



FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *SAVAGE SEASON*

HAP AND LEONARD

RIDE AGAIN

JOE R. LANSDALE



NOW A SUNDANCE TV ORIGINAL SERIES

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“Read Joe Lansdale and see the true writer’s gift.”

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—*Mystery Scene*

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—*Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*

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HAP AND LEONARD RIDE AGAIN

Also by Joe R. Lansdale

Hap and Leonard mysteries

- Savage Season* (1990)
Mucho Mojo (1994)
The Two-Bear Mambo (1995)
Bad Chili (1997)
Rumble Tumble (1998)
Veil's Visit: A Taste of Hap and Leonard (1999)
Captains Outrageous (2001)
Vanilla Ride (2009)
Hyenas (2011)
Devil Red (2011)
Dead Aim (2013)
Honky Tonk Samurai (2016)

The Drive-In series

- The Drive-In: A "B" Movie with Blood and Popcorn, Made in Texas* (1988)
The Drive-In 2: Not Just One of Them Sequels (1989)
The Drive-In: A Double-Feature Omnibus (1997)
The Drive-In: The Bus Tour (2005)
The Complete Drive-In (2009, omnibus)

Ned the Seal

- Zeppelins West* (2001)
Flaming London (2005)
Flaming Zeppelins: The Adventures of Ned the Seal (2010)

Other novels

- Act of Love* (1981)
Texas Night Riders (1983, as Ray Slater)
Dead in the West (1986)
The Magic Wagon (1986)
The Nightrunners (1987)
Cold in July (1989)
Batman: Captured by the Engines (1991)
Tarzan: The Lost Adventure (1995, with Edgar Rice Burroughs)
The Boar (1998)
Freezer Burn (1999)
Waltz of Shadows (1999)
Something Lumber This Way Comes (1999)
The Big Blow (2000)
Blood Dance (2000)
The Bottoms (2000)
A Fine Dark Line (2002)
Sunset and Sawdust (2004)
Lost Echoes (2007)
Leather Maiden (2008)
All the Earth, Thrown to the Sky (2011)
The Ape Man's Brother (2012)
Edge of Dark Water (2012)
Hot in December (2013)
The Thicket (2013)
Black Hat Jack (2014)
Prisoner 489 (2014)
Paradise Sky (2015)
Fender Lizards (2015)

For Lowell Northrop.
Thanks for your determination and dedication.



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Tachyon | San Francisco



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An Appreciation of Joe R. Lansdale by Michael Koryta

Different writers have different goals, but there are—or should be—some constants. Here are a few: memorable characters, original voice, stories that make the reader feel something.

I can think of many writers who have achieved those things. Then I think of Joe Lansdale, who has achieved them, lapped them, and redefined them. This wonderful collection of the tales of Hap Collins and Leonard Pine is—somehow—just a taste of the Lansdale oeuvre, but it is a delicious one.

Memorable characters? Meet Hap, a former social activist and a “white trash rebel,” and Leonard, a black, gay, Vietnam veteran and Republican voter. In the hands of many writers, this mix would be disastrous, an overwrought pairing designed to conceal inauthentic storytelling. In Lansdale’s hands, not only does the duo work, but they seem natural together, playing off each other in beautiful fashion. The dialogue exchanges between these two, as typified in the novella “Hyenas,” are filled with more gems than a jewelry store:

“Well,” Leonard said, “in cases like that, the gut is often right. We still know a shark when we see one. That’s why we crawled out of the

water and became men in the first place. Only thing is, some of the sharks crawled out after us.”

“That would be the lawyers,” I said.

There’s a smile on every page and an outright howler on every other, but it’s in the momentum of the stories that I’ve always found the true genius. Hap and Leonard do a lot of chatting, sure, a unique patter that seasons their adventures, but they’re always in motion, and the dialogue is truly in service of the story, not the other way around. A lot of writers with a gifted ear for dialogue—and Joe has one of the best ears around—can get caught in a trap built by their own abilities, creating wandering exchanges that don’t do much except show off. Joe’s stories are constantly in motion, and the dialogue reflects that:

“Ready?” I said.

“I was born ready.” Leonard said.

“Scared?”

“I don’t get scared.”

“Bullshit.”

“Okay, I’m a little scared. Let’s get it done before I get more scared.”

We started walking.

There you go—they started walking. They’re going somewhere, these two, and you’ll find yourself turning pages at paper-cut speed to keep up, watching a remarkable feat where Joe Lansdale balances violence and humor, tension and howling laughter, in a way that feels organic, unforced, and perfectly original. Each story or novel seems to begin in mid-sentence, with the sense that you’d best hustle along and catch up or you’re going to be left behind. There’s a confidence to the prose that is simply masterful, a trust in both voice and reader.

There is also—and I think this is overlooked in the Hap and Leonard stories—a hell of a lot of wisdom. Amid the fun and between the punches, there’s the voice of a writer who at times resembles Twain himself—and, yes, I really mean that, and, no, I do not say it lightly or easily.

In “The Boy Who Became Invisible,” a story of Hap in his early years, Lansdale does more than make the reader feel something—he makes you hurt. The early pages, a story of seemingly casual schoolyard bullying, show the making of the man we will know as Hap.

That hit me pretty hard, but I’m ashamed to say not hard enough, Hap thinks of his own role, his moral acquiescence to something beneath him. His one-time friend, Jesse, is becoming a target of ridicule, and what Lansdale has to say about it speaks not just to schoolyard torment but to the dangers of group think, of what happens when you compromise personal integrity to just go along with the flow. When the kids laugh at Jesse, you’ll hurt for him, and hurt for Hap, I assure you. But better than that, and more impressive—you’ll hurt *because* of Hap. And because of yourself. That is when the character-reader bond has reached an emotional height, and it’s a special experience.

When Jesse spoke to me, if no one was looking, I would nod.

We all carry memories of shame, embarrassment over our own conduct. Lansdale isn’t directing you to examine them; he’s too good a writer for that. The reflection is a product of the story, and all the great things—laughter, fear, profundity—that come from his work will *always* come from the story. While many writers repeat the show don’t tell cliché, Joe Lansdale lives it. If you don’t believe me, wait until you get to the last line of “The Boy Who Became Invisible.” See how long that one lingers.

Again, this is merely a taste of a remarkable body of work. That's staggering to consider, and inspiring.

I just have a knack to aim at something and hit it, Hap reflects on his shooting ability in "Hyenas," and that's the way reading Lansdale feels—effortless talent, a knack so natural that he just leans back in his chair, puts his feet up, and spins a yarn. Meet him in person, and you'll leave thinking the same thing, that this stuff comes easily, that he shares great storytelling as naturally as most of us exhale.

And I'm here to tell you it's bullshit.

Does Joe Lansdale, like Hap Collins, have one hell of a lot of natural talent, a "knack" for hitting stories out of the park and dropping one-liners that are the envy of professional comedians? Sure. Does it come easily? No. It comes from a lifetime of dedicated work, a man committed to craft, a man so aware of how story works and why that he can fool us into thinking it's effortless. William Blundell once said, "Easy writing makes hard reading. Hard writing makes easy reading."

I think of that line when I read Hap and Leonard, and when I read Joe Lansdale in general. I think about how smooth these stories go down, each line so razor-edged, each action scene so perfectly choreographed, and I think—this guy has worked awfully hard so the reader doesn't have to.

You have in your hands a collection by a master. Enjoy it, treasure it, and as you breeze through with a smile on your face and some head-nodding over bits of polished wisdom, be damn grateful that Joe Lansdale has put in the work to deliver it so well. I assure you, the writing is not easy.

But the reading? It's an absolute joy. You'd best get started. Hap and Leonard are already in motion, I assure you, and you're going to want to catch up.

Michael Koryta is the *New York Times* bestselling author of eleven suspense and horror novels.

Joe R. Lansdale, Hap and Leonard, and Me by Bill Crider

I like to tell people that I'm so old I can remember when Joe Lansdale said he didn't think he'd ever write a series. He may deny he said that, and I can't prove that he did because I wasn't wearing a wire at the time. But that's the way I remember it, and I should put a disclaimer in right here. Everything that I remember is suspect and might not even be true. I'll paraphrase Mark Twain here (I'll get back to Twain later) and say that my memory is so good that I can remember things that didn't even happen. Those things are true to me, however, and I think it's worth setting some of them down so that future literary critics can mine my comments for information. They're a little bit of the history of Texas writing from the perspective of someone who was around to witness it, whether his memory is reliable or not.

Let me start from the beginning.

I first met Joe R. Lansdale on April Fools Day back in 1979. He may not recall that, either, but I'm certain on this point. It was probably an appropriate day for us to meet, too, though I thought nothing about it at the time. We were both at the AggieCon X, a science-fiction convention at Texas A&M

University. The guests of honor that year were Theodore Sturgeon and Boris Vallejo. Wilson Tucker was the toastmaster, and he told us that the War of 1812 was fought in 1814. You could look it up.

Neither Joe nor I was a well-known writer at the time. I'd published pretty much nothing except a lot of reviews of crime fiction and a few essays about it in various fanzines. Joe might well have been selling fiction and nonfiction by that time, but it wasn't anything anybody would have heard of. As incredible as it may seem, some of it might not even have been reprinted. However, in spite of his relative obscurity at the time, I'd seen Joe's name attached to a few reviews and letters in some of the same fanzines I was publishing in, primarily one called *The Mystery FANcier*, and because he was from Texas, his name stuck with me.

I didn't cross Joe's path during the convention itself, or if I did, I don't remember it. On the final day of the con, my late wife, Judy, and I were in the Memorial Student Center where the convention was held in those days. We were getting ready to leave and had headed back to our room to get our luggage. As we walked down a hallway near one of the entrances to the dealers' room (I could take you to the exact spot even today), we stopped near a young man and woman. I was trying to decide whether to make one final run through the dealers' room, and I didn't really notice the man because the woman was (and still is) much better looking. Judy told me to forget the dealers' room, and we were about to move on when I happened to glance at the man's name tag and saw that he was claiming to be Joe Lansdale.

I'm not usually a guy who'll open a conversation with a stranger. I'm socially awkward and the very picture of an introvert (quite the opposite of Joe, as I learned), but Judy and I had been wandering around the convention all weekend

without speaking to anyone, and I thought we might as well get acquainted with one person. So I introduced myself. Joe seemed a little suspicious at first when I told him that I knew him from another fandom. Maybe he thought it was some kind of April Fools joke. However, after I told him that I'd read his letters and reviews in *The Mystery FANcier*, he relaxed and pretended that he recognized my name, too. He introduced his wife, Karen, and we talked for a few minutes. Not long, but long enough to exchange addresses. Almost as soon as we got home, we began a correspondence.

This correspondence was conducted in the quaint manner of the time, by means of typewritten letters on paper that was folded, placed in envelopes, and put in the U.S. mail, after which time the letter would reach the recipient within a few days. It seems like a tedious process compared to email, but it worked just fine for me and Joe. We became friends by way of our letters, and every year we'd get together at AggieCon and talk about the same things we wrote about in the letters: writing, reading, movies, TV, and just about anything that interested us. There was hardly anything that didn't interest us, to be honest, and the discussions were wide-ranging, indeed. We covered just about everything, from why Mars needs chickens to why Winston Churchill said (or didn't say) that the British naval tradition was nothing but "rum, sodomy, and the lash." Shoes and ships and sealing wax probably got into the conversation, too.

Many more people than Joe and I got involved in these discussions. A number of couches lined the hallway where we met, and often two or three other couches would be dragged to where we were. People sat on the floor, as well. The core group for many years consisted of me and Judy, Joe, Scott Cupp, Willie Siros, and Neal Barrett, Jr. I can't remember all of the others who dropped by, but I know that Tom Knowles, Lewis Shiner,

Henry Melton, Kurt Baty, Bill Page, and Jayme Lynn Blaschke showed up at one time or another. Sometimes the convention guests would stop and talk, too. I know that Greg Bear and David Drake did when they were the guests of honor.

Whatever else we talked about, the main topic was always writing. Not that everybody there wanted to write and publish, but most of us did, and a lot of us succeeded. Neal, of course, had succeeded already, and Joe and I were working on it. In 1981, both he and I published novels. His was *Act of Love*, a novel about a serial killer on the loose in Houston. It was published by Zebra Books, with one of its many fondly remembered knives-in-fresh-fruit covers. Joe's had an impaled strawberry, I believe. Mine was *The Coyote Connection*, one of hundreds of Nick Carter novels in that long-running series. It was written in collaboration with a friend, and here's a big difference between me and Joe. I would have been quite content to spend the rest of my life writing Nick Carter novels, and I might well have done just that had the editor who liked the proposals my co-author and I sent her not moved on. Joe, on the other hand, had no intention of spending the rest of his life writing novels about serial killers.

That was because Joe had more than talent. He had ambition, and he had a powerful confidence in his writing. I had neither one, and after the new Nick Carter editor nixed the proposals my co-author and I had sent to the previous editor, I took a look at the other novel I'd been working on and stuck it in a desk drawer and forgot it.

Joe kept writing, but he didn't stick to crime. From the very start, he was mashing up genres and selling a good many stories while also writing all kinds of things that nobody would buy. He didn't let the things that didn't sell bother him. He was too busy with books like *The Nightrunners*, *The Drive-In*, and

The Magic Wagon to worry. In 1989, he published *Cold in July*, which I think of as something of a breakthrough novel. It was a crime novel, but it wasn't like *Act of Love*. It was about ordinary people in East Texas who found themselves in an extraordinary situation, with some savage violence but with some humor and a core of humanity and decency that would distinguish Joe's books from then on.

A few years before *Cold in July*, I'd pulled my abortive novel out of my desk drawer because Joe had suggested we collaborate on a book. I sent him the fifty pages I'd written, but he soon sent them back. His career had started to take off. All those things that nobody would buy were selling now, and he didn't have time for a lengthy collaboration. And he said that the manuscript was fine just like it was and didn't need anything from him to help it along. I eventually finished the book on my own and sold it.

When I got the acceptance letter for my novel, the editor concluded by saying, "You are working on a sequel, aren't you?" The honest answer to that question would have been, "Nope. I never dreamed I'd sell that book, much less another one." This wasn't the answer I gave, however. I said, "Of course I'm working on a sequel." Soon after I sent that letter, I was at the typewriter (this was a long time ago, remember), and the Sheriff Dan Rhodes series is still going as I write this, with nearly twenty-five books and a lot of short stories in it now.

Which brings me at last to Hap Collins and Leonard Pine, the dynamic duo of East Texas who first appeared in *Savage Season* in 1990. It was a paperback original, and nobody who's seen the cover with its dramatic painting of a woman's hand with a nail driven right through the middle is likely to forget it. I remember considerable discussion of that cover at the AggieCon after the book appeared. Would people buy a book

with a cover like that, or would they be put off by it? We never came up with a definitive answer, though we all agreed that it was an accurate depiction of the contents.

The other topic of discussion related to the book was about series characters. By that time, I'd published five books in the Sheriff Rhodes series, so I considered myself an expert on the topic. Joe said he didn't like the idea of writing a series. It was too confining. He had too many ideas, too many different books he wanted to write, too many genres he wanted to explore and mash together and generally manhandle. I expect that explains at least in part why it was four years before a second Hap and Leonard novel appeared. By that time a lot of people must have thought the first one was a stand-alone instead of just a great first act.

But I know how it is with writers and characters. When you write a book, the characters don't just go away. They hang around in your head, and sometimes they talk to you. Sometimes they tell you such good stuff that you can't resist sitting down and writing a few sentences about them, and before long you find out you're forty or fifty pages along in what's about to become a much longer manuscript. So you keep writing things down until the characters shut up for a while.

Hap and Leonard must have been pretty insistent talkers, because after *Mucho Mojo* appeared in 1994, the books about them came out with some regularity: *The Two-Bear Mambo* (1995), *Bad Chili* (1997), *Rumble Tumble* (1998), and *Captains Outrageous* (2001). Then the guys went quiet for eight years. It's not that Joe wasn't writing. He was writing a lot, winning about every award there was, including the Edgar presented by the Mystery Writers of America for Best Novel. His bibliography is mighty impressive.

The boys were back at last in 2009 in *Vanilla Ride*, followed by *Devil Red* in 2011, and a couple of novellas, *Hyenas* in 2011

and *Dead Aim* in 2013. A new novel, *Honky Tonk Samurai*, is out in 2016. Not to mention the short stories, several of which are included in this volume. For someone who didn't think he wanted to write a series, Joe's done very well by his characters, and they've done well by him.

And what characters they are. Hap Collins is a working-class kind of guy who, by what must be the merest coincidence, shares a little bit of Lansdale's own background. Joe didn't go to prison for refusing to go to Vietnam as Hap did, but he did oppose the war on moral grounds, and he did refuse to be drafted. Once he makes up his mind, he's like another famous Texan, David Crockett, whose motto was "Be sure you're right, then go ahead." Joe never backed down, and he didn't go off to war. You could probably look up the court case if you were so inclined. Hap didn't back down, either, and served his time in prison. He's still a peaceable sort most of the time, and he doesn't much like guns. Leonard once told him that he had "more bleeding heart than the Democratic Congress." But hurt one of his friends or threaten them, and it's another story. Readers can be forgiven if they get the feeling that had Hap gone to Vietnam, he'd have kicked out the Viet Cong in a few weeks, especially if he'd had Leonard to help him.

Leonard Pine, unlike Hap, isn't a peaceable sort at all. He's black, gay, and often angry, eager to kick anybody's ass at the least excuse. He did go to Vietnam, and when you think about it, that would make both him and Hap about ready to go on Medicare and draw Social Security, assuming they ever paid into those programs, which isn't entirely likely considering their occupations, or lack of them. It's a good thing that fictional characters don't age like us mere mortals, or Hap and Leonard would be having a tough time keeping up their active lifestyles.

Although they sometimes find themselves working as unlicensed investigators for P.I.s named Marvin Hanson or Jim

Bob Luke, Hap and Leonard have most often taken on jobs for friends or helped each other work out personal problems that have turned seriously bad and require some heavy lifting to set right. However, both of them have had real jobs on occasion. Hap has worked in the Tyler rose fields, like his creator; at an aluminum chair factory; and on an offshore oil platform. He also works as a bouncer at various bars now and then, although it's a bit embarrassing to him to be doing work that requires him to beat up grown men. He and Leonard have worked security at a poultry plant, too, although Leonard would prefer to be a bouncer. He's not embarrassed by the work and doesn't mind beating up on anybody at all. As a bouncer, he can work out his anger issues in a more or less acceptable and legal fashion. Leonard also likes to burn down crack houses, but that's not really an occupation. It's more of a hobby.

What Hap and Leonard have instead of steady jobs is a talent for getting into trouble. They can't even take an ocean cruise without getting kicked off the ship and marooned in Mexico. We readers wouldn't have it any other way, of course. If they just sat around and led boring lives, they wouldn't be any fun to read about.

Or maybe they would. One thing that distinguishes the books and makes them so readable is Lansdale's use of language. Or maybe I should say that it's Hap's use of language. Hap is the first-person narrator of his own adventures, after all, and he has a way with a simile. When it's humid, for example, Hap might say that it's "humid as a monkey's armpit." A man's not just fast on the draw. He produces a pistol "quick as a bunny fucks."

I have a theory that you can draw a straight line from Mark Twain's use of the American vernacular to Joe Lansdale's use of it. Here's what Twain says in his explanatory note to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the

extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect; the ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

“I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.”

Lansdale’s use of dialect is equally masterful, although instead of Pike County his territory is East Texas. If I were really going to get far out in my literary theorizing, I’d seize on Twain’s “hap-hazard” comment and write a paper for the Modern Language Association’s annual meeting about how Hap Collins’ first name was derived from Twain’s note. But I’m not teaching anymore, and I don’t have time for high-falutin literary essays. Besides, I might be wrong.

I do know for sure that there’s nothing haphazard about what Lansdale does with words. He’s not just making up the language that appears in Hap’s narratives. He has, or had at one time, people who’d scout around for good phrases to use in his novels. At one of those late-night sessions at a long-ago AggieCon, Joe said that a friend had recently come to him and said, “I got you one.” When Joe asked what it was, the friend said, “It’s hotter than two rats fucking in a wool sock.” Sure enough, that expression turned up on one of the books not long afterward. It’s too bad nobody recorded those gab sessions. History in the making.

And like Twain, Lansdale’s not afraid to use what’s now called “the n-word.” In fact, there might be more instances of it in one of Lansdale’s books than in Twain’s. Lansdale’s despicably racist characters, of which there are many, find nothing offensive about the word, and it just comes naturally

to them, as it does to one in *The Two-Bear Mambo*, who has fond memories of minstrel shows and who thinks Leonard is funny: “I didn’t realize how much I’d missed being around funny niggers. And what I got here is not just some white man in blackface playing nigger, I got the real thing. I got me a genuine, born-of-black-hole nigger.” If you think a situation containing comments like this doesn’t end happily, you’d be right on the money.

Here’s something else. Terrible things are being said in this scene, and terrible things are happening, with even worse things to come, but it’s still very funny in a horrible way. Lansdale can wring humor out of any situation, even this one. You might hate yourself for laughing, you might look back and wish you hadn’t laughed, but you’re going to laugh. It’s the language that does it, as when a man describes Chihuahuas: “Sonofabitches would rather bark and piss than fornicate and eat. That’s the thing about ’em. They got no priorities. My sister had one of them little poots, and she use to jack him off once a week ’cause he was tense. Never could figure out what was wrong with the sonofabitch lickin’ his noodle like any other respectable dog.” You’re not going to find a passage like that in anybody else’s books.

Hap and Leonard deal out a lot of punishment over the course of the series, but they take a lot of punishment, too. More than most men could handle, I think. After the scene from *The Two-Bear Mambo* I quote above, for example, there’s a brawl in which the two come out on the bad end of a serious beating. In *Bad Chili*, we find out about Hap’s first meeting with Jim Bob Luke, just after Hap has been tied to a chair with a car battery attached to his testicles. He’s had a jolt from the battery, too, and if you can’t imagine what something like that might do to a fellow, Lansdale is quite happy to tell you. And he does.

It should be pretty obvious by now that the entire series is not exactly what a reader would want to dip into when looking

for some polite, politically correct fiction or for something to read aloud at a Sunday School picnic. Every book is full of cussing, sex, and heavy-duty violence. Not to mention a lot of laughs. It's a tough act to pull off, but Lansdale is a master at doing it. The opening of *Bad Chili*, which describes Hap and Leonard's battle with the rabid squirrel, is downright hilarious, even though it's also frightening and doesn't end well for the squirrel. Or Hap, for that matter.

No one should get the idea that books full of cussing, sex, and heavy-duty violence can't be socially conscious or present serious ideas and thoughtful commentary. Lansdale's Hap and Leonard works, besides containing all of the above and being funny besides, are also full of thoughtful social commentary, but it's couched in such a fast-moving narrative that some of it would be easy to overlook. Not the criticism of racism, of course. That's everywhere in the books, but you don't have to look too hard to find comments on the environment, politics, relationships, and friendships. Nothing about any of this is obtrusive, but it's all there if you want it.

Hap and Leonard are always true to themselves and to their friends, and while they're willing to use violence if they have to, and kill if they have to, they do have a code of sorts. They believe in sticking up for each other, their friends, and people who need their help. They don't take kindly to insults, and they believe in payback. They're tough, resourceful, and all too human. What's not to like?

I have one other theory about the books and stories about Hap and Leonard. It's that nobody really cares about the plots. (I think this is true of a lot of crime novels, in fact, maybe even my own.) The plot is just the writer's excuse for setting down a tale that ties the pages together. What people really care about is the characters and the writing, or, as Robert B. Parker put it about his own novels, "They like the sound of the words on the

page.” Those two things are what make series books a success. Readers want to find out more about the characters and what they’re up to. It’s almost as if they’re real people, old friends whom you like to hear from every now and then. It doesn’t matter how long the series becomes. Readers don’t want it to end. They want their old friends to endure.

And readers want to keep hearing the author’s voice. It becomes a familiar comfort, and from the first page of each story, you know that you’re hearing something unique to an individual, a way of writing that comes from a particular place within a particular person, something that nobody else can duplicate.

It’s true that people try. A series can continue even after an author’s death if the estate finds a writer to carry it forward. Most often I find these continuations remind me of another story about Mark Twain, when his wife tried to shame him about his cussing by repeating what he said. He told her that she had the words but not the tune. Lansdale has his own tune, and it’s not like anyone else’s. It’s unique, his alone, and it carries the reader along with a sound that nobody else can duplicate. He’s been around for a while now, easily long enough for other writers to try to capture some of the magic that appears on his pages, but if they have the words, they don’t have the tune. Lansdale’s still out there singing his own song, and that’s what we want to hear.

Being an old guy, considerably older than Joe Lansdale, as he’s always quick to remind me, I sometimes get a little nostalgic. It’s been a good many years since we sat up on the second floor of the Memorial Student Center during AggieCon and talked about our books and our editors and how things were going in the writing game. Who knew that Joe Lansdale would become a bestselling writer with movies and a TV series

based on his work or that he'd become a literary god in Italy? (I'm not making that up. You can ask him.)

I was lucky to be around for the birth of Hap and Leonard, and we've all been lucky enough to read the books. This new story collection is a good reason for celebration, as it collects a number of the stories into one volume. Anyone experiencing them for the first time is in for a rare treat. Those of us who have read them before are ready to hear from the guys again and to hear that voice that's like no other. It doesn't get much better than that.

Bill Crider lives in scenic Alvin, Texas, near Houston and the Texas Gulf Coast, where he's suffered the effects of both Hurricane Ike and Hurricane Alicia. He was the Division Chair of English and Humanities at Alvin Community College before his retirement in 2002. Bill is the author of more than fifty published novels and numerous short stories. He won the Anthony Award for best first mystery novel in 1987 for *Too Late to Die*. He and his wife, Judy, won the best short story Anthony in 2002 for "Chocolate Moose." His story "Cranked" from *Damn Near Dead* (Busted Flush Press) was nominated for the Edgar Award, the Anthony Award, and the Derringer Award. It won the latter. He's won the Golden Duck Award for best juvenile science-fiction novel and has been nominated for a Shamus. His latest novel is *Between the Living and the Dead* (St. Martin's). Check out his homepage at www.billcrider.com, or take a look at his peculiar blog at <http://billcrider.blogspot.com>.

Veil's Visit

with Andrew Vachss

1.

Leonard eyed Veil for a long, hard moment and said, "If you're a lawyer, then I can shit a perfectly round turd through a hoop at twenty paces. Blindfolded."

"I am a lawyer," Veil said. "But I'll let your accomplishments speak for themselves."

Veil was average height, dark hair touched with gray, one good eye. The other one roamed a little. He had a beard that could have been used as a Brillo pad, and he was dressed in an expensive suit and shiny shoes, a fancy wristwatch, and ring. He was the only guy I'd ever seen with the kind of presence Leonard has. Scary.

"You still don't look like any kind of lawyer to me," Leonard said.

"He means that as a compliment," I said to Veil. "Leonard doesn't think real highly of your brethren at the bar."

"Oh, you're a bigot?" Veil asked pleasantly, looking directly at Leonard with his one good eye. A very icy eye indeed—I remembered it well.

"The fuck you talking about? Lawyers are all right. They got their purpose. You never know when you might want one of

them to weigh down a rock at the bottom of a lake.” Leonard’s tone had shifted from mildly inquisitive to that of a man who might like to perform a live dissection.

“You think all lawyers are alike, right? But if I said all blacks are alike, you’d think you know something about *me*, right?”

“I knew you were coming to that,” Leonard said.

“Well,” I said. “I think this is really going well. What about you boys?”

Veil and Leonard may not have bonded as well as I had hoped, but they certainly had some things in common. In a way, they were both assholes. I, of course, exist on a higher plane.

“You wearing an Armani suit, must have set you back a thousand dollars—” Leonard said.

“You know a joint where I can get suits like this for a lousy one grand, I’ll stop there on my way back and pick up a couple dozen,” Veil said.

“Yeah, fine,” Leonard said. “Gold Rolex, diamond ring . . . how much all *that* set you back?”

“It was a gift,” Veil said.

“Sure,” Leonard said. “You know what you look like?”

“What’s that?”

“You look like Central Casting for a mob movie.”

“And you look like a candidate for a chain gang. Which is kind of why I’m here.”

“You gonna defend me? How you gonna do that? I may not know exactly what you are, but I can bet the farm on this—you ain’t no *Texas* lawyer. Hell, you ain’t no Texan, period.”

“No problem. I can just go *pro hac vice*.”

“I hope that isn’t some kind of sexual act,” Leonard said. “Especially if it involves me and you.”

“It just means I get admitted to the bar for one case. For the specific litigation. I’ll need local counsel to handle the pleadings, of course. . . .”

“Do I look like a goddamned pleader to you? And you best not say yes.”

“Pleadings’ just means the papers,” Veil said, his voice a model of patience. “Motions, applications . . . stuff like that. You wanted to cop a plea to this, Hap wouldn’t need me. I don’t do that kind of thing. And by the way, I’m doing this for Hap, not you.”

“What is it makes you so special to Hap?” Leonard asked, studying Veil’s face carefully. “What is it that you *do* do?”

“Fight,” Veil said.

“Yeah,” I said. “He *can* do that.”

“Yeah, so can you and me, but that and a rubber will get us a jack-off without mess.” Leonard sighed. He said to Veil, “You know what my problem is?”

“Besides attitude, sure. Says so right on the indictment. You burned down a crack house. For at least the . . . what was it, fourth time? That’s first-degree arson, malicious destruction of property, attempted murder—”

“I didn’t—”

“What? Know anyone was home when you firebombed the dump? Doesn’t matter—the charge is still valid.”

“Yeah, well they can valid *this*,” Leonard said, making a gesture appropriate to his speech.

“You’re looking at a flat dime down in Huntsville,” Veil told him. “That a good enough summary of your ‘problem?’”

“No, it ain’t close,” Leonard said. “Here’s my problem. You come in here wearing a few thousand bucks of fancy stuff, tell me you’re a fighter, but your face looks like you lost a lot more fights than you won. You don’t know jack about Texas law, but you’re gonna work a local jury. And that’s still not my big problem. You know what my big problem is?”

“I figure you’re going to tell me sometime before visiting hours are over,” Veil said.

“My problem is this: Why the hell should I trust you?”

“I trust him,” I said.

“I know, brother. And I trust you. What I don’t trust, on the other hand, is your judgment. The two ain’t necessarily the same thing.”

“Try this, then.” Veil told him. “Homicide. A murder. And nobody’s said a word about it. For almost twenty years.”

“You telling me you and Hap—?”

“I’m telling you there was a homicide. No statute of limitations on that, right? It’s still unsolved. And nobody’s talking.”

“I don’t know. Me and Hap been tight a long time. He’d tell me something like that. I mean, he dropped the rock on someone, I’d know.” Leonard turned to me. “Wouldn’t I?”

I didn’t say anything. Veil was doing the talking.

Veil leaned in close, dropping his voice. “It wasn’t Hap who did it. But Hap knows all about it. And you, if keep your mouth shut long enough, you will too. Then you can decide who to trust. Deal?”

Leonard gave Veil a long, deep look. “Deal,” he finally said, leaning back, waiting to hear the story.

Veil turned and looked at me, and I knew that was my cue to tell it.

2.

“It was back in my semi-hippie days,” I said to Leonard. “Remember when I was all about peace and love?”

“The only ‘piece’ I ever knew you to be about was a piece of ass,” Leonard said kindly. “I always thought you had that long hair so’s it could help you get into fights.”

“Just tell him the fucking story,” Veil said. “Okay? I’ve got work to do, and I can’t do it without Leonard. You two keep

screwing around and the guard's going to roll on back here and—”

“It was in this house on the coast,” I said. “In Oregon. I was living with some folks.”

“Some of those folks being women, of course.”

“Yeah. I was experimenting with different ways of life. I told you about it. Anyway, I hadn't been there long. This house, it wasn't like it was a commune or nothing, but people just . . . came and went, understand? So, one day, this guy comes strolling up. Nice-looking guy. Photographer, he said he was. All loaded down with equipment in his van. He was a traveling man, just working his way around the country. Taking pictures for this book he was doing. He fit in pretty good. You know, he looked the part. Long hair, but a little neater than the rest of us. Suave manner. Took pictures a lot. Nobody really cared. He did his share of the work, kicked in a few bucks for grub. No big deal. I was a little suspicious at first. We always got photographers wanting to ‘document’ us, you know? Mostly wanted pictures of the girls. Especially Sunflower—she had this thing about clothes being ‘inhibiting’ and all. In other words, she was quick to shuck drawers and throw the hair triangle around. But this guy was real peaceful, real calm. I remember one of the guys there said this one had a calm presence. Like the eye of a hurricane.”

“This is motherfucking fascinating and all,” Leonard said, “but considering my particular situation, I wonder if you couldn't, you know, get to the point?”

Seeing as how Leonard never read that part of the Good Book that talked about patience being a virtue, I sped it up a bit. “I was out in the backyard one night,” I said. “Meditating.”

“Masturbating, you mean,” Leonard said.

“I was just getting to that stage with the martial arts and I didn't want any of the damn marijuana smoke getting in my

eyes. I guess I was more conservative about that sort of thing than I realized. It made me nervous just being around it. So I needed some privacy. I wasn't doing the classic meditation thing. Just being alone with my thoughts, trying to find my center."

"Which you never have," Leonard said.

"I'm sitting there, thinking about whatever it was I was thinking about—"

"Pussy," Leonard said.

"And I open my eyes and there he is. Veil."

"That'd be some scary shit," Leonard said.

"Looked about the same he does now."

"Yeah? Was he wearing that Armani suit?"

"Matter a fact, he wasn't," I said. "He looked like everyone else did around there then. Only difference was the pistol."

"I can see how that got your attention," Leonard said.

"It was dark. And I'm no modern firearms expert. But it wasn't the stuff I grew up with, hunting rifles, shotguns, and revolvers. This was a seriously big-ass gun, I can tell you that. I couldn't tell if he was pointing it at me or not. Finally I decided he was just kind of . . . holding it. I asked him—politely, I might add—if there was anything I could do for him, short of volunteering to be shot, and he said, yeah, matter of fact, there was. What he wanted was some information about this photographer guy.

"Now hippie types weren't all that different from cons back then, at least when it came to giving out information to the cops. Cops had a way of thinking you had long hair, you had to be something from Mars out to destroy Mom, apple pie, and the American way."

"Does that mean Texas too?" Leonard asked.

"I believe it did, yes."

"Well, I can see their point. And the apple pie part."

"I could tell this guy was no cop. And he wasn't asking me for evidence-type stuff anyway. Just when the guy had showed up, stuff like that."

Leonard yawned. Sometimes he can be a very crude individual. Veil looked like he always does. Calm.

"Anyway, I started to say I didn't know the guy, then . . . I don't know. There was something about his manner that made me trust him."

"Thank you," Veil said. I wasn't sure if he was being sarcastic or not.

I nodded. "I told him the truth. It wasn't any big deal. Like I said, he wasn't asking anything weird, but I was a little worried. I mean, you know, the gun and all. Then I got stupid and—"

"Oh, *that's* when it happened?" Leonard asked. "That's like the moment it set in?"

I maintained patience—which is what Leonard is always complaining he has to do with *me*—and went on like he hadn't said a word: "—asked him how come he wanted to know all about this guy, and maybe I ought not to be saying anything, and how he ought to take his pistol and go on. I didn't want any trouble, and no one at the place did either.

"So Veil asks the big question: Where is the guy right now? I told him he was out somewhere. Or maybe gone, for all I knew. That's the way things were then. People came and went like cats and you didn't tend to get uptight about it. It was the times."

"Groovy," Leonard said.

"We talk for a while, but, truth was, I didn't *know* anything about the guy, so I really got nothing to say of importance. But, you know, I'm thinking it isn't every day you see a guy looks like Veil walking around with a gun almost the size of my dick."

"Jesus," Leonard said. "Can't ever get away from your dick."

"No, it tends to stay with me."

"How about staying with the story," Veil said, still calm but with an edge to his voice now.

“So I ask Veil, it’s okay with him, I’m going back in the house and get some sleep, and like maybe could he put the gun up ’cause it’s making me nervous. I know I mentioned that gun several times. I’m trying to kind of glide out of there because I figure a guy with a gun has more on his mind than just small talk. I thought he might even be a druggie, though he didn’t look like one. Veil here, he says no problem. But I see he’s not going anywhere, so I don’t move. Somehow, the idea of getting my back to that gun doesn’t appeal to me, and we’re kind of close, and I’m thinking he gets a little closer, I got a small chance of taking the gun away from him. Anyway, we both stick. Studying each other, I think. Neither of us going anywhere.”

“Neither the fuck am I,” Leonard said. “Matter of fact, I think moss is starting to grow on the north side of my ass.”

“All right, partner,” I told him, “here’s the finale. I decide to not go in the house, just sit out there with Veil. We talk a bit about this and that, anything but guns, and we’re quiet a bit. Gets to be real late, I don’t know, maybe four in the morning, and we both hear a motor. Something pulling into the driveway. Then we hear a car door close. Another minute or so, the front door to the house closes too. Veil, without a word to me, gets up and walks around to the drive. I follow him. Even then I think I’m some kind of mediator. That whatever’s going on, maybe I can fix it. I was hell for fixing people’s problems then.”

“You’re still hell for that,” Leonard said.

“Sure enough, there’s the guy’s van. I’m starting to finally snap that Veil hasn’t just showed up for an assassination. He’s investigating, and, well, I don’t know how, but I’m just sort of falling in with him. In spite of his sweet personality, there’s something about me and him that clicked.”

“I adore a love story,” Leonard said.

“So anyway, I wasn’t exactly shocked when Veil put the pistol away, stuck a little flashlight in his teeth, worked the locks on

the guy's van like he had a key. We both climbed in, being real quiet. In the back, under a pile of equipment, we found the . . . pictures."

"Guy was a blackmailer?" Leonard asked, a little interested now.

"They were pictures of kids," I told him. Quiet, so's he'd know what kind of pictures I meant.

Leonard's face changed. I knew then he was thinking about what kind of pictures they were and not liking having to think about it.

"I'd never seen anything like that before and didn't know that sort of thing existed. Oh, I guess, in theory, but not in reality. And the times then, lot of folks were thinking free love and sex was okay for anyone, grown-ups, kids. People who didn't really know anything about life and what this sort of thing was all about, but one look at those pictures and I was educated, and it was an education I didn't want. I've never got over it.

"So he," I said, nodding my head over at Veil, "asks me, where does the guy with the van sleep? Where inside the house, I mean. I tried to explain to him what a crash pad was. I couldn't be sure where he was, or even who he might be with, you understand? Anyway, Veil just looks at me, says it would be a real mess if they found this guy in the house. A mess for us, you know? So he asks me, how about if I go inside, tell the guy it looks like someone tried to break into his van?"

"I won't kid you. I hesitated. Not because I felt any sympathy for that sonofabitch, but because it's not my nature to walk someone off a plank. I was trying to sort of think my way out of it when Veil here told me to take a look at the pictures again. A good look."

"The guy's toast," Leonard said. "Fucker like that, he's toast. I know you, Hap. He's toast."

I nodded at Leonard. "Yeah," I said. "I went inside. Brought the guy out with me. He opens the door to the van, climbs

in the front seat. And there's Veil, in the passenger seat. Veil and that pistol. I went back in the house, watched from the window. I heard the van start up, saw it pull out. I never saw the photographer again. And to tell you the truth, I've never lost a minute's sleep over it. I don't know what that says about me, but I haven't felt a moment of regret."

"It says you have good character," Veil said.

"What I want to know," Leonard said looking at Veil, "is what did you do with the body?"

Veil didn't say anything.

Leonard tried again. "You was a hit man? Is that what Hap here's trying to tell me?"

"It was a long time ago," Veil told him. "It doesn't matter, does it? What matters is: You want to talk to me now?"

3.

The judge looked like nothing so much as a turkey buzzard: tiny head on a long, wrinkled neck and cold, little eyes. Everybody stood up when he entered the courtroom. Lester Rommerly—the local lawyer I went and hired like Veil told me—he told the judge that Veil would be representing Leonard. The judge looked down at Veil.

"Where are you admitted to practice, sir?"

"In New York State, your honor. And in the Federal District Courts of New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Michigan, California, and Massachusetts."

"Get around a bit, do you?"

"On occasion," Veil replied.

"Well sir, you can represent this defendant here. Nothing against the law about that, as you apparently know. I can't help wondering, I must say, how you managed to find yourself way down here."

Veil didn't say anything. And it was obvious after a minute that he wasn't going to. He and the judge just kind of watched each other.

Then the trial started.

The first few witnesses were all government. The fire department guy testified about "the presence of an accelerant" being the tip-off that this was arson, not some accidental fire. Veil got up slowly, started to walk over to the witness box, then stopped. His voice was low, but it carried right through the courtroom.

"Officer, you have any experience with alcoholics?"

"Objection!" The DA shouted.

"Sustained," the judge said, not even looking at Veil.

"Officer," Veil went on like nothing had happened, "you have any experience with dope fiends?"

"Objection!" The DA was on his feet, red-faced.

"Counsel, you are to desist from this line of questioning," the judge said. "The witness is a fireman, not a psychologist."

"Oh, excuse me, your honor," Veil said sweetly. "I misphrased my inquiry. Let me try again: Officer," he said, turning his attention back to the witness, "by 'accelerant,' you mean something like gasoline or kerosene, isn't that correct?"

"Yes," the witness said, cautious in spite of Veil's mild tone.

"Hmmm," Veil said. "Be pretty stupid to keep a can of gasoline right in the house, wouldn't it?"

"Your honor. . .," the DA pleaded.

"Well, I believe he can answer that one," the judge said.

"Yeah, it would," the fire marshal said. "But some folks keep kerosene inside. You know, for heating and all."

"*Thank* you, officer," Veil said, like the witness had just given him this great gift. "And it'd be even stupider to smoke cigarettes in the same house where you kept gasoline . . . or kerosene, wouldn't it?"

“Well, *sure*. I mean, if—”

“Objection!” the DA yelled. “There is no evidence to show that anyone was smoking cigarettes in the house!”

“Ah, my apologies,” Veil said, bowing slightly. “Please consider the question withdrawn. Officer: Be pretty stupid to smoke *crack* in a house with gasoline or kerosene in it, right?”

“Your honor!” the DA cut in. “This is nothing but trickery. This man is trying to tell the jury there was gasoline in the house. And this officer has clearly testified that—”

“—That there *was* either gasoline or kerosene in the house at the time the fire started,” Veil interrupted.

“Not in a damn *can*,” the DA said again.

“Your honor,” Veil said, his voice the soul of reasonableness, “the witness testified that he found a charred can of gasoline in the house. Now it was his expert *opinion* that someone had poured gasoline all over the floor and the walls and then dropped a match. I am merely inquiring if there couldn’t be some *other* way the fire had started.”

The judge, obviously irritated, said, “Then why don’t you just ask him that?”

“Well, Judge, I kind of was doing that. I mean, if one of the crackheads living there had maybe fallen asleep after he got high, you know, nodded out the way they do . . . and the crack pipe fell to the ground, and there was a can of kerosene lying around and—”

“That is *enough!*” the judge cut in. “You are well aware, sir, that when the fire trucks arrived, the house was empty.”

“But the trucks weren’t there when the fire *started*, judge. Maybe the dope fiend felt the flames and ran for his life. I don’t know. I wasn’t there. And I thought the jury—”

“The jury will *disregard* your entire line of questioning, sir.

And unless you have *another* line of questioning for this witness, he is excused.”

Veil bowed.

4.

At the lunch break, I asked him, “What the hell are you doing? Leonard already *told* the police it was him who burned down the crack house.”

“Sure. You just said the magic word: crack house. I want to make sure the jury hears that enough times, that’s all.”

“You think they’re gonna let him off just because—?”

“We’re just getting started,” Veil told me.

5.

“Now officer, prior to placing the defendant under arrest, did you issue the appropriate Miranda warnings?” the DA asked the sheriff’s deputy.

“Yes sir, I did.”

“And did the defendant agree to speak with you?”

“Well . . . he didn’t exactly ‘agree.’ I mean, this ain’t the first time for old Leonard there. We knowed it was him, living right across the road and all. So when we went over there to arrest him, he was just sitting on the porch.”

“But he *did* tell you that he was responsible for the arson, isn’t that correct, officer?”

“Oh yeah. Leonard said he burned it down. Said he’d do it again if those—well, I don’t want to use the language he used here—he’d just burn it down again.”

“No further questions,” the DA said, turning away in triumph.

“Did the defendant resist arrest?” Veil asked on cross-examination.

“Not at all,” the deputy said. “Matter of fact, you could see he was waiting on us.”

“But if he *wanted* to resist arrest, he could have, couldn’t he?”

“I don’t get your meaning,” the deputy said.

“The man means I could kick your ass without breaking a sweat,” Leonard volunteered from the defendant’s table.

The judge pounded his gavel a few times. Leonard shrugged, like he’d just been trying to be helpful.

“Deputy, were you familiar with the location of the fire? You had been there before? In your professional capacity, I mean.” Veil asked him.

“Sure enough,” the deputy answered.

“Fair to say the place was a crack house?” Veil asked.

“No question about that. We probably made a couple of dozen arrests there during the past year alone.”

“You made any *since* the house burned down?”

“You mean . . . at that same address? Of course not.”

“Thank you, officer,” Veil said.

6.

“Doctor, you were on duty on the night of the thirteenth, is that correct?”

“That is correct,” the doctor said, eyeing Veil like a man waiting for the doctor to grease up and begin his proctology exam.

“And your specialty is Emergency Medicine, is that also correct?”

“It is.”

“And when you say ‘on duty,’ you mean you’re in the ER, right?”

"Yes sir."

"In fact, you're in *charge* of the ER, aren't you?"

"I am the physician in charge, if that is what you're asking me, sir. I have nothing to do with administration, so . . ."

"I understand," Veil said in a voice sweet as a preacher explaining scripture. "Now, doctor, have you ever treated patients with burns?"

"Of course," the doctor snapped at him.

"And those range, don't they? I mean, from first-degree to third-degree burns. Which are the worst?"

"Third degree."

"Hmmm . . . I wonder if that's where they got the term, 'Give him the third degree' . . . ?"

"Your Honor. . . ," the DA protested again.

"Mr. Veil, where are you going with this?" the judge asked.

"To the heart of the truth, your honor. And if you'll permit me . . ."

The judge waved a disgusted hand in Veil's direction. Veil kind of waved back. The big diamond glinted on his hand, catching the sun's rays through the high courthouse windows. "Doctor, you treat anybody with third-degree burns the night of the thirteenth?"

"I did not."

"Second-degree burns?"

"No."

"Even *first*-degree burns?"

"You know quite well I did not, sir. This isn't the first time you have asked me these questions."

"Sure, *I* know the answers. But you're telling the jury, doctor, not me. Now you've seen the photographs of the house that was burnt to the ground. Could anyone have been *inside* that house and *not* been burned?"

"I don't see how," the doctor snapped. "But that doesn't mean—"

“Let’s let the jury decide what it means,” Veil cut him off. “Am I right, Judge?”

The judge knew when he was being jerked off, but, having told Veil those exact same words a couple of dozen times during the trial already, he was smart enough to keep his lipless mouth shut.

“All right, doctor. Now we’re coming to the heart of your testimony. See, the reason we have *expert* testimony is that experts, well, they know stuff the average person doesn’t. And they get to explain it to us so we can understand things that happen.”

“Your honor, he’s making a speech!” the DA complained, for maybe the two-hundredth time.

But Veil rolled on like he hadn’t heard a word. “Doctor, can you explain what causes the plague?”

One of the elderly ladies on the jury gasped when Veil said “the plague,” but the doctor went right on: “Well, actually, it is caused by fleas, which are the primary carriers.”

“Fleas? And here all along I thought it was carried by rats,” Veil replied, turning to the jury as if embracing them all in his viewpoint.

“Yes, fleas,” the doctor said. “They are, in fact, fleas especially common to rodents, but *wild* rodents—prairie dogs, chipmunks, and the like.”

“Not squirrels?”

“Only *ground* squirrels,” the doctor answered.

“So, in other words, you mean varmints, right, doctor?”

“I do.”

“The kind of varmints folks go shooting just for sport?”

“Well, some do. But mostly it’s farmers who kill them. And that’s not for sport—that’s to protect their crops,” the doctor said, self-righteously, looking to the jury for support.

“Uh, isn’t it true, doctor, that if you kill *enough* varmints, the fleas just jump over to rats?”

“Well, that’s true. . . .”

“That’s what happened a long time ago, wasn’t it, doctor? The Black Death in Europe—that was bubonic plague, right? Caused by rats with these fleas you talked about? And it killed, what? Twenty-five *million* people?”

“Yes. That’s true. But today, we have certain antibiotics that can—”

“Sure. But plague is still a danger, isn’t it? I mean, if it got loose, it could still kill a whole bunch of innocent folks, right?”

“Yes, that is true.”

“Doctor, just a couple of more questions and we’ll be done. Before there were these special antibiotics, how did folks deal with rat infestation? You know, to protect themselves against plague? What would they do if there was a bunch of these rats in a house?”

“Burn it down,” the doctor said. “Fire is the only—”

“Objection! Relevancy!” the DA shouted.

“Approach the bench,” the judge roared.

Veil didn’t move. “Judge, is he saying that crack *isn’t* a plague? Because it’s my belief—and I know others share it—that the Lord is testing us with this new plague. It’s killing our children, your honor. And it’s sweeping across the—”

“That is *enough!*” the judge shrieked at Veil. “One more word from you, sir, and you will be joining your client in jail tonight.”

“You want me to defend Leonard using sign language?” Veil asked.

A number of folks laughed.

The judge cracked his gavel a few times and, when he was done, they took Veil out in handcuffs.

7.

When I went to visit that night, I was able to talk to both of them. Someone had brought a chess board and pieces in and they were playing. “You’re crazy,” I told Veil.

“Like a fuckin’ fox,” Leonard said. “My man here is right on the money. I mean, he *gets* it. Check.”

“You moved a piece off the board,” Veil said.

“Did not.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“Damn,” Leonard said, pulling the piece out from between his legs and returning it to the board. “For a man with one eye you see a lot. Still check though.”

I shook my head. “Sure. Veil gets it. You, you’re gonna get life by the time he’s done,” I said.

“Everything’ll be fine,” Veil said, studying the chess board. “We can always go to Plan B.”

“And what’s Plan B?” I asked him.

He and Leonard exchanged looks.

8.

“The defense of *what?*” the judge yelled at Veil the next morning.

“The defense of necessity, your honor. It’s right here, in Texas law. In fact, the case of *Texas v. Whitehouse* is directly on point. A man was charged with stealing water from his neighbor by constructing a siphon system. And he did it, all right. But it was during a drought, and if he hadn’t done it, his cattle would’ve starved. So he had to *pay* for the water he took, and that was fair, but he didn’t have to go to prison.”

“And it is your position that your client *had* to burn down the crack . . . I mean, the occupied dwelling across the street from his house to prevent the spread of disease?”

“Exactly, your honor. Like the bubonic plague.”

“Well, you’re not going to argue that nonsense in my court. Go ahead and take your appeal. By the time the court even hears it, your client’ll have been locked down for a good seven-eight years. That’ll hold him.”

9.

Veil faced the jury, his face grim and set. He walked back and forth in front of them for a few minutes, as if getting the feel of the ground. Then he spun around and looked them in the eyes, one by one.

“You think the police can protect you from the plague? From the invasion? No, I’m not talking about aliens, or UFOs, or AIDS, now—I’m talking crack. And it’s here, folks. Right here. You think it can’t happen in your town? You think it’s only Dallas and Houston where they grow those sort of folks? Take a look around. Even in this little town, you all lock your doors at night now, don’t you? And you’ve had shootings right at the high school, haven’t you? You see the churches as full as they used to be? No you don’t. Because things are *changing*, people. The plague is coming, just like the Good Book says. Only it’s not locusts, it’s that crack cocaine. It’s a plague, all right. And it’s carried by rats, just like always. And, like we learned, there isn’t but one way to turn that tide. Fire!

“Now I’m not saying my client set that fire. In fact, I’m asking you to find that he did *not* set that fire. I’m asking you to turn this good citizen, this man who cared about his community, loose. So he can be with you. That’s where he belongs. He stood with you . . . now it’s time for you to stand with him.”

Veil sat down, exhausted like he’d just gone ten rounds with a rough opponent. But, the way they do trials, it’s always the prosecutor who gets to throw the last punch.

And that chubby little bastard of a DA gave it his best shot, going on and on about how two wrongs don't make a right. But you could see him slip a few times. He'd make this snide reference to Leonard being black, or being gay, or just being . . . Leonard, I guess, and, of course that part is kind of understandable. But, exactly like Veil predicted, every time he did it, there was at least one member of the jury who didn't like it. Sure, it's easy to play on people's prejudices—and we got no shortage of *those* down this way, I know—but if there wasn't more good folks than bad, well, the Klan would've been running the state a long time ago.

The judge told the jury what the law was and told them to go out there and come back when they were done. Everybody got up to go to lunch, but Veil didn't move. He motioned me over.

"This is going to be over with real quick, Hap," he said. "One way or the other."

"What if it's the other?"

"Plan B," he said, his face flat as a piece of slate.

10.

The jury was out about an hour. The foreman stood up and said "Not Guilty" about two dozen times—once for every crime they had charged Leonard with.

I was hugging Leonard when Veil tapped me on the shoulder. "Leonard," he said, "you need to go over there and thank those jury people. One at a time. *Sincere*, you understand?"

"What for?" Leonard asked.

"Because this is going to happen again," Veil said. "And maybe next time, one of the rats'll get burned."

Knowing Leonard, I couldn't argue with that. He walked over to the jury and I turned around to say something to Veil. But he was gone.

Death by Chili

“Well, I can almost see murdering someone for a good chili recipe,” Charlie Blank said, “but not quite.”

“What if it had been barbecue?” Leonard asked.

“Now, that’s different.”

“Ah, hah!” I said. “That’s because you’re prejudiced. You think barbecue is *The* Texas food, when any idiot knows it’s chili.”

“Only if you can’t get barbecue,” Charlie said.

“One thing is for sure,” I said. “Goober Smith’s recipe for chili isn’t going to grace anyone’s dinner table from here on out. Other than the person killed him for it, that is.”

It was a cold, rainy afternoon, dark as night, and we were sitting around Leonard’s dining room table drinking coffee and eating vanilla cookies, which Leonard thinks are some kind of food of the gods, but they’re just these plain ole vanilla things that you can eat about twenty-three zillion of and not realize you’ve eaten anything till you get on the scale. Even if you don’t like ’em much, you tend to eat ’em.

Anyway, we were sitting at the table and Charlie was telling us about Goober Smith. It was a story we'd all heard before, but not the details. Charlie, who's a lieutenant on the police force, got the story from someone at the cop shop, someone who had been around in 1978 when Goober got his head blown open and went face down in a bowl of chili.

"Whoever it was came up behind him and let the boom drop," Charlie said. "Killed him deader than the five-cent candy bar, then snuck off with his chili recipe. That recipe used to win all the chili cook-offs around these parts."

"What I wonder is what this person did with the recipe," I said. "If they were stealing it to win cook-offs, it never surfaced. Right?"

"Goober's chili was supposed to be as distinctive as a chicken with dentures. No one could use it if they stole it. Unless they were at home."

"Must have been some really fine chili," Leonard said.

"Jack Mays thought it was the best," Charlie said.

"That the cop told you about this?" I asked.

"Yep. He used to go around to cook-offs all over East Texas tryin' to see if he could get a taste and figure who killed Goober. Solving the murder was kind of an obsession with him. Everyone else had given up. Course, Jack's retired now."

"Now you're on it," I said.

"I tinker with it now and then," Charlie said.

"And how are you tinkering?"

"Not so good. I've looked at it from every angle possible. Why would someone come into Goober's place at night, catch him at the table, shoot him in the back of the head with a Luger, and steal his recipe?"

"What I'd like to know," Leonard said, dunking a cookie, "is how anyone knows his recipe was stolen. He could have had it in his head."

“Nope,” Charlie said. “He was adamant about the fact he kept it under lock and key in his wall safe, and the safe was cracked open and money was still in it. Only thing seems to have been missing was the recipe. Least ways, no one ever found it.”

“*Seemed* to be missing,” Leonard said. “But you don’t know for sure. Right?”

“I guess so,” Charlie said. “Well, it’s all chili through the intestines now, isn’t it?”

“Wasn’t the final official word it was suicide?” I asked.

Charlie nodded. “He was found sitting at the kitchen table, nude. The Luger was on the floor by the chair, and his brains were all over the place, and he was facedown in an empty bowl that had contained chili. There was a pot of it on the stove.”

“What made Jack think it wasn’t suicide?” I asked.

“Funny stuff. The bullet had gone out the top of Goober’s head, hit the ceiling. The casing from the Luger was on the floor behind him, and there was powder residue on his hand. No note.”

“Sounds like suicide to me,” Leonard said.

“Problem was, a Luger ejects its shell forward. You put the barrel to your head, the shell casing would have been thrown forward onto the table or the floor. That wasn’t the case.”

“Could have rolled,” I said.

“Floor behind Goober was raised, a living area. It couldn’t have rolled uphill. And the lead in the ceiling. Had Goober put the gun to his head, even if he’d slanted it, doesn’t seem likely it would have gone into the ceiling at that angle. It could have, I guess, but it doesn’t seem likely. Someone else could hold it at that angle more comfortable. It’s difficult to do it yourself and get those results. Add to it the safe was open and the money was there but there was no chili recipe, and you got a mystery.”

“Did Goober have reason to commit suicide?” Leonard asked.

“He was sick,” Charlie said. “Rumor was it was a bad disease of some kind, but what it looks like is someone came up behind him, shot him with the Luger, wrapped his hand around the gun, and let it fall so it would look like suicide. Then they stole the recipe.”

“The safe blown open?” Leonard asked.

“No. But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t cracked by someone knew how. Or someone had the combination. An old girlfriend was one of the suspects, but nothing ever came of that. Actually, I still have my eye on her.”

“The Luger belong to Goober?” Leonard asked.

“No one knows. Wasn’t registered. A war souvenir. Goober’s dad had been in World War II, so it’s possible it had been passed down, but if it was, that doesn’t mean Goober shot himself with it. Someone could have used it on him.”

“My uncle had a Luger like that,” Leonard said. “A World War II souvenir. I have it now.”

“Hey, I got to go, boys.”

Charlie put on his coat and I walked him to the door. It was very cold out there. Good chili weather. Charlie and I shook hands, and he drove off in the rain.

When I came back inside, Leonard was pouring us fresh cups of coffee.

“That recipe thing, that is kind of weird,” he said. “A real-life mystery.”

“For what it’s worth,” I said.

“I’ve heard about Goober Smith all my life,” Leonard said. “And the stuff about his chili and his murder and the missing recipe, but I never thought there was anything to it until Charlie gave us the skinny.”

“Want to watch a movie tonight? I see *She Creature* is coming on. We could pop some popcorn, get some *Sharp’s*.”

Leonard seemed distant, but he said, “Sure.”

We popped popcorn and watched the movie, but Leonard didn't really seem into it. He had a kind of glassy stare through it all.

I was making out with this marvelous raven-haired beauty, and she was just about to expose her breasts when she grabbed me by the arm and shook me like I was in a paint shaker.

I came awake to Leonard standing by the couch where I slept.

"Hap," he said, shaking me, "I solved the mystery."

"What mystery?"

"Get up."

"You're kidding. I was dreaming of and just about to make love to a black-haired beauty."

"She'll wait."

I pushed the covers down and sat on the edge of the couch. I felt like I had been plowed into the ground for fertilizer. Outside the rain hammered the house like a drum solo.

Leonard turned on the light. He brought a chair to the front of the couch and sat down on it. He was holding a Luger.

"This is my uncle's Luger," Leonard said.

"That's nice. Right now I'd like to shoot you with it."

Leonard held it in front of him. "I'm going to eject a shell."

"How nice."

He did. It flew up and over my head. "That was great, Leonard. Now let's go back to bed."

"Forward, just like Charlie said." Leonard put the Luger in his lap. "But if this is the Luger." He made a gun with his thumb and finger. "And I put it to my head, it wouldn't fire in such a way as to shoot a bullet into the ceiling."

"Which is what Charlie said."

“Right. But, think about this. Goober was naked, as suicides often are. He knows he’s dying, or is going to be terribly ill, so he decides to kill himself. You try and hold the Luger in the normal way, it isn’t comfortable. I mean, you hold it just right it could fire through the head and ceiling, but like I said, it’s not a comfortable way to hold it.”

“I don’t think comfort was on his mind.”

“So he holds it this way, which is really more natural.”

Leonard put his finger to his head, thumb down. “Think about it.”

I did. I was starting to get interested.

“So, when he pulls the trigger, he gets powder burns on his hand, and upside down, it would eject the shell casing backwards, behind Goober.”

“What about the way the bullet went into the ceiling?”

“Well, if it’s flat against the head, it won’t go into the ceiling at all. It could be slanted, held either way, but it’s very comfortable holding it upside down, and easier to give it a slant, and therefore easier to fire through the skull and into the ceiling.”

“As I said, I doubt Goober was all that worried about comfort right then.”

“Okay. But the rest of it adds up pretty good, doesn’t it?”

I thought about that for a moment. “That’s all well and good,” I said, “but that still doesn’t explain the open safe, the missing recipe.”

“I think it does,” Leonard said. “Goober was secretive about his recipe to the point of phobia. So, when he decided to commit suicide it was the one thing he wanted to take with him.”

“But it wasn’t found.”

“Because he ate it.”

“You mean he put it in the chili?”

“That’s what I think. He made up a last batch, tore up the recipe like seasoning, put it in the chili. Had himself a big bowl, then blew his brains out. That way, no one would ever have his recipe. That’s why nothing else was taken from the safe. Simple really. Charlie and Jack are all wet. It wasn’t murder. The first impression was correct. Goober really did kill himself.”

“You know what, Leonard? I think you’re right for a change.”

“Good, now I can go to sleep.”

“Course, it’s all just guess work and will probably never be proven one way or another.”

“I’m satisfied,” Leonard said.

“You going to tell Charlie?”

“Sure. Tomorrow. I want him to know how smart I am.”

Leonard turned off the light, went into the bedroom, and closed the door. I stretched out on the couch and pulled the covers over me. I looked at the ceiling a while.

Sonofagun, I thought. He probably did figure it out.

The rain hammered on the house. Lightning flashed through the curtains over the living room window.

I closed my eyes, hoping the raven-haired beauty would be back.

Lansdale Chili

First, you cook a lot of hamburger meat. I'm not sure how much is a lot, but you know, a lot. Anyway, you brown it, drain off the grease and put it in a pot. Now cut some steak into strips and brown it, cut this up in chunks and put it in the pot. Add a couple cups of water and six to twelve ounces of tomato paste. Put in two teaspoon's of sugar, four teaspoon's of chili powder, and ten cut up juicy jalopena peppers. Stir and add more water, be your own judge, but don't make it too watery.

Now, a dash of cayenne pepper, a dash of tobasco sauce, a teaspoon of garlic or some real chunks of garlic, add one tablespoon of olive oil—that's so it won't all clog up like a brick inside you.

Cut up two to three medium ripe tomatoes and toss this into the mix. Slice up a small onion and add it. Half a teaspoon of oregano. A tablespoon or two of black pepper and a half cup of ketchup.

Let this simmer for a damn long time, adding water when needed, but don't add too much. Keep it thick. If it looks a little watery, then add more ingredients. It's better at this point to add a cat or a parakeet than it is to add too much water.

After a few hours take a Pepcid and have chili.

If it doesn't taste quite right, you probably followed the recipe too closely or didn't take enough Pepcid. Throw it back into the pot, add some more of everything but water, and try again.

If your chili comes out of the pan in wads, then maybe you do need to add some water.

A Bone-Dead Sadness

It was about one o'clock in the afternoon with nothing to do but read email. It was mostly ads. Marvin Hanson was trying to figure out how to filter the ads, and not having much luck at it, when he came across an email to his website that was interesting.

It said:

MR. HANSON. I WANT TO HIRE YOU OR YOUR OPERATIVES, IF YOU HAVE ANY. MONEY IS NOT AN ISSUE. WELL, IT MIGHT BE AN ISSUE IF YOU ASK FOR TOO MUCH, BUT OTHERWISE, IF YOU'RE INTERESTED, COME OUT TO TIMBER LAKE DRIVE, 113, AND TALK TO ME ABOUT THREE P.M. TODAY. MILDRED CRAVER.

Hanson leaned back in his desk chair and thought a moment. He looked at his watch. He had come in late today, starting with lunch, and had only been in the office thirty minutes. It was already one-thirty.

Marvin leaned forward and typed: SEE YOU THEN, MARVIN HANSON.

Marvin sat in his desk for a moment and considered. He knew the area of the address in the email. Once nice, kind of gone to seed, but there were people out there that had money. Mildred said it wasn't an issue, but she had also curiously, and perhaps with humorous intent, added the part about asking too much.

There hadn't been much in the way of work lately, and certainly not enough to hire any operatives, that being mostly two of his friends, Hap Collins and Leonard Pine. They weren't worth messing with unless there was real business to take care of. Actually, friends or not, they were kind of a pain in the ass.

Nope. This was one he'd take care of himself.

Considering his leg, which had given him grief for some time due to a car accident, was much better, he thought he could handle it all himself. He still carried a cane, but mostly for psychological support. It was also a good weapon if he should need it. He thought about getting himself one with a sword inside of it, but it probably wouldn't play out well if he ended up using it. For now, he'd stick to the cane he had—solid hickory with a knob, not a hook.

Marvin got up without use of the cane and made a cup of coffee. He drank that while he sat at his desk reading the rest of his email. That finished, he made a phone call to his wife. Their marriage had a few bumps they were ironing out, and had been ironing out for years, but Marvin knew he had brought it on himself. Fact was, the wreck that had messed up his leg and nearly killed him had involved a girlfriend he was seeing.

Pussy.

It made a man crazy. Even a good man, and he liked to think that's what he was. But the thing was, he had cheated on his wife, and she knew, and she took him back. Even if she did remind him of it daily, and not always directly. She didn't have to. She just gave him a look that made him feel like a worm on a hot rock. She did it less as time went on, and he liked to think

he had proven to her that he had acquired better sense, but a certain element of trust had been lost, and maybe forever.

Anyway, he called her. It was a short talk, and mostly pleasant. She no longer checked on him, which was a mixed bag. It either meant she trusted him a lot more than before or just didn't care anymore.

When they finished talking, he fiddled with the email awhile longer, then pulled a book out of his desk drawer and read a bit of it. It was pretty good. *Hank and Muddy*, by Stephen Mertz.

He put it away after an hour and drove over to Starbucks and bought some coffee at the drive-through. It was better than the coffee he made. Decaf with soy milk and two artificial sweeteners. He sipped it as he drove out to Timber Lake Drive.

When he got there he saw the area had gone downhill a might more than he thought, but the house he was looking for hadn't gone downhill at all. In fact, it was sitting on top of one surrounded by trees. The yard looked as if it had just been clipped and the sky even looked brighter over the roof, as if the sunlight had saved itself for that location.

Marvin parked and got out. He had left his cane at the office, on purpose, now he was having second thoughts. He limped a little as he went up the steps and knocked on the door. After a short time, a middle-aged woman answered.

"Mrs. Craver?" Marvin asked.

She smiled. "I am, but I think you're looking for the other Mrs. Craver. Babe Craver. That's what everyone calls her. My mother-in-law. Would you please come in?"

Marvin did just that. It was a nice house. Not a mansion, but nice. The younger Mrs. Craver went away in search of the older.

When the older Mrs. Craver showed up, she looked old enough to have ridden in on a mammoth. She moved well enough, but there was something about her gait that gave the impression that she was near worn out. She had very white false

teeth that fit like they were too big for her mouth. She had hair that looked more orange than red and her face was marked with lines that looked to have been the results of chickens scratching through the pale powder on her face. Her lipstick was a little lopsided, like a monkey had put it on her in the dark. Marvin judged her age to be about Three B.C.

“Won’t you sit down, Mr. Hanson?” she said.

There was a couch, so Marvin sat. She sat too, though it took her awhile. Marvin commiserated. He wasn’t her age, but his leg had given him hell for quite a few years, so he recognized how she was trying not to show pain. He liked her immediately. Old as history, and tough as stone.

“Are you open to all manner of investigation?” she asked.

“I think I am. I have to hear the job to know.”

“Do you rough people up?”

“Not that I’d admit to.”

The old woman grinned her false teeth. “That’s all right. I was just checking. I don’t want you to beat anyone up. I just like to know if you’re a tough guy.”

“Do I need to be?”

“Nope. But my husband was, and I liked that about him. He was a good guy, but he was tough. They don’t make men tough anymore. You look pretty tough though.”

“It would take a dog a long time to eat me, I think.”

“Ha,” she said. “What I want is to find out what happened to my son, Tom.”

“How long has he been missing?”

“Twenty-five years.”

“Yikes.”

“Yep. Yikes. He went missing twenty-five years ago and I haven’t so much as heard a peep from him. I figure he’s dead, but I’d like you to look into it. If he is dead, I’d like to know how he ended up and where he is before I pass away. I don’t know how long I got left, but I wouldn’t count on much. I

got up this morning and felt so bad I thought I was dead for a couple of hours.”

“You look spry enough,” Marvin said.

“You sweet liar.”

“When was he last seen and where?”

“The bank, twenty-five years ago,” said the younger Mrs. Craver, who was entering the room again, carrying a tray with a pitcher of ice tea on it and three glasses. Marvin had heard her banging around in the kitchen and had hoped some kind of drink would be the result.

“This is my daughter-in-law, Frankie,” said Mrs. Craver. “She lives with me.”

“I’m more like a daughter,” Frankie said.

“True enough,” Mrs. Craver said.

Frankie sat. She was a thick lady with thick ankles and a thick neck. Her face showed a former beauty hidden under some fat. “He came to see me at the bank, and that was the last time anyone saw him.”

“Just a visit?”

“Actually. . . ,” Frankie glanced at Mrs. Craver when she spoke.

“It’s okay,” Mrs. Craver said. “He’s going to find him, he’s got to have the whole package.”

“He was fresh out of prison and he came to see me about money.”

“Your money or the bank’s?” Marvin asked.

“My money that he wanted to make his money,” Frankie said. “I didn’t give it to him.”

“Tom had his faults,” Mrs. Craver said. “And in fact, he was a shit and not worth the powder to blow him up. But he was my son, and in some place deep in the back of my old withered heart, I love him and want to know what happened to him. I presume an untimely end. But after twenty-five years, the police, and

four private investigators who have found nothing, I thought I'd give it another try. I was told at the police department that you used to be a cop and that you were known to manage some tough jobs, and sometimes you were known to stretch things a little, but not so much that they snapped.”

“Not that anyone knows about,” Marvin said.

“I'm not sure you're joking,” Mrs. Craver said.

Marvin didn't say anything to that.

“No matter what the outcome,” Mrs. Craver said, “I'd like to know what happened to him.”

“Tell me about his coming to see you,” Marvin said to Frankie.

“I worked a desk in the bank,” Frankie said. “The Standard Bank. I was a loan officer. That's when the bank was in the old section. Before the newer section was built.”

Marvin considered that. The old bank had been scheduled to be torn down at one time, until the historical society made a big stink about it. There was history with the old bank. Once it had been robbed at the turn of the century. One of the first robberies by car, before all the famous guys like Bonnie and Clyde came along. Marvin didn't really remember all that much about it.

“He came to see me, wanting money,” Frankie said. “It was about closing time, and I remembered the whole thing embarrassed me. I didn't give him any money. He left. That was the last time I ever saw him. That was the last time anyone in the bank ever saw him. No one else has ever claimed to have seen him since.”

“The law, the private detectives,” Marvin asked. “Did they come up with anything?”

Mrs. Craver tapped some thin folders that were lying on the coffee table between them. “These are the police reports, and the reports from the private investigators. Well, three of them. The fourth took our money and went to bars and never looked

any farther than the bartender. We sued him. We won, but he didn't have any money and he spent ours."

"All right," Marvin said. "Any special interests or friends that Tom may have had? That kind of thing."

"He was short in the friend department," Frankie said. "He was, of all things, a rodeo clown for awhile, then a circus clown. He actually ran off to the circus."

"When he was eighteen," Mrs. Craver said. "He was our youngest. All the other kids, and there are three others, did quite well for themselves. But Tom, he was always a pain in the ass. He took gymnastics, and baseball, and was good at all of them."

"He was a contortionist in the circus," Frankie said. "I figured when he went away that day, he just joined back up with the circus."

"I believe it was actually a carnival that he worked for," Mrs. Craver said.

"Whatever," Frankie said. "He worked for them from time to time. He could dislocate his shoulders and put his foot behind his head. It wasn't a skill that served him well outside of the carnival, and he didn't work there often. He was always looking for the easy way out."

"You don't sound like you miss him much," Marvin said to Frankie.

Frankie looked at Mrs. Craver.

"It's okay, dear," Mrs. Craver said. "I understand that you two weren't that close. Not in the end. It doesn't matter."

Frankie reached out and touched Mrs. Craver's arm. "You know I love you."

"Of course I do," Mrs. Craver said. She looked at Marvin. "She takes very good care of me. Better than my own children. She moved in with me to take care of me."

“So you and Tom weren’t close,” Marvin said to Frankie, “because of Tom’s work habits, or lack thereof, and his time in prison.”

“That would be a lot of it,” Frankie said. “That and the fact he chased every woman he saw. He was charming, but it was all BS. We were separated at the time of his disappearance. When he got out of prison, he wanted us to get back together. I had heard that before. And he’d mean it when he said it. For about a week, or until I gave him some money. My guess was in no time he’d be back in prison.”

“What did he go to prison for?” Marvin asked.

“Burglary,” Frankie said.

“All right,” Marvin said. “I guess that does me for now. I might have some questions later.”

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Craver said. “Shall we settle on a fee?”

They talked money. It was good money they were talking, and Marvin felt it was one hell of a good deal they settled on. A good fee to look and report, a better fee if he found out where Tom was, or what had happened to him.

When the deal was struck, Marvin picked up the files from the coffee table. “I’ll return these when I finish.”

“That’s fine,” Mrs. Craver said. “Do you think you can find out what happened to Tom?”

“It’s been quite a while.”

“But it’s possible?” Mrs. Craver said.

“Yes,” Marvin said. “But there are no guarantees.”

“I understand,” Mrs. Craver said.

“However,” Marvin said, “if it’s any consolation, if anyone can figure out what happened to him, or where he is, it’s me.”

“That’s not a very modest view,” Mrs. Craver said, showing her false teeth.

“No, it isn’t. But it’s not a brag either. Just fact.”

Frankie walked Marvin out to his car. When he opened the door to get in, he paused and leaned on it.

“I was trying to give her some hope in there,” Marvin said, “and I meant what I said about being good at what I do. But, it really is a long shot.”

“I realize that,” Frankie said. “And frankly, as far as Tom goes, I don’t really give a damn. He can be dead. He can be alive, living in Argentina with Hitler, and I don’t care. But, for her there’s always going to be a bone-dead sadness about her until she knows what happened to him, good or bad. Therefore, it matters to me. For her sake.”

“Is there anyone else that worked at the bank at that time that may remember Tom’s visit?”

“You doubt me?”

“Someone may have noticed something you didn’t.”

“And they’d remember twenty-five years later?” Frankie said. “I think the other detectives went over that.”

“A lot of detective work is looking at old information in a new way.”

“Well, I think James Raymond saw him, but he’s no longer around. He was the bank manager at the time. It was a small bank then, they were about to build the new one. He knew Tom in passing. But, as I said, he’s dead, so that doesn’t matter. There was Tiffany Millar. She was a teller. In fact, there was the manager, me, Tiffany, and old Mrs. Thompson. She did the books. She’s long dead as well. That was the whole bank staff back then.”

“All right,” Marvin said. “Thanks. And, good-bye.”

That evening at the dinner table, Marvin said to his wife, Rachel, “It’s a pretty odd case. Guy’s been missing twenty-five years.”

“You think he’s dead?”

“I think it’s highly possible. Likely even. But it’s also possible he’s living somewhere under another name.”

“He could be back in prison.”

“I checked that. That would have been easy for the law or the previous investigators to figure out. Even if Tom had been using an assumed name, he got caught doing something he shouldn’t, the fingerprints would have ratted him out. No. He’s either dead or out there in hiding.”

When they were through eating, Rachel said, “I’m going to go to bed.”

“Pretty early,” Marvin said. “We could watch some TV.”

“No. That’s all right.”

“Rachel?”

“Yes.”

“I’m trying.”

“Trying what?” she said.

“You know. To make up for things.”

“Sure. I know.”

“Can’t you forgive me?”

“I forgive you, Marvin. I just can’t forget.”

“Will you ever be able to forget?”

“No,” she said. “Of course not. You don’t forget getting burned, or hit by a car, or cheated on.”

“Stupid question.”

“Yes, it was. But maybe I can forgive more in time. I’m trying to. I want to. I’m just not there yet.”

“It’s been a long time,” Marvin said.

“Trust. Hard thing to get back, Marvin.”

“I know. I don’t know what I was thinking. I love you. I have always loved you. I just don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I do.”

“All right. Yeah. I was thinking that. No excuse. I was a dog.”

“Yes, you were.”

“It’s never happened again.”

“She’s dead.”

“I mean with anyone. It never will.”

“I believe you.”

“Then?”

“It still hurts. In time, maybe it won’t. I’m going up to bed.”

“I’ll be right up, soon as I finish my milk.”

“Don’t hurry.”

“No problem.”

“No,” Rachel said. “You watch some TV. That would be good. You come up after awhile.”

Marvin knew what that meant. After she was asleep.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll take care of the dishes.”

Rachel got up from the table and leaned over and kissed him on top of the head and went upstairs. Marvin watched her go. When she was gone he finished his milk and picked up the dishes, then went into the living room and got the *TV Guide*. He looked it over. There was nothing he wanted to see. He stretched out on the couch. He thought about Tom and what happened to him. He got up and got the files and looked at those. He read them for awhile. He decided to go up and go to bed, but he knew he would just have his cold space on the far side of the mattress.

He put the files away, stretched out on the couch, and thought about Florida, the woman he had cheated with, the one who was dead now. But that was a different deal, and he didn’t want to think about that. He thought about the Craver case a little more, and then he fell asleep.

At the office the next morning, Marvin went to the bank website. It was a lot of what he already knew and had been told by Frankie and Mrs. Craver.

The old bank had once been scheduled to be torn down. It had been sealed off as soon as it was closed, and for about two years the new bank was in a larger rented building on the other side of town. The plan was to destroy the old bank and build a new, larger, more modern one on the site. Instead, property next door to the old bank opened up and was purchased for the new bank. It was decided the old bank would be used for storage for awhile, and when the new bank was built, it would be torn down and that area would become a parking lot.

The storage plan never materialized. The new bank was built next to the old one, and the old one was saved by the city's historical society. Later, the new bank expanded even more and the old one was connected to it and was turned into a tourist attraction, which garnered money for the town with its simple tour and gift shop. Hanson thought about all that, decided there was nothing there that helped him much.

The notes from the private detectives offered a little more. An armored car that delivered money to the bank came up missing for a couple of days, was later found down in the Sabine River bottoms. The two drivers were there too, but they had bullet holes in their heads. No money was in the truck at the time, and therefore nothing was stolen.

Odd.

And odder yet, the bank manager Frankie said was dead was indeed that. But not of natural causes. He had been murdered a month after Tom disappeared. Marvin thought it odd that Frankie hadn't mentioned that. One of the private investigators had thought this might be important, said so in his notes, but apparently, whatever that importance was, he had never been able to link it up.

From the notes, no one at the police department had ever spoken to Tiffany Millar, the teller. Only the private detectives,

and they didn't really have anything of value from her in the notes.

He looked her up in the phone book. He called and she answered on the first ring.

"Excuse me. Is this Tiffany Millar?"

"It is."

"Who used to work at the bank?"

"I did. Who is this?"

"My name is Marvin Hanson. I've been hired by Mrs. Craver to look into the disappearance of her son."

"Again? I talked to private detectives about this before."

"I know. It's probably just old hat, but I wanted to speak with you. We can do it over the phone, or in person if you prefer."

"I'm bored. How about I meet you somewhere?"

"My office okay?"

"Do you have good coffee?"

"No."

"Starbucks?"

"When?"

"Now. Like I said, I'm bored."

They met at Starbucks. Hanson, who had already had morning coffee, ordered decaffeinated with soy milk and two artificial sweeteners. He bought Tiffany's drink, which looked to be something chocolate with whipped cream and colored sprinkles on top.

Tiffany, one hot fifty-year-old blonde who looked to have had only minimal surgery on her face, sat at the table and crossed her legs, which were long and smooth and clothed in high-heel shoes. Marvin thought: Who wears high heels in the middle of the day to go to Starbucks? But, he didn't mind all

that much, and since he assumed she sat the way she did so she could show him her legs, he let her.

She smiled at Marvin. He was sure it was a smile that had melted many a male heart and made many a female mad. It was doing something to him as well, though the area it was affecting was somewhat lower than the heart.

“I don’t know I can add much to help,” she said. “All I know is Tom came up missing and no one has found him, and that he came into the bank that day and spoke with Frankie. She was cute then,” she said. “Though I think time has been somewhat rough on her.”

“Not financially,” Marvin said.

“No. Not so bad in that department.” Tiffany said all of this between sips of her drink. “She endures.”

“Is there anything you can tell me about that day?”

“Tom came in and spoke to Frankie at her desk, and they argued a little, and then he left.”

“Did you hear anything they said?”

“No. Not really. I think it was over money. He wanted some, and she didn’t want to give it to him. I think they were not really together by then. He just hoped they were. And I don’t think it was for love. I think it was money, because his mother wouldn’t give him any more, and he thought his wife might. I think Frankie and her mother-in-law were close.”

“Still are,” Marvin said.

“Okay. But it wasn’t love. It was her money, and the money he thought he might get from his mother by way of his wife.”

“How do you know it wasn’t love he was after?” Marvin said.

“Because he had hit on me before, right after he got out of prison.”

“He came in before that?”

“He came in three or four times,” Tiffany said. “He’d walk around and look the bank over, and act like he was interested

in the place. You know, it was still the old bank in that day, and it had a kind of pioneer feel about it. It was old and small. It's a museum now. You should have a look at it."

"I will."

"He liked to look around and see the bullet holes in the wall. The bank had been robbed in the early nineteen-hundreds, old cowboy-style, except the robbers came with a car instead of a horse and got shot to death before they left town. They were shot with some kind of big gun. Shot so much it knocked one of them out of his boots. The car had a flat, you see, and the law caught up."

"But you didn't hear anything odd between Frankie and Tom?"

"If I did, I've forgotten it. I just remember it was an argument and money came up, and that was it. I really didn't mean to hear that much, but it was hard to help, you know. Small bank."

"Did Tom talk to anyone there besides her that time, or for that matter, the time before?"

"Just hit on me. Oh, I guess he chummed it up with everyone. He was a real glad-hander. A bullshitter, you might say. Excuse my language. TV has ruined the way I talk."

"Did you and Frankie socialize outside of the bank?"

"Usually just bank functions."

"What about the bank manager?"

Tiffany was suddenly a little less light. "Jim was found dead, you know."

"What did he die of?"

"Two bullet holes."

"Oh," Marvin said, as if he didn't know. "How long after Tom disappeared did that happen?"

"About two weeks, I think. Yes. That seems about right."

Marvin studied Tiffany. She looked not only less light, but he thought she looked teary.

"You were close to him?"

“Not really,” Tiffany said. “He was my boss, of course.”

“Did he get along with everyone at the bank?”

“Quite well,” Tiffany said. “Frankie, well . . . I think he may have gotten along with her too well.”

“They had something going?”

“I suppose there’s nothing wrong with that. She and Tom were separated. But she did work for him. It wasn’t seemly, the way she carried on. It wasn’t that she was at anytime a great looker, so I don’t understand his attraction.”

“You said she was cute,” Marvin said.

“Like a Chinese pug, but not pretty.”

“So, the boss liked her?”

“I doubt it was anything serious.”

Marvin sipped his coffee. None of this had been in the notes. And another thing not in the notes, and left unsaid, but seemingly said beneath the conversation, was the fact that Tiffany had had designs on the boss herself.

Marvin decided to come right out with it.

“Did you have interest in Jim?”

“Of course not.”

“A beautiful woman like you, and he didn’t notice?”

The beautiful woman line perked Tiffany up, but the glow faded quickly. “Oh, he noticed. He noticed plenty. It made Frankie mad, the way he noticed. It made her mad plenty.” Tiffany leaned back with satisfaction and drank her coffee. She licked at the whipped cream at the top of the straw like a cat licking milk.

“He just noticed?” Marvin said. “That’s all? Just noticed?”

“Yes. He just noticed. Are you looking into all of this again?”

This seemed like a stupid question, since that was why he had invited her to coffee, but he said, “Yes. I think the previous detectives might have missed something.”

“What would that be?”

“Don’t know yet, but I’m going to find out. They skimmed the surface. That’s what I get from reading their notes anyway. Me, I’m tenacious.”

“Are you?” she said.

“Very much so. It’s a cold day in hell when I quit.”

“I see. Well, that’s certainly a good quality in your line of work.”

“I like to think so.”

“Nothing else I can help you with, I suppose I should run along. I have a few errands to take care of.”

“If I think of something I’ve forgotten, would it be alright to call you up again?”

“I just can’t imagine having anything else to say on the matter. I’ve told you all I know. To tell the truth, I think Tom’s gone forever and no one will ever find him.”

“I’ve found people missing for years before,” Marvin said. “Sometimes they were even alive. So, you never know.”

She stood up with her drink in her hand. “Good luck to you, then.”

She stuck out her free hand. Marvin stood and shook it.

The next moment she was out the door.

Marvin drove by the bank. It was a pretty large building, and there were a number of drive-through outlets associated with it scattered throughout town.

It seemed to Marvin it hadn’t been that long ago when the old bank, which was a fifth the size of the new one, was the only one in use. But when he counted up the years in his head, he winced. Time flew quickly and was as merciless as a hawk.

The new bank was attached to the old one, but the old one was now a museum and could be entered only by the original front

door. Marvin did just that. The old bank had a lot of exposed fine wood, and there was a huge red brick fireplace to one side, and there were tellers' desks, and at the back was a glassed-in section that had been the manager's office. He remembered that from when he was a kid. He had lived in Houston at that time but visited LaBorde often, as his aunt had lived here. Dead and gone now, he had tagged along with her a number of times as she did her banking. It made him feel good to do it.

There was a woman at the desk and she smiled at Marvin and he smiled back. She was a plump woman in a loud flower pattern dress, but she had a gorgeous brown face and short black hair.

"It's a dollar to look through," she said.

Marvin paid his dollar. He walked around. There really wasn't much to see. The bullet holes had a frame around them and there was a placard there that said they had been shot into the wall by one of the robbers, Dog-Face Fulton, just to show he and his two pals meant business. This may have let the people in the bank at that time know he was serious, but it also alerted the law, who took note of the getaway driver outside, and promptly chased them down and shot them to pieces. Fulton may have been dangerous, but he wasn't smart.

Marvin was surprised to discover that the bank really was small. Even smaller than he remembered. As a child, it had seemed so imposing. He walked to the back and looked in at the glassed-in manager's office. It was claimed by another placard on the wall that all the furniture in the manager's office, and throughout the bank, was the original furniture in the same position, dating all the way back to the bank robbery. Probably was. It seemed like the same furniture he remembered.

Marvin stopped at the fireplace. There was a placard there. It said the fireplace ceased to be in use after the bank closed, but at one time it was the only heat for the bank. He walked past

the desk where the lady sat. He said, "So, the front door was the only way in when the bank was in use."

"No, you could come in from the back street," the lady said, and pointed at a sealed door. "That door leads into the new bank, but it used to be an outside entrance. There was an alley there. Oh, and there was a storage room off to the left of the door. That's gone too. It got incorporated into the new bank."

It was funny that he and she both thought of it as the new bank. It was only new as compared to the museum.

"I see," Marvin said, and thanked her and started to leave. But then he paused. He walked to where the old back entrance had been. There was a door there, but it was locked. He looked where the storage room would have been. He faintly remembered its location, and the doorway from the alley. Where the storage room had been located, there was only a wall.

He went back to the desk. "So where the wall is, there was a storage room?" he said as if he didn't know better, hadn't really listened to her.

The lady smiled the way you might for a little child who was easily distracted. "Yes, that's right. But everything else is the same."

"Everything?"

"All the desks, everything. Just like they were, all the way back to the robbery."

"Like the placard says," he said.

"Just like that," she said, losing a tiny bit of patience.

Marvin didn't blame her, but he thought it best to double-check. His memory wasn't perfect about the old bank, and he wanted to make sure the placards weren't shining on their history a bit more than was true.

Marvin looked at the back door. If someone had walked out that way, they could easily have stepped into the storage room, if they were being clever, without being seen by anyone. Unless that person was sitting where this lady was sitting now.

Marvin said, "This desk is original?"

"Yes, it is," the lady said, "as I said."

"Is this its original location? I mean, was it setting here back twenty-five years ago?"

"Wait a minute," the lady said.

She pulled open her desk drawer and pulled out a small stack of papers. She said, "This is a copy of the original layout. . . . Yes, it looks as if the desk was here all the way back to the eighteen-hundreds." She pushed the paper across the desk toward Marvin. "See," she said, "everything is pretty much the same. You can check for yourself."

"May I have a copy of the layout?" Marvin asked.

"There are plenty. I suppose I should put them out here on the desk, it's just that no one really seems all that interested in how things were laid out back then . . . I mean, you look around, and you can see that, how it was laid out. But if you'd like, certainly. Take one. Take two."

"One will do," Marvin said, took the sheet of paper, smiled, and went out.

Marvin stopped by the police station. He was lucky. His friend, the chief of police, was in. He was invited into the office. The chief was a cop named Drake who had been bumped up to the position recently. LaBorde went through chiefs of police like toilet paper for prune-juice drinkers.

Drake was thin and black as night. He had a flat nose that was partly due to genetics and partly due to someone's fist. He was leaning back in his chair, smiling at Marvin. "There's coffee, you want it."

Marvin stopped at the coffee table and fixed him a cup, lots of cream and sweetener. Marvin sat down and took a sip. He said, "Man, who shit in this?"

“I do the shitting,” Drake said. “Every morning. It gives the stuff some bite.”

Marvin took the coffee to the trashcan and dropped it inside.

“You’ll make everything wet,” Drake said.

“There’s a liner.”

Marvin sat back down. He said, “Twenty-five years ago, a fellow named Tom Craver disappeared. He was never found. Know anything about it?”

“They don’t know where he is,” Drake said, and grinned.

“Thanks.”

“It’s a cold case. I know a little about it. I even looked into it once. Not very seriously, I admit. But it came up again when I was a cop, not a chief, and we have that cold-case unit, which is two tired cops, one of which at the time was me, and a police dog without all his teeth and a surly attitude.”

“The dog helps on cold cases?” Marvin said.

“Not that I can see. He doesn’t even sniff drugs very well. But, can’t fire him. Union, you know.”

“Uh-huh. So, nothing?”

“I don’t remember a whole lot about it,” Drake said. “Just that this guy Tom disappeared and they didn’t find him. He was at the bank one day. Spoke to his wife, or ex-wife. I forget the exact situation. Anyway, he spoke to her, went out, and no one ever saw him again.”

“I hear the bank manager turned up dead of gunshots,” Marvin said.

“Oh, yeah. I remember that. Sure. No connection that anyone could find, though this Tom had a record, you see, and some thought it was him. That he wanted to rob the bank, maybe by getting the manager to help him out at gunpoint. There was an argument, and he shot the manager and killed him in his car while it was sitting in the drive. Anyway, some thought this Tom was good for it, but we never found him. Tom, wasn’t he some kind of circus guy?”

“Carnival. He was a contortionist. Clown. That sort of thing.”

“Yeah,” Drake said. “I remember now.”

“Anything else curious?”

“Let me see. Hell, there was the guard and the driver.”

“Excuse me?”

“The armored car,” Drake said. “They delivered money to the bank, and a week later, them and their armored car were found in the Sabine River, some good many miles from here. They were both shot in the head.”

“How many times?” Marvin said.

“What? Oh. I get you. Twice, I think. We can get the files and look, to make sure, but I think it was twice. You’re saying it was the same as the manager?”

“I’m saying they both got shot twice,” Marvin said. “A bit of a coincidence. I’m assuming the armored car made deliveries and or pickups at the bank.”

“Yep,” Drake said. “And a connection was thought of then, but none was found. No money came up missing. The bank was even. The armored car showed up there. The manager checked the money in. The money was put in the bank, and the right amount was there the next morning, and a week later. No one ever figured why the guards were killed, as they weren’t carrying money at the time, and no one ever figured why the bank manager was killed. A connection was implied, but never found. It seems to have all been a coincidence.”

“I believe in them,” Marvin said. “Happens all the time. But three of them? The armored truck guard and driver. The manager of the bank. And Tom Craver missing. That seems like a lot of coincidences, and all of them at least mildly related.”

“How do you see it?”

“Not sure,” Marvin said. “I think Tom might have gone in and talked to his wife, and then acted as if he left the bank, but maybe hid in a storage room.”

“To do what, use the bathroom later?” Drake said. “Nothing was stolen.”

“That’s where my theory has a hole in it,” Marvin said.

“And that puts you right back in the position where everyone else has ended up. Except no one has ever thought Tom hid out in the storage room. And if he did, to what purpose?”

“You’re making me feel bad,” Marvin said.

“You getting paid good money for this?”

“I am.”

“Monopoly money?”

“Nope. The real stuff.”

“Who’s paying?”

“Tom’s mother.”

Drake nodded. “She’s got some dough.”

“Yep.”

“I know you’re going to actually try and find Tom. I think some of the other detectives, from what I’ve heard, didn’t. I have a feeling you’re going to end up tired and frustrated.”

“You knew them? The private detectives?”

“One. He wasn’t so good in the reputation department. He probably did enough to make it appear he took a serious look, but I think he mostly looked at his name on the check Mrs. Craver wrote him. She’s a nice sort, actually. I’ve met her a few times.”

“I liked her,” Marvin said. “She seems like a tough old bird.”

“Last of a breed,” Drake said. “So, you doing this with the help of your crack assholes, Hap and Leonard?”

“Don’t think I need them for this.”

“Good. Otherwise they might have come in with you. They give me a stomachache. Especially Leonard.”

“They’re my friends, and they give me a stomachache. Especially Leonard.”

“You feel you’re really onto something?” Drake asked.

“You ever have that sensation that there’s a worm of wisdom in the back of your brain, and that it has the answer to what it is you’re searching for? That it has things figured out and it’s trying to burrow to the front of your head so it can let you know what’s up?”

“Nope.”

“Yeah,” Marvin said. “Me neither.”

Marvin drove back to his office. The worm in the back of his head was wiggling pretty hard now. He parked and waved at the good-looking woman who ran the bicycle shop below his place, climbed the stairs, and unlocked the door. His leg was bothering him, and when he got inside, he was glad to see his cane on his desk. He had a pretty good idea that for the rest of the day, he walked anywhere, he and it would be companions.

He made a cup of coffee, fixed it the way he wanted, was about to sit at his desk, and the door opened.

Two guys not any bigger than professional wrestlers entered the room. They weren’t young, but they weren’t old either. One was a little tubby, but he still looked like he could turn over a car and fuck it in the transmission. The other was leaner and had more defined muscles. He was the prettier of the two, and would have only been scary to children and small animals and old people, and well, pretty much anyone.

“You Hanson?” said the pretty one.

“That’s me,” Marvin said, and put the coffee down. He looked at them and moved toward his desk, stood behind it. He studied the men. They had an air of trouble about them. “How can I help you?”

“Look here,” said the not-so-pretty one. “We want you to leave our sister alone.”

“And who might that be?”

“Tiffany,” said the pretty one.

“I thought Tiffany and I had a nice and civil conversation,” Marvin said.

“She said you wanted to talk to her again, and she don’t want to talk,” said the pretty one.

“So she sent you troglodytes around to ask me not to call?” Marvin said. “That seems extreme.”

“Extreme, not so extreme,” said the not-so-pretty one, “we want you to not bother her anymore.”

“You know, I didn’t plan to,” Marvin said.

“That’s good,” said the not-so-pretty one. “It’s best that way.”

“I didn’t have any reason to,” Marvin said. “Until now.”

Marvin grabbed the cane and came out from behind the desk and whipped the cane over his head and caught the pretty one in the teeth. It was a good blow. Hickory is stout. The prettier of the two was soon less pretty. He was on the floor, bleeding from the mouth, spitting teeth.

The not-so-pretty one came at Marvin, and Marvin swung the cane and hit him in the knee, popped it up and caught him in the side of the jaw, then stepped in and folded the cane against his forearm and hit the not-so-pretty one in the throat with that. The man went down.

The prettier one tried to get up and Marvin kicked him in the throat. For good measure, he popped him across the back of the head with the cane. He went back quickly then to his desk, dropped the cane on it, pulled open the drawer, and took out a large automatic. He sat down in the chair behind his desk and waved it in their general direction.

“My leg hurts,” Marvin said. “So, I’m going to sit. You two can get up, but do it slow and don’t act like assholes, or I’ll shoot you full of more holes than a cheese grater. I’m in what I like to think of as one of my blue moods.”

Marvin rubbed his leg. It hurt like hell all of a sudden. The quick moves, the twisting.

“Now, what the hell is this all about?” he said.

“You knocked out some of my teeth,” said the formerly pretty one.

“Yes, I did,” Marvin said.

“It hurts.”

“I hope so. Now, both of you. Pay attention. Tell me what this is about, or I’m really going to get mad.”

“You’re already mad,” said the not-so-pretty one.

“Yes, but this isn’t as mad as I get.”

“Our sister wanted us to tell you to quit.”

“Let me tell you something,” Marvin said. “I have a gun. I have a cane. I have two friends that are less pleasant than I am. One’s named Hap, and one’s named Leonard—he’s really unpleasant. If I don’t beat you to death with my cane, or shoot you, they will find you and do one or the other if you bother me again. Do you understand?”

“They don’t know us,” the not-so-pretty one said.

“They’ll find you,” Marvin said. “You can count on that. Now, don’t bother me anymore. Get up and leave, and don’t let your fucking shadow darken my doorway again.”

They got up slowly.

Marvin said, “Before you go. You. Asswipe, find your teeth and take them with you.”

The formerly pretty one stood up and went about looking for his teeth. They were in various places around the room. He picked them up and put them in his pocket.

“Put those on ice, go to a dentist, they might can put those back in for you,” Marvin said.

“We was just gonna scare you,” said the not-so-pretty one. “It worked on the others.”

“The others?”

“Detectives,” said the not-so-pretty one.

“Now git,” Marvin said.
They got.

Marvin looked up Tiffany’s address and drove over there. It was a very nice house. Not as rich as the Cravers’ joint, but nice nonetheless, and in a neighborhood that was even more nice. No wear and tear around there.

Parking at the curb, Marvin went to the door and pushed the bell. Tiffany answered the ring. Her pretty face fell.

“Hey,” she said. “My brother lost teeth. I think Tony has a broken nose.”

“I hope so,” Marvin said. “They were certainly quick to call.”

She tried to shut the door. Marvin stuck a foot out and blocked it. “No you don’t.”

“I’ll call the police,” she said. “You get off my property.”

“I’ll wait here while you call the police, and then I’ll tell them about your brothers, and about how they threatened me. Had you left well enough alone, I might not have known you were dating your boss at the bank.”

“You don’t know that . . . I mean, that isn’t true.”

“Sure it is,” Marvin said. “I had my suspicions from our conversation earlier. But it didn’t matter to me. Not until you sent your brothers to see me. That was just plain stupid. Can I come in?”

“Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack.”

“My husband gets home in half an hour,” she said. “He wouldn’t like you here.”

“Oh, it’s all right. Me and him can talk about your earlier days, about the bank, about your boss and what was going on with him.”

Tiffany looked around, as if someone might be in the yard, said, “Okay, come in. But I only have twenty minutes.”

“I think that’ll cover it, if we can quit horsing around and get to the point.”

They went into a sitting room that didn’t look as if anyone ever sat there. It was very formal and smelled as clean as a hospital room, but was less charming. She waved at a chair and Marvin sat. She sat in a chair across from him.

“Ask what you like,” she said.

“Your boss. You were seeing him. Right?”

“Right. That was then, though. This is now, and that’s long in my past.”

“You were seeing him, and so was Frankie.”

“How do you know that? Frankie tell you?”

“No. You did. Or at least I could easily get that from your conversation today. It didn’t really matter that much at first, but when you sent your two stupid siblings around, it sort of did. It mattered that much to you that I didn’t ask about it, it had to be important.”

“I just don’t want my husband knowing.”

“Was that before you met your husband? You and Jim.”

“Yes.”

“Then what do you care?” Marvin said.

“I just don’t want it brought up.”

Marvin nodded. “We can maybe avoid that. I think we can. If you answer some questions. And honestly, I’d hate to have to come back, or have your brothers lose more teeth.”

“That was a bad idea, me sending them. It worked before. I guess I panicked. I didn’t want it to come up, and for my husband to know. He can be pretty jealous, even if Jim is dead.”

“Like you were jealous of Frankie?”

“I just never saw what he saw in her,” she said. “We were dating, and the next thing I know, she’s flirting with him, and

I'm thinking, okay, look at me and look at her. I mean, even then, she wasn't pretty. But she certainly opened his nose."

"How long did the two of them date?"

"They had just started. Me and Jim still saw each other, but I could tell he was playing the field. Me, her, whoever. But her working at the bank. Well, it hurt. I liked him quite a bit."

"All right. The day Frankie's husband came by. Which way did he go out when he left?"

"Go out?" she asked.

"Which door?"

"Oh, my god, that's been twenty-five years ago. I have no idea." Tiffany looked at her watch. "He'll be home soon."

"Did you ever hear of any money missing from the bank?"

Tiffany knitted her brows. "Never."

"Did all the money go straight in the vault?"

"Yes . . . well, there was the packet."

"The packet?" Marvin asked.

"That's right. I never quite understood about the packet. Jim explained it to me once, but I don't remember the details, but it made enough sense then, whatever the explanation. It was some kind of extra money for the bank and was kept separate."

"Tell me about the packet," Marvin said.

"The armored truck. It brought the money, and it brought the packet, which was separate. The packet was kind of hush-hush because it didn't go in the vault."

"Where did it go?"

"In Jim's desk drawer."

"Was it a packet of money?"

"That's what Jim said. That it was money, but it was separate. And that he had to make special notations and would put it in the vault later. I'm sure there was nothing wrong about it. The truck guards gave it to him and they were always there when he put the packet in the drawer, the rest in the vault."

"How big was the packet?"

“Hefty. Like a couch pillow. It was money wrapped in paper. Or I guess it was money. It arrived every now and then, this packet. Frankie saw it too. It wasn’t a big secret.”

“No hiding about it? Nothing unusual?”

“No,” Tiffany said. “Nothing like that.”

“Okay. And now I’m going to be a little more direct. Back then, were you sleeping with Jim?”

“That’s none of your business. I won’t answer that.”

“All right. Fair enough. Was Frankie?”

Tiffany was quick to answer. “Yes. She was. I know she was.”

“And how do you know?”

“Because I was very serious about Jim, and I could tell things weren’t right, and then the way he and Frankie started flirting at the bank . . . a girl knows these things. And then he quit seeing me. I thought maybe we could work things out . . . then, he was murdered. I really cared about him then. Loved him, I guess. But later, I had the feeling I didn’t really know him. Not really. I felt there had to be some secret for him to be killed like that. Nothing was stolen, or so I heard. He was just killed. I was even a suspect, but I was cleared. I had a solid alibi.” Tiffany looked at her watch. “Please. He’s so jealous. I don’t want him to find out about Jim, even if it was in the past. I don’t want to open that can of worms.”

“One more question. How long before the old bank changed over to the new bank?”

“There was a bank holiday that weekend. All the way until Tuesday. They were already building the new bank, and Tuesday we were to move into the new one and the old one was locked off. I remember that clearly. Will that do?”

“Good enough,” Marvin said, and stood up.

“So we’re through?”

“Can’t say for sure,” Marvin said. “Probably. But no promises.” Marvin headed for the door, said, “I can find my own way out.”

“I bet you can, you sonofabitch,” Tiffany said.

That night, at home, Marvin had dinner with his wife, then she went up to bed. He didn’t even try to follow. He sat on the couch and turned on the TV and watched for awhile, and then the phone rang. He turned off the TV and answered.

It was Frankie. “I just thought you should know. Babe is in the hospital.”

“What?”

“She’s been having spells, and she had a bad one today. I wanted you to know, because if there’s anything you’ve found out, any kind of comfort, even if it’s a lie you can give her, that would be good.”

“To tell you the truth, I might have something. I can’t say for sure, but if you’re willing to go to the bank museum tomorrow, I might have an answer, though I can’t promise.”

“It’s Sunday. It’s closed.”

“I know. But Chief Drake can have it opened.”

“Chief Drake?” Frankie said.

“Yes. And if you can come, I’d be grateful. I might need you to verify something.”

“What time?”

“Ten a.m. And keep in mind, I could be all wet, and in the end I may end up embarrassed and know no more than I did when I first started.”

“But you don’t think that?” Frankie said.

“No, I don’t.”

“I’ll see you then,” Frankie said.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Marvin arrived at the bank museum about five till ten. Drake was there and had already had the lady Marvin had met at the museum open the doors. She was inside at her desk, not looking too happy about things. Drake was leaning against the fireplace. Frankie had yet to arrive.

Marvin nodded at the lady at the desk, leaned on his cane. "Thanks for opening up."

She said, "I'm missing church."

"Sorry," Marvin said. "I'll try not to take long."

"I don't want to go in after things start."

"I'm sorry you've missed it," he said. "This shouldn't take long, and you can get on with the rest of your day."

This didn't seem to please or inspire the lady any at all.

Frankie came through the door and nodded at Marvin. She nodded at the lady behind the desk. "Tulip," she said. "How are you?"

"I'm missing church," she said.

"Preacher just makes it up anyway," Frankie said.

Tulip gave her a confused look. Frankie said to Chief Drake, "How are you?"

"Fine," Drake said. "I'm not missing church, but I am missing sleeping in late. I don't want to miss football."

"This shouldn't take that long," Marvin said. "If I'm wrong it'll take even less time. And if I'm wrong, I'll owe you all a lunch."

"Get on with it," Drake said.

"Everyone get comfortable," Marvin said.

Frankie captured a chair out from behind one of the desks and carried it over and placed it by the desk where Tulip sat.

"I'm just going to be blunt and get right to it," Marvin said.

“Frankie, I think your ex-husband, Tom, wanted you to help him rob the bank. No need to answer that. Just listen. I think he wanted you to do that, and I think maybe you were still seeing him again, and at the same time had taken up with Jim.

“Okay. Let’s focus on Jim. I think you got to wondering about the packets that the armored car guards were bringing in. The ones Jim put in his desk drawer, separate of the money in the vault. Maybe you figured it out, or maybe he even told you, during a little pillow talk. But I think you understood, or guessed one way or another, that that money was different. That it was Mob money, and this bank was a laundry for them. It was separate money, but in time, it was laundered through the bank, and it came out clean. Or at least the cut the Mob expected was clean. When I say Mob, I’m saying Dixie Mafia. I’ve had a few run-ins with them, and I have an idea how they work. Am I warm?”

Marvin was looking right at Frankie.

“You might be,” she said, and crossed her legs and swallowed.

“So, you’ve got the money figured, and maybe you even got something going with Jim, and then the ex-husband comes back into things. I’m figuring you’re thinking not to take all the money. Not the bank money, just the Mob money. The crooked money. But you don’t know you can do it. You need to be somewhere else for an alibi, so you need the ex. You have him come in, you two have that fight so everyone remembers it, and he goes out. But I figure he ended up in the storage room. The only way someone would know he didn’t go out is if you were sitting where Tulip is sitting now. Knew he wouldn’t go out, and had in fact planned for him to hide in the storage room until the bank closed. Could it have happened that way?”

Frankie didn’t answer.

“All right then, I’ll go on,” Marvin said.

Drake said, “This better have one hell of an ending.”

“I think it might,” Marvin said.

“So, you have an alibi. Turned out no one suspected you of anything because the money didn’t get out there in the world. How do I know that? I figure if it had, you wouldn’t have ended up living with your mother-in-law. My guess is the Mob was moving some serious cash through here. They wouldn’t bother for a few thousand. Or even a hundred thousand. My guess was there was anywhere from a quarter million to a million in that big fat packet, and there was something like that every time that packet showed up.”

“Why would I do something like that?” Frankie said. “My mother-in-law has money.”

Marvin dipped his chin. “True. I thought of that. But greed, it’s hard to explain. It comes out of nowhere and it’s a hell of a bitch. And maybe you thought you didn’t want to live with Tom’s mother, which is what you were doing since he had been in prison. It wasn’t like this bank job was making you a fortune. But I figure you didn’t get the money that your ex stole. That it didn’t happen the way you had hoped. Then Tom was gone, and, well, things fell in place. You ended up staying with Mrs. Craver, and in time, my guess is the two of you actually became close. I saw the way you looked at her. I think you care. I think it was a stupid mistake on your part, thinking about that money. Maybe it was the adventure. Maybe you said something to Tom about it, and then he got it in his mind to steal it and cut you in.”

“Lot of conjecture,” Drake said.

“Yep,” Marvin said. “I noticed all the windows are barred or wire meshed. And they would be locked. Tom had to have not only a good hiding place but a way out. And he didn’t want it to look like someone broke in or out. He left everything locked from the inside, there was no way for anyone to suspect anyone had been inside for any reason. Next day, when people came to

work, there were no signs of him breaking in. But the night he hid here, in the storage room, when everyone was gone, Tom came out and took the Mob money. He knew it was in that drawer, because you knew, Frankie. You knew when the guards came, and you knew Jim hid it in the drawer overnight, until he could do whatever he needed to do to launder it. When he came in the next day, discovered it was missing, he couldn't, wouldn't say anything. Fact was, no one would ever know it was missing except him, and Tom, and you, Frankie. Oh, and in time, the Mob. That's what happened to Jim. In a way, you and Tom killed him. Because when that money came up missing, and the Mob didn't get their fair share, they thought Jim and the truck guards tried to pull a fast one. So the Mob killed them all. Just moved onto another bank with another sucker. Someone who would do what they wanted for a healthy cut of the take. Same as Jim."

Drake leaned away from the fireplace. "That fits. That really fits."

"Yeah," Marvin said. "I thought so."

"But there's a problem," Drake said. "How would Tom get out and not leave a window open, a door unlocked?"

"He could have had a key, I suppose," Marvin said. "But my guess is, and this is just a guess, no one had a key to lock up but Jim. That's how he would want it, keeping that Mob money here. Is that right, Frankie?"

"He had the only key," Frankie said. "But that doesn't prove anything."

"It sure doesn't," Drake said. "I think your theory is falling apart. Sounded pretty good for a minute there, but now, not so much."

"Tom was a contortionist," Marvin said. "I figure, from looking at that big fireplace, he thought he'd just go up that and out." Marvin walked over to the fireplace. "Now we see if I'm an idiot."

Marvin reached a little flashlight from his pants pocket, ducked down carefully on his bad leg, looked up the chimney with the light. He reached up inside the chimney and got hold of something and pulled.

When he pulled his hand back, there was a shoe in it, and part of a bone. An ankle. The rest of the foot was in the shoe. “Looks like to me, the rest of Tom is hung up in there. It was a little tighter than he figured. He got hung. Probably even yelled out. But, it being a bank holiday. Well, my guess is he got up in there, twisted about, broke something, a rib maybe. Punctured something inside. Lung, heart, kidney. And he bled out internally. Died. Probably stank like crazy. But with the place sealed off for so long, no one being in here, it wasn’t noticed, and in time he dried out. As for the money, if the rats haven’t eaten it, you might find it up there too.”

Drake looked at the shoe, said, “I’ll be goddamned.”

“With the bank closing, the fireplace was never used again, so no one ever thought to look up there.”

“Until you,” Drake said.

“Yep,” Marvin said. “Until me.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Tulip said.

Marvin hated hospitals. He had spent more than a little of his time in a hospital bed after the wreck. He rode the elevator up and walked along the antiseptic hall, his cane clicking against the tile as he went.

A nurse moved past him. Down the hall he saw two nurses hustling quickly, which was never a good thing. Someone was in distress.

Marvin came to the room he wanted. The door was cracked open. He knocked ever so gentle, as if he might be waking up a dragon and was uncertain of the outcome.

Frankie came to the door, eased out into the hallway.

“She’s sleeping,” she said.

“Maybe we could talk for awhile then,” Marvin said. “Down in the cafeteria. I came to see her, to tell her in person about the outcome, but I wanted to see you as well.”

“When you tell her, I guess that’s not going to look so good for me,” Frankie said.

“Let’s go downstairs to the cafeteria, have some coffee.”

When they had their food and were sitting at a table away from the others, and there weren’t many in the cafeteria, Frankie said, “No matter what you might think, I really do care about her. I didn’t care so much for Tom after awhile, but I cared for her. And I’ll tell you this. I never planned to rob anyone. You’re wrong about that.”

“Am I?” Marvin said.

“I was seeing Jim, and I knew about the money, and he even bragged to me about it. He thought that might cinch the deal, me and him staying together. Maybe he just wanted to impress me right then. He was getting the goods, you know, so I don’t see how he needed to impress me anymore than he had.”

“Sounds like you still care about him.”

“Not at all, but I’m trying to tell you how things were then. What he told me didn’t endear him to me at all. It just confused me. I decided I wanted out of the relationship, and I went back with Tom. There was an easy excuse I could tell Jim. That Tom and I are trying to fix our marriage. It wasn’t really any better, our marriage, but it’s the excuse I used. I was actually thinking about turning Jim in to the law. But I was uncertain. And then Tom and I seemed to be getting along, and like an idiot, and I have no excuse except I was young, but I told Tom about the money. What Jim told me about it being Dixie Mafia money, and that he laundered it, got a big cut.”

“And that gave Tom ideas,” Marvin said.

Frankie nodded, sipped her coffee. “Yes. It did. I knew I had messed up immediately. I mean, if there ever was a sorry criminal at heart, and in action, it was Tom. And the idea that he could steal the money and no one would know who did it, and the law wouldn’t be bothered at all, and Jim would take the heat, for him, that was just too perfect to pass up.

“So, he tries to talk me into helping him. He wants me to give him a key. But I didn’t have a key. No one had a key but Jim. He always locked up. The doors in and out. He never locked his office. He never locked his desk. Cocky, I guess. And since the money most people would want was in the vault, he wasn’t worried. That little bank hadn’t been robbed since the famous robbery years before, and it hadn’t turned out so well for them. Arrogance on Jim’s part, I suspect.

“But that day me and Tom had the argument, he came to the bank and asked me for some money. I wouldn’t give it to him, and then I realized he was just putting up a front. He had other ideas. He told me he wanted to hide in the store room, and for me not to let on. That he had plans. I think he thought I’d draft in with him on account of, well, there he was and he was saying he was going to do it and I wouldn’t have a choice.”

“You didn’t report him. So I guess you did make a choice,” Marvin said.

“No. I didn’t report him. He hid there and I didn’t say anything. I thought he’d take the money and leave, and that would be that. I mean, it was Mob money. Not the people in the town.”

Marvin added some milk to his coffee. “How’d you think he’d get out?”

“The chimney. I knew what he had planned. I knew how he thought. Never occurred to me he’d get stuck. He was so cocky about what he could do. And then there was that long weekend, and then the bank moved. It was months before they

even opened the museum. I mean, damn. No one even cleaned the chimney after all these years.”

“I found out they blocked the chimney off at the top,” Marvin said. “Found that out yesterday. They had sealed it off some time ago, and hadn’t even noticed Tom was down there. I guess, you wanted to see him, you’d have to be looking. They just slapped some concrete on the bricks and put a piece of metal in the chimney, cemented it in.”

“What about . . . getting him out?”

“They already have. They took the entire chimney out to remove the body, or what was left of it. Mostly bones in clothes. Rats had been at the money. Wasn’t worth a thing. Just some chunks and mostly dust. All of it in a leather bag, and that wasn’t in too good a shape either. Pocked with rat and insect holes.”

“I thought he had taken the money and run off,” Frankie said. “I thought he got away with it. Figured he got away and maybe got himself killed some other way down the line.”

“He thought he’d squeeze through. But the chimney, for all its large size, it was built small inside. He got about halfway up, and the thing was even smaller there. Bad design. Bad luck for Tom.”

“All that time,” Frankie said. “In the goddamn chimney.”

“How’s Mrs. Craver taking it?”

“She doesn’t know all the details,” Frankie said.

“No one but me and you and Drake and Tulip know all the details,” Marvin said. “I guess I was trying to be dramatic and wanted an audience. Like in an old mystery movie. What does she know?”

“That you found Tom. That he was in the chimney, and was there to steal money. I left my connection out. Thought you could fill her in on my part. I just couldn’t tell her. I didn’t have the courage or the heart to let her down. I’m the last thing she has to cling to.”

“How’d she take Tom’s death?”

“Well enough. I think she just wanted to know what happened. She never expected him to come to any good, but she wanted to know, and now she does, and I think it was a relief.”

“Her health?”

“She won’t recover,” Frankie said, pushing her coffee cup away from her. “They say she’s got a few days at most. She comes around from the drugs about midday for a few hours. You can explain it all to her then.”

Marvin shook his head. “Nope. Me and Drake, we figure you were an idiot, but you didn’t really steal anything. And it was Mob money. And Jim was Mob, directly or indirectly.”

“He was still a human being.”

“But he’s a dead human being. You’re trying to do right, Frankie. You care about your mother-in-law. It’s a twenty-five-year-old crime. You haven’t stolen anything in the meantime, and if it’s any consolation, I believe your story.”

“Thank you,” Frankie said and reached out and touched Marvin’s hand.

He patted her hand and smiled. “I think it’s best we leave it alone from here on out. No one in town lost any money. The Mob made Jim and the two guards in on it pay, and that seems like a fitting end to all of it. I’ll try and see Mrs. Craver later today. But I won’t have anything new to add to what she knows.”

Frankie opened her purse and took out a check. She gave it to Marvin.

“Mrs. Craver signed this, told me to give it to you.”

Marvin looked at it.

“This is a lot more than we agreed to,” Marvin said.

“She wants you to have it. I want you to have it. Take it.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am. Mrs. Craver is.”

“All right then,” Marvin said. “That’s the end of my argument.”

That night at home, Rachel and Marvin had dinner. When they finished, Rachel said, “Want to watch some TV?”

“Sure.”

“We can surf the channels, see if there’s something interesting,” Rachel said.

“Sounds good.”

They went in the living room with glasses of ice tea and sat on the couch, Rachel on one end, Marvin on the other. They watched TV for a few minutes, and during a commercial, Rachel said, “What you told me about Mrs. Craver, about Frankie, not turning her in. That was the right thing to do.”

“I think so,” Marvin said.

Rachel slid over closer to Marvin and let her hand rest on top of his. “You’re a good man, Marvin.”

“Think so?”

“Stupid now and then,” Rachel said, “but at heart, a really good man.”

Marvin didn’t say anything to that, but he smiled. A little later he put his arm around Rachel’s shoulders, and she placed her head against his chest.

Not Our Kind

When I got out of school that day, I drove over to the Dairy Queen to get a hamburger before I had to go to work at the aluminum chair plant. I had a work permit, so I got off early, and I usually grabbed a burger, and then I drove out to the plant and worked until midnight. A lot of us from high school worked there, making fifty-six dollars and fourteen cents a week, which wasn't even good for 1968.

I was sitting at the back of the Dairy Queen, eating quickly, and was about halfway through the burger when four boys from school came in. I knew one of them pretty well, and the others a little. We all knew each other's names, anyway. I can't say any of them were friends of mine. We ran in different circles.

They saw me and came over. Two of them sat down in my booth, across from me, and the other two sat out to the side at a table and leaned on their elbows and looked at me. I didn't like their attitude.

"What's going on?" I said.

"You're seeing it," the one I knew best said. His name was David. Last time I saw him was at the Swinging Bridge, and there had been a fight there for money. My new friend Leonard was there. He won the fight. It was a friend of David's he

fought, and he beat the guy's ass like a tambourine and made some money.

Actually, that fight, lit by a huge tire fire, was the first time I met Leonard, and we hit it off, and we saw each other again in Marvel Creek, running into one another accidentally at first, and then finally on purpose. He lived over in LaBorde with his uncle, but they came to the general store in Marvel Creek to shop, which I didn't understand. Everyone in Marvel Creek goes to the larger city of LaBorde to shop, but his uncle had a store in Marvel Creek he liked, place where he had been buying shoes for a long time. He liked it, Leonard said, because the owner never told him to come around back, even before laws were passed that said he didn't have to.

David said, "We were talking about you the other day."

"Were you?" I said.

"Yeah. Some. We been seeing you around with that nigger."

"Leonard?"

"One name is as good as another for a nigger. 'Boy' will work. We'll call him 'Boy.'"

"I won't. And if I was you, I wouldn't call him that. You might find yourself turned inside out and made into a change purse."

"You think he's tough, don't you?"

"Don't you? You seen him whip some ass at the Swinging Bridge, same as me."

"We seen you whip some too," another of the boys said, "but that don't scare us none, about you or the nigger."

The big guy's real name was Colbert, but everyone called him Dinosaur on account of he was big and not that smart. He was a football player and he thought he was as cool as an igloo. He was said to be the toughest guy in school. That might have been true. He hadn't been at the bridge that night. I didn't know if he'd seen me and Leonard together or not, but he was riled about it, thanks to David.

I didn't like where this was going. I kept eating, but I didn't taste the rest of the burger.

"Way we see it," David said, and bobbed his head a little so as to indicate the others, "you aren't doing yourself any good."

"Oh, how's that?"

"Ought not have to spell it out for you, Hap. Hell, you know. Hanging with a nigger."

"You mean Leonard."

"Yeah. Okay. Leonard the nigger."

I nodded. I didn't realize until that moment that I really liked Leonard, and these guys I had known all my life, if only a little, I didn't care for that much at all.

"Word's getting around you're a nigger-lover," Dinosaur said.

"Is it?"

"Yeah. You don't want that," David said.

"I don't?"

"Are you trying to be a smartass?" Dinosaur said.

"I don't think so," I said. I put one foot out of the booth so I could move if I had to, could get a position to fight or run.

"There's talk, and it could reflect on you," David said.

"In what way?"

"You think girls want to date a nigger-lover? And way we hear it, this guy's queer as a three-dollar bill, and proud of it. A nigger queer, come on, man. You got to be kidding me."

"But he has such a nice personality," I said.

"You aren't going to listen, are you?" David said. "Girls don't want to date no nigger-lover."

"You said that."

"Because it's true."

"So, you have come here to spare me being viewed in a bad way, and to make sure I don't lose my pussy quota? That's what's up?"

“You’re making light of something you shouldn’t,” David said. “We got a way of doing things, and you know it.”

“We got to keep it protected,” Dinosaur said.

“We?” I said.

“White people,” David said. “Now that niggers can vote and eat with us, they think they can act like us.”

I nodded, glanced at the two that hadn’t spoken. “You guys, you thinking the same?”

They all nodded.

“Civil rights may change how the Yankees live,” David said, “but it won’t change us.”

“That’s why I don’t like you guys.”

This landed on their heads like a rock.

“You don’t have to like us, but we can’t have one of our own hanging about with niggers. He’s not our kind. He’s not one of us.”

“You know, it’s really been nice, but I have to go to work now, so I’ll see you.”

I got up and eased past Dinosaur, keeping an eye on him, but trying to look like I wasn’t concerned.

They all stood up. I was about halfway to the door when they came up behind me. David grabbed at my arm. I popped it free.

“You better take in what we’re saying,” David said.

“I could throw you through that window glass right now,” Dinosaur said.

“You might need yourself a nap and a sack lunch before you’re able to throw me through that glass, or anywhere else for that matter,” I said.

I was bluffing. I was a badass, and I knew it. But four guys, badass or not, are four guys. And one of them was a fucking freak of nature. I was reminded of how freakish he was with him standing almost as close to me as a coat of paint. He was looking down at me with a head like a bowling ball, shoulders wide enough to set a refrigerator on one side, a stove on the other.

About that time, the manager, Bob, came out from behind the counter. An older guy, red-haired, slightly gone to fat, not as big as Dinosaur, but I'd seen him throw out a couple of oil workers once for throwing ketchup-soaked fries against the Dairy Queen glass to see who could make theirs stick and not slide off. They didn't get very far in that game.

What I remember best was one of those guys, after Bob had tossed them out like they were dirty laundry, pulled a knife and held it on Bob when he came outside to make sure they were leaving.

Bob laughed, said to that guy, "Should have brought yourself a peppermint stick, you oil-field trash. They're a hell of a lot easier to eat."

This with the tip of the knife pressed to his stomach. The guy with the knife and his buddy believed Bob. Believed him sincerely. They were out of there so fast they practically left a vapor trail. It seemed they were standing there outside the Dairy Queen one moment, and the next their car's taillights were shining red in the distant night.

Bob said to David and the others, "All right, boys. Take it outside."

I thought, shit. Outside isn't going to be all that better for me.

We all started outside. Even Dinosaur didn't want a piece of Bob.

As we were going, Bob put his hand on my shoulder.

"You stay with me."

The others turned and looked at Bob.

"Unless I've developed a stutter, you know what I said."

They hesitated about as long as it takes to blink, and went out.

Bob waited until they were outside and looking through the glass. He made a shooping movement with his hand, and they

went away. After a moment I saw their car drive by the window and on out to the highway.

“They’ll be watching for you, son.”

“I know.”

“Hanging with niggers is frowned on. I got some nigger friends, but you got to know how to keep them at a distance. I go fishing with a couple of them, but I don’t have them around at my house, sitting in my chairs and eating at my table.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll remember that.”

“Still, no cause to pick on someone. You or the nigger. They don’t get to choose to be niggers. And you can get along with most anyone, and learn from most anyone, even a nigger. I learned how to catch catfish good from one.”

Well, Bob was better than the other four.

I bought a bag of chips and a Coca-Cola on ice to go, went out to my car, and drove to work. I was about halfway to the aluminum chair plant when Dinosaur, driving a Ford Mustang, pulled up behind me. The other three guys were in the car with him. They followed me to work. I parked close to the door and got out with my chips and Coca-Cola. I slurped at the Coca-Cola through a straw as I walked. I was saving the chips for dinner break. It was a light dinner, but I’d been trying to drop a few pounds. I was always prone to picking up weight, and I had to watch it.

I turned at the door into the plant and looked at them.

Dinosaur shot me the finger.

I shot him the finger back.

We had really showed each other. Funny how that can make people so mad. It’s their finger in the air, and that’s it. It has about as much actual effect as a leaf falling from a cherry tree in Japan.

They drove way, screeching tires as they left, and I went to work.

Next few days in school I'd see them in the hall, and I never once avoided them or tried to get out of the way. They were not always together, though sometimes they were, and Dinosaur bumped me a couple of times as he went by. I kept my cool. Once David said to me as he passed, "We'll get you, nigger-lover."

This went on for awhile, and now and then they'd follow me to work, but they never did anything. I had a ball bat in my car, and they knew that, because I let them see it by holding it up once while driving, knowing they could see it from their Mustang, as they were so close on my ass. What I feared is they'd hold up a gun or guns in response, but that didn't happen. Everyone wasn't shooting everybody back then.

This went on through the semester, and then the spring came, and one day I went downtown to buy some blue jeans and a union shirt. The old white union shirts had become popular. Everyone was dying them, or tie-dying them, and I guess I didn't want to be left out. What we had there in Marvel Creek was a kind of general store named Jack Woolens, and that's where I went to buy the shirt, couple pairs of jeans, and maybe what we called desert boots, which were tan, low-cut, comfortable shoes. I thought I had enough to afford it all. I was thinking on that, figuring I could skip one pair of pants if I had to, and I'd have enough for sure that way to get the shirt, shoes, and one pair of Lee Riders.

My hair had grown longer, and I had to comb it behind my ears at school and push it up off my forehead into a pompadour so I didn't get sent home. A bunch of us were wearing our hair longer, and there was even talk of a sit-in to protest how we were hassled by the principal, but I was the only one that showed up for the event. I ended up wandering around in the hall for a few

minutes and went back to the lunchroom and had some Jell-O before going to math class. I had it washed and combed out this day, and it was bouncing loosely as I walked. I thought I was as cool as a razor edge in winter time.

I parked my junker and was walking along the sidewalk, almost to Jack Woolens. I could see the wooden barrels setting out front—one had walking canes in it and brooms, the other had axe and hoe handles.

As I came along the sidewalk, I saw Leonard coming toward me. He saw me and smiled. We hadn't seen each other in a while, but when I saw him I knew I had missed him. He was like a stray dog that wandered in and out of my life, and I felt like when we were together that something missing was fulfilled. It was an odd combo, him being a homo and me being straight, him being black and me being white, and him being more redneck than I was. He didn't like my long hair and had told me, and I didn't like that he thought we needed a conservative president. He was a stray dog I liked, and I decided right then and there I wanted to keep him, even if he might bite. He probably thought I was the stray dog. I doubt he worried about my bite, however. He came down the sidewalk with one hand in his pants pocket, the other swinging by his side.

That's when David and Dinosaur, and the other two thugs, got out of the Mustang parked across the street, having spotted me and caught me without my ball bat. They came across the street, almost skipping.

They got to me before Leonard.

They came up on the curb and managed their way around me in a half circle. The door to Jack Woolens was at my back. It was open. It was a cool day and air-conditioning wasn't as common then, so it was left that way to let in the breeze as well as too many flies.

"Gotcha now," David said.

“Gotcha what?” Leonard said, as he came up the sidewalk, both hands swinging by his sides now.

“You’re the other one we want to see,” said Dinosaur. “You and the girl, here.”

“Wow,” I said. “That bites. You see, Leonard, they’re calling me a girl because my hair is long.”

“It is too long,” Leonard said.

“They are really pushing the wit, calling me a girl, noticing I have long hair. These guys, they ought to be on Johnny Carson.”

“Fuck you,” Dinosaur said.

“You’re looking for us, well, you done found us,” Leonard said.

“That’s right,” I said. “You have.”

“We don’t like what we see,” David said.

“That’s because you are a blind motherfucker and don’t know a couple pretty fellas when you see them,” Leonard said. “I could be on a fucking magazine, I’m so pretty. Shit. You could hang my goddamn dick in the museum of fucking modern art. Damn, Big Pile, you know you want to kiss my black ass, right where the tunnel goes down into the sweet dark depths.”

“You gag me,” David said.

“Fuck you,” Dinosaur said.

“The big man is consistent with those two words,” I said.

I didn’t know what it was about Leonard, but he brought out the double smartass in me. I figured if I was going to die, I might as well go out with a few good remarks. And with Leonard there, well, I felt I had a chance. That we had a chance.

Leonard looked at me. “Yeah. He repeats himself because it’s wishful thinking that slips out. Some of that Freudian stuff. Big white boy wants a piece of my fine, shiny, black ass I tell you, but his little ole dick dropped down there would be like tossing a noodle into a volcano.”

“Now I’m starting to get gagged,” I said.

“Ah, you’ll get over it, Hap,” Leonard said.

David said to Leonard, “You’re a goddamn dick-sucking nigger and he’s a nigger-lover.”

“Nah,” Leonard said. “I mean, yeah. I’m a dick-sucker, but me and Hap, we ain’t fucking, just hanging. Oh, I should also add, I don’t like being called a nigger, you cracker motherfucker.”

“You got some sand,” David said.

“I’m a whole goddamn beach,” Leonard said.

“What we’re thinking,” David said, “is we’re going to knock you two around until your shit mixes, until you get it through your head how things are supposed to be.”

“That a fact?” I said.

“Oh yeah,” Dinosaur said, “we’re gonna do that.”

Leonard grinned, said, “I guess you boys ought to get started. It’s already midday.”

“But the sun stays up for quite awhile,” I said.

“Yeah, there’s that,” Leonard said. “We got plenty of time to whip their asses.”

“Smartass nigger,” David said, and glanced at Dinosaur, who moved forward.

That’s when an older black man stepped out of Jack Woolens and reached in one of the barrels and pulled out an axe handle.

“I hear you peckerwoods calling my nephew a nigger?” the man said.

David bowed up a little. “We ain’t got a thing against hitting an old nigger, or a lady nigger, or kicking around a dead nigger, which is what you’re gonna be, you ancient watermelon fart.”

That’s when the old man swung the axe handle and clipped David across the jaw and made him stagger. I almost felt sorry for David. Even more so when the handle whistled again and caught him behind the neck and laid him out flat on his face on the cement.

The other three thugs froze, then seemed to come unstuck and started toward the three of us. Me and Leonard took fighting stances. That's when Jack Woolens came out behind us, a slightly paunchy old man with thinning dark hair.

"Stop it, goddamn it," Jack said.

They stopped, but when Dinosaur saw who it was, he said, "You old Jew bastard."

"Old Jew bastard fought Nazis, so he isn't afraid of your kind. You aren't a pimple on a Nazi's ass, but you're made of the same kind of pus."

This stopped them. I don't know why, but they hesitated.

The old Jew bastard pulled an axe handle from the barrel and stepped up beside the black man. "Way I see it," he said, "is we have axe handles, and for now, you have teeth. You see it that way, Chester?"

Chester said, "Yeah. They got some teeth right now."

Dinosaur looked a little nervous. "We ain't even eighteen, and that nigger hit David with an axe handle."

"Hard as he could," Leonard said.

"That's against the law," Dinosaur said. "We're underage. Minors."

"Sometimes, you have extenuating circumstances," Jack Woolens said. "I once strangled a Nazi when I was in the O.S.S. Look it up, you never heard of it. It wasn't a social group. I strangled him and went back to the farmhouse where I was hiding in Austria, and slept tight. I knocked me off a piece the next day. Young German girl who thought I was German. I can speak it. I had the chance, I'd have strangled another fucking Nazi."

"No shit?" Chester said. "You speak German?"

It was like they forgot the thugs were there.

"Yeah, I was born in Germany."

"No shit?"

“Yeah. I did get a little scratch when I was strangling that Nazi by the way. I don’t want to sound like I come out clean. That would be lying.”

Jack Woolens put the axe handle back in the barrel, and showed Chester a cut across his elbow by nodding at it. It was a long white line.

“Knife,” Jack said. “I had to wear a bandage for a few days.”

“That ain’t shit,” Chester said. “Cracker tried to castrate me once. I got a scar on my thigh I can show you makes that look like hen scratch. I had twenty-five stitches and had to stand when I fucked for awhile and reach under and hold my balls up so it didn’t slap my stitches. Want to see?”

“You win,” Jack said. “Keep your pants on.”

“I was moving when the cracker did that, cut me I mean,” Chester said. “Cracker didn’t turn out so well. They found his lily-white ass in the river, and there wasn’t no way of knowing how he got there. Some kind of accident like being beat to death and thrown in the river is my guess. You know, said the wrong thing to someone, tried to cut their balls off, something like that. I ain’t saying I know that to be a fact, him being dead in the Sabine River, but I’m going to start a real hard rumor about it right now.”

Jack turned back to the barrel and retrieved the axe handle, casual as if he were picking out a toothpick.

The thugs continued to stand there. As if just remembering they were there, Chester thumped Dinosaur’s chest with the axe handle. “Pick up this sack of dog shit, and carry him off. Do it now, ’cause you don’t, it’ll be hard to do with broke legs. You boys carry him now, you won’t have to scoot and pull him away with your teeth, ones you got left. Gumming him might be difficult. One way or another, though, it ain’t gonna turn out spiffy for you fellows.”

Dinosaur looked at me, then Leonard, then the older men. He looked at his friends. Nobody bowed up. No smart remarks were made. Dinosaur seemed small right then. They picked up David like he was a dropped puppet, tried to get him to stand, but they might as well have been trying to teach a fish how to ride a tricycle. They had to drag him across the street and into their car.

When they got David inside, the others got in, and Dinosaur went around to the driver's side. He shot us the finger. He said, "This ain't over."

"Better be," Jack Woolens said.

Dinosaur drove his friends out of there.

"We could have handled it," Leonard said.

"Maybe," I said.

"Shit," Leonard said. "We could."

"Now they're tough guys," Jack said to Chester. "It's all over, and now they're tough."

"We were tough enough," Leonard said, "and we could have got tougher."

"Leonard," Chester said, pulling car keys out of his pocket. "Bring the car around, and don't squeal the goddamn tires."

"Like he can't walk a few feet," Jack said. "Like he's got a lot to carry. A pair of shoes on lay-a-way he bought. He can walk."

I looked at Leonard and he grinned at me. I loved that grin.

Chester said. "I got the lumbago."

"Lumbago," Jack said. "Now the lumbago he gets."

Chester grunted, said to Leonard, "Get the car, kid."

Leonard looked at me, smiled, and went away to get it.

The Oak and the Pond

At one time there was a great oak tree behind the house where Leonard was living then, and the oak was deep in the woods, and it was one of the last of the great oaks. It stood tall and thick and ancient. It had great limbs you could crawl up on and stretch out on and sleep without real fear of rolling off.

We called it the Robin Hood tree, like the great tree where Robin and his merry band of men gathered to talk and feast. I also thought of it as the Tarzan tree, imagined how you could build a treehouse on its massive limbs and have plenty of room to live with a lithe, blonde Jane and do more than call elephants and swing on vines.

Leonard and I would meet at the oak, me having hiked through the woods from my place. My place wasn't all that far if you came by wooded path, then broke off the path and took a deer trail, and finally a winding trace through a series of tall blackjack oaks until you arrived at Fisherman's Creek. Across the creek the trees thinned in number but not in magnificence. There were sweet gums and hickory trees, and of course pines.

The Robin Hood tree was the granddaddy of them all. The oak rose higher and spread its limbs wider than all the others.

Its bark was healthy and dark, and in the spring its leaves were green as Ireland. To stand beneath it when it rained was a miracle, because the limbs were so thick and the leaves so plush that during the spring, and much of the summer, if not the fall when the leaves were brown and yellow and falling, you would hardly get wet. When it stormed the limbs shook like angry soldiers rattling their weapons, but the limbs didn't break, just old dead leaves and little branches dribbled down. The soil beneath the oak was thick and dark with many years of dropped and composted leaves. There were acorns on the ground, and sometimes when you came to the tree, squirrels were beneath it, rare black squirrels that made this part of the woods their home. They were in the tree too, chattering and fussing as you arrived.

Leonard and I met there many mornings, usually having a breakfast of boiled eggs we had brought in sacks, drinking coffee from our thermoses, carrying fishing gear and small coolers with our lunches in them.

We would sometimes sit there beneath the tree and talk, and finally we would go away from there, carrying our coolers, through the trees, and then along the creek line to where the pond was. It was a big pond, and at one point in time there had been a house near it. Now the house was a pile of gray lumber and rusty nails and a few bricks that showed where the fireplace had been. Beyond that was a clapboard barn that still stood, the great wide doors gone, probably taken for lumber for someone's project. Trees crowded it, and one sweet gum had grown up and under the roof and was pushing it loose on one side.

The pond had been dug maybe fifty years before and had been filled with fish, and we were fishing their descendants. There was a boat down there, one we had tediously carried there along the creek bank, and we left it for when we wanted to fish. No one bothered it, because no one came there anymore but

us. The land was owned by someone up North who had mostly forgotten about it. The pond was always muddy, but the fish were thick. We caught them and generally threw them back, unless they were good-sized enough and fat. Then they went home with us and became our supper.

We fished there with cane poles, not rods and reels. It wasn't a place for rods and reels. It was a place for fishing in an old and simple way. We put lines on the poles, sinkers, corks, hooks, and bait, usually worms. Out in the boat we would dangle lines and watch the fish jump, the dragonflies dip down on the water, see the shadows of birds flying over, now and again there was the sight of a leaping frog or a wiggling water moccasin. Turtle heads rose like periscopes, then fell beneath the water with a delicate splash and a small ripple.

In the spring it was cool for a long time, and in the summer it grew hot, but with wide-brimmed hats on, we still fished, and we lazed, and sometimes we talked, softly, fearing we might frighten the fish. We talked about all manner of things we believed in, and how we differed from one another. I told Leonard about my women, and he told me about his men. We talked about brotherhood without speaking of it directly. I told bad jokes and Leonard grumbled.

When Leonard moved from the house next to the woods, and I later moved from where I lived, we lost that spot.

Some years later the people up North remembered the land, and they brought in pulp crews and cut the woods down, even the great and ancient oak, which must have fought the saws with its old, hard wood. But the saws won, and it tumbled down and was coated in gasoline and set on fire. They didn't even bother to make it into lumber. The land where it stood was a black spot for a long time.

They planted rows and rows of soft lumber pines to be cut and replanted every fifteen or twenty years a crop. People claim

there are more trees now than before, but they are wrong. Once you could drive all through East Texas and there were trees as far as you could see, and not just pines either. The trees grew close to the roads and covered them in shadow. You don't have to go out in the woods and count trees one by one to know that the statements being made about there being more trees than ever before is a bald-faced lie. The pines they planted where the oak grew didn't shield you from rain or rattle in the wind the way the Robin Hood tree did.

Eventually, they filled in the pond, killing the fish. They dammed up the creek and made another, larger pond farther up, but it lacked charm, and finally scummed over. Nothing lived in it.

A company that raised chickens for a supermarket chain bought the land, and a series of long, commercial chicken houses took the place of the original pond and the woods that had surrounded it, even the pulp trees, which they also cut down and didn't replant. Now there is a wide gravel road that leads out of where the trees once grew, on to the highway. It's odd. Looking down that gravel road, you can see the highway so easy. It seemed farther away in the years before the road was there and the trees were cut.

Leonard wouldn't even look in the direction of the old place when we drove by. I look, but I don't like what I see. The rain still falls and the wind still blows, but the oak and the pond are gone.

The Boy Who Became Invisible

A comic book script based on
the story of the same name

Note to artist: East Texas is not West Texas. No mountains. No deserts. No sand dunes. It's a place of great pines and plentiful water in the form of creeks and rivers and man-made lakes. So do not think Texas of the movies, as East Texas is much closer in appearance to Louisiana and Arkansas. But most of the story takes place in a school and a schoolyard, places where that isn't a concern. Jesse's home should be on a wooded lot, and it isn't so small as it is old.

Another note: This comic builds, and it's not an action comic, and therefore could be designated as "talking heads" a lot, but I try to give it scenes and background that keep it interesting. I think the comic panels should reflect the alteration in Jesse's state of mind, along with events and dialogue. This keeps a kind of slow burn more interesting, and then in the end it becomes more dynamic. Much of the strength of the piece is the build, and the tension the artist puts into panels.

First page or so sets up town and era and mood, some symbolic ideas to go with the captions.

All CAPTIONS are Hap's internal dialogue.

Lastly, the artist may decide to change the size and number of panels, which is fine as long as the script is being properly conveyed. I like the artist to have freedom to create.

THE BOY WHO BECAME INVISIBLE

PAGE ONE

Four Panels

Panel One:

FIRST THIRD OF A PAGE

One end of the street looking down at—

View of a typical small East Texas town, one long main brick-street drag with buildings on either side, circa 1940s, though the story takes place in the 1960s. So keep that in mind. A couple of 1960s automobiles coast down the street, one toward us, one away from us.

CAPTION

I grew up in a little East Texas town called Marvel Creek.

Panel Two:

CAPTION

Not much happened there that will remembered outside the town and the surrounding countryside—

SECOND THIRD OF PAGE, AERIAL VIEW

View of the Sabine River, which is long, and muddy-colored and winding, but it's rarely a wide river, so we will use a medium-size run of water as it hurtles under a high metal trellis bridge, and all along the water is bordered by tall trees, oaks and pines and hickories, and close to the shore, willows and a few shrubs.

Panel Three:

AVERAGE-SIZE LEFT-HAND PANEL.

CAPTION

—but more went on there than outsiders might suspect. Some of it as evil as a water moccasin bite on a blistering hot day . . .

Close-up on a water moccasin swimming in the river water.

Panel Four:

A DARK SKY and a long, nasty, brightly flaring lightning bolt.

CAPTION

. . . as unexpected and deadly as being struck by a blast of lightning.

PAGE TWO

Four Panels

Panel One:

MEDIUM PANEL

A schoolyard with young kids running and playing, the school behind them, a structure of red brick and shiny windows, circa 1950s style.

CAPTION

Our little school wasn't much. And frankly, I preferred to stay home and read books.

Panel Two:

MEDIUM PANEL

CAPTION (1)

I pretended to be sick a lot.

CAPTION (2)

When I wasn't reading books, I liked to run along the creeks and through the woods with my best friend, Jesse.

The woods with a little creek winding along through it, and running beside the banks of the creek are two boys about nine or ten. One is Hap, the narrator of our story; the other is Jesse. Hap is a nice-looking kid with an air of contentment. Jesse is a raw-boned, long-legged, ragged-clothed kid with greasy hair that falls in his face.

What we see in their faces is the youthful excitement of being alive.

Panel Three:

CAPTION

Jesse was a kid's kid. He could juggle.

Jesse juggling rubber balls as Hap watches with surprise and delight.

Panel Four:

CAPTION

I couldn't.

Hap dropping balls as he tries to juggle, a look of disappointment on his face.

PAGE THREE

Three Panels

Panel One:

CAPTION

He could walk on his hands.

Jesse doing just that, in perfect upright position, legs straight and high to the sky.

Panel Two:

Hap is attempting to walk on his hands. We see him with his head down and his legs bent and him toppling.

CAPTION

I couldn't.

Panel Three:

HALF-PAGE PANEL

CAPTION

I knew Jesse's family lived differently than we did. They were very poor. So were we. But compared to them, we were the Rockefellers.

Very important to give some of Jesse's background, or at least how Hap sees it.

Hap and Jesse in tire swings side by side, swinging on ropes fastened to the tires and the limb of a huge oak.

Behind them we see a rundown shack with a porch to one side, and a leaning outhouse out to the left and some distance away from the house. There are old cars in the yard, tireless, wheel-less, up on blocks. Along with that, strewn about the yard, are overturned washing machines, hubcaps, and heaps of drying grass.

PAGE FOUR

Four Panels

Panel One:

DAY

CAPTION

And although my father couldn't read or write, he was a raging intellectual compared to Jesse's old man, Cletus.

SIDE VIEW AND MEDIUM-SIZED PANEL

Jesse's old man, a classic peckerwood-cracker-son-of-a-bitch. He's big, tall, and raw-boned like Jesse, but broad-shouldered with muscled arms. He's wearing overalls and his hair is greasy and combed back Elvis-style with what was called a duck's ass in the back—long, oily, flipped-up hair at the base of the neck. He is shirtless under the overalls.

Cletus has Jesse by the back of the neck, has his belt off and looped, and he's beating Jesse like a drum.

Hap is standing off to the side, shocked.

SFX

Sound effect of Jesse caterwauling.

Panel Two:

CAPTION (1)

Cletus had the brain of a flea, the ambition of a frog, and the temper and savagery of a wounded bear.

CAPTION (2)

He could go off on Jesse for the slightest reason.
Real or imagined.

MEDIUM-SIZED PANEL

Another angle on this scene. Jesse facing us, his old man behind him. His eyes are lit with anger or glee, a little of both, if that's possible to present, and his arm is raised high, the belt coiled and ready to strike. Although we are showing the same thing as the panel before, I think seeing what's going on twice and from a different angle affects the

viewer more, and lets us really know how nasty Jesse's home life is. But, if the artist wants to use these two panels to make several small panels to show what's going on, that's cool too. I'm for the artist using common sense.

Panel Three:

MOMENTS LATER, ANOTHER ANGLE

Jesse and Cletus, and in this scene Cletus is giving Jesse a good kick in the ass, sending him flying.

CAPTION

Cletus was a brutal old bastard.

Panel Four:

Hap is running by the front porch, away from Cletus's home, and on the porch we see Cletus's wife, a rundown middle-aged woman with black eyes.

CAPTION

He didn't treat his wife or dogs any better.
And as far as Jesse's mother was concerned,
he was on his own.

PAGE FIVE

Six Panels

Panel One:

INTERIOR CLASSROOM, DAY

Big panel for establishing classroom and kids.

No teacher is present yet. Blackboard. Desks. A globe of the world setting on it. Usual stuff. Pencils, notepads. Teacher supplies.

The kids are all sitting in their desks. Jesse is in the front row wearing ragged clothes, and behind him is Hap, simply dressed. Nothing fancy, but not ragged.

In a desk on Jesse's right is a solid-looking fifth grader, already looking as if some day he'll own a car dealership, have a gym membership, and have a mistress on the side and a fat pile of money. He's got a flattop and he's well-dressed for a fifth grader. This is JAMES.

Behind James is a near carbon copy, a little smaller, red hair. This is Ronnie. He's yukking it up over James's remarks.

Across from James there is a cute, blonde girl. This is MARILYN. She's laughing as James delivers his line. If ever there was a wicked harpy in the making, she is it.

JAMES

Jesse, you steal those clothes off a drunk?

SFX

Giggles from Ronnie and Marilyn, or any sound effect for laughter you like.

Panel Two:

FRONT VIEW SHOT OF JESSE

He's the main focus, but to his right side (our left) we can see James, his mouth open.

Jesse is sitting with his head hung, and we can see James thundering along with his abuse.

JAMES

I bet you sleep under the porch with the dog.

Panel Three:

INSERT CLOSE ON JESSE'S FEET.

He has monogrammed socks. Cheap-looking with a big "S" on them.

CAPTION

Jesse's secondhand socks especially drew James's ire.

Panel Four:

James pointing at Jesse's socks, his head thrown back in a laugh.

JAMES

What's that "S" for, Jesse? Sardines? No,
I know. Skunk?

Panel Five:

ON HAP

He doesn't look happy about what's going on, yet he sits, closed mouth.

CAPTION

I didn't like what they were doing to Jesse, but
to my shame, I said nothing in his defense.

Panel Six:

*ON JAMES as he touches Jesse's shoulder with his ruler, as if
knighting him.*

JAMES

I dub you “Skunk.”

PAGE SIX

Five Panels

Panel One:

The teacher coming into the room. He’s a big jock-looking guy, but with a kind face. This is Mr. Waters.

MR. WATERS

James. Be quiet.

CAPTION

Our second-period teacher always took up for Jesse. He knew what was going on.

Panel Two:

WE SEE:

Mr. Waters seated at his desk with a book cracked open, and his mouth is open as well, and he seems to be giving a lecture or commenting on something to do with the studies.

And we see James passing a note back to Marilyn.

Panel Three:

INSERT NOTE AND MARILYN'S SMALL HANDS:

We see what it says.

I can smell Jesse from here.

Panel Four:

Marilyn leaning forward, holding her nose. This is at a cross-hatch angle, and we can see the red-headed kid in this scene as well, and he's grinning.

Panel Five:

On Hap, looking disappointed in himself.

CAPTION

I should have said something. But they were the most popular kids in school, and I feared I might redirect their wrath from Jesse to me.

PAGE SEVEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

As they are leaving the classroom, filing out, Jesse is in front of Mr. Waters's desk, walking with his head down.

MR. WATERS

I like your socks, Jesse. Monograms are a sign of sophistication. I need to get me some.

Panel Two:

Jesse in the hallway, Hap behind him.

CAPTION

Nice try on Mr. Waters's part, bless him, but
I think recognition of socks with a monogram
that didn't fit Jesse's name only made him feel worse.

Panel Three:

ON THE PLAYGROUND

James and Ronnie have Jesse on the ground, and James is kicking him while Ronnie is bending over him, punching him in the back of the head. Marilyn is watching, laughing, her pretty blonde head thrown back, giving some impression of the beautiful but mean-spirited human being she will grow up to be.

CAPTION

It was bad enough he got beatings at home for
nothing, but now he was getting the same
thing at school.

Panel Four:

Marilyn has turned her head to look at Hap while the beating continues in the background. She is smiling.

Hap standing there, dumbstruck.

CAPTION (1)

Marilyn. She was so pretty. And I was so smitten.

CAPTION (2)

Goddamn me.

Panel Five:

ANOTHER ANGLE ON SCENE

Now Marilyn and Hap are close together and both are laughing as Jesse continues to take a beating in the background.

CAPTION

For a moment I was no better than them. Like Jesse, I just wanted to belong.

Panel Six:

Ronnie has Jesse's foot, and Jesse's shoe is off, and James is peeling off the monogrammed sock. He has his head turned to show the smell is offensive.

JAMES

I'm going to put this in a jar of alcohol as a little souvenir of a skunk hunt.

PAGE EIGHT

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse is sitting on the ground, crying, putting his shoe on his bare foot. He's looking over at Hap, who is standing with the others. They are all laughing, including Hap.

Panel Two:

Jesse walking home, one foot without a sock, bloody, with his books under his arm. Hap watching from a distance.

CAPTION

I began to distance myself from Jesse. I too began to see him as weird.

Panel Three:

CLASSROOM, ANOTHER DAY

All the seats, viewed from the front of the room, over Mr. Waters's shoulder. Everything is arranged the same. Except for Hap. He's now sitting at a desk closer to Marilyn.

CAPTION (1)

I was too young to know what it was about her that stirred me. I just knew what I felt wasn't a need to pee.

CAPTION (2)

It wouldn't be the first time my dick steered me wrong, but it was the worst time.

Panel Four:

The kids are filing out the door. Hap is last in line. Mr. Waters is at his desk.

MR. WATERS

Hap. Stay a minute.

Panel Five:

Hap standing in front of Mr. Waters. They are the only ones in the classroom.

MR. WATERS

You and Jesse been friends since you were both knee-high to a grasshopper. He doesn't need you joining in with those jackals.

HAP

Yes, sir.

Panel Six:

As Hap is going out the door, Waters, visible at his desk, calls out.

MR. WATERS

You're better than that.

CAPTION

Only I wasn't.

PAGE NINE

Four Panels

Panel One:

Hap inside his home, the curtain cracked, looking out at the street, and we can see Jesse over Hap's shoulder, walking down the road past the house.

CAPTION

Jesse quit coming by the house. And I avoided him when I could.

Panel Two:

HALL OF HIGH SCHOOL, FEW YEARS LATER

The kids are about seventeen in the following scenes.

Hap is walking down the hall, books under his arm, and coming toward him is Jesse with his books. Jesse looks equally uncomfortable.

CAPTION

I saw him at school now and then. But we seldom spoke. For me, he was fading into the background.

Panel Three:

CAFETERIA

Jesse sitting at a table, alone, with his sack lunch. Across the way at a table with others, including the bullies, sits Hap. He's looking at Jesse, but Jesse doesn't see him.

CAPTION(1)

Jesse couldn't afford school lunches. He brought his, when he had it to bring.

CAPTION (2)

A can of sardines or sausages, some crackers.
All of it he ate with his fingers.

Panel Four:

Fairly large panel so we can take in the budding sex bomb that is Marilyn.

CAPTION

Marilyn went from being a mean little kid—

MOMENTS LATER, SAME SCENE

Marilyn with her tray of cafeteria food, a carton of milk, and she's in mid-model stride.

Marilyn, older now, a real knockout in a mini-skirt so tight that if it had a pocket and there was a coin in it, you could read the writing on it. She has long, blonde hair, great cheekbones, and full lips. She looks like the kind of girl that would make you set fire to the pope and throw your wife into the flames after him. She's walking toward Jesse's table. She is smiling in a friendly way.

PAGE TEN

Five Panels

Panel One:

FULL PANEL ON JESSE'S FACE

He's staring at Marilyn, and we can see her reflection in his wide eyes. His skin is popped with sweat. He looks as if he could shit a high chair with a baby in it.

CAPTION

—to being an entitled, mean-spirited—

Panel Two:

Jesse stands, and we'll catch him in mid-stand, slightly bent as he comes to his feet. Marilyn is also in view, very close to his table, smiling wickedly, as if she's about to drop her panties right then and there and bend over a chair.

CAPTION

—devil with the face and body of an angel.

Panel Three:

Jesse pulling out a chair for Marilyn. He's hopeful she's going to sit with him, and it looks as if that is exactly what she is about to do.

CAPTION

When she spoke, it was loud, for all to hear.

MARILYN

Are you kidding? I just wanted to see what a loser eats for lunch. I thought it might be roadkill.

Panel Four:

WIDE VIEW OF CAFETERIA

All the kids are laughing as Marilyn, still carrying her tray, is walking away from Jesse's table, our view being her back and that marvelous ass. Her head is turned toward the table where Hap and the two bullies sit, and we can see her smiling her killer smile. Jesse is still standing, still feeling the insult.

SFX

Ha, ha, ha, or whatever sound effects you
feel are appropriate for a room full of mean laughter.

Panel Five:

Jesse, red-faced, is leaving the cafeteria with his sack, his head hung.

PAGE ELEVEN

Four Panels

Panel One:

EXTERIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Jesse outside the school, sitting on the curb eating his lunch.

CAPTION

After that, Jesse ate his lunches alone.

Panel Two:

INTERIOR HIGH SCHOOL, HALLWAY

Jesse coming down the hallway, and everyone in the hall, including Marilyn, Ronnie, and James, have turned their backs to Jesse. He is walking silently right behind them. Hap is not present in this shot.

CAPTION (1)

The wicked trio came up with a new plan to torment Jesse. They decided to treat him like a ghost.

CAPTION (2)

Word was spread that when he was present, he was to be ignored. That if he spoke, no one was to respond.

Panel Three:

DAY, STREET IN FRONT OF THE PICTURE SHOW

Hap in the driver's seat of a tan Impala. He has the window down and he's looking at Jesse walking on the sidewalk in front of a movie theater with a marquee that announces the current film. ROSEMARY'S BABY.

CAPTION (1)

I had had enough.

HAP

Hey, Jesse.

CAPTION (2)

I decided not to continue with that trio's meanness. But me and Jesse didn't go back to being friends as before.

Panel Four:

Jesse is so happy to be acknowledged, he's stopped walking, and is smiling awkwardly and raising his hand in a friendly wave as Hap drives away in his Impala.

CAPTION

Still, I was done with that bullshit.

PAGE TWELVE

Five Panels

Panel One:

THE SCHOOL CAFETERIA

Hap is standing in the lunch line with a lot of other teenagers, holding an empty tray, waiting to pick up his food. Behind him, coming through the door from a hallway, we see Jesse entering, carrying his sack.

Panel Two:

Jesse passing Hap, as Hap turns to look at him.

HAP

Hey, Jesse.

Panel Three:

Jesse has stopped and turned toward Hap. The look on Jesse's face is serene.

JESSE

Hi, Hap.

Panel Four:

CENTER OF CAFETERIA

At a table, sitting together, our trio of bullies, Marilyn, James, and Ronnie. They are all sitting with their lunches. Jesse is walking directly toward them. Marilyn is really looking good this day, at her devastating, mini-skirt best, her long legs crossed.

Panel Five:

ANOTHER ANGLE, JESSE'S POINT OF VIEW

Jesse has his back to us, but at an angle, so we can see part of his face, and we can see his hand reaching into his lunch sack. He's standing right by the trio's table, in front of an empty chair.

The trio is looking up at him with a "what the hell?" attitude.

CAPTION

In that moment, Marilyn dropped their code of silence toward Jesse.

MARILYN

Kind of lost, aren't you, Skunk?

PAGE THIRTEEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse has pulled a revolver from his sack. Marilyn has jumped to her feet, and we can see her chair tipping over backward behind her.

JESSE

My name is Jesse.

Panel Two:

Gunfire in Marilyn's face. A little blast of light and smoke.

Panel Three:

James, still in his chair, his mouth open in surprise, as he takes a full blast in the chest.

Panel Four:

Front view of Ronnie running toward us, but his hands are thrown out and we can see his chest bursting open as a bullet exits, and in the background we see Jesse pointing the revolver at him, a thin smile on his face.

JESSE

Bingo.

Panel Five:

CAFETERIA

Teenagers running in all directions, but in the center, calm as a fence post, is Jesse, walking, the revolver by his side.

Panel Six:

Hap is standing by himself, the tray dangling in his hand by his side, and Jesse is walking right up to him.

JESSE

Bye, Hap.

CAPTION

I don't know for sure how I found my voice, but when I did, it seemed to be coming from some place cold and far away.

HAP

Bye, Jesse.

PAGE FOURTEEN

Six Panels

Panel One:

Jesse exiting the cafeteria, entering into the hallway. Behind him, viewed through the door, but still in the cafeteria, Hap is following.

CAPTION

I can't explain it, but I walked out after him.

Panel Two:

IN THE HALLWAY

Jesse, and coming down the hall is the teacher Mr. Waters.

MR. WATERS

Jesse. What have you done, son?

Panel Three:

We are looking down Jesse's gun arm as he fires at Mr. Waters, who is taking the shot in the head and lurching backward from it.

CAPTION

I guess Mr. Waters was just in the way. Wrong place, wrong moment.

Panel Four:

VIEWED OVER HAP'S SHOULDER AS HE STEPS INTO THE HALLWAY

At one end of the hall are two glass doors, and Jesse is using one hand to push one of them open. The revolver dangles in the other hand.

CAPTION

I think I knew what was about to happen. It might have been for the best.

Panel Five:

CLOSER ON JESSE As the glass door is closing behind him. We see him through the glass as he places the gun to his head and is pulling the trigger.

SFX

BLAM!

CAPTION

His head jumped to the right a little, and then he fell.

Panel Six:

Jesse lying on the ground, a crowd around him that includes Hap. There's one boy in the crowd leaning over Jesse, looking down on him.

BOY

What got into Skunk?

PAGE FIFTEEN

Five Panels.

Panel One:

Hap has angrily grabbed the boy by the shirt.

HAP

Don't call him that. Don't ever call him that.

Panel Two:

LATER THAT DAY

CAPTION (1)

When they went out to tell his parents
what had happened . . . that Jesse was dead . . .

Sheriff's car pulling up in front of Jesse's home, the hovel.

CAPTION (2)

. . . that Marilyn was disfigured, James was
dead, and Ronnie was paralyzed from the
waist down . . .

Panel Three:

IN THE YARD

Sheriff and a deputy looking down at a dead dog in the yard.

CAPTION

. . . they found the family dog dead in the yard.
I figured Jesse didn't want him to go hungry.

Panel Four:

INTERIOR SHACK, BEDROOM

Jesse's parents lying on their backs, with their heads missing for the most part. They are just holes where bullets have gone through them. There is something lying across the old man's chest.

CAPTION

They discovered Jesse's parents on the bed
where he had shot them in the face, numerous times.

Panel Five:

CLOSE ON THIS SOMETHING

It's the belt that Cletus used to beat Jesse with. It's stretched out in full.

CAPTION

And across Jesse's father's chest, lying there
like a dead snake, was the belt Cletus had used
so many times to beat him.

THE END

Joe R. Lansdale Interviews Hap Collins and Leonard Pine

Q. Hap, I'm going to start with you. You strike me as an intelligent guy. Why don't you try and make a little bit more of your life?

Hap: Haven't a clue. I keep thinking I will, but I seem to take wrong turns.

Q. Why not back off from the situations you get yourself into? You deserve a little better, don't you?

Hap: I get into them before I mean to. It's like they're kind of lurking out there. I turn left to avoid them, there's more trouble comin' the other way.

Leonard: And he drags me in after him. Can I say something?

Q. Be my guest.

Leonard: Hap's bright, but doesn't fully believe it. He thinks because he hasn't come up with the formula for something

like Coca-Cola, or has done him some brain surgery, or cured a disease, he hasn't lived up to his expectations. Problem with Hap is, he coasts. Ain't sayin' he's lazy. He works hard. When he works. But he hasn't got any rudder.

Q. Now, don't take this wrong, Leonard, but what's your excuse?

Leonard: I don't make any. I'm doing what I want to do. That's the difference between me and my brother here. He isn't entirely happy being him. I'm damn ecstatic about being me. I work hard. I don't worry that much about the future. A little. But nothing serious. Hap, he's nothing but a big ol' bag of worry.

Hap: I thought I was a love machine.

Leonard: You're a love machine can't keep a woman.

Hap: You've had a bit of a problem maintaining relationships yourself, my good man.

Leonard: Yeah. But, you know what? I think I've found a man finally.

Q. That's another thing. Don't the people you guys care about seem to . . . well, you know?

Leonard: Yeah, they seem to give us bad luck. We haven't figured that one out yet.

Q. Well, they're the ones get killed.

Leonard: Yeah. We haven't figured that out either.

Q. This one's for you, Leonard. Do you feel that as you get older you're gettin' your temper under control?

Leonard: What temper?

Q. Well . . .

Leonard: Hey, answer the question. I didn't stutter. What temper?

Q. I was merely sayin' . . .

Leonard: You haven't said anything yet. You asked if I had a temper. I don't have any damn temper.

Hap: Yes you do.

Leonard: Hey, you want a piece of me, brother? You want to wake up with a crowd around you?

Hap: Hey, bubba. You and me get into it, you better brought yourself a sack lunch, 'cause we're gonna be here all night.

Leonard: Yeah?

Hap: Yeah.

Q. Let's change the subject. You guys seem to survive through pure tenacity and a feeling of quarrelsome brotherhood. . . .

Leonard: Quarrelsome. Who you callin'—

Hap: You're right. We do. There's this, Lansdale. You can have all the money there is, every damn thing, and what it comes down to finally, like it or not, you got to have someone to lean on.

Leonard and I aren't brothers by birth. But we are brothers. Like our lawyer friend Andrew Vachss says, "It's the family you choose that counts." We stand by that. It can be your blood kin, certainly, but it doesn't have to be. Way we see it, we can argue and fight with each other, but no one else better think they can. Least not in any serious manner.

Q. All right. Let me ask this: What are future plans?

Hap: Hard to say.

Leonard: Charlie Blank and Hanson have some ideas for us. They've got a little private investigator's agency, and we may be picking up a few jobs from them. Nothing technical. Just little stuff, you know. Hap here, he'll still be looking for a date. Watching his weight. Sticking to nonalcoholic beer and losing his hair. I'll still be cool and calm in my JCPenney's suit.

Hap: You may be calm, but that cheap suit is enough to make anyone else nervous.

Q. I have just a few more questions.

Leonard: Actually, we got to go. We borrowed the truck we're in to get over here, and we promised to have it back. Our junkers are in the shop. Guy needs this one back to go to work.

Hap: And there's a monster movie showing on channel 38 I want to see.

Leonard: Not that he hasn't seen it about a hundred times.

Q. Well, thanks, guys. And be careful out there.

Leonard: Hell, careful's our middle name, man.

An Interview with Joe R. Lansdale, His Own Self

Editor Rick Klaw sat down with Joe and discussed his writing, racism, violence, Texas, and, of course, Hap and Leonard.

RK: Your work has been called Texas gothic, gothic Texas fiction, Texas noir, mystery, suspense, crime, horror, western, and damn near everything in between. How would you describe your work?

JRL: Lansdale. I think of it as being Lansdale work. I try not to fit into any category. It's not that I purposely try not to, but that I just don't. I'm uncomfortable trying to force myself into a box. I write what I want to write. I also find that if I fit into a mystery or horror category and try to label myself or push myself as that, then if any one of those things becomes passé or not popular for awhile, then I've actually eliminated part of my audience. I don't want people to pick me up and read me for a mystery writer or read more mysteries; I want them to read more Joe Lansdale and that's not egotistical—although maybe it is a little, I don't know—but it's actually trying to find a way of expressing yourself and promoting what you do, instead of

the general idea of a certain genre or a label. And I really hate labels like “splatterpunk” and things like that. Those to me, I think, actually constrict your audience.

RK: One issue that is common to all your work is racism. Why is that?

JRL: I think it perhaps is when I grew up—I was born in 1951—and in the South there was a lot of Jim Crow laws. I grew up in East Texas, which is considered part of the South, unlike most of Texas, which is considered the Southwest, so I saw examples of it. The separate water fountains, separate toilets, going around to the back of restaurants to get their food, theaters where they had to be in the balcony, general attitude that they were not as human as whites. I think, too, that a lot of it was just that my mother was very progressive for her time and I think she planted that seed there for me. Then the sixties came along and civil rights was a big issue as part of the sixties. I think that in those early years that it imprinted. I just always felt uncomfortable with segregation and didn't understand exactly what it was about. I also felt that education and many things like that that had been denied blacks was the thing that prevented them being able to operate in society. I felt that these were things that should be there for everyone. And I didn't feel they were, and it really struck me deeply. It runs throughout my work, civil rights in general, but I think especially my experience being with how blacks were treated and to a great extent with how women were treated in the fifties and sixties and what their roles were expected to be. My mother defied that and was certainly, as I said, very progressive. I don't use the term “liberal” or “conservative” in that because I don't think that matters, but I think she was progressive in her time. I believe too that put a lot of stress on her trying to do that

because that certainly wasn't accepted, because there was a lot of religious fanaticism against the idea of women even working. All the things we take for granted now and are very common were at one time taboo socially—not just in the South but across the United States. Perhaps the racism struck me more deeply being from this area because we had more blacks and there was this ill legacy of the Civil War and people were still fighting the Civil War even when I was a kid. Even though it was over, they were still fighting it emotionally.

RK: Your work is littered with the mixture of violence and humor. Do you find these to be essential elements to your work, and do you feel you always need the combination?

JRL: I don't think you always have to. And I don't think I always have. But I think that it's more common in my work than not to have that. I think that's because I saw a lot of violence when I was growing up. Not necessarily always murderous violence, but in school Gladewater was a tough town—people always gettin' in fights, fistfights over silly things, and they fought hard. But there was a lot of humor in the way people conducted themselves and the way they saw things. I think that rubbed off on me a lot. I think everybody sees humor in violence, even those people who don't think they do. Because even if you are watching Laurel and Hardy or any comedian, whoever it is on these old shows that we grew up on, people are falling off ladders and people are laughing. People have always laughed at those sorts of things. Sane people laugh when they realize that no one is actually hurt. It is intertwined. I think that humor and violence is nothing new. It's always been intertwined. I think that Robert Bloch probably had a big influence on me as a writer because he always recognized that.

RK: In your books, the violence is very realistic. Why do you think you make it that way?

JRL: Like I said, I've seen it, I've been involved in it in the sense that I grew up with people who would fight at the drop of a hat over almost anything. I've been a martial artist all my life and I've actually used it in self-defense. I've also made a point of not using it a few times when I could have. I just controlled the situation either verbally or controlled them physically when they didn't realize that they were being controlled. And though I'm not anxious to get involved in violence myself (I'm not very much a fan of violence), it intrigues me. It's so much a part of the human condition. Some people try to deny it as part of the human condition. One of the things that martial arts does and writing this kind of fiction does is that they allow you to tap into that and let off some of that steam. Which is not to say that if you didn't that you'd necessarily go out and be an ax murderer, but I do believe that in my case that I have somewhat of an aggressive personality to some extent. I am very physical, and I think all those things help me keep my life balanced—which is still not to say I think I was gonna flip out or be an ax murderer or anything.

RK: It seems whenever a new Lansdale book comes out, fans and critics hail it as your most violent book yet.

JRL: I never can tell. To me, I don't notice any difference between this one and that one. I really don't. When I look at *Bad Chili*, I think, "Whoa! That was pretty violent." I always think of it and *Two-Bear Mambo* has the most violent of the Hap and Leonard series. *Nightrunners* and *Waltz of Shadows*, those are VERY violent. I never think about that. I never think that I'm going to make this scene violent or what. It just sort

of arrives. I'll read these other books, and this book is just as violent as my books. Why don't they talk about these people? As other people have told me: "But they don't write violence the same way. They don't have that kind of poetic description." I appreciate that.

RK: Your stories are steeped in Texas. Someone once said you're a writer who practically oozes Texas. Beside the fact that you grew up in Texas, is there another reason? There are plenty of writers who grew up here who don't have as much Texas flavor to their work.

JRL: First of all, as you said, growing up here. But I also believe that my parents were proud of being Texans. I think their people actually come from somewhere else. But my father was a Texan. My mother was a Texan. Prior to that, we weren't generations of Texans. But we epitomized what Texas represents, at least in that mythological sense, as being hardcore, independent people. People who literally did pull themselves up by their bootstraps. My father was a person who could not read or write. And I think he was a vast success. He taught himself how to be a mechanic. My mother bought him a Model T and said take this apart and put it back together until you can do it. And he did. That's how he learned to be a mechanic and, of course, just continued to learn and update his knowledge. He got to where toward the end of his life, he could actually read a little bit and write a couple of sentences here and there. His mother died when he was eight years old and him taking over the family pretty much. His father bein' a brutal bastard and my father, like I said, not being educated and having to work all these hard physical jobs. I look at my mother coming from a somewhat-better situation but still a poor situation. When they were reaching their adulthood, that was the Great Depression, and I

think all of that just epitomizes what people think of when they think of Texans. So whether true or not, there's that. Something that appealed to me is that as a child, I always loved mythology. I didn't know that I was living in mythology, because Texas has its own mythology. It's bigger than life. And my father was the kind of person who's a real, everyday, down-to-earth person, but was yet somehow bigger than life. He was what John Wayne thought he was.

RK: Since this is an interview for a collection of Hap and Leonard stories, we probably should discuss the stars. Hap is obviously you.

JRL: To a great extent, yeah.

RK: And Leonard is. . . ?

JRL: Leonard is made up of several people I know, both gay and straight. He's a combination of those. And uh, also the fact that Hap and Leonard in many ways reflect both of my sides, 'cause I've always found that the liberals consider me a conservative and the conservatives consider me a liberal. Somebody once said that I'm an Old Testament liberal, which I thought was one of the funniest things and most accurate things I'd heard, even though I'm not by nature a religious person. However, the concept was just perfect. I knew when they said that exactly what they meant. And even though it would be hard to define what that means, it tapped with me . . . that's exactly right. And I also have a way of just irritating either side, which gets me back to . . . what the hell was the question?

RK: The genesis of Leonard?

JRL: Yeah, so he's a combination of things. And they're also BOTH a combination of me. Hap represents more one side of me than the other and Leonard more the other side. But Hap in personality and, I think, the way he talks in the books and attitude and approach is more similar to me, and maybe if I had been less ambitious and hadn't met my wife, I might have lived like he did. Hopefully not with all the adventures, of course.

RK: You once told me that you were surprised at how popular Hap and Leonard were with older women. Have you ever figured out why?

JRL: I have not. What's interesting is that it's not just older women now. The more the series has been around, the more women are responding to it. I only know that people have said that women will never like this because there's references that they may find offensive. And I think some have.

RK: There are references that we all find offensive.

JRL: That's part of the point.

I think that's one thing that a lot of the readers never understand—that there are some people who are offensive just because they are writing offensively, and there are other people who are using it as a tool and sometimes just for the hell of it. Just for the shock of it. But it's also because this is how a lot of the people I know talk. This is how they really are. And all I'm trying to do is tap into that. A lot of guys have responded to that. They've said, this is the way we really talk. When women aren't around, this is what we say—and you've done that. And the women—another thing that I've heard is that I've had several say, just tell me that Hap is real, please, because I want to marry him. I think what they are responding to somewhat is that Hap

is a little bit in need. That people think, well, I can help him out. But the other part of it is that Hap does come across as a good man and that he means well and he's honest and he's trying his best. People respond to that. And they respond to that in Leonard, too.

RK: Do you have Hap and Leonard's lives mapped out?

JRL: No, not really. I have ideas about their lives. I borrow things from my own life, but I also borrow from people I know. It's not always negative stuff, but it's elements here and there. I have a general idea of where they are going, but it's a very general idea. I do some things on instinct. Basically, I'll have a really small idea that stays with me and I won't even know why. They aren't profound. They're little character things, and those will stay with me. The stories come out of the characters; about little revelations and little ideas. What happens is that there will be little things that will change the whole course of the novel. The characters themselves redirect my plans.

RK: Are you planning on incorporating the burgeoning and changing gay civil rights, such as the legalizing of same-sex marriage, in the stories?

JRL: Yeah, I think that will be more of it. It's hard to get a whole lot more, because Leonard's always been pretty damn outspoken. He's never been the bashful type about it. I'm sure that he's mentioned gay marriage a couple of times. I think in this one, there are problems with that because his boyfriend is being affected by all this religious brouhaha about changing your sexual orientation and all.

I think the books are better because they are crazy sort of folk tales mixed with reality, but it's always the social and cultural issues and the two characters that drive the series.

RK: Characters from your other crime novels keep popping in Hap and Leonard. Was this by design all along? Or did it just start happening?

JRL: It's a mixture. Some planned, most not. Sometimes readers see things that aren't there, or are coincidental, and sometimes they're right. I like to let people guess for themselves. It's more fun this way. Also an author touches on similar ideas frequently. Intentionally, or accidental.

RK: Will we start to see Hap and Leonard in your other books?

JRL: I doubt it. Then they might be described.

I hint at what they look like when Hap tells the stories, but actual descriptions by others might deflate the readers' imaginations. But, I never say never.

RK: Will some of these characters, such as Jim Bob and Marvin, star in their own stories?

JRL: Marvin does appear in *Act of Love* and later in "A Bone-Dead Sadness", a long story. Again more of him, or a Jim Bob story is always possible. I think Vanilla Ride is more likely.

RK: You've had periods when you stopped writing Hap and Leonard, including eight- and five-year gaps between novels. Why do you stop, and why do you keep returning to them?

JRL: The first reason is that I wanted a break from the characters. I didn't mean for it go eight years. A lot of other things I was doing got in the way and took more time than

I expected. Probably the biggest reason was that I changed publishers. So my backlist was with one publisher and my frontlist with another. A new publisher doesn't profit much by the backlist belonging to someone else and they're not as interested in doing one of the books in that series if they're not gonna have the backlist. So gradually my agent and I worked to get the backlist back, and it took several years. When we got the Hap and Leonard backlist back, then I went to Knopf, and I actually sold them two of the Hap and Leonard books: *Vanilla Ride* and *Devil Red*.

When I left Knopf for Mulholland, I wrote several historical books, including *Edge of Dark Water*, *The Thicket*, and *Paradise Sky*. All the while, I was writing new, shorter Hap and Leonard stories for other publishers, but then Hap's voice got louder and more insistent, so I wrote the novel *Honky Tonk Samurai*. He still wouldn't shut up, so I had to write another, which probably will be called *Rusty Puppy*.

The Care and Feeding and Raising Up of Hap and Leonard

Careers have phases, and I've had a few.

My early career was merely struggling to sell. I managed early on to write some mystery material, and then horror, mostly short fiction. I wrote some books I'm proud of in my early career—*The Nightrunners*, *Dead in the West*, *The Magic Wagon*, *The Drive-In*, and *Cold in July* come to mind.

I remember these were all written in a house on Christian Street. I also wrote there the stories that ended up in my first collection, *By Bizarre Hands*, as well as *Stories by Mama Lansdale's Youngest Boy*.

Shortly after I finished *Cold in July*, we moved to the far side of town, another rural area, to have more room for our kids. Before moving, my study became our daughter's room. She had her crib assembled, amid piles of books, next to my desk, which eventually became covered with baby supplies. I ended up ejected and working on a small, wobbly desk in our bedroom.

Our new house was massive compared to our old one. I had an entire floor for my study, for all my books. With this house came a large desk that I have used ever since, although that is about to change. We are moving. I wrote a lot of books and

stories and articles and screenplays and comics on that desk in our middle house, as I have christened it. Our children were raised here.

We are in the process of moving, and as we make efforts in that direction, it occurred to me that this is the house where Hap and Leonard were born. Other characters and stories, and some of my best critically received novels, were birthed here as well, but it somehow seems more significant to me that the boys were born here. There has always been something about Hap and Leonard that has engaged readers in a different way than what I might think of as my more “literary” novels. It’s not so much their adventures that keep pulling people back, although that’s part of it, but is instead the guys themselves. The way they interact with one another and others. A true odd couple. I feel as if I can hardly take credit for them. They seemed to leap into my skull whole-born, like Athena bursting forth from the head of Zeus. And, like Athena, their creation was not by design. It was a happy accident.

Let’s back up a bit.

I wrote *Cold in July* in the Christian Street house, the one before the house we are about to move from; it was one of a two-book contract I had with Bantam. I wanted, at least then, to write books that I thought would be like modern Gold Medal novels, Gold Medal being a division of Fawcett Books, now defunct. Gold Medal was known specifically for crime books, although it certainly produced Westerns, science fiction, and so on. But it was the crime Gold Medals that hooked me in my late teens, and throughout my twenties. Outside Gold Medal, I was influenced heavily by the usual suspects—Chandler, Hammett, and Cain. But there was a tone in the Gold Medal novels that was quite different. They were an overall collective of hardboiled deeds, capers, thefts, and poor suckers riding life trains to oblivion, with no chance to brake or leap off.

I loved that stuff. I collected Gold Medal books for years, and still do, when I can find one that isn't falling apart or that I don't already have. And sometimes even if I do have it, I buy it anyway. They are becoming rarer each day. Where they were once stacked in droves at garage sales and used bookstores fairly dripped with them, they are now as unusual to find as the three-toed sloth in your living room.

With my two-book contract at Bantam, I thought it would be fun to riff on the old Gold Medal books, and after a very vivid dream that led to *Cold in July*, I was fired up even more. I thought that one had worked out quite well, and I wanted to do yet another in the same tone. *Savage Season* certainly tasted like Gold Medal, but there was something different about it from *Cold in July*. It was more deliberate, casual, purposely paced, and although it had twists and a dynamic climax, I found I was writing about my past, at least in a symbolic way, about how my life might have been if certain things had gone another direction. They were fiction, of course, but I must 'fess up and say that a lot in the Hap and Leonard books, especially the first three, was taken directly from events in my life, or the lives of others I knew, extrapolated and made a lot more exciting and dangerous.

I was also writing about the sixties, about how that era shook out, at least for me. I found a symbolic way of doing that by writing a novel that took place in the late eighties, a reflective book, with Hap feeling the changes, wondering how one morning it was the sixties and early seventies—because much of the time when we talk about the sixties, we're really talking about the early seventies as well—and then, the world was new and more consumer-driven, far less idealistic, and the music kind of sucked. In the mid-seventies, the Vietnam War finally wrapped up and the soldiers came home. All of us who had yelled about civil rights and an unjust war and so many

things—gay rights, women’s rights—suddenly felt vindicated. But in the long run, as Leonard says in *Savage Season*, the sixties were just the eighties in tie-dyed T-shirts. I’m not as cynical as Leonard, but there’s something to be said, at least partially, for that point of view.

The book I was writing was not then called *Savage Season* but tentatively titled *Ice Birds*. Problem was everyone thought I was saying *Ice Bergs*, so I changed the title to *Savage Season*. It was originally something like *A Strange and Savage Season*, but that was too long and, frankly, didn’t quite fit. It sounded a smidgen pretentious. Therefore, the final decision for a briefer and simpler title. I started writing the book, as I said, pulling from my own life, adding things that never happened, and this guy named Leonard showed up. With his arrival at the first of the novel, I knew then it was a buddy story. I love those. But then Leonard surprised me, not only by showing up but by revealing in a sideways manner that he was gay, Republican, a supporter of the Vietnam War, and a war hero. I hadn’t known that going in. Hap Collins, my hero of the book, or at least the one who tells the tale, for Leonard is in many ways just as prominent a character, knew that about Leonard, but he didn’t tell me until the moment Leonard revealed it. At the time of writing that book, gay characters were uncommon in crime fiction. There were exceptions, but they were rare. Even more rare were black Republicans, and rarer yet, gay Republicans. They existed, of course, but were generally more uncommon than a three-toed sloth in your living room. They were, in fact, as uncommon as a three-toed sloth in your living room wearing a propeller beanie. Also, male gay characters who were, in appearance and action, more masculine were also underrepresented. Yet I knew they existed, so why not represent them as well? I wasn’t thinking about breaking new ground, or anything really, just about writing honest characters who weren’t all white and straight and middle class.

Anyway, there I was, writing along, and Leonard showed up, and he and Hap were best friends, and different of opinion in many ways, as many of my friends are different from me, but at the core, Hap and Leonard are one and the same. Honorable men, smart men, who took a wrong boat in life and ended up on the ragged edge of the American Dream.

At the time of that writing, I was not far removed from that very position in life. My wife, Karen, was my saving grace. She directed me in such a way that I moved in a straight line, not in circles. She and I worked as farm fieldworkers, ran a goat dairy, butchered our own meat, and raised our own vegetables. Karen had come from a more middle-class background than I had, but she had dove right in with me, making ends meet as best she could, having faith that our life together would be a good one, and that the American Dream, which I believe in—how can I not? I'm living it—was ours for the taking.

We took hold of it, and have kept our teeth securely clamped there ever since. I know it's an elusive dream, and dream is the right word. It's something we all want, and sometimes it's something, through hard work, inheritance, or accident, that we can have. But, for the most part, it's an opportunity, not a promise. That's all it's ever been, except for the fact that here in our country, that dream is supposedly more obtainable than elsewhere.

Sometimes it is, and sometimes it's not.

That, too, went into the book. In his own way, Hap is, like Gatsby, standing on the pier, reaching out for the green light across the bay. His life is a lot more blue-collar in nature, and the green light represents to him less than it meant to Gatsby. Not great riches and fine clothes and bringing back the past, just less-back-breaking work, a library card, and a TV that gets what was then all three network channels. A home where he can have a good wife and a happy sex life, raise fine kids to

whom he can pass along the dreams he holds dear. Fair play. Common sense. A decent bank account. And, with a little luck, a quick death in old age without lingering illness, or a tube in his pecker and adult diapers steaming with shit.

So Hap, in his own small, blue-collar way, is my Gatsby. At least he is in the first few novels. In time, that changes, as all our lives must change.

Leonard, he just wants to be left alone. He doesn't care about anyone's club. He's gay, and he's all right with that. He's black, and if you don't like it, you can ram a stick up your nose. He's a lot less introspective than Hap. He's one of those guys like my dad was. It is what it is. Wish in one hand and shit in the other, and see which one fills up first.

After *Savage Season*, I had no idea that I would ever write about Hap and Leonard again. I didn't intend to, and it was three years before I did. I had moved from Bantam to Mysterious Press by that time, a kind of movement not uncommon to authors, especially in those days when we still had a number of publishers to choose from, and we didn't have computer sales numbers following us around. My then-agent managed to get me a two-book contract at Mysterious, and my first book for it wasn't going so well. I put it aside and very quickly wrote another. When I sat down to write it, Hap started speaking to me, and he took over. Even then, I thought, this is it, two and out. But the book really hit a nerve with the publisher and the readers, and a series was born. And boy, did I love Hap and Leonard.

Savage Season, the first, has its funny moments, but compared to the others in the series, it is a little more dour. It was followed by seven others, funnier on the whole, although still dark in places, and variable in tone and themes. The first was my caper book, or as close as I'll get to that; the second was the mysterious murder that is tied to the heroes; the third was

the Bad Town novel; and the fourth was . . . well, wacky. The fifth was a road novel, the sixth a fish-out-of-water novel. I left the series for eight years to write other things at yet another publisher, Knopf, and for one of its paperback lines, Vintage.

At that time, Mysterious Press had the original Hap and Leonard novels, and Knopf wasn't interested in carrying the series forward because of that—hence the eight-year wait. Finally, the Hap and Leonard books went out of print, and Vintage picked them up. I wrote two new Hap and Leonard books back-to-back for it, one a kind of mysterious assassin novel, the other a dangerous cult book. The latest, *Honky Tonk Samurai*, forthcoming in 2016 from my current publisher, Mulholland, is what I call putting the crew together for one big event. It will be followed by *Rusty Puppy*. The definition of that one is yet to be decided. I never know until I'm finished, and frankly, even then I'm not absolutely certain. What remains in all the books are those guys, their close friendship, their personal histories, and the adventures.

I mention all of this to show how long Hap and Leonard have been with me. After the first six novels, I ceased aging them except when they were having books written about them. So the eight-year wait between number six, *Captains Outrageous*, and number seven, *Vanilla Ride*, is in my mind only a few months later, and so on. If I didn't do that, my guys would be in wheelchairs right now, fighting it out in rest homes with villains who were trying to take their desserts and piss in their bedpans.

But between all that waiting, now and again, I wrote shorter pieces about them. After *Vanilla Ride* and *Devil Red*, numbers seven and eight in the series, I wrote a novella, *Hyenas*, about them, and a short story that is among my favorites, a dark piece titled "The Boy Who Became Invisible." My comic-book script for an as yet unpublished comic that I produced for a

German publisher is included in this book. I followed this with *Dead Aim*, another novella. Some years before these, however, my brother Andrew Vachss and I collaborated on a Hap and Leonard novella that to my taste is one of the oddest pieces I've been involved with, unique because Andrew is unique. He added a character to the Hap and Leonard mythology, Veil, and he appears in *Veil's Visit*, also included here, and although it's not exactly rare, it's a story that, until now, has been hard to capture. Veil, like my brother Andrew, is smart and unpredictable. A man couldn't ask for a better brother and friend than Andrew Vachss, whom I love and admire, as does my entire family. He thinks outside the box as a writer, as a lawyer, and as a protector of children. For my own children, he is Uncle Andrew, and they love him and think the world of him. Of course, they should.

Another related novella was Marvin Hanson's first solo adventure since his introduction in my very first crime novel *Act of Love* (way back in 1981). *A Bone-Dead Sadness* is a bit different than much of my crime work, a kind of locked-room crime. Since Marvin is a recurring character throughout many of the Hap and Leonard stories, it's included in this very collection.

What else is here?

I also had a promotional piece I had written to advertise *Bad Chili*, the fourth book in the series. It was "cleverly" called "Death by Chili." It went out to reviewers and whoever received galleys of *Bad Chili*, part of a promotional package that included the story and a hot pepper glued to the page. I still have one or two of those promotional packets somewhere.

"Death by Chili" is the lightest of the Hap and Leonard pieces. Something to cleanse your palate. It's a kind of locked-room mystery, and it's Leonard's story, for the most part.

This book also includes an interview I did with the guys, and, better yet, an intro by Michael Koryta and a memoir of Hap and Leonard and me by Bill Crider, who was there at the beginning. To have fine writers like Michael and Bill write about Hap and Leonard, and about me, is humbling indeed. I'm honored to have them here.

On top of all that are two new Hap and Leonard stories, one about their high school years and the other, more a vignette, about one of their favorite hangouts.

I am also grateful to have Rick Klaw, my editor on this book, as a friend. I have known him for many years now. He was nothing but an energetic kid with a lot of plans when I met him. Now he's an energetic adult who has fulfilled many of those plans and is in the process of fulfilling others. Fortunately, I have been a part of those plans, and I owe him a lot for helping put this book together.

For Hap and Leonard fans who might have missed these stories when they first came out, I hope this will be a small treat. For those who have yet to discover Hap and Leonard, perhaps these short visits will encourage you to come on over and visit them in their truer habitat, the novel.

I would also like to thank Sundance TV; my friend and director, Jim Mickle; and my good buddy, actor/screenwriter Nick Damici, for all their hard work on developing these characters into a series. A special thanks has to go to Lowell Northrop, my friend and co-collaborator, for organizing and presenting this series to Jim and Nick, and for all his hard work and relentless pursuit of a series about Hap and Leonard. He knows the characters better than I do—I think they talk to him more than to me.

I should also mention, with great pride and respect, James Purefoy and Michael K. Williams, two fine actors and equally

fine fellows who have brought Hap and Leonard to life on the small screen. Thanks, guys. It has been a treat.

And thanks to my pal Bill Sage, as well as the always game Jeff Pope, the wonderfully intense Neil Sandilands, the remarkable Christina Hendricks, and Jimmi Simpson and the sweetly tough-as-nails Pollyanna McIntosh. She's what we in Texas call "a pistol." You need her to climb through a window, she'll do it. Wrestle a bear, she's ready. Kick someone's ass, where the hell are they?

Thanks to all the crew and actors and everyone involved in the television show for braving mosquitoes; all manner of huge, crawling bugs, including fire ants; alligators; snakes; tornadoes; windstorms; rainstorms; and blistering heat to make this series a reality.

Special thanks to my niece and assistant, the smart and lovely Pamela Lansdale, aka Pamela Dunklin. She kept me focused, provided granola bars when I looked as if I might be losing blood sugar, and made certain things went smoothly. And, of course, thanks to my lovely wife, Karen, for letting me go on a two-month long adventure into TV land. And to my children, Keith and Kasey, thanks for supporting your old man with kind words and humor.

Finally, thanks to the Baton Rouge, Louisiana area, and all the nice people there for letting us pretend it was East Texas. Why not? They look just alike, although I think your crawfish are better.

So here are the stories.

Read and enjoy.

About the Author

Joe R. Lansdale is the author of more than forty novels and four hundred shorter works, including stories, essays, introductions, and articles. He has written screenplays and teleplays, including for *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Superman: The Animated Series*. He wrote the script for the animated film *The Son of Batman*. His works have been translated into numerous languages, and several novels and short stories of his have been filmed, among them *Bubba Ho-Tep*; *Cold in July*; *Incident On and Off a Mountain Road*, for Showtime's *Masters of Horror*; and *Christmas with the Dead*, which he produced with a screenplay by his son, Keith.

Lansdale is the recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, among them the Edgar Award and ten Bram Stoker Awards, one of which is for Lifetime Achievement. He has received the Grandmaster of Horror Award; the British

Fantasy Award; the Inkpot Award for Lifetime Achievement; the Herodotus Award for historical/crime fiction; the Golden Lion Award for his contribution to the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs; the Grinzane Prize; and others.

Lansdale is also a member of the Texas Literary Hall of Fame and the Texas Institute of Letters, and he is Writer in Residence at Stephen F. Austin State University. He is the founder of Shen Chuan Martial Science and has been recognized by the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame as well as the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame.

Joe Lansdale lives with his wife, Karen, in Nacogdoches, Texas.

