

S T A N L E Y
E L K I N

Van
Gogh's
Room
at
Arles



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Stanley Elkin



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Her Sense of Timing

“All I can say,” Schiff told Claire, “is you’ve got a hell of a sense of timing, a *hell* of a sense of timing. You’ve got a sense of timing on you like last year’s calendar.”

“Timing, Jack? Timing? Timing has nothing to do with it. Time maybe, that it’s run out. This has been coming for years.”

“You might have told a fella.”

“Oh, please,” Claire said.

“Oh yes, you might have prepared a chap.”

“I just did.”

“Given *fair* warning I mean. Not waited till the last minute.”

“Two weeks’ notice?”

“Ain’t that the law?”

“For the help.”

“You *were* the help, Claire.”

“Not anymore.”

“I can’t afford to be single.”

“Tough,” she said.

“Tough,” Schiff said. “Tough, yeah, that should do me.”

“All you ever think you have to do is throw yourself on the mercy of the court.”

“Well, ain’t mercy of the court the law too?”

“For juveniles and first offenders. You’re close to sixty.”

“So are you.”

“I don’t talk about ‘fair.’”

“Very refined, very grown-up. Come on, Claire, put down the suitcases.”

“No. The others are all packed. I’ll send UPS for them when I’m settled.”

“I won’t let the bastards in. The door to this house is barred to the sons of bitches.”

“Oh, Jack,” Claire said, “the things you say. Stand up to delivery people? You? Painters and repairmen? But you’re such a coward. The man who comes to read the meter terrifies you. Tradesmen do, the kid who brings the pizza.”

“Why are they blue collar? This is America, Claire.”

“Is that my cab?” She looked down out their bedroom window and waved.

“This is really going to happen?”

“It’s happened,” she said, leaned over the bed to kiss her husband on the cheek, and just upped and walked out the door on their thirty-six-year marriage.

“Wait, hey wait,” Schiff called after her, taking up his walker and moving toward the window. By the time he got around the bed Claire was already handing the driver two big valises. Schiff, bracing his hands on the sill, stood before the window in his shorty pajamas. “Excuse me,” he called to the man. “Sir? Excuse me?” The fellow shaded his eyes and looked up. “Where are you taking her?”

The driver, a young man in his twenties, looked at Claire, who shook her head. “Sorry,” he said. “Destinations between a fare and her cabbie are privileged information.”

Schiff held up his walker. “But I’m a cripple, I’m handicapped,” he said. “I’m close to sixty.”

“Sorry,” the man said, shut the trunk in which he’d put Claire’s suitcases, and got into his cab.

“That,” Schiff called after the taxi, “was no fare, that was my wife.”

And thought, Her sense of timing, her wonderful, world-class, championship sense of timing. Leaving me like that. Just like that. Just get up and go. Just got up and gone. Don’t tell *me* she forgot tomorrow’s the party.

Schiff's annual party for his graduate students, though by no means a tradition—Schiff, who was professor of Political Geography, had started it up only two or three years ago when, during a fit like some cocktail made of equal parts of sentimentality and pique, he realized that though it was barely a few years until retirement he had had only a stunningly scant handful of students who ever wrote him once they were done with their studies, let alone any who might regard him as a friend—had become at least in Schiff's diminishing circles, one of the hottest tickets in town. Admittedly, it was not like Creer's annual anti- Thanksgiving Day bash, or one of Beverly Yaeger's famous feminist dos in honor of the defeat anywhere of a piece of anti-abortion legislation, but unlike the old manitou he could not claim Indian blood or, unlike Ms. Yaeger, even the menstrual stuff. Unlike any of his fabulous colleagues he was axless, out of it, their long loop of rage, degrees below the kindling point of the engagement. Outside all the beltways of attention and the committed heart. In point of fact uncommitted that one of the next things he would do, once he struggled back to bed, would be to call his guests and explain that his wife had left him suddenly, the party was off.

They'd understand. He did none of the work for it himself, never had—my handicap, my handicap and footicap, he liked to say—and would simply set forth for them the now impossible logistics, freely giving Claire the credit for the splendid spread they put out— not one but *three* roasts, rare through dark medium, turkey, sliced cheeses like slivery glints of precious metals, pâtés riddled with gemmy olives and crumbs of spice, breads and pastries, cakes and ale. Put out and gave away, doggy bags and Care packages, Schiff—who addressed them in class as “Mister,” as “Miss”—avuncularizing at them and propped up in the doorway forcing the uneaten food on his departing liquored-up guests like some hearty, generous Fezziwig. Schiff's all-worked-and-played-out Bo Cratchits, his pretty young Xmas Carols. It was a strain. It was more. Not just another side but a complete counterfeit of his character and, while he generally enjoyed the masquerade, he could not help but wonder what his students made of his impersonation. Many sent thank-you notes, of course—in a form Schiff regarded as condescending—but few ever actually mentioned the parties to him because the only other times they saw each other were in class, where it was business as usual, where the smoking lamp was never lit, and it was Mister and Miss all over again.

What he feared for was his dignity, protecting that like some old-timey maiden her virginity. The annual party, to Schiff's way of thinking, was pure ceremony, obligatory as hair let down for Marie Gras, candy and trinkets tossed from the float, insignificant gelt on the anything-goes occasions. But only, they would surely see, *voluntarily* obligatory, obligatory for as long as his mood was up for it. This was what the great advantage of his age came down to. Added to the other great advantage of his disabling condition, Schiff practically had it made. A cheerful, outgoing older man might have genuinely enjoyed it. Bargains struck with the Indians for Manhattan, a kind of openhanded heartiness done strictly on spec. Even—he's thinking about his rough bluff brusqueness with them—the flirting—the men as well as the women—— Schiff's sandpapery humours. (Well, it was in the nature of the profession to flirt, all profs engaged in some almost military hearts-and-minds thing.) Schiff would have enjoyed it. He *had* enjoyed it. In the days before he'd been struck down, when even at twenty-five, when even at forty and for a few years afterward, all this curmudgeon business had been merely a dodge, style posturing as temperament and all, he suspected (almost remembered) the customary mishmash of mush skin-deep beneath it. Because, again, the only thing that stood between him and his complete capitulation—he could not revert to what he had not really come from in the first place—his type, was that brittle dignity he had practically lain down his life for. Pretty ironic, he'd say, even in as ironic a world as this one, to have had stripped from him (and by mere pathology) the physical bulwark of his great protective formality and fastidiousness. (Completely toilet trained, according

family legend, at nine months.)

And now he has a choice to make: whether to wiggle- wagggle on the walker (with no one in the house to help him should he fall) the thirty or so steps to the bathroom, or to scoot crabwise up along the side of his bed toward the nightstand, where he keeps his urinal, Credé his bladder by pressing up on it with his good hand, priming piss like water from a pump till it flowed, not in anything like a stream but in nickel-and-dime dribs and petty drabs from his stunted, retracted penis (now more like a stuck elevator button than a shaft). They tell him he must use his legs or lose them, but it's his nicked dime—his, he means, energy, and he sidesaddles the bed, bouncing his fists and ass on the mattress in some awkward, primitive locomotion somewhere between riding a horse and potato racing. Vaguely he feels like a fellow in a folk song, a sort of John Henry, or as if he is somehow driving actual stitches into the bedding and thinks, and not for the first time, that he ought to be a medalist in the Olympics.

His head within striking distance of the head of the bed, Jack Schiff laid into gravity and fell back on the pillow, then, with his palms under his left thigh, he pulled his almost useless leg up after him. The right one still had some strength and he kicked it aboard, leaned over to open the door to the nightstand, and took out the green plastic basin and thin urinal, angled, tipped at its neck (always reminding Schiff somehow of a sort of shellfish, indeed actually smelling like one, of the shore, in its filthy musks and salts and iodines, its mixed and complex seas gone off like sour soup). It's into this once he's snapped back its plastic lid, Schiff must thread his penis, hold it in place, pushing up on the bottom of his abdomen, jabbing and jabbing with his thumb until he feels the burn. (Taking pleasure not just in the release of his water but in the muted, rain-on-the-roof sound it makes once it begins to come.) Only recently has he noticed the bruise on the skin of his lower stomach where he's been punching himself silly. He examines it now, reading the yellowish black and blue like a fortune-teller. What, thought Schiff, a piece of work is man, and blotted at his pee with a Kleenex. Then he measured his output in cubic centimeters on the bas relief plastic numerals outside the urinal. His secret wish was to piss a liter, but the most he's ever done was six hundred cubic centimeters. This time it's under two hundred. Not even average, but he's relieved because the fact is Schiff can't stand even 75 cc of discomfort, not even fifty. For a man as generally incapacitated and uncomfortable as Schiff is he's a sort of snob, but pissing is something he can do something about. Schiff is very conscientious about pissing.

And only now does his new situation have his full attention.

For the truth is Schiff has always been very organized. Even before he was a cripple he was organized. (Schiff believes in a sort of cripple's code—that one must never do anything twice. It's a conservation-of-energy thing, an anti- entropy thing, scientific, almost Newtonian, and now, in an age of raised environmental consciousness, recycling, of substitution and cut corners, the golden age, he supposes, of the stitch in time, of taken pains and being careful in the streets, he finds—for a cripple—he's not only, given his gait, in step with his times but practically a metaphor for them. It's a conservation-of-energy thing and a nine- months-of-toilet-training thing.)

Of course—he's thinking of his new situation, he's thinking of the carefully trained guns of his full attention, he's thinking of the inescapable fallout of the world, he's thinking of synergy, of the unavoidable garbage created not only out of every problem but out of each new solution—the pisser—he knew this going in, he couldn't help himself, by nature he was a list maker—will have to be emptied, especially this particular pisser with its almost caramel-colored urine. (Schiff prefers clearish urine, something in a dry white wine, and what, he wonders, is the liquid equivalent of an incontinent retentive?) This had been—even with the handle of the urinal attached to the walker's wide aluminum

crossrail his wild limp would not have permitted him to take five steps without setting up the dancing waters, a rough churn of spilled piss—Claire's job, and though he doesn't really blame Claire for leaving him—had their roles been reversed, take *away* his nine-month toilet training and his incremental, almost exponential squeamishness, he'd have bugged out on her long ago—he understands that, should this thing stick, in the future he will have to think twice, three times, more before using the urinal. (Or maybe, thinks the list maker, he can arrange for a *case* of urinals, keep them in the night-stand, turn it into a kind of wine cellar. Nah, he's kidding. Well he is and he isn't. It's something to think about, another thing he'll have to run past the cripple's code, the garbage potential latent in all solutions.)

But he set all that aside for the moment and took up the phone to see if he could get some idea where he stood.

The dispatcher at the cab company—Schiff had made a mental note of the number on Claire's taxi—said he'd like to help but the computer was down. (Schiff, who didn't believe him, wondered what the fallout would come to from such solutions.) He checked with the airlines, but since he couldn't give them Claire's destination, let alone times or flight numbers, they couldn't help him. (Couldn't they wouldn't. He insisted that even without the specifics they ought to be able to punch up her name on their computers. Claire Schiff, he said to one agent, how many Claire Schiffs could there be riding on their airplanes? She was his wife, for God's sake, and he didn't know of another Claire Schiff in all America. Suppose this had been a *real* emergency. A *real* emergency? "Sure. If the plane went down, God forbid. If there'd been a hijacking." "If the plane went down, if there's been a hijacking?" the agent said slyly. "God forbid," said Schiff. "She's your wife," another agent said, "and you don't even have a destination for her?" "Well, my girl." "Oh, now she's your 'girl.'" "My daughter," he said, "wouldn't you think she's run off." "Your daughter, is she?" the agent said. "Listen, you," Schiff, getting defensive, said aggressively, "I happen to be a Frequent Flyer on this airline. I have your platinum card, more than a hundred thousand uncashed miles and enough bonus points to practically charter my own goddamn plane. Either look up Claire Schiff for me or let me speak to your supervisor." The son of a bitch hung up on him. They'd whipped him. "I have to find her," he told the very last agent he spoke to, "I'm disabled and we're giving a party.") He probably spent thirty or forty dollars on long-distance fishing expeditions. Their friends, proclaiming no knowledge of her plans, went on fishing expeditions of their own. "No," he'd say, putting them off, "no trouble. As for myself, my condition's pretty much unchanged, but I think Claire may be getting a little spooked. Well," he said, still fairly truthfully, "we're both getting on. Hell," he said, "I'm close to sixty. So's Claire, for that matter. Maybe she thinks she won't be able to lift me much longer." But finally as cavalier with the truth as he'd been with the airline son of a bitch who'd hung up on him. "She's been depressed," he said. "I've got her meeting with a psychiatrist three, sometimes four times a week. We're starting to think about institutions. We're starting to think, now they've got a lot of the kinks worked out, about electroshock therapy. Life's a bitch, ain't it? Yeah, well, if you should happen to hear anything, anything at all, you have my number, give me a ring. Dr. Greif and I want to get this thing settled as soon as we can. Tell Marge hi for me."

No longer bothering to pick up the litter he left after these flights of fancy, no longer even thinking about it. Just working his new situation. And was still working his new situation when the idea came to him to call Harry Aid in Portland. Once he thought of it he didn't screw around.

"Harry, it's Jack. Is Claire with you?"

"With me? Why would she be with me?"

He recognized the tone in Harry's voice. It could have been the tone in his own voice when he was

handing out his God forbids to the airline agents and transforming his wife's identity into his girlfriend's and then declining that one into some daughter's.

"Why? Well, for starters, I think she may still have a thing for you, you big lug."

"That was years ago, Jack. Christ, man, I'm sixty years old. We ain't high school kids any longer."

"Is she with you, Harry?"

"Jack, I swear on my life she isn't."

"Yeah, all right, it's a four-hour plane ride to Portland. Is she on her way?"

"Honor bright, Jack, I'm telling you that as of this minute I have absolutely no idea where she is."

So, Schiff thought, she's run off to play out her life with her old sweetheart.

"Okay, Harry. Hang tough. Stonewall me. Just you remember. I'm a helpless old cripple with degenerative neurological disease who has to be strapped into the chair when he goes down the stairs on his Stair-Glide."

"Oh, Jack," Harry said.

"Oh, Harry," said Jack, and hung up.

It wasn't that satisfactory but at least now he knew where he stood. (Well, he thought, *stood*.) What he'd told his wife had been true. He *couldn't* afford to be single. Not at the rate his exacerbations had been coming. Only a little over a year ago he'd still been able to manage on a cane, he'd still been able to drive. He'd owned a walker—a gift from the Society—but hadn't even taken it out of its box. Now they had to tote him around in a wheelchair he hadn't enough strength in his left arm to propel himself. Now he had to go up and down stairs in contraptions on tracks—— Schiff's little choo-choo. Now he couldn't stand in the shower, there were grab bars on the sides of his handicap toilet, a bath bench in his tub, he had to sit to pee, and couldn't always pull the beltless, elastic-waistband pants he wore all the way up his hips and over his ass. (Now, for the same reason, he didn't even wear underwear.) There were ramps at both the front and rear of the house. And every other month now there was some elaborate new piece of home health equipment in the house. Indeed, where once it had been a sort of soft entertainment for him to go into the malls and department stores, now it had become a treat to drop into one of the health supply shops and scope the prosthetics. On his wish list was the sort of motorized wheelchair you'd see paraplegics tear around in, a van with a hydraulic lift in which to put it, and one of those big easy chairs that raised you to a standing position. Also, although in his case it was still a little premature to think about just yet, he had his eye on this sweet new electronic hospital bed. He found himself following ads for used hospital beds in the Society newsletter. ("Don't kid yourself," he told colleagues, "it takes dough to be crippled and still have a lifestyle.")

You could be crippled or you could be single. Schiff, though he made a pretty good living at the university— Check, he reminded himself, the savings and money-market accounts, see if she cleaned you out before she split— didn't know anyone who could afford to be both. Oh, maybe if you were into a *home* maybe, but unless you had only three or four years to live that was prohibitive, too. (Wasn't everything up front? Didn't you have to sign your life savings over to those guys? He should have known this stuff, but give him a break, until this morning he hadn't even known his wife would be running out on him.) And, though he'd never actually been in one, he didn't think he'd like the way it would smell in the corridors.

So he was checking his options. Still working his new situation, he meant, still, he meant, thinking about the blows he would be taking in his comfort, he found his mind drifting back to that wish list. He found himself idly thinking about the skeepskin whoosies crips draped over the furniture and across their wheelchairs and sheets to help prevent lesions and bedsores. It was astonishing what or

of those babies could go for in a wicked world. (It varied actually. They came in different grades, like wool rugs, fur coats, or diamonds. Lambskin was the most expensive, then ewes, then adult males, but it wasn't that simple. There were categories within even these categories, and certain kinds of sheep—castrated fully-grown males were an example—could sometimes be more expensive than even the finest virgin lambskin. Once you really got into it, it was a waste, a waste and a shame, thought Schiff to be crippled- up in such an interesting place as the world.) Oh well, he thought, if he really needed them he could afford all the sheepskins he wanted. Sheepskin deprivation wasn't his problem. His wish list wasn't. He *had* been drifting, he *had* been thinking idly. With Claire gone his problem was the real and present danger he was in, his problem was singleness and emergency.

He picked up his cordless phone and called Information. (Another thing he didn't understand about his wife. Since his disease had been first diagnosed, even, that is, when he was relatively asymptomatic, he'd asked the telephone company, and with a supporting letter from his neurologist received, for its free Unlimited Information Privilege. For years now he hadn't cracked a phone book. Claire had telephone numbers written down in a small, worn black spiral notebook she kept in a drawer in the kitchen. When she wanted the number of a plumber, say, or the man who serviced the air conditioners, she'd go all the way downstairs for it rather than call Information. Recently, it was the cause of some of their biggest fights. "Ask Information," Schiff offered expansively, almost like a host pressing food or drink on a guest. "The number's in my book," she'd say. "Why not ask Information? It's free." "I've got the number downstairs. Information has better things to do." "It's their *job*, for Christ's sake. What do you think the hell else they have to do?" "That's all right, I don't mind." "I mind," Schiff would say, and he'd be shouting now. "*Why?*" he'd yell after her. "*This is some passive-aggressive thing, isn't it? Sure,*" he'd shout, "*this is some lousy passive-aggressive thing on your part. Just your way of showing me who the cripple is in this outfit!*" Sometimes, out of spite and with Claire as witness, checking what was playing at all the movie houses, when the feature was scheduled to begin, he'd rack up a dozen or so calls to Information at a time. Or patiently explain to her, "You know, Claire, the Information operators don't actually look anything up. It isn't as if they were ruining their eyes over the tiny print in the telephone directory. It's all computers nowadays. They just punch in an approximate spelling and the number comes up on the screen." "It's wasteful," Claire might say. "It's free." "It's a drain on the electricity, it's wasteful." "You clip goddam coupons for shampoos and breakfast cereals and shit we wouldn't even eat unless you got fifteen or twenty cents off the price of the goddamn box! *That's wasteful!* Do you know what they charge for a call to Information? *Forty-five cents, that's what! Forty-five cents!* They're ripping you off I'll tell you the truth, Claire, I feel sorry for people who aren't handicapped today, I really do. I probably save us a dollar eighty cents a day. You know what that comes to over the course of a year? Practically six hundred fifty dollars a year! Go buy yourself a designer dress, Claire, go get yourself a nice warm coat." "*Big man!*" "*Big fucking passive aggressive!*")

"S.O.S. Corporation," a woman said when the number rang through. "How may we help you?"

"I've seen your ads on TV and I'd like to speak to one of your sales representatives," Schiff said.

"Bill isn't busy just now. I'll put you through to Bill."

"I'm disabled," Schiff told Bill. "My wife of thirty-six years skipped out on me today to be with an old boyfriend in the Pacific Northwest and left me high and dry and all alone in the house, pretty much a prisoner in it, in fact. Claire left me the car, and I have my handicap plates—my 'vanity plates,' they call them, with their stick-figure, big-wheeler wheelchairs like a kid's toy—but I haven't driven over a year and don't even know whether I still can."

The salesman started to explain his company's services but Schiff interrupted him. "Yes," he said

"I've seen your ads on TV," and continued, teaching Bill his life and current situation. Then the good political geographer went on to explain what he called "choke points" in his home, fault lines along which he could be expected most likely to fall, how close these were to the various telephones in the house. When he was done, the fellow, if he'd been paying attention at all, could have passed, and might even have aced, any pop quiz on the material that Schiff cared to give him.

"Yes sir," Bill said, "that's pretty clear. I think we'll be able to serve you just fine."

"I think so," Schiff said, "I've seen your ads on TV, I've heard them on the radio."

"Pretty effective spots," Bill said.

"Long-time listener, first-time caller," said Schiff.

"Hey," said the salesman, "you can rest easy. We could get the equipment over to you and set you up today."

"Well, I do have *some* questions."

"Oh," Bill said, disappointed, realizing things had gone too smoothly, sensing the catch, "sure. What's that?"

Schiff wanted to know if he could wear the thing in the shower, whether there was any chance he would be electrocuted. The shower was one of the major choke points; if he was going to be electrocuted the deal was off.

"No chance at all," Bill, who'd actually often been asked this same question, said brightly. "The emergency call button works on the same principle as the waterproof watch. Besides, everything in the case, the working parts, are all made of high-grade, bonded, heavy-duty plastic. The only metal part is the copper wire that carries the signal, and that's locked in bonded, heavy-duty, high-grade plastic insulation."

Schiff said that that was good, that people his age had been known to recover from broken hips, but that he couldn't think of anyone who'd ever come back from an electrocution. Bill chuckled and, feeling his oats, wanted to know if Professor Schiff had any other questions. Well, yes, as a matter of fact, he had. If he wasn't near a regular phone would it work on a cordless? The salesman was ready for him. He slammed this one right out of the park. "Yes, absolutely. So long as it's in the On mode. Then of course, since the battery tends to drain down in that position, it's your responsibility to see to it that you keep your phone charged."

"I could do that, I'm not completely helpless, you know," said Schiff, who, from the salesman's quick answer to what Schiff thought a cleanly unique question, suddenly had a sad sense of himself as a thoroughly categorized man.

"Of course not," Bill said. "Anything else?"

There was the question of price. Bill preferred to wait until he had a chance to meet Schiff in person before going into this stuff—there were various options—— if a doctor accompanied the paramedic on a call, whether Schiff would be using some of the other services the company offered, various options—but the professor was adamant. He reminded Bill of all he had yet to do if he was going to call off that party for his graduate students. He wouldn't budge on this one. The salesman would either have to tell him what it cost right then and there or lose the sale. Bill gave him the basic monthly rates, installation fees, what it would cost Schiff if they had to put in additional phones. He broke down the costs to him of the various options and offered a price on specific package deals. It was like buying a good used car.

It was expensive. Schiff said as much.

"Is it?" Bill said. "Do you have a burglar-alarm system in your house there, Professor?"

"No."

“Sure,” Bill said, “and if that’s what you have to pay to see to it your hi-fi ain’t stolen or they don’t clear out your spoons, isn’t your very life worth a few dollars more to you than just making sure they don’t get your tablecloth?”

“I said I *don’t* have a burglar-alarm system,” Schiff said.

“Whether you do or you don’t,” the salesman said. “It’s the same principle.”

On condition that all of it could be put in that day he ended up picking one of the S.O.S. Corporation’s most all-inclusive plans. He got a bit of a break on the package.

“You won’t be sorry,” Bill told him sincerely. “They dealt you a rotten hand. In my business I see all the time, and I agree, it’s a little expensive, but you’ll see, it’s worth it. Even if you never have to use us, and I hope you don’t, it’s worth it. The sense of security alone. It’s worth it all right. Oh, why don’t I still have you on the phone, is there something else you want to ask, can you think of anything you’d like to know?”

Schiff figured the man was talking about credit arrangements, but he didn’t care about credit arrangements. It was expensive, more expensive than Schiff would ever have thought, but not *that* expensive. If the bitch hadn’t cleaned out his accounts—something he’d have to check—he couldn’t afford it. But there *was* something else. Schiff brought it up reluctantly.

“Would I have to shout?” he asked. “On the TV, that lady who falls down shouts.”

“Well, you take a nasty spill like that you could just as well be screaming as actually shouting.”

“I think she’s shouting,” Schiff said. “She’s pretty far from the phone, all the way across the room. It sounds to me like she’s shouting.”

“Well,” Bill said gently, “shouting, screaming. That’s just an example of truth in advertising.” And Schiff knew what Bill was going to tell him next. He braced himself for it. And then the salesman said just exactly what Schiff thought he was going to say. “Maybe,” he said, “her phones aren’t sensitive enough, maybe they’re not wired for their fullest range. That’s one of the reasons I want to be on the phone site, why I don’t like to quote a customer a price over the telephone.”

He has me, thought the political geographer, they dealt me a rotten hand—he’s in the business, he knows—and he has me.

If it wasn’t one thing it was another. Or no, Schiff, remembering his theory of consequence and fallout, the proliferation of litter, corrected. First it was one thing, *then* it was another. Once you put the ball into play there was nothing for it but to chase it. He had to find out about his funds, whether there were enough left to take care of it if S.O.S. insisted on payment for their service up front. (Claire paid the bills, he hadn’t written a check in years. Except for a couple of loose dollars—it was awkward for him to get to his billfold, finger credit cards from a wallet or handle money—for a coffee and a sweet roll when he went to school, he didn’t even carry cash anymore. Even in restaurants Claire paid the check, figured the tip, signed the credit-card slip. His disease had turned him into some sort of helpless, old-timey widow, some nice, pre-lib, immigrant lady.) He knew the names of the three banks with which they dealt, but wasn’t entirely certain which one they used for checking, which handled their trust fund, which was the one they kept their money-market account. (There was even a small teacher’s credit-union account they’d had to open when the interest rates were so high on certificates of deposit a few years back and they took a loan out on an automobile Claire didn’t think they should pay for outright.)

Information gave him the bank’s number, but the bank—they might have been suspicious of his vagueness when he couldn’t tell them what kind of account he was asking about—wouldn’t tell him anything without an account number.

“Jesus,” he said, “I’m disabled, I’d have to go downstairs for that. My wife usually takes care of the

money. Normally I wouldn't even be bothering you with something like this, but she walked out on me today. Just left me flat."

"I don't like it," the bank said, "when people take the name of the Lord in vain."

He knew where to find the stuff, in the top drawer of a high, narrow cabinet in the front hall—f for reasons neither could remember they called it "the tchtchk"—the closest thing they had in the house to an antique, and except for the fact that two of its elaborate brass handles were missing it might have been valuable. The only thing was, getting there would not be half the fun. Even with the Stair-Glide, Claire had to help him. Always she had to swivel and lock the seat, folded upright like a seat in a movie theater, into position for him at the top of the stairs. On days he was weak she had to lift Schiff's feet onto the little ledge—less long than his shoes—and pull down its movable arms he was high in the air like a victim's in a stickup. Even on days he was strong she had to fold and carry his aluminum walker down the stairs for him. The logistics seemed overwhelming. He'd really have to think about this one.

He was in bed. He was lying down. Lying down, sitting, he was any man's equal. He didn't know his own strength. Literally. He had no sense of weakness, his disease. He could be in remission. Unless he tried to turn on his side, or raise himself into a sitting position, he felt fit as a fiddle. At rest, even his fingers seemed normal. He could have counted out money or arranged playing cards. Really, the logistics seemed overwhelming. He was as reluctant to move as a man in a mine field. Inertia had become almost a part of his disease, almost a part of his character. His character, Schiff thought, had become almost a part of his disease. A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, he thought, and heave himself upright. So far, so good. Not bad, he thought, and pushed himself up off the bed and, preparing to move, leaned into his walker. Not bad, he thought again, pleased with the relative crispness of his steps, but soon his energy began to flag. By the time he'd taken the thirteen or so steps to the Stair-Glide (the twenty-six or so steps, actually, since his movement on the walker could be broken down—) to keep his mind occupied, he really *did* break it down—this way: push, step, pull; push, step, pull; each forward step with his right leg accompanied by dragging the left one up alongside it, *almost* alongside it. He felt like someone with a gaping hole in his hull). Push, step, rest, pull, he was going now; then push, rest, step, rest, *pull. Rest!* He lived in slow motion, like someone bathed in strobe light or time-lapse photography. He could have been the subject of time-motion studies.

In repose, folded out of the way against the wall, the Stair-Glide looked like a torso on a target on a rifle range. Gasping, Schiff fumbled with the lever that swiveled it into position and, almost losing his balance as he took a hand off the walker, had practically to swipe at its shallow little theater seat to get it down. With difficulty he managed to lower the chair's arms and wrap them about himself—the walker was a sort of elbow on each arm that loosely encircled his body and was supposed to keep him from falling too far forward—and lower the tiny footrest. (They design this shit for kids, Schiff thought. They think of us as a bunch of Tiny Tims.) He didn't know what to do, whether to pull his feet up onto the footrest and then try to collapse the walker, or to collapse the walker and then worry about getting his feet up. (They're right, he thought. We *are* kids. We need nursemaids. Or wives. Boy, he thought angrily, her sense of timing. Her world-class, son-of-a-bitch sense of timing. Briefly, it occurred to him that he might be better off homeless, find himself a nutso, broken-down bag lady with whom he could bond and who would take care of him, or, if it was still too soon for him to make a commitment, get involved, or even too early for him to start dating again, some street-smart, knowledgeable old wino with a feel for the soup kitchens, the ground-floor, handicap-friendly shelters. He had money. Surely she'd left *something* for him, though even if she hadn't there was the house. He could sell it, split the proceeds with her, and have enough left over to pay the wino or bag lady for their trouble.

What could it cost him—— ten bucks a day, fifteen? Hell, if he didn't save almost that much on the calls he made to Information, he saved almost *almost* that much. I was already crippled, Schiff thought, now I'm crazy, too.) It was a dilemma, a whaddayacallit, Hobson's choice. This ain't going to happen, he told himself. If I bring my feet up and fold the walker, my feet will slide off the footrest and I'll never get them back on it again. If I fold the walker and hold it I won't have the use of my hands to lift up my feet. Then, out of the blue, it came to him. He raised his feet onto the footrest and moved the chair into its glide mode. He leaned over and picked up the still uncollapsed walker. He didn't even *try* to fold it. With his arms on the armrests and the heel of his hand pressed against the button that made the Stair-Glide go, he raised the lightweight aluminum walker around his body and up about level with the top of his head and, to all intents and purposes, proceeded to *wear* it downstairs!

By the time he'd made it the eight steps to the landing— his hand kept slipping off the button and stopping the chair—a second walker—one he could keep permanently set up at the bottom of the stairs—had gone on his wish list. When the Stair-Glide slowly started its turn into the second flight—he timed it once, it took exactly one minute to do the trip—the telephone began to ring. He knew it would stop ringing before he could get to it. I'm in farce, he thought. I take to farce the way ducks take to water. But, even in farce, Schiff was a hopeful man—a man, that is, obsessed with solutions, even though he tried always to live by the cripple's code with all its concomitant notions about the exponentiality of litter and his grand ideas about every solved problem creating a new one. Now, for example, he had still more items for his wish list. He could leave cordless phones all over the house in every out-of-the-way place he was likely to be when a phone started to ring, by the shelf where the toilet paper was kept, along the tops of tables, between the cushions of the sofa, in the gap between his pants pocket and the side of a chair, beside potted plants on windowsills—— in each inconvenient closet, pantry, alcove, and cuddy, adjunct to all the complicated, nesty network of random space.

The minute was up. He was at the bottom of the stairs. He disrobed himself of the walker and set down, aware at once (by the relief he felt, that suffused him like a kind of pleasure) of how rough it could be, how heavy it became if one wasn't up to the burdens of aluminum. The burdens of aluminum. And, still seated in the Stair-Glide, already accustomed to his relief, no longer surprised by the return of his off-again, on-again energies, restored—so long as he remained seated—to health, which after the ordeal of the stairs he intended to savor a while longer, not even tempted by the telephone which he suddenly realized had never stopped ringing. It's Claire, he thought. Only Claire knew he was alone in the house, how long it took him to get to a phone. Then he thought, No, that's not true, plenty of people know, Claire's driver, even the dispatcher at the taxicab company, the agent at the airlines, the woman at the bank, friends to whom he'd spilled the beans, Harry in Portland, Bob at S.O.S. Even, when it came right down, Information. God, he hoped it wasn't Information. Then he realized he was wrong about that one too. He hoped it *was* Information. They could be checking up on him to see if he was still crippled. He wanted Information on his side and decided not to pick up. The phone stopped ringing. Though, actually, Schiff thought once it had stopped, it *could* have been anyone. Thieves checking to see if the house was empty so they could come out and strip it, take what they wanted. If it was thieves, Schiff thought, it was probably a good thing he hadn't yet had time to do anything about his wish list—— that second walker, the dozen or so extra cordless telephones he thought he might buy. And suddenly scratched the cordless telephones and had another, less expensive, even better item for the wish list—— an answering machine. They didn't have an answering machine—Schiff felt clumsy speaking to them and didn't like to impose on others what he hated to do himself— but he had to admit, in his new circumstances, under his novel, ne

dispensation, an answering machine could be just the ticket. It might just fill the bill. The problem with an answering machine as Schiff saw it was the message one left on it to tell callers you couldn't come to the phone. If the device caught important calls you didn't want to miss, it was also an open invitation to the very vandals and thieves he was concerned to scare off. "I can't come to the phone just now, but if you'll just..." was too ambiguous. It wouldn't keep the tiger from your gates. A good thief would see right through the jesuiticals of a message like that and interpret it any way he wanted. Schiff wouldn't take it off the wish list but he'd first have to compose an airtight message for the machine before he ever actually purchased one. An idle mind is *too* the devil's workshop, Schiff thought, and rose from the chair, plowed—he often thought of his walker as a plow, of his floors and carpets as fields in which he cut stiff furrows—his way to the tchtchk and, quite to his astonishment, found almost at once statements from the banks with their account numbers on them. These he put into his mouth, but he couldn't go up just yet, couldn't yet face the struggle with the walker on the Stair-Glide; he had to rest, build strength, and decided to go into the living room for a while and sit down.

Where he collected his strength and doodled messages in his head for the answering machine.

Hi, he thought, this is Jack Schiff. Sorry to have missed your call, but I've stepped out for five minutes to run out to the store for some milk for my coffee. Just leave your et cetera, et cetera, and I'll get right back to you.

That wasn't bad, Schiff thought, but what would people who knew him make of it, of his "stepped out" and "run out" locutions? Of the swiftness and fluency of movement—so unlike him—he implied in that "get right back to you" trope? Unless they read it as the code that it was, they would think they'd reached some other Jack Schiff. Also, what if the thieves waited five minutes and called back. Or ten? Or fifteen? Or a whole hour and then heard the same damn message? After they robbed him they'd probably trash the place, maybe even torch it.

Hi, et cetera, et cetera, he revised, but——WOULD YOU CUT THAT OUT, PLEASE? DOWN, DAMN IT DOWN! Sorry, my pit bull's acting up again. Look, just leave your name at the sound of the——oh, my God, BEEEEEP!

Well, Schiff thought, pleased with the new composition and his invention of the pit bull. But there was a problem of verisimilitude. Wouldn't there have to be growls, the sound of snarls and vicious barking? Probably he could manage a fairly convincing growl, or even a snarl, particularly over the telephone with its gift of enhanced, electronic sibilance, but he was an academic not an actor, he would never be able to handle the rough barking. (A pit bull went on the wish list. Then, thinking of the effort it would be to care for, came right back off again.)

Et cetera, et cetera, he began over, I'm too depressed to come to the phone right now. Thieves cleaned me out. I called the cops. They tell me it looks like the work of professionals. Like that, supposed to be a comfort? Leave your name, if I ever cheer up I'll try to get back to you.

There were people at his front door. From where he sat on the sofa he could see the S.O.S. van through the French windows. Well, thought Schiff, thank God for small favors.

It was good he was downstairs. If he'd gone up—he had the wrong temperament for someone with his disease; really, he thought, he wasn't laidback enough; not trying to get to the phone earlier before it stopped ringing was the exception not the rule—he could have had an accident in an effort to rush down to them before his visitors gave up and left. Even now, knowing what he knew about himself and no more than twenty feet from the door, he scampered to it. The bank statements were still in his mouth.

"No no," Bill, who was in the business, who knew a rotten hand when he saw one, who'd told him

much, said, waving off the hand Schiff extended, “let’s wait, why don’t we, until you sit down before we try to shake hands?”

In the living room Bill introduced him to the technician he’d brought with him, a woman. For a fellow with a quiet libido, it was astonishing to Schiff how much at ease women could put him, even women like this one, got up in gray coveralls like a repairman’s, moving man’s, or delivery man’s jumpsuit, a person’s who worked basements. It was generally true what Claire had said. Workmen tended to frighten him. At something like the ambassadorial level Claire handled the workmen, though Schiff began to wonder if he hadn’t been missing something. After some initial small talk—“Have any trouble finding the place?” ““Yes, it is a nice neighborhood, St. Louis’s best-kept secret”—which he quite enjoyed but wouldn’t have guessed he had in him, Bill presented him with some brochures about the equipment and service. Schiff accepted and started to read them before Bill interrupted. “Those are just to give you an idea of the colors that are available.”

“Oh, I don’t care about the color,” Schiff said.

“Well, good for you,” said Bill.

“The olive would have to be special-ordered anyway,” Jenny Simmons said. “So would the teal.”

“We don’t have the teal?” Bill said.

“I don’t think Indianapolis even makes it anymore. When was the last time you saw a teal?”

“Come to think of it,” Bill admitted.

“I really *don’t* care about the color,” Schiff said.

“Most clients don’t,” Bill said.

“Hey,” Schiff said, “I’m far gone, but I’m not *that* far gone. I still get a kick out of life. It’s not color monochromatic. All I meant was, it ticks me off when a company tries to make a profit off the paint they splash over its products. I can remember when the Princess telephone first came out and Ma Bell charged you extra for any piece of equipment that wasn’t black.”

“That’s what I thought you meant,” Bill said, “Wasn’t it Henry Ford who said you could get the Model T in any color you wanted so long as it was black? Some clients are a little fussy is all. It actually matters to them whether the unit they wear around their neck and that could save their life is green or gray. Though don’t get me wrong. The S.O.S. Corporation isn’t Ma Bell. We don’t charge extra for the color.”

“There’s no scientific reason for it I can think of,” Jenny Simmons said, “but it’s been my experience that we have less trouble with a plain white unit than with any other color.”

“Plain white it is for me,” Schiff said.

“There you go,” Bill said. “It’s just we’re required by law to show you what’s available.”

Schiff looked to Jenny, who seemed to be frowning. By law? Was he serious? Required by law? Schiff smiled at her. Jenny looked down. Then Schiff wondered if she knew about his situation. Sure he thought, she had to. They’d come together in the van. They were partners. Like cops. The salesman would almost certainly have passed on all that Schiff had himself volunteered—— that he’d been married thirty-six years and that this was the day the Lord had made for his wife to just up and leave him, fled to her boyfriend in Oregon, spilling his life like a suicide. Also, she’d seen him with barbed statements in his mouth. Now *Schiff* looked down. And only a few minutes earlier he’d been thinking of giving them tea, hard stuff even. (Schiff remembered when he was a kid, his parents offering “a shot” to men who came to do for them, carry their furniture up and down flights of stairs. Maybe that’s why he was still afraid of them—— their power and rough, blue-collar ways.) He felt a little betrayed. Even at that, though, he took a sort of comfort in their company, and if it wasn’t for the fact that he had still to call the banks and check with them about his accounts he would have been content

to spend the rest of the afternoon being sold to. There was something soothing about it, like watching a fishing show on TV that taught you to tie your own flies or showed you how to paint a picture. It was a little, he imagined, like a woman getting a free makeover in a department store. (Schiff, abandoned on his own, was coming a little to terms with the domestic.)

"I took the liberty of making some notes during our earlier phone conversation." Bill said. "Whenever you're ready we can check out your floor plan. Jenny's the expert. I'd like her to walk through it. Nothing's written in stone yet. There could still be some changes you might want to make."

"Of course, of course, but I don't think you really need me. While you're pacing it off I could be making some calls."

"Sure thing," Bill said, "we'll take care of it. Go make your calls."

"Well, that's just it," Schiff said. "I have this cordless phone? I may even have mentioned it to you."

"I remember you did."

"It's up on the bed in my room. I live by the cripple's code. That you must never do anything twice. Unfortunately, I do just about everything twice. Well," he said, "I'm crippled. I almost have to."

"You mustn't say that. You're hardly a cripple," the salesman said. "You know how to cope. I hope I cope half as well as you do if I'm ever handicapped."

"Well," said Schiff, "in any event. I wasn't able to bring it with me when I came down. If someone could just get it for me?"

"No problem," Bill said. "Your room is——?"

"First door on the left, top of the stairs."

Which left him alone in the living room with Jenny. She seemed shy for someone who worked with Bill. Stuck for something to say, she grinned at him goofily. It occurred to him she was embarrassed by everything she already knew about him. Bold cop, shy cop. Schiff poked around, looking for something he could say to put her at ease.

"I had you for a professor," Jenny told him.

Schiff felt himself flush, a stain of red discovery cross his features.

"I don't blame her," he blurted. "Not for a minute. She should have done it years ago. I would've. In her place I would've. No one owes anyone that kind of loyalty."

Before either of them could recover Bill was back with Schiff's phone. "There you go," he said.

"Thank you," Schiff said, "thanks."

"No problem. It was just where you said. You give very good directions."

Schiff waited impatiently while Bill explained what was going to happen, that he and Jenny were going to go over the house looking for the best spots to install their relays. He had his notes, he said, he just wanted to make sure they hadn't overlooked anything. "For example," Bill said, "I notice the house has a third floor."

"I'm never up there."

"Well, I know," Bill said, "but can't you conceive of a circumstance which might bring you up there?"

"There's no Stair-Glide. I couldn't get to the third floor if I wanted to."

"What about the basement, what if something went wrong in the basement? If the furnace went out, or, God forbid, your storm drains clogged and you had severe water damage?"

"Same thing," Schiff said, "no Stair-Glide."

"Well, sure," said Bill. "I'm not prying. That's just the sort of thing the corporation has to find out about if it's to render its services properly. Also, I'll tell you something, we have to cover our behinds"

If something happened to a client in an area of the house we overlooked or failed to warn him he was vulnerable we could be looking at a pretty good lawsuit.”

“I consider myself warned,” Schiff said, getting a little cranky now, the charm of being sold having worn off, and oppressed by all he had yet to do.

Bill chuckled. “Well, I know,” he said, “and I hope you don’t mind putting your signature to this when we close the deal.”

“I have to sign a consent form? Like you’re my surgeon? Like you’re operating on me?”

“It’s for both our protections,” Bill said in exactly the same tone of voice Schiff often used in class when he had to explain something. He turned to his partner. “What do you say, Jenny? We start down here?”

Shit, Schiff thought, fingering his bank statements, getting anxious now, feeling suddenly rushed and hurried, his oppression compounding into a sort of spiritual indigestion he could almost feel.

Now see, he told himself, that’s exactly what I meant about farce. He was furious he had to call the bank while S.O.S. was there, more outraged than by his condition itself, than by Claire’s leaving. It wasn’t fair. It was none of the corporation’s business that his wife might have plundered the accounts. It was that straw that breaks that camel’s back. He waited for them to clear out of the living room, which they went over, deliberate as sappers. Maybe she’d been his student when he still taught undergraduates. But that was just what he meant, too. It wasn’t just her odd garment that threw him off the scent. He simply didn’t *know* these people. His students, he meant. It wasn’t even only that they failed to keep in touch. They weren’t in touch to begin with. Many of his colleagues’ former students were like family. They had pictures of the people their students had married, of their kids. Also, it a little depressed Schiff to see one of his old students got up in coveralls, doing, he didn’t care how much electronics she probably knew, a sort of manual labor. It was a long way from political geography, from the high ground of pure theory, the strictly hands-off of scholarship and the sheer delicious luxury of an arcane discipline. Schiff knew professors of painting whose students had pictures hanging in museums, business profs with kids who were CEOs. It diminished already diminished old Schiff that he couldn’t think of a single one of his students who’d gone on in the field. He taught graduate students pursuing advanced degrees in history, in poli sci, and many of them had distinguished careers, but Schiff kept up, he knew the people in his field, hotshots in Washington think tanks many of them, high-ups in the CIA, consultants to or officials in the Census Bureau, advisers at Rand- McNally, the publishers of other important atlases, and couldn’t think of anyone who’d been in one of his classes who was a practicing political geographer. They were probably waiters, he thought, drivers in the taxicab trade very likely, or, like Miss Simmons here, got up like people you see when your airplane has landed, signaling jets to the gate.

They left the living room and moved through the rest of the first floor, going into the dining room, Schiff’s kitchen, his half bath, the small storage area at the rear of his house where the backdoor opened out onto the porch, the small in-ground pool.

Schiff waited until he heard their steps on the stairs. Then, cupping his hand over the speaker, he lowered his voice and asked Information for the bank’s phone number. Even as he was doing so he saw it plain as the nose, right there on the statement. It would have been too much trouble to tell the operator that never mind, forget it, he’d found it (never mind, forget it, more farce), so he waited for the little mechanical recitation to come on and dutifully checked it against the phone number on the statement.

Now that he could give them their account number (sotto voce, as sotto as he could make it and still be heard, so sotto, in fact, that he sounded suspicious even to himself), the bank was nice as pie. Too nice, you asked him. He could have been anyone. He was upset with them that they’d just hand o

information like that. He even thought he recognized the voice, that it belonged to the religious zeal he'd spoken to earlier. Now here it was again, giving out inside info on him like there was no tomorrow. Taking his substance in vain. Which, even in his pique, he was pleased to learn Claire had made no inroads on. He called their other banks, the one where they did their checking, the one used for the trust-fund account.

Which couldn't have been more cooperative, sir, pleased to provide him with that information, sir, yes sir, connected with an employee who might, Schiff felt, had he only asked for them, have called out the intimate weights and measures of anyone who'd ever done business with the bank, not only the last penny but right down to the last overdraft, the last bounced check. Not only was money fungible, apparently an account number, *any* account number was too, or maybe just any five random digits, like figures on a Bingo card. He felt like a government agency. He felt like a car dealer, Jack Schiff Oldsmobile, say, calling for the lowdown on a would-be customer.

He probably wouldn't have felt this way (or felt anything more than a little surprised) if just at that moment, the very moment when the bank's teller, or clerk, or paid professional informer, was singing out Schiff's bottom lines, bright, clear, and brassy as a belter on Broadway stopping the show for someone somewhere in the house hadn't picked up an extension.

The cooperative teller asked if Schiff had gotten that and, before he could answer, broke down the sums for him again.

"Oh," said Miss Simmons, "is that you, Professor? I didn't know you were still making your calls."

"I got a wrong number," he said, and disengaged.

The three of them were downstairs.

"Yep," Bill was saying, rubbing his hands, "you got it right the first time. Turns out we didn't really have to check. We could almost go with the plan we specified on the telephone. Jenny found one or two places the signal may have to be reinforced, but you could do a voice level, she'll meter you and who knows, you might just be able to get away without us having to change a thing in the original specs. Even if we do have to make an adjustment it wouldn't run you more than an additional two or three hundred dollars."

"I have to go upstairs?"

"No, no," Bill said, "she marked off the distances. You can do the reading right down here, can't you, Jenny?"

"Sure," said his former student. She took something that looked rather like a light meter from one of the deep pockets in her coveralls and held it up. "Go ahead," she said, "pretend you've fallen. Just speak into the air."

"What should I say?"

"Anything. I'm just getting a level."

"Calling all cars," Schiff said in a normal voice. "S.O.S. S.O.S. Save our Schiff."

"What do you think, Jen?" Bill said.

His former student looked at her old professor whose worth she knew—as a teacher, as a husband—she looked at his weakened limbs, may even, when she was upstairs, have seen his urinal—as a man.

"It's all right," she said.

"Is it?" said Bill, surprised. "How about that?" he said. "You got it right the first time, but that's your business, isn't it, Professor? Floor plans, knowing the territory."

In spite of himself, Schiff basked in what, in spite of himself, Schiff knew wasn't really a compliment. But he did, he *did* know the territory.

"Yep," Bill said, "Jenny tells me you used to be some kind of geography professor."

"I still am," Schiff said, "I still teach."

"Do you?" Bill said. "Well, good for *you*."

He knew the territory, all right. He should have thrown the S.O.S. s.o.b. out of the house. He told himself it was only because Claire had left him and he needed the service that he didn't. But it was because of what Claire had said, too. His fear of tradesmen, of almost anyone who didn't teach at university. At least a little it was. So he *knew* the territory.

"Well," said Bill, "all we have to do now is a little paperwork, fill out a few forms."

He was asked questions about his medical history, stuff out of left field. Not just about his neurology but about childhood diseases, allergies, even whether he'd ever had poison ivy. He listed his medications. It was for show, not for blow, but again, and still in spite of himself, he took a certain pleasure in this medical inventory. It was the first time in years anyone had taken such an interest in him, even a faked one. Bill was more thorough than any of his physicians, and Miss Simmons seemed to hang on his answers as much as the salesman.

"That should about do it," Bill said.

"Oh," said Schiff, a little let down.

"Well, except for a few housekeeping details the corporation has to have for its files. Nothing GMAC or any financial institution wouldn't need to know if you were applying for a loan on a car."

Schiff couldn't have said why he was so steamed. He'd expected it. Wasn't this the reason he'd been trying to get through to his banks? Wasn't it why he'd attempted to be so circumspect?

"Will you be paying by check?"

"Yes," Schiff said, thrown off, expecting some such, but not exactly this, question. "The corporation takes checks, doesn't it?"

"These systems are fairly big-ticket items. It takes cashier's checks."

"Well, that poses a problem, doesn't it?" Schiff said. "Me being crippled and all? My wife having lit out for the territory and leaving me up shit creek without a paddle with a car in the driveway to go to the bank but not quite enough strength in my legs to press down on the accelerator let alone the brake pedal?"

"Don't get so excited," Bill said. "We're flexible. We'll work with you. Hey," he said, "we're not nothing if not flexible. If you can demonstrate you have enough money in your account to cover the check, we'll work with you."

"Ask Miss Simmons if I have enough money in my account to cover it," Schiff said.

"No offense, old man," the salesman said. "Hey," he said, "take it easy. No offense. Often, a spouse quits on a partner who's been dealt a bad hand she Hoovers out their joint accounts before she goes."

"This happens?" Schiff, oddly moved, said suddenly, in spite of himself, interested, narrowing his eyes, studying the man, a sort of political geographer in his own right, a kind of bellwether, some sibyl of the vicissitudes.

"Well, a lot of resentment builds up," Bill explained. "I mean, put yourself in her place. At least *some* of the trouble between you had to have been physical, right?"

Schiff stared at him.

"Sure," Bill said, "and it's my guess that until you were struck down you two probably had it pretty good in bed together. Go ahead, write the check. It's the amount we agreed on. You're good for it."

"Am I?"

"Well, sure you are," Bill said. "She ever have to lift you up off the floor?"

"Yes," Schiff said stiffly.

"She ever have to carry you?"

“Once in a while,” he said.

Bill clucked his tongue. “You enjoy that? You come to enjoy that?”

“Well,” Schiff said evasively.

“Well, sure you did,” Bill said.

“I didn’t want her to hurt herself.”

“Of course not,” Bill said.

“She’s pretty strong, but let’s face it, she’s no spring chicken.”

“Let’s face it,” Bill said.

“I don’t have my checkbook.”

“Want me to go get it? Want Jen to?”

“I think it may be in one of the drawers in the tchtchk.”

“Say what?”

“The cabinet in the hall. We call it the tchtchk.”

“That’s a new one on me. You ever hear that, Jen? The choo-choo? Heck, I can’t even pronounce it.”

How do you say that again?”

“Tchtchk. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Just a pet name, eh? From your salad days.”

“I guess.”

“Well, sure,” Bill said. “It’s just something you ought to bear in mind.” Schiff didn’t follow. “Well,

that you *had* salad days,” Bill said.

“Oh, right,” Schiff said, who didn’t need the lecture but wanted to placate the man just long enough to write the check and be rid of him.

“That’s why the good Lord usually lets us hold on to our memories,” Bill said. “So we can remember the times before our wives had to carry us around piggyback.”

“She never carried me around piggyback,” Schiff said.

“No? How’d she manage you?”

“She held me around my waist.”

“Off the ground?”

“Thanks,” Schiff told Jenny, “thank you.” She’s brought his checkbook. She could have brought him the one from the money-market account, even the tiny credit-union one. It was the account with the money from the trust. “May I use your pen?” he asked coolly. It was hard to get a good grip on the pen with his weakened hand, difficult for him to write the check, almost impossible to form the numerals, some of which he had to trace two or three times and which were an illegible muddle when he finished. He didn’t even bother to sign it but pulled the ruined check from the book and started another. Miss Simmons looked elsewhere. Bill watched Schiff closely, bearing down on him with a knowing stare. “My small motor movements are shot,” Schiff explained. “I didn’t forget how to make out a check.”

“Of course not,” Bill said. “It’s like riding a bicycle.”

“I forgot how to ride a bicycle,” Schiff said.

“We have to keep our chin up,” Bill said. “Hey,” he said,

“I’ve got to get back to the office. Jenny still has to do the installations so I’ll leave her here with you.”

“Sure,” Schiff said.

“Watch yourself now.”

“I will.”

“Don’t fall.”

“I won’t.”

“I don’t know if Jenny could handle you,” Bill said. Schiff didn’t answer. “The service, though, the service is another story. Sometimes the service sends out women.”

Schiff had enough. “What is this?” he demanded. “What are you getting at? Just what are you hinting? Do you talk this way to all your customers?”

“Why are you so excited? Do you think it’s good for you to get so excited? I know your blood pressure medications. I know what you have to put into your bloodstream to keep a lid on the stress. Do you think I’m against you? I’m not against you. Quite the contrary. I represent the service. Does the service stand to gain if its clients become upset with it? I know how highly you think of our advertising campaign but believe me, brother, what it finally boils down to is word-of-mouth. And, you want to know, I wasn’t ‘hinting’ or ‘getting’ at anything. All I was referencing was man’s dependence on woman for her ability to nurture.”

“All right,” Schiff told him wearily.

“Sure,” Bill said, “that’s all there is to it. She helps him out with his motor movements. Large and small both.”

“Okay.”

“Ain’t a mother’s son of us don’t want to float around in the pool in his mama’s arms. Ain’t a joe alive don’t enjoy going for a ride in the mommy roo’s pouch. Security is the name of the game.”

Okeydokey already, Schiff thought.

“So I wasn’t suggesting anything kinky. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*,” the salesman said, took up the check in Schiff’s smashed handwriting, and left him in the house with Miss Simmons.

Who to this point, she told him, had only been seeing what had to be done, that now she could start to plant.

“To plant?”

“Your garden,” she said. “Lay out your seeds and bulbs for you. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s a serviceman’s term in the industry.”

The professor nodded, surprised by the term “industry,” though once he thought about it, maybe not so surprised. Increasingly, he’d been noticing those ads on TV. It was some crisis of the infirm and elderly thing, high tech’s interim arrangement with the nursing-home interests, with Medicare, the aging demographics, the death-with-dignity folks. He explained this to Miss Simmons as she laid out her tools, set out the equipment she brought into Schiff’s home from the van.

“Oh, now,” Miss Simmons said.

“By which, thought Schiff, she meant to assuage him, ease him, allay his fears, cut him, he meant from the herd of the infirm, aging and elderly, anyone struggling for a few last breaths of dignity. Because it was true what the salesman had said. Women *were* nurturers, even women like this one. Beneath her repair or maintenance man’s gray union suit, this person who worked in the basement down with the pipes, boilers, and boards of circuit breakers, was probably just another bleeding-heart nurturer and enabler.

And my God, Schiff thought, I wasn’t even fishing. Though maybe, he thought, all he ever did now was fish, his condition, his very appearance these days a fishing expedition, searching out reassurance like a guy on a treasure hunt. (Appalled by his letters of credit, his devastating *carte blanche* entries like some terminal kid’s on a trip to Disney World. Appalled, too, by what he must have done to Claire, who’d abandoned him, forcing her against *her* nature by the cumulative, oppressive weight of his need.) Shit, he thought, I am what I am, and asked a question that had been at least somewhere out

his mind since she'd told him he'd been her professor.

"I've been trying to think," Schiff said, "was I still on a cane when you were my student?"

"A cane?" she said. "I don't think so. I don't remember any cane. No," she said, "you walked like everyone else."

"That had to be at least a dozen years ago."

"I graduated it'll be fifteen years this June."

"You knew me when," Schiff said.

"Oh, now," Miss Simmons said.

"I knew *you* when," he said.

Miss Simmons looked down at her wrenches and scissors and rolls of duct tape, at all the instruments he did not have names for. She appeared to blush, though women were clever, he thought. Blushing and downcast eyes could be a sort of nurturing, too. Outright flirting could. How could men trust a sex that lived so much by its inborns and instincts, that stood so firm by the agenda of its drive and temperament (anything for the cause), its goals and nature? Christ, he thought, they might just as well have been critters, low and furious on the biological scale as spawning salmon. (Giving another passing, glancing, bruising thought to what he must have done—his disease must have done—to his own wife's damaged intrinsics and basics.) And, quite suddenly suspecting she may have thought he was coming on, momentarily panicked.

"Oh, no," he said, finding his place again in the lecture she probably hadn't even recognized was one, "I'm all for it. I believe it's exactly the thing, quite the right way to go. I mean after the initial outlay it's rather economical. And Bill is right, a sense of security is the name of the game."

"Well," she said, gathering up some pieces of equipment and rising, "this is going to take at least a couple of hours. I'm afraid I have to tie up your phones; you won't be able to use them till I'm done. If there are any calls you have to make you ought to try to make them now. Otherwise..."

"What if someone was trying to reach me?"

"Well, they'd get a busy signal."

"At least two hours, you said. No one talks on a phone two hours. They'd think something was wrong, that I'd had an accident. Well," he said, "they could call the operator, I suppose, ask her to check to see if the line really *was* engaged."

"That's right," Miss Simmons said.

"I think of all the contingencies," Schiff somewhat apologetically said.

"I see you do."

"Occupational hazard," he said. "Plus it has something to do with my being a gimp."

"Oh, now."

"No, really," he said, "I could give you a whole song and dance about the cripple's code. But I bore you silly."

"Oh, now."

Schiff, who still had some character left, was becoming as tired of the game as Miss Simmons.

"Really," he said, "two hours?"

"If I get started right now."

"I take your point," he said, and gallantly moved his arm as if signaling her to pass, to play through. She excused herself and disappeared from his living room.

Well, thought Schiff, reminded of sudden furious electrical storms when he was a boy on vacation with his parents in the summer bungalow they had in the country, of great howling winds and plummeting temperatures and of wide shadows that spread from horizon to horizon and came down

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