

Anthony Schmitz
Fatman Descends/1

The Dead Guy Pose I start every day with a yoga pose at which I excel. This is the Dead Guy Pose. I don't bother to get out of bed. I swipe the pillows to the floor, arrange my arms beside me, palm up, and let my mind go blank.

The last part of this does not require so much effort. Then again, the other parts don't either.

On the morning that concerns us here, I was distracted briefly by the curtain fluttering in the window, by the birds doing their usual twittering, and by what sounded like the neighbor's pitbull going for the paper boy. Then that delicious nothingness settled on me, until out of the blankness my mother's image appeared.

Okay, I was a momma's boy. I don't make any excuses. Just because she's been dead twenty years doesn't mean so much has changed. When momma sends me a message, I listen.

Charles, she said. Strange things about to happen.

The Earth Moves Under My Feet After a healthy breakfast I walked down University Avenue, huffing and also puffing. It is not for nothing that I am known as Fatman. People pronounce it as one word. I'm used to it.

I think of myself as majestic. When I sink my head upon my chins and look down my nose at you from my height, well, you know you're being looked at. For all that, I am surprisingly light on my feet. Believe me, it's not the only contradiction in the way I'm put together.

I walked east from Victoria, toward AAA-A1 Auto Repair, to retrieve my Volvo from a gentleman named Ivan.

I was outside his shop when I felt the sidewalk tremble beneath my feet. No surprise there. Earth movers tor up the street. Workmen in their lime-colored vests were building the light rail line that would accomplish, in theory, all sorts of things. Move workers to their jobs. Spur development. Transform the, oh, *sketchy* environs into something they had not previously been. Like prosperous.

I looked around to see what was making the ground jump. There it was: a front-end loader dumping a few tons of rubble. Dust rose in the hazy June morning.

For a moment it seemed that the world held its breath. Workers stopped in place. Birds quit their chirping. Maybe I'm getting this wrong but even the bits of dust froze in the air.

Then came another rumble, this from deep beneath my feet. The fresh scent of a summer morning was replaced by something else, faint at first. My nose twitched. Sulfur. That was it. Like a few thousand eggs boiled somewhere inside the Earth.

"You smell that?" one of the workmen yelled to me.

"Maybe you hit a gas line."

"No way. We got it shut off."

"Then what? A volcano?"

"Don't mess with me."

"Okay, you don't like my idea. What's yours?"

"Smells like somebody opened the door to hell."

Despite all the official explanations and denials that were to come, this was less wrong than you might think.

A Million Hard Boiled Eggs: The signs on Ivan's shop made a lot of promises. Friendly, reliable service. Quality you can trust. Oil changes, \$14.99. False, false, false, but as I walked in the door I was, briefly, hopeful.

I found Ivan engaged in customer service with a Hmong kid, who explained that he had brought his car in to have suspension gizmos installed. His idea was that his Civic would be raised in the back, creating the impression that even when parked it was hurtling forward. "But your guy, he puts them on front, not back. Maybe he doesn't understand?"

All of this was said apologetically, an exercise in doling out face-saving opportunity.

"My guy! My guy!" Ivan snapped. "You say my guy is stupid? He doesn't know which way which?"

"No, no, no! He's not stupid! Maybe he doesn't understand."

"Down, up, up, down. He does it the right way, like the instructions say."

By now Ivan had a finger poised, ready to jab the kid in the chest.

"You guys smell something funny?" I asked.

"What! Now you say my shop stinks?"

"Cool down, brother. Try your nose instead of your mouth."

"I'm not your brother."

"Take a whiff."

That smell from the sidewalk was stronger now. I figured it might be leaking through the cracks in the floor. Our nostrils twitched together. We all went a little cross-eyed, considering.

"I don't smell nothing."

"Like matches," said the kid. "Like someone lit a whole book of matches."

It wasn't just that. Something was getting under my skin. Normally I find ranters like Ivan interesting, amusing even. But mostly now I wanted to get a hand around his throat. This wasn't me. Usually I've got a song in my heart.

The kid slammed an open palm on the counter. "Your shop stinks," he said. "Your service stinks. I tell everyone I know. Stinks!"

My feeling was that we were all being poisoned.

Before Ivan could react, a cop let himself in.

"Yo, Fatman," he said. "You a satisfied customer here? Puts you in an exclusive club."

"Roscoe. You're in consumer services now? What happened to murder and mayhem?"

"It gets old, you know? Anyway, my sister-in-law's got issues with Ivan here."

"I got issues," the kid said.

"Of course you do. You're doing business with Ivan. My advice..."

Roscoe paused. His nose pleated like an accordion.

"What the hell. You butchering pigs in the back?"

"My thought was hard-boiled eggs. About a million of them."

"I was pissed off when I walked in here and I'm more pissed off now," Roscoe observed.

"The sister-in-law's transmission shifts like it's full of gravel. My brother is climbing up my back. I got my eye on you, Ivan. That's all I'm saying. I'm coming back tomorrow. You better have a plan to make me happy."

"Officer, he puts on my lifters, backward."

"He does everything backward. My advice, buddy, go someplace else. Anyplace else."

The kid and Roscoe cleared out at the same time, leaving me alone with Ivan.

"You! What you want!"

"You got my Volvo. Oil change. Fourteen ninety-nine."

"Not ready! Come back tomorrow!"

"You know I'll be back! It better be ready!"

Ivan grabbed a heavy-duty torque wrench. "Don't tell me what happen," he whispered.

"Okay, man. Okay. I'll be back. Tomorrow morning. Nine. I want my car."

"Oh, you have your car."

I hit the door and strode back onto University Avenue. Once I got a block down the street I felt my usual self again. Out with the angry stomping, in with the happy swagger.

And I wondered, *What was that all about?*

We Go By the Book. Mostly: I'm a punctual guy. My trains run on time. When I told Ivan I'd be back at nine, I didn't mean two minutes after. I didn't imagine he'd be there, but I figured it would make all the more of an impression if I was leaning up against his door, waiting.

I listened to the birds sing for a while before rolling out of my bed at seven. Same drill as always. A healthy breakfast. Most important meal of the day. Eggs, toast, bacon, yogurt, orange juice, coffee, cream and sugar, berries, maybe a few other items that I'm forgetting. I'm a hungry man in so many ways. Newspaper spread out before me. Old school, that. Who reads the things anymore? Then outside to dabble in my garden. Tie off the tomatoes. Deadhead the flowers. Listen to the bees.

I've got a tidy little place. Get this: there's even a white picket fence along the

sidewalk. Sure, a little too often someone spray paints *Fuck you Fatman* on it, and I'm another hundred bucks into Alfonzo, my handyman. But still. You can't let yourself get dragged down.

I sauntered down Charles Avenue, turned on Victoria and headed east on University Avenue again toward Ivan's place. I'm not telling you the neighborhood is beautiful. There are places where people are trying, places where they have failed, places where the idea of trying was lost a few generations back.

Ivan's place was still locked up when I arrived. No surprise there. I got out the local section of the paper that I had tucked in my back pocket. I lowered myself — okay, it's a job, moving my girth — onto the weed-choked planter outside Ivan's door. I was grinding through the paper's daily dose of murder, beatings and child abuse when Roscoe pulled up in his cruiser.

"Fatman," he said. "What? You think your car is finished?"

"Finished. Yeah, it might be that."

Roscoe gave me a dead little chuckle. "Same as my sister-in-law's car. Christ."

Roscoe hitched up his belt. His gear pulled it down over the arc of his belly. The squad-car diet hadn't done him much good.

"This guy think he's a banker? It's after nine. Is he hiding in there?"

"How should I know? Why don't you shoot the door open?"

"That's Dirty Harry stuff. We go by the book. Mostly."

He took out his flashlight and banged on the door.

"You're going to break it with that thing." The flashlight was the size of a toddler's arm.

He put a hand against the glass and pressed his face to the window. "That your ride in there, Fatman?"

"Volvo? Black?"

"I like how he changes the oil."

"What?"

"Pulls the plug and lets it drain on the floor."

I struggled to my feet and arranged myself beside Roscoe. "That all you see?"

"What?"

"I'm not telling you how to do your job. But if I were you?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd be curious that pair of feet sticking out from under my car."

No Rush on the Ambulance: Roscoe slammed his flashlight against the glass door. It shattered. We walked through. "Police," Roscoe shouted. "We're going to get you out."

"Doesn't look like there's much rush."

"Come on, Fatman. Let's be positive."

"Be positive if you want. The guy's still dead."

"We don't know that."

I hit the button for the lift.

"Jesus, Fatman. That's evidence. Don't go smearing everything up."

"You're the one thinks he's living. I'm getting the car off him. You give him mouth-to-mouth. If he's so alive."

"Call nine one one, will you? Do something useful."

I got the car six feet in the air and stopped it there.

"Jesus, what a mess," Roscoe said.

"No rush on the ambulance," I told the dispatcher.

"Looks like you don't have to keep an eye on Ivan anymore," I said.

"That's Ivan? How can you tell?"

"Says Ivan on his shirt."

"Yo Sherlock. You ever considered a career in law enforcement?"

"I can read. Why waste my talents?"

"With all due respect, go to hell, Fatman."

"Yeah, you're welcome."

"What do you think? The lift failed?"

I shrugged. "It goes up." I lowered the car a couple feet. "It goes down. You got engineers to check it out, right?"

"Oh yeah, we got a couple dozen just waiting on me to call."

"Looks to me like somebody dropped it on him."

"Don't these things have safety catches?"

"Maybe somebody jimmied it. You're the cop, remember?"

"That's awfully cold. I mean, shooting a guy, sure. Happens every day. Stabbing. But dropping a car, even on a guy like Ivan. That's messed up."

Oil and water don't mix; neither do blood and oil. The red was bright against the black puddle.

"The suspect list," Roscoe said. "Man, that's everybody ever walked in the door. My sister-in-law for starters."

Sirens sounded. The fire station was just down the street, but the way University Avenue was dug up it would take a while before the trucks arrived.

"Might as well take a load off," Roscoe said. Ivan had a mini-van seat propped up against the wall. Roscoe and I sat side-by-side and stared at the mess.

"What next?" I asked. "Do I change my own oil?"

"Get used to walking, Fatman. Your ride is evidence now. You're screwed, pal."

"You take some pictures, you take some prints. How much time do you need?"

"You ever hear about government work? You don't like walking, maybe you should buy a bike. The exercise won't kill you, you know."

"Now you're a doctor."

"I wish. I'd get paid more for looking at blood."

That shut us both up for a while. You can joke for a while in the presence of death but it catches up with you.

"It still stinks in here," Roscoe said. "What the hell do you think it is?"

As a description of the facts, *what the hell* turned out to be closer than you'd think.

A Murder of Grackles: I figured Roscoe was right about my car. The cops would care more about their investigation than about my ride. Ivan's shop would be a crime scene for days. My car would be stuck on Ivan's lift. Then the cops would impound it because it was a murder weapon.

"Come on, I'll give you a ride home," Roscoe offered after the investigators were done with me. "Long way for a big guy to walk."

"I don't know. Ride in a cop car. Always makes me nervous."

"Take a walk on the wild side, Fatman."

Outside it was the usual end-of-the-world scene that comes with a murder. An ambulance. A fire truck. A half dozen cop cars. Then the news trucks and cameramen. Photogs from print. A couple dozen gawkers.

"Over here," Roscoe said, pointing toward his cruiser.

Some kind of bird was belly up on the hood, its wings just barely flapping. "What are you, Roscoe. The angel of death?"

"A grackle," Roscoe said. "Not like there's a shortage."

"There might be. Look around." I saw another dozen or so, dead or near dead. They looked like they had fallen out of the sky. Then I spotted a rat wriggling in the gutter on its back.

"Maybe you ought to call somebody," I said.

"Like who? James Audubon?"

"Poison Center. Natural Resources. Animal Control. I don't know. Somebody. Even the rats can't take it. Does this look natural to you?"

"It's Frogtown, Fatman. What's natural?"

"Okay, you got me."

Some stunted trees grew out of metal grates in the sidewalk. Weeds sprouted from the cracks. That was it for nature where we stood.

"You could put one of them in a plastic bag at least. Take it to the health department."

"I'm a street cop, okay? Not Francis of Assisi. Give me your paper, will you?"

I still had the newspaper tucked in my back pocket. I handed it over to him. Roscoe used it to brush the bird from the hood and into the street. Then he looked at the paper with disgust. He dropped it on top of the bird and got into the car.

"What happened to the laws against littering?"

"You want a ride or not?"
"I'm telling you, Roscoe, nobody respects my neighborhood."
"Of course not. You ought to move."
"It's home, man. You're insulting my home."
"I'm saying maybe you need a new home. Think about it."

That's My Soul in that Jar: We drove a couple blocks, past the CarX and the U-Haul shop. We were closing in on Little Junior's second-hand joint when I yelled at Roscoe, "Hey, stop!"

"Something else dead, man, I'm throwing you out of the car and driving away."
"No, it's wheels, Roscoe."

The usual flotsam was stacked on the sidewalk outside the store. Chairs, a couple beds, dressers, tables. Stuck in among it all was a three-wheeled bike.

"That's the spirit, Fatman. Start pedaling yourself around. Before you know it you'll look as good as me."

"That's encouraging?"
"That's flattery, pal."

Roscoe parked illegally. Little Junior didn't bother to look up from his crossword when we walked in. "You two," he said. "Good cop bad cop."

"I'm no cop."
"Close enough. Mister Morality."

We go back. I told him once his soul would rot if he continued to overcharge me. Next time I came in he handed me a Mason jar with what looked like dried up dog shit inside it. "What's that?" I asked him.

"I believe it's my soul. I thought, 'Maybe Fatman would like to keep it.' For you, no charge."

I asked Little about the bike.

"Two hundred," he said, pulling at his ear. A thicket of hair grew out of it. Disgusting, sort of, but Little wasn't making a living as an ear model.

"I got fifty."
"Don't insult me."
"Look who's talking."
"Okay, Fatman. As a contribution to your health and well-being. One fifty."
"Roscoe, put him in cuffs. He's trying to rob me."
"I ought to toss you both into the cruiser. Aggravated penny-pinching."
"Aggravating," I said.
"This is my final offer, Fatman. One twenty five."

I rode it away for eighty-seven fifty.

I was mocked by feral youth on my way back home. Kids holding down the corner, holding up their pants. "Need a wide load sign on that! Blinking lights!

Lookout Mr. Street! Asphalt gonna buckle!" So on and so forth. Ha ha. What passes for humor.

Shouting back at them was pointless. They were headed for work in the nothing industry, even if they didn't know it yet. My insults would be meaningless compared to what the world had in mind.

Anyway, I had Doris waiting for me.
Which made up for just about anything.

She Causes Accidents: Doris is one of the few people on Earth who does not call me Fatman.

"Charles, baby, what's this? You're *exercising*?"

"The cops got my car. It's a long story."

"It must be a long story if you're riding... what do you call that thing?"

"Tricycle. Trike, I suppose."

"Next thing, you'll look like a stick. Charles, I'm warning you. I don't care for those little stick guys. I like a guy who packs a punch, you know what I mean?"

"Don't worry, sugar. I got a lot to spare."

Doris sat on my porch glider. Her hair was piled on top of her head. She wore denim shorts that looked like they had been cut with a machete and a t-shirt that could have been a size larger.

A lot of people wonder, *What is she doing with him!?* She has literally caused traffic accidents just walking down University Avenue. Talk about the consequences of distracted driving. It's the red hair, those ripe lips and a few hundred other things. Don't get me started on her eyes. You can watch the heads snap as men drive by. For that matter, you can watch the heads snap as women drive by. Her appeal is pan-sexual. Her toenails are enough to drive me crazy. Where a lot of other women have a rose or some flowery sentimental tattoo thing, Doris has a leering devil with a flaming pitchfork. That's my baby.

As for what she's doing with me, well, she's had her share of self-serving lugs, guys who have regarded her as an ornament — a living version of a Rolex watch or an Armani coat. Whereas I know what I've got going here and I act accordingly. I ply her with chocolate and champagne. I don't stint on the bouquets. If she says, *Chuck, my feet are aching*, I'm on a tear to heat up the scented oil and massage her little piggies.

"What, you were speeding? Why did the police take your car?"

"Okay. Short version. It was a murder weapon."

"Your car murdered somebody? Your old junker?"

"It's not a junker. It fell on the guy who was changing the oil. Actually it was dropped. He looked like a bug."

"Jesus!"

"I'll say."

"Who does something like that?"

"He wasn't much of a mechanic."

"Yeah, but that's extreme."

"No denying. Anyway, what brings you round?"

"I am embarrassed to say this."

"No need !"

"Yeah, but I'm going to sound like a nutter."

"Compared to who? Baby, you're a beacon of common sense."

"Last night as I'm walking in from my car..."

"I keep saying you should move in with me. I've got room..."

"Look, let's not get into that right now. Last night, I'm going into the house, this guy runs by on the street."

"You have the Mace I bought for you?" To say that I worry about Doris is putting it mildly.

"No time to think about that. But this guy..."

I'm not sure I want to hear this.

"He's running and it's hard to say. But he looks..."

"What?"

"Okay, it's crazy. But he looks like... what was his name?"

"I don't know, baby."

"The one from the motorcycle shop. Deadarm? Was that his name?"

"Deadhead."

"That's the one. Deadhead. Not such a bad guy really."

"Just to set the record straight, he was. He had some good points. He was an excellent mechanic. If you had a Harley. But he's dead."

"Right. That accident. With the gun."

"I don't know that I'd call it a total accident."

"Still. He was running down the street. He looked at me and I looked at him and, Charles, we knew each other. Then he runs down the street like the devil is on his tail."

"Hmm," I said. Doris is a sensible gal, but sometimes her perceptions are compromised. Hand her a drink or a joint and she won't necessarily say no. "Let me think about that."

That's Why They Called Him Deadhead: When you have been in a place as long as I have, you see what's there and what used to be there. Sometimes you forget, and are surprised to notice that reality and memory have drifted so far from each other.

I head south on Dale, make the left on University and, depending on my state of mind, expect to see a lumberyard. Which hasn't been there for thirty years. Ditto for all the porn and strip joints that filled three out of four corners at Dale and University. The

Belmont Club, the Notorious Faust, and the peep show storefront that, if it even had a name, I've forgotten. Gone, except for memory.

Farther down the street, Red's, the bar and stolen goods emporium. In the other direction the Gopher Bar, a logical stop if you needed a drink, a lump of crack and a prostitute. When the cops made their final bust at the Gopher, they brought a city bus to haul away the number of people under arrest.

That's local color! That's atmosphere! People yap at me about gentrification and expect me to share their outrage. The past: *Fatman don't want to go back there.*

Deadhead. Sure, I remember him. May he rest in peace.

He operated out of a cement-block garage in the alley between Sherburne and Charles, within earshot of my tidy cottage. If you laid eyes on him once, you understood the sobriquet Deadhead. Not because his pals were deeply imaginative. His skull was draped with the thinnest possible layer of skin. His eyes were sunken, his teeth were vile. When meth came along he was an early adopter, a real trendsetter.

Especially for a guy so thoroughly zonked, he was a mechanical genius and an artist. The bikes that came out of his shop rumbled in a way that made you wonder if you were listening to Satan's gurgling stomach. They were confections of chrome and candy-flake paint. If you had parked them in an art museum, no one would have asked why.

He drove all of us neighbors nuts. When you're flying high on crank, you don't care where the big hand and the little hand are pointing. Deadhead didn't think twice about revving a Harley engine at three in the morning. If his customers stopped by on their Harleys, burned rubber in the alley, test-fired their weaponry and tossed empty beer cans on the pavement all night long, Deadhead was not losing any sleep. Because he wasn't sleeping anyway.

"Fatman, we got to have a meeting," the neighbors said to me. They wanted someone to do something, but they didn't want to do it themselves. There was no telling what Deadhead and his associates *wouldn't* do. No one wanted to turn into a target. They figured that was my job.

I agreed. Not because I thought it was smart. Mostly because I was so tired. Like everyone else, I never slept through the night. Harley racket. Gun shots. Shouting. Fight. Cops. More shouting. Fight. Slammed car doors. Repeat. I couldn't think straight enough to refuse.

I should have said no. A reasonable person would have suggested that we call the police, the councilman, the mayor. Maybe the National Guard. But back then it was common for the cops to tell you that if you had a problem with the neighborhood, maybe you needed a new address.

I picked a gentle summer morning for my meeting with Deadhead. Birds sang their heads off. Big fat clouds floated overhead. Butterflies flapped here and there. It all

made an impression — the sweetness of creation! — because I could imagine this encounter going so badly.

Deadhead's garage door was open. The building looked like it exhaled a mist of grease and motor oil that sucked up the sunlight. "You in there, Deadhead?" I yelled.

Nothing. "Deadhead?"

"Yo, Fatman. What's all the shouting?"

"Good question."

"Kind of early is what I'm saying."

He came out as far as the garage door but stayed in the shadows. If you told me Deadhead was a vampire I wouldn't have argued. "Deadhead, I got to ask. When's the last time you were out in the sun?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Vitamin D. It's a big deal. You get it from sunlight."

"You're going to start dishing out health advice, you ought to lose a hundred pounds first, man."

"Yeah, okay, okay."

Doris tells me I'm a healthy fat, like a sumo wrestler. There's a lot of muscle under that sleek top layer. I take off my clothes, I don't look like a melted candle. There wasn't any point getting into that with Deadhead.

His leather vest was emblazoned with the name of his gang, Los Amigos. He wore that and a pair of greasy jeans. He looked like an anatomy lesson. You could see the veins and ropey arteries, bluish-green under his pale skin.

We went to high school together decades ago. Talk about your two roads diverging in a yellow wood. Except that neither of us made it out of Frogtown. Back then he was one of those artistic runts, always doodling in his notebook. He would have been bullied, except for his older brother, Earl. In a modern school, Earl would have been hung with an alphabet's worth of diagnoses. ADD. ADHD. PTSD. At the time people said, *Earl, he just don't care.*

"Deadhead, the neighbors..."

"Oh, screw the neighbors, Fatman. What do they ever do but complain?"

"They want to get a little sleep. I want to get a little sleep."

"So sleep then. You got the whole night ahead of you."

"It's not so easy."

"Close your eyes. Count some little lambikins. What's hard about that?"

"It's the noise. Motorcycles. Gunfire. Drunks hollering all night long."

"Close the windows. Turn up the air conditioner. This is a city, you know? Not everybody goes to sleep after the news."

"I'm trying to be reasonable here, Deadhead."

"Fatman, I'm still talking to you. Which is more reasonable than I would be with most people. We go back."

"That's why I'm here. We don't work something out, you know what's going to happen. The neighbors call the councilman. The councilman leans on the cops. The cops lean on your friends. It's no good for anybody. You can run your business here, nobody cares. It's the noise, man. You got to do something about the noise."

What I was saying about the demolished buildings that I still see? That's how it was talking to Deadhead. I saw the hollow-eyed addict ahead of me, sure, but also the little geek in his button-down shirt, sketching in his notebook with his tongue peeking out between his chapped lips. I thought I could reason with him and succeed.

"What ever happened to home of the free and land of the brave, Fatman? What ever happened to a man's home is his castle? Give me a home where the buffalo roam!"

"What? Who's talking about buffalo? This is Frogtown, Deadhead. All we got here are pitbulls."

"Then give me a home where the god damn pitbulls roam!" Spittle sprayed from his lips. They were still chapped but now they were a shade of blue, like he was either freezing or oxygen starved. I was still thinking about that when he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small chrome revolver.

They Dressed Like Darth Vader: "You're jumping a few steps ahead," I told him. "We're still having a conversation, Deadhead. Put the gun away. It makes it hard to talk."

"You got any idea about my life, Fatman? Do you?" He jabbed at the sky with his gun.

"Honestly, Deadhead, I think I do. We had the same nuns slapping us around in school. We were altar boys together, for Christ's sake. We go back, man."

A faint light seemed to go off in his eyes, like someone lit a candle on the other side of the valley. "That was some crazy shit. Teachers dressed like Darth Vader. Every day with that and you think it's normal.

"Well, it was normal. For us. Those were the days."

"They sucked, man."

"Well, yeah."

"I'm talking about now. You know how many people I got crawling up my ass? Guys who don't pay me. Guys I don't pay. People who think they can rip me off. People I got to convince they can't rip me off. Dead guys. Dead guys' relatives. Now the neighbors. You think a little noise is on my radar, Fatman? I mean, really. Noise?"

"I'm just saying, why not take care of the problems you can take care of?"

He pointed the gun at his head. "Why don't I just blow my brains out? That would take care of my problems."

"That seems extreme to me. Then again, they're your problems."

My policy is never to argue strenuously with people waving guns around.

If Deadhead had stared at me any harder his eyes would have popped out of his head. Before either of us could say another word, the opening riff of *Born to Be Wild* sounded.

"Sorry, Fatman. My phone."

He dug it out of his pocket, glanced at the caller ID and sighed. "I got to take this."

I tried to imagine what kind of call Deadhead had to take. He held the phone in one hand and the gun in the other.

"Yeah?" he said.

High-pitched squawking came from the other end. Deadhead rolled his eyes, which was like tipping over a pair of tombstones.

"Yeah," he said dully. "No." Pause. "Yeah."

Then, agitated, "What is this? International Chew Deadhead's Ankles Day? Christ, it's not even noon and I got you on the phone. I got Fatman here telling me the neighbors don't like the noise. The noise! What's next? What's next?!"

At that a stray pitbull swaggered down the alley. He stopped at Deadhead's garbage can, got his paws up on the lip of the can and tipped it over.

"I'll tell you what's next!" Deadhead shouted into the phone. "The pitbulls telling me that they don't like my garbage. That's what's next!"

He still had the phone to his ear when he pointed the gun at the dog and pulled the trigger. The dog glanced at Deadhead, unconcerned. He went back to pulling at a Styrofoam tray stuffed with pork rib bones. That's one way that Deadhead was wrong. The pitbull liked his garbage just fine.

The gun's report was followed by the high-pitched *zing* of a ricochet. I turned back toward Deadhead in time to see him collapse onto the grease-black garage floor. The hole between his open eyes sprouted a lazy little rivulet of blood.

That's the long version of why I doubted that Doris had seen Deadhead running past her in the street.

They Invented Luck for You: "You ought to spend the night here," I told Doris.

"I got to work tomorrow. I should get some sleep."

"Who says you can't sleep? You'll get plenty of sleep."

"Yeah, right."

"What, you're gonna sleep with that guy prowling around your house?"

Doris didn't answer that. She doesn't like to admit that she's afraid of anything.

"You make me breakfast?" she asked.

"Anything you want, baby."

"Buttermilk pancakes?"

"You got it."

"Those little sausages?"

"I'm pulling them out of the freezer right now."

"Grapefruit?"

"Broiled. Brown sugar on top. Butter."

"Coffee."

"With cream and sugar, just how you like it. A big breakfast like that, makes you want to go back to bed. Sleep it off."

"Just because you don't have to work, Charles, doesn't mean everybody has that luxury."

"Okay, okay. I got a little bit of luck."

"You're half past lucky. They invented luck so you could have it." She put one hand on my stomach for balance, then got up on her tiptoes to give me a kiss.

"Maybe I deserve it."

"Not so much, really."

It's not like I won the lottery. At least not literally. My parents left me nothing except my house and a small pile of credit card debt. But my father's brother, Jacob, was a bachelor farmer with four hundred acres out in what used to be the sticks. Eventually this became the prosperous suburbs. He ran a herd of dairy cows, grazing them in the wooded pasture that surrounded the lake plunked down in the middle of his spread.

He drove developers nuts. They imagined the lake surrounded by McMansions instead of dairy cows that crapped in the water. Uncle Jacob never shared the dream. He collapsed in his barn. The neighbor found him open-eyed, face up, surrounded by cows that licked his dead face.

I was the sole heir. Jacob's dream was not mine. I stayed in his place for a night and the quiet drove me crazy. The cows became hamburger. The land went to the highest bidder. I figured I could live off the interest if I kept my overhead low. So far so good.

Doris tossed her clothes on the rocker in my bedroom. She jumped on my bed, kicked back the sheets and held her arms open wide. "What you waiting for?" she said.

"What happened to sleep?"

"How much do you need?" she asked.

It's Never Dark in Frogtown: I don't know why I woke up. Doris was draped over me. She's a drooler. My shoulder was slick with it. I slid her onto her back. She mumbled something I couldn't understand and started to snore. Doris is no delicate flower. She's an enthusiast. There's not much she does halfway, even when she's asleep.

Truth be told, she may be a little young for me. I'm getting to the age where I never sleep through the night. I wake up, I start thinking about my bladder. Try to ignore it. Can't. Sigh. Roll out of bed. Which was what I did.

I glanced out the window. And saw a face looking back at me.

It's never dark in Frogtown, what with the streetlights and the security lights and the motion detectors. Gloomy: that was the word. As I peered at the face in the gloom, I thought: *Deadhead*. Down to the tidy hole in his forehead, right between his eyes.

I looked to the bedside table where I keep a piece for protection. When I looked back to the window again, whatever it was was gone.

Dreams. They come in many types and sizes. I wondered if I had actually seen anything at all.

The Dementia Train Stops Here: "I love to watch you eat, baby, but I don't understand. How do you get away with it?"

Doris cut her pancakes into small portions and dabbed at her lips with a napkin in between. All the same, she packed away breakfast with gusto. "You need another pancake?"

"I've got a high metabolism, Charles."

"Sure, you must. But — I'm not criticizing, don't get me wrong — you eat like a lumberjack. You sit at a desk all day. You ought to be the size of a truck."

"Is that what you want?"

"What I want is exactly what I got."

"Maybe one more. And a sausage. Maybe two. If you have them."

"Coming right up!"

I didn't mention *Deadhead*. In the light of day it seemed ridiculous. *Deadhead* staring in the window. First stop on the dementia train.

Doris drained her coffee.

"More?" I asked.

"It's a balance, Charles. Enough edge so they know I'm not calling for fun. But not so much that I'm screaming." She handed me her cup. "Just half, okay?"

Doris does collections in the logistics industry. Trucks. Drivers. Cargo. This going here, that going there.. She's heard it all and she is not impressed. You signed on the line and now it's time to deliver. Case closed. Save the explanations for some sucker.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" I said. "Take a vacation from your place."

Doris knows I'd marry her tomorrow. I'd throw her in the car if I had one and drive her to the courthouse for a JP wedding right this minute.

"That's sweet," she says when I mention it. "But love, the law — they don't go together."

If the here and now weren't so beautiful, Doris would break my heart.

"You trying to get me to move in, Charles? That your game?"

"I just want you to be safe."

"What are you making for supper?"

"What you want? Just tell me."

"You made one of those steaks lately? The kind you marinate in that garlicky stuff and then grill on your apple wood? With those potatoes baked in foil with the bacon and cabbage. Maybe some tomatoes from your garden. Sliced with basil. A little balsamic."

"Beer or wine?"

"It's summer. Beer."

"We're on, sugar. I'm riding to the meat market."

I walked Doris to her car. It was parked on the street. My idea was to give her a discreet peck on the cheek.

"Charles, really. What's that?" she said. She planted her feet on top of mine, grabbed one of my chins and pulled my face down for a real kiss. I wondered if I'd have lips left when she was done.

I heard a car creeping past. I opened my eyes to see Roscoe. His head was stuck out of his cruiser. He leered at us.

"Hey Fatman, we got laws," he called. "How about you get a room?"

"How about you jerk off outside the doughnut shop?" Doris replied. If you didn't know they were pals you would have been looking for cover.

Doris patted my chest, winked and said, "See you tonight, lover." This was half for Roscoe's benefit.

As she drove off, Roscoe got out of his car. "All the things I don't get in life, Fatman, which is quite a bit given my customer base, I got to say, this is number one."

"I know, I know. What's she doing with me."

"My exact thought."

"Maybe you should ask yourself what special qualities I've got that you don't. Maybe ask if I teach a master class."

"What I think is, this is one more crazy thing going on in Frogtown. Which never lacks."

"What else?"

"First your pal, Ivan and his death by Volvo. The birds dropping out of the sky around his shop. What a stinking mess that turned out to be. Then last night."

"What about last night?"

"You didn't hear?"

"What am I, clairvoyant? I was busy."

"Yeah, sure, busy. Anyway, two citizens turn up dead."

"Two? That's kind of high."

"That's what the chief was saying. He'd like to keep his job."

"Anybody we know?"

"Pair knuckleheads in the pharmaceutical business."

"Street or management?"

"One of each."

"Could be a coincidence, right?"

"Could be. Except both of them had their heads twisted off."

"As in twisted off? Like a bottle cap?"

"More or less. Except it wasn't that neat."

Park Your Butt with Me, Fatman: I got on my trike and headed toward the grocery store to get Doris some meat. She'd be thinking about supper all day long. She's a woman with appetites.

Doris is also big on expectations, on having them fulfilled. That serves her in her line of work. But domestically-speaking, if she comes home to pork chops when she's got T-bones on her mind, it's a disappointment. That's a check in the column against you. Too many checks and she's on to the next thing. Believe me, for Doris there is no shortage of next things.

If you can waddle on a tricycle, I suppose that's what I did. It wasn't so bad. The trees made a canopy overhead. The breeze dried some of the sweat. I felt virtuous, rolling under my own stream.

One thing about poking along on a trike, you get the up-close-and-personal that is lost in a car. So you see the tidy house, where every blade of grass is trimmed with a scissors, parked next to a slumlord-owned dump; and the garbage tossed in the alley because there is no municipal collection; ditto the old tires, set loose in the street because it would cost a couple bucks to get them hauled away. These are my people. My people also yelled at me. "Fatman! Yo! Too big to fail!" And so on. Ha ha. Comedians.

I rolled past Ivan's former business place to see if my Volvo was still there. The place was wrapped in police tape, but the door was open. "Anybody home?" I yelled.

"Halt! Wer da?" someone shouted.

The German told me everything I needed to know.

"Colonel. What? You own this place?"

"Fatman? That you?"

He stuck his head through the open door. He was kinsman in terms of girth, though shorter and rounder. His hair was a fringe of white, but you rarely got around to noticing it because of his moustache. It was sculptural, monumental, a waxed, white concoction that defied gravity and ended in twirled points, like saber tips jutting outward from his nose. His name was a tongue-twister, something like Helmut von Raschenbergen, but everyone knew him as the Colonel. He organized an annual Oktoberfest costume ball where he showed up in full Otto von Bismarck gear, including a helmet and sword. He owned property but he was discreet about it. The Colonel didn't rattle his sword unnecessarily.

"Essen müssen wir alle!"

"Huh?"

"I've got a bag of doughnuts and some coffee. Park your butt with me, Fatman."

"I've been working up an appetite."

"What got into you?"

"You got my car. That was my Volvo murdered Ivan."

"Tough luck for him. But try getting the rent out of the guy. I would have dropped a car on him myself. The cops towed your car, by the way."

"I didn't know this was your place."

"Under the radar, Fatman, that's how to fly. Unless you want to buy Girl Scout cookies every day of the week. People know you've got a little something and everyone wants their cut."

"What's next for this place?"

"Get rid of Ivan's tools. Scrub the floor."

"Got to be tough to find a renter. What with the construction out there. No parking. Mounds of dirt. Ivan's ghost."

"Assuming you go in for that sort of thing."

"That's not half of it."

"Who needs more?"

"I tell you, you're not going to believe me."

"What wouldn't I believe? I've lived here so long I'll believe anything."

The Colonel tore off a page of the newspaper to use as a napkin. The headline was, *Freak Slayings Stump Cops*.

"You read this?"

"No, but Roscoe clued me in. How do you twist somebody's head off?"

The Colonel poured coffee from a thermos into two Styrofoam cups. He pulled a pair of glazed doughnuts out of a greasy paper sack.

"A normal person couldn't do it."

"That's my point. Not that everybody around here is *normal*. But still..."

"You'd have to have... abilities."

"Or an awful big wrench."

"Okay, Fatman. Most people, I wouldn't even try to explain this. Just listen until I'm done. Eat your doughnut. Do something with your mouth besides talk. Verstehen?"

"Ja wohl!"

"Good." He sipped at his coffee and scowled. "You remember back to 1966?"

"I was fifteen. All I remember is being high. Those brain cells didn't survive."

"Be that as it may, Fatman. That's the year I bought this building. Cheap. Stupidly cheap. So cheap I should have asked questions. Not that I would have got a straight answer. Not that I would have believed if Jesus Christ Himself told me."

"It's not like you got a charming property here. It's a pile of concrete block. Why shouldn't it be cheap?"

"Spare me the architecture review. Put that doughnut in your mouth, okay? You wouldn't remember, but there was sewer construction going on that year. The whole street torn up. About like it looks right now.

"Also a summer where all hell broke loose. Grisly murders a dime a dozen. One guy, railroad spike driven through each eyeball. Another guy actually tossed through a

brick wall. A cop stuffed into a mail sack and dropped from a stolen airplane.”

"Jesus."

"That wasn't all."

"What's that got to do with your building?"

"This is where I'm saying you got to keep an open mind. There's a basement, right? Nobody ever goes down there, not if I can help it. Double steel doors. Crucifixes welded on the inside and outside. Other ju-ju you wouldn't know about."

Doughnut sprayed on the newspaper when I laughed. "What you saying, Colonel? You got a vampire pit down there?"

"You can believe it or not. I don't care. I'm just telling you what it is."

"Which is what?"

"Portal to the underworld. All the banging in the street opened it in 1966. The digging and pounding opened it again now. That's what I think.”

"You're serious?"

"Go ask the guys with the twisted off heads. See if they think we're dealing with the usual screwballs."

I'm Sorry to Say That Makes the Most Sense: It's hard to know what to say next after someone tells you you're sitting on top of a portal to the underworld. We sat at Ivan's desk. It was a jumble. Keys, loose change, power bills, notices from the city. Details of no further concern to Ivan.

"You got another doughnut?" I asked.

"Sure. Riding a bike, you got to keep up your strength." The Colonel reached into his bag. He got out a doughnut for each of us. It was better thinking about that than the underworld opening directly beneath us.

"I believe you," I said. "Anybody else would think you're a nut job, but I believe you."

"It's true whether you believe it or not. But thanks. I appreciate a man with an open mind."

"You remember Deadhead."

"The motorcycle guy? A pitbull got him, right?"

"Sort of. He was shooting at a pitbull. Ricochet. I was there when it happened."

"Right. Hell of a mechanic. He fixed up the sidecar on my BMW."

When he wasn't driving his Mercedes, the Colonel got around in a vintage military-green motorcycle with his Rottweiler in the sidecar.

"He's been dead, what, ten years? A historical figure."

"Yeah, well, I saw him."

"Deadhead?"

"Outside my window. Last night. Doris saw him too. Running down the street."

"Impressive for a dead guy."

"You think he escaped from down there?" I nodded toward the floor.

"I'm sorry to say that makes the most sense. You sure it was him?"

"There weren't too many guys who looked like him when he was alive. Plus he had a bullet hole between his eyes."

"Hmmm."

"You think Deadhead is behind all this? The twist-offs?"

"Maybe. Even if he is, he's not the only one down there. You got to figure on more trouble."

"Until what?"

"It's not like the cops are going to arrest them."

"Why not?"

"They're already dead, for one thing. Legally speaking, can they even arrest a dead guy?"

"You're talking technicalities now, Colonel."

"Okay. But the other thing is, Deadhead isn't here the way you and I are here."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you try to touch him?"

"He was on the other side of the window. Anyway, he's dead. I didn't want to touch Deadhead when he was living. The meth. His overall standard of hygiene. The guy was one big germ."

"Yeah, well. The thing is, he's not all there."

"What, he's like Casper? He walks through walls?"

"It's like he's half there. I'm not saying I'm an expert, Fatman. Maybe the underworld has changed in the last fifty years. Who knows? My experience is, they feel like slugs. They ooze through things. They can get through a sheetrock wall, but it might take them half the day."

"Since when do slugs twist a guy's head off?"

"I'm not saying it makes sense. I'm just telling you what I know. What I think I know."

"But you got them back in the... what do you call it?"

"The underworld. The in-between."

"How did you do it?"

"Jesus, Fatman. I spent fifty years trying to forget."

You Going Cosmic on Me? "The question you got to start with, Fatman, is, Why are they in the underworld? Why do they want to come back?"

"What the hell is the underworld? That's where I've got to start. Why is there an underworld?"

"If you're going to go all cosmic on me, Fatman, then there's no way to continue. Why is there an underworld? Why is there a world at all? The sun comes up in the morning, the moon comes out at night, the birdies tweet up in the trees and the stars go

twinkle twinkle. You think of it for a minute, the why of the world, the weirdness of it, your head is going to explode."

"You got a point."

"Of course I do. So let's not even get started on the why of the underworld."

"Sorry I brought it up."

"You want another doughnut?"

"I think I'm good."

The Colonel pulled out another one for himself.

"Well. If you're having one."

"Glazed?"

"Why not?"

"What *is* the underworld? We can talk about that."

"You been there?"

"Unfortunately."

"You can come and go?"

"You wouldn't want to count on it, the leaving part. But yeah. If you're lucky."

"I'm picturing purgatory."

"That's your Catholic claptrap. I mean, maybe there's a purgatory, too. Who the hell would know? I'm just saying the underworld we're sitting on top of is not filled with guys screaming in flames."

"That's a relief, sort of."

"Everything could always be worse."

"Whether that's a relief is hard to say."

"You sure you don't want another doughnut? I got one left."

"Okay, give it to me."

The Colonel reached into the greasy bag again. Maybe it was all the talk about the half-life under our feet, but I looked at the doughnut — really looked at it — as the Colonel held it in his pudgy fingers. I was struck by the realization that it was beautiful, this greasy, gleaming bit of pastry was gorgeous. I wanted to communicate this idea to the Colonel. He was right. You begin to think about the details of existence and it seems too strange to sustain from one moment to the next.

"These doughnuts are really... ah..." I couldn't come up with the words to express myself, not in Ivan's grease smeared office with the underworld apparently yawning beneath us. "They're..."

"They're not bad. I get them from that kid down at Sugar Rush."

"He's a real worker. I like the long-johns. But anyway, it's not penitential, the underworld?"

"I'm not saying it's a joyride. It's more like a bad Greyhound station. Horrible lighting. Grimy. Smells like crap. The feeling you get is, bad job. Nobody wants to stay. Everybody's afraid to quit. They don't know that things can't be worse."

"But they want to get out."

"Long enough to settle some scores. Longer once they're out breathing fresh air again."

The Colonel checked his bag to make sure he hadn't overlooked a pastry. Empty. He wadded up the bag and tossed it in the corner. He settled his chin on his chest. He looked like he might fall asleep.

"Colonel," I said.

His head jerked upward.

"Last time you closed the portal. How'd you do it?"

"It's not like I closed it myself. I was a kid. Twenty-four, twenty-five years old. What did I know about the underworld? I went to get professional help."

"What do you mean? You looked in the yellow pages?"

"Listen, wise guy, yes, that's eventually what I did. But I started with the so-called experts. Himmelmeyer, the padre at the church. I figured it would be up his alley. You remember Himmelmeyer?"

"Of course I do. The nuns broke too many yardsticks on you, they referred you to Himmelmeyer. Everybody came back crying."

"That's the guy. Tough old nut. But he wasn't buying the whole underworld idea at the time."

"It's a lot to get your mind around."

"These are the people who brought you exorcisms and the Inquisition. I didn't think it would be a tough sell."

"You convinced him?"

"After one of the nuns got tossed from the belfry. What a mess that was. Everyone agreed to call it suicide. But they knew."

"What was the tip-off?"

"Another twist off, for one thing. A signature move. But also, a couple witnesses saw Benny DeVito running out of the church. Benny was dead, so it caught their eyes."

"The reporters must have gone nuts. I'm surprised I don't remember."

"It never got in the papers. For Himmelmeyer it was bad enough, one of his nuns was dead. But murdered by a ghost? That was taking it too far. The police chief was a Catholic kid. Mum's the word, Himmelmeyer told him, and that was that. Suicide, case closed. Except it wasn't. Himmelmeyer called me the next morning. 'Tell me more about this underworld,' he said."

"So what, he came over with a team of altar boys?"

"More or less. Except not your regular altar boys from the neighborhood. This was a squad from the Archdiocese office. Serious guys. They pulled up to the curb in a black Buick and five or six of them piled out. Himmelmeyer in full game uniform. Brocaded vestments, a crucifix around his neck that must have gone five pounds. The miter, the big gold staff. The rest of them in altar boy gear. Cassock. Surplus. A couple censers. Bells. Another couple crucifixes on wooden poles. One of those big altar bibles. These boys were brawl-sized, if you know what I mean. They looked like the defensive line for the St. Thomas football team. Himmelmeyer came loaded for bear.

"So we're all crowded in this office, right here where we're sitting now."

Himmelmeyer asks me, 'Where is this underworld?' It wasn't like it is now, with the double steel doors. There was my basement. There was a crack in the wall from the sewer construction. That was the portal to the underworld. A crack in the wall. At least that's what I figured. I told Himmelmeyer and he nodded to his boys. He made a sign of the cross and said, 'Okay. Here we go.'

You with the Censure, Give It a Swing: "You went along with them?"

"Of course I did. I was a kid. What did I know from the underworld? I opened the basement door and said, 'This way, gentlemen.' That smell hit us at once, like matches burning inside rotten eggs. All the incense in the Catholic Church wouldn't have been enough to get on top of that. Himmelmeyer started gagging. One of his altar boys threw up. Once one of them started, well, the whole gang's puking. So we got vomit running down the stairs. Himmelmeyer slips in it and bounces down the last half dozen steps. That was the great padre's entry to the realm of the undead. Or whatever they are down there."

"Deadhead is dead. Or was dead. He's still got that bullet hole in his head."

"Whatever. Anyway, so finally we're all in the basement. We dust off Himmelmeyer. I turn on the light. It's one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. The floor back then was dirt. Nothing fancy about it. Cool even on a hot summer day. It was like being inside an extra large grave. "

The Colonel leaned in toward me. He had that old guy odor — clothes in need of washing, a body that was none too fresh itself, a whiff of decay mixed with the doughnut and coffee still stuck in his mouth. It struck me that the Colonel himself might not be one hundred percent alive.

"Did Himmelmeyer have a plan?" I asked.

"Is there a playbook for closing the portal to the underworld? I doubt it. Himmelmeyer looked like he was winging it. 'You with the bible,' he said to one of his altar boys. "Come over here." Himmelmeyer put one hand on the bible. In the other he had his gold-headed staff. 'Who's got the flashlight?' he asked. One of his goons squeaked, 'I got it, Father.'

"Well don't just stand there. Check for an opening."

"What? Like a door?"

"I'm just guessing," Himmelmeyer said. 'But my bet is, you're not going to find a door labeled *Underworld. Enter Here*. Use your imagination. Your powers of observation. Sherlock Holmes this thing, son. You with the censer, give it a swing. Let's see if we can smoke the bastards out.

"So now we got the vomit smell, plus the stench of the underworld, and we're all choking on incense. Just then the basement door slams. Slams so hard it sounded like somebody had pulled the trigger on a shotgun."

You Want a Bingo Game, Sure, Call a Priest; "They had you trapped down there?"

"Fatman, let me tell you the truth. I don't know. Maybe it was the wind. Nobody wanted to find out. Finally one of the altar boys said, 'What do we do now?' "Himmelmeyer turns to me and says, 'What do you think?'

"What do you mean, what do I think?' I said. 'That's why I got you!'"

"It's your building. Take some responsibility.'

"You're the priest for God's sake!'

"You think they had classes on this at the seminary?' he said.

"That's not my fault.'

"Then the altar boy with the flashlight yells, 'Over here, Father!' He's on his knees in a corner, scratching at the dirt.

"I can't be crawling in the filth in my vestments,' Himmelmeyer told me. 'You go take a look.'

"By now I'm thinking, well, what did I expect? You want a bingo game, sure, call Himmelmeyer. You want to deal with the forces of evil, probably I should have called in a half dozen nuns. So anyway, I get down beside the altar boy and now we're both staring at a crack in the floor. He shines the flashlight down there and all you can see is nothing. I dug at the edges figuring we'd listen and hear how long until the heard the dirt hit bottom. If it ever did I never heard it. The smell was even worse than before. I called over to Himmelmeyer, 'If this isn't it, I don't know what is.'

"So now we've got Himmelmeyer standing over us, mumbling something in Latin. He whacks me with his staff and says, 'Here, take this. Poke around down there.'

"I grab the gold end and stick it in the hole. All at once the edges crumble. A chunk of dirt the size of a manhole cover falls away. Me and the altar boy jump back. The smell now is enough to choke a rat. We listen and wait and listen some more and finally the dirt hits something.'

"You hear that?' Himmelmeyer whispers.

"What?'

"Screaming.'

"Frankly I wasn't sure I heard the dirt land, and I sure as hell didn't hear any screaming. But you know how those old time priests were. Nobody ever disagreed with them. It was like being Elvis. The altar boy says, 'Yes, Father. Screaming.'

"You with the censer,' Himmelmeyer says. 'Let's have some smoke.' He was just stalling for time. Who had any idea what to do next?

"So now we're in a cloud of smoke. Himmelmeyer is saying some damn hocus pocus. The other altar boys are eyeing the steps, looking like they want to make a run for it. I'm thinking that seems like a good idea, except that five minutes later they'd be gone and I'd be stuck with the same problem.

"I'm still waiting for Himmelmeyer to do something when these...these...*things* start oozing up out of that hole in the ground."

I Try to Keep It Practical: "What do you mean, things oozing out of the ground?"

"Okay, Fatman, let me say this again. You live thinking things can be this way but not that way. It's your experience of life, right? You're used to the sun coming up in the east, and the clouds floating around in the sky, the flowers popping out of the dirt. You accept that because you've seen it before. None of it necessarily makes any sense. Why not two suns? Or a half dozen blue suns? Why not flowers floating through the air?"

"Because that's not the way the world is."

"Because it's not what we're used to seeing in the world. The world could be any way at all, and whatever way it was, we'd find a way to explain it. We'd accept it."

"Because it *is*. That's the difference."

"Sorry to go philosophical on you, Fatman."

"I try to keep it practical."

"I know. We're two old guys sprinkled with doughnut crumbs, sitting in a lousy mechanic shop in Frogtown. I'm asking you to bear with me."

"I'm trying, Colonel. You're telling me about things oozing out of the underworld. I'm working with you. I'm trying to understand."

"I'm going to keep this simple. All the whys and the wherefores, let's not get messed up with that. Let me just say that Benny DeVito floated up out of this hole. He looked like some kind of jellyfish."

"A jellyfish?"

"Yeah. You ever been to the ocean, maybe snorkel in the Caribbean?"

"Not really my style."

"You ought to try it. Good for a big guy. The water holds you up. Anyway, the jellyfish float along and you see through them. There's not much there. That's how it was with Benny Vito. He oozed up. Then he was standing on the floor right next to us. He started filling in until he looked more or less like the same old Benny. Except that the same old Benny was dead, and this Benny was walking and talking."

"Just like that?"

"I don't know. A minute, maybe two. I didn't get out a stopwatch."

"So it's you, Benny, the padre and the altar boys?"

"Plus the flying nun. The sister that Benny chucked off the belfry."

"You're making this up."

"I'm telling you, Fatman. You can believe or not, I don't care. Same deal, she floats up like a jellyfish, then she fills out. I mean, she's *there*. Her head was sort of stitched back on with what looked like shoe laces. She plants a big kiss on Benny."

"Wait. The nun is kissing Benny? Now you're really losing me, Colonel."

"I'm not talking about a peck on the cheek. Tongue down his throat. Hand down his pants. The whole deal."

"What did the padre do?"

"He grabbed the big crucifix around his neck and pushed it toward her. Lots of Latin coming out of his mouth."

"What then?"

"The sister ripped the cross out of his hand and heaved it down the hole. Himmelmeyer opened his mouth but now nothing's coming out. When he was able to talk he sounded like a guy on helium. 'You can't do that,' he said. To which the sister replied, 'Oh, I didn't know. I'm so sorry. Let me make it up to you.' Then she grabs Himmelmeyer by the back of the head. Same deal as with Benny. Himmelmeyer starts choking. He looks like his head will explode. 'Later, big guy,' the sister says and pats him on the cheek. Before any of us get out another word, she and Benny are up the stairs and out the door. The next morning the chief of police and the archbishop are found in a cruiser with two empty booze bottles on the floor and their pants around their ankles. Both still living, which made it worse."

"So they've got a sense of humor in the underworld."

"Yeah, for dead guys they're a bunch of comedians."

Funny Business with the Trash: "Okay, but how did you get Benny and the nun back into the underworld?" I asked.

The Colonel brushed a few of the doughnut crumbs off his chest. He glanced at his watch. "Sorry, Fatman," he said. "I got a date with my lawyer."

"What now?"

"You think there isn't going to be a civil case? Ivan gets beamed by a Volvo and nobody pays?"

"But what if the Volvo was dropped by a dead guy?"

"Tell it to the jury."

"No, thanks."

"That's what I think."

The Colonel locked the door behind us. "Too bad that won't keep them in," he said. "I'd let them have the place."

"They'll ooze through?"

"If they can't find an open vent or a window to open. A crack in the wall is enough. You can't keep them in. Not unless you..."

"What?"

"Sorry, Fatman, I don't have time. This guy bills me three hundred an hour starting from the appointment time, not from when I show up. Punctuality-wise, this guy's more German than I am. I'll call you."

"We're talking about the undead here, Colonel. Don't you think you ought to make the time?"

"You know what Jesus said about the poor."

"Yeah, they're always with us. But the dead?"

"Them too, probably. This is just the portal I know."

"There's more?"

"It would explain a lot, wouldn't it? *Aufweidersehen*, Fatman."

The Colonel eased himself into his Mercedes and pulled onto University Avenue. I got back on my trike.

I rolled up to Dale Street and rolled northward from there. Only a knucklehead would risk his life biking on Dale. I stuck to the sidewalk. Of course not everyone appreciated my presence. A young mother pushing a stroller wondered, "You too fat for the law? Got to ride the sidewalk?" A gang of ruffians observed, "Can't walk on the sidewalk if Doughboy be hoggin' all the space."

Lower myself to that level? No. I raised my chins, looked down my nose and passed them by without a word. At Dragon Star I chained my ride to the leg of one of the concrete lions beside the door.

It's the League of Nations inside, shoppers from every corner of the Earth. There's fruit that looks like it's imported from Jupiter; vegetables where I've got no idea. Fry, boil, broil? Really, who knows? It's owned by an Asian guy. Hmong gals run the registers. Mexicans do the heavy lifting. I was after a porterhouse for Doris, but I got distracted by the ox tails.

"Don Fatman, what you need?"

A Latino kid with a couple gold chains and a tattoo creeping out from under his t-shirt poked at the cellophane-wrapped package. Miguel is not the meat manager, but he pretends to be. "You take that home, sear it in oil, get some onion and garlic going, tomato in the pot with some chipotle peppers, you're talking *comida, sabe?*"

"Excelente, Miguel. You got me convinced. But I need a porterhouse, or maybe a T-bone for the little lady."

"Go with the ox-tail, amigo. The chili, it excites them. *Entiende?*"

"Maybe. But Doris is an accept-no-substitutes kind of gal, you know what I mean. She's thinking steak right this minute."

"Then buy both. What can it hurt?"

"You're a genius, my friend."

"*Claro*," he said. "I help you, now you help me."

"If it's legal."

"Why would you ask?"

"Yeah, why?" I said.

Miguel winked at me. "A sense of humor. A good thing in this world, Don Fatman." He steered me by the forearm toward a quiet corner near the lobster tank.

I feel bad for the crustaceans, clomping around in the cloudy tank, their claws bound with orange rubber bands. Which isn't to say I've never taken a pair home for me and Doris.

"These past days there is funny business with our trash," Miguel said in a low voice.

"Not my department, Miguel. Try your garbage hauler."

"Listen. It starts because of the fish guts."

"You sell a lot of fish, you get a lot of guts. Nothing new there."

"Except we are careful. We put them in the bin. We put down the lid. Otherwise, the neighbors complain. The smell."

"Well, it's summer. Things get ripe."

"But there are the guts and the heads, spread all around in the dirt. And the smell..."

"You got some new guys on the job? Maybe they don't know the drill."

"I tell them. I watch them. I check before I leave. Then the next morning, guts everywhere again."

"Who wants fish guts?"

"That's what I wondered. Animals? Raccoons? Rats? But how do they lift the lid?"

"Your wild animal can be a cunning creature, Miguel."

"Still. So I buy a six pack of beer and get a lawn chair. I take a flash light and I go up on the roof. I think I will watch."

"You're a patient man, Miguel. If I needed an employee, you'd be my man."

"I wait. I drink. I wait some more. Maybe also I drink more. Nothing happens. I sleep, for a minute. Maybe two. Until I hear the lid slam against the bin. I shine my flashlight. What I see, Don Fatman, I don't believe."

"Don't stop now, Miguel."

"There is a man in the bin. And he is throwing guts and fish heads this way and that. Until he finds the head of the catfish. All whiskers and big lazy eyes. Dead and slimy. And this thing, Don Fatman, he picks it up and tears at it with his teeth. He is eating the stinking catfish."

"Did you notice anything unusual about this character, Miguel? I mean, except for that he was eating a rotten fish head?"

"When I shine the flashlight in his face, now he looks up at me, and I think this man should not be living. Because it seems that there is a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead."

She Knows What She Wants: Doris has expectations regarding steak. She doesn't turn up her nose at fat. She's not the type to trim it off and leave it in a tidy pile on the side of her plate. "It's *steak*, Charles," she explained to me early on. "It's not health food." I've got my marching orders. Charred on the outside, rare inside. Seared over a pile of fruit wood. Seasoned with course sea salt and fresh-ground pepper, barely cracked.

One thing to say for Doris: she knows what she wants in this department and a lot of others.

We ate out on my patio. I've made a retreat out there. I've got my vegetable garden, a wall of shrubbery, a few fruit trees, flowers. I spend an hour or so most mornings, weeding, thinning, rearranging. Except for the dogs barking, the cars speeding down the residential streets, the boom of rap from vehicles passing by, the cop and fire truck sirens, plus the occasional gunshot and the neighbors' shouted arguments, you wouldn't think you were in a city at all.

"Usually you look so peaceful out here," Doris observed.

"It's my little kingdom, baby, you know?"

"So what's eating at you tonight?"

"It's that obvious?"

"Charles, I'm not some harpy you just picked up. I know. Something's wrong."

"Okay. I didn't want to tell you. You'll worry."

"I'm a big girl. We're in this together."

So I spilled it all out, everything I had learned that day. The underworld portal under the Colonel's shop. The previous escape by Benny DeVito and the flying nun. The strong likelihood that Deadhead had escaped from below, and was dining on fish heads from the Dragon Star dumpster.

"What's a dead guy doing, eating?" Doris wondered.

"Good question. Maybe he likes the taste."

She thought about that for a while.

"You don't have to do anything about it," Doris said at last. "You can leave it to the cops."

"They're not geared up to handle this. They're straight-forward guys. They dealt with Deadhead once. He's dead. They're not going to open his file again."

"That doesn't mean it's your problem."

"It's somebody's problem. Dead guys walking around. Dropping my car on Ivan. Plus the twist offs."

Doris picked up the steak bone and gnawed at the bits of meat that clung to it. "I'm saying there are other people who could step up. The highway patrol. The National Guard. The ministerial alliance. That neighborhood organizer, what's-her-name. Kitty Rice. The mortuary society. The league of graveyards. Citizens Against Zombies. I don't see why you think it's your job."

"Doris, half the things you named don't exist. And the rest of them, how long do you think it will take them to wake up? Both of us could be twist offs before they pull on their pants and velcro their shoes."

"If it's that dangerous, why don't we move? Maybe someplace warm while we're at it. California. Florida."

"Who's to say they don't have twice as many portals there? Anyway, baby, this is where I live. This is my home. I'm not going to let the a bunch of dead guys drive me out."

"Why does this have to be an us-versus-them situation? We can decide to leave. We don't have to say we were driven out. It's not like this is Valhalla. It's Frogtown, Charles. Nobody would blame you. Mostly they'll wonder why you didn't come to your senses sooner."

"I'll get killed on the real estate deal, that's one reason. I bought this joint for fifty six, thirty years ago. What's it worth now? Fifty seven? I would have been better off investing in crack pipes."

"That still doesn't mean you've got to take on Deadhead and his pals."

"I know it doesn't. But it's who I am. That's the long and short of it. That's why you love me. Go ahead, admit it."

"I'm admitting no such thing." She pushed her plate away and drained her wine glass. "Why don't we clean up tomorrow morning and go to bed now?"

A Saber Was Missing: Doris jabbed her elbow in my ribs. "Charles."

"What? You hear something? What time is it?" The sky was still black.

"It doesn't matter. But you never said."

"What?"

"The priest couldn't close the portal. So who did? What did they do?"

"I don't know. The Colonel didn't get around to it. He had an appointment."

"That's the first thing we do tomorrow, right? Talk to the Colonel. We got to find out what worked last time."

"Right after breakfast."

"Eggs would be good. Over easy. Maybe you've got bacon? Toast, coffee, juice. A few berries in yogurt."

"Coming right up! Soon as the sun rises."

That's Doris. She's not the kind of gal to take the easy way out, though she talks as if it's the first thing on her mind. I knew she'd be with me. She threw an arm across my girth and pressed herself against my back. She's like a radiator. In minutes we were both sleeping again.

I'm not saying I was up with the birds, but I listened to them for a while before I made breakfast for Doris. She knocked off a couple eggs and bacon for two, then dabbed her lips with a napkin and said, "Okay, the Colonel."

"We can't barge in on him at this hour."

"Sure we can. Besides, I've got to get to work."

"I should call first."

"He'll just give you some excuse. Let's go."

There's no arguing with the woman. Doris insisted on riding with me on my trike. She stood on the rear axle with a hand on each of my shoulders. "Come on, Charles," she said. "Faster!"

"Faster? You trying to kill me, baby?"

"You weren't complaining about your heart last night. I don't see why pumping those pedals is going to take you down."

My lungs ached, but she laughed as we tore down the street toward Lexington, where the Colonel lived. I took Edmund, because all the trees hadn't been cut down on that street. Bugs infested the trees on Charles. The city's loggers had clear-cut the boulevard, leaving a stretch that looked like Kansas City. The deforestation plus the number of foreclosed houses added up to too much gloom so early in the morning.

Not surprisingly, the Colonel took a systematic approach to his house and garden. His flower beds looked like they were laid out with a ruler and a T-square. He had annihilated any weeds that dared to appear. The grass was a green version of a military buzz cut. Which is to say that when I saw the screen ripped out of the front door and the newspaper still on the stoop, breakfast sunk low in my stomach.

"This doesn't look good," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"The screen. That's not how the Colonel rolls."

I knocked on the door, yelled his name.

Nothing. Not from the Colonel or his dog.

"Maybe he's out," Doris said.

"Stay here." I peered in the garage to check for his car and motorcycle. They were both parked.

Doris sat on the steps. "So?"

"He didn't leave."

"Should we call the cops?"

"We probably will."

I pulled the screen door open. The main door looked like it came from a castle — thick, forged hinges, cast-iron rivets through the oak, a knocker the size of a man's hand. I gave it a push with my knuckle. It swung open.

I figured I knew where this was headed, which made the details along the way that much sadder. The Colonel kept a pair of accordions on top of his piano. I'd been to his house a time or two for his Germanic hootenannies, yelping *Du, du liebs mir in*

Herzen while sloshing beer from my stein to the floor, then watching the dog lap it up like the booze hound he was. The Colonel kept a village full of Hümme figurines on top of a dark, carved credenza. Trolls and angels, little kids with big eyes, sappy but touching, especially given the context. Then his collection of steins. Not to mention the half dozen military sabers hung above the fireplace.

"Are you a hoarder if everything is so orderly?" Doris asked.

"One of the sabers is missing."

"So?"

"You sure you don't want to wait outside?"

"We're in this together."

As I've mentioned, it's pointless arguing with her.

We found the Colonel in the dining room, pinned to the table with the missing saber. The hilt was buried to his chest. The blade was smashed through the oak table top. What happened to the dog I don't want to say.

Your Ass Hanging Over the Edge: Roscoe showed up again along with the investigators, the ambulance, the hearse, a unit from Animal Control, a bunch of reporters and most of the neighbors. The squad lights flashed, but in the morning light they looked more jolly than ominous, like Christmas come early.

We sat behind the police tape at the Colonel's kitchen table. His Mr. Coffee was full and still hot.

"No sense letting this go to waste," Roscoe said. He took three cups from the Colonel's drainer. They were delicate things, old lady china. Roscoe filled them up. We drank with our pinkies stuck in the air.

"Aren't we destroying evidence?" Doris asked.

Roscoe sighed. "Everybody's an expert these days. Watch two episodes of *CSI* and you're a criminologist."

"That's why I don't work," I said.

"Yeah, I wish I had your job."

It seemed wrong to make small talk with the Colonel stuck to his table like a bug in a museum. I glanced into the dining room, where the police photographer was at work. The Colonel's mustache still defied gravity. For a murder victim, he had a peaceful look.

The birds chattered outside. The sun shone through the Colonel's lace curtains. The shadows were a delicate touch, especially in comparison.

"Fatman," Roscoe said finally, "here's my question. Who needs the dispatchers? Why don't I just follow you around? Every time I see you, there's a dead guy."

"My bad luck."

"You've got a lot of it all of a sudden. Ivan. Now the Colonel. Who had it in for him?"

"You know as much as I do."

"I'm starting to doubt that, Fatman. This is a lot of coincidence."

"You don't know?" said Doris.

"What should I know? I'm a cop."

"Ha ha," I said to Doris, hoping to derail her. "Officer Roscoe is your just-the-facts-ma'am style of copper."

"Don't listen to him," Roscoe replied. "Fatman's not the only goofball here."

Doris glanced at me, trying to figure what to say next. I gave her a hand signal that was either too subtle or that she ignored. "We came to find out how he closed it last time."

"Closed it?"

"The portal."

"The portal," Roscoe repeated.

Doris looked at me again. I shrugged. It was too late to stop her. "To the underworld."

"Yeah, I've heard about that," Roscoe said. He did a good job at keeping a poker face.

Doris spit it all out. The Colonel, his shop, Benny DeVito and the flying nun, Himmelmeier and the altar boys, Deadhead, the twist offs, now the Colonel looking like he'd been killed by Superman. A murder ring run by the dead, or whatever state it was the Deadhead and his pals had achieved.

"I mean, how does someone pick the Colonel up in the first place?" Doris asked. "He must go three hundred pounds. Then put a sword through him and the table? You'd need a sledge hammer."

"Some freak on crank," Roscoe speculated. "We had a case the other night, took six of us to get him in the squad."

"Believe what you want," Doris said. "Nobody's paying me to keep the streets safe. That's your ass hanging over the edge."

"Okay, you know it all. So how do we lock up the underworld? It's not like you get a court order."

"We don't know either," I said.

"That's why we were here," Doris said. "To ask the Colonel how he did it last time."

"Too bad you waited until the Colonel was so..." "What?"

"Hmmm. Indisposed?"

The Dead Get Away with Everything: The neighbors gave Doris and me a look when we got back on my trike. I recognized one of the old ladies pressed up against the police tape. Last time I saw her she was dressed up with two of her cronies as the Three Blind Mice. They weren't the strangest characters at the Colonel's Oktoberfest Ball. I went as a jellyfish. Doris was an octopus. I don't remember why.

"You know who I am, Fatman? I'm Lucy," she said. She hadn't bothered to put in her bottom plate. She wasn't working with a full set of teeth on the top either. Her front uppers were still there. Even without a costume, she looked like a rodent. She wore a bathrobe with a set of fuzzy blue slippers.

"Lucy, sure I remember."

"He's dead then, is that it?"

"Dead as they get."

"The Colonel." She stopped and shook her head. "A real Frogtownner. Crazy. What was it? Heart attack? He never passed up a beer or a pork chop."

"True enough. But it wasn't natural causes."

"What then?"

Doris mentioned the saber and the dining room table.

"Mother of God, so we got lunatics on the loose again."

She gave me a suspicious look. "What were you up to?"

"Doris and I stopped by to chat."

"This hour? Aren't you the early birds."

When you know Doris the way I know Doris, you also know when she's out of patience, when another word of small talk is likely make her blow. With Doris it starts with a squint. Next thing you know her lips are tugged into a pout. She cracks her knuckles, yanks at her hair, and then, like it or not, she's going to tell you what's on her mind.

I heard her knuckles go snap, crackle, pop, and then she said, "How long you lived next to the Colonel?"

"When haven't I lived next to the Colonel?" Lucy replied. "Neither of us ever moved. He lived in his parent's house, I lived in mine."

"So. Seventy years?"

"Go ahead. Flatter away."

Doris grabbed Lucy by the elbow and steered her away from the crowd. "What's the big secret?" Lucy asked.

"I think you know," Doris said. "I think you remember. Did the Colonel ever tell you about the portal to the underworld?"

"Portal to the underworld? You must be one more real Frogtownner."

"What do you mean?"

"Crazy."

Doris took a deep breath. If Lucy had been Doris's age she probably would have smacked her. "You know what I'm talking about," Doris said. "You remember from last time."

"Sure I know when I hear bullshit and fairy tales. Sure I know what you're talking about."

"So you don't know anything about the nun who got tossed from the belfry. If I said dead guys were walking in the street it would come as news to you. Never heard of such a thing. That's it?"

"Lucy," I said. "Why don't you just tell Doris what you know? You owe the Colonel that much, don't you think? Whatever it was that killed him, justice should be served."

"Justice," she said.

Not so much surprises me anymore. Nonetheless I was surprised when she spit on my shoe. From the look of it she had some type of lung infection.

"The Colonel is going to feel better if justice is served? He's going to pull the sword out of his chest and dance down the street?"

She tapped me on the chest as she said this. I gently pushed her hand away.

"The Colonel's dancing days are over. That doesn't mean that somebody should get away with killing him. Doesn't mean that more people won't be killed. Could be me. Could be you. I haven't noticed that the dead need a reason to do what they do."

"The dead get away with everything," Lucy said. "You put them in handcuffs at six and by midnight you know what you got?"

I shrugged.

"A pair of empty handcuffs. The best you can do is put them back where they came from."

"The underworld," Doris said.

Lucy sighed. "Okay, have it your way. The underworld."

"So what do you know about it," Doris insisted.

"Okay, okay. Come over to my house. I'll tell you what I know Such as it is."

She's Got a Few Screws Loose: Lucy hadn't thrown away much in her life. It took me a minute to notice that there was a motor scooter in the living room. The dining room table was heaped with paper and surrounded by envelopes that had slid down the slope. There were boxes, rugs, lamps, a box of hammers and a pile of saws, figurines, garden gnomes, a few thousand more things. Doris and I exchanged a look.

"Sit," Lucy said. "You want coffee?"

"Can you find a cup?" Doris said under her breath.

"Why don't we go out on the stoop?" I said. All the surfaces inside were already occupied.

"Suit yourself."

Doris and I watched the traffic stream past on Lexington. Unlike the Colonel, these were people going on with their lives.

Lucy appeared with three cups. "You take up a lot of space," she said to me. She stuck the toe of her slipper beneath my ribs and pushed.

"Okay, okay."

She groaned as she arranged herself between me and Doris.

"The underworld," she said. "You think you ought to be able to get rid of the dead at least. Everything else piles up and piles up. But the dead. You stick them in a hole and you figure that's that. Then they show up again. One more thing..."

"It wouldn't be so bad," I said. "If they just came back and told you what's what, what you could expect. That would be a service. We might all live better lives."

"Or worse," Doris said. "If you knew there was no hell or purgatory. Then you might as well spend your time sticking up convenience stores."

"It would still be wrong." Lucy slurped at her coffee. Her lack of teeth apparently made it tough to drink from a cup.

"A lot of things are wrong but people do them anyway. People do what they can get away with," I said.

Lucy poked Doris on the shoulder. "I'm with him."

"You're a depressing pair."

"We're just old," Lucy replied.

"Right. You've been around. You've seen it all before."

"Not all. But a lot."

"The last time the portal opened. You were there."

"It's not like I was down in a flaming pit. I heard about it. The Colonel told me."

"Maybe that's why they killed him this time. Get rid of the only person who knows how to close the door."

"What makes you think the Colonel knew?"

"He told me he was there when the priest and the altar boys tried to smoke them back in," I said.

"And did that work? Not really. The Colonel was just the middle man."

"So who got the portal closed?" Doris asked. She was cracking her knuckles again.

"Here's what the Colonel told me. You remember the psychic on University?"

"Fatima?" Doris said. "The one who works out of the house?"

"No, no, not her. Before her. Fatman, do you remember? Lady Elizabeth. She had that place above the Notorious Faust."

"The porn theater?" Doris asked.

"Sure," I said. "Lady Elizabeth. There was some question whether she was strictly in the psychic business."

"I knew her from church," Lucy said.

"Church? What I heard, she spent time on her back, time on her knees. Prayer not being the point."

"A complicated lady. A believer. Confession, forgiveness. A generous donor to the faith."

"I hope this isn't a whore with a heart of gold story," Doris said.

"She got out of the psychic business..."

"If that's what it was..."

"How about you let me finish? She got into home health care."

"That's right. It's coming back to me now. What did they get her for? Embezzlement?"

"Exploiting vulnerable adults. Anyway, a lot of money went missing."

"But she closed the portal," Doris said. "That's the important thing. She could still tell us how she did it. Even if she is in prison."

"She's not in prison. Not anymore." Lucy made more noise with her coffee.

"How do we find her?"

"The way things are going, maybe she'll come walking down the street some night."

"What?"

"She's dead. Stabbed in prison. A gal with the knife said Lady Elizabeth stole money from her old auntie. A good candidate for the underworld."

"Now what?" Doris asked.

"She had a daughter in the psychic business with her."

"Fatima?" Doris asked.

"No, no. She went by Mistress Leona back then. But she got out of it. She's a clerk at Target now. You've probably seen her there. Big lady. Pile of gray hair. Cat-eye glasses. I hear she still does consultations. But you've got to know her. Or get an introduction."

"You could introduce us?" I asked Lucy.

"I can try. I can't promise. She's got a few screws loose. Like everyone else around here."

I'm Not Closing No Portal for Free: "Why did I get out of it?" Mistress Leona said, answering my question with one of her own.

Leona had already upset my expectations. I figured we'd meet at a ramshackle Frogtown house or apartment. I figured dirty dishes in the kitchen, the smell of recently fried food. And I figured one way or another any help I got from Mistress Leona was going to cost me something.

We stood at the window of her apartment, me, Leona, Lucy and Doris. She had a downtown condo on the forty-ninth floor of the Airye. Frogtown was out there to the west, blurry in the summer morning haze. I don't get the God's-eye view that often. Cars were stuck on the freeway far below. I felt an odd pang of compassion for the ordinary, lowly working stiff, huffing carbon monoxide down there in traffic. And that just a prelude to the rest of the work day.

The condo's wood floors were covered with rugs most likely hand-knotted by enslaved Pakistani twelve-year olds. A couple of Mies black leather chairs and a sofa surrounded a glass coffee table. What the art on the walls intended to say I couldn't tell you, but it said a lot. Money, mostly.

How this jibed with Leona's clerk job at Target confused me. She said her mother left her some cash, at which Lucy got busy rolling her eyes.

"I bet she did," she said *sotto voce*.

"Why did I get out of my former profession?" Leona said, repeating my question.

She crossed her arms over her chest, which was easier said than done. Like me, she was an impressive figure. An off-the-rack coffin wouldn't have worked for her.

"I'm a life-is-for-the-living sister. That's what I finally figured out. People don't come to a consultation because they believe that. Most times, it's Mister Dead this and Misses Dead that. You start thinking life is for the dead, and second for the people moping around after them. Thinking some old dead body still cares how you live your life. Not my style. I'm more about here and now. Rather work at Target, I would. Dealing with people dealing with real things. Like buying a bag of potato chips. Keeps the mind occupied in a pleasant way."

"You don't believe in spirits?" Doris asked. "You think this is a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of world?"

"Let's not go to extremes," Leona replied. "You can't control what other living people are doing to mess you up. Forget about controlling the dead. They just don't care."

"Ha ha," said Lucy. "There you have it. The dead don't care."

"They don't care about your feelings. IBut they care about a lot of things. Getting even. Collecting debts. Of one kind of another. Lucky that most times they can't do much about it."

"What do you mean?" Doris said.

"They're trapped. They're stuck in the underworld. That keeps them where they ought to be. Which is not here."

"Well, that's the problem," Doris said.

Birds flew past, but way below us. The river snaked along to the south. It was easy to cultivate a sense of distance from just about everything at this height.

"What's the problem?" Leona said.

"They're out again," Lucy said. "The dead. They're out."

She had all her teeth in. Instead of her fuzzy slippers and robe, she wore a polyester dress and sensible shoes, the type of black lace-ups you used to see on nuns. Up in Leona's condo she looked like a time traveler.

"Where this time?"

"Same place. The Colonel's old shop on University Avenue."

"That again. Why didn't he call me? What? He thinks he's going to save some money? Do it himself?"

"The Colonel's not doing anything himself anymore."

I explained about the saber, the table.

"Sounds like he didn't suffer much," Leona said. "You got that."

"Didn't suffer much?" The sound Doris made was not really a laugh. "The blade looked like it got smacked in with a pile driver. There was blood on the ceiling."

"I mean, I don't expect it was a long fight. I don't expect it was much of a fight at all."

"That part you got right."

"So you want me to close up the portal."

"We don't know who else to ask," I said.

"Isn't anybody else *to* ask. Not that I know about. Except my momma. And she's dead."

"So you'll do it?"

"Depends. I'm not closing no portal for free. It's not like we're going to read to a kindergarten class. People get hurt. Killed."

I heard Doris's knuckles cracking. "How do you know you won't be the next twist off?" she said. "You want to take that chance while you're waiting for the money?"

"Watch your mouth, young lady," Leona said. "I'm up forty-nine floors up and I got my tricks. Unlike you."

"How much are you thinking about?" I asked.

"Eight would have done it. But if I got to be insulted along the way, ten."

"What about we split the difference. Nine."

"Cash."

"Half up front, half after the portal is closed."

"Don't worry about no portal being open once I get done."

"Don't worry about getting your money when it is."

"When do we start?"

"Tonight?"

"I got to work tonight."

"You going to make nine at Target?"

"You saying I should blow off my regular? You heard about responsibility?"

"We got people's lives at stake here. Every night goes by, we got the dead rising up. They're not coming for a picnic."

"Tell me something I don't know. But I'm saying we start tomorrow night."

The Dead Are Like Death Itself: "Charles, I don't want to be by myself tonight." Doris played with the buttons on my shirt. She had just put away a plate of pasta with shrimp in a wine sauce laced with fresh basil. We sat on my back patio. The crickets had started in a while ago. The sun was all but gone.

"I don't want to think about you being by yourself." I pulled the wine from the ice bucket and filled her glass.

"You think we'll be okay here?"

"We could check into a hotel. But my feeling is, the dead are like death itself. They want to find you, they will. The important thing is, we're together. Being afraid and alone is a whole different thing than being afraid with company."

"You get your head twisted off you still don't have a head. Doesn't matter who's around and who's not."

"Can't argue. But what can either of us do about it?"

"Let's finish the wine," she said.

On You It Looks Good: I woke up with my face buried in Doris's hair. It was still dark. The cicada were at work outside, competing with the freeway noise.

I never sleep through the night anymore. I'm used to it. I've got an inventory of thoughts to keep me busy in the dead of night. I've also got an inventory of thoughts that I avoid, for fear that if I start down that path I'll never fall asleep again.

I didn't get to either side of my thought inventory. I was interrupted by a tap on my shoulder.

"Fatman."

"Huh!" I jolted upright.

Doris screamed. "What?"

We were both naked, half covered by the sheet.

Laughter from both sides. And then, "Relax, Fatman. Relax. Old friends."

"Jesus!"

"One thing we ain't is Jesus."

"Deadhead. Colonel. What are you..."

"What's going on, Charles?" Doris said. She sounded calmer than I did.

"We've got visitors."

"Colonel? What the hell. You haven't been buried."

Even in the dark bedroom his uniform looked dazzlingly white. He had fringed gold epaulets, gold buttons, a spiked helmet covering his bald head.

"Who says I have to be buried?"

"Aren't there rules?"

"I hate rules," Deadhead said.

"Anyway, they're more like procedures, recommendations. From what I can tell so far," the Colonel said.

"Great uniform."

"Thanks. Whatever you can imagine, that's what you get. You like the pickelhaube?"

"What?"

"The helmet."

"On you it looks good. You feeling okay? Last time I saw you..."

"I wasn't at my best."

"That's one way to put it."

"Now I'm feeling good. Like a kid again."

"That's great, Colonel."

The obvious question hung in the air. It seemed inhospitable to raise it so quickly. So I didn't.

"You guys hungry? I could get you a beer."

"Nah, forget it, Fatman." Deadhead pulled a chair up to the bed and sat down.

"Nice offer, but we don't actually eat."

Doris pulled the sheet around herself.

"It's liberating, sort of," the Colonel said. "All those basic human needs, gone. Food, money, sex."

"Breathing," Deadhead added.

"There's a lot we don't seem to need."

The conversation stalled. The Colonel cleared his throat. Deadhead leaned in toward us. "Nice seeing you again, Fatman. I got no beef with you. I had some issues with the Colonel from back in the day."

"Issues?" Doris asked. "You don't settle them halfway, do you?"

Deadhead shrugged. "It's the underworld. We don't deal in shades of gray. Well, we do. I mean, the whole place is sort of gray. But philosophically, morally, we're on or we're off."

"I'll say. A saber. Through the heart. The spine. The table. You couldn't talk it through?"

"Not really. It's hard to explain."

"What was the big problem?"

"He never let up. I don't know. Maybe it's a German thing. The persistence. The crazy attention to detail. A little crack in the floor, next thing you know there's five guys laying rebar and concrete. Speck of rust on the door and the painters are there. The old guys had been stuck down there, what, fifty years? A hundred? Who knows? Stuck in the underworld, all they want to do is get out, settle a few old scores. Instead they spend decades bumping up against steel doors and concrete. It gets frustrating.

"You're living, you don't understand," the Colonel said.

"That's it. You don't understand. You're dead, okay, you don't eat, you don't crap, you don't screw. You don't feel any pain. You're strong as a gorilla. But that doesn't mean everything's settled. You still got desires."

"You just said you don't want anything. Which is it?" I said.

"You don't want anything physical. You know what that makes you realize?"

"I'm thinking I have no idea."

"You realize that the things you want most are not physical. I tell you from experience, Fatman. As a living person, you think you want a beer, you want a steak, you want, excuse me ma'am, some ass. Then you're dead. You think everything is different. But you got, finally, some time for reflection. You see truly what is what. Which is that the things you truly wanted were never the beer and the steak and the piece of ass."

Deadhead paused. He idly fingered the bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. "Well, I might be wrong about the ass part. But you're dead and you see what you wanted, what you really wanted, were the things you can't count, that you can't buy. Love. Respect. Justice."

"Isn't it a little late for that?" Doris asked. "You got a hole in your head. His heart is cut in half. Excuse me for pointing out the obvious. But you're dead."

"Living or dead, what are we to others?" the Colonel asked. "We're an idea, right? An idea that people hold. A conception. Most people, you're not having sex with them. You're not hitting them. You're not twisting their ears or tickling their toes. Your physical reality..."

"...or lack thereof..." Deadhead added.

"...is insignificant."

"This is fascinating, guys," I said. "But it's the middle of the night. I was sound asleep. It's a lot to think about, is what I'm saying. And this is a hard time to think."

"Okay. Let's get down to business."

"We need you to stop trying to close up the portal," the Colonel said.

"Give me a minute here," I said. "A couple days ago..."

"I know. I know. A couple days ago I wanted to fill in the cracks. That was a couple days ago. I was living then."

"You understand my problem, right? You guys make a mess."

"Lots of people make a mess," Deadhead said. "The cops. The military. They leave behind bodies and nobody complains."

"It's part of the job."

"How's that different? We all got our work. You think I wouldn't rather be dead? I mean, dead dead. Walking around with a hole in my head, it's humiliating."

"You mean, leave the portal open all the time. So you can do whatever you want any time you want to do it?"

"Basically, yeah. It's not like we're the Mongolian horde."

"How many of you are there?" Doris asked.

"We're not at liberty to say."

"What? You've got a security system? Secrets?"

"We're trying to give you a break here, Fatman. We don't have to convince you. We got other methods." He cracked his knuckles. It sounded like he was snapping baseball bats in two.

"Okay. Excuse me. I'm just trying to understand."

"We know you're trying to hire Mistress Leona."

"You guys get around."

"Take my advice, Fatman," the Colonel said. "Put that one in the dead letter file."

"You got to make some kind of deal with me here."

"Not really."

"Oh, let him talk. What you got in mind, Fatman?"

"Say we open the portal a couple times a year? Not day-to-day chaos. Not unreasonable confinement. Something that works for everybody."

"We not authorized. Maybe somebody can make that deal. We can't," Deadhead said.

"Figures," said the Colonel. "Bureaucracy everywhere."

"We'll get back to you on that. Schedule a meeting. I don't know."

"Should we pencil something in? Say tomorrow?"

"Jesus, Fatman, slow down," the Colonel said. "What makes you think we have to make any kind of deal?"

"Because if you don't you're going to have everybody on your trail. The psychics, the wiccans, the druids, the cops, the priests, the evangelicals, the National Guard. Doofuses, most of them. But somebody's going to know how to take care of business."

"Maybe, maybe not."

"You guess wrong and you're trapped down there again for who-knows-how-long."

"Okay. You got a point. You ain't so dumb, Fatman. I got to hand it to you. What you're doing living here all these years I don't understand. But that's a different question."

"So we talk again tomorrow. Say an hour after sunset. That's good for you?"

"We're not vampires. But okay."

"Where? I don't think we can get a table at Wendy's. Considering."

"You got a nice place. Here is okay. Just one thing, Fatman."

"Name it."

"Just to make sure there's no monkey business?"

"Yeah?"

"We take Doris."

The Colonel pushed me down against the bed, his open hand so hard against my chest that it drove the breath from me. Deadhead wrapped Doris in the sheet and threw her over his shoulder. He went out the door. The Colonel dove through the window. I rolled off the mattress gasping for air. By the time I got to my feet they were long gone.

Defenestration, Officer? It was the middle of the night, but there wasn't any point in figuring I was going back to sleep. There wasn't any point in calling the cops about Doris's kidnapping either. They wouldn't want to hear that she had been abducted by two dead guys.

I put on some clothes and got on my bike. My thinking was that I needed to get to Mistress Leona pronto. While Deadhead and the Colonel dealt with Doris, Leona and I could get started on a plan to rescue her and lock up the underworld.

I rolled down Sherburne as fast as I could, which was not too fast. Even so, my heart beat like a timpani. I felt the pulsing in my gut, in my ears. I hadn't taken the time to button my shirt, so it flapped behind me. My belly jiggled with every bump in the road.

There are times when my condition is frustrating. Oh, I wished I could fly, and there I was, pumping slowly down the dark street, the big lazy bugs out in front of me as they flew from light to light. A method-up hooker stood on the corner of Western and gawked as I pedaled past. "I got what you need, mister," she called. And I thought, no, no you don't. I need Doris back. I need Leona on the case. I need the dead back under ground. You don't have a single thing I need right now.

A pair of characters stumbled down the street with a forty in a paper bag. Near the corner two cars pulled up and idled in the middle of the street. Hands reached out from the driver's seats — cash going one way, dope going the other. My watch said three forty eight. I wasn't expecting that the Mormons and the welcome wagon would be out at this hour. Decent people were asleep. Only the desperate and those who serviced them stalked the streets now.

I labored over the pedals. A two-syllable rhythm played through my head. Failure. Fail-ure. Fail-ure. Doris had come to me for protection and I was utterly useless. The cops had my car so I proceeded at a virtual crawl toward the only person who could help me. The slow-moving bugs of the night whapped against my bare sweating belly.

I crossed Rice Street and arced past the Capitol. I looked up at that golden charioteer beneath the dome and could all but hear the mockery. Yo, chump! Get some horses! I double-timed it toward Leona's condo.

I saw the blue and red flashing lights long before I got there. There were cop cars, a couple fire trucks, an ambulance, all of them blocking off the street. I looked for Roscoe but he was nowhere in sight.

A young cop came up to me. "Move it along, sir. There's nothing to see."

I could guess what had happened but I hoped I was wrong. I looked up the glass wall of Leona's building. Her window was up forty-nine floors. A long way down.

"Defenestration, officer?"

"Huh?"

"A jumper? A suicide? Somebody went out the window?"

"You got it."

"Black? Big? Gray hair?"

"Sort of hard to tell right now. Flat, mostly." He gave me a look. "You know a lot. Why don't you stick around a minute?"

He turned to yell at a guy with more stripes on his uniform shoulder. In the meantime I slipped behind the ambulance, put a fire truck between him and me, then pedaled off the wrong way up Jackson Street.

Leona wasn't going to be any help.

Going Down: The sun was not rising quite yet but it was getting there. A blush hung on the horizon. Under normal circumstances this might have been beautiful.

I tried to pedal back up the hill from downtown to Frogtown but got stuck halfway to the History Museum. Sure, it was embarrassing sometimes to be so heavy, so out of shape, so done in by exertion. But let's face it, there wasn't anyone around to see. I got off the trike and pushed it up the hill.

What I needed was time to think. What I also needed was a cup of coffee. A coffee shop would have been the thing, not that there was one in Frogtown. Once I got back on level ground I pedaled to the Holiday station on Rice.

"Ain't you the early bird?" said Ebony, the girl at the till. She used to live down the street from me.

"All the good worms are out this time of day."

"Ha, ha, Mr. Fatman," she said. Her mama taught her manners. "You go have yourself a splendid day."

The curb being a long way down, I arranged myself on the seat of my trike and rested the coffee on the bulge of my belly. The pair of doughnuts I set in the trike basket. My knees hurt. I was sticky with sweat. And Doris was a hostage in the underworld, held by guys who hadn't thought twice about pitching Leona out the window.

I tried to come up with a plan. It's hard to figure out how to deal with the dead. We don't know much about them, except that we've put them in a hole, or turned them to ashes. You want to negotiate with somebody, it helps to know something about what they need, what they want, what they're willing to give up and where they draw the line.

I needed to have a sit-down with the dead. I didn't want to wait until the meeting I had scheduled with Deadhead and the Colonel. As long as they had Doris I didn't want to wait at all.

I knew where I was going after I finished my coffee and doughnuts. I didn't want to admit it quite yet, but I knew.

Descent into the underworld. That had to be my move.

I wondered if there was anyone I could bring along, anyone who could help.

A man of the cloth? Maybe a cop? Given what I had seen so far, a kindergarten teacher might fit the bill, or a certain type of lawyer. Duke Black came to mind. He was the attorney you hired if the cops caught you standing over a bloody corpse with a tire iron in your hand.

There wasn't time for explanations. There wasn't time for a sales job.

I knew I'd need all the strength I could muster. I filled my mouth with doughnut, and washed it down with Holiday coffee.

Then I brushed the crumbs off my bare chest. Truth is, the sugar glazing smeared against the sweat that was pooled there. I gave it another swipe and pointed my trike toward Ivan's former shop.

Toward the portal to the unworld.

The Only Step that Would Save Her: Outside Ivan's shop, University Avenue was still a dirt track. A truck filled with slabs of asphalt jounced westward. The ground shook under my feet. That smell hung in the air again, like a joke. Sulfur, the underworld, yes, of course. The sun rose, the temperature climbed. The sweat poured from me now, running in streams over the arc of my gut.

I hadn't given thought to the particulars. Such as, how did I intend to get into Ivan's shop? I was tugged in two directions. Doris might be down there. Even if she was not, somebody there might know where she was.

Had I been thwarted by a lack of tools, been forced to gear up, to regroup, I would not have been one hundred percent disappointed. If Jesus Christ could wonder if the cup might pass, was I not entitled to second thoughts?

I lifted the police tape over my head. The door that Roscoe had smashed open a few days earlier was now covered with plywood. I gave it a push with a finger and it swung open.

Good. Damn.

I stepped inside.

The grease that covered the walls absorbed the faint morning light. Ivan's tools were still scattered around the repair bays. I was not so surprised they hadn't been stolen. There was a feel around the place. If I had significant hair left on my head it would have been standing on end. As it was, my heart raced, my mouth went dry.

I grabbed a flashlight from Ivan's desk and stuck it in my pocket. Then I found the door to the basement. A metal hasp, welded to the steel door, was closed with a lock as thick as my index finger. I tugged on it. Nothing happened.

Good. Damn.

A hacksaw would do it. Ivan must have had one. It would be slow work. But when you're looking at what be your final moments, the prospect of a slow walk to get there is not completely unappealing. Then I noticed the acetylene torch that Ivan had stuck in the corner.

I put on the goggles and leather gloves that hung from the gas tanks. I fired up the torch. Sparks flew; flame nipped at the steel. The lock glowed red then fell to the floor in pieces. I used a screwdriver to pry pop the hasp.

Bare concrete steps led downward, ending at another steel door, this one shut with a submarine bulkhead crank. One thing for the Colonel: he was thorough. I twisted the

crank to open the lock. A blast of warm, foul air hit me in the face. I stood there, motionless, and peered into the gloom.

The first few steps were hewn from rock. I pulled Ivan's flashlight from my pocket, switched it on and pointed the beam into the darkness. There wasn't anything to see. There wasn't anything on which to base a plan, or make a judgment. There was nothing to do but take one step and then another, into the underworld.

So I went down.

Bureaucracy Everywhere: A couple things about the underworld: the lighting is terrible, and so is the air.

I walked for I'm not sure how long. I seemed to be in a hallway cut out of rock and dirt. It sloped downward at a gradual pitch. Eventually I noticed the faintest glow ahead, the kind of light you'd get from a single fluorescent fixture stuck in a huge room.

A voice traveled through the gloom. "Who's there?"

"You don't know?"

"Why the hell should I? What, you're the only guy in the world? I'm a mind-reader?"

"Okay, okay, my name is Charles."

"Come on in, Chuck. Don't be shy."

The hallway opened into a large space. The walls were the same rock and dirt. So was the floor. A figure sat at a gray steel desk set in the middle of the dim space. He was still so far away I couldn't say what he looked like.

"You got a last name, Charley?"

"Fadiman. People call me Fatman."

"Fatman! Why didn't you say?"

"It would have mattered?"

I was close enough now to make out his features. He could have lost a few pounds. He could have used some hair. His beard needed a trim. The truth is, he looked unnervingly like me. But then so do a lot of guys my age.

"Of course it matters. You're a topic of conversation, man."

"Is that good or bad?"

"Ha ha. You're a character. It's always good to get people talking. Get the brand out there."

"I'm not worrying about my brand. I'm trying to find my girl."

"Doris. Sure. High-spirited gal."

"So she's here."

"I didn't say that."

"How do I find out?"

"Let's face it, Fatman. You don't show up in the underworld and get answers just like that. It's a process."

I noticed he had a pad on his desk. He jabbed at it now with a ball-point pen. "Let's get your particulars. Name I got. Date, okay. Time, let's call it eight thirty. Purpose of visit. What you want to say here? Reclaim girlfriend?"

"What do you think?"

"No point beating around the bush. Why don't you have a seat."

There wasn't another chair. He caught me looking around. "Sorry, but what we got here is the floor. The underworld is a low-accommodation facility, sad to say. You can lean against the wall. There's a good spot over there." He pointed vaguely toward my left.

"I got to take this downstairs. Just wait here. I'll be back."

He pushed himself out of his chair and limped into the gloom, leaning on a cane. He dragged a mangled leg behind him. His pant leg was tattered, as if it had been chewed by a pack of pit bulls. The tap of his cane against the floor was like the sound of a very slowly ticking clock.

I made my way to the wall and sat in the dirt. I waited.

What You Looking At? Another thing about the underworld: no way to keep track of time. I checked my watch. I stared at the dark walls for what seemed like ten minutes. I checked my watch again. Not a minute seemed to have passed. The second hand had stopped moving. No tick tick tick. I tapped on the bezel with my finger. Nothing happened. The watch was dead.

I can't tell you whether an hour passed, or two, or ten. I stretched out in the dirt for a while. I fell asleep. I'd been awake for a while when I heard movement in the dark space beyond the reception desk. Mumbling. Again the tap of that cane. Feet dragging in the dirt.

"Fatman, buddy, you still there?"

"Over here," I called. I struggled to my feet. I was stiff and sore. I felt filthy, but in that light there was no way to tell.

"Come on into the light. Such as it is."

"What is that? Five watts?"

"We're sort of off the grid down here, you know what I mean? The light is the light. The heat is the heat. The air-conditioning, forget about it."

"That you, Deadhead?"

"I brought friends. The Colonel. Leona. Jack from reception. You already met Jack. Plus Benny. Fellow Frogtownner. Maybe you heard of him."

"Benny DeVito? The flying nun guy?"

"The same."

"Sure, I heard."

We gathered around the desk. They weren't a great looking bunch. Deadhead with the bullet hole in his head. The Colonel's white uniform, which looked top-notch the last time I saw him, was dusted now with underworld grime. His saber wound wept through the fabric. Jack from reception had lost most of the flesh on his leg. Leona... let's just say you can't hit the pavement from forty-nine floors up and still move like a gazelle or look like you belong on a magazine cover. There's a lot that gets pushed out of joint, feature-wise, when you land.

"What you looking at?" she asked.

I made some noises that weren't quite words.

"You could say, Sorry. Sorry Mistress Leona that I got you wrapped up in this. Sorry my friends threw you out your window. Sorry all that retirement planning you did got so meaningless. Sorry you won't be going on that cruise you got booked. Sorry you..."

"Okay, Leona," Benny said. "Everybody has plans. Things happen. Deal with it. Silently would be best."

She opened what was left of her mouth to answer but Deadhead put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

Benny sighed. For a corpse he looked good. The reason he was dead wasn't evident. "Fatman," he said. "A pleasure. I've been hearing so much about you. From my associates here. From Doris. She's quite a gal."

The Underworld Is Full of Lawyers: "So you've got Doris here," I said.

"I didn't say that." Benny waggled a finger at me and grinned, as if we were joking around.

"You're not saying you don't."

He shrugged.

"Don't see why we're pussyfooting around," Leona said. She slurred and lisped as she spoke. Her jaw wasn't well attached. She was missing most of her teeth. "We got the girl. He knows, we know. Don't matter where she is exactly. We still got her."

Benny gave her a look. "As I was saying, Doris brightens things up around here. She's a colorful woman. No offense, Fatman, but what's she doing with you?"

"I've heard that before. Why don't we ask her?"

"Ha ha," Benny replied. "I'm dead, not dumb."

"What's the harm? You guys are as strong as gorillas. It's not like I'm going to muscle my way out of here. What else you doing?"

"He's got a point there," Deadhead said, yawning.

I heard a yell from somewhere. Across the room, down a hall, maybe behind a door. "That's Doris now," I said. "What are you doing to her?"

"Relax, Fatman," the Colonel said. "We're honorable people. Sure, we're kidnapers. But we're not torturers. She's comfortable. Or as comfortable as you get in the underworld."

"Maybe you're trying. But you got to admit, Martha Stewart isn't working here. It's a little rough."

"You telling me," Leona said. "Had a nice penthouse situation 'til I got tossed out my window. Leather loveseat and sofa, good carpet on the hardwood floor. Then no thanks to you, bang! I'm squatting in the dirt. Got rocks under my butt."

"Okay, Jack," Benny said. "Go get the lady. We'll have a little reunion, talk about what's next."

Jack went limping off again with his cane. At his pace a short trip would take a while. We all watched him disappear in the shadows.

"No offense, Benny," I said. The silence was getting to me. "But I can't figure out your strategy here. What do you want from me?"

"I thought we made that clear. Didn't you make it clear, Deadhead? Colonel?"

"Sure," said Deadhead. "We told him. No stoppering up the underworld. That's the deal."

"Fine. But what are you going to do? Keep her forever? You give her back, what's to prevent me from doing whatever I want?"

"For one thing, we'll come back and get her."

"Maybe I shouldn't be mentioning this, but not if I put a plug in the underworld. You're here, I'm there, you're not going anywhere. Is there something I'm not understanding?"

"Yeah, yeah, you got a point. But it's a gamble, right? It all works until it doesn't. They build their little train track upstairs, the ground shifts again and next thing you know, you got an express lane open. Do a little sewer work, put in new cable, upgrade the water hook-up, and who's to say when we'll be out again? And what do we have to do except nurse our grudges?"

"I could take Doris and we could move."

"Let's be real with each other now, Fatman. You lived here, what, thirty-five years? You're going to move now? You're a Frogtownner, man. You're not fit to live anywhere else. You wouldn't know how to do it."

"So you're saying all I got to do is promise not to plug up the underworld and Doris can go with me?"

"You're moving a little fast now," Benny said. "We got to have some whereases and wherefores. Maybe a contract. Who knows, written in blood."

"You guys still have blood?"

"Some. For a while. The Colonel still has a bit. Look at his uniform. Leona, it's all over her. Me, maybe not so much," said Benny. "Anyway, it's more a figure of speech."

"We need a lawyer then."

"You think the underworld isn't full of them?"

Before we could get any further I heard Jack and Doris approach. When she got close enough to see me, she said, "Charles, it's about time."

What You Take Us For? Animals? "Baby, it's been a few hours," I said. "I haven't rested since they grabbed you."

"It's been days."

"Centuries," said Leona. "One thing time don't do here is fly."

Doris was still wrapped in the sheet from our bed. She'd tied it up so it looked like a toga. A filthy toga. She wasn't better at staying clean than anyone else in the underworld. Regardless, she made my blood jump in my veins. The smudge of dirt on her cheek and the dirty toga did something to me, I'm embarrassed to admit. I had to push my mind back on the track.

"They treating you okay?"

"Maybe you noticed it's not the Hilton. No furniture. It stinks. Dirt everywhere."

"They feeding you?"

"Chee-tos. Potato chips."

"Come on, guys," I said. "You got to do better."

"We're not running a soup kitchen," Benny said. "Nobody else here eats. It's what we had around."

"I feel like a mole, Charles. You've got to get me out of here."

"I'm working on it, sugar. But before we made any kind of deal I wanted to know for sure that you were still... you know..."

"What?"

"Well, living."

"Damn, Fatman," Deadhead said. "What you take us for? Animals?"

"Devils, you asking me," Leona said. "The way you all tossed me out the window. Like I was a bag of potatoes. Animals wouldn't have done that."

"That's different," Benny said. "Security threat. You do what you got to do."

"So what's the deal?" Doris asked.

"We agree not to seal up the underworld. They agree to let you go."

"Sounds fair enough to me," Doris said. "What do we do? Shake on it?"

"They've got lawyers."

"Lawyers!" She cracked her knuckles a few times.

"Relax, Doris," I said. I worried about what she'd do next.

"Lawyers!" she said again. "Down here they'll have billable centuries. I'll never get out!"

"We'll get on it pronto, honey. They've got their guys, I'll get ours. We'll meet... where?"

"Here is good," Benny said.

"Here is not good." Doris worked her knuckles over again.

"Okay, simpler. Fewer questions. Our best guys don't look so great."

"Who is our guy?" Doris asked.

"I'm thinking Duke Black. Seems like his kind of caper."

"Duke Black," said the Colonel. "I appreciate that, Fatman. Shows respect for the process."

"I think I still owe him a couple thousand," Deadhead said. "He got me off on a murder rap."

"You guilty?" Benny wondered.

Deadhead gave him the first genuine grin I had seen from the dead. "I'm innocent and I hire Duke Black?" he said.

Step Into the Inner Sanctum: Duke and I go back a ways. We went to St. Agnes together in the pre-Vatican II era, back when God still spoke Latin. After high school he went his way and I went mine. His way led to a thirty-fifth-floor downtown office with a view of several congressional districts. The man lives large, both in the physical sense — he matches me pound for pound, with maybe a few to spare — and in terms of lifestyle. His suits look like they've been melted on his skin. Third world bandits would cut off his arm to get at his Rolex. A box of his cigars probably cost more than my car. If I still had a car.

I rode my bike to his office, coasting down the long hill to his doorstep. I was straight from the underworld. I buttoned up my shirt, but I was still sweating and filthy.

I got some looks in the elevator. Duke's no-nonsense receptionist gave me a hard stare over her reading glasses before she said, "How exactly may I help you, sir?" At the same time she reached under her desk to hit the security button.

A few seconds later a side door opened and a nicely-dressed palooka with a shaved head and a neck the size of a fire hydrant appeared.

"Could you tell Duke that Fatman is here?"

"First name?" the receptionist asked.

"Just Fatman. He'll know."

Duke's muscle man asked, "Get you a cup of coffee? A glass of water? You look like you could use something."

Duke and all his people are used to the rougher element. They're geared up, but they're not frightened. Murderers, extortionists, thieves of every description; all of them Duke's bread and butter. Unless you're a fool you understand that it's Duke's way or the highway, and generally the highway ends at a state or federal institution.

Before the strong man returned Duke burst through the door. "Fatman!" he exclaimed, then stopped short. "Jesus, man, what? You crawled through the sewer to get here?"

"Something like that. I need help, Duke."

"That's why I'm here, friend. Step into the inner sanctum. We'll get you straightened out."

He held open the door to his office. There was a glass table, a glowing laptop, a carpet that any Arab potentate would have been happy to own, a desk chair that looked like it came off a space ship. One of the walls was a sheet of glass, the others were paneled in endangered Amazonian lumber.

"I got to say, you look like hell, Fatman. Here's what. Step into my bath, take a shower, put on a robe and we'll talk."

"I'm short on..."

"Everybody is. Just humor me. Go on."

The water ran gray over his marble bath tiles. I fought the urge to sink to the floor and sleep under the hot spray. But then I saw Doris's face again, Doris stuck in the pit of filth, the seconds dragging on like hours, and every one of them counting against me.

I dried myself on a cloud-soft towel and slipped on a terry robe.

"Hey, hey," said Duke. "I feel like I'm talking to a human being now. So who did you kill, Fatman."

"It's more complicated than that."

"I hand it to you. Most people don't figure how complicated crime is. They think, hey, I'm solving my problems. Truth is, their troubles are just getting started."

"I'm the victim here, Duke," I said.

He gave me a skeptical look. "Tell me about it," he said.

I told him everything that led up to Doris's kidnapping: about the portal and how it opened, about how the dead bumped off the Colonel and Leona, about Deadhead and the Colonel showed up in my bedroom and nabbed Doris.

"Deadhead! He still owes me six thousand bucks!"

"Try to collect. Maybe the dead pay their bills."

"Christ, the living don't pay their bills."

"The point isn't Deadhead. It's Doris. I need a negotiator to get her out. They've got lawyers."

"I bet they do. Probably some top talent down there."

"I need somebody who can go head-to-head with their guys."

"Needless to say, you're in the right place. So when do we start?"

"How about now?"

He hit a button on his phone. "Judy," he said. "Cancel out the rest of the day."

Everybody As Happy As They Can Be: Duke lent me a navy blue track suit monogrammed with his initials. We took the elevator to the basement and climbed into his Benz. As we floated along the streets an unjustified sense of calm settled on me. I melted into the leather seats. You don't realize the tension stored up in your muscles until finally they relax. This was the first time I had felt like myself since Doris and I found the Colonel skewered to his table.

This was Duke's great talent. He made you believe that you had done everything you reasonably could, that everything would work out in your favor. Except that you would need to pay his bill.

I directed Duke to Ivan's shop. We got stuck behind a pair of dump trucks loaded with broken asphalt. "This kind of project, imagine the legal work," Duke said appreciatively. "Your construction contracts, the inevitable screw ups, the civil suits, maybe some criminal, who knows? Anyway, where do we park?"

"In front of Ivan's door. He's not using it."

Once we were inside, I grabbed the flashlight from Ivan's desk and directed Duke through the doors to the underworld. "This is it?" he said. "A couple of doors and we're in the underworld?"

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. A little drama. Whatever happened to Charon rowing us over the River Styx, the dead wailing in water, all that?"

"Sorry, Duke. It's not the *Inferno*. We're in the basement of a Frogtown mechanic's shop. And not a very good one at that."

"So many ways that things aren't what they used to be. No style anymore. You ought to have a torch instead of that crummy flashlight."

"This is what we got."

The beam of light hardly seemed to matter. All it lit was a patch of black dirt amid the overwhelming darkness. We stumbled down the tunnel for I don't know how long until again that dim fluorescent glow appeared before us.

"Hey!" I shouted.

In return, nothing.

I shouted again. Silence.

Sweat prickled on my bald scalp. It was hard not to fear the worse. "I don't know. Maybe it's a double cross. Maybe they took Doris and checked out for good. She might not even be..."

"Stop," Duke commanded. "As your counsel, I advise you to get a grip, Fatman. "They're playing your emotions. This is business."

"No, it's not business. This is love. This is Doris in the hands of... They're dead, Duke. They don't care about the things we care about."

"We'll see about that. They got things they want. We got things we want. We're talking about making everybody as happy as they can be. Well, really, making us as happy as we can be."

We marched together toward the gray puddle of light.

Fetch the Girl: "Damn!" Duke exclaimed. "Pimlipper! Graydon! Will you look at you two!"

The underworld's representation sat at the steel table. A pile of paper, a quill pen, a shallow clay bowl and a scalpel were arranged before them. Deadhead, the Colonel, Benny and Leona stood nearby.

"Duke Black. I should have known. Have a seat, my friend. Let's get down to business."

"Hold on just a minute, Pimlipper. This isn't just another day in court."

"Not that different. Except here the Supreme Court really is supreme."

"You mean...?"

"Don't listen to him, Duke," Graydon said. "We've got no idea. You get rumors. Same as everywhere else. Talk is talk. You hear about your divine judgment, but the evidence? Lacking, I would say."

"In heaven as it is on Earth," Duke said. "You boys look pretty good. Considering."

For dead guys they could have looked worse. Pimlipper still had a sharp set of eyes, pale blue but lively, as if they were backlit. His suit, filthy of course, hung loosely from his shoulders. I could have stuck my hand between his shirt collar and his waddled neck. He had that bug-eyed look of the elderly in thick glasses.

Graydon was like a beachball dressed in a pinstripe suit. How he maintained his girth on a no-food diet was a mystery. His coloring would have been better on a battleship. But like Pimlipper, he looked eager for action, gleeful almost.

"I'm surprised, I got to say. Not that you're here. But that the billable hours never stop."

"Money isn't really a pressing need here, Duke," Pimlipper said.

"Still, you've got work."

"Not that much. Plenty of potential clients, naturally. Centuries worth of corpses. Indians. Traders. Robber barons. The famous. The infamous. Mountains of nobodies. They all got their gripes. But there's only so much you can do about it."

"What do you mean?" Duke said.

"Think about it. You die with your usual pile of remaining beefs. People owe you money. Maybe some Romeo ran off with your wife. Punks steal your car. Whatever. You got a window of opportunity to get even. A year, ten years, half a century," Pimlipper said.

"Variable, but finite, that's the point," Graydon added. "You want to settle the score but here you are. Trapped. All you got is time and nothing to do with it."

"Except now and then, something happens. Earthquake. Construction. Your normal erosion. Sinkhole. The portal opens and it's spring vacation. Everybody with an open file heads for the exits," Pimlipper said.

"Most of your underworlders could care less," Graydon said. He picked up the scalpel and trimmed a loose piece of flesh from his thumb. "Their files are closed. All the old enemies dead."

"They don't have relatives?" Duke wondered.

"Sure they do. But think of it," Graydon said. "You want to even up with the guy

who did you wrong. Not some great-great-grand-nephew twice removed. Even the dead have a sense of proportion."

"So what happens?"

"What happens is you've got a lot of unhappy, frustrated former people. Which, as far as we can tell, is the point of this whole operation. It would be one kind of despair if you knew the portal never opened and you could never expect revenge."

"But it's another," Pimplipper said, "if there is a possibility you might be able to get out there and literally rip somebody's head off. Except that it almost never happens. So the minutes and hours and decades tick by. You're a sucker to think tomorrow is going to be different. But you never stop wondering if this will be the day."

"It's like playing Powerball. You know you're not going to win, but you ignore that fact because winning would be so sweet."

"It's an eternity of living like a chump."

"You got nothing else to occupy your time?" Duke asked.

"You've got no idea how much time it is to occupy," Pimplipper said.

"Not yet, anyway," Graydon added. "We've got a place on the shingle for you. Pimplipper, Graydon, Black, LLP."

"Thoughtful of you, boys. But maybe now we could do a little business. Why don't you show me the girl?"

"Trust us, we've got her. She's probably sleeping."

"I trust you as much as I trust myself. I want to see the girl."

Pimplipper chuckled, but his laughter quickly turned into a hollow cough. "Can't say I blame you," he said at last. "Deadhead," he said over his shoulder, "why don't you go fetch the Doris?"

A No-Star Hotel: "You mind if we look around while we're waiting?" Duke said.

Now it was Graydon's turn to laugh. "Some day you're going to see more of the underworld than you want, Duke. But go ahead. Take a peek."

"I won't get lost?"

"Benny can show you around, right?"

"Sure thing."

"He's no Virgil, but he gets around better than Leona."

"That's another thing I got against you, Fatman," Leona mumbled through her smashed mouth.

Duke and I fell in behind Benny. I clicked on my flashlight and pointed the beam just past Benny's feet.

"Trust me on this. You'll see more if you turn it off."

I did as I was told. "What do you mean by more?" I asked. "A grave couldn't be blacker."

"Wait."

I followed Benny's scuffling. "You still there, Duke?" I said.

"Depends on what you mean by *there*. This much darkness, you start to wonder if you're here at all."

"Okay, let's stop," Benny said.

This was a Three Stooges routine. I ran into Benny, Duke plowed into me.

As we stood there together the outlines of the space began to emerge.

"I don't get it," Duke said. "I don't see where the light comes from."

As light goes, it wasn't much; like that dim, barely gray space between the dead of night and the first suggestion of dawn. "You don't have to worry about the bulbs burning out," Benny said. "There aren't any. You stand in one place and there's this glow."

"I wouldn't call it flattering," Duke observed.

"You get used to it. Anyway, there's only so good we're going to look. We're dead."

"Speak for yourself."

"Don't feel too good about it. Trust me, life is a temporary condition."

We were at the edge of the room where we met up with Pimplipper and Graydon. A half-dozen hallways fanned out before us. They all looked hewn from coal. The walls had a dull sheen. The floors were made of black dust littered with black rock.

"Which way?" Benny asked.

"What's the difference?" Duke wondered.

"We're not talking about your circles of hell, if that's what you have in mind. It's an equal opportunity environment. One place is pretty much the same as the next."

"Why, that's a consolation!" Duke exclaimed. His normal state of enthusiasm was slowly returning. "No ninth circle for betrayers. No eternal cannibalism, no three-headed Satan chewing on you forever."

"Maybe that happens somewhere else. I don't know," Benny said. "Here, one moment, the next, it's pretty much the same. That's why Pimplipper and Graydon are so hopped up to see you. Something different."

"They ought to be out there, settling scores," Duke said. "They haven't been dead that long. Right now the door's wide open. What's their problem?"

"It takes a lot of energy. You get used to the nothingness of the day-to-day. A guy like Deadhead, he's motivated. You're talking about vengefulness, he owns the franchise. Your normal dead guy, he punches in, he punches out. He talks about being frustrated, says he wants to get out there, tear up the world, yappety-yappety-yap, but it comes right down to it? He squats in the dust. He's not happy, he's not unhappy enough to do anything about it. It's a job."

"Rotten pay."

"Great job security," Benny said. "Come on, we'll check out the accommodations." We fell in behind him again, like he was the concierge at a no-star hotel.

You Sure This Isn't Hell? We stopped and that dull glow appeared around us again. Before us was a doorway leading to another room. It seemed about the size of a football field, but that's only a guess. Darkness swallowed the edges. Pods of gray light lit groups of the dead. Some of them arranged themselves on scavenged furniture. Others squatted in the dirt. There were hundreds, maybe thousands.

We stepped inside. The buzz of conversation was deafening.

"What's this?" Duke shouted over the din. "A convention?"

"You got your loners, you got your joiners," Benny said. "These would be your joiners, if they could agree on what they're joining."

"I don't get it," Duke said.

"Just listen," Benny said. He led us to the nearest group. "This is the Association of Dead Northern Europeans. Though it might be something else. They can't agree on a name."

A couple dozen of the dead sat in the dirt. A slight, bald corpse stood on an overturned plastic bucket. "I hear the criticism," he said. "Some of you think we're moving too fast. The question ahead of us here is whether we have until the end of time or whether there might actually be an earlier limit. In which case our existing strategy...."

"We got a strategy? When did we agree on a strategy? How can we have a strategy if we don't have a name?" This was from an obese dead lady dressed in an apron covered with flour and dirt.

"Three meetings ago we agreed on a name." Even for a dead guy, the man on the bucket sounded weary. "The Association of..."

"I don't identify as Northern European." The fat lady spit this out in a Russian accent. "I mean, what is Russia? Europe or Asia? Who are you? Stalin?"

"You want to put it to a vote? We could settle this once and for all right now."

"Sure, with the people who are here." This came from an agitated character who looked like Ichabod Crane. "What about the people who aren't here?"

"Maybe they don't want to be here. Maybe they don't care."

"Maybe they never heard. How are they supposed to find out?"

"So it's my job. That's what you're saying? What about it's your job?"

"You're the guy standing on the bucket."

"You're the guy with his head up his..."

Ichabod and the fat lady lunged at the bucket man, knocking him to the ground. A dust cloud rose around them as they kicked and punched and bit each other. The others formed a circle, egging them on.

"You taking bets on this?" Duke wondered.

"Pointless," Benny said. "Nobody ever wins. Nobody ever loses. It just goes on, day after day. You want to hear more?"

"What do you got?"

"All the people of the Earth got their associations. Your Latinos, your Africans, your Hmong and Vietnamese, your Bosnians. You name it. It's not like you check that stuff at the door."

"Some of them must do better, right?"

"Ha, ha," Benny said.

"You sure this isn't hell?" Duke asked. "Arguing for the sake of arguing. For what? Days? Years? Forever? I say this as a member of the bar. Does it ever end?"

"Not that I've seen so far." Benny shrugged.

"Let's go back," Duke said. "They must have Doris by now."

We stumbled through the dark hallway again, following the scuffling of Benny's feet in the dusty gravel. I saw Doris; Doris spotted me. She called, "Oh, Charles!"

My heart was as good as broken. There she was, even filthier now, still wrapped in that bedsheet toga. Her hair hung lank around her shoulders. The color seemed to have drained out of her.

"Baby!" I cried as I ran toward her. I lifted my arms to pull her into an embrace. She stiff-armed me. My nose smashed into her open palm.

"Wha..." I mumbled through the piercing pain.

Something ugly flashed in her eyes. "When do you plan to get me out of here?" she hissed.

Find the Man a Bucket: "Excellent!" Duke said. "The girl is here, none the worse for wear. Full of spunk. Graydon! Pimplipper! Let's get down to business."

"I am not full of spunk," Doris said. "I am dying down here. What's it been? Six months? When are you going to start doing something?"

"Sugar, it hasn't even been a day," I pleaded. "I've been doing nothing but running in circles since you left. Ask Leona."

"He been getting me thrown outa buildings, if you count that working. I don't know how long it's been but I know what you mean. Not like the sun rises and sets down here in mole town."

Duke raised a finger. "Fatman has retained counsel and we have been working diligently and tirelessly. Now, if I could get a chair, gentlemen..."

"How about a bucket?" Pimplipper said. "Deadhead, can you find the man a bucket?"

"We're working with the available resources here, Duke," Graydon said.

Deadhead dropped a bucket beside Duke. Duke shook his head. He lowered his bulk onto the bucket. His shoulders and head barely cleared the desk. Another man might have looked ridiculous, sitting there like that. But because it was Duke you wondered not if he was too low, but if everyone else was too high.

"You know what we want," Duke said to Pimplipper and Graydon. "We want to leave with Doris. I need a clear description of what your clients require."

I Might Be Dead But I'm Not Stupid: "Our clients..." said Pimplipper, rolling his eyes.

"They have various requirements," Graydon said quickly.

"Maybe if we could start with the basics here." Duke rubbed his temples and in the process left a smear of dust.

"Prime among them is routine egress from the underworld. We have clients who require congress with the living."

"From what I understand, that's to convert some of the living into the dead."

"There's no need to get hung up on the details," Pimplipper said. "Why don't we concentrate on the egress issue for now."

"What we need here are reasonable limitations," Duke said. "You open a highway out of here, the corpses start piling up from the so-called congress between the living and the dead, and next thing you know, it's out of control. It's already out of control. The twist-offs, the Colonel, Leona here, Doris abducted. You got the cops on red alert, the mayor's having a heart attack, the newspapers are going to be doubling their ink order. What we need to be talking about right now is a cooling off strategy. For right now we don't need more dead people roaming the Earth. I'm not saying it benefits me. It benefits you."

"Duke, Duke, Duke," Pimplipper said. His thin, bloodless lips curled into something like a grin. "I might be dead but I'm not stupid. I appreciate that we're negotiating here, but Jesus. You're telling me we should give you the girl and then stay down here in our hole? What's the pay-off? Maybe you could come up with a bone we could throw to our clients?"

"Okay. Say we start with a two-month moratorium. No more...what do you call it? Revenge killings?"

Graydon sneered. "That, sir, is a derogatory usage and doesn't begin to reflect the ethical realities. For the purposes of an eventual document, let's say 'karmic adjustments.'"

"So, two months, no karmic adjustments. Let things cool off."

"A month."

"Okay, six weeks. But then what we need is a system. So many adjustments per quarter. Some sense of community standards. You toss a respected community member out of a forty-ninth floor window, or skewer a businessman with a saber to his dining room table — it's not like it goes unnoticed. We're not talking death by natural causes. You might as well put billboards along 94: *Zombies Coming to Get You.*"

"We are not zombies," Graydon sniffed. "We're deceased individuals with many legitimate grievances. If we can all recognize that, we are much more likely to come to a mutually satisfactory solution."

I slumped down into the dirt. One by one, so did Leona, Deadhead and the Colonel. Our lawyers were having a great time all by themselves, apparently happy —

overjoyed! — to argue for all of eternity. Duke pulled a fountain pen from his suit pocket and with a flourish scribbled Memorandum of Understanding on the top of a page.

"It's not a Memorandum of Understanding," said Pimplipper.

"It sure as hell isn't a contract," Duke replied. "Unless you can identify the court of law in which it will be enforced."

This set them off for what might have been a half hour or might have been three weeks. It was hard to say.

Doris slipped next to me and sat down. A cloud of black silty dust rose around the two of us. She leaned up against me. "Are we ever going to get out, Charles?" A tear made a muddy trace down her cheek.

"Of course we are. Duke Black is on our side. The rest is just details."

"Details. They could last the rest of our lives. If we're even alive. We're in the underworld, Charles. If we never get out, how is that different than being dead?"

"We're getting out. We're not dead."

"Let's just leave. We could walk out. Who would notice?"

She had a point. Leona, Deadhead and the Colonel were flat on their backs, staring up at the ceiling. They weren't breathing, but then they never did. They looked more dead than usual. Our counselors leaned over the document that Duke had started. They were scribbling, scratching, arguing. We could be in Mexico before they'd notice we were missing.

"I'm not sure I could find the way out."

"So what if we're wrong? Even that's better than being stuck here. I'm going nuts, Charles. I've been here half my life."

"They think we're sneaking away, then we really never will get out."

Doris sobbed. She leaned more heavily against me. We sat there in the dirt. I suppose we might have slept.

I woke to what sounded like gunfire. As it turned out it was Duke, slapping his palm on the tabletop. "Boys, we've got ourselves a deal here."

"Break out the scalpel, Graydon," Pimplipper said. "Let's get this thing signed."

It's Just a Little Blood: Pimplipper grabbed the scalpel from the bowl on the table and ran it over his finger. The skin opened but nothing came out. "Sharp enough," he declared. "Who are our signatories going to be?"

"Someone for the living, someone for the dead," Duke said.

He looked at me. "Fatman. You're living. Looks like you're the man for our team."

"What about Doris?"

"Well, yes, she's living, of course. But given her previous involvement, you know how it will go. Coerced, held captive, would have signed anything, so on and so forth."

"It's a little blood, Charles," Doris said. "Don't be a baby."

"It's just...well...where's that scalpel been?" It had a wood handle, a rusty blade. It looked like it came out of a Civil War surgeon's kit.

"We can use yours if you've got one," Graydon said. His eyes were set deep in a curtain of fat. Still they managed to twinkle at this.

"Anyway, why does it have to be blood? Duke's got a pen."

"Community standards, Fatman," Duke said as he patted my shoulder. "Their ballpark. Their jurisdiction. Flexibility, my friend."

"I don't even know what we're agreeing to. Let me take a look at that."

Duke plucked the three scribble up pages from the desk. "Let me summarize. Boilerplate here, defining the relevant parties, the living, the formerly living. Statements of fact, legitimate interest of the dead in adjusting unbalanced karmic accounts, recognition by the dead that excessive adjustments may result in mediation, establishments of annual quotas, certain non-disclosure clauses among informed parties, et cetera, et cetera. As your counsel, I advise you to sign."

I took a minute for this to sink in. There was something about the underworld — the absence of light, the absence of any normal sense of time, the vileness of the air, who knows what else— that made your thoughts feel like they were wading across a swamp to reach your consciousness. "So we're agreeing to a regulated hunting season, is that it?"

Duke leaned toward me and whispered, "You want to get out of here with Doris, sign the damn thing."

"This might sound ridiculous to you, but I try to live a righteous life. I can't trade Doris for somebody else who might be perfectly innocent."

"Who's perfectly innocent?" Duke asked. He gave me arm a hard squeeze. "Let's deal with our immediate problem. The rest we sort the rest out later. You want to get out of here or not?"

"We going to sign or are we going to just talk about signing?" Pimplipper asked. He rocked back in his chair and put his feet up on the table. He trimmed his fingernails with the scalpel. "Only thing that never stops growing as far as I can tell," he said.

"Sign, Charles," Doris said. She jabbed at my back with a finger.

"Okay, okay," I said. I stepped up to the table and put my hand over the blood bowl.

"Wait," Pimplipper said. "First we need blood from our side of the table. Not so simple as you'd think. I don't have any in me." He reached over and took a slice at the back of Graydon's hand. "Nothing there, as you can see."

He looked over at Deadhead, Leona and the Colonel, slumbering in the dust. "Deadhead's dry as a bone, but maybe one of these two." He kicked at the soles of their feet.

"Wie gehts!" the Colonel shouted.

"Woman can't even get no sleep when she's dead," Leona sputtered.

"Come over here, you two," Pimplipper said.

They struggled to their feet. Pimplipper grabbed the Colonel's hand and plunged the scalpel into his wrist. "What the hell!" the Colonel screamed. He grabbed his wrist as if to stop the flow of blood. Nothing came out. "Oh," he said.

"Come here, Leona," Pimplipper demanded.

"You ain't poking me."

"That's where you're wrong."

"I'm already messed up enough."

"You won't notice a little more."

"Hell I won't."

"Let me explain something," Graydon said softly. He motioned for her to step up to the table.

She shuffled over reluctantly. He grabbed her arm and slammed it on the table. Pimplipper stabbed her with startling speed. An ooze of blood blossomed. He held her arm over the bowl.

"Done," said Pimplipper.

"Nobody going to stick me like a pig!" Leona swiped at Graydon.

Graydon blocked her arm and kicked her legs out from under her. She landed hard. A mushroom cloud of dust rose around her.

"I'll get you," she said.

"I doubt it," Graydon replied.

Pimplipper held up the bloody scalpel and pointed at me. "Now the party of the second part," he said.

"You're not going to sterilize it?"

"You got an autoclave in your pocket?" Graydon asked.

"Give me that," Duke said. He took the scalpel from Pimplipper and pulled a lighter from his pocket. Leona's blood smoked and sputtered, then dried in a crust on the blade. Duke knocked it against the desk, then held it over the flame again. "There," he said. "Now give me your hand."

When I came to again I was slumped over the desk. The bowl was half-filled with blood. Graydon stirred it with the scalpel blade. Duke dipped the pen's nib into the bowl and filled the reservoir.

"Here," he said, handing the pen to me. "Sign."

Wasn't That Door Supposed to Stay Open? "Deadhead will see you back to the portal," Pimplipper said. He pushed himself up from the table and slowly straightened out. Extending a gray hand to Duke, he said, "Pleasure doing real business again. We miss it, don't we Graydon?"

"There's work," Graydon said. "But it's like being a shop steward. This guy missed three meetings in a row. She didn't file her Form 390. On and on. It's not hell, but you can see it from here."

"Form 390?" Duke asked.

"The usual bureaucracy. Wait until you're dead. No point in thinking about it now."

"Don't be a stranger, Duke," Pimplipper said. "As per subsection two b" — he picked up the contract and shook it — "our doors are always open."

"If you drank I'd bring champagne."

"Can we get moving?" Doris said. She turned and started walking.

"Uh, this way," Deadhead said. He started off in the opposite direction.

My forearm throbbed where Duke stabbed me. I had rocks in my shoes. Each step was painful, but it was pointless to ask Doris to stop for a second. She was right behind Deadhead. Duke was ahead of me. The blackness was obliterating, a trip through nothingness, except that my feet hurt as those sharp pebbles ground into my soles. Otherwise I felt that everything except my thoughts had vanished.

"How do you know where to go?" Doris asked.

"Who says I do? People get lost all the time. I met a guy, said some wolves ate him in 1857, he gets here, turns left, been wandering around ever since."

"You're not lost." This was not quite a question.

Deadhead laughed. "No. We're here."

As we stood together that eerie light seemed to glow around us again. There was the steps that led to those double doors. "You take care of yourselves."

"Coming from a man with a bullet hole in his head, I take that advisedly," Duke said.

"See you around," Deadhead said. "Fatman, you know where to find me. And I know where to find you."

I tried to laugh but it sounded like I was being strangled.

"Fine," Doris said. "Thanks for everything. Charles, we got to go." She started up the stairs.

We got to the second of the steel doors. Light slipped into the stairway from beneath the flimsy door at the very top of the steps.

"Isn't that supposed to stay open?" I whispered to Duke.

"A technicality," he said. "Not completely defined in the document as I recall." He gave the wheel that locked the door a quick spin. "Why don't we get out of here," he said.

Doris was already at the upper door. She pushed it open and the light flooded in. She stood, silhouetted, the sun shining through the filthy bedsheet that she wore. I hurried up the steps after her and wrapped her in my arms. I figured I had seen this movie, I knew how it was supposed to end. "You're free, Doris," I said. "We got you out of there."

Maybe I played the triumph card a little too hard.

"It took forever, Charles," she said, wiggling loose. "Anyway, what I need is a bath."

Duke huffed up the steps and staggered into the light. We hurried out the door to the street. Duke's Mercedes was covered in light rail construction dust. That same vague

stench lingered in the air. A crane dropped rail track in a heap on University Avenue. A cement truck lumbered along the dirt track.

Duke leapt into the street. He waved his hands over his head to stop the truck.

"What's he doing?" Doris asked.

"Baby, I have no idea."

The Old Double Cross: Duke shouted to make himself heard over the engine noise.

"That full?" he asked, pointing at the mixing drum.

"It's spinning, right? It's full."

The driver was ruddy faced, bearded. He looked like he knew his way around a Bud and a Camel. "What's it to you?"

At the moment Duke did not look like the most conniving attorney in St. Paul. He did not appear to be the man who had just closed a deal with the dead. He was covered with dust. His white shirt was smeared with grime. He looked like he'd come off a two-week bender in a coal mine.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a gold money clip that pinched a stack of hundred dollar bills.

"You got a supervisor anywhere nearby?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," the driver said. His eyes beamed in on the currency in Duke's hand.

"I'm Duke Black. What's your name, friend?"

"Bruce," he said after a moment's thought. "It's Bruce."

The name tag on his shirt said Jeff.

"Bruce, you're a businessman, I'm a business man."

"I'm a cement truck driver."

"Never mind. You've got a commodity in the back of this truck. And I'm in the commodities market at the moment. I want to buy your cement."

"It's not exactly my cement."

"It's in your truck, right?"

"It's not really my truck."

"Let's not get hung up on details here, Bruce. For say, four thousand dollars, is this your cement and your truck?"

He thought about this very briefly. "I suppose it is."

"And if I wanted you to empty this truck somewhere nearby, you could do that, right?"

"I can't drive to hell and back if that's what mean."

"I mean right now, more or less right here."

"Right here?"

"Not exactly right here. I want you to drive up to that door, extend your chute, and dump your load into the stairway of this building."

"It's your building?"

"Let's say it is."

"You're not a cop?"

"Do I look like a cop?"

"No disrespect, but you look like a nut job with a hand full of cash."

"We can work with that. Here Bruce, take the money. Hell, take the money clip too. A souvenir. I'll direct you to the door."

Duke shed his coat and tossed it on the sidewalk. It landed there with the Armani label facing upward. "Push the door open, will you, Fatman?"

"I don't get it."

"We're making an addendum to the contract. A fact on the ground, as the Israelis would say. Get the basement door, too, okay?"

Duke jumped up on the running board to confer with Bruce. He shook his head more than once in apparent disbelief as Duke jabbered at him. Finally he turned the truck and lowered a long arm connected to the drum. With Duke pointing and waving, he backed the arm up to the open basement door.

"Okay Bruce, let her rip," Duke shouted.

A mechanical grinding and churning filled the air. The stink of the underworld was replaced with the smell of wet concrete. The gray sludge oozed down the steps and slowly settled against the steel door.

"Duke," I said. "We had a deal. I mean, I know they're dead, but I signed in blood."

"If they ever get out, it's likely they'll come looking for you. As your attorney, Fatman, I'm afraid I have to advise you to move. Probably to another state. You're getting along in age. Someplace warmer would make more sense. One story, no steps. There's no reason to stay here."

"This is my home. I live here, Duke, for Christ sake."

"You're an adult, Fatman. You've got to do what you think is right. Bruce says this is eight yards of concrete. Twelve tons, more or less. They'll probably be stuck down there for a long time. What's it been since last time they got out? Fifty years? You could take your chances."

"Duke, don't take this personally, but you double crossed them."

"That seems harsh, Fatman. I weighed the overall moral complexities and came to a decision. You hired me to get Doris free and lock up the underworld. You got what you wanted, buddy."

"I didn't want every dead guy in the underworld holding a grudge against me. I got a moral code."

"They're dead! Can you screw the dead? I don't know, Fatman. You tell me. You'd rather have an open door policy with the underworld? Living people getting their heads twisted off? All because some dead guy feels his momma didn't love him enough or whatever the hell his beef is?"

"I don't know, Duke. It's complicated."

"It's not going to be complicated for long. Once this cement sets it's going to be real simple."

Doris tugged at my arm. "Forget about it, Charles," she said. "We'll all be dead

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soon enough. Right now I'm going back to your house. I'm going to take a shower. I'm going to get in bed."

I thought about that. Not for very long. Life is for the living.

"I'm right behind you, baby," I said.