

ONE

SHE CAME ALONG THE ALLEY AND UP THE BACK STEPS THE WAY she always used to. Doc hadn't seen her for over a year. Nobody had. Back then it was always sandals, bottom half of a flower-print bikini, faded Country Joe & the Fish T-shirt. Tonight she was all in flatland gear, hair a lot shorter than he remembered, looking just like she swore she'd never look.

"That you, Shasta?"

"Thinks he's hallucinating."

"Just the new package I guess."

They stood in the street light through the kitchen window there'd never been much point putting curtains over and listened to the thumping of the surf from down the hill. Some nights, when the wind was right, you could hear the surf all over town.

"Need your help, Doc."

"You know I have an office now? just like a day job and everything?"

"I looked in the phone book, almost went over there. But then I thought, better for everybody if this looks like a secret rendezvous."

Okay, nothing romantic tonight. Bummer. But it still might be a paying gig. "Somebody's keepin a close eye?"

"Just spent an hour on surface streets trying to make it look good."

“How about a beer?” He went to the fridge, pulled two cans out of the case he kept inside, handed one to Shasta.

“There’s this guy,” she was saying.

There would be, but why get emotional? If he had a nickel for every time he’d heard a client start off this way, he could be over in Hawaii now, loaded day and night, digging the waves at Waimea, or better yet hiring somebody to dig them for him . . . “Gentleman of the straightworld persuasion,” he beamed.

“Okay, Doc. He’s married.”

“Some . . . money situation.”

She shook back hair that wasn’t there and raised her eyebrows *so what*.

Groovy with Doc. “And the wife—she knows about you?”

Shasta nodded. “But she’s seeing somebody too. Only it isn’t just the usual—they’re working together on some creepy little scheme.”

“To make off with hubby’s fortune, yeah, I think I heard of that happenin once or twice around L.A. And . . . you want me to do what, exactly?” He found the paper bag he’d brought his supper home in and got busy pretending to scribble notes on it, because straight-chick uniform, makeup supposed to look like no makeup or whatever, here came that old well-known hardon Shasta was always good for sooner or later. Does it ever end, he wondered. Of course it does. It did.

They went in the front room and Doc laid down on the couch and Shasta stayed on her feet and sort of drifted around the place.

“Is, they want me in on it,” she said. “They think I’m the one who can reach him when he’s vulnerable, or as much as he ever gets.”

“Bareass and asleep.”

“I knew you’d understand.”

“You’re still trying to figure out if it’s right or wrong, Shasta?”

“Worse than that.” She drilled him with that gaze he remembered so well. When he remembered. “How much loyalty I owe him.”

“I hope you’re not asking me. Beyond the usual boilerplate people owe anybody they’re fucking steady—”

“Thanks, Dear Abby said about the same thing.”

“Groovy. Emotions aside, then, let’s look at the money. How much of the rent’s he been picking up?”

“All of it.” Just for a second, he caught the old narrow-eyed defiant grin.

“Pretty hefty?”

“For Hancock Park.”

Doc whistled the title notes from “Can’t Buy Me Love,” ignoring the look on her face. “You’re givin him IOUs for everything, o’ course.”

“You fucker, if I’d known you were still this bitter—”

“Me? Trying to be professional here, is all. How much were wifey and the b.f. offering to cut you in for?”

Shasta named a sum. Doc had outrun souped-up Rollsies full of indignant smack dealers on the Pasadena Freeway, doing a hundred in the fog and trying to steer through all those crudely engineered curves, he’d walked up back alleys east of the L.A. River with nothing but a borrowed ’fro pick in his baggies for protection, been in and out of the Hall of Justice while holding a small fortune in Vietnamese weed, and these days had nearly convinced himself all that reckless era was over with, but now he was beginning to feel deeply nervous again. “This . . .” carefully now, “this isn’t just a couple of X-rated Polaroids, then. Dope planted in the glove compartment, nothin like ’at . . .”

Back when, she could go weeks without anything more complicated than a pout. Now she was laying some heavy combination of face ingredients on him that he couldn’t read at all. Maybe something she’d picked up at acting school. “It isn’t what you’re thinking, Doc.”

“Don’t worry, thinking comes later. What else?”

“I’m not sure but it sounds like they want to commit him to some loony bin.”

“You mean legally? or a snatch of some kind?”

“Nobody’s telling me, Doc, I’m just the bait.” Come to think of it, there’d never been this much sorrow in her voice either. “I heard you’re seeing somebody downtown?”

Seeing. Well, “Oh, you mean Penny? nice flatland chick, out in search of secret hippie love thrills basically—”

“Also some kind of junior DA in Evelle Younger’s shop?”

Doc gave it some thought. “You think somebody there can stop this before it happens?”

“Not too many places I can go with this, Doc.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to Penny, see what we can see. Your happy couple—they have names, addresses?”

When he heard her older gent’s name he said, “This is the same Mickey Wolfmann who’s always in the paper? The real-estate big shot?”

“You can’t tell anybody about this, Doc.”

“Deaf and dumb, part of the job. Any phone numbers you’d like to share?”

She shrugged, scowled, gave him one number. “Try to never use it.”

“Groovy, and how do I reach you?”

“You don’t. I moved out of the old place, staying where I can anymore, don’t ask.”

He almost said, “There’s room here,” which in fact there wasn’t, but he’d seen her looking around at everything that hadn’t changed, the authentic English Pub Dartboard up on the wagon wheel and the whorehouse swag lamp with the purple psychedelic bulb with the vibrating filament, the collection of model hot rods made entirely of Coors cans, the beach volleyball autographed by Wilt Chamberlain in Day-Glo felt marker, the velvet painting and so forth, with an expression of, you would have to say, distaste.

He walked her down the hill to where she was parked. Weeknights out here weren’t too different from weekends, so this part of town was already all ahoop with funseekers, drinkers and surfers screaming in the alleys, dopers out on food errands, flatland guys in for a night of hustling stewardesses, flatland ladies with all-too-grounded day jobs hoping to be mistaken for stewardesses. Uphill and invisible, traffic out on the boulevard to and from the freeway uttered tuneful exhaust phrases which went echoing out to sea, where the crews of oil tankers sliding along,

hearing them, could have figured it for wildlife taking care of nighttime business on an exotic coast.

In the last pocket of darkness before the glare of Beachfront Drive, they came to a pause, a timeless pedestrian gesture in these parts that usually announced a kiss or at least a grabbed ass. But she said, “Don’t come any further, somebody might be watching by now.”

“Call me or something.”

“You never did let me down, Doc.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll—”

“No, I mean really ever.”

“Oh . . . sure I did.”

“You were always true.”

It had been dark at the beach for hours, he hadn’t been smoking much and it wasn’t headlights—but before she turned away, he could swear he saw light falling on her face, the orange light just after sunset that catches a face turned to the west, watching the ocean for someone to come in on the last wave of the day, in to shore and safety.

At least her car was the same, the Cadillac ragtop she’d had forever, a ’59 Eldorado Biarritz bought used at one of the lots over on Western where they stand out close to the traffic so it’ll sweep away the smell of whatever they’re smoking. After she drove away, Doc sat on a bench down on the Esplanade, a long slopeful of lighted windows ascending behind him, and watched the luminous blooms of surf and the lights of late commuter traffic zigzagging up the distant hillside of Palos Verdes. He ran through things he hadn’t asked, like how much she’d come to depend on Wolfmann’s guaranteed level of ease and power, and how ready was she to go back to the bikini and T-shirt lifestyle, and how free of regrets? And least askable of all, how passionately did she really feel about old Mickey? Doc knew the likely reply—“I love him,” what else? With the unspoken footnote that the word these days was being way too overused. Anybody with any claim to hipness “loved” everybody, not to mention other useful applications, like hustling people into sex activities they might not, given the choice, much care to engage in.

Back at his place, Doc stood for a while gazing at a velvet painting from one of the Mexican families who set up their weekend pitches along the boulevards through the green flatland where people still rode horses, between Gordita and the freeway. Out of the vans and into the calm early mornings would come sofa-width Crucifixions and Last Suppers, outlaw bikers on elaborately detailed Harleys, superhero badasses in Special Forces gear packing M16s and so forth. This picture of Doc's showed a Southern California beach that never was—palms, bikini babes, surfboards, the works. He thought of it as a window to look out of when he couldn't deal with looking out of the traditional glass-type one in the other room. Sometimes in the shadows the view would light up, usually when he was smoking weed, as if the contrast knob of Creation had been messed with just enough to give everything an underglow, a luminous edge, and promise that the night was about to turn epic somehow.

Except for tonight, which only looked more like work. He got on the telephone and tried to call Penny, but she was out, probably Watusi-ing the night away opposite some shorthaired attorney with a promising career. Cool with Doc. Next he rang up his Aunt Reet, who lived down the boulevard on the other side of the dunes in a more suburban part of town with houses, yards, and trees, because of which it had become known as the Tree Section. A few years ago, after divorcing a lapsed Missouri Synod Lutheran with a T-Bird agency and a fatality for the restless homemakers one meets at bars in bowling alleys, Reet had moved down here from the San Joaquin with the kids and started selling real estate, and before long she had her own agency, which she now ran out of a bungalow on the same oversize lot as her house. Whenever Doc needed to know anything touching on the world of property, Aunt Reet, with her phenomenal lot-by-lot grasp of land use from the desert to the sea, as they liked to say on the evening news, was the one he went to. "Someday," she prophesied, "there will be computers for this, all you'll have to do's type in what you're looking for, or even better just talk it

in—like that HAL in *2001: A Space Odyssey*?—and it’ll be right back at you with more information than you’d ever want to know, any lot in the L.A. Basin, all the way back to the Spanish land grants—water rights, encumbrances, mortgage histories, whatever you want, trust me, it’s coming.” Till then, in the real non-sci-fi world, there was Aunt Reet’s bordering-on-the-supernatural sense of the land, the stories that seldom appeared in deeds or contracts, especially matrimonial, the generations of family hatreds big and small, the way the water flowed, or used to.

She picked up on the sixth ring. The TV set was loud in the background.

“Make it quick, Doc, I’ve got a live one tonight and a quarter ton of makeup to put on yet.”

“What can you tell me about Mickey Wolfmann?”

If she took even a second to breathe, Doc didn’t notice. “Westside Hochdeutsch mafia, biggest of the big, construction, savings and loans, untaxed billions stashed under an Alp someplace, technically Jewish but wants to be a Nazi, becomes exercised often to the point of violence at those who forget to spell his name with two *n*’s. What’s he to you?”

Doc gave her a rundown on Shasta’s visit and her account of the plot against the Wolfmann fortune.

“In the real-estate business,” Reet remarked, “God knows, few of us are strangers to moral ambiguity. But some of these developers, they make Godzilla look like a conservationist, and you might not care to get into this, Larry. Who’s paying you?”

“Well . . .”

“All on spec, eh? big surprise. Listen, if Shasta can’t pay you, maybe that means Mickey’s dumped her, and she’s blaming the wife and wants revenge.”

“Possible. But say I just wanted to hang out and rap with this Wolfmann dude?”

Was that an exasperated sigh? “I wouldn’t recommend your usual approach. He goes around with a dozen bikers, mostly Aryan Brotherhood

alumni, to watch his back, all court-certified badasses. Try making an appointment for once.”

“Wait a minute, I ditched social-studies class a lot, but . . . Jews and the AB . . . Isn’t there . . . something about, I forget . . . hatred?”

“The book on Mickey is, is he’s unpredictable. More and more lately. Some would say eccentric. I would say stoned out of his fuckin mind, nothing personal.”

“And this goon squad, they’re loyal to him, even if when they were in the place they took some oath with maybe a anti-Semitic clause in it here and there?”

“Drive within ten blocks of the man, they’ll lie down in front of your car. Keep coming, they’ll roll a grenade. You want to talk to Mickey, don’t be spontaneous, don’t even be cute. Go through channels.”

“Yeah, but I also don’t want to get Shasta in trouble. Where do you think I could run into him, like, accidentally?”

“I promised my kid sister I’d never put her baby in the way of danger.”

“I’m cool with the Brotherhood, Aunt Reet, know the handshake and everything.”

“All right, it’s your ass, kid, I have major liquid-liner issues to deal with here, but I’m told Mickey’s been spending time out at his latest assault on the environment—some chipboard horror known as Channel View Estates?”

“Oh yeah, that. Bigfoot Bjornsen does commercials for them. Interrupting strange movies you’ve never heard of.”

“Well, maybe your old cop buddy’s the one who should be taking care of this. Have you been in touch with the LAPD?”

“I did think of going to Bigfoot,” Doc said, “but just as I was reaching for the phone I remembered how, being Bigfoot and all, he’d probably try to pop *me* for the whole thing.”

“Maybe you’re better off with the Nazis, I don’t envy you the choice. Be careful, Larry. Check in now and then just so I can reassure Elmina that you’re still alive.”

Fucking Bigfoot. Well, wouldn't you know. On some extrasensory impulse, Doc reached for the tube, switched it on and flipped to one of the off-network channels dedicated to long-ago TV movies and unsold pilots, and sure enough, there was the old hippie-hating mad dog himself, moonlighting after a busy day of civil-rights violation, as pitchman for Channel View Estates. "A Michael Wolfmann Concept," it read underneath the logo.

Like many L.A. cops, Bigfoot, named for his entry method of choice, harbored show-business yearnings and in fact had already appeared in enough character parts, from comical Mexicans on *The Flying Nun* to assistant psychopaths on *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, to be paying SAG dues and receiving residual checks. Maybe the producers of these Channel View spots were desperate enough to be counting on some audience recognition—maybe, as Doc suspected, Bigfoot was somehow duked into whatever the underlying real-estate deal was. Whatever, personal dignity didn't come into it much. Bigfoot showed up on camera wearing getups that would have embarrassed the most unironical hippie in California, tonight's being an ankle-length velvet cape in a paisley print of so many jangling "psychedelic" hues that Doc's tube, a low-end affair purchased in Zody's parking lot at a Moonlight Madness sale a couple years ago, couldn't really keep up. Bigfoot had accessorized his outfit with love beads, shades with peace symbols on the lenses, and a gigantic Afro wig striped in Chinese red, chartreuse, and indigo. Bigfoot often reminded viewers of legendary used-car figure Cal Worthington—except where Cal was famous for including live animals in his pitch, Bigfoot's scripts featured a relentless terror squad of small children, who climbed all over the model-home furniture, performed insubordinate cannonballs into the backyard pools, whooped and hollered and pretended to shoot Bigfoot down, screaming "Freak Power!" and "Death to the Pig!" Viewers were ecstatic. "Those li'l kids," they would cry, "wow, they're really something, huh!" No overfed leopard ever got up Cal Worthington's nose the way these kids did Bigfoot's, but he was a pro, wasn't he, and by God he would soldier through, closely studying old W. C. Fields and

Bette Davis movies whenever they came on to see what tips he could pick up for sharing the frame with kids whose cuteness, for him, was never better than problematical. “We’ll be chums,” he would croak as if to himself, pretending to puff compulsively on a cigarette, “we’ll be *chums*.”

There was now sudden hammering on the front door, and briefly Doc flashed that it had to be Bigfoot in person, about to kick his way in once again as in days of old. But instead it was Denis from down the hill, whose name everybody pronounced to rhyme with “penis,” appearing even more disoriented than usual.

“So Doc, I’m up on Dunecrest, you know the drugstore there, and like I noticed their sign, ‘Drug’? ‘Store’? Okay? Walked past it a thousand times, never *really* saw it—Drug, Store! man, far out, so I went in and Smilin Steve was at the counter and I said, like, ‘Yes, hi, I’d like some drugs, please?’—oh, here, finish this up if you want.”

“Thanks, all’s ’at’ll do ’s just burn my lip.”

Denis by now had drifted into the kitchen and started looking through the fridge.

“You’re hungry, Denis?”

“Really. Hey, like Godzilla always sez to Mothra—why don’t we go eat some place?”

They walked up to Dunecrest and turned left into the honky-tonk part of town. Pipeline Pizza was jumping, the smoke so thick inside you couldn’t see from one end of the bar to the other. The jukebox, audible all the way to El Porto and beyond, was playing “Sugar, Sugar” by the Archies. Denis threaded his way back to the kitchen to see about a pizza, and Doc watched Ensenada Slim working one of the Gottlieb machines in the corner. Slim owned and operated a head shop just up the street called the Screaming Ultraviolet Brain and was a sort of village elder around here. After he’d won a dozen free games, he took a break, saw Doc and nodded.

“Buy you a beer, Slim?”

“Was that Shasta’s car I saw down on the Drive? That big old ragtop?”

“She stuck her head in for a couple minutes,” Doc said. “Kind of weird seeing her again. Always figured when I did, it’d be on the tube, not in person.”

“Really. Sometimes I think I see her at the edge of the screen? but it’s always some look-alike. And never as easy on the eyes, of course.”

Sad but true, as Dion always sez. At Playa Vista High, Shasta made Class Beauty in the yearbook four years running, always got to be the ingenue in school plays, fantasized like everybody else about getting into the movies, and soon as she could manage it was off up the freeway looking for some low-rent living space in Hollywood. Doc, aside from being just about the only dooper she knew who didn’t use heroin, which freed up a lot of time for both of them, had never figured out what else she might’ve seen in him. Not that they were even together that long. Soon enough she was answering casting calls and getting some theater work, onstage and off, and Doc was into his own apprenticeship as a skip tracer, and each, gradually locating a different karmic thermal above the megalopolis, had watched the other glide away into a different fate.

Denis came back with his pizza. “I forget what I asked for on it.” This happened at the Pipeline every Tuesday or Cheap Pizza Nite, when any size pizza, with anything on it, cost a flat \$1.35. Denis now sat watching this one intently, like it was about to do something.

“That’s a papaya chunk,” Slim guessed, “and these . . . are these pork rinds?”

“And boysenberry yogurt on pizza, Denis? Frankly, eeeww.” It was Sortilège, who used to work in Doc’s office before her boyfriend Spike came back from Vietnam and she decided love was more important than a day job, or that’s how Doc thought he remembered her explaining it. Her gifts were elsewhere, in any case. She was in touch with invisible forces and could diagnose and solve all manner of problems, emotional and physical, which she did mostly for free but in some cases accepted weed or acid in lieu of cash. She had never been wrong that Doc knew about. At the moment she was examining his hair, and as usual he had

a spasm of defensive panic. Finally, with an energetic nod, “Better do something about that.”

“Again?”

“Can’t say it often enough—change your hair, change your life.”

“What do you recommend?”

“Up to you. Follow your intuition. Would you mind, Denis, actually, if I just took this piece of tofu?”

“That’s a marshmallow,” Denis said.

BACK AT HIS PLACE AGAIN, Doc rolled a number, put on a late movie, found an old T-shirt, and sat tearing it up into short strips about a half inch wide till he had a pile of maybe a hundred of these, then went in the shower for a while and with his hair still wet took narrow lengths of it and rolled each one around a strip of T-shirt, tying it in place with an overhand knot, repeating this southern-plantation style all over his head, and then after maybe half an hour with the hair dryer, during which he may or may not have fallen asleep, untying the knots again and brushing it all out upside down into what seemed to him a fairly presentable foot-and-a-half-diameter white-guy Afro. Inserting his head carefully into a liquor-store carton to preserve the shape, Doc lay down on the couch and this time really did fall asleep, and toward dawn he dreamed about Shasta. It wasn’t that they were fucking, exactly, but it was something like that. They had both flown from their other lives, the way you tend to fly in early-morning dreams, to rendezvous at a strange motel which seemed to be also a hair salon. She kept insisting she “loved” some guy whose name she never mentioned, though when Doc finally woke up, he figured she must’ve been talking about Mickey Wolfmann.

No point sleeping anymore. He stumbled up the hill to Wavos and had breakfast with the hard-core surfers who were always there. Flaco the Bad came over. “Hey man, that cop was around looking for you again. What’s that on your head?”

“Cop? When was this?”

“Last night. He was at your place, but you were out. Detective from downtown Homicide in a really dinged-up El Camino, the one with the 396?”

“That was Bigfoot Bjornsen. Why didn’t he just kick my door down like he usually does?”

“He might’ve been thinking about it but said something like ‘Tomorrow is another day’ . . . which would be today, right?”

“Not if I can help it.”

DOC’S OFFICE WAS located near the airport, off East Imperial. He shared the place with a Dr. Buddy Tubeside, whose practice consisted largely of injecting people with “vitamin B₁₂,” a euphemism for the physician’s own blend of amphetamines. Today, early as it was, Doc still had to edge his way past a line of “B₁₂”-deficient customers which already stretched back to the parking lot, beachtown housewives of a certain melancholy index, actors with casting calls to show up at, deeply tanned geezers looking ahead to an active day of schmoozing in the sun, stewardii just in off some high-stress red-eye, even a few legit cases of pernicious anemia or vegetarian pregnancy, all shuffling along half asleep, chain-smoking, talking to themselves, sliding one by one into the lobby of the little cinder-block building through a turnstile, next to which, holding a clipboard and checking them in, stood Petunia Leeway, a stunner in a starched cap and micro-length medical outfit, not so much an actual nurse uniform as a lascivious commentary on one, which Dr. Tubeside claimed to’ve bought a truckload of from Frederick’s of Hollywood, in a variety of fashion pastels, today’s being aqua, at close to wholesale.

“Morning, Doc.” Petunia managed to put a lounge-singer lilt onto it, the vocal equivalent of batting mink eyelashes at him. “Love your ’fro.”

“Howdy, Petunia. Still married to what’s-his-name?”

“Oh, Doc . . .”

On first signing the lease, the two tenants, like bunkmates at summer camp, had tossed a coin for who'd get the upstairs suite, and Doc had lost or, as he liked to think of it, won. The sign on his door read LSD INVESTIGATIONS, LSD, as he explained when people asked, which was not often, standing for "Location, Surveillance, Detection." Beneath this was a rendering of a giant bloodshot eyeball in the psychedelic favorites green and magenta, the detailing of whose literally thousands of frenzied capillaries had been subcontracted out to a commune of speed freaks who had long since migrated up to Sonoma. Potential clients had been known to spend hours gazing at the ocular maze, often forgetting what they'd come here for.

A visitor was here already, in fact, waiting for Doc. What made him unusual was, was he was a black guy. To be sure, black folks were occasionally spotted west of the Harbor Freeway, but to see one this far out of the usual range, practically by the ocean, was pretty rare. Last time anybody could remember a black motorist in Gordita Beach, for example, anxious calls for backup went out on all the police bands, a small task force of cop vehicles assembled, and roadblocks were set up all along Pacific Coast Highway. An old Gordita reflex, dating back to shortly after the Second World War, when a black family had actually tried to move into town and the citizens, with helpful advice from the Ku Klux Klan, had burned the place to the ground and then, as if some ancient curse had come into effect, refused to allow another house ever to be built on the site. The lot stood empty until the town finally confiscated it and turned it into a park, where the youth of Gordita Beach, by the laws of karmic adjustment, were soon gathering at night to drink, dope, and fuck, depressing their parents, though not property values particularly.

"Say," Doc greeted his visitor, "what it is, my brother."

"Never mind that shit," replied the black guy, introducing himself as Tariq Khalil and staring for a while, under different circumstances offensively, at Doc's Afro.

"Well. Come on in."

In Doc's office were a pair of high-backed banquettes covered in

padded fuchsia plastic, facing each other across a Formica table in a pleasant tropical green. This was in fact a modular coffee-shop booth, which Doc had scavenged from a renovation in Hawthorne. He waved Tariq into one of the seats and sat down across from him. It was cozy. The tabletop between them was littered with phone books, pencils, three-by-five index cards boxed and loose, road maps, cigarette ashes, a transistor radio, roach clips, coffee cups, and an Olivetti Lettera 22, into which Doc, mumbling, "Just start a ticket on this," inserted a sheet of paper which appeared to have been used repeatedly for some strange compulsive origami.

Tariq watched skeptically. "Secretary's off today?"

"Something like that. But I'll take some notes here, and it'll all get typed up later."

"Okay, so there's this guy I was in the joint with. White guy. Aryan Bro, as a matter of fact. We did some business, now we're both out, he still owes me. I mean, it's a lot of money. I can't give you details, I swore a oath I wouldn't tell."

"How about just his name?"

"Glen Charlock."

Sometimes the way somebody says a name, you get a vibration. Tariq was talking like a man whose heart had been broken. "You know where he's staying now?"

"Only who he works for. He's a bodyguard for a builder named Wolfmann."

Doc had a moment of faintheadness, drug-induced no doubt. He came out of it on paranoia alert, not enough, he hoped, for Tariq to notice. He pretended to study the ticket he was making out. "If you don't mind my asking, Mr. Khalil, how did you hear about this agency?"

"Sledge Poteet."

"Wow. Blast from the past."

"Said you helped him out of a situation back in '67."

"First time I ever got shot at. You guys know each other from the place?"

“They were teachin us both how to cook. Sledge still has about maybe a year more in there.”

“I remember him when he couldn’t boil water.”

“Should see him now, he can boil tap water, Arrowhead Springs water, club soda, Perrier, you name it. He the Boilerman.”

“So if you don’t mind an obvious question—you know where Glen Charlock works now, why not just go over there and look him up directly, why hire some go-between?”

“Because this Wolfmann is surrounded day and night with some Aryan Brotherhood army, and outside of Glen I have never enjoyed cordial relations with those Nazi-ass motherfuckers.”

“Oh—so send some white guy in to get *his* head hammered.”

“More or less. I would of p’ferred somebody a little more convincing.”

“What I lack in *al*-titude,” Doc explained for the million or so -th time in his career, “I make up for in *at*-titude.”

“Okay . . . that’s possible . . . I seen that on the yard now and then.”

“When you were inside—were you in a gang?”

“Black Guerrilla Family.”

“George Jackson’s outfit. And you say you did business with who now, the Aryan Brotherhood?”

“We found we shared many of the same opinions about the U.S. government.”

“Mmm, that racial harmony, I can dig it.”

Tariq was looking at Doc with a peculiar intensity, and his eyes had grown yellow and pointed.

“There’s something else,” Doc guessed.

“My old street gang. Artesia Crips. When I got out of Chino I went looking for some of them and found it ain’t just them gone, but the turf itself.”

“Far out. What do you mean, gone?”

“Not there. Grindit up into li’l pieces. Seagulls all pickin at it. Figure I

must be trippin, drive around for a while, come back, everything's still gone."

"Uh-huh." Doc typed, *Not hallucinating.*

"Nobody and nothing. Ghost town. Except for this big sign, 'Coming Soon on This Site,' houses for peckerwood prices, shopping mall, some shit. Guess who the builder on it."

"Wolfmann again."

"That's it."

On the wall Doc had a map of the region. "Show me." The area Tariq pointed to looked to be a fairly straight shot from here eastward down Artesia Boulevard, and Doc realized after a minute and a half of mapreading that it had to be the site of Channel View Estates. He pretended to run an ethnicity scan on Tariq. "You're, like, what again, Japanese?"

"Uh, how long you been doing this?"

"Looks closer to Gardena than Compton, 's all I'm saying."

"WW Two," said Tariq. "Before the war, a lot of South Central was still a Japanese neighborhood. Those people got sent to camps, we come on in to be the next Japs."

"And now it's your turn to get moved along."

"More white man's revenge. Freeway up by the airport wasn't enough."

"Revenge for . . . ?"

"Watts."

"The riots."

"Some of us say 'insurrection.' The Man, he just waits for his moment."

Long, sad history of L.A. land use, as Aunt Reet never tired of pointing out. Mexican families bounced out of Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium, American Indians swept out of Bunker Hill for the Music Center, Tariq's neighborhood bulldozed aside for Channel View Estates.

“If I can get ahold of your prison buddy, will he honor his debt to you?”

“I can’t tell you what it is.”

“No need.”

“Oh and the other thing is I can’t give you nothin in front.”

“Groovy with that.”

“Sledge was right, you are one crazy white motherfucker.”

“How can you tell?”

“I counted.”

TWO

DOC TOOK THE FREEWAY OUT. THE EASTBOUND LANES TEEMED with VW buses in jittering paisleys, primer-coated street hemis, woodies of authentic Dearborn pine, TV-star-piloted Porsches, Cadillacs carrying dentists to extramarital trysts, windowless vans with lurid teen dramas in progress inside, pickups with mattresses full of country cousins from the San Joaquin, all wheeling along together down into these great horizonless fields of housing, under the power transmission lines, everybody's radios lasing on the same couple of AM stations, under a sky like watered milk, and the white bombardment of a sun smogged into only a smear of probability, out in whose light you began to wonder if anything you'd call psychedelic could ever happen, or if—bummer!—all this time it had really been going on up north.

Beginning on Artesia, signs directed Doc to Channel View Estates, A Michael Wolfmann Concept. There were the expected local couples who couldn't wait to have a look at the next OPPOS, as Aunt Reet tended to call most tract houses of her acquaintance. Now and then at the edges of the windshield, Doc spotted black pedestrians, bewildered as Tariq must have been, maybe also looking for the old neighborhood, for rooms lived in day after day, solid as the axes of space, now taken away into commotion and ruin.

The development stretched into the haze and the soft smell of the fog component of smog, and of desert beneath the pavement—model units nearer the road, finished homes farther in, and just visible beyond them the skeletons of new construction, expanding into the unincorporated wastes. Doc drove past the gate till he got to a patch of empty contractor hardpan with street signs already in but the streets not yet paved. He parked at what would be the corner of Kaufman and Broad and walked back.

Commanding filtered views of an all-but-neglected branch of the Dominguez Flood Control Channel forgotten and cut off by miles of fill, regrading, trash of industrial ventures that had either won or failed, these homes were more or less Spanish Colonial with not-necessarily-load-bearing little balconies and red-tile roofs, meant to suggest higher-priced towns like San Clemente or Santa Barbara, though so far there wasn't a shade tree in sight.

Close to what would be the front gate of Channel View Estates, Doc found a makeshift miniplaza put there basically for the construction folks, with a liquor store, a take-out sandwich place with a lunch counter, a beer bar where you could shoot some pool, and a massage parlor called Chick Planet, in front of which he saw a row of carefully looked-after motorcycles, parked with military precision. This seemed the most likely place for him to find a cadre of badasses. Plus, if they were all here at the moment, then chances were Mickey was, too. On the further assumption that the owners of these bikes were here for recreation and not waiting inside drawn up in formation prepared to kick Doc's ass, he breathed deeply, surrounded himself with a white light, and stepped in the front door.

"Hi, I'm Jade?" A bubbly young Asian lady in a turquoise cheongsam handed him a laminated menu of services. "And please take note of today's Pussy-Eater's Special, which is good all day till closing time?"

"Mmm, not that \$14.95 ain't a totally groovy price, but I'm really trying to locate this guy who works for Mr. Wolfmann?"

"Far out. Does he eat pussy?"

“Well, Jade, you’d know better’n me, fella named Glen?”

“Oh sure, Glen comes in here, they all do. You got a cigarette for me?” He tapped her out an unfiltered Kool. “Ooh, lockup style. Not much eating pussy in there, huh?”

“Glen and I were both in Chino around the same time. Have you seen him today?”

“Till about one minute ago, when everybody suddenly split. Is there something weird going on? Are you a cop?”

“Let’s see.” Doc inspected his feet. “Nah . . . wrong shoes.”

“Reason I ask is, is if you were a cop, you’d be entitled to a free preview of our Pussy-Eater’s Special?”

“How about a licensed PI? Would that—”

“Hey, Bambi!” Out through the bead curtains, as if on a time-out from a beach volleyball game, strode this blonde in a turquoise and orange Day-Glo bikini.

“Oboy,” Doc said. “Where do we—”

“Not you, Bong Brain,” Bambi muttered. Jade was already reaching for that bikini.

“Oh,” he said. “Huh . . . see, is what I thought is, here? where it says ‘Pussy-Eater’s Special’? is what that means is, is that—”

Well . . . neither girl seemed to be paying him much attention anymore, though out of politeness Doc thought he should keep watching for a while, till finally they disappeared down behind the reception desk, and he wandered away figuring to have a look around. Out into the hallway, from someplace ahead, seeped indigo light and frequencies even darker, along with string-heavy music from half a generation ago from LPs compiled to accompany bachelor-pad fucking.

Nobody was around. It felt like maybe there had been, till Doc showed up. The place was also turning out to be bigger inside than out. There were black-light suites with fluorescent rock ‘n’ roll posters and mirrored ceilings and vibrating water beds. Strobe lights blinked, incense cones sent ribbons of musk-scented smoke ceilingward, and carpeting of

artificial angora shag in a variety of tones including oxblood and teal, not always limited to floor surfaces, beckoned alluringly.

As he neared the back of the establishment, Doc began to hear a lot of screaming from outside, along with a massed thundering of Harleys. “Uh-oh. What’s this?”

He didn’t find out. Maybe it was all the exotic sensory input that caused Doc about then to swoon abruptly and lose an unknown amount of his day. Perhaps striking some ordinary object on the way down accounted for the painful lump he found on his head when at length he awoke. Faster, anyhow, than the staff on *Medical Center* can say “subdural hematoma,” Doc dug how the unhip Muzak was silent, plus no Jade, no Bambi, and he was lying on the cement floor of a space he didn’t recognize, though the same could not be said for what he now ID’d, far overhead, like a bad-luck planet in today’s horoscope, as the evilly twinkling face of Detective Lieutenant Bigfoot Bjornsen, LAPD.

“**CONGRATULATIONS, HIPPIE SCUM,**” Bigfoot greeted Doc in his all-too-familiar 30-weight voice, “and welcome to a world of inconvenience. Yes, this time it appears you have finally managed to stumble into something too real and deep to hallucinate your worthless hippie ass out of.” He was holding, and now and then taking bites from, his trademark chocolate-covered frozen banana.

“Howdy, Bigfoot. Can I have a bite?”

“Sure can, but you’ll have to wait, we left the rottweiler back at the station.”

“No rush. And . . . and where are we at the moment, again?”

“At Channel View Estates, on a future homesite where elements of some wholesome family will quite soon be gathering night after night, to gaze tubeward, gobble their nutritious snacks, perhaps after the kids are in bed even attempt some procreational foreplay, little appreciating that once, on this very spot, an infamous perpetrator lay in a drugged stupor,

babbling incoherently at the homicide detective, since risen to eminence, who apprehended him.”

They were still within sight of the front gate. Through a maze of stapled-together framing, Doc made out in the afternoon light a blurry vista of streets full of newly poured foundations awaiting houses to go on top of them, trenches for sewer and utility lines, sawhorse barricades with lights blinking even in the daytime, precast storm drains, piles of fill, bulldozers and backhoes.

“Without wishing to seem impatient,” the Lieutenant continued, “any time you feel you’d like to join us, we would so like to chat.” Uniformed toadies crept about, chuckling in appreciation.

“Bigfoot, I don’t know what happened. Last I recall I was in that massage parlor over there? Asian chick named Jade? and her Anglo friend Bambi?”

“Wishful figments of a brain pickled in cannabis fumes, no doubt,” theorized Detective Bjornsen.

“But, like, I didn’t do it? Whatever it is?”

“Sure.” Bigfoot stared, snacking amusedly on his frozen banana, as Doc went through the wearisome chore of getting vertical again, followed by details to be worked out such as remaining that way, trying to walk, so forth. Which was about when he caught sight of a medical examiner’s crew with a bloodstreaked human body supine on a gurney, settled into itself like an uncooked holiday turkey, face covered with a cheap cop-issue blanket. Things kept falling out of its pants pockets. Cops had to go scramble in the dirt to retrieve them. Doc found himself freaking out, in terms of his stomach and whatever.

Bigfoot Bjornsen smirked. “Yes, I can almost pity your civilian distress—though if you had been more of a man and less of a ball-less hippie draft dodger, who knows, you might have seen enough over in the ’Nam to share even my own sense of professional ennui at the sight of one more, what we call, stiff, to be dealt with.”

“Who is it?” Doc nodding at the corpse.

“Was, Sportello. Here on Earth we say ‘was.’ Meet Glen Charlock,

whom you were asking for by name only hours ago, witnesses will swear to that. Forgetful dope fiends should be more cautious about whom they choose to act out their wacko fantasies upon. Furthermore, on the face of it, you have chosen to ice a personal bodyguard of the rather well-connected Mickey Wolfmann. Name ring a bell? or in your case shake a tambourine? Ah, but here's our ride."

"Hey—my car . . ."

"Like its owner, well on the way to impoundment."

"Pretty cold, Bigfoot, even for you."

"Come come, Sportello, you know we'll be more than happy to give you a lift. Watch your head."

"Watch my . . . How 'm I spoze to do that, man?"

THEY DIDN'T GO downtown but, for reasons of cop protocol forever obscure to Doc, only as far as the Compton station, where they pulled in to the lot and paused next to a battered '68 El Camino. Bigfoot got out of the black-and-white and went back and opened the trunk. "Here, Sportello—come and give me a hand with this."

"What, excuse me, the fuck," Doc inquired, "is it?"

"Bobwire," replied Bigfoot. "An eighty-rod spool of authenticated Glidden four-point galvanized. You want to take that side?"

Thing weighed about a hundred pounds. The cop who'd been driving sat and watched them lift it out of the trunk and stash it in the bed of the El Camino, which Doc recalled was Bigfoot's ride.

"Livestock problems out where you live, Bigfoot?"

"Oh, you'd never use this wire for actual fence, are you crazy, this is seventy years old, mint condition—"

"Wait. You . . . collect . . . barbed wire."

Well yes, as it turned out, along with spurs, harness, cowboy sombreros, saloon paintings, sheriffs' stars, bullet molds, all kinds of Wild West paraphernalia. "That is, if *you* don't object, Sportello."

"Whoa easy there Jolly Rancher, ain't looking for no drawdown 'th

no bobwire collector, man's own business what he puts in his pickup ain't it."

"I should hope so," Bigfoot sniffed. "Come on, let's go inside and see if there's a cubicle open."

Doc's history with Bigfoot, beginning with minor drug episodes, stop-and-frisks up and down Sepulveda, and repeated front-door repairs, had escalated a couple of years ago with the Lunchwater case, one more of the squalid matrimonials that were occupying Doc's time back then. The husband, a tax accountant who thought he'd score some quality surveillance on the cheap, had hired Doc to keep an eye on his wife. After a couple days of stakeouts at the boyfriend's house Doc decided to go up on the roof and have a closer look through a skylight at the bedroom below, where the activities proved to be so routine—hanky maybe, not much panky—that he decided to light a joint to pass the time, taking one from his pocket, in the dark, more soporific than he had intended. Before long he had fallen asleep and half rolled, half slid down the shallow pitch of the red-tile roof, coming to rest with his head in the gutter, where he then managed to sleep through the events which followed, including hubby's arrival, considerable screaming, and gunfire loud enough to get the neighbors to call the police. Bigfoot, who happened to be out in a prowler car nearby, showed up to find the husband and the b.f. slain and the wife attractively tousled and sobbing, and gazing at the .22 in her hand as if it was the first time she'd seen one. Doc, up on the roof, was still snoring away.

Fast-forward to Compton, the present day. "What concerns us," Bigfoot was trying to explain, "is this, what we in Homicide like to call, 'pattern'? Here's the second time we know of that you've been discovered sleeping at the scene of a major crime and unable—dare I suggest 'unwilling'?—to furnish us any details."

"Lot of leaves and twigs and shit in my hair," Doc seemed to recall. Bigfoot nodded encouragingly. "And . . . there was a fire truck with a ladder? which is how I must've got down off the roof?" They looked at each other for a while.

“I was thinking more like earlier today,” Bigfoot with a touch of impatience. “Channel View Estates, Chick Planet Massage, sort of thing.”

“Oh. Well, I was unconscious, man.”

“Yes. Yes but before that, when you and Glen Charlock had your fatal encounter . . . when would you say that was, exactly, in the sequence of events?”

“I told you, the first time I ever saw him, is he was dead.”

“His associates, then. How many of them were you already acquainted with?”

“Not normally guys I’d hang with, totally wrong drug profile, too many reds, too much speed.”

“Potheads, you’re so exclusive. Would you say you *took offense* at Glen’s preference for barbiturates and amphetamines?”

“Yeah, I was planning to report him to the Dope Fiend Standards and Ethics Committee.”

“Yes, now your ex-girlfriend Shasta Fay Hepworth is a known intimate of Glen’s employer, Mickey Wolfmann. Do you think Glen and Shasta were . . . you know . . .” He made a loose fist and slid the middle finger of his other hand back and forth in it for what seemed to Doc way too long. “How did that make you feel, here you are still carrying the torch, and there she is in the company of all those Nazi lowlifes?”

“Do that some more Bigfoot, I think I’m gettin a hardon.”

“Tough little wop monkey, as my man Fatso Judson always sez.”

“Case you forgot, Lieutenant, you and me are almost in the same business, except I don’t get that free pass to shoot people all the time and so forth. But if it was me over there in your seat, I guess I’d be acting the same way, maybe start in next with remarks about my mother. Or I guess *your* mother, because you’d be me. . . . Have I got that right?”

It wasn’t till the middle of rush hour that they let Doc call his lawyer, Sauncho Smilax. Actually Sauncho worked for a maritime law firm over at the Marina called Hardy, Gridley, and Chatfield, and his résumé fell a little short in the criminal area. He and Doc had met by accident one night at the Food Giant up on Sepulveda. Sauncho, then a novice

doper who'd just learned about removing seeds and stems, was about to buy a flour sifter when he flashed that the people at the checkout *would all know what he wanted the sifter for* and call the police. He went into a kind of paranoid freeze, which was when Doc, having an attack of midnight chocolate deficiency, came zooming out of a snack-food aisle and crashed his cart into Sauncho's.

With the collision, legal reflexes reawakened. "Hey, would it be okay if I put this sifter in with your stuff there, like, for a cover?"

"Sure," Doc said, "but if you're gonna be paranoid, how about all this chocolate, man . . . ?"

"Oh. Then . . . maybe we'd better put in a few more, you know, like, innocent-looking items. . . ."

By the time they got to the checkout, they had somehow acquired an extra hundred dollars' worth of goods, including half a dozen obligatory boxes of cake mix, a gallon of guacamole and several giant sacks of tortilla chips, a case of store-brand boysenberry soda, most of what was in the Sara Lee frozen-dessert case, lightbulbs and laundry detergent for straight-world cred, and, after what seemed like hours in the International Section, a variety of shrink-wrapped Japanese pickles that looked cool. At some point in this, Sauncho mentioned that he was a lawyer.

"Far out. People are always telling me I need a 'criminal lawyer,' which, nothing personal, understand, but—"

"Actually I'm a marine lawyer."

Doc thought about this. "You're . . . a Marine who practices law? No, wait—you're a lawyer who only represents Marines. . . ."

In the course of getting this all straight, Doc also learned that Sauncho was just out of law school at SC and, like many ex-collegians unable to let go of the old fraternity life, living at the beach—not far from Doc, as a matter of fact.

"Maybe you better give me your card," Doc said. "Can't ever tell. Boat hassles, oil spills, something."

Sauncho never officially went on retainer, but after a few late-night panic calls from Doc he did begin to reveal an unexpected talent for

dealing with bail bondsmen and deskfolk at cop stations around the Southland, and one day they both realized that he'd become, what they call de facto, Doc's lawyer.

Sauncho now answered the phone in some agitation.

"Doc! Have you got the tube on?"

"All's I get here's a three-minute call, Saunch, they've got me in Compton, and it's Bigfoot again."

"Yeah well, I'm watching cartoons here, okay? and this Donald Duck one is really been freaking me out?" Sauncho didn't have that many people in his life to talk to and had always had Doc figured for an easy mark.

"You have a pen, Saunch? Here's the processing number, prepare to copy—" Doc started reading him the number, real slowly.

"It's like Donald and Goofy, right, and they're out in a life raft, adrift at sea? for what looks like weeks? and what you start noticing after a while, in Donald's close-ups, is that he has this *whisker stubble*? like, growing out of his beak? You get the significance of that?"

"If I find a minute to think about it, Saunch, but meantime here comes Bigfoot and he's got that look, so if you could repeat the number back, OK, and—"

"We've always had this image of Donald Duck, we assume it's how he looks all the time in his normal life, but in fact he's always had to go in *every day* and *shave his beak*. The way I figure, it has to be Daisy. You know, which means, what other grooming demands is that chick laying on him, right?"

Bigfoot stood there whistling some country-western tune through his teeth till Doc, not feeling real hopeful, got off the phone.

"Now then, where were we," Bigfoot pretending to look through some notes. "While suspect—that's you—is having his alleged midday nap, so necessary to the hippie lifestyle, some sort of incident occurs in the vicinity of Channel View Estates. Firearms are discharged. When the dust settles, we find one Glen Charlock deceased. More compellingly

for LAPD, the man Charlock was supposed to be guarding, Michael Z. Wolfmann, has vanished, giving local law enforcement less than twenty-four hours before the feds call it a kidnapping and come in to fuck everything up. Perhaps, Sportello, you could help to forestall this by providing the names of the other members of your cult? That would be ever so helpful to us here in Homicide, as well as the chance of a break for you when that ol' trial date rolls around?"

"Cult."

"The *L.A. Times* has referred to me more than once as a Renaissance detective," said Bigfoot modestly, "which means that I am many things—but one thing I am not is stupid, and purely out of noblesse oblige I now extend this assumption to cover you as well. No one, in fact, would *ever* have been stupid enough to try this alone. Which therefore suggests some kind of a Mansonoid conspiracy, wouldn't you agree?"

After no more than an hour of this sort of thing, to Doc's surprise, Sauncho actually showed up at the door and started right in with Bigfoot.

"Lieutenant, you know you don't have any case here, so if you're going to charge him, you better. Otherwise—"

"Sauncho," Doc hollered, "will you dummy up, remember who this is, how sensitive he gets— Bigfoot, don't mind him, he watches too many courtroom dramas—"

"As a matter of fact," Detective Bjornsen with the fixed and sinister stare he used to express geniality, "we probably *could* take this all the way to trial, but with our luck the jury pool'd be ninety-nine percent hippie freaks, plus some longhair sympathizer of a DDA who'd go and fuck the case all up anyway."

"Sure, unless you could get the venue changed," mused Sauncho, "like, Orange County might be—"

"Saunch, which one of us are you working for, again?"

"I wouldn't call it work, Doc, clients pay me for work."

“We’re only detaining him for his own good,” Bigfoot explained. “He’s closely connected with a high-profile homicide and possible kidnapping, and who’s to say he himself won’t be next? Maybe this’ll turn out to be one of those perpetrators who *especially like* to murder hippies, though if Sportello’s on their list, I might have a conflict of interest.”

“Aww, Bigfoot, you don’t mean that. . . . If I got knocked off? think of all your time and trouble finding somebody else to hassle.”

“What trouble? I go out the door, get in the unit, head up any block, before I know it, I’m driving through some giant damn *herd* of you hippie freaks, each more roustable than the last.”

“This is embarrassing,” said Sauncho. “Maybe you two should find somewhere besides an interrogation cubicle.”

The local news came on and everybody went out to the squad room to watch. There on the screen was Channel View Estates—a forlorn-looking view of the miniplaza, occupied by an armored division’s worth of cop vehicles parked every which way with their lights all going, and cops sitting on fenders drinking coffee, and, in close-up, Bigfoot Bjornsen, hair Aqua-Netted against the Santa Anas, explaining, “. . . apparently a party of civilians, on some training exercise in anti-guerrilla warfare. They may have assumed that this construction site, not yet being open for occupancy, was deserted enough to provide a realistic setting for what we must assume was only a harmless patriotic scenario.” The Japanese-American cutie with the microphone turned fullface to the camera and continued, “Tragically, however, live ammunition somehow found its way into these war games, and tonight one ex-prison inmate lies slain while prominent construction mogul Michael Wolfmann has mysteriously vanished. Police have detained a number of suspects for questioning.”

Break for commercial. “Wait a minute,” said Detective Bjornsen, as if to himself. “This has just given me an idea. Sportello, I believe I shall kick you after all.” Doc flinched, but then remembered this was also cop slang for “release.” Bigfoot’s thinking on this being that, if he cut Doc

loose, it might attract the attention of the real perpetrators. Plus giving him an excuse to keep tailing Doc in case there was something Doc wasn't telling him.

"Come along, Sportello, let's take a ride."

"I'm gonna watch the tube here for a while," Sauncho said. "Remember, Doc, this was like fifteen billable minutes."

"Thanks, Saunch. Put it on my tab?"

Bigfoot checked out a semi-obvious Plymouth with little E-for-Exempt symbols on the plates, and they went blasting through the remnants of rush hour up to the Hollywood Freeway and presently over the Cahuenga Pass and down into the Valley.

"What's this?" Doc said after a while.

"As a courtesy I'm taking you out to the impound garage to get your vehicle. We've been over it with the best tools available to forensic science, and except for enough cannabis debris to keep an average family of four stoned for a year, you're clean. No blood or impact evidence we can use. Congratulations."

Doc's general policy was to try to be groovy about most everything, but when it was his ride in question, California reflexes kicked in. "Congratulate this, Bigfoot."

"I've upset you."

"Nobody calls my car a *murderer*, man?"

"I'm sorry, your car is some kind of . . . what, pacifist vegetarian? When bugs come crashing fatally into its windshield, it . . . it feels remorse? Look, we found it almost on top of Charlock's body, idling, and tried not to jump to any obvious conclusions. Maybe it intended to give the victim mouth-to-mouth."

"I thought he was shot."

"Whatever, be happy your car's in the clear, Benzidine doesn't lie."

"Well yeah . . . does make me kind of jumpy though, how about you?"

"Not the one with the *r* in it"—Bigfoot fell for this every time—"oh,

but here's Canoga Park coming up in a few exits, let me just show you something for a minute."

Off the exit ramp, Bigfoot hooked a U-turn without signaling, went back under the freeway and began to climb up into the hills, presently pulling in at a secluded spot that had Shot While Trying to Escape written all over it. Doc began to get nervous, but what Bigfoot had on his mind, it seemed, was job recruitment.

"Nobody can predict a year or two hence, but right now Nixon has the combination to the safe and he's throwing fistfuls of greenbacks at anything that even looks like local law enforcement. Federal funding beyond the highest number you can think of, which for most hippies is not much further than the number of ounces in a kilo."

"Thirty-five . . . point . . . something, everybody knows that— Wait. You, you mean like, *Mod Squad*, Bigfoot? rat on everybody I ever met, how far back do we go and you still don't know me any better'n 'at?"

"You'd be surprised how many in your own hippie freak community have found our Special Employee disbursements useful. Toward the end of the month in particular."

Doc took a close look at Bigfoot. Jive-ass sideburns, stupid mustache, haircut from a barber college out somewhere on a desolate boulevard far from any current definition of hipness. Right out of the background of some *Adam-12* episode, a show which Bigfoot had in fact moonlighted on once or twice. In theory Doc knew that if, for some reason he couldn't imagine right away, he wanted to see any other Bigfoot, off camera, off duty—even married with kids for all Doc knew, he'd have to look in through and past all that depressing detail. "You married, Bigfoot?"

"Sorry, you're not my type." He held up his left hand to display a wedding ring. "Know what this is, or don't they exist on Planet Hippie."

"A-and, you have like, kids?"

"I hope this isn't some kind of veiled hippie threat."

“Only that . . . wow, Bigfoot! isn’t it *strange*, here we both are with this *mysterious power* to ruin each other’s day, and we don’t even know anything *about* each other?”

“Really profound, Sportello. Aimless dooper’s driveling to be sure, and yet, why, you have just defined the very essence of law enforcement! Well done! I always knew you had potential. So! how about it?”

“Nothing personal, but yours is the last wallet I’d ever want money out of.”

“Hey! wake up, it only looks like Happy and Dopey and them skipping around the Magic Kingdom here, what it really is is what we call . . . ‘Reality?’”

Well, Doc didn’t have the beard, but he was wearing some tire-tread huaraches from south of the border that could pass for biblical, and he began to wonder now how many other innocent brothers and sisters the satanic Detective Bjornsen might’ve led to this high place, his own scenic overlook here, and swept his arm out across the light-stunned city, and offered them everything in it that money could buy. “Don’t tell me you can’t use it. I am aware of the Freak Brothers’ dictum that dope will get you through times of no money better than vice versa, and we could certainly offer compensation in a more, how to put it, inhalable form.”

“You mean . . .”

“Sportello. Try to drag your consciousness out of that old-time hard-boiled dick era, this is the Glass House wave of the future we’re in now. All those downtown evidence rooms got filled up ages ago, now about once every month Property Section has to rent more warehouse space out in deep unincorporated county, bricks and bricks of shit stacked to the roof and spilling out in the parking lot, Acapulco Gold! Panama Red! Michoacán Icepack! numberless kilos of righteous weed, name your figure, just for trivial information we already have anyway. And what you don’t smoke—improbable as that seems—you could always sell.”

“Good thing you’re not recruiting for the NCAA, Bigfoot, you’d be in some deep shit.”

AT THE OFFICE NEXT DAY, Doc was listening to the stereo with his head between the speakers and almost missed the diffident ring of the Princess phone he’d found at a swap meet in Culver City. It was Tariq Khalil.

“I didn’t do it!”

“It’s okay.”

“But I didn’t—”

“Nobody said you did, fact they thought for a while it was me. Man, I’m really sorry about Glen.”

Tariq was quiet for so long that Doc thought he’d hung up. “I will be, too,” he said finally, “when I get a minute to think about it. Right now I’m conveying my ass out of the area. If Glen was a target, then so am I, I would say in spades, but you folks do get offended so easy.”

“Is there someplace I can—”

“Better not be in no contact. This is not some bunch of fools like the LAPD, this is some heavy-ass motherfuckers. And if you don’t mind a piece of free advice—”

“Yeah, care in motion, as Sidney Omarr always sez in the paper. Well, you too.”

“*Hasta luego*, white man.”

Doc rolled a number and was just about to light up when the phone rang again. This time it was Bigfoot. “So we send some Police Academy hotshot over to the last known address of Shasta Fay Hepworth, just a routine visit, and guess what.”

Ah, fuck no. Not this.

“Oh, *I’m* sorry, am I upsetting you? Relax, all we know at this point is that she’s disappeared too, yes just like her boyfriend Mickey. Isn’t that odd? Do you think there could be a connection? Like maybe they ran off together?”

“Bigfoot, can we at least try to be professional here? So I don’t have to start callin’ you names, like, I don’t know, mean-spirited little shit, somethin’ like that?”

“You’re right—it’s the federals I’m really annoyed with, and I’m taking it out on you.”

“You’re apologizing, Bigfoot?”

“Ever known me to?”

“Uhhm . . .”

“If anything does occur to you about where they—so sorry, *she*—might’ve gone, you will share that, won’t you?”

There was an ancient superstition at the beach, something like the surfer belief that burning your board will bring awesome waves, and it went like this—take a Zig-Zag paper and write on it your dearest wish, and then use it to roll a joint of the best dope you can find, and smoke it all up, and your wish would be granted. Attention and concentration were also said to be important, but most of the dopers Doc knew tended to ignore that part.

The wish was simple, just that Shasta Fay be safe. The dope was some Hawaiian product Doc had been saving, although at the moment he couldn’t remember for what. He lit up. About the time he was ready to transfer the roach to a roach clip, the phone rang again, and he had one of those brief lapses where you forget how to pick up the receiver.

“Hello?” said a young woman’s voice after a while.

“Oh. Did I forget to say that first? Sorry. This isn’t . . . no, of course it wouldn’t be.”

“I got your number from Ensenada Slim, at that head shop in Gordita Beach? It’s about my husband. He used to be close to a friend of yours, Shasta Fay Hepworth?”

All right. “And you’re . . .”

“Hope Harlingen. I was wondering how your caseload’s looking at the moment.”

“My . . . oh.” Professional term. “Sure, where are you?”

It turned out to be an address in outer Torrance, between Walteria

and the airfield, a split-level with a pepper tree by the driveway and a eucalyptus out back and a distant view of thousands of small Japanese sedans, overflowed from the main lot on Terminal Island, obsessively arranged on vast expanses of blacktop and destined for auto agencies across the desert Southwest. TVs and stereos spoke from up and down the streets. The trees of the neighborhood sifted the air green. Small airplanes went purring overhead. In the kitchen hung a creeping fig in a plastic pot, vegetable stock simmered on the stove, hummingbirds out on the patio poised vibrating in the air with their beaks up inside the bougainvillea and honeysuckle blossoms.

Doc, who had a chronic problem telling one California blonde from another, found an almost 100-percent classic specimen—hair, tan, athletic grace, everything but the world-famous insincere smile, owing to a set of store-bought choppers which, though technically “false,” invited those she now and then did smile at to consider what real and unamusing history might’ve put them there.

Noticing Doc’s stare, “Heroin,” she pretended to explain. “Sucks the calcium out of your system like a vampire, use it any length of time and your teeth go all to hell. Flower child to wasted derelict, zap, like magic. And that’s the good part. Keep it up long enough . . . Well.”

She got up and started pacing. She was not a weeper, but she was a pacer, which Doc appreciated, it kept the information coming, there was a beat to it. A few months back, according to Hope, her husband, Coy Harlingen, had OD’d on heroin. As well as he could with a doper’s memory, Doc recalled the name, and even some story in the papers. Coy had played with the Boards, a surf band who’d been together since the early sixties, now considered pioneers of electric surf music and more recently working in a subgenre they liked to call “surfadelic,” which featured dissonant guitar tunings, peculiar modalities such as post-Dick Dale *hijaz kar*, incomprehensibly screamed references to the sport, and the radical sound effects surf music has always been known for, vocal noises as well as feedback from guitars and wind instruments. *Rolling*

Stone commented, “The Boards’ new album will make Jimi Hendrix *want* to listen to surf music again.”

Coy’s own contribution to what the Boards’ producers had modestly termed their “Makaha of Sound” had been to hum through the reed of a tenor or sometimes alto sax a harmony part alongside whatever melody he was playing, as if the instrument was some giant kazoo, this then being enhanced by Barcus-Berry pickups and amplifiers. His influences, according to rock critics who’d noticed, included Earl Bostic, Stan Getz, and legendary New Orleans studio tenor Lee Allen. “Inside the surf-sax category,” Hope shrugged, “Coy passed for a towering figure, because he actually improvised once in a while, instead of the way second and even third choruses usually get repeated note for note?”

Doc nodded uncomfortably. “Don’t get me wrong, I love surf music, I’m from its native land, I still have all these old beat-up singles, the Chantays, the Trashmen, the Halibuts, but you’re right, some of the worst blues work ever recorded will be showing up on the karmic rap sheets of surf-sax players.”

“It was never his work that I was in love with.” She said it so matter-of-factly that Doc risked a quick scan for eyeball shine, but this one was not about to start in with the faucets of widowhood, or not yet. Meantime she was running through some history. “Coy and I should’ve met cute, with cuteness everywhere back then and all of it up for sale, but actually we met squalid, down at Oscar’s in San Ysidro—”

“*Oh* boy.” Doc once or twice had been in—and through the mercy of God, out of—the notorious Oscar’s, right across the border from Tijuana, where the toilets were seething round the clock with junkies new and old who’d just scored in Mexico, put the product inside rubber balloons and swallowed them, then crossed back into the U.S. to vomit them back up again.

“I had just gone running into this one toilet stall without checking first, had my finger already down my throat, and there Coy sat, gringo

digestion, about to take a gigantic shit. We both let go at about the same time, barf and shit all over the place, me with my face in his lap and to complicate things of course he had this hardon.

“Well.

“Even before we got to San Diego, we were shooting up together in the back of somebody’s van, and less than two weeks later, on the interesting theory that two can score as cheaply as one, we got married, next thing we knew here came Amethyst, and pretty soon this is what we had her looking like.”

She handed Doc a couple of Polaroid baby pictures. He was startled at the baby’s appearance, swollen, red-faced, vacant. Having no idea of what kind of shape she was in at present, he felt his skin begin to ache with anxiety.

“Everybody we knew helpfully pointed out how the heroin was coming through in my breast milk, but who could afford to buy formula? My parents saw us locked into a dismal slavery, but Coy and I, all we saw was the freedom—from that endless middle-class cycle of choices that are no choices at all—a world of hassle reduced to the one simple issue of scoring. And how was shooting up any different from the old folks and their dinner-hour cocktails anyway? we figured.

“But actually when did it ever get that dramatic? Heroin in California? my gracious. Stepped on so often it should have ‘Welcome’ written across every bag. There we were happy and stupid as any drunk, giggling in and out bedroom windows, cruising straightworld neighborhoods picking out strange houses at random, asking to use the bathroom, going in and shooting up. ’Course, now that’s impossible to do, Charlie Manson and the gang have fucked that up for everybody. End of a certain kind of innocence, that thing about straightworld people that kept you from hating them totally, that real desire sometimes to help. No more of that, I guess. One more West Coast tradition down the toilet along with three percent product anymore.”

“And so . . . this thing that happened to your husband . . .”

“It wasn’t California smack, for sure. Coy wouldn’t’ve made that

mistake, using the same amount without checking. Somebody had to've switched bags on him deliberately, knowing it would kill him."

"Who was the dealer?"

"El Drano, up in Venice. Actually Leonard, but everybody uses the anagram because he does have that sort of caustic personality, plus his effect on the finances and emotions of those close to him. Coy had known him for years. He swore up and down it was local heroin, nothing out of the ordinary, but what does a dealer care? Overdoses are good for business, suddenly herds of junkies are showing up at the door, convinced if it killed somebody then it must be *really good shit*, and all they have to do themselves is be careful and not shoot quite so much."

Doc became aware of a baby, or technically toddler, risen quietly from her nap, holding on to a doorjamb and watching them with a big expectant grin in which you could see some teeth already in.

"Hey," Doc said, "you're that Amethyst, ain't you?"

"Yep," replied Amethyst, as if about to add, "what's it to you?"

Bright-eyed and ready to rock 'n' roll, she bore little resemblance to the junkie baby in the Polaroids. Whatever dismal fate had been waiting to jump her must've had a short attention span and turned aside and gone after somebody else. "Nice to see you," Doc said. "Really nice."

"Really nice," she said. "Mom? Want juice."

"You know where it is, Juicegirl." Amethyst nodded vigorously and headed out to the fridge. "Ask you something, Doc?"

"Long as it ain't the capital of South Dakota, sure."

"This mutual friend you and Coy have. Had. Is she, like, some kind of ex, or were you just dating, or . . . ?"

Who did Doc have to talk to about any of this that wasn't stoned, jealous, or a cop? Amethyst had found a cup of juice waiting in the fridge and climbed up onto the couch next to him, looking all set for a grown-up to tell her a story. Hope poured more coffee. There was too much kindness in the room all of a sudden. Doc had learned only a thing or two in the business, but one of them was, kindness without a price tag came along only rarely, and when it did usually it was too

precious to accept, being too easy, for Doc anyway, to abuse, which he was bound to. So he settled for, “Well, sort of an ex, but now she’s a client, too. I promised her I’d do something, and I waited too long, so the party she ended up with, scumbag developer and all, could be in some bad trouble now, and if I’d just taken care of business—”

“As one who’s been down that particular exit ramp,” Hope advised, “you can only cruise the boulevards of regret so far, and then you’ve got to get back up onto the freeway again.”

“Thing is, though, now Shasta’s disappeared too. And if she’s in trouble—”

Amethyst, realizing this wasn’t going to be her idea of entertainment, climbed down off the couch, threw Doc a reproachful look over her juice, and went off into the next room to watch the tube. Soon they could hear Mighty Mouse’s dramatic treble.

“If you’re on this other case,” Hope said, “busy with it or something, I understand. But the reason I wanted to talk to you,” and Doc saw it a half second before she said it, “is I don’t think Coy is really dead.”

Doc nodded, more to himself than to Hope. According to Sortilège, these were perilous times, astrologically speaking, for dopers—especially those of high-school age, who’d been born, most of them, under a ninety-degree aspect, the unluckiest angle possible, between Neptune, the dopers’ planet, and Uranus, the planet of rude surprises. Doc had known it to happen that those left behind would refuse to believe that people they loved or even only took the same classes with were really dead. They came up with all kinds of alternate stories so it wouldn’t have to be true. Some ex-old lady had hit town, and they’d run away together. The emergency room had mixed them up with somebody else, the way maternity wards switched babies around, and they were still on some intensive-care ward under another name. It was a particular kind of disconnected denial, and Doc figured he’d seen enough by now to recognize it. Whatever Hope was showing him here wasn’t it.

“Did you ID the body?” He figured he could ask.

“No. That was one peculiar thing. Whoever called said somebody from the band already did it.”

“I think it’s supposed to be next of kin. Who called you?”

She had her diary from that period, and she’d remembered to write it down. “Lieutenant Dubonnet.”

“Oh yeah, Pat Dubonnet, we’ve transacted one or two pieces of business.”

“Sounds like he ran you in.”

“Not to mention over.” She was giving him one of those looks. “Sure, I had this hippie phase. Everything I really did, I got away with, and nothin they picked me up on was ever my doing, because the only description they had was Caucasian male, long hair, beard, multicolored clothing, bare feet, so forth.”

“Just like the one of Coy they read me over the phone. It could’ve been a thousand people.”

“I’ll go talk to Pat. He might know something.”

“There’s this other thing that happened. Look.” She brought out an old bank statement from shortly after Coy’s alleged overdose, for her account at the local Bank of America, and pointed to a credit.

“Interesting sum.”

“I called, I went in and talked to vice presidents, and everybody insisted it was correct. ‘Maybe you lost the deposit slip, did the math wrong.’ Ordinarily don’t look a gift horse, you know, but this was creepy. They kept using exactly the same phrases, over and over, I mean, talk about denial?”

“You think it was something to do with Coy?”

“It showed up so close to his . . . his disappearance. I thought, maybe somebody’s idea of a payoff? Local 47, some insurance policy I didn’t know about. I mean, you wouldn’t expect it to be anonymous, would you. But here’s this mute set of figures in a monthly statement and some obviously jive-ass story the bank came up with to explain it.”

Doc wrote the date of the deposit on a match cover and said, "Is there a picture of Coy you could spare?"

Was there. She pulled out a liquor-store box full of Polaroids—Coy sleeping, Coy with the baby, Coy cooking heroin, Coy tying off, Coy shooting up, Coy out under a shade tree pretending to cower away from a 454 Big Block Chev engine, Coy and Hope out on the beach, sitting in a pizza joint playing tug-of-war with the last slice, walking down Hollywood Boulevard just as the streetlight was coming on.

"Help yourself. I should've probably thrown 'em all away a long time ago. Detach, right? move on, hell, I'm always lecturing everybody else to. But Ammie likes them, likes it when we look through them, I'll tell her a little about each one, and she should have something anyhow, when she gets older, to remind her. Don't you think?"

"Me?" Doc remembered how Polaroids have no negatives and the life of the prints is limited. These, he noticed, were already beginning to shift color and fade. "Sure, sometimes I'd like to have one for every minute. Rent, like, a warehouse?"

She gave him one of those social-worker looks. "Well, that . . . might be a little . . . Are you seeing, like, a therapist?"

"She's more of a deputy DA, I guess."

"No, I meant . . ." She'd picked up a handful of photos and was pretending to arrange them in some meaningful way, the gin hand of her brief time with Coy. "Even if you don't know what you've got," she said slowly after a while, "act sometimes like you do. She'll appreciate that, and even you'll be better for it."

Doc nodded and picked up the first picture to hand, a shot of Coy holding his tenor, maybe taken during a gig, the lighting inexpensive, out-of-focus elbows and shirtsleeves and guitar necks poking in at the edges. "Okay if I take this one?"

Without looking at it, Hope said, "Sure."

Amethyst came running in, revved up. "Here I am," she sang, "to save the day!"

LATER IN THE AFTERNOON Doc drifted up to the Tree Section to his Aunt Reet's place, where he found his cousin Scott Oof out in the garage with his band. Scott had been playing with a local group known as the Corvairs, till half of them decided to join the northward migration of those years up to Humboldt, Vineland, and Del Norte. Scott, to whom redwoods were an alien species, and Elfmont, the drummer, decided to stay on at the beach and went around sticking up ads on different school bulletin boards till they'd assembled this new band, which they called Beer. Playing mostly covers in bar gigs around the area, Beer were now actually almost paying their rent month to month.

At the moment they were rehearsing, or today actually trying to learn the correct notes to, the theme from the TV western *The Big Valley*, which had recently gone into reruns. The shelves of the garage were lined with jars of purple pork rind, sure-fire bait for the depraved reservoir bass Aunt Reet went off periodically to Mexico after and came back with the trunk full of. Doc wasn't sure, but in the dimness the stuff always appeared to be glowing.

Beer's front man Huey was singing, while the rhythm guitar and bass filled in behind him,

"The . . . Big . . .

Valley!

[*Guitar fill*]

The

BIG Valley! [*Same guitar fill*]

just

How big, is it, well go, visit sometime . . .

Ride all night, till,

Dawn-and-what will

you find?

The Big Valley! Yes! Even more-of— the
Big Valley! *no* place to score in— the
Big Valley! big? that's for sure, it's— the
Big Val-ley!

"It's like my roots," Scott explained, "my mom hates the San Joaquin, but I don't know, man, every time I go up there, gigs at the Chowchilla Kiwanis or whatever, there's this strange feeling, like I used to live there. . . ."

"You did live there," Doc pointed out.

"No, like in another life, man?"

Doc had considerably brought along a shirtpocket full of prerolled Panamanian, and soon everybody was wandering around drinking cans of supermarket soda and eating homemade peanut butter cookies.

"Anything on the rock 'n' roll grapevine," Doc inquired, "about a surf saxophone player named Coy Harlingen who used to play for the Boards?"

"OD'd, right?" said Lefty the bass player.

"Allegedly OD'd," Scott said, "but there's also been a strange rumor going around, is that he really survived? they brought him back in some Beverly Hills emergency room, but everybody kept it quiet, some say they paid him to go on pretending he's dead, and he's out there someplace right now walkin among us in disguise, like with different hair and so forth—"

"Why would anybody go to that much trouble?" Doc said.

"Yeah," said Lefty, "not like he's some hot-lookin singer every chick wants to ball, some kick-ass guitarist who'll change the business forever, just another surf-band sax player, easy to replace." So much for Coy. As for the Boards, they'd been making piles of money lately, living all together in a house up in Topanga Canyon, with the usual entourage—groupies, producers, in-laws, pilgrims who'd journeyed long and hard enough to be taken in as part of the household. The resurrected Coy Harlingen was darkly rumored to be one of these, though nobody

recognized anyone there who might be him. Maybe some thought they did, but all was fuzzed, as if by the fog of dope.

Later, as Doc was getting in his car, Aunt Reet stuck her head out the bungalow office window and hollered at him.

“So you had to go talk to Mickey Wolfmann. Nice timing. What did I tell you, wise-ass? Was I right?”

“I forget,” Doc said.

THREE

THE COP WHO'D CALLED HOPE HARLINGEN WITH THE NEWS ABOUT Coy's overdose, Pat Dubonnet, was now top kahuna at the Gordita Beach station. Doc located behind his ear a bent Kool, lit up, and considered aspects of the situation. Pat and Bigfoot had come up at around the same time, both having begun their careers in the South Bay, practically on Doc's own stretch of beach, back in the era of the Surfer-Lowrider Wars. Pat had stayed, but Bigfoot, quickly picking up a rep for stick-assisted pacification solid enough to look to the folks downtown like an obvious draft choice, had moved on. Doc had been around long enough now to watch a few of these hotshots come and go, and to note that they always left behind them some residue of history. He also knew that Pat had more or less fucking hated Bigfoot for years.

"Time for a visit," he decided, "to Hippiephobia Central."

He drove past the Gordita Beach station house twice before he recognized it. The place had been radically transformed, courtesy of federal anti-drug money, from a pierside booking desk with a two-coil hot plate and a jar of instant coffee into a palatial cop's paradise featuring locomotive-size espresso machines, its own mini-jail, a motor pool full of rolling weaponry that would otherwise be in Vietnam, and a kitchen with a crew of pastry chefs working around the clock.

After threading his way among a crew of trainees chirping around

the place squirting mist at the dwarf palms, Wandering Jews, and dieffenbachias, Doc located Pat Dubonnet in his office, and reaching into his fringe shoulder bag, withdrew a foil-wrapped object about a foot long. “Here you go Pat, expressly for you.” Before he could blink, the detective had grabbed, unwrapped, and somehow ingested at least half of the lengthy wiener and bun within, which had also come with Everything On It.

“Hits the spot. Amazed I have any appetite. Who let you in, by the way?”

“Posed as a drug snitch, fools ’em every time, all ’em bright new faces, still naïve I guess.”

“Not enough to stay here any longer than they have to.” Even though Doc was watching carefully, somehow the rest of the hot dog had disappeared. “Look at this miserable place. It’s The Endless Bummer. Everybody else will move on, but guess who, for his sins, will remain stuck out here forever in Gordita, nothin but penny-ante collars, kids under the pier dealing their moms’ downers, when I should be in West L.A. or Hollywood Division, at least.”

“Center of the cop universe for sure,” Doc nodding sympathetically, “but we can’t all be Bigfoot Bjornsen can we—ups I mean who’d want to be him anyway?” hoping this wasn’t pushing things, given Pat’s mental health, frail on the best of days.

“At this point,” Pat replied grimly, a quiver in his lower lip, “I’d settle for a life swap even with him, yes trade what I’ve got for what’s behind the door where Carol is standing you might say, even if it turns out to be a zonk—in Bigfoot’s bracket how bad of a deal could that be?”

“Weird, Pat, ’cause what I hear is, is he’s scuffling these days. You’d know better than me, o’ course.”

Pat squinted. “You’re awfully inquisitive today, Sportello. I would have noticed sooner if I wasn’t so upset with career issues which are no doubt beyond you. Is Bigfoot giving you problems again? Call the Internal Affairs Hot Line, it’s toll-free—800-BENTCOP.”

“Not that I’d ever file a complaint or nothin, Lieutenant, understand,

but how *desperate*, man, blood out of a turnip, even the most wasted spare-change artist up on Hollywood Boulevard knows enough to pass *me* by anymore, but not that Bigfoot, oh no.”

You could see a struggle going on here in Pat’s mind, between two major cop reflexes—envy of another cop’s career versus hatred of hippies. Envy won out. “He didn’t actually quote you a *sum*?”

“He listed some expenses,” Doc started improvising, and saw Pat’s ears definitely change angle. “Personal, departmental. I told him I always thought he was better connected than that. He got philosophical. ‘People forget,’ is how he put it. ‘No matter what you may have done for them in the past, you can never count on them when you need them.’”

Pat shook his head. “And with the risks he’s taken . . . A lesson to us all. Some real ungrateful fuckers in *that* business, huh?” He had this Art Fleming look on his face, like Doc was now supposed to guess which business, exactly.

Doc in turn made with the blank hippie stare that could mean anything, and which if held long enough was sure to unnerve any quadrilateral in uniform, till Pat shifted his eyes away, mumbling, “Ah. Yeah I get you. Groovy. ’Course,” he added after some reflection, “he’s got all them residuals.”

Doc by now had very little idea what they might be talking about. “I try to stay awake for those reruns,” he hazarded, “but somehow I always crash before Bigfoot’s are on.”

“Well, Mr. News At Ten’s got himself another case of the century now, since Mickey Wolfmann’s gorilla got wasted. . . . Let the others have Benedict Canyon and Sharon Tate and them, for the right chief investigator this one could be a bottomless source of cash.”

“You mean . . .”

“It’s bound to be a Movie for TV, ain’t it, whatever happens. Bigfoot can end up with script and production credits, even play himself, the asshole, but ups, eleventh-commandment issues, ignore that I said that.”

“Not to mention if he gets Mickey back, he’s a big public hero.”

“Yeah, if. But what if he’s too close to this? Some point it begins to

fuck with your judgment, like doctors ain't supposed to operate on family members?"

"Mickey and him are that tight, huh?"

"Ace buddies, according to legend. Hey. You think Bigfoot's Jewish, too?"

"Swedish, I thought."

"Could be both," Pat dimly defensive. "There can be Swedish Jews."

"I know there's Swedish Fish." Basically only trying to be helpful.

FOUR

ON CERTAIN DAYS, DRIVING INTO SANTA MONICA WAS LIKE having hallucinations without going to all the trouble of acquiring and then taking a particular drug, although some days, for sure, *any* drug was preferable to driving into Santa Monica.

Today, after a deceptively sunny and uneventful spin up through the Hughes Company property—a kind of smorgasbord of potential U.S. combat zones, terrain specimens ranging from mountains and deserts to swamp and jungle and so forth, all there, according to local paranoia, for fine-tuning battle radar systems on—past Westchester and the Marina and into Venice, Doc reached the Santa Monica city line, where the latest mental exercise began. Suddenly he was on some planet where the wind can blow two directions at once, bringing in fog from the ocean and sand from the desert at the same time, obliging the unwary driver to shift down the minute he entered this alien atmosphere, with daylight dimmed, visibility reduced to half a block, and all colors, including those of traffic signals, shifted radically elsewhere in the spectrum.

Doc went automotively groping in this weirdness east on Olympic, trying not to flinch at what came popping up out of the gloom in the way of city buses and pedestrians in altered states of consciousness. Faces came sharpening into an intensity usually seen only at area racetracks, their trailing edges prolonged, some of them, in quite drastic hues, and

often taking some time to clear the frame of the windshield. The car radio didn't help much, being able to pick up only KQAS, playing an old Droolin' Floyd Womack single Doc had always had conflicted feelings about, on the one hand trying not to take it personally just because he'd chased down a debtor or two, but then again finding himself going back over wrongs and regrets—

Th' reposess man comes
Bouncin through that
Win-dow! just
Layin' his hooks on ev'rything he can—
There goes my 19-inch!
My ride's up on some winch!
Good-bye and cheeri-o
To my ol' stere-o!

Wohh,

The reposess man, he
Never will be
Hap-py,
Till he's got ev'rything I need that
Gets me through. . . .
'Cause it's all just out on loan,
Never really your own,
Look out!
That reposess man, he's comin' after you!

Just out of Ondas Nudosas Community College, Doc, known back then as Larry, Sportello had found himself falling behind in his car payments. The agency that came after him, Gotcha! Searches and Settlements, decided to hire him on as a skip-tracer trainee and let him work the debt off that way. By the time he felt comfortable enough to ask why, he was in too deep.

"This is fun," he remarked once after about a week on the job, as he

and Fritz Drybeam were parked up in Reseda someplace on what was proving to be an all-night stakeout.

Fritz, in the business twenty years and seen it all, nodded. “Yep and wait till you start with the Inconvenience Premiums.”

This being Milton the bookkeeper’s term. Fritz, as graphically as possible, went on to describe some of the forms of motivation that clients, typically those who loaned at high interest, often asked the agency to provide.

“*I’m* supposed to kick somebody’s ass? How believable is that?”

“You’ll be authorized to carry a weapon.”

“I never fired a gun in my life.”

“Well . . .” Reaching under the seat.

“What—kind of a ‘weapon’ is that?”

“It’s a hypodermic outfit.”

“I knew that, but what am I supposed to load it with?”

“Truth serum. Same kind the CIA uses. Just stab ’em anyplace that’s easy to reach, and before you know it they’re jabbering like speed freaks, won’t stop, telling you all about assets they never even knew they had.”

Larry decided to stash the outfit in a sinister-looking red faux-crocodile shaving kit he’d found at a yard sale up in Studio City. It wasn’t long before he noticed how many of the delinquents he and Fritz visited seemed unable to keep their eyes off of it. He understood that if he was lucky, he might not have to so much as unzip it. It never quite became a tool of his trade, but did develop into a useful prop, in time earning him the nickname “Doc.”

Today Doc found Fritz banging around under the hood of a Dodge Super Bee preparing to go out on a collection run. “Hey there Doc, you look like shit.”

“Wish I could say the same for you, bright eyes. Keepin all ’em carburetors straight?”

“Wholesome thoughts and don’t smoke nothing ’s been grown in a combat zone, that’s my secret and it could even work for you, that’s if you had any self-control.”

“Uh-huh, well my good luck today that your brain’s all dialed in, because I need to find somebody in a hurry—my ex-ol’ lady Shasta Fay.”

“I think you mean Mickey Wolfmann’s girlfriend. This is Dr. Reality’s office calling, you’re way overdue for your checkup?”

“Fritz, Fritz, how have I offended you?”

“Every cop in the LAPD and the Sheriff’s is out looking for both of them. Who do you think will find them first?”

“Judging by the Manson case, I say any random idiot off the street.”

“Well come on in and check this out,” motioning Doc into the office. Milton the bookkeeper, wearing a flowered Nehru jacket, several strings of cowrie shells around his neck, and vivid yellow shooting glasses, glanced up with a wide smile out of a haze of patchouli scent and waved slowly as they headed for the back room.

“He looks happy.”

“Business has been picking up, and it’s all because of—” He flung open a door. “Tell me how many random idiots you know got anythin like this.”

“Wow, Fritz.” It was like being inside a science-fictional Christmas tree. Little red and green lights were going on and off everywhere. There were computer cabinets, consoles with lit-up video screens, and alphanumeric keyboards, and cables running all over the floor among unswept drifts of little bug-size rectangles punched out of IBM cards, and a couple of Gestetner copy machines in the corner, and towering over the scene all along the walls a number of Ampex tape reels busily twitching back and forth.

“ARPAnet,” Fritz announced.

“Ah, no I’d better not, I’ve got to drive and stuff, maybe just give me one for later—”

“It’s a network of computers, Doc, all connected together by phone lines. UCLA, Isla Vista, Stanford. Say there’s a file they have up there and you don’t, they’ll send it right along at fifty thousand characters per second.”

“Wait, ARPA, that’s the same outfit has their own sign up on the freeway at the Rosecrans exit?”

“Some connection with TRW, nobody over there is too forthcoming, like Ramo isn’t telling Woolridge?”

“But . . . you’re saying somebody hooked up to this thing might know where Shasta is?”

“Can’t know till we look. All over the country, in fact the world, there’s new computers gettin plugged in every day. Right now it’s still experimental, but hell, it’s government money, and those fuckers don’t care what they spend, and we’ve had some useful surprises already.”

“Does it know where I can score?”

FIVE

SHASTA HAD MENTIONED A POSSIBLE LAUGHING-ACADEMY ANGLE to Mickey Wolfmann's matrimonial drama, and Doc thought it might be interesting to see how society-page superstar Mrs. Sloane Wolfmann would react when somebody brought up this topic. If Mickey was currently being held against his will in some private nuthouse, then Doc's immediate chore would be to try and find out which one. He called the number Shasta had given him, and the little woman herself picked up.

"I know it's awkward to be talking business right now, Mrs. Wolfmann, but unfortunately time is a factor here."

"This wouldn't be another creditor inquiry, would it, there've been an astonishing number already. I'm referring them to our attorney, do you have his number?" Some kind of English smoker's voice, it seemed to Doc, at the low end of the register and unspecificably decadent.

"Actually, it's our firm who owe your husband some money. As we're talking in the mid-six figures, we felt we should bring it to your attention." He waited half a subvocalized bar of "The Great Pretender." "Mrs. Wolfmann?"

"I may have a few minutes free around noon," she said. "Whom did you say you represented?"

"Modern Institute for Cognitive Repatterning and Overhaul,"

Doc said. “MICRO for short, we’re a private clinic out near Hacienda Heights, specializing in the repair of stressed personalities.”

“Ordinarily I review all of Michael’s larger disbursements, and I must confess, Mr.—is it Sportello?—that I am unfamiliar with any dealings he may have had with you.”

Doc’s nose had begun to run, a sure sign that he was onto something here. “Perhaps, given the sum in question, it might be easier after all to work through your attorney. . . .”

It took her a tenth of a second to calculate how much of a shark-bite out of the surfboard that might involve. “Not at all, Mr. Sportello. Perhaps it’s only your voice . . . but you may consider me officially intrigued.”

In a former en suite broom closet at the office, Doc had assembled a collection of disguises. He decided today on a double-breasted velour suit from Zeidler & Zeidler, and found a short-hair wig that almost matched the suit. He considered a glue-on mustache but figured simpler would be better—switched his sandals for standard-issue loafers and put on a tie narrower and less colorful than currently fashionable, hoping Mrs. Wolfmann would read this as pathetically unhip. Looking in the mirror, he almost recognized himself. Groovy. He considered lighting a joint but resisted the impulse.

At the print shop down the street, his friend Jake, used to rush orders, ran him off a couple-three business cards with the legend MICRO—RECONFIGURING SOUTHLAND BRAINS SINCE 1966. LARRY SPORTELO, LICENSED ASSOCIATE, which was true enough, long as you meant a California driver’s license.

On the Coast Highway about halfway to the Wolfmann residence, the Bonzo Dog Band cover of “Bang Bang” came on from KRLA in Pasadena, and Doc cranked up the Vibrasonic. As he moved up into the hills, the reception began to fade, so he drove slower, but eventually lost the signal. Before long he found himself on a sunny street somewhere in the Santa Monica Mountains, parked near a house with high

stucco walls, over which flowers of some exotic creeper poured in a flame-colored cascade. Doc thought he spotted somebody looking down at him from one of the openings of a Mission-style loggia running the length of the top floor. Heat of some kind, a sniper no doubt, though federal or local, who knew?

A presentable young Chicana in jeans and an old SC sweatshirt answered the door and checked him out with dramatically made-up eyes. “She’s hanging by the pool with all the police and them. Come on upstairs.”

It was a reverse floor plan, with bedrooms on the entrance level and then upstairs the kitchen, maybe more than one, and various entertainment areas. The house should have been full of law enforcement. Instead the boys from Protect and Serve had set up a command post at the pool cabana, somewhere out in back. Like getting in some last-minute free catering before their federal overlords showed up. Sounds of distant splashing, rock ‘n’ roll radio, eating between meals. Some kidnapping.

As if auditioning for widowhood, Sloane Wolfmann strolled in from poolside wearing black spike-heeled sandals, a headband with a sheer black veil, and a black bikini of negligible size made of the same material as the veil. She wasn’t exactly an English rose, maybe more like an English daffodil, very pale, blond, reedy, probably bruised easily, overdid her eye makeup like everybody else. Miniskirts were invented for young women like her.

In the time it took her to lead him through a dim sunken interior full of taupe carpeting, suede upholstery, and teak, which seemed to extend indefinitely in the direction of Pasadena, Doc learned that she had a degree from the London School of Economics, had recently begun studying tantric yoga, and had met Mickey Wolfmann originally in Las Vegas. She waved at a picture on the wall, which looked like a blowup of an eight-by-ten glossy from the lobby area of some nightclub. “Why, goodness,” said Doc, “it’s you, isn’t it?”

Sloane made with the half-frown, half-smirk Doc had noticed among minor- and ex-showbiz people trying to be modest. “My lurid youth. I was one of those notorious Vegas showgirls, working at one of the casinos. Up onstage in those days, with the lights, the eyelashes, all the makeup, we did look fairly much alike, but Michael, something of a connoisseur in these matters as I was later to learn, said that he picked me out the minute I walked on, and after that I was really the only one he could see. Romantic isn’t it, yes, certainly unexpected—next thing either of us knew, we were down at the Little Church of the West, and I had this on my finger,” flashing a gigantic marquise-cut diamond up in the double digits someplace with respect to carats.

She had told the story hundreds of times, but that was all right. “Handsome stone,” Doc said.

Like an actress hitting her mark, she had come to a pause beneath a looming portrait of Mickey Wolfmann, shown with a distant stare, as if scanning the L.A. Basin to its farthest horizons for buildable lots. She whirled to face Doc and smiled sociably. “Here we are, then.”

Doc noticed a sort of fake chiseled stone frieze above the portrait, which read, ONCE YOU GET THAT FIRST STAKE DRIVEN, NOBODY CAN STOP YOU.—ROBERT MOSES.

“A great American, and Michael’s inspiration,” said Sloane. “That’s always been his motto.”

“I thought Dr. Van Helsing said that.”

She’d found and stopped exactly inside a flattering convergence of lights that made her look like some contract star of the grand studio era, about to let loose with an emotional speech at some less expensive actor. Doc tried not to glance around too obviously to see where the light was coming from, but she noticed the flicker off his eyeballs.

“Do you like the lighting? Jimmy Wong Howe did it for us years ago.”

“The D.P. on *Body and Soul* wasn’t he? Not to mention *They Made Me a Criminal*, *Dust Be My Destiny*, *Saturday’s Children*—”

“Those,” quizzically, “are all . . . John Garfield movies.”

“Well . . . yes?”

“Jimmy did film other actors.”

“I’m sure he did . . . oh, and *Out of the Fog*, too, where John Garfield is this evil gangster—”

“Actually, what I find memorable about that picture is the way Jimmy lit Ida Lupino, which, now I think of it, had a lot to do with selling me on this house. Jimmy was certainly fond enough of specular highlights, all that prize-fighter sweat and chrome and jewelry and sequins and so forth . . . but his work also had such a spiritual quality—you look at Ida Lupino in her closeups—those eyes!—and instead of hard-edged lamp reflections there’s this glow, this purity, almost as if it’s coming from inside— . . . Excuse me, is that what I think it is?”

“Darn! It’s that Ida Lupino, every time her name comes up, so does this. Please don’t take it personally.”

“How curious. I can’t recall ever feeling that way about John Garfield . . . but as I have a meditation appointment at one, we might find time for drinks, if we guzzle them down fast enough, and perhaps you can even tell me what you’re doing here. Luz!”

The young lady who’d let him in appeared from the artfully sculpted shadows. “Señora?”

“The midday *refrescos* now, if you wouldn’t mind, Luz. I do hope, Mr. Sportello, that margaritas will be satisfactory—though given your film preferences, perhaps some sort of beer and whiskey arrangement would be more appropriate?”

“Thank you, Mrs. Wolfmann, tequila’s just fine—and what a welcome relief not to be offered any ‘pot’! I’ll never understand what these hippies see in the stuff! Do you mind if I smoke a normal cigarette, by the way?”

She nodded graciously, and Doc fished out a pack of Benson & Hedges menthol he’d remembered to bring instead of Kools, given the expected class level here and so forth, and offered her one, and they both

lit up. Sounds reached them, from a pool whose dimensions he could only imagine, of policemen at play.

“I’ll try to keep this brief, and you can return to your guests. Your husband was planning to endow a new wing for us, as part of our expansion program, and shortly before his puzzling disappearance he actually had tendered us a sum in advance. But somehow it just didn’t seem right to keep the money while so little is known of his whereabouts. So, we’d like to refund you the sum, preferably before the end of the quarter, and if and as we all pray when Mr. Wolfmann is next heard from, why then, perhaps the process can resume.”

She was squinting, however, and shaking her head a little. “I’m not sure. . . . We recently endowed another facility, in Ojai, I believe. . . . Are you somehow a subsidiary or . . .”

“Perhaps it’s one of our Sister Sanatoria, there’s been a program for some years. . . .”

She had stepped over to a small antique desk in the corner, bent so as to present to Doc’s gaze an unquestionably alluring ass, and took some time rummaging through different pigeonholes before coming up with another publicity shot of herself. This was a photo of a groundbreaking ceremony, with Sloane sitting at the controls of a front-end loader and backhoe rig, in whose bucket could be seen one of those oversize checks that also get handed to winners of bowling tournaments. A personage in a doctor outfit was smiling and pretending to look at the amount, which ran to a lot of zeros, but he was really gazing up Sloane’s skirt, which was fashionably short. She was also wearing shades, almost as if she didn’t want to be recognized, and an expression conveying how much she didn’t want to be there. A banner behind her carried a date and the name of the institution, though both were just out of focus enough that Doc couldn’t get much more than an impression of a long, foreign-looking word. He was wondering how suspicious it would make Sloane if he asked the name, when Luz came back in with a tray holding a gigantic pitcherful of margaritas and some chilled glasses

of an exotic shape whose only purpose was to make it impossible for the servants to wash them without the help of some high-ticket custom dishmop.

“Thank you, Luz. Shall I be Mother?” taking the pitcher and pouring. Doc noticed there was an extra glass on the tray, so it wasn’t too much of a surprise when presently he saw reflected in the screen of a mammoth TV in the corner a large, muscular blond person coming silently down the stairs and moving toward them across the carpeting like an assassin in a kung fu movie.

Doc got up to have a look and say howdy, quickly noting that any prolonged eye contact here would mean a visit to the chiropractor for neck work, this party having three feet of altitude on him, easy.

“This is Mr. Riggs Warbling,” said Sloane, “my spiritual coach.” Doc didn’t see them actually “exchanging glances,” as Frank might put it, but if acid-tripping was good for anything, it helped tune you to different unlisted frequencies. No doubt these two had actually sat now and then on adjoining meditation mats pretending to empty their heads, just for anybody that might be nearby—Luz, the heat, himself. But Doc would bet an ounce of seedless Hawaiian and throw in a pack of Zig-Zags that Sloane and old Riggs here were also fucking regularly, and that this was the b.f. Shasta had mentioned.

Sloane poured Riggs a drink and angled the pitcher inquiringly in Doc’s direction.

“Thanks, got to be back in the office. Maybe you can tell us where to send this refund, and what form you’d like it in?”

“Small bills!” boomed Riggs amiably, “with nonconsecutive serial numbers!”

“Riggs, Riggs,” Sloane not as grimly as might be expected given the possibility, still open, that her husband had been kidnapped, “always making with the tasteless jokes . . . Perhaps if one of your company officers simply endorsed Michael’s check back to one of his bank accounts?”

“Of course. Let us know the account number and it’s as good as in the mail.”

“I’ll just go pop in the office for a moment, then?”

Riggs Warbling had appropriated the margarita jug, which he was taking sips from without going through the exercise of pouring anything into a glass. With no warning he blurted, “I’m into zomes.”

“Beg pardon?”

“I’m a contractor, I design and build zomes? That’s short for ‘zonahedral domes.’ Greatest advance in structure since Bucky Fuller. Here, let me show you.” He had brought out from somewhere a pad of quadrille paper and begun sketching on it, using numbers, and symbols which might have been Greek, and pretty soon he was going on about “vector spaces” and “symmetry groups.” Doc grew convinced of unwelcome developments inside his brain, though the diagrams were kind of hip-looking . . .

“Zomes make great meditation spaces,” Riggs went on. “Do you know, some people have actually walked into zomes and not come back out the same way they went in? and sometimes not at all? Like zomes are portals to someplace else. Especially if they’re located out in the desert, which is where I’ve been for most of last year?”

Uh, huh. “You’ve been working for Mickey Wolfmann?”

“At Arrepentimiento—that’s a longtime dream project of his, near Las Vegas. Maybe you saw the piece on it in *Architectural Digest*?”

“Missed it.” Actually, the only magazine Doc read with any regularity was *Naked Teen Nymphos*, which he subscribed to, or at least used to till he began to find the few copies that made it to his mailbox opened already and with pages stuck together. But he decided not to mention this. Sloane came sashaying back over, holding a slip of paper. “The only number I can find at the moment is for a joint account at one of Michael’s S&Ls, I hope that won’t present a problem for your people. Here’s a blank deposit form, if that’s any help.”

Doc stood, and Sloane stayed where she was, which was close enough for her to be seized and violated, a thought which unavoidably crossed

Doc's mind, taking its time, in fact, and more than once looking back and winking. Who knows what lurid acts might have followed had Luz not reappeared and flashed him, unless he was hallucinating from tequila, a warning look.

"Luz, could you please see Mr. Sportello out?"

Downstairs among corridors leading off to some unknown number of bedroom suites, Doc, as if just remembering he had to piss, said, "Mind if I use a bathroom?"

"Sure, long as *you* don't steal anything."

"Oh, dear. I hope that doesn't mean any of those policemen out by the pool have been reverting to type—um, that is to say—"

She wagged a finger no, and glancing quickly around, as if the house might be bugged, crooked her arm and flexed a bicep, while rolling her eyes upstairs.

Riggs—it figured. Doc smiled and nodded and for the benefit of any audience said, "Thank you, uh . . . *muchas gracias* there, Luz, I won't be but a minute."

She slouched gracefully against a doorway and watched him, her eyes dark and busy. Doc located the door to a palatial bathroom and, guessing it was Mickey's, went in, and then on into the adjoining bedroom.

Snooping around, he came across a number of strange neckties hanging inside a walk-in closet on a rack of their own. He switched on a light and had a look. At first glance they seemed to be vintage hand-painted silk ties, each with an image of a different nude young woman on it. But these were not exactly vintage nudes. Erect clits, spread pussy lips with sort of highlights on them to suggest wetness, over-the-shoulder invitations to anal entry, each goose bump and pubic hair painstakingly set down in photographic detail. Doc became lost in art appreciation, having noticed something striking about the faces as well. They weren't just cartoon features taking on some catalog of fuck-me expressions. These seemed to be the faces, and he guessed the bodies, of specific women. Maybe some kind of a Mickey Wolfmann girlfriend inventory. Was

Shasta Fay in here, by any chance? Doc began to flip through the ties one by one, trying not to sweat on anything. He had just come across Sloane's image—inarguably Sloane and not just some blonde—lying back among tangled sheets, arms and legs open, eyelids lowered, lips shining—an almost gentlemanly angle to Mickey's character he hadn't counted on—when a hand slid around his waist from behind.

“Yaagghhh!”

“Keep looking, I'm in there someplace,” Luz said.

“I'm ticklish, babe!”

“There I am. Cute, huh?” Sure enough, it was Luz in full color, on her knees, gazing upward with her teeth bared in what wasn't, it seemed to Doc, a specially inviting smile.

“My tits aren't really that big, but it's the thought that counts.”

“Did you ladies all pose for these?”

“Yep, guy over in North Hollywood, does custom work.”

“How about that chick what's-her-name,” Doc trying to keep a tremor out of his voice. “The one that's been missing?”

“Oh, Shasta. Yeah, she's in there someplace,” but as it turned out, strangely, she wasn't. Doc looked at the couple-three ties remaining, but none of them had Shasta's picture on it.

Luz was gazing over his shoulder into Mickey's bedroom. “He always used to take me in the shower to fuck,” she reminisced. “I never got a chance to do anything on that groovy bed in there.”

“Seems easy enough to arrange,” Doc said smoothly, “maybe—” At which point, wouldn't you know, came a horrible low-fidelity screech from an intercom speaker out in the hall. “*¡Luz! ¿Dónde estás, mi hijita?*”

“Shit,” murmured Luz.

“Another time, perhaps.”

At the door Doc gave her one of the fake MICRO cards, which had his real office number on it. She slipped it in the back pocket of her jeans.

“You’re not really a shrink, are you?”

“Y—maybe not. But I do have a couch?”

“*¡Psicodélico, ése!*” Flashing those famous teeth.

Doc was just getting in his car when a black-and-white came barreling around the corner with all its lights going, and pulled up next to him. A window on the shotgun side came cranking down, and Bigfoot leaned out.

“Wrong part of town for scoring weed, isn’t it, Sportello?”

“What—you mean my mind’s been wanderin again?”

The cop driving killed the motor, and they both got out and approached Doc. Unless Bigfoot had been demoted in some strange piece of LAPD disrespect Doc knew he’d never begin to understand, this other cop could in no way have been Bigfoot’s partner, though he might be a close relative—they both had the same smooth and evil look. This party now raised his eyebrows at Doc. “Mind if we have a look through that attractive purse, sir?”

“Nothing but my lunch,” Doc assured him.

“Oh, we’ll see you *get your lunch*.”

“Now, now, Sportello’s only doing his job,” Bigfoot pretended to soothe the other cop, “trying to figure out what happened to Mickey Wolfmann, just like the rest of us. Anything so far you’d like to share on that, Sportello? Who’s—beg pardon, *how’s*—the missus doing?”

“That’s one brave little lady,” Doc, nodding sincerely. He thought about getting into what Pat Dubonnet had told him about Bigfoot and Mickey being ace buddies, but there was something about the way this other cop was listening to them . . . way too attentive, maybe even, if you wanted to be paranoid about it, as if he was undercover, reporting to some other level inside the LAPD, his real job, basically, to keep an eye on Bigfoot. . . .

Too much to think about. Doc deployed his most feckless doper’s grin. “There’s law enforcement in there, guys, but nobody introduced me. Could even be the *federales* for all I know.”

“I love it when a case goes all to hell,” remarked Bigfoot with a sunny smile. “Don’t you, Lester, doesn’t it just remind you why we’re all here?”

“Cheer up, compadre,” said Lester, returning to the car, “our day will come.”

Off they sped, hitting the siren just to be cute. Doc got in his car and sat staring at the Wolfmann residence.

Something had been puzzling him now for a while—namely, what, exactly, was with Bigfoot here, riding around in these black-and-whites all the time? Far as Doc knew, detectives in suits and ties rode in unmarked sedans, usually two at a time, and uniformed officers did the same. But he couldn’t recall ever seeing Bigfoot out on the job with another detective—

Oh, wait a minute. Out of the permanent smog alert he liked to think of as his memory, something began to emerge—a rumor, likely by way of Pat Dubonnet, about a partner of Bigfoot’s who’d been shot and killed a while back in the line of duty. And ever since then, so the story went, Bigfoot had worked alone, no replacements either asked for or assigned. If this meant Bigfoot was still in some kind of cop mourning, he and the dead guy must’ve been unusually close.

This bond between partners was nearly the only thing Doc had ever found to admire about the LAPD. For all the Department’s long sorrowful history of corruption and abuse of power, here was at least something they had not sold but kept for themselves, forged in the dangerous life-and-death uncertainties of one working day after another—something real that had to be respected. No faking it, no question of buying it with favors, money, promotions—the entire range of capitalist inducement couldn’t get you five seconds of attention to your back when it really counted, you had to go out there and earn it by putting your pitiful ass on the line, again and again. Without knowing any details of the history Bigfoot and his late partner had been through together, Doc would still bet the contents of his stash for the next year that Bigfoot if, improbably, asked to generate a list of people he loved, would have put this guy up near the top.

Meaning what, however? Was Doc about to start offering Bigfoot free advice, here? *Nōnono*, bad idea, Doc warned himself, bad idea, just let the man deal with his grief, or whatever it is, without your help, okay?

Sure, Doc answered himself, cool with me, man.

SIX

UNABLE TO REACH HER AT HOME, DOC FINALLY HAD TO CALL Deputy DA Penny Kimball at her office downtown. A lunch date had just happened to cancel, so she agreed to pencil Doc in. He showed up at a peculiar skid-row eatery off Temple where wine abusers up from bed-rolls in vacant lots back of what remained of the old Nickel mingled with Superior Court judges taking recess breaks, not to mention a population of lawyers in suits, whose high-decibel jabbering rebounded off the mirrored walls, rattling and threatening at times to knock over all the eighty-five-cent mickeys of muscatel and tokay stacked up in pyramids behind the steam tables.

Presently in strolled Penny, one hand loosely in a jacket pocket, exchanging civilized remarks with any number of perfectly groomed co-workers. She was wearing shades and one of those gray polyester business outfits with a very short skirt.

“This Wolfmann-Charlock case,” is how she greeted Doc—“apparently one of your old girlfriends is a principal?” Not that he was expecting a friendly kiss or anything—there were colleagues watching, and he didn’t want to, what you’d call, fuck up her act. She put her attaché case on the table and sat staring at Doc, a courtroom technique no doubt.

“I just heard that she skipped,” Doc said.

“Put it another way . . . how close *were* you and Shasta Fay Hepworth?”

He'd been asking himself this for a while now but didn't know the answer. "It was all over with years ago," he said. "Months? She had other fish to fry. Did it break my heart? Sure did. If you hadn't come along, babe, who knows how bad it might've got?"

"True, you were a fucking mess. But old times aside, have you had any contact with Miss Hepworth in, say, the last week or so?"

"Well now, funny you should ask. She called me up a couple days before Mickey Wolfmann disappeared, with a story about how his wife and her boyfriend were plotting to hustle Mickey into the booby hatch and grab all his money. So I sure hope you guys, or the cops or whoever, are looking into that."

"And with your years of experience as a PI, would you call that a reliable lead?"

"I've known worse—oh, wait, I dig, you're all gonna just ignore this. Right? some hippie chick with boyfriend trouble, brains all discombobulated with dope sex rock 'n' roll—"

"Doc, I never see you this emotional."

"Cause the lights are out, usually."

"Uh-huh, well apparently you didn't tell any of this to Lieutenant Bjornsen, when he pulled you in at the crime scene."

"I promised Shasta I'd come talk to you first, see if anybody at the DA's shop could help. Kept calling you, day and night, no reply, next thing I know Wolfmann's gone, Glen Charlock's dead."

"And Bjornsen seems to think you're as good a suspect as anyone in this."

"Seems to—' you've been *talking*, to *Bigfoot*, about me? Wow, well never trust a flatland chick, man, prime directive of life at the beach, all we've been to each other too, hey if that's the way it must be, okay, as Roy Orbison always sez," holding out his wrists dramatically, "let's git it over with—"

"Doc. Shh. Please." She was so cute when she got embarrassed, nose-wrinkling and so forth, but it didn't last long. "Besides, maybe you *did* do it, has that crossed your mind yet? Maybe you just conveniently

forgot about it, the way you do so often forget things, and this peculiar reaction of yours now is a typically twisted way of confessing the act?”

“Well, but . . . How would I forget something like that?”

“Grass and who knows what else, Doc.”

“Hey, come on, I’m only a light smoker.”

“Oh? How many joints a day, on average?”

“Um . . . have to look in the log. . . .”

“Listen, Bjornsen’s in charge of the case, that’s all, he’ll be interviewing hundreds of you people—”

“Us people. Come in my fuck’n *window* again, ’s basically what you’re sayin.”

“According to police reports, you have tended to barricade your door on previous occasions.”

“You pulled my jacket and looked me up? Penny, you really *do* care!” with a glance meant to be appreciative, but which all these mirrors in here, as Doc checked out his image, were somehow presenting as just another red-eyed doper’s stare.

“I’m going after a sandwich. Can I bring you something? Ham, lamb, or beef.”

“Maybe just Vegetable of the Day?”

Doc watched her getting in line. What kind of DDA game was she running on him now? He wished he could believe her more, but the business was unforgiving, and life in psychedelic-sixties L.A. offered more cautionary arguments than you could wave a joint at against too much trust, and the seventies were looking no more promising.

Penny knew more about this case than she was telling Doc. He’d seen enough of that shifty way legals had of holding back information—lawyers taught it to each other, attended weekend seminars out in motels in La Puente just to work on greasiness skills—and there was no reason, sad to say, that Penny should be any exception.

She got back to the table with the Vegetable of the Day, steamed Brussels sprouts, heaped on a plate. Doc waded in.

“Yum, man! see that Tabasco a minute—hey, have you talked yet to

anybody over at the coroner's? Maybe your friend Lagonda's seen Glen's autopsy?"

Penny shrugged. "Lagonda describes the matter as 'very sensitive' there. The body's already been cremated, and she won't say any more than that." She watched Doc eat for a while. "Well! And how's everything at the beach?" with a low-sincerity smile he knew enough by now to beware. "'Groovy'? 'psychedelic'? surf bunnies all as attentive as ever? Oh and how are those two stews I caught you with that time?"

"I told you, man, it was that Jacuzzi, the pumps were on too high, those bikinis just kind of mysteriously came undone, it wasn't nothin deliberate—"

As it seemed she never missed a chance to do lately, Penny was referring to Doc's off-and-on partners in mischief, the notorious stewardii Lourdes and Motella, who occupied a palatial bachelorette pad in Gordita, down on Beachfront Drive, with a sauna and a pool, and a bar in the middle of the pool, and usually an endless supply of high-quality weed, as the ladies were known to smuggle in forbidden merchandise, having by now, it was said, enormous fortunes stashed in offshore bank accounts. Yet after nightfall most any layover here, it seemed that they ended up cruising the bleak arterials of dismal L.A. backwaters, seeking out of some helpless fatality the company of low-lives of opportunity.

"Maybe you'll be seeing them sometime soon?" Penny avoiding eye contact.

"Lourdes and Motella," he inquired as gently as he could, "they're, uh, Chicks of Interest to your shop?"

"Not so much them as some company they've been keeping lately. If in the course of bikini-related activities you should happen to hear them mention by name either or both of a pair of young gentlemen known as Cookie and Joaquin, could you try to make a note of it on something waterproof and let me know?"

"Hey, if you're thinkin of dating outside the legal profession, I can sure fix you up. If you're really desperate, there's always me."

She'd been looking at her watch. "Hectic week ahead for me, Doc, so unless any of this heats up dramatically, I hope you understand."

As romantically as he could, Doc sang her a few quiet falsetto bars of "Wouldn't It Be Nice."

She had learned the technique of pointing her face one way and her eyes another, in this case sideways at Doc, with her lids half shut, and a smile she knew would have its effect. "Walk me back to the office?"

OUTSIDE THE HALL OF JUSTICE, as if remembering something, "Do you mind if I just drop something off next door at the Federal Courthouse? It won't take a minute."

They weren't two steps into the lobby before being joined, or did he mean surrounded, by a couple of feds in cheap suits who could have used a little more time in the sun.

"These are my next-door neighbors, Special Agent Flatweed, Special Agent Borderline— Doc Sportello."

"Gotta say I've always admired you guys, eight p.m. every Sunday night, wow, I never miss an episode!"

"The ladies' room is down this way, right?" said Penny. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

Doc watched her out of sight. He knew her gait when she had to piss, and this wasn't it. She wouldn't be back anytime soon. He had about a second and a half to get spiritually prepared before Agent Flatweed said, "Come on, Larry, let's find us a cup of joe." They politely but firmly steered him into an elevator, and for a minute he wondered when he'd get to smoke a joint again.

Upstairs, they waved Doc into a cubicle with framed pictures of Nixon and J. Edgar Hoover. The coffee, in sumptuous black cups with gold FBI insignia, didn't taste like it accounted for too much of their entertainment budget.

From what Doc could make out, both federals seemed newly arrived in town, maybe even straight from our nation's capital. By now he had

seen a few of these back-East envoys, who landed in California expecting to have to deal with rebellious and exotic natives and either maintained a force field of contempt till the tour of duty was up, or else with blinding speed found themselves barefoot and stoned, putting their stick in their woody and following the surf off wherever it might roll. There seemed no middle range of choices. It was hard for Doc not to imagine these two as surf Nazis doomed to repeat a film loop of some violent but entertaining beach-movie wipeout.

Agent Borderline had taken out a folder and begun to look through it.

“Hey, what’s ’at you got there—” Doc angling his head amiably, Ronald Reagan style, to peer at it. “A *federal file*? on me? Wow, man! The big time!” Agent Borderline closed the folder abruptly and slid it into a pile of others on a credenza, but not before Doc saw a blurred telephoto shot of himself out in a parking lot, probably Tommy’s, sitting on the hood of his car holding a gigantic cheezburger and peering into it quizzically, actually *poking through* the layers of pickles, oversize tomato slices, lettuce, chili, onions, cheese, and so forth, not to mention the ground-beef part of it which was almost an afterthought—an obvious giveaway to those who knew about Krishna the fry cook’s practice of including somewhere in this, for fifty cents extra, a joint wrapped in waxed paper. Actually, the tradition had begun in Compton years ago and found its way to Tommy’s at least by the summer of ’68, when Doc, in the famished aftermath of a demonstration against NBC’s plans to cancel *Star Trek*, had joined a convoy of irate fans in pointed rubber ears and Starfleet uniforms to plunge (it seemed) down Beverly Boulevard into deep L.A., around a dogleg and on into a patch of town tucked in between the Hollywood and Harbor Freeways, which is where he first beheld, at the corner of Beverly and Coronado, the burger navel of the universe. . . .

“What’s that? I was lost in thought.”

“You were drooling on the desk. And you weren’t supposed to see that file.”

“Only wondering if you had any copies, I always like to carry some pictures around in case people want autographs?”

“These days as you may know,” Agent Flatweed said, “most of the energy in this office is going into investigating Black Nationalist Hate Groups. And it’s come to our attention that you had a visit yourself not long ago from a known black prison militant calling himself Tariq Khalil. We naturally became curious.”

“It’s the chronology, really,” Agent Borderline pretended to explain. “Khalil visits your place of business, next day a known prison acquaintance of his is slain, Michael Wolfmann disappears, and you get arrested on suspicion.”

“And cut loose again, don’t forget that part. Have you guys talked to Bigfoot Bjornsen about this? he has the whole file on the case, way more information than I ever will, and you’d really like talking to him, he’s real intelligent and shit.”

“Lieutenant Bjornsen’s impatience with the federal level is widely remarked on,” Agent Borderline looking up from speed-reading another folder, “and his cooperation if any is likely to be limited. You on the other hand may know things he doesn’t. For example, what about these two employees of Kahuna Airlines, Miss Motella Haywood and Miss Lourdes Rodriguez?”

Whom Penny had also just been asking about. What a strange and weird coincidence. “Well, what’ve these young ladies got to do with your Black Nationalist COINTELPRO, not I hope just ’cause they both happen to be of non-Anglo origins or nothin . . .”

“Ordinarily,” said Agent Flatweed, “we’re the ones who ask the questions.”

“Sure thing, fellas, except aren’t we’re all in the same business?”

“And there’s no need to be insulting.”

“Why don’t you just share with us what Mr. Khalil had to say the other day when he visited you,” suggested Agent Borderline.

“Oh. Because he’s a client, so that’s privileged conversation, is why not. Sorry.”

“If it has bearing on the Wolfmann case, we might have to disagree.”

“Groovy, but what I can’t figure is, is if your shop is really so focused on the Black Panthers and all that let’s-you-and-him-fight with Ron Karenga’s folks and so forth, what’s with this FBI interest in Mickey Wolfmann? Somebody’s been playing Monopoly with federal housing money? no, couldn’t be that, ’cause this is L.A., there’s no such thing here. What else, then, I wonder?”

“We can’t comment,” Agent Flatweed smug and, Doc hoped, lulled by his deliberately clueless cross-inquiry.

“Oh, wait, I know—after twenty-four hours it’s officially a kidnap case, state lines or whatever, so you guys must be figuring it for a *Panther operation*—say they put the snatch on Mickey to make some political point, and get a shot at some nice ransom money too while they’re at it.”

At which the two federals, as if unable not to, had a quick nervous look at each other, suggesting they’d at least thought about this for a cover story.

“Well bummer and so forth, wish I could help, but that Khalil guy didn’t even leave me a phone number, you know how irresponsible they can get.” Doc stood, put out his cigarette in the rest of his FBI coffee. “Tell Penny how groovy it was of her to set up this little get-together, oh, and hey—can I be frank for a minute?”

“Of course,” said Agents Flatweed and Borderline.

Snapping his fingers, Doc sang himself out the door with four bars of “Fly Me to the Moon,” more or less on pitch, and added, “I know that the Director has a thing about spade penises, and I sure hope you find Mickey before any of that cell-block stuff starts happening.”

“He’s not cooperating,” Agent Borderline muttered.

“Keep in touch, Larry,” called Agent Flatweed. “Remember, as a COINTELPRO informant you could be making up to three hundred dollars a month.”

“Sure. Say hi to Lew Erskine and the gang.”

All the way down in the elevator, though, it was Penny that Doc was

worrying about. If the best bargaining chip she had these days was to shop him to the *federales*, she had to be in some deep shit with somebody. But how deep, and who with? The only connection he saw right offhand was that both federal and county heat shared a common interest in the stewardii Lourdes and Motella, and their friends Cookie and Joaquin. Yep, he had best go look into that as soon as possible, not least because the girls were just back from Hawaii and probably had some heavy-duty dope in the house.

MEANTIME, PEOPLE WERE seeing Mickey all over the place. In the meat section at Ralph's in Culver City, shoplifting filet mignons in party-size lots. Out at Santa Anita, in earnest discussion with a person named either Shorty or Speedy. In some accounts, both. In a bar in Los Mochis, watching an old episode of *The Invaders* dubbed into Spanish, and writing urgent memos to himself. In airport VIP lounges from Heathrow to Honolulu, drinking heedless combinations of grape and grain not seen since the days of Prohibition. At antiwar rallies in the Bay Area, begging a variety of armed authorities to mow him down and end his troubles. Out at Joshua Tree, doing peyote. Ascending into the sky haloed in an all-but-unwatchable radiance toward spacecraft not of earthly origin. So forth. Doc started a file on all these reports, and hoped he wouldn't forget where he was stashing it.

Coming out of work later in the day, he happened to notice in the parking lot this tall lanky blonde plus an equally familiar *Oriental cutie*. Yes! it was those two young ladies from that Chick Planet massage parlor! "Hey! Jade! Bambi!" The girls, casting paranoid glances back over attractive bare shoulders, ran and jumped into a species of Harley Earl Impala, screeched out of the lot, and smoked away down West Imperial. Trying not to take this personally, Doc went back inside looking for Petunia, who, shaking her head reproachfully, handed him a flyer for the Chick Planet Massage Pussy Eater's Special.

"Oh. Well I can explain this—"

“Dark and lonely work,” muttered Petunia, “but somebody has to do it, something like that? Oh, Doc.”

On the back of the flyer, written with an applicator in hot pink toenail polish, it said, “Heard they cut you loose. Need to see you about something. I’m working weeknights at Club Asiatique in San Pedro. Love and Peace, Jade. P.S.—*Beware of the Golden Fang!!!*”

Well, actually Doc wouldn’t’ve minded a brief word or two with that Jade, either, seeing ’s how, being the last person he’d spoken with back at Chick Planet before he’d slipped, as Jim Morrison might put it, “into unconsciousness,” she could have had a role in setting his unwary ass up for whoever had snatched Mickey Wolfmann and shot down Glen Charlock.

So, knowing them to be longtime Club Asiatique regulars, he headed directly for the beachfront mansion of Lourdes and Motella, who it turned out this evening were headed down to that very waterfront dive to meet their current hearthrobs, FBI Persons of Interest Cookie and Joaquin, offering Doc a chance to find out why the *federales* should be so interested, while at the same time wrecking any hopes he might’ve entertained for some drug-enhanced three-way among just him and the girls—now, as Fats Domino always sez, “never to be,” which was how it usually worked out anyway with these two.

“Okay if I tag along?”

Motella gave him a skeptical O-O. “Those huaraches are marginal, the bell-bottoms will do, but the top needs some work. Here, have a look,” leading him to a closet full of gear, from whose dimness Doc grabbed the first Hawaiian shirt he could see, parrots in psychedelic color schemes, some visible only under black light, that would have gotten them second looks even from parrot communities already noted for their extravagance of feather shades, plus hibiscus blossoms that merely snorting them would send you off onto nasal acid trips, and tubular green, phosphorescent surf. A very yellow crescent moon. Hula girls with big tits.

“You can also wear these,” handing him a string of love beads from

the Kahuna Airlines Duty-Free Head Shop, which opened whenever the airplane entered international airspace, “but I’ll want ’em back.”

“Aahhh!” Lourdes meantime in the bathroom, screaming with her nose to the mirror. “Photo courtesy of NASA!”

“It’s this light in here,” Doc hastened to point out. “You look fine, you guys, fine, really.”

They did, and soon, toggled out in matching dresses from the Dynasty Salon at the Hong Kong Hilton, the girls, one on each of Doc’s arms, proceeded down to the alley, where, locked in a garage with a single dusty window, through the bleared old glass there glowed this dream of a supernaturally cherry vintage Auburn, maroon in color with some walnut trim, and bearing the license plate LNM WOW.

Driving down the San Diego and Harbor Freeways, the high-spirited stewardii filled Doc in on a list of Cookie and Joaquin virtues he would ordinarily have zoned out in the middle of, but since the FBI’s curiosity about the boys had provoked his own, he felt obliged to listen. It was also a distraction from what seemed to Doc the unnecessarily suicidal way Lourdes was piloting the Auburn.

On the radio was a golden oldie by the Boards, in which rock critics had noticed a certain Beach Boys influence—

Thought I musta been hallu-cinating,
Waiting at the light she called to me, “Let’s go!”
How am I supposed to refuse an 18-
Year-old cutie in a GTO?

We took off north, from the light at Topanga,
Tires smokin in a long hot scream,
Under the hood of my Ford Mustang, a
427 cammer runnin just like a dream—

[*Bridge*]

Grille to grille, by the time we hit
Leo Carrillo [*Horn section fill*],

And it still, wasn't over by Point Mugu—
Just a Ford Mustang and a sweet GTee-O,
In motion by the ocean,
Doin what the motorheads do.

Shoulda filled-up when I got-off, the San Diego, it's
Been pinned on empty for the last ten miles,
Next thing I know she's wavin *hasta lu-ego*, flashin
One of those big California smiles—

(Doc tried to listen to the instrumental break, and though the horn section put some nice mariachi harmonies onto “Leo Carrillo,” the tenor player didn't seem to be Coy Harlingen, just another specialist in one- or two-note solos.)

Bummed out on the shoulder, couldn't feel bluer,
Here comes that familiar Ram Air blast,
What's that on the front seat, right next to her,
It's a shiny red can full of hi-test gas—

So we grooved, back on down, past
Leo Carrillo [*Same horn fill*],
Grille to grille all the way down to Malibu,
Just a Ford Mustang and that sweet GTee-O,
In motion by the ocean
Doin what the motorheads do. . . .

The girls in the front seat were bouncing up and down, squealing “¡A toda madre!” and “What it be, girl!” and so forth.

“Cookie and Joaquin, they are so-o-o bitchin,” swooned Motella.

“¡Seguro, ése!”

“Well, actually I meant Cookie is, I can't really speak for Joaquin, can I?”

“How’s that, Motella.”

“Ooh, like wondering how it must be, getting into bed with somebody, who has *another person’s* name? *tattooed* on his body?”

“No problem unless all you do in bed is read,” muttered Lourdes.

“Ladies, ladies!” Doc pretended to push them apart, like Moe going, “Spread out!”

Doc gathered that Cookie and Joaquin were a couple of ex-grunts newly out of Vietnam, back in the World at last though it seemed still pursuing missions of consequence, having caught wind just before they left of some demented scheme featuring connexes full of U.S. currency being transshipped, it was believed, to Hong Kong. In-country traffic in dollars ordinarily fetched many long years in the stockade, but with the money now physically in international waters, according to various bullshit artists of their acquaintance, the situation was bound to be different.

They had manifested on to Lourdes and Motella’s flight to Kai Tak, heads seriously waltzed around with by Darvons, speed, PX beer, Vietnamese weed, and airport coffee, so as to be broadly incapable of the customary airplane chitchat and thus, as the ladies told it, scarcely were the seat-belt lights off than Lourdes and Joaquin, Motella and Cookie, respectively, found themselves in adjoining lavatories fucking each other’s brains out. The frolicking continued through the girls’ layover in Hong Kong, while the containers of currency grew more and more difficult to locate, not to mention believe in, though Cookie and Joaquin did try, whenever lulls in recreation allowed, to pursue an increasingly halfhearted search for them.

Club Asiatique was in San Pedro, opposite Terminal Island, with a filtered view of the Vincent Thomas Bridge. At night it seemed covered, in a way protected, by something deeper than shadow—a visual expression of the convergence, from all around the Pacific Rim, of numberless needs to do business unobserved.

Glassware behind the bar, which might in some other type of saloon have been found too dazzling, here achieved the smudged cool glow

of images on cheap black-and-white TV sets. Waitresses in black silk cheongsams printed with red tropical blossoms glided around on high heels, bearing tall narrow drinks decorated with real orchids and mango slices and straws of vivid aqua plastic molded to look like bamboo. Customers at tables leaned toward each other and then away, in slow rhythms, like plants underwater. House regulars drank shots of hot sake chased with iced champagne. The air was dense with smoke from opium pipes and cannabis bonges, as well as clove cigarettes, Malaysian cheroots, and correctional-system Kools, little glowing foci of awareness pulsing brighter and dimmer everywhere in the dusk. Downstairs, for those nostalgic for Macao and the joys of Felicidad Street, an exclusive fantan game went on day and night, as well as mah-jongg and dollar-a-stone Go in various alcoves behind the bead curtains.

“Now Doc my man,” Motella warned as they slid into a booth upholstered with some tigerskin print in nailpolish purple and vivid rust, “remember me and Lourdes’s springin for this, so tonight it’s well drinks only, none of that li’l umbrella shit.” Plenty cool with Doc, considering the income-disparity situation and all.

Cookie and Joaquin showed up just as the house band was percolating into a zippy version of the Doors’ “People Are Strange (When You’re a Stranger),” sporting widebrim panama hats, counterfeit designer shades, and white civilian suits bought off some rack in Kaiser Estates, Kowloon, sauntering in in step, one step per beat, each waving a forefinger in the air, down into the echoless reaches of the club. “Joaquin! Cookie!” called the girls, “Oh wow! Dig it! Lookin so groovy!” And so forth. Though few men indeed can be copacetic enough with their lives that they won’t go for public appreciation like this, Doc also could see Joaquin and Cookie looking at each other thinking, Shit, man, I wonder how he does it.

“May have to leave in a hurry, *mes chéries*,” rumbled Cookie, burying one hand in Motella’s Afro and getting into a kiss of some duration.

“Nothin personal,” added Joaquin, “kind of a short-notice business trip,” enveloping Lourdes in a possibly even more passionate embrace,

interrupted by a well-known bass line from the band, who were hidden in a small grove of indoor palm trees.

“All right!” Motella seizing Cookie by his necktie, which had a picture of a florid Pacific lagoonscape in psychedelic colors. “Let’s ‘get down’!”

In two seconds Joaquin had disappeared under the table. “What’s this?” Lourdes keeping her composure.

“Some psychological shit from the ’Nam,” Cookie dancing away, “every time people say that, he does it.”

“It’s okay, folks,” called Joaquin, who had spent the war trying to make some money, and wouldn’t know a LZ if it ran up and started firing some rockets at his ass, “I like it down here—you don’t mind, do you, *mi amor?*”

“I suppose I could think of it as being out with somebody real short?” with her arms folded and a bright smile that was maybe a little higher on one side than the other.

A small perfect Asian dewdrop in the house getup, who on closer inspection seemed to be Jade, came over to Doc. “There are a couple of gentlemen,” she murmured, “real eager to see these boys, even to the point of handing out twenties right and left?”

Joaquin stuck his head out from under the tablecloth. “Where are they? We’ll finger somebody else, and then we’ll be twenty dollars ahead.”

“Forty dollars,” corrected Lourdes.

“Ordinarily a sound plan,” said Motella, returning with Cookie, “except everybody here knows you two and as a matter of fact here comes the folks in question right now.”

“Oh shit, it’s Blondie-san,” said Cookie. “He look pissed off to you? I think he’s pissed off.”

“Nah,” said Joaquin, “he ain’t pissed off, but I’m not so sure about his pardner there.”

Blondie-san wore a blond toupee that wouldn’t have fooled nobody’s *abuelita* back in South Pas, and a black business suit of vaguely mob-connected cut. . . . Cranked up, prickly-eyed, and chain-smoking

cheap Japanese cigarettes, he was accompanied by a yakuza torpedo named Iwao, the spiritual purity of whose *dan* ranking had long been compromised by a taste for unprovoked asskicking, his eyes sliding back and forth and his face wrinkling in thought as he tried to figure out who was to be his primary target here.

Doc hated to see anybody that confused. Plus which, the more deeply Cookie and Joaquin were drawn into discussion with Blondie-san, the less attention they paid to Lourdes and Motella, making the ladies that much crazier and more susceptible to those grand emotional disasters they shared such a taste for. None of which boded well.

Around then Jade happened by again. “Thought that was you,” Doc said, “though we ain’t exactly been wallerin in eye contact. Got your note at the office, but why’d you go runnin away like that? we could’ve hung out, you know, smoke some shit. . . .”

“Like there was these creeps in a Barracuda that tailgated us all the way from Hollywood? Could’ve been anybody and we didn’t want to get you in any more trouble than you are, so we pretended we were there for the B₁₂ shots and I guess that made us a little speedy so when we saw you we got paranoid and split?”

“Better not be negotiating no Singapore Slings over there,” Motella advised, “none of that shit.”

“She’s a old schoolmate, we’re reminiscing about the prom, geometry class, lighten up Motella.”

“What school was that, Tehachapi?”

“Oooh,” went Lourdes. The girls were on edge, and strong drink was not improving their mood.

“See me outside,” Jade whispered, high-heeling away.

THE NEARLY TOTAL absence of lighting in the parking lot could have been deliberate, to suggest Oriental intrigue and romance, though it also looked like a crime scene waiting on its next crime. Doc noticed a ’56 Fireflite ragtop which seemed to be breathing deeply, as if it had raced all

the way down here gathering pinks as it came, and was trying to think of how he could discreetly pop the hood and just have a look at the hemi beneath, when Jade showed up.

“I can’t stay out here long. We’re in Golden Fang territory, and a girl doesn’t necessarily want to get into difficulties with those folks.”

“This is the same Golden Fang you said to beware of in your note? What is it, some band?”

“You wish.” She made a my-lips-are-zipped gesture.

“You’re not gonna tell me, after ‘beware of’ and so forth?”

“No. I really only wanted to say how sorry I am. I just feel so shitty about what I did. . . .”

“Which was . . . what again?”

“I’m not a snitch!” she cried, “the cops told us they’d drop charges if we just put you at the scene, which they already knew you were so where was the harm, and I must’ve panicked, and really, Larry, I am, like, *so sorry?*”

“Call me Doc, it’s cool, Jade, they had to cut me loose, now they just tail me everyplace, is all. Here.” He found a pack of smokes, tapped it on the side of his hand, held it out, she took one, they lit up.

“That copper,” she said.

“You must mean Bigfoot.”

“Some warped sheet of plastic, that one.”

“Did he ever come around your salon, by any chance?”

“Looked in now and then, not the way a cop would do, not like expecting freebies or whatever—if this guy was being paid off, it was more like some private deal with Mr. Wolfmann.”

“And—don’t take it personally, but—was it Bigfoot himself who put me on the Buenas Noches Express, or did he subcontract it?”

She shrugged. “Missed all that, Bambi and me were so freaked with that badass brigade stomping in, we didn’t stick around?”

“How about those jailhouse Nazis ’t were supposed to been covering Mickey’s back?”

“All over the place one minute, gone the next. Too bad. We were their damn PX there for a while, we even got to where we could tell them apart and whatever.”

“They all disappeared? Was that before or after the fun started?”

“Before. Like a raid, when people know it’s gonna happen? They all cleared out except for Glen, he was the only one who . . .” she paused as if trying to remember the word for it, “stayed.” She dropped her cigarette on the blacktop and squashed it with the pointed toe of her shoe. “Listen—there’s somebody who wants to talk to you.”

“You mean I should get out of here quick.”

“No, he thinks you can help each other out. He’s a new face, I’m not even sure of his name, but I know he’s in some trouble.” She headed back inside.

Out of the onshore mists known to shroud this piece of waterfront, another figure now emerged. Doc wasn’t always that easy to creep out, but still wished he hadn’t waited around. He recognized this party from the Polaroid that Hope had given him. It was Coy Harlingen, newly returned from the next world, where death along with its other side effects had destroyed any fashion sense the tenor player might have had left when he OD’d, resulting in painter’s overalls, a pink button-down shirt from the fifties with a narrow black knit tie, and ancient pointed cowboy boots. “Howdy, Coy.”

“I would’ve come to your office, man, but I thought there might be unfriendly eyeballs.” Doc needed an ear trumpet or something, because along with the horns and bells out in the harbor, Coy also had this tendency to fall into a nearly inaudible junkie’s murmur.

“Is this safe enough for you, out here?” Doc said.

“Let’s light this up and pretend we came out to smoke it.”

Asian indica, heavily aromatic. Doc prepared to be knocked on his ass but instead found a perimeter of clarity not too hard to stay inside of. The glow at the end of the joint was blurred by the fog, and its color kept shifting between orange and an intense pink.

"I'm supposed to be dead," Coy said.

"There's also a rumor you're not."

"That don't come as such great news. Bein dead is part of my job image. Like what I do."

"You working for these people here at the club?"

"Don't know. Maybe. It's where I come to pick up my paycheck."

"Where are you staying?"

"House up in Topanga Canyon. A band I used to play for, the Boards. But none of them know it's me."

"How can they not know it's you?"

"Even when I was alive, they didn't know it was me. 'The sax player,' basically—the session guy. Plus over the years there's been this big turn-over of personnel, like, the Boards I played with have most of them gone off by now and formed other bands. Only one or two of the old crew are left, and they're suffering, or do I mean blessed, with heavy Doper's Memory."

"Story was you came to grief behind some bad smack. You still into that?"

"No. God. No, I'm clean these days. I was in a place up near—" A long silence and a stare while Coy wondered if he'd said too much and tried to figure what else Doc might know. "Actually, I'd appreciate it if—"

"It's okay," said Doc, "I can't hear you too good, and how can I talk about what I don't hear?"

"Sure. There was somethin I wanted to see you about." Doc thought he caught a note in Coy's voice . . . not exactly accusing, but still sweeping Doc in somehow with some bigger injustice.

Doc peered at Coy's intermittently distinct face, the drops of fog condensed on his beard shining in the lights from the Club Asiatique, a million separate little halos radiating all colors of the spectrum, and understood that regardless of who in this might help whom, Coy was going to require a light touch. "Sorry, man. What can I do for you?"

"It wouldn't be nothin heavy. Just wondering if you could check in on

a couple of people. Lady and a little girl. See that they're okay. That's all. And without bringing me into it."

"Where are they staying?"

"Torrance?" He handed over a scrap of paper with Hope and Amethyst's street address.

"Easy drive for me, probably won't even have to charge you for mileage."

"You don't have to go in and talk to anybody, just see if they're still livin there, what's in the driveway, who's going in or out, law enforcement in the picture, any details you find interesting."

"I'm on it."

"I can't pay you right now."

"When you can. Whenever. Unless maybe you're one of these folks who believe information is money . . . in which case, could I just ask—"

"Bearing in mind that either I don't know or it'll be my ass if I tell you, what is it, man?"

"Ever heard of the Golden Fang?"

"Sure." Was that a hesitation? How long is too long? "It's a boat."

"Off-ly in-t'resteen," Doc sang more than spoke in the way Californians do to indicate it isn't interesting at all. Since when do you beware of a boat?

"Seriously. A big schooner, I think somebody said. Brings stuff in and out of the country, but nobody wants to talk about what exactly. That blond Japanese guy tonight with the badass sidekick, who's talkin to your friends? He'd know."

"Because?"

Instead of answering, Coy nodded somberly over Doc's shoulder, across the parking lot, down the street at the main channel and the Outer Harbor beyond. Doc turned and thought he saw something white moving out there. But the fog coming in made everything deceptive. By the time he got to the street, there was nothing to see. "That was it," Coy said.

"How do you know?"

“Saw it sail in. Got here about the same time I did tonight.”

“I don’t know what I saw.”

“Me neither. Fact, I don’t even want to know.”

Back inside, Doc found the light apparently shifted to more of an ultraviolet mode, because the parrots on his shirt had now begun to stir and flap, to squawk and maybe even talk, though that could also have been from smoke. Lourdes and Motella meanwhile were behaving very badly indeed, having chosen to assault a couple of local gun molls as a sort of tag team, for which waiters and waitresses, keeping semivisible, had relocated a couple of tables in order to clear a space, and customers had gathered around to give encouragement. Clothing was ripped, hairdos disarranged, skin exposed, and many holds with sexual subtexts wriggled into and out of—the usual allurements of girl wrestling. Cookie and Joaquin were still deep in conversation with Blondie-san. Iwao the torpedo was busy watching the girls. Doc edged closer into earshot.

“Just conferenced with the partners by satellite,” Blondie-san was saying, “and the best offer is three per unit.”

“Maybe I’ll go back and reenlist,” muttered Joaquin. “Make more off of the bonus than I will this.”

“He’s only being emotional,” Cookie said. “We’ll take it.”

“You take it, *ése*, I ain’t gonna take it.”

“I need not remind you,” said Blondie-san with sinister amusement, “that this is the Golden Fang.”

“Best we not be messin with no Golden Fang,” Cookie agreed.

“¡*Caaa-rajo!*” Joaquin in a violent double take, “what are those chicks *doin* over there?”

SEVEN

DOC CALLED SAUNCHO NEXT MORNING AND ASKED IF HE'D EVER heard of a boat called the *Golden Fang*.

Sauncho grew strangely evasive. "Before I forget—was that a diamond ring on Ginger last episode?"

"You sure you didn't, like—"

"Hey, I was on the natch, I just couldn't get a good look. And how about all those googoo eyes at the Skipper? I didn't even know they were dating."

"Must've missed that," said Doc.

"I mean I always figured she'd end up with Gilligan, somehow."

"Nah, nah—Thurston Howell III."

"Come on. He'd never divorce Lovey."

There was a pulse of embarrassed silence as both men realized that this could all be construed as code for Shasta Fay and Mickey Wolfmann and, incredibly, even Doc himself. "The reason I was asking about this boat," Doc said finally, "is, is that—"

"Okay, how about," Sauncho a little abrupt, "you know the yacht harbor in San Pedro? There's a local fish place called the Belaying Pin, meet me there for lunch. I'll tell you what I can."

From the smell that hit him when he walked in, Doc wouldn't have ranked the Belaying Pin as one of your more health-conscious seafood

joints. The clientele, however, were not as easy to read. “It isn’t new money exactly,” Sauncho suggested, “more like new debt. Everything they own, including their sailboats, they’ve bought on credit cards from institutions in places like South Dakota that you send away for by filling out the back of a match cover.” They threaded their way among plasticatic yachtsfolk seated at tables made from Varathaned hatch-covers to a booth by a window in back looking out on the water. “The Pin’s where I like to take very special clients, and I also figured you’d want to see the view.”

Doc looked out the window. “Is that what I think it is?”

Sauncho had a pair of ancient WWII field glasses on a strap around his neck. He took them off and handed them to Doc. “Meet the schooner *Golden Fang*, out of Charlotte Amalie.”

“Where’s that?”

“Virgin Islands.”

“Bermuda Triangle?”

“Close enough.”

“Sizable vessel.”

Doc regarded the elegantly swept yet somehow—what would you call it, *inhuman* lines of the *Golden Fang*, everything about her gleaming a little too purposefully, more antennas and radomes than any boat could possibly use, not a flag of national origin in sight, weather decks of teak or maybe mahogany, not likely intended for relaxing out on with no fishing line or can of beer.

“She has a tendency to show up unannounced in the middle of the night,” Sauncho said, “no running lights, no radio traffic.” Local sophisticates, assuming her visits to be drug-related, might lurk hopefully for a day or two but would soon drift away, muttering about “intimidation.” By whom was never quite made clear. The harbormaster went around in a state of nerves, as if coerced into waiving all the fees applying to transients, and every time the office radio kicked in, he was seen to jump violently.

“So who’s the mob kingpin that owns this?” Doc saw no harm in asking.

“Actually, we’ve considered hiring you to find out.”

“Me?”

“Off and on.”

“Thought you guys ’s all dialed in on this, Sauncho.”

For years Sauncho had kept a watchful eye on the yachting community of Southern California as they came and went, at first feeling the unavoidable class hatred such vessels, for all their beauty under sail, inspire in those of average income, but evolving after a while into fantasies about going in with somebody, maybe even Doc, on a boat, some little Snipe or Lido-class day-sailer at least.

As it turned out, his firm, Hardy, Gridley & Chatfield, had been keenly, almost desperately, curious about the *Golden Fang* for a while now. Her insurance history was an exercise in mystification, sending bewildered clerks and even partners clear back to nineteenth-century commentators like Thomas Arnould and Theophilus Parsons, usually screaming. Tentacles of sin and desire and that strange world-bound karma which is of the essence in maritime law crept through all areas of Pacific sailing culture, and ordinarily it would have taken no more than a fraction of the firm’s weekly entertainment budget, deployed at a carefully selected handful of local marina bars, to find out anything they wanted to know from nightly chatter, yarns of Tahiti, Moorea, Bora-Bora, dropped names of rogue mates and legendary vessels, and what had happened aboard, or might have, and who still haunts the cabin spaces, and what old karma lies unavenged, waiting its moment.

“I’m Chlorinda, what’ll it be,” A waitress in a combination Nehru jacket and Hawaiian-print shirt, just long enough to qualify as a minidress, and with a set of vibes that didn’t help sharpen anybody’s appetite.

“Ordinarily I’d go for the Admiral’s Luau,” Sauncho more diffident than Doc expected, “but today I guess I’ll just have the house anchovy loaf to start and, um, the devil-ray filet, can I get that deep-fried in beer batter?”

“Your stomach isn’t it. How about you, l’il buddy?”

“Mmm!” Doc scanning the menu, “All this *good eatin’!*” while Sauncho kicked him under the table.

“If my husband dared to eat *any* of this shit, I’d throw him out on his ass and drop all his Iron Butterfly albums out the window after him.”

“Trick question,” Doc said hastily. “The, uh, jellyfish teriyaki croquettes I guess? and the Eel Trovatore?”

“And to drink, gentlemen. You’ll want to be good and fucked up by the time *this* arrives. I’d recommend Tequila Zombies, they work pretty quick.” She stalked away scowling.

Sauncho had been gazing out at the schooner. “See, the problem with this vessel is trying to find out *anything*. People back off, change the subject, even, I don’t know, get creepy, head for the toilet never to reappear.” Again Doc thought he saw in Sauncho’s expression a strange element of desire. “Her name isn’t really the *Golden Fang*.”

No, her original name was *Preserved*, after her miraculous escape in 1917 from a tremendous nitroglycerin explosion in Halifax Harbor which blew away most everything else in it, shipping and souls. *Preserved* was a Canadian fishing schooner, which later during the 1920s and ’30s also picked up a reputation as a racer, competing regularly with others in her class, including, at least twice, the legendary *Bluenose*. Shortly after World War II, as fishing schooners were giving way to diesel-powered craft, she was bought by Burke Stodger, a movie star of the period who not long after got blacklisted for his politics and was forced to take his boat and split the country.

“Which is where the Bermuda Triangle comes in,” recounted Sauncho. “Somewhere between San Pedro and Papeete, the ship disappears, at first everybody assumes she’s been sunk by the Seventh Fleet, acting on direct orders from the U.S. government. Naturally, the Republicans in power deny all involvement, the paranoia keeps growing, till one day a couple years later, boat and owner suddenly reappear—*Preserved* in the opposite

ocean, off Cuba, and Burke Stodger on the front page of weekly *Variety*, in an article reporting his return to pictures in a big-budget major-studio project called *Commie Confidential*. The schooner meantime, instantly, as if by occult forces, relocated to the other side of the planet, has been refitted stem to stern, including the removal of any traces of soul, into what you see out there. The owners are listed as a consortium in the Bahamas, and she's been renamed the *Golden Fang*. That's all we've got so far. I know why I'm so interested, but how come you are?"

"Story I heard the other night. Maybe some kind of a smuggling angle?"

"That would be one way of putting it." The ordinarily lighthearted attorney seemed a little bummed today. "Another way of putting it is, is better she should have got blown to bits in Halifax fifty years ago than be in the situation she's in now."

"Sauncho get that weird look off your face, man, you'll wreck my appetite."

"As attorney to client, this story you heard—it didn't happen to include Mickey Wolfmann?"

"Not so far, why?"

"According to scuttlebutt, shortly before his disappearance everybody's favorite developer was observed going on board the *Golden Fang*. Took a little excursion out into the ocean and back again. Like what the Skipper might call 'a three-hour tour.'"

"And wait, I'll bet he was also accompanied by his lovely companion—"

"Thought you were done with that sad bullshit, here, let me order you a boilermaker or something to go with that Zombie, you can start the whole sordid thing over again."

"Just asking. . . . So everybody got back okay, nobody pushed over the side, nothing like that?"

"Well strangely enough, my source in the federal courthouse claims he did see something go over the side. Maybe not a person, it looked to

him more like weighted containers, maybe what we call lagan, which is stuff you sink deliberately so you can come back and get it later.”

“They, what, put out a buoy or something to mark the spot?”

“Nowadays it’s all electronic, Doc, you get your latitude and longitude fix from loran coordinates, and then when you want to zero in closer, you run a sonar scan.”

“Sounds like you’re plannin to go out and have a look.”

“More like a civilian on a ride-along. People at the courthouse who know I’m . . .” He tried to think of the word.

“Interested.”

“Putting it kindly. Long as you don’t call it obsessed.”

If it was a chick, maybe, Doc thought, hoping his lips weren’t moving.

AS USUAL THESE DAYS, Fritz was back in the computer room, staring at data. He had that ask-me-if-I-give-a-shit look Doc had noted before in newcomers to the groovy world of addictive behavior.

“Word is that your girlfriend has split the country, sorry to be the one to hand you the news.”

Doc was surprised at the intensity of the rectogenital throb that ran through him. “Where’d she go?”

“Not known. She was aboard what the federals call a vessel of interest, to them and maybe you too.”

“Uh-oh.” Doc looked at the printout and saw the name *Golden Fang*. “And you got this from some computer that’s hooked up to your network?”

“This in particular comes from the Hoover Library at Stanford—somebody’s collection of countersubversive files. Here, I printed it all down.” Doc went out in the front office and drew a cup of coffee from the urn, whereupon Milton the bookkeeper, who had been acting difficult lately, got right into a hassle with Fritz about whether Doc’s coffee should be charged to travel and entertainment or to company overhead.

Gladys the secretary turned up the office stereo, which happened to be playing Blue Cheer, either to drown out the argument or suggest gently that everybody pipe down. Fritz and Milton then began screaming at Gladys, who screamed back. Doc lit a joint and began to read the file, which had been put together by a private intelligence operation known as the American Security Council, working out of Chicago, according to Fritz, since around '55.

There was a brief history of the schooner *Preserved*, of keen interest to the countersubversive community for her high-seas capability. At the time of her reappearance in the Caribbean, for example, she was on some spy mission against Fidel Castro, who by that point was active up in the mountains of Cuba. Later, under the name of *Golden Fang*, she was to prove of use to anti-Communist projects in Guatemala, West Africa, Indonesia, and other places whose names were blanked out. She often took on as cargo abducted local “troublemakers,” who were never seen again. The phrase “deep interrogation” kept coming up. She ran CIA heroin from the Golden Triangle. She monitored radio traffic off unfriendly coastlines and forwarded it to agencies in Washington, D.C. She brought weapons in to anti-Communist guerrillas, including those at the ill-fated Bay of Pigs. The chronology here ran all the way up to the present, including Mickey Wolfmann’s unexplained day trip just before he vanished, as well as the schooner’s departure last week from San Pedro with known Wolfmann companion Shasta Fay Hepworth on board.

That Mickey, known to be a generous Reagan contributor, might be active in some anti-Communist crusade came as no big surprise. But how deeply was Shasta involved? Who had arranged for her passage out of the country aboard the *Golden Fang*? Was it Mickey? was it somebody else paying her off for her services in putting the snatch on Mickey? What could she have gotten into so heavy-duty that the only way out was to help set up the man she was supposed to be in love with? Bummer, man. Bumm. Er.

Assuming she even wanted out. Maybe she really wanted to remain *in* whatever it was, and Mickey stood in the way of that, or maybe

Shasta was seeing Sloane's boyfriend Riggs on the side, and maybe Sloane found out and was trying to get revenge by setting Shasta up for Mickey's murder, or maybe Mickey was jealous of Riggs and tried to have him iced only the plan misfired and whoever had contracted to do the deed showed up and by accident killed Mickey, or maybe it was on purpose because *the so-far-unknown hitperson really wanted to run off with Sloane*. . . .

"Gahhh!"

"Good shit, ain't it," Fritz handing back a smoldering roach in a roach clip, all that was left of what they'd been smoking.

"Define 'good,'" Doc muttered. "I am, like, overthinking myself into brainfreeze, here."

Fritz chuckled at length. "Yeah, PIs should really stay away from drugs, all 'em alternate universes just make the job that much more complicated."

"But what about Sherlock Holmes, he did coke all the time, man, it helped him solve cases."

"Yeah but he . . . was not real?"

"What. Sherlock Holmes was—"

"He's a made-up character in a bunch of stories, Doc."

"Wh— Naw. No, he's real. He lives at this real address in London. Well, maybe not anymore, it was years ago, he has to be dead by now."

"Come on, let's go over to Zucky's, I don't know about you, but I've suddenly got this, what Cheech and Chong might call matzo-ball jones?"

Entering the legendary Santa Monica delicatessen, they came under the red-eyed scrutiny of a crowd of freaks of all ages who seemed to be expecting somebody else. After a while Magda showed up with the usual Zuckyburger and fries, and rolled beef on rye, and potato salad and Dr. Brown's Cel-Rays plus another bowl of pickles and sauerkraut, and looking more than ordinarily imposed upon. "Joint sure is jumpin," Doc observed.

She rolled her eyes up and down the establishment. "*Marcus Welby,*

M.D. freaks. You ever notice how the Zucky's sign shows up for half a second in the opening credits? Blink and you'll miss it, but it's more than enough for these people, who come in asking if that's, like, Dr. Steve Kiley's motorcycle parked out in front, and where's the hospital, and who also," her voice rising as she left the table, "get confused when they can't find Cheetos or Twinkies on the goldurn menu!"

"At least it ain't *Mod Squad*-ers," Doc grumbled.

"What," Fritz innocently. "My favorite show."

"Pro-cop fuckin mind control's more like it. Inform on your friends, kids, get a lollipop from the Captain."

"Listen, I came up in Temecula, which is Krazy Kat Kountry, where you always root for Ignatz and not Offisa Pupp."

They got into face-stuffing activities for a while, forgetting if they'd ordered anything else, bringing Magda back over, then forgetting what they wanted her for. "Cause PIs are doomed, man," Doc continuing his earlier thought, "you could've seen it coming for years, in the movies, on the tube. Once there was all these great old PIs—Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, the shamus of shamuses Johnny Staccato, always smarter and more professional than the cops, always end up solvin the crime while the cops are followin wrong leads and gettin in the way."

"Coming in at the end to put the cuffs on."

"Yeah, but nowadays it's all you see anymore is cops, the tube is saturated with fuckin cop shows, just being regular guys, only tryin to do their job, folks, no more threat to nobody's freedom than some dad in a sitcom. Right. Get the viewer population so cop-happy they're beggin to be run in. Good-bye Johnny Staccato, welcome and while you're at it please kick my door down, Steve McGarrett. Meantime out here in the real world most of us private flatfoots can't even make the rent."

"So why do you stay in the business? Why not get a houseboat up in the Sacramento Delta—smoke, drink, fish, fuck, you know, what old guys do."

"Don't forget piss and moan."

SUNRISE WAS ON the way, the bars were just closed or closing, out in front of Wavos everybody was either at the tables along the sidewalk, sleeping with their heads on Health Waffles or in bowls of vegetarian chili, or being sick in the street, causing small-motorcycle traffic to skid in the vomit and so forth. It was late winter in Gordita, though for sure not the usual weather. You heard people muttering to the effect that last summer the beach didn't have summer till August, and now there probably wouldn't be any winter till spring. Santa Anas had been blowing all the smog out of downtown L.A., funneling between the Hollywood and Puente Hills on westward through Gordita Beach and out to sea, and this had been going on for what seemed like weeks now. Offshore winds had been too strong to be doing the surf much good, but surfers found themselves getting up early anyway to watch the dawn weirdness, which seemed like a visible counterpart to the feeling in everybody's skin of desert winds and heat and relentlessness, with the exhaust from millions of motor vehicles mixing with microfine Mojave sand to refract the light toward the bloody end of the spectrum, everything dim, lurid and biblical, sailor-take-warning skies. The state liquor stamps over the tops of tequila bottles in the stores were coming unstuck, is how dry the air was. Liquor-store owners could be filling those bottles with anything anymore. Jets were taking off the wrong way from the airport, the engine sounds were not passing across the sky where they should have, so everybody's dreams got disarranged, when people could get to sleep at all. In the little apartment complexes the wind entered narrowing to whistle through the stairwells and ramps and catwalks, and the leaves of the palm trees outside rattled together with a liquid sound, so that from inside, in the darkened rooms, in louvered light, it sounded like a rainstorm, the wind raging in the concrete geometry, the palms beating together like the rush of a tropical downpour, enough to get you to open the door and look outside, and of course there'd only be the same hot cloudless depth of day, no rain in sight.

For the last few weeks now, St. Flip of Lawndale, for whom Jesus Christ was not only personal savior but surfing consultant as well, who rode an old-school redwood plank running just under ten feet with an inlaid mother-of-pearl cross on top and two plastic skegs of a violent pink color on the bottom, had been hitching rides from a friend with a little fiberglass runabout far out into the Outside, to surf what he swore was the gnarliest break in the world, with waves bigger than Waimea, bigger than Maverick's up the coast at Half Moon Bay or Todos Santos in Baja. Stewardii on transpacific flights making their final approaches to LAX reported seeing him below, surfing where no surf should've been, a figure in white baggy trunks, whiter than the prevailing light could really account for. . . . In the evenings with the sunset behind him, he would ascend again to the secular groove of honky-tonk Gordita Beach and grab a beer and silently hang out and smile at people when he had to, and wait for first light to return.

Back in his beach pad there was a velvet painting of Jesus riding goofyfoot on a rough-hewn board with outriggers, meant to suggest a crucifix, through surf seldom observed on the Sea of Galilee, though this hardly presented a challenge to Flip's faith. What was "walking on water," if it wasn't Bible talk for surfing? In Australia once, a local surfer, holding the biggest can of beer Flip had ever seen, had even sold him a fragment of the True Board.

As usual among the early customers at Wavos, there were differing opinions about what, if anything, the Saint had been surfing. Some argued for freak geography—an uncharted seamount or outer reef—others for a weird once-in-a-lifetime weather event, or maybe, like, a volcano, or a tidal wave, someplace far away out in the North Pacific, whose swells by the time they reached the Saint would have grown suitably gnarlacious.

Doc, also up early, sat drinking Wavos coffee, which was rumored to have double-cross whites ground up in it, and listening to the increasingly hectic conversation, and mostly observing the Saint, who was waiting for his morning ride out to the break. Over the years Doc had

known a surfer or two who'd found and ridden other breaks located far from shore that nobody else had the equipment either under their feet or in their hearts to ride, who'd gone alone every dawn, often for years, shadows cast out over the water, to be taken, unphotographed and unrecorded, on rides of five minutes and longer through seething tunnels of solar bluegreen, the true and unendurable color of daylight. Doc had noticed that after a while these folks would no longer be quite where their friends expected to find them. Long-standing tabs at frond-roofed beer bars had to be forgiven, shoreside honeys were left to gaze mournfully at the horizons and eventually to take up with civilians from over the berm, claims adjusters, vice principals, security guards, and so forth, even though rent on the abandoned surfer pads still got paid somehow and mysterious lights kept appearing through the windows long after the honky-tonks had closed for the night, and the people who thought they'd actually seen these absent surfers later admitted they might have been hallucinating after all.

Doc had the Saint figured for one of those advanced spirits. His guess was that Flip rode the freak waves he'd found not so much out of insanity or desire for martyrdom as in a true stone indifference, the deep focus of a religious ecstatic who's been tapped by God to be wiped out in atonement for the rest of us. And that one day Flip, like the others, would be someplace else, vanished even from GNASH, the Global Network of Anecdotal Surfer Horseshit, and these same people here would be sitting in Wavos arguing about where he was.

Flip's friend with the outboard showed up after a while, and amid a clamor of anti-powerboat remarks the two split down the hill.

"Well, he's crazy," summarized Flaco the Bad.

"I think they just go out and drink beer and fall asleep and come back when it gets dark," opined Zigzag Twong, who had switched last year to a shorter board and more forgiving waves.

Ensenada Slim shook his head gravely. "There's too many stories about that break. Times it's there, times it ain't. Almost like something's down below, guarding it. The olden-day surfers called it Death's Doorsill. You

don't just wipe out, it grabs you—most often from behind just as you're heading for what you think is safe water, or reading some obviously fatal shit totally the wrong way—and it pulls you down so deep you never come back up in time to take another breath, and just as you get lunched forever, so the old tales go, you hear a *cosmic insane Surfari's laugh*, echoing across the sky.”

Everybody in Wavos including the Saint proceeded to cackle “Hoo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo—Wipeout!” more or less in unison, and Zigzag and Flaco started arguing about the two different “Wipeout” singles, and which label, Dot or Decca, featured the laugh and which didn't.

Sortilège, who had been silent till now, chewing on the end of one braid and directing huge enigmatic lamps from one theoretician to another, finally piped up. “A patch of breaking surf right in the middle of what's supposed to be deep ocean? A bottom where there was no bottom before? Well really, think about it, all through history, islands in the Pacific Ocean have been rising and sinking, and what if whatever Flip saw out there is something that sank long ago and is rising now slowly to the surface again?”

“Some island?”

“Oh, an island *at least*.”

By this point in California history, enough hippie metaphysics had oozed in among surfing folk that even the regulars here at Wavos, some of them, seeing where this was headed, began to shift their feet and look around for other things to do.

“Lemuria again,” muttered Flaco.

“Problem with Lemuria?” inquired Sortilège sweetly.

“The Atlantis of the Pacific.”

“That's the one, Flaco.”

“And now you say this lost continent, is it's rising to the surface again?”

Her eyes narrowing with what, in a less composed person, could've been taken for annoyance, “Not so strange really, there's always been

predictions that someday Lemuria would reemerge, and what better time than now, with Neptune moving at last out of the Scorpio death-trip, a water sign by the way, and rising into the Sagittarian light of the higher mind?"

"So shouldn't somebody be calling *National Geographic* or something?"

"*Surfer* magazine?"

"That's it, boys, I've had my Barney quota for the week."

"I'll walk you," Doc said.

They moseyed south down the alleys of Gordita Beach, in the slow seep of dawn and the wintertime smell of crude oil and saltwater. After a while Doc said, "Ask you something?"

"You heard Shasta split the country, and now you need to talk to somebody."

"Readin my thoughts again, babe."

"Read mine then, you know who to see as well as I do. Vehi Fairfield is the closest thing to a real oracle we're ever gonna see in this neck of the woods."

"Maybe you're prejudiced 'cause he's your teacher. Maybe you'd like to place a small wager it's only all that acid talking."

"Throwing your money away, no wonder you can't keep your IOUs straight."

"Never had that problem when you were working at the office."

"And would I ever consider coming back, no, not without benefits including dental and chiropractic, and you know that's way beyond your budget."

"I could offer freak-out insurance maybe."

"Already have that, it's called *shikantaza*, you ought to try it."

"What I get for fallin in love outside my religion."

"Which'd be what, Colombian Orthodox?"

Her boyfriend Spike was out on the porch with a cup of coffee. "Hey, Doc. Everybody's up early today."

"She's tryin to talk me into seeing her guru."

“Don’t look at me, man. You know she’s always right.”

For a while after he got back from Vietnam, Spike had been keenly paranoid about going anyplace he might run into hippies, believing all longhairs to be antiwar bombthrowers who could read his vibrations and tell immediately where he’d been and hate him for it, and try to work some sinister hippie mischief against him. The first time Doc met Spike, he found him a little frantically trying to assimilate into the freak culture, which sure hadn’t been there when he left and had made returning to the U.S. like landing on another planet full of hostile alien life-forms. “Tippy, man! How about that Abbie Hoffman! Let’s roll us a couple of numbers and hang out and listen to some Electric Prunes!”

Doc could see that Spike would be fine as soon as he calmed down. “Sortilège says you were over in Vietnam, huh?”

“Yeah, I’m one them baby killers.” He had his face angled down, but he was looking Doc in the eyes.

“Tell the truth, I admire anybody’s had the balls,” Doc said.

“Hey, I just went in every day and worked on helicopters. Me and Charlie, no worries, we spent a lot of time in town together hanging out smoking that righteous native weed, listening to rock ‘n’ roll on the Armed Forces Radio. Every once in a while, they’d wave you over and go, look, you gonna sleep on the base tonight? you’d say, yeah, why? and they’d say, don’t sleep on the base tonight. Saved my ass a couple times like that. Their country, they want it, fine with me. Long as I can just work on my bike without nobody hassling me.”

Doc shrugged. “Seems fair. Is that yours outside, that Moto Guzzi?”

“Yeah, picked it up from some road maniac from Barstow who just rode the shit out of it, so putting it back in shape is taking up a few weekends. That and old Sortilège, they’re keeping me cheerful.”

“It’s really nice to see you guys together.”

Spike looked over at the corner of the room, thought a minute, said carefully, “We go back some, I was a year ahead of her at Mira Costa, we dated a couple times, then when I was over there we started writing, next thing anybody knew I was going, well, maybe I won’t re-up after all.”

“Must’ve been around the time I had that matrimonial in Inglewood where the b.f. tried to piss on me through a keyhole I was lookin in. Leej will never let me forget that, she was still working for me then, I remember thinking that something cool must have been happening in her life.”

As time passed, Spike was able slowly to learn to relax into the social yoga positions defining life at the beach. The Moto Guzzi brought its share of admirers to hang out and smoke dope and drink beer on the cement apron in front of the garage where Spike worked on it, and he found one or two veterans back from the ’Nam who wanted more or less the same unhassled civilian afterlife he did, especially Farley Branch, who’d been in the Signal Corps and managed to boost some equipment nobody wanted, including an old Bell & Howell 16-mm movie camera from WWII, army green, spring-wound, indestructible, and only a little bigger than the roll of film it used. They would take off on their bikes from time to time looking for targets of opportunity, both discovering after a while a common interest in respect for the natural environment, having seen too much of it napalmed, polluted, defoliated till the laterite beneath was sun-baked solid and useless. Farley had already collected dozens of reels’ worth of Stateside environmental abuse, especially Channel View Estates, which reminded him strangely of jungle clearings he had known. According to Spike, Farley had been out there the same day as Doc, shooting footage of the vigilante raid, and was waiting now to get it back from the lab.

Spike himself had been growing obsessed with the El Segundo oil refinery and tanks just up the coast. Even when the wind here cooperated, Gordita was still like living on a houseboat anchored in a tar pit. Everything smelled like crude. Oil spilled from tankers washed up on the beach, black, thick, gooey. Anybody who walked on the beach got it on the bottoms of their feet. There were two schools of thought—Denis, for example, liked to let it just accumulate till it was thick as huarache soles, thereby saving him the price of a pair of sandals. Others, more fastidious, incorporated regular foot-cleaning into their day, like shaving or brushing their teeth.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Spike said the first time Sortilège found him

on the porch with a table knife, scraping off the soles of his feet. “I love it here in Gordita, mostly ’cause it’s your hometown and you love it, but now and then there’s just some . . . little . . . fucking detail . . .”

“They’re destroying the planet,” she agreed. “The good news is that like any living creature, Earth has an immune system too, and sooner or later she’s going to start rejecting agents of disease like the oil industry. And hopefully before we end up like Atlantis and Lemuria.”

It was the belief of her teacher Vehi Fairfield that both empires had sunk into the sea because Earth couldn’t accept the levels of toxicity they’d reached.

“Vehi’s okay,” Spike told Doc now, “though he sure does a awful lot of acid.”

“It helps him see,” explained Sortilège.

Vehi wasn’t just “into” LSD—acid was the medium he swam and occasionally surfed in. He got it delivered, possibly by special pipeline, from Laguna Canyon, direct from the labs of the post-Owsley psychedelic mafia believed in those days to be operating back in there. In the course of systematic daily tripping, he had found a spirit guide named Kamukea, a Lemuro-Hawaiian demigod from the dawn of Pacific history, who centuries ago had been a sacred functionary of the lost continent now lying beneath the Pacific Ocean.

“And if anybody can put you in touch with Shasta Fay,” Sortilège said, “it’s Vehi.”

“Come on, Leej, you know I had some weird history with him—”

“Well, he thinks you’ve been trying to avoid him, and he can’t understand why.”

“Simple. Rule number one of the Dopers’ Code? Never, ever put nobody—”

“But he *told* you that was acid.”

“No, he told me it was ‘Burgomeister Special Edition.’”

“Well that’s what that means, Special Edition, it’s a phrase he uses.”

“*You* know that, *he* knows that. . . .” By which point they were out on the esplanade, en route to Vehi’s place.

Voluntary or whatever, the trip Vehi'd put him on with that magic beer can was one Doc kept hoping he'd forget about with time. But didn't.

It had all begun, apparently, some 3 billion years ago, on a planet in a binary star system quite a good distance from Earth. Doc's name then was something like Xqq, and because of the two suns and the way they rose and set, he worked some very complicated shifts, cleaning up after a labful of scientist-priests who invented things in a gigantic facility which had formerly been a mountain of pure osmium. One day he heard some commotion down a semiforbidden corridor and went to have a look. Ordinarily sedate and studious personnel were running around in uncontrolled glee. "We did it!" they kept screaming. One of them grabbed Doc, or actually Xqq. "Here he is! The perfect subject!" Before he knew it he was signing releases, and being costumed in what he would soon learn was a classic hippie outfit of the planet Earth, and led over to a peculiarly shimmering chamber in which a mosaic of Looney Tunes motifs was repeating obsessively away in several dimensions at once in vividly audible yet unnamable spectral frequencies. . . . The lab people were explaining to him meanwhile that they'd just invented intergalactic time travel and that he was about to be sent across the universe and maybe 3 billion years into the future. "Oh, and one other thing," just before throwing the final switch, "the universe? it's been, like, expanding? So when you get there, everything else will be the same weight, but bigger? with all the molecules further apart? except for you—you'll be the same size and density. Meaning you'll be about a foot shorter than everybody else, but much more compact. Like, solid?"

"Can I walk through walls?" Xqq wanted to know, but by then space and time as he knew it, not to mention sound, light, and brain waves, were all undergoing these unprecedented changes, and next thing he knew he was standing on the corner of Dunecrest and Gordita Beach Boulevard, and watching what seemed to be an endless procession of young women in bikinis, some of whom were smiling at him and offering thin cylindrical objects whose oxidation products were apparently meant to be inhaled. . . .

As it turned out, he was able to go through drywall construction with little discomfort, although, not having X-ray vision, he did run into some disagreeable moments with wall studs and eventually curtailed the practice. His new hyperdensity also allowed him sometimes to deflect simple weapons directed at him with hostile intent, though bullets were another story, and he also learned to avoid those when possible. Slowly the Gordita Beach of his trip merged with the everyday version, and he began to assume that things were back to normal, except for when, now and then, he'd forget and lean against a wall and suddenly find himself halfway through it and trying to apologize to somebody on the other side.

"Well," Sortilège supposed, "many of us do get uncomfortable when we discover some secret aspect to our personality. But it's not like you ended up three feet tall with the density of lead."

"Easy for you to say. Try it sometime."

They had arrived at a beach pad with salmon walls and an aqua roof, with a dwarf palm growing out of the sand in front decorated all over with empty beer cans, among which Doc couldn't help noticing a number of ex-Burgies. "Actually," Doc remembered, "I've got this coupon, buy a case, get one free, expires midnight tonight, maybe I better—"

"Hey, it's your ex-old lady, man, I'm just along for the finder's fee."

They were greeted by a person with a shaved head, wearing wire-rim sunglasses and a green and magenta kimono with some kind of bird motif on it. He was a dedicated old-school longboarder recently back from Oahu, having somehow known in advance about the epic surf that hit the north shore of that island back in December.

"Man, did you miss a big story," he greeted Doc.

"You too, man."

"I'm talkin about sets of fifty-foot waves that wouldn't quit."

"'Fifty,' huh. I'm talkin about Charlie Manson gettin popped."

They looked at each other.

"On the face of it," Vehi Fairfield said finally, "two separate worlds, each unaware of the other. But they always connect someplace."

"Manson and the Surge of '69," said Doc.

"I'd be very surprised if they weren't connected," Vehi said.

"That's because you think everything is connected," Sortilège said.

"Think'?" He turned back to Doc, beaming. "You're here about your ex-old lady."

"What?"

"You got my message. You just don't know you did."

"Oh. Sure, Woo-Woo Telephone and Telegraph, I keep forgetting."

"Not a very spiritual person," Vehi remarked.

"His attitude needs some work," Sortilège said, "but for the level he's on, he's okay."

"Here, take some of this." Vehi held out a piece of blotter with something written on it in Chinese. Maybe Japanese.

"Oboy, now what, more through-the-wall sci-fi, right? groovy, can't wait."

"Not this," said Vehi, "this is designed expressly for you."

"Sure. Like a T-shirt." Doc popped it in his mouth. "Wait. Expressly for me, what's that mean?"

But after putting onto his stereo, at top volume, Tiny Tim singing "The Ice Caps Are Melting," from his recent album, which had been somehow fiendishly programmed to repeat indefinitely, Vehi had either left the area or become invisible.

At least it wasn't quite as cosmic as the last trip this acid enthusiast had acted as travel agent for. When it began exactly wasn't too clear, but at some point, via some simple, normal transition, Doc found himself in the vividly lit ruin of an ancient city that was, and also wasn't, everyday Greater L.A.—stretching on for miles, house after house, room after room, every room inhabited. At first he thought he recognized the people he ran into, though he couldn't always put names to them. Everybody living at the beach, for example, Doc and all his neighbors, were and were not refugees from the disaster which had submerged Lemuria thousands of years ago. Seeking areas of land they believed to be safe, they had settled on the coast of California.

Somehow unavoidably the war in Indochina figured in. The U.S.,

being located between the two oceans into which Atlantis and Lemuria had disappeared, was the middle term in their ancient rivalry, remaining trapped in that position up to the present day, imagining itself to be fighting in Southeast Asia out of free will but in fact repeating a karmic loop as old as the geography of those oceans, with Nixon a descendant of Atlantis just as Ho Chi Minh was of Lemuria, because for tens of thousands of years all wars in Indochina had really been proxy wars, going back, back to the previous world, before the U.S., or French Indochina, before the Catholic Church, before the Buddha, before written history, to the moment when three Lemurian holy men landed on those shores, fleeing the terrible inundation which had taken their homeland, bringing with them the stone pillar they had rescued from their temple in Lemuria and would set up as the foundation of their new life and the heart of their exile. It would become known as the sacred stone of Mu, and over the centuries to follow, as invading armies came and went, the stone would be taken away each time for safekeeping to a secret location, to be put up someplace different when the troubles were over. Ever since France began colonizing Indochina, on through the present occupation by the U.S., the sacred stone had remained invisible, withdrawn into its own space. . . .

Tiny Tim was still singing the same number. Moving through the three-dimensional city labyrinth, Doc noticed after a while that the lower levels seemed a little damp. By the time the water was ankle-deep, he began to get the idea. This entire vast structure was sinking. He went up steps to higher and higher levels, but the water level kept rising. Beginning to panic, and cursing Vehi for setting him up once again, he felt more than saw the Lemurian spirit guide Kamukea as a shadow of deep clarity. . . . We must leave now, said the voice in his mind.

They were flying together, close to the tops of the waves of the Pacific. There was dark weather at the horizon. Ahead of them a white blur began to sharpen and grow, and slowly it resolved into the sails of a topmasted schooner, running along full-spread before a fresh breeze. Doc recognized the *Golden Fang, Preserved*, Kamukea silently corrected him. This was no dream ship—every sail and piece of rigging was doing its

work, and Doc could hear the snap of canvas and the creak of timbers. He angled in toward the port quarter of the schooner, and there was Shasta Fay, brought here, it seemed, under some kind of duress, out on deck, alone, gazing back at the way she'd come, the home she'd left. . . . Doc tried calling her name but of course words out here were only words.

She'll be all right, Kamukea assured him. You don't have to worry. That is another thing you must learn, for what you must learn is what I am showing you.

"I'm not sure what that means, man." Even Doc could feel now how mercilessly, despite the wind and the sails of the moment so clean and direct, this honest old fishing vessel had come to be inhabited—possessed—by an ancient and evil energy. How would Shasta be safe in that?

I have brought you this far, but now you must return through your own efforts. The Lemurian was gone, and Doc was left at his negligible altitude above the Pacific to find his way out of a vortex of corroded history, to evade somehow a future that seemed dark whichever way he turned. . . .

"It's okay, Doc." Sortilège had been calling his name now for a while. They were outside on the beach, it was nighttime, Vehi wasn't there. The ocean lay close by, dark and invisible except for luminescence where the surf broke stately as the bass line to some great uncontainable rock 'n' roll classic. From somewhere back in the alleys of Gordita Beach came gusts of dopers' merriment.

"Well—"

"Don't say it," warned Sortilège. "Don't say, 'Let me tell you about my trip.'"

"Makes no sense. Like, we were out in this—"

"I can either press your lips gently closed with my finger or—" She made a fist and positioned it near his face.

"If your guru Vehi did not just set me up . . ."

After about a minute, she said, "What?"

"Huh? What was I talkin about?"

EIGHT

THE BANK DEPOSIT FORM SLOANE WOLFMANN HAD GIVEN DOC was from Arbolada Savings and Loan in Ojai. This, according to Aunt Reet, was one of many S&Ls Mickey held a controlling interest in.

“And their customers, how would you describe them?”

“Mostly individual homeowners, what we in the profession refer to as ‘suckers,’” replied Aunt Reet.

“And the loans—anything out of the ordinary?”

“Ranchers, local contractors, maybe some Rosicrucians and Theosophists now and then—oh and of course there’s Chryskylodon, who’ve been doing a heap of building and landscaping and tacky but expensive interior design lately.”

As if his head was a 3-D gong just struck by a small hammer, Doc recalled the blurry foreign word in the photo of Sloane he’d seen at her house. “How do you spell that, and what is it?”

“Got one of their brochures someplace on this desk, down around the Precambrian layer as I recall . . . aha! Here: ‘Located in the scenic Ojai Valley, Chryskylodon Institute, from an ancient Indian word meaning “serenity,” provides silence, harmony with the Earth, and unconditional compassion for those emotionally at risk owing to the unprecedented stressfulness of life in the sixties and seventies.’”

“Sure sounds like a high-rent loony bin, don’t it.”

“The pictures don’t tell you much, everything’s been shot with grease on the lens, like some girlie magazine. There’s a phone number here.” Doc copied it, and she added, “Call your mother, by the way.”

“Oh, shit. Something happen?”

“You didn’t call for a week and a half, is what happened.”

“Work.”

“Well, the latest is, is they think you’re a dope dealer now. The impression I get, I should say.”

“Right, well, seeing Gilroy’s the one with the life, operations manager for whatever, grandkids and acreage and so forth, stands to reason, don’t it, I should be the one with the narcs breathin down my neck.”

“Preaching to the choir, Doc, I wanted out of that place before I could talk. They’d catch me pedaling a mile a minute on my li’l pink trike heading out through the beet fields, and drag me back screaming. Nothing you can tell me about the San Joaquin, kid. Then again, Elmina says she misses your voice.”

“I’ll call her.”

“She also agrees with me you should look at that two-acre piece out in Pacoima.”

“Not me, man.”

“Still on the market, Doc. And like we say in the business, get a lot while you’re young.”

Leo Sportello and Elmina Breeze had met up in 1934 at the World’s Largest Outdoor Rummy Game, held annually in Ripon. Leo, reaching for one of her discards, said something like, “Now, you’re sure you don’t want that,” and as Elmina told it, the minute she looked up from her cards and into his eyes, she was sure as salvation about what she did want. She was still living at home then, student-teaching, and Leo had a good job at one of the wineries, known for a fortified product marketed up and down the coast as Midnight Special. Every time Leo so much as put his head in the door, Elmina’s father would go into a W. C. Fields routine—“Ah? the wino’s frien-n-n-d . . . ye-e-esss . . .” Leo began to make a point of bringing some over whenever he came to pick up

Elmina for a date, and before long his future father-in-law was buying the stuff by the case, using Leo's company discount. The first wine Doc ever drank was Midnight Special, part of Grandpa Breeze's concept of baby-sitting.

DOC WAS HOME watching division semifinals between the 76ers and Milwaukee, mainly for Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, whom Doc had admired since he was Lew Alcindor, when right in the middle of a fast break he became aware of a voice down in the street calling his name. For a minute he flashed that it was Aunt Reet, secretly resolved to sell his place out from under him, showing it at this inappropriate hour to some flatland couple especially selected for their pain-in-the-ass qualities. By the time he got to the window to have a look, he dug how he'd been fooled by a similarity of voices, and it was actually his mother Elmina in the street, somehow in deep discussion with Downstairs Eddie. She looked up, saw Doc, and started waving cheerfully.

"Larry! Larry!" Behind her was a double-parked 1969 Oldsmobile, and Doc could dimly make out his father Leo leaning out the window, an inexpensive cigar clamped in his teeth pulsing bright to dim and back again. Doc was now imagining himself at the rail of a long-ago ocean liner sailing out of San Pedro, ideally for Hawaii but Santa Monica would do, and he waved back. "Ma! Dad! Come on up!" He went running around opening windows and cranking up the electric fan, though the odor of marijuana smoke, having long found its way into the rug, the couch, the velvet painting, was years too late to even worry about.

"Where do I park this?" Leo hollered up.

Good question. The kindest thing anybody'd ever called the parking in Gordita Beach was nonlinear. The regulations changed unpredictably from one block, often one space, to the next, having been devised secretly by fiendish anarchists to infuriate drivers into one day forming a mob and attacking the offices of town government. "Be right down," said Doc.

"Will you look at that hair," Elmina greeted him.

“Soon as I can get to a mirror, Ma,” by which time she was in his arms, not all that put out at being hugged and kissed in public by a longhaired hippie freak. “Hi, Dad.” Doc slid into the front seat. “There’s probably something down on Beachfront Drive, just hope we don’t have to go halfway to Redondo to find it.”

Meantime, Downstairs Eddie was going, “Wow, so this is your folks, far out,” and so forth.

“You boys go park,” said Elmina, “I’ll just hang out with Larry’s neighbor here.”

“Door’s open upstairs,” Doc quickly reviewing what he knew of Eddie’s rap sheet, including the hearsay, “just don’t get in any kitchens with this guy, you should be all right.”

“That was back in ’67,” Eddie protested. “All those charges got dropped.”

“My,” said Elmina.

Of course no more than five minutes later, having lucked into a spot just down the hill good at least till midnight, Doc and Leo returned to find Eddie and Elmina in the kitchen, and Eddie just about to open the last box of brownie mix.

“Ah-ah-ah,” Doc wagging his finger.

There were beers and half a bag of Cheetos, and Surfside Slick’s deli up the hill was open till midnight for whatever they’d be running out of.

Elmina wasted no time in bringing up the subject of Shasta Fay, whom she’d met once and taken to right away. “I always hoped . . . Oh, you know . . .”

“Leave the kid be,” muttered Leo.

Doc was aware of Downstairs Eddie, who’d once upon a time had to listen to it all through his ceiling, throwing him a look.

“She had her career,” Elmina continued. “It’s hard, but sometimes you have to let a girl go where her dreams are calling her. There did use to be Hepworths over by Manteca, you know, and a couple of them moved down here during the war to work in the defense plants. She could be related.”

“If I see her, I’ll ask,” Doc said.

There were footfalls up the back steps and Scott Oof came in by way of the kitchen. “Hi Uncle Leo, Aunt Elmina, Mom said you’d be driving down.”

“We missed you at supper,” Elmina said.

“Had to go see about a gig. You’ll be here for a while, right?”

Leo and Elmina were staying up on Sepulveda at the Skyhook Lodge, which did a lot of airport business and was populated day and night with the insomniac, the stranded and deserted, not to mention an occasional certified zombie. “Wandering all up and down the halls,” said Elmina, “men in business suits, women in evening gowns, people in their underwear or sometimes nothing at all, toddlers staggering around looking for their parents, drunks, drug addicts, police, ambulance technicians, so many room-service carts they get into traffic jams, who needs to get in the car and go anyplace, the whole city of Los Angeles is right there five minutes from the airport.”

“How’s the television?” Downstairs Eddie wanted to know.

“The film libraries on some of these channels,” Elmina said, “I swear. There was one on last night, I couldn’t sleep. After I saw it, I was afraid to sleep. Have you seen *Black Narcissus*, 1947?”

Eddie, who was enrolled in the graduate film program at SC, let out a scream of recognition. He’d been working on his doctoral dissertation, “Deadpan to Demonic—Subtextual Uses of Eyeliner in the Cinema,” and had just in fact arrived at the moment in *Black Narcissus* where Kathleen Byron, as a demented nun, shows up in civilian gear, including eye makeup good for a year’s worth of nightmares.

“Well, I hope you’ll be including some men,” Elmina said. “All those German silents, Conrad Veidt in *Caligari*, Klein-Rogge in *Metropolis*—”

“—complicated of course by the demands of orthochromatic film stock—”

Oboy. Doc went out to search through the kitchen, having dimly recalled an unopened case of beer that might be there. Soon Leo put his head in.

"I know it has to be someplace," Doc puzzled out loud.

"Maybe you can tell me if this is normal," Leo said. "We got a weird phone call at the motel last night, somebody on the other end starts screaming, at first I figure it's Chinese, I can't understand a word. Finally I can just make out, 'We know where you are. Watch your ass.' And they hang up."

Doc was having those rectal throbs. "What name are you guys checked in under?"

"Our usual one." But Leo was blushing.

"Dad, it could be important."

"Okay, but try to understand, it's this habit your mother and I have sort of fallen into, of staying at different motels up and down old 99 on weekends, under fake names? We pretend we're married to other people and having an illicit rendezvous. And I won't try to kid you, it's a lot of fun. Like those hippies say, whatever turns you on, right?"

"So the front desk doesn't really have you down as any kind of Sportello."

Leo gave him one of those hesitant smiles that fathers use to deflect the disapproval of sons. "I like to use Frank Chambers. You know, from *The Postman Always Rings Twice*? Your mother uses Cora Smith if anybody asks, but for Chrissake don't tell her I told you that."

"So it was a wrong number." Doc saw the case of beer, out in front of his face all this time. He put some cans in the freezer, hoping he'd remember he'd done this and that nothing would explode like it usually did. "Well Dad, I'm really shocked at you two." He embraced Leo and held it for almost long enough to be embarrassing.

"What's this?" Leo said. "You're laughing at us."

"No. No . . . I'm laughing 'cause I like to use that same name."

"Huh. You must get that from me."

Later, though, around three A.M., four, one of those desolate hours, Doc had forgotten his feelings of relief and only remembered how scared he'd been. Why had he automatically assumed there was something out there that could find his parents so easily and put them in danger? Mostly in these cases, the answer was, "You're being paranoid." But in

the business, paranoia was a tool of the trade, it pointed you in directions you might not have seen to go. There were messages from beyond, if not madness, at least a shitload of unkind motivation. And where did that mean this Chinese voice in the middle of the night—whenever that might be at the Skyhook Lodge—was telling him to look?

NEXT MORNING, waiting for the coffee to percolate, Doc happened to glance out the window and saw Sauncho Smilax down in his classic beach-town ride, a maroon 289 Mustang with a black vinyl interior and a low, slow throb to its exhaust, trying not to block up the alley. “Saunch! come on up, have some coffee.”

Sauncho took the stairs two at a time and stood panting in the doorway, holding a briefcase. “Didn’t know if you were up.”

“Me neither. What’s happening?”

Sauncho had been out all day and night with a posse of *federales* aboard a garishly overequipped vessel belonging to the Justice Department, visiting a site previously identified as the spot where the *Golden Fang* was supposed to have left some kind of lagan. Divers went down to have a look and, as the light shifted over the ocean, presently were bringing up one connex after another full of shrink-wrapped bundles of U.S. currency, maybe the same ones Cookie and Joaquin, on behalf of Blondie-san, might still be out after. Except that upon opening the containers, imagine how surprised everybody was to find that, instead of the usual dignitaries, Washington, Lincoln, Franklin and whoever, all of these bills, no matter which denomination, seemed to have *Nixon’s* face on them. For an instant a federal joint task force paused to wonder if they might not after all, the whole boatload of them, be jointly hallucinating. Nixon was staring wildly at something just out of sight past the edge of the cartouche, almost cringing out of its way, his eyes strangely unfocused, as if he had himself been abusing some novel Asian psychedelic.

According to intelligence contacts of Sauncho’s, it had been common CIA practice for a while to put Nixon’s face on phony North Vietnamese

bills, as part of a scheme to destabilize the enemy currency by airdropping millions of these fakes during routine bombing raids over the north. But Nixonizing U.S. currency this way was not as easily explained, nor sometimes even appreciated.

“What is this? The CIA’s done it again, this shit is worthless.”

“You don’t want it? I’ll take it.”

“What are you gonna do with it?”

“Spend a bundle of it before anybody begins to notice.”

Some thought it was a plot by Chinese Communist pranksters to mess with the U.S. dollar. The engraving work was too exquisite not to have some Fiendish Oriental Provenance. According to others it might have been circulating as scrip for a while now throughout Southeast Asia, and even somehow be negotiable Stateside.

“And let’s not forget its value on the collectors’ market.”

“Bit too weird for me I’m afraid.”

“And dig,” said Sauncho later to Doc—“the law says that before you can get your picture on U.S. currency, you have to be dead. So in any universe where this stuff is legal tender, Nixon would have to be dead, right? So what I think it is, is it’s *sympathetic magic* by somebody who wants to see Nixon among the departed.”

“That sure narrows it down, Saunch. Can I have some of this?”

“Hey, take whatever. Go on a shopping spree. See these shoes I’ve got on? Remember those white loafers that Dr. No wears in *Dr. No*, 1962? Yes dig it! same identical ones! Bought ’em on Hollywood Boulevard with one of these Nixon twenties—nobody examined it, nothing, it’s amazing. Hey! my soap’s almost on, do you, uh, mind?” He headed for the tube without delay.

Sauncho was a devoted viewer of the daytime drama *The Way to His Heart*. This week—as he updated Doc during lulls—Heather has just confided to Iris her suspicions about the meat loaf, including Julian’s role in switching the contents of the Tabasco bottle. Iris isn’t too surprised, of course, having for the duration of her own marriage to Julian taken

turns in the kitchen, so that there remain between these bickering exes literally hundreds of culinary scores yet to be settled. Meanwhile, Vicki and Stephen are still discussing who still owes who five dollars from a pizza delivery weeks ago, in which the dog, Eugene, somehow figures as a key element.

Doc was in the toilet pissing during a commercial break when he heard Sauncho screaming at the television set. He got back to find his attorney just withdrawing his nose from the screen.

“Everything cool?”

“Ahh . . .” collapsing on the couch, “Charlie the fucking Tuna, man.”

“What?”

“It’s all supposed to be so innocent, upwardly mobile snob, designer shades, beret, so desperate to show he’s got good taste, except he’s also dyslexic so he gets ‘good taste’ mixed up with ‘taste good,’ but it’s worse than that! Far, far worse! Charlie really has this, like, *obsessive death wish!* Yes! he, he *wants* to be caught, processed, put in a can, not just any can, you dig, it has to be StarKist! suicidal brand loyalty, man, deep parable of consumer capitalism, they won’t be happy with anything less than drift-netting us all, chopping us up and stacking us on the shelves of Supermarket Amerika, and subconsciously the horrible thing is, is we *want* them to do it. . . .”

“Saunch, wow, that’s . . .”

“It’s been on my mind. And another thing. Why is there Chicken of the Sea, but no Tuna of the Farm?”

“Um . . .” Doc actually beginning to think about this.

“And don’t forget,” Sauncho went on to remind him darkly, “that Charles Manson and the Vietcong are *also* named Charlie.”

When the show was over, Sauncho said, “So you, how you doing, Doc, going to be arrested again or anything?”

“With Bigfoot on my tail now, I could be calling you any minute.”

“Oh. I almost forgot. The *Golden Fang*? Seems there was an ocean marine insurance policy taken out on her just before she singled up all

lines, covering this one voyage only, the one your ex-old lady's supposed to be on, and the beneficiary is listed as Golden Fang Enterprises of Beverly Hills."

"If the boat sinks, they collect a lot of money?"

"Exactly."

Uh huh. What if it was a deliberate insurance hustle? Maybe Shasta could still get ashore in time, onto some island where maybe even now she'd be pulling small perfect fish out of the lagoon and cooking them with mangoes and hot peppers and shredded coconut. Maybe she was sleeping out on the beach and looking at stars nobody here under the smoglit L.A. sky even knew existed. Maybe she was learning to sail island to island on an outrigger canoe, to read the currents and the winds, and how to sense magnetic fields like a bird. Maybe the *Golden Fang* had sailed on to its fate, gathering those who hadn't found their way to shore deeper into whatever complications of evil, indifference, abuse, despair they needed to become even more themselves. Whoever they were. Maybe Shasta had escaped all that. Maybe she was safe.

THAT EVENING OVER at Penny's place, Doc fell asleep on her couch in front of the day's sports highlights, and when he woke, sometime well after dark, a face, which turned out to be Nixon's, was on the tube going, "There are always the whiners and complainers who'll say, this is fascism. Well, fellow Americans, if it's Fascism for Freedom? *I . . . can . . . dig it!*" Tumultuous applause from a huge room full of supporters, some of them holding banners with the same phrase professionally lettered on them. Doc sat up, blinking, groping around in the tubelight for his stash, finding half a joint and lighting up.

What struck him was that Nixon right now had the exact freaked-out expression on his face that he did on the fake twenty-dollar bills Doc had gotten from Sauncho. He took one out of his wallet now and consulted it, just to be sure. Yep. The two Nixons looked *just like photos* of each other!

“Let’s see,” Doc inhaled and considered. This same Nixonface here, live on the screen, had somehow *already* been put into circulation, months ago, on millions, maybe billions, in false currency. . . . How could this be? Unless . . . sure, time travel of course . . . some CIA engraver, in some top-security workshop far away, was busy *right now* copying this image off of his own screen and then would later somehow go slip his copy into a covert *special mailbox*, which would have to be located close to a power-company substation so they could bootleg the power they needed, raising everybody else’s rates, to send information time-traveling *back into the past*, in fact there might even be *time-warp insurance* you could buy in case these messages went astray among the unknown energy surges out there in the vastness of Time. . . .

“I knew I smelled something in here. Lucky for you I don’t go in to work tomorrow,” Penny, squinting and barelegged in one of Doc’s Pearls Before Swine T-shirts.

“This joint woke you up? Sorry, Pen, here—” offering what was by now more a friendly gesture than a real roach.

“No, all that screaming did. What are you watching, sounds like yet another Hitler documentary.”

“Nixon. I think it’s happening live right now, someplace in L.A.”

“Could be the Century Plaza.” Which was presently confirmed by the newsfolks covering the event—Nixon had indeed dropped in, as if on a whim, at the palatial Westside hotel to address a rally of GOP activists who called themselves Vigilant California. In cutaways to individuals in the audience, some seemed a little out of control, like you’d expect to find at gatherings like this, but others were less demonstrative and, to Doc at least, scarier. Strategically posted among the crowd, wearing identical suits and ties you’d have to call on the unhip side, none of them seemed to be paying much attention to Nixon himself.

“I don’t think they’re Secret Service,” Penny sliding over next to Doc on the sofa. “Not cute enough, to begin with. More likely private sector.”

“They’re waiting for something—ha! look, here we go.” As if linked by ESP, the robot operatives had pivoted as one and begun to converge

on a member of the audience, longhaired, wild-eyed, dressed in matching psychedelic Nehru shirt and bell-bottoms, who was now screaming, “Hey, Nixon! Hey, Tricky Dick! Fuck you! And you know what, hey, fuck Spiro, too! Fuck everybody in the First Fuckin Family! Fuck the dog, hey! Anybody know the dog’s name? whatever—fuck the dog, too! Fuck all of you!” And began to laugh insanely as he was seized and dragged away through the crowd, many of them glaring, snarling and foaming at the mouth in disapproval. “Better get him to a hippie drug clinic,” suggested Nixon humorously.

“Giving revolutionary youth a bad name,” it seemed to Doc, who was rolling another joint.

“Not to mention raising some First Amendment issues,” Penny leaning up close to the screen. “Strange, though . . .”

“Really? Looks like typical Republicans to me.”

“No, I mean—there, there’s the close-up. That’s no hippie, look at him. It’s Chucky!”

Or to put it another way, Doc now became aware with a jolt, it was also Coy Harlingen. It took him maybe half a lungful of pot smoke to decide against sharing this with Penny. “Friend of yours,” he inquired disingenuously.

“Everybody knows him—when he’s not hanging out at the Hall of Justice, he’s at the Glass House.”

“A snitch?”

“‘Informant,’ please. He works mostly for the Red Squad and the P-DIDDies.”

“Who?”

“Public Disorder Intelligence Division? Never heard of them, eh?”

“And . . . why’s he yelling at Nixon like that again?”

“Jeez, Doc, at this rate they’re going to pull your paranoia card. Even a PI can’t be that naïve.”

“Well, his outfit maybe is a little overcoordinated, but that don’t mean there’s any setup.”

She sighed didactically. “But now that he’s been all over the TV? he

has instant and wide credibility. The police can infiltrate him into any group they want.”

“You guys been watchin that *Mod Squad* again. Gives you all these *cold-ass* ideas. Hey! Did I tell you Bigfoot offered me a job the other day?”

“Astute of Bigfoot as always. He must have detected in your character some special gift for . . . betrayal?”

“Come on, Penny, she was sixteen, she was dealing, I was only trying to steer her away from a life of crime, how long are you gonna—”

“Goodness, I don’t know why you always get so defensive about it, Doc. There’s no reason to feel guilty. Is there?”

“Great, just what I want to do—discuss guilt with a deputy DA.”

“—was identified,” the TV set announced, while Penny reached to turn up the volume, “as Rick Doppel, an unemployed student dropout from UCLA.”

“I don’t think so,” Penny muttered. “It’s that Chucky.”

And dang, Doc added silently, if it ain’t a resurrected tenor sax player, too.