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ANHEDONIA  
A NOVEL  
BY  
MARK WINBURN

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Perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.

-- A.E. Houseman, "The Name and Nature of Poetry"

To be conscious is an illness -- a real thoroughgoing illness.

-- Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes from Underground

Sin, guilt, neurosis -- they are one and the same, the fruit of the tree of knowledge.

-- Henry Miller, "Creative Death," The Wisdom of the Heart

I am not tan enough.

-- Jacques Derrida, Southern California

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MIAMI, FLORIDA  
127 NE POMPANO TERRACE  
3:17PM EASTERN STANDARD TIME

Berto stands at the window, sweating from nerves and the humidity. Rico is behind him, taller, thicker, but more afraid.

"Was it that bad?" Norman asks quietly.

"You got no fucking idea, man," Berto turns his head quickly to get the words out and then returns his eyes to the window.

"What about Rubén?"

"They caught him, tripped him as he was running for the fence."

"But he fought with them," Rico adds. "He punched them all over." He starts to laugh a little. It sounds breathy and weak. "They were so busy with that round, little pendejo they couldn't even shoot at us."

"We didn't plan for a distraction like that. But we should have," Berto says, still looking nervously out the window. "Shit, he got us here." Berto pauses for a moment.

"I hope they didn't put him down," he says, glancing at Rico.

Norman regards them for a moment, noting how scared and desperate they look now compared to when he first met them for an interview when they landed. They were so relieved then, happy to be in the states. They were hungry but full of optimism.

Norman looks down at his black t-shirt. It has a white smear of plaster across the ribs. His jeans have plaster dust sprinkled across the thighs and his black cowboy boots are white with the stuff. He slaps his legs and chest, churning up a cloud of dust.

"Will you cut that shit out, Norman?" Berto whispers loudly.

A board falls somewhere on the other side of the abandoned building and a quick hustle of feet is heard down the hall.

"Oh, shit," Rico says.

Berto climbs out the window first, lifting his bare foot over the window sill and then disappears in a flurry of Hawaiian shirt. Rico follows him, slower and clumsier. Norman grabs his video camera and holds it out the window.

"You don't have to follow us, Norman. You're a reporter, man, and you're gonna get shot."

"Grab the camera, Rico," Norman says.

"I mean it, man. The migras are gonna shoot at us."

"Grab the fucking camera, you Castro-sucking, Garcia-Marquez-reading, little girl."

Rico takes the camera.

Norman struggles out the window and stands in the dirt. He is a good six inches taller than them. He grabs the camera back and holds it in his hand for a moment, caressing it, rubbing it like Aladdin. It is a lighter-weight unit than what he normally carries, but it has the long zoom lens he prefers and an extra-sensitive, directional mic mounted on top like a rifle scope.

They run along the side of the building in the heat and then across the street. Berto leads the way followed by Rico with Norman and his camera gear in tow. They turn up an alley behind some shops and then into a neighborhood. The houses flash pink, turquoise, seafoam green -- the official colors of Miami. When they hear the sirens they turn another corner and hop a fence into a large construction site, overgrown with tall weeds. They stop by a large tree and lean against the fence.

"How hard did you hit them?" Norman asks between breaths.

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Berto has his butt up against the fence and is leaning forward on his knees and trying to swallow. Though he is thirty and hasn't been able to bathe or shave in the refugee camp for nearly a week, he looks clean-shaven.

"Hard," Berto says, finally. "Real hard. We figured we had one shot - one shot while the riot was going on. So we put it all into one shot."

"They're hot for our ass," Rico says. "You can be sure of that." Rico sticks an elbow in Norman's side. "We ain't no little girls."

A police radio cracks loudly behind them, just over the fence: "Johnson, where are you?"

Berto and Rico are startled into the field. Norman feels their fright, too, but overcomes it immediately, as if it happened an hour ago . . . .

The camera picked up the Cubans as they ran chest deep in the yellow weeds but were easily spotted in their bright floral shirts. They were headed for a wall some 50 yards away. The journalist took off after them, but more slowly: he had the video camera to his eye and was shooting. The INS came over the fence in a wave: twenty tan uniforms in a hurry. The journalist was halfway between them and everyone was headed for the wall at the other end.

The Cuban men got to the wall and jumped for the top but were unable to reach it. Suddenly they disappeared under the weeds. Loud, booming gunfire thundered across the field and the INS stopped, ducked and hid under the weeds. "Guns?" the journalist asked out loud. "Where the hell did they get guns?"

The journalist stood alone in the field and panned around for bodies. Suddenly, the short Cuban man was flung up toward the top of the fence by the taller one. The journalist zoomed in tight with his camera. He could see that the man's floral collar lay flat against his back, drenched with sweat. He had a tight grip on the top of the cement wall. Panning down, he saw the big butt of a .45 shoved in the back pocket of his jeans. Shots boomed again from below and the INS remained invisible. The short Cuban straddled the fence and reached an arm down to lift his friend. The tall Cuban stood and grabbed the forearm. The camera zoomed in tight, tight enough to capture the crucifix tattooed between the short Cuban's thumb and index finger.

A rhythm of popping sounds erupted from somewhere behind and to the right of the journalist. Small caliber bullets tore into the little Cuban's neck and shoulder, and one punctured the taller's forearm.

The firing stopped, but the grip held . . . .

Norman hangs the camera down at his side and makes his way slowly through the weeds to the Cubans. Berto is still straddling the fence, motionless, and Rico leans against it. His shoulder hangs awkwardly from the torn muscle and bone beneath his shirt.

An INS agent appears next to Norman, breathing fast and hard. Norman looks down at him. He is young and blond hair sticks out like straw from beneath his cap which he wears backward. He is staring at the two dead Cubans. His eyes are confused. He is too new at this to have the cold eyes of the sharpshooter.

"You Johnson?" Norman asks.

The young man doesn't look away from the bodies. "Yeah," he says.

"You run track in high school?"

He turns to Norman and knots up his eyebrows. "College," he says as he adjusts his cap. "North Carolina."

Norman nods his head.

They stare at the bodies together, in silence.

"Did you get all this on film, Norman?" a voice asks from behind him.

"Again, Grif," Norman says. Captain Griffin has a thin, high voice, one Norman usually associates with fat men.

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Griffin steps around in front of Norman. He is a broad man, and looks Norman right in the eyes.

"Did you know you were right in between those Cubans and my men?"

Norman looks at him blankly.

"Of course you knew," Griffin says. "And were you trying to obstruct us?"

Norman blinks.

"Of course you weren't. You were just right in the goddam way."

"You sent Johnson here wide, didn't you?"

Griffin steps up close to Norman. "How do you feel about that, Norman? Does it make you feel safer that Johnson had an angle on those Cubans that meant you wouldn't get hit or does it piss you off because the bullets wouldn't go through all that hair of yours?"

Norman bobs the camera in his hand and then holds it up to his chest, between him and the Captain.

Captain Griffin looks down at the camera and gives it a thump with two fingers.

"You know," Griffin says, waving at Johnson, "these men are taught to clean their weapons and to use their weapons. They're taught to respect them, maybe even to fear them so they don't manage to shoot themselves or get hurt by them. What training did you ever get?"

31,712 FEET OVER DALLAS, TEXAS

BUCCANEER AIRLINES BOEING 727

7:58AM CENTRAL STANDARD TIME

"Is your head going to be in my way?"

Norman looks up from the Harper's Index in his lap. He thinks for a moment, trying hard to relate the impact of now knowing the average September rainfall in Wyoming, the number of Indian tribes in Argentina with a "c" in their name, and the cumulative height of all dictators in recorded history to a comment that blustered over his seat-back.

He closes the magazine and sets it on the floor atop the others he scoured: Byte (his own computer received a glowing review); Newsweek (the photos were all taken in an upright position and the news was the same he had gotten in the past few days from the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times and the Miami Herald); Vogue (the photos were all taken on a tripod); The Economist (three photos appeared to have the negative reversed); Sports Illustrated (the photos were all taken from the ground up, whether they were aimed at basketball players or at young models in swimwear). He slides right in his seat, pins his left shoulder and twists on it hard to look down at the woman behind him in the airplane. She looks up at him with her chin. A glass of clear liquor sits on one palm and the fingers of her other hand lace carefully around the rim.

"Something about my head, ma'am?" he says.

Her lips grow thin and stretch toward her ears. "You're quite tall. I won't be able to see the movie."

Looking down at her, Norman notices that the woman is average in height and thus would have trouble watching an in-flight movie anyway.

"We could trade places but there are people in front of me, too. I think you'll find that if you lean a little to one side, you'll see just fine."

"I don't want to lean."

"Everyone has to lean, ma'am."

"No they don't. You don't. You just look down at everyone like some baboon in a tree."

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Norman pauses for a moment. "Wouldn't a giraffe be a more appropriate image?"

"No, a baboon has black hair all over it like you do."

"I see."

"Yes. Well, that's fine and well for you but damned inconsiderate for the rest of us."

Norman can't help but think that this woman is utterly indistinguishable -- brown hair, hazel eyes, medium height, medium weight -- except for her personality. He would never photograph her except to contrast the image with the caption: Barracuda.

Norman looks around the plane for an empty seat. Through the darkness of the evening flight he sees that every seat is filled with passengers in impossible positions -- arms contorted, necks twisted, legs crossed and thrust out into the aisles, bodies wrestling to find the one spot that provides the least amount of pain or perhaps enough of it to afford them a narcotic effect and allow them some brief escape from the endless drone and pitch inherent in air travel. The singular light that shines in the plane is the reading lamp above this woman's head, angled improperly, more that of a spotlight in a horror film cascading from directly overhead, creating shadows that emphasize all the wrong features of her face. She keeps both her elbows close to her body, careful not to touch those next to her.

"There's no place to go, ma'am. The seats are all filled."

She squints her eyes and purses one side of her mouth. "And you find that satisfactory?"

Norman wonders where all this is going.

"I accept it," he says.

"I don't," she fires back.

"I didn't think you would."

"Do you accept things easily? Is that your way, to just let things be?"

"Ma'am, it's just a movie."

"Of course it's just a movie. But next it'll be some little censorship or minor taxation -- the slow, minute and continuous erosion of our standards by your brand of complacency. This is where it all starts, mister."

Her head bobs on its axis while she speaks and punctuates her distaste for the situation by thrusting it against the back of her seat. The obloquy is over. With her eyes closed, her head back and the glass held close to her chest, she looks much like the corpses Norman photographed while working the streets back in Miami. Out of habit, he quickly scans her temples and neckline for the spot where the .22 might have entered and scrambled her brain.

Norman turns back around and aims his attention at the screen ten rows ahead. The stewardess, dressed in a black maternity dress with a red, spotted scarf around her neck announces into the microphone that the movie is about to begin. He cannot help notice how much the airline has changed. Originally it was notorious for its sexy stewardesses in hot pants, bare midriffs and pirate bandannas but since then has grown up into one noted for its progressive, even ardently feminist, tendencies (and cheap fares).

Norman observes the interplay of the characters on the screen, a foreign-looking man and a pretty young woman, a popular personality, who has transparently made the transition from model to actress. They are in his office where she explains to him that she is wearing a sheer blouse because of the dire heat there in L.A., Norman's destination. He scoffs, knowing that the heat there will be nothing compared to the miserable Floridian humidity.

As the characters move about the screen, Norman pulls back visually to examine the entire set and the framework of the cameraman's target. As the

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actors move, the camera holds still, to create its own room, its own reality between the margins of its segmented existence. The man moves in and out sometimes seeming perturbed that the blocking -- or perhaps the cameraman -- fails to notice his presence. When the young woman speaks, Norman notices that the camera carefully keeps her nipples just above the bottom of the screen, forever setting the bottom margin of her celluloid existence.

Focusing closer, Norman examines the particle movement of color through a single spot on the screen. The single pixel on which he fixates shines at one moment black, then a flicker of red and soon white. It then returns to black and meanders through the tapestry of colors he remembers are part of the whole scene. Over the heads of the sleeping passengers in front of him he watches this for some time, endlessly, letting go of the story, of the characters, and concentrates only on the one spot of light.

When he finally returns his focus to the movie -- to the whole picture -- he is lost.

As the credits roll, the pregnant stewardess announces from her seat that the plane is now descending into LAX and requests that all seats be returned to their upright positions. It is 9:35 am in L.A., she announces. Norman compares her time to his stainless steel Rolex. She's off by two minutes, he notes, and gives his wrist a couple of shakes to wind the watch.

From the back pocket of his jeans, he pulls out the itinerary that was sent to him by Cecil Hunsacker, the producer who hired him to come to L.A. Norman's next stop, it reads, is the Drake Car Rental agency and then to the Blackbeard Motel in West Hollywood where he will stay until he can find a place to live. Norman plans to check in and shower, put on a fresh pair of jeans and a clean shirt and then show up by noon at KPOC for a welcome and a walk-through.

It will be a terrific change, Norman thinks, getting away from the street scene for a while. Courtroom drama never held much excitement for him, but it's what he was coming to L.A. to do. Track embezzlements, political sex scandals, Hollywood egos. Duller, yes, but no gunfire.

But staring at the blank, glimmering screen in front of him, Norman can't help wonder how it is that a Los Angeles television station could offer him so much money, his Pulitzer Prize notwithstanding, to leave a job in Miami and then send his ass coach where his head would be in the way of a barracuda.

WEST HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
12366 JACKSON DRIVE  
11:07AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

The Blackbeard Motel in Hollywood has a theme to it. According to the brochure Norman read, it was originally designed in the mid-60's, and was meant to cater to families. It has a playful, Malaysian decor, turquoise and pink and black with large, angry totems carved from telephone poles. The pool is shaped like a whale and is mostly shallow with a long, curving slide that dumps into the deep end. Pink and green flamingos are stuck among the ferns and birds of paradise. But as Norman looks around, over twenty years after it was built, the motel now caters to the seedy, though not to the poor. Its campiness now serves up a distinctly chic tone that the harder elements of life prefer. Twenty year-old convertibles and heavy Harleys sit lonely and rusting in their spaces while the night-people snore through Good Morning America, the Stock Market Report, and National Public Radio. Norman's car is the only one yet to see its tenth birthday and in it he tries to find something other than Eric Clapton on the radio and rubs his eyes. He

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finds a Mexican polka, a conjunto, extra heavy on the accordion that suits his mood, and closes his eyes.

His heart did not race, he was not scared, he did not sweat. If it weren't for the numbness in his chin and the cold .357 on his lap he would think the mugging never happened.

Norman purses his lip and a rush of pain shoots across his jaw to his ear. The rental car agent, Norman thinks, told me he had a special car for me, one he parked himself the night before. He looked so proper in his neat blue suit and white shirt, his nametag shiny and carefully etched, "Charlie." He looked out of place in the suit. No, this Charlie, Norman pictures, "Carlitos" they call him, and his homeboys hang out in long, white t-shirts, khakis and knee-length shorts, thick socks and high tops, nodding their heads at the cholo truisms the gavachos could never know . . . .

"Hey, says here you're workin' for KPOC news. Izzat true?"

Norman listened hard and recognized this was not the Cuban English he was used to. The man probably wasn't a Latino at all; he just hung out with Chicanos.

"Yeah," Norman said.

"No shit? You, like, haul those big videos around and take pictures of the shootings and then talk about them?"

"That's what I do," Norman shrugged. "That's mostly what I do."

Charlie paused. "So, hey, you rich, man? You must make a lot of money."

Norman looked at him sideways. "I do OK," he told him.

Charlie nodded his head big and shuffled some papers behind the counter.

"You know, there was a great shooting last night. They had Fausto's body on TV last night. He was shot up pretty good, arm shot off and shit. He looked real bad. And they had it all on at dinner time." Charlie laughed through his teeth. It was more like a hiss. "That you?"

Norman had brought hundreds of bodies to the dinner table in South Florida. "No," he said. "I'm starting today."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"So, you're going to be working with Chloe White, right?"

"Not, really. She anchors, I'm out on the street."

"She's a freak, man."

"Really," Norman said, squinting.

"No, man. I mean she's a freak. Good-lookin'. A freak. I thought news people knew calo."

Norman nodded.

"My buddies an' me, we call her 'Chlamydia'," He hissed. "She's kind of bitchy-lookin', you know? We'd all like ta give her chlamydia." He grinned real big at that one.

"I haven't met her."

"But you will?"

"I imagine so."

"Cool. Well, welcome to L.A., man. I'll get you a really good car. Something that ain't no hooptie."

Little Charlie bowed his head to the counter and began rummaging through envelopes with customer names on the outside and car-keys on the inside until he found some Ford keys. He came up smiling, sharing his silver dental work. "You'll like this," he said . . . .

Norman looks across the parking lot at one of the totem poles. The face on it has big eyes and a big mouth like the idols on Easter Island. Easter Island was quiet and abandoned, like the Blackbeard Motel seems. Little idols stopped speaking to the people, Norman thinks, remembering a

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theory, so they built bigger ones. Only they didn't speak either, so they abandoned idolatry and left the island. The people couldn't find the answers outside themselves, they had to look inside which, of course, screwed up their whole civilization.

As Norman turns his thoughts inward again to the mugging, he realizes he has watched it before, like an old movie. It plays back in his head with such detachment that it might have happened to someone else. But there's this gun . . . .

The tall, bearded man threw his marine green duffel bags into the back seat of the Mustang convertible. When he turned around, he was quickly pushed in the chest and back up against the fender. He glanced down at the blue-black muzzle held at his cheek. Holding the gun was a hungry-looking white man with a goatee and no other visible hair, a foot shorter than he was and squinting to see. Behind the assailant stood a fat kid, shorter yet, sweating like he was corn-fed, and hopping up and down with a melting Snickers bar in his hand.

"Fuck!" the fat kid said. "Oh, man, fuck!"

"It's a fuckeen bad morning, man," went the man with the gun. He leaned in close to the tall man while the fat kid waddled like a beach ball in the wind. "You know the routine, man. Give it up, now."

The man pushed the gun into the victim's cheek, forcing his head a little to one side. The victim reached slowly into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He edged it forward a little, poking the assailant in the stomach, and then withdrew. The assailant kept his eyes on the victim and with his free hand he fished around blindly for the wallet. He couldn't find it. The victim poked him again with the wallet and withdrew. Obviously frustrated, the assailant looked down for the wallet. The second he did, the tall man pushed away the gun hand and started swinging his elbows around like he had just rebounded a basketball. The simultaneous crack of the assailant's orbital bone and the blast of the .357 was deafening. He went down hard with both hands holding his left eye.

The tall man picked up the gun and told the fat kid to drop the goddam snickers bar and get his buddy to a hospital.

"Get yourself to one, motherfucker," the fat kid yelled back . . . .

Norman fingers the trigger of the gun and notices the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. The perspective he watched the mugging from was outside himself but vaguely placed, more omniscient. It was like Nijinsky watching himself from the orchestra pit, but from the string section and the horn section simultaneously.

As he thinks about what happened to him, it occurs to him that he hasn't slept. It occurs to him that he hasn't slept much at all for the past few months. He listens to the clocks tick at night, listens to the sounds around him, but mostly he listens to his own body. Just as a patient suddenly becomes conscious of his own breathing when the doctor conducts an examination, Norman has been spending time listening and feeling while trying to fall asleep. He feels the process, the laborious expansion and contraction of his diaphragm, the inhaling and exhaling, the sifting of air through his nose. Then he feels the heartbeat, the basso chamber music his body plays while he is at rest or out on the basketball court. And Norman watches himself.

It is now after eleven o'clock and Norman needs a shower before showing up at the station at noon. Inside, behind the counter, stands a thin woman dressed in a long black skirt and a long black sweater who has obviously gone to some lengths to dye her hair black. It stretches back, plain, toward the floor and the color looks as if it would come out completely with a good hosing. As she turns around to face him, she has bright red lips and the pale face of death. To complete the arrangement, she has a round and

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pleasant face and in the morning sunlight she appears like the head nurse at a Hawaiian vampire retirement home. Her first words were a syncopated "Je-sus-help-us-Jesus!" which came out in a wonderful, matronly tone, and her first duty is to clean up Norman who is unaware, because of the numbness in his chin, that blood fills most of his beard and is becoming dry and sticky. She herds him behind the counter and into the adjacent office that has a bathroom attached and sits him on the toilet. She drapes a towel around his shoulders, covering his chest, and soaks a washcloth under the faucet.

"Well, you didn't cut yourself shaving, so what happened?" she asks while facing the mirror. She turns to him and begins rinsing out his beard. "This couldn't have happened that long ago, the blood's still damp -- Je-sus, what a mess! -- but what could have happened in the morning?"

Norman wrestles to speak but she has such a grip on the hairs of his beard that he has lost voluntary control of his jaw until she is ready to rinse out the washcloth.

"This area's really not that bad, you know. You mustn't think it's full of winos and muggers. I walk the streets all the time." She tugs his beard to one side.

Norman glances at her sideways and she looks down at him fish-eyed. She pauses and snags him again by the hairs on his chin.

"Just because a woman walks the street, mister, doesn't mean she walks the street." She has both her eyes on his, chin-to-chin. "Understand?"

Norman can't move his head so she nods it for him and gives him a smile.

"You're a mess, friend. You been out drinking all night, get in a fight?"

Norman moves his head in a circle, yes-no.

When she begins rinsing he explains what happened.

She turns to him with her hands on her hips and looks at him hard.

Norman wonders where all this is going.

"You don't need stitches, but it is pretty deep."

"Aren't you going to tell me I did the right thing?"

She lowers her eyebrows on him. "I don't know. Your wallet's a stupid thing to defend. But it depends."

"Depends on what?"

"Depends on what you keep in your wallet. Money's one thing, credit cards, ID -- they can be replaced. But ideas, family photos, treasure maps -- they're a little different."

"Treasure maps?"

"You're in the Blackbeard Motel, mister. What'd you expect me to say? Just be glad I'm not wearing a smoldering tricorn and have ribbons in my beard like the real Blackbeard."

Norman stands from the toilet and wanders out into the office. "There were only credit cards and ID in my wallet."

"Then your fat lip wasn't worth it," she says from the doorjamb of the bathroom. "You did a stupid thing. You could have been seriously hurt."

Norman nods at her glassy-eyed.

"So, what's your name, stupid?" she grins a mouth full of bright and delicately crooked teeth.

"Norman Lessing." He is starting to wake up. "And you are nurse . . . ?"

"Lee, obviously," she says, extending an arm and an open hand.

"Of course," he returns and shakes the hand.

She grabs him by the belt loop and tugs him out into the lobby.

"C'mon, let's check you in."

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HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
56567 FIGUEROA BOULEVARD  
12:13PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Cecil Hunsacker's office is a glass cube in the middle of the fourth floor of the KPOC building. It is surrounded by tables and people in unkempt hair and rumpled suits with expressions on their faces that decry a mixture of anger and tardiness. His office contains nothing but a long, glass table and six uncomfortable, black Bauhaus chairs built to allow for the lowest probability of extraction. The office serves as nothing more than a quiet meeting place amidst the madness of day-to-day newscasting and an observatory from which to survey the worker bees. Cecil himself is a man of considerable girth: tall, broad as a billiard table, and sought to enhance his size with heavily padded European suit-jackets. He always stands, and smokes perpetually. The glass cube contains the smoke, which is sucked up through the ceiling via a black fixture that resembles an upside-down funnel. His cigars are as large as pool cues and made in the Philippines. It is Cecil's contention -- he explains to Norman who sits stretched out (slid out is more accurate) in one of the chairs, his long, clean, jeaned legs reaching the opposite side of the table -- that Castro is the most pretentious sombitch he ever met. Castro used to wait tables in Miami, spoke English better than Barbara Walters, and still insists on conducting his interviews in Español. Cecil would buy his goddam ceegars anyplace but Cooba.

In the cube it is explained to Norman that he was hired to help track the gang activity in Los Angeles. "Lately," Cecil blew, "it has become as comprehensive as the mafia of old but with major differences. The gangs are young, Norman. Kids. And they're disorganized. And because they're younger and because there are so many factions, this translates into more violence and more places for it to happen. Hell, just when the police move in to quell one disagreement or to shut down one rock house, another pops up around the corner, undetected and smarter. And this is beginning to get national attention.

"And you know what's most bizarre about all this?" Cecil turns and places his big hands on the table and leans on them. "The gangs love the media. Of course they don't allow their faces to be shown, but they're beginning to allow their hits for crissakes. The week I called you, a photographer for the Times went on a drive-by. He rode in the back seat and took pictures while these kids fired on a rival gang's house and killed two people. Couldn't fucking believe it."

Cecil turns and looks out the cube, at the windows at the far end where the Los Angeles skyline is fuzzy in the smog and filthy windows.

"If we had had that footage, Norman, do you have any idea what that would have meant? Do you? We could be selling thirty-second spots to Fuji and Kodak for triple what we are now."

Norman pulls his head back a bit and looks up at the behemoth.

"That means raises, Norman."

"Ummm."

"And that's why you're here."

"To take pictures of drive-bys?"

"Yes."

"But, Cecil, that's not why I came here. That's not why you hired me."

"Not directly, no."

"What do you mean by that? I was hired to track L.A.'s bullshit.

Where do you get off telling me about drive-bys? I mean, for one, isn't that a little dangerous?"

"You bet your ass it's dangerous."

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"Cecil," Norman cocks his head, "why would I want to go on a drive-by? I'm likely to get shot, if not by the gang they're shooting at then by the police."

"Norman," Cecil leans his shoulders against the glass and lets his arms fall at his sides, "you don't get shot."

"And how do you plan to guarantee that?"

"I don't have a plan, Norman, I don't mean it that way. I mean you don't get shot. I don't know what it is you do, but you never get shot."

"Cecil, I don't like being shot at."

"I know you don't. Of course, you don't. But you're not going to be shot at. You never have been. Photojournalists aren't shot at. They just happen to be where all the shooting is going on."

"Sometimes." Norman sits upright and then the leather under him slides him halfway back down again. "But this sounds suicidal. After all, there are no fewer than three hunting parties involved in one of these drive-bys: the police and the rival gangs, assuming there are only two warring at the time. And besides, doesn't this include quite a bit of premeditation? A responsible citizen, knowing of an upcoming drive-by would naturally warn the police and, for that matter, run like hell."

Cecil gives Norman a bored look and goes to the door. He yells into the room to Georgia, possibly his harried secretary, possibly a woman just passing by, telling her to get him Norman's file. He stands staring out, filling the doorway with his grey suit and puffing the cigar that is still in his mouth. Georgia comes back at a quick pace with an accordion folder held by both hands in front of her and bouncing on her thighs. She doesn't come too close to Cecil, she just hands it forward like arms to Caesar. Cecil nods respectfully to her and returns to Norman.

Cecil pulls a manila folder from the file and then dumps the remainder of the accordion file all over the table. Newspaper clippings, microfiche and a few videotapes litter the table.

"Norman, this is you. You're the only video-journalist I've ever known who gets newspaper articles written about him."

Norman flips through the litter: back-page articles and front-page starters about Norman's repeated coverage of city violence that left him in the middle of gunfire. The videotape of Berto and Rico shot in the field in Miami by the INS is among the heap. What made the video so remarkable to the news producers was that the quality of the footage lacked the usual amateurish feel normally associated with live, raw carnage. The quality of it had been so smooth, clear -- professional -- that it almost seemed choreographed. Because the action was so glossy, it lacked any nightmarish gore and was gleefully run coast to coast at the dinner hour much the same way an ad for "Dirty Harry Week" was run.

Norman wonders what happened to Rubén. Did the INS put him down? Would he retaliate for what they did to his friends?

Norman pushes his past across the table. "Things like these are accidents. I don't go looking for these things. As a matter of fact, I just go where the assignment editor sends me."

"Norman, insurance companies make a hell of a lot of money off people like you. Innocent people, driving down the road, get rear-ended, get rolled-into by some depressed housewife trying to commit suicide, get pounded by meteors, and it's not their fault. They were just on their way to the mall, to work, whatever. They get their car fixed and then a week later they get a notice that their insurance just went up. Why? Because statistically they've got bad luck. If something shitty is going to happen within a ten-mile radius, it will involve them. No one knows why, it just happens. The insurance companies, with their eyes on their calculators say, 'you've got to pay.' Now, Norman, I'm not saying you've got bad luck. In fact, I believe

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you're going to be good luck to me and to this station. But where you go, things happen."

"I told you I just go where I'm sent."

"Yes, but something happens after that. Maybe you stick around longer than you should. Maybe you blend in and nobody notices you. Actually, that's kind of hard to believe because you're so damn tall. I don't know. But there's something. By the way, what happened to your mouth?"

Norman touches his lip. "I forgot to carry my camera this morning."

"What? Did you get into a fight this morning? With whom?"

"A couple of hungry losers. I think I was set up by the guy at the car rental agency."

"Did you call the police?"

"Actually, I kind of forgot about it after I took a shower."

Cecil crosses his arms and twirls the cigar in his mouth. "You should call the police."

"Actually, I should just store it away for a while. If it was a setup, I could use it for a favor later."

Cecil's eyebrows came down hard over his eyes. A "hmm" came out with the smoke.

"Cecil, I'm not going to go on a drive-by."

The ashes on Cecil's cigar have gotten very long and are starting to command Norman's attention. He remembers an old story of an attorney who smoked cigars in the courtroom and would slide a piece of wire inside the cigar and never dump the ashes. Eventually the ashes became so long that they seemed to defy gravity and the entire courtroom had their eyes on the cigar in the attorney's hand, especially the witness. The distraction then became a tool he used to turn the testimony inside-out. Cecil's ashes, though -- the split-second his hand passes gracefully over the solitary glass ashtray at one corner of the table -- fall.

"The fact is, Norman, we want it." He pauses and gives Norman a long, pensive look. "All right, we need it. We have an expensive staff here. I pay some of the highest salaries in the industry from anchorwoman to cameraman and we pay for this with advertising. And our advertising rates are directly linked to our ratings. And ratings, as you know, are related to the drama in our newscasts. If there's no video, there's no news," Cecil says. It's the mantra of newscasting.

Cecil is pacing now, back and forth in front of the glass.

"Now, KPOC isn't known for its yellow journalism and I'm not going to start it either. But, if there are certain elements of the news we report on better than anyone else, elements that people are -- and ought to be -- concerned with, then we can keep the best ratings and keep paying these salaries."

Norman tilts his head and raises an eyebrow at Cecil.

"Understand this, Norman. We would never send you on a drive-by. Hell, we can't schedule that sort of thing. And I won't tell you to go on one, either, even though I would like to have that footage. But I'll guarantee you this: you'll go on a drive-by, and be in the middle of this gang business not because I say so, but because you're Norman Lessing."

Georgia is dispatched once again, this time to introduce Norman to the troops. She does this with her head aimed at the floor and her arms always at her sides except when she raises a palm to point in the direction of the person she is introducing. Before each introduction, she first tells Norman who he is about to meet, why he is about to meet that person and the level of importance that person has in the organization.

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At that hour, most of the important players are out covering their business. The planning sessions occur even earlier and the reporters are already well into their day. Consequently, Norman's introductions are confined to the administrative staff, the nuances of which Georgia explains thoroughly. She explains how the paychecks are processed, who to be kind to, how to get the supplies he needs with the least amount of fuss, all the political administrative gossip -- in essence, how to become a local quickly. He is left on his own when Georgia introduces Norman to the assignment editor.

Horace sits in the middle of a mind-numbing array of audio technology. Police radios, ham radios, several small televisions and AM/FM radios glitter and hum incongruously on a wall behind him while an enormous phone panel in front of him twinkles menacingly. The panel is armed with four receivers, two of which are off the hook, waiting for Horace to return to them, one is in its place and the last is at his ear. Dispatches originate here, in this morass of information. Horace assimilates information in the fashion of a supercomputer. He is fed information from an assortment of powerful information-gathering devices and then prioritizes, sorts and dispatches reporters, camera crews, et al as he sees fit. His position is so central to the outfit that even hirings and layoffs are really his to determine.

He glances up at Norman through his glasses and then begins searching through piles of paper for something. Still searching and listening to someone frantically and breathlessly explain a predicament at the other end of the receiver, Horace extends a hand.

"Nice t' meetcha, Norman," he says with one hand covering the receiver.

"Likewise. Horace, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

Horace looks around and yells, "Jane! Jane!" A pretty but very haggard-looking young intern sticks her head around the corner. "Where are the choppers? Where are the goddam choppers? Get the goddam choppers in the air!"

"They're on their way."

"But they're not there yet, Jane! Get the goddam choppers over the zoo!"

Horace smiles at Norman and then realizes he forgot something: "And where's the fucking autopsy report? We need the fucking autopsy report!"

Jane stood up. She is as tall as a basketball player. "Goddammit, I told you Andy's getting it."

Horace, who isn't nearly as tall as Jane, screams back: "I don't give a shit! It's not here and it's your ass. Is that clear or do I have to write it down so you can study it tonight while you look through the want ads?"

Jane sits down and gets on the phone.

"I've got Chloe on the other end here," he says with a smile. "She's pissed off 'cause I got her down at the zoo. Kinda dangerous, really. A bunch of rhinos got loose."

"Crash."

"Yup."

"No. I meant a crash of rhinos."

"Really? A crash? Hey, that's great." Horace interrupts the discourse, "Chloe, it's a crash of rhinos . . . yeah . . . a crash . . . ." He turns to Norman. "What about a bunch of bears?"

"Bears?"

"Yeah. It's gettin' kinda ugly down there."

"A sloth."

"Sloth? Kinda boring isn't it, compared to 'crash'?"

Norman shrugs.

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Horace returns to the phone. "Sloth, Chloe . . . that's right . . . no, you can't . . . Chloe, you have to report on it even if it's a boring word . . . you'll figure it out . . . byeee." Horace hits a button and tells the phone to wait.

"So you just put the world on hold."

"Look at this mess," Horace says, gesturing across his information manifold. "You have to put it on hold to let your brain cool off. But sometimes I'll just walk away for a while and then come back just to see how long it takes me to catch up."

"Do you find it exciting?"

"Hell, it's always an emergency around here. You should see it when there's an earthquake."

"But is it exciting tracking the politics, the homicides, the robberies . . . the rhinos?"

"It's actually boring. Even though I'm always in a hurry, the information is generic. There's so much, I don't even focus on it. Imagine a kid working in a toy store for a year. The first month is the best of his entire life. But from then on there's no more magic in playing with toys. Ruined forever. I used to love the news. I don't even own a TV anymore. But I'm the guy who creates the reality for millions," he laughs.

"Pretty much the same thing where I came from. They complained they never knew what was going on. I always wondered what they meant by that, being right in the middle of things."

"Information overload, my friend. We're not God. We can only process so much and then the interest turns to . . ."

"Apathy?"

"Hell, it ain't that bad. Mush is more like it."

Horace turns back to his papers and comes up with an envelope.

"Anyway, you'll be working with Wanda for a while. She's at the DA's office trying to find out about this serial killer story and then she's meeting with a bunch of mothers who want the upcoming gas chamber execution to be on TV. Or is it a 'herd' of mothers?" he says with a smile and hands Norman his press credentials. Norman looks down at the picture of himself and wonders where they got it. Then Horace hands him what looks like a thick, black pen. "She'll call you later on this."

"What's this?"

"Your pager. A little less obtrusive than the garage-door openers you're probably used to."

Norman slides it into his shirt pocket.

"Well, Norman, enjoy yourself," he says, and turns to his phone panel. "Pick a button . . . any button."

At the foot of the stairs that lead to the basement someone has posted a sign that says, "There Is No Atmosphere Down Here" and someone else has scribbled across it, "What answers will you get when you start with imaginary numbers!"

Down the hall, a room on the left holds the audio/visual gear Norman is supposed to pick up before leaving the station. On the right is an open door with the word "Chief" on it. Norman calls out, but no one answers. Norman takes this as an invitation to enter. Inside, one wall is lined with computers -- PC's, Macintoshes, terminals that lead to bigger computers somewhere else. Opposite them are printers, most of them churning out long indecipherable reports.

As Norman looks closer, the noisy, windowless room is that of the weatherman. The computers tie together sensors from various parts of the country, which feed supercomputers at a local university. According to the

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pages of scribbles on a desk, one system is in its ninth hour of calculation in an effort to predict not the probability of rain today, but the time.

Norman can't remember seeing any clouds.

Outside in the dusty sunlight, Norman sucks on his lip. His hands swing low at his sides holding eighty-five pounds of camera, film, battery and cable. His mind buzzes with the sting of sleeplessness as he glares out at the skyline. It is now his job to know this city and the reasoning behind its behavior. Impossibly, a journalist is expected to account for the ebb of bodies downtown or the blare of loud pipes on the streets in Hollywood. So now he has to get to know the city somehow. Since this is his first time in L.A., he figures he has to do what he has always done to learn a city: get lost.

He packs his gear in the trunk of the Mustang 5.0 and starts it up.

Norman focuses hard on the street names: Melrose, La Brea, La Cienega, Sepulveda, Vermont, Grand, 9th, 6th, . . . . He scrutinizes the hotels, the office buildings, the parks and parking structures, the kinds of people and cars there, the convenience stores, the plants, the air. He takes it all in in business-like fashion, thinking what might go on behind those doors, what commerce might occur there, what kind of person might go there and why. It becomes an extended story involving the hundreds of characters in his past who have since become a class -- a stereotype -- he plugs into the environment to fulfill his storyline, to help him predict the future.

Next, Norman must find the railroad.

Train tracks represent the other side of preferred living. They are surrounded by poverty and the displaced of society. Living next to them is like wearing a badge of dishonor, of having succumbed to the ugliest demands of capitalism. Goods must be moved from one place to another and people must have domiciles. While each in honorable in its own right, where they meet, ugliness is the product. Streets yield to the railroad tracks. They come to a halt at the presence of a train and highways must go up, over, and down via costly structures to avoid a single pair of skinny rails.

Train tracks are his favorite means of losing himself in a city. The problem with them is that they do not serve any useful purpose except to trains. The highways in cities rarely run either along-side railroad tracks or even perpendicular to them. Instead, streets just run. And though tracks run nearly straight through cities like Los Angeles, they seem to weave their way through it and keeping close to them through the downtown area is a sure-fire way to get lost.

At half a tank, Norman discovers that several sets of rails convene on the Sears warehouse near the intersection of the 5 and 10 freeways. He wheels into the dirt and gravel and rumbles over the rails to stop halfway to the loading dock. Huge trailers sit, quiet and forgotten, in the middle of the yard.

Norman gets out and leans against the door. At the edges of the vast yard are walls and on the other side of the walls cars move nervously and deliberately away from here. The walls bear the graffiti of the gangs who bother to consider the place and of those who want a place to practice their craft. Like the piss wolves use to mark their territory, gangs write to tattoo and to signal. The fat, cartoonish S's or F's or T's (Norman can't tell one from the other) come together here as the art of anguish, desperation and, to a larger degree, hopelessness. It is short, loud, and virtually illegible. Only the pros could read this. What Norman can read he knows is the work of a neophyte, probably one who either can't or hasn't made it. The stuff he can read, he aims his camera at.

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It feels good to have the camera at his shoulder again. It is well-balanced and quick. It focuses in on the strokes of the spray cans like a microscope and then draws back to view the top edge of a picture that looks like automatic writing on a canvas of dirt and machinery. He spins around, panning the freeways for the faces of drivers, and the walls for the faces of the children who move quickly along the tops, dodging with great experience the broken glass that has been cemented in.

Norman tracks a pair of Latino men down the hill on the other side of the road. They are young, the oldest is probably in his early twenties, and wear the uniform. They have on expensive basketball shoes, khakis, white t-shirts and untucked flannel shirts buttoned only at the neck and at the cuff. They stop near an abandoned wooden shack at the bottom, laugh a bit and light up cigarettes.

Norman zooms in to check out their colors. One man wears fishnet over his head, but no bandanas. The flannels are much different. Gang members, but no clear markings.

An old metallic blue Chevy Impala pulls up in front of them, friends, it appears, and they all share a sip of something from a paper bag.

Nothing special, Norman thinks. A regular Tuesday. Except that Norman has a question.

He puts the camera gear on the passenger seat and points the Mustang in their direction. He drives the car slowly. Even so, his too-long mop of black curls flutters around in the wind. Because of his height, his hair sticks up over the windshield like a clown's in some kind of miniature car and the message is clear: this guy is no threat.

As he approaches, the men all look straight at him. They stand up straight and their chests fill up a bit. He pulls up carefully, a little clumsily, with a slight sense of goofiness in his grin that puts them at ease but awkward-feeling, like being in the presence of a retarded man.

The two men in the car get out and all four approach from the curb, their hands in their pockets. They look at the car and listen to it quietly, listening to see if it is running alright. They give each other glances with their lower lips out, shrugging and shaking their heads. Car runs OK. Norman looks at them all, smiling, they at him.

After an uncomfortably long pause that is starting to irritate everyone, Norman pipes up: "So who's Fausto?"

"Blood flows free, man," Griego proselytizes. His index fingers point to the ground as he paces back and forth in the dirt in front of the others who sit on the porch with Norman. "Fausto's was pure and it flowed."

"He was a businessman. He was just a businessman," Mokey adds. "He knew how to move the goods. His was the best and at the best price." He turns to face Norman. "And that's what you get, man, for doing a good job, here. You get dead."

"You bet your ass, man," goes Espresso. Espresso is very short and wiry. His face is thin and has small clusters of very dark hair giving him a worn appearance that could easily be wiped away. As the bottle is passed around, it is never passed to him. Norman suspects it is because he would go off like a firecracker.

"He was smooth," Mokey continues. "He was quiet, never talked down to you. He made you feel like you were his friend. Like he would do anything for you."

"Wasn't this guy dealing heroin?" Norman wants to know.

"It makes you free," Griego says. The statement makes him stop.

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"That wasn't the problem," Oso finally says. Oso is fat. He is hairy and he is fat. But he has a smile that is as contagious as a yawn and it punctuates every sentence he speaks.

"Dealing wasn't the problem?" Norman asks.

"Heroin wasn't," Oso replies.

"They hit him because he was successful . . . ," Mokey says abruptly.

"He was his hit because of the rocks," Oso interrupts. Oso is always allowed to interrupt. He takes a sip from the bottle, lifting it with a thick arm that is adorned with a stunningly large gold Rolex. Norman runs various scenarios through his head and each of them leaves some wealthy fellow angry that he is no longer the owner of a watch with a diamond face and bezel. "No one could touch his heroin. So no one did."

"He had style, man," Griego adds. "He was like Oscar Wilde!"

They all give him a look at that one but Griego keeps on pacing.

"He started to sell the rocks. He wanted to be the one-stop-shop," Oso goes on. "He lost a lot of customers in the eighties when the brothers started sellin' crack. He had a good base of rich people, white people like your friends at the station, you know? Then everybody starts sellin' crack. It's all over the place, man. We got one place up the street, another four streets over, a couple guys driving around. It's all over the hood. And Fausto sees this and he's got no money coming in compared to what he used to. He went on for years like that, making his trade in smack and coke. But he's smart. He covers all the bases, locking it all up, until there's almost no one else doin' what he's doin'. All the money for heroin and coke comes in to him. It's a lot, but it ain't enough. So one day he does it. He cuts in with the Crips and wham!, bato, you are a major distributor. All these others, rocks are all they got. But with Fausto and the Crips, you got it all -- the rock, the smack and the cocaine for the prima donas. You're the man."

"He was putting them out of business," Mokey says. "He was an OG, first generation, triple-X, man. Everybody else was just a baby g-ster compared to him."

"Fausto really knew business, man. He helped get the Crips set up in Chicago," Oso says. "He showed 'em the best routes, how to handle the money, how to keep movin' so the pigs don't come down on you. He was going to take them international, man."

"They didn't like it and they hit him," Mokey says. "Simple." Mokey's fists and jaw are clenched.

"So who's 'they'?" Norman asks. He didn't give the question much thought. He figures that since they saw his camera gear they would know he wouldn't cause them any trouble.

"Hey, what are you, anyway?" Espresso stands up next to Griego who is much taller and built like a professional wrestler except that he wears a fish net over his hair which makes him look more like a big dishwasher.

Oso lets out a big sigh. "What's wrong, pinche Espresso? You afraid he might be five-oh? You afraid of a cop who can sit down and talk to you? A cop who doesn't hassle you? A cop who would pass you the bottle if we let him? Shit, ese, he ain't no five-oh."

Espresso steps toward Norman who is still sitting next to Oso. He steps forward hesitantly, stiffly, ready to fight. But Norman sitting is tall enough to look Espresso straight in the eye.

"I don't want to fight you, Espresso. I was in a fight last night."

"Nice lip," Espresso says. "Is that why you got a beard? Still can't use a razor?"

"Where?" Oso asks calmly, almost bored.

"By the airport. Two guys. One of them had a .357. Gun went off and grazed my lip."

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Oso starts to laugh and Mokey joins in.

"The other guy had a gun?" Oso howls. "Sit down, Espresso," Oso says, smiling big. "You don't need no ass-whippin'."

The pager in Norman's pocket suddenly goes off like an alarm clock. Everybody gives him a look and slowly starts into the pose they give the police.

Oso gives Norman a sideways glance and pulls the pen from Norman's pocket. Oso looks at the phone number in the little window on the pen.

"Who you gotta call?" he asks.

"Wanda. She's the reporter I'm assigned to for a while until I get my legs here in L.A. I haven't even met her yet."

"What's the phone number to?"

"I don't know. Wherever she is."

Mokey is nodding his head. "Fausto had one of those."

"Fausto had style," Griego adds. They wait for his comparison this time but instead he gives them a look like he knows he fucked up last time.

Oso puts the pager back in Norman's pocket and pats the pocket shut. He feels Norman's press credentials in the pocket, too, and takes a quick glance at them. Oso looks at the ground, deep in thought and shakes his head. "There are lots of rumors but no one really knows who hit him. People say the Bloods but shit, they don't know. There are so many wild dogs nowadays. It might have been one of the dealers who lost a lot of money or it might have been some little fucker trying to get inside, trying to make a name for himself."

"It was Pump," Mokey says.

"Fuckin' Pump," says Griego, his index fingers once again pointing to the ground.

". . . ." Espresso can't get out the word he wants so he just nods furiously.

Norman looks to Oso for confirmation.

Oso shrugs. "Maybe. Anyway, Pump's an easy guy to hate: he's a lawyer."

Norman nods and stands. "I gotta go, guys."

They teach him the grip, a mostly seventies handshake but at the end they punch each other's fist as if they all play on the same basketball team, and he fires up the Mustang.

"Looks like you need gas," Espresso says.

"Exxon is the devil's fuel!" Griego says.

Norman imagines Griego at the pulpit in his fish net hair, mesmerizing the congregation with his enigmatic aphorisms.

While the four of them sit back down on the porch and start bitching about the empty bottle, Norman finds his Mexican polka station and turns it up.

"How can you listen to that shit?" Espresso grins. It is good to see him smile.

"Sorry, man. I'm all out of Los Lobos."

"Los Lobos is for old farts like you, ese. Give me rap."

"Rap is for kings!"

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY COURTHOUSE  
2:52PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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Wanda sits on the bench with a double-beef bacon, lettuce and tomato cheeseburger unwrapped in front of her on her over-sized navy-blue men's suit which is rolled up at the sleeves, the shiny white silk lining peeking out at the cuffs. In one hand is a chocolate shake she holds aloft like an Olympic torch and in the other is a french-fry dripping with the ketchup she has just dipped into. She stares amorously at the french-fry, about to indulge when, suddenly, she stops. She glances around her, squinty-eyed, to one side where a couple of homeless people are watching her from under a tree, and to the other where policemen are leaning against a Mercedes Benz. She looks around some more.

She starts to take a bite again but stops. She glances around. Nothing. She sips a little, listening, watching. Her shoulders start up toward her ears, getting a little tense. Then they slump. Exasperated, she stops trying to eat.

Norman can't stand it anymore. He feels too much like the hidden cameraman for a TV comedy show. He doesn't laugh at the sight, but he can't separate himself from the subject enough to keep the camera rolling.

He releases the trigger and gets out of the car. Wanda locates him quickly and holds a french-fry up in her fist in a gesture that traditionally is insulting but one which Norman takes to mean friendly fire.

"Hiya, Norman," she says, gesturing to the empty part of the bench in a half-order to sit down. Wanda's bright, scarlet hair blows into her face, making it difficult to take a bite, so she speaks some more: "Find the place OK?"

They are sitting right along the street outside the Superior Court building. Buses and cars fume past and pedestrians, acutely aware of the media, give them second and third glances.

"Not a problem. I'm getting a feel for the place."

"You smell like beer," Wanda says indifferently; she is finally getting down to business and her burger is giving her trouble.

"Good nose. I'm surprised you can smell anything over that onion."

Wanda has a small, sharp nose and dark eyes; everything that goes well with red hair.

"I usually use it to sniff B.S., so it works especially well on beer."

"I had lunch with some guys in the barrio."

Wanda turns to Norman. He smiles his big, furry, fat-lipped smile at her. She raises her eyebrows. "You don't look drunk~."

Norman shakes his head, "Oh, no. Nothing like that. I was just out driving around and wanted to know who Fausto was. So I asked."

"You just pulled up to some gang members and asked them who Fausto was?" Wanda is nearly choking.

"Yeah."

"Out for a little roughing-up before lunch were ya, Norman?"

"Oh, come on. I think they liked me."

"Shit. They hate me. They always talk about fucking me. I hate hearing that. They sound like my boyfriend. A whole lotta talk." She gives Norman a playful kick in the shin.

Norman grins. Wanda is one of those women who spent her whole life being so pretty and so smart -- and with hair as red as hers -- she could never be ignored. Early on she must have discovered she could say whatever she wanted whenever she wanted and not only would she be heard, she would be responded to. Her opponents would call her arrogant, her associates would call her a bitch and her friends would call her assertive. But as likable as she might be, she seems to confuse rudeness with bravado and masculine behavior with equality. Though Norman sees all these sides of her in the same way he has seen it in others, he has never learned to just see the

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person. He takes all of her in as separate parts -- the sage, the bitch, the beauty -- not just as the amalgam, Wanda.

"Cecil gave me the low-down on you, Norman. You've got quite a past." The words come out sincerely though she seems preoccupied by something other than her oversized burger.

Norman doesn't respond. He is thinking about food.

"How do you manage to keep everything so glossy looking? What kind of system did you use in Miami?"

"Nothing special. Pretty much the same rig as here. Actually, I never gave it much thought." Norman is stretching out over the bench, reclining into his usual slouch. Due to the magnitude of Norman's length though, his recline is often confused with his approach. Curiously, Wanda responds not by closing her legs, but by putting a sharp elbow between Norman and her food.

"Scary stuff. How did you get in the middle of all that? How did you get all that footage?"

"I don't know. Some of the reporters I worked with just didn't do very much. I've always been kind of a loner so when I wasn't assigned I just went my own way. The editors were pissed at first, but it often worked in their favor, especially in Sweeps Month which we're about to start. So, so long as I was there when they needed me, they let me go my own way."

Wanda finishes up her lunch, wipes her face and pulls back her hair. She has a light constellation of freckles across her nose. As she gathers up the wrappers, she looks down at the crotch of her baggy pants to see a huge grease spot that has leaked through the paper. She lets out a big shit-sigh as she leans back against the bench.

"That's all I need."

Norman looks down at it. It is a good one.

"Oh, man. These women are going to have a riot with this one."

"When's the hearing?"

On the phone, Wanda explained that she was unable to arrange an interview with Mothers Against Censoring Executions until after the hearing. The fact is they didn't exactly hit it off well in the first interview. Wanda was nearly half an hour late to the home of Freida Ostetler, the director of MACE, because the previous interview ran late. To complicate matters, Wanda was stuck driving down a two-lane road in an opulent area of West Los Angeles behind a slow-driving woman in an expensive Japanese sedan. Wanda, unfortunately, is not a polite driver to begin with -- she becomes extremely anxious when late -- and has an annoying habit of giving history lessons on the Bataan Death March to the drivers of Japanese vehicles. That day she unleashed it all on a woman who could barely see over the dashboard and one whom she followed right into the driveway of the Ostetler residence. Freida, it seemed, was just coming from having her hair done.

Freida was elderly, polite, wealthy, philanthropic and was unfortunate in that her daughter was raped and killed near USC by a poor black man. She sought and got the death penalty in a trial that was highly publicized. However the actual execution, once over, received attention only by Amnesty International who published the statistic . . . three months later. Freida was so infuriated by this -- that there was no real effort to make an example of one person's dreadful actions against another -- that she founded MACE to see that executions would be broadcast to the world showing what violence against another would result in.

During the entire interview, Freida charmed Wanda into complacency with her hospitality and apologies only to rip her to shreds with delicately placed jabs that bit to the heart of Wanda's well-hidden femininity: "That is such pretty hair when it's cut well . . . Wonderful material, I should

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recommend you to a tailor . . . On TV you've always looked good in that sweater . . . ."

Wanda actually cried when she got back into her car. And then spent the following weekend, and nine hundred dollars, at a spa.

Today, Wanda had even taken care to pick out an outfit that even the Wicked Witch of West L.A. could not insult. Now, however . . . .

"The hearing's in five minutes. Look at this. Shit."

"Incontinence is such a debilitating disorder."

Wanda smiles and pulls herself together. She stands up and takes a deep breath.

"Well," she says, "how do I look?"

"Like you pissed your pants."

She nods. "Yup," she says. "But reality is only what the camera sees, right, Norman?"

The hearing is shut to the public and to live media coverage. Because there has been such polarization in this case, and such rambunctiousness, Judge Samuel Horowitz had no choice but to clamp down on the courtroom. In his preface to the courtroom he explains that the choice was a difficult one for him. He is a strong civil libertarian, so limiting the media during a trial works against his logic and his instincts.

Wanda leans over to Norman and whispers that for Freida, Judge Horowitz is a godsend: not only is the good Judge pro-free speech, he is also an advocate of the death penalty. For the ACLU, on the other hand, the trial has been like picking between your mother and your grandmother for a six-month stay on a desert island. Different factions have filed motions for a variety of reasons: that a public execution is a violation of a man's right to privacy; that executions are all a violation of a man's right to a good attorney; that there is no way to properly fill a jury with a poor black man's peers; and alternatively for the right of the trial to be open to the public and for the executions to be televised. Ultimately, they tried to delay the hearing indefinitely, making it unwise financially -- and statistically improbable for the aged Freida Ostetler -- to continue the fight. But when Freida started tugging on the purse strings that kept so many causes active, not the least of which was the Governor's own political action committee, delays turned into decisions and MACE kept on rolling.

The hearing itself is short and somber. After Judge Horowitz's brief preface to the courtroom, he reads a prepared statement from the Governor indicating there would be no stay of execution for anyone on death row regardless of what is decided here today.

The Judge then has the Bailiff switch on a large television to show a tape of a live killing. The tape, the Judge explains, was procured from a local television station. To Norman's horror, it is one of his, one he took in Miami a few years ago and was picked up and broadcast nationally. He indicates quietly to Wanda that it is his. She replies that she knows and that if the judge approves live coverage, he's got a good chance of filming them personally.

Norman is starting to hate his job.

The Judge then goes on to state that he has never before been faced with deciding between fighting against such blatant and wanton revenge and such a need to educate criminals about the consequences of their own ill deeds. Nevertheless, based on the arguments brought forth in this courtroom -- especially that televised death seems to have no measurable ill effect on our society and that part of the reason for capital punishment is its exemplary nature -- he will allow executions to be carried live on television, the station of which will be chosen at a hearing on another date.

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That event, he reassures the courtroom, is guaranteed to be as ugly as this one.

Freida Ostetler sat in a deeply-colored wooden chair with her hands folded neatly on her lap. Her finely coiffed silver hair shone like a halo against the white wall behind her. Wanda's shoulder was barely visible, though clearly present, in the lower left corner of the video footage.

"Mrs. Ostetler, you must be pleased with the outcome of all this."

"Oh, yes, Wanda, I am. It's been such a long and sorrowful affair for me and my family."

"What did you think of the Governor's remarks?"

"Well, I had already spoken with him last week and he reassured me then that he would not interfere."

"Really. It sounds as if you have quite an effect on the Governor."

"We've known each other for many years."

"Mrs. Ostetler, the next scheduled execution is of Franklin Jackson and now that it will be televised, along with the other forty-seven people on death row, what impact do you feel there will be? Do you expect an immediate response to this?"

The picture zoomed in close to the woman's face. Very close. So close that little pools of makeup could be detected in the wrinkles of her skin.

"Oh, yes, very much so. Those people all watch a lot of television. I think that's mostly what they do, you see. At first, I expect everyone to watch it and be horrified. Some will probably vomit and be gravely ill. Then they'll know the consequences of their deeds. I am confident that those people will think twice before running off and raping people and killing people and maiming people."

"One of the issues here is that the execution will go on as normal, except of course that cameras will be present."

The picture zoomed out and moved right, showing the profiles of both women.

"Oh, yes. That's what I want. That's what all of us at MACE have worked so long and hard for."

The picture came in on Mrs. Ostetler again.

". . . except that the head of Franklin Jackson will be covered by a hood."

"Well," the camera came in closer, "of course. I mean, when that animal begins to writhe and burn when he starts sucking in that gas and his lungs start to suffocate, then his face will look just awful. I mean, really, there will be children watching out there. We can't have them see everything, now, can we?"

"But if you don't show everything, then do you really believe your own point?"

"Miss, I am a decent woman. And I must draw the line somewhere. I mean, when someone gets run over in the street, people stop and stare, but they don't run up and look at the broken bones, do they?"

"In fact, they do, Mrs. Ostetler."

"Well, that's not what I do."

The picture zoomed out and slid behind Wanda, bringing in more of her cheek and shoulder but still focusing on Mrs. Ostetler.

"Mrs. Ostetler, according to Camus, a French jurist once calculated that one in every 257 executions is of an innocent man. A reprieve was even granted here in California in the late 50's but it arrived too late; the man had already been executed. With that in mind, doesn't televising the execution of an innocent person make us all party to a grave injustice?"

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"Your calculation leaves a great deal to be desired in this day and age. We have an excellent legal system and I think it's wrong to criticize its accuracy. Even if that were true, we would still get 256 very good lessons."

"Do you plan to watch the next execution, Mrs. Ostetler?"

"Oh, my, yes. We'll rent a ballroom at the Biltmore and throw quite a little f^te there, I must say."

"And will you watch the others?"

"Well, I doubt it, you see. I mean, as much as I'd like to, my calendar is really quite busy."

"So you won't make a point of setting aside a few moments to watch someone put to death?"

"Well, no. After all, what's the point, really? I mean, I'm not the one who needs to watch this. It's the hoodlums who need to watch them."

"Do you think these hoodlums will watch them? Assuming, of course, they know they're hoodlums and that that is what hoodlums are supposed to do."

"Of course. That's what they do, isn't it? Watch television?"

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
KPOC TELEVISION STATION  
4:47PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Cecil chews on his cigar. "Nice interview, Wanda. You gave her a chance and her true personality really came pumping out."

Wanda beams. Her freckles start to glow as she puffs up her cheeks.

"And Norman," Cecil continues. "You must have the most vicious instincts. Whatever possessed you to zoom in that close on the woman. My God! She looked absolutely ghastly."

They all step out of the tape-room and Wanda takes a seat next to the set. Cecil starts toward his glass cube then realizes they had sat down. Wanda whispers to Norman that she loves to keep him out of his cube. The entire staff vehemently opposes smoking, and since Cecil loves his cigars, it is their little game to keep him in foreign territory. Cecil turns and stands before them.

"So, are you two going to get along?"

"Oh, yeah," Wanda says. "We're pals."

Norman slumps down in a chair next to her.

"Norman?" Cecil begs confirmation.

"Oh, yeah. She eats like a pig, though."

"Just 'cause I wouldn't give you any."

"I see," Cecil nods. "And what's the status on the serial killer?"

"Hard to say, really," Wanda says, leaning forward, putting her elbows on her knees. "No one is in at the DA's office. But they gave me a written OK on going on patrol tomorrow night. We're supposed to meet Murray in Westwood around eight."

"Murray?" Norman squints.

"He's the cop assigned to the case. He's fat as a tire," Wanda explains.

"Very good," Cecil exclaims, walking away through the middle of the set.

The television news set is made entirely of polished cement. Cecil had it designed to be quintessentially urban, focusing of course on those elements of urban life from which the news usually comes.

Norman is wondering how he'd spray-paint his name across the KPOC logo.

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The tables and benches are all stark and smooth and the overwhelming shiny greyness that radiates gives a somber feel to a rather happy crew. The cameramen are all very muscular and wearing shorts and a pair of them are betting on the inaccuracy of this evening's weather report while they throw a frisbee back and forth between them.

Behind him, by the window, Norman turns around to see Chloe White sitting down to get a little makeup before the broadcast. Her hair is blonde, neatly and simply cut, and her face is honest and serious. She has on a handsome white blouse that is tucked into a pair of cutoff jeans and she slaps her bare feet on the floor thoughtfully as she edits the evening's news. She holds a blue marker in her teeth that the makeup man, a very skinny bald fellow, is starting to get irritated with because he is trying to pencil her lips.

Soon Dwight shows up and sits down next to Chloe. The makeup man is clearly miffed at his presence because he isn't even through with Chloe yet - she refuses to put down her "paperwork" and it keeps getting in the way. So he storms off in search of all that "African-American Makeup." Dwight is wearing a dress shirt, coat and tie in preparation for his co-anchoring of the news with Chloe and has on bicycling shorts and a pair of sandals.

Chloe pulls her papers down from her face and looks at Dwight's legs.

"Why don't you just admit it, Dwight: you're gay."

Dwight smiles. "I'm not gay, Chloe. Just because I shave my legs does not mean I'm gay."

"Give it up. You really want to be a woman. You want to so bad, you take up a geeky sport like pedaling just so you can say you have to shave your legs."

"You do have to shave your legs."

"Oh, come on. Why?"

"Because if you lay down the bike and you get a strawberry, then it's going to be full of hair."

"So?"

"So you don't want hair in your scabs."

"Since when is there an aesthetic quality to scabs?"

"We're talking about pain here."

"Oh, don't be such a crybaby. Are you trying to be a crybaby? Is that one of those gay things? Or do you think crying is a womanly thing and you want to be like a woman, which is pretty much the same thing as being gay."

"Chloe, it is not. Being gay is not like being a woman. It is like being a man."

"So what are you saying here, Dwight? That you want to be gay because it's more manly?"

"I don't want to be gay."

"So what you're saying here is that you can't help it. Were you born this way?"

"Chloe, I'm not gay."

"You just said that being gay is like being a man and you are a man aren't you? Or are you so far gone now that you think you're a woman?"

"What I meant, Chloe, is that gays like men because they like the homogeneity. For some, psychologically, being gay is being afraid of the differences in the sexes."

"So why do you shave your legs, then? If you're trying to be like other men, then why are you trying to be like a woman?"

"I'm not trying to be like a woman."

"Don't you find all this leg-shaving a little perverse, Dwight? Don't you find homosexuality to be perverse?"

"It's not perversity, it's fear. Fear of the other."

"Sounds more like self-indulgence."

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"It really is."  
"Like shaving your legs is self-indulgent."  
"Now, Chloe . . ."  
"Your self-indulgence is a woman's, Dwight."  
"I am not interested in looking like a woman."  
"You have the legs for it. Help me out here, Wanda. Doesn't Dwight have great legs?"  
"Beautiful legs," Wanda says. "As a woman, I'm jealous."  
"Hey, Wanda," Chloe stops teasing and grows serious. "Great interview with Mrs. Ostetler. We're leading with it."  
"Really? Yeah, well, thanks," Wanda says a little shyly. Then, recovering, "Chloe, Dwight, this is Norman Lessing. He works here now."  
Norman stands up and shakes hands all around. He is impressed by Chloe's strong handshake and then also by Dwight's. He feels as if he is suddenly a referee in a handshake contest.  
"You're the one with Horace when I was out at the zoo," Chloe says. Norman nods.  
Chloe purses up her lips and makes a mischievous face. "How about a bunch of geese?"  
"Oh, give it a break, Chloe," Dwight says. "That's the easiest one in the book. Gaggle, gaggle, gaggle."  
Dwight gets a long glance from everyone with that statement.  
"Alright, then. How 'bout owls?"  
"Super," Dwight says.  
"A parliament," is Norman's response.  
"Really?" Dwight says.  
"And peacocks?"  
"An ostentation."  
"You gotta be making these up," Dwight says.  
"Maybe," says Norman.  
"Know any others?" Dwight wants to know.  
"A few."  
"OK. One more, then."  
"A mustering of storks."  
"Bullshit."  
"Probably. My dad used to drill me on them when I was a kid hunting with him. He probably made some of them up just to impress me."  
"Well," Dwight says, "it doesn't matter. It's a pleasure to meet you. So you're the crazy video-journalist who's supposed to help us get this year's Emmy."  
"What do you mean by that?" Norman says, crossing his arms.  
"What he means by that," Chloe explains, "is that every year around this time, Cecil comes up with some grandiose plan to secure us the Emmy for best newscast as well as get us a commanding share during Sweeps Month. Last year he got us Chief Running Cloud. The year before that he came up with ol' girlie-legs here. The fact is, we've never won an award for anything except popularity and it's Cecil's goal to get us both. Right now, we may be the most watched, but we're also the most laughed-at."  
"How badly does Cecil want this award, anyhow?" Norman sits down and leans forward in his chair.  
"I don't know," Chloe goes on. "Rumor has it, he'll quit the business if he doesn't get it this time. Personally, I don't think he'll ever quit. But he's set you up, that's for sure."  
"Why do you say that?"  
"Because you're working with Wanda," Chloe says.  
Dwight taps Wanda on the knee. "Wanda here is the best reporter you're going to see, Norman. She's always in on the hot story and she's so

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independent she's got her own flag. Cecil put you with her for two reasons, Norman: she'll get you into trouble and she won't cramp your style. Working with her is no taxi job."

Norman is simultaneously trying to calculate the depth of office romance at work here and the extent to which he should be pissed off. When he thinks he has the romantic involvements of Chloe, Dwight and Wanda figured out -- none, just typical office flirtation -- he starts in on Cecil. All he can come up with is that Cecil has hired him for the instinctual manner in which he operates. Try as he might, he can't get mad at an employer for hiring him to do exactly the same things he had been doing at another station for the past fifteen years.

So Norman shrugs at the three of them.

"He hired you a little later than the others though, Norman. The Emmy's are next month," Chloe says.

"I suppose he has a lot of faith in me."

"I think he discovered you a little late. You're a great journalist, Norman, don't get me wrong. But if we'd have had you all this year, things would be different. Instead, we have to go out with a big bang in order to even get noticed. That's a lot of pressure."

"I'm just going to do my job."

Wanda touches him on the shoulder. "That's all you need to do, Norman. Don't try to do anything special."

A tall man with very long brown hair pulled back in a braided pony-tail walks up and stands before the four of them. He wears a cheap grey pin-striped suit and a bola and has a manila folder in one hand. He nods at Norman. Norman nods back.

"Hey, Norman, this is Chief Running Cloud, our weatherman," Dwight says.

Norman stands up. He looks the Chief right in the eyes.

"Good afternoon, Chief Running Cloud."

"You are very tall, Norman."

"Well, so are you, Chief."

"The Chief's got a doctorate in mathematics and physics, Norman," Dwight says. "You've gotta see his office. It's in the basement, away in the dark. He's got more computer terminals and printouts than you can imagine. It takes him half the damn day to figure out what temperature it is in his office."

"So what's the weather going to be like tomorrow, Chief?" Chloe asks.

"A high of 72 degrees at 2:37pm," is his reply.

"Oh, yeah?" Chloe replies.

"You were wrong today, Miss White."

"One degree, Chief. One degree. Hell, you said it was going to rain."

"I have fixed the formula," he replies.

"So what's it going to be tomorrow?" Dwight asks Chloe.

Chloe looks out the window. The sun is setting quickly among heavy red and blue clouds.

"How about 77 degrees? I don't know when. A bet, Chief?~~"

The Chief nods his head. Then he turns to Norman, nods again and walks through the set and disappears around the corner where a drape hangs for his delivery of the weather map.

"He's never right," Chloe says. "He thinks too much."

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
ROOM 204  
3:11AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

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Norman breathes. The air sifts in laboriously, out slowly. Again. He feels it fill, expand, push. His heart thuds away underneath. He listens to it speed slightly with each inhalation, slow during the exhale. He pauses his breathing and feels the heart slow even further. He closes his eyes and surrenders the effort and lets the breathing continue in its reflex nature . . . .

The picture showed that the covers were in disarray from the twisting and turning. One foot stuck out in the cool air. The man's hair was matted down on one side, an arm ran across his eyes. Duffel bags laid in the corner, camera gear was strewn along the wall and black jeans were tossed on top of them . . . .

It is another sleepless night for Norman.

He watched KPOC's eleven o'clock news broadcast hours ago. Chloe and Dwight looked sincere and professional. No one could tell that they all had on shorts, everyone except Chief who wore his dull suit and delivered his weather with copious illustrations and calculations, each with just the least bit of innacuracy. As Chloe had explained to Norman, the Chief built each prediction on a previous prediction. And since each prediction was itself off, the cumulative effect was that of geometrically incorrect data, enough to make the whole forecast worthless. It is almost pitiful how inspired Chief is to accurately predict the weather, tracking every conceivable factor on his vast arrays of computers and sensors only to be outgunned, ultimately, by the turbulence generated by a butterfly's wing.

Rather than run the day's events through his head again, like a cinema short that is the only feature of the evening, he switches the TV back on.

The Blackbeard Motel features 118 cable channels in all, collected from the satellite dish on the roof, near the pool's diving board. One channel shows Bonanza reruns, another Gilligan's Island, another The Lucy Show, and so on. Norman keeps zapping through channel after channel of late-night reruns. Even the Tonight Show is running a re-run show of its own, under the self-serving notion of an anniversary show. Norman is actually relieved when he finds a commercial:

"Hello, Mateys." A man in a nautically-striped shirt stands on the deck of a sailboat, a patch over one eye, one deeply-tanned hand on the rigging, one on the shoulder of a smiling, buxom blonde who is topless but has an arm stretched across her breasts to keep the ad presentable. "Manny of the Islands, here," he continues while steel drums tinkle away in the background. "Claudia and me, we're down in the Caribbean, see, having the time of our lives. Claudia is just one of the hundreds of beauties who travel down here in the Virgin Islands." Manny turns to Claudia. "I never have figured out why they call it that," he grins and Claudia bubbles. "And I run the wildest ship in the Caribbean." The ad then shows cheap, canned, aerial photos of the Virgin Islands, beautiful shots, the standard sort of post-cards families send to relatives indicating what a wonderful vacation they could have taken. "I'll take you to the best topless beaches, the best topless bars in all the Caribbean," Manny says, the camera back on him. "This vacation is guaranteed to clear your head of whatever's troubling you. So don't let the stress and strain of your city life keep you up at night. Come join me. Dial 1-800-MANNY-OF-THE-ISLANDS." The numbers show up on the screen. Norman counts seventeen of them, ten too many. "And if you're already worrying about the numbers," Manny says straight to Norman, "you really need to give me a call."

Norman switches off the set. He lays back in his bed and wonders if he isn't just stressed-out over the new job. Already, Cecil said there are great and dangerous things expected of him, and now he knows he needs to do them in a month. Maybe that is why he is wide awake, thinking about his

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body. Maybe not. He did the same thing in Miami, long before Cecil ever gave him a call.

In Miami, the doctor gave him a variety of depressants, Valium and Quaaludes even. They served him well when he wanted to get stoned. Norman prefers them over cocaine and pot. In fact, now that he thinks about it, he still has a huge variety of prescription narcotics in his trunk. But as far as sleeping goes, they only serve to make him think about the effect drugs have on the body, on the glands, the muscles, the brain.

Norman decides to think about food instead.

It is normally right about this time that Norman takes a walk and looks for a Cuban food joint with character. Norman doesn't expect to find much Cuban food in L.A., however. The gusanos stay mostly in Miami. But maybe he can find some platanos or flan in one of the Mexican cafes nearby.

As Norman looks out the door of his room at the pool below, a little naked boy climbs up the ladder of the diving board. Norman looks around for a parent but the area is empty. The boy steps forward on the board. The full moon up above shines so brightly on the satellite dish, it looks as though two moons are shining down on them. The boy runs toward the end of the board but, just as he is jumping, spies Norman out the corner of his eye. The boy becomes self-conscious and falls in a great, twisting arc from the mouth of the satellite dish to the open blue mouth of the whale-pool, simultaneously trying to remember how to dive and to cover up his privates. The boy makes a huge flop into the water, but swims frantically to the far side, climbs out, and scurries into his family's room, his feet slapping the concrete and dripping like a fish.

In the lobby of the Blackbeard Motel, Lee stands at the desk in her trademark black outfit, this time an ensemble of sheer black gauze strips over a black leotard. Though the gauze falls over her like a belly-dancer's outfit, it shows off a shapely, slender body. A dancer at heart? Norman thinks.

She is flipping through a book that is making her pucker-up in disgust and shake her head. She keeps turning, though, page after page, going "eeuu" and "oooh" and "Je-sus-help-us-Je-sus!"

"You sound like you're eating old mayonnaise," Norman says. "What's all the fuss?"

Lee looks up, wide-eyed.

"Oh, hi, Norman," she says. "It's this book I bought. It's really disgusting. It's about primitivism. You know, piercing your body, tattoos, stuff like that."

Norman looks at her ears. The right has only a couple of dainty hoops in the lobe but he counts no less than seven earrings in her left ear, tracing up from the lobe and even into the cartilage. Some of them are studs, some are hoops and a few of them are chained together.

"And that bothers you?"

"Oh, my God! Here. Look at this picture."

Norman looks down at the book. A man is hanging three feet off the ground from fish hooks that snag the length of his body and are tethered to a piece of wood above him.

"It looks like a re-enactment of a tribal ritual. Something the Indians used to do," Norman says.

"Yeah, well the clincher is that this guy isn't in any tribe. He does it because he likes it."

She turns to a few other pages in the book pointing out piercings through nipples, noses, genitalia. At every page Lee makes icky sounds and has to turn away.

"How can people do this stuff?" she wants to know.

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"It probably isn't that tough once you start thinking about it. Wire running through the epidermis. There's not that much to it, really. After all, how did you get your ear pierced so many times?"

"That's different. Lots of people do it."

"Well, that's all there is to it," Norman says. "Once you have been exposed to enough piercings, you stop thinking about them. Then the cooties go away," Norman smiles. "These people have just done it a lot."

"Yeah, but I don't go around sticking needles in my nipples."

"But you're thinking about the nipple as a sensitive area that is part of your body. If you could learn to think of it as just a piece of skin, it wouldn't be any big deal. Doctors go through the same thing. At first, they don't get any great kick out of cutting people open. But once they learn to separate the part from the whole, then it's no longer a squeamish matter for them."

"This stuff is just awful," she says, turning pages again.

"Then why did you buy it?"

"Because I like getting goosebumps."

BUDDHA'S CAFE  
3727 SEPULVEDA BOULEVARD  
3:38AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

The waitress wears her hair in an inefficient bun that is so furry it looks like an old chia pet. Her makeup is heavy and overwrought and though her perfume wafts thickly over the linoleum table top, it still cannot overcome the stale smell of alcohol she brings with the two cups of decaf she sets down in front of Norman and Lee. When they said that they'd want a lot of coffee, the waitress apparently thought she ought to bring it all at one time because both the cups and the saucers are running over. The waitress wipes a little at what she spilled on the table, but mostly she just spreads it around. Then with a big smile she says the eggs will be along shortly.

Lee leans back comfortably in the green vinyl booth and spreads her arms across the top. She grins and looks around.

Buddha's Cafe is not the kind that serves healthy food from the orient. Lee explains that it was originally named for a great sax player who was built like Buddha. His "healthy" appearance had an enticing effect on the diners, and the profits soared, but he didn't care: he bought the diner so he could be around people.

After Buddha died, the business really took off as the place become something of an historic landmark, if only to the locals. There isn't much business late at night, but it is Buddha's will that it always stay open. The day-time profits keep the place open at night. It is just hard to find quality help.

When the waitress returns, she sets a huge plate of steak and eggs in front of Lee and chorizo and eggs in front of Norman.

"I would have guessed you for a vegan," Norman says.

"Naah. They drive me nuts. Actually, I don't normally eat that much meat, but every once in a while a get a mad craving."

"So why do you work the night shift?"

"Why not? I mean, what's time? I've always been a late sleeper. My teachers in high school were always calling my house trying to find out why I was never in class. Mostly it was because I was just in bed asleep. My parents didn't help much. They are both jazz musicians, up late every night. It's just the way I grew up."

"Didn't they care that you aren't in school?"

Lee is in the middle of a mouthful.

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"Umm," she says. "Kinda sorta but not really. I always read a lot. I never worried much about it, but they didn't really know whether or not they should. I was a good kid and all, but they were such amateurs at being parents that they didn't know if that was enough. So I took the SAT early and did great and they felt OK after that."

Norman considered her for a moment over the hot chorizo in his mouth. She seemed nearly thirty, but: "Are you going to college now?"

She is never going to finish a mouthful.

"Oh, yeah, I'm all done with that. I did the art history routine at Cal. Fun. Painless. What college is supposed to be, la-la-la."

Lee started a fork toward her mouth but thought better. "How 'bout you?" she says.

"What do you mean?"

Lee tilts her head forward, trying to get her food down.

"Why are you out here? Where did you go to college? Why can't you sleep at night?" She darts a big forkful into her mouth and grins at him.

While Lee eats happily Norman explains his job and his coming out here. He hadn't gone to college because he discovered photography late in his teens. For years he did nothing but portraits. As he started to do photos for magazines, he learned that he liked where it took him. He was equally enthralled by the politics he followed as a result of his work. Consequently, he had been working steadily either as a newspaper photographer or television journalist since he was twenty-one. Only lately, his work had been starting to blur his perception.

"So are you starting to see yourself as one of your subjects?" Lee asks, searching the bottles on the table for a particular condiment.

"I suppose. I just spend so much time focusing, always focusing. And to focus, you have to examine your subject, examine the surroundings to come up with the precise arrangement within the framework of the camera. I just haven't been able to leave that kind of awareness at the office. When I get home -- or to the Blackbeard," he looks at Lee who is chomping away and staring right at him, "I envision myself from various angles within the room when I lie down and close my eyes. I just can't stop thinking."

Lee comes up for air. "You know, athletes go through the same thing. A Magic or a Gretzky doesn't become a great passer without an extraordinary awareness of what's around them. They have to concentrate hard on the movements of others and themselves in order to pass off between everybody. You're probably going through some of the same thing. You're just so tense now with the new job that you can't turn it off at night."

"Maybe," he says, as Lee sprinkles some liquid all over her eggs. "But this has been going on since long before this job."

"Then maybe you need to work out," she says.

"I hate that. Is that everyone's answer to people's foibles these days? If you work out then everything will be OK?"

"I don't mean it like that," Lee says, dismissing his slight anger. "I mean, if athletes go through a similar experience but they can turn it off at night, then the only difference between you and them is the activity. Maybe if you just took a run and a shower before sacking out then you'd be OK."

"Maybe," Norman says, feeling a little cranky. "But there's something else about the consciousness: when I experience it, it's not entirely like I'm one part and I'm just watching me. It's kind of like there's no difference between the me and the action. As if when I do something, it's done, or already done -- no cause and effect, just movement. Does that make any sense?"

"Sounds like a description of Nirvana."

"It's not Nirvana. It's tiresome."

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Lee puts her fork down and puts her elbows on the table. She regards him for a long, soft pause and then takes his hand.

"You know what you need to do?" she says.

Norman raises his eyebrows: what?

"You need to eat."

He nods.

"You need to not try to do so much. I know it does no good to tell you to relax. I remember I used to hate having my mother tell me to do that; as if telling meant it was done." She leans back and says in a deep, preacherly tone, "I now pronounce you man and wife -- done," she says, waving a hand across the booth. "But I will tell you not to do so much. Stay tense as hell if you want. But just slow down."

She gives his hand a squeeze and they share a long pause.

"So what's your last name?" Norman quizzes.

"Colton. Tracy Lee Colton."

"Your father is Fox Colton?"

"Yup."

"He's a helluva trumpet player."

"He's the best trumpet player," she corrects him.

"So why 'Lee' instead of 'Tracy'? Didn't your parents mean for you to be called 'Tracy'?"

"Something crazy I did when I was 13. I was changing schools, reinventing myself, proving my ardent independence."

"So what do your parents call you?"

"Tracy."

"So should I call you 'Tracy'?"

"Oh, no. My name's Lee. Regrettably or not. I also have a thistle tattooed on my butt. Sooner or later you just have to forget about what you've done and move on."

WESTWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
WESTWOOD BOULEVARD  
9:59PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

"You look good, Murray. Have you lost some weight?" Wanda says, shaking his hand. It is important to get on the good side of a cop early, Wanda explained earlier. Especially when you're going to spend the evening with him.

"Forget it, Wanda," he says. "It is a new suit, though. I bought it across the street at that Italian joint," he says, pointing across the street with a chubby paw. "The woman kept pokin' me like was a sack of flour. Poked me right out of eight hundred bones. I may be fat," he says, strutting and twirling, "but damn if I ain't a good lookin' fat man. This Norman?"

Norman introduces himself and they shake hands hard. Murray is strong and sly and it shows in his face. His round, wet eyes dart around constantly but they never linger and they never return to the same place twice, as if he is taking it all in and would measure it later over a cheeseburger.

"So what's the plan, Murray?" Wanda says.

Murray starts up the street past the expensive shops. "Oh, the usual. Wander around this elite little area, let you get your footage of the efficient cop on the beat, see what happens."

"So you're not going to tell us anything," Wanda says in a tone that also says, "typical."

Norman glances around. Why would Murray give anything away? What Wanda doesn't know she will prod him for and Murray cannot afford that. Murray has to keep her close to him. Close so that he can keep the media far

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enough from the real work his boys are doing elsewhere and likewise keep himself just the right distance away so that should anything go down, he can get there quickly enough to get good press. "Political symbiosis" Norman called it in Miami.

"You should know me well enough by now, Wanda. You'll get everything I've got," Murray says, his arms spread wide in mock honesty.

Wanda has another tack: "Well, then, why don't you fill Norman in on the case?" she winks at Norman. Perhaps Murray would give something away inadvertently. Fat men love to tell stories, she whispers to Norman.

Murray strolls on a ways, his arms swinging, his round nose in the air. As he turns a corner, amidst the crowd, he stops and starts tapping on his side. He then reaches back and pulls a tin of Copenhagen out of the seat pocket of his eight hundred dollar suit. He gives the tin a few good cracks, digs out a heap with the top and empties it into his mouth. His tongue works with the tobacco a while as he moves on up the street. Norman and Wanda trail behind, Wanda toting her big purse and Norman, six-foot six with hair that makes look him six-foot eight, hauling his camera gear and trying to look inconspicuous.

"I like dippin' when I'm in Westwood," he says to anyone who is listening. "It feels good to have some country in your mouth while you walk around with all these rich pricks."

"'Country pasture' he means," Wanda whispers.

"The chief says I gotta fit in when I do this kinda stuff. Hell, I'm expensing this suit off little by little every month. But it doesn't mean I gotta @MDBO-be them. Cocky foreigners, asshole college kids." Murray considers them for a moment and points up the street at the UCLA campus. "At least they don't go to USC," Murray says, a pudgy index finger in the air.

"You see," Murray stops and looks into Norman's chest. "There's plenty to hate here if you want to be resentful. The privileged are wandering around here like they deserve special treatment. But there are plenty of good folk around, plenty of people working hard." He passes a trio of musicians playing recorders and chimes. "Some of them have a weird idea about what work is, though."

Murray looks at Wanda's chest absent-mindedly. Norman can see he has his mind on something coming around the corner.

"Take these kids, for instance."

Seven gang-bangers come around the corner in full dress regalia: Raiders caps turned backwards over red bandannas, black t-shirts, satin and leather jackets and heavy gold jewelry. They strut in close formation, forcing others out of their way and making lewd remarks.

"They get more mileage than a mo-ped out of shocking people. No damage tonight, though. They'll make some folk uncomfortable, kinda like they feel when someone burns a cross in their neighborhood. But you don't put on your best Sunday-go-to-meetin' necklace if you're going to whack somebody. Naah, they'll just wander around 'till midnight, talking about fucking this girl and that and then go home and think about it some more. Same ol' teenager shit I did back in Fort Worth."

Murray turns his body and faces them square as they walk across the street. A few of them spot him and shout indecipherables and flip him off. Murray spits in their direction.

"Friends of yours, I see," says Norman.

"Old friends. I knew their older brothers. I knew one kid's old man. It's sad. The circle just feeds on itself."

Murray turns and starts walking again.

"White man really did it to them. Men were slaves, not women. So when we beat the hell out of the men, the women spoke up knowing we wouldn't do anything to them. The men couldn't speak or we'd beat them some more. So

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the whole family grew up looking to the mother, knowing the father was powerless in his position to do anything. So the man did less and just grew, through the generations, to be less and less responsible. No wonder they're so fucked-up nowadays. Every family that's fucked-up is fucked-up because of the father. Because he's violent, stupid, drunk, stoned or, worst of all, not around." Murray stops at another street corner and has a look around. "Generally speaking of course," he says. "Anyway, that's my excuse for them."

"To blame yourself, white man?" Wanda says.

"Yeah. Being Catholic makes you wonder if somehow you didn't do it."

"I didn't realize you were such a sensitive guy, Murray," Wanda teases. Murray gives her a glare. "What we should have done is beat the women," he snorts.

"So what is the story with this serial killer?" Norman asks.

Murray tongues the dip around in his mouth.

"Nobody knows," he says. "We're trying to pin him down on a lunar cycle. We think he's operating only on the second and third days of a full moon."

"Does that make much sense?" Wanda asks. She has her hands in the jacket pockets of another oversized suit, a dapper grey glen-plaid.

"Not really. I mean, what makes you go off on the second day? Couldn't find someone on the first day? Still, it's too early to tell. There have only been three murders."

"So are you saying you need more killings before you can figure out who it is?"

Murray shrugs. "Not necessarily. But we're going in all directions to avoid any more homicides if we can. We've even got another theory that the guy's working on a constellation pattern. We've been plotting the locations of the murders and then comparing them to astronomy charts. So on the one hand it looks like it could be Beetlegeuse. But then again it could be Orion's belt. It could be almost anything depending on your perspective. If you plot the murders and treat the locations as far apart, then you get one image. If you treat the locations as close together, you get another. The fractal imagery is killing us. We're not sure which image is right. But even those are based on the idea of plotting the location of the bodies when they were found and not necessarily where the people were murdered. Again, with only three killings, the locations at this point could mean everything or nothing."

Murray wanders around the next corner.

"At this stage," Murray says, "it's all just research and speculation. It becomes very paranoid." Murray stops a couple of buildings down and points to the sidewalk. "Take these spots for instance."

At Murray's feet are three black spots several inches apart. They look like some kid had been warming up his spray can. Norman looks around for graffiti.

"Look at it. The thinking goes like this: first, you figure the pattern has meaning, a message. Second, you think the message has something to do with you or what you're looking for. So a good cop looks up to see if a piano isn't about to be dropped on him."

The three of them look up at a streetlight. The building nearest them is a one-storey job.

"And then you look around to see if you aren't in someone's line of fire."

They look at Murray who has already looked around twice before they got to the spot.

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"But the fact is," Norman says, "three spots can only be arranged in either a line or a triangle, so there's not much likelihood of a message in it."

Wanda stares at Norman. "Norman," she says, her hands on her hips, "I'm impressed."

"Don't be," he says, "it's a composition issue, not a mathematical one. It's why I hate shooting three people."

Murray raises an eyebrow at Norman.

"So you're in a helluva bind then, eh, Murray," Wanda says.

"Basically. Still, we look in the personals and check out the psychological profiles."

"And how were they murdered?" Norman says, setting down the heavy equipment.

Murray spits a good five feet into the gutter and has another pensive look around. He gives Norman a long pause.

"Broken necks. All very neat and efficient. There has never been any evidence of a struggle. It only takes about five pounds of pressure to break someone's neck, you just have to know how."

"Murray," Wanda says. "C'mon. There's more to it than that."

"What? Is this guy from out of town or something?"

"As a matter of fact, he is."

"I just moved here from Miami."

"You're not just a new guy, you're a fucking new guy. A regular FNG."

Murray looks down at Norman's black cowboy boots.

"Nice boots. You lay them on their sides at night?"

"Always."

"Good man." Murray pauses and hums. "You want some Cope'? I'm sorry I didn't offer you some before."

"No, thanks, Murray."

"Is this male bonding episode over yet?" Wanda says. "Can't you just tell Norman what this killer has been doing without whipping out your machismo?"

Murray smirks. "Why is it smart, pretty women always got so much attitude?"

Murray crosses his arms.

"This killer is different. After breaking their necks, he messes up their faces. Spreads grease paint around some. You know, like those lines and V's that mimes put on themselves to make them indistinguishable. It's supposed to make them universal or something. Anyway, this guy messes them up into some kind of message or something, we're not exactly sure."

"So is this person after mimes?" Wanda asks.

"The victims aren't mimes. But they are actors. Or were anyway."

Murray turns toward them. "And here's an interesting twist: they had all acted in a Tennessee Williams play at one time or another."

"Strong female characters in Williams' plays," Norman conjectures.

"Yup."

"So maybe the guy's got something against women," Wanda says quietly. "Not just women, but strong women."

"What makes you think the killer is a him?" Norman asks.

Murray looks at the ground.

"You know," Murray says, thinking, raising his head. "Nothing. In fact, considering the lack of force needed and the delicacy of the work, it might very well be a woman."

"What are you saying? That women aren't strong? That men can't do delicate things? What kind of bullshit is this, anyway?" Wanda is hot.

"Relax, red," Murray says, emphasizing the "red." "We haven't crossed the line into specificity. We're profiling here, not generalizing about the

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whole human race. Jesus, why do smart, pretty women always got to have so much attitude?"

Wanda grins a little bit. She is uncomfortable with compliments and Murray delivers them like a professional softball pitcher: fat and innocuous-looking but the execution keeps her off guard.

"So what you're saying is it could be anybody," Norman says.

"Right."

"And you want me to bring that up in the interview?" Wanda asks.

"You can if you want but it wouldn't be accurate. You see, while it could be any of these people walking around, it will only be one person. And although we don't have a profile we like on this killer, we do have leads. Leads I expect to pan out very soon."

"Like tonight?" Wanda wants to know.

Murray walks to the gutter and empties the tobacco from his mouth.

"Like very soon," he says.

"So let's pick a spot," Wanda says.

Norman already has his camera on his shoulder and is scanning the angles. "I like the graffiti in this alley and the theatres in the background," he says. ~"It has a good feel."

Murray shrugs.

Wanda asks for a moment to compose herself. She likes to approach an interview with a combination of ruthless trial attorney and huckster talk show host. She asks questions she knows the answers to in order to bring the audience up to date and then, to spark interest, if only for her own personal thrill, she asks blunt, somewhat crass questions to catch the subject off guard and make them ill at ease. Even if she doesn't get any great news, it is always fun to watch someone squirm in front of the camera.

While Wanda paces and taps her forehead, Norman zooms in and out, feeling for the proper frame. The theatre in the background, he notices, is playing Meta-Man. Across the street from it, a group is gathering in anticipation of another movie. Others sit around small tables in front of a cafe drinking espresso and . . . Norman zooms in farther. A woman in a red turban lifts a glass of white wine to her thin blue lips. The man across from her, much younger, with a fresh haircut checked the time on his gold . . . Bulova. A shadow moves in front of the man. Norman zooms out to see the image. It is one of the black kids Murray pointed out earlier. Norman checks around. He is alone! Start taping!

Wanda hears the camera begin to hum continuously. She looks up, startled. "What are you taping?"

"I'm not sure."

Murray looks up the street.

The kid moves into the crowd in front of the theatre. In a smooth, rehearsed movement, almost pretty, he pulls a 9mm out of his shiny Raiders jacket. He pushes it up against the bald part on the back of a head that belongs to another black kid with a towering, cylindrical doo. Norman tapes the quick reflex of the gun as the hammer reacts to the finger that twitches back the trigger. The pressure from the bullet causes a small eruption in the front of the kid's face. He then falls and his date goes down with him, hand in hand. Two more shots are fired, this time into the air, and everyone hits the ground, leaving only the one kid standing, hovering over them all. Norman catches a scared grin on him. And then the shooter takes off running.

The tell-tale pop-gun cracks of the 9mm brings a microphone out of Murray's suit. He describes the event in four or five quick codes and takes off toward the scene. Norman picks him up too, whipping out not one, but two huge .44's from his sides.

Wanda is stuck up against the wall. Then, as Murray turns the corner, she takes off after him. After all, she can catch that fat-ass.

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So what is Norman to do? Haul this heavy camera after them? A jog, maybe, but not a sprint after this kid.

So where is the kid heading? Where exactly do you run when you whack someone in the middle of a crowded area?

Well, you run away, and if you're smart, you double back. Not exactly retracing your steps, but close enough, looking for a getaway car that is parked close by and pointed toward a traffic-free street.

Norman whizzes the camera around, checking the street. People are stopped in the middle, getting out of their cars.

Maybe you run . . . down an alley.

Norman takes a few steps forward and turns the camera into the alley.

Norman fades to black.

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
ROOM 204  
11:01PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

"Good evening, and welcome to the news at eleven," Chloe says into the camera. She has on a bright red jacket and a crisp white blouse. Her flaxen hair just brushes the shoulders of the jacket. In all, she really doesn't look like a "Chlamydia," the name given her by Charlie, the rental car agent, and his friends. "A gang-related killing took place in Westwood tonight. Our own Wanda Overgaard is there on assignment and caught the killing in some dramatic footage. Wanda?"

"Thank you, Chloe," Wanda says, still in her over-sized suit, looking a little worn and frumpled but still quite professional and serious. "Gang rivalry and retaliation over the killing of drug czar Fausto Jimenez continued tonight with the killing of a young man waiting in line for a movie in fashionable Westwood. The young man was standing in line with his date when a rival gang member came up behind him and shot him, killing him instantly. When the assassin fled the scene, he was apprehended by our own reporter, Norman Lessing, who disarmed him with a video camera. The entire event was captured on film by Norman which we will now show you."

"Je-sus-help-us-Je-sus," is Lee's reaction to the footage.

"The assassin, Jimmy Johnson, is well-known to have been an aide to Fausto. It is rumored that the young man who was shot, Alexander Williams, was an assistant to the man known only as 'Pump.' The identity of Pump has never been discovered and his involvement in the killing of Fausto is under investigation. The police department has high hopes that Jimmy Johnson will provide some indication as to the relationship of these killings. Chloe?"

"When do the police expect to have more information from Jimmy?" Chloe asks.

"Within the week. Jimmy has been hospitalized and is unconscious from the blow he took from Norman. He reportedly took 37 stitches in the head."

"Thank you, Wanda."

"In town three days and already a hero," Lee says. She sits on the edge of the bed holding a book and a pack of ice she brought from the lobby.

Norman looks at himself in the mirror. His good left eye examines the reflection of his right. The eyepiece of the camera was pushed hard and far into Norman's eye socket by the pressure of the kid running full tilt into the lens. His eye is almost swollen shut and the swelling is already starting to drift down into his cheek. He is going to have a helluva shiner.

"'Apprehended.' Makes it sound like I wanted to run into him."

"You said yourself that you were looking for him."

"Yeah, but that's not the truth," Norman says.

"But it is accurate, isn't it?"

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"Accurate language is not the same as the truth."

"What's the difference?"

"The difference is that accuracies like that make me into things I'm not. People draw heroic conclusions about me from tiny inferences all because the language fails to describe the circumstances. That's how I got this job, that's how I got this fat lip and that's how I got popped in the eye. Next thing you know I'll go on a date and I'll suddenly be Don Juan."

"Sure," Lee says. "Sex equals AIDS."

Norman regards Lee. She has on a deeply cut white v-neck t-shirt under a black suspender-leotard and is swinging a bag of ice between her legs. Her hair is knotted on top of her head in a black ball.

"Well, no," Norman says.

"You're blowing it all out of proportion," Lee says. "Here," she says, patting the bed. "Lie down and let me put this ice on. You need to relax."

Norman hesitates for a minute, then takes off his boots and spreads out. His feet stick out over the edge of the bed. He flinches at the pressure and the sharp coldness of the ice being placed, ever so gently, over his eye. He closes his eyes and runs the picture of the room through his mind.

"And now here's Chief Running Cloud with the weather report," Chloe says on the TV. The Chief drones on through report after report of barometric measurements, humidity levels, temperatures, variations, averages, percentages . . . a Farmer's Almanac of information describing a zone in which the temperature range for this time of year is all of ten degrees.

Finally, Chloe asks, "And what exactly was today's high, Chief?"

"77 degrees."

"And you says it would be how high today, Chief?"

"72 degrees, Chloe."

"Thank you, Chief." Chloe smiles a little, suddenly looking slightly bitchy, slightly like a Chlamydia. "And now for the sports . . . ."

"Why do they prod him like that on the air?" Lee asks, holding the bag of ice slightly so that the full weight of the bag won't put too much pressure on Norman's eye.

"They have a bet going. Chloe says he thinks too much, doesn't just go with the flow."

"Know anyone else like that?"

"Hey, that's different," Norman says, rising.

Lee pushes him back down, flopping him on the bed and then grabbing his beard to keep him steady.

"Yeah, yeah, I know all about it," she says releasing his beard.

"~Listen, I brought a book for you. It tells you how to get to sleep without pills."

She lets go of the bag and opens up the book on Norman's chest.

"It's got all these different methods: Nidra, Pranayama, Tenlax."

"I'm really not into any of that mystical stuff, Lee," he says, sitting up again.

"Oh, shut up, Mr. Skeptic. These are medical methods, exercises designed to induce sleep. You don't have to chant anything."

Lee puts the book on her lap and leans over it, reading. Norman glances down at her shirt. The drift of her shirt from his angle clearly exposes a breast: soft, chalk-white; pink, glowing nipple. Norman lingers: one-eyed, silent.

Lee suddenly senses the silence and looks down at her shirt and realizes the situation. She turns toward Norman. He blinks the one eye. She smiles and sits up straight, blushing like she is ready to explode.

"Je-sus, aren't you embarrassed?" she says, a hand across her chest.

"Not really. I wasn't leering. It was just there," Norman responds.

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Lee puts a hand to her face. "I'm so hot. I blush so hard," she says. Norman puts a hand to her face. It is warm and soft.

"Don't you blush?" Lee asks. "I mean, it's kind of hard to tell with that beard."

"No," he says, "I really don't."

"Never?"

"No. Not that I can remember."

"That can't be true."

"Maybe not. But it's accurate," he says.

Lee pushes him back down again and puts the ice back on his face. A Manny of the Islands ad comes on the TV. She watches it with a crooked squint.

"That's what you need," Lee says. "A vacation. You need to take some time off."

"I'm taking a few days," he says, adjusting the ice a little. "At least until this eye heals some. I need to find a house. Maybe I'll go looking for a house."

"What's wrong? Can't stand the company at the Blackbeard?"

Norman takes off the ice. "Oh, no. Nothing like that. I mean, I just need a house."

Lee looks at him with a face that is half critical, half playful.

"In fact, it would be nice if you went with me, showed me where to look."

Lee nods her head. "I could do that," she says.

She puts the ice over his eye again.

"There's a dinner party coming up Saturday night," she says, holding the ice firmly in place. "I'd like you to go with me."

Norman doesn't say anything.

Lee pushes down on the ice.

"OK, OK," he says.

"Is that accurate?" she says.

"No," he retorts. "But it's the truth."

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
3220 ARIZONA STREET  
11:12AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

The Suds 'n' Duds yellow pages ad claimed it had 100 washers and dryers. Norman counts them and they have 107 washers and 55 dryers. Why not advertise that they have over 150 washers and dryers? Why not say "over 100 washers and over 50 dryers"? Norman starts to run ad copy through his mind and settles on the fact that he might write ad copy one day: it seems a more arresting pastime than being a journalist has become lately.

As Norman scans the room he recognizes that Suds 'n' Duds is arranged as two joints: the suds and the duds. The duds is clean and efficient, with polished cement floors and tall white walls. The large round port holes that are the dryers line three walls of the room, their stainless steel rims encircling the grey pupils of glass that stare out at the rows of glimmering white washers that sit with their lids wide open, in formation, offering, like so many beggars, to wash Norman's clothes in exchange for a handful of silver pieces. The suds half is a saloon offering only beer and wine and burgers and dogs. Allman Brothers music is playing and it floods over the washers. There is a rotten pool table by a long wooden bar lined with stools and a wall with several unattended video games.

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People mill about the washing machines, glaring down into them in search of lost underwear or socks. A homeless fellow runs his hand through each of them for change that might have spilled out of someone's pockets.

Norman picks a few washers farthest away from the saloon. There the music is the least disturbing for while he likes the Allman Brothers' music, he is starting to find himself hooked on bad polka music. And, beyond all else, he is here to catch up on his reading.

After filling three washers -- one each of whites, colors, denims -- he settles himself in for the haul.

Before coming here this morning, Norman walked down the street from the Blackbeard Motel to a newsstand he drove past many times before. It was a glorious place filled with periodicals of all kinds. Norman lingered over the Formula One Racing News, Forbes, Business Week, PC Week, MacWeek, UNIXWorld, Mainframe News, Sports Illustrated, The Sporting News, special interest magazines of all concerns. The keeper, who was an ex-jockey, hovered around Norman like a beetle. Norman knew it was patrons like himself that caused shopkeepers to put up "NO BROWSING" signs. So Norman was always careful to make generous purchases, if only of newspapers, and to make them often so that no such signs ever went up at his favorite newsstands.

Norman gobbled up the information in the magazines. He felt driven to do so. He picked up and read carefully, if only summarily, through all classifications. As he read on, he could feel some sense of importance in his deeds, that keeping up with this wide array of topics was necessary. He was compelled by some fundamental responsibility to know what was going on in the world. He felt that somehow, with all that was going on, with all that was important to so many lives, with all that was available, that it was morally right, politically correct, to have this information inside him.

For two hours Norman went from left to right through the entire length of the newsstand, never failing to notice a journal. Rolling Stone, Esquire, even the many women's magazines that had so little difference between them -- just varied arrangements of the same advertisements -- he went through. Norman even picked up Playboy, though he felt himself hesitate. But so many times people had mentioned this actress or that exposed within it, or this interview or another by dignitaries surrounded in an undignified manner within it, that he went right through the skeptical eye of the jockey and unfolded every page.

Now he sits in his sweats, comfortable but anxious to get through the five newspapers that sit next to him on the white plastic bench.

Before getting started, he reaches down to tie up his high-tops. He has a habit of not tying them when he isn't playing ball and just wearing them around for chores, but they feel awkward and clutzy when he crosses his legs to read. His left shoe tied up fine but the right lace breaks off in his hand causing Norman to re-lace the shoe and tie it up only three-fourths the way. He wads the lace up into a loose ball and takes a free throw at the trash can at the other end of the bench. The lace unfolds in mid-air and settles on the rim. No good. He gets up, compelled to slam dunk.

At the trash can Norman is met by the homeless man who was roaming around Suds 'n' Duds since he got there.

"May I have that?" the man asks politely.

"You want a broken lace?"

"It's a very important piece of string," he says. The man is unshaven and probably drank a lot. His stringy hair falls over his face which, under close inspection, is translucent and veiny, like an old oily Texaco map.

"Sure," Norman says. "It's yours." And he walks back to the bench.

The man comes near.

"It's funny how it works, isn't it?" he says, licking his lips.

Norman looks up at the man.

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The man leans over a little and put his hands on his knees.

"The light," he says pointing to the rows of fluorescent lamps on the ceiling.

"Funny?"

"The most powerful vacuums there are. They're everywhere."

The man moves closer. He doesn't want everyone to know the secret.

"The lights are vacuums?" Norman asks.

"The suck out all the darkness," the man divulges. "They suck it all out of the room."

"Lights suck up the darkness," Norman repeats.

"Shhh. . .," the man says. "Not everyone knows."

"Well, shouldn't they?"

"Maybe they're the ones responsible," he says waving at the room.

"Someone's got to build the machines, install them. Maybe they think we don't know."

Norman nods his head.

"Maybe you can't see with the bum eye."

"The left eye's good," Norman says, suddenly feeling a sting in his right cheek.

"You gotta be careful. When they stop running the vacuums, they sneak around in the dark and that's when they get you. Is that what happened to you?"

"No, it was an accident."

"Maybe," the man says, nodding, calculating. "Maybe they think we don't know that these rooms have to spin around for the vacuums to work."

"They do?" Norman asks, wondering somewhat if he ever should have thought about the slam dunk.

"Thanks for the string," the man says in a whisper.

Norman leans back against the wall behind him and watches the man wander off toward the dryers. He moves stealthily but stiffly, like an old spy who spent all night sleeping on concrete.

Norman returns himself to the business of newspapers. They sit stacked eight inches high: the Journal, the Times, the Register, and so on. He starts at the top, section one, page one, column one. He scans down through the headlines, measuring the relative importance, the immediacy of the news, checking quickly for anything that requires his instant attention. When he finds an article of particular interest he reads it all though sometimes he hesitates and weighs the need to turn to some page farther along in the section. Sometimes he scans each page as he goes and then reads the rest of an article when he gets to it deeper into the newspaper.

As he reads, he thinks ahead. He reads down through the remainder of the article thinking, often correctly, what will be written next. His experience with the news leaves him with few surprises after the first couple of paragraphs because the styles in each are the same: they run from the crucial to the banal. He can guess, with relative accuracy, the players and their reactions, at least with regard to international and domestic affairs. The sports section has a reasonable level of surprise, at least in those sports that provide parity. And the entertainment sections often provides him with some sense of newness and occasionally brings a smile to his bruised face. But those events are often so trivial that they're more like filler -- a newspaper's own Hamburger Helper. Even so, he reads on.

As he turns the pages, a sense of sameness starts to creep in. The format, the participants, the events, their concerns, all seem to have been played out before. Perhaps they have not, but his awareness of them becomes so acute that the news seems repetitive, which it is by the time he has re-read the news in the third paper. Still, even the first article had that same feeling. Norman's awareness and familiarity has become so acute that

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the occurrence and causality of the events wash into one another. He looks out at the pages like he has seen them before, some time, a minute, an hour, days ago. He dissolves into them not sure if he is reading or has read. The stories begin to play out as if they are a tale he has heard before or is in. He finds himself participant and audience to his own act of reading the pile of information he had, at some time, brought before himself.

His arms weigh heavily on his knees, but numbly as they hold the paper out. He can feel the blood filter through his arms and back again with each heartbeat. The air runs through his nose to the bronchial tubes where it is hauled into the body by the pulmonary veins. His eyes absorb the light reflected by the paper. His mind assimilates the shapes in the reflection. The shapes of the letters on the page have their own references and the sequence gives him the news. The more he becomes aware of, the slower he reads until he has nearly stopped altogether. Pumping, sifting, reading, thinking, the machine Norman has reached its capacity for tasks that can operate simultaneously and for each of those tasks the progress is virtually nil. Had it not been for the loud, irritating buzz of the washing machine that announced it had run its course, Norman would have sat there, stuck in his motionless state of motion.

He rises and washes the ink off his hands in a sink by the dryers. As he assesses the dryers, looking for a few empty ones to use, he notices that his old shoelace is tied to one of the dryers.

Norman peers into the dryer. It is spinning, heatless, on fluff, and staring back at him, wide-eyed and eager, is the little stiff spy.

Norman opens the door: "What the hell are you doing?"

The man spins slowly to a stop. When it halts, he is sitting like a dog and braced to keep from bouncing around inside. "I told you before: they have to spin the place around in order to get the lights to work. This is the only way to see the place as it really is."

"What? The room spins around the dryer?"

"I'd let you in but there's barely room for me in here," he says, grabbing the string and tugging the door shut again. "Push the button, will ya?" he yells through the glass. "I need to stop moving again."

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
LA CIENEGA AND SUNSET  
8:11PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Cache Booty is a strip joint and Thursday night is Velcro Night, the night when the patrons, hard men -- plumbers, journeymen, escalator repairmen, most of whom are married -- put on a fuzzy yellow suit, run toward a wall covered with the hook part of velcro and bounce off a trampoline to see who can stick highest on the wall. The strippers are tipped well to pull the men off the wall in the most provocative manner, grabbing in all the wrong places men who are stuck six feet up on a wall as helpless and immobile as in a Roach Motel.

This is where Cecil wanted to meet Norman, to see how he is, to see what progress his prize journalist is making toward shooting a drive-by.

Norman did notice that many of the men are smoking cigars, an act that would attract Cecil to a place like this. The women are also very attractive: very young, 18-year-olds or around there. They all have taut stomachs and large bare breasts. They stumble around in black stiletto heels and g-strings of various colors, pushing for drinks, pulling the men around. It always fascinated Norman how loud women are in male strip joints and how quiet and manipulatable men are by comparison. He doesn't really see Cecil as the kind who would go for a place like this, though perhaps it was just

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this quality of submission that would bring him here: a gregarious, dominating man who liked to shut up and watch.

The bartender is large and pretty. Obviously strong and tough, he nonetheless has a eunuch-like quality about him that makes his fierceness somewhat passive and friendly, like a Great Dane is around kids. He is well-dressed, in a loose-fitting single-breasted suit, the kind the FBI wears to mislead all but the most discerning eye. Norman imagines some large gun or club under the suit, the sort that suddenly appeared out of nowhere when President Reagan was shot.

The one thing that particularly interested Norman is that the Cache Booty pours a Black-and-Tan. The bartender smiled when he took the order; he liked serving up a Black-and-Tan. He pours it with a certain pride -- the Bass first and then the Guinness slowly over a bent soup spoon -- and then returns to tell Norman it is on the house. He says he respects a man who fights and even more one who isn't ashamed to go out in public afterward. Norman desperately wanted to correct him, to set the record straight so that he wouldn't suddenly become some Jerry Cooney with a beard, but the bartender was called away to separate two men who have started shoving each other over who is next into the fuzzy yellow suit.

The long plank bar is relatively quiet since the velcro festivities are in full swing. Norman is not particularly enchanted by this kind of an event, if for no other reason than he is sober, so he pulls out the Los Angeles Times he wasn't able to get to in the laundromat and spreads it out over his corner of the bar.

While the KPOC news last night managed to make Norman into an accidental hero, thus cashing in big on the sensational, it nonetheless failed to explain what happened in the hunt for the serial killer. As it turned out, they did manage to catch a suspect, a Ms. Hillary Hines, wrestling with a man in another alley, the Times reported. She was apparently damn pissed off at the capture: it took four SWAT members to get her off the guy. She finally gave up when one of them ripped her gabardine dress. No shots are fired, but one of the swat team suffered a fractured cheek bone when Ms. Hines bashed him in the face with her shoe. The man was uninjured, although he looked like hell in the photo.

Ms. Hines was from El Segundo and taught p.e. at a junior high school there. Fellow teachers who were interviewed said she was inordinately quiet, though not necessarily shy and no one knew much about her personal life. She was a good teacher, but ever since her divorce she never got involved in extra-curricular activities.

As if she has developed a new one of her own? Norman wonders. He wonders who her husband left her for: a co-worker? a man?

The Times also went into some depth regarding the shooting in Westwood. As inter-journalistic competition would have it, they mercifully neglected to mention Norman by name, though they otherwise did describe the capture accurately. As the article continued it went deep into the history of the feud between the two drug dealers, Fausto and Pump.

It seemed that things had been fine as drug businesses went and during the past few years Pump rose high in the crack industry. His distribution was widespread and so elaborate that no one actually knew who Pump was. Lately, however, heroin had become chic which caused a stiff drop in crack sales and -- as any good businessman knew -- a need for cutbacks. Cutbacks in this business, though, meant maximally demoting members of the competition. The competition, of course, was Fausto.

Fausto, as might be expected, was operating in the same competitive spirit. As Oso explained to Norman over a bottle of beer, Fausto had been peddling heroin for years and had cornered the market by the time people became bored with putting coke up their noses or crack into their lungs. But

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to further promote the demise of his competitor's crack business, Fausto also started to sell crack -- but cheaply. Very cheaply. And crack, like so much black coffee, inevitably lead to something with a bigger bang for anyone who was in it for the jolt. Fausto let the crack go at rock-bottom prices to entice the new-comers and then let the addictive qualities of the drug create the repeat business. Regardless of the markup, the sheer volume of the product he moved made him millions.

As Norman sees it, though, Fausto obviously didn't have a knack for violence. This was unfortunate because his business-savvy was too good for the drug trade and brought others against him. Consequently he was caught, as the paper described, alone and defenseless in, of all places, a drug store picking up some condoms. Pump's men shot him so many times his arm came off.

Without Fausto's connections and control, the drug community had been in disarray ever since. Demand for smack was still up, but the suppliers were all rallying for control and either couldn't be found or were short on the goods.

Pump's people, meanwhile, were happy to fill the gap with the poor quality rocks they had, at newly inflated prices. Others in Pump's brood sought to break into Fausto's heroin market, wheeling and dealing with the suppliers, trying to instill in them, with their violent techniques of persuasion, that reliability was the single most important quality to seek in a business partner.

The shooting that occurred in Westwood was retaliation for the killing of Fausto. The kid who died, Alexander Williams, reportedly had been a confidante of Pump's. He gave and carried out Pump's orders. The assassin was Jimmy Johnson, one of Fausto's friends.

Norman figures that Jimmy was typical of Fausto's crew in that he did what he thought he should: retaliate for the death of his friend. But when it came to violence, he did it so ineptly that it brought much unneeded attention to the rivalry. Now, the whole matter was escalating out of control, even for gang violence. The disdain and animosity in this conflict was so fierce that it was now going beyond its usual boundaries. This sort of fighting was usually confined to the hoods, the clubs -- places where the impact was felt most because if affected the friends and families. But lighting up some kid in a public place like Westwood was not only a sure-fire way to get caught, it was also a good way to bring sharp focus on both gangs.

Cecil appears suddenly and quietly in the stool next to Norman. He already has a cigar, a big wet Havana, rolling in his lips.

"Norman," he says loudly, "you are one sad lookin' mutha."

"It's been a tough week," Norman replies.

The bartender delivers two more Black-and-Tans.

"Good evening, Mr. Hunsacker. It's been quite a while."

"Yes, it has, Otto. Yes it has."

"How is your show doing?"

Cecil took a swig of beer commensurate with his size.

"We are stuck at the top, my friend," he says, putting the beer down.

They all regard the beer. It is fascinating the way a beer poured half-dark at the top and half-light at the bottom manages to stay that way until the last sip.

"I'm glad to hear that, Mr. Hunsacker."

"Well, you should be, Otto. And you should also know my new star reporter, Norman Lessing, who happens to have the best instincts in the business."

"We've met," Otto says, smiling his crisp, white smile.

"Have you?" Cecil says, turning a skeptical eye toward Norman. He pauses and then continues, "but then, Norman, you know everyone."

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Cecil rolls the cigar in his fingers for a long time, silently, until Otto goes away.

"Gorgeous lad, isn't he?" Cecil says.

Norman gives Cecil a sideways glance.

"He must attract homosexuals like a sale at Neimen-Marcus."

Norman gives his curly mop a shake.

"Norman," Cecil says, looking at him intensely. "How are you?"

"I'm tired," is Norman's response.

Cecil nods. "I see," he says, pausing. "But will you be back in a couple of days?"

"On Monday."

"Good. Good. Wanda misses you. She sends her regards."

"Did you assign her someone new?"

"We have some cameramen," Cecil says, firing up his cigar with a blue-tip he snaps off his fingernail. "But we're not replacing you, if that's your concern. She's got cameramen working with her, not a video-journalist. And god-damn if they aren't just dumb as dirt. To call them gorillas would be an insult to the gorillas. So we have to keep rotating them until you get back. But you know how she is. She does a lot of research and then calls as she needs someone. Just like you."

Norman really wasn't so much concerned about being replaced as he was hoping. He sips a little and wonders about having a cigar himself.

"Norman, just exactly how did you manage to find your way into the Pump-Fausto rivalry?"

"I didn't. I just noticed it was going on."

Cecil turns toward Norman, blocking his view of the Velcro Games.

"It was incredible footage. Damn near that of a drive-by."

"You mean it doesn't let me off the hook for your drive-by?"

"Norman, I don't make the rules. You do. This is just the beginning. This is the sort of stuff you do."

"You mean it just keeps getting worse."

"No," Cecil says, his hands on his hips, enlarging his appearance so much it is blocking the light. "It just keeps getting more exciting."

"Cecil, my only interest is to cover stories as if they were TV commercials; no investigative stuff. This hit just happened where we were. We were there for the serial killer, remember? Not for any gang rivalry. Wanda even made the arrangements. I don't want to get any deeper into it than that."

"And that is what's so great about it."

"Cecil, I'm not interested in having any more of these accidental involvements."

"Interest has nothing to do with it"

"I didn't even have luck this perverse back in Miami, Cecil. It just isn't natural. It's more like the hit happened where I was, like it was set up so that I'd be certain to get it on film. It doesn't even seem accidental."

"No, no, no. It's just that weird. But forget it. It's not important. What's important is that you're well and you're making progress of your own on this."

"No I'm not. I'm not making any progress," Norman said with a slight tone of stubbornness and trying to muster up a pout.

"OK. You're not," Cecil says, turning toward the bar.

Norman turned toward Cecil. "If that's my assignment, then I'll pursue it. If it isn't then I'm staying the hell away from the whole affair. I'll cover the court bullshit and the amoral divorces but unless you tell me otherwise, I'm not interested in Pump or Fausto or any of their screwed-up, gun-slinging friends."

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"In other words, you don't know who Pump is."

"Well, I have some leads, but that's all."

"Exactly what I expected."

Norman takes a hard swallow.

"As far as assignments go, you just need to keep on the serial killer story. The crazy woman's getting an attorney now and she'll be arraigned on Monday afternoon, plenty of time for you to get healthy and cover the hearing."

"By the way, why didn't you run the serial killer story? There was nothing at all in the broadcast about catching the suspect."

"Simple, my friend: we didn't have any footage. No fault of yours, of course. You can't be in two places at once. And I'd rather you were where you were."

"And . . ."

"Norman, this is TV, remember? We are entirely visual. That's why people tune us in. If that weren't true, we'd have put newspapers out of business long ago. But hell, there're more of them popping up every day. Thank God there are only 15,000 channels; at least we can't get any more competition."

Norman curls his fat lip up into a smile.

Cecil puts his hand on Norman's shoulder and looks at his face.

"Norman, you look like a damn mean fighter," he says.

"To tell you the truth, Cecil, I hate violence," Norman says, wondering if he shouldn't just pull that ceegar from Cecil's face and smoke it.

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
LOS FELIZ BOULEVARD  
5:05PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Echo Park has a lake in the middle of it. Actually, it is something in between a lake and a pond. Norman can't help but think how much it resembles the La Brea Tar Pits. In both places the animals seem unreal and stuck in sludge near the downtown area. Echo Park does have a fountain, though, but it is more like a large, errant hose. And grass lines the edges of the lake where displaced people gather looking lonely and confused.

All day long Lee has directed Norman from two-bedroom house to loft to bungalow to hovel and back again in search of something he liked. She had a list of them on a yellow pad on her lap which she checked off with a green Crayola (it was all she could find in her purse). Since he hadn't given her any guidelines, she produced a survey of homes all in the general vicinity of areas she approved of and all with the minimum requirements she felt were needed for a home. Norman wondered how little that actually was. In most cases the addresses provided mere sustenance: walls, roof, toilet, sink. And in no case was there luxury. Lee did, however, fall in love with a loft. Norman thought it looked more like a garage. It had unpainted cement floors and walls and a high tin roof. A toilet stuck out from one wall with nothing around it but a roll of toilet paper that had come unraveled and plumbing stuck out in various other places like so many capped sticks. She was thrilled with the potential. All Norman saw was work. She told him she found it when she went to a party one night in the five-storey parking garage next to it. Norman still might have considered it had it not been for a train track that bordered the other side.

After looking at fully 19 different places Lee became frustrated. Norman hadn't expressed so much as an ooh or an ahh at any of them. To make things worse, he didn't say he didn't like any of them either. In short, she felt she had failed. She felt he should have been amazed at something. He

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explained to her that it takes time to find the right home and told her he wanted her to keep helping him look, that she had done an excellent job. Deep down, though, he had been amazed.

It happened in the big, empty loft/garage she showed him. He was kneeling at one corner, inspecting the plumbing -- doing what he felt was the "guy" thing to do when looking for a home. He stood and turned around to look at the room. It was big as a football field. Standing right in the middle of it was Lee. She wore a simple, billowy light-orange outfit that day instead of her usual black ensemble. She told him she didn't want him to feel uncomfortable when meeting the realtors; like he was married to a mortician or something. As he looked at her gaze around the room, it no longer looked empty: it suddenly filled up with her face and her eyes and her long pitch-black hair as she glided along the floor inside her glowing dress. Columns of dusty light beamed through the skylights, partially obscuring her as she moved in and out of them like a fan-dance. The whole place burst with Lee's presence. Quickly, though, he recognized the phenomenon and shook it off: epiphanies bugged him.

Having exhausted the list of homes just outside the Echo Park area, they agreed to stop by her parents' place for a drink since they lived nearby.

Norman and Lee drive past the park and up the hill to the top. The street gets more and more narrow as the unkempt trees and bushes creep farther and farther onto the roadway until they reach a stretch of road so narrow the bushes scrape the sides of the Mustang 5.0. Lee instructs him under a low-hanging bush and has him stop the car on a what looks like a wooden patio. The patio sticks out from the edge of the hill away from Echo Park and toward the industrial valley that lies below. For miles along the floor of the valley and up to the hills far away in the smog, smoke stacks, warehouses and business complexes are surrounded by fences and cars that run along an endless web of streets and highways. But behind Norman is lush shrubbery and trees. Standing there on the edge of the terrace, Norman feels vaguely like Nero.

Lee calls him through a door behind some shrubbery. Inside, the house is brick and wood and exotic-looking rugs are thrown everywhere giving it a cool warmth of comfort but not of grandma.

Fox Colton is doing the laundry. He has on a pair of cutoff jeans and has a pipe in his mouth. He is moving the whites from the washer to the dryer. Lee hugs him from behind, forcing him to drop them on the floor. When he turns around, his big hairy belly makes Lee lean over far to hug him around the neck. He has short, unruly tufts of grey hair and a stringy goatee. The combination does make him look like a fox. During the hug, Fox Colton sticks out a hand and shakes Norman's.

In the living room, Fox serves up caipirinhas. A caipirinha, Fox explains, is Brazilian grain alcohol mixed with lime and sugar that is ground together with a pestle. It is sweet and slightly gamey-tasting and hits Norman in the back of the mouth.

"These things warm the soul and heat the tongue," Fox says, settling back in a chair. "A devastatingly sensual combination. Exactly what you'd expect from Brazil."

Fox regards Norman for a moment. "How'd you get scarred-up, son?"

"A little accident last week," Norman says back, rubbing his lip and wiping a palm across his eye. "Nothing serious. Just a matter of being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Bruised lips are a problem," Fox says, eyeing Lee.

"Have you played down in Brazil much?" Norman asks from the end of one couch. He is looking down at a pile of instruments that lay scatter-shot across the floor.

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"Not in a long time. The last time I played down there was with John Coltrane, if that gives you any idea. But we played a lot down there. Damn wild time. Great people. We just let go. It just forces you to let go."

"Brazil you mean? Or the drink?" Lee asks, rattling the ice cubes around in the glass indicating she is ready for another.

"Oh, no, Brazil," he says, waving his arm across his chest. "You close your eyes, you lean forward, and you play. You go on forever -- all night long and into the next afternoon. I can't keep it up too long, though. The Brazilians . . . remarkable. How can they stay that loose for so long? I never understood it."

"I always thought your music was very loose," Norman says.

"It is. But it's the same, too," Fox says. "Otherwise we'd all fall apart. Even when we write, we make sure the bass and rhythm are down first before we lay down anything else. We need to make sure they're right because they won't change, they have to stay rigid."

"Do you write when you write? I mean do you write it down?"

"Naah. The recordings are for that. We play for them and from them. We never write anything or read anything."

Fox drinks some and looks around. Norman is fascinated by the casual way he takes in a stranger. Fox is still in his cutoffs, bare-bellied, unshaven -- basically a man at home late on a Saturday afternoon, sucking on a caipirinha. Norman still expected to be judged somehow, if only because he arrived here with his daughter and looked like he was beat up recently.

"No, that's not true," Fox speaks up. "Classical is all written," he says. "You can't improvise classical. Every note is too important." He nods for a moment. "That must be read. It must be written."

Fox starts to swing his arms and legs around in a wild motion all aimed at moving his considerable girth forward in his chair. At the edge of his seat he begins: "I remember the first classical piece I ever played. Not really the first -- I played a little classical when I first started to play the trumpet -- I mean the first piece I ever played to perform. I had heard this recording of a Vivaldi brass piece done on original instruments. You know: the brass used during Vivaldi's time. Man, it was something." Fox closes his eyes and his furry grey eyebrows move down toward his cheeks. He seems to be hearing the music in his head. "It was just magical," he continues.

"So I got the sheet music and I sat it on the music stand. I was young, and the notes on the page didn't ring in my head like they do now. The notes just looked like black ink; they didn't speak to me. The title was right, it was the music I wanted, but I couldn't be sure until I played it. In my head I could hear the music I heard on the record, hear the soaring melodies ring out like nothing you ever heard, man. So I looked at the music, I picked up my trumpet and I played it. I played the notes that sang in my head."

Fox finishes off his caipirinha.

"Most goddam disappointing thing I ever did, man," Fox says. "It absolutely ruined it for me. That Vivaldi concerto had been magic for me; I had no idea how he did it or how they made that music sound that beautiful. But once I had played it, it all went away. I now knew how he did it and the magic was gone." He shook the ice cubes around in his glass. "It's the reason I play jazz, man. Well, that and having King Oliver and Louis Armstrong tell me that playing the trumpet was better than sex," he says, trailing off. "Boy, that'll change a youngster's life."

"There's more magic in jazz?" Norman asks.

"Yeah. Lot's more. Not for the audience, I guess, but much more to the musician because you don't completely know what's next. You're tapping

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into something in your brain, man, something possibly wild and unknown. Classical, you always know: the notes are right there in front of you."

"Sounds kind of selfish, dad. Sounds like you play jazz because it makes you feel good and not the audience," Lee says.

"Yeah, sweetie, damn selfish," he replies. "But hell, it feels good. And when you're on, you get shivers down your spine. You just hope you're getting that same feeling across to the crowd."

"Can't you get that feeling from classical?" Lee asks.

"I can't. Maybe others can. I can get it from hearing it. I can get it all day long from hearing it, but not from playing it. It's kind of frustrating for me, really."

Fox Colton sits there in silence for a long time, closes his eyes and listens to something in his head. Then he opens his eyes and stares at something in his glass.

Lee goes into the kitchen and crunches up three more caipirinhas while Fox puts on some Mahler. Outside, the three of them sit quietly on the porch and watch the night close in on the hazy valley below.

HOLLYWOOD HILLS, CALIFORNIA  
42388 HOLLISTER WAY  
9:54PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

"My boyfriend, he's an environmental . . . what did the father in the Brady Bunch do?" Martha can't remember.

"He was an architect," Ramona says.

"That's right, he's an environmental architect."

Martha's only distinguishing feature is that she is tall. Otherwise, she is boney and plain and has long, nondescript brown hair -- just the sort of combination that makes her a good model: she takes makeup well. Her friend, Ramona, is toothy and blonde and rep's the au courant athletic clothing line for the L.A. area. Martha and Ramona were old high school buddies of Lee's. The host likes to have them around like attractive human accessories.

Norman smiles across the table at Lee.

"He's taking me to the Emmys," Martha continues.

Norman turns his head toward them. That goddam Cecil is still counting on him to win an award for the newscast, an award Norman wants like hemorrhoids if he gets it the way Cecil wants. He looks down at his lap and frowns at the distasteful inevitability of drive-by shootings and then wonders where Cecil will be sitting at the Emmys.

"I don't know how he got tickets."

"Where are your seats?"

"I don't care. I'm wearing that outlaw dress I bought."

"Oh-my-god, that thing's like going topless," Ramona gasped through a big smile. "Your boyfriend's going to be pissed."

~ "Wait 'till he sees the lingerie spread I did," she laughs.

Lee turns to Norman and rolls her eyes at the ceiling

"Damn it! It's good to see all of you," Theo pronounces.

The dinner party is at his house in the Hollywood Hills. The occasion is: no one has had a dinner party in a long time. He became aware that there had been no parties and that they should be having parties, so he decided to throw one. He invited everyone to climb out of their rut, get dressed up, and come to his fabulous house in the Hills. After all, how can you possibly have fun in your dreary little lives when you know you should be gulping champagne and spooning caviar?

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Theo's house is a bizarre and accidental mix of post-modern and classic Hollywood 40's architecture. It was originally owned by a popular actress of the 30's and 40's. When she died it was bought by a horse breeder and then by a civil engineer who married well. The civil engineer, Theo claimed as he gave Norman a tour, went crazy and staged the murder of his wife. The civil engineer was never convicted and subsequently spent the rest of his life putting his absurd theories to work. As a result, doors opened to walls, stairways ended at ceilings and hallways went nowhere. When the civil engineer died, the house was still under construction and looked like a Hotel in Beirut. Theo picked it up for a song and finished all the civil engineer's plans right down to a small room with no access. It has been the love of his life ever since.

The house is replete with abstract paintings and tribal fetishes which perpetuates the eclectic atmosphere. Theo tops it off by playing a random mix of Puccini arias, Beatles, Led Zepplin and hip-hop music that keeps moods and conversations wildly varied.

Years ago, Theo worked for the company that managed Fox Colton's band. Lee met him when she was sixteen and didn't think much of him. But, she explained to Norman on the drive over, they got to be friends over the years and they talked whenever Theo felt depressed, which was surprisingly often. He probably didn't care to be alone in this playpen of a house, Norman figured.

Theo takes a call at the door quietly. He steps outside to deal with the visitor. Since Norman is near the door, he takes the opportunity to watch through the crack as Theo exchanges cash for an eight-ball of cocaine with some hands that move in and out. OK, Norman figures, it's a party. He feels a little uneasy, though, when the red car that drives away has a "Drake Car Rental" bumper sticker on it.

Theo sits down at the head of the immense table. He is nearly hairless except that he is heavily unshaven and wears a bright green linen suit with a white shirt buttoned to the collar. The table is so filled with bowls of fruit, bread, vegetables and pasta that there is barely enough room for the plates and glasses. And the bowls are so tall that only the faces of people can be seen across the table. Elbows and wrists are flying every which way and bottles of chianti rotate constantly, interrupting mouthfuls and conversation.

". . . he was so embarrassed by the mistake he turned red as a baboon's butt," Lance says, sitting next to Norman. Lance works at Theo's public relations firm. He is a slight man, prematurely grey, and wears an ascot with a blazer. He handed Norman a wet fish for a handshake when they met which Norman instinctively crushed. Lance wilted a bit at the knees and slapped Norman in the chest when he let go. Norman apologized in the form of feigned interest in ascots and, when it was time to sit for dinner, insisted that they sit next to one another.

"I thought he was going to explode," Theo roars with laughter.

"God, I can't imagine," Martha says. "I embarrass so easily. My whole face just red-red-red."

"Hand me a beer, will ya?" Alex says.

"Here. More wine over there?" Darlene returns.

"Yes."

"Absolutely."

Norman watches Alex and Darlene carry on. They are friends of Theo's and thus far have managed to keep pretty much to themselves. New, young lovers, Norman thinks. Alex is just breaking into the professional tennis circuit and is reveling in the new-found attention professional athletes command. Darlene is lovely and immaculate and she contrasts deeply with Alex's coarse social mores which were refined during a 15-year tennis camp.

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"Darlene took one of those home pregnancy tests, you know," Alex says to Theo, "and it came up positive. I couldn't believe it. So I went back to the store and I bought . . ."

"A six-pack?" Theo shoots out.

"Yeah. I figured it was one of those cheap kind and we'd better check again."

"What do you mean, 'cheap kind'? Did it have a blue wrapper around it? Come with a scantron card and a number two pencil or something?"

They start to laugh and get the eggplant going around the table.

"I don't blush easily," Ramona says. "But when I do, my nose turns red."

"Rudolph the bitch-deer," Martha says.

"You blush when your purse spills out."

"That's because her gynecologist prescribes birth control pills with a 'Safe to Fuck' label on them," Lance says.

"All out of the Fred Flintstone chewables, I guess," Theo rings out.

"No," Martha says, modeling a pout.

"Come on. It's a natural reaction." Darlene contributes to the conversation, surprising everyone.

"Blushing is the most natural of human emotions. It separates man from beast," Theo says, tossing a piece of eggplant in the air with his hand and catching it in his mouth.

"It's a symptom not an emotion," Norman says.

"Sounds like a disease," Lee says.

"Love is the most human of emotions." Theo lifts another piece of eggplant and belches unabashedly.

"Animals love," Ramona says, pushing a few strands of pasta around her plate.

"Animals mate," Norman clarifies. "Love is our invention. It excuses us from sanity," he grins.

"Aren't you two getting married soon?" Lance says to Alex and Darlene.

"No."

"Huh-uh."

"I thought you were pregnant," Lance says quickly.

"I was," Darlene says without blinking an eye.

"I'm so embarrassed," Ramona quivers, pulling the collar of her tennis shirt shut.

"Don't be," Darlene says.

"Forget it," blurts Alex.

"This is not appropriate dinner conversation," Lee says shaking her head and reaching for Norman's tequila.

"It doesn't matter," Darlene says, rubbing her shoulder against Alex.

"I'm embarrassed for you," Martha says to Darlene.

"Well, is everyone embarrassed now?" Theo jokes, settling everyone down again.

Lee looks across the table at Norman. He looks back, happy and chomping away. Lee cocks her head at him and wrinkles up her eyebrows.

"Norman doesn't get embarrassed," she says.

"Really?" Lance wants to know.

"You don't?" Martha says, squeaking a little.

"No."

"Impossible. It's the most human of emotions. Even if it's a symptom, everyone still blushes," Theo says.

"Not if you know what you're doing," Norman says, getting the last bit of tequila out of the glass.

"You make it sound like a high-wire act," Theo says.

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"The Blushing Walendas," Lee pronounces, forking a piece of eggplant into her mouth.

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
ROOM 204  
11:37AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

"I really have never seen you blush," Lee says, adjusting her pillow.  
"That's OK. You never saw me naked before last night."  
"But we've been friends for a while."  
"Even so, why should I feel embarrassed among friends? Assuming, of course, that blushing is a result of embarrassment."  
"Of course it's from feeling embarrassed. What else would it be?"  
"Shame, confusion. The sorts of things you endure after you discover religion and before you discover friends"  
"Are you saying that I blush because I don't have friends?"  
"Perhaps you don't believe in them strongly enough as friends."  
"And you do?"  
"No. I just know what I'm doing."  
"And what are you doing?"  
"I don't know so much what I'm doing as I do that I'm doing."  
"And that which thou art doing . . ."  
"Talking, eating, walking, thinking. The usual stuff."  
"What's usual about that? You're not supposed to think about those things. Those are supposed to be on autopilot, like breathing. Don't you think about work, sports . . . screwing?"  
"I think about the process. You can override the autopilot, cause yourself to breathe rather than be caused to breathe. The worst is thinking about sleeping. Of course, when you do that, you don't. I lie there waiting for the REM to kick in and it never comes. So I read. Then I think about the reading process, the symbols, their reference . . ."  
"Je-sus-help-us-Je-sus. Norman, you worry too much about details, specificity, pixels and particles. If you draw too many lines in the window, cutting the view into smaller and smaller pieces, you won't be able to see out. Quite Zen of me, don't you think?"  
"Can't see the forest for the trees?"  
"Pretty cliché of you."  
"I'm just aware, that's all."  
"Sounds like you're trying to kill yourself."  
"I know it sounds like it. But the body really has too strong a will to live. To a large extent you can override it, though, like the monks who meditate blood out of a limb or into another."  
"Can you make yourself blush? Meditate blood right into your face?"  
"No."  
"So, you're saying you don't blush because you think about blushing."  
"If you think about it, you can't do it. After all, you can't tickle yourself. Blushing has to come spontaneously. Spontaneity and contemplation are mutually exclusive."  
"Quite a club."  
"Except for boners. You can discover them or earn them."  
"Ah-hah! There's a case of blood moving both willfully and unwittingly. But you say you can't blush."  
"We men are an enigma."  
"You men are an enema."

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LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY COURTHOUSE  
8:52AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

The heat of the morning is so pervasive it is heating the terrazzo floor of the courthouse beneath Norman's feet. People are arriving in a hustle, dressed crisply if not uncomfortably. Their heels snap along the floor and stop impatiently before elevators and in lines. They pass Norman who stands sleepily in blue jeans, boots and a work shirt. His slightly unkempt hair and beard solicit a number of sour looks that on second glance quickly turn to approval when they spot the camera gear at Norman's feet. At that point they stand a little straighter, put out their cigarettes and fluff their hair.

Wanda shambles in with both her hair and a cup of coffee in her face. She finds Norman with her eyes almost shut and leans up against the cool marble wall.

"Don't say anything, Norman," she says, wheezing a little. "I always look like this when I'm getting along well with my boyfriend. With any luck we'll start fighting again soon."

Norman sets up his gear in the back of the courtroom. Up in front it is a real gang-bang as reporters jockey for position among the first few benches. Wanda isn't up to it. And because no food or drink is allowed in the courtroom, she has to be content with finishing her coffee outside. It isn't as if she is going to miss anything Norman can't get on tape. Furthermore, Norman has taken an extra precaution by taping a portable tape record under the front bench.

There is a sudden rumbling and then the doors to the courtroom swing open. Through them stride a tall and dashing black man in a luxurious blue suit. His hair is cut short, leaving him almost bald and he is clean-shaven. He wears elegant tortoise-rimmed glasses and behind them his eyes dart around swiftly. He sticks one arm out like a running back to keep the more anxious reporters at bay as they swarm around the woman at his flank.

The woman is small and has brown hair cut in an innocuous page boy. Norman zooms in. She moves quickly and athletically, utterly undaunted by her surroundings. Her dress seems a mix of yellow and white until Norman zooms in farther: she is wearing a white sun-dress with little yellow pineapples on it.

The attorney holds out his hand in a chivalrous gesture, guiding the woman into her chair. The man sits down next to her at the table and opens his briefcase and pulls out some papers he doesn't look at.

The District Attorney is already seated at another table and has with him three other attorneys. The DA is young and has none of the panache of his opponent but is smart enough to arm himself with good people in an effort to overcome the defense in numbers if not by skill. Still, today is just the arraignment.

Norman scans carefully for shots that will edit well later. He takes a long shot of the door leading to the judge's chambers to be certain he catches the drama of the judge entering and delivering the DA's charges. When the judge does enter, though, she trips slightly on her robe. She doesn't fall, but Norman knows the stumble will be edited out by the producer in an effort to maintain the viewers' faith in the infallibility of the legal system, if only in its appearance.

Norman scans around elsewhere and catches Murray the Cop tapping his stubby fingers on a can of Copenhagen he has on his knee. The benches behind Murray are filled with a lot of theatre-types who were noticeably angry but too afraid or ignorant of the law to voice it. Instead, they sit arm-in-arm,

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hugging one another without provocation. As Norman zooms in farther he finds that the women didn't shave their armpits.

Out of comparative interest Norman focuses on Ms. Hillary Hines, the defendant. With her arms up tight against her body, there is no way to know if she is kin to these theatre-types. But Norman does catch one interesting item: as she raises her hand to push back her hair, her arms are enormously muscular. With even the slightest turn of her wrist, her biceps inflate and pull thick, sinewy tendons along her forearm. The thin, malnourished theatre-types had no chance against this little body-builder.

As the Judge, Maria Fernandez, looks up, about to speak, Wanda taps Norman on the shoulder to let him know she is awake.

For the prosecution there is Steve Keogh who stands, speaks his name and sits down. The others on his staff nod furiously; well done.

For the defense is Philip Encher.

"Good morning, Philip," the judge says.

"Good morning, Judge," he replies, smiling.

"Great suit, as usual."

"Thank you."

The DA frowns while his staff starts tugging at their single-breasted suits.

"How does a p.e. teacher afford a top-dollar attorney?" Norman wants to know.

"She doesn't," Wanda whispers. "This one's pro bono. This one will get Encher a lot of publicity. He probably would have done it for free even if she had a million bucks."

"Ms. Hines," the judge begins, "you have been charged with . . ." she refers to the papers before her . . . "seven counts of first degree murder." She pauses for a moment, looking over the courtroom and carefully considers her next words. "Now, madam, this is very bad stuff . . . even if they were out of work actors." Norman catches a smile in his camera lens; she can't help herself.

The theatre-types hiss like they suddenly sprung a leak.

"No doubt, your plea is . . ."

"Not guilty on all counts," Philip Encher says.

"Alright . . . alright," the Judge says, looking over her calendar.

"The trial date is then set for . . . October 27th."

Shit. Norman leans back from the camera. The Emmy awards will be long gone by that date. No matter what Norman or Wanda do for this story, it will be irrelevant to this year's awards. Norman will have to find some other way to avoid a drive-by.

Leaning against the wall behind him, Norman looks down at Wanda. She shrugs her shoulders at him knowingly.

"Now, Philip, before you start complaining about what I'm about to say, I want you to know that I thought a lot about it and I'm not changing my mind, do you hear me?"

"Yes, Judge."

"No, I mean do you really hear me? I've made up my mind, and I've got a meeting right after this so I don't want a lot of carrying on. Got it?"

"Yes."

"Bail is set at one million dollars."

A collective gasp comes over the courtroom followed by dead silence.

"Looks like she'll need a million bucks," Wanda says.

"But Judge . . .," Encher starts in a most dignified whine.

"Thank you for coming, Philip. I'll see you in October," she says and quickly leaves the room.

Over Wanda's head Norman watches the people file out. They shuffle quietly. Even with the high bail, there is nothing entirely unexpected in

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the arraignment except that Norman feels Ms. Hines has the ability to commit the murders, if not the reason.

Norman watches in silence with Wanda as the last of the people -- and the DA with his staff -- file out of the courtroom, leaving only Encher and Hines and one other fellow standing at the wall on the far side of the room. Norman puts his camera on him. The man wears over-sized khakis and a flannel shirt. Norman zooms in farther. It is Charlie, the little fucker who rented Norman his car at the airport.

Philip Encher seems uncomfortable seeing Charlie. So much so, he leaves the room with Ms. Hines quickly. Charlie follows them out, keeping his distance.

"I'll get the tape recorder," Wanda says.

"Wanda," Norman calls out. "I've got to follow them."

"Why? It's done."

"I don't know."

"You sound like me."

In the hallway, Norman watches as Ms. Hines goes one way with two sheriffs and a woman who appears to be an assistant of Encher's. Encher and Charlie, in the meantime, disappear down the stairwell. Norman tries to keep up, trucking down the stairs with his camera gear. Norman circles the large lobby and checks every exit but it is useless: the two of them are gone.

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
ROOM 204  
12:21PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

Norman turns on a light in his motel room to check the local phone numbers for CompuServe, the computer-accessed national public information service. He is quickly accumulating questions and none of them are getting answered. He is particularly frustrated at all the loose ends he has regarding who this Pump character is and why he keeps running into Drake Car Rental; he thought Hertz was the car rental king in this town. To frustrate him even further, he has few people in L.A. to turn to for answers. So he decides to do some research of his own. He would hook up his computer and modem and dial up some of the databases in CompuServe in an effort to get his questions resolved, and to check up on whatever electronic mail that might have gathered in the weeks since he last dialed in.

Norman's portable computer has a built-in modem for talking to other computers through the phone. He pulls it from one of his duffel bags and sets it up on a spot he clears on the desk. Technologically, the Blackbeard Motel is a blessing in disguise. While it lacks any of the usual services found in other hotels such as room service or on-call maid service, the phone system is archaic and uncomplicated and therefore the room has only one line and no call-waiting. Due to this, Norman's call to CompuServe can not be interrupted by another call and therefore serves a modem connection well.

"Can't sleep, again, I see," Lee says, knocking on the door after she opened it. Working the night shift again, she has just come on duty.

"I figured I'd do a little work," Norman says, looking through a booklet.

"Spiffy computer. I didn't know you could type."

"Cute."

". . . one stop bit, seven-bit, even parity . . . ," Lee reads over his shoulder. "What's a bit?"

"Computer-talk. Computers are electronic, like light switches, so they talk in either on or off modes. A bit is a switch and eight-bits make a byte."

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"What's a byte?"  
"A character, like A or B."  
"Why eight?"  
"Pieces of eight."  
"Like what the pirates got from Spain?"  
"Yeah. They used to literally cut up their money, silver pesos, into eight pieces, like a pizza. When we created the dollar, we based it on the peso and we counted like they did. That's why even now, with everybody counting in decimals, the stock exchange still quotes is eighths."  
"Because they consider themselves pirates?"  
"Well, sortof."  
"So what's that got to do with computers?"  
"When they made them they just decided to count the same way."  
"That's just dumb. Who'd want to count in eights?"  
"It is easier than counting in tens."  
"Says who?"  
"Counting in eight bits means there are eight switches that can each be set to two settings, on or off. So that's two to the eighth power which is 256 different combinations. With ten bits, that's two to the tenth power which is 1,024 different combinations. So if you are always counting in tens, you have 768 more combinations to worry about with everything you do."  
"How do you know all this?"  
"I don't. But since I'm supposed to know, and so long as you keep asking, I'll keep making them up."  
Lee sits down on the bed hard, and rolls her eyes.  
"M.A.S.," she says.  
"What's that?"  
"Male Answer Syndrome. You've got it bad," Lee rolls over twice on the bed. "So many people are like that," she says. "They feel like they have to know things."  
"It's the anxiety of ignorance."  
"No it's not," Lee says, gathering the pillows together under her elbow. "Ignorance is bliss. You never see a stupid person worrying about answering a question. They're happy to say 'I don't know.'"  
"How about, 'It's the anxiety of being ignorant?'"  
". . . to a person who's not ignorant," Lee completes.  
"Fair enough," Norman says, commanding his computer into CompuServe and shutting off the light.  
The system asks for his log-in name to which Norman types "Norrin." For the password, he types "Radd."  
"Norrin Radd?" Lee asks. "What's Norrin Radd?"  
"The real name of the Silver Surfer."  
"The Silver Surfer! What a wimp! That guy rides a long-board!"  
"How do you know who the Silver Surfer is?" Norman says, scratching his beard.  
"I've seen posters of the cartoon. The guy rides a board big as a barge. You'd think he was fifty years old. Some super hero," she says, hassling Norman.  
"I suppose," Norman says. "I never really thought about the character. I was actually poking fun at this database that was written for the Macintosh. When the program was in development it was code-named 'Silver Surfer.' It was being touted as extremely powerful and very intuitive, like the Mac is supposed to be. Instead, the program is so clumsy it is as if you have to be some kind of propeller-head to use it. It's just an inside joke."  
"Yeah, well, get a real super hero, like that stretch-guy in the Fantastic Four. He's probably got a willie the size of a totem pole."  
"It's just a log-in name, Lee."

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Once inside, Norman is first interested in looking up Philip Encher's case history. At the ! prompt, he types GO CALAW to enter a California Law database that contains summary information on all filings within the state since 1975. Norman fills out an index form describing the parameters. His search, which used only Encher's name, found 1,813 entries. Norman decides to search again, but examining cases during only the last five years. The result yields 304 cases.

"Busy guy, your Encher. Must make a lot of money. Is he your lawyer?"

"No. He's representing the serial killer. I'm just trying to find out a little more about him. You should see his clothes."

"I've never liked the way they dress. It's like they can't eat spaghetti because the sauce might get on their suit. I like a guy who wears boots and jeans and owns two colors of t-shirts."

Norman turns around and Lee winks at him.

Norman requests a list of the cases in "brief" mode, listing only filing dates, clients, penal codes and their descriptions. The computer responds with a list made up entirely of large corporate clients. The cases vary from patent and copyright infringements to intellectual property cases involving manufacturing processes and robotics.

Strange, Norman thinks.

He makes a new request but this time focuses on Encher's early years. The result is just 98 cases. This time, though, Encher represented the state. Encher worked for the District Attorney's office in his early years prosecuting pimps, drug dealers and petty thieves and worked his way up to mail fraud and embezzlement.

"Looks like your guy Encher went from the embezzlees to the embezzlers," Lee says.

"I'm sure that's what most of them do. After all, how much can you make in the DA's office? They probably all go into private practice eventually. That or become a judge."

"So what's the problem? Isn't that what you'd expect?"

"Maybe. But right now this guy is getting ready for a trial. He's not a litigator. He hasn't tried a case in ten years. He just pushes paper around to piss off big corporations. What's he doing representing a serial killer?"

"Maybe he's in it for the money."

"Nah. Wanda says it's pro bono; he's in it for the publicity."

"Who's Wanda?"

"The reporter."

"Really? What's she look like?"

"Hell, really. She and her boyfriend are up all night, every night."

"On a computer, I'll bet," Lee says sarcastically.

"But even if he's in it for the publicity," Norman continues, "he might embarrass himself by screwing up the case. I mean, you don't litigate a big case if you're out of practice. So why is he doing it?"

"Sounds like that's the big question."

"My guess is he worked in the DA's office for a long time, probably with the judge on this case, Maria Fernandez. They had this cute little t<sup>^</sup>te-a-t<sup>^</sup>te in the courtroom like they were old friends. He went off into private practice and did well while she became a judge."

"OK. So?"

"OK, so I don't know. It's just that he met with someone odd today."

"Someone weird-looking or someone he shouldn't be with?"

"Both. This guy I met at the airport."

"Really? What's weird about that?"

"I'm pretty sure he's in a gang. For that matter, I'm pretty sure he set me up for that mugging I got at the car rental."

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"That sonofabitch! You ought to kick his ass!"

"Well, I may yet. But I don't know anything yet. I just can't figure out why a guy who represents corporations suddenly turns into a litigator in a homicide case."

"Do you think Encher's in a gang or this woman's in a gang? Maybe the same gang?"

"Not a chance. There's something else going on."

Norman turns back to the computer and tries another subject. Drake Car Rental has been on his mind long enough. Gang members work at it and drug peddlers drive them, and the cars aren't even that great. It is time to find out who runs it.

Car rental companies demand a heavy investment, or at least a sizable line of credit, usually involving several people. And they can turn an immense profit. The cars depreciate quickly and with loans taken out to purchase them the capital investment can be deferred allowing for an excellent operating position while maintaining huge tax write-offs. Furthermore, because they are reusable -- indeed designed to be reusable -- cars can be earning profit, with virtually no overhead, within six months. The problem is, you must have the clout to launch one and immediately get the national marketing needed to attract travelers.

Norman returns to the ! prompt and types GO SECSTAT to look through filings in a database of the nation's Secretaries of State. All states except Mississippi and Alabama have added their information to this database. Mississippi chose not to on the grounds of state privacy while Alabama hasn't because they voted to put their money into education before computerizing the state's record-keeping facilities. Florida had done so only six months before when similar funds became available.

When creating his search, Norman chooses to look in all states for information on Drake rather than just California. The search will take much longer, approximately 57 minutes the computer reports back. That is fine with him because A) he can't be sure if Drake is a California corporation or of some other state, B) KPOC is picking up the tab, and C) it will give him some "quality" with Lee.

As Lee sleeps, Norman buttons up a pair of jeans and opens the door to get an angle on the lobby. He will keep an eye and an ear on it to allow her some rest. He still can't sleep and his report finished an hour and a half ago.

The report yielded an old prospectus for its stock offering. Drake Car Rental, Inc. is, indeed, a California corporation. It was founded in 1981 and had a common stock offering of 3,000,000 shares in 1985. Norman reads through the company's description which is ridiculously long for a company that just rents Ford automobiles.

Summary Financial Data  
(in thousands, except per share data)

Statements of Income Data:	1987	1988	1989
Net revenues	\$37,156	\$47,889	\$49,232
Operating income	10,331	12,433	13,008
Net income	8,090	10,001	10,926
Net income per share	\$ 0.82	\$ 0.093	\$ 0.98

Norman reads slowly through the rest of the financial information surmising that this is a straight-forward, if not tightly run, company that has been building steadily.

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He scrolls through the information more quickly in search of the directors and executive officers. First, though, he has to plow through the Risk Factors, the Fluctuations in Operating Results, the Competition, the Purpose of the Offering and Use of Proceeds, the Background, the Strategy, and the Marketing until, finally, he reaches Management.

Name	Age	Title
Thomas Armstrong	54	Chairman, CEO, Director
Robert McKinsey	57	Vice Pres., Sales, Director
Cheryl Clairmont	48	CFO, Director
Georgia Michaels	44	Director
Phillip Encher	42	Director

And there it is, Norman grins through his beard. It stares back at him on the screen like it has been waiting for him to get there.

Norman scrolls down through the information to find the description of Mr. Encher. He is disappointed to find that it holds only ancillary details he has already been able to discern. So he decides to check on the other directors to see what connection might be made there between Charlie, the drug trade, and Philip Encher.

Thomas Armstrong, it appears was an executive at Ford for many years with Robert McKinsey. Both were engineers but had risen into upper-management. They joined Ford Aerospace in California in the early eighties to ply their engineering skills again but apparently discovered that management is their better fare. They teamed up with Cheryl Clairmont who had been a senior partner at the accounting firm of Kenneth Leventhal and created Drake Car Rental. Philip Encher handled the legal requirements in exchange for a directorship. Georgia Michaels put up a huge sum of money and was made a director, but her business experience was nil. She seemed to be a partner by virtue of her wealth.

"Anything?" Lee says softly.

"Nothing. Clean," Norman says. "At least from what I see here."

"So what's the deal?"

"The lawyer is a businessman and some guy he may or may not know is an employee of his went to see him at the courthouse."

"And?"

"And it's fishy."

"Tuna or anchovies?"

"Anchovies."

Lee gets up, still undressed, and hugs him from behind. Norman reaches around his chair and gives her calf a squeeze.

"So what else does this thing do?"

"Well, it gets some of my mail for one, which is something I need to check."

Norman types in GO EMAIL to take him to his electronic mailbox.

"You'd better not look. All my old girlfriends leave me love letters in here."

"I don't think you go for the nerd type," she says, tugging at his chin.

Norman's mail is mostly messages sent as advertising to renew his service next month. But a few are from old friends at the station in Miami who sent a "hello" as a matter of course while they had been on-line themselves doing research.

"What else is there?"

"Most anything: Stock Market reports, airline reservations, encyclopedias, newspapers, computer company bulletin boards, games, shopping . . ."

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"Shopping sounds good."  
"Not really. It's catalogue shopping."  
"Not even as good as the Sears underwear section, huh?"  
"Not even."  
Suddenly there is a flash across the screen and a loud beep. Norman looks down. There is a "Norrin, where ya been, my man?" in a box across the bottom.  
"How'd that get there?" Lee says, standing up.  
"It must be Sturgis, he's one of the sysops who monitors everything. I've been on so many times at night we've gotten to be friends."  
"Sturgis?" Norman types in the dialogue box.  
":-)" comes the response.  
"What's that? Did the system go bad?"  
"It's an emoticon. Look at it sideways."  
Lee did and smiled. "Hey, that's clever. Like what Joyce did -- 'U. p: up.' Remember?"  
"Remember what?"  
"Bloom is in the whore house. He can't get it up, up. Of course, you don't pee colon up."  
"Hmm."  
"So, do you know any?"  
"{:-})"  
"Is that supposed to be you?"  
"Sortof."  
"That's cool. It looks kind of hairy."  
"Still can't sleep, eh?" Strugis writes.  
"Still thinking," is Norman's reply.  
"Drugs?"  
"They never help."  
"Maybe go the other way: U4ia."  
"U4ia?" Lee reads. "What kind of drug is that?"  
"It's an amphetamine. Sturgis is a programmer. He takes really wild shit to work out problems. He lives around Cal as a matter of fact. Maybe he's an old friend of yours."  
"Never. My friends took drugs to bury their problems, not to figure them out."  
"I'll need a source," Norman types back.  
"Check your box next week," Sturgis replies. "I've got something for you to look into," he continues. "Maybe it'll help your thinking. It's something I've been working on."  
"What does he mean by 'your thinking'?"  
"He thinks I don't sleep because I'm too exact in my thinking. It's a strange thing for a programmer to say."  
"Neural networks, fuzzy logic," Sturgis sends across the screen.  
"We're using it to park cars."  
"He's a programmer who parks cars. Norman, you trust this guy?"  
"Go on," Norman pushes.  
"You approximate when you park a car. Close enough in back, close enough in front. The brain works qualitatively, not exactly. We're trying to get computers to think in terms of 'like,' 'mostly,' and 'better' rather than 'greater than,' 'less than' or 'equal to.' You're trying to think like an old computer, Norrin. We're trying to get computers to think pattern recognition, like people do."  
Norman squints at the screen. He suddenly feels very tired.  
"I'll get you some titles for you to read. But try looking up non-linear and dynamical systems. Stay away from artificial intelligence. That's all logical bullshit."

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"Norman, are you really a computer, like Hymie was on 'Get Smart'?"  
"Give me a break."  
"Why the long search?" Sturgis writes.  
"Je-sus, does this guy know everything you do in here?" Lee says.  
"He could. He's the system operator. He watches over everybody."  
"Good thing big brother is on your side," she says, crossing her arms.  
"Research on a guy: Philip Encher," Norman types.  
"Encher o saco >:->" comes the quick reply.  
"What's that last bit?" Lee says, her head cocked sideways. "Kinda looks like a winking devil."  
"Yeah. 'Encher o saco' must mean something dirty."  
"What's it mean?" Norman types.  
"Slang: Don't bug me. Literal: Don't fill my scrotum."  
They laugh.  
"(\*) there's a girl present," Norman types.  
"8:-) ?"  
"What's that?"  
"I called him an asshole and he asked if you're a little girl."  
":-)-8" Lee types in over Norman's shoulder.  
"Really big girl," she says.  
"Hi!" Sturgis writes.  
"Encher is 'fill'? In what language?" Norman types.  
"Portuguese for 'fill' or 'pump,'" comes the reply.  
Norman is breathless.  
"Norman?" Lee says, grabbing his shoulders.  
"Encher is Pump," Norman gasps. "Je-sus, Encher is running the whole fucking drug business."  
"Are you sure? When does he have time?"  
"I have no idea." Norman stands up. "Of course. Oso said Pump was easy to hate. Of course he's an attorney."  
"Sturgis, you're a savior. I love you," Norman types.  
"Norrin, you big galut. You're only saying that 'cause it's true. What'd I do, anyway?"  
"I'll tell you next time I'm in. I've got to find out a few things first."  
"OK. Well, wish me luck. I'm doing DMT Saturday."  
"Is that another one of those funky drugs of his?"  
"Yeah, but this one's different. He does hallucinogens for illumination. DMT three times and you're stuck in the dark."  
"Are you going to be with friends?" Norman asks Sturgis.  
"I'm always with friends, Norrin. Bye."  
The box on the screen dissolves slowly.  
"Wow," Lee says. "Weird stuff."  
"You want to know how it does that, how the little box appears and disappears?" Norman asks.  
"Naah," she replies. "I like it just the way it is: input . . . PFM . . . output."  
"PFM?"  
"Pure Fucking Magic."  
Lee moves silently to the door while Norman saves all his evening's work to disk and shuts down the computer. Lee stands at the door, naked, lit only by the half moon in the sky. She glistens in the shadows. He can just barely make out the thistle tattooed on her right buttock.  
"Let's take a swim," she says.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

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CENTURY BOULEVARD  
7:03AM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

At the stoplight, Norman rubs his eyes. The smog by the airport is so thick already it is like dust. It stings his eyes. As he rubs them, trying to bring a tear to them to ease the dryness, they grate like sandpaper. Maybe sunglasses are the answer. They would keep out the dust, the harsh glare. But what kind? Wayfarers and look like an actor? Persols and look like I have European savoir-faire? Blades and look like an athlete with bad taste? Tiny, round, useless green lenses to drink espresso with? And what would I do with them when I put the camera up to my eye? Bend them in my pocket? Get a leash and dangle them around my neck like a necklace? Norman acknowledges the need for sunglasses in L.A., but faced with the myriad ancillary decisions they bring, settles on Visine as his brand.

He thinks perhaps he'll put up the top on the Mustang 5.0 and blast the air conditioning instead. He squints down at the gas gauge and realizes he will need a re-fill to satiate the beast if he's going to run the air. Norman looks across the intersection at the Exxon station. Outside, two men puff cigarettes by the diesel pump. Norman figures he'll just pick up some Visine at a pharmacy later.

At the Drake car rental booth in the airport terminal, Charlie isn't there. Norman didn't necessarily expect him to be, but it would have been foolish of him not to at least try to find him during the shift he was working when they met. Behind the counter are two chubby Latina girls with darling, cherubim faces. Above them their bangs curl in unnaturally high waves, kept there by half a can of hair spray and a bottle of gel. They look like quail. A covey of quail, Norman reminds himself.

Carlos Melendez isn't in, they confirm, with slightly angry looks on their faces. When Norman inquires as to when he might be in, they are quick to volunteer that that chickeen-sheet sonofabeetch better not come around here or he is gonna lose his deek. Charlie, it seems, had an encounter with Alicia, here, on one of the late shifts and has gotten her pregnant. Since then he has left her high and dry. They go so far as to give Norman not only his home address and phone number, but a list of his friends, family, hangouts and a good-bye blessing that Norman find the leetle bastard and keek hees ass.

Norman says thanks.

Charlie isn't home either. His mother, a very tall and very young woman answers the door in her house-coat. She regards Norman with a slight look of shock on her face and then when she sees his car, quickly ushers him inside.

People gossip so much, she tells him. In the barrio, people become very protective. But it serves as justification to pry. She blushes a little. She has delicate crow's feet at the corners of her eyes. She pulls her hair back and gathers it in a pony-tail with a rubber band she pulls off the newspaper. She dates gavachos, she explains. It never really went down well in the barrio and she gets charged more at the market and at the hair-dresser because of it. But, she says, offering Norman some coffee, it is her life. When Norman refuses the coffee and inquires further as to Charlie's whereabouts, he quickly finds himself back in the Mustang and trying some of Alicia's other suggestions.

Valenzuela Park is empty, except for a few of the leftover day-workers: the weak ones, the ornery ones, those who are stoned or playing an electric guitar that was plugged into the grass. The video arcade doesn't have him either. And TacoMundo isn't open yet.

One place Alicia could only describe, and even that she did vaguely. She didn't say it, but Norman knows they are moving crack through it. Alicia

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didn't know the address, exactly, but she gave him the street and guessed he'd know the place when he saw it. She was right. Scattered along the street, hunkered down in the curbs near car fenders, people squat, undisturbed, applying torches to tiny glass bowls. A couple of women shudder on a neighbor's lawn; one man vomits on a hub cap. Norman double-checks his watch. It's 9:32 in the morning.

As Norman approaches the house in his car, a few large men appear in the street wearing heavy coats in the morning heat. Norman produces his press credentials and they direct him into the driveway of an old, crummy track-home with bars on the windows, no different from any of the others except that people saunter up to it periodically, and then scramble back into their cars and drive off. Norman gets out and strolls up to the door, purposely looking obvious and slightly stupid to put the guards at ease.

Behind the brown, stained curtains in the windows, Norman can see rivets and thick metal, and the door, while painted an inconspicuous brown, is also made of thick metal and has two tiny doors in it. Norman is about to knock when he sees a brown eye shining back at him through the peep-hole. It doesn't say anything.

"My name's Norman Lessing," he says to the eye. "I work for KPOC news," he tells it.

It has always been Norman's contention that obviousness is the best defense in dangerous situations. By stating his real name and his intent -- something no one would ever consider doing here -- no one would fuck with him.

"I'm looking for Charlie Melendez," he says.

The eye goes away.

Norman scratches his head.

The eye comes back.

"He ain't been here in three days," the eye says. Then it laughs. "We think he's hidin' from some chick. Go figure it, man. No chick will fuck this guy. Then, when he finally gets one, he hides from her."

"Yeah, well, it looks like he got her pregnant," Norman says.

"Hey," the eye yells at someone in the house, "Carlitos knocked up Alicia!"

A lot of hooting and hollering bounces around the house.

Aah, geez, Norman winces.

"We didn't think he had it in him," the eye says back to Norman. "Did you check at his house, homie?"

"Yeah. He isn't there."

"Did you see his mom? She's fine, ain't she?"

"I suppose."

"Did you and she do it?"

"No, man," Norman says, scratching his head again.

"You should have, man. She's hot for white ass."

"Any idea where I can find him?"

"That's easy, man: Rosie's."

Rosie's XXX-rated porno shop opens early and closes late. It is as large as a sporting goods store, but has more leather. Three walls are lined with thin, expensive magazines with titles like "Wide Open Beaver" and "Split Tail" which have all the subtlety of silicon breasts in a bikini contest. One wall has leather and battery-operated gizmos meant to excite, but with the distinct possibility of inflicting great pain. At the counter a very bored looking man is sipping coffee and watching a tape of an old Republican convention. In the video, Ronald Reagan is waving at a video of Nancy Reagan waving at a video of Ronald Reagan waving to Nancy Reagan. When it finishes,

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the man rewinds it and watches it again. And again. Norman watches it with him.

"Great, isn't it?" the man says. "Isn't it? Isn't it?" the man repeats, more to himself than to anyone else. "Is it happening, or did it ever really happen?~"

Norman mentions that he is looking for Charlie. But before he can finish describing him, Charlie appears through a door at the back of the room. He is wearing oversized jeans and a plain white t-shirt and wears a wide red bandana across his forehead. His face bears the exhaustion of having been in the private screening room for too long.

"That's the little prick you're after," the man says, waving the zapper in Charlie's direction. "He's spends a lot of time in here. But not much money."

"Shit, see," Charlie says, heading Norman's way with a hand extended for shaking.

Norman doesn't feel like shaking hands so he shoves them into his pockets.

"How's the car? You still got the car, ain'tcha?"

"You want to take a ride in it, Carlitos?"

Charlie looks at him and rocks back and forth on his feet. He cocks his head and says, "What's the deal?"

"I just want to ask you a few questions, that's all. I'm just curious about Drake."

"Ah, shit, man. You been talkin' to Alicia? That fat bitch's been tryin' to get me in trouble from the start."

"Come on, Carlitos," Norman says with a distinct undertone of anger, and ushers Charlie out the door by the elbow. "This won't take long."

Pump jacks scatter the beach like large oil-sucking mosquitoes while overhead, 747's and small, noisy private planes take off frequently, head into the wind, over the Pacific, and then turn back inland and disappear over the Palisades.

On the way to the beach, Charlie pushes for the scoop on life at a television station but Norman isn't telling. He is running the details of the last few days through his head, a head that is damn tired from not sleeping and furthermore is starting to buzz.

Norman drives the front tires of the car onto the sand and iceplant and they get out and sit on the hood. Charlie is still trying to be pals: he fishes a joint out of his jeans pocket and offers it in truce. Norman refuses.

"So what do you do for Drake -- other than rent cars and get girls pregnant?"

"Hey, ese, that ain't fair. I didn't know she wasn't on no pill. She got sloppy. She shoulda used a rubber or somethin'. Whaddya 'spect? I'm a virile guy. A girl's gotta be careful around me."

"The word is: Alicia was your first."

"Whoever told you that is a liar, man. That's a lie."

Norman reaches over and flicks Charlie's joint out of his hand. It twirls in the air in an arcing trail of ashes, and disappears into the iceplant. He slaps Charlie in the face, hard, which shakes him up. Charlie jumps off the car and back-peddles in the sand, facing Norman.

"So what else do you do for Drake?"

"What the fuck're you doin', man?"

"I want to know about Drake. It's not that tough a question, Charlie."

"I don't know shit about Drake," he says, retreating some, with his hands stuck deep into his pockets.

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"You don't know," Norman says back to him. "You don't know shit about Drake, you don't know shit about birth control . . ."

"Hey, I know about birth control, ese. It's not like I want her to give me aids or nothin'."

"No, you don't know shit about birth control, Charlie. You wear the rubber, she wears a diaphragm. It's called a 'diaphragm.'"

"Hey, I know what they are. They're like a taco: You put sauce in it and roll it up."

"Don't lie to me, Charlie. I want you to stop lying to me."

"I've used lotsa rubbers."

Norman puts his head on his hand. "For what? To fill them up like water-balloons?"

"Hey, man . . ."

"So, you don't know shit about Drake. You don't know shit about birth control and now you're going to tell me you don't know shit about that guy who jumped me in the parking lot."

"See, you gotta believe me, I don't know shit about those guys."

"How'd you know there was more than one?"

Charlie finally shuts up. He fell for an old, stupid trick. He just stands there looking at his high-tops.

Norman regards him with his elbows on his knees.

Charlie takes a seat on the hood again. "I'm sorry about that, see."

"Quit giving me the 'ese' shit and tell me about Drake."

After a long pause Charlie says quietly, "I don't know much."

"Well you do know something. Now what do you know?"

"Well, shit . . . if you know so goddam much, why don't you tell me?"

"Well, who runs it?"

"Mr. McKinsey. He's the gran jefe anyway. My boss is Joey Laughlin. He's a geek. A real company guy. Always wears a button on his lapel that says 'Drake' on it. What a geek."

"Any regulars?"

"Sure, lots."

"Any of them locals?"

"Yeah, a couple."

"Who are they, Charlie?"

"A couple of guys. You wouldn't know them."

"Don't give me a lot of shit, Charlie. I'm still pissed at being jumped by your fucking buddies."

"Yeah, well one of them is a regular."

"The bald one?"

"No, Chorizo, the fat one. Bull is crazy. He pushes me around a lot. Pushes Chorizo around, too. He's an asshole."

"So, what about Chorizo?"

"There are reservations for him and a bunch of others almost every weekend on the computer. They run errands for some guy."

"Who do they deliver for?"

"No idea."

Norman sits up straight and looked at him hard.

"They run crack around the city. A lot of it. They each put on about 500 miles every weekend."

"Who for?"

"I don't know."

"Who's on the computer, Charlie? Who makes the reservation for them? That piece of shit Chorizo doesn't have a credit card."

"Philip Encher."

"Do you know him?"

"Yeah."

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"Know him by any other name?"

Charlie gets off the hood and steps out onto the sand. "Why are you asking me all this shit, anyway? You know it all. You're just asking to hear how smart you are."

"I need confirmation."

"Fine: Somebody makes reservation for them in Pump's name."

"He goes by 'Pump'?"

"Some call him that. I call him 'Mr. Encher' to his face."

"Encher doesn't have to put the reservation in himself?"

"Get real, man. Most of the time it's done by travel agents and secretaries. I thought you were smart. Encher's got three secretaries"

"Go on."

"They pick up the cars and bring them back a few days later."

"So how do you know what they do?"

"Chorizo tells me. What do you think?"

"What does he tell you?"

"He gets the shit from some guy in Bel Air with a list of addresses and makes the run."

"Does he get the shit from Encher?"

"No. Some other guy, Matlaga. But I don't know him."

"You don't know him?" Norman stares him down.

Charlie holds up his hands, "I don't, I swear. Chorizo says he's loco, though. On a power trip or something."

"So how do you know Encher?"

"He asks me what's goin' on, that's all."

"Like you tell the truth," Norman says.

"Hey, I do when I get treated right."

"So what have you told him lately."

"Nothing."

"What did you tell him at the courthouse?"

"Shit, what have you been doin', followin' me?"

"Tell me."

"Somebody is trackin' him, bad. Somebody's been trying to find out what he does with Drake."

" . . . and all the crack."

"Man, I don't know about him and the crack. I mean, except for the car biz, I don't know what he does. He doesn't talk about it. He doesn't do the shit or nothin'. People just use his name. It's like he owns everything but keeps clear of it at the same time. He just asks me about what it's like working for Drake and what everybody is thinking about him. Business questions. I work, you know."

"What did he have to do with Fausto's death?"

"Fausto? Shit, what do you care about Fausto?"

"They were competitors."

"Are, they are competitors."

"Fausto's dead."

"No shit."

"Well, what do you mean?"

"So Fausto's dead. His homeboys are still around. There's plenty of business for anybody who wants it."

"Well, who runs it?"

"How should I know? I don't hang with them."

"Did Pump kill Fausto or have him killed?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Shit, why does everybody want to know that? It ain't like drugs is new. Shit, people get dusted every day. Why all the fuss?"

"Who's asking about him?"

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"Some bitch keeps givin' Alicia a hard time but she don't know what I know. I mean, the bitch scared her pretty bad, and she don't scare so easy. She's cool."

Charlie pauses and looks at the little waves piddling onto the sand.

"Sounds like you care about her."

"Yeah, she's OK."

"So why do you treat her so shitty?"

"I ain't so bad. I'm takin' her to a movie tonight."

"Since when?"

Charlie sticks the toe of his high-top in the sand and then looks up at Norman. "Since now," he says.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
HEADING FOR FOOD  
11:37PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME

The warm late-night air feels cool against his scalp when the Mustang 5.0 hits 45mph. Slower than that it feels dry and hot. It is the kind of weather people call "earthquake weather."

Sleepless again, Norman speeds along the street, moving farther and farther from the Blackbeard Motel where Lee stands behind the desk sifting through the ledger in preparation for the monthly report.

Norman tried hard that day to prepare himself for a good night's sleep. He even bothered to work out, running three exhausting and hilly miles in basketball shoes and then paid twenty dollars for a "guest fee" to work out in a gym in which he was the only one to exercise with the free weights: all the others stood around in loose fitting t-shirts and g-string leotards posing, chatting and posing some more.

Still, he couldn't sleep.

Now, he is hungry and determined to find Cuban food. He is so determined tonight that he broke with tradition: he always prided himself on learning a city through experience -- no cheating by using maps or asking directions. But tonight was different: he picked up the phone book.

Norman parks his car on the street in front and walks up to the doorway. Casa Cortez has thick walls and big windows that open wide to the street. The walls are painted a bright white enamel that have a slight pink tint to them from the neon beer signs that hang from the ceilings and flicker above the patrons. A waitress waves to Norman, signalling she has a seat for him near one of the windows. He sits down and quickly reaches for the menu.

Platanos fritos, lengua guisada, bistec picadillo. His mouth is already watering and his stomach hurts in anticipation. Maybe a soft drink, a Jupina, a Materva.

A chair leg squeaks suddenly on the tile floor. Norman looks up. Across from him at the table Oso is grinning back at him, fat and hairy as ever.

"So how is it, ese?" he says.

"Hungry."

"How's work? How's Wanda?"

"Wanda?"

"Your reporter-friend. You still carry that pager?"

"Oh, yeah . . . good."

Norman can't carry the small talk; there is business to be done.

"How's the food?" he asks.

"It's good. But eat the regular stuff: beef, potatoes. Don't eat no tongue or bananas."

"Platanos?"

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"No, they'll kill you."

"Hmm," Norman tries not to look at the menu. "I found out something that might interest you. Something about Pump."

Oso pulls his chair up close to the table.

"Pump didn't kill Fausto."

"You sure about that?"

"Pretty sure. There's another guy using his name a lot. But Pump's not really involved in anything. Or if he is, he keeps his distance pretty good."

Oso looks toward the back of the restaurant, like he is waiting for someone. "I didn't think so," he says. "Matlaga's getting kind of wild. People been sayin' that it was his own homies." Oso turns back toward Norman. "Do you know about Matlaga? You gonna use this in a story or something?"

Norman is trying to mentally juggle his interest in what Oso is saying with what is on the menu.

"I know something about Matlaga and Pump but I don't know who Matlaga is," he says. "There's no proof of anything, really. Just a lot of conjecture. I'll need an interview with someone directly involved. Right now, we're just fishing. It's not much of a story, I guess." Norman glances around the restaurant. "Have you got anything?"

Oso looks at his monstrous gold Rolex. Norman gets a close look at it and sees that Oso wears it above a large tattoo of a crucifix with a bear scratching at it. It is quarter 'till midnight.

"I can point them out to you sometime, Matlaga or some of his cliqua. They ain't my friends, but I know who they are. But you gotta keep it quiet. I don't want to answer up to no five-oh. I ain't known for droppin' dime on nobody."

Oso becomes serious and regards Norman over a long pause. "What, exactly, are you doing here?"

"I'm hungry," Norman says flatly. "Just what are you so nervous about?"

Oso keeps looking at Norman. Norman looks back wondering what he is judging.

"You're cool," he finally says.

"Yeah, well, so?"

"It's just tonight . . ."

"What happens at midnight?"

"What are you talkin' about?" Oso says. He looks shocked and sits back in his chair with his arms crossed.

Norman puts the menu down.

"Oso, you come over here, friendly and talkative, and then you start checking your watch and the back door like you're waiting for a date. I figure your girlfriend is meeting you here at midnight."

Oso starts to laugh hard. It is loud and high-pitched, like a little girl's. The whole restaurant looks over their shoulders to see who it is. Seeing that it is Oso makes them shrug, roll their eyes and return to their meals.

Oso quiets down and wipes his eyes. He leans forward with a dead serious look on his face and says to Norman, "Have you got your camera gear in your car?"

"Sure."

"Then meet me around back."

Norman pulls the Mustang 5.0 into the alley and around the back of Casa Cortez. He parks by the dumpster and switches off the lights. He sits

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there, lighted only by the sole, bare bulb above the back door of the restaurant that throws long, sharp shadows. Around the corner a large black BMW comes coasting down the asphalt with its lights off. Norman can make out Oso's watch floating above the steering wheel. It pulls up beside Norman and the passenger-side window slides down revealing Espresso sitting inside.

"What the fuck, Oso? We don't need no poohbutt on this ride," Espresso says, squirming back and forth in a leather seat that dwarfs him.

"Shut up, Espresso," Oso says, thumping him in the chest and pinning him to the seat. Oso leans toward Norman. "Put the top up, ese. This is a bad neighborhood," he smiles.

As Norman assembles the top, Oso gets out and watches.

"Espresso's little brother was shot last night, Norman."

Oso looks sad for the first time. He stands there, at the trunk of the car, with his hands in his baggy khakis and a helpless look on his face.

"You didn't hear about it?"

"No," Norman says.

"Yeah," Oso says. "It's not really news, I suppose. I mean, it ain't like it never happens."

"Where did it happen?"

"By a grocery store near the 'hood."

Oso looks up at Norman. He is serious.

"Any others hit?"

"No, just Rolando." Oso walks around the side of the car and leans on the rag top.

"You know, Espresso ain't a real well-liked guy," Oso says. "But Rolando wanted to be just like him. Big brother kinda thing, I guess." Oso starts tugging at a loose thread on the top. "And he wore Espresso's jacket and shoes to buy some hamburger meat."

"Bad move."

"Real bad move. Fuckers thought he was Espresso. Cheap, pussy motherfuckers thought he was Espresso and didn't even have the cojones to do him in the face."

"How many?"

Oso looks straight at Norman. His face is tight.

"Five of them."

Oso stares across the alley, unblinking and hard.

Norman looks over at the BMW, black as night, fast, safe, surrounded by heavy iron, picked off the street especially for this g-ride. Espresso is wired and bouncing around in the front seat. Oso is committed, by his misaligned friendship to the overexcitable Espresso, as are others whom they will inevitably meet up with later.

"I don't think so, Oso."

Oso turns his head slowly toward Norman. "It ain't that simple," he says, walking over to Norman. "We're goin', even if you go back inside and eat the whole right-hand side of the menu. It don't matter. But this kinda shit is your business. It's what you do for a living."

"I'm not interested in watching anyone get killed. Hell, I might get killed."

"It don't work that way. Everybody knows who you are. Everybody knows you don't choose sides. You guys are reporters. You just show it. You don't make it up."

"I don't think so."

Oso moves up close, right next to Norman's ear. "Don't you wonder why you didn't hear nothing about Rolando?" he says. "I mean, doesn't that make you sick? What's all this choosing about? Who chooses what's news, anyway? Rolando never did nothing, ese. He was Espresso's little brother and for that they lit him up? And nobody hears about it. Ain't that news?"

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Nobody hears about it, Norman repeats in his head and is reminded of Freida Ostetler and her MACE posse. And then he imagines Horace, sitting at the Assignment Editor's desk, hearing about Rolando's death on the police radio band and shrugging -- no video, no news.

Oso takes the keys from Norman's hand and opens the trunk. They look down at the camera gear that is strewn around.

"Get in the Beemer," Oso whispers.

Norman has to move an arsenal of Uzi's, AK-47's, 9mm's, .22's, and other miscellaneous pistols off the back seat to make room for himself behind Oso. He moves them carefully. The guns are mostly semi-automatics with magazines long enough to take on a whole division of policemen.

He examines one of the semi-automatics closely. It is cool to the touch, and very heavy. Revolvers, he knows, aren't likely to go off unprovoked; the trigger has to be pulled. But this 9mm has its safety devices removed. Though it is more likely to jam than a revolver, and requires two hands to operate properly, it is also much more likely to go off with very little encouragement. Still, it carries a helluva lot more rounds than a revolver. There is probably no image more macho than emptying one in a shoot out and then sliding in another magazine and snapping it shut like the tough guys on TV.

"Why not just use a .12 gauge with double-ought buck?" Norman says out loud, angrily shaking his head. "That way you don't have to be half as accurate."

Oso and Espresso nod their heads at each other: next time.

I know too much about this shit, Norman says to himself. I know too much about everything.

He sets the pistol on the floor with the others, making a pile that keeps falling over, making him flinch.

He sets the camera gear on the seat next to him and starts making adjustments for night shooting.

Oso drives calmly and Espresso keeps hopping around in the front, talking big-man-shit to keep himself extra riled-up. Oso drives slowly, but Espresso's antics keep rattling the guns that lean against his seatback. This distracts Norman as he makes his camera adjustments and attempts to position himself to move the big camera around freely.

In a residential neighborhood Norman hasn't seen before, Oso turns into another alley and switches off the lights again. They drift down a ways and the sound of gravel, weeds and glass crackling underneath the belly of the car can be heard through Espresso's open window. The car doesn't stop when the door opposite Norman suddenly opens . . . .

The camera picked up two individuals who jumped inside, one in a white t-shirt and jeans and the other in a black tank-top and khakis. The camera shot carefully avoided the faces of the young men, capturing only their muscular torsos and the door of the car. They sat cramped in the seat and passed automatic rifles and pistols among themselves and the individuals in the front seat. They handled the firearms knowingly, cocking them and releasing them repeatedly, searching for one they were comfortable with.

The car drifted down the alley and made its way out of the neighborhood and into another one, similar in its track homes, barred windows, unkempt lawns and broken-down automobiles which littered the streets. The car lights, back on, were the only things that illuminated the area; the street-lamps were all either broken or had been shot out. Very few people were out at this hour and they were cautiously and quickly making their way home. They gave only furtive glances toward the passing auto and then returned their glare to the ground ahead of them.

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The car turned right onto a street with large, 40's-era homes, replete with circular driveways, big porches and huge but worn lawns. The houses, though at one time glamorous, appeared ominous and abandoned from having been squeezed on either side by poverty. The car sped slightly down the street while the individuals inside turned their attention to a small party that was hardly noticeable behind some bushes that separated the house from the street. The individual in the front passenger seat became quite excited and began banging the butt of a rifle against the floor of the luxury German auto.

The car made a U-turn in the wide, cracked, empty street and shut off its lights. Heading back toward the house where the party was, they drove very slowly, on the wrong side of the street, hugging the cars parked along the curb. Then suddenly, as if well-rehearsed, the windows of the car and the sun-roof opened and the individuals quickly and awkwardly crawled into them with firearms in each hand, forcing them to claw their way to a stable position. The car then picked up speed, veered out into the street, and then turned back and roared the wrong way into the circular driveway where a half-dozen young men were gathered.

Gun-fire chased the men into the bushes and the house. Holes magically appeared in the backs of chairs on the porch and one man fell into a lounge, limp, bloody. Another tripped painfully on a sprinkler head buried in the lawn. He turned back toward the car to watch holes cut into his leg and up into his chest. He did not see the one that opened his throat.

The German auto began to take fire in the doors from shots that originated in the bushes. Return fire from the man who stood through the sun-roof cut down branches with continuous horizontal fire. The young men behind them twisted and hopped as they took metal in their ribs and foreheads. Two of the young men landed on a third and together they formed an awkward mound of flesh.

The rapid fire continued as the car fled at high speed out the other side of the driveway. The men still hung out the windows, emptying their firearms, yelling for more, passing them out, and continued out of range. The front and rear windows, mysteriously, were untouched . . . .

Only a mile from where the drive-by took place, they empty the BMW and get into an old hooptie they arranged for earlier. They are all alarmingly quiet, especially Espresso, who is silent but whose chest is heaving with adrenalin. Oso drives the five of them to an old house near the place they picked up the two back-seat shooters. There they all get out except Norman who sits in the back with his camera on his knees and stares at the torn ceiling of the car. He can't quite make out the conversations in the background which go on for what seems like an hour. Norman doesn't have the energy to get out of the car to find out what their assessment is.

Oso reappears and sits down in the front seat.

"You didn't get our faces, did you?"

Norman looks down at him, feeling slightly groggy, slightly nauseous.

"Umm, no. No, I didn't," he says. "It probably doesn't matter anyway," Norman says. "I mean, who do they think did it any way?"

"That ain't it. It's CRASH, ese. Sure, they'll know, but they won't know. We don't want them to have anything firm. They'll suspect us no matter what. But no proof. Except you, of course. But you reporters don't talk to no five-oh."

"It won't do any good," Norman shook his head. "There'll be retaliation anyway, won't there? From somebody."

"Of course," Oso says, matter-of-factly. "What do you think we did tonight?"

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LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
THE ZOO  
MORNING

Norman sits leaning forward on the wooden slat bench with his elbows on his knees, sipping instant coffee from a thin, paper cup. He gazes blankly at the elephants wandering around the compound. They step slowly, carefully on the dirt with their trunks draped limply toward the ground. They make their way toward the only people other than Norman who are around the elephants, a man and his young daughter.

Norman gets up and ambles over to the fence. He looks down at a metal sign just inside the fence.

"African Elephant, *Loxodonta africana*. This member of the Elephantidae family is indigenous . . . ."

The words go out of focus. Norman looks across the compound at the elephants. He watches one, a smaller female, saunter up to him. It reaches out with its trunk, strokes at Norman's shoulder and probes its way down his arm. Norman reaches into a pocket of his denim jacket and pulls out a small bag of peanuts. As he starts to open it, the elephant grabs one corner of the top and holds it while Norman rips it open. Norman reaches inside and pulls one out. He opens his palm, offering the single peanut to the elephant. The female snags it easily with her trunk and takes the peanut to her mouth. She quickly reaches out for another. Norman reaches into the bag again but pulls out several and holds them in his palm. Again the female is able to pick them up easily and shuttle them to her mouth. She holds out her trunk for more. Norman looks up at the elephant's face. She is turned slightly sideways to him. He regards her eye which is large and wet. Norman reaches into his jacket and pulls out last night's video tape. He holds it out to the elephant. She picks it up in her trunk and swings it around a little, eying it, weighing it. She holds it over the dirt for a while, and Norman and she stare back at one another. The elephant then hands the tape back to Norman. They exchange glances for a moment and then the elephant quickly makes off with the bag of peanuts.

Lee hugs Norman from behind. He can smell her.

"You need a bath," she says.

"That's the elephants," Norman says.

"Maybe," she replies, turning him around, "but we can still take a bath."

They kiss.

"Is this where you spent the night?" she asks.

"Since they opened. The rest of the time I was at Buddha's having a long breakfast."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"I had a really bad night. It wouldn't have been fair."

"What happened?"

"I taped a massacre."

"You did it, didn't you? You went on a drive-by."

"I really didn't want to."

"You're OK, aren't you?"

Norman sighs. "I don't know. I didn't really watch it."

"Is it on this tape?"

"All of it."

"What was it like?"

Norman grabs her hand and takes her back to the bench where they sit down.

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"I can't say what it was like. I didn't watch it, I didn't feel it, I just know that a bunch of kids got the shit blown out of them."

"What do you mean? Did you see it or not?"

"I saw it but I didn't watch it. Or I watched it but I didn't see it . . . however you want to say it . . . I taped it."

"You taped it but you didn't watch."

"Right."

"How do you do that?"

"I don't know. But I need to know because I can't do it anymore."

"You're going to quit?"

"I mean I separate myself from what I'm doing and it makes me do awful things."

"Norman, you didn't do anything."

"I taped a killing, a mass murder. It's like I condone this kind of behavior."

"Norman, you are not the news. Your subjects are the news. Just because you report it does not make you part of it. This thing would have happened anyway."

"I could have stopped it."

Lee starts to laugh.

Norman shrugs.

He hands her the tape. She looks down at it in her hands and stops laughing. She quickly gives it back to him.

"It just feels bad, doesn't it?" Norman says.

Lee looks at him quietly. "Are you going to give it to the station?"

"Why? So I can be like Freida Ostetler?"

"Who's that?"

"She's head of MACE. She wants executions to be on TV."

"That's awful."

"What's the difference?"

"Executions are sanctioned by the state, drive-bys aren't."

"It's all just poor people getting killed," Norman says, setting the tape on the bench.

"Don't you think that's something people will learn by seeing this?"

"I don't know. That's quite a leap of faith we're giving the viewing public. Do they look at some killing and say to themselves, 'Hey, these are all poor people doing this. I wonder if there's a connection.' Or do they say, 'Hey, honey, put down that meat loaf and look at this, I think this guy takes eight bullets in the stomach'?"

"It's not yours to say, Norman. You have to let them decide. But you have to give it to them in order for them to decide at all, otherwise they'll never think any differently."

Norman suddenly feels anxious. He stands up and wanders toward the elephants and then wanders back. He takes Lee by the hand and pulls her up to him. He hugs her and keeps waiting for an answer to come to him.

Lee taps him on the back. He looks down at her. She points toward the elephants. A bull has mounted the female and his enormous penis is feeling around her back side like a blind serpent.

"They have a prehensile penis, like their trunk," Norman says. "They get information from both ends."

"You sure know how to take romance out of a great moment," Lee says. Lee turns him and they start toward the monkeys.

"Hey, your tape," she says.

They stop and look at it sitting alone on the bench.

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KPOC TELEVISION STATION  
LATE AFTERNOON

Norman never could figure out what Georgia did at KPOC. She was very thorough, if shy, when she introduced him around the studio. But she wanders around in a state of half-supervisor, half-leisure, chatting quietly and politely with a few people here and there, never with any evidence of destination. And now he finds her behind Cecil's desk, sipping tea and casually going through a stack of manila folders.

Norman inquires as to Cecil's whereabouts. Georgia smiles back and says she isn't sure but would leave him a note to page him. She asks him how he likes his work to which Norman can only muster a bored and slightly irritated "fine." She replies, "that's good," and offers to make him some tea since he looks tired. Norman shakes his head and says "thank you, but no." He sticks his hands into the pockets of his denim jacket and wanders off toward the studio.

He passes Horace, who is lighting up a cigarette and gathering his things together, ready to go home. The evening news is to begin shortly and he makes it a point not to be around when it goes off. Above him is a sign that has "The Information Vortex" scratched out and "Funnel of Entropy" written in its place. Horace waves to Norman. He has one of the reporters on the speaker-phone. "Goddammit, Horace," the voice says, "I can't go to Aspen and shoot the snow. I don't have any snow clothes." Horace holds his hands to the sky.

Inside the editing room, Ginny has Blair on a live pickup from Sacramento. Ginny is the Associate Producer who will be handling tonight's broadcast, a Japanese woman who looks deceptively young. She stares down into the monitor and shouts orders: "Hey, who's doing the lighting down there, Ray Charles?" Blair is primping her business suit and testing out the audio: "This is K-P-A-I-N, crime time before prime time. Welcome to the video Gulag. If it's news, it's news to us."

"Hello, Norman," she smiles, quickly and crisply. "I haven't seen anything from you in a while."

"Yeah, I know. I've got something for tonight, but it'll need a lead-in from Dwight or Chloe. Have you seen them?"

Ginny directs Norman downstairs to Chief Running Cloud's office where Chloe is finishing up a tour for a group of Girl Scouts. Chloe has on a green outfit that blends in with the covey of little Scouts that huddle around her in the hallway. She is fielding the last of the questions before she has to run off and review before the broadcast.

One little girl raises her hand politely and Chloe calls on her.

"Do you get nervous before the show. I mean, aren't there millions and millions of people watching your mouth move?"

Chloe smiles. It is a beauty queen smile, smooth in its curl and unerotic almost to the point of generic perfection.

"I don't get nervous," she says. "But I don't get nervous because I never think about the people watching. If I thought about what I was doing, I wouldn't be able to do it. I have to just not think about it."

The Girl Scout leader wraps things up and they all thank Chloe loudly. They each shake her hand and then march up the stairs, single-file, like so many martians headed back to their spaceship.

Chloe looks at Norman and then blows her bangs up in mock exhaustion and laughs.

"I need to talk to you," Norman says.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, well, fine, but not really. I left a tape with Ginny. You need to see it and write a lead-in and probably some voice-over. I didn't do one

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but if you run it without a V.O. it'll be too grim," Norman says with his arms crossed.

Chloe regards him and squints her eyes.

"Look, Norman, this isn't easy for me to say, but if you don't want it to run, we can just pretend it didn't happen. Horace pulls that shit all the time. You wouldn't believe the kind of stuff we don't show. Take the tape and trash it."

"No," he says. "It's too obvious. Not only will every station report on it, they'll know I was there. It'll get out. Might as well use it while it's current."

"So what is it, exactly?"

Norman looks at Chloe and shuffles back and forth on his feet.

"Is it really?" she says excitedly.

"I'm afraid so."

"No fucking way."

"Go look at it," Norman waves his hand at the stairs in a slightly disgusted gesture.

Chloe grabs him by the hand. "Let's," she says, pulling him.

"No, thanks," he says, pulling away, and starts up the stairs alone.

"I'm leaving."

Chloe runs up the stairs behind him. "Norman," she says, stopping him, "you did the right thing."

"I did my job," he corrects her. "They're not always the same thing."

"Maybe not, but you didn't do anything wrong. You didn't hurt anybody."

"Not yet," he says. He turns and starts to head out but stops.

"Where's Cecil?"

"What are you going to do to him?"

"Nothing, Chloe," he says, suddenly feeling very tired. "I'm just going to take some time off. I want to tell him that."

"I don't know. I'll have him call you."

Chloe takes him by the arm and gives him a squeeze. "Are you going home now?"

Norman laughs. He realizes he is still staying at the Blackbeard and hasn't made any progress on finding a house.

"Yeah, have him call me later."

Norman takes a few steps toward the door and pauses. "What exactly does Georgia do here?" he asks.

"She's the Assistant Station Manager. It's her station really. She owns it."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"Sure," Chloe says running toward the production room. "She's Cecil's ex-wife."

SOUTH CENTRAL LOS ANGELES  
DRAGNETTING STREETS  
A LITTLE BEFORE 6PM

Norman isn't exactly sure which house belongs to Oso and his gangbangers. When he left there last night his mind was reeling and he felt sick. But when he sees the hooptie they rode in parked on the barren lawn with several others, he knows they are inside waiting to see themselves on TV.

Norman parks in the driveway and goes up to the door. The door is open and inside he can hear a TV turned up loud and playing the game show that comes on just before the news. He leans his head inside and yells out for

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Oso and Espresso. An unfriendly-looking muscular Latino fellow with a blue bandana wrapped around his forehead comes to the door. He is as tall as Norman and about fifty pounds heavier. He looks about sixteen.

"Norman!" he exclaims. He smiles broadly and quickly ushers him inside. He has Norman around the shoulders and brings him into the living room where a half a dozen homeboys and a few of their girls sit around a beautiful wall-sized TV. "This is Norman, everybody," the young man says.

Everybody waves and says, "Hello, ese," to Norman. He holds up his hand in a mild wave and someone puts a Budweiser in it. Oso and Espresso sit together on a beat up couch. They are both uncharacteristically quiet. Norman doesn't recognize anyone else.

"Are they going to show it on TV? When are they going to show it?" the young man who brought him in wants to know. Norman wonders if he was on the drive-by. Norman thinks he recognizes the torso, but he didn't get the face last night.

"It'll probably be first," Norman grimaces.

"Hey, Arturo, get the tape going," one of them says to a youngster who is kneeling next to the monstrous TV. "We want to get this on tape."

"I am Pieso," the young man finally says, introducing himself. "Are you feeling better? You looked pretty bad last night."

Norman is relieved to learn that he recognized him.

"Yes," Norman says. "I'm tired though."

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel it, too. I was up all night. Those things are frightening. I don't like to do them, but we can't let them hunt us like that, you know? If we don't fight back, we're all gone."

Norman looks at Pieso who is shaking his head at the TV. The game show audience is rooting for a woman in big hair to choose a man with equally big hair even though she is talking about the one whose hair is slicked back.

"I hate this show," Pieso says. "When's the news on?" he shouts.

Norman steps back a little and leans against the wall. Oso and Espresso are staring at the TV. Oso's foot is shaking and Espresso is numb with excitement. He has a glass of water between his legs. Across from them on another sofa are two young couples, one pair is holding hands, the other has intertwined their limbs and rub each other wherever their hands fall. Norman breathes heavily and opens the Budweiser. He leans his head back, closes his eyes and takes a big swig. As he swallows he can hear the introductory music of KPOC's Evening News.

"Arturo," Pieso says, "are you getting this?"

"Yes, pendejo," the kid turns and yells back.

The room goes dead silent.

The big screen fills with Chloe's face and blonde hair.

"Gangland violence erupted again last night in South-Central Los Angeles as five men were shot down in a drive-by shooting. This is the second such killing in two days, this one in apparent retaliation for Monday night's murder of thirteen-year-old Rolando Hidalgo outside a grocery store. In this remarkable exclusive footage by our own Norman Lessing . . ."

"Hey, that's you," Arturo says, and is immediately shushed.

Pieso moves up close to the silent crowd and watches with them. Norman goes outside to finish his beer on the porch.

"Hey, nice watch, Oso," Norman hears Arturo say about the tape.

"Shut up, pendejo."

When the tape finishes, the room is quiet except for the girls whose conversation Norman can't make out. The channel changes soon after that, to a Dodger pre-game show, and Oso comes outside.

"Is that what you wanted?" Norman asks him.

Oso shrugs.

"It doesn't get Rolando back, does it?"

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"It's OK to lose out here, ese," Oso says. "But it ain't OK not to fight back. You gotta show them no fear. Otherwise they'll stomp you for sure."

Norman thinks about telling him to call the police, but thinks better. He'll only get an earful of how they get jacked around for no reason by the cops and how they don't look out for nobody but themselves. Who's going to look out for those couples inside if he and Espresso are locked up like animals? Who's going to teach Arturo to live on these streets?

By this time everyone has joined them on the porch. It is dark out already and they are gathered around Norman and Oso, looking up at them under the porch-light.

"I came by because I wanted to know if you're satisfied now. Is this enough, to have the drive-by on TV?"

Norman glances down at Espresso whose eyes are moist and timid and returns his focus to Oso.

"Norman," Oso says, "even when we live in the big houses and have the big cars and the big jobs, even then we'll look out for our homies. We've got to."

Norman looks around the porch at them all. Oso, the oldest, for all his street wisdom, is maybe eighteen.

Norman nods and they walk him to his car. At the door of the Mustang he shakes hands all around, the way they taught him the day they met.

He then turns and looks over Oso's shoulder at the street. Coming at them is an old Chevy Impala with its high beams on and men hanging from every window. Popping sounds are heard first over the whine of the engine but the impact of the bullets can't be seen. The car skids to a stop in the street and the cannon-loud bang of high caliber weapons erupts.

Norman instinctively goes for the trunk and scratches nervously at the lock with his car key. Oso and Espresso kneel down professionally and fire back with pistols they wrench from their pant-legs. The couples run for the front door of the house but the girl in the lead falls, hit in the hip. Two of the others fall on her and the man in back catches one in the chest throwing him sideways and down in the weeds.

Pieso appears suddenly at the hood of one of the cars on the lawn. He stands up with an enormous rifle at his hip and starts unloading it into the Impala. With an array of bullets, the rear tire explodes and a man leaning out the window suddenly bows over.

Norman throws open the trunk and leans into it. He can hear the tinkling of the bullets hitting the side of the Mustang as he pulls and tugs at the camera, struggling to get it out. As he holds it up close to his eye, he can see that Oso and Espresso are down and blood is puddling from where Oso's kidney used to be . . . .

The camera picked up a high-powered rifle firing from behind a Ford pickup truck parked on the lawn. The shots tore through the rear window of the late model Chevy in the street. Return fire from the Chevy was sporadic and filled the front fender of the truck . . . .

The camera jolts in Norman's hand as the lens catches a bullet. The camera cracks again and again. It is knocked out of Norman's hands abruptly and hits the ground. Norman can feel a sudden sting in his cheek and the familiar metallic taste of blood in his mouth. He swipes his tongue around in his mouth and puts it in a hole where a molar used to be. His knees go slack and he braces himself with one hand on the rear fender of the Mustang.

The Impala limps away. The left rear tire sparks and smokes as it accelerates. Pieso's bullets chase it down the street.

Norman puts his hand to his beard and his finger finds a hole in his cheek.

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Pieso stands at the end of the driveway looking down the street. He looks over at Norman. Norman blinks hard. His head aches badly and he can't focus. His knees give way.

"Oh, shit, ese," Pieso says.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
CEDAR-SANAI HOSPITAL  
LATE MORNING

Sugar Bear Billings ran for over 5,000 yards with the Dolphins. He had 42 career touchdowns and ran at you, like Earl Campbell did, not around you. He was just big and hard and made linebackers sweat more than a paternity suit. Sportswriters and coaches alike lauded his work on the field and collectively felt he would go on to become one of the all time greats. That was why his sudden retirement after only six years in the league was so startling. It wasn't startling to him. He had always wanted to finish college, he told the press conference. And he wanted to do it before he was brain dead from bashing helmets every day.

That press conference was the last time Norman saw Sugar Bear Billings. But when the door to Norman's hospital room slams shut, he opens his eyes to see Murray the Cop handing Sugar Bear a pen and asking him for his autograph. Sugar Bear is still big and very broad-shouldered. But it is odd to see him in a tweed coat with suede elbow-patches, and gnawing on the end of a burled-wood pipe. It seems so self-consciously professorial. Why isn't he just wearing sweats or the Versace suit Murray has once again been coaxed into buying?

Norman watches Sugar Bear write in Murray's notebook and then, when he is through, Murray offers him some Copenhagen.

Norman gags at the thought of dipping tobacco. He swallows hard and feels the stitches on the inside of his mouth pull and grind against his sore gums. He jerks his jaw instinctively and the muscles ache from being stretched during oral surgery and then from the prolonged stillness of sleeping off the anesthesia. He groans and puts his hand to his face. He feels both cheeks, feels the large bandages on each side that cover the stitches.

"Bullet went clean through your face, Norman," Murray says. "High calibre .22. Good thing you were so close to the guy who shot you. At about 200 yards those bullets start to tumble. They rip faces off then."

"I feel better now, Murray," Norman says sarcastically. He speaks gingerly, careful not to rub too hard against the wounds.

A doctor comes into the room cracking his knuckles and popping bubble gum. Norman thinks it's his jaw. A nurse in tow is unwrapping some gum and adds the stick to the piece already in her mouth. They stop at the end of Norman's bed and regard Sugar Bear and Murray with cheerful confusion.

"How are you this morning, Mr. Lessing?" the doctor says, popping a bubble.

"What time is it?" Norman wants to know. His jaw stings.

"Nearly noon," the doctor says, pushing on a button on the side of Norman's bed that makes him sit up.

The nurse bursts a bubble and a string of it falls in her shoulder-length brown hair. She tugs and preens for a long time. The men watch as she wipes repeatedly at the gum, unable to get it out.

Norman rubs his clean-shaven chin and runs his hand over the top of his head. It is as fuzzy as a tennis ball.

"Hey," he says as angrily as his jaw would allow. "Why the hell is my head shaved?"

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The doctor and nurse share a grin. The doctor reaches down to check the clipboard at the end of the bed. He nods at the information on it.

"Because the orderly who prepared you was Walter."

"Walter?" Norman says. "What the hell is a Walter?"

"Do you still have pubic hair, Mr. Lessing?" the doctor asks.

Norman looks at the nurse who looks back at him with a mischievous smirk on her face. Norman rustles around under the sheets.

"Yes," he says.

"Then you're lucky," the doctor replies.

Dr. McDuffy hits a switch that turns on bright track lighting that hits Norman right in the face. Norman notices that the floor is covered with industrial grey carpeting.

"Did you hear the joke about how they discovered that the biggest cause of AIDS is track lighting and grey carpeting?" Norman says.

Norman looks around the room. They all look back at him blankly.

"Is that the way you tell jokes, Norman? To not tell them?" Sugar Bear asks.

"Well, I just figured maybe everyone had heard it. I mean, I heard it."

"I haven't heard it," the nurse says.

"I haven't heard it either," Murray says.

"But it's told now," Sugar Bear concludes, rubbing the bowl of his pipe.

Dr. McDuffy removes the bandages and examines the stitches. While examining the work done in Norman's mouth, he explains that he was the oral surgeon who plugged his holes last night. They had to shave around the area they were working on and Walter is often a little over-zealous.

"You were a very unpleasant sight when you came in," the nurse adds. "Your mouth and beard were full of blood and tissue. I'm afraid the paramedics didn't do too good a job. They never do with oral injuries."

"Yeah," Murray says, "but you were the only one who came to the medical center. The rest went to the morgue."

Norman cringes and throws his head back against his pillow. The back, right side of his head is sore. He rubs it and feels a large and tender bruise.

"I fell pretty hard, I guess," he says.

"We think you hit the trunk of your car," Murray says. "We're not sure, though. There weren't any witnesses. Not any living, anyway."

Norman looks up at Murray and wonders about Pieso. He wants to ask how many died, to somehow calculate if Pieso was hit too, but he isn't sure how many were there. He just remembers that a lot of them were hit.

"How do you feel?" the doctor asks, writing on the clipboard.

Norman shrugs. "How should I feel?"

The doctor looks at Norman, and chews.

"Any pain? Anything unusual?"

"Probably exactly what you would expect," Norman tells him. "Nothing more, nothing less. It's just irritating. I'd rather be doing something else."

The doctor writes some more.

The nurse redresses his wounds while the doctor says he wants Norman to stay at least one more day for observation. If all goes well, then he can go home tomorrow.

Norman goes along with it, figuring it is one way to start his vacation.

The doctor leaves Norman with a small bottle of Vicodin for the pain and tells him to eat nothing but soft foods for a while. He can order whatever he wants from the hospital menu, Dr. McDuffy says, gnawing at his

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gum and blowing another bubble, but stay away from the very chewy stuff they serve, like the breakfasts, the lunches, the dinners . . . .

When the doctor, the nurse and their schtick finally take leave of them, Murray and Sugar Bear step to the foot of Norman's bed where Norman is introduced to DuWayne "Sugar Bear" Billings.

"You made the news twice yesterday, Norman," Billings says with a smooth, molasses-thick voice. He has a round, pleasant face and a pensive, animated brow that moves up and down as he speaks. His short hair ends abruptly at his forehead, giving his black face a sort of darkly-lit, full-moon appearance.

"Yeah, well, I've become pretty popular in Los Angeles since I got here."

"When did you get here?"

Norman grins lightly and says, "Last week."

Sugar Bear looks at Murray who can only shrug and suck on the Copenhagen in his lip.

Norman glances down at Sugar Bear's gut. It is about even with Murray's.

"You've been out of football for a long time," Norman says.

Sugar Bear smiles, wide and bright, giving his nickname some substance. "I've been a psychiatrist for a long time, Norman," he says.

"A psychiatrist? That's a lot of schooling . . . and a lot of money."

"I did a lot of it on scholarships, actually," Sugar Bear says, shuttling around the room. "The rest I paid cash. Football treated me well," he says.

Norman thinks for a moment, assembling. "Does Cecil want me to start therapy or does Murray?" he says after a pause.

"Neither, as a matter of fact," Sugar Bear says, stuffing his pipe into his jacket pocket and wandering slowly around the room, as if about to begin a lecture. "I came here for two reasons: For one, there's suddenly a lot of shit going down in and around the neighborhood where I grew up and you always happen to be standing in the middle of it, reporting and taking pictures," he says, looking out the window of Norman's room.

"And two," he says, turning back toward Norman, "just how in the hell can you just stand there taking pictures while bullets are flying right past you? As I see it," he says, crossing his arms and knotting his eyebrows, "you're either staging this shit, or there is something deeply wrong here."

Norman sits up stiffly in bed.

"To address your first concern," Norman says, "there's nothing 'sudden' about it. I don't know how close you are to your old neighborhood, but there's nothing new about any of what's been going on there. Even so, I don't think there will be that much more of that shit going down in your old neighborhood because there isn't much left of that old neighborhood. The way the people there have been carrying on, we'll be lucky if there's anyone living there before long. Hell, even the businesses are moving out of the area. You couldn't find a restaurant around there if you took a table, two chairs, silverware and a chef down there. You can't even find a goddam grocery store in that area."

Norman pauses for a moment and slides down in the bed.

"And as to your second concern," he says after a breath, "I don't know what's wrong. A week ago, I didn't know anybody out here. And suddenly I'm in the middle of gang violence, I'm tracking down some drug dealers, and I still can't sleep worth a damn. Last night was the first full night of sleep I've had since I can remember. And to do that, I has to go out and get shot in the head."

"To be perfectly honest with you," Sugar Bear says, approaching the bed, "I'm not real close to my old neighborhood. I got my football

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scholarship and I never looked back except to move my parents into a house in Bel Air. But it's been a real slap in the face to suddenly see my old neighborhood on television, for all the wrong reasons. And it's made me wonder how some tourist suddenly manages to get all this in our faces. So I started looking into you and it turns out that this isn't new to you, Norman. I remember your footage from the Cuban riots in Miami."

"How'd you know they were mine?"

"I talked to Wanda this morning. And to your old station in Miami. They all wish you well, by the way."

Norman nods, a little ashamed.

"How did you get in the middle of this?" Murray asked.

"I was hired to get in the middle of all this," Norman says. "I get paid a lot of money to do this kind of reporting. It's what the station wanted me to do."

"Did you like taking those pictures?" Sugar Bear asks.

"Oh, come on," he responds. "Don't they make you sick?"

"I wanted to know how they made you feel, Norman. That's why I asked."

Norman leans his head back a little. Psychiatrist shit, he sighs to himself. He thinks for a minute, trying to be as honest about his impressions of his actions as he can. He just shakes his head. "I really have no reaction to the whole thing. Just guilt. I don't have any feeling for what I did while I was doing it, just remorse for it afterward." He pauses. "That makes it kind of psychopathic, doesn't it?"

Murray looks at Sugar Bear eagerly, anxious to hear about psychopaths.

"Not at all," Sugar Bear says.

Murray's shoulders drop visibly.

"Psychopaths don't know guilt or remorse at all."

Norman feels somewhat relieved. He stares at his feet at the end of the bed.

"Would you like to have a few meetings?" Sugar Bear asks.

Norman thinks for a moment, wondering if he will sleep tonight.

"Leave me a card," he says. "Right now I'd say 'no.' I mean, I should be able to lick this thing by myself, right? I'm a reasonable person. But on the other hand, I haven't been able to sleep in a very long time, and I have the feeling I'm going to need to talk to someone before this is all over."

"Fine," Sugar Bear says, pulling a card out of his jacket pocket and wiping a few flakes of tobacco off it. He puts it into Norman's hand. "Call me," he says.

Sugar Bear turns and heads for the door. He stops before reaching for the door-handle and turns back toward Murray.

"I think I will take you up on that Copenhagen," he says.

Norman squints at them bleakly.

Murray beams as he hands Sugar Bear the can.

"I haven't done this since my college days," Sugar Bear says, smiling at them both. He digs into the can and pulls up a sizable pinch. "If I don't puke on this, I'll be stoned to the gills by the time I get to my car."

He holds up the pinch as if to say "cheers" and then slides it into his mouth like an old pro. He then waves them both, grinning like a school boy, and disappears out the door.

Murray pulls up a chair next to Norman's bed.

"Smart guy, Billings," Murray says, sitting down. "Gawd, I lost a lot of money betting against him. I sure was glad when he retired."

Murray smiles big at Norman and puts his feet up on the side of the bed.

"So tell me all about it, Norman," he says.

"What do you know about Pump?" Norman asks.

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Murray laces his fingers together on his belly and wiggles them like chubby little puppets.

"Nothing much," he says. "We think he's the guy behind Matlaga, but no one knows exactly who Pump is."

"So you do know who Matlaga is."

"Oh, sure. We've been tailing his ass for years. Never got anything solid on the guy. But he's been pushing a lot of coke and crack through this city for a long time. See, that's the big mystery around here. Every time we get close to Matlaga, then everything starts pointing to this guy Pump. Then, just when we think we know who Pump is, Matlaga's name comes up. Fact is, most of the department think Matlaga is Pump."

"What do you think?"

"I don't think Matlaga is Pump," Murray says, watching his fingers rotate. "I think that Matlaga is actually trying to get at Pump for some reason. Back in Westwood," Murray says, tapping the bump on his lip that hides the Copenhagen, "that kid who did the shooting was a guy named Jimmy Johnson. Now, Jimmy used to be one of Fausto's runners. He's a tough little shit, but dumb as dirt. We figured he shot Alexander Williams to get back at Pump and Matlaga since they were rumored to have ordered the hit on Fausto. Not so. Sure, Alexander was way up in Matlaga's organization, but it turns out that ol' Jimmy was looking out for el numero uno. He read el escrito en el pared, if you'll pardon the Mexican cliché, and figured it was time to find a new employer. He figured he could take Fausto's rolodex and just promenade right on into Matlaga's office and be welcomed like some debutante. Wrong. Instead, he ran head-long into Alexander Williams who didn't cotton to the opposing party, especially one who jumped ship like he was John Connelly."

"Who's John Connelly?" Norman asks.

"Ex-governor of Texas. You remember him: He was in the car when Kennedy is shot. He took it in the chest and in the arm. Later, though, after the wounds healed, he didn't think it was fashionable to be a Democrat anymore so he figured he'd become a Republican. Easier to get into country clubs that way, I guess."

Norman shakes his head.

"Which brings me to my point," Murray continues. "Just what kind of a fool thinks he can go from Fausto's gang to Matlaga's anyway?"

"Does that ever happen?"

"Are you kidding? These guys aren't businessmen, they're families and blood brothers. They're very, very tight. Trouble with being that tight is that a lot of them end up with brains so mushy it's like they're from different branches of the same family tree. Now, me, I don't like to think that anyone is that dumb. Solet's give Jimmy Johnson the benefit of the doubt for just a moment: Suppose he's not dumb, which means he's no more going to try to join Matlaga's crew than join the Klan."

"So, what made him think he could get away with it?"

"Good question. And I asked him that same thing, in my own kind and persuasive manner," Murray says, cocking his head at Norman and looking boyishly clever. "He says he not only has Fausto's old rolodex to bring to the table, but a good deal of information on Pump."

"On Pump?"

"Yup. You see, Jimmy is always out to be on the winning side. Of course, in this business, that's like picking between Harvard and Yale in a football game against Notre Dame. Jimmy had somehow come up with evidence that Pump was out to get rid of Matlaga. And with it he figured he could be welcomed into Matlaga's gang, if only he could get past Alexander Williams. Which he did. Only he got caught by you."

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"So how did he find out that Pump doesn't want to have anything to do with Matlaga anymore?"

"Well, I asked him that, too. Only he didn't exactly want to answer that one. He seemed to figure he would get out on bail soon and wouldn't have to tell anyone."

"Did he?"

"The very next day. Some friend of his put up a very expensive bond for him. I tried to trace it, but the guy paid cash to the bail bondsman, if you know what I mean, and didn't want to tell me anything, which figures."

"So he didn't tell you anything."

"I didn't say that. I said he didn't want to tell me that," Murray grins sheepishly. "Still, it ain't like he told me everything, either. But someone is trying to drive a wedge between Pump and Matlaga, trying to get at Pump. Someone is feeding Jimmy information about Pump, trying to get Matlaga to take aim at him."

"Any idea who that is?"

"None. But we're looking. It would help if we knew who Pump was, Norman," he says, looking straight at him, "so we can find out who's got this vendetta against him."

"What makes you think I know who Pump is?"

"You say so."

Norman thinks for a moment.

"I just said 'drug dealers.' Not any drug dealers in particular."

"Don't bullshit me, Norman. Jimmy Johnson ran right into you. What other drug dealers would you be interested in?"

Norman thinks for a moment but can't come up with a reason not to tell him.

"Has your department recently caught anyone peddling drugs from rental cars?" Norman asked.

Murray watches his fingers twiddle.

"A number of them, actually."

"Ever wonder why they were all driving Drake cars?"

"We wondered, but we haven't pursued it. It's like we're supposed to check out Brooks Bros. every time a politician is caught with his hand in the cookie jar. What the fuck is that?"

"No one in your department has been looking into Drake?"

"Not that I know of. Why?" Murray asks.

"Well, someone has."

Murray is silent. His eyes dart around the room. "Go on," he says, after a pause.

"And whose name do you suppose those cars are in?" Norman asked.

"Pump's," Murray says.

"Sort of," Norman says. "He doesn't make the reservations for them, Matlaga does. Stolen credit card numbers for confirmation, but paid for in cash so the receipts are disposed of, but they're made in Pump's name."

"No shit," Murray says. "No direct ties to anyone anywhere."

"Exactly."

"So who's Pump?"

Norman pauses for a moment, to squeeze out a little drama.

"Philip Encher," Norman says.

"The lawyer? No shit? Ah, damn. He's the one who's been telling me where to buy these suits."

"And I know people who can link Matlaga to the whole thing."

"But why is someone trying to get at Encher? Sure, he's a lawyer, but that's no reason to get someone like Matlaga mad at you. Are you sure?"

"Encher is part owner of Drake."

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"But what's the connection between him and Matlaga? Right now, if I go put it to Encher, he's going to deny everything. He's just going to say someone else is using his name. There's nothing to go on. It's all Matlaga, and someone trying to get him mad at Encher."

"Right. So now all you have to do is pick up Matlaga and we can link him to all sorts of dealings and protect your fashion consultant at the same time, even though you'll have to lock him up, too."

"But who's the fink? If it was one of these guys you were out on your shootin' match with, they're all dead."

"It's another. I think he'll talk, but I don't think he'll testify."

"Well, if he won't testify then we got no more than a Deep Throat here. And Deep Throats don't do shit for me. They want protection like a villa in Monte Carlo or something. This is garbage, Norman."

"He's talking to me, just like everyone else is. I figure if I just talk straight to Encher and to Matlaga, we can put the rest of it together ourselves. They'll put themselves on camera."

"Why."

"Damndest thing: They want to see themselves on TV."

"Like hell they do."

"Encher does, why else is he representing the serial killer?"

"Fine. That's good publicity, in a Son of Sam kinda way. But what about Matlaga? You think you can just waltz into his home in Beverly Hills and say, 'how's the drug business, boss?'"

"Maybe, maybe not. But I just watched a whole mess of kids get wiped out over getting themselves on TV and they're all cut from the same cloth as Matlaga."

Murray glares thoughtfully at Norman. "What are you trying to do here, Norman? Are you investigating now, or are you trying to redeem yourself for the death of those kids?"

"I don't know, Murray," Norman says. "Maybe I just want out of this bed."

Norman left a message for Lee at the desk of the Blackbeard Motel asking her to visit him at the hospital as soon as she could and to bring his portable computer and case. The young man who took the message said he would pass it on to her "anon," whenever that was. There was just no hiding from those theatre types.

Lee shows up within an hour of his call. She throws open the door spouting "Je-sus-help-us-Je-sus" and packing an armful of tulips. She floats into the room, layers of floral material and her long black hair streaming behind her. She jumps on top of him in bed, flowers and all and hugs him hard, trapping his arms in the sheets.

She sits up on top of him, still holding the flowers in her arm and plops the computer, in its briefcase-like pack, flat on his chest.

"You have such a pretty face," she says. "I had no idea. Of course, you look like a little chipmunk with those swollen cheeks of yours."

She leans over and gently kisses the bandages on his cheeks and then they smooch lightly.

"You're wearing colors again," Norman jokes. "Did you miss me?" he asks.

Lee shakes her head. "How? You've been on the news non-stop. KPOC got a hold of your old TV station and they've been running a whole bunch of your pictures over and over again. Miss you? I'm sick of you," she teases. "Here." She gets off him and dumps the flowers on him, covering him from cheek to foot.

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Just then Wanda walks in the door. She looks at Norman, covered with flowers and then glances over at Lee whose outfit is an overpowering floral arrangement in itself.

"Is he dead?" she asks.

Lee looks at Norman with a skeptical look on her face. "He will be soon," she says.

"Lee, this is Wanda Overgaard. Wanda, this is Lee Colton."

"Charmed," Wanda says, offering her hand to Lee to be shaken. Lee holds it instead, and curtsies.

Wanda pauses, looking typically disheveled in her oversized menswear -- and uncharacteristically confused.

"God, Norman, you really were shot in the head," Wanda observes, releasing Lee's hand and strolling quickly to the opposite side of the bed.

"Just one bullet," he says.

"When do you get to leave?" Lee asks, perching herself next to Norman on the bed.

"One more night," Norman says.

Lee nods with approval.

"I just don't know about this new haircut of yours, Norman," Wanda says. "It looks a little too Manson for you."

"I like it," Lee says. "I can see your face. You have a nice face." She gives his pate a rub.

Norman gives them a quick rundown of the events that led up to his hospitalization. Wanda prods him repeatedly for more details, times, events, people involved. Lee, on the other hand, keeps wanting to know how he felt, what his impressions were. Norman answers them both copiously, but struggles to do so because his recall comes much like out of body experiences. They are patient with his slow responses, but it prompts Wanda to ask if there is any brain damage.

Norman thanks Wanda for keeping the press out of his room.

"Cecil did it, actually," Wanda says. "He didn't want any other stations to get to you, so our reports have you staying at another hospital under an assumed name."

"So that's why I couldn't find you," Lee says, elbowing Norman.

"Cecil kept telling me to get down here and get you on tape but I told him to shove it. I figured you wanted to be left alone," Wanda smiles. "I just wanted to come by to see how you were."

Norman opens up his computer case and switches on the unit.

"I've got something on here I want you to look at," Norman says to Wanda. "You remember Philip Encher, the attorney who's representing Hillary Hines, the serial killer?"

"Sure."

"Well, he's the one everyone calls 'Pump.'"

"No shit?"

Norman stares at Wanda and thinks about Charlie. That is his favorite phrase, and it seems to be catching.

"Yeah," Norman says. "And it turns out he's part owner of Drake Car Rental."

"Oh, my-my," Wanda says, pushing her hair up above her forehead. She looks like her mind is reeling. She sits down on the chair by the window. "This is weird."

"Whassup?"

"I got this call from Horace at the station the other day," Wanda says. "He told me he got this Deep Throat call from some guy telling him to get me onto Drake. Deep Throat told him that if I started digging around in Drake, I would find out who the biggest drug dealer in L.A. was. So I started asking around only the farthest I ever got was these tough little Latina

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girls who wouldn't tell me anything. They wouldn't even let me see who was renting the cars."

"So you're the one," Norman says.

"What do you mean?"

"Some guy I know told me someone was asking about Drake."

"Well, what do you know?"

"I did some research the other night," Norman says. He copies a file in his computer onto a diskette and hands it to Wanda. "That's how I found out who Pump was. It turns out he's part owner of Drake. But that doesn't mean all that much. It could be that someone is just using his name. I was talking with Murray earlier and we think it's really this guy Matlaga who's doing it all. But I want you to look at this file. There is nothing firm linking Pump to anything. But maybe there's something in that file I don't see. I saved it in ASCII format."

"What's ASCII?" Lee asks.

"It means Any Stupid Computer can Interpret It," Norman says.

"Male Answer Syndrome," Lee says quietly, shaking her head.

"So why did someone call up and tell us to look into Drake? Do you think that person is after Encher?" Wanda asks, getting up and glaring blankly out the window.

"It would seem that way."

"What a shame. He's so good-looking," Wanda says.

"But it's really Matlaga, anyway," Norman says.

"Is that what the caller wants us to think, or does the caller really and truly think Pump is behind it all?"

"Does it matter? I mean, if we know the truth, then Deep Throat can think John Conelly did it for all we care."

"John Conelly? Who's John Conelly?" Lee wants to know.

"Ex-governor of Texas. It's a joke . . . never mind. Does it really matter what the caller thinks?"

"Yes," Wanda says indignantly, turning back toward Norman.

"Why?"

"Because spineless, little, vengeful worms make calls like that. People who are trying to get back at someone for something they did. The person who made that call has as much to hide as the person he pointed us to."

"Yeah, like disgruntled hookers telling on their pimps. Sounds like a pretty sleazy bunch," Lee says, absentmindedly tugging on a loose thread on her dress.

Wanda smiles at Lee and puts her hands on her hips.

"What did you say your name was?"

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
ROOM 204  
LATE NIGHT

Norman stands at the window of his motel room and looks out over the pool. The reflection of the moon is clear and sharp on the water. The evening is cool and silent except for Lee's whispering snore beneath the sheets and the snapping of Norman's finger against DuWayne Billings' card in his hand. In his mind he can see his fingernail hitting the white card, the black letters of the address, phone number and the word "psychiatrist" bending with the quick pressure.

Norman is haggard and triste. He runs his hand across his cheeks and chin. He decided to keep the clean-shaven look now that the stitches are out and the scabs are gone. But he can still find the thin palimpsest of scars.

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His hair has grown back some. And though he no longer has the Manson look, as Wanda put it, it is still decisively spiky.

Earlier that day he ran, lifted weights at the club, sat in the sauna - even took a swim in that unheated whale-pool. He and Lee shared an enormous, quiet dinner of Indian food and split a good bottle of red. Later they made love until they were both so spent even their emotions could not push them further. Still, Norman is wide awake, his mind reeling with thoughts ranging from Philip Encher and Matlaga to yesterday's sports page. He feels beaten.

Norman opens up the drawer of the desk and looks at the .357, a reminder of his welcome-mugging to L.A. It sits there alone on the rough wood. No Gideons Bible here. He stares down at it for a moment and then shuts the drawer and puts Billings' card on top of the telephone and crawls back into bed.

WESTWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
1ST NATIONAL BANK BUILDING  
MID-MORNING

DuWayne "Sugar Bear" Billings' office is on the 14th floor and from the lobby window Norman can spot the location where Jimmy Johnson ran into him. The bruise to Norman's eye has since worn off, but he remembers the incident vividly and re-enacts it in his mind. He watches it all happen again -- to someone else -- this time from the vantage point of Billings' 14th storey window.

DuWayne Billings' lobby has three doors: one that leads to the hallway and two that lead to offices. The walls of Billings' lobby are covered with thick, wooden bookcases. They don't fit well in the room. They are angled improperly, tipping slightly, like they are being stored there temporarily. The shelves are stacked high with medical journals and texts thrown there hastily and interspersed with football memorabilia: trophies, photographs, magazine articles. One of the magazine articles lists the voting of the Heisman Trophy for Billings' senior year at UCLA. He came in second. Another article lists the NFL's leading rushers. Billings is second there too. In another pile are several photographs of Billings and his family: Sugar Bear playing catch with his sons; Billings and wife and kids; Billings and another wife and kid. Norman wonders how Billings feels about being known as "second."

"I have an old photo you took," Billings says, coming into the lobby from his office. He has on a worn blue-denim shirt, blue and red striped rep tie and tan corduroys that whistle as he squish-squashes into the room on his crepe-soled desert boots. He digs into one of the piles and hands it to Norman. "UCLA and Miami. You caught me with my head in the chest of a linebacker. If you look real close, you can see what it looks like when the air is knocked out of you. That linebacker is in a lot of pain."

Norman puts his hand to his chest.

"Can you see it on his face?" Billings asks. "You were unconscious even back then."

"I don't know if 'unconscious' is the right word," Norman says.

"We'll see. Come on," Billings says, leading Norman into his office, "We'll talk in here."

Norman glances around the room. Bookshelves line the room and in the center are two large, red leather chairs at a 45 degree angle to one another. One -- Billings' presumably -- has a clipboard sitting on it.

Norman, feeling awkward but brave and honest, sits down quickly in his seat and then slouches down far. He crosses one jeaned leg over the other

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and looks down at his black boots. Billings sits down politely, and immediately starts making notes. Norman wishes he had worn a newer white t-shirt.

Billings leans forward and looks straight at Norman for a long time. Norman looks back calmly, trying to calculate Billings' thoughts before he does.

"Tell me why you haven't slept much, Norman," he says, sitting back.

Norman thinks quickly, gathering together his response and then predicting Billings' response to that so that he can regenerate a response that would be further along in the conversation but not so far ahead as to miss the connection in between; to respond intelligently and without cliché, but not dissociatedly.

"I think too much," is his response.

"What do you mean by that?"

Norman sighs.

"I think about things instead of sleeping," he says.

"Anything in particular?"

"No. Anything . . . everything. My mind just races. It picks up on a thought and sees it down a long path that leads to other thoughts and then thoughts beyond that. And all the while there are other thoughts running along side it doing the same thing. It's maddening really. Like some marathon of a thousand runners and none of them have any sense of direction."

"Is it work? Relationships? What exactly do you think about?"

"All of those. Bodily functions to politics to theories. You name it. It's like I must or I'm not doing the right thing."

"And it keeps you up at night?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Well, not always. I mean I do sleep some. But not much."

"Would you characterize it as depression?"

"I don't think I know enough about the ways depression manifests itself to say one way or the other. Doctors in the past have put me on Prozac. I got more active physically but it didn't address the sleeplessness or the mental activity."

"Were you better off in Miami?"

"No."

Billings thinks for a moment.

"Have you ever has your melatonin levels checked?"

Norman smiles.

"Yes," he says. "A reporter in Miami referred me to a doctor who specialized in Seasonal Affective Disorder cases. I believe sitting in front of lights eases SAD cases. I think if people thought of themselves more as mechanical beings instead of miracles of wonder they'd have a lot fewer problems. But my problem isn't seasonal. Besides, my melatonin levels were normal."

"So do you see yourself as mechanical in some way?"

"I don't know if 'mechanical' is the right word, but mechanical is about as close as you can get."

"What makes you mechanical?"

"Mechanical is not what I mean."

"I know, but . . ."

"I get it," Norman interrupts. "I don't want to spend this hour arguing semantics." Norman thinks for a moment. "I see things in their parts. People. Plants. For instance, plants are constructed of all these affine redundancies. A fern leaf -- just the smallest part of a fern leaf -- is just a small but complete version of the larger leaf. And they can be reproduced again and again as if they were machine parts. Engineers have

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been able to reproduce these mathematically. It's really all that's going on in plants. How complicated can they really be, anyway?"

Billings stares at Norman.

"Nature is basic in that way," Norman continues. "Similar forms of different sizes layered together to create larger versions of the same form. Snowflakes are like that, clouds. Don't you ever wonder?"

"I wonder. But not like that."

"Well, sure. It's all a big puzzle. Amino acids, too. Though there really aren't that many of them, they interact to create whole organisms. The rub up against one another in an innumerable variety of combinations and sequences like the affine coefficients. Think of DNA. Chromosomes are normally diploid. And then when a singular anomaly -- a triploid -- is introduced, it creates a Down's syndrome organism, rendering the form virtually identical to all others even though they were constructed in a completely different way. What is seemingly chaotic is really simple and fundamental."

"My, God, how do you know about things like trisomic conditions?"

"I read everything."

"Yes, well, I read a good deal as well, but I don't know anything that approaches your kind of knowledge." Billings pauses and puts on a playful face.

"How are you at trivia?" Billings asks.

"Not bad, I guess."

"How many are on death row in California?"

"157. But that's not fair: I'm working on a story on executions right now. Or I was. Officially, I'm on vacation. Unofficially, I quit my job."

"Really? Which is it?"

"I think I have to find something else to do."

"Hmm . . . well," Billings says, a little excited. "Who's the President of Uruguay?"

"Julio Maria Sanguinetti. Or at least he was."

"I'll have to take your word for it; I have no idea."

"Try something you know."

Billings laughs. "Yeah, what the hell," he says. "Who did UCLA beat in the 1983 Rose Bowl?"

"Michigan. 24-14."

"I won a lot of money that day," Billings says, reminiscing to the ceiling. "Of course, you didn't hear that."

"It's an interesting fact," Norman says. "But I'm not a reporter anymore."

"I don't know about that," Billings says, growing serious. "You take in a lot of information and spit it back out like one. Do you read everything, or do you think you have an extraordinary memory?"

"That's not exactly the point," Norman says. "I'm really no different from anyone else. You probably read just what I read. Maybe not as much, but we certainly read many of the same things. It's just that when I come across something that leads to the particle core of the element, whether it be the nature of humankind or the carbon makeup of a cat's thigh bone, I gravitate toward it like some insatiable factovore."

"Why do you think you do that?"

"I'm driven, inside. It's like I must do it."

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"Are there other things you feel you must do?"

"Mostly, yes. Things like what I eat, how I dispose of things . . . the whole green thing: eat right, recycle, turn off lights as you leave a room."

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"But 'the green thing,' as you called it, is society calling. For that matter," Billings says, "it's not even society in general, it's just a facet of society."

"True, but its altruism makes it somewhat noble. Hell, anyone would feel guilty not at least trying to do the right thing."

"Do you therefore subscribe to that whole realm of political philosophy?"

"Not really. However, whenever I act, I am acutely aware of its relationship to whatever is or isn't politically correct. Therefore, whenever I act, however I act, it is a conscious action. One that is willfully either for or against a political position."

"Must you always make a statement?"

"No, but I do. And it is very tiresome. But the criticism of others is just so prevalent these days. The availability of information has just brought others to our doorsteps. Not literally, of course, but in the sense that it is immoral to not act in a politically fashionable manner."

"So you're saying that the opinions of others are very important to you?"

"I know it sounds that way, but I'm not afraid of criticism or of disagreement. In fact, I rather like both. I just like to be right. But the micro-management of people's lives today is widespread, not in that people are banging at our doors, but at our minds with news and information."

"You're always doing what you should do and not necessarily what you feel or want to do."

"Yes."

"Hmm . . ."

Norman watches Billings write in his pad. He thinks he sees him write a "C" at the beginning of a word.

"I think I'm compelled to do these things, but not so much by some neuron gone awry but because it's the right thing to do."

Billings looks up quickly and then composes himself. He is silent for a moment, and stares at Norman's knee.

"What is the 'right thing to do'?"

Norman reseats himself.

"It's all out there. It's very easy to see."

"How so?"

"Pick up any newspaper, turn on the news at night, it's right there for anyone to see."

"What other people say?"

"What other respectable people say."

"Like who?"

"Hundreds," Norman says excitedly. "There are experts on nearly every subject imaginable. People know."

"They know what?"

"What's right. How things work, how to make them better."

"Norman," Billings says quietly, "if I understand you correctly, your whole belief system stems from the so-called experts of society. They are dictating to you -- daily -- the rights and wrongs of your actions."

Norman runs that through the mill.

"Yes," he says finally.

"Well, then, let me ask you this: what is your religion?"

"I was raised a Catholic."

"But what is your religion now?"

"When I go to church, it is Catholic."

"Let's go deeper than that: how do you define your religion?"

"The same as anyone else."

"Sure. But tell me your definition anyway."

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"It's how one worships God. And it is the system that answers the unknown. It is one's faith, one's respectable way of saying 'I give up'."

"So you do believe in God."

"Oh, sure."

"But you seem to think that religion is used when someone gives up."

"Right."

"Gives up on what?"

"On finding the truth. On life. Whatever."

"So you think you can know the truth, about everything?"

Norman looks at Billings who looks back calmly, but a little alarmed.

"Truth is a relative thing, DuWayne . . ."

"No semantics," Billings says quickly. "Answer the question."

Norman thinks for a long moment and takes a deep breath.

"I'd hate to have to prove this, but yes, I do think the truth can be discovered about everything. It's there if we want it."

"Norman, there is a theory known as Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. It says that you cannot know an object's true present state."

"Yes."

"This means," Billings continues, "that if you don't know where it is now, you cannot really know where it is going. In fact, the closest you can ever get to measuring the true present location of an object is known as Planck's constant. Beyond that, you affect and thereby change the location of the very object you're trying to measure the location of."

"Uh-huh. Quantum mechanics."

"It's like trying to see if the refrigerator light goes out when you shut the door."

Norman looks at Billings blankly.

"It means you can't know everything, Norman. It's God's own built-in security system. You can't really know it or Him or anything in the ways you're trying to. You can predict, formulate, theorize, believe whatever you want, but you can not know."

"The world just is not made up of hocus-pocus, DuWayne," Norman says, shaking his head.

"No mysteries?"

"No."

"Let me ask you something," Billings says. "Do you realize how self-conscious you are?"

"I think I'd say I was more conscious than self-conscious."

"But doesn't it stand to reason that you'd be conscious of your self-consciousness?"

". . . Which is precisely why I wouldn't want to be self-conscious: it's such a waste of time. I mean, I know what I look like."

Billings has a finger on his tightly-pursed lips and stares at Norman, nodding.

"You really feel you know what you look like?"

"Exactly. But don't get me wrong," Norman quickly corrects. "It's not that I'm vain; I'm just not self-conscious that way."

"No," Billings says, matter-of-factly, "I wouldn't presume. But it brings us back to an earlier topic. You mentioned a series of things you thought about and one of the items was bodily functions."

Norman rubs his forehead. "Uh-huh," he breathes.

"Do you think of bodily functions when you talk, such that we are now? Do you think of throwing up or spitting?"

"Not really those things so much as the more basic functions like breathing or blinking or moving muscles. It goes on endlessly at night when I'm not in conversation or actively doing anything. I stay up for hours that way."

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"Is work stressful?"

"Not particularly, no. Although it's not very predictable and it moves very fast, I've been doing it for such a long time that there are not a lot of surprises. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that there are no surprises in the surprises. It's consistently inconsistent, as Aristotle would have put it."

"Ars Poetica?"

"Poetics," Norman corrects him. "You're thinking of Horace. You don't know Horace do you?" Norman asks, wondering who the Deep Throat is who tipped Horace about Drake.

"Ars Poetica?"

"No, another Horace."

"No," Billings says, making a quick note on his pad.

"Aristotle loved tragedy," Billings says, looking up.

"He wrote about it, anyway. They say he wrote about comedy, too, but no one's ever seen it. He claimed tragedy portrayed man better than he actually was, comedy worse than he actually was."

"And what do you photograph?"

"Man worse than he actually is," Norman says, resettling himself. "A tragic-comedy," he says.

"So do you think your work has tragic overtones?"

"Yes. It puts the spotlight on the bad. By definition news is events that are characterized by the extraordinary."

"How do you think that affects you?"

"I'm not sure. I think its effect is part and parcel to my whole situation. Certainly, I'm part of the news now, but when I shoot, I don't think of myself as part of the news, the scene. Rather, I do but I don't. It's like I'm there but I'm not really there. Does that make any sense?"

DuWayne Billings is writing furiously. "Actually," he says, his pencil still skittering across the clipboard, "it makes a great deal of sense. Please go on."

Norman wonders what Billings is discovering and why he can't discover it himself.

"Well," he continues, "when I shoot, it's like I dissolve completely into the scene, and the sense of myself disappears. It helps me, really. I take better pictures that way. I have a better feeling of what is happening and what will happen. I don't get in the way."

"You got in the way of a bullet."

Norman sits up.

"That is a bit of a problem. It's what made me realize this ability to dissolve is actually more of a hindrance than a help. I just don't know if it's innate or manufactured."

Billings nods at Norman. He pulls his pages of notes off the clipboard and hands it to Norman along with the pencil.

"What I'd like you to do, Norman, is to draw yourself," Billings says.

"Draw myself?"

"As accurately as you can."

Norman smiles. He looks down at the blank, white paper and rolls the yellow, hexagonal Ticonderoga around in his fingertips.

Billings slides down a little in his chair and picks his knee up in his clasped hands, watching.

Norman draws a box first, to limit himself on the paper, and then outlines the chair to get some sense of proportion. He figures he'll take a side-view of the situation, as if he were looking at both Billings and himself. Thinking quickly, he outlines his boots and the curve of his knees in relation to the size of the boots and the height of the chair. He draws his hands on the clipboard carefully, knowing he'll have difficulty doing it

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properly and interested in the challenge of not using the pencil's eraser. He has some fun drawing in the spiky hair on his head, though it distresses him to have to blacken in the circles under his eyes. All in all, Norman draws a painfully complete picture.

He hands it to Billings.

DuWayne regards it, unable to keep his surprise from showing in his eyebrows.

"You do see yourself completely, don't you?"

"Utterly," Norman says.

Billings sets the clipboard down on his lap and scratches his ear.

"It's called the 'DAP,'" Billings says. "The Draw A Person test. Schizophrenics can't picture themselves. Clearly, you're not schizophrenic, even though you have similar tendencies. I didn't think you were, but I wanted to give you the DAP anyway."

"Really?" Norman says matter-of-factly. "The DAP. Why not call it the 'DY'? The Draw Yourself test?"

Norman pauses.

"Because," Norman goes on, "it's not a TLA. And three-letter-acronyms are what people naturally gravitate toward: IBM, PDQ, DAP, BFD. It's the music of it. DY doesn't hack it," he says quietly.

Norman looks up at Billings, who goes "hmm."

"You do that," Billings says. "You answered yourself that day in the hospital, too. It was the way you didn't tell the joke you told. Why do you do that?"

"Because I usually have the answer," he says. "There's this obviousness. I mean, you think -- I think, one thinks . . . you can't help that, of course -- and the moment you're done, the next thought comes. That part's a given. But when it does, it corrects the previous thought, or elucidates it, making the previous thought obsolete, or boring. Not that the original thought was. It's just the process . . . the progress."

"But what makes you think others have any idea what you're thinking? How can they participate if they don't know what you're thinking?"

"I don't necessarily have any intention of having them participate."

"They why bother trying to tell a joke?"

"Good question," Norman, says, sitting up. That's the problem: thinking this way. I've got to stop somewhere in the middle of that process. It's like a business: You develop a product and you bring it to the table ready to release it on the market. Then you have to think about the competition: How are they going to respond to it? Maybe they're ready to release a similar product. Or maybe they will very soon. So you plan how you're going to respond to that product. You try to be proactively reactive. And so you decide to release the latter product. That way, you're two steps ahead of the competition and deep inside their time/cycle loop."

"But that's not how you think, Norman," Billings says. "You don't stop there. You keep going. You keep responding to responses until you are paralyzed with your own consciousness. You keep going until you're left with this entropic mud-puddle of details you've thought of."

"That's obvious," Norman shrugs.

Billings adjusts his butt in his seat and crosses his arms.

"I think I'm starting to understand what you're doing," Billings says. "I'll let you in on something, Norman. At first I decided to examine your proximity to schizophrenia."

"Schizophrenia," Norman repeats stiffly.

"Frankly, Norman, you're not that far off. The phrase itself is originated by Bleuler to define the state of feeling as if one is losing oneself, breaking away, which is clearly what you do. But it's different in that you break away, yet you are also keenly aware of where you are."

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"Yes, that's exactly it," Norman says.

"Yes," Billings replied. "This is unique."

"You lean toward schizophrenia but without the dissolution of the id, is that accurate?"

"Yes."

"Would you describe it for me another way?"

"It is as if I am acutely aware of what is going on. I am myself and I see myself all at the same time. I sense the present so intensely that it is as if it is already past. Like the present is imposing on the past so violently that there is no present, only the past. Thoughts get inside other thoughts, disrupting their normal flow. But this is happening to everybody. Our society has gone from being outside the decision cycle to being so far inside the decision cycle that it leaves us virtually paralyzed."

"Not everyone, Norman, you," Billings corrects him.

Norman leans back in his chair.

"I don't know. It's not just me. I see it happen on Wall Street: traders handling over-the-counter stocks are often bitten because they fail to act quickly enough on the rapidly changing market. Profit and loss statements are announced and these quick pirate traders make sales and purchases before market makers can change the prices on their standing buy orders. Getting inside their cycle is literally changing their reality; they are holding the past while the present speeds away from them."

"But that's business, Norman, not life. No offense, Norman, but I think of you in terms of the idiot savant. The idiot savant is the genius in all of us. But it's as if all his strength has been made by draining the resources from all his other faculties and spent just on the one, like the musician or the mathematician. He can't wipe his own ass but he can play the piano better than Horowitz. You, paradoxically, are made feeble by the acuteness of all your senses. While the savant operates unconsciously, you are entirely conscious. And while the savant is happy in his own, limited routine, unlimited, you are unhappy."

Norman digests this.

"I have an insatiable desire for knowledge or maybe just facts. I'd like to think it is what we're all about, that man is driven by an inherent desire to know. Compelled, if by nothing else, then by the anxiety of being ignorant."

"But there is nothing wrong with having limitations."

"But what if you think you shouldn't have limitations, that you shouldn't fall back on excuses? What then?"

"But you do have limitations and you have to learn to accept them."

"I'm not interested in copping out."

"Accepting who you are is not copping out."

"But you're presuming I'm limited."

"Not like the savant. But face it, you don't play ball like Magic Johnson and you don't play the piano like Vladimir Horowitz."

"That's limited?"

"In your sense of it, it is."

Norman shakes his head. "It's so odd."

"You're an anomaly, Norman. I've seen people lately who are like you in your drive to know so much. You have such an acute sense of consciousness. But you have changed the definition."

Billings goes to a bookshelf and pries out a thick medical journal and opens it.

"Your condition is not a florid example," he says, sitting again. "It is similarly defined, but the cause is different. I think it's largely obsessive-compulsive but notably different. Get a load of this," Billings says, flipping through the pages. "It was first coined by a French

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psychologist named Theophile Ribot. He says it is a 'pathological pleasureless state, an insensitivity to pleasure alone.' Sound familiar?"

"It's starting to."

"Here." Billings finds another page. "Glauber put it this way right after World War II: 'In psychoeconomic terms it is a consequence of failure of libidinal investment within the conscious ego boundaries due to instinct defusion and the resultant fixation of libido to an unconscious, primitive ego. This ego -- the narcissistic ideal ego -- is undifferentiated from the magical, omnipotent mother image. This fixation, in turn is a reaction to specific intolerant environmental conditions during the earliest phases of the child's nurture . . . this can be differentiated from other affective states on the same ego-libido level such as anxiety, apathy, depression. This may, under certain circumstances, be transformed into any one of these.'"

"A little obsessed with Freud, wasn't he?"

"Yes, but he's right on the money. I don't think yours is all that bound to childhood controls, but that doesn't mean we've come across some nomen nudum either. On the face of it, you're like the hopeless cocaine addict. Coke causes the release of zillions of endorphines. An accumulation of these neurochemicals gives you the high. But you can wear out the system. And when you do, you no longer have the capacity to feel pleasure in life. Now that's like you. Normally, pharmacologists would treat this by trying to regulate the amino acids and bring on some level of stability and bring them back to normal. Serotonin is the criminal amino acid here. If you reduce it, you reduce the craving for endorphines and therefore of cocaine. So one way to treat it is by diluting it with the 19 other amino acids in our diet. You dilute the serotonin, you stabilize the reality. But we don't have chemicals to blame here. You're more like a consciousness-induced schizophrenic."

"So what is the condition?"

"Anhedonia."

"Anhedonia?"

"The inability to feel pleasure in life. By amassing facts the way you do, you elevate your consciousness to such a level that you are unable to function normally and enjoy life. It's also what allows you to have these exosomatic, these out of body, experiences you have when you are behind your camera or laying in bed. People who take LSD have them all the time. In fact the drug actually induces schizophrenic experiences."

Norman pauses and half-closes his eyes. "Yes," he says, "I suppose that's it." Then, looking up at Billings, "so what's the treatment?"

"Shit," he says. "I don't know." Then after a pause, "Want some Copenhagen?"

"Oh, come on, Billings," Norman says, aggravated. "I need to sleep, I need to stop thinking."

"Well, that's obvious. In fact, the whole solution is obvious. Of course, that doesn't necessarily make the solution readily achievable."

"What do you recommend?"

Billings looks across the room at one of the bookshelves with his knuckles up to his mouth.

"Did you know that the Jesuits developed the steps you go through in Alcoholics Anonymous?"

"Are you telling me I should join AA? What, is it also known as Anhedoniacs Anonymous?"

"No, no, Norman. That's not my point at all. Look, you're Catholic, right?"

"That has nothing to do with anything."

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"On the contrary: it has everything to do with everything, especially since the Jesuits help give credence to my theory."

Norman cocks his head. "This should be good."

"You have to give up."

"I have to give up?"

"Right now you think you can know everything and that's the way you go on. That's what you believe but in reality you can't, you're not God. You see, one of the first things one must accept in AA is that you can't control or know everything, you must give up and accept powerlessness and a certain level of ignorance. Every religion preaches the same reality: The Jews have Moses, the Christians have Jesus, the Muslims have Muhammad, the Bahais have Bahaula. Even the word 'Muslim' is Arabic for 'one who submits.' So in AA they tell you just pick one and submit -- give up."

"But it's not that simple, DuWayne. Science is answering questions one by one. The information is there."

"It's too much information, Norman."

"It's there."

"Your obsessive-compulsive nature is where we must start if you're going to sleep at night. You've got to face this."

Norman puts his hand to his face and rubs his cheeks.

"In St. Augustine's City of God, he places Genesis at 5,000 B.C.," Billings says. "Anthropologists place it at 10,000 B.C. Which is it, Norman?"

Norman regards him blankly.

"Does it really matter?"

Norman remains silent.

"I'll leave you with a little story, Norman."

Billings makes himself comfortable.

"St. Augustine was wandering the beach contemplating the irreconcilable mystery of the Trinity. I like this story in particular because St. Augustine was a black man," Billings says with a grin. "Anyway, he comes across this little boy who has dug a hole in the sand. The little boy keeps running to the water, fills a bucket and then pours it into the hole. Of course the water disappears out the bottom. So the boy runs back to the water, fills his bucket again and pours it into the hole. Same thing happens. St. Augustine watches this go on for a while until he is compelled to tell the boy, 'Son, you should stop this foolishness. You cannot fill that hole, it is endless.' The boy looks down at his futility and then looks up at Augustine and says, 'So too are your efforts, Father Augustine.'"

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
THE EXXON BUILDING  
LATE MORNING

"Let me read the account number back to you," the receptionist says to the phone at her ear in an accent that is heavily Australian. "I've got double-five seven, two, double-six, double-nine, two, double-three, is that correct?" There is a long pause. "Did I get it right?" she asks again. "Fine, then I'll give it to him just as soon as he's out of the dunny," she says into the receiver and then puts down the phone.

The receptionist looks up at Norman and Wanda.

"Mr. Encher, please," Wanda says.

"Is he expecting you? I don't have any appointments listed for him until after lunch."

"Please tell him it's KPOC News and we'd like to take just a few minutes of his time."

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The receptionist hits a button and begins talking quietly into the receiver.

"Very polite of you, Wanda," Norman says.

"It's the new me. I figured I'd give it a shot. If it doesn't get us in then I'll just barge in like the bitch in heat I usually am."

"Is this about the Hines trial?" the receptionist asks.

"Yes," Norman blurts out quickly. He doesn't quite trust the new Wanda yet.

"Then go right on in. Second door on the right," she says.

"Thank you," Norman says.

"Nice to see you haven't retired yet," Wanda says as they turn the corner.

"Yeah, well, I was up all night thinking about Encher and Matlaga and not about the stuff that usually keeps me up. Maybe if we can get to the bottom of this, I can bow out gracefully and get a good night's rest."

Encher's door is open and he stands to welcome them. His suit looks brand new and is earnestly wrinkleless.

"Norman Lessing," Encher says excitedly. "My lord, I've got a celebrity in my office."

Norman cringes. "It's not something I strive for, believe me."

"Well, you certainly have gone about getting it in a rather unorthodoxed manner but I'd gladly accept the amount of air time you've had."

"Is that why you took on the Hines case," Wanda asks.

"Is this the interview?" Encher asks, sitting.

"Well, yes it is," Wanda says.

Encher adjusts his tortoise-rimmed glasses. "Then don't you think you should set up the camera?"

Wanda and Encher look at Norman.

"Oh, yeah," Norman says, and starts extending the tripod.

Wanda takes a seat near Philip Encher's desk and Norman gets a fix on the two of them. He pulls a chair up next to the door of the office and slouches into it.

"OK," Norman says.

Encher looks surprised. "OK? Don't you have to man that thing?"

"Not unless you two start moving around. If you do, I'll pick it up. It'll be fine."

Encher looks at Wanda suspiciously. She just smiles. The new Wanda.

"So," Wanda starts again, "did you take on the Hillary Hines case because of the publicity it will generate?"

Encher puts his elbows on his desk, looking very relaxed and much like a politician.

"I think it would be less than candid of me to say that a high-publicity case such as this isn't beneficial to the firm. But we do a great deal of pro bono work here and since Miss Hines has been charged unjustly, I stepped forward quickly to help."

"But Mr. Encher, your recent legal history shows that you've done almost no trial work in years. Do you feel you're the right person to represent her?"

Encher smiles, "Certainly. My trial record is excellent and has invariably dealt with difficult cases. Furthermore, I am confident that Miss Hines will be completely exonerated in this case. The evidence against here is entirely circumstantial and based on feeble conjecture. We shouldn't even be wasting the state's money on this kind of witch hunt."

"The DA sees it quite differently. They feel they caught her red-handed and they plan to go for the death penalty."

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"Which is precisely why I have chosen to be involved in this case. That the death penalty has been introduced at all gives me even more resolve to have the whole case thrown out."

"Mr. Encher, she was caught trying to kill someone."

"That Miss Hines was having an impassioned argument with someone does not make her a killer. What we have here is a poor woman, a teacher, and that's exactly who gets the death penalty -- the poor, never the rich. How can you execute people when the system isn't fair?"

"Mr. Encher," Norman says from the door, "you are part owner of Drake Car Rental is that true?"

Encher gives a startled look at Wanda and puts up his hand to the camera. "Excuse me," he says to Wanda, "but whose interview is this and what exactly is it about?"

"It's fine," Wanda says. "Norman's a reporter, too. You know that."

"I was told this had to do with the Hines case."

"Of course," Wanda says.

"I agreed to speak about the Hines case," Encher says with an undertone of extreme agitation. "If it drifts out of line I will have the two of you removed from my office, is that clear?" he says, smiling slightly.

"Of course," Wanda says with the extreme sincerity of the new Wanda.

"Fine, then," Encher says, putting his hand down and turning toward Norman. "To answer your question, Norman, I am part owner of Drake."

"After the indictment of Miss Hines you were seen talking with a Drake employee. In fact, you disappeared very quickly with him after the hearing. Would you mind telling me what you two were discussing and why he felt compelled to show up at such an important and public event in order to meet with you?"

"I like to get an insider's view of the Drake business. Reading profit and loss statements doesn't really give you the complete picture of the operation so I encourage this fellow to talk to me. I suppose with all the publicity of the hearing, he knew where to find me."

"I am currently renting a Drake car," Norman says.

Encher smiles at him. "Thank you for your endorsement."

"I was also mugged in the Drake parking lot and was set up for it by the exact same fellow you met with after the indictment."

"All right," Encher says, getting up and marching toward the camera. "Get out," he says, looking for the button to shut it off. "Get the fuck out of my office," he says after finding the button.

Norman stands up to face Encher. Norman is taller but Encher is built tougher.

"I want to know what you know about drugs being sold out of your cars and the money being laundered through Drake," Norman says.

"What the fuck are you talking about? You come in here under entirely false pretenses and then start accusing me of getting you mugged and running a drug business? Get the fuck out," Encher says, getting into Norman's face.

Norman doesn't blink. "Are you Pump?"

Encher pulls the glasses off his face and gives Norman the look of a crazy man. Norman's reflexes are tightening.

"I'm 'Pump' because I'm Brazilian," Encher says, his face loosening some. "But you already know that. You probably also know I grew up in the ghetto here and that I'm a homeboy just like the assholes who probably mugged you. But I'm not an asshole, Norman and deep down you know that. So why this bullshit?"

"You're linked," Norman says. "Your name is all over. Your name is on the cars that make the drug runs, your name is on the street, but no one really knew who Pump was until you just said it."

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"No. You knew it. People know it. But they also know I'm just an attorney so they leave me alone. If something shitty is going down in Drake then you know I'm going to find out what's going on and get the hell out of it. I've climbed out of gangbang and made a good life for myself. There's no way I'm going to fuck it up," he says returning to his desk.

"Circumstances," Encher whispers from his chair, "facts. No story line, no yarn."

He swings his chair around to face Norman and Wanda who are standing next to each other by the camera.

"Muggings and gangs are good press, aren't they?" Encher says, philosophizing. "You do so much reporting on gangs. And you're here now like I was some gang member. You make gangs hip."

Encher shakes his head at his desk. He tugs at his lapel.

"Did you ever notice that the clothes gang members wear are ill-tailored and just plain bad? But somehow they're glamorized. People think gang members' baggy pants are cool; it's all the fashion. But they're baggy because they're hand-me-downs. The people are poor, can't you see? And a hand-me-down from where? Don't you think hip-hop clothes look a lot like prison clothing? Think about it."

Norman and Wanda watch him in silence.

"My family was real poor. My mother moved here from Louisiana to try to better herself. She tried to keep my father around but it was no good. So she raised her kids in the ghetto and tried to give us the best she could afford. So get a load of this: We drank chicory coffee. People these days drink chicory coffee like it's fashionable and tasty. It's shit. Chicory is a goddam root added to coffee grounds to make it go further. It's fucking Hamburger Helper for coffee. It's just another case of glamorizing poverty."

Encher leans back in his chair. "And rap music is shit and primitive but people think it's hip because you reporters focus on it. Hey, wake up, just because it's in the news doesn't make it cool. Wrong. News is that which is not normal. But not being normal is not the same as being innovative."

"It's amazing that with all these facts, you don't think about them. Think. Think, motherfucker! Think about why their clothes look like prison duds. Or why black fathers run out on their children. Stop your goddam reporting for a minute and think about the whole picture. Stop glamorizing poverty and start making it evil. Stop gathering little bits of information. Stop gathering facts and look at the reasons. You always say that this happened, that that happened. Don't you ever wonder why? Why did this happen? Why did that happen? Why? Start wondering why and stop focusing on the details or the results. Focus on the reasons why, not the that of it."

Encher looks at them, hard. "We attorneys catch a lot of shit for the work we do, but at least we bother to wonder why so that the truth comes out."

Encher is through and stares down at the papers on his desk. He looks sad and troubled.

Norman can't stop himself: "Do you know Matlaga?"

Encher looks up at them and says to him quietly, "I'm not talking anymore."

Norman nods and packs up his camera.

Norman and Wanda share a long silence waiting for the elevator to arrive.

"It would have been a helluvan interview if he hadn't shut off the camera," Wanda says on the way down.

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"Actually," Norman says, watching the floor numbers change, "he only turned off the sound. And come to think of it, my tape recorder is still running."

BEL AIR  
1317 CELESTIAL PARKWAY  
NIGHT

Norman pulls the Mustang 5.0 up to the guard gate of an enormous white house. It is surrounded by tall shrubbery that hide the thick walls and razor wire that twirls along the top. A big Latino in a black uniform with big brass buttons steps up to the car.

"Who are you?" the guard asks.

"Norman Lessing. I'm here to see Mr. Matlaga."

"He's not expecting you."

Norman looks beyond him and spies an M-16 leaning against the doorjamb just inside the guard house. It is the kind of gun Murray the Cop said shot him.

"I'm from KPOC News. Would you tell him that?"

The guard leans over Norman and glances around the car. "Wait here."

In the guard house, the Latino gets on the speaker phone.

"Norman Lessing?" a voice yells back. "Shit, man, ask him what took him so long? No, man, just check him out and send him up."

The guard returns to Norman. "You're clean, aren't you?" the guard says sternly, with a keen eye on Norman's face. "You see, if you're not, the only way out is past me. "Entiendes?"

"Yeah," Norman says quietly.

"Entiendes?" he repeats loudly.

"Shit, yes," Norman equals.

The guard smiles and returns to the guard house where he hits a button that swings open the heavy iron gate, a gate you couldn't drive a tank through.

As Norman rolls up the long drive to the house, Matlaga is waiting there on the porch for him. He is dressed in a silk paisley robe over some expensive slacks and he's holding two martinis.

"Norman, mano," Matlaga says, handing him a martini and shaking his hand.

Matlaga is a handsome fellow, excessively well-groomed. But the heavy gold chain that droops down over his hairy chest exudes a nouveau-rich cheapness. He stands confidently before Norman on the expansive white porch and a big smile erupts across his clean face.

"Nice to meet you, Norman," he jerks his head. "I've been expecting you."

"That's not what the guard said."

"Oh, I don't tell him shit. He's a guard. If he ain't suspicious of everybody, he ain't doing his job, you know? Hey, try the martini. Shaken, not stirred, you know?"

Norman takes a big sip while looking down at Matlaga who's a little shorter than he is.

"Come inside, meet some of my friends," he says.

Inside, the house looks more like an elegant hotel. The decor is in surprisingly good taste considering the gauche tendencies of Norman's host. All the lights are on and an occasional well-dressed man and woman pass through the lobby, go up the palatial staircase or into an adjacent room.

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"I have a lot of friends, Norman. They are nice to stop by. But come. I am sure you want to meet my associates, probably ask some questions. Come."

Matlaga pads through the house with Norman's boots thumping along behind him across the tile floor and into the kitchen. There, a half-dozen tough guys in assorted sizes are gathered around a TV on the bar. Next to the TV are three sand dunes of cocaine that the smallest guy has stuck a straw into. The others are hooting and hollering at the screen, rewinding again and again a key scene. Norman steps around the side to get a glimpse. Frieda Ostetler's first death penalty victim was on TV. They were replaying the moment when the hydrocyanic gas fills the room and the man suffocates from the burning of his lungs.

"The motherfucker had it coming," Matlaga says, not laughing like the others. "He never should have got caught."

Matlaga takes a sip of his martini while looking at Norman.

"Let's sit down over here where we can talk quietly."

Matlaga leads Norman into another room, regal in all its cherry wood and fireplace. He gestures for Norman to sit in a chair in front of the roaring fire.

"Why the fire?" Norman asks. "It's 75 or 80 outside."

"Why not?" he responds. "I like fires. I have a nice fireplace. Why not use it, you know?"

Matlaga sits next to Norman in chairs that face each other much like in Billings' office.

"So, what took you so long to see me, Norman?"

"If you wanted to see me so bad, why didn't you just invite me?"

"I like my friends to stop by and see me. I like them to show a little of their own initiative. I like people with initiative."

"Like Jimmy Johnson?"

"He's that shooter you caught, isn't he?"

"'Ran into' is more like it."

"Sì, sì," Matlaga says pensively, staring into the fire. "He worked with Fausto. Poor bastard. But, you already know that."

"Yes," Norman says, "I know that. Did you have anything to do with Fausto's death?"

Matlaga smiles at Norman. "Initiative," Matlaga nods, "I like that. But no. Fausto died because he got caught."

"Like the guy in the gas chamber."

"Yes," Matlaga says, nodding half-heartedly. "Like him."

"Did he get caught by you?"

"By somebody," Matlaga grins, cocking his head in Norman's direction. Norman finishes off his martini. "There are a lot of drugs around here."

"Sì. They like to party and I let them, you know? You've been to parties where there was cocaine. It's no different."

"What do you do for a living, Matlaga?"

"It's Ernesto. Ernesto Matlaga. It's better to call me Ernesto. Matlaga shows a little disrespect. OK?"

"Fine, Ernesto. What do you do for a living? You make a lot of money but it's not clear where it comes from."

"I import, I export. Would you like another martini, by the way? I import that vodka, too. It's very good, wouldn't you say?"

"You import vodka?"

"And lots of other things," Matlaga smiles and crosses one knee over the other.

"Like cocaine?"

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"Like other things," Matlaga says, shaking a finger at Norman. "But I really like your initiative."

This is going nowhere.

"Do you know Philip Encher?"

Matlaga lights up, "Of course. We grew up in the barrio together. He's real smart. A hot-shot attorney now, you know. And he was real tough in the barrio." He repositions himself in his chair. "One time, when we were twelve, he took on three other guys all by himself. Man, he kicked the shit out of them, and they were all older and much bigger than he was. He was tough, Normano," Matlaga stares into the fire.

"That was back in the old days. But when the guns came to the barrio, he changed. He changed a lot. He didn't want nothing to do with us. Me, I like guns."

He reaches into his robe and pulls out a Beretta.

Norman suddenly realizes this guy thinks he's James Bond: A Beretta; martinis shaken and not stirred. Norman wonders if there isn't an Aston Martin in the garage.

"It's interesting," Norman says.

"Sí?"

"I was at a party recently where there was cocaine."

"It is everywhere, isn't it?" Matlaga says.

"Yes. And it was interesting that the delivery boy showed up in a Drake rental car."

Matlaga nods at the statement. "Hmm. Rental cars are traceable."

"Of course, it depends on who it's traced to, doesn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Because, if it was traced to someone important, then it could get that person in very much trouble, wouldn't you agree?"

"Unless it wasn't really checked out to that person."

"But today, with computers, that person is the only one it could be checked out to. You see, computers, unlike people, can forget," Matlaga says.

Norman nods in agreement. "True," Norman says. "But people put the information into the computers."

"A tragic flaw in the system," Matlaga says.

"So, what is the truth? The person who says checked out the car or the computer?"

Matlaga looks at the fire for a very long time.

"Do you have your boys deliver coke in those cars?" Norman asks.

Matlaga pauses. "Do you like guns, Norman?"

"No."

"But you have a .357 in your motel room."

Norman looks over at Matlaga hard. "You have been expecting me, haven't you, Matlaga?"

He waves the Beretta at Norman casually, "Ernesto," he corrects. "I figure that with as much as you know about me, I ought to get to know you too, Normano."

"I didn't go into your house looking through your drawers."

"No," he says slowly, "you came right up to the front door. You know, you may have more initiative than me."

Matlaga pauses and shakes his head. "But I don't like that," he says and puts away the gun.

"Did you enjoy your martini?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, you must buy me a drink sometime and we will talk again."

Matlaga stands.

"So, we are even. We have found out all we are going to about one another. It is time now for you to go."

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Matlaga starts for the front door.

"What about Jimmy Johnson?" Norman blurts out, stopping Matlaga.

Matlaga stops and turns around quickly. "I am not going to have anything to do with some idiot shooter. No one will. Now, Mr. Lessing, let us go."

Norman follows Matlaga a ways and stops again.

"Do you ever see Pump?"

"Pump? You mean Philip Encher?" Matlaga pauses and looks off into the air. "It's been a very long time," he says. "Perhaps I should show some initiative, you know?"

LOS ANGELES POLICE DEPARTMENT HEADQUARTERS  
WILSHIRE DISTRICT  
MID-EVENING

Norman got the page driving out of Bel Air and called Wanda at Murray's office. There, he was escorted upstairs by two young and thin five-ohs and taken into a quiet room where Murray was sitting and reviewing the long print-out of Norman's research on CompuServe.

"Have a nice chat with Matlaga?" Murray asks.

"If you mean 'do I have as little as you do?' the answer is 'yes.'"

"What did he tell you?" Wanda asks. She is sitting in a stiff wooden chair at one end of the table.

Norman rubs his face and slouches down in a chair next to her. "Well, ol' James Bond imports vodka and doesn't deny anything. Of course, he doesn't admit to anything, either."

Murray nods and stands to pace the room. "I knew you'd go there, Norman, but you had to have known ahead of time what he'd tell you."

"Yeah. The answers were as obvious as the questions. I just wondered if he'd give anything away."

"And he didn't."

"Nope."

"You see, Norman," Murray says, "I've got this theory. It's a little about luck." Murray paces back across the room and stops at the table. "Norman, you've got luck, maybe even prescience. But even experienced craps players will tell you to get the hell away from the table after a while. And," he says, sitting and looking past Norman and at the window of the room behind him, "yours might have just flat run out."

Norman shuttles around in his seat.

"You survived a mugging, caught a murderer, lived through hanging around gang members, went on a drive-by, got shot through the head and not in the head . . . even played a little one-on-one with Matlaga. Norman, ol' buddy, I'd say it's time to step away from the table."

"He's a reporter," Wanda says.

"Yeah? So what?" Murray counters. "I'd tell a cop the same damn thing: Take a vacation. Lay off. Give us what you've got and give it a rest. You're getting too close. And that's when the emotions start to kick in and your judgement has as much logic as your pecker."

"Are you telling me to stop reporting?"

"First Amendment rights tell me just to follow you. In a lot of ways, you're doing better than the whole fucking department is. I'm telling you to give me your sources and take that pretty Lee Colton and head for the Bahamas because I like your boots and I don't want to bury you in them."

"My emotions don't get in the way, Murray. That's my problem."

"Bullshit, Norman. Your emotions are as full as a bitch in heat."

Wanda bows her head to the table.

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"If you ain't fuckin' Lee Colton, you're either stupid or a eunuch and I don't pick you for neither."

"So you figure that because I'm dating Lee, my luck's run out."

Murray just stares at Norman.

"C'mon, Murray. There's no logic in that. What am I supposed to think? Hell, look at your suit. What is that, another Armani? Jesus, Murray, if that ain't a mid-life crisis, what is?"

Murray smiles.

"My wife worries about that, too. Fact is, all she talks about lately is whether or not I'm going to have one. So I figured I would -- for her. I'm been romancing her for months like we were back at TCU. Dressing up. Taking her to fancy restaurants, bringing her flowers and shit. I hope I can stop it soon 'cause it's costing me a fortune. But she likes it. Maybe it's a little calculated on my part, but she's important to me. I wish I could be a little more emotional about it but I've been married to this job too long to let it go sour, either."

Norman gets up from his chair and turns around to see Georgia being let into the room.

Georgia is dressed more elegantly than usual, looking more like the KPOC station owner she is than the harried secretary Norman always took her for.

"I suppose you all know each other," Murray says.

"Of course," Georgia says.

"Thank you for coming, Miss Michaels," Murray says and pulls out a chair. "Won't you please sit down?"

Michaels, Norman thinks. She's on the Board of Drake with Encher. She dropped Cecil's name.

Georgia takes a seat and looks around the room a little befuddled.

"Georgia, what are you doing here?" Wanda asks.

"Well, I'm not really sure," she replies with both hands on her knees, rubbing them.

"I asked Miss Michaels to come down here to tell us all what she told me. It's quite interesting, really," Murray smiles at them all.

Murray makes himself comfortable in his chair and they all square off as if they were about to play a game of poker.

"Miss Michaels has the unfortunate, or let's say, a unique involvement in both KPOC and Drake," Murray begins. "Now, Wanda pointed out to me that Miss Michaels is part owner of Drake thanks to your print-out, Norman, as is our Mr. Encher whom we have come to know as Pump thanks to your video tape. And, as you both should know by now, she owns KPOC. Furthermore, I'm not all that much for luck and coincidence so I thought I'd give Miss Michaels a visit, real friendly-like, to see if there was any merit to my thinking. So let's start simple: Miss Michaels, how did you meet Mr. Hunsacker?"

"I told you all this at the television station."

"I realize that, Miss Michaels. But I wonder if you might indulge me for the enrichment of your fine employees."

"Employees . . ." Georgia repeats quietly, rubbing her knees again.

"Yes, well . . . Mr. Encher introduced us at a fund-raiser."

"Philip Encher introduced you?" Wanda blurts out.

"Yes. Mr. Encher was a fine young attorney I had just met at that party and was chatting with me briefly when he introduced me to Cecil who had just walked up and patted Mr. Encher quite loudly on the back. I remember that because Mr. Encher dropped his glass on the carpet. Cecil was just a reporter then and Mr. Encher introduced me as the daughter of the owner of KPOC. I thought was a rude introduction at the time but both he and Cecil were quite dashing so I let it pass. It was a fund-raiser and I was used to the social climbing that goes on so it really didn't matter all that much

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anyway. Still, Mr. Encher disappeared quite quickly after that. At the time I wasn't exactly sure if Mr. Encher wanted to leave us alone or get away from Cecil."

"Which do you think it was now, Miss Michaels?" Murray asks.

"I'm quite certain that even then there was something wrong between Mr. Encher and Cecil and that Mr. Encher was using me as a reason to distance himself from Cecil. I'm not sure what the problem was between them but . . . well, Cecil and I married very soon after that."

Georgia looks down at her knees, reminiscing. "Cecil was extremely charming and intelligent. My God, the man knew everyone, knew everything. He was really something to watch."

She pauses for a moment. "My father," she starts again, "was very impressed with him and brought him on at the station as his assistant and before long he was running it. Our ratings soared. Our relationship, on the other hand, went bad very quickly after that."

"What was the problem?" Wanda asks.

Georgia looks at her blankly.

Oh, shit, Norman thinks, the old Wanda is back.

"Was he married to his work?"

"Married . . ." Georgia calmly says and then laughs lightly. "No, marriage . . ." she stops and thinks. "Let's just say he developed a wandering eye after my father died and managed to leave everything to me."

"How can that be?" Wanda asks. "As community property, half the station and everything else is his."

"That's not exactly true. It involves a very complicated legal and corporate structure, but Cecil has no income except as Station Manager. It's a good salary, he doesn't complain. He never has. At least not to me. But our relationship dissolved after that, almost imperceptively. So we divorced. Rather amicably, actually."

"And you let him stay on as the manager," Murray says.

"Oh yes," Georgia says, addressing him directly. "It's a business and he's quite good at it. I keep my emotions out of it. Besides," Georgia says, smiling at Norman and Wanda, "how else would I have these two on my staff?"

"Well, if Cecil is so well liked," Norman asks, "then where does the bad blood between him and Encher come from?"

"I don't know," Georgia says. "Although you must keep in mind that it's true that he knows everyone, but he's not liked by everyone. You see, when Cecil was a reporter, Philip was working at the DA's office. I'm sure they got to know each other there."

"If there's one place you want to stay in touch with," Wanda says, "it's the DA's office. And with the police," she grins at Murray.

"Yeah, but I'll tell you what," Murray snorts, "those are great places to burn bridges, too. If a reporter pushes too hard, he'll find himself pushing up against a wall. Think Cecil did that?"

"Oh, quite possibly," Georgia says and then glances down at her knees again. "But he gets what he wants," she says quietly.

"How did you get involved with Drake?" Norman asks.

Georgia looks up. "Once Philip went into private practice, he did extremely well. He and some others approached me with the idea of investing in their venture and at the advice of my attorneys, I did. It's quite profitable. Although now I'm told drugs are being run through it by Philip."

"That's not exactly true," Norman says.

"It may be true," Murray says forcefully. "His name is as muddy as a roughneck's boots right now. What I'm trying to figure out is Cecil's connection to this. Unfortunately, Miss Michaels, the connection isn't directly with Cecil, but you."

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"Me?" she says and sits up straight as a board and says, "Pardon me, but that's bullshit."

"Now hold on a minute, Miss Michaels. That's why you're here. It may be bullshit. But until we can find out exactly how your company is involved with drugs, you're a suspect and so is Philip and Cecil."

"What . . ." Wanda started in.

"Now, I've got my suspicions but I need them verified," Murray commands. "So, would you please describe for us what transpired the other day at the assignment editor's desk?"

Georgia glances over at Wanda for a moment, wondering and looking suddenly frightened. Then she begins with a blank and remembering look on her face, "I was standing by Horace, listening to a report come in over the police radio about a little girl who was trapped underneath an earth mover when I noticed that one of the phone lines kept ringing and ringing. Horace is always very good about keeping on top of the phones but I picked up the line to answer it thinking he might miss it. But I didn't even get in a word when Horace picked up the line on another phone without even looking. Sometimes he surprises even me and I've been watching him for years now. Well, as I listened, I recognized the voice but I couldn't place it."

"What did the voice have to say?" Wanda asks.

"He said that we needed to get down to Drake Car Rental and find out why Philip Encher had been renting so many cars."

"The goddam Deep Throat," Wanda says.

"But whose voice was it?" Norman asks.

"It was odd. Very odd," she says. "But I know it was Cecil's."

Back at the Blackbeard Motel, the young man at the desk tells Norman that Lee is over "at that house of Theo's that is absolutely fabulous" and hands him the phone number in case he wants to reach her there.

"Thanks," Norman says. "I'll see you anon," he grins as he heads up to his room.

The pager goes off just as Norman is tossing it onto the desk next to his computer. He can't think of anything else he and Wanda could want to talk about. The case is a mishmash of threads. They know they could run Encher's interview and try to flush out whatever he might be hiding but according to Murray, they'd be setting themselves up for a libel suit. It is Murray's contention that if they let the situation simmer for a while someone will step forward; now there is pressure on all sides and enough doubt between them all that either Encher or Matlaga will make a move if for no other reason than Georgia will pressure Cecil to come forward with what he knows about everything.

Norman dials the number on the pager.

"I'm done," a man's voice says.

"Encher?"

"Meet me at St. John's . . . now. And bring your camera gear."

"Why? Whassup?"

"That's where confessions are made, aren't they?"

LOS ANGELES  
ST. JOHN'S CATHOLIC CHURCH  
MIDNIGHT

In the dim light of the church, Norman and Wanda can make out Philip Encher's V-shaped outline. His back is to them as he stands and faces the enormous altar from the center of a pew. Their footsteps echo loudly,

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uncomfortably, as they approach him and enter a pew behind him. They stop and stare.

"I should have come to church more often," Encher says. "But it's always when you have no where else to go, when you give up, that you go to church."

"People come here to get married, too," Norman says.

Encher turns and faces them.

"Don't forget funerals," Encher smiles. He leans back against the pew behind him and clasps his hands.

"On the phone, you said that you were done," Norman says. "Does that mean you're expecting your own funeral?"

"My law practice, my political career, yes," he says quietly and then shakes his head, "Who knows? I might even go to jail. But I don't intend to die."

The church creaks.

"Why don't you set up your camera," Encher says. "Can you put it on a tripod here or do you need to hold it?"

"I think I'll go back a pew or two and just hold it. Wanda can do the interview."

"Oh, this won't be much of an interview. I have things to say, that's all. And then some plans to make."

Norman steps down a pew and sits on the back, balancing himself and the camera by leaning his elbows on his knees. He has Encher and Wanda in his sights. In consecutive pews: Encher, Wanda, Norman.

"Yeah," Norman says.

"I grew up in the ghetto with Ernesto Matlaga," Encher begins. His speech sounds well-rehearsed already. "I left as soon as I could and tried to stay as far away from him as I could. But Ernesto is like the retarded cousin who won't go away. You see, he imports and distributes drugs. Huge amounts of them. And he's very brash about it with me. He stops by my house at odd hours of the night, expecting a martini, and brags about it."

"Why does he think he can do that?" Wanda asks.

"Because," Encher pauses and rubs his forehead, "the business of gangs is inescapable. We were part of the trey-nine. And together we killed other boys . . . for what really amounted to no reason at all. It was a long time ago, or it seems that way, but he reminds me of it and reminds me that what I know, he knows. Drugs and murders. Guilty by association. And," he pauses, "I want out."

Encher's confidence disappears and he slumps slightly.

"I do pro bono work, stay active in the community, work hard to make an honest living . . . this sounds kind of corny, doesn't it?" he says to Wanda. "But I've always ended up on the wrong end of things. And I just let it happen. I just fucking let it happen."

"What is Matlaga doing with Drake?" Wanda says.

Norman can feel the energy draining out of Encher.

"Whatever he wants," Encher says. "Our past together enabled him to force me to give him the license he needed to manipulate Drake's cars, and the disproportionate deposits for their rentals. Then payments for what were called 'consulting' were made to a company he owns and he dealt his drugs, every day of the week. Worse yet, I knew about it all."

"He kept you up to date on all this."

"No, actually. And this could work in the police's favor, I have an informant, and he's been quite thorough."

Charlie, Norman says to himself.

Encher takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes. "The irony is, this didn't have to happen now. Or maybe ever. It's just that this guy wants to win an Emmy."

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Sorry, Norman thinks. I'm not that good.

"An Emmy?" Wanda says. "How does an award have anything to do with this?"

"Oh, please, drugs are news. I'm news. Get all this on camera and take the brass ring."

"With all due respect, Mr. Encher, you weren't news until you began representing Hillary Hines who's accused of being a serial killer."

"And just how do you think that happened? You yourself pointed out that I'm not a litigator. Pro bono or not, I am not the right person to represent her. I was forced into doing it. Do it or be exposed."

"Why would Matlaga want you to represent an accused killer?"

Encher shakes his head, "New paragraph, Miss Overgaard. We're talking about Cecil Hunsacker, your boss."

His Emmy, not mine, Norman thinks.

"We go way back to when I was at the DA's office and he was a reporter on the beat. Cecil knows about me and Matlaga. And for years he used the same tactics to get me to leak information to him so that he'd be in on all the hot stories. I violated client-attorney trust so many times for him I'm surprised he didn't get a Pulitzer and I didn't get disbarred, which I'm sure I will now."

"Cecil Hunsacker pushed you into representing Hillary Hines?"

"I got the phone call minutes after she was caught. Cecil heard it on the police radio band and I got a phone call in my car. It was that fast."

"Mr. Encher, we were led to your possible drug dealings through Drake by a Deep Throat call to the KPOC station."

"Sure, why not? I told Cecil I was going to represent Miss Hines. Hell, I wanted to. I actually wanted the press. But as for any further information being given to him about the case or anything else I told him never again. I told him I was through being his stoolie. The guy got stories from me, got insider trading information prior to takeovers I was involved with. He'd gotten plenty from me and all I ever got from him was threats. I told him to shove it. It's no surprise to me you started investigating Drake."

"Cecil's not a millionaire," Wanda says.

"OK, so maybe he didn't do anything with the stock information. Maybe he just wanted to see if I'd give it to him. So he's clean and everyone else is dirty. Matlaga and I did the deeds and he holds the information. I guess that makes him a good reporter or Station Manager or whatever. The power of information, of knowing, of accumulating facts." Encher shakes his head at the thought. "I think he just wants to be famous."

Two quick shots explode from beside Norman. Encher topples over backward and disappears onto the pew behind.

"Always aim for the body," Matlaga says. "It's harder to miss than the head."

Matlaga walks over to Encher and reaches down. Norman can't see what he's doing but he keeps the camera rolling. A tiny puff of smoke dribbles up from his Beretta.

"When someone talks so much," Matlaga says to the camera, "I have to show some initiative, you know, Normano?"

End of interview.

Norman reaches over and shoves Wanda down under the pew. He ducks down, too and pulls her back out of view of Matlaga. "Scoot. Scoot," Norman says, and slides his butt and camera away from Matlaga.

"Normano, what are you doing?" Matlaga says condescendingly.

Norman pulls the .357 from his pocket and fires it at the roof.

"Pendejo!" Matlaga yells. "Goddamit, Normano, you want to start a gunfight in a fucking church?"

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Norman keeps sliding away, taking the camera with him.  
"Normano. You're no good at this. Come back," Matlaga says calmly.  
"Come back and talk to me and Wanda."  
Wanda . . . Shit.  
"Forget the gun, Normano. Toss it away and come talk to us. Oh, and bring the camera."  
Norman stands. He is a dozen pews away from Matlaga. Wanda is standing next to him with her arms crossed and glaring at him. She is visibly pissed off.  
Norman unloads the bullets from the .357 and tosses the gun and the bullets down in the pew.  
"S; . That's OK. Now bring the camera over here."  
Norman shuffles slowly up the aisle toward them with the camera drooping in one hand.  
"Now give me the camera."  
Norman stares at Matlaga.  
"Now, Normano."  
"It's 'Norman', ese," Norman says angrily and heaves the camera with everything he's got. It bounces twice down the long pew and the butt of it smashes up against the armrest at the other end sending small pieces of plastic into the air.  
They all look at the camera.  
Matlaga steps up to it, reaches down and pulls out the tape.  
"Broke it good, Normano," he says. "But it's funny. You unload the gun but you don't unload the camera. But the camera has always been more dangerous to you, you know?"  
"Yeah," Norman says. "I know."  
Matlaga nods at him and walks down the aisle.  
"Find a new job," Matlaga says as he turns the corner.  
Wanda goes over to Norman. "That goddam sonofabitch has the tape."  
"Yeah, he's got a 1/2" professional beta and nothing to play it on. I even broke the I/O on the camera to make sure he wouldn't try to play it through that."  
They stand in the middle of the church and listen to it creak.  
"Phone calls," Wanda says.  
"The police are on their way. The paramedics, too."  
Norman and Wanda look up. Cecil is standing at the end of the church with a lit cigar in his mouth. He walks toward them.  
"A bad ending but a good story," Cecil says. "But no video."  
Norman stares at him and pulls another tape from his pocket. He flips it around in his hand and then reaches over and pulls Cecil's jacket open, hard. He shoves the tape in his pocket and pulls out a cigar and a lighter.  
"I don't think it'll need much voice over," Norman says, lighting the cigar and putting the lighter back in Cecil's pocket.  
"I guess you've got your Emmy now," Norman says, puffing hard and pulling Wanda out of the church by the hand.

WESTWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
SUGAR BEAR BILLINGS' OFFICE  
AFTER LUNCH

"Feel like you know everything?" Billings says from his chair.  
Norman looks at Billings in his glen-plaid suit. "Almost nothing," he says.  
"Nothing?"  
"Not in the same way. Not nothing, just not everything."

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"Is it that you don't feel you completely understand what you've been through with Cecil?"

"Partially," Norman says, regarding his boot size in comparison to Billings' shoe size, which he notices, are the same. "Just that I don't feel comfortable anymore saying 'I know.'"

"You know but you don't know."

"Hmm."

"Well, that's a start," Billings says, comforting himself in his chair. "You still think you can know everything?"

Norman regards Billings' large, round face. "It takes a lot of energy," Norman says. "A lot of time. Time I'm not sure I want to invest. Time I think is better spent on other things."

"So you're concentrating on new things now."

"I don't know. Maybe. I'm just tired of it all now."

"But you're epistemology hasn't changed?"

"I don't think so. I think I just realize that in order to pursue it, it's all you can do -- it's the only thing you can do. I think I understand your story about St. Augustine now."

"You realize you can't maintain this heightened awareness."

"Not and have a life."

"Ahh," Billings sighs. "Norman is evolving."

Norman looks away at the bookshelves, hunting for Darwin.

Billings watches him. "Look for the Bible, Norman. "Consciousness evolves in the Bible."

Norman glances back at Billings and then looks for a Bible.

"The Old Testament is full of commands from God, Norman. It's full of voices from God, talking to man who has no consciousness. The New Testament is about one man, full on the consciousness of his actions and how he must deal with them. It's as if the more you learn, the more you know, the further you are from God," Billings says, whispering. "You can't know He exists unless you believe."

Norman smirks at Billings. "The Great Admonition."

Billings leans forward to Norman, "The Great Acceptance," he corrects.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA  
DOROTHY CHANDLER PAVILION  
LATE IN THE AFTERNOON

At the Emmy's, Norman waltzes along the red carpet, holding Lee by the hand. Looking over the crowd he sees some of the gang members he met, eying the stars. Charlie is among another group, waving frantically at Norman.

Norman is in a very special tuxedo. "Hey, Pachuco," Charlie calls out to him, "Mr. Zoot Suit. Nice tando, calcos, lisa, hat, shoes, shirt. And mira the drapes, mano. I haven't seen baggy trousers and a chain like that since I was snooping around my madre's photos of her and my father. Now that's the real gangster suit."

Norman smiles at him and goes inside.

Norman and Lee take their seats along an aisle. Lee takes a moment to glance around at all the recognizable faces. She grabs Norman's arm and kisses him on the cheek where the scar has nearly worn away.

"This is a cheap time to say it, Norman, but I love you," she says.

Norman looks at the big smile on her face and puts a hand high on her thigh.

"I don't like being here," he says, "but you just made it bearable."

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Hokey stage performances and worse jokes interrupt the ceremony and Norman finds himself applauding even for the winners for Leading Roles in a Nighttime Serial. It helps him keep his mind off the awards for the newscasts, which are coming up. And he feels strange; he can't help but grin at the fact that he is actually nervous.

When the nominations are announced for Excellence in Investigative Reporting, a screen descends from one side of the stage and shows clips of his work and Wanda's as each of the nominees are announced. When the interview of Philip Encher is run, the applause is loud and continuous and drowns out the following nominee's clip.

"Je-sus-help-us-Je-sus," Lee whispers in Norman's ear. "You won. You fucking won."

After accepting the award, Norman is escorted offstage by the announcer and some model. Norman can't figure out which of them has on more cologne. Dwight spots Norman in the wings and runs up to him and shakes his hand firmly as ever, congratulating him.

"Thanks, Dwight," Norman says and tries to make his way quickly back to Lee.

"Hey," Dwight yells out as Norman is leaving. "What do you call of pack of wolverines?"

Norman looks back at him with a puzzled look on his face.

"Shit, Dwight," he smiles, "I don't know."

THE BLACKBEARD MOTEL  
NORMAN'S ROOM  
MID-MORNING

Lee is sitting on the floor in one of Norman's t-shirts, going through the morning's paper.

"Do you want the Sports section or something?" she asks.

"I don't know. Give it to me and I'll see what interests me. But," he says, leaning forward on the bed and kissing her hair, "move your head, will ya? I can't see the TV."

HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA  
KPOC  
AROUND LUNCHTIME

Downstairs in the audio-visual room, Norman looks around for a place to retire his camera gear. The bakers' racks in front of him are half-full and numbered along the front, 016, 017, 018, etc. Norman spies an empty spot above 007 and grins. He reaches up and tosses the gear there with clamorous disrespect. The camera rolls over backward and stops when it hits the wall behind. He reaches into his shirt pocket and pulls out his KPOC press credentials. He regards them for a moment, swinging before him on their cheap, military-style chain as if they were trying to hypnotize him, something he figures Billings would have gotten around to trying if he'd kept up the therapy. He drapes the credentials over his camera gear and heads up the stairs.

Except for a few people roaming the newsroom floor with a typical look of anxiousness on their faces, the place is quiet and Norman leaves without even so much as a pestering question or a "ciao" or a "congratulations on the Emmy."

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Just outside the KPOC building, Norman puts on a pair of sunglasses. He finally conceded he needed a pair in L.A. but insisted it would be the first ones he came across and not something full of pretentious premeditation. They turned out to be a vintage pair of aviator Ray Bans Lee showed him when they went shopping together on Melrose. He turns his head up to the sunshine and lets it warm his face.

As Norman strolls slowly to his car, he sees a short, roundish Latino approaching him. Norman smiles at him and turns to open his car door.

"Norman Lessing?" the Latino asks.

Norman recognizes the slight Cuban accent in his voice.

"Yeah. Hi," Norman says, turning his face toward him.

A boom of gunfire knocks Norman into the mirror of the car door. Norman leans awkwardly over the windshield. He can feel the hit in his kidney and something foreign pushing up against something else soft inside him. With his left hand he pulls himself off the windshield and turns himself around to face the man. With both hands he steadies himself on the car door.

The Latino stops several feet away from Norman.

Norman takes a deep breath and the pain makes him look at the asphalt.

"Rubén," Norman states weakly.

"You're a big, guy now," Rubén says sarcastically. "Múy famoso. You look a lot different now without your beard and long hair."

Norman looks up at him.

"But being famous makes you easy to find," Rubén adds.

"Why do you think I had anything to do with Berto's and Rico's death?"

"Because you and your fuckeen camera told everyone where they were.

You chased them just like the migras."

Norman puts his right hand on his kidney. The blood has spread down to his knee.

"You chase death, Norman Lessing."

"No, Rubén, death chases me."

Rubén nods at the asphalt and then returns his glare to Norman.

"Yes," he says, "that is more accurate."

"But I'm not sure it's the truth," Norman says, for Lee.

Another boom of gunfire cracks into Norman's breast knocking him backward. His head falls back loosely and his sunglasses fly off but his left hand grabs the seat and keeps him from falling into the car.

Norman slowly pulls himself forward again and looks at Rubén. Norman can feel the second bullet inside him. It ruptured his lung and blood starts to fill his mouth. He leans forward and spits it out onto the ground.

"I think . . . you hit my lung," Norman manages.

Leaning forward, he puts his right palm over his kidney again and then presses the other palm over his chest. He tries to breathe, gurgling through the mess of cartilage and blood in his windpipe.

Slowly, deliberately, Norman stands up straight. He regards the little round Cuban and blinks hard.

"Aim a little more to your right," Norman says. "I think you'll find the heart is a little more to your right."

Norman watches him turn the gun a little, and watches the hammer drift slowly back.