



VINELAND

Thomas Pynchon

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Boston Toronto London

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For my mother and father

Every dog has his day,
and a good dog
just might have two days.

— Johnny Copeland

VINELAND

LATER than usual one summer morning in 1984, Zoyd Wheeler drifted awake in sunlight through a creeping fig that hung in the window, with a squadron of blue jays stomping around on the roof. In his dream these had been carrier pigeons from someplace far across the ocean, landing and taking off again one by one, each bearing a message for him, but none of whom, light pulsing in their wings, he could ever quite get to in time. He understood it to be another deep nudge from forces unseen, almost surely connected with the letter that had come along with his latest mental-disability check, reminding him that unless he did something publicly crazy before a date now less than a week away, he would no longer qualify for benefits. He groaned out of bed. Somewhere down the hill hammers and saws were busy and country music was playing out of somebody's truck radio. Zoyd was out of smokes.

On the table in the kitchen, next to the Count Chocula box, which turned out to be empty, he found a note from Prairie. "Dad, they changed my shift again, so I rode in with Thapsia. You got a call from Channel 86, they said urgent, I said, you try waking him up sometime. Love anyway, Prairie."

"Froot Loops again I guess," he muttered at the note. With enough Nestle's Quik on top, they weren't all that bad, and various ashtrays yielded half a dozen smokable butts. After taking as much time as he could in the bathroom, he finally got around to locating the phone and calling the local TV station to recite to them this year's press release. But — "You'd better check again, Mr. Wheeler. Word we have is that you've been rescheduled."

"Check with who, I'm the one's doin' it, ain't I?"

"We're all supposed to be at the Cucumber Lounge."

"Well I won't, I'll be up at the Log Jam in Del Norte." What was the matter with these people? Zoyd had been planning this for weeks.

Desmond was out on the porch, hanging around his dish, which was always empty because of the blue jays who came screaming down out of the redwoods and carried off the food in it piece by piece. After a while this dog-food diet had begun to give the birds an attitude, some being known to chase cars and pickups for miles down the road and bite anybody who didn't like it. As Zoyd came out, Desmond gave him an inquiring look. "Just dig yourself," shaking his head at the chocolate crumbs on the dog's face, "I know she fed you, Desmond, and I know *what* she fed you too." Desmond followed him as far as the firewood, tail going back and forth to show no hard feelings, and watched Zoyd backing all the way down to the lane before he turned and got on with his day.

Zoyd headed down to Vineland Mall and rolled around the lot there for a while, smoking up half a joint he'd found in his pocket, before parking the rig and going into More Is Less, a discount store for larger-size women, where he bought a party dress in a number of colors that would look good on television, paying with a check both he and the saleslady shared a premonition would end up taped to this very cash register after failing to clear, and proceeded to the men's room of the Breez-Thru gas station, where he shifted into the dress and with a small hairbrush tried to rat what was on his head and face into a snarl he hoped would register as insane-looking enough for the mental-health folks. Back at the pump he put in five dollars' worth of gas, went in the back seat, got a quart of oil out of the case he kept there, found his spout, punched it in the can, put most of the oil in his engine, except for a little he saved to mix in the can with some gas, and poured this into the tank of an elegant little imported-looking chain saw, about the size of a Mini-Mac, which he then stashed in a canvas beach bag. Prairie's friend Slide came wandering out of the office to have a look.

"Uh-oh, is it that time again already?"

"This year it snuck up on me, hate to think I'm gettin' too old for this."

"Know the feeling," Slide nodded.

"You're fifteen, Slide."

"And seen it all. Whose front window you doin' it to this year?"

"Nobody's. I'm givin' that all up, window jumping's in my past, this year I'm gonna just take this little chain saw into the Log Jam and see what develops from there."

"Um, maybe not, Mr. Wheeler, you been up there lately?"

"Oh I know there's some heavy-duty hombres, badasses, spend all day narrowly escaping death by tree, not too much patience with anything out of the ordinary, but I've got the element of surprise. Don't I?"

"You'll see," weary Slide advised.

He sure would, but only after spending more time out on 101 than his already fragile sense of humor could take, owing to a convoy of out-of-state Winnebagos on some leisurely tour of the redwoods, in among whom, on the two-lane stretches, he was obliged to gear down and put up with a lot of attention, not all friendly. "Gimme a break," he yelled over the engine noise, "it's, uh, a Calvin Klein original!"

"Calvin doesn't cut nothin' bigger than a 14," a girl younger than his daughter screamed at him out her window, "and you ought to be locked up."

It was well into lunchtime when he got to the Log Jam, and he was disappointed to find nobody at all from the media, just a collection of upscale machinery parked in the lot, itself newly blacktopped. These were to be the first of several rude updates. Trying to think cheerful thoughts — like assuming the television crews were only late — Zoyd collected the bag with the saw in it, checked his hair one more time, and went storming into the Log Jam, where right away he noticed that everything, from the cooking to the clientele, smelled different.

Uh-oh. Wasn't there supposed to be some loggers' bar around here someplace? Everybody knew it was high times for the stiffes in the woods — though not for those in the mills, with the Japanese buying up unprocessed logs as fast as the forests could be clear-cut — but even so, the scene in here was peculiar. Dangerous men with coarsened attitudes, especially toward death, were perched around lightly on designer barstools, sipping kiwi mimosas. The jukebox once famous for hundreds of freeway exits up and down the coast for its gigantic country-and-western collection, including

half a dozen covers of "So Lonesome I Could Cry," was reformatted to light classical and New Age music that gently peeped at the edges of audibility, slowing, lulling this roomful of choppers and choker setters who now all looked like models in Father's Day ads. One of the larger of these, being among the first to notice Zoyd, had chosen to deal with the situation. He wore sunglasses with stylish frames, a Turnbull & Asser shirt in some pastel plaid, three-figure-price-tag jeans by Mme. Gris, and après-logging shoes of a subdued, but incontestably blue, suede.

"Well good afternoon pretty lady and how fine you're looking, I'm sure in another setting and mood we'd all like to know you as a person with your many fine points and so on like that, but from your fashion message I can tell that you are a sensitive type person who'll appreciate the problem we have here in terms of orientational vibes, if you follow —"

The already confused Zoyd, whose survival instincts may not have been working all the way up to spec, decided to produce the chain saw from his bag. "Buster," he called plaintively to the owner behind the bar, "where's the media?" The implement attracted immediate attention from everyone in the room, not all of it technical curiosity. It was a tailor-made lady's chain saw, "tough enough for timber," as the commercials said, "but petite enough for a purse." The guide bar, handle grips, and housing were faced in genuine mother-of-pearl, and spelled out in rhinestones on the bar, surrounded by sawteeth ready to buzz, was the name of the young woman he'd borrowed it from, which onlookers took to be Zoyd's drag name, CHERYL.

"Easy there cowgirl, now things're just fine," the logger stepping back as Zoyd, he hoped demurely, yanked at a silk cord on a dainty starter pulley, and the lady's pearl-handled chain saw spun into action.

"Listen to that li'l honey purr."

"Zoyd, what th' heck you doin' this all the way up here for," Buster deciding it was time to intervene, "no channel's gonna send no crew this far out of town, why are you not down in Eureka or Arcata someplace?"

The logger stared. "This person is known to you?"

"Played together in the old Six Rivers Conference," Buster all smiles, "those were the days, huh Zoyd?"

"Can't hear you," hollered Zoyd, trying to maintain a quickly fading image of dangerousness. He throttled the nacreous pretty saw reluctantly back first to a ladylike bass line and then to silence. Into the echo, "See you did some redecorating."

"If you would've come around last month, you 'n' 'at little saw, could've helped us gut the place."

"Sorry, Buster, guess I did come to the wrong bar, I sure can't saw any of this stuff, not with the money you must've put in . . . only reason I'm up here is 'at the gentrification of South Spooner, Two Street, and other more familiar hellraisin' locales has upped the ante way outa my bracket, these are all folks now who like to sue, and for big bucks, with hotshot PI lawyers up from the City, I so much as blot my nose on one of their designer napkins I'm in deep shit anymore."

"Well, we're no longer as low-rent as people remember us here either Zoyd, in fact since George Lucas and all his crew came and went there's been a real change of consciousness."

"Yep, I noticed . . . say, you want to draw me a, just a lady's-size beer there . . . you know I still haven't even got around to that picture?"

They were talking about *Return of the Jedi* (1983), parts of which had been filmed in the area and in Buster's view changed life there forever. He put his massive elbows on about the only thing in here that hadn't been replaced, the original bar, carved back at the turn of the century from one giant redwood log. "But underneath, we're still just country fellas."

"From the looks of your parking lot, the country must be Germany."

"You and me Zoyd, we're like Bigfoot. Times go on, we never change, now, you're no bar fighter, I can see the thirst for new experiences, but a man's better off sticking to a specialty, your own basically being transfenestration."

"Mm yes, I could tell," commented another logger, his voice almost inaudible, sidling in and laying a hand on Zoyd's leg.

"Besides which," continued Buster, imperturbable, though his

eyes were now fixed on the hand on the leg, "it's become your MO, diving through windows, you start in with other stuff at this late date, forcing the state to replace what's in your computer file with something else, this is not gunno endear you to them, 'Aha, rebellious ain't he?' they'll say, and soon you'll find those checks are gettin' slower, even lost, in the mail and say there Lemay! my good man and good sport, let's have a look at the palm of that hand up here on the bar a minute? 'Cz I'm gonna read your fortune for you, how about that," guiding by strange jovial magnetism a logger's hand that would just as happily have been a fist up off of the leg of by now mentally paralyzed Zoyd, or as the (it seemed) smitten Lemay kept calling him, Cheryl. "You will have a long life," Buster looking Lemay in the face, not the hand, "because of your common sense and grasp on reality. Five bucks."

"Huh?"

"Well — maybe just buy us a round, then. Zoyd here does look a little strange right now, but he's out on governmental business."

"I knew it!" cried Lemay. "Undercover agent!"

"Nut case," confided Zoyd.

"Oh. Well . . . that sounds like interesting work too. . . ."

Just then the phone rang, and it was for Zoyd. His partner, Van Meter, was calling from the Cucumber Lounge, a notorious Vineland County roadhouse, in high agitation. "Got six mobile TV units waiting, network up from the City, plus paramedics and a snack truck, all wonderin' where you are."

"Here. You just called me, remember?"

"Aha. Good point. But you were supposed to be jumping through the front window at the Cuke today."

"No! I called everybody and told 'm it was up here. What happened?"

"Somebody said it got rescheduled."

"Shit. I knew someday this act would get bigger than me."

"Better come on back," said Van Meter.

Zoyd hung up, put the saw back in the bag, finished his beer, and made his exit, blowing broad show-biz kisses and reminding everybody to watch the evening news.

*

The Cucumber Lounge property extended back from the disreputable neon roadhouse itself into a few acres of virgin redwood grove. Dwarfed and overshadowed by the towering dim red trees were two dozen motel cabins, with woodstoves, porches, barbecues, waterbeds, and cable TV. During the brief North Coast summers they were for tourists and travelers, but through the rainy remainder of the year, occupants tended to be local, and paying by the week. The woodstoves were good for boiling, frying, even some baking, and some of the cabins had butane burners as well, so that along with woodsmoke and the austere fragrance of the trees, there was an all-day neighborhood smell of cooking in the air.

The lot Zoyd tried to find a parking space in had never been paved, and the local weather had been writing gullies across it for years. Today it was enjoying a visit from the media, plus a task force of cop vehicles, state and county, flashing their lights and playing the "Jeopardy" theme on their sirens. Mobile units, lights, cable, crews everywhere, even a couple of Bay Area stations. Zoyd began to feel nervous. "Maybe I should've found something cheap at Buster's to saw on anyway," he muttered. He finally had to pull around back and park in one of Van Meter's spaces. His old bass player and troublemaking companion had been living here for years, in what he still described as a commune, with an astounding number of current and ex-old ladies, ex-old ladies' boyfriends, children of parent combinations present and absent, plus miscellaneous folks in out of the night. Zoyd had watched television shows about Japan, showing places such as Tokyo where people got into incredibly crowded situations but, because over the course of history they'd all learned to act civil, everybody got along fine despite the congestion. So when Van Meter, a lifetime searcher for meaning, moved into this Cucumber Lounge bungalow, Zoyd had hoped for some Japanese-style serenity as a side effect, but no such luck. Instead of a quiescent solution to all the overpop, the "commune" chose an energetic one — bickering. Unrelenting and high-decibel, it was bickering raised to the level of ceremony, bickering that soon generated its own house newsletter, the *Blind-Side Gazette*, bickering that could be heard even out on the

freeway by the drivers of hurtling eighteen-wheelers, some of whom thought it was radio malfunction, others unquiet ghosts.

Here came Van Meter now, around the corner of the Cuke, wearing his trademark face, Wounded Righteousness. "Are you ready? We'll be losin' the light, fog's gonna come in any minute, what were you doin' all the hell the way up to the Log Jam?"

"No, Van Meter — why is everybody here instead?"

They went in the back way, Van Meter furrowing and unfurrowing his forehead. "Guess I can tell you now you're here, is there's this old buddy of yours, just showed up?"

Zoyd went sweaty and had one of those gotta-shit throbs of fear. Was it ESP, was he only reacting to something in his friend's voice? Somehow he knew who it would be. Here when he needed all his concentration for getting through another window, instead he had to worry about this visitor from out of the olden days. Sure enough, it turned out to be Zoyd's longtime pursuer, DEA field agent Hector Zúñiga, back once again, the erratic federal comet who brought, each visit in to Zoyd's orbit, new forms of bad luck and baleful influence. This time, though, it had been a while, long enough that Zoyd had begun to hope the man might've found other meat and be gone for good. Dream on, Zoyd. Hector stood over by the toilets pretending to play a Zaxxon machine, but in reality waiting to be reintroduced, this honor apparently falling to the manager of the Cuke, Ralph Wayvone, Jr., a remittance man from San Francisco, where his father was a figure of some substance, having grown successful in business areas where transactions are overwhelmingly in the form of cash. Today Ralph Jr. was all dolled up in a Cerruti suit, white shirt with cuff links, touch-them-you-die double-soled shoes from someplace offshore, the works. Like everybody else around here, he looked unusually anxious.

"Say Ralph, lighten up, it's me's gotta do all the work."

"Ahhh . . . my sister's wedding next weekend, the band just canceled, I'm the social coordinator, supposed to find a replacement, right? You know of anybody?"

"Yeah, maybe . . . you better not fuck up this one Ralph, you know what'll happen."

"Always kidding, huh. Here, let me show you the window you'll be using. Can I have them get you a drink or anything? Oh by the way Zoyd, here's an old friend of yours, come all this way to wish you luck."

"Uh-huh." He and Hector exchanged the briefest of thumb-grips.

"Love your outfit, Wheeler."

Zoyd reached, bomb-squad careful, to pat Hector's stomach. "Look like you been 'moving the mustache' there a little, old amigo."

"Bigger, not softer, *ése*. And speaking of lunch, how about tomorrow at Vineland Lanes?"

"Can't do it, tryin' to make the rent and I'm already late."

"It's im-por-tan'," Hector making a little melody out of it. "Think of it this way. If I can prove to you, that I'm as bad of a desperado as I ever was, will you allow me to spring for your lunch?"

"As bad as . . ." As what? Why did Zoyd keep going, time after time, for these oily Hectorial setups? The best it had ever turned out for him was uncomfortable. "Hector, we're too old for this."

"After all the smiles, and all the tears —"

"All right, stop, it's a deal — you be bad, I come to lunch, but please, I have to jump through this window right now? is it OK, can I have just a few seconds —"

Production staff murmured into walkie-talkies, technicians could be seen through the fateful window, waving light meters and checking sound levels outside as Zoyd, breathing steady, silently repeated a mantra that Van Meter, claiming it'd cost him \$100, had toward the end of his yoga phase last year hustled Zoyd into buying for a twenty that Zoyd hadn't really enjoyed discretionary use of. At last all was set. Van Meter flashed Mr. Spock's Vulcan hand salute. "Ready when you are, Z Dubya!"

Zoyd eyeballed himself in the mirror behind the bar, gave his hair a shake, turned, poised, then screaming ran empty-minded at the window and went crashing through. He knew the instant he hit that something was funny. There was hardly any impact, and

it all felt and sounded different, no spring or resonance, no volume, only a sort of fine, dulled splintering.

After obligingly charging at each of the news cameras while making insane faces, and after the police had finished their paperwork, Zoyd caught sight of Hector squatting in front of the destroyed window, among the glittering debris, holding a bright jagged polygon of plate glass. "Time for the bad," he called, grinning in a nasty way long familiar to Zoyd. "Are you ready?" Like a snake he lunged his head forward and took a giant bite out of the glass. *Holyshit*, Zoyd frozen, *he's lost it* — no, actually now, instead Hector was chewing away, crunching and slobbering, with the same evil grin, going "Mmm-mm!" and "*¡Qué rico, qué sabroso!*" Van Meter went running after a departing paramedic truck hollering "Corpsman!" but Zoyd had tumbled, he was no media innocent, he read *TV Guide* and had just remembered an article about stunt windows made of clear sheet candy, which would break but not cut. That's why this one had felt so funny — young Wayvone had taken out the normal window and put in one of these sugar types. "Euchred again, Hector, thanks."

But Hector had already vanished into a large gray sedan with government plates. News-crew stragglers were picking up a few last location shots of the Cuke and its famous rotating sign, which Ralph Jr. was happy to light up early, a huge green neon cucumber with blinking warts, cocked at an angle that approached, within a degree or two, a certain vulgarity. Did Zoyd have to show up next day at the bowling alley? Technically, no. But in the federale's eyes there'd been a glint that Zoyd could still see, behind the one-way auto glass, even as the nightly fog rolled up over the great berm and on toward 101 and Hector was driven away into it. Zoyd could feel another hustle on the way. Hector had been trying over and over for years to develop him as a resource, and so far — technically — Zoyd had hung on to his virginity. But the li'l fucker would not quit. He kept coming back, each time with a new and more demented plan, and Zoyd knew that one day, just to have some peace, he'd say forget it, and go over. Question was, would it be this time, or one of the next few times? Should he wait for another spin? It was like being on "Wheel of Fortune,"

only here there were no genial vibes from any Pat Sajak to find comfort in, no tanned and beautiful Vanna White at the corner of his vision to cheer on the Wheel, to wish him well, to flip over one by one letters of a message he knew he didn't want to read anyway.

ZOYD made it home in time to view himself on the Tube, though he had to wait till Prairie finished watching the 4:30 Movie, Pia Zadora in *The Clara Bow Story*. She fingered the material of the lurid print dress. "Crazy about this, Dad. Fresh, rilly. Can I have it when you're done? Use it to cover my futon."

"Hey, do you ever date logger types, fallers, choker setters, that sort of fellow?"

"Zoy-oyd. . . ."

"Don't get offended, is it's only that a couple of these guys slipped me their phone number, see? along with bills in different denominations?"

"What for?"

He did a take, squinted closely at his daughter. Was this a trick question here? "Let's see, 1984, that'd make you . . . fourteen?"

"Nice going, like to try for the car?"

"Nothin' personal, jeez." Zoyd had been removing the large and colorful dress. The girl shied away in mock alarm, covering her mouth and making her eyes round. He was wearing ancient surfer baggies underneath, and a dilapidated Hussong's T-shirt. "Here you go, it's all yours, mind if I check myself out on the news?"

They sat together on the floor in front of the Tube, with a chair-high bag of Chee-tos and a sixpack of grapefruit soda from the health-food store, watching baseball highlights, commercials, and weather — no rain again — till it was time for the kissoff story. "Well," chuckled news anchor Skip Tromblay, "an annual Vineland event was repeated today, as local laughing-academy outpatient Zoyd Wheeler performed his now familiar yearly leap through another area plate-glass window. This time the lucky establishment was the infamous Cucumber Lounge, seen here in its usual location, just off Highway 101. Alerted by a mystery caller,

TV 86 Hot Shot News crews were there to record Wheeler's deed, which last year was almost featured on 'Good Morning America.'"

"Lookin' good, Dad." On the Tube, Zoyd came blasting out the window, along with the dubbed-in sounds now of real glass breaking. Police cruisers and fire equipment contributed cheery chrome elements. Zoyd watched himself hit the hardpan, roll, come up, and charge the camera, screaming and baring his teeth. Footage of the pro forma booking and release wasn't included, but in Tubal form he was pleased to see that the dress, Day-Glo orange, near-ultraviolet purple, some acid green, and a little magenta in a retro-Hawaiian parrots-and-hula-girls print, came across as a real attention-getter. Over on one of the San Francisco channels, the videotape was being repeated in slow motion, the million crystal trajectories smooth as fountain-drops, Zoyd in midair with time to rotate into a number of positions he didn't remember being in, many of which, freeze-framed, could have won photo awards someplace. Next came highlights of his previous attempts, at each step into the past the color and other production values getting worse, and after that a panel including a physics professor, a psychiatrist, and a track-and-field coach live and remote from the Olympics down in L.A. discussing the evolution over the years of Zoyd's technique, pointing out the useful distinction between the defenestrative personality, which prefers jumping out of windows, and the transfenestrative, which tends to jump through, each reflecting an entirely different psychic subtext, at about which point Zoyd and Prairie began to drift away.

"Give you a nine point five, Dad, your personal best — too bad the VCR's busted, we could've taped it."

"I'm workin' on it."

She looked at him evenly. "We really need a new one."

"All I need's the money, Trooper, I can't even keep enough groceries in this place."

"Oh, no. I know what that means. Fat talk! What am I supposed to do? Isn't me that's leaving all these cakes and pies and stuff layin' around, candy bars in the freezer, Nestle's Quik instead of sugar, eeoo! What chance have I got?"

"Hey, all's I was talkin' about was money, kid. Who's been makin' you crazy with fat talk?"

The girl's head on its long smooth neck and vertebrae gave a small precision turn and tilt, as if slipping into an adjustment that would allow her to talk with her father. "Oh . . . maybe one or two remarks lately from the Big I."

"Oh great, yes, the well-known punker diet expert — named himself after what again, some robot?"

"After Isaiah Two Four, a verse in the Bible," shaking her head I-give-up slowly, "which *your* friends his hippie-freak parents laid on him in 1967, about converting from war to peace, beating spears into pruning hooks, other idiot peacenik stuff?"

"Well both of you just better watch 'at shit, 'd it ever occur to you maybe ol' R2D2's just cheap, and doesn't want to buy you any more food than he has to? What's he doing? What *does* he let you eat?"

"Love is strange, Dad, maybe you forgot that."

"I know love is strange, known it since 1956, including all those guitar breaks. You're in love with this individual, well, maybe *you* forget, I already know him, I can remember all you guys trick or *treatin'* not so long ago and let me tell you, any kid who shows up at the door as 'Jason' from *Friday the 13th* [1980], please, take it from an old mental case, he's in some trouble."

Prairie sighed. "Everybody was Jason that year. He's a classic now, like a Frankenstein, and so what, I don't see how you could have any kind of a problem with that. Isaiah has always admired you, you know."

"What?"

"For jumping through all those windows. He's studied every inch of all your videotapes. Says you were nearly speared a couple of times."

"Nearly, ah. . . ."

"Glass falls straight down out of the window frame," she explained, "in these big sharp spears? heavy enough to go right through ya? Isaiah says all his friends have remarked on how awesomely cool you always look, how unaware of the danger."

White and nauseated, he was still able to peer dubiously out

of one eye. No point telling her about the fake window today, she looked so sincere, even, unnaturally, admiring, good time to just dummy up. But was it true, was it possible, had he been that close to death or major surgery each previous fun-filled time? How, then, unless he could count on sugar windows from here on in, could he expect to bring in any more revenue this way? Heck — he should have been working for a Joey Chitwood-type thrill show all this time and making some real money.

". . . and I think you and Isaiah could even do some business," Prairie had evidently been saying, "'cause I know he'd be willing, and all you'd have to do's keep an open mind."

Zoyd didn't know what she was talking about, but forced himself to think chirpy. "Long as he don't open it for me," having then to dodge the athletic shoe, luckily without her foot in it, that came whizzing past his ear.

"You are judging him by his haircut, his haircut alone," shaking her finger, trying for something between neighborhood scold and soap-opera Chief of Psychiatric. "You've turned into exactly the same kind of father that used to hassle you, back when you were a teen hippie freak."

"Sure I was at least as heavy duty of a menace to the public as your boyfriend is today, but never did any of us in my generation show up late at night at somebody's door in no hockey mask, carryin' around all these lethal blades, even somethin' looked like a pruning hook? and you're telling me we can do business? What business, summer-camp renovation?" He started throwing Cheetos at her, scattering vividly orange crumbs all over.

"He's got a good idea, if only you'd listen, Pop."

"Pop this." Zoyd ate a Chee-to he'd been planning to throw. "Of course I can listen, I hope I can still do that, what kind of uptight father do you take me for, why, he might even turn out to be a fine young man despite all the evidence, look at Moon-doggie, for example, in *Gidget* [1959], after all. . . ."

"Isaiah!" hollered the girl, "let's move it mah man, no telling how long he's even gonna be in this good of a mood," and out of another dimension, where he'd been waiting in orbit, emerged Isaiah Two Four, who today, Zoyd noticed, had his long Mohawk

colored a vibrant acid green, except at the tips, where some magenta shade was airbrushed on. Now these happened to be Zoyd's two all-time favorite colors, and Prairie, who had given him enough T-shirts and ashtrays in the quaint sixties combo, knew it. Was this some weird effort to be nice?

Isaiah, in their greeting, wanted to slap and dap, having always somehow believed that Zoyd had seen combat in Vietnam. Some of this was bush-vet and jaiyard moves Zoyd recognized, some was private choreography he couldn't keep up with, though he tried, Isaiah throughout humming Jimi Hendrix's "Purple Haze." "Hey, so, Mr. Wheeler," Isaiah at last, "how you doing?"

"What's this 'Mr. Wheeler,' what happened to 'You lunch meat, 'sucker'?" this line having climaxed their last get-together, when, from a temperate discussion of musical differences, feelings had swiftly escalated into the rejection, on quite a broad scale, of most of one another's values.

"Well then, sir," replied the NBA-sized violence enthusiast who might or might not be fucking his daughter, "I must've meant 'lunch meat' only in terms of our joint strange fate as mortal sandwich, equally exposed to the jaws of destiny, and from that perspective what's it matter, rilly, that you don't care for the musical statements of Septic Tank or Fascist Toejam?" jiveassing so obvious that Zoyd had no choice but to thaw.

"By the same token, I could easily overlook as trivial your spirited advocacy of the Uzi as a means of resolving many of our social problems."

"That's gracious of you, sir."

"Eats, you guys," Prairie coming in with a gallon of guacamole and a giant-size sack of tortilla chips, Zoyd wondering if soon there ought not to appear as well, aha there it was — a cold six-pack of Dos Equis, ah *right!* Popping one open, beaming, he observed once again in his daughter the sly, not yet professionally developed gift of staging a hustle, something she must surely have got from him, and he felt himself begin to glow, unless it was the guacamole, in which she'd gone a little heavy tonight on the commercial salsa.

Zoyd's reference to the Uzi submachine gun, "Badass of the

Desert," as it is known in its native Israel, had been appropriate. Isaiah's business idea was to set up first one, eventually a chain, of violence centers, each on the scale, perhaps, of a small theme park, including automatic-weapon firing ranges, paramilitary fantasy adventures, gift shops and food courts, and video game rooms for the kids, for Isaiah envisioned a family clientele. Also part of the concept were a standardized floor plan and logo, for franchising purposes. Isaiah sat at the cable-spool table, making diagrams with tortilla chips and pitching his dreams — "Third World Thrills," a jungle obstacle course where you got to swing on ropes, fall into the water, blast away at surprise pop-up targets shaped like indigenous guerrilla elements . . . "Scum of the City," which would allow the visitor to wipe from the world images of assorted urban undesirables, including Pimps, Perverts, Dope Dealers, and Muggers, all carefully multiracial so as to offend everybody, in an environment of dark alleys, lurid neon, and piped-in saxophone music . . . and for the aggro connoisseur, "Hit List," in which you could customize a lineup of videotapes of the personalities in public life you hated most, shown one apiece on the screens of old used TV sets bought up at junkyard prices and sent past you by conveyor belt, like ducks at the carnival, so your pleasure at blowing away these jabbering, posturing likenesses would be enhanced by all the imploding picture tubes. . . .

Zoyd was barely ahead of the white water here, nearly taken under by the surge of demographics and earnings projections the kid was coming up with. Dazedly he realized that at some point his mouth had fallen open and remained so, he didn't know for how long. He shut it too abruptly and clipped his tongue, just as Isaiah arrived at the line, "And it won't cost you a penny."

"Uh-huh. How much *will* it cost me?"

Isaiah gave him the five-figure California orthodontia, plus full eye contact. Zoyd need only stand ready to cosign for a loan —

Zoyd allowed himself a lengthy and mirthless chuckle. "And who'll be doing the lending?" expecting some address in a distant state, obtained from a matchbook cover. Turned out to be the Bank of Vineland Itself. "You didn't, uh, threaten 'em, nothin' like 'at?" Zoyd needling the long-shadowed youth.

Isaiah just shrugged and went on, "In consideration, you get all the construction and landscaping work."

"Wait a minute, why don't your parents cosign?"

"Oh. . . I guess 'cause they've always been into, you know, nonviolence?" There was something wistful in the way he said this. It wasn't just that his folks were vegetarians, they also discriminated *among* vegetables, excluding from their diet everything red, for example, the color of anger. Most bread, having been made by killing yeasts, was taboo. Zoyd, no shrink, nonetheless wondered if the kid wasn't doing unto Prairie what was being done unto him at home, in terms of food craziness.

"And . . . your folks don't know about this yet?"

"Sort of wanted it to be a surprise?"

Zoyd cackled. "Parents love surprises," and he caught Prairie giving him a weird look, like, Oh yeah? here, try this —

Instead, "We were all gonna go camping out for a few days, OK? Basically the band and a couple of other girls?"

Isaiah played with a local heavy-metal band called Billy Barf and the Vomitones, who'd been having trouble lately finding work.

"Go see Ralph Wayvone, Jr., over at the Cuke," Zoyd advised, "his sister's getting married down the City next weekend, the band suddenly ain't gonna show, and he sounds a little desperate for a replacement."

"Uh . . . well maybe I'll do it now, can I use your phone?"

"Think it's in the bathroom, last time I looked."

Alone, he and Prairie happened to get eye contact. She'd never been a squirmer, not even as a baby. Finally she said, "So?"

"He's a OK fella, but no bank's gonna let me cosign no loan, come on."

"You're a local businessman."

"They'll call it gypsy roofer, and I owe too much money all over the place anyhow."

"They *love* it when you owe money."

"Not like I owe it, Prairie — if the whole project went belly-up, they'd take the house." A point that may even have begun to get through, when Isaiah came running out of the bathroom yelling, "We got the gig! We got it! Awesome! I can't believe it!"

"Me either," Zoyd muttered. "You're going to a full-scale Italian wedding and do what? 'Fascist Toejam's Greatest Hits'?"

"It could need some reconceptualizing," Isaiah admitted. "I, like, implied we were Italian, for one thing."

"Well you might want to learn a few of the tunes, but you'll settle in, try not to worry," chortling to himself as Prairie and Isaiah went out the door, yes always glad to help out, my boy, a crime-family gig, whatever, no no, don't bother to thank me. . . . Zoyd had played a few mob weddings in his career, nothing the kid couldn't handle, and besides the eats would more than make up for any awkward episodes, so it wasn't as if he were running a mean trick on his daughter's boyfriend, whom he was still not 100 percent crazy about, or anything like that. And as a problem to be addressed, Isaiah was more like a vacation from deeper difficulties, chief among which, all of a sudden, was the recrudescence of Hector Zuñiga in Zoyd's life, a topic, as he lit a joint and settled in front of the soundless Tube, that his thoughts unavoidably found their way back to.

IT was a romance over the years at least as persistent as Sylvester and Tweety's. Although Hector may from time to time have wished some cartoon annihilation for Zoyd, he'd understood from early in their acquaintance that Zoyd was the chassee he'd be least likely ever to bag. Not that he credited Zoyd with anything like moral integrity in resisting him. He put it down instead to stubbornness, plus drug abuse, ongoing mental problems, and a timidity, maybe only a lack of imagination, about the correct scale of any deal in life, drug or nondrug. And though not as obsessed these days about turning Zoyd — they'd had that crisis long ago — Hector still, for no reason he could name, liked to keep on popping in every now and then, preferably unannounced.

He showed up first in Zoyd's life shortly after Reagan was elected governor of California. Zoyd was living down south then, sharing a house in Gordita Beach with elements of a surf band he'd been playing keyboard in since junior high, the Corvairs, along with friends more and less transient. The house was so old that all of its termite clauses and code violations had been waived, on the theory that the next moderate act of nature would finish it off. But having been put up back during an era of overdesign, it proved to be sturdier than it looked, with its old stucco eaten at to reveal generations of paint jobs in different beach-town pastels, corroded by salt and petrochemical fogs that flowed in the summers onshore up the sand slopes, on up past Sepulveda, often across the then undeveloped fields, to wrap the San Diego Freeway too. Down here, a long screened porch faced out over flights of rooftops descending to the beach. Access from the street was by way of a Dutch door, whose open top half, that long-ago evening, had come to frame Hector under a ragged leather hat with a wide brim, peering through sunglasses, the darkening Pacific in pale-topped crawl below. Out on the street, wedged into most of the front seat of a motor-pool Plymouth, waited Hector's partner in those days,

the seriously oversize field agent Melrose Fife. Zoyd, whose luck it happened to've been to answer Hector's knock, stood trying to understand what this individual with the outlaw hat and cop sideburns was talking about.

After a bit, Corvairs lead guitar and vocalist Scott Oof wandered in from the kitchen to join them, leaning on the doorjamb playing with his hair. "Maybe later," Hector greeted him, "you could explain this all to your friend here, 'cause I don't know if I've been gittin' through. . . ."

"¿Qué?" replied Scott wittily. "*No hablo inglés.*"

"Whoa." Hector's front-door smile tightened up. "Maybe I should get my pardner up here for this. See him, out there in the car? You can't really tell till he stands up, but he is so big, that nobody ever wants to get him out of the car, 'cause once he's out, you dig, he ain't always that easy to git back in?"

"Don't mind Scott," Zoyd hastily, "he's a surfer — so long, Scott — he had a little run-in a few years ago with some, uh, young gentlemen of Mexican origin, so sometimes —"

"In the parking lot at the Taco Bell in Hermosa, yes a memorable series of evenings, much celebrated in the folklore of my people" — this being in the early days of a Ricardo Montalban impersonation that would over the years grow more refined.

"You've come to take revenge?"

"Please. For-give me," Hector producing from an inside pocket, access to which now also afforded a leisurely view of a service .38 in an armpit rig, his federal commission in a fancy tooled flip-open leather case.

"Nobody here's into nothing federal," Zoyd didn't think.

Van Meter, back in those days sporting a profile that mandated at least a stop-and-frisk, ran in frowning. "What's wrong with Scott? he just split out the back."

"What I'm really here about," Hector had been explaining, "is the matter of drugs."

"Thank God!" screamed Van Meter, "it's been weeks, we thought we'd never score again! oh yes, it's a miracle —" Zoyd kicking him frantically — "who sent you, are you the dude that knows Leon?"

The federale showed his teeth, amused. "Subject you refer to is temporarily in custody, though sure to be back before very long in his accustomed spot beneath the Gordita Pier."

"Aaaaaa . . .," went Van Meter.

"No, no my man but that is precisely the sort of corroborating detail that we value so highly," snapping, like a magician, a crisp five-dollar bill, half a lid of Mexican commercial in those days, from behind Van Meter's ear. Zoyd rolled his eyes as the bass player grabbed at the money. "And there's always plenty more in our imprest fund for good-quality product. For make-believe bullshit, of course, we pay nothing, and in time we grow annoyed."

That fatal five-spot was not the last Purchase-of-Information disbursement in the neighborhood. In those years there were so many federal narcs in the area that if you were busted in the South Bay you actually stood less chance of its being the local Man than some fed. All the beach towns, plus Torrance, Hawthorne, and greater Walteria, were in on some grandiose pilot project bankrolled with inexhaustible taxpayer millions, appropriate chunks of which were finding their way to antidrug entities up and down every level of governance. Zoyd, to be sure, made a point of never pocketing any of Hector's PI money personally, though he was content to go on eating the groceries, burning the gas, and smoking the pot others obtained with it. Now and then he would get fooled on some minor dope purchase, sweet basil in a heat-sealed bag, a small vial of Bisquick (yep, he'd murmur, still making stupid mistakes and how about yourself?) and he'd feel really tempted, sometimes for days, to turn the dealer in to Hector. But there were always good reasons not to — it would happen that one was a cool person who needed the money, another a distant cousin from the Middle West, or a homicidal maniac who would take revenge, so forth. Each time Zoyd failed to inform on these people, Hector grew furious. "You think you're protectin' them? They just gonna fuck you over again." The edge in his voice was frustration, everything about this Gordita assignment was just really fucking frustrating, all these identical-looking beach pads beginning to blend together, resulting in more than enough mistaken addresses, early-morning raids upon the innocent, failures to apprehend fugitives

who might have only fled across an alley or down a flight of public steps. The arrangements of hillside levels, alleyways, corners, and rooftops created a Casbah topography that was easy to get lost in quickly, terrain where the skills of the bushwhacker became worth more than any resoluteness of character, an architectural version of the uncertainty, the illusion, that must have overtaken his career for him ever to've been assigned there in the first place.

"Situations back then," Zoyd hammered it on in, these many years later, "relationships, sure got tangled up in that house, with more and also less temporary love partners and sex companions, jealousy and revenge always goin' on, plus substance dealers and their go-betweens, and narcs who thought they were undercover trying to pop them, couple-three politicals fleedin' from different jurisdictions, good deal of comin' and goin' 's what it was, not to mention you actin' like it was your own personal snitch Safeway, just drop in, we're open 24 hours."

They were sitting at a table in the rear of the restaurant at Vineland Lanes, Zoyd after a lot of lost sleep having decided to show up after all. He ordered the Health Food Enchilada Special and Hector had the soup of the day, cream of zucchini, and the vegetarian tostada, which upon its arrival he began to take apart piece by piece and reassemble as something else Zoyd could not identify but which seemed to hold meaning for Hector.

"Lookit that, lookit your food, Hector, what have you done?"

"At least I'm not droppin' it all over the place, includin' my shirt, like I was out in some parkin' lot." Yes, a certain emphasis there for sure, and this after their having shared, maybe not many, but still a parking lot or two, even some adventures therein. Zoyd guessed that at some point since their last get-together Hector, as if against a storm approaching over his life's horizon, had begun to bring everything indoors. Stuck out in the field at GS-13 for years because of his attitude, he had sworn — Zoyd thought — he'd go out the gate early before he'd ever be some *cagatintas*, a bureaucrat who shits ink. But he must have cut some deal, maybe it got too cold for him — time to say goodbye to all those eyeswept parking lots back out under the elements and the laws of chance, and hello GS-14, leaving the world outside the office to folks earlier

in their careers, who could appreciate it more. Too bad. For Zoyd, a creature of attitude himself, this long defiance had been Hector's most persuasive selling point.

What the federal computers this morning had not brought to Hector's attention was that the alleys today were scheduled for junior regional semifinals. Kids were in town from all over the northern counties to compete on these intricately mortised masterpiece alleys, dating back to the high tide of the logging business in these parts, when the big houses framed all in redwood had gone up and legendary carpenters had appeared descending from rain-slick stagecoaches, geniuses with wood who could build you anything from a bowling alley to a Carpenter Gothic outhouse. Balls struck pins, pins struck wood, echoes of collision came thundering in from next door along with herds of kids in different bowling jackets, each carrying at least one ball in a bag plus precarious stacks of sodas and food, each squeaking open the screen door between lanes and restaurant, letting it squeak shut into the next kid, who'd squeak it open again. Didn't take many of these repetitions to have an effect on Zoyd's lunch companion, whose eyes were flicking back and forth as he hummed a tune that not till sixteen bars in did Zoyd recognize as "Meet the Flintstones," from the well-known TV cartoon show. Hector finished the tune and looked sourly at Zoyd. "Any of these yours?"

Here it was. OK, "What are you sayin', Hector?"

"You know what I'm sayin', asshole."

Zoyd couldn't see a thing in his eyes. "Who you been talking to?"

"Your wife."

Zoyd began stabbing and restabbing his enchiladas with a fork while Hector waited him out. "Uh, well how's she doing?"

Hector's eyes were moist, and popping out some. "Not too good, li'l buddy."

"Tryin' to tell me what, she's in trouble?"

"You catch on fast for an ol' dooper, now try this one, you ever heard of defunding? Maybe you noticed on the news, on the Tube, all these stories about Reaganomics, a-an' cutbacks in the federal budget and stuff?"

"She was on some program? Now she's off it?" They were talking about his ex-wife, Frenesi, years and miles in the past. Why, besides the free lunch, was Zoyd sitting here listening to this? Hector, leaning forward bright-eyed, had begun to show signs of enjoying himself. "Where is she?"

"Well, we *had* her under Witness Protection."

Not hearing the stress on *had* right away, "Oh bullshit, Hector, that's for Mob folks trying to be ex-Mob 'thout havin' to die first, since when are you usin' that Mafia meat locker for politicals, thought you just took 'em put 'em in the booby hatch like they do over there in Russia."

"Well, technically it was a different budget line, but still run by the U.S. Marshals, same as with the Mob type of witness."

Man could crush him with just a short tap dance over the computer keys — why was Hector being so unnaturally amiable? All that could possibly be restraining the tough old doorkicker was kindness, unfortunately a trait he was born so short on that nobody living or dead had ever observed it anywhere near him.

"So — she's in with all these Mob snitches, the money disappears, but you still have her file, you can punch her up when you need her —"

"Wrong. Her file is destroyed." The word hung in the wood space, between percussive attacks from next door.

"Why? Thought you guys never destroyed a file, 'th all 'ese little fund, defund, refund games —"

"We don't know why. But it's no game in Washington — *châle ése* — this ain't tweakin' around no more with no short-term maneuvers here, this is a *real* revolution, not that little fantasy hand-job you people was into, is it's a groundswell, Zoyd, the wave of History, and you can catch it, or scratch it." He eyed Zoyd with a smug look which in view of what he'd been doing to his tostada, over, by now, most of the tabletop, lacked authenticity. "The man who once shot the old Hermosa Pier durin' a lightnin' storm," Hector shaking his head. "Listen, K mart this week has full-length mirrors on sale, and I'm nobody's charm-school professor, but I'd urge you to get one. Might want to start upgradin' your image, li'l buddy."