

Dead Fingers Talk

The Restored Text

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William S. Burroughs

Edited and with an
Introduction by Oliver Harris



CALDER

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Dead Fingers Talk

the heat closing in

I CAN feel the heat closing in, feel them out there making their moves, setting up their devil doll stool pigeons, crooning over my spoon and dropper I throw away at Washington Square Station, vault a turnstile and two flights down the iron stairs, catch an uptown A train—Young, good looking, crew cut, Ivy League, advertising exec type fruit holds the door back for me. I am evidently his idea of a character. You know the type: comes on with bartenders and cab drivers, talking about right hooks and the Dodgers, calls the counterman in Nedick's by his first name. A real asshole. And right on time this narcotics dick in a white trench coat (imagine tailing somebody in a white trench coat. Trying to pass as a fag I guess) hit the platform. I can hear the way he would say it holding my outfit in his left hand, right hand on his piece: "I think you dropped something, fella."

But the subway is moving.

"So long flatfoot!" I yell, giving the fruit his B production. I look into the fruit's eyes, take in the white teeth, the Florida tan, the two hundred dollar sharkskin suit, the button-down Brooks Brothers shirt and carrying *The News* as a prop. "Only thing I read is Little Abner."

A square wants to come on hip—Talks about "pod," and smoke it now and then, and keeps some around to offer the fast Hollywood types.

"Thanks, kid," I say, "I can see you're one of our own." His face lights up like a pinball machine, with stupid, pink effect.

"Grassed on me he did," I said morosely. (Note: Grass is English thief slang for inform.) I drew closer and laid my dirty junky fingers on his sharkskin sleeve. "And us blood brothers in the

same dirty needle. I can tell you in confidence he is due for a hot shot.” (Note: This is a cap of poison junk sold to addict for liquidation purposes. Often given to informers. Usually the hot shot is strychnine since it tastes and looks like junk.)

“Ever see a hot shot hit, kid? I saw the Gimp catch one in Philly. We rigged his room with a one-way whorehouse mirror and charged a sawski to watch it. He never got the needle out of his arm. They don’t if the shot is right. That’s the way they find them, dropper full of clotted blood hanging out of a blue arm. The look in his eyes when it hit. Kid, it was tasty.

“Recollect when I am travelling with the Vigilante, best Shake Man in the industry. Out in Chi—We is working the fags in Lincoln Park. So one night the Vigilante turns up for work in cowboy boots and a black vest with a hunka tin on it and a lariat slung over his shoulder.

“So I say: ‘What’s with you? You wig already?’

“He just looks at me and says: ‘Fill your hand stranger’ and hauls out an old rusty six shooter and I take off across Lincoln Park, bullets cutting all around me. And he hangs three fags before the fuzz nail him. I mean the Vigilante earned his moniker.

“Ever notice how many expressions carry over from queers to con men? Like ‘raise,’ letting someone know you are in the same line?

“‘Get her!’

“‘Get the Paregoric Kid giving that mark the build up!’

“‘Eager Beaver wooing him much too fast.’

“The Shoe Store Kid (he got that moniker shaking down fetishists in shoe stores) say: ‘Give it to a mark with K.Y. and he will come back moaning for more.’ And when the Kid spots a mark he begin to breathe heavy. His face swells and his lips turn purple like an Eskimo in heat. Then slow, slow he comes on the mark, feeling for him, palpating him with fingers of rotten ectoplasm.

“The Rube has a sincere little boy look, burns through him like blue neon. That one stepped right off a *Saturday Evening Post* cover with a string of bullheads, and preserved himself in junk. His marks never beef and the Bunko people are really

carrying a needle for the Rube. One day Little Boy Blue starts to slip, and what crawls out would make an ambulance attendant puke. The Rube flips in the end, running through empty automats and subway stations, screaming: ‘Come back, kid!! Come back!!’ and follows his boy right into the East River, down through condoms and orange peels, mosaic of floating newspapers, down into the silent black ooze with gangsters in concrete, and pistols pounded flat to avoid the probing finger of prurient ballistic experts.”

And the fruit is thinking: “What a character!! Wait till I tell the boys in Clark’s about this one.” He’s a character collector, would stand still for Joe Gould’s seagull act. So I put it on him for a sawski and make a meet to sell him some “pod” as he calls it, thinking, “I’ll catnip the jerk.” (Note: Catnip smells like marijuana when it burns. Frequently passed on the incautious or uninstructed.)

“Well,” I said, tapping my arm, “duty calls. As one judge said to another: ‘Be just and if you can’t be just, be arbitrary.’”

I cut into the automat and there is Bill Gains huddled in someone else’s overcoat looking like a 1910 banker with paresis, and Old Bart, shabby and inconspicuous, dunking pound cake with his dirty fingers, shiny over the dirt.

I had some uptown customers Bill took care of, and Bart knew a few old relics from hop smoking times, spectral janitors, grey as ashes, phantom porters sweeping out dusty halls with a slow old man’s hand, coughing and spitting in the junk-sick dawn, retired asthmatic fences in theatrical hotels, Pantopon Rose, the old madam from Peoria, stoical Chinese waiters never show sickness. Bart sought them out with his old junky walk, patient and cautious and slow, dropped into their bloodless hands a few hours of warmth.

I made the round with him once for kicks. You know how old people lose all shame about eating, and it makes you puke to watch them? Old junkies are the same about junk. They gibber and squeal at the sight of it. The spit hangs off their chin, and their stomach rumbles and all their guts grind in peristalsis while they cook up, dissolving the body’s decent skin, you expect any

moment a great blob of protoplasm will flop right out and surround the junk. Really disgusts you to see it.

“Well, my boys will be like that one day,” I thought philosophically. “Isn’t life peculiar?”

So back downtown by the Sheridan Square Station in case the dick is lurking in a broom closet.

Like I say it couldn’t last. I knew they were out there pow-wowing and making their evil fuzz magic, putting dolls of me in Leavenworth. “No use sticking needles in that one, Mike.”

I hear they got Chapin with a doll. This old eunuch dick just sat in the precinct basement hanging a doll of him day and night, year in year out. And when Chapin hanged in Connecticut, they find this old creep with his neck broken.

“He fell downstairs,” they say. You know the old cop bullshit.

Junk is surrounded by magic and taboos, curses and amulets. I could find my Mexico City connection by radar. “Not this street, the next, right—now left. Now right again,” and there he is, toothless old woman face and cancelled eyes.

I know this one pusher walks around humming a tune and everybody he passes takes it up. He is so grey and spectral and anonymous they don’t see him and think it is their own mind humming the tune. So the customers come in on *Smiles*, or *I’m In the Mood for Love*, or *They Say We’re Too Young to Go Steady*, or whatever the song is for that day. Sometimes you can see maybe fifty ratty-looking junkies squealing sick, running along behind a boy with a harmonica, and there is The Man on a cane seat throwing bread to the swans, a fat drag queen walking his Afghan hound through the East Fifties, an old wino pissing against an El post, a radical Jewish student giving out leaflets in Washington Square, a tree surgeon, an exterminator, an advertising fruit in Nedick’s where he calls the counterman by his first name. The world network of junkies, tuned on a cord of rancid jissom, tying up in furnished rooms, shivering in the junk-sick morning. (Old Pete men suck the black smoke in the Chink laundry back room and Melancholy Baby dies from an overdose of time or cold turkey withdrawal of breath.) In Yemen, Paris, New Orleans, Mexico City and Istanbul—shivering under

the air hammers and the steam shovels, shrieked junky curses at one another neither of us heard, and The Man leaned out of a passing steam roller and I copped in a bucket of tar. (Note: Istanbul is being torn down and rebuilt, especially shabby junk quarters. Istanbul has more heroin junkies than NYC.) The living and the dead, in sickness or on the nod, hooked or kicked or hooked again, come in on the junk beam and the Connection is eating Chop Suey on Dolores Street, Mexico D.F., dunking pound cake in the automat, chased up Exchange Place by a baying pack of People. (Note: People is New Orleans slang for narcotic fuzz.)

The old Chinaman dips river water into a rusty tin can, washes down a yen pox hard and black as a cinder. (Note: Yen pox is the ash of smoked opium.)

Well, the fuzz has my spoon and dropper, and I know they are coming in on my frequency led by this blind pigeon known as Willy the Disk. Willy has a round, disk mouth lined with sensitive, erectile black hairs. He is blind from shooting in the eyeball, his nose and palate eaten away sniffing H, his body a mass of scar tissue hard and dry as wood. He can only eat the shit now with that mouth, sometimes sways out on a long tube of ectoplasm, feeling for the silent frequency of junk. He follows my trail all over the city into rooms I move out already, and the fuzz walks in on some newlyweds from Sioux Falls.

“All right, Lee!! Come out from behind that strap-on! We know you” and pull the man’s prick off straightaway.

Now Willy is getting hot and you can hear him always out there in darkness (he only functions at night) whimpering, and feel the terrible urgency of that blind, seeking mouth. When they move in for the bust, Willy goes all out of control, and his mouth eats a hole right through the door. If the cops weren’t there to restrain him with a stock probe, he would suck the juice right out of every junky he ran down.

I knew, and everybody else knew they had the Disk on me. And if my kid customers ever hit the stand: “He force me to commit all kinda awful sex acts in return for junk,” I could kiss the street good-bye.

So we stock up on H, buy a second-hand Studebaker, and start West.

The Vigilante copped out as a schizo possession case:

“I was standing outside myself trying to stop those hangings with ghost fingers—I am a ghost wanting what every ghost wants—a body—after the Long Time moving through odorless alleys of space where no life is only the colorless no smell of death—Nobody can breathe and smell it through pink convolutions of gristle laced with crystal snot, time shit and black blood filters of flesh.”

He stood there in elongated court room shadow, his face torn like a broken film by lusts and hungers of larval organs stirring in the tentative ectoplasmic flesh of junk kick (ten days on ice at time of the First Hearing) flesh that fades at the first silent touch of junk.

I saw it happen. Ten pounds lost in ten minutes standing with the syringe in one hand holding his pants up with the other, his abdicated flesh burning in a cold yellow halo, there in the New York hotel room—night table litter of candy boxes, cigarette butts cascading out of three ashtrays, mosaic of sleepless nights and sudden food needs of the kicking addict nursing his baby flesh.

The Vigilante is prosecuted in Federal Court under a lynch bill and winds up in a Federal Nut House specially designed for the containment of ghosts: precise, prosaic impact of objects—washstand—door—toilet—bars—there they are—this is it—all lines cut—nothing beyond—Dead End—And the Dead End in every face.

The physical changes were slow at first, then jumped forward in black klunks, falling through his slack tissue, washing away the human lines—In his place of total darkness mouth and eyes are one organ that leaps forward to snap with transparent teeth—but no organ is constant as regards either function or position—sex organs sprout anywhere—rectums open, defecate and close—the entire organism changes colour and consistency in split-second adjustments.

The Rube is a social liability with his attacks as he calls them. The Mark Inside was coming up on him and that's a rumble nobody can cool; outside Philly he jumps out to con a prowler car and the fuzz takes one look at his face and busts all of us.

Seventy-two hours and five sick junkies in the cell with us. Now not wishing to break out my stash in front of these hungry coolies, it takes maneuvering and laying of gold on the turnkey before we are in a separate cell.

Provident junkies, known as squirrels, keep stashes against a bust. Every time I take a shot I let a few drops fall into my vest pocket, the lining is stiff with stuff. I had a plastic dropper in my shoe and a safety-pin stuck in my belt. You know how this pin and dropper routine is put down: “She seized a safety pin caked with blood and rust, gouged a great hole in her leg which seemed to hang open like an obscene, festering mouth waiting for unspeakable congress with the dropper which she now plunged out of sight into the gaping wound. But her hideous galvanized need (hunger of insects in dry places) has broken the dropper off deep in the flesh of her ravaged thigh (looking rather like a poster on soil erosion). But what does she care? She does not even bother to remove the splintered glass, looking down at her bloody haunch with the cold blank eyes of a meat trader. What does she care for the atom bomb, the bed bugs, the cancer rent, Friendly Finance waiting to repossess her delinquent flesh—Sweet dreams, Pantopon Rose.”

The real scene you pinch up some leg flesh and make a quick stab hole with a pin. Then fit the dropper *over*, *not in* the hole and feed the solution slow and careful so it doesn't squirt out the sides—When I grabbed the Rube's thigh the flesh came up like wax and stayed there, and a slow drop of pus oozed out the hole. And I never touched a living body cold as the Rube there in Philly.

I decided to lop him off if it meant a smother party. (This is a rural English custom designed to eliminate aged and bedfast dependents. A family so afflicted throws a “smother party” where the guests pile mattresses on the old liability, climb up on top of the mattresses and lush themselves out.) The Rube is a drag on the industry and should be “led out” into the skid rows of the world.

(This is an African practice. Official known as the “Leader Out” has the function of taking old characters out into the jungle and leaving them there.)

The Rube’s attacks become an habitual condition. Cops, doormen, dogs, secretaries snarl at his approach. The blond God has fallen to untouchable vileness. Con men don’t change, they break, shatter—explosions of matter in cold interstellar space, drift away in cosmic dust, leave the empty body behind. Hustlers of the world, there is one Mark you cannot beat: The Mark Inside.

I left the Rube standing on a corner, red brick slums to the sky, under a steady rain of soot. “Going to hit this croaker I know. Right back with that good pure drugstore M—No, you wait here—don’t want him to rumble you.” No matter how long, Rube, wait for me right on that corner. Goodbye, Rube, goodbye kid—Where do they go when they walk out and leave the body behind?

Chicago: invisible hierarchy of decorticated wops, smell of atrophied gangsters, earthbound ghost hits you at North and Halstead, Cicero, Lincoln Park, panhandler of dreams, past invading the present, rancid magic of slot machines and roadhouses.

Into the Interior: a vast subdivision, antennae of television to the meaningless sky. In lifeproof houses they hover over the young, sop up a little of what they shut out. Only the young bring anything in, and they are not young very long. (Through the bars of East St. Louis lies the dead frontier, riverboat days.) Illinois and Missouri, miasma of mound-building peoples, grovelling worship of the Food Source, cruel and ugly festivals, dead-end horror of the Centipede God reaches from Moundville to the lunar deserts of coastal Peru.

America is not a young land: it is old and dirty and evil before the settlers, before the Indians. The evil is there waiting.

And always cops: smooth college-trained state cops, practiced, apologetic patter, electronic eyes weigh your car and luggage, clothes and face; snarling big city dicks, soft-spoken country sheriffs with something black and menacing in old eyes color of a faded grey flannel shirt.

And always car trouble: in St. Louis traded the 1942 Studebaker in (it has a built-in engineering flaw like the Rube) on an old Packard limousine heated up and barely made Kansas City, and bought a Ford turned out to be an oil burner, packed it in on a jeep we push too hard (they are no good for highway driving)—and burn something out inside, rattling around, went back to the old Ford V-8. Can’t beat that engine for getting there, oil burner or no.

And the U.S. drag closes around us like no other drag in the world, worse than the Andes, high mountain towns, cold wind down from postcard mountains, thin air like death in the throat, river towns of Ecuador, malaria grey as junk under black Stetson, muzzle loading shotguns, vultures pecking through the mud streets—and what hits you when you get off the Malmo Ferry in (no juice tax on the ferry) Sweden knocks all that cheap, tax free juice right out of you and brings you all the way down: averted eyes and the cemetery in the middle of town (every town in Sweden seems to be built around a cemetery), and nothing to do in the afternoon, not a bar not a movie and I blasted my last stick of Tangier tea and I said, “K.E. let’s get right back on that ferry.”

But there is no drag like U.S. drag. You can’t see it, you don’t where it comes from. Take one of those cocktail lounges at the end of a subdivision street—every block of houses has its own bar and drugstore and market and liquorstore. You walk in and it hits you. But where does it come from?

Not the bartender, not the customers, nor the cream-colored plastic rounding the bar stools, nor the dim neon. Not even the TV.

And out habits build up with the drag, like cocaine will build you up staying ahead of the C bring-down. And the junk was running low. So there we are in this no-horse town strictly from cough syrup. And vomited up the syrup and drove on and on, cold spring wind whistling through that old heap around our shivering sick sweating bodies and the cold you always come down with when the junk runs out of you—On through the peeled landscape, dead armadillos in the road and vultures over the swamp and cypress stumps. Motels with beaverboard walls, gas heater, thin pink blankets.

Itinerant short con and carny hyp men have burned down the croakers of Texas.

And no one in his right mind would hit a Louisiana croaker. State Junk Law.

Came at last to Houston where I know a druggist. I haven't been there in five years but he looks up and makes me with one quick look and just nods and says: "Wait over at the counter—"

So I sit down and drink a cup of coffee and after a while he comes and sits beside me and says, "What do you want?"

"A quart of PG and a hundred nembies."

He nods, "Come back in half an hour."

So when I come back he hands me a package and says, "That's fifteen dollars—Be careful."

Shooting PG is a terrible hassle, you have to burn out the alcohol first, then freeze out the camphor and draw this brown liquid off with a dropper—have to shoot it in the vein or you get an abscess, and usually end up with an abscess no matter where you shoot it. Best deal is to drink it with goof balls—So we pour it in a Pernod bottle and start for New Orleans past iridescent lakes and orange gas flares, and swamps and garbage heaps, alligators crawling around in broken bottles and tin cans, neon arabesques of motels, marooned pimps scream obscenities at passing cars from islands of rubbish.

New Orleans is a dead museum. We walk around Exchange Place breathing PG and find The Man right away. It's a small place and the fuzz always knows who is pushing so he figures what the hell does it matter and sells to anybody. We stock up on H and backtrack for Mexico.

Back through Lake Charles and the dead slot-machine country, south end of Texas, nigger-killing sheriffs look us over and check the car papers. Something falls off you when you cross the border into Mexico, and suddenly the landscape hits you straight with nothing between you and it, desert and mountains and vultures; little wheeling specks and others so close you can hear wings cut the air (a dry husking sound), and when they spot something they pour out of the blue sky, that shattering bloody blue sky of

Mexico, down in a black funnel—Drove all night, came at dawn to a warm misty place, barking dogs and the sound of running water.

"Thomas and Charlie," I said.

"What?"

"That's the name of this town. Sea level. We climb straight up from here ten thousand feet." I took a fix and went to sleep in the back seat. She was a good driver. You can tell as soon as someone touches the wheel.

Mexico City where Lupita sits like an Aztec Earth Goddess doling out her little papers of lousy shit.

"Selling is more of a habit than using," Lupita says. Non-using pushers have a contact habit, and that's one you can't kick. Agents get it too. Take Bradley the Buyer. Best narcotics agent in the industry. Anyone would make him for junk. (Note: Make in the sense of dig or size up.) I mean he can walk up to a pusher and score direct. He is so anonymous, grey and spectral the pusher don't remember him afterwards. So he twists one after the other.

Well the Buyer comes to look more and more like a junky. He can't drink. He can't get it up. His teeth fall out. (Like pregnant women lose their teeth feeding the stranger, junkies lose their yellow fangs feeding the monkey.) He is all the time sucking on a candy bar. Baby Ruths he digs special. "It really disgust you to see the Buyer sucking on them candy bars so nasty," a cop says.

The Buyer takes on an ominous grey-green color. Fact is his body is making its own junk or equivalent. The Buyer has a steady connection. A Man Within you might say. Or so he thinks. "I'll just set in my room," he says. "Fuck 'em all. Squares on both sides. I am the only complete man in the industry."

But a yen comes on him like a great black wind through the bones. So the Buyer hunts up a young junky and gives him a paper to make it.

"Oh all right," the boy says. "So what you want to make?"

"I just want to rub up against you and get fixed."

"Ugh—Well all right—But why cancha just get physical like a human?"

Later the boy is sitting in a Waldorf with two colleagues dunking pound cake. “Most distasteful thing I ever stand still for,” he says. “Some way he make himself all soft like a blob of jelly and surround me so nasty. Then he gets wet all over like with green slime. So I guess he come to some kinda awful climax—I come near wiggling with that green stuff all over me, and he stink like a old rotten cantaloupe.”

“Well it’s still an easy score.”

The boy sighed resignedly; “Yes, I guess you can get used to anything. I’ve got a meet with him again tomorrow.”

The Buyer’s habit keeps getting heavier. He needs a recharge every half hour. Sometimes he cruises the precincts and bribes the turnkey to let him in with a cell of junkies. It get to where no amount of contact will fix him. At this point he receives a summons from the District Supervisor:

“Bradley, your conduct has given rise to rumors—and I hope for your sake they are no more than that—so unspeakably distasteful that—I mean Caesar’s wife—hrump—that is, the Department must be above suspicion—certainly above such suspicions as you have seemingly aroused. You are lowering the entire tone of the industry. We are prepared to accept your immediate resignation.”

The Buyer throws himself on the ground and crawls over to the D.S. “No, Boss Man, no—The Department is my very lifeline.”

He kisses the D.S.’s hand, thrusting the fingers into his mouth (the D.S. must feel his toothless gums) complaining he has lost his teeth “inna thervith.” “Please Boss Man. I’ll wipe your ass, I’ll wash out your dirty condoms, I’ll polish your shoes with the oil on my nose—”

“Really, this is most distasteful! Have you no pride? I must tell you I feel a distinct revulsion. I mean there is something, well, rotten about you, and you smell like a compost heap.” He put a scented handkerchief in front of his face. “I must ask you to leave this office at once.”

“I’ll do anything, Boss, *anything*.” His ravaged green face splits in a horrible smile. “I’m still young, Boss, and I’m pretty strong when I get my blood up.”

The D.S. retches into his handkerchief and points to the door with a limp hand. The Buyer stands up looking at the D.S. dreamily. His body begins to dip like a dowsers’ wand. He flows forward.

“No! No!” screams the D.S.

“Schlup—schlup schlup.” An hour later they find the Buyer on the nod in the D.S.’s chair. The D.S. has disappeared without a trace.

The Judge: “Everything indicates that you have, in some unspeakable manner uh—assimilated the District Supervisor. Unfortunately there is no proof. I would recommend that you be confined or more accurately contained in some institution, but I know of no place suitable for a man of your caliber. I must reluctantly order your release.”

“That one should stand in an aquarium,” says the arresting officer.

The Buyer spreads terror throughout the industry. Junkies and agents disappear. Like a vampire bat he gives off a narcotic effluvium, a dank green mist that anaesthetizes his victims and renders them helpless in his enveloping presence. And once he has scored he holes up for several days like a gorged boa constrictor. Finally he is caught in the act of digesting the Narcotics Commissioner and destroyed with a flame thrower—the court of inquiry ruling that such means were justified in that the Buyer had lost his human citizenship and was, in consequence, a creature without species and a menace to the narcotics industry on all levels.

In Mexico the gimmick is to find a local junky with a government script whereby they are allowed a certain quantity every month. Our Man was Old Ike who had spent most of his life in the States.

“I was travelling with Irene Kelly and her was a sporting woman. In Butte, state of Montany, she gets the coke horrors and run through the hotel screaming Chinese coppers chase her with meat cleavers. I knew this cop in Chicago sniff coke used to come in form of crystals, blue crystals. So he go nuts and start screaming the Federals is after him and run down this alley and stick his head

in the garbage can. And I said, ‘What you think you are doing?’ and he say, ‘Get away or I shoot you. I got myself hid good.’”

We are getting some C on RX at this time. Shoot it in the mainline, son. You can smell it going in, clean and cold in your nose and throat then a rush of pure pleasure right through the brain lighting up those C connections. Your head shatters in white explosions. Ten minutes later you want another shot—you will walk across town for another shot. But if you can’t score for C you eat, sleep and forget about it.

This is a yen of the brain alone, a need without feeling and without body, earthbound ghost need, rancid ectoplasm swept out by an old junky coughing and spitting in the sick morning.

One morning you wake up and take a speed ball, and feel bugs under your skin. 1890 cops with black mustaches block the doors and lean in through the windows snarling their lips back from blue and gold embossed badges. Junkies march through the room singing the Moslem Funeral Song, bear the body of Bill Gains, stigmata of his needle wounds glow with a soft blue flame. Purposeful schizophrenic detectives sniff at your chamber pot.

It’s the coke horrors—Sit back and play it cool and shoot in plenty of that GI M.

Day of the Dead: I got the chucks and ate my little Willy’s sugar skull. He cried and I had to go out for another. Walked past the cocktail lounge where they blasted the Jai Lai bookie.

When they walked in on me that morning at 8 o’clock, I knew it was my last chance, my only chance. But they didn’t know. How could they? Just a routine pick-up. But not quite routine.

Hauser had been eating breakfast when the Lieutenant called: “I want you and your partner to pick up a man named Lee, William Lee, on your way downtown. He’s in the Hotel Lamprey, 103 just off B way.”

“Yeah I know where it is. I remember him too.”

“Good. Room 606. Just pick him up. Don’t take time to shake the place down. Except bring in all books, letters, manuscripts. *Anything* printed, typed or written. Ketch?”

“Ketch. But what’s the angle—Books.”

“Just do it.” The Lieutenant hung up.

Hauser and O’Brien. They had been on the City Narcotic Squad for 20 years. Oldtimers like me. I been on the junk 16 years. They weren’t bad as laws go. At least O’Brien wasn’t. O’Brien was the con man, and Hauser the tough guy. A vaudeville team. Hauser had a way of hitting you before he said anything just to break the ice. Then O’Brien gives you an Old Gold—just like a cop to smoke Old Golds somehow—and starts putting down a cop con that was really bottled in bond. Not a bad guy, and I didn’t want to do it. But it was my only chance.

I was just tying up for my morning shot when they walked in with a pass key. It was the special kind you can use even when the door is locked from the inside with a key in the lock. On the table in front of me was a packet of junk, spike, syringe—I got the habit of using a regular syringe in Mexico and never went back to using a dropper—alcohol, cotton and a glass of water.

“Well well,” says O’Brien—“Long time no see eh?”

“Put on your coat, Lee,” says Hauser. He had his gun out. He always has it out when he makes a pinch for the psychological effect and to forestall a rush for toilet, sink or window.

“Can I take a bang first, boys?” I asked—“There’s plenty here for evidence.”

I was wondering how I could get to my suitcase if they said no. The case wasn’t locked, but Hauser had the gun in his hand.

“He wants a shot,” said Hauser.

“Now you know we can’t do that, Bill,” said O’Brien in his sweet con voice, dragging out the name with an oily, insinuating familiarity, brutal and obscene.

He meant, of course, “What can you do for *us*, Bill?” He looked at me and smiled. The smile stayed there too long, hideous and naked, the smile of an old painted pervert, gathering all the negative evil of O’Brien’s ambiguous function.

“I might could set up Marty Steel for you,” I said.

I knew they wanted Marty bad. He’d been pushing for five years, and they couldn’t hang one on him. Marty was an oldtimer, and very careful about who he served. He had to know a man and

know him well before he would pick up his money. No one can say they ever did time because of me. My rep is perfect, but still Marty wouldn't serve me because he didn't know me long enough. That's how skeptical Marty was.

"Marty!" said O'Brien. "Can you score from him?"

"Sure I can."

They were suspicious. A man can't be a cop all his life without developing a special set of intuitions.

"O.K.," said Hauser finally. "But you'd better deliver, Lee."

"I'll deliver all right. Believe me I appreciate this."

I tied up for a shot, my hands trembling with eagerness, an archetype dope fiend.

"Just an old junky, boys, a harmless old shaking wreck of a junky." That's the way I put it down. As I had hoped, Hauser looked away when I started probing for a vein. It's a wildly unpretty spectacle.

O'Brien was sitting on the arm of a chair smoking an Old Gold, looking out the window with that dreamy what I'll do when I get my pension look.

I hit a vein right away. A column of blood shot up into the syringe for an instant sharp and solid as a red cord. I pressed the plunger down with my thumb, feeling the junk pound through my veins to feed a million junk-hungry cells, to bring strength and alertness to every nerve and muscle. They were not watching me. I filled the syringe with alcohol.

Hauser was juggling his snub-nosed detective special, a Colt, and looking around the room. He could smell danger like an animal. With his left hand he pushed the closet door open and glanced inside. My stomach contracted. I thought, "If he looks in the suitcase now I'm done."

Hauser turned to me abruptly. "You through yet?" he snarled. "You'd better not try to shit us on Marty." The words came out so ugly he surprised and shocked himself.

I picked up the syringe full of alcohol, twisting the needle to make sure it was tight.

"Just two seconds," I said.

I squirted a thin jet of alcohol, whipping it across his eyes with a sideways shake of the syringe. He let out a bellow of pain. I could see him pawing at his eyes with the left hand like he was tearing off an invisible bandage as I dropped to the floor on one knee, reaching for my suitcase. I pushed the suitcase open, and my left hand closed over the gun butt—I am righthanded but I shoot with my left hand. I felt the concussion of Hauser's shot before I heard it. His slug slammed into the wall behind me. Shooting from the floor, I snapped two quick shots into Hauser's belly where his vest had pulled up showing an inch of white shirt. He grunted in a way I could feel and doubled forward. Stiff with panic, O'Brien's hand was tearing at the gun in his shoulder holster. I clamped my other hand around my gun wrist to steady it for the long pull—this gun has the hammer filed off round so you can only use it double action—and shot him in the middle of his red forehead about two inches below the silver hairline. His hair had been grey the last time I saw him. That was about 15 years ago. My first arrest. His eyes went out. He fell off the chair onto his face. My hands were already reaching for what I needed, sweeping my notebooks into a briefcase with my works, junk, and a box of shells. I stuck the gun into my belt, and stepped out into the corridor putting on my coat.

I could hear the desk clerk and the bell boy pounding up the stairs. I took the self-service elevator down, walked through the empty lobby into the street.

It was a beautiful Indian Summer day. I knew I didn't have much chance, but any chance is better than none, better than being a subject for experiments with ST (6) or whatever the initials are.

I had to stock up on junk fast. Along with airports, R.R. stations and bus terminals, they would cover all junk areas and connections. I took a taxi to Washington Square, got out and walked along 4th Street till I spotted Nick on a corner. You can always find the pusher. Your need conjures him up like a ghost. "Listen, Nick," I said, "I'm leaving town. I want to pick up a piece of H. Can you make it right now?"

We were walking along 4th Street. Nick's voice seemed to drift into my consciousness from no particular place. An eerie, disembodied voice. "Yes, I think I can make it. I'll have to make a run uptown."

"We can take a cab."

"O.K., but I can't take you in to the guy, you understand."

"I understand. Let's go."

We were in the cab heading North. Nick was talking in his flat, dead voice.

"Some funny stuff we're getting lately. It's not weak exactly—I don't know—it's different. Maybe they're putting some synthetic shit in it—Dollies or something."

"What!!!? Already?"

"Huh?—But this I'm taking you to now is O.K. In fact it's about the best deal around that I know of—Stop here."

"Please make it fast," I said.

"It should be a matter of ten minutes unless he's out of stuff and has to make a run—Better sit down over there and have a cup of coffee—This is a hot neighborhood."

I sat down at a counter and ordered coffee, and pointed to a piece of Danish pastry under a plastic cover. I washed down the stale rubbery cake with coffee, praying that just this once, please God, let him make it now, and not come back to say the man is all out and has to make a run to East Orange or Greenpoint.

Well here he was back, standing behind me. I looked at him, afraid to ask. Funny, I thought, here I sit with perhaps one chance in a hundred to live out the next 24 hours—I had made up my mind not to surrender and spend the next three or four months in death's waiting room. And here I was worrying about a junk score. But I only had about five shots left, and without junk I would be immobilized—Nick nodded his head.

"Don't give it to me here," I said. "Let's take a cab."

We took a cab and started downtown. I held out my hand and copped the package, then I slipped a fifty-dollar bill into Nick's palm. He glanced at it and showed his gums in a toothless smile: "Thanks a lot—This will put me in the clear."

I sat back letting my mind work without pushing it. Push your mind too hard, and it will fuck up like an overloaded switch-board, or turn on you with sabotage—And I had no margin for error. Americans have a special horror of giving up control, of letting things happen in their own way without interference. They would like to jump down into their stomachs and digest the food and shovel the shit out.

Your mind will answer most questions if you learn to relax and wait for the answer. Like one of those thinking machines, you feed in your question, sit back, and wait.

I was looking for a name. My mind was sorting through names, discarding at once F.L.—Fuzz Lover, B.W.—Born Wrong, N.C.B.C.—Nice Cat But Chicken; putting aside to reconsider, narrowing, sifting, feeling for the name, the answer.

"Sometimes, you know, he'll keep me waiting three hours. Sometimes I make it right away like this." Nick had a deprecating little laugh that he used for punctuation. Sort of an apology for talking at all in the telepathizing world of the addict where only the quantity factor—How much \$? How much junk?—requires verbal expression. He knew and I knew all about waiting. At all levels the drug trade operates without schedule. Nobody delivers on time except by accident. The addict runs on junk time. His body is his clock, and junk runs through it like an hour-glass. Time has meaning for him only with reference to his need. Then he makes his abrupt intrusion into the time of others, and, like all Outsiders, all Petitioners, he must wait, unless he happens to mesh with non-junk time.

"What can I say to him? He knows I'll wait," Nick laughed.

I spent the night in the Ever Hard Baths—(homosexuality is the best all-around cover story an agent can use)—where a snarling Italian attendant creates such an unnerving atmosphere sweeping the dormitory with infra red see in the dark fieldglasses.

("All right in the North East corner! I see you!") switching on floodlights, sticking his head through trapdoors in the floor and walls of the private rooms, that many a queen has been carried out in a straitjacket.

I lay there in my open top cubicle room looking at the ceiling—listened to the grunts and squeals and snarls in the nightmare half-light of random, broken lust.

“Fuck off you!”

“Put on two pairs of glasses and maybe you can see something!”

Walked out in the precise morning and bought a paper—Nothing—I called from a drugstore phone booth—and asked for Narcotics:

“Lieutenant Gonzales—who’s calling?”

“I want to speak to O’Brien.” A moment of static, dangling wires, broken connections.

“Nobody of that name in this department—Who are *you*?”

“Well let me speak to Hauser.”

“Look, Mister, no O’Brien no Hauser in this bureau. Now what do you want?”

“Look, this is important—I’ve got info on a big shipment of H coming in—I want to talk to Hauser or O’Brien—I don’t do business with anybody else.”

“Hold on—I’ll connect you with Alcibiades.”

I began to wonder if there was an Anglo-Saxon name left in the Department.

“I want to speak to Hauser or O’Brien.”

“How many times I have to tell you no Hauser no O’Brien in this department—Now who is this calling?”

I hung up and took a taxi out of the area—In the cab I realized what had happened—I had been occluded from space-time like an eel’s ass occludes when he stops eating on the way to Sargasso—Locked out—Never again would I have a Key, a Point of Intersection—The Heat was off me from here on out—relegated with Hauser and O’Brien to a land-locked junk past where heroin is always twenty-eight dollars an ounce and you can score for yen pox in the Chink Laundry of Sioux Falls—Far side of the world’s mirror, moving into the past with Hauser and O’Brien.

in a strange bed

LYKIN was the first to awake—He could not remember where he was—Slowly his blue eyes blurred with exhaustion registered glowing red rocks and metallic shrubs with silver leaves that surrounded the little pool where he lay—The ghastly night flooded back into his memory—Controls of their space craft had suddenly blanked out by the intervention of an invisible alien force like an icy draught through the cabin—Not only the mechanical controls had been put out of action but their nerve centers had been paralyzed—He and Bradly the Co-pilot had sat helpless in their pressure seats for two hours while the invading force guided their ship in a sickening spiral through the poisonous cloud belts of an unknown planet—Lykin and Bradly had blacked out when they landed—How had they gotten out of the ship?—He stood up and tripped over the sleeping form of his companion naked except for the skin tight transparent space suit that clung to his muscular body—He decided to have a quick look at the terrain before waking Bradly—He was at the bottom of a gully surrounded by red rocks of some translucent substance—He climbed out of the gully and found himself on a plateau—A fantastic landscape of multicolored rock carved like statues of molten blue lava interspaced with stalagmites of a pearly white intensity he had never experienced in his previous explorations—The sky was like a green ocean—There were four suns on the horizon around the plateau, each sun of a different color—Blue, green, red, and one (much larger than the others) a brilliant silver—The air was of a tingling clarity that seemed to support his body so that movements were incredibly precise and easily performed—He turned and started back down