

A VERY TIGHT PLACE

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Curtis Johnson rode his bike five miles every morning. He had stopped for a while after Betsy died, but found that without his morning exercise he was sadder than ever. So he took it up again. The only difference was that he stopped wearing his bike helmet. He rode two and a half miles down Gulf Boulevard, then turned around and rode back. He always kept to the bike lanes. He might not care if he lived or died, but he respected the rule of law.

Gulf Boulevard was the only road on Turtle Island. It ran past a lot of homes owned by millionaires. Curtis didn't notice them. For one thing, he was a millionaire himself. He had made his money the old-fashioned way, in the stock market. For another, he had no problem with any of the people living in the houses he passed. The only one he had a problem with was Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker, and Grunwald lived in the other direction. Not the last lot on Turtle Island before Daylight Channel, but the second-to-last. It was the last lot that was the problem between them (one of the problems). That lot was the biggest, with the best view of the Gulf, and the only one without a house on it. The only things on it were scrub grass, sea oats, stunted palms, and a few Australian pines.

The nicest thing, the very nicest, about his morning rides was no phone. He was officially off the grid. Once he got back, the phone would seldom leave his hand, especially while the market was open. He was athletic; he would stride around the house using the cordless, occasionally returning to his office, where his computer would be scrolling the numbers. Sometimes he left the house to walk out to the road, and then he took his cell phone. Usually he would turn right, toward the stub end of Gulf Boulevard. Toward The Motherfucker's house. But he wouldn't go so far that Grunwald could see him; Curtis wouldn't give the man that satisfaction. He just went far enough to make sure Grunwald wasn't trying to pull a fast one with the Vinton Lot. Of course there was no way The Motherfucker could get heavy machinery past him, not even at night—Curtis slept lightly since there was no Betsy lying beside him. But he still checked, usually standing behind the last palm in a shady stretch of

two dozen. Just to be sure. Because destroying empty lots, burying them under tons of concrete, was Grunwald's goddam business.

And The Motherfucker was sly.

So far, though, all was well. If Grunwald did try to pull a fast one, Curtis was ready to empty the holes (legally speaking). Meanwhile, Grunwald had Betsy to answer for, and answer he would. Even if Curtis had largely lost his taste for the fray (he denied this to himself, but knew it was true), he would see that Grunwald answered for her. The Motherfucker would discover that Curtis Johnson had jaws of chrome ... jaws of chrome steel ... and when he took hold of a thing, he did not let go.

When he returned to his home on this particular Tuesday morning, with ten minutes still to go before the opening bell on Wall Street, Curtis checked his cell phone for messages, as he always did. Today there were two. One was from Circuit City, probably some salesman trying to sell him something under the guise of checking his satisfaction with the wall-hung flatscreen he'd purchased the month before.

When he scrolled down to the next message, he read this: 383-0910 TMF.

The Motherfucker. Even his Nokia knew who Grunwald was, because Curtis had taught it to remember. The question was, what did The Motherfucker want with him on a Tuesday morning in June?

Maybe to settle, and on Curtis's terms.

He allowed himself a laugh at this idea, then played the message. He was stunned to hear that was exactly what Grunwald did want—or appeared to want. Curtis supposed it could be some sort of ploy, but he didn't understand what Grunwald stood to gain by such a thing. And then there was the tone: heavy, deliberate, almost plodding. Maybe it wasn't sorrow, but it surely sounded like sorrow. It

was the way Curtis himself sounded all too often on the phone these days, as he tried to get his head back in the game.

“Johnson ... Curtis,” Grunwald said in his plodding voice. His recorded voice paused longer, as if debating the use of Curtis’s given name, then moved on in the same dead and lightless way. “I can’t fight a war on two fronts. Let’s end this. I’ve lost my taste for it. If I ever had a taste for it. I’m in a very tight place, neighbor.”

He sighed.

“I’m prepared to give up the lot, and for no financial consideration. I’ll also compensate you for your ... for Betsy. If you’re interested, you can find me at Durkin Grove Village. I’ll be there most of the day.” A long pause. “I go out there a lot now. In a way I still can’t believe the financing fell apart, and in a way I’m not surprised at all.” Another long pause. “Maybe you know what I mean.”

Curtis thought he did. He seemed to have lost his nose for the market. More to the point, he didn’t seem to care. He caught himself feeling something suspiciously like sympathy for The Motherfucker. That plodding voice.

“We used to be friends,” Grunwald went on. “Do you remember that? I do. I don’t think we can be friends again—things went too far for that, I guess—but maybe we could be neighbors again. Neighbor.” Another of those pauses. “If I don’t see you out at Grunwald’s Folly, I’ll just instruct my lawyer to settle. On your terms. But ...”

Silence, except for the sound of The Motherfucker breathing. Curtis waited. He was sitting at the kitchen table now. He didn’t know what he felt. In a little while he might, but for the time being, no.

“But I’d like to shake your hand and tell you I’m sorry about your damn dog.” There was a choked sound that might have been—incredible!—the sound of a sob, and then a click, followed by the phone-robot telling him there were no more messages.

Curtis sat where he was for a moment longer, in a bright bar of Florida sun that the air conditioner couldn't quite cool out, not even at this hour. Then he went into his study. The market was open; on his computer screen, the numbers had begun their endless crawl. He realized they meant nothing to him. He left it running but wrote a brief note for Mrs. Wilson—Had to go out—before leaving the house.

There was a motor scooter parked in the garage beside his BMW, and on the spur of the moment he decided to take it. He would have to nip across the main highway on the other side of the bridge, but it wouldn't be the first time.

He felt a pang of hurt and grief as he took the scooter's key from the peg and the other attachment on the ring jingled. He supposed that feeling would pass in time, but now it was almost welcome. Almost like welcoming a friend.

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The troubles between Curtis and Tim Grunwald had started with Ricky Vinton, who had once been old and rich and then progressed to old and senile. Before progressing to dead, he'd sold his undeveloped lot at the end of Turtle Island to Curtis Johnson for one-point-five million dollars, taking Curtis's personal check for a hundred and fifty thousand as earnest money and in return writing Curtis a bill of sale on the back of an advertising circular.

Curtis felt a little like a hound for taking advantage of the old fellow, but it wasn't as if Vinton—owner of Vinton Wire and Cable—was going away to starve. And while a million-five might be considered ridiculously low for such a prime piece of Gulfside real estate, it wasn't insanely low, given current market conditions.

Well ... yes it was, but he and the old man had liked one another, and Curtis was one of those who believed all was fair in love and war, and that business was a subsidiary of the latter. The man's housekeeper—the same Mrs. Wilson who kept house for Curtis—

witnessed the signatures. In retrospect Curtis realized he should have known better than that, but he was excited.

A month or so after selling the undeveloped lot to Curtis Johnson, Vinton sold it to Tim Grunwald, alias The Motherfucker. This time the price was a more lucid five-point-six million, and this time Vinton—perhaps not such a fool after all, perhaps actually sort of a con man, even if he was dying—got half a million in earnest money.

Grunwald's bill of sale had been witnessed by The Motherfucker's yardman (who also happened to be Vinton's yardman). Also pretty shaky, but Curtis supposed Grunwald had been as excited as he, Curtis, had been. Only Curtis's excitement proceeded from the idea that he would be able to keep the end of Turtle Island clean, pristine, and quiet. Exactly the way he liked it.

Grunwald, on the other hand, saw it as the perfect site for development: one condominium or perhaps even two (when Curtis thought of two, he thought of them as The Motherfucker Twin Towers). Curtis had seen such developments before—in Florida they popped up like dandelions on an indifferently maintained lawn—and he knew what The Motherfucker would be inviting in: idiots who mistook retirement funds for the keys to the kingdom of heaven. There would be four years of construction, followed by decades of old men on bicycles with pee bags strapped to their scrawny thighs. And old women who wore sun visors, smoked Parliaments, and didn't pick up the droppings after their designer dogs shat on the beach. Plus, of course, ice cream-slathered grandbrats with names like Lindsay and Jayson. If he let it happen, Curtis knew, he would die with their howls of discontent—"You said we'd go to Disney World today!"—in his ears.

He would not let it happen. And it turned out to be easy. Not pleasant, and the lot didn't belong to him, might never belong to him, but at least it wasn't Grunwald's. It didn't even belong to the relatives who had appeared (like roaches in a Dumpster when a bright light is suddenly turned on), disputing the signatures of the witnesses on both agreements. It belonged to the lawyers and the courts.

Which was like saying it belonged to nobody.

Curtis could work with nobody.

The wrangling had gone on for two years now, and Curtis's legal fees were approaching a quarter of a million dollars. He tried to think of the money as a contribution to some particularly nice environmental group—Johnsonpeace instead of Greenpeace—but of course he couldn't deduct these contributions on his income tax. And Grunwald pissed him off. Grunwald made it personal, partly because he hated to lose (Curtis hated it, too, in those days; not so much now), and partly because he had personal problems.

Grunwald's wife had divorced him; that was Personal Problem Number One. She was Mrs. Motherfucker no more. Then, Personal Problem Number Two, Grunwald had needed some sort of operation. Curtis didn't know for sure it was cancer, he only knew that The Motherfucker came out of Sarasota Memorial twenty or thirty pounds lighter, and in a wheelchair. He had eventually discarded the wheelchair, but hadn't been able to put the weight back on. Wattles hung from his formerly firm neck.

There were also problems with his once fearsomely healthy company. Curtis had seen that for himself at the site of The Motherfucker's current scorched-earth campaign. That would be Durkin Grove Village, located on the mainland twenty miles east of Turtle Island. The place was a half-constructed ghost town. Curtis had parked on a knoll overlooking the silent suspension, feeling like a general surveying the ruins of an enemy encampment. Feeling that life was, all in all, his very own shiny red apple.

Betsy had changed everything. She was—had been—a Lowchen, elderly but still spry. When Curtis walked her on the beach, she always carried her little red rubber bone in her mouth. When Curtis wanted the TV remote, he only had to say "Fetch the idiot stick, Betsy," and she would pluck it from the coffee table and bring it to him in her mouth. It was her pride. And his, of course. She had been

his best friend for seventeen years. The French lion-dogs usually lived to no more than fifteen.

Then Grunwald had put in an electric fence between his property and Curtis's.

That Motherfucker.

It wasn't especially high voltage, Grunwald said he could prove that and Curtis believed him, but it had been of a voltage high enough to do for a slightly overweight old dog with a bad heart. And why an electric fence in the first place? The Motherfucker had spouted a lot of bullshit having to do with discouraging potential home-breakers—presumably creeping from Curtis's property to that upon which La Maison Motherfuckair reared its purple stucco head—but Curtis didn't believe it. Dedicated home-breakers would come in a boat, from the Gulf side. What he believed was that Grunwald, disgruntled about the Vinton Lot, had put in the electric fence for the express purpose of annoying Curtis Johnson. And perhaps hurting his beloved dog. As for actually killing his beloved dog? Curtis believed that had been a bonus.

He was not a weeping man, but he had wept when, prior to her cremation, he had removed Betsy's dog tag from her collar.

Curtis sued The Motherfucker for the price of the dog—twelve hundred dollars. If he could have sued for ten million—that was roughly how much pain he felt when he looked at the idiot stick lying, innocent of dogspit now and forever, on the coffee table—he would have done so in a heartbeat, but his lawyer told him that pain and suffering wouldn't fly in a civil suit. Those things were for divorces, not dogs. He would have to settle for the twelve hundred, and he meant to have it.

The Motherfucker's lawyers responded that the electric fence had been strung a full ten yards on Grunwald's side of the property line, and the battle—the second battle—was on. It had been raging for eight months now. Curtis believed the delaying tactics being

employed by The Motherfucker's lawyers suggested that they knew Curtis had a case. He also believed that their failure to propose a settlement, and Grunwald's failure to just cough up the twelve hundred, suggested that it had become as personal to Grunwald as it was to him. These lawyers were also costing them plenty. But of course, the matter was no longer about money.

Riding out along Route 17, through what had once been ranchland and was now just overgrown scrub ground (Grunwald had been raving mad to build out here, Curtis thought), Curtis only wished he felt happier about this turn of events. Victory was supposed to make your heart leap, and his wasn't. All he seemed to want was to see Grunwald, hear what he was actually proposing, and put all this shit behind them if the proposal wasn't too ridiculous. Of course that would probably mean the roach-relatives would get the Vinton Lot, and they might well decide to put up their own condo development, but did it even matter? It didn't seem to.

Curtis had his own problems to deal with, although his were mental rather than marital (God forbid), financial, or physical. They had begun not long after finding Betsy stiff and cold in the side yard. Others might have called these problems neuroses, but Curtis preferred to think of them as angst.

His current disenchantment with the stock market, which had fascinated him ceaselessly since he had discovered it at sixteen, was the most identifiable component of this angst, but by no means the only one. He had begun taking his pulse and counting his toothbrush strokes. He could no longer wear dark shirts, because he was plagued with dandruff for the first time since junior high school. Dead white crap plated up on his scalp and drifted down to his shoulders. If he scraped with the teeth of a comb, it came down in ghastly snow flurries. He hated this, but still sometimes found himself doing it while sitting at the computer, or while talking on the phone. Once or twice he'd scraped until he drew blood.

Scraping and scraping. Excavating that white deadness. Sometimes looking at the idiot stick on the coffee table and thinking (of course)

of how happy Betsy was when she brought it to him. Human eyes hardly ever looked that happy, especially not when the humans in question were doing chores.

A midlife crisis, Sammy said (Sammy was his once-a-week masseur). You need to get laid, Sammy said, but he didn't offer his own services, Curtis noticed.

Still, the phrase rang true—as true as any twenty-first-century newspeak, he supposed. Whether the Vinton Lot fuck-a-monkey show had provoked the crisis or the crisis had provoked the Vinton mess, he didn't know. What he did know was that he had come to think heart attack instead of indigestion each time he felt a transient, stabbing pain in his chest, that he had become obsessed with the notion that his teeth were going to fall out (even though they had never given him any particular trouble), and that when he'd gotten a cold in April, he had diagnosed himself as being on the verge of a complete immunological breakdown.

Plus this other little problem. This compulsion, which he hadn't told his doctor about. Or even Sammy, and he told Sammy everything.

It was on him now, fifteen miles inland on seldom-traveled Route 17, which had never been particularly busy and had now been rendered all but obsolescent by the 375 Extension. Right here with the green scrub pressing in on both sides (the man had been bonkers to build out here), with the bugs singing in high grass no cows had grazed for ten years or more and the power lines buzzing and the sun beating down like a padded hammer on his helmetless head.

He knew just thinking of the compulsion summoned it, but that was of no particular help. None at all, in fact.

He pulled over where a track marked DURKIN GROVE VILLAGE ROAD shot off to the left (grass was now growing up the center hump, an arrow pointing the way to failure) and put the Vespa in neutral. Then, while it purred contentedly between his legs, he forked the first two fingers of his right hand into a V and stuck them down

his throat. His gag reflex had grown numb over the last two or three months, and his hand was in almost all the way to the bracelets of fortune on his wrist before it finally happened.

Curtis leaned to one side and ejected his breakfast. It wasn't getting rid of the food that interested him; he was many things, but bulimic wasn't one of them. It wasn't even the vomiting part that he liked. What he liked was the gagging: that hard rejecting clench of the midsection, plus the accompanying yaw of the mouth and throat. The body was totally in gear, determined to oust the intruder.

The smells—green bushes, wild honeysuckle—were suddenly stronger. The light was brighter. The sun beat down more heavily than ever; the pad was off the hammer and he could feel the skin on the nape of his neck sizzling, the cells there maybe at this very moment turning outlaw and heading for the chaotic land of melanoma.

He didn't care. He was alive. He rammed his spread fingers down his throat again, scraping the sides. The rest of breakfast yurped up. The third time he produced only long strings of spittle, stained faintly pink with his throat's blood. Then he felt satisfied. Then he could go on toward Durkin Grove Village, The Motherfucker's half-built Xanadu out here in the silent bee-buzzing wilds of Charlotte County.

It occurred to him, as he putted modestly along the overgrown lane in the right-hand wheelrut, that Grunwald might not be the only one who was in a tight place these days.

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Durkin Grove Village was a mess.

There were puddles in the ruts of the not-yet-paved streets and in the cellar holes of unfinished (in some cases not yet even framed) buildings. What Curtis saw below—half-built shops, a few pieces of shabby-looking construction equipment here and there, sagging yellow caution tape—was surely a blueprint for deep financial

trouble, perhaps even ruin. Curtis didn't know if The Motherfucker's preoccupation with the Vinton Lot—not to mention the decampment of his wife, his illness, and his legal problems concerning Curtis's dog—had been the cause of the man's current overextension or not, but he knew overextension was what it was. Even before continuing down to the open gate and seeing the sign posted there, he knew.

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Below this, some exuberant wit had spray-painted: DIAL
EXTENSION 69 AND ASK FOR THE CUNT-LICKER GENERAL!

The tar ended and the potholes began after the only three buildings that looked completed: two shops on one side of the street and a model home on the other. The model home was a faux Cape Cod that made Curtis's blood run cold. He didn't trust the Vespa on the unpaved surface, so he turned in beside a payloader that looked as if it had been parked there for a century or more—grass was growing in the dirt at the bottom of its partially raised scoop—put down the stand, and turned off the engine.

Silence poured in to fill the socket which had been occupied by the Vespa's fat purr. Then a crow cawed. It was answered by another. Curtis looked up and saw a trio of them poised on a scaffolding that enshrouded a partially finished brick building. Maybe it had been intended as a bank. Now it's Grunwald's tombstone, he thought, but the idea didn't even bring a smile to his lips. He felt like gagging himself again, and might even have done it, but farther down the deserted dirt street—at the far end, in fact—he saw a man standing beside a white sedan with a green palm tree on it. Above the palm tree: GRUNWALD. Below it: CONTRACTORS & BUILDERS. The man was waving to him. Grunwald was for some reason driving a company car today instead of his Porsche. Curtis supposed it wasn't impossible that Grunwald had sold the Porsche. It wasn't impossible to think the IRS had seized it, and might even seize Grunwald's Turtle Island property. Then the Vinton Lot would be the least of his worries.

I just hope they leave him enough to pay for my dog, Curtis thought. He waved back to Grunwald, flicked the red alarm switch below the ignition after removing the key (these things were only reflex; he did not think the Vespa was in any danger of being stolen, not out here, but he had been taught to take care of his things), and put the key in his pocket with his cell phone. Then he started down the dirt street—a Main Street that never was, and, it now seemed certain, never would be—to meet his neighbor and settle the trouble between them once and for all, if that were possible. He was careful to avoid the puddles left from the previous night's shower.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald said as Curtis approached. He was wearing khakis and a T-shirt with his company's palm-tree logo on it. The shirt bagged on him. Except for hectic blotches of red high on his cheekbones and dark—almost black—circles under his eyes, his face was pale. And although he sounded cheerful, he looked sicker than ever. Whatever they tried to cut out of him, Curtis thought, they failed. Grunwald had one hand behind him. Curtis assumed it was in his back pocket. This turned out not to be true.

A little farther down the rutted and puddled dirt road was a trailer up on blocks. The on-site office, Curtis supposed. There was a notice encased in a protective plastic sleeve, hanging from a little plastic suction cup. There was a lot printed on it, but all Curtis could read (all he needed to read) were the words at the top: NO ENTRY.

Yes, The Motherfucker had fallen on hard times. Hard cheese on Tony, as Evelyn Waugh might have said.

“Grunwald?” It was enough to start with; considering what had happened to Betsy, it was all The Motherfucker deserved. Curtis stopped about ten feet from him, his legs slightly spread to avoid a puddle. Grunwald's legs were spread, too. It occurred to Curtis that this was a classic pose: gunfighters about to do their deal on the only street of a ghost town.

“Yo, neighbor!” Grunwald repeated, and this time he actually laughed. There was something familiar about his laugh. And why

not? Surely he had heard The Motherfucker laugh before. He couldn't remember just when, but surely he must have.

Behind Grunwald, across from the trailer and not far from the company car Grunwald had driven out here, stood a line of four blue Port-O-Sans. Weeds and nodding wedelia sprouted around their bases. The runoff from frequent June thunderstorms (such afternoon tantrums were a Gulf Coast specialty) had undercut the ground in front of them and turned it into a ditch. Almost a creek. It was filled with standing water now, the surface dusty and bleared with pollen, so that it cast back only a vague blue intimation of sky. The quartet of shithouses leaned forward like frost-heaved old gravestones. There must have been quite a crew out here at one time, because there was also a fifth. That one had actually fallen over and lay door-down in the ditch. It was the final touch, underlining the fact that this project—crazy to begin with—was now a dead letter.

One of the crows took off from the scaffolding around the unfinished bank and flapped across the hazy blue sky, cawing at the two men facing each other below. The bugs buzzed unconcernedly in the high grass. Curtis realized he could smell the Port-O-Sans; they must not have been pumped out in some time.

“Grunwald?” he said again. And then (because now something more seemed to be required): “How can I help you? Do we have something to discuss?”

“Well, neighbor, it's how I can help you. It's strictly down to that.” He started to laugh again, then choked it off. And Curtis knew why the sound was familiar. He'd heard it on his cell phone, at the end of The Motherfucker's message. It hadn't been a choked-off sob, after all. And the man didn't look sick—or not just sick. He looked mad.

Of course he's mad. He's lost everything. And you let him get you out here alone. Not wise, buddy. You didn't think it through.

No. Since Betsy's death, he had neglected to think a great many things through. Hadn't seemed worth the trouble. But this time he

should have taken the time.

Grunwald was smiling. Or at least showing his teeth. “I notice you didn’t wear your helmet, neighbor.” He shook his head, still smiling that cheery sick man’s smile. His hair flapped against his ears. It looked as if it hadn’t been washed in a while. “A wife wouldn’t let you get away with careless shit like that, I bet, but of course guys like you don’t have wives, do they? They have dogs.” He stretched it out, turning it into something from *The Dukes of Hazzard*: dawwwgs.

“Fuck this, I’m taillights,” Curtis said. His heart was hammering, but he didn’t think it showed in his voice. He hoped not. All at once it seemed very important that Grunwald not know he was scared. He started to turn around, back the way he’d come.

“I thought the Vinton Lot might get you out here,” Grunwald said, “but I knew you’d come if I added in that butt-ugly dog of yours. I heard her yelp, you know. When she ran into the fence. Trespassing bitch.”

Curtis turned back, unbelieving.

The Motherfucker was nodding, his lank hair framing his pale smiling face. “Yes,” he said. “I went over and saw her lying on her side. Little ragbag with eyes. I watched her die.”

“You said you were away,” Curtis said. His voice sounded small in his own ears, a child’s voice.

“Well, neighbor, I sure did lie about that. I was back early from my doctor’s, and feeling sad that I had to turn him down after he’d worked so hard at persuading me to take the chemo, and then I saw that ragbag of yours lying in a puddle of her own puke, panting, flies all around her, and I cheered right up. I thought, ‘Goddam, there is justice. There is justice after all.’ It was only a low-voltage, low-current cattle fence—I was absolutely honest about that—but it certainly did the job, didn’t it?”

Curtis Johnson got the full sense of this after a moment of utter, perhaps willful, incomprehension. Then he started forward, rolling his hands into fists. He hadn't hit anyone since a playground scuffle when he was in the third grade, but he meant to hit someone now. He meant to hit The Motherfucker. The bugs still buzzed obliviously in the grass, and the sun still hammered down—nothing in the essential world had changed except for him. The uncaring listlessness was gone. He cared about at least one thing: beating Grunwald until he cried and bled and crawfished. And he thought he could do it. Grunwald was twenty years older, and not well. And when The Motherfucker was on the ground—hopefully with his newly broken nose in one of those nasty puddles—Curtis would say, That was for my ragbag. Neighbor.

Grunwald took one compensatory step backward. Then he brought his hand out from behind his back. In it was a large handgun. “Stop right there, neighbor, or I'll put an extra hole in your head.”

Curtis almost didn't stop. The gun seemed unreal. Death, out of that black eyehole? Surely not possible. But—

“It's a .45 AMT Hardballer,” Grunwald said, “loaded with soft-point ammo. I got it the last time I was in Vegas. At a gun show. Just after Ginny left, that was. I thought I might shoot her, but I find I've lost all interest in Ginny. Basically, she's just another anorexic Suncoast cunt with Styrofoam tits. You, however—you're something different. You're malevolent, Johnson. You're a fucking gay witch.”

Curtis stopped. He believed.

“But now you're in my power, as they say.” The Motherfucker laughed, once more choking it off so it sounded strangely like a sob. “I don't even have to hit you dead on. This is a powerful gun, or so I was told. Even a hit in the hand would render you dead, because it would tear your hand right off. And in the midsection? Your guts'd fly forty feet. So do you want to try it? Do you feel lucky, punk?”

Curtis did not want to try it. He did not feel lucky. The truth was belated but obvious: he had been cozened out here by a complete barking lunatic.

“What do you want? I’ll give you what you want.” Curtis swallowed. There was an insectile click in his throat. “Do you want me to call off the suit about Betsy?”

“Don’t call her Betsy,” The Motherfucker said. He had the gun—the Hardballer, what a grotesque name—pointed at Curtis’s face, and now the hole looked very big indeed. Curtis realized he would probably be dead before he heard the gun’s report, although he might see flame—or the beginning of flame—spurt from the barrel. He also realized that he was perilously close to pissing himself. “Call her ‘my ass-faced ragbag bitch.’”

“My ass-faced ragbag bitch,” Curtis repeated at once, and didn’t feel the slightest twinge of disloyalty to Betsy’s memory.

“Now say, ‘And how I loved to lick her smelly cunt,’” The Motherfucker further instructed.

Curtis was silent. He was relieved to discover there were still limits. Besides, if he said that, The Motherfucker would only want him to say something else.

Grunwald did not seem particularly disappointed. He wagged the gun. “Just joking about that one, anyway.”

Curtis was silent. Part of his mind was roaring with panic and confusion, but another part seemed clearer than it had been since Betsy died. Maybe clearer than it had been in years. That part was musing on the fact that he really could die out here.

He thought, What if I never get to eat another slice of bread?, and for a moment his mind united—the confused part and the clear part—in a desire to live so strong it was terrible.

“What do you want, Grunwald?”

“For you to get into one of those Port-O-Sans. The one on the end.”
He wagged the gun again, this time to the left.

Curtis turned to look, feeling a small thread of hope. If Grunwald intended to lock him up ... that was good, right? Maybe now that he'd scared Curtis and blown off a little steam, Grunwald intended to stash him and make his getaway. Or maybe he'll go home and shoot himself, Curtis thought. Take that old .45 Hardballer cancer cure. A well-known folk remedy.

He said, “All right. I can do that.”

“But first I want you to empty your pockets. Dump them right out on the ground.”

Curtis pulled out his wallet, then, reluctantly, his cell phone. A little sheaf of bills in a money clip. His dandruff-flecked comb.

“That it?”

“Yes.”

“Turn those pocketsets inside out, Precious. I want to see for myself.”

Curtis turned out his left front pocket, then his right. A few coins and the key to his motor scooter fell to the ground, where they glittered in the hazy sun.

“Good,” Grunwald said. “Now the back ones.”

Curtis turned out his rear pockets. There was an old shopping list jotted on a scrap of paper. Nothing else.

Grunwald said, “Kick your cell phone over here.”

Curtis tried, and missed completely.

“You asshole,” Grunwald said, and laughed. The laugh ended in that same choking, sobbing sound, and for the first time in his life, Curtis completely understood murder. The clear part of his mind registered this as a wonderful thing, because murder—previously inconceivable to him—turned out to be as simple as reducing fractions.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Grunwald said. “I want to go home and get in the hot tub. Forget the painkillers, that hot tub is the only thing that works. I’d live in that baby if I could.” But he did not look particularly anxious to be gone. His eyes were sparkling.

Curtis kicked at the phone again and this time connected, sending it skittering all the way to Grunwald’s feet.

“He shoots, he scores!” The Motherfucker cried. He dropped to one knee, picked up the Nokia (never taking the gun off Curtis), then straightened up with a small, effortful grunt. He slipped Curtis’s phone into the right pocket of his pants. He pointed the muzzle of the gun briefly at the litter lying on the road. “Now pick up the rest of your crap and put it back in your pockets. Get all the change. Who knows, you might find a snack machine in there.”

Curtis did it silently, again feeling a little pang as he looked at the attachment on the Vespa’s keyring. Some things didn’t change even in extremis, it seemed.

“You forgot your shopping list, Fucko. You don’t want to forget that. Everything back in your pockets. As for your phone, I’m going to put that back on its little charger in your little housie. After I delete the message I left you, that is.”

Curtis picked up the scrap of paper—OJ, Roloids, pce of fish, Eng muffins, it said—and stuffed it back into one of his rear pockets. “You can’t do that,” he said.

The Motherfucker raised his bushy old-man eyebrows. “Want to share?”

“The house alarm’s set.” Curtis couldn’t remember if he had set it or not. “Also, Mrs. Wilson will be there by the time you get back to Turtle.”

Grunwald gave him an indulgent look. The fact that it was mad indulgence made it terrifying instead of just infuriating. “It’s Thursday, neighbor. Your housekeeper only comes in during the afternoons on Thursdays and Fridays. Did you think I wasn’t keeping an eye on you? Just like you’ve been keeping one on me?”

“I don’t—”

“Oh, I see you, peeking from behind your favorite palm tree on the road—did you think I didn’t?—but you never saw me, did you? Because you’re lazy. And lazy people are blind people. Lazy people get what they deserve.” His voice lowered confidentially. “All gay people are lazy; it’s been scientifically proven. The gay lobby tries to cover it up, but you can find the studies on the Internet.”

In his mounting dismay, Curtis hardly noticed this last. If he’s been charting Mrs. Wilson ... Christ, how long has he been brooding and planning?

At least since Curtis had sued him over Betsy. Maybe even before.

“As for your alarm code ...” The Motherfucker loosed his sobbing laugh again. “I’ll let you in on a little secret: your system was put in by Hearn Security, and I’ve been working with them for almost thirty years. I could have the security codes for any Hearn-serviced home on the Island, if I wanted. But, as it happens, the only one I wanted was yours.” He sniffed, spat on the ground, then coughed a loose rumbling cough that came from deep in his chest. It sounded as if it hurt (Curtis hoped so), but the gun never wavered. “I don’t think you set it, anyway. Got your mind on blowjobs and such.”

“Grunwald, can’t we—”

“No. We can’t. You deserve this. You earned it, you bought it, you got it. Get in the fucking shithouse.”

Curtis started toward the Port-O-Sans, but aimed for the one on the far right instead of the far left.

“Nope, nope,” Grunwald said. Patiently, as if speaking to a child. “The one on the other end.”

“That one’s leaning too far,” Curtis said. “If I get in, it might fall over.”

“Nope,” Grunwald said. “That thing’s as solid as your beloved stock market. Special sides is why. But I’m sure you’ll enjoy the smell. Guys like you spend a lot of time in crappers, you must like the smell. You must love the smell.” Suddenly the gun poked into Curtis’s buttocks. Curtis gave a small, startled scream, and Grunwald laughed. That Motherfucker. “Now get in there before I decide to turn your old tan track into a brand-new superhighway.”

Curtis had to lean across the ditch of still, scummy water, and because the Port-O-San was leaning, the door swung out and almost hit him in the face when it came off the latch. This occasioned another burst of laughter from Grunwald, and at the sound, Curtis was once more visited with thoughts of murder. All the same, it was amazing how engaged he felt. How suddenly in love with the green smells of the foliage and the hazy look of the blue Florida sky. How much he longed to eat a piece of bread—even a slice of Wonder Bread would be a gourmet treat; he would eat it with a napkin in his lap and choose a complementary vintage from his little wine closet. He had gained a whole new perspective on life. He only hoped he would live to enjoy it. And if The Motherfucker just intended to lock him in, maybe he would.

He thought (it was as random and as unprompted as his thought about the bread): If I get out of this, I’m going to start giving money to Save the Children.

“Get in there, Johnson.”

“I tell you it’ll fall over!”

“Who’s the construction guy here? It won’t fall over if you’re careful. Get in.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this!”

Grunwald laughed unbelievably. Then he said, “You get your ass in there or I will blow it off, so help me God.”

Curtis stepped across the ditch and into the Port-O-San. It rocked forward alarmingly under his weight. He cried out and leaned over the bench with the closed toilet seat in it, splaying his hands against the back wall. And while he was standing there like a suspect about to be frisked, the door slammed shut behind him. The sunlight was gone. He was suddenly in hot, deep shadows. He looked back over his shoulder and the Port-O-San rocked again, on the very edge of balance.

There was a knock on the door. Curtis could imagine The Motherfucker out there, leaning over the ditch, one hand braced on the blue siding, the other fisted up to knock with. “Comfy in there? Snug?”

Curtis made no reply. At least with Grunwald leaning on the Port-O-San’s door, the damned thing had steadied.

“Sure you are. Snug as a bug in a whatever.”

There was another thump, and then the toilet rocked forward again. Grunwald had removed his weight from it. Curtis once more assumed the position, standing on the balls of his feet, bending all his will to keeping the stinking cubicle more or less upright. Sweat was trickling down his face, stinging a shaving cut on the left jawline. This made him think of his own bathroom, usually taken for granted, with loving nostalgia. He would give every dollar in his retirement fund to be there, razor in his right hand, watching blood trickle through the shaving cream on the left-hand side while some stupid

pop song played from the clock radio beside his bed. Something by The Carpenters or Don Ho.

It's going over this time, going over for sure, that was his plan all along—

But the Port-O-San steadied instead of tumbling over. All the same it was close to going, very close. Curtis stood on tiptoe with his hands braced against the wall and his midsection arched over the bench seat, becoming aware now of how badly the hot little cubicle smelled, even with the seat closed. There was the odor of disinfectant—it would be the blue stuff, of course—mingling with the stench of decaying human waste, and that made it somehow even worse.

When Grunwald spoke again, his voice came from beyond the rear wall. He had stepped over the ditch and circled around to the back of the Port-O-San. Curtis was so surprised he almost recoiled, but managed not to. Still, he couldn't suppress a jerk. His splayed hands momentarily left the wall. The Port-O-San tottered. He brought his hands back to the wall again, leaning forward as far as he could, and it steadied.

"How you doing, neighbor?"

"Scared to death," Curtis said. His hair had fallen onto his forehead, it was sticking in the sweat there, but he was afraid to flick it back. Even that much extra movement might send the Port-O-San tumbling. "Let me out. You've had your fun."

"If you think I'm having fun, you're very much mistaken," The Motherfucker said in a pedantic voice. "I've thought about this a long time, neighbor, and finally decided it was necessary—the only course of action. And it had to be now, because if I waited much longer, I'd no longer be able to trust my body to do what I needed it to do."

"Grunwald, we can settle this like men. I swear we can."

“Swear all you like, I would never take the word of a man like you,” he said in that same pedantic voice. “Any man who takes the word of a faggot deserves what he gets.” And then, yelling so loud his voice broke into splinters: “YOU GUYS THINK YOU’RE SO SMART! HOW SMART DO YOU FEEL NOW?”

Curtis said nothing. Each time he thought he was getting a handle on The Motherfucker’s madness, new vistas opened before him.

At last, in a calmer tone, Grunwald went on.

“You want an explanation. You think you deserve one. Possibly you do.”

Somewhere a crow cawed. To Curtis, in his hot little box, it sounded like laughter.

“Did you think I was joking when I called you a gay witch? I was not. Does that mean you know you’re a, well, a malevolent supernatural force sent to try me and test me? I don’t know. I don’t. I’ve spent many a sleepless night since my wife took her jewelry and left thinking about this question—among others—and I still don’t. You probably don’t.”

“Grunwald, I assure you I’m not—”

“Shut up. I’m talking here. And of course, that’s what you’d say, isn’t it? Regardless of whether you knew or not, it’s what you’d say. Look at the testimonies of various witches in Salem. Go on, look. I have. It’s all on the Internet. They swore they weren’t witches, and when they thought it would get them out of death’s receiving room they swore they were, but very few of them actually knew for sure themselves! That becomes clear when you look at it with your enlightened ... you know, enlightened ... your enlightened whatever. Mind or whatever. Hey neighbor, how is it when I do this?”

Suddenly The Motherfucker—sick but apparently still quite strong—began to rock the Port-O-San. Curtis was almost thrown against the

door, which would have resulted in disaster for sure.

“Stop it!” he roared. “Stop doing that!”

Grunwald laughed indulgently. The Port-O-San stopped rocking. But Curtis thought the angle of the floor was steeper than it had been. “What a baby you are. It’s as solid as the stock market, I tell you!”

A pause.

“Of course ... there is this: all faggots are liars, but not all liars are faggots. It’s not a balancing equation, if you see what I mean. I’m as straight as an arrow, always have been, I’d fuck the Virgin Mary and then go to a barn dance, but I lied to get you out here, I freely admit it, and I might be lying now.”

That cough again—deep and dark and almost certainly painful.

“Let me out, Grunwald. I beg you. I am begging you.”

A long pause, as if The Motherfucker were considering this. Then he resumed his previous scripture.

“In the end—when it comes to witches—we can’t rely on confessions,” he said. “We can’t even rely on testimony, because it might be cocked. When you’re dealing with witches, the subjective gets all ... it gets all ... you know. We can only rely on the evidence. So I considered the evidence in my case. Let’s look at the facts. First, you fucked me on the Vinton Lot. That was the first thing.”

“Grunwald, I never—”

“Shut up, neighbor. Unless you want me to tip over your happy little home, that is. In that case, you can talk all you want. Is that what you want?”

“No!”

“Good call. I don’t know exactly why you fucked me, but I believe you did it because you were afraid I meant to stick a couple of condos out there on Turtle Point. In any case, the evidence—namely, your ridiculous so-called bill of sale—indicates that fuckery was what it was, pure and simple. You claim that Ricky Vinton meant to sell you that lot for one million, five hundred thousand dollars. Now, neighbor, I ask you. Would any judge and jury in the world believe that?”

Curtis didn’t reply. He was afraid to even clear his throat now, and not just because it might set The Motherfucker off; it might tip the precariously balanced Port-O-San over. He was afraid it might go over if he so much as lifted a little finger from the back wall. Probably that was stupid, but maybe it wasn’t.

“Then the relatives swooped in, complicating a situation that was already complicated enough—by your gayboy meddling! And you were the one who called them. You or your lawyer. That’s obvious, a, you know, QED type of situation. Because you like things just the way they are.”

Curtis remained silent, letting this go unchallenged.

“That’s when you threw your curse. Must have been. Because the evidence bears it out. ‘You don’t need to see Pluto to deduce Pluto is there.’ Some scientist said that. He figured out Pluto existed by observing the irregularities in some other planet’s orbit, did you know that? Deducing witchcraft is like that, Johnson. You have to check the evidence and look for irregularities in the orbit of your, you know, your whatever. Life. Plus, your spirit darkens. It darkens. I felt that happening. Like an eclipse. It—”

He coughed some more. Curtis stood in the ready-to-be-frisked position, butt out, stomach arched over the toilet where Grunwald’s carpenters had once sat down to take care of business after their morning coffee kicked in.

“Next, Ginny left me,” The Motherfucker said. “She’s currently living on Cape Cod. She says she’s there by herself, of course she does,

because she wants that alimony—they all do—but I know better. If that randy bitch didn't have a cock to pole-vault on twice a day, she'd eat chocolate truffles in front of American Idol until she exploded.

“Then the IRS. Those bastards came next, with their laptops and questions. ‘Did you do this, did you do that, where’s the paperwork on the other?’ Was that witchcraft, Johnson? Or maybe fuckery of a more, I don’t know, ordinary kind? Like you picking up the telephone and saying, ‘Audit this guy, he’s got a lot more cake in his pantry than he’s letting on.’”

“Grunwald, I never called—”

The Port-O-San shook. Curtis rocked backward, sure that this time

...

But once more the Port-O-San settled. Curtis was starting to feel woozy. Woozy and pukey. It wasn't just the smell; it was the heat. Or maybe it was both together. He could feel his shirt sticking to his chest.

“I’m laying out the evidence,” Grunwald said. “You shut up when I’m laying out the evidence. Order in the fucking court.”

Why was it so hot in here? Curtis looked up and saw no roof vents. Or—there were, but they were covered over. By what looked like a piece of sheet metal. Three or four holes had been punched into it, letting in some light but absolutely no breeze. The holes were bigger than quarters, smaller than silver dollars. He looked over his shoulder and saw another line of holes, but the two door vents were also almost completely covered.

“They’ve frozen my assets,” Grunwald said in a heavy put-upon voice. “Did an audit first, said it was all just routine, but I know what they do, and I knew what was coming.”

Of course you did, because you were guilty as hell.

“But even before the audit, I developed this cough. That was your work, too, of course. Went to the doctor. Lung cancer, neighbor, and it’s spread to my liver and stomach and fuck knows what else. All the soft parts. Just what a witch would go for. I’m surprised you didn’t put it in my balls and up my ass as well, although I’m sure it’ll get there in good time. If I let it. But I won’t. That’s why, although I think I’ve got this business out here covered, my, you know, ass in diapers, it doesn’t matter even if I don’t. I’m going to put a bullet through my head pretty soon. From this very gun, neighbor. While I’m in my hot tub.”

He sighed sentimentally.

“That’s the only place I’m happy anymore. In my hot tub.”

Curtis realized something. Maybe it was hearing The Motherfucker say I think I’ve got this business out here covered, but more likely he had known for some time now. The Motherfucker meant to tip the Port-O-San over. He was going to do that if Curtis blubbered and protested; he was going to do it if Curtis held his peace. It didn’t really matter. But for the time being, he held his peace anyway. Because he wanted to stay upright as long as possible—yes, of course—but also out of dreadful fascination. Grunwald wasn’t speaking metaphorically; Grunwald actually believed Curtis Johnson was some kind of sorcerer. His brain had to be rotting along with the rest of him.

“LUNG CANCER!” Grunwald proclaimed to his empty, deserted development—and then began coughing again. Crows cawed in protest. “I quit smoking thirty years ago, and I get lung cancer NOW?”

“You’re crazy,” Curtis said.

“Sure, the world would say so. That was the plan, wasn’t it? That was the fucking PLAAAAN. And then, on top of everything else, you sue me over your damn ass-faced dog? Your damn dog that was on MY PROPERTY? And what was the purpose of that? After you’d

taken my lot, my wife, my business, and my life, what possible purpose? Humiliation, of course! Insult to injury! Coals to Newcastle! Witchcraft! And do you know what the Bible says? Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live! Everything that's happened to me is your fault, and thou shalt not suffer a witch ... TO LIVE !”

Grunwald shoved the Port-O-San. He must have really put his shoulder into it, because there was no hesitation this time, no tottering. Curtis, momentarily weightless, fell backward. The latch should have broken under his weight, but didn't. The Motherfucker must have done something to that, too.

Then his weight returned and he crashed down on his back as the portable toilet hit the ground door-first. His teeth snapped shut on his tongue. The back of his head connected with the door and he saw stars. The lid of the toilet opened like a mouth. Brown-black fluid, thick as syrup, vomited out. A decomposing turd landed on his crotch. Curtis gave a cry of revulsion, batted it aside, then wiped his hand on his shirt, leaving a brown stain. A vile creek was spilling out of the gaping toilet seat. It ran down the side of the bench seat and pooled around his sneakers. A Reese's Peanut Butter Cup wrapper floated in it. Streamers of toilet paper hung out of the toilet's mouth. It looked like New Year's Eve in hell. This absolutely could not be happening. It was a nightmare left over from childhood.

“How's the smell in there now, neighbor?” The Motherfucker called. He was laughing and coughing. “Just like home, isn't it? Think of it as a twenty-first-century gayboy ducking stool, why don't you? All you need is that gayboy Senator and a pile of Victoria's Secret undies and you could have a lingerie party!”

Curtis's back was wet, too. He realized the Port-O-San must have landed in or just bridged the water-filled ditch. Water was seeping in through the holes in the door.

“Mostly these portable toilets are just thin molded plastic—you know, the ones you see at truck stops or turnpike rest areas—and you could punch right through the walls or the roof, if you were

dedicated. But at construction sites, we sheet-metal the sides. Cladding, it's called. Otherwise, people come along and punch holes through them. Vandals, just for fun, or gayboys like you. To make what they call 'glory holes.' Oh yes, I know about those things. I have all the information, neighbor. Or kids will come along and huck rocks through the roofs, just to hear the sound it makes. It's a popping sound, like popping a great big paper bag. So we sheet those, too. Of course it makes it hotter, but that's actually an efficiency thing. Nobody wants to spend fifteen minutes reading a magazine in a shithouse as hot as a Turkish prison cell."

Curtis turned over. He was lying in a brackish, smelly puddle. There was a piece of toilet paper wrapped around his wrist, and he stripped it away. He saw a brown smear—some long-since-laid-off construction worker's leavings—on the paper and began to cry. He was lying in shit and toilet paper, more water was bubbling in through the door, and it wasn't a dream. Somewhere not too far distant his Macintosh was scrolling up numbers from Wall Street, and here he lay in a puddle of pisswater with an old black turd curled in the corner and a gaping toilet seat not far above his heels, and it wasn't a dream. He would have sold his soul to wake up in his own bed, clean and cool.

"Let me out! GRUNWALD, PLEASE!"

"Can't. It's all arranged," The Motherfucker said in a businesslike voice. "You came out here to do a little sightseeing—a little gloating. You felt a call of nature, and there were the porta-potties. You stepped into the one on the end and it fell over. End of story. When you're found—when you're finally found—the cops will see they're all leaning, because the afternoon rains have undercut them. They'll have no way of knowing your current abode was leaning a little more than the others. Or that I took your cell phone. They'll just assume you left it at home, you silly sissy. The situation will look very clear to them. The evidence, you know—it always comes back to the evidence."

He laughed. No coughing this time, just the warm, self-satisfied laugh of a man who has covered all the bases. Curtis lay in filthy water that was now two inches deep, felt it soaking through his shirt and pants to his skin, and wished The Motherfucker would die of a sudden stroke or heart attack. Fuck the cancer; let him drop right out there on the unpaved street of his stupid bankrupt development. Preferably on his back, so the birds could peck out his eyes.

If that happened, I'd die in here.

True, but that was what Grunwald had planned from the first, so what difference?

“They’ll see there was no robbery; your money is still in your pocket. So’s the key to your motor scooter. Those things are very unsafe, by the way; almost as bad as ATVs. And without a helmet! Shame on you, neighbor. I noticed you set the alarm, though, and that’s fine. A nice touch, in fact. You don’t even have a pen to write a note on the wall with. If you’d had one, I would have taken that, too, but you don’t. It’s going to look like a tragic accident.”

He paused. Curtis could picture him out there with hellish clarity. Standing there in his too-big clothes with his hands stuffed in his pockets and his unwashed hair clumping over his ears. Ruminating. Talking to Curtis but also talking to himself, looking for loopholes even now, even after what must have been weeks of sleepless nights spent planning this.

“Of course, a person can’t plan for everything. There are always wild cards in the deck. Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all. That kind of thing. And chances of anyone coming out here and finding you? While you’re still alive, that is? Low, I’d say. Very low. And what have I got to lose?” He laughed, sounding delighted with himself. “Are you lying in the shit, Johnson? I hope so.”

Curtis looked at the coil of excrement he had shoved off his pants, but said nothing. There was a low buzzing. Flies. Only a few, but

even a few was too many, in his opinion. They were escaping from the gaping toilet seat. They must have been trapped in the collection tank that should have been below him instead of lying at his feet.

“I’m going now, neighbor, but consider this: you are suffering a true, you know, witchly fate. And like the man said: in the shithouse, no one can hear you scream.”

Grunwald started away. Curtis could track him by the diminishing sound of his coughing laughter.

“Grunwald! Grunwald, come back!”

Grunwald called: “Now you’re the one in a tight place. A very tight place indeed.”

Then—he should have expected it, did expect it, but it was still unbelievable—he heard the company car with the palm tree on the side starting up.

“Come back, you Motherfucker!”

But now it was the sound of the car that was diminishing, as Grunwald drove first up the unpaved street (Curtis could hear the wheels splashing through the puddles), then up the hill, past where a very different Curtis Johnson had parked his Vespa. The Motherfucker gave a single blip of his horn—cruel and cheery—and then the sound of the engine merged with the sound of the day, which was nothing but the buzz of the insects in the grass and the hum of the flies that had escaped from the waste tank and the drone of a far-off plane where the people in first class might be eating Brie on crackers.

A fly lit on Curtis’s arm. He brushed it away. It landed on the coil of turd and commenced its lunch. Suddenly the stench of the disturbed waste tank seemed like a living thing, like a brown-black hand crawling down Curtis’s throat. But the smell of old decaying crap

wasn't the worst; the worst was the smell of the disinfectant. It was the blue stuff. He knew it was the blue stuff.

He did a sit-up—there was just room—and vomited between his spread knees, into the puddled water and floating strands of toilet paper. After his earlier adventures in regurgitation there wasn't much left but bile. He sat bent over and panting, hands behind him and braced against the door he was now sitting on, the shaving cut by his jawline throbbing and stinging. Then he heaved again, this time producing only a belch that sounded like the buzz of a cicada.

And, oddly enough, he felt better. Somehow honest. That had been earned vomiting. No fingers down the throat needed. As far as his dandruff went, who knew? Perhaps he could gift the world with a new treatment: the Aged Urine Rinse. He would be sure to check his scalp for improvement when he got out of here. If he got out of here.

Sitting up, at least, was no problem. It was fearsomely hot, and the stench was terrible (he didn't want to think what might have been stirred up in the holding tank, and at the same time couldn't push such thoughts away), but at least there was headroom.

“Must count blessings,” he muttered. “Must count those sons of bitches carefully.”

Yes, and take stock. That would be good, too. The water he was sitting in wasn't getting any deeper, and that was probably another blessing. He wasn't going to drown. Not, that was, unless the afternoon showers turned into downpours. He had seen it happen. And it was no good telling himself he'd be out of here by afternoon, of course he would, because that kind of magical thinking would be playing right into The Motherfucker's hands. He couldn't just sit here, thanking God he at least had some headroom, and waiting for rescue.

Maybe someone from the Charlotte County Department of Building and Planning will come out. Or a team of headhunters from the IRS.

Nice to imagine, but he had an idea it wasn't going to happen. The Motherfucker would have taken those possibilities into consideration, too. Of course some bureaucrat or team of them might take an unscheduled swing by here, but counting on it would be as stupid as hoping that Grunwald would have a change of heart. And Mrs. Wilson would assume he'd gone to an afternoon movie in Sarasota, as he often did.

He rapped on the walls, first the left, then the right. On both sides he felt hard metal just beyond the thin and yielding plastic. Cladding. He got up on his knees, and this time he did bump his head, but hardly noticed. What he saw was not encouraging: the flat ends of the screws holding the unit together. The heads were on the outside. This wasn't a shithouse; it was a coffin.

At this thought, his moment of clarity and calm vanished. Panic descended in its place. He began to hammer on the walls of the toilet, screaming to be let out. He threw himself from side to side like a child having a tantrum, trying to roll the Port-O-San over so he could at least free the door, but the fucking thing hardly moved at all. The fucking thing was heavy. The cladding that sheathed it made it heavy.

Heavy like a coffin! his mind shrieked. In his panic, every other thought had been banished. Heavy like a coffin! Like a coffin! A coffin!

He didn't know how long he went on like that, but at some point he tried to stand up, as if he could burst through the wall now facing the sky like Superman. He hit his head again, this time much harder. He fell forward on his stomach. His hand splatted into something gooey—something that smeared—and he wiped it on the seat of his jeans. He did this without looking. His eyes were squeezed shut. Tears trickled from the corners. In the blackness behind his lids, stars zoomed and exploded. He wasn't bleeding—he supposed that was good, one more goddam blessing to count—but he had almost knocked himself out.

“Calm down,” he said. He got up on his knees again. His head was down, his hair hanging, his eyes closed. He looked like a man who was praying, and he supposed he was. A fly did a touch-and-go on the nape of his neck. “Going nuts won’t help, he’d love it if he heard you screaming and carrying on, so calm down, don’t give him what he’d love, just calm the fuck down and think about this.”

What was there to think about? He was trapped.

Curtis sat back against the door and put his face in his hands.

*

Time passed and the world went on.

The world did its thing.

On Route 17, a few vehicles—mostly workhorses; farm trucks bound for either the markets in Sarasota or the whole-foods store in Nokomis, the occasional tractor, the postman’s station wagon with the yellow lights on the roof—trundled by. None took the turnoff to Durkin Grove Village.

Mrs. Wilson arrived at Curtis’s house, let herself in, read the note Mr. Johnson had left on the kitchen table, and began to vacuum. Then she ironed clothes in front of the afternoon soap operas. She made a macaroni casserole, stuck it in the fridge, then jotted simple instructions concerning its preparation—Bake 350, 45 mins—and left them on the table where Curtis’s note had been. When thunder began to mutter out over the Gulf of Mexico, she left early. She often did this when it rained. Nobody down here knew how to drive in the rain, they treated every shower like a nor’easter in Vermont.

In Miami, the IRS agent assigned to the Grunwald case ate a Cuban sandwich. Instead of a suit, he wore a tropical shirt with parrots on it. He was sitting under an umbrella at a sidewalk restaurant. There was no rain in Miami. He was on vacation. The Grunwald case would

still be there when he got back; the wheels of government ground slow but exceedingly fine.

Grunwald relaxed in his patio hot tub, dozing, until the approaching afternoon storm woke him with the sound of thunder. He hauled himself out and went inside. As he closed the sliding glass door between the patio and the living room, the rain began to fall. Grunwald smiled. "This'll cool you off, neighbor," he said.

The crows had once more taken up station on the scaffolding which clasped the half-finished bank on three sides, but when thunder cracked almost directly overhead and the rain began to fall they took wing and sought shelter in the woods, cawing their displeasure at being disturbed.

In the Port-O-San—it seemed he'd been locked in here for at least three years—Curtis listened to the rain on the roof of his prison. The roof that had been the rear side until The Motherfucker tipped it over. The rain tapped at first, then beat, then roared. At the height of the storm, it was like being in a telephone booth lined with stereo speakers. Thunder exploded overhead. He had a momentary vision of being struck by lightning and cooked like a capon in a microwave. He found this didn't disturb him much. It would be quick, at least, and what was happening now was slow.

The water began to rise again, but not fast. Curtis was actually glad about this, now that he had determined there was no actual risk of drowning like a rat that has tumbled into a toilet bowl. At least it was water, and he was very thirsty. He lowered his head to one of the holes in the steel cladding. Water from the overflowing ditch was bubbling up through it. He drank like a horse at a trough, sucking it up. The water was gritty, but he drank until his belly sloshed, constantly reminding himself that it was water, it was.

"There may be a certain piss content, but I'm sure it's low," he said, and began to laugh. The laughter turned to sobbing, then back to laughter again.

The rain ended around six P.M., as it usually did this time of year. The sky cleared in time to provide a grade-A Florida sunset. The few summer residents of Turtle Island gathered on the beach to watch it, as they usually did. No one commented on Curtis Johnson's absence. Sometimes he was there, sometimes he wasn't. Tim Grunwald was there, and several of the sunsetters remarked that he seemed exceptionally cheery that evening. Mrs. Peebles told her husband, as they walked home hand in hand along the beach, that she believed Mr. Grunwald was finally getting over the shock of losing his wife. Mr. Peebles told her she was a romantic. "Yes, dear," she said, momentarily putting her head on his shoulder, "that's why I married you."

When Curtis saw the light coming through the holes in the cladding—the few that weren't facedown in the ditch—fading from peach to gray, he realized he was actually going to spend the night in this stinking coffin with two inches of water on the floor and a half-closed toilet hole at his feet. He was probably going to die in here, but that seemed academic. To spend the night in here, however—hours stacked on more hours, piles of hours like piles of great black books—that was real and unavoidable.

The panic pounced again. He once more began to scream and pound the walls, this time turning around and around on his knees, first beating his right shoulder against one wall and then his left against the other. Like a bird caught in a church steeple, he thought, but could not stop. One flailing foot splattered the escaped turd against the bottom of the bench seat. He tore his pants. He first bruised his knuckles, then split them. At last he stopped, weeping and sucking at his hands.

Got to stop. Got to save my strength.

Then he thought: For what?

By eight o'clock, the air had begun to cool. By ten o'clock, the puddle in which Curtis was lying had also cooled—seemed cold, in fact—

and he began to tremble. He clutched his arms around himself and drew his knees up to his chest.

I'll be all right as long as my teeth don't chatter, he thought. I can't bear to hear my teeth chatter.

At eleven o'clock, Grunwald went to bed. He lay there in his pajamas under the revolving fan, looking up into the dark and smiling. He felt better than he had felt for months. He was gratified but not surprised. "Goodnight, neighbor," he said, and closed his eyes. He slept through the night without waking for the first time in six months.

At midnight, not far away from Curtis's makeshift cell, some animal—probably just a wild dog, but to Curtis it sounded like a hyena—let out a long, screaming howl. His teeth began to chatter. The sound was every bit as awful as he had feared.

Some unimaginable time later, he slept.

*

When he woke up, he was shivering all over. Even his feet were jerking, tapdancing like the feet of a junkie in withdrawal. I'm getting sick, I'll have to go to the damn doctor, I ache all over, he thought. Then he opened his eyes, saw where he was, remembered where he was, and gave a loud, desolate cry: "Ohhhh ... no! NO!"

But it was oh yes. At least the Port-O-San wasn't entirely dark anymore. Light was coming through the circular holes: the pale rose glow of morning. It would soon strengthen as the day brightened and heated up. Before long he would be steam-cooking again.

Grunwald will come back. He's had a night to think it over, he'll realize how insane this is, and he'll come back. He'll let me out.

Curtis did not believe this. He wanted to, but didn't.

He needed to take a leak in the worst way, but he was damned if he was going to piss in the corner, even though there was crap and used toilet paper everywhere from yesterday's overturning. He felt somehow that if he did that—a nasty thing like that—it would be the same as announcing to himself that he had given up hope.

I have given up hope.

But he hadn't. Not completely. As tired and achey as he was, as frightened and dispirited, part of him still hadn't given up hope. And there was a bright side: he felt no urge to gag himself, and he hadn't spent even a single minute of the night just gone by, nearly eternal though it had been, scourging his scalp with his comb.

There was no need to piss in the corner, anyway. He would just raise the toilet seat lid with one hand, aim with the other, and let fly. Of course, given the Port-O-San's new configuration, that would mean pissing horizontally instead of at a downward-pointing angle. The current throb in his bladder suggested that would be absolutely no problem. Of course the final squirt or two would probably go on the floor, but—

“But them's are the fortunes of war,” he said, and surprised himself with a croaky laugh. “And as far as the toilet seat goes ... fuck holding it up. I can do better than that.”

He was no Mr. Hercules, but both the half-ajar toilet seat and the flanges holding it to the bench were plastic—the seat and ring black, the flanges white. This whole goddam box was really just a cheap plastic prefab job, you didn't have to be a big-time construction contractor to see that, and unlike the walls and the door, there was no cladding on the seat and its fastenings. He thought he could tear it off pretty easily, and if he could he would—if only to vent some of his anger and terror.

Curtis seized the seat and lifted it, meaning to grip the ring just beneath and pull sideways. Instead he paused, looking through the

circular hole and into the tank beneath, trying to make sense of what he saw.

It looked like a thin seam of daylight.

He looked at this with perplexity into which hope came stealing slowly—not dawning, exactly, but seeming to rise through his sweaty, ordure-streaked skin. At first he thought it was either a swatch of fluorescent paint or an out-and-out optical illusion. This latter idea was reinforced when the line of light began to fade away. Little ... less ... least ...

But then, just before it could disappear completely, it began to brighten again, a line of light so brilliant he could see it floating behind his lids when he closed his eyes.

That's sunlight. The bottom of the toilet—what was the bottom before Grunwald tipped it over—is facing east, where the sun just rose.

And when it faded?

“Sun went behind a cloud,” he said, and shoved his sweat-clumped hair back from his forehead with the hand not holding the toilet seat. “Now it's out again.”

He examined this idea for the deadly pollution of wishful thinking and found none. The evidence was before his eyes: sunlight shining through a thin crack in the bottom of the Port-O-San's holding tank. Or perhaps it was a split. If he could get in there and widen that split, that glowing aperture into the outside world—

Don't count on it.

And to get to it, he would have to—

Impossible, he thought. If you're thinking of wriggling into the holding tank through the toilet seat—like Alice into some shit-splattered

Wonderland—think again. Maybe if you were the skinny kid you used to be, but that kid was thirty-five years ago.

That was true. But he was still slim—he supposed his daily bicycle rides were mostly responsible for that—and the thing was, he thought he could wriggle in through the hole under the toilet seat's ring. It might not even be that tough.

What about getting back out?

Well ... if he could do something about that seam of light, maybe he wouldn't have to leave the same way he went in.

“Assuming I can even get in,” he said. His empty stomach was suddenly full of butterflies, and for the first time since arriving here at scenic Durkin Grove Village, he felt an urge to gag himself. He would be able to think more clearly about this if he just stuck his fingers down his throat and—

“No,” he said curtly, and yanked the toilet seat and ring sideways with his left hand. The flanges creaked but didn't let go. He applied his other hand to the task. His hair fell back down on his forehead, and he gave an impatient snap of his head to flop it aside. He yanked again. The seat and ring held a moment longer, then tore free. One of the two white plastic dowels fell into the waste tank. The other, cracked down the middle, spun across the door Curtis was kneeling on.

He tossed the seat and ring aside and peered into the tank, hands braced on the bench. The first whiff of the poisoned atmosphere down there caused him to recoil, wincing. He thought he'd gotten used to the smell (or numbed to it), but that wasn't the case, at least not this close to the source. He wondered again when the damned thing had last been pumped.

Look on the bright side; it's been a long time since it was used, too.

Maybe, probably, but Curtis wasn't sure that made things any better. There was still a lot of stuff down there—a lot of crap down there, floating in whatever remained of the disinfected water. Dim as the light was, there was enough to be sure of that. Then there was the matter of getting back out again. He could probably do it—if he could go one way, he could almost certainly go the other—but it was all too easy to imagine how he'd look, a stinking creature being born from the ooze, not a mudman but a shit-man.

The question was, did he have another choice?

Well, yes. He could sit here, trying to persuade himself that rescue probably would come after all. The cavalry, like in the last reel of an old western. Only he thought it was more likely that The Motherfucker would come back, wanting to make sure he was still ... what had he said? Snug in his little housie. Something like that.

That decided him. He looked at the hole in the bench, the dark hole with its evil aroma drifting out, the dark hole with its one hopeful seam of light. A hope as thin as the light itself. He calculated. First his right arm, then his head. Left arm pressed against his body until he had wriggled in as far as his waist. Then, when his left arm was free ...

Only what if he wasn't able to get it free? He saw himself stuck, right arm in the tank, left arm pinned against his body, his midsection blocking the hole, blocking the air, dying a dog's death, flailing at the sludge just below him while he strangled, the last thing he saw the mocking bright stitch that had lured him on.

He saw someone finding his body half-plugged into the toilet hole with his ass sticking up and his legs splayed, smeary brown sneaker prints stamped on the goddam toilet cubicle from his final dying kicks. He could hear someone—perhaps the IRS agent who was The Motherfucker's bete noire—saying “Holy shit, he must have dropped something really valuable down there.”

It was funny, but Curtis didn't feel like laughing.

How long had he been kneeling there, peering into the tank? He didn't know—his watch was back in his study, sitting by his computer's mousepad—but the ache in his thighs suggested quite awhile. And the light had brightened considerably. The sun would be entirely over the horizon now, and soon his prison would once more turn into a steam room.

"Gotta go," he said, and wiped sweat from his cheeks with the palms of his hands. "It's the only thing." But he paused again, because another thought had occurred to him.

What if there was a snake in there?

What if The Motherfucker, imagining that his witchly enemy might try this very thing, had put a snake in there? A copperhead, perhaps, for the time being fast asleep under a layer of cool human mud? A copperhead bite on the arm and he would die slowly and painfully, his arm swelling even as the temperature climbed. A bite from a coral snake would take him more quickly but even more painfully: his heart lunging, stopping, lunging again, then finally giving up.

There are no snakes in there. Bugs, maybe, but no snakes. You saw him, you heard him. He wasn't thinking that far ahead. He was too sick, too crazy.

Perhaps, perhaps not. You couldn't really gauge crazy people, could you? They were wild cards.

"Deuces and jacks, man with the axe, natural sevens take all," Curtis said. The Tao of The Motherfucker. All he knew for sure was that if he didn't try it down there, he was almost certainly going to die up here. And in the end, a snakebite might be quicker and more merciful.

"Gotta," he said, once more wiping his cheeks. "Gotta."

As long as he didn't get stuck halfway in and halfway out of the hole. That would be a terrible way to die.

“Not going to get stuck,” he said. “Look how big it is. That thing was built for the asses of doughnut-eating long-haul truckers.”

This made him giggle. The sound contained more hysteria than humor. The toilet hole did not look big to him; it looked small. Almost tiny. He knew that was only his nervous perception of it—hell, his scared perception, his frightened to death perception—but knowing that didn’t help much.

“Gotta do it, though,” he said. “There’s really nothing else.”

And in the end it would probably be for nothing ... but he doubted anyone had bothered to add a steel outer layer to the holding tank, and that decided him.

“God help me,” he said. It was his first prayer in almost forty years. “God, please help me not get stuck.”

He poked his right arm through the hole, then his head (first taking one more deep breath of the better air in the cubicle). He pressed his left arm to his side and slithered into the hole. His left shoulder caught, but before he could panic and draw back—this was, part of him understood, the critical moment, the point of no return—he shimmied it like a man doing the Watusi. His shoulder popped through. He jackknifed into the stinking tank up to his waist. With his hips—slim, but not nonexistent—plugging the hole, it was now as black as pitch. That seam of light seemed to float mockingly just before his eyes. Like a mirage.

Oh God, please don’t let it be a mirage.

The tank was maybe four feet deep, maybe a trifle more. Bigger than the trunk of a car, but not—unfortunately—the size of a pickup truck’s bed. There was no way to tell for sure, but he thought his hanging hair was touching the disinfected water, and that the top of his head must be within inches of the muck filling the bottom. His left arm was still pinned against his body. Pinned at the wrist now. He couldn’t get it free. He shimmied from one side to the other. His arm

stayed where it was. His worst nightmare: caught. Caught after all. Caught head down in stinking blackness.

Panic flared. He reached out with his free hand, not thinking about it, just doing it. For a moment he could see his fingers outlined by the scant light coming in through the bottom of the tank, which was now facing the sunrise instead of the ground. The light was right there, right in front of him. He grabbed for it. The first three fingers of his flailing hand were too big to fit through the narrow gap, but he was able to hook his pinky into the split. He pulled, feeling the ragged edge—metal or plastic, he didn't know which—first dig into the skin of his finger and then tear it open. Curtis didn't care. He pulled harder.

His hips popped through the hole like a cork coming out of a bottle. His wrist came free, but too late for him to lift his left arm and help break his fall. He crashed headfirst into the shit.

Curtis came up choking and flailing, his nose plugged with wet stink. He coughed and spat, aware that he was in a very tight place now, oh for sure. Had he thought the toilet was tight? Ridiculous. The toilet was the wide-open spaces. The toilet was the American west, the Australian Outback, the Great Horsehead Nebula. And he had given it up to crawl into a dark womb half-filled with rotting shit.

He wiped his face, then flung his hands to either side. Ribbons of dark stuff flew from his fingertips. His eyes were stinging, blurring. He wiped them with first one arm, then the other. His nose was plugged. He stuck his pinky fingers up them—he could feel blood running down the right one—and cleared his nostrils as best he could. He got enough out so he could breathe again, but when he did, the stench of the tank seemed to leap down his throat and sink claws into his stomach. He retched, a deep growling sound.

Get hold of yourself. Just get hold, or it's for nothing.

He leaned back against the caked side of the tank, dragging in deep gasps of air through his mouth, but that was almost as bad. Just

above him was a large pearl of oval light. The toilet hole he had, in his madness, wriggled through. He retched again. To his own ears he sounded like a bad-tempered dog on a hot day, trying to bark while half-strangled by a too-tight collar.

What if I can't stop? What if I can't stop doing that? I'll have a seizure.

He was too frightened and overwhelmed to think, so his body thought for him. He turned on his knees, which was hard—the side wall of the holding tank, which was now the floor, was slippery—but just possible. He applied his mouth to the split in the floor of the tank and breathed through it. As he did, a memory of some story he'd heard or read in grammar school came back to him: Indians hiding from their enemies by lying on the bottom of a shallow pond. Lying there and breathing through hollow reeds. You could do that. You could do that if you remained calm.

He closed his eyes. He breathed, and the air coming in through the split was blessedly sweet. Little by little, his runaway heartbeat began to slow.

You can go back up. If you can go one way, you can go the other. And going back up will be easier, because now you're ...

"Now I'm greasy," he said, and managed a shaky laugh ... even though the dull, closed-in sound of his own voice frightened him all over again.

When he felt he had some control, he opened his eyes. They had adjusted to the deeper gloom of the tank. He could see his shit-caked arms, and a matted ribbon of paper hanging from his right hand. He plucked it off and dropped it. He supposed he was getting used to such things. He supposed people could get used to anything, if they had to. This wasn't a particularly comforting thought.

He looked at the split. He looked at it for some time, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. It was like a split along the seam of a

badly sewn garment. Because there was a seam here. The tank was plastic after all—a plastic shell—but it wasn't a single piece; it was two. It was held together by a line of screws that glimmered in the dark. They glimmered because they were white. Curtis tried to remember if he had ever seen white screws before. He couldn't. Several of them at the lowest point of the tank had broken off, creating that split. Waste and wastewater must have been dribbling out and onto the ground beneath for some time.

If the EPA knew about this. Motherfucker, you'd have them on your back, too, Curtis thought. He touched one of the screws still holding, the one just to the left of where the split ended. He couldn't be sure, but he thought it was hard plastic rather than metal. The same kind of plastic the toilet-ring flanges were made of, probably.

So. Two-piece construction. The tanks put together on some portable-toilet assembly line in Defiance, Missouri, Magic City, Idaho, or—who knew?—What Cheer, Iowa. Screwed together with hard plastic screws, the seam running across the bottom and up the sides like a big old smile. The screws tightened with some special long-barreled screwdriver, probably air-driven, like the gadget they used in garages to loosen the lug-nuts holding on your tires. And why put these screwheads on the inside? That was easy. So some merry prankster couldn't come along with his own screwdriver and open a full tank from the outside, of course.

The screws were placed about two inches apart along the seam, and the split was about six inches long, causing Curtis to deduce that three of the plastic screws had snapped. Bad materials, or bad design? Who gave a shit?

“To coin a phrase,” he said, and laughed again.

The screws still holding to the left and right of the split were sticking up a little way, but he could neither unscrew them nor snap them off as he had the toilet seat. He couldn't get enough purchase. The one on the right was a little loose, and he supposed that if he worked at it, he might be able to get it started and then unscrew it the rest of

the way. It would take hours, and his fingers would probably be bleeding by the time he managed the job, but it could probably be done. And what would he gain? Another two inches of breathing space through the seam. No more than that.

The screws beyond the ones bordering the split in the seam were firm and tight.

Curtis could stay up on his knees no longer; the muscles in his thighs were burning. He sat down against the curved side of the tank, forearms on his knees, filthy hands dangling. He looked at the brightening oval of the toilet hole. That was the overworld, he supposed, only his share of it had grown very small. It smelled better, though, and when his legs felt a little stronger, he supposed he would clamber back through the hole. He wasn't going to stay in here, sitting in shit, if there was nothing to be gained by it. And it seemed there was not.

A jumbo cockroach, made bold by Curtis's new stillness, scuttled up his filthy pant leg. He flapped a hand at it and it was gone. "That's right," he said, "run. Why don't you squeeze out through the hole? You'd probably fit." He brushed his hair out of his eyes, knowing he was smearing his forehead, not caring. "Nah, you like it in here. You probably think you died and went to cockroach heaven."

He would rest, let his throbbing legs calm a little, then climb out of Wonderland and back into his phone-booth-sized piece of the overworld. Just a short rest; he wasn't staying down here any longer than he had to, that was for sure.

Curtis closed his eyes and tried to center himself.

He saw numbers scrolling up on a computer screen. The stock market wouldn't be open yet in New York, so these numbers must be from overseas. Probably the Nikkei. Most of the numbers were green. That was good.

“Metals and industrials,” he said. “And Takeda Pharmaceutical—that’s a buy. Anyone can see ...”

Curled against the wall in what was almost a fetal position, his drawn face streaked with brown warpaint, his butt sunk almost to the hips in muck, his filth-caked hands still dangling from his drawn-up knees, Curtis slept. And dreamed.

Betsy was alive and Curtis was in his living room. She was lying on her side in her accustomed place between the coffee table and the TV, snoozing with her latest half-chewed tennis ball near to hand. Or paw, in Betsy’s case.

“Bets!” he said. “Wake up and fetch the idiot stick!”

She struggled to her feet—of course she struggled, she was old now—and as she did, the tags on her collar jingled.

The tags jingled.

The tags.

*

He woke up gasping, listing to the left as he leaned against the holding tank’s greasy bottom, one hand outstretched, either to take the TV controller or to touch his dead dog.

He lowered his hand to his knee. He wasn’t surprised to find he was crying. Had probably started even before the dream began to unravel. Betsy was dead and he was sitting in shit. If that wasn’t reason enough to cry, he didn’t know what was.

He looked again at the oval light across from and slightly above him, and saw it was quite a lot brighter. Hard to believe he’d been asleep for any length of time, but it seemed he had been. An hour at least. God knew how much poison he was breathing, but—

“Don’t worry, I can deal with poison air,” he said. “After all, I’m a witch.”

And, bad air or no bad air, the dream had been very sweet. Very vivid. The jingling of those tags—

“Fuck,” he whispered, and his hand flew to his pocket. He was terribly sure he must have lost the Vespa key in his tumble and would have to feel around for it down here, sifting through the shit with nothing but the scant light coming in through the split seam and the toilet hole to help him, but the key was still there. So was his money, but money would do him no good down here and the clip wouldn’t, either. It was gold, and valuable, but too thick to qualify as an escape aid. So was the key to the Vespa. But there was something else on the keyring. Something that made him feel simultaneously bad and good every time he looked at it, or heard it jingle. It was Betsy’s ID tag.

She had worn two, but this was the one he’d slipped off her collar before giving her a final hug goodbye and turning her body over to the vet. The other one, state-required, certified that she’d had all her shots. This one was more personal. It was rectangular, like a GI’s dog tag. Stamped on it was

BETSY

IF LOST CALL 941-555-1954

CURTIS JOHNSON

19 GULF BOULEVARD

TURTLE ISLAND, FLA. 34274

It wasn't a screwdriver, but it was thin, it was made of stainless steel, and Curtis thought it just might serve. He said another prayer—he didn't know if what they said about no atheists in foxholes was true, but there seemed to be none in shitholes—then slipped the end of Betsy's ID tag into the slot of the screw just to the right of where the split ended. The screw that was a little loose to begin with.

He expected resistance, but under the edge of the ID tag the screw turned almost at once. He was so surprised he dropped his keyring and had to feel around for it. He slotted the end of the tag into the screwhead again, and turned it twice. The rest of the length he was able to loosen by hand. He did it with a big, unbelieving grin on his face.

Before beginning on the screw at the left end of the split—a split that was now two inches wider—he wiped the metal tag clean on his shirt (or as clean as he could; the shirt was as filthy as the rest of him, sticking to his skin) and kissed it gently.

“If this works, I'll frame you.” He hesitated, then added: “Please work, okay?”

He slipped the end of the ID tag into the screwhead and turned. This one was tighter than the first ... but not that tight. And once it started turning, it came out in a hurry.

“Jesus,” Curtis whispered. He was crying yet again; he'd turned into a regular leaky faucet. “Am I gonna get out of here, Bets? Am I really?”

He moved back to the right and started on the next screw. He went on that way, right-left, right-left, right-left, resting when his hand got tired, flexing and shaking it until it felt loose again. He had spent going on twenty-four hours in here; he wasn't going to hurry now. He especially didn't want to drop his keyring again. He supposed he could find it, the area was small, but he still didn't want to risk it.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

And slowly, as the morning passed and the holding tank heated up, making the smell ever thicker and more noisomely rich, the split in the bottom of the tank widened. He was doing it, closing in on getting out, but he refused to hurry. It was important not to hurry, not to bolt like a frightened horse. Because he might fuck up, yes, but also because his pride and self-esteem—his essential sense of self—had taken a beating.

Questions of self-esteem aside, slow and steady won the race.

Right-left, right-left, right-left.

*

Shortly before noon, the seam in the dirt-caked bottom of the Port-O-San bulged open, then closed, then bulged and closed again. There was a pause. Then it split open along four feet of its length, and the crown of Curtis Johnson's head appeared. It drew back, and there were clatters and scratches as he went to work again, removing more screws: three on the left, three on the right.

The next time the seam spread apart, the matted, brown-streaked crown of his head continued to thrust forward. It pushed slowly through, the cheeks and mouth drawn down as if by terrible G-force, one ear scraped and bleeding. He cried out, shoving with his feet, terrified that now he was going to get stuck half in and half out of the holding tank. Still, even in his fear, he registered the sweetness of the air: hot and humid, the best he had ever breathed.

When he was outside to his shoulders, he rested, panting, looking at a crushed beer can twinkling in the weeds not ten feet from his sweating, bleeding head. It looked like a miracle. Then he pushed again, head lifted, mouth snarling, cords on his neck standing out. There was a ripping sound as the gaping split in the tank tore the shirt off his back. He hardly noticed. Just ahead of him was a baby scrub pine no more than four feet high. He stretched, got one hand on the base of its thin and sappy trunk, then the other. He rested for another moment, aware that both of his shoulder blades were scraped and bleeding, then pulled on the tree and pushed one final time with his feet.

He thought he might pull the small pine right out by the roots, but he didn't. There was a searing pain in his buttocks as the seam through which he was wriggling tore his pants down, bunching them around his sneakers. In order to get all the way out, he had to keep pulling and twisting until the sneakers finally came off. And when the tank finally let go of his left foot, he found it almost impossible to believe he was actually free.

He rolled over on his back, naked save for his underpants (askew, the elastic hanging in a limp flap, the seat torn open to reveal badly bleeding buttocks) and one white sock. He stared up at the blue sky, eyes wide. And began to scream. He had screamed himself almost hoarse before he realized he was screaming actual words: I'm alive! I'm alive! I'm alive!

*

Twenty minutes later, he got to his feet and limped to the defunct construction trailer sitting on its concrete blocks, a large puddle from yesterday's shower hiding in its shadow. The door was locked, but there were more blocks lying to one side of the raw wooden steps. One was cracked in two pieces. Curtis picked up the smaller chunk and bashed it against the lock until the door shuddered open, letting out a puff of hot, stale air.

He turned before going in and for a moment surveyed the toilets on the other side of the road, where pothole puddles flashed back the bright blue sky like shards of a dirty mirror. Five Port-O-Sans, three standing, two lying facedown in the ditch. He had almost died in the one on the left. And although he was standing here in nothing but a pair of tattered underpants and one sock, shit-streaked and bleeding in what felt like a hundred places, that idea already seemed unreal. A bad dream.

The office was partially empty—or partially ransacked, probably only a day or two ahead of the final project shutdown. There were no partitions; it was one long room with a desk, two chairs, and a discount-store couch in the front half. In the back half there was a stack of cartons filled with papers, a dusty adding machine sitting on the floor, a small unplugged fridge, a radio, and a swivel chair with a note taped to the back. SAVE FOR JIMMY, the note said.

There was also a closet door standing ajar, but before checking it, Curtis opened the little fridge. Inside were four bottles of Zephyr spring water, one of them opened and three-quarters empty. Curtis seized one of the full bottles and drank the entire thing down. It was warm, but it tasted like the kind of water that might flow in the rivers of heaven. When it was gone, his stomach clenched. He rushed to the door, hung out by the jamb, and vomited the water back up to one side of the steps.

“Look, Ma, no gagging necessary!” he cried, with tears running down his filthy face. He supposed he could have vomited the water right onto the deserted trailer’s floor, but he didn’t want to be in the same room with his own waste. Not after what had happened.

In fact, I intend never to take another dump, he thought. From now on I’m going to empty myself the religious way: immaculate evacuation.

He drank the second bottle of water more slowly, and it stayed down. While he sipped, he looked into the closet. There were two pairs of dirty pants and some equally dirty shirts piled in one corner. Curtis

guessed that at one point there might have been a washer-dryer back there, where the cartons were stacked. Or maybe there had been another trailer, one that had been hitched up and hauled away. He didn't care. What he cared about was the two pair of discount-store overalls, one on a wire hanger, the other dangling from a wall hook. The pair on the hook looked much too big, but the one on the hanger might fit. And did, more or less. He had to roll the cuffs up two turns, and he supposed he looked more like Farmer John after slopping the hogs than a successful stock trader, but they would serve.

He could call the police, but he felt he had a right to more satisfaction than that after what he had been through. Quite a lot more.

"Witches don't call the police," he said. "Especially not us gay ones."

His motor scooter was still out there, but he had no intention of riding back just yet. For one thing, too many people would see the mud-man on the red Vespa Granturismo. He didn't think anyone would call the cops ... but they'd laugh. Curtis didn't want to be noticed, and he didn't want to be laughed at. Not even behind his back.

Also, he was tired. More tired than he'd ever been in his life.

He lay down on the discount-store sofa and put one of the pillows behind his head. He had left the trailer door open and a little breeze frisked through, stroking his dirty skin with delicious fingers. He was wearing nothing but the overalls now. He had stripped off his filthy undershorts and the remaining sock before putting them on.

I don't smell myself at all, he thought. Isn't that amazing?

Then he fell asleep, deeply and completely. He dreamed of Betsy bringing him the idiot stick, the tags on her collar jingling. He took the controller from her, and when he pointed it at the TV, he saw The Motherfucker peering in the window.

*

Curtis woke four hours later, sweating and stiff and stinging all over. Outside, thunder was rumbling as that afternoon's storm approached, right on schedule. He made his way down the makeshift trailer steps sidesaddle, like an old man with arthritis. He felt like an old man with arthritis. Then he sat down, looking alternately at the darkening sky and at the portable toilet from which he had escaped.

When the rain began, he stepped out of the overalls, threw them back into the trailer to keep them dry, and then stood there naked in the downpour, his face turned upward, smiling. That smile didn't falter even when a stroke of lightning forked down on the far side of Durkin Grove Village, close enough to fill the air with the tang of ozone. He felt perfectly, deliciously safe.

The cold rain sluiced him relatively clean, and when it began to let up, he slowly climbed the trailer steps again. When he was dry, he put the overalls back on. And when late-day sun began to spoke through the unraveling clouds, he walked slowly up the hill to where his Vespa was parked. The key was clutched in his right hand, Betsy's now-battered ID tag pressed between the first two fingers.

The Vespa wasn't used to being left out in the rain, but it was a good pony and started after only two cranks of the engine, settling at once into its usual good-natured purr. Curtis mounted up, barefooted and helmetless, a blithe spirit. He rode back to Turtle Island that way, with the wind blowing his filthy hair and belling the overalls out around his legs. He saw few cars, and got across the main road with no problems at all.

He thought he could use a couple of aspirins before going to see Grunwald, but otherwise he had never felt better in his life.

*

By seven o'clock that evening, the afternoon shower was just a memory. The Turtle Island sunsetters would gather on the beach in another hour or so for the usual end-of-day show, and Grunwald expected to be among them. For now, however, he lay in his patio hot tub with his eyes closed, a weak gin and tonic near to hand. He had taken a Percocet prior to climbing into the tub, knowing it would be a help when it came to the short walk down to the beach, but his sense of almost dreamy satisfaction persisted. He hardly needed the painkillers. That might change, but for the time being, he hadn't felt so well in years. Yes, he was facing financial ruin, but he had enough cash socked away to keep him comfortable for the time he had left. More important, he had taken care of the queer who had been the author of all his misery. Ding-dong, the wicked witch was d—

“Hello, Grunwald. Hello, you motherfucker.”

Grunwald's eyes flew open. A dark shape was standing between him and the westering sun, looking cut from black paper. Or funeral crepe. It looked like Johnson, but surely it could not be; Johnson was locked in the overturned toilet, Johnson was a shithouse mouse either dying or dead. Also, a smarmy little bandbox dresser like Johnson would never have been caught dead looking like an extra from that old Hee-Haw show. It was a dream, it had to be. But—

“You awake? Good. I want you to be awake for this.”

“Johnson?” Just a whisper. It was all he could manage. “That's not really you, is it?” But now the figure moved a little—just enough to allow the late-day sun to strike across his scratched face—and Grunwald saw that it was. And what was that he had in his hand?

Curtis saw what The Motherfucker was looking at, and considerately turned a little more, so that the sun struck across it, too. It was a hair dryer, Grunwald realized. It was a hair dryer, and he was sitting chest-deep in a hot tub.

He grabbed the side, meaning to pull himself out, and Johnson stepped on his hand. Grunwald cried out and jerked his hand back.

Johnson's foot was bare, but he had brought it down heel first, and hard.

"I like you right where you are," Curtis said, smiling. "I'm sure you felt the same about me, but I got out, didn't I? And I even brought you a present. Stopped by my house to get it. Don't refuse it on that account; it's only slightly used, and I blew off all the gay-dust on my way over here. By way of the backyard, actually. Convenient that the power's off in the stupid cattle-fence you used to kill my dog. Here you go." And he dropped the hair dryer into the hot tub.

Grunwald screamed and tried to catch it, but he missed. The hair dryer splashed, then sank. One of the water jets turned it over and over on the bottom. It bumped Grunwald's scrawny legs and he jerked away from it, still screaming, sure he was being electrocuted.

"Take it easy," Johnson said. He was still smiling. He unsnapped first one strap of the overalls he was wearing, then the other. They dropped to his ankles. He was naked beneath, with faint streaks of filth from the holding tank still on the insides of his arms and thighs. There was a nasty brown clot of something in his navel. "It wasn't plugged in. I don't even know if that old hair-dryer-in-the-tub thing works. Although I must admit that if I'd had an extension cord, I might have made the experiment."

"Get away from me," Grunwald rasped.

"Nah," Johnson said. "Don't think so." Smiling, always smiling. Grunwald wondered if the man had gone mad. He would have gone mad in circumstances similar to those in which he'd left Johnson. How had he gotten out? How, in God's name?

"The rain shower this afternoon washed off most of the shit, but I'm still quite dirty. As you see." Johnson spied the nasty wad in his navel, pried it out with a finger, and flicked it casually into the hot tub like a booger.

It landed on Grunwald's cheek. Brown and stinking. Starting to run. Good God, it was shit. He cried out again, this time in revulsion.

"He shoots, he scores," Johnson said, smiling. "Not very nice, is it? And although I don't exactly smell it anymore, I'm very tired of looking at it. So be a neighbor, would you, and share your hot tub."

"No! No, you can't—"

"Thanks!" Johnson said, smiling, and jumped in. There was a great splash. Grunwald could smell him. He reeked. Grunwald floundered for the other side of the hot tub, skinny shanks flashing white above the bubbling water, the tan on his equally skinny legs looking like taupe nylon stockings. He flung one arm over the edge of the tub. Then Johnson grabbed him around the neck with one badly scratched but horribly strong arm and hauled him back into the water.

"No no no no no!" Johnson said, smiling. He pulled Grunwald against him. Little brown-black flecks danced on the surface of the bubbling water. "Us gay guys rarely bathe alone. Surely you came across that fact in your Internet researches. And gay witches? Never!"

"Let me go!"

"Maybe." But Johnson hugged him closer, horribly intimate, still stinking of the Port-O-San. "First, though, I think you need to visit the gayboy ducking stool. Kind of a baptism. Wash away your sins." The smile became a grin, the grin a rictus. Grunwald realized he was going to die. Not in his bed, in some misty, medicated future, but right here. Johnson was going to drown him in his own hot tub, and the last thing he'd see would be little particles of filth floating in the previously clean water.

Curtis grabbed Grunwald's naked, scrawny shoulders and shoved him under. Grunwald struggled, his legs kicking, his scant hair floating, little silver bubbles twisting up from his big old beak of a nose. The urge to just hold him there was strong ... and Curtis could

do it because he was strong. Once upon a time, Grunwald would have been able to take him with one hand tied behind his back, age difference or not, but those days were gone. This was one sick Motherfucker. Which was why Curtis let him go.

Grunwald surged for the surface, coughing and choking.

“You’re right!” Curtis cried. “This baby is good for aches and pains! But never mind me; what about you? Want to go under again? Submersion is good for the soul, all the best religions say so.”

Grunwald shook his head furiously. Drops of water flew from his thinning hair and more luxuriant eyebrows.

“Then just sit there,” Curtis said. “Sit there and listen. And I don’t think we need this, do we?” He reached under Grunwald’s leg—Grunwald jerked and uttered a small scream—and snagged the hair dryer. Curtis tossed it over his shoulder. It skittered beneath Grunwald’s patio chair.

“I’ll be leaving you soon,” Curtis said. “Going back to my own place. You can go down and watch the sunset if you still want to. Do you still want to?”

Grunwald shook his head.

“No? I didn’t think so. I think you’ve had your last good sunset, neighbor. In fact, I think you’ve had your last good day, and that’s why I’m letting you live. And do you want to know the irony? If you’d let me alone, you would have gotten exactly what you wanted. Because I was locked in the shithouse already and didn’t even know it. Isn’t that funny?”

Grunwald said nothing, only looked at him with his terrified eyes. His sick and terrified eyes. Curtis could almost have felt sorry for him, if the memory of the Port-O-San was not still so vivid. The lid of the toilet flopping open like a mouth. The turd landing in his lap like a dead fish.

“Answer, or you get another baptismal dunk.”

“It’s funny,” Grunwald rasped. And then began to cough.

Curtis waited until he stopped. He wasn’t smiling anymore.

“Yes, it is,” he said. “It is funny. The whole thing’s funny, if you see it from the right perspective. And I believe I do.”

He boosted himself out of the hot tub, aware that he was moving with a lightheartedness The Motherfucker would never again be able to match. There was a cabinet under the porch overhang. There were towels inside. Curtis took one and began to dry off.

“Here’s the thing. You can call the police and tell them I tried to drown you in your hot tub, but if you do that, everything else comes out. You’ll spend the rest of your life fighting a criminal case as well as dealing with your other woes. But if you let it go, it’s a reset. Odometer back to zero. Only—here’s the thing—I get to watch you rot. There will come a day when you smell just like the shithouse you locked me in. When other people smell you that way, and you smell that way to yourself.”

“I’ll kill myself first,” Grunwald rasped.

Curtis was pulling the overalls on again. He had decided he sort of liked them. They might be the perfect garment to wear while watching the stock quotes on one’s computer in one’s cozy little study. He might go out to Target and buy half a dozen pairs. The new, non-compulsive Curtis Johnson: an overall kind of guy.

He paused in the act of buckling the second shoulder strap. “You could do that. You have that gun, the—what did you call it?—the Hardballer.” He finished with the buckle, then leaned toward Grunwald, who was still marinating in the hot tub and looking at him fearfully. “That would be acceptable, too. You might even have the guts, although, when it comes right down to it ... you might not. In any case, I’ll listen with great interest for the bang.”

He left Grunwald then, but not the way he had come. He went around to the road. A left turn would have taken him back to his house, but he turned right, toward the beach. For the first time since Betsy died, he felt like watching the sunset.

*

Two days later, while sitting at his computer (he was watching General Electric with especial interest), Curtis heard a loud bang from next door. He didn't have his music on, and the sound rolled through the humid, almost-July air with perfect clarity. He sat where he was, head cocked, still listening. Although there would be no second bang.

Us witches just know shit like that, he thought.

Mrs. Wilson came rushing in, holding a dishtowel in one hand. "That sounded like a gunshot!"

"Probably just a backfire," he said, smiling. He had been smiling a lot since his adventure at Durkin Grove Village. He thought it wasn't the same sort of smile as the one he had worn during the Betsy Era, but any smile was better than none. Surely that was true?

Mrs. Wilson was looking at him doubtfully. "Well ... I guess." She turned to go.

"Mrs. Wilson?"

She turned back.

"Would you quit me if I got another dog? A puppy?"

"Me, quit over a puppy? It'd take more than a pup to drive me out."

"They tend to chew, you know. And they don't always—" He broke off for a moment, seeing the dark and nasty landscape of the holding tank. The underworld.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Wilson was looking at him curiously.

“They don’t always use the bathroom,” he finished.

“Once you teach them, they usually go where they’re supposed to,” she said. “Especially in a warm climate like this one. And you need some companionship, Mr. Johnson. I’ve been ... to tell the truth, I’ve been a little worried about you.”

He nodded. “Yes, I’ve kind of been in the shit.” He laughed, saw her looking at him strangely, and made himself stop. “Excuse me.”

She flapped her dishtowel at him to show he was excused.

“Not a purebred, this time. I was thinking maybe the Venice Animal Shelter. Someone’s little castoff. What they call a rescue dog.”

“That would be very nice,” she said. “I look forward to the patter of little feet.”

“Good.”

“Do you really think that was a backfire?”

Curtis sat back in his chair and pretended to consider. “Probably ... but you know, Mr. Grunwald next door has been pretty sick.” He lowered his voice to a sympathetic whisper. “Cancer.”

“Oh, dear,” Mrs. Wilson said.

Curtis nodded.

“You don’t think he’d ... ?”

The marching numbers on his computer screen melted into the screen saver: aerial photos and beach scenes, all featuring Turtle Island. Curtis stood up, walked to Mrs. Wilson, and took the dishtowel from her hand. “No, not really, but we could go next door and check. After all, what are neighbors for?”