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**A NOVEL**

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Thinking of James M. Cain

*They threw me off the hay truck about noon . . .*





# GRAY MERCEDES



*April 9–10, 2009*

Augie Odenkirk had a 1997 Datsun that still ran well in spite of high mileage, but gas was expensive, especially for a man with no job, and City Center was on the far side of town, so he decided to take the last bus of the night. He got off at twenty past eleven with his pack on his back and his rolled-up sleeping bag under one arm. He thought he would be glad of the down-filled bag by three A.M. The night was misty and chill.

“Good luck, man,” the driver said as he stepped down. “You ought to get something for just being the first one there.”

Only he wasn’t. When Augie reached the top of the wide, steep drive leading to the big auditorium, he saw a cluster of at least two dozen people already waiting outside the rank of doors, some standing, most sitting. Posts strung with yellow DO NOT CROSS tape had been set up, creating a complicated passage that doubled back on itself, mazelike. Augie was familiar with these from movie theaters and the bank where he was currently overdrawn, and understood the purpose: to cram as many people as possible into as small a space as possible.

As he approached the end of what would soon be a conga-line of job applicants, Augie was both amazed and dismayed to see that the woman at the end of the line had a sleeping baby in a Papoose carrier. The baby’s cheeks were flushed with the cold; each exhale came with a faint rattle.

The woman heard Augie’s slightly out-of-breath approach, and turned. She was young and pretty enough, even with the dark circles under her eyes. At her feet was a small quilted carry-case. Augie supposed it was a baby support system.

“Hi,” she said. “Welcome to the Early Birds Club.”

“Hopefully we’ll catch a worm.” He debated, thought

what the hell, and stuck out his hand. "August Odenkirk. Augie. I was recently downsized. That's the twenty-first-century way of saying I got canned."

She shook with him. She had a good grip, firm and not a bit timid. "I'm Janice Cray, and my little bundle of joy is Patti. I guess I got downsized, too. I was a housekeeper for a nice family in Sugar Heights. He, um, owns a car dealership."

Augie winced.

Janice nodded. "I know. He said he was sorry to let me go, but they had to tighten their belts."

"A lot of that going around," Augie said, thinking: *You could find no one to babysit? No one at all?*

"I had to bring her." He supposed Janice Cray didn't have to be much of a mind reader to know what he was thinking. "There's no one else. Literally no one. The girl down the street couldn't stay all night even if I could pay her, and I just can't. If I don't get a job, I don't know what we'll do."

"Your parents couldn't take her?" Augie asked.

"They live in Vermont. If I had half a brain, I'd take Patti and go there. It's pretty. Only they've got their own problems. Dad says their house is underwater. Not literally, they're not in the river or anything, it's something financial."

Augie nodded. There was a lot of that going around, too.

A few cars were coming up the steep rise from Marlborough Street, where Augie had gotten off the bus. They turned left, into the vast empty plain of parking lot that would no doubt be full by daylight tomorrow . . . still hours before the First Annual City Job Fair opened its doors. None of the cars looked new. Their drivers parked, and from most of them three or four job-seekers emerged, heading toward the doors of the auditorium. Augie was no longer at the end of the line. It had almost reached the first switchback.

"If I can get a job, I can get a sitter," she said. "But for tonight, me and Patti just gotta suck it up."

The baby gave a croupy cough Augie didn't care for, stirred in the Papoose, and then settled again. At least the kid was bundled up; there were even tiny mittens on her hands.

*Kids survive worse*, Augie told himself uneasily. He thought of the Dust Bowl, and the Great Depression. Well, this one was great enough for him. Two years ago, everything had been fine. He hadn't exactly been living large in the 'hood, but he *had* been making ends meet, with a little left over at the end of most months. Now everything had turned to shit. They had done something to the money. He didn't understand it; he'd been an office drone in the shipping department of Great Lakes Transport, and what he knew about was invoices and using a computer to route stuff by ship, train, and air.

"People will see me with a baby and think I'm irresponsible," Janice Cray fretted. "I know it, I see it on their faces already, I saw it on yours. But what else could I do? Even if the girl down the street could stay all night, it would have cost eighty-four dollars. *Eighty-four!* I've got next month's rent put aside, and after that, I'm skint." She smiled, and in the light of the parking lot's high arc-sodiums, Augie saw tears beading her eyelashes. "I'm babbling."

"No need to apologize, if that's what you're doing." The line had turned the first corner now, and had arrived back at where Augie was standing. And the girl was right. He saw lots of people staring at the sleeping kid in the Papoose.

"Oh, that's it, all right. I'm a single unmarried mother with no job. I want to apologize to everyone, for everything." She turned and looked at the banner posted above the rank of doors. **1000 JOBS GUARANTEED!** it read. And below that: "*We Stand With the People of Our City!*" —MAYOR RALPH KINSLER.

"Sometimes I want to apologize for Columbine, and 9/11, and Barry Bonds taking steroids." She uttered a semi-hysterical giggle. "Sometimes I even want to apologize for the space shuttle exploding, and when that happened I was still learning to walk."

"Don't worry," Augie told her. "You'll be okay." It was just one of those things that you said.

"I wish it wasn't so damp, that's all. I've got her bundled up in case it was really cold, but this damp . . ." She shook her head. "We'll make it, though, won't we, Patti?" She gave Augie a hopeless little smile. "It just better not rain."

It didn't, but the dampness increased until they could see fine droplets suspended in the light thrown by the arc-sodiums. At some point Augie realized that Janice Cray was asleep on her feet. She was hipshot and slump-shouldered, with her hair hanging in dank wings around her face and her chin nearly on her breastbone. He looked at his watch and saw it was quarter to three.

Ten minutes later, Patti Cray awoke and started to cry. Her mother (her *baby mama*, Augie thought) gave a jerk, voiced a horselike snort, raised her head, and tried to pull the infant out of the Papoose. At first the kid wouldn't come; her legs were stuck. Augie pitched in, holding the sides of the sling. As Patti emerged, now wailing, he could see drops of water sparkling all over her tiny pink jacket and matching hat.

"She's hungry," Janice said. "I can give her the breast, but she's also wet. I can feel it right through her pants. God, I can't change her in this—look how foggy it's gotten!"

Augie wondered what comical deity had arranged for him to be the one in line behind her. He also wondered how in hell this woman was going to get through the rest of her life—*all* of it, not just the next eighteen years or so when she would be responsible for the kid. To come out

on a night like this, with nothing but a bag of diapers! To be that goddam desperate!

He had put his sleeping bag down next to Patti's diaper bag. Now he squatted, pulled the ties, unrolled it, and unzipped it. "Slide in there. Get warm and get *her* warm. Then I'll hand in whatever doodads you need."

She gazed at him, holding the squirming, crying baby. "Are you married, Augie?"

"Divorced."

"Children?"

He shook his head.

"Why are you being so kind to us?"

"Because we're here," he said, and shrugged.

She looked at him a moment longer, deciding, then handed him the baby. Augie held her out at arms' length, fascinated by the red, furious face, the bead of snot on the tiny upturned nose, the bicycling legs in the flannel onesie. Janice squirmed into the sleeping bag, then lifted her hands. "Give her to me, please."

Augie did, and the woman burrowed deeper into the bag. Beside them, where the line had doubled back on itself for the first time, two young men were staring.

"Mind your business, guys," Augie said, and they looked away.

"Would you give me a diaper?" Janice said. "I should change her before I feed her."

He dropped one knee to the wet pavement and unzipped the quilted bag. He was momentarily surprised to find cloth diapers instead of Pampers, then understood. The cloth ones could be used over and over. Maybe the woman wasn't entirely hopeless.

"I see a bottle of Baby Magic, too. Do you want that?"

From inside the sleeping bag, where now only a tuft of her brownish hair showed: "Yes, please."

He passed in the diaper and the lotion. The sleeping bag began to wiggle and bounce. At first the crying intensified. From one of the switchbacks farther down, lost in

the thickening fog, someone said: "Can't you shut that kid up?" Another voice added: "Someone ought to call Social Services."

Augie waited, watching the sleeping bag. At last it stopped moving around and a hand emerged, holding a diaper. "Would you put it in the bag? There's a plastic sack for the dirty ones." She looked out at him like a mole from its hole. "Don't worry, it's not poeey, just wet."

Augie took the diaper, put it in the plastic bag (COSTCO printed on the side), then zipped the diaper bag closed. The crying from inside the sleeping bag (*so many bags*, he thought) continued for another minute or so, then abruptly cut out as Patti began to nurse in the City Center parking lot. From above the ranked doors that wouldn't open for another six hours, the banner gave a single lackadaisical flap. **1000 JOBS GUARANTEED!**

*Sure*, Augie thought. *Also, you can't catch AIDS if you load up on vitamin C.*

Twenty minutes passed. More cars came up the hill from Marlborough Street. More people joined the line. Augie estimated there already had to be four hundred people waiting. At that rate, there would be two thousand by the time the doors opened at nine, and that was a conservative estimate.

*If someone offers me fry-cook at McDonald's, will I take it?*  
Probably.

*What about a greeter at Walmart?*

Oh, mos def. Big smile and *how're you today?* Augie thought he could wallop a greeter job right out of the park.

*I'm a people person*, he thought. And laughed.

From the bag: "What's funny?"

"Nothing," he said. "Cuddle that kid."

"I am." A smile in her voice.

At three-thirty he knelt, lifted the flap of the sleeping bag, and peered inside. Janice Cray was curled up, fast



asleep, with the baby at her breast. This made him think of *The Grapes of Wrath*. What was the name of the girl who had been in it? The one who ended up nursing the man? A flower name, he thought. Lily? No. Pansy? Absolutely not. He thought of cupping his hands around his mouth, raising his voice, and asking the crowd, *WHO HERE HAS READ THE GRAPES OF WRATH?*

As he was standing up again (and smiling at this absurdity), the name came to him. Rose. That had been the name of the *Grapes of Wrath* girl. But not just Rose; Rose of *Sharon*. It sounded biblical, but he couldn't say so with any certainty; he had never been a Bible reader.

He looked down at the sleeping bag, in which he had expected to spend the small hours of the night, and thought of Janice Cray saying she wanted to apologize for Columbine, and 9/11, and Barry Bonds. Probably she would cop to global warming as well. Maybe when this was over and they had secured jobs—or not; not was probably just as likely—he would treat her to breakfast. Not a date, nothing like that, just some scrambled eggs and bacon. After that they would never see each other again.

More people came. They reached the end of the posted switchbacks with the self-important DO NOT CROSS tape. Once that was used up, the line began to stretch into the parking lot. What surprised Augie—and made him uneasy—was how *silent* they were. As if they all knew this mission was a failure, and they were only waiting to get the official word.

The banner gave another lackadaisical flap.

The fog continued to thicken.

Shortly before five A.M., Augie roused from his own half-doze, stamped his feet to wake them up, and realized an unpleasant iron light had crept into the air. It was the furthest thing in the world from the rosy-fingered dawn of poetry and old Technicolor movies; this was an anti-dawn, damp and as pale as the cheek of a day-old corpse.

He could see the City Center auditorium slowly revealing itself in all its nineteen-seventies tacky architectural glory. He could see the two dozen switchbacks of patiently waiting people and then the tailback of the line disappearing into the fog. Now there was a little conversation, and when a janitor clad in gray fatigues passed through the lobby on the other side of the doors, a small satiric cheer went up.

"Life is discovered on other planets!" shouted one of the young men who had been staring at Janice Cray—this was Keith Frias, whose left arm would shortly be torn from his body.

There was mild laughter at this sally, and people began to talk. The night was over. The seeping light wasn't particularly encouraging, but it was marginally better than the long small hours just past.

Augie knelt beside his sleeping bag again and cocked an ear. The small, regular snores he heard made him smile. Maybe his worry about her had been for nothing. He guessed there were people who went through life surviving—perhaps even thriving—on the kindness of strangers. The young woman currently snoozing in his sleeping bag with her baby might be one of them.

It came to him that he and Janice Cray could present themselves at the various application tables as a couple. If they did that, the baby's presence might not seem an indicator of irresponsibility but rather of joint dedication. He couldn't say for sure, much of human nature was a mystery to him, but he thought it was possible. He decided he'd try the idea out on Janice when she woke up. See what she thought. They couldn't claim marriage; she wasn't wearing a wedding ring and he'd taken his off for good three years before, but they could claim to be . . . what was it people said now? Partners.

Cars continued to come up the steep incline from Marlborough Street at steady tick-tock intervals. There would soon be pedestrians as well, fresh off the first bus

of the morning. Augie was pretty sure they started running at six. Because of the thick fog, the arriving cars were just headlights with vague shadow-shapes lurking behind the windshields. A few of the drivers saw the huge crowd already waiting and turned around, discouraged, but most kept on, heading for the few remaining parking spaces, their taillights dwindling.

Then Augie noticed a car-shape that neither turned around nor continued on toward the far reaches of the parking lot. Its unusually bright headlights were flanked by yellow fog-lamps.

*HD headers*, Augie thought. *That's a Mercedes-Benz. What's a Benz doing at a job fair?*

He supposed it might be Mayor Kinsler, here to make a speech to the Early Birds Club. To congratulate them on their gumption, their good old American git-up-and-git. If so, Augie thought, arriving in his Mercedes—even if it was an old one—was in bad taste.

An elderly fellow in line ahead of Augie (Wayne Welland, now in the last moments of his earthly existence) said: “Is that a Benz? It looks like a Benz.”

Augie started to say of course it was, you couldn't mistake a Mercedes's HD headlamps, and then the driver of the car directly behind the vague shape laid on his horn—a long, impatient blast. The HD lights flashed brighter than ever, cutting brilliant white cones through the suspended droplets of the fog, and the car leaped forward as if the impatient horn had goosed it.

“Hey!” Wayne Welland said, surprised. It was his final word.

The car accelerated directly at the place where the crowd of job-seekers was most tightly packed, and hemmed in by the DO NOT CROSS tapes. Some of them tried to run, but only the ones at the rear of the crowd were able to break free. Those closer to the doors—the true Early Birds—had no chance. They struck the posts and knocked them over, they got tangled in the tapes,

they rebounded off each other. The crowd swayed back and forth in a series of agitated waves. Those who were older and smaller fell down and were trampled underfoot.

Augie was shoved hard to the left, stumbled, recovered, and was pushed forward. A flying elbow struck his cheekbone just below his right eye and that side of his vision filled with bright Fourth of July sparkles. From the other eye he could see the Mercedes not just emerging from the fog but seeming to *create* itself from it. A big gray sedan, maybe an SL500, the kind with twelve cylinders, and right now all twelve were screaming.

Augie was driven to his knees beside the sleeping bag, and kicked repeatedly as he struggled to get back up: in the arm, in the shoulder, in the neck. People were screaming. He heard a woman cry, "*Look out, look out, he's not stopping!*"

He saw Janice Cray pop her head out of the sleeping bag, eyes blinking in bewilderment. Once more he was reminded of a shy mole peering from its hole. A lady mole with a bad case of bed head.

He scrambled forward on his hands and knees and lay down on the bag and the woman and baby inside, as if by doing this he could successfully shield them from a two-ton piece of German engineering. He heard people yelling, the sound of them almost lost beneath the approaching roar of the big sedan's motor. Someone fetched him a terrific wallop on the back of his head, but he barely felt it.

There was time to think: *I was going to buy Rose of Sharon breakfast.*

There was time to think: *Maybe he'll veer off.*

That seemed to be their best chance, probably their only chance. He started to raise his head to see if it was happening, and a huge black tire ate up his vision. He felt the woman's hand grip his forearm. He had time to hope the baby was still sleeping. Then time ran out.

**DET.-RET.**



Hodges walks out of the kitchen with a can of beer in his hand, sits down in the La-Z-Boy, and puts the can down on the little table to his left, next to the gun. It's a .38 Smith & Wesson M&P revolver, M&P standing for Military and Police. He pats it absently, the way you'd pat an old dog, then picks up the remote control and turns on Channel Seven. He's a little late, and the studio audience is already applauding.

He's thinking of a fad, brief and baleful, that inhabited the city in the late eighties. Or maybe the word he really wants is *infected*, because it had been like a transient fever. The city's three papers had written editorials about it all one summer. Now two of those papers are gone and the third is on life support.

The host comes striding onstage in a sharp suit, waving to the audience. Hodges has watched this show almost every weekday since his retirement from the police force, and he thinks this man is too bright to be doing this job, one that's a little like scuba diving in a sewer without a wetsuit. He thinks the host is the sort of man who sometimes commits suicide and afterward all his friends and close relatives say they never had a clue anything was wrong; they talk about how cheerful he was the last time they saw him.

At this thought, Hodges gives the revolver another absent pat. It is the Victory model. An oldie but a goodie. His own gun, when he was active, was a Glock .40. He bought it—officers in this city are expected to buy their service weapons—and now it's in the safe in his bedroom. Safe in the safe. He unloaded it and put it in there after the retirement ceremony and hasn't looked at it since. No interest. He likes the .38, though. He has a sentimental

attachment to it, but there's something beyond that. A revolver never jams.

Here is the first guest, a young woman in a short blue dress. Her face is a trifle on the vacant side but she's got a knockout bod. Somewhere inside that dress, Hodges knows, there will be the sort of tattoo now referred to as a tramp-stamp. Maybe two or three. The men in the audience whistle and stomp their feet. The women in the audience applaud more gently. Some roll their eyes. This is the kind of woman you don't like to catch your husband staring at.

The woman is pissed right from go. She tells the host that her boyfriend has had a baby with another woman and he goes over to see them all the time. She still loves him, she says, but she hates that—

The next couple of words are bleeped out, but Hodges can lipread *fucking whore*. The audience cheers. Hodges takes a sip of his beer. He knows what comes next. This show has all the predictability of a soap opera on Friday afternoon.

The host lets her run on for a bit and then introduces . . . THE OTHER WOMAN! She also has a knockout bod and several yards of big blond hair. There's a tramp-stamp on one ankle. She approaches the other woman and says, "I understand how you feel, but I love him, too."

She's got more on her mind, but that's as far as she gets before Knockout Bod One goes into action. Someone offstage rings a bell, as if this were the start of a prizefight. Hodges supposes it is, since all the guests on this show must be compensated; why else would they do it? The two women punch and claw for a few seconds, and then the two beefcakes with SECURITY printed on their tee-shirts, who have been watching from the background, separate them.

They shout at each other for awhile, a full and fair exchange of views (much of it bleeped out), as the host watches benignly, and this time it's Knockout Bod Two



who initiates the fight, swinging a big roundhouse slap that rocks Knockout Bod One's head back. The bell rings again. They fall to the stage, their dresses rucking up, clawing and punching and slapping. The audience goes bugshit. The security beefcakes separate them and the host gets between them, talking in a voice that is soothing on top, inciteful beneath. The two women declare the depth of their love, spitting it into each other's faces. The host says they'll be right back and then a C-list actress is selling a diet pill.

Hodges takes another sip of his beer and knows he won't even finish half the can. It's funny, because when he was on the cops, he was damned near an alcoholic. When the drinking broke up his marriage, he assumed he *was* an alcoholic. He summoned all his willpower and reined it in, promising himself he would drink just as much as he goddam wanted once he had his forty in—a pretty amazing number, when fifty percent of city cops retired after twenty-five and seventy percent after thirty. Only now that he has his forty, alcohol no longer interests him much. He forced himself to get drunk a few times, just to see if he could still do it, and he could, but being drunk turned out to be no better than being sober. Actually it was a little worse.

The show returns. The host says he has another guest, and Hodges knows who that will be. The audience does, too. They yap their anticipation. Hodges picks up his father's gun, looks into the barrel, and puts it back down on the DirecTV guide.

The man over whom Knockout Bod One and Knockout Bod Two are in such strenuous conflict emerges from stage right. You knew what he was going to look like even before he comes strutting out and yup, he's the guy: a gas station attendant or a Target warehouse carton-shuffler or maybe the fella who detailed your car (badly) at the Mr. Speedy. He's skinny and pale, with black hair clumping over his forehead. He's wearing chinos and a crazy green

and yellow tie that has a chokehold on his throat just below his prominent Adam's apple. The pointy toes of suede boots poke out beneath his pants. You knew that the women had tramp-stamps and you know this man is hung like a horse and shoots sperm more powerful than a locomotive and faster than a speeding bullet; a virginal maid who sits on a toilet seat after this guy jerked off will get up pregnant. Probably with twins. On his face is the half-smart grin of a cool dude in a loose mood. Dream job: lifetime disability. Soon the bell will ring and the women will go at each other again. Later, after they have heard enough of his smack, they will look at each other, nod slightly, and attack him together. This time the security personnel will wait a little longer, because this final battle is what the audience, both in the studio and at home, really wants to see: the hens going after the rooster.

That brief and baleful fad in the late eighties—the infection—was called “bum fighting.” Some gutter genius or other got the idea, and when it turned a profit, three or four other entrepreneurs leaped in to refine the deal. What you did was pay a couple of bums thirty bucks each to go at each other at a set time and in a set place. The place Hodges remembered best was the service area behind a sleazy crab-farm of a strip club called Bam Ba Lam, over on the East Side. Once the fight card was set, you advertised (by word of mouth in those days, with widespread Internet use still over the horizon), and charged spectators twenty bucks a head. There had been better than two hundred at the one Hodges and Pete Huntley had busted, most of them making odds and fad-ing each other like mad motherfuckers. There had been women, too, some in evening dress and loaded with jewelry, watching as those two wetbrain stewbums went at each other, flailing and kicking and falling down and getting up and yelling incoherencies. The crowd had been laughing and cheering and urging the combatants on.

This show is like that, only there are diet pills and insur-

ance companies to fade the action, so Hodges supposes the contestants (that's what they are, although the host calls them "guests") walk away with a little more than thirty bucks and a bottle of Night Train. And there are no cops to break it up, because it's all as legal as lottery tickets.

When the show is over, the take-no-prisoners lady judge will show up, robed in her trademark brand of impatient righteousness, listening with barely suppressed rage to the small-shit petitioners who come before her. Next up is the fat family psychologist who makes his guests cry (he calls this "breaking through the wall of denial"), and invites them to leave if any of them dare question his methods. Hodges thinks the fat family psychologist might have learned those methods from old KGB training videos.

Hodges eats this diet of full-color shit every weekday afternoon, sitting in the La-Z-Boy with his father's gun—the one Dad carried as a beat cop—on the table beside him. He always picks it up a few times and looks into the barrel. Inspecting that round darkness. On a couple of occasions he has slid it between his lips, just to see what it feels like to have a loaded gun lying on your tongue and pointing at your palate. Getting used to it, he supposes.

If I could drink successfully, I could put this off, he thinks. I could put it off for at least a year. And if I could put it off for two, the urge might pass. I might get interested in gardening, or birdwatching, or even painting. Tim Quigley took up painting, down in Florida. In a retirement community that was loaded with old cops. By all accounts Quigley had really enjoyed it, and had even sold some of his work at the Venice Art Festival. Until his stroke, that was. After the stroke he'd spent eight or nine months in bed, paralyzed all down his right side. No more painting for Tim Quigley. Then off he went. Booya.

The fight bell is ringing, and sure enough, both women are going after the scrawny guy in the crazy tie, painted fingernails flashing, big hair flying. Hodges reaches for

the gun again, but he has no more than touched it when he hears the clack of the front door slot and the flump of the mail hitting the hall floor.

Nothing of importance comes through the mail slot in these days of email and Facebook, but he gets up anyway. He'll look through it and leave his father's M&P .38 for another day.

## 2

When Hodges returns to his chair with his small bundle of mail, the fight-show host is saying goodbye and promising his TV Land audience that tomorrow there will be midgets. Whether of the physical or mental variety he does not specify.

Beside the La-Z-Boy there are two small plastic waste containers, one for returnable bottles and cans, the other for trash. Into the trash goes a circular from Walmart promising **ROLLBACK PRICES**; an offer for burial insurance addressed to **OUR FAVORITE NEIGHBOR**; an announcement that all DVDs are going to be fifty percent off for one week only at Discount Electronix; a postcard-sized plea for "your important vote" from a fellow running for a vacancy on the city council. There's a photograph of the candidate, and to Hodges he looks like Dr. Oberlin, the dentist who terrified him as a child. There's also a circular from Albertsons supermarket. This Hodges puts aside (covering up his father's gun for the time being) because it's loaded with coupons.

The last thing appears to be an actual letter—a fairly thick one, by the feel—in a business-sized envelope. It is addressed to Det. K. William Hodges (Ret.) at 63 Harper Road. There is no return address. In the upper lefthand corner, where one usually goes, is his second smile-face of the day's mail delivery. Only this one's not the winking Walmart Rollback Smiley but rather the email emoticon of Smiley wearing dark glasses and showing his teeth.

This stirs a memory, and not a good one.

No, he thinks. No.

But he rips the letter open so fast and hard the envelope tears and four typed pages spill out—not real typing, not *typewriter* typing, but a computer font that looks like it.

Dear Detective Hodges, the heading reads.

He reaches out without looking, knocks the Albertsons circular to the floor, finger-walks across the revolver without even noticing it, and seizes the TV remote. He hits the kill-switch, shutting up the take-no-prisoners lady judge in mid-scold, and turns his attention to the letter.

## 3

Dear Detective Hodges,

I hope you do not mind me using your title, even though you have been retired for 6 months. I feel that if incompetent judges, venal politicians, and stupid military commanders can keep their titles after retirement, the same should be true for one of the most decorated police officers in the city's history.

So Detective Hodges it shall be!

Sir (another title you deserve, for you are a true Knight of the Badge and Gun), I write for many reasons, but must begin by congratulating you on your years of service, 27 as a detective and 40 in all. I saw some of the Retirement Ceremony on TV (Public Access Channel 2, a resource overlooked by many), and happen to know there was a party at the Raintree Inn out by the airport the following night.

I bet that was the real Retirement Ceremony!

I have certainly never attended such a “bash,” but I watch a lot of TV cop shows, and while I am sure many of them present a very fictional picture of “the policeman’s lot,” several have shown such retirement par-

ties (NYPD Blue, Homicide, The Wire, etc., etc.), and I like to think they are ACCURATE portrayals of how the Knights of the Badge and Gun say “so-long” to one of their compatriots. I think they might be, because I have also read “retirement party scenes” in at least two Joseph Wambaugh books, and they are similar. He should know because he, like you, is a “Det. Ret.”

I imagine balloons hanging from the ceiling, a lot of drinking, a lot of bawdy conversation, and plenty of reminiscing about the Old Days and the old cases. There is probably lots of loud and happy music, and possibly a stripper or two “shaking her tailfeathers.” There are probably speeches that are a lot funnier and a lot truer than the ones at the “stuffed shirt ceremony.”

How am I doing?

Not bad, Hodges thinks. Not bad at all.

According to my research, during your time as a detective, you broke literally hundreds of cases, many of them the kind the press (who Ted Williams called the Knights of the Keyboard) terms “high profile.” You have caught Killers and Robbery Gangs and Arsonists and Rapists. In one article (published to coincide with your Retirement Ceremony), your longtime partner (Det. 1st Grade Peter Huntley) described you as “a combination of by-the-book and intuitively brilliant.”

A nice compliment!

If it is true, and I think it is, you will have figured out by now that I am one of those few you did not catch. I am, in fact, the man the press chose to call

a.) The Joker

b.) The Clown

or

c.) The Mercedes Killer.

I prefer the last!

I am sure you gave it “your best shot,” but sadly (for

you, not me), you failed. I imagine if there was ever a “perk” you wanted to catch, Detective Hodges, it was the man who deliberately drove into the Job Fair crowd at City Center last year, killing eight and wounding so many more. (I must say I exceeded my own wildest expectations.) Was I on your mind when they gave you that plaque at the Official Retirement Ceremony? Was I on your mind when your fellow Knights of the Badge and Gun were telling stories about (just guessing here) criminals who were caught with their pants actually down or funny practical jokes that were played in the good old Squad Room?

I bet I was!

I have to tell you how much fun it was. (I’m being honest here.) When I “put the pedal to the metal” and drove poor Mrs. Olivia Trelawney’s Mercedes at that crowd of people, I had the biggest “hard-on” of my life! And was my heart beating 200 a minute? “Hope to tell ya!”

Here was another Mr. Smiley in sunglasses.

I’ll tell you something that’s true “inside dope,” and if you want to laugh, go ahead, because it is sort of funny (although I think it also shows just how careful I was). I was wearing a condom! A “rubber”! Because I was afraid of Spontaneous Ejaculation, and the DNA that might result! Well, that did not happen, but I have masturbated many times since while thinking of how they tried to run and couldn’t (they were packed in like sardines), and how scared they all looked (that was so funny), and the way I jerked forward when the car “plowed” into them. So hard the seatbelt locked. Gosh it was exciting.

To tell the truth, I didn’t know what might happen. I thought the chances were 50-50 that I would get caught. But I am “a cockeyed optimist,” and I prepared for Success rather than Failure. The condom is “inside dope,” but I bet your Forensics Department (I also watch CSI)

was pretty darn disappointed when they didn't get any DNA from inside the clown mask. They must have said, "Damn! That crafty perk must have been wearing a hair net underneath!"

And so I was! I also washed it out with BLEACH!

I still relive the thuds that resulted from hitting them, and the crunching noises, and the way the car bounced on its springs when it went over the bodies. For power and control, give me a Mercedes 12-cylinder every time! When I saw in the paper that a baby was one of my victims, I was delighted!! To snuff out a life that young! Think of all she missed, eh? Patricia Cray, RIP! Got the mom, too! Strawberry jam in a sleeping bag! What a thrill, eh? I also enjoy thinking of the man who lost his arm and even more of the two who are paralyzed. The man only from the waist down, but Martine Stover is now your basic "head on a stick!" They didn't die but probably WISH they did! How about that, Detective Hodges?

Now you are probably thinking, "What kind of sick and twisted Pervo do we have here?" Can't really blame you, but we could argue about that! I think a great many people would enjoy doing what I did, and that is why they enjoy books and movies (and even TV shows these days) that feature Torture and Dismemberment, etc., etc., etc. The only difference is I really did it. Not because I'm mad, though (in either sense of the word). Just because I didn't know exactly what the experience would be like, only that it would be totally thrilling, with "memories to last a lifetime," as they say. Most people are fitted with Lead Boots when they are just little kids and have to wear them all their lives. These Lead Boots are called A CONSCIENCE. I have none, so I can soar high above the heads of the Normal Crowd. And if they had caught me? Well if it had been right there, if Mrs. Trelawney's Mercedes had stalled or something (small chance of that as it seemed very



well maintained), I suppose the crowd might have torn me apart, I understood that possibility going in, and it added to the excitement. But I didn't think they really would, because most people are sheep and sheep don't eat meat. (I suppose I might have been beaten up a little, but I can take a beating.) Probably I would have been arrested and gone to trial, where I would have pleaded insanity. Maybe I even am insane (the idea has certainly crossed my mind), but it is a peculiar kind of insanity. Anyway, the coin came down heads and I got away.

The fog helped!

Now here is something else I saw, this time in a movie. (I don't remember the name.) There was a Serial Killer who was very clever and at first the cops (one was Bruce Willis, back when he still had some hair) couldn't catch him. So Bruce Willis said, "He'll do it again because he can't help himself and sooner or later he'll make a mistake and we will catch him."

Which they did!

That is not true in my case, Detective Hodges, because I have absolutely no urge to do it again. In my case, once was enough. I have my memories, and they are as clear as a bell. And of course, there was how frightened people were afterward, because they were sure I would do it again. Remember the public gatherings that were cancelled? That wasn't as much fun, but it was "tres amusant."

So you see, we are both "Ret."

Speaking of which, my one regret is that I couldn't attend your Retirement Party at the Raintree Inn and raise a toast to you, my good Sir Detective. You absolutely did give it your best shot. Detective Huntley too, of course, but if the papers and Internet reports of your respective careers are right, you were Major League and he was and always will be Triple A. I'm sure the case is still in the Active File, and that he takes those

old reports out every now and then to study them, but he won't get anywhere. I think we both know that.

May I close on a Note of Concern?

In some of those TV shows (and also in one of the Wambaugh books, I think, but it might have been a James Patterson), the big party with the balloons and drinking and music is followed by a sad final scene. The Detective goes home and finds out that without his Gun and Badge, his life is pointless. Which I can understand. When you think of it, what is sadder than an Old Retired Knight? Anyway, the Detective finally shoots himself (with his Service Revolver). I looked it up on the Internet and discovered this type of thing isn't just fiction. It really happens!

Retired police have an extremely high suicide rate!!

In most cases, the cops who do this sad thing have no close family members who might see the Warning Signs. Many, like you, are divorced. Many have grown children living far away from home. I think of you all alone in your house on Harper Road, Detective Hodges, and I grow concerned. What kind of life do you have, now that the "thrill of the hunt" is behind you? Are you watching a lot of TV? Probably. Are you drinking more? Possibly. Do the hours go by more slowly because your life is now so empty? Are you suffering from insomnia? Gee, I hope not.

But I fear that might be the case!

You probably need a Hobby, so you'll have something to think about instead of "the one that got away" and how you will never catch me. It would be too bad if you started thinking your whole career had been a waste of time because the fellow who killed all those Innocent People "slipped through your fingers."

I wouldn't want you to start thinking about your gun.

But you are thinking of it, aren't you?

I would like to close with one final thought from "the one that got away." That thought is:

FUCK YOU, LOSER.

Just kidding!  
Very truly yours,  
THE MERCEDES KILLER

Below this was yet another smile-face. And below that:

PPS! Sorry about Mrs. Trelawney, but when you turn this letter over to Det. Huntley, tell him not to bother looking at any photos I'm sure the police took at her funeral. I attended, but only in my imagination. (My imagination is very powerful.)

PPS: Want to get in touch with me? Give me your "feedback"? Try Under Debbie's Blue Umbrella. I even got you a username: "kermitfrog19." I might not reply, but "hey, you never know."

PPPS: Hope this letter has cheered you up!

4

Hodges sits where he is for two minutes, four minutes, six, eight. Completely still. He holds the letter in his hand, looking at the Andrew Wyeth print on the wall. At last he puts the pages on the table beside his chair and picks up the envelope. The postmark is right here in the city, which doesn't surprise him. His correspondent wants him to know he's close by. It's part of the taunt. As his correspondent would say, it's . . .

Part of the fun!

New chemicals and computer-assisted scanning processes can pick up excellent fingerprints from paper, but Hodges knows that if he turns this letter in to Forensics, they will find no prints on it but his. This guy is crazy, but his self-assessment—*one crafty perp*—is absolutely correct. Only he wrote *perk*, not *perp*, and he wrote it twice. Also . . .

Wait a minute, wait a minute.

What do you mean, *when you turn it in*?

Hodges gets up, goes to the window carrying the letter, and looks out on Harper Road. The Harrison girl putts by on her moped. She's really too young to have one of those things, no matter what the law allows, but at least she's wearing her helmet. The Mr. Tastey truck jangles by; in warm weather it works the city's East Side between school's out and dusk. A little black smart car trundles by. The graying hair of the woman behind the wheel is up in rollers. Or is it a woman? It could be a man wearing a wig and a dress. The rollers would be the perfect final touch, wouldn't they?

That's what he wants you to think.

But no. Not exactly.

Not *what*. It's *how* the self-styled Mercedes Killer (except he was right, it was really the papers and the TV news that styled him that) wants him to think.

It's the ice cream man!

No, it's the man dressed as a woman in the smart car!

Uh-uh, it's the guy driving the liquid propane truck, or the meter-reader!

How did you spark paranoia like that? It helps to casually let drop that you know more than the ex-detective's address. You know he's divorced and at least imply that he has a kid or kids somewhere.

Looking out at the grass now, noticing that it needs cutting. If Jerome doesn't come around pretty soon, Hodges thinks, I'll have to call him.

Kid or kids? Don't kid *yourself*. He knows my ex is Corinne and we have one adult child, a daughter named Alison. He knows Allie's thirty and lives in San Francisco. He probably knows she's five-six and plays tennis. All that stuff is readily available on the Net. These days, *everything* is.

His next move should be to turn this letter over to Pete and Pete's new partner, Isabelle Jaynes. They inher-

ited the Mercedes thing, along with a few other dangles, when Hodges pulled the pin. Some cases are like idle computers; they go to sleep. This letter will wake up the Mercedes case in a hurry.

He traces the progress of the letter in his mind.

From the mail slot to the hall floor. From the hall floor to the La-Z-Boy. From the La-Z-Boy to here by the window, where he can now observe the mail truck going back the way it came—Andy Fenster done for the day. From here to the kitchen, where the letter would go into a totally unnecessary Glad bag, the kind with the zip top, because old habits are strong habits. Next to Pete and Isabelle. From Pete to Forensics for a complete dilation and curettage, where the unnecessariness of the Glad bag would be conclusively proved by: no prints, no hairs, no DNA of any kind, paper available by the caseload at every Staples and Office Depot in the city, and—last but not least—standard laser printing. They may be able to tell what kind of computer was used to compose the letter (about this he can't be sure; he knows little about computers, and when he has trouble with his he turns to Jerome, who lives handily nearby), and if so, it would turn out to be a Mac or a PC. Big whoop.

From Forensics the letter would bounce back to Pete and Isabelle, who'd no doubt convene the sort of idiotic kop kolloquium you see on BBC crime shows like *Luther* and *Prime Suspect* (which his psychopathic correspondent probably loves). This kolloquium would be complete with whiteboard and photo enlargements of the letter, maybe even a laser pointer. Hodges watches some of those British crime shows, too, and believes Scotland Yard somehow missed the old saying about too many cooks spoiling the broth.

The kop kolloquium would accomplish only one thing, and Hodges believes it's what the psycho wants: with ten or a dozen detectives in attendance, the existence of the letter will inevitably leak to the press. The psycho

is probably not telling the truth when he says he has no urge to repeat his crime, but of one thing Hodges is completely sure: he misses being in the news.

Dandelions are sprouting on the lawn. It is definitely time to call Jerome. Lawn aside, Hodges misses his face around the place. Cool kid.

Something else. Even if the psycho *is* telling the truth about feeling no urge to perpetrate another mass slaughter (unlikely, but not out of the question), he's still extremely interested in death. The letter's subtext could not be clearer. *Off yourself. You're thinking about it already, so take the next step. Which also happens to be the final step.*

Has he seen me playing with Dad's .38?

Seen me putting it in my mouth?

Hodges has to admit it's possible; he has never even thought of pulling the shades. Feeling stupidly safe in his living room when anybody could have a set of binocs. Or Jerome could have seen. Jerome bopping up the walk to ask about chores: what he is pleased to call *chos fo hos*.

Only if Jerome had seen him playing with that old revolver, he would have been scared to death. He would have said something.

Does Mr. Mercedes really masturbate when he thinks about running those people down?

In his years on the police force, Hodges has seen things he would never talk about with anyone who has not also seen them. Such toxic memories lead him to believe that his correspondent could be telling the truth about the masturbation, just as he is certainly telling the truth about having no conscience. Hodges has read there are wells in Iceland so deep you can drop a stone down them and never hear the splash. He thinks some human souls are like that. Things like bum fighting are only halfway down such wells.

He returns to his La-Z-Boy, opens the drawer in the table, and takes out his cell phone. He replaces it with the .38 and closes the drawer. He speed-dials the police department, but when the receptionist asks how she can

direct his call, Hodges says: "Oh, damn. I just punched the wrong button on my phone. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No bother, sir," she says with a smile in her voice.

No calls, not yet. No action of any kind. He needs to think about this.

He really, really needs to think about this.

Hodges sits looking at his television, which is off on a weekday afternoon for the first time in months.

## 5

That evening he drives down to Newmarket Plaza and has a meal at the Thai restaurant. Mrs. Buramuk serves him personally. "Haven't seen you long time, Officer Hodges." It comes out *Offica Hutches*.

"Been cooking for myself since I retired."

"You let me cook. Much better."

When he tastes Mrs. Buramuk's Tom Yum Gang again, he realizes how sick he is of half-raw fried hamburgers and spaghetti with Newman's Own sauce. And the Sang Kaya Fug Tong makes him realize how tired he is of Pepperidge Farm coconut cake. If I never eat another slice of coconut cake, he thinks, I could live just as long and die just as happy. He drinks two cans of Singha with his meal, and it's the best beer he's had since the Raintree retirement party, which went almost exactly as Mr. Mercedes said; there was even a stripper "shaking her tailfeathers." Along with everything else.

Had Mr. Mercedes been lurking at the back of the room? As the cartoon possum was wont to say, "It's possible, Muskie, it's possible."

At home again, he sits in the La-Z-Boy and takes up the letter. He knows what the next step must be—if he's not going to turn it over to Pete Huntley, that is—but he also knows better than to try doing it after a couple of brews-kis. So he puts the letter in the drawer on top of the .38 (he never did bother with the Glad bag) and gets another beer.

The one from the fridge is just an Ivory Special, the local brand, but it tastes every bit as good as the Singha.

When it's gone, Hodges powers up his computer, opens Firefox, and types in *Under Debbie's Blue Umbrella*. The descriptor beneath isn't very descriptive: *A social site where interesting people exchange interesting views*. He thinks of going further, then shuts the computer down. Not that, either. Not tonight.

He has been going to bed late, because that means fewer hours spent tossing and turning, going over old cases and old mistakes, but tonight he turns in early and knows he'll sleep almost at once. It's a wonderful feeling.

His last thought before he goes under is of how Mr. Mercedes's poison-pen letter finished up. Mr. Mercedes wants him to commit suicide. Hodges wonders what he would think if he knew he had given this particular ex-Knight of the Badge and Gun a reason to live, instead. At least for awhile.

Then sleep takes him. He gets a full and restful six hours before his bladder wakes him. He gropes to the bathroom, pees himself empty, and goes back to bed, where he sleeps for another three hours. When he wakes, sunshine is slanting in the windows and the birds are twittering. He heads into the kitchen, where he cooks himself a full breakfast. As he's sliding a couple of hard-fried eggs onto a plate already loaded with bacon and toast, he stops, startled.

Someone is singing.

It's him.

6

Once his breakfast dishes are in the dishwasher, he goes into the study to tear the letter down. This is a thing he's done at least two dozen times before, but never on his own; as a detective he always had Pete Huntley to help him, and before Pete, two previous partners. Most of the letters were threatening communications from ex-husbands



(and an ex-wife or two). Not much challenge in those. Some were extortion demands. Some were blackmail—really just another form of extortion. One was from a kidnapper demanding a paltry and unimaginative ransom. And three—four, counting the one from Mr. Mercedes—were from self-confessed murderers. Two of those were clearly fantasy. One might or might not have been from the serial killer they called Turnpike Joe.

What about this one? True or false? Real or fantasy?

Hodges opens his desk drawer, takes out a yellow legal pad, tears off the week-old grocery list on the top. Then he plucks one of the Uni-Ball pens from the cup beside his computer. He considers the detail about the condom first. If the guy really was wearing one, he took it with him . . . but that makes sense, doesn't it? Condoms can hold fingerprints as well as jizz. Hodges considers other details: how the seatbelt locked when the guy plowed into the crowd, the way the Mercedes bounced when it went over the bodies. Stuff that wouldn't have been in any of the newspapers, but also stuff he could have made up. He even said . . .

Hodges scans the letter, and here it is: *My imagination is very powerful.*

But there were two details he could not have made up. Two details that had been withheld from the news media.

On his legal pad, below IS IT REAL?, Hodges writes: HAIRNET. BLEACH.

Mr. Mercedes had taken the net with him just as he had taken the condom (probably still hanging off his dick, assuming it had been there at all), but Gibson in Forensics had been positive there was one, because Mr. Mercedes had left the clown mask and there had been no hairs stuck to the rubber. About the swimming-pool smell of DNA-killing bleach there had been no doubt. He must have used a lot.

But it isn't just those things; it's everything. The *assuredness*. There's nothing tentative here.

He hesitates, then prints: THIS IS THE GUY.  
Hesitates again. Scribbles out GUY and prints  
BASTARD.

## 7

It's been awhile since he thought like a cop, and even longer since he did this kind of work—a special kind of forensics that doesn't require cameras, microscopes, or special chemicals—but once he buckles down to it, he warms up fast. He starts with a series of headings.

ONE-SENTENCE PARAGRAPHS.  
CAPITALIZED PHRASES.  
PHRASES IN QUOTATION MARKS.  
FANCY PHRASES.  
UNUSUAL WORDS.  
EXCLAMATION POINTS.

Here he stops, tapping the pen against his lower lip and reading the letter through again from *Dear Detective Hodges* to *Hope this letter has cheered you up!* Then he adds two more headings on the sheet, which is now getting crowded.

USES BASEBALL METAPHOR, MAY BE A FAN.  
COMPUTER SAVVY (UNDER 50?).

He is far from sure about these last two. Sports metaphors have become common, especially among political pundits, and these days there are octogenarians on Facebook and Twitter. Hodges himself may be tapping only twelve percent of his Mac's potential (that's what Jerome claims), but that doesn't make him part of the majority. You had to start somewhere, though, and besides, the letter has a young feel.

He has always been talented at this sort of work, and a lot more than twelve percent of it is intuition.

He's listed nearly a dozen examples under UNUSUAL WORDS, and now circles two: *compatriots* and *Spontaneous Ejaculation*. Beside them he adds a name: *Wambaugh*. Mr. Mercedes is a shitbag, but a bright, book-reading shitbag. He has a large vocabulary and doesn't make spelling errors. Hodges can imagine Jerome Robinson saying, "Spellchecker, my man. I mean, *dub*?"

Sure, sure, these days anyone with a word processing program can spell like a champ, but Mr. Mercedes has written *Wambaugh*, not *Wombough*, or even *Wombow*, which is how it sounds. Just the fact that he's remembered to put in that silent *gh* suggests a fairly high level of intelligence. Mr. Mercedes's missive may not be high-class literature, but his writing is a lot better than the dialogue in shows like *NCIS* or *Bones*.

Homeschooled, public-schooled, or self-taught? Does it matter? Maybe not, but maybe it does.

Hodges doesn't think self-taught, no. The writing is too . . . what?

"Expansive," he says to the empty room, but it's more than that. "*Outward*. This guy writes outward. He learned with others. And wrote *for* others."

A shaky deduction, but it's supported by certain flourishes—those FANCY PHRASES. *Must begin by congratulating you*, he writes. *Literally hundreds of cases*, he writes. And—twice—*Was I on your mind*. Hodges logged As in his high school English classes, Bs in college, and he remembers what that sort of thing is called: incremental repetition. Does Mr. Mercedes imagine his letter being published in the newspaper, circulated on the Internet, quoted (with a certain reluctant respect) on *Channel Four News at Six*?

"Sure you do," Hodges says. "Once upon a time you read your themes in class. You liked it, too. Liked being in the spotlight. Didn't you? When I find you—if I find

you—I'll find that you did as well in your English classes as I did." Probably better. Hodges can't remember ever using incremental repetition, unless it was by accident.

Only there are four public high schools in the city and God knows how many private ones. Not to mention prep schools, junior colleges, City College, and St. Jude's Catholic University. Plenty of haystacks for a poisoned needle to hide in. If he even went to school here at all, and not in Miami or Phoenix.

Plus, he's a sly dog. The letter is full of false fingerprints—the capitalized phrases like *Lead Boots* and *Note of Concern*, the phrases in quotation marks, the extravagant use of exclamation points, the punchy one-sentence paragraphs. If asked to provide a writing sample, Mr. Mercedes would include none of those stylistic devices. Hodges knows that as well as he knows his own unfortunate first name: Kermit, as in *kermitfrog19*.

But.

This asshole isn't quite as smart as he thinks. The letter almost certainly contains two *real* fingerprints, one smudged and one crystal clear.

The smudged print is his persistent use of numbers instead of the words for numbers: 27, not twenty-seven; 40 instead of forty. Det. 1st Grade instead of Det. First Grade. There are a few exceptions (he has written *one regret* instead of *1 regret*), but Hodges thinks they are the ones that prove the general rule. The numbers *might* only be more camouflage, he knows that, but the chances are good Mr. Mercedes is genuinely unaware of it.

If I could get him in IR<sup>4</sup> and tell him to write *Forty thieves stole eighty wedding rings . . . ?*

Only K. William Hodges is never going to be in an interview room again, including IR<sup>4</sup>, which had been his favorite—his lucky IR, he always thought it. Unless he gets caught fooling with this shit, that is, and then he's apt to be on the wrong side of the metal table.

All right, then. *Pete* gets the guy in an IR. Pete or Isa-

belle or both of them. They get him to write *40 thieves stole 80 wedding rings*. What then?

Then they ask him to write *The cops caught the perp hiding in the alley*. Only they'd want to slur the *perp* part. Because, for all his writing skill, Mr. Mercedes thinks the word for a criminal doer is *perk*. Maybe he also thinks the word for a special privilege is a *perp*, as in *Traveling 1st class was one of the CEO's perps*.

Hodges wouldn't be surprised. Until college, he himself had thought that the fellow who threw the ball in a baseball game, the thing you poured water out of, and the framed objects you hung on the wall to decorate your apartment were all spelled the same. He had seen the word *picture* in all sorts of books, but his mind somehow refused to record it. His mother said *straighten that pitcher, Kerm, it's crooked*, his father sometimes gave him money for the *pitcher show*, and it had simply stuck in his head.

I'll know you when I find you, honeybunch, Hodges thinks. He prints the word and circles it again and again, hemming it in. You'll be the asshole who calls a *perp* a *perk*.

## 8

He takes a walk around the block to clear his head, saying hello to people he hasn't said hello to in a long time. Weeks, in some cases. Mrs. Melbourne is working in her garden, and when she sees him, she invites him in for a piece of her coffee cake.

"I've been worried about you," she says when they're settled in the kitchen. She has the bright, inquisitive gaze of a crow with its eye on a freshly squashed chipmunk.

"Getting used to retirement has been hard." He takes a sip of her coffee. It's lousy, but plenty hot.

"Some people never get used to it at all," she says, measuring him with those bright eyes. She wouldn't be too shabby in IR4, Hodges thinks. "Especially ones who had high-pressure jobs."

"I was a little at loose ends to start with, but I'm doing better now."

"I'm glad to hear it. Does that nice Negro boy still work for you?"

"Jerome? Yes." Hodges smiles, wondering how Jerome would react if he knew someone in the neighborhood thinks of him as *that nice Negro boy*. Probably he would bare his teeth in a grin and exclaim, *I sho is!* Jerome and his chos fo hos. Already with his eye on Harvard. Princeton as a fallback.

"He's slacking off," she says. "Your lawn's gotten rather shaggy. More coffee?"

Hodges declines with a smile. Hot can only do so much for bad coffee.

## 9

Back home again. Legs tingling, head filled with fresh air, mouth tasting like newspaper in a birdcage, but brain buzzing with caffeine.

He logs on to the city newspaper site and calls up several stories about the slaughter at City Center. What he wants isn't in the first story, published under scare headlines on April eleventh of '09, or the much longer piece in the Sunday edition of April twelfth. It's in the Monday paper: a picture of the abandoned kill-car's steering wheel. The indignant caption: HE THOUGHT IT WAS FUNNY. In the center of the wheel, pasted over the Mercedes emblem, is a yellow smile-face. The kind that wears sunglasses and shows its teeth.

There was a lot of police anger about that photo, because the detectives in charge—Hodges and Huntley—had asked the news media to hold back the smile icon. The editor, Hodges remembers, had been fawningly apologetic. A missed communication, he said. Won't happen again. Promise. Scout's honor.

"Mistake, my ass," he remembers Pete fuming. "They

had a picture that'd shoot a few steroids into their saggy-ass circulation, and they fucking used it."

Hodges enlarges the news photo until that grinning yellow face fills the computer screen. The mark of the beast, he thinks, twenty-first-century style.

This time the number he speed-dials isn't PD Reception but Pete's cell. His old partner picks up on the second ring. "Yo, you ole hossy-hoss. How's retirement treating you?" He sounds really pleased, and that makes Hodges smile. It also makes him feel guilty, yet the thought of backing off never crosses his mind.

"I'm good," he says, "but I miss your fat and hypertensive face."

"Sure you do. And we won in Iraq."

"Swear to God, Peter. How about we have lunch and catch up a little? You pick the place and I'll buy."

"Sounds good, but I already ate today. How about tomorrow?"

"My schedule is jammed, Obama was coming by for my advice on the budget, but I suppose I could rearrange a few things. Seeing's how it's you."

"Go fuck yourself, *Kermit*."

"When you do it so much better?" The banter is an old tune with simple lyrics.

"How about DeMasio's? You always liked that place."

"DeMasio's is fine. Noon?"

"That works."

"And you're sure you've got time for an old whore like me?"

"Billy, you don't even need to ask. Want me to bring Isabelle?"

He doesn't, but says: "If you want."

Some of the old telepathy must still be working, because after a brief pause Pete says, "Maybe we'll make it a stag party this time."

"Whatever," Hodges says, relieved. "Looking forward."

“Me too. Good to hear your voice, Billy.”

Hodges hangs up and looks at the teeth-bared smile-face some more. It fills his computer screen.

## 10

He sits in his La-Z-Boy that night, watching the eleven o'clock news. In his white pajamas he looks like an overweight ghost. His scalp gleams mellowly through his thinning hair. The big story is the Deepwater Horizon spill in the Gulf of Mexico where the oil is still gushing. The newsreader says the bluefin tuna are endangered, and the Louisiana shellfish industry may be destroyed for a generation. In Iceland, a billowing volcano (with a name the newsreader mangles to something like *Eeja-fill-kull*) is still screwing up transatlantic air travel. In California, police are saying they may have finally gotten a break in the Grim Sleeper serial killer case. No names, but the suspect (the *perk*, Hodges thinks) is described as “a well-groomed and well-spoken African-American.” Hodges thinks, Now if only someone would bag Turnpike Joe. Not to mention Osama bin Laden.

The weather comes on. Warm temperatures and sunny skies, the weather girl promises. Time to break out the bathing suits.

“I’d like to see you in a bathing suit, my dear,” Hodges says, and uses the remote to turn off the TV.

He takes his father’s .38 out of the drawer, unloads it as he walks into the bedroom, and puts it in the safe with his Glock. He has spent a lot of time during the last two or three months obsessing about the Victory .38, but tonight it hardly crosses his mind as he locks it away. He’s thinking about Turnpike Joe, but not really; these days Joe is someone else’s problem. Like the Grim Sleeper, that well-spoken African-American.

Is Mr. Mercedes also African-American? It’s technically possible—no one saw anything but the pullover clown