

# The Boot

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Robert Canzoneri

“You speak English?” she said. “Thank God for that.”

Behind him the canopy of Bernini was reaching toward St. Peter’s dome; his body was in a gentle corkscrew from having looked up a post of twisted bronze. Before him stood a slender British woman; her short grey hair was dripping wet. He put a hand to his own dome, touched his fingers to unanointed skin.

“I’m in an awful mess, you know. I was sitting out at a little tea room yesterday, and a *carabiniere* hit me over the head with his stick and tried to take my passport. I haven’t an idea what to do.”

“Really?” he murmured.

“Oh, he wasn’t a real *carabiniere*, of course. He was just dressed up like one. They do that, you know, to take advantage of you. Like the priests and nuns. Many of *them* aren’t real.”

Off to the side, people kept doing something to their lips and breasts and touching the polished toe of St. Peter, who sat, darkly metallic, more upright than a straight chair.

“They stood up and shouted, ‘*Non è giusto! Non è giusto!*’ The English people did. And he ran away. I was reeling, positively reeling, so they put me in a taxi to the British Embassy, but of course it was closed. Saturday, you know. Closed today too.”

“Sunday, yes,” he said, polishing the toe of his shoe on the leg of his trousers.

She braced herself, as though the floor might roll. “Well, listen, mate, when my husband returns, there’ll be war. He’s in charge of the maritime, you know. A sailor, my brave Bob, with eyes as blue as the sea.”

It occurred to him that his own name was Bob and that his own eyes were as blue as the sea. “Just call me Tommy,” he said.

“I thought the thing to do is talk to the Holy Father. Don’t you agree?”

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“But how does one get to the Holy Father? I’ve tried to find a priest, but do you know there’s not a priest around? Not a one.”

He looked toward the banks of wooden confessionals, toward the altar, toward the distant open door. "I don't see one."

"Why in Westminster they're all over. The place is thick with them. But here! It's very like the Italians. The way everything is dirty, the way they treat their wives—disgraceful. They don't care about their churches. They don't care about God." She gave a little laugh, looked off, fingered her glass beads. "They don't believe in Him."

"There's a nun," he told her.

"They're useless. I tried to tell one of them my predicament, but she merely said, 'It seems unlikely.'"

His hand was at his throat. "I'd like to help you." He attempted a wry smile. "But this is not even a reversible collar."

She studied him a moment. "You're the wrong color, anyway, with those stripes in the shirt, and the jacket blue."

He turned his blue eyes away. "Tommy," he said. If he were not Bob and her husband were not Bob, he might have said Bobby. That might have reassured her.

"But how *does* one get in to see the Holy Father? What is the front door, so to speak? You'd think this would be it, wouldn't you?"

He gestured vaguely toward what seemed to be keys in the bronze hand of St. Peter. People kept touching themselves and touching the toe.

"He's here, all right. I saw him at noon, from the square. There were multitudes of priests around then."

He had been there too, one of the thousands of heads all looking up at the far window where the tiny white figure stood like Punch himself, arms waving so. Any moment Judy would appear, and, whack, the arms would have the paddle aside her head. When he spoke, the voice came large into the left ear, as if from the dome itself. When he waved, all the hands waved back.

Her fingers went to the wet fringes of her hair. "There's another entrance, of course, away off to the side, where one goes in to visit the Sistine Chapel." As if she had paused to let it, something began to occur to him; he felt prickles over the blank dome of his head. "But of course that's closed on Sunday." She gave a genteel little snort. "I say to them, 'If this were London. . . .' And then I stop and say, 'But obviously this *isn't* London, is it?' Oh, it makes them furious."

He could say to her that it had all begun in Palermo—actually, back when they shot Jack Kennedy, but this time in Palermo—when he saw the old woman with two thumbs.

Two thumbs? she might respond. I have two thumbs, you have two thumbs, every person with all God gave him has two thumbs.

But, he could counter, both of hers were on one hand.

She would look at him for a moment before turning away. Over her shoulder, faint in the vast emptiness, the words would float: It seems unlikely.

Yes! he would call after her. Yes!

The girl at the Embassy was tall, her voice fit the room exactly. Here in this corner of a foreign land, its tone implied, is a spot as American as a cube of ice

is cold. The portrait of Richard Nixon behind her hung like a smudge which had tugged itself into definition, which clamped itself viselike even now to hold the tenuous outlines proper to a face. The girl seemed half humorously to ignore it. Presidents may come and go, but we unelected and unassassinated stay on forever. She handed him back his passport. "Your number," she told him, "is K1221754. If you say 1 equals A, 2 equals B, and so on, it spells KABBAGED. I notice things like that."

"Oh?" he said, feeling his head.

"What can I do for you?" she asked. "Did you realize that you were born a day after Bobby Kennedy, rest his soul? You were 38 one day, and the next day his brother was killed."

He sat forward in the leather chair. "I'll be 46 this year," he told her, "the same age Jack was."

"Yes, of course. I noticed. But, then, you're not the President, are you?"

His laugh seemed to him terribly unsteady. "Tommy," he said.

She shook her head. "Robert. It's in your passport, you know. I remember things like that. People call you Bob, perhaps? Bobby?" She did not wait for an answer. "But what can I do for you?"

"A tattoo artist." He licked his lips. "I want to find one."

"An American tattoo artist?"

"An artist," he said. "He must be an artist."

She reached for the telephone. "Of course. It happens that we are in touch with an American tattoo artist here in Rome at this very moment. He bills himself as the Tattoo King of the Western World."

He nodded. "I like a man who knows his limitations."

"Birra," the Tattoo King of the Western World said. "You want beer too?"

He nodded.

"*Due birre*," he told the waiter. He hitched around; the chair upon which he sat was enveloped in fat. "I talk a little Eyetalian. I know a lot of Eyetalians in North Beach. That's how come I'm here. One came back to the old country and showed this baron a saint I had done on his back, and he sent me a ticket. Wanted his coat of arms on each shoulder, but the son of a bitch died before my plane could land at Leonardo da Vinci. Ain't that a helluva name for an airport? Can't collect one single solitary *lira*, not even a ticket back to Frisco."

"Oh," he said.

"Herb Caen would shit his britches if he heard me call it Frisco. I deal with too goddam many sailors. It's not what I like, but it buys the groceries."

"Good."

"Albert," the fat man said. "Albert's the name." He held his hand out across the little table. The waiter put a bottle of beer on each side of it.

"Tommy." Only this morning in the Piazza Venezia he had heard an American woman telling another American woman, "Bob says Eyetalian beer is not bad, and if Bob says it's not bad, you can bet it's not bad." Beyond her loomed the

grandiose monument to Victor Emmanuel; it had the strut of Mussolini, who used to gesture like a puppet from the balcony over the woman's head, with little wooden heads crowding the square, arms going up all pulled by the same string. "Bob says that Victor thing is the best thing in Rome," the woman said. "That and the terminal Mussolini built." Near Amalfi he had teetered on the edge of a mountain high above the blue sea, had ridden an elevator down with a sullen man, had boarded a small square boat at the mouth of a cave, had seen sunlight come blue as glass up through the water, had heard stalagmites named: "And that ees Mussolini." A tiny figure, chest and rump out, chin cocked, arm and fist raised, black against the hidden artificial light. Formed and ridiculed by nature long centuries before his birth. Immortal. *Il Duce*. Dunce. Dunderhead. "Bob says he was a great man; he got the trains running on time."

"Tommy," Albert was saying. "Thomas *Tomasso*. What can I do for you?"

A leaf drifted down from a sycamore tree and landed beside his beer. The leaf was brown and dry. It wasn't autumn yet; it was hardly summer. And the beer was not Italian beer: Imported from Holland, the label said in English. He licked his lips. "The Sistine Chapel. . . ."

"*San Tomasso*," Albert said. "It was *San Tomasso* I did on that Eyetalian's back. 'Listen, I told him, 'art's art, and I'll put the best saint down your backbone anybody ever looked over his shoulder at in a mirror, but don't kid yourself with all this religion. *Tomasso's* in the cold, cold ground.'" Albert did not pour his beer into the dripping glass the waiter had placed in front of him. He gave the bottle a glance which seemed to say, All right, I see you, and poured it down his throat. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "He didn't get it, of course. Didn't know the song. Me, I grew up in the South. Started out in Norfolk with a specialty in four-leaf clovers on the left hind cheek. Jesus, what I didn't know in those days."

"The Sistine Chapel," he said again.

"We having another beer?" Albert motioned to the waiter. "*Due birre*. Make it *quattro*." He closed one eye and stared with the other. It was bulbous and blue, so far as it could be seen a perfect sphere. "Now, what the hell is this about the Sistine Chapel?"

"I want it. On my head."

Albert rolled his lips into his mouth, first the top one, then the bottom. "On your old bald head."

"Yes. Just as if, you know, I had stuck my head up into the dome and the paint had printed itself on my scalp."

Albert sat still a moment. "In reverse," he said.

He thought about it. "I suppose it would have to be."

"*Tomasso, Tomasso!* Have you ever seen the Sistine Chapel?"

"It was closed. It's closed every Sunday. But . . . I've heard of it, of course."

Albert leaned as far into the little table as his fat would let him. "Well, I'd better inform you, my friend, that your head would no more fit the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel than one of the marbles you've lost would fit my landlady's claw-footed bathtub."

"To scale," he said. "I mean to scale."

"To scale my ass. I'm trying to tell you that the Sistine Chapel ain't got no dome. It's shaped more like the inside of an Arkansas watermelon cut in half lengthways and spooned clean down to the rind."

The sycamores rustled. Zaccheus, he thought. A small motorcycle ground through the beeping traffic and blasted past, numbing his ears. He put his hand to his head, felt it carefully. It certainly was not long like a watermelon, but, then, it was not dome-shaped either. It was broad and round except for a sort of ridge down the middle. He could feel his heart pounding. "It wouldn't have to come down to my ears, would it?"

Albert's eyes moved speculatively to the bald pate before him. The waiter lifted each bottle, took away the empty ones.

"I've seen it," Albert said finally. "For some goddam Christian reason it's free on the last Saturday of every month. Never got poked and shoved by so many people in my life, all looking up. You got a ball point?"

He felt in his jacket pocket, withdrew the pen, clicked it open, handed it to Albert. The bulbous blue eyes had not left his head.

"Lean over."

The ball point ran an elongated course around the ridge of his skull.

"It's about like that. Not perfect. But, hell, Michelangelo didn't have it so easy, either. You want this last beer?"

He could never come right out, but now and then while Albert worked he would try to tell him some of it. Once he said that when they shot Jack Kennedy he had cried for three days, but Albert, hoisted above him face down on the scaffolding, had said, "I never could see what was so great about Kennedy. Now, William Howard Taft—there was a man of substance." Albert was in great spirits. "All that agony and ecstasy stuff—hell, give me only ecstasy." That was why he used a vast woven hammock for his scaffolding.

"It seemed like there was hope, then," he told Albert long enough afterward for him not to know it was about Jack Kennedy. And still later, "I decided that I had to be worth shooting by the time I was 46." The gentle northern sky settled upon him through the slanted panes, and Albert's rolling laugh, and the familiar prick-prick of the needle upon his skull.

"You want me to put in the cracks?" Albert said.

He thought a moment. "Will it hurt?"

"Jesus Christ. I wasn't planning to use a chisel."

"Well . . . yes." He had learned to talk by moving his lower jaw only, so that his head remained steady. "Exactly the way it is."

"Worth shooting," Albert said. "Down South we used to say not-wuff-a-shit."

"I've got till fall."

He tried to tell about the thumbs, too, how he was walking aimlessly down a street in Palermo, where the ship had put in for a few hours, and there she was, this scrawny old woman in a long dress on some steps with her right hand out for money, and her two thumbs were cocked up, one above the other. Just sitting there, still, saying nothing, not moving.

"Not even twiddling?" Albert said. "Oh, great Christ, she could have been hitch-hiking around the world in forty days."

"And then I went to the *Catacombe dei Cappuccini*."

"Or digging for buggers in both nostrils at once!"

"And this live monk led me down into some long corridors and left me to look at all the dead monks."

"Or fumbling an easy fly in Candlestick Park!"

"They're dried, you know, and hung on the walls."

"Or doing thumbnail sketches for Eyetalians with double vision!"

"Sometimes the cheeks have drawn up and hardened into laughter, or more like minstrels trying to coax you to laugh, even the bodies bent and bowing, soft-shoeing dead still, and hung with old black coats and striped pants."

"Why, she could have been thumb-tacking, thumb-sucking, thumbing her nose. . . ."

"You're not listening."

"Oh, yes I am, Mr. Bones." The needle stopped. It was as if time itself were suspended. Albert cleared his throat. "Why did the *Cappuccini* get to the other side? They rode the cross. Chuckle-chuckle-chuckle."

It was useless. Useless. But he had to finish. "Not all of them are monks. One is a little girl more than 50 years old now, and she looks just the way she did the day she died."

Albert's great fist appeared above him, tugged a rope, pulled his scaffolding into view, the face bulging around its bands of elastic, the eyepiece matching fiercely with a globular blue eye. "Why don't you do what every other 45-year-old failure I know does? Go out and make an ass of yourself over some 22-year-old with one thumb on each hand and one boob on each side?"

He had sat stock still, as though the needle were still going prick-prick on his scalp. "Aurora her name was," he said to the northern light, "as sure as my name is Tommy."

"Well, it's the big day," Albert said. "We'll just see if you got your money's worth. Sit down." He began to unwind gauze just as he did every morning.

One day at the English Tea Room beside the Spanish Steps a woman at the next table had pointed to the swathed head. "A crash upon the motorways," she said. "It's God's judgment upon us." Her remaining teeth were long and kept wanting to slide out over her lower lip. All of her was settled into a shapeless blue dress. "The same as my husband, proud man that he was. Crushed his skull like a melon, they said, when he took his leap through the windscreen and struck the pavement."

"Killed him?" he inquired, unable to say nothing.

"Dead. It was a porker he'd run across, a gross fat porker with a score or so of gross fat dugs like he'd always had a weakness for, all in a double line down her belly. Bruised her something dreadful, and the motor totally demolished."

"Your husband's name was Bob," he told her as if it were only a lucky guess.

She shrieked with laughter. "Not as he ever admitted. Harold, like the Prime

Minister. I told my sister at the service, I said, 'Lady,' I said, 'now the two with like names has got heads of equal soundness,' I said, 'only the one's in hell and the other in 10 Downing.' Of course, he'd cleared 10 Downing before a year had gone. It's the darker races causes the trouble, and the poor. If they didn't kill each other off, they'd die of filth and disease, them that hadn't starved. So what's the difference, hey? What's the difference?"

Albert twirled the end of the gauze in the air like a banner and touched the scalp with gentle fingers. He was humming an old time revival hymn. "I'd sing the goddam words, if I could remember them," he said. "This is a serious moment." Overhead he had rigged a magnifying shaving mirror. Onto the base of a music stand he had screwed a round side mirror from an automobile. He placed it grandly into position. "All right, *Tomasso*," he cried. "Focus!"

His hand was surprisingly calm. You have confidence, he told himself. A little to the left, a little down. . . .

"Head up!" Albert bellowed. "Jesus, you'll see it on the bias!"

Steady, he told himself. Head upright, both hands upon the mirror as though driving, a little more to the left and then further down . . . and there it was, clear for an instant only before tears blurred the outstretched finger of God only a pore or two from the outstretched finger of Adam.

"I could have done the Last Judgment down your forehead," Albert said, "if you wouldn't keep it wrinkled up all the time."

He held still until he could begin to see again. "It's a beautiful job." He tried to think of another word, but he could not. "Beautiful."

"Well, after all," Albert said, "I *am* the Tattoo King of the Western World."

"You speak English?" he said. He had missed the banks, had come to the Central Station to cash a travellers check.

The man in the bright yellow jacket looked up at him. Water ran from the dark hair over the staring face. He had just splashed himself at the lavatory and said God-damn-mother-fucking-son-of-a-bitch. Now he said, "Hell yes. American?"

He nodded. "I'm looking for a lawyer. One that speaks English."

"Son of a bitch," the man said, looking for something to dry his face on. "I haven't slept for two days and the stupid bastards don't even have towels in the john." He jerked a handkerchief from his pocket and swabbed his face violently. "Backward? Kee-rist! I'm late for a wedding in Messina. Cousin of mine. Flew to Rome and the line at customs was so long I missed my fucking plane, so I grabbed the first one down here, and now there's some kind of son-of-a-bitching strike and I can't get out of the goddam station." He held out his hand. "Charlie," he said. "I own a restaurant in Boston. I told them, I said, 'The problem with you guys is you'll always be screwed up.' Lazy. Fuzzy in the head, you know? Can't focus on getting the job done. 'Jesus.' I told them, 'I drive a seven-thousand-dollar car, and you guys fart around in little Fiats with fourteen kids packed in like sardines.' You know what I mean?"

"A lawyer," he said, "here in Palermo, who speaks English."

"Sure," he said. "I got a cousin works for one. We'll go eat first and get a taxi over there. You like fish?"

At the osteria, Charlie said, "*Calamari*," and later, "*Scampi*," and still later, "*Spada*," and ate all that and a salad of tomatoes and lettuce and olives and fine pink anchovies, and a couple of loaves of bread and drank a litre and a half of wine. "You know what they'll get for this? Maybe a buck and a half a serving, maybe ten bucks in all for the both of us. Me, I'd get 25, 30, 40 bucks plus the wine. They don't know nothing, for the love of God." He motioned impatiently to the waiter, "*Conto*, you. . . . Can't even get them to take your money. Am I glad I left this dump. *Conto!*" He looked at the written figures and glared at the waiter. "Four thousand!" he said. "Jesus, that's nearly seven dollars!" He launched into a tirade in Italian; the waiter shouted back; hands flew. After a while Charlie turned and winked. "Give him three thousand," he said. "They got no sense of values."

"The lawyer," he said.

"Oh, yeah. Got something to write on? I'll give you his name and address."

He had not intended to deal with a lawyer. It had all seemed simple, inevitable, when he caught the plane back to Palermo. He had rung the bell at the entrance to the catacombs. In a moment the door opened and a monk stood in it, bearded and silent. Perhaps it was the same one he had seen before; he did not know. He handed the monk a large magnifying glass, removed his hat, bowed his head. He saw the hand dangling from the full brown sleeve go rigid, heard the voice rise in wonder, a single word, musical and sustained: "*Sistina!*" He had been led inside, settled upon a chair, surrounded with a curtain of brown, pored over, exclaimed over, felt, admired. When he left, he did not know what had been done. A lawyer, he had said to himself in despair. I'll have to get a lawyer.

"American, yes?" the lawyer said. "Ciro sent you? Charlie?" He held out his hand. "I will serve you as best I may." He pressed a button on his desk. A man stuck his nose in the door. "*Caffè*," he said.

"I want you to deal with the *Cappuccini*," he said. "I want to be . . . accepted."

The lawyer smiled. "You wish to serve God?"

"No. No. In the catacombs."

"Ah. That will be difficult."

"Just tell them the man with the Sistine Chapel on his head."

The lawyer laughed. "And—how you say it?—the world upon his shoulders?"

He took off his hat and tilted slightly.

The lawyer got to his feet behind the desk. "*Maria!*" he said, crossing himself. "Will it—how you say?—will it wash?"

As before, when the silent man had brought coffee, the lawyer turned his up and downed it with a single swallow. "I admit some difficulty," he said, "but I have told you the best I can the contract. Is not okay?"

He was stricken. The terms seemed to specify that his death must be by lightning, wind, flood, fire, disease, old age, starvation, failure of the vital organs, or



some other act of God; or as the result of unavoidable acts of man such as war, the malpractice of doctors, assassination, or error in the construction or operation of aircraft, motorcars, ships, tramways, or other devices mechanical or electrical, provided that the portion of the head bearing the semblance of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel were intact and in good color. "But," he said, "all of this seems designed to rule out suicide."

"*Io Dio*," the lawyer said, crossing himself. "Do you know nothing of the laws of God?" He spread his hands. "There are many ways to die. Only one is a mortal sin."

"But . . ." he said, and sat helpless.

The lawyer watched him a moment, stood, opened the window.

Outside there were trees half bare of their leaves, cloth banners strung across the street, left over from the elections. "A magistrate was shot to death near the *catacombe*, in the spring. Mafia perhaps? His driver too." He pointed; the banner said *No Al Caos*. Beyond it was visible another with hammer and sickle. "The *democrazie* have been—how you say—slipping to the left." He made a motion downward and sideways with his hands. "That is why the *fascisti* came so strong in the election. We are a stupid people. We need someone to tell us what to do, or nothing is done." He sat back down, was quiet a moment, winked. "To suicide oneself was in the thought, *non è vero?* A technicality." He tossed it carelessly over his shoulder, then he pointed to his head—his temple? his eye?—and smiled. "For every man, there is a man willing to kill—if reason is given."

He realized that he still held the small cup of coffee. He tasted it, and it seemed to bring his whole head alive. "The Mafia," he said.

The lawyer shook his head violently. "No-no-no-no. There is no Mafia, and if there is, why do they wish to kill you?"

"Then . . . who?"

The lawyer smiled again. "I have a cousin in the *carabinieri* who is to be very helpful by reason of his everyday association with . . ." He held his arms out, crossed as though bound at the wrists.

"Don't tell me who," he had said, "as long as he will do it, and do it at the right time."

"No one knows anything," the lawyer had replied, "but he has killed before and wishes to perform well. He will of course be recaptured afterward and returned to the place from which he has been escaped."

Now he sat in the only chair in the sparse room, looking at his executioner seated upon the narrow bed, astonished that he should have happened upon so notorious a personage. "So you are Bertram R. . . ."

"Shhh," the other man said. "We better not use real names. Call me something else."

"Harvey?" he said.

The man nodded. He was small and very white. His glasses glinted when he turned beneath the single weak light bulb. He had hijacked a plane bound from Barcelona to Rome and shot two Arabs whom, the papers had said, he mistook

for Jews. Since one bullet struck the radio equipment, he managed to get off the plane long enough to mutilate a man who offered to sell him a gold watch on the street. He had been startled to find himself in Sicily; he had meant Messina, New York, where one of his uncles was buried. The first thing he had done upon coming into the room was ask for water, which now he sipped and swished about in his mouth. His jaw was set slightly forward like that of a dog. "I am very religious," he said. "I don't mean in the usual way. That's a lot of bullshit. I believe in God."

"That's all right."

"And Jesus. I believe in Jesus too. I can paint Jesus Saves in three languages."

"Three," he murmured.

"Counting English. You probably wonder why I believe in God but say bullshit."

He shrugged. His hour was near. "The hippies do it."

Harvey stared at him through the thin lenses of his glasses. His eyes were very blue. "The God damned hippies. It's all right to say God damn. Only God *can* damn; did you ever think of that?" He rubbed a hand over his crewcut blond head. "God reserved long hair for women and beards for prophets and apostles. I'm a latter day disciple." He leaned forward, "I've got to explain it to you. It's a sin to kill one of your own kind without explaining it to him. I wouldn't feel right. God would take away my joy."

He looked at his watch. "Of course."

"I've studied," Harvey said. "I only went through the seventh grade, but I paid attention. Before I found God I became a follower of the Japanese mystic Hayakawa, who taught about how the word is not the thing, and I knew why my mouth wanted to say shit and my asshole wouldn't let go. You understand? God lets us learn from the heathen. In the beginning was the Word." He stood up, put his hands into his overcoat pockets, sat down. "It's all right to say bullshit. It's all right to say shit and fuck. God *wants* us to, because those are functions of the natural body, and we have to know about them to keep from doing them." He rubbed his nose with his hand. "I'm a sinner, just like Peter."

The light was dim. Through the threadbare gauze curtains, if the wooden shutters were open, whatever light there was would throw faint patterns on the vaulted ceiling. He was calm. Yesterday he had become 46 years old, today he would be shot precisely eight years after Jack Kennedy, tomorrow he would be delivered to the *Cappuccini* for drying and eventual display. He looked at his watch again. "You do have the gun?" he said. Seven-thirty here would be 12:30 Dallas time.

Harvey stood up and checked his overcoat pockets. "Yeah. The knife too." He sat down. "Just like Peter," he said, leaning forward. "You know what your peter is, don't you? And all that about the cock crew—you know what he really did, don't you?"

The only picture on the wall was a garish madonna, hung at a careless angle. In Capri a boy pointed out, far down in the Marina Piccola, the yacht of Jackie and Aristotle Onassis. The boy assisted the waiter at the small hotel; he worked

there for six months and on the mainland for six months, twelve, sixteen hours a day to learn the trade, to make something of himself. He wanted to practice his English. "I saw them in the piazza last night," he said. "I do not like Onassis."

"Why not?"

The boy shrugged. "Because he is old and rich."

Madonna, he thought. Mary, wife and mother of us all. Jackie, Coretta, Ethel. At least he himself would never be old. Jesus, Jack, Martin, Bobby. "Just call me Tommy," he heard himself saying.

"All have sinned," Harvey said. "Jesus died for us, and that takes care of the sins of the body, thank God for that. But our whole nation has sinned. I mean the United States. I read about it in the *Reader's Digest* and it hit me like a brick that it was true."

"It's nearly time," he said. "Do you need to cock the gun or something?"

Harvey took the pistol from his pocket, looked at it, snapped something with his thumb. "Just the safety. But don't you see, the sacrifice can't be just anybody and just any old way. God won't work like that. When they first asked me, I said no. I said I got nothing against the Eyetalians, now that I found out the Vatican is a different country, and wasn't it the Eyetalians fought against the black anti-Christ down in Ethiopia? It was when they said you're a white American that God moved me to do it." He laid the pistol on the bed and drew from his other pocket a bone-like handle. Casually he touched it with his thumb and a long thin blade flicked out. "I thought I'd shoot you first."

"Yes," he said. Then, "First?"

"Before taking the scalp. It's the Indians we've sinned against, the lost tribes of Israel God placed in the New World. God trained me up for it, without my knowledge even, from childhood. They used to always be the cowboys and make me be the Indian, and I was the one got shot and tied up and they would run off and leave."

He pulled his hat down as tightly as he could. "But you can't take the scalp," he said. "My head has to be saved."

Harvey stared at him. "Saved? God doesn't save heads."

"He wants mine saved. Just the way it is."

"But it won't do any good without the scalp. Don't you understand? It's for the Indians."

"No," he said. "No. I didn't agree to that."

Harvey stood blinking at him through the glasses. Suddenly he closed the knife and jammed it into his pocket, snatched the gun up off the bed, started for the door. "Well bullshit!" he cried. "Just . . . bullshit!"

He was exhausted. He had walked all night and through the morning. He had staggered in and out of beeping Palermo traffic, had been nudged by tiny Fiats, been shouted at, gestured at, accosted. He had gone through dark alleyways, down long tree-lined streets, beside a waterfront crowded with boats and crusted with road construction. He had stopped at a little fish market and stared at the swordfish cut neatly in two, one half hung sword up, the other half facing him, a

perfect circle of translucent flesh patterned around the symmetrical bone.

I must think, he had said to himself from time to time, but he had not thought. Now, with a warm November sun in his eyes, he saw ahead of him the same steps he had seen long before, the same woman in the same long dress, the same two thumbs standing one above the other, cocked rigidly upon the hand held as though casually to receive money. He stood a moment over her, uncertain what to do. His legs ached, his breath hurt his chest, his head dripped with sweat. Abruptly, he sat down. From his back pocket he took out his handkerchief, ran it over his forehead and cheek, wiped the back of his neck. He took off his hat and sponged the sweat from his head. For a moment he sat still, panting. Then he put his hat in his lap and began with both hands carefully to fold the handkerchief. It was some time before he realized that coins were falling into his hat, that voices were saying, "*Bello! Favoloso! Meraviglioso!*" He could not bring himself to move. His eyes stayed upon the play of coins falling, the pile rising in the hat. He was only distantly aware that a man had begun to charge for the use of a magnifying glass.

His legs did not want to unbend. "Wait," he said. "Wait," trying to unlock the stiff muscles, but a thin strong hand was tugging him to his feet. It was, he began to realize, the left hand of the old woman; it had only one thumb.

She said things, but he did not understand them. As they walked he held the hat out toward her and said, "For you," but she seemed to ignore him. The skin of her face was as parched and tight as that of a dried monk. They turned down a narrow street, walked through a tiny courtyard, climbed narrow stairs in the dark.

She set him upon a stool and pulled back a dingy curtain; he saw a washstand, a single butane burner, a comb and brush. She took the hat and turned her back; he heard the rush of coins into something he could not see. Then she stooped, peering and fumbling into the base of the washstand, and came up with a rag and a scrubbrush. Now she stood before him, held out her right hand, said something.

"What?" he said. "I don't speak Italian."

She said it again, vehemently, pointing with her left forefinger at the two thumbs. All he got was *Dio*.

"Oh," he said after a moment. "God. God gave you that?"

She pointed to his head and rattled off something negative—he got the *non*—about *Dio*.

"God didn't give me this? No. Nor much else."

She took the rag in her left hand and grasped the brush firmly in her right, fingers tight upon the wooden back against the opposing thumbs. He sat in shock for some moments before he realized that it was a wire brush, that the drops she was wiping at upon his forehead, around his ears, were blood. He sat as still as he could.