





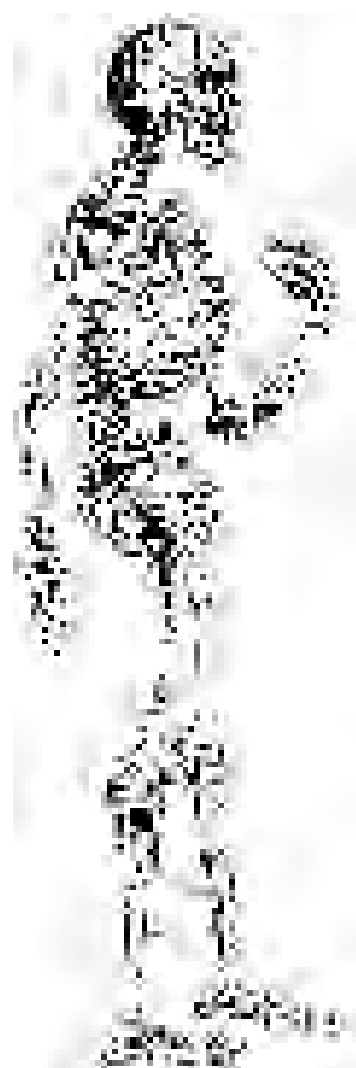


THE AUTOPSY
AND OTHER TALES

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An anatomical illustration of a dinosaur skeleton, likely a Tyrannosaurus Rex, shown from a dorsal view. The skeleton is rendered in a light blue color against a white background. The skull is at the top, with the jawbone and teeth clearly visible. The spine runs down the center, with the vertebrae and ribs shown in detail. The wings are spread out to the sides, and the tail is at the bottom. The overall style is that of a scientific or educational illustration.

FILL IT WITH REGULAR

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IT WAS JUST PAST 3:00 A.M. An all night gas station stood on its lonely little asphalt atoll, a delta bordered by two convergent country roads. Not far beyond this confluence, the two-lane blacktop passed under a freeway. Up there, along 101's unsleeping corridors, big semis boomed and groaned, their frequency abated at this hour, but still clocklike. Down here on ground level, however, below the imperial elevation of that viaduct, all was country darkness, country silence full of crickets. The black shapes of the roadside trees shrank and islanded the station's light between them, big, half-naked oaks, crooked against the stars.

The attendant stood by one of the pumps. His khaki jacket — with "Al" stitched in red over one pocket — was thin, but he stood relaxed, even slack-armed, in the chill air. In fact, in the absence of muscle tone from his sharp-nosed face, there was something faintly moronic.

A pair of headlights sank down the freeway off-ramp and approached. Al shifted slightly on his feet and worked his fingers. An old, dented blue Maverick sighed on worn tires up to the pumps. The driver was a large, rather drunk-looking man. His horn-rims, one hinge sutured with black tape, sat on his nose a shade askew. Two or three of his lower teeth were missing, and his chin stubble was gray in patches. His air was cordial.

"A glad good evening to you! Just fill this puppy to the brim with regular!"

Al nodded eagerly. Still, an uncertainty entered his manner after he unholstered the gas nozzle. The drunk blinked, smacked his forehead.

"Ach! Where's my *mind*?"

He hauled himself from the car, and an empty Rainier Ale can followed

him out and tap-danced briefly on the asphalt. Dragging out his keys and moving sternwards, he unlocked his gas cap, set it on the trunk lid, and returned to his seat, all with a kind of staggy flourish.

Al filled the tank. A gush of excess foamed down the Maverick's tail, making a clean stripe across the dirty license plate. Al released the trigger. Still hesitant, but moving hopefully now, Al reholstered the nozzle. The drunk, squinting at the gauge, hoisted his hip for money — his unseen feet, shifting, raised the musical jostle of bottles. Peeling open a distorted lump of wallet, the drunk poked inside. He rummaged. He blinked. He raised a look heavenward and sighed as at some relentless, long-known enemy, now plaguing him anew.

“Will you *believe* this, man? Will you fuckin’ believe this? I’ve only got a ten here! I should have looked! I should have fuckin’ looked before I told you to fill it! But hey, listen. Look here. I don’t live far off. Over that way somewhere. Take this now, and I’ll bring you back the other two fifty, if not tonight, then first thing in the morning.”

Al was watching him with a kind of raptness. He kept nodding nervously, as if in sign of noting important information. The drunk beamed.

“You’re an ace, man! An ace! Just stick that in your pocket, and before another moon rises, I’ll be back with its two little buddies! God bless!”

Looking genuinely moved, the drunk cracked another beer and sipped it as he drove off, dribbling gas at the stern. As he dipped the driveway, his gas cap tumbled off the trunk and rolled to the gutter as he accelerated away.

Al resumed his position by the regular pump. Then a thought seemed to strike him. He went into the office, and through its connecting door into the locked garage. Here the legs of a man on a mechanic’s under-dolly thrust out from beneath a station wagon with its hood up. Al got some wrenches from one of the shelves along the back wall and laid them on the pavement beside the dolly.

Standing again by the pump, Al seemed less catatonic than he had. His hands were more restive, task-ready, and his lips moved faintly, as though rehearsing words. From the freeway, another pair of headlights sank toward the empty corridors of oak shadows. A big, new Cadillac slid its flawless, dark cream paint job up to the pumps.

It held a middle-aged couple, the Fennermans. They had been dining with their friends the Crosses and were in a pleasant mood. Fred Cross, who also ran a new car dealership, had let slip to Ted enough about his business to make Ted realize that his own lot had been doing pretty damn well lately by comparison. Gail Fennerman, for her part, had been deeply pleased by the enchiladas Muriel Cross had made, and no less pleased by

the seven margaritas she had washed them down with. Al marched to the window as Ted rolled it down. He looked hopeful now, determined.

“Hi! Fill it with regular?” His energy bordered on the intimidating.

“Oh, no!” Ted Fennerman chuckled uneasily. “Supreme! It’s supreme all the way with these babies, right?”

“Ah!” said Al, seeming crestfallen. He brightened at a thought. “Want to give me your keys?”

“Right,” said Ted, separating out his gas key so that the rest hung from it, and putting it between Al’s fingertips. Al marched back, unlocked the cap, laid it on the trunk. He got the hose, which he handled now with increased panache. He began to fill the Caddy’s tank.

“What a strange man,” Gail Fennerman said.

“I’ll say. I guess, though, that you’d have to be some kind of a loony to take a job like this in the first place. The boredom would drive a sane guy nuts.”

“Teddy?”

“Yeah?”

“Isn’t he filling us with regular anyway?”

“Hey! Hey! Stop that!” Ted thrust almost half himself out the window. “Cut that out!”

“Right,” said Al. Even then the overflow puddled beneath the plate.

“What the hell is *wrong* with you?” keened Ted. “Didn’t I tell you *supreme*? Didn’t I tell you that *specifically*?”

Hanging up the nozzle, Al gave a thoughtful nod. “You *did* say supreme specifically. Yes.” He tucked the Fennermans’ keys into the pocket containing the drunk’s ten-dollar bill.

“Hey!” Ted half-erupted again. “Gimme back my keys!”

“Oh,” said Al blinking. Returning the keys, he cleared his throat. “It’s okay if you just give me ten dollars. You can bring the rest by later tonight, or first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t understand you,” Ted Fennerman said slowly, astonishedly. He forgot even to contest payment. “Here’s my credit card.”

“Oh,” said Al. He inspected the card carefully, and then put it in his pocket with the ten-dollar bill.

“What the hell are you doing?” Ted sounded hushed, awed. “Give me back my god-damned credit card!”

Al — perplexed, mouth ajar — returned the card. Pocketing it, Ted Fennerman hesitated only an instant over the legal risk of leaving without paying — then he fired up the car and pulled out. Gail’s head turned, she spoke, and the Caddy lurched to a stop just short of the driveway. Ted popped out. Keeping his hands on the car, as if for cover, he hurried astern

of her, replaced the gas cap, dove back inside, and slid the car up into the darkness between the star-hung trees.

Al walked to the driveway, picked the drunk's gas cap from the gutter, and gazed at it, nodding owlishly. He pocketed it and returned to the regular pump. Unholstering the nozzle, he put its tip to his mouth and triggered himself a couple of hearty gulps. Smacking his lips, he seemed to judge the savor. He went into the office and came out with a small, dark sack.

He went to one of the brass-hatched intake valves whereby the trucks fed the station's cisterns. He keyed it open, dug from the bag a handful of black dust, and dropped it in. He shut the hatch, returned the bag to the office. He resumed his post at the regular pump. Again his lips seemed to practice, voicelessly, and his eyes looked around at the country darkness environing his little wedge of light.



Next morning around eight, Ted Fennerman started siphoning the gas from his tank into a pair of cans from the garage. The engine had gotten detectably shuddery in just the few miles home from that miserable station. There had seemed a kind of juvenile delinquent fun in the siphoning just at first, but his first draw was too prolonged, and he got a mouthful that soured the whole thing. He cursed the oil company whose logo had crowned that station, a seeming oasis down in the shadow lands, as seen from 101, which they had crested so serenely at sixty-five. Why hadn't he kept going? It was his own fault for being so compulsive about keeping the tank full. He called his local station to send out a tow truck with some supreme.

With tepid breakfast coffee, he rinsed the fumes from his mouth. When the tow truck arrived, he recognized the kid driving it — slight and pimply, but peppy. Today, though, he was so vague and slothful in his actions that Ted took the can and poured the gas into the Caddy himself. When Ted tipped him a buck, the kid didn't seem to know what to do with it. What the hell was happening? The Caddy thrummed and pinged all the way in to his car lot in Santa Rosa. He ground his teeth and swore as he drove. He might as well not have bothered changing the gas at all. He got to his desk around ten in a foul mood. He realized that, unmistakably, he had the beginnings of a sore throat.

It was a little after eleven when the drunk, an artist named Ken, got up. He had a good reason for getting up so early: he had to go see Dale and

borrow a hundred dollars from his academic friend. Starburst Paperbacks still owed Ken six hundred on his last cover, but far be it from them to speed payment. He washed his face. He warmed up some pizza and poured a beer. He hummed between sips, waiting for the cheese to remelt. It was a nuisance having to borrow money, but afterward they could drink and bullshit and watch cable TV — Dale got all the channels.

He went out to his car around noon. He threw his traveling sketch pad — for ideas that obtruded themselves upon his drinking time — in through the passenger window and circled round the car. Feeling an odd crackliness to the asphalt underfoot, he paused, looked down — and noticed he lacked his gas cap.

“Shit!” he said.

He drove back to the gas station, trying to keep all his accelerations smooth. It hadn’t seemed that cold last night, certainly not now, yet the roadway still felt faintly crisp under his tires. He pulled into the station. The garage’s overhead door was now up, displaying someone on the floor dolly half under a station wagon. Al was standing near the regular pump. Ken got out.

“Hi, Al!” he cried, noting only now the red-stitched name. “Say, did I leave my gas cap here last night?”

“You sure did!”

“Ah, great! That’s a relief!” There was a smiling pause. “Well,” Ken prodded. “Can I have it back?”

“Why don’t I get it for you? It’s in the office!”

“Great idea!” Ken hung around the doorway of the garage while Al went in. Al seemed more sure of himself, much brisker today. On the other hand, Ken realized, he hadn’t seen the guy under the car move very much at all.

“Ha!” he offered. “Great place for a nap, hey?” The guy didn’t move or answer. Ken shrugged. Some assholes just didn’t have a sense of humor. Al brought him his cap and smiled.

“Fill her up with regular for you?”

Ken laughed. “I didn’t lose *that* much. Thanks anyway. So long! Inwardly he sighed, driving off — the two fifty was forgotten. He’d scrounged up only two dollars anyway, and now he could get a sixer of Buckhorn with it. He slid on down Old Redwood Highway — which stretched bright, almost silvery before him — and smiled skyward at the fresh fall sunlight.

Gail Fennerman awoke numb, feeling nibbled away around the edges, at 12:30. Before moving, like a swimmer who chooses the bit of distant coast he will strike toward, she determined two of the things she would do today. First, have a sauna at the gym. Second, have a flame-broiled patty-melt at

the Fern 'n Burger. The first would atone in advance the second, for Gail equated sweating with calorie loss.

She rose. She reached the shower, her legs feeling of unequal length. In the kitchen, her protein smoothie whirled strenuously in the blender, growling aggressively. Swallowing it was an act of grim will, such as she imagined it must take to lift weights, or learn French.

Confronting her mirror to make up, she asked it sarcastically: "Do you think you can drive? See? It really makes you look forty-three, every day of it!" She didn't even like the smell of alcohol, but these delicious cocktails, like Bloody Marys or margaritas, were her downfall. Last night she had, self-mockingly, kept mental count of her margaritas, but, perversely, this only enhanced the pleasure of the indulgence. Ted was partly to blame — he didn't even *go* to the gym anymore, even just for the Jacuzzi. His getting so paunchy, after he'd promised, undermined her own resolve. Not much past two o'clock, she locked the front door and crunched down the driveway to her Buick.

Crunched? On firm asphalt? She paused. The sun, sloping past zenith, delicately shadowed a kind of translucent fur, perhaps a quarter inch deep, covering most of the drive, with an especially thick circular patch just behind where Ted always parked the Cadillac. She scuffed at the stuff with the tow of her designer track shoe. It was crackly, but seemed to be giving rather than breaking under the prodding. She shook her head. As a SoCal girl, she had always deplored the creepy growths that northern California's lushness fostered. She fired up the Buick and turned on the Montanavi tape she had left in the deck. She sped down the silvery highway — it *was* rather glittery today, wasn't it?

At the gym the strangest thing happened. With two other women, one of whom she knew slightly, she was sitting in the sauna. Tina Claymore, who managed a boutique in Coddington Center, was saying to Gail:

"Boy, this dry heat can sure get to your nose and throat sometimes, can't it?"

"Yeah. Mine really feels scratchy, too. What's that on your legs, Tina?"

Both bent to inspect Tina's pallid thighs, flattened to ovoids on the sweat-dark bench. Her thighs looked dusty. A vanishingly fine, faint soot besprinkled them. Tina brushed at it, but it smeared into her sweat. "Look!" the third woman told Gail. "It's on *your* arms and legs, too!"

"Yow! And yours, too!"

For a moment the three ladies twisted and splayed themselves to present all their surfaces to the weak, sulfurous light — patting and spanking at their limbs, till all at once the scene they made struck them and they all shakily laughed and trooped out.

They were in the showers, soaping lustily, when the instructress got back to them. She pushed her twenty-old, T-shirted, upper half into the room and told them brightly:

“I was right! Rod says it’s just a little soot — the gas heaters have been burning a little sooty today!”

The girl’s sunny self-approval vexed Tina Claymore, to whom soapsuds gave clownishly exaggerated breasts, as though some grotesque lichen had overgrown them. “Well that’s just peachy! Peachy! Why didn’t you *tell* us?”

“I haven’t been in the sauna today,” the girl said, looking stung. “Rod just forgot, I guess. It’ll wash right *off*, won’t it?”

“But it still *itches*. And what about my nose and throat? They’re scratchy, too!”

Gail privately agreed that her skin also felt a bit prickly, but she didn’t detain herself to make an issue of it. Purposefully, she dried and dressed. It was patty-melt time at the Fern ’n Burger.

From there she called Ted at four, to see if there were any errands that needed running before things started closing. Ted didn’t feel like talking. He had “a god-damned sore throat.” He said he’d meet her at eight at The Cattleman’s for dinner, and hung up. Just as she returned to her table, her food arrived. It was exquisite, except that the meat had an odd extra crispness and very faint, so discreet as to be rather pleasing — a slight bitterness.

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Dale was an entomologist out at Sonoma State. He had bought one of the little motor courts — proto-motels of thirties vintage — still to be found decaying along Old River Highway, which had been the 101 of the pre-freeway era. The office and the first two cabins were built of a piece, and this structure Dale had inhabited. By knocking out the connecting walls, he had created a single, large, living space with three bedroom cubicles, the office kitchen, and the old registration desk left standing by the office door, the only one Dale made use of.

A Charlie Musslewhite tape raunched and wailed roomfillingly. Near the entry the TV, sans sound track, beamed the Playboy Channel, which Ken, a great lounge and sprawler, watched from the couch. He had a Buckhorn in one hand, the remote control in the other, and in his thoughts the hard truth, ever less ignorable, that they were out of beer. Dale was more of a pacer and an arm waver, and he was near the rear of the room. Here were the bookshelves and dart board, and here he liked to do much of his ranting and raving while throwing darts. A blown-up photo of an ant,

pinned to a corkboard, was his target. Big and shambling though Dale was, and eruptive with his restless thoughts, time and again the patterns of six darts he threw came incredibly close to pinning all the insect's feet — Ken glanced over and checked now and then. Dale had paused in his monologue, and Ken sighed.

“So come on, man! Money me! We need some more beer — you've been pecking at that one can for the last hour.”

“It was the only one I got my hands on in your whole sixpack!”

“Wait,” said Ken, palm raised. There was a wet T-shirt contest on the screen, and the guy with the bucket had finally gotten to the brunette. Ken watched her get it. “So?” he resumed. “All the more reason to get some more.”

“It's amazing!” Dale grinned, poking another dart into the air. It landed in the ant's upper right tarsus. “How routinely, with such minimal effort, you get money out of me! A few solicitational gestures — a bow, a tap of the antennae, a nudge to the gullet — and I disgorge a big, fat drop of my hard earned nectar. Just like *Atta texana*.”

“Don't be an asshole. You *know* you have it, you *know* you'll get it back, you *know* in the meantime I'll buy beer and enchiladas with it, and you *know* you're going to lend it to me in the end!”

“That's it exactly!” Dale crowed. “I'm going to do it! And I seem to have no more power over regurgitating this sugary blob of monetary energy than the poor insect does!”

“You're a scientist, Dale! Energy is collected in nature only to be utilized, dispensed, dissipated — converted into some other form, beer, in this case.”

Dale, not listening, smiled at his own thought:

“And I let you sap me, you see, of that sugary blob, for one reason alone, one that should make all scientists humble. Because even the smartest of them — why, even *I* — even I am no more essentially free of my nature than the lowly bugs I study!” He threw a dart, which lodged a quarter inch off the mid-right tarsal claw. Ken regarded Dale.

“I think that's just incredibly humble of you, Dale.”

Dale took up his beer. He began his professional patrol of the big room, pacing comfortably, causing for Ken two regular eclipses of the TV screen as he orbited. He said:

“It's a fact! A fact made banal by the facile affirmation of the heedless! You, Kenny, though only an artist, might guess at the arrogance that can go with a little knowledge among scientists. However much we know and can do, we mustn't swagger through the cosmos. Inevitably, some form exists that's perfectly adapted to exploit us in spite of all our technical furnishings.”

Ken, musing, laughed. Dale's length of limb, the seemingly erratic emphasis of his movements, *were* antlike. "I have to buy that image, Dale. I'd like to draw you that way — as an *Atta* worker disgorging your wallet from gaping mandibles."

Dale was nodding as he paced, assenting not to Ken, but to another dawning insight of his own. "Look here, Kenny. You've always confessed that my erudition gives you graphic inspirations. So to hell with this piddling parasitism — a hundred here, a hundred there. Let's get a real mutualism going." Dale's orbital speed increased as he warmed to the idea. "I'll ape that noble scale insect so famous for her fungal parasite. I'll be industrious *Chionaspis corni*, pumping the sap of learning from my academic branch. You, of course, will be *Septobasidium*, the fungus whose spores I ingest and that sprouts from the interstices of my dorsal sclera. At first, you see, I house you, and I feed your *oeuvre* from my brimming brain. Soon, you're making real bucks in the art racket, and the tables turn. You house *me* grandly, as the embowering fungus doth the bug! Muriel moves in, we mate and reproduce and live as your coddled tenants from then on. The analogy's not perfect, of course. *Septobasidium* sterilizes its living plant pot. It's her sisters' offspring that the fungal tenement roofs and feeds with its plump sporangia. In our case, my *own* reproduction would be fostered by the setup — all the better for science, of course."

"I dunno, Dale, I can't quite picture this one. Me growing out of the cracks in your dorsal sclera and all. Suppose I think about it, and meanwhile you give me the fucking money so we can get some beer?"

Still smiling in the afterglow of his ironic vision, Dale tossed Ken his wallet. "Finally!" Ken said. He plucked the money and tossed the wallet back. "So let's make it a ride — take Reibli through the hills a ways. Bring the Ry Cooder tape."

Dale took the tape from the rack. "Time's a-wastin', Sonny!" he said, following Ken out the door. He paused to lock it, and turned as Ken was firing up the Maverick. Where the exhaust boiled against the drive, Dale thought he saw an odd glitter, but he was impatient to ride out and take the sun, and just got into the car.

Their windows overflowing Cooder's *Trouble*, Dale patting time on the doorsill with his jutting elbow, they roared down Redwood, up Mark West, and swung onto Reibli, which meandered along the hills just under their crests. In a pause between cuts, Ken asked:

"What's that? That crackling, hear it?"

They pulled onto the shoulder and got out. What they found shocked them. They saw it best when they squatted on the shoulder and looked at the road surface along the angle of incidence of the latening sunlight:

a fine, translucent furriness perhaps a half-inch deep, all over the asphalt. It was finer, really, than the finest fur, yet its countless fibrils were made opulently distinct by the glints of diffraction their innumerable curvatures shed. The friends gaped at each other, poked and pinched the stuff.

“As far as you can see!” Ken said, “the whole road!”

“It’s *tough*, Kenny! The tires don’t crush it! It springs back! And these little droplet formations all through it. Like sporangia. Damn if it doesn’t look like some incredible mold mycelium.”

“Road-eating mold?”

“What can I say? There’s a mold that eats creosote, I’ve heard...”

“Let’s keep going.” They drove on, without music. Only occasionally could they see its faint flash, but the frosty noise of it was continuous, though it wove easily into the susurration of a moving car. And didn’t it intensify noticeably as they took more trafficked streets into Santa Rosa? They tried to see if other motorists were noticing it — and then they turned onto a broad, westbound street that dropped through the center of town. Now the crush of it was louder still, its slight resistance to their tires grew palpable — and this asphalt laneway to the sinking sun was laddered with ghostly smears of rainbow no one could miss. Now cars flowing in both directions were carrying people who were pointing out the roadway to each other. Ken swung north, and pulled in at Pap’s Liquors on Mendocino Avenue.

Inside, with his twelve-packs and quart of Jack Daniels on the counter between them, Ken asked the woman at the register:

“What’s with this stuff on the streets? Has it been like this all day?”

“You know, for the last hour or so, *everybody’s* been asking that. I couldn’t tell what the heck they were talking about at first. You can really see these, like, flashes of color off it now, can’t you?” She mused on her view of the street, as though it were a picture in a travel brochure, or a telecast. “Oh dear!” she cried. “There’s another one!”

“Another what?”

“Poor doggie! We saw one just a little while ago, and I asked this man was in here if it could be, you know, mad, but he said no, when they were mad they just foamed at the *mouth*. Oh dear!”

The dog, a mixed shepherd, flinched away and cantered down the sidewalk when Dale, newly amazed, went out and tried to coax the animal to hand. It was as if the dog felt some particular humiliation in its affliction — to have its all-questioning nose so strangely furred with a grayish thistledown that it could neither sneeze nor rub away.

Driving back up Redwood, Ken said, “I know it’s got our attention now

and all, but I'd swear it wasn't this thick an hour ago. We'd have heard it through the music."

"Park right where you were, Kenny. There was something I saw under your tail pipe."

This proved to be a patch of markedly thicker and taller roadgrowth. "When you first came over, you idled here a little before killing your engine."

"I was listening to the last part of a cut."

Dale nodded. "So...diffusion by automotive exhaust?" Both men gazed up and down the roadways. "I'm going to make some phone calls," Dale said, "and I think I won't be the only one doing it."

"Good idea. I'll wash us out a couple of glasses."

4

Ted Fennerman sat at his desk, his chair clicked back at its rest angle. From his window he looked across his lot, over the enameled candy colors of mint-new car tops, at the sky. Its dusky blue was turning purple as gradually as Ted imagined wine must ripen in a vat, or whatever they made wine in.

When business had been good, this was always an hour Ted savored, like a liquor sipped privately. He watched the arc of 101 that wrapped the south end of his lot, watched the dinnerbound traffic's headlights coming on like stars. He pictured, individually, the day's sales, each shepherded singly from his corral of glossy stock, and frisking with their new owners out to graze on 101's long pasture and raise the happy roar of their vitality.

Not so this evening, though business had been very good. Tonight, bone-weary and naggingly sore of throat, he couldn't taste the tang of it all. He'd told his secretary hours ago that he was out to calls; it seemed such an effort just to talk. He'd sat and fought his way through desk work, but at last ground to a halt. Lines of text had grown vague and slippery like snowed-under road; his pen lurched with a balky clutch, or lost it on the curves.

What kind of wimp was he? he asked himself bitterly. A simple god-damned sore throat, and bam — he was belly-up on the canvas. It was galling to feel too weak to strike when the iron was hot. He had promised himself that he would go in on that new franchise with Clark Mannheim if things stayed even half as good as they'd been going. Clark wasn't going to stand around waiting to be kissed forever—he'd find someone else. Ted thought of all those TV ads where tired businessmen bungled big deals for lack of the right antihistamine-and-aspirin compound — dumb, though

there was a grain of truth. You feel just a little off your feed, and it could cost you some important moment.

Ted shook himself groggily, to wake his will. He snapped his chair up to its no-nonsense angle. He breathed deeply and punched Clark's number. When the receiver clicked open, he again drew breath for a hearty greeting. Clark's voice said:

"Yes?"

"Gullub!" Ted boomed. "Glarg?"

"What? Who is this?"

Ted, as shocked as Clark sounded, gaped at the phone. He clapped it back to his head and cried: "Glarg!?! Gellub?!!" Now fear raked his heart. He slammed the phone down, jumped up. Clicking on his washroom light, he saw his mouth loom gaping up to the mirror over the sink, as if to devour it. An eerie, pale fur thronged his throat and flourished from his gums. He moaned, watching his shaggy tongue shudder in its weedy pit, like some hibernating monster tormented by a dream. Ted Fennerman headed for the hospital without further attempts on the phone.

When Gail, after waiting through half an hour and two piña coladas at a table at the Cattleman's, called the lot, she learned that Ted had left long before without a word to anyone. So she went back and ordered her sirloin and a third colada — a double.

The drink seemed spiritless, but it did soothe a touch of soreness in her throat — Ted's bug no doubt — and help numb a general itchiness that had persisted since the sauna. See the cycle? she asked herself. Get hung over, get lowered resistance, get sick, and then you wind up having more cocktails for relief. But she couldn't seem to care, and ordered another double when the steak came.

The restaurant seemed to promote her lassitude. Usually thronged, it was rather empty tonight; and in spite of this, it was short-staffed, too — her waitress had apologized in advance, saying they were not only lacking table help, but were short on cooks, too. Gail ate. Even with plenty of horseradish, the steak entertained her dulled palate only mildly. She finished it, though well before the last bite, she was beginning to feel almost drugged, as though she had ingested an anchor that tried to drag her head after it as it sank.

To hell with her thoughtless bastard of a husband. He'd forgotten her, gone home, was already resting. Thanks to him, she'd been stranded here to overeat and overdrink, but she'd waste no more time waiting on him. She'd get home and get off her feet. Slowly but decisively, Gail wiped her lips, rose, and walked out.

She stood in the parking lot. Out on Montgomery the mid-evening

traffic looked pretty heavy. Did it sound extra screechy? More brakes and horns than usual? There! That tow truck nearly piled into that station wagon there at the light. She'd have to be very careful driving home.

"Mrs. Fennerman!" It was her waitress. The girl looked worried as well as tired. She seemed to stare a bit at Gail's face as she said: "You forgot your coat. And the check...?"

"Oh dear! I'm sorry! I feel so *woozy* tonight..." The girl was looking at her face, strangely, as they went back inside. Gail smiled self-deprecatingly at the cashier as she extended the woman her credit card. The cashier gasped, and Gail, seeing what made her do so, felt her head wobble at the shock as though lightly punched: her own forearm and hand, all silkily befurred with an exquisite lawn of pallid fine filaments a quarter inch long, like freshest, tenderest shoots of spring.

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The windows, long gray with dawn, were turning buttery with sunrise.

"Jesus Christ!" Ken said, keying down the newscast's volume. He and Ken sat in a kind of information trance, stunned by nightlong revelations. "I feel like a kid," Ken said. "After a sugar whiteout, my brain gorged with weird images, coming out into an afternoon sun so bright it hurts. I knew — I *knew* I should've stocked up better yesterday. I mentioned it, right? And now, God rot me, I've got to drive into town before it's too late — before it's *three* inches deep."

Dale shook his head and gestured at the screen. "Didn't you see how traffic's starting to slip and slide?"

"It still looks steerable to me. There won't be much traffic on Redwood. It's now or never."

"Well, if you break down, stay off the road walking back. And get some food. Something in cans, and eatable cold. Chilli or stew."

Ken rose, scattering empty beer cans, loath to be reminded of the fungus's capacity for rooting in flesh. Shutting the door after him, he looked with hate at the drive, where the fungal mat was now a lush two inches deep. He did a lumbering ballet across it, his soles cringing from the contact, and hauled himself into the Maverick. He feared his ill-tuned engine stalling, so he idled till it was good and warm. It mortified him that in doing this, he was feeding his world's new enemy, helplessly stoking the biological conflagration that had somehow, overnight, embraced it. The suspicion nagged him that this would be just how evolution's fallguys, the adaptively overtaken breeds, always exited the stage; by a droll, inadvertent suicide, mechanically revving up their long-sacred tricks of survival that

the upstart, by some dire new ingenuity, has turned to death traps. He gunned onto Old Redwood Highway's long mycelial lawn.

It was supple. Its slick toughness made the curves tricky. At least he was rolling — his tires could have been fused with the road. It had happened to thousands of vehicles left parked overnight on heavily trafficked urban streets, which had been superabundantly seeded with exhaust-born spores. This lush crop's greedy upreach was answered by the germination of a second form of spore, the strictly wind-born kind produced by the road surface growth, and with which the treads of *all* cars that had been driven the day before were packed. By the time, two hours ago, the earliest commuters stepped out to their mounts, many found them crouched on crumbling flats that were already half digested by this devil grass growing from beneath and within. Ken, at some risk, stayed near forty, knowing his own venerable retreads must already be dying from within.

Maneuver proved little worse than on a slushy, half-snowed road, but in fact — wasn't the fungus beginning to look wet here and there? What was this, some new wrinkle? Should he call it in? The thought, an instant later, forced a laugh from him. Oh yes, report it! Add his jot of awe and stupefaction to the general delirium! Since TV's Tribal Eye first squinted at the streets on last night's six o'clock news, and blinking anchormen — raising uncertain voices above the rush-hour road — had affirmed the infestation, the municipal, technical and military sectors of the area had been caucusing with state authorities. They had clashed and conferenced throughout the night, all consensus eluding them. Information-pooling switchboards were quickly formed and publicized, and the data for a sketchy etiology of the ecoplague were soon gathered. But as long as continued observation showed the roads to be drivable, all involved willingly shunned the contemplation of their clearest countermeasure — the interdiction of all public thoroughfares. So vast an arrest of circulation, assuming it could even be brought off, seemed itself a cataclysm, a mortal shock that must produce unguessed-at mayhem among the bottled masses. They flooded the media with advisories, put troops and cops on alert, and waited. And with the dawn, people started trooping out to their usual commutes, also waiting to see what would happen; as though the simple wonder of the thing had universally captured people's curiosity, the sheer scope and unity of it. A fungus, stunningly proliferative, that thrived on hydrocarbons of every kind.

Gasoline and some municipal supplies of natural gas were thought to be its initial vector, at least in California and others of the heaviest-hit states. The mechanisms of its continuing diffusion were no mystery. The fungus's omniperipheral advance, by mycelial branching, was incredibly rapid in

itself, of course, through any food matrix. But with the combustion of the matrix, the mycelium it contained underwent a fusion and a heat-triggered concentration of genetic material, and resolved itself into a gust of exceedingly small and numerous spores. Hence the roadways were only the first of many zones that those first vectors had seeded, since most of a tail pipe's tillage went aloft to haunt the troposphere. *There* was the real scope of this thing, and it made Ken shiver slightly, imagining that global microsnow, that sooty seed like a gauze-fine, wide-flung shroud settling right now — softly, softly — down upon them all. What could anybody do but drive out to business as usual through this awesome newness that had been laid upon the world?

At the liquor store he called the hot line on the pay phone. The wet spots on the mold weren't news to the tired-sounding woman he got. "Enzyme puddles, they think," she said bleakly. "Stay off the roads, especially the freeways."

"Yeah," said Ken, who could hear 101's roar a quarter mile from where he stood. He went in and got two cans of stew, two twelve-packs of Buckhorn, and a half gallon of Jim Beam. Reapproaching his car, he saw two black smears matching his tires' path, and seeming to melt into the mold even as he watched. Further provisionings must surely be made afoot, and the imbalance of his supplies bothered him. He went back in and got another half gallon of Beam.

He drove fast, as the few other cars on Redwood were doing, slewing and screeching. His tires were spongy now, taunting him with collapse. He rolled past vineyard and pasture, trailer parks and sprawled junkyard country houses. Fine fungal lawns toupéed all asphalt-shingled roofs — white lawns where antennas stood like stark, futuristic trees. Furred garden hoses lay in yards like feathered snakes in the grass. The pallid fuzz outlining window frames baffled him till he realized the monomers composing most caulks were hydrocarbons. On one porch he saw a shuddering puffball shape — just discernibly a dog, on its back, fighting to breathe, its paws kneading the air. Ken's rear left tire gasped, and sagged, and started jouncing. He braked, the brakes locked, the Maverick came ass-around, crossed the shoulder, dropped its rear in a rain ditch, and blew the tire on the right.

Raging, he got out hugging his bag, hotfooted across the sporulating mat, and jumped the ditch. He landed ankle-deep in sweet, sane, earthy grass — and partly in cowpat. He roared some nouns and gerundives, found and flung an illogical rock at his car, whose front left tire sank with a wet cough. Ken broke out a beer and strode north, hurrying not to hear the last tire go. He stooped through the wire and straddled the wooden fences,

and tiptoed the highway only where berry-choked streams compelled it. The space he moved through now was that magnified space into which everyone emerges from a failed car — full-scale space, toilsome and time-swallowing, where to reap one aim or object, you had to plow across acres for hours. “I should’ve stocked up better,” Ken muttered. He shifted his burden and cursed the weight of the stew.

Dale was where he had left him, but sitting straighter, rapt in the newscast again. “Enzyme slicks, Kenny! Like a sudden digestive *assault*.

“What is it, near nine? Look there!”

“Man! That’s 101 north of Novato?”

“Yup! Just where the southbound backup always starts — and I think its being rush hour’s saved a lot of lives. From there on down, no one was going very fast when the fungus came on.”

They watched an aerial view of confluent freeways where, at this hour, San Francisco-bound traffic routinely braked to join a creeping clog twenty miles long. Today the free-flowing traffic had come up on the clog at lower than usual speeds, though generally drivers had managed to maintain a cautious, coping flow over this invader of their path. They came in slower, but the enzyme sweat was brutally sudden in its increase, and their tires had turned greasy in their swift liquefaction. Brakes jammed fruitlessly. With seeming abandon — some with fey, balletic half turns — cars skied into the phalanxed bumpers of the idling backup.

Now the clog sat unmoving on twenty miles of flats, smoke penciling up here and there from the rivered vehicular jigsaw. South of the crazed skewing of the pileup zone, the jumbling of the derelict armada was less severe, though everywhere were sideways chromeboats with crumpled corners, ram-welded pairs of tailgating muscle-cars, and jackknifed semis pillowed on luckless imports. Diced safety glass, like a sugar spill, everywhere jeweled the prickly vigor, the pubic wetness of the mold.

The network’s helicopter caught four others in its scan, two winching up wounded. The anchorman’s voice-over announced his own craft’s return south to base to be refurbished for rescue work. Thereafter, his shakily improvised script tended to relapse to a formula, an awed dirge:

“And of course here we’re seeing 101 as it approaches San Rafael...And this of course is 101 climbing past Marin...” Already most of the vehicles were abandoned, while the people in their tens of thousands, in four streams choppy with contrariety, trudged along both sides of the freeway’s two corridors, as clotted in this progress as they had been in their cars. As an image, Ken found it very moving. As if he viewed an epochal event — mankind at last abjuring some vast, ambiguous enterprise, a millennial pilgrimage frozen in its tracks by a cataclysmic unison of doubt, and

abandoned at long last, all dismounting, all returning their myriad of separate ways. Their sun-blazoned fleet, while it roared, had seemed aimed, an army. It looked now like an aborted stampede.

“The shine of it! Christ!” Dale almost enthused. “It’s almost *puddled* with enzymes.”

“Tell me about it. Did you hear my car pull in? It’s ass-in-a-ditch two miles back on four flats. Have a beer.”

“And food?”

“In the bag. You know I just can’t buy it, any kind of Russki gene-engineering angle. Why conquer a place so you can’t get around in it once it’s yours? They’d make something that went for the people primarily.”

“This stuff doesn’t do so bad on people,” Dale said from the kitchen, plying a can opener.

“Yeah, but you’ve got to practically gargle or smoke spores to get it going.”

Dale found a fork and came back to his chair. “It’s not Russki, of course. It’s off-world, obviously.” He began gobbling stew. Ken nodded readily, but found he had to clear his throat.

“Right. Designed by another environment. And damn if I can imagine what kind of setup could produce...*this*.”

Dale sat forking, musing. His forking slowed a beat or two, and he interlaced it with conjectures. “Biologically hot world? Teeming? Epochs of floral/faunal explosion. Organic sumps capped. With limestone by shallow seas, like here? Vast petrochemical deposits, in any case. But lots of venting to the surface. By vulcanism? Other seismic events? So plenty of tar pools, asphalt seeps, burning vents of natural gas.” Dale forked up the last muddy lump, dropped his fork in the empty can, belched, and sighed. Ken, though bleakly, had to laugh.

“Somehow, I see *you*, Dale. A titanotheres of that alien Tertiary, shuffling to a flaming tar pit, munching the sludge.”

“The flaming vents,” added Dale composedly, “would promote the evolution of combustive sporulation, of course.”

It sobered them a moment, this naming of that most frightening fungal trick. The ragged carbon microshells that their seemingly destructive birth created for the spores made them infinitely responsive to air currents, amazingly invasive and adherent once in contact with a food matrix. Was there even now a just perceptible tickle in their fall through the air? They sat feeling the noise and stir of this new day rising around them, the unimaginable bawl of mired commerce, of eighteen-wheel giants who lay half devoured by the very paths they trod.

Near the close of that same day, Sheri Klugman, Gail Fennerman's younger sister, blinked away tears, turning her face for a moment to the windows and the honey-and-roses light of dusk. Roy Hummer sat with his eyes commiserately downcast. He was experienced in the resurgences of grief his clients suffered in these interviews, but he was also exceedingly tired. This was his twelfth transaction since noon — all twelve of them involving loved ones in the Fennermans' condition.

"I'm sorry," Sheri said, resettling with a sigh the burden of composure on her shoulders. "It's just this awful *suddenness* of everything..."

"Please. You have our entire sympathy. And I know it's a terrible added burden, this time limit for disposal — *disposition* of your loved ones."

"Yes...well, I guess it's lucky that we live close enough to attend... Midnight tonight does feel so...*hurried*, though."

"Yes, of course, we're terribly sorry." Watch that tone of voice, Roy told himself. "It's certainly never been *our* way of doing things, this tactless hurry. But you can see that from a sani — a *medical* viewpoint...?"

Grief resurged in Sheri, overflowing as plaintiveness. "Do you really think that an open-casket ceremony isn't...?"

"No, that's quite definite, I'm afraid." Roy paused, and warned himself again. "You see, with this thing there's just nothing we can do. It's too tough to be, ah, shaved off. Even if it could be, there is a considerable, an extensive amount of *sbriveling*, frankly — do you follow me?" He saw that Sheri, with the inattentiveness of sorrow, was looking out the window again. Roy felt frayed and gritty. He wanted a shower. He wanted to sleep. Sheri's eyes were full again. The woman was plainly dazed, powerless to leave alone the few futilities remaining of her sister. With the helpless iteration of bereavement she said:

"They were just both so *definite* — whenever it came up, I mean, about both wanting to be cremated — "

"No way," Roy Hummer snapped. "That's all there is to it. We're respecting the emergency ordinance 100 percent. So please just take it or leave it, Miss Klugman."

"Screw the whole effort. Why struggle?" Ken asked, though he didn't stop working. It was the following afternoon. He was encasing his shoe and ankle in an aluminum foil bootie, crinkling it on sheet by sheet, securing it round the ankle with rubber bands. Dale already had his booties on. He

tossed Ken a paper particle mask and stowed others, left over from his remodeling, into one of the two knapsacks lying readied on the counter.

“Hunger and thirst,” he answered. “Curiosity.”

“Boy. Look at that, Dale.” The TV’s copter-born eye scanned down over an oil tanker docked at Long Beach. The voice-over was saying:

“As you can see, the fittings of those off-load hoses are densely covered with the mold, and as I say, the samples from what’s still in the tanker as well as what’s now in the offshore tanks have both been tested positive for infestation. You can see, too, how these pipelines to the holding tanks in the hills are also covered. Officials have told us that this is merely a surface growth on a bituminous cover that’s put on all gas pipeline to protect it from corrosion and weathering...”

“Christ!” Dale said. “What’s it matter? That tanker was half off-loaded before they stopped! Three quarters of a million barrels!”

“Know what they said last night, while you were asleep?” Ken asked, booting his other foot. “Seems they inject natural gas into the ground — to force up the pressure of crude they’re pumping? So it turns out a lot of this natural gas also tests positive for infestation.”

“Hoo boy,” Dale said quietly. The newsman was now narrating a flyby of one of the Long Beach refineries. It belonged, he said, to one of the first of the big oil companies to comply with the federal immediate shutdown order, acting within twenty four scant hours of receiving it. The furnaces beneath, and burn-off pipes above; its fractioning towers had been quenched for several hours now. Every valve and juncture in its python’s nest of pipes was muffed with mold. Gaskets everywhere however thick, sandwiched at whatever pressures — were digested to monomers to feed the alien biopolymer, and wherever gas drizzled in result, the mycelium grew in ghastly whiskers, along the undersides of pipe, in streamers trailing down to puddles, like moss dusting every secret little creek of leakage woven through the installation. And of course, as the hills and graded bluffs the storage tanks stood on were all capped with asphalt, the whole plant was environed with sweeping pastures of the pale predator.

“Think of it, Kenny.” Dale still sounded subdued. “Those burn-off pipes just shut off this morning. Giant spore nozzles, pumping the atmosphere full like it was just another giant tank.”

The voice-over, having discoursed on gaskets, was saying:

“Chuck, I think, was pointing out earlier that here in L.A., the infestation layer has made airborne infestation of petroleum products in general an especially severe problem. Crated TVs still in the factory warehouses have been opened, and the insulation of their wiring found infested. And that, in fact, is why we’re going to have this intermission in our telecopter report,

because we're very concerned to have our copter return to base for regular checks of the fuel line. That's why you see us turning around right now, and that's why it's back to you now, Chuck."

The studio anchorman appeared, conjured by his name. "Right, Dave, and thank you. And you'll be back on the air about noon for continued coverage of the Long Beach area?"

"That's right, Chuck. I...Ah, it seems I'll have to sign off a little quicker than...the pilot says we have a sudden loss of fuel pressure that — MY GOD, THE ENGINE'S STOPPED!"

The studio men had cut back to the copter's video transmission, but the camera, being aimed out the copter's windshield, was half eclipsed by Dave's panicked profile. Some movement of the man's terror had killed the sound. He turned a blind stare, mouth moving, to the camera, then back to the view before them all. This now tilted and — shockingly — rushed upward.

The studio, with quick cannibalism, cut to the video from a second copter, clearly fleeing the scene as it recorded Dave's craft smashing to fire against the mossy, gas-rilled grounds. Smoke welled up. Flame bloomed, branched and probed rootlike through the jungled steel, and then the fleeing copter cut transmission and the studio anchor team was back on screen, so stunned that Chuck actually gave an astonished laugh. "That really happened!" he said.

"I mean..."

Dale and Ken put on their packs, but stood waiting till a ground crew cut in transmission from a hilltop a mile from the refinery. There was a raving note in the reporter's voice left from the fury he had just seen. He told of the storage tanks' explosion moments before. The pair watched the black upward avalanche, the new hosts of spores storming up to mingle with their fellows under the inversion layer. Ken cracked the last beer, made room in it for bourbon, and spiked it. "So let's go," he said.

They left the TV on — an irrational, magical measure against its failure with the inevitable loss of electrical insulation — but there was relief in the firmness with which Dale shut and locked the door on its global window. They now marched — resolute, if shaky — into their local piece of the catastrophe, a share that seemed more manageable. The day was cloudless. Golden light waxed the blackish branches of the oaks and drenched the fields flanking Old Redwood Highway, while through these fields a fair number of folk trudged, townward or back. Dividing them, the translucent luxuriance of the roadway was riverlike, something that made the people on either side more separate than could the gap alone. They all walked through a country silence never known here with the freeway running so

near. They looked rather dwarfed in their unshelled littleness — by the green acres they had always zipped past. They traded calls here and there, in voices also dwarfed by the big, breeze-whispery trees. Many of them wore bandanas like silent-Western stickup men, and some wore masks like Ken's and Dale's.

Both, as they walked in their bright-booted guise, felt a touch of unmeant circus gaiety in the spectacle. Now dozens of cars, mired within a half hour of Ken's mishap, were derelict on the ermined asphalt — whimsically angled, or half in ditches, or squared off in the disarray of impact. All were richly bearded on their greased underbellies; the interiors of most, those with plastic upholstery, were lavishly robed. There was something of Mardi Gras in the long, disjointed rumba line of them.

"Floats in the Fungus Bowl Parade," Ken said. "Aborted due to lack of tires." The flanking power lines with their tufted insulation suggested streamers, while a service station just ahead offered racks of furry tires, like festively frosted doughnuts. Dale gave a laugh that was half a groan.

"I tell you, Kenny, we're doomed! Look at those sporangia. I mean, as if the combustive spores aren't enough, we're getting this incredible ground crop in just three days! I mean, this stuff is *fast*. We either hit the bush, head for the unpaved hills, or we've had it. And you know, all the time it keeps nagging at me: how the hell did this stuff *get* here? I mean, did it just blow across space?"

"How the hell do I know? Here." Ken took the bottle from his pack and tilted some bourbon in under his mask, and Dale followed suit. "Once we pick up some more beers at Larkfield, we'll both feel better," Ken advised.

There was a crowd at Larkfield, and beer's price had gone up sharply. They proceeded with three more twelve-packs, Ken grumbling. They gingerfooted on their silver feet through the shopping center — all paved — and across Mark West Road. After that there were fields to walk on again. Lifting their masks often to swallow beer, they climbed the highway's gradual rise to an overview of 101, which swept near at this point, just above town.

The freeway's curve, the outward surge of it, acted as their TV had done, brought home afresh the continental scope of this plague, the wheels of trade and travel locked in this hoarfrost coast to coast. They paused to ply the bourbon, hundreds of captured vehicles visible from here. All the sunlight, and the beauteous diffractions of the sporangia, made them seem numinous things, crude Elder Gods overtaken by an exuberant cosmos of simpler, more vigorous beings: a tow truck, its oily boom so bearded it seemed some exotic sailbacked being; a toppled bus like a giant bug cocooned or spider-shrouded —

“Hey. Look there,” Ken said. “That Rolls behind the bus? It’s *idling*. Christ, you’d think the jackass could’ve — ”

“No, there’s a guy there that just leaned in and started it up! Look, there he is, moving up to that green van, see?”

“Jesus Christ! That’s Al! Guy that works in a gas station up the road. What the hell’s he *doing*?”

Al’s awkwardness and odd hesitations of three days ago were gone. He was a man of experience now. He grasped the van’s door handle as surely as its owner might. The van yielded what he sought — the keys — for he geared it to neutral, fired it up, warmed it, and then left it idling on what remained to it of fuel.

Al surveyed the way he had come, and then the way he was headed. He looked up at the sun and seemed to come to a decision. He sat down on the step-up of a big semi’s cab. He settled back with an odd completeness, so the step well and door received and propped him fully. Then he opened his shirt. Dividing his chest and stomach was a vertical red scar. Al grasped the flaps of this seam as briskly as he had his shirt, and spread open a slick chasm from which a multi-legged blackness, about a small dog’s size, came nimbling down across his lap, and sprang thence to the fungal lawn. The hands that freed it fell slack as its last leg was plucked from the incision.

The thing was glossy and quick. There was much of the insect about its structure, about its scissoring, multiple mouthparts, with which it now began to gorge on the sporangia that sparkled everywhere around its stiling legs. It wandered out to graze the jeweled laneway, while slump-headed Al stared empty-eyed.

“Ah yes,” Dale said in a slow, strange voice. “A biologically hot world indeed. Full of remarkable forms. You know what, Kenny? See the pickup in that guy’s driveway over there? See the gun racks? Let’s go borrow a rifle, or bring him over here.”

“There must be thousand’s of them, man. All over.”

“Yeah. But we can *get* this one.”

This seemed to waken Ken a bit. “Right on,” he said.

