



**The High
Priest of
Hallelujah**

By

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PART ONE

Sometimes I hear her laughter and yet I know nobody's around but me. I'm alone and the breath-close beauty of laughing love is right here with me, making me ache for the sweet sorrow of what never again can be.

That's the way it is with Lori and me.

When we first got married a buddy of mine said, "Jackson, she's such a great looking woman."

And it was true. She was a beautiful woman. But I've never really thought of her as a woman. That sounds so mature. But she wasn't a girl either. I think we need a new word for females of any age who are old enough to be called "women" but light enough of spirit to defy the serious status of earth-mother womanhood.

She was like that. A woman-girl. A lady-child. And, in any case, she was only twenty-three when she was killed. Pretty young for anyone to be terminally labeled an adult, don't you think?

And us... it wasn't as if we were mature for our ages or anything so dreadful as that. No, we were the best of young lovers—carefree enough to be childlike and just lusty enough to make pleasure a grown-up game. Old enough to vote and drink whiskey and get into dirty movies if we were so inclined; but young enough so it was still all toys and dreams with us.

Sometimes I can see her so vividly. It's been years, but her image is etched into that fleeting realm of elusive recollection accessible only by an unsuspecting glance. Etched and deathly still she lingers there like a painting. I could tell you about the depth of her eyes and the way her dark blonde hair draped the nape of her neck. I could tell you the naked wonder of her and you, too, could know her like a work of art. But I won't.

Let it suffice that my friend was right. She was "a great looking woman."

I remember how I answered his compliment, and I wasn't being facetious. "Sure she's beautiful, but the best thing about her is she laughs at my jokes." And that's the best, and of course, the most painful part of her that I still possess. Her laughter is what haunts and blesses me. Such sweet cruelty, her laughter is yet alive. So clearly it speaks to me—the music of sensually-softened chimes ringing ever within me. How I cherish the agony of hearing it.

1 Brother Earl

In addition to pounding, punching, grinding, melting, fusing, cutting, polishing, and drilling machines; in factories there is a contraption that bends metal. Large sheets of material can be fed into its wide mouth and, with a growl and a puff of air, be bent into a "V" of predetermined angle. If one looks around at all of the bent pieces of metal in our world, the value of such a machine becomes obvious. There are various names used to designate this category of equipment, however, I always called the one I operated for eight to ten hours a day, six days a week, "You Son of a Bitch." My time card read, "Blake, Jackson W., Machine Operator—Brake Bar."

It was a huge plant and the Brake Bar Department was buried deep in the middle of the building in a region isolated from the physical or mental egress of windows or doors. While the energies of machines tirelessly fashioned integral components for the industrial complex, changing seasons could easily slip silently upon the earth-scape without notice. I felt trapped and escaped at every opportunity. In the ten-minute rest period given the Brake Bar Department each morning and again each afternoon, by jogging, and thus violating a basic tenet of occupational safety, I was able to zigzag through stacks of materials and around great, rumbling machinery, dash frantically down forklift freeways, and finally make my way to one of the fire doors on the perimeter of the factory; look through the dust-covered window or sometimes even dare to step outside a door for a furtive breath of the sky-roofed world; then reluctantly retrace my rapid route; and return to my machine just in time to begin work again.

What price too great for sanity?

It was after such a marathon that I stood before the vista-green and safety-yellow hulk of my machine, breathing heavily and cursing the two thousand three hundred forty six pieces I had yet to bend on my current work order (before I would once again have the joy of setting up and starting another work order). Just as the hypnotic rhythm of production was lulling me into the drift of another afternoon, from the shadowed aisle that passed behind the machines, over the grumble and growl of the puffing progenitors of the American Gross National Product, I heard a voice that I will never forget. It was a whine of a voice straining over the roaring din.

"Why do y'all do that, boy?"

It startled me from daydreams. "Do what?" I asked.

"Take off a-runnin' ever time the break whistle goes off like some kinda rabbit with dogs on his tail. That's what." The man still had not appeared from behind the machine, but I recognized his voice as being that of one of the spot welder operators from the next section over. Earl was his name.

"So, what's it to you what I do with my break.

"Jus' tell me what 'ur up to, Boy, don't worry none about my reasons."

"Sure," I said. Life was still pretty innocent back then and who was I to complicate its mysteries by trying to understand them? So, in a voice shouted over the rumble of machinery, I answered his question. "I feel closed in here with no windows. I just like to go over to the outside wall to look and see if it's raining, or snowing, or if an early autumn front might have cooled the summer heat for a few hours or if, right across the highway, there might be hordes of naked women assembling armies for an assault on the Getzman Refrigerator Factory. You never know if you don't look."

There was a momentary pause. Just as I was entertaining the pleasing thought that my inquisitor might have left, the voice spoke up and said, "I think you're crazy, boy."

"You're not the first," I replied.

"Don't you worry none about what's a-goin' on outside, Mister. You jus' tend to your own business in here."

"Why?" I asked in genuine amazement that anybody would give a hoot about my break-time activities. "What's wrong with taking a little stroll—it's my time, isn't it?"

And with a voice expressing not the slightest touch of amicability or human compassion, much less humor, he said, "It ain't natural, what you been a-doin' durin' break. God-fearin' workin' men sit down and drink Pepsi-Cola pop when the whistle blows and don't waste their time buttin' into God's work outside a window."

With considerable self-control restraining an outburst of either laughter or anger, perhaps both, I retorted, "But I have loved ones out there."

"So you do, Boy. So you do," spoke the harsh whinny of a voice.

The guy was really starting to get to me. What right did he have to intrude in my business?

"What do you do, keep track of all the sinners for God?" I asked with indignation, though I was still on the verge of laughing at the ridiculous situation.

"At's right, Boy," he said and then with a sudden, chilling shift in dialect, with words and intonation spoken from rote he said, "And if you persist in this irreverent activity then most certainly, you will burn in the eternal flames of Hell."

And the voice was gone.

I was twenty-four years old, going to night school to get a college education so as to better myself, being one hundred percent faithful to Lori, my beautiful bride of eight months, getting to work on time every day even though the monotony of the job was giving me an ulcer—all the ingredients for pure Americana—and I was already damned to Hell. And just for taking a glance out a factory window.

"A fella doesn't have a chance, You Son of a Bitch," I laughingly said to my machine.

Obviously, at that tender age, I had no concept of the scope and power of ignorance.

I was damned.

Damned.

You know, it's funny though. During all the years that had led me from the cradle to the Getzman Refrigerator factory, I had quietly, unpretentiously assumed myself to be blessed. I had never been exceptional at any of my endeavors, but had always assumed whatever distraction that was currently enveloping my life—whether it be school, household chores, or a massive stack of metal in need of bending—was just that: a temporary detour from some profound path, predetermined by birth or the alignment of constellations and planets or just by immense good fortune, which would surely lead me to greatness.

So certain was I of this grand destiny, I had seldom made any overt attempts to seek it out. I figured the proper course would be blatantly obvious once the forces of fate had maneuvered me into position. In the meantime I spent days in front of factory machinery, evenings attending night classes at a nearby university, and weekends studying dull books and basking in the pleasures of my young wife. It wasn't such a bad way to spend my time while waiting around for the real purpose of my life to magically emerge.

And then Earl came along and shipped me off to Hell.

"Well, rats," I said to the son of a bitch and all it said was "growl-puff, growl-puff."

My mother and sister had been the religious contingent of our family. Dad didn't have much to say about such matters—come to think of it, he might have been waiting around for his own call to destiny, just like me. But Mom was a seriously religious woman and the only thing she was waiting around for was the second coming of Christ so she could get on to

Heaven where there wasn't so damned much housework. She wasn't waiting so much as she was "putting up with." However, we were a tolerant lot, seldom prone to the kinds of theological discussions that so often lead to familial schisms. Actually, the rites deemed precious to my sister and mother often proved advantageous to Dad and me. By the time they were just mumbling down to the last "Amen" of grace, we usually had our plates filled.

Throughout my childhood, though my mother never damned me—she loved me and wouldn't think of such a thing—she did fairly regularly find subtle means of instructing me about God's punishment for the wrongdoer. But there was one less-than-subtle occasion when Mother lowered the Judeo-Christian boom upon my young soul and, somehow, her lesson associating God's love with excruciating pain proved to be a precursor to the dreadful times forthcoming with Earl. Upon that fateful day at the Getzman Refrigerator Factory, I was no stranger to the threat of Divine Retribution.

I recall a time from my childhood in Missouri. The humidity and heat had formed their annual alliance producing a level of discomfort that was almost unbearable. I was at the difficult developmental plateau known as early adolescence and, true to the dictates of this chemically and mentally disoriented stage, prided myself in entertaining those who shared my small world by accomplishing feats of unequalled bad taste. My mid-adolescent sister and early middle-aged parents were sitting around the kitchen table trying to consume the evening's repast with as little heat-producing movement as possible. Shirtless and sweaty, I came rushing in from a stimulating afternoon of spitting at grasshoppers in the backyard of my best friend, Chester Jennings, III.

To the pubescently twisted perception of my mind, the situation was ideal for performing a new trick of my own creation perfected that very morning. The whole family was assembled, the tension of physical discomfort emanating from the table could only enhance the effectiveness of my depraved attempt at humor, the stifling heat would likely lessen the possibility of violent physical reaction on the part of my father: no better stage could have been set for my mad performance.

Naked to the waist, in a rush I dashed into the kitchen with such flourish I immediately commanded the listless attention of my beloved family. Taking a short bow, I then deftly flopped upon my back in the middle of the floor. With the bodily control of a yogi, by moving my shoulders and pelvis and utilizing the sealing effects of the moisture that drenched my bare flesh, I created in the pocket formed between the linoleum floor and the curvature of my spine, a vacuum.

"What foolishness are you up to now?" my mother asked in the monotone of her summer apathy.

"Oh, Mother Dear, I fear I am becoming ill," I quavered. Then, in one great, swelling upheaval, I arched my back, thus allowing the damp warm air to be sucked noisily along the whole contour of my body from shoulder blades to waistline—creating a fart-like sound of enormous proportion.

With demonic grin upon my lean face, I forestalled the howling laughter crowding the confines of my diaphragm so as to observe the reactions of my family. Father actually was unable to suppress a smile and had to turn away to avoid bestowing the unthinkable reward of laughing at me. Sister rolled her eyes in disgust and said, "God help us, Mother, does he have to live here?" And Mother, exercising a supreme degree of personal restraint, sternly said, "That will be quite enough, Jackson!"

But, remember, I was an early adolescent—by no earthly reach of the imagination was it "quite enough." Immediately I began rapidly undulating on the floor, producing a veritable storm of rattling obnoxiousness accentuated by the nasal rasping of my thirteen-year-old hysteria.

Then I managed to suck a vertebra out of alignment and, with a gasp, grew silent in the semi-paralytic throes of incredible pain. My mother looked up toward Heaven as if to

say, "Take me now, Lord, take me now." Then, after muttering a few words of prayer, the look of bewilderment slid from her face and with a smile that knew the Source of eternal justice, she stared into my wretched eyes and pronounced, without the least hint of malice and in tones of a loving and responsible parent, His holy judgment.

She said, "See."

So it was that the events of the days following the threat of Earl, the spot welder, were not without precedent in my personal history. A couple of days had passed since his first appearance and I was hard at work bending metal. "You Son of a Bitch!" I raged at my machine. "Do you realize we've got three hours to go yet?"

And the machine said, "Growl-puff, growl-puff, growl-puff."

Sometimes it seemed that the entire momentum of my young life was forever stalled with three more hours left to the workday afternoon. It had all the symptoms of another abysmally dull day when from out of the shadows appeared the face and form of the bearer of the voice of my condemnation. In an ambivalent Ozark-mountain-East-Texas-Oklahoma whine, he said, "Hi! My name's Brother Earl. Does y'all like country music?"

He was less than five and a half feet tall, stout, bordering on being fat. And, glaring from their notch above the ruddy swell of his cheeks and beaming smile, was the coldest set of eyes I had ever seen.

I had just recommenced the manufacturing process following my afternoon break. Two days had passed since my first encounter with Holy Earl. I had not made my ten-minute dash for the daylight due to a recent lesson I had received which updated my appreciation of the might of Divine Retribution. Within an hour of my initial encounter with the voice of *God-fearin'* folk, while waiting in line for a sandwich at lunch, a machine operator from the spot welding section had accidentally dropped a fifty-five pound tool box on my right foot. Not only had it hurt a great deal, and not only had there been no indication of the slightest trace of regret on the part of the conveniently clumsy spot welder, but also, when in great pain, I limped back from the clinic and began working again, there was a familiar country voice from behind The Son of a Bitch that said, "See."

He had asked the question, "Does y'all like country music?"

My foot was hurting, my spirit daunted by the reality of three more hours of bending steel before another four hours of the near-insuperable tedium of night school, and I knew that in some way the beady-eyed bastard standing in front of me had arranged for the flattening of my favorite foot—but I thought, forget it, I'll tell the fool what he wants to hear.

"Yeah," I lied, "I'm crazy about country music."

Normally, I can say I'm a very honest person. That is, honest except in certain situations where diplomacy and survival are at stake. Working in factories there were occasions that necessitated a lessening of the truth just for the sake of human relations. If I had ever honestly expressed my opinion of possum huntin' to the hillbillies, drag racin' to the city guys, or the rise and fall of the Roman Empire to John Bonkowsky, the Polish machinist/world historian, I would have been ostracized for being a jerk. But, rarely had I been blatantly dishonest and usually then only with some justification—say, in matters of life and death or honor. Such had been the case months earlier when I lied to the scariest guy at the factory.

The fiercest, most frightening man who worked at the Getzman Refrigerator Factory was a big black forklift operator named Zee. Zee had devil eyes and huge muscles. He roared around the aisles of the plant on a lift truck that smoked and popped and spat fire. In the wake of his intermittent passing there were not only choking clouds of carbon monoxide but, also, whispered tales of the horrible things he had done with knives and bare hands. Even the foreman of the material handlers, Tony, the Italian Tyrant, would never dare to address Zee in any but the most guarded tones. The shop superintendent, Nervous Charlie, was visibly terrified at the very presence of the man.

It was late on a Friday afternoon in December—almost quitting time. Lori and I had decided, since night school was out for Christmas break and Friday was payday and her mother was on the verge of noticing that I was sharing an apartment with her daughter, that we would get married when I got home from work. Though we had made our decision a week or so earlier, I had attempted to forego the verbal jostling associated with such occasions by concealing the event from co-workers. However, one of my fellow factory guys had talked to Lori when she was waiting for me in the parking lot the night before and, by ten o'clock Friday morning, everyone in my department was making fun of me.

"Jackson's gonna get some, Jackson's gonna get some," they said. "College Boy's gonna get laid."

"Let them have their childish fun, you Son of a Bitch," I said to my machine. Men were starting to gather inconspicuously in corners and nooks near time clocks in anticipation of the afternoon whistle. There was muffled laughter and a general salivation at the nearing prospect of happy-hour beers in various roadside taverns and neighborhood bars.

Then, suddenly, with charging engine and squealing tires, Zee, the forklift-man, burst into the scene and screeched to a stop. All became quiet. A sinister cloud of exhaust vapor filled the area.

"Hey," he barked in a deep, gruff voice, "I want to talk to you."

In the focus of his scathing attention I felt the heat of his terrible eyes.

"Yeah, you. Come on over here. I got something to say to you, Blake."

"Oh, Jesus, he even knows my name" I said to myself as I stumbled obediently toward the menacing figure on the idling forklift. It seemed so unfair that my short life should end on the very threshold of entering into a respectable relationship with the girl I loved.

Feeling small and weak, I stood before the evil machine. From high up on the seat, the man leaned his huge, muscular frame threateningly toward me and said, "I hear you're getting married tonight. That right?"

"Yes, Mr. Zee. I'm supposed to get married this evening. That is, if I am fortunate enough to live so long."

There was a pause as he contemplated my answer. Then he asked, "This girl, she nice lookin'?"

"Yes, Sir, I think she's beautiful," I replied cautiously.

Another pause—his eyes staring off into the smoky gloom beyond me and then refocusing on mine. "You ever screw her yet?"

And without a flinch, I opted for Lori's honor over my own male pride, "No, Sir," I lied. "Not yet."

No one within earshot had taken an audible breath since his arrival. Slowly and pensively he scratched his head with his massive left hand.

Finally, he spoke. Revving the motor to a rattling snarl, he shouted, "Well, then maybe you'd better rub her boobies a little bit first!" and, with a roar and the blackest billow of smoke ever belched from the innards of an internal combustion engine, he was gone.

Lies.

What the heck, I thought, if I can lie to Zee I can easily lie to this squatty-assed bastard from spot welding.

"Yeah, I like country music," I said. "If it weren't for my complete collection of Buck Owens albums, I don't know how me and the missus could ever get through a Saturday night." I had fallen right into his trap.

"You're lyin' ta me, Boy," said the man with cold eyes squinting from the pressure of his smile which had shifted from that of pseudo-friendliness to smug self-righteousness. "Y'all don't like country music at all."

"I don't like country music?"

"No sir. You can't lie to me, Boy. I see right through it all. I know you're lyin'

because I know the Truth and the Truth has set me free! Praise the Lord! I know the lies of heathens."

"How do I get into these situations, You Son of a Bitch?" I said to my machine.

"Go ahead, Sinner. You can call me names, you can blaspheme, profane, and defame 'til you turn blue—but you just as well admit it here and now, Boy: Y'all don't like country music. I see it right there in your lyin' face."

"My foot hurts! Who are you anyway?"

"My name is Brother Earl and I know the Ways of the Serpent."

"I'm sure you do, Earl."

"I know the Truth and it has set me free. Now you tell Brother Earl the truth—you're lyin', aint you?"

I just shook my head and said, "Well, Earl, since you obviously can look right into core of my deceitful soul, I've got to fess up. You've caught me here in the middle of a blatant act of deception. You've got me dead to rights, Earl. To tell the truth, I think country music is a mournful, maudlin, self-pitying, sleazy bunch of noise—I can't stand it. Yes, I lied. Country music is crap, Earl. Do you hear me? Crap!"

"Amen!" he shouted. "Now you're talkin', Boy. You tell old Earl the truth and he'll help you out of this heathen mess you're in. We're gonna put a stop to this irreverent behavior everywhere, ya hear."

"What a relief this is to me. I mean, it's about time that someone put an end to all the evil ways of man. And what a privilege it is for me to be blessed by the good fortune of actually meeting, face to face, The Messiah returned right here at the Getzman Refrigerator Factory. I didn't even have to follow a star to find you."

"Don't you get smarty-mouthed around me, Boy. I know the reward for those who don't fear the Lord. I know just what happens to sinners. You'd better listen to Brother Earl—you don't want to get me too riled up. I know the terrible power of righteousness against the blasphemy of the Devil."

"Tell me, Earl, just how does it feel to walk on water?"

"You're tryin' me, Son. Now I've been watchin' your devilish ways and you've been warned about bein' irreverent and you've had your foot stomped flat by the *Will* of God. Don't press me no more. I know the power of the Lord and you'd better believe me, Brother Earl will use it to educate the sinner, to bring sinners of the world to the righteous path. I know the Ways of the Serpent."

Something of inordinate proportion was happening. A man was going into a full-scale evangelistic rage at me for refusing to drink soft drinks and sit around talking about huntin' and fishin' I had become the prime target for the wrath of his holy madness and, in my youth, had no better sense than to further provoke the fool.

"You turn Pepsi-Cola into wine and maybe I'll start listening to you."

And slowly, with seething heat he pronounced his doom upon me. "That done it, Boy," he said as he turned away, looking back over his shoulder as he moved into the shadows, smiling like a pious demon. "Brother Earl has warned you and now you shall know his wrath, sinner."

And he was gone.

I laughed so loudly that the man at the next work station heard me over the "growl-puff, growl-puff" of his machine and stopped to gaze in my direction as if I were crazy.

2 Tracks

A seer once told me about the Spirit Guides who accompany invisible levels of our consciousness—tracking the movements of our own existences. Sometimes they hover behind and take account of the impressions we have made upon the paths we follow. Sometimes they scout the trails ahead and, if we are willing to hear their wisdom, hazards of the journey can be averted. But in the rapid pace of this world, often it is all they can do to rush along as, in hot pursuit, our awareness shadows the events of our own lives.

At times the trails follow solid ground; at times they lead us over the edge of seemingly bottomless abysses.

It was raining. A radio was playing sadly in a distant corner of my apartment. Lori—my bride, my laughter, my ambition, my heart—was dead.

Then, later, it was snowing outside a classroom window. Dr. Byron M. Fintin, Professor of English, was mumbling in the distant background, and my precious Lori was dead.

Much later, on a bright Saturday morning with bird-sounds and lilac smells, a warm sun shone through the window of the bedroom and the stirrings of yet another blessed spring were all about me but Lori, my love, was dead.

Finally, it was June. Lori had been dead for nine months. Long before she was murdered I had promised her I would finish my college degree and, because of that promise made to a living person, I quit my job. It happened, her murder that is, on a Sunday afternoon two days after my second encounter with Brother Earl—and I never went back to the factory. I didn't return to pick up my tools, my quart jar of Kosher dill pickles, my paycheck—I never entered the Getzman Refrigerator Factory again. Instead, I withdrew most of what Lori and I had ironically referred to as our life savings and enrolled as a full-time student at the university so as to finish in two semesters what would have taken three or four in night classes.

It was June and I was standing outside a college auditorium sweltering beneath the ludicrous anachronism of a thick, black, medieval gown after having participated in a ritual marking the completion of the task I had promised—terminating any obligation on my part to exist.

"I suppose congratulations are in order, Mr. Blake. I must admit, I never thought of you as one who would finish his degree." Professor Fintin was a tall, thin man who almost looked dignified, but not quite. If he had been a judge or a doctor or a Roto-Rooter man he might have carried it off, but there is some inherent weakness in many English professors that subtly diminishes their stature and forces them to the desperation of intellectual arrogance.

Fintin had been the most prominent aggravation vexing my tragic commitment to finish an education and, as such, had unwittingly extended my life span by grueling months. A promise is one thing; survival is another. In his overwhelmingly pedantic style of instruction, there were elements so exasperating to me that, of all the potentially effective stimuli I had experienced in those lifeless hours and weeks following her death, he alone had generated enough ire in me to penetrate the otherwise benumbed core of my being. I had hated the haughty prick—and stayed alive.

There were weekends—weekends were the worst—when, after I had exhausted my ability to persevere in studies of the trivial and complex and had run out of beer and, due

to blatantly masochistic tendencies, had directly confronted the specter of death that dwelled with me in the mockery of our apartment (sleeping in our bed, eating at our table), sometimes the only thing that saved me from the alluring pits of oblivion was focusing all of my self-destructive energies on the thought of how much I detested the pompous ass.

"Thank you, Dr. Fintin." I said. "I would have never made it without you."

"Oh, really. I didn't realize I had that much influence on you, Blake. It does this old pedagogue good to hear that his insight and conviction might have served as an inspiration to a student."

"Believe me, reflections on your teaching got me through some rather precarious times."

"Strange. It never occurred to me that you were the kind of individual who reflected much about anything, much less the lofty lessons of the bards. You were always so subdued in my classes. I simply assumed your silence was a result of a profound lack of knowledge."

"Times have been a bit strained for me recently, Professor."

"Yes, I understand, Blake, terrible thing about your wife, terrible... uh... er.... tell me, what are your plans now that you have completed your baccalaureate degree?"

"Oh, they're very simple, Dr. Fintin. There is no complexity to my future at all."

"I see. Then you've got matters pretty well mapped out, do you?"

"Yes, indeed. I have absolutely no question about the direction of my life."

"Such confidence," he said and laughed the same disdainful laugh that had echoed countless times off the stilted walls of his classroom. "Such naïveté. Young man, nobody knows exactly what is going to happen in the next minute, much less the next day or, as you seem to believe, in his whole lifetime. Surely, this is not what you're asserting: that you have a soothsayer's vision of your own destiny. Bosh. For a moment there I thought you might have really learned something from the literature and my lectures."

"God help you if you ever begin to know half of what I've learned in this life, Professor. And, yes, I do claim to know exactly the course of my lifetime."

"Come now, Blake," he said, ignoring the intent of my words. "You're not serious. I can't believe anyone as old as you and as well-educated would be foolish enough to actually stand here before me and say he knows precisely what he is going to do with the rest of his entire life."

"Believe it. It's all very simple."

"Well, pray tell, Mr. Blake, enlighten me. What is this absolute plan you are going to initiate tomorrow?" He was irked at the assurance of my answers but he deserved to be irked at the exaggerated confidence of another human being in matters of a subjective nature. Damn the hours I had spent listening to his static interpretations of the vitality and moment of literature.

"I can tell you exactly what I'm going to do with my life, Sir. At 2:17 tomorrow morning I'm going to end it."

I had finally forced the professor to react to something he hadn't said himself. He was momentarily shocked and then, construing my statement to be sarcasm, angered.

"You certainly don't take the future very seriously, do you, Blake?"

There was perceptible element of disgust in his voice—I relished it.

"To the contrary, Professor, I probably take the future more seriously than anyone you've ever met. I take it so seriously that, in fact, I am going to eliminate its potential for dabbling into my affairs any further. The future is but a terrible place where more bad times are waiting to happen to all of us, even college professors. And, theologically speaking, I can assure you any intellectual analysis of reality which doubts the existence of an all-powerful force determining the course of the universe is erroneous. There is a Force that has the ability to manipulate the future of our planet and of each of us who individually stumble across its surface. And here's the best part, Dr. Fintin—the undeniable truth that makes the

concept of the future such a ludicrous notion—the Force that runs this game of stars and oceans, pretty girls and professors is absolutely malevolent."

"'Malevolent,' you say?" There was something missing from his voice. He suddenly sounded much less uppity-British, much more human.

"You've got that right, Professor," I was on a roll. There was no cause for restraint. "A vicious, evil force controls every drop of rain or blowing mote of dust and curses every hopeless, life-dashed second of existence."

"My God, Blake... Jackson is it?"

"Jackson."

"Jackson, I believe you actually intend on taking your own life."

"Now we're getting somewhere, Doctor. We are finally establishing communication on a level you used to say only existed between poets and people with Ph.D.'s in English literature. We're beginning to speak an absolute truth aren't we?"

"Calm down, Young Man. I understand." Again, there was a human touch to his voice that had never once entered the sanctimonious realm of his classroom. There was almost a hesitation in the flow of his words as if something was shaking within him. "This is all because of your wife's death, isn't it? You lost your wife and now you want to die."

I couldn't let it go. I couldn't just appreciate his first shot at humanity and return to the awful seclusion of my inner self.

"You put that so well, so tactfully, Dr. Fintin—'lost my wife'—it sounds as if she might have wandered off into the moonlit marsh of some mythical sea or was taken by the mist of an early morning or just plain misplaced somewhere out there in the clutter of it all. I lost her all right." And then, in sing-song-y madness I sang, "I lost my wife and I'll lose my life, said Barnacle Bill the sailor." I was clearly losing it. "How pleasant. Lost their mittens, lost those damned mittens again, naughty fucking kittens."

"Allow me to rephrase..."

"No, no. You said it right. Lost. Do you want to hear how she was lost?"

"I read about it in the paper. An appalling accident—dreadful. Unfortunate."

"Dreadful indeed. I'll tell you exactly how she was lost. She was alive—laughing, loving, soft-fleshed and music-voiced—and then in an instant she was struck stiff and stone-eyed, dead and black like bad toast. Charred and, oh, so very dead."

All of those months of simmering silence and then I boiled my heart empty to a dried-up old windbag of a teacher.

After a moment to allow me to regain my composure, Dr. Fintin asked, "Perhaps this is a foolish question, but how on earth did you determine the exact moment of your impending suicide to be, what was it, 2:17 a.m.?"

"That's the exact time a sixty-mile-per-hour freight train passes behind Izzy's Highway Hamburger Haven."

"Izzy's Hamburger Haven?"

"Yes—delightful place to eat. You'll have to take an evening's repast there sometime. I highly recommend the 'Burger *a la* cheese and onion.'"

"There must be some sentimental reason for Izzy's and the 2:17 train."

"Indeed there is, Sir.

"I see."

Bullshit. He couldn't see. I was the only survivor in the land of the living to see. Once there were two of us in the entire world who understood the significance of the intersection of a train, a hamburger joint, and love. Now there was but one.

We, Lori and I, had only gone out together a few times. She was a beautiful and delicate young lady, full of the stirrings which motivate life but none of the weighty experiences that make it real. I was a year older, a man of travel and experience, and she had allowed herself to be dazzled by my distances and seduced by the laughter I had given her.

The lights at Izzy's were just being turned off when we pulled into the parking lot. It didn't matter, our appetites had little to do with hamburgers. I parked the car in the back of the deserted lot and we sat so close. We were laughing at irrelevant matters as we circled closer and closer to the good feelings that were happening in our closeness. The last dishwasher at Izzy's finally left and we were alone in the quiet.

It was a fresh warm night and she said, "Let's get out of the car."

There was a board fence along the back of the lot. We walked around it and into the blue-edged darkness cast by the mercury vapor lights burning eternally over the drive-in. We walked down across a wide gully lined with soft grass and up the other side to the railroad track. Standing on the gravel roadbed, I kissed her and in a smooth, heated rush of expectation exalting in discovery, I felt her warm lips and then her arms and then the press of her body tight against me, and forever the lush excitement of her whole being enmeshed with my mortal essence. There was no need to speak of love. The only sounds were of breathing and the rustle of our clothing as we clasped each other in a bond existing from that moment until she had no more moments.

With a startling blast of air horn, dreadful rumble, and the glare of brilliant headlight, the night train tore upon us. We held our ground and our embrace tightened in the terror and excitement of the mass of energy and noise and danger roaring upon us and past us only a few feet from our fragile bodies.

And in the mad peak of that love and exhilaration and the terrifying sound and motion she said, "Make love to me, Jackson. Take me right now. Make me yours."

And, hence, the 2:17 rendezvous with a deadly train. Just a final touch of sentiment and I would be finished with the sorrow that had become my life. In one final and definitive encounter, I would once again know the horrendous and wonderful power that had drawn us into sexual and emotional unity, and say to that part of the night which is death, "Take me right now. Make me yours."

"Jackson," the professor said with a tone of voice which was less aloof than any I had ever heard him utter, "it is terrible to lose a loved one, I beg your pardon, to have someone we love die. Five years ago my wife became ill and died, and, believe me, after having twenty-five years of loving companionship, the emptiness I encountered was almost more than I felt I could bear. But, I survived, and in time I became glad I was still alive. My life will never be the same, but it is a life with some trace of pleasure, some substance yet—a life worth continuing."

"I'm sorry your wife is dead, Dr. Fintin. And I appreciate what you are saying, but, I don't think you understand the magnitude of my Lori's death. You had your loving years together; we did not. Your wife was the victim of a terrible disease; my wife was brutally murdered. In an indelible, eternal moment, all the wonders of a life to be were struck to never. There is a difference."

"Yes, of course," he said. "The shock would be more profound from the suddenness of her demise. And she was so very young." And then, almost as an aside, he said, "Sometimes it is most difficult to communicate what is most important to say. But, Jackson," he continued, "perhaps I am mistaken. Correct me if I am wrong. It is my recollection that your wife died as a result of an accident."

"No. She was murdered."

Dr. Fintin was normally pale of complexion, but, as he spoke he took on a starker shade of white. "Wasn't she struck by lightning?"

"Yes. That is correct."