

# OPEN STAGE

a novel by  
Ray Holland

## **OPEN STAGE**

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You can contact the author at [rayhollandbooks@gmail.com](mailto:rayhollandbooks@gmail.com) with comments, suggestions, questions, or whatever. I can't promise to reply to all email, but I'll read everything.

—RH

Whenever I'm caught between two evils, I take the one I've never tried.

—Mae West

Sometimes I wonder if men and women really suit each other. Perhaps they should live next door and just visit now and then.

—Katharine Hepburn

Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That's relativity.

—Albert Einstein

~ 1 ~

It was a simple drumbeat with an understated funk feel. After a couple bars a synthesizer joined in, sounding like waves washing over the beach, more of a sound effect than tonal music. Then the bass started, smooth and sensuous. It was at this point that one noticed the acoustic guitar strumming chords, mixed low. Had it been there all along? Finally, the female vocalist began, clear and self-assured, with only a hint of reverb. It was a beautiful arrangement of a beautiful song, and the Golden Palominos' *Pure* was one of Gilbert Ragwater's favorite make-out CDs. Mellow and atmospheric.

Suddenly, the intro to Johnny Winter's version of "Johnny B. Goode" kicked in, raucous and rowdy—Ragwater's cell phone ringtone. Lisa, startled, pulled away. Ragwater didn't care about the phone, though. Even if he had reason to believe that, say, Warren Buffet was calling to offer him a check for ten million dollars, free and clear . . . well, good ol' Warren could call back the next day. Ragwater leaned in and gave Lisa's cheek a delicate kiss.

Johnny began singing.

"Are you going to get that?" Lisa asked.

Ragwater glanced at his cell phone on the coffee table.

The display screen was glowing a faint blue, a tiny beacon to the world of whoever was calling. “It’ll go to voice mail,” he said.

Johnny stopped. The Golden Palominos continued. Ragwater resumed. Lisa put her arms around him.

A few moments later, Johnny started up again. Lisa pushed Ragwater away. “Answer that thing,” she said.

“Huh?” Maybe she would drop it if he pretended he didn’t know what she was talking about.

Once again, Johnny’s vocal.

“You’d better get the phone.”

“What phone?”

“The phone that’s ringing. Or singing. Or whatever. Answer it.”

“It’s the CD. It just *sounds* like the phone.”

“It’s amazing how they can engineer the CD to make it sound like the part of the music that’s completely out of place is actually coming from the phone.”

“Yes, they can do all sorts of amazing things with digital technology.” He dove for her neck. She pushed him back. “Answer the phone, lover boy.”

“It’s not ringing anymore.”

Lisa paused a moment to listen, then shrugged. “Well, whatever,” she said.

“If it’s important they’ll leave a message.” Ragwater put an arm around Lisa and drew her closer. She settled back. He kissed her neck and began nibbling gently. The phone started ringing again.

“Gilbert . . .”

“Mmmm . . .”

“You might as well answer that damn thing. They’re not

going to give up.”

“You’re probably right. Don’t forget where I left off.”

“No way.”

He leaned over and picked up the phone. “Hello?”

The voice at the other end was excited. “Henry! Hey, man, you got any weed?”

Wrong number. And the only worse time for it would have been when . . . well, if it had come later in the evening. But this was, like, the third time the guy had tried to call. Or fourth. Or something. Hadn’t he heard the outgoing voice mail message? “This is Gilbert Ragwater. Sorry I can’t answer the phone right now . . .” and so on. “Gilbert Ragwater” sounded nothing like “Henry,” and that should have tipped him off on the first call. Maybe not, though, if he hung up as soon as it clicked over to voice mail. If this guy was in such a hurry to get the stuff, he probably wouldn’t bother with leaving a message. He would want to MAKE Henry answer the damn phone *right now*.

“Uh . . .” Ragwater considered some replies. He could go with, maybe, “Henry’s dead. Didn’t you hear about it? He passed out drunk and his cat ate him. Tragic. His friends were always warning him to keep a generous amount of food in the cat dish, but he wouldn’t listen.” Someone might believe it if you sounded serious enough. Or possibly, “Oh, dude, lemme tell ya . . . Henry experienced a religious crisis, and now he’s in a monastery in southern Dementistan living on a diet of water chestnuts and daffodil tea. His only possession is a tattered robe he wears when he goes to the village to stand on the street corner offering people shoulder massages for spare change, and he spends the rest of his time sitting in a dark room meditating by staring at a lit candle . . . What?

Why am I answering his phone? He, uh, gave it to me when he left. Yeah. He has no need of it anymore. I don't even think they have cell phone service in Dementistan, anyway."

But then, inspiration struck. "No, but I know where I can get you some," he told the guy.

Lisa looked at Ragwater, puzzled. He mouthed "wrong number" at her and grinned.

"Great! I knew you'd come through for me," the guy said.

"Sure, man. For you, no problem. Where are you?"

"At this chick's house I met tonight. It's off Frankfort Avenue."

Ragwater mentally mapped out the city. "You know where the Burger Utopia is on Dixie Highway?"

"In Valley Station?"

"Yeah, that's it. Meet me there in the parking lot, and we'll go see the guy. He lives around the corner."

Lisa was shaking her head, a sour look on her face. Ragwater winked at her.

The guy hesitated. "But that's all the way across town!"

"Well, if it's not worth the drive . . ." Ragwater let the sentence trail off.

And the guy was right on top of it. "Oh, no, no . . . I, I mean, yeah. Yes, it is. When?"

"How soon can you make it?"

"I don't know. Forty-five minutes?"

Ragwater sighed, pretending to think it over. "I don't know, man. I have to meet some people later." He glanced at Lisa and licked his lips.

"Wait a second." Ragwater heard some indistinct talking away from the guy's phone. Then, "Yeah, if I leave now, I can get there in, like, a half-hour."

“Good.”

“You know this guy definitely has some? I don’t want to drive all that way for nothing.”

“No doubt about it. I talked to him this afternoon. He’s all stocked up.”

“Okay. Thanks, Henry.”

“Yeah. Just get there as quickly as you can, all right? I don’t have time to wait around.”

“I’ll be there.”

Ragwater flipped his phone shut and flopped back on the sofa.

“What was that all about?” Lisa asked. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“I have no intention of going anywhere. It was a wrong number. Some guy wanted drugs. I let him think I was his friend Henry, and I sent him across town to meet me.”

Lisa tried to frown in disapproval, but a smile broke through. “That was mean. You shouldn’t have.”

“Oh, come on. He’s just some jerk trying to get a girl high, thinking he can get into her pants.”

“Maybe he can.”

“Maybe he could have if he had dialed the right number, but not now. He’ll go off and make the half-hour drive across town, wait in that parking lot for who knows how long, drive back, and walk in after all that time with nothing to show for it. I believe it’s safe to say that’ll kill the mood, don’t you think?”

“I would imagine.”

“He’ll be more careful when he dials the phone from now on.”

“No, he’ll be mad at his friend Henry for not showing up.”

“I’m sure Henry can deal with it. Getting your connections messed up is one of the hazards of going into his line of business. Say, are you hungry? I’ll cook something up if you want.”

“Hungry? You were all hot to trot not five minutes ago.”

“Blame it on the rude interruption. But I’ll be hot to trot again soon enough.”

“I’m sure you will,” Lisa said. “So what do you have?”

Ragwater stood up and turned on the lamp. “Let’s check it out. It’ll be, like, an adventure or something.”

In the kitchen, Ragwater opened the refrigerator and looked inside. “Slim pickins,” he said. “Eggs, milk, assorted fruit, celery . . .”

“Celery?”

“Yeah. I pick up some celery every now and then. What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing. I just didn’t picture you as a celery person.”

“A celery person? You mean like in that old movie *The Invasion of the Celery People*?”

“I don’t think I remember that one.”

“It was one of those old-school 3D movies. Thousands of mutant, half-human and half-celery people start coming up out of the ground as a result of an evil farmer’s unspeakably twisted experiment that goes horribly awry. They end up in people’s vegetable soup and get eaten, thereby creating a new generation of even deadlier celery people. At the climax, the guy who’s been working feverishly to develop a vaccine to cure celery-personitis is delivering the formula to the government lab so it can be mass produced, and he ends up in a car chase with some of the evil celery farmer’s celery-person minions—and they’re ‘minions’ because it’s such a cool-sounding word.

It's like onions, only with 'min' in front."

"Doesn't your brain ever get tired?"

"Of what?"

"All that work you make it do, constantly thinking up stupid stuff."

"I don't *make* it work. It does it on its own."

"Oh, dear . . ."

"Yeah. So they have this big car chase through the countryside, with all kinds of twisty, turny roads and whatnot. Finally, the guy crashes into a tree. But he's not hurt, so he takes off on foot. And the celery-people minions stop their cars and chase him on foot, but . . . okay, see, here's the good part. The guy's running across some farmer's wheat field, and suddenly he stops because he sees a pack of mean-looking dogs running at him. He's standing there, scared stiff, because he has mean dogs in front of him and celery-people minions behind him. Minions." He paused a moment to relish the word. "But then . . . and, see, the chase has been going on all night . . . as the sun is coming up over the horizon, the dogs run right past him. Our hero stands there watching in utter amazement while the dogs chow down on the celery-people minions. So he gets the farmer to give him a ride to the government lab, and they save the day."

"Why didn't he call the government lab on the phone and tell them the formula?"

"Because *unlike you*, he's not a smartass who tries to ruin stories."

Lisa rolled her eyes.

"And in response to your next question," Ragwater said, "No, the dogs did not turn into celery dogs after eating the minions. They're immune."

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“You say you weren’t, but I know you were wondering.” Ragwater was looking through the refrigerator again. “And we have a little bit of ground beef.” He picked up the package, gave it a quick sniff, and frowned. “Or maybe we don’t.” He tossed the ground beef into the garbage. “But here’s a lump of spicy sausage. And we have eggs.”

“If they’re still good.”

“If they’re still good.”

~ 2 ~

Work, for Ragwater, was owning, running and in general being the guy in charge of a small, independent store in the Highlands neighborhood of Louisville, a place called North Star Music: All the best in rock, jazz, folk and blues—new and used CDs and vinyl, posters, t-shirts, music-related books and magazines, yadda, yadda. It was possibly the only store in town you could walk into and hear Jorma Kaukonen, The Germs, Sun Ra, Can, Praxis or a 1977 Grateful Dead soundboard recording playing on the in-store sound system; see portraits of Patti Smith, John Lee Hooker, Pete Seeger, Grace Slick, David Bowie, Charles Mingus, Aretha Franklin, Buddy Holly and other musical luminaries painted on the walls (no one who’s recent because, let’s face it: great though some of them are, they haven’t had the opportunity to “stand the test of time” yet); purchase any Frank Zappa or Gong title you could think of; get the owner to play you samples of Moondog, Koko Taylor, the Carter Family or John Zorn; buy vintage Fugs and Ornette Coleman LPs; find Miles Davis’ autobiography always in stock; and so on.

This wasn’t the store you would visit looking for the latest top-40 pop hits—you wouldn’t find most of them. This was the

store whose owner ran a half-price special on Cramps CDs when Lux Interior's birthday rolled around.

And if all this meant Ragwater wasn't going to get rich, he was content nonetheless to live in his own little world with his core of faithful customers. They spent hours hanging out and talking about bands they used to be in and concerts they'd attended, telling stories about highly exotic encounters with groupies and fights with club owners who wouldn't pay the band, and their dealings with the various eccentric musicians they had worked with.

Late afternoon on the day after the wrong number, Ragwater was online, using the laptop computer he kept at the front sales counter to place orders. Danny, the old-school punk rocker and veteran of numerous bands, had just left after telling Ragwater a story about a woman in Miami who had offered herself to the entire band. She promised a massive litany of bizarre sexual activities, some of it frightening and possibly illegal—even unsafe—and the guys were gung-ho. She got them into a cheap motel room and unleashed a hair-raising fire-and-brimstone sermon about their evil ways—a sermon that, to say the least, spoiled the mood.

Still amused by the story, Ragwater clicked off merchandise on the web site. More Rolling Stones posters, more MMW t-shirts, more Eraserhead buttons. He didn't like trying to keep up with all the nonessential merchandise (as he thought of it), but people bought that stuff. Sadly, in the last two or three years it had accounted for an increasing percentage of his sales. He would much rather have been selling more music, but he had to admit that it was best to take the opportunity you have, rather than insist on the opportunity you don't have.

He was busy cross-referencing his handwritten list with the items in his shopping cart, ticking off each item to double-check for the third time that everything was in order. Yeah, he had a bad habit of getting careless when he didn't want to deal with something, so multiple double- and triple-checks were necessary.

As Ragwater was about to start the final check on his order, his lifelong best friend John Plow walked into the store. "HEY RAGWATER!!!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, then strode dramatically to the sales counter and slammed a medium-sized box down, causing a disconcerting rattle.

"Hey, a little bit louder, okay?" Ragwater said. "There are still a couple people in Cave Hill Cemetery you didn't wake up."

"All right. HEY, RAGWATER!!!!!!!!!!!"

"John Plow, Mister Jocularly. Hold on a second. I'm almost finished here." (Note to self, Ragwater thought: Mister Jocularly would be a good name for a band.)

"Yeah, sure. Whatever. I know I'm not as important as the porn you're looking at."

"No, man. I don't do porn out front here. It could cause an embarrassing scene if the wrong person walks in. The porn is for the back room."

"Yeah, whatever."

Ragwater ran through his order one more time, verified the payment details and clicked the "Place Order" button. Having done something productive, he paused a couple seconds to savor the moment. "Now, then," he said, "what can I do for you?"

Plow lifted the flaps on the box to reveal about a dozen CDs. "I want to trade these sucky CDs in for some good ones."

“Good ones?”

“Yeah, good ones. My mom had a yard sale, and she couldn’t sell them. So she gave ’em to me. They suck, and I want good ones.”

“You have a lot to learn about salesmanship, my friend.”

“Salesmanship? I don’t think it matters what I say about these things. You’ll see for yourself as soon as you look in the box.”

Ragwater pulled the box closer. “Let’s see what we have here,” he said. “Assuming you didn’t smash them all to pieces when you slammed the box down.” He reached in and pulled a couple CDs out.

“CDs don’t break that easily. I’ve tried.”

Ragwater glared at Plow.

“Not with these,” Plow said. “Other ones. I’ve tried to break *other* CDs. I’ve given these the utmost of delicate treatment.”

Ragwater nodded and looked at the first CD. *Kansas, Point of Know Return.*

“So, like, how are you getting along with Lisa?” Plow asked.

“Pretty well. I like her a lot.”

“Yeah, she seems pretty nice.”

“I can’t use this one,” Ragwater said.

“Huh? You just said you like her a lot.”

“I mean the CD. Can’t use it.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Kansas, man. Kansas.”

“So what?”

“I’m never going to sell Kansas here. Besides, the insert is all crumpled up.”

“Kansas?” Plow said, surprised. “I didn’t have mom pegged as a Kansas fan.”

“What? You don’t even know what these discs are?”

Plow fixed Ragwater with a dead-serious gaze. “Look, man, think about it. They were my mother’s, okay?”

“So?”

“I didn’t need to look at them. I knew there wouldn’t be anything I could possibly want in here.”

“So what makes you think I want them?”

“You probably have customers who would want them.”

Ragwater shook his head slowly. “Dude, after seven years of hanging out in the store, you still don’t know what people buy here?” Ragwater waved the CD in front of his face. “Nothing against this fine band, but they don’t fit into the program.”

“The program,” Plow said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“Yup.” Ragwater looked at the next CD. Bob Seger, *Against the Wind*.

“Could be getting serious, eh?” Plow said.

“Huh?”

“You and Lisa. Could be serious?”

The disc had a few “cosmetic scratches” but looked playable. “Could be, but it’s not.” Ragwater reached for the next disc. “You look disappointed.”

“I’m trying to look out for you, is all.”

“I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

“Yeah, well, I’m just sayin’ . . .”

Boston’s first album, insert missing. Ragwater waved it in Plow’s face. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

“Sharpen the edges and fling it at shoplifters.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard anyone use

the word fling in face-to-face conversation.”

“I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard anyone use the word face-to-face in face-to-face conversation.”

“Smart off all you want. I still can’t take the disc. No insert, no deal, no matter how great the title is.” Ragwater tossed the CD down and picked up the next one.

“I bet you’re not even trying.”

Journey, *Evolution*. “I’m *trying* to resist the urge to strangle you for bringing me this stuff.”

“Yeah, everything reduces to snark with you, doesn’t it?”

“You’ve known me for, what, twenty-five years, is it? What do you think?”

Plow sighed. “The point is, I don’t think you’ve ever made a real attempt to get a serious relationship going.”

“What’s with the serious stuff all of a sudden?”

“Well, I know you think I’m an insensitive clod with women, like, sort of a non-romantic jerk or something.”

“Let’s not get carried away. I wouldn’t call you a jerk.”

“I’m trying to lead up to this,” Plow said. “It’s out of character for me, and probably the only time you’ll ever hear me say something like this, but . . .”

“But what?”

“I think Lisa’s really great. For you, that is.”

“I told you I like her.”

“Yeah, but I’d hate to see you blow it because you don’t feel like putting any effort into making it work. I think there’s some real potential.”

“Why are you talking this way? I’m expecting any minute now you’re going to invite me to a sleepover, and we’ll stay up all night having pillow fights and braiding each other’s hair.”

“Neither one of us has hair long enough to braid.”

“No matter. We’ll be busy painting little rainbows on our fingernails.”

“Make all the smartass remarks you want, but the fact remains: She might be worth more effort than you usually put into a relationship.”

“I can’t use Journey,” Ragwater said.

“Don’t you dig their rich, full-bodied sound?”

“They’re not coffee.” Ragwater picked up another CD. Meat Loaf, *Dead Ringer*.

“All I’m saying is Lisa’s nice. She’s attractive. She’s bright. She’s fun to be around. She knows you fairly well, for someone who’s only been dating you for . . . what, three months?”

“Two, maybe.”

“And she likes you. I’ve seen the way she looks at you.”

“So what you’re trying to say is that you can go down the checklist of qualifications and check off all the items. Low mileage, fuel efficient, body in good condition. What’s the asking price? How much for my trade-in?”

“So what I’m saying is, what’s not to like?—unless you’re going to freak out because she has man hands.”

“She doesn’t have man hands.” Ragwater tossed *Dead Ringer* down and picked up The Clash’s *Cut the Crap*. Yeah, she picks the *one* bad Clash album to buy.

“That’s just for example. The point is—and I’m pretty sure you knew this—that . . . well, I’ve already made my point.”

“The point is on top of your head.”

“Ha, ha, freakin’ ha. Come up with something original, okay?”

“It’s not as if you’re an expert on women, anyway. Be-

sides, at this stage of my life, do I need to get serious with someone?”

“Well, you’re pushing thirty. Maybe you should be open to the possibility. You know, like if the right person happened to come along.”

“Is that what you’re doing?”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m doing. I don’t have anyone like Lisa, but I’m open.”

“You’re open. That’s fine. In the meantime, if you want to trade CDs, bring me something I can sell.”

“Check out the rest of ’em. There’s stuff still in that box that’ll make your toes curl. Say, you got a beer?”

“Sure. Help yourself.”

Plow walked toward the back of the store and disappeared into the combo office/store room, where Ragwater had a refrigerator.

Gilbert Ragwater and John Plow had been best friends since early childhood. The Ragwater family had just moved into their newly-built suburban ranch house in a newly-developed subdivision. Young Gilbert—he must have been, oh, three or four years old at the time (Plow being two months younger, as they later figured out)—was standing out at the end of his driveway eating a popsicle, a green one dripping down his forearm, checking out his surroundings, when a chubby little boy pedaled by on a tricycle—a pretty nice-looking tricycle, actually, all new and shiny. Young Gilbert wondered if this kid was rich. Well, yes, with a bicycle like that, he must be. He might even have a solid gold television set!

“Hi,” Young Gilbert said. Young John stopped.

“My name's Gilbert. Want to be friends?”

“Okay,” Young John said.

And that was that; they were friends. Ragwater mused, much later, that it was only at that age when a friendship could get started in such a simple and guileless manner. If an adult were to approach another adult the same way, he would probably be in for an ass-kickin'. If only we could operate, socially, on that same childlike level all our lives . . .

But Plow claimed it didn't happen like that. He claimed he kicked little Gilbert's ass for some small but important transgression, and little Gilbert, scared for his life and hysterical almost to the point of total incoherence, begged little John to be his friend. He, Plow, insisted on clinging to that story through the years, but it was the type of story he would cling to regardless of whatever the reality might be.

They agreed, however, that little John took little Gilbert home, which was across the street and down three houses. His mother made them lunch. She went all-out, with slices of roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy, green beans they didn't touch, some peach cobbler and ice tea. Although she served them lunch hundreds of times after that, it was always something on the order of peanut butter sandwiches and milk. Ragwater was never sure why they rated such special treatment that first time. He only knew he missed the roast beef, but he was too timid to ask for it again.

They started school together. They learned to read and do arithmetic and construct full sentences sitting next to each other.

They faced the bully together, Bobby Withberger the big sixth grader, who shoved all the little kids around on the school bus. He made them get up and change seats while the

bus was in motion, pushed them down, knocked their books out of their hands, and so on. The bus driver, close to retirement, simply pretended not to notice. Presumably he only wanted to take the path of least resistance through his final couple years of driving.

The final straw came when Ragwater and Plow tried to gang up on Bobby one day on the way home. The bigger boy fought them off easily, and the smaller ones ended up going home scuffed up, scraped and bruised, trying not to cry.

It was Plow's cousin Kevin who took care of the problem. He met Bobby coming off the bus one day and told him that if he picked on his cousin any more, he'd be sorry. Kevin was about five years older than Bobby and considerably bigger. The threat carried some weight.

“Sure,” Bobby said. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it anymore. Which one's your cousin?”

“You don’t need to know,” Kevin said.

Ragwater and Plow discovered beer together. They discovered girls at the same time.

Plow was there when Ragwater's parents died in a car crash. He helped Ragwater sell off the rather large coin collection he inherited. Then he pointed out that the proceeds gave Ragwater enough money to start some sort of business, and he convinced Ragwater that he was capable of running a business.

(And, incidentally, they watched Ragwater’s brother Gustav party away his portion of the inheritance in a matter of weeks. He might have been left with nothing to show for it, but he remained fondly remembered by any number of hookers, drug dealers and bartenders.)

Now, in his very own music store, Ragwater continued examining Plow's CDs. More Journey, some Styx, some REO Speedwagon. It was an arena rock extravaganza. He kept a few CDs by these bands in stock, but didn't see much demand for them.

As Ragwater was checking out a Cheap Trick CD, the bell over the door jingled and a couple guys walked in together. They looked to be in their mid-twenties and had long, stringy hair and rock band t-shirts: The Rabid Dust Bunnies and The Exploding Sperm Whales. The Rabid Dust Bunnies guy looked like a younger version of Ragwater's Aunt Rachel—which was no reflection on the guy; Aunt Rachel was disconcertingly masculine-looking. The Exploding Sperm Whales guy looked like Sniffy the Lonesome Bear, a character from a Saturday morning cartoon Ragwater had watched as a child. Sniffy was always getting into trouble trying to make friends with people—not because people were afraid of bears (no one seemed to notice that Sniffy was, in fact, a bear), but because he was terribly clumsy. He was continually getting in the way and breaking things. Fortunately for Sniffy, he was so big-hearted and good-natured—and cute; don't forget cute—that no one could stay mad at him very long.

He imagined these guys worked for some sort of tree trimming or lawn service, out there hacking away at vegetation and whatnot in people's yards when the weather permitted. And then, on freezing, icy days, or when a thunderstorm was beating down, they would sit around at home—they were probably roommates—smoking prodigious amounts of weed—maybe they got it from Henry—and watching . . . what? Stoner movies? No, too obvious. On the other hand, it would be going too far against the stereotype if they were to spend

hours on end watching 60's-era European art films, comparing and contrasting Michelangelo Antonioni's style of blocking out scenes as opposed to Ingmar Bergman's. How about old gangster and crime movies? Yeah, that was it. *White Heat*. *Little Caesar*. The original *Scarface*. *The Maltese Falcon*. *Double Indemnity*. Stuff with lots of tough guys issuing cleverly-worded threats and shooting it out. They sat around on non-work days, these guys, lights out, watching one old crime movie after another.

Between movies, they would try to figure out how to get the girl at the Stupendous Mart into bed. Yeah, see, they went to that store all the time, and there she was, slim and cute, with long hair and clear skin and a beautiful smile. She could have stepped straight out of a shampoo or toothpaste commercial. Ragwater was in the store quite a bit, what with it being right around the corner from his apartment, and he thought she was pretty nice—Sylvia, it said on her nametag—but he figured guys were hitting on her all the time. In fact, John Plow contrived reasons to go into the store when she was working. He needed milk. He needed lottery tickets. He needed shoe polish. So, figuring he didn't want to add to the annoyance, Ragwater behaved himself.

But these guys . . . They would have a sort of friendly rivalry, a little contest to see which one could score with her first—it never occurred to either of them (Ragwater thought) that she wouldn't want to have anything to do with either of them. So they would come into the store all the time and give her corny pickup lines—the worst possible, moldy-oldie clichés left over from the disco era—“You must be a sergeant because you make my privates stand up straight.” She brushed them off. She was used to it, so she knew how to

handle it.

And Sylvia herself . . . Ragwater had, over time, worked up a fairly elaborate scenario for her, on the basis of nothing more than having her ring up his milk and beer purchases, along with the Sunday paper every week and the occasional dark chocolate bar (the good stuff), over a period of about a year and a half.

She was biding her time at the Stupendous Mart, according to Ragwater's story, saving money, living with three roommates, going to classes as she can afford/schedule them, working toward a degree in philosophy—and from there, to law school. Inspired by *Erin Brokovich*, she wanted to work on behalf of homeowners who had gotten screwed over by corporations in some way, such as dumping toxic chemicals in the neighborhood or whatnot. Her roommates thought she was embarrassingly naïve, but they admired her commitment. They hoped she would be able to do one or two good things before she became, as was inevitable in their view, jaded and cynical, an empty suit who was going through the motions so as to collect a paycheck.

Ragwater had extended this little scenario into the future. She was going to go to work at a law firm that specialized in such cases and have a moderate degree of success for, oh, two or three years. And then, she would take on the case of a manufacturing company whose employees had an alarmingly high rate of pancreatic cancer. She interviews the employees, the doctors, the medical experts. She painstakingly works on building a case.

It all unravels when she receives an email from an anonymous free email account. It has no text; it's just an overexposed photograph of her mother unlocking her front

door, presumably coming home from work or something. The picture has a black border that leaves the visible part of the picture a circle—with crosshairs meeting at the back of her head. Now, if this were a screenplay Ragwater was writing, it would be a plain photo. That should be enough to get the message across. But these guys . . . they have to jab you in the rib with their elbow, so to speak, laughing and barking in your ear, “Get it? We can *shoot* her. Get it?”

Threats against her personally wouldn’t deter her—it would only show that she was on the right track—but against her family . . . well, that was a different matter. So the next day she resigns, moves to Seattle, and becomes the manager of a day care center.

“I’m telling you, man, I’ve had it with Henry,” Aunt Rachel said.

Henry? Ragwater studied the CD in his hand closely, to hide his surprise. Well, it was just a coincidence—and not a very remarkable one at that. The city had to have hundreds, maybe thousands, of Henrys running around.

“I waited at that Burger Utopia for two hours, and he never showed up,” Aunt Rachel continued.

All right, so it wasn’t a coincidence. Ragwater looked up at the two guys again. Yeah, he could do that. It wouldn’t be unnatural for a storekeeper to look at customers, right? It would be unnatural for him not to.

“You know what happened? I was sitting there in my car, waiting for Henry, minding my own business. Some woman saw me, thought I was her husband who ran away years ago. Tried to get in the car with me, told me she forgave me and wanted me to come back home. Reaching out and grabbing at me, crying . . .” he shuddered. “I was trying to push her away,

and she kept coming at me. I thought I was going to have to hit her.”

Realizing he didn’t want to appear curious about them, Ragwater went back to his work.

“Oh, man,” Sniffy said. “What happened?”

“Her friend finally came along and pulled her away. Then I called him—Henry, I mean—and he acted like he didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Hmmm, Ragwater thought. Apparently he was able to get the right number that time. Maybe when he had called Ragwater, hormones were clouding his thinking. Very likely, hormones would no longer have been surging after driving across town and spending two hours in a parking lot, waiting for someone who never showed up and going through an unseemly incident with a drunk woman.

“He’s been acting kind of spaced-out lately,” Sniffy sad. “I think it’s the new job he has at that printing shop. The fumes in those places can really get to you. Fry your brain.”

“That’s his problem. If he wants to turn himself into a burnout case, fine. But he shouldn’t cause hassles for other people while he’s at it. Remember that brake job he did for Nick Rolinski?”

“No, what happened?”

“It was, like, last summer he worked on Nick’s brakes. Nick let him do it as a favor, because he didn’t have a job. Anyway, next day Nick was cruising along 71 and almost killed himself because his brakes went out.”

“Oh, man.”

“Yeah. Check it out, man. Nick was going to have his friend Doug work on it. Doug’s been doing that stuff for, what, like twenty years or something, you know? Factory certified,

works at the dealership, the whole bit. But Henry needed the money. He swore up and down he could do the job. Turns out he had watched some guy do it one time.”

“Dumbass.”

“You got that right. Guy barely knows how to pop a hood, and he wants to do a break job. He really thought watching someone do it one time taught him all he needed to know.”

“Unbelievable.”

“Yeah. And here’s another one: When Artie got busted last month, Henry’s fault. He went around all over the place shooting his mouth off about that cocaine, not thinking about who might hear it. I could stand here telling you stories for the next five days. He’s doing all kinds of stuff, messing people up.”

“Sounds like you got off easy. I mean, it’s not like you almost got killed.”

“No, but it was bad enough. I’ll tell you what. If this stuff keeps up, someone’s going to end up killing him. They’ll find him beaten to death in an alley. Who knows?”

Plow came back with two beers. He offered one to Ragwater.

“No, thanks,” Ragwater said. “I’m on duty.”

“Oh, trying to make me look like an alky, huh?” Plow said. He immediately chugged down about three-quarters of one of the beers, spilling some of it down the front of his shirt.

“Evelyn!” The voice was loud and insistent. Ragwater looked around and saw a skinny guy who looked to be about 25 standing in the doorway. He was staring intently at a woman who had been browsing through CDs in the back of the store. She turned around and went wide-eyed.

“Josh!” she said, a tone of fear in her voice.

“Yeah, I bet you didn’t expect me here,” Josh said.

“I . . . I didn’t . . .” Evelyn didn’t know what to say.

And then, from seemingly out of nowhere, Josh pulled a gun and aimed it at her.

“Oh, my god,” Aunt Rachel gasped. Their way out of the store blocked by the gunman, he and Sniffy backed away toward the corner.

Ragwater took a drink from his beer.

“You leave me for my best friend,” Josh said. “Yeah, I should get over it, shouldn’t I? That’s what Rudy told me you said. I should get over it.”

“Josh,” Evelyn said. “Please . . .”

“Five years, Evelyn. We were together five years. How easy do you think it is to get over it?”

Evelyn stood there, eyes wide.

“I can get over it, all right. But only if I do something first.” He raised the gun to get her in the sights. “I already took care of Steve,” Josh said. “Your lover-boy is gone. Gone, gone, gone.”

“No, Josh, no . . .”

“Bullet in his heart. Poetic, isn’t it? First Cupid comes along and shoots him in the heart with an arrow. Then I come along and shoot him in the heart with a bullet. I watched him die not fifteen minutes ago.”

“Please, Josh, this isn’t the way to handle it.”

“This is exactly the way to handle it,” Josh said. “I’ve already killed one person. I might as well finish the job.”

Aunt Rachel and Sniffy were desperately looking around, apparently trying to figure out where they could dive for cover. Plow poked his finger through the hole in a CD.

“This is it, Evelyn. Say good-bye!”

“Josh, NO!”

A loud crack sounded through the store. Evelyn grabbed her chest and slumped against the wall, then slid to the floor, mouth gaping, eyes wide open and empty-looking. Plow took the CD off his finger, picked up his beer and drank.

“Oh, my god!” Aunt Rachel whispered to himself, voice trembling. He and Sniffy had no idea what to do. Josh was still at the door, blocking their exit.

Ragwater walked toward Evelyn. “Okay, show’s over,” he said, extending his hand. Evelyn took it, and he helped her up.

“What’s going on?” Aunt Rachel asked.

“They’re from Olive’s Coffee Shop. Russ, the guy who owns the place, sends people here to play practical jokes. And I send people over there. This is one of their better ideas, but I think they could have used a bit more rehearsal.”

Evelyn grinned self-consciously.

“Are you okay?” Ragwater asked.

“Yeah, sure,” she said.

“I think you need to apologize to my customers over there.”

“Sorry,” Evelyn said.

“Yeah, sorry,” Josh said. It was more of a recitation than an apology.

“I didn’t think it looked real,” Aunt Rachel said.

“Well, you were right,” Ragwater said. And then, to Evelyn and Josh, “Okay, get out of here. Go tell Russ he’d better watch his back.”

After they were gone, Ragwater said to Aunt Rachel and Sniffy, “You want revenge? Play a little prank on Russ down at Olive’s?”

Aunt Rachel grinned. “I’m in,” he said. Sniffy nodded agreement.

“Come back tomorrow at five o’clock,” Ragwater said. And then, to make sure they wouldn’t lose interest, “I’ll give you each a CD for your trouble.”

With everyone else out of the store, Plow was ready to talk CDs again. “How much for all this?”

“I can give you one CD for them.”

“One?!?!? I have twenty CDs here!”

“John, I can’t even put some of these things out on the floor. And the ones I can are dogs. They’ll probably sit here until the Earth falls into the sun. The only reason I’m offering you anything at all is because you’re a friend.”

Plow picked up *Evolution*. “You’re telling me no one’s going to buy *Journey*?”

“Not here, they won’t. You know that as well as I do. Bring me some Red Krayola or The Fall and we’ll talk.”

“Well . . .”

Ragwater lowered his voice. “Okay, don’t tell anyone, but I’ll give you two CDs. Great deal. I wouldn’t do it for anyone else.”

“Gosh, Gilbert. You’re making me feel like a worthless, ungrateful piece of trash.”

“Only because that’s precisely what you are. But you’re still my oldest, dearest, bestest friend in all of the whole, entire universe.” Out of the corner of his eye, Ragwater saw the door swing open—and, oddly, the bell didn’t jingle.

A stunning redhead walked in. She was about five-six, slender and graceful, with wavy hair that fell to about half-

way down her back. Her face was a blend of classical beauty and a look that Ragwater thought of as “cute.” She wore an almost luminous-looking off-white dress—not actually luminous but something about the appearance of the fabric suggested it—cut in a simple style that draped over her curves very nicely, with a belt wrapped loosely around her waist. She moved across the room with an almost magical sort of self-confidence—not quite the confidence of someone who knows she can handle any situation, but the confidence of someone who is unconcerned about the possibility of having to deal with a bad situation. No, not oblivious. She was unconcerned. Ragwater also had the impression that she was right to feel that way—if, he pointed out to himself—if indeed that was how she felt.

A few steps in, she slowed enough to glance sideways at Ragwater and betray a bit of a half-smile—at him? At a remembered joke? Impossible to tell. She looked away and went to the jazz section.

“So, uh . . . what do you want?” Ragwater asked, knowing the sentence was somehow appropriate but not sure what the words meant.

Plow, clearly sensing that Ragwater’s attention was elsewhere, looked around and saw the redhead flipping through CDs. “Who are you talking to?” he asked, keeping his voice low. “Her or me?”

Ragwater came halfway back to reality. “Either.”

“I gotta say, buddy, if you’re going to get so distracted you don’t even know where you are, you picked a good one to do it with.”

“Yeah . . .” Ragwater’s mind was off again, off on its own,

off at Olive’s Coffee House, the redhead sitting at a table across from him, telling him about . . . about what? About the photographs of the aurora borealis she sold to *National Geographic*. Yes, because such a woman would be highly accomplished, a world traveler. She would have the talent and the connections to contribute to such high-profile publications.

How could a guy like Gilbert Ragwater, apparently unable to even aspire to play in her league, possibly be of interest to a woman like this? Well, that was for her to answer. She was, indisputably, there in the store, right? She was there for some reason. Ah, she wants a CD.

But, he told himself, he had no merchandise that couldn’t be found somewhere else. So why was she here—*here*, in particular? It must have something to do with him, right? She might want to meet the guy who runs this unique music store she’s heard so much about. She might think he’s cute. Who knows what she might think?

“Earth to Gilbert.”

“Yeah, man. What’s up?”

“Snap out of it. Get your head out of the clouds, man.”

“My head’s not in any clouds. And don’t be so loud.”

Plow looked around. The redhead was still looking through CDs. “I wasn’t loud. Besides, the music you’re playing in the store is loud enough to cover. She couldn’t possibly hear. What is that music, anyway?”

“Soft Machine.” Ragwater figured she would be adventurous and imaginative with . . . uh . . . the “intimate” activities. No highly kinky stuff; he didn’t see her dripping hot wax all over him and applying electrical currents to parts of his body and tying him up into a tight little ball with yards of nylon rope. No, not that kind of stuff. It was easy, though, to picture

her getting into costumes and role playing, with scenes about cops and nuns and doctors and rock stars and plumbers and, well, anyone.

They could play games. She would go into the corner bar, dressed to the nines and all high-class-looking, as if she might be a U.S. senator's wife. He would follow a few minutes later, three days unshaven, wearing torn jeans and a dirty t-shirt, looking like a guy who had just gotten finished cutting his grass. He'd sit next to her and ogle her shamelessly. And then, loudly so that nearby folks couldn't help but hear, say, "Hey, babe, wanna *do it?*" in a coarse, maybe creepy voice. She would look him over and say, "I thought you'd *never* ask," and they'd go out, arm-in-arm, leaving everyone else in the place slack-jawed in amazement.

"Gilbert, are you there?"

"Yeah."

"Get a grip, man. I mean, I bust your balls all the time about how you deal with women, but seriously, I think this is the first time you've lost touch with reality."

"I'm very well in touch with reality."

"And we both know you're not even going to talk to her, except maybe to ask her for money if she buys something. That is to say, if you can manage to get the words out of your mouth when she's standing right there in front of you."

"What's got up your butt?" Ragwater said. "I'm just looking. It's harmless."

"It's 'just looking' if you appreciate her beauty for a moment and then move on with your life. It's *not* 'just looking' if you can't carry on a conversation and then get all obsessed for a week to come."

"You don't know that I'm going to get obsessed."

“I’ve seen you do it. Remember that girl you saw at World of Words that time?”

Yeah, Ragwater had finished browsing through a biography of Frank Zappa at World of Words, the independent bookstore next to Olive’s, when he spotted an exotic, dark-haired beauty reading a magazine. He stood there, trying to think of a way to start talking to her. But he was at a loss. It wasn’t as if she had come into North Star, where he would be on his home turf and could be expected to say something to her—and music would be the obvious topic of conversation.

At the bookstore, he was just another customer, just some random guy. He thought of asking her about the magazine, but it was a fashion publication. He knew nothing about fashion, nor did he care. If it turned out that she was interested in talking about it, he would have no clue where to go from there except to say, “Uh . . .” So he tried to come up with something else. He thought of telling her he liked her hair. She would probably give him a polite smile, say “Thank you,” and go back to reading the magazine. Then what?

She finally left, with never a word spoken between them. And he had tormented Plow mercilessly for a week—probably longer, really—rambling on about how he couldn’t believe he had blown his chance. (Chance? What chance? That he happened to be ten feet away from someone who didn’t know he was there wasn’t a “chance” in any meaningful sense of the word.) For his part, Plow had been afraid his friend was going to start haunting the bookstore, hours at a time, day after day, month after month, hoping for her to return. Well, actually, he knew better, but he *said* he was worried about it, hoping to shock Ragwater out of his sorry state.

The fashion magazine reader wasn’t the only one, but she

was Plow's favorite example.

And now, this redhead. Okay, Ragwater had to admit he was doing more than appreciating her beauty for a moment before moving on with his life. But it was far too easy to picture . . . life with her. It would be a combination of fine dining and fast food, of opera and rockabilly . . . of double-feature DVD nights with *Juliet of the Spirits* followed by *Porky's*, of vacations to Art Basel in Miami and spur-of-the-moment road trips to Collinsville, IL to see the world's largest catsup bottle.

They wouldn't be inseparable, but it would seem that way to their friends. They would appear at parties, art openings—and yes, even open stage night at Olive's, probably doing comedy routines they had worked up, regaling the audience with snarky, fast-paced banter that would sound improvised but really wasn't because Ragwater (he had to admit) couldn't think that fast on his feet.

“Gilbert, *for the love of God*,” Plow said.

“Yeah, sorry.”

“You're losing all contact with reality.”

“I'm not losing a damn thing.”

“Would you act this way in front of Lisa?”

“What kind of question is that? It's not as if I were engaged to her.”

“Well, see, there's the problem. You seem to think that relationships are either a matter of hanging out, with no expectations, or being engaged. There's lots of territory in between.”

“I don't think that.”

“It's like I said before. You're not willing to put any effort into it. An attractive woman walks in, and all of a sudden you're talking like you want to kick Lisa to the curb and it

wouldn't be any more significant than a cab driver leaving a rider off at his destination.”

“I don't want to kick anybody anywhere,” Ragwater said. “Except maybe your ass, right now. And when she walks out of here, it'll all be over with.” He punctuated the sentence with a firm nod.

“What'll be over? Your interest in the redhead or your interest in Lisa?”

The redhead walked toward the door, again with that magical, self-assured way she had of carrying herself. Giving Ragwater the slightest glance with a raised eyebrow, she went out the door.

Once again, the bell didn't jingle.

“There she goes,” Plow said. “Right out of your life.”

“So what?”

“So you blew your big chance. You let her walk out of here without saying a word to her.”

“I didn't say I wanted to talk to her. I was looking and appreciating, like you said. Nothing more.”

“So I can assume I'll never hear another word about this redhead for as long as we both shall live. Is that what you're telling me?”

“Okay, then, Mister Big-Time Relationship Expert. What do you propose I should have done?”

“I don't know. You're the one who's losing your mind. You're going to be moping around for weeks because you let her get away, even though no other outcome was possible. See, it's in my best interest to try to give you a friendly reality check, so that maybe you won't drive me nuts for the next month prattling on about her.”

“Well, there's . . . something about her.”

“What’s that? Probably that you’ve never made it with a redhead.”

“How do you know?” Ragwater said. “I don’t tell you everything.”

“Yeah, right. Like you’re not going to tell me every single detail about every single girl you get close to. Sure thing, buddy.”

Ragwater shrugged. “Go get your CDs,” he said.

“You said, three, right?”

It wasn’t a battle Ragwater wanted to fight. “Yeah, sure,” he said.

~ 3 ~

He kept it all on a thin plywood board, about four feet across and three feet high, painted white and marked off into a carefully-drawn grid of four-inch squares. Little slips of paper with short notations written on them were taped inside some of the squares.

It was *Flight Home From London*, Ragwater's novel-in-progress, his intended contribution to American literature, his magnum opus. It was a cold-war-style spy novel, full of double agents and double crosses and shifting alliances and red herrings and MacGuffins and clever James-Bond-style gadgets and chase scenes and shootouts . . . and sex, plenty of hot, steamy sex involving sultry seductresses who clearly have ulterior motives and unclear allegiances. The story centered around Ohlmann King, an American secret agent who was lured to Athens, Greece with a fake message that his mother had been kidnapped while on vacation.

Once there, he was captured by a group of bad guys who claimed to be Russian agents. They mistakenly believed he had information about secret research into a bulletproof fabric as light and comfortable as cotton. No more need for bulky body armor or anything of the sort. You could make garments

that would look and feel like typical street clothes—although, of course, they would be far from typical.

King knew all about the fabric, although there was, in reality, nothing for him to tell these agents. It was one of dozens of made-up stories, bits of disinformation leaked to confuse both friends and foes alike as to the United States' true capabilities. In some cases, Ragwater explained in his story, higher-ups in the U.S. intelligence community would go so far as to have a mock research lab or manufacturing plant set up if they had reason to believe one of the stories was actually gaining traction somewhere, to help sell the illusion. In one case, semi trucks transported empty crates from one of these fake facilities in Alabama to several locations scattered across the country, and these trucks were closely monitored by a number of foreign agents.

And now, the bulletproof fabric story had obviously gained traction somewhere and aroused some serious interest.

King effected an escape with the clever use of a tiny flashpot-like device in his watch and a couple martial arts moves that had been developed by and for (exclusively) the CIA. He grabbed a gun out of a surprised bad guy's hand and made a spectacular, perfectly-timed leap from a second-floor window into the bed of a passing pickup truck.

Now out of their clutches, King realized—after thinking about certain things they had said when they questioned him—that these guys weren't really working for the Russian government. No, more likely they were actually with some sort of independent organization not affiliated with a national government but working only toward its own ends.

He couldn't go home. He had to stay and investigate these people.

Thus began the story, which Ragwater had been working on for eleven years. He had produced hundreds of thousands of words, thousands of pages, hundreds of scenes . . . most of which he later discarded, changed, rewrote, or, in a few cases, excised intact for use in a different story because although it was good material that he didn't want to lose, it really didn't quite fit this project.

So now he had a good, solid, set-in-stone forty pages of finished manuscript and about sixty-five pages of miscellaneous material that might end up getting modified, placed in another writing project, or trashed altogether. He didn't even like the title, but in eleven years hadn't been able to think of anything better. And, were he to be honest with himself, that forty pages of good, solid, set-in-stone, finished manuscript could easily be thrown out if he were to come up with some great, new ideas that didn't mesh with it. Yeah, that's some kind of stone.

At this rate, he could finish the novel if he lived to the age of 130. Yes, and *then* he could begin the wonderful process of seeking publication. How, how on *Earth* did professional novelists do it???

He sat on the coffee table, looking at the board propped up against the back of the sofa. Even if he couldn't make respectable progress, he found the work . . . therapeutic, for lack of a better word. No matter what happened in real life, this was a world he could control, events laid out on The Grid with some inscrutable logic, as if it were God's Own Calendar. He, Ragwater, could move them around, add to them, take them away, or change them as he wished.

What about computers, those wondrous machines that are supposed to make everything easier? Well, he preferred to do

the actual writing on his laptop. But even with two computers at the store and the one at home, he still found it easier to organize material on The Grid. He could see, at a glance, all characters and events, and each item's relationship to everything else—timelines, concurrent events, causes and effects, and so on. It might not have mattered so much if he were writing a simple, linear story in which some guy does first one thing and then another. But *Flight* had a lot of stuff going on, lots of characters and subplots woven together. One small change in a detail regarding a minor character could have a ripple effect that would require changes in three other subplots and, possibly, the addition and/or removal and/or modification of one or more major characters. Yes, that very thing had happened several times already.

Did it ever occur to Ragwater to shelve the hugely ambitious project and embark upon something simple for his first novel? Yes, indeed it had. But a simple story didn't interest him.

Ragwater made a quick notation, "Mysterious redhead enters" on the corner of a sheet of typing paper, using a *Manchurian Candidate* DVD case as a writing surface. He cut the corner off with round-ended scissors and taped it to a square at the right-hand edge of the board, about a third of the way down. He studied his handiwork for a moment, frowned, and moved the new note a square to the left. And then, another notation in the next square down: "After much research into King's taste in women, the Chinese recruited her to attract him."

Now, as to *why* the Chinese wanted to get a woman close to King, well . . . Ragwater would have to figure that out. The obvious answer was that she was supposed to get some sort of

information out of him—but, of course, getting information out of King was already the basis of the main plot, so this would have to be something different. Besides, Ragwater couldn't go with the obvious answer. Ah, but King could. Ohlmann King could find out somehow that the redhead was a plant. But not knowing *why* she was sent to him, he *assumes* that she wants info.

Hmmm . . . Yeah, sounds good. Another note.

As Ragwater looked at the board, admiring his handiwork, his new character and the subplot she brought with her, he heard a knock on the door. Then, Lisa's voice. "What are you up to?"

"New character. A mysterious, redheaded woman from the 59<sup>th</sup> dimension."

Lisa sat down next to him. "The 59<sup>th</sup> dimension?"

"Well, no, not really. I'm basing her character on what I think she would be like if she were from the 59<sup>th</sup> dimension. I want her to be uber-exotic."

"What are people from the 59<sup>th</sup> dimension like?"

"Very 59<sup>th</sup>-ish." He filled her in on his plans for the new character.

"Sounds promising," Lisa said. "Maybe she's supposed to get King to do something."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But if the idea is that she's scientifically chosen as his perfect woman, her employers might figure that she could manipulate him somehow."

"They might." Yes, yes. The idea seemed to have some potential.

"But if she comes into the story that early, does that mean you'll have to change all the stuff about the microacceleration

generator?”

“No, not at all.” Ragwater looked at the board, squinted, and studied it closer. “Well, maybe so,” he said. “Because if I want King to be in Berlin when the Swedish mob boss meets the hit man, he’ll have to . . .” Ragwater trailed off, thinking. “No, that’s not possible, either,” he said. He pulled the mysterious redhead notes off the board and put them in squares closer to the middle. “So if she comes into the story after the Berlin stuff, she can be the one who takes King to the hospital when he gets food poisoning. Yeah, see, now there’s an extra dimension to that episode. The food poisoning wasn’t accidental after all. Lutz set it all up. His men did it on purpose so the redhead can help King, which is supposed to prove to him that he can trust her. Has there ever been an author more brilliant than I? Oh, I think not.”

“Do you want something to drink?” Lisa asked, getting up.

“I’ll take some ice water,” Ragwater said, not looking away from the board. “I don’t think I should have anything stronger because at the moment I’m highly intoxicated by my own genius. Could be dangerous.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Just the same, I’ll bring the ice water.”

He ran through several scenarios in his head, sketching out a crude flowchart in the notebook. “The way I see it,” he said, “is that when Cornella Melton finds the suitcase with the ransom money in it, she puts the microacceleration generator in there, too.” He leaned forward and added a couple words to a note that was taped to the board, then scratched a word out on another note. He was vaguely aware of the “plonk” sound of Lisa putting a glass of ice water on the coffee table next to him. “Thanks,” he murmured, without reaching for the glass.

for the glass.

Ragwater tried to think of the next step in the microacceleration generator chain of events, but drew a blank. He wanted it to be stolen, about halfway through the novel, by petty thieves who didn't know what they had. But he wasn't sure how to work things out so that it would be in a place where they could get it. It was a prototype, possibly irreplaceable, and so was under heavy security at all times. He figured that somehow, he needed to come up with a compelling reason for the developers to transport it over the road. And then, the armored car crashes. The petty thieves could just happen to come upon the scene and pluck the microacceleration generator out of the wreckage because . . . well, because it looks cool.

After that? Well, maybe demented celery-people minions could attack them.

Oh, well. Lisa was there, and he had done enough work for the time being, anyway. "I think I've exhausted my genius for today. So what do you want to do? The Ghosts are playing at Herman's."

"I don't like The Ghosts. They're too creepy."

"Well, they're The Ghosts, for Pete's sake. The name should be a dead giveaway."

"I thought we could hang out here and make some popcorn and watch *The Blob* on TV."

"Sure," Ragwater said. "That would be nice and cozy. I'll even pop the corn."

Ragwater had met Lisa when she came into North Star to see the place. Her brother Sid, a bebop jazz devotee and regular customer, had recommended the store. He had, in fact, been recommending it for the better part of the two years he

had been customer, but Lisa, when buying the occasional CD, generally found herself at Best Buy. It was close to where she worked. It was easy.

And then, one day she was in the neighborhood. She saw the store. She had some time. She stopped.

As she walked through the door, a scenario began forming in Ragwater's mind. He figured she was a database administrator for Jefferson County, and she had discovered a flaw in the system that would allow her to divert property tax payments into a special account. But she had to be careful. She was only going to have one shot at this—they'll discover the theft the next morning, which means she has to score big and flee the country immediately, to some out-of-the-way place where she would never be found. Now, as she walked into the store, Lisa was biding her time, patiently monitoring transactions for just the right opportunity.

Weeks later, after getting to know and trust and like Ragwater, she lets him in on her little scheme. Does he want to come with her? Does he want to give up his life suddenly, leave his family and friends and customers and landlord wondering what happened, to run off with a woman who has a two or three million dollar bank account?

Why wouldn't he?

Through the next few weeks, they spend as much time together as they possibly can, spending whole weekends in bed, making love repeatedly and plotting what they're going to do when The Big Score finally comes through.

One day at 5:30, Ragwater's phone rings. Caller ID shows it to be the prepaid cell phone Lisa had gotten for this one call. "It's show time," she says.

Business is slow that day. Ragwater waits for the one re-

maining customer to leave, then makes his way to the back of the store and out into the alley. He doesn't lock up. Why bother?

He makes the five-minute drive home, opens the suitcase he had packed weeks ago, and puts his laptop in. It takes less than a minute. Going out, he once again leaves the door unlocked.

Who cares?

Ragwater drives to the ice cream shop around the corner from Lisa's place. He orders and sits down. After a few minutes, she shows up. They finish their ice cream while gazing into each other's eyes, not talking, barely able to contain their excitement. Outside, lips still sugary-sticky, they throw her suitcase into his car and drive to the airport.

Approaching the ticket counter, they find themselves surrounded by a group of no-nonsense-looking men. The head guy identifies himself as an FBI agent. "Yes, you were clever," he says, "but not clever enough. The IT manager monitors all access to that database. He sat in his office and *watched* you transfer that money even as you were doing it."

Oops. Ragwater wasn't sure why he had let their little caper go wrong. Getting caught was the only realistic outcome, but what did that matter in a fantasy? Well, he could redo it if he wanted to. Maybe later that night he would work out a scenario in which they somehow get away by the skin of their teeth.

And in the store—in reality—Lisa smiled at him.

Ragwater was friendly. He was solicitous. He made suggestions and recommendations. Lisa had shopped at indie stores before, but never with this degree of service—of *personal* service.

He cracked jokes. He made her laugh. He told her a story about starting the business. He had gotten his friend John so drunk he passed out. Then, referring to instructions he had found on a do-it-yourself web site, Ragwater carefully (yes, oh-so-carefully, so as not to cause any more damage than necessary) removed a kidney and sold it to finance the store. To this day, the story went, John walks around with a mysterious soreness in his lower back that he's never been able to figure out. Lisa was impressed—not by the dorky story, but simply by the fact that Ragwater was willing to tell her something like that. (She offered to buy the other kidney if he would take \$20 for it.)

Besides, he was trying so hard she found it kind of cute.

In short, he was everything he wished he could have been with the exotic-looking woman in the bookstore. What a difference the home field advantage makes!

When he finally got around to asking her out, she accepted. After closing that night they stopped at a nearby club to check out The Bulldogs, a blues band that had some CDs at the store on consignment. After about a half-hour, they were ready to get out of there and go someplace where they could talk.

That was a Friday night. She left his apartment early Monday morning with barely enough time to go home and change clothes before work.

And now, three months later (or was it two?), Ragwater was flipping on the light in his kitchen, having left Lisa to her own devices. As he took the popcorn popper out of the cabinet, he could hear the television coming on. Big, full, rich-sounding, dramatic music blasted in from the living room, as

if some sort of Hollywood blockbuster movie was starting. Then it stopped, and snippets of other sounds came and went. Explosions. People shouting. Some sort of country-sounding music. An audience applauding. Finally, she settled on something that had people arguing. Ragwater couldn't make out what they were saying, but it sounded highly dramatic.

He poured some oil into the popcorn popper, and almost as if that had been a cue, someone knocked on the back door. He stepped over and pulled the curtain aside to see a shortish, skinny, middle-aged man standing outside, illuminated by the full moon. He was dressed in a dark, button-down shirt and what looked like dress pants. His hair was reddish, cut short, and thinning. He bounced about, dancing in place, the way one might do in cold weather. But since this was the middle of July, it was probably nervous energy. No wonder the guy was skinny.

Ragwater opened the door a crack, leaving the chain hooked. "Can I help you?"

"Are you Gilbert Ragwater?" The man's voice was surprisingly deep and Barry White-like for such a little guy. It also didn't sound as if he were asking a question. He knew.

"Uh, yeah, I guess so."

"Can I come in?" Still dancing. "I'd like to have a word with you."

"I'm kind of in the middle of something," Ragwater said, feeling that his voice had no conviction behind it.

"This is something good, and it won't take long."

Well, he seemed harmless. Or, at least he didn't seem threatening. Ragwater figured he wouldn't have much trouble putting a full nelson on the guy if he had to. "All right," Ragwater said. He unchained the door and opened it wider. "But

it has to be quick.”

“Won’t take long at all,” the man said, stepping in. “I’ll be gone before *The Blob* starts.” He turned and closed the door behind himself.

How did he know about *The Blob*? Ragwater was already sorry he had let the man in. “Who are you?”

“My name is Maxwell. But you can call me Maxwell.” He seemed a bit calmer now that he was inside.

“Huh?” Irritating, fakely-clever lines didn’t help endear the man to Ragwater.

Maxwell leaned back against the sinktop. “You know those old-timey fantasy stories where someone stumbles upon a tiny, hole-in-the-wall antique shop run by a funny little man who sells the guy a magic genie lamp, and the guy makes wishes and everything goes horribly wrong, and the guy tries to take the lamp back but the store’s gone? I own those shops. I have dozens of them across the country. Maybe hundreds; I’m not sure. Quite lucrative.”

This clearly was going nowhere. “Look,” Ragwater said. “I don’t think we have anything to talk about.” He felt, more-or-less, that his voice had some conviction in it now.

“Sure we do. For instance, that redhead who was in your store today.”

Ragwater stifled the urge to kick Maxwell in the crotch. He sighed and took a moment to roll things around in his mind before saying anything. Then, “Did John Plow send you here?” Plow wasn’t much of a jokester; his area of expertise was mostly in the realm of being a smartass. Still, Ragwater couldn’t think of a more likely suspect. Russ might send someone to the store to do this, if he could somehow be sure that Ragwater had taken special notice of the redhead. But

home was strictly off-limits.

“No. John Plow has nothing to do with this. I’m here on my own, and I have a little proposal.” He idly picked up a butter knife from the sink and balanced it on the tip of his left index finger.

Ragwater didn’t know whether to comment on the stunt or continue the conversation. Or, for that matter, whether to reconsider kicking Maxwell in the crotch. Finally, in the interest of concluding the scene as quickly as possible—after all, he had popcorn to pop, a movie to watch, and a beautiful woman to get close to—he prompted: “Concerning the red-head.”

“Exactly.” Maxwell tossed the knife into the air and caught it by the handle. “You can have her, and your girlfriend will never know.” He spun the knife around to hold it by the blade and tapped the handle against a refrigerator magnet for a too-fast bar of the Bo Diddley beat, as if adding a ta-da! to his statement, then put the knife down.

“That sounds pretty screwy.”

From the living room, Lisa chimed in. “Gilbert, are you talking to someone?”

Oh, crap. He couldn’t tell her some strange man was there offering him another woman. (Really, even if he didn’t think she would care, he couldn’t tell her a cockamamie story like that.) “No,” he said. “Reciting some dialog to myself. For the novel, to see if it sounds natural.”

Maxwell leaned in close. “She has the TV on quite loud. I’m pretty sure all she can hear from in there is indistinct voices. Maybe not that much.”

“Pretty sure?”

“I’m sure. In fact, if she has it turned up that loud, she

might have problems with her hearing. Has she seen an ear specialist?”

“I don’t know.”

Maxwell picked up a cereal box and looked at the ingredients. “And while we’re talking about health,” he said, “this isn’t as good for you as you think it is.”

Ragwater grabbed the box and slammed it down on the countertop. “Never mind that. You apparently have some sort of deal to propose. Let’s hear it so I can get on with my evening.”

Maxwell smiled gently. “Listen to my offer and think about it for a couple days. You might agree that I could become your oldest, dearest, bestest friend in all of the whole, entire universe.”

“You’re making that ever more impossible with everything you say.”

“I can see you’re getting impatient. That’s the trouble with you younger guys.” Maxwell noticed something across the room. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing.

“What’s what?”

“That thing on the wall.”

“The electrical outlet?”

“Is that what it is? Well, ain’t that something?”

“Tell me about this deal so you can, like, get lost.”

“Lost?”

“It’s a figure of speech. It means you’re going to leave.” In only a couple minutes, Ragwater had reached the point at which he wasn’t surprised at the need to explain the expression “get lost” to Maxwell.

“So if you say ‘get lost’ when you want someone to leave, what do you say if you want to tell someone you don’t know

where you are?”

“It’s a matter of context.”

“Okay, yeah. Context. Well, I have some work that needs to be done. Seven tasks in all. If you complete them, I can make the redhead available to you.”

“Available?”

“Yes. You can dally with her for a night and then send her on her way. Or you can shack up and make her get a job and support you. Or you could even lock her in a closet and feed her nothing but breath mints. Anything you want.”

“I don’t want to do any of that stuff.”

“Or you can marry her and worship her as a goddess.”

“I’m not sure about that, either.”

“Or the two of you can do comedy routines together on open stage night at Olive’s.”

A slight wave of panic hit Ragwater. “What do you know about that?”

“Open stage? It’s where they let people go up on stage and sing songs or read poems or whatever. Most of the time it’s pretty lame, but occasionally someone turns out to have some talent.”

“I mean . . .” But knowing he wasn’t going to get an explanation of how Maxwell had known his fantasy, Ragwater said, “Never mind.”

Maxwell sighed. “Gilbert, she’ll go along with anything you want. Anything.”

“In return for doing seven tasks for you?”

“Yes! You understand perfectly.”

“Gilbert!” Lisa called from the living room, “I have an idea!”

“What?”

“An idea. For the scene where the FBI has the Fennell brothers trapped in the mobile home out in the desert.”

“Okay, hold on.”

“What if they bring their parents to the scene to talk them out, you know, like in the movies? And the father turns out to be Sturges Morton?”

Ragwater whispered, “Hold on a second” and walked into the living room. Lisa was sitting on the coffee table looking at The Grid.

“What is it?” Ragwater asked.

“Well, see, if Sturges Morton is the Fennell Brothers’ father, and the FBI brings him in to talk them out of the mobile home . . .”

“ . . . and then, after the brothers are arrested and that whole incident is over with, Morton could still be out there in the desert when the plaston beams start hitting the area . . .”

“ . . . so he’s incapacitated for the next two weeks . . .”

“ . . . thereby giving King the time he needs to find Scarlett Cypress.” That had, in fact, been something of a sticky point in the story line for quite a while. Scarlett Cypress, at first a seemingly minor character, was going to become much more important as the story progressed. In fact, Ragwater figured that in the final chapter, she was going to singlehandedly kill a dozen thugs to clear the way for King to get to the plane for the titular flight home from London.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

“That’s great,” Ragwater said. “Write it down.” Lisa grabbed the steno pad and started writing.

Ragwater returned to the kitchen to find Maxwell examining, intensely and with great interest, the can opener. It was one of those little manual things you crank by hand, but

Maxwell appeared never to have seen one before. He looked up. “Gilbert, this is one of the funniest-looking things I’ve ever seen.”

“I take it you’ve never looked in a mirror?”

“I don’t think mirrors look funny. But this sure does.”

“You don’t know what that is?”

“Sure I do.” He paused, then added with a heavy tone of suspicion, “If it’s really what I think it is.”

“It’s a can opener.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Maxwell said. “Yeah, can opener.”

Ragwater plowed ahead. “What kind of stuff do you want me to do?”

Maxwell turned the handle on the can opener a few times. His lips were pursed, giving him a look of scientific curiosity. Then he said, “You don’t get to find that out yet. Once you’ve agreed to the deal, I’ll tell you what each task is, one at a time.” Crank, crank. “You complete the one I give you. Then you have the option of quitting or letting me assign you another one.” Crank, crank. “But once I give you an assignment, you *must* finish it.” Crank, crank.

“What if I don’t?”

“You forfeit your life.” Crank, crank, crank. It might have had no more significance than imposing a five-dollar fine.

“Come again?”

Maxwell put the can opener down. “You forfeit your life. It’s nothing to worry about, though. You shouldn’t have any reason not to complete any of them. It’s simply my way of keeping you dependable.” He turned to the sink and leaned over to study the fixtures. He started pivoting the faucet back and forth. “These tasks are very important to me.”

“But my life . . .”

“There’s no time limit on any of them,” Maxwell said, varying the speed of his faucet pivoting. Quickly to the left, slowly to the right. Ragwater thought he heard it squeaking; he had never noticed it do that before. Did he need to replace an O ring or something?

“If you break that thing, I’m going to kick your ass,” Ragwater said.

Maxwell’s eyes widened. He stood up straight, eyes once again normal, an amused look on his face. “No worries,” he said. “As long as I know you’re sticking with it, you have nothing to worry about.” His hand found its way to the faucet again, but it slid across the top and flopped down by his side.

“But you could tell me to drink the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Why would I want you to do that?” Maxwell asked, as if the suggestion were an insult.

“I’m just saying, I don’t know what these tasks are going to be like.”

“None are impossible,” Maxwell said. He frowned. “Or is it, none *is* impossible? Is none singular or plural? It doesn’t make sense either way when you’re talking about no quantity at all.”

“None *are*,” Ragwater said.

“Yeah, okay. None are impossible. Some are more difficult than others, but they’re all pretty simple. They won’t require you to make any changes in your life.” He glanced down, and something about the floor caught his attention. “Why do you have different-colored squares all over your floor?”

“They made it that way.”

“Who are *they*?”

“Whoever built the place.” Ragwater blurted out the first name he thought of. “Jan and Dean, flooring contractors.”

“Jan and Dean, you say?”

“Haven’t you noticed floors before? It’s not unusual.”

“Curious,” Maxwell muttered to himself. Then he snapped back to the matter at hand. “You’ll never be required to do anything morally objectionable. In short, you won’t have any reason other than laziness to quit. And I know you’re not lazy.”

“How can you guarantee she’ll go along with it?”

“You mean the redhead?”

“No, Betsy Ross. Of course I mean the redhead.”

“Gilbert, do you think I’m someone who’d waste time with this if I couldn’t deliver the goods?”

“I don’t know anything about you. But if you want to talk about wasting time, I’ll point out that you’ve stretched a two-minute conversation out to about ten minutes so far.”

“I think I’ve made a strong first impression.”

Ragwater paused to think. But what was there to think about? Maxwell’s first impression? The dude who knew he was going to watch *The Blob*? Who knew he had fantasized about performing comedy routines with the redhead? The dude who was offering him some kind of nutso deal regarding that redhead, the payoff being that he would “make her available” to Ragwater? The dude who apparently didn’t know they tiled floors in checkerboard patterns? “What I mean,” Ragwater said, “is that I don’t see what’s in it for her.”

“That’s between me and her,” Maxwell said.

The dude who was sounding sort of like a . . . pimp, maybe?

And from the living room, “Gilbert, what’s taking you so long?”

“I . . . uh, had trouble finding the popcorn. I have it now.”

“Well, hurry. The movie starts in five minutes.”

“I’ll be there.” And then, to Maxwell, “This is pretty strange. And you’re not telling me much. I don’t even know her name.”

“I’m telling you all you need to know. I’m being fair.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“Okay, I understand that this is a strange kind of deal for you. I’ll give you some time to think about it and get back to you in a couple days.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Maxwell smiled a genuine-looking paternal smile. Ragwater could almost hear the thought go through his head that these young guys are so suspicious; you have to handle them just right.

Halfway out the door, Maxwell turned to Ragwater. “Enjoy *The Blob*. And by the way, the popcorn is in the far left cabinet, all the way in the back, behind the Crisco.” With that, he made his exit.

Ragwater opened the middle cabinet, where he knew the popcorn would actually be, and didn’t find it. He went through everything, standing on a stepstool to get a better view inside, but it wasn’t there.

Just to make sure, just so he could rule out the possibility, he tried the far left cabinet. He moved a few things in front out of the way and found the popcorn precisely where Maxwell had said it would be.