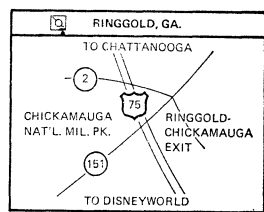


From *THE FRANCHISER* / Stanley Elkin



INN-DEX (225) BENJAMIN FLESH, Inkpr.
404/727-4312
I-75 at Ringgold-Chickamauga Exit P.O. Box 18 (30702)
Dwtn 1 mi. Lookout Mtn 6 mi; Chickamauga Nat'l Mil Pk
4 mi; Kennels. Suites. All Color TV. Dixieland Room
Rest, live enter. 150 rms., 2 flrs. Mtg. rms. to 100. Tax
3% EST F.A.P. \$15 add'l per person; XP \$3.

	1 bed	2 beds
1 Per	\$12	\$16
2 Per	\$19	\$22

He opened for business July 22, 1975, four months after his target date.

He was, he realized, nowhere. It was not a place. Not geographically viable. It had been, he supposed, before the Interstate had cast down its pale double lanes of coming and going with their white margins and their long stuck Morse of broken dashes—*l*'s, *t*'s, *m*'s and *5*'s—down the center of the highway like great cement stitches—forest, foothills, frontier. A trace, perhaps, for deer, bear, or that Indians passed through to be somewhere else. But it was not a place. As most of earth was not a place. It took its significance from its proximity to Ringgold, to Chattanooga, to Chickamauga (which itself had become a place one hundred and twelve years before and then only for a few days, for only as long as it took the Confederate and Union soldiers to kill each other, and was then returned, after the battle, to nowhere again). But even after the road had been laid it was something, somewhere, seen only in passing, not even observed—for it was not spectacular, pleasant country enough but never spectacular—so much as registered peripherally, there only in the marginalia of the eyes. So it was not a place until he made it one, until he had spent money to clear, chop, bulldoze, raze, as if place lay sunken beneath stone, trees, brush, the natural cloud cover of ordinary unbeautiful earth.

And now, in the fullness of his expended fortune and of a time that went back to a time before his disease had declared itself—so ambitious had he been in those days, Ben, the Empire builder, the from-the-sea-to-shining-sea kid, connecting the dots, Howard Johnson to Burger King, Burger King to IHOP, IHOP to Midas Muffler—he had made it—what? A sort of place. A feeder or way station of place—Chattanooga, Atlanta, Disney World. A sort of place as Collinsville, Illinois, was a sort of place outside St. Louis. (As the Sunoco service station which went up only after Ben had built his motel was.) As all suburbs were only a sort of place through-

out the world. Throughout the solar system. (As the moon was only a sort of place because of its relation to Earth.) Everywhere place sucking sort of place into its orbit.

And this, on the day he opened, is the sort of place it was:

First of all, nothing spectacular. In keeping with the sort of place it was before the furrows of Interstate had been turned.

From the outside a bracket of double storied buildings like immense rows of mailboxes in a lobby. Brushstrokes of gold stucco the color of wet sand veneered the pile of cinder blocks that framed each unit—a wide wall of intersecting Thermopane set in aluminum splints the color of warships.

The corridors were just wider than the passageways in steamers and a long runner of carpet deep and rich as flowerpot supported a design like the thick geometry on a bandanna.

The rooms endlessly repeated themselves behind each door on either side of each corridor on each floor of each building. Eleven rooms long at the top and bottom of the bracket (times two times two), sixteen rooms long on one floor of the long center building (times two), fifteen (times two: here were the pair of suites) on the other.

Two beige headboards like the carved, distressed lengths of a child's casnet were mounted on the wall like trophy at the level of one's belt and presided above an illusion of bed—box springs, mattress, thick metal frames set into large inverted "nails" like the panties on lamb chops—that was sustained by bright caramel paneled, olive bedspreads studded with a long, unbroken ganglion of print stem and leaf and flower, a Möbius strip of fabric vegetation repeated on the thick lined drapes (the lining vaguely the texture of good shower curtains). There were two captain's chairs upholstered in a tough Naugahyde the shade and texture of the cushion on a physician's chair in a consulting room. The cushions, like the mounted headboards, were inseparably joined to the chairs, as almost everything in the room was locked or bolted to something else. (A wooden wall mounting like a forearm and fist—the wood, like all the wood in the room, the color of the skins of Idaho potatoes—clenched a lamp. The mirror, the notches of its frame like those in harmonicas, was locked flush with the thin wallboard. The room's two paintings—one tenuously abstract, bold, black stroked bark, a jagged vertical timber against a clouded, milky silver; the other strongly representational, a tobacco colored barn that seemed to float on a field of 24 carat wheat, scratchy black trees like the tank traps on Normandy beaches, a sky blue as water in a swimming pool, Van Gogh's huge black birds like widely spreading *w's*—were screwed steadfastly into the wall above each headboard. A lamp on thick linked chain looped like immense fob from two fixtures in the ceiling. The television set was locked in its clawed metal tee and seemed tied to the wall itself by a broad gauge rubber cable.) The only other furniture was a

wide nightstand between the two beds; next to the drapes a table whose octagonal top bloomed from phlebitic newel; a long low dresser with two deep drawers and a composition top—the same that surfaced the nightstand and table—which looked exactly like the leather corners on a desk blotter. There was a chair on casters. There was a two-headed lamp on the nightstand. There were electric sockets like surprised hobgoblin. There was a plastic wastebasket the color of chewing gum. There was a telephone exactly the shade of ham in a sandwich with a red message bulb blossoming from it like a tumor. There was a thermostat with a knob for High, Medium and Low, there was a wake-up buzzer, a grill for the heating and air-conditioning, a carpet the color of coffee grounds, a Bible opened to Psalms 105 and 106. There was a rough of ceiling the texture of sandpaper magnified a hundred times. There was a white plastic ice bucket and four plastic glasses in a plastic tower. And a dashboard of bathroom fixture, bottle opener sunk like a coin return slot into a wide projecting vanity, its contact paper a ruled cirrus of grain not found in nature. A shiny toilet paper dispenser with an extra roll in the chamber. Butterscotch slabs of tile like so many pieces of toast above the bathtub and a foolscap of successively smaller towels and cloths folded like flag in a vertical rack. A spotlight of heatlamp. A grill like a speaker set in the wall. Outside the bathroom was an open recessed closet with chrome plated pipes and slotted key rings of hanger. The metal door with its locks and chain link of bolt, its reversible multi-lingual DO NOT DISTURB sign hanging from the doorknob by the narrows of a perfect punched-out pear. And the framed glass fine print innkeeper statutes of the state of Georgia, two long columns like the tiny font in accounts and dispatches from the front in old newspapers—one big Welcome and a hundred codicils of warning. The Room.

In the small lobby with its registration desk the carpet is patternless, a blend of deep russets and failing greens pale as money. A crown of chandelier above the furniture. A palimpsest of dark low Mediterranean table, notched, carved as old chest, wood nailed across wood like artisan'd slabs of condemnation. Two lamp tables beside the couch, higher but with the same vague apothecary effect, the tables studded with rounds of brass the size of shotgun shells, the lamps that stand in a sequence of diminished and expanded wooden pots and dowels. (It is a Hindu confection of a universe—the world on an elephant, the elephant on a tortoise, the tortoise on a lotus, the lotus on the sea.) The long faint and patient curve of the brown velvet couch between the lamp tables no greater than the natural slouch and slump of a man's shoulders. There are four red lounge chairs of a slightly purplish cast like the fruit in chocolate covered cherries. Velour, they seem to refract light, but it is only the oilslick of conflicting weave, weave set against weave like a turbulence of fabric. Where the

buttons are set in the chairs' soft backs, cracks radiate like geologic flaw. At the other end of the lobby—the furniture makes walls, creating an illusion of parlor—are four deep vinyl chairs exactly the shade of ripe tomato and glossy as shined shoes.

Rising above the southern wall made by two of the strange velour lounge chairs is a large display board. The ledge at the bottom, like the ledges in banks where one makes out deposit and withdrawal slips, holds brochures like a miniature newsstand (points of local interest, Disney World literature, and, under glass, seven typed index cards with the addresses and times of worship of Ringgold's churches: Seventh Day Adventist, Pentecostal, Southern Baptist, First Christian Church, Church of Christ, Church of Jesus Christ the Son of God, Church of God the Father of Jesus Christ). Above the ledge is a jagged globe of the world like a flattened, fragmented egg-shell—Africa west of the United States, Australia between South America and Madagascar. The map is shaded, shows the off-white of sea level, the pale green of plains, the deep greens of hill country, the rusts of high ground. To the left of this a wheel radiates six 100 mile concentric circles of map that spin about Ringgold, Georgia, the center of the world.

He is more comfortable in the public rooms, the dark lounge with its mural Chickamauga and carriage lamps and the plain lumber of the bar like the gray timber of outhouse. Feels there the anticipation preceding a party, or, no, the sense rather of readiness, preparedness, some soldier security in the ordnance of bottles—the Scotches and bourbons and blends and gins, the handsomely formed bottles of liqueurs with their lollipop liquids, the brandies like the richly colored calligraphy on beautiful invitations (and thinks, too, of ink in old ledgers, letters, check-books), the vermouths and wines. The labels on the bottles are like currency. Even the glasses with their upright cords and sheaves of swizzle stick. Even the bowls of peanuts and pretzel. The bar itself a fortification, the gunmetal IBM cash register like some weapon of ultimacy, the cocktail napkins like gauze, like bandage, the infantry of glasses. The uniformity is reassuring. (The competent barman in his gold jacket, a very veteran of a fellow with all the sergeant major's crisp demeanor.) The clean ashtrays, eighteen inches apart, with their closed blue Travel Inn match-books. Everything. The handles of the draft beer like detonators. The refrigerator units for cans and bottles. The ice machine. The cocktail shakers. The round measured jiggers on each bottle. Everything. Even the black cushioned ledge eight inches wide that travels the edge of the bar like a soft coping. Everything. The pleasant scent of the booze, a masculine cologne smelling oddly of air-conditioned afternoons in a cinema. Yes. All is readiness, all the equipment of business and seduction and solace. (Flesh is no drinking man, but even he can appreciate the peculiar decorum here, the clean, surgical rituals of such place. More than anything

else there is *that* quality in the lounge, an aura of spiffy, readied operating theater. He supposes banks have this sort of potentiality before they open for business in the morning, that planes do before they board passengers for the day's first flight.) Whatever, it is pleasant to take the air here, to see the spotless precision of the stools, correct as chorus line, disciplined as dress parade. (It is the way, too, his motel rooms look before anyone occupies them.) To take the air, deep breathing the rich oxygen of contending liquors.

And likes, too, the restaurant—the Dixieland Room—the tables with their dinner party aspect, the white overhanging tablecloths pleated as skirt and the bright blot of the deep blue napkins pitched as tent, discreet as wimple beside the place settings, the perfectly aligned silverware. He is pleased by the clean plates, the cups overturned on their saucers, and admires the tall mahogany salt and pepper shakers, the tiny envelopes of sugar in bowls at the center of the table by the netted red glass of the candle holders. He likes the ring-o'-rosy of captains' chairs that circle the large round tables, enjoys the solid confrontation of chairs about the tables set for four and two, notices with something like surprise the knock-kneed angle of the chair legs. And sits to a sort of practice lunch, reads the butter set before him, stamped "Butter," the letters so smudged they look like Hebrew characters.

He walks the grids of the new plaid carpet.

He looks about him at the strange, dark, implemented walls. (No effort has been made to fit the restaurant's decor to its name.) They bristle with weapon, with ancient farm equipment, with plow and axe and hoe, with things he cannot name, all earth's agricultural backscratchers, all its iron age instrument, its homely spade, pick, harrow, sickle and pitchfork, all its cultivant tool, its cusps and its blades like the housekeys of earth.

Yes. He is pleased. He is proprietary. More than with anything he has yet franchised. He owns all this. Owns the spare, no nonsense meeting rooms with their accordion walls. Owns the long banquet tables and metal card chairs that wait for the Kiwanis of Ringgold, for Ringgold's Jaycees and Vets of Foreign Wars, for its ecumenical prayer breakfasts. Owns the swimming pool with its thousands of gallons of water pale green as lettuce, the blue and white rope floating through the blue and white buoys. Owns the turquoise trimmed diving board, the surface of the board studded with friction, the shiny ladders that grow from the deck like great staples. All the contour pool furniture, the lounges of sunbath and the lanyard weave chairs, the beach umbrellas that rise through holes in the round all-weather tables on notched broad gauged spindles and burst above their scalloped fringe into a dome of bright pattern like wallpaper in kitchens. Owns the big Ford shuttle bus. Owns the playground equipment. Owns the hundred seventy or so telephones. (He was, he realized, nowhere. If by nothing else he knew this by the hollow ratchety sound of the dial tone, the shrill feedback

of voices like echo in tunnels. A phone company in exile. Mary was dead, the one who couldn't menstruate. The autopsy showed she was compacted with a red caviar of ova, her womb filled with a molecular compost of hardened gametes, rubescent, like a necklace of ball bearings.) Owns—partly owns, rents the space for—the vending machine big as a breakfront—The Convenience Center. Behind the forty windows of the big console are collapsed bathing rings, water pistols, joke books, puzzles, nose clips like chewed bubble gum, swim caps, beach balls, lighter fluid, packets of Confererate money, decks of cards, nail clippers, Chap-Stik, panty hose, toothbrushes, Modess tampons, Tums, hair spray and hand lotion, sewing kits, aspirin and Alka Seltzer, Pepsodent and rubber combs, Vitalis, deodorants, shaving cream, razors, blades, Aqua Velva and a mystery by Peter M. Curtin.

Owns the Travel Inn Great Sign like a big blue flag trimmed in a fringe of bright 150 watt bulbs. A thick metal shaft or "flagstaff" supports the sign, its long looped neon like glowing ropes. A huge T burns at the top of the pole on a squat wick, and is caught in a web of flaring neon that radiates brightly colored bolts of fluorescence. It is the ultimate trademark, so huge it is potted in its own landscaping, a long mortared planter four bricks high.

He owns it all. Yet in a certain sense, though it's his, it's his by charter. A dispensation, some paid for grace and favor arrangement like Maryland, say, before the Revolutionary War.

Richmond is a hard taskmaster. There is a 93 acre Travel Inn University in western Virginia where his manager has been required to attend classes in motel management. Two weeks before the opening a team has been sent down to Ringgold to conduct training sessions for his employees. There have been dress rehearsals, dry runs.

Beds have been rumped and remade. The kitchen has prepared each item on its menu. Waitresses have served dinner to the maids and bellmen and other surrogate guests. The dishwasher has returned his steak saying it is too medium. His chief maintenance man is called in to change a guest's tire. His manager goes to his chef with a complaint from his bartender that her children are disturbing the people in the next room by playing the TV too loud. He thinks they may be jumping on the beds. He is as diplomatic as it is possible to be. The chef promises to see to it that the children behave. The manager is very understanding. The day desk clerk requests a baby sitter for his small boy and hires the manager. A busboy complains of chest pains at three in the morning. The team from Richmond looks on approvingly. Flesh looks on approvingly. Inspired, he grabs a night auditor from the cashier's office and tells her that he is worried about his puppy in the Travel Inn kennels. He explains that the puppy, so recently taken from its mother, must be held while it feeds. The bookkeeper reassures him, says she will see to it that the request is

relayed to his dining room hostess. Ben asks a maid for the best route to Bar Harbor, Maine. Pretending drunkenness, he asks his bartender for one more for the road. The bartender suggests coffee. Ben becomes belligerent, makes a racial slur against white people. The bartender coaxes him into passivity, gently reminds him it's time to settle accounts and hands him his check to sign. Ben writes a hundred and fifty dollar tip across the bottom of his bar bill. The bartender crosses off the last two zeros, puts a decimal between the one and the five and helps him to his room. A waiter from room service hands the newsdealer who places the Chattanooga and Atlanta papers in the Honor Box a Master Charge card which the man checks against the numbers on the latest list of deadbeat accounts that Master Charge sends out. Ben's accordion player from the marching band asks the cashier to help carry the lifeguard's wheel chair with the lifeguard still in it up the stairs to the second floor room they have taken. One of the men from Richmond drowns in the swimming pool. The telephone operator lugs him to the shallow end. They are all having a wonderful time.

"I'm," a colored housemaid tells the desk clerk, "Horace Tenderhall, General Sales Manager of the Volume Shoe Corporation of St. Louis, Missouri. I arranged with your people months ago for my people to hold our semi-annual Southeastern Sales Conference here in Ringgold in preparation for the opening of the new fall line, and what do I find when I get here but that the meeting room where the meeting is to take place has been pre-empted for a banquet with the Daughters of the Eastern Star? Now I have no intention of making a foofaraw, but I put down a five hundred fifty dollar deposit and here my people are arriving on every other airplane that flies into Chattanooga and there isn't any place to put them. *Now whut you gone do 'bout dat?*"

The driver of the courtesy car goes through a guard rail at the top of Lookout Mountain. Three people are killed and four are critically injured. Ben's manager immediately contacts the five other Travel Inns in the Chattanooga area on the Inn-Dex machine and, pressing their courtesy cars into service as ambulances, dispatches them to the scene of the tragedy. In this way they are able to save three of the critically injured guests.

The team from Richmond beams. Ben and the staff and the Richmond people shake hands all around and Ben throws a switch and the lights of the Travel Inn Great Sign come on and the team is driven back to the Chattanooga airport in the courtesy car and the one thousand and seven hundred and ninth Travel Inn in the continental United States is officially open for business.

And three hours later no one has come.

The staff, which has nothing to do, drifts back into the lobby. His chef takes a place on the sofa. (The tables are set for dinner, the salads are

crisping on a bed of ice, a side of beef warming on the steam table.) A few of the maids step out onto the driveway with the head housekeeper to watch the traffic on I-75. Ben joins them, has an idea, signals the maids and housekeeper back inside, addresses them and the rest of his help still seated in the lobby.

"Go out back," he says, "where your cars are parked. Drive them around to the front. Park them where they can be seen. Two of you drive right up to the office, leave your cars in the driveway. Afterward," he tells the housekeeper and her people, "open the drapes in every second or third room that faces the highway. Turn on the lights."

Still no one comes.

"Well, it's just only four o'clock," John Angel, his manager, says.

"They should be here by now," Ben says. "*Someone* should be here."

"Richmond is supposed to get us some guests. They've been alerted. I know that. They've instructed the toll free number to divert some of the Chattanooga business our way."

"I didn't know that," Ben says. "Why didn't they say something?"

"Maybe it's supposed to be a surprise," his manager says.

The housekeeper has come back with the maids. The people have returned to the lobby after reparking their cars. Ben feels simultaneously in Lord of the Manor and Head Butler relation to them. His staff. His crew. His people. Ben's men. "Suppose no one comes?"

"That's not possible," his desk clerk says.

"But suppose. Suppose no one comes? There's no guarantee. I'm in over my head here." It seems to him an astonishing admission. A strange way to talk to his employees. And something occurs to him. The notion of employees. In his life, except for the time he was in the army, he has always had employees. People dependent upon him for their living. He has always been Boss. It is a remarkable thing. Why, he thinks, I have been powerful. It's always been my word that goes. I am higher than my father who, before he was a boss, had only been a partner. How strange, he thinks, how strange to be a boss. How peculiar to tell others what to do, how mysterious that they do it. And how odd that so frightened a fellow, a man running scared, should command payrolls, control lives. Who had elected him to such office? Where did he get off? How many had worked for him over the years? Hundreds? At least hundreds. What could have possessed so many to do what he told them? A man who had not even come up from the ranks? Who had never lifted a finger? How many more must there be like him, he wondered? Baskin-Robbins hotshots who had no calling for ice cream? His life had reduced itself to what the dozen and a half people who stood before him in Ringgold, Georgia, could do for him. To what the men and women, total strangers, whizzing by on I-75 could. The two hundred twenty million or so Americans who hadn't the vaguest notion

who he was. (A franchiser, hiding behind others' expertise, paying them for their names.) If they failed him he would fail. The banks would get him. He was struck by the enormity of things and had to tell them.

"Listen," he said, "you don't know. A lot's at stake here. My God," he said, "we've got a dining room, place settings, service for eight hundred. Think," he said, "the linen alone. A hundred fifty rooms. Three hundred double beds. That's six hundred pillows, six hundred pillowcases. The towels. Think of the towels and washcloths and bathmats. A thousand maybe. What are we into here? I'm a bachelor, I've got a thousand towels, three hundred sheets for three hundred double beds."

"More," his housekeeper said.

"What?"

"More. For every sheet and pillowcase and towel there's another for when they get dirty."

"Jesus," Ben said, "I didn't even think of that. Twelve hundred pillowcases. Jesus. Two thousand towels." He thought of all the other Travel Inns, of all the rooms in all the Travel Inns. He took a Travel Inn Directory from the registration desk and opened it at random. It opened on pages 120 and 121—Michigan, Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo. There were 16 motels with 2,221 rooms. He multiplied this by the 239 pages that listed Travel Inns in the United States. There were 530,819 rooms. "That doesn't count Canada," he said. "That doesn't count Japan. It doesn't count Mexico or Zaïre or Indonesia. That doesn't count Johannesburg or Paris or Skanes in Tunisia or Tamuning in Guam.

"Half a million rooms," he said. "Service for two and a half million. That doesn't count Ramada, it doesn't count Best Western. It doesn't count Quality. That doesn't count Hilton, TraveLodge, Hospitality Inn. It doesn't count Rodeway or the Sheraton motels or Howard Johnson or the Ben Franklin chain. It doesn't count Holiday Inn. It doesn't count Regal 8 Inns, Stouffer, the Six's, Day's Inn, Hyatt, Master Hosts, Royal Inns, Red Carpet, Monarch, Inn America, Marriott. It doesn't count all I can't think of or those I don't know. It doesn't count the independents. It doesn't count hotels. And it doesn't count tourist cabins in national parks or places where the Interstates ain't.

"What are we up to? Twenty million rooms? Twenty *five*? What are we up to? What are we *talking* here? Service for a hundred fifty million? A ghost room for every family in America? And almost every one of them air conditioned, TV'd or color TV'd, swimming pooled, cocktail lounged, restauranted, coffee shopped.

"How will they find us? How will they know? What's to be done? Yes, and occupancy rates never lower or competition stiffer. Go! Re-route traffic. Paint detour signs, Paint FALLING ROCK, paint SLIPPERY WHEN WET, paint DANGEROUS CURVE. Paint CAUTION, MEN WORKING NEXT THOUSAND MILES,

Paint BRIDGE OUT AHEAD. *How will they find us? What's to be done?*"

He wrung his hands. "See?" he said. "I wring my hands. I am wracked. I chafe. I fret. I gall. I smart and writhe. I have throes and am discomfited. All the classic positions of ballet pain."

"Mr. Flesh," his housekeeper, Mrs. Befelico, says.

"Yes? What? You know a way? Something's occurred to you? Say. Mrs. Befelico? Anyone. Everyone." He speaks over her shoulder to Mr. Angel. "A suggestion box. Have Mr. Wilban put a suggestion box together for the employees." Mr. Wilban is the chief maintenance man. "Mr. Wilban, can you handle that?" He turns to his employees. "There's bonus in it for you. How will they know us? What's to be done? How will they find us? Yes, Mrs. Befelico, excuse me."

"It's just that . . ."

"What? What is it just? It's just what? Just what is it?"

"Well, sir, it's just that it's past four-thirty and the maids go off duty."

He stares at the housekeeper. "They'll take their cars? Remove their cars from the driveway?"

"Well, yes, sir, that's probably what we'll have to do. Yes sir."

"Yes," Ben says, "of course. We'll see you in the morning."

And at six the two desk clerks go off duty. His cashier leaves. Mr. Wilban does. John Angel says he'll stay on awhile.

Two people come in but it is only Miss McEnalem and Mr. Kingseed, his night auditor and night clerk.

Then his first guests arrive.

The couple is in their thirties. The woman, who holds the car keys, speaks for them. The waitresses, the hostess, the man from room service, the chef and her assistants hang about to watch them register. John Angel glances peremptorily at his personnel and lightly claps his hands together, dismissing them.

"Have you a reservation, Mrs. Glosse?" the night clerk asks.

"No. Do we need one?"

"How long do you plan to be staying with us?"

"Just overnight."

"Oh," the night clerk says, "in that case I think we can fix you up then. Room 1107." He gives the Glosses their room key and tells them how to get there. The instructions, as Ben has always found them to be, though he has slept most of his life in motels, are extremely complicated.

"Excuse me," Ben says, "I happen to be in the room next to yours. I was just going there. I'm the blue Cadillac. You can follow me." They walk along with him as he goes toward his car. "You're lucky," Ben says, "that room happens to be poolside. The water's terrific. I took a dip before dinner. Dinner was great. The prime ribs are sensational. They do a wonderful Scotch sour. I'm going to watch television tonight. There are some

swell shows on. It's color TV. The reception is marvelous. I may doze off though, the beds are so comfortable." He drives around to the rear of the long central building, stops and waits for them to make the turn. When they are abreast of him he lowers his electric window. "Yours would be the fifth room in from the end of the building." They nod and drive on to where Ben is pointing. Flesh slips his car in just next to theirs in the otherwise vacant parking area. "It's convenient, isn't it? The parking."

"Real convenient," Mr. Glosse says.

"Well, you folks get comfortable," he tells them. "Maybe I'll see you in the lounge later on. They've got a super combo. Really excellent. Young, but real pros. The kid with acne on drums is something else."

The Gloses stare at him. "There's free ice," he says lamely. "In the corridor. Very cold." Ben lets himself into his room and turns on the television set. He waits a few minutes, leaves by the door that opens onto the corridor, and returns to the lobby.

"Did anyone check in while I was gone?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact," John Angel says. "Some people named Storrs. A couple with kids."

"Teenagers? Babies?"

"No. About ten, I guess. A girl ten, a boy about seven."

He bites his lips. Teenagers would have been \$3 extra apiece. A baby would have meant another dollar for a crib.

Ben sat with his manager in the small office behind the wall of room keys. He could hear everything that happened at the front desk, could hear the switchboard operator as she took wake-up calls. It was not yet midnight.

Ultimately twenty-seven rooms were let. Five to individuals, nine to couples, four to families with two children, five to families with one child. Four doubles went to sisters or to friends traveling together. There were seventy-two guests in the motel. The last room had been rented at twenty minutes to ten. It was just under an 18 percent occupancy rate. They broke even at 60 percent.

"Why don't you get some sleep? Anyone traveling this time of night would just keep on going I expect."

"We'll be killed," Ben said.

"No," his manager said. "They told me at school that unless you overlook a place like Niagara Falls, or you're in one of the big towns, and only then if it's some skyscraper setup that gets a lot of advance publicity and makes a mark on the skyline, you can't expect to do much business the first month or so. At service locations like ours it could be three or four months before an inn takes hold."

"Eighteen percent?"

"Eighteen is low."

"They'll kill us."

"We've got fifteen reservations for tomorrow night, Mr. Flesh. That doesn't include what comes in off the highway. Like today, for example. Only eleven rooms were reserved. We picked up sixteen off the street. Two rooms are staying over. We do just as good off the highway as we did today, that's thirty-three rooms occupied. And you've got to expect we'll get another ten reservations at least. That's forty-three rooms."

"Twenty-eight percent," Ben said. They would kill him. It was so. This was the busy season, when people went on their vacations. It was different with his other franchises. Convenience foods, for example. Appetite was a constant. Appetite was seasonal, too, of course. It had its rush hours, its breakfasts and lunch hours and dinners. But it also had its steady increment of whim, the sudden gush of appetite, the cravings of highs and pregnancy, its coffee breaks and gratuitous lurching thirsts, its random sweet toothedness, all the desiderata of gratification and reward. How had he so miscalculated? They would kill him. The eighteen percent would climb to twenty-eight percent, the twenty-eight to thirty-five, to forty, the forty to fifty or fifty-two. And level off. Things could be done, he knew, measures taken. The break-even point could be lowered, perhaps even met. There could be cutbacks among the staff, maids could be let go, some of the waitresses and kitchen help, one or two bookkeepers made redundant. People could double up on jobs. His debt could be slowly amortized by the piecemeal selling off of his other franchises. There were plenty of things that could be done. They would kill him. He would be killed.

"Why don't you?"

"What?"

"Why don't you get some sleep?" Angel asks kindly.

"No no. You. Kingseed's out front. He can take care. It's interesting. Go home. I'd prefer it. It's interesting to me. To be on this end of the motel. I figure I sleep two hundred fifty, maybe three hundred nights a year in them. But lobby life—This I know nothing about. Go get your rest. Tomorrow's another day. I read that somewhere. This way, the both of us up, it's too much like a deathwatch. Go on. Kingseed doesn't need either of us. It's just that I feel more comfortable minding it through its first night. Go on. Why should your wife be alone?"

Ben insisted and Angel left.

"I think I'll walk around a bit," he told Lou Kingseed after awhile, and went through the lobby past the closed lounge and closed restaurant to the long central building where all the guests had been given rooms. He walked along the corridor and came to 1109, his room. Through the door he could hear the television set still playing. He opened the

door, went in, and turned the set off. He was about to go out again when he heard voices behind the thin wallboard.

"Suck me, suck me," Mr. Glosse says.

"What's this?" Ben says softly.

Mr. Glosse groans. "I'm coming, I'm coming," he cries. "I'm coming in your mouth. I'm shooting my dick inside your face."

"What's this?"

"No, no," he pleads, "swallow it, swallow it. Don't spit it out, what's wrong with you? All right. It's all over your lips. Kiss me, kiss me now."

"What's this?" Ben says, "what's this?" He listens but can make out no other words.

He returns to the hall. Now he is conscious of the sounds that come from behind each door. He hears Mr. Kith, a single in 1134. He is talking to Elke Sommer. She is a guest on Carson's program. He'd seen her when he went into his room to turn his set off. "Take that, Elke. Take that you German bitch. How do you like my cock in your hair?" What's this? Is he beating off against Nate Lace's television set? Flesh puts his ear to the door and hears what sounds like meat being slapped against glass. He hears growls and the falsetto whimper of masturbate orgasm. What's this? What's this?

And blazes a trail down all the long corridor stopping at each occupied room. He is able to remember exactly who is where. He listens at 1153. The Jetjouberts' room. A couple in their forties with a son about fourteen or fifteen.

"Shh," Mrs. Jetjoubert says softly. "Hush darling, be very quiet. Oh that's good. That's very good. But be quiet. Oh that's lovely, sweetheart. Rub the other. Oh. oh. Shh. Hush, you'll wake Daddy."

What's this, What's this?

It is twelve forty-five when he goes to the INN-DEX machine and sends his first message. He has the Travel Inn Directory open like a phone book beside him. He depresses the Enter button, sees the top light go on and knows he is on the air. He punches the INN-DEX code number and painfully taps out his message:

MAYDAY. MAYDAY. RINGGOLD, GA. TRAVEL INN CALLING VINELAND, N.J. IT'S LOVE NIGHT. IT'S LOVE NIGHT. AND HERE'S WHAT'S HAPPENING.

He tells Vineland about the Glosses, about Tim Kith in 1134, about the Jetjouberts. He describes the goings on between the Buggle sisters in 2218. Finally it is too uncomfortable for him to type. His paresthetic fingers vibrate like flesh tuning forks and he asks Kingseed to take over for him. "Tell

Vineland," he tells Kingseed, "that Elly and Nestor Hubbins make love in the shower."

"But Mr. Flesh—"

"Send the message," he commands.

"What do I say?"

"Dear Vineland, New Jersey, Travel Inn'," he dictates. "Elly and Nestor Hubbins of St. Paul, Minnesota, who checked into the Ringgold, Georgia, Travel Inn at approximately 7:15 p.m. driving a—' just a minute." He goes to the records, slips out the Hubbins' charge sheet and registration form. "—driving a 1971 Buick vista-vision station wagon, Minnesota plates J75-1414-R2, dinner charges \$12.57 with tip, representing—let's see, can you make this out, Kingseed? Does that say 'Crossroads Furniture'? It does, doesn't it?—Representing Crossroads Furniture and paying by BankAmericard—' am I going too fast?"

"Was that \$12.57 with tip?"

"Right." He repeats himself slowly, waits till Kingseed catches up. Talking so slowly he is aware of a certain thickness in his speech, the words slightly distorted, as if the sides of his tongue were curling, rolled up like a newspaper tossed on a porch. With effort he is able to flatten it again. "Mrs. Hubbins is a tall, slender gray haired woman, almost as tall as Nestor who is perhaps six foot. Though I couldn't hear all they said due to the interference of the shower, adjusted, I should say, to something like fine spray, full force, I was able to make out a good deal, Elly's ringing yelps, Nestor's laughter, Elly's desire to have her genitals soaped, Nestor's predilection for lathered buttocks. I take it that they were standing face to face. I take it that they used washcloths. I only hope they remembered to close the shower curtain and put it inside the tub. I only hope there was a bathmat on the floor.

"When they were finished they dried themselves off. From what sounded like the crinkle of tissue paper I would say that Nestor was probably wearing new pajamas. This impression was reinforced by a compliment I heard Elly pass on to her husband, perhaps not a compliment so much as an affirmation of her own judgment and taste. "See," she said, "those checks aren't at all loud. They're quite elegant, really. I like a pajama top you don't have to button. With everything wash and wear the button holes get all out of shape, Ness." She calls him Ness. I'm not at all certain that Elly wears anything to bed. At least I couldn't hear her poking about in their suitcase and it seemed to me from the angle and pitch of her voice that she may have been the first in bed. I distinctly made out a sort of grunt when she removed the bedspread. This was before I heard the crinkle of tissue paper. What follows is rather personal and more than a little touching.

"When they were both in bed—and they slept in different beds, inci-

dentally, for I heard Ness pull back *his* bedspread—and had turned off the lights—I could see the little strip of light go out where the door just barely misses meeting the carpet—and I was just about to go down the corridor to see what was with Marie Kiprisco in 2240, I suddenly heard Mrs. Hubbins' voice.

“ ‘ ‘Ness?’ she said, ‘Ness? Are you awake darling, are you still up, dear?’ ”

“ ‘ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘what is it, Elly?’ ”

“ ‘ ‘I’m frightened,’ she said. ”

“ ‘ ‘Oh, El,’ he said, ‘I promise it will be all right.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘But *Florida*, Ness.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘It’s three years yet before I retire, El.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘Yes.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘The St. Paul winters.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘I know.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘All that snow.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘I *know*.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘We’ll make friends, El. There’ll be people there. Why, goodness, ninety-five percent of the people *in* those condominiums are from up north. People like us. And we’re just looking. Though I’ll tell you, El, prices are going up all the time. If we find something we really like I think we ought to snap it up, make a down payment. That way, too, darling, we could take our vacations in the winter and rent it out when we’re not using it. And don’t forget, there’s a Crossroads branch now in North Miami Beach. With my discount we could furnish the whole place for under two thousand dollars. Golly, El, if we *did* rent it out our tenants would be making the down payment for us.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘It isn’t that, Ness. *I* get just as cold in the winter, *I* know we’ll make new friends, *I* even agree about the economics of the thing. It isn’t that.’ ”

“ ‘ ‘Then what?’ ”

“ ‘ ‘The water, Ness. The water’s so *hard* down there. Do you know how much effort it takes to work up a good lather? People our age? Sweetheart, have you any idea what the heck that’s going to do to our love life?’ ” ”

He contacts Huntsville, Alabama, contacts Lumberton, North Carolina, contacts Fort Myers, Florida. He tells on the Glosses, tells on Mrs. Jet-joubert, on Kith and the Buggle girls and the Hubbinses, and relates the normative one-on-one passions of the Marshes and Gamgochicnas. He has Kingseed patrol the corridors of the motel and sends the news to Wilmington, Delaware, that Bob and Minne Cates, talking in their sleep, each calls out the name of different lovers. “Oh, Hubert,” Minnie pleads. “Sylvia, Sylvia,” Bob Cates cries out.

“Wilmington, Wilmington,” he has Kingseed ask their INN-DEX, “what’s

this? I recall," he has him spell out on Travel Inn's worldwide reservation system, "coming across scumbags in forests, panties in wilderness, love's detritus on posted land, everywhere the flotsam and jetsam of concupiscence scattered as beer can, common as litter. What's this, what's this? Everyone everywhere is evidence, datum. The proof is all about us. We're the proof. Everyone at the Super Bowl a fact of fuck. Every schoolboy, each senator and every officer in every army, all the partners in law firms and anyone on a mailing list or listed in a phone book or cramming for the written part of his driver's exam. Each civil servant and every pope and all the leads in plays and films and all the walk-ons and everybody in the audience. Everyone with anything to sell and anyone with money to buy it and all the faces on the cash exchanged for it, and every old man and all the dead. And also every representation, every sketched face in the funny papers and every piece of clothing on every rack in every store in the world. And even furniture. Every chair or table or lamp to read by and all the beds. Every sideboard where the dishes are put away and every dish as well as every machine ever made, the toaster and the nuclear submarine, and every musical instrument and every rubber comb and each piece of chewing gum and all the pot roast. As though the world were merely a place to hold it all, as if gravity and Rumania and history were only parts of some great sexual closet. The world as Lover's Lane, drive-in, back seat, front porch, park bench and blanket on the beach. Am I right about this, Wilmington, Delaware? How's your love life? Over."

And an answer came, Ben reading it like stock market quotation as it ticked out on the INN-DEX:

YES. YOU ARE. A CONVENTION'S IN TOWN. WE'VE SEEN EIGHT HOOKERS GET INTO THE ELEVATORS SO FAR. EARLIER THIS EVENING WE HAD A CALL FROM TOM KLEINMAN IN 317 OBJECTING TO THE NOISE THAT THE HONEYMOONERS, EARL AND DELORES SIMMONS, WERE MAKING IN THE NEXT ROOM. MR. KLEINMAN SAID HIS BOY, TOM, JR., ELEVEN, COULD HEAR EVERYTHING THAT WAS GOING ON BETWEEN THOSE TWO. HE ASKED THAT EITHER WE CALL THE SIMMONSES AND TELL THEM TO HOLD IT DOWN, OR PUT HIM AND TOM, JR., IN A DIFFERENT ROOM. WE COULDN'T DO THE LATTER BECAUSE WE'RE FULL UP—THE CONVENTION. AND WE WERE RELUCTANT TO DO THE FORMER BECAUSE, WELL, YOU KNOW HOW IT IS, YOU CAN'T CALL GUESTS UP AND TELL THEM NOT TO FORNICATE. IT IS THEIR HONEYMOON, AFTER ALL. WHAT MR. PITTMAN,

OUR INNKEEPER, FINALLY DID WAS TO CALL EARL SIMMONS UP AND TELL HIM HE'D HAD A COMPLAINT HE WAS PLAYING HIS TELEVISION TOO LOUD. YOU HAVE TO BE DIPLOMATIC. BUT YOU PUT YOUR FINGER ON IT, RINGGOLD, THE WORLD IS A VERY SEXY PLACE.

They INN-DEX'd Chicago, contacted Denver, rang up L.A. Everywhere it was the same story. Not even the time differential made any difference finally, Ringgold's nighttime, California's evening, love's mood obliterating time and space and all zones erogenous.

They put out all points bulletins, calling Fort Wayne, Indiana, Springfield, Missouri, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Burlington, Vermont, Wichita and Great Falls, Montana, and Albuquerque, Phoenix and towns up and down the Pacific coast. It *was* the same. Sperm was in the air like humidity. Heavy breathing was, and squeals like imprint sounds in nature. Love's high pressure systems and lows, its fronts and squall lines and small craft warnings only a sort of generic weather at last. Everything reduced finally to the skin's friction, the fusion of agents and objects and all the moleculars of love.

Flesh couldn't stand it. He had hoped to be torn off the air, to have been comeuppanced, jammed like the Voice of America, warned by Richmond itself perhaps. What he had not wanted was endorsement, all hunches confirmed. He would like to have been told by Houston that no, folks round there seemed tuckered out, content, after a long day's drive from Lubbock or a rough flight from Cleveland, to shower, in clean p.j.'s take their dinners on trays from room service, watch the telly, read the local papers, doze off.

"What's this, what's this?" he asked Kingseed. "Look, look," he said, taking up the long print-out. "Oh my. Oh. Oh my oh my."

"Why are you upset?"

"Why? Because love happens," he said. "It really happens. It actually takes place. It occurs. Why am I upset? Because love is sweeping the country and lyrics are the ground of being, singing the literature of the ordinary, and romance is real as heartburn. Because guys score and stare at the women next to them and trace their fingers gently over their sweetheart's eyebrow breaking like a wave. Twelve million are epileptics."

"Sir?"

"Twelve million are epileptics. A million and twenty-one thousand three hundred and eighty died of cardiovascular diseases. Three hundred and nineteen thousand of cancer. A hundred eleven thousand were killed in accidents. Pneumonia and influenza knocked off seventy thousand. Diabetes thirty-eight thousand, four hundred and seventy. Bronchitis and

emphysema and asthma thirty-three thousand. Twenty-nine thousand died of cirrhosis of the liver and seventeen thousand of birth defects. Kidney diseases got twenty thousand and *hernias* close to eight, for Christ's sake. TB killed sixty-six hundred and there were fifteen thousand homicides. And one died of heaviness and one of bed-wetting and one of prejudice and another of cradle cap and one of constipation and one of a blindness to metal and another of orneriness and one of household pests and one of left tittedness and one froze to death when his temperature hit 98.6 degrees."

"Where do you get this? What is this stuff?"

"Two million," he said.

"Pardon?"

"Two million a year die. It's a ballpark figure."

"Only two million? I would have thought more."

"Be patient. I told you. Twelve million have epilepsy."

"I don't see—"

"If thirty-eight thousand four hundred seventy died of diabetes, how many more have it and are still alive? Ten times that number, twenty? I should think twenty. Conservatively twenty."

"But—"

"And if twenty have diabetes for each one that dies of it, and diabetes is only the fifth biggest killer, how many people do you suppose live with bad hearts, with cancer growing in them like food turning in the refrigerator? Be patient. How many have Parkinson's disease, how many VD?"

"Every other?"

"We're standing water, fucking roosts. Be patient," Flesh said. "Plague builds its nests in us."

"Gee," Kingseed said, "put that way it's kind of depressing."

"Kind of," Flesh said. "There's scarlet fever and muscular dystrophy and Hodgkin's disease and a special strain of kid leukemia. There's the heartbreak of psoriasis."

"The doctor told me my pressure's a little high."

"There you go," Flesh said.

"Gee."

"And *still* they smooch."

"What? Oh. Yeah."

"They come calling, call coming, go courting, hold hands, sip soda through a straw, French kiss with their throats sore and their noses running."

"My gosh."

"*My* gosh."

Flesh stares blankly at the silent IBM typewriter and suddenly it begins to clatter out a message.

INN-DEX 225. INN-DEX 225 *\$#*&†¢%%*©#?%‡/\$* THE INN-DEX IS NOT A TOY! YOURS, INN-DEX 000, RICHMOND.

Then the top button, like Hold on a telephone, fills with a square of solid yellow light. "We're off the air," Ben says. "Love Night's over. Richmond pulled our plug."

"Will we get in trouble?"

Ben shrugs. He comes out from behind the registration desk and sits down in one of the velour chairs. He yawns.

It is Kingseed's snores which finally awaken him. His clerk is sleeping with his face on the desk. It's 3:30. The man will have a stiff neck when he gets up.

Ben stretches. He can have slept no more than an hour and a half yet is fully rested. He could go to his room now, but he doubts if he would sleep. Still, Kingseed's heavy snores are unpleasant to hear, though he has no wish to wake the man, no wish either to disturb the night auditor working on her accounts in the small office behind the wall of keys and letter slots. He rises, intending to go to his room when his eye is caught by the map on the big display board opposite the registration desk. The concentric hundred mile circles make the states behind them a sort of target, twelve hundred miles of American head seen through a sniperscope. He goes up to the map, to dartboard America, bull's-eyed, Ptolemaic'd Ring-gold. He examines it speculatively. And suddenly sees it not as a wheel of distances but of options. It's as if he hadn't seen it properly before. Though there are dozens of road maps in the glove compartment of his car he has rarely referred to them. Not for a long while. Not since the Interstates had made it possible to travel the country in great straight lines. Why, there are signs for Memphis and Tulsa and Chicago in St. Louis now. Signs for Boston and Washington, D.C., in the Bronx. Seen this way, in swathes of hundred mile circles like shades in rainbows, he perceives loops of relationship. He is equidistant from the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and Centralia, Illinois. He could as easily be in Columbus, Ohio, as in Petersburg, Virginia. New Orleans rings him, Covington, Kentucky does. He is surrounded by place, by tiers of geography like bands of amphitheater. He is the center. If he were to leave now, striking out in any direction, northwest to Nashville, south to Panama City, Florida, it would make no difference. He could stand before maps like this one in other Travel Inns. Anywhere he went would be the center. He would pull the center with him, the world rearranging itself about him like a woman smoothing her skirt, touching her hair.

It was the start of his ecstasy attack.