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REAL BUCKS  
AND OTHER STORIES

By

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A.B., Boston University, 1968

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
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## COLTRANE LIVE

It was late summer of sixty-five when I arrived in Boston. I began working days and going to school nights. Miranda was three months pregnant, I'd just turned twenty-one and I was trying to do right.

I didn't want to spend my life as some chump from downstate Florida, though. There were things going on in that town - things like beatniks, things like reefer and jazz. I wanted to be hip. Still, I never figured I'd meet Coltrane himself. There were plenty of things I never figured on before I bumped into Delacroix.

I was working as a checker on the top floor of Filene's department store. Checkers are the people who open the boxes of new merchandise and mark the contents off against the invoice sheet. If you can count, you could be a checker too. Then the merchandise went to pricing, one floor down, where it sold or it didn't. If it didn't it went on down to the bargain basement, where it was set upon by Brookline housewives and Irish grannies from Dorchester.

We got to paw through some top quality merchandise: Gucci gloves, Liberty ties, Bally shoes and so on. And if it was really knock out stuff, particularly the imports,

the box would come in way short, maybe sixty or seventy percent. We'd write LIS - lost in shipment - on the invoice and then we'd laugh, because of course, it hadn't been lost at all.

I worked next to a kid from the North Shore, a smiley, nice looking kid named Billy. The buyers were mostly women, young women - graduates of Pine Manor or Stevens and pretty hot stuff. They'd come up in their mini-skirts and tease him; call him "Bill-ee" and "Sweetbuns" and so on and he'd blush and we'd all crack up. When they'd leave, we'd make jokes about their tits and all, which I imagine they were perfectly aware of. God knows what they said about us. That's the way things were when Delacroix showed up.

He was about six-four, a good bit older than us and he was black. He had a nasty scar on his nose and he was pretty shy that first day, hanging out in the locker room by the elevators during morning break. Most likely he'd decided we didn't have much in common. Most likely he was right.

Billy and I and some other guy I can't remember now had been having lunch at this flyblown little bar called Tad's. We were on our way out when we saw Delacroix, moping around. We asked him if he wanted to come along and so that noon we sat in Tad's and Delacroix drank Ballantine Ale and smoked Kools and listened to us talk about the buyers - which ones



were pushy, which ones were good looking and how the foreman was harmless and didn't want any trouble.

Delacroix told us his family was from New Orleans and that his name was Lawrence Delacroix, not Larry, and that he'd grown up in Pittsburgh. In fact, he said, he'd grown up in Pittsburgh with John Coltrane.

I told him I was a big fan of Coltrane's, that I really liked his album My Favorite Things and that I thought it was the best thing he'd ever done. I told him that because it was the only Coltrane record I had and because Nat Hentoff had said that on the liner notes. The afternoon sunlight fell across the table and we sat there in beery silence awhile. Then I asked him about his scar.

"I got that in Ko-rea," he said.

"On your nose?"

"Uh-huh. Shrapnel." He touched it gingerly with a long finger. "Shouldn't be no scar at all but the surgeons in Japan didn't know about how black people heal - we keloid, you know." he said seriously. Then he grinned.

"You thought I was in a knife fight, didn't you? Some guy cut me with a razor?"

I laughed and said no, but as it happened, that was exactly what I'd thought.

A couple of weeks later, Billy got bored and went in the navy and the other guy I knew left too. Suddenly Delacroix and I had been there longer than anyone. I hated

it and was looking for something else. My plan was to stay through the semester, then shop around in a big way. That's why I stuck around. I didn't understand why Lawrence did till sometime in December.

We were all going to the Celtics-Seventysixers game to watch Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlin duke it out. Miranda said she'd fix dinner and then we'd go to the Garden from our place. She was six months gone but she wanted to come too. She made mousakka and a huge greek salad and I bought a decent bottle of scotch. We lived in a cheesy little three room apartment out in Alston. We'd furnished it with odds and ends - painted wooden furniture, a Hershey brown sofa bed that weighed five hundred pounds and was worthless as either a sofa or a bed, a bizarre assortment of lamps - I'm sure you get the picture. But Miranda had set the table and it looked pretty. The place smelled delicious and we were sitting around, having a drink when Delacroix showed up. He'd brought a bunch of carnations for Miranda and he looked sharp, in a familiar kind of way; sharp and somehow bigger. It took me a moment to realize that he was modeling a little of everything we'd booked in that day: Irish sweater, crushed velvet slacks, cashmere scarf and a goatskin suede coat, imported from Spain. He was wearing

them all over the clothes he'd come to work in. When I started to laugh, he didn't bat an eye.

Delacroix would go past the security check with his employee's card half an hour before anyone else, then move out on the men's wear floor. The big item was these goatskin coats. They ran for five hundred and Lawrence fenced them off for fifty each. He'd stash the coats in a garbage can by the employee's elevator, then his man Percy would come in at noon and make the pickup, hide them in the bottom of a grocery bag, and walk out. It was pretty smooth. Security must have figured they were being boosted during the day. Around Christmas time he asked me if I wanted one for myself and I told him I didn't. I couldn't figure out how I'd explain to anyone what I was doing with a five hundred dollar suede coat. It didn't occur to me till later that it was none of their business. About that time, I started calling everyone "man."

But we sat there that night, the three of us chatting and eating, and I didn't say a word to Miranda, even though I thought I'd lose it when Lawrence began to ask her what size coat she wore, what size dress and so on. She looked puzzled but told him.

"I don't usually care much for young girl's cooking,"

he said. "But this here - this some bad dinner. What size shoe you take?"

"Five and a half," she said.

Lawrence was astounded. "Five and a half?" He turned to me and grinned.

"Whatchu do with them, man? Kiss 'em and lick 'em?"

That was the only time I ever saw Miranda blush.

One day Percy didn't show and Lawrence got in a big sweat. He was afraid when they emptied the garbage cans that evening someone would find the coats and close things down.

"I won't ask you to do it again," he said. "But you got to help me out. They never stop you."

It scared me up till the time I dumped the coats in the bag. The odd thing was, walking through the crowds and out the door, I knew he was right. They never would stop me.

After that things changed between us. Lawrence began to undertake my education. "Dave-it man," he said. "I'm going to show you places very few white men have ever seen."

Delacroix had moved in with a woman in the meantime. Her name was Yolanda. I never met her and he didn't talk much about her, but she had a red '64 Riviera and he seemed

to end up with it a lot. Some nights after work we'd drive around Roxbury, looking for pot, or I'd go with him on mysterious errands into apartments, bars or drugstores. Sometimes I'd go in, sometimes I'd wait in the car. I was not always comfortable waiting curbside in Yolanda's Riviera late at night in the middle of the ghetto. On the other hand, I was not always comfortable going in.

One night we went to see if Percy had any pot. Percy lived in a basement apartment of Tremont with two dobermans, Jameel and Obalagi. When I tailed in behind Lawrence one of them ambled up and clamped my hand in his mouth, just shy of breaking the skin. The other one circled around behind me. I froze and looked down at the rolling eyes and flattened ears. "Jesus Christ," I whispered.

Percy came over and swatted the dog. "Lagi! Let the hell go that man's hand."

Lawrence was laughing. "He just thought you was po-lice."

Percy scowled. "Lagi didn't think he was no po-lice. Lagi thought he some kinda white boy."

"Where'd he get a hare-brained idea like that?" I said, and Percy gave a short, nasty laugh.

"If he'd thought you was po-lice, he woulda bit your dick."

Another time we went in a bar called Papa Dee's.

It was a tiny place, no more than twenty by thirty, with gallon jugs of port wine on crude shelves behind a plywood bar. In the corner was a rusty cooler full of Schlitz. It looked back-woods. It was a Monday night, I remember. There were just a few people in there, but it got real quiet when I walked in. I went to order a beer but Delacroix checked my arm and said we weren't going to stay. There was a sweaty tension in the place and I stood fighting the impulse to beat it, my hands dangling at my sides. I tried to put them in my pockets but they didn't seem to fit. There was a fat, rheumy old guy with nappy hair sitting in front of me. He got up, tottered over to the jukebox and dropped a quarter in. A James Brown song called Papa's Got a Brand New Bag came up. The jukebox was at full volume and when the band hit the opening chords, the old man closed his eyes, half squatted and shot backwards across the floor, his arms stretched wide, flapping like a raven while his feet carved out powerful sliding arcs, as if he was skating in reverse. Nobody paid much attention to him. Whoever Lawrence was looking for wasn't there and we left. Back on the street he began to chuckle.

"Man," he said. "If you'd knowd what happened in that place Saturday night, you wouldn't never gone in there." But I was still seeing that old guy dancing. The fact was, there were any number of reasons why I'd never have gone in Papa Dee's.

One morning Lawrence came into work beaming. "John's in town," he said. "Get your little wife decked out and we'll go down, catch John." We hatched a plan to meet at my place for drinks Friday night, then make an evening of it.

That night after work I went out for some ribs with Delacroix and Marvin, a weasly little guy in a goatskin coat and Fillipo Verde shoes with lightning bolts on the sides. We bought an order to go. I was sitting in the back chewing on a rib while Delacroix and Marvin sat up front talking softly. I'd dummied up. I heard Lawrence say "No, he's cool." Marvin turned, laid an arm over the white upholstery and gave me what I guess was supposed to be a reassuring smile.

"Say, baby," he said. "We been talkin' and we was wonderin' - how'd you like to go in on some skag with us? You know, kinda like a silent partner?"

I thought about it for a minute. I stuck the rib bone in an ashtray and looked in the driver's mirror. Delacroix's eyes were scanning the street. "What's skag?" I said finally.

Both men turned and looked at me. Neither said a word. Lawrence started the car and we drove off.

When we passed Estelle's Lounge, Marvin said we could let him off there. I asked Lawrence if I'd said something wrong, maybe. He scrutinized me, then shook his head. "You don't

know what skag is?" he said.

"No."

"Man," he said, and laughed. "You blowin' my mind."

Later on that evening I rode home through the labyrinth of MTA tunnels, trying to look out the window. All I could see was my reflection in the dark glass and the shower of sparks from the overhead. I had a sudden longing to be with Miranda and be a whole lot dumber. I had a pretty good idea what skag was.

We came up out of the tunnel and ground to a stop just short of the Commonwealth Avenue station. The car lurched once, then died and went black. There was an irritated buzz of voices and we sat there for some time before it dawned on anyone that not just the car but the whole town had gone black. Finally the conductor sprung the doors. Some of us took off walking, the rest sat waiting for things to get straightened out.

I walked the two miles home, wondering what it was all about: Sabbotage? End of the World? I worried about Miranda and wondered whether she'd made it home from work all right.

She had. Our place was lit with candles and toasty. She had a portable radio on and she grinned and kissed me and



said it was a black out, all up and down the coast.

"It must be those Russians," I said.

"Those fuckin' Russians," she said. We had a drink and joked about it, then sat down to dinner, but it wasn't that funny. For all we knew, it was the fuckin' Russians. On the radio there were reports of UFO sightings. We laughed about it, and that night we lay in bed and I held them both, Miranda, so small and cat-like, and my unborn daughter. I held them in my arms, in the middle of the vast, uneasy night, half waking, half sleeping. In the morning it was all a joke, a short in a booster station in Buffalo. It was one of the last funny things we'd read in the papers for many years. One month later the Tonkin Resolution passed.

"You sure you feel like doing this?" I asked Miranda. She'd had dizzy spells a week earlier and had taken a fall in the bath tub.

She looked at me like I was crazy. "Yeah," she said. "Of course." She was busy with the eyeliner, standing on tiptoe at the bathroom mirror, her belly brushing the sink. She wore a dark mini-skirt and an aqua maternity top, and her hair was brushed long and shiney. We were listening to Coltrane's Favorite Things album and waiting for Lawrence to show up.

"I love this record," she said, glueing on her eyelashes.  
"I think it's the best thing he's ever done."

"So does Hentoff."

"There's nothing like being right," she said.

Lawrence showed up around eight, exuberant in red turtle neck, James Bond style trench coat and seventy dollar camel hair slacks. I knew how much they cost because I'd booked them in that day. He was carrying the ever present shopping bag. He took off his coat, then gave me a long, appraising look. His face wrinkled in distaste.

"That whatchu gonna wear?" he demanded. "You look like some kinda fraternity fool, sumthin'."

Miranda tipped her head back and laughed. Those were pretty much her sentiments, too. She was from New York and knew how to look good. She never cared much for the way I turned myself out, which tended toward the casual. I can remember thinking that it had some kind of integrity, though; Miranda was from New York, Delacroix was from Roxbury, I was from north Florida and that's how we all looked. I even said something to that effect before I huffed into the bedroom. There I looked at myself in the mirror. My checkered sports jacket was the same one I'd had since 1960 and I wore a skinny little candy-stiped tie, chino pants

and sneakers. I took a drink of scotch and realized Delacroix was wrong - no self-respecting frat guy would be caught dead in that outfit. It dawned on me that it was possible to go to the Jazz Mecca with all the hip people in the world and still walk out looking like a high school jerk.

The door opened and Delacroix stuck his head in. "You gettin' it together?"

"I suppose."

He laughed. "Now don't be gettin' mad, Jim. We just be givin' you some friendly shit. Here," he said, handing me a pay envelope. "This ought to make you feel better."

I opened the flap and peeked in: three joints nestled inside. I felt ready for anything. I slipped them in my pocket and went to the kitchen to pour another drink. When I returned to the living room, Lawrence and Miranda were laughing about something.

Miranda said: "Bet he won't. You can't tell him anything." And she laughed again, her face flushed from the scotch. She wasn't supposed to be drinking but you couldn't tell her anything, either. I kind of liked that.

"Won't what?" I said.

"Won't wear Lawrence's suede coat tonight," She giggled. "You'd be chickenshit."

"Woo!" Delacroix hollered.

"Why'd I be chickenshit to wear somebody's coat?"

I snapped.

"I just think you would," she said.

We'd been married only a few months but she knew me well enough. "Let's have it," I said.

Delacroix pulled it out of the shopping bag and I slipped it on. It was supple and warm and it shone with an odd, smokey luster. I couldn't keep myself from grinning. "Raise my rent," I said. "Well raise my rent."

I bummed a Kool from Delacroix, put my arm around Miranda and watched the brownstones slide by as we cruised down Beacon street in the Riviera. I was pretty drunk by then and I can remember feeling that I had, unquestionably, arrived.

The Mecca was in the basement of an old federal style building on Tremont. We followed the steps down into the smoke and laughter and in the dim light of guttering candles I could make out the whole night-time specturm of players and pimps, hookers and highrollers. I felt a thrill. It seemed I had penetrated to the very heart and soul of hipdom.

We found a table close to the stage and ordered a round. Delacroix was up and about, moving through the crowd. Miranda and I sat close together and rubbernecked the parade. She took my hand under the table and gave it a squeeze. When she looked at me her eyes sparkled:

"My God, you look sharp," she said.

"Me or my suede?"

She took a long pull on her drink and looked at me thoughtfully, as if trying to decide. Abruptly, a blood-red light hit the bandstand and the MC, a thuggy-looking guy in a white turtleneck, came bouncing on:

"Ladies and gentlemen. I want to tell you that it's a privilege - no, a stone privilege, for me to introduce one of the great artists of this century, one of the seminal forces in jazz today - Mr. John Coltrane!"

The crowd went ape shit in a restrained kind of way. The house lights dimmed and the stage lit up with an ice blue spot as the band filed: McCoy Tyner, Jimmy Garrison, Elvin Jones - Jones was already sweating, his goat skin suede glowing in the kliegs as he lit into an intricate poly-rhythm and then suddenly Coltrane was standing right in front of me in a midnight suit and tie. He had an austere kind of dignity, like an archdeacon or something, so when he picked up the bagpipes, it was almost funny.

I can remember hoping that the bagpipes were just for the first number but I was wrong. The set was a holocaust of skirling and squealing that left the crowd stunned. I looked around a couple of times. Nobody was snapping their fingers or bop-slapping the table tops and when it finally ended I sat there stupified. Miranda looked like she was drowning. She said she'd take a taxi home.

Delacroix leaned over to me and said: "Well man.

What'd you think of that?"

I shrugged. "Those were some bad sounds."

"Where's your little wife headed?" He smiled.

"Don't she like music?"

I was standing in the men's room toward the end of the break when they all walked in: Garrison, Jones and Delacroix. They called him "Del".

"Here he is," he said. "My man Dave-it. He's a college man - a English major!"

Garrison and Jones raised eyebrows, smiled and we shook hands, honky-style. Garrison asked me if I liked the set and we stood around a minute, bullshitting, then Delacroix eyeballed the door.

"Dave-it, man. Where's that little package?"

It was a nightmare. I stood there in the crapper of the Mecca, fumbling half-heartedly in my pockets while two jazz immortals waited patiently for me to get them high. I knew where that little package was. It was in my other coat.

"I left it home." I mumbled.

Garrison looked down and tugged at a cuff. Jones rocked gently back and forth on his heels. Delacroix took a long, slow breath and let it out. Somewhere down the line of stalls a toilet flushed.

The door swung open and Coltrane breezed in. "Gentlemen," he said. He looked at Lawrence and smiled. "Del. What's this - a gatherin' of the clans?"

"It was damn near that," said Delacroix wistfully. "How're you feelin John?"

"Pretty good," he said, and he looked at his watch. "Getting to be about that time though." He looked at me, then at Delacroix. "Who's this young man?"

"That's Dave-it," said Delacroix faintly. "Dave-it NoDope."

"Now that's an interestin' name," he said. We shook hands. "I see you sitting tight on the stage there, NoDope. You gotta be a jazz fan." He brushed my lapel with his forefinger. "Shoo," he said. "That's a bad coat."

As we were leaving the men's room, Lawrence invited them over to Yolanda's the next night. "We're goin' to have ribs," he said. "We're goin' to have chicken, we're goin' to have sweet potatos."

"Hey Del," said Jones. "There gonna be women there?"

Lawrence scowled at him. "This a family get-together. Ain't that kind of party, Elvin. Ain't that kind of party at all."

When they dropped me off in front of my building, we all

shook hands. I invited them in for a drink; Coltrane said he didn't indulge. They were very polite. I watched them drive off, tail lights winking around the corner as they headed back for town.

"I thought it was horrible," Miranda said. She was in bed, still awake and cross. "Did he ever play the sax?"

"No," I said. I took three aspirins, undressed and got in bed too. We lay there a long time, then she said:

"Maybe it was like an exorcism or something?"

"Maybe," I said. Whatever it was, I sure didn't get it. I felt restless. I was still hearing those bagpipes and I was still excited about something. I lay facing the wall, then rolled over and put my arms around her. She made a funny little noise and we cuddled up like rabbits down a hole. I thought about the baby and tried to put myself ahead a year, imagining what the child would be like. Of course I couldn't, anymore than I could imagine that by then, Delacroix would be doing three-to-five, or that Miranda and I would split up - or that Coltrane would be dead.

"I got to ride home with him." I whispered, but she was already asleep and I lay there, wishing to myself that there'd been someone around, someone I knew - anyone - to watch me climb in that Riviera and ride home with 'Trane.

THE END



## REAL BUCKS

Doyle stood on a deadfall, looking up the narrow slot of valley leading to the Scapegoat wilderness, ten miles north. A D4 cat plowed toward him through the crotch-high slash, the tap of its diesel rattling down the hillsides like buckshot off a tin roof. The skinner was a wild-haired kid in his late teens. "Get them trees, Doyle!" he hollered.

Doyle waved, dug in his pockets for his foam plugs and stuffed them in his ears. The noise of the engine became distant, as if it was underwater. Doyle watched the play of the kid's arms on the clutch levers and the twitchy, reptilian responses of the machine as the kid rode serenely past, his face masked with dust under a black baseball cap. Doyle waded through the cat's churned up wake, balanced his chainsaw on a shoulder and started up the hillside on a meandering current of logs.

He thumbed the compression release on his Stihl and popped the starter till it caught. He gunned the saw and felt a hundred c.c.'s of torque twitch the bar skyward, then set it down to idle while he peed and figured his

strip. He was in a good-looking lodgepole stand, studded here and there with big Douglas fir. It was backlit with morning sun so that the insects looked ghostly, floating up from the beargrass and the yellows and purples of glacier lillies and lupine glowed brilliantly in the narrow ribbons of light. He found the boundary flag, tied around a hundred foot fir. "Good morning, honey," he said. He notched out the uphill side, then sank his saw into the back-cut, flooding his boot with a wash of chips. He tapped in a plastic wedge and the big tree listed, sighed, released and fell with a dull crash. A galaxy of dust motes swam in the light pouring through the hole he'd made overhead. Doyle caught himself staring and shook his head clear. He jammed his tape-nail in the log, squared it off and clambered up on it. He walked off a clear thirty-five footer, cut it out, reset his tape and began limbing the top section, swinging his saw and singing:

I fell in, to that burning ring of fire -  
Goin' down down down, the flames are gettin' higher

Spence finished his supper, sniffed, belched and lit a cigarette. "Eagle day tommorrow."

"If Dave decides to show up, it is." said Doyle. He set his plate down and pulled on his boots. They were camped downstream from Roger's Pass, home of the coldest recorded

temperature in the lower forty-eight and those summer twilights were chilly.

Spence downed a handfull of B-complex and washed them down with tea. "Goddamn, here we are, working our butts off, living in the dirt and maybe we'll get paid. There's just got to be another way to make a hundred bucks a day."

Doyle sipped at his tea and thought about it. He had a BA but so did a lot of people. There was selling dope, but there was also the idea of doing time. At thirty-four, the only thing he really knew how to do was saw. He buttoned his jacket. He was bone tired but he couldn't sleep. He needed something nice first. Something pretty. He tipped his head back and watched the sparks from the fire drift to the tips of the lodgepole that surrounded them, then to the frosty, crystalline circle of night sky.

"Spence," he said finally. "I need a three piece Denver suit." He settled back, stuffed his hands in his pockets and thought about Florence.

*Beautiful green-eyed Florence with the long legs. And the two kids. He frowned. Beautiful green-eyed Florence without the two kids. Ten years ago, maybe. Florence sitting across a table set with china and crystal, her hands clasped to her smooth cheek, agog with his Denver suit, the pockets bristling with twenties. Florence in black. Scooped neckline, hair piled in a French twist.*

*Emerald earrings. Scent of magnolias. Everybody really, really clean. They'd eat artichoke hearts and veal. Then there'd be cognac. Then they'd waltz.*

He stood up and knocked the remains of his supper into the fire, then walked stiff-legged to the creek. He scrubbed out the pan in the icy water and returned to the circle of light. Spence was bedded down by the fire.

"You sleeping with the bugs again? I'm turning in," Doyle said. He unzipped the tent screen and ducked inside. It stank of pitch and sweat and a sweet-sour smell he couldn't place. He looked out the window and saw Spence, lost in the embers. Night time was Spence's time.

The tent was large and roomy and they had shared it all summer, till a few nights before. Doyle would wake in the night to the dull clink of Spence's vodka bottle at odd hours and the tent thick with cigarette smoke. He would lie there in the blackness, listening to the gurgle of the bottle and the delicate replacement of the cap, trying to gauge the hours left until dawn. One day Doyle counted the empties and he knew Spence could never keep it up. The next night Spence moved out by the fire. Their starts were getting later and later. There was a cut-off point, and they were close to it. Somebody was going to get hurt.

Doyle turned out at first light and struggled into his boots with swollen fingers. It was just above freezing. He drew on a jacket, unzipped the tent and stepped out under the dawn sky.

Spence was awake, smoking a cigarette and staring at the ashes, his stocking feet propped in front of him and a blanket draped over his head. Doyle's stomach churned; he walked to the creek and back before he spoke. "How's it going in there, old timer?" he said.

Spence looked up, startled, then smiled sweetly. "Kinda spaced..."

"Spaced," Doyle said. "You burned up all the fucking firewood."

"I was keepin' the bears away," Spence said, his voice hollow.

Doyle stamped his feet to get the circulation going. If he went to get wood they'd be late again. No coffee. No nothing. Cursing, he threw the gear into the back of the truck as Spence, the blanket still around him, stumbled off to the creek.

They waited for Dave till three thirty, then got in the

truck, and tight-lipped, headed for Missoula, some two hours west. It was ninety-five degrees when they arrived in town. Doyle backed the pickup close to the dumpster behind his downtown apartment and they dragged out into the heat. They each made three trips up the fire escape with the gear. From the top landing, Doyle could see it was Happy Hour on the sun deck of the Acapulco Lounge.

Doyle toweled himself off, shaved, brushed his hair back and stepped into a pair of cut-offs. Rivulets of sweat ran down the insides of his arms as he dialed Florence's number. The phone rang several times:

"Hello - "

"S'Doyle. I just got in. Listen: Tommorrow night..."

There was a piercing scream in the background. "Just a minute," she said. "Clean it up!" he could hear her say. "Right now!" There was a defiant whinny, and Doyle held the receiver away from his ear, drummed his fingers and looked out the window.

Spence walked out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. "Hey, killer!" he winked at Doyle. "Nookie-nookie?" He walked off to the kitchen. Doyle heard the refrigerator open and a beer can crack.

Florence was back on the line. "Those little creeps,"

she said. "What's this about tommorrow night?"

"OK," said Doyle. "Put on a dress, do up your hair and I'll take you anyplace you want to go. Le Maison! The Antlers!"

"Doyle, I'm not going to one of those places! They're fakes."

He took the phone from his ear and thought hard. "I like fakes," he said finally.

"How about some place I can go in jeans?"

"Florence. We're not communicating. I'm a high rolling logger, just in from the pucker brush. I've had it with Miller Time! I want Chardonnay Time!"

"The only dress I've got is something weird my husband bought me when we went to Vegas."

"Wear it."

"It's got sequins on it! Ostrich feathers."

"Fantastic!"

Florence sighed. "You better hang on to some of that money for fall..."

"I want to see some leg!"

"Woo!" hollered Spence. Doyle scowled at him.

"Who's there with you?" she said.

"Spencer the Rat's Ass, of course."

"Tell him 'Hi'. How's he doing?"

Doyle put his hand over the receiver. "I think she

wants to go out with you."

Spencer smiled, "They all do, secretly. I'm double Scorpio."

Florence was back on the line. "I'll have to think about this, Doyle."

"Think about it?"

"I'll call you tommorrow."

"I'm coming over."

He hung up the phone and Spence handed him a beer. "Sounds like things are kinda strained." he said.

Florence's trailer sat in a lot at the edge of town, the Bitterroot Valley sprawling off to the south. Doyle pulled up at twilight and parked next to a large plastic frog on wheels. A little boy ran off the porch and seized his leg.

"Hey Mitch," said Doyle, peeling him off. "Watcha say, kid?"

"I got an underwater car!"

"That's real handy." Doyle lifted him high in the air.

"It goes over mountains too! Are you going to stay overnight with my mommy?"

Florence was in the kitchen, dealing chicken parts on to a broiler pan, a tall, pretty woman with rounded shoulders. She wore a flannel shirt with the tail out and



the sleeves rolled up. She took Doyle's arm and gave him a hostess's buss on the cheek, then went back to her chicken. Doyle felt a vague dread. He forced a smile.

"What's all this? I can't take you out?"

Florence shoved the pan in the oven. "You staying for dinner?"

"What's going on?" he said reflexively. He had decided he didn't want to know.

Florence opened herself a beer and sat down on the countertop across from him. She looked tired. "Doyle, I left California to get away from that shit. I wear jeans now. I like jeans."

Doyle felt something draining out of him. "Bad week?" he said.

Florence drank some beer, looked at Doyle and shrugged. "I owe everyone," she said. "I've owed 'em for a while and they all want it. Then you come over, talking about filet mignon..."

"You got to have a little style, Florence..." He watched Mitch chase the cat outside. "How much you owe?" he said.

"More than I got."

"How much?"

Florence looked at him sharply. "That's my business," she said. The door flew open and three kids chased each

other in. "Hi, Doyley!" they said. "Are you going to stay overnight?"

Doyle was half drunk by the time the kids were in bed. He lay on the living room floor with his head against the couch while Florence put the dishes away. He tried to figure out if Florence wanted him to leave, but he was too tired.

"How's the woods?" she said from the kitchen.

"Ahh," he said. "Spence is drinking his face off... it doesn't look good."

She stood in the doorway and wiped her hands on the sides of her jeans. "Why don't you get out of it," she said.

"The money's good."

"Not that good."

"I like it," he said. "What else would I do?"

"You could teach school or something..."

Doyle scowled.

"Why do you like it?"

"Because it's scary."

Florence laughed.

"Really," he said. "If I don't do something that scares me for a good reason, I end up getting scared for all the wrong reasons." He tipped his head back to her. "Does that

sound funny?"

She looked at him intently. "Do I scare you?"

"Hell yes."

She shook her head and smiled. "That's good. You sure scare me..."

He sat up at dawn. He couldn't remember sleeping but he knew he must have. They had not made love. He looked over at Florence. She lay on her back, staring at the ceiling. He grinned and slapped her on the knee. "Here it comes again," he said.

"Yeah," she said. "Here it comes again."

He felt cold. He got up and began to dress. "I better get going. Got a lot to get done today..."

"Uh-huh," said Florence, her eyes still on the ceiling.

"What about tonight?" he said, lacing his sneakers.

"I'll put on a work shirt and we'll go down to the Hamburger Ace - "

She got out of bed and began to brush her hair.

"I'll call you, Doyle."

It was the sixth week without rain. A great cloud of pulverized clay hung in the air and everyone working roadside

knotted bandanas over their faces. Doyle caught a cold and coughed incessantly from the dust. The temperature rose and the horseflies grew bolder, covering their arms with welts. Log counts were down, the skidder was catching up and Spence was drinking hard.

Thursday morning at nine o'clock, they hadn't left camp yet. Doyle sat by the fire, drinking tea and coughing.

"You sound awful," said Spence. "You ought to see a doctor..."

Doyle snorted and set his mug of tea carefully on the ground. Everything's turning ape shit, he thought, and this rumdum's telling me I ought to see a doctor! "Spence," he said, "I got a cold. You got a problem."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

Doyle spat into the embers. If he went to the doctor Spence would take the day off too. The summer was going down fast.

"It means nobody's gonna piss down my back and call it sweat! You're sucking on that goddamn bottle all night and you're dogging it because I'm sick! Hey, one of us has to look good here - we got the best strip on this sale!" Doyle gave the water jug a kick that sent it skittering across the campsite. "Spence! You could be driving a new four-by-four this winter! Hell, you could even move into your own place! What's going on with you, buddy?"

Spence folded his arms and toed the dirt. Doyle dropped his gaze too.

"Alright," said Spence. His voice came from far away. "I have these spells, Doyle. Hot flashes. Kind of like epilepsy. Happens mornings, mostly. My mother told me last year it runs in the family... and the doctor said there's nothing you can do about it except just ride it out." He looked at Doyle. "I never told anybody this before."

Doyle stared at him, then spat. "Horseshit." he said.

Spence shrugged, his eyes blank. They packed the truck and drove to the cut in silence.

Doyle felt pissy all morning and lost count of his logs. He took a drink from the water jug, slipped on his jacket to keep the flies off and touched up his chain. He listened for Spence's saw and didn't hear it. He dug a plug out of his ear and listened again. Nothing. Alright, he thought, either he's fucking off or he's lying under a snag. "Good," he said out loud. He scowled. Why couldn't he just be gassing up? He coughed, spat a string of mucus then felled a tree. And what the hell had got into Florence? He'd managed not to be around when she was supposed to call. She was looking for an old man, and he was showing up late and

leaving early. It wasn't going to be him and Florence knew it. He spat. If she hadn't broken it off, he thought, I would have.

A horse fly buried its head in Doyle's arm and he slapped murderously at it. Goddamnit! he thought. I liked her! I liked her a lot! He caught a flash of movement out of the corner of his eye, jumped clear of the log he was limbing and spun.

"Haw," said Spence. "You should have seen the move you put on that log! Can you give me a hand? My saw's bound up."

"You bet," said Doyle. It was a relief to see Spence in the flesh. They walked to his strip, cleared the saw and had a cigarette.

"I got a little carried away this morning," said Doyle.

"True," said Spence. "Actually we're not doing that bad..."

"Yeah," said Doyle. "We're not doing that bad." It was a lie. "Let's head for town," he said. "I need a beer."

They stood in the doorway of the Diamond Back and surveyed the Thursday night crowd. The bar was ringed with drivers, skimmers and sawyers in their stagged-off Frisco jeans and chain saw promo hats.

Spence grinned. "These guys are dirty. I'll give you that," he said. "But I just don't see anyone in here dirtier than us..."

"We're in a class by ourselves," said Doyle. "Nobody else is dumb enough to live out in a tent just to save a buck."

They sat down next to a young woman in cutoffs and a Montana State T-shirt. The bartender drew a couple of beers and slid the dice and shaker in front of Spence. "You guys get your hundred logs today?"

"We got a hundred, Gus." Doyle said sourly. "Between the two of us, I'm sure we did..."

Spence nodded toward Doyle. "He's got a hair 'crost his ass today." He threw three naturals and won a six pack.

"Hey," said Doyle. "Just what you need, partner." He pulled a ten out of his jeans and tossed it on the bar. "And a vodka for my lucky pal."

Spence eyed him curiously. "A draw'll be fine," he said.

"You guys finally got paid?" said Gus.

"Three days after the fact," said Doyle. "In time to cover the checks I bounced." He turned abruptly to Spence. "Damnit, I'm buying and I say we have some vodka. Don't you ever loose. Spence? It's our seventh week without anyone getting killed and we can celebrate. We cut half

what we did last week but we still got our strip. Shit, now I know we've got it made! Dave's keeping us because we're so good looking - Gus, give this man a big ol' glass of vodka - body temperture."

There was an icy silence. Gus gave a short, strangled laugh.

"I'll buy my own fuckin' drinks," Spence said finally.

"That's shitsure," said Doyle, nodding his head.

"That is the God's truth."

Spence's eyes flashed with pain and hatred. "Doyle, I guess I don't have to take this crap."

Gus's face drew tight. "Hey," he said. "OK, now - "

Doyle's face flushed with heat and his big hands squeezed the lip of the bar. Too late, he thought. Let's finish this up now. Let's just finish it...

There was a sudden clatter of glassware and Spence shot to his feet, knocking over the barstool. Heads swiveled and Doyle was on his feet too, jaw set tight but Spence just stood there staring at the beer foaming down his shirt front and spattering the floor. The woman sitting next to him was dabbing at his shirt front with a paper napkin. "God," she said over and over. "God, I'm sorry, God I'm so clumsy!"

Spence stared at her, his eyes crazy and she stepped back, her broad, pretty face anxious. "I said I was sorry," she said. "Are you gonna punch me out?" she added in a



tiny voice.

Spence looked confused, then embarrassed. He wrung out his shirt front and gave her a shy, ragged smile. "No big deal," he mumbled.

Gus snickered. "I dunno, Spence. Maybe you oughta deck her. Spilled your beer and ruined your shirt - "

"Thanks a lot, Gus." she snapped.

"Hey. Buy me a beer, I won't have to deck you," he said reasonably. He turned to Doyle "Face, you know..." He held Doyle's eyes for a long second.

Doyle grinned, light-headed. OK, he thought. All right. "Face," he said. He turned to the woman in the cut-offs. "You know you got off pretty lucky." he said confidentially. "This guy's a pathological tree killer."

Spence cackled.

"He dances on their bodies and everything." Doyle continued.

She looked the two of them up and down. "Well," she said. "You're sure dirty enough to be loggers..."

"Do you want to take a shower with me?" said Spence.

"It's a filthy heathen business," said Doyle expansively. "But if it wasn't for us, everybody'd be living in mud huts."

"Mud's cozy," she said, and took a sip of beer.

Doyle looked down her tanned, muscular legs to her

clogs. "Yeah," he said. "But there wouldn't be any Dr. Scholl's," he looked back to her merry eyes and grinned, "And we even make it so you can wipe your behind."

Spence rolled his eyes.

"Yeah," she said. "And you make it real ugly out there, too."

And Doyle exploded in a fit of laughter, holding his ribs and rocking helplessly on his stool, nodding his head like an idiot because it was just so true.

"This baby's gonna cut some wood today, Christ Howdy." Doyle sat on his Stihl, took the rakers down with a flat file then put a couple of extra strokes on each cutting tooth. It was Friday morning and they had an early start, the way he liked it. It was the way you got things done. They'd get a couple hundred and be running for Missoula before three. He started up the saw, leaned the carburetor till it screamed, then shut it back an eighth of a turn. He felt good and light. Friday was Hit It day. It didn't matter what the week had been like, now. Something had broken. Even Spence was hot to go this morning. Must have been some kind of slump. Doyle felled a lodgepole and ran up it with a burst of energy. Christ, he thought. I should have been cutting like this all week!

He broke a sweat and took off a layer of shirt, the saw chuckling beside him. He smiled. "Me and Florence," he said. "Me and Boss Flo, win, lose or draw!" He scanned his strip and it was a skinner's dream, the logs lying tight and close and parallel. Florence, he thought. It was the weekend coming up. He felled another tree. "I like Florence," he sang. "She's got sass. She's got heart." He stood with the saw idling in his hands. She's got a nice ass. And nice kids. A great big happy woman. He patted the saw. Me and Boss Flo, making buck after buck. I'll dress em all up! Tuck em all in! Pay her plumber and won't even tell her! He looked up a tall fir, bowed into the hillside from the wind, one hundred twenty feet, plus. Big un. Three thirty-fives and a sixteen, maybe. How old? Two hundred? Three hundred? Weathered a burn or two. Smarter than me?"No fucking doubt," he said out loud. He shook his head. Nothing but a big vegetable. And it's harvest time. He looked down the slope to where Rondo was working the cat through a dust cloud. Ugly. But. Lots of houses there. He blipped the saw. Ugly houses. He notched out the fir then sank the Stihl into the backcut. Boss Flo? But it's over.

The fir fell slowly, ripping through several lodgepole and hanging on one briefly till it was torturously uprooted. Nah. How could it be over? A nice guy like me? Affectionate. Urbane. Crawling with bucks. I'll rescue them. I like kids.

Hell, I love kids.

He worked his way up the log, slicing limbs away, sweating, the saw howling in his hands. Doyle looked down at his forearms, glistening in the sun. God, he thought. Lookit the muscles on that dude! The wind gusted around him, blowing the insects clear and drying his sweat and he felt a sudden chill, as if he were in shadow. He jerked his head around to look behind him, as the shock of the chain travelled up his shin to his jawbone. There was an explosion of red and he was looking down his leg to bright shreds of meat hanging through a gaping split in his jeans. He dug the plugs from his ears and stared at the silvery white shin bone and gristle. Oh sweet shit. Jaysus. He stepped off the log onto his good leg and walked in tight circles as the blood bubbled over his boot top. He ripped off a shirt sleeve and knotted it above the knee, hands trembling. He cut himself a crutch and giddy with adrenalin, limped through the slash to the road.

He could see Spence's head bobbing a hundred yards away, knew he was sawing, knew he couldn't hear him. He hauled himself into the front seat of his pickup, put the leg up and opened the flap of shredded denim. The cut ran from the knee almost to the ankle. The flies clustered on it and he began to feel sick. He closed the flap.

Spence lifted the screen on his hard hat and set down

his saw. Doyle leaned on the horn. Spence looked over and waved. Doyle leaned on it again.

It was three by the time they reached the Lincoln Clinic. The doctor wore steel rimmed glasses, levis and high topped Keds. "Jesus," he said. "I've been up since five. What have you got?" Doyle climbed on the table and opened the flap of jeans. The doctor whistled. "You did a good job."

He grunted, cleaned the wound and shot it with novacaine. Doyle gripped the table and stiffened. "Does that hurt?" he said.

"Doctor, I can't feel a fucking thing."

"Severed some nerves. How'd it happen? Buck-back?"

"I don't know," said Doyle. "I was dreaming."

The doctor looked up. "Dreaming?" he said.

"Yes," said Doyle. He felt like crying. That, right there, was the summer.

"Well, you chipped the bone but there's no damage to the tendons. You were lucky."

"If you say so."

"You've still got it, buddy. What about this dreaming business? Happen often?"

Doyle tipped his head back and laughed. "No, my partner's the epileptic."

The doctor's brows knit. He shrugged, farted and sewed Doyle up.

Spence was sitting in the waiting room when Doyle finally hobbled out. "Guess who I bumped into in the liquor store?" he said. Dumb-shit himself! I got you a present - your check. And Dave got you this," he said, holding up a quart of bourbon.

"Aw," said Doyle, "He really cares. What'd he say?"

"He said he'll see you when he sees you. And here's some forms to fill out."

"You'll be a month off that, anyway," said the doctor. "And if it gets infected, which it will, here's a prescription."

Spence started the truck and turned on the radio. "A month? Could have been worse, Doyle."

"That's what they tell me." Doyle took a drink of bourbon.

"How'd you do it?"

"I don't know!" Doyle said, thumping the dashboard.

"God, I really don't know..."

"How's it look?"

"Ugly."

Doyle lay on the couch with his feet up, drinking from the bottle of bourbon. He was still in his work clothes. He couldn't imagine getting out of them, he couldn't imagine negotiating the bath tub. Spence was bustling around, straightening the place up. He had showered and shaved and looked positively jolly. The phone rang and Spence picked it up. "Hallo?" "It sure is, honey. Who? You mean the Gimp? He sure is..." He handed the phone to Doyle. "It's Florence."

"Where were you last Saturday?" said Florence. "I thought we were going out."

"It didn't sound like it to me..."

"You sound funny."

"I am funny."

"What's this about gimping? Did you cut yourself?"

"I was making the world ugly for you, darling."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to collect, Flo, and make Big Money at home."

"How many stitches?"

"I don't know. He covered it right up. Said he was tired."

"Are you drunk? Oh, forget it. I'm coming up to see you."

"Bring me a basketa goodies."

"I'll bring you a kick in the ass."

"Wear a dress!"

"Bye."

Feathers!" Doyle cried into the receiver. "Wear feathers!"

"That wasn't much of a conversation," said Spence.

"I'm in love with a beautiful bird," said Doyle with a distant smile.

Spence washed down a handful of vitamin C with Red Zinger. "You ought to do yourself a favor and take a few of these. How's the leg?"

"Number than shit."

"Looks like that's the summer," Spence said cheerfully.

Doyle shifted on the couch and tried to pay attention to the baseball game. It was KC and the Angels. The KC batter lined a single into shallow left. "You could keep sawing, Spence," he said finally. "We're all set up. We don't have to fold the whole show..."

"I guess I could..." said Spence thoughtfully.

"Spence?"

"What?"

"You don't want to do it anymore, do you?"

"No."



"You tired of all the money?"

Spence shook his head. "Tired of all the noise."

Doyle leaned toward him and mouthed three words silently.

Spence laughed. "How's that?" he said, cupping a hand to his ear.

"Save the Whales," said Doyle. Then he lay back and closed his eyes.

"Is this the patient?" a voice asked.

"That's most of him" Spence said.

Doyle blinked. "Flo."

She stood between him and the TV, breath-taking in a turquoise halter top and Levi jacket. "You shit-bum." she said. "Look what happens when you stand me up!"

"What you see in that guy is beyond me," said Spence. "Practically a vegetable."

Doyle reached up and pulled her down on top of him, his head swimming with her warm smell. "Go to your room, Spence,"

Florence lay on her stomach and propped her chin on her hands. "Did you cut yourself just to get laid?"

"It worked, didn't it? Who's with the kids?"

"My sister. She wasn't real happy about...does it hurt?"

"No. I cut the nerves."

"Oh great. Why weren't you there last weekend?"

Doyle played with her hair, rolling it behind her head.

"I thought you were calling it off."

"I was going to, yes. This isn't going anywhere, Doyle..." she laid a smooth hand on his stomach. He closed his eyes.

"I was thinking about that..." he said.

"When you cut yourself?"

"Nah," he said. "Nah. I wasn't thinking at all when it happened. But...I was thinking... um..that you're alright." He turned on his side. "You know what I mean?"

"No."

"Well." He kissed her lightly in the glow from the street lamps seeping in through the shades. My God, she's beautiful, he thought. "Well," he said. "I really like ya, Flo."

"Not 'Flo'," she said, removing his hand from her breast.

"If you let me call you 'Flo' I won't ask you to wear dresses. Please, I have to call you 'Flo'."

"For tonight..." she began. Then she sat up. "See? Everytime we start to talk about things you change the subject."

"You can call me 'Doe'."

"It's not funny, Doyle. I need to know where I stand."

I got a lot going on in my life and you're asking me for something I just can't pull off. 'Doe', 'Flo' - what's this shit?"

Doyle rammed his head into the pillow. "You think I duck your kids, don't you?"

"Don't you? That's my family, Doyle. There's a bunch of us..." she was silent. "That's the problem, isn't it?" she said finally.

Doyle lay thinking, his mind foggy with alcohol. The problem, the problem, he thought. My move. "I love you, honey," he said. "I love you Flo."

"Oh" she said. "First I was alright. Now you love me. Great. I'm moving right up." She turned to him. "This is stupid." She began to look for her clothes, then stopped. "You think because someone cares about you then you can take what you want and just toss the rest!"

"What?" Doyle said, sitting up.

"You heard what I said!"

He sat on the edge of the bed, his mouth working. "Flo!" he said finally. He put his hands on his head. "You want to talk about the future? My partner's out there pig drunk and I about cut my leg off...I'll be delighted to make it through the night!"

Florence stepped into her jeans and zipped them up. "Well that ought to tell you something."

"What? What should tell me something?"

"Carving yourself up like that all the time..."

"First time in nine years," Doyle snapped.

"Why don't you leave it at that?"

"Do you want me to sign something - is that it?"

Florence looked at him a long time, then shook her head. She put arms around him, squeezed him, then kissed the top of his head. "I'm glad you're OK," she said.

"So am I," said Doyle. He held his face to her belly for a long time, her heart to his ear. Finally he pulled away and leaned back on the bed. "You know what'd be nice? I've always wanted to open a pancake joint. With fresh sausage and real maple syrup, Bloody Marys..."

"It takes money to do that."

"We could sell your trailer."

Florence laughed. "Where'd you get the 'we'?"

"I'll need a waitress."

"You can't cook a lick."

"We'll call it Doze 'n Floze - "

"And we could all live in the back, right?"

"Something like that."

Florence finished dressing. "I've got to pick up the kids. It's late." She bent and kissed him lightly on the mouth. "Take care of yourself, Doyle." She reached for the door. "I'm glad you're OK."

Doyle sat on the bed, staring at his bandaged leg. Glad I'm OK? I'm not OK! He extended his foot, then eased it down. He stood up, put on a pair of shorts and limped around the room in a slow circle.

Spence sat on the floor of his room, watching TV, a drink in his hand. His McCulloch was stripped down in front of him, the parts lying on a greasy sheet of newspaper. He turned and grinned when Doyle hobbled in. "You two get everything straightened out?"

"I guess," said Doyle. He felt the numbness creeping up his leg. "We figured out there's nothing much I can do for her. And nothing much she can do for me." He picked up the bar from Spence's saw and sighted down the groove. "Not that we wouldn't like to - " He looked at Spence. "How you feel about pancakes?"

"Pancakes?" Spence's eyes swam peacefully in their sockets, unfocused, like a baby's. "It's not that long, Doyle. Four weeks and and we'll be back out there, get us some wood down." He grinned and the pupils suddenly focused; huge, hypnotic, patient. "Hell, we could use a break!"

Doyle was sweating heavily. "Let's see your cup," he said. He took a long drink, then turned to the window. Flies buzzed overhead. Outside, a flight of Harleys took

off up Front Street and into the night. Drunken laughter floated up from the parking lot below and a car door slammed.

Doyle stood in the blackness of his room, groping through the pocket of his jeans till he found his earplugs. He pushed them in as far as they'd go and made his way out to the fire escape. He leaned against the building and looked down the river to the west. The water was so low you could walk across on the larger bottom stones.

*Could have been worse. Come September we can try another outfit. Thompson Falls or Superior, maybe. Get a stake together and take a ferry up to Ketchikan and the big wood! Con Spence into one of those hard-ass Mormon logging camps and dry him out. Make some real bucks and buy a place on an island...*

He sagged against the brick, his leg stiff and leaden beneath him. He eased himself down to the cool steel of the fire escape and sniffed at the eastwind that riffled the surface of the river.

*Gulls. Gulls wheeling overhead and me and Spence, dressed to kill, smoking cigars. Sitting in a pagan gold Power Wagon with white spokes. Big CB whip. Watching the Prince Rupert ferry crawl in through the fog. They'll berth her up with those big hawsers and we'll sit there so cool, everyone'll*

*think we're Texans and there's Flo, radiant, walking down the gangplank, dark hair streaming in the wind. Beaded moccasins and a turquoise parka, coyote trim. Silver necklace, silver bracelets, ringing like bells, and I'll scoop her up and swing her around, out there on the jetty, around and around till she's breathless, till the sparks fly from her eyes --*

THE END

## THE PRINCE OF OAKS

Carlo opened the window wide, stuck his head out into the sodden October morning, then turned to the rustle of covers behind him.

"Are you going in?" said Iris, her voice sleepy.

"I guess I will."

She lay on her stomach, rested her chin on her downy arms. Carlo was a small, fine-boned man - almost delicate except for his powerful shoulders. She smiled. "You don't listen to the news, do you sweetpea? There's a major storm coming. Nobody's gonna be there today."

Carlo stepped into his jeans, his St. Christopher medallion jingling from his neck, then sat down on the bed to put on his socks. "Richie'll be there."

Iris turned on her side and faced the wall. "Shady Richie," she said. "Shady craazy Richie."

He turned to her, puzzled. "Jesus," he said, then turned his attention back to his socks, a pair of argyles Iris had picked out for him. "I think you must be in love with Richie Furey."

Iris sat up abruptly, her pale blond hair spilling down her back. "He's poison," she said. "I wouldn't touch



him with a vaccinated crow-bar."

"You don't even know him, goddamnit!"

She hugged her knees to her breasts. "I know Richie," she said. "He's a failed priest who'd rather scam than eat." She brushed his shoulder with her hand. "He scares me, Carlo."

"Seminary for one year...and he left. Period. You don't know what you're talking about." Carlo laced his boots in silence then slipped on his jean jacket. He buttoned it slowly, watching the window, remembering the afternoon he and Richie spent in the High Hat Lounge, drinking beers and shots; the veteran winos slobbering over their port, the young losers drinking Schlitz and hustling each other on a six foot table while next to him Richie droned on in mock liturgy:

The priesthood's a pompous scum, Carr-lo.  
A bunch of fat-ass eunuchs, out in the middle of nowhere,  
gnawing on the Eucharist, scarfing up the Trilogy  
While the world rots away a-rrround them -

He remembered the raw, tepid whisky, the potent stink of Richie's cigar and the hatred that shone from his boney face. There was something about Richie that scared him too.

He adjusted a Big Apple hat over his eyes so he had to tip his head back to see out. "Richie's a good tree man, he's the best they got," he said.

"Better than you?"

"Hell yes!" Then he added: "Possibly."

"I think you clowns deserve each other," she said,

and held out her arms.

Carlo bent and kissed her on the mouth. "Cheerio, mama."

"Give my love to Richie!"

He clumped out the door and down the stairs.

"Cheerio, pal," she said.

Richie backed the International Loadstar out of the shop while Carlo went in the office to get the day's work order.

"You're gonna get rained on," the secretary said.

She was the only one there.

"Everbody's been telling me that," Carlo said. "Fortunately..... I thrive on hardship." He flashed a smile. "In fact, I can't hardly get enough." She continued her typing without looking up. She was a heavy, sad-looking woman with streaked hair, lacquered nails, and blue 'harlequin' style glasses.

"We'll see ya, Marie."

"Pretty soon, no doubt," she said.

The International sat by the front office idling. Its paint was an oxidized green and hydraulic fluid oozed from the lines of the five-ton boom on the back. WHEELLOCK TREE SERVICE was painted in faded letters on the side. Carlo jumped in and slammed the door.

It didn't close. He opened it and a flattened Pepsi can clattered out. Carlo slammed it again.

The inside of the cab was thick with tobacco smoke. Richie sat at the wheel, a rangy, blond man in his mid-thirties. His elbows rested on the spokes, his hands were clasped across the upper rim. His bony knees nudged the dashboard and a Between the Acts cigar hung from his mouth. A scattering of acne scars and hard, angular cheekbones suggested his face had been gouged from some softer block of flesh. A drooping mustache helped fill out a sparse goatee and he wore a green knit hat far back on his head. His eyes were locked on some point far away.

Raindrops began to spatter the roof and hood. Richie flicked the wipers on and they squealed across the windshield. He flicked them off and the two men sat for several minutes beneath the din of the rain, the engine rumbling softly.

"It's a dogshit day," Carlo said finally. "You want to hang it up?"

Richie gave him a peculiar smile.

"You realize we're the only crew that came in?"

Richie blew a stream of smoke at the windshield and spoke in a weary voice: "Carlo, I love these days. They're dark, they're depressing and everyone says 'fuck it' and goes home. Everybody but me, because I love them. You want to hang it up?" he turned to Carlo. "This is the way it looks to me all the time. This is the way it really is all the time." He stubbed his cigar out on the floor and

a foul smell rose. "What's the order say?"

Carlo shrugged. The season was winding down and he could use the money. He picked up the order and read "'Remove oak, left front, 205 Halsey Street, Eva Zook.' I'm in there, Richie. Let's go."

Richie dumped the truck into gear and pulled out into the Boston traffic. "How much has he got on that oak?"

"Five hundred bucks," said Carlo.

"Must have some size," said Richie. "But then, Red's an equal opportunity gouger. That's our boss, Carlo. If Zook has any cash at all, he'll smell it."

By the time they turned up Halsey Street it was a steady downpour. The buildings were uniform three-story tenements sided in pastel shingling; they slipped by in a monochrome blur. The wind picked up and scattered circles of wet leaves around them. They stopped at a light, next to a group of fat women waiting for a bus, shopping bags clutched in their hands.

"Wet and miserable and wishing they were dead!" Richie cried. He rolled down his window. "There's a turkey in the oven, ladies! And no one's home to baste it! Not a soul!"

The women peered into the truck, eyes blank. Carlo

figured they didn't get it. He didn't get it himself. It was one of those things Richie was moved to holler after he'd been fighting with his wife. He lit a Pall Mall.

"Hand me one of those stogies, Carlo," Richie said. "God this is great!" He drummed his fingers on the wheel and hummed tunelessly.

Carlo handed him a cigaret. "You and Johanna fight the Third World War last night?"

Richie snorted, his eyes on the street. "Carlo, you little greaser. You knock me out." His face twisted with anger. "I got home last night, walked in the door and tripped over four bags of garbage. There's two weeks' dishes in the sink and the kid's running around with his pants full. Food and shit wall to wall. Clothes, shoes, crap...I blew up and we went round and round. Midnight and finally I go to bed - she's sitting on the can, crying her brains out..." He turned to Carlo. "I don't care what Johanna does all day but it makes me wonder..." His voice was tired, flat. He dragged on his cigaret. "Three AM, she's still sitting there, still crying. So I went in and sat down beside her. I put my arm around her and I said 'Johanna, you look so pitiful I think you ought to kill yourself. If I had a .45 I'd load it and help you hold it to your head!'" Richie's mouth was tight and bloodless and his eyes squinted ahead into the rain-swept street.

Carlo felt a chill. He put out his cigaret and forced a laugh. "Domini, domini," he said. He heard these stories a couple times a week. It was an Act of God they hadn't killed each other yet. He wondered why they didn't hang it up.

Number 205 sat on the high point of Halsey Street, a granite outcropping with seams bulging through the thin grass. It was the only single family house in the neighborhood: tudor gables, brick lower story. Old money. The shades were drawn and thick clumps of hemlock screened the downstairs. Carlo shivered and pulled at his cap.

Richie was out of the truck, dragging his raingear from under the seat, humming as he struggled into it. His slicker was jet black and when he flipped the hood up, he looked like a hangman. He finished outfitting himself and walked over to the oak. Reluctantly, Carlo got out and joined him.

The oak stood in the northwest corner of the lot. It was at least sixty feet high. Twenty-four inch diameter with a straight, clear run of trunk to the first crotch, some twenty feet up. House current and phone lines on the back side, pretty good clearance by the house. The backside would need rigging, the rest of the tree was a clear drop. In decent weather they could have it down and out of there

in under a day. Five hundred dollars was outrageous.

Richie shielded his eyes from the rain and scanned the top. "Half-day, plus," he said. "Jesus. I don't even see any dead wood up there. Why does she want it down?"

Richie went to the door with the order while Carlo studied the tree. It was a beauty. No scars, no splits. Straight and symmetrical, it was an aristocrat among the ailanthus and swamp maple struggling from the hard packed earth of the surrounding yards. The leaves that clung to the outer branches were lustrous gold, even in the rain. There was good reason to take it down. It outclassed the whole neighborhood.

In the shadow of the porch he could see Richie towering over Eva Zook, her head tipped back like a child. Carlo looked toward the oak. Uh-uh, he thought. It's wet, it's cold, it's stupid. Kiss it off, Carlo. He shook his head and jogged for the shelter of the porch.

Eva Zook stood at Richie's side, a tiny figure with Coke bottle glasses and a toothless smile. They stopped talking as Carlo climbed the steps. Richie was grinning incandescently. The smell of mildew hung thickly in the gloom. Something was up.

"Mrs. Zook, allow me to introduce my partner, Carlo

Piranesi," Richie said with antic grace. "Carlo - Eva Zook."

"My pleasure," Carlo said. She extended a bloodless hand and Carlo shook it gently. Richie was still grinning. What is this shit? thought Carlo. "Why do you want it down, Mrs. Zook? It's a specimen. You're lucky to have it."

"I've raked its leaves for forty years," she said. "I'm not going to rake them anymore."

Carlo rolled his eyes in Richie's direction. "That's the nature of the beast, Mrs. Zook," he said. "At least it don't crap on your lawn..." he folded his arms in exasperation, then pointed to it. "It's a beautiful tree..."

"I know it's a beautiful tree!" she snapped. "Three o'clock in the morning, ten years ago I saw its spirit, like a ball of fire right there," she said, pointing a finger at a spot to the left of the oak's crown, over the sidewalk.

Carlo glanced at Richie. Richie raised his eyebrows and turned his palms up.

"You believe a tree has a spirit then?"

"I know perfectly well it does," she said shortly. "I saw it."

"But you still want it down?"

"I'm eighty-two years old," she said, her watery eyes focusing on a point somewhere over his shoulder. "I do not intend to rake leaves the rest of my life."



"You could have someone else rake 'em, Mrs. Zook. The neighborhood kids maybe." Behind Mrs. Zook's back Richie grimaced.

"I won't have those little heathens on my property!" she trilled. "They used to prowl around, spying in my windows. They'd laugh at me when I walked down the street. Finally they set my garage on fire, and I had to fix 'em. Ooh, did I fix 'em," she said, turning her gaze pointedly from one man to the other. There was an awkward pause.

"Well," said Richie, flipping his cigar off the porch. "Sometimes you gotta do that. Let's get to it."

The two men pushed through the hemlocks to the street. They heard the door close behind them.

"What do you suppose she did to those kids?" said Richie.

"She fixed 'em. Pushed 'em in the oven and ate 'em. She's crazy, Rich."

Richie scrambled onto the bed of the truck, unlocked the jockey box and began yanking ropes and harness out. The gear was soaked instantly.

Carlo stood in a puddle by the curb and watched, incredulous. "You really planning to go through with this?"

"You wanta raise the boom, Carlo?"

"Shit no."

Richie hopped down, raised the boom himself, then began a sing-song inventory as he pulled more equipment out of the box. "And we gotta da setta spurs and we gotta da climbing line for Carlocci and dio mio! We gotta da chainsaw! Hot damn. You starta da backside and I finish! Bellissima!"

Richie tossed Carlo's gear to him. Carlo let it fly by and land in a heap in the muddy drive. He stood glaring up at Richie. He'd pretty much made up his mind he was going to put his fist through Richie's head.

"Carlo, buddy. Just zip that top off into the drive, we'll rope those four off the backside, you come down and I'll finish up. What d'ya say?" Richie said easily.

"I'd rather blow a goat."

Richie looked pained. "Listen, Carlo," he began.

Carlo interrupted him. "You listen. If you think at five bucks an hour I'm going to shag this fucking tree in the middle of a fucking typhoon for some crazy woman, you are sadly mistaken. You climb it! It's your kind of day. Carlucci is packing it in."

Richie checked the belligerent line of his partner's jaw. He'd seen Carlo get ugly. He squatted down on the edge of the truck bed, a smile flickering across his face. Carlo set his feet and got ready. The rain pelted down.

"Carlo, buddy. We ain't talking about five bucks an

hour," he said steadily. "Or six or eight or ten bucks an hour. What we're talking about is twenty-five bucks an hour. Do you think you can knock that oak down in a little weather for twenty-five bucks an hour? Two hundred big ones for the day, partner. Can you get into it?"

Carlo was jarred. He backed away a step and snorted. "Jesus, Richie. Did you steal this job? Zook's in there cancelling right now, is that it?"

"You got it."

"What if Red shows up to check on us?"

"Red ain't coming in today, Carlo."

"So you beat his price by a hundred and she bought it?"

"She bought it!" Richie crowed. "I beat it by a bill and she bought it!"

Carlo tipped his hat back and laughed up into the downpour. "You win!"

Richie hopped down from the deck, gloating. "Money talks and bullshit walks, it's true what they say." He began gassing the saws, then looked over his shoulder at Carlo. "Glad to see you're not bullshit."

"Uppa da tree," said Carlo, fishing his gear out of the mud. He stepped into his harness and buckled it tight, grabbed the coiled hundred feet of half-inch line and the

spurs and slogged over to the oak. He strapped on the spurs, undid the hitch on the coil of line, snapped the safety hook to the harness and looked up the span of trunk to the crown. His hands were numb. He rubbed them together and exhaled a plume of breath on them. He dug a spur into the thick bark at the base of the tree, threw his arms around the trunk and started up. Then he stopped. "Richie, this is the prince of oaks we're beating down."

Richie was carrying the two chainsaws over. His face was cowed in the shiny hood of his slicker, a cigar tight in his teeth. "Carlo," he said. "If we don't do it, somebody else will."

Carlo didn't say anything. Richie's right, he thought. Richie's always fucking right. It might as well be me for two bills. He reached the first crotch and took a breather. He patted the wet bark. "Sorry buddy, but it's your time," he said.

He climbed toward the crown, stood in a crotch and tucked his hands under his armpits to warm them. Richie was back on the porch, talking to Eva Zook. Carlo wondered if Richie would have told him he'd stolen the job if he hadn't balked. He guessed Richie would have had to, otherwise he wouldn't have drawn pay for the day and would have been asking around. He wondered if it was a fifty-fifty split or if Richie had gone higher than four hundred. The two of them looked up from the porch and he began clinging again. He decided

he wondered too much. His top spur slipped free and he shot downward, all his weight on the lower spur, his legs in a splits. He regained his balance, his forearms smarting from the slide, and reached the top wood. He jammed a spur in the tender upper bark and rested his weight in the crotch of a four-inch branch. He warmed his fingers in his mouth, then looped his climbing line through the crotch, clipped the safety hook to the D rings on his harness and tied in with a taut-line hitch. Looking around the crown, he saw the tree was as clean as if it had been fine pruned. He looked straight down the trunk at the line of splintery burrs his spurs had left. "Send up the saw!" he hollered.

Richie tied the saw to Carlo's line, then tugged once. Carlo hauled it up, the saw spinning and glistening on the end of his rope. He untied it and cranked it till it caught. He let it run for a minute, sighted down an open slot between the lower branches, then notched the top out above his safety line. It was a section about fifteen feet long, weighted toward the street. "Heads up," he hollered, and sank the Homelite into the back cut. He watched the piece settle out, then break clean from its hinge and whistle into the drive.

Richie began bucking it while Carlo fumbled at the

rain-swollen coils of his safety knot. Eva Zook was watching from the steps now. She had put on a green floral rain bonnet. Cute, he thought. Richie was already loading brush onto the truck. He freed his knot and descended to the next branch. It was very close to the wires.

"Looks pretty tight, Richie."

"Looks good from here!"

Carlo eyeballed the branch again and shrugged. This time he cut a shallow notch in a plane horizontal to the branch. He switched off his saw.

"You'd better take a wrap, Richie. This one's heavy!"

Richie walked the line once around the tree for more friction. Carlo brought the back cut in until he felt the branch shudder. The ends swept heavily across the wires, cleared and Richie let the piece rip down before it could swing back into them. The lines danced and buzzed, but they held.

"Nice! Nice!" called Richie.

"Goddamn," said Carlo. "This tree's taking itself down." Then he knocked on wood. He was giddy with adrenalin. That had been the tightest cut.

He looked straight down at Richie's black shiny back, then turned his gaze along the taut manila line, spinning out from his belly to the ugly stubs of the cut he'd made, twenty feet above. The raw living wood shone bright against the wet bark. I have certainly made the son-of-a-bitch ugly,

he thought. He looked to where the skyline should have been but there was nothing but tri-plexes. He felt a numbing compression in his stomach.

Eva Zook was watching him.

"You still up there, Carlo?" Richie stood waiting for the next cut.

"Still up here."

"And are you having a good time?"

"Fabulous, Richie." He yanked at his knot and lowered himself past his last cut, the clean scent of tannin stinging his nostrils. He descended to the mud, unsnapped his safety hook, stripped off the spurs and harness and handed the gear to Richie. "It's your show, buddy," he said. He felt light and bouncy back on the ground.

"Let's break," said Richie. "Your ass is soaked."

"You're on," said Carlo.

"Nice job. Bravo."

They sat in the cab of the truck with the heater on, smoking cigarettes.

"What time is it, Richie?"

"Eleven."

"We're doing good. Turn that heater down a notch. I'm burning up."

"You won't be when you get back out there, Carlo. Didn't you bring any rain gear?"

"I'm no duck."

"Are you complaining?" Richie chuckled, his long nicotine stained fingers delicately tapping the ash from his cigar. "Carlo, what do you say we skip lunch. We can be out of here by three if we hump it."

Carlo didn't mind. The only thing he minded was being close to Eva Zook. He turned to Richie. "You looked like you were getting pretty chummy with the Zook," he said.

Richie scowled. "Yeah, yeah! Jesus! Talked my brains out. But you know what? The woman owns every other property on this street. Her husband managed 'em till he died, then she managed 'em herself till recently. The old bat's a slumlord, Carlo."

"No wonder the kids gave her shit."

"Yeah," said Richie, his face softening. "The poor old woman's been holed up in this place for twenty years, surrounded by hostiles. Rattling around, seeing fireballs - Ai-yiyi." He smiled suggestively. "But she liked your act, Carlo. Watned to know if you were married."

"What'd you tell her?"

"'Living in sin'. She thought you were pretty cute." He rolled his eyes grotesquely. "Yeah, if you play your cards right, someday this could all be yours, daddy sugar!" And



he gestured grandly to the neighborhood.

"Asshole!" Carlo said, flushing.

Richie choked with laughter. "Carlo, don't sit on this one. Get in there while the getting is good. She's got one foot in the grave and the other on a banana peel - "

"Richie, let's get this over with!" said Carlo. He stuck his cap back on his head and they stepped out of the truck.

Carlo hooted and danced up and down as the cold penetrated his wet clothes. As the two men stood gassing the saws, Eva Zook appeared. Carlo was struck by how poor her clothes were. All that money and she dressed Salvation Army. She wore a tiny pair of buckle galoshes, a child's size. Her threadbare maroon coat hung to her ankles and the rain hat leaked.

"There's hot coffee on the porch for you gentlemen. And I've got something for you," she said, pointing her finger at Carlo, and she headed back to the gloom of the porch.

Richie winked at Carlo and made the Big OK with his thumb and forefinger. Carlo punched him in the kidneys.

Up on the porch were two steaming cups of Sanka and a bag of cookies. The two men seated themselves on the railing while the old woman entered the house and returned with a yellow rain parka.

"Take it," she said, beaming. She thrust it toward Carlo. "It's for you."

Richie sipped his coffee, poker-faced while she dangled the parka in front of him. Carlo stood up and took it gently. "Thanks, Mrs. Zook," he said.

"Yellow's a spiritual color," she said. Richie was humming Help Me Make It Through the Night.

Carlo slipped it on. There was a large rip under one arm. Eva Zook sat in a rusted porch chair across from them and told them about how she had been sick after her husband died. With the properties to manage, she had developed bleeding ulcers and the doctors had wanted to remove her stomach. "I wouldn't let them." she said. "I cured myself by eating nothing but custard and cream. One night I saw the face of God outside my window, glowing like the sun, except it was blue. Then I knew I was cured."

Richie and Carlo sat on the railing, their backs to the storm. Water gushed from the holes in the gutters and beat at the hemlocks enclosing the porch. A dog barked somewhere down the block.

"Did you let him in?" asked Richie. Always the Jesuit, thought Carlo.

Mrs. Zook looked surprised. "Did I let him in? No. He had come to tell me I was whole again. Then he was gone."

Richie finished the tree while Carlo bucked the wood and stacked brush on the truck. By three all that was left standing was a twenty-foot log.

"There's some boards in that," said Carlo.

"We're not in the board business," said Richie. He'd left a rope tied to the top of the but and Carlo pulled from the street as Richie cut, the Homelite bellowing against the storm. When Richie finally killed the saw there was no sound except the rain.

They boomed the log on top of the brush and nudged it tight against the side rack. They packed the gear, lashed the load down, then ambled up the steps tracking sawdust and mud. "It's tip day," said Richie, "I can feel it." He did an odd little dance in the mud.

Eva Zook was waiting for them with a roll of bills the diameter of a coffee can. She began peeling off fifties into Richie's muddy hand and Carlo watched, counting to himself till Richie put his back to him. Richie pocketed the cash and thanked her.

"Thank you," she said. "It was a pleasure to watch

you. Both of you." She shook Richie's hand and turned primly to Carlo. "And this is for you," she said, pressing a bill into his hand. She paused. "I know you," she said.

"Pardon me?"

"I know you," she repeated. "You do lecherous things with women. Upstairs somewhere. Behind doors."

Richie snickered.

"You know you do," she said solemnly. "I want you to keep that parka. It protects."

"OK, Mrs. Zook. Thanks," said Carlo. The smell of mildew was overpowering.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she said. "I won't be raking leaves anymore. You do good work."

The two men slogged back to the truck.

"Well, killer," Richie grinned. "How much did she slip you?"

Carlo looked at the bill crumpled in his muddy hand. "I got a big fin," he said, and pushed the twenty under his slicker and into his back pocket. "Now where's my two bills?"

Richie laughed. "Listen to Carlucci! 'Where's my two bills?' We've got to dump first, then we've got to think of something to tell Red when he asks me where the truck was all day."

Carlo snorted. That was no problem. Red was afraid

of Richie. Everybody was. Everybody but Carlo. "Tell him we were cleaning out your apartment with it."

Richie roared with laughter. "I like it!" he said. "I like it."

"Good. Cut the cake, Rich."

"How about when we get back to town?"

"How about now?"

"Ok, Ok, Jesus." Richie growled. "What'd you think I was going to do - disappear with it?" He got in the driver's side and slammed the door hard.

Carlo climbed in beside him. "I don't see what the problem is," he said. "We finish the job and then we divvy up. What's the problem?"

Richie looked annoyed. "There's no goddamn problem, Carlo," he said. "How about a Pall Mall, buddy?"

While Carlo fished inside his sweater for a cigaret, Richie produced the roll of bills and quickly peeled four fifties onto the seat. Carlo shot a glance down and saw five bills left in the roll before Richie could replace it. Carlo handed him a cigaret and Richie lit up and started the engine.

"Nothing like some fresh green in your jeans, partner." He knuckled Carlo in the ribs, dropped the truck into low range and they rumbled away from the curb.

Carlo watched as Eva Zook's house receded in the mirror.

There was a kind of hole where the oak had been - a flicker, a blank spot. He'd seen it before, trees that left holes. He had known for a fact the oak would.

"Yeah," Richie continued. "Iris is gonna kiss your head off when you come home all monied down and it's not even payday. She's gonna say: 'Ooh, Carlucci!'" and his voice trailed off in falsetto.

Carlo stretched and propped his boots on the dash. "Nah," he said. "She'll wonder where I got it. And when I tell her, she won't like it. We'll have this big fucking fight - " he tipped his head back and began to laugh. "She'll cry and I'll offer her a .45, cause it's the gentlemanly thing to do - " he stopped laughing and slid his feet to the floor. "So I figure I won't tell her." He turned to Richie. "Know what I mean?"

Richie cranked down his window and tossed away his cigaret. A gust of rain caught the side of his face. "Do I know what he means?" he hollered to the street. He closed the window, a smile razor thin on his lips. "I know what he means..."

"Good," said Carlo. "I'll buy you a drink. We've got the Prince of Oaks himself back there and we've got to do this right."

"...He means he'll trade a venial sin for a mortal one, Lord."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You're up to your neck in the most repulsive kind of turpitude, sport. So far today you've cheated and stolen and willingly involved yourself in the kind of depravity that'd make you complicit in a tragic suicide. And the ugly thing is, you did it all for moo-lah. Do you really think you can cop a plea with the Redeemer?" Richie snickered. "Odds are you've even fornicated too."

Carlo closed his eyes wearily. "Get outta here with that shit. Let's have a drink."

"Now he's planning to drink his guilt away. Sweet Christ." Richie shifted into high range and they picked up speed. "No, Carlo. We've got to make the dump before it closes." He twisted in his seat, a gleeful light in his eyes. "Then I'll take your confession."

"Who's gonna take yours? Batman?" Carlo's voice sounded small and flat to him. It had grown stuffy in the cab and he unzipped the parka.

Richie exploded with laughter. "Why the Prince of Oaks is, you little fart! The Prince of Oaks himself!"

Carlo shook his head. "You're crazier than hell, Rich."

Richie's eyes were locked on the street ahead. "Once a catholic, always a catholic, Carlo," he said, his voice serene.

Carlo stared through the fogged windshield at the

dingy spectacle of Halsey Street and a mixture of exhaustion and sadness swept over him, oddly familiar. Richie was right. Richie was always fucking right.

THE END