PART ONE: YELLOW MORNING

Chapter I: The Tennis Club (I)

1

If, as the twentieth century neared its end, anyone had needed a symbol of the odd and joyless mood of America, and of the strange creative exhaustion of Americans, the Tennis Club Apartments would have served aptly enough. If anyone had wanted to guage the temprament of the citizenry in that time, he or she might have done well to have guaged the temprament of the tenants of the Tennis Club Apartments--although such a guage would have measured the world only according to the scale of the middle-class, with an average age of thirty-six years. It could be argued that other citizens--the very poor, the very rich, the very old, the very young--saw the world according to different scales. But those who lived in the Tennis Club (Junior Lease: One year) represented fairly enough those who consumed the goods, filled the white-collar positions (and as the eighties rolled along, there were fewer and fewer blue-collar positions), made certain movies and TV shows hits while they made others failures, those who jogged, those who bought automobiles which got good gas mileage and yet looked sporty, those who mostly did not go to church but who often did go back to school to "take courses," those who, in short, lived mostly for themselves in the era of withdrawal from committment.

The Tennis Club Apartments were comfortable, but with no real warmth; they were convenient, but not to anything one would wish to remember; they were safe, although obscene graffiti had a way of turning up on doors all over the building in a cycle which corresponded with the full moon. One's neighbors

could best be described as guardedly pleasant--a tenant saw the same people day after day, but of course [redacted] one could never tell if the person one rode up with in the elevator might not be the Full Moon Scribe, who left such thoughtful communications as SUCK MY COCK and ASSFUCKER BUDDY on apartment doors every so often. It was better not to get too friendly.

The security guards were helpful and courteous--they were told to be--but the very fact that there were security guards on duty in eight-hour shifts around the clock, and that there were TV cameras in the outer lobby, inner lobby, elevators, and the underground passageway that connected the apartment building to the sports complex next door, was a little unsettling. It suggested that there were worse things in the world than the Full Moon Scribe.

The view on all four sides of the building could best be described as sterile. To the north was a huge shopping mall (eighty-four stores on two levels) with a gigantic parking lot in front of it. To the east was the parking lot annex, and a [redacted] hivelike movie complex called Cinema World, which consisted of no less than seven theaters. To the south was the intersection of roads which served mall, hive, parking lots, and the Tennis Club Apartments--Route 22, lined with yet more stores, every fast-food franchise under the sun (including a Wok-In Chinese Food, a Taco Loonybin, and an [redacted] ice-cream parlor called Dairy DashHound), karate parlors, massage parlors, an Army-Navy Surplus store, and a small brick business establishment named Machine Head which turned out to be a video-games arcade; Route 481, which was lined on both sides with more of the same, but adding a roller rink, a bowling alley, a supper-club whose marquee advertised the impending appearance of Sister Sledge, two drive-ins (one showing two X-rated pictures, the other showing

two Disney pictures), and a plumbing supply store called The Straight Flush; and finally, the Interstate, Exit 5 of which served the roads, the mall, and the apartment building. The overall impression was one of hectic but somehow aimless hurry-scurry, and at the confluence of these three roads, the blare of horns and the thump of fenders was as common as clockwork. Only to the west was there any relief at all. In that direction was something the municipal fathers called a "greenbelt," apparantly being ashamed to call it anything as grand as a forest or even a patch of woods. In fact, it was a fairly thick area of trees and underbrush, and from the lower apartments facing in that direction, it gave a half-hearted illusion of rural life (if you could ignore the blare of horns, the thump of fenders, and the gurgle of water in the pipes as your upstairs counterpart took a shower, that was). From the upper apartments, not even the illusion maintained. Westward-facing tenants on floors seven and eight could see the tract-style houses that had been developed beyond the greenbelt, and the golden arches of a McDonald's beyond the development.

Each unit was equipped with huge air-conditioning units, but there were stickers on all the switch-plates and on the thermostats reminding tenants to CONSERVE PRECIOUS ENERGY. Each unit was equipped with cable TV, but once a month--around the time of the full moon, in fact--service to whole blocs of apartments had a way of going out. The cablevision repairman had the routine down pat by now, three years after the apartments had opened. He would go up to the roof, unlock the small hut where all the apartment cables went in and from which the master-cable for the entire Tennis Club Apartments came out, and plug in all

again.
the pulled apartment-cables to the console. As the Tennis Club Apartments were afflicted with a Full Moon Scribe, so was it afflicted with a Full Moon Cable-Puller. Most of the tenants who thought about this at all thought that the Scribe and the Cable-Puller were one and the same person, but he (or she) caused rather more uneasiness in his (or her) Cable-Puller's hat. After all, anyone with a key to the inner lobby door could deface doors with a key or a pocket-knife blade. The hut on the roof which housed the Cablevision console was a different matter. That was a service-key, and not even the repairman had it; he had to get it from the office on the second floor. And if the Cable-Puller had that key (the hut never showed signs of forced entry), might he (or she, but probably he) not have others? Master keys? Pass keys?

And so the cable TV was nice enough...but it brought uneasy thoughts with it to some.

Perhaps all of this is only to say that things at the Tennis Club Apartments were somehow wrong--not wrong in huge ways, not wrong, certainly, as they went wrong sometime during the early morning hours of July 19, 198-, but wrong in little ways. There was no hunger there, no want, no epidemic diseases, no bitter political strife...but there was also very little real friendliness, love, caring, or openness. In the center of the door giving on the hall in each Tennis Club apartment, set exactly five feet and three inches from the floor, was a security peephole. When one looked into this peephole to verify the identity of a caller, one saw the grotesquely bloated face of a monster--even the face of one's mother might give one pause. In the security peephole, which is designed to give the

widest possible view of the danger-zone (said danger-zone being the place where, in other times, people used to put down welcome mats), all faces become distorted and sinister. It is the design, meant to allow maximum safety, which causes the distortion. Those peepholes sum up as well as anything else whatever it was that was wrong there, even before July 19th.

2

Ground was broken on the apartment building two years after the opening of the Tennis and Swim Club, which was located on the other side of the small service road that served the mall and the highways. The Tennis and Swim Club had been an enormous success from the first day it began accepting applications for membership.

The same consortium of city businessmen who had built the sports complex built the apartment building; so it had been planned in the early seventies, and so it was.

At that time, most of the automobile-related desolation already mentioned did not exist. Instead of a scrawny "greenbelt" to the west, most of the area was woods--some of it deep woods. There had been a few deer left, and they had flipped their white tails through the underbrush where the Mall Parking Annex now was; there had been fox and raccoon where the apartment building now stood. This had been Squirrel Hill, once woods, now the site of the Squirrel Hill Mall.

These businessmen, seven of them in all, had farsightedly seen a different sort of decade--perhaps even a duo-decade!--arriving in the wake of the turbulent Sixties, with its marches and shrill rhetoric and its war statistics. They had seen an approaching time when people--particularly middle-class people with an average

age of, say, thirty-six--would gradually unplug those involvement circuits and decide that, after investing at least five years in trying to make the world a better place by marching, resisting the draft, listening to Bob Dylan records, and trying to end the war in Vietnam, it was time to spend the next five years--or fifty--in trying to make their place in the world better.

They had, these businessmen, forseen the Decade of Self.

The seven of them [redacted] and simply bought Squirrel Hill outright--it was, at that time, owned by half a dozen farmers and perhaps two dozen small businesspeople; even along Highways 22 and 481, most of the shops were built on leased land.

The Mall came first, then the Tennis and Swim Club, and finally the Tennis Club Apartments, with its Junior Leases, Senior Leases, and Alumni Leases. It was built in two years--a graceless muddy-brown brick building eight stories high. It was as immidiately successful as the Tennis and Swim Club before it, and the Squirrel Hill Mall before that. Tenants could work (and shop) at the mall, live in the apartment building, exercise at the athletic club, and go to the movies at Cinema World. All the bases were covered. One didn't [redacted] really need to ever step outdoors; the tunnel under the service road connected the apartments with the sports complex, and a complimentary tram shuttled between the apartment building and the mall. Everything was arranged; everything had been planned for. Except, perhaps, an occasional wildcard like the Full Moon Scribe.

There were one hundred and ninety-eight apartments in the building, twenty-three three-bedroom flats on four floors, twenty-six two-bedroom flats on two floors, and

twenty-seven one-bedroom flats on two floors. The space that would have been taken up by the other two apartments was the office and the super's apartment. The same man had been the super since the Tennis Club Apartments opened. His name was Rinaldi. His Christian name (assuming Rinaldi was a Christian, or that his parents had been Christians) was undoubtedly in the records of the Squirrel Hill Leasing Corporation somewhere, but no tenant of the apartments, past or present, knew it. Rinaldi always wore khaki suntans, and the suntans were always clean. When a tenant spoke to him, Rinaldi always allowed a long, long pause before answering. The tenant would then feel compelled to amplify on the subject under discussion--a balky garbage disposall, problems with noise in the next apartment, or a little message from the Full Moon Scribe. Tenants left Rinaldi's quarters feeling sweaty, as if they had just escaped the third degree in a film noir from the forties. Rinaldi looked as if, under the right circumstances, he might bite. He had no wife, no family, no car. No one had ever seen Rinaldi outside of the Tennis Club Apartments. It was possible that he never left.

The building stood there, bordered by roads, and the mall, and the thinning greenbelt. Tenants came and went. No one had ever died in the building; there were no ghosts. And if the tenants felt anything in common--if the building had a low, sounding, psychic cord--it was only that something there had not been finished; that something had either been inadvertantly built out, or, worse, advertantly thrown away. No pets. No children. Hallways lit by round white globes. Can there be a musical tone in what is left out? The concept of the caesura suggests that perhaps there can be.

One early morning in May, two months before the events which this story relates began to occur, Tommy Hill came home and badly shaken late from the TV station where he worked. Network coverage had been interrupted by a tornado that cut a jagged and unexpected swath through the northern suburbs of the city, killing forty-seven. He was tired, frightened, and unable to quite forget the cries of the maimed and wounded he had heard in in the Pittstown High School gymnasium, where a jackleg infirmary had been set up.

He reached the door of his apartment on the sixth floor, thinking about only one thing: soup. A bowl of hot soup. He had flashed on the thought of the soup about five minutes before the third live feed from the P.H.S. gym was scheduled to begin. When the thought of soup first came, he had been watching a grip put Andrea Dorraty's mark on the floor. Behind the kneeling grip, a man was holding his son. The boy was about four, and his hand had been clipped off by a flying chunk of windshield glass. The boy was doped up, sleeping, but the father rocked him ceaselessly, the skin under his eyes shock-blue, his face uncomprehending. And Tommy thought: A bowl of soup. Chicken noodle. And I might sleep. Later he realized it was his mother's recipe--Jewish penicillin, she called it--but that didn't stop the craving.

So he was thinking about soup as he pushed his key home, and he was so tired he was barely able to walk straight. And he saw a message scratched on his door, a little missive from the Full Moon Scribe. BITE MY HAIRY OLD BAG, it said.

And, perversely, he felt a sense of almost overwhelming relief. He turned his key and suddenly began to weep, understanding that he was weeping for the father of the ~~han~~ son who had

lost his hand, understanding suddenly that no one in the Tennis Club Apartments might understand his grief...except perhaps the Full Moon Scribe, who was trying to codify that missing tone, to fill the caesura. He found himself remembering the way a college English prof had expressed the existential credo: Better to do good than evil; better to do evil than nothing at all. When you turned the last of all possible corners, that was what you found written on the brick wall at the end of the blind alley.

He put the soup on and sat there, watching it simmer, still weeping, and thought that if he ever met the Full Moon Scribe, he just might buy the cat a drink.

4

No pets. No children. Self service elevators. And on July 19th--

Chapter II: [redacted] Tom Hill in the Lobby
(July 19th, 4:00 A.M. to 5:00 A.M.)

1

So far as he ever knew, Tommy Hill was the first one to encounter the problem which arose on July 19th. [redacted] Any [redacted] others--Bamford, the 11 P.M. to 7 A.M. security guard, for instance--[redacted] were not around to tell about it.

Tommy had been living in apartment 610 at the Tennis Club Apartments for a little over two years; he had entered the final year of his three-year Senior Lease. He was privately pleased with the way his decision to take the Senior Lease rather than a one-year Junior had worked out--not because the Senior Lease was a bit cheaper overall, but because his confidence in his [redacted] ability to control his own career had been admirably justified. He had taken the Senior Lease even though his original contract with WKMT had been probationary: six months and if we don't like you, hit the road, Cholly. We're under no obligation to explain.

WKMT had renewed the probationary contract for a second six-month period, and Tom, who had come to the city with 3rd Assistant Director credentials from a Cleveland independent station and his college PBS station before that, was promoted to 2nd A.D.--"You get to pass out the paperclips as well as count them now," one of the grips told him. "Congratulations."

But Tom had been pleased. His salary had risen $4000 a year; the nest-egg the Senior Lease had almost wiped out began growing again. More important, the career was still on the rails. You had to keep advancing, or somebody walked over you. Simple as that.

The same instinct that had told him to take the Senior Lease

even though his contract was only for six months was now telling him not to renew at the Tennis Club Apartments, although he was quite sure a long-term WKMT contract was in the offing. It was time to move on--to move east. Every move was a step closer to New York. That was how it worked...or how it was supposed to work.

2

The alarm buzzed at 4:00 A.M. and Tom rose as he always did on work mornings, groping for the yowling clock, unable to believe he was really getting up at this hour. He had discovered as a college freshman that the old alarm-clock-on-the-nighttable bit was no good, at least not for him. It was too easy to push in the pin, rendering the loudmouthed little cocksucker mute, and then roll over and go back to sleep. He began keeping it across the room. When you had to get up, it was easier to keep moving.

He grabbed it, turned it off, shucked his pajama bottoms, went into the bathroom, voided his bladder (two beers with Andrea Dorraty the night before--politics, folks, it never pays to forget politics--and yessir, here those beers were), flushed, turned on the shower, and stood under it for about four minutes, making only token scrubbing motions. For Tom, serious showers were for the evening. In the morning you stood under the hot water until that weird I'm-awake-too-soon disassociation began to receed. You stood there and waited for your mind to plug into reality again, one jack at a time.

He turned off the shower, towelled dry, pulled on fresh underwear, and padded barefoot down to the kitchen. The underwear shorts were a concession to another of his mother's dictums: only vulgarians cooked or ate with no clothes on.

He liked to cook, and even after two years plus in 610, it was the only room in the place that really bore the stamp of his personality. A poster on the fridge showed Frank Zappa presiding over a church congregation of roasts, chops, and steaks...all with legs. WE ARE ALL MEAT, the caption beneath read. There was a spice-rack bolted under the impersonal Tennis Club cupboards--not a small one but one which ran a length of four feet. There was a wine-rack he had built himself and stocked exclusively with domestic wines--Mondavi, mostly. A Miss Piggy calendar hung askew on the wall, most of the dates scribbled over with memos and appointments, pots spilled over onto the counter. He hated the electric stove with its burners reading WARM, LO, MEDIUM, MEDIUM-HOT and HOT, but buying a better one would have expressed much the same permanence as renewing the lease. He suffered with it.

A tiny Panasonic does-everything receiver sat beside the toaster--TV, AM/FM, plus cassette recorder, and all of it almost small enough to slip into your pocket. He plugged a folk-blues tape into it and began to get breakfast for himself--the music was another way of plugging into the day.

Eggs--three of them, scrambled. Grated cheddar on top. Some patty sausage in another skillet, along with a touch of thyme--weird, okay, but when you live alone you can have what you like. Shitty compensation, but you take what there is. Rough white bread that he had made himself for toast; the toaster was the old-fashioned flip-up variety where you cook one side and then turn the slices over. A pain in the ass if you forgot, but you could put home-made bread into it without it getting stuck and then risking your life, trying to lever

it out with a knife--zzzaaap, and another one bites the dust. We are all meat.

He put orange juice on the table, strawberry preserves, silverware. By the time he brought the eggs, sausage, and toast, he had begun to feel like a living person again. He ate, listened to Mississippi John Hurt, and thought about the day.

Into the city along Route 481, which had been torn up when Tom arrived and which was still torn up and which would probably still be torn up when and if he ever came back this way in ten years, or thirty. Check in with David McGinn, who was a prick at five-thirty in the morning, a prick at three-thirty in the afternoon, and an insufferable prick when he was drunk. David would soon be leaving WKMT for a 1st A.D.'s job at a station in Philly (not much, but a step closer to New York), and Tom expected to be offered David's job...which he would not take. The voice inside--the Career Voice--said no, and when that voice spoke, Tom listened. You had to move at speed. If you were forty when you got to New York, New York was apt not to want you.

So then came prep for the A.M. show--the umpty-umptieth A.M. show he had done. It ran from eight to ten (WKMT broadcast only the first hour of Good Morning America) and rated extremely well. It offered local news, features, traffic reports, and, of course, the guests, who were interviewed in a cozy living-room set, either by Randi Frechette if they were Light, or by Doug Stapes if they were Heavy. Randi was twenty-three, honey-haired, and built. She would soon move on (toward New York, one hoped, although there was a Randi in every major TV market in America, and while she had the wet-lipped, breathlessly expectant stare down pat, Tom didn't believe that she had the

killer instinct to go with it--the ability to slice in there and cut a guy wide open while he was still thinking about getting her in the sack). Doug Stapes, on the other hand, was now at least sixty and a WKMT fixture. Kids who had watched Stapes dish out cartoons as Uncle Dougie in the fifties were now grandparents. Randi got the women who were promoting books on the New You, dermatologists who could explain (in the seven minutes allotted them) how you could ease the pain of mouth-sores with cold teabags, the clowns from the Shrine Circus, the dolphin trainers, the paraplegic who was crossing the country by wheelchair. Doug Stapes had gotten William Westmoreland when he came to town, Robert Redford ("Tell me, are you recognized often on the street, Bob? Do you wear sunglasses?"), John Anderson, and similar folks.

Another A.M. morning. Prep from five-thirty until just before air-time, verify every guest, make sure there were doughnuts in the greenroom, get the guests to sign release forms, go over timings and cues, reshuffle the schedules if someone was late or didn't show.

Break for coffee. Listen to the grip-crew tell Polish jokes or Frenchman jokes or whatever jokes. Get a lousy lunch in the commissary after the preliminary agenda for News at Noon with Andrea Dorraty, who would need only minimal luck to go just as far as she wanted; do the final agenda for News at Noon; do the broadcast; set up for The Prizewinner Movie, which combined the lure of Dialing For Dollars with that of B-pictures from the forties, fifties, and sixties; break for coffee; greet the kids who were going to be that afternoon's L'il Folks on Trolley-Trolley; leave for home. If you wanted to call apartment

610 home.

Put that way, it sounded grim. Sometimes it was. But there were compensations. The tornado coverage had been scary and horrifying, but there had also been a wild rush there, coupled with a sense of urgency and importance--what they were doing mattered. But the satisfactions weren't always big ones. Some of the L'il Folks came in scared, pasty-faced, sure that something frightening was going to happen on this unfamilier side of the camera ("Am I gonna be broadcasted?" one little girl asked Tom, teetering on the edge of miserable tears). In most cases he was able to convince them that nothing awful was going to happen, and the way they cheered up cheered him up. He was still learning (although he knew that part of this new restlessness was an understanding that WKMT had taught him almost everything it had to teach); everything from Chromakey stuff and the new computer-generated graphics to some of the weird shit that sometimes came out on the news--well, why call it weird shit? It was lies, sometimes. But you had to know. If you wanted to stay in the game and tell the truth as much as you could, you had to keep your wits about you.

No, the job had its rewards. He was still alone, although for about six months during his first year here he had thought that might change--before the disagreements between the girl and himself became too big to ignore--and he was sometimes lonely, but he got on by himself quite well. He had some friends (not in the Tennis Club Apartments, however), and when he came back here he could turn the whole thing off --well, most nights--and read a book. The ambition was still

there, but it was still healthy. He monitored for signs of cancer there as well as he could.

Breakfast was done. He scraped his plate into the disposall, rinsed the frypans, put everything into the dishwasher, and set it running. He shaved, put on a shirt, jeans, a pair of Quoddy moccasins, combed his hair. He put the comb into his back pocket behind his wallet and looked at his hair sadly in the mirror for a moment. It was a sandy blonde, and definately thinning.

Keys and change distributed between the front pockets. He turned off Mississppi John Hurt--regretfully--and went out the door.

There was Muzak in the hallway; endless Muzak that whispered down from overhead speakers endlessly. It had begun by amusing him, had then irritated him, had then begun to strike him as ~~definately~~ eerie. At last he had stopped noticing it at all, unless someone called it to his attention, and he reckoned that as another sign that it was probably time to split the scene.

He walked down the hall, moccasins whispering on the hallway rug, made a little uneasy by all these closed doors with the staring bullet eyes of the peepholes...as he always was.

He paused just before turning left to the elevators, looking at the door of 602. The Full Moon Scribe had struck again, this time in rather cryptic fashion. FARTS ON JUPITER had been scrawled below the peephole with a pocketknife blade or a key. The letters straggled and draggled. Maybe it's Thomas Pynchon and that's the title of his forthcoming novel, Tom thought. He smiled a little--unaware, of course, that he was now very close to touching a much larger strangeness--and turned the corner. He pushed the DOWN button, and when the elevator came,

he stepped in and rode down to extremely big trouble.

3

The lobby of the Tennis Club Apartments was luxuriously barren, and Tom Hill had reflected on several occasions (once after trying--and failing--to explain the place's subtle creepiness to his good friend Blake over after-work beers) that the idea of barren luxury didn't make much sense unless you'd seen such a place as this lobby.

Straight ahead as you stepped off the elevator was the mail alcove--a box for each apartment. There were no keys; each box had ten buttons, 1 through 0. When you signed your lease, you punched a four-diget number--one you could remember, presumably, even when drunk--into a console in the downtown renting office. No one saw that number but you (or so they said). To get your mail, you punched out the numbers and your box opened. For Tom Hill, whose parents were dead and who maintained no ties with any of the people he had known in school, the mail consisted mostly of advertising circulars from the mind-numbing one hundred and ten stores in the mall behind the apartment building.

On another wall in the mail alcove was a bulletin board. Everything that went up on the board had to be cleared through Rinaldi, who stamped the announcement with the date. A week later, he took the announcement or ad down. Most of them were from women who would clean apartments. Tom employed such a woman. She was a nut about astrology, but otherwise okay.

To the right--again, as you stepped out of one of the elevators--were two doors. One of them was a back entrance-exit, and it was here that the Mall Shuttle, a diesel-powered Mercedes bus (so small that Myers, a hugely fat young man from the fourth floor with whom Tom had a nodding acquaintence, had dubbed it

a busette), loaded and unloaded once an hour between ten in the morning and nine at night. The other led down a flight of stairs to the tunnel which connected the apartment building with the sports complex across the road.

To the left was the lobby proper. It was carpeted with a thick brown shag rug. In the center was a free-form backless couch, upholstered in a corduroy material of an even darker brown than the shag rug. Tom sometimes observed people sitting on this couch, waiting for something or someone. They always looked uncomfortable and slightly freaked out by the fact that there was absolutely nothing to look at except a giant canvas on one wall. The canvas showed bright drips of color--blue, green, vermillion. It was as non-representational in its way as the couch was. The walls were cream-colored. There was nothing else, except the two hallways leading to the first-floor apartments.

Tom stepped out of the elevator, bouncing his car-keys in his hand, turned left, and crossed the lobby. The couch was deserted at this hour, and it looked as unearthly as some weird sea-creature cast up from the depths. He pulled open the lobby door and stepped into the foyer. He was thinking of nothing more important than the Cook's Corner, which was a daily feature of the A.M. Show. Perhaps because he liked to cook himself, the Cook's Corner contained one of the few TV illusions to which he had never been able to completely reconcile himself. Because most foods didn't look exactly appetizing under the hot studio lights, they were usually sprayed with a liquid plastic. As a result, the chops, salads, and desserts looked like food, but they had really become highly disposable exhibits that went out with each day's trash. Tom kept telling himself that in a

medium that existed on such dubious commodities as PTL Club prayer cassettes, Slim Whitman albums, and hemerroid remedies, such an illusion shouldn't really cause him concern...but it did. The world was full of starving people, and so how the hell did you justify spraying a peach melba with plastic so it would look tasty to some overweight housewife out in Breezewood who was ironing clothes and eating Doritos while she watched? Drop it, Hill, he thought, but his mind gnawed at it. In the best of all possible worlds, shit like that wouldn't go down...but then, in the best of all possible worlds, people wouldn't go hungry [illegible], atomic power plants wouldn't go critical, and out-of-season tornadoes wouldn't clip off the hands of little boys. Drop it, Hill.

The foyer between the lobby and the awning-covered walkway between the building and the parking lot was narrow and glassed-in. From the walk outside, you could enter the foyer without a key, but the door giving on the lobby proper was always locked. If you didn't have a key to that door--if you weren't a resident--you had to use the telephone on the wall. It was mounted beside a building directory. If you were visiting someone, you entered the foyer, picked up the telephone, and dialed the number beside the name (the numbers weren't the same as the apartment numbers, another little security fillip that was supposed to help foil burglars--although Tom's apartment was 610, you had to dial 255 on the phone to ring the telephone in his apartment). If the tenant dialed was disposed to let you in, he or she punched 4 on his telephone. The buzzer signalling the fact that the lobby door was now unlocked went off. The visitor then had fifteen seconds to enter the lobby.

Tom crossed the foyer in five steps, still telling himself

to forget the Cook's Corner, pulled open the outer door, went to his car, jumped in, and went to work--

--except all of this occurred only in the part of his mind which was occupied with the nuts-and-bolts step-A-to-step-Z scheduling that makes up Habit. What happened in fact was much more simple, although it had nothing at all to do with habit: the door did not open. It didn't budge at all.

4

Tom pulled it again, frowning, still bouncing his car-keys in his left hand. And again. It did not budge--that was the exact truth. Later he would tell Myers that there was not even that small give one usually feels in a locked door, as it swings in a severely limited arc of an eighth of an inch, or a sixteenth of same. It was like pulling on a handle set into a cement plug.

He pulled a fourth time, but for no real reason--only because the handle was in his hand, and because this door had always opened before; it was <u>supposed</u> to open. Nothing. Nothing at all.

He looked out for Ronnie Bamford, the eleven-to-seven security guard with whom he had a speaking acquaintance. He was half-appalled, half-amused by Ronnie's neanderthal politics, but he was someone to speak with, another way of plugging into the world at the ungodly hour of four-forty-five in the morning. He didn't see Ronnie out there.

A slight frown crossed Tom's face, but the only thought to consciously cross his mind then

<u>(funny)</u>

was unfocused and nonspecific. It was only later during that long, crazy day, while speaking to Meyers, that he was

able to put his finger on what was wrong. It was the quality of the light; that was wrong. Not spectacularly wrong, but wrong enough to sound an underchord in Tom Hill's mind. It was, he told Myers, just a little bit too bright for 4:45 A.M. He had been getting up at four for a long time now, long enough to know that in the summer he started to really see the daylight just as he was parking downtown broadcast and getting ready to walk the two and a half blocks to the building. That brightening of the sky was for 5:45, not 4:45; ~~but the sky was brighter than it should have been, all the same.~~ today

For the time being, he let it drop with that one passing thought. The fact of the locked outer door was a lot less subtle than the quality of the light, and a lot more important to Tom at that moment.

Maybe, he thought, something happened. Maybe Ronnie saw some bad guys getting ready to heist the whole place like those crooks in The Anderson Tapes, or a bunch of terrorists in burnooses jumping out of the back of a VW van with Uzi machine-guns in their hands--

He snorted at that, but the snort wouldn't quite make the idea go away. Bad shit happened. It happened every day. People died with perplexed smiles on their faces, ~~unable to believe the absurdity of the blood that was spouting out of them~~. He supposed it was just possible that Ronnie had seen some sort of suspicious activity and locked the outer door. Ronnie sure wasn't out there now. Only the cars in the parking-lot, Tom's own elderly Saab among them.

He turned away from the outer door, went back to the foyer-lobby door, and dug for his building keys. He was unable to come up with them, and he felt something that might have been panic

masquerading as self-deprecating humor. Oh, hi, Ronnie. How long have I been out here in the foyer? About an hour. Where were you?...Oh. Something you ate, maybe. ~~Use your passkey upstairs at my place, if you want. There's some Kaopectate in the medicine cabinet~~. By the way, Ronnie ole buddy, why did you lock the outer door? Did you think someone was going to steal that insane painting while you were up in the office on the squat?...What do you mean, it's not locked? Push it instead of pull it? Oh. You don't say.

That last was stupid, of course. He had been living here long enough to know that you pulled the damned foyer door open; you didn't push it, ~~for Christ's sake~~. And where were his keys? God only knew when the next workbound stiff might get off the elevator and see him out here, stuck in the frigging foyer, looking like a goldfish in a bowl--

He uttered an exasperated laugh, not liking the way his heartbeat was speeding up. This was stupid; nothing was really wrong, it was all a part of the insideous disorientation that went with getting up at four o'clock in the morning, and he'd be able to have a laugh about it with Blake at lunch. And where are my motherfucking keys?

He forced himself to go through his pockets again, this time removing the change instead of just pushing it around, and there they were, right where they always were, six keys on a fob with his name, address, and telephone number. He selected the key which opened the inner door, twisted it clockwise, and let himself back in.

The air-conditioning struck him and he realized he had been sweating. He thought to himself that he probably wouldn't tell Blake that part. A little selective editing of the incident

might be in order.

He paused, looking doubtfully back over his shoulder at the foyer, and then shrugged. What the hell. He went back out and tried pushing the outer door. Nothing. The door was absolutely immovable.

He used his key to let himself back into the lobby, crossed in front of the elevators, and went to the back door. Walking all the way around the building to his car was going to be a pain in the ass, but he didn't have a lot of time in which to play Freddy Fuckaround. He had to get going or he was going to be late.

The back foyer was exactly the same as the front foyer; there was even a telephone and a building directory. Even as he grasped the handle of the outer door, Tom felt a queer sense of surity: this one was going to be locked, too. He pulled it. Nothing. No give.

"Oh shit, come on," he said, and looked out.

Darkness. Not so many cars parked back here. At a distance of about half a mile, he could see the arc-sodiums in the Mall parking-lot twinkling (that underchord sounded again: the parking-lot lights were a hard white, so bright they were almost blue-white; he had never noticed them twinkling before).

He stepped back, not sure what to do now. No action presented itself immediately to mind. The situation was ludicrous. He glanced at his watch, saw that it lacked three minutes of five--he was always out of the Tennis Club lot and bound for 481 by five, but it didn't look like that was going to happen this morning--and then looked out again, hoping to see Ronnie Bamford wandering around back there. He didn't see that, nor did he see the stuff of a WKMT Newsbreak--Ronnie lying face-down in

a pool of blood, or maybe Ronnie crouched behind the trunk of a car, his gun out, making frantic lie down gestures at Tom. He saw no crooks, no Arab terrorists toting machine-guns. Just the back parking-lot.

He used his key, went back into the lobby, walked toward the elevators, then walked away from them again. He looked at the silly non-representational painting without really seeing it and tried to figure this out. Both lobby doors locked. Some kind of mechanical glitch? That was the most likely. Cute. He supposed he ought to check in the office. Most likely he would find Ronnie there, cooping on the couch or in Rinaldi's chair with his feet cocked up on the desk.

He went back to the elevators and pushed for up. The elevator he had come down in was still there, and the door opened at once. Tom got on and pushed for the second floor. It was exactly five o'clock.

Chapter III: Pulaski (7/9, 5:00 A.M. to 6:00 A.M.)

1

The upper floors of the Tennis Club Apartments were served by two elevators, and at only a minute or two past five on that morning, Tom Hill and Dennis Pulaski passed within less than four feet of each other, Pulaski on his way down to the lobby from his fourth floor apartment, Tom on his way to the second floor to look for Ronnie Bamford. The two of them, Tom and Pulaski, had passed a few times in the lobby and had ridden together in one of the elevators on a few occasions, but no word had ever passed between them. ~~That~~ Soon that would ~~soon~~ change.

Pulaski was fifty, twice divorced. He was paying alimony to one wife and supporting three children. A fourth, the only one he cared a squat for, worked for him downtown. ~~He~~ Pulaski had fought in Korea and had gotten medals there. He liked to hunt upstate in the fall. He liked to pick up a woman in one of the singles bars downtown (or out here on the strip) two or three Saturdays a month. He brought these women back to his apartment and fucked them. He liked to fuck, but only straight up--he called it the Christian Position. Every now and then he met a woman who wanted something different, or who would do something different. By women who would "do something different," he meant a blowjob. He did not put blowjobs in the same category as "wanting something different"; he could not conceive of a woman who would <u>want</u> to give a man a blowjob.

"Wanting something different" usually meant one thing to Pulaski: hair pie. He did not eat hair pie. He had never eaten hair pie. He never would. A woman could ask and he wouldn't get mad. He wouldn't kick her out. She could still make breakfast in the morning, and eat her half. But he wouldn't do it. The current morning despatcher downtown was a young nigger kid named Renfrew. A month or so ago, he had told Renfrew about the woman he'd had home over the weekend, and how she had asked him to eat hair pie. Renfrew had responded: "You should have tried it, Ski. You might have liked it."

Pulaski had been astounded.

"Babycakes," he had told Renfrew, "no man likes to eat hair pie. Believe it."

Renfrew's big old lips had spread in a salacious grin. "I like it just fine," he said. "Man, you give me that oyster anytime. That's the sweetest oyster a man ever gets, that's what I think."

"Well, that's what you think you think, Babycakes," Pulaski said, giving them both an out, and went on into his office. He could have told Renfrew something different, of course; that niggers, having just come down from the trees, were different. But then there would have been a shitstorm of hurricane velocity, and that he didn't need. Besides, Renfrew was good at dispatching, and Pulaski didn't want to lose him.

There had been a time when he would have no more hired a nigger for anything other than driving on the eleven-to-seven than he would have eaten hair pie. But then, in the sixties and seventies, along had come the knee-jerk liberals, telling you had to hire one a dese, one a dose. So now Yell For A Yellow, Pulaski's cab company, had a house nigger. And Renfrew had turned out to be good. He knew the city backward and forward. But that didn't change Pulaski's steadfast belief that Renfrew was different. He supposed the knee-jerk liberals, who wanted to take away his guns and who were breaking their asses to make sure that faggot murderers like that Elmer Wayne Henley guy got fair trials, would call his mind closed. He did not view it that way. His mind was set, made up, and clear. It was not closed.

He had bought into the taxi business with an army buddy of his in 1953. The two of them had fought to make a go of it, and Yell For A Yellow had gone. His partner had died of lung cancer in 1973, and since then Pulaski had run it by himself. He was not rich, but he was comfortably fixed. He had his business, he had his hunting, he had his one good son to pass the business on to, and he had his health. On the day of Smitty's funeral, Pulaski had thrown away the carton of Camels on the refrigerator in his house (he had then been living with his second wife) and had not smoked since. He was as happy as he supposed a man like himself could be.

The world was going to hell, of course, but there was nothing he could do about that. He took care of number one. He stood six-foot-three, weighed two hundred and ten pounds, and no one told Polish jokes where he could hear them. He did his work. And he did not eat hair pie.

He got off the elevator at three past five, the time he always got off the elevator--give or take a minute--and crossed the lobby, sparing not a glance for the painting, feeling the room's crouched emptiness not at all. He went through the inner door and pulled on the outer door.

Nothing.

2

"What the fuck is this?"

Pulaski, who would not have known a line of iambic verse from a line of trochaic, chanted these words in a burst of irritation that was almost anger. His arms were powerful. He swam thirty laps in the sports complex pool each day and worked with hand-weights. He was aware that he was a big man, and that big men had a tendency to go soft. He didn't want that to happen to him, so he worked at staying in shape.

He layed hold of the handle with both hands and pulled. His muscles stood out not in well-formed bulges and ropes and ridges, but in simple slabs under his khaki shirt. Nothing. The door did not bulge in the slightest. Pulaski, unlike Tommy Hill, worked with physical objects for a living; he had begun on his father's farm and in Korea he had been in the motor pool. He knew, much more clearly than Tom, that the door's refusal to budge in the slightest was fundamentally wrong.

He drew away from it, frowning, and then tried it once more. This time he put on so much pressure that he could hear the door's steel handle creak faintly, but the door itself did not move at all.

He stopped again , wiping his tingling hands on his khaki pants, and then went back to the inner door. His keys, all of them in one place, hung from a ring that was attached to one of his belt loops, but he did not reach

for them just yet. He wanted verification that the outer door's movelessness was screwy.

He grabbed the handle of the foyer door and yanked. It held, of course, but he could feel some movement as the lock, which was not entirely flush, moved back and forth in its steel socket. That was what you expected from a door.

Pulaski did not speculate. It was a building problem, and there were people who got paid--too fucking much--to deal with building problems. He grabbed his keyring, found the key he wanted, and let himself back into the lobby. He would go out the back door and circle the building to his car, which was a 1975 Checker tough enough to withstand anything short of a nuclear blast.

He crossed the lobby to the back door.

3

While Pulaski was finishing the drill he had completed himself some minutes earlier, Tom Hill was knocking at the office door on the second floor. There was no response. He knocked louder, giving up the ornamental knocker and using his knuckles. Between the lobby and here, the possibility that Ronnie might be sleeping in the office had solidified into a certainty.

He rapped, looked at his watch, rapped again, and finally hammered. No one came. He thought about hammering again, but the long, empty corridor intimidated him. People were sleeping. And if Ronnie Bamford was one of the people sleeping, he was really going to have to whomp on the door to wake him up. So what did he do now?

He glanced at his watch again, saw that it was now seven past five, and thought about going to the next door down. The office bore the number 201. Below 203 on the next door was a plaque which read SUPERINTENDENT in small capital letters. Rinaldi's apartment. That was the logical place to go, but Tom didn't want to wake Rinaldi up unless he absolutely had to. He didn't like Rinaldi and he didn't like Rinaldi's long, pregnant pauses, which

somehow turned everything into your fault.

He turned this over in his mind, trying to ignore the mental voice that kept yelling at him about the way time was moving on. He didn't like to be late, not for work, not for a date, not for anything. It put acid in his stomach and had been known to bring on pulsing headaches. And this minor annoyance was steadily working its way up toward the big leagues. He had passed the stage of imagining the way he would rib Ronnie about it when Ronnie unlocked the door, and had entered that of imagining reading someone--Rinaldi, maybe; surely not poor Ronnie--the riot act.

But that was for later. Right now, as ludicrous as it seemed, the problem to be solved was finding a way out of his damned apartment building in time enough to get to work before David McGinn began screaming. Even if he got out in the next five minutes, he was going to have to risk a traffic ticket.

For just a moment his irritation bubbled over, and he struck the office door with his fist. Stupid, just so fucking stupid. This was the way the world was going to end, no doubt, in some fucking stupidity just like this. Oh, was that the button that lauched all the Titan-II's? Jesus, sir, I'm really sorry!

He glanced around guiltily the moment he had done it. The sound of his fist crashing against the office door had made the loudest of his previous poundings seem like love-pats. Someone would come out, see him standing here nursing his reddening fist like a big, overgrown baby doing a tantrum, somebody, probably Rinaldi, and Rinaldi would look him up and down and finally, after at least two hours, Rinaldi would ask him what was wrong--

But Rinaldi's door remained firmly shut. So did the doors of the other apartments, 204-210, in this hallway. So, for that matter, did the office door. No puffy-faced Ronnie Bamford poked his head out, sheepishly wiping the sleepers from his eyes. There was no sound but the Muzak--some popular tune arranged for strings; it was familier but tantalizingly unrecognizable. Listening to it, Tom discovered that his certainty had mostly evaporated.

It was, he supposed, still technically possible that Ronnie was sleeping in there, but his own knowledge of human nature suggested it wasn't so. Ronnie was a security guard, hired to stay awake while others were sleeping. Ergo, going to sleep while on duty would be a firing offense. Further ergo, ~~(and this was where Tom's own view of human nature came in),~~ any sleep Ronnie got while on the job should be thin sleep, nervous sleep, probably even guilty sleep...and Tom's first discreet taps with the ornamental knocker should have had him springing to his feet, straightening his tie, and trying to look like the most alert sentry to ever stand a late-night watch. No, the reason no one had come to the door was because no one was in the office. Unless--

Tom frowned a little. Maybe Ronnie was into dope of some kind. It seemed very unlikely considering his right-of-Reagan politics, but Tom supposed you didn't have to be a Democrat to blow a little dope, or to maybe drop a Quaalude... especially if somebody gave you the Lude as a weird and unfunny practical joke, telling you that it was a benny.

Now this new idea grew toward certainty in Tom's mind. A lot of nightwatch security people took uppers from time to time, and Ronnie was extraordinarily naive in some ways. People had a way of taking advantage of that, people whose blunt senses of humor could only be tickled by exploding cigarettes, dribble glasses, and the like. Ronnie takes the pill. Starts getting very sleepy very fast. Panics a little. Uses a key--some special key they give security guards--and locks the front and back doors. Then he goes up to the office and crashes out.

Tom decided to go back down to the lobby and ring the office on the telephone. Then, if there was still nothing, he supposed he would have to call first Rinaldi and then the station. Notifying David McGinn would be bad enough, but facing a McGinn who had not been notified would be even worse.

Tom went back to the elevators, pushed the down button, waited for a car (the one which came was the same one that had brought Pulaski down to the lobby a few minutes before), and rode back down.

Pulaski was standing in the middle of the lobby, his hands shoved deeply into his front pockets and his forehead furrowed in a frown, when the elevator door opened and a young guy in jeans and moccasins got off. Pulaski saw several things at once.

He would not have been surprised at all if told that Renfrew, his black nighttime dispatcher, considered him a "dumb racist hunky son of a bitch"; Renfrew himself would have been more surprised to find out that Pulaski knew Renfrew's opinion of him, and had known it almost from the start. Pulaski presented a facade that was almost perfect stereotype: the big dumb Pole who thought right-wing, voted right-wing, and whose reading experience probably began with the newspaper comics and ended with the LEARN TO DRIVE ads on matchbook covers--the sort of man who saw Archie Bunker not as a buffoon but as a sage.

Pulaski had used this image he projected, not quite--but almost!--understanding what he was doing. If people thought you were dumb, they left themselves open. If people thought you were dumb, you could sometimes use them in the most outrageous ways and afterward never be called to task for what you had done--people would rather let a thing go than admit they had been gulled or bested by someone who was a lot smarter than they had thought.

And Denny Pulaski <u>was</u> smart. He was not a great intellect, nor a marvellous native wit, nor a philosopher in the rough. But his mind was awake, and as watchful as a dangerous jungle creature. He found it best to hide his intelligence, and was amused by the fact that people rarely looked for it. People just didn't expect a guy who owned a taxi company and dressed in khaki to be very bright.

He was bright enough to see that this skinny guy humping it off the elevator already knew about the locked doors, and in the three or four seconds it took him to approach, Pulaski mused that if the guy had come into the Yell For A Yellow office wanting a job, he would have hired him in nothing

flat, and never mind the faded bluejeans he was wearing, or the fact that he apparantly felt it was all right to go off to work in the morning wearing a sloppy pair of mocs instead of hard shoes. Pulaski would have hired him for the look in his eyes, the mingled look of irritation and distress that said I am late for work and it doesn't matter that it's not my fault because I just don't like to be late--not for any reason. It was a look Pulaski knew and respected, one he saw less and less in this era of food-stamps, welfare, and government handouts. When you saw that look, you knew the man wearing it would usually pull his side of the sled until his fucking back broke.

The kid glanced up at Pulaski, and before he could speak, Pulaski said: "The doors are locked. Both of them. Front and back." He could have said something simpler; he could have used his reading of the kid's face as a shortcut and said simply: I already know. But he didn't do things like that. He might never speak to this kid again--probably wouldn't, in fact--but the caution was deeply engrained: keep your wits to yourself.

"I know," the kid said. "Have you seen the security guy?"

"Bamford? No." Pulaski took one hand out of his pocket and rubbed a finger along the side of his nose. "He's probably sleeping in the office or in one of the laundry rooms."

"Laundry--" The kid looked dismayed. "Jeez, I never thought of the damned laundry rooms."

"You already went up to the office?"

"Yes." Tom told him about his first idea, and then his later one--that someone might have given Ronnie a sleeping pill masqurading as an upper. "But it never occured to me until now that there are about a dozen other places he might be sleeping," Tom finished.

Pulaski shrugged. "Buzz the office anyway. If it was me, I'd sleep there. Behind a locked door."

"Okay," Tom said.

Pulaski stood where he was and watched Tom use the telephone in the foyer.

He had begun to find all of this moderately interesting.

The kid held the phone against his ear for quite awhile, and Pulaski knew long before the kid finally gave up hope that Bamford wasn't there. He watched the kid hang up the phone and then begin sifting through his pockets for his keys. Pulaski did not actually shake his head...but he shook it inside, yeah, you bet. He was the big racist dummy, stone-headed Pole, Neanderthal with a club...but there was Mr. Reet and Compleat, right out there in the foyer, without enough sense to put his keys where he could get to them in a hurry. Stone the crows.

Pulaski opened the door for him just as Tom finally happened on his keys again and pulled them out of his pants pocket.

"Thanks," Tom said. "If he's there, he's ashamed to answer the phone. I'm Tom Hill, by the way." He put his hand out.

"Denny Pulaski." He shook the hand. "What do you think about going out the fire door in the walkway?" He jerked his head toward the other side of the lobby.

He saw Hill start to say no automatically, because going out the fire door would cause a ruckus. Then he glanced down at his wristwatch again. It was now quarter past five--seventeen past, to be exact--and the day wasn't getting any younger. When Hill looked up from his watch, Pulaski saw that look in his eyes again: I am late for work...not for any reason.

"It's alarmed," Hill said doubtfully.

Pulaski nodded. There was an infantile observation if he had ever heard one, but the sad truth was that there were probably four dozen people in the building [illegible]--some who probably used the walkway not just once but two, maybe three times a day--who wouldn't even have noticed that...or maybe the door itself.

"Make a hell of a racket," Hill said, more doubtfully still. "Wake up half the people in the damn building, I guess." The fire door in the tunnel connecting the apartments and the sports complex was ordinary enough; you opened it by hitting either a protruding square of metal or the push-bar. The door was painted red and the white letters on it read: DO NOT OPEN THIS DOOR EXCEPT IN CASE OF EMERGENCY--ALARM WILL SOUND! The alarm was a bell (a loud bell) that screamed bloody murder until the door was shut again.

Pulaski could have said a lot. That half the people in the building would be getting up over the course of the next hour anyway. He could have pointed out that this was an emergency of sorts. He could have pointed out that he and Hill would be long gone before anyone got down to the walkway to see what was happening, and that the only person to get hit with the shit would be Ronnie Bamford--which was as it should be.

He could have said those things, but he preferred to allow the Hill kid to convince himself in his own time and his own way. Yell For A Yellow wasn't going to go into bankruptcy if he was fifteen minutes or a half an hour late, and watching the kid try to deal with his dilemma was almost as good as watching a Golden Gloves match. In this corner, we got the current champion, Social Conscience, weighing in at one-nineteen. In this one we got the challenger, a real comer, Gotta Get To Work, at one-twenty-five.

"Guess it would only ring for a few seconds," Tom said.

Pulaski nodded, idly twiddling his keyring.

"Lot of people will be getting up pretty soon anyway."

Pulaski nodded again. He had begun to nibble at the insides of his cheeks to keep from smiling.

"And if that's the only way out, maybe this is an emergency."

"Right!" Pulaski said. "So let's talk the situation over awhile longer, what do you say?"

Hill looked up at him, and Pulaski saw the fierce gleam of an interested, thoughtful intelligence in the kid's eyes--and the dawning of dislike. That was okay, too. Dislike was a weapon, he had discovered that first in Korea. It was the shaft that bore the hard, sharp tip of fear.

"Okay," Hill said briefly.

The two of them crossed the lobby, Pulaski letting the kid draw slightly ahead. Yes, this was definately interesting...in a dumbass sort of way. Pulaski decided he would be an hour late for work before he pushed that fire door open and tripped the alarm. Do it yourself, kid. Build a better tomorrow.

Hill pushed the door open and they went down the cement steps into the tunnel.

5

As always, the walkway smelled strongly of chlorine from the pool and their footfalls took on a flat echoing sound. The air was damply cool and, apart from the chlorine, there was a smell that was vaguely similar to mildew--it was, Tom thought, a jock smell: sweat, sneakers, Ace bandages, damp swimsuits.

He half-hoped to find Ronnie down here, hustling back from the sports complex, but no such luck. Tom felt put out and irritated. His breakfast was sitting heavily in his stomach, and he guessed he was going to have acid indigestion later on. Worse, he felt a headache hovering around his temples. It was a shitty way to start the morning, and he had a strong feeling that this Pulaski was laughing at him.

Well, fuck it. I'm getting out, and I'll probably never even speak to him again--and if I do, I'm sure as hell not going to

ask him to dance.

The walkway's walls were beige tile, the floor and the ceiling unadorned concrete. Stencilled messages on the walls read NO BARE FEET and NO UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN and MEMBERSHIP CARD REQUIRED FOR ENTRY.

The fire door was, on the left, forty feet from the ~~stairs on the left.~~ foot of the stairway. Tom looked at it for a moment and then back at Pulaski, who was standing about five feet behind him with his hands in the pockets of his khaki pants. He returned Tom's look blandly and made no move.

Tom felt that flash of dislike again, and then asked himself in an angry sort of way who he was kidding. Pulaski wasn't going to do it for him...if that was what Tom wanted.

He glanced at the forbidding white letters again--ALARM WILL SOUND!--and then he looked at the square of metal on its spring. Steeling himself for the howl of the alarm bell, he pushed the square.

The alarm bell screamed, beating into his eardrums, and the door opened. He and Pulaski went through and up the short flight of steps to the parking lot. They went off to work and never spoke again--

Except none of that happened, either. The square of metal did not move at all. It did not move an inch, a half-inch, not so much as a silly millimeter. The alarm did not sound. And the fire door did not open.

Hill looked at him, stupidly surprised, and for a moment or two Pulaski felt every bit as nonplussed as the kid looked. Hill tried the square of metal a second time, then a third. He gave that up and tried the push-bar. The push-bar didn't move either.

He was getting ready to start the whole drill again when Pulaski pushed him aside--not hard but not gently, either--and tried it himself. Something was happening inside Pulaski: he felt his stomach settling back against his spine, settling back the way the whole body settles back into the bucket seat of a very fast sports-car when someone really kicks it in the tail and unwinds the tachometer. It happened to him when he went hunting, sometimes, but it hadn't <u>really</u> happened since Korea. When he went out on patrol, it always happened.

"Hey!" Hill said in a surprised, slightly injured tone. Pulaski barely heard him. Hill had, in a way, ceased to exist.

"Sorry, Babycakes," Pulaski murmured, and gave the metal square three hard shots--<u>bam-bam-bam</u>--with the flat of his right hand. He hit the way boxers are taught to hit, not moving forward, not using his body, but using his arm as a piston, feeling each jolt travel up through his flesh to the shoulder.

No joy.

He gave it to the push-bar with both hands. Nothing.

He stepped back, hands hot and tingling. He looked down at his hands briefly, frowning, and saw that they were reddening. He looked up, to the left, back the way he and the kid had come. Forty feet back that way were the cement stairs leading up to the lobby. There was a fire extinguisher on the wall. He looked to the right. Roughly one hundred feet down that way was another set of concrete steps leading up to the sports complex.

He felt whole systems of his body coming awake--nerve-networks lighting up like strings of Christmas tree lights. The feeling, coming on him like this, all at once, unexpectedly, was not at all pleasant. Acceleration. His eyesight sharpening. Here was a crack in the cement, zig-zagging its way down the wall, splitting

in two, becoming an idiotic lower-case y, testimony to some contractor's cut corner. Heart-rate picking up--since quitting cigarettes his pulse-rate had dropped from the high nineties into the sixties. Now he could feel it rising: seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five. One flourescent down toward the sports complex was dying, flickering, making a sound like an elderly fly in the upper pane of a window. The spit in his mouth was drying out, and when he licked at his lips he could feel the bumpy terrain of his tongue.

Trapped, he thought. Me and this kid are unarmed, and we're trapped down here. How do you like them apples, Babycakes?

He didn't like them at all. He didn't know if this was serious or not, but he knew it was wrong, and three times out of ten wrong meant serious. For a moment--the only moment until almost the end--he felt panic do a jittery ballet through his body, dancing up and down all those nerve networks, and he had to fight off a mental return to his war for the first time since--God, it was hard to believe--since the early sixties, when that mick with the long hair had been President. For a moment he was sure that gooks were going to come down one staircase or the other, eight of them, ten, maybe a dozen, and they would see him and the kid, and their lips would pull back in idiot gook grins that showed their buck teeth, and then they would unload on them, bullets whining and richocheting, chips of substandard concrete flying, and they would be thrown back, the kid knocked out of his moccasins, his eyes bugged out, the crotch of his jeans first turning a darker blue as he wet himself, and then red as the bullets socked home. He himself would maybe try to run, try to zig-zag, and there would be a thump at the base of his spine like a boxing glove loaded with lead shot, and then all the little Christmas tree lights would go out and the last sound he would hear would be their high,

chittering laughter, a sound like a bunch of monkies having a circle-jerk in the tops of a bunch of fucking eucalyptus trees.

The kid touched his arm and Pulaski almost went for him.

Hill must have seen it, although Pulaski only jerked slightly, his open hands rising perhaps three inches before settling back. Or perhaps he felt it. Either way, he drew back a step or two, his eyes dark and wary and considering.

"That door is not supposed to be locked," Pulaski said.

"No," Hill agreed cautiously.

"Not fucking ever."

"No."

"I didn't know they could be locked from the inside."

"I don't think they can," Hill said.

Pulaski jerked a thumb at the fire door. "That's not a mirage, Babycakes."

"Maybe there's a bunch of crap piled against it. Trash barrels. Crates." Hill shrugged. "Crap."

"It doesn't move at all."

Hill only shrugged.

Pulaski wanted to get out of the tunnel--and suddenly he wanted to get out of the building, not to get to work but just because he wanted to get out. He started down toward the sports complex.

"The doors down there are going to be locked," Hill called after him. His voice had a flat, dead echo, just as their footfalls had.

Pulaski continued on three or four steps and then turned back toward him.

"Until ten," Hill explained, looking embarassed. "I tried to take a swim once at five in the morning. Locked, padlocked, chained."

Tom thought that Pulaski would ask him why he had taken it into his head to go swimming at five in the morning; he would not have told Pulaski that in the wake of the tornado he had not slept so well--that he had dreams about the boy who had lost a hand, and about the boy's father. But Pulaski did not ask.

"Well, what are we going to do about this, Mr. Hill?" Pulaski asked instead, and although Tom understood the question was not really a question but only expressed thought, he answered.

"I don't know," he said softly. "I really don't. Give me a minute."

Pulaski looked at him, really seeing him again, seeing that Hill was also scared.

"Let's get out of this fucking tunnel," Pulaski said. "It makes me nervous."

"Okay," Tom said, and as Pulaski shouldered past him, he glanced down at his watch and saw it was nearly five-thirty.

7

The lobby was no longer deserted. Pulaski could hear murmuring voices while he was still half a dozen steps from the top of the walkway stairs. As he came into view, the murmuring voices stopped and half a dozen faces turned toward him.

No--more than that. Eight people in the lobby now, none of them sitting on the backless couch. They were standing around like guests at a cocktail party...only none of them had drinks.

There were four women, two of them young, two of them old, the two young ones in nurses' uniforms, and four men, three of them in business attire--suits or sport jackets--and one of them in a jogging outfit. The jogger looked about sixty. He was as thin as a plucked chicken, wore glasses, and had an Ace bandage wrapped around one knee.

"No excuses, no stories," the jogger said in a high, irritating, almost feminine voice. "As long as it's fixed."

"I don't work here, I live here," Pulaski said, and pushed past the jogger, not seeing him, not seeing the business types, not seeing the nurses or the older women. They were as gone as the kid--place-holders, extras. He headed for the foyer.

Behind him, as he went out, he heard Hill begin to explain that he and the other gentleman, Mr. Pulaski, had gone down into the walkway to try the fire door when they had discovered both of the doors giving egress from the lobby were locked. Then the foyer door swung closed and clicked locked behind him, cutting off the conversation.

Pulaski pulled the building phone off its hook, checked Rinaldi's number on the directory board, and dialed 100. It began to ring and he stood there with the phone on his shoulder and his head cocked against it, looking inside.

The kid looked out at him and mouthed a word: Rinaldi? Pulaski nodded impatiently. Who else? The Pope?

The phone rang six times before it was picked up. "Rinaldi."

"Pulaski. 414. Get your ass down here, Rinaldi. Neither of the outer doors open, the fire door in the walkway doesn't open, and your Rent-A-Cop is long gone and hard to find. There are people down here waiting to go to work."

A long, considering pause--the sort that Rinaldi affected, the sort that made Tom Hill uncomfortable.

Pulaski was not intimidated.

"If you've got your finger on your dick, take it off, Babycakes. Move your ass. Let's have some shucking and jiving."

"What did you say your name was?" Rinaldi spoke as a high school teacher might speak to the most obstreperous troublemaker

at a high school dance.

"Pulaski. 414."

"And you said the doors are locked?"

"They won't open," Pulaski said. No, I didn't say they were locked, and I'm not going to say it, Babycakes.

"You--"

"Look, just come down here," Pulaski said. One of the elevators had opened, revealing another three people. For a moment all three of them, armored to meet the day but still puffy-eyed, cringed back at the unusual crowd of people in the lobby. The elevator door started to slide closed on its track again and one of them put her hand out. The door bounced back. The trio got out of the elevator. "This place is starting to get full, Babycakes."

Rinaldi began another long, pregnant pause, but Pulaski hung up in the middle of it. He glanced at his watch. Almost twenty to six now. It--

He looked out through the glass of the foyer, and the thought broke apart.

Daylight was starting to come out there, but Pulaski could not remember ever having seen a daylight quite like this one--thin, watery, almost wavery. For a moment he was struck by unreality, by a sense that somehow his eyes were deceiving him, and he thought of something that had happened to him in junior high school--George Pensky's birthday party...holy fuck, I haven't thought about that in maybe thirty years.

George Pensky's father was comptroller of the garbage collectors' union in Chicago, and the Penskys had been rich. For George's thirteenth birthday, they had gotten a party on the Penskys back lawn. Yes, lawn--Denny Pulaski knew about such things, but he had

seen precious few of them, and played on none at all. Parks, yes. Lawns, no. And when Pulaski had been growing up, during the tag end of the Depression and the years of World War II, no one had called it "the inner city." They had just called it the neighborhood, and they neighborhood came with parks, but no lawns.

And George Pensky's rich parents had hired some teen-aged kid to do magic tricks, and while most of the tricks were just shit--pick a card, any card, and you'll notice both arms go all the way up to my shoulders, ha-ha--one of the tricks had driven young Denny Pulaski crazy. This had been the teen-aged magician's finale. He had produced a white dove from a silk handkerchief.

The teen-aged magician hung around for some cake and ice cream, and Denny Pulaski asked him how he had done that, how he had gotten that dove to come out of that silk handkerchief. The teen-aged magician, looking down at Pulaski from the lofty heights of his eighteen years, told him that a magician never told you how he did his tricks--it got you kicked out of the union, or something.

Denny Pulaski had kept after him about it, and now, looking out at the watery daylight that was not right--somehow just not right--he remembered following the teen-aged magician down George Pensky's street, hitting him with the question again and again: Howja do it, huh? Howja do that, huh? Come on, give you a quarter...give you half a fuckin rock. That's all I got. He had the half a rock because his mother had given him a buck to buy George a birthday present and he had only spent half of it. He thought George Pensky was a dinkleballs.

Down the street, down George Pensky's street where all the houses had lawns, dogging the footsteps of the teen-aged magician who had put his magician's cloak and his collapsable magician's top hat into his little case, which he held in his right hand.

In his left hand was a cage with the dove in it, and Pulaski could see that the dove, which had produced such ooohs and aaahs from the kids (and even from Mr. and Mrs. Pensky) was kind of scrawny-looking, its tailfeathers caked with some kind of cage-crap...litter, or something.

But that didn't matter. What mattered was getting this right. Fucking doves did not come out of fucking snotrags, for Chrissake, and Denny Pulaski had not just wanted to know how it was done; in a way he needed to know, to get it right, because fucking doves did not come out of fucking snotrags.

So he had dogged the teen-aged magician's footsteps, and finally the teen-aged magician turned around and told Pulaski that if he didn't get lost, he would get the crap beaten out of him. Pulaski took the magician on anyway, and the magician, who outweighed Pulaski by sixty pounds and stood five inches taller, did indeed beat the crap out of him.

A week later that summer--the summer of 1944, as the Allies were driving grimly across France--Pulaski had gone down to the library and had asked if he could get a library card. His heart had been thumping viciously in his throat because the library, with its towering silence, frightened him even more than the Devil Boys, the gang from two blocks over.

The librarian had given him a form to fill out and then had demanded fifty cents--a registration fee, some bullshit like that. Pulaski had paid over his half a rock and had taken out a book on magic. He found out about how you could get a dove--or a rabbit, or a fucking chicken, if that was what you wanted--to come out of a silk handkerchief. After that he had thrown the library card away, satisfied with his purchase of information. He did not try to do the trick himself; he had only wanted to know how it was

done. No; correct that. Had needed to know. Had needed to get it right in his mind. Because fucking doves did not come out of fucking snotrags.

Now he looked out through the glass, seeing the awning which covered the walk, seeing the parking lot, seeing the cars, seeing the road and, dimly beyond it, the trees that marked the edge of the greenbelt. The quality of the light was wrong, just as it was wrong that there should not be so much as a millimeter of give in any of the doors.

We got a dove coming out of a silk snotrag here, Pulaski thought, ~~disturbed~~, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all.

He unlocked the foyer door and went back into the lobby to wait for Rinaldi.

8

He stood quietly against the wall and after awhile the Hill kid, tired of explaining a situation which essentially had no explanation--at least not yet--joined him.

"Rinaldi coming down?"

"He better," Pulaski said, and Hill nodded.

There were sixteen or eighteen people in the lobby by the time Rinaldi arrived (with another two residents), and the volume of the conversation had risen appreciably. Rinaldi was at once assailed with questions which he did not even attempt to answer.

Rinaldi was dressed in his khaki suntans; in their manner of dress, at least, he and Pulaski might have been twins, and the jogger's assumption that Pulaski had been sent to fix whatever had gone wrong with the doors was somewhat justified. Physically, they were total opposites. Rinaldi was tall and cadeverous. His skin was olive, and while he appeared completely awake, there were dark pouches under his brown eyes. His hair was dead black,

slicked back. His hands hung at his sides, perfectly at rest. He waited for all the mingled questions, explanations, exhortations, and expressions of outrage to die into a confused, slightly guilty silence, and then he said, "Pulaski?"

"Here," Pulaski said.

Rinaldi looked at him reflectively for a long moment and then said, "Trying to work that fire door when there's no fire is against the law. Did you know that?"

Pulaski smiled. "A fire door that don't work is even more against the law. Did you know that?"

Rinaldi paused, looking at Pulaski from his gaunt, oddly scholarly face, perhaps expecting Pulaski to drop his eyes. Pulaski did not. The others in the lobby had fallen completely, uneasily silent now. The two nurses had drawn closer together.

"Cut the shit," Hill said suddenly, softly, from Pulaski's elbow. It startled Pulaski a bit, and he looked at the kid. He would have expected the kid to be exactly Rinaldi's meat. "There are people here waiting to get to work."

Rinaldi crossed the lobby--people pulled away from him--and went out into the foyer. Pulaski watched him go to the outer door and try it. There was also a keyring attached to one of Rinaldi's belt-loops, and, when the door did not open, Pulaski expected the man to pick through the keys, select one, and try it. Rinaldi did not do this.

Instead, he turned back to the foyer-lobby door. Then he picked through his keys, selected the proper one, and let himself back into the lobby.

"What's the meaning of this?" the elderly jogger demanded shrilly. "Why don't you open the door?" But Pulaski thought he understood why. His understanding brought no recurrance of the

panic he had felt in the tunnel when the fire door refused to open. He was getting used to the keyed-up feeling now. Soon he would begin to enjoy it.

Rinaldi didn't answer the elderly jogger, although he looked down at the Ace bandage and then up to the man's face, as if he knew something about that bandage, something he could tell if he was moved to do so. The jogger flushed thinly and fell silent.

They watched him go to the rear lobby door and try that one. Again, he made no effort to try a key. Instead, he returned to the lobby again.

"Well, are you going to let us out or not?" a young woman asked truculently.

Rinaldi took his customary pause and then spoke, parceling each word out carefully. "I have a key to everything in the building," he said. "Everything, that is, with the exception of those two doors. Each of you here has a key to the door between the foyer and the lobby, because those doors are always locked. None of you has a key to the door between the foyer and the outside, because those doors are never locked."

"They're sure as hell locked now," Tom Hill said grimly.

Rinaldi swung his olive-skinned, gaunt, and somehow melancholy face in Tom's direction.

"That is impossible," he said, and looked at them all. "You didn't understand me."

"There are no locks on those doors, are there?" Pulaski said suddenly, and in his mind he vividly saw that dove coming out of the silk handkerchief; he could almost smell the cut grass of George Pensky's back lawn. "No locks, no tumblers, no keyholes, no nothing."

"That's exactly the case," Rinaldi agreed, and this time no

one in the lobby spoke. No one at all. Pulaski looked at their uncomprehending, just-beginning-to-be-afraid faces, and thought about the first squad of greenies he had ever lead into action, soldiers beginning to realize the war was real, and that some nightmares could come true.

"I don't know what those doors are," Rinaldi said into this vibrating silence. His calm, at least, was unbroken. "But they are not locked."

Chapter IV: Jo's Bible; Pulaski's Bat; Rinaldi's Call (7/9, 6:00 A.M. to 7:00 A.M.)

Reverse the last 2

Joanne Page rose to the sound of WKLA-FM, the city's classical music station, at 4:45 A.M., as she did each working morning. She skimmed off her plain blue cotton nightgown, which rose from her ankles to her neck, revealing a lovely two-tone body--tanned legs, arms, neck and face, milk-white breasts, torso, and loins. She did not wear two-piece swimsuits. Her face, framed by short blonde hair, was as lovely as her body. She was twenty-five, an advertising copywriter in the city's second largest ad agency. Had been, at least, until today. She thought that today she might very well lose her job. Although this disturbed her and worried her, it had not disturbed her sleep. Her face was calm, serene, and at rest. One cheek was rosy from the pillow.

She showered, washed her hair, and dressed in a simple pink cotton dress. She cooked herself a bowl of oatmeal and ate it standing at the kitchen counter, listening to Mozart. Unlike Tom Hill, she was no cook; if she wanted a substantial meal, she ate at a restaurant.

Her breakfast done, she went into the living room, knealt simply and prettily on the rug, and prayed for five minutes. She prayed as a child prays, with her hands clasped together at her breastbone, her eyes shut. Her morning prayer was generally even shorter than this (in the evenings she prayed at greater length, her thoughts slowly coalescing into an almost hypnotic anthem of praise, and she was was not amazed to utter an internal amen, open her eyes, and see that three hours had passed), but this morning she added a specific request, which was unusual for her--Jesus had taught his disciples to pray only that "Thy will be done," and since her early childhood, when she had prayed as a child prays, she had understood that God is not apt to change His plans at the whim of creatures below, who desire much but understand little.

Nonetheless, she prayed for grace and understanding to be given to her during the difficult day ahead--for those things, and for peace of mind in the event that Dick Allenson had decided to give her a pink slip.

That out of the way, she slipped into her more normal prayer,

which was only that God grant her understanding in her morning devotions. This she followed with the Lord's Prayer, uttered aloud in a calm, low, confident voice. Then she rose, took her Bible from the coffee table, and opened it to the Gospel according to St. Luke.

The Bible had no history; it had not been handed down from mother to daughter to granddaughter. There was no record of weddings and funerals and births in the center section; that section was utterly blank. But the Bible meant a great deal to Jo Page because it was the first thing she had bought in this city. She had bought it twenty minutes after stepping off a Greyhound bus from Stroudsburg, a small town in downstate Illinois. She had come to this city because God had told her she should come here; she had come with her references (such as they had been at age twenty-two, and only one year out of college) neatly put away in a folder and Xeroxed in quadruplicate so they looked much more meaningful than they really were. Other than the references,she had had two suitcases of clothes and four hundred dollars.

She had bought the Bible in a department store for five dollars and ninety cents. The cover had been imitation leather, the binding glued rather than actually bound, and it was now falling apart--but God had spoken clearly, and this Bible had served her well. Getting off that bus she had had four hundred dollars and hopes, but no prospects; now she had a nice apartment, a fulfilling job, a likewise fulfilling (if sometimes confusing) social life, and a bank account--savings as well as checking. For Jo, her Bible was a kind of umbilicus, a constant reminder of the girl who had come to the city with no real reference but her calm and constant faith, with money sufficient to keep her for no more than a month even if she practiced the most stringent economies, with nothing

to hold her up but her belief that this was the thing God meant her to do. Not in any grand way; she did not see herself as a Mother Theresa or a Jeanne d'Arc--an advertising agency in a moderate-sized American city was not the place for such a destiny, nor did she wish such a destiny (if her wishes mattered). But she recognized life as little more than a hall of mirrors in a funhouse run by the Prince of the Earthly World, and in her Bible she saw the only piece of glass which reflected a true image--however darkly.

So with Mozart giving way to a chamber group playing a piece she did not recognize, she opened the Bible to the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 15, verses twenty-four to thirty-nine. She read Mark's account of Christ's crucifixion carefully--not for the first time, nor, she hoped, for the last.

Today she meditated most carefully [redacted] upon the thirty-fourth verse of the chapter. Matthew's account of the crucifixion also contained the sense of this verse, but neither Luke, the physician, nor John, the scholar, mentioned it, and Jo wondered why--it was not the sort of thing, she thought, that would seem unimportant enough to be left out or to be forgotten.

She read the verse aloud in her low, pleasant voice: "And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, which is, being interpreted, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Why did God forsake His son? she wondered, not for the first time. He sent Him into the world to do soldier's work--why at the end did He turn His face away? If He could bear Jesus up through what dad used to call the mud and the crud, why did He turn away then, after they had driven home the nails and put that insulting sign on the cross? Why?

It came to her suddenly that perhaps that had been the moment of transfer...the moment when Christ had taken it all upon himself, every sin committed by mankind on the face of the earth since the apple. All that dirt and blood at once, suddenly taken from the world and filling Him like a black poison. And God--

God was sinless!

"Sinless, perfect..." She muttered, looking straight ahead. So God, unable to abide sin, had turned away. And the human side of Christ had been unable to understand? Was that possible? It was. Hadn't the human side of Christ prayed in Gethsemene that

the cup be taken from his lips, if it was God's will?

She turned to that section and re-read it, now wondering how such a request could not be presumptive, and thus a sin in the one man ever born who was without sin. No answer came.

Her thoughts returned to the idea that God had turned His face away at the moment Christ's purpose had been fulfilled--at the moment when he had actually become the savior promised in every book of the Old Testament.

Her arms prickled, [illegible] and her thoughts rose in a kind of exaltation. A mental picture came to her suddenly, as clear as a National Geographic photograph, of a man on a cross covered with bees--so covered that he was little more than a manlike shape. Bees...millions of them, billions of them, crawling, filled with both poison and the capacity for sweetness.

She seized this picture and it became the centerpiece of her meditation. She murmured the phrase Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani over and over again, unaware of it, her eyes wide, the Bible with its sleazy, peeling cover on her lap. The moment of transfer...the calling of the bees. God turns His face away in horror, and in this final instant of despair, all prophecies are fulfilled and the work is done. Moments later, Christ cries out again, wordlessly this time, not a decorous cry, no; there is instead a final scream of horror and pain...and then...over. The doorway of salvation is finally unlocked and the bees collapse in, stinging...

...on nothing.

Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

So she sat, Jo Page, meditating on the death of Jesus Christ as told by Mark, trying to see it, trying to understand, not trying to mould the concept to fit her but trying to mould herself to fit the concept. She flew into what was nearly a [illegible] trance, thoughts finally dissolving into a steady beat of visceral praise.

When she closed the Bible, replaced it on the coffee table, and stood up, she felt totally new and totally refreshed. She took her satchel from the hall closet, her purse from the table, and left the apartment, headed for the elevators. She attended no church--certainly not the electronic fundamentalist church available twenty-four hours a day on two cable channels. The rantings of these self-styled priests in their tailored suits repulsed her almost to the point of physical illness; when they began asking for donations and huckstering their taped devotions and their gospel recordings, she always got an image of Jesus raging through

the temple, not God's lamb but God's lion, His dark eyes blazing with disgust and outrage, overturning tables covered with heavy, unevenly milled coins, grabbing protestors by their robes and heaving them away, breathing in short, steady pants, sweat on His brow and trickling down His face.

Her religion was a private matter; she forced it on no one and was revolted by those who did. In some of these she recognized an innocent joy which she could at least sympathize with if she could not respect; in most she saw only a kind of filthy self-aggrandizement, the final mirror-trick by which the Prince of the World tried to turn God Himself into an illusion. Because the Bible demanded that the followers of Christ should witness, she did so--wasn't that why she was in the jam she was in at work?--but she did so only when asked, or when circumstances demanded it.

But...thy will be done. There was no sense thinking about it now. God's will would be done, yes indeed, and as her dad had also been fond of saying, things that can't be cured have to be endured.

So she stepped into the car when the elevator door opened and rode down from the sixth floor with three or four other tenants who were off to work. She saw these same three or four people on most mornings, and she passed the usual automatic pleasantries with them. Everything was just as it should have been...until the elevator doors opened and she saw all the people standing in the lobby.

2

Rinaldi, Tom Hill, and Denny Pulaski were no longer in the lobby when Jo Page ~~and the others who had ridden down with her~~ arrived there. Both Tom and Pulaski had insisted on accompanying Rinaldi up the the office, and Rinaldi had not demurred.

He was, in fact, rather relieved that none of the others also demanded to come along, and considered that he was getting off cheaply.

Rinaldi put all tenants into three classes: Busybodies, Good Tenants, and Troublemakers. He classed the Full Moon Scribe and whoever kept yanking the apartment TV cables out of the console in the shed on the roof as Troublemakers, and when he finally found out who they were, out they would go...as had the guy last year who kept vandalizing the coin-op washers for no reason, as had the guy two years ago who occasionally took it into his head to creep up and down the halls clad only in a London Fog topcoat and a Casper the Friendly Ghost Halloween mask, exposing a scanty cloud of gingery pubic hair and a great clublike erection whenever a woman appeared. This flasher had turned out to be none other than Elmer Rincon, the vice-director of public relations for the city's pro football team. How he was at public relations, Rinaldi didn't know, but he had been great at vice. He had exposed himself at least a dozen times (and probably more; Rinaldi supposed a lot of women no more wanted to report a flasher than they wanted to report being raped), always racing down the fire stairs and escaping. Then one night a tough fifty-year-old woman had lunged at him and ripped off his mask rather than fleeing. The flabbergasted Rincon had tripped over his own feet, bashed his head against the door of 211, and had knocked himself out.

There had been other Troublemakers since the Tennis Club Apartments opened, but almost all of them underestimated just how closed a system an apartment building was, and how watchful the tenants were--afraid, if you wanted to get right down to it and call a spade a spade. Sooner or later they were identified and Rinaldi got them the hell out. He had no interest in prosecuting them;

concepts such as "justice" or "right" meant nothing to him. He just wanted the bastards (and the occasional Troublemaking bitch, such as the one in 808 three years ago who had been turning any number of very discreet tricks) out.

Troublemakers were, thankfully, the smallest group of tenants. Above them in numbers were the Good Tenants, who paid their rent on time, notified him of when they were going on vacation at least two weeks before they actually went, who did not try to sublet their apartments, or to sneak in pets--they did not run around flashing other tenants, writing dirty words on doors, or hollering bloody murder every time something went wrong...or every time they imagined it did. Good Tenants were quiet, polite, willing to wait for service if the garbage disposall or the shower went on the fritz. They didn't treat you as if you were a nigger, and Rinaldi was always sorry to see a Good Tenant go.

The Busybodies were far and away the largest class of residents--in Rinaldi's view, seven out of every ten apartment dwellers were Busybodies. When anything went wrong, they screamed at the super whether whatever had gone wrong was the super's fault or not. They complained about the noise coming from other apartments constantly (after listening to one Busybody complain bitterly about the noise coming from the apartment next door, for two weeks Rinaldi had finally gone to the offending apartment, only to discover the tenants, a young married couple, had been in the Black Hills of Dakota for the previous ten days and the flat was empty--the complaining Busybody had not been penitent; he simply went on scolding Rinaldi about the noise as if he had not heard Rinaldi's report at all), they complained about the mail service, the cost of the coin-op washers and dryers, the shuttle service to the mall, the towel sevice at the pool. The most common cry of the

Busybody Tenant was: "I'm writing the owners, and when they hear about this, you'll be looking for another job!" Well, the Busybodies came and went, but Rinaldi was still right here. He knew how to handle them, and the consortium of businessmen who owned The Tennis Club Apartments (in their tax-sheltery kind of way) knew he knew. The Busybodies could write letters until their hands fell off and he would still be right here, thank you very much.

He had recognized several Busybodies among the early-morning crowd in the lobby--Turk Ashton, the jogger, was only the worst of them. So he considered himself well ahead of the game to get away with just Pulaski and Hill in tow. Pulaski was a smartass son of a bitch, but that did not necessarily mean he was a Busybody. He might be, of course, but Rinaldi had decided that the early-morning call was justified, and not immediate grounds for a Busybody classification. After all, people did have to get to work. No work, no pay. No pay, no rent. It all hung together.

Hill was a Busybody, but he could be handled. He had complained about noise in the apartment below four times, about problems with the coin-op washers four or five times, abut the Full-Moon Scribe almost constantly. When the Water-Pik attachment on his shower-head broke, he had called the office every afternoon until he arrived home and found it fixed. But Hill could be handled; Rinaldi only had to turn his dark, contemplative eyes on Hill and he faltered and fell silent, flushing guiltily. Rinaldi had seen it all before, and he would continue seeing it long after Tom Hill had gone somewhere else. I know you haven't renewed your lease, Rinaldi's dark glance said, and every day closer to your lease running out your power over me wanes a little--you know it and I know it. You're only a transient. I'm here for the long

haul.

So Tom Hill and Pulaski were okay, at least for now...but the problem was very definately not okay. Not okay at all, and although his almost perfect poker face revealed nothing as the three of them rode up to the second floor, Rinaldi was thinking furiously about two things--how to handle the ongoing situation, and how to cover his own ass when this matter came up for review.

As for the former, there was only one thing he could do before finally passing the buck. He thought it would work, and he certainly hoped it would work, because you only passed the buck when you absolutely had to. You always looked smaller in the eyes of the fellow who had gotten the buck--smaller, unable to cope with real trouble, a minor-leaguer, a boat that didn't draw much water. Rinaldi had only had building-wide trouble on three or four previous occasions, and he had only had to pass the buck once, when the winter floods four years before had swept away a sewage pumping station and nearly half a mile of sewage drains in Squirrel Hill. Everything in the building had either stopped draining or had begun flowing backwards--in several apartments shit had geysered to the ceilings when toilets were flushed, garbage disposers had thrown up gushers of pureed food-scraps, and washers had overflowed rich rivers of suds. Rinaldi had gone ahead in that case and had made the call to the office of Mid-City Developing Corporation. He had asked for Mr. Rand, had stated the nature of the problem, and had admitted as crisply and briefly as possible that no, he could not handle the situation. Because when something building-wide did happen, you had to walk a fairly fine line. You didn't want to diminish yourself by throwing a problem you could have solved into the lap of a guy like this Rand...but neither did you want someone concluding later on that you had cost the corporation money by

keeping your mouth shut when you should have been yelling for help at the top of your lungs.

Before calling Rand (and Rinaldi recognized that the situation here was potentially even more dicey--the sewer problem had finally grown serious enough to warrant his call in the mid-afternoon, when Rand was at work; if this door problem could not be solved, he would have to call Rand at home), he would ring Security Systems Inc., the outfit which provided the security guards for the building--Rent-A-Cops like Ronnie Bamford. Because Bamford was gone, Security Systems looked like Rinaldi's most likely escape hatch--he could yell them out here to take care of the problem and never have to call Rand at all.

As for covering his ass later, he thought he was mostly okay. He had seen Bamford come on duty last night at eleven, had spoken to him briefly--and had been observed by at least two tenants. It was his responsibility to ascertain that the security guard was on duty; he had done so. Thus it was Bamford who was <u>really</u> going to have to look to his ass...

Except maybe for that business of the fire door.

He wished he had had time to go down there and try it for himself, but there had just been too damn many people in the lobby. If the fire door really <u>was</u> locked, or if it had been somehow secured shut, Rinaldi could have some fancy explaining to do...because that door was <u>his</u> responsibility.

But first things first.

He unlocked the main office; Pulaski and Hill followed him in. He went to the desk, picked up the telephone, and started to dial.

"Who are you calling?" Pulaski asked.

"Security Systems," Rinaldi said. "I want to know if they've heard anything from Bamford."

"Why don't you put it on the hooter?" Pulaski said casually.

Rinaldi looked up, five of the seven digets dialed, affecting not to understand what Pulaski meant...although he knew well enough. There was an amplifier attached to the phone, and if you dropped the handset into the amplifier's cradle, the voice of the person you were calling was boosted so that everyone in the room could hear it--and, of course, anyone in the room could also speak to the person who had been called.

"The hooter," Pulaski said impatiently. "Come on, Rinaldi, don't play dumb."

"Mr. Pulaski, I don't need you to tell me how to do my job," Rinaldi said. His face was still calm and expressionless, but he felt a ripple of disquiet--the kind of ripple he always felt on those few occasions when he found himself dealing, or trying to deal, with an unclassifiable tenant.

"When a fire door doesn't open," Pulaski said, putting his finger unerringly on Rinaldi's one unarmored spot, "maybe somebody does need to tell you, Mr. Rinaldi."

Their eyes met, and Tom Hill simply watched, ignored by both of them and so fascinated by the confrontation that he momentarily forgot that David McGinn would soon be howling for his scalp. Rinaldi's face never changed from its usual melancholy--and perhaps slightly crazed--watchfulness. Pulaski's face was totally bland; his expression might even have been mistaken for pleasantness. But Tom remembered the way Pulaski had looked in the tunnel, when the fire door wouldn't open. He didn't think Pulaski felt particularly pleasant...but he did think Pulaski would be extremely pleased to be underestimated by Rinaldi. And he felt the currents between them so clearly that the hairs on his arms stirred.

Rinaldi shrugged and sighed--the shrug and sigh of a man who wished to convey how much patience it took to deal with such unreasonable fellows, and how foolish it was to even attempt to argue with them--and dropped the phone into the amplifier cradle. He turned it on, and all three of them heard the final two musical beeps as Rinaldi touched the buttons.

"Pretty early," Pulaski said as the phone began to ring.

"If nobody answers that phone, the whole bunch of them will be looking for new jobs," Rinaldi said, "not just Bamford."

The phone rang twice and then it was picked up. The voice, absurdly loud, came out of the amp: "This is Security Systems, Inc. You have dialed the emergency number. Please identify yourself by both name and code number and then state the nature of your problem. This is Bo Franklin speaking."

"This is Rinaldi, super at the Tennis Club Apartments," Rinaldi said, "1400 Mall Road, Squirrel Hill. The code number for this building is--" he looked at the side of the telephone, where a small typed sheet of important numbers had been taped down "— 1424. Neither the front door nor the back door going out from the lobby will open. I've got a couple of tenants here who--"

"Bo Franklin speaking," the voice interrupted, and for just a moment Tom saw wavy annoyance-lines form on Rinaldi's smooth, sallow forehead. They were gone so quickly that he could not convince himself that he had actually seen them. "Security Systems. If you're there, give me your name, code number, and problem."

"I've got a couple of tenants here who say the fire door doesn't work, either," Rinaldi said, raising his voice, "although it was fine when I checked it yesterday." This last was a lie; he hadn't actually checked the tunnel fire door since mid-June. When he finished with this call, he'd have to get rid of Pulaski and the

other one in a hurry so he could catch his log-book up to date. Someone would be sniffing through it very soon--maybe as soon as this afternoon.

"Is anybody there?" Franklin's voice boomed.

"Listen up!" Pulaski replied. His voice was loud, exasperated. "We got a problem here, Babycakes, and your security guard is [redacted] (somewhere) (jerking off!)"

"If it's the connection, call back," Franklin said. There was a click...and then the steady burr of an open line.

"Holy shit, the phones are screwed up, too," Tom blurted--and for the first time he felt something pierce his confusion and harried annoyance at being late. He found nothing welcome about the new emotion.

It was fear.