


He Wasn't Ready For Death

THE

Disposables

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The Disposables

I have always believed in some mysterious force, or fate, which controls every individual fortune, every single movement, and all of Destiny. Yet, when I was only eighteen I was stupid enough to believe myself capable of manipulating this force. I would become the force itself. Thus I could supernaturally rise above all of the mediocre humans who could only be manipulated by such divine forces. Certainly, the help and co-operation of some of those mortals would prove necessary, but I would remain the exploiter rather than the exploited. I would become the brightest star in the world, let alone the entertainment industry. Because I was the puppeteer as opposed to the puppet.

Or so I thought. The gap between the divine ideal and my reality as a pop commodity became wider and wider after the initial honeymoon was over. To be loved one must remain constantly the same in the eyes of one's lovers. One must always be available for those who only watch because they themselves are incapable of creation. When you change your audience feels cheated, and then they will search for another convenient stationary object. And the cycle continues without you.

And when the objects become subjects they retreat further into themselves, so much further that they cease to have any practical liaison with the outside world. But they still want some sort of liaison. Everyone does, no matter how wealthy or exclusive they may be. The recognition must correspond to the original intention. Or am I striving for the impossible?

I strived for the impossible, with results I could have not possibly foreseen, despite my irrational belief in the power of the mysterious force or fate.

The cafeteria seemed normal enough, considering the neighbourhood. A lot of people were lingering in booths well beyond the regulation time for loitering. Cash transactions were minimal. This was routine here. Nobody came to this cafeteria to eat, although people do kill time with their interminable cups of caffeine. People came here to wait. For a trick, for a payoff, for a connection. I was waiting too. But for something far more important.

Earlier on I had tried to make contact with my former best friend Matthew Wilding. Matt used to be a brilliant writer but now he'd decided to close the book on the human race, other than those connected to one particular dubious business venture that his entire future was hinged upon. On my previous visit Matt hadn't even acknowledged my presence. I had to try again. This time I had to be successful.

I already felt conspicuous in this cafeteria because I was probably the only patron who wasn't here for the small time traffic. I was only stalling time, trying to think of a different approach than the one I'd made when I'd barged in on Matthew fifteen minutes ago, and I was getting nowhere. There was no other recourse than to barge in again, this time even more insistently. My eyes had to be wilder, more desperate, more violent. To re-establish contact with Matt Wilding was a matter of life and death to me.

Oh, my God! A complication was walking towards the window. Thank Christ that Kate Barton's eyesight was none too reliable without her glasses, however, I wasn't going to take a chance. I didn't have to go to the bathroom, my hands were still clean, but that was where I dashed off to. I wanted to disappear into a stall but a junky was tying up. Right now even my empty stomach couldn't deal with a junky on top of my nerves so I took a chance on the women's john being empty. I was lucky. I sat down on the toilet and tried to shit. But I hadn't eaten for a long time.

Was Kate looking for Matthew, or did she think that was where she'd find me? How did she know the address? Had they ever had a relationship? All these questions right now were so hypothetical. They could never be answered so they weren't going to be asked any more. I'd made my decision, and I was going to stick by it.

I climbed the stairs from the washrooms stealthily. My timing had been accidentally perfect. I could see the back of Kate's body walking away from the front window, and I knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't look behind. The coast was clear.

Damn it, I muttered. I can't hold out here any longer. So I left a tip for my unfinished tea and walked briskly out of the cafeteria. Right around the corner and into Matt Wilding's apartment building. I tried not to hang around the reception area too long, in case a janitor would get suspicious, but I was in luck. A little old lady who lived in the building was approaching and her keys were ready. I cautiously slipped in behind her.

Matt was living in Room 801. I got off the elevator at the eighth floor and walked down the hall, the carpet helping to muffle my approaching footsteps. 801 was right at the northeast corner of the building, where the light would be at its weakest.

When I got there I didn't hear the sound of Matt at his typewriter, or any other sound. This was disturbing, because he usually walked around when he was working, or he muttered to himself. And he hadn't been sleeping twenty minutes ago.

Then I tugged at the door handle. It was unlocked although masquerading as impenetrable. Morality and right to privacy be damned! I turned the handle and opened the door. How I wish that I hadn't!

Matthew Wilding was stone cold dead in the middle of the floor, strangled with his own worn-out necktie. Strangulation is the most passionate of murder techniques; it is not even a technique. It is a grip that must be held onto for dear life and eventually it puts an end to breathing. And I of all people had the most reason to put an end to Matt's breathing, because I was the person who had the necessary degree of passion.

On my way in two punks had noticed me. "That's Richard Monitor!" one shouted to the neighbourhood.

"Yeah, really?"

"Yeah, really. Wonder what he's doing down here?"

My immediate impulse was to blow town. I'd come to L.A. for the purpose of being anonymous and I wind up wanted for murder. Besides, the place drives me up the wall. After all, it is the home of the North American entertainment industry, which I have an enormous desire to dynamite into oblivion. Anywhere, anywhere, but L.A. New York would be too obvious. How about New Orleans? I could very easily get lost in the Latin Quarter among all the other condescending tourists. No, the idea smelled. How about Tokyo? A hell of a distance from L.A., that's for sure. But I know too many people there, which means that too many people know me. After all, my Japanese period did have a certain notoriety.

The fact was that blowing town abruptly would not be the brightest idea. If there were a warrant out for my arrest, and the warrant was inevitable unless something completely unforeseen were to happen, then my face would be poison at any major airport. I thought of driving to either San Francisco or Phoenix and then getting out of the country, but an international warrant is an international warrant. Airports were completely out of the question.

I applied the same logic to the car problem. Unless someone had been

tailing me from the moment of my arrival in L.A. (and I didn't figure that Jack actually would've hired a private detective), then my car wasn't a liability.

A bright red Citroen may be a lot flashier than your drab American sedan, but L.A. is a town full of flashy cars. And the red Citroen had nothing on some of the hot rods I'd seen lately.

Right now I figured I could afford to stop into a bar and think about life. So I drove over to Harry's Video Bar. I could immerse myself in a mindless video game while planning my next move. But first I would head downstairs where the telephones were a few steps away from the men's room. Where there's a phone book there should be a yellow pages. And the book opened up on an ad for Gibson's Motel, with reasonable rates and color TV. I'd never heard of it so I figured the odds were good that no one else had either. So, to justify my presence at Harry's I would order a beer, play the video games, and then split. Gibson's Motel would be my destiny.

The first time I ever performed in L.A. almost ten years ago, I was booked into the Cow Palace for a week's run. It was on the third night that Patrick Thompson showed up. I had been periodically searching for his telephone number but I figured he'd show up sooner or later.

Standing behind Patrick was a tall, gaunt looking man, whose eyes begged for some kind of external activation. The young man was wearing an undertaker's jacket and pants, as if he were already aware that my performance had a great deal more to do with death than it did with life. An elaborately speckled bow-tie was the final touch; meaning that this knowledge of death would be laced with caustic salon wit. There would be a long wake before any literal death occurred. I craved an introduction.

"Hello, Patrick. And who is your friend?"

Patrick squirmed when he heard the last word. The young man had entered the dressing room in Patrick's company so I had assumed the two were friends. But perhaps I had made the wrong assumption.

"Richard Monitor, or should I say Richard Stevenson, this here is Matthew Wilding. He is a writer."

I knew his writing. His first play, which was called Time Bomb, depicted the final hours of a notorious international terrorist who was going to be assassinated in two hours and knew it. The brutality and honesty were controversial and acclaimed. Time Bomb was made into an independently financed movie which had no publicity budget but nevertheless achieved a very high profile. After this initial success, Matthew switched focus to sexual politics. That was when the major studios moved in on him.

And Patrick noticed how immediately taken I was with Matt. He made a point of leaving the two of us alone, informing me in no uncertain terms that I should call him later during the week. I absently agreed to do so.

As Matt talked in the already deserted backstage area he pointed out to me his keen desire to work in the field of popular music and he was especially interested in my recordings and stage presentation. But I barely listened to him, I only looked. What I saw was a man who was an absolute professional at keeping his distance; a man who meticulously selected those few whose work he would allow to influence his own work. A tickling sensation was taking over my body. That sensation was called recognition.

The video game was one I'd played hundreds of times before. Truth is, I wasn't even playing the game. I was only pressing the buttons.

When the waiter came around I ordered whatever was cold and mindlessly resumed playing. For some technical reason the TV wasn't on, otherwise I might've had to deal with the horror of one of my own videos.

My beer arrived and, as I tipped the waiter, I noticed a man staring at me. He was in his early to mid-forties and was pretending to read the sports section while nursing a bourbon. He looked a few decades too old to be one of my legion of admirers. Maybe the guy just thought I looked different from the average customer, but I doubt that. If I left abruptly it would look more than a bit suspicious. Plus he'd follow me anyway, so what was the point? I would pretend to be oblivious.

My skin has become numb. It is as though my feet have sunk into the ground, become too passive to walk. Usually I find this feeling sensual and wonderful. Meanwhile my brain informs me that the man with the sports section must be some kind of cop and therefore I should get the hell out of this place as soon as possible. The brain wins. I slug the beer down and rise up on my feet. On the way to my car I bumped into a young man whose apology sounded too sincere to be believable.

I remember the last time I saw Matthew. That was the night I picked up the master tapes of the songs that I had decided not to sing in *The Only Solution*. Songs that I had written that I didn't want to be associated with. Formula work for a formula project. There was no way I wanted these masters to be in anyone's possession other than my own, for both legal and aesthetic reasons.

Matt came to the door with about four days worth of facial growth on him. He knew that I would be coming even though I hadn't phoned. The knock at the door, that knock which had interrupted his chosen solitude; it would have to have been me. He was as civil as he had to be. Which meant that he grunted, walked over to the tape that he had located in anticipation of my eventual arrival, and gave me a "Here you are Richard, here is your cassette" in a voice that made it plain that for me to say thank you would be an act of extreme rudeness. A voice that informed me that I had become a stranger to him. Then he watched me walk to the door, standing there in his littered room with its nicotine air.

Everything about the man reeked of repression. The same old creased jacket, baggy stained pants and worn down shoes. The man's brain was frozen; any information not pertaining to *The Only Solution* wasn't allowed to enter. To avoid the temptation of absorbing information, he only went out when he had to. This wretched man, the one-time rake who now probably couldn't remember his last bath or change of clothes, who used to be my best friend, was now a ghost. To think is to live and Matthew had stopped thinking a long time ago. His entire world hinged upon the anticipated payoff from *The Only Solution*. He was a dupe for Ed Walker. Ed was simply going to use this formula trash, which Matthew was convinced was going to be his *Mein Kampf* but was fathoms below his previous writing because it contained no criticism whatever. Ed only wanted to take the fluff and then bleed the boy until the boy was dry. And then find another flunky. Matthew had become a fool, a masochist for a hypothetical reward, a casualty. And so was I, for having visited him.

That was the last time, I scolded myself sternly. With the master tape back in my possession I had no further business with the ghost. I walked close to the wall, in case my shadow leapt out and became visible to whoever might be stationed at the end of the hallway. I felt guilty about this visit, and wanted my guilt to remain a secret.

Some people can simply press a button and fall asleep. Those peoples' lives are emotionally simplistic. They can lose their concentration at a moment's notice because they are not genuinely, concentrating on anything to begin with. And then there are people who deserve a beautiful sleep who can never attain it when they need it. They don't trust the world outside of their inner selves. Paranoia is not the problem. It's a matter of conscience.

I could sleep for a thousand years. Last night's sleep was so beautiful that I wanted it to last forever. But I must live. Which means I must wake up and look into the mirror.

Since Patrick Thompson and Richard Stevenson were in the same high school class together during Richard's teenage residence in Los Angeles, Patrick had followed Richard's career with more than a casual curiosity. The boy was the only other member of that class who seemed to have any literary potential. But Richard was afraid of his true potential. To be a writer means withdrawal rather than competition. It is the diametric opposite of a popularity contest. The commitment to loneliness is frightening. Only those with the necessary courage become writers. Richard was too interested in being accepted. In being loved. So he didn't become a writer. He became an entertainer.

Patrick never dated in high school. He was afraid that he might like being popular after all. Richard rarely dated. Occasionally one of the girls in the class would make a play in his direction. He was English, and different. His vision veered towards the fantastic, too obviously for most people to handle. It's one thing to see someone in the movies: but he had an Englishman's fascination with American crudity. These American stereotypes required redefinition by a European sensitivity. Jean-Paul Belmondo in *Breathless* plays Bogart even more than Bogie played himself.

Richard really was quite the collection. Belmondo, Laurence Harvey, Dirk Bogarde, Yves Montand, the works. The fantastic and the banal rarely mix successfully. It's not even a question of hostility; it's indifference. It's what's wrong with your own life anyways kid. One of these days you'll grow up and out of it. The trouble with Richard was his pathological need to be loved, as opposed to being admired from a distance.

Patrick never saw Richard again until after the latter had become famous. But he had always wondered what would become of the boy, now that the boy had neglected his own true calling. Two boys who were friends in high school, attracted to one another due to mutual rejection of and by everybody else. What did the pair see in each other, their classmates probably wondered. The bookworm and the flake. Oh, well, they're both different, aren't they?

Then one day Patrick heard a record, and the voice sounded familiar. A strange, sort of novelty song about a cat that suddenly ran away from its home. The lyric was a peculiar cross between a nursery rhyme and a horror story, and Richard's voice wasn't at all the voice of a rock'n'roller. It was devoid of the traditional machismo, the standard pathetic Caucasian attempts to sound black. The delivery was more effete, whimsical yet macabre. This record, which actually was called *The Slippery Black Cat*, was anything but commercial.

The slippery black cat
Chased after a rat
She never came back
The slippery black cat

Did she go to the gallows
Is she wandering the moors
Has she fallen for some wretched tomcat's allures
Has she gone to the dogs
on the cold foggy heath
Did she fall on the road
and lose all of her teeth

The slippery black cat
Jumped after a bat
Well, imagine that
The slippery black cat

Patrick was so disappointed. The boy whom he had hope for, the boy whom he felt would eventually realize his true calling, was a writer of insipid nursery rhymes. A little boy so narcissistic, so desperate for recognition; that he would record a stupid lyric that anybody with a free hand could have written. Richard probably hadn't even written the monstrosity.

Patrick heard no further word of Richard until three years after that first record. Just another one hit wonder after all, except that boy never even had a hit. Not even a name. Richard Stevenson. That was a writer's name, for God sakes, not a pop star's. The name was to come later.

After high school Patrick Thompson attended Teacher's College, and while doing this he met a girl named Susan. This was to be his first and last consummated relationship. Patrick and Susan graduated together with both teaching certificates and rings. And then they had the baby girl.

During Susan's pregnancy she didn't work. It was easier for teachers back then, even in the early seventies, to take the entire year off. So one day at home when Patrick was off teaching his Grade 8 English class, Susan was casually listening to the radio when she heard this strange song by somebody called Richard Monitor. Metallic rock of the period gone right off the deep end with a stream of consciousness lyric running the gamut from population control to Canterbury Tales period homoerotic dreams. Susan was curious about both the record and the singer. Richard Monitor. The last name was obviously fake but wasn't that high school friend that her husband always talked about named Richard? So when Patrick arrived home from work he phoned the station and made the request. When his request was granted and the song jumped out form the standard programming format like a dominatrix at a Ladies' Auxiliary convention, Patrick recognized the voice immediately.

The deejay had described Richard as being a man ahead of his time. Patrick of course knew better. To him Richard was a young man still wavering. Unable to decide whether to be a poet or a musician. You have to be one or the other. None of these pop stars were genuine writers; they were Tin Pan Alley hacks. Everything they wrote had to rhyme, and as long as you're locked into monotonous pentameter you're still writing about the moon in June, the rain in Spain, or whatever. Patrick hated all those hacks who flashed literary pretensions, and it hurt to hear Richard Stevenson joining their ranks. And that name. Richard Monitor. It reeked of video art, the latest illiteracy from the art ghettos of New York and London. Of some moronic conceptual artist, finding one successful advertising cliché to conceal the fact that he or she has absolutely nothing to say. Patrick wished that Richard would come to Los Angeles on a promotional tour. He would have to talk some sense into the boy's head, because the boy was in dire need of a teacher.

Patrick never got a chance to ask Richard which side of the fence he was on until Richard had seemingly made up his own mind. The first time Richard Monitor ever performed in L.A. was well after he had become a huge star in the U.K. He had done it by wearing extravagant costumes, sweetening up his music, and handing himself over to a fast talking, expatriate American manager by the name of Jack Newman. Jack wanted to play colonel and Richard Stevenson was the best potential vehicle.

Jack and I had pulled it off. His family had a lot of money and they invested. And for my part of it, I had created the complete plastic fabrication of a pop star. The pop star's face, body, and career as canvas to be projected upon. To be costumed and fantasized. My posture was diametrically opposite to the posture known as naturalism. I despised naturalism, the naivety of somebody being marketed as a real person. The fake sincerity made me sick. I adapted the role of an alien, a science fiction vampire cliché who needed the blood of the mass audience. And the posture, assuming that one wholeheartedly accepted the idea of blatant posturing, was so transparent that the mask was therefore disposable. It could be removed in a flash. Theoretically.

My band was called the Disposables, which meant that they could be hired or rehired or whatever at will. My will or Jack's? That question came up more than a few times. But since I would totally change face and character at least once a year, it only made sense that the musicians would be journeypersons on salary. I couldn't stand the idea of working with something as naturalistic, as sloppily organic, as a band.

I, Richard Stevenson, who has been professionally known as Richard Monitor for the last ten years, felt simultaneously furious and bored. Furious at my manager, Jack Newman, for being such an obstructively closed-minded asshole. And bored with him for making perfect sense in such an obvious way.

Our latest argument was over the promo tape for my most recent record. The record was called *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, after the Hitchcock movie; and the song was about this man named Matthew Wilding, who used to be my best friend.

Matt was a writer who'd stopped writing. He'd accepted a contract to contrive something obvious and make a lot of money. Dirty money. The script was called *The Only Solution* and it was being financed by a guy named Ed Walker. Ed Walker owned large chunks of New York, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo, Sydney, Brazil, and the world. Nobody owns that much without being thoroughly unscrupulous, and Ed Walker was no exception to that rule.

One night I woke up and made this videotape on my home equipment. I was having trouble sleeping that night because I simply couldn't stop thinking about Matthew. How the man had become a shell. By making this tape, I could laugh at him as well as cry. So I made myself up to be this withered old man; Howard Hughes watching his favorite movie over and over again while his man-servant swats imaginary flies. And this morning I showed it to Jack the Manager, and Jack of course hates it.

Like I said, I was angry and bored at the same time. By the fact that Jack was right, and I was working in the wrong arena. Jack as always was concerned about money and, because I'm not exactly starving, my concerns are elsewhere. I can afford to be concerned about artistic integrity. So our concerns were diametrically opposite.

He liked the record because of the familiar title and sound, but he wanted a really slick, impersonal promo tape. Because the song was about Mathew Wilding, the video had to be about him too. Or else I would be telling another lie.

I had no reason to talk to Jack any more. So I threatened to leave the stable, and when he called my bluff a minute later, I found myself opening the door of Jack's reception room, kissing Carol the secretary good-bye forever and walking out onto the street.

I meant it. I didn't ever want to see Jack Newman again. His face, his voice, his mentality; I was sick of it all. All right, I knew damn well that I wouldn't be here today if it hadn't been for Jack, but at this moment I wanted to be somewhere else.

The area in Manhattan along Broadway in the mid-twenties is cheap and anonymous. With lots of hotels, the idea of checking into one of those hotels appealed to me, except I've done it before so it's too obvious. Jack would get on the phone, and no matter what alias I came up with this time he could always prod a hotel attendant's memory with the right amount of cash.

So, I head for the American Airlines office at 42nd and Park and I bought a one-way ticket to Los Angeles. L.A. is a lot more anonymous than New York. New York is about walking and L.A. is about driving. I would rent a car as soon as the plane landed, then I would spend some time driving. Then I would find a hotel. In L.A.

Meanwhile I had to kill time and I didn't want to see anybody. Which meant that I didn't want to be seen by anybody. So I scanned the Voice, looked for the most possibly obscure art movie listed, and then actually went to it. I had no trouble killing time because I fell asleep. The usher woke me up when the movie was over.

After the movie I found myself looking at the faces in the lineup for the next screening. It doesn't make sense that a person trying to be anonymous would be looking for someone, but my situation was different. I knew who I was looking for.

Matthew Wilding used to be the most forbidding person in the world because everything about him was so right. Without ever having to raise his voice he could make you feel as if you were in the presence of the Master. His eyes were always on you, and so were his ears. When in a room with Matthew I always found myself refraining from crude jokes, rash character judgments; and all the other verbal bad habits of lesser men. Matthew was a teacher.

Right now Matt Wilding probably is the most forbidding person in the world, but for altogether different reasons. Though even before he had never been much of a dresser, now he was a bum. There was no other possible description for the man's personal appearance and hygiene. Howard Hughes died looking like a Bowery Bum; and Matt Wilding was heading for a similar exit. I'd seen it coming slowly, just as I, could have anticipated his voluntary near muteness. He used to be a listener rather than a talker; now he had stopped listening to

everybody except for the man who was going to make him so rich that he would never have to deal with people ever again.

Matthew and I used to be best friends. I love this man as I could never love another person.

As soon as my plane landed in L.A. I immediately rented a car. There were a lot of American sedans and then there was a bright red Citroen.

Then I went driving. Up Santa Monica and back down Sunset. I passed what looked like the house in which Norma Desmond shot Joe Gillis in my favorite movie. Except that particular house was an interior. Sunset Boulevard was the ultimate star fantasy, the ultimate rejection and damnation of the outside world. Sometimes I feel that I would love to be for ever young and have a handsome Prussian butler and the works. But I don't feel that way at this moment.

Shortly after I picked up the Citroen from the airport Rent-a-Car and started driving I felt a depressing familiarity. Even though L.A. was supposedly always in a state of development, constantly adding new suburbs to its already staggering amount, the place never really changed. Always the same imported palm trees looking over the boulevards. Always the same drug stores and liquor stores that try to recall the city's film noir heyday but fail to cut the mustard. The only thing L.A. has going for it now is the car barrier. A French rented car and a tacky hotel. It would do for a while.

Plus I had a feeling that Matthew Wilding was out there somewhere. He used to hole up in the worst hotels in New York but that was before Mister Ed Walker began handing out the per diems. Tax deductible handouts to keep the young genius none too hungry and not too drunk Money so that precious Mathew wouldn't have to deal with any of the world that Ed didn't own. But then, there probably wasn't too much of that world around these days.

Nah. Jack would never hire a real gumshoe to track me down. He'd hire one of those boring corporate private detectives, or worse, he'd probably send Alan Buxton looking for me.

Alan Buxton used to be my arranger. My translator to the working musicians, who must be spoken to in their own peculiar language. Alan was very good at what he did but if he was good at doing anything else he'd sure been keeping it secret for a long time. We'd parted working company some time ago because I had nothing to say to the guy and he knew it. Jack always figured that Alan was my reality contact, but then what the hell did Jack know?

Suddenly one of my older hits came on the dashboard radio. By older hits I don't mean one of my first. One of my blueprints would've been a better description. One of those old songs that isn't an immediate radio hit but an LP track that ages well. A key to my entire oeuvre, say the critics.

Faces are disposable
Fashions are disposable
Missiles are disposables

They're supposed to explode
EXPLODE!

That word was followed by a synthetic explosion. An aural equivalent of action painting, superimposed on top of an electronically programmed dance beat. I'd been having my cake and eating it too. The song, whose title actually was *Disposables*, had indeed weathered well. Because it was about the popular music industry itself. Get a new face at least once a year the way cars do or else you'll bite the dust. You'll become a minor footnote in history. If you keep making the same model, then only the prototype will have any real value.

Usually, whenever one of my oldies comes on the car radio I immediately change stations. But not this time. The song was so obvious. If I really wanted to disappear and start a new life, I should do something about my face. Plastic surgery. Was that the only genuine interpretation? The only solution? The message is so blatant it scared me. Did I really want to give it all up?

A star is no longer a star when he or she is not recognized in the flesh by those who would love to be stars but could never be. Fame is not disposable. Hit records may be but not careers. Images have to be variations of the same body or else nobody gets it. Just like the chassis of a car. No, I couldn't give it all up. Not yet.

Changing the faces
At every intersection
It's hard to be alone
When you don't have disguises
Or DISPOSABLES

That synthetic explosion again. The bomb! I changed the station to the nearest alternative. I didn't want to be alone. That was the last thing I wanted to be. I was sick of the business and I needed new friends desperately.

A voice called out my name on the street. Who on earth could it be? Everyone I know in Los Angeles works in some kind of office well above street level. At first I was paranoid that the voice might belong to the press, but the voice wasn't one of the nagging variety. It had to belong to somebody who was confident that I would inevitably turn around and respond.

So I turned around. And it made sense to me that the voice belonged to Patrick Thompson. One of those people out of my past who I always run into when something in my life is going to change. To me it was an omen that I would bump into Patrick while absently walking around the new downtown L.A.

Besides, the last thing Patrick would talk about would be the music industry, which suited me fine. Hopefully he wouldn't go on too long about his failure of a marriage and his reluctant son. Hopefully we could simply drink and discuss literature. Patrick was the person who introduced me to the novels and short stories of Cornell Woolrich, and for that reason alone I like him very much.

But the main reason that I felt a bond with Patrick was that we had both been through different experiences involving Matthew Wilding.

Patrick and I had gone to high school together, during my years as an American student. If I had been the one too eccentrically beautiful to be popular with the rest of the class, then he was the one too conventionally ugly. Patrick was one of those people you just knew would be less of a voyeur if only they considered themselves worth looking at. Therefore, it made perfect sense that we would frequently stumble over each other's paths.

He did begin with the perfunctory questions about the entertainment racket. But that was merely his ploy to get me talking about how fed up I was with it. And his eyes exploded like fireworks when I informed him that I'd suddenly burst out of my manager's office.

"Is it permanent?"

Permanent to me at this moment could only mean that I had no desire to return to the stable. So, yes it was permanent.

"This calls for drinks." Patrick was beaming at me with pride. Normally when I saw him I paid for the refreshments. After all, I was a pop star and he was a schoolteacher. But since our last encounter Patrick had saved enough money to quit teaching and purchase a small building, open a bookstore, and then purchase another building which paid its rent by auditioning comedians and improvising actors six days a week. Therefore that left the seventh night, Tuesday, open for Patrick's personal favourite: writers, particularly poets. Anybody could show up before the crowd came, register his name with Patrick who also hosted the evening, and then get up and read his work. Tonight would be poetry night.

"Have you been keeping up with your writing, Richard?"

It wasn't a question; it was a personal challenge that I felt compelled to rise to. I'd been having a block and Patrick knew it. After all, he had been following my career relentlessly for years. When he invite me to read my most recent writing at his café this evening, I accepted the invitation.

I took a long look at the crowd before my reading. I was looking at the people I'd managed to avoid by never attending a university. One Patrick Thompson was quite enough as far as I was concerned. Most of them were even wearing glasses, concealing their deadly fixed eyeballs.

One woman stood out. She looked like an eccentric academic, crossed with that ultra-witty late thirties Hepburn/Roz Russell type. The type who would up running the business because none of the men around her knew how to count when the chips were down. This woman could obviously tell the difference between a stupid person pretending to be smart and a smart person pretending to be stupid.

I fixed my gaze upon this one woman. I would address myself to her, and at this moment everybody else in the room became irrelevant.

But what I was about to pass off as literature was written by a body artificially supporting a mind which on that particular night was frozen because an actor in a bad movie is supposed to do the job instead of think about it. My one and only B movie, *The Neapolitan Caper*, was dreadful. On the set I killed time with cocaine and scribbling.

At one point the subject found himself
Abandoned in a suburban ravine
In the middle of the night
He didn't have a compass
He didn't have a television
He was very confused

The heart pounded a million beats for every
second

The body demanded excitement
And the subject had no idea what to do

The subject started walking
Until a cop car pulled up and demanded I. D.
The subject was illegal
So he was installed in the drunk tank
And released after humiliation by the guards.

The subject decided
That he was sick of his old address
So he called on a friend
Borrowed some cash
Then checked into a hotel
He turned on the television
But he stared at the wall.

We didn't exchange names until we were driving in the red Citroen. She offhandedly introduced herself as Kate. A name doesn't hurt if you're going to be talking to somebody for a while, and Kate's a fine name. Other names may come and go, but Kate will never go away.

My only prerequisite for choosing a watering hole was that I'd never heard of the place. Kate had the same prerequisite. She was also a fugitive from the entertainment industry. Being a freelance film editor on other people's projects had been driving her up the wall. So now she no longer did other people's work, unless she believed in the work politically.

When we saw an anonymous enough looking restaurant called *The Lookout* I stopped the car and decided here was as good as anywhere. She didn't disagree. We knew we could talk privately.

To make things informal we each ordered a scotch and soda directly from the bar and then we found a table.
Kate was looking at me benevolently.

"You should develop your writing more Paul. Or can I come right out and call you Richard?"

I wasn't as embarrassed as she might've hoped. I hadn't put an enormous amount of effort into my disguise.

"No, really, Richard. I like the way you write. It's a succession of images or events. It's cinematic."]

"But a lot of people don't like that!"

"Well, fuck purists!"

No argument from me. So we toasted. The pompous literary stuffed shirts had their own library.

"But you should write more. Spend more time on it. The one you read at Patrick's cafe seemed like a throw-away number."

It was. I had no argument. Besides, I was always a sucker for a particular feminine schoolteacher type. She cornered me.

"It was, wasn't it!"

I gave her the run-down on how I wrote the throwaway during the production of *The Neapolitan Capers*. That cracked her up.

I agreed with her.

"After all, Hollywood only has two plots!"

Kate looked at me warily.

"Are you referring to the happy ending and the realistic ending?"

For a moment I felt awkward, then I solved the problem by motioning to the waiter. But before I could make the gesture too overblown and vulgar Kate mentioned to me that she had a bottle of Scotch back at her apartment and she invited me back to share it with her.

Was I interested? You bet I was!

"Is this all there is?" I asked her. Kate smiled and informed me that it was indeed. Had I been expecting more? After all, she did work in the film industry, didn't she? The apartment consisted of a living room, a kitchen and a bedroom with boudoir. Big enough for one but for two?

There was a man living here. In a small rack at the end of the coffee table I could see three different model briar pipes and a tobacco pouch. Since Kate considered herself to be intellectual, it figured that she would live with some variety of academic. But since the apartment was so small the man would probably have to do the same thing. Especially, if either of the couple were doing something that took up the entire apartment, which wouldn't be a difficult achievement.

Kate was smiling at me. "This is more than enough room for me." I couldn't believe it. "You live alone?"

"Always have."

"But..."

She moved down on the sofa towards the pipes and reached for one. "You thought these belonged to some man?"

Kate laughed at me. No way the pipes belonged some man. They were hers.

"Around home I like to smoke a pipe. When I'm alone or with a friend. But not in public. It's not worth the bullshit I have to put up with. Assholes thinking I must be some weird kind of dyke and staring at me."

I couldn't resist staring at her either, after she'd lit the pipe and was just sitting there, puffing away at it. Women smoking pipes in America are a rare sight indeed, but they weren't so unusual in Europe. Once in Copenhagen I'd seen a beautiful Monroe type dyed blonde smoking a pipe and calmly ignoring a hysterical young man sitting across the table from her. It was a classic power situation. He was ranting away at her, and she was preoccupied with her pipe.

I was intrigued by Kate's briar fixation. It was different, and I was definitely in the mood for something different.

Kate announced that she was tired. I was beginning to fade away myself, but I wasn't yet ready for sleep and I didn't think she was either. She leaned forward, put her right hand on my left shoulder, and then stared directly into my eyes.

The eye contact was unbelievable. I'd never seen such an intensity in my entire previous life. I was becoming very aroused.

After that prolonged eye contact Kate tongue-kissed me. This went on for a long time, because I responded with an energy I never knew I had. By now I was so hard I could've burst. I was afraid of the potential flood.

"Kate, let's. Let's do it now. Please, I can't wait any longer."

She looked at me, still maintaining the same intensity of eye contact.

"We shouldn't, Richard."

"My body wants to."

"Mine does too. But we don't really know each other very well yet and not interested in careless casual sex."

I wasn't going to give in lightly. This was not careless and casual sex. I'd taken the necessary preparatory measures some time ago. But Kate wasn't about to be persuaded.

"I can't afford to take any chances. I've been hurt before."

It was apparent that there was no way we were going to sleep together tonight had desire to burn, but also had the desire for some kind of future relationship, which I'd blow if I lost my self-control at this particular heated moment. What is the different between a man who imposes himself on an unwilling woman and a rapist?

"Richard, I'm sorry. But I'm tired."

"No, you're not too tired. But it's alright, I understand."

We smiled at each other, then we kissed. Not erotically as before, but affectionately. As friends do, friends who have a commitment to watch out for each other.

"You can sleep on the sofa if you want, Richard. It pulls out."

No way, I told myself. I had to go somewhere else. There was no way I could sleep knowing that she was in the next room.

"Thanks, but no. I'm going to find a hotel tonight."

"Under a pseudonym?"

She was right. I shouldn't take chances.

"Your flight sounds exciting."

Not right now it didn't. I wasn't trying to escape from something that I didn't want. On the contrary, I was only admitting defeat. But it wasn't that complicated. Too bad the bookstores were all closed. I could use a good pulp detective novel.

We kissed one more time, then she headed for her bedroom. I waited for a few minutes before letting myself out. There was something in between us, a barrier rather than a compatibility. I looked around the apartment for clues. A poster for *Zero Population Growth* was a possibility. I hadn't shown any sign of immediate commitment or even interest. After all, I was still a corporate-sponsored pop star. And she no longer worked on machine-made movies. Kate had principles.

Nah, that's just scratching the surface. That particular distance is negotiable. I knew who was standing in between us. It was Matthew. Matthew would have to go.

I wasn't really tired yet. I'd only wanted to go to bed with her. But since she didn't want me to, there was nothing I could do about it without being obnoxious and rude, and therefore killing the potential for any kind of relationship let alone romance. After all, on my way out I had remembered to jot down Kate's phone number.

But since I wasn't really tired at all, morbid curiosity persuaded me to drop out to a club. When I arrived I could see a band called *GQ*. That's right, they called themselves *Gentlemen's Quarterly*. The room was hot as hell and they were all wearing these Armani suits and replicating my dance period sound with a reasonable degree of accuracy. But they weren't doing anything that anybody can afford the right suits and hairdressers couldn't do with a few music lessons and a producer to boot. And when they finished their last number, the lead singer, who knew damn well that I was watching him, made a bee line for me, so I had to make a quick exit. These squirts, who are quick to call me a dinosaur in the press, but in reality would all like to suck my cock. But I'm not attracted to their big mouths.

When I got back to my car this woman named Linda Sanders was sitting on my trunk. After I broke up with Sarah I made some god-awful mistakes and a night with Linda Sanders was one of them. She was wearing black leather pants that might well have been glued to her and her eyes were glassy. As always, I had to admit that right now heroin was tempting, and Linda knew it. The fact that she knew it was enough to help me resist the temptation, and when she persisted in sitting on my trunk after I'd told her no and positioned myself behind the steering wheel, I had to make a theatrical production out of turning the ignition key in order to give her the hint that all I wanted to

do tonight was to go off by myself and find a quiet, anonymous hotel.

When I saw the *Vacancy* sign I pulled over and stopped. For the sake of continuity I signed the register as Paul Davidson, from San Francisco to go with the California license plates. My room was so quiet I could've heard a pin drop, and since no pins were there to fall on the floor sleeping wasn't much of a problem. When I woke up, however, I felt as if I was alone in a foreign country. So I reached into my jacket pocket for the number I'd remembered to jot down last night, then I called Kate.

Even a blind person would've been capable of spotting all the posters on the walls of Kate's apartment. She had no paintings, no photographs of film stills, only posters for the *Zero Population Growth* movement. Kate was active, or make that hyperactive, in that particular movement. Too many people were automatically breeding too many kids; therefore the schools were overcrowded with kids who were more than likely to become unemployed and indeed unemployable. Unemployable because a select few fat men controlled all of the money in the capitalist and a few old bureaucrats did the same thing in the Communist countries. And the rest of the world is stuck between, without any money to be controlled. There are too many people in America, let alone England. Let alone the third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh worlds. Yeah, it's an important issue, although hardly the only one. Yeah, I feel too that there are too man people in the world, because too many people think that they know me and who I am. But I was very interested in this particular fetish of Kate Barton's. I felt it was only the tip of the volcano.

Before I left the motel I had a sudden guilt feeling about Jack. I should at least phone his office, although I still didn't want to talk to him.

Despite everything, Jack Newman really was, in his own words, some kind of *mensch*. Of course we had enjoyed our puppeteer and puppet relationship. That sort of bondage is part and parcel of the popular entertainment industry, and anyone who argues is kidding themselves. Unless one wants to confine the act to a small circle of friends, which nobody really does despite the security. Because the false security of fixed parameter is enough to drive one to drink and drugs, which one can't afford to indulge in if stuck within a fixed parameter.

However, I resisted my guilt feelings, because I didn't feel much more than shade guilty. There were always others in Jack's stables. The man always did have an eye and ear for young upstarts. I was always disposable, and that had been the basis of our working relationship. Faces are disposable. Just like all pop stars.

Besides, if I really was indispensable to Jack Newman's wallet or his ego or his whatever, he would come looking for me. Perhaps he might hire a private detective. How exciting, to be a fugitive after all these years of being public property.

The headline on the front page of the L.A. Times jumped out at me

from the news vendor's stand. What jumped out in particular was a headline about a murder involving the restaurant business. Vince Bertinelli, owner of Flavio's Restaurant in a prominent mall, had been found dead in the parking lot after closing time. At first a witness claimed to have seen the victim in the company of a dark-haired, big shouldered man with a scar under his left eye but, after extensive police questioning, the witness took everything back. She was forced to admit that she hadn't actually seen anything.

What made me feel positive that the witness had been intimidated was the name of Flavio's new owner, Stanley Newtonbrook. I had met the man once, and the introduction was made by none other than Ed Walker, producer of *The Only Solution*. Before I walked out of that production I met a lot of similar slimy characters.

One of the many reasons why I consider the press to be a collective pain in the ass is because they habitually ask me about my relationship with Sarah Bankwell. Sarah and I lived together, in the sense of having the same mailing address, for over two and half years. We almost got married for economic as well as romantic reasons.

The press likes to ask complex questions and then in return expects stupid and simplistic answers. Yet the relationship was hardly unusual. We both had to travel a lot, me supposedly being an entertainer and she being a photographer. No matter where we had to travel to, both of us had to spend considerable time, with people who could only be described as assholes. So when we were both home, all we wanted was privacy. Privacy from everybody including each other. Intellectually I didn't equate Sarah (and she didn't equate me) with the outside world that I was completely frustrated with, but I guess emotionally I had made that equation. So the only sensible, civilized thing to do was to break up.

I'd still like to think that Sarah and I were friends, but I'm sure she doesn't feel that way about me. I lost my temper more than a few times too many, so I know that she wouldn't appreciate any calls from me.

Kate greeted me warmly but casually. After all, she had been expecting me. My arrival was inevitable and on time, so she took it for granted.

"You look like you had a good sleep. Come on in, I'll just be a moment."

After a minute in the boudoir she emerged. Today Kate was wearing a pink sweater and an exquisite pair of closely pleated hounds-tooth slacks with cuffs. She reminded me of a librarian who knows where all the books, which aren't supposed to be in the library, are hidden. Or a filing clerk with dangerous alliances. Kate sat down on the sofa and began filling one of her pipes.

"You don't mind if I smoke this pipe." It wasn't a question. She knew damn well that I loved it.

I had never met anyone else like Kate Barton before. Lots of very intelligent, academic women, whose company I infinitely preferred to that of models, artless starlets and vacuous scene makers in general, have passed through my life. I had often wondered what some of these academics were like when they stopped talking and made eye contact, but none of them did. Eye contact was emotional, and to be avoided at all costs. Since I myself am afraid of my emotions, on the surface that suited me fine. But I couldn't be aroused by people who always talked

and didn't seem to do anything else, just as much as I couldn't get aroused by people who couldn't talk. Because people who would stare at me and never interrupt my monologue with some point of view of their own were wallpaper and usually I would have the sense to leave quickly.

At this moment, sitting in this woman's apartment, felt as if I were a million miles away from the variety of obviously excessive sexuality that had cause me to temporarily abandon the medium. With her perfectly cut pink sweater, her tan pleated men's slacks, Kate Barton's sexuality intrigued me like hadn't been intrigued in a long time.

After years of being part of the entertainment industry, and after years of simply living, I had really come to resent people who confuse obvious sexual imagery with any kind of genuine eroticism. The less obviously sexy someone might seem to be on the surface, the more intriguingly sexual that particular person would seem to me. Whenever I read in the pop press that I was 'sexy', if I was in a good mood I would become furious. Whatever gave these leeches who don't know me and never will know me the right to make that description? I suppose it's merely a generalization about the stars. After all, aren't stars only people who make themselves available for fantastic consumption? If a star, then sexy because always in public. Always on a platter waiting for the arrival of the vultures. Well, after the initial curiosity wore off I didn't want to be touched by any member or members of the public and I had no desire to touch any of them either.

Kate retrieved the TV section out of the late afternoon paper and quickly flipped forward. I was going to be on TV tonight, on one of the talk shows. But it was an ancient interview, and I didn't want to see it again. Fortunately she solved the problem for me.

"I'm going to see *Blytheport*." Her choice surprised me.

"I thought you were finished with everything Hollywood."

"It's only harmless curiosity. Do you want to come?"

I didn't. I knew that I would surrender to the seduction of television.

Now I had the apartment to myself. Here I was, after two days, already thinking in terms of 'now I have the place to myself'. This woman has already become someone I love being with and can't stand being with. Somebody from whom I would crave privacy, and then, the minute I'm alone, crave their company. Their mind, their body. Their love. It was real and it hurt.

When Kate left for the movies, I welcomed the temporary solitude. Now I could indulge in a little history. Earlier on, when Kate had been in her boudoir, I'd sneaked a quick glance at the TV Guide. What a surprise! I was going to be on television in about five minutes. By that time Kate would be safely out of earshot.

If I were so anxious to deny my history, to dispose of my previous incarnations, then why indeed was I; about to watch my own image on television? I laughed, in the direction of the mirror in the open boudoir." Since there wasn't a promo tape ready for that 'hot new single

of mine', I concluded, Jack must've arranged for this old interview and performance clips to be aired.

The interview itself wasn't much. After all, I had participated in it and then seen the playback several times. Only the stuff about my esoteric Japanese influence period was of interest to me. Occasionally I could disguise myself, grow a few days beard or whatever, and meet people anonymously. Go to art shows and to Noh Theatre, and not always in Toyko and the other big cities. It occurred to me, now that I was on the lam under a phony name (well, last night's hotel and the poetry reading anyways) that I should be doing something about my face.

Then the performance segment of the show came on. I loved it and I was terrified of it. I was singing one of the songs that was never going to materialize in *The Only Solution*. The song was called *Breakdown*. It was about the systematic reduction of fluid language into something resembling Orwellian newspeak. The end of decorative indulgence, the end of wit.

Too many words
Means too much thinking
Too much thinking
Means too much trouble

No more talking fancy
It's time to speak plain
Things used to be simple
Now they are again

So no more thinking
We've already made plans
And we need men
Whose brains are in their hands

Break it down
Let's break everything down
Break it down
Help break everything down

Oscar Wilde would've gladly swallowed Socrates' hemlock if he could have foreseen this aberration. Only I the performer, the performer as Der Fuhrer or at least the fanatical party patriarch, only I was allowed to be decorative. So magnetic, so charismatic, that the audience would be bludgeoned into wearing nothing but utilitarian overalls for the rest of their lives. The star system in this instance was not aristocratic, it was fascistic. One leader and billions of followers. The television had to be killed. I pushed the button with all the vehemence of a person deactivating a ticking bomb. When I sat back down on the sofa, I realized that I had broken out into extreme perspiration.

Having one of those faces is a blessing if you want to play star, but ultimately having one of those faces is a curse. If your eyes are naturally on fire, there's no way that ironic delivery will work with an audience of more than ten, if even that many. If your eyes are on fire, that means that you must believe in everything you say. Isn't that how love works, by love, I mean passion.

In the project known as *The Only Solution*, I was going to play the zealous party official. And the audience was going to love me because of my eyes. Mr. Big Movie Producer, Ed Walker, his stooge Matthew the Flunky, and whoever the nonentity they would eventually hire as director didn't care about editorial comment. They didn't care about shading and texture. They couldn't listen to criticism, mine or that of anybody more objectively removed from the project than I was. They only wanted my eyes. My eyes were going to be their ticket to power, glory, conquest of the free world. My eyes were going to be tyranny personified, and therefore glorified. I had decided no. There could've been no way I could've

lived with myself. I would've been condoning fascism for the purpose of making myself ever richer. I would've felt guilty about the money and spent it all on various agents of self-destruction. So I walked out of the project in a fury, and therefore severed what remained of my friendship with Matthew Wilding.

I hated it! I could still see my possessed eyes, even though I had killed the image. Quickly, I looked through Kate's bookcase for whatever escapist literature she might have for my immediate benefit. I was in luck. Hidden in among all the criticism and film periodicals I found a thriller called *E Train*. It was only a hundred pages, a bit longer than *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. *E Train* would keep me occupied until Kate returned.

When Kate announced to Richard that she was on her way to a movie, she was careful to pick one that she'd already seen. That way, she could describe it accurately in roughly three hours time, when she would really be returning from a women's bar called EmJays. EmJays was a bar where women could get together for a drink, drink alone, cruise, or sit and think. The latter was Kate's intention. She sat on a bar stool, well down from that part of the bar where EmJay herself was making the customers feel at home. She'd brought one of her pipes with her; that would definitely create the impression of someone not inclined towards dancing.

She genuinely found herself liking Richard Monitor, some of whose casual affairs had been well publicized over the years. But there were a couple of things about the man that had to change. Or rather than change, be completely eliminated. But there was one thing Kate was sure about. When she would be fucking Richard Monitor later that evening, the heterosexual act would not be a contradiction of her involvement with Zero Population Growth. It was no secret that the star had been vasectomized, shortly after his last relationship had terminated. Indeed, that decision was a large part of what she liked about the man.

Hopefully last night's desire was still there for him as it was for her. Last night she couldn't take another chance on his not being just another sleazy hit-and-run artist. Or some guy indulging in some weird fantasy on his night off and then returning to Normalville. Richard had stuck around too long to be one of those. Kate simply hoped that he wouldn't be faking it later tonight. That he wouldn't be too preoccupied to deliver, now that his initial arousal was history.

Kate lit the pipe again. Soon it would be alright to catch the bus home. The precision of the L.A. transit system was consolation for Tinseltown's few non-drivers. As she followed her cloud of white smoke up into the chandeliers, she noticed a big shouldered woman staring at her. The woman's name was either Sarah or Martha. Kate wasn't sure which and she didn't intend to find out tonight. Maybe later, but not tonight. A lot depended on how Mr. Monitor was going to pan out. If he proved to be as hopelessly self-contained as Kate suspected he might, then the gentleman would have to remain a casual acquaintance.

She finished her drink, collected her belongings and headed for the transit stop. She couldn't wait for the bus to come.

Just when the thriller was about to climax I heard the key. Kate let out a loud "Richard" as if she was trying to wake me up. Well, there's no way that I could've been sleeping. I had been reading a good, if fairly conventional thriller, but its climax could've been postponed indefinitely.

"How was the movie? Sorry, I've forgotten the title."

For a moment I thought Kate had also forgotten the title. But then she remembered. The movie was called *Blytheport*. I'd read about it, I was sure. Wasn't that the one about the woman working for this oil company who gets snuffed in her car.

"Uh huh. Except it's been glossed over about a hundred times. You gotta watch those libel laws in Hollywood. Especially when one of your producers probably owns shares in the oil company."

Fuck it, I thought. I'm not interested in talking about the futility of mainstream political movies. And neither was Kate. She looked down and noticed my erection.

"You've been that way for a long time."

It wasn't a question. Yes I had. It was the same one as last night, on a return engagement. I was waiting for her to decide whether to feel happy or sorry about my physical condition. I'd felt this way all night. Her face lit up.

"Then we can go into the bedroom and you can play with me."

So, Kate and I entered the bedroom, closed the door, took the phone off the hook, removed our clothes, lay down beside each other and I began to feel her. Soon I also began tonguing her. She was becoming very excited, but I'd been nervous for so long that it was quite useless. A little anticipation can be a dangerous thing, especially if you still haven't rejected the element of surprise. She was building up fast, and I was sagging. Limp and useless. Premature ejaculation or whatever the Platonics call it. For a moment Kate looked as if she wanted to kill me. After all, I had let her down.

Then she broke out laughing, a refreshingly vulgar sort of laugh.

"Eager beaver gets no worm. Hah!"

I waited until it was obvious that she wasn't going to scream at me until I added my sheepish chuckle.

"I'm sorry Kate. Anticipation can be deadly."

"What do you mean deadly. Shit, it's only sex. I've got a better idea."

Kate wanted to head out and have a few drinks. She'd only gone to the movies because she'd sensed that I wanted to be alone and also because the apartment had become claustrophobic. Besides, two tense people always need to loosen up if they want to explode at a later date. So the idea of going out drinking appealed to me. I could drive and I could pay.

We hadn't been driving for too long when Kate tapped me on the shoulder and pointed out our destination. I found myself looking at a split level combination restaurant and bar called Sammy Mananas. The place had a dining room and a wine cellar that was probably closed by this hour. So we decided on the dining room, and then I parked the car.

Suddenly the red Citroen was a conspicuous car. Sammy Mananas' parking lot was full of executive vehicles: Lincolns, Imperials, and Caddies. They had all been finished in the conventionally sedate colours favoured by conservative moneyed types, who take their wealth so much for granted they don't have to flaunt it. I was expecting to see a lot of three-piece banker suits inside.

As Kate and I approached the steps to the front door we noticed the smell of cigars, the businessman's smoke; perhaps we were about to enter some kind of boardroom meeting. Still, we would be able to have our own booth. There would be a room full of middle-aged tycoons and then there would be the two of us.

I'd never been here before but I'd certainly heard the name. And it didn't take me very long to remember where I'd heard it. No sooner had we been greeted by the maitre d' when suddenly Kate tapped me on the shoulders. This time the tap was nervous.

"Richard, let's get out of here."

I also wanted to vanish. The swarthy man standing behind the maitre d' was none other than Mister Ed Walker. Aircraft tycoon, oil magnate, film producer, restaurateur, and syndicate man. With the final occupation taking priority over all the others. I shared Kate's hatred of the

man so we both turned around and we shipped out.

I knew why I hated Ed Walker. I hated him because he had stolen Matthew. But I wanted to hear her story.

"That man is the main reason why from now on I only work on independent productions. He stinks. That's all I have to say about him."

I remembered the item in yesterday's papers about the sudden change of ownership pertaining to Flavio's Restaurant. Had the owner of Sammy Mananas gone fishing too? If Kate had known whose presence was going to be dominating the place she wouldn't have suggested going there. Or was she that straightforward?

"Where now?" We had been driving in stone silence for about five minutes. She looked shaken.

"I don't know. Let's keep driving for awhile."

It was the period after sex that I enjoyed the most. During sex, you have to force yourself to think of one thing in particular, a fetish, while simultaneously being sensitive to your partner. If you're insensitive, then the fetishism will be all too transparent and he or she will feel more than somewhat disposable. But the period afterwards is even more ecstatic than the period of activity. While the bodies remain posed in a perfectly photographic tableau; the minds are thinking of absolutely everything or sweet nothing.

I needed air the next morning and I sensed that Kate wanted some time alone. So I drove downtown, where you can actually park the car somewhere and walk around. I did exactly that, visited a couple of galleries with crude neo-expressionist paintings on their walls, and then dropped into Patrick Thompson's bookstore. My pretext was a curiosity about any delayed responses to the other evening's recital. There weren't any. Patrick looked as if it was going to be lecture time after closing the door.

"No Richard. To everyone there you were just another poet. None of them knew who you were and none of them cared. You'll have to become more serious about your writing, Richard. I've heard a lot worse than what you read the other night, but they still sounded to me like song lyrics."

"Well they were lyrics that I'd written but could never find the right music to go with them."

"Aha."

Patrick stood up so he could put a periodical back on the right shelf. I bought a New York Times, in a quick attempt to change the subject. My purchase only led to the next part of the professor's lecture. When Patrick turned around his eyes were stern, like those of a philosopher king who was about to punish a star pupil for making an elemental mistake.

"You went home with Kate Barton and don't lie to me and tell me that you didn't. The two of you walked out the door together after you gave me a token thank you."

I flushed. Jealousy does that to me as it does to most people, but things get embarrassing when the particular jealousy is not mine. "She's no good for you, Richard. Stay away from Kate Barton."

What was it to him? Had they perhaps had a painful affair? Like Patrick's own non-marriage. I wanted an explanation.

"I've been enjoying Kate's company for the last two days. And why are you so full of hatred?"

He glared at me as if I were the stupidest person on the entire planet.

"That woman has no idea who she is or what she wants. All of this pseudo-political activist number that she pulls on people is bullshit. She doesn't know what her preferences are. You're just her latest guinea pig, Richard. She'll have a brief affair with you, and then decide that heterosexuality is politically incorrect, and then throw you out of her life like another one of your stupid disposables. Don't fall for it, Richard."

So, Kate was confused. I was confused too. Confused people are frequently attracted to each other. But Patrick would never understand this. He buried all of his confusion in the mystery section of his little bookstore. For all of his ability to get along famously with academics who are afraid of words with fewer than three syllables, Patrick liked pulp with no self critical overview. Pulp written by repressed men who are afraid of women. Men who convert this fear into homicidal hatred. I had to get out of the bookstore immediately. His eyes were making me squirm.

"Patrick, you really do believe all those clichés about the castrating spider woman."

"They apply to you as well Richard. You've spent your whole life getting yourself hopelessly tangled. Your manager, your old girl friends, Matt Wilding, organized crime, now Kate Barton."

"You don't even know any of these people. Except for Matthew." I was boiling under the collar.

"I know you. You're this leech who always fastens onto your inferiors. Matt is merely a plagiarist with a good ear, then when he fell under criminal patronage he decided that he could afford to lose that ear. You, Richard, are much better than any of those people. So why don't you deal with it."

"Are you a writer, Patrick."

"You'll know the answer to that question pretty damn soon. You'll see it right before your eyes."

"I have to go." As I walked briskly to the front door he shouted after me.

"One of these days, Richard Monitor, you will be listening to me reading my masterpiece directly to you."

I ran to the spot where the red Citroen was parked. I had to clear out of the downtown core, but I wasn't yet ready for a return engagement with Kate. She was confused enough without having to deal with me. It was early, but what I needed was a drink.

In New York I used to see Matt all the time, sitting in the all-night donut shops in front of a million paper cups with his little pocket notebooks. If he was in L.A. he couldn't be so public. He would be in a rooming house or a hotel perhaps, depending on the per diems from Big Ed. I was inclined towards undertaking a little detective work.

There are many low-budget hotels in L.A., but then Mr. Ed Walker isn't exactly a starving artist. Meaning that Matt was more likely to be in an expensive apartment, and there are also a lot of those in L.A. Therefore, I had to figure out where Matt might actually go shopping for basic living essentials. You can forget the most obvious requirements of the man's daily existence, Matt lived on French fries and caffeine but ...I was onto something! What did he do in order to keep in shape? When Matthew and I used to be friends he drank nothing but beer, and yet back then he still had some concern about vanity. Which meant that he had to somehow work off all the fat. Exercise is the usual method, and in his case exercise meant swimming. A solitary enough exercise; a few lengths, a token shower, and then last night's damage was theoretically undone. He was a man who hung onto habits. Perhaps it was possible that he hadn't yet given up his daily swim.

Now my priority was to hit a phone booth and scan the Yellow Pages. I could safely rule out all the obviously gay establishments; Matthew's homophobia was something that I'd previously forced myself to tolerate. No, any place he'd go for his daily swim would have to be a good old-fashioned cheap indoor swimming pool. There weren't too many of those in L.A. Then my heartbeat slowed down. I was completely on the wrong track. If Big Ed had set his protégé up in a high rise then the high rise complex would have its own pool. I was wasting my time. Damn it! I pulled the car over at the nearest bar, and I ordered a beer.

Too early in the day for a beer. When you haven't eaten yet beer ruins your concentration. Your thinking gets fuzzy. But when you realize your thinking is becoming fuzzy you often realize that you were on the right track to begin with. It wouldn't be like Matthew not to head out somewhere, if only for a few intersections, for a swim. He wouldn't drive; he'd lost that particular kind of concentration a long time ago, but he'd definitely go outside of his work room. He'd always required some sense of temporary immersion in the outside world.

So, I headed for the pay phones and grabbed the Yellow Pages again. My eyes noticed an ad for Al's Steam Baths. These baths were not attached to a restaurant or any other enterprise, so they were worth a drive. I memorized the address and started the Citroen. I was driving towards one of the more rundown sections of L.A.

When I arrived at Al's Steam Baths I could easily imagine Matthew using the facilities. I could visualize him carefully picking a locker at a good safe distance from all the other swimmers. He had been a morning swimmer; mornings for some reason I'd never understood were less crowded than the late afternoons. Well, it wasn't inconceivable that Matthew had switched to the early afternoons because of the three-hour time difference between coasts, so I purchased a towel, trunks, and shower. And then I dove in.

The cold water was refreshing, at least as refreshing as the morning shower at Kate's had been. My encounter with Patrick had created a desperate need for cleanliness which was now being fulfilled. I had the pool virtually to myself, except for a floating old man, and I didn't resent the solitude.

Then I heard footsteps in the locker room. They were the footsteps of a man who tried too hard to maintain erect posture when his natural posture had long since deteriorated. They were the footsteps of someone desperately holding onto whatever personal dignity he had remaining. They were Matthew's footsteps.

My fists were clenching tighter and tighter. His movements had become inaudible.

Soon the shower would be running. The shower was tempting, a neutral and vulnerable territory between the pool and the locker room. It would be easy to follow him no matter which alternative he chose. My fists were clenched for life.

The shower strategy made sense. With my fists unbearably tensed, I jumped out of the pool and ran towards the door almost slipping on the side of the pool. Temporarily off balance as I was reaching for the handle, a burly muscle man bumped into me and then snickered an apology.

I had to run. I couldn't stand this any longer. The muscle man called after me.

"My, my, you are in a hurry."

Yes, I was in a hurry. I had to do something fast about those fists.

Kate was right. In fact, her accuracy was deadly. I was scared of her. Afraid of what was so obviously there between the two of us. This person, this woman, who knew me all too well although we'd only been together for a couple of days, was too close for comfort. The space between the two of us was so hot, so full of possibilities, that I'd had to put up a barrier, a buffer zone.

Yet Matthew really did have a hold on me. I couldn't just throw him away. Cross him out of my telephone book like I did all the others. How could I? There was something unresolved between us. No temporary diversion, nothing was going to stand in my way.

Only Kate could possibly intercept me. Hers was the only presence strong and tempting enough, rational and passionate enough. Therefore I had to escape from her.

I drove the rented red Citroen in the neighbourhood of a restaurant owned by Mr. Ed Walker himself. Kate had mentioned that the boys often hung out there. Maybe Matt was having drinks on the big man's tab.

It might be all right to mindlessly drive around L.A. if you're a first-time tourist, but I've been here before and I wasn't seeing anything I hadn't seen before. Only the same old underground parking lots where a famous movie star maybe did and maybe didn't get snuffed. Only the same old mansions owned by people who never were in the movies but made a lot of the money. The actors were supposed to spend all their money in order to qualify as stars. But the parasites merely laid back and counted the money rolling in. The watchers were the smart ones.

No, L.A. hadn't changed at all. The same old Sunday drivers, Monday morning coke dealers, all week long high pressure salesmen; the same old fast-food outlets and fly-by-night watering holes, if I didn't see one I could remember from the last visit then I was looking at its replacement.

I could see everything and everybody except for the one man who I wanted to see. The man I knew must be out here. Waiting.

The swimming pool idea didn't seem too farfetched. Old habits don't all of a sudden die, especially with someone as cerebral as Matthew. Cerebral types like the physical details to happen automatically, so the brain isn't diverted from the more important, abstract details. But what did he do when he ventured outside?

He went out for junk food. But of course he'd have a car. In L.A. either you stay in the car, or else you run inside from the car. You don't park and then walk a couple of blocks.

But Matthew always liked to walk. He was not an L.A. person. He didn't live in a car. His frayed slacks and slightly crippled gait were distinctive, and he knew it. It could never belong to anyone else. Why else would he go out? What else was essential to his working habits? Coffee. The man lived on junk food and caffeine. No wonder a thrift mobster like Ed Walker took the boy on as a protégé. Matt didn't have any expensive tastes. Unless...

Aha. I was onto something. Matthew didn't have any expensive tastes unless he was using drugs again. His early writings were methedrine-crazed blurs, and even the later work, before he formalized it, was initially scribbled down on a run.

I was onto something because, no matter how hard they may try, druggies tend to return to form sooner or later.

Whenever I wanted drugs, usually cocaine, I could always arrange for other people to be the procurers. That way, they would be the ones who might get caught with the drugs, not I. But right now I was not above a little bit of constructive slumming. If I procured a little coke in some slimy drug hole, that didn't mean that I had to use the stuff.

I was more interested in examining the other customers. I could pretend that Matthew was a dealer with whom I had to make contact. Which was not far from being the truth.

However, an accomplice was required. Somebody who procured drugs for their own use because their life depended upon it. I took a deep breath, then I called up Linda Sanders. There was no way I wanted her to come with me; I needed some expert assistance in cruising likely locations.

She was home and she wasn't on the nod. I was becoming excited. I certainly wasn't going to tell Linda why I was suddenly looking for drugs, and when I mentioned coke she groaned and told me to try harder in the regular showbiz haunts. I treated her to a vehement denunciation of showbiz in general and made it clear that I felt like roughing it tonight. The danger was the attraction.

Linda became enthusiastic about my newfound taste for sleaze. She felt privileged to give me the address of one particular diner, near a ratty-looking high-rise. This diner was one of those spoons where the owners didn't even try to keep the traffic moving. Endless caffeine killed time while the customers desperately waited. Tonight I would become a customer.

Except in the summertime, L.A. is a city of two different climates per day: daytime and night-time. A lot of people with poor cold resistance get fooled. They think it's hot at two in the afternoon and they forget to carry the sweater they'll desperately need at five.

I had no further daytime business. I didn't even want to look out the window until I knew that the sun had been down for a least two hours. Then I would head out into the night. The dark side of L.A., unknown to all but the lunatic fringe of Hollywood. The parts of town that the tourist buses will forever remain ignorant of.

The wardrobe had to be inconspicuous. So I pulled out a pair of black jeans, a faded purple sweater, and my black leather jacket. A pair of black top sneakers completed my anonymity. Nothing looked firsthand.

Linda had given me the address of a cafe that even she avoided if at all possible. But she'd go there if she couldn't get the stuff anywhere else and it was a matter of life and death.

I had to connect with Matthew or else my escape from the entertainment industry would all be in vain. If I didn't locate him then there would be no point in remaining here in L.A., alone with a rented car and a catalogue of pseudonyms. I would be another runaway rich dilettante.

It wouldn't be like Matthew to have somebody bringing him the pharmaceuticals if he had truly returned to form. His writing required a familiarity with laces unknown to bureaucracy.

But he had erased me from his memory. Why wouldn't he then have erased more crucial parts of his own history?

Because no writer can possibly work in a vacuum. Even a recluse must have something to remember.

Or somebody.

The diner was chrome on the outside, except the finish had long since faded. What was inside the diner had been faded before it was even born. Every single one of the customers had stationary, cadaverous eyes. These eyes were capable of looking in only one direction, towards the door. Every time the door creaked the eyes would all veer towards it in unison. There would be a temporary expression of hope, and then more barely controlled agony. Except for the lucky pair of eyes.

My eyes were still not frozen. They weren't ever going to get that way if I had any further control over my life. Nobody even gave me a curious, furtive glance. After all, addiction had been on the rise for a long time now and newcomers learn the geography quickly if they're smart.

I didn't want my eyes to be included among theirs. I was waiting for a different connection.

I couldn't stand any of the other faces in the diner. And I didn't want the man behind the counter to be particularly aware of me. So I ordered another cup of coffee and then stared at the floor.

Every time I heard the door creak I looked up however. The first few times I was optimistic, then with each successive customer I'd become more and more depressed. Until I felt like giving up.

Finally I got up to leave. After putting my jacket back on I walked straight towards the front door. Then my face in the glass accused me of cowardice. I had unfinished business. So I awkwardly turned around and walked down the stairs to the washroom. Evidently there was nothing unusual about someone putting their jacket back on just to use the washroom.

Fortunately I had it all to myself. I didn't want to observe any transactions let alone have to participate. The tap with the sink didn't work, but I would've smelled even if it did.

Halfway up the stairs I heard the creaking door. Another customer. Another dealer. They were all the same to me. But because my eye level when I tilted my head upwards was on a level with the main floor I could see the newcomer's shoes. They had a familiar wear and the cuffs had the familiar fray. I stood absolutely still, took a deep breath and listened.

The familiar voice ordered a regular coffee to go. I froze. I knew he was there but he didn't know I was there. The transaction lasted for an unbearable minute. Then the familiar voice muttered thanks and the feet turned around.

He was in his own world. I could begin moving again.

When I arrived back on the main floor of the diner the feet had left and a familiar face walked right by me, oblivious to everything. He was walking straight ahead.

He walked towards a high-rise apartment door, inserted his key into the latch, opened the inside door, and then disappeared from my view.

I waited as long as I could without making it too obvious that I'd been following him. Then I knocked on the door that I'd seen him entering. Room 801. I knocked three times, and then he came to the door.

Matthew Wilding stared at the wall behind me for a second, then mumbled 'Hello Richard' without having looked at me.

An automatic acknowledgement, an acknowledgement utterly devoid of emotions, is even more deadly than silence. At least with silence it's possible to feel the hatred. Matthew had addressed me as if it was inevitable that I would look him up, and that was that. I had called on the man. I had knocked on his apartment door. So what? That was my problem, not his. When he wanted to resume his work he would do so. He didn't even have to close the door on me.

Matthew simply stood in his doorway, puffing on one of those small cigars he'd begun smoking during the writing of *The Only Solution*, and ignoring me. He knew why I'd come, so there was no need for me to say anything. So I didn't. Why make a fool of myself out loud, even to such a rhetorically unresponsive audience.

I had the freedom to stand there and watch the man for as long as I wanted to. I wasn't imposing on his territory, and that was what infuriated me. He needed imposition. He needed someone to wring his neck and shake some sense into him. Matthew needed someone like me to restore him to life.

I had the option of watching the man forever, except that he hadn't changed, he probably never would change, and I wasn't interested in humiliating myself in front of someone who wasn't interested in whether or not they were successfully humiliating me. So I left.

I had to wring his neck. Nobody else cared enough about the man to do him such a favour. Neglected genius is the most infuriating thing in the world. When somebody has the power to transform everyday mediocrity into something cerebral and sublime; when that somebody is the only person who has such divine power, then drastic measures are called for, and therefore justified.

When I glimpsed him for the first time in too long a time I had to follow him. Now it was clearer than ever that I had to confront him.

After my first visit, the one in which Mathew had ignored and rejected me, I retreated to the diner to think my next move over. This time I had no choice, I was the person who'd found him dead, and sooner or later someone else would find the body and leap into action. Id' been seen in the neighbourhood, and my obsession was known to more than a few people. It was known to some very powerful people on whom Mathew had been dependent. Whether or not I had actually been the murderer was quite beside the point. I had been seen, I would be suspected, so I should flee. And therefore I

would be acting guilty and confirm all suspicions. But the cops would take Ed Walker's word over mine, that much I knew for sure. So, I had no choice.

After driving for awhile I rationalized that since nobody had been following me the smartest thing to do would be to return to the hotel that I'd been staying at. So I did. In the lobby the night clerk greeted me as 'Mister Davidson' in exactly the same perfunctory tone that he used with everyone else. Which meant that I was inconspicuous. It wasn't hard to be inconspicuous in this melting-pot of a hotel, as long as one didn't look rich.

When I turned on the TV the woman reading the news looked a lot like Kate. Not enough to cause me to ask the TV for forgiveness, but definitely enough to upset me. To put me in a deep funk. The kind in which you have almost no physical energy and yet you can't sleep because you're too damn nervous. Too preoccupied with a relationship and how you've blown it. You were afraid of her and made it all too obvious. Kate is at least as hyper, and as irrational, as I am. Only she was a lot better at keeping that fact a secret, even on a one-to-one level. And here I was with no further possibility of a relationship with Kate Barton.

How well had she known Matthew? Well enough to know that the three of us couldn't possibly have lived together. That she'd made plain to me. Matt was the one who would have to go. But what was Kate Barton doing in that building between the time when Mathew didn't talk to me and the time when he couldn't have even if he'd wanted to?

I changed the channel. The news at this moment was external information that I couldn't receive, so I didn't want to try. But the channel had to be changed. The image had to be changed. The woman looked too much like Kate for comfort. Any minute now she would put me in my place and I would love it. Now I had no one to look up to.

I reached for my cigarette pack, then realized that it was time to buy another. What the hell did I need another pack for? Stupid habit. Because there was nothing else to do. I'd already looked for interesting reading material in the motel lounge, but the desk clerk was an illiterate. So there wasn't really anything else to do except smoke cigarettes, watch TV and hopefully fall asleep. And try to avoid thinking about Matthew, Kate, and loneliness.

On the way to the cigarette machine the room service woman asked me if there was anything I needed. I didn't respond because when I need something I like to be the one making the request. Since I hadn't responded she would've taken the hint but she didn't. She asked me where I came from. I was furious. Solitude, when it is one's only choice, has to be special or else it's agony. It has to be impenetrable.

So I heard myself telling the room service woman to leave me alone. To fuck right off. She stared at me as if I were obviously sick. I had hurt her feelings. Well, it served her right. My personal life is none of her goddamn business.

Then, after obtaining the coffin nails, I hated myself for lashing out at her. She was only a person trying to make a boring job more

exciting. It wasn't her feelings I was concerned about however, it was her intuitions. My suspicious behavior hadn't been a bright move. Clamming up at a simple, friendly question is not the behavior of a professional criminal. Only an amateur would make that kind of slip. Right at this moment the room service woman was probably informing the hotel manager of my suspicious behavior. They might be phoning the police this very instant.

I'd find out sooner or later, wouldn't I? I wanted to find out. It was time for excitement, except terminal boredom is a lot safer.

The knowledge that the two punks who had pointed at me and yelled out 'There's Richard Monitor' would probably end up talking to the cops was only the beginning. Those two punks knew there was something fishy about me being in that particular lowdown neighbourhood; they weren't adoring fans who could never believe that a pop idol might be a murderer. But this was only the tip of it.

I hadn't forgotten who'd been in the neighbourhood at the same time. I'd seen Kate between the first visit, when Matthew was still physically alive, and the second time when he wasn't. Kate Barton was a woman I both loved and feared. I was the one who was going to be pursued by mad raging bulls. But I had indeed seen her enter the building between my two visits. My eyes are the one part of myself that I can always trust.

Was she a killer? If I were a killer, with motive and passion all too easily accounted for, then she could be too. I was only beginning to know her when I decided that it was detour time, but I knew her well enough that if she decided something was rotten she would take care of that something pretty damn quick. The something rotten in our relationship was Matthew Wilding. But I rationalized, she hadn't been there for very long. Kate was strong-willed, but hardly athletic. Matthew was not a little man; he was gaunt and you would have to be a fool to physically attack him. Matthew would put up a fight, that was for sure, unless he wanted to die. Strangulation is a crime of passion, and crimes of passion involve attack, struggle, self-defense. That requires time, and Kate wasn't in the building long enough. Maybe she decided that it wasn't worth her while looking for me there, that I wasn't worth looking for after all. Or perhaps, Matthew had already been killed, and then she could briskly walk away from the scene of the crime with the satisfaction that someone else had already done something she would have liked to have done.

Good. There was no one in the hallway. To all potential observers I was just another customer, but I wasn't in the mood for that cackling room service woman. I wasn't up to anything more complicated than purchasing yet another pack of cigarettes and a newspaper. I'd slipped my coin into the necessary machine and returned to Room 8 in no time at all. But when I opened up the paper that's when my equilibrium heated up. On the second page of the insight section there was a lengthy article about *Zero Population Growth*. The article was in effect a notice for a rally this afternoon in City Hall Square. And last among the names of the speakers was the name Kate Barton.

I figured that I wouldn't have too much difficulty being anonymous in this crowd. I was simply going to drive to City Hall, and become yet another member of a blue-jeaned audience. For all anybody might know or care, I could pass as a mature college student. Knowing that I would be the logical suspect I would have the sense to vanish before the sirens. Therefore, the odds were at least 90 to 100 that the area

around Gibson's Motel was absolutely clear. And those two punks, who were undoubtedly going to be witnesses for the prosecution, hadn't yet seen my car. Only my body, walking out of Matthew's apartment around the time that he was killed. I would be safe with a car until I reached my destination, and the destination itself seemed perfectly harmless. And Kate herself would be there. I was excited. In a couple of hours I could drive. I could be somewhere else other than in this hotel room. At frequent points in my career I had capitalized on my natural fear of open spaces but crowded fresh air; now that was entirely another matter.

The rally was taking place at the City Hall, and it was already well in progress by the time I arrived. Every conceivable political persuasion was out in full force. A sizable Pro-Choice contingent attracted a vociferous Right-to-Life counter-contingent. A crowd of punks advocated the bomb as a practical solution to overpopulation. They were ignored by everybody else. Benevolent humanitarian types who were on the lookout for medical Nietzschean conspiracies, namely the chemical creation of a 'master race', were countered by leftover sixties activist types who maintained that Western capitalism flourished by keeping the rest of the world in a state of constant starvation, and therefore the Western powers had a vested interest in overpopulation. The throng was multi-cultural, multinational, multi-sexual, multi-whatever. Their faces were all so serious, with the exception of the pro-nuke punks and an old ruddy-faced man whose placard quoted W.C. Fields' 'Kid Are Fine, When They're Fricaseed'. But the pranksters were peripheral. And the entire crowd was peripheral to me, except for the next speaker.

Kate stood on the podium with her shoulders hunched, making last minute alterations in her speech notes. Before the event of Matthew's murder the woman could switch from ultra-butch through subversive librarian to ultra-femme in a matter of seconds; now she'd left herself with only one option. She'd chosen ultra-severe; the requisite party member look. No lipstick, no eye-shadow, no embellishments whatever, only swept back hair revealing her fabulously oversized forehead. And as she grabbed the microphone I was more attracted to her than I had ever been before.

Tersely, she took one last drag on her cigarette and then stomped on the butt with all the subtlety of a field marshal. Then the speech began.

It began with a basic rehash of the *Zero Population Growth* philosophy. Phrases such as 'guaranteed annual income', 'arbitrarily imposed multi-family housing facilities', 'hopelessly decreasing average annual income' passed by in a daze which meant very little to me. If only I'd had the courage to forget about Matthew and pursue Kate. We could've been fantastic collaborators, fantastic lovers.

But would I have been more than a temporary diversion for her? She was a fanatic, and I was a thin white dilettante. Her speech now grabbed my attention. One particular phrase jumped out.

'... to all of those women who for whatever personal reason might require some time spent with a man, you don't have to pretend to love him. That is the guilty response. There is nothing wrong with using a man. Oh, some of you might have to flatter him, cater to his ego a little bit, make him feel more important than he really is, but don't get carried away emotionally. Always make it clear that he is a disposable. After all, he's only using you! It's only those who feel guilt about harmless pleasure who must apologize with 'love' and marriage...'

I drifted off again. I hadn't been that candid with her. I was looking for permanence. I was a romantic fool. But she hadn't been that candid with me, either.

I wanted to haul her out of here, away from this mass of drab and deadly people. I wanted to hold her by the shoulders and make it clear that I didn't mind being used. She could use me, therefore I would be using her. What did it matter which of the two of us would be the bigger user? For Kate to use me I would have to be in her possession. But I was a wanted man, a criminal. There were many other disposables who would be safer for her. Kate was a moralist, and that morality excluded criminals.

I was distracted from my distraction by another phrase from Kate's monologue. The phrase which jarred me was 'chemically oriented'.

"The inevitable results of heterosexual organically-rooted sex are marriage and family, which are both, let's face it, tyrannical control institutions. Organic sex requires justification. That justification is commonly described by the word 'love', organic sex being 180 degrees opposite from the notion of sex as a commodity, as ultimately represented by prostitution. Love becomes an arrangement, or a marriage. But, because organic sex is practiced by those hostile to the idea of sex as a commodity, or as something exclusive from anything other than itself, organic sex therefore must be for some purpose. Or justification. And that justification is..." Children. I completed Kate's sentence for her. Well, I for one had taken the only satisfactory precaution years ago. I was never going to be any little baby's organic father. There was no point in having second thoughts about it, because the operation was long over and done with.

She was winding up her speech now. On the night we had met she was in my audience; now I was in hers. I was not in a position to approach her after the performance, as she had done with me. On that night, I was in disguise but I wanted my disguise to be revealed. That was out of the question this afternoon.

But my heart wasn't interested in safety. My heart demanded resolution.

After the speech there was a gigantic round of applause. It was obviously more than Kate expected, and for a moment I thought she was going to seize the opportunity for another speech. But the rally was definitely over. Most of the crowd was heading away from the podium but a large portion of the crowd was walking by it instead. I figured I could blend in with this second crowd and be inconspicuous.

But Kate could see me coming.. She must've been on the lookout. She didn't have to scream at me for me to be able to decipher her lips.

DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!

I tried to disappear into the crowd while keeping my eyes on Kate. While the crowd was giving her another round of applause on their way out she was screaming at me, although making it appear to an outside observer that she was addressing the throng. She was telling me that she loved me and that I should leave her alone.

I couldn't take it. I had to prove her wrong So I surged towards the front of the mob. Her face was becoming more and more agitated. Then, as I was about to make a fool of myself and run out of the crowd and into her arms, I noticed that her fear was double edged. Because Big Ed Walker and two gorillas were seated calmly on the guest speaker chairs at the side of the podium. If I were to make a move would they leap into action and chase me? Or was Kate their target? Or were those

the only alternatives? Kate was pointing in the direction over her left shoulder. I strained my eyes as far as possible. I saw a man in a green suit advancing quickly in my direction. It was time for me to get moving. Hopefully his car wasn't parked right behind mine.

I was in luck. The car parked behind my rented Citroen was no private dick's car, unless private dicks have suddenly begun driving Lincolns. Besides, I could see the impatient chauffeur through my rearview window. With no further delay I stepped on the gas.

It wasn't until almost three blocks later that an anonymous looking Ford sedan distinguished itself by following every lane change that I was making. I wasn't inclined towards letting the guy get close enough for me to see his face in the rear view mirror, but desperate driving was definitely the name of his game. Possibly he was a theoretical dick, the type who wasn't accustomed to doing his own dirty work. The smartest thing I could do was to stay on the main streets for as long as possible. To drive on the side streets would be to destroy the buffer zone that I had in my favour.

Except that this particular main street was coming to an end. So I had to make a quick decision. Which way to turn? The airport was a temptation, an obvious temptation. So I turned right, in the opposite direction from the airport. Except the Ford saw my move. Now the coasting was over. The manual transmission of the red Citroen was going to get a work over.

Every couple of blocks I would hang a right, then quickly alternate with a left. The man in the Ford would see me, of course, but at least I was disorienting him. This went on for about seven rounds.

Then a huge black Imperial blasted by me at about five times the speed limit. It wasn't going too fast for me to get a good look at the passengers however. One of Big Ed Walker's goons was driving and the other one was in the front passenger seat. The man himself was seated on the throne, in the rear, where he probably had his own bar and telephone. Sure enough, he actually did pick up the phone and start barking out orders to someone, perhaps at another bar; Sammy Mananas or Flavio's or any one of his many fronts. Passing the word down about the next move to make now that boy-genius Matthew Wilding was out of the way.

They didn't see me and I kept driving, but I was hoping that the guy in the Ford sedan would recognize them as clearly as I had. I turned right, drove over to the seventh parallel side street, and made a sudden decision to head towards the airport. Miraculously my rear view mirror was clear, so the next move was to get myself onto the airport freeway.

The Ford had been anticipating my move. Well, the fact that the dick had followed me onto the ramp had to be made irrelevant. My freedom depended on giving this man the slip.

Both of us worked our way into the lanes behind the sick-looking palm trees. Both of us were going to be looking at those trees out of our left windows for awhile yet. Any right turn-off would have to be a very sudden move indeed. We would be arriving almost together at L.A. International Airport. And where would the driver be heading towards from there? There was actually a flight to New York happening about this time. If only I could jump on it before him and grab the last available stand-by ticket. Then I would be laughing. I could get off in Chicago, or in Dallas, or in Vegas, or wherever the stopover might be. I didn't want to return to New York.

The dick probably didn't care where he might end up, as long as it was hot on my trail. He was sure sticking close to me right now, with only about a four-car buffer zone. And the airport was the next exit. Which

terminal was I going to tell the man in the underground parking entrance booth.

Then it came to me. I was expecting somebody. I would park the red Citroen in the arrivals' parking lot, head towards the Rent-a-Car dealer where I'd rented this damn car in the first place, quickly exchange it for another car, which would have to be even more anonymous than the Ford. Then I would have an attendant drive the Citroen back to the rental dealer. And then I would take off, in a different car rather than on a plane.

The important thing is to create the illusion of my boarding a flight, however. So I scotched the arrival plan and parked in a departure zone. The dick parked seven rows over and followed by foot. There were too many people around for him to simply run after me, plus he seemed more interested in my destination than in my apprehension. The destination business was where I had to throw the man for a loop.

I held my breath, counted to ten, and then ran for the nearest New York ticket counter, conspicuously butting into the line, making it look like I suddenly wanted to grab a coffee, while all the while veering towards the car rentals area. When I got there the attendant recognized me and demanded the red Citroen. I told him where it was parked, explained the rush to the manager, jumped into a greenish-blue Plymouth, whipped out my plastic and then stepped on the gas, leaving a huge cloud of dust behind me. Another example of the customer high-pressuring the salesman. Sure it looked suspicious, and they knew who I was alright, but after all I had the plastic and that was the important thing at this moment.

I couldn't see the Ford following me when I glanced into my new rear view mirror. He was probably tied up at the Rent-a-Car, grabbing an excited mouthful from the attendant or perhaps the owner. I took advantage of the situation by getting onto a side road. The first motel I saw was called Leonard's. It was small and it was obvious. All of those airport hotels were too obvious. But I needed something quick. It would've been ideal for me to return back to the Gibson and pretend that nothing had happened. After all, as far as the owner was concerned, I'd only been out for a short while. But the different car would've been a tip off. Leonard's would have to do.

When I arrived the quiet, reliable-looking clerk asked for my name. My name was now 'David Stewart' and he assigned me to Number 8. I inquired about parking the Plymouth behind the motel rather than in front of it, and he didn't look at me as if that was an unusual request. So I parked the car, locked it, and opened the door to Room Number 8. The room was tidy and functional, and I congratulated myself on my recent performance.

I flashed for a moment that the man in room six was Matthew, hammering away as always at a typewriter with that same nicotine derived (although he later switched to cigars) odor emanating from the room. He was alive. To write is to live and Matthew had known that before I'd even thought of it. The sound of the typewriter was alive and well two doors down the hall. I wasn't wanted for murder. How could I be? There hadn't been a crime.

I was a free man as long as I never left this room again. I was free to go nowhere, and to consequently imagine going everywhere.

As soon as I turned the TV off I became mad with the silence. Since I hadn't originally been planning, a vacation I hadn't brought a tape recorder, which used to be essential to my life. So I turned on MTV. Perhaps one out of ten videos was interesting. Unfortunately, more like one out of five hundred if you were lucky. But I left it on, mindless as it was.

I was lonely, I was lovesick, I wanted proof of the existence of another human being. There was a telephone in my room, and I gave in to the temptation.

The phone rang several times but there was no answer. Something strange was happening. Kate had an answering service that came on after the third ring if she wasn't home or too busy to answer the phone. I was scared shitless that something had happened to her. Suppose someone else had seen her near Matthew's apartment building. Suppose she knew who the actual killer was and had been silenced. My heart was beating so fast. I wanted to fly out the door and call the cops, but I was powerless. Once guilty, always guilty. The cops would laugh in my face before they tied me up and gagged me.

If I wasn't guilty, then what the hell was I doing in this god-awful motel under a phony name. If you have the vocabulary, then you're guilty.

Jesus Christ! I had to get out of here and I couldn't. I almost wanted that private dick to show up so that I could go for a fast drive. Maybe my last ever fast drive.

My face was looking rougher and rougher. More beatnik than ever before. Sarah Bankwell used to call me Mister Sandpaper whenever I needed a shave, when my beard had been too rough for me to be sexually appetizing. Now it was in my best interest to be Mister Sandpaper. To look a million miles away from the Face. Pop star disguised as beatnik. Hah! If Jack could only see me now.

Because I had wanted to kill Matthew Wilding and was the obvious suspect, I had partially transformed myself into the man. The solitude that he'd finally decided he could live with, could even enjoy living with, was mine now. Except that Matthew could always walk around in the outside world and remain unapproachable. It was all in the appearance, and in the walk. Even if he hadn't looked so scruffy, so violently antisocial, you could've guessed from his walk that he didn't want to be disturbed. He walked as if he were heading somewhere specific. Towards somewhere where a particular object could be obtained. I didn't walk that way. I never knew how. I used to walk like someone trying to avoid people while simultaneously scanning for new faces. Now I walked like someone trying too hard not to fidget. Not to be shifty. But it didn't work. Because I had nothing to walk towards.

I caught myself talking out loud again. Damn it. I knew that would happen sooner or later. From now on the TV was never going to be off. I had only had it on ambiently anyways, but it was going to be on permanently. Even when sleeping, in case I'd been talking in my sleep all this time without being aware of it. Walls have ears, and so do the people behind those walls.

I have known other people who, as a result of spending long periods of time alone in one room, have seen faces hidden in the colorless walls. That wasn't-happening to me, for some reason or another. Perhaps it was because the walls were white, and therefore the occasional sunlight that crept through the closed blinds would have no effect on the walls. It was as though the walls had been deliberately muted by some considerate landlord. Perhaps the shadows make people think they're seeing things and consequently the absence of shadows was a pleasant relief. It meant that it was up to me to internally visualize all of the faces who'd played a crucial role in my exile.

There was always the mirror temptation, however. I could've covered it with a blanket, explaining to the room service woman that I didn't need it, that the mirror's glare was obnoxious. But that would've been suspicious behaviour. It was up to me not to torture myself with mirrors.

The eyes. A person's eyes both view the world and are viewed by the rest of the world. There is very little eye contact in the world; eyes are rarely easy to read. The average person tones down the intensity in the interest of self-survival. It's when they make eye contact with their own eyes that things get scary.

The mirror confirmed what I feared. Today I had the eyes of a killer. Haunted yet set in a fixed position. Their intention read even to a blind person. My eyes that used to be as bright as a laser beam were now drained. They had accomplished their intention. They have served their purpose. Professional killers have shifty eyes which are too smart to ever become fixated. Killers of passion are not that professional.

Even without looking into the mirror I could tell that my eyeballs were surrounded by red. Not the red your eyes become when you've been up all night having fun; and not the red they become when you can't sleep because of work or something important. I didn't need to look into the mirror to see that I resembled the kind of man who was afraid to fall asleep in case he woke up under arrest. Or else, be killed during his sleep. Silently and without any amateur commotion. I couldn't sleep because I believed in a God who had the power to punish me by never allowing me to wake up again, even though the most beautiful thing I could imagine now was an eternal sleep.

The flame on my lighter seemed to get higher and higher with every cigarette that I would light. I tried to adjust the flame length but the mechanism must've been broken. When a lighter's flame is extremely high it obliterates everything else in the room for one wonderful moment. You are only conscious of the fire that will eventually consume you.

When I woke up I felt wonderfully well rested. I was all prepared to function in the outside world except I didn't have to. No obligation whatever. I had no idea what the time was and I didn't care. I felt as if I'd been asleep for years. My face certainly gave that impression. I looked at least a half decade older and I loved it. No more kid stuff, this is for real. This is being an adult. Adulthood is a hotel room where I don't know anybody and I don't want to know anybody. I was free.

The next time I looked into the mirror I took my eyes for granted. They were frozen and hopefully they would remain that way. It was the beard that pleased me. The beard appealed to some remaining sense of humour, this attempt to be anonymous. Like any one of the millions of chronic slobs whom I initially reacted against.

It all started during my teenage years in L.A. The casual attitude to appearance which was predominant in my Grade 11 class infuriated me. It was a mediocrity that demanded a violent reaction. Artifice and affectation as war against naturalistic mediocrity. All the assholes pretending to be real people but in reality repressing God knows what. And now, I had no further use for artifice. The less I resembled any incarnation of Richard Monitor, the better.

Thinking about high school in L.A. reminded me of Patrick Thompson. He was the worst slob in the class. Actually he was a closet Dorian Gray. I knew it but none of the others did. Nobody else could even begin to figure out the attraction between the two of us. Patrick intrigued me because he knew many things that I didn't and probably never will.

It was then that I looked up and noticed my eyes. They had changed drastically. They were no longer dead. My eyes were alive and dangerous. They were identical to Patrick Thompson's eyes that morning when I had to leave the bookstore quickly. The morning of the day on which I opened an apartment door and found Matthew Wilding's dead body.

I needed a drink. I needed a drink so badly that I was prepared to take a chance on the room service woman. A cigarette would help temporarily. Something to keep from shaking while pressing the intercom button with my wrong hand.

She answered immediately. She was already on her way to my room with a bottle of Scotch. I tried my best to appear casual, knowing damn well that on the intercom I'd come off like a hypochondriacal drunk.

The room service woman must have realized that I was trying too hard to appear normal. After a slow, ritualistic exchange of cash and bottle, she grabbed an opportunity to hit me with the question she'd been dying to ask.

"Say, are you Richard Monitor?"

No. This may have been inevitable, but the inevitability was no reassurance. I managed to gain enough composure that I could deflect fear into anger.

"No, I'm not. I get mistaken for that asshole all the time. But I'm not him."

By now my voice must've been audible in the front room. To the manager and everyone else within earshot who was against me, I was shouting out that I was not Richard Monitor. She could take her scotch back and keep the money, if only I could get out of here.

And I ran to the Plymouth and stepped on the gas. Sure enough, the guy who'd chased me after the rally was jumping into a different anonymous sedan. He'd probably been parked there for a long time now, relaxing and waiting for me to make a move. Well, he can follow me all he wants to. I have one advantage over him. I know where I'm going.

Patrick Thompson's Poetry Cafe was downtown near his bookstore. It was on a side street and I knew a whole network of side streets. I was up for it alright. A few more devious quick turns and I'd give that bastard the slip.

The rear view mirror was clear, meaning that the Ford sedan was nowhere in sight. The sensation I was experiencing was not unlike a drug rush, the kind of rush you get when you know you have work to do and you take the necessary drugs before blastoff. Before the final countdown.

The side streets were all mine. Evidently the dick in the sedan was unfamiliar to them. And therefore oblivious to my destination and intentions.

There is a numbing pulse your body feels when you're hot and cold at the same time. The heat comes from fever and the cold from trepidation. But this coldness came from the knowledge that I intended to kill a man. Patrick Thompson was Matthew's murderer. The resemblance between the eyes was no coincidence; they were the same eyes. I could see it when I checked the rear view mirror, just as I could see it immediately prior to my flight from the motel. That morning, when I'd dropped into Patrick's bookstore, he'd already made his decision. I'd caught him on his way out the door. I was only a last minute distraction to him, this man who had once loved me the way that I still loved Matthew.

I would show him who was an idol and who was a killer. If Patrick really had loved me then he wouldn't have betrayed me. He thought that by killing Matthew he was doing me a favour but he was doing me the exact opposite. If you really love somebody you must let them do what their heart tells them to do, even though your lover's course of action might be diametrically opposed to your expectations.

I was getting closer and closer to my destination. So now it was time to get off the side streets and onto the freeway. The Ford was nowhere in sight and I laughed so loud I didn't care who else heard it. I wasn't tense at this moment; I was fiendishly happy. I knew that I wouldn't become tense again until the action itself. Until I strangled Patrick Thompson with a necktie. I'd brought one myself, as he would probably be casually dressed and therefore more vulnerable.

The necktie was definitely mine, unlike Matt's which had been his own. Matt's tie and the one I was carrying in my jacket pocket couldn't have been more unlike. His was old and wide, already fraying at the sides. My tie had been purchased strictly for the occasion. It was thin, red and shiny. The only thing the two ties would have in common would be their knots.

He wasn't surprised to see me. How long could a man stay alone in a motel room, cooped up with no one to scream at except for a curious room service woman. With no one to kill other than yourself? And when subjecting yourself to that intensity of loneliness, you won't kill yourself because your self is all you have left and there are no victims around except for innocent intruders. But you're no longer interested in innocent people. They're a nuisance because they don't share your guilt, they can only observe it. Patrick had been observing me from a different angle all these years. He knew I'd eventually come running to him. That's how revenge works.

Patrick's eyes were calm. No flickering whatsoever. Everything about him suggested a man completely at peace with himself, a man who had virtually accomplished everything he had originally set out to do. The café had been swept up since the last reading. There was no sign of anyone ever having been there. I could see the table where Kate had been sitting the night of our initial meeting, but now that was just another table. I was on Patrick's home turf and he knew it. I had to make him nervous and therefore vulnerable.

He was so pleased to see me that I was feeling well beyond uncomfortable. Nauseous was a better word for it.

"Tonight you really do look like a poet."

"I haven't shaved for over a week."

He was pleased that I'd finally come around to seeing the world.

"I admire your self-discipline, Richard. All that time in a motel room with a large dresser mirror and you're not vain enough to shave."

I'd looked into the mirror alright, I reminded myself, but I didn't leave that room until I recognized Patrick Thompson's eyes.

"You still look like Richard Monitor, however. And you always will." He was at this moment the ideal headmaster.

"This isn't a safe place, my friend. A private investigator has been snooping around here."

I had to request a quick description. If it was the same man driving the same car that didn't leave me with much time. Sure enough Patrick's description matched that of the Ford driver. The man who figured no one would ever mistake him for a private eye because he looked too much like the movie version. He'd be arriving soon, since he'd been here already. Unless...

My host was laughing.

"He's convinced that dear old Katie is the missing link. Unfortunately she herself is missing. I don't know where she is, but I know where the kidnapers are."

Patrick proceeded to tell me an absurd story about how Ed Walker and his hoods were convinced that Kate killed Matthew, and those hoods were pleased as hell that I was the official suspect. That way, Big Ed could hold Kate hostage for her own protection, while getting a big sadistic chuckle out of the whole business. According to Patrick, the kidnapping occurred immediately after the Zero Population Growth rally. Since Patrick had lied and told the detective that he hadn't seen me since the poetry reading and that I'd left that night with Kate, it would follow that Kate would be the missing link. And now she was also missing. Which was all too damn convenient for Patrick. To save his own noose he could've told the dick about my leaving the bookstore so suddenly the

morning of Mathew's murder. But it had been Patrick's eyes which frightened me into leaving.

He could never have turned me in. Because he loved me too much to do it simply. He wanted at least one last moment together, which suited me perfectly.

For a moment I wasn't sure whether I should suggest that we should go out together, because of the approaching detective. But hadn't Patrick himself told me this place was dangerous. Very well then, we would have to head out somewhere. Somewhere anonymous like a shopping mall. I was beginning to feel confident about my beard. It was Patrick whom I wanted to dress up.

He wanted to head out too. Perhaps those maddeningly still eyes were concealing an itchiness; a fear that somebody more threatening than myself might be dropping by any minute now. Was it the detective, was it Ed's thugs, or was it a yet unknown threat? I decided to reveal my curiosity about the detective.

One of my initial fugitive fantasies had indeed come true. The movie actor type at Harry's Video Bar, the driver of the archetypically anonymous Ford sedan, actually was a private detective called Frank Kingsley who'd been hired by Jack on the advice of his secretary. Dear old Carol always had wanted to mother me. I could see them in the reception room; Jack going on and on about how useless and expensive private eyes were and Carol setting Jack straight on how useless and broke he would be without yours truly in his stable.

Patrick told me that the dick's secretary was a closet literary type who went to his Tuesday night readings, and she'd suspected something peculiar about the evening's final reader. So, after extracting a sizable cheque out of Jack's wallet, this Frank Kingsley hitailed it over to the cafe and found the proprietor to be more than a co-operative witness.

Faces are disposable
Fashions are disposable
Missiles are disposable
They're supposed to explode
EXPLODE!

Patrick Thompson never had much of a face and he was never a dresser. He would've liked to have been one or else he would've never become so obsessed with me. Now I would make him happy. I would dress him. Except there wouldn't be much of an explosion when I put the tie on. There would be one last gasp, and then nothing.

"So, you think that we should head out somewhere?" I decided to move the traffic.

His eyes were absolutely inflexible.

"Actually, Richard, I don't know. At first I thought that our detective friend might be dropping in on us, but I think he would've done that, by now, don't you?"

The detective had been following me, but Patrick was looking at me as if I were a hopelessly retarded pupil. That same benign schoolteacher attitude that unfortunately he'd been born with. I couldn't wait to strangle the bastard. I was so sick of his condescension; his stupid assumption that he knew me and all my desires. The schoolteacher opened up the blinds and pointed out the window as if it were a blackboard with one particular painful truth written all over it.

"See Richard. No detective. No car. I no longer feel any urgent need to escape from this location."

I certainly did. I had to either reveal my trump card or else get out of this basement as if my desire had never been there. But there was no way that I could ignore it.

Suddenly I threw my arms around him. It was meant to be read as a gesture of passionate love. Hopefully he would temporarily be fooled by my theatricality.

"We were always made for each other and it's about time we faced up to it. You have the mind but I have the body."

Patrick was gasping. Now his eyes were beginning to flicker. I could tell that he wasn't sure where I was coming from, and that I was making him nervous. I decided to hit him quickly with my next move, but I was still hiding the necktie in my pocket. So I kept talking.

"Except I'm not as stupid as you've always considered me, but you really are a shitty dresser. Now look, if we're going to inform the public that we belong together, we're going to have to do something about your personal presentation. So Patrick," my heart was frozen and I loved it, "I bought you a new tie."

I reached into my right pocket but his eyes froze me. They'd flickered earlier, but now they were completely calm. They were repulsive. And now I was about to use the necktie, but Patrick drew a revolver. He wasn't at all afraid that the gun might wake up the neighbours.

"Get your hands out of your pockets, Richard." The professor had transformed himself into a cold blooded killer with only one more victim remaining.

"Now move back against that corner wall and put your hands up above your head." Patrick broke out laughing. Only a severely repressed man could've done it, cackling like a homicidal maniac while getting a rise out of himself. The futile little academic playing the heavy. His laugh was too shrill and at this particular moment I didn't happen to share his sense of humour.

"It really is too bad that it took you so long to realize that we belong together. If only you hadn't been too slow then all this would never have happened. But I eliminated Matthew for you, then Ed Walker and company unwittingly did me a favour and took care of your girlfriend, and now that leaves you, doesn't it Richard?"

I wasn't in the mood for his peculiar rationality. I knew something about Patrick that I hadn't been meant to know, therefore I had to be killed. Mathematics plus passion is a deadly combination. I only wanted him to hurry up and get it over with.

"Spare me the excuses, Patrick. You've got your gun, so shoot me. Come on and shoot me!" Then I made a sudden lunge for the door. It was now or never. But he was faster than me. He kned me in the gut. His gun moved me back in the corner without any further violence. I was winded and doubled over.

He had me in a corner; I couldn't move and his gun was pointed directly at me. He was going to do it now. The professor had become a psycho-killer. Patrick cackled insanely.

"Too bad it had to end this way, Richard." Then he pulled the trigger. Somehow I could sense that by moving slightly I could disorient him, since he had been taking my immobility for granted. He also made the

mistake of taking his accuracy for granted. The bullet was a hair's breath off to the left. I'd been that close to death. He'd congratulated himself too early. With our ears reverberating from the cartridge's explosion we were still in the same situation as we'd been in before his bullet missed me. The professor had a revolver and my only weapon was a necktie. The discrepancy was absurd, but neither of us were laughing. Patrick had to be successful this time. One of the neighbours must've heard the fire because we could both hear a noise coming from the vicinity of the front door.

It was probably the detective but I was beyond that particular fear. For me it was the opportunity. Patrick would try to keep me covered while dealing with the intruder, but there would have to be one crucial moment when his back would be turned. That was when I was going to rush him. To try for the gun would be a mistake. That was the action he would be anticipating, and anticipation always prevents the fire from getting started. The necktie had been purchased as a weapon, and now I was going to use it.

He was still pointing his gun at me while backing towards the door. But the pounding at the door was becoming more and more insistent. If the intruder didn't get an answer he was going to bust down the front door, or break the window. And I was becoming hysterically excited, waiting for that violence.

My moment came when Patrick turned with the intention of greeting the intruder with a bullet. Landing on his back was a pleasure. Wrapping the tie around his neck was a greater pleasure. But pulling it tight, while he could only gasp because I'd knocked the gun out of his right hand and he couldn't pivot, then pulling the noose tighter and tighter until Patrick could no longer breathe, that was the most sensational pleasure that I had yet experienced in my life.

It was too bad for me that I hadn't managed to do it earlier because at this point the front window pane shattered and two big men immediately assumed possession of the room. The two men were Mister Ed Walker and a giant flunky. The flunky immediately helped himself to Patrick's abandoned revolver.

There are those who maintain that a criminal of passion has a built-in advantage over the professional criminal, with the passion itself being that supposed advantage. Those who believe this are idealistic fools. Like Patrick Thompson. He wouldn't have stood a chance in hell against these thugs, and neither did I.

Big Ed was all smiles. Patrick's arrogance had been that of a man who suddenly had a little bit of power in a small world; Ed Walker's arrogance was that of a man who'd had a lot of power in the big world for a long time, and who was casually accumulating more power every second.

"Looks like the boys had an argument, doesn't it, Hank?" The big man grunted. He knew what his job was, and he was impatient.

"Yeah, I know, Hank. We have business to do here, and it must be done. But there is always such a thing as finesse. Finesse is very important to me, Richard."

Ed looked at me as if I were supposed to think he was a man of wealth and taste. I have always hated people who presume that I am still somebody I gave up being a long time ago. But I wasn't in a position to object. I wasn't even in a position where I could plead with the big man to shoot now and get it over with. Professional criminals can afford to take their time while the amateurs are always racing against the clock. Especially when the pros are more than friendly with the Chief of Police.

"You see Hank," Big Ed was really talking to me, "We have to make it look like a crime of passion. And the best way to do that is by making it look like Monitor committed suicide after strangling

Thompson. Like he knew he'd never be able to live with what he had done.

Hank grunted again. If Ed wanted to rearrange the furniture that was Ed's business. His business was to pull the trigger. How long did I have? How long did I have? Not too long. Walker and his flunky weren't going to be arranging too much furniture. All they had to do in order to make my death look like suicide was to shoot me with Patrick's gun and then leave that gun lying on the floor beside me, as if it had fallen out of my hands the moment I hit the floor.

"You entertainers seem to be under the illusion that you are important. Hah!"

There was absolute silence in the room now. Ed realized that words were beside the point and so did I. I wasn't about to humiliate myself by pleading.

Then the bullet came, but not from where I'd been expecting it. The bullet hadn't been aimed at me either. It sailed in through the broken window, perfectly aimed at Big Ed Walker's heart by Kate Barton.

I was ecstatic, even though Hank's gun was still pointed at my heart. Having seen Kate achieve a personal vengeance made me delirious. But neither Kate nor the detective accompanying her seemed aware of my existence. Was I going to be conveniently killed in their line of duty? My breath was short but my ears were still sharp. And I could see Hank's gun trying to cover the pair of them. If only I had a weapon.

"It's a good thing you were carrying two guns, Frank." Kate was expressing her gratitude to the detective.

Frank was confident. His revolver was gleaming as it was pointed at Hank. But it was then that the goon pivoted and shot me. I didn't get to watch the rest of the shootout.

I didn't know when, if ever, I would be leaving the hospital, but it sure as hell wasn't going to be in the near future. My legs weren't a part of whatever the medical problem might be at this particular time; I had no difficulty walking to and from the bathroom or the magazine rack. Therefore, on several occasions I was extremely tempted to slip out when no one was looking. I could've probably stolen a hat and coat from the visitor's rack and simply walked away. Except when I really thought about it, it wouldn't have been so easy. I was probably booked in the hospital under a phony name, because I was a media prisoner and a wanted man.

Unless I'd somehow been cleared of Matthew's murder and unsuspected of Patrick's. Perhaps, now that Kate had realized one of her major ambitions and killed Ed Walker, the cops of L.A. might suddenly have become interested in abstract concepts such as truth and justice. Except that I was guilty of the pre-meditated murder of Patrick Thompson. I'd deliberately evaded a man who'd been tailing me and had gone to Patrick's place of residence carrying the weapon of death. That had nothing to do with any alternative notion of justice. That was murder, motivated by revenge. Patrick had killed Matthew whom I loved, despite his stupid betrayal of me.

It was going to be anaesthetic time again soon. Morphine. A guaranteed painkiller. Some take morphine derivatives illegally in order to kill pain, because emotional pain doesn't always register on

a thermometer and psychiatrists constantly make futile attempts to convince patients that emotional pain can be cured organically. I have several friends who have become junkies that way, it's always been a temptation.

Now I would become a medical junkie. Whenever the memories would become too painful and I consequently become manic, I would be given an injection. Officially I was a sick person, because I knew too much for my own good. But there is always a contentment in being labelled. There is a definition lacking in a world where one is struggling to prove oneself, in order to possess something. I'd lived that way and had barely lived to tell the story. So I didn't want to live my second life that way.

I only wanted to sleep again. I could've been sleeping for years and I wanted to sleep for decades. Why did these walls have to be so dull? Since my imagination wasn't functioning, the colour wouldn't change. That only happened when I was dreaming sweet dreams that were too abstract to be psychologically decipherable.

A woman was standing at the foot of the bed. She wasn't wearing a nurse's uniform and she had jet-black hair and permanent reading glasses. Although the face didn't register the body seemed strangely familiar.

The woman smiled at me, as if one of these days I would no longer have to ask her any more questions.

"It's Kate." The voice was also familiar.

"You're probably not going to believe me, Richard, and I can hardly blame you for your scepticism but," she lowered her voice, "I've had plastic surgery."

Aside from the body and the voice, I wouldn't have recognized Kate Barton in a thousand years. She smiled at me, informing, me without words that I should do the same. Our second lives would be spent together.

"The nurse will be here with your shot any minute. So I have to go now."

Before leaving, Kate gave me a card with a phony name on top of a real address. I was to meet her at that address as soon as I was released from the hospital. The detective had taken care of the man who'd wounded me, and then driven me to the hospital where my own plastic surgery was to be performed. Now my career in the entertainment industry really was over.

So. Here we are, the two of us, living in the country on this farm without having any neighbours for miles. We don't grow anything. With my new face I can always drive to the market in the nearest village, which actually is called Centreville. So central that hardly anybody lives there. Certainly nobody with any kind of profile in the film and recording industries. But it's somewhere. It was the only solution.

We both have changed our names, of course. I've become Jeff Watson and Kate's become Elizabeth Bowman. Anonymous names for anonymous people. I'm no longer in front of the camera. Once in awhile I ask Kate, or I should be calling her Liz, for a walk-on in one of her films, but she always says no and she knows best. Her films are personal enough without me being in them. She uses willing professionals who love working for her. I love it too. I do the soundtracks, under my current pseudonym,

and I work as a driver. She never did learn to drive. I guess it would've been a bad omen.

We've really come to like each other a lot. By that I mean that we keep out of each other's way a good deal of the time. Liz has her films, and I read most of the time when I'm not watching TV or working for her. Or else we spend a lot of time in the same room but miles apart, even though we're both thinking about the same subject.

Matthew Wilding is still between us. By wanting to dispose of the man I only made the man permanent. Mythologies never go away; they always increase in value if well preserved. And there was no way that Matthew would ever be de-mythologized. I needed my own mythology to live on. Once you've become addicted, you never completely kick. Hunted for a crime of passion that I didn't commit, then allowed to go scot free for killing a man who had become a killer because he loved me. Self-defense was the verdict I'd heard from the hospital before the surgery. Now I was living with a woman who had saved my life by killing a man who wanted me dead. And the woman was allowed to go scot free because a detective with a heart of gold obstructed traffic, or justice, or whatever it's called this week. I've always had a temptation, although Liz knows better, to call up that detective Frank Kingsley. Hadn't he been hired to find me? Whatever motivated him to find me and then let me go? I was fascinated and yet I knew damn well that the man would never want to hear from me again. He'd probably used my case for his own obsessive reasons, and that was that.

Faces are disposable
Fashions are disposable
Missiles are disposable
They're supposed to explode

Again I heard that synthetic explosion. It was Patrick killing me because I had betrayed him. It was my desire to be free. Free, as it turned out, to do nothing.

Careers are disposable too, if you have the will or if you have no choice. But passions are never disposable. If you never act upon them, then they will always be there. If you do act upon them, then you will suffer the appropriate consequences. And if you're caught in between, you're not in purgatory. You're in hell. .

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