

# This Moment of Brilliance

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"Before the beginning of great brilliance, there must be chaos. Before a brilliant person begins something great, he must look foolish to the crowd."

--I Ching

The view from each landing's window on Ed's way up the apartment stairs showed pine trees.

Behind his big, ordinary face, balding hair combed straight back, behind his tallness, his stockiness, three other men in suits and one in a Downeast Carpet Cleaning uniform ascended along the edges of the steps.

At the top landing Ed stepped aside. The carpet cleaning guy flung a short, heavy battering ram at the door, like a fist against a face.

Splintering wood.

Where there had been a door marked 3-A now there was a view into a kitchen, a man sliding on his back across the checkerboard floor, doorknob rolling off his tie.

Ed stepped through the splintered doorway into someone else's life.

Will I find it here?

The others followed through the jagged wood behind him. The carpet cleaning guy rested the battering ram against an inside wall.

The three other men in suits fanned out through the interior doorways to check the rest of the small apartment.

Ed walked around the man on the floor, to the stove. A pot sat on a burner, its water starting to pearl upwards. Next to the orange burner, on the white counter, lay a package of shrimp-flavored ramen noodles.

One of the men in suits, a black man, back in the kitchen now, looked down angrily at the man on the floor. "Are you Donald?"

The man on the floor nodded.

The black man in the suit started kicking down at Donald's knees and shoulders. Donald crawled backwards into the corner by the stove.

"All yours, Ed."

Ed stepped in front of where Donald lay huddled in the corner.

"My name's Ed. We want to know about the guy who lived downstairs in 1B."

Donald pulled his knees up to his chin. "You mean Cyril?"

Ed smirked at the others. The black man, transferring the boiling pot over to the sink, swiveled his head around and said, "All right."

"What's Cyril's last name?"

"Shepherd."

"All right again."

"Where is he now?"

"I—he moved out, about a month ago."

Ed kicked Donald's face into the wall.

One of the other men in a suit turned a kitchen chair around with one hand, sitting in it backwards, resting his forearms on the chair's back. His jacket fell open, showing a black revolver holstered to his hip. His red hair preserved the trails of a comb.

Donald's face still half inside the wall, his left eye looked across the surface of the wall, seeing the electric outlet under his kitchen table. His right eye looked across the inside of his wall, seeing the back of the outlet, the tri-colored wires snaking through dust clumps and studs.

He pulled his face out of the wall, cherry juice and dry wall dust on his hair and right profile. He started to cry.

"Where is he now?"

"If I knew I'd—"

Ed stepped back, pointed at the Downeast Carpet Cleaning guy, then at the two-door cabinet over the stove.

The carpet cleaning guy dragged a kitchen chair in front of the stove, stood up on the seat, jammed an oversized crow bar into the molding where the two-door cabinet joined the ceiling.

One of the other men in a suit, blonde-haired, grabbed Donald by the back of the collar and slid him across the linoleum away from the stove. As he let go of Donald's collar, the man's wallet fell out of an inside pocket of

his suit's jacket, landing open on its spine like a small leather book. Gold cards and money, but no driver's license.

The cabinet dropped, banging open on the stove top. Appliance warranty cards blew out like butterflies knocked off their pins.

The carpet cleaning guy hoisted the cabinet off the stove, tossed it on one of the far counters.

The black man in a suit looked at Donald as if Donald had said something. "We know the building is empty during the day. That's why we can make so much noise."

Donald got on his knees. He was still frightened, but no longer in a state of shock. "What do you guys want?"

The others looked at Ed. "We want to know where Cyril Shepherd is living now."

"I don't know. I swear to God."

"You may really not know. But there's no way for us to know for sure you don't know." He looked at the carpet cleaning guy. "Turn on the other three burners."

"He moved to Milwaukee."

Ed looked down at Donald, then across at the red-haired man, who had stood up from his turned-around chair when the two-door cabinet crashed down. The red-haired man lowered himself onto his haunches so his eyes were level with Donald's profile, the side that wasn't covered with white dust and blood. Donald looked over at him. The red-haired man said, "Don't look at me. Face forward."

Ed squatted down directly in front of Donald. "How do you know that?"

"I was out in the parking lot the same time he was a few days before he left, and I asked him where he was moving to, just to make conversation, and he said Milwaukee."

"Why didn't you tell us this when we first asked you?"

"I was in shock. I come home like I always do, start my lunch, then you guys burst through the door."

Ed kept looking into Donald's desperate eyes. "Hollis?"

The red-haired man shook his head. "He's lying."

Ed nodded. "Okay. Take off his shoes."

The carpet cleaning guy lay across Donald's abdomen, pinning Donald's wrists to the linoleum. The blonde-haired man pulled off Donald's shoes and socks.

The two straight-legged Donald over to a chair set to the right of the stove.

The black man hopped straight up onto the aluminum sink, then walked across the white counter to behind Donald.

All three men worked on getting Donald up on the chair, then up on the counter, the carpet cleaning guy and the blonde-haired man on the floor pushing, the black man on the counter pulling.

Once Donald was up on the counter, the blonde-haired man hopped up alongside the black man and took charge of Donald's left armpit. The carpet cleaning guy hopped up on the narrow counter on the other side of the stove and grabbed Donald's right armpit.

The black man hopped off the counter.

The two men dragged Donald to the left, Donald's bare feet jerking up, his knees bending, as he was suspended directly above the two front burners.

Although his feet were high above the orange spirals, his soles were already getting hot.

The black man walked across the linoleum to in front of the stove and encircled Donald's ankles with his hands.

Ed looked up at Donald. "Do you know where he is?"

"No!" Donald bug-eyed at the red-haired man. "If he can tell when I'm lying, why can't he tell when I'm telling the truth?"

Ed and the red-haired man looked at each other and burst into laughter. Ed smoothed down what was left of his hair.

Donald let out a sob. "This isn't fair!"

Ed snorted. "Life isn't fair. Know who said that? John F. Kennedy. Look what they did to him."

The black man pulled Donald's bare feet down. They touched the burners with a sizzle.

Smoke rose between Donald's curling toes.

His jaws separated and screams came out, like a man, like an animal, like nothing familiar. To him.

After ten seconds the carpet cleaning guy and the blonde-haired man yanked him up, the front burners coming up with his feet, stuck to his soles. The black man stepped back. They dropped Donald from the stove onto the floor.

The black man walked over to the refrigerator, yanked open the freezer door. He tugged a bag of ice free, colorful frozen food packages sliding out, their corners bouncing up off the floor as curves.

The black man stood above Donald's smoking feet, still stuck to the coils, and dropped the bag of ice on them.

Ed pulled out his revolver. "Give him a pink shot."

The black man knelt down, pulled Donald's shirt tail out, placed a drug-delivery gun with a pink muzzle against his hip, and pulled the trigger.

After seven blinks, each slower and more lidded than the last, Donald was calm. One of the coils fell off his sole.

Ed showed Donald the revolver. Swung the barrel out, spun it. All six chambers were empty.

"Here's the deal."

The red-haired man said, "Jesus, here we go again. Why don't we just ship him out for a forty-foot star, Ed?"

Ed looked at him, then back at Donald. "Here's the deal." He hoisted the opened gun. "This revolver holds six bullets." Ed opened his other hand. Seven bullets rocked in his wide palm, eclipsing his life and love lines. "One too many." He pocketed the extra metal

bullet. "I believe you probably don't know where Cyril Shepherd is. The procedure at this point is to put these six bullets into your body."

Donald nodded tearfully.

"Now the conventional way to do that would be to shoot them into your body."

The black man shook his head, grinning. "You are a mother fuck."

"Quiet. If I shoot them into your body, that's going to cause a great deal of damage to you."

Donald stared up.

"Right?"

"Right."

"Can you think of some other way I can get these bullets into your body without shooting you?"

Donald shook his head. The other coil fell off his foot.

"What if you were to swallow the bullets? That way they'd be in your body, but they wouldn't cause any damage getting there." Ed knelt down by Donald's head, lay the still-opened revolver on the linoleum. He held a sample bullet upright between thumb and forefinger. "They're not that big."

Donald twisted his eyebrows.

"Or I could shoot them into you."

"You'll let me swallow them?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Because that way I did my part, I got all six bullets into your body. It's a technicality."

"If I swallow them, no one else will shoot me?"

"These six bullets are the end of our violence against you."

"Can I see one of the bullets?"

Ed handed him one. Donald held it close to his dilated eyes, looking at it unhappily.

Ed picked up his revolver from the linoleum. "They're not that big. It's a lot less painful swallowing them."

"Okay."

"Okay, well, you got the first bullet in your hand already. Just put it in your mouth and swallow."

"May I have some water, please?"

"Cary?"

The blonde-haired man went around the cabinets, opening and shutting doors until he found some glasses. He tore open the plastic bag of ice on Donald's feet, put a few cubes in the glass, filled it with water, then handed the cold glass to Ed.

Ed handed the glass to Donald. "Put the bullet in your mouth pointy-end first. That'll make it easier to swallow."

"Okay." Donald took a long sip of water. Holding the water in his mouth, he pushed the bullet between his lips and swallowed. He made a face.

"Didn't work, right?"

The black man came over, leaned forward, hands on knees. "Want a tip? Put the bullet in your mouth first, kind of push it back along that groove in the center of your tongue as far as you can, and take a medium-sized sip of water. Then just gulp it down."

Donald opened his mouth, but not as wide as he could, and gently pushed the bullet towards the back of his tongue. He hurriedly took a sip of water and gulped.

His wet eyes squeezed shut briefly in pain.

Ed grinned. "Get it down?"

Donald grinned back. "Yeah."

"Here's the next one."

Donald swallowed this one easily, as if it were a pill.

"Number three."

He gagged trying to get it down.

Water spilled over his lower lip.

"Don't get discouraged. Try again."

The black man, still leaning over, said, "You know already you can swallow them."

Donald got it down.

Ed handed him the fourth bullet.

Donald waited a moment, holding the bullet in his fingers, trying to get his

breathing regular. He aimed the pointed head at his mouth.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he forced the bullet down. He cleared his throat.

Ed handed Donald the fifth bullet.

Donald put the bullet on his tongue, tilted the rest of the water into his mouth, and swallowed. He gave a nervous smile. His eyes were less dilated.

Ed held up the sixth bullet. "Last one."

"Can I have some more water, please?"

Ed grinned at him, raising his brown eyebrows. "No."

Donald stared up at Ed. Ed looked blandly back.

"I have to swallow the sixth one without water? Is that it?"

Ed shook his head. "You don't get to swallow the sixth one."

"What?"

Ed straddled Donald's prone body, took his hand out of his pocket, pushed metal into the chamber, closed the gun, pointing it down at Donald's body. "Sixth one I shoot into you. Don't be a cry baby about it-- getting shot with one bullet's a hell of a lot less painful than getting shot with six." He turned to the black man with a twinkle in his eye. "Where?"

"Been six minutes. I say here." The black man tapped Donald's abdomen right below the ribs, then hurriedly stepped back.

Donald lifted himself up on his elbows.

Ed squeezed the trigger.

The bullet slammed into Donald's stomach just below the ribs. Like a string of firecrackers, the five other bullets blew out of the body, ricocheting around the kitchen.

Ed hopped around above Donald's percolating body, hand with the gun waving wildly.

The black man rolled his sleeve up, looking at the red pucker blasted through his forearm. "Son of a bitch!"

The crotch of Donald's pants sagged with blood. His left arm from mid-bicep down was blown off. There was a red pucker underneath his chin. The top of his head lay wrapped around a kitchen chair leg like a dark wash cloth.

The red-haired man was sitting on the floor in front of the refrigerator, blood coating his forehead, eyes and nose.

Ed checked his own body, opening his jacket on both sides to look at his white shirt.

He grinned at the black man. "Not a scratch."

In West Palm Beach, on Worth Avenue, in the Bagpipe Restaurant, three green leather booths spanned the sunny front windows.

In the booth on the left, a man with longish brown hair sipped soup. Inside his tan linen jacket, inside his wallet, behind a clear-plastic cover, was an Arizona driver's license. The picture on the left front of the driver's license was a picture of the man sipping soup, but in shirtsleeves and smiling. Next to the picture, in a pale block of type, was the man's name and address. Cyril Shepherd.

In the middle booth a man and a woman sat facing each other, discussing choices over the slanted-down tops of their menus. They were laughing and excited.

Ed sat in the booth on the right.

His stainless steel spoon slid under the muddy surface of his gumbo, revolving back out with a spice-flecked shrimp, tiny vegetable cubes spilling over the curved sides of the spoon.

"Are you in town for the bowling tournament?"

Ed's neck muscles rolled his big, ordinary face away from the white bowl on the white plate, tilting the face up towards the waitress.

"I wouldn't be in town for that," he said. "I'm here on business."

"What business you in?" She took away his ashtray, put a clean one in its place.

She was young, about thirty. Nice hips, clean face. That was about it, and that was enough.

He patted his napkin to his lips, moving sideways in his booth to face her better, resting one black shoe on the green leather seat. Both brown eyebrows arched.

"What's your name?"

"Grace."

"Grace, have you ever stayed in a motel?"

"Sure. Each year I save up my tips, scrape up some more money to add to it, living cheap, and fly to Hawaii for four days. Florida's the sunshine state, but Hawaii's even warmer, like a window sill."

"When you're in your motel room, do you ever have an occasion to hang a dress, or maybe a lei or something in the closet that comes with your motel room?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Ed nodded slowly. "And in that closet, besides all the wire hangers, are there two or three really nice, wooden hangers? And are these wooden hangers different from all the others, in that you can't lift them off the rod, you have to twist the hangers off a metal ring around the rod?"

She laughed, knowing what he was talking about.

"So then you have the bottom half of the hanger, the wide triangle to hang your dress on, but you can't just hang it back up because it has no hook at the top, right? You have to work the little metal knob at the top of the hanger into a little slot on the bottom of the metal ring on the rod. Right?"

"Right."

He leaned his big face closer to her, flirting. "Why do you think they do that, make those hangers that way?"

She scrunched her face. "I always figured it was to prevent people from stealing their hangers."

"Because why?"

"Well, because the hangers wouldn't be worth anything, because you couldn't hang them up in your own closet."

"Exactly. But do you know people still steal those hangers? Even though they're worthless?"

She laughed at the stupidity of the species of which they were members. Tilting her head back, lifting her eyes in her sockets, she shook her head lightly, flirting back. "Why are some people so dumb?"

Ed tapped her hip. "So what I do, I sell hanger bottoms to motels and hotels, to replace the ones that get stolen."

"Really?" Grace looked out the window, considering. A boy and girl walked by backwards, licking the pointed bottoms of their upraised ice cream cones. She turned back to Ed. "Is there—if you don't mind my asking—is there much money in that?"

Ed spread his arms expansively. "Do you know how many thousands of hotels and motels there are in the United States alone?"

She laughed. "Yeah, that's true, I never thought of that."

Ed gave her a light slap against her hip, raising his hand, pointing a finger at her, laughing. "Right?"

She laughed back, leaning her face closer to his, hand on her hip where it had been slapped. Ed looked down her blouse, weighted forward by her clunky name tag, seeing the tops of her soft, small breasts.

After a moment she straightened up, cocking a hip at him. "So that's why you're here, to sell hangers? Excuse me, hanger bottoms?"

Ed shook his head. "I'm here because someone else is in town, and do you know what he's selling at swap meets all around the country?"

"No."

"The rings that go around the rod."

"The rings that...Oh."

"And if he's allowed to do that, then I'm out of business, because all the motels and hotels will switch to some other system, because the thievery of the hanger bottoms will increase ten-fold. Maybe even a hundred-fold."

"Gee. All this is going on, and I never knew about it."

Ed reached behind him, brought out the wallet he had been sitting on. He split it open, pulled out a thick batch of hundred dollar bills. "How much do I owe you for lunch?"

She stared open-mouthed at the wad in his hand. "Not that much."

Ed looked up at her, thumb rustling the tops of the hundreds. "Is it true some waitresses have a slot in their left shoulder?"

Grace's face reared back, pale blue eyes reflecting Ed. "That's not true."

On the edge of town, on a street full of cottages, some for sale, a city worker was up on a stepladder opened across a driveway, holding a loud chainsaw over his head to cut the browning lower fronds off a palm tree. A station wagon, slanted half in the street, half in the driveway, honked its horn, trying to get the worker's attention.

In a cottage near the end of the block, Ed sat on the edge of Grace's bed in his trousers and undershirt.

Grace, standing in front of him, stepped out of her shoes. She climbed across Ed's lap, skirt riding up, hands squeezing his beefy arms. Tilting her head, closing her eyes, she lowered her lips down towards his.

Ed pushed her away before their lips met.

She sat back on his lap, raising a hand to push her hair away from her eyes. "What?"

Ed looked her squarely in the face. "I have to go out in a little while to do something. So first we do it my way, then when I get back we do it your way."

Still sitting on his lap, she shrugged. "Okay. Whatever."

"Get off my lap."

She climbed off backwards, standing up in front of him.

Ed leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I want you to take all your clothes off."

"Okay. You mean like a striptease?"

"No. Just take them off."

She started unbuttoning her blouse, looking at him. "I haven't slept with a million different guys, but the ones I have slept with, every once in a while I come across someone who has very specific ideas about what he wants to do, and those are always the best guys. The ones you masturbate about months afterwards."

When she was naked she spread her hands out, turned around to show him her back and ass, then faced forward again. Her body was clean, a little too thin.

He held a hand out, beckoned with its fingers for her to step closer.

She did.

He rolled his fingertips around her pubic hair. "I don't want to kiss," he said quietly. "I don't want to hold you, I don't want to fuck you. I want you to stand in front of me while I touch you between your legs."

Grace exhaled. "I don't know if I can. I'm feeling self-conscious already just standing in front of you. Are you going to watch while you touch me?"

Ed solemnly nodded his ordinary face. "You bet."

She blinked rapidly, then brought her body a little closer to him, so he could slip his fingers up between her legs.

Her eyelids fluttered at the first touch. His fingers felt under the curly hair, located her clitoris. The upper pad of his middle finger started methodically rubbing back and forth.

From behind closed eyes she said, "I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I can come."

"Give me five minutes more." With his free hand, he reached over and turned out the lamp by the bed.

In the soft late afternoon sunlight she stood naked in front of him, he sat clothed on the bed, his hand moving between her legs.

After a few minutes, eyes still closed, she said, "Do you want to touch my breasts

with your other hand while you masturbate me?"

"No."

"Is it okay if I do?"

"No."

Sighing, she rested her hands on his forearm. "Your arm's really thick."

Still masturbating her, he swung the elbow of that arm over to prop it on his knee. "I can support you on my arm."

Eyes closed, she smiled. "Really?" He kept rubbing his finger over her clitoris. Biting her tongue, she tentatively lifted one foot off the carpet. Swaying, she found her balance, then slowly pulled her other foot up.

She was sitting over the carpet now on his hand, knees held up by his elbow. Her hands reached down blindly, finding his forearm and squeezing it. She cleared her throat. "You are really strong."

Ed said nothing.

She pulled her knees further up, crossing her calves in mid-air, lowering them down onto where his forearm met his upper arm. "This is more comfortable."

Bending her blind face forward, she ran her hands along his forearm, eyebrows arching above the closed eyelids. She sat up straight again.

She started breathing through her nose.

Ed's pale blue eyes looked at her erect nipples, the folded-in positioning of her legs on his forearm.

After another minute her mouth opened. She started to say something, but didn't. She closed her mouth. She opened it again. Cleared her throat. Her hands stroked the thick sides of his forearm.

Ed said nothing.

The room grew quiet.

She took her last breath through her nose, started breathing through her opened mouth.

She put her hands up on her shoulders, sat up slightly. Five more minutes

passed during which she didn't move or try to say anything.

She stopped breathing.

She started breathing through her mouth again, gave out a cry of pain, soft thighs scrambling across his forearm and themselves.

She opened her eyes, head slightly down, dark pupils tucked high in the sockets. She shut her eyes again, getting her breath back, then opened them. She caressed his forearm. "Want me to suck you?"

Ed shook his head. "I have to go. To take care of that business. I'll be back later. When it's dark."

She dismounted from his hand, feet touching down, lower spine twisting up. Standing on wobbly legs, nipples and knees prominent, she pushed her hair back from her damp face. "I fell in love twice in the past, five years apart, high school and a different restaurant, and I believe I'm going to fall in love at least once more."

Ed picked his dress shirt up off the bed. "I have the same hope. What's your favorite ice cream?"

Her eyebrows shot up. "Huh? Oh, vanilla, I guess."

Ed grinned at her. He took a pen and paper out of his shirt pocket. "What's your second favorite?"

She twisted her lips and nose around, being cute, thinking. "Coffee, probably."

Ed wrote it down. "And your third favorite."

She grinned sloppily. "Hey, one's enough, Ed." She reached out and touched his shoulder.

Ed looked at her. "Seriously."

"Seriously? Oh..." She threw her hands around, trying to think. "Cherry vanilla. How's that?"

"Cherry vanilla it is." He wrote it down.

Grace ducked her head down, shy. She took a step closer to him. "This business you're going to take care of, is this about the

man who's selling the rings for the coat hangers?"

Ed looked up from tucking the pen and paper back into his shirt pocket. "Yeah."

Ed parked his rental off to one side of the large circular drive in front of the Breakers Hotel.

Before locking up, he reached into the back seat and pulled out a sports jacket.

He put the jacket on walking past a Lexus, several Jaguars, and couples in evening clothes.

Inside the high-vaulted lobby, he made his way down the huge potted plants to the elevators.

A white-haired man in a tuxedo was also waiting.

An elevator arrived with a ding. Ed let the older man get on first. Inside, Ed rested his back against the wall opposite to where the man stood. He held his hands in front of his stomach.

The white-haired man looked at him. "Floor?"

"Sixth."

The man pushed the button for the fifth floor, then the button for the sixth.

With a slight jerk, the elevator started to rise. Ed kept staring at the man's profile.

The light for the second floor lit up and went out as they rose.

The white-haired man in the tuxedo turned from his profile to look at Ed, then silently looked forward again.

The light for the third floor lit up and went out.

Ed, still resting against the elevator's wall, let out a loud fart.

The white-haired man stayed looking forward.

Ed let out another fart.

The man lowered his chin slightly, raised it again, continued looking straight forward.

The light for the fourth floor lit up and went out.

Ed farted three times in succession, still staring at the man.

The light for the fifth floor lit up and stayed lit.

Ed let out another fart.

The man stayed staring straight ahead.

The doors of the elevator slid open.

The man walked through, not looking back.

The doors of the elevator slid closed.

With a slight jerk, the elevator started to rise. The light for the sixth floor lit up and stayed lit.

Cyril Shepherd walked through the lobby of the Breakers Hotel, past the glass doors leading to the lawns and fountains of the courtyard, towards the elevators.

He got off at the sixth floor, turned down a quiet hallway, put his key into a door near the end.

His bed had been made. He walked across the room to the windows, opening them. Outside, beyond a cement driveway and the sea wall, the Atlantic Ocean rolled against rocks.

Unlocking the portable bar, he reached in and took out three airline bottles of scotch.

There were no ice machines so he had to hunt down a maid, who half-filled his plastic bucket.

Back in his room, he poured one of the bottles into a glass, dropped in two cubes, swirled it in his hand, and drank it down.

He twisted the cap off another bottle, poured it over the ice in the glass, and set it on top of the dark TV.

Water from the shower head dropped straight down, instead of spraying out at a slant. He got under it anyway, wetting his hair but not bothering to use shampoo because of the low pressure. Rubbing his hands over the complimentary soap bar, he soaped up his body.

Eyes shut, mouth open, he rotated his body under the thick dribble of water, soap foam sliding down to his feet.

Standing by the toilet, he pressed the towel against his chest, legs and arms, then swung it around his back and sawed it up and down his spine.

Back in the bedroom, he retrieved his glass of scotch from the top of the TV, picked up the room service menu in his other hand, and walked over to the bed.

From under the foot of the bed a huge, glistening sword blade swung out, slicing above the carpet in an arc that passed right through Shepherd's ankles.

The blade clanged to a stop halfway through the wall at the head of the bed.

Shepherd looked down at the blade buried in the wall, his eyes traveling along its half-foot width to where the lower portion disappeared under the bed. From where he stood he could just make out, in the shadows under the bed, the sword's hilt. Wrapped around the hilt were the tops of eight fingers.

He thought, there's someone under my bed who just swung a huge sword across my legs.

He looked down, saw that the tops of his feet were bloody.

There was a red circumference just above each ankle.

From under the bed a man's voice said, "Hi."

Cyril jumped back, jumping off his feet.

He fell on his ass, looking past the stumped ends of his calves to where his feet still stood by the bed.

Ed clumsily pulled himself out from under the bed, knocking two of the pillows off in the process.

He stood over Shepherd, looking at the feet behind him, then back at Shepherd again.

Shepherd's face stared up at Ed.

Ed smiled down at him. "Where is it?"

Shepherd reached into his mouth and pulled out a tooth. He held it up to Ed.

Using his thumbnail, Ed pried off the foil sealant inside the tooth. Holding the tooth upside down over his palm, he shook out a small black dot of film.

Ed walked past the two red feet on the carpet, sitting at the edge of the bed, by the lamp. "I have to be sure." He pulled a magnifier out of his jacket pocket, holding it over the old-fashioned dot until the line of tiny writing rose and hovered in legibility. The characters were alphanumeric. He had been told the first, fifth, eighth and seventeenth characters only. He checked those characters in the long line that floated in the magnification, and all four characters matched.

From the carpet Shepherd said, "It's authentic."

Ed nodded.

"Listen, whoever you are, what I did was wrong, no question, but you are going to kill me, aren't you?" He started sobbing, scared.

Ed stood up. "I'll kill you. Don't worry."

Shepherd sobbed again. "Promise?"

Ed picked up the sword, face straining at its heaviness. "Tilt your head back, open your mouth wide."

Shepherd did what he was told.

Ed dragged the sword over, hoisting it only at the last minute, letting its own weight bring the blade down sideways into Shepherd's mouth.

The top of Shepherd's head, with its upper row of teeth, popped off and flipped into the middle of the carpet.

Ed picked it up by the maxilla, feeling the rough edges of the teeth against his fingers, looking into the wildly roving eyes. The nose started jumping, then sneezed on his hand.

"Fuck." He dropped the top of the head, wiped his hand on his pants.

Walked over to the rest of the body.

Fully exposed, the tongue flicked around inside its frame of lower teeth. Ed crouched down by it and reached inside his pocket, taking out a paper sugar packet. He tore the packet open, poured the white crystals on the tongue.

The tongue widened, curving its tip down so some of the crystals slid forward.

Ed smiled.

He swung the sword around on the carpet until its hilt faced him. At the bottom of the hilt was a small metal knob. Grasping the knob between thumb and forefinger he pulled on it, pulling out a long, thin wire.

As the wire was pulled out, the sword deflated.

Once the wire was all the way out he rolled it around his hand and put it in his jacket pocket.

Bending over, he folded up the sword until it was the size of a hardcover book.

Ed sat at Grace's kitchen table, drinking an imported beer from a fancy mug.

Grace closed the oven door, straightening up and turning around in a party dress that emphasized her legs rather than her breasts. She pulled out the chair next to Ed, but instead of sitting in it she remained standing, resting one knee on the seat. "So what do you really do?"

Ed looked amused. He helped himself to some more of the guacamole dip she had made in his absence. "What do I really do?"

"Yeah."

He waited until he had swallowed the tortilla chip. "I work for someone who has been my mentor."

"City government?"

Ed snorted.

"Oh. For some reason, I thought maybe you worked for the water department." She shut her eyes, vibrated her head at her stupidity.

Ed said nothing, chewing through another chip, raising his eyebrows to himself.

She rested both her hands on the back of the chair, holding her upper body erect. "So anyway, why'd you have to meet with this guy tonight?"

"To get something, and then to kill him." He took another swig of his beer, not looking up to see her reaction.

Grace smiled. "Sure."

Ed leaned back in his chair, looked up at her. Shrugged.

"Is this like the hanger story?"

"No."

"You killed somebody?"

"With a sword." He clasped his hands together, swung the clasped hands smoothly through the air.

She laughed. "Come on."

"Don't believe me."

"You could kill someone and then calmly sit here eating chips?"

"Sure. I did what I had to do. I saw it through." He licked the salt off his fingers.

"Know what I do when I'm not working? Same thing everyone else in my profession does. Go through the files, find out where a serial killer's been tracked to, toss a suitcase in the trunk, locate him, bump into him, have breakfast with him in a diner off a highway somewhere, get some new ideas. Not from their actual killings, because those are usually pretty ordinary. But once I get them to open up about their fantasies of how they'd like to kill someone? If they had my resources at their disposal? Man, that's a motherlode." His big, ordinary face lengthened with a happy grin. "I love violence. I want to be a part of it. Violence is comedy with blood. I want the whole world to smile."

Grace nodded skeptically. "Well, I'm not gonna believe a kidder like you. Why'd you supposedly kill him?"

"Because he stole something."

"How'd you know it was him that stole it?"

"Say there are five guys. Let's call 'em Jack, John, Jim, Joshua and Joe. Joe has blond hair. Jim lives across the hall from Joshua. The

man with red hair collects chess pieces. Jim pays \$385 a month in rent. John is queer. Jack bragged to the bald-headed man in a motel restaurant in Gallup, New Mexico that he fucked the bald-headed man's ex-wife. The black-haired man has a scar on his body. The brown-haired man owes a lot of money. John once pushed one of Jack's ivory pawns through his two fingers in an unsuccessful flirtation. From this and other data we knew we had our monster."

"What exactly did he steal?"

"Give me an example of infinity."

"Infinity?"

"Right. Give me an example."

She shrugged prettily. "Sand."

Ed smiled. "That's what everyone says. That's from school, right? The teacher tries to get you to understand what infinity is, so they use sand. But the amount of sand on a beach isn't infinite. It's a large number, and for all practical purposes you could probably not count every grain, but if you took all the sand in the world, from all the beaches and desserts and golf courses and hourglasses, you'd still have a limited, finite amount of sand."

"I should have said 'stars'."

Ed pointed his finger at her. "You'd still be wrong. We don't know how many stars there are, but we do know they're limited. Know why? Because the universe is expanding, right? Well, if it's expanding, it has to be expanding against something, right? A backdrop. And the backdrop the universe with all its stars expands against is called the super universe. So the universe itself is huge and finite."

She cocked her head, blinking her eyes in a way that suggested amused participation in a fanciful discussion. "Okay, 'numbers'."

"There you go. You can create infinity with a number series, like the set of all whole numbers. So infinity equals one, two, three dot dot dot to infinity. So infinity therefore exists. But that raises an old problem. Look at

that clock face above your fridge. Say it's a quarter to three. For the black minute hand to move from the 9 to the 10, it has to pass through all the points between the 9 and the 10."

"Which is an infinite number of points."

"Right. So how can it do that? No matter how many points the minute hand moves through, it still has to move through an infinite number of more points to ever reach the 10."

"I remember that from school."

"So if infinity does truly exist, the minute hand would keep getting a little bit closer to the 10, but it would never reach it."

"So?"

"So, what happened is that at this university in Germany last year, this research team was calculating  $\pi$ . That's what some mathematicians do, they spend their whole lives trying to calculate  $\pi$ , hoping that someday they'll prove that seven eventually divides evenly into twenty-two. And what these research scientists in Germany did was, they used this new, incredibly powerful computer program to keep the divisions going night and day, okay? So one morning they show up at the university with their berliners and their coffee and the computer is no longer dividing seven into twenty-two. For a heartbeat, these scientists think, my God, we finally got it to divide  $\pi$  all the way to the end. We're going to be famous. Then they look at the program and find out the program didn't calculate  $\pi$  to the end. The program ran out of numbers."

Grace lowered her head, raising her eyebrows, showing the skepticism of two years of college. "'Ran out of numbers'?"

Ed nodded solemnly. "They wrote a mathematical formula to represent what they had discovered. They called it the 'f formula'. 'F' for 'finite'. That's why a minute hand can pass from 9 to 10. It's because it doesn't pass through an infinite number of points, it passes through a finite number of points."

Which makes sense. How else could anything in the world move from one spot to another? Scientists always knew about the contradiction, but filed it away because they thought it was unsolvable—because they couldn't accept the solution staring right at them. There is no such thing as infinity. We only thought a number series was infinite because it's so fucking large, like the grains of sand on a beach or the number of stars in the universe. The  $f$  formula is a mathematical formula that produces the final, largest number that exists. The number you can't add a 1 to, to make it bigger."

"You can always add 1 to a number to make it bigger."

Ed shook his head. "Not this number, you can't. I know, I know, you're thinking, well I can add 1 to 10, and I can add 1 to a billion, and a billion billion billion, and that's all true, but you have to realize that even a billion billion billion billion billion is at the very low bottom of the finite set of numbers. As you start getting towards the final number, the rules change. We're talking about numbers so large by then that they get harder and harder to increase. It takes more than a 1 to increase them, then more than a 10, then it rapidly reaches the point where nothing will increase them, they're too incomprehensibly huge to be increased, and that's the final number."

"Hmm. So now you have the formula."

"Now I'm 'it'. I maneuvered myself into this corner. I only feel alive when there's all that wet paint in front of me."

"Who's trying to tag you?"

"Others. You see, there's all these different groups criss-crossing America all the time, catching flights, checking into motels, watching 60 Minutes while they take their guns apart. Anywhere from three to eight, the number shrinks and expands. The existence of the groups--the number, their size—doesn't depend on ideology. It depends on budget."

She put her hands on the front of her hips. "Do you belong to the top group?"

Ed took another sip of his beer.

"We're old-fashioned. We kill. One of the other groups has something they call the 'forty-foot star'. They know death is not punishment. It's release. Especially if you're lying on a floor bleeding out of fourteen holes kicked into you. Most guys, when they do finally get caught, they get really scared, looking up at the man who's got them where he wants them, trying to read his face. Is he going to kill me? He's reaching in his pocket. Is he gonna pull out a gun, or a syringe?" Ed passed his big hand over his thin hair, smoothing it on his scalp. "You always pray it'll be a gun."

"This group, they know the only way to really make you regret working against them is to not kill you. Instead, they give you what they call a yellow shot. It paralyzes you. You see everything going on, but can't move. I've seen big guys doped that way. In their eyes there's that huge hyper-awareness fear brings, that total pupil dilation, that moment of brilliance when you are totally fucking focused on the present because you are more frightened than you have ever been in your fucking life. Because you know what's next. The forty-foot star."

"Once they have you paralyzed they load you on a plane and fly you out to Nevada, to this abandoned test range they still own up in the hills. They dig a grave forty feet deep. That's where the 'forty-foot' comes from. A couple of their medical technicians are lowered on pulleys into the hole with you, and they hook you up to five tubes. That's where the 'star' comes from, the five points of a star. One tube goes over your cock or up your cunt for your piss, one up your ass for your shit. One tube in your mouth so you can breathe. One tube in your left thigh for intravenous feedings, one tube in your right thigh to keep you pumped full of this paranoia-inducing drug some sick fuck invented. Then they bury you, forty feet deep."

They say it's gotta be forty feet, so you're cut off from everything. You can't even sense anything subliminally, you're too deep into the world. They start the drug dripping, trickling down a plastic tube through forty feet of dirt into your right thigh, and you take the worse fear you ever had in your fucking life, maybe a nightmare when you were a kid where you were trying to scream yourself awake but no sound would come out of your mouth, and that drug intensifies that fear ten fucking times worse, then a hundred fucking times worse, then a thousand fucking times worse." He looked up at Grace.

Grace touched his head. "You look scared."

"The adrenal gland is in charge of pumping out emotions. The difference in chemical composition between anger and fear is only one molecule. That's probably why you misinterpreted my face.

"They say they got guys down there from the sixties, still alive, still locked into this one moment of total fear, total awareness, total brilliance.

"The guy I used to report to, he flew me over one of the sites in a black helicopter. It was night but the moon was up. You could make out the Nevada hills. Down below, I could see on the hills these pipes sticking out of the ground, in clusters of five. Talk about lonely? The widest pipe is the one they put in your mouth. Over the sound of the helicopter's blades I could hear the wails floating out of the pipes. Wails from forty feet under and forty years ago. Like the wind but worse, because even after forty years it still sounds human. Animals stay away from the pipe clusters. Flying insects don't."

Grace bit her lip. "Fuck. Who thought up this forty-foot star shit?"

Ed smiled, reached his hand out and patted the inside of her bare thigh. "Probably a serial killer. One they got to before us. How about some ice cream?"

"Ice cream? Now?" She swung around to look at the oven. "We'll be eating in

about half an hour. I mean, if you want to. I just thought I'd fix something while I was waiting for you, but yeah, we can have some ice cream if you want."

Ed reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a vial and a syringe.

Grace's eyelids fluttered. "You know, you've just been telling me this story about this 'forty-foot star' thing, and now you pull out a syringe..."

Ed shook his head. "It's okay. This is a different drug. It's got nothing to do with fear."

She took the vial from his hand, looked at the clear liquid inside. There was no label on the little bottle. Its rubber cap was blue. "What's it do?"

"Two things. Number one, it makes you suggestible. Number two, it makes you very compulsive. That part of it comes from a chemical in the brains of people with extreme compulsive disorders."

She scrunched up her face, eyes becoming more prominent. "I don't know if I want to take something like that."

"I didn't explain it very well. Listen. You take the drug, then I suggest to you you're eating ice cream. You'll really think you are eating ice cream, and you won't stop like you usually would because you're worried I'm gonna think you're a pig, or that you're gonna gain weight. You just give in to the pleasure of what you're doing. Eating ice cream."

She chuckled. "Can you use it with sex?"

"Sure. But for now, let's use it with ice cream." He took the vial back from her, held it across his left palm and pierced the blue rubber cap with the hollow, slanted point of the needle.

They both watched the liquid in the vial lower as the level in the syringe rose.

Ed inverted the syringe so the needle was sticking up, then squirted a drop to get the air out.

"Okay, now give me your arm."

She shrank her arm away. "I don't like needles. You take it first."

He laughed. "I can't take it the same time you do. One of us has to be the one who's suggestible, and one of us has to be the one making the suggestions. Here, bring your arm over here."

"No, Ed. I don't want to. You take it first, and I'll make suggestions to you."

Ed sighed, shook his head, stuck the needle in her bare thigh, pushed the plunger down.

"Ow!" She got off the chair, standing a few feet back from him, upset. "I told you not to give it to me!"

Ed gave her a bored look.

Grace leaned over in her party dress, rubbing her bare thigh. "You're scaring me with this. How do I know what's in that thing?" She looked across at him, eyes red.

He held his left hand out, palm up. "Look at my hand."

"Fuck you."

"Grace, look at my hand."

"So?"

"See the big container of ice cream in it?"

"The big...where'd that come from?"

"See it in my hand?" He mimed lifting off a lid in mid-air. "Look inside here, Grace. See the three flavors, like three triangles pushed together in a circle? You've got vanilla, cherry vanilla and coffee. See the three flavors?"

She came over, looking from the palm of his hand to his pale blue eyes. "Where'd you get this? Where'd this come from?"

"Want some?"

"Yeah."

"It's nice and cold and sugary. Want some?"

"Yeah!"

He stood up. "Well here, you sit down in this chair, and I'll put this big, cold container of ice cream in your lap."

She sat down obediently, happy and excited. He held out his right hand. "Here you

go, Grace. Here's a big silver spoon to eat it with."

She hunkered down over her lap, small right hand closed, moving in a rotation from above her lap to her mouth. "Mmmm! This is great!" She giggled, ducking her head, wiping the sides of her mouth, compulsively moving her closed right hand in a rotation from lap to mouth.

Ed reached out for the plastic table cloth, yanked it off the kitchen table unnoticed by Grace. He crunched across the spilled tortilla chips to the cabinet drawers, opened three of them before he found a knife. Using the knife, he cut a slit in the center of the table cloth.

"Pretty good, huh Grace?"

She nodded enthusiastically, mouth full.

Ed took off his shirt. Standing beside her, he pushed his beefy arm through the slit in the table cloth all the way up to the shoulder, using the plastic cloth as a shield to cover his trousers, trunk and face.

"You like that ice cream, Grace?"

"Mmmm!"

His fist hit her so hard across the side of her face she nearly fell off the chair. Her perfumed hair came undone.

Her small right hand kept scooping from her lap to her mouth.

The next punch broke her jaw. Her hand kept scooping and lifting.

His closed hand struck out again, knocking her to the floor. He went down with her, straddling her, aimed his fist at her face and, while her right hand kept going, sideways now, from lap to mouth, he methodically raised and lowered punch after punch until both her eyes were on the same side of her face, like a flounder.

Ed closed the front door of Grace's bungalow behind him.

He stepped off her porch into the cool dark air.

The front porches on both sides of the street were lit, pools of palm and stucco under the orange and lavender stars.

His thumb pressed a button in his palm. A loud beep sounded from his rental.

As he started walking around the dark headlights, the porch door of the cottage he had parked in front of opened.

A young Japanese man in a suit came stomping down the cement porch stairs, gesticulating angrily, shouting at Ed in Japanese.

Ed thought, I can't understand what he's saying to me. He's so angry he's speaking in Japanese.

The Japanese man reached into his trouser pocket, where most men keep their handkerchief.

Pulled out a gun.

Ed pitched sideways, sliding along the curb, crashing into three metal garbage cans.

The man circled around the overturned cans to be on the same side, still yelling in Japanese, raising the gun.

Ed rolled onto his back, falling off the curb. Eyes alert, but not frightened. He whipped his head around, looking for what would save him.

Three garbage cans on their sides, contents spilling out like joke cornucopias.

The Japanese man stood in front of Ed, upper and lower lips retracted, spitting out short words, screwing a silencer onto his revolver.

A square of plywood.

The Japanese man braced his feet on the pavement, grasped the gun in both hands, raised the gun higher so it was superimposed over Ed's face, and started squeezing the trigger.

Ed grabbed the square of plywood, swung it in front of his face.

The first bullet crashed into the plywood, sparks flying. On Ed's side of the wood a bump popped out, the bullet pushing behind it.

Bullets two and three hit, then four, then bullets five and six, their delayed impacts vibrating the board in his two-handed grasp as if he were holding wings.

Ed strained to keep the board above him, elbows starting to bend under the force of the bullets as they pushed the square closer and closer to his face.

The orange-hot tip of the first bullet broke through the hard layers of plywood, spinning to a stop, still embedded.

Orange tips popped out of four other bumps on the board's flat underside, above Ed's chest. As he screwed his face up, they spun to a stop, turned dark.

An angry buzz burst out right above his face. He looked up as the sixth bullet bore through, splintering the wood, popping out and dropping on the side of his nose, hot and rolling.

Ed stood up, bullet-studded board still in his hands. He shut his eyes a moment, then shook his head and grinned. "Not a scratch."

He looked across at the Japanese man standing in his business suit on the sidewalk.

The Japanese man took a step back, looking at Ed's car.

Ed whipped the square of plywood through the air like a discus. It caught the Japanese man in the mouth, pitching him over.

The way the man's body landed on the sidewalk, Ed knew he didn't need to check.

He ran his hands through his thinning hair, then turned to leave.

He fell over, landing on the pavement with a skin-scraping heaviness.

His left leg wouldn't move.

Looking down his trousers he saw, sticking out of the side of his sock, a small, canary-feathered dart.

The Japanese man lay sprawled on the sidewalk.

Ed thought, you were a diversion.

His body started settling on the pavement. His last movement not controlled

completely by gravity was to have his neck muscles roll his big, ordinary face around, tilting it to look under his rental.

Soon even his eyes couldn't move, black pupils passively reflecting the Citrus Carpet Cleaning guy walking over, the upside-down image in the pupils bouncing larger, the black convexity dilating wider, in this moment of brilliance.