

The Big Store

Through the open door of the Detention Room I could see the girl sitting tensely erect in the straightbacked chair. I beckoned Odile-Odette, the matron, out into the corridor. "What's the story?" I asked.

"She say she weel talk with no one but you, Alain," the matron answered. "Alors, I . . ." she shrugged piquantly. *Toujours gai*, I thought. Fifteen years of rousting, strip-searching and mother-henning every species of booster, junkie, con *artiste* and street harpy, and not an ounce of rich Gallic *crème* had been skimmed from her Parisian soul.

"Okay, *copain*," I said, "I'll take it from here. *Merçi*."

"Euhhh . . ." she shrugged.

I unbuttoned my trench coat and half-sat on the edge of the desk, facing the girl. "Hello, Louise," I said. "Pretty early in the day for this kind of rendezvous, isn't it?" I pushed my fedora up on my forehead and rubbed my eyes. The dregs of sleep still stuck to me like ticks in the creases of an old dog's hide.

"Early for you maybe," she said with a weak half-smile. Fatigue and fear had carved their tracks on what would otherwise have been a pretty face. "Are you the one called Al?"

"Some call me that," I acknowledged. I let my eyes do a recon on her body; they reported lush terrain.

She tried another, brighter smile and brushed a lank strand of blonde hair away from her eyes. The night shift had busted her red-handed in Ecclesiastical Supplies, trying to slip a seven-hundred dollar jewelled bishop's miter (Anglican) into a false-bottomed box, and had slapped her into the little grey room to sit alone for five hours. According to her printout it was her first offense, so she had every reason to be one step from gonzo, but she still had the presence of mind to try to assert some style. I found myself liking her for that.

"They said you weren't any ordinary copper, Al. They said your solitude clothes compassion. Even tenderness." As she spoke, her eyes locked onto mine. Hers were green, and they softened as the boldness of her words melted away some of the glazing of fright on them. Mine are brown.

"People always talk," I said. "They want to shape you to the dimensions of their own sentimentality, fit themselves to you where you don't fit them. It's a cockamamie world, kid." I kept my voice neutral. The day was just beginning, and I had a hunch that more expert hands than Louise's would

be tugging at my ego before it ended. "Let's get something straight," I said. "I'm no copper, Louise. I'm a dick. And you're no oasis on the endless desert of my alienation. You're a booster. That lays out the whole *corrida*, game, set and match. You could've saved yourself some seat-squirming, because I'm not going to tell you anything the others couldn't have told you five hours ago."

That shook her. Fear fell over her face again like a vulture's shadow. In a way, I was sorry to see her let go so fast, but it didn't surprise me. Confront Louise's type with the ineluctible modality of their situation and they change feelings the way a hypochondriac changes doctors: fast and often.

She looked down at her hands, trembling in her lap. "Don't you want to know why I did it?" she asked softly.

"I suppose it's the Rogation Days." Her head snapped up, but before she could say anything, I went on: "Not that it matters. You were apprehended in contravening the Property Laws, an objective fact which entails two options upon you. You may accept prosecution, for one. That's detention without bail, conviction without appeal, incarceration without parole, rehabilitation and stigmatization. That's the hard way." She opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off with a gesture. "The other way is this," I said. "You sign the Culpability Forms here and now, the matron takes you upstairs and you can be stigmatized and on your way home within the hour. You want to flip a coin?"

She wanted to sneer, but her lips wouldn't support it. "Fancy words for a tattoo," she said, a half-beat ahead of a sob.

"Brass isn't your substance, Louise," I snapped. "If this were New York, you'd lose your right thumb and do hard time besides. I'd say a couple of letters tattooed on the back of your hand isn't that high a price, compared. Anyway," I said, letting my voice soften—I still hadn't given up on liking her—"Anyway, the needles here are sterile and almost painless, and Sailor Vincent'll even let you pick your color and lettering style. He takes pride. Not like those graffitists at Rehab. You shouldn't have to think twice, Kid. It's night and day." I watched her, knowing what was coming next.

It came. She slid forward in the chair so that her skirt rode up under her bottom and let her hands play on her bare thighs. She drooped her eyelids and slid her tongue slowly across her lower lip. It was sexual invitation as it existed in some man's fantasy of some woman's fantasy of some man's fantasy of some woman's fantasy, *ad infinitum*; a Moebius track I'd long since given up jogging on. "Can the wearisome burleycue," I snorted, stifling a yawn.

"But they said—"

"Sign the paper, Louise."

She leaned toward me, staring intently as though my eyes bore a message written in a half-forgotten language. "You've been wounded in your heart,

haven't you?" she breathed. "They were right. Your solitude wafts like an after-shave scent."

I grinned away my mounting annoyance. "There's a brand of stinkum that's even cheaper," I said. "It's called cursory intimacy, and it smells like dogsbreath."

She touched her breasts, offering them. "Woof, Al," she said.

"Arf, arf," I answered for the sheer crazy hell of it, and rang for the matron. In my line temptation comes at you from a thousand directions, wearing a thousand faces, all trying to push you off the wire you walk every day, all by yourself; I'm a dick, at the Big Store.

The name of the shop is Griffin and Bludgin, and it occupies the first forty-eight levels of the two-hundred-and-twelve-level Northeast Vertical Arcopolis (West Bank). My office is on forty-six. I was about to hop onto the paternoster when the next tender was announced.

"Psst. Hey, Al. Al."

I turned toward the voice. Its generator was lurking in the recessed doorway that led to the fire stairs, a tall, lean gent in a double-breasted Chesterfield and bowler hat. His closely trimmed hair was greying at the temples and there was salt and pepper in his eyebrows and his pip-pip mustache. I leafed through my memory and came up empty on the name, but my instincts had already filled in the species tag: hophead.

As I approached, he beckoned with furtive impatience, ducking his head from side to side and jerking his body around as if his underwear were wired to some treadmill dynamo propelled by spastic kangaroo rats. It was true that his appearance suggested a newly retired Brigadier, but his demeanor bore the hashmarks of service in an army whose doom was preordained.

"What's the pitch?" I said, keeping my distance.

He grinned with twitchy imprecision. "I have it that you're the dude they call Al," he said. His voice surprised me; it was deep and smooth, controlled. I said nothing. "They say you're a hip dude, Al," he continued. "And I say that's cool, because I have the sort of proposition for you that a really hip dude can dig on, don't you know? Huh. Look here—"

"Drugs," I said.

His pale-lashed blue eyes widened, and he stared at me with forced amazement, then turned away and bent double in silent laughter. "*Drugs!*" he said to no one in particular, then straightened suddenly and faced me again, this time with a menacing scowl. "If I want *drugs*," he said, "I visit the chemist. Don't jive me, Al my man. Here's my card." From between his fingers he produced a calling card, bearing the name LORD PETER LORD and a London address (West End). "Lord Peter is not to be jived," he admonished with a flick of his hand. "Lord Peter is no chemist, no drug merchant and no dope pusher, do you dig? No. The commodity here is what you

might want to call sweet and bad. Say candy. Uh-huh, *nose* candy. Look here." He ducked away and came back with a sapphire-lidded snuffbox which he opened, revealing a crystalline white powder within. "Go ahead, Al," he said. "Slide some of that into your septum, brother. They say you're the Lone Ranger here, my man, and I say powder your nose with this shit, and you can ride off into the golden sunsets of your mind. It's super-clean and super-fine. It's *organic*, Jim, and there is lots more where that came from. They say you're ripe for some discreet thrills, Al, and I can proffer the franchise. Yes. Now dig this proposition . . ."

I tuned out his babbling while my mind sifted the data. Before I'd even had a chance to get to the office I'd had sex and chemical nirvana thrust at me. What next, I wondered, flowers? I could feel myself getting edgy. You'd think that "they"—whoever "they" were—would have learned by now, but maybe it was just as well that they never had; when they did, I might be out of a *raison d'être*.

I might have saved myself a lot of trouble if I'd been more attentive to Lord Peter, but the nattering snowbird was getting on my nerves, so I gave him a chop under the ear and tossed him down the fire stairs. I didn't stay around to watch him land; I was already late for work.

Emma was waiting at the door of the outer office. "Hi, toots," I said, brushing past her. I stopped short, arrested by something flickering beneath the surface of her calm, dark eyes, something I'd almost missed. Almost. "What's up?" I said. Emma and I had been a team for seven years. We knew each other's signals.

She nodded toward my inner office. "Company, Alejandro," she said. "A couple of hundred-twenty-seventh-level types."

"North side?"

"My guess," she nodded.

I grinned. "When was the last time you were wrong?" She'd come in as a secretary, even though I hadn't asked for a secretary. Hell, nothing undermines your independence like a hierarchic relationship, I'd told them. The T.O. calls for it, they said. Some T.O., I said. As soon as she'd learned the ropes, I'd made her my associate, without benefit of T.O. It had been a right move. Emma was as tough as I was, as competent and almost as independent. She ran her own cases, carried her own passkeys. She looked out for herself. We took turns at playing gofer, alternating weekly. "Anything else?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Something in your eyes."

"Look again."

She had me. Whatever I'd reacted to was gone now, and I didn't have time to try to reconstitute it. I had company.

They were standing in the center of the room, four feet from the front of

my desk. Side by side, like mismatched andirons. They wore their hats low on their foreheads and their hands in the pockets of their overcoats.

I scaled my fedora onto a peg and tossed my trench coat over the top of the filing cabinet, without attracting any noticeable attention. “*Buon giorno*,” I said. No fires of amenity were lit from my spark. I began to wonder if the decorators might have installed the two figures on my carpet as an amusing new kind of semi-kinetic sculpture. Given the choice, I’d just as soon have taken a model railroad. I sat at the desk and pressed Emma’s button on the intercom. “Hey, I forgot,” I said. “Prune Danish this morning, okay?” It was her week.

“Anything for the company?” she answered.

With my eyes I inquired the company. “Gentlemen?” I said. The word fluttered around the room in confusion, like a one-eyed sparrow in a hall of mirrors.

The short, fat half of the asymmetrical tandem shrugged. “Eh, shoo,” he said. “Habatta hot chawklit, eh? Anna cannoli? Nice.” He licked his thick, purple lips. The gesture created a visual effect only a deviate could appreciate.

“Dieting, are you?” I said blandly. He looked like ten gallons of spumoni in a five-gallon container. As soon as my words sank in, great shifting forces began to labor at rearranging his face into a sheepish smile, but before they could complete the task his companion reached over and grabbed a handful of cheek and twisted, hard.

“Sharrup,” the companion snarled. His hand snaked back into his coat pocket. “My associate change his mine,” he explained to me. “We catch a bite onna way over.” He was tall and as stark as a bicycle chain, with a complexion like minced *weisswurst*.

The fat one kneaded his cheek like Goodyear smoothing a wrinkle on his blimp. “Yeh,” he said thickly. “Wharra you thin, it’s a tea potty?”

“Suit yourself,” I said. “That’s all, toots.”

“*Zu befehl*,” Emma answered.

“Anyways,” the fat one sneered. “You get from Cohen’s, don’t ask how we know, eh?” He was trying to salvage some self-respect.

“I like from Cohen’s,” I said.

“*Immondizie*,” he spat, shifting a few pounds of lip this way, a few more pounds that. “Gobbidge, knowwottamean? You like a nice *cappucino* anna bitea pastry—nice—you go Vito’s, up hunnerd-twenny-sev’, hah? I—”

“Sharrup,” the tall one interrupted, this time without the pinch. “We he’ on bidniz.”

“Ass ri,” the fat one affirmed.

“You don’t say,” I said. “I thought maybe you’d stopped in to compare recipes. Now me, I’ve found I can make my *involtini* come alive by adding just a suggestion of tarragon to the broth.”

The fat one sputtered like a sucking chest wound. “Wharra you, crazy?” he cried.

“Sharrup,” the tall one inserted. He regarded me with eyes you could smash diamonds on. “We gotta proposish’,” he said. I nodded. I wasn’t surprised. Not today. “Yudda one calt Al,” he said. “To you we come in re-speck.” As a signal of his respect he lifted his upper lip in a vulpine grin. His teeth looked as though they’d been marinating in hot root beer for a generation or so. “We reppasent someone that if I tolya the name you’d shitchersef.”

“Try me,” I said. “It might clear the air in here.”

“Gahead,” he said with cool menace. “Smott awf.”

“Yeah,” the fat one echoed, “gahead. See iffa you so smott when you walkin’ backward onnacounta you knees benda wrong way.” He flexed his shoulders. It may have been my imagination, but I thought I heard some seams protest.

“Sharrup,” the tall one said.

“Who are you?” I said. Though their timing was great, the repartee was starting to cloy.

“Ossa,” he said, with a short bow.

“Peglioni,” said the fat one. “Pasquale. Hawwaya?”

“Who sent you Knights of Columbus and what are you pushing, fun, money or mechandise?” It was time to take control.

Ossa squinted closely at me, as though counting the bones in my inner ear. “Howa you like to be rich, Al?” he said. “Plenty rich? They sayin’, the sex thing don’t get t’rough to Al. No offense, it’s what they sayin’. They sayin’, you don’t score Al witha pills an’ powders. Again, no offense, eh? Word is, they sayin’ that Al, he—*come si dice*—he dwell ascetical inside a basilica of solitude. Pleasure don’t tempt, they sayin’. It’sa pattern like anxiety, eh? So you ask, wheres a source of the anxiety inna modern life, eh? Anna supposish’ is: money. Wharra you thin’?”

“We talkin’ fi’ figures atcha, Al, openers,” the fat one said. “That’s some kinda K.”

Things were clicking in the back of my brain, forming into a pattern. I wasn’t being tempted today; I was being set up. Real temptation is spontaneous, serendipitous, but all three of the siren songs I’d heard this morning were piping the same tune. Before things went any further, I had to find out who the composer was.

I leaned back in my chair as nonchalantly as I could. “Before I punch up a No Sale,” I said, “there are a few things I’d like to know. And you’re going to enlighten me.” I let my jacket fall open to give them a look at the .38 Police Special on my belt.

“Yah yah yah,” Ossa barked. “Wharra you afraid?”

I shrugged. “Prolonged pain,” I said, “wasting disease, the unhappy mo-

ments when you see love becoming indifference, poisonous reptiles. The usual.”

“Spoze,” he said. “Spoze I say this izza nawffa—”

“Don’t say it and you won’t be sorry,” I riposted.

For a tense moment we all stared sulphurously at each other. Then Ossa shook himself lightly like a duck coming in out of a thin mist and tapped Peglioni on the shoulder. “Camawn, ’Squale,” he said. “I treatcha piecea pie.”

“Wait a minute . . .” I started to say, but Ossa’s words had been a signal. As soon as they were spoken, points appeared in the fabric in front of the left-hand pockets of both men’s coats, points which began to spew soft lead. I kicked my chair away from the desk, drawing my .38 as I rolled out of the line of their fire. I took Ossa first, through his eye; it seemed it wasn’t unbreakable after all. Then Peglioni, who had hesitated just long enough to even up the odds. Perhaps the word “pie” had distracted him; at least it was nice to think so. After all, gluttony is one of the deadly sins. They fell together in a pile, Peglioni on Ossa. Or maybe the other way around. I didn’t particularly care; they had already ceased to exist for me.

Reholstering the .38, I stepped around them and out to the outer office. Emma hadn’t come back with the coffee yet, but I didn’t have time to wait. Someone was making a determined effort to get at the substance of my ego, and I couldn’t afford just to sit around waiting for the next attempt. At Emma’s desk I put in a quick call to the cleanup boys and asked them to get the mess off my carpet. As I was getting up to leave, the phone rang. On my line.

I hesitated. My adrenaline had me as nerved up as a fire-walking fakir with athlete’s foot. What now? I wondered. I lifted the phone with caution that would have done credit to a bomb-disposal expert. “Yeah,” I said.

“Albie?” said the dick on the other end. “It’s Jerry. I’m in Pets.”

I forced myself to breathe. “What’s up, Jer?” I said, listening carefully.

“There’s a bunch of kids from the Neo-Pan-African Directorate down here trying to get into the lion cage,” he reported. “They say they have to dance with Simba before the sun warms the topmost branches of the fever tree today. They say if they don’t famine is gonna dry up the dugs of our mothers and pestilence will blind our eyes with scabs. It’s got a touchy feel to it, Albie. I may need some help.”

I replayed the report in my head, probing for traps. It sounded straight, but just to be sure I asked: “Did anyone ask for me personally, Jer?”

“Huh? No, I just thought you oughtta know.”

“Fair enough,” I said. Jerry was a person I could trust; a good dick. “Call Negotiations on one-five and have them send one of their people. No, better make it two: one cultural and one religious. That’d be Doctor Fred and The One Who Swallows Like a Giraffe (Slowly). Clear the area and don’t be

afraid to do some dealing yourself, until the others get there. Give 'em a couple of crocs if you think you need to buy time; I'll square it with the Merchandise Manager. The main thing is, don't let them get a hand on Simba. That's an order, Jer."

"Roger, Albie."

"Good dick." I hung up, feeling better. It was a nice, restorative slug of down-to-earth reality: the first routine event of the day.

Emma ankled in with the coffee and pastries. "All yours, toots," I said. "No breaks for the wicked today." She seemed to start at the sound of my voice, and when I looked that something I'd seen before was back in her eyes.

"Holy Toledo," she cracked. "Another day at the Big Store, eh?"

"Unh-huh," I said. Now it was gone again, leaving behind only a faint, warning tingle on my nerve endings, as nebulous as an echo. I let it pass. How do you figure a dame anyway?

"By the way," Emma said, "I passed Harry on the escalator just now. He was on the way to Pharmaceuticals. Some geek's loose down there with a vial of VH 79/80."

"The lupus culture?"

She nodded. "The one that's on special this week. He used a micro-charge to blow a hole in the ventilation shaft and now he says he'll dump the germs in unless the store hires no fewer than four hundred ethnic Taiwanese in positions of Assistant Buyer and above."

"Jesus," I said, "if he does, there won't be a nose left in the whole Arcopolis by Thanksgiving. What's Harry doing?"

"Negotiating, what else?"

I couldn't let it go by. "Did anyone ask for me personally?" I asked.

She flashed me a look I couldn't interpret. "No," she answered. "All Harry said was, 'Tell Alf if you see 'im.'" Her imitation of Harry's brisk drawl was exquisite; but then, everything Emma did was exquisite.

"Harry's a good dick," I said. "Anything else?"

Some sudden impulse seemed to press her mouth open, but she caught it and shrugged it away. "I guess not," she said.

"Okay," I said, heading for the door. "Ciao." I didn't have time to harvest ambiguities; for better or for worse, I had a caper to track.

I didn't have to wait long for the break. I was approaching the down escalator on forty-five when a voice somewhere in the neighborhood of my left elbow rasped out, "Well well well, Aloysius my lad. How's your good-self this fine business day?" I turned to face the shriveled bonhomie of George (Yankee) Dougal Bludgin himself, the oldtime drygoods merchant who, more than two-thirds of a century earlier, had joined up with the late J.H.S. Griffin to found the Big Store. Though officially retired, Bludgin

continued to visit the premises daily, a wire-rimmed, sleeve-gartered wraith who doddered about the shop annoying the employees with his platitudes and kibitzing. Still, he was a spunky old jasper, and I rather liked him, though I didn't have time for his digressions today. I bade him Good Morning as noncommittally as I could and hastened on toward the escalator.

He wasn't going to let me pass that easily. "There there," he croaked heartily, hooking a claw into my sleeve. "None of that Mister Bludgin stuff with us, Aloysius. The name's Yank, to you. Call me anything but don't call me late to supper, eh?" He winked stickily up at me and spread his wattles in a grin. "You're just the feller I was looking for, by golly, and with your kind indulgence I'll just perambulate along with you for a quick nonce. After you, sir. After you." He shooed me ahead of him onto the escalator and sidled on three steps behind, which put our heads at the same level as we descended. "Yes sir," he said, "just the feller. I come to you with a proposition, Aloysius, and I'd wager cheese against chalk it'll be manna to your ears. But don't let me entice you; the product has to sell itself, whether it's birdseed, barley or buttonholes. Are you game, sir?" His head bobbed toward me like an egg in boiling water. I kept my face straight to hide my impatience. "Fair enough," Bludgin continued. "Grant him the open door and the crackerjack salesman can find his own way into the parlor. I won't mince words now. The nut of it is—oh here, let's go around again, what say?"

We had reached the bottom of the escalator, and he scuttled around and mounted the adjacent, ascending stairs. I tagged along, wondering where he was leading me. "Up up, eh?" he beamed moistly. "The appropriate direction for positive cogitation. You know the expression, up and coming? The ambitious man builds his house on the hilltop, to show the world his eye is on the heights. Ha. Sleep with a pillow, lad. The sludge won't collect in your cranium while you're banking your fires. Up up. Where was I?" He tapped his temple with an index finger you could clean pipestems with. "Ah yes," he said. "We've had our eye on you for some time, Aloysius. We've observed your *modus operandi* and perused your *curriculum vitae*. By the bye, you're not Italian, are you?"

I felt myself draw a sharp breath. The familiar tune was sounding in my head again, with a variation that made my suspicions dance: the *they* employed by the others—Louise, Lord Peter, Ossa—had become *we* in Bludgin's gummy ramblings. If the transition was true, it could be my chance to unlock the libretto and see how the final scenes were writ, and in whose hand. I listened as the old drummer rattled on.

"Back in my day," he said, "all the ace dicks were Irish. Nowadays any jackanapes with a taste for the iron figures he has the stuff. Takes more than that, as you well know. You're a man who knows how to keep his bib

and tucker shiny. I'll talk turkey with you, Aloysius. I'm an octogenarian, but if I was in your shoes I'd grab temptation by the throat and waltz her into the boudoir. Here here, after you."

We made the turnaround and got back onto the down escalator. Bludgin's breathing had become slightly labored, but his words hit me like darts from a blowgun. It was all I could do to keep from grabbing him and shaking the punchline from him. "We've got plans for you, lad," he said. "We know you work alone and keep your own counsel, and that's a fine thing. Self-reliance is something they used to teach in the old school, but it seems to be something they've dropped from the syllabus since I took my BHK—that's Bachelor of Hard Knocks. Nevertheless, the solitary man is vulnerable. You march too long to your own drummer and pretty soon you're out of step. Mrs. Bludgin—God rest her—used to say to me, she'd say . . . *herrrk* . . ." He gasped and began to change color. His hands made a couple of weak forays against his stiff collar, like mice trying to climb out of a cast-iron bathtub. He fell forward into my arms.

I carried him off the escalator and laid him on the floor, cradling his head in my hands. His breath was misfiring and his eyes were rolled up under their lids. Life had already decamped from his old carcass and death was installing its own effects. "Yank," I said, "tell me, quick. Who's behind you? What's the caper? Why me? Who's offended?" I bent my ear to his mouth but there was no sound there except the wintry sussurrus of his failing breath, sweetened by Sen-Sen. "Yank," I cried, shaking the old egg. His lips moved. "Blueballs," he gasped, and died.

As a crowd gathered around us, I crouched over the corpse and tried to assess my situation. It was no surprise that I was up against collective opposition. Hell, you might say that's the story of post-industrial society. But what did they want? Unless I could answer that, my chances of thwarting their caper were no better than the odds on a one-legged man in an ass-kicking match. So far they'd tried to bribe me and buy me, and all I'd learned from it was that I was a target. "They"—or "we"—were after *me*. Or were they? The only real proof was in my own feelings, which were real enough to me, all right, but so what? Subjective reality won't even buy you a cup of ersatz java, at the Big Store. I could feel the sweat breaking out on my brow, and my head began to swim. This was like trying to arm-wrestle with a *Zeitgeist*. I had to get someplace where I could think.

I stood and muscled my way out through the crowd. I grabbed a house phone and told the operator to send a cleanup crew. The operator told me to hold on; someone was trying to reach me. I would have hung up, but the connection was already made and a familiar voice was hissing in my ear.

"Mister Alphonse?" the voice said, with a whistle around the esses.

"Is that you, Roy?"

"It's me, Mister Alphonse," he said. "Roy, the elevator boy." All the way

down at the bottom of the Arcopolis, beneath the automatic high-speed elevators, paternosters, pneumotubes, moving ramps, escalators, funiculars, tracked vehicles and molecular transit cabins that held the place together, was the solitary Otis elevator which Roy had been driving for more than sixty years. It lurched and wheezed like an asthmatic acrobat and reached no higher than the sixteenth floor of the Big Store, and its continued service could be explained only as an uncharacteristic gesture of sentiment by management to Roy and to the store's oldest customers, for whom there was also maintained a token stock of goods in whalebone and genuine leather.

"How's life, Roy," I said, "still got its ups and downs?" If I hadn't said it, he would have.

"I'm stuck, M-mister Alphonse," he croaked. The catch in his voice could have been fear, fatigue or famine, but it was somehow familiar enough to force caution on me.

"I'll bite," I said. "What's holding you up?"

"M-me and the Otis, we're jammed, M-mister Alphonse," he said. His voice dropped to a whisper. "And get this one: I d-don't even know where. Hell's bells. I got to keep my voice down, so as not to spread any doom amongst the passengers, b-but I'm making no secret of the fact this is a new one on m-me. Sixty-two years and you see a lot. M-malfunction, sure. Even a streamline rig like the Otis gets weary. Who don't? P-perfection's the dream of youth. Jesus, can you f-figure it? I'm luh . . . I'm luh . . . I'm luh . . ."

"Roy?"

"I'm *lost*, Mister Alphonse."

"Who isn't," I said, only half to myself. My heart went out to the old boy. Like me, he was a loner, a free-lance. It was a bad day for our kind.

"Mister Alphonse," he whispered, the fear rustling in his voice like a black widow spider in a cellophane bag, "I'm on thirteen."

My ear did a double-take. "But Roy—" I started to say.

"M-mister Alphonse," he interrupted, "THERE IS NO THIRTEENTH FLOOR!" As his voice rose, it was joined in its ascent by a crescendo of muttering in the background. I heard: "How's that?" and "Queen? Queen?" and then Roy, saying "Face the front of the car, please." The background noise died away.

"Roy," I said, "are you sure?"

"Mister Alphonse," he answered with weary dignity, "I've been squeezing up and down the same shaft for sixty-two years, like the senior citizen said to his childhood sweetheart. Now all of a sudden there's a set of doors with a big red thirteen on them that was never there before. You tell me."

"Well, why don't you—"

"Open them? Look here, young man, I've got passengers aboard. All right, if it was me alone, I'd say, well Roy, this is it. You overshot a few, you

shortstopped some more, and now you made it square to thirteen, everybody out. That's what I'd say. But Mister Alphonse, some of these poopsies have been riding with me for a golden half a century. They trust me like the church or synagogue of their choice. I ask you, how can I discharge them here, where every elevator boy ever born of woman knows your thirteenth floor is the horizontal shaft that runs right off the edge of life. It's the last stop, all off, don't crowd. It's your coffin, Mister Alphonse. Your coffin. I'd sooner strap them to my back and go hand over hand up the cable to safety, like I did in thirty-three, before you were even whelped. Yes, by Jesus, I would. But you know," he added, his voice tightening, "I don't think I got a cable any more. I think I'm in the wrong hole. I think—hell's bells, I don't know what to think, Mister Alphonse. I need help."

I didn't hesitate. I couldn't, even though suspicion was hammering on me with a stroke that said: set-up. "Hang on, Roy boy," I said. "We'll find you and get you home safe." I didn't know how I'd do it, but I knew I had to; that proud old man was my ticket to self-respect.

"Mister Alphonse," his voice rose and scolded, "I didn't ask for no *we*. I wanted a *we*, I'da called up Jack over at maintenance and then sat around three days while him and that Franco formed up a committee and took a vote on what to do. You can't get piss poured out of a boot nowadays until you've got consensus and social guidelines. I know about that. I called *you*, Mister Alphonse, 'cause I need action, fast and independent, and that's your style. Don't let me down son, or . . ." His voice trailed off in a sigh that held every one of his years.

My ears sizzled. I hadn't heard it myself, but the old fox had pounced on the collective pronoun as if I'd tied bright feathers to it. "*Touché*," I growled. "You just keep your passengers sweet until I get there."

"Yes *sir*," Roy fluted. "We'll get going on a word game, maybe a song-sing. I dunno; sometimes *in extremis* a group'll take to confessional reminiscence. Sometimes a star is born. We'll see. Leave it to me, Mister Alphonse." There was a new lilt in his voice which struck me as somehow incongruous; it was almost feminine.

"Good man," I said, and hung up. A vagrant impulse scratched at the back door of my mind: to call Emma with a quick fill-in. I shut it out in an instant. This was no time to play footsie with organizational responsibility. I had to play the hand I held or fold the game.

I used the bypass key to unlatch the elevator doors on fifteen and leaned into the shaft, beaming my flashlight down into the gloom. The hole was as bleak as an amputee's sleeve, with no sign of Roy's car or even the cable on which it depended. The guide rails were dull and fuzzy with dust and two stories overhead the pulleys and drive wheels sat uselessly, like teeth on a dresser. Spider webs festooned the counterweight track on the facing wall. I might have been a relic hunter unsealing a Biblical-era catacomb, except

that the old sarcophagi don't sing and from somewhere below me I could piece out the sounds of a measly chorus. It was barely audible in the tumult of the Big Store, but there it was, a thin, quavering "Nearer My God to Thee." It was all the invitation I needed.

Two feet to the left of the doors, a narrow iron ladder was set into a recessed channel in the wall of the shaft. I swung aboard and kicked the doors closed. The noise of the store faded and the singing became more distinct, changing now to "Row Row Row Your Boat," as a three-part round. I switched off the flashlight and stuck it in my pocket, and began to hum along, adding a fourth part. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I started down.

At first I lowered myself with exaggerated caution, as though slipping into bed with a couple of scorpions, but then I found a rhythm of descent that soothed me. When he's on a caper, a good dick is like a good reporter; all of his senses are focused on the who, what, when, where, how and why. But when the action starts, the dick shuts off the distractions and concentrates on his body, and that's what I did now. Let my unfathomed adversaries do the puzzling for a change; I was alone, the way I liked it. No phantoms for me; just the rusty grit on the ladder rungs, the pleasant muscle strainings in my shoulders and forearms, the pressure of my .38 against my thigh, my animal motion. And somewhere in the background a song: *Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare*, to let me know that Roy was keeping up his end of the bargain.

Then, without warning, my foot hit the roof of the elevator car.

As if a plug had been pulled, the singing stopped in mid-phrase. I tested my weight on the roof and found it would hold me. "Roy?" I called, letting go of the ladder.

"Mister Alphonse?" came the answering shout from below.

"Everything's jake," I shouted, and it was, too, for just about as long as it took to say so, until another voice—not Roy's, but a voice even more familiar than Roy's—said, "Wait a sec," and something happened under my feet.

I once knew an old dick named Hartman, who used to say, "Some days you crack the case, and some days the case cracks you." He left out those days when it all happens at once. Like today.

A hatch in the roof of the elevator car swung open beneath me and I found myself on top of ten feet of open space. On my way through it, I extemporized some maneuvers for which the Olympic free-diving judges have no grades, with a boffo finale that consisted of landing on the back of my neck with all of my hundred and ninety-seven heavier-than-air pounds. As the roar of an appreciative crowd thundered in my ears, I *gracefully* lost consciousness.

Some time later the rabble got whipped into line and began chanting my

name. "*Per-ry Per-ry Per-ry*," they chorused, which was puzzling; nobody had called me Perry for years. I'd even managed to break my mother of the habit, though she slipped once or twice at the end. I raised up on my elbows to try to get a better perspective on the testimonial, and as I did the audience dispersed into an invisible distance, leaving behind a solitary cheerleader who bent over me and said, "Perry? Are you all right? Perry?"

It was Emma.

"Toots," I said, shaking my head.

"Are you all right?"

"Copacetic," I managed, but I had to close my eyes again. What in the name of Spade was going on? This was no elevator car I found myself in; it was a green, grassy field dappled with white flowers. Nearby, birds sang in a leafy shade tree which had a swing hanging from one of its lower branches, and on the other side of the house a creek burred merrily. The house! It gleamed like a peeled egg beneath the cloudless sky, and through an open upstairs window a lace curtain, tickled by the warm breeze, beckoned to me with a gesture that I recognized as concupiscent. That would be our bedroom, I realized.

Emma touched my face. "Poor baby," she said. "That was quite a tumble. If you don't feel up to it, we can just lie quietly and be close. The kids won't be home until suppertime." As if cued by her words, a sweet scent tweaked my nostrils: apple pie, cooling on a kitchen windowsill. "Your favorite," Emma whispered. She kissed my ear. "Let's go inside," she purred.

I shook her off and stumbled to my feet, holding my head. I needed to think, to evaluate the situation, but all that occurred to me were the sensations of this place. "Just feel it," said Emma. "Isn't it ideal?" "Ideal?" I said. "I don't know." For no reason I was smiling. I put my hand over my mouth. Confusion lashed around inside me like the tail of a giant lizard beset by fire ants. "What an ugly image," Emma said, making a face. I registered the face; it was a mock expression of fear. Fear. That seemed right. I felt afraid. "You don't have to be," Emma said. How did she know? Unless . . .

I closed my eyes again, but nothing went away. I was shorn of my own reality, straining to find a handle, a tool, something . . .

"Perry, don't," Emma said gently.

A word jumped to my lips and I snapped at it like a trout rising to a fly. "Al," I said.

A sudden, small chill fluttered in the breeze.

"Perry, *darling*." Her arms went around me and her lips found the side of my throat.

"Al," I said, louder this time. "I'm the one called Al." It raised gooseflesh on her bare arms. "Yeah," I said, "Al. The dick. The solo operator." It started to get easier, as one word drew another behind it. "The shamus," I said, as a cloud passed in front of the sun.

“No,” Emma cried, grinding her body against me. “Look at me, Perry. You mustn’t. You don’t know—”

I twisted away from her. “Ixnay, toots,” I said. “You got the wrong patsy. If you want Perry, look in the herd where the rest of them are: the Perrys, the Barrys, the Jerrys, the Carys, the Larrys, the organization types. But don’t look for me there, because I’m my own organization, baby, overlord and underling, the whole lineup complete in one slightly shredded package, but free to roll like a billiard ball, to carom and kiss and roll away. . . .” I was babbling now, because I knew I had to. I had to keep my thoughts obscured, and inane spontaneous verbiage was the nearest opaque material at hand. So I kept on talking, tough and sassy the way a dick talks, because now I knew where I was.

“You’re *home*,” Emma pleaded. “Where you *belong*. Where you’re loved and needed and—”

“Put a belt on it, sister,” I snarled. “You don’t have to tell me where I am. Roy gave me that much. Thirteen, he called it, and now it’s coming back like a song. Thirteen. In the old days they called it Notions. Counters stacked high with ideals, promises, humours, hot flashes, aspirations, hobgoblins, the whole *megilleh*. In the Thirties the big item was Pie in the Sky. In the Forties, Doing Your Part was a sellout, and there were always specials on things like Zip Your Lip and Four Freedoms for the price of three. Get the picture? The old-timers’ll tell you the Big Store was never bigger than it was then.

“But something queered the deal. The department got overbought in imports, and the goods went stale on the shelves, and before they knew it every corner stunk of Red Menace and a Doomsday Culture got into the carpeting. You couldn’t bring the customers in with grappling hooks; they were wary as a turkey the day before Thanksgiving. So management did the only sensible thing. They closed down the department and sealed off the floor. Sure, some of the goods were still salable—things like Pressure to Conform, and Getting in Touch with Your Feelings—so they spread them around in little boutiques all over the Arcopolis. Funny how I forgot about it, or maybe not so funny. I’d guess you had it figured pretty close. All those mugs of yours throwing around the ‘theys’ and ‘wes’—just the thing to fire up the gas under my paranoia. Everything pointed to a collective enemy.

“Then you hit me with Roy, and you knew I’d jump. Hell, he’s as real as they come, one of those spunky old loners they just don’t make any more, all spit and elbow grease. If he said there was no thirteenth floor, I was primed to buy it without question. It never occurred to me that not only was there a thirteenth floor but by now all the old virulent strains would have died off, and anyone with a passkey could move in and set up shop with his—or her—own fantasies. It was slick, toots. Damn slick.”

Emma sobbed once. "I think your word was 'exquisite,' Alejandro," she said. "I appreciated that coming from you. I really did."

I opened my eyes.

The country of Emma's fantasy had disappeared and we were back inside an elevator car. Emma stood against the back wall, wiping away the tears. At my shoulder were two steel doors, closed tight. A big red 13 was painted across them.

"You ought to know," Emma said, "that Roy wasn't in on it. He got fifty dollars and a ticket to the dog track delivered with his milk this morning." She switched into Roy's voice. "He's gone to the doggies, Mister Alphonse," she wheezed. I grinned, this time because I felt like it.

"What about the rest of your little repertory company?" I said. "I can figure Louise and the junky and those two goombahs—they were all fresh out of the plea-bargaining tank—but what about old Bludgin? Was he terminal or something?"

"Just an old drummer making his final pitch," she said. She smiled sadly. "He was so tickled to get a chance to push something he really believed in again, that . . . well, I guess he didn't mind giving it everything he had. He really admired you a lot."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

Her eyes flashed angrily. "You fool," she said. "Why do you think I dragged you down here?"

"Never mind that," I said. I knew why. The scent of the apple pie was still fresh in my nose, to remind me how compelling Emma's ideal of romance was to me. No use retracing that ground, or I might get sucked in for good. After all, people are forever trying to wrap you in the cloak of their own sentimentality; who's to say that just one time it might not fit?

"You're wrong," Emma said. "Oh, I had my own reasons for doing it this way. Hell, I know what's beneath your shell of solitude, toots. I know there's compassion there, and tenderness, and heaven knows I can always use a little more of that. But that's not why I did it."

"Okay," I said. I could accept the correction, because it didn't matter. I leaned against the doors and lipped a Camel out of the pack, while Emma kept on talking. They were going to get me, she said. I snapped a Blue Tip into flame with my thumbnail. She just wanted to get me out of their sight for a while, she said. I pulled my fedora low on my forehead. The smoke rasped across my eyes like emery board. They wanted to promote me, she said. Or maybe it was demote me? They wanted me to be Perry again. Or maybe not. It was like the old song. Tulip or Turnip. Rosebud or Rhubarb. I could be either; I could be both. Whatever, it would still be me. I flipped up the collar of my trench coat and tugged the belt tight.

I opened the doors.

Outside, the dark streets glistened, their puddles reflecting the halos

gathered by the streetlights in the evening fog. The only sounds were the muffled peals of the buoys in the harbor, and the mournful hoot of a ship's horn somewhere out on the bay.

Emma touched my sleeve. "Al," she said, "let me . . ."

I tapped her under the chin, gently. "Sorry, kid," I said.

"Can't take the sunshine, huh?" Her smile flickered like a candle in a birdcage, but she managed to hold onto it. She had that kind of style.

"Maybe next time," I said. I owed her that much.

Her lips brushed my cheek. "So long sucker," she said. "See you in the funny papers." She turned away.

"Ten-four," I answered softly. And as the elevator doors eased shut behind me, I stepped out into the hostile night, back on the wire I walk all the time, all by myself. It's the only way for me. I'm a dick, at the Big Store.

POETRY / HUGO, MERWIN, WRIGHT,
McPHERSON, BOOTH, PASTAN, GOLDBARTH

White Center / Richard Hugo

Town or poem, I don't care how it looks. Old woman
take my hand and we'll walk one more time these streets
I believed marked me weak beneath catcalling clouds.
Long ago, the swamp behind the single row of stores
was filled and seeded. Roses today where Toughy Hassin
slapped my face to the grinning delight of his gang.
I didn't cry or run. Had I fought him
I'd have been beaten and come home bloody in tears
and you'd have told me I shouldn't be fighting.

Wasn't it all degrading, mean Mr. Kyte sweeping
the streets for no pay, believing what he'd learned
as a boy in England: this is your community?
I taunted him to rage, then ran. Is this the day
we call bad mothers out of the taverns and point them
sobbing for home, or issue costumes to posturing clowns
in the streets, make fun of drunk barbers, and hope