
NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
SNEAKERS

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Stephen King

John Tell had been working at Tabori Studios just over a month when he first noticed the sneakers. Tabori was in a building which had once been called Music City and had been, in the early days of rock and roll and top-forty rhythm and blues, a very big deal. Back then you never would have seen a pair of sneakers (unless they were on the feet of a delivery boy) above lobby-level. Those days were gone, though, and so were the big-money producers with their reet pleats and pointy-toed snakeskin shoes. Sneakers were now just another part of the Music City uniform, and when Tell first glimpsed these, he made no negative assumptions about their owner. Well, maybe one: the guy really could have used a new pair. These had been white when they were new, but from the look of them new had been a long time ago.

That was all he noticed when he first saw the sneakers in the little room where you so often ended up judging your neighbor by his footwear because that was all you ever saw of him. Tell spied this pair under the door of the first toilet-stall in the third-floor men's room. He passed them on his way to the third and last stall. He came out a few minutes later, washed and dried his hands, combed his hair, and then went back to Studio F, where he was helping to mix an album by a heavy-metal group called The Dead Beats. To say Tell had already forgotten the sneakers would be an overstatement, because they had hardly registered on his mental radar screen to begin with.

Paul Jannings was producing The Dead Beats' sessions. He wasn't famous in the way the old be-bop kings of Music City had been famous—Tell thought rock-and-roll music was no longer strong enough to breed such mythic royalty—but he was fairly well-known, and Tell himself thought he was the best producer of rock-and-roll records currently active in the field; only Jimmy Iovine could come close.

Tell had first seen him at a party following the premiere of a concert film; had, in fact, recognized him from across the room. The hair was graying now, and the sharp features of Jannings's handsome face

had become almost gaunt, but there was no mistaking the man who had recorded the legendary Tokyo Sessions with Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, John Lennon, and Al Kooper some fifteen years earlier. Other than Phil Spector, Jannings was the only record producer Tell could have recognized by sight as well as by the distinctive sound of his recordings—crystal-clear top ends underscored by percussion so heavy it shook your clavicle. It was that Don McLean clarity you heard first on the Tokyo Sessions recordings, but if you wiped the treble, what you heard pulsing along through the underbrush was pure Sandy Nelson.

Tell's natural reticence was overcome by admiration and he had crossed the room to where Jannings was standing, temporarily unengaged. He introduced himself, expecting a quick handshake and a few perfunctory words at most. Instead, the two of them had fallen into a long and interesting conversation. They worked in the same field and knew some of the same people, but even then Tell had known there was more to the magic of that initial meeting than those things; Paul Jannings was just one of those rare men to whom he found he could talk, and for John Tell, talking really was akin to magic.

Toward the end of the conversation, Jannings had asked him if he was looking for work.

"Did you ever know anyone in this business who wasn't?" Tell asked.

Jannings laughed and asked for his phone number. Tell had given it to him, not attaching much importance to the request—it was most likely a gesture of politeness on the other man's part, he'd thought. But Jannings had called him three days later to ask if Tell would like to be part of the three-man team mixing The Dead Beats' first album. "I don't know if it's really possible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," Jannings had said, "but since Atlantic Records is footing the bills, why not have a good time trying?" John Tell saw no reason at all why not, and signed on for the cruise immediately.

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A week or so after he first saw the sneakers, Tell saw them again. He only registered the fact that it was the same guy because the sneakers were in the same place—under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men's. There was no question that they were the same ones; white (once, anyway) hightops with dirt in the deep creases. He noticed an empty eyelet and thought, Must not have had your own eyes all the way open when you laced that one up, friend. Then he went on down to the third stall (which he thought of, in some vague way, as "his"). This time he glanced at the sneakers on his way out, as well, and saw something odd when he did: there was a dead fly on one of them. It lay on the rounded toe of the left sneaker, the one with the empty eyelet, with its little legs sticking up.

When he got back to Studio F, Jannings was sitting at the board with his head clutched in his hands.

"You okay, Paul?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

"Me. I was wrong. I am wrong. My career is finished. I'm washed up. Eighty-sixed. Over-done-with-gone."

"What are you talking about?" Tell looked around for Georgie Ronkler and didn't see him anywhere. It didn't surprise him. Jannings had periodic fugues and Georgie always left when he saw one coming on. He claimed his karma didn't allow him to deal with strong emotion. "I cry at supermarket openings," Georgie said.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," Jannings said. He pointed with his fist at the glass between the mixing room and the performance studio. He looked like a man giving the old Nazi Heil Hitler salute. "At least not out of pigs like those."

"Lighten up," Tell said, although he knew Jannings was perfectly right. The Dead Beats, composed of four dull bastards and one dull

bitch, were personally repulsive and professionally incompetent.

“Lighten this up,” Jannings said, and flipped him the bird.

“God, I hate temperament,” Tell said.

Jannings looked up at him and giggled. A second later they were both laughing. Five minutes after that they were back to work.

The mix—such as it was—ended a week later. Tell asked Jannings for a recommendation and a tape.

“Okay, but you know you’re not supposed to play the tape for anyone until the album comes out,” Jannings said.

“I know.”

“And why you’d ever want to, for anyone, is beyond me. These guys make The Butthole Surfers sound like The Beatles.”

“Come on, Paul, it wasn’t that bad. And even if it was, it’s over.”

He smiled. “Yeah. There’s that. And if I ever work in this business again, I’ll give you a call.”

“That would be great.”

They shook hands. Tell left the building which had once been known as Music City, and the thought of the sneakers under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men’s john never crossed his mind.

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Jannings, who had been in the business twenty-five years, had once told him that when it came to mixing bop (he never called it rock and roll, only bop), you were either shit or Superman. For the two months following the Beats’ mixing session, John Tell was shit. He didn’t work. He began to get nervous about the rent. Twice he almost

called Jannings, but something in him thought that would be a mistake.

Then the music mixer on a film called Karate Masters of Massacre died of a massive coronary and Tell got six weeks' work at the Brill Building (which had been known as Tin Pan Alley back in the heyday of Broadway and the Big Band sound), finishing the mix. It was library stuff in the public domain—and a few plinking sitars—for the most part, but it paid the rent. And following his last day on the show, Tell had no more than walked into his apartment before the phone rang. It was Paul Jannings, asking him if he had checked the Billboard pop chart lately. Tell said he hadn't.

"It came on at number seventy-nine." Jannings managed to sound simultaneously disgusted, amused, and amazed. "With a bullet."

"What did?" But he knew as soon as the question was out of his mouth.

" 'Diving in the Dirt.' "

It was the name of a cut on The Dead Beats' forthcoming Beat It 'Til It's Dead album, the only cut which had seemed to Tell and Jannings remotely like single material.

"Shit!"

"Indeed it is, but I have a crazy idea it's gonna go top ten. Have you seen the video?"

"No."

"What a scream. It's mostly Ginger, the chick in the group, playing mudhoney in some generic bayou with a guy who looks like Donald Trump in overalls. It sends what my intellectual friends like to call 'mixed cultural messages.' " And Jannings laughed so hard Tell had to hold the phone away from his ear.

When Jannings had himself under control again, he said, “Anyway, it probably means the album’ll go top ten, too. A platinum-plated dog-turd is still a dog-turd, but a platinum reference is platinum all the way through—you understand dis t’ing, Bwana?”

“Indeed I do,” Tell said, pulling open his desk drawer to make sure his Dead Beats cassette, unplayed since Jannings had given it to him on the last day of the mix, was still there.

“So what are you doing?” Jannings asked him.

“Looking for a job.”

“You want to work with me again? I’m doing Roger Daltrey’s new album. Starts in two weeks.”

“Christ, yes!”

The money would be good, but it was more than that; following The Dead Beats and six weeks of Karate Masters of Massacre, working with the ex-lead singer of The Who would be like coming into a warm place on a cold night. Whatever he might turn out to be like personally, the man could sing. And working with Jannings again would be good, too. “Where?”

“Same old stand. Tabori at Music City.”

“I’m there.”

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Roger Daltrey not only could sing, he turned out to be a tolerably nice guy in the bargain. Tell thought the next three or four weeks would be good ones. He had a job, he had a production credit on an album that had popped onto the Billboard charts at number forty-one (and the single was up to number seventeen and still climbing), and he felt safe about the rent for the first time since he had come to New York from Pennsylvania four years ago.

It was June, trees were in full leaf, girls were wearing short skirts again, and the world seemed a fine place to be. Tell felt this way on his first day back at work for Paul Jannings until approximately 1:45 P.M. Then he walked into the third-floor bathroom, saw the same once-white sneakers under the door of stall one, and all his good feelings suddenly collapsed.

They are not the same. Can't be the same.

They were, though. That single empty eyelet was the clearest point of identification, but everything else about them was also the same. Exactly the same, and that included their positions. There was only one real difference that Tell could see: there were more dead flies around them now.

He went slowly into the third stall, "his" stall, lowered his pants, and sat down. He wasn't surprised to find that the urge which had brought him here had entirely departed. He sat still for a little while just the same, however, listening for sounds. The rattle of a newspaper. The clearing of a throat. Hell, even a fart.

No sounds came.

That's because I'm in here alone, Tell thought. Except, that is, for the dead guy in the first stall.

The bathroom's outer door banged briskly open. Tell almost screamed. Someone hummed his way over to the urinals, and as water began to splash out there, an explanation occurred to Tell and he relaxed. It was so simple it was absurd … and undoubtedly correct. He glanced at his watch and saw it was 1:47.

A regular man is a happy man, his father used to say. Tell's dad had been a taciturn fellow, and that saying (along with Clean your hands before you clean your plate) had been one of his few aphorisms. If regularity really did mean happiness, then Tell supposed he was a happy man. His need to visit the bathroom came on at about the same time every day, and he supposed the same must be true of his

pal Sneakers, who favored Stall #1 just as Tell himself favored Stall #3.

If you needed to pass the stalls to get to the urinals, you would have seen that stall empty lots of times, or with different shoes under it. After all, what are the chances a body could stay undiscovered in a men's-room toilet-stall for …

He worked out in his mind the time he'd last been there.

… four months, give or take?

No chance at all was the answer to that one. He could believe the janitors weren't too fussy about cleaning the stalls—all those dead flies—but they would have to check on the toilet-paper supply every day or two, right? And even if you left those things out, dead people started to smell after awhile, right? God knew this wasn't the sweetest-smelling place on earth—and following a visit from the fat guy who worked down the hall at Janus Music it was almost uninhabitable—but surely the stink of a dead body would be a lot louder. A lot gaudier.

Gaudy? Gaudy? Jesus, what a word. And how would you know? You never smelled a decomposing body in your life.

True, but he was pretty sure he'd know what he was smelling if he did. Logic was logic and regularity was regularity and that was the end of it. The guy was probably a pencil-pusher from Janus or a writer for Snappy Kards, on the other side of the floor. For all John Tell knew, the guy was in there composing greeting-card verse right now:

Roses are red and violets are blue,

You thought I was dead but that wasn't true;

I just deliver my mail at the same time as you!

That sucks, Tell thought, and uttered a wild little laugh. The fellow who had banged the door open, almost startling him into a scream, had progressed to the wash-basins. Now the splashing-lathering sound of him washing his hands stopped briefly. Tell could imagine the newcomer listening, wondering who was laughing behind one of the closed stall doors, wondering if it was a joke, a dirty picture, or if the man was just crazy. There were, after all, lots of crazy people in New York. You saw them all the time, talking to themselves and laughing for no appreciable reason … the way Tell had just now.

Tell tried to imagine Sneakers also listening and couldn't.

Suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Suddenly he just felt like getting out of there.

He didn't want the man at the basin to see him, though. The man would look at him. Just for a moment, but that would be enough to know what he was thinking. People who laughed behind closed toilet-stall doors were not to be trusted.

Click-clack of shoes on the old white hexagonal bathroom tiles, whooze of the door being opened, hisshh of it settling slowly back into place. You could bang it open but the pneumatic elbow-joint kept it from banging shut. That might upset the third-floor receptionist as he sat smoking Camels and reading the latest issue of Krrang!

God, it's so silent in here! Why doesn't the guy move? At least a little?

But there was just the silence, thick and smooth and total, the sort of silence the dead would hear in their coffins if they could still hear, and Tell again became convinced that Sneakers was dead, fuck logic, he was dead and had been dead for who knew how long, he was sitting in there and if you opened the door you would see some slumped mossy thing with its hands dangling between its thighs, you would see—

For a moment he was on the verge of calling, Hey Sneaks! You all right?

But what if Sneakers answered, not in a questioning or irritated voice but in a froggy grinding croak? Wasn't there something about waking the dead? About—

Suddenly Tell was up, up fast, flushing the toilet and buttoning his pants, out of the stall, zipping his fly as he headed for the door, aware that in a few seconds he was going to feel silly but not caring. Yet he could not forbear one glance under the first stall as he passed. Dirty white mislaced sneakers. And dead flies. Quite a few of them.

Weren't any dead flies in my stall. And just how is it that all this time has gone by and he still hasn't noticed that he missed one of the eyelets? Or does he wear em that way all the time, as some kind of artistic statement?

Tell hit the door pretty hard coming out. The receptionist just up the hall glanced at him with the cool curiosity he saved for beings merely mortal (as opposed to such deities in human form as Roger Daltrey).

Tell hurried down the hall to Tabori Studios.

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"Paul?"

"What?" Jannings answered without looking up from the board. Georgie Ronkler was standing off to one side, watching Jannings closely and nibbling a cuticle—cuticles were all he had left to nibble; his fingernails simply did not exist above the point where they parted company with live flesh and hot nerve-endings. He was close to the door. If Jannings began to rant, Georgie would slip through it.

"I think there might be something wrong in—"

Jannings groaned. “Something else?”

“What do you mean?”

“This drum track is what I mean. It’s badly botched, and I don’t know what we can do about it.” He flicked a toggle, and drums crashed into the studio. “You hear it?”

“The snare, you mean?”

“Of course I mean the snare! It stands out a mile from the rest of the percussion, but it’s married to it!”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes but Jesus bloody fuck, I hate shit like this! Forty tracks I got here, forty goddam tracks to record a simple bop tune and some IDIOT technician—”

From the tail of his eye Tell saw Georgie disappear like a cool breeze.

“But look, Paul, if you lower the equalization—”

“The eq’s got nothing to do with—”

“Shut up and listen a minute,” Tell said soothingly—something he could have said to no one else on the face of the earth—and slid a switch. Jannings stopped ranting and started listening. He asked a question. Tell answered it. Then he asked one Tell couldn’t answer, but Jannings was able to answer it himself, and all of a sudden they were looking at a whole new spectrum of possibilities for a song called “Answer to You, Answer to Me.”

After awhile, sensing that the storm had passed, Georgie Ronkler crept back in.

And Tell forgot all about the sneakers.

*

They returned to his mind the following evening. He was at home, sitting on the toilet in his own bathroom, reading Wise Blood while Vivaldi played mildly from the bedroom speakers (although Tell now mixed rock and roll for a living, he owned only four rock records, two by Bruce Springsteen and two by John Fogerty).

He looked up from his book, somewhat startled. A question of cosmic ludicrousness had suddenly occurred to him: How long has it been since you took a crap in the evening, John?

He didn't know, but he thought he might be taking them then quite a bit more frequently in the future. At least one of his habits might change, it seemed.

Sitting in the living room fifteen minutes later, his book forgotten in his lap, something else occurred to him: he hadn't used the third-floor rest room once that day. They had gone across the street for coffee at ten, and he had taken a whiz in the men's room of Donut Buddy while Paul and Georgie sat at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about overdubs. Then, on his lunch hour, he had made a quick pit-stop at the Brew 'n Burger … and another on the first floor late that afternoon when he had gone down to drop off a bunch of mail that he could have just as easily stuffed into the mail-slot by the elevators.

Avoiding the third-floor men's? Was that what he'd been doing today without even realizing it? You bet your Reeboks it was. Avoiding it like a scared kid who goes a block out of his way coming home from school so he won't have to go past the local haunted house. Avoiding it like the plague.

"Well, so what?" he said out loud.

He couldn't exactly articulate the so-what, but he knew there was one; there was something just a little too existential, even for New

York, about getting spooked out of a public bathroom by a pair of dirty sneakers.

Aloud, very clearly, Tell said: “This has got to stop.”

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But that was Thursday night and something happened on Friday night that changed everything. That was when the door closed between him and Paul Jannings.

Tell was a shy man and didn’t make friends easily. In the rural Pennsylvania town where he had gone to high school, a quirk of fate had put Tell up on stage with a guitar in his hands—the last place he’d ever expected to be. The bassist of a group called The Satin Saturns fell ill with salmonella the day before a well-paying gig. The lead guitarist, who was also in the school band, knew John Tell could play both bass and rhythm. This lead guitarist was big and potentially violent. John Tell was small, humble, and breakable. The guitarist offered him a choice between playing the ill bassist’s instrument and having it rammed up his ass to the fifth fret. This choice had gone a long way toward clarifying his feelings about playing in front of a large audience.

But by the end of the third song, he was no longer frightened. By the end of the first set he knew he was home. Years after that first gig, Tell heard a story about Bill Wyman, bassist of The Rolling Stones. According to the story, Wyman actually nodded off during a performance—not in some tiny club, mind you, but in a huge hall—and fell from the stage, breaking his collarbone. Tell supposed lots of people thought the story was apocryphal, but he himself had an idea it was true … and he was, after all, in a unique position to understand how something like that could happen. Bassists were the invisible men of the rock world. There were exceptions—Paul McCartney, for one—but they only proved the rule.

Perhaps because of the job’s very lack of glamor, there was a chronic shortage of bass players. When The Satin Saturns broke up

a month later (the lead guitarist and the drummer got into a fist-fight over a girl), Tell joined a band formed by the Saturns' rhythm man, and his life's course was chosen, as simply and quietly as that.

Tell liked playing in the band. You were up front, looking down on everyone else, not just at the party but making the party happen; you were simultaneously almost invisible and absolutely essential. Every now and then you had to sing a little backup, but nobody expected you to make a speech or anything.

He had lived that life—part-time student and full-time band gypsy—for ten years. He was good, but not ambitious—there was no fire in his belly. Eventually he drifted into session work in New York, began fooling with the boards, and discovered he liked life even better on the far side of the glass window. During all that time he had made one good friend: Paul Jannings. That had happened fast, and Tell supposed the unique pressures that went with the job had had something to do with it… but not everything. Mostly, he suspected, it had been a combination of two factors: his own essential loneliness and Jannings's personality, which was so powerful it was almost overwhelming. And it wasn't so different for Georgie, Tell came to realize following what happened on that Friday night.

He and Paul were having a drink at one of the back tables in McManus's Pub, talking about the mix, the biz, the Mets, whatever, when all of a sudden Jannings's right hand was under the table and gently squeezing Tell's crotch.

Tell moved away so violently that the candle in the center of the table fell over and Jannings's glass of wine spilled. A waiter came over and righted the candle before it could scorch the tablecloth, then left. Tell stared at Jannings, his eyes wide and shocked.

"I'm sorry," Jannings said, and he did look sorry … but he also looked unperturbed.

"Jesus Christ, Paul!" It was all he could think of to say, and it sounded hopelessly inadequate.

“I thought you were ready, that’s all,” Jannings said. “I suppose I should have been a little more subtle.”

“Ready?” Tell repeated. “What do you mean? Ready for what?”

“To come out. To give yourself permission to come out.”

“I’m not that way,” Tell said, but his heart was pounding very hard and fast. Part of it was outrage, part was fear of the implacable certainty he saw in Jannings’s eyes, most of it was dismay. What Jannings had done had shut him out.

“Let’s let it go, shall we? We’ll just order and make up our minds that it never happened.” Until you want it to, those implacable eyes added.

Oh, it happened, all right, Tell wanted to say, but didn’t. The voice of reason and practicality would not allow it… would not allow him to risk lighting Paul Jannings’s notoriously short fuse. This was, after all, a good job … and the job per se wasn’t all. He could use Roger Daltrey’s tape in his portfolio even more than he could use two more weeks’ salary. He would do well to be diplomatic and save the outraged-young-man act for another time. Besides, did he really have anything to feel outraged about? It wasn’t as if Jannings had raped him, after all.

And that was really just the tip of the iceberg. The rest was this: his mouth closed because that was what his mouth had always done. It did more than close—it snapped shut like a bear-trap, with all his heart below those interlocked teeth and all his head above.

“All right,” was all he said, “it never happened.”

*

Tell slept badly that night, and what sleep he did get was haunted by bad dreams: one of Jannings groping him in McManus’s was followed by one of the sneakers under the stall door, only in this one

Tell opened the door and saw Paul Jannings sitting there. He had died naked, and in a state of sexual excitement that somehow continued even in death, even after all this time. Paul's mouth dropped open with an audible creak. "That's right; I knew you were ready," the corpse said on a puff of greenly rotten air, and Tell woke himself up by tumbling onto the floor in a tangle of coverlet. It was four in the morning. The first touches of light were just creeping through the chinks between the buildings outside his window. He dressed and sat smoking one cigarette after another until it was time to go to work.

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Around eleven o'clock on that Saturday—they were working six-day weeks to make Daltrey's deadline—Tell went into the third-floor men's room to urinate. He stood just inside the door, rubbing his temples, and then looked around at the stalls.

He couldn't see. The angle was wrong.

Then never mind! Fuck it! Take your piss and get out of here!

He walked slowly over to one of the urinals and unzipped. It took a long time to get going.

On his way out he paused again, head cocked like Nipper the Dog's on the old RCA Victor record labels, and then turned around. He walked slowly back around the corner, stopping as soon as he could see under the door of the first stall. The dirty white sneakers were still there. The building which used to be known as Music City was almost completely empty, Saturday-morning-empty, but the sneakers were still there.

Tell's eyes fixed upon a fly just outside the stall. He watched with an empty sort of avidity as it crawled beneath the stall door and onto the dirty toe of one of the sneakers. There it stopped and simply fell dead. It tumbled into the growing pile of insect corpses around the sneakers. Tell saw with no surprise at all (none he felt, anyway) that

among the flies were two small spiders and one large cockroach, lying on its back like an upended turtle.

Tell left the men's room in large painless strides, and his progress back to the studios seemed most peculiar; it was as if, instead of him walking, the building was flowing past him, around him, like river-rapids around a rock.

When I get back I'll tell Paul I don't feel well and take the rest of the day off, he thought, but he wouldn't. Paul had been in an erratic, unpleasant mood all morning, and Tell knew he was part (or maybe all) of the reason why. Might Paul fire him out of spite? A week ago he would have laughed at such an idea. But a week ago he had still believed what he had come to believe in his growing-up: friends were real and ghosts were make-believe. Now he was starting to wonder if maybe he hadn't gotten those two postulates turned around somehow.

"The prodigal returns," Jannings said without looking around as Tell opened the second of the studio's two doors—the one that was called the "dead air" door. "I thought you died in there, Johnny."

"No," Tell said. "Not me."

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It was a ghost, and Tell found out whose a day before the Daltrey mix—and his association with Paul Jannings—ended, but before that happened a great many other things did. Except they were all the same thing, just little mile-markers, like the ones on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, announcing John Tell's steady progress toward a nervous breakdown. He knew this was happening but could not keep it from happening. It seemed he was not driving this particular road but being chauffeured.

At first his course of action had seemed clear-cut and simple: avoid that particular men's room, and avoid all thoughts and questions about the sneakers. Simply turn that subject off. Make it dark.

Except he couldn't. The image of the sneakers crept up on him at odd moments and pounced like an old grief. He would be sitting home, watching CNN or some stupid chat-show on the tube, and all at once he'd find himself thinking about the flies, or about what the janitor who replaced the toilet paper was obviously not seeing, and then he would look at the clock and see an hour had passed. Sometimes more.

For awhile he was almost convinced it was some sort of malevolent joke. Paul was in on it, of course, and probably the fat guy from Janus Music—Tell had seen them talking together quite frequently, and hadn't they looked at him once and laughed? The receptionist was also a good bet, him with his Camels and his dead, skeptical eyes. Not Georgie, Georgie couldn't have kept the secret even if Paul had hectored him into going along, but anyone else was possible. For a day or two Tell even speculated on the possibility that Roger Daltrey himself might have taken a turn wearing the mislaced white sneakers.

Although he recognized these thoughts as paranoid fantasies, recognition did not lead to dispersion. He would tell them to go away, would insist there was no Jannings-led cabal out to get him, and his mind would say Yeah, okay, makes sense to me, and five hours later —or maybe only twenty minutes—he would imagine a bunch of them sitting around Desmond's Steak House two blocks downtown: Paul, the chain-smoking receptionist with the taste for heavy-metal, heavy-leather groups, maybe even the skinny guy from Snappy Kards, all of them eating shrimp cocktails and drinking. And laughing, of course. Laughing at him, while the dirty white sneakers they took turns wearing sat under the table in a crumpled brown bag.

Tell could see that brown bag. That was how bad it had gotten.

But that short-lived fantasy wasn't the worst. The worst was simply this: the third-floor men's room had acquired a pull. It was as if there were a powerful magnet in there and his pockets were full of iron filings. If someone had told him something like that he would have laughed (maybe just inside, if the person making the metaphor

seemed very much in earnest), but it was really there, a feeling like a swerve every time he passed the men's on his way to the studios or to the elevators. It was a terrible feeling, like being pulled toward an open window in a tall building or watching helplessly, as if from outside yourself, as you raised a pistol to your mouth and sucked the barrel.

He wanted to look again. He realized that one more look was about all it would take to finish him off, but it made no difference. He wanted to look again.

Each time he passed, that mental swerve.

In his dreams he opened that stall door again and again. Just to get a look.

A really good look.

And he couldn't seem to tell anyone. He knew it would be better if he did, understood that if he poured it into someone else's ear it would change its shape, perhaps even grow a handle with which he could hold it. Twice he went into bars and managed to strike up conversations with the men next to him. Because bars, he thought, were the places where talk was at its absolute cheapest. Bargain-basement rates.

He had no more than opened his mouth on the first occasion when the man he had picked began to sermonize on the subject of the Yankees and George Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner had gotten under this man's skin in a big way, and it was impossible to get a word in edgeways with the fellow on any other subject. Tell soon gave up trying.

The second time, he managed to strike up a fairly casual conversation with a man who looked like a construction worker. They talked about the weather, then about baseball (but this man, thankfully, was not nuts on the subject), and progressed to how tough it was to find a good job in New York. Tell was sweating. He

felt as if he were doing some heavy piece of manual labor—pushing a wheelbarrow filled with cement up a slight grade, maybe—but he also felt that he wasn't doing too badly.

The guy who looked like a construction worker was drinking Black Russians. Tell stuck to beer. It felt as if he was sweating it out as fast as he put it in, but after he had bought the guy a couple of drinks and the guy had bought Tell a couple of schooners, he nerved himself to begin.

"You want to hear something really strange?" he said.

"You queer?" the guy who looked like a construction worker asked him before Tell could get any further. He turned on his stool and looked at Tell with amiable curiosity. "I mean, it's nothin to me whether y'are or not, but I'm gettin those vibes and I just thought I'd tell you I don't go for that stuff. Have it up front, you know?"

"I'm not queer," Tell said.

"Oh. What's really strange?"

"Huh?"

"You said something was really strange."

"Oh, it really wasn't that strange," Tell said. Then he glanced down at his watch and said it was getting late.

*

Three days before the end of the Daltrey mix, Tell left Studio F to urinate. He now used the bathroom on the sixth floor for this purpose. He had first used the one on four, then the one on five, but these were stacked directly above the one on three, and he had begun to feel the owner of the sneakers radiating silently up through the floors, seeming to suck at him. The men's room on six was on

the opposite side of the building, and that seemed to solve the problem.

He breezed past the reception desk on his way to the elevators, blinked, and suddenly, instead of being in the elevator car, he was in the third-floor bathroom with the door hisshhing softly shut behind him. He had never been so afraid. Part of it was the sneakers, but most of it was knowing he had just dropped three to six seconds of consciousness. For the first time in his life his mind had simply shorted out.

He had no idea how long he might have stood there if the door hadn't suddenly opened behind him, cracking him painfully in the back. It was Paul Jannings. "Excuse me, Johnny," he said. "I had no idea you came in here to meditate."

He passed Tell without waiting for a response (he wouldn't have got one in any case, Tell thought later; his tongue had been frozen to the roof of his mouth), and headed for the stalls. Tell was able to walk over to the first urinal and unzip his fly, doing these things only because he thought Paul might enjoy it too much if he turned and scurried out. There had been a time not so long ago when he had considered Paul a friend—maybe his only friend, at least in New York. Times had certainly changed.

Tell stood at the urinal for ten seconds or so, then flushed it. He headed for the door, then stopped. He turned around, took two quiet on-tiptoe steps, bent, and looked under the door of the first stall. The sneakers were still there, now surrounded by mounds of dead flies.

So were Paul Jannings's Gucci loafers.

What Tell was seeing looked like a double exposure, or one of the hokey ghost effects from the old Topper TV program. First he would be seeing Paul's loafers through the sneakers; then the sneakers would seem to solidify and he would be seeing them through the loafers, as if Paul were the ghost. Except, even when he was seeing

through them, Paul's loafers made little shifts and movements, while the sneakers remained as immobile as always.

Tell left. For the first time in two weeks he felt calm.

*

The next day he did what he probably should have done at once: he took Georgie Ronkler out to lunch and asked him if he had ever heard any strange tales or rumors about the building which used to be called Music City. Why he hadn't thought of doing this earlier was a puzzle to him. He only knew that what had happened yesterday seemed to have cleared his mind somehow, like a brisk slap or a faceful of cold water. Georgie might not know anything, but he might; he had been working with Paul for at least seven years, and a lot of that work had been done at Music City.

"Oh, the ghost, you mean?" Georgie asked, and laughed. They were in Cartin's, a deli-restaurant on Sixth Avenue, and the place was noon-noisy. Georgie bit into his corned-beef sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and sipped some of his cream soda through the two straws poked into the bottle. "Who told you 'bout that, Johnny?"

"Oh, one of the janitors, I guess," Tell said. His voice was perfectly even.

"You sure you didn't see him?" Georgie asked, and winked. This was as close as Paul's long-time assistant could get to teasing.

"Nope." Nor had he, actually. Just the sneakers. And some dead bugs.

"Yeah, well, it's pretty much died down now, but for awhile it was all anybody ever talked about—how the guy was haunting the place. He got it right up there on the third floor, you know. In the john." Georgie raised his hands, trembled them beside his peach-fuzzy cheeks, hummed a few bars of The Twilight Zone theme, and tried to look ominous. This was an expression he was incapable of achieving.

“Yes,” Tell said. “That’s what I heard. But the janitor wouldn’t tell me any more, or maybe he didn’t know any more. He just laughed and walked away.”

“It happened before I started to work with Paul. Paul was the one who told me about it.”

“He never saw the ghost himself?” Tell asked, knowing the answer. Yesterday Paul had been sitting in it. Shitting in it, to be perfectly vulgarly truthful.

“No, he used to laugh about it.” Georgie put his sandwich down. “You know how he can be sometimes. Just a little m-mean.” If forced to say something even slightly negative about someone, Georgie developed a mild stutter.

“I know. But never mind Paul; who was this ghost? What happened to him?”

“Oh, he was just some dope pusher,” Georgie said. “This was back in 1972 or ‘73, I guess, when Paul was just starting out—he was only an assistant mixer himself, back then. Just before the slump.”

Tell nodded. From 1975 until 1980 or so, the rock industry had lain becalmed in the horse latitudes. Kids spent their money on video games instead of records. For perhaps the fiftieth time since 1955, the pundits announced the death of rock and roll. And, as on other occasions, it proved to be a lively corpse. Video games topped out; MTV checked in; a fresh wave of stars arrived from England; Bruce Springsteen released Born in the U.S.A.; rap and hip-hop began to turn some numbers as well as heads.

“Before the slump, record-company execs used to deliver coke backstage in their attache cases before big shows,” Georgie said. “I was concert-mixing back then, and I saw it happen. There was one guy—he’s been dead since 1978, but you’d know his name if I said it—who used to get a jar of olives from his label before every gig. The jar would come wrapped up in pretty paper with bows and ribbon and

everything. Only instead of water, the olives came packed in cocaine. He used to put them in his drinks. Called them b-b-blast-off martinis."

"I bet they were, too," Tell said.

"Well, back then lots of people thought cocaine was almost like a vitamin," Georgia said. "They said it didn't hook you like heroin or f-fuck you over the next day like booze. And this building, man, this building was a regular snowstorm. Pills and pot and hash too, but cocaine was the hot item. And this guy—"

"What was his name?"

Georgie shrugged. "I don't know. Paul never said and I never heard it from anyone in the building—not that I remember, anyway. But he was s-supposed to be like one of the deli delivery boys you see going up and down in the elevators with coffee and doughnuts and b-bagels. Only instead of delivering coffee-and, this guy delivered dope. You'd see him two or three times a week, riding all the way up and then working his way down. He'd have a topcoat slung over his arm and an alligator-skin briefcase in that hand. He kept the overcoat over his arm even when it was hot. That was so people wouldn't see the cuff. But I guess sometimes they did a-a-anyway."

"The what?"

"C-C-Cuff," Georgie said, spraying out bits of bread and corned beef and immediately going crimson. "Gee, Johnny, I'm sorry."

"No problem. You want another cream soda?"

"Yes, thanks," Georgie said gratefully.

Tell signalled the waitress.

"So he was a delivery boy," he said, mostly to put Georgie at his ease again—Georgie was still patting his lips with his napkin.

“That’s right.” The fresh cream soda arrived and Georgie drank some. “When he got off the elevator on the eighth floor, the briefcase chained to his wrist would be full of dope. When he got off it on the ground floor again, it would be full of money.”

“Best trick since lead into gold,” Tell said.

“Yeah, but in the end the magic ran out. One day he only made it down to the third floor. Someone offed him in the men’s room.”

“Knifed him?”

“What I heard was that someone opened the door of the stall where he was s-sitting and stuck a pencil in his eye.”

For just a moment Tell saw it as vividly as he had seen the crumpled bag under the imagined conspirators’ restaurant table: a Berol Black Warrior, sharpened to an exquisite point, sliding forward through the air and then shearing into the startled circle of pupil. The pop of the eyeball. He winced.

Georgia nodded. “G-G-Gross, huh? But it’s probably not true. I mean, not that part. Probably someone just, you know, stuck him.”

“Yes.”

“But whoever it was must have had something sharp with him, all right,” Georgie said.

“He did?”

“Yes. Because the briefcase was gone.”

Tell looked at Georgie. He could see this, too. Even before Georgie told him the rest he could see it.

“When the cops came and took the guy off the toilet, they found his left hand in the b-bowl.”

“Oh,” Tell said.

Georgie looked down at his plate. There was still half a sandwich on it. “I guess maybe I’m f-f-full,” he said, and smiled uneasily.

*

On their way back to the studio, Tell asked, “So the guy’s ghost is supposed to haunt … what, that bathroom?” And suddenly he laughed, because, gruesome as the story had been, there was something comic in the idea of a ghost haunting a shithouse.

Georgie smiled. “You know people. At first that was what they said. When I started in working with Paul, guys would tell me they’d seen him in there. Not all of him, just his sneakers under the stall door.”

“Just his sneakers, huh? What a hoot.”

“Yeah. That’s how you’d know they were making it up, or imagining it, because you only heard it from guys who knew him when he was alive. From guys who knew he wore sneakers.”

Tell, who had been a know-nothing kid still living in rural Pennsylvania when the murder happened, nodded. They had arrived at Music City. As they walked across the lobby toward the elevators, Georgie said, “But you know how fast the turnover is in this business. Here today and gone tomorrow. I doubt if there’s anybody left in the building who was working here then, except maybe for Paul and a few of the j-janitors, and none of them would have bought from the guy.”

“Guess not.”

“No. So you hardly ever hear the story anymore, and no one s-sees the guy anymore.”

They were at the elevators.

“Georgie, why do you stick with Paul?”

Although Georgie lowered his head and the tips of his ears turned a bright red, he did not sound really surprised at this abrupt shift in direction. “Why not? He takes care of me.”

Do you sleep with him, Georgie? The question occurred at once, a natural outgrowth, Tell supposed, of the previous question, but he wouldn’t ask. Didn’t really dare to ask. Because he thought Georgie would give him an honest answer.

Tell, who could barely bring himself to talk to strangers and hardly ever made friends, suddenly hugged Georgie Ronkler. Georgie hugged him back without looking up at him. Then they stepped away from each other, and the elevator came, and the mix continued, and the following evening, at six-fifteen, as Jannings was picking up his papers (and pointedly not looking in Tell’s direction), Tell stepped into the third-floor men’s room to get a look at the owner of the white sneakers.

*

Talking with Georgie, he’d had a sudden revelation … or perhaps you called something this strong an epiphany. It was this: sometimes you could get rid of the ghosts that were haunting your life if you could only work up enough courage to face them.

There was no lapse in consciousness this time, nor any sensation of fear… only that slow steady deep drumming in his chest. All his senses had been heightened. He smelled chlorine, the pink disinfectant cakes in the urinals, old farts. He could see minute cracks in the paint on the wall, and chips on the pipes. He could hear the hollow click of his heels as he walked toward the first stall.

The sneakers were now almost buried in the corpses of dead spiders and flies.

There were only one or two at first. Because there was no need for them to die until the sneakers were there, and they weren’t there until I saw them there.

“Why me?” he asked clearly in the stillness.

The sneakers didn’t move and no voice answered.

“I didn’t know you, I never met you, I don’t take the kind of stuff you sold and never did. So why me?”

One of the sneakers twitched. There was a papery rustle of dead flies. Then the sneaker—it was the mislaced one—settled back.

Tell pushed the stall door open. One hinge shrieked in properly gothic fashion. And there it was. Mystery guest, sign in, please, Tell thought.

The mystery guest sat on the john with one hand lying limply on his thigh. He was much as Tell had seen him in his dreams, with this difference: there was only the single hand. The other arm ended in a dusty maroon stump to which several more flies had adhered. It was only now that Tell realized he had never noticed Sneakers’s pants (and didn’t you always notice the way lowered pants bunched up over the shoes if you happened to glance under a bathroom stall? something helplessly comic, or just defenseless, or one on account of the other?). He hadn’t because they were up, belt buckled, fly zipped. They were bell-bottoms. Tell tried to remember when bells had gone out of fashion and couldn’t.

Above the bells Sneakers wore a blue chambray work-shirt with an appliqued peace symbol on each flap pocket. He had parted his hair on the right. Tell could see dead flies in the part. From the hook on the back of the door hung the topcoat of which Georgie had told him. There were dead flies on its slumped shoulders.

There was a grating sound not entirely unlike the one the hinge had made. It was the tendons in the dead man’s neck, Tell realized. Sneakers was raising his head. Now he looked at him, and Tell saw with no sense of surprise whatever that, except for the two inches of pencil protruding from the socket of his right eye, it was the same

face that looked out of the shaving mirror at him every day. Sneakers was him and he was Sneakers.

“I knew you were ready,” he told himself in the hoarse toneless voice of a man who has not used his vocal cords in a long time.

“I’m not,” Tell said. “Go away.”

“To know the truth of it, I mean,” Tell told Tell, and the Tell standing in the stall doorway saw circles of white powder around the nostrils of the Tell sitting on the john. He had been using as well as pushing, it seemed. He had come in here for a short snort; someone had opened the stall door and stuck a pencil in his eye. But who committed murder by pencil? Maybe only someone who committed the crime on …

“Oh, call it impulse,” Sneakers said in his hoarse and toneless voice. “The world-famous impulse crime.”

And Tell—the Tell standing in the stall doorway—understood that was exactly what it had been, no matter what Georgie might think. The killer hadn’t looked under the door of the stall and Sneakers had forgotten to flip the little hinged latch. Two converging vectors of coincidence that, under other circumstances, would have called for no more than a mumbled “Excuse me” and a hasty retreat. This time, however, something different had happened. This time it had led to a spur-of-the-moment murder.

“I didn’t forget the latch,” Sneakers told him in his toneless husk of a voice. “It was broken.”

Yes, all right, the latch had been broken. It didn’t make any difference. And the pencil? Tell was positive the killer had been holding it in his hand when he pushed open the stall door, but not as a murder weapon. He had been holding it only because sometimes you wanted something to hold—a cigarette, a bunch of keys, a pen or pencil to fiddle with. Tell thought maybe the pencil had been in Sneakers’s eye before either of them had any idea that the killer was

going to put it there. Then, probably because the killer had also been a customer who knew what was in the briefcase, he had closed the door again, leaving his victim seated on the john, had exited the building, got … well, got something …

“He went to a hardware store five blocks over and bought a hacksaw,” Sneakers said in his toneless voice, and Tell suddenly realized it wasn’t his face anymore; it was the face of a man who looked about thirty, and vaguely Native American. Tell’s hair was gingery-blonde, and so had this man’s been at first, but now it was a coarse, dull black.

He suddenly realized something else—realized it the way you realize things in dreams: when people see ghosts, they always see themselves first. Why? For the same reason deep divers pause on their way to the surface, knowing that if they rise too fast they will get nitrogen bubbles in their blood and suffer, perhaps die, in agony. There were reality bends, as well.

“Perception changes once you get past what’s natural, doesn’t it?” Tell asked hoarsely. “And that’s why life has been so weird for me lately. Something inside me’s been gearing up to deal with … well, to deal with you.”

The dead man shrugged. Flies tumbled dryly from his shoulders. “You tell me, Cabbage—you got the head on you.”

“All right,” Tell said. “I will. He bought a hacksaw and the clerk put it in a bag for him and he came back. He wasn’t a bit worried. After all, if someone had already found you, he’d know; there’d be a big crowd around the door. That’s the way he’d figure. Maybe cops already, too. If things looked normal, he’d go on in and get the briefcase.”

“He tried the chain first,” the harsh voice said. “When that didn’t work, he used the saw to cut off my hand.”

They looked at each other. Tell suddenly realized he could see the toilet seat and the dirty white tiles of the back wall behind the

corpse… the corpse that was, finally, becoming a real ghost.

“You know now?” it asked Tell. “Why it was you?”

“Yes. You had to tell someone.”

“No—history is shit,” the ghost said, and then smiled a smile of such sunken malevolence that Tell was struck by horror. “But knowing sometimes does some good … if you’re still alive, that is.” It paused. “You forgot to ask your friend Georgie something important, Tell. Something he might not have been so honest about.”

“What?” he asked, but was no longer sure he really wanted to know.

“Who my biggest third-floor customer was in those days. Who was into me for almost eight thousand dollars. Who had been cut off. Who went to a rehab in Rhode Island and got clean two months after I died. Who won’t even go near the white powder these days. Georgie wasn’t here back then, but I think he knows the answer to all those questions just the same. Because he hears people talk. Have you ever noticed the way people talk around Georgie, as if he isn’t there?”

Tell nodded.

“And there’s no stutter in his brain. I think he knows, all right. He’d never tell, Tell, but I think he knows.”

The face began to change again, and now the features swimming out of that primordial fog were saturnine and finely chiseled. Paul Jannings’s features.

“No,” Tell whispered.

“He got better than thirty grand,” the dead man with Paul’s face said. “It’s how he paid for rehab … with plenty left over for all the vices he didn’t give up.”

And suddenly the figure on the toilet seat was fading out entirely. A moment later it was gone. Tell looked down at the floor and saw the flies were gone, too.

He no longer needed to go to the bathroom. He went back into the control room, told Paul Jannings he was a worthless bastard, paused just long enough to relish the expression of utter stunned surprise on Paul's face, and then walked out the door. There would be other jobs; he was good enough at what he did to be able to count on that. Knowing it, however, was something of a revelation. Not the day's first, but definitely the day's best.

When he got back to his apartment, he went straight through the living room and to the john. His need to relieve himself had returned —had become rather pressing, in fact—but that was all right; that was just another part of being alive. "A regular man is a happy man," he said to the white tile walls. He turned a little, grabbed the current issue of Rolling Stone from where he'd left it on the toilet tank, opened it to the Random Notes column, and began to read.