

Cooling Off · J.M. McCool

THE FLATBED TRUCK pulled to the edge of the lot. The Sales Manager, an over-anxious man in his late forties, spoke to the driver: "Could y'all pull it up so theyg'n see ya' from the highway?" It was before noon, but his face and neck shone with sweat.

The driver cursed under his breath and pulled to the spot where the Sales Manager indicated. "Perfect, full sun seven hours a day, and the vultures already gathering."

The assistant spoke up through gapped yellow teeth: "Easy, just back in there at an angle and we can set up a shade for the compressor."

The young woman sat between them and looked at the faces of the people who had heard about them on the radio. "You shouldn't keep calling them vultures. It's bad luck. They're looking for something beyond the range of their own lives, and we give it to them."

"Right. It's already ninety-five. They look like sweaty pork in polaroid sunglasses." He was thirty-five, nervous, reaching for the pack of cigarettes on the dash, thinking give them beyond the short range of their own lives but you haven't given me in weeks, Little Rock three days then on the road too hot, and your period before Mobile and three days there and two days on the road only one time when he was asleep hadn't touched you in so long it was over in ten seconds

The assistant stepped off the truck before it had stopped, and directed the driver with quick motions of his wiry arms. He was past sixty, but didn't show it unless he grinned.

The young woman touched the driver's arm. She studied his eyes and the line of his nose as he watched the gathering crowd. The cigarette hung unlit from his lips. "We can take some time off soon. It's not that bad, honey. We're saving a lot, before the season's out we'll have enough to take off. I jus' wish you wouldn't get so despondent."

He took the cigarette from his lips and looked at her. "I'm tired of it, all these hot little towns the faces beginning to look the same as though we hadn't moved at all, two three days you're under glass, then we drive till my back melts. I'm sick of these hot bloated faces town after town, these asphalt car lots—"

"All right! Don't get started. The season's nearly over and it's been good. We can be together. Stop in one spot for awhile. Jus' don't torment yourself. We're doing all *right*." She laced her fingers into his, and squeezed.

He gave her a tentative smile and lit his cigarette, inhaling too deep. "It's OK," talking through his smoke, "we never see each other anymore unless we're driving. It's getting to me."

"I know, honey. And it's been so hot this year." She watched him, reassured. "Go to town, find some novels. Something to occupy your mind. We'll be together soon." She stepped out of the cab and folded down the stairs that led into the small sleeping compartment.

The crowd watched her, the men craning their necks to see her young legs in the cut-off blue jeans, the children asking if she's the one, that's gonna' get frozen. The Sales Manager stepped towards her to speak, but she was already inside the sleeper, smiling briefly at him and closing the door.

The driver leaned back and inhaled his cigarette in desperate puffs. He could hear her moving around inside the sleeper. He imagined her undressing and putting on the bikini she wore when she was frozen, thinking haven't touched you in weeks except that once too short, something to occupy my mind while you're dreaming ice, something to keep my mind off the heat like a yellow fist while you're dreaming ice for three days, I'm out here talking to the faces beginning to look the same in every town, pink bacon-faces, goddammit you don't have to sit out here and listen to them clucking the thousand slurred versions of the same questions over and over and

He was interrupted by the sound of the assistant opening and closing the doors on the compressor. The Sales Manager leaned into the cab: "I guess you're Doug Barnes. I'm Hank Staples," shaking his hand. "We got yer 220 cables. How quick you think y'all can get set up? We got your P.A. system like you said." He glanced nervously at the crowd and back again at the driver. He was anxious for this stunt to be a success, so the owner would feel justified in the money he was spending to get them to come. It was the most the dealership had ever spent for publicity, and he felt the responsibility of it like a tumor in his throat. "We were hoping y'all could get set up by noon."

"Well Hank, in this heat it'll take at least an hour to cool the freezer to ten below. By then you'll have sold a couple of station wagons. And the crowd always loves the suspense of standing around in this heat. By one o'clock, if we're lucky." He finished his cigarette too fast, watching sweat move like hot oil across the Sales Manager's face, thinking christ you're a walking stroke, deliver me from the pork-sweating faces the rank breath like entrails in the sun deliver me from these dog-days on asphalt

"One o'clock's fine, Mr. Barnes. Between you'n me, what's the *trick*? That little lady dudn' really freeze herself, does she?"

"It's no trick, Hank. You're paying for the real thing, just between you and me. Could we get that out of the way, our check?"

The Sales Manager handed him the envelope. "We heard y'all did three days over in Shreveport, we were wondr'n if y'all could maybe do *four* for us, since the dealership's so much bigger. We could pay you extra."

The driver grinned. "It's not something you can *abuse*, Hank. Three days is a *long* time." He looked at the check and folded it into his wallet.

“We could pay you another thousand for the extra day.”

The driver shook his head. Behind them the assistant was starting the compressor.

The Sales Manager watched the door of the sleeper open as the young woman stepped down the ladder, wearing a bathrobe over her bikini.

“I’ll go for five days if he doubles the check. We could knock off earlier at the end of the season.”

The driver looked at her with his eyes bulging, shaking his head and reaching for his cigarettes. “Well Hank, d’ja hear that?”

“Um *Hmm*. Yes m’am, you must be Ms. Barnes, I’m pleased ta’ meet you. I’m Hank Staples, Sales Manager here at Dodge Village. Five days would put it Sunday afternoon. Lemme’ go talk t’tha boss.” He winked assuringly.

“Maybe you could show me where the ladies’ room is?”

“Yes m’am, yes m’am.” The sight of her naval brought a greenish flush to his throat. He led her away, puffing and sweating. The crowd parted to let them pass, then closed in again to watch the assistant as he moved around on the back of the truck, manipulating valves and running his rag over the stainless steel surface of the freezer.

The driver stepped out of the cab and walked around the truck, pretending to ignore the crowd but feeling their eyes on him like fishhooks. He spoke a little loud to the assistant, so the crowd wouldn’t miss it: “She wants to go for *five* days.”

The assistant didn’t look up, wiping fingerprints from the six-inch square window on the door of the freezer. “In this heat the compressor won’t stand more than three or four days.”

“That’s what I was hoping. How’s the oxygen?”

The crowd had begun to buzz at the mention of five days, and the word oxygen was like an invocation.

“We’ve got enough. *We could* set up a big fan, blow across the compressor. Once the box is cooled it doesn’t take that much to keep it down. Big fan might do it. Did they offer extra?”

“She told them to double the check. Hope they can’t afford it.”

“That extra’d be nice, if she’s willing to go for it. We could get some tires.” He stepped down and walked around to the front of the truck. He lifted the hood and checked the oil.

The driver leaned down, so the crowd couldn’t hear. “Christ Wib, a set of tires! Five days! I’ll forget what she looks like!”

“Doubt that. Relax, she’s the one who has to do it. Our part is easy.” He checked the fanbelt. The engine was ten years old, but he kept it immaculate.

“But *five* days, Wib! Three’s hard enough, but *five*?”

“Just take it easy, kid. You’ve got it good. Anyone in the crowd would jump at the chance to take your place.”

“Not if they knew how long I have to wait between places.”

“The season’s nearly over. Few weeks, you can have your fill. Silly to torment yourself.” He closed the hood and wiped his hands. “Keep busy. Don’t think so much.”

The driver looked across the asphalt at the heat simmering up, the unlit cigarette drooping from his mouth. The Sales Manager stepped out of the showroom and walked towards them, holding another envelope. The sun reflected in bright splashes on his bare scalp. He stepped through the crowd and handed him the envelope: “Yep, owner thinks it’s a great idea. Prob’ly a record, huh? Five days!” He glanced approvingly at the crowd, doubled since the truck’s arrival.

“A record. Hank, meet Uncle Wib. He’s our *engineer*. He says for five days you’ll need to set up a strong fan in front of the compressor, so it won’t overheat.”

“Yes sir, pleased ta’ meet ya’ Wib. We’ll get one of the boys to set up that fan.” They shook hands. “Yes sir, anything y’all need, jes help yourself. There’s cokes and coffee in the showroom. There’s a shower in the ladies’ room, if y’all need it.”

The assistant smiled his yellow gapped teeth and walked around to the back of the truck. The Sales Manager nodded and glanced towards the showroom. The young woman stepped out into the bright sun and walked towards them. The driver watched her through the heatwaves, the young legs moving under the bathrobe, the face shimmering out of focus. Through the heat he could see the brief flash of her smile when she saw him looking.

The Sales Manager held his breath as she approached, his nervous gaze searching for that flash of naval. It came at last, and he swallowed. “Yes m’am, owner thinks five days is fine. Phone’s been ring’n off the hook!” He laughed in a dry retch, passing his handkerchief ineffectually across his shiny face.

The driver watched him sideways, thinking you look like exploding, bacon-shrapnel, too long in the sun you’ll burst like a watermelon, cash our checks before the sun closes your account . . . “A good investment, Hank,” smiling over the crowd, as though he stood on stage. “By Sunday, they’ll drive a *hundred* miles to your lot, and you can steer at least a few of them into new cars. You’ll be part of history, Hank!”

“Well, we got radio stations in four counties running the ad, once ever’ hafe hour.”

“You’ve covered thousands of square miles, Hank. When they hear it’s five days instead of three, they’ll come on buses!”

The young woman stepped past them, smiling briefly at the Sales Manager and rolling her eyes at the driver to shut up. She climbed into the sleeper, leaving the door open for him to follow.

He stepped up through the door, turning around to face the Sales Manager

and the crowd: "It'll be magnificent, Hank. In this heat they'll swarm like locusts. You wanna' get that fan set up immediately?"

The Sales Manager nodded and puffed away. The crowd squinted to get a look inside the sleeper, as though it held the secret. The driver smiled over their heads and closed the door.

She sat on the narrow bed and rubbed oil into her skin with a cotton ball, wiping it over her closed eyelids and behind her ears and under her nose, tipping frequently from the brown glass bottle. "Your sarcasm's gonna' get your teeth kicked in. They're not so dumb they can't tell you're making fun of them."

"Yeah. They're smart enough to stand in the sun and envy this air-conditioned closet with a bed. They're smart enough not to miss you while you're gone. Five days this time."

"I wish it passed as quickly for you as it will for me. If you could just get your mind off it."

"Yeah, well I can't. I pass the meat counter in the store and turn away for fear I'll see you lying among the cuts. Five days is ridiculous. I can't sleep when you're in there, every little noise, the compressor changing key—" as he spoke the compressor changed key, signal that the box had cooled to ten below,—"—five days! Five nights on hot asphalt with—."

The assistant tapped on the door and stuck his head in, winking: "So it's five days? Are ya' *sure*?"

"Yes Wib." She reached out to touch him on the arm. "I'm strong."

He nodded, flashing gapped teeth at the driver. "You ready kid?"

He stared at a spot on the wall, thinking proving my own impotence to change the situation by pretending till the last moment that I can say something that will stop it "Yep, I'm ready. Microphone?"

"It's all set up. Hank's hemorrhaging to make his speech." He leaned out and closed the door.

The young woman watched herself in the mirror and rubbed oil into her ears and nostrils with the moistened tips of her little fingers. "You should get with Wib, drink some beer." She leaned towards him and kissed him with her lips pursed, so the oil wouldn't get on his lips. "It'll be fine. You can go into town'n get us some books."

To keep her from worrying he smiled over his dread. "There might be a good movie in range. I watched Doctor Zhivago fourteen times in that town with the copper streetlights, thought I was coming down with a cold." He brushed up his hair and reached under the bed for the white patent leather shoes with the pointed toes, thinking it made her laugh a little maybe she won't worry "In weather like this I could use a Doctor Zhivago." He changed his shirt, remembering a movie he'd seen in which an oily woman had been rapturously penetrated by siamese twin males simultaneously. He

adjusted his pants and sat next to her, leaning over to slip on the white shoes and watching her rub the oil into her knees and thighs.

"It'll be fine, honey. Tell Wib to bring up the oxygen one or two per cent on the fifth day."

He nodded thinking haven't touched you since that once like a firecracker "Two per cent." He checked himself in the mirror. "Guess I'll see you in five days, try to write." He opened the door, waiting until she'd laughed a little, thinking it's not right to worry you, in five days no worried dreams

She closed her eyes. "Give me five minutes."

"OK. Sweet dreams." He stepped down the ladder and closed the door, taking a deep breath. The crowd looked so much like pigs he couldn't look at their faces without laughing.

In front of the compressor a giant fan roared like an airplane. He walked around and climbed up onto the tailgate behind the freezer.

The assistant stood looking at the oxygen gauge, squinting in the noonday glare. They both avoided looking at the Sales Manager, who stood in front of the crowd trying to catch their eye, and holding the microphone out in front of himself like a gun.

The driver put his fingers on the valves and pretended to make adjustments, because he knew the crowd expected it. He wanted a cigarette. "She's depending on you Wib, to get me drunk. She thinks it might help," speaking into his ear so the crowd couldn't hear, tantalizing them. "She'll be ready in a minute, then you and I can sit on the asphalt shore drinking beer til the world recedes to a dull roar."

The assistant wiped his quick rag over the faces of the meters. "You'd better let him start, before he busts," moving his eye towards the Sales Manager. He moved his rag over the stainless steel, waiting until the crowd became impatient before touching valves and making confident motions he knew would stir their curiosity. The driver turned to the Sales Manager with a quick nod.

At once the speakers exploded, welcoming everybody to the cooling off sale down here at Dodge Village. He spoke about the heat, free cokes and watermelon, and the advisability of buying *now*. The driver tried not to listen, thinking you didn't need to advertise on the radio everyone within a hundred miles can hear you, like a preacher reviving the backsliders, god if you'd just hold it a little farther from your mouth you're dripping oily sweat and tearing things in my head, god they can hear you in China

The Sales Manager spoke of station wagons and trucks, pointing left and right to the long ranks of vehicles obliquely parked so their colors displayed facsimile rainbows.

The driver cleared his throat and allowed his eyes to pass quickly over the faces in the crowd, almost all of them staring at him in anticipation. A young

woman in yellow shorts stared, her mouth half-open, smiling. She stood in the front row with her legs slightly apart, and each time he glanced in her direction, their eyes met. She wouldn't look away but stared intensely, her smile deepening when she saw the color rising in his throat. He pulled his eyes away and swallowed, feeling nervous sweat trickle under his shirt. Above the roaring in his head he heard his name booming from the loudspeakers. The crowd applauded briefly, and the Sales Manager handed him the mike.

"Thank you, Hank. Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. I'd like to draw your attention to the window in the front of the freezer," sweeping his arm through the air and allowing his fingers to come to rest against the six-inch square of glass, covered now with frost. "I'd also like to ask, because of the fire hazard, that you refrain from smoking within fifty feet of the truck." He avoided looking at the front row, but he could feel her watching him. "The freezer has been cooled to ten degrees below zero. In a moment our friend will place herself in a profound hypnotic sleep and spend the next five days, in *here*," swinging open the steel door to reveal a frost-lined compartment, dark and narrow. Around the open door clouds of fog swirled convincingly, pouring down across the tailgate and condensing in mist on the pointed toes of his white shoes. He swung back the door and closed it firmly, so the crowd could hear the double click of the heavy latch. They were impressed.

"In case there are any of you who still imagine this is some kind of trick, I'd like to ask someone from the audience to step up and testify that the freezer is really as cold as we say."

The woman in yellow shorts moved towards the tailgate, but three children scrambled faster, one of them leaping first to stand beside him. He'd felt his throat tightening when she moved, her yellow shorts incandescent in the corner of his eye. He leaned down to the child. "Hi, what's your name?"

"Steve," grinning down at his taunting comrades.

"You having fun this summer, Steve?"

"Yessir," wiggling his toes on the hot metal of the tailgate.

"Steve, I wonder if I could get you to open this door and pull out that cot for me?" He helped him with the heavy latch, and held the door so the child could swing out the small cot on its aluminum wheels. "Is it cold in there, Steve?" He closed back the door.

"Yes sir!"

"Thanks Steve, you can jump down now," reaching into his pocket and handing him fifty cents. He glanced down. She hadn't taken her eyes off him.

"You heard him, ladies and gentlemen, it's cold in there. Ten degrees below zero."

The crowd murmured its approval. At a sign from the driver, the assistant stepped down and walked around to the sleeper, where he knocked three times. The door opened immediately, and the young woman stepped down the ladder,

oil glistening on her body. Women in the crowd watched her skeptically, but men whooped at her bikini, and craned their necks to see her oily legs. She walked quickly on her bare feet across the hot asphalt and stepped up onto the tailgate.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is Beatrice.”

They applauded, concealing loud whoops behind the clapping.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to ask that you remain silent for a moment, so that she can prepare herself.” He raised his right hand over his head, then brought it slowly down to rest his index finger across his lips. The crowd hushed, even the children.

She stretched out on the cot and closed her eyes.

“Are you ready, Beatrice?” whispering into the microphone. She didn’t move. He leaned close over her face and whispered again, “Are you ready, Beatrice?” She didn’t move. He nodded to the audience, “She’s sleeping deeply, ladies and gentlemen.” He glanced through the front row, but the woman in yellow shorts was gone. Feeling calmer, he opened the freezer door and rolled the cot slowly inside, watching the cold fog swirl across her oiled body. When he carefully closed and latched the door, the crowd made a humming noise, and when he fastened the heavy padlock into the latch, women and children held their hands against their open mouths.

“Five days, ladies and gentlemen,” looking at his watch. “That’s 1:04 pm, Sunday, August 29th, we’ll open this door and roll her out.” Across the lot he saw the yellow shorts getting into a yellow Ford. “Please feel free to step up on the tailgate and take a peek,” touching the frosted glass and watching the yellow Ford drift away. “You can see her in there sleeping at ten below zero, anytime you wish, day or night. Again, let me ask that you refrain from smoking within fifty feet of the truck, because of the extreme fire hazard. Thank you.” He handed the microphone down to the Sales Manager.

People clambered onto the tailgate to get a peek through the frosted glass at the young woman in the bikini. The driver watched them with a faint smirk on his lips, keeping his ears turned away from the nearest loudspeaker, which blared above the roaring fan. He smelled his own sweat blowing up through his clothes in hot waves, mingled with the smell of hot asphalt. He looked at his shoes, thinking god she watched me like I was a piece of raw meat hungry wolf-eyes not even blinking, my heart went crazy blue spots in my eyes from the dying heart’s last hot explosion, dog-days vampire on hot asphalt, something I conjured on a wave of poisonous sweat the heat burning the brain hot flakes peeling off in yellow-splashed visions it’s the heat He looked up the road in the direction she’d driven.

“OK kid, I’ll take the first shift.” The assistant stood by him wiping his hands and looking up the road in the same direction.

The driver couldn’t tell if he knew or not. “Thanks Wib. I’m not ready to

answer questions in this heat," glancing at the three or four anxious people he knew would pin him if he didn't leave at once. "I'll go bank these checks, pick up some food. Get you anything?"

"If it's not too far away, get me an ice cream."

"What kind?"

"Nuddie-Buddie."

* * *

Two days later the driver and the assistant sat with paper cups of beer, watching the copper sun go down beyond the dark edge of the world. The temperature had risen over a hundred by noon, but the huge fan kept the compressor cool enough. When the sun winked out and the flame of it was gone from their faces, they leaned back in their aluminum chairs and waited for that breath of coolness one expects after sunset. But the asphalt let go now of everything it had absorbed during the day, a palpable heat rising the moment the sun was gone, filling the murky air with dark ripples.

"Wib, this is one of the undiscovered rings of hell. We're hanging here in black-bottomed inferno of sulfurous heat and mosquito blood, beyond the range of the spotlight shining on her stainless steel crypt, blue-frosted semi-suicidal souls hanging in this stainless steel pocket above the asphalted floor of hell. Any minute, Hank will swing his evening orbit, one last wink at the lady in her bikini. Hank the Stroker, condemned to hang in his sweating husk until the sale of every car and truck on earth releases his soul. How much longer than five days *that* will take!"

"I'd think you got tired of talking, all those people asking you questions till your throat catches. Don't you ever let up?" The assistant thumped his arm and grinned, the gaps in his yellow teeth more noticeable in the evening light.

"That's a good one from you, Wib. You're a blur with a rag in its hand, ministering to a stainless steel monster, your uncannily insect sense of smell finding every speck of dirt and film and catching it in the quick motion of your rag. Even when you're sitting still I can feel you thinking up things to piddle with on the truck." His voice took on an incisive edge, tapping rancor he felt towards the assistant for his easy laugh and his disgusting ability to take life as it came. The assistant's gapped teeth inevitably reminded him of the intellectual dullness which irked him and the physical wisdom which he envied. In the embrace of beer, he felt remorse pumping into his lungs, seeing the creases in the assistant's eyes, the only sign that words had stung him.

"Shoulda' remembered beer oils your tongue. It wouldn't surprise me to see it jump right out of your mouth and fly off waggin'."

They both laughed. The assistant thumped him on the shoulder, creases gone from his laughing eyes.

They saw the yellow car pull up, the woman getting out, green shorts too tight. They stopped laughing and watched her step up on the tailgate. She bent over and peeked into the freezer window. The driver stared at her, thinking she can't see us out here in the dark her breasts pressed against the stainless steel

"She came by last night, too." The assistant watched him.

"What?"

"Around midnight, red shorts."

The driver tried to swallow.

"It's nine o'clock kid, I'm gonna' knock off awhile. Watch out you don't get your hand stuck in her pants," not smiling, steady gaze until the driver looked at him and shook his head: "If I sit out here in the dark she won't see me."

"She can smell you. Give me a yell if you need anything." He finished his beer, and walked across and climbed into the sleeper.

The driver sat beyond the circle of light holding his breath, hoping the young woman didn't feel his eyes on her. In the same instant he saw her straighten up from the window and turn to look directly at him. The arc-light gave her flesh a greenish cast, and twenty feet away she looked like a statue. She stood motionless, watching him, her mouth open. He could feel his eyes burning from staring too hard at the greenish flesh swelling from her shorts, the bare knees the out-sized breasts above the bare midriff, the smooth plane of flesh above the top of her blouse. He heard the Sales Manager shouting his name.

"*There* you are. The owner reminded me to tell you y'all can use one of the demonstrators if you want to go into town or anything. He's real pleased with the sale, wants ya' to know we appreciate y'all puttin' on such a good show."

"That's awful nice, Hank. We like to know we're giving people their money's worth."

"*Hay listen*, I sold seven trucks this afternoon, every one of those people came to look at that lady in the freezer-locker," looking towards the tailgate, his sweaty face green in the arc-light. The woman in shorts was getting into her car. He watched her drive away.

The driver watched him staring at the yellow car, thinking god how alike we are Hank, alike in that woman with the green shorts, both getting dry in the throat at the sight of her flesh swelling around that crotch seam, few years of beer and fried food I'd look just like you sweating out this morning's sausage, living for that fleeting glimpse of uncovered flesh to stir the blood, the desperate flash of naked untouchable flesh to fill the void of days, god three more days "Three more days, Hank. Think you'n stand us three more days?"

"Shoot! We ain't had a boom like this since I started. And ya' know, the

owner was dead set against y'all comin'. He's a deacon in the church, now by the way he brags you'd think it was *his* idea in the first place." He shook his head.

"Well that's how it is, Hank. Earthly justice." He leaned back until his chair creaked, looking beyond the arc-lights to the opaque chocolate-purple sky, brighter stars showing through now like flecks of dandruff, thinking star light star bright first star . . .

"Ain't it the truth. The harder you go the behinder you git." He too looked towards the sky, but saw no point in it and wiped his face with his limp handkerchief. In spite of the profuse sweat, he still smelled perfumy. "Well, lemme' git one las' lookat yer little lady 'fore I take off." He walked across and climbed the four steps with his left hand pressed against his side, as though the effort pained him. He squinted into the freezer window. To heighten the effect, a blue light burned above her head. The Sales Manager looked at her there, lying down so close, with only thin strips of cloth over her breasts and groin, all around her coils of frosty metal. He felt almost grateful for the stifling blanket of the heat that pulsated against him. "How does she do it? It's *not* a trick, is it?"

"No Hank, it's not a trick. To tell you the truth I don't know myself how she does it." He took a sip of beer and let it run back into the cup, warm and flat and bitter. He felt dizzy, not drunk but horribly thirsty. The Sales Manger had probably locked the showroom. He'd have to drink out of the hose, unless he wanted to disturb Wib. Around the arc-lights bugs swirled, reminding him of fish in green-black water.

The Sales Manager stepped down, holding his side. "Well, I better git on home. See y'all in the mornin'." He looked up at the freezer window, glowing faintly blue. It made him shudder, and he felt the tingle of gooseflesh as he walked to his car, the hot air wafting through his damp clothes, still the cold chill along his spine.

"Take it easy Hank."

He lifted his hand in a quick salute and drove away.

The driver sat motionless, feeling the night rush down on him at last, alone in his webbed chair beyond the range of the spotlight. His thoughts came flat like bullets. He was alone, the tail lights of Hank's car flicking out of sight around the bend, no other cars on the lot except the ones for sale, lined up like sleeping robots. He could feel his bowels uncoiling in the freedom of solitude, and immediately he tried to remember the woman's face, but saw instead that bulge around the seam too tight, thinking pudgy, but I know she had a face, laughing out loud at his inability to remember her face, as though her entire being had shrunk behind those swelling lips, her body and blood, her eyes and teeth consumed in hot waves from her disembodied vulva. He laughed. He heard the barking of a dog, but it was his own voice echoing off the wall of

the service department. He laughed once more experimentally, feeling a little ashamed that he couldn't remember her face. Surely, he thought, she's just some woman with a yellow car, about as aware of that bulge as I am of what her face looked like . . . Just a little curious, maybe more than the rest, but surely not aware of her seam too tight, though she must feel it there so tight, god it's silly I can't get her face, the eyes like a cow, the eyes not blinking, her mouth! . . . Feeling a moment of triumph at the conjured vision of her mouth, but shaming nonetheless at having to fight through that imprinted image of her shorts too tight.

He stood up and pulled his damp clothing from his skin. He could feel the hot asphalt through the soles of his shoes as he walked across and stepped up onto the tailgate. It probably upset him more than anyone to see her lying there inside the freezer, and he usually avoided looking or thinking about her in there if he could help it, but he leaned down and peered in, placing his hands against the cool stainless steel where the young woman's breasts had pressed. "What did she think, when she saw you lying there in the cold? Did her lips clinch when she saw the frosty coils, thermometer at ten below?" He looked at her ribs beneath the bikini top, trying to catch some movement there that would tell him she was breathing. But in the cold blue lights she lay motionless to his eyes, the oiled flesh taking on the texture of marble, the lips sealed as though with glue, the eyelashes reminding him of cadavers. He could not look at her in there anymore without thinking of corpses. He'd had a nightmare that she had come to him while he was dreaming, cutting into his dream like a sliver of ice, coming transparent to whisper in his ear 'wake up, wake up,' and still dreaming, he'd gotten up and run to the freezer and peered inside. Something had gone wrong, the freezer was warm. She lay there with her eyes open, dry. When he got the padlock off and opened the door she had already begun to smell. He screamed and opened his eyes. It had all been a dream, a nightmare. The dread of it had never left him, and he avoided looking at her in there. He'd abandoned trying to understand how she did it, and it wasn't so terrifying now for him to slide her into the freezer and lock the door, but he dreaded looking through that window at her eyes, open, filmed over like the eyes of dead fish. But her eyes were closed tonight, and he was only a little frightened that she didn't seem to be breathing. He knew that sometimes when she was awake she breathed so softly he couldn't tell it. The eyes could be fooled. He tried to imagine what the woman in the green shorts would look like lying there in the blue cold, and he laughed again, at the quick flash of those vertical lips bulging around the tight seam of painted-on shorts, yellow-red-green. He felt embarrassed at the quick surge of his loins over the vision of another woman, and realized in the embarrassment how much she meant to him, lying there inside the freezer. He wanted to feel the lust like fire, but the pressure of shame reminded him of his devotion—sometimes idiotic—to

her in the freezer. He didn't want to think of her at all when she was in there, the worrying like a black vise. He closed his eyes and remembered the young woman's face, the high forehead above the hungry eyes, large nostrils above parted lips, the pudgy lips, he thought, laughing because he couldn't remember now that tight seam, could envision only her staring face. "God what a racket!" looking for a star in the creamy black sky.

* * *

Saturday was the fourth day. The sun came up like a giant flare. By eight o'clock the temperature was over ninety. The asphalt simmered, and crowds came like locusts, their sunglasses bulging like locusts' eyes. Above their heads a small airplane circled once, twice, then flew off to the west dragging a long tail of letters: SEE THE FROZEN LADY AT DODGE VILLAGE.

Though he wasn't scheduled to go on duty until one o'clock, the driver stood on the tailgate in his white shoes, surveying the crowd and making sure no one stepped up with a lighted cigarette. The assistant stood next to the window, wiping continually the stainless steel around the window, and the glass itself after people left their fingerprints. He watched the gauges, and answered questions with a lively winking of his right eye.

The driver kept his eyes above the faces so that no one would try to ask him questions, scanning the crowd, but never letting anyone catch his eye. He was *not* looking for *that* woman, he told himself. He was looking to make sure she *wasn't* there. She hadn't shown up Friday, and the assistant had confirmed that she hadn't been there since Thursday night. It was almost a relief, and he looked through the crowd, more nervous that he would see her than desirous that she come. If she hadn't been there since Thursday night chances were she wouldn't be back at all. This encouraged him, though he felt a lonely pressure in his groin, as though he were standing at the edge of a cliff.

Before noon the crowd abated, so that there was no longer a long line waiting for a peek at the frozen lady. At twelve fifteen the yellow car pulled in and the young woman got out and walked up to the tailgate. The driver didn't realize who it was until he'd reached down to help her up the steps. She wore a nurse's uniform, white stockings, white skirt above pudgy knees, and the ridiculous paper hat like an inverted french-fry box from the drive-in. He knew that he was staring with his mouth open, as she had done, but he had not expected to see her except in those flesh-tight shorts. In the crisp nurse's uniform she was more terrifying, because now she seemed firmly anchored in reality, in earth. In painted-on shorts she was still some hot summer fantasy, succulent but untouchable. Now she stood holding his hand, even after she'd climbed the steps the sweet breath of starch rising from her uniform, the swell of her breasts under the crisp whiteness, the undeniable closeness of her flesh,

the terrifyingly real pressure of her fingers in his palm—now she was not the tumid fantasy at a distance, but a nurse, imminent, pinky, her fingers lingering on his palm, her smell engulfing him, her eyes so close he could see his warped reflection in her iris.

“Hello.” She spoke softly, letting go his hand.

“Hi.” His palm buzzed where she’d touched him. He pulled his eyes away from her face and looked at the second button on her uniform. He grinned, feeling like an idiot, thinking smells like a peach, too ripe, her button rises and falls with her breath. . . . He lifted his eyes to hers. She held his gaze, her chest expanding as though she was taking a breath of him. She turned away, leaning down to squint into the frosty window. The assistant hadn’t recognized her yet, or if he had the driver couldn’t tell it.

He stepped down and walked past the roaring fan, thinking he could easily make it into the sleeper before she noticed, but somehow she was standing beside him. He was shocked that she had moved as fast as she would have to move to get beside him. He could smell his own nervous sweat. He stared at her jugular notch, smiling stupidly.

“I was wondrin’, what time you git off,” she said. “We could maybe go for a ride or somethin’.” She touched his right elbow, looking almost shy, biting her lower lip, smiling.

He glanced around to see if anybody was looking. He could feel himself blushing, but amazingly, they were unobserved.

“I know a real nice place, it’s always cool there.” Her eyes flashed.

“That might be nice. It sure is hot,” laughing once, like a dog’s bark.

“Um hmm, it is. There might be some rain.” She tilted her head to the left, pushing the hair away from her neck, “So what time you git off?”

He swallowed, staring at the curve of her neck. “Not till nine.”

“We could take a ride’n cool off,” blushing too now, at the boldness of her talk, the pink rush coming in her throat.

He saw it, rising like the bloom on a ripe peach. She too was a little afraid, and it calmed him. He could feel cool phrases rising in his mind, hot quick flatteries to impress her. “You look ripe,” not believing he’d said it, but she closed her eyes, the blush growing on her neck.

“I feel ripe,” pressing her neck. She was blushing up to her eyes.

“You look like you would *feel* ripe.” He touched her bare arm.

“Ooh, not now I cain’t stand it. I git off at ten, I can come by, if you want.” She shook her head as though to clear her thoughts.

He watched her eyes, his mind ranging out in the distance. “I can use one of the demonstrators, drive out and meet you someplace.”

She nodded slowly, getting his message. “Out the highway, seven or eight miles, I’ll meet ya’, ’bout ten thirty. It’s a gas station, closes at dark,” nodding towards the south.

“That sounds fine.”

“OK.” She touched his elbow again, more timidly, then walked across to her car and drove away.

He glanced around to see if anyone was watching. His pants bulged, but no one seemed to have taken any notice. He stepped into the sleeper and closed the door. He was afraid of her, but his pants were ready to burst. “God it’s crazy,” grinning and shaking his head.

He lay down and slept until the assistant tapped quietly on the door and stuck his head in: “OK kid, I’ll let you take it for awhile.”

“Wib, you bastard, you let me sleep too long.” It was after four. His head felt stuffed with cotton. He touched his elbow where she’d squeezed, but his skin felt leathery. He yawned and looked around at the wrinkled sheets, the mirror, the half-kitchen like a doll house.

“I’m going into town with Fred, have a few.”

Fred was one of the mechanics in the service department. The driver blinked hard and thought, now I won’t have to go, I’ll have to be on till midnight now that I’ve overslept He tried to hold it, but he knew the assistant didn’t work that way. He wouldn’t expect him to work till midnight, he wouldn’t even think about it, he’d be back by nine to go on duty. “OK Wib, enjoy yourself.”

“You shouldn’t have any trouble. Keep an eye on that oxygen, I’ll see you later.”

“Right.” He brushed his hair and changed his shirt, trying to remember something, the oxygen, god a nurse it’s crazy right there in front of everyone the smell of her neck no one even *saw* us He looked down at his pants, I can’t meet her it’s crazy, he thought, imagining wild penetrations in the dark. He shuddered and opened the door, stepping into the heat. The assistant saw him and nodded, “I’ll be back by nine. Take it easy kid.”

He lifted his hand in a quick salute, like the Sales Manager’s. “Take your time, Wib. I should work later anyway,” thinking I won’t go, somehow I won’t go He stepped onto the tailgate and checked the gauges reminded again of something, but unable to catch it between hot flashes of the young woman in countless penetrable postures, dripping like a peach after the first bite, god I don’t even know her name

The Sales Manager stepped up, holding his side and wincing behind his smile. “Is it hot enough for ya?”

The driver had hardly noticed the heat, though it was over a hundred. He looked at the Sales Manager’s pink eyes, blistered by the glare. “If it was any hotter, Hank, I’d get in there with her!”

The Sales Manager cackled, looking down at the frosty window. He liked that: lying down on top of that oily flesh, cool as marble. “Maybe we’ll get a little rain later on, cool things off some,” nodding towards the south, where clouds were beginning to pile up on the horizon like mountains of steam.

“That reminds me, Hank. Can I borrow one of the demonstrators? I thought I’d go into town after I get off.”

“Hay sure thing. You can take my Monaco,” reaching into his pocket and handing him the keys.

“Preciate that, Hank. Thought I’d take in a movie, get my mind off it, ya’ know?” motioning towards the frosty window.

“Yeah, it must be pretty nerve-wracking, after four days.” He shook his head sympathetically.

An older man in a madras sports coat and white slacks waved from the door of the showroom. It was the owner, and that was as close as he’d gotten to the truck in four days. The Sales Manager lifted his hand and stepped down. “Boss wants me. You take my Monaco, I’ll use a loaner.”

“Thanks Hank.” He held the keys for a moment, then put them in his pocket.

Beside him an old Negro woman waited to catch his eye. He smiled.

“She really been in there since Tuesday?” Her eyes were bright as two matches flaring at once.

“Yes M’am, since 1:04 pm, Tuesday.” He wanted to stand talking forever, to go home with her to fried cornbread and peas. The satisfaction of her life sparkled in her face.

“It’s not some devil’s trick, is it?” She leaned back from him, her head turned so that she watched him out her left eye, grinning slyly.

“Not that I know of, m’am,” focusing on the creases in her old face, cheeks like wrinkled chocolate.

She put her hand on his arm, leaning close: “You’re just cheatin’ death! Can’t no good come of it.”

“Sometimes, I feel that way myself,” thinking not of the woman in the freezer but of the nurse’s smooth neck, the rising and falling of that second button.

The old woman patted his arm. He could see her eyes filling with tears, and he wanted to embrace her for her concern, assure her that everything would be fine. This time tomorrow the woman in the freezer would be up and walking around like the rest of us. “This time tomorrow she’ll be walking around like the rest of us.” He blinked away his tears, thinking I won’t go I don’t have to go. “Come tomorrow one o’clock, I’ll roll her out for you.” He put his hand over hers on his arm, feeling the wiry tendons.

“I’ll be at church.”

“Well, sing loud, so we can hear you.” He helped her down the stairs. “Bye now.”

“You don’t *look* wicked, son, but there’s somethin’ ain’t right about it.” She waved, her caramel palm flashing.

He watched her walk across the lot, holding the sight of her as long as he

could, to keep from thinking about *her*. A child stood next to him on the tailgate: "Hay Mister?"

The rest of the afternoon he answered their questions and checked the gauges, and everytime he saw a woman in shorts he looked mechanically for that swell of lips, and decided finally that she must not have been wearing any panties.

By nine o'clock he could feel his heart thumping. He watched the sunset and the clouds piling up in the south, thunderheads, catching the last light like gold-capped boulders. He didn't realize till nine-thirty that the assistant was still gone. He decided to stay out, he thought, not like him but tonight he figured he could stay a little later since I'd slept so long, so I don't have to go, it'll be too late He looked up into the sky, feeling reprieved. But at ten-fifteen he saw Fred's truck pulling in. The assistant got out and walked up to the tailgate, smiling, a little red in the face from drinking.

"Sorry I'm late kid, got carried away lost track of time." He climbed up and checked the oxygen gauge.

"No sweat, Wib. As late as I slept you deserved it." He felt for the keys in his pocket, thinking, I'll go, maybe it's already too late and she's gone. "Hank left me his car. Think I'll take a little cruise. See you later, Wib."

"OK kid."

He drove south down the highway, watching the odometer and trying to keep his heart down. It was ten thirty-nine and he'd seen nothing but open farmland, and an occasional wateroak looming in the headlights.

At the top of a small rise the headlights caught in the red reflectors of her car. She was parked beside an old wooden gasoline station with a single pump. Except for a small yellow light burning somewhere inside, the station was dark. He pulled in behind her and switched off the lights. Suddenly he felt calm, opening the door and walking up to her car. He leaned into her window. "Well hello."

She still had on her uniform. The paper hat glowed in the dark. "You can leave your car here and drive down with me."

He could barely see her face. Only her eyes held any light, sparkling, a little too far apart. He blinked and realized his nose was almost touching hers, the warm mist of her breath condensing in his nostrils, cantaloupe breath. She pressed her lips against his, her tongue moving. Her lips were almost cold. He touched her neck. "You're *freezing*."

She held his hand against her, pressing him with cold fingers. He could feel her hot breath on his cheek, but the uncanny coldness of her fingers distracted him from the pleasure of it. "Why are you so *cold*?"

"It's the air conditioning at the hospital." She opened her door and he got in beside her.

He drove down the dirt road as she directed. Beyond the headlights the sky

lit up for an instant, a ball of lightning glared through the leaden smoke, darkness closing in again. He listened for thunder, but there was only the whine of the engine and the whirl of insects in the blackberries, and the occasional thump of a rock under the car.

* * *

Fifteen minutes after the driver had left, the assistant shut off the fan and covered it with a tarp. Lightning was flashing in the south, and the rain had already begun to splat on the hot dusty asphalt. He climbed into the cab and watched the storm crash and pass away, the lightning like flashbulbs over the land. In the brighter flashes he could see the wet fields rolling away to a silver line where the world curved under.

When the rain had slackened he got out and sat in the folding chair. He'd barely settled against the cool wetness of the nylon webbing when he saw a car hiss past the lot so fast it seemed to skim over the pavement. As it overshot the driveway, he recognized Hank's Monaco. "Don't touch those power brakes, kid, you'll leave the road."

He was doing over a hundred, and it took him half a mile to stop. He turned around in the highway and drove slowly back. When he pulled in, he saw the assistant, absurdly calm, sitting in his folding chair.

"You went by here like a boat," grinning as though he'd enjoyed the spectacle.

"Beatrice said to turn up the oxygen one or two per cent on the fifth day."

"You just now remembering?" The wet asphalt sent up vapor. He slowly climbed onto the tailgate and readjusted the oxygen.

"Is she all right—is she OK?"

The assistant looked down at him and grinned, black sky opening above his head, stars like mist. He could tell the driver had been crying. "Look for yourself, don't get mud on the truck."

The driver looked down and saw that his pants were muddy, his shoes beaded with gobs of red mud. "I got caught out in the rain." He looked up at the assistant, feeling now his dripping hair and the stinging on his wet bare arms where the blackberries had gotten him. He'd driven her down into the woods, and when the lightning had flared on her bare skin he had jumped out of the car and run away.

"Looks like you spooked a wild-cat, kid!" laughing through his gapped teeth.

He looked toward the south, where lightning still lit the sky, and he let out a sob, warm tears rising again, but the sound of it was laughing, slow deep laughter under his tears.

* * *

On Sunday the sky looked like fall, the rain-washed air blue and cloudless.

The driver stood on the tailgate in his tennis shoes helping people up the stairs and constantly checking his watch. The crowd was not large yet, but the Sales Manager said it was because of church, that by one o'clock they'd be here in flocks.

Overhead, the plane droned back and forth, dragging its tail of letters: LAST DAY COOLING OFF SALE DODGE VILLAGE. The driver looked at the faces in the crowd. For the first time in years, he'd awakened without reaching for the cigarettes, and it no longer seemed ironic to warn people about smoking near the truck.

At twelve-thirty, his prophecy that they would come on buses was fulfilled: a Trailways arrived, thirty grandmothers in their Sunday best, THE GOSPEL CAROLEERS. They'd heard about it on the radio. They'd dyed their hair the same color, a silvered purple, and they stood at the back of the crowd like a row of grape popsicles. They would not approach the truck.

A few minutes before one, the Sales Manager stepped up with the microphone in his left hand. "There's a long distance call for you."

"Thanks Hank." Before he reached the showroom the speakers exploded: bargains extras options deals. He looked back at the assistant, standing behind the Sales Manager, cringing to hold out the noise, winking when he saw him looking.

The call was from Memphis, the owner of the lot where they'd be working their next engagement, wanting to know if they'd do five days for *them*, through the Labor Day Weekend? He looked at his watch, 1:03. "We'll have to talk about that when we get there," pushing down the button before Memphis had time to respond. He crossed the lot and stepped up beside the Sales Manager as he finished his introduction.

"Thank you, Hank. Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. As I'm sure you've heard, Beatrice has been in the freezer since 1:04 pm, Tuesday. As of now, that's *five* days, ladies and gentlemen," holding up his arm so they could see his watch. The crowd checked their watches. It was officially 1:04 pm, Sunday, August 29th.

"To our knowledge this represents a record. No one has stayed in a freezer at ten below for more than three days and lived to tell about it. And now, ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to remind you to refrain from smoking near the truck. I'm going to open the door, and the fire hazard is extreme."

He unlocked the padlock and swung back the door. The crowd murmured at the sight of vapor swirling around the dark opening. "I'd like to ask that you remain silent for a moment," index finger across his lips. He rolled out

the cot, and the assistant closed back the door. The driver leaned over her face, the microphone close to his lips, "Beatrice, wake up now." He watched her eyelashes. Everyone in the crowd was leaning forward.

"Beatrice, wake up now." She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. He turned back to the crowd, his eyes filling. "As you can see ladies and gentlemen, Beatrice is fine." He nodded to encourage applause, and helped her sit up. It took her several minutes to wake up completely, but she always awoke smiling, her eyes slightly dilated, an open look that took the crowd in the pit of its stomach, a tragic beautiful look. He helped her stand up, and draped the white terry robe over her shoulders so that her bikinied flesh was exposed only fleetingly to the Sunday light. The men enjoyed her skin, but not so loudly as on Tuesday, and the women approved of her—even in the bikini—because that face was glowing like the paintings in their illustrated Bibles. They clapped and cheered.

"Thank you. Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen." He waved over their heads, and passed the microphone down to the Sales Manager, who shouted that they deserved a big hand. They clapped and cheered again as the driver led her down the steps of the tailgate. He leaned close to her ear. "Are you all right?"

"Mmm. Don't like it five days. Dreams."

"I don't like it either." He pressed her to him, smiling to the crowd as he helped her into the sleeper and closed the door. He poured her a cup of hot tea and wrapped her feet in blankets. "I'll help Wib unhook. We'll be ready to leave in five minutes."

"Mmm." She sipped her tea and watched him.. "Are you all right? Those scratches on your arm?"

He leaned down to kiss her. "I'm fine."

When he stepped outside to help the assistant he saw *her*, standing in a fresh uniform, her nurse's hat sparkling like a bird in her hair. They smiled and nodded to each other, like old friends, though after last night he'd not have blamed her if she'd shot him. He saw that her car was splattered with mud, and he had the fleeting notion of giving her one of his white shoes, a sort of peace offering. The mud would match that on her car.

He helped the assistant fold down the tailgate and secure the freezer, and when he looked for the woman again she was gone. He looked at the assistant, but he seemed to be preoccupied, and if he knew, he didn't let on.

In fifteen minutes they were ready to leave. The Sales Manager leaned into the cab, speaking above the warming engine. "Well, I wanna thank y'all again, for puttin' on such a good show'n all. We never seen anything like it." He reached in to shake their hands, giving the young woman a pat on the knee. "Wanted to give y'all a little token of my gratitude, you've been s'nice'n all." He handed her an envelope and leaned back out of the cab.

The driver let the truck ease away, "So take it easy, Hank!"

The Sales Manager walked along beside the truck, shouting now: "If y'all ever get back this way, stop in'n see us." They smiled and waved.

He raised his hand, and watched the truck pull onto the highway and drive away.