

'My first thought was the stagecoach,' said, 'but we'd never get it out of the yard without being noticed, and everyone within a twenty-mile radius knows what it looks like, anyway. guess maybe we can use my ord.'

' uess again,' ean said, popping his specs back onto his nose. 'You couldn't get John offey into your car if you stripped him naked, covered him with lard, and used a shoehorn. You're so used to looking at him that you've forgotten how big he is.'

had no reply to that. Most of my attention that morning had been focused on the problem of Percy - and the lesser but not inconsiderable problem of ild ill harton. Now realized that transportation wasn't going to be as simple as had hoped.

arry erwilliger picked up the remains of his second sandwich, looked at it for a second, then put it down again. ' f we was to actually do this crazy thing,' he said, ' guess we could use my pickup truck. it him in the back of that. ouldn't be nobody much on the roads at that hour. e're talking about well after midnight, ain't we?'

'Yes,' said.

'You guys're forgetting one thing,' ean said. ' know offey's been pretty quiet ever since he came on the block, doesn't do much but lay there on his bunk and leak from the eyes, but he's a *murderer.* lso, he's *huge.* f he decided he wanted to escape out of the back of arry's truck, the only way we could stop him would be to shoot him dead. nd a guy like that would take a lot of killing, even with a. . uppose we weren't able to put him down? nd suppose he killed someone else? 'd hate losing my job, and 'd hate going to jail - got a wife and kids depending on me to put bread in their mouths - but don't think 'd hate either of those things near as much as having another dead little girl on my conscience.'

' hat won't happen,' said.

' ow in od's name can you be so sure of that?'

didn't answer. didn't know just how to begin. had known this would come up, of course did, but still didn't know how to start telling them what knew. rutal helped me.

'You don't think he did it, do you, Paul?' e looked incredulous. 'You think that big lug is innocent.'

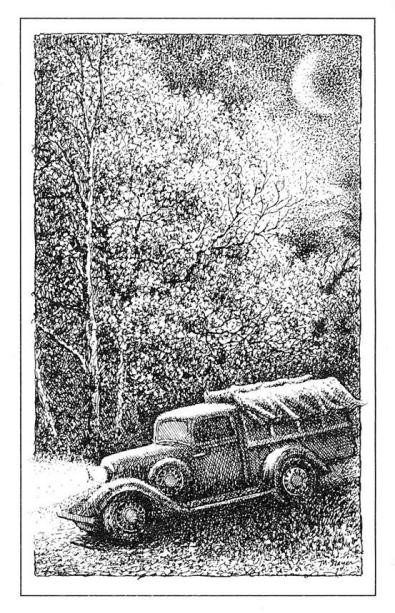
' 'm positive he's innocent,' said.

' ow in the name of Jesus can you be?'

' here are two things,' said. 'One of them is my shoe.' leaned forward over the table and began talking.

# Pa t Five

Night Journey



# 1

Mr. . . ells once wrote a story about a man who invented a time machine, and have discovered that, in the writing of these memoirs, have created my own time machine. nlike ells's, it can only travel into the past - back to 93 , as a matter of fact, when was the bull-goose screw in

lock of old Mountain tate Penitentiary - but it's eerily efficient, for all that. till, this time machine reminds me of the old ord had in those days: you could be sure that it would start eventually, but you never knew if a turn of the key would be enough to fire the motor, or if you were going to have to get out and crank until your arm practically fell off.

've had a lot of easy starts since started telling the story of John offey, but yesterday had to crank. think it was because 'd gotten to elacroix's execution, and part of my mind didn't want to have to relive that. t was a bad death, a *terrible* death, and it happened the way it did because of Percy

etmore, a young man who loved to comb his hair but couldn't stand to be laughed at - not even by a half bald little renchman who was never going to see another hristmas.

s with most dirty jobs, however, the hardest part is just getting started.

t doesn't matter to an engine whether you use the key or have to crank; once you get it going, it'll usually run just as sweet either way. hat's how it worked for me yesterday. t first the words came in little bursts of phrasing, then in whole sentences, then in a torrent. riting is a special and rather terrifying form of remembrance, 've discovered - there is a totality to it that seems almost like rape. Perhaps only feel that way because 've become a very old man (a thing that happened behind my own back, sometimes feel), but don't think so. believe that the combination of pencil and memory creates a kind of practical magic, and magic is dangerous. s a man who knew John offey and saw what he could do - to mice and to men - feel very qualified to say that.

Magic is dangerous.

n any case, wrote all day yesterday, the words simply flooding out of me, the sunroom of this glorified old folks' home gone, replaced by the storage room at the end of the reen Mile where so many of my problem children took their last sit-me-downs and the bottom of the stairs which led to the tunnel under the road. hat was where ean and arry and rutal

and confronted Percy etmore over duard elacroix's smoking body and made Percy renew his promise to put in for transfer to the riar idge state mental facility.

here are always fresh flowers in the sunroom, but by noon yesterday all

could smell was the noxious aroma of the dead man's cooked flesh. he sound of the power mower on the lawn down below had been replaced by the hollow plink of dripping water as it seeped slowly through the tunnel's curved roof. he trip was on. had travelled back to 93 , in soul and mind, if not body.

skipped lunch, wrote until four o'clock or so, and when finally put my pencil down, my hand was aching. walked slowly down to the end of the second-floor corridor. here's a window there that looks out on the employee parking lot. rad olan, the orderly who reminds me of Percy - and the one who is altogether too curious about where go and what do on my walks - drives an old hevrolet with a bumper sticker that says i have seen god and his name is newt. t was gone; rad's shift was over and he'd taken himself off to whatever garden spot he calls home. envision an

irstream trailer with *ustler* gatefolds cotch-taped to the walls and ixie

eer cans in the corners.

went out through the kitchen, where dinner preparations were getting started. ' hat you got in that bag, Mr. dgecombe?' Norton asked me.

' t's an empty bottle,' said. ' 've discovered the ountain of Youth down there in the woods. pop down every afternoon about this time and draw a little. drink it at bedtime. ood stuff, can tell you.'

'May be keepin you young,' said eorge, the other cook, 'but it ain't doin

*shit* for your looks - '

e all had a laugh at that, and went out. found myself looking around for olan even though his car was gone, called myself a chump for letting him get so far under my skin, and crossed the croquet course. eyond it is a scraggy little putting green that looks ever so much nicer in the eorgia Pines brochures, and beyond that is a path that winds into the little copse of woods east of the nursing home. here are a couple of old sheds along this path, neither of them used for anything these days. t the second, which stands close to the high stone wall between the eorgia Pines grounds and

eorgia ighway 7, went in and stayed for a little while.

ate a good dinner that night, watched a little , and went to bed early. On many nights 'll wake up and creep back down to the room, where

watch old movies on the merican Movie hannel. Not last night, though; last night slept like a stone, and with none of the dreams that have so haunted me since started my adventures in literature. ll that writing must have worn me out; 'm not as young as used to be, you know.

hen woke and saw that the patch of sun which usually lies on the floor at six in the morning had made it all the way up to the foot of my bed,

hit the deck in a hurry, so alarmed hardly noticed the arthritic flare of pain in my hips and knees and ankles. dressed as fast as could, then hurried down the hall to the window that overlooks the employees' parking lot, hoping the slot where olan parks his old hevrolet would still be empty. ometimes he's as much as half an hour late -

No such luck. he car was there, gleaming rustily in the morning sun.

ecause Mr. rad olan has something to arrive on time for these days, doesn't he? Yes. Old Paulie dgecombe goes somewhere in the early mornings, old Paulie dgecombe is up to something, and Mr. rad olan intends to find out what it *is. What do you do down there, Paulie? Tell me.*

e would likely be watching for me already. t would be smart to stay right where was□ except couldn't.

'Paul?'

turned around so fast almost fell down. t was my friend laine

onnelly. er eyes widened and she put out her hands, as if to catch me. Lucky for her caught my balance; laine's arthritis is terrible, and probably would have broken her in two like a dry stick if 'd fallen into her arms. omance doesn't die when you pass into the strange country that lies beyond eighty, but you can forget the *one with the Wind* crap.

' 'm sorry,' she said. ' didn't mean to startle you.'

' hat's all right,' said, and gave her a feeble smile. ' t's a better wake-up than a faceful of cold water. should hire you to do it every morning.'

'You were looking for his car, weren't you? olan's car.'

here was no sense kidding her about it, so nodded. ' wish could be sure he's over in the west wing. 'd like to slip out for a little while, but don't want him to see me.'

he smiled - a ghost of the teasing imp's smile she must have had as a girl. 'Nosy bastard, isn't he?'

'Yes.'

' e's not in the west wing, either. 've already been down to breakfast, sleepyhead, and can tell you where he is, because peeked. e's in the

kitchen.'

looked at her, dismayed. had known olan was curious, but not how curious.

' an you put your morning walk off?' laine asked.

thought about it. ' could, suppose, but□ ' 'You shouldn't.'

'No. shouldn't.'

*Now*, thought, *she ll ask me where go, what have to* do *down in those woods that s so damned important.*

ut she didn't. nstead she gave me that imp's smile again. t looked strange and absolutely wonderful on her too-gaunt, pain-haunted face. ' o you know Mr. owland?' she asked.

' ure,' said, although didn't see him much; he was in the west wing, which at eorgia Pines was almost like a neighboring country. ' hy?'

' o you know what's special about him?'

shook my head.

'Mr. owland,' laine said, smiling more widely than ever, 'is one of only five residents left at eorgia Pines who have permission to smoke. hat's because he was a resident before the rules changed.'

grandfather clause, thought. nd what place was more fitted for one than an old-age home?

he reached into the pocket of her blue-and-white-striped dress and pulled two items partway out: a cigarette and a book of matches. ' hief of green, thief red,' she sang in a lilting, funny voice. 'Little llie's going to wet the bed.'

' laine, what - '

' alk an old girl downstairs,' she said, putting the cigarette and matches back into her pocket and taking my arm in one of her gnarled hands. e began to walk back down the hall. s we did, decided to give up and put myself in her hands. he was old and brittle, but not stupid.

s we went down, walking with the glassy care of the relics we have now become, laine said: ' ait at the foot. 'm going over to the west wing, to the hall toilet there. You know the one mean, don't you?'

'Yes,' said. ' he one just outside the spa. ut why?'

' haven't had a cigarette in over fifteen years,' she said, 'but feel like one this morning. don't know how many puffs it'll take to set off the smoke detector in there, but intend to find out.'

looked at her with dawning admiration, thinking how much she reminded me of my wife - Jan might have done exactly the same thing.

laine looked back at me, smiling her saucy imp's smile. cupped my hand around the back of her lovely long neck, drew her face to mine, and kissed her mouth lightly. ' love you, llie,' said.

'Oooh, such big talk,' she said, but could tell she was pleased.

' hat about huck owland?' asked. ' s he going to get in trouble?' 'No, because he's in the room, watching *ood Morning America* with

about two dozen other folks. nd 'm going to make myself scarce as soon as the smoke detector turns on the west-wing fire alarm.'

' on't you fall down and hurt yourself, woman. 'd never forgive myself if - '

'Oh, stop your fussing,' she said, and this time *she* kissed *me.* Love among the ruins. t probably sounds funny to some of you and grotesque to the rest of you, but 'll tell you something, my friend: weird love's better than no love at all.

watched her walk away, moving slowly and stiffly (but she will only use a cane on wet days, and only then if the pain is terrible; it's one of her vanities), and waited. ive minutes went by, then ten, and just as was deciding she had either lost her courage or discovered that the battery of the smoke detector in the toilet was dead, the fire alarm went off in the west wing with a loud, buzzing burr.

started toward the kitchen at once, but slowly - there was no reason to hurry until was sure olan was out of my way. gaggle of old folks, most still in their robes, came out of the room (here it's called the esource

enter; now *that s* grotesque) to see what was going on. huck owland was among them, was happy to see.

' dgecombe!' Kent very rasped, hanging onto his walker with one hand and yanking obsessively at the crotch of his pajama pants with the other. ' eal alarm or just another falsie? hat do you think?'

'No way of knowing, guess,' said.

Just about then three orderlies went trotting past, all headed for the west wing, yelling at the folks clustered around the -room door to go outside and wait for the all-clear. he third in line was rad olan. e didn't even look at me as he went past, a fact that pleased me to no end. s went on down toward the kitchen, it occurred to me that the team of laine onnelly

and Paul dgecombe would probably be a match for a dozen rad olans, with half a dozen Percy etmores thrown in for good measure.

he cooks in the kitchen were continuing to clear up breakfast, paying no attention to the howling fire. alarm at all.

' ay, Mr. dgecombe,' eorge said. ' believe rad olan been lookin for you. n fact, you just missed him.'

*Lucky me,* thought. hat said out loud was that 'd probably see Mr.

olan later. hen asked if there was any leftover toast lying around from breakfast.

' ure,' Norton said, 'but it's stone-cold dead in the market. You runnin late this morning.'

' am,' agreed, 'but 'm hungry.'

'Only take a minute to make some fresh and hot,' eorge said, reaching for the bread.

'Nope, cold will be fine,' said, and when he handed me a couple of slices (looking mystified - actually both of them looked mystified), hurried out the door, feeling like the boy once was, skipping school to go fishing with a jelly fold-over wrapped in waxed paper slipped into the front of my shirt.

Outside the kitchen door took a quick, reflexive look around for olan, saw nothing to alarm me, and hurried across the croquet course and putting green, gnawing on one of my pieces of toast as went. slowed a little as entered the shelter of the woods, and as walked down the path, found my mind turning to the day after duard elacroix's terrible execution.

had spoken to al Moores that morning, and he had told me that Melinda's brain tumor had caused her to lapse into bouts of cursing and foul language□ what my wife had later labelled (rather tentatively; she wasn't sure it was really the same thing) as ourette's yndrome. he quavering in his voice, coupled with the memory of how John offey had healed both my urinary infection and the broken back of elacroix's pet mouse, had finally pushed me over the line that runs between just thinking about a thing and actually *doing* a thing.

nd there was something else. omething that had to do with John

offey's hands, and my shoe.

o had called the men worked with, the men had trusted my life to over the years - ean tanton, arry erwilliger, rutus owell. hey came to lunch at my house on the day after elacroix's execution, and they

at least listened to me when outlined my plan. Of course, they all knew that offey had healed the mouse; rutal had actually seen it. o when suggested that another miracle might result if we took John offey to Melinda Moores, they didn't outright laugh. t was ean tanton who raised the most troubling question: hat if John offey escaped while we had him out on his field-trip?

' uppose he killed someone else?' ean asked. ' 'd hate losing my job, and 'd hate going to jail - got a wife and kids depending on me to put bread in their mouths - but don't think 'd hate either of those things near as much as having another little dead girl on my conscience.'

here was silence, then, all of them looking at me, waiting to see how 'd respond. knew everything would change if said what was on the tip of my tongue; we had reached a point beyond which retreat would likely become impossible.

xcept retreat, for me, at least, was already impossible. opened my mouth and said

# 2

' hat won't happen.'

' ow in od's name can you be so sure?' ean asked.

didn't answer. didn't know just how to begin. had known this would come up, of course had, but still didn't know how to start telling them what was in my head and heart. rutal helped.

'You don't think he did it, do you, Paul?' e looked incredulous. 'You think that big lug is innocent.'

' 'm positive he's innocent,' said. ' ow *can* you be?'

' here are two things,' said. 'One of them is my shoe.'

'Your *shoe?* rutal exclaimed. ' hat has your *shoe* got to do with whether or not John offey killed those two little girls?'

' took off one of my shoes and gave it to him last night,' said. ' fter the execution, this was, when things had settled back down a little. pushed it *through the* bars, and he picked it up in those big hands of his. told him to tie it. had to make sure, you see, because all our problem children normally wear is slippers - a man who really wants to commit suicide can do it with shoelaces, if he's dedicated. hat's something all of us know.'

hey were nodding.

' e put it on his lap and got the ends of the laces crossed over all right, but then he was stuck. e said he was pretty sure someone had showed him how to do it when he was a lad - maybe his father or maybe one of the boyfriends his mother had after the father was gone - but he'd forgot the knack.'

' 'm with rutal - still don't see what your shoe has to do with whether or not offey killed the etterick twins,' ean said.

o went over the story of the abduction and murder again - what 'd read that hot day in the prison library with my groin sizzling and ibbons snoring in the comer, and all that the reporter, ammersmith, told me later.

' he ettericks' dog wasn't much of a biter, but it was a world-class barker,' said. ' he man who took the girls kept it quiet by feeding it sausages. e crept a little closer every time he gave it one, imagine, and while the mutt was eating the last one, he reached out, grabbed it by the head, and twisted. roke its neck.

'Later, when they caught up with offey, the deputy in charge of the posse - ob Mc ee, his name was-spotted a bulge in the chest pocket of the biballs offey was wearing. Mc ee thought at first it might be a gun.

offey said it was a lunch, and that's what it turned out to be - a couple of sandwiches and a pickle, wrapped up in newspaper and tied with butcher's string. offey couldn't remember who gave it to him, only that it was a woman wearing an apron.'

' andwiches and a pickle but no sausages,' rutal said. 'No sausages,' agreed.

' ourse not,' ean said. ' e fed those to the dog.'

' ell, that's what the prosecutor said at the trial,' agreed, 'but if offey opened his lunch and fed the sausages to the dog, how'd he tie the newspaper back up again with that butcher's twine? don't know when he even would have had the chance, but leave that out of it, for the time being.

his man can't even tie a simple granny knot.'

here was a long moment of thunderstruck silence, broken at last by

rutus. ' oly shit,' he said in a low voice. ' ow come no one brought that up at the trial?'

'Nobody thought of it,' said, and found myself again thinking of

ammersmith, the reporter - ammersmith who had been to college in

owling reen, ammersmith who liked to think of himself as enlightened,

ammersmith who had told me that mongrel dogs and Negroes were about the same, that either might take a chomp out of you suddenly, and for no reason. xcept he kept calling them *your* Negroes, as if they were still property□ but not *his* property. No, not his. Never his. nd at that time, the

outh was full of ammersmiths. Nobody was really *equipped* to think of it, offey's own attorney included.'

' ut *you* did,' arry said. ' oddam, boys, we're sittin here with Mr.

herlock olmes.' e sounded simultaneously joshing and awed.

'Oh, put a cork in it,' said. ' wouldn't have thought of it either, if hadn't put together what he told eputy Mc ee that day with what he said after he cured my infection, and what he said after he healed the mouse.'

' hat?' ean asked.

' hen went into his cell, it was like was hypnotized. didn't feel like could have stopped doing what he wanted, even if 'd tried.'

' don't like the sound of that,' arry said, and shifted uneasily in his seat. ' asked him what he wanted, and he said "Just to help." remember that very clearly. nd when it was over and was better, he knew. " helped it,"

he said. " helped it, didn't ?" '

rutal was nodding. 'Just like with the mouse. You said "You helped it," and offey said it back to you like he was a parrot. " helped el's mouse."

s that when you knew? t was, wasn't it?.'

'Yeah, guess so. remembered what he said to Mc ee when Mc ee asked him what had happened. t was in every story about the murders, just about. " couldn't help it. tried to take it back, but it was too late." man saying a thing like that with two little dead girls in his arms, them white and blonde, him as big as a house, no wonder they got it wrong. hey heard what he was saying in a way that would agree with what they were seeing, and what they were seeing was black. hey thought he was confessing, that he was saying he'd had a compulsion to take those girls, rape them, and kill them. hat he'd come to his senses and tried to stop.

' ut by then it was too late,' rutal murmured

'Yes. xcept what he was *really* trying to tell them was that he'd found them, tried to heal them - to bring them back - and had no success. hey were too far gone in death.'

'Paul, do you believe that?' ean asked. ' o you really, honest-to- od believe that?'

examined my heart as well as could one final time, then nodded my head. Not only did know it now, there was an intuitive part of me that had known something wasn't right with John offey's situation from the very beginning, when Percy had come onto the block hauling on offey's arm and blaring " ead man walking!" at the top of his lungs. had shaken hands with him, hadn't ? had never shaken the hand of a man coming on the

reen Mile before, but had shaken offey's. 'Jesus,' ean said. ' ood Jesus hrist.'

'Your shoe's one thing,' arry said. ' hat's the other?'

'Not long before the posse found offey and the girls, the men came out of the woods near the south bank of the rapingus iver. hey found a patch of flattened-down grass there, a lot of blood, and the rest of ora

etterick's nightie. he dogs got confused for a bit. Most wanted to go southeast, downstream along the bank. ut two of them - the coon-dogs - wanted to go *upstream*. ' obo Marchant was running the dogs, and when he save the coonies a sniff of the nightgown, they turned with the others.'

' he coonies got mixed up, didn't they?' rutal asked. strange, sickened little smile was playing around the corners of his mouth. ' hey ain't built to be trackers, strictly speaking, and they got mixed up on what their job was.'

'Yes.'

' don't get it,' ean said.

' he coonies forgot whatever it was obo ran under their noses to get them started,' rutal said. ' y the time they came out on the riverbank, the coonies were tracking the *killer,* not the girls. hat wasn't a problem as long as the killer and the girls were together, but□ '

he light was dawning in ean's eyes. arry had already gotten it.

' hen you think about it,' said, 'you wonder how anybody, even a jury wanting to pin the crime on a wandering black fellow, could have believed John offey was their man for even a minute. Just the idea of keeping the dog quiet with food until he could snap its neck would have been beyond

offey.

' e was never any closer to the etterick farm than the south bank of the

rapingus, that's what think. ix or more miles away. e was just mooning along, maybe meaning to go down to the railroad tracks and catch a freight to somewhere else - when they come off the trestle, they're going slow enough to hop - when he heard a commotion to the north.'

' he killer?' rutal asked.

' he killer. e might have raped them already, or maybe the rape was what offey heard. n any case, that bloody patch in the grass was where the killer finished the business; dashed their heads together, dropped them, and then hightailed it.'

' ightailed it northwest,' rutal said. ' he direction the coon-dogs wanted to go.'

' ight. John offey comes through a stand of alders that grows a little way southeast of the spot where the girls were left, probably curious about all the noise, and he finds their bodies. One of them might still have been alive; suppose it's possible both of them were, although not for much longer. John offey wouldn't have known if they were dead, that's for sure.

ll he knows is that he's got a healing power in his hands, and he tried to use it on ora and Kathe etterick. hen it didn't work, he broke down, crying and hysterical. hich is how they found him.'

' hy didn't he stay there, where he found them?' rutal asked. ' hy take them south along the riverbank? ny idea?'

' bet he did stay put, at first,' said. ' t the trial, they kept talking about a *big* trampled area, all the grass squashed flat. nd John offey's a big man.' 'John offey's a fucking giant,' arry said, pitching his voice very low so

my wife wouldn't hear him cuss if she happened to be listening.

'Maybe he panicked when he saw that what he was doing wasn't working. Or maybe he got the idea that the killer was still there, in the woods upstream, watching him. offey's big, you know, but not real brave. arry, remember him asking if we left a light on in the block after bedtime?'

'Yeah. remember thinking how funny that was, what with the size of him.' arry looked shaken and thoughtful.

' ell, if he didn't kill the little girls, who did?' ean asked.

shook my head. ' omeone else. omeone *white* would be my best guess. he prosecutor made a big deal about how it would have taken a strong man to kill a dog as big as the one the ettericks kept, but - '

' hat's crap,' rutus rumbled. ' strong twelve year-old girl could break a big dog's neck, if she took the dog by surprise and knew where to grab. f

offey didn't do it, it could have been damned near anyone□ any man, that is. e'll probably never know.'

said, ' nless he does it again.'

' e wouldn't know even then, if he did it down exas or over in

alifornia,' arry said.

rutal leaned back, screwed his fists into his eyes like a tired child, then dropped them into his lap again. ' his is a nightmare,' he said. ' e've got a man who may be innocent - who probably *is* innocent - and he's going to walk the reen Mile just as sure as od made tall trees and little fishes.

hat are we supposed to do about it? f we start in with that healing-fingers shit, everyone is going to laugh their asses off, and he'll end up in the ry- O-Lator just the same.'

'Let's worry about that later,' said, because didn't have the slightest idea how to answer him. ' he question right now is what we do - or don't do

- about Melly. 'd say step back and take a few days to think it over, but believe every day we wait raises the chances that he won't be able to help her.'

' emember him holding his hands out for the mouse?' rutal asked. '' ive im to me while there's still time,' he said. *While there s still time.*

' remember.'

rutal considered, then nodded. ' 'm in. feel bad about el, too, but mostly think just want to see what happens when he touches her. Probably nothing will, but maybe□ '

' doubt like hell we even get the big dummy off the block,' arry said, then sighed and nodded. ' ut who gives a shit? ount me in.'

'Me, too,' ean said. ' ho stays on the block, Paul? o we draw straws for it?'

'No, sir,' said. 'No straws. You stay.'

'Just like that? he hell you say!' ean replied, hurt and angry. e whipped off his spectacles and began to polish them furiously on his shirt. ' hat kind of a bum deal is that?'

' he kind you get if you're young enough to have kids still in school,'

rutal said. ' arry and me's bachelors. Paul's married, but his kids are grown and off on their own, at least. his is a *mucho* crazy stunt we're planning here; think we're almost sure to get caught.' e gazed at me soberly. 'One thing you didn't mention, Paul, is that if we do manage to get him out of the slam and then offey's healing fingers don't work, al Moores is apt to turn us in himself.' e gave me a chance to reply to this, maybe to rebut it, but couldn't and so kept my mouth shut. rutal turned back to ean and went on. ' on't get me wrong, you're apt to lose your job, too, but at least you'd have a chance to get clear of prison if the heat really came down. Percy's going to think it was a prank; if you're on the duty

desk, you can say you thought the same thing and we never told you any different.'

' still don't like it,' ean said, but it was clear he'd go along with it, like it or not. he thought of his kiddies had convinced him. ' nd it's to be tonight? You're sure?'

' f we're going to do it, it had *better* be tonight,' arry said. ' f get a chance to think about it, 'll most likely lose my nerve.'

'Let me be the one to go by the infirmary,' ean said. ' can do that much at least, can't ?'

' s long as you can do what needs doing without getting caught,' rutal said.

ean looked offended, and clapped him on the shoulder. ' s soon after you clock in as you can□ all right?'

'You bet.'

My wife popped her head through the door as if 'd given her a cue to do so. ' ho's for more iced tea?' she asked brightly. ' hat about you, rutus?'

'No, thanks,' he said. ' hat 'd like is a good hard knock of whiskey, but under the circumstances, that might not be a good idea.'

Janice looked at me; smiling mouth, worried eyes. ' hat are you getting these boys into, Paul?' ut before could even think of framing a reply, she raised her hand and said, 'Never mind, don't want to know.'

# 3

Later, long after the others were gone and while was dressing for work, she took me by the arm, swung me around, and looked into my eyes with fierce intensity.

'Melinda?' she asked.

nodded.

' an you do something for her, Paul? eally do something for her, or is it all wishful dreaming brought on by what you saw last night?'

thought of offey's eyes, of offey's hands, and of the hypnotized way

'd gone to him when he'd wanted me. thought of him holding out his hands for Mr. Jingles's broken, dying body. *While there s still time,* he had said. nd the black swirling things that turned white and disappeared.

' think we might be the only chance she has left,' said at last.

' hen take it,' she said, buttoning the front of my new fall coat. t had been in the closet since my birthday at the beginning of eptember, but this was only the third or fourth time 'd actually worn it. ' ake it.'

nd she practically pushed me out the door.

# 4

clocked in that night - in many ways the strangest night of my entire life

- at twenty past six. thought could still smell the faint, lingering odor of burned flesh on the air. t had to be an illusion - the doors to the outside, both on the block and in the storage room, had been open most of the day, and the previous two shifts had spent hours scrubbing in there - but that didn't change what my nose was telling me, and didn't think could have eaten any dinner even if hadn't been scared almost to death about the evening which lay ahead.

rutal came on the block at quarter to seven, ean at ten 'til. asked

ean if he would go over to the infirmary and see if they had a heating pad for my back, which seemed to have strained that early morning, helping to carry elacroix's body down into the tunnel. ean said he'd be happy to. believe he wanted to tip me a wink, but restrained himself.

arry clocked on at three minutes to seven. ' he truck?' asked.

' here we talked about.'

o far, so good. here followed a little passage of time when we stood by the duty desk, drinking coffee and studiously not mentioning what we were all thinking and hoping: that Percy was late, that maybe Percy wasn't going to show up at all. onsidering the hostile reviews he'd gotten on the way he'd handled the electrocution, that seemed at least possible.

ut Percy apparently subscribed to that old axiom about how you should get right back on the horse that had thrown you, because here he came through the door at six minutes past seven, resplendent in his blue uniform, with his sidearm on one hip and his hickory stick in its ridiculous custom- made holster on the other. e punched his time-card, then looked around at us warily (except for ean, who hadn't come back from the infirmary yet). 'My starter busted,' he said. ' had to crank.'

' w,' arry said, 'po' baby.'

' hould have stayed home and got the cussed thing fixed,' rutal said blandly. ' e wouldn't want you straining your arm none, would we, boys?'

'Yeah, you'd like that, wouldn't you?' Percy sneered, but thought he seemed reassured by the relative mildness of rutal's response. hat was good. or the next few hours we'd have to walk a line with him - not too hostile, but not too friendly, either. fter last night, he'd find anything even approaching warmth suspect. e weren't going to get him with his guard down, we all knew that, but thought we could catch him with it a long piece from all the way up if we played things just right. t was important that we move fast, but it was also important - to me, at least - that nobody be hurt. Not even Percy etmore.

ean came back and gave me a little nod.

'Percy,' said, ' want you to go on in the storeroom and mop down the floor. tairs to the tunnel, too. hen you can write your report on last night.' '*That* should be creative,' rutal remarked, hooking his thumbs into his

belt and looking up at the ceiling.

'You guys are funnier'n a fuck in church,' Percy said, but beyond that he didn't protest. idn't even point out the obvious, which was that the floor in there had already been washed at least twice that day. My guess is that he was glad for the chance to be away from us.

went over the previous shift report, saw nothing that concerned me, and then took a walk down to harton's cell. e was sitting there on his bunk with his knees drawn up and his arms clasped around his shins, looking at me with a bright, hostile smile.

' ell, if it ain't the big boss,' he said. ' ig as life and twice as ugly. You look happier'n a pig kneedeep in shit, oss dgecombe. ife give your pecker a pull before you left home, did she?'

' ow you doing, Kid?' asked evenly, and at that he brightened for real.

e let go of his legs, stood up, and stretched. is smile broadened, and some of the hostility went out of it.

' ell, damn!' he said. 'You got my name right for once! hat's the matter with you, oss dgecombe? You sick or sumpin?'

No, not sick. 'd *been* sick, but John offey had taken care of that. is hands no longer knew the trick of tying a shoe, if they ever had, but they knew other tricks. Yes indeed they did.

'My friend,' told him, 'if you want to be a illy the Kid instead of a ild

ill, it's all the same to me.'

e puffed visibly, like one of those loathsome fish that live in outh

merican rivers and can sting you almost to death with the spines along their backs and sides. dealt with a lot of dangerous men during my time on the Mile, but few if any so repellent as illiam harton, who considered himself a great outlaw, but whose jailhouse behavior rarely rose above pissing or spitting through the bars of his cell. o far we hadn't given him the awed respect he felt was his by right, but on that particular night wanted him tractable. f that meant lathering on the softsoap, would gladly lather it on.

' got a lot in common with the Kid, and you just better believe it,'

harton said. ' didn't get here for stealing candy out of a dimestore.' s proud as a man who's been conscripted into the eroes' rigade of the

rench oreign Legion instead of one whose ass has been slammed into a cell seventy long steps from the electric chair. ' here's my supper?'

' ome on, Kid, report says you had it at five-fifty. Meatloaf with gravy, mashed, peas. You don't con me that easy.'

e laughed expansively and sat down on his bunk again. 'Put on the radio, then.' e said radio in the way people did back then when they were joking, so it rhymed with the fifties slang word ' addy-O.' t's funny how much a person can remember about times when his nerves were tuned so tight they almost sang.

'Maybe later, big boy,' said. stepped away from his cell and looked down the corridor. rutal had strolled down to the far end, where he checked to make sure the restraint-room door was on the single lock instead of the double. knew it was, because 'd already checked it myself. Later on, we'd want to be able to open that door as quick as we could. here would be no time spent emptying out the attic-type rick-rack that had accumulated in there over the years; we'd taken it out, sorted it, and stored it in other places not long after harton joined our happy band. t had seemed to us the room with the soft walls was apt to get a lot of use, at least until " illy the Kid" strolled the Mile.

John offey, who would usually have been lying down at this time, long, thick legs dangling and face to the wall, was sitting on the end of his bunk with his hands clasped, watching rutal with an alertness - a *thereness -* that wasn't typical of him. e wasn't leaking around the eyes, either.

rutal tried the door to the restraint room, then came on back up the Mile. ie glanced at offey as he passed offey's cell, and offey said a

curious thing: ' ure. 'd *like* a ride.' s if responding to something rutal had said.

rutal's eyes met mine. *e knows*, could almost hear him saying.

*Somehow he knows.*

shrugged and spread my hands, as if to say *Of course he knows.*

# 5

Old oot- oot made his last trip of the night down to lock with his cart at about quarter to nine. e bought enough of his crap to make him smile with avarice.

' ay, you boys seen that mouse?' he asked.

e shook our heads.

'Maybe Pretty oy has,' oot said, and gestured with his head in the direction of the storage room, where Percy was either washing the floor, writing his report, or picking his ass.

' hat do you care? t's none of your affair, either way,' rutal said. ' oll wheels, oot. You're stinkin the place up.'

oot smiled his peculiarly unpleasant smile, toothless and sunken, and made a business of sniffing the air. ' hat ain't me you smell,' he said. ' hat be el, sayin so-long.'

ackling, he rolled his cart out the door and into the exercise yard. nd he went on rolling it for another ten years, long after was gone - hell, long after old Mountain was gone - selling Moon Pies and pops to the guards and prisoners who could afford them. ometimes even now hear him in my dreams, yelling that he's fryin, he's fryin, he's a done tom turkey.

he time stretched out after oot was gone, the clock seeming to crawl.

e had the radio for an hour and a half, harton braying laughter at red

llen and *Allen s Alley,* even though doubt like hell he understood many of the jokes. John offey sat on the end of his bunk, hands clasped, eyes rarely leaving whoever was at the duty desk. have seen men waiting that way in bus stations for their buses to be called.

Percy came in from the storage room around quarter to eleven and handed me a report which had been laboriously written in pencil. raser- crumbs lay over the sheet of paper in gritty smears. e saw me run my thumb over one of these, and said hastily: ' hat's just a first pass, like. 'm going to copy it over. hat do you think?'

hat thought was that it was the most outrageous goddam whitewash

'd read in all my born days. hat told him was that it was fine, and he went away, satisfied.

ean and arry played cribbage, talking too loud, squabbling over the count too often, and looking at the crawling hands of the clock every five seconds or so. On at least one of their games that night, they appeared to go around the board three times instead of twice. here was so much tension in the air that felt could almost have carved it like clay, and the only people who didn't seem to feel it were Percy and ild ill.

hen it got to be ten of twelve, could stand it no longer and gave ean a little nod. e went into my office with a bottle of . . ola bought off

oot's cart, and came back out a minute or two later. he cola was now in a tin cup, which a prisoner can't break and then slash with.

took it and glanced around. arry, ean, and rutal were all watching me. o, for that matter, was John offey. Not Percy, though. Percy had returned to the storage room, where he probably felt more at ease on this particular night. gave the tin cup a quick sniff and got no odor except for the , which had an odd but pleasant cinnamon smell back in those days.

took it down to harton's cell. e was lying on his bunk. e wasn't masturbating - yet, anyway - but had raised quite a boner inside his shorts and was giving it a good healthy twang every now and again, like a dopey bass-fiddler hammering an extra-thick string.

'Kid,' said.

' on't bother me,' he said.

'Okay,' agreed. ' brought you a pop for behaving like a human being all night - damn near a record for you - but 'll just drink it myself.'

made as if to do just that, raising the tin cup (battered all up and down the sides from many angry bangings on many sets of cell bars) to my lips.

harton was off the bunk in a flash, which didn't surprise me. t wasn't a high-risk bluff; most deep cons - lifers, rapists, and the men slated for Old

parky - are pigs for their sweets, and this one was no exception.

' imme that, you clunk,' harton said. e spoke as if he were the foreman and was just another lowly peon. ' ive it to the Kid.'

held it just outside the bars, letting him be the one to reach through.

oing it the other way around is a recipe for disaster, as any long-time prison screw will tell you. hat was the kind of stuff we thought of without even knowing we were thinking of it - the way we knew not to let the cons

call us by our first names, the way we knew that the sound of rapidly jingling keys meant trouble on the block, because it was the sound of a prison guard running and prison guards *never* run unless there's trouble in the valley. tuff Percy etmore was never going to get wise to.

onight, however, harton had no interest in grabbing or choking. e snatched the tin cup, downed the pop in three long swallows, then voiced a resounding belch. *Excellent!* he said.

held my hand out. ' up.'

e held it for a moment, teasing with his eyes. ' uppose keep it?'

shrugged. ' e'll come in and take it back. You'll go down to the little room. nd you will have drunk your last . . nless they serve it down in hell, that is.'

is smile faded. ' don't like jokes about hell, screwtip.' e thrust the cup out through the bars. ' ere. ake it.'

took it. rom behind me, Percy said: ' hy in od's name did you want to give a lugoon like him a soda-pop?'

ecause it was loaded with enough infirmary dope to put him on his back for forty-eight hours, and he never tasted a thing, thought.

' ith Paul,' rutal said, 'the quality of mercy is not strained; it droppeth like the gentle rain from heaven.'

' uh?' Percy asked, frowning.

'Means he's a soft touch. lways has been, always will be. ant to play a game of razy ights, Percy?'

Percy snorted. ' xcept for o ish and Old Maid, that's the stupidest card-game ever made.'

' hat's why thought you might like a few hands,' rutal said, smiling sweetly.

' verybody's a wisenheimer,' Percy said, and sulked off into my office. didn't care much for the little rat parking his ass behind my desk, but kept my mouth shut.

he clock crawled. welve-twenty; twelve-thirty. t twelve-forty, John

offey got up off his bunk and stood at his cell door, hands grasping the bars loosely. rutal and walked down to harton's cell and looked in. e lay there on his bunk, smiling up at the ceiling. is eyes were open, but they looked like big glass balls. One hand lay on his chest; the other dangled limply off the side of his bunk, knuckles brushing the floor.

' osh,' rutal said, 'from illy the Kid to illie the eeper in less than an hour. wonder how many of those morphine pills ean put in that tonic.' ' nough,' said. here was a little tremble in my voice. don't know if

rutal heard it, but sure did. ' ome on. e're going to do it.' 'You don't want to wait for beautiful there to pass out?'

' e's passed out now, rute. e's just too buzzed to close his eyes.' 'You're the boss.' e looked around for arry, but arry was already

there. ean was sitting bolt-upright at the duty desk, shuffling the cards so hard and fast it was a wonder they didn't catch fire, throwing a little glance to his left, at my office, with every flutter-shuffle. Keeping an eye out for Percy.

' s it time?' arry asked. is long, horsey face was very pale above his blue uniform blouse, but he looked determined.

'Yes,' said. ' f we're going through with it, it's time.'

arry crossed himself and kissed his thumb. hen he went down to the restraint room, unlocked it, and came back with the straitjacket. e handed it to rutal. he three of us walked up the reen Mile. offey stood at his cell door, watching us go, and said not a word. hen we reached the duty desk, rutal put the straitjacket behind his back, which was broad enough to conceal it easily.

'Luck,' ean said. e was as pale as arry, and looked just as determined.

Percy was behind my desk, all right, sitting in my chair and frowning over the book he'd been toting around with him the last few nights - not *Argosy* or *Stag* but *Caring for the Mental Patient in nstitutions.* You would have thought, from the guilty, worried glance he threw our way when we walked in, that it had been *The Last Days of Sodom and omorrah.*

' hat?' he asked, closing the book in a hurry. ' hat do you want?' ' o talk to you, Percy,' said, 'that's all.'

ut he read a hell of a lot more than a desire to talk on our faces, and was up like a shot, hurrying - not quite running, but almost - toward the open door to the storeroom. e thought we had come to give him a ragging at the very least, and more likely a good roughing up.

arry cut around behind him and blocked the doorway, arms folded on his chest.

' aaay!' Percy turned to me, alarmed but trying not to show it. ' hat is this?'

' on't ask, Percy,' said. had thought 'd be okay - back to normal, anyway - once we actually got rolling on this crazy business, but it wasn't working out that way. couldn't believe what was doing. t was like a bad dream. kept expecting my wife to shake me awake and tell me 'd been moaning in my sleep. ' t'll be easier if you just go along with it.

' hat's owell got behind his back?' Percy asked in a ragged voice, turning to get a better look at rutal.

'Nothing,' rutal said. ' ell□ *this*, suppose -!'

e whipped the straitjacket out and shook it beside one hip, like a matador shaking his cape to make the bull charge.

Percy's eyes widened, and he lunged. e meant to run, but arry grabbed his arms and a lunge was all he was able to manage.

'Let go of me!' Percy shouted, trying to jerk out of arry's grasp. t wasn't going to happen, arry outweighed him by almost a hundred pounds and had the muscles of a man who spent most of his spare time plowing and chopping, but Percy gave it a good enough effort to drag arry halfway across the room and to rough up the unpleasant green carpet kept meaning to replace. or a moment thought he was even going to get one arm free panic can be one hell of a motivator.

' ettle down, Percy,' said. ' t'll go easier if - '

' on't you tell me to settle down, you ignoramus!' Percy yelled, jerking his shoulders and trying to free his arms. 'Just get away from me! ll of you! know people! ig people! f you don't quit this, you'll have to go all the way to outh arolina just to get a meal in a soup kitchen!'

e gave another forward lunge and ran his upper thighs into my desk.

he book he'd been reading, *Caring for the Mental Patient in nstitutions,* gave a jump, and the smaller, pamphlet-sized book which had been hidden inside it popped out. No wonder Percy had looked guilty when we came in.

t wasn't *The Last Days of Sodom and omorrah,* but it was the one we sometimes gave to inmates who were feeling especially horny and who had been well-behaved enough to deserve a treat. 've mentioned it, think - the little cartoon book where Olive Oyl does everybody except weet Pea, the kid.

found it sad that Percy had been in my office and pursuing such pallid porn, and arry - what could see of him from over Percy's straining shoulder - looked mildly disgusted, but rutal hooted with laughter, and that took the fight out of Percy, at least for the time being.

'Oh Poicy,' he said. ' hat would your mother say? or that matter, what would the governor say?'

Percy was blushing a dark red. 'Just shut up. nd leave my mother out of

it.'

rutal tossed me the straitjacket and pushed his face up into Percy's.

' ure thing. Just stick out your arms like a good boy.'

Percy's lips were trembling, and his eyes were too bright. e was, realized, on the verge of tears. ' won't,' he said in a childish, trembling voice, 'and you can't make me.' hen he raised his voice and began to scream for help. arry winced and so did . f we ever came close to just dropping the whole thing, it was then. e might have, except for rutal. e never hesitated. e stepped behind Percy so he was shoulder to shoulder with arry, who still had Percy's hands pinned behind him. rutal reached up and took Percy's ears in his hands.

' top that yelling,' rutal said. ' nless you want to have a pair of the world's most unique teabag caddies.'

Percy quit yelling for help and just stood there, trembling and looking down at the cover of the crude cartoon book, which showed Popeye and Olive doing it in a creative way had heard of but never tried. 'Oooh, Popeye!' read the balloon over Olive's head. ' ck-uck-uck-uck!' read the one over Popeye's. e was still smoking his pipe.

' old out your arms,' rutal said, 'and let's have no more foolishness about it. o it now.'

' won't,' Percy said. ' won't, and you can't make me.'

'You're dead wrong about that, you know,' rutal said, then clamped down on Percy's ears and twisted them the way you might twist the dials on an oven. n oven that wasn't cooking the way you wanted, Percy let out a miserable shriek of pain and surprise that would have given a great deal not to have heard. t wasn't *just* pain and surprise, you see; it was understanding. or the first time in his life, Percy was realizing that awful things didn't just happen to other people, those not fortunate enough to be related to the governor. wanted to tell rutal to stop, but of course couldn't. hings had gone much too far for that. ll could do was to remind myself that Percy had put elacroix through od knew what agonies simply because elacroix had laughed at him. he reminder didn't go very far toward soothing the way felt. Perhaps it might have, if 'd been built more along the lines of Percy.

' tick those arms out there, honey,' rutal said, 'or you get another.'

arry had already let go of young Mr. etmore. obbing like a little kid, the tears which had been standing in his eyes now spilling down his cheeks, Percy shot his hands out straight in front of him, like a sleepwalker in a movie comedy. had the sleeves of the straitjacket up his arms in a trice. hardly had it over his shoulders before rutal had let go of Percy's ears and grabbed the straps hanging down from the jacket's cuffs. e yanked Percy's hands around to his sides, so that his arms were crossed tightly on his chest.

arry, meanwhile, did up the back and snapped the cross-straps. Once Percy gave m and stuck out his arms, the whole thing took less than ten seconds.

'Okay, hon,' rutal said. ' orward harch.'

ut he wouldn't. e looked at rutal, then turned his terrified, streaming eyes on me. Nothing about his connections now, or how we'd have to go all the way to outh arolina just to get a free meal; he was far past that.

'Please,' he whispered in a hoarse, wet voice. ' on't put me in with him, Paul.'

hen understood why he had panicked, why he'd fought us so hard. e thought we were going to put him in with ild ill harton; that his punishment for the dry sponge was to be a dry cornholing from the resident psychopath. nstead of feeling sympathy for Percy at this realization, felt disgust and a hardening of my resolve. e was, after all, judging us by the way he would have behaved, had our positions been reversed.

'Not harton,' said. ' he restraint room, Percy. You're going to spend three or four hours in there, all by yourself in the dark, thinking about what you did to el. t's probably too late for you to learn any new lessons about how people are supposed to behave - rute thinks so, anyway - but 'm an optimist. Now move.'

e did, muttering under his breath that we'd be sorry for this, plenty sorry, just wait and see, but on the whole he seemed relieved and reassured.

hen we herded him out into the hall, ean gave us a look of such wide- eyed surprise and dewy innocence that could have laughed, if the business hadn't been so serious. 've seen better acting in backwoods range revues.

' ay, don't you think the joke's gone far enough?' ean asked.

'You just shut up, if you know what's good for you,' rutal growled.

hese were lines we'd scripted at lunch, and that was just what they sounded like to me, scripted lines, but if Percy was scared enough and

confused enough, they still might save ean tanton's job in a pinch. myself didn't think so, but anything was possible. ny time 've doubted that, then or since, just think about John offey, and elacroix's mouse.

e ran Percy down the reen Mile, him stumbling and gasping for us to slow down, he was going to go flat on his face if we didn't slow down.

harton was on his bunk, but we went by too fast for me to see if he was awake or asleep. John offey was standing at his cell door and watching. 'You're a bad man and you deserve to go in that dark place,' he said, but don't think Percy heard him.

nto the restraint room we went, Percy's cheeks red and wet with tears, his eyes rolling into their sockets, his pampered locks all flopping down on his forehead. arry pulled Percy's gun with one hand and his treasured hickory, head-knocker with the other. 'You'll get em back, don't worry,'

arry said. e sounded a trifle embarrassed.

' wish could say the same about your job,' Percy replied. '*All* your jobs.

You can't do this to me! You *can t*!'

e was obviously prepared to go on in that vein for quite awhile, but we didn't have time to listen to his sermon. n my pocket was a roll of friction- tape, the thirties ancestor of the strapping-tape folks use today. Percy saw it and started to back away. rutal grabbed him from behind and hugged him until had slapped the tape over his mouth, winding the roll around to the back of his head, just to be sure. e was going to have a few less swatches of hair when the tape came off, and a pair of *seriously* chapped lips into the bargain, but no longer much cared, 'd had a gutful of Percy etmore.

e backed away from him. e stood in the middle of the room, under the caged light, wearing the straitjacket, breathing through flared nostrils, and making muffled *mmmph! mmmph!* sounds from behind the tape. ll in all, he looked as crazy as any other prisoner we'd ever jugged in that room.

' he quieter you are, the sooner you get out,' said. ' ry to remember that, Percy.'

' nd if you get lonely, think about Olive Oyl,' arry advised. ' ck-uck- uck-uck.'

hen we went out. closed the door and rutal locked it. ean was standing a little way up the Mile, just outside of offey's cell. e had already put the master key in the top lock. he four of us looked a each other, no one saying anything. here was no need to. e had started the

machinery; all we could do now was hope that it ran the course we had laid out instead of jumping the tracks somewhere along the line.

'You still want to go for that ride, John?' rutal asked, 'Yes, sir,' offey said. ' reckon.'

' ood,' ean said. e turned the first lock, removed the key, and seated it in the second.

' o we need to chain you up, John?' asked.

offey appeared to think about this. ' an if you want to,' he said at last. ' on't *need* to.'

nodded at rutal, who opened the cell door, then turned to arry, who was more or less pointing Percy's. at offey as offey emerged from his cell.

' ive those to ean,' said.

arry blinked like someone awakening from a momentary doze, saw Percy's gun and stick still in his hands, and passed them over to ean.

offey, meanwhile, hulked in the corridor with his bald skull almost brushing one of the caged overhead lights. tanding there with his hands in front of him and his shoulders sloped forward to either side of his barrel chest, he made me think again, as had the first time saw him, of a huge captured bear.

'Lock Percy's toys in the duty desk until we get back,' said. ' *f* we get back,' arry added.

' will,' ean said to me, taking no notice of arry.

' nd if someone shows up - probably no one will, but if someone does - what do you say?'

' hat offey got upset around midnight,' ean said. e looked as studious as a college student taking a big exam. ' e had to give him the jacket and but him in the restraint room. f there's noise, who ever hears it'll just think it's him.' e raised his chin to John offey.

' nd what about us?' rutal asked.

'Paul's over in dmin, pulling el's file and going over the witnesses,'

ean said. ' t's especially important this time, because the execution was such a balls-up. e said he'd probably be there the rest of the shift. You and

arry and Percy are over in the laundry, washing your clothes.'

ell, that was what folks said, anyway. here was a crap-game in the laundry supply room some nights; on others it was blackjack or poker or acey-deucey. hatever it was, the guards who participated were said to be

washing their clothes. here was usually moonshine at these get-togethers, and on occasion a joystick would go around the circle. t's been the same in prisons since prisons were invented, suppose. hen you spend your life taking care of mudmen, you can't help getting a little dirty yourself. n any case, we weren't likely to be checked up on. " lothes washing" was treated with great discretion at old Mountain.

' ight with versharp,' said, turning offey around and putting him in motion. ' nd if it all falls down, ean, you. don't know nothing about nothing.'

' hat's easy to say, but - '

t that moment, a skinny arm shot out from between the bars of

harton's cell and grabbed offey's slab of a bicep. e all gasped.

harton should have been dead to the world, all but comatose, yet here he stood, swaying back and forth on his feet like a hard-tagged fighter, grinning blearily.

offey's reaction was remarkable. e didn't pull away, but he also gasped, pulling air in over his teeth like someone who has touched something cold and unpleasant. is eyes widened, and for a moment he looked as if he and dumb had never even met, let alone got up together every morning and lain down together every night. e had looked alive - *there -* when he had wanted me to come into his cell so he could touch me.

elp me, in offeyspeak. e had looked that way again when he'd been holding his hands out for the mouse. Now, for the third time, his face had lit up, as if a spotlight had suddenly been turned on inside his brain. xcept it was different this time. t was *colder* this time, and for the first time wondered what might happen if John offey were suddenly to run amok.

e had our guns, we could shoot him, but actually taking him down might not be easy to do.

saw similar thoughts on rutal's face, but harton just went on grinning his stoned, loose-lipped grin - ' here do you think you're going?' he asked. t came out something like *Wherra fink yerr gone?*

offey stood still, looking first at harton, then at harton's hand, then back into harton's face. could not read that expression. mean could see the intelligence in it, but couldn't *read* it. s for harton, wasn't worried about him at all. e wouldn't remember any of this later; he was like a drunk walking in a blackout.

'You're a bad man,' offey whispered, and couldn't tell what heard in his voice - pain or anger or fear. Maybe all three. offey looked down at the hand on his arm again, the way you might look at a bug which could give you a really nasty bite, had it a mind.

' hat's right, nigger,' harton said with a bleary, cocky smile. ' ad as you'd want.'

was suddenly positive that something awful was going to happen, something that would change the planned course of this early morning as completely as a cataclysmic earthquake can change the course of a river. t was going to happen, and nothing or any of us did would stop it.

hen rutal reached down, plucked harton's hand off John offey's arm, and that feeling stopped. t was as if some potentially dangerous circuit had been broken. told you that in my time in lock, the governor's line never rang. hat was true, but imagine that if it ever had, would have felt the same relief that washed over me when rutal removed

harton's hand from the big man towering beside me. offey's eyes dulled over at once; it was as if the searchlight inside his head had been turned off. 'Lie down, illy,' rutal said. ' ake you some rest.' hat was my usual

line of patter, but under the circumstances, didn't mind rutal using it. 'Maybe will,' harton agreed. e stepped back, swayed, almost went

over, and caught his balance at the last second. ' hoo, daddy. hole room's spinnin around. Like bein drunk.'

e backed toward his bunk, keeping his bleary regard on offey as he went. 'Niggers ought to have they own 'lectric chair,' he opined. hen the backs of his knees struck his bunk and he swooped down onto it. e was snoring before his head touched his thin prison pillow, deep blue shadows brushed under the hollows of his eyes and the tip of his tongue lolling out.

' hrist, how'd he get up with so much dope in him?' ean whispered.

' t doesn't matter, he's out now,' said. ' f he starts to come around, give him another pill dissolved in a glass of water. No more than one, though.

e don't want to kill him.'

' peak for yourself,' rutal rumbled, and gave harton a contemptuous look. 'You can't kill a monkey like him with dope, anyway. hey thrive on it.'

' e's a bad man,' offey said, but in a lower voice this time, as if he was not quite sure of what he was saying, or what it meant.

' hat's right,'. rutal said. 'Most wicked. ut that's not a problem now, because we ain't going to tango with him anymore.' e started walking again, the four of us surrounding offey like worshippers circling an idol that's come to some stumbling kind of half life. ' ell me something, John - do you know where we're taking you?'

' o help,' he said. ' think□ to help□ a lady?' e looked at rutal with hopeful anxiety.

rutal nodded. ' hat's right. ut how do you know that? ow do you

*know?*

John offey considered the question carefully, then shook his head. ' don't know,' he told rutal. ' o tell you the truth, boss, don't know much of anything. Never have.'

nd with that we had to be content.

# 6

had known the little door between the office and the steps down to the storage room hadn't been built with the likes of offey in mind, but hadn't realized how great the disparity was until he stood before it, looking at it thoughtfully.

arry laughed, but John himself seemed to see no humor in the big man standing in front of the little door. e wouldn't have, of course; even if he'd been quite a few degrees brighter than he was, he wouldn't have. e'd been that big man for most of his life, and this door was just a scrap littler than most.

e sat down, scooted through it that way, stood up again, and went down the stairs to where rutal was waiting for him. here he stopped, looking across the empty room at the platform where Old parky waited, as silent - and as eerie - as the throne m the castle of a dead king. he cap hung with hollow jauntiness from one of the back-posts, looking less like a king's crown than a jester's cap, however, something a fool would wear, or shake to make his high-born audience laugh harder at his jokes. he chair's shadow, elongated and spidery, climbed one wall like a threat. nd yes, thought could still smell burned flesh in the air. t was faint, but thought it was more than just my imagination.

arry ducked through the door, then me. didn't like the frozen, wide- eyed way John was looking at Old parky. ven less did like what saw

on his arms when got close to him: goosebumps.

' ome on, big boy,' said. took his wrist and attempted to pull him in the direction of the door leading down to the tunnel. t first he wouldn't go, and might as well have been trying to pull a boulder out of the ground with my bare hands.

' ome on, John, we gotta go, 'less you want the coach-and-four to turn back into a pumpkin,' arry said, giving his nervous laugh again. e took John's other arm and tugged, but John still wouldn't come. nd then he said something in a low and dreaming voice. t wasn't me he was speaking to, it wasn't any of us, but have still never forgotten it.

' hey're still in there. Pieces of them, still in there. hear them screaming.'

arry's nervous chuckles ceased, leaving him with a smile that hung on his mouth like a crooked shutter hangs on an empty house. rutal gave me a look that was almost terrified, and stepped away from John offey. or the second time in less than five minutes, sensed the whole enterprise on the verge of collapse. his time was the one who stepped in; when disaster threatened a third time, a little later on, it would be arry. e all got our chance that night, believe me.

slid in between John and his view of the chair, standing on my tiptoes to make sure was completely blocking his sight-line. hen snapped my fingers in front of his eyes, twice, sharply.

' ome on!' said. ' alk! You said you didn't need to be chained, now prove it! alk, big boy! alk, John offey! Over there! hat door!'

is eyes cleared. 'Yes, boss.' nd praise od, he began to walk. 'Look at the door, John offey, just at the door and nowhere else.' 'Yes, boss.' John fixed his eyes obediently on the door.

' rutal,' said, and pointed.

e hurried in advance, shaking out his keyring, finding the right one. John kept his gaze fixed on the door to the tunnel and kept my gaze fixed on John, but from the comer of one eye could see arry throwing nervous glances at the chair, as if he had never seen it before in his life.

*There are pieces of them still in there□ hear them screaming.*

f that was true, then duard elacroix had to be screaming longest and loudest of all, and was glad couldn't hear what John offey did.

rutal opened the door. e went down the stairs with offey in the lead.

t the bottom, he looked glumly down the tunnel, with its low brick ceiling.

e was going to have a crick in his back by the time we got to the other end, unless - pulled the gurney over. he sheet upon which we'd laid el had been stripped (and probably incinerated), so the gurney's black leather pads were visible. ' et on,' told John. e looked at me doubtfully, and nodded encouragement. ' t'll be easier for you and no harder for us.'

'Okay, oss dgecombe.' e sat down, then lay back, looking up at us with worried brown eyes. is feet, clad in cheap prison slippers, dangled almost all the way to the floor. rutal got in between them and pushed John

offey along the dank corridor as he had pushed so many others. he only difference was that the current rider was still breathing. bout halfway along - under the highway, we would have been, and able to hear the muffled drone of passing cars, had there been any at that hour - John began to smile. ' ay,' he said, 'this is fun.' e wouldn't think so the next time he rode the gurney; that was the thought which crossed my mind. n fact, the next time he rode the gurney, he wouldn't think or feel anything. Or would he? here are pieces of them still in there, he had said; he could hear them screaming.

alking behind the others and unseen by them, shivered.

' hope you remembered laddin, oss dgecombe,' rutal said as we reached the far end of the tunnel.

' on't worry,' said. laddin looked no different from the other keys carried in those days - and had a bunch that must have weighed four pounds - but it was the master key of master keys, the one that opened everything. here was one laddin key for each of the five cellblocks in those days, each the property of the block super. Other guards could borrow it, but only the bull-goose screw didn't have to sign it out.

here was a steel-barred gate at the far end of the tunnel. t always reminded me of pictures 'd seen of old castles; you know, in days of old when knights were bold and chivalry was in flower. Only old Mountain was a long way from amelot. eyond the gate, a flight of stairs led up to an unobtrusive bulkhead-style door with signs reading no trespassing and state property and electrified wire on the outside.

opened the gate and arry swung it back. e went up, John offey once more in the lead, shoulders slumped and head bent. t the top, arry got around him (not without some difficulty, either, although he was the smallest of the three of us) and unlocked the bulkhead. t was heavy. e could move it, but wasn't able to flip it up.

' ere, boss,' John said. e pushed to the front again - bumping arry into the wall with one hip as he did so - and raised the bulkhead with one hand. You would have thought it was painted cardboard instead of sheet steel.

old night air, moving with the ridge-running wind we would now get most of the time until March or pril, blew down into our faces. swirl of dead leaves came with it, and John offey caught one of them with his free hand. will never forget the way he looked at it, or how he crumpled it beneath his broad, handsome nose so it would release its smell.

' ome on,' rutal said. 'Let's go, forward harch.'

e climbed out. John lowered the bulkhead and rutal locked it - no need for the laddin key on this door, but it was needed to unlock the gate in the pole-and-wire cage which surrounded the bulkhead.

' ands to your sides while you go through, big fella,' arry murmured. ' on't touch the wire, if you don't want a nasty bum.'

hen we were clear, standing on the shoulder of the road in a little cluster (three foothills around a mountain is what imagine we looked like), staring across at the walls and lights and guard-towers of old Mountain Penitentiary. could actually see the vague shape of a guard inside one of those towers, blowing on his hands, but only for a moment; the road-facing windows in the towers were small and unimportant. till, we would have to be very, very quiet. nd if a car *did* come along now, we could be in deep trouble.

' ome on,' whispered. 'Lead the way, arry.'

e slunk north along the highway in a little congaline, arry first, then John offey, then rutal, then me. e breasted the first rise and walked down the other side, where all we could see of the prison was the bright glow of the lights in the tops of the trees. nd still arry led us onward.

' here'd you park it?' rutal stage-whispered, vapor puffing from his mouth in a white cloud. ' altimore?'

' t's right up ahead,' arry replied, sounding nervous and irritable. ' old your damn water, rutus.'

ut offey, from what 'd seen of him, would have been happy to walk until the sun came up, maybe until it went back down again. e looked everywhere, starting - not in fear but in delight, am quite sure - when an owl hoo'd. t came to me that, while he might be afraid of the dark inside, he wasn't afraid of it out here, not at all. e was caressing the night, rubbing

his senses across it the way a man might rub his face across the swells and concavities of a woman's breasts.

' e turn here,' arry muttered.

little finger of road - narrow, unpaved, weeds running up the center crown - angled off to the right. e turned up this and walked another quarter of a mile. rutal was beginning to grumble again when arry stopped, went to the left side of the track, and began to remove sprays of broken-off pine boughs. John and rutal pitched in, and before could join them, they had uncovered the dented snout of an old armall truck, its wired-on headlights staring at us like buggy eyes.

' wanted to be as careful as could, you know,' arry said to rutal in a thin, scolding voice. ' his may be a big joke to you, rutus owell, but come from a very religious family, got cousins back in the hollers so damn holy they make the hristians look like lions, and if get caught playing at something like this -!'

' t's okay,' rutal said. ' 'm just jumpy, that's all.'

'Me too,' arry said stiffly. 'Now if this cussed old thing will just start - '

e walked around the hood of the truck, still muttering, and rutal tipped me a wink. s far as offey was concerned, we had ceased to exist. is head was tilted back and he was drinking in the sight of the stars sprawling across the sky.

' 'll ride in back with him, if you want,' rutal offered. ehind us, the

armall's starter whined briefly, sounding like an old dog trying to find its feet on a cold winter morning; then the engine exploded into life. arry raced it once and let it settle into a ragged idle. 'No need for both of us to do it.'

' et up front,' said. 'You can ride with him on the return trip. f we don't end up making that one locked into the back of our own stagecoach, that is.' ' on't talk that way,' he said, looking genuinely upset. t was as if he had realized for the first time how serious this would be for us if we were

caught. ' hrist, Paul!'

' o on,' said. ' n the cab.'

e did as he was told. yanked on John offey's arm until could get his attention back to earth for a bit, then led him around to the rear of the truck, which was stake-sided. arry had draped canvas over the posts, and that would be of some help if we passed cars or trucks going the other way. e hadn't been able to do anything about the open back, though.

' psy-daisy, big boy,' said. ' oin for the ride now?'

' hat's right.'

' ood.' e smiled. t was sweet and lovely, that smile, perhaps the more so because it wasn't complicated by much in the way of thought. e got up in back. followed him, went to the front of the truckbed, and banged on top of the cab. arry ground the transmission into first and the truck pulled out of the little bower he had hidden it in, shaking and juddering.

John offey stood spread-legged in the middle of the truckbed head cocked up at the stars again, smiling broadly, unmindful of the boughs that whipped at him as arry turned his truck toward the highway. 'Look, boss!' he cried in a low, rapturous voice, pointing up into the black night. ' t's

assie, the lady in the rockin chair!'

e was right; could see her in the lane of stars between the dark bulk of the passing trees. ut it wasn't assiopeia thought of when he spoke of the lady in the rocking chair; it was Melinda Moores.

' see her, John,' said, and tugged on his arm. ' ut you have to sit down now, all right?'

e sat with his back against the cab, never taking his eyes off the night sky. On his face was a look of sublime unthinking happiness. he reen Mile fell farther behind us with each revolution of the armall's bald tires, and for the time being, at least, the seemingly endless flow of John offey's tears had stopped.

# 7

t was twenty-five miles to al Moores's house on himney idge, and in arry erwilliger's slow and rattly farm truck, the trip took over an hour.

t was an eerie ride, and although it seems to me now that every moment of it is still etched in my memory - every turn, every bump, every dip, the scary times (two of them) when trucks passed us going the other way - don't think could come even close to describing how felt, sitting back there with John offey, both of us bundled up like ndians in the old blankets arry had been thoughtful enough to bring along.

t was, most of all, a sense of *lostness* - the deep and terrible ache a child feels when he realizes he has gone wrong somewhere, all the landmarks are strange, and he no longer knows how to find his way home. was out in the

night with a prisoner - not just *any* prisoner, but one who had been tried and convicted for the murder of two little girls, and sentenced to die for the crime. My belief that he was innocent wouldn't matter if we were caught; we would go to jail ourselves, and probably ean tanton would, too. had thrown over a life of work and belief because of one bad execution and because believed the overgrown lummox sitting beside me might be able to cure a woman's inoperable brain tumor. Yet watching john watch the stars, realized with dismay that no longer *did* believe that, if ever really had; my urinary infection seemed faraway and unimportant now, as such harsh and painful things always do once they are past (if a woman could really remember how bad it hurt to have her first baby, my mother once said, she'd never have a second). s for Mr. Jingles, wasn't it possible, even likely, that we had been wrong about how badly Percy had hurt him? Or that John - who really did have some kind of hypnotic power, there was no doubt of that much, at least - had somehow fooled us into thinking we'd seen something we hadn't seen at all? hen there was the matter of al Moores. On the day 'd surprised him in his office, 'd encountered a palsied, weepy old man. ut didn't think that was the truest side of the warden. thought the real arden Moores was the man who'd once broken the wrist of a skatehound who tried to stab him; the man who had pointed out to me with cynical accuracy that elacroix's nuts were going to cook no matter who was out front on the execution team. id think that al Moores would stand meekly aside and let us bring a convicted child- murderer into his house to lay hands on his wife?

My doubt grew like a sickness as we rode along. simply did not understand why had done the things had, or why 'd persuaded the others to go along with me on this crazy night journey, and did not believe we had a chance of getting away with it - not a hound's chance of heaven, as the oldtimers used to say. Yet made no effort to cry it off, either, which might have been able to do; things wouldn't pass irrevocably out of our hands until we showed up at Moores's house. omething - think it might have been no more than the waves of exhilaration coming off the giant sitting next to me - kept me from hammering on top of the cab and yelling at arry to turn around and go back to the prison while there was still time.

uch was my frame of mind as we passed off the highway and onto

ounty , and from ounty onto himney idge oad. ome fifteen

minutes after that, saw the shape of a roof blotting out the stars and knew we had arrived.

arry shifted down from second to low ( think he only made it all the way into top gear once during the whole trip). he engine lugged, sending a shudder through the whole truck, as if it, too, dreaded what now lay directly ahead of us.

arry swung into Moores's gravelled driveway and parked the grumbling truck behind the warden's sensible black uick. head and slightly to our right was a neat-as-a-pin house in the style which believe is called ape

od. hat sort of house should have looked out of place in our ridge country, perhaps, but it didn't. he moon had come up, its grin a little fatter this morning, and by its light could see that the yard, always so beautifully kept, now looked uncared for. t was just leaves, mostly, that hadn't been raked away. nder normal circumstances that would have been Melly's job, but Melly hadn't been up to any leaf-raking this fall, and she would never see the leaves fall again. hat was the truth of the matter, and had been mad to think this vacant-eyed idiot could change it.

Maybe it still wasn't too late to save ourselves, though. made as if to get up, the blanket 'd been wearing slipping off my shoulders. would lean over, tap on the driver's-side window, tell arry to get the hell out before -

John offey grabbed my forearm in one of his hamhock fists, pulling me back down as effortlessly as might have done to a toddler. 'Look, boss,' he said, pointing. ' omeone's up.'

followed the direction of his finger and felt a sinking - not just of the belly, but of the heart. here was a spark of light in one of the back windows. he room where Melinda now spent her days and nights, most likely; she would be no more capable of using the stairs than she would of going out to rake the leaves which had fallen during the recent storm.

hey'd heard the truck, of course - arry erwilliger's goddam armall, its engine bellowing and farting down the length of an exhaust pipe unencumbered by anything so frivolous as a muffler. ell, the Mooreses probably weren't sleeping that well these nights, anyway.

light closer to the front of the house went on (the kitchen), then the living-room overhead, then the one in the front hall, then the one over the stoop. watched these forward-marching lights the way a man standing against a cement wall and smoking his last cigarette might watch the lockstep approach of the firing squad. Yet did not entirely acknowledge to

myself even then that it was too late until the uneven chop of the armall's engine faded into silence, and the doors creaked, and the gravel crunched as

arry and rutal got out.

John was up, pulling me with him. n the dim light, his face looked lively and eager. hy not? remember thinking. hy shouldn't he look eager?

e's a fool.

rutal and arry were standing shoulder to shoulder at the foot of the truck, like kids in a thunderstorm, and saw that both of them looked as scared, confused, and uneasy as felt. hat made me feel even worse.

John got down. or him it was more of a step than a jump. followed, stiff-legged and miserable. would have sprawled on the cold gravel if he hadn't caught me by the arm.

' his is a mistake,' rutal said in a hissy little voice. is eyes were very wide and very frightened. ' hrist lmighty, Paul, what were we thinking?'

' oo late now,' said. pushed one of offey's hips, and he went obediently enough to stand beside arry. hen grabbed rutal's elbow like this was a date we were on and got the two of us walking toward the stoop where that light was now burning. 'Let me do the talking. nderstand?'

'Yeah,' rutal said. ' ight now that's just about the only thing *do*

understand.'

looked back over my shoulder. ' arry, stay by the truck with him until call for you. don't want Moores to see him until 'm ready.' xcept was never going to be ready. knew that now.

rutal and had just reached the foot of the steps when the front door was hauled open hard enough to flap the brass knocker against its plate.

here stood al Moores in blue pajama pants and a strapstyle tee-shirt, his iron-gray hair standing up in tufts and twists. e was a man who had made a thousand enemies over the course of his career, and he knew it. lasped in his right hand, the abnormally long barrel not quite pointing at the floor, was the pistol which had always been mounted over the mantel. t was the sort of gun known as a Ned untline pecial, it had been his grandfather's, and right then ( saw this with a further sinking in my gut) it was fully cocked.

' ho the hell goes there at two-thirty in the goddam morning?' he asked.

heard no fear at all in his voice. nd - for the time being, at least - his shakes had stopped. he hand holding the gun was as steady as a stone. ' nswer me, or - ' he barrel of the gun began to rise.

' top it, arden!' rutal raised his hands, palms out, toward the man with the gun. have never heard his voice sound the way it did then; it was as if the shakes turned out of Moores's hands had somehow found their way into

rutus owell's throat. ' t's us! t's Paul and me and□ it's us!'

e took the first step up, so that the light over the stoop could fall fully on his face, joined him. al Moores looked back and forth between us, his angry determination giving way to bewilderment. ' hat are you doing here?' he asked. 'Not only is it the shank of the morning, you boys have the duty. know you do, 've got the roster pinned up in my workshop. o what in the name of□ oh, Jesus. t's not a lockdown, is it? Or a riot?' e looked between us, and his gaze sharpened. ' ho else is down by that truck?'

*Let me do the talking.* o had instructed rutal, but now the time to talk was here and couldn't even open my mouth. On my way into work that afternoon had carefully planned out what was going to say when we got here, and had thought that it didn't sound too crazy. Not normal - nothing about it was normal - but maybe *close enough* to normal to get us through the door and give us a chance. ive *ohn* a chance. ut now all my carefully rehearsed words were lost in a roaring confusion. houghts and images - el burning, the mouse dying, oot jerking in Old parky's lap and screaming that he was a done tom turkey - whirled inside my head like sand caught in a dust-devil. believe there is good in the world, all of it flowing in one way or another from a loving od. ut believe there's another force as well, one every bit as real as the od have prayed to my whole life, and that it works consciously to bring all our decent impulses to ruin. Not atan, don't mean atan (although believe he is real, too), but a kind of demon of discord, a prankish and stupid thing that laughs with glee when an old man sets himself on fire trying to light his pipe or when a much-loved baby puts its first hristmas toy in its mouth and chokes to death on it. 've had a lot of years to think on this, all the way from old Mountain to eorgia Pines, and believe that force was actively at work among us on that morning, swirling everywhere like a fog, trying to keep John offey away from Melinda Moores.

' arden□ al□ □ ' Nothing tried made any sense.

e raised the pistol again, pointing it between rutal and me, not listening. is bloodshot eyes had gotten very wide. nd here came arry

erwilliger, being more or less pulled along by our big boy, who was wearing his wide and daffily charming smile.

' offey,' Moores breathed. 'John offey.' e pulled in breath and yelled in a voice that was reedy but strong: ' alt! alt right there, or shoot!'

rom somewhere behind him, a weak and wavery female voice called: ' al? hat are you doing out there? ho are you talking to, you fucking cocksucker?'

e turned in that direction for just a moment, his face confused and despairing. Just a moment, as say, but it should have been long enough for me to snatch the long-barrelled gun out of his hand. xcept couldn't lift my own hands. hey might have had weights tied to them. My head seemed full of static, like a radio trying to broadcast during an electrical storm. he only emotions remember feeling were fright and a kind of dull embarrassment for al.

arry and John offey reached the foot of the steps. Moores turned away from the sound of his wife's voice and raised the gun again. e said later that yes, he fully intended to shoot offey; he suspected we were all prisoners, and that the brains behind whatever was happening were back by the truck, lurking in the shadows. e didn't understand why we should have been brought to his house, but revenge seemed the most likely possibility.

efore he could shoot, arry erwilliger stepped up ahead of offey and then moved in front of him, shielding most of his body. offey didn't make him do it; arry did it on his own.

'No, arden Moores!' he said. ' t's all right! No one's armed, no one's going to get hurt, we're here to help!'

' elp?' Moores's tangled, tufted eyebrows drew together. is eyes blazed.

couldn't take my eyes off the cocked hammer of the untline. ' elp *what?*

elp *who?*'

s if in answer, the old woman's voice rose again, querulous and certain and utterly lost: ' ome in here and poke my mudhole, you son of a bitch!

ring your asshole friends, too! Let them all have a turn!'

looked at rutal, shaken to my soul. 'd understood that she swore - that the tumor was somehow *making* her swear - but this was more than swearing. lot more.

' hat are you doing here?' Moores asked us again. lot of the determination had gone out of his voice - his wife's wavering cries had done that. ' don't understand. s it a prison break, or□ '

John set arry aside - just picked him up and moved him over - and then climbed to the stoop. e stood between rutal and me, so big he almost

pushed us off either side and into Melly's holly bushes. Moores's eyes turned up to follow him, the way a person's eyes do when he's trying to see the top of a tall tree. nd suddenly the world fell back into place for me.

hat spirit of discord, which had jumbled my thoughts like powerful fingers sifting through sand or grains of rice, was gone. thought also understood why arry had been able to act when rutal and could only stand, hopeless and indecisive, in front of our boss. arry had been with John□ and whatever spirit it is that opposes that other, demonic one, it was in John

offey that night. nd, when John stepped forward to face arden Moores, it was that other spirit - something white, that's how think of it, as something white - which took control of the situation. he other thing didn't leave, but could see it drawing back like a shadow in a sudden strong light.

' want to help,' John offey said. Moores looked up at him, eyes fascinated, mouth hanging open. hen offey plucked the untline pecial from his hand and passed it to me, don't think al even knew it was gone.

carefully lowered the hammer. Later, when checked the cylinder, would find it had been empty all along. ometimes wonder if al knew that. Meanwhile, John was still murmuring. ' came to help her. Just to help.

hat's all want.'

' al!' she cried from the back bedroom. er voice sounded a little stronger now, but it also sounded afraid, as if the thing which had so confused and unmanned us had now retreated to her. 'Make them go away, whoever they are! e don't need no sales men in the middle of the night! No lectrolux! No oover! No rench knickers with come in the crotch!

et them out! ell them to take a flying fuck at a rolling d□ d□ ' omething broke - it could have been a waterglass - and then she began to sob.

'Just to help,' John offey said in a voice so low it was hardly more than a whisper. e ignored the woman's sobbing and profanity equally. 'Just to help, boss, that's all.'

'You can't,' Moores said. 'No one can.' t was a tone 'd heard before, and after a moment realized it was how 'd sounded myself when 'd gone into

offey's cell the night he cured my urinary infection. ypnotized. *You mind your business and ll mind mine* was what 'd told elacroix□ except it had been *Coffey* who'd been minding my business, just as he was minding al Moores's now.

' e think he can,' rutal said. ' nd we didn't risk our jobs - plus a stretch in the can ourselves, maybe - just to get here and turn around and go back without giving it the old college try.'

Only had been ready to do just that three minutes before. rutal, too.

John offey took the play out of our hands. e pushed into the entry and past Moores, who raised a single strengthless hand to stop him (it trailed across offey's hip and fell off; 'm sure the big man never even felt it), and then shuffled down the hall toward the living room, the kitchen beyond it, and the back bedroom beyond that where that shrill unrecognizable voice raised itself again: 'You stay out of here! hoever you are, just stay out! 'm not dressed, my tits are out and my bitchbox is taking the breeze!'

John paid no attention, just went stolidly along, head bent so he wouldn't smash any of the light fixtures, his round brown skull gleaming, his hands swinging at his sides. fter a moment we followed him, me first, rutal and

al side by side, and arry bringing up the rear. understood one thing perfectly well: it was all out of our hands now, and in John's.

# 8

he woman in the back bedroom, propped up against the headboard and staring wall-eyed at the giant who had come into her muddled sight, didn't look at all like the Melly Moores had known for twenty years; she didn't even look like the Melly Moores Janice and had visited shortly before

elacroix's execution. he woman propped up in that bed looked like a sick child got up as a alloween witch. er livid skin was a hanging dough of wrinkles. t was puckered up around the eye on the right side, as if she were trying to wink. hat same side of her mouth turned down, one old yellow eyetooth hung out over her liverish lower lip. er hair was a wild thin fog around her skull. he room stank of the stuff our bodies dispose of with such decorum when things are running right. he chamberpot by her bed was half full of some vile yellowish goo. e had come too late anyway, thought, horrified. t had only been a matter of days since she had been recognizable - sick but still herself ince then, the thing in her head must have moved with horrifying speed to consolidate its position. didn't think even John offey could help her now.

er expression when offey entered was one of fear and horror - as if something inside her had recognized a doctor that might be able to get at it

and pry it loose, after all□ to sprinkle salt on it the way you do on a leech to make it let go its grip. ear me carefully: 'm not saying that Melly Moores was possessed, and 'm aware that, wrought up as was, all my perceptions of that night must be suspect. ut have never completely discounted the possibility of demonic possession, either. here was something in her eyes,

tell you, something that looked like fear. On that think you can trust me; it's an emotion 've seen too much of to mistake.

hatever it was, it was gone in a hurry, replaced by a look of lively, irrational interest. hat unspeakable mouth trembled in what might have been a smile.

'Oh, so big!' she cried. he sounded like a little girl just coming down with a bad throat infection. he took her hands - as spongy-white as her face - out from under the counterpane and patted them together. 'Pull down your pants! 've heard about nigger-cocks my whole life but never seen one!'

ehind me, Moores made a soft groaning sound, full of despair.

John offey paid no attention to any of it. fter standing still for a moment, as if to observe her from a little distance, he crossed to the bed, which was illuminated by a single bedside lamp. t threw a bright circle of light on the white counterpane drawn up to the lace at the throat of her nightgown. eyond the bed, in shadow, saw the chaise longue which belonged in the parlor. n afghan Melly had knitted with her own hands in happier days lay half on the chaise and half on the floor. t was here al had been sleeping - dozing, at least - when we pulled in.

s John approached, her expression underwent a third change. uddenly

saw Melly, whose kindness had meant so much to me over the years, and even more to Janice when the kids had flown from the nest and she had been left feeling so alone and useless and blue. Melly was still interested, but now her interest seemed sane and aware.

' ho are you?' she asked in a clear, reasonable voice. ' nd why have you so many scars on your hands and arms? ho hurt you so badly?'

' don't hardly remember where they all come from, ma'am,' John offey said in a humble voice, and sat down beside her on her bed.

Melinda smiled as well as she could - the sneering right side of her mouth trembled, but wouldn't quite come up. he touched a white scar, curved like a scimitar, on the back of his left hand. ' hat a blessing that is!

o you understand why?'

' eckon if you don't know who hurt you or dog you down, it don't keep you up nights,' John offey said in his almost- outhern voice.

he laughed at that, the sound as pure as silver in the bad-smelling sickroom. al was beside me now, breathing rapidly but not trying to interfere. hen Melly laughed, his rapid breathing paused for a moment, indrawn, and one of his big hands gripped my shoulder. e gripped it hard enough to leave a bruise - saw it the next day - but right then hardly felt it.

' hat's your name?' she asked. 'John offey, ma'am.'

' offey like the drink.'

'Yes, ma'am, only spelled different.'

he lay back against her pillows, propped up but not quite sitting up, looking at him. e sat beside her, looking back, and the light from the lamp circled them like they were actors on a stage - the hulking black man in the prison overall and the small dying white woman. he stared into John's eyes with shining fascination.

'Ma'am?'

'Yes, John offey?' he words barely breathed, barely slipping to us on the bad-smelling, air. felt the muscles bunching on my arms and legs and back. omewhere, far away, could feel the warden clutching my arm, and to the side of my vision could see arry and rutal with their arms around each other, like little kids lost in the night. omething was going to happen.

omething big. e each felt it in our own way.

John offey bent closer to her. he springs of the bed creaked, the bedclothes rustled, and the coldly smiling moon looked in through an upper pane of the bedroom window. offey's bloodshot eyes searched her upturned haggard face.

' see it,' he said. peaking not to her - don't think so, anyway - but to himself. ' see it, and can help. old still□ hold right still□ '

loser he bent, and closer still. or a moment his huge face stopped less

than two inches from hers. e raised one hand off to the side, fingers splayed, as if telling something to wait□ just wait□ and then he lowered his face again. is broad, smooth lips pressed against hers and forced them open. or a moment could see one of her eyes, staring up past offey, filling with an expression of what seemed to be surprise. hen his smooth bald head moved, and that was gone, too.

here was a soft whistling sound as he inhaled the air which lay deep within her lungs. hat was all for a second or two, and then the floor moved under us and the whole house moved around us. t wasn't my imagination; they all felt it, they all remarked on it later. t was a kind of rippling thump.

here was a crash as something very heavy fell over in the parlor - the grandfather clock, it turned out to be. al Moores tried to have it repaired, but it never kept time for more than fifteen minutes at a stretch again.

loser by there was a crack followed by a tinkle as the pane of glass through which the moon had been peeking broke. picture on the wall - a clipper ship cruising one of the seven seas - fell off its hook and crashed to the floor; the glass over its front shattered.

smelled something hot and saw smoke rising from the bottom of the white counterpane which covered her. portion was turning black, down by the jittering lump that was her right foot. eeling like a man in a dream, shook free of Moores's hand and stepped to the night-table. here was a glass of water there, surrounded by three or four bottles of pills which had fallen over during the shake. picked up the water and dumped it on the place that was smoking. here was a hiss.

John offey went on kissing her in that deep and intimate way, inhaling and inhaling, one hand still held out, the other on the bed, propping up his immense weight. he fingers were splayed; the hand looked to me like a brown starfish.

uddenly, her back arched. One of her own hands flailed out in the air, the fingers clenching and unclenching in a series of spasms. er feet drummed against the bed. hen something screamed. gain, that's not just me; the other men heard it, as well. o rutal it sounded like a wolf or coyote with its leg caught in a trap. o me it sounded like an eagle, the way you'd sometimes hear them on still mornings back then, cruising down through the misty cuts with their wings stiffly spread.

Outside, the wind gusted hard enough to give the house a second shake - and that was strange, you know, because until then there had been no wind to speak of at all.

John offey pulled away from her, and saw that her face had smoothed out. he right side of her mouth no longer drooped. er eyes had regained their normal shape, and she looked ten years younger. e regarded her raptly for a moment or two, and then he began to cough. e turned his head so as not to cough in her face, lost his balance (which wasn't hard; big as he

was, he'd been sitting with his butt halfway off the side of the bed to start with), and went down onto the floor. here was enough of him to give the house a third shake. e landed on his knees and hung his head over, coughing like a man in the last stages of .

thought, *Now the bugs. e s going to cough them out, and what a lot there ll be this time.*

ut he didn't. e only went on coughing in deep retching barks, hardly finding time between fits to snatch in the next breath of air. is dark, chocolatey skin was graying out. larmed, rutal went to him, dropped to one knee beside him, and put an arm across his broad, spasming back. s if

rutal's moving had broken a spell, Moores went to his wife's bed and sat where offey had sat. e hardly seemed to register the coughing, choking giant's presence at all. lthough offey was kneeling at his very feet, Moores had eyes only for his wife, who was gazing at him with amazement. Looking at her was like looking at a dirty mirror which has been wiped clean.

'John!' rutal shouted. ' ick it up! ick it up like you done before!'

John went on barking those choked coughs. is eyes were wet, not with tears but with strain. pit flew from his mouth in a fine spray, but nothing else came out.

rutal whammed him on the back a couple of times, then looked around at me. ' e's choking! hatever he sucked out of her, he's choking on it!'

started forward. efore got two steps, John knee-walked away from me and into the corner of the room, still coughing harshly and dragging for each breath. e laid his forehead against the wallpaper - wild red roses overspreading a garden wall - and made a gruesome deep hacking sound, as if he were trying to vomit up the lining of his own throat. hat'll bring the bugs if anything can, remember thinking, but there was no sign of them.

ll the same, his coughing fit seemed to ease a little.

' 'm all right, boss,' he said, still leaning with his forehead against the wild roses. is eyes remained closed. 'm not sure how he knew was there, but he clearly did. ' onest am. ee to the lady.'

looked at him doubtfully, then turned to the bed. al was stroking Melly's brow, and saw an amazing thing above it: some of her hair - not very much, but some - had gone back to black.

' hat's happened?' she asked him. s watched, color began to blush into her cheeks. t was as if she had stolen a couple of roses right out of the

wallpaper. ' ow did get here? e were going to the hospital up in

ndianola, weren't we? doctor was going to shoot -rays into my head and take pictures of my brain.'

' hhh,' al said. ' hhh, dearie, none of that matters now.'

' ut don't *understand!* she nearly wailed, ' e stopped at a roadside stand□ you bought me a dime packet of posies□ and then□ 'm here. t's dark! ave you had your supper, al? hy am in the guest room? id have the -ray?' er eyes moved across arry almost without seeing him - that was shock, imagine - and fixed on me. 'Paul? id have the -ray?'

'Yes,' said. ' t was clear.' ' hey didn't find a tumor?'

'No,' said. ' hey say the headaches will likely stop now.'

eside her, al burst into tears.

he sat forward and kissed his temple. hen her eyes moved to the comer. ' ho is that Negro man? hy is he in the corner?'

turned and saw John trying to get up on his feet. rutal helped him and John made it with a final lunge. e stood facing the wall, though, like a child who has been bad. e was still coughing in spasms, but these seemed to be weakening now.

'John,' said. ' urn around, big boy, and see this lady.'

e slowly turned. is face was still the color of ashes, and he looked ten years older, like a once powerful man at last losing a long battle with consumption. is eyes were cast down on his prison slippers, and he looked as if he wished for a hat to wring.

' ho are you?' she asked again. ' hat's your name?'

'John offey, ma'am,' he said, to which she immediately replied, ' ut not spelled like the drink.'

al started beside her. he felt it, and patted his hand reassuringly without taking her eyes from the black man.

' dreamed of you,' she said in a soft, wondering voice. ' dreamed you were wandering in the dark, and so was . e found each other.'

John offey said nothing.

' e found each other in the dark,' she said. ' tand up, al, you're pinning me in here.'

e got up and watched with disbelief as she turned back the counterpane. 'Melly, you can't - '

' on't be silly,' she said, and swung her legs out. 'Of course can.' he smoothed her nightgown, stretched, then got to her feet.

'My od,' al whispered. 'My dear od in heaven, *look* at her.'

he went to John offey. rutal stood away from her, an awed expression on his face. he limped with the first step, did no more than favor her right leg a bit with the second, and then even that was gone. remembered rutal handing the colored spool to elacroix and saying, ' oss it - want to see how he runs.' Mr. Jingles had limped then, but on the next night, the night el walked the Mile, he had been fine.

Melly put her arms around John and hugged him. offey stood there for a moment, letting himself be hugged, and then he raised one hand and stroked the top of her head. his he did with infinite gentleness. is face was still gray. thought he looked dreadfully sick.

he stood away from him, her face turned up to his. ' hank you.' ' ight welcome, ma'am.'

he turned to al and walked back to him. e put his arms around her. 'Paul - ' t was arry. e held his right wrist out to me and tapped the

face of his watch. t was pressing on to three o'clock. Light would start showing by four-thirty. f we wanted to get offey back to old Mountain before that happened, we would have to go soon. nd wanted to get him back. Partly because the longer this went on the worse our chances of getting away with it became, yes, of course. ut also wanted John in a place where could legitimately call a doctor for him, if the need arose. Looking at him, thought it might.

he Mooreses were sitting on the edge of the bed, arms around each other. thought of asking al out into the living room for a private word, then realized could ask until the cows came home and he wouldn't budge from where he was right then. e might be able to take his eyes off her - for a few seconds, at least - by the time the sun came up, but not now.

' al,' said. ' e have to go now.'

e nodded, not looking at me. e was studying the color in his wife's cheeks, the natural unstrained curve of his wife's lips, the new black in his wife's hair.

tapped him on the shoulder, hard enough to get his attention for a moment, at least.

' al, we never came here.' ' hat -?'

' e never came here,' said. 'Later on we'll talk, but for now that's all you need to know. e were never here.'

'Yes, all right□ ' e forced himself to focus on me for a moment, with what was clearly an effort. 'You got him out. an you get him back in?'

' think so. Maybe. ut we need to go.'

' ow did you know he could do this?' hen he shook his head, as if realizing for himself that this wasn't the time. 'Paul□ thank you.'

' on't thank me,' said. ' hank John.'

e looked at John offey, then put out one hand - just as had done on the day arry and Percy escorted John onto the block. ' hank you. hank you so much.'

John looked at the hand. rutal threw a none-too-subtle elbow into his side. John started, then took the hand and gave it a shake. p, down, back to center, release. ' elcome,' he said in a hoarse voice. t sounded to me like Melly's when she had clapped her hands and told John to pull down his pants. ' elcome,' he said to the man who would, in the ordinary course of things, grasp a pen with that hand and then sign John offey's execution order with it.

arry tapped the face of his watch, more urgently this time. ' rute?' said. ' eady?'

' ello, rutus,' Melinda said in a cheerful voice, as if noticing him for the first time. ' t's good to see you. ould you gentlemen like tea? ould you,

al? could make it.' he got up again. ' 've been ill, but feel fine now.

etter than have in years.'

' hank you, Missus Moores, but we have to go,' rutal said. ' t's past John's bedtime.' e smiled to show it was a joke, but the look he gave John was as anxious as felt.

' ell□ if you're sure□ '

'Yes, ma'am. ome on, John offey.' e tugged John's arm to get him going, and John went.

'Just a minute!' Melinda shook free of al's hand and ran as lightly as a girl to where John stood. he put her arms around him and gave him another hug. hen she reached around to the nape of her neck and pulled a fine-link chain out of her bodice. t the end of it was a silver medallion.

he held it out to John, who looked at it uncomprehendingly.

' t's t. hristopher,' she said. ' want you to have it, Mr. offey, and wear it. e'll keep you safe. Please wear it. or me.'

John looked at me, troubled, and looked at al, who first spread his hands and then nodded.

' ake it, John,' said. ' t's a present.'

John took it, slipped the chain around his bullneck, and dropped the t.

hristopher medallion into the front of his shirt. e had completely stopped coughing now, but thought he looked grayer and sicker than ever.

' hank you, ma'am,' he said.

'No,' she replied. ' hank *you*. hank *you*, John offey.'

# 9

rode up in the cab with arry going back, and was damned glad to be there. he heater was broken, but we were out of the open air, at least. e had gone about ten miles when arry spotted a little turnout and veered the truck into it.

' hat is it?' asked. ' s it a bearing?' o my mind, the problem could have been that or anything; every component of the armall's engine and transmission sounded on the verge of going cataclysmically wrong or giving up the ghost entirely.

'Nope,' arry said, sounding apologetic. ' got to take a leak, is all. My back teeth are floatin.'

t turned out that we all did, except for John. hen rutal asked if he wouldn't like to step down and help us water the bushes, he just shook his head without looking up. e was leaning against the back of the cab and wearing one of the rmy blankets over his shoulders like a serape. couldn't get any kind of read on his complexion, but could hear his breathing - dry and raspy, like wind blowing through straw. didn't like it.

walked into a clump of willows, unbuttoned, and let go. was still dose enough to my urinary infection so that the body's amnesia had not taken full hold, and could be grateful simply to be able to pee without needing to scream. stood there, emptying out and looking up at the moon, was hardly aware of rutal standing next to me and doing the same thing until he said in a low voice, ' ell never sit in Old parky.'

looked around at him, surprised and a little frightened by the low certainty in his tone. ' hat do you mean?'

' mean he swallered that stuff instead of spitting out like he done before for a reason. t might take a week-he's awful big and strong - but bet it's quicker. One of us'll do a check-tour and there he'll be, lying dead as stone on his bunk.'

'd thought was done peeing, but at that a little shiver twisted up my back and a little more squirted out. s rebuttoned my fly, thought that what rutal was saying made perfect sense. nd hoped, all in all, that he was right. John offey didn't deserve to die at all, if was right in my reasoning about the etterick girls, but if he *did* die, didn't want it to be by my hand. wasn't sure could lift my hand to do it, if it came to that.

' ome on,' arry murmured out of the dark. ' t's gettin late. Let's get this done.'

s we walked back to the truck, realized we had left John entirely alone

- stupidity on the Percy etmore level. thought that he would be gone; that he'd spat out the bugs as soon as he saw he was unguarded, and had then just lit out for the territories, like uck and Jim on the ig Muddy. ll we would find was the blanket he had been wearing around his shoulders.

ut he was there, still sitting with his back against the cab and his forearms propped on his knees. e looked up at the sound of our approach and tried to give us a smile. t hung there for a moment on his haggard face and then slipped off.

' ow you doing, ig John?' rutal asked, climbing into the back of the truck again and retrieving his own blanket.

' ine, boss,' John said listlessly. ' 's fine.'

rutal patted his knee. ' e'll be back soon. nd when we get squared away, you know what? 'm going to see you get a great big cup of hot coffee. ugar and cream, too.'

You bet, thought, going around to the passenger side of the cab and climbing in. f we don't get arrested and thrown in jail ourselves first.

ut 'd been living with that idea ever since we'd thrown Percy into the restraint room, and it didn't worry me enough to keep me awake. dozed off and dreamed of alvary ill. hunder in the west and a smell that might have been juniper berries. rutal and arry and ean and were standing around in robes and tin hats like in a ecil . eMille movie. e were

enturions, guess. here were three crosses, Percy etmore and duard

elacroix flanking John offey. looked down at my hand and saw was holding a bloody hammer.

*We got to get him down from there,* Paul! rutal screamed. *We got to get him down!*

xcept we couldn't, they'd taken away the stepladder. started to tell

rutal this, and then an extra-hard bounce of the truck woke me up. e were backing into the place where arry had hidden the truck earlier on a day that already seemed to stretch back to the beginning of time.

he two of us got out and went around to the back. rutal hopped down all right, but John offey's knees buckled and he almost fell. t took all three of us to catch him, and he was no more than set solid on his feet again before he went off into another of those coughing fits, this one the worst yet. e bent over, the coughing sounds muffled by the heels of his palms, which he held pressed against his mouth.

hen his coughing eased, we covered the front of the armall with the pine boughs again and walked back the way we had come. he worst part of that whole surreal furlough was - for me, at least - the last two hundred yards, with us scurrying back south along the shoulder of the highway. could see (or thought could) the first faint lightening of the sky in the east, and felt sure some early farmer, out to harvest his pumpkins or dig his last few rows of yams, would come along and see us. nd even if that didn't happen, we would hear someone (in my imagination it sounded like urtis

nderson) shout ' *old it right there!* as used the laddin key to unlock the enclosure around the bulkhead leading to the tunnel. hen two dozen carbine-toting guards would step out of the woods and our little adventure would be over.

y the time we actually got to the enclosure, my heart was whamming so hard that could see little white dots exploding in front of my eyes with each pulse it made. My hands felt cold and numb and faraway, and for the longest time couldn't get the key to go into the lock.

'Oh hrist, headlights!' arry moaned.

looked up and saw brightening fans of light on the road. My keyring almost fell out of my hand; managed to clutch it at the last second.

' ive them to me,' rutal said. ' 'll do it.'

'No, 've got it,' said. he key at last slipped into its slot and turned. moment later we were in. e crouched behind the bulkhead and watched as a unshine read truck went pottering past the prison. eside me could hear John offey's tortured breathing. e sounded like an engine which has almost run out of oil. e had held the bulkhead door up effortlessly for us on our way out, but we didn't even ask him to help this time; it would have been out of the question. rutal and got the door up, and arry led john down the steps. he big man tottered as he went, but he got down. rutal and followed him as fast as we could, then lowered the bulkhead behind us and locked it again.

' hrist, think we're gonna - ' rutal began, but cut him off with a sharp elbow to the ribs.

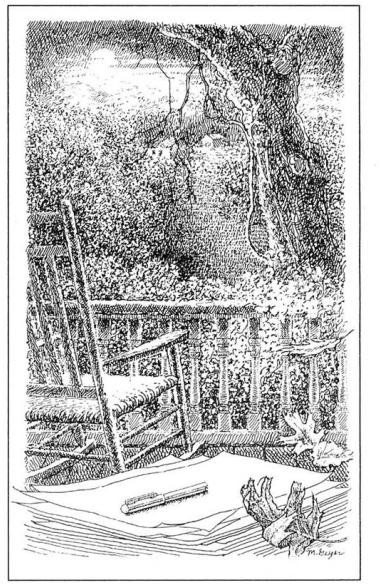
' on't say it,' said. ' on't even think it, until he's safe back in his cell.'

' nd there's Percy to think about,' arry said. Our voices had a flat, echoey quality in the brick tunnel. ' he evening ain't over as long as we got him to contend with.'

s it turned out, our evening was *far* from over.

# Pa t Six

offey on the Mile



# 1

sat in the eorgia Pines sunroom, my father's fountain pen in my hand, and time was lost to me as recalled the night arry and rutal and took John offey off the Mile and to Melinda Moores, in an effort to save her life. wrote about the drugging of illiam harton, who fancied himself the second coming of illy the Kid; wrote of how we stuck Percy in the straitjacket and jugged him in the restraint room at the end of the reen Mile; wrote about our strange night journey - both terrifying and exhilarating - and the miracle that befell at the end of it. e saw John

offey drag a woman back, not just from the edge of her grave, but from what seemed to us to be the very bottom of it.

wrote and was very faintly aware of the eorgia Pines version of life going on around me. Old folks went down to supper, then trooped off to the

esource enter (yes, you are permitted a chuckle) for their evening dose of network sitcoms. seem to remember my friend laine bringing me a sandwich, and thanking her, and eating it, but couldn't tell you what time of the evening she brought it, or what was in it. Most of me was back in

93 , when our sandwiches were usually bought off old oot- oot's rolling gospel snack-wagon, cold pork a nickel, corned beef a dime.

remember the place quieting down as the relics who live here made ready for another night of thin and troubled sleep; heard Mickey - maybe not the best orderly in the place, but certainly the kindest - singing " ed

iver alley" in his good tenor as he went around dispensing the evening meds: *"From this valley they say you are going□ We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile□ "* he song made me think of Melinda again, and what she had said to John after the miracle had happened. *dreamed of you.*

*dreamed you were wandering in the dark, and so was . We found each other.*

eorgia Pines grew quiet, midnight came and passed, and still wrote. got to arry reminding us that, even though we had gotten John back to the prison without being discovered, we still had Percy waiting for us. ' he evening ain't over as long as we got him to contend with' is more or less what arry said.

hat's where my long day of driving my father's pen at last caught up with me. put it down - just for a few seconds, thought, so could flex

some life back into the fingers - and then put my forehead down on my arm and closed my eyes to rest them. hen opened them again and raised my head, morning sun glared in at me through the windows. looked at my watch and saw it was past eight. had slept, head on arms like an old drunk, for what must have been six hours. got up, wincing, trying to stretch some life into my back. thought about going down to the kitchen, getting some toast, and going for my morning walk, then looked down at the sheafs of scribbled pages scattered across the desk. ll at once decided to put off the walk for awhile. had a chore, yes, but it could keep, and didn't feel like playing hide-and-seek with rad olan that morning.

nstead of walking, 'd finish my story. ometimes it's better to push on through, no matter how much your mind and body may protest. ometimes it's the only way to *get* through. nd what remember most about that morning is how desperately wanted to get free of John offey's persistent ghost.

'Okay,' said. 'One more mile. ut first□ '

walked down to the toilet at the end of the second floor hall. s stood inside there, urinating, happened to glance up at the smoke detector on the ceiling. hat made me think of laine, and how she had distracted olan so

could go for my walk and do my little chore the day before. finished peeing with a grin on my face.

walked back to the sunroom, feeling better (and a *lot* comfier in my nether regions). omeone - laine, have no doubt - had set down a pot of tea beside my pages. drank greedily, first one cup, then another, before even sat down. hen resumed my place, uncapped the fountain pen, and once more began to write.

was just slipping fully into my story when a shadow fell on me. looked up and felt a sinking in my stomach. t was olan standing between me and the windows. e was grinning.

'Missed you going on your morning walk, Paulie, he said, 'so thought

'd come and see what you were up to. Make sure you weren't, you know, sick.'

'You're all heart and a mile wide,' said. My voice sounded all right - so far, anyway - but my heart was pounding hard. was afraid of him, and don't think that realization was entirely new. e reminded me of Percy

etmore, and 'd never been afraid of *him*□ but when knew Percy, had been young.

rad's smile widened, but became no less pleasant.

' olks tellin me you been in here all night, Paulie, just writing your little report. Now, that's just no good. Old farts like you need their beauty rest.'

'Percy - ' began, then saw a frown crease his grin and realized my mistake. took a deep breath and began again. ' rad, what have you got against me?'

e looked puzzled for a moment, maybe a bit unsettled. hen the grin returned. 'Old-timer,' he said, 'could be just don't like your face. hat you writin, anyway? Last will n testicles?'

e came forward, craning. slapped my hand over the page 'd been working on. he rest of them began to rake together with my free hand, crumpling some in my hurry to get them under my arm and under cover.

'Now,' he said, as if speaking to a baby, 'that ain't going to work, you old sweetheart. f rad wants to look, rad is going to look. nd you can take that to the everfucking *bank.*'

is hand, young and hideously strong, closed over my wrist, and squeezed. Pain sank into my hand like teeth, and groaned.

'Let go,' managed.

' hen you let me see,' he replied, and he was no longer smiling. is face was cheerful, though; the kind of good cheer you only see on the faces of folks who enjoy being mean. 'Let me see, Paulie. want to know what you're writing.' My hand began to move away from the top page. rom our trip with John back through the tunnel under the road. ' want to see if it has anything to do with where you - '

'Let that man alone.'

he voice was like a harsh whipcrack on a dry, hot day□ and the way

rad olan jumped, you would have thought his ass had been the target. e let go of my hand, which thumped back down on my paperwork, and we both looked toward the door.

laine onnelly was standing there, looking fresh and stronger than she had in days. he wore jeans that showed off her slim hips and long legs; there was a blue ribbon in her hair. he had a tray in her arthritic hands - juice, a scrambled egg, toast, more tea. nd her eyes were blazing.

' hat do you think you're doing?' rad asked. ' e can't eat up here.'

' e can, and he's going to,' she said in that same dry tone of command. had never heard it before, but welcomed it now. looked for fear in her eyes and saw not a speck - only rage. ' nd what you're going to do is get

out of here before you go beyond the cockroach level of nuisance to that of slightly larger vermin - *Rattus Americanus,* let us say!'

e took a step toward her, looking both unsure of himself and absolutely furious. thought it a dangerous combination, but laine didn't flinch as he approached. ' bet know who set off that goddam smoke alarm,' olan said. 'Might could have been a certain old bitch with claws for hands. Now get out of here. Me and Paulie haven't finished our little talk, yet!'

' is name is *Mr. Edgecombe,* she said, 'and if ever hear you call him Paulie again, think can promise you that your days of employment here at eorgia Pines will end, Mr. olan.'

'Just who do you think you are?' he asked her. e was hulking over her, now, trying to laugh and not quite making it.

' think,' she said calmly, 'that am the grandmother of the man who is currently peaker of the eorgia ouse of epresentatives. man who loves his relatives, Mr. olan. specially his *older* relatives.'

he effortful smile dropped off his face the way that writing comes off a blackboard swiped with a wet sponge. saw uncertainty, the possibility that he was being bluffed, the fear that he was not, and a certain dawning logical assumption: it would be easy enough to check, she must know that, ergo she was telling the truth.

uddenly began to laugh, and although the sound was rusty, it was right. was remembering how many times Percy etmore had threatened us with his connections, back in the bad old days. Now, for the first time in my long, long life, such a threat was being made again□ but this time it was being made on my behalf.

rad olan looked at me, glaring, then looked back at her.

' mean it,' laine said. ' t first thought 'd just let you be - 'm old, and that seemed easiest. ut when my friends are threatened and abused, *do not* just let be. Now get out of here. nd without one more word.'

is lips moved like those of a fish - oh, how badly he wanted to say that one more word (perhaps the one that rhymes with *witch).* e didn't, though.

e gave me a final look, and then strode past her and out into the hall.

let out my breath in a long, ragged sigh as laine set the tray down in front of me and then set herself down across from me. ' s your grandson really peaker of the ouse?' asked.

' e really is.'

' hen what are you doing here?'

' peaker of the statehouse makes him powerful enough to deal with a roach like rad olan, but it doesn't make him *rich,*' she said, laughing. ' esides, like it here. like the company.'

' will take that as a compliment,' said, and did.

'Paul, are you all right? You look so tired.' he reached across the table and brushed my hair away from my forehead and eyebrows. er fingers were twisted, but her touch was cool and wonderful. closed my eyes for a moment. hen opened them again, had made a decision.

' 'm all right,' said. ' nd almost finished. laine, would you read something?' offered her the pages had clumsily swept together. hey were probably no longer in the right order - olan really had scared me badly - but they were numbered and she could quickly put them right.

he looked at me consideringly, not taking what was offering. Yet, anyway. ' re you done?'

' t'll take you until afternoon to read what's there,' said. ' f you can make it out at all, that is.'

Now she *did* take the pages, and looked down at them. 'You write with a very fine hand, even when that hand is obviously tired,' she said. ' 'll have no trouble with this.'

' y the time you finish reading, will have finished writing,' said. 'You can read the rest in a half an hour or so. nd then□ if you're still willing□

'd like to show you something.'

' s it to do with where you go most mornings and afternoons?'

nodded.

he sat thinking about it for what seemed a long time, then nodded herself and got up with the pages in her hand. ' 'll go out back,' she said. ' he sun is very warm this morning.'

' nd the dragon's been vanquished,' said. ' his time by the lady fair.'

he smiled, bent, and kissed me over the eyebrow in the sensitive place that always makes me shiver. ' e'll hope so,' she said, 'but in my experience, dragons like rad olan are hard to get rid of.' he hesitated. ' ood luck, Paul. hope you can vanquish whatever it is that has been festering in you.'

' hope so, too,' said, and thought of John offey. *couldn t help it*, John had said. *tried, but it was too late.*

ate the eggs she'd brought, drank the juice, and pushed the toast aside for later. hen picked up my pen and began to write again, for what

hoped would be the last time.

One last mile.

green one.

# 2

hen we brought John back to lock that night, the gurney was a necessity instead of a luxury. very much doubt if he could have made it the length of the tunnel on his own; it takes more energy to walk at a crouch than it does upright, and it was a damned low ceiling for the likes of John

offey. didn't like to think of him collapsing down there. ow would we explain that, on top of trying to explain why we had dressed Percy in the madman's dinner-jacket and tossed him in the restraint room?

ut we had the gurney - thank od - and John offey lay on it like a beached whale as we pushed him back to the storage-room stairs. e got down off it, staggered, then simply stood with his head lowered, breathing harshly. is skin was so gray he looked as if he'd been rolled in flour. thought he'd be in the infirmary by noon□ if he wasn't dead by noon, that was.

rutal gave me a grim, desperate look. gave it right back. ' e can't carry him up, but we can help him,' said. 'You under his right arm, me under his left.'

' hat about me?' arry asked.

' alk behind us. f he looks like going over backward, shove him forward again.'

' nd if that don't work, kinda crouch down where you think he's gonna land and soften the blow,' rutal said.

' osh,' arry said thinly, 'you oughta go on the Orpheum ircuit, rute, that's how funny *you* are.'

' got a sense of humor, all right,' rutal admitted.

n the end, we did manage to get John up the stairs. My biggest worry was that he might faint, but he didn't. ' o around me and check to make sure the storage room's empty,' gasped to arry.

' hat should say if it's not?' arry asked, squeezing under my arm. ' " von calling," and then pop back in here?'

' on't be a wisenheimer,' rutal said.

arry eased the door open a little way and poked his head through. t seemed to me that he stayed that way for a very long time. t last he pulled back, looking almost cheerful. ' oast's clear. nd it's *quiet*.'

'Let's hope it stays that way,' rutal said. ' ome on, John offey, almost home.'

e was able to cross the storage room under his own power, but we had to help him up the three steps to my office and then almost push him through the little door. hen he got to his feet again, he was breathing stertorously, and his eyes had a glassy sheen. lso - noticed this with real horror - the right side of his mouth had pulled down, making it look like Melinda's had, when we walked into her room and saw her propped up on her pillows.

ean heard us and came in from the desk at the head of the reen Mile. ' hank od! thought you were never coming back, 'd half made up my mind you were caught, or the arden plugged you, or - ' e broke off, really seeing John for the first time. ' oly cats, what's wrong with him? e looks like he's dying!'

' e's not dying□ are you, John?' rutal said. is eyes flashed ean a warning.

' ourse not, didn't mean actually *dyin*' - ean gave a nervous little laugh - 'but, jeepers□ '

'Never mind,' said. ' elp us get him back to his cell.'

Once again we were foothills surrounding a mountain, but now it was a mountain that had suffered a few million years, worth of erosion, one that was blunted and sad. John offey moved slowly, breathing through his mouth like an old man who smoked too much, but at least he moved.

' hat about Percy?' asked. ' as he been kicking up a ruckus?'

' ome at the start,' ean said. ' rying to yell through the tape you put over his mouth. ursing, believe.'

'Mercy me,' rutal said. ' good thing our tender ears were elsewhere.'

' ince then, just a mulekick at the door every once in awhile, you know.'

ean was so relieved to see us that he was babbling. is glasses slipped down to the end of his nose, which was shiny with sweat, and he pushed them back up. e passed harton's cell. hat worthless young man was flat on his back, snoring like a sousaphone. is eyes were shut this time, all right.

ean saw me looking and laughed.

'No trouble from that guy! asn't moved since he laid back down on his bunk. ead to the world. s for Percy kicking the door every now and then,

never minded that a bit. as glad of it, tell you the truth. f he didn't make any noise at all, 'd start wonderin if he hadn't choked to death on that gag you slapped over his cakehole. ut that's not the best. You know the best?

t's been as quiet as sh ednesday morning in New Orleans! Nobody's been down all night!' e said this last in a triumphant, gloating voice. ' e got away with it, boys! e did!'

hat made him think of why we'd gone through the whole comedy in the first place, and he asked about Melinda.

' he's fine,' said. e had reached John 's cell. hat ean had said was just starting to sink in: *We got away with it, boys□ we did.*

' as it like□ you know□ the mouse?' ear asked. e glanced briefly at the empty cell when elacroix had lived with Mr. Jingles, then down a the restraint room, which had been the mouse's seeming point of origin. is voice dropped, the way people's voices do when they enter a big church where even the silence seems to whisper. ' as it a□ ' e gulped. ' hoot, you know what mean - was it a miracle?'

he three of us looked at each other briefly, confirming what we already knew. ' rought her back from her damn grave is what he did,' arry said. 'Yeah, it was a miracle, all right.'

rutal opened the double locks on the cell, and gave John a gentle push inside. ' o on, now, big boy. est awhile. You earned it. e'll just settle Percy's hash - '

' e's a bad man,' John said in a low, mechanical voice.

' hat's right, no doubt, wicked as a warlock,' rutal agreed in his most soothing voice, 'but don't you worry a smidge about him, we're not going to let him near you. You just ease down on that bunk of yours and 'll have that cup of coffee to you in no time. ot and strong. You'll feel like a new man.'

John sat heavily on his bunk. thought he'd fall back on it and roll to the wall as he usually did, but he just sat there for the time being, hands clasped loosely between his knees, head lowered, breathing hard through his mouth.

he t. hristopher's medal Melinda had given him had fallen out of the top of his shirt and swung back and forth in the air. e'll keep you safe, that's what she'd told him, but John offey didn't look a bit safe. e looked like he had taken Melinda's place on the lip of that grave arry had spoken of.

ut couldn't think about John offey just then turned around to the others. ' ean, get Percy's pistol and hickory stick.'

'Okay.' e went back up to the desk, unlocked the drawer with the gun and the stick in it, and brought them back.

' eady?' asked them. My men - good men, and was never prouder of them than was that night, nodded. arry and ean both looked nervous;

rutal as stolid as ever. 'Okay. 'm going to do the talking. he less the rest of you open your mouths, the better it'll probably be and the quicker it'll probably wrap up□ for better or worse. Okay?'

hey nodded again. took a deep breath and walked down to the reen Mile restraint room.

Percy looked up, squinting, when the light fell on him. e was sitting on the floor and licking at the tape had slapped across his mouth. he part 'd wound around to the back of his head had come free (probably the sweat and brilliantine in his hair had loosened it), and he'd gotten a ways toward getting the rest off, as well. nother hour and he would've been bawling for help at the top of his lungs.

e used his feet to shove himself a little way backward when we came in, then stopped, no doubt realizing that there was nowhere to go except for the southeast corner of the room.

took his gun and stick from ean and held them out in Percy's direction. ' ant these back?' asked.

e looked at me warily, then nodded his head. ' rutal,' said. ' arry. et him on his feet.'

hey bent, hooked him under the canvas arms of the straitjacket, and up he came. moved toward him until we were almost nose to nose. could smell the sour sweat in which he'd been basting. ome of it probably came from his efforts to get free of the quiet-down coat, or to administer the occasional kicks to the door ean had heard, but thought most of his sweat had come as a result of plain old fear: fear of what we might do to him when we came back.

'll be okay, they ain't *killers,* Percy would think□ and then, maybe, he'd think of Old parky and it would cross his mind that yes, in a way we *were* killers. 'd done seventy-seven myself, more than any of the men 'd ever put the chest-strap on, more than ergeant York himself got credit for in

orld ar . Killing Percy wouldn't be logical, but we'd already behaved illogically, he would have told himself as he sat there with his arms behind

him, working with his tongue to get the tape off his mouth. nd besides, logic most likely doesn't have much power over a person's thoughts when that person is sitting on the floor of a room with soft walls, wrapped up as neat and tight as any spider ever wrapped a fly.

hich is to say, if didn't have him where wanted now, never would. ' 'll take the tape off your mouth if you promise not to start yowling,'

said. ' want to have a talk with you, not a shouting match. o what do you say? ill you be quiet?'

saw relief come up in his eyes as he realized that, if wanted to talk, he really did stand a good chance of getting out of this with a whole skin. e nodded his head.

' f you start noising off, the tape goes back on,' said. ' o you understand that, too?'

nother nod, rather impatient this time.

reached up, grabbed the end of the runner he'd worked loose, and gave it a hard yank. t made a loud peeling sound. rutal winced. Percy yipped with pain and began rubbing his lips. e tried to speak, realized he couldn't do it with a hand over his mouth, and lowered it.

' et me out of this nut-coat, you lugoon,' he spat. ' n a minute,' said.

*Now! Now! Right n -*

slapped his face. t was done before 'd even known was going to do it□ but of course 'd known it *might* come to that. ven back during the first talk about Percy that 'd had with arden Moores, the one where al advised me to put Percy out for the elacroix execution, 'd known it *might* come to that. man's hand is like an animal that's only half-tame; mostly it's good, but sometimes it escapes and bites the first thing it sees.

he sound was a sharp *snap,* like a breaking branch. ean gasped. Percy stared at me in utter shock, his eyes so wide they looked as if they must fall out of their sockets. is mouth opened and closed, opened and closed, like the mouth of a fish in an aquarium tank.

' hut up and listen to me,' said. 'You deserved to be punished for what you did to el, and we gave you what you deserved. his was the only way we could do it. e all agreed, except for ean, and he'll go along with us, because we'll make him sorry if he doesn't. sn't that so, ean?'

'Yes,' ean whispered. e was milk-pale. ' uess it is.'

' nd we'll make *you* sorry you were ever born,' went on. ' e'll see that people know about how you sabotaged the elacroix execution - '

*Sabotaged -!*

' - how you almost got ean killed. e'll blab enough to keep you out of almost any job your uncle can get you.'

Percy was shaking his head furiously. e didn't believe that, perhaps *couldn t* believe that. My handprint stood out on his pale cheek like a fortune-teller's sign.

' nd no matter what, we'd see you beaten within an inch of your life. e wouldn't have to do it ourselves. e know people, too, Percy, are you so foolish you don't realize that? hey aren't up in the state capital, but they still know how to legislate certain matters. hese are people who have friends in here, people who have brothers in here, people who have fathers in here. hey'd be happy to amputate the nose or the penis of a shitheels like you. hey'd do it just so someone they care for could get an extra three hours in the exercise yard each week.'

Percy had stopped shaking his head. Now he was only staring. ears stood in his eyes, but didn't fall. think they were tears of rage and frustration. Or maybe just hoped they were.

'Okay - now look on the sunny side, Percy. Your lips sting a little from having the tape pulled off them, imagine, but otherwise there's nothing hurt but your pride□ and nobody needs to know about that but the people in this room right now. nd we'll never tell, will we, boys?'

hey shook their heads. ' ourse not,' rutal said. ' reen Mile business stays on the reen Mile. lways has.'

'You're going on to riar idge and we're going to leave you alone until you go,' said. ' o you want to leave it at that, Percy, or do you want to play hardball with us?'

here was a long, long silence as he considered - could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he tried out and rejected possible counters.

nd at last, think a more basic truth must have overwhelmed the rest of his calculations: the tape was off his mouth, but he was still wearing the straitjacket and probably he had to piss like a racehorse.

' ll right,' he said. ' e'll consider the matter closed. Now get me out of this coat. t feels like my shoulders are - '

rutal stepped forward, shouldering me aside, and grabbed Percy's face with one big hand - fingers denting in Percy's right cheek, thumb making a

deep dimple in his left.

' n a few seconds,' he said. ' irst, you listen to me. Paul here is the big boss, and so he has to talk elegant sometimes.'

tried to remember anything elegant might've said to Percy and couldn't come up with much. till, thought it might be best to keep my mouth shut; Percy looked suitably terrorized, and didn't want to spoil the effect.

'People don't always understand that being elegant isn't the same as being soft, and that's where come in. don't worry about being elegant. just say things straight out. o here it is, straight out: if you go back on your promise, we'll most likely take an ass-fucking. ut then we'll find you - if we have to go all the way to ussia, we'll find you - and *we* will fuck *you*, not just up the ass but in every hole you own. e'll fuck you until you'll wish you were dead, and then we'll rub vinegar in the parts that are bleeding. o you understand me?'

e nodded. ith rutal's hand digging into the soft sides of his face the way it was, Percy looked eerily like Old oot- oot.

rutal let go of him and stepped back. nodded to arry, who went behind Percy and started unsnapping and unbuckling.

'Keep it in mind, Percy,' arry said. 'Keep it in mind and let bygones be bygones.'

ll of it suitably scary, three bogeymen in bluesuits□ but felt a kind of knowing despair sweep through me, all the same. e might keep quiet for a day or a week, continuing to calculate the odds on various actions, but in the end two things - his belief in his connections and his inability to walk away from a situation where he saw himself as the loser would combine.

hen that happened, he would spill his guts. e had perhaps helped to save Melly Moores's life by taking John to her, and wouldn't have changed that ("not for all the tea in hina," as we used to say back in those days), but in the end we were going to hit the canvas and the ref was going to count us out. hort of murder, there was no way we could make Percy keep his end of the bargain, not once he was away from us and had started to get back what passed for his guts.

took a little sidelong glance at rutal and saw he knew this, too. hich didn't surprise me. here were no flies on Mrs. owell's boy rutus, never had been. e gave me a tiny shrug, just one shoulder lifting an inch and then dropping, but it was enough. *So what?* that shrug said. *What else is there, Paul? We did what we had to do, and we did it the best we could.*

Yes. esults hadn't been half-bad, either.

arry undid the last buckle on the straitjacket. rimacing with disgust and rage, Percy pawed it off and let it drop at his feet. e wouldn't look at any of us, not directly.

' ive me my gun and my baton,' he said. handed them over. e dropped the gun into its holster and shoved the hickory stick into its custom loop.

'Percy, if you think about it - '

'Oh, intend to,' he said, brushing past me. ' intend to think about it very hard. tarting right now. On my way home. One of you boys can clock me out at quitting time.' e reached the door of the restraint room and turned to survey us with a look of angry, embarrassed contempt - a deadly combination for the secret we'd had some fool's hope of keeping. ' nless, of course, you want to try explaining why left early.'

e left the room and went striding up the reen Mile, forgetting in his agitation why that green floored central corridor was so wide. e had mad this mistake once before and had gotten away with it. e would not get away with it again.

followed him out the door, trying to think of a way to soothe him down

- didn't want him leaving lock the way he was now, sweaty and dishevelled, with the red print of my hand still on his cheek. he other three followed me.

hat happened then happened very fast - it was all over in no more than a minute, perhaps even less. Yet remember all of it to this day - mostly, think, because told Janice everything when got home and that set it in my mind. hat happened afterward - the dawn meeting with urtis

nderson, the inquest, the press-meeting al Moores set up for us (he was back by then, of course), and the eventual oard of nquiry in the state capital - those things have blurred over the years like so much else in my memory. ut as to what actually happened next there on the reen Mile, yes, that remember perfectly well.

Percy was walking up the right side of the Mile with his head lowered, and 'll say this much: no ordinary Prisoner could have reached him. John

offey wasn't an ordinary prisoner, though. John offey was a giant, and he had a giant's reach.

saw his long brown arms shoot out from between the bars and yelled, '*Watch it, Percy, watch it!* Percy started to turn, his left hand dropping to

the butt of his stick. hen he was seized and yanked against the front of John offey's cell, the right side of his face smashing into the bars.

e grunted and turned toward offey, raising the hickory club. John was certainly vulnerable to it; his own face was pressed so strenuously into the space between two of the center bars that he looked as if he was trying to squeeze his entire head through. t would have been impossible, of course, but that was how it looked. is right hand groped, found the nape of Percy's neck, curled around it, and yanked Percy's head forward. Percy brought the club down between the bars and onto John 's temple. lood flowed, but John paid no attention. is mouth pressed against Percy's mouth. heard a whispering rush - an exhalatory sound, as of long-held breath. Percy jerked like a fish on a hook, trying to get away, but he never had a chance; John 's right hand was pressed to the back of his neck, holding him firm. heir faces seemed to melt together, like the faces of lovers have seen kissing passionately through bars.

Percy screamed, the sound muffled as it had been through the tape, and made another effort to pull back. or an instant their lips came apart a little, and saw the black, swirling tide that was flowing out of John offey and into Percy etmore. hat wasn't going into him through his quivering mouth was flowing in by way of his nostrils. hen the hand on the nape of his neck flexed, and Percy was pulled forward onto John 's mouth again; was almost impaled on it.

Percy's left hand sprang open. is treasured hickory baton fell to the green linoleum. e never picked it up again.

tried to lunge forward, guess *did* lunge forward, but my movements felt old and creaky to myself. grabbed for my gun, but the strap was still across the burled-walnut grip, and at first couldn't get it out of its holster.

eneath me, seemed to feel the floor shake as it had in the back bedroom of the arden's neat little ape od. hat 'm not sure of, but know that one of the caged lightbulbs overhead broke. ragments of glass showered down. arry yelled in surprise.

t last managed to thumb loose the safety strap over the butt of my.38, but before could pull it out of its holster, John had thrust Percy away from him and stepped back into his cell. John was grimacing and rubbing his mouth, as if he had tasted something bad.

' hat'd he do?' rutal shouted. ' hat'd he do, Paul?'

' hatever he took out of Melly, Percy's got it now,' said.

Percy was standing against the bars of elacroix's old cell. is eyes were wide and blank - double zeros. approached him carefully, expecting him to start coughing and choking the way John had after he'd finished with Melinda, but he didn't. t first he only stood there.

snapped my fingers in front of his eyes. 'Percy! ey, Percy! ake up!'

Nothing. rutal joined me, and reached toward Percy's empty face with both hands.

' hat isn't going to work,' said.

gnoring me, rutal clapped his hands sharply together twice, right in front of Percy's nose. nd it *did* work, or appeared to work. is eyelids fluttered and he stared around - dazed, like someone hit over the head struggling back to consciousness. e looked from rutal to me. ll these years later, 'm pretty sure he didn't see either of us, but thought he did then; thought he was coming out of it.

e pushed away from the bars and swayed a little on his feet. rutal steadied him. ' asy, boy, you all right?' Percy didn't answer, just stepped past rutal and turned toward the duty desk. e wasn't staggering, exactly, but he was listing to port.

rutal reached out for him. pushed his hand away. 'Leave him alone.'

ould have said the same if 'd known what was going to happen next?

've asked myself that question a thousand times since the fall of 93 .

here's never any answer.

Percy made twelve or fourteen paces, then stopped again, head lowered.

e was outside of ild ill harton's cell by then. harton was still making those sousaphone noises. e slept through the whole thing. e slept through his own death, now that think of it, which made him a lot luckier than most of the men who ended up here. ertainly luckier than he deserved.

efore we knew what was happening, Percy drew his gun, stepped to the bars of harton's cell, and emptied all six shots into the sleeping man' just bam-bam-bam, bam-bam-bam, as fast as he could pull the trigger. he sound in that enclosed space was deafening; when told Janice the story the next morning, could still hardly hear the sound of my own voice for the ringing in my ears.

e ran at him, all four of us. ean got there first - don't know how, as he was behind rutal and me when offey had hold of Percy - but he did.

e grabbed Percy's wrist, prepared to wrestle the gun out of Percy's hand,

but he didn't have to. Percy just let go, and the gun fell to the floor. is eyes went across us like they were skates and we were ice. here was a low hissing sound and a sharp ammoniac smell as Percy's bladder let go, then a *brrrap* sound and a thicker stink as he filled the other side of his pants, as well. is eyes had settled on a far corner of the corridor. hey were eyes that never saw anything in this real world of ours again, so far as know.

ack near the beginning of this wrote that Percy was at riar idge by the time that rutal found the colored slivers of Mr. Jingles's spool a couple of months later, and didn't lie about that. e never got the office with the fan in the comer, though; never got a bunch of lunatic patients to push around, either. ut imagine he at least got his own private room.

e had connections, after all.

harton was lying on his side with his back against the wall of his cell. couldn't see much then but a lot of blood soaking into the sheet and splattered across the cement, but the coroner said Percy had shot like nnie Oakley. emembering ean's story of how Percy had thrown his hickory baton at the mouse that time and barely missed, wasn't too surprised. his time the range had been shorter and the target not moving. One in the groin, one in the gut, one in the chest, three in the head.

rutal was coughing and waving at the haze of gunsmoke. was coughing myself, but hadn't noticed it until then.

' nd of the line,' rutal said. is voice was calm, but there was no mistaking the glaze of panic in his eyes.

looked down the hallway and saw John offey sitting on the end of his bunk. is hands were clasped between his knees again, but his head was up and he no longer looked a bit sick. e nodded at me slightly, and surprised myself - as had on the day offered him my hand - by returning the nod.

' hat are we going to do?' arry gibbered. 'Oh hrist, what are we going to do?'

'Nothing we *can* do,' rutal said in that same calm voice. ' e're hung.

ren't we, Paul?'

My mind had begun to move very fast. looked at arry and ean, who were staring at me like scared kids. looked at Percy, who was standing there with his hands and jaw dangling. hen looked at my old friend,

rutus owell.

' e're going to be okay,' said.

Percy at last commenced coughing. e doubled over, hands on his knees, almost retching. is face began to turn red. opened my mouth, meaning to tell the others to stand back, but never got a chance. e made a sound that was a cross between a dry heave and a bullfrog's croak, opened his mouth, and spewed out a cloud of black, swirling stuff. t was so thick that for a moment we couldn't see his head. arry said 'Oh od save us' in a weak and watery voice. hen the stuff turned a white so dazzling it was like January sun on fresh snow. moment later the cloud was gone. Percy straightened slowly up and resumed his vacant gaze down the length of the

reen Mile.

' e didn't see that,' rutal said. ' id we, Paul?' 'No. didn't and you didn't. id you see it, arry?' 'No,' arry said.

' ean?'

' ee what?' ean took his glasses off and began to polish them. thought he would drop them out of his trembling hands, but he managed not to.

' ee what, that's good. hat's just the ticket. Now listen to your scoutmaster, boys, and get it right the first time, because time is short. t's a simple story. Let's not complicate it.'

# 3

told all this to Jan at around eleven o'clock that morning - *the next morning,* almost wrote, but of course it was the same day. he longest one of my whole life, without a doubt. told it pretty much as have here, finishing with how illiam harton had ended up lying dead on his bunk, riddled with lead from Percy's sidearm.

No, that's not right. hat *actually* finished with was the stuff that came out of Percy, the bugs or the whatever-it-was. hat was a hard thing to tell, even to your wife, but told it.

s talked, she brought me black coffee by the half-cup - at first my hands were shaking too badly to pick up a whole one without spilling it. y the time finished, the shaking had eased some, and felt that could even take some food - an egg, maybe, or some soup.

' he thing that saved us was that we didn't really have to lie, any of us.' 'Just leave a few things out,' she said, and nodded. 'Little things, mostly,

like how you took a condemned murderer out of prison, and how he cured a

dying woman, and how he drove that Percy etmore crazy by - what? - spitting a pureed brain tumor down his throat?'

' don't know, Jan,' said. ' only know that if you keep talking like that, you'll end up either eating that soup yourself, or feeding it to the dog.'

' 'm sorry. ut 'm right, aren't ?'

'Yeah,' said. xcept we got away with the - ' he what? You couldn't call it an escape, and furlough wasn't right, either. ' - the field trip. Not even Percy can tell them about that, if he ever comes back.'

' f he comes back,' she echoed. ' ow likely is that?'

shook my head to indicate had no idea. ut did, actually; didn't think he *was* going to come back, not in 93 , not in ' or ' , either. n that was right. Percy etmore stayed at riar idge until it burned flat in

9 . eventeen inmates were killed in that fire, but Percy wasn't one of them. till silent and blank in every regard - the word learned to describe that state is *catatonic* - he was led out by one of the guards long before the fire reached his wing. e went on to another institution - don't remember the name and guess it doesn't matter, anyway - and died in 96 . o far as know, the last time he ever spoke was when he told us we could clock him out at quitting time□ unless we wanted to explain why he had left early.

he irony was that we never had to explain much of anything. Percy had gone crazy and shot illiam harton to death. hat was what we told, and so far as it went, every word was true. hen nderson asked rutal how Percy had seemed before the shooting and rutal answered with one word - *" uiet"* - had a terrible moment when felt that might burst out laughing. ecause that was true, too, Percy *had* been quiet, for most of his shift he'd had a swatch of friction-tape across his mouth and the best he'd been able to come up with was *mmmph, mmmph, mmmph.*

urtis kept Percy there until eight o'clock, Percy as silent as a cigar-store

ndian but a lot more eerie. y then al Moores had arrived, looking grim but competent, ready to climb back into the saddle. urtis nderson let him do just that, and with a sigh of relief the rest of us could almost hear. he bewildered, frightened old man was gone; it was the arden who strode up to Percy, grabbed him by the shoulders with his big hands, and shook him hard.

' on!' he shouted into Percy's blank face - a face that was already starting to soften like wax, thought. '*Son!* o you hear me? alk to me if you hear me! want to know what happened!'

Nothing from Percy, of course. nderson wanted to get the arden aside, discuss how they were going to handle it - it was a political hot potato if there had ever been one - but Moores put him off, at least for the time being, and drew me down the Mile. John offey was lying on his bunk with his face to the wall, legs dangling outrageously, as they always did. e appeared to be sleeping and probably was□ but he wasn't *always* what he appeared, as we had found out.

' id what happened at my house have anything to do with what happened here when you got back?' Moores asked in a low voice. ' 'll cover you as much as can, even if it means my job, but have to know.'

shook my head. hen spoke, also kept my voice low-pitched. here were now almost a dozen screws milling around at the head of the aisle.

nother was photographing harton in his cell. urtis nderson had turned to watch that, and for the time being, only rutal was watching us. 'No, sir. e got John back into his cell just like you see, then let Percy out of the restraint room, where we'd stashed him for safekeeping. thought he'd be hot under the collar, but he wasn't. Just asked for his sidearm and baton. e didn't say anything else, just walked off up the corridor. hen, when he got to harton's cell he pulled his gun and started shooting.'

' o You think being in the restraint room□ something to his mind?' 'No, sir.'

' id you put him in the straitjacket?' 'No, sir. here was no need.'

' e was quiet? idn't struggle?' 'No struggle.'

' ven when he saw you meant to put him in restraint room, he was quiet and didn't struggle.'

' hat's right.' felt an urge to embroider on this to give Percy at least a line or two - and conquered it. impler would be better, and knew it. ' here, was no fuss. e just went over into one of the far corners and sat down.'

' idn't speak of harton then?' 'No, sir. '

' idn't speak of offey, either?'

shook my head.

' ould Percy have been laying for harton? id he have something against the man?'

' hat might be,' said, lowering my voice even more. 'Percy was careless about where he walked, al. One time harton reached out, grabbed him up against the bars, and messed him over some.' paused. ' elt him up, you could say.'

'No worse than that? just□ "messed him over"□ and that was all?'

'Yes, but it was pretty bad for Percy, just the same. harton said something about how he'd rather screw Percy than Percy's sister.'

' rn.' Moores kept looking sideways at John offey, as if he needed constant reassurance that offey was a real person, actually in the world. ' t doesn't explain what's happened to him, but it goes a good piece toward explaining why it was harton he turned on and not offey or one of you men. nd speaking of your men, Paul, will they all tell the same story?'

'Yes, sir,' told him. ' nd they will,' said to Jan, starting in on the soup she brought to the table. ' 'll see to it.'

'You *did* lie,' she said. 'You lied to al.'

ell, that's a wife for you, isn't it? lways poking around for moth-holes in your best suit, and finding one more often than not.

' guess, if you want to look at it that way. didn't tell him anything we both won't be able to live with, though. al's in the clear, think. e wasn't even *there,* after all. e was home tending his wife until urtis called him.'

' id he say how Melinda was?'

'Not then, there wasn't time, but we spoke again just as rutal and were leaving. Melly doesn't remember much, but she's fine. p and walking.

alking about next year's flower beds.'

My wife sat watching me eat for some little time. hen she asked, ' oes

al know it's a miracle, Paul? oes he understand that?' 'Yes. e all do, all of us that were there.'

'Part of me wishes 'd been there, too,' she said, 'but think most of me is glad wasn't. f 'd seen the scales fall from aul's eyes on the road to

amascus. probably would have died of a heart attack.'

'Naw,' said, tilting my bowl to capture the last spoonful, 'probably would have cooked him some soup. his is pretty fine, hon.'

' ood.' ut she wasn't really thinking about soup or cooking or aul's conversion on the amascus road. he was looking out the window toward the ridges, her chin propped on her hand, her eyes as hazy as those ridges look on summer mornings when it's going to be hot. ummer mornings like the one when the etterick girls had been found, thought for no reason.

wondered why they hadn't screamed. heir killer had hurt them; there had been blood on the porch, and on the steps. o why hadn't they screamed?

'You think John offey really killed that man harton, don't you?' Janice asked, looking back from the window at last. 'Not that it was an accident, or anything like that; you think he used Percy etmore on harton like a gun.'

'Yes.'

' hy?'

' don't know.'

' ell me again about what happened when you took offey off the Mile, would you? Just that part.'

o did. told her how the skinny arm shooting out from between the bars and grabbing John 's bicep had reminded me of a snake-one of the water moccasins we were all scared of when we were kids swimming in the river - and how offey had said harton was a bad man. lmost whispering it.

' nd harton said□?' My wife was looking out the window again, but she was listening, all right.

' harton said, " hat's right, nigger, bad as you'd want." ' ' nd that's all.'

'Yes. had a feeling that something was going to happen right then, but nothing did. rutal took harton's hand off John and told him to lie down, which harton did. e was out on his feet to start with. aid something about how niggers should have their own electric chair, and that was all. e went about our business.'

'John offey called him a bad man.'

'Yep. aid the same thing about Percy once, too. Maybe more than once.

can't remember exactly when, but know he did.'

' ut harton never did anything to John offey personally, did he? Like he did to Percy, mean.'

'No. he way their cells were - harton up by the duty desk on one side, John down a ways on the other - they could hardly see each other.'

' ell me again how offey looked when harton grabbed him.' 'Janice, this isn't getting us anywhere.'

'Maybe it isn't and maybe it is. ell me again how he looked.'

sighed. ' guess you'd have to say shocked. e gasped. Like you would if you were sunning at the beach and snuck up and trickled a little cold

water down your back. Or like he'd been slapped.'

' ell, sure,' she said. ' eing grabbed out of nowhere like that startled him, woke him up for a second.'

'Yes,' said. nd then, 'No.' ' ell which is it? Yes or no?'

'No. t wasn't being *startled.* t was like when he wanted me to come into his cell so he could cure my infection. Or when he wanted me to hand him the mouse. t was being surprised, but not by being touched□ not *exactly,* anyway□ oh hrist, Jan, don't know.'

' ll right, we'll leave it,' she said. ' just can't imagine why John did it, that's all. t's not as if he's violent by nature. hich leads to another question, Paul: how can you execute him if you're right about those girls?

ow can you possibly put him in the electric chair if someone else - '

jerked in my chair. My elbow struck my bowl and knocked it off onto the floor, where it broke. n idea had come to me. t was more intuition than logic at that point, but it had a certain black elegance.

'Paul?' Janice asked, alarmed. ' hat's wrong?'

' don't know,' said. ' don't know anything for sure, but 'm going to find out if can.'

# 4

he aftermath of the shooting was a three-ring circus with the governor in one ring, the prison in another, and poor brain-blasted Percy etmore in the third. nd the ringmaster? ell, the various gentlemen of the press took turns at that job. hey weren't as bad then as they are now - they didn't *allow* themselves to be as bad - but even back then before eraldo and Mike allace and the rest of them, they could gallop along pretty good when they really got the bit in their teeth. hat was what happened this time, and while the show lasted, it was a good one.

ut even the liveliest circus, the one with the scariest freaks, funniest clowns, and wildest animals, has to leave town eventually. his one left after the oard of nquiry, which sounds pretty special and fearsome, but actually turned out to be pretty tame and perfunctory. nder other circumstances, the governor undoubtedly would have demanded someone's head on a platter, but not this time. is nephew by marriage - his wife's own blood kin - had gone crackers and killed a man. ad killed a killer - there

was that, at least, and thank od for it - but Percy had still shot the man as he lay sleeping in his cell, which was not quite sporting. hen you added in the fact that the young man in question remained just as mad as a March hare, you could understand why the governor only wanted it to go away, and as soon as possible.

Our trip to arden Moores's house in arry erwilliger's truck never came out. he fact that Percy had been straitjacketed and locked in the restraint room during the time we were away never came out. he fact that

illiam harton had been doped to the gills when Percy shot him never came out, either. hy would it? he authorities had no reason to suspect anything in harton's system but half a dozen slugs. he coroner removed those, the mortician put him in a pine box, and that was the end of the man with *Billy the Kid* tattooed on his left forearm. ood riddance to bad rubbish, you might say.

ll in all, the uproar lasted about two weeks. uring that time didn't dare fart sideways, let alone so take a day off to investigate the idea 'd gotten at my kitchen table on the morning after all the upheavals. knew for sure that the circus had left town when got to work on a day just shy of the middle of November - the twelfth, think, but don't hold me to that. hat was the day found the piece of paper 'd been dreading on the middle of my desk: the O on John offey. urtis nderson had signed it instead of

al Moores, but of course it was just as legal either way, and of course it had needed to go through al in order to get to me. could imagine al sitting at his desk in dministration with that piece of paper in his hand, sitting there and thinking of his wife, who had become something of a nine days, wonder to the doctors at ndianola eneral ospital. he'd had her own O papers handed to her by those doctors, but John offey had tom them up. Now, however, it was offey's turn to walk the reen Mile, and who among us could stop it? ho among us *would* stop it?

he date on the death warrant was November 0th. hree days after got it - the fifteenth, think - had Janice call me in sick. cup of coffee later was driving north in my badly sprung but otherwise reliable ord. Janice had kissed me on my way and wished me good luck; 'd thanked her but no longer had any clear idea what good luck would be - finding what was looking for or not finding it. ll knew for sure is that didn't feel much like singing as drove. Not that day.

y three that afternoon was well up in the ridge country. got to the Purdom ounty ourthouse just before it closed, looked at some records, then had a visit from the heriff, who had been informed by the county clerk that a stranger was poking in amongst the local skeletons. heriff

atlett wanted to know what thought was doing. told him. atlett thought it over and then told me something interesting. e said he'd deny he'd ever said a word if spread it around, and it wasn't conclusive anyway, but it was something, all right. t was sure something. thought about it all the way home, and that night there was a lot of thinking and precious little sleeping on my side of the bed.

he next day got up while the sun was still just a rumor in the east and drove downstate to rapingus ounty. skirted around omer ribus, that great bag of guts and waters, speaking to eputy heriff ob Mc ee instead. Mc ee didn't want to hear what was telling him. Most vehemently didn't want to hear it. t one point was pretty sure he was going to punch me in the mouth so he could *stop* hearing it, but in the end he agreed to go out and ask Klaus etterick a couple of questions. Mostly, think, so he could be sure wouldn't. ' e's only thirty-nine, but he looks like an old man these days,' Mc ee said, 'and he don't need a smartass prison guard who thinks he's a detective to stir him up just when some of the sorrow has started to settle. You stay right here in town. don't want you within hailing distance of the etterick farm, but want to be able to find you when 'm done talking to Klaus. f you start feeling restless, have a piece of pie down there in the diner. t'll weight you down.' ended up having two pieces, and it *was* kind of heavy.

hen Mc ee came into the diner and sat down at the counter next to me,

tried to read his face and failed. ' ell?' asked.

' ome on home with me, we'll talk there,' he said. ' his place is a mite too public for my taste.'

e had our conference on ob Mc ee's front porch. oth. of us were bundled up and chilly, but Mrs. Mc ee didn't allow smoking anywhere in her house. he was a woman ahead of her time. Mc ee talked awhile. e did it like a man who doesn't in the least enjoy what he's hearing out of his own mouth.

' t proves nothing, you know that, don't you?' he asked when he was pretty well done. is tone was belligerent, and he poked his home-rolled cigarette at me in an aggressive way as he spoke, but his face was sick. Not

all proof is what you see and hear in a court of law, and we both knew it. have an idea that was the only time in his life when eputy Mc ee wished he was as country-dumb as his boss.

' know,' said.

' nd if you're thinking of getting him a new trial on the basis of this one thing, you better think again, *seńor. ohn* offey is a Negro, and in

rapingus ounty we're awful particular about giving new trials to Negroes.'

' know that, too.'

' o what are you going to do?'

pitched my cigarette over the porch rail and into the street. hen stood up. t was going to be a long, cold ride back home, and the sooner got going the sooner the trip would be done. ' hat wish did know, eputy Mc ee,' said, 'but don't. he only thing know tonight for a fact is that second piece of pie was a mistake.'

' 'll tell you something, smart guy,' he said, still speaking in that tone of hollow belligerence. ' don't think you should have opened Pandora's ox in the first place.'

' t wasn't me opened it,' said, and then drove home.

got there late - after midnight - but my wife was waiting up for me. 'd suspected she would be, but it still did my heart good to see her, and to have her put her arms around my neck and her body nice and firm against mine. ' ello, stranger,' she said, and then touched me down below. 'Nothing wrong with this fellow now, is there? e's just as healthy as can be.'

'Yes ma'am,' said, and lifted her up in my arms. took her into the bedroom and we made love as sweet as sugar, and as came to my climax, that delicious feeling of going out and letting go, thought of John offey's endlessly weeping eyes. nd of Melinda Moores saying *dreamed you were wandering in the dark, and so was .*

till lying on top of my wife, with her arms around my neck and our thighs together, began to weep myself.

'Paul!' she said, shocked and afraid. don't think she'd seen me in tears more than half a dozen times before in the entire course of our marriage. have never been, in the ordinary course of things, a crying man. 'Paul, what is it?'

' know everything there is to know,' said through my tears. ' know too goddam much, if you want to know the truth. 'm supposed to electrocute

John offey in less than a week's time, but it was illiam harton who killed the etterick girls. t was ild ill.'

# 5

he next day, the same bunch of screws who had eaten lunch in my kitchen after the botched elacroix execution ate lunch there again. his time there was a fifth at our council of war: my wife. t was Jan who convinced me to tell the others; my first impulse had been not to. asn't it bad enough, asked her, that *we* knew?

'You're not thinking clear about it,' she'd answered. 'Probably because you're still upset. hey already know the worst thing, that John's on the spot for a crime he didn't commit. f anything, this makes it a little better.'

wasn't so sure, but deferred to her judgement. expected an uproar when told rutal, ean, and arry what knew ( couldn't prove it, but knew, all right), but at first there was only thoughtful silence. hen, taking another of Janice's biscuits and beginning to put an outrageous amount of butter on it, ean said: ' id John see him, do you think? id he see

harton drop the girls, maybe even rape them?'

' think if he'd seen that, he would have tried to stop it,' said. ' s for seeing harton, maybe as he ran off, suppose he might have. f he did, he forgot it later.'

' ure,' ean said. ' e's special, but that doesn't make him bright. e only found out it was harton when harton reached through the bars of his cell and touched him.'

rutal was nodding. ' hat's why John looked so surprised□ so shocked.

emember the way his eyes opened?'

nodded. ' e used Percy on harton like a gun, that was what Janice said, and it was what kept thinking about. hy would John offey want to kill ild ill? *Percy,* maybe - Percy stamped on elacroix's mouse right in front of him, Percy burned elacroix alive and John knew it - but harton?

harton messed with most of us in one way or another, but he didn't mess with John at all, so far as know - hardly passed four dozen words with him the whole time they were on the Mile together, and half of those were that last night. hy would he want to? e was from Purdom ounty, and as far as white boys from up there are concerned, you don't even see a Negro unless he happens to step into your road. o why did he do it? hat could

he've seen or felt when harton touched him that was so bad that he saved back the poison he took out of Melly's body?'

' nd half-killed himself doing it, too,' rutal said.

'More like three-quarters. nd the etterick twins were all could think of that was bad enough to explain what he did. told myself the idea was nuts, too much of a coincidence, it just couldn't be. hen remembered something urtis nderson wrote in the first memo ever got about

harton - that harton was crazy-wild, and that he'd rambled all over the state before the holdup where he killed all those people. *Rambled all over the state.* hat stuck with me. hen there was the way he tried to choke

ean when he came in. hat got me thinking about - '

' he dog,' ean said. e was rubbing his neck where harton had wrapped the chain. don't think he even knew he was doing it. ' ow the dog's neck was broken.'

' nyway, went on up to Purdom ounty to check harton's court records - all we had here were the reports on the murders that got him to the

reen Mile. he end of his career, in other words. wanted the beginning.' 'Lot of trouble?' rutal asked.

'Yeah. andalism, petty theft, setting haystack fires, even theft of an explosive - he and a friend swiped a stick of dynamite and set it off down by a creek. e got going early, ten years old, but what wanted wasn't there. hen the heriff turned up to see who was and what was doing, and that was actually lucky. fibbed, told him that a cell-search had turned up a bunch of pictures in harton's mattress - little girls with no clothes on.

said 'd wanted to see if harton had any kind of history as a pederast, because there were a couple of unsolved cases up in ennessee that 'd heard about. was careful never to mention the etterick twins. don't think they crossed his mind, either.'

' ourse not,' arry said. ' hy would they have? hat case is solved, after all.'

' said guessed there was no sense chasing the idea, since there was nothing in harton's back file. mean, there was *plenty* in the file, but none of it about that sort of thing. hen the heriff - atlett, his name is - laughed and said not everything a bad apple like ill harton did was in the court files, and what did it matter, anyway? e was dead, wasn't he?

' said was doing it just to satisfy my own curiosity, nothing else, and that relaxed him. e took me back to his office, sat me down, gave me a

cup of coffee and a sinker, and told me that sixteen months ago, when

harton was barely eighteen, a man in the western part of the county caught him in the barn with his daughter. t wasn't rape, exactly; the fellow described it to atlett as "not much more'n stinkfinger." orry, honey.'

' hat's all right,' Janice said. he looked pale, though. ' ow old was the girl?' rutal asked.

'Nine,' said.

e winced.

' he man might've taken off after harton himself, if he'd had him some big old brothers or cousins to give him a help, but he didn't. o he went to

atlett, but made it clear he only wanted harton warned. No one wants a nasty thing like that right out in public, if it can be helped. nyway, heriff

. had been dealing with harton's antics for quite some time - had him in the reform school up that way for eight months or so when harton was fifteen - and he decided enough was enough. e got three deputies, they went out to the harton place, set Missus harton aside when she started to weep and wail, and then they warned Mr. illiam " illy the Kid"

harton what happens to big pimple-faced galoots who go up in the hayloft with girls not even old enough to have heard about their monthly courses, let alone started them. " e warned that little punk good," atlett told me. " arned him until his head was bleedin, his shoulder was dislocated, and his ass was damn near broke."

rutal was laughing in spite of himself. ' hat sounds like Purdom

ounty, all right,' he said. 'Like as not.'

' t was three months later, give or take, that harton broke out and started the spree that ended with the holdup,' said. ' hat and the murders that got him to us.'

' o he'd had something to do with an underage girl once,' arry said. e took off his glasses, huffed on them, polished them. '*Way* underage. Once isn't exactly a pattern, is it?'

' man doesn't do a thing like that just once,' my wife said, then pressed her lips together so tight they almost weren't there.

Next told them about my visit to rapingus ounty. 'd been a lot more frank with ob Mc ee - 'd had no choice, really. o this day have no idea what sort of story he spun for Mr. etterick, but the Mc ee who sat down next to me in the diner seemed to have aged seven years.

n mid-May, about a month before the holdup and the murders which finished harton's short career as an outlaw, Klaus etterick had painted his barn (and, incidentally, owser's doghouse next to it). e hadn't wanted his son crawling around up on a high scaffolding, and the boy had been in school, anyway, so he had hired a fellow. nice enough fellow. ery quiet.

hree days, work it had been. No, the fellow hadn't slept at the house,

etterick wasn't foolish enough to believe that nice and quiet always meant safe, especially in those days, when there was so much dust-bowl riffraff on the roads. man with a family had to be careful. n any case, the man hadn't needed lodging; he told etterick he had taken a room in town, at

va Price's. here *was* a lady named va Price in efton, and she *did* rent rooms, but she hadn't had a boarder that May who fit the description of

etterick's hired man, just the usual fellows in checked suits and derby hats, hauling sample cases - drummers, in other words. Mc ee had been able to tell me that because he stopped at Mrs. Price's and checked on his way back from the etterick farm - that's how upset he was.

' ven so,' he added, 'there's no law against a man sleeping rough in the woods, Mr. dgecombe. 've done it a time or two myself.'

he hired man didn't sleep at the ettericks' house, but he took dinner with them twice. e would have met owie. e would have met the girls,

ora and Kathe. e would have listened to their chatter, some of which might have been about how much they looked forward to the coming summer, because if they were good and the weather was good, Mommy sometimes let them sleep out on the porch, where they could pretend they were pioneer wives crossing the reat Plains in onestoga wagons.

can see him sitting there at the table, eating roast chicken and Mrs.

etterick's rye bread, listening, keeping his wolf's eyes well veiled, nodding, smiling a little, storing it all up.

' his doesn't sound like the wildman you told me about when he first came on the Mile, Paul,' Janice said doubtfully. 'Not a bit.'

'You didn't see him up at ndianola ospital, ma'am,' arry said. 'Just standin there with his mouth open and his bare butt hangin out the back of his Johnny. Lettin us dress him. e thought he was either drugged or foolish. idn't we, ean?'

ean nodded.

' he day after he finished the barn and left, a man wearing a bandanna mask robbed ampey's reight Office in Jarvis,' told them. ' ot away with

seventy dollars. e also took an 89 silver dollar the freight agent carried as a lucky piece. hat silver dollar was on harton when he was captured, and Jarvis is only thirty miles from efton.'

' o this robber□ this wildman□ you think he stopped for three days to help Klaus etterick pain his barn,' my wife said. ' te dinner with them and said please pass the peas just like folks.'

' he scariest thing about men like him is how unpredictable they are,'

rutal said. ' e might've been planning to kill the ettericks and rifle their house, then changed his mind because a cloud came over the sun at the wrong time, or something like. Maybe he just wanted to cool off a little. ut most likely he already had his eye on those two girls and was planning to come back. o you think, Paul?'

nodded. Of course thought it. ' nd then there's the name he gave

etterick.'

' hat name?' Jan asked. ' ill onney.'

' onney? don't - '

' t was illy the Kid's real name.'

'Oh.' hen her eyes widened. 'Oh! o you *can* get John offey off! hank

od! ll you have to do is show Mr. etterick a picture of illiam

harton□ his mug-shot should do□ '

rutal and exchanged an uncomfortable look. ean was looking a bit hopeful, but arry was staring down at his hands, as if all at once fabulously interested in his fingernails.

' hat's wrong?' Janice asked. ' hy are you looking at each other that way? urely this man Mc ee will have to - '

' ob Mc ee struck me as a good man, and think he's a hell of a law officer,' said, 'but he swings no weight in rapingus ounty. he power there is heriff ribus, and the day he reopens the etterick case on the basis of what was able to find out would be the day it snows in hell.'

' ut□ if harton was there□ if etterick can identify a picture of him and they *know* he was *there□*

' im being there in May doesn't mean he came back and killed those girls in June,' rutal said. e spoke in a low, gentle voice, the way you speak when you're telling someone there's been a death in the family. 'On one hand you've got this fellow who helped Klaus etterick paint a barn and then went away. urns out he was committing crimes all over the place,

but there's nothing against him for the three days in May he was around

efton. On the other hand, you've got this big Negro, this *huge* Negro, that you found on the riverbank, holding two little dead girls, both of them naked, in his arms.'

e shook his head.

'Paul's right, Jan. Mc ee may have his doubts, but Mc ee doesn't matter.

ribus is the only one who can reopen the case, and ribus doesn't want to mess with what he thinks of as a happy ending - 'it was a nigger' thinks he, 'and not one of our'n in any case. eautiful. 'll go up there to old Mountain, have me a steak and a draft beer at Ma's, then watch him fry, and there's an end to it.'

Janice listened to all this with a mounting expression of horror on her face, then turned to me. ' ut Mc ee believes it, doesn't he, Paul? could see it on your face. eputy Mc ee knows he arrested the wrong man. on't he stand up to the heriff?'

' ll he can do by standing up to him is lose his job,' said. 'Yes, think that in his heart he knows it was harton. ut what he says to himself is that, if he keeps his mouth shut and plays the game until ribus either retires or eats himself to death, he gets the job. nd things will be different then. hat's what he tells himself to get to sleep, imagine. nd he's probably not so much different than omer about one thing. e'll tell himself, " fter all, it's only a Negro. t's not like they're going to burn a white man for it." '

' hen you'll have to go to them,' Janice said, and my heart turned cold at the decisive, no-doubt-about-it tone of her voice. ' o and tell them what you found out.'

' nd how should we tell them we found it out, Jan?' rutal asked her in that same low voice.

' hould we tell them about how harton grabbed John while we were taking him out of the prison to work a miracle on the arden's wife?'

'No□ of course not, but□ ' he saw how thin the ice was in that direction and skated in another one. 'Lie, then,' she said. he looked defiantly at

rutal, then turned that look on me. t was hot enough to smoke a hole in newspaper, you'd have said.

'Lie,' repeated. 'Lie about what?'

' bout what got you going, first up to Purdom ounty and then down to

rapingus. o down there to that fat old heriff ribus and say that

harton *told you* he raped and murdered the etterick girls. hat he confessed.' he switched her hot gaze to rutal for a moment. 'You can back him up, rutus. You can say you were there when he confessed, you heard it, too. hy, Percy probably heard it as well, and that was probably what set him off. e shot harton because he couldn't stand thinking of what harton had done to those children. t snapped his mind. Just□ hat?

hat *now*, in the name of od?'

t wasn't just me and rutal; arry and ean were looking at her, too, with a kind of horror.

' e never *reported* anything like that, ma'am,' arry said. e spoke as if talking to a child. ' he first thing people'd ask is why we didn't. e're supposed to report anything our cell-babies say about prior crimes. heirs or anyone else's.'

'Not that we would've believed him,' rutal put in. ' man like ild ill

harton lies about anything, Jan. rimes he's committed, bigshots he's known, women he's gone to bed with, touchdowns he scored in high school, even the damn weather.'

' ut□ but□ ' er face was agonized. went to put my arm around her and she pushed it violently away. '*But he was there! e painted their goddamned barn! E ATE D NNER W T T EM!*

' ll the more reason why he might take credit for the crime,' rutal said.'

fter all, what harm? hy not boast? You can't fry a man twice, after all.' 'Let me see if 've got this right. e here at this table know that not only

did John offey not kill those girls, he was trying to save their lives. eputy Mc ee doesn't know all that, of course, but he *does* have a pretty good idea that the man condemned to die for the murders didn't do them. nd still□ *still□* you can't get him a new trial. an't even reopen the case.'

'Yessum,' ean said. e was polishing his glasses furiously. ' hat's about

the size of it.'

he sat with her head lowered, thinking. rutal started to say something and raised a hand, shushing him. didn't believe Janice could think of a way to get John out of the killing box he was in, but didn't believe it was impossible, either. he was a fearsomely smart lady, my wife. earsomely determined, as well. hat's a combination that sometimes turns mountains into valleys.

' ll right,' she said at last. ' hen you've got to get him out on your own.' 'Ma'am?' arry looked flabbergasted. rightened, too.

'You can do it. You did it once, didn't you? You can do it again. Only this time you won't bring him back.'

' ould you want to be the one to explain to my kids why their daddy is in prison, Missus dgecombe?' ean asked. ' harged with helping a murderer escape jail?'

' here won't be any of that, ean; we'll work out a plan. Make it look like a real escape.'

'Make sure it's a plan that could be worked out by a fellow who can't even remember how to tie his own shoes, then,' arry said. ' hey'll have to believe that.'

he looked at him uncertainly.

' t wouldn't do any good,' rutal said. ' ven if we could think of a way, it wouldn't do any good.'

' hy not?' he sounded as if she might be going to cry. 'Just why the damn hell not?'

' ecause he's a six-foot-eight-inch baldheaded black man with barely enough brains to feed himself,' said. ' ow long do you think it would be before he was recaptured? wo hours? ix?'

' e got along without attracting much attention before,' she said. tear trickled down her cheek. he slapped it away with the heel of her hand.

hat much was true. had written letters to some friends and relatives of mine farther down south, asking if they'd seen anything in the papers about a man fitting John offey's description. nything at all. Janice had done the same. e had come up with just one possible sighting so far, in the town of Muscle hoals, labama. twister had struck a church there during choir practice - in 9 9, this had been - and a large black man had hauled two fellows out of the rubble. oth had looked dead to onlookers at first, but as it turned out, neither had been even seriously hurt. t was like a miracle, one of the witnesses was quoted as saying. he black man, a drifter who had been hired by the church pastor to do a day's worth of chores, had disappeared in the excitement.

'You're right, he got along,' rutal said. ' ut you have to remember that he did most of his getting along before he was convicted of raping and murdering two little girls.'

he sat without answering. he sat that way for almost a full minute, and then she did something which shocked me as badly as my sudden flow of tears must have shocked her. he reached out and shoved everything off the

table with one wide sweep of her arm - plates, glasses, cups, silverware, the bowl of collards, the bowl of squash, the platter with the carved ham on it, the milk, the pitcher of cold tea. ll off the table and onto the floor, ker- smash.

' oly shit!' ean cried, rocking back from the table so hard he damned near went over on his back.

Janice ignored him. t was rutal and me she was looking at, mostly me. ' o you mean to kill him, you cowards?' she asked. ' o you mean to kill the man who saved Melinda Moores's life, who tried to save those little girls, lives? ell, at least there will be one less black man in the world won't there? You can console yourselves with that. *One less nigger.*

he got up, looked at her chair, and kicked it into the wall. t rebounded and fell into the spilled squash. took her wrist and she yanked it free.

' on't touch me,' she said. 'Next week this time you'll be a murderer, no better than that man harton, so don't touch me.'

he went out onto the back stoop, put her apron up to her face, and began to sob into it. he four of us looked at each other. fter a little bit got on my feet and set about cleaning up the mess. rutal joined me first, then

arry and ean. hen the place looked more or less shipshape again, they left. None of us said a word the whole time. here was really nothing left to say.

# 6

hat was my night off. sat in the living room of our little house, smoking cigarettes, listening to the radio, and watching the dark come up out of the ground to swallow the sky. elevision is all right, 've nothing against it, but don't like how it turns you away from the rest of the world and toward nothing but its own glassy self. n that one way, at least, radio was better.

Janice came in, knelt beside the arm of my chair, and took my hand. or a little while neither of us said anything, just stayed that way, listening to *Kay Kyser s Kollege of Musical Knowledge* and watching the stars come out. t was all right with me.

' 'm so sorry called you a coward,' she said. ' feel worse about that than anything 've ever said to you in our whole marriage.'

' ven the time when we went camping and you called me Old tinky

am?' asked, and then we laughed and had a kiss or two and it was better again between us. he was so beautiful, my Janice, and still dream of her. Old and tired of living as am, 'll dream that she walks into my room in this lonely, forgotten place where the hallways all smell of piss and old boiled cabbage, dream she's young and beautiful with her blue eyes and her fine high breasts that couldn't hardly keep my hands off of, and she'll say, *Why, honey, wasn t in that bus crash. You made a mistake, that s all.*

ven now dream that, and sometimes when wake up and know it was a dream, cry. , who hardly ever cried at all when was young.

' oes al know?' she asked at last.

' hat John 's innocent? don't see how he can.'

' an he help? oes he have any influence with ribus?' 'Not a bit, honey

he nodded, as if she had expected this. ' hen don't tell him. f he can't help, for od's sake don't tell him.'

'No.'

he looked up at me with steady eyes. ' nd you won't call in sick that night. None of you will. You can't.'

'No, we can't. f we're there, we can at least make it quick for him. e can do that much. t won't be like elacroix.' or a moment, mercifully brief, saw the black silk mask burning away from el's face and revealing the cooked blobs of jelly which had been his eyes.

' here's no way out for you, is there?' he took my hand, rubbed it down the soft velvet of her cheek. 'Poor Paul. Poor old guy.'

said nothing. Never before or after in my life did feel so much like running from a thing. Just taking Jan with me, the two of us with a single packed carpetbag between us, running to anywhere.

'My poor old guy,' she repeated, and then: ' alk to him.' ' ho? John?'

'Yes. alk to him. ind out what *he* wants.'

thought about it, then nodded. he was right. he usually was.

# 7

wo days later, on the eighteenth, ill odge, ank itterman, and someone else - don't remember who, some floater - took John offey over

to lock for his shower, and we rehearsed his execution while he was gone. e didn't let oot- oot stand in for John; all of us knew, even without talking about it, that it would have been an obscenity.

did it.

'John offey,' rutal said in a not-quite-steady voice as sat clamped into Old parky, 'you have been condemned to die in the electric chair, sentence passed by a jury of your peers□ '

John offey's peers? hat a joke. o far as knew, there was no one like him on the planet. hen thought of what John had said while he stood looking at parky from the foot of the stairs leading down from my office: *They re still in there. hear them screaming.*

' et me out of it,' said hoarsely. ' ndo these clamps and let me up.'

hey did it, but for a moment felt frozen there, as if Old parky did not want to let me go.

s we walked back to the block, rutal spoke to me in a low voice, so not even ean and arry, who were setting up the last of the chairs behind us, would overhear. ' done a few things in my life that 'm not proud of, but this is the first time ever felt really actually in danger of hell.'

looked at him to make sure he wasn't joking. didn't think he was. ' hat do you mean?'

' mean we're fixing to kill a gift of od,' he said. 'One that never did ary harm to us, or to anyone else. hat am going to say if end up standing in front of od the ather lmighty and e asks me to explain why did it?

hat it was my job? My *job?*

# 8

hen John got back from his shower and the floaters had left, unlocked his cell, went in, and sat down on the bunk beside him. rutal was on the desk. e looked up, saw me in there on my own, but said nothing. e just went back to whatever paperwork he was currently mangling, licking away at the tip of his pencil the whole time.

John looked at me with his strange eyes - bloodshot, distant, on the verge of tears□ and yet calm, too, as if crying was not such a bad way of life, not once you got used to it. e even smiled a little. e smelled of vory soap, remember, as clean and fresh as a baby after his evening bath.

' ello, boss,' he said, and then reached out and took both of my hands in both of his. t was done with a perfect unstudied naturalness.

' ello, John.' here was a little block in my throat, and tried to swallow it away. ' guess you know that we're coming down to it now. nother couple of days.'

e said nothing, only sat there holding my hands in his. think, looking back on it, that something had already begun to happen to me, but was too fixed - mentally and emotionally - on doing my duty to notice.

' s there anything special you'd like that night for dinner, John? e can rustle you up most anything. ven bring you a beer, if you want. Just have to put her in a coffee cup, that's all.'

'Never got the taste,' he said.

' omething special to eat, then?'

is brow creased below that expanse of clean brown skull. hen the lines smoothed out and he smiled. 'Meatloaf'd be good.'

'Meatloaf it is. ith gravy and mashed.' felt a tingle like you get in your arm when you've slept on it, except this one was all over my body. *n* my body. ' hat else to go with it?'

' unno, boss. hatever you got, guess. Okra, maybe, but 's not picky.' ' ll right,' said, and thought he would also have Mrs. Janice

dgecombe's peach cobbler for dessert. 'Now, what about a preacher?

omeone you could say a little prayer with, night after next? t comforts a man, so 've seen that many times. could get in touch with everend

chuster, he's the man who came when el - '

' on't want no preacher,' John said. 'You been good to me, boss. You can say a prayer, if you want. hat'd be all right. could get kneebound with you a bit, guess.'

*Me!* John, couldn't - '

e pressed down on my hands a little, and that feeling got stronger. 'You

*could,* he said. ' ouldn't you, boss?'

' suppose so,' heard myself say. My voice seemed to have developed an echo. ' suppose could, if it came to that.'

he feeling was strong inside me by then, and it was like before, when he'd cured my waterworks, but it was different, too. nd not just because there was nothing wrong with me this time. t was different because *this time he didn t know he was doing it.* uddenly was terrified, almost choked with a need to get out of there. Lights were going on inside me

where there had never been lights before. Not just in my brain; all over my body.

'You and Mr. owell and the other bosses been good to me,' John offey said. ' know you been worryin, but you ought to quit on it now. ecause *want* to go, boss.'

tried to speak and couldn't. e could, though. hat he said next was the longest ever heard him speak.

' 'm rightly tired of the pain hear and feel, boss. 'm tired of bein on the road, lonely as a robin in the rain. Not never havin no buddy to go on with or tell me where we's comin from or goin to or why. 'm tired of people bein ugly to each other. t feels like pieces of glass in my head. 'm tired of all the times 've wanted to help and couldn't. 'm tired of bein in the dark. Mostly it's the pain. here's too much. f could end it, would. ut cain't.'

top it, tried to say. top it, let go of my hands, 'm going to drown if you don't. rown or explode.

'You won't 'splode,' he said, smiling a little at the idea□ but he let go of my hands.

leaned forward, gasping. etween my knees could see every crack in the cement floor, every groove, every flash of mica. looked up at the wall and saw names that had been written there in 9 , 9 6, 93 . hose names had been washed away, the men who had written them had also been washed away, in a manner of speaking, but guess you can never wash anything completely away, not from this dark glass of a world, and now saw them again, a tangle of names overlying one another, and looking at them was like listening to the dead speak and sing and cry out for mercy. felt my eyeballs pulsing in their sockets, heard my own heart, felt the windy whoosh of my blood rushing through all the boulevards of my body like letters being mailed to everywhere.

heard a train-whistle in the distance - the three-fifty to Priceford, imagine, but couldn't be sure, because 'd never heard it before. Not from

old Mountain, hadn't, because the closest it came to the state pen was ten miles east. *couldn t* have heard it from the pen, so you would have said and so, until November of '3 , would have believed, but heard it that day.

omewhere a lightbulb shattered, loud as a bomb.

' hat did you do to me?' whispered. 'Oh John, what did you do?'

' 'm sorry, boss,' he said in his calm way. ' wasn't thinkin. in't much, reckon. You feel like regular soon.'

got up and went to the cell door. t felt like walking in a dream. hen got there, he said: 'You wonder why they didn't scream. hat's the only thing you still wonder about, ain't it? hy those two little girls didn't scream while they were still there on the porch.'

turned and looked at him. could see every red snap in his eyes, could see every pore on his face□ and could feel his hurt, the pain that he took in from other people like a sponge takes in water. could see the darkness he had spoken of, too. t lay in all the spaces of the world as he saw it, and in that moment felt both pity for him and great relief. Yes, it was a terrible thing we'd be doing, nothing would ever change that□ and yet we would be doing him a favor.

' seen it when that bad fella, he done grab me,' John said. ' hat's when knowed it was him done it. seen him that day, was in the trees and seen him drop them down and run away, but - '

'You forgot,' said.

' hat's right, boss. ntil he touch me, forgot.'

' hy *didn t* they scream, John? e hurt them enough to make them bleed, their parents were right upstairs, so why didn't they scream?'

John looked at me from his haunted eyes. ' e say to the one, ' f you make noise, it's your sister kill, not you,' e say that same to the other. You see?' 'Yes,' whispered, and *could* see it. he etterick porch in the dark.

harton leaning over them like a ghoul. One of them had maybe started to cry out, so harton had hit her and she had bled from the nose. hat's where most of it had come from.

' e kill them with they love,' John said. ' hey love for each other. You see how it was?'

nodded, incapable of speech.

e smiled. he tears were flowing again, but he smiled. ' hat's how it is every day,' he said, 'all over the worl'.' hen he lay down and turned his face to the wall.

stepped out into the Mile, locked his cell, and walked up to the duty desk. still felt like a man in a dream. realized could hear rutal's thoughts - a very faint whisper, how to spell some word, *receive,* think it was. e was thinking *i before* e, *except after c, is that how the dadratted*

*thing goes?* hen he looked up, started to smile, and stopped when he got a good look at me. 'Paul?' he asked. ' re you all right?'

'Yes.' hen told him what John had told me - not all of it, and certainly not about what his touch had done to me ( never told anyone that part, not even Janice; laine onnelly will be the first to know of it - if, that is, she wants to read these last pages after reading all the rest of them), but repeated what John had said about wanting to go. hat seemed to relieve

rutal - a bit, anyway - but sensed (heard?) him wondering if hadn't made it up, just to set his mind at ease. hen felt him deciding to believe it, simply because it would make things a little easier for him when the time came.

'Paul, is that infection of yours coming back?' he asked. 'You look all flushed.'

'No, think 'm okay,' said. wasn't, but felt sure by then that John was right and was going to be. could feel that tingle starting to subside.

' ll the same, it might not hurt you to go on in your office there and lie down a bit.'

Lying down was the *last* thing felt like right then - the idea seemed so ridiculous that almost laughed. hat felt like doing was maybe building myself a little house, then shingling it, and plowing a garden in back, and planting it. ll before suppertime.

*That s how it is,* thought. *Every day. All over the world. That darkness.*

*All over the world.*

' 'm going to take a turn over to dmin instead. ot a few things to check over there.'

' f you say so.'

went to the door and opened it, then looked back. 'You've got it right,' said: 'r-e-c-e-i-v-e; i before *e,* except after c. Most of the time, anyway; guess there's exceptions to all the rules - '

went out, not needing to look back at him to know he was staring with his mouth open.

kept moving for the rest of that shift, unable to sit down for more than five minutes at a stretch before jumping up again. went over to dmin, and then tromped back and forth across the empty exercise yard until the guards in the towers must have thought was crazy. ut by the time my shift was over, was starting to calm down again, and that rustle of thoughts

in my head - like a stirring of leaves, it was - had pretty much quieted down.

till, halfway home that morning, it came back strong. he way my urinary infection had. had to park my ord by the side of the road, get out, and sprint nearly half a mile, head down, arms pumping, breath tearing in and out of my throat as warm as something that you've carried in your armpit. hen, at last, began to feel really normal. trotted halfway back to where the ord was parked and walked the rest of the way, my breath steaming in the chilly air. hen got home, told Janice that John offey had said he was ready, that he wanted to go. he nodded, looking relieved.

as she really? couldn't say. ix hours before, even three, would have known, but by then didn't. nd that was good. John had kept saying that he was tired, and now could understand why. t would have tired anyone out, what he had. ould have made anyone long for rest and for quiet.

hen Janice asked me why looked so flushed and smelled so sweaty, told her had stopped the car on my way home and gone running for awhile, running hard. told her that much - as may have said (there's too many pages here now for me to want to look back through and make sure), lying wasn't much a part of our marriage - but didn't tell her why.

nd she didn't ask.

# 9

here were no thunderstorms on the night it came John offey's turn to walk the reen Mile. t was seasonably cold for those parts at that time of year, in the thirties, 'd guess, and a million stars spilled across used-up, picked-out fields where frost glittered on fenceposts and glowed like diamonds on the dry skeletons of July's corn.

rutus owell was out front for this one - he would do the capping and tell an ay to roll when it was time. ill odge was in with an ay. nd at around eleven-twenty on the night of November 0th, ean and arry and went down to our one occupied cell, where John offey sat on the end of his bunk with his hands clasped between his knees and a tiny dab of meatloaf gravy on the collar of his blue shirt. e looked out through the bars at us, a lot calmer than we felt, it seemed. My hands were cold and my temples were throbbing. t was one thing to know he was willing - it made

it at least possible for us to do our job - but it was another to know we were going to electrocute him for someone else's crime.

had last seen al Moores around seven that evening. e was in his office, buttoning up his overcoat. is face was pale, his hands shaking so badly that he was making quite some production of those buttons. almost wanted to knock his fingers aside and do the coat up myself, like you would with a little kid. he irony was that Melinda had looked better when Jan and

went to see her the previous weekend than al had looked earlier on John

offey's execution evening.

' won't be staying for this one,' he had said. ' urtis will be there, and know offey will be in good hands with you and rutus.'

'Yes, sir, we'll do our best,' said. ' s there any word on Percy?' s he coming back around? is what meant, of course. s he even now sitting in a room somewhere and telling someone - some doctor, most likely - about how we zipped him into the nut-coat and threw him into the restraint room like any other problem child□ any other lugoon, in Percy's language? nd if he is, are they believing him?

ut according to al, Percy was just the same. Not talking, and not, so far as anyone could tell, in the world at all. e was still at ndianola - "being evaluated," al had said, looking mystified at the phrase - but if there was no improvement, he would be moving along soon.

' ow's offey holding up?' al had asked then. e had finally managed to do up the last button of his coat.

nodded. ' e'll be fine, arden.'

e'd nodded back, then gone to the door, looking old and ill. ' ow can so much good and so much evil live together in the same man? ow could the man who cured my wife be the same man who killed those little girls? o you understand that?'

had told him didn't, the ways of od were mysterious, there was good and evil in all of us, ours not to reason why, hotcha, hotcha, row-dee-dow. Most of what told him were things 'd learned in the church of Praise Jesus, he Lord s Mighty, al nodding the whole time and looking sort of exalted. e could afford to nod, couldn't he? Yes. nd look exalted, too.

here was a deep sadness on his face - he was shaken, all right; never doubted it - but there were no tears this time, because he had a wife to go home to, his companion to go home to, and she was fine. hanks to John

offey, she was well and fine and the man who had signed John 's death

warrant could leave and go to her. e didn't have to watch what came next.

e would be able to sleep that night in his wife's warmth while John offey lay on a slab in the basement of ounty ospital, growing cool as the friendless, speechless hours moved toward dawn. nd hated al for those things. Just a little, and 'd get over it, but it was hate, all right. he genuine article.

Now stepped into the cell, followed by ean and arry, both of them pale and downcast. ' re you ready, John?' asked.

e nodded. 'Yes, boss. uess so.'

' ll right, then. got a piece to say before we go out.' 'You say what you need to, boss.'

'John offey, as an officer of the court□ '

said it right to the end, and when 'd finished, arry erwilliger stepped up beside me and held out his hand. John looked surprised for a moment, then smiled and shook it. ean, looking paler than ever, offered his next. 'You deserve better than this, Johnny' he said hoarsely. ' 'm sorry.'

' be all right,' John said. ' his the hard part; be all right in a little while.'

e got up, and the t. hristopher's medal Melly had given him swung free of his shirt.

'John, ought to have that,' said. ' can put it back on you after the□ after, if you want, but should take it for now.' t was silver, and if it was lying against his skin when Jack an ay switched on the juice, it might fuse itself into his skin. ven if it didn't do that, it was apt to electroplate, leaving a kind of charred photograph of itself on the skin of his chest. had seen it before. 'd seen most everything during my years on the Mile. More than was good for me. knew that now.

e slipped the chain over his head and put it in my hand. put the medallion in my pocket and told him to step on out of the cell. here was no need to check his head and make sure the contact would be firm and the induction good; it was as smooth as the palm of my hand.

'You know, fell asleep this afternoon and had a dream, boss,' he said. ' dreamed about el's mouse.'

' id you, John?' flanked him on the left. arry took the right. ean fell in behind, and then we were walking the reen Mile. or me, it was the last time ever walked it with a prisoner.

'Yep,' he said. ' dreamed he got down to that place oss owell talked about, that Mouseville place. dreamed there was kids, and how they

laughed at his tricks! My!' e laughed himself at the thought of it, then grew serious again. ' dreamed those two little blond-headed girls were there. hey us laughin, too. put my arms around em and there us no blood comin out they hair and they 'us fine. e all watch Mr. Jingles roll that spool, and how we did laugh. it to bus,' we was.'

' s that so?' was thinking couldn't go through with it, just could not, there was no way. was going to cry or scream or maybe my heart would burst with sorrow and that would be an end to it.

e went into my office. John looked around for a moment or two, then dropped to his knees without having to be asked. ehind him, arry was looking at me with haunted eyes. ean was as white as paper.

got down on my knees with John and thought there was a funny turnaround brewing here: after all the prisoners 'd had to help up so they could finish the journey, this time was the one who was apt to need a hand. hat's the way it felt, anyway.

' hat should we pray for, boss?' John asked.

' trength,' said without even thinking. closed my eyes and said, 'Lord

od of ' osts, please help us finish what we've started, and please welcome this man, John offey - like the drink but not spelled the same - into heaven and give him peace. Please help us to see him off the way he deserves and let nothing go wrong. men.' opened my eyes and looked at ean and

arry. oth of them looked a little better. Probably it was having a few moments to catch their breath. doubt it was my praying.

started to get up, and John caught my arm. e gave me a look that was both timid and hopeful. ' 'member a prayer someone taught me when 'us little,' he said. ' t least think do. an say it?'

'You go right on and do her,' ean said. 'Lots of time yet, John.'

John closed his eyes and frowned with concentration. expected now- - lay-me-down-to-sleep, or maybe a garbled version of the Lord's prayer, but

got neither; had never heard what he came out with before, and have never heard it again, not that either the sentiments or expressions were particularly unusual. olding his hands up in front of his closed eyes, John

offey said: ' aby Jesus, meek and mild, pray for me, an orphan child. e my strength, be my friend, be with me until the end. men.' e opened his eyes, started to get up, then looked at me closely.

wipe my arm across my eyes. s listened to him, had been thinking about el; he had wanted to pray one more at the end, too. *oly Mary,*

*mother of od, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death.*

' orry, John.'

' on't be,' he said. e squeezed my arm and smiled. nd then, as 'd thought he might have to do, he helped me to my feet.

# 10

here weren't many witnesses - maybe fourteen in all, half the number that had been in the storage room for the elacroix execution. omer

ribus was there, overflowing his chair as per usual, but didn't see eputy Mc ee. Like arden Moores, he had apparently decided to give this one a miss.

itting in the front row was an elderly couple didn't recognize at first, even though had seen their pictures in a good many newspaper articles by that day in the third week of November. hen, as we neared the platform where Old parky waited, the woman spat, ' ie slow, you son of a bitch!' and realized they were the ettericks, Klaus and Marjorie. hadn't recognized them because you don't often see elderly people who haven't yet climbed out of their thirties.

John hunched his shoulders at the sound of the woman's voice and

heriff ribus's grunt of approval. ank itterman, who had the guard-post near the front of the meager group of spectators, never took his eyes off Klaus etterick. hat was per my orders, but etterick never made a move in John 's direction that night. etterick seemed to be on some other planet.

rutal, standing beside Old parky, gave me a small finger-tilt as we stepped up onto the platform. e holstered his sidearm and took John 's wrist, escorting him toward the electric chair as gently as a boy leading his date out onto the floor for their first dance as a couple.

' verything all right, John?' he asked in a low voice.

'Yes, boss, but□ ' is eyes were moving from side to side in their sockets, and for the first time he looked and sounded scared. ' ut they's a lot of folks here hate me. *lot.* can feel it. urts. ores in like bee-stings an' *hurts.*

' eel how we feel, then,' rutal said in that same low voice. *We* don't hate you - can you feel that?'

'Yes, boss.' ut his voice was trembling worse now, and his eyes had begun to leak their slow tears again.

*Kill him twice, you boys!* Marjorie etterick suddenly screamed. er ragged, strident voice was like a slap. John cringed against me and moaned.

*You go on and kill that raping baby-killer twice, that d be just fine!* Klaus, still looking like a man dreaming awake, pulled her against his shoulder.

he began to sob.

saw with dismay that arry erwilliger was crying, too. o far none of the spectators had seen his tears - his back was to them - but he was crying, all right. till, what could we do? esides push on with it, mean?

rutal and turned John around. rutal pressed on one of the big man's shoulders and John sat. e gripped parky's wide oak arms, his eyes moving from side to side, his tongue darting out to wet first one corner of his mouth, then the other.

arry and dropped to our knees. he day before, we'd had one of the shop-trusties weld temporary flexible extensions to the chair's ankle clamps, because John offey's ankles were nigh on the size of an ordinary fellow's calves. till, had a nightmarish moment when thought they were still going to come up small, and we'd have to take him back to his cell while

am roderick, who was head of the shop guys in those days, was found and tinkered some more. gave a final, extra-hard shove with the heels of my hands and the clamp on my side closed. John 's leg jerked and he gasped. had pinched him.

' orry, John,' murmured, and glanced at arry. e had gotten his clamp fixed more easily (either the extension on his side was a little bigger or John 's right calf was a little smaller), but he was looking at the result with a doubtful expression. guessed could understand why; the modified clamps had a *hungry* look, their jaws seeming to gape like the mouths of alligators.

' t'll be all right,' said, hoping that sounded convincing□ and that was telling the truth. ' ipe your face, arry.'

e swabbed at it with his arm, wiping away tears from his cheeks and beads of sweat from his forehead. e turned. omer ribus, who had been talking too loudly to the man sitting next to him (the prosecutor, judging from the string tie and rusty black suit), fell silent. t was almost time.

rutal had clamped one of John 's wrists, ean the other. Over ean's shoulder could see the doctor, unobtrusive as ever, standing against the wall with his black bag between his feet. Nowadays guess they just about run such affairs, especially the ones with the drips, but back then you almost had to yank them forward if you wanted them. Maybe back then

they had a clearer idea of what was right for a doctor to be doing, and what was a perversion of the special promise they make, the one where they swear first of all to do no harm.

ean nodded to rutal. rutal turned his head, seemed to glance at the telephone that was never going to ring for the likes of John offey, and called ' oll on one!' to Jack an ay.

here was that hum, like an old fridge kicking on, and the lights burned a little brighter. Our shadows stood out a little sharper, black shapes that climbed the wall and seemed to hover around the shadow of the chair like vultures. John drew in a sharp breath. is knuckles were white.

*Does it hurt yet?* Mrs. etterick shrieked brokenly from against her husband's shoulder. *hope it does! hope it hurts like hell!* er husband squeezed her. One side of his nose was bleeding, saw, a narrow trickle of red working its way down into his narrow-gauge mustache. hen opened the paper the following March and saw he'd died of a stroke, was about the least surprised man on earth.

rutal stepped into John 's field of vision. e touched John's shoulder as he spoke. hat was irregular, but of the witnesses, only urtis nderson knew it, and he did not seem to remark it. thought he looked like a man who only wants to be done with his current job. esperately wants to be done with it. e enlisted in the rmy after Pearl arbor, but never got overseas; he died at ort ragg, in a truck accident.

John, meanwhile, relaxed beneath rutal's fingers. don't think he understood much, if any, of what rutal was telling him, but he took comfort from rutal's hand on his shoulder. rutal, who died of a heart attack about twenty-five years later (he was eating a fish sandwich and watching wrestling when it happened, his sister said), was a good man. My friend. Maybe the best of us. e had no trouble understanding how a man could simultaneously want to go and still be terrified of the trip.

'John offey, you have been condemned to die in the electric chair, sentence passed by a jury of your peers and imposed by a judge of good standing in this state. od save the people of this state. o you have anything to say before sentence is carried out?'

John wet his lips again, then spoke clearly. ix words. ' 'm sorry for what

am.'

*You ought to be!* the mother of the two dead girls screamed. *Oh you monster, you ought to be! YO DAMN WELL O T TO BE!*

John's eyes turned to me. saw no resignation in them, no hope of heaven, no dawning peace. ow would love to tell you that did. ow would love to tell myself that. hat saw was fear, misery, incompletion, and incomprehension. hey were the eyes of a trapped and terrified animal.

thought of what he'd said about how harton had gotten ora and Kathe

etterick off the porch without rousing the house: *e kill them with they love. That s how it is every day. All over the world.*

rutal took the new mask from its brass hook on the back of the chair, but as soon as John saw it and understood what it was, his eyes widened in horror. e looked at me, and now could see huge droplets of sweat standing out on the curve of his naked skull. s big as robin's eggs, they looked.

'Please, boss, don't put that thing over my face,' he said in a moaning little whisper. 'Please don't put me in the dark, don't make me go into the dark, 's afraid of the dark.'

rutal was looking at me, eyebrows raised, frozen in place, the mask in his hands. is eyes said it was my call, he'd go either way. thought as fast as could and as well as could - hard to do, with my head pounding the way it was. he mask was tradition, not law. t was, in fact, to spare the witnesses. nd suddenly decided that they did not need to be spared, not this once. John, after all, hadn't done a damned thing in his life to warrant dying under a mask. hey didn't know that, but we did, and decided was going to grant this last request. s for Marjorie etterick, she'd probably send me a thank-you note.

' ll right, John,' murmured.

rutal put the mask back. rom behind us, omer ribus called out indignantly in his deep-dish cracker voice: ' ay, boy! Put that-air mask on him! hink we want to watch his eyes pop?'

' e quiet, sir,' said without turning. ' his is an execution, and you're not in charge of it.'

' ny more than you were in charge of catching him, you tub of guts,'

arry whispered. arry died in 98 , close to the age of eighty. n old man. Not in my league, of course, but few are. t was intestinal cancer of some kind.

rutal bent over and plucked the disk of sponge out of its bucket. e pressed a finger into it and licked the tip, but he hardly had to; could see the ugly brown thing dripping. e tucked it into the cap, then put the cap on

John 's head. or the first time saw that rutal was pale, too - pasty white, on the verge of passing out. thought of him saying that he felt, for the first time in his life, that he was in danger of hell, because we were fixing to kill a gift of od. felt a sudden strong need to retch. controlled it, but only with an effort. ater from the sponge was dripping down the sides of John 's face.

ean tanton ran the strap - let out to its maximum length on this occasion - across John 's chest and gave it to me. e had taken such pains to try and protect ean on the night of our trip, because of his kids, never knowing that he had less than four months to live. fter John offey, he requested and received a transfer away from Old parky, over to lock, and there a prisoner stabbed him in the throat with a shank and let out his life's blood on the dirty board floor. never knew why. don't think anyone ever knew why. Old parky seems such a thing of perversity when look back on those days, such a deadly bit of folly. ragile as blown glass, we are, even under the best of conditions. o kill each other with gas and electricity, and in cold blood? he folly. he *horror*.

rutal checked the strap, then stood back. waited for him to speak, but he didn't. s he crossed his hands behind his back and stood at parade rest, knew that he wouldn't. Perhaps couldn't. didn't think could, either, but then looked at John 's terrified, weeping eyes and knew had to. ven if it damned me forever, had to.

' oll on two,' said in a dusty, cracking voice hardly recognized as my own.

he cap hummed. ight large fingers and two large thumbs rose from the ends of the chair's broad oak arms and splayed tensely in ten different directions, their tips jittering. is big knees made caged pistoning motions, but the clamps on his ankles held. Overhead, three of the hanging lights blew out - *Pow! Pow! Pow!* Marjorie etterick screamed at the sound and fainted in her husband's arms. he died in Memphis, eighteen years later.

arry sent me the obit. t was a trolley-car accident.

John surged forward against the chest-strap. or a moment his eyes met mine. hey were aware; was the last thing he saw as we tilted him off the edge of the world. hen he fell against the seatback, the cap coming askew on his head a little, smoke - a sort of charry mist - drifting out from beneath it. ut on the whole, you know, it was quick. doubt if it was painless, the way the chair's supporters always claim (it's not an idea even the most rabid

of them ever seems to want to investigate personally), but it was quick. he hands were limp again, the formerly bluish-white moons at the base of the fingernails now a deep eggplant hue, a tendril of smoke rising off cheeks still wet with salt water from the sponge□ and his tears.

John offey's last tears.

# 11

was all right until got home. t was dawn by then, and birds singing. parked my flivver, got out, walked up the back steps, and then the second greatest grief have ever known washed over me. t was thinking of how he'd been afraid of the dark that did it. remembered the first time we'd met, how he'd asked if we left a light on at night, and my legs gave out on me. sat on my steps and hung my head over my knees and cried. t didn't feel like that weeping was just for John, either, but for all of us.

Janice came out and sat down beside me. he put an arm over my shoulders.

'You didn't hurt him any more than you could help, did you?'

shook my head no. ' nd he wanted to go.'

nodded.

' ome in the house,' she said, helping me up. t made me think of the way John had helped me up after we'd prayed together. ' ome in and have coffee.'

did. he first morning passed, and the first afternoon, then the first shift back at work. ime takes it all, whether you want it to or not. ime takes it all, time bears it away, and in the end there is only darkness. ometimes we find others in that darkness, and sometimes we lose them there again. hat's all know, except that this happened in 93 , when the state penitentiary was still at old Mountain.

nd the electric chair, of course.

# 12

round quarter past two in the afternoon, my friend laine onnelly came to me where sat in the sunroom, with the last pages of my story

squared up neatly in front of me. er face was very pale, and there were shiny places under her eyes. think she had been crying.

Me, 'd been looking. Just that. Looking out the window and over the hills to the east, my right hand throbbing at the end of its wrist. ut it was a peaceful throb, somehow. felt empty, husked out. feeling that was terrible and wonderful at the same time.

t was hard to meet laine's eyes - was afraid of the hate and contempt might see there - but they were all right. ad and wondering, but all right. No hate, no contempt, and no disbelief.

' o you want the rest of the story?' asked. tapped the little pile of script with my aching hand.

' t's here, but 'll understand if you'd just as soon not - '

' t isn't a question of what *want,* she said. ' have to know how it came out, although guess there is no doubt that you executed him. he intervention of Providence-with-a-capital-P is greatly overrated in the lives of ordinary humans, think. ut before take those pages□ Paul□ '

he stopped, as if unsure how to go on. waited. ometimes you can't help people. ometimes it's better not even to try.

'Paul, you speak in here as though you had two grown children in 93 - not just one, but *two.* f you didn't get married to your Janice when you were twelve and she was eleven, something like that - '

smiled a little. ' e were young when we married - a lot of hill-people are, my own mother was - but not *that* young.'

' hen how old *are you?* 've always assumed you were in your early eighties, my age, possibly even a little younger, but according to this□ '

' was forty the year John walked the reen Mile,' said. ' was born in

89 . hat makes me a hundred and four, unless my reckoning's out.'

he stared at me, speechless.

held out the rest of the manuscript, remembering again how John had touched me, there in his cell. *You won t splode,* he'd said, smiling a bit at the very idea, and hadn't□ but something had happened to me, all the same. omething lasting.

' ead the rest of it,' said. ' hat answers have are in there.'

' ll right,' she almost whispered. ' 'm a little afraid to, can't lie about that, but□ all right. here will you be?'

stood up, stretched, listened to my spine crackle in my back. One thing

that knew for sure was that was sick to death of the sunroom. 'Out on the

croquet course. here's still something want to show you, and it's in that direction.'

' s it□ scary?' n her timid look saw the little girl she had been back when men wore straw boaters in the summer and raccoon coats in the winter.

'No,' said, smiling. 'Not scary.'

' ll right.' he took the pages. ' 'm going to take these down to my room.

'll see you out on the croquet course around□ ' he riffled the manuscript, estimating. ' our? s that all right?'

'Perfect,' said, thinking of the too-curious rad olan. e would be gone by then.

he reached out, gave my arm a little squeeze, and left the room. stood where was for a moment, looking down at the table, taking in the fact that it was bare again except for the breakfast tray laine had brought me that morning, my scattered papers at last gone. somehow couldn't believe was done□ and as you can see, since all this was written after recorded John

offey's execution and gave the last batch of pages to laine, was not.

nd even then, part of me knew why.

labama.

filched the last piece of cold toast off the tray, went downstairs, and out onto the croquet course. here sat in the sun, watching half a dozen pairs and one slow but cheerful foursome pass by waving their mallets, thinking my old man's thoughts and letting the sun warm my old man's bones.

round two-forty-five, the three-to-eleven shift started to trickle in from the parking lot, and at three, the day-shift folks left. Most were in groups, but rad olan, saw, was walking alone. hat was sort of a happy sight; maybe the world hasn't gone entirely to hell, after all. One of his joke-books was sticking out of his back pocket. he path to the parking lot goes by the croquet course, so he saw me there, but he didn't give me either a wave or a scowl. hat was fine by me. e got into his old hevrolet with the bumper sticker reading i have seen god and his name is newt. hen he was gone to wherever he goes when he isn't here, laying a thin trail of discount motor oil behind.

round four o'clock, laine joined me, just as she had promised. rom the look of her eyes, she'd done a little more crying. he put her arms around me and hugged me tight. 'Poor John offey,' she said. ' nd poor Paul dgecombe, too.'

*Poor Paul*, heard Jan saying. *Poor old guy.*

laine began to cry again. held her, there on the croquet course in the late sunshine. Our shadows looked as if they were dancing. Perhaps in the Make elieve allroom we used to listen to on the radio back in those days.

t last she got herself under control and drew back from me. he found a Kleenex in her blouse pocket and wiped her streaming eyes with it. ' hat happened to the arden's wife, Paul? hat happened with Melly?'

' he was considered the marvel of the age, at least by the doctors at

ndianola ospital,' said. took her arm and we began to walk toward the path which led away from the employees, parking lot and into the woods.

oward the shed down by the wall between eorgia Pines and the world of younger people. ' he died - of a heart attack, not a brain tumor - ten or eleven years later. n forty-three, think. al died of a stroke right around Pearl arbor ay - could have been *on* Pearl arbor ay, for all remember - so she outlived him by two years. ort of ironic.'

' nd Janice?'

' 'm not quite prepared for that today,' said. ' 'll tell you another time.' 'Promise?'

'Promise.' ut that was one never kept. hree months after the day we walked down into the woods together ( would have held her hand, if hadn't been afraid of hurting her bunched and swollen fingers), laine

onnelly died quietly in her bed. s with Melinda Moores, death came as the result of a heart attack. he orderly who found her said she looked peaceful, as if it had come suddenly and without much pain. hope he was right about that. loved laine. nd miss her. er and Janice and rutal and just all of them.

e reached the second shed on the path, the one down by the wall. t stood back in a bower of scrub pines, its sagging roof and boarded-over windows laced and dappled with shadows. started toward it. laine hung back a moment, looking fearful.

' t's all right,' said. ' eally. ome on.'

here was no latch on the door - there had been once, but it had been torn away - and so used a folded-over square of cardboard to wedge it shut. pulled it free now, and stepped into the shed. left the door as wide open as it would go, because it was dark inside.

'Paul, what?□ Oh. *Oh!*' hat second 'oh' was just shy of a scream.

here was a table pushed off to one side. On it was a flashlight and a brown paper bag. On the dirty floor was a av- - ampa cigar box 'd gotten from the concession man who refills the home's soft-drink and candy machines. 'd asked him for it special, and since his company also sells tobacco products, it was easy for him to get. offered to pay him for it - they were valuable commodities when worked at old Mountain, as may have told you - but he just laughed me off.

Peering over the edge of it were a pair of bright little oilspot eyes.

'Mr. Jingles,' said in a low voice. ' ome over here. ome on over here, old boy, and see this lady.'

squatted down - it hurt, but managed - and held out my hand. t first didn't think he was going to be able to get over the side of the box this time, but he made it with one final lunge. e landed on his side, then regained his feet, and came over to me. e ran with a hitching limp in one of his back legs; the injury that Percy had inflicted had come back in Mr. Jingles's old age. is old, *old* age. xcept for the top of his head and the tip of his tail, his fur had gone entirely gray.

e hopped onto the palm of my hand. raised him up and he stretched his neck out, sniffing at my breath with his ears laid back and his tiny dark eyes avid. held my hand out toward laine, who looked at the mouse with wide-eyed wonder, her lips parted.

' t *can t* be,' she said, and raised her eyes to me. 'Oh Paul, it isn't□ it *can t*

be!'

' atch,' said, 'and then tell me that.'

rom the bag on the table took a spool which had colored myself - not with rayolas but with Magic Markers, an invention undreamed of in 93 .

t came to the same, though. t was as bright as el's had been, maybe brighter. *Messieurs et mesdames,* thought. *Bienvenue au cirque du mousie!*

squatted again, and Mr. Jingles ran off my palm. e was old, but as obsessed as ever. rom the moment had taken the spool out of the bag, he'd had eyes for nothing else. rolled it across the shed's uneven, splintery floor, and he was after it at once. e didn't run with his old speed, and his limp was painful to watch, but why should he have been either fast or surefooted? s 've said, he was old, a Methuselah of a mouse. ixty-four, at least.

e reached the spool, which struck the far wall and bounced back. e went around it, then lay down on his side. laine started forward and held

her back. fter a moment, Mr. Jingles found his feet again. lowly, so slowly, he nosed the spool back to me. hen he'd first come - 'd found him lying on the steps leading to the kitchen in just that same way, as if he'd travelled a long distance and was exhausted - he had still been able to guide the spool with his paws, as he had done all those years ago on the reen Mile. hat was beyond him, now; his hindquarters would no longer support him. Yet his nose was as educated as ever. e just had to go from one end of the spool to the other to keep it on course. hen he reached me, picked him up in one hand - no more than a feather, he weighed - and the spool in the other. is bright dark eyes never left it.

' on't do it again, Paul,' laine said in a broken voice. ' can't bear to watch him.'

understood how she felt, but thought she was wrong to ask it. e loved chasing and fetching the spool; after all the years, he still loved it just as much. e should all be so fortunate in our passions.

' here are peppermint candies in the bag, too,' said. ' anada Mints. think he still likes them - he won't stop sniffing, if hold one out to him - but his digestion has gotten too bad to eat them. bring him toast, instead.'

squatted again, broke a small fragment off the piece 'd brought with me from the sunroom, and put it on the floor. Mr. Jingles sniffed at it, then picked it up in his paws and began to eat. is tail was coiled neatly around him. e finished, then looked expectantly up.

' ometimes us old fellas can surprise you with our appetites,' said to

laine, and handed her the toast. 'You try.'

he broke off another fragment and dropped it on the floor. Mr. Jingles approached it, sniffed, looked at laine□ then picked it up and began to eat.

'You see?' said. ' e knows you're not a floater.'

' here did he come from, Paul?'

' aven't a clue. One day when went out for my early-morning walk, he was just here, lying on the kitchen steps. knew who he was right away, but

got a spool out of the laundry room occasional basket just to be sure. nd

got him a cigar box. Lined it with the softest stuff could find. e's like us, llie, think - most days just one big sore place. till, he hasn't lost all his zest for living. e still likes his spool, and he still likes a visit from his old blockmate. ixty years held the story of John offey inside me, sixty and more, and now 've told it. kind of had the idea that's why he came

back. o let me know should hurry up and do it while there was still time.

ecause 'm like him - getting there.' ' etting where?'

'Oh, you know,' said, and we watched Mr. Jingles for awhile in silence.

hen, for no reason could tell you, tossed the spool again, even though

laine had asked me not to. Maybe only because, in a way, him chasing a spool was like old people having their slow and careful version of sex - *you* might not want to watch it, you who are young and convinced that, when it comes to old age, an exception will be made in your case, but *they* still want to do it.

Mr. Jingles set off after the rolling spool again, clearly with pain, and just as clearly (to me, at least) with all his old, obsessive enjoyment.

' vy-glass windows,' she whispered, watching him go. ' vy-glass windows,' agreed, smiling.

'John offey touched the mouse the way he touched you. e didn't just make you better of what was wrong with you then, he made you□ what, resistant?'

' hat's as good a word as any, think.'

' esistant to the things that eventually bring the rest of us down like trees with termites in them. You□ and him. Mr. Jingles. hen he cupped Mr. Jingles in his hands.'

' hat's right. hatever power worked through John did that - that's what

think, anyway - and now it's finally wearing off. he termites have chewed their way through our bark. t took a little longer than it does ordinarily, but they got there. may have a few more years, men still live longer than mice, guess, but Mr. Jingles's time is just about up.'

e reached the spool, limped around it, fell over on his side, breathing rapidly (we could see his respiration moving through his gray fur like ripples), then got up and began to push it gamely back with his nose. is fur was gray, his gait was unsteady, but the oilspots that were his eyes gleamed as brightly as ever.

'You think he wanted you to write what you have written,' she said. ' s that so, Paul?'

'Not Mr. Jingles,' said. 'Not him but the force that - '

' hy, Paulie! nd laine onnelly, too!' a voice cried from the open door. t was loaded with a kind of satiric horror. ' s live and breathe!

hat in the goodness can you two be doing here?'

turned, not at all surprised to see rad olan there in the doorway. e was grinning as a man only does when he feels he's fooled you right good and proper. ow far down the road had he driven after his shift was over? Maybe only as far as he rangler for a beer or two and maybe a lap-dance before coming back.

' et out,' laine said coldly. ' et out right now.'

' on't you tell *me* to get out, you wrinkledy old bitch,' he said, still smiling. 'Maybe you can tell me that up the hill, but you ain't tip the hill now. his ain't where you're supposed to be. his is off-limits. Little love- nest, Paulie? s that what you got here? Kind of a *Playboy* pad for the geriatric□ ' is eyes widened as he at last saw the shed's tenant. ' hat the *fuck?*

didn't turn to look. knew what was there, for one thing; for another, the past had suddenly doubled over the present, making one terrible image, three-dimensional in its reality. t wasn't rad olan standing there in the doorway but Percy etmore. n another moment he would rush into the shed and crush Mr. Jingles (who no longer had a hope of outrunning him) under his shoe, and this time there was no John offey to bring him back from the edge of death. ny more than there had been a John offey when needed him on that rainy day in labama.

got to my feet, not feeling any ache in my joints or muscles this time, and rushed toward olan. 'Leave him alone!' yelled. 'You leave him alone, Percy, or by od 'll - '

' ho you callin Percy?' he asked, and pushed me back so hard almost fell over. laine grabbed me, although it must have hurt her to do so, and steadied me. ' in't the first time you done it, either. nd stop peein in your pants. ain't gonna touch im. on't need to. hat's one dead rodent.'

turned, thinking that Mr. Jingles was only lying on his side to catch his breath, the way he sometimes did. e was on his side, all right, but that rippling motion through his fur had stopped. tried to convince myself that

could still see it, and then laine burst into loud sobs. he bent painfully, and picked up the mouse had first seen on the reen Mile, coming up to the duty desk as fearlessly as a man approaching his peers□ or his friends.

e lay limp on her hand. is eyes were dull and still. e was dead.

olan grinned unpleasantly, revealing teeth which had had very little acquaintance with a dentist. ' w, *sakes,* now!' he said. ' id we just lose the family pet? hould we have a little funeral, with paper flowers and - '

'*S T P*!' laine screamed at him, so-loudly and so powerfully that he backed away a step, the smile slipping off his face. *ET O T OF ERE!*

*ET O T OR YO LL NE ER WORK ANOT ER DAY ERE! NOT ANOT ER O R! SWEAR T!*

'You won't be able to get so much as a slice of bread on a breadline,' said, but so low neither of them heard me. couldn't take my eyes off Mr. Jingles, lying on laine's palm like the world's smallest bearskin rug.

rad thought about coming back at her, calling her bluff - he was right, the shed wasn't exactly approved territory for the eorgia Pines inmates, even knew that much - and then didn't. e was, at heart, a coward, just like Percy. nd he might have checked on her claim that her grandson was

omebody mportant and had discovered it was a true claim. Most of all, perhaps, his curiosity had been satisfied, his thirst to know slaked. nd after all his wondering, the mystery had turned out not to be such of a much. n old man's pet mouse had apparently been living in the shed. Now it had croaked, had a heart attack or something while pushing a colored spool.

' on't know why you're getting so het up,' he said. ' ither of you. You act like it was a *dog*, or something.'

' et out,' she spat. ' et out, you ignorant man. hat little mind you have is ugly and misdirected.'

e flushed dully, the spots where his high school pimples had been filling in a darker red. here had been a lot of them, by the look. ' 'll go,' he said, 'but when you come down here tomorrow□ *Paulie*□ you're going to find a new lock on this door. his place is off-limits to the residents, no matter what bad-tempered things old Mrs. My hit on't tink has to say about me. Look at the floor! oards all warped and rotted! f you was to go through, your scrawny old leg'd be apt to snap like a piece of kindling. o just take that dead mouse, if you want it, and get gone. he Love hack is hereby closed.'

e turned and strode away, looking like a man who believes he's earned at least a draw. waited until he was gone, and then gently took Mr. Jingles from laine. My eyes happened on the bag with the peppermint candies in it, and that did it - the tears began to come. don't know, just cry easier somehow these days.

' ould you help me to bury an old friend?' asked laine when rad

olan's heavy footsteps had faded away.

'Yes, Paul.' he put her arm around my waist and laid her head against my shoulder. ith one old and twisted finger, she stroked Mr. Jingles's moveless side. ' would be happy to do that.'

nd so we borrowed a trowel from the gardening shed and we buried

el's pet mouse as the afternoon shadows drew long through the trees, and then we walked back to get our supper and take up what remained of our lives. nd it was el found myself thinking of, el kneeling on the green carpet of my office with his hands folded and his bald pate gleaming in the lamplight, el who had asked us to take care of Mr. Jingles, to make sure the bad 'un wouldn't hurt him anymore. xcept the bad 'un hurts us all in the end, doesn't he?

'Paul?' laine asked. er voice was both kind and exhausted. ven digging a grave with a trowel and laying a mouse to rest in it is a lot of excitement for old sweeties like us, guess. ' re you all right?'

My arm was around her waist. squeezed it. ' 'm fine,' said.

'Look,' she said. ' t's going to be a beautiful sunset. hall we stay out and watch it?'

' ll right,' said, and we stayed there on the lawn is for quite awhile, arms around each other's waists, first watching the bright colors come up in the sky, then watching them fade to ashes of gray.

*Sainte Marie, Mčre de Dieu, priez pour nous, pauvres pécheurs, maintenant et ŕ l heure de nôtre mort.*

men.

# 13

9 6.

labama in the rain.

Our third grandchild, a beautiful girl named essa, was graduating from the niversity of lorida. e went down on a reyhound. ixty-four, was then, a mere stripling. Jan was fifty-nine, and as beautiful as ever. o me, at least. e were sitting in the seat all the way at the back, and she was fussing at me for not buying her a new camera to record the blessed event. opened my mouth to tell her we had a day to shop in after we got down there, and she could have a new camera if she wanted one, it would fit the budget all right, and furthermore thought she was just fussing because she

was bored with the ride and didn't like the book she'd brought. Perry Mason, it was. hat's when everything in my memory goes white for a bit, like film that's been left out in the sun.

o you remember that accident? suppose a few folks reading this might, but mostly not. Yet it made front-page headlines from coast to coast when it happened. e were outside irmingham in a driving rain, Janice complaining about her old camera, and a tire blew. he bus waltzed sideways on the wet pavement and was hit broadside by a truck hauling fertilizer. he truck slammed the bus into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour, crushed it against the concrete, and broke it in half.

wo shiny, rain-streaked pieces spun in two opposite directions, the one with the diesel tank in it exploding and sending a red-black fireball up into the rainy-gray sky. t one moment Janice was complaining about her old Kodak, and at the very next found myself lying on the far side of the underpass in the rain and staring at a pair of blue nylon panties that had spilled out of someone's suitcase. wednesday was stitched on them in black thread. here were burst-open suitcases everywhere. nd bodies. nd parts of bodies. here were seventy-three people on that bus, and only four survived the crash. was one of them, the only one not seriously hurt.

got up and staggered among the burst-open suitcases and shattered people, crying out my wife's name. kicked aside an alarm clock, remember that, and remember seeing a dead boy of about thirteen lying in a strew of glass with P. . lyers on his feet and half his face gone. felt the rain beating on my own face, then went through the underpass and it was gone for awhile. hen came out on the other side it was there again, hammering my cheeks and forehead. Lying by the shattered cab of the overturned fertilizer truck, saw Jan. recognized her by her red dress - it was her second-best. he best she had been saving for the actual graduation, of course.

he wasn't quite dead. have often thought it would have been better - for me, if not for her - if she had been killed instantly. t might have made it possible for me to let her go a little sooner, a little more naturally. Or perhaps 'm only kidding myself about that. ll know for sure is that have *never* let her go, not really.

he was trembling all over. One of her shoes had come off and could see her foot jittering. er eyes were open but blank, the left one full of blood, and as fell on my knees next to her in the smoky-smelling rain, all

could think of was that jitter meant she was being electrocuted; she was being electrocuted and had to hold the roll before it was too late.

' elp me!' screamed. ' elp me, someone help me!'

No one helped, no one even came. he rain pounded down - a hard, soaking rain that flattened

My still-black hair against my skull - and held her in my arms and no one came. er blank eyes looked up at me with a kind of dazed intensity, and blood poured from the back of her crushed head in a freshet. eside one trembling, mindlessly spasming hand was a piece of chromed steel with the letters Y on it. Next to that was roughly one quarter of what had once been a businessman in a brown ool suit.

*elp me!* screamed again, and turned toward the underpass, and there saw John offey standing in the shadows, only a shadow himself, a big man with long, dangling arms and a bald head. *ohn!* screamed. *Oh ohn, please help me! Please help anice!*

ain ran into my eyes. blinked it away, and he was gone. could see the shadows had mistaken for John□ but it hadn't been *only* shadows. 'm sure of that. e was there. Maybe only as a ghost, but he was there, the rain on his face mixing with the endless flow of his tears.

he died in my arms, there in the rain beside that fertilizer truck with the smell of burning diesel fuel in my nose. here was no moment of awareness

- the eyes clearing, the lips moving in some whispered final declaration of love. here was a kind of shivery clench in the flesh beneath my hands, and then she was gone. thought of Melinda Moores for the first time in years, then, Melinda sitting up in the bed where all the doctors at ndianola

eneral ospital had believed she would die; Melinda Moores looking fresh and rested and peering at John offey with bright, wondering eyes. Melinda saying *dreamed you were wandering in the dark, and so was . We found each other.*

put my wife's poor, mangled head down on the wet pavement of the interstate highway, got to my feet (it was easy; had a little cut on the side of my left hand, but that was all), and screamed his name into the shadows of the underpass.

*ohn! O N COFFEY! W ERE ARE YO , B BOY?*

walked toward those shadows, kicking aside a teddy-bear with blood on its fur, a pair of steel rimmed eyeglasses with one shattered lens, a severed

hand with a garnet ring on the pinky finger. *You saved al s wife, why not my wife? Why not anice? W Y NOT MY AN CE?*

No answer; only the smell of burning diesel and burning bodies, only the rain falling ceaselessly out of the gray sky and drumming on the cement while my wife lay dead on the road behind me. No answer then and no answer now. ut of course it wasn't only Melly Moores that John offey saved in 93 , or el's mouse, the one that could do that cute trick with the spool and seemed to be looking for el long before el showed up□ long before John offey showed up, either.

John saved me, too, and years later, standing in the pouring labama rain and looking for a man who wasn't there in the shadows of an underpass, standing amid the spilled luggage and the ruined dead, learned a terrible thing: sometimes there is absolutely no difference at all between salvation and damnation.

felt one or the other pouring through me as we sat together on his bunk

- November the eighteenth, nineteen and thirty-two. Pouring out of him and into me, whatever strange force he had in him coming through our joined hands in a way our love and hope and good intentions somehow never can, a feeling that began as a tingle and then turned into something tidal and enormous, a force beyond anything had ever experienced before or have ever experienced since. ince that day have never had pneumonia, or the flu, or even a strep throat. have never had another urinary infection, or so much as an infected cut. have had colds, but they have been infrequent - six or seven years apart, and although people who don't have colds often are supposed to suffer more serious ones, that has never been the case with me. Once, earlier on in that awful year of 9 6, passed a gallstone. nd although suppose it will sound strange to some reading this in spite of all have said, part of me relished the pain that came when that gallstone went.

t was the only serious pain 'd had since that problem with my waterworks, twenty-four years before. he ills that have taken my friends and same- generation loved ones until there are none of them left - the strokes, the cancers, the heart attacks, the liver diseases, the blood diseases - have all left me untouched, have swerved to avoid me the way a man driving a car swerves to avoid a deer or a raccoon in the road. he one serious accident was in left me untouched save for a scratch on the hand. n 93 , John

offey inoculated me with life. *Electrocuted* me with life, you might say. will pass on eventually - of course will, any illusions of immortality

might have had died with Mr. Jingles - but will have wished for death long before death finds me. ruth to tell, wish for it already and have ever since

laine onnelly died. Need tell you?

look back over these pages, leafing through them with my trembling, spotted hands, and wonder if there is some meaning here, as in those books which are supposed to be uplifting and ennobling. think back to the sermons of my childhood, booming affirmations in the church of Praise Jesus, he Lord s Mighty, and recall how the preachers used to say that

od's eye is on the sparrow, that e sees and marks even the least of is creations. hen think of Mr. Jingles, and the tiny scraps of wood we found in that hole in the beam, think that is so. Yet this same od sacrificed John offey, who tried only to do good in his blind way, as savagely as any Old estament prophet ever sacrificed a defenseless lamb□ as braham would have sacrificed his own son if actually called upon to do so. think of John saying that harton killed the etterick twins with their love for each other, and that it happens every day, all over the world. f it happens, od *lets* it happen, and when we say ' don't understand,' od replies, ' don't care.'

think of Mr. Jingles dying while my back was turned and my attention usurped by an unkind man whose finest emotion seemed to be a species of vindictive curiosity. think of Janice, jittering away her last mindless seconds as knelt with her in the rain.

*Stop it*, tried to tell John that day in his cell. *Let go of my hands, m going to drown if you don t. Drown or explode.*

'You won't 'splode,' he answered, hearing my thought and smiling at the idea. nd the horrible thing is that didn't. haven't.

have at least one old man's ill: suffer from insomnia. Late at night lie in my bed, listening to the dank and hopeless sound of infirm men and women coughing their courses deeper into old age. ometimes hear a call- bell, or the squeak of a shoe in the corridor, or Mrs. Javits's little tuned to the late news. lie here, and if the moon is in my window, watch it. lie here and think about rutal, and ean, and sometimes illiam harton saying *That s right, nigger, bad as you d want.* think of elacroix saying *Watch this Boss Edgecombe, teach Mr. ingles a new trick.* think of

laine, standing in the door of the sunroom and telling rad olan to leave me alone. ometimes doze and see that underpass in the rain, with John

offey standing beneath it in the shadows. t's never just a trick of the eye,

in these little dreams; it's always him for sure, my big boy, just standing there and watching. lie here and wait. think about Janice, how lost her, how she ran away red through my fingers in the rain, and wait. e each owe a death, there are no exceptions, know that, but sometimes, oh od, the reen Mile is so long.

# Aut o ' A te o

don't think 'd want to do another serial novel (if only because the critics get to kick your ass six times instead of just the once), but wouldn't have missed the experience for the world. s write this afterword on the day before Part of *The reen Mile* is to be published, the serialization experiment is looking like a success, at least in terms of sales. or that,

onstant eader, want to thank you. nd something a bit different wakes us all up a little, maybe - lets us see the old business of storytelling in a new way. hat's how it worked for me, anyway.

wrote in a hurry because the format demanded that write in a hurry.

hat was part of the exhilaration, but it also may have produced a number of anachronisms. he guards and prisoners listen to *Allen s Alley* on their

lock radio, and doubt if red llen was actually broadcasting in 93 .

he same may hold true for Kay Kyser and his *Kollege of Musical Knowledge.* his isn't to let me off the hook, but it sometimes seems to me that history which has recently fallen over the horizon is harder to research than the Middle ges or the time of the rusades. was able to determine that rutal might indeed have called the mouse on the Mile teamboat

illy - the isney cartoon had been in existence almost four years by then - but have a sneaking suspicion that the little pornographic comic book featuring Popeye and Olive Oyl is an artifact out of time. might clean up some of this stuff when and if decide to do *The reen Mile* as a single volume□ but maybe 'll leave the goofs. fter all, doesn't the great

hakespeare himself include in *ulius Caesar* the anachronism of a striking clock long before mechanical clocks were invented?

oing *The reen Mile* as a single volume would present its own unique challenges, have come to realize, partly because the book couldn't be published as it was issued in its installments. ecause took harles

ickens as my model, asked several people how ickens had handled the problem of refreshing his readers, recollections at the beginning of each

new episode. had expected something like the synopses which preceded each installment of my beloved *Saturday Evening Post* serials, and discovered that ickens had not been so crude; he built the synopsis into the actual story.

hile was trying to decide how to do this, my ife began telling me (she doesn't exactly nag, but sometimes she *advocates* rather ruthlessly) that

had never really finished the story of Mr. Jingles, the circus mouse. thought she was right, and began to see that, by making Mr. Jingles a secret of Paul dgecombe's in his old age, could create a fairly interesting "front story." ( he result is a little bit like the form taken by the film version of *Fried reen Tomatoes.)* n fact, everything in Paul's front story - the story of his life at the eorgia Pines old folks, home - turned out to my satisfaction. particularly liked the way that olan, the orderly, and Percy

etmore became entwined in Paul's mind. nd that was not something planned or did on purpose; like the happiest of fictions, it just ambled along and stepped into its place.

want to thank alph icinanza for bringing me the "serial thriller" idea in the first place, and all my friends at iking Penguin and ignet for getting behind it, even though they were scared to death at the beginning (all writers are crazy, and of course they knew that). also want to thank Marsha e ilippo, who transcribed a whole stenographer's notebook full of my cramped handwriting and never complained. ell□ *rarely* complained.

Most of all, though, want to thank my wife, abitha, who read this story and said she liked it. riters almost always write with some ideal reader in mind, think, and my wife is mine. e don't always see eye to eye when it comes to what we each write (hell, we rarely see eye to eye when we're shopping together in the supermarket), but when she says it's good, it usually is. ecause she's tough, and if try to cheat or cut a comer, she always sees it.

nd you, onstant eader. hank you, as well, and if you have any ideas about *The reen Mile* as a single volume, please let me know.

- tephen King *April 2 , 1996 New York City*