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James Crumley

The Mexican Tree Duck

excerpt from a novel in progress

When the 3:12 through-freight to Spokane hit the East Meriwether crossing, the engineer touched his horn and released a long, mournful wail into the snowbound November night. It sounded like the first note of a lost Hank Snow ballad. I slipped the dolly from under the jukebox and plugged it into the extension cord. The bubbling neon glowed softly in the wet, snowy air. When I dropped a quarter into the slot, the large machine burbled and seemed to settle more solidly onto the railroad tracks.

"You sure you know what you're doing, Sughrue?" Lawyer Rainbolt asked from his squatting position beside the roadbed.

"Hey, man, I don't know who Boy George is and I don't care if he sings like a girl," I maintained, "but I've shaken hands with Hank Snow, by god." I waved the damaged tequila bottle across the white space of the parking lot toward the back of the Hell Roaring Liquor Store and Lounge. "Right over there."

Solly took the tequila, had a hit, then handed it back, and dumped a small but dangerous pile of crystal meth into the palm of his scarred hand. He glanced up, smiling, huge snowflakes melting in his shaggy blond hair. "Which one is he?" Solly asked. "All those country singers sound like girls to me."

"Asshole."

Solly grinned like the cat that fucked the canary before he ate it, very amused. Nothing amuses me less than an amused lawyer. He raised his hand, smiled again.

"Let's do it before it blows away," he suggested.

I make it a policy never to argue with drug lawyers: they have most of the drugs and all the best arguments. So we knelt together as the engine came around the curve at the base of Devil's Hump, its brilliant headlamp whipping through the snow-cursed night, knelt and snorted the speed off the circular cicatrix in Solly's palm. I stood up, shakily, stepped onto the tracks, and punched P-17 as Solly limped across the parking lot toward the shadowed rear of the bar, his brace clicking and grinding as the engineer hit his heavy note one more time.

The first time I saw Solomon Rainbolt, he was dead. Or we thought he was. The base camp CP bunker had taken at least three direct RPG hits, and after forty-eight hours under the monsoon rain, we couldn't tell the bodies from the sandbags. When one of the muddy lumps opened its red-rimmed eyes and grinned white-toothy and wild, one of my FNG's shit his pants and touched off an M-16 clip into the clotted Vietnamese sky. The head lifted, still grinning.

"Hey, sarge," it said in a deep Southern accent, "where the fuck you guys been?" Then he struggled out of the sucking mud, shifting aside the dead Nug mercenary who lay across his legs. Once his lanky frame stood upright, he held up his left hand and clenched his fist. Even in the rain, I could hear the bones grind against each other. A ribbon snake of blood drifted out of his muddy fingers and down his thick wrist. "Capt. Solomon Rainbolt, bound for the free world." Then he glanced around him at the remains of his command. Only he had survived. By playing dead, perfectly. Suddenly, Solly laughed, thunderous in the hammering rain, squeezed his fist again, and shouted, "Purple fucking heart bound for the free world!"

Solly got that, and some other chicken-shit baubles, too, but he didn't find his way back to the free world for a long time. He did one more tour for the green weenie, then another long one as one of those spooky hard-assed dudes dressed in tiger-striped tailored fatigues, SKS assault rifles, and eyes from hell. But I was back in the States by then, busy with my own troubles.

Some years later, we were both in San Francisco at the same time. I was working runaways among the flower children and Solly was making a name for himself as a defense lawyer during the years of peace and love. I went to watch him work one afternoon. He was defending a rather famous biker against a murder-one charge. Solly was something to see: half-Jewish, half-peckerwood, half-crippled war hero. One of the courthouse buffs whispered to me that Solly could make a jury kiss his ass and convince them it was a rose. Whatever, he never lost a murder case that went to trial. And his plea bargains were famous in law schools all over the country.

I meant to call him, renew the brief friendship that had started on the four-day hump out of the bush. But he dropped out of the public view before I could call. There were rumors—there are always rumors—of an acrimonious divorce, a dead child, a missing ex-wife. Wherever Solly disappeared, when he came back, it was in Denver, and he specialized in defending heavy drug dealers, guys who moved serious weight. He seemed to have a real hard-on for the DEA, and he kicked the government's ass with disturbing regularity. When he had taken whatever revenge he intended—I don't know because he never talked about it—he moved his practice to Meriwether, Montana, a town I had called home for a while now, and we picked up that friendship we had

left in the bush. But I had never worked for him, no matter how bad things got.

And they got bad that year. The PI business died with a September blizzard that dumped sixteen inches of cold wet snow on Meriwether. People seemed to be able to divorce quite badly without my help during the cold snap and icy drizzle that followed the blizzard. Those local merchants who might have had repossession on their minds chose to be nasty to deadbeats personally.

I wouldn't have had time, anyway. The part-time bartending job at the Hell Roaring that kept me fairly solvent had degenerated into a full-time chore as the customers lurched madly toward the stone-cold heart of winter. The owner of the Hell Roaring, Leonard the Sly, a man whose heart usually only sang with the music of the cash register, suddenly fell in love with Betty Boobs, our prettiest cocktail waitress. They fled to Mexico before the first snowflake hit the ground. God knows what Leonard thought. Perhaps he thought his wife, Betty Books, who kept them, might not notice their absence. No such luck. A week later, she picked up the weekend cash-deposit bag and climbed on an airplane bound eventually for Fiji, muttering something about revenge fucking in the Third World. But she said quite plainly to me. "It's yours, C.W. Drink it up or burn it down—I just don't give a shit anymore."

I didn't have time to do either. The help, surly in the best of times, rankled quickly under my guidance. When Big Linda's check was short the second week in a row, she responded by drop-kicking a tray of drinks across a five-o' clock throng. One poor woman protested the death of her silk blouse, and Big Linda hit her so hard that half of her house plants died. Big Linda quit

on the spot, moved to Tucson the next day to follow her career as a professional mud wrestler. All the mud in Meriwether was frozen. Little Linda followed quickly, packing her three kids and two broken television sets from four marriages into her old Falcon station wagon, with a large sign SNOW painted on the back window. She planned to drive south until somebody asked her what *that* was, that snow thing. Then the cruelest blow of all: my best, most experienced most dependable bartender, the Original Linda, fell back in love with her second husband when he got out of Deer Lodge Prison, and they got married, joined AA, and Linda quit her job.

Bars can be nice places, comfortable, homes away from the loneliness or confusion of home, but nobody, not even the most confirmed degenerate drunk can spend eighty or ninety hours a week in one. I hired and fired so much help that I actually hired a woman so drunk she had forgotten that I had fired her the week before. I don't know what my excuse was. Something to do with my nose, I suspect. As far as I was concerned, the sun was something that happened in another country. I didn't care if it came out. Then it did just to prove me wrong.

The first day, the snow melted like sugar in the golden shower. On the second afternoon, it was all gone, and I had hammered my few customers with free drinks until they mostly sat still and silent, stunned in the flat rays of the lowering sun that flooded the front door of the Hell Roaring, an autumn light alive and full of hope and glory. I played every Hank Snow song on the jukebox ten times. Two of my semi-mobile customers—a gypo-logger with a broken leg and a real estate saleswoman with a broken arm—had fallen under the spell of the gravelly romantic voice.

They'd fallen in love; they danced with clumsy grace around the pool table. I could have danced myself.

A thousand years ago when I first came to Meriwether, the first time I set foot in the Hell Roaring when the sixties were dying into the seventies, I found that soft autumn light filling the magic afternoon easiness of the bar. I eased myself onto the stool next to the poor schmuck I had been chasing for six months. He looked so pitiful I nearly walked away, but drink in hand, I swiveled around and stopped in that light, that sun-filled silence.

I don't even remember his name. Just some wretch from Redwood City, a pale, wrinkled man, a pharmacist once, an unhappy man wedded to a woman hard with unhappy fat and a gut bucket for a mouth. The pharmacist read the wrong books, maybe, or watched the wrong television shows, whatever, he became convinced that the sexual revolution had taken place without him. So he faked a robbery, fled with the money and the drugs and a hippie chick with flowers in her hair, fled toward the peace and freedom of the Mountain West, Montana, the word like a benison on his trembling lips.

By the time I caught up with him, though, he had had enough of his dream. He should have been glad to go home. I bought him a drink and explained the hard and the easy ways back to California. He wept like a child, a man leaking everywhere, everything. He had a junkie's sniffles, oozing tracks inside his elbows, behind his knees, and between his toes. A revolutionary strain of gonorrhea had started a commune in his urinary tract and none of the miracles of modern pharmacy could dislodge it.

But it hadn't all leaked out. When I tried to console him with the information that his wife wanted him back, he shook his head,

murmured something about his additional curse of a weak bladder, then raised a flaky eyebrow and nodded toward the john.

Maybe if I hadn't turned my stool back to face that blessed light, I might have heard the muffled thumps from the bathroom.

Five minutes later when I decided that not even the most painful piss should take that long, I went to check. He really wanted to die. I found him on his knees in front of the urinal, hanging from his belt, leaning into the leather strap. This time everything had finally leaked out.

Almost twenty years later, I poured myself a healthy tot of single-malt scotch as Hank Snow, The Singing Ranger, chorded into "It Don't Hurt Anymore." I raised my glass to the autumnal light. "It don't hurt any less, either," I said to nobody in particular. Then I raised my glass again to the Leaking Man.

Actually, it was his fault I was here. His wife had hounded me with lawsuits until I had to give up California. Naturally, I came here. The scotch tasted as smooth as the smoky sunlight.

When I put my glass back on the bar and surveyed my domain, I noticed that Kathleen and Bill had managed to sprawl on the pool table. They writhed as if they could escape their casts. Kathleen had a history on the pool table.

"Goddammit," I suggested, "can't you two at least behave until dark?"

"Fuck you, C.W.," Kathleen said smugly as she touched her nose. Then she grabbed Bill by his cast and towed him toward the men's room. I didn't care anymore. I thought about following them into the can, but just the thought of cocaine made my knees weak and my kidneys ache. I had another smoky scotch and forgot about them.

Forgot about them until they sidled out of the john toward the back door without bothering to dump their drinks into go-cups. When I checked the can, I found the toilet reduced to a heap of porcelain shards standing in frothy water. I shut off the valve, dashed outside with blood in my eyes, ready to do battle over a busted toilet. My patience seemed to be minimal these days.

The crippled lovers were giggling on the front seat of Kathleen's Buick. When she saw my face, Kathleen sobered enough to try a drunken grin, then gave that up when it wasn't returned. "God-dammit, C.W., I'm outa cash," she whined.

"I'll take a check," I said.

"You'll take shit," Bill growled as he leaned over Kathleen, "you rotten bastard." Bill didn't like me, sometimes, and sometimes I returned the favor. "Son of a bitch."

"Smile when you say that, motherfucker," I said, then popped him on the nose with the heel of my hand. It opened up like the Red Sea.

"Jesus Christ," Kathleen said as Bill scrambled around trying to staunch the flood and get out at the same time.

"Moses," I said. "Gimme your car keys."

Kathleen reached into her purse, then smiled. For an instant I thought she was going to bring out a piece. But her hand came out clutching a white bindle of cocaine. "Take this instead," she said. "It's almost an eighth."

Then she started the Buick, dropped it into reverse, placating Bill with one hand and driving with the other. "Next time just chop up the fucking toilet!" I shouted as the star-cast lovers sped away, plaster of paris scraps drifting out of the Buick's windows while I considered the bindle in my hand.

A better man, which I plan to become someday, would have thrown the blow away. Or at least sold it to pay for the broken plumbing. Or even saved it for a rainy day. I sensed clouds on the near horizon. So I just did a little.

Back in the bar, I found the mindless goons from Mountain States Vending servicing the jukebox and the gambling machines. One had been a ranked light-heavy once, the other a defensive tackle in the CFL. "New format," the ex-pug explained, changing records. "Ain't some of these Hank Snow records yours, C.W.?" the former tackle asked. I started to protest, but I would have had to kill them to stop them. I thought about it.

"New format," I echoed, a coward in the face of necessity as they went about their business.

The sunshine didn't even last until dark; it fell under the weight of another snowstorm. The new format and the cocaine lasted exactly ten hours. After Solly and I had a few post-closing drinks, I gave him some of the cocaine as a retainer, and when that ran out, he gave me some of his crystal, somebody else's retainer, and I got the dolly and the extension cords out of the basement.

When the cowcatcher on the engine pulling the 3:12 fast fr eight to Spokane hit the jukebox, Boy George screamed one last empty wail that died quickly beneath the thundering steel wheels. The collision filled the snowy night with an explosive rainbow shower of plastic and pot-metal, worthless quarters and inflated dollar bills that covered the pale parking lot like some hard post-apocalyptic rain.

"Absolutely fucking perfect," I said to Solly. "Hank Snow would be ecstatic."

“What the hell, man, I suspect Boy George might have liked it, too.”

“I don’t care,” I said.

“I can tell you’re happy, Sughrue,” Solly said, “and I’m happy, too.”

“Yeah?”

“You may be happy playing the music critic from hell, Sonny, but I’m glad I don’t have to play your lawyer.”

“What are you gonna do, counselor? Sneeze my retainer all over the parking lot?”

Solly grabbed his nose as if he might consider just that, but he laughed as we climbed into my pickup, headed for the happy confusion of darkness and laughter.

We spent several days arranging various alibis, all of which involved acting as if nothing had happened. We spent some time in Butte, a perfect Montana place to hide—nobody would ever look for you in Butte—then even more time at Chico Hot Springs where Solly bathed his old wounds while I sought liver damage in the bar. Eventually, though, Thanksgiving was upon us, and we, or Solly to be more exact, decided that we, meaning me, had to return to Meriwether to face, as it were, the music.

They were playing our song, and this was my dance: civil suits had surrounded me like a tribe of Hollywood Indians. Leonard the Sly’s slick business lawyer, Betty Books from Fiji, the BN Railroad, and Meriwether Vending all had filed for damages to their property. Even the railroad engineer driving the train asked for psychic damages, claiming the collision with the jukebox had caused him to hear strange voices and to see lights in the dark-

ness. Criminal charges were forthcoming, the Meriwether County Attorney said, just as soon as he stopped laughing.

That was too much for Solly. He deigned to accept all my cases, and on his advice, I became as liquid as dirty dishwater. And about as useful. All my portable goods, including my old truck, were converted to cash, which somehow all landed in Solly's pocket. I gave up the apartment where I had lived forever and moved into the basement of Solly's law firm offices, a building that had served until recently as a mortuary. It wasn't too bad. I had an embalming table covered with a foam pad for a bed, a tiny hot plate on a baby refrigerator on a coffin stand, and a chance to spend the next ten or fifteen years listening to Solly's chuckles as I chipped away at my legal fees interviewing witnesses, transcribing depositions, and sweeping up, while we waited, as he said, for some *real work*, a job worthy of my talents, whatever and however odd they might be.

Survival, perhaps, an ability to withstand whatever vicissitudes life rolled my way, and certainly a willingness to be amazed. For instance, the wonders of Montana weather never cease to amaze me. The winter broke again, and we enjoyed a long fall into the middle of December. The snowstorm finally predicted arrived two days late and seemed more like the fulfillment of a weather forecast than a prophecy of icy doom. I even learned to sleep among the ghosts of the lately dead, knowing they rested warmly under a cold white mantle. But most amazing of all, Solly actually found me a *real job*.

I was doing something disgusting involving scrambled eggs and canned chili—I'm neither sensitive to women's needs nor do I cook, which explains why I've never married—over my hot plate

that morning when Solly creaked down the concrete stairs, his step light and jolly, his chuckle absolutely amused.

"Sughrue, my old friend, you're going to just love this one," he said, handing me a business card, "just absolutely love it." He laughed all the way back up the stairs.

I glanced at the card. DALHGREN'S TROPICAL FISH AND PET PARADISE. I liked it already.

Dalhgren's version of Paradise sat on the edge of a section of Meriwether, which in other towns would be called "across the tracks." But since Meriwether, like most Western towns, had been developed with an eye to utility rather than aesthetics, everything was just across the tracks or beyond some mystic river or over some other arbitrary line just around the corner from space and time. So we just called it Felony Flats, as some wag had named it back in my days as a deputy sheriff. Cheap rents mean cheap locks, and felons don't make the best of neighbors. Often it seemed that the entire neighborhood traded material goods and/or spouses every six or eight months, whether they wanted to or needed to or not.

From the look of Dalhgren's building, though, I suspected they did most of their business in richer climes. The parking lot was littered with new foreign cars, and I pulled the Japanese pickup Solly had loaned me in beside the store's van, a three-quarter ton Ford decked out in tropical seascapes. It looked a bit odd covered with six inches of fresh snow.

When I opened the front door and stepped into the soft bubbling light of the fishy section, a slight young woman with a large mouth and a small moustache darted swiftly through the sparklingly clean tanks. She stopped in front of me, her slim body still

trembling, and whispered, "Yes-s-s-s," breathlessly, her pale eyes bulging with the effort. I handed her my last card, a tattered bit, and asked to see Mr. Dalhgren.

"Which one?" she murmured wetly. I lifted a shoulder as if I might break out in an Australian crawl or a butterfly. She understood, nodding. "I'll get them," she said, glancing at my card. "Mr. Soo-goo?" she ventured.

"'Shoog' as in sugar, honey," I said, slipping my card out of her slick fingers and resisting a sudden urge to chuckle her behind the gills, "and 'rue' as in rue the fucking day."

She smiled coldly, exposing an enormous number of very large white teeth, then turned, smoothing her shimmery blue skirt over her tiny hips, and wriggled toward the dark, watery recesses at the rear of the store.

As I waited, I watched some brightly designed fish wander from one end of a tank to another, a miniature school mindlessly following the lead of the alpha fish. They were nice to watch, but I couldn't pronounce their name or afford their price. One of the last times my mad father came back to South Texas to visit, he showed up in front of my mother's shotgun house in a rattletrap pickup. A dark woman with sharp features and quick hands sat in front, a bundle of snot-nosed kids beside her. Occasionally, her hands darted at the kids, sometimes cleaning their noses with a dirty thumb, sometimes delivering a sharp crack on the noggin. My father looked slightly embarrassed as he came around the truck, a plastic bag of goldfish in one hand, a bowl in the other.

"Better than a bunny rabbit," he explained after he hugged me, "and more likely to survive than colored chicks." He handed me the gifts. I gathered he thought it was somewhere near Easter

time, which it wasn't, and I began to understand why my mother called him "a cheap-trick, white-trash mystic."

After he left in a cloud of slow dust, heading west one more time, seeking visions again, my mother came out of the house and collected my father's gifts. The fish bowl became her favorite ashtray, the grave of millions of Viceroy butts, and she dumped the goldfish into the algae-clotted horse trough behind the salt cedar windbreak where they grew large and ugly on a diet of mosquito larvae and dragonflies, where they might still be living now for all I knew, though my mother had been buried by the Viceroy butts.

As I peered back at the sweeping motions of the tiny fish, I suspected they survived on a more expensive, less useful diet, but before I had time to consider it, the sounds of soft confusion and muttered "excuse me's" came from the back of the store. I peeked around the corner. Two very large, fat men were stuck in the office doorway with the tiny woman lodged between them. Her eyes seemed ready to pop out of her head, but she slipped one slim hand out, then slithered from between them with an audible "plop" and rushed toward a nearby tank the size of a deep-freeze. I expected her to dive in, safe at last, but at the last moment she veered into a crowd of customers.

The two men lumbered toward me, their steps raising tiny waves in the tanks, dressed in matching polyester sport tents. They were a pair of giant twins, at least six-six and three hundred pounds, hugely fat but somehow willowy too, as if their massive flesh rode on green sticks instead of bones.

"I'm Joe," one said.

"I'm Frank," the other chimed.

"Dalhgren," they sang, then giggled and offered me oddly delicate hands. Although the boys looked a great deal alike—so much alike, in fact, I could never tell them apart—they had difficulty doing things together. Like shaking hands. I think I shook Joe's hand twice and Frank's not at all, but I was never sure.

"I understand you gentlemen have a problem," I said, and restrained myself from shouting *weight!* at the top of my lungs, "but Lawyer Rainbolt didn't fill me in on the particulars."

"Particulars," they said in a jumble, then glanced at each other. After several moments of hesitation on both their parts, both reached into their plaid sport tents and withdrew folded sheets of paper. I took both just to be fair. They were copies of invoices, a long list of names I assumed to be various fish, tanks, and other equipment. The total price came to \$5,354.76.

"Somebody's mighty serious about their fish," I said, trying to smile. The Dalhgren's didn't return it. In fact, they frowned so deeply I thought fat, greasy tears might slide down their rounded, downy cheeks. Then one of them handed me a yellow personal check covered with NSF and DO NOT REDEPOSIT stamps. "So what am I supposed to do," I asked, "repossess a bunch of fish?"

"Please," Joe said.

"Without violence," Frank added.

Rue the fucking day, I thought, *giant pacifist twins*. Then I looked at the check, as if I knew what I was doing. It had been drawn on a small state-chartered bank one county west of Meriwether. The bank had been fleeced by a California resort developer, forced into receivership, absorbed by a Midwestern holding company, then closed. The account in the dead bank was in the name of one Norman Hazelbrook, a vaguely familiar name. Then the comment about *no violence* made sense.

"You guys took a check from Abnormal Norman? Are you batshit crazy?" I asked. The boys attempted to look at their feet as they blushed.

Abnormal Norman Hazelbrook was president and chief executive officer of a biker gang known as the Snowdrifters, a gang made up of misfits and rejects from gangs all over the country. If you couldn't cut it with the Angels, or were just too fucking disgusting for the Banditos, Norman would take you in his merry band of miscreants. Their headquarters sat at the head of Clatterbuck Creek on the old Moondog mining claim. Norman had purchased the property after he got out of the Oregon state pen, where he was doing time for aggravated assault. The story was that Norman got in a scruffle with an Oregon state patrolman, and somehow managed to bite his nose off. Then the fool added grievous insult to massive injury when he chewed it up and swallowed it in front of the horrified officer.

"Didn't his rather odd attire give you some idea that Norman might not be exactly an outstanding citizen?" I asked them.

"You know Mr. Hazelbrook, I take it?"

"I hate to admit it but I know Norman," I said. Fun is where you find it, right, even if you have to follow your nose. "But I wouldn't take a check from him."

"He was very persuasive," one offered shyly.

"Very," the other added, glancing over his shoulder as if Norman might be lurking behind the gerbils.

"Ah, he ate our entire supply of African leaf fish," the one I decided to call Joe said.

"Then he ate Li Po," Frank whispered, "swallowed the old gentleman without a gulp. I hesitate to think about his last

moments, the horror of drowning in that, that monster's stomach acids."

"I can understand," I said, "even sympathize. But who's this Lee Poe fellow? Edgar's little brother?" I know I shouldn't have laughed, but I thought I caught it quite nicely with a coughing fit.

"One of our rarest and finest Siamese fighting fish," Joe said. "We took the check before his, ah, friends joined in."

"Norman never goes anywhere without his friends," I said, "not even to sushi bars." The boys were not amused. "But seriously, now, boys. Stop me if I'm wrong, okay? You want the fish back, is my guess, not the money." They nodded ponderously, jowls trembling. "I might be able to get the money—with a tank—but I can't repossess ten tanks of tropical fish from one of the worst motorcycle gangs in America."

"Actually, we have a tank," Frank said softly.

"Right," I said, smiling at his little joke, "lots of them. But we need more than that. I take it you took this to the sheriff over there?"

"He suggested that it was our fault for doing business with people of that ilk."

"I wouldn't know where to begin," I admitted.

"You know him," Joe said, "you could at least talk to him. We would pay you five hundred dollars just to talk to him."

"Cash?"

"Of course," Frank said. "Just give us a moment, please, to get the money." With that, they heaved about, ships spinning in the night, then made way for their office, their large buttocks rocking slowly like a gelatinous surf.

As I waited, I thought about it as I strolled over to a turtle tank. For old times' sake, Norman might talk to me, and if I came out

of it alive, the five hundred would make walking around Meriwether a lot more fun. Solly had deep pockets but he was reluctant to put his hands into them for my good times. I stared down at the little captive turtles, took a deep breath, thinking perhaps to sigh over my weary plight. Forget it. Never take a deep breath over a turtle tank. Live on fish heads and rice, suck on a wino's sock, eat a rotten egg, but never take a deep breath over a turtle tank. By the time I stopped gagging, the Dalhgren boys had returned with the cash.

"I want to borrow your van this afternoon," I said as I counted the bills, "and I want you to write a letter to Solly explaining that all I have to do is talk to Norman and that you promise to cover all my medical expenses as a result of this interview. Fair?"

"Fair," they agreed as we shook hands, tiny tears of hope glimmering in their eyes.

The living quarters of the Snowdrifters had grown organically, in the same way a fungus grows on a loaf of bread. They had started with a couple of converted school-bus campers backed up to the old mine shacks. Then Norman got middle-class pretensions. He had a log house built into the hillside in front of the old Moon-dog shaft. Then bit by furry bit everything became connected, and whatever members of the gang were in residence at any one time seemed to live wherever it suited them. One big happy family. Some of them, more than you would think, had jobs. Some even had families and had built houses away from the main complex for their old ladies and children. The sixties seemed alive and well up Clatterbuck Creek, if a little gray and dull and semi-communal, but I knew that however much fun and polite these guys could play, they could also play rough given the slightest reason.

I wouldn't want to burn them on a drug deal, or try to enforce the county zoning laws, and that's for sure. But the county sheriff, who had been constantly elected since the early sixties, occasionally made noises about cleaning up the mess up there, if only the county attorney would give him the papers, but it was just noise. I knew some DEA types and some state narco boys who were convinced that the Snowdrifters ran an amphetamine factory in the old mine shaft, but they were part of the same group of law enforcement turkeys who promised to rid the county of drugs by . . . well, by sometime . . . and who lied to the press about the value of the few drug busts they made. Besides, Norman might look funny, but he could count on his fingers and toes, and he hadn't taken anything but misdemeanor busts for fights and traffic violations since his release from Salem. And if the truth be known, I had worked for Norman a few times riding shotgun on deals and runs. I remembered him as half-good company, the times as half-fun. Except perhaps for the last time, when we went off the top of Rogers Pass in a stolen green Saab with a trunkload of AK-47's. That's another story, though.

Norman also had the best illegal satellite video system in western Montana, which I had occasion to watch, but Norman's main fault seemed to be the ease with which he got bored. After the satellite dish came video games, which bothered me a little, and after the video games came the white rats. They didn't bother me—they were oddly affectionate—but Norman took to getting stoned and taking pot shots at them with a .44 magnum, and rumor had it that he occasionally bit their heads off for effect. I didn't believe that, though. If I had, I might have been nervous.

When I called, Norman's long-time old lady, Midget, shouted at Norman. I heard him shout back, "Tell the old fart to come on

out. We'll twist one, have some fun like the old days." Then I heard wild laughter, the ringing crash of gunfire, nameless squeals.

By the time I wrestled the Paradise van up to Norman's gate, I thought about being nervous, even thought about giving the money back. Some clients think private eyes have a code, something like *never quit* or *seek justice whatever the cost* or *punish the guilty whomever they might be*, but the code is probably more like *never give the money back*. So I leaned on the horn, the chain-link gate rolled back, and I drove toward the end of the canyon over the rough, snowy track. As I came around the last corner, I could see Norman sitting in the school bus that served as one of his front entrances. He had started without me. A cloud of smoke shrouded his head, he cradled an AK-47 in his arms, and he smiled brightly in the snowy light.

When I trudged up to the bus door, Norman levered open. "You got them fat boys stashed in that fish van, Sughrue?"

"They wouldn't fit," I said, stepping into the moldering funk of the bus.

Norman leaned the rifle against the far window and asked, "So what the fuck you doin' here?"

"Just trying to make a living, Norman."

"Bullshit, man," he growled, then stretched and yawned, his wild eye roving in its socket. He took a hit off the remains of the doobie, then ate it, fire and all. His grimy hand rubbed at his bearded chin. The hand came back dirtier, if that was possible, without dislodging the pieces of what looked like last week's anchovy and jalapeno pizza. "You can't hardly make enough livin' to pay for your fun." He laughed. "What was playing?"

“Boy George.”

“Figures,” he said, hugely amused with himself, “homophobic bastard.” Norman watched too many television talk shows on his dish, which might prove that the method of the education is more important than the information. Or might not. “Goddammit, Sughrue, not even in my wildest days, not even in my worst moments, did I ever consider somethin’ like that, somethin’ that—what can I say?—that fuckin’ *abnormal*,” he said with what seemed to be great admiration. “Wish to fuck I’d thought of it,” he added, then laughed so hard he seemed about to come apart.

Aside from looking even crazier than he was, Norman seemed to be the only survivor of a genetic disaster, a man of parts, and all the parts from totally unrelated people. His lank greasy hair draped thick and black around a long pale face with light gray eyes and a wispy, almost oriental moustache. His long skinny arms ended in tiny hands; his short legs tried to carry the torso of a large man on feet so tiny a Chinese prince might love them. Then of course there was the eye, always staring with deep interest just over your shoulder into some demented fourth dimension. And the smell, a mixture of stale urine, bad teeth, marijuana, and probably acid rain and crotch rot that followed him like bad karma.

Norman’s laughter ended in a terrific fit of dope coughing. He dragged something living from the gravel pit of his throat, then hawked it onto a side window where it quickly froze among others of its ilk. “Modern art is lovely,” Norman claimed, then thumbed toward the back of the bus where it connected through a cabin to his log house. “Let’s go twist one, man.”

I had an attack of fastidious hesitation, but moved quickly along when he raised his arm to throw it affectionately around my

shoulders. "Goddammit, Sughrue, it's a fuckin' kick in the ass to see you again, my man, remember that fuckin' time I stuffed that fuckin' Saab through that snowbank and we flew off Rogers Pass . . ."

As he told the story that I remembered all too well, I worked my way through the debris of a particularly untidy life, managed to dodge the double sleeping bag on the bus floor where Norman's second-in-command, Beater Bob, reclined calm and supine. Bob was as large as both the Dalhgren twins, so heavy he hadn't straddled a hog in years, but rode with the gang on a specially sprung trike driven by a Volkswagen engine. Bob didn't seem to be in the bag alone. Someone or something bobbed at his crotch, low grunts slipping forth from the center of the bag.

"C.W.," Bob said pleasantly.

"Bob," I answered as I stepped aside and tried to hold my breath. Bob had his arms propped behind his head, and I could tell he hadn't been to the car wash since the cows came home at the beginning of winter.

The clutter faltered in the cabin behind the bus and died completely, thanks to Midget, in the large living room of Norman's house. Except for the rats. And the rat turds. The former were either coursing about the room in great cinematic stampedes rife with the pitter-patter of tiny feet on the oak flooring, or just hanging out in quivering bunches. The latter crunched under my boots. A large naked woman I didn't recognize snored in a hammock stretched in front of the stone fireplace across the room. At the far end, Norman's video equipment sat about like a showroom display, silent and gray. But the near wall, covered with the fish tanks in question, shimmered with movement and light. Midget, a small, hard woman dressed in a baby doll nightie,

sat on a ladder, a fish book in one hand and a box of something dried and disgusting in the other. She seemed to know what she was doing, though. The water in the tanks was as limpid and lively as that in Dalhgren's Paradise.

"Hey, C.W.," she said without looking up, then shook her head and glanced at Norman. "This fish shit is complex, man."

"Ain't that something," Norman said proudly. "Mary's my full-time fish-bitch."

"Norman," Midget scolded.

"Sorry," Norman apologized. Their relationship must have taken a turn. I'd never known Midget's given name and never known Norman to apologize for anything. "The royal keeper of the fish," he amended as he swept a cluster of sleeping rats off a tattered recliner. I perched on the front of an old couch, trying to take a seat that wasn't moving. Norman drew a packet of smoke out of his overalls pocket and quickly twisted a number the size of a mouse. "So what's up, Sughrue?" he asked after he lit it. "You come for the money?"

"The fish," I said as he handed me the joint. Norman looked as if I had hurt his feelings. "Hey, man, it's just a day's work for me, and I've already earned it. After me, though, comes the county sheriff and his minions."

"Fuck the sheriff and his fuckin' onions," Norman said calmly as he took the number from me. "That pussle-gutted piss-ant bastard shows up on my property, I'll have Bob squeeze shit-for-brains till his head pops like a pimple, then Mary can feed him to the fish."

"Now Norman, you know that's not right," Mary said, shaking her head fondly.

"You get the picture," he said. Norman offered me the smoke but I waved it away. "I'm keepin' the fuckin' fish, man. I like 'em. A lot. I picked 'em up on orders."

"Orders?"

"From my doc, man," he explained. "He told me to get them, but I'm attached to the little fuckers now, Sughrue, you wouldn't believe it—"

"Don't believe it," Mary interrupted. "Norman don't even know their names, man. I'm the one's attached. He's just barely involved."

I felt as if I had missed something very important, so I took the number back from Norman and had a healthy hit. I wanted to fit in with the weird. "Your doctor told you to get the fish?" Norman nodded. "What the fuck for?"

"Ah, shit, man," he sighed. "I got this ah, you know, this fuckin' blood pressure problem. Hypertension, you know. Stress related, they think."

"Certainly lots of stress in your business, Norman."

"Damn straight. You oughta try runnin' a business, not a big business but a business, with the kinda creeps I got hangin' around me. It ain't easy, man. Somebody's gotta be responsible, right. So I guess it's gotta be me. I can't depend on these other fuckin' jerks."

"Thanks, Norman," Mary complained.

"Except for Mary, of course," he continued, "and I'm sorry, man, we been friends a long time, but I'm keepin' the fish. I guess that's the bottom line, dude."

I kept thinking that there must be some easy way out of this, but since I didn't know what it might be, I said to Norman, "I

know I shouldn't ask, man, but what the hell do the fish have to do with your blood pressure?"

"I always liked that about you, Sughrue. Even when you're stoned senseless, man, you always ask the right question. You can go back to work for me anytime. Just ask. Where was I?"

"Fish tanks and blood pressure," I said.

"Thanks, man. See, I had these headaches, and the doc said it was my blood pressure so he gave me these tiny little pills but they made my pretty little pecker absolutely fuckin' useless."

"Never was all that useful, anyway," Mary giggled from the ladder. Then she took a hit off a roach, blew smoke across the water, and laughed again.

Instead of dragging one of the pistols off the end table and killing her, Norman joined her laughter fondly. I took another hit. Quickly. Norman took the number from me, then picked up a rat off the arm of the couch and sat it on his chest, where he stroked it gently and blew dope smoke softly into its tiny gaping nostrils.

"So he told me to try fish. I watch 'em two hours ever' day. Works like a voodoo charm," he said, then patted his crotch. "Watchin' them little fucks eats up that stress, man, makes me mellow."

As if the idea of *mellow* worked on him, Norman wriggled his ass, settled his bulk into the recliner, and tilted it back. A loud, painful squeal ripped from the recess of the Lazy Boy. "Oh, shit, man," Norman groaned. He handed me the roach and the rat, which I took as calmly as if I had been just waiting for the chance to hold them, then he stood up, carefully turned over the chair, and gently dug a damaged rat from the springs. "Poor baby," he crooned as he held it in his hand. The rat thrashed around its broken back, then sunk its teeth into Norman's thumb. Norman

let it. After a moment, he quickly snapped its neck, stroked it with his thumb once more, then tossed it toward the fireplace. It bounced off the fat lady's hip and into the fire. She neither woke nor sang, but then it wasn't time yet. "I fuckin' hate that, man," Norman said as he righted the recliner.

"You don't use them for target practice anymore?" I asked as I handed him his pretties back. The rat had been sweetly affectionate as I held it, and I swear it gazed at me with longing as I gave it back.

"No way, man," he said. "I'm a changed man, Sughrue, massively mellow."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said.

Norman stopped petting the rat on his chest and gave me a hard look. Not that mellow, I guess.

"So maybe we can work something out."

"Don't fuck with me, man."

"Maybe if you'd just pay the Dalhgrens, Norman, and maybe let them see what a good job Mary is doing with the fish, maybe visitation rights," I suggested, "maybe they could help Mary."

"Mary don't need any help, and I don't want those fat fucks in my house. Can you dig it?" Norman said, his good eye hard and his bad one nearly focused, his voice bottomed out on the line. Then his mood shifted again, quickly, and he mused, "You know what, man? If those fat fucks hadn't been so scared of me, I might have given them a good check."

"Norman, you ate their entire supply of African leap fish," I said.

"Leaf fish," he corrected.

"And somebody who sounded like their grandfather."

"Li Po," he said. "A Siamese fighting fish. Shit, it was strange having those fish swimming around in my tummy, man."

"Norman!" Mary screeched from the tanks, but we both ignored her.

"So the boys were a little scared," I suggested.

"They shit their baggy pants."

"Well, what would you do if I came in here and bit the heads off your favorite rats?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. You always were crazier than me, Sughrue. And never scared of me or treated me like I was a freak," he said. "That's why I always liked you. And goddammit I hate it when some fuck treats me like I'm a freak. Hey, man, I'm a human being, you know, and I got fuckin' feelings like anybody else, so when people are afraid of me, unless I mean for them to be, it makes me weird. Okay?"

"Well, it's okay with me, but I think the boys will go to the law."

"What do you think I got lawyers for, man? Traffic tickets? It'll take 'em a year just to get through the gate. Maybe by then my blood pressure will be down."

"Fuck your blood pressure, Norman," I said. We were both sort of stunned, but I carried on in my foolishness. "You fucking criminals are the most self-centered assholes in the world. All you think about is yourself. Think about somebody else for a change. Just give the Dalhgrens their money and let them see that the fish are all right, and all this will go away."

"Maybe you should go away, asshole." Norman had feelings, and I had damaged them. "Out of my house." He stood up slowly.

"Norman," Mary said softly from the fish tanks.

"I'll be back," I said, standing too.

"Like I said, asshole, you always were crazy."

"Keep that in mind."

"Don't get crossways with me and the brothers," Norman said.

"Fuck you and the brothers," I said as I walked toward the door, the skin crawling like rats across my exposed back. But Norman snorted, bitter and tough, and I knew I had walked out this time. Next time, well, who knows about next time.

As I drove away in the van, I found my hands trembling on the steering wheel. It didn't feel like fear, though, but some sort of anger, maybe even rage. Norman was just Norman, and I didn't think I was mad at him. It was just me, on the backside of forty, bedded down on a slab. Not even my own slab.

The snow-slick roads back to Meriwether gave me plenty of time to consider my life, but sometimes I simply wasn't interested in my life. So I'd never married, hadn't had a date in a year, hadn't slept with a woman in so long I couldn't remember it, I mean really slept with a woman, but I didn't seem to care. I might think that the Dalhgrens were funny, but they really cared about their fish. I couldn't fix my life, but I could get their fish back. Maybe that was my life, helping those who could still care, even if I couldn't. At the moment it didn't sound like such a bad life.