

## ***Part 3***

the *oklahoma*  
kamikaze



# 7

OLIVER

Reading Volume IV of Mother's diary, I see myself and the culture in which I was raised through the eyes of a woman being driven crazy by both of them. Volume IV chronicles the end of my first decade of life, and the end of the sixties. Both of us were stinkers.

My most vivid memory of 1970 is of April, when an oxygen tank in the command module of Apollo 13 ruptured. At school, we had a Moment of Silence every day to pray for Lovell, Haise, and Swigert as they went all the way around the moon with a crippled ship, using the oxygen and power reserves of the lunar module to substitute for what the command module no longer had. For the only time in my life, I willingly said the same prayers that everyone else did.

And then they were back, haggard and drained, but heroes, and I felt again as though human beings could accomplish anything, that all in the universe was ours.

I was ten years old.

Mother, of course, saw Apollo 13 and its message in a different light.

*The ancient Atlanteans, they who fly the ships of light, have done this, she wrote. They crippled the ship to teach us our weakness, and they brought it safely home to teach us that our lives are dependent on chance, on Fate.*

*The astronauts were closer to death than we have been told. The coupling with the lunar module should not have worked, but the celestial Seekers saw to it that it did. They are warning us of our frailties while exhorting us to become pure of heart so that we may overcome those frailties.*

*It is yet another omen. They are trying to tell us that we are close to disintegration, to self-destruction.*

The command capsule of Apollo 13 returned to Earth on April 17, 1970, and Mother wrote the preceding words the next day. Two and a half weeks later, four people were shot to death on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

They carried no weapons. They were killed by bullets shot from the rifles of National Guardsmen—by definition, their protectors.

*Disintegration. Self-destruction.*

Some animals, when caught in a trap, will chew off parts of their bodies in order to escape. As the decade came to a close, my nation was caught in such a trap, and it began to devour itself. A few kids at a time.

I was ten years old.

There was no prayer vigils in school for those who were killed, and none for those killed a few days later at Jackson State.

Mother wrote, *I am changing my opinions of those who fly the ships of light. Some of them must be malevolent. It must have been one of these who whispered into a Guardsman's ear, "Shoot, or they will kill you!" It is*

*the only explanation. Why else would a youth with a rifle kill another youth who does not have one? Human beings would melt into pools of blood before we would do such things of our own wills.*

*We could not massacre children as it is said was done at Mylai. After all, we are not only humans, but Americans. We are the Good Guys. We would not beat people to death or hang them from trees. We would not kill unless we were made to do so by a force against which we could not stand.*

*Some blame Nixon. I do not. He is not strong enough to do this to us. He may not even exist.*

*Somewhere in the Void, a battle is raging. The aliens who love us are fighting those who despise us, and while the battle rages, spies of the malevolent ones whisper in our ears. They know that we can be made to destroy ourselves.*

*Yet some of us, especially those who make music of power, are not so weak as the rest. They have joined in the battle against the malevolent ones, and in them I place my ultimate hope.*

Which was more hope than they could handle. In the fall, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin died of drug overdoses within weeks of each other. Willingly or not, they and their music had become symbols of the counterculture and of the struggle for justice, and they had blown it. Big time.

Shortly after Mother had taken her job at KKAP, she had begun the album collection that now forms the core of my own. She began with the Crickets and proceeded through the late fifties and early sixties until she had caught up with the year, and then she had bought whatever music she could afford. By 1970, she owned virtually all of the most important rock 'n' roll albums ever pressed.

Then Hendrix and Joplin offed themselves.

*They lied, Mother wrote. They promised life, and they gave us death. They listened to the malevolent ones. Jimi played guitar like he came from a planet where a guitar is part of your body, and then he drowned in his own puke. Janis had a voice that could make you feel love and pain and life and sex all at the same instant, and then she filled her body with shit and fell on her face.*

*Fuck them and the bus they rode in on.*

She went through her record collection and pulled out everything that had been pressed after 1965, boxed them up, and sealed the boxes with duct tape. She wanted to retreat to the late fifties, when Buddy Holly was still alive and all seemed right with the world.

"We'll take these to the dump," she told me, and I was horrified. *Sergeant Pepper* was in there.

The boxes sat in the living room while Mother immersed herself in the music of the fifties and in paperbacks about UFOs and ancient civilizations. I listened to acid rock under the covers in my bedroom.

Then, on her thirtieth birthday, Mother wanted to hear "Eleanor Rigby," from the Beatles' *Revolver* album, which was pressed in 1966. The box containing that record came open, and the others soon followed. She played them all, even the ones by the Jimi Hendrix Experience and Full Tilt Boogie. Mother could get righteously angry with the best of them, but even she had a hard time holding a grudge against the dead.

Still, things always get worse before they get better. The year of Mother's thirtieth birthday was a signal for all of the evil on the planet to squirm out into the light. 1971 began with the conviction of Charles Manson and three members of his "family" for the slaughter of seven

people. The murders were two years in the past, but it was only with the trial that the sickening details were revealed. Then, as if that weren't horror enough, a court-martial told the world that Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr., was guilty of the murder of *twenty-two* South Vietnamese civilians. Our *allies*.

One night soon after the conclusion of the trial, flipping from one radio station to another, I chanced upon a country music station playing a song that praised Calley as a hero. I was confused by this and asked Mother to clarify the situation for me. She refused. If she had her way, she said, I wouldn't hear anything about what was going on out in the world in the first place.

Laos was invaded by South Vietnamese and U.S. forces in February, and thousands were killed. Jim Morrison died of a "heart attack" in France on July 3. North Vietnam was bombed in December.

And, paradoxically, while the world was filled with pain, there were triumphs. Apollo 14 and Apollo 15 went to the moon in January and July, and I felt pride so massive I thought my chest would explode. Space had tried to stop us, but we had come back. We had conquered another planet.

I was eleven years old.

There would be two more lunar landings in 1972, but then we would abandon our new planet, won at such high cost, without so much as a good-bye.

The Vietnam war and the Apollo program had more in common than was clear at the time.

By the end of the year, Mother had begun to talk openly of her beliefs concerning the ancient Atlanteans, their ships of light, the Cosmic Battle, and the malevolent ones. I laughed and told her that she was dreaming.

I thought that I knew better than she did, that my

A in science meant that I knew far more of what the Universe was about than she with her fantasies ever could.

Obviously, I knew less than nothing.

That, at least, hasn't changed. Everything else has.

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Miraculously, Peggy Sue started when the Bald Avenger attacked at the roadside park, and we escaped. I would like to think that I would have gone back to help Gretchen, but I didn't have to face that decision. As I was slowing down to consider it, the Ford crew cab that the Bald Avenger had been driving barreled past. Its interior light was on, and I saw Gretchen at the wheel. I followed.

Now that Peggy Sue, Gretchen, and I had survived and would continue to survive for a while (the Jaguar's rear tires had been shot flat, so the Avenger couldn't come after us), I began to wonder how my neighbors' Doberman had happened to show up in the middle of Oklahoma. Ringo's size and his galvanized chain collar had identified him beyond any doubt.

He had appeared some four hundred miles from where I had last seen him.

As I rode, I listened to the ragged noise emanating from Peggy Sue's semi-amputated left tail pipe. Ringo had bitten through it, and I still had the threaded tooth he had lost doing so. I had seen his eyes, and they had burned with blue sparks.

The conclusion I came to was weird enough that Mother would have been proud of me: Ringo was a doggy robot, or a canine android, or something like that. Therefore, he had stamina beyond that of mortal Dobermans and could follow me indefinitely. Unless the Bald



Avenger had killed or deactivated him, I would be seeing the beast again.

That made me unhappy. Ringo scared the piss out of me.

As did the Bald Avenger. I hoped that they had managed to waste each other, because I figured that was the only way I'd have a shot at making it to Lubbock unscathed. So far, the regular cops hadn't been a big problem, so as long as I could get the Avenger and the Doberman pinscher cyborg off my tail—

I would still be in trouble. Ringo belonged to Cathy and Jeremy What's-Their-Name, which had to mean that *they* were something weird too. (The astute reader will recognize that I should have figured all this out two days earlier when Ringo bit through hot metal. I plead extenuating circumstances. Buddy Holly had just come back from the grave and had read my name on TV. I was preoccupied.) I was being pursued by things beyond human ken. I began to wonder whether Mother might have been on to something all along.

Such were my thoughts when Gretchen's truck pulled onto the shoulder. I stopped alongside, and she rolled down the window.

"Goddamn cheap-ass ratmeat," she said.

I flipped up my faceplate. "What'd I do now?"

"This junk Ford is out of gas. I abandoned my backpack to get to it—my *backpack*, with my weights and tape player and everything—and now it's stranded me in Oklahoma at two-thirty in the morning with a dorkus on a *motorcycle*."

I patted the portion of Peggy Sue's seat that extended behind me. "Room for a passenger," I said.

Gretchen's face contorted. "I'm wearing warm-ups over a tank top and shorts. I'd freeze."

I shrugged and revved the Ariel's engine. It didn't sound good, which diminished the effect I'd been hoping for. "Up to you," I said, "but I'm going on to Lubbock." I put the bike into gear.

Gretchen poked a shotgun barrel out of the window. "You take off without me, and I'll shoot 'Peggy Sue' right in the motor," she said.

I stopped. "How'd you know her name?"

She opened the truck door and stepped out. "You talk in your sleep," she said, climbing onto the bike behind me. She put her left arm around my waist and cradled the shotgun in her right.

"You sure you want to keep that?" I asked. The shotgun was aimed at the back of my knee.

"Positive. Just like I'm positive that I was crazy for deciding to go to Lubbock with you. What do I care if Buddy Holly has risen from the grave? What's he gonna do for me if he has? Just take me to the nearest town with a phone, yorface, and I'll get my friend in Houston to wire money for a bus ticket."

"What about your lack of spiritual fulfillment?"

"Screw it. I'm alive, and I won't be if I stick with you. Our association is ended. Let's go."

I flipped down my faceplate, and we went. I hadn't seen any distance-to-next-town signs since leaving the roadside park, but it couldn't be more than ten miles. Gretchen would survive the ride, and then we would part. It made me a little sad, even though I had a sense that we would each be better off without the other. Gretchen would be warmer, and I wouldn't have a shotgun threatening to shorten my leg.

I should have remembered: Things get worse before they get better. A mist began to fall, and then, six miles from where the Ford had stopped, Peggy Sue lurched and died. I clutched and let her roll.

“What’s going on?” Gretchen shrieked. “What the bloody damn stupid pissant hell are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” I yelled. We coasted to a stop on the shoulder.

Gretchen dismounted and began stomping back and forth, shouting curses that were unintelligible because she was shivering. This went on for twenty seconds or so, and then she cocked the shotgun and pointed it at Peggy Sue’s fuel tank. “Get off!” she bellowed.

I was rigid. “No.”

She turned away and aimed the gun across the ditch at an empty field. A spike of blue fire roared out, and then another and another. A plastic shell bounced off my helmet. “Goddamn goddamn goddamn goddamn goddamn!” Gretchen cried, cocking and firing, cocking and firing, until the chamber was empty. She threw the gun into the field.

I switched off Peggy Sue’s lights and put down the kickstand. “Feel better?” I asked as I dismounted.

Gretchen punched me in the stomach, but because of the Moonsuit and a layer of cupcakes, it didn’t hurt much. I stood with my hands on my knees, and the mist turned to rain.

Gretchen flipped up my faceplate. Despite the darkness, I could see the water soaking her hair and running down her face. “My parents put you up to this, didn’t they?” she said.

When I was able to stand upright, we started walking. I pushed the bike. Gretchen set a fast pace, and occasionally I ran in an attempt to catch up. Peggy Sue was heavy, though, and before long Gretchen was far enough ahead that I couldn’t see her. When I did spot her again, it was because she was illuminated by the headlights of a vehicle coming from the north.

My first thought was that the Bald Avenger was after

us again, but as I looked back I saw that the headlights sat too high to be the Jaguar's. I stopped walking and straddled the Ariel to pretend that nothing was wrong, hoping that the unknown vehicle would pass by without slowing. I was more afraid of being hauled in than I was of being stranded in the rain.

Gretchen, however, was running down the shoulder toward me, waving her arms.

"Stop it!" I yelled. "We don't know who that is!"

"I don't care who it is," she said.

I grabbed Gretchen's wrists as she came close, but by then it was too late. A Winnebago slowed to a stop beside us. Lights came on inside, and the door opened.

An elderly couple smiled out. The husband, who was driving, asked, "You folks having trouble?"

"No," I said, while Gretchen said, "Yes."

"Need a lift?"

"Please," Gretchen said, pulling away from me and starting toward the open door.

The wife's eyes widened. "Dale, the radio, it talked about a motorbike, a blue suit . . ."

The husband's face switched to an expression of shocked recognition. He put the Winnebago into gear and hit the gas.

Gretchen ran after it, keeping pace with the open door for fifteen or twenty yards. "I'm not with him!" she cried. "I've never seen him before! Wait, goddamn it!"

They didn't. I got off Peggy Sue and began pushing again. When I reached Gretchen, she said, "I hate you."

"You can't," I told her. "You're my accomplice."

I had judged that she was in too much discomfort to hit me this time, and I was right. She began walking beside me and the Ariel, calling us names now and then.

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Another vehicle, a flatbed farm truck, came upon us from the same direction several minutes later, and it too slowed and stopped. Gretchen stared at it sullenly.

"What's up?" the driver asked. His cab light wasn't on, and I couldn't see his face. I could, however, see the faces of a teenage boy and girl sitting beside him.

"Just some mechanical difficulty," I said. "I can handle it, thanks."

"You sure?" the man asked. "Nearest town's Pumpkin Center, and there's nothing there. There's Lawton, of course, but that's another twenty miles."

I considered. Twenty miles might as well have been fifty or a hundred. The Moonsuit was wet and heavy, and my Nikes were drenched.

"Well, I'd hate to leave my bike out here," I said.

"Got a ramp," the man said. "Don't think she'll fall over if you ride back there with her. There isn't enough room up here for more than one more anyway."

"That's me," Gretchen said.

The passenger door of the truck opened, and the boy jumped out. "Hop in," he told Gretchen, and she did. Then he nodded toward the back of the truck and said, "I'll give you a hand with your motorcycle, sir."

I rolled Peggy Sue backward as the driver emerged. He was broad-shouldered and walked as if he were strong. He and the boy dragged a sheet of plywood from the flatbed and propped it on the tail.

The man vaulted up onto the bed. "Push her up, and I'll grab the handlebars when she's high enough," he said.

Peggy Sue and I were at the bottom of the ramp now, but I hesitated. It had occurred to me that I had no idea of what I was getting myself into.

"You sure you want to take us all the way into Lawton?" I asked.

"If you want," the man said. "To tell you the truth, though, it's awful late, and we live just a couple of miles from here. I've got a shop, so I could probably fix you up for less money than they'd stiff you in town."

I became suspicious. "Why would you want to do that?"

"I'm getting wet," the boy said.

"Be polite, son," the man said as he waved for me to bring the bike up. "We've got a spare room. You and your wife look honest, and you could probably use some sleep. I promise we aren't thieves or backwoods cannibals."

I pushed Peggy Sue up the ramp, and the man reached down to help. When we were almost up, I slipped and fell to one knee on the wet plywood, but the man caught the bike and kept her from falling.

"I'm Pete Holden," he said as I scrambled to my feet.

"Thanks, Pete," I said. "I'm—Charles Hardin. I owe you one."

"At least," the boy muttered.

I rolled the bike to the front of the flatbed and propped her on the kickstand while Pete and his son shoved the ramp in after me. I would have to crouch beside the bike to hold her steady.

"I'll take it slow," Pete said.

As they walked past on either side, my suspicion increased. They hadn't asked what Gretchen and I were doing out here. They hadn't asked why she was wearing such inadequate clothing. They were being far too helpful to possess entirely altruistic motives.

"Seen any TV lately?" I blurted.

Pete got into the cab without answering, but the boy paused and looked up at me.

"Television is the new opiate of the masses," he said. "It tells them lies of peace and prosperity while they're

slowly crushed by the iron heel of an oppressive and greedy aristocratic minority." He got into the cab.

The truck started moving, and now I couldn't escape without abandoning Peggy Sue. All I could do was huddle in the cold rain as a stranger drove me toward whatever would happen next.

Soon, the truck left the highway for a muddy road and proceeded through countryside that alternated between flat, open fields and stands of soggy trees. The silhouettes of oil pumps nodded like rocking horses. The truck turned twice onto muddier, bumpier roads, and I was afraid that Peggy Sue and I would be jostled into the ditch. My arms, shoulders, and back ached from holding the Ariel, and my fingers were numb.

Finally, the truck turned into a rock driveway that entered a grove, and I saw a mailbox with an attached sign that read "Holden Welding and Motor Works." Far back in the trees stood a one-story frame house with a porch light that illuminated a separate garage and a satellite dish. The truck stopped beside the garage, and I let go of the bike. When Gretchen, Pete, and the two kids came back to the bed, I was lying on my side.

"Rough ride?" Pete asked.

Gretchen didn't give me a chance to answer. "Hey, pinbrain, did you tell this guy that I was your wife?"

I felt so lousy that being killed by Gretchen wasn't such a horrible prospect. "No," I croaked. "I told him you're my concubine."

Pete stepped between Gretchen and the bed before she could grab me. "If we get your bike into the garage," he said, "it'll be dry by the time we're ready to work on it."

I forced myself up and helped Pete and his son with the ramp and with Peggy Sue. The girl pulled open the garage door, and I pushed the Ariel inside onto a con-

crete floor. There was a fast-looking white car occupying one quarter of the garage, and most of the rest of the place was cluttered with toolboxes, welding equipment, and electronic and mechanical doohickeys that I couldn't identify. Pete called for me to come into the house and get warm.

I patted Peggy Sue on her fuel tank and went out. The girl closed the door, and then Gretchen and I followed the Holdens to the back door of their home. Gretchen thumped my helmet with the side of her fist to demonstrate her displeasure with my "concubine" remark.

We entered the house through a mud room, and I hung my helmet and the Moonsuit on pegs that Pete indicated. It was at this point that I had my first clear look at the Holdens. Pete was tall and ruddy, with blue eyes and sandy hair cut down to bristles; the girl had the same coloring, but wore her hair in an anachronistic ponytail; and the boy, who was shorter and more slender than the girl, was darker than either his father or sister. The way he looked at me made me feel as if he were judging my life at a glance.

The girl, who introduced herself as Laura, gave Gretchen a robe so that she could get out of her wet clothes, and the boy, whom Pete called Mike, brought us each a towel. I took off my Nikes and socks, hanging them with the Moonsuit and helmet, and dried my feet.

"I hate to ask since you're already doing so much," I said, "but do any of you wear hard contact lenses? I, uh, lost my case and soaking solution."

"We all wear 'em," Pete said. "We can probably scrounge up what you need."

"I want the new kind," Laura said. "The kind that you can wear for weeks or months without taking them



out. But Dad says they cost too much.”

Mike looked at his sister disdainfully. “How can you ask for luxuries when the majority of the human race lives in conditions of poverty and oppression?”

Gretchen leaned close to me and muttered, “Jesus, this kid sounds like my father.”

“Here’s the bathroom,” Pete said, leading us into a hallway and stopping beside a door. “There are new toothbrushes in the drawer under the sink, and I’ll see if I can find a case for your lenses, Mr. Hardin. Come down the hall when you’re finished, and I’ll set one of you up in the spare bedroom and the other one on the living-room couch.” He and the kids went on.

“I have dibs on the john,” Gretchen said, shoving past me. “And guess which one of us is taking the couch.” She entered the bathroom and shut the door.

I leaned against the opposite wall and thought again that there was something wrong here. Normal people simply weren’t such Good Samaritans. Not without a reason.

Pete reappeared and handed me a plastic contact lens case. “There’s soaking solution in the medicine cabinet,” he said, peering at me. “You okay? You look dizzy.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said, too loud. “I’m just tired. Cold. Wet. You know.”

Pete turned away. “Hope the soaking solution’s your brand,” he said, and left.

I dropped the plastic case, and my fingers could hardly pick it up again. I had come to the conclusion that a reward had been offered for my capture, and that Pete Holden was planning to collect it.

Gretchen came out of the bathroom wearing the robe that Laura had loaned her. “Your turn, bozo. I hung my clothes on the towel rack, and I’ve memorized their exact positions, so if you touch them, I’ll know.”

"They're going to turn us in," I said. "It's the only explanation."

She shook her head. "I talked with them in the truck, and they don't seem the type to do that." Her eyes hardened. "Besides, what's this 'they're going to turn *us* in' crap? There is no *us*, bud. I've severed our association, remember? It's only coincidence that we're stuck together for now. And as soon as I get some sleep, I'll take care of that." She started down the hall.

"Good night," I said.

"Up yours," she answered.

When I had finished in the bathroom, I walked down the hall barefoot and blurry-visioned with my sweat-shirt draped over a shoulder. The hall took me to the kitchen, and I went through to a small dining area. From there I could see Pete sitting on a couch in the living room. I could also see a big Sony TV set like mine. Its screen was dark.

"Feel better?" Pete asked as I approached.

"Some," I said, eyeing the Sony. Surely it had been turned on at least once in the past two days, and surely the satellite dish beside the garage had fed it the same thing from every channel in the world. . . .

Pete squinted at my T-shirt. "Rock-chalk, chick-enhawk," he read. "Eff blank blank blank KU. What's that mean?"

"I've never been sure."

He pointed past me. "That's my bedroom on the other side of the dining room. If you need anything, just give a knock."

"Sure," I said. "Great." The Sony was staring at me.

"And you don't need to worry that the kids'll bother you before morning," Pete said, jerking a thumb at a door beside the couch. "Their rooms are in the basement."

"Oh. Good." I began to inch backward.

Pete stood. "I'll get you a blanket."

"Terrific," I said, still inching away. I was too great a coward to run.

Pete sighed. "All right, then." He looked at my eyes. "I know that your name is Oliver Vale, but you can hide here without being afraid that I'll turn you in."

I stopped inching. "How do I know that?"

He reached into a back pocket and pulled out a wallet. "Here," he said, removing a photograph. "I would've told you about this when I found you, but I was afraid you'd think I was making up a story to lure you. Not everyone believes in Fate."

I took the photo and held it close to my face so that I could see it clearly. It was a black-and-white snapshot of two young men in Army fatigues. Their faces were dirty and sweat-streaked, but they had their arms around each other's shoulders and were grinning.

"Your mother's name is Michelle," Pete said. "I used to read all of her letters."

I handed the photo back. "Thank you," I said, and lay down on the couch. Pete brought two blankets and a pillow, then turned off the light and went to his room.

I covered myself with the blankets and noticed for the first time that the Holdens' house smelled as if a pot roast had been cooked there within the past twenty-four hours. Pot roast had been Mother's specialty. It was the only thing she could prepare that didn't taste like everything else she had ever cooked.

I hadn't felt so safe in years.

When I awoke, the room was lit by filtered sunlight, and Laura and Mike were standing over me. They were both wearing jeans and sweatshirts, and Mike was holding a thick Sunday newspaper.

"You snore," Mike said.

"Try sleeping on your side," Laura suggested.

I mumbled an apology, and they moved away and sat cross-legged on the floor to read the paper.

"You'll be happy to hear that you're still the top story, Mr. Vale," Mike said dryly. "You've managed to make everyone with a television set forget everything in the world except you and Buddy Holly. You've made them forget the thousands of innocent people being murdered by neo-Nazis and oligarchical theocrats in Chile, South Africa, Israel, El Salvador, Afghanistan, Iran, Ulster, and Sri Lanka. All of the major protest marches and riots this past weekend were the result of worldwide anger over the current homogenous state of video entertainment."

"You know who I am too?" I asked, sitting up.

"Mind like a trap," Laura muttered.

"Of course we know who you are," Mike said. "We found you last night because we were looking for you. What did you think we were doing, riding around in the middle of the night because we enjoyed it?"

"How—" I began.

Laura dropped her section of the paper. "It wasn't tough. In fact, I'm surprised we got to you before anyone else did. Once we decided that you must be heading to Lubbock, Texas—an obvious choice, and I don't know why the authorities have only now started to consider it—"

"They have?" I asked. Mike tapped a front-page headline and held it up close enough for me to read: TEXAS OFFICIALS THINK VID-PIRATE COULD HEAD FOR ROCK STAR'S HOMETOWN. It wasn't the lead story, but it was there.

Laura was still talking. "—calculated that the odds were seven to three that you would pass within fifty miles of here sometime between Saturday noon and Sunday morning, so I monitored various CB, police, and two-way

bandwidths, and when I caught a CB signal that suggested you were near the transmitter, I metered it and calculated your approximate distance on the basis of signal strength.”

“Which was silly,” Mike said, “because the guy came right out and said where you were.”

Laura glared at him. “And you said that he wasn’t even talking about Mr. Vale. You said that the motorcycle in a roadside park beside a ‘rich bitch’s’ Jaguar was a coincidence. I, on the other hand, calculated that the odds were three to two that a motorcycle in that location at that time would be Mr. Vale’s. And I was right.”

My stomach tightened. “You didn’t go to that park, did you?”

“Sure,” Mike said. “We got there via the road that Dad figured would be your first-choice route after leaving the place, and when we didn’t see you there or at the park, we came back on the highway, which was where we found you.”

“Did you see anyone at the park?” I asked. “A bald man with a gun, a huge robot dog with electric eyes?”

Laura and Mike exchanged glances. “We saw the Jaguar,” Laura said, “but its back tires were flat and no one was inside. We honked our horn and yelled, and when no one responded, we left. We didn’t see a dog.”

I slumped and closed my eyes.

“I was surprised at your choice of companions when we finally found you,” Mike said. “This Gretchen person strikes me as being a self-centered, materialistic tool of the gluttonous consumerist profiteering machine.”

My eyes opened. “How old are you?”

“Thirteen,” he said. “How old did you think?”

Laura grinned. “You’re boring enough to be sixty.”

“And you’re politically naive enough to be a Baby Boomer.”

Pete's bedroom door opened, and Pete shuffled out. He was wearing baggy coveralls. "Damn it, I was up late last night," he said, his voice thick with sleep.

"Sorry, Dad," Laura and Mike said in unison.

I stood. "Why'd you do it?" I asked Pete.

He looked at me groggily. "Do what?"

"Search for me. Bring me here. Granted, you knew my uncle, but . . ."

He shuffled toward the kitchen. "Coffee. Food. Maybe a shower. Then we'll talk." He wrinkled his nose. "And do your laundry."

I followed him. The mention of food had made me smell the pot roast again, which in turn had made me hungry. The mention of laundry had made me realize that I'd been wearing the same pair of briefs since Thursday, which in turn had made me itch.

"Should we wake Miss Laird at any particular time?" Laura asked.

I shrugged. Gretchen had made it plain that she no longer wanted anything to do with me, so I saw no reason to have anything to do with her.

"Let the fascist sleep," Mike said.

After putting in my contacts and having breakfast (pancakes and sausage), I put on a pair of coveralls that Pete loaned me and threw my other clothes into his Kenmore. Then he and I went out to the garage, and I gave the Ariel a few test kicks while he listened to her wheeze. Then he took a toolbox from a shelf and got to work. "Sounds like fouled plugs," he said, fitting a spark-plug socket to a ratchet and squatting beside the bike.

I grunted and looked away. It's embarrassing when someone else has to do your work for you, no matter what the circumstances. My eyes lit on the white car.

"Nice vehicle," I said.

Pete began loosening a plug. "Yeah, that's the Oklahoma Kamikaze. A 1968 Barracuda with a 426 Hemi. My special project."

"It isn't finished?"

"Oh, yeah, he's finished," Pete said. "But a Hemi always needs adjustments. He's temperamental, like a stud thoroughbred."

"He?"

"Named after your uncle." The plug came free. "See, look at that spark gap—carbonized all to hell."

I looked. It was. "I'd sort of figured that your son was named after my uncle," I said.

"He is. But he's also heavily into politics, which the old Mikey definitely was not."

"Young Mike's into politics? Never would have guessed."

Pete chuckled. "He says he's a founder of a club called the New Radicals, and he claims that the 1990s are going to be the sixties all over again. He's his own man."

He pointed at the Barracuda. "Now, *that*, on the other hand, is my old friend. We called him Kamikaze Mikey—Jesus, twenty-one years ago. He was going to move down here after we got out, and we were going to go into the welding business together. He said he was going to become the *Oklahoma Kamikaze*."

"Why 'Kamikaze' in the first place?"

"Because he was, man. Full-bore, all eight cylinders hammering, wild-assed, look-out-motherfuckers-I'm-heading-down-your-goddamn-throats, bug-eyed, shit-fire crazy."

"I don't remember his letters being anything like that."

"Well, I guess not," Pete said, loosening the second plug. "I read them all before he sent them, and sometimes I made him do them over again so they'd sound

normal. Now, don't get me wrong; he could be as sane as anyone. But he knew when a situation called for *in*-sanity, and it wasn't something he could just turn off like that." Pete snapped the fingers of his free hand.

Something like recognition welled up in me. "I remember you! I mean, I remember him writing about you. You were the guy who thought about food all the time."

Pete nodded. "Uh-huh. We all had our things. Some guys had women or pot or whatever. Mikey had craziness. I had food. Would've gotten fat if I hadn't had the shits so often." He grinned. "Except near the end of my tour, we got some stuff in dinky cans that, God, had to have been Korean War surplus. Cheese stuff with bacon. We called it choke-ass. First few guys who ate it got so constipated that no one but me wanted any."

He held up the second plug, and it was worse than the first. "Think they'll be okay if we clean them?" I asked.

Pete shook his head. "Better get new ones if you want to make it to Lubbock without breaking down again."

I was disgusted. "Does everybody in the world know where I'm going?"

"Maybe," Pete said, standing and tossing the cruddy spark plugs into a bucket of junk. "Laura knew right away. She'd no sooner seen the broadcast on Friday when she asked me all sorts of questions about Buddy Holly. When I said that I thought he was buried in Lubbock, she said, 'Then that's where Oliver Vale is going.'"

"Smart girl."

He walked to a rack of drawers and began opening and closing them, looking inside each. "Yeah, she's only sixteen, but she'll graduate from high school this spring, a year early. Then she figures on heading off to MIT. She already knows more about computers than most en-



gineers, and on top of that, she's just a solo flight short of her pilot's license. She wants to be an astronaut, if NASA ever gets its act together again, and she figures that flying'll be a good complement to brain power." He looked at me. "Sorry. I tend to go on about my kids."

"Sounds like they're something to go on about. Besides, you're fixing my bike, so I'll listen to anything."

He turned back to the drawers. "Well, I *hope* I can fix it. I'm more comfortable with things that run on a decent number of wheels. Tell you what, though—if we can't get the bike up and chugging again, I'll run you to Lubbock in the Kamikaze." He looked into the last drawer. "I don't have the right plugs, so I'll have to go to town. You won't be able to leave until tonight at the earliest. Assuming nothing else is wrong."

"Wouldn't count on it," I said. "Peggy Sue's old, and I'm not much good at preventive maintenance."

"Peggy Sue, huh?" Pete scratched his neck as he gazed at the bike. "What happened to the left pipe?"

"Doberman pinscher cyborg. A big one."

"It'd have to be."

We walked back to the house, and Pete told Laura and Mike that he was going into Lawton for parts. While he was gone, they were to treat me and Gretchen as honored guests.

I followed Pete to the mud room, and as he was putting on his coat, I again asked, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Come on, Pete. The same 'why what' as an hour ago. Why treat me like an 'honored guest'? Why search for me in the first place?" I hesitated. "Look, if you knew my uncle, you also know that he and I never met, so it doesn't make sense for you to do this for his sake. We were related by blood, but nothing else."

Pete stared at the floor. "You were related by things

stronger than blood," he said, "but I'm not sure I can put a name to any of them. Not and have them make sense." He opened the door, and the rush of cold air made my eyes water. "There's a metal box on the desk in my room. It has all of the letters your mother wrote to Mikey. He told me to keep them if something happened to him, because he knew I liked reading them as much as he did."

"You've kept them twenty-one years?"

"Couldn't throw them away. Emily, my wife, was going to once, because she thought they were from an old girlfriend. But I explained it to her, and she let me keep them. Still, she always knew that she was right, in a way."

"You fell in love with my mother?" I was starting to shiver, and I hugged myself.

Pete was silent for a moment. "Not love," he said then. "Fascination. I fell into fascination with her, with all of that wild stuff about Atlantis and space beings who flew around in bubbles of light. Stuff about how you were the spiritual reincarnation of Buddy Holly. I got to feeling like I was as much your uncle as Mikey was." He shook his head. "Never had the guts to get in touch with either of you after I made it home, though. I was afraid that the reality wouldn't live up to the fascination. Boy, was I wrong." He started to close the door. "Go read the letters. Me, I've got to buy some off-size spark plugs."

The door closed, but I opened it again. Pete was walking toward the flatbed truck.

"Mother died five years ago," I blurted.

He stopped, saying nothing.

"I didn't know whether you knew," I said.

Pete looked back. "I knew," he said. Then he went to the truck and drove away.

\* \* \*

I wandered back through the kitchen and dining area. My eyes avoided the door to Pete's room.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Vale?" Laura asked as I came into the living room and sat on the couch. She was lying on the floor reading a book filled with diagrams and equations.

"Fine," I said. "Except for the worldwide chaos that's being blamed on me, I mean."

"Glad to hear it."

Mike came into the room from the basement. "It's ten o'clock," he said. "Does Ms. Laird always perform auto-erotic acts at about this time?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "How do you?"

"I was wondering how she could sleep so long, so I went downstairs and used a stethoscope to listen to the spare room's floor. A lot of thumping and bumping."

"She's probably exercising. She seems to place great value on having a strong body."

"I'm not surprised," Mike said. "Right-wingers have little else of value in their lives."

Laura looked up from her book with a sour expression. "Give it a rest. You don't know anything about her."

"I know enough."

"Dad said we were to be polite."

"And I will be, when she shows her face. If you weren't so concerned with numbers and gadgets, you might have some small awareness that people like her are responsible for most of the world's pain and suffering, not to mention the decline of art and culture."

As Laura retorted, I stood and crossed into the dining area. Then, before Mike retorted to Laura's retort, I opened the door to Pete's room and stepped inside.

The light was on. The room contained only a bed, a bureau, and a desk with a wooden chair. On the desk was a PC and a metal document box.

I closed the door and stood still, unwilling to go to the desk. When I had first read the passage in Volume I that described my conception, my life had changed, and not for the better. Then, after Mother's death, I had read the entire diary, and that had changed things further. Again, the change had not been for the better . . . assuming that "better" means increased happiness and peace of mind. Reading Mother's words had never given me either of those.

Now here I was again, with more of her words before me, knowing that the things she might have said to a brother she missed terribly, a brother trapped in a world of shit, might reveal things about her, and about me, that even her diary had failed to reveal. If I read these words, I would again be changing all the changes of my life.

I stepped forward and opened the box. I always had.

#### SHARON

Notes on client Oliver Vale, continued . . .

Sunday, February 5, 1989. 10:20 A.M.

I should never have tried to do this thing with Bruce. He isn't the only lawyer in the world.

Once we made it through Oklahoma City (after hours of struggling through crowds and traffic jams), I told Bruce, who was driving, to take a state highway that I hoped would not be well patrolled. I was afraid that the authorities might be looking for us by now and that someone in the city might have spotted us.

Bruce refused. The mess in Oklahoma City had been the last straw, he said. If I wanted to go to Lubbock,

Texas, fine, but we wouldn't skulk about like fugitives. "That," he said, "is a method I'll leave to your friend Oliver the Geek."

Despite my protests, he turned the car around and drove north to I-40, where he turned west. We would do the sensible thing, he said, and drive directly to Amarillo, then south on I-27 to Lubbock.

I tried to explain. The KBI agents had told me to stay in Topeka. If we were caught—

Bruce scoffed. The KBI had neither placed me under arrest nor delivered a court order requiring me to stay put, so they didn't have a legal leg to stand on.

We reached the Texas border about 7:00 A.M., and a mile after we crossed it, we encountered a Texas Highway Patrol roadblock. The patrolman who looked in at us said, in a West Texas drawl, that he was sorry for the inconvenience, but that it was the opinion of the Texas Highway Patrol that the Federal fugitive known as Oliver Vale might be headed for Lubbock, and as of this morning the patrol was stopping traffic on all major highways coming into the state. Could he please see our identification, and had either of us seen anyone riding an old motorcycle or fitting Vale's description?

We had no choice. Bruce and I both had to show him our Kansas driver's licenses. He took them and asked us to wait a moment.

While traffic began to pile up behind us, the patrolman went to one of the four cruisers sitting on the highway and spoke into a microphone, reading from the licenses. I rolled down my window to hear the reply, but all I could make out were static-filled squawks.

When the patrolman returned, three of his colleagues came with him. "Would y'all step out of the vehicle, please?" the patrolman said.

Bruce scowled his best don't-harass-me-you-fool-I'm-an-attorney scowl. "What is this?" he demanded. "Are we under arrest?"

"No, sir."

"Then we're not stepping out," Bruce told him. "I'm a lawyer, and I know my—"

"Sir," the patrolman said, interrupting, "you aren't under arrest *now*. However, if you refuse to cooperate with the Texas Department of Public Safety in our efforts to apprehend a possible felon, we'll have just cause to suspect you of aiding that felon. *Then* we'll arrest you."

"This is coercion!" Bruce thundered.

The patrolman smiled. "No, sir," he said. "This is Texas."

They put us in a cruiser and took us to a Texas DPS building in the town of Shamrock (assuring us that Bruce's car would follow via tow truck), and that's where we've been for almost three hours now.

Every fifteen minutes, two suit-and-tie Texas Rangers come into the room and ask the same questions.

Do you know Oliver Vale?

Is Oliver Vale responsible for the takeover of television communications?

Did you help him do it?

What are Vale's intentions?

Why Buddy Holly?

Are you going to Lubbock? Is that where Vale is heading? Why?

Each time, I answer their questions as honestly as I can. Yes, I know Oliver. I don't know whether he's responsible. I didn't help him. I don't know his intentions. He identifies with Buddy Holly, but that doesn't mean that he did it. Yes, we're heading to Lubbock. Maybe. I don't know.

The Rangers can only hear me part of the time. The

rest of the time, Bruce is bellowing about deprivation of civil liberties and massive legal retaliation.

The way I feel now, I myself may retaliate by depriving myself of Bruce.

RICHTER

After the slug was removed and the stitches and bandage were in place, Richter got down from the table and pulled on his pants despite the doctor's advice.

"You should rest for a few hours," the doctor said. "You had quite an ordeal, waiting all that time out there. Lucky for you that you had a car phone."

"Yes," Richter said, sitting on the table again to put on his shoes.

The doctor coughed. "Um, you should also stay because, um, I have to report a bullet wound to the police. They'll want to ask you how it happened."

"No," Richter said, and limped out of the cubicle past the wide-eyed nurse. He had too much to do to waste more time here, and he didn't think that the doctor would have much of a chance to call the police.

He had to push his way through the packed Emergency waiting room toward the exit. Lawton was not a large city, but it was currently experiencing an epidemic of physical injuries ranging from scrapes and broken bones to almost-severed limbs. The Bill Willyite/Couch Potato Riots were in full swing here. One of the ambulance attendants had told him that a large number of soldiers from Fort Sill had been given weekend passes and that they had become enthusiastic contributors to the violence of the demonstrations.

"Hey, is your name Richter?" a voice boomed over the noise in the waiting room.

Richter saw a beefy policeman pointing at him from a doorway. He kept moving toward the exit, but his leg slowed him down too much, and he didn't make it. The policeman's hand clamped on his shoulder.

In this crowd, it would be difficult to break free and stay free without killing his opponent. It was unfortunate, but . . .

"You've got a phone call," the policeman said, pulling Richter toward the doorway from which he had come.

Richter shook himself from the officer's grip, then followed him down a hall to a bank of pay telephones where another officer was holding a receiver. Richter took it, and both officers walked away.

He leaned against the wall to take the weight off his right leg, and he spoke into the receiver, "Yes?"

"Richter." It was his superior. "I thought I would call and save you the bother. You *were* going to call when you were out of surgery, weren't you?"

"Yes," Richter lied.

"Mmmm. I wondered, because the credit card you gave the towing company and the hospital receptionist is one that you obtained using an alias that we did not assign to you. If I didn't know better, I would suspect that you didn't want us to know you were in a hospital in Lawton, Oklahoma. Nor that you had been shot. Nor, by extension, that you were having difficulty with your assignment. That wasn't the case, was it?"

"No," Richter said. He was weary. The amphetamines had long since worn off, and he ached in more places than his leg.

After the Doberman had run off, Richter had crawled to the Jaguar and had been about to get inside when a flatbed truck had pulled into the rest area. Richter had



belly-slid under the car and had drawn his pistol, waiting there while the truck's occupants had honked their horn and shouted, "Is anyone here?," a hundred times. Richter had nearly passed out, but even so he had been certain that he had heard someone yell, "Is Oliver Vale here?" He hadn't had a chance to investigate that, though, because the truck had left.

He had crawled out from under the car, gotten inside, and called for an ambulance and a tow truck. Both had taken over an hour to arrive, with the tow truck showing up ten minutes before the ambulance, but he was fortunate in that his wound had bled only a little. He had known that he wouldn't die. It was a small comfort.

"I'm glad to hear that you haven't forgotten me, Richter," his superior said, "for I certainly haven't forgotten you. You are my best operative and have been for a number of years—"

"Yes," Richter said.

"—which is why I regret to inform you that you are removed from your assignment. Other arrangements will be made about the matter. As soon as your vehicle is repaired, you will proceed to the Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City and fly home."

Richter smoldered.

"You can't be surprised, Richter. Did you think that I would speak with you via an unsecured telephone line if I were going to say anything else?"

"No," Richter said. He tried to keep the anger out of the word and did not succeed.

The tone of his superior's voice became consoling. "Sometimes the simplest-looking jobs turn out to be the most complicated, my friend. This one wasn't your type, anyway. Come home, and I promise something good for you. You aren't so old that we're putting you out to

pasture. There's an individual representing a certain foreign company who has been taking advantage of the current social disorder to engage in unfair business practices. You may be able to persuade him to desist. Yes?"

Richter almost said "Yes," but stopped himself.

*You aren't so old that we're putting you out to pasture.*

It was a lie, but it contained the truth.

They weren't going to give him a sanction when he had failed at an apprehension. An operative only failed once, and then he was no longer an operative. Usually that was because he was dead, but there were a few who survived and were merely considered incompetent.

"Problem," Richter said. His throat began hurting.

"What is it?"

"Leg's hemorrhaging. Request two days recuperation."

There was a long silence. At last his superior said, "Very well. We'll assign another man to the business problem. I assume you'll be coming home for your R and R."

"No. Possible concussion. Dizziness. Don't want to fly until it's gone."

Another silence. "Your order to return home will be in force in forty-eight hours." The line clicked.

Richter hung up the phone. Whatever happened now, his career was over. His life was over.

They had done it to him. Vale. The woman. The dog.

The dog that could catch bullets in its teeth and spit them out again.

Richter didn't care. Nobody did to him what they had done. Nobody made him look like a fool.

He limped down the hall to Emergency and struggled through the packed bodies again. He had paid the men in the tow truck quadruple their usual rate in ex-

change for a promise that they would replace the Jaguar's blown tires and bring the car to the Emergency parking lot. He found that they had fulfilled that promise.

Richter slid behind the wheel and sat for a few minutes until the throbbing in his leg subsided to a tolerable level. Then he reached under the seat and took his weapon and shoulder holster from the compartment where he had hidden them. He removed the pistol from the holster, ejected its ammunition clip, and checked the action. Then he replaced the clip and started the Jaguar.

Amphetamines would not relieve his fatigue now, so he would take some time to recuperate, just as he had said he would.

But not much.

#### CATHY AND JEREMY

Jeremy sat on his haunches in the passenger seat of the Datsun and scratched himself behind an ear. "We should've had this car fumigated when we bought it," he said.

"Which way at the next light?" Cathy said, holding her nose with one hand and steering with the other. The stench of crude oil was heavy even though it was Sunday morning.

"Left," Jeremy answered. "Past the refinery."

"Wonderful," Cathy muttered, taking the corner and accelerating.

"Sorry. This is the way Ringo went."

Cathy's eyebrows rose. "I just had a thought. Can you see where he is now?"

Jeremy closed his human-eye and opened the other.

"He's caught up with Vale again. He's lying among some trees and watching the house where Vale's hiding."

"Great. Let's buy a road map and just *go* there. There's got to be a more direct route."

Jeremy shook his head. "I can see what Ringo sees, so in one sense I know where he is—but I don't know *where* he is. I couldn't even figure out his current location by trying to trace his route on a map, because he doesn't care about north or south, east or west. He just follows the motorcycle and occasionally looks at the scenery. So the scenery's all I've got to go by."

They came upon the oil refinery tower, its flame burning bright orange in the gray dawn. Cathy shuddered. "How can they stand it? All these odors flooding their senses for their entire lives. . . ."

"Human beings can get used to anything." Jeremy stiffened as he spoke and looked to the east.

"What?" Cathy asked. "What's wrong?"

"Pull onto the shoulder and stop."

Cathy did so, then looked out to see what Jeremy saw.

"Can you feel them?" he asked.

She nodded. "I knew they were here somewhere, but the stink kept my senses occupied."

"So this is SkyVue," Jeremy said.

"Not an impressive place."

"Impressive enough. Read the marquee."

Cathy did, and grimaced. "Bill Willy? Here? Are the pro-fleshies *trying* to defeat themselves?"

"Sort of looks that way. Should we drop in and say hello?"

Cathy steered the Datsun onto the road again. "Why? To gloat? With all that's happened in the past two days, our point's been proven. The fleshbound peoples of Earth aren't ready for the responsibility of noncorporeality. All

that you and I have to do now is see to it that Vale remains unharmed, and our consciences are clear.”

“What about the rest of the world?” Jeremy asked. “A lot of people besides Vale stand to get hurt. Some already have been.”

Cathy jerked her left thumb at the receding drive-in theater. “That’s the responsibility of our two cousins back there. The only part of it that you and I have had anything to do with is Vale. And he’s going to be fine. Right?”

“I hope so. When the Fed tried to shoot him, I was afraid that we’d waited too long, but—”

“But Ringo responded to your commands, as I predicted.”

Jeremy frowned. “Maybe. . . .”

“Whattaya mean ‘maybe’? He stopped the attack, didn’t he? He gave Vale the chance to escape and hide, didn’t he?”

Jeremy began scratching his ear again. “Yes. But it felt as if he might be acting on his own.”

“He’s not smart enough to do that,” Cathy said. “The hardware didn’t include any free-will circuits, and the rest of him is plain old dog.”

“Maybe ‘plain old dog’ has more to it than we thought. I didn’t tell him to put a bullet into the Fed’s leg.”

“That was just a reflex, and no real harm done. Vale escaped, and the G-man survived. All’s well that ends well.”

“It hasn’t ended yet. The agent won’t quit.”

“But he won’t get to Vale again before we do.”

“Assuming our car holds up.”

Cathy pounded on the dashboard. “Damn it, why’d you have to say that? The heater’s stopped again! What an existence—putrid stench, bodies that ache and col-

lapse, machines that don't work. How do the fleshbound stand it?"

Jeremy shrugged. "By taking one day at a time, I suppose, so the agony doesn't accumulate. That's no more than a guess, mind you."

Cathy gritted her teeth. "Just a little longer," she said. "Just a little longer, and then we can go back to taking life the civilized way—one *millennium* at a time."

Jeremy squirmed and began biting his shoulder. "Right now," he said around a mouthful of his shirt, "I'd settle for taking life with no fleas."

## 8

OLIVER

In 1974, when I was fourteen and Mother was working on Volume V, we moved to the house south of the city where I still live. The move came as a surprise to me, for I had always assumed that Mother's salary barely covered necessities and record albums. Somehow, though, she had saved enough in nine years at the radio station to cover a down payment. (Of course, a down payment in 1974 was somewhat less than the fortune required now.) We moved in the spring, right after the end of the school year. I had finished junior high, and it was a good time for change.

The Apollo program was over, and while the Skylab missions had been fascinating, they hadn't been as exciting as the lunar adventures, and my interest in space exploration had waned. That waning, however, wasn't entirely due to the change in NASA's priorities, because my own priorities had shifted. By the end of my ninth-grade school year, if a genie had given me the choice of becoming either the first man on Mars or the first man

to fornicate with Valerie Frackner from my English class, I would have agonized for about six seconds and then tackled Valerie.

It was a good summer. I was old enough that Mother trusted me to take care of myself while she was at work, and I was young enough that I didn't have to find a job of my own yet. I spent my mornings either reading in my new room or shooting a basketball at the hoop over the garage door, and on every sunny afternoon I changed into swim trunks and rode my bicycle nine miles to the community pool on the city's south side. There I could lounge with three or four other males my own age, drinking soda pop and swimming, but mainly ogling the seventeen-year-old female lifeguards.

I had been wearing black-framed glasses for over a year, but those afternoons at the pool made me yearn for contact lenses. For one thing, I was the only boy my age who knew, or cared, who Buddy Holly had been, and the fact that my glasses made me look like him was an irrelevancy in my social circle. For another thing, the guys told me that the glasses were dorky, and that the girls thought so too.

Mother told me that what with house payments and everything, contact lenses were just too expensive, especially since our optometrist said that my eyes were still changing. She was afraid of spending a few hundred dollars just to have to do it all over again. "Besides," she said, "your glasses make you look like Buddy." Mother and Buddy had been on a first-name basis ever since he had died.

I was beginning to resent the dominating influence of Charles Hardin Holley in my life in much the same way that other adolescent males resented the dominating influence of their fathers in theirs, and sometimes at night I would lie awake and curse him. I wanted to



live in 1974, not 1958; I wanted to be Oliver Vale, not an avatar of a man who had been dead for fifteen years.

And yet, just as the adolescent male who resents his father will fight when his father is slandered, so I fought when Buddy was slandered. One afternoon at the pool, someone had a transistor radio tuned to KKAP's Oldies Hour, and one of the oldies was the original version of "Rave On." A guy I didn't know asked what sort of crap that was supposed to be, and the radio owner answered that it didn't matter because the singer was dead.

"Good riddance," answered the other guy.

I shoved him into the water. Neither of the lifeguards saw me do it, but they *did* see him come up out of there and punch me in the face, busting my glasses at the bridge. He was thrown out and forbidden to return for the rest of the summer, and a bikinied lifeguard named Shelley came to me while I was holding my nose, put her hand on my arm, and asked if I was hurt.

I was struggling to keep the pain from bringing tears to my eyes. "Nah, he didn't hit me hard," I said, leaning close so that Shelly's left breast touched my shoulder. What I wanted to do then was drop my hand from my nose and gaze into her eyes, but what I had to do instead was turn away and head for the shower room. The tears had come anyway. Pain had defeated sex.

By the time I had recovered enough to emerge from the shower room, the guy with the radio had ratted on me, and I was thrown out too—but just for the afternoon, since no one in charge had any hard evidence against me. Riding my bike home while trying to hold my busted glasses on my injured face was tough, but I felt triumphant. I had kicked butt, had mostly gotten away with it, and had brushed against a seventeen-year-old girl's boob.

It was a good summer.

Nixon resigned on August 9, and I didn't care. I was fourteen and had better things on my mind.

Mother's attitude wasn't much different. She wrote, *Nixon has resigned. Big deal. He was only a figment of my imagination anyway.* Not surprisingly, she had shown more interest in the death of Mama Cass Elliot eleven days before. She had written, *Despite the sadness that I feel, I must admit that after all of the overdose deaths of the past five years, it is refreshing to see a pop star phase herself into another plane of existence via a ham sandwich.*

Then the summer was gone, and I started high school with a new pair of black frames and my first truly hideous pimples. With the move to the house, my school district had changed, and instead of going to Topeka High, I wound up at a rural unified-district school. My classmates were strong, rawboned farmers' kids, and I didn't fit in too well. Not that I would have fit in any better elsewhere. The summer of 1974 was the only oasis in the desert of my early adolescence, and it would have been so no matter where I had gone to school.

My grades were okay—no A's, but not many C's either—and my social relationships were about the same. I made a few friends, but none were close. I made the junior varsity basketball team and played for a total of fifteen minutes in five games. None of the girls I wanted were disgusted by me, but none were attracted either.

If I was the reincarnation of a rock 'n' roll star, I thought, I was not living up to it. It was only later, after Mother bought the first biographies of Buddy to hit the stands, that I discovered he hadn't been a superstar in high school either.

Like every other male I knew, I spent my days in agony. My hard-on would start on the school bus in the

morning and take only five-minute breaks between then and my arrival home in the late afternoon. My blue jeans were a torture chamber. Basketball practice helped, but only when we didn't have to share the gym with the girls' team.

These were not the sort of things that I discussed with Mother. Yet for my fifteenth birthday, she gave me two presents: a mongrel puppy and a box of condoms.

I was delighted at the first and horrified at the second. Rubbers, for the love of Christ. Peacocks, made down the road in Kansas City. From my mother. For my birthday. As if I had a use for them. Didn't I wish.

I named the scruffy black-haired pup Ready Teddy, after the Little Richard song that Buddy had covered à la rockabilly, and I took both him and the condoms into the backyard. While Ready Teddy growled puppy growls and chewed on my shoelaces, I removed the twelve prophylactics from their packets and stuffed them inside each other until I had a rubber ball. Then I taught Ready Teddy to chase it, and chew on it, and play keep-away with it in the cool December air.

When Mother came outside to tell me that it was time for supper, she saw what I had done, and for the one and only time in her life she became furious with me.

"Do you think it's a joke?" she shouted. "Is that it, Oliver? Do you think it's a goddamn *joke*?"

In those days we had no neighbors closer than a quarter mile away, for which I was grateful. "I don't know," I said sullenly. Ready Teddy was at my feet chewing on the condom-ball.

"You don't know," Mother said. "You *don't know*. Fucking-A *right* you don't know!"

I yelled back at her. "Don't talk like that! Other people's mothers don't talk like that!"

Her hands became fists. "I'm not other people's mother, shithead! And I didn't give you those to be funny. I gave them to you because you're fifteen. I gave them to you because in the next few years things are going to *happen*. I gave them to you because I want you to take *responsibility* for those things. Do you understand?"

I glared. "No." It was a lie, but I was pissed.

Some of the fury went out of Mother's eyes, and when she spoke again she didn't shout. But the words cut deeper than the yelling had. "That's the only box I'll ever buy for you, Oliver," she said. "You have to buy the next one yourself. Whether you think it's worth it, or whether you take the trouble, is up to you. But know this: If you get a girl pregnant, you no longer have a home. Got it?"

I squatted to pet my puppy, not wanting to look at Mother anymore.

"I asked you a question," she said.

"Don't worry," I said. Ready Teddy nipped at my fingers. "I'm never going to be stupid enough for that." This last was a slap at her, because she *had* been stupid. Even as I said it, though, I was thinking, *I'm never going to be lucky enough for that*.

A long silence followed as I petted Ready Teddy and pretended that I couldn't feel Mother's eyes on me.

Then she said, "Promise."

I couldn't help looking up. "Promise what?"

Now she was the one who looked away. "Promise that you won't get anyone pregnant. If you don't promise, I'll have to leave. On a UFO. A ship of light. The world is hard enough as it is. I couldn't stay knowing that my son had made it worse."

I picked up my dog and stood. "I promise," I said. It seemed the quickest way to get the whole scene over with.

Mother looked at me again and smiled, her eyes

glistening. "You're a good boy," she said, turning to go inside. "Come in and eat. Pot roast and baked potatoes."

Of all the meals we ate together, that is the one I can still taste.

\*

Reading Mother's letters to Uncle Mike was a lot like reading Volumes III and IV, except that her isolation comes through even more strongly. She missed her brother, and in seven of the twenty-two letters she even tells him that "sometimes I miss Mama almost as much"—a statement that has no equivalent in the diary. Yet it rings true, especially since Mother and Grandmother did begin to spend time together after Uncle Mike's death (a trend that was destroyed, of course, when Grandmother brought me home to find Mother and Keith making love on the carpet).

I sat at Pete's desk going through the letters for two hours and was beginning to think that perhaps I would emerge from the experience unchanged. Parts of the letters were tough going, but I hadn't come across anything startling.

Then I came to the last letter in the stack, dated August 29, 1968. It could not have arrived in Vietnam until after Uncle Mike's death.

It begins with the usual letter-from-home news, but concludes with this:

*I am going to tell you something now, Mikey, that I have not told anyone else. I have not even put it into my diary because I don't want to read it again after writing it down, but I have to let it out this once because it has been preying on my mind. When you come home, pretend I never told you.*

*I had a dream during the Democratic National Convention that did not seem to be a dream at all. I dreamed*

*that I was walking along a sidewalk in Chicago when I became trapped between a mob of anti-war protesters and another mob of riot police. Both sides converged on me, and a policeman, thinking that I was one of the protesters, clubbed me. I fell, and they all began trampling me. I tried to crawl away, and then there were bodies falling on me, smothering me. There was blood on my mouth and nose. My eyes were closed. I was being killed. The whole world was watching.*

*Then, just as I could feel the last of my life about to be crushed, all of the weight disappeared, and I floated up, up, up. I opened my eyes and saw that I was suspended in the center of a sphere of light high above the street. I could see through the sphere, and I looked at the riot below me. The shouts and screams had become one loud rumble.*

*I thought that I was dead, that I had left my body. But then I felt a vibration in the sphere that surrounded me, and a voice burrowed into my head, saying, "You must remain until twenty-five years have passed."*

*The sphere carried me higher and flew me home, depositing me in my bed here in Topeka. When I awoke the next morning, there was blood on my pillow from a cut on my lower lip, and I had a bruise on my forehead. I covered the bruise with makeup and went to work.*

*I have thought about it a lot, and I am sure that I know what the sphere of light meant: I am to die on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Buddy Holly.*

*It is not an easy thing to know when you will die, even if it will not happen until 1984. That is why I had to tell you, Mikey—you, who must think of death every day and find a way to live with it. I am sorry to give you more.*

*And now that I have written it, I will find a way to live with it myself. Pretending that I don't know will, I*

*think, be the wisest course. Whatever works.*

I read those paragraphs over and over again.

"Why didn't you tell me too?" I murmured.

But I knew that Mother never would have told me anything that she wasn't even able to tell her diary. Besides, I had been eight years old. I couldn't have understood. Now I was twenty-nine, and I still couldn't.

When I heard Pete's truck drive up outside, I gathered the letters and replaced them in the metal box, glad that I had finished before he had returned. Then I stood and opened the blinds over the window to the left of the desk. Pete had stepped out of the truck and was petting an enormous Doberman pinscher with a galvanized chain collar.

I yelled and burst out of the room, colliding with Gretchen, who shoved me into a wall. "Watch where you're going, lardbrain," she said.

Mike and Laura appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Is something wrong, Mr. Vale?" Laura asked.

"Do you own a rifle?" I gasped.

"Dad has a shotgun," Mike said, "but I hid the shells so he wouldn't hurt himself."

"Find them! My neighbors' dog is here!"

The sound of the back door slamming shut echoed through the house. "Hey, kids, look what I've got," Pete called. "I gave him a piece of jerky, and he seems to have decided that I'm God." A moment later he came into the dining room with Ringo trotting by his side.

I tried to become part of the wall. "Are you crazy?" I shrieked. "That's the monster that bit off my tail pipe!"

Pete looked at me and back to the dog. "No kidding?"

Gretchen got down on her knees and began petting the Doberman. "I don't care," she said. "He saved my

butt from the Bald Avenger, and yours too.”

“Only so he could have us for himself,” I said. “It was one killer battling another.”

“Yeah, some killer,” Gretchen said, reaching up to scratch behind Ringo’s ears. His eyes were closed, and his bobbed tail was wagging.

“He’s beautiful,” Laura said, joining Gretchen in petting him.

Mike crossed his arms. “Looks like a four-legged Gestapo officer.”

“Oh, shut up,” Laura said. “He can’t help that.”

“Who’s the Bald Avenger?” Pete asked.

“Somebody who’s after me,” I said. “Just like Ringo’s been after me.”

Mike gave me a look. “‘Ringo’?”

“I told you, he belongs to my neighbors. That’s what they call him.”

Mike looked back at the Doberman. “I don’t see the resemblance. Still, a dog named Ringo isn’t likely to be a fascist.” He joined Gretchen and Laura in stroking the animal, which quivered with pleasure.

“Don’t trust him,” I said. I was beginning to feel foolish for standing against the wall while everyone else was falling all over the creature. “I’m telling you, this dog ate a chunk of my motorcycle and has been following me ever since.”

Pete went into the living room and sat on the couch. “Oliver, are you claiming that Ringo left Topeka at the same time as you and followed you all the way here?”

“That’s right.”

“I see. Do his owners mistreat him?”

“I have no idea,” I said, “but I don’t see how they could. *Look* at him!”

Pete did. “He’s big, but that doesn’t mean much. I



know dogs, and I wouldn't have let this one into my home if he hadn't given me good vibes."

"*Good vibes?* From a Doberman that bites through—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Gretchen said. She was still petting Ringo. "You know, Vale, you're a real eighties kind of guy—a complete pussy."

"Can we keep him, Dad?" Mike asked. "The dog, I mean."

"I knew who you meant," Pete said.

"Well, can we?" Laura asked. "You've been saying ever since Puck died that we ought to have another dog."

Pete leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. "If Ringo has run this far from home since Thursday night, he either really hates his owners or really loves Oliver. And since he and Oliver don't seem to be pals, I guess it's the former. If he wants to stick around here, he's welcome."

Mike and Laura made various noises of thanks while Gretchen went to sit beside Pete. "Good decision," she said, patting his knee.

"Look at his eyes!" I cried.

Laura took Ringo's massive head in her hands. "Come on, boy," she said. "Let's reassure Mr. Vale. Open your eyes. Mike, stop petting him or he'll keep them closed."

Mike stopped petting, and Ringo opened his eyes. He looked at me, and I saw that his left eye was as I remembered—black, with a blue spark in its center. The right eye, though, had changed. It was blue, and almost human-looking.

"Dad, did you notice these before?" Laura asked. She turned Ringo's head so that he was facing Pete.

Pete frowned. "Didn't look straight at them until now."

"Me either," Gretchen said. She sounded less brash than usual.

Laura held Ringo's eyelids open with her thumbs. "There, boy, it's all right, I just want to look closer. That's a good— Oh!"

Ringo's right eye had popped out and was rolling across the carpet.

Mike picked it up. "Hey, it isn't slimy."

"And Ringo doesn't seem to mind that it's gone," Laura said. The Doberman was licking her hands and wagging his stump so hard that he swayed back and forth. "In fact, he seems glad about it."

Gretchen shuddered. "God, how gross!"

"Spoken like an eighties woman," Mike said dryly.

I relaxed a little. "Laura, you're the scientist," I said. "Is the mutt a robot?"

She was probing gingerly around Ringo's remaining eye. "Well, that might explain how he was able to bite through metal, if in fact he did. . . ."

I remembered that I still had Ringo's missing tooth in a Moonsuit pocket, so I ran back to the utility room to retrieve it. When I returned, Mike was shining a penlight into Ringo's eye socket, and Laura was peering inside.

"It's pink," she said. "But there's a crosshatch of fine silver wires set into the flesh."

"And the rear half of the eyeball has a silvery coating," Mike said.

Ringo was standing stock-still. "That's one patient dog," Pete said. "Hard to believe he attacked you, Oliver."

"I have evidence," I said, holding up the tooth.

Laura took it from me, examined it, and then pushed her fingers in between Ringo's lips.

I started toward her, intending to pull her away from those Doberman jaws, but Mike pointed the penlight at

my face, stopping me. "She knows what she's doing, Mr. Vale," he said. "She knows animals, like Dad. Besides which, she's a genius."

"That's the first compliment you've ever given me," Laura said as she pried Ringo's mouth open.

"It wasn't a compliment," Mike said. "Both of the traits I mentioned are inherited, so you aren't responsible for them. In all things for which you *are* responsible, such as social duty and political awareness, you're a miserable failure."

"Uh-huh," Laura said. "Look, there's the same silver crosshatch on the roof of his mouth. And the upper right canine is missing." She began screwing the tooth back into place. "Some of the socket threads are stripped, but it's going in. It'll be a little crooked, but I don't think it'll jab his lip."

"If he's a robot, what would it matter?" Mike asked.

Laura stood and patted Ringo, who nuzzled her hand.

"He's not a robot," Laura said. "He acts like a dog, smells like a dog, and slobbers like a dog." She wiped her hand on Mike's shirtsleeve, and he pretended to ignore it. "Dad, I'd like to take him to my room and try a few experiments. Nothing physical, just radio-frequency stuff. I want to see if that crosshatch is an antenna. Also, I should try to reinsert his eye."

"Be sure you don't hurt him," Pete said. "He's got a sweet disposition, but that doesn't mean he won't get mad."

Laura nodded. "C'mon, Ringo, let's see what makes you tick." She started for the basement door, and Ringo followed.

"I'd better go along to keep her humane," Mike said. "She might cut his skull open just out of curiosity. Besides, I have the eye." He went into the stairwell after Laura and Ringo, shutting the door behind him.

Pete stood and started for the kitchen. "He's probably hungry and thirsty. I'll see what I can find." As he passed me, he said, "Oh, yeah—I got your spark plugs."

Gretchen followed him. "Need a hand, Mr. Holden?" she asked.

"Sure, if you like," he answered. "When we're done with this, I'll call the Lawton depot for tomorrow's bus schedule. I thought about driving you in when I made my trip this afternoon, but I didn't want to wake you."

"There's no hurry," Gretchen said, sounding bizarrely sweet.

I went to the couch and sat down, picking up the remote control for Pete's TV from an end table. As long as I had to wait a bit longer for Peggy Sue to be repaired, I wanted to see what Buddy was up to. He might even take my mind off the fact that I was in the same house with Ringo. Vibes or no vibes, I still didn't trust the beast.

The Sony wouldn't come to life when I punched the button on the remote, and when I went to the set to investigate, I discovered that it was unplugged. I remembered then that my own remote-controlled Sony had refused to stay off for more than several seconds, while both of the nonremote-controlled motel televisions I had seen since leaving home had turned on and off with no trouble. Whoever or whatever had taken over video broadcasts had also managed to take over remote controls, perhaps by periodically zapping the planet with split-second bursts of infrared radiation. Except that infrared radiation couldn't go through walls. . . .

I stopped trying to figure it out. What was, was. *How* was irrelevant. That would be a bad attitude for someone like Laura, but for me, it was the only one possible.

I plugged in the set and returned to the couch while

the picture tube resolved into an image of Buddy lying on his back in the dust. His hands were clasped behind his head and his knees were raised; his guitar lay beside him. As I watched, he crossed his right ankle over his left knee and began humming. His right foot bobbed.

I had never before heard the tune that he hummed. When he stopped and started over again, changing some notes, I realized that Buddy Holly was writing a new song before my eyes. I leaned forward, fascinated, and hardly noticed when Pete and Gretchen walked by and went downstairs.

Softly, Buddy began to sing. "I got a girl from Jupiter, she comes from outer space." He paused, scratched the bridge of his nose under the glasses frame, and sat up cross-legged. Then he picked up the Strat and began strumming. "And if she had a mind to, she could change the human race."

He stopped playing, frowned, then began again, faster. "And I'll sing, whoa-oh! fly a little bit higher, gonna ride a rocket with a flame so bright. Whoa-oh! gonna let her take me with her, gonna ride a ragin' rocket to the stars tonight."

Buddy stopped strumming, then looked out and grinned at me. "Could be worse," he said.

I grinned back, feeling as though I were up there with him.

Then somebody pounded on the front door, and I snapped back to Earth. I hit the remote, and Buddy disappeared.

"Hey, Pete!" a deep voice boomed. "Pete Holden! You home or what?"

I stood to head for another room, and as I did, I caught a glimpse of the man outside through the translucent curtain over the picture window. He was wearing a uniform and a gun.

The TV popped on again. Buddy was strumming.

The stairwell door opened, and Pete and Ringo came into the living room. Ringo's ears were stiff, and his left eye was open wide. His right eye was still missing.

"Maybe you ought to go downstairs," Pete said to me, gesturing toward the stairwell with his thumb.

I stepped onto the landing, shutting the door behind me. I didn't go downstairs, though, because I wanted to hear what happened.

The front door opened. Ringo growled.

"Hello, Pete," the deep voice said. "Sorry to bother you on a Sunday, but the boss says deputy sheriffs ain't got a Sabbath."

"That's okay, Curt. You want to come in?"

"Better not take the time. Your dog doesn't seem to want me to anyway. How long've you had him?"

"Just today. He's a stray, but I think we're going to keep him. He and the kids hit it off."

"Well, good. How are your kids these days, anyway?"

I was going nuts. Why couldn't the guy just get to what he wanted, the way city Authorities did?

"The usual," Pete said. "Laura's brilliant, and Mike's gonna change the world."

The deputy chuckled. "If he were brilliant too, he'd know better."

Buddy began singing his song about the girl from Jupiter again, at a faster tempo. I heard Pete walk across the room, and Buddy stopped abruptly. Ringo was growling steadily now.

"Uh, guess I'd better not waste too much more of your time," the deputy said as Pete returned. "I just need to ask if you've seen anyone on a motorcycle."

"Lots of times. The Harrisons down the road own four."

"Yeah, right, but see, we got a report this morning

from some snowbirds on their way to Texas. They said they saw Oliver Vale—you know, the one who did *that*—I imagined him nodding at the TV—“about eight miles from here, out on sixty-five. Wondered if you’d seen anything like that.”

Pete clicked his tongue. “Curt, folks are getting so upset over doing without their boob tubes that they’ll think anybody on a bike is Vale. Those snowbirds probably saw one of the Harrisons.”

The deputy coughed. “Well, uh, Pete, I talked to the Harrisons and looked at their motorcycles. Didn’t fit the description. Besides which, they don’t ride at three in the morning, do they?”

“No, I guess not.”

“Me neither. And, well, Pete, Mrs. Harrison said you drove your truck past at about that time. She had insomnia and was in the kitchen, and when the truck went past, she looked out and thought she saw something in the back that might’ve been a motorcycle.”

There was a brief silence. “Let me get this straight, Curt,” Pete said then. “You think I’m actually Oliver Vale and that I took over every TV in the world because I’m a Buddy Holly fan.”

The deputy chuckled again, but nervously. “’Course not, but I’ve gotta check things out.”

“Okay, you’ve checked.”

Another silence. “You know, Pete, I remember that back in high school you used to get out of trouble by taking the teacher’s question and giving it a sort of judo throw. You never lied, but you never answered quite straight. You’re doing the same thing now.”

Ringo snarled, and his collar rattled.

“Hey, down, boy!” Pete cried. “Sit! Good dog!”

“He doesn’t like me much, does he?” the deputy said.

“Guess not.”

The deputy sighed. "So I guess I'll go check out another report. To tell you the truth, I don't want to catch the sumbitch even if he is around here somewhere. People in town are so foul-tempered about this business that we're thinking about asking for Guard troops to keep 'em from busting things up. If we apprehended Vale and tried to keep him in temporary custody in our jail, we'd be buried in the rubble before the Federal boys could catch a plane."

"Sounds like it's lucky for you that you haven't found him," Pete said.

There was a final silence, and then the deputy said, "Yeah, real lucky. See you, Pete. And congratulations on the new dog. He ought to keep the place good and safe."

"You know it." The door closed.

I waited, listening to be sure that the deputy was gone. I was poked in the ribs from behind and almost fell down the stairs.

"He's gone, turkeybutt," Gretchen said.

I went into the living room. Pete was standing beside the closed front door, scratching Ringo behind the ears.

"Think Curt is satisfied?" I asked.

Pete shook his head. "He won't be back today, but he'll keep thinking about it until he's sure you're here, and then he'll show up with a buddy or two. Tomorrow afternoon, maybe. We'll have you out of here by then."

Unexpectedly, Ringo, who had looked relaxed, jerked his head away from Pete and pricked up his ears. Then, with a sharp bark, he bounded past me and Gretchen and barreled down the basement stairs.

"What's with him?" Gretchen asked, as if Pete or I should know.



Pete followed Ringo. "Mike! Laura!" he shouted as he entered the stairwell. "Everything all right down there?"

Laura answered. "Sure, Dad. I've been broadcasting a beep signal on different frequencies to see if Ringo would respond, and he just did."

Pete came out of the stairwell, and then Laura, Mike, and Ringo appeared as well.

"He won't let us put the blue eye back," Mike said.

"Because it isn't his," I said. "Both of his eyes used to be like the one he still has. I don't know how he came to have the one that popped out."

"If he doesn't want it back by tomorrow, I'm taking it apart," Laura said. "In the meantime, I'll see if I can rig a radio dog whistle. A garage-door remote would be perfect, but Dad's always been too cheap to buy an electric opener."

"Now you know why," Pete said. "You'd have torn it apart and put it back together as something else, and I'd still have to open the garage by hand."

I went to the Moonsuit and retrieved my garage-door remote control. I figured that I might as well let Laura have it, since I doubted that I had a house or garage left anyway. An enraged populace had surely torn the place apart by now. I mourned for my record collection.

Laura accepted the remote control with what seemed to be uncharacteristic shyness, and then she, Mike, and Ringo disappeared downstairs again.

Pete stretched. "Well, Peggy Sue won't fix herself." He looked at Gretchen. "Miss Laird, I hope you don't mind staying another night. I'd take you to Lawton now, but getting Oliver on the road again is more urgent."

Gretchen smiled brightly. It looked weird on her. "I don't mind at all, Pete," she said, "but I wish you'd stop

calling me 'Miss Laird.' As long as I'm freeloading, you might as well call me by my first name."

Pete glanced at me. "Uh, sure," he said.

He and I went out to the garage. "Looks like you've got a girlfriend if you want one," I said.

Pete grunted and turned on the lights. "She's a little young for me. Like about twenty years."

"She doesn't seem to mind."

He gave me a narrow-eyed look. "You're a lot closer to her generation than I am. Why don't *you* make a move?"

"Because one, she hates my guts, and two, she scares the piss out of me."

Pete laughed. "Well, she doesn't scare me, but she sure makes me feel old. She was probably nursing at her momma's breast in a condo while your uncle and I were sucking on reefer in a pit latrine." He shook his head. "Too much distance there."

"I'm not so sure," I said, nodding toward the Oklahoma Kamikaze. "I think she could relate to a '68 Barracuda. She respects physical power. And mentally, she's closer to your age than she is to mine. It's clear she prefers you."

"You sound jealous," he said, taking the new spark plugs from a paper bag. "No reason you should be, though. After all, she's only a mortal. Why should you want that when you have an Ariel?"

"Don't let Gretchen hear that comparison. She's already accused me of preferring motorcycles to women. I think her basic assumption is that men, or at least men who ride bikes, are all misogynist perverts."

Pete squatted beside Peggy Sue. "I wasn't comparing women and motorcycles. I was comparing natural with supernatural, using Gretchen as an example of the natural and your Ariel as an example of the supernat-

ural. Even if Gretchen were to attach herself to you, her aid would only be physical. But with the Ariel, why, you're Prospero—you can command your airy spirit to conjure up a tempest."

I stared at him. "Pretty mystical for a welder who drives a Barracuda."

"Not really. I don't smoke dope anymore, but when I did, I smoked a *lot*."

"And that gave you insight into the supernatural?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. But I get feelings for things. For example, when Laura figured out that you were in the area last night, I was already getting ready to leave, because I *knew* you were close. I was even pretty sure which stretch of road we'd find you on."

"Did you know Gretchen would be with me?"

"Nope. She was a surprise."

Pete finished inserting and connecting the plugs while I thought about what he had said about Ariel and Prospero. I had taken a Shakespeare class at KSU before dropping out, and *The Tempest* had been one of the plays I'd read. It began to come back to me.

"Peggy Sue isn't like Prospero's Ariel," I said. "This Ariel is only a machine."

"Is that why you gave her a name and call her 'she' instead of 'it'?"

"It's not like I really believe it, Pete. *I* never smoked a lot of dope."

"Maybe you should have." Pete stood, wiped his hands on a rag, and gestured at the bike. "Give her a try."

I got on and gave Peggy Sue a few kicks. She didn't even come close to starting. "Think the choke needs help?" I asked. Pete nodded and found a screwdriver, and I got off the bike so he could tinker with it.

I watched, chewing my lip, and finally said what I

was thinking. "Prospero had to set Ariel free at the end of the play."

"That's true," Pete said. "But only after Ariel had done everything he'd asked of it."

"It?"

"What would you call an airy spirit?" He stood and gestured for me to try the bike again.

I straddled the motorcycle and put my foot on the starter. "I'm not sure," I said.

"Liar."

He was right. I would call an airy spirit "she."

Peggy Sue started on the first kick. She sounded better than she had at any moment since we'd left home.

I killed the engine. "Guess I should be going," I said, and found that I didn't want to. My fervor to reach Buddy's gravesite had been subdued by comfort and security.

"Not just yet," Pete said. "You should wait until deep night. Besides, it's almost time for supper."

We returned to the house, where Mike and Gretchen were preparing salad and baked chicken. They weren't getting along. As Pete and I came into the kitchen, Gretchen said that the country would never find another president to match Reagan, and Mike responded by saying, "Yeah, cue-card readers are hard to find."

I think Gretchen was about to stab Mike with a carrot peeler when Pete upbraided his son for being rude. He concluded by saying, "Political arguments have no place in the kitchen. Kitchens are for food." This was directed as much toward Gretchen as it was toward Mike, and I was glad to see her look abashed. She could do it better than I would have guessed.

While waiting to eat, Pete and I sat at the table and listened to the kitchen radio. The latest news was not good. The riots in the cities were getting worse—an un-

determined number of people in New York City had been killed—because mobs hungry for Sunday evening movies had stormed theaters and fought over tickets. And now the U.S. Naval Observatory had confirmed reports that the primary Buddy Holly broadcast signal did indeed originate on Ganymede. The worldwide frustration of having no TV (other than Buddy) was rapidly becoming compounded by the fear of an extraterrestrial invasion.

“Personally,” Pete said, “I would’ve been surprised if they’d discovered that the unknown Buddy Holly fan *wasn’t* an alien intelligence.”

“All I know is that *I* didn’t have anything to do with it,” I said. “In fact, with this news, even the FCC must realize that I’m innocent.”

“Either that, or they think that you’re an extraterrestrial,” Mike said. “And they won’t be the only ones. If I were you, I’d watch out for the Corps of Little David and for Bavarian villagers carrying torches.”

“And for the Bald Avenger,” Gretchen said.

“In any case,” Mike said, “if the news media have only now confirmed the source of the signals, you can bet that our government and others have known it for a day or more. Your pursuers don’t want to incarcerate you; rather, they want to hand you over to the latter-day equivalents of mad scientists and have you dissected.”

Laura came into the kitchen. “Who’s dissecting what?”

“Here’s one now,” Mike said. “Run for your life.”

Laura gave him a puzzled look, then came to the table and sat in the chair beside me. She put my garage-door remote control in front of me.

“You can call Ringo from up to half a mile away,” she said, pressing the bar.

Ringo romped into the room, put his front paws on the tabletop, and nosed the remote control into my lap.

"Impressive," Pete said.

"Uh, yeah," I mumbled, drawing back from Ringo's fetid breath and picking up the remote. "You should keep this, Laura. Ringo's staying with you, right?"

Laura frowned. "Aren't you too, Mr. Vale?"

Pete cleared his throat. "Oliver's got to get on to Lubbock, honey."

"I know," she said. "But he's coming back, isn't he? Since he's your friend's nephew, I thought . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Pete gave me a meaningful look. "He's welcome here any time, as one of the family. But he has his own home too."

I wasn't sure that was true anymore, but I didn't say so. Instead, I held out the remote control to Laura.

She shook her head. "I want you to have it. You can use it whenever you visit. It'll help you and Ringo become friends." She stood and patted the dog, who lowered his front paws to the floor, and then she crossed the room and looked into the oven.

I left the table and went to the utility room to replace the remote in its Moonsuit pocket. Pete followed.

"She has a crush on you," he said.

"I don't know why."

"Me either. Hell, what father ever knows his daughter's mind? But my guess is that she sees you as some romantic, questing Don Quixote figure."

"Don Quixote was a deluded fool."

"Uh-huh."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I won't do anything to encourage her. Even if she weren't your daughter, she's way too young."

"Got that right," Pete said. He looked at the floor

and stroked his lower lip. "Y'know, it just occurred to me that there's a smaller age difference between you and Laura than there is between me and Gretchen."

"Laura's sixteen. Gretchen's twenty-three. The comparison isn't valid."

"Maybe not, but it's still a sobering thought."

"Not as sobering as the thought that the human race is trapped under the thumb of extraterrestrial video dictators."

"Says you. Bug-eyed monsters are easy compared to women."

I disagreed. It seemed to me that they were about the same.

From the kitchen, Mike called, "Supper!"

During the meal, I had no thought of the rioting in the cities or of those who might be behind it. I sat with the Holdens, and with Gretchen, and even with Ringo, and savored the chicken. Whatever would happen to me was coming fast, and time was draining like water, but I relaxed in that house in Oklahoma and took my time. Time, after all, is an illusion. At least, that's what they say.

#### CATHY AND JEREMY

Jeremy clapped a hand over his dog-eye and gasped.

Cathy glanced at him as she drove. "What is it?"

Jeremy swallowed. "He's gone. The eye-link has been removed."

Cathy clutched the steering wheel. "You can't feel him? You can't see what he sees?"

Jeremy shook his head.

Cathy drove on for another mile, then said, "But you

know how he got to where he is now, right?"

Jeremy popped out the dog-eye. It glistened in his palm like a black jewel. "I think I saw the whole route in his memory. I think I can remember it."

"All right, then. Are we still on track?"

Jeremy looked out at the countryside. "We're in Oklahoma," he murmured.

"I *know* that. Are we still on Ringo's route?"

"I think so."

Cathy glared. "I wish you'd stop saying that. Saying 'I think' is like saying 'I'm guessing.'"

Jeremy replaced the dog-eye in his socket. "Still nothing. Damn it, Cath, I might as well be guessing. Even if I can get us to where Ringo and Vale were when the link was cut, Vale won't be there anymore."

"If he's not, we'll catch up at Lubbock."

Jeremy gave her a grim look. "He'll never reach Lubbock. If he leaves his current hiding place, he'll be lynched before reaching Texas."

"You don't know that."

"If I don't, then what am I doing here? And if you don't, what are *you* doing here?"

Cathy's jaw muscles bulged. "I'm driving," she said. "And you're whining."

Jeremy popped out the dog-eye again and placed it in his shirt pocket. "Not anymore," he said.

## RINGO

The girl named Laura gave him the supper leftovers, and although he wasn't hungry, he ate enthusiastically. While he was eating, the boy, Mike, attempted to replace the human-eye, but Ringo turned his head so



the thing wouldn't go in. With its removal, the last of his wariness of these people had vanished, and he had realized that the eye was what had made him suspicious of people in the first place. He had only used the Windex incident as a rationalization. His reaction to the man named Boog had been the true one.

He had made up his mind: He would stay with the Holdens. He wouldn't miss Cathy and Jeremy.

The only uneasiness that he felt now was a sense of guilt for having damaged Vale's motorcycle. Pete, Laura, and Mike Holden all liked Ringo, as did the woman named Gretchen, but Vale was still wary.

So when the people went to lounge in the living room, Ringo trotted in and lay at Vale's feet. Vale stiffened. To reassure him, Ringo sat up and licked his hand. Vale made a noise in his throat, and Ringo realized that the man thought he was being tasted.

Gretchen laughed and called Vale a name.

Ringo knew now that it would take more than friendly gestures to make Vale his friend. It would take a gift.

He belched his last can of Budweiser onto Vale's lap. All of the people were immediately interested.

"Looks like a peace offering," Pete said.

Ringo barked to indicate that Pete was right.

"Uh, well, uh, thanks," Vale said. He was still nervous, but at least he was smiling.

"Well, aren't you going to open it?" Pete asked.

Vale picked up the can and popped the tab, and beer sprayed everywhere. The people yelped like puppies.

When the can stopped spraying, everyone was splattered with white flecks. Mike and Laura went to the kitchen for paper towels. Ringo sniffed the can in Vale's hand and found that it was empty.

He lay down and put his head on his paws. His gift

had been worthless. Vale would dislike him more than ever now.

Instead, Vale leaned down, laughing, and patted Ringo's back. "Listen," he said, "it's the thought that counts."

Ringo raised his head and let his tongue hang out. He had been forgiven. Everything in his world was good.

## 9

### OLIVER

I graduated from high school in 1977 at the age of seventeen. It had been a good spring, the highlight being when a friend and I drove to Lawrence to hear Lynyrd Skynyrd on the KU campus. Seeing Ronnie Van Zant and the band perform their fourteen-minute-plus concert version of "Free Bird" was a transcendental experience. I was probably the only member of the audience, though, who felt guilty because he hadn't brought his mother along. She would have appreciated the show more than most of the people there.

Following commencement (my four-year GPA was 2.8; I was forty-third in a class of a hundred and twelve), I went to work hauling hay. Tossing bales at four cents apiece was dirty, sweaty, itchy work . . . work to sweat the poison out, as my custom-cutter boss said. I and the other four guys on the crew alternated between complaining that the baler was packing the bales too heavy, and bragging about how well we were going to do with the women come fall. All of us would be going away to

college, and none of us were able to think of that event in any context other than sex. Or if we were, we didn't talk about it.

I was heading for Kansas State University in Manhattan. The campus was only fifty-five miles west of Topeka, but Mother seemed to think it was on the dark side of Neptune. She couldn't believe that I was grown-up enough to leave home. (This was the same woman who had given me a box of prophylactics for my fifteenth birthday.)

Mother's UFO/Atlantis/occult obsessions had been getting worse, leaning toward spiritualism and entrail reading, and as my departure date drew near, she began holding seances in the basement. I made it a point not to learn the names of any of the middle-aged women who joined her for these things, and I counted the minutes until I could jump into my '69 Dart and head west.

It's easy now to look back at my seventeen-year-old self and feel ashamed, particularly after reading some of Mother's thoughts as recorded in Volume VI:

*I am thirty-six years old. I have no husband or lover. Since 1959—except for one brief interlude with a man named Keith—only three things have mattered in my life: my son; rock and roll; and a belief that beings with powers beyond those of Earth will someday come in their ships of light to transform the world. Now my son is leaving home (hard to comprehend that he is the same age that I was when I became pregnant with him), and I am too old and solitary to make a life of rock 'n' roll, for it is the music of youthful tribes. In fact, because he was conceived in that energy, the last of the music may leave me when my son leaves. All that will be left is what Oliver calls my "weirdnesses." All that will be left is the hope that human beings will not be allowed to mangle themselves.*

*I'll still have my records. But what is music if you listen to it alone?*

*Even if I were younger, I couldn't rejoin the tribes, for the tribes have dissolved. The stuff the kids listen to these days ("disco") would drive me to self-evisceration in a matter of hours. Even KKAP plays it; I wear ear-plugs at my desk. I have begun haunting used record stores after work so that I can buy the artifacts that may soon be extinct. Thank Chuck, my son was raised right. He is leaving, but he is leaving with the Beatles, not the Bee Gees, in his heart. C. would be proud.*

*I will miss him.*

Meanwhile, I was having the best summer of my life. I was making money, and the work became easier as the summer progressed. My stamina increased each day and made the bales seem ever lighter. Hard work does that for you when you're seventeen. Shirtless, I swung my hay hook as if it were a part of me and tossed seventy-pound bales onto a flatbed as if they were made of cotton candy. My arms and back became brown, and my sweat smelled of salt and prairie hay.

What was mainly responsible for my joy, however, was a girl named Cheryl. She was the cousin of one of the guys on the hauling crew, and on Friday, July 1, she came out to the field where we were working and, as a favor to his mother, gave him the lunch that he had forgotten that morning.

Sun-blonded. Tanned skin. Cutoff jean shorts. Long legs. White blouse not buttoned all the way.

"Owwww," one of the guys groaned as we watched her crossing the greenish-brown expanse of the field.

All of us, with the possible exception of her cousin, wanted her—and I, with my ridiculous black-framed glasses, was the one who got her. I asked her out before

I knew what I was doing, and she said yes.

Cheryl and I went out every Saturday night for the next seven weeks, and starting with Week Two we clambered into the Dart's back seat and screwed like maniacs. The first time really was my first time. She was patient up to a point and then aggressive. I was grateful.

I had always thought that I would have to rely on pity to have a First Time, but the actual event was more like a delirium-induced coincidence: Cheryl and I happened to meet while we were each experiencing intense late-adolescent summer horniness, and so neither of us had a choice, nor wanted any. It would never happen that way again.

I used a condom the first time, and most of the others. My fifteenth birthday present notwithstanding, I'd had too many nightmares about accidental babies to do otherwise. On August 13 (Week Seven), however, Cheryl and I had the luxury of her bed because her parents and siblings were at the movies, and we were stripped and tangled before I realized that the Peacocks were still out in the Dart. Cheryl, undaunted, untangled and dashed from the room, returning with a can of foam from her parents' dresser. I was horrified, but she only laughed and gave me my next lesson.

There was one week of hay hauling left, and I would leave for Manhattan the next Sunday, so after making a mess with the foam, Cheryl and I made plans for a last summer romp together. We would meet on Saturday, August 20, drive to Perry Reservoir, and spend the night there. It would be our last time together until I came back to Topeka for a weekend visit. Then we would pick up where we left off.

So we told each other; but Week Seven, in Cheryl's bed, was the last. If I had known, I would have stayed

longer and made love to her again despite my fear that her parents would return.

But I didn't know, for I had no way of divining that in Memphis, Tennessee, the forty-two-year-old King of Rock and Roll had less than three days left to live.

On Tuesday, August 16, the hay crew hauled late into the evening because we were all leaving the next Sunday and still had several fields to clear. The portable radio's batteries died before sundown, so I didn't hear the news until I got home. Ready Teddy greeted me, as always, by performing a mad dance punctuated by yips. He had grown into a cocker-spaniel-size, dustmop-colored mutt, and I loved him. I would miss him while I was at K-State. He and I went into the house, and I headed for the bathroom.

But Mother was in there, and she had the door locked, so I went into the kitchen to have a can of soda and to wait. I waited thirty-five minutes, and at a quarter to ten I returned to the bathroom and knocked on the door.

"Are you all right?" I called.

Silence.

*Heart attack. I thought. Stroke. A slip in the tub. Concussion. Coma. Death.*

"Mother! Answer me or I'll break down the door!"

The latch clicked, the knob turned, and the door opened. Mother stood in the doorway, still wearing her radio-station-secretary clothes.

I rolled my eyes and leaned against the wall. "Jesus, Mother, I thought you were dead or something."

She looked at me steadily, and I saw that the rims of her eyelids were red.

"Why do you always call me 'Mother'?" she asked. "Why haven't I ever been 'Mom'? Not even once, not even

when you were little, have you ever called me 'Mom.' ”

“I, uh, I don't know,” I said.

She nodded, as if I had said what she had expected, and stepped into the hall.

“Elvis is dead,” she said.

Then she turned away and walked to her bedroom. She went inside and closed the door. I stood in the hall, not thinking, not doing anything. Ready Teddy came to me, his toenails clicking on the hardwood, and nuzzled my hand.

Eventually, I took a shower and went to bed. That night I dreamed of a bloated corpse singing “Hound Dog.” Naked, it writhed on its back, its fingers coming off as they clawed at the stage. Cheryl appeared wearing nothing but cutoff jeans and went down on the corpse, her breasts bobbing with the music. I awoke in the dark, my chest thundering, my erection hard as diamond.

I was still awake when the alarm went off at 5:00 A.M. I got up, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, fed Ready Teddy, and ate cereal and toast. I heard the newspaper hit the driveway just before 5:30, and I went out for it. Before bringing it inside, I read the front-page headlines. One of them was HEART ATTACK CLAIMS ELVIS PRESLEY. It was not in particularly big type.

I took the paper inside and found Mother in the living room. She was wearing her terry-cloth robe and kneeling before the album rack. Her copies of *The Sun Sessions*, *Elvis Is Back!*, and *Elvis—TV Special* lay on the carpet beside her.

“The station got rid of a lot of records last year,” she said, “so I thought I'd take some of ours, just for today. The disc jockeys will want them.”

“Good idea,” I said. I lay the paper on the coffee table and left for the fields.



All through the hot day, the guys and I listened to the radio that was hung over the truck's outside mirror. On every station we tuned in, even the country ones, we heard Elvis; but only KKAP was playing the really good stuff, the stuff he'd recorded in the days before the high-collared, jeweled jumpsuits . . . back when he was Elvis the Pelvis, every boy's sexual role model and every girl's fantasy.

"If I hear 'Love Me Tender' one more time I'm gonna puke," someone said.

That evening, Cheryl called. "I've been thinking about this Saturday," she said. Her voice dripped with promise. "I've been thinking about it so much that I can't wait until then. I know it's late and you've been working, but . . . let's go for a drive."

I had been tired, but Cheryl's voice revitalized me. I said that I would pick her up in ten minutes, and then I ran to my room for my car keys and a couple of Peacocks.

"Mother!" I yelled as I charged back through the house. "I'm going out!" I had my hand on the knob of the front door before I realized that there had been no answer. Mother always answered.

I yelled again, and still there was no answer, so I looked for her. She wasn't in the house, but her '74 Nova was still in the garage.

I found her in the backyard. She was sitting on the ground and gazing up at the just-emerged stars.

"You're going to get chiggers," I said.

She remained silent.

"Mother, Cheryl called. We're going for a drive."

Still she said nothing.

I glanced up at the patch of sky she seemed to be gazing at. "What are you looking for?"

"Elvis."

"No such constellation." I was trying to joke. But of course she was serious.

"When Buddy died," she said, as if I had not spoken, "Elvis was in the Army. In Germany. He sent a telegram of sympathy to the Holleys, in Lubbock. He'd been on the road a lot too, and he knew that it could have been him."

I turned to go. Cheryl was waiting.

"Elvis played in Lubbock more than once in his early days," Mother said. "He met Buddy before Buddy became a star. Buddy was encouraged and inspired by him. They were so different, and so much alike. Elvis sent the telegram from Germany, knowing what had been lost. So I'm looking for him in the sky now, to wave good-bye. He'll appear like a shooting star in reverse. I would have seen Buddy's star too, but it was cloudy that night."

Cheryl was waiting. I turned back and sat down a few yards away from Mother.

"Elvis's star would have appeared yesterday, wouldn't it?" I asked.

"No. A man like Elvis would wait a day, to be sure he was really supposed to go."

We waited and watched. Soon, we saw a meteor.

"There," I said. "We should go in before the chiggers eat us alive."

"That wasn't him. It fell. Elvis will be going the other way."

Another meteor fell then, and another, and another. Later, I discovered that they were the stragglers of the annual Perseid shower, but Mother had another explanation. "Ancient Atlanteans," she said. "They're flying down to show Elvis the way."

Chiggers were chewing my ankles, mosquitoes biting my arms and neck. In Topeka, a suntanned girl waited to make love to me, and I was sitting in the

backyard, staying with my lunatic mother until her crisis passed. I had the bitter thought that her crisis would never pass until she herself flew up to join Elvis and Buddy, so I might as well take off. Then I hated myself for thinking that, and I knew that I wouldn't budge. Not even to telephone Cheryl and tell her that I couldn't make it.

Hours later, we saw Elvis leave the planet. He was a ball of orange light with flickers of blue that shot up from the southeastern horizon—from Memphis—and disappeared near the zenith. I had never seen anything like it.

Mother waved.

We went inside then. After Mother went to bed, I sat in the kitchen for another hour, staring at the phone. I hadn't heard it ring while I had been in the yard. Cheryl hadn't called to ask where I was, and I couldn't call her now because it was 2:00 A.M. and her parents would throw a shit fit. In three and a half hours I would have to leave for the fields, and it would still be too early to call. I wouldn't have a chance to explain until evening.

And what explanation would I give? That I had preferred sitting in chigger-infested grass to thrashing in a back seat with Cheryl? That I had turned my back on carnal nirvana to watch for the ghost of Elvis?

Thursday dragged on for months, but when it was over, the summer was over too. We cleared our last field, and at 9:45 P.M. I threw the last bale from the truck to my buddies in the hay shed. Our boss told us to come by his place Friday or Saturday, and he'd give us our final checks.

I didn't care about that. All I cared about was getting home and calling Cheryl before it was too late.

Her mother answered the phone and told me that I shouldn't be calling after ten, and in any event Cheryl didn't want to speak with me. Before I could protest, or plead, the line clicked.

I tried again in the morning, and I did speak to Cheryl this time, but it would have been better if I hadn't. She and her parents had fought about me on Wednesday evening, she said. They had charged that I had a crazy mother and that I was no good either. Then, when I hadn't shown up for our drive, Cheryl had decided that they were right.

She told me that she wouldn't keep our rendezvous the next day because she had another date. I called her a bitch and slammed down the receiver.

That afternoon I picked up my check and went out with my hay-hauling buddies. One of them was eighteen, so he took some of our money and converted it into five cases of Coors. We drank a case, and then we bought our way into the various topless bars that lined the southernmost mile of Topeka Boulevard. We drank more beer at those places (two of which we were thrown out of because I tried to join the girls onstage) and tipped lavishly, and when our cash was gone, we went in search of female companions to help us with our remaining four cases. We didn't find any. But we were men, we bel-lowed. We could drink them all ourselves.

I was sick twice that night that I remember, and probably more times that I don't. My friends went home before dawn, and I called them all pussies. Sometime after the sun was well up, I awoke in the Dart on the edge of a country road. My eyes had been rubbed with handfuls of sand, my tongue was a lump of dry cotton, and my stomach was bubbling into my throat. Sections of my skull were pulling apart. The Dart was full of empty and half-empty Coors cans, and beer slimed the

seats, the floor, the dash, and the steering wheel. The stench was unbelievable.

I rolled down the window and got my head outside before heaving, but I had emptied myself in the night. The strength I had gained over the summer had drained away, leaving chewed gelatin in place of muscle.

It took me awhile to figure out that I was only a few miles from home. I didn't remember getting there, but was glad that I had. A few miles was as far as I would be able to drive.

I managed to park in the driveway, and then, stooped over because of the agony in my head, I went around to the back door in hopes of avoiding Mother. But I had to go through the kitchen, and she was eating lunch.

"Would you like a sandwich?" she asked.

It made me furious. Just once, I wanted her to act like a real parent. Just once, I wanted to hear the I-sacrificed-to-raise-you-and-now-look-at-what-you've-done speech that everyone I knew had gotten on such occasions. The only speech I had ever gotten was the don't-get-anyone-pregnant one.

"What's the matter with you?" I yelled. "I got *drunk!* I'm underage, and I went to *topless bars!* I stayed out twenty-four hours! Weren't you afraid that I was *dead?*"

"No," she said. "My friends and I held a seance last night. We contacted Elvis, and he told us that you were drinking, but that you would be fine. He said that you would sleep in your car on a country road close to home and that no one would bother you. I asked to talk to Buddy, but Elvis said he didn't see him anywhere."

I went into the bathroom and locked the door behind me. The next day I left for K-State.

I didn't come back until Friday, October 21.

I went to two morning classes that day, and then I

read a newspaper during my lunch break. Afterward, I got into the Dart and headed for home. In so doing, I skipped a Calculus exam and failed to turn in a U.S. History essay.

The newspaper had told me that the night before, a plane had crashed near Gillsburg, Mississippi. Three members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, including Ronnie Van Zant, had been killed. Ronnie had sung "Free Bird" for the last time on earth. His next concert would be in the Spirit Land.

If they had died any other way, I might have stayed in Manhattan. I would have mourned, but I would have taken my exam and turned in the essay. But they had been in a small plane, flying from one gig to another. And three of them had died.

I had been home for two hours when Mother returned from work. She didn't ask why I was there. What she said was, "I'm glad you're here, Buddy." I let it pass.

We didn't sit in the backyard that night. The musicians who had just passed on had not been like Elvis, who had believed in his own immortality. They would not have waited a day before leaving.

When the weekend was over, I went back to K-State and finished the semester, although I received a C in History and a D in Calculus for an eighteenth birthday present. I even started the spring '78 semester, but Fate had decreed that I was destined for something other than a Bachelor's degree. I came home at spring break and didn't go back. By April, I had a job as a salesman at a stereo shop in Topeka.

Mother was delighted that I was home, so I warned her that it would only be until I could afford my own apartment. She said that was fine. Infrequently, but often enough to irritate me, she called me by the name of a dead man.

In June, I went to an ophthalmologist and ordered contact lenses. When they arrived, I put my glasses away in a drawer.

\*

I fell asleep on Pete's couch again, so I didn't leave on Sunday night as I was supposed to. When I awoke, it was Monday morning, and I told myself that it had been better to stay at the Holdens' and blow my travel strategy than it would have been to fall asleep at sixty miles per hour. I was rationalizing, but because of the way things were about to happen, I was right. For the wrong reasons.

Mike and Laura were in the dining room arguing with Pete about going to school. "Nobody'll be there today," Mike said. "There's a world crisis in progress, Dad."

"No school closings have been announced on the radio," Pete said.

"So where's the bus?" Laura asked. "It's twenty minutes late."

"Take the Dart," Pete said.

I got up from the couch and staggered toward them. "You have a Dart?"

"Behind the garage," Pete said.

"It's junk," Mike added.

"But it runs," Laura said. She and Mike went out through the kitchen.

"Mother and I used to have a Dart," I said.

Pete looked at me quizzically. "You feel okay?"

I didn't. Not only was I groggy, but I had slept with my contacts in, and my eyes felt like balls of vacuum-cleaner dirt. I shuffled past Pete, through the kitchen, and into the bathroom to try to revive myself. While there, I found my clean laundry folded on the sink counter, so I changed out of Pete's coveralls.

When I emerged, Pete was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. A radio on the table was murmuring to him.

"Guess I lost the advantage of driving at night," I said.

Pete nodded. "Yeah, but I figured that if you were that tired, you weren't in any shape to ride anyway. Daylight or not, though, you have to go now, because my friend Curt will be back." He took a piece of paper from his shirt pocket and dropped it on the table. "I've refueled Peggy Sue and drawn a map of a route to Lubbock that ought to keep you clear of cops."

"I'll pay you for the gas."

"Don't be stupid. Just grab some breakfast and get going. Cereal's in the cupboard, milk's in the fridge."

I went to get the cereal, and Pete turned up the radio.

"—can only speculate on how the grave came to be disturbed," the announcer said, "but the primary theory is that Oliver Vale came to Lubbock and exhumed the casket. No one, however, has any idea of how he could have done so, by himself, while the cemetery was being watched by police officers and several civilian volunteers. One officer was heard to say nothing of this earth could have done such a thing. . . ."

I dashed back to the table.

"Once again, this morning's top story," the announcer said. "In Lubbock, Texas, the grave of Buddy Holly has been discovered open, and the casket is gone. No explanation is apparent, although Oliver Vale is believed to be in the city and is being searched for. We'll have more details as they become available. Meanwhile, the space-based broadcast purporting to be of Holly is continuing to supersede all terrestrial video signals." The announcer paused. "God help us."

Pete turned the radio down to a murmur again.



"Didn't ride to Lubbock and back overnight, did you?" he asked.

I sat down heavily. "I was going there to see if Buddy had arisen, and now they tell me that he has. Besides which, they're searching for me there. . . ." I hadn't thought beyond my destination, and now that the reason for that destination had been obliterated, I felt purposeless.

"So go home," Pete said.

"What home? It'll be picked to pieces by now."

"You don't know that. But even if it is, you still have to go back. Now that Lubbock is out, your home is your only link to what's happening. Buddy's been giving out your address and telling people to contact you there, so maybe it isn't you that's important, but the address. The place."

Something in my brain went *whang*. "Mother's dish," I said.

"What's that?"

I stood and began to pace. "The SkyVue satellite dish she bought in '83. In Volume VII of her diary, just before she died, she claimed that it helped her communicate with a weird 'other world' populated by the ghosts of ancient Atlanteans. She had done it before with seances, she said, but the dish was better. When she bought the thing, I thought she only wanted more channels. Should have known."

Pete stood as well. "That's it, then."

I stared at him. "Pete, my mother was *crazy*."

"So is the idea that Buddy Holly is performing on Ganymede. Look, I learned from your uncle that when the universe turns out to be insane, the wise man embraces insanity. Your mother's claims for her satellite dish were crazy when the world was sane, but now they make as much sense as anything else. Maybe she really

did communicate with another world through that dish. Maybe she put the idea of Buddy Holly into alien beings' heads, or whatever they have instead of heads. Maybe that dish is a link to whoever's responsible for mucking up television—and for pointing a finger at you.”

“If that’s the case,” I said, “then I don’t want to go back.”

“I’ll take the Kamikaze and go with you,” Pete said. “If the aliens come for you, we can outrun ’em.”

That too was insane, and so it made perfect sense. I agreed to go home, as long as I could ride Peggy Sue while Pete followed in the Kamikaze. I couldn’t abandon the Ariel after all we’d been through, could I?

“We’ll be conspicuous in daylight, but we can’t wait until dark,” Pete said. “So let’s get going. I’ll leave Laura and Mike a note. They’re old enough to take care of themselves for a day or two, especially with Ringo for protection.”

“What about Gretchen?”

Pete shrugged. “I guess she’s old enough to take care of herself too. And I don’t think she needs any protection.”

We prepared to leave. I was in the Moonsuit and waiting for Pete in the living room when Ringo burst up the basement stairs and began barking furiously.

Pete came out of his bedroom with an olive-drab backpack slung over one shoulder. “What’s with the dog?” he asked, raising his voice to be heard over the barking. “Did you hit the button on your remote?”

I was sure that I hadn’t. “I put it back in its pocket before supper last night, and I haven’t touched it since.”

“Maybe you bumped it while you were pulling on your coveralls.” He headed toward the basement door. “I’ll enter a message for the kids on Laura’s computer.

That's the first place she'll go when she gets home." As Pete went downstairs, the Doberman, still barking, went with him. I followed.

Laura's room was dominated by a long table that held a Mac, a video monitor displaying a stretch of country road, and oscilloscopes, receivers, transmitters, and other gadgets, including Ringo's blue eye.

"Impressive, huh?" Pete said as he sat down at the Mac and began typing. "I paid for the flying lessons, but she bought all of this herself. She does systems consulting at eighty bucks an hour, when she can get it." He saw me looking at the video monitor. "The road surveillance camera was Mike's idea. They started setting it up while you and I were working on your Ariel yesterday. It took them longer than they thought it would, though. If they'd had it ready sooner, I'd've known Curt was coming. Not that it would have made much difference."

"They should've asked me for help," I said. "I'm a whiz at that sort of crap." I thought, not for the first time, that it was the only thing I *was* a whiz at.

Ringo let out a howl, put his front paws on the table, and rubbed his nose against the monitor. Pete and I looked at the picture but saw nothing. Ringo barked at us.

Then, far down the road, a black speck appeared.

I yelled and ran for the stairs, Ringo bounding ahead of me. As we reached the living room, Gretchen emerged from the spare bedroom.

"What's all the goddamn noise?" she asked.

"The Bald Avenger's coming!"

I must have run to the utility room, pulled on my helmet and gloves, and sprinted to the garage with Pete and Gretchen close behind. The next thing I remember clearly is being on Peggy Sue, following the Oklahoma Kamikaze down the driveway at gravel-slinging speed.

Gretchen was in the Barracuda with Pete, and Ringo was running alongside me and the Ariel. The Doberman stopped at the mouth of the driveway.

As Peggy Sue bounced onto the road, I saw that the Bald Avenger's Jaguar was within a hundred yards. The Kamikaze ran right at it, and the Jaguar swerved toward the ditch. The Kamikaze blew past, and the bike and I squeezed by just as the Jaguar began to swerve back to block our path.

I didn't look behind to see whether the Jaguar was able to turn around in the narrow, muddy road. I knew, though, that Ringo wouldn't let it use the driveway. He had elected to stay behind and guard the Holden homestead.

When we reached the highway, Pete waved for me and Peggy Sue to take the lead. "We slipped him!" he yelled out his window as the Ariel and I passed, and indeed, the Jaguar was nowhere in sight. But I didn't expect that to last long. When the Bald Avenger reached the highway, he would know what direction we had taken by the trail of mud we would leave behind.

For the first time in days, the sun was breaking through the cloud cover. I would have a scenic ride until the Avenger ran me into the ground. Which would happen eventually. Pete and I had ten cylinders between us, but the Avenger had twelve.

When he caught up, he was going to set his foot down on me and never lift it.

SHARON

Notes on client Oliver Vale, continued . . .  
Monday morning. After holding us in custody for

twenty-four hours (we slept on vinyl divans in our interrogation room), the Texas Rangers have released us.

The reason: Buddy Holly's grave is empty.

Either Oliver is already in Lubbock, or the world as we know it has come to an end. Either way, the Rangers see no purpose in holding us any longer.

Likewise, I have told Bruce that there is no point in continuing to Lubbock. If the authorities can't find Oliver there, then we have no hope of finding him either. I still want to help him, but I will have to wait until he contacts me or is captured.

Bruce is relieved that I have "come to my senses."

Yet I feel that I have done just the opposite. There are things going on that I cannot understand and that I can do nothing about. But I have always felt in control of myself, of my friends and clients, and of my world. Thus my sense of failure. Thus my anger at Bruce, who is connected with that failure.

I know, rationally, that I cannot be responsible for everything. The radio tells us that there is panic, even looting, in every major city of the world and many of the minor ones. I'm not responsible for that, am I?

The radio also tells us that the Buddy Holly TV broadcast does in fact originate on Ganymede. Oliver is either an innocent or an extraterrestrial.

And I *know* I don't have anything to do with that.

. . . unless the clues have been there all along in his behavior and in the things he has said in private and in the Group. In his stories about his mother's UFO studies and her belief that he is the reincarnation of Holly. . .

Perhaps we should be paying more attention to what the broadcast has said: "For assistance, contact Oliver Vale."

Perhaps he has been chosen as liaison between us

and Whomever. Like in that old movie with the giant chandelier.

The radio says that the Ganymede signal has not repeated itself since it began. Technology aside, no human being would have the patience to create three days of that.

But whatever he is, human or alien, Oliver is my friend. And I wish that I could help him.

#### RICHTER

Early Monday, his leg and mind well rested, Richter left his Lawton hotel room and drove to the Comanche County sheriff's office. There he presented his FCC identification and asked to see all reports of regional "Oliver Vale sightings." He made it clear that, for security reasons, there was to be no record of his visit.

Most of the "Vale sighting" reports were the ravings of crackpots, but two caught his eye. The first stated that an elderly couple had spotted Vale at two-thirty in the morning, and that he had been in the company of a muscular woman. The second stated that a housewife had observed a certain Peter Holden hauling a motorcycle on his flatbed truck a short time later.

Richter hadn't seen the vehicle that had stopped at the rest area while he had been hiding under the Jaguar, but its engine noise had been that of a truck. It could have been a flatbed.

He handed the second report to the sheriff. "Directions to Holden's," he said.

The sheriff shook his head. "Don't bother. A deputy checked this out, and it turned out to be nothing." He chuckled. "Lucky for that Vale character that he *wasn't*

there. My deputy says Holden's got himself a big old Doberman that like to bit his arm off."

Richter's leg began throbbing.

"Directions," he said.

He would have them this time, and since he was no longer on the assignment, he would have no one to answer to for what he did.

They wouldn't even know that he was coming.

Except that, somehow, they did. He was driving slowly, looking at names on mailboxes to be sure he found the right place, when a white muscle car exploded from a stand of trees and came at him. It happened so quickly that he couldn't see who was inside, and he was barely able to swerve to the edge of the road in time to avoid a collision.

Then he saw Vale. He swerved back, hoping to block the motorcycle or hit it, but he was too late.

Ahead of him, standing beside a mailbox, was the dog who could spit bullets.

For an instant Richter was torn—but if he stopped to try to kill the Doberman, Vale would disappear yet again. Richter turned the Jaguar around and pursued. The muscle car and the motorcycle were already out of sight, but that meant nothing. This time the chase was in daylight. He would find them again soon.

And when he did, he would not aim for the tires.

#### SKYVUE

The two smiling, dark-suited ministers of the Corps of Little David emerged from the projection room. Khru-shchev glared at them.

"Everything all right?" Eisenhower asked.

"All of our equipment is in working order, praise the Lord," the taller minister said. "Satan's hellish waves have no effect on our video projector."

"The Reverend Willard blessed it before we brought it up from Oklahoma City," the second minister said.

"Satan's hellish waves wouldn't bother it regardless of whether it was blessed," Khrushchev said. "It's closed circuit, without broadcast reception capability, right?"

The tall man nodded. "Indeed, brother—"

Khrushchev growled. Eisenhower elbowed him.

"—for the Reverend Willard wishes to be seen and heard by all in this community and the surrounding region who wish to see and hear him. Even as he stands atop this building, preaching courage during this campaign of the Antichrist, his image shall be relayed from our cameras to the projector, and thence to the screen of this theater, larger than life, a beacon of Truth—"

Khrushchev put a finger into his mouth and made gagging noises.

The minister stared. "I beg your pardon?"

"My associate is grumpy because he hasn't been able to watch reruns of *My Mother the Car* on his five-inch color set since Satan's broadcast commenced," Eisenhower said.

"And if you jerks broke that little TV while you were futzing around in there," Khrushchev added, "you can forget about getting your deposit back."

The second minister cleared his throat. "I believe we agreed on a rental fee of six thousand dollars." He handed Eisenhower a check.

"That's right," Eisenhower said. "You do understand that we can't provide security officers?"

"No matter," the tall man said. "The Corps of Little David will provide its own security. After all, the Reverend William Willard himself will be here."



"We *know*, we *know*," Khrushchev said. "And we aren't going to collect the admission fees for you either."

"We wouldn't want you to," the second minister said. "We'll have a member of our Ladies' Auxiliary in the ticket booth."

"And I believe that concludes our business for now," the tall man said. "I trust that our equipment, tools, and accessories will remain undisturbed until our projectionist arrives."

"Of course," Eisenhower said.

"Assuming that the blessing holds up until then," Khrushchev muttered.

The two ministers left.

Eisenhower regarded Khrushchev sternly.

"What're *you* looking at?" Khrushchev snarled.

"Are you trying to ruin everything?" Eisenhower asked. "What if they'd taken offense and called the thing off?"

"I'd be delighted. As it is, this place is gonna be packed with several thousand Willyites who'll be whipped into a frenzy by their Fearless Leader's apocalyptic hysteria. It's bad enough that your Buddy Holly stunt has instigated violence in major metropolitan areas, but now it's going to happen out here in the sticks too."

Eisenhower looked thoughtful. "Could be," he said.

"Doesn't that bother you?" Khrushchev bellowed. "Don't you *care*?"

"Yes."

"Then why let Bill Willy come to our birthplace and pollute it until it's as rotten as the rest of the fleshbound world?"

Eisenhower went to the projection room's doorway and looked inside at the video projection equipment.

"Because," he said, "everybody likes a good show."

