

Handcarved Coffins, Truman Capote

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Handcarved Coffins A Nonfiction Account of an American Crime

MARCH, 1975.

A town in a small Western state. A focus for the many large farms and cattle-raising ranches surrounding it, the town, with a population of less than ten thousand, supports twelve churches and two restaurants. A movie house, though it has not shown a movie in ten years, still stands stark and cheerless on Main Street. There once was a hotel, too; but that also has been closed, and nowadays the only place a traveler can find shelter is the Prairie Motel.

The motel is clean, the rooms are well heated; that's about all you can say for it. A man named Jake Pepper has been living there for almost five years. He is fifty-eight, a widower with four grown sons. He is five-foot-ten, in top condition, and looks fifteen years younger than his age. He has a handsome-homely face with periwinkle blue eyes and a thin mouth that twitches into quirky shapes that are sometimes smiles and sometimes not.

The secret of his boyish appearance is not his lanky trimness, not his chunky ripe-apple cheeks, nor his naughty mysterious grins; it's because of his hair that looks like somebody's kid brother: dark blond, clipped short, and so afflicted with cowlicks that he cannot really comb it; he sort of wets it down.

Jake Pepper is a detective employed by the State Bureau of Investigation. We had first met each other through a close mutual friend, another detective in a different state. In 1972 he wrote a letter saying he was working on a murder case, something that he thought might interest me. I telephoned him and we talked for three hours.

I was very interested in what he had to tell me, but he became alarmed when I suggested that I travel out there and survey the situation myself; he said that would be premature and might endanger his investigation, but he promised to keep me informed. For the next three years we exchanged telephone calls every few months. The case, developing along lines intricate as a rat's maze, seemed to have reached an impasse. Finally I said: Just let me come there and look around.

And so it was that I found myself one cold March night sitting with Jake Pepper in his motel room on the wintry, windblown outskirts of this forlorn little Western town. Actually, the room was pleasant, cozy; after all, off and on, it had been Jake's home for almost five years, and he had built shelves to display pictures of his family, his sons and grandchildren, and to hold hundreds of books, many of them concerning the Civil War and all of them the selections of an intelligent man: he was partial to Dickens, Melville, Trollope, Mark Twain.

Jake sat crosslegged on the floor, a glass of bourbon beside him. He had a chessboard spread before him; absently he shifted the chessmen about. TC: The amazing thing is, nobody seems to know anything about this case. It's had almost no publicity.

JAKE: There are reasons.

TC: I've never been able to put it into proper sequence. It's like a jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces missing.

JAKE: Where shall we begin?

TC: From the beginning.

JAKE: Go over to the bureau. Look in the bottom drawer. See that little cardboard box? Take a look at what's inside it.

(What I found inside the box was a miniature coffin. It was a beautifully made object, carved from light balsam wood. It was undecorated; but when one opened the hinged lid one discovered the coffin was not empty. It contained a photograph—a casual, candid snapshot of two middle-aged people, a man and a woman, crossing a street. It was not a posed picture; one sensed that the subjects were unaware that they were being photographed.)

That little coffin. I guess that's what you might call the beginning.

TC: And the picture?

JAKE: George Roberts and his wife. George and Amelia Roberts.

TC: Mr. and Mrs. Roberts. Of course. The first victims. He was a lawyer?

JAKE: He was a lawyer, and one morning (to be exact: the tenth of August 1970) he got a present in the mail. That little coffin. With the picture inside it. Roberts was a happy-go-lucky guy; he showed it to some people around the courthouse and acted like it was a joke. One month later George and Amelia were two very dead people.

TC: How soon did you come on the case?

JAKE: Immediately. An hour after they found them I was on my way here with two other agents from the Bureau. When we got here the bodies were still in the car. And so were the snakes. That's something I'll never forget. Never.

TC: Go back. Describe it exactly.

JAKE: The Robertses had no children. Nor enemies, either. Everybody liked them. Amelia worked for her husband; she was his secretary. They had only one car, and they always drove to work together. The morning it happened was hot. A sizzler. So I guess they must have been surprised when they went out to get in their car and found all the windows rolled up. Anyway, they each entered the car through separate doors, and as soon as they were inside—wam!

A tangle of rattlesnakes hit them like lightning. We found nine big rattlers inside that car. All of them had been injected with amphetamine; they were crazy, they bit the Robertses everywhere: neck, arms, ears, cheeks, hands. Poor people. Their heads were huge and swollen like Halloween pumpkins painted green. They must have died almost instantly. I hope so. That's one hope I really hope.

TC: Rattlesnakes aren't that prevalent in these regions. Not rattlesnakes of that caliber. They must have been brought here.

JAKE: They were. From a snake farm in Nogales, Texas. But now's not the time to tell you how I know that.

(Outside, crusts of snow laced the ground, spring was a long way off—a hard wind whipping the window announced that winter was still with us. But the sound of the wind was only a murmur in my head underneath the racket of rattling rattlesnakes, hissing tongues. I saw the car dark under a hot sun, the swirling serpents, the human heads growing green, expanding with poison. I listened to the wind, letting it wipe the scene away.)

JAKE: 'Course, we don't know if the Baxters ever got a coffin. I'm sure they did; it wouldn't fit the pattern if they hadn't. But they never mentioned receiving a coffin, and we never found a trace of it.

TC: Perhaps it got lost in the fire. But wasn't there someone with them, another couple?

JAKE: The Hogans. From Tulsa. They were just friends of the Baxters who were passing through. The killer never meant to kill them. It was an accident.

See, what happened was: the Baxters were building a fancy new house, but the only part of it that was really finished was the basement. All the rest was still under construction. Roy Baxter was a well-to-do man; he could've afforded to rent this whole motel while his house was being built. But he chose to live in this underground basement, and the only entrance to it was through a trap door.

It was December—three months after the rattlesnake murders. All we know for certain is: the Baxters invited this couple from Tulsa to spend the night with them in their basement. And sometime just before dawn one humdinger of a fire broke out in that basement, and the four people were incinerated. I mean that literally: burned to ashes.

TC: But couldn't they have escaped through the trap door?

JAKE (twisting his lips, snorting): Hell, no. The arsonist, the murderer, had piled cement blocks on top of it. King Kong couldn't have budged it.

TC: But obviously there had to be some connection between the fire and the rattlesnakes.

JAKE: That's easy to say now. But damned if I could make any connection. We had five guys working this case; we knew more about George and Amelia Roberts, about the Baxters and the Hogans, than they ever knew about themselves. I'll bet George Roberts never knew his wife had had a baby when she was fifteen and had given it away for adoption.

'Course, in a place this size, everybody more or less knows everybody else, at least by sight. But we could find nothing that linked the victims. Or any motivations. There was no reason, none that we could find, why anybody would want to kill any of those people. (He studied his chessboard; he lit a pipe and sipped his bourbon) The victims, all of them were strangers to me. I'd never heard of them till they were dead. But the next fellow was a friend of mine. Clem Anderson. Second-generation Norwegian; he'd inherited a ranch here from his father, a pretty nice spread. We'd gone to college together, though he was a freshman when I was a senior.

He married an old girl friend of mine, wonderful girl, the only girl I've ever seen with lavender eyes. Like amethyst. Sometimes, when I'd had a snootful, I used to talk about Amy and her amethyst eyes, and my wife didn't think it was one bit funny. Anyway, Clem and Amy got married and settled out here and had seven children. I had dinner at their house the night before he got killed, and Amy said the only regret she had in life was that she hadn't had more children.

But I'd been seeing a lot of Clem right along. Ever since I came out here on the case. He had a wild streak, he drank too much; but he was shrewd, he taught me a lot about this town.

One night he called me here at the motel. He sounded funny. He said he had to see me right away. So I said come on over. I thought he was drunk, but it wasn't that—he was scared. Know why?

TC: Santa Claus had sent him a present.

JAKE: Uh-huh. But you see, he didn't know what it was. What it meant. The coffin, and its possible connection to the rattlesnake murders, had never been made public. We were keeping that a secret. I had never mentioned the matter to Clem.

So when he arrived in this very room, and showed me a coffin that was an exact replica of the one the Robertses had received, I knew my friend was in great danger. It had been mailed to him in a box wrapped in brown paper; his name and address were printed in an anonymous style. Black ink.

TC: And was there a picture of him?

JAKE: Yes. And I'll describe it carefully because it is very relevant to the manner of Clem's death. Actually, I think the murderer meant it as a little joke, a sly hint as to how Clem was going to die.

In the picture, Clem is seated in a kind of jeep. An eccentric vehicle of his own invention. It had no top and it had no windshield, nothing to protect the driver at all. It was just an engine with four wheels. He said he'd never seen the picture before, and had no idea who had taken it or when.

Now I had a difficult decision. Should I confide in him, admit that the Roberts family had received a similar coffin before their deaths, and that the Baxters probably had as well? In some ways it might be better not to inform him: that way, if we kept close surveillance, he might lead us to the killer, and do it more easily by not being aware of his danger.

TC: But you decided to tell him.

JAKE: I did. Because, with this second coffin in hand, I was certain the murders were connected. And I felt that Clem must know the answer. He must.

But after I explained the significance of the coffin, he went into shock. I had to slap his face. And then he was like a child; he lay down on the bed and began to cry: "Somebody's going to kill me. Why? Why?" I told him: "Nobody's going to kill you. I can promise you that. But think, Clem! What do you have in common with these people who did die? There must be something.

Maybe something very trivial." But all he could say was: "I don't know. I don't know." I forced him to drink until he was drunk enough to fall asleep. He spent the night here. In the morning he was calmer. But he still could not think of anything that connected him with the crimes, see how he in any way fitted into a pattern. I told him not to discuss the coffin with anyone, not even his wife; and I told him not to worry—I was importing an extra two agents just to keep an eye on him.

TC: And how long was it before the coffin-maker kept his promise?

JAKE: Oh, I think he must have been enjoying it. He teased it along like a fisherman with a trout trapped in a bowl. The Bureau recalled the extra agents, and finally even Clem seemed to shrug it off. Six months went by. Amy called and invited me out to dinner. A warm summer night. The air was full of fireflies. Some of the children chased about catching them and putting them into jars.

As I was leaving, Clem walked me out to my car. A narrow river ran along the path where it was parked, and Clem said: "About that connection business. The other day I suddenly thought of something. The river." I

said what river; and he said that river, the one flowing past us. "It's kind of a complicated story. And probably silly. But I'll tell you the next time I see you."

Of course I never saw him again. At least, not alive.

TC: It's almost as though he must have overheard you.

JAKE: Who?

TC: Santa Claus. I mean, isn't it curious that after all those months Clem Anderson mentions the river, and the very next day, before he can tell you why he suddenly remembered the river, the murderer kept his promise?

JAKE: How's your stomach?

TC: Okay.

JAKE: I'll show you some photographs. But better pour yourself a stiff one. You'll need it.

(The pictures, three of them, were glossy black-and-whites made at night with a flash camera. The first was of Clem Anderson's homemade jeep on a narrow ranch road, where it had overturned and was lying on its side, headlights still shining. The second photograph was of a headless torso sprawled across the same road: a headless man wearing boots and Levis and a sheepskin jacket. The last picture was of the victim's head. It could not have been more cleanly severed by a guillotine or a master surgeon.

It lay alone among some leaves, as though a prankster had tossed it there. Clem Anderson's eyes were open, but they did not look dead, merely serene, and except for a jagged gash along the forehead, his face seemed as calm, as unmarked by violence as his innocent, pale Norwegian eyes. As I examined the photographs, Jake leaned over my shoulder, looking at them with me.)

JAKE: It was around dusk. Amy was expecting Clem home for supper. She sent one of their boys down to the main road to meet him. It was the boy who found him.

First he saw the overturned car. Then, a hundred yards farther on, he found the body. He ran back home, and his mother called me. I cursed myself up one row and down the other. But when we drove out there, it was one of my agents who discovered the head. It was quite a distance from the body. In fact, it was still lying where the wire had hit him.

TC: The wire, yes. I never have understood about the wire. It's so-

JAKE: Clever?

TC: More than clever. Preposterous.

JAKE: Nothing preposterous about it. Our friend had simply figured out a nice neat way to decapitate Clem Anderson. Kill him without any possibility of witnesses.

TC: I suppose it's the mathematical element. I'm always bewildered by anything involving mathematics.

JAKE: Well, the gentleman responsible for this certainly has a mathematical mind. At least he had a lot of very accurate measuring to do.

TC: He strung a wire between two trees?

JAKE: A tree and a telephone pole. A strong steel wire sharpened thin as a razor. Virtually invisible, even in broad daylight. But at dusk, when Clem turned off the highway and was driving in that crazy little wagon along that narrow road, he couldn't possibly have glimpsed it. It caught him exactly where it was supposed to: just under the chin. And, as you

can see, sliced off his head as easily as a girl picking petals off a daisy.

TC: So many things could have gone wrong.

JAKE: What if they had? What's one failure? He would have tried again. And continued till he succeeded.

TC: That's what's so preposterous. He always does succeed.

JAKE: Yes and no. But we'll come back to that later.

(Jake slipped the pictures in a manila envelope. He sucked on his pipe and combed his fingers through his cowlicked hair. I was silent, for I felt a sadness had overtaken him. Finally I asked if he was tired, would he rather I left him? He said no, it was only nine o'clock, he never went to bed before midnight.)

TC: Are you here all alone now?

JAKE: No, Christ, I'd go crazy. I take turns with two other agents. But I'm still the principal guy on the case. And I want it that way. I've got a real investment here. And I'm going to nail our chum if it's the last thing I ever do. He'll make a mistake. In fact, he's already made some. Though I can't say that the manner in which he disposed of Dr. Parsons was one of them.

TC: The coroner?

JAKE: The coroner. The skinny itzy-bitsy hunchbacked little coroner.

TC: Let's see, now. At first you thought that was a suicide?

JAKE: If you'd known Dr. Parsons, you'd have thought it was a suicide, too. There was a man who had every reason to kill himself. Or get himself killed. His wife's a beautiful woman, and he had her hooked on morphine; that's how he got her to marry him. He was a loan shark. An abortionist. At least a dozen dotty old women left him everything in their wills. A true-blue scoundrel, Dr. Parsons.

TC: So you didn't like him?

JAKE: Nobody did. But what I said before was wrong. I said Parsons was a guy who had every reason to kill himself. Actually, he had no reason at all. God was in His heaven, and the sun was shining on Ed Parsons right around the clock. The only thing bothering him was he had ulcers. And a kind of permanent indigestion. He always carried around these big bottles of Maalox. Polished off a couple of those a day.

TC: All the same, everyone was surprised when they heard Dr. Parsons had killed himself?

JAKE: Well, no. Because nobody thought he had killed himself. Not at first.

TC: Sorry, Jake. But I'm getting confused again.

(Jake's pipe had gone out; he dumped it in an ashtray and unwrapped a cigar, which he did not light; it was an object to chew on, not to smoke. A dog with a bone.)

To begin with, how long was it between funerals? Between Clem Anderson's funeral and Dr. Parsons'?

JAKE: Four months. Just about.

TC: And did Santa send the doctor a gift?

JAKE: Wait. Wait. You're going too fast. The day Parsons died—well, we just thought he had died. Plain and simple. His nurse found him lying on the floor of his office. Alfred Skinner, another doctor here in town,

said he'd probably had a heart attack; it would take an autopsy to find out for sure.

That same night I got a call from Parsons' nurse. She said Mrs. Parsons would like to talk to me, and I said fine, I'll drive out there now.

Mrs. Parsons received me in her bedroom, a room I gather she seldom leaves; confined there, I suppose, by the pleasures of morphine. Certainly she isn't an invalid, not in any ordinary sense. She's a lovely woman, and a quite healthy-looking one. Good color in her cheeks, though her skin is smooth and pale as pearls. But her eyes were too bright, the pupils dilated.

She was lying in bed, propped up by a pile of lace-covered pillows. I noticed her fingernails—so long and carefully varnished; and her hands were very elegant, too. But what she was holding in her hands wasn't very elegant.

TC: A gift?

JAKE: Exactly the same as the others.

TC: What did she say?

JAKE: She said "I think my husband was murdered." But she was very calm; she didn't seem upset, under any stress at all.

TC: Morphine.

JAKE: But it was more than that. She's a woman who has already left life. She's looking back through a door—without regret.

TC: Did she realize the significance of the coffin?

JAKE: Not really, no. And neither would her husband. Even though he was the county coroner, and in theory was part of our team, we never confided in him. He knew nothing about the coffins.

TC: Then why did she think her husband had been murdered?

JAKE (chewing his cigar, frowning): Because of the coffin. She said her husband had shown it to her a few weeks ago. He hadn't taken it seriously; he thought it was just a spiteful gesture, something sent to him by one of his enemies. But she said—she said the moment she saw the coffin and saw the picture of him inside it—she felt "a shadow" had fallen. Strange, but I think she loved him. That beautiful woman. That bristling little hunchback.

When we said goodnight I took the coffin with me and impressed on her the importance of not mentioning it to anyone. After that, all we could do was wait for the autopsy report. Which was: Death by poisoning, probably self-administered.

TC: But you knew it was a murder.

JAKE: I knew. And Mrs. Parsons knew. But everybody else thought it was a suicide. Most of them still think so.

TC: And what brand of poison did our friend choose?

JAKE: Liquid nicotine. A very pure poison, fast and powerful, colorless, odorless. We don't know exactly how it was administered, but I suspect it was mixed together with some of the doctor's beloved Maalox. One good gulp, and down you go.

TC: Liquid nicotine. I've never heard of it.

JAKE: Well, it's not exactly a name brand—like arsenic. Speaking of our friend, I came across something the other day, something by Mark Twain, that struck me as very appropriate. (After searching his bookshelves, and finding the volume he wanted, Jake paced the room, reading aloud in a voice unlike his own: a hoarse, angry voice) "Of all the creatures that

were made, man is the most detestable. Of the entire brood he is the only one, the solitary one, that possesses malice.

That is the basest of all instincts, passions, vices—the most hateful. He is the only creature that inflicts pain for sport, knowing it to be pain. Also in all the list, he is the only creature that has a nasty mind.”

(Jake banged the book shut and threw it on the bed) Detestable.

Malicious. A nasty mind. Yessir, that describes Mr. Quinn perfectly. Not the whole of him. Mr. Quinn is a man of varied talents.

TC: You never told me his name before.

JAKE: I've only known it myself the last six months. But that's it. Quinn.

(Again and again Jake slammed a hard fist into a cupped hand, like an angry prisoner too long confined, frustrated. Well, he had now been imprisoned by this case for many years; great fury, like great whiskey, requires long fermentation.)

Robert Hawley Quinn, Esquire. A most esteemed gentleman.

TC: But a gentleman who makes mistakes. Otherwise, you wouldn't know his name. Or rather, you wouldn't know he was our friend.

JAKE: (Silence; he's not listening)

TC: Was it the snakes? You said they came from a Texas snake farm. If you know that, then you must know who bought them.

JAKE (anger gone; yawning): What?

TC: Incidentally, why were the snakes injected with amphetamine?

JAKE: Why do you think? To stimulate them. Increase their ferocity. It was like throwing a lighted match into a gasoline tank.

TC: I wonder, though. I wonder how he managed to inject the snakes, and install them in that car, all without getting bitten himself.

JAKE: He was taught how to do it.

TC: By whom?

JAKE: By the woman who sold him the snakes.

TC: A woman?

JAKE: The snake farm in Nogales, it's owned by a woman. You think that's funny? My oldest boy married a girl who works for the Miami police department; she's a professional deep-sea diver. The best car mechanic I know is a woman—

(The telephone interrupted; Jake glanced at his wristwatch and smiled, and his smile, so real and relaxed, told me not only that he knew who the caller was, but that it was someone whose voice he'd been happily expecting to hear.)

Hello, Addie. Yeah, he's here. He says it's spring in New York; I said he should've stayed there. Naw, nothin'. Just knocking off some drinks and discussing you-know-what. Is tomorrow Sunday? I thought it was Thursday. Maybe I'm losing my marbles. Sure, we'd love to come to dinner. Addie—don't worry about it. He'll like anything you cook. You're the greatest cook either side of the Rockies, east or west. So don't make a big deal out of it. Yeah, well, maybe that raisin pie with the apple crust. Lock your doors. Sleep tight. Yes, I do. You know I do. Buenas noches.

(After he'd hung up, his smile remained, broadened. At last he lit the cigar, puffed on it with pleasure. He pointed at the phone, chuckled.) That was the mistake Mr. Quinn made. Adelaide Mason. She invited us to dinner tomorrow.

TC: And who is Mrs. Mason?

JAKE: Miss Mason. She's a terrific cook.

TC: But other than that?

JAKE: Addie Mason was what I had been waiting for. My big break.

You know, my wife's dad was a Methodist minister. She was very serious about the whole family going to church. I used to get out of it as much as I could, and after she died I never went at all. But about six months ago the Bureau was ready to close shop on this case. We'd spent a lot of time and a lot of money. And we had nothing to show for it; no case at all. Eight murders, and not a single clue that would link the victims together to produce some semblance of a motive. Nothing. Except those three little handcarved coffins.

I said to myself: No! No, it can't be! There's a mind behind all this, a reason. I started going to church. There's nothing to do here on Sunday anyway. Not even a golf course. And I prayed: Please, God, don't let this sonofabitch get away with it!

Over on Main Street there's a place called the Okay Café. Everybody knows you can find me there just about any morning between eight and ten. I have my breakfast in the corner booth, and then just hang around reading the papers and talking to the different guys, local businessmen, that stop by for a cup of coffee.

Last Thanksgiving Day, I was having breakfast there as usual. I had the place pretty much to myself, it being a holiday and all; and I was in low spirits anyway—the Bureau was putting the final pressure on me to close this case and clear out. Christ, it wasn't that I didn't want to dust off this damn town! I sure as hell did. But the idea of quitting, of leaving that devil to dance on all those graves, made me sick to my guts. One time, thinking about it, I did vomit. I actually did.

Well, suddenly Adelaide Mason walked into the café. She came straight to my table. I'd met her many times, but I'd never really talked to her. She's a schoolteacher, teaches first grade. She lives here with her sister, Marylee, a widow. Addie Mason said: "Mr. Pepper, surely you're not going to spend Thanksgiving in the Okay Café? If you haven't other plans, why don't you take dinner at our house? It's just my sister and myself." Addie isn't a nervous woman, but despite her smiles and cordiality, she seemed, hmnn, distracted. I thought: Maybe she considers it not quite proper for an unmarried lady to invite an unmarried man, a mere acquaintance, to her home. But before I could say yes or no, she said: "To be truthful, Mr. Pepper, I have a problem. Something I need to discuss with you. This will give us the chance. Shall we say noon?"

I've never eaten better food—and instead of turkey they served squabs with wild rice and a good champagne. All during the meal Addie kept the conversation moving in a very amusing manner. She didn't appear nervous at all, but her sister did.

After dinner we sat down in the living room with coffee and brandy. Addie excused herself from the room, and when she came back she was carrying—

TC: Two guesses?

JAKE: She handed it to me, and said: "This is what I wanted to discuss with you."

(Jake's thin lips manufactured a smoke ring, then another. Until he sighed, the only sound in the room was the meowing wind clawing at the window.)

You've had a long trip. Maybe we ought to call it a night.

TC: You mean you're going to leave me hanging out here?

JAKE (seriously, but with one of his mischievously ambiguous grins): Just until tomorrow. I think you should hear Addie's story from Addie herself. Come along; I'll walk you to your room.

(Oddly, sleep struck me as though I'd been hit by a thief's blackjack: it had been a long journey, my sinus was troubling me, I was tired. But within minutes I was awake; or, rather. I entered some sphere between sleep and wakefulness, my mind like a crystal lozenge, a suspended instrument that caught the reflections of spiraling images: a man's head among leaves, the windows of a car streaked with venom, the eyes of serpents sliding through heat-mist, fire flowing from the earth, scorched fists pounding at a cellar door, taut wire gleaming in the twilight, a torso on a roadway, a head among leaves, fire, fire, fire flowing like a river, river, river. Then a telephone rings.)

MAN'S VOICE: How about it? Are you going to sleep all day?

TC (the curtains are drawn, the room is dark, I don't know where I am, who I am): Hello?

MAN'S VOICE: Jake Pepper speaking. Remember him? Mean guy? With mean blue eyes?

TC: Jake! What time is it?

JAKE: A little after eleven. Addie Mason's expecting us in about an hour. So jump under the shower. And wear something warm. It's snowing outside.

(It was a heavy snow, thick flakes too heavy to float; it fell to the ground and covered it. As we drove away from the motel in Jake's car, he turned on his windshield wipers. Main Street was grey and white and empty, lifeless except for a solitary traffic light winking its colors. Everything was closed, even the Okay Café. The somberness, the gloomy snow-silence, infected us: neither of us spoke. But I sensed that Jake was in a good mood, as though he was anticipating pleasant events.

His healthy face was shiny, and he smelled, a bit too sharply, of after-shave lotion. Though his hair was ruffled as ever, he was carefully dressed—but not as though he was headed for church. The red tie he wore was appropriate for a more festive occasion. A suitor en route to a rendezvous? The possibility had occurred to me last night when I'd heard him talking to Miss Mason; there was a tone, a timbre, an intimacy.

But the instant I met Adelaide Mason, I crossed the thought right out of my mind. It didn't matter how bored and lonely Jake might be, the woman was simply too plain. That, at least, was my initial impression. She was somewhat younger than her sister, Marylee Connor, who was a woman in her late forties: her face was a nice face, amiable, but too strong, masculine—cosmetics would only have underlined this quality, and very wisely she wore none. Cleanliness was her most attractive physical feature—her brown bobbed hair, her fingernails, her skin; it was as though she bathed in some special spring rain.

She and her sister were fourth-generation natives of the town, and she had been teaching school there since she left college; one wondered why—with her intelligence, her character and general sophistication, it was surprising that she hadn't sought a vaster auditorium for her abilities than a schoolroom full of six-year-olds. "No," she told me, "I'm very happy. I'm doing what I enjoy. Teaching first grade. To be there at the beginning, that's what I like. And with first-graders, you see, I get to teach all subjects. That includes manners. Manners are very important. So few of my children ever learn any at home."

The rambling old house that the sisters shared, a family inheritance, reflected, in its warm soothing comfort, its civilized solid colors and atmospheric "touches," the personality of the younger woman, for Mrs. Connor, agreeable as she was, lacked Adelaide Mason's selective eye, imagination.

The living room, mostly blue and white, was filled with flowering plants, and contained an immense Victorian birdcage, the residence of a half-dozen musical canaries. The dining room was yellow and white and green, with pine-plank floors, bare and polished mirror-bright; logs blazed in a big fireplace. Miss Mason's culinary gifts were even greater than Jake had claimed. She served an extraordinary Irish stew, an amazing apple and raisin pie; and there was red wine, white wine, champagne. Mrs. Connor's husband had left her well-off.

It was during dinner that my original impression of our younger hostess began to change. Yes, very definitely an understanding existed between Jake and this lady. They were lovers. And watching her more attentively, seeing her, as it were, through Jake's eyes, I began to appreciate his unmistakable sensual interest. True, her face was flawed, but her figure, displayed in a close-fitting grey jersey dress, was adequate, not bad really; and she acted as though it was sensational: a rival to the sexiest film star imaginable.

The sway of her hips, the loose movements of her fruity breasts, her contralto voice, the fragility of her hand-gestures: all ultra seductive, ultra feminine without being effeminate. Her power resided in her attitude: she behaved as though she believed she was irresistible; and whatever her opportunities may have been, the style of the woman implied an erotic history complete with footnotes.

As dinner ended, Jake looked at her as if he'd like to march her straight into the bedroom: the tension between them was as taut as the steel wire that had severed Clem Anderson's head. However, he unwrapped a cigar, which Miss Mason proceeded to light for him. I laughed.)

JAKE: Eh?

TC: It's like an Edith Wharton novel. The House of Mirth—where ladies are forever lighting gentlemen's cigars.

MRS. CONNOR (defensively): That's quite the custom here. My mother always lighted our father's cigars. Even though she disliked the aroma. Isn't that so, Addie?

ADDIE: Yes, Marylee. Jake, would you like more coffee?

JAKE: Sit still, Addie. I don't want anything. It was a wonderful dinner, and it's time for you to quiet down. Addie? How do you feel about the aroma?

ADDIE (almost blushing): I'm very partial to the smell of a good cigar. If I smoked, I'd smoke cigars myself.

JAKE: Addie, let's go back to last Thanksgiving. When we were sitting around like we are now.

ADDIE: And I showed you the coffin?

JAKE: I want you to tell my friend your story. Just as you told it to me.

MRS. CONNOR (pushing back her chair): Oh, please! Must we talk about that? Always! Always! I have nightmares.

ADDIE (rising, placing an arm around her sister's shoulder): That's all right, Marylee. We won't talk about it. We'll move to the living room, and you can play the piano for us.

MRS. CONNOR: It's so vile. (Then, looking at me) I'm sure you think I'm a dreadful sissy. No doubt I am. In any event, I've had too much wine.

ADDIE: Darling, what you need is a nap.

MRS. CONNOR: A nap? Addie, how many times have I told you? I have nightmares. (Now, recovering) Of course. A nap. If you'll excuse me. (As her sister departed, Addie poured herself a glass of red wine, lifted it, letting the glow from the fireplace enhance its scarlet sparkle. Her eyes drifted from the fire to the wine to me. Her eyes were brown, but the various illuminations—firelight, candles on the table—colored them, made them cat-yellow. In the distance the caged canaries sang, and snow, fluttering at the windows like torn lace curtains, emphasized the comforts of the room, the warmth of the fire, the redness of the wine.)
ADDIE: My story. Ho-hum.

I'm forty-four, I've never married, I've been around the world twice, I try to go to Europe every other summer; but it's fair to say that except for a drunken sailor who went berserk and tried to rape me on a Swedish tramp steamer, nothing of a bizarre nature has ever happened to me until this year—the week before Thanksgiving.

My sister and I have a box at the post office; what they call a "drawer"—it's not that we have such a lot of correspondence, but we subscribe to so many magazines. Anyway, on my way home from school I stopped to pick up the mail, and in our drawer there was a package, rather large but very light. It was wrapped in old wrinkled brown paper that looked as if it had been used before, and it was tied with old twine. The postmark was local and it was addressed to me. My name was precisely printed in thick black ink. Even before I opened it I thought: What kind of rubbish is this? Of course, you know all about the coffins?

TC: I've seen one, yes.

ADDIE: Well, I knew nothing about them. No one did. That was a secret between Jake and his agents.

(She winked at Jake, and tilting her head back, swallowed all her wine in one swoop; she did this with astonishing grace, an agility that revealed a lovely throat. Jake, winking back, directed a smoke ring toward her, and the empty oval, floating through the air, seemed to carry with it an erotic message.)

Actually, I didn't open the package until quite late that night. Because when I got home I found my sister at the bottom of the stairs; she'd fallen and sprained an ankle. The doctor came. There was so much commotion. I forgot about the package until after I'd gone to bed. I decided: Oh well, it can wait until tomorrow. I wish I'd abided by that decision; at least I wouldn't have lost a night's sleep.

Because. Because it was shocking. I once received an anonymous letter, a truly atrocious one—especially upsetting because, just between us, a good deal of what the writer wrote happened to be true. (Laughing, she replenished her glass) It wasn't really the coffin that shocked me. It was the snapshot inside—a quite recent picture of me, taken on the steps outside the post office. It seemed such an intrusion, a theft—having one's picture made when one is unaware of it.

I can sympathize with those Africans who run away from cameras, fearing the photographer intends to steal their spirit. I was shocked, but not frightened. It was my sister who was frightened. When I showed her my little gift, she said: "You don't suppose it has anything to do with that other business?" By "other business" she meant what's been happening here the past five years—murders, accidents, suicides, whatever: it depends on who you're talking to.

I shrugged it off, put it in a category with the anonymous letter; but the more I thought about it—perhaps my sister had stumbled on to something. That package had not been sent to me by some jealous woman, a mere mischief-making ill-wisher. This was the work of a man. A man had whittled that coffin. A man with strong fingers had printed my name on that package. And the whole thing was meant as a threat. But why? I thought: Maybe Mr. Pepper will know.

I'd met Mr. Pepper. Jake. Actually, I had a crush on him.

JAKE: Stick to the story.

ADDIE: I am. I only used the story to lure you into my lair.

JAKE: That's not true.

ADDIE (sadly, her voice in dull counterpoint to the canaries' chirping serenades): No, it isn't true. Because by the time I decided to speak to Jake, I had concluded that someone did indeed intend to kill me; and I had a fair notion who it was, even though the motive was so improbable. Trivial.

JAKE: It's neither improbable nor trivial. Not after you've studied the style of the beast.

ADDIE (ignoring him; and impersonally, as if she were reciting the multiplication table to her students): Everybody knows everybody else. That's what they say about small-town people. But it isn't true. I've never met the parents of some of my pupils. I pass people every day who are virtual strangers. I'm a Baptist, our congregation isn't all that large; but we have some members—well, I couldn't tell you their names if you held a revolver to my head.

The point is: when I began to think about the people who had died, I realized I had known them all. Except the couple from Tulsa who were staying with Ed Baxter and his wife—

JAKE: The Hogans.

ADDIE: Yes. Well, they're not part of this anyway. Bystanders—who got caught in an inferno. Literally.

Not that any of the victims were close friends—except, perhaps, Clem and Amy Anderson. I'd taught all their children in school.

But I knew the others: George and Amelia Roberts, the Baxters, Dr. Parsons. I knew them rather well. And for only one reason. (She gazed into her wine, observed its ruby flickerings, like a gypsy consulting clouded crystal, ghostly glass) The river. (She raised the wineglass to her lips, and again drained it in one long luxuriously effortless gulp) Have you seen the river? Not yet? Well, now is not the time of year. But in the summer it is very nice.

By far the prettiest thing around here. We call it Blue River; it is blue—not Caribbean blue, but very clear all the same and with a sandy bottom and deep quiet pools for swimming. It originates in those mountains to the north and flows through the plains and ranches; it's our main source of irrigation, and it has two tributaries—much smaller rivers, one called Big Brother and the other Little Brother.

The trouble started because of these tributaries. Many ranchers, who were dependent on them, felt that a diversion should be created in Blue River to enlarge Big Brother and Little Brother. Naturally, the ranchers whose property was nourished by the main river were against this proposition. None more so than Bob Quinn, owner of the B.Q. Ranch, through which the widest and deepest stretches of Blue River travels.

JAKE (spitting into the fire): Robert Hawley Quinn, Esquire.

ADDIE: It was a quarrel that had been simmering for decades. Everyone knew that strengthening the two tributaries, even at the expense of Blue River (in terms of power and sheer beauty), was the fair and logical thing to do. But the Quinn family, and others among the rich Blue River ranchers, had always, through various tricks, prevented any action from being taken.

Then we had two years of drought, and that brought the situation to a head. The ranchers whose survival depended upon Big Brother and Little Brother were raising holy hell. The drought had hit them hard; they'd lost a lot of cattle, and now they were out full-force demanding their share of Blue River.

Finally the town council voted to appoint a special committee to settle the matter. I have no idea how the members of the committee were chosen. Certainly I had no particular qualification; I remember old Judge Hatfield—he's retired now, living in Arizona—phoned me and asked if I would serve; that's all there was to it. We had our first meeting in the Council Room at the courthouse, January 1970. The other members of the committee were Clem Anderson, George and Amelia Roberts, Dr. Parsons, the Baxters, Tom Henry, and Oliver Jaeger—

JAKE (to me): Jaeger. He's the postmaster. A crazy sonofabitch.

ADDIE: He's not really crazy. You only say that because—

JAKE: Because he's really crazy.

(Addie was disconcerted. She contemplated her wineglass, moved to refill it, found the bottle empty, and then produced from a small purse, conveniently nestling in her lap, a pretty little silver box filled with blue pills: Valiums; she swallowed one with a sip of water. And Jake had said that Addie was not a nervous woman?)

TC: Who's Tom Henry?

JAKE: Another nut. Nuttier than Oliver Jaeger. He owns a filling station.

ADDIE: Yes, there were nine of us. We met once a week for about two months. Both sides, those for and those against, sent in experts to testify. Many of the ranchers appeared themselves—to talk to us, to present their own case.

But not Mr. Quinn. Not Bob Quinn—we never heard a word from him, even though, as the owner of the B.Q. Ranch, he stood to lose the most if we voted to divert "his" river. I figured: He's too high and mighty to bother with us and our silly little committee; Bob Quinn, he's been busy talking to the governor, the congressmen, the senators; he thinks he's got all those boys in his hip pocket. So whatever we might decide didn't matter. His big-shot buddies would veto it.

But that's not how it turned out. We voted to divert Blue River at exactly the point where it entered Quinn's property; of course, that didn't leave him without a river—he just wouldn't have the hog's share he'd always had before.

The decision would have been unanimous if Tom Henry hadn't gone against us. You're right, Jake. Tom Henry is a nut. So the vote stood eight to one. And it proved such a popular decision, a verdict that really harmed no one and benefited many, there wasn't much Quinn's political cronies could do about it, not if they wanted to stay in office.

A few days after the vote I ran into Bob Quinn at the post office. He made a tremendous point of tipping his hat, smiling, asking after my welfare. Not that I expected him to spit on me; still, I'd never met with so much courtesy from him before. One would never have supposed he was resentful. Resentful? Insane!

TC: What does he look like—Mr. Quinn?

JAKE: Don't tell him!

ADDIE: Why not?

JAKE: Just because.

(Standing, he walked over to the fireplace and offered what remained of his cigar to the flames. He stood with his back to the fire, legs slightly apart, arms folded: I'd never thought of Jake as vain, but clearly he was posing a bit—trying, successfully, to look attractive. I laughed.)

Eh?

TC: Now it's a Jane Austen novel. In her novels, sexy gentlemen are always warming their fannies at fireplaces.

ADDIE (laughing): Oh, Jake, it's true! It's true!

JAKE: I never read female literature. Never have. Never will.

ADDIE: Just for that, I'm going to open another bottle of wine, and drink it all myself.

(Jake returned to the table and sat down next to Addie; he took one of her hands in one of his and entwined their fingers. The effect upon her was embarrassingly visible—her face flushed, splashes of red blotched her neck. As for him, he seemed unaware of her, unaware of what he was doing. Rather, he was looking at me; it was as if we were alone together.)

JAKE: Yes, I know. Having heard what you have, you're thinking: Well, now the case is solved. Mr. Quinn did it.

That's what I thought. Last year, after Addie told me what she told you. I lit out of here like a bear with a bumblebee up his ass. I drove straight to the city. Thanksgiving or no Thanksgiving, that very night we had a meeting of the whole Bureau. I laid it on the line: this is the motive, this is the guy. Nobody said boo!—except the chief, and he said: "Slow down, Pepper. The man you're accusing is no flyweight. And where's your case? This is all speculation. Guesswork." Everybody agreed with him. Said: "Where's the evidence?"

I was so mad I was shouting; I said: "What the hell do you think I'm here for? We've all got to pull together and build the evidence. I know Quinn did it." The chief said: "Well, I'd be careful who you said that to. Christ, you could get us all fired."

ADDIE: That next day, when he came back here, I wish I'd taken Jake's picture. In the line of duty I've had to paddle many boys, but none of them ever looked as sad as you, Jake.

JAKE: I wasn't too happy. That's the fact of that.

The Bureau backed me; we began checking out the life of Robert Hawley Quinn from the year one. But we had to move on tiptoe—the chief was jittery as a killer on Death Row. I wanted a warrant to search the B.Q. Ranch, the houses, the whole property. Denied. He wouldn't even let me question the man—

TC: Did Quinn know you suspected him?

JAKE (snorting): Right off the bat. Someone in the governor's office tipped him off. Probably the governor himself. And guys in our own Bureau—they probably told him, too. I don't trust nobody. Nobody connected with this case.

ADDIE: The whole town knew before you could say Rumpelstiltskin.

JAKE: Thanks to Oliver Jaeger. And Tom Henry. That's my fault. Since they had both been on the River Committee, I felt I had to take them into my confidence, discuss Quinn, warn them about the coffins. They both promised me they would keep it confidential. Well, telling them, I might as well have had a town meeting and made a speech.

ADDIE: At school, one of my little boys raised his hand and said: "My daddy told my mama somebody sent you a coffin, like for the graveyard. Said Mr. Quinn done it." And I said: "Oh, Bobby, your daddy was just teasing your mama, telling her fairy tales."

JAKE: One of Oliver Jaeger's fairy tales! That bastard called everybody in Christendom. And you say he isn't crazy?

ADDIE: You think he's crazy because he thinks you're crazy. He sincerely believes that you're mistaken. That you're persecuting an innocent man. (Still looking at Jake, but addressing me) Oliver would never win any contest, neither for charm nor brains. But he's a rational man—a gossip, but good-hearted. He's related to the Quinn family; Bob Quinn is his second cousin.

That may be relevant to the violence of his opinions. It's Oliver's contention, and one that is shared by most people, that even if some connection exists between the decision of the Blue River Committee and the deaths that have occurred here, why point the finger at Bob Quinn? He's not the only Blue River rancher that might bear a grievance. What about Walter Forbes? Jim Johanssen? The Throby family. The Millers. The Rileys. Why pick on Bob Quinn? What are the special circumstances that single him out?

JAKE: He did it.

ADDIE: Yes, he did. We know that. But you can't even prove he bought the rattlesnakes. And even if you could—

JAKE: I'd like a whiskey.

ADDIE: You shall have it, sir. Anybody else?

JAKE (after Addie left on her errand): She's right. We can't prove he bought the snakes, even though we know he did. See, I always figured those snakes came from a professional source; breeders who breed for the venom—they sell it to medical laboratories. The major suppliers are Florida and Texas, but there are snake farms all across the country. Over the last few years we sent inquiries to most of them—and never received a single reply.

But in my heart I knew those rattlers came from the Lone Star State. It was only logical—why would a man go all the way to Florida when he could find what he wanted more or less next door? Well, as soon as Quinn

entered the picture, I decided to zero in on the snake angle—an angle we'd never concentrated on to the degree we should have, mainly because it required personal investigation and traveling expenses.

When it comes to getting the chief to spend money—hell, it's easier to crack walnuts with store-bought teeth. But I know this fellow, an old-time investigator with the Texas Bureau; he owed me a favor. So I sent him some material: pictures of Quinn I'd managed to collect, and photographs of the rattlers themselves—nine of them hanging on a washline after we'd killed them.

TC: How did you kill them?

JAKE: Shotguns. Blasted their heads off.

TC: I killed a rattler once. With a garden hoe.

JAKE: I don't think you could've killed these bastards with any hoe. Even put a dent in them. The smallest one was seven feet long.

TC: There were nine snakes. And nine members of the Blue River Committee. Nice quaint coincidence.

JAKE: Bill, my Texas friend, he's a determined guy; he covered Texas from border to border, spent most of his vacation visiting snake farms, talking to the breeders. Now, about a month ago, he called and said he thought he had located my party: a Mrs. Garcia, a Tex-Mex lady who owned a snake farm near Nogales. That's about a ten-hour drive from here. If you're driving a State car and doing ninety miles an hour. Bill promised to meet me there.

Addie went with me. We drove overnight, and had breakfast with Bill at a Holiday Inn. Then we visited Mrs. Garcia. Some of these snake farms are tourist attractions; but her place was nothing like that—it was way off the highway, and quite a small operation. But she sure had some impressive specimens. All the time we were there she kept hauling out these huge rattlers, wrapping them around her neck, her arms: laughing; she had almost solid gold teeth. At first I thought she was a man; she was built like Pancho Villa, and she was wearing cowboy britches with a zipper fly.

She had a cataract in one eye; and the other didn't look too sharp. But she wasn't hesitant about identifying Quinn's picture. She said he had visited her place in either June or July 1970 (the Robertses died 5 September 1970), and that he had been accompanied by a young Mexican; they arrived in a small truck with a Mexican license plate. She said she never spoke to Quinn; according to her, he never said a word—simply listened while she dealt with the Mexican.

She said it was not her policy to question a customer as to his reasons for purchasing her merchandise; but, she told us, the Mexican volunteered the information—he wanted a dozen adult rattlers to use in a religious ceremony. That didn't surprise her; she said people often bought snakes for ritualistic usage. But the Mexican wanted her to guarantee that the snakes he bought would attack and kill a bull weighing a thousand pounds. She said yes, that was possible—provided the snakes had been injected with a drug, an amphetamine stimulant, before being put in contact with the bull.

She showed him how to do it, with Quinn observing. She showed us, too. She used a pole, about twice the length of a riding crop and limber as a willow wand; it had a leather loop attached to the end of it. She caught the head of the snake in the loop, dangled him in the air, and jabbed a

syringe into the belly. She let the Mexican run a few practice sessions; he did just fine.

TC: Had she ever seen the Mexican before?

JAKE: No. I asked her to describe him, and she described any border-town Mexicali Rose between twenty and thirty. He paid her; she packed the snakes in individual containers, and away they went.

Mrs. Garcia was a very obliging lady. Very cooperative. Until we asked her the important question: would she give us a sworn affidavit that Robert Hawley Quinn was one of two men who had bought a dozen rattlesnakes from her on a certain summer day in 1970? She sure turned sour then. Said she wouldn't sign nothing.

I told her those snakes had been used to murder two people. You should have seen her face then. She walked in the house and locked the doors and pulled down the shades.

TC: An affidavit from her. That wouldn't have carried much legal weight.

JAKE: It would have been something to confront him with: an opening gambit. More than likely, it was the Mexican who put the snakes into Roberts' car; of course, Quinn hired him to do it. Know what? I'll bet that Mexican is dead, buried out there on the lone prairie. Courtesy of Mr. Quinn.

TC: But surely, somewhere in Quinn's history, there must be something to indicate that he was capable of psychotic violence?

(Jake nodded, nodded, nodded.)

JAKE: The gentleman was well acquainted with homicide.

(Addie returned with the whiskey. He thanked her, and kissed her on the cheek. She sat down next to him, and again their hands met, their fingers mingled.)

The Quinns are one of the oldest families here. Bob Quinn is the eldest of three brothers. They all own a share of the B.Q. Ranch, but he's the boss.

ADDIE: No, his wife's the boss. He married his first cousin, Juanita Quinn. Her mother was Spanish, and she has the temper of a hot tamale. Their first child died in childbirth, and she refused to ever have another. It's generally known, though, that Bob Quinn does have children. By another woman in another town.

JAKE: He was a war hero. A colonel in the marines during the Second World War. He never refers to it himself, but to hear other people tell it, Bob Quinn single-handedly slaughtered more Japanese than the Hiroshima bomb.

But right after the war he did a little killing that wasn't quite so patriotic. Late one night he called the sheriff to come out to the B.Q. Ranch and collect a couple of corpses. He claimed he'd caught two men rustling cattle and had shot them dead. That was his tale, and nobody challenged it, at least not publicly. But the truth is those two guys weren't cattle rustlers; they were gamblers from Denver and Quinn owed them a stack of money. They'd traveled down to B.Q. for a promised payoff. What they got was a load of buckshot.

TC: Have you ever questioned him about that?

JAKE: Questioned who?

TC: Quinn.

JAKE: Strictly speaking, I've never questioned him at all.

(His quirky cynical smile bent his mouth; he tinkled the ice in his whiskey, drank some, and chuckled—a deep rough chuckle, like a man trying to bring up phlegm.)

Just lately, I've talked to him plenty. But during the five years I'd been on the case, I'd never met the man. I'd seen him. Knew who he was.

ADDIE: But now they're like two peas in a pod. Real buddies.

JAKE: Addie!

ADDIE: Oh, Jake. I'm only teasing.

JAKE: That's nothing to tease about. It's been pure torture for me.

ADDIE (squeezing his hand): I know. I'm sorry.

(Jake drained his glass, banged it on the table.)

JAKE: Looking at him. Listening to him. Laughing at his dirty jokes. I hate him. He hates me. We both know that.

ADDIE: Let me sweeten you up with another whiskey.

JAKE: Sit still.

ADDIE: Perhaps I ought to peek in on Marylee. See if she's all right.

JAKE: Sit still.

(But Addie wanted to escape the room, for she was uncomfortable with Jake's anger, the numb fury inhabiting his face.)

ADDIE (glancing out the window): It's stopped snowing.

JAKE: The Okay Café is always crowded Monday mornings. After the weekend everybody has to stop by to catch up on the news. Ranchers, businessmen, the sheriff and his gang, people from the courthouse. But on this particular Monday—the Monday after Thanksgiving—the place was packed; guys were squatting on each other's laps, and everybody was yakking like a bunch of sissy old women.

You can guess what they were yakking about. Thanks to Tom Henry and Oliver Jaeger, who'd spent the weekend spreading the word, saying that guy from the Bureau, that Jake Pepper fella, was accusing Bob Quinn of murder. I sat in my booth pretending not to notice. But I couldn't help but notice when Bob Quinn himself walked in; you could hear the whole café hold its breath.

He squeezed into a booth next to the sheriff; the sheriff hugged him, and laughed, and let out a cowboy holler. Most of the crowd mimicked him, yelled wahoo, Bob! hiya, Bob! Yessir, the Okay Café was one hundred percent behind Bob Quinn. I had the feeling—a feeling that even if I could prove dead-certain this man was a murderer many times over, they'd lynch me before I could arrest him.

ADDIE (pressing a hand to her forehead, as though she had a headache): He's right. Bob Quinn has the whole town on his side. That's one reason my sister doesn't like to hear us talk about it. She says Jake's wrong, Mr. Quinn's a fine fellow. It's her theory that Dr. Parsons was responsible for these crimes, and that's why he committed suicide.

TC: But Dr. Parsons was dead long before you received the coffin.

JAKE: Marylee's sweet but not too bright. Sorry, Addie, but that's how it is.

(Addie removed her hand from Jake's: an admonishing gesture, but not a severe one. Anyway, it left Jake free to stand up and pace the floor, which he did. His footsteps echoed on the polished pine planks.)

So back to the Okay Café. As I was leaving, the sheriff reached out and grabbed my arm. He's a fresh Irish bastard. And crooked as the devil's toes. He said: "Hey, Jake. I wantcha to meet Bob Quinn. Bob, this is Jake Pepper. From the Bureau." I shook Quinn's hand. Quinn said: "I heard

plenty about you. I hear you're a chess player. I don't find too many games. How about us getting together?" I said sure, and he said: "Tomorrow okay? Come by around five. We'll have a drink and play a couple of games."

That's how I started. I went to the B.Q. Ranch the next afternoon. We played for two hours. He's a better player than I am, but I won often enough to make it interesting. He's garrulous, he'll talk about anything: politics, women, sex, trout fishing, bowel movements, his trip to Russia, cattle versus wheat, gin versus vodka, Johnny Carson, his safari in Africa, religion, the Bible, Shakespeare, the genius of General MacArthur, bear hunting, Reno whores versus Las Vegas whores, the stock market, venereal diseases, cornflakes versus Shredded Wheat, gold versus diamonds, capital punishment (he's all for it), football, baseball, basketball—anything. Anything except why I'm stuck in this town.
TC: You mean he won't discuss the case?

JAKE (halting in his pacing): It's not that he won't discuss the case. He simply behaves as though it doesn't exist. I discuss it, but he never reacts. I showed him the Clem Anderson photographs: I hoped I could shock him into some response. Some comment. But he only looked back at the chessboard, made a move, and told me a dirty joke.

So Mr. Quinn and I have been playing our games within a game several afternoons a week for the last few months. In fact, I'm going there later today. And you—(Cocking a finger in my direction) are going with me.
TC: Am I welcome?

JAKE: I called him this morning. All he asked was: Does he play chess?
TC: I do. But I'd rather watch.

(A log collapsed, and its crackling drew my attention to the fireplace. I stared into the purring flames, and wondered why he had forbidden Addie to describe Quinn, tell me what he looked like. I tried to imagine him; I couldn't. Rather, I remembered the passage from Mark Twain that Jake had read aloud: "Of all the creatures that were made, man is the most detestable ... the only one, the solitary one, that possesses malice ... he is the only creature that has a nasty mind." Addie's voice rescued me from my queasy reverie.)

ADDIE: Oh, dear. It's snowing again. But lightly. Just floating. (Then, as though the resumption of the snow had prompted thoughts of mortality, the evaporation of time) You know, it's been almost five months. That's quite long for him. He usually doesn't wait that long.

JAKE (vexed): Addie, what is it now?

ADDIE: My coffin. It's been almost five months. And as I say, he doesn't usually wait that long.

JAKE: Addie! I'm here. Nothing is going to happen to you.

ADDIE: Of course, Jake. I wonder about Oliver Jaeger. I wonder when he'll receive his coffin. Just think, Oliver is the postmaster. He'll be sorting the mail and—(Her voice was suddenly, startlingly quavery, vulnerable—wistful in a way that accentuated the canaries' carefree songfest) Well, it won't be very soon.

TC: Why not?

ADDIE: Because Quinn has to fill my coffin first.

IT WAS AFTER FIVE WHEN we left, the air was still, free of snow, and shimmering with the embers of a sunset and the first pale radiance of a moonrise: a full moon rolling on the horizon like a round white wheel, or a mask, a white featureless menacing mask peering at us through our car

windows. At the end of Main Street, just before the town turns into prairie, Jake pointed at a filling station: "That's Tom Henry's place. Tom Henry, Addie, Oliver Jaeger; out of the original River Committee, they're the only three left. I said Tom Henry was a nut. And he is. But he's a lucky nut. He voted against the others. That leaves him in the clear. No coffin for Tom Henry."

TC: A Coffin for Dimitrios.

JAKE: What say?

TC: A book by Eric Ambler. A thriller.

JAKE: Fiction? (I nodded; he grimaced) You really read that junk?

TC: Graham Greene was a first-class writer. Until the Vatican grabbed him. After that, he never wrote anything as good as Brighton Rock. I like Agatha Christie, love her. And Raymond Chandler is a great stylist, a poet. Even if his plots are a mess.

JAKE: Junk. Those guys are just daydreamers—squat at a typewriter and jerk themselves off, that's all they do.

TC: So no coffin for Tom Henry. How about Oliver Jaeger?

JAKE: He'll get his. One morning he'll be shuffling around the post office, emptying out the incoming mail sacks, and there it will be, a brown box with his very own name printed on it. Forget the cousin stuff; forget that he's been hanging halos over Bob Quinn's head. Saint Bob isn't going to let him off with a few Hail Marys. Not if I know Saint Bob. Chances are, he's already used his whittling knife, made a little something, and popped Oliver Jaeger's picture inside it—

(Jake's voice jolted to a stop, and as though it were a correlated action, his foot hit the brake pedal: the car skidded, swerved, straightened; we drove on. I knew what had happened. He had remembered, as I was remembering, Addie's pathetic complaint: "... Quinn will have to fill my coffin first." I tried to hold my tongue; it rebelled.)

TC: But that means—

JAKE: Better turn on my headlights.

TC: That means Addie is going to die.

JAKE: Hell, no! I just knew you were going to say that! (He slapped a flattened palm against the steering wheel) I've built a wall around Addie. I gave her a .38 Detective Special, and taught her how to use it. She can put a bullet between a man's eyes at a hundred yards. She's learned enough karate to split a plank with one hand-chop. Addie's smart; she won't be tricked. And I'm here. I'm watching her. I'm watching Quinn, too. So are other people.

(Strong emotion, fears edging toward terror, can demolish the logic of even so logical a man as Jake Pepper—whose precautions had not saved Clem Anderson. I wasn't prepared to argue the point with him, not in his present irrational humor; but why, since he assumed Oliver Jaeger was doomed, was he so certain Addie was not? That she would be spared? For if Quinn stayed true to his design, then absolutely he would have to dispatch Addie, remove her from the scene before he could start the last step of his task by addressing a package to his second cousin and staunch defender, the local postmaster.)

TC: I know Addie's been around the world. But I think it's time she went again.

JAKE (truculently): She can't leave here. Not now.

TC: Oh? She doesn't strike me as suicidal.

JAKE: Well, for one thing, school. School's not out till June.

TC: Jake! My God! How can you talk about school?

(Dim though the light was, I could discern his ashamed expression; at the same time, he jutted his jaw.)

JAKE: We've discussed it. Talked about her and Marylee taking a long cruise. But she doesn't want to go anywhere. She said: "The shark needs bait. If we're going to hook the shark, then the bait has to be available."

TC: So Addie is a stakeout? A goat waiting for the tiger to pounce?

JAKE: Hold on. I'm not sure I like the way you put that.

TC: Then how would you put it?

JAKE: (Silence)

TC: (Silence)

JAKE: Quinn has Addie in his thoughts, he does indeed. He means to keep his promise. And that's when we'll nail him: in the attempt. Catch him when the curtain is up and all the lights are on. There's some risk, sure; but we have to take it. Because—well, to be goddamned honest, it's probably the only damn chance we're gonna get.

(I leaned my head against the window: saw Addie's pretty throat as she threw back her head and drank the dazzling red wine in one delicious swallow. I felt weak, feeble; and disgusted with Jake.)

TC: I like Addie. She's real; and yet there's mystery. I wonder why she never married.

JAKE: Keep this under your hat. Addie's going to marry me.

TC (my mental-eye was still elsewhere; still, in fact, watching Addie drink her wine): When?

JAKE: Next summer. When I get my vacation. We haven't told anybody. Except Marylee. So now do you understand? Addie's safe; I won't let anything happen to her; I love her; I'm going to marry her.

(Next summer: a lifetime away. The full moon, higher, whiter now, and celebrated by coyotes, rolled across the snow-gleaming prairies. Clumps of cattle stood in the cold snowy fields, bunched together for warmth. Some stood in pairs. I noticed two spotted calves huddled side by side, lending each other comfort, protection: like Jake, like Addie.)

TC: Well, congratulations. That's wonderful. I know you'll both be very happy.

SOON AN IMPRESSIVE BARBED-WIRE FENCE, like the high fences of a concentration camp, bordered both sides of the highway; it marked the beginnings of the B.Q. Ranch: ten thousand acres, or thereabouts. I lowered the window, and accepted a rush of icy air, sharp with the scent of new snow and old sweet hay. "Here we go," said Jake as we left the highway and drove through wooden swung-open gates. At the entrance, our headlights caught a handsomely lettered sign: B.Q. Ranch/R. H. Quinn/Proprietor. A pair of crossed tomahawks was painted underneath the proprietor's name; one wondered whether it was the ranch's logo or the family crest. Either way, an ominous set of tomahawks seemed suitable.

The road was narrow, and lined with leafless trees, dark except for a rare glitter of animal-eyes among the silhouetted branches. We crossed a wooden bridge that rumbled under our weight, and I heard the sound of water, deep-toned liquid tumblings, and I knew it must be Blue River, but I couldn't see it, for it was hidden by trees and snowdrifts; as we continued along the road, the sound followed, for the river was running

beside us, occasionally eerily quiet, then abruptly bubbling with the broken music of waterfalls, cascades.

The road widened. Sprinklings of electric light pierced the trees. A beautiful boy, a child with bouncing yellow hair and riding a horse bareback, waved at us. We passed a row of bungalows, lamplit and vibrating with the racket of television voices: the homes of ranch hands. Ahead, standing in distinguished isolation, was the main house, Mr. Quinn's house. It was a large white clapboard two-storied structure with a covered veranda running its full length; it seemed abandoned, for all the windows were dark.

Jake honked the car horn. At once, like a fanfare of welcoming trumpets, a blaze of floodlights swept the veranda; lamps bloomed in downstairs windows. The front door opened; a man stepped out and waited to greet us.

My first introduction to the owner of the B.Q. Ranch failed to resolve the question of why Jake had not wanted Addie to describe him to me. Although he wasn't a man who would pass unnoticed, his appearance was not excessively unusual; and yet the sight of him startled me: I knew Mr. Quinn. I was positive, I would have sworn on my own heartbeat that somehow, and undoubtedly long ago, I had encountered Robert Hawley Quinn, and that together we had, in fact, shared an alarming experience, an adventure so disturbing, memory had kindly submerged it.

He sported expensive high-heel boots, but even without them the man measured over six feet, and if he had stood straight, instead of assuming a stooped, slope-shouldered posture, he would have presented a fine tall figure. He had long simianlike arms; the hands dangled to his knees, and the fingers were long, capable, oddly aristocratic.

I recalled a Rachmaninoff concert; Rachmaninoff's hands were like Quinn's. Quinn's face was broad but gaunt, hollow-cheeked, weather-coarsened—the face of a medieval peasant, the man behind the plow with all the woes of the world lashed to his back. But Quinn was no dumb, sadly burdened peasant. He wore thin wire-rimmed glasses, and these professorial spectacles, and the grey eyes looming behind their thick lenses, betrayed him: his eyes were alert, suspicious, intelligent, merry with malice, complacently superior.

He had a hospitable, fraudulently genial laugh and voice. But he was not a fraud. He was an idealist, an achiever; he set himself tasks, and his tasks were his cross, his religion, his identity; no, not a fraud—a fanatic; and presently, while we were still gathered on the veranda, my sunken memory surfaced: I remembered where and in what form I had met Mr. Quinn before.

He extended one of his long hands toward Jake; his other hand plowed through a rough white-and-grey mane worn pioneer-style—a length not popular with his fellow ranchers: men who looked as though they visited the barber every Saturday for a close clip and a talcum shampoo. Tufts of grey hair sprouted from his nostrils and his ears. I noticed his belt buckle; it was decorated with two crossed tomahawks made of gold and red enamel.

QUINN: Hey, Jake. I told Juanita, I said honey, that rascal's gonna chicken out. Account of the snow.

JAKE: You call this snow?

QUINN: Just pullin' your leg, Jake. (To me) You oughta see the snow we do get! Back in 1952 we had a whole week when the only way I could get out of the house was to climb through the attic window. Lost seven hundred head of cattle, all my Santa Gertrudis. Ha ha! Oh, I tell you that was a time. Well, sir, you play chess?

TC: Rather the way I speak French. Un peu.

QUINN (cackling, slapping his thighs with spurious mirth): Yeah, I know. You're the city slicker come to skin us country boys. I'll bet you could play me and Jake at the same time and beat us blindfolded.

(We followed him down a wide high hallway into an immense room, a cathedral stuffed with huge heavy Spanish furniture, armoires and chairs and tables and baroque mirrors commensurate with their spacious surroundings. The floor was covered with brick-red Mexican tiles and dotted with Navajo rugs. An entire wall had been composed from blocks of irregularly cut granite, and this granite cavelike wall housed a fireplace big enough to roast a brace of oxen; in consequence, the dainty fire ensconced there seemed as insignificant as a twig in a forest.

But the person seated near the hearth was not insignificant. Quinn introduced me to her: "My wife, Juanita." She nodded, but was not to be distracted from the television screen confronting her: the set was working with the sound turned off—she was watching the zany ditherings of muted images, some visually boisterous game show. The chair in which she sat may well have once decorated the throne room of an Iberian castle; she shared it with a shivering little Chihuahua dog and a yellow guitar, which lay across her lap.

Jake and our host settled themselves at a table furnished with a splendid ebony-and-ivory chess set. I observed the start of a game, listened to their easygoing badinage, and it was strange: Addie was right, they seemed real buddies, two peas in a pod. But eventually I wandered back to the fireplace, determined to further explore the quiet Juanita. I sat near her on the hearth and searched for some topic to start a conversation. The guitar? The quivering Chihuahua, now jealously yapping at me?)

JUANITA QUINN: Pepe! You stupid mosquito!

TC: Don't bother. I like dogs.

(She looked at me. Her hair, center-parted and too black to be true, was slicked to her narrow skull. Her face was like a fist: tiny features tightly bunched together. Her head was too big for her body—she wasn't fat, but she weighed more than she should, and most of the overweight was distributed between her bosom and her belly. But she had slender, nicely shaped legs, and she was wearing a pair of very prettily beaded Indian moccasins. The mosquito yap-yapped, but now she ignored him. The television regained her attention.)

I was just wondering: why do you watch without the sound?

(Her bored onyx eyes returned to me. I repeated the question.)

JUANITA QUINN: Do you drink tequila?

TC: Well, there's a little dump in Palm Springs where they make fantastic Margaritas.

JUANITA QUINN: A man drinks tequila straight. No lime. No salt. Straight. Would you like some?

TC: Sure.

JUANITA QUINN: So would I. Alas, we have none. We can't keep it in the house. If we did, I would drink it; my liver would dry up ...

(She snapped her fingers, signifying disaster. Then she touched the yellow guitar, strummed the strings, developed a tune, a tricky, unfamiliar melody that for a moment she happily hummed and played. When she stopped, her face retied itself into a knot.)

I used to drink every night. Every night I drank a bottle of tequila and went to bed and slept like a baby. I was never sick a day; I looked good, I felt good, I slept well. No more. Now I have one cold after the other, headaches, arthritis; and I can't sleep a wink. All because the doctor said I had to stop drinking tequila. But don't jump to conclusions. I'm not a drunk. You can take all the wine and whiskey in the world and dump it down the Grand Canyon. It's only that I like tequila.

The dark yellow kind. I like that best. (She pointed at the television set) You asked why I have the sound off. The only time I have the sound on is to hear the weather report. Otherwise, I just watch and imagine what's being said. If I actually listen, it puts me right to sleep. But just imagining keeps me awake. And I have to stay awake—at least till midnight. Otherwise, I'd never get any sleep at all. Where do you live?

TC: New York, mostly.

JUANITA QUINN: We used to go to New York every year or two. The Rainbow Room: now there's a view. But it wouldn't be any fun now. Nothing is. My husband says you're an old friend of Jake Pepper's.

TC: I've known him ten years.

JUANITA QUINN: Why does he suppose my husband has any connection with this thing?

TC: Thing?

JUANITA QUINN (amazed): You must have heard about it. Well, why does Jake Pepper think my husband's involved?

TC: Does Jake think your husband's involved?

JUANITA QUINN: That's what some people say. My sister told me—

TC: But what do you think?

JUANITA QUINN (lifting her Chihuahua and cuddling him against her bosom): I feel sorry for Jake. He must be lonely. And he's mistaken; there's nothing here. It all ought to be forgotten. He ought to go home. (Eyes closed; utterly weary) Ah well, who knows? Or cares? Not I. Not I, said the Spider to the Fly. Not I.

BEYOND US, THERE WAS A commotion at the chess table. Quinn, celebrating a victory over Jake, vociferously congratulated himself: "Sonofagun! Thought you had me trapped there. But the moment you moved your queen—it's hot beer and horse piss for the Great Pepper!" His hoarse baritone rang through the vaulted room with the brio of an opera star. "Now you, young man," he shouted at me. "I need a game. A bona-fide challenge. Old Pepper here ain't fit to lick my boots." I started to excuse myself, for the prospect of a chess game with Quinn was both intimidating and tiresome; I might have felt differently if I'd thought I could beat him, triumphantly invade that citadel of conceit.

I had once won a prep-school chess championship, but that was eons ago; my knowledge of the game had long been stored in a mental attic. However, when Jake beckoned, stood up, and offered me his chair, I acquiesced, and leaving Juanita Quinn to the silent flickerings of her television screen, seated myself opposite her husband; Jake stood behind my chair, an encouraging presence. But Quinn, assessing my faltering manner, the indecision of my first moves, dismissed me as a walkover, and resumed a conversation he'd been having with Jake, apparently concerning cameras and photography.

QUINN: The Krauts are good. I've always used Kraut cameras. Leica. Rolliflex. But the Japs are whippin' their ass. I bought a new Jap number, no bigger than a deck of cards, that will take five hundred pictures on a single roll of film.

TC: I know that camera. I've worked with a lot of photographers and I've seen some of them use it. Richard Avedon has one. He says it's no good. QUINN: To tell the truth, I haven't tried mine yet. I hope your friend's wrong. I could've bought a prize bull for what that doodad set me back. (I suddenly felt Jake's fingers urgently squeezing my shoulder, which I interpreted as a message that he wished me to pursue the subject.) TC: Is that your hobby-photography?

QUINN: Oh, it comes and goes. Fits and starts. How I started was, I got tired of paying so-called professionals to take pictures of my prize cattle. Pictures I need to send round to different breeders and buyers. I figured I could do just as good, and save myself a nickel to boot.

(Jake's fingers goaded me again.) TC: Do you make many portraits? QUINN: Portraits? TC: Of people.

QUINN (scoffingly): I wouldn't call them portraits. Snapshots, maybe. Aside from cattle, mostly I do nature pictures. Landscapes. Thunderstorms. The seasons here on the ranch. The wheat when it's green and then when it's gold. My river-I've got some dandy pictures of my river in full flood.

(The river. I tensed as I heard Jake clear his throat, as though he were about to speak; instead, his fingers prodded me even more firmly. I toyed with a pawn, stalling.) TC: Then you must shoot a lot of color.

QUINN (nodding): That's why I do my own developing. When you send your stuff off to those laboratories, you never know what the hell you're gonna get back. TC: Oh, you have a darkroom? QUINN: If you want to call it that. Nothing fancy. (Once more Jake's throat rumbled, this time with serious intent.)

JAKE: Bob? You remember the pictures I told you about? The coffin pictures. They were made with a fast-action camera. QUINN: (Silence) JAKE: A Leica.

QUINN: Well, it wasn't mine. My old Leica got lost in darkest Africa. Some nigger stole it. (Staring at the chessboard, his face suffused with a look of amused dismay) Why, you little rascal! Damn your hide. Look here, Jake. Your friend almost has me checkmated. Almost ...

IT WAS TRUE; WITH A skill subconsciously resurrected, I had been marching my ebony army with considerable, though unwitting, competence, and had indeed managed to maneuver Quinn's king into a perilous position. In one sense I regretted my success, for Quinn was using it to divert the angle of Jake's inquiry, to revert from the suddenly sensitive topic of photography back to chess; on the other hand, I was elated-by playing flawlessly, I might now very well win. Quinn scratched his chin, his grey eyes dedicated to the religious task of rescuing his king. But for me the

chessboard had blurred: my mind was snared in a time warp, numbed by memories dormant almost half a century.

It was summer, and I was five years old, living with relatives in a small Alabama town. There was a river attached to this town, too; a sluggish muddy river that repelled me, for it was full of water moccasins and whiskered catfish. However, much as I disliked their ferocious snouts, I was fond of captured catfish, fried and dripping with ketchup; we had a cook who served them often. Her name was Lucy Joy, though I've seldom known a less joyous human. She was a hefty black woman, reserved, very serious; she seemed to live from Sunday to Sunday, when she sang in the choir of some pineywoods church. But one day a remarkable change came over Lucy Joy.

While I was alone with her in the kitchen she began talking to me about a certain Reverend Bobby Joe Snow, describing him with an excitement that kindled my own imagination: he was a miracle-maker, a famous evangelist, and he was traveling soon to this very town; the Reverend Snow was due here next week, come to preach, to baptize and save souls! I pleaded with Lucy to take me to see him, and she smiled and promised she would. The fact was, it was necessary that I accompany her. For the Reverend Snow was a white man, his audiences were segregated, and Lucy had figured it out that the only way she would be welcome was if she brought along a little white boy to be baptized.

Naturally, Lucy did not let on that such an event was in store for me. The following week, when we set off to attend the Reverend's camp meeting, I only envisioned the drama of watching a holy man sent from heaven to help the blind see and the lame walk. But I began to feel uneasy when I realized we were headed toward the river; when we got there and I saw hundreds of people gathered along the bank, country people, backwoods white trash stomping and hollering, I hesitated. Lucy was furious—she pulled me into the sweltering mob.

Jingling bells, cavorting bodies; I could hear one voice above the others, a chanting booming baritone. Lucy chanted, too; moaned, shook. Magically, a stranger hoisted me onto his shoulder and I got a quick view of the man with the dominant voice. He was planted in the river with water up to his white-robed waist; his hair was grey and white, a drenched tangled mass, and his long hands, stretched skyward, implored the humid noon sun.

I tried to see his face, for I knew this must be the Reverend Bobby Joe Snow, but before I could, my benefactor dropped me back into the disgusting confusion of ecstatic feet, undulating arms, trembling tambourines. I begged to go home: but Lucy, drunk with glory, held me close. The sun churned. I tasted vomit in my throat. But I didn't throw up; instead, I started to yell and punch and scream: Lucy was pulling me toward the river, and the crowd parted to create a path for us.

I struggled until we reached the river's bank; then stopped, silenced by the scene. The white-robed man standing in the river was holding a reclining young girl; he recited biblical scripture before rapidly immersing her underwater, then swooping her up again: shrieking, weeping, she stumbled to shore. Now the Reverend's simian arms reached for me. I bit Lucy's hand, fought free of her grip. But a redneck boy grabbed me and dragged me into the water. I shut my eyes; I smelled the Jesus hair, felt the Reverend's arms carrying me downward into drowning blackness, then hours later lifting me into sunlight. My eyes, opening, looked into his grey, manic eyes. His face, broad but gaunt, moved closer, and he

kissed my lips. I heard a loud laugh, an eruption like gunfire:
"Checkmate!"

QUINN: Checkmate!

JAKE: Hell, Bob. He was just being polite. He let you win.

(The kiss dissolved; the Reverend's face, receding, was replaced by a face virtually identical. So it was in Alabama, some fifty years earlier, that I had first seen Mr. Quinn. At any rate, his counterpart: Bobby Joe Snow, evangelist.)

QUINN: How about it, Jake? You ready to lose another dollar?

JAKE: Not tonight. We're driving to Denver in the morning. My friend here has to catch a plane.

QUINN (to me): Shucks. That wasn't much of a visit. Come again soon. Come in the summer and I'll take you trout fishing. Not that it's like what it was. Used to be I could count on landing a six-pound rainbow with the first cast. Back before they ruined my river.

(We departed without saying goodnight to Juanita Quinn; she was sound asleep, snoring. Quinn walked with us to the car: "Be careful!" he warned, as he waved and waited until our taillights vanished.)

JAKE: Well, I learned one thing, thanks to you. Now I know he developed those pictures himself.

TC: So—why wouldn't you let Addie tell me what he looked like?

JAKE: It might have influenced your first impression. I wanted you to see him with a clear eye, and tell me what you saw.

TC: I saw a man I'd seen before.

JAKE: Quinn?

TC: No, not Quinn. But someone like him. His twin.

JAKE: Speak English.

(I described that summer day, my baptism—it was so clear to me, the similarities between Quinn and the Reverend Snow, the linking fibers; but I spoke too emotionally, metaphysically, to communicate what I felt, and I could sense Jake's disappointment: he had expected from me a series of sensible perceptions, pristine, pragmatic insights that would help clarify his own concept of Quinn's character, the man's motivations.

I fell silent, chagrined to have failed Jake. But as we arrived at the highway, and steered toward town, Jake let me know that, garbled, confused as my memoir must have seemed, he had partially deciphered what I had so poorly expressed.)

Well, Bob Quinn does think he's the Lord Almighty.

TC: Not think. Knows.

JAKE: Any doubts?

TC: No, no doubts. Quinn's the man who whittles coffins.

JAKE: And some day soon he'll whittle his own. Or my name ain't Jake Pepper.

OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS I called Jake at least once a week, usually on Sundays when he was at Addie's house, which gave me a chance to talk with them both. Jake usually opened our conversations by saying: "Sorry, pardner. Nothing new to report." But one Sunday, Jake told me that he and Addie had settled on a wedding date: August 10. And Addie said: "We hope you can come." I promised I would, though the day conflicted with a planned three-week trip to Europe; well, I'd juggle my dates. However, in the end it was the bride and groom who had to alter schedules, for the Bureau agent who was supposed to replace Jake while he was on his honeymoon ("We're going to Honolulu!") had a hepatitis attack, and the

wedding was postponed until the first of September. "That's rotten luck," I told Addie. "But I'll be back by then; I'll be there."

So, early in August, I flew Swissair to Switzerland, and lolled away several weeks in an Alpine village, sunbathing among the eternal snows. I slept, I ate, I reread the whole of Proust, which is rather like plunging into a tidal wave, destination unknown. But my thoughts too often revolved around Mr. Quinn; occasionally, while I slept, he knocked at the door and entered my dreams, sometimes as himself, his grey eyes glittering behind the wire-framed spectacles, but now and then he appeared guised as the white-robed Reverend Snow.

A brief whiff of Alpine air is exhilarating, but extended holidays in the mountains can become claustrophobic, arouse inexplicable depressions. Anyway, one day when one of these black moods descended, I hired a car and drove via the Grand St. Bernard pass into Italy and on to Venice. In Venice one is always in costume and wearing a mask; that is, you are not yourself, and not responsible for your behavior. It wasn't the real me who arrived in Venice at five in the afternoon and before midnight boarded a train bound for Istanbul. It all began in Harry's Bar, as so many Venetian escapades do.

I had just ordered a martini when who should slam through the swinging doors but Gianni Paoli, an energetic journalist whom I had known in Moscow when he had been a correspondent for an Italian newspaper: together, aided by vodka, we had enlivened many a morose Russian restaurant. Gianni was in Venice en route to Istanbul; he was catching the Orient Express at midnight. Six martinis later he had talked me into going with him. It was a journey of two days and two nights; the train meandered through Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, but our impressions of those countries were confined to what we glimpsed out the window of our wagon-lit compartment, which we never left except to renew our supply of wine and vodka.

The room spun. Stopped. Spun. I stepped out of bed. My brain, a hunk of shattered glass, painfully clinked inside my head. But I could stand; I could walk; I even remembered where I was: the Hilton Hotel in Istanbul. Gingerly, I made my way toward a balcony overlooking the Bosphorus. Gianni Paoli was basking there in the sunshine, eating breakfast and reading the Paris Herald Tribune. Blinking, I glanced at the newspaper's date.

It was the first of September. Now, why should that cause such severe sensations? Nausea; guilt; remorse. Holy smoke, I'd missed the wedding! Gianni couldn't fathom why I was so upset (Italians are always upset; but they never understand why anybody else should be); he poured vodka into his orange juice, offered it to me, and said drink, get drunk: "But first, send them a telegram." I took his advice, all of it. The telegram said: Unavoidably detained but wish you every happiness on this wonderful day.

Later, when rest and abstinence had steadied my hand, I wrote them a short letter; I didn't lie, I simply didn't explain why I had been "unavoidably detained"; I said I was flying to New York in a few days, and would telephone them as soon as they returned from their honeymoon. I addressed the letter to Mr. and Mrs. Jake Pepper, and when I left it at the desk to be mailed I felt relieved, exonerated; I thought of Addie with a flower in her hair, of Addie and Jake walking at dusk along Waikiki beach, the sea beside them, stars above them; I wondered if Addie was too old to have children.

But I didn't go home; things happened. I encountered an old friend in Istanbul, an archeologist who was working on a "dig" on the Anatolia coast in southern Turkey; he invited me to join him, he said I would enjoy it, and he was right, I did. I swam every day, learned to dance Turkish folk dances, drank ouzo and danced outdoors all night every night at the local bistro; I stayed two weeks. Afterward I traveled by boat to Athens, and from there took a plane to London, where I had a suit fitted. It was October, almost autumn, before I turned the key that opened the door of my New York apartment.

A friend, who had been visiting the apartment to water the plants, had arranged my mail in orderly stacks on the library table. There were a number of telegrams, and I leafed through those before taking off my coat. I opened one; it was an invitation to a Halloween party. I opened another; it was signed Jake: Call me urgent. It was dated August 29, six weeks ago. Hurriedly, not allowing myself to believe what I was thinking, I found Addie's telephone number and dialed it; no answer.

Then I placed a person-to-person call to the Prairie Motel: No, Mr. Pepper was not at present registered there; yes, the operator thought he could be contacted through the State Bureau of Investigation. I called it; a man—an ornery bastard—informed me that Detective Pepper was on a leave of absence, and no, he couldn't tell me his whereabouts ("That's against the rules"); and when I gave him my name and told him I was calling from New York he said oh yeah and when I said listen, please, this is very important the sonofabitch hung up.

I needed to take a leak; but the desire, which had been insistent all during the ride from Kennedy airport, subsided, disappeared as I stared at the letters piled on the library table. Intuition attracted me to them. I flipped through the stacks with the professional speed of a mail sorter, seeking a sample of Jake's handwriting. I found it. The envelope was postmarked September 10; it was on the official stationery of the Investigation Bureau, and had been sent from the state capital. It was a brief letter, but the firm masculine style of the penmanship disguised the author's anguish:

Your letter from Istanbul arrived today. When I read it I was sober. I'm not so sober now. Last August, the day Addie died, I sent a telegram asking you to call me. But I guess you were overseas. But that is what I had to tell you—Addie is gone. I still don't believe it, and I never will, not until I know what really happened. Two days before our wedding she and Marylee were swimming in Blue River. Addie drowned; but Marylee didn't see her drown. I can't write about it. I've got to get away. I don't trust myself. Wherever I go, Marylee Connor will know how to locate me. Sincerely ...

MARYLEE CONNOR: Why, hello! Why, sure, I recognized your voice right off.

TC: I've been calling you every half-hour all afternoon.

MARYLEE: Where are you?

TC: New York.

MARYLEE: How's the weather?

TC: It's raining.

MARYLEE: Raining here, too. But we can use it. We've had such a dry summer. Can't get the dust out of your hair. You say you've been calling me?

TC: All afternoon.

MARYLEE: Well, I was home. But I'm afraid my hearing's not too good. And I've been down in the cellar and up in the attic. Packing. Now that I'm alone, this house is too much for me. We have a cousin—she's a widow, too—she bought a place in Florida, a condominium, and I'm going to live with her. Well, how are you? Have you spoken to Jake lately?

(I explained that I'd just returned from Europe, and had not been able to contact Jake; she said he was staying with one of his sons in Oregon, and gave me the telephone number.)

Poor Jake. He's taken it all so hard. Somehow he seems to blame himself. Oh? Oh, you didn't know?

TC: Jake wrote me, but I didn't get the letter until today. I can't tell you how sorry ...

MARYLEE (a catch in her voice): You didn't know about Addie?

TC: Not until today ...

MARYLEE (suspiciously): What did Jake say?

TC: He said she drowned.

MARYLEE (defensively, as though we were arguing): Well, she did. And I don't care what Jake thinks. Bob Quinn was nowhere in sight. He couldn't have had anything to do with it.

(I heard her take a deep breath, followed by a long pause—as if, attempting to control her temper, she was counting to ten.)

If anybody's to blame, it's me. It was my idea to drive out to Sandy Cove for a swim. Sandy Cove doesn't even belong to Quinn. It's on the Miller ranch. Addie and I always used to go there; it's shady and you can hide from the sun. It's the safest part of Blue River; it has a natural pool, and it's where we learned to swim when we were little girls. That day we had Sandy Cove all to ourselves; we went into the water together, and Addie remarked how this time next week she'd be swimming in the Pacific Ocean. Addie was a strong swimmer, but I tire easily.

So after I'd cooled off, I spread a towel under a tree and started reading through some of the magazines we'd brought along. Addie stayed in the water; I heard her say: "I'm going to swim around the bend and sit on the waterfall." The river flows out of Sandy Cove and sweeps around a bend; beyond the bend a rocky ridge runs across the river, creating a small waterfall—a short drop, not more than two feet. When we were children it was fun to sit on the ridge and feel the water rushing between our legs.

I was reading, not noticing the time until I felt a shiver and saw the sun was slanting toward the mountains; I wasn't worried—I imagined Addie was still enjoying the waterfall. But after a while I walked down to the river and shouted Addie! Addie! I thought: Maybe she's trying to tease me. So I climbed the embankment to the top of Sandy Cove; from there I could see the waterfall and the whole river moving north. There was no one there; no Addie. Then, just below the fall, I saw a white lily pad floating on the water, bobbing. But then I realized it wasn't a lily; it was a hand—with a diamond twinkling: Addie's engagement ring, the little diamond Jake gave her.

I slid down the embankment and waded into the river and crawled along the waterfall ridge. The water was very clear and not too deep; I could see Addie's face under the surface and her hair tangled in the twigs of a tree branch, a sunken tree. It was hopeless—I grabbed her hand and pulled and pulled with all my strength but I couldn't budge her. Somehow, we'll never know how, she'd fallen off the ridge and the tree had caught her

hair, held her down. Accidental death by drowning. That was the coroner's verdict. Hello?

TC: Yes, I'm here.

MARYLEE: My grandmother Mason never used the word "death." When someone died, especially someone she cared about, she always said that they had been "called back." She meant that they had not been buried, lost forever; but, rather, that the person had been "called back" to a happy childhood place, a world of living things. And that's how I feel about my sister. Addie was called back to live among the things she loves. Children. Children and flowers. Birds. The wild plants she found in the mountains.

TC: I'm so very sorry, Mrs. Connor. I ...

MARYLEE: That's all right, dear.

TC: I wish there was something ...

MARYLEE: Well, it was good to hear from you. And when you speak to Jake, remember to give him my love.

I SHOWERED, SET A BOTTLE of brandy beside my bed, climbed under the covers, took the telephone off the night table, nestled it on my stomach, and dialed the Oregon number that I had been given. Jake's son answered; he said his father was out, he wasn't sure where and didn't know when to expect him. I left a message for Jake to call as soon as he came home, no matter the hour. I filled my mouth with all the brandy it could hold, and rinsed it around like a mouthwash, a medicine to stop my teeth from chattering.

I let the brandy trickle down my throat. Sleep, in the curving shape of a murmuring river, flowed through my head; in the end, it was always the river; everything returned to it. Quinn may have provided the rattlesnakes, the fire, the nicotine, the steel wire; but the river had inspired those deeds, and now it had claimed Addie, too. Addie: her hair, tangled in watery undergrowths, drifted, in my dream, across her wavering drowned face like a bridal veil.

An earthquake erupted; the earthquake was the telephone, rumbling on my stomach where it had still been resting when I dozed off. I knew it was Jake. I let it ring while I poured myself a guaranteed eye-opener.

TC: Jake?

JAKE: So you finally made it back stateside?

TC: This morning.

JAKE: Well, you didn't miss the wedding, after all.

TC: I got your letter. Jake—

JAKE: No. You don't have to make a speech.

TC: I called Mrs. Connor. Marylee. We had a long talk—

JAKE (alertly): Yeah?

TC: She told me everything that happened—

JAKE: Oh, no she didn't! Damned if she did!

TC (jolted by the harshness of his response): But, Jake, she said—

JAKE: Yeah. What did she say?

TC: She said it was an accident.

JAKE: You believed that?

(The tone of his voice, grimly mocking, suggested Jake's expression: his eyes hard, his thin quirky lips twitching.)

TC: From what she told me, it seems the only explanation.

JAKE: She doesn't know what happened. She wasn't there. She was sitting on her butt reading magazines.

TC: Well, if it was Quinn-

JAKE: I'm listening.

TC: Then he must be a magician.

JAKE: Not necessarily. But I can't discuss it just now. Soon, maybe. A little something happened that might hasten matters. Santa Claus came early this year.

TC: Are we talking about Jaeger?

JAKE: Yessir, the postmaster got his package.

TC: When?

JAKE: Yesterday. (He laughed, not with pleasure but excitement, released energy) Bad news for Jaeger but good news for me. My plan was to stay up here till after Thanksgiving. But boy, I was going nuts. All I could hear was slamming doors. All I could think was: Suppose he doesn't go after Jaeger? Suppose he doesn't give me that one last chance? Well, you can call me at the Prairie Motel tomorrow night. Because that's where I'll be.

TC: Jake, wait a minute. It has to have been an accident. Addie, I mean.

JAKE (unctuously patient, as though instructing a retarded aborigine): Now I'll leave you with something to sleep on.

Sandy Cove, where this "accident" occurred, is the property of a man named A. J. Miller. There are two ways to reach it. The shortest way is to take a back road that cuts across Quinn's place and leads straight to Miller's ranch. Which is what the ladies did.

Adios, amigo.

NATURALLY, THE SOMETHING HE HAD left me to sleep on kept me sleepless until daybreak. Images formed, faded; it was as though I were mentally editing a motion picture.

Addie and her sister are in their car driving along the highway. They turn off the highway and onto a dirt road that is part of the B.Q. Ranch. Quinn is standing on the veranda of his house; or perhaps watching from a window: whenever, however, at some point he spies the trespassing car, recognizes its occupants, and guesses that they are headed for a swim at Sandy Cove. He decides to follow them. By car? or horseback? afoot? Anyway, he approaches the area where the women are bathing by a roundabout route. Once there, he conceals himself among the shady trees above Sandy Cove. Marylee is resting on a towel reading magazines. Addie is in the water.

He hears Addie tell her sister: "I'm going to swim around the bend and sit on the waterfall." Ideal; now Addie will be unprotected, alone, out of her sister's view. Quinn waits until he is certain she is playfully absorbed at the waterfall. Presently, he slides down the embankment (the same embankment the searching Marylee later used). Addie doesn't hear him; the splashing waterfall covers the sound of his movements. But how can he avoid her eyes? For surely, the instant she sees him, she will acknowledge her danger, protest, scream. No, he obtains her silence with a gun. Addie hears something, looks up, sees Quinn swiftly striding across the ridge, revolver aimed—he shoves her off the waterfall, plunges after her, pulls her under, holds her there: a final baptism.

It was possible.

But daybreak, and the beginning noise of New York traffic, lessened my enthusiasm for fevered fantasizing, briskly dropped me deep into that

discouraging abyss—reality. Jake was without choice: like Quinn, he had set himself a passionate task, and his task, his human duty, was to prove that Quinn was responsible for ten indecent deaths, particularly the death of a warm, companionable woman he had wanted to marry. But unless Jake had evolved a theory more convincing than my own imagination had managed, then I preferred to forget it; I was satisfied to fall asleep remembering the coroner's common-sense verdict: Accidental death by drowning.

An hour later I was wide awake, a victim of jet lag. Awake but weary, fretful; and hungry, starved. Of course, due to my prolonged absence, the refrigerator contained nothing edible. Soured milk, stale bread, black bananas, rotten eggs, shriveled oranges, withered apples, putrid tomatoes, a chocolate cake iced with fungus. I made a cup of coffee, added brandy to it, and with that to fortify me, examined my accumulated mail. My birthday had fallen on September 30, and a few well-wishers had sent cards. One of them was from Fred Wilson, the retired detective and mutual friend who had first introduced me to Jake Pepper. I knew he was familiar with Jake's case, that Jake often consulted him, but for some reason we had never discussed it, an omission I now rectified by calling him.

TC: Hello? May I speak to Mr. Wilson, please?

FRED WILSON: Speaking.

TC: Fred? You sound like you have a helluva cold.

FRED: You bet. It's a real granddaddy.

TC: Thanks for the birthday card.

FRED: Aw, hell. You didn't have to spend your money just for that.

TC: Well, I wanted to talk to you about Jake Pepper.

FRED: Say, there must be something to this telepathy stuff. I was thinking about Jake when the phone rang. You know, his Bureau has him on leave. They're trying to force him off that case.

TC: He's back on it now.

(After I recounted the conversation I'd had with Jake the previous evening, Fred asked several questions, mostly about Addie Mason's death and Jake's opinions pertaining to it.)

FRED: I'm damned surprised the Bureau would let him go back there. Jake's the fairest-minded man I've ever met. There's nobody in our business I respect more than Pepper. But he's lost all judgment. He's been banging his head against a wall so long he's knocked all the sense out of it. Sure, it was terrible what happened to his girl friend. But it was an accident. She drowned. But Jake can't accept that. He's standing on rooftops shouting murder. Accusing this man Quinn.

TC (resentfully): Jake could be right. It's possible.

FRED: And it's also possible the man is one-hundred-percent innocent. In fact, that seems to be the general consensus. I've talked with guys in Jake's own Bureau, and they say you couldn't swat a fly with the evidence they've got. Said it was downright embarrassing. And Jake's own chief told me, said so far as he knew Quinn had never killed anybody.

TC: He killed two cattle rustlers.

FRED (chuckles, followed by a coughing fit): Well, sir. We don't exactly call that killin'. Not around these parts.

TC: Except they weren't cattle rustlers. They were two gamblers from Denver; Quinn owed them money. And what's more, I don't think Addie's death was an accident.

(Defiantly, with astounding authority, I related the "murder" as I had imagined it; the surmises I had rejected at dawn now seemed not only plausible but vividly convincing: Quinn had trailed the sisters to Sandy Cove, hidden among the trees, slid down the embankment, threatened Addie with a gun, trapped her, drowned her.)

FRED: That's Jake's story.

TC: No.

FRED: It's just something you worked out by yourself?

TC: More or less.

FRED: All the same, that is Jake's story. Hang on, I gotta blow my honker.

TC: What do you mean—"that is Jake's story"?

FRED: Like I said, there must be something to this telepathy stuff. Give or take a lotta little details, and that is Jake's story. He filed a report, and sent me a copy. And in the report that's how he reconstructed events: Quinn saw the car, he followed them ...

(Fred continued. A hot wave of shame hit me; I felt like a schoolboy caught cheating in an exam. Irrationally, instead of blaming myself, I blamed Jake; I was angry at him for not having produced a solid solution, crestfallen that his conjectures were no better than mine. I trusted Jake, the professional man, and was miserable when I felt that trust seesawing. But it was such a haphazard concoction—Quinn and Addie and the waterfall.

Even so, regardless of Fred Wilson's destructive comments, I knew that the basic faith I had in Jake was justified.)

The Bureau's in a tough spot. They have to take Jake off this case. He's disqualified himself. Oh, he'll fight them! But it's for the sake of his own reputation. Safety, too. One night here, it was after he lost his girl friend, he rang me up around four in the morning. Drunker than a hundred Indians dancing in a cornfield. The gist of it was: he was gonna challenge Quinn to a duel. I checked on him the next day. Bastard, he didn't even remember calling me.

ANXIETY, AS ANY EXPENSIVE PSYCHIATRIST will tell you, is caused by depression; but depression, as the same psychiatrist will inform you on a second visit and for an additional fee, is caused by anxiety. I rotated around in that humdrum circle all afternoon. By nightfall the two demons had combined; while anxiety copulated with depression, I sat staring at Mr. Bell's controversial invention, fearing the moment when I would have to dial the Prairie Motel and hear Jake admit that the Bureau was taking him off the case.

Of course, a good meal might have helped; but I had already abolished my hunger by eating the chocolate cake with the fungus icing. Or I could have gone to a movie and smoked some grass. But when you're in that kind of sweat, the only lasting remedy is to ride with it: accept the anxiety, be depressed, relax, and let the current carry you where it will.

OPERATOR: Good evening. Prairie Motel. Mr. Pepper? Hey, Ralph, you seen Jake Pepper? In the bar? Hello, sir—your party's in the bar. I'm ringing.

TC: Thank you.

(I remembered the Prairie Bar; unlike the motel, it had a certain comic-strip charm. Cowboy customers, rawhide walls decorated with girlie posters and Mexican sombreros, a rest room for BULLS, another for BELLES,

and a jukebox devoted to the twangs of Country & Western music. A jukebox blast announced that the bartender had answered.)

BARTENDER: Jake Pepper! Somebody for you. Hello, mister. He wants to know who is it?

TC: A friend from New York.

JAKE'S VOICE (distantly; rising in volume as he approaches the phone): Sure I have friends in New York. Tokyo. Bombay. Hello, my friend from New York!

TC: You sound jolly.

JAKE: About as jolly as a beggar's monkey.

TC: Can you talk? Or should I call later?

JAKE: This is okay. It's so noisy nobody can hear me.

TC (tentative; wary of opening wounds): So. How's it going?

JAKE: Not so hotsy-totsy.

TC: Is it the Bureau?

JAKE (puzzled): The Bureau?

TC: Well, I thought they might be giving you trouble.

JAKE: They ain't giving me no trouble. But I'm giving them plenty. Buncha nitwits. No, it's that knucklehead Jaeger. Our beloved postmaster. He's chicken. He wants to skip the coop. And I don't know how to stop him. But I've got to.

TC: Why?

JAKE: "The shark needs bait."

TC: Have you talked to Jaeger?

JAKE: For hours. He's with me now. Sitting over there in the corner like a little white rabbit ready to jump down a hole.

TC: Well, I can sympathize with that.

JAKE: I can't afford to. I've got to hold on to this old sissy. But how? He's sixty-four; he's got a bundle of dough and a pension coming. He's a bachelor; his closest living relative is Bob Quinn! For Christ's sake. And get this: he still doesn't believe Quinn did it. He says yes, maybe somebody means to harm me, but it can't be Bob Quinn; he's my own flesh and blood. There's just one thing that gives him pause.

TC: Something to do with the package?

JAKE: Uh-huh.

TC: The handwriting? No, it can't be that. It must be the picture.

JAKE: Nice shot. This picture's different. It's not like the others. For one thing, it's about twenty years old. It was made at the State Fair; Jaeger is marching in a Kiwanis parade—he's wearing a Kiwanis hat. Quinn took the picture. Jaeger says he saw him take it; the reason he remembers is because he asked Quinn to give him a copy, and Quinn never did.

TC: That ought to make the postmaster think twice. I doubt that it would do much to a jury.

JAKE: Actually, it doesn't do much to the postmaster.

TC: But he's frightened enough to leave town?

JAKE: He's scared, sure. But even if he wasn't, there's nothing to keep him here. He says he always planned to spend the last years of his life traveling. My job is to delay the journey. Indefinitely. Listen, I'd better not leave my little rabbit alone too long. So wish me luck. And keep in touch.

I wished him luck, but he was not lucky; within a week, both the postmaster and the detective had gone their separate ways: the former packed for global wanderings, the latter because the Bureau had removed him from the case.

THE FOLLOWING NOTES ARE EXCERPTED from my personal journals: 1975 through 1979.

20 October 1975: Spoke to Jake. Very bitter; spewing venom in all directions. He said "for two pins and a Confederate dollar" he'd quit, write in his resignation, go to Oregon and work on his son's farm. "But as long as I'm here with the Bureau, I've still got a whip to crack." Also, if he quit now, he could forfeit his retirement pension, a beau geste I'm sure he can't afford.

6 November 1975: Spoke to Jake. He said they were having a cattle-rustling epidemic in the northeast part of the state. Rustlers steal the cattle at night, load them into trucks, and drive them down into the Dakotas. He said that he and some other agents had spent the last few nights out on the open range, hiding among the cattle herds, waiting for rustlers who never showed up: "Man, it's cold out there! I'm too old for this tough-guy stuff." He mentioned that Marylee Connor had moved to Sarasota.

25 November 1975: Thanksgiving. Awoke this morning, and thought of Jake, and remembered it was just a year ago that he had got his "big break": that he had gone to Addie's for dinner and she had told him about Quinn and Blue River. I decided against calling him; it might aggravate, rather than alleviate, the painful ironies attached to this particular anniversary. Did call Fred Wilson and his wife, Alice, to wish them "bon appétit." Fred asked about Jake; I said the last I heard he was busy chasing cattle rustlers. Fred said: "Yeah, they're workin' his ass off. Trying to keep his mind off that other deal, what the Bureau guys call 'The Rattlesnake Baby.' They've assigned a young fellow named Nelson to it; but that's just for appearance sake. Legally, the case is open; but for all practical purposes the Bureau has drawn a line through it."

5 December 1975: Spoke to Jake. The first thing he said was: "You'll be pleased to hear the postmaster is safe and sound in Honolulu. He's been mailing postcards to everybody. I'm sure he sent one to Quinn. Well, he got to go to Honolulu, and I didn't. Yessir, life is strange." He said he was still in the "cattle-rustling business. And damned sick of it. I ought to join the rustlers. They make a hundred times the money I do."

20 December 1975: Received a Christmas card from Marylee Connor. She wrote: "Sarasota is lovely! This is my first winter in a warm climate, and I can honestly say I don't miss home. Did you know that Sarasota is famous as a winter quarter for the Ringling Bros. Circus? My cousin and I often drive over to watch the performers practice. It's the best fun! We've become friendly with a Russian woman who trains acrobats.

May God see you through the New Year, and please find enclosed a small gift." The gift was an amateurish family-album snapshot of Addie as a young girl, perhaps sixteen, standing in a flower garden, wearing a white summer dress with a matching hair ribbon, and cradling in her arms, as though it were as fragile as the surrounding foliage, a white kitten; the kitten is yawning. On the back of the picture, Marylee had written: Adelaide Minerva Mason. Born 14 June 1939.

Called Back 29 August 1975.

1 January 1976: Jake called—"Happy New Year!" He sounded like a gravedigger digging his own grave. He said he'd spent New Year's Eve in bed reading David Copperfield. "The Bureau had a big party. But I didn't go. I knew if I did I'd get drunk and knock some heads together. Maybe a lotta heads. Drunk or sober, whenever I'm around the chief it's all I can

do not to throw a punch bang into his fat gut." I told him I'd received a card from Marylee at Christmas and described the picture of Addie accompanying it, and he said yes, Marylee had sent him a very similar picture: "But what does it mean? What she wrote--'Called Back'?" When I tried to interpret the phrase as I understood it, he stopped me with a grunt: it was too fanciful for him; and he remarked: "I love Marylee. I've always said she's a sweet woman. But simple. Just a mite simple."

5 February 1976: Last week I bought a frame for Addie's snapshot. I put it on a table in my bedroom. Yesterday I removed it to a drawer. It was too disturbing, alive--especially the kitten's yawn.

14 February 1976: Three valentines--one from an old schoolteacher, Miss Wood; another from my tax accountant; and a third signed Love, Bob Quinn. A joke, of course. Jake's idea of black comedy?

15 February 1976: Called Jake, and he confessed yes, he'd sent the valentine. I said well, you must have been drunk. He said: "I was."

20 April 1976: A short letter from Jake scribbled on Prairie Motel stationery: "Have been here two days collecting gossip, mostly at the Okay Café. The postmaster is still in Honolulu. Juanita Quinn had a pretty bad stroke. I like Juanita, so I was sorry to hear it. But her husband is fit as a fiddle. Which is the way I prefer it. I don't want anything to happen to Quinn until I have a final crack at him. The Bureau may have forgotten this matter, but not me. I'll never give up. Sincerely ..."

10 July 1976: Called Jake last night, not having heard from him for more than two months. The man I spoke to was a new Jake Pepper; or rather, the old Jake Pepper, vigorous, optimistic--it was as though he had at last emerged from an inebriated slumber, his rested muscles primed to prowl. I quickly learned what had roused him: "I've got a devil by the tail. A humdinger." The humdinger, though it contained one intriguing element, turned out to be a very ordinary murder; or so it struck me. A young man, aged twenty-two, lived alone on a modest farm with an elderly grandfather. Earlier in the spring the grandson killed the old man in order to inherit his property and steal money the victim had misered away under a mattress.

Neighbors noticed the farmer's disappearance and saw that the young man was driving a flashy new car. The police were notified, and they soon discovered that the grandson, who had no explanation for his relative's sudden and complete absence, had bought the new car with old cash. The suspect would neither admit nor deny that he had murdered his grandfather, though the authorities were certain he had. The difficulty was: no corpse. Without a body they couldn't make an arrest. But search as they might, the victim remained invisible. The local constabulary requested aid from the State Bureau of Investigation, and Jake was assigned to the case. "It's fascinating. This kid is smart as hell.

Whatever he did to that old man is diabolical. And if we can't find the body, he'll go scot-free. But I'm sure it's somewhere on that farm. Every instinct tells me he chopped Grandpa into mincemeat and buried the parts in different spots. All I need is the head. I'll find it if I have to plow the place up acre by acre. Inch by inch." After we'd hung up, I felt a surge of anger; and jealousy: not just a twinge, but a mean jab, as though I'd recently learned of a lover's betrayal. In truth, I don't want Jake to be interested in any case other than the case that interests me.

20 July 1976: A telegram from Jake. Have Head One Hand Two Feet Stop Gone Fishing Jake. I wonder why he sent a telegram instead of calling? Can he imagine that I resent this success? I'm pleased, for I know his pride has been at least partially restored. I only hope that wherever he has "gone fishing," it is somewhere in the neighborhood of Blue River.

22 July 1976: Wrote Jake a congratulatory letter, and told him I was going abroad for three months.

20 December 1976: A Christmas card from Sarasota. "If you ever come this way, please stop by. God bless you. Marylee Connor."

22 February 1977: A note from Marylee: "I still subscribe to the hometown paper, and thought the enclosed clipping might interest you. I've written her husband. He sent me such a lovely letter at the time of Addie's accident." The clipping was Juanita Quinn's obituary; she had died in her sleep. Surprisingly, there was to be no service or burial, for the deceased had requested that she be cremated and her ashes scattered over Blue River.

23 February 1977: Called Jake. He said, rather sheepishly: "Hiya, pardner! You've been quite the stranger." In fact, I'd mailed him a letter from Switzerland, to which he had not replied; and though I'd failed to reach him, had twice phoned during the Christmas holidays. "Oh yeah, I was in Oregon." Then I came to the point: Juanita Quinn's obituary. Predictably, he said: "I'm suspicious"; and when I asked why, answered: "Cremations always make me suspicious." We talked another quarter-hour, but it was a self-conscious conversation, an effort on his part. Perhaps I remind him of matters that, for all his moral strength, he is beginning to want to forget.

10 July 1977: Jake called, elated. Without preamble, he announced: "Like I told you, cremations always make me suspicious. Bob Quinn's a bridegroom! Well, everybody knew he had another family, a woman with four children fathered by Squire Quinn. He kept them hidden over in Appleton, a place about a hundred miles southwest. Last week he married the lady. Brought his bride and brood back to the ranch, proud as a rooster. Juanita would spin in her grave. If she had a grave." Stupidly, dazed by the speed of Jake's narrative, I asked: "How old are the children?" He said: "The youngest is ten and the oldest seventeen. All girls.

I tell you, the town is in an uproar. Sure, they can handle murder, a couple of homicides don't faze them; but to have their shining knight, their big War Hero, show up with this brazen trollop and her four little bastards is too much for their Presbyterian eyebrows." I said: "I feel sorry for the children. The woman, too." Jake said: "I'll save my sorrow for Juanita. If there was a body to exhume, I'll bet the coroner would find a nice dose of nicotine inside it." I said: "I doubt that. He wouldn't hurt Juanita. She was an alcoholic.

He was her savior. He loved her." Quietly, Jake said: "And I gather you don't think he had anything to do with Addie's 'accident'?" I said: "He meant to kill her. He would have, eventually. But then she drowned." Jake said: "Saving him the trouble! Okay. Explain Clem Anderson, the Baxters." I said: "Yes, that was all Quinn's work. He had to do it. He's a messiah with a task." Jake said: "Then why did he let the postmaster glide through his fingers?" I said: "Has he? My guess is that old Mr. Jaeger has an appointment in Samarra. Quinn will cross his path one day. Quinn can't rest until that happens. He's not sane, you know." Jake hung up, but not before acrimoniously asking: "Are you?"

15 December 1977: Saw a black alligator wallet in a pawnshop window. It was in fine condition, and initialed J.P. I bought it, and because our last conversation had ended angrily (he was angry, I wasn't), I sent it to Jake as both a Christmas present and a peace offering.

22 December 1977: A Christmas card from the faithful Mrs. Connor: "I'm working for the circus! No, I'm not an acrobat. I'm a receptionist. It beats shuffleboard! All wishes for the New Year."

17 January 1978: A four-line scrawl from Jake thanking me for the wallet—curtly, inadequately. I'm receptive to hints. I won't write or call again.

20 December 1978: A Christmas card from Marylee Connor, just her signature; nothing from Jake.

12 September 1979: Fred Wilson and his wife were in New York last week, en route to Europe (their first trip), happy as honeymooners. I took them to dinner; all talk was limited to the excitements of their impending tour until, while selecting dessert, Fred said: "I notice you haven't mentioned Jake." I pretended surprise, and casually remarked that I hadn't heard from Jake in well over a year. Shrewdly, Fred asked: "You fellows have a falling out?" I shrugged: "Nothing quite so clean-cut. But we haven't always seen eye to eye." Then Fred said: "Jake's had bad health problems lately. Emphysema. He's retiring the end of this month. Now, it's none of my business, but I think it would be a nice gesture if you called him. Just now he needs a pat on the back."

14 September 1979: I shall always be grateful to Fred Wilson; he had made it easy for me to swallow my pride and call Jake. We spoke this morning; it was as if we had talked yesterday, and the day before. One wouldn't believe that there had ever been an interruption in our friendship. He confirmed the news of his retirement: "Just sixteen days to go!"—and said that he planned to live with his son in Oregon. "But before that, I'm going to spend a day or two at the Prairie Motel. I've some unfinished chores in that town. There's some records in the courthouse I want to steal for my files. Hey, listen! Why don't we go together? Have a real reunion. I could meet you at Denver and drive you down." Jake did not have to pressure me; if he hadn't offered the invitation, I would have suggested it myself: I had often dreamed, while awake or asleep, of returning to that melancholy village, for I wanted to see Quinn again—meet and talk with him, just the two of us alone.

IT WAS THE SECOND DAY of October.

Jake, declining an offer to accompany me, had lent me his car, and after lunch I left the Prairie Motel to keep an appointment at the B.Q. Ranch. I remembered the last time I had traveled this territory: the full moon, the fields of snow, the cutting cold, the cattle banded together, gathered in groups, their warm breath smoking the arctic air. Now, in October, the landscape was gloriously different: the macadam highway was like a skinny black sea dividing a golden continent; on either side, the sun-bleached stubble of threshed wheat flamed, rippled with yellow colors, sable shadows under a cloudless sky. Bulls pranced about these pastures; and cows, among them mothers with new calves, grazed, dozed.

At the entrance to the ranch, a young girl was leaning against a sign, the one with the crossed tomahawks. She smiled, and waved for me to stop.
YOUNG GIRL: Afternoon! I'm Nancy Quinn. My dad sent me to meet you.
TC: Well, thanks.

NANCY QUINN (opening the car door, climbing in): He's fishing. I'll have to show you where he is.

(She was a cheerful twelve-year-old snaggle-toothed tomboy. Her tawny hair was chopped short, and she was splashed with freckles from top to bottom. She was wearing only an old bathing suit. One of her knees was wrapped in a dirty bandage.)

TC (referring to the bandage): Hurt yourself?

NANCY QUINN: Naw. Well, I got throwed.

TC: Throwed?

NANCY QUINN: Bad Boy throwed me. He's one mean horse. That's how come they call him Bad Boy. He's throwed every kid on the ranch. Most of the guys, too. I said well, I bet I can ride him. And I did. For 'bout two seconds flat.

You been here before?

TC: Once; years ago. But it was at night. I remember a wooden bridge—

NANCY QUINN: That's it yonder!

(We crossed the bridge: finally I saw Blue River; but it was a glimpse as swift and flurried as a hummingbird's flight, for overhanging trees, leafless when last seen, blazed with obscuring autumn-trimmed foliage.)

You ever been to Appleton?

TC: No.

NANCY QUINN: Never? That's funny. I never met nobody that's never been to Appleton.

TC: Have I missed something?

NANCY QUINN: Oh, it's okay. We used to live there. But I like it here better. It's easier to get off by yourself and do the kinda stuff I like. Fish. Shoot coyotes. My dad said he'd give me a dollar for every coyote I shot down; but after he'd give me more'n two hundred dollars, he cut me down to a dime. Well, I don't need money. I'm not like my sisters. Always got their face stuck in a mirror.

I got three sisters, and I'll tell you they're not too happy here. They don't like horses; they hate most everything. Boys. That's all they've got on their mind. When we lived in Appleton, we didn't see so much of my dad. Maybe like once a week. So they put on perfume and lipstick and had plenty of boyfriends. That was okay with my mom. She's a lot like them, someways. She likes to fuss with herself and look pretty. But my dad is real strict. He won't let my sisters have any boyfriends. Or wear lipstick. One time some of their old boyfriends drove over from Appleton, and my dad met them at the door with a shotgun; he told them, said the next time he saw them on his property he'd blow their heads off. Wow, did those guys scoot! The girls cried themselves sick. But the whole thing gives me the biggest laugh.

See that fork in the road? Stop there.

(I stopped the car; we both got out. She pointed to an opening in the trees: a dark, leafy, downward-sloping path.)

Just follow that.

TC (suddenly afraid to be alone): You're not coming with me?

NANCY QUINN: My dad don't like anybody around when he talks business.

TC: Well, thanks again.

NANCY QUINN: My pleasure!

SHE WALKED AWAY WHISTLING.

Parts of the path were so overgrown that I had to bend branches, shield my face against brushing leaves. Briars, strange thorns caught at my trousers; high in the trees, crows cawed, screamed. I saw an owl; it's odd to see an owl in daylight; he blinked, but did not stir. Once, I almost stumbled into a beehive—an old hollow tree-stump swarming with

wild black bees. Always I could hear the river, a slow soft churning roar; then, at a curve in the path, I saw it; and saw Quinn, too.

He was wearing a rubber suit, and holding aloft, as though it were a conductor's baton, a supple fishing rod. He stood waist-deep, his hatless head in profile; his hair was no longer flecked with grey—it was white as the water-foam circling his hips. I wanted to turn and run, for the scene was so strongly reminiscent of that other day, that long-ago time when Quinn's look-alike, the Reverend Billy Joe Snow, had waited for me in waist-high water. Suddenly I heard my name; Quinn was calling it, and beckoning to me as he waded toward shore.

I thought of the young bulls I had seen parading in the golden pastures; Quinn, glistening in his rubber suit, reminded me of them—vital, powerful, dangerous; except for his whiter hair, he hadn't aged an iota; indeed, he seemed years younger, a man of fifty in perfect health.

Smiling, he squatted on a rock, and motioned for me to join him. He displayed some trout he'd caught. "Kinda puny. But they'll eat good." I mentioned Nancy. He grinned and said: "Nancy. Oh, yeah. She's a good kid." He left it at that. He didn't refer to his wife's death, or the fact that he had remarried: he assumed I was aware of his recent history.

He said: "I was surprised when you called me."

"Oh?"

"I don't know. Just surprised. Where you staying?"

"At the Prairie Motel. Where else?"

After a silence, and almost shyly, he asked: "Jake Pepper with you?"

I nodded.

"Somebody told me he was leaving the Bureau."

"Yes. He's going to live in Oregon."

"Well, I don't guess I'll ever see the old bastard again. Too bad. We could've been real friends. If he hadn't had all those suspicions. Damn his soul, he even thought I drowned poor Addie Mason!" He laughed; then scowled. "The way I look at it is: it was the hand of God." He raised his own hand, and the river, viewed between his spread fingers, seemed to weave between them like a dark ribbon. "God's work. His will."

The End