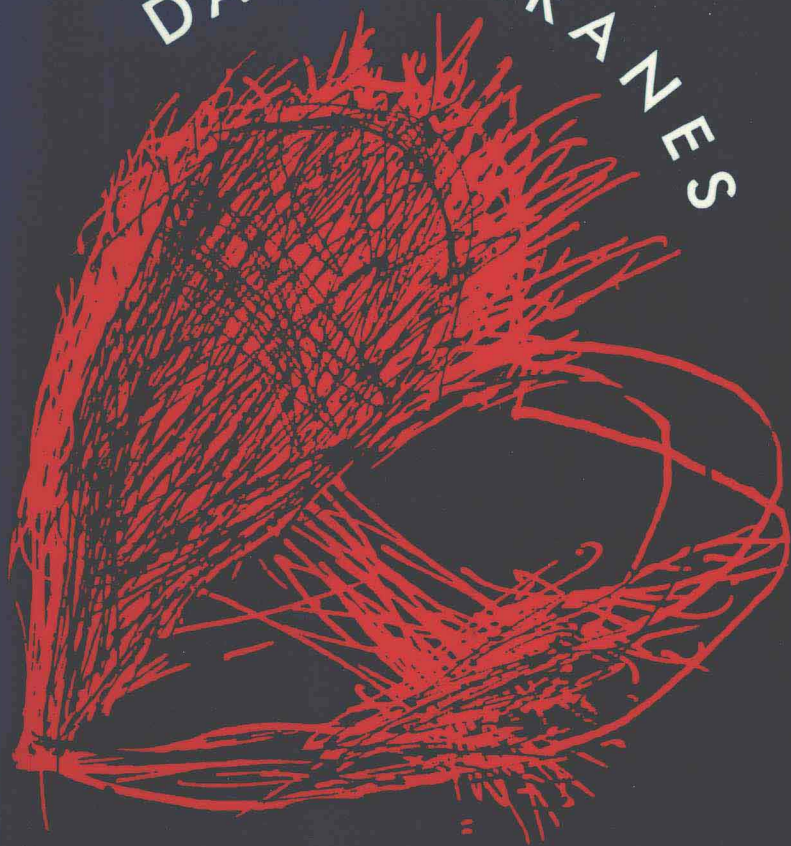


# KENO RUNNER

DAVID KRANES



A ROMANCE

# KENO • RUNNER

David Krane



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RENO • LAS VEGAS

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This book  
in thanks for their  
Spirits

is for four friends

Bud Church  
Paul Messer, S.J.  
Ethan John Phillips  
Dr. Len Schmidt

“You cannot love what shocks you!”

—Nathaniel Hawthorne,  
*The Birthmark*

*Everything was blood. Operatic. Blood and relentless. Lives dispatched. That was Clark Henderson's logic. In the heat and darkness: relentless blood; blood relentless. Henderson would simulate—in cruel script—the black logic of untamed blood. Let loose. Spilled out. Unstopped. Here was violence uncontained at its own carnival. And the world would see. And the media report: "Such are our times." Because these were Henderson's times. Filled with broken needs. Filled with rage and license. So Clark would stage nothing more than a headline—what we wash down with our coffee, taste in the daily glaze of croissants: the public, broken logic of unbracketed passion.*

*After all—Clark knew as we all know—ours is a world of the randomness and the unchecked. Ours is a lost world, a world fallen from past restraining codes. "Things fall apart." Here, shattered, spills what we once called Love. There, torn, hang the rags of, formerly, Truth. Disorder! It was present. It was common. It was daily. People did these things. People walked hourly into the houses of strangers with strop razors and firearms and garden tools. The phrase "senseless massacre" had fallen into cliché. There were Gold Records about children firing into schoolyards. "Senseless massacres." "Senseless violence." Homicide bureaus and night desks all had phrases handy. "The Henderson family massacre appears to be just another in a growing national epidemic of senseless violent crimes."*

*The Theatre of Senselessness!*

*And the Princeton graduate, Henderson, loved theatre! Dramatic gesture! Irony! How irony played!*

. . . . .

*So Clark Henderson crossed the carpet to the bodies of his wife and mother. Perhaps, in the ormolu-framed mirror, he saw himself. Unclothed. So that blood traces on garments would be impossible. Then, likely, seeing himself, he stopped. "He was in love with his own fucking body!" His brother's claim had found echo, less bluntly, in the reports of surgeons and nurses who'd seen Clark Henderson scrub. "He can be a bit self-enamored," Wolk, the Chief of Surgery, had said. So Clark may have taken the moment: to admire what he'd carved through regimen. Hard, conditioned frame. Wide shoulders, athletic waist tapered by relentless daily swimming laps. The thick neck. The polished pectorals. "The Decathlon Doctor." He was gorgeous! He often watched himself!*

*So—let's say Clark Henderson stopped, caught by his own body and image. Did he see? What he'd really done? What had really happened? Did he absorb? Take in the blood splayed across his rippled and stark flesh? Or did the blood register only in commonplace: A Doctor smeared—of course!—from his daily heroism! The Miracle Surgeon! The God Covered With Blood!*

*So perhaps, when he moved again, made adjustments and walked now into his children's bedrooms, it was with a deliberate cause, not unlike the "blessed" "healing" mission with which he operated any day . . . And while the headlines would cry: "Senseless Intrusion" and "Violence in Respected House," and though there would be more blood, perhaps, in his own tripped mind, Clark Henderson would be only more Miraculous! More a God! What was blood?! From his first high-school biology through his residency, his hands had been forever-now-it-seemed aswim in it. How was any of this different?*

. . . . .

Kohlman looked up from where the small, morning west-side Manhattan light made the page of the bestseller in his hands slick with haze. He breathed, closed the book. GOD COVERED WITH BLOOD. By Randall Keller. Good author's name. Sounded literate. Also sounded like *killer*. GOD COVERED WITH BLOOD. Not bad. As title. Serviceable. *Old Testamentish*. Which never hurt. Kohlman made a note for the naming of his own project: "Use something with *destiny* . . . that sense . . . better, *deliverance*." Perhaps FIRE. HOUSE OF FIRE, or, he thought, SET THIS HOUSE . . . except, no; that had

already been used . . . though, in the trade, stealing played. Kohlman's last editor had wrapped the "writing trick" in three words: "*Lie, cheat, and steal.*" So, maybe, an old forgotten title . . . He'd advised Kohlman: "Fallen world, Man!" then laughed: "Rough—but it's what we got! It's what they gave us!" And though Kohlman felt disturbed by the ways in which such ideas, somewhere, hurt; still, they made that agreeable buzz: like . . . what? . . . perhaps work songs across a river in a foreign country or . . . throaty blues down a broken tenement flight, baleful, painful only in some vague connection, the kind of sounds savage truths make far enough away and yoked to serve. Prospero and Caliban.

So Kohlman had taken the words. Filed them. Passed them off. Told himself: *Writers wrote.* Told himself: *It's a fallen world and it's what they gave us.* The phrases made sense. Had . . . whatever: neatness. Served.

Also, an ABC Morning News director, when Kohlman had worked *there*, had said: "Stories turn corners. They bump into you: You take them!"

So he had. That had happened. There had been an opportunity. A person: a wild woman apparently . . . or essentially, named *Janice Stewart*—a long-term headline accused of a bizarre arson/murder: her wealthy father-in-law in his Essex, Connecticut, estate . . . any number of weird, who knew, probably *kinky* implications—had fallen into his lap . . . *in a way* . . . in a way: he'd called her . . . and she had said: *write my story* . . . *write my life*. And of course his friend had been right: you *don't* turn down opportunities; you *don't* pan for gold and then throw the nugget back into the stream. It turns up . . . it presents itself: if you're a writer . . . if you aspire: then that's what you need to be alert to. Gift horses are . . . *whatever* . . . *that* business . . . *that*.

Kohlman felt anxious.

So . . .

GOD COVERED WITH BLOOD! Whatever. It was a foothold. It was *more* than a foothold. Capote had done *his* book; Mailer had done his. America was an outlaw camp: it was an accepted rap; it was a standard take on the culture and its myth. Great actors, any number, had begun doing daytime television. Mugging shamelessly. Slapping booze-riddled, clutching women. It wasn't *art* . . . but it was . . . *craft*, certainly . . . *something*.



Kohlman touched the book jacket's slick cover like braille. It wasn't *bad*. It was a *title*. The book wasn't bad. It read . . maybe a little "pumped," but it read. So . . . It worked; it drove. Certainly it had the requisite "hook." More advice: from an agent: "You want bottom line? With these books? This is free: For *nothing* you get to think about the sound of a word: so you can *say* the word . . to yourself . . forever . . until it means something. 'Primal.' That's all. That's all I'm passing out. 'Primal.' One word."

So he was reading . . what the hell! . . a *primal* book. If someone needed a term. To prepare. As homework. One writer studies another. It couldn't hurt. Strategy and style. Exercise. Preparation. It was a way to get into the requisite genre: GOD COVERED WITH BLOOD. The title stood out in red, wide letters, thick and palpable and filled with microphotographed blood cells.

. . . . .

Kohlman set the book down on a glass table. He lifted the phone. He needed to call Janice Stewart, the woman, his subject, in Las Vegas and remind her of his arrival. She always seemed so . . *scattered* wasn't the word but it was all that came . . . *Elusive?* . . *ephemeral?* . . *something* over the phone. *Disoriented?* *Different* . . *singular* . . *hard to pin down?* She'd gone to Las Vegas after she'd been acquitted and served her "observation" time in Danbury Psychiatric Center. And she was working there, in Vegas, as a . . whatever-it-was . . *keno runner* . . at the Golden Nugget Hotel/Casino.

He dialed her. His wrist vaguely electric with a tremor. He tried gripping the receiver less tightly to stop the buzz. The line rang three times. A woman answered. "Yes," she said.

"Miss Stewart?"

"Interesting: 'Miss Stewart,'" the woman said. She seemed amused.

"Is this Miss Stewart?" Kohlman said. "This is Benjamin Kohlman . . calling from New York."

"Part of you sounds different," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Every time you call," the woman said. Her voice began to confirm itself. He'd spoken only a half dozen times with her. It had always been curiously brief, oblique, unbusinesslike.

"I just wanted to remind you: I'm flying in," Kohlman said.

"I'll be watching," she said.

"Tomorrow, probably, sometime," Kohlman said.

"I'll be watching," Janice Stewart repeated.

"I'll call you."

"I'll be watching."

"We still . . . ?" Something slipped, somewhere, in his sentence.

"Mr. Kohlman?"

"We still . . . have our agreement? You never sent the papers back."

"No; I don't do that," she said. "I don't send papers back. I *bring* them back." Her voice had a lift.

"But we're still . . ."

"Still . . . ?"

"I mean: together on this," Kohlman said. "We're still on."

"You stress your prepositions," she said. "That's interesting. I've never heard that . . . in quite that way before. Is there a reason?"

"You haven't given the rights to anyone else," Kohlman said, worried.

"I've given myself the rights," Janice Stewart said.

"Okay."

"I've given myself the rights—and it feels good. But we need to meet."

"But you haven't given the rights to someone *else*," Kohlman said.

"No; but that's an idea," Janice Stewart said. "Come. I'll be watching. We can see. I'm optimistic."

"I'll call," Kohlman said.

"No. Don't call. *Come*."

"Right. I meant that," Kohlman said.

"Good," Janice Stewart said. Her voice wasn't unkind. She hung up.

. . . . .

Kohlman hung up. His hand had trouble leaving the phone. Was it Janice Stewart? The difficulty? Or . . . he hesitated to wonder . . . *women*? All women. Recently he had felt vulnerable. Kohlman stood in a room almost emptied of breeze, breathing, taking great sweeps of the impoverished air into himself, holding it, a habit which his . . . did you use *ex* for *non*-husband/wife lovers? . . . any-

way, a habit Sharon had hated. “Kohlman: Christ!” she’d say: “I have serious questions about my space, to *begin* with, living with you! Then you *vacuum* it! You worried you’ll *deflate*? Should I bring in, say, a portable *oxygen unit*?” And then she’d wait, and he would sense her smile and pull away into some blanketed lull, and she’d start in with a new glee: “Hey, Christ: good: be sensitive! But could you make it something *important*—okay? There’s a contender: in there: I moved in with a contender. Let him out!”

Hopefully, Janice Stewart would demand less.

Though dimly Kohlman knew: Sharon wasn’t without cause. He was private. He was stiff. He threw protection up in patched, makeshift gates against her weather, strung out windbreaks. Hid.

Still, that wasn’t the whole picture. Was it? Because good things, too, chased and wanted at his pulse—far things, fragile things—and along the soft, cup-shaped hollows of his skin: old things; things familiar, though . . . okay: perhaps mute in shape. Things he saw but sometimes couldn’t name. Image kinds of intimations he might watch at forty feet but then not reach for. Like the sweep of corn silk or the sense of . . . yes, all right: *women* . . . once his mother behind him on their Iowa farm, present, Kohlman pressing his face sweetly into the long neck of a fevered horse. Kohlman had been embarrassed.

Maybe it was all embarrassment, somehow. Women. Sharon. Not wanting to have another person, like that, slip up or come behind you and find you open, find you caring.

He loved Sharon. Something . . . *like* . . . love: did one have to name? Her storms. He would crouch low, cover, feel her, raw and wresting, near, her swirl. He’d admire the power, want it, feel pride, wait. She demanded *for* him. She unleashed, insisted *for* him, refused to forgive, held every light accountable. She was who he—grown, moved East and launched—now, maybe, couldn’t be. Or, say . . . admit to. She was an unabandoned purpose. She was him without compromise. She was crazy Righteousness. He could wake up to her, and she’d be like good, loud music.

Yet, even beside her, *inside* her sometimes though not always, he could still be *away* and on his own, shut down in part. He could be tight against himself, some personal wall, and still watch her toss the furniture. She was something. She was the *Kohlman* he could live with and not remember at the same time. She was the first minister he had ever heard in church. She was the air turned

yellow-green and wildly dangerous in Templeton, Iowa. She was his father, except she spoke. She was his mother, unreined and angry. She was something forbidden in his house. She was the one who said *no* and then said *yes* and there would be no revisions.

And he loved having her . . . on his skin sometimes, at his ear, pressed against his eyes. He loved her impatience. He loved her demands. She was the exaggerated Adult. And child. And she'd left. Gone. She hadn't been with him for two weeks. Well, but then of course *it had had to happen*—right? Kohlman said that now—*it had had to happen*—alone, in the room, though he had no real idea who the audience was or even, really, what he was saying.

So: that was Sharon. That had been Sharon. And now he was going to write the book about Janice Stewart.

Though, Kohlman thought, he should see her. Before he caught his flight West to start the book: he really should stop by briefly at her loft. "I just stopped briefly by . . .": would he put it that way? She got angry when anyone interrupted her painting. Or maybe . . . Could he pose a bargain? If he posed something like: "Look: I'll be gone three weeks. Maybe getting the book behind me will allow us to . . . What if we plan, when I get back, to try this whole thing . . ." *Whole thing*: She'd savage that; she'd tear him apart! How should he begin? What approach? "I'm just leaving for the interviews with Janice Stewart . . . in Las Vegas." Good! Great setup! That he had even *thought* such a book had been their major issue. "Neat idea, Kohlman! Write pathology. Write about some poor *other* lost soul's pain. Write about a *fucked-up* person. Don't put *yourself* at risk. —I'm sorry. You'll do that later: right? After . . . how does it go? . . . after you've gotten a 'foothold'? After you've gotten 'established'? Is that the . . . ? When you have more—help me, prompt me with this—'credibility'? . . . is that the word I'm looking for? . . . 'leverage'? How'm I doing? Am I close?"

It didn't matter—that he kept repeating to her that he felt on the "edge of something" . . . something different, something important . . . if she'd just be patient. Each time, she'd throw the phrase back at him mercilessly. Once he'd said, trying to simplify, perhaps taking the cue from elsewhere: "Sharon: Look . . . hey: it's an opportunity."

And how she'd leapt! "An opportunity! An opportunity! How dense, really, of me not to have *seen* that! Kohlman? This is just a question, but: what do you suppose people did . . . you

know, like, *Pre-Opportunity?*” Then she’d snapped her fingers: “No; that’s right! I remember! I remember reading about it: *they named things!* Right? They stood in this garden and they named things! Pre-Opportunity. Back then. But that was so long ago.”

. . . . .

Kohlman twisted. He did isometrics in place then moved, toured his three rooms—past the Nagra recorder, past the Compaq computer and luggage, all standing, ready, near the door. His plane left in four hours. Had Sharon overlooked anything, left herself behind? His tour said *no*. It would have been more heartening had Kohlman been a more disorderly person, such that litter might have snared one of her earrings. Or a cheese knife. Or a contact lens. A powder-blue emptied pill box. A scarf. An Emmy Lou Harris tape. A button. A #5 camel-hair brush. Broken heel of a shoe. Stem of a wine glass. Dried eyeliner tube. But Kohlman’s care, his placement of all things his . . . his daily vacuumings (“Oh, yeah! And it’s not enough that you *inhale* like a possessed person—you have to *vacuum* three-times-at-least a day!”) . . . None of his habits had left any space to trap Sharon, some part of her, in an overlooked prize.

The only vague disarray was Kohlman’s corkboard: postcards spilling crazily, hundreds in overlapped scales, out beyond their block. All from his parents. From across the continent. Kohlman’s parents had sold their Iowa farm and had bought an Airstream, which they drove from American place to American place, sending postcards. No messages. Often the cards were even unsigned. Sometimes they said simply, “Mother & Dad.” Sometimes they just bore initials. Kohlman had imagined that, to his brother, Adam, the Ph.D. university professor in Michigan, they sent more traditional letters: describing, say, a rainstorm driven through in North Carolina or some scarlet long-legged birds seen at dusk across a pasture in Missouri or perhaps a roadside reptile museum. With Adam, they might inquire after his health or ask about the welfare of their son’s children. But with Kohlman: no; no letters. He was their *other* son; prefigured to stay, yet who hadn’t. He was the son for whom Iowa hadn’t been enough. “You wouldn’t trust our pleasures,” his father had said once, on a brief visit, “so you’ll forgive us if, being with you, we fail at conversation.”

So . . . ? What? What was his father's logic? Postcards were like truck stops? Or motel lights? They "didn't stay." But were . . . *media*? And so Kohlman, being away and in New York and in the *media*, got postcards . . . ?

He untacked a card. It pictured a man on Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, head crimson with sunburn, and was captioned: "Having a wonderful time. Wish you were hair!"

Kohlman hadn't seen his parents in four years. "You're a great guy, Kohlman!" Sharon had said: "The Continent of North America has eaten your parents—and you don't even wonder on it!" "I wonder on it," Kohlman had said; "I wonder on it all the time. Don't be so smug. Don't be so sure you understand."

Sharon overstated; still, she took your legs out. Kohlman's version, most times, to himself, was: his parents were different people. They'd been final inheritors of a passed life-style, a previous continent; they'd worked a three-generation family farm—and Kohlman loved that; he admired it; he did not deride it. He loved the way it had felt around him in the tall stalks, growing up, and he'd loved the dark magic of an earth basement, which had smelled always like the underbellies of large stones . . . and the mason jars. There had been a sweetness often. Closed certainly: that, but a safe electric kind of sweetness that tasted, when he remembered it, like the charged hour after a lightning storm.

But it had seemed bound, too. Too bound. Closed. Choked. Wasted. Used up. Departing. Each year more. Until all he could see, all Kohlman could imagine, nearly, was his parents getting beat up by an economy whose machinery and ruthlessness only laughed at them.

And so he'd tried to imagine . . . *other places*, places, for himself, *beyond*. Reach there. Stretch his hand. So that his acceptance to Princeton had seemed immense, a miracle—though it had made little difference to them. They'd seemed to treat it like a bad crop or a short drought. And so some kind of . . . *separation* had begun. Some kind of change. Some kind of *shift* in whatever had been their Kohlman-family geology. That was all. That was it, only. He wasn't *opposed* to them. He wasn't their *enemy*. He wasn't in combat. Still, Sharon had made him feel, at times, as though that was the perception.

They were dedicated. Very dedicated people. And that was good. But . . . perhaps "uninformed." That was the way he, in

words once, had marked the difference. "You mean, *dumb*?" Sharon had said. *No*; he hadn't meant *dumb*, not dumb; "dumb" was an ugly word. "I don't think I have those feelings," he'd said. "Right!" she'd said: "I understand. What you *meant* was '*ignorant*'—right? After all, they're your parents." "Give me a break!" he'd said. But she'd gone on: "More along the lines of . . . like you were talking 'strong simplicity' . . . right? *Sturdy* 'folk.' Beasts of burden. Lovable plow horses."

"Why do you always have to give me such a hard time?" Kohlman had said.

"Oh . . . darlin' . . . Oh, darlin': because you're *there*, you know? Because you're such a target. You're so set up!"

. . . . .

Kohlman tacked the Myrtle Beach card back and looked at the board of his parents' cards, unsure why he'd ever kept or displayed them. Huge potatoes, filling entire truckbeds. Nineteen different postcards of the "Famous Jackalope!" Cartoons of outhouses. A card from Amarillo, Texas, made to order: his parents riding on the back of a giant diamondback; the caption, "Fangs for Everything!" The cards were, in part, embarrassing. Had Kohlman and his parents ever shared a language? They must have. But what had that language been? They were both silent people. *Taciturn. Reserved.* Weren't those the words people used? "Do you think I don't *love* my parents?" Kohlman had asked Sharon. Kohlman couldn't explain his feelings. "Right! Don't do *that*," Sharon had said: "Don't explain your feelings: hard to imagine the disaster!"

*Okay:* His parents had different sensibilities! Their *bodies* seemed more their antennae . . . while *he* . . . they had different . . . he . . . *fuck!* . . . tended . . . he took things more through his head! So . . . ! *Anyway:* he had kept the board of postcards. So, obviously, wherever his parents were—Kohlman hadn't trashed them. He'd kept their presence. However his mounting and displaying the postcards *did* that. He was not dismissing them.

. . . . .

He would see Sharon and say good-bye. He'd go there. They'd been close, more, and it was right. She'd rail; she'd complain, but he needed to not just slip away. He needed to say . . . whatever his visit would say. He needed to make the gesture.

He checked his message machine: that it was on and ready for calls in. He checked his five windows: that they were locked. He stood in front of the board of postcards, wondering if there might be anything he'd overlooked. Then he gathered his baggage and left, triple-locking the apartment behind.

. . . . .

Sharon's studio loft was nearby, just down West 67th, then up not-quite-two blocks on Ninth Avenue. He'd walk. Awkward with baggage, Kohlman, nevertheless, felt a need to move, sense some weight and strain, mark his own graceless reality. Somewhere the stubborn child liked that: the sweat, the dry fire in his hair, the sense of stumbling into what he carried. It had no logic, but it gave pleasure. A few blocks. He could manage himself that far, see Sharon, get a cab.

What he'd forgotten, though, this June Saturday, was the Ninth Avenue Food Fair, which tumbled nonstop, washed in swells and backcurrents around him, caught him in small eddy pools. Any margin of safety Kohlman had hoped for—between the setting down of GOD COVERED WITH BLOOD and his flight, between his departing inventories and his arrival at Las Vegas to meet Janice Stewart and record her, between the familiar and the unmapped—such a margin was quickly swept away in the street. And Kohlman fell into another world: the broth of sausage and teriyaki; shrimp creole, souvlaki, metal drums and street mimes, spring rolls and stuffed mushroom caps, break dancers, baklava, and jugglers. The street was thick for as far uptown as he could see, clotted and rife with human tastes that made Kohlman wonder.

Would Las Vegas be like this? Would it be a carnival? He had never been. It was in the desert, right? So . . . desert hot? He felt the dim recall of some moment lived once as a child, when he'd been borne by something not-quite-sleep and turbulent, after a day enflamed on him by a terrible sun. He'd thrashed in images. And he felt the same tossing now, somehow, of unsorted, unpredictable memory. His bags were heavy. The Nagra, particularly, with all its wires and miking equipment, regardless of padded case, cut against him. Kohlman was not a heavy man, so he could feel his belongings and all his equipment thud and slap onto his bones.

Perhaps he shouldn't visit Sharon. Ninth Avenue was closed off from traffic and there were no cabs. Still, Kohlman, once com-



mitted, found it difficult to not at least take steps. “Dolmathes?” someone asked. Kohlman heard the cry, “Cold Corona beer!”

Where he had not previously been, he was, suddenly, tired: too much being demanded of an instant. Kohlman saw a tanned, heavy man in a red-and-white tank top tease a child with a soft ice-cream cone, holding the cone, pushing the soft creamy white into the child’s face frontally, while the child cried and, blinded by the ice cream, groped outward, hungry. Kohlman dropped his computer case and slapped the cone out of the man’s hand. “Jesus: don’t *do* that!” Kohlman ordered. “Don’t do that. He’s just a child.”

“So: what? You wanna die, mister?” the tanktop said.

Kohlman regripped his computer and moved on . . . through the crowd.

“So: mind your own fucking business!” the tanktop yelled. “He’s *my* kid!” The threat staggered over the heads of a hundred people behind.

Kohlman had no idea why he’d done what he’d done. It was unlike him. It was all the tide and undertow of the street and crowd. It had to be. Because, though such acts, on a level of instinct, outraged him, he nevertheless understood the rules of interference and distance. How many unforgivable scenes had he crossed the street from? He remembered his father, once, confronting a bully in the parking lot at a Grange dance. The man, Parkins, had held a thresher against a girl’s breast, the girl backed against a hay wagon, and Kohlman’s father had disarmed the man, getting his hand cut to the bone and beyond in the process. Once at Princeton, Kohlman, a bit edgy at a semester’s end and perhaps thinking he was his father, had spoken out against a distinguished, chaired professor who’d humiliated another student for his question in an Economics class. “Are you taking me on, Mr. Kohlman?” the professor had asked. “Are we in combat here?” “Don’t ridicule people,” Kohlman had said. “Just . . . don’t ridicule people—that’s all.” And, the next day, he’d dropped the class. Such moments were inexplicable and rare. Usually, Kohlman was a careful reader of reality and fact.

He arrived at Sharon’s building in a sweat—which was not the way he wanted to fly and begin his book. She had a bathroom; perhaps she’d let him shower. He rang her loft.

“Yes?” her no-nonsense voice cracked through the speaker.