



*"I like to feel a man's
fingers tracing their way over my
body, to have him kiss my nipples, my
neck, the insides of my thighs."*



Fiction by ISIDORE HAIBLUM

GREED

A HARD-BOILED DETECTIVE YARN IN THE
HAMMETT-CHANDLER TRADITION
CHAPTER I

The voice was flat, nasal, like some pug's who'd taken one too many in the breezer, and spoke in a whisper.
"Dunjer?"

"Uh-uh," I told the phone, flipping on the recorder. Over the line I could hear some woman warbling a torch song, a tinny band playing along. Dishes rattled. Voices murmured. The song stopped and another began. It took me a second to know where I'd heard that sequence before, the juke box in the Swell Slipper, one of my sometimes hangouts.

"You lookin' for Joe Rankin?" the whisper asked above the racket. Rankin? I sat there gripping the phone as if it might crawl away. I hadn't even told my lawyer about Rankin's disappearance. "Who is this?" "Never mind, chum, just listen. Rankin's stashed hisself at the Cozy Rest Home. That's at the edge of town. It's in the directory, see? Maybe he got tired, right? Only how long he stays tired is somethin' else. You get me?"

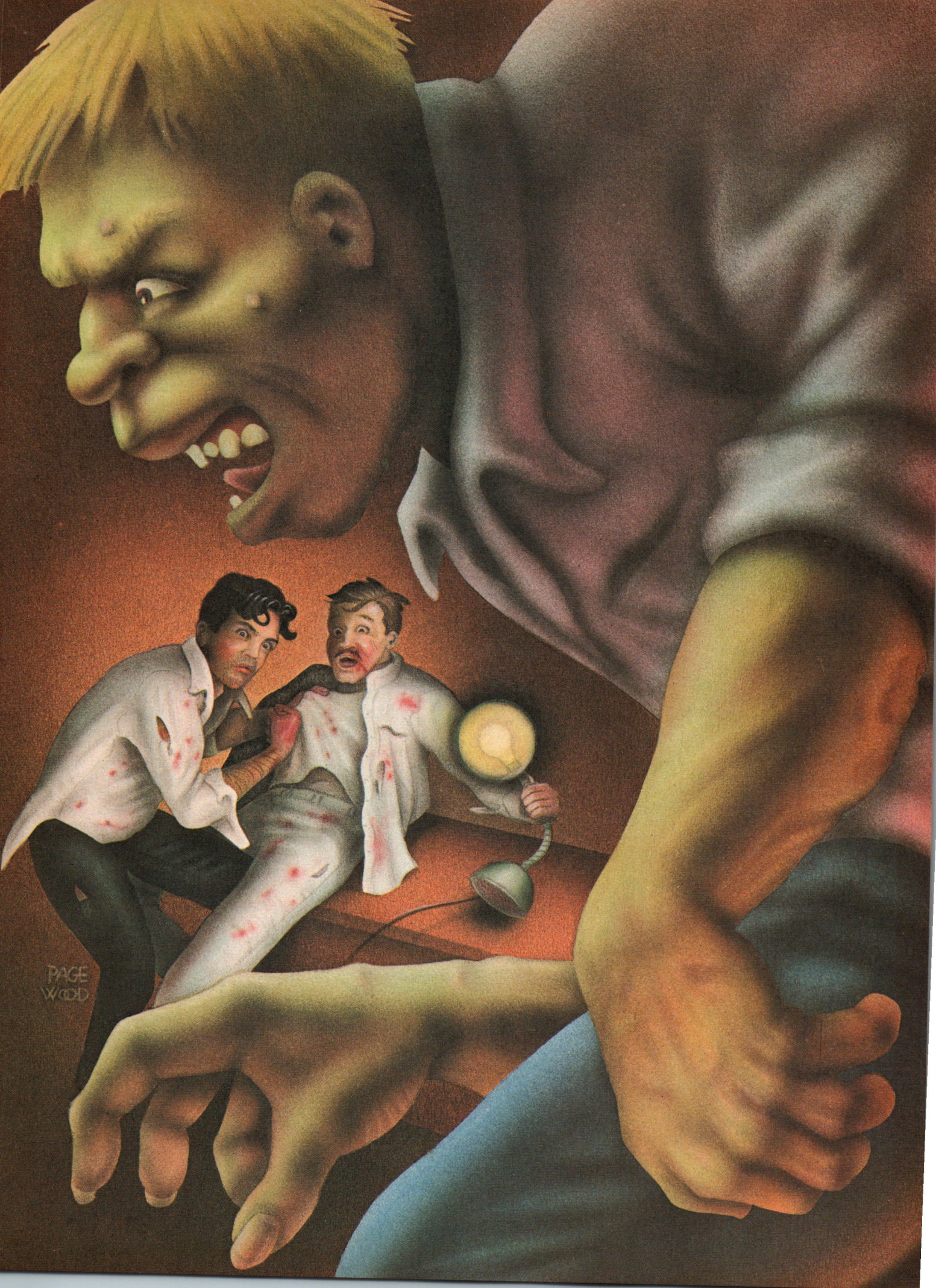
I'd got him. The line went click and I was alone again. I took the cassette out of the recorder, put it in my pocket. Just great, I thought. The Cozy Rest Home, of all places. And on a night like this. I was supposed to set up security at the new Hastings bank vault; now it would have to wait. I didn't give a hoot about Joe Rankin but maybe if I ran him down I'd get a line on the other half of our missing combo, his wife Linda, who just also happened to be my sister. I called Underwood and Snow, the firm I'd subcontracted for the Hastings job, and put off our little get-together for later. Then I took a ride.

I'd been driving close to an hour when my headlights caught the sign: Cozy Rest Home. Swinging left, I followed the crooked arrow onto a narrow, twisting gravel road.

All hell was busy pelting the car. Trees on either side of the roadway strained against their roots as if trying to take off for niftier climes; wind wailed and the rain lashed out like some mad, lost thing caught in a trap. A hateful scene if ever there was one.

I rounded a bend, came to a clearing. The gravel underneath turned to soft, soupy mud. I peered into the darkness like a drunk hunting a light switch. Lightning crackled and flared; in the sudden glare, I saw an old, weather-beaten mansion—a four-story job of wood and shingles, looking as chummy as the corner mortuary. The sight was gone in a roar of thunder.

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PAGE
WOOD

Part of his head had been bashed in like a very softboiled potato. Rankin had been a worthless deadbeat all his life, an idler from the word go; who would bother to kill him?

Parking my heap in a large, disorderly puddle, I got out, started for the house. A rowboat would've helped plenty.

Three stone steps took me up to the front door. Nothing happened. I did some more pounding. There should've been a bell somewhere, only I couldn't find it. All this racket was murder on the knuckles, but if I stayed out here much longer I'd need a life belt.

Sounds finally from inside. Bolts were being undone.

Bolts? In a rest home?

The door slid open.

A startled-faced lady—somewhere in her mid-thirties—stood there, dressed in a nurse's starched white uniform; she stared at me as if one of the trees had hobbled over to ask for shelter. I took that for an invite—the only one I was apt to get—and brushed past her into the house. "Yes?" she asked coldly. Her lips, I saw, were bright with lipstick, eyebrows arched and penciled in. She looked as trim and spiffy as a dimestore dummy.

"I'd like to see Joe Rankin," I told her. "Tom Dunjer's the name; I'm his brother-in-law." I lowered my voice. "It's a family matter."

"Wait here," the nurse told me and hurried away.

I was in a large hallway. Lumpy yellow wallpaper crawled up the walls, a maroon carpet stretched itself along the floor. Any second I expected the black window drapes to slither over and fang me. At the hall's end, stairs—tame and ordinary by comparison—led to the second floor. The only sound was the rain outside.

A door squeaked down the hall; the nurse was back, a large stout, brown-jacketed party in tow. Cocking a bushy eyebrow my way, he waddled over with outstretched hand like a huge seal. Head bald, shiny. Lips, large and pouting. Three chins danced as he walked. He wore the perfect smile of a man whose teeth came from the dime-store.

"My name, sir," he said, "is Dr. Spelville."

"Dunjer," I told him.

The sweetheart in nurse's uniform shot us both a look of dark disapproval and went away. Spelville pumped my hand as though trying to dredge up water from a very deep well, led me to his office, folded himself into a wide chair behind a cluttered mahogany desk and gave me a bright smile. "A visitor on a night such as this—a de-

lightful surprise, I assure you. How may I be of service?"

I told him. I explained I wanted a brief chat with my in-law, who was—reportedly—taking the cure here. It seemed a simple matter.

"So—" Spelville sighed, as if he'd just learned I'd towed a small mountain to his doorstep and expected him to climb it. "I fear I can be of little help," he sighed again. "Your brother-in-law is gone."

"Gone?" I said. "Where to?"

The doctor shrugged, shook his head, pulled on an earlobe with a fat thumb and forefinger. He didn't get up and tango, but that was probably next on the agenda. "The things that happen, sir—you have no idea. Mr. Rankin packed his bag and departed this afternoon. I believe a car picked him up at our door. A sick man, sir." The doctor wiggled a finger at me. "A very sick man. Certainly in need of rest. High-strung, nervous," his voice became confidential, "possibly deranged. But what could I do? What indeed? Mr. Rankin was a free agent, so to speak." The doctor spread his palms as if he were going to sing a very long and complicated aria. "Perhaps you would like to see his room?"

It was my turn to shrug.

"Splendid," Spelville said. He pressed a button on his desk. A door to my left opened soundlessly. An attendant or something came shuffling through. He was short, broad gent with stooped shoulders, long dangling arms and a face that looked like a rock pile. I'd figured this day couldn't get much worse, but I'd been wrong.

"Waldorf," Dr. Spelville said, "take this gentleman to the room Mr. Rankin used to occupy." Waldorf nodded at me, led the way. I followed him down a series of white-walled deserted corridors, smelling disinfectant, floor wax, the odors of damp wood. We took a lot of turns, came to an elevator, got in and rode up to the second floor. Waldorf hadn't said a word yet. Maybe he didn't know how.

Rankin's room, when I finally got there, was as empty as a railbird's wallet.

We went back the way we'd come, a bland, uneventful trip. What I'd learned couldn't exactly be called a windfall. The doctor hadn't moved an inch from behind his desk, as if he'd become fixed in an invisible block of ice during my short jaunt. The ice thawed. "Satisfied, Mr. Dunjer?" I

wagged my head. Not quite the word I'd've chosen, but anyone would do now. We traded our good-bys solemnly. The fat man remained seated.

The sourpuss nurse let me back into the rain.

I waded to the car, climbed in, started the motor, splashed through a number of puddles, hit a bend in the gravel road and pulled over. Getting a flash and gun from the glove compartment, I put up my coat collar, slid into the wet. In an instant the car was swallowed by the dark. I was running back through the rain toward the Cozy Rest Home. If Rankin was holed-up in that place, I aimed to flush him out. Twenty years of sleuthing should've stood me in good stead for this kind of workout. But three years as head of Bank Security had got me out of practice. I hoped I still remembered what to do.

CHAPTER TWO

The house was dark and still. No light escaped from the shuttered windows. It was an old, ugly mansion and it reeked of decay. This time I circled the joint and came up behind it, slipping in the mud. Moss grew up the walls, along with a couple of dozen parasites I couldn't name. A great spot for a weed garden, if the weeds could stand it.

I flicked the beam of my flash up the back wall. No windows on the first floor—they'd been cemented over; those on the second were shuttered tight. I'd've needed a ladder to get up there anyway, or a pair of wings. No other door that I could see. A swell set-up—you couldn't get in or out without using the front entrance. That wouldn't do at all. I tried the sides of the building. Not a crack. Retracing my steps, I kept the light pinned to the ground. About halfway around the joint I found it: the coal chute.

I went down on hands and knees. The two sides of the chute were padlocked tight. My gun was out. I waited for the lightning. It came a long moment later. Thunder followed it, went off around my head like a TV aspirin commercial. Before the sound had faded, I'd blasted off the lock, was sliding into the basement.

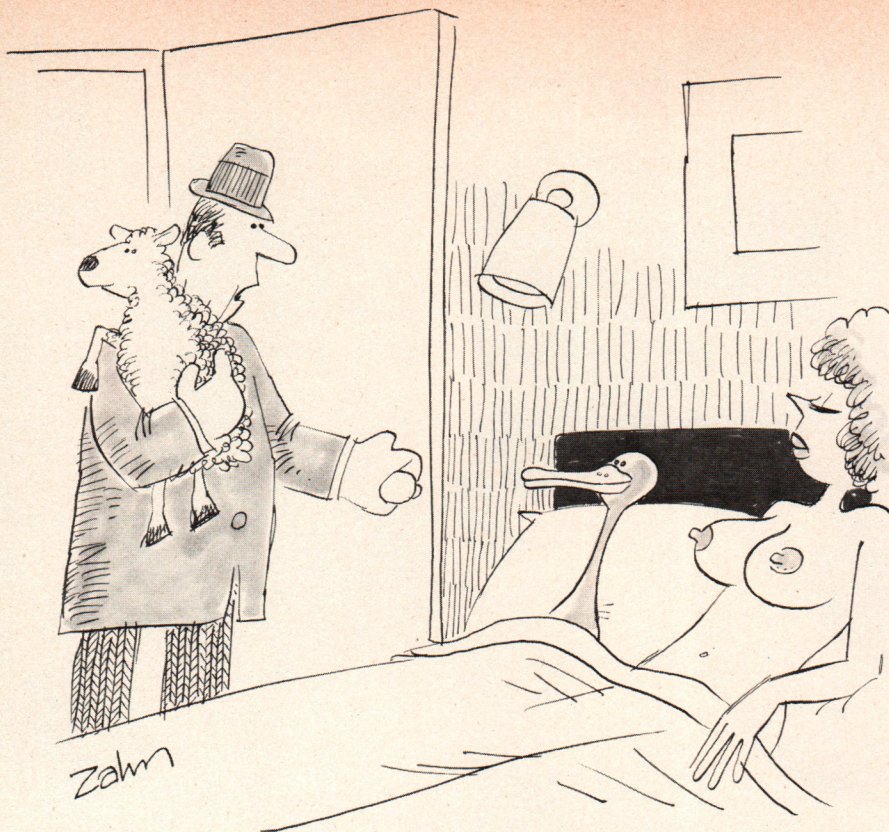
The stone cellar was as dank and dismal as a leaking bath tub. I shone my feeble light against walls covered with cobwebs, dirt and grime. Too bad I wasn't hunting spiders; I could've had my pick.

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"I wanted to go home with him, rip his shirt off, scratch his back with my fingernails and generally get crazy."





You're sick, Helen, nobody does it with a goose!

GREED

continued from page 32

Finding steps, I started up in a hurry. Inching the door open on top, I peered out. Another door faced me, the one I'd come through earlier that night. The ground floor was lit up like a funhouse, but not a soul in sight having fun. I wasn't about to complain. I left my hiding place. No one stopped me. The corridor was all mine. I listened for voices. There weren't any. The rest home had taken a mickey; the sour-faced nurse had done in the doctor and orderly; they'd all murdered each other. It was fine with me; I had my own problems.

The stairs leading to the second floor were on the right. I took 'em two at a time. Opening the door at the top, I stepped through into darkness. I didn't want to bother anyone with a lot of light. Getting my flash out, I started turning doorknobs softly.

Five minutes of that and I'd tiptoed through a dozen empty rooms, all like the one I'd seen earlier, and come up with precisely nothing. This floor was as bare as a nudie in the girlie shows, but not half as entertaining. That left the third and fourth stories. Having gotten this far, I decided to go whole

hog. Returning to my stairway, I climbed to the next landing. Another door greeted me. I stopped, opened it slowly.

The beam of my light criss-crossed the walls as I started down the corridor. I felt the sound rather than heard it. I threw myself to the side.

Something went smack against my right shoulder. An instant ago my head would've been there. I dropped the flash and the light died. Movement in the dark. I went down on the floor as something swished past my right ear.

I kicked out, was answered by a deep grunt. I pushed myself in that direction, grabbed feet, got kicked in the ribs for my trouble. I yanked at the feet, put my weight behind the effort. The feet toppled over. A body came with them, cursing and snarling. A quiet chat between opposing factions didn't seem called for. I drove my fist into something—a face. I did again. The face didn't like that. Hands, large and powerful, caught me by the neck, began squeezing me like a lemon. The dark seemed to light up with all kinds of winking and dancing specks like a circus of fireflies. I took hold of what I hoped were two little fingers and began to twist them. The hands—suddenly—let go. I could breathe again. I put my foot into a stomach and felt it fall away from me. I rolled over out of harm's way and fumbled for my gun. I was up on one knee, like an aspiring

torch singer, when I heard it:

A high-pitched scream—a woman's voice—somewhere in this very hallway.

The lights snapped on.

Waldorf, the orderly, stood by the light switch, his face blood-smearing from our tussle. He wasn't looking my way. I couldn't blame him.

The biggest and ugliest thing I ever saw was standing there. He was the stuff of raw nightmare, what strait-jackets and padded cells were all about. He must've been over seven feet tall, all muscle and bone. I blinked my eyes, but he didn't go away. They rarely do.

In his arms, dangling like a toy, he held what was left of the hard-case nurse. She'd stopped screaming. Her neck projected at a funny angle as she hung there like a torn rag doll. He'd done it to her with his hands. Waldorf let out a moan, made for a creature. What he should've done was head for the nearest exit. The orderly was a powerful man, but next to this thing he was a midget. The monster let go of the nurse with one hand and took hold of Waldorf's arm with the other. I heard the arm snap. My stomach started to crawl up my windpipe.

Waldorf screamed—once.

The thing jerked him up lightly and threw him against the wall as though playing with a rubber ball. It caught him easily on the rebound. It lifted Waldorf and held him high over its head, nearly touching the ceiling. Then it brought his body down on one raised knee. The sound was like the cracking of a chicken bone. Waldorf's days were done. It tossed him aside like an empty cigarette pack and turned its attention to me. Just what I needed!

I was sitting with one knee on the floor, as though I'd been nailed to it, and my mouth was hanging open like the gateway to a large, useless tunnel. I was damp with sweat, as if the rain had especially sought me out here in the inner confines of the rest home. I hadn't moved a muscle since the lights had gone on. I was paralyzed.

The thing looked at me dully. It looked at me as though I were an annoying fly that perplexed it, an insect it wasn't exactly sure how to swat. Something resembling a light appeared in its eyes.

Its large jaws began to work. The thing could speak. Its lips moved. It said two words: "Lugo fix."

I had no doubt what it intended to fix.

It came straight at me.

My hands were shaking so I could hardly hold the gun. I sent six slugs into the thing's belly. I squeezed the trigger slowly each time. I held the gun with both hands. The thing kept coming, both at its sides, fingers working spas-

modically, eyes fixed on me, its face expressionless. It didn't slacken its pace. It didn't even blink.

I started to laugh. I was shaking and laughing. Bullets couldn't stop it. Bombs and cannons would be mere irritants. I couldn't see straight because the sweat was dripping into my eyes. Both hands were palsied. The gun was so heavy I could hardly raise the muzzle.

The thing was almost on me. I could hear its breathing, see it needed a shave.

I raised the gun one last time and fired.

A large round hole appeared where its left eye had been. It gazed at me reproachfully with its one remaining eye. It stood there looking down at me as though carefully considering what its next move ought to be.

Then it toppled over.

I barely got out of the way in time.

It lay there, a wide puddle of blood beginning to spread under it, a sight that didn't darken my mood at all.

Slowly I got up on feet that felt like rubber stilts and started walking. After what seemed a long while I reached the head of the stairs. I was about to go down them and hopefully far, far away when something caught the corner of my eye. The door to one of the rooms was half ajar. A foot and ankle stuck out into the hallway.

I stumbled over for a look-see.

Sprawled on the floor was a small skinny bird in a blue and white striped shirt and black trousers. I knew he was somewhere in his mid-forties. He had sandy hair and still wore a pair of rimless eyeglasses. They'd do him no good. Part of his head had been bashed in like a very soft-boiled potato. I'd found Joe Rankin and this time he was really gone.

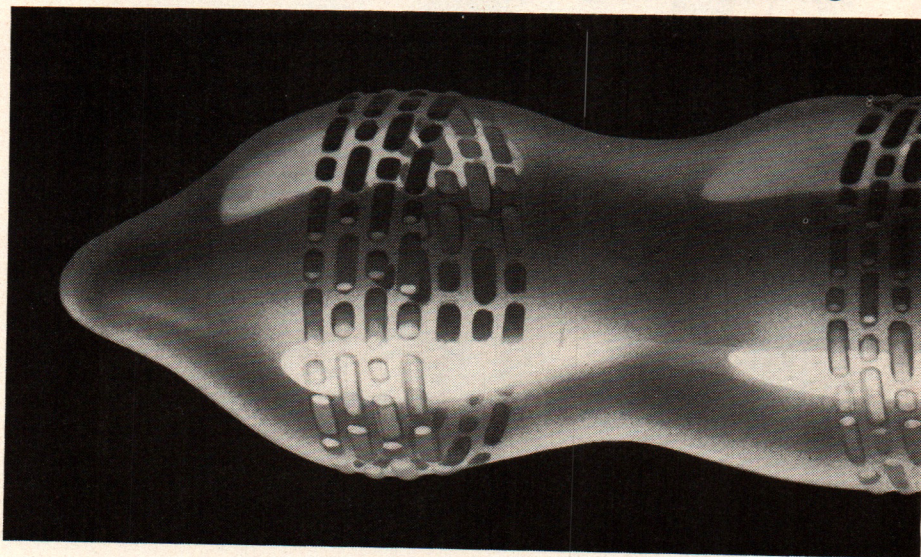
Rankin had been a worthless dead-beat all his life, an idler from the word go; who would bother to kill him? A lot of blood all over the place I saw; he'd probably bought it right here on the spot. I turned him over. A round, red hole punctured his back. I straightened, left Joe with no reluctance at all, and slowly made my way downstairs.

Spelville wasn't in his office; his desk held no papers now, his closet no clothing. Walking through a number of empty rooms gave me only exercise. With the exception of a small potted palm I seemed to be the only living thing left in the joint. The palm wouldn't mind if I went away. I did so in a hurry.

CHAPTER THREE

Rain hammered my windshield like an apprentice carpenter showing off his new skills. Wind whipped the car like an aged sadist bent on a last fling. I sat hunched over the wheel, woozy

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My wife doesn't understand me. She's a vegetarian.

and bleary-eyed like a heavy boozier drying out in the drunk tank. There was no one left at the Cozy Rest Home to answer my questions. But the voice that had tipped me to the nut house was calling from the Swell Slipper—so maybe I'd get some answers there. At least it couldn't hurt to take a look. Or could it?

My heap pulled up near a dingy row of dark, sullen-looking tenements some forty-five minutes later. Wet refuse and trash cans elbowed each other for pavement space. It had stopped raining. Dim red neon lights on the corner said Swell Slipper. I got out of my jalopy and went in there. I took a corner table, sat down, ordered a tall glass of hootch from a short gent in a dirty white apron and kicked at the sawdust on the floor. After a while I motioned to him again. Shorty waddled over.

"Yeah?" he said, eyeing my still unfinished drink. Already he looked suspicious.

"Got a second?" I asked, waving him toward the empty chair at my elbow. The waiter shrugged, sat down. He knew me, I'd been in before. Small, hazel eyes squinted through the smoke out of a white, sagging face. His sparse bluish hair was pasted straight back, parted in the middle.

I said, "I want you to hear some-

thing."

My companion said nothing. Around us the merriment was going on full tilt. I dug the recorder out of a wide coat pocket, inserted the cassette. Shorty's face remained impassive as he listened to the tape, the one featuring the voice on the phone that had sent me off to the rest home. When it was done, he shifted his gaze to my left shoulder and said, "So?"

I said, "Who is he, the guy with the whisper?"

Shorty blinked, looked at my right shoulder. "Search me, mac."

I said, "Don't worry, this is just between us; real private."

"Yeah? How private?"

I got out my wallet, put a ten on the table.

The waiter's eyes went from the ten spot to my face. "That's only semi-private, mac. Don't you know nothin'?"

A fiver joined the ten.

"Uh-huh," he said, "now it's private."

"Well?" I said.

His hand crept toward the money. I shook my head. "First things first, buddy. Watch those fingers."

"Look," he said, "I make this Joe sure—only he's a regular." The hand had reached the dough; it lay there like a dead fish. The waiter licked his lips. "Trouble'd screw me, mac; trou-

ble ain't worth no fifteen smackers."

"How much's it worth?"

"Twenty?" Shorty asked hopefully.

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. Fifteen's tops."

The waiter sighed. "It must be your winnin' personality, mac; you convinced me."

The fifteen clams went into his apron pocket, his eyes went back to my face. "Aces Tommy, that's the guy you want—a voice in a million. He camps two, three blocks from here." Shorty gave me an address. "You never seen me, right, mac?"

"You're a stranger to me, buddy," I assured him, getting to my feet.

Aces Tommy holed up on a third floor walk-up. I climbed a crooked staircase to his flat. My hand moved toward the buzzer, rang it. The door opened. I saw a long-faced guy with a flat nose, heavy lids and short-cut grey hair.

I said, "Aces Tommy?"

"Uh-huh," Aces Tommy said; his face—the left side—doing a number; eye winked, lips twisted, cheeks twitched in time to the eye. I watched this performance with some interest, went inside then said:

"Thanks."

"Uh-huh. For what?"

"Joe Rankin."

Aces Tommy grinned, "You Dunjer, huh? Figured you might find me. You nail Rankin?"

"Uh-huh."

"The creep. He spills his guts, huh?"

"Uh-huh."

"Uh-uh? Waddya mean uh-uh?"

"He was croaked."

Aces Tommy whistled. "Like that, huh?"

"Like that."

"An' Spelville?"

"Powdered out."

Aces Tommy cursed. "You let him?"

"He didn't exactly ask my permission." I explained.

"So how come you're here, chum?"

Tommy asked.

"My sister's been snatched. Mrs. Rankin to you."

Tommy's face did its number again. "You don't say? Know who turned the trick?"

"I was going to ask you."

Tommy spat. "Try Spelville. He took over the Loomis mob."

I raised an eyebrow. This Loomis mob was a cheap bunch of hoods and grifters, led by one Louie Loomis till his untimely demise. Strictly small-time. A two-bit outfit. I wondered why they'd put the grab on Linda.

I asked.

Tommy shrugged. "Beats me, chum. I'm an ex-mobster now, see? I was in on this knock-over, see? Only they rook me, don't come through with my end, see?"

I saw. I'd've been blind not to. "So?"
"I switched dodges. No more strong arm, no more hustle; now I'm a stoolie."

I wished him luck.

"Don't knock it, chum," Aces Tommy said. "It can maybe steer you to the missin' person."

"My sister?"

"Uh-huh. Like I know their stash. How much you spendin'?"

"For that and what else?"

"Just that. Rankin was in with Spelville, sure, only me, I ain't got the what or where. But I got an address."

I gave him the money. He gave me an address.

CHAPTER FOUR

It was a three-story brownstone far on the edge of town. I parked down the block.

Using my pass keys, I got the front door open, tip-toed in. This would be fast and sweet—a classic rescue job, done by the book.

An empty hallway took me into a dim living room. At first I saw no one. Then something moved in the semidarkness—a small, ratty man in blue pants and white undershirt ran toward me. This would be the look-out. His hand clutched a poker.

I had the .38 in my fist, obscured by a flap of my jacket. I was ready for bear,

elephant, eagle and anything else that moved. I was ready to take on armies—almost. But I didn't want to put a hole in this bird. Noise might waken the establishment.

The little man grinned, swung his poker. I went to the side. The poker went past my shoulder, took a thick slice out of the air. I stepped in close, drove the .38 into his face, snapping back his head. He fell down. I kicked him a couple of times. He stopped moving. When they do that, it's time to stop kicking. I stopped, feeling moderately satisfied.

The feeling didn't last long.

All this horseplay had taken less than thirty seconds, but the house was already springing to life as if my presence had broken a spell. I'd hoped for privacy—I wasn't going to get it. Ahead, a staircase to the floor above: sounds of doors slamming and feet running. To the right, a hallway leading further into the house: more racket—only less of it.

I was rousing the dead; soon I'd have more company than a man could stand. It was no time for idling. I moved.

The hall was as good a direction as any. I went that way.

A large, half-dressed man loomed up before me, snarling.

My gun swung down in a whistling arc. Head and gun connected.

I stepped over the wreckage and kept going, taking a look-see into a couple of empty rooms as I ran. No sign of Linda.

Behind me the action had risen to a circus roar! Falling chairs, flying doors, pounding feet and raised voices joined in chorus.

I turned a corner and found I'd run out of corridor. A large door blocked my progress—one that wouldn't open. Any locked room in this joint claimed my interest. I couldn't see going back anyway they'd have a cannon set up by now.

I used my .38; the door moved as the lock fell away.

Gunfire burned at me.

I went down, rolling sideways into the room. One lone, squinting guy handled all the gun there was; it shook in his hand like a malted-milk mixer.

I'd come in too fast and low to give him a good target. Thank goodness for the Detective's Handbook; it diagrams all the right moves.

I blasted the guy from where I sat. The bullet hit him in the arm, sent him back against the wall.

Feet pounded in the corridor behind me—racing, scrambling feet.

I took in the room at a glance: four walls and one door—the one I'd come through—a narrow high window in the far wall; a table, some chairs and a dirty red couch. That was all. It would have

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to do.

A single lightbulb glowed in the ceiling; my bullet ruined it.

Darkness came as the first one sprang through the door. At his heels a swell of bodies surged forward.

That was fine with me!

These characters hadn't counted on darkness. Now their momentum sent them spilling, piling up one on top of the other.

I heaved the table at the melee, threw a chair in for good measure. I crouched, my back to the wall—out of line with the partly-lighted doorway. I emptied my gun into the ceiling, then crawled behind the couch for safety.

Pure, blind panic had seized the man-made bottleneck that jammed the doorway and filled half the room. Arms, legs groped, scratched and tore. Mouths cursed and growled. The damned in hell would have a long way to go before they could equal this!

I chucked another chair at the high window. Glass shattered and tinkled. Moist air rushed in.

I got out of there as a swarm of heaves spilled over in that direction. I moved straight for the door. No one asked to see my ticket.

I was in the hallway. I kept going. I was glad of the chance.

All this was too much row for me. I was having trouble holding up my end. The thing to do now was go away while I had the chance. Let the law save my sister.

Outside nothing had changed. The neighbors were still catching their forty winks. Some neighbors.

A sound reached me—an idling engine. It came from the back of the house—the alley. I ran that way, digging the gun out of my coat pocket again, as if it and I had finally merged, become one. A less than sane grin split my face. Suddenly all I could see was blood—red, ripe and dripping. This certainly wasn't part of the Detective's Handbook. I'd become a deviationist.

A fence got in my way. I went over it. I made the back trotters, looked around for something to shoot. Two tail lights were busy disappearing down the alley. I aimed my .38 at them, squeezed the trigger. The gun clicked emptily.

I stood there, as alone as the office water cooler five minutes after quitting time. The car was gone.

Another sound came to me, a woman's voice screaming, somewhere inside the house.

Screaming fit my mood perfectly.

Safe to go back, I figured, what more could happen? The brownstone residents had just taken a very quick, guilt-ridden powder.

I returned to the now-empty house, followed the complaining voice up a flight of charred stairs—small rivulets of fire still smoldering—let myself into

a bedroom and found my sister on a hard-backed, wooden chair trussed up with a length of rope like a prize package about to be sent through the mail.

"Hello there," I said.

"I've been kidnapped," she told me bitterly.

"Yeah," I said, "so I see."

I used my pocket knife to cut her loose.

"What's it all about?" I asked her, "eh?"

"You've got me, big brother."

"Uh-huh," I said, "just what I've always wanted."

CHAPTER FIVE

The motor purred. The highway was a wet, gleaming smudge under us. Mist and fog swirled over the car. As I drove I briefed Linda about the dearly departed, namely Joe.

She turned to squint at me. Linda was a small-boned lady with pert features, short black hair, striking green eyes; She said, "He's dead, you mean?"

I nodded. "That's what I mean. Sometimes emotion makes me tongue-tied and people don't know what I mean, but that's what I mean."

"At least," Linda sighed, "it'll save me all those divorce fees."

"What was he up to these last couple of weeks?"

"Up to? Trying to get out of hock, as usual. He was taking lessons."

"At getting out of hock?" I asked in some wonder.

"At a job," Linda said.

"Joe, working?" I shook my head. "Grief has affected your mind," I told her simply.

"No kidding. It was very peculiar. He actually got himself a job."

"You wouldn't happen to know with whom?" I asked.

Linda shrugged. "Sure, someone called Underwood and Snow."

"Ah," I said, for lack of anything better to say. I was in shock. Underwood and Snow was the outfit I'd hired to set up security at the Hastings bank vault. How about that?

I called Sam Underwood from my office. "Since when has Joe Rankin been on your staff?"

"Since last month. A very ambitious lad," Underwood said. "He asked to be put on the Hastings job. How could we refuse? Your brother-in-law, after all."

"You didn't tell me," I said bitterly.

"You didn't ask," Sam Underwood pointed out. "Besides, Joe wanted it to be a surprise."

"I'll bet."

"Nuts," Chief Bligh growled.

"Patience," I told him.

It was our second night hidden in the darkened basement of the Hastings

bank. The vault security system had been installed, on schedule, by Underwood and Snow. The squad of cops we had hanging around was an added bonus.

"I'll give it to you again," I said.

"Why don't you shut up?" Chief Bligh asked.

I ignored him. Two nights without sleep were two nights too many. I needed some reassuring words and mine were the only ones I was apt to hear.

"Joe Rankin," I said, "owed a bundle to the local bookies. Spelville was a syndicate enforcer. When his boys put the arm on Rankin, my rotten brother-in-law came up with a brainstorm. Rankin knew about my Hastings job through Linda; if he could land a slot with Underwood and Snow, using his connection with me, he might be able to pass on the whole Hastings security set-up to Spelville. With that in hand—knowing the ins-and-outs of the system—Spelville and his mob could knock over the bank vault with impunity.

"Spelville bought the idea. The Cozy Rest Home—with Spelville playing the M.D.—would serve as a hide-out after the job. Rankin brought them the goods, but when he wanted a bigger cut, Spelville had him bumped off. Underwood and Snow wouldn't miss Rankin for a while, but Linda might, and if she got to chinning with me and mentioned Joe's new job, I was sure to put two-and-two together. So they snatched her.

"When I started nosing around the rest home, Spelville decided to unleash its one legit occupant against me, a holdover from the days when the place was on the up-and-up. But Lugo turned on his keepers and did them in instead. . . ."

Captain Bligh waved a meaty hand in the semi-darkness. "Bunk," he snarled, "rest homes, nutty giants and now this bank job; it's goofy, Dunjer. And I'll tell you why. Your sister *did* get to spill the beans about Rankin being a wage-earner—and that blows the whole racket."

"Maybe," I said, "and maybe no. You forget something, Bligh."

"Yeah?"

"Greedy."

"Shit."

"They can't be sure we've hit on that one, small item. And they're greedy."

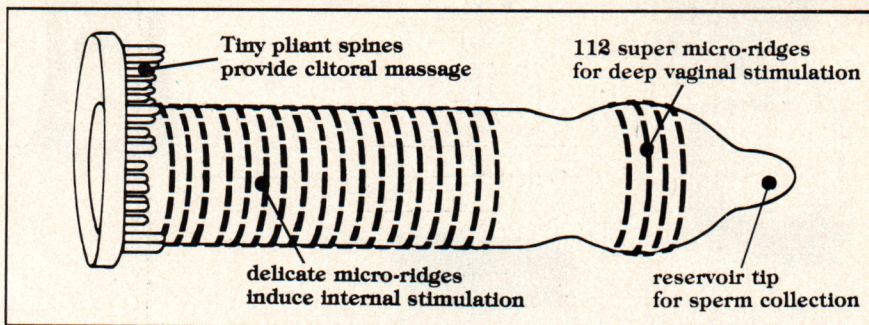
"Aw, stow it," Captain Bligh growled.

I did. Because just then—it was 3:30 A.M.—the top door slowly eased open and a long, pot-bellied shadow began inching down the staircase. Dr. Spelville and his crew, sorry, no doubt, they'd been so tough on me, had come to make amends the only way they could: they'd shown up just in time to prove me right.



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**"I don't care if it is a picture of your boyfriend.
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COCAINE

continued from page 62

And then there were the dawns we saw come up. That time out on Hayes' penthouse terrace when an early morning police chopper came floating by so close all they needed was a long straw. And the unbounded enthusiasm of those hours. Like my telling a down-in-the-mouth Mafia hit man, about to be indicted for eight killings, "Look, everything's going to be okay." That's what it was about those 6 a.m.s. A profound mellowness filled you, like the dawn itself. No one needed Valium. Yet.

But more people were beginning to hear about coke. Someone had given them a taste and they wanted a taste of yours. And even though this was exactly the way you started, somehow you was resented it.

Usually there was a reason.

"Sure, take a taste. But try to go easy," you said, and handed them your packet of foil under the table. But when you got it back it was an angry tangle of silver. And when you managed to pry it apart, with fourteen people banging on the john door, what was left were only faint atolls of coke where once had been a lush, inviting island.

"I've got some really incredible coke I want you to try," I told a noted criminal lawyer who had been pointed out as having done coke since the day he

was born. Maybe it was a case of The Kid vs. The Gunfighter. But the noted criminal lawyer stood up, nodded and subtly motioned his head toward the john. Once inside, I carefully unfolded the foil, revealing in all its beauty an untouched gram.

"Hmmm," he said, whipping out his own coke spoon, dusting it against his sleeve.

"Not bad," he said, sniffing and snorting.

"Not bad at all," he said, his wrist a blur.

"... The cut's a bit sweet," he said, unstoppable now. "Is it dextrose? You should know these things, babe."

"On a scale of 1 to 10, oh," he mused, slowing down a bit, "... I'd give it, oh, maybe about a 6," and, handing me the crumbs, he strode grandly out the door.

And there were the nights when no one had any coke. None at all. That situation you never wanted to face, not if it felt like a night for cocaine. A few feelers might have been put out earlier in the evening, before you came out, but if you hadn't been able to score, that was absolutely no problem. Someone would come up with some. It was certain. There would be coke.

11:40 was the time you began to worry. 11:30 was smooth sailing, but 11:40 was a whole different story. By 11:40 you should have already been basking in the reassuring comfort that you had some in your pocket, that you were going to enjoy your coffee and brandy just a little while longer before

you took your first blow. That was even pleasure in itself, postponing it. Teasing yourself, knowing you had some with you but putting it off. And if you were in the company of new acquaintances who knew you were carrying, and who were waiting for you to offer, sometimes you held them off a while longer and you could feel the power.

But it was 11:40. You had finished your coffee and brandy. You had no coke. Hayes was three tables down. You tried to catch his eye. You wriggled your nose. He shook his head. He didn't have any. Cranston, who had given me that first blissful snort, looked over and raised his brow in expectation. But I had to shake my head. We watched the aisles for furtive slipping-aways to the john, hoping to cash in, even barged in on innocent urinations, but no one had any coke.

And so there were sent forth messengers into the night. I think we would have sent them right down to Bogotá, right up to the front doors of illicit labs, if they could have gotten back before closing. But usually it was "crosstown." These messengers, with pipelines to hidden sources, knew something we didn't, and their knowledge was always "just crosstown." We waited and tried to look blasé when they came back, which was difficult. One of us would take possession of the precious gram and a great flood of relief, a surge of anticipation would tingle our blood. You wandered back to the john slowly, sometimes nudged aside by waiters, nothing much on your mind, and waited for your friends to follow.

The suspense could be excruciating.

Then in they trooped and, if it were Hayes and Cranston, Hayes, who had a giant back, would hold the door closed with it. Cranston, ever elegant, would shoot his cuffs, clear his throat dramatically and, delighted by the virginity of the full, mounded gram before him, would produce his straw. Each of us would take a two-and-two. Sighs, groaned exaltations, squints of first blow delirium followed them. Then, one by one, we would wander back out into the restaurant, a slight, quick sniff all that was telltale or the look in our eyes which, for the rest of the evening, seemed focused slightly to the left of everyone's ears.

"I tell you, they buried him with some. The word is two ounces," Hayes once tried to convince us when the messengers had struck out. We were jumpy and restless. "I see nothing wrong, in fact it makes perfect sense for us to get in my car right now and go out there, dig him up with a lot of respect, maybe a few nice choruses of *Santa Lucia* as we're digging, and score it. What do dead guys need with coke? The only problem is trowels. Where the fuck do we get trowels at four