

Stephen King

11/22/63 (passages from the novel)

It is virtually not assimilable to our reason that a small lonely man felled a giant in the midst of his limousines, his legions, his throng, and his security. If such a nonentity destroyed the leader of the most powerful nation on earth, then a world of disproportion engulfs us, and we live in a universe that is absurd.

— Norman Mailer

If there is love, smallpox scars are as pretty as dimples.

— Japanese proverb

Dancing is life.

For Zelda

Hey, honey, welcome to the party.

11/22/63



I have never been what you'd call a crying man.

My ex-wife said that my “nonexistent emotional gradient” was the main reason she was leaving me (as if the guy she met in her AA meetings was beside the point). Christy said she supposed she could forgive me not crying at her father’s funeral; I had only known him for six years and couldn’t understand what a wonderful, giving man he had been (a Mustang convertible as a high school graduation present, for instance). But then, when I didn’t cry at my own parents’ funerals — they died just two years apart, Dad of stomach cancer and Mom of a thunderclap heart attack while walking on a Florida beach — she began to understand the nonexistent gradient thing. I was “unable to feel my feelings,” in AA-speak.

“I have *never* seen you shed tears,” she said, speaking in the flat tones people use when they are expressing the absolute final deal-breaker in a relationship. “Even when you told me I had to go to rehab or you were leaving.” This conversation happened about six weeks before she packed her things, drove them across town, and moved in with Mel Thompson. “Boy meets girl on the AA campus”—that’s another saying they have in those meetings.

I didn't cry when I saw her off. I didn't cry when I went back inside the little house with the great big mortgage, either. The house where no baby had come, or now ever would. I just lay down on the bed that now belonged to me alone, and put my arm over my eyes, and mourned.

Tearlessly.

But I'm not emotionally blocked. Christy was wrong about that. One day when I was nine, my mother met me at the door when I came home from school. She told me my collie, Rags, had been struck and killed by a truck that hadn't even bothered to stop. I didn't cry when we buried him, although my dad told me nobody would think less of me if I did, but I cried when she told me. Partly because it was my first experience of death; mostly because it had been my responsibility to make sure he was safely penned up in our backyard.

And I cried when Mom's doctor called me and told me what had happened that day on the beach. "I'm sorry, but there was no chance," he said. "Sometimes it's very sudden, and doctors tend to see that as a blessing."

Christy wasn't there — she had to stay late at school that day and meet with a mother who had questions about her son's last report card — but I cried, all right. I went into our little laundry room and took a dirty sheet out of the basket and cried into that. Not for long, but the tears came. I could have told her about them later, but I didn't see the point, partly because she would have thought I was pity-fishing (that's not an AA term, but maybe it should be), and partly because I don't think the ability to bust out bawling pretty much on cue should be a requirement for successful marriage.

I never saw my dad cry at all, now that I think about it; at his most emotional, he might fetch a heavy sigh or grunt out a few reluctant chuckles — no breast-beating or belly-laugh for William Epping. He was the strong silent type, and for the most part, my mother was the same. So maybe the not-crying-easily thing is genetic. But blocked? Unable to feel my feelings? No, I have never been those things.

Other than when I got the news about Mom, I can only remember one other time when I cried as an adult, and that was when I read the story of the janitor's father. I was sitting alone in the teachers' room at Lisbon High School, working my way through a stack of themes that my Adult English class had written. Down the hall I could hear the thud of basketballs, the blare of the time-out horn, and the shouts of the crowd as the sports-beasts fought: Lisbon Greyhounds versus Jay Tigers.

Who can know when life hangs in the balance, or why?

The subject I'd assigned was "The Day That Changed My Life." Most of the responses were heartfelt but awful: sentimental tales of a kindly aunt who'd taken in a pregnant teenager, an Army buddy who had demonstrated the true meaning of bravery, a chance meeting with a celebrity (*Jeopardy!* host Alex Trebek, I think it was, but maybe it was Karl Malden). The teachers among you who have picked up an extra three or four thousand a year by taking on a class of adults studying for their General Equivalency Diploma will know what a dispiriting job reading such themes can be. The grading process hardly figures into it, or at least it didn't for me; I passed everybody, because I never had an adult student who did less than try his or her ass off. If you turned in a paper with writing on it, you were guaranteed a hook from Jake Epping of the LHS English Department, and if the writing was organized into actual paragraphs, you got at least a B-minus.

What made the job hard was that the red pen became my primary teaching tool instead of my mouth, and I practically wore it out. What made the job dispiriting was that you knew that very little of that red-pen teaching was apt to stick; if you reach the age of twenty-five or thirty without knowing how to spell (*totally*, not *todilly*), or capitalize in the proper places (*White House*, not *white-house*), or write a sentence containing both a noun *and* a verb, you're probably never going to know. Yet we soldier on, gamely circling the misused word in sentences like *My*

husband was to quick to judge me or crossing out swum and replacing it with swam in the sentence I swum out to the float often after that.

It was such hopeless, trudging work I was doing that night, while not far away another high school basketball game wound down toward another final buzzer, world without end, amen. It was not long after Christy got out of rehab, and I suppose if I was thinking anything, it was to hope that I'd come home and find her sober (which I did; she's held onto her sobriety better than she held onto her husband). I remember I had a little headache and was rubbing my temples the way you do when you're trying to keep a little nagger from turning into a big thumper. I remember thinking, *Three more of these, just three, and I can get out of here. I can go home, fix myself a big cup of instant cocoa, and dive into the new John Irving novel without these sincere but poorly made things hanging over my head.*

There were no violins or warning bells when I pulled the janitor's theme off the top of the stack and set it before me, no sense that my little life was about to change. But we never know, do we? Life turns on a dime.

He had written in cheap ballpoint ink that had blotted the five pages in many places. His handwriting was a looping but legible scrawl, and he must have been bearing down hard, because the words were actually engraved into the cheap notebook pages; if I'd closed my eyes and run my fingertips over the backs of those torn-out sheets, it would have been like reading Braille. There was a little squiggle, like a flourish, at the end of every lower-case *y*. I remember that with particular clarity.

I remember how his theme started, too. I remember it word for word.

It wasn't a day but a night. The night that change my life was the night my father murdirt my mother and two brothers and hurt me bad. He hurt my sister too, so bad she went into a comah. In three years she died without waking up. Her name was Ellen and I loved her very much. She love to pick flouers and put them in vayses.

Halfway down the first page, my eyes began to sting and I put my trusty red pen down. It was when I got to the part about him crawling under the bed with the blood running in his eyes (*it also run down my throat and tasted horrible*) that I began to cry — Christy would have been so proud. I read all the way to the end without making a single mark, wiping my eyes so the tears wouldn't fall on the pages that had obviously cost him so much effort. Had I thought he was slower than the rest, maybe only half a step above what used to be called "educable retarded"? Well, by God, there was a reason for that, wasn't there? And a reason for the limp, too. It was a miracle that he was alive at all. But he was. A nice man who always had a smile and never raised his voice to the kids. A nice man who had been through hell and was working — humbly and hopefully, as most of them do — to get a high school diploma. Although he would be a janitor for the rest of his life, just a guy in green or brown khakis, either pushing a broom or scraping gum up off the floor with the putty knife he always kept in his back pocket. Maybe once he could have been something different, but one night his life turned on a dime and now he was just a guy in Carhartts that the kids called Hoptoad Harry because of the way he walked.

So I cried. Those were real tears, the kind that come from deep inside. Down the hall, I could hear the Lisbon band strike up their victory song — so the home team had won, and good for them. Later, perhaps, Harry and a couple of his colleagues would roll up the bleachers and sweep away the crap that had been dropped beneath them.

I stroked a big red A on top of his paper. Looked at it for a moment or two, then added a big red +. Because it was good, and because his pain had evoked an emotional reaction in me, his reader. And isn't that what A+ writing is supposed to do? Evoke a response?

As for me, I only wish the former Christy Epping had been correct. I wish I had been emotionally blocked, after all. Because everything that followed — every terrible thing — flowed from those tears.

WATERSHED MOMENT



CHAPTER 1

1

Harry Dunning graduated with flying colors. I went to the little GED ceremony in the LHS gym, at his invitation. He really had no one else, and I was happy to do it.

After the benediction (spoken by Father Bandy, who rarely missed an LHS function), I made my way through the milling friends and relatives to where Harry was standing alone in his billowy black gown, holding his diploma in one hand and his rented mortarboard in the other. I took his hat so I could shake his hand. He grinned, exposing a set of teeth with many gaps and several leaners. But a sunny and engaging grin, for all that.

“Thanks for coming, Mr. Epping. Thanks so much.”

“It was my pleasure. And you can call me Jake. It’s a little perk I accord to students who are old enough to be my father.”

He looked puzzled for a minute, then laughed. “I guess I am, ain’t I? Sheesh!” I laughed, too. Lots of people were laughing all around us. And there were tears, of course. What’s hard for me comes easily to a great many people.

“And that A-plus! Sheesh! I never got an A-plus in my whole life! Never expected one, either!”

“You deserved it, Harry. So what’s the first thing you’re going to do as a high school graduate?”

His smile dimmed for a second — this was a prospect he hadn’t considered. “I guess I’ll go back home. I got a little house I rent on Goddard Street, you know.” He raised the diploma, holding it carefully by the fingertips, as if the ink might smear. “I’ll frame this and hang it on the wall. Then I guess I’ll pour myself a glass of wine and sit on the couch and just admire it until bedtime.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said, “but would you like to have a burger and some fries with me first? We could go down to Al’s.”

I expected a wince at that, but of course I was judging Harry by my colleagues. Not to mention most of the kids we taught; they avoided Al’s like the plague and tended to patronize either the Dairy Queen across from the school or the Hi-Hat out on 196, near where the old Lisbon Drive-In used to be.

“That’d be great, Mr. Epping. Thanks!”

“Jake, remember?”

“Jake, you bet.”

So I took Harry to Al’s, where I was the only faculty regular, and although he actually had a waitress that summer, Al served us himself. As usual, a cigarette (illegal in public eating establishments, but that never stopped Al) smoldered in one corner of his mouth and the eye on that side squinted against the smoke. When he saw the folded-up graduation robe and realized what the occasion was, he insisted on picking up the check (what check there was; the meals at Al’s were always remarkably cheap, which had given rise to rumors about the fate of certain stray animals in the vicinity). He also took a picture of us, which he later hung on what he called the Town Wall of Celebrity. Other “celebrities” represented included the late Albert Dunton, founder of Dunton Jewelry; Earl Higgins, a former LHS principal; John Crafts, founder of John Crafts Auto Sales; and, of course, Father Bandy of St. Cyril’s. (The Father was paired with Pope John XXIII — the latter not local, but revered by Al Templeton, who called himself “a good Catlick.”) The picture Al took that day showed Harry Dunning with a big smile on his face. I was standing next to him, and we were both holding his diploma. His tie was pulled slightly askew. I remember that because it made me think of those little squiggles he put on the ends of his lower-case y’s. I remember it all. I remember it very well.

2

Two years later, on the last day of the school year, I was sitting in that very same teachers’ room and reading my way through a batch of final essays my American Poetry honors seminar had written. The kids themselves had already left, turned loose for another summer, and soon I would do the same. But for the time being I was happy enough where I was, enjoying the unaccustomed quiet. I thought I might even clean out the snack cupboard before I left. *Someone* ought to do it, I thought.

Earlier that day, Harry Dunning had limped up to me after homeroom period (which had been particularly screechy, as all homerooms and study halls tend to be on the last day of school) and offered me his hand.

“I just want to thank you for everything,” he said.

I grinned. “You already did that, as I remember.”

“Yeah, but this is my last day. I’m retiring. So I wanted to make sure and thank you again.”

As I shook his hand, a kid cruising by — no more than a sophomore, judging by the fresh crop of pimples and the serio-comic straggle on his chin that aspired to goateehood — muttered, “Hoptoad Harry, hoppin down the av-a-new.”

I grabbed for him, my intention to make him apologize, but Harry stopped me. His smile was easy and unoffended. “Nah, don’t bother. I’m used to it. They’re just kids.”

“That’s right,” I said. “And it’s our job to teach them.”

“I know, and you’re good at it. But it’s not my job to be anybody’s whatchacallit — teachable moment. Especially not today. I hope you’ll take care of yourself, Mr. Epping.” He might be old enough to be my father, but *Jake* was apparently always going to be beyond him.

“You too, Harry.”

“I’ll never forget that A-plus. I framed that, too. Got it right up beside my diploma.”

“Good for you.”

And it was. It was all good. His essay had been primitive art, but every bit as powerful and true as any painting by Grandma Moses. It was certainly better than the stuff I was currently reading. The spelling in the honors essays was mostly correct, and the diction was clear (although my cautious college-bound don’t-take-a-chancers had an irritating tendency to fall

back on the passive voice), but the writing was pallid. Boring. My honors kids were juniors — Mac Steadman, the department head, awarded the seniors to himself — but they wrote like little old men and little old ladies, all and ooo, don't slip on that icy patch, Mildred. In spite of his grammatical lapses and painstaking cursive, Harry Dunning had written like a hero. On one occasion, at least.

As I was musing on the difference between offensive and defensive writing, the intercom on the wall cleared its throat. "Is Mr. Epping in the west wing teachers' room? You by any chance still there, Jake?"

I got up, thumbed the button, and said: "Still here, Gloria. For my sins. Can I help you?"

"You have a phone call. Guy named Al Templeton? I can transfer it, if you want. Or I can tell him you left for the day."

Al Templeton, owner and operator of Al's Diner, where all LHS faculty save for yours truly refused to go. Even my esteemed department head — who tried to talk like a Cambridge don and was approaching retirement age himself — had been known to refer to the specialty of the house as Al's Famous Catburger instead of Al's Famous Fatburger.

Well of course it's not really cat, people would say, or probably not cat, but it can't be beef, not at a dollar-nineteen.

"Jake? Did you fall asleep on me?"

"Nope, wide awake." Also curious as to why Al would call me at school. Why he'd call me at all, for that matter. Ours had always been strictly a cook-and-client relationship. I appreciated his chow, and he appreciated my patronage. "Go on and put him through."

"Why are you still here, anyway?"

"I'm flagellating myself."

"Ooo!" Gloria said, and I could imagine her fluttering her long lashes. "I love it when you talk dirty. Hold on and wait for the ringy-dingy."

She clicked off. The extension rang and I picked it up.

"Jake? You on there, buddy?"

At first I thought Gloria must have gotten the name wrong. That voice couldn't belong to Al. Not even the world's worst cold could have produced such a croak.

"Who is this?"

"Al Templeton, didn't she tellya? Christ, that hold music really sucks. Whatever happened to Connie Francis?" He began to ratchet coughs loud enough to make me hold the phone away from my ear a little.

"You sound like you got the flu."

He laughed. He also kept coughing. The combination was fairly gruesome. "I got something, all right."

"It must have hit you fast." I had been in just yesterday, to grab an early supper. A Fatburger, fries, and a strawberry milkshake. I believe it's important for a guy living on his own to hit all the major food groups.

"You could say that. Or you could say it took awhile. Either one would be right."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I'd had a lot of conversations with Al in the six or seven years I'd been going to the diner, and he could be odd — insisted on referring to the New England Patriots as the Boston Patriots, for instance, and talked about Ted Williams as if he'd known him like a brudda — but I'd never had a conversation as weird as this.

"Jake, I need to see you. It's important."

"Can I ask—"

"I expect you to ask plenty, and I'll answer, but not over the phone."

I didn't know how many answers he'd be able to give before his voice gave out, but I promised I'd come down in an hour or so.

"Thanks. Make it even sooner, if you can. Time is, as they say, of the essence." And he hung up, just like that, without even a goodbye.

I worked my way through two more of the honors essays, and there were only four more in the stack, but it was no good. I'd lost my groove. So I swept the stack into my briefcase and left. It crossed my mind to go upstairs to the office and wish Gloria a good summer, but I didn't bother. She'd be in all next week, closing the books on another school year, and I was going to come in on Monday and clean out the snack cupboard — that was a promise I'd made to myself. Otherwise the teachers who used the west wing teachers' room during summer session would find it crawling with bugs.

If I'd known what the future held for me, I certainly would have gone up to see her. I might even have given her the kiss that had been flirting in the air between us for the last couple of months. But of course I didn't know. Life turns on a dime.

3

Al's Diner was housed in a silver trailer across the tracks from Main Street, in the shadow of the old Worumbo mill. Places like that can look tacky, but Al had disguised the concrete blocks upon which his establishment stood with pretty beds of flowers. There was even a neat square of lawn, which he barbered himself with an old push-type lawn mower. The lawn mower was as well tended as the flowers and the lawn; not a speck of rust on the whirring, brightly painted blades. It might have been purchased at the local Western Auto store the week before. . . if there had still been a Western Auto in The Falls, that was. There was once, but it fell victim to the big-box stores back around the turn of the century.

I went up the paved walk, up the steps, then paused, frowning. The sign reading WELCOME TO AL'S DINER, HOME OF THE FATBURGER! was gone. In its place was a square of cardboard reading CLOSED & WILL NOT REOPEN DUE TO ILLNESS. THANK YOU FOR YOUR BUSINESS OVER THE YEARS & GOD BLESS.

I had not yet entered the fog of unreality that would soon swallow me, but the first tendrils were seeping around me, and I felt them. It wasn't a summer cold that had caused the hoarseness I'd heard in Al's voice, nor the croaking cough. Not the flu, either. Judging by the sign, it was something more serious. But what kind of serious illness came on in a mere twenty-four hours? Less than that, really. It was two-thirty. I had left Al's last night at five forty-five, and he'd been fine. Almost manic, in fact. I remembered asking him if he'd been drinking too much of his own coffee, and he said no, he was just thinking about taking a vacation. Do people who are getting sick — sick enough to close the businesses they've run single-handed for over twenty years — talk about taking vacations? Some, maybe, but probably not many.

The door opened while I was still reaching for the handle, and Al stood there looking at me, not smiling. I looked back, feeling that fog of unreality thicken around me. The day was warm but the fog was cold. At that point I still could have turned and walked out of it, back into the June sunshine, and part of me wanted to do that. Mostly, though, I was frozen by wonder and dismay. Also horror, I might as well admit it. Because serious illness does horrify us, doesn't it, and Al was seriously ill. I could see that in a single glance. And mortally was probably more like it.

It wasn't just that his normally ruddy cheeks had gone slack and sallow. It wasn't the rheum that coated his blue eyes, which now looked washed-out and nearsightedly peering. It wasn't even his hair, formerly almost all black, and now almost all white — after all, he might have been using one of those vanity products and decided on the spur of the moment to shampoo it out and go natural.

The impossible part was that in the twenty-two hours since I'd last seen him, Al Templeton appeared to have lost at least thirty pounds. Maybe even forty, which would have been a quarter of his previous body weight. Nobody loses thirty or forty pounds in less than a day, nobody. But I was looking at it. And this, I think, is where that fog of unreality swallowed me whole.

Al smiled, and I saw he had lost teeth as well as weight. His gums looked pale and unhealthy. "How do you like the new me, Jake?" And he began to cough, thick churning sounds that came from deep inside him.

I opened my mouth. No words came out. The idea of flight again came to some craven, disgusted part of my mind, but even if that part had been in control, I couldn't have done it. I was rooted to the spot.

Al got the coughing under control and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He wiped first his mouth and then the palm of his hand with it. Before he put it back, I saw it was streaked with red.

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I went down with my left foot. Went down with my right foot again, and all at once there was a pop inside my head, exactly like the kind you hear when you're in an airplane and the pressure changes suddenly. The dark field inside my eyelids turned red, and there was warmth on my skin. It was sunlight. No question about it. And that faint sulphurous smell had grown thicker, moving up the olfactory scale from barely there to actively unpleasant. There was no question about that, either.

I opened my eyes.

I was no longer in the pantry. I was no longer in Al's Diner, either. Although there was no door from the pantry to the outside world, I was outside. I was in the courtyard. But it was no longer brick, and there were no outlet stores surrounding it. I was standing on crumbling, dirty cement. Several huge metal receptacles stood against the blank white wall where Your Maine Snuggery should have been. They were piled high with something and covered with sail-size sheets of rough brown burlap cloth.

I turned around to look at the big silver trailer which housed Al's Diner, but the diner was gone.

2

Where it should have been was the vast Dickensian bulk of Worumbo Mills and Weaving, and it was in full operation. I could hear the thunder of the dyers and dryers, the shat-HOOSH, shat-HOOSH of the huge weaving flats that had once filled the second floor (I had seen pictures of these machines, tended by women who wore kerchiefs and coveralls, in the tiny Lisbon Historical Society building on upper Main Street). Whitish-gray smoke poured from three tall stacks that had come down during a big windstorm in the eighties.

I was standing beside a large, green-painted cube of a building — the drying shed, I assumed. It filled half the courtyard and rose to a height of about twenty feet. I had come down a flight of stairs, but now there were no stairs. No way back. I felt a surge of panic.

"Jake?" It was Al's voice, but very faint. It seemed to arrive in my ears by a mere trick of acoustics, like a voice winding for miles down a long, narrow canyon. "You can come back the same way you got there. Feel for the steps."

I lifted my left foot, put it down, and felt a step. My panic eased.

"Go on." Faint. A voice seemingly powered by its own echoes. "Look around a little, then come back."

I didn't go anywhere at first, just stood still, wiping my mouth with the palm of my hand. My eyes felt like they were bugging out of their sockets. My scalp and a narrow strip of skin all the way down the middle of my back was crawling. I was scared — almost terrified — but balancing that off and keeping panic at bay (for the moment) was a powerful curiosity. I could see my shadow on the concrete, as clear as something cut from black cloth. I could see flakes of rust on the chain that closed the drying shed off from the rest of the courtyard. I could smell the powerful effluent pouring from the triple stacks, strong enough to make my eyes sting. An EPA inspector would have taken one sniff of that shit and shut the whole operation down in a New England minute. Except. . I didn't think there were any EPA inspectors in the vicinity. I wasn't

even sure the EPA had been invented yet. I knew where I was; Lisbon Falls, Maine, deep in the heart of Androscoggin County.

The real question was when I was.

3

A sign I couldn't read hung from the chain — the message was facing the wrong way. I started toward it, then turned around. I closed my eyes and shuffled forward, reminding myself to take baby steps. When my left foot clunked against the bottom step that went back up to the pantry of Al's Diner (or so I devoutly hoped), I felt in my back pocket and brought out a folded sheet of paper: my exalted department head's "Have a nice summer and don't forget the July in-service day" memo. I briefly wondered how he'd feel about Jake Epping teaching a six-week block called The Literature of Time Travel next year. Then I tore a strip from the top, crumpled it, and dropped it on the first step of the invisible stairway. It landed on the ground, of course, but either way it marked the spot. It was a warm, still afternoon and I didn't think it would blow away, but I found a little chunk of concrete and used it as a paperweight, just to be sure. It landed on the step, but it also landed on the scrap of memo. Because there was no step. A snatch of some old pop song drifted through my head: First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.

Look around a little, Al had said, and I decided that was what I'd do. I figured if I hadn't lost my mind already, I was probably going to be okay for awhile longer. Unless I saw a parade of pink elephants or a UFO hovering over John Crafts Auto, that was. I tried to tell myself this wasn't happening, couldn't be happening, but it wouldn't wash. Philosophers and psychologists may argue over what's real and what isn't, but most of us living ordinary lives know and accept the texture of the world around us. This was happening. All else aside, it was too goddam stinky to be a hallucination.

I walked to the chain, which hung at thigh level, and ducked beneath it. Stenciled in black paint on the other side was NO ADMITTANCE BEYOND THIS POINT UNTIL SEWER PIPE IS REPAIRED. I looked back again, saw no indication that repairs were in the immediate offing, walked around the corner of the drying shed, and almost stumbled over the man sunning himself there. Not that he could expect to get much of a tan. He was wearing an old black overcoat that puddled around him like an amorphous shadow. There were dried crackles of snot on both sleeves. The body inside the coat was scrawny to the point of emaciation. His iron-gray hair hung in snaggles around his beard-scruffy cheeks. He was a wino if ever a wino there was.

Cocked back on his head was a filthy fedora that looked straight out of a 1950s film noir, the kind where all the women have big bazonkas and all the men talk fast around the cigarettes stuck in the corners of their mouths. And yep, poking up from the fedora's hatband, like an old-fashioned reporter's press pass, was a yellow card. Once it had probably been a bright yellow, but much handling by grimy fingers had turned it bleary.

When my shadow fell across his lap, the Yellow Card Man turned and surveyed me with bleary eyes.

"Who the fuck're you?" he asked, only it came out Hoo-a fuck-a you?

Al hadn't given me detailed instructions on how to answer questions, so I said what seemed safest. "None of your fucking business."

"Well fuck you, too."

"Fine," I said. "We are in accord."

"Huh?"

"Have a nice day." I started toward the gate, which stood open on a steel track. Beyond it, to the left, was a parking lot that had never been there before. It was full of cars, most of them battered and all of them old enough to belong in a car museum. There were Buicks with portholes and Fords with torpedo noses. Those belong to actual millworkers, I thought. Actual millworkers who are inside now, working for hourly wages.

"I got a yellow card from the greenfront," the wino said. He sounded both truculent and troubled. "So gimme a buck because today's double-money day."

I held the fifty-cent piece out to him. Feeling like an actor who only has one line in the play, I said: "I can't spare a buck, but here's half a rock."

Then you give it to him, Al had said, but I didn't need to. The Yellow Card Man snatched it from me and held it close to his face. For a moment I thought he was actually going to bite into it, but he just closed his long-fingered hand around it in a fist, making it disappear. He peered at me again, his face almost comic with distrust.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I'll be damned if I know," I said, and turned back to the gate. I expected him to hurl more questions after me, but there was only silence. I went out through the gate.