

The Mulching of America

a novel



"Harry Crews is a storyteller who bears down
on American enterprise with fierce eyes and a cackle."

—Valerie Mayers, *The New York Times Book Review*



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MULCHING
OF
AMERICA

A N O V E L



HARRY CREWS



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HARRY CREWS

1995

This book is for George Kingson.
Abrazos.

Chapter One

The air was a shimmering of heat, and it felt to Hickum Looney as though with every step he took the weight of the sun on the top of his balding head and his thin shoulders became heavier. The long sidewalk in front of him was so hot that it shook and undulated in his eyes and made them feel cracked and gritty.

There was nothing unusual about that, though. Just another ordinary August day in Miami. Hickum had suffered through twenty-five years of such summers, and if he could survive five more he could walk away from the only job he'd ever known—if he did not count the three years he had spent as a supply technician in the air force.

And he had never counted those years a job. He'd spent every hour of every working day in an air-conditioned office filing copies of supply requisitions. Those were pleasant, comfortable days, the kind of days during which a man could let his mind float where it would while he stood over an open file drawer, daydreaming and fantasizing, and no one would care because no one would notice whether he was actually filing anything or not.

He went into the air force a private and he came out a private. He never got any letters of commendation, but he never got any turds in his personnel file, either. Any way he figured it, it was an easy ride. And he did not know how much he had liked it until his hitch was up and he was a civilian again, looking for a job, and ended up as a door-to-door salesman for a company named Soaps For Life, and realized before the first month was out that he did not like being a door-to-door salesman talking to people day in and day out about soap.

It wasn't that he hated it, or anything nearly that strong. He just had never been able to make himself care for it very much, which he thought was worse than the promotions he had deserved in the air force but never got. Nor did he want to learn more about selling soap than he already knew, which he felt must be about as much as any sane man ought to know about anything, nor did he want to talk about it nonstop when two or more salesmen of Soaps For Life got together, which the Boss had gone to some trouble to let all the salesmen know was precisely what was expected of them.

The real horror of the whole thing was that Hickum had taken this job twenty-five years ago with the intention of quitting it the following week and going to work as an apprentice in a sheet metal shop. All he had to do was wait seven days for the sheet metal job to come open and he could kiss the door-to-door business good-bye. But it didn't work out that way. The morning before he was to start as an apprentice, a butane gas tank had blown up and left nothing of the sheet metal shop but flat ground and grieving widows.

He knew he ought to count himself lucky not to have been there when the tank blew up. But all he could seem to think of was that he had lost a job. In some screwy way he did not understand, it seemed to him that he had always missed every good job he had had a chance for. Except for Soaps For Life. So he had obsessively clung to it for a quarter of a century now, always secretly wishing he was doing something else.

One of the worst parts of having the job was going to the annual sales convention and listening to the harelipped little man who had founded the Company and who invariably spent three podium-pounding hours telling his salesmen—every one of whom, with the exception of Hickum Looney, seemed to want to be just like him—how he had single-handedly built his company. Over and over, he would hammer through his success story: one-man-and-one-dream-and-one-case-of-soap-sample-and-one-long-street-that-never-ended-until-that-one-man-and-that-one-dream-had-become-an-empire.

“*Shoe leather,*” the little man would scream, “*shoe leather is the secret.*”

—Again and again during the interminable speech that at times seemed deranged and half out of control, the little man hopped about the stage as though he had hot coals in his shoes, often raising his hands above his head in what could have been surrender or supplication, and screamed: “You nink nare if I not a narenip?”

He might not care, but God, did he have a harelip! It was by far the worst one Hickum had ever seen.

“My narenip was given na me by Nod!” Hysterical applause made him smile, and the smile would always show a single enormous, square, and badly stained tooth in the center of his face. Then he would raise his hands for silence. “Nu nink I non’t know what people nall me? I know! I know plenty! But, now listen! I may be kind of strange and warped . . .” In this part of the speech, he often went into a kind of frenzied jitterbug: head snapping, arms flapping, and knees pumping like pistons. “Can nu near me? Can nu near me, brothers?”

After each question there was a responsive roar that shook the walls of the convention center. Yes, they could hear him. Then the Boss would abruptly become very still. When his voice came out of his mouth, it would come in a whisper, and yet the whisper reached every man and woman present. And that voice, so quiet and yet so strongly surging, gave them all gooseflesh.

“I am most awfully ugly. But! Near *me now!* I am standing in a nousand dollars’ worth of suit!”

The roar of approval seemed it would take the plaster off the walls.

“Nand I may have wists and numbs in me na make a rattlesnake crazy. But I still drive a Cadillac car. Ne biggest Cadillac car nay build. Nand I got a nelephone in nat Cadillac, got it right by my knee. Nand finally, finally, I trade for me a new Cadillac car every year!”

It was then that the salesmen got loose and crazy, some of them bashing their heads together in an ecstasy of enthusiasm and longing. Hickum never felt like bashing heads with another salesman at the annual convention, and certainly he never felt ecstatic with joy by anything the Boss said from the podium. Hickum thought this to be some failing in himself that he could not identify. Nonetheless, he never doubted it was somehow his fault.

But if he dropped dead this very instant on the short flagstone walk leading to the house of his prospect of the day—a modest yellow cinder block house with a white roof—he would be recorded in the annals of the Company with an asterisk identifying him as one of the top salesmen it ever had. If it hadn’t been for the Boss, Hickum would have been the champion salesman at Soaps For Life. But it was the Boss who held all selling records. Year after year, he remained unbeatable. So if Hickum Looney didn’t feel an urge to bash heads every year at the convention, why didn’t he at least feel the convulsive jolt of accomplishment? Why instead did he carry a cold fury and dread at the center of his chest, where he had always supposed his heart to be?

He knew why. Of course he did. He could not easily or graciously accept being second best. The Boss had somehow taught him to accept nothing less than being a winner and then—year after year—refused to allow him to win. This was the first day of August, the month of the contest for Salesman of the Year. Whoever sold the most soap this month would win a Cadillac, a trip to Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and \$2,000 spending money.

There was only one problem. The Boss always entered the contest each year himself, always in a different part of the country, and he always won. To ensure it was absolutely honest, the Boss’s completed sales forms were entrusted to an old and honorable CPA firm, which verified the accuracy of the sales. For the twenty-five years Hickum Looney had worked for the Company, the Boss had been the undisputed champion salesman. And finally, in a gesture that the Boss called magnificent.

generous, but a gesture that humbled and humiliated his salesmen all the same, humbled and humiliated them as nothing else in their lives could, he took the sum total of the winnings—the cash from the trip, the spending money—and divided all of it evenly among his salesmen across the country. For all the years Hickum had been with Soaps For Life, the share for each salesman had never exceeded \$4. Last year, Hickum's check had been for \$3.36.

And yet every year, including last year, Hickum had fought his heart out to win. And in spite of himself, in spite of not wanting to bash heads with his fellow salesmen at the convention when the Boss spoke, he fully intended to walk the leather off as many pairs of shoes as it took to win. The Boss always told his men to think of the contest as a learning experience because, he said, that was why he had started it in the first place, and he also told them he always entered the contest himself to demonstrate to them that he was not asking the salesmen to do anything he would not and could not do himself. It was to strengthen the bond between them.

Hickum Looney shook his head violently to get rid of the unthinkable notion of strengthening the bond between himself and the little demented harelip. He had to make himself focus on the Selling Mode and at the same time try to get himself into it. The founder of the Company, known universally as the Boss, demanded that all his salesmen focus their concentration on getting into the Selling Mode before ever approaching the first prospect at the beginning of each working day. But even after all these years Hickum Looney still did not know exactly what that meant. He must be doing something right, though, because it was rare when one entire order book was not full, or nearly so, when he got back to the office in the evening.

He loosened his tie and tried to look haunted and full of stress. For a salesman to give a potential customer the impression that he was haunted and full of stress was called simply the Look in the official Sales Manual. When he felt everything was as it should be for him to make a quick sale, he walked up to the little yellow cinder block house and rang the bell. He had a habit of counting after the first ring of the doorbell or knock on the door.

“One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus, three hippopotamus . . .”

If nobody appears or he did not hear somebody moving behind the door by the time he got to *thirty hippopotamus*, he usually went back to *one hippopotamus* and counted to *twenty hippopotamus* before he rang or knocked again. But there were often times when he simply walked away. It all depended on what his instincts dictated that he do. He trusted his instincts and he trusted signs, and he always tried to trust whatever signs he thought he saw or what his instincts were trying to tell him.

He had counted back to *fifteen hippopotamus* when the wooden door behind the screen eased open a little. He had heard no footsteps, no bolt sliding in a lock, no sound of hinges turning, nothing at all. There was no light in the room behind the door, which had slowly closed now to about six inches. The person, dim as a ghost behind the screen wire, was the size of a jockey with a cap and closely cropped gray hair twisted into wild tufts. Hickum had no idea if it was a man or a woman. But then one of the person's hands reached up and patted the twisted tufts of hair and then dropped and held a tiny gold locket suspended from a gold chain. The hand was full of blue veins under translucent skin marked with liver spots. It was a woman. No question in his mind at all.

“Good day, madam. My name's Hickum Looney and I represent Soaps For Life. Our headquarters are in Atlanta, Georgia, but we've got representation for our product in every state in the Union. The company that I represent makes exactly what you need, no matter what that need might be. I know that makes me sound just about too beautiful and too good for your ordinary citizen to accept. But all the representatives of Soaps For Life are one of a kind. Yes, madam, one of a kind. You might have seen our thirty-minute infomationals on television.”

As Hickum talked, he watched one of the old lady's nearly fleshless hands float slowly but steadily upward and latch the screen door before floating in the same slow and steady way back to his side.

When he heard the latch fall into place, he looked down and rubbed the toe of his shoe in his welcome mat and said: "Aw, now how come you do that, ma'am?"

"Because you might be a crazy person," said the little old lady in a dry rasping voice, "with murder in his heart and rape on his mind. Don't you read the papers? Happens every day." Hickum smiled broadly. He always did when he was in the Selling Mode. It didn't matter at all what the prospect said to him. She'd need a hatchet to get the Selling Smile (treated at length in the Sales Manual) off his face, now that he was in the Selling Mode.

"I try never to dispute a lady," said Hickum, "but you are flat wrong is what you are. I come from a long line of honest, hardworking people. Back in east Tennessee my mother was a Hickum, so she got her maiden name. And Looney? My daddy's a Looney. Up in east Tennessee it's enough Hickums and Looneys to fight a war. Matter of fact it was a war between the Looneys and the Hickums off and on for nearly a hundred years, so the story goes. But then they got started marrying each other and, such, as men and women are subject to do, and that kind of cooled things down, if you know what I mean."

"I do not believe I would care to know what you mean now or any other time," said the little old lady. She had taken a half step back into the room and Hickum could hardly see her through the screen door. Her cap of gray hair bobbed and weaved in a way that made her head seem to move, in the deep shadowy light, as if free of a body.

"I don't believe I understand," said Hickum.

"Well, a fool can see you don't understand a whole lot," she said. "If you understood much of anything at all, you wouldn't be standing on my porch at my front door at this time of the morning holding a suitcase full of soap and expecting to be let into my house. That's the way us girls get raped, you know, strangers showing up on our doorstep carrying suitcases made out of tin and wanting to use our phones."

"I do not want to use your phone, ma'am. I never said one single word about using a phone of yours."

"They mostly never do, but that don't mean a thing." She clicked her false teeth in a little rhythm like castanets.

Hickum glanced down at his metal briefcase and then back to the old lady, who was growing more indistinct and harder to see as she moved deeper into the room. The old ones were usually either the easiest or the most difficult to sell. They had only a few years left and they weren't risking anything by opening the door for the wrong reason. On the other hand, nearly all of them were desperately lonely. That's the kind all the salesmen at Soaps For Life tried to search out when they could. Most people seemed not to notice it, but a salesman could not help but notice how many of the old ones were so desperately lonely they would let the devil through the front door if he promised to talk to them.

Hickum sighed. This was what door-to-door selling was all about. Anybody could sell who could somehow manage to get inside the house. Failed salesmen always got shut out on the steps before they could make their presentation. A man who could never find a way to make his presentation could never make a sale. But there was always a way to handle getting on the inside, and top-of-the-line door-to-door men like Hickum Looney always knew that, and given enough time, he could always find a way to go in.

Hickum lifted the metal briefcase and smiled for all he was worth. "Don't you think this is just a little small to be a suitcase?"

In a tight little voice that sounded like an infuriated school teacher, she said: "I try not to think of that which is of no concern to me."

"But this is your concern. This box holds life everlasting."

If someone had a gun to his head, Hickum Looney could not have explained why he had said his box held life everlasting. He didn't even know what such a statement might mean, or if it meant anything at all. But there was no denying that some days he was more creative than others. He had suspected for a long time now that the habit of meeting strangers at their doors, a habit stretching back over his entire working life, had taught him instinctively what to say. In any event, he had found out early on that simply saying something like that would not move the product, just as smelling good would never sell a bar of soap. Everybody that sold anything seemed to sing the same tired song. And no doubt that was why the Sales Manual had a whole chapter demonstrating that a good salesman could play a customer like a banjo: Pluck the right string, get the right sound, and get a sale. A door-to-door man simply had to find the string that said: *I'll buy*.

But there was no single string, no single tune, no single song a door-to-door man could use that would sell everybody. That was the Boss's great secret. Or he said it was. Read the customer like a road map and you'll go straight to his heart. That was what the Boss said he had built his company on his company and his selling record, year in and year out. And where was the evidence to prove him wrong? He had his suit and his Cadillac car and men all over the country ready to follow him anywhere he led. What didn't he have? What?

The little lady came rushing out of the shadows until her nose was nearly pressed against the screen door. Her tiny eyes were black and shiny as a bird's.

"*Everlasting*? Did you say *life everlasting*? Young man, you keep on talking like that and sure as I'm standing here lightning will strike my house. And I'm not insured against lightning, and on top of that, I'm not even a Christian."

"Madam, could you unlatch the screen door? I wasn't raised to talk to a lady through a screen door."

"What was that you said?"

Hickum knew she had heard him, but he repeated it anyway, adding: "And I can just look at you and tell you're not the sort to have conversations through a screen door, either. Anybody can see that way yonder too trashy for a lady like you."

She caught her bony little chin in her hand and seemed to think on that for a moment. "It's what's wrong with the world today, people doing business through screen doors. But you can't be too careful, am I right?"

"Right as rain. *Careful* is the watchword."

She squinted her eyes as though to see him better. "*Careful* is the watch . . . what?"

"Word," he said.

"Word? Is that what you said?"

Hickum had not been paying enough attention to what he had been saying. He had to stay focused or he would let himself slip onto automatic pilot and lose her after he already had her moving in his direction.

He nodded his head and said, "Yes, madam. I believe *watchword* is what I said."

"You've started spinning your wheels. You better quit while you're still ahead."

"No doubt the gospel truth. Yes, indeed, I . . ."

But even as he was talking, her hand drifted up and unlatched the door.

~~Without making a move, Hickum said: "You're a very wise lady. Not many in this old world going to put one over on you. Noosirree!"~~

"You can count on it, buster. My face may be red but I wasn't born yesterday," she said.

Hickum gave the Hearty Company Laugh, and at the same time he eased the door open, not knowing if she would allow it or not. She did, though. She left it open while she kept her eye on his metal briefcase as he moved slowly to a low coffee table and set it down on its side.

He straightened up and put one of the Company's Looks on his face, a look that the manual called *the truth can be awful*.

He looked closely at her, judged her age as best he could, and said: "Let me ask you this madam. Do you suffer from swelling of the joints? Night sweats? Failing eyesight? Thinning hair? Difficulty falling asleep? Or find it hard waking up?"

Was there a goddam woman her age in the whole sorry country who didn't suffer from at least one of the ailments he'd named?

"I don't know as I go around having conversations with total strangers about what I have and what I don't." But her voice had a tremor in it when she spoke, and Hickum knew he had caught the scent of blood spoor, the sweet fragrance of old mortality. And he had known for a long time now that getting mortality into the game could never hurt, no matter what game a man was playing.

"That's more gospel truth right there," he said. "People nowadays don't seem to know what's public and what's private. They just go ahead and tell anything and everything."

The old woman watched him but said nothing. Hickum focused his smile on her with ultimate intensity, and then winked, which made her head snap back as if she'd been slapped.

"I told you my name at the door, Hickum Looney, remember? Don't believe I got yours."

"Don't believe I gave it," she said.

Hickum Looney clasped his hands and remained standing. Every blind in the house was drawn making the room very dark. She either didn't have any air-conditioning or did not have it on. He had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he could see very clearly. First dimly and then in sharp detail. Hickum saw a man standing in a corner of the room, and it made him jump and grunt as though he had been struck in the stomach. It was a God's own wonder that it didn't make him scream and bolt for the door, leaving the briefcase behind, so badly did it unnerve him. But squinting harder showed it to be not a man but rather a rubber aspidistra plant. It was very old and very tired and the thick leaves were gray with a thin layer of dust. But it looked for all the world like an old man wearing a ruined hat.

"What's that?" she said. She had stopped on the other side of the coffee table and not taken her eyes off the briefcase.

"What's what?"

"You grunted," she said.

"Why would I grunt?"

"How would I know? Why'd you show up at my door with a suitcase full of soap?"

"Briefcase," he said.

"What?"

"That on the table there is not a suitcase, it's a briefcase."

"Full of soap?" she said.

"Full of soap."

"You still grunted."

"Not me. Not today."

She regarded him for a moment and then said, "If that was not a grunt I heard, maybe we better leave it alone and get on with the business at hand, because if what you say is true, I may be on the edge of the last deep hole and just about to slide in."

He said: "You're too hard on yourself. You're still a fine figure of a woman."

"I'll tell you, buddy boy, you make a move on me and I'll dial nine-one-one so fast it'll make your head swim. They've got a place for salesmen gone bad."

He dropped his eyes to her hands, joined over her stomach by twisted, large-jointed fingers. Then he called on a voice that was deep with authority, a voice that had been given him by the Boss along with the soap, the metal briefcase, the Manual for Presentation of Products, and everything else that had made him the salesman he had become.

He pulled himself up but restrained his desire to go all the way to tiptoe, tilted his chin upward and called on the voice that the Company Manual insisted would open the gates of heaven themselves. "I am an honorable man doing an honorable job with an honorable product. Now, would you please sit down, Mizz . . . , sit down, Mizz . . . ?"

"Ida Mae," she said in a curiously subdued voice hardly more than a whisper.

". . . sit down, Mizz Ida Mae. There are other of God's children waiting."

"Waiting?" she said, her eyes going wide to show red broken veins at their edges.

"For me," he said, still in the Company voice, "for me and the soap to save them."

The business about soap and God's children waiting for him to save them was something that had only occurred to him once he got inside the house. It just seemed to go with the decor, with the dusty aspidistra plant wearing a hat, or something that looked like a hat, in the corner of the living room, crushed, dry, and hopeless. But now that the lie had come to him, there was nothing to do but see what he could squeeze out of it. The Boss would have been pleased that he noticed it and, furthermore, that he planned to milk it.

He snapped the hasps in the front of his briefcase and lifted the lid. It was lined in red velvet. Round jars were held in round slots. Each jar had a different-colored lid on it. And on each lid of each jar was a single letter, each letter drawn in elaborate Germanic script.

Slowly, she traced out each of the letters with a rigid, thick-jointed finger. As she touched each letter there in the dim little room, she pronounced each of them as soft as breathing: "S-A-I-P-P-U-A-K-I-V-I-K-A-U-P-P-I-A-S."

Chapter Two

It had been a good day, an unprecedented day, for Hickum Looney. As he eased his dirty yellow dented Dodge through bumper-to-bumper traffic, he whistled a gay little tune, his favorite. It had been a Coca-Cola kind of day and he was whistling a Coca-Cola commercial from a good while back—he couldn't remember how long—five or ten years, maybe even longer. And he loved it so much, he invariably saved it for those days when sickness, suffering, death, and the rankest kind of blasphemy—all subjects begging for confession and absolution—opened every door he knocked upon. He responded to every bell he rang. But not one of his days over the last quarter century could match this one.

Without quite being able to help it, he suddenly pushed back in his seat, stretched his neck, and sang: “Co-o-oke is the *re-al* thing.”

He pounded the steering wheel and bounced on the seat to keep the beat and sang at the top of his voice: “And so is Hickum Looney!”

He was doing the commercial again while he was stopped at a red light, substituting his own name for Coca-Cola, when he looked over and saw four men in ruffled suits, ties loosened and crooked at their necks. Only one of them was pointing at him, but they were all stretching their faces in tired smiles. They looked suspiciously like salesmen themselves. Seedy, down at the heels, supplicants all. Even their smiles looked like pleas for help.

It embarrassed Hickum, and he covered his mouth with the back of his hand and yawned, his mouth pulled to its limits, until the light changed and they drove away. As soon as they were out of sight, Hickum tried the commercial again just to prove to himself that he could do it. Hell, he wasn't embarrassed. He tried the commercial jingle again but he found it impossible to do. He was more embarrassed than ever. Suddenly he felt like he would be embarrassed for the rest of his life.

It should not have been so. He should have been elated, but if he wasn't, so what? It had been, by any measure, his greatest day—ever. To his absolute delight, today had been like touring a huge neighborhood exclusively reserved for the sick and dying. Even the occasional cirrus cloud that floated across the blue Florida sky seemed stamped with a death's-head. Consequently, he had filled not one but twelve order books. An all-time record. He had never even dreamed of such a thing. The highest number he had ever heard of was nine filled order books in one working day. And it had taken the Boss himself to turn that trick.

Hickum Looney had been lucky enough to stumble onto Ida Mae and she had insisted on taking him through an unbroken string of tragedy. A gift. Nothing but a gift. It was damn near impossible to sell anything to a happy person. Serious injury or sickness or any near-death experience was another matter. Grief would pay any price to buy anything, no matter how absurd the thing for sale was. Such was the nature of hope, or of courage, depending on who was looking at it or who was putting the name on it.

If the grief was deep enough, the world and everything in it was transformed into salvation of one kind or another. Hickum had always thought that a man broken badly enough in body and spirit could be sold anything at any price, and the more broken and troubled he was, the easier it was to sell him. Who else but poor, broken, and troubled men and women could be sending all that money to those preachers on television who daily told all the poverty-ridden, death-stricken listeners who could hear their voices that the first thing they had to do was quit taking their medicine and quit eating so much food and quit trying to stay warm in the winter and send every cent they had to the Service

God? Then magically the address of the Service of God appeared on the screen.

—~~Ida Mae was the classic prospect. Hickum knew she would buy his soap the moment his gas had fallen upon her arthritic fingers, which she held over her swollen stomach. From long experience he could see there was so much hurt in her that she desperately needed to be rid of it. And after she was rid of it, she needed care. She needed hope. She needed love. And Hickum Looney had it all, or at least he had everything she needed, right there in the Company Manual in his metal briefcase. Hickum Looney believed that to be the truth. He had no alternative. Without belief, how could he get up every morning and go on with the work of Soaps For Life?~~

She had looked down at the briefcase. “What’s in it?”

“I told you, soap.”

“What kind?”

“The kind with wonder-working power,” he said.

Her milk white face darkened. “I’m an atheist,” she said. “Been one a long time. Hope to stay one. So don’t try to work that one on me.”

He leaned back on the couch and put his hands behind his head. Then he brought his hands down and put them between his knees, leaned forward, and looked serious. “I would have taken you for a believer of the gospel, the way you were talking at the door.”

She leaned over the table. Her eyes were fixed on him and he could smell her. Her odor was thick and heavy, an odor that Hickum Looney always associated with things long enclosed.

“I’m not responsible for what you take or how you take it, but I’m an atheist. Believe it,” she said, “because it’s true. And they drove me to it is what they did. I’ve been sold more shit in the name of Jesus than there is rice in China. Oh yeah, I know that one. Give your money to Jesus but send it to my address.”

Hickum Looney said: “Well said. Yessireebob, well said! Me? I try to cover the waterfront. I’m selling everything to every man and to every God, dead and dying. I’m a believer and a disbeliever. I go on when I come in. Janus faced, too. At least they called it that in olden times, or at least that’s what the Company has to say on the matter anyway. I’m also a man who never wanted much and at the same time a man who always wanted everything. Put your mind to working on that once in a while when you think the mystery has gone out of your life and out of this tired old planet we live on.”

Everything he’d said had been a direct quote from the Company Sales Manual.

Ida Mae sat very still and appeared a little stunned. “I think I’d prefer not to. You’re not making a whole lot of sense, either, you know that?”

“Sense and nonsense?” Hickum said. “It come to me a long time ago that entirely too much was made of the difference.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

She breathed on him and he smelled the old friendly and final odor of death. It had never bothered him. Actually he had come to enjoy it. Everybody’s breath to one degree or another smelled of death to Hickum Looney. Most people couldn’t smell it because they were afraid of the truth. But a man was not afraid of the truth but loved it instead, then the odor of death was heavy everywhere, ubiquitous as the air he breathed, and it kept his own mortality firmly fixed in his mind. Or at least that was what the Company Manual guaranteed in boldface print. And the salesmen believed, because believing was the first condition of employment.

“I can’t,” he said.

“Can’t what?”

“Leave.”

The quilted flesh of her face pulled tightly smooth: “You’ll leave my house when I tell you to.”

“Perhaps,” he said. “But you wouldn’t tell me to leave.”

“And why, may I ask, would I not?”

“Because you’re a lady.” He held up his palm to stop her when she opened her mouth to answer.

“No denials, please. We are both too mature for childish games. Breeding tells. It always tells.”

“How tacky,” she said. “You only want to sell me containers of soap that somebody has made you carry from door to door every day of your life like a beast of burden, and you have the nerve to talk to me about breeding. That is purely tacky.”

“There,” he said. “Don’t you feel better now? Nothing clears the air like the truth.”

“What would you know of the truth?” she said.

“Not nearly as much as some people. But just enough to know that you need to buy what I’ve got more than I need to sell it to you. The people who buy from me always do.”

When the Boss was out giving a selling demonstration, he could deliver that line about people needing what he had to sell with such fiery passion that people often fainted, especially the afflicted and the very old.

Hickum indicated the chair directly across the coffee table from him. “Would you sit with me for a moment?”

“No.”

“Oh, please don’t be hard to get along with and make my day more difficult than it already is. Why wouldn’t you sit with me for a moment?”

“You forget where you are,” she said. “I am not required to give reasons or offer excuses for what I do in my own home.”

“I know that,” he said. “But you’ll end up feeling compelled to explain it if you don’t say *Noblesse oblige*.”

“I would not have thought you to know such a phrase.”

“I don’t, not really,” he said. “It’s in the Company Manual.”

“What else is in the manual?”

“Everything,” he said. “Everything, even my heart’s most secret desires.”

“How delightfully corny,” she said. “You manage to be disgusting without even trying.”

“Actually, that was not in the manual,” he said. “I made that one up myself.”

“I thought as much.”

She had thought wrong. It was on page 32, subhead B, the part that dealt with False Poetry. The Company thought—correctly, as it turned out—that it would not do for the manual to be too consistent, so they deliberately threw in errors and bad diction and greeting-card poetry in an effort to make the salesmen seem more nearly human. The crooked made the straight seem straighter. The rankly false made ordinary truth seem gospel, or so the Company Sales Manual insisted.

Hickum Looney had found out a long time ago, the Boss of the Company was nobody to fool around with. He’d nail you hand and foot every time and he didn’t appear to give much thought to what he nailed you to or nailed you with or how long or how much you bled. He could be a kind and generous man, but he could also be a real sonofabitch, merciless and unforgiving, and there never seemed to be rhyme or reason to explain the kind of man he was at any given moment.

Ida Mae made a little sound in her throat, not a word exactly, just a little humming that was close to a word.

“What?” he said.

“I thought I heard my name.”

“You might have heard it but not from me.”

—“Carrying that suitcase around in this weather may have touched you a little. The sun can cause an awful affliction, if you know what I mean.”

“Perhaps.”

“You like that word, don’t you?”

“*Perhaps?*”

“You say it a lot.”

“I mean it a lot. *Perhaps* is as close as I’ve ever been able to get to anything.”

She pointed to the metal briefcase on the table. “What about that?”

“Perhaps it’ll save you. Perhaps it won’t. Then again perhaps it’s all up to you. Perhaps you can see the problem.”

“What makes you think I need saving?”

“It’s not what I think, it’s what you think. Do you know Shakespeare?”

“Never had the pleasure,” she said.

“Aww, now come on, Miss Ida Mae, you know what I mean.”

“As it happens, I do.”

“Perhaps you’ll remember this then: ‘Nothing is true or false but thinking makes it so.’ I’ve always thought it might be the truest thing he ever wrote.”

“That’s not a direct quote. He didn’t write it that way. What you quoted was really a kind of sloppy paraphrase. Did you get that out of the Company Manual, too?”

“Yep.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Miss Ida Mae, you must be able to read minds. You’ve caught me again.”

“I knew there wasn’t a Company Manual in the Western world that quoted Shakespeare—even badly.”

She was wrong, again. He had quoted from chapter 10, page 23. Ten was the Shakespeare chapter. And it was invaluable.

Shakespeare was a source of total contradiction. If you wanted to prove the truth of any subject, go to Shakespeare. If you wanted to disprove what Shakespeare had just got through proving, go back to Shakespeare. If you knew where to look he would always obligingly disprove himself for you.

Shakespeare was like the Bible that way. He could and would go either way on any subject. If you didn’t like his position on a subject, keep reading. Sooner or later he’d change. Shakespeare did not seem to give much thought to what might or might not be true. He only wanted to win the point on the issue.

The Boss of Soaps For Life loved Christ the same way he loved Shakespeare. Christ himself would go either way on any issue. The Boss loved him for that if for nothing else. In some of his three-hour tirades from the podium at the annual convention, the Boss would completely break down and cry.

“Nu couldn’t pay a man nuke Nesus Christ what he was worth. If I had Nesus, I could rule the world. Wit Nesus, I’d be bigger nan Wal-Mart and IBM both together. I know in my heart nat Nesus Christ could write more orders nan all my other salesmen put together. Nat’s one goddam ning I know about Nesus Christ.”

Had he been religious, Hickum would have thought it blasphemous the way the Boss carried on, but since he himself believed that every man everywhere was only flesh that would eventually return to the nitrogen cycle, he did not spend too much time thinking about it.

Things did happen, though. They did happen, things did. The business with the dime and Ida Mae and what Hickum had done was brand new. It had amazed Hickum as much as it had Ida Mae. When he took the dime out of his pocket, he didn't have the slightest notion of what he meant to do with it. The dime lay in his open palm with Ida Mae looking at it. Hickum was staring at it too. He could not have done otherwise.

"Your left wrist hurts very badly, doesn't it?" he said.

"You wouldn't believe how I suffer with it," she whispered, as though to keep a secret.

"You're wrong there," he said. "I believed it when I stepped through the door." Her left wrist was badly discolored and swollen half again as big as the right one. "But," he said without raising his eyes from the dime, "the only real bedrock problem we have here is whether or not you believe."

She stared at the dime. "It's got to where I can't even lift my frying pan with that arm and it's aluminum, too. I haven't been able to lift my good cast iron one in years."

"Rub a little bit of this soap on the dime," he said.

There was silence during which they did not raise their eyes from the dime.

When Ida Mae did speak, her voice fell between them in a soft, uninflected monotone. "Which one of the bottles you want me to get the soap from?"

"You'll get it from the right place," he said. "I wouldn't worry about it."

She'd get it from the right place? He wouldn't worry about it? What was he saying and what on earth had he meant by it? But then he made himself calm down by reminding himself that the manual clearly stated that each customer's pain was different, and the Boss himself emphasized that it did not matter what the salesman said or promised as long as he sold the product. He was only trying to sell as much as he could. That was the way it had always been. That and nothing else. Selling as much as he could day in and day out, the salesman served not only the Boss but the customer as well.

"I'm not so sure about this," she said.

"It's not my wrist," he said. "I believe you'll get the right soap. That's what I believe. What do you believe, Ida Mae?"

She touched the lids of several bottles before her finger stopped on a yellow one decorated with an elaborate S.

"This is the one," she said. Then: "I believe."

"Open it," he said.

"Could you hold the bottle for me while I do the lid? I don't think my bad wrist can hold it."

"That's what I'm here for," he said, "to help."

He held the jar and she unscrewed the lid. It was only then that she raised her eyes from the dime to look at him.

"What?" she said.

"Touch the soap with your finger and then touch the dime with the soap."

She did as he told her. Hickum took up the dime. "Let me have your hand."

She gave him her hand and he drew it toward him and placed the dime soap side down on the swollen place where he could see the pulse beating under her fine, nearly translucent skin. He could not even guess at what might be going on in her mind, much less the turmoil in her tired old heart, and he was completely at a loss about what he ought to do next. Fear splashed over him as quickly and totally as if it had been water thrown from a bucket.

He heard himself say: "The dime is warm and growing warmer. That heat's spreading." He felt totally absurd and he wondered if she felt how essentially crazy all this was. "Your entire wrist is hot now, not uncomfortable, but still hot." He didn't know how long he could go on with this. He was

making it all up and had no notion at all where it might lead. But this was the way it was supposed to work. With every customer he had to reinvent the way to sell the soap. The Boss called it creative salesmanship, and it was covered in detail in the manual.

“Oh, sacred Mary, Mother of God!” she said in a rushing whisper. “Look at my wrist.”

He looked at it and it looked exactly as it had before. The swelling and the discoloration were still as they had been. Nothing had changed. Nothing.

She said: “On the holy eyes of Jesus, you’ve cured me.”

He was addled and startled, and more than that, he was frightened. “Be careful with that Jesus business,” said Hickum in a voice that sounded in his own ears like that of a beggar. “You’re the atheist, remember?”

“Not anymore,” she said.

He threw his hands out between them, his palms facing her.

“I’m a soap-selling fool from east Tennessee, but I never signed on for anything like fooling with Jesus.”

The Boss would not have approved. But Jesus scared the hell out of Hickum, not because he was a believer but because he was superstitious.

“You know where I’ve got to take you?” she said, a little breathless. “I’ve got to take you to meet my friends.”

“Ida Mae, I’m selling soap today.”

“They’ll buy.” Her old, milky, quilted skin had gone grayer still. “I will testify for this product and the rewards it brings. I’ll testify and they’ll buy.”

“You’d do that for me?”

“I’ll do that for the soap,” she said in a whisper, and then after a moment of thinking, still in a whisper: “I’ll do that for you too.” Another silence as her brow drew together and her skin broke into a fine web of wrinkles. “But you and the soap are the same thing, if you know what I mean.”

Hickum nodded vigorously although he did not have the slightest notion what she meant. Still, he shuddered at the thought it might be true.

She gave him a coy, sly look that, despite her age, reminded Hickum of the look of a young girl when she first feels her sexuality begin to beat in her blood.

“I saw that the word was a palindrome when I spelled it out,” she whispered. “I saw that it spelled the same backward as it does forward: S-A-I-P-P-U-A-K-I-V-I-K-A-U-P-P-I-A-S. I’m betting it’s the longest one-word palindrome in the world.”

He felt the skin over his heart go cold. She was, of course, right. Although he had never told anyone, he himself believed the word to be wonderfully incredible, totally impossible, and at the same time silly beyond saying, because the word meant *door-to-door soap salesman*.

She opened her mouth and showed him the tip of her old dry tongue that was as gray as death. She closed her mouth and said, still in a dry whisper: “A palindrome ends where it begins, and lives inside itself, a self-contained, self-justifying madness.” She waited a moment, her dry tongue tracing her thin desiccated lips that now held a smile he did not like and that he thought might not even be a smile. “Be careful, Hickum Looney,” she said. “Take nothing for granted.”

“I’ll try. God knows I’ll try.”

Chapter Three

Hickum turned into an asphalt parking lot in front of a blindingly white three-story building, some brutal design, full of sharp edges and abrupt angles. Sloping away from either end of the building was a carefully tended, geometrically designed garden of beautiful, varicolored flowers. But the lovely, delicate flowers only served to make the brutal design of the building seem even more brutal. Perhaps that was why it always reminded Hickum of a bunker on a battlefield, even though he had never seen a bunker or been on a battlefield. Every regional office of the Company throughout the country was of this design. The design had originated with the Boss. The little harelipped demon had his touch on the pulse of everything in the Company. He was a pushing, pounding, probing, hands-on kind of owner as he never tired of writing in memos and directives and screaming at the annual sales convention.

He would cat-dance across the convention stage in a frantic little jig, moving as though the soles of his feet were on fire, stop at the podium, smiling, a single great square tooth gleaming through the inverted V of his upper lip, and thunder: "I'm a hands-on kind of an owner. I push, I probe, I pound. I do it because I love it. By God and by damn I *do* love each and every one of you and carry my soap through all the long streets of the great cities of the country. Not all the people everywhere know what I've fabricated for the fullness of your lives!" His salesmen always went a little nuts when he told them he loved them. "Nure my troops and I mean to take you to new levels of greatness you never imagined."

And the salesmen would roar their approval. Several throughout the enormous convention hall would enthusiastically bash their heads together, not because they liked doing it but because they could not help doing it, much as football players on a playing field bashed one another's heads about in uncontrollable spasms of joy.

As Hickum eased his dented yellow Dodge into slot number eleven, he realized just how tired he was. Even his bones seemed to hurt with exhaustion. He could not remember a day when he had covered more ground, worked harder. But the entire surface of his skin tingled when he let himself think about the fact that he had done that day what had never been done in the history of the Company by anybody. Not even the Boss on his best day ever had brought in twelve completed order books.

Despite his mutilated mouth, or perhaps because of it, the little man would sometimes show up unannounced at regional offices throughout the country to take an inexperienced young salesman and sometimes one of the older experienced salesmen out for a day of selling. But nobody had ever filled twelve books of new orders. Hickum Looney had crossed into virgin territory.

Hickum got out and stood thinking beside the open door of the car. It would never have happened without Ida Mae. Hers was the energy of a buzz saw out of control. Amazing! She, not he, had made it happen. She had taken him through enclaves of men and women who were sick and dying from the same incurable disease: *age*.

They had tramped from one elderly village to the next elderly village, from one home to the next home. Some of the homes and villages were run for profit and some of them were not. Some of them were affiliated with one of the Protestant denominations and some of them were not. Some of them were supported by the mother church in Rome and some of them not. But Ida Mae had worked each and every one of them with equal fervor while Hickum Looney carried the display case of soap and watched, utterly amazed.

And he was a man who believed in giving credit where credit was due. If anybody wanted

know how such an incredible feat of selling had been accomplished (as all the salesmen might, even the last one of them), Hickum was prepared to give Ida Mae the credit, all of it if necessary, simply because she deserved it. At least he thought he would give her the credit. He paused and looked out toward the west, where the sun had not yet gone down into the waveless water of the Gulf of Mexico. He was late, but with twelve order books filled, he didn't care.

Of course he would give Ida Mae credit. Wasn't he a fair man who always played by the rules? No answer came behind his question, and he stood very still watching dark thunderheads beginning to rise on the western horizon. He listened carefully for the little voice that always spoke in his head at times like these, the same voice that—in rare moments of doubt—assured him of his own basic and decent morality. And the voice might have come if the macadam that had been soaking up the sun all day had not suddenly made him aware that his tender feet were cooking through the thin soles of his shoes.

Hickum grabbed the metal briefcase out of his car and hurried toward the Company office. No one was allowed to go home in the afternoon until all the salesmen had reported in. Every last one of the parking slots had been filled with the exception of Hickum Looney's, filled with the dented and dirty yellow Dodges the salesmen had no alternative but to drive. The Boss thought driving dented and dirty yellow Dodges generated sympathy for his salesmen and made the work of selling easier.

When it was pointed out to him that American businessmen and their salesmen always tried to look like millionaires, particularly if they were on the edge of bankruptcy and dying of despair, the Boss would scream: "I made my fortune and built my company and my name doing everything my own way!" He would go into a characteristic rapid spin on his tiny and fiery little feet, and then suddenly stop and point one of his long, spoon-shaped fingers at the person nearest him. "Neep ne bastardo guessing! Near me? *Do nu near me?*"

And not only did everyone hear him, but everyone also believed him too. Because even if he was small, ugly, and handicapped by his speech impediment, he was also a millionaire many times over. And his being a millionaire made them forgive him every fault he may have had in the past, had now or might have in the future. His salesmen loved him simply because he had made money, and that had made believers of them all.

But as Hickum found out, there were believers and there were believers. It had taken Ida Mae, with her twisted little-girl curls and her pleated Gypsy skirt and her mincing little-girl walk to make her a more profound believer out of Hickum than he had ever been before—not in God, which he dismissed as a hoax and a fraud, but in his own powers to control what happened in his life.

What he was most deeply and immediately interested in at the moment was doubling the amount of soap he sold in a day. He'd done that and more with Ida Mae's help, and up until the very moment he started through the door of his office building, he had taken it for granted that he would tell everyone about her and all that she had done. But now he was not so sure, and the knowledge that he might not do what was right made his face burn with shame. Along with everyone else, he thought of himself to be a deeply moral man.

The interior of the Soaps For Life building always reminded Looney of a public restroom. It had been the first day he had set foot in it, and after all these years it still did. He tried not to think about it because he was frightened by what thinking such a thing might imply about himself. But he thought about it anyway. He always did. For all he knew, every other salesman thought the same thing. He wished he knew. But he had never asked. He had wanted to but he had not. He tried to force himself to think about Ida Mae and all the credit he was going to heap upon her old graying head. Then it occurred to him that he might not heap credit or anything else on her graying head. He had begun

suspect that he might not even mention her.

—To keep his mind off that ignominious thought, he looked at all the smooth tile and plaster and plastic and glass and fake marble and remarked again the total absence of decoration—not a single framed print or picture, not a plant of any kind, whether hanging or potted, fake or real—and told himself that, goddammit, he was not only entitled to think anything he wanted to about such a place but also about the people in it. But all he got for his trouble was the abrupt, almost overwhelming awareness of a ubiquitous odor that lingered everywhere about the building, in every room, hallway, and closet. The odor was of a particular and peculiar disinfectant. The only other place Looney had ever smelled it was in the urinal of a public restroom. He lowered his head and hurried for the stairs.

There were no elevators in any of the Soaps For Life buildings because that was the way the Boss wanted it. And he never explained the reason. He didn't have to. His employees had figured it out to their own satisfaction. The Boss had certain notions about physical fitness, never fully articulated by him and consequently never fully understood by his employees. Every worker in the Company, though, knew the Boss's position on how information ought to pass between him and the people who worked for him.

“If I want nu na know something, I'll tell nu. If I want na know something, I'll ask nu.”

Everybody at Soaps For Life knew this, but nobody had ever seen it written anywhere and nobody could ever recall hearing the Boss say it.

But some facts were not in dispute. All company office buildings were three stories, no more, no less. The salesmen's offices and the big conference room were always on the third floor. All the secretaries had cubicles on the first floor. The Boss believed in keeping the salesmen away from the secretaries as much as possible. Although a short man, the Boss invariably took the stairs two at a time going up and two at a time coming down. Nobody had ever successfully kept up with him, not even the very young and the very strong, although many had tried. He was nothing but a blur once he had his full stride, and when he visited a regional office, he sometimes stood about with a stopwatch timing his workers as they went up and came down the stairs. Sometimes on one of his random visits he took up his position on the stairs with his stopwatch for an entire day, shouting encouragement while salesmen and janitors flew past him. Without it ever being stated, the assumption was that whether the Boss was visiting or not, everyone was expected to take the stairs in a full-bore sprint.

Some did, others did not. Hickum Looney always tried his best to give his best. So even today, with the soles of his feet tender from the hot sidewalks and the even hotter parking lot, the vertebrae of his bones aching from exhaustion, and his vision blurring from sweat and the reflected glare of the sun, he attacked the stairs in a hip-hop stride with his briefcase banging against his thighs. But after two flights he was gasping for breath and he had to slow to a walk.

The conference room was at the end of the hall. The door was open and Hickum knew that the salesmen were all waiting for him. So why was there no sound—none at all—coming from the room? He stopped and cocked his head to listen. Nothing. But tobacco smoke was boiling out of the room, so the salesmen had to still be in there. Hickum eased up to the door and looked in.

The salesmen sat with their fingers tented under their chins, their elbows on the desktops in front of them and thick cigars stuck in their faces. It was a physical attitude the Boss took and sometimes held for as long as half an hour, each minute of which seemed insufferably long, as though each of them was trying to see who could hold his breath the longest. The room was so full of blue smoke that Hickum thought it could probably be cut up and made into work shirts. On the teleconference screen at the front of the room sat the Boss, fingers tented under his chin and his elbows on the desk in front of him and smoke boiling from around the cigar jammed deeply into his

mouth through his split upper lip.

—Each of the salesmen's faces held an expression that was a copy of the look that hardened on the Boss's face when he wanted to signify that after long thought he had decided that there was no hope for his salesmen, his company, or himself. He often reminded them at such times that if this were Japan there would be no honorable option left the entire sales force but a collective gut ripping. Even the last one of them would have to commit ritual seppuku and watch dispassionately as their entrails and blood spilled onto the floor in front of them. The Boss often wondered aloud why he could not command the loyalty of a single one of his employees the way a goddam Jap could. If only one of his people would disembowel himself, sales would quadruple in a month. It was his opinion that there was nothing like blood and guts spilling onto the floor to light a fire under everybody else. But so far, he had no luck with that, nor did he expect to. He said Americans had not grown soft, they had always been soft.

Peering in the door through the cloud of blue smoke, Hickum stood very still watching the salesmen with their tented fingers under their chins and their defeated faces, and Hickum was watching, too—the Boss, on the teleconference screen. Hickum Looney knew he had just missed the Japanese-gut-ripping lecture. And besides that, Hickum knew that the length of the teleconference had been extended, to wait for him to show up. Thank God for Ida Mae. Thank God that in his briefcase were twelve completed and signed order books, a new and incredible company record, because the truth was he had forgotten this was a teleconference day.

From his inner jacket pocket he took a long, thick cigar—a cigar supplied to him and the other salesmen by the Boss—bit the end of it off, lit it, coughed, and then puffed like a bellows until he was nearly hidden in smoke, even though he was always afraid he would puke on his shoes when he had a light one up, because he had never even smoked cigarettes and he generally became light-headed with a storming attack of nausea by the second or third puff of a cigar.

And if that were not bad enough, an uncontrollable bout of diarrhea often appeared unannounced. Not always, but often. The random nature of these green-apple two-steps made it all the worse. With everything else he had to live with in his life, he knew that at any moment and total without warning he might feel the hot juice of his bowels running down his legs and filling his shoes. He lit a cigar. Whether or not he lit one, however, was not in his control.

He had no choice. For reasons nobody understood, cigars had become fashionable, and so fashionable in fact that it caused movie actresses and actors (whom the Boss inevitably referred to as triumphs of advertising over good sense, which made him love them all the more) to come together for cigar-smoking parties that apparently had no other purpose than for the sleek, golden, blindingly beautiful men and women who graced the silver screen to sit around and blow smoke in one another's faces and cough and laugh and generally have a good time.

The Boss, a student—amateur though he was, he was still a rabid student—of physical behavior in men and women, would immediately pick up any fad or fashion that raged through the movie colony, and his salesmen, without ever being told or asked, would immediately do as the Boss had done. In his earlier days he had been in the habit of taking his salesmen to the ballet every night before their yearly sales conference, which lasted a full week. He had been overwhelmed by the long-limbed bodies impossibly soaring through the air, hanging there at times as if they never meant to come down.

But somebody, somewhere, had mentioned that they were all fags and lesbians, so none of what they did counted for anything in the world of real men and women. Nobody knew who had the nerve to tell the Boss such a thing. But that was the rumor, and since in the Soaps For Life Company, rumors

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